

Chapter 3 – Justice?

I leaned back against the damp brick wall, staring out at the darkness of Purgatory. Above was a protruding eave that protected against the rain, while next to me was a peeling public service poster, slowly crumbling into nonexistence. In my entire life, whether growing up in the Third Heaven or working as a Peacekeeper in the Third Earth, I'd never actually gone so far from the city center as to look at Purgatory up close. I hadn't thought about it often until traveling to the Fourth Earth, which was the first time I'd ever laid eyes on the place. One might think that, as a homicide detective, I would have at least traversed the darkness of the location on occasion. After all, it was a nearly perfect place to dump a body. But there were special units who kept watch over Purgatory, and none of the cases I'd worked had ever led me there.

It was quiet this far from the city center, away from the crowded sidewalks, gridlocked traffic, and ever-present city chatter. Out here, the constant drip of water surrounded me, and little else. No cabs. No pedestrians. It was a no-man's-land.

Purgatory was never scheduled for rain; in fact, it literally couldn't rain here the way it did within the Ring Roads. But there was constant runoff, with some sections being virtual lakes of water from the Curse Storm.

"Hagiwara Hina," Itsuki had said from behind the steering wheel of the beat-up hovercar. It was designed to go fast and had burly turbines so loud it forced us to raise our voices to near shouts. "That's her name. You see, there aren't many female Corpses who favor the sword. And of those who do, there's only one who uses a chiburi like the one you described."

"Chiburi?"

"A formal way to remove blood from the blade. I'll teach you more about it later." Given that our ultimate destination was the Saito Clan in the First Heaven, where swordsmanship was extremely important, he'd been giving me a few lessons in the basics. "Anyway, Hina comes from a poor family who lives out near Purgatory. I'll drop you off, then go get her and bring her to you."

"You have a plan, then?"

“I always have a plan,” he’d said with a grin. It was only later that I realized how grim that grin had actually looked. After he pulled over near the very building I was currently waiting next to, he said, “You get out and wait here for me to get back.”

Not in the mood to ask what he had in mind, I’d complied. As soon as I’d closed the car door behind me, he rolled the window down and said, “Don’t go anywhere,” then zoomed off.

I almost couldn’t get over how surreal this situation was. Since that fateful day I met Elena, I’d experienced plenty of strange things. I’d literally died and had even spoken face-to-face with a god. But never in my most bizarre hypothesizing could I have guessed that I would end up friends with Itsuki Saito, and that he would be the one to ‘solve’ Xiaoli’s case. Would it really be *him* that provided resolution and justice?

Here I waited, looking out at the soaked wasteland, my heart pounding into my throat as I tried to envision what was about to happen. What would I do? Scream at the woman? Force her to fight me? It’s not as though I could simply execute her. I didn’t have that right, morally or legally.

After what seemed like hours, I heard the rumble of the cheap muscle car and looked around the corner of the building to see Itsuki landing on the street a few dozen yards away. After the turbines went still, he dismounted and grabbed a human-sized bag from the trunk, slung it over his shoulder, and walked toward me. I’m not sure why I’d expected our ‘guest’ to step out of the passenger seat door.

“That’s...?” I said as he approached.

“It’s her. And she’s the one. I confirmed it.” He lowered the bag to the ground and unzipped it to reveal a female form dressed in floral-themed pajamas. Black hair obscured most of her face as he grabbed her underneath the armpits and dragged her out of the bag, then leaned her up against the wall. He peeled a paliprox-D patch off the inside of her forearm, replacing it with a white patch that would filter the drug from her system and allow her to regain consciousness within seconds or minutes.

Frowning distastefully, I said, “How can you be sure?”

“I told her I was running an off-the-books investigation into orgplant informants who were supposed to be liquidated, but ended up mysteriously turning up in the Dark Earths with new names. Such incidents have occurred in the past. Like many Corpses, Hina has a book with a kill list and photographic evidence, which she was only so happy to show me to prove she’s not corrupt.”

“Photographic evidence? As in... an actual picture from that night? When did she have time to pull out a camera?”

“Black Corpse tech,” he answered. “A micro-camera.” Looking down at the woman, Itsuki said, “It was Hina, Wang Fan, no question about it. She killed your sister. See for yourself.” He produced a small notebook bound in synthetic maroon leather and offered it to me.

I shook my head. “I... I trust you. I don’t want to see it.”

“Fine. Either way, it’s cut and dry.”

About a minute later, Hagiwara Hina groaned, then shook her head. Realizing that her hands were bound behind her back, she struggled briefly to free herself before looking up. Her hair parted, and when I saw her eyes, they struck me like a fist. This was her. The killer. I remembered this woman staring down at me that accursed night. My heart surged with an odd mixture of fury, disgust, and confusion.

This was the person who had taken Xiaoli’s life. She’d taken my sister away.

The woman hardly glanced at me. “What the hell, Itsuki?”

“Sorry about all this, Hina, but it’s necessary.”

“Necessary? For fuck’s sake, you dosed me with paliprox and *kidnapped* me! What’s this about?”

“This gentleman here has an issue that you can resolve.”

Hina looked at me. “I don’t recognize him. Who is he?”

“A friend,” Itsuki replied.

“What do you want, ‘friend’?” she said, and it sounded very much like an order. She was bound and in a bad situation, but much like Itsuki, she projected an intense bravado. “If this is some sort of perverted shit, I swear—”

“It’s not,” I interrupted. “Were you the one who ‘liquidated’ Wang Xiaoli?”

“Who?”

“Her,” I replied, producing a picture of Xiaoli and holding it out for Hina to look at.

“You think I’m going to remember a—” After a glance at the picture, she shifted her gaze to my arm, at which point she hissed a Japkor curse word I wasn’t familiar with. “Fuck. I remember now. You were with her that night.”

I lifted my artificial arm and wiggled the bonemetal fingers. “Yeah. I got this thing thanks to you. Don’t worry, the department paid for it. I’m a Peacekeeper. Or I used to be.”

“Itsuki,” she said, looking back at him, her tone a bit less confident than before, “what’s going on here? I liquidated that girl as part of an official assignment. If she was this guy’s girlfriend or something, sorry. But she was a criminal.”

“She was my sister,” I grated. “And she *wasn’t* a criminal. She was a Constable 3rd class in Cross-Level Control! Clean. Honest. Hardworking. A model Peacekeeper. And she deserves justice!”

Hina looked at me briefly before lowering her gaze. “The sad fact is that a lot of Peacekeepers are corrupt. Believe me, I know.”

“She wasn’t corrupt!” I said, raising my voice. “She was a good person! She DIDN’T—”

Itsuki reached out and put his hand on my shoulder. “Wang Fan, you’re yelling.”

Glaring down at Hina, I tried to keep my voice cold as I asked, “What exactly was she guilty of?”

Itsuki squeezed my shoulder. “She doesn’t know. That kind of thing doesn’t matter to a Black Corpse liquidator. They receive their orders, and they follow them, no questions asked. For all Hina knew, her commanding officer was trying to get rid of a mistress.”

“That’s not true, Itsuki,” Hina said. “Corpse officers would never—”

“Yes, they would,” he said. “Trust me.”

I turned away from both of them to look out at Purgatory, shoving trembling hands in my pocket to look for a cigarette that wasn’t there. For years, I’d wanted to bring Xiaoli’s killer to justice, and now that person was lying helpless in front of me. I knew what I *wanted* to do. But what *should* I do?

“Regardless, I *did* know the reason,” Hina said. “I don’t just ‘follow orders’ no matter what. I study my liquidation orders when I get them because I *want* to know the details. She was caught trying to break into an orgplant. There was surveillance footage.”

“So, you’re admitting you killed her?” Itsuki said.

“I *liquidated* her, Itsuki,” she said, and I detected a tremor in her voice. “That’s different, and you know it. It’s part of our job. Your liquidation count is probably higher than mine! Remember when—”

“This isn’t about me,” he said. “We’re talking about Wang Xiaoli. You ended her life, and you can’t deny it.” He turned to me. “Wang Fan, this is your sister’s killer right here. It’s time to put this part of your life behind you.”

Put it behind me? Could I even do that? And what did he think I was going to do to her?

“This is crazy, Itsuki,” Hina said, her voice cracking. “Are you suggesting he *kill* me?”

“No. *Liquidate* you.”

Out of the corner of my eye I saw her wriggle her back against the wall and try to push herself to her feet. Itsuki shoved her back down.

“This is about justice, Hina,” he said. “Plain and simple.”

To the living, we owe justice... I didn’t have time to continue musing about my father’s words, though.

“Justice? I was doing my job! I was—”

“Shut it, Hina. I used to be a Corpse just like you, so don’t try to pull that sanctimonious crap on me. You enjoy killing. Don’t you?”

“What did you just say?” She seemed taken aback. “*Used* to be a Corpse? What...?”

“I’ve had my eyes opened. Listen, Wang Fan, you can’t sit around here all night staring off into Purgatory. The situation is simple. Hina here killed your sister. If you want to avenge that death, now’s your chance. You know the old saying: *an eye for an eye.*” I heard a swish as his bonemetal blade appeared in his hands. “Here, you can use my sword. Or your cannon if you prefer. Either will be quick and painless.”

“No!” Hina blurted, desperation rising in her voice. She again tried to get to her feet, but Itsuki pushed his sword against her throat and forced her back down. She whimpered. “Stop this, Itsuki. Please, I beg of you. My parents need my income to—”

“Shut up!” he said, raising his voice. “Wang Fan, I’m starting to lose my patience. You’re wasting time. Get it over with!”

“No,” I said firmly, turning to face him. “It’s not right.”

He bit his lower lip in frustration. “It’s justice. A life for a life! It couldn’t be simpler!”

“She hasn’t even had a trial, Itsuki. I’m not a judge! I can’t—”

He let out a frustrated shout. Teeth bared, he spat, “Are you kidding me? Trial? Judge? You know just as well as I do that the entire point of the courts in the Grand Kingdom is to fill up orplants. You think they’re about justice? Don’t make me laugh! This woman here is guilty of murder. And the punishment for that should be execution!”

“Wang Fan,” Hina jumped in, her voice hoarse and her eyes glistening, “I can tell you’re a good person. You have to know that we Black Corpses are the only thing keeping the Grand Kingdom in one piece! I’m a good cop. I follow orders, that’s all. I’m sorry your sister got caught up—”

“SHUT UP!” Itsuki yelled. “Just shut UP!”

I turned. “Itsuki...”

“Don’t fall for her show. In Corpse training we study acting. Did you know that? She’s trying to play off your emotions. She’ll kill both of us the first chance she gets. At this point, it’s us or her.”

“You can’t just execute people because of what they *might* do.”

“It’s about what she *did* do, you idiot!” he shouted. “She took Xiaoli from you! Have you forgotten about your own sister?”

I wasn’t quite sure what to say in response to that. Everything he was saying was spot on, and I didn’t know how to deal with it. I thought about Xiaoli, about all our good times and bad times. I thought about her kneeling to pet a cat, only to be ruthlessly beheaded by the very woman in my presence now.

I looked down at Hina and saw her cheeks wet with tears.

Stumbling a bit over my words, I said, “She... she was just—”

“Which she are you talking about? Hina? She was just what? Just doing her job? Do you know what her job entails? Do you really know?” He put a tiny bit of pressure on the sword so it cut into the skin of Hina’s neck. Blood welled up around the blade as he said, “Tell him, Hina. How many people have you ‘liquidated’?”

“I... I don’t know. Five? Ten?”

He threw his head back and laughed. “Yeah right. I have your liquidation journal, remember? You’ve killed ten times that many people. Have you ever taken out an old person? Or a teenager?”

“Of course! But that’s—”

“Have you ever killed a child?”

“N-no,” she said. She was obviously lying.

“You *have*,” Itsuki said, his voice as hard as the blade he held in his hand. “Haven’t you? How old? Ten? Five?”

“So have you!” she cried. “Everyone talks about that time you—”

“Quiet,” he said, pulling the sword slowly across her neck, deepening the cut so blood oozed down toward her chest. He stopped with the tip resting just above her collarbone. Closing his eyes, he took a deep breath. Then he opened his eyes and looked at me. “What’s your decision here, Wang Fan?”

“I’m not going to just execute her! Killing people in combat is one thing. That’s what you always say, right? ‘It’s combat.’ But this *isn’t* combat. She’s a prisoner!”

“I’m really starting to get tired of this,” he said, his voice quiet but icy. “This is a matter of practicality and justice. There’s only one thing that can happen.”

“No,” Hina said. “There’s—”

“Last chance, Wang Fan,” Itsuki said.

Would executing Hina bring back Xiaoli? I knew it wouldn't. No matter how much I wanted justice for my sister, I didn't see how another death was going to do anything. "We can have Yu Yitai serve as the judge," I said. "Or even better, we ask him to appoint—"

Itsuki shoved his sword deep into Hina's neck. As her eyes bulged, he twisted the blade and ripped it out, causing a deluge of blood to soak her chest. She never had a chance to make a sound. Her head dropped to rest on her chest, and then she toppled forward onto the ground, ending up in something resembling the fetal position.

Itsuki's entire blade was covered with dripping blood. He took out a cloth that he used to clean it before retracting it into the shape of a ball. The cloth he crumpled up and threw off to the side.

As I looked down at Hina's corpse and the blood soaking into her floral pajamas, I felt sick to my stomach.

"It's done," Itsuki said quietly. "Justice has been served."

Has it? I wanted to say, but instead, I maintained my silence. Just like that, it was all over. I knew who killed Xiaoli, and the killer had now paid the ultimate price. But was Itsuki killing her any different from how she had killed Xiaoli? And did her death change anything? Whether in the grand scheme of things, or to me personally, what did it matter that Hagiwara Hina was no more? I felt the urge to reach down and touch her shoulder, to comfort her, to untie her hands and help her to her feet. Foolish thoughts, I supposed. Why should I comfort my sister's killer?

Itsuki took out a flask of liquid that he splashed over the body. From the pungent aroma, I realized it was some sort of lighter fluid. "Unfortunately, I don't have any better tech than this at the moment," he said.

I watched numbly as he then produced a disposable lighter, created a flame, and tossed it down. A whoomp sound rang out as the body burst into flames.

As the fire spread, a sickening aroma filled the area that caused my stomach to clench. I took a few steps back.

Itsuki turned, took two steps toward the car, then stopped and looked back at me. His shoulders seemed oddly crumpled, and his voice cracked when he said, "Let's get out of here."

The last thing I wanted right now was to climb into a car with Itsuki. Why had he done this? Was it out of his twisted sense of justice? Did he think it would please me? His own words from moments ago echoed in my mind.

I used to be a Corpse just like you, so don't try to pull that sanctimonious crap on me. You enjoy killing. Don't you?

Had those last two sentences been spoken to Hina? Or to himself? Was it confession through projection?

"I'd rather take some time," I said. "I'll catch the zont-rail back."

"Sure." He hesitated, cleared his throat, and then said, "Wang Fan, you know that this had to happen, right? There's no real justice to be found at the hands of the Peacekeepers or the Corpses. Probably not the Naturalism Sect either. Like it or not, there's no one in the world you could have reported Hina to and expected resolution."

I nodded curtly, not because I agreed, but because I wanted him to leave. Giving me a return nod, he climbed into the car, fired up the turbines, and headed back toward the city center.

As for me, I stood in the rain looking down at Hina's body burning there.

To the living, we owe respect; to the dead, we owe justice.

What would Dad think about all this? Or Elena? I couldn't even begin to guess.