

CHAPTER V - THE REAL BUSINESS

I wait for a moment after ringing the doorbell.

"Who is it?" a voice from behind the door finally demanded. It seems like he's been standing there this whole time. Perhaps it's true that he doesn't wish to see *her*.

"It's me," I replied, making my voice as clear as possible. "Mister Koizumi, I have some items from the company that I've been asked to deliver to you. If it's inconvenient for you right now then I can leave the items at your door and be on my way."

A moment passed in silence.

I heard the sound of a door being unlocked.

The door opened ever so slightly, as if merely to indicate that I could enter. I nodded. Glancing over my shoulder, I remind myself that *she* was here. I clear my throat. "Mister Koizumi, before I enter, it does seem to me like you have two more guests. As I've said, it's of no inconvenience to me if you have some other business. I'm but a delivery girl for today. A messenger pigeon, in other words."

"I don't believe I'm scheduled to have any other guests until seven this evening," the voice replied. "Come in. I've prepared some tea already."

"I see," I answer. Turning once more to glance at the two girls by the front gate, staring at me (with quite a humorous expression upon their faces, might I add), I smile and give them a little wave with my free right hand before entering the house carefully, after pushing the door open by just another little crack.

Slowly shutting the door, I smile. "How've you been, Touma? I hear you've been sick."

"Just a little under the weather," Touma replied flatly. "It's no more than a sore throat, Celeste."

"I see," I reply.

"You look beautiful today, by the way," he added, turning around and motioning for me to follow him into the kitchen. I feel my cheeks reddening a little. He's always like this...it's so *unfair*. "Th-thank you," I manage to say.

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"Why does *she* get to go in?" Yuki complained. "This is absurd! She leapt over his goddamn fence! That's trespassing!"

"C-calm down," I say, trying to calm Yuki down.

"HEY, TOUMA KOIZUMI!" Yuki cried at the top of her lungs. Oh shit, people are gonna start glaring at us...this is damn embarrassing! "YOUR

GIRLFRIEND'S HERE TO SEE YOU! OPEN THE FUCK UP!" Yuki continued shouting.

"S-stop it already!" I snapped, grabbing Yuki by the arm.

"WHAT?" Yuki cried. "I don't get it! You were supposed to deliver his phone and make up with him, but instead the phone gets intercepted by some American secretary-lady or something and he won't even come out to see us? The fuck is that?"

"Uhh...the fuck is *what*?" a voice suddenly asked. Looking over Yuki's shoulder, I (unfortunately) spot a head of familiar blue hair. "U-uhh...*hi there*," I said as calmly as I could. "Sh-Shizue, right? I've heard a lot about you—"

"Michiko Inoue, please do me a favor and *cut the crap*," Shizue demanded.

"W-what?" I asked.

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I pour Celeste a cup of tea and place it before her. She gives me a little smile.

I really like her smile. Her resting face looks rather apathetic and impatient, but whenever she smiles at you, it's as if she's know you or just about *forever* and was *dying* to see you. The corners of her mouth curl upwards naturally, making a beautiful little arcing shape. She was wearing a thin red lipstick today, and it made her lips seem extra defined. Celeste has always been seductive. It's not that she was trying to be that way (I think), but rather that she was *born* with that kind of look.

Celeste is enticing.

Having just taken a sip of her tea, Celeste lowers her cup to the table slowly before picking up the suitcases she had placed at her feet and laying them gently upon the table. Taking a seat opposite to her, she turned the suitcases to face me. There was one at either side of her. It's kinda reminiscent of a mob boss bring two suitcases to a cop and preparing to show him the money to bribe him.

Reaching over to the suitcase to her left (or my right) first, Celeste calmly opened the simple locking mechanism on it. "First of all," she said, "this one contains your paycheck for January to March of 2511. It should be the right amount, but if anything's off, don't hesitate to let me know." Lifting the lid of the suitcase, she motions for me to come closer. I lean forward a little.

My vision is clouded by countless 10,000-yen bills. All the bills seem brand new. They're tied together in neat little bundles. From my experience, Celeste ties twenty bills per bundle. The suitcase contains three layers of these bundles, with each layer consisting of a dozen bundles.

I find myself breaking into a little laugh. "Not bad, not bad," I mumble.

"This is quite a bit higher than the starting salary," Celeste explained, "but you've received numerous tips from our private clients as well as a few bonuses from the government, thus increasing your total income. I'm sure you know that we get an exclusive tax return as well, correct?"

“Yeah,” I replied, nodding. Money was never the *biggest* thing for me to be honest. I was barely scraping by with the money my parents had left me since their passing, but I was careful with it. I was making do.

My current income is high. And I mean *high*. It’s higher than the average salary for any normal job on the market. Maybe it’s danger money? Or maybe it’s because workers like me are *extremely* short in supply? Regardless, it’s a solid income that means I can live relatively frivolously, if I so choose.

I don’t.

Closing the suitcase up, Celeste pushes it across the table to me. Then, with a smile, she reaches for the remaining suitcase. “This one isn’t technically part of your income,” she said. “It’s not money at all, in fact. This is just a one-time thing, but my father wanted to have something prepared for you as a little...shall we call it an *incentive*?” She smiled. “Father normally doesn’t do this kind of thing, but we are still in your debt, Touma,” she said to me, her eyes gazing deeply into my own.

Opening up the second suitcase, Celeste moves a hand and gestures towards its contents. Instinctively, my eyes follow her slim fingers and look into the suitcase. Inside is a set of weapons.

The first thing I notice is a pair of handguns. Picking them up, I inspect them quickly. There’s no magazine. That is, there’s no place for a magazine to be inserted. Instead, there’s an embellished gem on the grip of each gun, right where my palm should touch. The ejection port, usually used to eject empty shells, is also missing. In fact, that part was hollowed out. It looked as if my new guns had a chunk taken out of them, right in front of the rear sight where my ejection ports should have been.

Putting them down, I look again into the suitcase. There remained an odd-shaped handle. Celeste’s eyes were glued onto me as I took it out. It looked like a sword...without a blade. Once again, it had a gem impressed into the grip of the “weapon.”

It took me a moment for realization to hit.

These were spirit weapons. They were made *oddly* because they didn’t ever require any real ammunition or anything. The gems that were on the weapon allow people born with Patron Spirits to channel the spirit’s power through the weapon. In other words...

“I see you’ve figured it out,” Celeste laughed. “These things are usually extremely expensive, so father and I took the liberty of having these commissioned and custom-made for you. I used your specific measurements, from height and weight to even the side of your palms.” She smiled. “The guns don’t need to reload. They’ll launch bolts of fire using your spirit powers. The sword’s blade can vary in size, allowing you to change it from a short dagger to a building-sized superweapon at your discretion.”

I nod slowly.

Celeste giggles. She’s really cute when she does that.

“Please, think of it as a sentiment from my father and I,” she said. “And besides, they’ll help you greatly from now on.”

I sighed. “I guess it’s time to retire my old gear then, eh?”

Celeste nodded.

I place the weapons back into the suitcase and close it up, taking it in my hands and bowing deeply. Celeste walked over to my side and grabbed me by the shoulders, forcing me to stand up straight once more. “Don’t be so formal with me,” she said. “I owe you my very life as it is, so this is nothing.” She smiled. “We’re entering the *real* business from now on, okay?”

I nod in response. “Will do, Celeste,” I answer.

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After finishing her tea, Celeste reached into her pocket and handed me my work phone (the one I’d left in Michiko’s room) and warned me not to lose it again before she bid me farewell and left. I saw her out the door and, after returning back to the confines of my own house, I bring the two suitcases upstairs. They’re both coated in a thin layer of metal, making them shiny, and also very sturdy. Bringing them to my room, I sigh.

First order of business. Opening my drawer, I open a small hidden latch and pull out my old equipment: a little pocket knife and a single handgun. Moving to my bed, I climb underneath it and reach forward, touching a lock. As if it was muscle memory, I turn the dial on the lock a few times and the door swings open. This is my safe. It’s quite large, and it hides underneath my bed. Inside were numerous different items—old documents and journals of mine, my old school uniforms, that kind of thing. Carefully reaching in, I place the pocket knife and unloaded handgun inside. I won’t be needing those anymore, after all. Then, opening the suitcase containing my paycheck, I take out three of the bundles of cash and close it back up again, placing the entire suitcase into the safe.

As expected, the bills were tied in bundles of twenty. I’d only received this kind of bundle of cash from Celeste once before, in the form of two bundles as an item I was supposed to deliver to a client. They were, of course, two bundles of twenty bills.

I smile to myself. Opening the latch in my drawer back up, I place one of the bundles aside, and I open the other suitcase to empty its contents. Placing my new weapons in the little storage unit, I close the now empty suitcase and slip it into the safe.

I swing the safe door shut and reset the lock.

Lastly, I carefully place one of the bundles of money beneath my pillow as a backup amount of money, and unbind the last bundle before slipping it into my wallet. Having finished organizing my items, I lay down onto my bed and closed my eyes. I need a nap. My sore throat’s coming back.

I wonder what Michiko’s up to.

I miss Michiko.

I wish I was a better boyfriend to her.

Closing my eyes, I find myself missing Michiko more and more. Part of me wanted to invite her in earlier, but I knew I should speak with Celeste in private. It's always a good idea. We're supposed to be talking about work (which we did). And besides, I admit that I'm not ready to face Michiko yet.

Not if she's still disappointed with me.