

DROWNING FISH

By Keita Tokaji

Translated by Ginny Tapley (*sample translation, unedited*)

Chapter 1

1

“We’ll start with your name, age, date of birth, and rank,” said the female officer from the Special Investigations Division coldly.

She and Akiyoshi were alone in the suffocating box-like room with off-white painted walls. The microphone set on the table in the centre of the room was pointed at Akiyoshi. The microphone lead hung down to the linoleum floor, from where it snaked over to the wall behind the officer and disappeared through a small hole in the corner. In the next room, a tape deck turned soundlessly.

Akiyoshi’s face was even paler than usual. He swallowed a lump of saliva blocking his throat, then, keeping his head bowed and his eyes fixed on the National logo adorning the microphone stand, he began to talk.

“Akiyoshi, first name Munetaka. Age thirty-three, born nineteenth of June, nineteen sixty-four. Er... Detective Inspector, Squad Two of the Violent Crimes Unit, Criminal Investigations Bureau Division One, Tokyo Metropolitan Police Department.”

At a metre sixty-three, Akiyoshi was on the short side. He was fair complexioned, with scant body hair, and of slim build. His face, too, was small, with rather feminine delicate features.

“Detective Inspector Akiyoshi, I want a straight answer. Why did you steal those women’s cosmetics from the department store?”

Five to ten years older than Akiyoshi, the Special Investigations officer made no attempt to disguise the contempt in her voice.

Akiyoshi had been ordered to give a straight answer, and so he decided to do just that. Even if he kept quiet about it now, if they searched his apartment (and it was inconceivable that they wouldn’t) he would be exposed anyway.

They were probably tearing his flat apart right at this moment.

“Because I like dressing up as a woman.”

Akiyoshi couldn't help regretting that the first person in whom he had confided his secret vice was this Special Investigations officer so utterly lacking femininity, more like a rather nondescript man in her grey suit.

For a moment he had the urge to watch her reaction to his words, but in the next instant he thought, *Who cares anyway?* and kept his gaze turned down.

"You are a transvestite?" There was no trace of emotion in her voice.

"Yes."

"Do you walk about the streets dressed as a woman?"

"Yes, I do. I go to cinemas and pachinko parlours."

"What about public toilets?"

"Toilets? I go to the ladies', naturally." He could feel the officer's piercing gaze in the region of his forehead.

She wants to call me a pervert, doesn't she? Well, she can call me whatever she likes.

Akiyoshi wanted to immerse himself in a philosophical comparison of the weakness that had led him time after time to give into temptation and go shoplifting, even knowing that he was inviting his own destruction at any time, and the weakness that all criminals, potential criminals, and by extension all humanity basically share in the face of temptation. However, she dragged him back to reality.

"Detective Inspector, are you homosexual?"

Why should that follow? Akiyoshi wanted to ask. *Transvestism and homosexuality are two completely different things!* But someone so sexless as this Investigations Officer probably wouldn't be able to grasp such a fundamental distinction.

"No, I'm not."

"If you are, we'll find out about it."

Social awareness of sexuality had been changing, more and more gays had been coming out, and the public had gradually been coming to accept homosexuality, but even so homophobia remained the norm here at Tokyo MPD in Sakuradamon. In the police force, homosexuals were essentially thought of as scum. If it ever leaked out that you were gay, your path to promotion would be cut off, and you would be shunned by your peers. Even in the twenty-first century, that prejudice would probably never change.

"No, really, I'm not. I'm a genuine cross-dresser, that's all."

A genuine cross-dresser? What the hell am I saying? Akiyoshi cringed at his own words. His mouth was dry from nerves, but he could hardly expect them to bring out some chilled green tea.

What action are they going to take against me? was the question foremost in his mind.

He had heard rumours from colleagues that the Special Investigations Division preferred to deal on the quiet with crimes committed by police officers, as long as those crimes didn't include murder, armed robbery, or other serious offences. Crimes by police officers seriously damaged the public's trust in the police force, therefore if it was something they could cover up, apparently they would. Akiyoshi wondered if that was true.

Was shoplifting something that could be covered up?

Today for some reason he had been sussed by a plain-clothes store detective, who had taken him off to a back room. The store detective was only a security guard, and as such did not have the authority to demand his ID papers. Fully aware of this, Akiyoshi kept his mouth clamped tightly shut. Naturally, his recalcitrant attitude had irritated the store detective, who reported him to the police. Two officers quickly arrived, and took him to the nearest police box. It was only then that they discovered that he was a police officer—and a couple of ranks above themselves to boot.

“I am placing you under house arrest until we have decided what to do with you. You are not at liberty to go out.”

Does that mean I can't even go shopping?

“Um, what about groceries and stuff...?”

Akiyoshi raised his head timidly and looked at the Special Investigations officer. She had the steely face, devoid of any human kindness, of someone who had lived their life according to rules, more rules, and nothing but rules. In her skin, though, he thought he could detect the faint trace of an expression reflecting the tedium of it all.

She was probably sick of endlessly having to deal with weak-willed fools.

“I shall be sending an officer to keep an eye on you, so please consult him with regard to any needs you may have.”

Haven't they got anything better to do in the Special Investigations Division? Maybe they're just overstaffed.

“Also, all phone calls are prohibited. That includes answering incoming calls.”

“Even from my family?”

“Of course. For the time being you have lost any right to privacy. I shall also require a duplicate key to your apartment.”

It probably wasn't an empty threat. No doubt they'd bugged the phone.

“At the present time I can't say how long you will be kept under house arrest.”

“Right.”

“In the event that you disobey my orders—”

“I have no intention of doing so,” Akiyoshi forestalled the officer, unwilling to listen to any threats.

“That's all, then. I shall arrange for someone to drive you home. Wait here until they come to get you.”

The Special Investigations officer stood up and, without any further comment, slipped past Akiyoshi and exited the room.

Time passed, but nobody appeared. After about forty minutes, he felt the urge to urinate and stood up to open the door, but it was locked. The doorknob was as round and smooth as a priest's bald pate, with no keyhole.

He tried calling out, and then hammering on the door with his fists, but he didn't get any response.

This was clearly psychological torture.

Unable to bear it any longer, he yelled into the microphone, “Hey, quit messing won't you? This is taking it too far!”

Still no answer. His bladder felt like it was about to burst.

Another fifteen minutes went by.

“Please, somebody listen to me!” he appealed again to the microphone in a half-joking, half-serious plaintive voice.

No reaction.

He began to hallucinate the walls closing in on him, and his breathing became forced. His fear mounted in the room's oppressive silence.

If I stay locked up here any longer, I'll go crazy.

Alone and miserable, Akiyoshi began trembling.

Just when he was about to wet his pants in desperation, the door suddenly opened without so much as a knock, and two men in suits came in.

One hour eighteen minutes had passed since Akiyoshi had been left alone. His nerves were shot to pieces.

Akiyoshi's apartment was in the Nogata district of Nakano Ward, in western Tokyo. He had been certain that the Special Investigations Division would have given his apartment a thorough going-over, taking away with them numerous items of women's clothing, but to his surprise everything looked untouched, on the surface at least.

Once the two taciturn detectives had left, Akiyoshi flopped down on the mattress of his steel-framed bed, curled himself up into a foetal position, and remained like that for the best part of an hour.

How long would he be kept shut up like this? His fate was in the hands of the Special Investigations Division. He had no choice in the matter, and no idea what to expect. He almost certainly wouldn't be reinstated to the MPD. There couldn't be a more disgraceful way to lose his job.

Detective Inspector, are you homosexual?

The Special Investigations officer's words rang in his ears.

Of course not. But if it was a matter of being attracted to young girls like most men, then that was not the case either. To tell the truth, he wasn't attracted to either men or women. At his age, getting involved with other people only led to complications. These days he didn't know a single person he could call a friend. Even though he longed for emotional excitement, the only people around him were boring and stuck in routine.

He had even lost the burning enthusiasm he had once had for his job. He was in Squad Two of the Violent Crimes Unit, but they didn't get to make any arrests. They just took over cases that the Criminal Investigations Division had already initiated, continuing with the routine side of the investigation. In most cases, any chance of making an arrest was either in a distant future, or never.

In other words, his job was a bit like chewing on gum that had already been chewed and spat out by someone else.

He was probably getting close to burnout. Depending on how you looked at it, this could be his chance to get out of the police force and step out on a new phase in life.

Yes, it's a matter of perspective.

Feeling a little better, Akiyoshi decided to make the most of his time under house arrest to read as much as possible. He got up off the bed, and stood before the bookcase.

His hand landed on the first volume in the *Collected Works of Edgar Allen Poe*.

2

“Detective Inspector Shirasu, do you really mean to say that you never noticed Detective Inspector Ochiai taking any of the money?”

The Special Investigations officer stressed his point with a cheerless glare that would instantly wilt a flower.

“That’s right,” replied Detective Inspector Katsuhiko Shirasu of Squad One of the Armed Robberies Unit, Criminal Investigations Bureau Division One, Tokyo MPD.

Maybe it was the white walls or the ceiling, but Shirasu was feeling somewhat constrained and finding it difficult to breathe. He even had the sensation that the room was gradually closing in on him.

“And you’re telling me that you didn’t pocket so much as a single yen?”

Yeah, go on about it until you’re blue in the face, why don’t you?

“Yes, I am,” Shirasu asserted once again.

“Let’s recap once more. You and Detective Inspector Ochiai were the first into the room. You were the first to fire a shot. Then one of the suspects fired and Detective Chief Inspector Mizuki, who was about to follow you in, was hit in the chest and collapsed. Two more officers right behind Mizuki grabbed his wrists and dragged him over to the staircase to keep him out of the firing line. As they tried to hand him over to two more officers on the stairs, they mucked it up and dropped him, and all of them fell like dominoes right down to the bottom of the stairs.”

His tone indicated that he considered them a bunch of idiots. Shirasu gave a noncommittal grunt of assent.

“During that time there was the sound of more shooting in the room, and by the time the rest of the squad had regrouped and followed you in, both suspects were dead. Detective Chief Inspector Yamazaki, who took over the command, testified that all that took about twenty seconds.”

Shirasu nodded silently.

“Everyone in the squad testified that the shooting didn’t last any longer than five seconds. That means that Detective Inspector Ochiai must have pocketed a wad or two in the remaining fifteen seconds. Yet you claim that you don’t know anything about it.”

“That’s right. I was checking one of the suspects to see if he was still alive. I

assumed Detective Inspector Ochiai was doing the same.

Twenty seconds! It had felt more like a year. In the space of those twenty seconds, he had killed two men (one had died instantly, the other later in hospital), and had got his hands on enough money to fund two or three months' worth of fun.

That fucking idiot Ochiai, killing himself after being jilted by some woman, of all the stupid things. He's really landed me in the shit.

The memory of that moment was still vivid in Shirasu's mind.

The first to shoot had been Shirasu himself.

The bundles of bank notes and two automatic pistols had been on the low table, and the two suspects had simultaneously reached for the guns. As far as Shirasu was concerned, the hell with a warning.

Ochiai's reaction, though, had been different. Shirasu didn't know whether it reflected a fundamental difference in his character, or his ability to stay cool, but Ochiai had aimed his gun at them yelling *Freeze!* At exactly the same instant, Shirasu had aimed his New Nanbu at the belly of the young man with dyed blonde hair sitting cross-legged on the right, and pulled the trigger. Ochiai's warning had been drowned out by the shot, and the blonde-haired youth had toppled over backwards, still cross-legged.

Ochiai had frozen with shock. That had been a dangerous moment. The fat guy on the left had taken a shot in their direction. The bullet had skimmed past the two of them and embedded itself in Mizuki's bulletproof vest as he leapt through the door, throwing him back.

The next to shoot had been Ochiai. A hole had opened in Fatso's left cheek, and clumps of brain and blood splattered out the back of his head. Shirasu had finished him off with shots to his neck and heart.

When he'd turned back to Blondie, the guy had been trying to get up (although now when he came to think about it, it was probably just convulsions caused by shock). Shirasu had fired another shot into his hip.

Then Shirasu had rushed over to Blondie, Ochiai over to Fatso.

Shirasu had taken Blondie's gun, and felt his carotid artery for a pulse. The pulse was weak, but it was there. The guy's eyes seemed to be staring vacantly at nothing. When he looked back, Ochiai was stuffing a bundle of ten-thousand-yen notes from the table into his bulletproof vest. Ochiai felt Shirasu's gaze on him, and for a moment their

eyes locked.

Surprisingly, that was all it had taken to establish a firm complicity and common understanding between them. It wasn't that Shirasu and Ochiai had had any particular liking for each other. But Shirasu had felt something akin to himself in Ochiai at that moment. Something that seldom appeared on the surface—a rare flash of brutality, of indifference verging on numbness, of an irremediable lack of loyalty to the police force... in that brief glance Shirasu had put Ochiai down as an accomplice.

Shirasu had looked around to see Mizuki disappearing from sight, apparently being dragged by the officers who'd been on standby outside. And there were sounds of a commotion on the stairs outside. "Idiot! Get up, quick!" "Move your leg. Your fucking LEG!" "Harada's hurt his head." "Call an ambulance!" He didn't know what had happened, but it sounded like chaos out there. He quickly stuffed a wad of notes into his vest.

The two guys lying bleeding on the floor had been carrying out a series of armed robberies in the Toshima, Shinjuku, and Kita Wards over the previous three months. Their targets had all been debt collectors for credit unions. The police had found out about them after a tip-off from a former inmate of the jail where Fatso had done time. A couple of days before, on Sunday, the informer had bumped into Fatso at the Seibuen cycle racing track in Saitama. Judging from the way Fatso was throwing money around, the guy had sussed he must be onto something good and had tried to wheedle his way in on it, only to be told that it wasn't the kind of job a bumbling fool like himself could be trusted with. Stung, he'd flown into a rage and charged at Fatso, but Fatso had grabbed him by the collar and growled at him to beat it. Realising he was no match physically, he'd slunk off vowing revenge.

He had later called his local police station in Ikebukuro, pointing the finger at a former convict named Yoichi Katayama. The police had realized that Katayama resembled one of the pair identified by victims of the recent spate of armed robberies against credit union debt collectors, and had contacted the MPD's Armed Robberies Unit.

The fact that they'd been spending the money so recklessly meant that, however much Ochiai and Shirasu pocketed, nobody need ever know about it.

"Ochiai! Shirasu! Are you okay?" Coming from outside the room, Detective Chief Inspector Yamazaki's voice sounded distraught.

A moan came from deep in Ochiai's throat, and he suddenly dropped to all fours beside Fatso and threw up onto the tatami floor. No doubt the shock of having killed a man and fear of being found out for stealing were churning up Ochiai's stomach.

Shirasu found himself coming back to his senses from the unreal nightmarish sensation, and looked once more at the bodies lying on the floor. Fatso's brains were spattered over the tatami floor, and were slowly trickling down the window and the walls forming rivulets. The bullet that had entered through Blondie's belly button had exited through his right side, leaving a large hole through which his intestines were spilling out over the tatami like a giant worm, still wriggling.

No wonder Ochiai was puking! Shirasu vomited violently.

In the end, Blondie had died without uttering another word thirty minutes after arriving at hospital. Nobody but Ochiai and Shirasu knew the truth about the money. Since then, they'd seen each other at work, but had never once mentioned it. On the contrary, they both seemed to actively avoid being partnered again.

Shirasu had considered the money he'd pocketed as compensation for risking his life. First, he'd bought a Honda VTR 250cc bike. It was a mean-looking machine with its steel truss frame chassis. The rest of the money had disappeared into "pink salon" sex bars and "soapland" massage parlours. He'd also picked up women through "tele-kura" telephone clubs. One mistake and he could have been dead! Nothing could beat a good hard fuck after that kind of experience. And over six hundred thousand yen had disappeared in the twinkling of an eye. After all it was dirty money, and that was the best way to use dirty money.

But Ochiai had used the money somewhat differently. He had become infatuated with a hostess called Miki. And being generally taciturn and unfriendly, he didn't have the kind of relationship with his colleagues that would oblige them to look after him and stop him from getting involved with such an inappropriate woman. In order to attract the Miki's attention, he had used the money to buy her expensive presents and take her out to high class restaurants. After an appropriate time had gone by, he had asked her to marry him.

What form the rejection had taken was unknown, but in any case it was clear that Ochiai's proposal had not been accepted. He had gone back to his apartment, downed the remains of a bottle of whisky, put on Ozzy Osbourne at full volume, and had penned an almost indecipherable suicide note that looked as if it had been written during a

major earthquake. In it, he vented all his feelings and resentment for the woman who had dumped him.

Then he'd jumped from the seventh-floor window.

Detectives from the local Iidabashi police station had hauled in Miki, who'd been named in the suicide note, and grilled her for several hours about every last detail of her relationship with Ochiai. Having learnt that Ochiai's influence over her had suddenly increased immediately following that fateful raid, it became clear that it couldn't be filed away as an ordinary case of suicide.

The National Police Agency's Special Investigations Division had initiated an enquiry, and so Shirasu had been called up before them today.

Shirasu was in a foul mood as the meaningless questioning continued.

"I'm placing you under house arrest for the time being," the Special Investigations officer finally informed him.

"Why? I haven't done anything wrong." Shirasu objected, making his voice sound deeply offended. Nobody could prove his guilt, so it was best to protest his innocence to the end.

"To prove that objectively will take time. You'll only be under house arrest for the time it takes."

"The benefit of the doubt lies with the defendant, doesn't it?" Shirasu glared at the officer as if trying to pull rank on him.

"In the case of civilians," the Special Investigations officer said dismissively. "You may not leave your apartment. In the event that it is absolutely necessary to go out, you will be accompanied at all times by an officer. Phone calls in or out are not allowed."

"Even though you haven't got any proof?"

"I will arrange for you to be driven home. Until then, you will wait here."

"If you want me to quit, then I'll quit. I suppose you'd feel satisfied then," Shirasu snarled.

"Until our investigations are complete, you are not at liberty to quit."

"It's no fucking joke! Is this a police state or what?"

Shirasu stood up from his chair. At a meter seventy-nine, he was a good ten centimetres taller than the Special Investigations officer. Behind him, the door opened and two men rushed in.

“You want a fight? Come on then!” Shirasu spun round and adopted a defensive pose. From behind, the Special Investigations officer prodded Shirasu’s thigh with a stun gun, and he collapsed instantly to the floor.

3

On the fifth day of house arrest, Akiyoshi made up his mind and left his apartment. The driver’s window of the dark blue Toyota Crown parked in the narrow street facing his apartment wound down, and a male officer from the Special Investigations Division peered out questioningly.

Forcing a smile, Akiyoshi approached the car and said, “Um, I was thinking about things and...”

The officer’s cold expression remained unchanged as he waited for Akiyoshi to finish.

“It’s been five days since I last talked to anyone. Until yesterday I passed the time reading and listening to music, but today I feel like I’m going crazy cooped up like this.”

So what? the officer’s eyes seemed to say.

“Well, anyway, it’s hot isn’t it? Even with air conditioning, it can’t be all that much fun sitting in the car all day.”

The officer didn’t so much as twitch an eyebrow.

Finally, feeling horribly self-conscious, Akiyoshi blurted out, “Um, well... as long as it’s not interfering with your work, how about coming upstairs for something cold to drink? We can have a chat or whatever.”

“I don’t know what you’re scheming, but—”

“I’m not scheming anything! I just feel like talking to someone.”

“I’m not here to provide idle gossip for you.

Oh well... only to be expected. Akiyoshi gave a deep sigh.

“Yeah, of course not, but...”

“If that’s all, then please go back to your apartment.”

The Special Investigations Officer cut short the conversation.

Akiyoshi smiled wryly and shrugged. “Ah, by the way, I don’t suppose I could get a can or two of beer, could I?”

The officer’s eyes flashed menacingly. “Alcohol consumption is out of the

question.”

“Right. Well, I’ll go back upstairs then.” Akiyoshi’s shoulders drooped as he returned to his apartment.

With dull movements, he slipped off his sandals.

What the hell was I thinking? How could I have even thought it would possible to hold a decent conversation with that poker-face? I must be losing my mind, just wanting to talk to anyone, even him. Well, I guess there’s nothing else for it...

Since day one of house arrest he had been resisting the urge, but he couldn’t stand it any longer. He went straight to the bathroom, took off his jeans, and sat on the shower stool. He showered both legs and then lathered them with soap before carefully shaving the hair off his shins. When he had finished they were smooth, and he began to feel a little better.

He went back through to the living room and drew the curtains, shutting out the rays of the late afternoon sun. He took one of his favourite CDs out of the rack, placed it in the CD player, and pressed play. The room filled with the laid-back swell of a low, heavy bass accompanied by a light, tinny drum machine. His body responded naturally and his shoulders and hips began to move loosely.

The track was Swing Out Sister’s “Get In Touch With Yourself.” Its lyrics always touched a chord in Akiyoshi. That guy outside would never know. As long as he stayed in his apartment, he could do as he liked. He opened the bottom drawer of the wardrobe, revealing a tightly-packed colourful array of panties, bras, and camisoles. All of them nicked. These were his portal to transformation. He was grateful to the Special Investigations Division for not confiscating them. If they had, it would have made his confinement even tougher—although that obviously wasn’t why they’d left them.

Today he selected light blue panties with a lace frill and matching bra (a D cup, incidentally). He took off his T-shirt and underpants and stood naked in front of the full-length mirror in the corner of the room, then put on the lingerie. A refreshing sensation spread through his chest as if he’d just swallowed a mint, and a shiver ran down his spine. The song was approaching the chorus.

“Bera geddin touch wi’ yo seeelf.”

The movement of his hips became more urgent. There was not an ounce of excess flab on Akiyoshi’s body, yet neither was he too skinny or bony. A long time ago, a former lover (a girl, naturally) had once told him half-enviously that he had a more

beautiful body than she did.

“Do watchoo feeeeeeel, aah make it reeeeeeal.”

Bang! Bang! Bang! All of a sudden there were three impatient raps on the door.

“Detective Inspector Ayikoshi! I’m coming in.”

It was that woman, that Special Investigations officer! He heard the key being inserted in the lock and the clunk as it opened.

“Aaaahhhh! Wa-wait a sec!”

Just as Akiyoshi charged at the door to hold it shut, the door opened. Still wearing his lingerie, Akiyoshi collided with the officer and they both tumbled out into the corridor in a tangle.

“Ughhh!” the woman moaned, squashed beneath Akiyoshi.

4

Change my pitch up, smack my bitch up!

Drenched in sweat, Shirasu was slamming punches and kicks to a sandbag suspended from a hook in the ceiling in time to the music. It was the fifth day of house arrest, and he’d already long passed the limit of his endurance. This was the only outlet for the hair-raising irritation and anger he was feeling.

Shirasu was long limbed, with a well-developed chest and abs. He didn’t have all the superfluous muscle of a body builder, but the necessary practical parts alone were finely tuned.

“Eeeee-yaaaaaa!” The room shuddered with the impact of each punch and kick.

Just as the track reached the bridge, the doorbell rang three times in succession. Perhaps that asshole of a Special Investigations officer had come to tell him what official disciplinary action would be taken against him. He threw a bath towel over the naked upper half of his body and, wiping the sweat from his face, he headed down the hall. The doorbell rang again.

“Fucking noisy bastard!” His face twisted with rage, Shirasu shoved the door open to find himself face to face with an equally furious middle-aged man. It was Mr. Kosuge, from the apartment upstairs. Shirasu was taken aback. An officer was parked outside the apartment to prevent him leaving the building, but they didn’t appear to be watching his association with other residents within the building. *Idiots!* he thought, amused.

“Ah, good evening,” Shirasu said politely.

Mr. Kosuge's thinning hair was almost too perfectly slicked back, in contrast to his scruffy appearance from neck down. There were several grease spots on his worn-out T-shirt, and the hems of his grey sweatpants were frayed. From the neck up it looked as if he was still at work, mused Shirasu.

"Look, Mr. Shirasu. I don't like having to say this sort of thing, but the thudding is so loud I can't get to sleep. I don't know what it is you're doing, but please stop it." Kosuge's way of talking somehow reminded Shirasu of that comical chat show host Kin'ichi Hagimoto.

"I'm boxing." Well, you couldn't really call it that, but anyway.

"Boxing or whatever it is, please don't do it in this building. You're a policeman, aren't you? How can we have the police disturbing the residents?"

"Ah, sorry." Shirasu apologised, although his face and voice showed no trace of regret.

"In any case, please stop it. I'm tired and I need to rest. Oh, and turn the music down a bit too." Mr. Kosuge finished what he had to say, and went back up stairs.

"Shit." Shirasu went back to the living room and turned down the volume. As he was putting on a plain black T-shirt, the doorbell rang again.

Did the old fucker forget something, or what?

He went back to the front door and growled grumpily, "Yeah?"

"Mr. Shirasu?" It was a girl's voice.

"Ami?" Shirasu's voice suddenly sweetened, and he opened the door to a young woman. She was just Shirasu's type, with dazzlingly white skin, slender limbs, and large breasts. "Hey, long time no see."

"Ha ha! How are you? I'm sorry, my old man came to complain, didn't he? Was he really horrible?" Ami was as cheerful and vivacious as always.

Shirasu quickly ran his eyes over her body from her bare feet with blue-painted nails, up her perfect, shapely legs to the denim miniskirt covering her pert little bottom, and then the huge boobs that always took his breath away. Her long glossy brown hair really set off her small oval face that still retained an air of childish innocence. However beautiful her mother may have been, Shirasu could hardly believe that such a stunning daughter could have been born from the sperm of that old fart.

"No, no, not at all. It was my fault," said Shirasu, grinning from ear to ear.

"Well, I practice the guitar late at night so we're quits, aren't we?"

Ami was twenty years old. She was in her second year at university, and was the lead guitarist in a girl's rock band. Lying in bed at night, Shirasu could often hear the distorted sound of an electric guitar coming through the ceiling. She would always slip up on a particular phrase, then work on it, repeating it over and over again until she got it right. Then she'd get stuck on the next simple phrase. It was enough to send anyone listening around the bend. If it had been anyone else Shirasu would have got totally wound up about it, but seeing as Ami was so cute and was putting so much effort in he could hardly complain.

"So how's the practice going? Have you got that latest one down yet? You know, *dum dum dada yewee dala leela leela...*"

Peals of Ami's laughter rang around the corridor. "Ah ha ha ha! That's soooo embarrassing!"

"Who's that track by?"

"That one? White Zombie."

"Oh yes!" Shirasu sounded impressed, but was thinking to himself, *So that scratchy riff was actually a proper song, was it?*

"Hey, you know what? I've got a gig in Shimokita coming up,"

"Wow, great!"

"Will you buy a ticket for it? Please?"

"Sure!" It was cheap at the price just to see Ami looking happy.

Ami's face got even brighter. "Thank you! I brought two with me, just in case you want to bring a friend along..."

"Okay, I'll take both." Shirasu pulled out his wallet and handed over the money in exchange for the tickets.

"Are you sure you'll be able to come?"

Shirasu wasn't at all sure, but he didn't say so. "Yeah, no problem. I'll be there."

"Hey, quit doin' the hard sell on those tickets!" A boy's voice sounded behind Ami.

Ami frowned, and in a bored voice said, "Oh, it's the cop lover again."

The "cop lover" was Ami's brother Shinkichi. He was four years younger than Ami, in his first year at high school.

"Ah, shut it." A youth wearing a black T-shirt with a picture of Bruce Lee on the front with orange shorts and Nike trainers sauntered over to them.

"Have you come to talk to Mr. Shirasu too?" Ami scowled at her brother.

“Yup. If you’ve finished, beat it.”

“What a brat!” Ami smacked Shinkichi half-seriously on the head and turned to Shirasu, “Well, I’ll be off. See you later.” She gave a wave as she went back upstairs.

“Come and see me any time!” Shirasu waved back.

Shirasu and Shinkichi were left alone in the corridor. Shirasu looked at Shinkichi. As usual, he looked as if he’d just got up with his hair sticking up all over. He was trying to look grown up with piercings, but they didn’t suit him at all.

Shinkichi was totally obsessed with guns and the police. He was a kind of self-styled Mike Mizuno-type character. When Shirasu had moved to this apartment block, he’d done the customary rounds of the neighbours introducing himself. When he’d gone to the Kosuge’s, as soon as he mentioned to Shinkichi’s mother that he worked for the Tokyo Metropolitan Police Department, she’d immediately looked worried and confessed, “Our son has a mania for the police, and we’re really at our wits end. Could you possibly do something about it?”

In truth, Shinkichi’s obsession really wasn’t just a passing fad. He always confronted Shirasu with a barrage of questions. Why aren’t police cars in Japan equipped with shot guns? Is the stopping power of the New Nanbu 38 Special cartridge really sufficient? During a raid, do you use stun grenades? Does a Hostage Rescue Unit equipped with MP5 submachine guns really exist? If so, where and how do they train? There were hardly any questions that Shirasu could answer—not because it was classified information, but because he simply didn’t know the answers. Shinkichi was a bit cross-eyed and he’d got a bad feeling from him to begin with, but actually he was quite a nice lad when you got to know him. It seemed he was totally adrift in school, though.

“Look at this!” Shinkichi said triumphantly, thrusting an object he’d been hiding behind his back under Shirasu’s nose. It was an air pistol.

“Have you just bought it?”

“No, no—I customized it.”

“It’s illegal to increase its power, you know.”

“I haven’t increased its power. I *added* something to it. Look!”

Shinkichi grabbed the gun and aimed at the floor. A small dot of red light appeared on the dirty white linoleum floor.

“An infrared laser?”

“You got it. I fitted the laser sight myself. The gun’s a Glock 17, but it’s a lightweight with a cavity behind the grip. That’s where I put the battery and activation switch. It’s a lot smaller and easier to use than the type you attach to the frame.”

Recently it had become extremely easy to buy real gun accessories like this at gun shops. What you couldn’t buy were the real guns themselves and live ammunition.

Shirasu knew a bit about laser sights. When you pointed a gun on which a small infrared illuminator had been attached to the underside of the barrel, a red dot appeared on the target. When you pulled the trigger, the bullet hit the red dot. It made aiming by aligning the gun with your arm, shoulder and eye unnecessary. Once you got used to it, it was still accurate even if your position wasn’t good, and it really demonstrated its power during combat in the semi-dark. SWAT teams in Europe and the States had been equipped with them for years now, but they were still relatively new in Japan.

“If you squeeze the grip, the laser sight activates automatically.”

“Wow. Can I have a look?”

His curiosity aroused, Shirasu took the gun from Shinkichi.

“It’s light, isn’t it? It’s only a model, of course.”

“Glocks are light, that’s why they’re so good. It’s a pioneering gun with over half its parts made from reinforced plastic. It’s light, and its malfunction rate is virtually zero, making it the best possible gun for close range combat.”

“Mmm, right.”

Shirasu held the gun horizontally just above his belly button and squeezed the grip. A red dot appeared on the wall at the end of the corridor, seven metres away. It was small but bright, and perfectly visible.

“This is really useful, isn’t it? It must have been expensive.”

“I sold my body to pay for it. Hawf hawf hawf hawf!”

It was a rare joke from Shinkichi, and his laugh sounded bizarrely weird. Shirasu looked at Shinkichi and burst out laughing. But Shinkichi suddenly stopped laughing. He was looking down the corridor. Shirasu followed his gaze.

A Special Investigations officer had just reached the top of the stairs, and was standing with his shoulders squared and a grim look on his face. He looked alternately at Shirasu standing with the gun aimed at him, and the red dot on the breast of his own suit.

5

“We don’t believe this is your first offence,” said Horiuchi, a Special Investigations officer with a protruding lower lip and thick black-rimmed spectacles. “Most of the clothing and accessories in your apartment were probably shoplifted.”

Akiyoshi stared at a point on the desk without replying. Not only had Horiuchi hit the nail on the head, but he wanted to know as quickly as possible what action was going to be taken against him.

“We can trace products back to their retailers. That means we can also assess the amount of loss incurred by them.”

In other words, they haven’t investigated it yet. What the hell have they been doing over the last five days? Polishing desks?

“No doubt it amounts to a considerable sum. Doesn’t it?”

“... I don’t really know.” Akiyoshi’s vague answer was barely audible.

“It’s probably too much for us to settle the matter quietly.” Horiuchi sounded as if he was trying to convince himself. “As you probably know, the penalties are generally heavier for police officers who commit crimes than for ordinary people.”

Akiyoshi could almost hear the blood drain from his face. He felt a pain as if his stomach had suddenly constricted. His neck and shoulder muscles felt tight, and he thought he was about to throw up.

What little he did know about prison life only served to increase his fear. Convicts were handcuffed and tied together at the waist before being loaded into the prison van and taken to jail. Once their personal effects had been inspected, they were told to strip naked and a finger was inserted into their anus and moved around thoroughly to make sure they weren’t hiding anything there. This so-called arsehole baptism frequently had grown men in tears.

Inmates bathed twice a week, for just fifteen minutes. Even then, jostling for space with a motley bunch of tattooed yakuza, geriatrics about to kick the bucket, and simpletons unable to tell left from right, you’d be hard pressed to give your body a proper wash. When you wanted to take a leak, you had to stand at attention before the prison guard and announce, “Section xx, number xx, name xx, permission to go to the lavatory, Sir!”

To put it bluntly, you’d be better off dead.

“When they went to pick you up, it seems that you were dancing to music wearing

women's underwear. The officer in charge reported that you showed no sign of remorse for your crime."

Suspect behaviour whilst under house arrest was fatal. *I don't want to go to prison I don't want to go to prison I don't want to go to prison I don't want to go to prison!* Akiyoshi began to tremble.

"Looking at your behaviour, I'd say that you were asking to go to prison."

"I *do* regret it!" Akiyoshi raised bleary bloodshot eyes to the Special Investigations officer.

"That's hard to believe," Horiuchi said as if he couldn't care less what happened to Akiyoshi, then fell silent.

"I do, really." But Akiyoshi's words dissolved into the air like smoke. The seconds of silence ticked past.

Akiyoshi considered swearing how ashamed he was of his conduct, but he'd probably just be giving satisfaction to this officer who seemed to be actively enjoying winding him up, so he decided not to. Besides, whatever he said now, his punishment had already been decided. He was fearful to know what it was, but he wanted to be told about it right away, and he didn't want to have to look at this Special Investigations officer's face any more.

"Let's get to the point," Horiuchi said suddenly, repositioning his glasses.

Akiyoshi held his breath. *It's prison, no, it's dishonourable discharge, no, it's got to be prison, but will they take it that far? Maybe it'll be a suspended sentence? Oh God! Oh fuck, oh fuck!* Various voices clamoured inside Akiyoshi's head.

"If you accomplish a certain mission, we'll overlook it."

The words were so sudden and unexpected that Akiyoshi reflexively squeaked, "Huh?"

"If you accomplish a certain mission, we shall overlook your offence this time," Horiuchi repeated slowly.

"I'm not sure I understand what you're saying..."

"Cigarette?" Horiuchi asked abruptly.

"No thanks, I don't smoke."

"Really."

"So what is this all about?"

Horiuchi looked again at Akiyoshi as if he were sizing him up. It was an unpleasant

gaze. "I want you to calm down and listen," he said, although he himself was now looking nervous. He repositioned his glasses again.

"Right."

"What I am about to tell you about is classified information from to the Special Investigations Division."

Classified? What the hell's this about? Why is he revealing the Special Investigations Division's classified information to me? And what happened to my shoplifting offence?

"If you leak anything of what I'm about to tell you to anybody else, I will arrest you and deliver you to prison personally."

"Why reveal such important classified information to me...?"

"I'm not exactly happy about it either, but it can't be helped."

Akiyoshi had no idea what it was that couldn't be helped, but in any case it meant that it hadn't been Horiuchi's decision.

"Er, do I have the right to refuse to listen to it?" Akiyoshi asked timidly. He didn't know what it was about, but official secrets usually meant trouble.

Horiuchi raised his eyebrows, unprepared for such an impertinent question. "If you wish to be arrested, go ahead and refuse."

What a mess.

"Can I make a decision after listening—"

"No, you can't," Horiuchi shot back.

"So, if I listen to it there's no going back...?"

"That's the way it is."

In other words, Horiuchi was telling him that he had to successfully undertake some mission that was about to be explained to him. If he didn't, he'd be punished for shoplifting.

"Right. Just tell me one thing. Will this mission place my life in danger? I think I have the right to ask that much."

"Place your life in danger?" Horiuchi looked as if he was grimacing, but in reality he was laughing. "Good lord no! There shouldn't be anything like that."

"It's not dangerous, then," Akiyoshi pressed his point.

"Absolutely not."

Absolutely not, huh?

“Alright. I’ll listen.”

If it means getting out of that arsehole baptism and living in prison hell, let’s give it a go.

“Okay. Let’s go somewhere else and I’ll explain it to you. Follow me,” said Horiuchi, standing up.

6

“So, how’s it going?” asked Shirasu, not bothering to conceal the irritation in his voice. He was sitting in the back seat next to a crew-cut Special Investigations officer named Sayama. “Have you come up with any proof that I nicked some of that stolen money?”

Sayama exchanged a look with the Special Investigations officer in the driver’s seat before responding, “The day before yesterday you went to the supermarket accompanied by Chief Inspector Abe here, didn’t you?” He indicated Abe in the driver’s seat with his eyes.

“So?”

The day before yesterday his dwindling stock of provisions had reached rock bottom, so he’d gone shopping for groceries and other daily necessities at the supermarket by Kami Shakujii Station. Permission was necessary to go shopping, so Abe had come with him. Shirasu had felt depressed pushing his trolley with the pale, gloomy Abe following silently in his wake as if in a funeral procession.

“You paid with a ten thousand yen note, didn’t you?”

Shirasu’s reminiscing was cut short by Sayama’s voice.

“Well yes, but...”

An unpleasant presentiment started spreading through his chest. Had that ten thousand yen note been part of that money? He’d put it in his wallet together with his own money, so he had no idea. But it wasn’t as if they’d recorded the numbers of the notes, and he’d checked it carefully for bloodstains as soon as he’d got home that night.

“Actually there was another Special Investigations officer in the supermarket. Someone you don’t know. After you left, he confiscated the note you’d paid with and took it to forensics.”

Shirasu looked at Sayama in silence waiting for him to go on.

“We hadn’t really been expecting much, but this time we were in luck. There were traces of dried saliva on the note. According to DNA analysis, it was a perfect match for

Yoichi Katayama. That's the Katayama you and Detective Inspector Ochiai shot dead."

Shirasu had the sensation that he'd just broken away from the flow of time and had begun to drift in space. Even the landscape speeding past the car window suddenly lost any sense of reality and his existence within it seemed to recede further into the distance. There was nothing he could say now. Even if he did regret having committed the crime, it was too late.

"We can talk about it at leisure back at MPD."

Shirasu was no longer listening. Into his mind had floated an image of himself in an unheated prison in the freezing mid-winter, squatting trembling on an unenclosed, openly visible toilet.

He'd be better off dead. For the first time in his life, Shirasu really thought so.

7

"Before I explain the mission to you, I need to fill you in on some background details," started Horiuchi.

"Ah," replied Akiyoshi vaguely, as he looked around the room. It was empty. They'd moved to a different room, but the only difference he could see was that it was slightly larger. There was also a one-metre-tall by two-metres-wide two-way mirror (presumably that's what it was) on one wall. That was all.

The two cups of coffee on the table had been left untouched, steam rising from them as they gradually cooled.

"As I think you will by now have realised, the main role of the Special Investigations Division of the National Police Agency's Commissioner General's Secretariat is to expose and prevent crimes committed by police officers. That, and to build and maintain the public's trust in the police force."

Akiyoshi nodded meekly.

"Us officers in the Special Investigations Division generally have the authority to carry out investigations into all officers in the police force as a whole. That involves interrogation, property search, and surveillance. Furthermore, in the extremely rare cases when we deem it necessary, we may also use bugging devices."

In other words, they could do anything they liked. The troublesome formalities necessary in the case of the general public could be sidestepped when the suspect was a police officer. Police officers aren't so much people as members of that huge

organizational pyramid that makes up the police force. It can't have been just Akiyoshi who felt that way, any police officer must have felt it at least once. Listening to Horiuchi now, Akiyoshi felt his awareness of it deepen even further.

Horiuchi looked at Akiyoshi questioningly as if to say, *So, have you understood so far?* Akiyoshi signalled his assent.

"I qualified what I said earlier with the term 'generally,' because the fact is that the general rule doesn't always apply." From his expression, it was clear that Horiuchi wasn't exactly happy with that fact.

"But as part of the Commissioner General's Secretariat, isn't the Special Investigations Division at the top of the police organizational structure?"

"That's correct. Nevertheless, the reality isn't that clear-cut. There are too many cases where a department or even a whole division don't want the upper echelons to find about an internal transgression and instead try to deal with it themselves on the quiet."

"I suppose there would be."

It stood to reason. Everyone wanted to cover their own arse. It might sound courageous to report some transgression, unless you considered it from the perspective of a senior ranking officer forced to take responsibility for a stupid subordinate, or a detective who faced bullying in the ranks if he failed to turn a blind eye.

"In terms of our duty to prevent crimes by police officers, a lack of transparency within the organization is never desirable, but when that lack of transparency and the level of secrecy becomes the very nature of the organization, it makes our job extremely difficult."

"Are you referring to Public Security?"

It seemed that Akiyoshi had preempted Horiuchi. The corners of the officer's mouth rose slightly.

"You're sharp, aren't you."

Akiyoshi didn't feel any satisfaction at being praised.

"You're right. The Special Investigations Division and the Public Security Division don't get along. They come under, respectively, the Commissioner General's Secretariat and the Security Bureau, which are otherwise known as the twin heads of the National Police Agency. We have never successfully completed an investigation into an officer of the Public Security Division. For the most part, we've been blocked midway as soon as

the Security Bureau voices its objection to the Commissioner General's Secretariat.

For the first time, Horiuchi looked irritated.

"So it seems that even the elite Special Investigations Division doesn't always get its own way." Akiyoshi hadn't meant to sound sarcastic, but Horiuchi's face darkened. Hastily he added, "So, scandals in the Public Security Division have been covered up? Or, rather, you failed to expose them?"

Horiuchi scowled, as if Akiyoshi had chosen his words deliberately to wind him up.

"Let's just say that we have been secretly keeping an eye on Public Security officers suspected of using their position as police officers to commit some offence. When we do, I don't know where or how they get wind of it but you could say it's almost a given that the head of the Security Bureau will send an objection to the head of the Secretariat. Officer X is currently investigating an important case, so don't get in his way—something along those lines. The head of the Secretariat doesn't want to get into any unnecessary quarrel, so he tells us to put the investigation on hold for a while. Which means indefinitely. That's happened any number of times. In other words, whatever a Public Security officer does he can always claim it's in the line of duty."

"Aren't you exaggerating a bit?"

"Not at all. The nature of the job in Public Security does frequently necessitate acting independently. Acquiring a new informer or getting information from an existing informer mostly involves acting alone. And so the lack of transparency begins. To give you an example, we were keeping an eye on a chief inspector from the MPD's Public Security Bureau Division Two. I'll call him K. K had arrested the son of a union leader in a major company who'd been caught red handed in possession of stimulants. The kid had never taken pills before, let alone bought any. There was a suspicion that K had accepted a bribe from the executive director of Labour Relations in order to crush the union. We started investigating him, but K got wind of it and reported it to his superior. It went all the way to the head of the NPA's Security Bureau and the usual objection arrived at the Secretariat. We were ordered to suspend our investigation, and in the end we never could get any proof of K's misconduct."

Akiyoshi shrugged.

"I'll give you another example. A shot was fired at the home of a freelance journalist who had written an expose of the personal relationship between the leader of a right-wing group and a well-known yakuza gang, and he received a blackmail letter

which threatened to kill his son and daughter if he didn't suspend publication and recall all copies sold. The private junior high school his kids attended was named in the letter. Since the journalist had published his book under a different name, it was a mystery how whoever had written the letter could have discovered his real name and home address, let alone the fact he even had kids. However, one possibility occurred to him. While he was still writing the book, he had requested in strictest confidence an interview with a chief inspector in Division Three of the MPD's Public Security Bureau, but had been turned down. It was possible that chief inspector had passed the journalist's personal information to the leader of the right-wing group. The case came to the attention of the Commissioner General's Secretariat, and we started an investigation into that chief inspector. However, barely a fortnight later the inevitable objection was sent from the Security Bureau and we received the order to suspend our investigation. The reason? This chief inspector is currently investigating a right-wing group, so don't get in the way."

It was a depressing story. Akiyoshi sighed, and muttered "You really don't get along, do you?" He was beginning to get a presentiment of how Horiuchi's story might be connected to his own mission.

Horiuchi took a sip of his long-cold coffee and moistened his mouth. "We are now initiating a new investigation into an officer in the Public Security Division."

"Let's hope this one goes a bit better than the others."

Horiuchi ignored this. He opened a drawer in the table and took something unexpected out: a remote control. He pointed it at the two-way mirror and pressed the switch. The mirror immediately became transparent like glass, and a dazzlingly bright light shone onto the opposite wall.

"Flip that switch, will you?"

Akiyoshi got up from his chair and flipped the switch on the wall to turn off the ceiling light.

8

"This building is a complex of shops and residences called Hill Stone Villa, in Kami Meguro 3 Chome, Meguro Ward. It's just off the Yamanote Dori main road. There are four shops there, one of which is a members-only bar."

Shirasu was struggling to somehow retain Sayama's explanation in his hotly flushed

head. He was feeling panic stricken, still in shock from the totally unexpected turn of events. If you accomplish a certain mission, your crime will be overlooked, he'd been told. He couldn't help panicking. After all, he had no choice in the matter. If he didn't accept the mission, he'd be sent to prison. Without giving Shirasu any time to prepare himself, Sayama had dimmed the lights and switched on the projector embedded in the wall.

"The bar is called Kling Klang..."

"What?"

"Kling Klang. It's onomatopoeia in German. Like Ding Dong, or Crash Bang, or something like that.

"Crash Bang..." What a stupid name, Shirasu thought.

"The owner of the bar is Hiroki Aizawa. He's a former actor, stage name Hiroki Kyodo. You've heard of him, I expect."

Shirasu's eyes grew round.

"Of course I've heard of him! He was a cop in that long-running 'Tokyo Big Search' detective series on TV when I was in high school! He was in a lot of films too."

"That's him."

"He disappeared off the screen completely. I guess he's been in retirement, huh?"

Sayama nodded. "Six years ago he had an operation for stomach cancer, after which he retired from showbiz and went off somewhere with his wife. That is until two years ago, when he turned up unexpectedly in Tokyo and started up this bar. He runs it together with his wife. It's members only, so naturally the clientele are limited. We originally started investigating it because it seems that some pretty unusual radical types get together there. For example..."

The screen dimmed, and then the next slide came up. The picture was dark with a coarse grain, and clearly taken from a high angle at some distance. It showed two couples emerging through the building's arched gate.

"The stocky middle-aged man in glasses on the right is Yoshifumi Shinoda. He's a film director. Maybe you've heard of him?"

"I've heard the name," replied Shirasu.

"The short woman on his left is Yoriko Ashida. She's the managing director of Searching Products, an imports agency."

"Oh? What about that huge guy in sunglasses?" Shirasu pointed at a slim,

conspicuously tall man who stood a head and a half taller than the other three.

“That’s not a man, it’s a woman.”

“Huh?” Shirasu leaned forward and strained his eyes for a closer look.

The image was dark, so all he could tell was that she was wearing what looked like a black suit. Broad shoulders, a firm jaw, and short dark hair. She looked just like a man. However, her skin did seem a little whiter and more translucent than a man’s.

“A woman...?”

“She’s a fashion model called Nami Arikawa. She’s only half Japanese—her father’s French.”

“No wonder... And that guy with a scruffy beard on the left?”

“A gay photographer called Tetsuaki Okabe. He’s new on the scene, just put out a book of photos last year. He takes male nudes. Then...”

A new slide came up, this time of just one couple. It was so dark neither of them could be seen clearly.

“This woman here... actually it’s a man dressed up as a woman.”

“A man?” Shirasu frowned.

“Yup, an avant-garde Butoh dancer called Yasuhito Shibusawa. His performance apparently consists of going on stage completely naked daubed with paint and writhing about screaming.”

Shirasu tried to imagine it. Then thought, *No, I’d rather not.*

“As for this guy...”

“Don’t tell me it’s a woman dressed up as a man.”

“Actually, it is.”

Shirasu forgot his position and started giggling.

“Masako Hirono. Owns a member’s-only S&M club in Roppongi. It’s a pretty well-known classy outfit.”

“Yeah, I guess that’s what you’d call radical.”

A number of other slides followed, all of them showing members of Kling Klang.

The managing director of a venture capital enterprise, an author, the unemployed son of a wealthy aristocrat, an avant-garde musician, a performing arts post-grad student—some of them famous, some of them not, but all with some vice or other. A surprising number of them were going in and out of the club dressed up as members of the opposite sex, and also, according to Sayama, even of the ones that looked normal,

many were gay or lesbian. It seemed that the clientele had pretty radical attitudes towards sex, too. For a police detective like Shirasu, all of the members of Kling Klang could have been from another planet—they were people who only did what they wanted, who had a degree of social success and demanded some eccentric stimulus, and who stepped lightly out of the framework of society

“Recently, a new member joined. A chief inspector from Foreign Affairs Division One.”

“Don’t be ridiculous!” Shirasu’s voice became shrill. “An MPD officer wouldn’t want to mix with this kind of crowd. He must be working undercover to find out more about them. There are enough dodgy ones amongst them to arouse suspicions.”

“I can’t say whether or not it’s an undercover operation, but he has told the other members that he’s a freelance journalist.”

“How do you know that?”

“Because we’re listening in on their conversations,” said Sayama lightly.

He brought up another slide. It showed a man’s profile and upper body as he descended the stairs of an apartment block. His hair was long on top, and shaved on the back and sides. His cheeks were plump, although he wasn’t fat, and he had a slender neck and broad shoulders. Public Security and Criminal Investigations might be different areas of the police, but they all had the same air unique to the force.

“Chief Inspector Shuji Ishimaki from Foreign Affairs Division One of the MPD’s Public Security Bureau. Forty-seven years old. He’s an extremely intelligent man. Back in his Police Training Academy days, his grades were always in the top five per cent. You probably already know that the recruits with the best grades almost always go to Public Security. He got married at the age of twenty-nine, and has a seventeen-year-old daughter.”

“You said you’re listening in on them, right? How on earth did you get a bug into the bar?”

“The bar takes a number of newspapers for use by members. The *Yomiuri*, *Mainichi*, *Nikkei*, *Sports Shinbun*—but not *Asahi*. So Chief Inspector Abe disguised himself as a salesman for *Asahi*, forced his way into the bar, and had a heated argument about it with Kyodo. During which he managed to place a bug under the counter.

Shirasu couldn’t help chuckling at the story. Sayama’s face stiffened.

“What’s so funny?”

“Nothing, just the police can be weird, too.”

“Meaning what?”

“It’s just funny that a detective would pass himself off as an *Asahi Shinbun* salesman, of all things.”

“Have you quite finished?”

Shirasu stifled a snort. “Yes, please go on.”

“The conversations have all been taped. We’ve edited and transcribed the most important bits. Here.” Sayama passed several pages to Shirasu. “Ishimaki goes by the alias of Tsutsui at the bar,” he said, taking out another remote control from the drawer. He pointed it at the projector and pressed the button. Some weird music started flowing out of two speakers embedded in the facing wall. Over the primitive, slightly irregular beat of a large drum sounded the fragmentary, dissonant chords of a synthesizer overlaid by a metallic scratch sound effect. Shirasu supposed it was music playing in the bar. He followed the written transcript as he listened.

At the top of the transcript was the date of the recording. The first was on the fourth of June.

Okabe (gay photographer): “So how’s work been going lately?”

Ishimaki: “I’ve been thinking it’s about time to start a new project. I’ve been slacking off lately, but a man has to work (laughs).”

Arikawa (model): “What topic are you going to pick next?”

Ishimaki: “Hmmm. The question of whether the time has come for the world to seriously consider the legalization of drugs.”

Okabe: “Brilliant. I’d been thinking it was about time to consider legalizing drugs. Marijuana, at least.”

Arikawa: “I’m in favour of legalizing marijuana. It’s harmless, after all. Alcohol is much worse for you. Do you smoke dope, Tsutsui?”

Ishimaki: “Yeah, once a month or so.”

Arikawa: “I smoke about three spliffs a week... ha ha ha!”

(All of them laugh)

Ishimaki: “I’m in favour of legalizing drugs because it’ll cut off the biggest source of funds for organized crime syndicates. I suspect that more than a few people working in the legal system secretly think that way too. They don’t say so openly though. I’m

thinking of trying to persuade them to talk about it.”

Okabe: “Yeah, that’s really good. Go for it.”

The tape stopped.

Shirasu’s eyes met Sayama’s. He felt that he was expected to give his impression.

“Officials debating about legalizing drugs? Well, maybe they’re more progressive in Public Security. But anyway, there’s nothing particularly wrong with them discussing this sort of thing, is there?”

Sayama pressed the switch on the remote control once more.

Hirono (S&M club owner): “You know, there are police officers, detectives, and lawyers among my regular customers. They’re all so bored with their lives you can’t help feeling sorry for them. How about you? Don’t you feel any desire to change yourself?”

Ishimaki: “Sure I do. I don’t know about the M thing though. I think S is more suited to my personality.”

Hirono: “Come and check it out. We keep the strictest privacy, so you don’t need to worry about that. You’ll probably get to know some police and other members of the legal profession who could be useful to you in your line of work.”

“You’ve really got balls, haven’t you Ishimaki!” Shirasu couldn’t contain himself.

9

“I think by now you’ve got a pretty good idea of Chief Inspector Ishimaki’s character and personality.”

“Well, kind of,” replied Akiyoshi.

“So what do you think?” demanded Horiuchi, his lower jaw thrust out even further than usual.

“Um, what I think... well... he’s not doing anything particularly wrong, is he? It sounds a bit like he’s up to something.”

“For our part, we think he’s worth keeping an eye on at least.”

“You’re keeping him under surveillance because he’s got some unsuitable ideas for a police officer, and is hanging out with a dubious crowd of sexual deviants? It’s just my

opinion, but I think as far as he's concerned it's part of his job."

"His job?"

"Yes, he probably infiltrated that bar in order to get close to a particular customer there."

"There is a remote possibility of that, of course."

"Er, I've been wondering... how come you decided to place him under surveillance in the first place?"

"We received a tip off," replied Horiuchi. "We're always getting anonymous phone calls, most of which are probably from police officers. They see something underhand going on in their own section and they don't want to ignore it, but they know they'll be attracting trouble for themselves if they make an official report so they do it anonymously. Either that, or they want to take revenge on a superior who's been bullying them, so they find their tormentor's weak spot and tell us about it in the hope that we'll go after them. Various reasons like that. In this case, there was a phone call informing us that Chief Inspector Ishimaki from Foreign Affairs Division One of the MPD's Public Security Bureau had been seen frequenting an inappropriate bar for a police officer, so we decided to check him out."

"Maybe Foreign Affairs knows what he's up to?"

"Maybe. But Foreign Affairs Division One specializes in Russia, and as far as we can make out there doesn't seem to be anyone among the bar's clientele who could possibly have links to the Russian mafia. We can't say for sure that he's not on an undercover job, but we feel that it's highly unlikely."

Horiuchi reached out a hand for the cup of lukewarm coffee, then stopped. "What's more, this isn't the first time we've placed Ishimaki under surveillance. It's the *third* time," he said, emphasizing "third."

"What was he guilty of before?"

"When he was still in Public Security Division One, he was suspected of being involved in attempts by the management of Daito Corporation to appease union leaders. The second time was after he'd moved to the Foreign Affairs Division. He was suspected of accepting a considerable sum of money in exchange for keeping the name of a person who was importing and selling knives used by the former Soviet Union's Spetsnaz assault team off their blacklist of people to be watched. Although we weren't able to prove either case."

He sounded genuinely regretful, and Akiyoshi had the unpleasant sensation that he still hadn't got over his resentment at their failure.

"So, what is it you want me to do?" asked Akiyoshi, although he already had a pretty good idea.

"We want you to find out Chief Inspector Ishimaki's objective. You probably already know why we're asking you to do this."

"Because of my cross-dressing vice?"

Horiuchi nodded. "There's another reason too. We want to avoid the usual complications with the Security Bureau, and so we're sending in someone with no connection to the Special Investigations Division."

"You mean that if I'm found out, you'll be able to wash your hands of me, is that it?"

"Well, if you want to make it sound like a TV drama, I guess that's about it."

Akiyoshi was so taken aback that he was at a loss for words.

"Ah... that is... how to put it... in other words... a spy—that's what you mean, isn't it?" he said timidly, watching Horiuchi's face carefully. Even when he mentioned the word spy, Horiuchi didn't so much as bat an eyelid.

"We only do this when absolutely necessary. We have limited manpower, and there are also many cases where we can't openly carry out surveillance," he answered matter-of-factly, with no trace of embarrassment.

"Do you think it will work?"

"Is there any chance that it won't?"

"Of course there is! Just because I'm into dressing up as a woman doesn't mean I'll automatically gain access to that bar. And what about my identity?"

"You'll start by getting close to one of the members. We'll select the appropriate target. You can pose as an artist. You won't need ID papers for that—more important is whether or not you can get in with that sort of crowd. If you can manage that much, nobody's going to worry about who you are."

"Ishimaki will probably be suspicious."

"If he becomes suspicious of you, then we shall intervene. Also, you'll have a partner."

Akiyoshi had been reaching for his coffee, but his hand stopped in mid-air.

"What did you say?" he said, blinking twice.

“We have no intention of sending you in alone. We shall therefore be sending in someone as your partner and supervisor. You will also be his supervisor. You’ll be keeping an eye on each other.”

“He’ll only get in the way!”

Just as Akiyoshi had accepted that it was the only way of avoiding disciplinary action, they’d suddenly saddled him with an unnecessary partner. It pissed him off.

“I’d just been getting into the idea of it. Let me go in alone. Please. I’ll do it much better that way.”

Horiuchi stayed quiet.

“But you’ve got the place bugged—can’t you keep track of what I’m doing that way?” Akiyoshi persisted, but Horiuchi simply shook his head.

“No.”

“Why not...?”

“Because we’re not receiving anything from the bug now. It’s either been discovered or it’s broken, but in any case it’s no longer functional.”

“Why not fit another one?”

“If it’s been discovered, then Kyodo is going to be very wary. It won’t be possible to fit another one for the present.”

“Can’t you sneak into the place when it’s closed?”

Horiuchi gave him a sharp look. “Are you asking us to break in? That’s illegal, you know. It’s owned by a civilian.”

Akiyoshi gave a deep sigh. Without looking up he asked, “So what type have you got me partnered with? You referred to him as ‘he’ so I presume it’s a guy.”

“Let me introduce you to him. He’s already here.”

With Akiyoshi in tow, Horiuchi pressed a button beside the door of the room. There was a click as the electronic lock opened, and a man in his late forties put his head around the door. Horiuchi looked at him and nodded, then the door opened wide. Horiuchi turned to Akiyoshi and beckoned with his eyes for him to enter. Akiyoshi’s body stiffened with sickening nervousness as he walked into the room.

Right in the centre of the room was a desk, at which was seated a tall, short-haired man who was looking their way. He had a rather long face with a broad forehead, and the furrow leading down beneath his nose was deep. His eyebrows were thick, and

seemed connected by the sparse hairs growing in the space between them.

He looked tough.

Violent, hot-tempered, arrogant, the type that bullies anything weaker than himself. Those were the images that rose one after another into Akiyoshi's mind.

Horiuchi stood between them.

"I'll introduce you. This is Detective Inspector Katsuhiko Shirasu from the Armed Robberies Unit of Criminal Investigations Division One, MPD. Shirasu, this is Detective Inspector Munetaka Akiyoshi from the Violent Crimes Unit of Criminal Investigations Division One. I presume you know each other by sight?"

Akiyoshi did indeed recall having seen him around at work, in the toilets, the corridors, and the car park. The guy must have seen his face before too. However, although they were both in Division One, they'd never spoken to each other.

"The normal thing is to at least greet each other, isn't it?" prompted Horiuchi.

"How do you do? I'm Akiyoshi." Akiyoshi gave a slight bow, his eyes fixed at a point on Shirasu's collar.

"Shirasu," responded Shirasu, also avoiding Akiyoshi's eyes. His voice was low, and angry.