

Chapter 4: Tokyo

THE NEXT MORNING SAW SHARPE UP BRIGHT AND EARLY, repairing the damage to his computer and to his office. Mieko was still sleeping, snoring slightly, as he made his way to the shower to wake himself up for the day ahead. His face still felt sore, and he decided not to shave that day. As he'd said to Sugita/Ishihara, there was little work that had been lost, but there was still a mass of papers and general level of messiness in the room that exceeded even the usual standards for the place. Looking through his appointments, he realised that there was nothing that couldn't be put off for a day or so. He sent off a couple of e-mail messages to take care of a progress meeting demanding a report (yesterday's neglected task), and attendance at a lecture given by a technical society that Sharpe only attended when he was on the prowl for new clients.

As he strolled into the kitchen to make the coffee for breakfast, he heard waking-up noises from Mieko. He could almost hear her smile as she walked into the kitchen behind Sharpe and flung her arms around him, pressing her breasts against his back. She was stark naked.

“Get dressed, you lewd and lascivious wench,” he said, turning in her embrace, returning her kiss and playfully slapping her backside. She put on a pout of mock annoyance, and sashayed out of the room.

By the time she returned, dressed and made up for the day, the coffee was ready, and they sat down to discuss the day ahead, as they usually did. Sharpe told her that he wasn’t going to go to the customer today, and was going to get on with the work he should have done earlier, and Mieko informed him in return that she was going to go round to Meema’s to pick up a few things she’d left there. Sharpe wasn’t aware that she’d taken enough with her for one night to be able to forget anything, but he knew from experience that Mieko was capable of leaving a trail of belongings behind her wherever she went – one reason why she put up with his own messiness, he supposed.

“Aren’t you going to Tokyo station?” asked Mieko.

“What for?” he replied, and then remembered the key he’d been given the previous night. “Oh, yes. I suppose I’d better find out what it’s all about. I’ll do it when I find a place to stop in the report I’m meant to be writing. It shouldn’t take me more than an hour to go there and back. And I can buy a spare hard disk while I’m there.”

He carried his third cup of coffee of the morning to his office, and started on his report for a major investment bank (not the one where Vishal worked), who had the idea that they might save some money by outsourcing some of their information technology to India, so that all their Tokyo databases would be managed from Bangalore. Sharpe’s job was to analyse the possible risks and downsides of this approach, as seen from the Tokyo end.

As it happened, Sharpe thought this proposal was one of the silliest ideas he’d heard in a long time, but he was finding it difficult to put his thoughts into diplomatic

language for the report, so after an hour or so, he put on his jacket and walked to the station to catch the train for Tokyo. On the way there he passed a small builder's yard, and made a mental note to call in there on the way back to get the broken window fixed.



THE JOURNEY TO TOKYO STATION WAS QUITE LONG, and involved two changes of train. He spent the time on the train idly reliving last night's adventures, from the time he'd rushed out of the house to rescue Mieko, to the time when they'd fallen asleep contentedly in each other's arms. On balance he decided that he rather liked Katsuyama's father-in-law. At least he seemed to say what he meant, unlike Major Barclay, for one.

On arrival at the vast sprawling complex of Tokyo station, which was home to any number of Japan Railways lines and a number of subway lines, he wondered where to try first. The Yaesu side of the station was the busiest side of the station, so he decided to try his luck there first. Pushing his way through the crowds of middle-aged ladies, all of whom seemed to be determined to block his way by moving in front of him before stopping dead in their tracks and standing rooted to the spot, Sharpe entered the underground area near the Gin-no-Suzu meeting place, where many of the coin lockers were to be found. A look at one bank of coin lockers there showed that they were of a new electronic keyless type where his key would obviously be useless. The next bank had numbers which were completely wrong, and the key tags were the wrong colour. By the time he'd checked the tenth bank of coin lockers around the meeting area, he was beginning to get more than a little discouraged. He guessed that the lockers at platform level would be of the same type, but felt

he had to check them, all the same. A trudge up the stairs confirmed this.

His next stop was the other side of the station – the Marunouchi side. Remembering a factoid he had heard once, that more people use Tokyo station every day than live in New Zealand, he fought his way to the other side against the flow of human traffic with some difficulty, passing a couple of other banks of lockers in the underground passage, neither of which seemed to offer anything useful. Nothing there which looked promising. The coin lockers had keys, but one set had a completely different set of numbers, and the other set seemed to use a completely different shape and size of key to the one in his pocket.

Time for the subway lines. He couldn't find the coin lockers at the Marunouchi line for some time, as the area was under construction, but emerging from that area, he spotted a small isolated group of lockers opposite, in an area with relatively little traffic, and somewhat off the beaten track. He saw that the top row contained locker 7415, there was no key in it, and his key fitted. He swung open the door to disclose a large bag with the name of an electronics retail chain on it, drew out the bag and peeked inside. His first thought was that Al Kowalski wasn't going to be burgling any houses in the near future. His next was that he had to find a place to be sick very soon, preferably out of the way, where he would not draw any attention to himself and the locker with the bag and its ghastly contents.

He stuffed the bag back where it had come from and re-locked the locker quickly, pushing in three 100-yen coins to do so, trusting that no-one had seen him. He walked fast, almost running, following the signs for the toilets and dashed inside.

Thanking God that at least one cubicle was empty, his stomach heaved, and what seemed like the whole of last week's meals erupted to fill the porcelain. Flushing the mess away, he wiped his chin with toilet paper, and staggered out to the basins where he splashed cold water over his face. He drew a few curious looks, but not that many – Japanese seem less shy about exhibiting the contents of their stomachs before the world than the British, but usually late at night. Mid-morning was a slightly unusual time for public vomiting.

Time for a drink, he thought, looking around for a drinking fountain.

As he bent over the water spout in the corner of the room, he felt a hand on his shoulder, and heard a vaguely familiar Australian voice. "You all right, mate? Strewth, you look like death warmed over."

Sharpe looked up. "What the bloody hell are you doing following me about?" he asked Jon, who had reverted to his Australian backpacker look.

"Shut up, and let me get you a coffee. You look as though you could use one," replied the other. "And what the bloody hell happened to your face?" looking at the scabs on his cheek.

"You're the one who should be shutting up," replied Sharpe. It wasn't the most witty bit of repartee going, but he didn't care. "Now get out of my fucking way and stay out of my life. OK?" He prodded Jon firmly in the chest with a pointing forefinger.

"No way," said Jon, pointing a finger back. "There's no way I'm going to let you walk away from this without finding what's going on. Tim Barclay's going to have my balls for breakfast if I come back with no answers."

"Then I wish him *bon appétit*," replied Sharpe. "Now, if you'll excuse me—" His stomach gave a sudden unexpected

lurch to port, and he dashed for the cubicle again. When he came out again, Jon was still standing there waiting.

“Oh, for God’s sake, buy me a coffee or something,” snapped Sharpe. “I suppose you’re going to find out all about this sooner or later, so I might as well get a cup of coffee out of it.”

“Good man,” said Jon. He made as if to take Sharpe’s elbow, but Sharpe shrugged him off.

They found a Starbucks in the underground mall adjoining the station, under one of the new office blocks that were going up on the Marunouchi side. “We’ll sit near the door,” said Sharpe. “I need the air, even if it is underground. And mine’s a double espresso – no sugar. I’ll get the table, you get the coffee. Don’t worry, I’m not going to run away. I couldn’t if I wanted to.”

He was telling the truth – he didn’t feel like running anywhere. Sitting down at the table, the memory of the bag in the locker came back to him, and he retched again, but there was nothing in his stomach to back it up.

Jon arrived with the coffees.

“Thanks,” said Sharpe, and winced as he took his first sip. Jon just sat, waiting.

“Well, aren’t you going to ask me any questions?” asked Sharpe.

“No, since you probably aren’t going to answer them. I’ll wait until you talk.” Jon sipped his iced latte in silence, and folded his arms behind his head. Neither man spoke for a few minutes.

“Did you see Katsuyama’s body?” asked Sharpe, breaking the silence.

“No, why the hell would I have done?” replied Jon. “All we knew was what we were told by Ishihara.”

“Did he see the body?” asked Sharpe.

“I suppose so. Why? What’s strange about it?”

“I heard a rumour that it wasn’t Katsuyama’s body and that Katsuyama himself is still alive.”

Jon put down his cup and stared at Sharpe. “I think you’re serious.”

“Well, the person who told me this was certainly serious about it. His view was that Katsuyama had been kidnapped by the Japanese authorities, which I personally think is a complete load of bullcrap.”

“Is that the same person who did that?” pointing to Sharpe’s face.

“Could be, could be,” replied Sharpe.

“Well, I suppose we can always get an exhumation order to find out whether this is a load of bovine excrement or not?” suggested Jon. Sharpe began to laugh. “What’s so bloody funny?”

“You haven’t been here that long, have you?”

“You know I haven’t. Why?”

“First off, no-one’s buried here in Japan. It’s all cremation by law—you’re not allowed to bury the dear departed. Next off, they don’t hang about here when it comes to disposing of each other. Usually there’s a sort of wake affair the day after they pop their clogs, and the funeral’s the day after that. You have to wait 24 hours, but most people go ahead with things very fast indeed. The contents of the coffin with Katsuyama’s name on it are probably a little pile of grey ash by now.”

“They do things that fast even when there’s suspicion of foul play?” asked Jon.

“Seems like it.”

“Jeezus. No wonder there are so many unsolved crimes in this country.” He took a pull at his coffee. “So if he’s not dead, where is he?”

“I don’t know. And if I did, why would I want to tell you?”

“Oh, good God, you really are touchy today, aren’t you?” retorted Jon.

“And just how would you feel if you’d just come across a severed head in a station coin locker?” replied Sharpe. The words were out of his mouth before he could bite them off.

Jon dropped his paper coffee cup into his lap. The last drops spilled over his trousers, but he didn’t seem to notice. “A what?” he croaked. “You’re joking, right?”

“I never joke about that kind of thing. Why the bloody hell do you think I was puking my guts up? For the fun of it?”

“OK.” Jon’s mood was one of humouring a lunatic. “A head, you say? Just sitting there in the locker?”

“No, the thing was in a damn’ Yodobashi Camera bag.”

“Severed?” repeated Jon, stupidly.

“Of course the bloody thing was severed,” replied Sharpe. “You couldn’t stuff a whole body into one of those lockers, could you?”

“Jesus Christ. Weird things do seem to be happening to you, don’t they? Do you know where the head came from?”

“Yes. From the body of Al Kowalski.”

Jon’s eyes bulged. “Who would have done that? And why?”

“I think it was meant as a present for me. A sort of peace offering from someone who wants me to see them as a friend.”

“You have some fucking weird friends, I’ll tell you that much for free.” He started mopping his trousers with a paper napkin. “Who’s the mystery friend, then?”

Sharpe ignored the question. “So what are you going to do about it?”

“What am I going to do about it?” he asks. “Why the hell should I have anything to do with it?”

“Well, I’m certainly not going to get involved with this. You’ve probably got diplomatic immunity or something, haven’t you?”

“I do have a kind of diplomatic standing,” Jon admitted. “In any case, I suppose that I stand higher in the eyes of the Japanese authorities than you do. Did you touch anything?”

“Well, I had to, to lift up the bag and look inside, didn’t I?”

“So your bloody fingerprints are all over everything? Oh, bloody wonderful. I’m going to have to tell Ishihara about this, you realise? I suppose the bag can be sanitised somehow before we tell him.”

“Can you keep me out of it, then? I really don’t need any more hassle about this.”

“God knows how, but we can try.”

“We?”

“Well, I’m going to have to tell the poison dwarf about this as well, you know. Major Tim bloody Barclay’s going to love the melodrama. He’ll probably wet himself with excitement. Oh, how absolutely *thrilling*,” he mimicked.

“Again, keep me out of it with him. I don’t want to have any more to do with him if it can be helped,” said Sharpe.

“I don’t really see how I can manage it.” Jon was thinking aloud. “I mean, how do I go about stumbling over severed heads in station lockers unless someone guides me there?”

“A tall dark stranger presses the key into your hand as you get off the train at Tokyo station?” suggested Sharpe.

“Come off it.”

“All right, it arrives in your mailbox with a little note saying ‘Tokyo station?’”

“Better, I suppose. Why the hell should I shield you, anyway? You’re hardly being co-operative with us.”

“For very good reasons,” Sharpe pointed out. “My place gets turned over by a friend of yours, my girlfriend gets abducted,” Jon showed great surprise at this, “and I get beaten up last night. Where the bloody hell are you while all this is happening? And then, when I really need you lot like I need a hole in the head, you turn up.”

“All right. There’s not that many of us, you know. We can’t provide twenty-four hour coverage for you. And what’s this about your girlfriend being abducted?”

“Believe me, I really don’t want to tell you anything about this. How many of you is ‘not many’, then?”

“Two or three,” Jon confessed, shamefacedly.

“And that’s you and Tiny Tim and someone else when he’s not got anything better to do?” asked Sharpe. Jon nodded.

“Why the hell don’t you two work with the real professionals in this game, if things get this rough? All right, so I’m sure there’s some stupid Whitehall reasons about turf and bailiwicks and whatnot. But wouldn’t it be simpler if you just got out of this and left me to it or handed it over to people who are more used to the idea of severed heads in coin lockers? I don’t see that you’re doing a lot of good, frankly.”

“We need to stop the North Korean military getting hold of it, and we’re the best people to do that.”

Sharpe sighed. “I’m not sure I believe that load of cobblers any more.”

“Please yourself. I don’t have that luxury. Someone’s got to tell our lords and masters in London that Al Kowalski is no longer around to work his magic touch on the youth of Tokyo, and that the late lamented Katsuyama may well not be so late.”

“Like I say, leave me out of it.”

“If I can, I will. Now, I suppose I’m going to have to check out this story about Katsuyama still being alive.”

“You’re not going to tell Ishihara about that, are you?”

“Not if I can help it.”

They left the table and dutifully dumped their rubbish in the cans provided, sorting out the paper and plastic as requested by the signs. Jon turned to look at Sharpe.

“You look a bit better than you did,” he remarked. “Not that that’s saying that much, really.”

A thought struck Sharpe. “Look,” he said. “You’re short-handed, you say. I need some extra work. Why don’t you take me on as a temporary or something?”

“You’d have to sign the Official Secrets Act,” pointed out Jon.

“Signed the bloody thing yesterday,” objected Sharpe.

“And you’d have to come clean,” Jon added. “Tell us everything you know and hand over everything you have.”

“Forget it,” Sharpe replied. “I’d probably be too expensive for you cheapskates anyway.”

“You do believe in playing hard to get, don’t you?” Jon said. “But you might be right about the money, anyway. I won’t tell you about the pittance I get paid for leading my life of international glamour and mystery. It might embarrass us both. Look, I’m not going to be able to stay with you and make sure nothing else happens to you. But I will try to make sure that someone from the embassy keeps a quiet eye on your place, especially at night.”

“Thanks. I’d appreciate that.”

“In the little matter of gratitude, actions speak louder than words, remember,” Jon called out as they went their separate ways.

