

西尾維新

NISIOISIN

推すい掟おきて
薦せん上がみ
文ぶん今き日じ子ごの



講談社



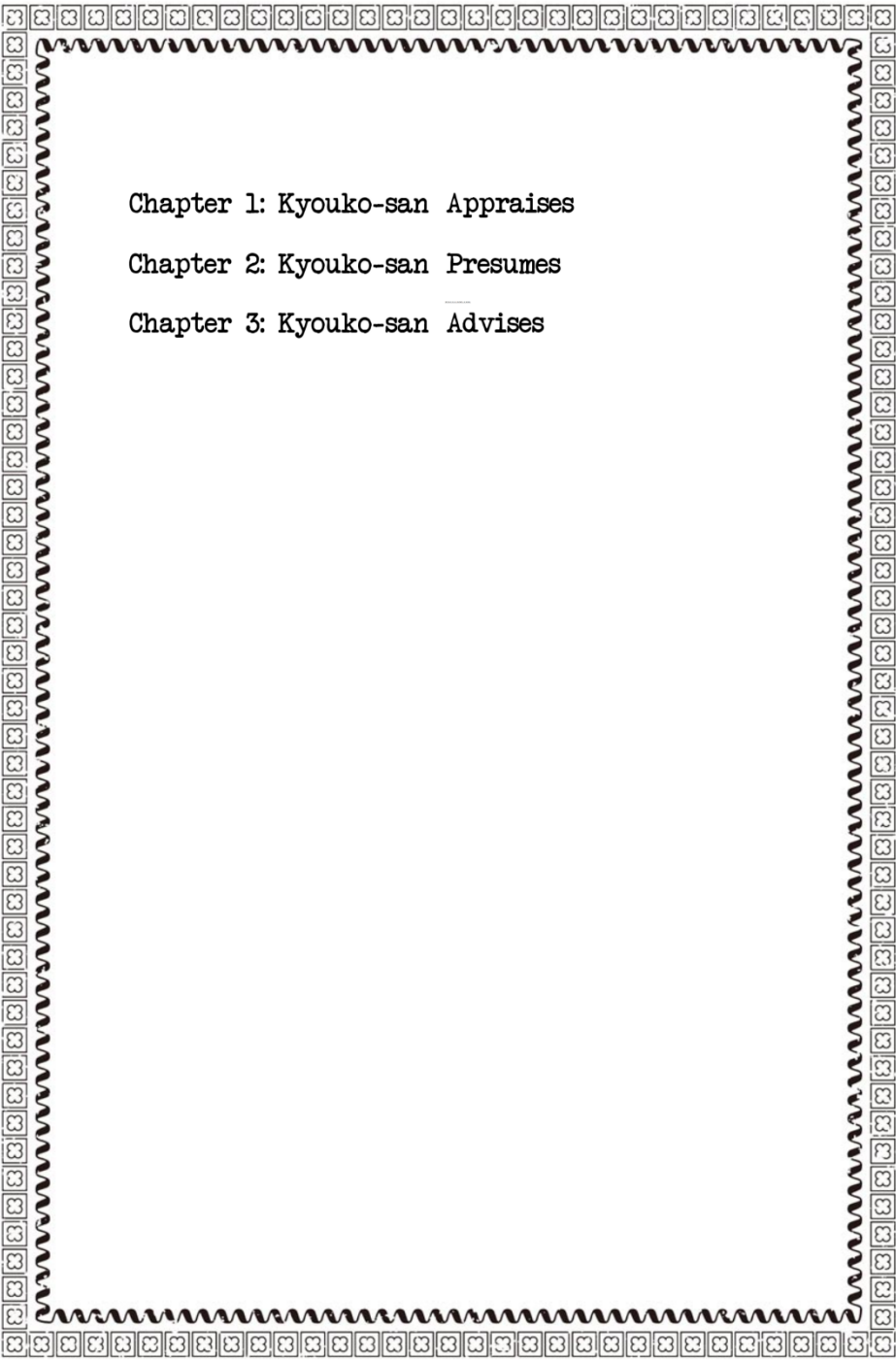
The Testimonial of
Okitegami Kyouko

西尾維新
NISIOISIN

Kodansha

Illustrator: VOFAN

Formatting: Veia



Chapter 1: Kyouko-san Appraises

Chapter 2: Kyouko-san Presumes

Chapter 3: Kyouko-san Advises

Chapter 1:

Kyouko-san
Appraises

You never know when you might hit a turning point in life. As life goes on, from time to time, you might catch a glimpse of what's in store, but such visions are a complete hallucination. Take for instance my, Oyagiri Mamoru's, life.

To be honest, when my employment was decided- what's more, at the Oote Security Company I had been hoping for- I felt a joy great enough to completely forget the misery-numbing levels of job hunting that led up to it; when I knew nothing had even begun yet, I hadn't accomplished anything, it's true I felt that I had 'risen above' my past life.

My future to come was set in stone.

Here on out, there wouldn't be any more seat changes or class changes or graduations: for the rest of my life, I would continue my job of 'protecting something', I got around to thinking. Well I'm sure that was the intent of my grandfather who gave me the name Mamoru¹, and my mother and father who gifted me this needlessly sturdy body, and I felt proud from the depths of my heart I could answer their expectations. But on the other hand, with my last choice in life gone and done with, I cut the rudder to my future, and as I thought how everything to come would be a one-way street, there was a stroke of loneliness I couldn't wipe away.

I was mistaken.

Life can't be decided by the likes of employment.

It can change as much as it wants, wherever it likes- and foresight of the future is practically a mirage. No, if it were a mirage, then perhaps the real article might exist somewhere but- it's uncertain any visions of the future even exist.

That's why you can never tell the turning points of life. That's nothing to feel let down by; humans are always changing, you can always just wait in

¹ Mamoru means to protect

expectation to see what the future has waiting for you. No matter the year, the day, it's the start of an adventure.

But the problem is, that turning point might be a downward turn. We must always tread with caution, wary of what might trip us up, or who might grasp at our ankles. If you think those accidents and incidents that flow past on the TV are 'irrelevant to you', you're in for some pain... though, even if a greenhorn like me spouts some plausible-sounding moral lessons like that, it might not come off as the least bit persuasive. Still, please hear me out. These aren't some flowery words I picked up from some billboard, they're teachings of self-admonishment I learned from painful experience.

Please grasp my words as a stick before you fall over.

And maybe that's precisely what will give me the qualifications to console myself, that I wasn't a man who fell over for nothing.

To start off, I'd like to introduce the three people who brought an unforeseen turning point to the life of the man who felt as enlightened as a mountain hermit from mere employment. Rather than brought the turning point, it would be more accurate to say they were the three people who tripped up my life's smooth sailing, but I'll refrain from phrasing it like that.

First off, it's not like they had any ill intent when they overturned my life, and secondly, they were customers. The customers are god... even if that's saying too much, customers are customers. Not the targets I should be directing my resentment towards.

Of course, it's not like they were my customers- meaning they weren't the subject of my security. They were customers of a certain art museum I had been stationed at. The precious visitors to a so-called modern art museum a man like me would never get involved with had he not been stationed there for work. Of course, strictly speaking, one of them was not a customer, but there's no doubt he was a visitor.

The first person was a woman with white hair. While I couldn't call her a regular, she would drop by the museum with relative frequency, appreciate every art piece from start to finish, and leave. Among the pieces, she seemed to have an attachment to a single article in my security area; her feet would stop before the painting for up to an hour as she gazed at it intently.

I grew curious whether she displayed such conduct in the other areas and asked a colleague, but apparently that painting was the only one she looked at for such a long time.

Then perhaps she dropped by the museum just to see that painting... as mentioned prior, I have absolutely no grounded knowledge in art, so I couldn't tell what was so good about the painting she gazed at, but it didn't feel so bad to watch someone deeply moved by my subject to guard.

It made me proud to know I was protecting something with value- it might be strange for me to feel triumphant over such a thing, but just as she gazed at the picture like that, there were times I became inclined to watch her picture watching back.

Truthfully so, her standing form made a pretty enough picture to warrant it.

But like that, I learned the tiresomeness that comes with standing and staring all too well— no matter how moved, how deep of a trance one might be in, staying standing, maintaining an unmoving stance expended considerable muscle. You're hearing that from someone who stands there like that six hours every day- albeit with breaks- so there's no doubt about it.

Take for say conceding your seat to the elderly on a train, you might occasionally find that the action contrarily enrages them. I've experienced it a number of times— well, not understanding a hatred of being treated as old was definitely a failure of my own imagination, and there's no helping they chastise me for it. The standard I reaped from that example was the possibility 'She might be dyeing her hair white'— Dyeing one's hair an unnatural color comes from the train of thought of wanting one's self to look younger; of course, there are plenty of exceptions, and it should be taken as case by case— and in that sense, I had no reason to hesitate to worry for that woman with beautiful all-white hair.

It was a museum scrupulous about removing all barriers, so as long as she filed the paperwork, she could at least rent a chair, I called out to inform her of that... but even disregarding how that overstepped my position as a security guard, that was a mistaken action.

What had from my angle always looked like a diminutive back belonged to a woman of whom, forget old, looked no older than me. A woman in her mid-twenties. The intellectual eyes behind her glasses looked up at me dubiously.

“U-um...”

Having lost the words I should say despite being the one who called out, I cursed my own folly. The situation was unanticipated but the place was a respectable museum, and if you told me it was appropriate to see it

coming, I couldn't disagree. In a place for those of original aesthetic sense that transcended the sense of values of an unsociable man like me, it shouldn't be strange for there to be a woman who dyed her hair white instead of blonde for fashion's sake. Rather than dyed or a wig, the white looked to be much too natural for that, but...

Thinking back, at least from what I can remember, she had never appeared in the museum wearing the same clothing twice. That was the first time I saw her in that turtleneck knit sweater, a stole draped over, and long skirt below. For such a fashionable lady, her white hair must be a facet of her style, though it's not like I'm some detective from a novel, and if you wanted me to make a definitive deduction, that's setting the bar way too high... whatever the case, calling out without ever confirming her face was idiotic and overeager of me.

What's more, the face that turned to me- while belonging to a cute young lady- wasn't looking at me for the better... as I panicked to smooth over my failure, I was practically a pickup artist flurried before a beauty. That being the case, starting out the conversation with I thought you were an old woman was difficult to imagine as virtuous under the circumstances.

"Y-you come here often. You must really like this painting."

After mulling a moment, those words came to mouth... lines that sounded like they should come from someone concerned with the museum, but as truth would have it, I was an outsourced security guard.

"I come here... often? Do I?"

The white-haired woman tilted her head.

Hmm, she muttered as if it was someone else's business. Her behavior almost made it seem like she was learning that for the first time from my mouth.

"? You do come here often, don't you... and every time, you stand stock still in front of this painting as if it's sucking your soul in."

"Is that so."

“When it’s a painting you must have seen countless times, but every time you seem just as emotionally moved as the first time you saw it, so I’m sure it must be a wonderful painting perfectly suited to your sensitivities.”

“Is that so...”

Her responses were half-baked.

Well, I was throwing in ambiguous terms like ‘I’m sure’ and ‘must have’, perhaps it went both ways. It was like I was confessing I didn’t understand the piece- as a matter of fact, the painting hung up was abstract, or rather, all I could see was a single canvas randomly smeared with blues, whites, greens, and browns.

On the plate stuck to the wall beside it, the painter and the production date, the materials and the style, and in large letters, the title ‘Mother’ was written, but it completely eluded me what part of the painting was supposed to be a mother— I could only call it an abstract with fragmented knowledge, but I couldn’t even determine if that was accurate.

“I see, so I’ve brought myself to this museum numerous times... and I always stand here and stare. Fufu. Well, I guess you could say that goes without saying.”

“? Eh...”

I couldn’t tell what was funny, but as the white-haired girl giggled, I returned a smile of social courtesy— my thoughts reached the lane of confusion. Do people with sharp aesthetic intuition hold an unconventional sense in daily conversation as well... or so I thought when,

“Around how long do I usually stand here?”

She asked something even stranger than before. Even if it wasn’t a major museum with an incessant stream of visitors, I couldn’t be away from my station too long, so now that I understood I wasn’t dealing with an old woman in need of consideration and my thoughts began to turn calmly, I wanted to get the conversation over and done with already, but her carefree attitude was enough for me to think I wanted to talk just a little longer— despite the peculiar contents of the conversation.

“Usually around an hour, I’d say... Forgetting time, as if you’ve lost yourself.”

“Forgetting time, as if I’ve lost myself.”

She repeated over the words I managed out. She gave a grin.

“Around an hour... is it? Fufufu, that sounds about right. Yes, I’m sure I spent at least that much time standing here today— this work has enough charm for it to shave away a whole hour of my today.”

“Y-you’re right, surely.”

My today was quite the odd way to phrase it, but whatever the case, I felt a bit of relief that it didn’t end as, ‘I was looking at a painting my friend painted’— I’m repeating myself here, but it was a delight to know that what I was guarding was something of value. Much more so in a case like this where I couldn’t discern that value myself.

A security guard cannot choose the target of their protection, but guards are not a system, but human beings. Their emotion can’t be denied. If I was going to be working anyways, I’d rather have joy than anger as my motivation.

It’s just, when it came to value and price tags, the all-white-haired woman’s following statement was really quite straightforward, in that regard as if casting a straight stone... in an emotional tone as if appraising from the bottom of her heart,

“I mean, this work is two hundred million yen.”

She said.

Two hundred million: The average amount a modern Japanese salaryman makes over the course of his entire life, an amount you might win as the grand prize of a lottery, and if I had to spell it out, an undoubtedly large sum— of course, this was an art museum, so there’s no way the price tags were written on the plates that gave details for each piece, but when she brought up two hundred million yen, the way I looked at it changed.

That painting so incomprehensible to me suddenly seemed to emit a peculiar radiance. No, judging an artistic work by its monetary value and

worth isn't something that should come to pass... but she was the one who brought up a monetary evaluation.

“So it'll go for two hundred million... this thing.”

“Yes, can't you tell by looking?”

She stared at me in blank wonder. You're guarding it without such rudimentary knowledge? Or so I was caught up in such a delusion of persecution. Well, it really can't be helped if you call me unlearned... I'll have to do some serious soul-searching.

“Amazing isn't it? Two hundred million yen. Just think of the things you could do with that money. I guess I'd save half of it, and run through the other half in one go? Quit worrying about finances and just buy up all the clothes I want.”

“I-I see...”

She said it in such a natural, absentminded tone I might just let it slip by, but she had said something considerably rude... no, I don't really care, but I'm pretty sure the artist who painted it didn't want it to be judged on price alone, right? Rather, what the woman spoke of was that very sum. Still, it's a world without a fixed price tag, so it's only natural an upfront appraisal might not become its actual price...

“Yes, I really do think the world of art is amazing... cost-performance-wise.”

“C-cost performance? You think?”

“Yes. No matter what material you use, there's surely an upper limit to the cost price, right? And yet, there are times when they're worth millions, billions even... and unlike with authors and cartoonists, you don't even have to worry about the printing and binding fees that come afterward. More so, by subtracting the cost of mass production, its value rises even further—that's a business model I'd like to take a lesson from.”

“...”

I lost my words in a different sense than before. Could business model be the most unbecoming word to voice in a museum? As long as the art

museum I was stationed at didn't offer free admission, there was no doubt it was a business... It's all a matter of perspective. But the way she put it made it sound almost as if she paid the entrance fee to come and see a wad of two hundred thousand yen—standing before two hundred million yen, spending an hour in a trance, she had far surpassed greedy into plain eccentric. By a considerable margin at that.

“My word, good sir. Have I ruined your mood? Fret not, I understand; I assure you. In order to preserve its value in being the only of its kind in the world, the cost this institution must pay to maintain it, it's not as if I could ignore that.”

While I'm not sure exactly what way she took the confusion that apparently showed on my face, she followed through in a manner missing the mark—rather than missed the mark, it somewhat felt like she was playing dumb.

As if by shifting the point in question, she managed to evade it entirely—that being the case, no matter how she was looking at it, I honestly felt a little happy she was properly recognizing the existence of a security guard like me, who occasionally received heartless words that he was tainting the scenery of an art museum.

“Still it really is nice, two hundred million yen. Two hundred million, that truly is wonderful. There's no other replacement for two hundred million yen than two hundred million yen. And now that I've been able to see such a beautiful two hundred million yen, I get the feeling I can do my best today.”

“C-could you please stop repeating two hundred million yen... so umm, what exactly do you do for a living?”

I asked the question to change the topic, but it wasn't a completely irrelevant theme. I mean to say, I abruptly arrived at the possibility this person might be an art dealer.

In that case, it would be understandable that her first criterion of evaluating artwork would be its price—inevitable even. Giving a severe and proper numerical estimate would be her business. Even if the woman with a spacy vibe to her didn't give of the air of a competent art dealer, it was plenty possible her occupation was something similar. If I consider

the way she frequents (so naturally even I can't remember from when) the art museum as part of her job, then some things do fall into place.

Yet that was my complete misapprehension. It does seem my tempo gets thrown off when I'm around her—my deductions never hit the mark.

“I'm a detective.”

She said slickly as she held out a business card. The card read as follows.

‘Okitegami Detective Agency Chief 掟上 Kyouko’

“Kyouko-san... is it.”

While I thought it might be impolite to suddenly call a girl by her first name, I didn't know how I was supposed to read the ‘掟上’ kanji in her surname², so there was no way around it. But seemingly without that discourtesy harming her mood, “Yes, I'm Kyouko. Okitegami Kyouko,” she named herself— thanks to her introduction, it became clear ‘掟上’ was read as ‘Okitegami’. Thank god— no, perhaps she inferred I couldn't read it, and quite intentionally gave the reading herself.

When it came to her deductions, that would be a very detective-esque deduction for her to make—wait, detectives only deduce in novels, do they? The real detective occupation mainly consists of investigations and reports—whatever the case, she's the Chief of all things.

“So she's a bigshot.”

I ended up putting out the comment. Judging someone by their title was an act even ruder than judging artwork by its price, but no matter how I looked at it, the stiff title of Chief didn't suite the gentle-aired woman before my eyes.

“No way, I'm not particularly high up. It's just my personal office. To be more precise, I'm chief, accountant, manager, deskwork, and grunt work.”

² While they are both pronounced Okitegami, Kyouko's office and last name use different kanji

She—Kyouko-san said such a humbling thing, but being her own boss at her age was quite something in and of itself. Okitegami Detective Agency— Okitegami— just from her office name, it was hard to think she was owner in name alone.

“In the way we protect the best interests of our clients, you could say we’re in the same industry, Oyagiri-san. So if you’re ever in need of something, feel free to put in a word.”

Kyouko-san said with a deep bow of her white-haired head. From her attitude, it was apparent she was in charge of marketing as well. Her somewhat (if I must understate) noisy financial sense was understandable if that was the case. It’s just, I’m pretty sure detectives and security guards are probably quite different occupations... tying them down just with protection seemed considerably forced.

Huh? But I’m sure I hadn’t introduced myself yet... where did she get my name? Wait, no, I’m sure she just saw the nametag clipped to the breast pocket of my uniform. Was that also the keen sight of a detective... even so, my Oyagiri last name, just like her Okitegami, was by no means easy to get right the first time.

“Then if you’ll excuse me. I do apologize for taking up your time. I’ll be looking at this two hundred million y... this painting for a little while longer, but Oyagiri-san, do feel free to return to your work.”

“... Of course. I apologize for getting in your way.”

I had completely missed my opportunity to step back, so it was honestly a huge help when Kyouko-san came out with it herself. I got the impression she was upright or rather refreshing sort of person.

I gave a bow and returned to my station. Just as she had proclaimed, after gazing at the painting a while, she eventually took her leave.

That was my first close quarters encounter with her, of course, that alone wouldn’t be enough to form a turning point in my life, and I didn’t learn anything from it—at most, the moral lesson, ‘When you try talking to someone, properly see who they are first.’

Even if I put it to memory as a single trifling mistake I made on the job, I had plenty of other similar tales of failure to tell. I'm a human far too distant from perfect, I won't deny my numerous slipups.

But in regards to Kyouko-san, there is another episode I'd like to add to that first step. Carrying on from there, Kyouko-san continued incessantly dropping by to see that two hundred million yen but, of course, I didn't try talking to her again.

Even if that wasn't the case, it was only good manners to keep quiet in a museum. As before, without me leaving my post, I simply watched the back of the white-haired woman gazing at the painting. That routine-excluding the changes in her fashionable garments- showed not the slightest sense of crumbling, until the day an aberration came about.

It was a sudden change— even if I say that, it's not like Kyouko-san underwent a flashy visual change (for example her hair turning black, or her wearing clothing I had any recollection of), it wasn't anything like that. It was a sense of unease I got precisely because I had always watched Kyouko-san pass through the museum. To put it simply, what I thought would continue for eternity, the routine I considered empyrean at that point, without any preface, suddenly crumbled away.

Kyouko-san passed by that painting without stopping to look. The painting she would always spend an hour before, she went by with barely a glance. Her feet barely slowed to look at it.

“... Please wait a second.”

I reflexively and unintentionally called her to a stop. Unlike the last time, I had no backing from my station; it was an action that completely exceeded my authority, one I had no excuse for. But being well aware of that, I had no choice but to call out to Kyouko-san.

By the way, Kyouko-san was in blue denim that day, a vest over her white shirt. In regards to that, she's a person who looks good in anything she wears, but every time I meet her I have to reimagine just how giant of a closet she must have at her home. But I digress.

“You're not going to look at that painting?”

“Pardon?”

Kyouko-san gave a hysteric reply. Her expression too verbosely spoke the words ‘who are you’— it did appear she had forgotten me. When it comes to uniformed security guards, they all end up looking the same, so it’s nothing unreasonable. But taking into account the sharp eyes I experienced the other days, it wouldn’t be strange if she at least remembered my face. Contrary to her intellectual air, perhaps her memory wasn’t actually that good.

Regardless, it’s not like I spoke to her with any ulterior motives, and I really couldn’t care much less for the color of impression I left in Kyouko-san’s recognition. The problem was the shade of impression that painting left on her— why was it that the painting she always appreciated without exception, today of all days, was passed without stopping?

I was so curious I couldn’t help myself. It was the idol she had been devoted to all the while- though you could just call it two hundred million yen at this point- but without treading on a single step down the stairs, was it really possible for her to abruptly lose interest?

“I did see it... so what?”

Kyouko-san kept up her guard as she answered so. The gears weren’t meshing, or rather, what I wanted to say wasn’t getting across in the slightest. Thinking back, I get the feeling our previous conversation was also spotty at best...

“That you did... no I mean, aren’t you going to stare it like you usually do? You usually admire it for a much longer period of time. And yet.”

I’m practically sounding like a stalker, I reflected as I spoke. For me to approach as if to lecture her because her routine work collapsed, my actions were far from a security guard. It was almost as if she was a potential danger I’d marked down.

For a woman, it wouldn’t be strange for her to cower and flee, my attitude was the epitome of suspicious, and yet Kyouko-san showed no hesitation. More than that, she spoke with great intrigue.

“Hmm?”

The corners of her mouth rose. It was very much the smile of a ‘Great Detective encountering a fascinating mystery’— her gentle atmosphere inverted to an expression I might even call aggressive.

“That sounds interesting— could you give me the details?”

“E-even if you ask me the details... um, as I was saying... why did Kyouko-san who would usually take her sweet time looking at that painting suddenly ignore it today...”

When the other party had clearly forgotten that we’d talked before, it was hard to step in from my side. Therefore, I completely skipped over that part and gave just the main points. Albeit, at Kyouko-san’s bearing as if she had even forgotten she ‘usually looked at it’, I couldn’t help but feel something off-putting...

As we were talking, I started coming under the impression it was much stranger to be captivated by the same painting every time she dropped by, but it didn’t seem that was the point the person in question- Kyouko-san- was caught up on.

“Yes, yes, you might be wondering ‘why I ignored this piece today of all days’, but what’s on my mind is ‘why this piece deeply touched me to this day’ you see— we’ve talked before, have we?”

She suddenly pointed out.

When she jabbed at it, it made me feel insincere for trying to play dumb... it’s not like I have any confidence in my acting ability (More so, I have zero confidence in it), but I wonder how she saw through me.

“No, I mean, you just called me ‘Kyouko-san’ when I had yet to introduce myself.”

“Ah...”

Crap. To a cliché extent, that was from my own boneheadedness. Whatever the case, this was a problem that sprung from her own deficiency in forgetting someone she had talked to before, so I did get the feeling she stirred up trouble just to solve on her own.

“Yes, we have. At the time, you spoke heatedly about this piece, making me find it all the more bizarre...”

“Heatedly, is it. Knowing me— it wasn’t the artistic technique, but the price of this work that I spoke so heatedly over, correct?”

Knowing me, she said making it sound like someone else’s business. She did seem to have a tendency to cast away her past self as a stranger.

“U-umm.”

I found it hard to say she was right. But she had repeated the paintings price so many times that day it would feel too insincere to say she was wrong- at the end of my hesitation, meaning at the end of my failure to think up a means to play it off, “You said it was two hundred million yen,” I answered idiotically honestly.

Well, it’s not like anything would start by haggling down the price to one hundred or fifty thousand, and inflating it would be just as pointless.

“Two hundred million yen. Hmm... this piece is?”

As she said that, Kyouko-san stood before the painting. Looking at her pose and position, it was the same ‘picturesque Kyouko-san’ as always, but when it wasn’t as if anything had changed, it was as if the nuance I could feel from her had taken on a complete shift. Eyes appreciating eyes—that they were not.

As if to bluntly interfere with its contents, to outspokenly force their way into the secret private lives of another, they were like the eyes of a detective.

Wait... that’s wrong.

She’s not like a detective, she’s a detective.

“Fufu. Indeed, this is a wonderful piece the artist must have put his soul into, but two hundred million is going a bit too far... three million... no, if you want me to be realistic, I’d say it’s around two million.”

She said.

I was taken aback, to think the price would fall to one one-hundredth of its original value—for an investment, that’s great enough decline to hang yourself over.

Just what could have happened?

From what I could see, it’s not as if the canvas was damaged, or the colors were stripped, no damage visible to the eye had happened to the painting. Granted, different appraisers might come out with different prices, that was within the realm of possibility, but the one who said two hundred million was none other than Kyouko-san. I couldn’t understand... I could only think it was Kyouko-san who had undergone a change.

“No, nothing’s changed with me. I can guarantee that one— tastelessly little change if I do say so myself.”

“I-I see.”

When she said that brimming with confidence, I could only accept it. Rather, it was hard to refute.

“I’d like to confirm something, Oyagiri-san.”

Kyouko-san called my name. It’s not like she remembered it, I’m sure she saw the nametag on my chest.

“Is it true this piece hasn’t changed? It’s not the tiniest bit different from when I last saw it?”

“It’s... it’s the same.”

When she emphasized it so hard, I grew anxious. I couldn’t guarantee it wasn’t the slightest bit different. It’s just, even if I looked at the painting anew, I couldn’t spot anything different—as a guard, my job was to look out for suspicious individuals, and not to appreciate the pieces themselves (more so, I’m not supposed to pay attention to the art). But that being the case, as I kept to my station, the painting naturally entered my field of view, so I’m sure I would notice any blatant changes.

In that case, not the painting, did something change in its background? If you’ll let me drop my prudence, it’s possible for a so-called work of art’s value shoots up upon the death of its painter—that’s a case where the

price rises, but I'm sure there are patterns where it can plummet. For example, it came to light it was actually painted by someone else... in that case, even if the painting itself didn't change, it would be possible for its price to change.

But if any such news flowed in, before the price's fluctuation came into question, an uproar would happen at the museum displaying it. No doubt such a ruckus would enter even the ear of an outsider security guard. If it became public the history of a painting they'd always displayed was wrong, the display would be put on hold, it might even become a scandal on the scale of the museum taking a temporary holiday.

"Yes, I see your point. But a difference in the background is a good train of thought. Art is only art with everything around it—"

"... Though they do say a creator and his work are different matters."

"Ahaha. If you're looking at it for enjoyment, it's perfectly fine to detach them, but if you want to look at it as fine art, the partition is difficult... an art piece can sometimes be seen as the main essence of the artist."

Though that's irrelevant right now, said Kyouko-san.

It's irrelevant? But she was speaking with a strange sense of confidence, so perhaps Kyouko-san already had a rough idea of why the unchanging painting's price changed. I wrung out my courage to ask.

"Well if I had to say, I do have an idea. I don't have any evidence, and it's just a notion that struck me without any basis."

Kyouko-san said after all. And parting from the space before the painting, "Well then, I'll be taking my leave," she gave me a bow and walked off.

"H-hey, hey wait a minute."

"? What is it?"

"You're not going to tell me? Why the painting you told me was two hundred million yen is two million yen today?"

"I'm sure it's true I once said this piece was worth two hundred million yen. But today it's two million. Then it's clear that a change of one hundred ninety-eight million yen must have occurred... but explaining

The Testimonial of Okitegami Kyouko

that here would be somewhat uncouth. This is a place to speak of art and not mysteries. In the first place, today is my off-day.”

If you say I must, or so Kyouko-san held out her business card.

That was something that wasn't the tiniest bit different from the last card I received, Okitegami Detective Agency Chief Okitegami Kyouko's business card.

“Make a request. I don't deduce for free.”

3

When all was said and done, in the end, the mystery of why a two hundred million yen painting suddenly faced a drop in price to two million went unsolved— or at least to me and the museum. Of course, I was curious, but I didn't see it as the sort of overblown case or mystery to go as far as to pay money for a detective. Even if my knowledge on a detective's market price was limited, I highly doubted it would be cheap. When she possessed such a wide array of clothing, I couldn't think that Kyouko-san worked for a low enough value to be covered by my disposable income.

In the first place, two hundred million and two million were both no more than her personal estimates, and if I had to say, it was possible she was just making things up- it was practically she who built up the whole mystery. I wouldn't go as far as to call it some new form of scam, but it seemed plausible that was her proactive business campaign as a detective; getting caught up in that and forced to pay a fortune didn't sit very well with me.

There were ways to go about it, say drawing out the details on that painting from someone involved with the museum employing me, but I wouldn't be able to avoid them reversing the question and asking why I wanted to know. Once asked, the fact I had a chat with a visitor on the job in derogation of my duties would inevitably come to light- something I'd definitely like to avoid if possible.

So when all was said and done, I held on to some hazy thoughts as I continued to work my unchanging job, with the unchanged painting in my field of vision. I spotted Kyouko-san's figure a few times in the museum after that, but she would never rest her feet before that painting in question again.

Nor would I call out to her.

Naturally, she didn't speak to me of her own accord either. Perhaps she had already forgotten me again. That's why my only point of contact with her- the two business cards I had forgotten to take out of my uniform pocket- only returned to memory after the incident had occurred.

Whatever the case, I must now introduce the second of the three people who brought a turning point to my life—it would be an exaggeration to call him a gent; he was a young boy around ten.

For a child to grant me a moral lesson makes me feel like a disgrace of an adult, but he was a so-called prodigy, so it's not particularly like it was a complex I was alone in feeling. It's occasionally the case that someone with talent comes to despise those without it, and perhaps owing to that, the young boy took on an impertinent attitude with me from beginning to end. In that sense, I don't hold a very good impression of him, but I have no choice but to recognize his talent.

His 'artistic' talent, that is.

I first came to recognize him shortly after I first spoke with Kyouko-san—after she told me the painting was worth around two hundred million, I suppose. As I recall, it was around the time the curator's negotiated works came in, and there was a bit of a ruckus over how they were going to be exhibited. The new exhibit attracted attention, my surveillance area was even quieter than usual when the crop-cut boy appeared with his sketchbook. Of course, he was a visitor who paid the standard fee (child's fare), so I had no complaints in that regard. A child had just as much right as an adult to enjoy the fine arts—however, what he took was a problematic action I couldn't overlook as a security guard.

No, couldn't understand would be more precise. But it was the sort of problem for which a single security guard tasked with a single area in the corner of the museum was supposed to make a decision on the spot. No food and drink, keep quiet in the building, don't touch the art pieces, no photography.

Those rules were stipulated all throughout the building, and I had no hesitation to enforce them as a guard—as a guard, my eyes were shining. Especially in the present age, where the diffusion of cellphones has made photography a part of everyday life, cautioning the visitors who tried taking pictures without any ill intent could be called my main job.

But what about in that circumstance? Meaning when he took his position in front of a single picture, flipped open his sketchbook, and let the pencil in his hand begin to smoothly reproduce it—

“...?”

The child started sketching much too boldly, as if to give me the feeling ‘that’s just what you’re supposed to do here’—sure enough, it didn’t say anywhere in the building you couldn’t draw on the premises. If it was truly a good a museum, then it wouldn’t be strange for an inspired visitor to want to take up the brush... but that was strange. In the first place, the kid has come with his sketchbook and materials in hand from the start, brimming with the intent to draw.

To start with, it wasn’t the timeslot for an elementary schooler to stop by. I don’t remember the specific day, but it was undoubtedly midday on a weekday. I looked around to see if it was the extracurricular activity of some elementary school, but there weren’t any other kids around who looked the part. No teacher taking command either.

That being the case, disciplining a child wasn’t part of my job—if he wanted to come to a museum instead of going to school, I could feel some extraordinary circumstance after all—now then, what was I to do? Painting a picture to duplicate it did somewhat seem like a blind spot of the photography ban, but thinking over it with a level head, it wasn’t something I should shut my eyes to.

Even so, it was the work of a child, it’s not like I didn’t consider overlooking it with warm eyes- at the time, neither Kyouko-san nor any other guests were around, it wasn’t as if he was causing any trouble to anyone, and more than that, seeing a child do his best to draw was in itself a pleasant scene. Hesitating whether I should look to my superior or employer for a decision, I decided to start by approaching him only for my smile to freeze.

That ‘copy’ laid out in his sketchbook was, how should I put it, a piece that made the word ‘copy’ sound forced... if I wanted to search my vocabulary for an appropriate word, ‘reproduction’ was more accurate. No, it was difficult to even call a reproduction. I mean the painting on the wall was done in paint, and even if it wasn’t clear what was being depicted, there was no doubt it was done in blues, whites and green... in contrast, the boy’s tool was a single pencil. It would be impossible to completely recreate it; but as if applying Indian ink painting, the boy used only

shades of black to gray and reproduce the abstract (?) painting before his eyes... and I could say his attempt was largely successful.

This is just the opinion of an amateur, so perhaps an artist might hold my description in scorn but... it was such a precise level of reproduction I wondered if that was what would come out if a picture brimming with color was run through a monochrome copier. A copy machine is, well a machine, so it would be possible- when a human did that with their own craft, to be honest, it could be summed up in the word uncanny.

In the first place, I could sense a difference from if a copy machine scanned a single painting. This wasn't a matter of my own sensibility, no matter how dense one might be, they would notice. I learned it for the first time guarding a museum, but paintings are never perfectly level. By slathering paint on a canvas, a rough surface will inevitably be formed; multiple layers alone will protrude certain parts, and if you went from dark to light, the flow was such from high to low—the strength of the brush stroke also made a difference.

A strong stroke and a light touch of the canvas would change the image and damage granted to the surface—both of which would change over the passage of years. If you want a simple metaphor, an artist taking up a brush was engaging in a single genre of sculpting. You could say that was the large difference from producing digital graphics. It was in that sense as well that they were impossible to reproduce; that's why no matter how advanced photographic technology becomes, humans will still bring their feet to a museum to see the real articles. A sense of reality that can't be conveyed by a printing or monitor—or perhaps a sense of texture one can sense without touching exists.

With all that said, there it was on the boy's sketchbook—I won't tell you not to be surprised, rather please share in it with me. The young boy had reproduced that unevenness, brushstrokes included, with a single pencil.

That's why, monochrome or not, in paint or in pencil... regardless of whether there was any difference in the finished product, it made me feel like I was seeing a complete reproduction. A tender young child who didn't quite understand the rules of the museum, wanting to join the ranks of the artists, got in the mood to copy a painting—it has far exceeded that level.

Just what was he doing, that child?

In a sense, it was an act far more exorbitant than taking a picture—as if not just the image itself, he was stripping away its deepest contents. As a security guard charged with the area, or at least to me, it was difficult to overlook it—I mean, not so long ago, I had already heard from Kyoukosan that the painting was two hundred million yen. It was as if I was present at the scene of a two hundred million yen masterwork being snatched away: a heist so bold Arsene Lupin might direct it himself.

“Hey, kid, what are you doing?”

Perhaps I was too into it, as the voice came out deeper than expected—raising a cry of “Whoah!” the young boy dropped his sketchbook. He didn’t unhand his pencil, which may be because the way he held it was just wrong. Like an infant, his pencil was held up in a clenched fist; no, if he was able to produce such a work at such a speed with that grip, then labeling it as wrong was a decision entrenched in my own educational prejudice. If this child were to assert it was more proper to hold it like a sword, I doubt I would be able to refute it—and as things stood, it was because he held it like that, that it didn’t fall from his hand.

“W-what is it... wait? How long have you been there, old-timer?”

In his immersion, it seems he had completely failed to notice my existence as I approached. That high pre-pubescent voice and sharp manner confirmed to me he was as much a child as his appearances suggested.

I wasn’t yet at the right age to be called old, surely, but when I was around his age, perhaps I thought of anyone beyond twenty like that as well.

“Don’t talk to me so suddenly. You surprised me.”

“Oh yeah... sorry for that.”

I said as I retrieved the sketchbook the boy had dropped on the ground. This was yet another scene I had no experience in, and I had no idea how to interact with a child. The museum wasn’t the sort of place adults brought their children to; it was definitely not the sort of place children came to alone.

Therefore, while I was in a position where I needed to caution him, I reflexively ended up apologizing, but that did offer me slight relief. At his attitude fitting of a child his age, I was hit by the reality I wasn't dealing with some form of apparition. It was only the next moment I would realize how hollowful that reality was—I can't guarantee hollowful is a real word or not, but whatever the case, I took the opportunity to open up the sketchbook in my hands and take a glance over its contents.

I only looked like going through a flipbook, so it's not as if I got a proper look at every page, but, but still, with that alone my chest was instantaneously, instinctively slammed with dread—with intuition rather than logic, I got to know of the young boy's hard-to-describe artistic prowess.

Not just the picture he had just drawn, the numerous pencil sketches he had done to this point were more than enough to overwhelm the looker—I doubt all of them were copies but I got the feeling perhaps I wouldn't get this much of an impact even if I looked at the real pieces he was mimicking. I felt an off-mark relief that his sketchbook didn't bend when it hit the ground.

Returning the book, I looked over the boy. A shaved head, sun-tanned skin laid bare by his T-shirt and shorts, his knees were lightly skinned while his feet were in sandals. Looking at that alone, he looked like a healthy base-ball playing boy you'd find racing across the field—at the very least, his appearance didn't give off an artist's impression, and he didn't have the nuance of a child prodigy you'd see on TV. Or could it be if you took away broadcast production value, those child prodigies were surprisingly something like this?

For such vague features as talent or nature, come to think of it, they would be stranger if they actually came out in one's appearance...

“Something up, old timer? I'm a bit busy here.”

He calmly said to me. Forget shying back, I would go as far as to call his attitude abusive. Well, it was a hefty demand to ask an elementary schooler (?) to speak politely... after all. For a boy who could draw such pictures, the main problem was how I was supposed to make him respect me in the first place.

“You’re causing trouble, drawing here. Could you put away your sketchbook and pencil?”

“Really? Where does it say I can’t?”

The boy sounded displeased. I never expected him to accept it and stand down so easily- it never is that simple- and things were proceeding as iffy as I thought.

“It’s not written, but you’ll bother the other guest so—”

“Other guests?”

The young boy looked around—as luck would have it, it was around noon on a weekday, and at present, there wasn’t another guest in sight. I wonder what he would have said if Kyouko-san was around.

“Then if someone else comes I’ll stop. That sound alright?”

Said he as he let the lead of his pencil dash across his sketchbook anew—I’d be troubled if I let the conversation end just like that. If I stood down just because I was dealing with a child, or perhaps a genius, I couldn’t call myself a security guard.

“It’s not much different from taking down notes on what you feel when looking at a painting, right? Is that also banned?”

“I guess...”

When he put it that way, I couldn’t find the words to speak back.

Of course, if he went on to set up an easel, spread out a canvas, and take paintbrush and paint in hand, I would be able to restrict him by the reigns of common sense... with eccentricity on that level, whether it be clearly stipulated or not, it would be reasonably understandable.

But all he was using was a pencil and moderately sized portable sketchbook... if I started restricting that, then how much would I have to restrict? So if I witnessed a scene of any other kid- even adult- before a painting smoothly copying it out (I don’t have such experience, this is purely hypothetical), I’m sure I would have hesitated before ignoring it, or taken it as an event beyond my authority and consulted a superior.

The reason I moved on my own discretion was simply because his skills were prominent to an uncanny extent—he was too skillful for me to turn a blind eye. But how was I supposed to explain that? You're too good at drawing, so you can't draw here?

No, that was the exact train of logic I was following, but I also thought it was too unreasonable of a force to place on a child; not much different from asking the fast running kid to match pace with everyone else. You can't just make the fastest kid lower himself to the standards of the curriculum.

Let's see, for example, in a bookstore, you know it's wrong to copy out the contents of a book on sale, right? It's the same as that... no it's not. A museum and shop are institutions with different natures—if I had to say, the proper comparison would be a library. In a library, it was actually recommended to copy out some of the text... which means in the end, I was in a situation where all I could say was 'it's just wrong'. At a loss, eventually,

“Anyways, what are you doing here? Shouldn't you be in school?”

I was forced into approaching from a different angle; the logical route of, quit drawing in a place like this and properly get yourself to school. Well, I had a vague understanding there was some circumstance to it, but even if that wasn't the case I had a hard time believing a kid like this could fit into a normal school—

“I don't have to go. You know the thing with compulsory education? The parents have a legal obligation to send their children to school; the children aren't obligated to go.”

That was definitely how the law worked, but it was a childish argument. If that sophistry actually passed, I get the feeling we wouldn't have so much trouble.

“Then where are those parents? Somewhere around? Did you come here together?”

“You've got eyes, don'cha? Keep it down.”

Even as he said that, the boy raced his pencil... the sketchbook was dyed a deep black as the two hundred million yen painting was reaching its completion. As long as I had no means to stop it, I could only watch over the trace's completion. It's not like I could use force against a child. I mean, he wasn't even half my size, so if I wanted to take away his pencil, it would be easy enough, but if such extreme protective measures developed into a problem of responsibility for the museum, that really would be putting the cart before the horse—I wouldn't be protecting a thing.

“I can see just fine... then they're not with you. What's your name, kid?”

Determining it was a subject beyond my reach, I decided to get more details on the situation. The plan was to at least make a report to give to my employers. With a child of his skills, it was quite possible I just happened to be oblivious, and he was actually a famous name in the museum. In that case, this sort of questioning might be routine.

Without stopping his pencil hand, the young boy curtly responded.

“It's Hakui Riku.”

“Hakui?”

As if disappointed by my repetition—almost as if he thought it was uncultured for someone to not know his name—he silently wrote out the kanji on the next page of his sketchbook. Hakui Riku (剝井陸).

In contrast to the brush strokes he penciled in, it was somewhat rough, crude handwriting, that took some effort to decipher, but...

“I see, so it's Hakui-kun.”

“I said it because you asked me, but could you not call me so casually? It's not a name I'm fond of. Neither Hakui nor Riku.”

He said in scornful routine, returning to his sketchbook's sketch page—his actions showed he was upset I had thrown off his rhythm. But even if his movements were flustered as he put pencil to paper, his pencil mastery remained as precise as ever—as if he had two chains of command in his head.

If he didn't like the name Hakui, then what was I supposed to call him... as I mulled over how to respond, Hakui-kun spoke up.

“Hey old-timer. What about you? You asked for someone's name, so you've got to give your own.”

He said.

I highly doubted Hakui was interested in my name, but, well, perhaps it was some revenge for getting in the way of his art... unlike Kyouko-san, it didn't look like he had the sharp eyes to identify my name from my nametag. While artist and detective are two completely different occupations, wouldn't he need an appraiser's eye... no, barely knew anything about Hakui, so there was no helping it.

“My name is Oyagiri. Oyagiri Mamoru.”

“Oyagiri? What sort of name is that?”

“Exactly as it sounds. To cut your parents³. It's a name I like quite a bit.”

“You like cutting down parents... ah, no, so you write it as kindness? Hmm.”

Upon turning, he finally noticed my nametag; he gave a nod before flipping his sketchbook again—and underneath where he wrote ‘Hakui Riku’, he wrote ‘Oyagiri’ in the bad handwriting I'd come to expect. It did appear I had succeeded in giving the boy wonder an impact with my surname... though he ignored my commonplace given name of Mamoru.

And all-too-easily as if to say our business was finished, young Hakui returned to his ‘painting’. I also didn't have anything more to say or ask him. Returning to my station, I would simply report the order of events on my radio. I would seek orders, and wait for someone who could make a

³ The kanji for kindness is 親切, the first kanji being parent, the second being to cut. This does not have anything to do with cutting parents, it is because the kanji for parent has the meaning of intimate (親しい), and cut is used in a strange phrase that translates to ‘close enough to cut you’ (刃物をじかに当てるように). Not it a bad way. So it means close and intimate. Oyagiri's name is spelled kindness, but read as the literal interpretation of parent (oya) cut (kiri)

proper decision to put out a proper order. Just as with Kyouko-san, the museum was visited by all sorts—I can't say much, but perhaps that's how a future artist would be raised. No, from how he seemed to think it was strange I didn't know the name Hakui Riku, perhaps not just the museum, he was already a child known to the world of art. It sounds all profound to say art has nothing to do with age, but I heard Pablo Picasso was painting from six after all...

But there I suddenly grew curious and came to a stop—I had nothing more to say or ask, but there was something I wanted to know—one thing I wanted him to tell me. Kyouko-san had such a charm and radiance to her I couldn't bring myself to ask... meaning, just what was that painting supposed to be?

That was the question. It had a title of 'Mother', but when it came to what part of the painting was a 'Mother', or what sort of meaning was put into that abstract (?) I hadn't the slightest idea. Maybe that's just how it's supposed to work, you're just supposed to understand what you see. It's mistaken for an amateur to attempt interpretation.

Or so I thought, but because Kyouko-san had told me it was worth two hundred million the other day, all holds were off. It just didn't sit right with me that such an incomprehensible scribble was worth two hundred million.

At the very least, I wanted to know what was being depicted, a vague yearning was there. I might be able to find out in no time if I looked into it, but it's not like I wanted to know what an index had to say. I wanted someone who properly understood to tell me. That's why I thought to ask my employer if the opportunity presented itself, but I somewhat understood that wouldn't be anytime soon... and there I had Hakui-kun.

Normally, it wasn't the sort of thing to ask a child (especially when it came to talks of money and two hundred million yen), but he went as far as capturing the texture to reproduce it... with his craft of copy, perhaps Hakui-kun could understand the painting to its very depth. That's why, "Hey, do you know why this painting is titled 'Mother'?" I asked—not expecting a response.

"What, you don't get it?"

For argument's sake, I tried to phrase it vaguely to draw out information, but an adult's tact didn't get through to a child and he returned the question.

"Nope. Can't make heads or tails."

I honestly admitted. Perhaps that was the right answer as, "That so," Hakui-kun answered unsympathetically, flipping over two pages in his sketchbook... it looks like Hakui Riku and Oyagiri were all that was going on the previous page. It felt like a bit of a waste, but I'm sure he had his fixations... And on the brand new page he revealed, with a swish he swiftly penciled something in.

"Now look. Do you get it now?"

What he showed me was something I definitely could understand at one glance. A three-dimensionally shaded circle... on the sphere was something an amateur, no anyone could see and understand as the third planet in our solar system, meaning the earth.

In just a few seconds, he had freehanded the earth without any tools or references, making me once again recognize the artistic prowess of young Hakui, but... the earth?

I lifted my face from his sketchbook and looked at the painting 'Mother' on the wall. So does that mean 'Mother' was supposed to represent 'Mother Earth'? The paints filling the canvas to the brim were code for our planet... no, even with that knowledge, looking at it once more, I really didn't get the impression.

"So it's an abstract after all."

"I don't think abstract means what ya think it means, but this is a landscape painting."

"What? A landscape?"

"Yeah. Well not strictly speakin', but a landscape's a landscape. At least they painted the view."

At that scale, I don't think it could be called landscape, but the earth itself was definitely scenery if you wanted to call it that.... But the sketch in Hakui-kun's book aside, the painting on display didn't really...

“Wait... this is a closeup?”

“Pretty much.”

By that time, Hakui-kun had returned to his work. I didn't ask anymore, but once I had noticed, it became the sort of mystery where I felt ashamed I never noticed it before. Blue, white, green and brown. With various things mixed and marbled in, it was the sea, the clouds, the trees, and earth... From a map of the earth seen from space, a portion had been zoomed and cut out.

That's why it wasn't an abstract but a landscape.

No, from the artist's point of view, I'm sure they had some deeper intent of artistic expression... purposely portraying the earth in such a way and tacking on the name 'Mother' was a way of thoughts I would never reach and not something I should speak so frivolously on.

But upon knowing that, looking at the painting with that knowledge, it felt far more refreshing than before as if I could finally appreciate it. While Kyouko-san who would stand before it only spoke about costs, it went without saying that what the painting depicted was self-evident to her.

Taking it to the extremes, there are some quizzes where a high-spec camera or microscope is used to take a closeup of some object before asking 'What do you think it is', but... I doubt the artist was able to look at the actual article, so I can see why Hakui-kun said it wasn't strictly a landscape.

“Did the artist look at a satellite picture or something to paint it...”

“Might have just thought it up. No need to look at a picture to constrict the possibilities.”

Hakui-kun answered my murmur.

“It's even possible that the painter was an astronaut.”

“I-is it really?”

“No way in hell. Don’t take it so seriously.”

When he was the one who brought it up, Hakui-kun angrily spat toxicity before slamming his sketchbook shut.

“Ah, sorry. Did I ruin your mood?”

My speech there was strange. In the first place, I had tried to stop his painting... when I was getting in his way from the start, there was no need for apologies. Of course, it did seem the likes of me was unable to hinder the creative urges of the boy wonder and, “I just finished drawin’,” he said matter-of-factly.

Finished drawing?

I had wondered why he was so willing to tag along with my conversation around the end, but in that case, it was because he had found the leisure to... however, after only spending an hour there (oddly around the same times Kyouko-san would spend), was it possible to complete a copy?

“Wait... could you let me see it for a bit?”

“Whatever.”

As if to say he didn’t care if I saw it, but it was a real pain to open up the sketchbook he had just closed, he sluggishly opened to the pages before handing it to me.

I hoisted it up lining it beside the real article. As expected of full color and monochrome, looking at it like that, there were some minute differences, and it was difficult to call a perfect copy—but, even so it held a reproduction value boasting a bizarre sense of precision.

Instead of impressed, I could only be awed by his overflowing wisdom, and if he could do so much, I could only question why he was here doing this. This is also just the arbitrary impression of an amateur, but isn’t copying supposed to be practice work for an artist? If he could already do this much, it was already time for him to move onto the next step, I held as my humble opinion. I arbitrarily looked through the other pages of the sketchbooks—the other works I had only got a quick flip through.

“Do all of these have originals?”

I tried asking.

“Yeah... originals ‘r rather samples or... well, just call ‘em models. I’ve been to museums all over.”

It sounded hard to explain. I also felt a frank atmosphere around him as if there was no use telling it to an amateur... sure enough, I doubted I could understand if he explained.

“You’re not going to draw your own painting? Um, I don’t mean a self-portrait...”

“I get it, I know that much. Of course, I’ll draw it someday but... My teacher told me I’m not on that level yet.”

Teacher?

No, there’s no way it’s his school teacher. I’m sure he means his art master or something like that... so even this impertinent kid is apprenticed to some predecessor. When I thought about it like that, it was a bit reassuring—but to say a young boy with such abilities wasn’t on that level yet, they must be a strict teacher.

“I think you’ve got some amazing talent.”

I found myself following through, or rather I said something almost like consolation... even if someone like me consoled him, it would only be a disgrace, but, “Well thanks for that,” or so Hakui-kun offered some slapdash gratitude—and, “Old-timer, what do you think talent is?” he continued on.

That was something I had never thought of before, and if he didn’t ask me there, a question I would never think of henceforth... what is talent?

This might be an exceedingly commonplace answer, but it’s a gift from the heavens... realistically from one’s parents, or a gene from some ancestor perhaps? When it comes to me, my sturdy body is a sort of talent, and it even decided my employment. But that was an amateur’s opinion after all.

Hakui-kun spoke his ‘teacher’s opinion like gospel.

“Accordin’ to teacher, having talent means you can put in a higher form of effort, it’s something like a qualification... because I’m a genius, I have to

put in one hundred times more effort than everyone else. That's why I don't have the time to go to school."

"....."

"Sorry for troubling you, old-timer. My effort here is over, so I'm not coming back. Lighten up a bit. If anything happens..."

As I couldn't find the right words to say, the young boy took my hand. I thought he intended to shake it, but instead he started writing numbers on it in pencil. It was pencil on skin, so it was hard to say he wrote it properly (his handwriting was terrible for one thing), but he finished with a ten-digit number I could barely make out... no a phone number, eh.

"Just make a call to that number... well, you might be the one getting the call in the near future, mind you."

"? ... Is this your house's number?"

"Yeah. My house, er I mean my guardian or... whatever, does it really matter?"

Apparently explanations had become a pain again and Hakui-kun cut off before snatching away the sketchbook that was still in my hands. He put away his pencil and left the space in front of the painting.

And just as he took his first step,

"... Old-timer, I don't think we'll meet again, so there's something frank I want to ask you about this paintin'."

He pointed at the painting on the wall as he spoke.

"Oh? Of course, go ahead... but I'm an amateur you know."

"I want to hear an amateur's opinion. I want a layman's perspective, your simple thoughts... we talked about astronauts, right?"

"Yes, we did... but that was a joke, right?"

"Yeah, there's no way this painter was an astronaut... but was it Gagarin? The one who said the earth was blue?"

"Let's see... I think so. What about it?"

“I just think that quote is a good example, see apart from Gagarin, all sorts of astronauts have looked at the earth and they all say it, they go on and on about how it’s a beautiful planet. What do you think about that, old-timer?”

“What do I think... well, I’m sure that’s just how it’s got to be. I don’t think they were lying when they said it.”

I’m no astronaut, and I can’t say if it’s even remotely the same, but when I look at satellite images, I do get a similar impression. If the time comes when everyone can go to space, and everyone can see the whole earth as the astronauts of yore... once they learn the beauty of the earth, then environmental pollution and destruction might screech to a halt, or so the theory goes. I think there’s some sense to it.

But with a “Hmm,” Hakui-kun ignored my response that could only be called commonplace before unveiling his own view that ran in full opposition.

“I, you see... the first time I saw a satellite photo of the earth, my first impression was how filthy it was.”

“Fil... filthy?”

“Right. Filthy.”

He spat out the word.

“Speckled with all sorts of colors getting all jumbled up like mud, just how dirty can it be— why do all the astronauts call it beautiful, let alone blue? Why do they praise it like that, I don’t get it at all... if it were me, then the moment I see it, I’m sure I’ll throw up. The moment I first saw that, young me firmly decided he would never become an astronaut.”

“.....”

A child was intentionally saying something edgy to tease an adult... his cynical tone was too close to sincere for me to interpret it that way. It’s not like he was hooked on the sense that his values ran contrary to the rest of the world... this child really couldn’t understand what the astronauts were saying. Just as I could barely understand what he was saying.

“That sensation is also the origin of my art style... I’m not doin’ everything in black pencil because it’s a rough sketch, I find colors disgusting. Go for monochrome over color... come to think of it, I think Gogh-san said the way we view scenery differs from person to person? I think I’m like that. In which case, that’s also a talent, I guess.”

If it’s about the various theories on Van Gogh’s sense of vision, he’s famous enough that even an outsider like me’s heard them... more importantly, I was sure the young boy who added -san to Gogh was using a single pencil because it was just barely within the bounds of what was (maybe) permitted in the museum, but it seems he had a fundamental repugnance for color.

“There’s no way of telling if the landscape someone else sees matches up with what’s in your eyes—paintings c’n be copied over however many times you want, but you can’t share their field of vision. I think about it regularly, but you can sympathize with the astronauts so easily. What I’d give for that.”

I wonder how much effort a genius has to put in to catch up to the common man... saying only his last line in jest, the young artist left the museum.

He said he wouldn't come again, but as one in charge of security, I couldn't swallow his words whole, naturally reporting everything that happened that day to a superior—including the phone number Hakui-kun had written on my hand.

I knew I might be reprimanded for sending him off without stopping him, but that said, I couldn't be negligent with my work. But not only did I not receive the summons I had resolved myself for, I didn't even get any advice on how to handle it the next time a child came around. When it got to that point, it felt as if my report had been crumpled up and tossed, something wasn't sitting right—but as he declared, Hakui kun didn't stop by the museum after that, so it didn't develop into the same predicament again.

Hakui Riku.

While he said we would never meet again, it was simply the case that the site of our reunion wouldn't be the museum... and while I'm putting on airs, I might as well introduce the third and final person who brought a turning point to my life. As truth would have it, he was the one who most harshly tripped up my feet, so instead of beating around the bush, perhaps I should have introduced him first, but there's a process to these things.

Because it was only because of my encounters with Kyouko-san and Hakui-kun that my third encounter turned out as it did...

The bonds between people truly are bizarre.

It goes without saying, the incident that followed occurred because it had to—regardless of whether I was involved or not, it was an inevitable occurrence. I don't intend to say it was my doing or anything pretentious like that, and I'm not virtuous enough to shoulder too much responsibility for it.

Now then, while I first misunderstood Kyouko-san as an elderly woman in need of assistance, the third was, without any mistake, an old man. He did

dye his hair white, but as he came to the museum with a cane, well, there's no doubt about it. It's just, even if I did feel obliged to look out for him, he emitted an aura that made him difficult to approach. To put it simply, a grumpy air.

Like the others, he also... stopped his feet before that painting.

Before the painting Kyouko-san would stare at, and that Hakui-kun copied—granted by that time, Hakui-kun had stopped coming to the museum, and Kyouko-san said the painting wasn't two hundred million but two million, not even lowering her walking speed to look at it. As always, I had no choice but to stand there, so whether I liked it or not, the painting entered my field of vision... but what had once been an 'incomprehensible abstract' when I first took this position had become a 'two hundred million yen masterpiece', after which it became clear what was painted was a 'landscape of the planet earth', and after that, for some reason, its value bombed to 'two million yen', a hundredth of its original value. Unsure of how I was supposed to face it, my position in the room was becoming unstable.

So when the old man in a hakama came to a stop before the painting, I won't deny I curiously looking forward to what would happen this time. I ended up hoping for the next plot twist to come. Those aren't the right feelings to hold on the job, and I know I should reflect on that, but that being the case, the retribution bestowed on me was simply too great for the sin.

Undue suffering... no, if I wanted to bring up suffering, the painting 'Mother' suffered a far crueler fate than me.

On top of having her contents stripped bare by a boy wonder, and her price beaten down to one hundredth by a white-haired beauty, she was finally smashed to pieces by the mysterious old man's cane.

“Ah...!”

By the time I could react, the cane's second blow came down on the canvas... the poor depiction of earth, as if it had collided with a meteor from a movie, was smashed into pieces.

“H... hold it right there! What do you think you're doing!?”

Between my stiffening from sudden circumstance to the return of my senses was only an instant, and rushing over took less than two seconds... but with a deftness that didn't let one feel his age, he made good use of even that small period, showing no mercy to the canvas that had fallen from the wall to the floor, and showering it with strikes from his cane.

His handling of that stick was so wonderful I had to wonder if he carried it not because his legs were weak, but because he had intended to do it from the moment he left the house—but this wasn't the time to be impressed. At the point I had grappled the man away, the painting had- frame included- been rendered impossible to repair. Still unsatisfied, he continued to put up an intense resistance with immense power I couldn't expect from an old man. It felt like he would shake me off if I let my guard down, but as I was dealing with an elderly person, the most I could do was a Nelson hold. I couldn't quite slam him to the floor.

“Unhand me, you insolent wretch!”

On the other hand, the old man showed no signs of cooling off... forget that, his heel naturally started slamming into my shin. The man was wearing geta instead of shoes, so when the corners dug in, the pain was no joke.

The painting's removal from the wall sounded the alarm, and with such a ruckus I was sure that backup would come soon enough, but I wasn't confident I could restrain the old man without injuring for that long.

“Please calm down... what's gotten into you?”

“What's left to explain!?”

I asked without expecting any proper exchange, but surprisingly he did give what sounded like a response.

“How dare they think they could get away with something like this! The sheer nerve!”

Saying that, the old man glared at me... with all the pressure he put on, I got the urge to just let go of his arms as he ordered me.

“A-anyways, just calm down. If you stop resisting, I'll release you...”

“Shut it, you can start by calling Shikihara!”

Shikihara? I thought over who that might be before remembering the curator had a name like that... meaning this person was telling me to call the curator?

If I had to say, the one who was going to be called somewhere was the old man who had committed such violence... but the man’s overbearing way of addressing the curator without honorifics wasn’t easy to ignore. He had too much dignity in his rage for me to write it off as an old man’s hysteria, and I felt like I might end up obeying him if I was caught unprepared. I was on the verge of calling the curator, but if I just did as I was told there, it would be the same whether a security guard was stationed there or not. Now that he had destroyed what I was to protect, there was already practically no point in my being there, but even so, I was unable to abandon my station.

“If you want to say something, I’ll hear you out...”

“Bollocks I say! It’s a waste of breath on a knot-eyed amateur like you!”

“Knot-eyed? By knot-eyed, you mean...”

I could understand if he said an outsider security guard was a waste of breath, but what did he mean by a knot-eyed amateur? As if to take a stab at the moment I spent pondering, the old man rapidly untangled one of my arms, holding his cane aloft. His dynamism unfit for his age astonished me... at the same time, I couldn’t help but question what sort of impulse was driving him so far. I seized the cane he was about to lower.

“D-do you have some bone to pick with the planet earth!?”

I cried... and suddenly.

All of a sudden, the old man went docile—draining his power, he also stopped stamping his feet. With his one-eighty, I was about to fall over from my own left-over momentum.

“Speak.”

Quietly this time, the old man spoke... Just because he had stopped resisting, releasing the perpetrator of such violence was crazy, but he had

already preceded me and released the cane from his hand... he discarded his armament.

I was half lifting him up in that air, and once he had stopped thrashing around, precisely because were practically stuck together, the feel of his slender light constitution was conveyed to me... My respect for the elderly that had turned off in crisis came back to me.

At the end of my hesitation, I let go of his withered branch- though from his previous rampage it was surely too powerful for that label- of a body. Of course, keeping myself ready to cope if he started going at it again.

“Hmph.”

But for now, it looked like my worries were undue, and all the freed man did was straighten out his disheveled traditional clothing... looking at him like this, even retracting my own build from mind, he was a small-built old man; though his eyes were too sharp for me to think of him that way... I wonder what it is, he didn't give off the slightest sense he had given up resistance and surrendered on my intervention.

“You mentioned the earth. Can you understand that painting?”

“.....”

I was perplexed by the question he tossed over... really, what was it? Ah, was he referring to my ‘Do you have some bone to pick with the planet earth’ line? No, if he asked whether I understood the picture or not, I could only say I didn't. All I had was hand-me-down knowledge from Hakui-kun. If I was told two hundred million, it looked like two hundred million to me. If I was told it was the earth, it started looking like the earth, and if I was told it was two million, it started looking like two million... that was the extent of my eye for appraisal.

But even if he was calm for now, thinking of the old man's temperament, I couldn't imagine answering honestly was the appropriate response. So while it was far from sincere.

“Yes. It's a landscape of earth seen from space... isn't it? That's why it was given the title ‘Mother’.”

“...”

I'm surprised a child's opinion helped me to such a degree, but the deed was acknowledged and, "I see," the old man gave a profound nod.

"It looks like they're not complete knotholes... but in that case, you're even more of a dullard than I thought. It's all the more sorrowful to see you had a discerning eye on you..."

"U-um, what do you mean by that?"

"... Alright."

Without answering any of my questions, after taking a scrupulous rude look over me, "Whelp. What's your name?" he asked.

Whelp... owing to my height over one eighty centimeters, I had never been referred to as such, and for a moment, I couldn't tell he was talking about me. In the end, it looks like Kyouko-san was the only one who could discern my name from the tag on my chest... could it be my nametag was completely meaningless?

"Oyagiri Mamoru."

"I see. Then Mamoru. I'm going to give you a test."

Despite being a ruffian taken in... despite being someone who would be turned in to the police, the man spoke with a majestic, imposing air. His tone overly condescending, he had shown strong enough resistance to warrant it... but at the word test, for some reason, I felt some intrigue. What did he bite onto?

I couldn't tell... and as I couldn't tell, the old man pointed at the fragmented canvas strewn across the ground.

"Try putting a price on this painting."

"... A price, is it?"

"Yeah. It can be a general estimate. Nearest whole, just give me the first price that comes to mind."

"..."

With the eyes of a true appraiser strongly trained on me, he issued me an order... I looked at each piece of the dispersed canvas in turn. Price... on that question, I naturally recalled Kyouko-san—the white-haired woman who first appraised the painting at two hundred million, and after that, as if forgetting that episode entirely, she revised it to two million.

Just as I jumped onto Hakui-kun's opinion, could I ride aboard Kyouko-san's take there as well? But even if I wanted to, Kyouko-san had given two. The two hundred million she would spend an hour admiring, or the two million she barely glanced at—which price would be right to say in this situation? Before right and wrong, was there even a correct answer to the eccentric old man's query? I got a feeling he would take offense to whatever I said and call it wrong. Perhaps he even had a vague sense that the answer it was a landscape of the earth wasn't an answer of my own... isn't that why he was testing me?

Instead of a test, was he stripping off my mask? In that case, I couldn't carelessly be caught up in his trap. But even if I wasn't going to borrow Kyouko-san's words as is, I would have to give my own honest opinion; problem being, I didn't have one on the matter.

“What's wrong? Can't answer? If you don't know, just say you don't know.”

It was fact that I couldn't answer, he was right when he said I didn't know, but honestly admitting I didn't know would make me too much a greenhorn to the old man... I still had some will in me.

I tried thinking.

I didn't have to appraise... I just had to deduce.

If hypothetically, I used Kyouko-san's estimate as a base, the options would be two hundred million or two million... in that case, just considering it in turn, the obvious choice would be the latter.

That went without saying, it was a problem of chronological order. The day Kyouko-san said two hundred million yen, and the day Kyouko-san said two million yen, the problem wasn't which day Kyouko-san's eyes were more trustworthy... the main problem was which one was the latest information. Putting aside whether Kyouko-san's opinion changed after

that, she never stopped her feet before the painting again—if its value had returned to two hundred million yen, then surely she would have spent an hour admiring it as she did in the days of yore.

With her detective insight, she had noticed the price plummet of something I couldn't detect any change in, and if there were any further changes, she wouldn't overlook them... but if I had to be pedantic, it wasn't as if Kyouko-san came by the museum every day. In essence, she hadn't stopped by in the past week; I had no guarantee the painting hadn't changed in that timeframe...

At the very least, if I knew what basis Kyouko-san used for her change in price, I would be able to proceed without hesitation, but she wouldn't tell me, and I had no developments myself... she said she wouldn't deduce for free.

In that case, should I have made a formal request?

No, at that point, I had no telling the information would be necessary... and in the first place, there was no finality to Kyouko-san's pricing. To the end, that was her personal opinion—there was no guarantee this old man would take to it.

Rather than saying something stupid to send him on another rampage, keeping silent or lowering my head and saying I didn't know would be the adult decision. It was disgraceful and an option I resented, but in all honesty, I didn't know the price of the fragmented painting, and regardless of how it was in the corner of my field of vision for months, I couldn't notice any changes with it.

“.....”

No... wait. Change?

If we're talking about changes, there was a bigger one than any in the months I've been here. A dramatic change making it impossible to even compare to how it was before just happened. The old man smacked it with his cane, smashing it frame and all... even if it's price the previous day was two hundred million yen, now that it's in pieces on the floor... there's no way that price exists. Kyouko-san had said something about 'the cost paid to preserve its value'.

“Zero yen.”

“.....”

“In its current state, it is no longer possible to put a price on it... far from it, in the current day and age, its disposal might not even be free of charge.”

Of course, it's not as if the pains and zeal the painter put into it have become worthless... more so, because the actual article has been lost, they might actually rise in value but... its physical price as a painting was completely lost.

While changes can occur over the years, there are instantaneous changes as well... there's no need to say all things in life are transitory, there's no way anything can preserve the same value forever. Just as turning points in life can come at any time, an item's value, the values of society can change... there's nothing that doesn't die and nothing that doesn't break.

The moment the old man hit it, the painting had lost its value... whether it be two hundred million yen or two million, it was also a form of proof it had a definite unyielding value up to that point.

The old man grinned, he gave a wicked smile, “Hmph. I'll admit you've got some wit to you—I'll have to give you a pass.” He said as he turned his hand towards me.

It appeared he was demanding the return of his cane... I had some hesitation, but come to think of it, I had no basis to determine the cane was only carried to destroy artwork. If his legs really were weak, depriving an old man of his cane would be horribly mean-spirited.

I held out the cane. Seeing how, after taking it, he immediately pressed it to the ground and entrusted his body weight, my decision was not mistaken.

That aside, judging by the old man's remark, my answer was by no means worth one hundred points... it felt more like I had used some clever loophole to barely pass. Well, he did call it for what it was. It was a scene where it wouldn't be strange if he screamed out that wasn't what he meant... I was just happy the old man had completely calmed down.

And in his plight, he decided to return some wit for wit.

“Now then, you must let me take my leave—all I did was smash a painting worth nothing, so naturally, you have nothing to fault me on.”

He made a grand show of using his staff to walk off down the museum’s recommended route... no wait, there’s no way that logic would ever pass! I hurriedly circled ahead of him, spreading both arms to block his way.

“Something the matter? The one who said it was zero yen was you.”

“Y-you’re right, but you know that’s not it—anyways, don’t move. I’ll call someone in.”

“You’re a hard shell to crack. That’s what I’ve been saying from the start, just call Shikihara in—tell him Wakui came by, and he’ll understand.”

“W-Wakui, is it?”

“That’s right. Now get to it.”

“O-on it...”

The old man’s name had finally come to light, but more importantly, from his manner of speech, he made it sound like he was an acquaintance of the curator. In that case, it would explain his unchanging arrogant attitude but... could it be the old man, old Wakui was a mainstay of the world of art?

He definitely looked the part... but would a prominent artist make such a mess of an art museum? Thinking about it logically, I couldn’t imagine it so, but at present, it was impossible to think of that person as being within the bounds of logic.

As that was going on, the security guards from the other areas and the museum employees finally rushed in from the ruckus. As I reported the turn of events to them, old Wakui was led off to another room, and by the time I noticed it, he was gone. None of the guards knew him, but it seems some of the staff were aware of who he was, and looking at their courteous attitude that went a little beyond caring for the elderly, I was sure he had to be someone big... whatever the case, as the one charged with the area the problem occurred, I was charged with cleaning up the mess.

The Testimonial of Okitegami Kyouko

So the identity of the old man and what motives he held in his destructive actions, in the end, I could only come to know them on a later date... or so despite the gravity of the situation, I was still trying to keep optimistic.

I never saw it coming.

To think the events of that day would be cause for me to lose my job... that's why it became a turning point in my life.

A turn for the worse.

When you really boil it down, my hopes were too sweet... on top of the sweetness, perhaps I had simply yet to have a proper taste. It's not like I had ice cream dangling in front of my face, and I wanted to chastise myself for how much a sweet tooth I had been... well, I don't hate sweets, but I never thought that would force me to taste such hardships.

If old Wakui was acquainted with the curator—it seemed he was receiving special treatment after all—I won't deny I had some light hopes things could be settled internally.

Even if I couldn't escape punishment as the one charged with the area, at most I'd be transferred out of the museum or get off with some disciplinary action, or so I thought... who would've thought I'd actually get sacked for it.

I couldn't believe a moment of negligence had cost me the job I had so longed for and put in considerable work to obtain... it felt as if I was trapped in a nightmare.

But thinking about it calmly, it was only natural to fire a security guard who couldn't protect what they were supposed to. All the more that I failed to prevent the destruction of a painting momentarily valued at two hundred million yen from so close, what reason did they have to continue hiring me? It was a tale where it wouldn't be strange if they demanded reparations from the security company... it was stranger for me to think they would cover for me.

No, if I took a careful read of my employment contract and hired a lawyer to fight it out, perhaps I would be able to resist. As luck would have it, in this country- at least the official stance states- the rights of laborers are guaranteed... I could fight if I had the will.

But it was a turn of events that dampened my spirits.

I held a guilty conscience that it had all sprouted from my insufficiencies, and I didn't think my mentality could hold up through dragging the

company I had so wished for employment with through the muddled fields of law.

Just imagining it tired me out.

And even if I say I was fired, the company let it stand that I retired of my own volition... meaning I got my full retirement package. In that case, using those funds as stock while I searched for my next occupation would be a far better use of my time. With how things link up, I was sure the scandal I caused would spread in no time, so it would be difficult to find work in the industry anymore but...

Even so, what bothered me most was the retirement package my company paid... when I was surprised by the fact they deposited anything at all, the amount wasn't in any way reduced from my normal payment, more so, it was as if some extra colors were added in.

Just as young Hakui said he hated colors, when it came to all this green, I felt a little sick, or rather, I felt an unrefreshing taste in my mouth. If they just threw in a bonus so I wouldn't be thrown onto the streets, I would naturally be thankful, but unfortunately, I was no longer able to see things so sweet.

I could only think that the listed amount included hush money... regardless of the fact an exhibited painting had been violently smashed at a by-no-means-small-scale museum, the media never took to it.

The name of the museum, Wakui, and naturally my name never graced the space of a newspaper or the buzz of the TV. Granted art is a restricted culture in the grand scheme of things, so if you told me it was never that newsworthy I'd have to agree, so it didn't really bother me at the time... rather, back then, I was in the midst of the greatest calamity of my life- losing my job- so I hadn't the leisure to think too deeply into it.

But as time went by and I started to reflect—when I thought about it alongside the sum of retirement money I received, it was a strange tale indeed. Some large power had moved to end things peacefully... maybe it truly had been solved internally. But in the circle that excluded me...

It was too late to say such things, and if I realized it sooner I doubted I would have done anything about it but, when I thought it seemed

obvious... to end matters peacefully, a scapegoat was necessary, and I was given the grand honor.

Since large damages had actually come out, someone had to be punished—perhaps the large sum the company paid came from the guilt and pity they harbored towards me. I didn't have any evidence, but if I deduced it that way, it fit into place... by cutting off only me, the person in charge of the site, they managed to settle it.

And they all lived happily ever after.

I don't know that much, and there was no way I could shake off the feeling I had pulled the short straw, but even so, it was true the company had given me as much consideration as they could. What's done is done. That being the case, if I wanted to change gears and head forwards, I still had my lingering regrets. I didn't have any resentment towards the museum, security company or old Wakui, but even so, I wanted to know what had been put into this bitter situation—if I didn't know, then I wouldn't be able to handle it next time this happened, next time I was put through it.

For what reason did that old man so incessantly smash the painting to pieces... and in the end, how much was it worth? In the first place, who was the old man, and why did everyone try to cover up the ruckus?

There were too many mysteries.

No way in heck was I going to live the rest of my life taken up by such impenetrable enigmas.

I needed a staff. Not a staff to violently smash them to bits, a walking stick to prop me up met time I fall for a turning point in life... when I thought that, what came to mind were the words of the all-white woman.

'I don't deduce for free--'

Right.

Everything has an appropriate price—whether it be paintings or work or retirement or mystery solving. Back then, I didn't think unraveling the painting's mystery was important enough to pay money for, but seeing how it all turned out, I was wrong. Because I pigeonholed a mystery I should have set straight, it straddled along the clock and came falling

The Testimonial of Okitegami Kyouko

from above—if I got her to say the reason for the plummet in price, it wouldn't have come to this.

Of course, I could only say that in hindsight, and in the first place, at the time I didn't have the money saved up to hire a professional detective like Kyouko-san, so it was a talk that went nowhere... but whatever the case, the current me had the savings.

The hush money I couldn't bring myself to save; a sum far too great to call consolation.

Of course, whichever it may be, they were important capital until I found my next place of employment, and not something I could use up—from dusk to daybreak, it was something I should properly keep tucked away. I was well aware of its importance, but even so, I took out the two business cards... All crumpled up in the pocket of the uniform I missed the opportunity to return, the two cards I had forgotten to take out.

Okitegami Detective Agency Chief—Okitegami Kyouko.

My second bout of job hunting could only start after I made a call to her.

“Sorry to keep you waiting, I’m Okitegami. You’re my client, Oyagiri-san, right? A pleasure to meet you.”

She said as she appeared at the café—it had been a while since I last saw her face-to-face, but there way I could mistake her all-white hair. Still, her ‘pleasure to meet you’ meant she must have forgotten about me again... did I really give off such a light impression? Whatever the case, this made for our third conversation, and if I properly explained, I was sure she would remember.

Kyouko-san’s fashion that day consisted of a light blue shirt and jacket, a tight skirt, stockings, and pumps, a formal ensemble. Was it because unlike when she came to the museum, she was on the job? Perhaps she was a person with a clear on and off switch; when it came to me, if I took off my guard uniform and spent a whole day off, I felt as if I would lose sight of myself. Maybe that’s why I never got around to returning it, I couldn’t help but wonder.

“Yes. I’m Oyagiri. It’s a pleasure.”

Whatever the case, I wasn’t wearing a nametag, and of course, in my unemployed state, I didn’t have any business card to give her, so as I stood, all I could do was name myself.

“Haha. As you said, you do have a wonderful build. I could pick you out at a glance. Oyagiri-san, are you doing something to train?”

Giving a care-free smile, Kyouko-san offered some flattery—her atmosphere hadn’t changed from when I last saw her at the museum. Since it seemed there was a considerable change in fashion between her work and private life, I thought her manner of speech would change as well, but that didn’t seem to be the case.

“I’m not doing anything special at the moment, but... well, due to my job I... no, I don’t have that job anymore...”

When we spoke over the phone, I hadn't told her the details. Rather, the talks proceeded at such a rapid tempo, it was more accurate to say she didn't afford me the time to say the details. When I resolved myself to call the Okitegami Detective Agency, I ended up with an evening appointment on the very same day.

I was only told to wait at the designated café.

Naturally, I had intended to make a booking on some later date, and the rapid tempo did put me off, but as far as I can tell, it seems as if the Okitegami Detective Agency only handles same day appointments—isn't that practically the same as not making an appointment at all?

Could one really set up a detective trade on that system... while I held some questions, it was best to get it over with as quickly as possible, so I got my appearance in order. After waiting for Kyouko-san to finish placing her order (contrary to her white hair, she turned down sugar and milk, ordering straight black coffee), "... Umm, truth be told, we've spoken on this matter before... do you have any recollection of that?" I got right into it.

"Hmm?"

Kyouko-san blankly tilted her head... she didn't have the slightest idea.

"See, there's that museum you often go to, right? I was working as a security guard there... since I'm not wearing my uniform, is it hard to recognize me?"

"..."

Kyouko-san silently stared at me... I wondered what she was thinking was she trying to imagine me in a security guard uniform?

"There's a... museum I go to."

"Y-yes. Umm—there's this painting of the earth you always used to... no, it's not on display anymore, did you notice that?"

"My word..."

"Some circumstances have forced me to quit my job at the museum, but have you been around lately?"

“Oh... I wonder.”

“...?”

The gears were more misaligned than I thought. Perhaps I had a strong impression of it simply because it was my workplace, but to Kyouko-san, her visits to the museum were simply a portion of her daily life not important enough to commit to memory. No, at the very least, back when she used to stand stock still an hour, that couldn't have been the case—that was no way to express what would shave away one twenty-fourth of her day.

It was difficult to say it left a light impression on her.

“Oyagiri-san. For now, I'm fine if you keep speaking on the matter—please ignore if I'm personally involved with any of the contents of the request. If possible, please explain it as if you're spelling it out to someone you're meeting for the first time. While you're at it, please forget for a moment that I'm Okitegami Kyouko, and tell me all the calamity that has befallen you, down to the last detail.”

Her black coffee arrived, and Kyouko-san said such a thing after taking a mouthful. With how slow the talks were going, she was pretty much sending out a lifeboat, but that didn't detract from how strangely she put it.

Forget for a moment that Kyouko-san is Kyouko-san... I doubted I could reset my cognition of her so conveniently, but I presumed that as a detective, she hoped to obtain an objective grasp of events. The observer effect, was it? I don't have any study in that field, so I don't really know... but whatever the case, I shouldn't stick my mouth into the methods of a professional.

So I spoke about the events surrounding my last few months on the job. I didn't think I had to touch on Haku-kun, but she demanded 'down to the last detail', so I decided to throw it in just in case—even if she didn't ask, he was a boy who left too large of an impact to ignore.

I concealed the fact I thought Kyouko-san was an old woman when I first met her—it was too untactful to look her in the face and say it. Still, that left me without a reason for calling out to her so, “Your back was simply

so charming, I couldn't help but call over," I said to cover it up. When it comes to a security guard who ditches work to hit on someone, it would be inevitable they get sacked, but in regards to that, it would still be more flattering than the truth.

Luckily, it seems I didn't give her a bad impression and, "Oh my, you're quite something," I got off with some light scolding. From her gentle smile, perhaps she had unexpectedly seen right through my deceit. The woman had a certain something to her that made me second guess.

And on her further urgings, I continued on to tell the full story. When I explained it to someone like that—come to think of it, that was the first time I properly explained it to someone from start to finish—I felt a certain degree of consistency, rather, it felt as if what I had gone through wasn't as bizarre as I thought it was; but that still only ran to a 'certain degree' and no further, or so was the impression I got.

What sort of impression did Kyouko-san take from it?

As I wondered and waited for her reaction, she lifted up her cup that had run empty over the course of the story, "I'll be getting a refill, but how about you?" she said something that sounded wholly out of place—granted, it was true my throat was dry from all the topping.

To take her consideration into account, I ordered an ice tea. Kyouko-san's second order was a double espresso. For that one as well, she said "I don't need milk or sugar"—just what sort of tongue did she have on her?

"I'm quite relieved that I can be of some use... it seems you're unaware, but I'm a considerably specialized type of detective, and my field of expertise is terrible constrictive. So, if I determined it was impossible, I would have to introduce you to someone else in the business... it's quite a shameful feeling to have to pass a job to a rival, you know."

Kyouko-san said as she waited for her drink to arrive... but a field of expertise?

"And what's your expertise?"

“Perhaps calling it a field of expertise isn’t the right term. I mean the subjects I’m capable of resolving, and those I cannot... wasn’t it written on the business card I handed you?”

“Not that I recall...?”

I took out the business card I carried along just to be sure... but looking at it front to back, I couldn’t see any warning labels that looked the part.

“It’s definitely on it. See, it’s right there.”

“...?”

Leaning over the table, Kyouko-san pointed it out... she got closer than I had anticipated, startling me into bending my back in the opposite direction, but I could make out the words she pointed out.

‘We’ll solve your troubles in a day!’

I hadn’t paid it much mind, but under the ‘Okitegami Detective Agency’ logo, such a vigorous sales pitch was laid out—but just what sort of specialization did that point to? It sounded like simple enthusiasm, or a declaration of conviction, maybe even the catchphrase of the office. While it sounded a little too boastful to go and say she could ‘solve your troubles in a day’... forget warning, it was even reassuring.

“You’re wrong about that. It means I can, ‘Only take on jobs that can be solved in a day’... I’m the forgetful detective, after all.”

“For”

I hesitated at that term I wasn’t used to hearing.

“Forgetful... Detective?”

“Yes.”

For some reason, Kyouko-san gave a triumphant nod.

“My memory is reset each and every day... every event that has happened today will be cleanly forgotten by tomorrow.”

Kyouko-san only has today.

I had made a request unaware of the most emphasis-worthy characteristic of the Okitegami Detective Agency, but having heard that, I finally had a satisfying explanation for our unmeshing conversation. It wasn't just that Kyouko-san didn't remember me, or that she didn't remember visiting the museum, she had forgotten everything that happened up to yesterday. It was no wonder she only accepted same-day appointments—even if she did take up a job for a later date, by the time the day in question came, she would have already forgotten the corresponding appointment. This wasn't on the daily level of bad memory or forgetful... I couldn't believe it all of a sudden, but I couldn't think that Kyouko-san had any reason to lie about that. There would be no need to indicate that demerit on her business card if it wasn't true. For the detective trade with a premise of prolonged investigation, was that not a fatal attribute to have?

“Don't worry about it, it's not all bad. More than that, it's apparently been treated as a priceless treasure before. To a detective, behind that premise, there's an even bigger premise of preserving confidentiality and adhering to secrecy. Looking at it from the perspective of protecting privacy, there's nothing more trustworthy.”

“Oh... I see.”

Sure enough, the person investigating would forget, so there were no means for information to leak... not only the contents of the investigation, the fact they took a request, and who the client was would be forgotten by the next day. It went both ways, and even if Kyouko-san herself learned national-level secrets she should never find out, she would never have to feel in danger... if she was simply going to forget it in a few hours, she wouldn't have any need to brave the risk.

If a detective came around who could brazenly step right into any classified scenario, I could see why she'd be classified as a priceless treasure. I had made the request oblivious, simply listening to her words,

it did seem that contrary to her gentle air, Kyouko-san's style and stance made for a sharp detective separated from the sort I'd imagined her.

Once national secrets entered the conversation, I felt like shrinking back at the notion I had brought her a request concerning the likes of myself. Wasn't it rude to use our slight connection to make such a small request? Perhaps reading the mood, "Oh, don't worry about that," Kyouko-san waved a hand in front of her face.

"No matter what sort of incidents I've taken charge of or resolved, to today's me, you're my first ever client, and this is my first job. There's a question of whether I'm capable of doing it or not, but I'm not the sort to be picky with my work... I may lose my memory, but that's precisely why I never lose my beginner's drive."

If you don't find me unreliable, please don't rescind your request, Kyouko-san deeply lowered her head.

I had learned first-hand the pain of losing a job you'd thought you've secured, and the words 'I never forget my beginner's drive' did have a good ring to them... come to think of it, perhaps it was because I had lost my beginner's drive that I was unable to stop an old man's rampage. At some point, the job I had wished hard for had started to become only natural, and because I had gotten around to thinking it was only natural for me to stand there, I was unable to deal with an unforeseen situation.

Going at it constantly thinking today is your first day... and at the same time your last is perhaps the most favorable mindset for labor.

"I'll be troubled if you take me so seriously. When you get down to it, I can't accumulate experience, and I can't learn—you could say I'm more suited to routine work than anyone. I can be deeply moved by the same piece any number of times."

"I see, so that's how it was."

The reason she spent an hour entranced by that painting every time she came to the museum, was because she had forgotten the last time she saw it... and the reason she frequented the museum might not be because it piqued her interest to such a degree, but because her past history of visiting had been erased.

If everything was a first experience, then admiration would never fade... always facing art with a fresh perspective, well, that might not be too bad. The desire to erase the passion you got from an interesting movie so you can get another taste of it from zero is something everyone's felt once or twice, and Kyouko-san could actually—albeit unwillingly—pull it off.

When I called out to her the second time—and today the third—Kyouko-san treated it as our first meeting not because I left a shallow impression, but because the memories had already been reset, and how she forgot her emphasized two hundred million yen was also because she had actually forgotten it. However, if her life became a routine precisely because her actions didn't accumulate, then calling a painting two hundred million yen one day, and two million yen another, was remarkably inconsistent. The painting Kyouko-san once appraised as 'two hundred million yen' really should, on another day—another 'today' still be two hundred million yen.

No... maybe not?

Even if there was no time-based change on Kyouko-san's part, with its environment and circumstance, perhaps the target changed by the day... You can see weather as one word, but the sky's never the same twice. For every day she took a look at the clouds and decided to visit the museum, was a day where she decided to read a book at home.

More so, it was precisely because she forgot her appraisal of two hundred million yen, that she could see through to its 'current value' with partial eyes. Which means some sort of change would have to have happened to that painting... something even I couldn't notice when I looked at it every day, a minute change...

“But hypothetically, even if there was a change, the painting's already been smashed to smithereens... there's no way to confirm it. There's no use saying it at this point, but if only I'd asked you to solve the mystery back then, something like this wouldn't have...”

“No, I'm sure that's the fault of that day's me's shortsightedness. It's nothing you need to repent for, Oyagiri-san, that day's me is to blame. Yes, the real problem here lies with that day's me saying something so profoundly suggestive, without telling anyone what it really meant.”

She kept repeating that day's me, that day's me, but from my point of view, it was Kyouko-san all the same... just because she had cleanly cut off her past self, she was boldly pushing her under the bus.

“And it's not like it's too late. I said it, didn't I? I'm relieved I can be of some help—I said.”

“Eh?”

Yeah, that's right.

She said it... that it was within her field of expertise.

Then that inevitably meant that Kyouko-san determined the matter could be solved in a day... but was that really possible? Even if she said today, it was already evening, and it did appear there was barely any time remaining... even if we brought our feet to the museum that very instant, we wouldn't make it before they shut their doors. Whether she wanted to investigate the scene, or question those concerned...

“No, we don't have to move a single step. The mystery has already been solved.”

“Eh?”

“Oh my. Were you unaware of that? On the contrary, I'm surprised you even made a request to me. Ah, it must be the result of profoundly suggestive thing I said, a splendid sales pitch if I do say so myself... I guess I really can't take that day's me for a fool. Yes, the truth is, they call me the fastest detective--”

Kyouko-san carelessly threw it out... but f-fastest?

Certainly, if the mystery was already solved, I couldn't ask for any faster but, that was almost as if she heard a math problem from me, and instantly did some mental arithmetic. On top her nature, the forgetful detective couldn't take down notes, so she had to do it in her head but... that wasn't what I meant.

“T-then Kyouko-san, do you already know the answer?”

“I won’t go as far as to call it an answer... as things stand, it’s just a deduction. As a matter of procedure, I’ll have to go substantiate it, but there’s probably no doubt.”

“That’s amazing.”

She said it too matter-of-factly for me to praise her, and while I let out some plain admiration, Kyouko-san humbly shrugged her shoulders with an, “It’s nothing much.”

“It just goes to show your provision of information was detailed enough for me to picture the scene and scenario just from your words... though you could also take it as me skipping some crucial steps as the problem solver. If I had to say, an armchair detective’s means go against my principles. I’m thankful to be a detective who shaves down her soles visiting the crime scene a hundred times... well, in this case, it sounds like I’ve already been to the scene- the museum enough time, so let’s just make a special exception.”

Her saying my detailed account solved the mystery was probably just social courtesy, but I did feel some pride in my chest... Old Wakui had called me a knot-eyed amateur but at the very least, this showed I wasn’t knot-eyed as a surveillance guard.

Of course, if I myself didn’t notice the answer, I really can’t evade the label of knot-eyed...

“But in that case, Kyouko-san.”

“What could it be?”

“Could that possibly mean the deduction you wouldn’t give for free that day, will be provided free of charge today?”

That’s really reassuring, I had intended to continue but,

“What are you saying!?”

Kyouko-san put her hands to the table in abject astonishment—the one surprised by her threatening air was me.

“That’s not what I meant when I said it was nothing. There’s no way you’d be able to get the reasoning I wouldn’t unveil for free that day, free of charge. What are you even saying?”

“O-of course.”

“My fee will be the standard rate. Not a single yen short.”

“...”

It’s not like I was trying to use her slip of the tongue to haggle myself out of paying, but she was simply so ardent in chastising her past self, I wondered if that might be the case. It seems she had no intent to repent for her ‘shortsightedness’... she was going to keep pushing it until it worked.

It’s something I understood from when she appraised the painting, but it seemed Kyouko-san was stricter with money than I understood her to be... just because she was able to easily, swiftly piece together her deduction, the price wasn’t going down.

Of course, I had no objections.

It should actually be rising, come to think of it, it’s strange to think the reward should go down because the job was done fast... and around that point, the espresso and ice tea we ordered arrived. It was the first time I ever saw someone drink an espresso straight... Kyouko’s face didn’t even grimace at the bitterness, she kept an elegant countenance as if she was sipping a café latte.

Was it because she couldn’t see the world as sweet as me, that she was a detective who knew the bitterness of life... no wait, even if she tasted her way through sweet and sour, Kyouko-san would forget the taste.

“Then let’s start solving the mystery. Are you ready?”

“Ready... do I need to prepare something?”

“No, nothing in particular.”

As I braced myself, the forgetful detective turned it on me.

“If I had to say, prepare your heart.”

“What I’d first like to assert is the fact that an item’s value is fluid, and in economics, there is no such thing as an eternally unchanging fixed price. Currency value is by no means absolute either... While two hundred million yen might sound like a fortune, if for say, Japan’s national power increased a hundredfold, then its relative value by exchange rate will fall to two million.”

“Y-yes... I see.”

I tried nodding, but the talks had suddenly gone into technical details, which I couldn’t confirm the validity of. Meaning, if you changed currency when the exchange rate was one dollar to one hundred yen, then two hundred million yen would be two million dollars, but if one dollar was one yen, two million yen would become two million dollars, so relatively speaking, two hundred million yen and two million yen would have equivalent value in their times... so what?

“Only in theory, mind you.”

“Which means... on the day you changed your pricing on that painting, there was such a great economic shift—is that what you’re trying to say?”

“No, not at all.”

I asked in suspense but was evaded oh so easily. I thought it might be a segue into something serious, but it seemed it was a sort of joke to lighten the mood. I really could never get a read on that woman.

“Certainly, in that case, the two hundred million and two million yens I mentioned would mean precisely the same thing but... if the exchange rates showed a movement to that extent, it would be exceedingly hard to believe you would be unaware, as a citizen of Japan.”

“W-well, that’s definitely true.”

“If you really want to consider the possibility, I do think it’s possible to look into the rates on that day but... should we?”

She sounded like she was trying to show consideration towards me. I was only trying to follow along with the conversation—no, it's true I had braced myself just in case it was such a global reason, so it's now like her joke completely missed the mark...

“No need. So what's the real reason?”

“Hey slow down there. I mean, if you really wanted to, any mystery, any curiosity could be explained in a single sentence, but that's not being the fastest, it's just being lazy. If I don't properly go through the proper procedures to unravel it, the root of the problem will remain in the end—Oyagiri-san, to you, this request isn't the sort where it's fine as long as you just know the answer, right?”

“About that...”

“From what I can tell, you see this as an unavoidable rite of passage, before you can think about your next employment... in that case, you might get a little fed up with applying the formula, but I will be quite happy if you took it as part of the show only a detective can put on.”

Well—she definitely had a point. It's not like I called Kyouko-san to learn the answer to a riddle or quiz. If it was simple curiosity or pure thirst for knowledge, there were surely other means. And yet—

“.....”

“Are we good now? Then I'll be going on—all I'm saying is that an item's worth is relative. That's not limited to monetary value. For example, my white hair, it's something that stands out quite a bit in town... I can feel some stares even now. But if you gathered up a hundred similarly white-haired woman, its novelty will disperse like the mist. While it may sound odd that gathering will disperse—more so, if a black haired person participated in those hundred, then surely that one would be showered with attention.”

“The majority and minority... is that what you're getting at?”

It seemed we were still a long ways away from the main issue, but if she called it proper procedure, I couldn't let it slide by. If I didn't treat everything she said as necessary, I couldn't connect to the next point. I

needn't be fully satisfied with her current explanation—it's a buildup to the next. Which means, I shouldn't simply listen to what she has to say, I need to do some thinking on my own part; I'm sure Kyouko-san's urging me to do so as well.

“Meaning... the price... and meaning can change based on the surrounding circumstance. Supply and demand, market principle... it's a world I've no connection do, but there certainly are people who buy paintings as an investment.”

“Ahaha. If they did, I'm sure they'd be quite shocked to find their two hundred million became two million.”

It would be more than a shock. But while Kyouko-san got to passing by it without a glance, if I was a visitor, the very fact such a massive price fluctuation had occurred would be reason enough for me to stare at that painting. A spirit of curiosity, or perhaps even a sense of schadenfreude to look over such an unfortunate piece.

And swift was heaven's vengeance.

“No, no, that's the normal way to look at it. You don't need to feel more guilty than necessary... a plummeting price gathers attention, and that attention rebounds it to the top again, those shifts in gravity occur here and there on the market.”

Kyouko-san kindly followed through. While I was thankful, I couldn't let her pamper me.

“But Oyagiri-san. It's not as if anything of the sort happened at the museum, right? There was no sudden increase in visitors to the museum or anything like that-- Which means, paradoxically, there was no grand news of a change in the market value of that painting.”

“Yeah... that's what it would mean.”

Even if that talk of currency rates was an exaggerated hypothetical... that day when I talked with Kyouko-san, the conversation also turned towards the background. If at that time, a truth that would drop the value of the painting came to light, it would surely have become the sort of ruckus the museum would have to take off for... there's no way a professional

couldn't see what Kyouko-san could. Taking that into account, it seemed only appropriate to discard the theory that the painting's relative price changed because of a change in societal circumstance. If I had to nitpick, it could simply have not been made public—on a need-to-know basis—there may be some backroom reasons only the well informed had a grasp on, but I really can't think the Kyouko-san of that day could have had any knowledge of them.

Not recording any such confidential matters to memory was precisely why she was the forgetful detective... meaning, the two million-yen Kyouko-san appraised it for wasn't a relative judgment, but an absolute judgment.

She had judged it on nothing more than the painting itself.

“There's no guarantee on that one, Oyagiri-san.”

“Really?”

“As I was saying... and I'll be repeating myself here, but making an absolute judgment of an item on its own merit is difficult. Even if you try to look with unclouded, unbiased eyes, an objective point of view isn't something one can consciously hold—that's the same for someone who doesn't carry on memories up to yesterday.”

Observation is difficult, even for a pro detective, said Kyouko-san.

“And when it comes to appraisal, that adds another layer to it.”

“Is that how it works... but as a matter of fact, you went and appraised it in the blink of an eye. Both when you said two hundred million and two million”

“It does seem that the way I stuck prices on them has become a baseline for you... it seems that's become your prejudice, please remember that. From what you could see, there was no change to the painting itself, was there?”

It sounded so shapeless when the forgetful detective told me to remember something but... what was she getting at?

“Then how about we digress and try thinking over whether my prices were accurate or not? When there was no change in the painting's background

or its contents, would it really be possible for its pricing to change? In that case, it could just be my misapprehension... wouldn't that be possible?"

"But that would end up crumbling our major premise..."

There was never a mystery to begin with, she was making it sound like the punchline of a ghost story.

"This is a thought experiment. A round robin of possibilities. Just wrestle with it as a warm-up."

"A warm-up, is it..."

If she was building the groundwork for me to accept the truth of the matter, I really couldn't make light of it... my better judgment told me that doubting the person before my eyes would be rude, but come to think of it, looking over that point first was the best bet to make sure the major premise remained standing. Of course, if Kyouko-san wasn't the forgetful detective, this would be an unnecessary hassle, but... to 'Today's Kyouko-san', the women I met on those two days were both strangers, those were affairs she was unable to take part in, and she was, to the end, a third party.

"I simply don't think you had the necessity to tell a lie... that's how I see it."

"People do lie without a necessity."

"But would someone lie to a security guard they've coincidentally just met on the spot?"

"Isn't it possible a man who's just her type called out to her, so she got the urge to tease him? She said something profound-sounding like two hundred million yen to draw his attention?"

"I-I see."

She said a man who's just her type so plainly, it made my heart skip a beat, but that was definitely something of the 'teasing' variety. Perhaps she was returning the favor for my efforts to deceive with the 'I saw a charming woman and tried hitting on her' line.

“It’s also possible you called out to me when I was genuinely enraptured by the painting as a form of art, so I brought the talks to money to cover up my embarrassment... you see, if you wanted to throw something together, you can fabricate a reason like that as well.”

“But, even if that was the case, that wouldn’t make a reason for you to say a painting is two hundred million yen one day, and two million yen another.”

“If they were both lies, that’s within the range of allowance. When you mention two hundred yen first, it sounds like a relative trifle, but two million yen is still quite a bit, you know.”

That was true. While I was sent a retirement pay I wasn’t expecting, if this unforeseen incident never happened, two million was a number I never thought possible to see in my bank balance. To save that much money, a person would need to save up for months.

“Yes. If it were me, I’d do anything for two million.”

“A-anything?”

That’s also an amazing sense of values. It was undoubtedly the sort of sum one might bring up as a joke... taken the other ways, if I imagined having two million yen in debt, just imagining it would make me want to take flight.

“Ahaha. Right, right. If I wasn’t the forgetful detective, but a competent swindler, perhaps I’d have done something like that. By calling the painting I initially valued at two hundred million yen the first time, two million the second, it might have stirred your urge to buy... sounds like a real bargain, right?”

Which means two million was also an exquisite price... it was a high sum, but if you took a loan, even a youngster like me could just barely obtain it.

“If you want to be thorough and hold everything in doubt, it’s not a bad idea to delve into the possibility... so how about it?”

“Ah, no, perish the thought...”

When she made such a mischievous smile, I ended up thinking I wouldn't mind being deceived by her, but even retracting her smile from the equation, the possibility that was a scam was slim—the institution I was in service to was a museum, not a gallery. Even if she instigated my urge to buy low, sell high, no matter how much of a bargain it was, I wouldn't even be able to negotiate a sale.

In contrast, since two hundred million and two million both sounded like a fortune, it was possible that was a lie Kyouko-san told based on her mood that day. Though in that case, that would mean there had to be another reason she started ignoring the painting she always stood entranced by before...

“Right. On the day I appraised it at two hundred million, I might have seen an exposé on a baseball player who makes two hundred million annually. On the two million day, perhaps I saw some infotainment on a high-class mansion with a rent of two million yen. Led along by that, each time, I made a decision based on what I considered to be a fortune... and now that we've reached that point, Oyagiri-san. Are you satisfied with that explanation?”

“I'm...”

I wasn't satisfied, but I did think the logic checked out... if we worked under the supposition that Kyouko-san had a reason to lie, then the puzzle solving couldn't be any simpler. Even if the man my type part was a hazardous joke, she could have said something random to drive away the rude security guard who called out while she was enjoying the museum—reluctant as I was to admit it, that train of thought was plausible.

But in the end, that would only resolve the first half of the question I held—the problem solving I requested Kyouko-san for pertained to the latter half that followed. If I had to say, that was the part of higher relative importance. Even if Kyouko-san gave a purely absurd appraisal, that wouldn't provide the slightest explanation for old Wakui's violent outburst.

Of course, it was possible to think that Kyouko-san's appraisal and old Wakui's destructive acts were irrelevant to one another... but the stars aligned to well for me to assume so without a basis.

Granted, since it wasn't the picture, but him himself with eccentricities, Hakui-kun could possibly be irrelevant...

"Then shall we place the piece's price aside for a moment, and discuss the events that followed? What became the direct cause of your loss of employment... it pains my heart when I imagine myself being made to stand in your shoes, but let's try to think not from your, but from Wakui-san's position."

"Wakui-san's position... is it? I see..."

Even if she told me that, honestly I was disinclined, or rather, it was difficult for me to find a point in common with that rough-tempered old man, and imagining what was going through his head was beyond me.

But it wasn't as if I was reading a book—if Kyouko-san was the sort of great detective from the pages of a mystery novel, then now was the time to deduce taking the hard-to-measure inner thoughts of the characters into consideration. Short as I fell, I had to accompany her. Just what motive would lead a person to smash a painting displayed in a museum with his cane... just what did that old man want to accomplish?

"Yes. So let's try thinking about it. This is also just a thought experiment. Oyagiri-san, what would have to happen to impel you to destroy a piece of art hung up in a museum?"

That was a crazy question. Even if I had been fired, that wasn't the sort of thing a security guard should consider; but, if I had to force myself to think over it, well... I only had some hunches without any evidence.

"That old man was actually the painter who painted the work and... he was unsatisfied with the finished product, so unable to bear it was being displayed to the public, he impulsively smashed it, or something--"

I didn't have any evidence, but if I had to bring up something that sounded like a basis, when I think of how violence to such an extent was settled with just the firing of the guard on the site, it seemed plausible that the culprit and victim were the same individual. Like a potter who smashes his bowl into the ground because he hates how it turned out—if that old man was a famous painter, I could also see how he'd be acquainted with the curator.

Ignoring monetary appraisals, I have to wonder if the painter who should know its artistic value as a work of art more than anyone would really destroy it in such a fashion, but it was precisely because he was the artist that he had the qualification to destroy it—that logic did feel complete in and of itself.

No, if I had to speak conclusions, even if he was the very man who painted it, I doubt he had the right to destroy a piece being exhibited in a museum.

“Right you are. It might be good to probe into the possibility that Wakui-san was the painter... even if it wasn’t his own painting, he might have the educational motive of smashing the poor workmanship of one of his disciples, or perhaps it was an act of brutality out of jealousy that a detested rival’s work was on display.”

Brutality from jealousy, no matter how I looked at it, was too out of line with his age... but if we were talking possibilities, it wasn’t impossible. Regardless of how I thought of the matter, at the very least, old Wakui didn’t feel like the sort who took his own age into great consideration.

“But considering how he calmed a bit after you saw through the painting’s intent- abiding our cute boy wonder’s advice- as a landscape of the earth, it feels a little off to think he destroyed it because he didn’t like the painting.”

“Well... you have a point.”

If he didn’t like how the painting turned out, then no matter how I evaluated it, no matter what I thought was depicted, he wouldn’t have cared... more so, if I showed a needless understanding, it might actually send him into a rage. While it really was just hand-me-down knowledge, when I showed I wasn’t the knot-eyed amateur he thought I was, old Wakui stopped his rampage, which means...

“And while it works as a hypothesis, if Wakui-san was the painter, then I’m sure you’d have noticed—you’ve surely caught sight of the artist’s name on the plate beside the painting more than enough times.”

Sure enough. If the name written there was Wakui, I'm sure I'd have noticed... strictly speaking, I didn't record the artist's name to memory, but if that's what it was, I'd definitely notice.

“That being the case, that doesn't mean we can completely eliminate the possibility, so let's consider if Wakui-san was the painter, and that became the reason for his smashing of the painting in question... but in that case, the timing is considerably peculiar.”

“Timing... you say?”

“Yes. Why did his destructive behavior come out on that day? Judging by your story, the painting's been up for quite a while, right? And yet, why wasn't it right after it was put on display... but on that day?”

“...”

Come to think of it, that was a large hole in the theory. Whatever reason he might have, if he didn't like the painting being shown, then he could've just destroyed it when it was put on display. If he really was the artist, I doubt they'd exhibit a painting he detested to begin with—of course, the world works in strange ways, and doing work you're not pleased with happens now and again in every occupation.

Even so, the painting was on display even before I was stationed as security in that museum, so why come so far, so late in the game? I couldn't deny that feeling.

“Not long left on earth, he might have gotten the urge to take care of his last regrets, but Wakui-san sounded too vigorous for that.”

It was hard to tell from her grinning mouth, but Kyouko-san calmly said something quite dark... not long left on earth, is it?

I had my suspicions since I first spoke to her, but now that I was sitting down, speaking face to face, but this person was just forming a gentle smile to play it off; the things she said were severe, and she didn't seem to ever be carried by feeling. Perhaps that was precisely why she could guess human feelings and thought but—I grew just a little curious as to why she was working as a detective. Did she have a desire to ‘protect something’ like I did...? Well, now wasn't the time to appraise Kyouko-san.

“Then let’s put whether Wakui-san’s real identity was as the painter or not on hold, and pose the question of why he attacked at that timing. How does that sound, Oyagiri-san?”

“Sounds fine...”

It’s not like that day was any special day—it was a normal weekday, and the museum hadn’t held any particularly large event.

“This will be backtracking a bit, but are you sure it wasn’t because... there was a change in the painting being exhibited? Meaning, he didn’t have any dissatisfactions when it was displayed in its original state, but as time went on, something in the painting changed, and he couldn’t contain his urge to smash it?”

It made some sense, but if I were to take on that perfectly logical supposition, then it would come to heads with the theory there was no actual change of two hundred million to two million (Kyouko-san’s falsehood).

In the end, the painting would have to have changed—more than that, a change of two hundred million to two million hit the mark perfectly, or at least sounded appropriate.

“It’s plenty possible there was some inadequacy in the display. In truth, it happens now and again with abstracts. Like the painting being put out upside-down through the museum’s lack of knowledge, angering the artist.”

“Yes... but as far as I remember, there was never a change in the painting’s orientation. If there was any change like that, I’m sure I would know.”

“Ufufu. The problems are going round and round. Is this what you call going around in circles?”

Kyouko-san seemed to be enjoying herself a bit... well, from the point of view of someone who had already reached the answer, perhaps my flailing was interesting to watch. You could call it in bad taste, but I was already aware she wasn’t a person of perfect virtue.

“For example... you actually mentioned this one, Kyouko-san.”

“Oh I did?”

“You did.”

What a strange conversation.

“Maintenance requires a considerable cost, something like that. A painting is different from digital data, and they can't help but deteriorate with time. That might be a good thing in some cases, but it's quite a hassle to preserve artwork... so that museum might have...”

“What museum?”

“No, there's no way you couldn't figure that one out from the flow of the conversation... that museum failed to properly maintain a piece on display and, umm, the paint cracked, or came unstuck or... some heartless visitor doodled on it and ruined its worth. When the artist Wakui-san realized that, he was taken by rage... in that scenario, there would be some coherency with the timeframe.”

“But, and I'm being incessant, but as far as you could see, there was no change in the painting, right?”

“That's right, but...”

But that's the opinion of a knot-eyed amateur. It's not like I could confirm if there were any minute nicks in the painting on display... I don't have the right eyes to spot the minute changes only a pro could tell.

“If you want to take it there, I'm not a professional on art either. Of course, observing things is my job, so I'd notice the sort of change that would turn two hundred million to two million, but I wouldn't be able to tell the slight changes that would need a magnifying glass or x-ray analysis to tell.”

“I see.”

“And you were in the same area, observing that painting all the while, right? In that case, even if you didn't notice a change in the painting, you could at least tell if someone scribbled on it or not, right?”

I could definitely guarantee that. It's not like I overlooked Hakui-kun when he took out a pencil before the painting... no one laid a hand on that

painting until Wakui-san abused it. And if I had to give testimony as a security guard, I couldn't say that painting's management was particularly bad... even if there was an oversight in its preservation, the other paintings displayed in that area were in the same conditions. I haven't heard any talks of any of the other paintings being similarly smashed—it would be troubling if there were loads of such violent old men out there, and even if such an incident occurred, it might be likewise covered up, but...

“I wonder about that. If multiple pieces were damaged, I would really have to question the place's standing as a museum.”

“That's right... that wasn't the sort of scandal that could be solved just by firing the guard on site.”

In the first place, the coverup might not have been to conceal the scandal at the museum, but to cover for old Wakui, who had been driven to violence. I won't go as far as to say I was just dragged along for the ride because I happened to be there, but this matter was a personal matter brought up by old Wakui.

“How should I put it, the more theories we build up, the more these theories contradict one another... should we look at it more simply? Or should we dig a little deeper and divide up the possibilities?”

“No, with this, we have the important theories all roughly gathered up—it's enough. Good work, Oyagiri-san.”

As I held my head, Kyouko-san offered her gently gratitude. For a moment, I thought she was being sarcastic, but that didn't seem to be the case. Meaning, Kyouko-san had finished treading over the proper procedure for her deduction... the forgetful detective's detective ceremony had concluded. It was like I had done a good once-over on the peculiarities of the case.

I didn't feel any sense of achievement, rather, with my thoughts dragging on and on and over one another, I got the impression the puzzles and mysteries had multiplied.

“Y-you mean the right answer lies among the theories we've put out to this point? And by gathered up, you mean the options are gathered--”

“There is no right answer. Through our scrutinization, we have found them all to be false... there is no room for reexamination. In the words of a detective among detectives, who all detectives may admire, ‘Once you eliminate the impossible, whatever remains, no matter how improbable, must be the truth.’ Apparently. Of course, there are some exceptions, and this is one of them.”

“T-that so...”

If it’s that aphorism, I knew it as well—after hearing my story, I thought Kyouko-san had immediately come to a watertight conclusion, but this meant that in that slight space of time, she had concluded this many thoughts... Apparently, it wasn’t just the request resolution speed that made her the fastest detective, her natural thought speed was also too fast... when all was said and done, in her ‘ceremony’, she lowered her pace to lead me along.

“B-but... let’s say our discussion up to now served as process of elimination and wasn’t completely pointless. I really have no idea what remains.”

“More than a process of elimination, it was *reductio ad absurdum*. Whichever the case, it’s a standard technique in detective novels—umm, then let’s put it simply.”

Saying that, Kyouko-san suddenly stood. And changing her position, she moved to the side of the table. At around a step back from where a waiter would take orders, she settled her position.

Putting her legs at shoulder width, she raised both hands over her head... what sort of pose was that? If I had to say, while I’d never been in that position myself, it was similar to the pose one took when having their belongings checked upon entering an area of high security. Regardless, it wasn’t a posture one often took in daily life.

“W-what is it? That. Are you mimicking some sculpture?”

The museum I worked at centered around paintings, so the only sculptures they had were around the entrance, but... at the very least, they didn’t strike such strange poses.

Though it wasn't crowded, it's not like we left the café for secret talks, so of course, Kyouko-san's actions attracted some eyes... not that she seemed to mind. Did she not pay attention to other peoples' eye?

When standing as a security guard, exerting a sense of presence is part of the job, but attracting so much attention is still embarrassing... perhaps because she had the premise 'I'll forget it by tomorrow', she was able to numb her sense of shame.

"it's not a sculpture. I just thought you'd be able to see my full body better this way."

"Your body? Yes, I definitely can see all of you..."

Since she was lifting her hands up, I could see everything apart from her back... in that sense, much like the sculptures at the museum, Kyouko-san's (somewhat comical) posing did enter my eye from the top of her head to the tips of her toes.

Her formal attire didn't particularly have much exposure, but without anything special being anywhere, her standing form looked somewhat sensual for some reason. Well, if a person just normally stood, I doubt they'd garner that much attention...

"And what about it? Umm, Kyouko-san, if possible, could you sit down already..."

"Have you noticed something?"

"...?"

Completely ignoring my advice, Kyouko-san asked in a nonchalant face—as I failed to grasp the meaning of her question, "Have you noticed any large difference from when you talked to me in the museum?" she specified.

"Difference..."

Since her memories reset, wasn't she not supposed to have any change from the passage of time? Of course, her hair would grow, and her nails would grow, such minute differences would surely come about... but it would be difficult to call those large changes.

“You don’t get it? Take a good look.”

“You want me to take a good look? I really don’t get it, but is there really a difference? ... Ah.”

Under a circumstance where Kyouko-san would continue taking center stage in the shop if I didn’t answer quick, my impatience jumbled my thoughts, but once it hit me, the answer was simple. Forget simple, it was the first thing I thought when I saw Kyouko-san in the café.

“Your... clothing?”

“Yes. That’s right.”

I presented it right when I thought the waiter might come to caution us, and it seemed my not-particularly unexpected answer was taken favorable, as Kyouko-san easily stopped posing and sat back in her chair. I pat my chest in relief.

And wait, if that’s all it was, then instead of purposely showing her whole body, if she just normally asked from her seat, I think I’d have been able to answer much faster... even if you retracted her trait of forgetting everything by the day, she was a somewhat defenseless person.

It seemed dangerous, and a little fearful to watch.

That aside, her clothing... it wasn’t just something limited to today, Kyouko-san was definitely fashionable, and even in the museum, I’d never seen her wear the same clothing twice. I often pondered how large of a closet she must have at her home but... what about it?

“Yes. Then this is the question, but why were you able to determine I was the same person when I was wearing different clothing?”

“Yes?”

“I mean, ninety percent of what you can see is completely different from how it was the last time you saw me. And yet, what basis do you have to identify me as the same person?”

Ninety percent of what I could see was different... sure enough, she was right about that. Thought it was quite extreme for a person to appear in different clothing each and every day like her.

“It’s not like you’re hiding your face or anything... there’s also build, and when it comes to you, Kyouko-san, I think I could also judge based on hair color.”

“Face, build, hair color... meaning the attachments it’s not possible to remove, me myself. Regardless of whether the clothing I wear changes, I’m just me, you say.”

“Of course?”

I didn’t mean to say anything so Aesop, but that was the gist. The world would be so much easier if changing clothes was all it took to become a different person.

“But Oyagiri-san, you said it first, right? ‘since I’m not wearing my uniform, is it hard to recognize me?’ You asked... is your uniform an exception?”

“Yeah... well, when it comes to security guards, they’re often recognized by their clothing. If they wear that, then anyone can give off security-guard-ish signals... it’s not limited to guards, I’m sure uniforms ought to work like that in most cases.”

“Yes. I’m sure. There are times the clothes one wears can define them— while I’m me no matter what I put on, for example, I’m on the job today, so I’m in formal wear, but when I’m off, I might possibly go all out and wear short shorts.”

“S-short shorts, is it?”

I couldn’t really imagine it. But what was she talking about? Wasn’t she supposed to be giving hints to resolve it? Checking up on Kyouko-san’s fashion was interesting enough as a topic, but I did think it wasn’t fitting for work...

“You don’t get it? Even if there’s no change with me, by the clothes I wear, I can become various forms of myself... a so-called image change. On the contrary, if I always wore the same clothing, I might not be able to change for the better, but I’ll preserve an immutable value. And this isn’t something limited to humans, it’s the same for art.”

“The same... mn?”

I could see what she was getting at. But wasn't that theory already mentioned and denied? Even if the painting itself didn't change, the artist could have died or been someone else. By those sorts of surroundings, its marked value can face a relative change... to extend that even further, factors such as what other painters lived in the same period, what cultivated their style, and what circumstances the work was created under, those such background stories can also influence the price.

But if there was such a dramatic change in circumstance, I must conclude it would be difficult for me to remain unaware while I worked at a museum.

"But despite, that, you're asserting there was some change in the background?"

"It's not the background. Nothing behind it, but perhaps up, down, left and right?"

"...?"

At Kyouko-san's blanked-out answer, I tried to catch on... up and down? Left and right? Did she mean the other paintings displayed in the same area? Would that change its relative price?

No, left and right aside, there weren't any paintings exhibited above or below it... and I didn't hear about any paintings being swapped out in the area I was charged with.

"Kyouko-san, please quit putting on airs, I'm begging you, just tell me the answer already."

Pitiful as it was, I had to raise the white flag.

"Just what could have made the painting's price change—why did you frame the price at two hundred million one day and two million the next?"

"It was framed differently because it was framed differently."

"And I'm asking..."

"It was framed differently because it was framed differently."

The Testimonial of Okitegami Kyouko

As if to evade the question, Kyouko-came out with such a tautology; I felt I might almost close in on her for it, but then she repeated the exact same words—her intonation changed.

It was framed differently... frame?

Then she wasn't dodging it as well?

It was just as she said, completely straight-forward... was that the answer to the riddle?

“To be a little more precise... the monetary value changed because the picture frame changed. The frame that borders it on all four sides.”

It was much too large to call a blind spot... I won't say that spot was large enough to cover the whole surface, but at the very least, it surrounded it. But sure enough, when appreciating a work of art, 'the sort of frame it's in' is often unconsciously omitted. Just as when watching TV, it's not the TV itself, but the scenery displayed that you see... however,

"The sort of frame a masterpiece is in is actually quite important, you know. It's not like there's any change to the painting itself, but the frame around it can largely change how you look at it... as a person can be defined by what they wear, taken to the extremes, a painting might be defined by its frame. Your neighborhood forgetful detective remembers Oscar Wilde once said, 'It is only shallow people who do not judge by appearances,' but that doesn't mean appearances are always so straightforward."

What makes an appearance... to what extent were the contents the criterion for judgment? It was certainly a difficult problem. For example, I doubt it would work if I told people I didn't want to be judged by appearance while wearing my security guard uniform, but that being the case, I doubt they'd think I'm a different person just because I changed clothing.

Even if the frame of a painting on display changes... I can't think anyone would notice there was a change from afar. In reality, I never considered it and didn't notice.

"What I don't want you to misunderstand here, is simply the fact I'm not referring to the price of the frame... when criticizing a shoddy painting one might say, 'even the frame's worth more', but in this case, the matter in question is still the piece of art itself. It's not that a two hundred million yen frame was switched out for a two million yen one, it's a question of affinity with the main subject, the artwork. In fashion, there's clothing that suits you, and clothing that doesn't. And there's no one out there who looks good in anything, right?"

"Yeah..."

I wondered if she actually fit the bill for that one, but that would change the topic of conversation so I held my tongue. I mean, I doubt even Kyouko-san could wear clothing the wrong size... or so, I forcefully interpreted it.

“On the contrary, if a professional stylist selects the clothing, even if the subject doesn’t change, it might be possible to observe an unthinkable transformation.—entrusting it to the store clerk when buying clothing is also an option.”

From the point of view of a guy used to wincing from overbearing clerks, it was a sense of values I found hard to nod along to, but now that she’d mentioned it, perhaps there were some things that couldn’t be understood just by looking at a mirror that inverted left and right.

“As a matter of fact, among artists, there are those who end up making their own frames but naturally- you could call them stylists for paintings- there are also professionals who specialize in producing frames.”

“P-professional frame makers? That’s an actual occupation?”

“Even things we only thing natural to exist have someone who made them. This table, this chair, and this cup as well. The clothing we wear, and the frame that borders a painting... someone made it with pride.”

“ ... ”

That was also... a blind spot.

With technology at such a level, and mechanized production the norm, in the end, if no one made the screws, the gears would never turn... of course, as with security guards who work at museums, it’s not as if everyone longs for the spotlight but... there aren’t many out there who wished to be ignored entirely. If pride was too decorative of a word to use, it was at least the minimum professional sense.

“Yes. That’s why it’s really a let-down... when the framing specifically made for that painting is switched out for another. It might even get to your head, driving you to rage, and making you smash it apart.”

“! Then... Wakui-san wasn’t the one who painted it... but the frame maker!?”

What he was trying to smash back there wasn't the painting but the frame? The painting just got dragged along and—thinking back, what was smashed up wasn't only the canvas, but the frame as well. So that's why old Wakui came to his senses when I reminded him about the painting... When I asked 'do you have some bone to pick with the planet earth,' he didn't actually have a grudge against the earth, meaning the painting.

That's why his rage subsided. Perhaps the test he gave me afterward was to cover up his poor decision-making skills in destroying the painting he didn't intend to.

“Apparently, the proper term for someone who works in Wakui-san's field is a picture framer. A job to draw out the value of a masterpiece as much as possible... or perhaps to make frames that enhance it.”

“A framer...”

“It may sound more modern to call them a painting designer, but that sounds like it treads into the artist's territory, so when they name themselves without putting on airs, it's usually just the standard frame maker.”

In novel terms, would it be like the binding? Certainly, the cover, and the size of the book, even if they don't align with the contents, can change the reader's impression considerably—did old Wakui accomplish the same effect with a frame?

“At the present time, it's still just a deduction. Of course, I currently do not have the evidence to confirm Wakui-san's identity. But in museums that display artwork, framers are deeply-connected business partners, so it wouldn't be strange if he was acquainted with the curator... or that he was treated as a VIP and had his violence pushed under the rug.”

“.....”

“I'm sure it's no joke when you were hit with the gust as the rug fell back in place, but I'm sure Wakui-san just received some unfairly favorable treatment... you could call it an inevitability, and perhaps the museum felt like doing some atonement. By which I mean, and this is also just a guess, but they probably arbitrarily switched out one of the frames without Wakui-san's permission.”

But even so, that was also a frame someone had to have made, what's more, there's really something wrong with him if it got to his head so hard he smashed it painting and all... said Kyouko-san. She sounded like she was trying to follow through for him, but it seemed she had no intent to stick up for the museum or old Wakui.

She's a severe person after all. Well, it was just as she said. Thinking of how the painting old Wakui smashed, and the frame both had their own makers, no matter how necessary he felt it, no matter how angry he was, I really couldn't sympathize...

"I do think it would be more appropriate if you went and checked the answer later, but for now, just listen to the mere deductions of an outsider detective... of just how this incident came to be."

"Yes... if you will."

"At the point I expressed the painting's value at two hundred million yen, I think the frame was one Wakui-san provided. And it was changed somewhere down the line... You said something about there being a ruckus over the curator's negotiated works coming in? I wonder if it was at that time. The museum wanted to decorate them marvelously on their debut. That's why... they decorated them with the best frame they had."

Their best suit, said Kyouko-san. Comparing it to clothing made it easier to grasp—but those clothes were supposed to have been made specifically for that painting, and wouldn't it be impossible to determine if they fit the new works?

"Even if you say that, they're still clothes made by a professional. To an extent, they'll go with any painting—clothing maketh the man might have a bad ring to it, but as long as the size isn't wrong, you know. Of course, the painting whose frame was removed needed a new frame as well, but that doesn't mean its contents were changed."

"... But someone with good eyes like you was able to see the difference."

Two hundred million to two million. A hundred-fold fall.

Come to think of it, back then, Kyouko-san kept speaking of its price as a 'piece'... not as a 'painting', as a 'piece' its price was either two hundred million or two million. Her price tag included the frame.

"... I must emphasize this, but that was just my estimation. Take it with a grain of salt. I don't know what price tag society's placed on it."

Kyouko-san added in a remark.

"The opinion that a painting's price is irrelevant to the frame it's in should be respected in and of itself. The museum probably intended for it to be for a limited time, a temporary arrangement I'm sure... there's no way they were completely unaware of Wakui-san's temperament."

If it fell all the way from two hundred million to two hundred, then the piece's affinity with its new frame must have been exceedingly poor... that might have been part of it. And I can't say if the newly arrived painting 'fit it' or not...

"Did they think they could... deceive him?"

"I'm sure they did, and in essence, it was the sort of wrong-doing they might be able to get away with. To the museum, Wakui-san's visit must have been unexpected... otherwise, as the guard charged with the area, you'd have received some sort of command."

I wonder if he got a secret little message from someone, said Kyouko-san.

What Kyouko-san hinted at was naturally someone who worked in the museum's domain, but my gut instinct told me old Wakui was tipped off to the wrongdoing by that young boy with a sketchbook.

That was a deduction without any evidence... but the only ones who paid enough attention to notice the difference in frames were Kyouko-san and Hakui-kun. If the frame had already been switched by the time he made a copy... and if he felt something off from it...

And to be more precise, while Kyouko-san- who lost memory with time- could notice the frame's price, she couldn't notice the frame had been switched... which means, among the visitors, only Hakui-kun could pass the message.

That was something I had no way of confirming, and whatever the case, it didn't change the fact old Wakui learned the truth... he embarked on his mission, after all. And singing his own masterpiece that was supposed to surround the painting wasn't there, he displayed an unthinkable level of violence. While I can't determine from this reasoning whether he brought his cane with the sole intent of destruction, thinking of how he destroyed the frame with its adjoined painting, I really do think he did it on impulse.

That's why he calmly let himself be led along once he returned to his senses... in contrast, those on the museum side were aware they were the ones who started it, so unable to go out too strongly, they settled matters internally.

“.....”

Once everything was said, I fell into silence.

As one who worked at the facility, I couldn't say Kyouko-san's deductions were right down the finer details, but at the very least, the questions I held, and my suspicions were almost all wiped away. They were wiped, but...

“So, Oyagiri-san. What are you going to do now?”

“... Hmm?”

Asked so suddenly, I responded blankly... the deductions were over, meaning Kyouko-san's job was supposed to be over; but as if to say the real problem started now, she stared straight at me. It was a piercing gaze.

“W-what do you mean by that?”

“I have hereby unraveled the reason for your dismissal, but upon hearing that, what do you plan to do? Is my meaning. Because you feel guilty for your inability to protect the painting, it looks like you've accepted your punishment, but I wonder. If you trace it back to the source, the museum's frame swap brought on Wakui-san's destructive behavior, so I do think it's a little inappropriate for you to be the one punished for it.”

“.....”

“If you say you want to fight against the organization’s unfair treatment of you, I wouldn’t mind lending my power. In that case, your foe won’t be the security company, but the museum, so I doubt you’ll need to show the restraint you spoke about. I can introduce you to a skilled lawyer, and if it’s simple legal procedures, I can also act as your agent. I can even accompany you to the museum after this to confirm the truth.”

“I see...”

Apparently, the first stage cleared changed Kyouko-san from a detective consultant to a detective’s sales pitch... that part of her was obstinate or rather, her self-made woman attitude seemed completely different from the sense of a hired man like me. Though I wasn’t hired anymore...

I had intended to request the job to Kyouko-san so I could get to finding my next occupation, but the path I hadn’t anticipated, back to my original position was coming into sight... still.

“No... I do not intend to return to my original position.”

“Oh my, is that so? ... Can I ask for your reasons?”

“Reason...”

Of course, it would be a lie to say I had no lingering regret. Even if it was a path I had once completely given up on, if the circumstances changed, perhaps I should fight... fired unjustly, if I fought here, I might be able to set a precedent, protecting others who find themselves in the same position as me. To let those who follow proceed without wallowing in the same misery, for the sake of my own rights, perhaps I should move assertively. The victim’s meek acceptance would only lead to the fostering of the next crime.

“But... in this incident, I don’t think the greatest victim was me.”

“Hmm, then who could it be?”

Kyouko-san asked brimming with curiosity. “Why the painting put up in that frame,” I replied.

“It’s a fact I couldn’t protect it... even if the circumstances change, if the background dealings become public, that doesn’t change the reality I

couldn't protect the painting I was charged with protecting. It's a constant. In that case, I think I should accept my recompense... but not as a punishment the organization has handed me, but one I'm inflicting upon myself."

I wonder if the destroyed frame thought the same... this was too much to bear for my unfair treatment, but I couldn't work in a way that lightened the load on my back. In essence, it's not as if anything changed. Even if I put in a request and had her unravel the mystery... nothing changed, and I wasn't trying to change anything. I would welcome tomorrow still lacking a job... but that was fine.

Even if events didn't shift, my interpretation of them did.

The price, the meaning it held—it changed.

I thought that was fine—for the better.

"I want to become someone who can protect something. Honestly, I had lost my confidence, but thanks to you, I've regained enough to set my sights on that again... to me, that alone is plenty."

"Sounds wonderful."

Kyouko-san said matter-of-factly.

When she said it like that, it made me feel awkward... perhaps I had tried acting too cool. Growing embarrassed, I forcefully got the talk together.

"And so, the job I request to you ends here... my payment will be in hard cash, and I need to pay within the day, right?"

Taking out the wad of bills I withdrew at a convenience store before coming to the café, I handed them over still in their envelope... I had my misgivings of taking out exposed money, but Kyouko-san easily pulled them out of the envelope and with the deft hands of a banker, began to count them.

"You're all good. Thank you. I have a strict adherence to confidentiality, so have no fear... so Oyagiri-san. What are you going to do now?"

"Pardon?"

The Testimonial of Okitegami Kyouko

I thought we had already covered that... why was she bringing it back up? It had barely become six in the afternoon, but did her memories already reset?

“Not that. Do you have any other plans today? Was my meaning. Unfortunately, you didn’t give me an additional request, so I’m completely off after this. Wouldn't you take responsibility and treat me to dinner?”

The day is still young.

So spoke Kyouko-san... while it was by complete coincidence, because I didn’t have any additional requests for Kyouko-san, I had no further plans either.

Chapter 2:

Kyouko-san
Presumes

“The culprit is in our midst.”

Kyouko-san declared it so.

It was like a spell handed down from the days of yore, a line a detective used to begin the traditional ceremony; but to me, Oyagiri Mamoru, I couldn't feel any truth in those words, and at that point, it seemed far too excessive to praise the white-haired woman's deductive prowess.

The reason being, what Kyouko-san pointed to wasn't a group assembled in a room, but the entirety of a high-class, modern, thirty-floor apartment complex. Even if she said 'in our midst', I hadn't the slightest idea how many suspects that would include.

Whatever the case, it didn't seem she brought it up as a joke to lighten the mood, Kyouko-san's expression was thoroughly serious... Following on from that old-fashioned, hard-to-call-appropriate-given-the-circumstances line,

“The problem is,”

She continued on.

“Whether or not there's a painter present.”

Certainly... that was a problem. To Kyouko-san, and to me.

When scolding a child not to be picky with food, adults often use the logic that, ‘There are people out there who can’t eat it even if they wanted to, so don’t be picky,’ but when closely observed, that phrase is a false equivalency. Sure, regional food shortages and world hunger are pertinent problems one must be informed of from a young age, but does an environment where ‘people can’t eat even if they wanted to’ really develop into, ‘don’t be picky’ by any logical sequence?

Perhaps instead of entrusting ourselves to the bitter silence of liking what we like, yet being unable to say we hate what we hate, teaching children to create a world where they’re able to freely state their tastes is the proper way to raise them... of course, that’s plain sophistry.

Sophistry, or rather an empty ideal.

It merely shifts the problem.

Realistically speaking, the world isn’t a place to speak with such top-down morality... but also realistically speaking, the real reason an adult tells a child not to be picky is to make sure they get a proper nutritional balance to ensure healthy growth, or otherwise to restrain them from excessive nutritional intake, having absolutely nothing to do with fear for societal food problems. The one who shifted the problem first wasn’t the child, but the parent. Making a child listen by using moral words that were hard to speak up against, while I wouldn’t go as far as to call it hypocritical, it was part of the foul playbook of being an adult.

The point to all this is, putting aside whether they eat it or not, I really would just like it if they were free to say if they liked it or not... the moment I thought such a thing might have been around that time when I myself held a strong lament for my future.

The retirement money I got from the Oote Security firm was somewhat cut down by my payment to the Okitegami Detective agency, but it wasn’t enough to get me thrown out on the streets, nor was it enough to curb my anxieties about the future—perhaps the recent recession was the blame, or

The Testimonial of Okitegami Kyouko

it may have just been my own lack of credentials, but I couldn't see my second workplace anywhere in reach.

In that case, instead of retirement money, I should've asked my superior to write a letter of recommendation, I would think from time to time.

It did seem I was no longer in a place where I could voice my tastes, or rather fixation, on working a 'job where I can protect something'. If I stopped being picky, surely there were plenty of jobs out there, or so it was finally my time to say that senseless line.

Abandoning my freedom in job selection wouldn't only restrict my own life, it would restrict my place in society as a whole. I knew I shouldn't submit to the dilemma, but the way things were going, forget having a choice of job, I would be cornered into a position where I couldn't have a choice of the food I ate.

Unlike a child, the grown adult me doubted he had any more to grow, but no matter where I worked, my body was my main asset, so I had to take a nutritional balance into consideration. They say man forgets how to work if he remains unemployed too long and all—

So not just the competition of the security firm I worked at, I finally started looking into other jobs as well—the career requirements for a policeman or firefighter, and such; from how I was still trying to choose jobs close to my expertise, it couldn't be helped that you point out I was still bound, but however so, it was around that time.

A call came to my cellphone.

“... Hello?”

The screen displayed the raw number of someone not registered in my address book, so I had some hesitation to answer the phone, but I was in the midst of job hunting... as someone hoping for reemployment, caution alone wasn't going to get me anywhere. When I thought of how they might inform me of the results of an application or interview, I couldn't neglect any call. Even withheld or private numbers couldn't be ignored.

While it was a territory distant from the crime-prevention sense I was supposed to hold, it's true that my wariness wasn't very active on that call.

The Testimonial of Okitegami Kyouko

The reason was simple, I had a slight recollection of the number displayed. To be more precise, at the level of, ‘I think I might have seen it somewhere before’, and truly an unreliable sense, mind you.

While a phone book makes a clear distinction between the numbers its registered and those it has not, the human memory is a peculiar thing. To register... even if I didn’t remember the number itself, I could recall things like the fact I had ‘seen it before’.

Though there were people who could cleanly forget like Kyouko-san, those were a rare case. I knew it. I knew that number. It was a number that tugged at my heartstings with such uncertainty— the memory ran so thin that a light tug was the perfect way to describe it.

Where had I see it... if I had, then where? It wasn’t a 090 or 080 number⁴, so it seemed to be a landline, but what region was the area code from?

I thought as I took up the phone, but,

“Hmm. So it’s that whelp from before.”

On the response I received from the other side, I understood who I was speaking to in an instant.

In that regard as well, the human memory is peculiar. Such slight triggers can suddenly revive memories so vivid. No wonder Kyouko-san who could forget all the previous day’s memories would be a national treasure. Anyways, I had to confirm it so, “Is this Wakui-san?” I replied.

“Indeed. This is Wakui Kazuhisa,” the man named himself.

Right, it was that old man who went on a rampage in the museum and cost me my job... rather than vigorous, I could remember his violent form all too well. Of course, at the time he only gave his surname of Wakui. His full name was something I learned after hearing Kyouko-san’s deductions, when I went to confirm their validity.

⁴ In Japan, cellphone numbers begin with 090 or 080, instead of having an area code.

The Testimonial of Okitegami Kyouko

Apparently, I was just ignorant, and framer was a traditional occupation that had existed for ages; and while I investigated into that occupation, I reached old Wakui's name without even having to look for it.

The industry's 'old man of the mountain', a mainstay among mainstays.

Providing frames that fit paintings better than any could dream, he was known as the most prominent framer. The number of painters who wished for him to make them a frame was beyond count—I see, in that case, there was no way a single museum could stand against him. No wonder they'd go take an interest in coverups.

He wasn't a mainstay artist, but a mainstay craftsman... nay, the voices who claimed the frames he made had already reached the realm of fine arts were in no few numbers, apparently.

Meaning back then, I got an outrageous bigshot into a full nelson... as long as they wish to violate the target, then the sort of VIP they are is irrelevant. That's the main essence of a bodyguard or at least the official stance.

... But why did that old Wakui put in a call to my line? I didn't remember exchanging contact information with him.

"Mamoru."

Paying no heed to my confusion, with a tone of dignity rather than familiarity, old Wakui called me by my first name and asked.

"What have you been up to lately? Safe and sound?"

"U-umm..."

The question itself was what a youngster might ask his friend... from what I saw of him, he looked to be an old man barely past seventy, but while it was rude to call it a surprise, his sensitivities may be surprisingly youthful.

At the very least, his disposition was...

"If you want to know what I've been up to, I haven't been doing anything particular..."

The Testimonial of Okitegami Kyouko

“Mn. That’s no good, no good at all. A youth at your age, loafing around, not working in the middle of the day, that’s a real waste.”

I didn’t say anything about loafing, and whose fault did he think my predicament was? If he wanted me to answer the safe and sound portion, the terrible calamity that visited me was too recent for me to laugh about it.

In the sense I was locked in place and complaining, I definitely was in a safe making sound... and I was running out of air. Come to think of it, a sound’s a body of water surrounded mostly by land. Seeing how I’m not getting anywhere, there really wasn’t any better phrase to describe me.

In self-admonishment for failing to prevent the painting’s destruction, I didn’t seek reemployment, but that doesn’t mean humankind is constructed such that they could hear it directly from the culprit who caused it all—and back then I was in front of Kyouko-san, so a part of me probably just wanted to look cool. I was almost about to roughen up my voice and shout back at him, but as if to promptly restrain me,

“I get it, I get it,”

Said the old man, his voice tinged with a laugh.

“Whelp, I heard you got fired from the security company because of me. My bad.”

“.....”

When he apologized that easily, it was a real underhanded tactic, or rather a letdown, more so, it felt more like he was just pouring oil onto the flame. He really was in for it bad.

“Hey, I gave that fool Shikihara a stern talking to, so cut me some slack. You’ll find fools who don’t understand art in any generation, any age. You can also say it’s people like him that raise the value of art. The fewer people fighting over the pie, the better.”

“I see...”

What’s more, while just barely accepting his responsibility in the matter, in the end, he pushed it all onto the curator, Shikihara-san... I was taken

The Testimonial of Okitegami Kyouko

aback, it was a shifting of responsibility so idiotic that it felt stupid to get angry. Well, it's true the root cause was with the museum for arbitrarily changing out frames.

And there it hit me. It wasn't as if I held round-robin deductions like Kyouko-san, and it was a flash of inspiration from my own complete lack of thought.

“Did you get my contact information from Curator Shikihara?”

My gut told me.

The security firm was also a possible route, but to that company, the museum was only a single place they were charged with, and it was hard to say old Wakui's influence (or perhaps intimidation) would have a direct effect—I couldn't think they would leak the personal information of a former employee. But the museum kept their staffs' direct contact information in case of emergency, and finding it out from them wouldn't be difficult for the man.

“Yeah, that's right. What about it?”

Showing no signs of apologetics, the old man brazenly replied—if I was that shameless, then my life would be much easier; but when I considered how many people I'd have to collide with to maintain that shamelessness, it didn't make me envious.

“No, nothing at all,” I evaded, “Do you have some business with me?”

I pushed the talk forward.

How should I put it, he went as far as looking into my number to contact me, so normally I'd deduce the old man got in the mind to apologize to me after reflecting on his violence with a level head, but from what I could tell from our conversation, it was clear that wasn't all. This person was definitely not reflecting, first off.

I'm sure it wasn't because of his obstinacy that even let one feel a form of conviction growing into that personality rather, I should see it as him climbing all the way up to his arrogance.

The Testimonial of Okitegami Kyouko

“Business? Yes, of course I do. There’s no way I’d call a whelp like you without any business. I’m a busy man, you know.”

“I see...”

“Mamoru, do you want to come work at my place?”

While I was quite fed up with the old man’s haughtiness, those words instantly sobered me up—what?

“Don’t turn me down here. It’s not like you’ve got anything better to do.”

“I’m free but--”

I answered on reflex, but strictly speaking, I wasn’t free. By that point, my jobhunting schedule wasn’t planned out day by day, but hour by hour—even that day, I planned on going out to search. When I plainly informed him of that,

“In that case, it works out perfectly. Because I’m telling you I’ll employ you,” said old Wakui, ever triumphant.

While he sounded boastful of his own foresight, he was the very one who made me unemployed, so there was nothing for him to be proud of at all. I highly doubted he was employing me to atone for anything... in the first place, he said employ, but what did he intend to make me do?

If he judged me highly for my ability to see through that painting’s intent as the ‘earth’, and he wanted to invite me to the world of art, then he was overestimating me. That was a complete second-hand opinion.

“Hah? Wrong, wrong. What are you misunderstanding? I don’t need any disciple like you.”

The old man gave a hearty laugh—I was the one who didn’t want a master like old Wakui, but in that case, what was he trying to put me up to?

“That goes without saying. You’re a security guard, aren’t you? In that case, what other job would I have besides security?”

Those were strong words. As one who had started job hunting with other occupations in my field of vision, they were especially painful on the

ears... at the very least, this was not the time to assert I retired so I was no longer a guard.

“Security... is it?”

“Yes, that’s right. You’ll take it up, right?”

He seemed impatient, one step away from telling me to just accept it already, but no matter how I turned my head, I definitely wasn’t getting the full picture... I was much too lacking in information to simply nod along to the word security.

“If it’s an official job, I think you’re better off asking a proper company...”

“Hmph, like I could trust an organization.”

The old man spoke disparagingly. They were words mingled with a harsh prejudice, but as the organization of the museum had just betrayed him the other day, I couldn’t rebut it so suddenly—Well, I was also abandoned by the organization I was employed by, so even if I didn’t sympathize, a part of me got where he was coming from.

“No matter what it is, I’ll see with it my own eyes and make a decision. I’m placing my hopes on you, think of it as an honor.”

“Y-yeah...”

So he really was judging me for seeing through the earth? Or perhaps he was referring to the price appraisal I did on that painting. While that one wasn’t second-hand, it was hard to deny the hint of desperation in my response, so even if he appraised me for that, it didn’t feel much different from being appraised on coincidence.

“So umm... what sort of painting do you want me to protect?”

Take it or not, I needed to asked—unless I heard that, I couldn’t make a decision. No, if I had to say, the side of me asking in order to decline was stronger. The old man criticized organizations, but there was a limit to what an individual could protect.

In the end, what opposes violence isn’t a single hero, but a faction with organizational capability.

The Testimonial of Okitegami Kyouko

When he called it security, even subtracting the fact of my unemployment, I felt I would latch onto it by instinct, but not doing what you're incapable of is also part of the job.

“Who said you'd be protecting a painting?”

Said old Wakui.

“I'm not a painter—you didn't know?”

“No... of course, I'm aware, err... you're a framer, right?”

Though I only became privy of their existence quite recently... sure enough, it was too early to conclude I'd be protecting a painting.

Which means I'm guarding... a frame?

“Yeah, something like that. But it doesn't exist yet—I'm going to make it now.”

“So you're going to make... a frame?”

Still uncomprehensive, I repeated his words.

“It's right about time I get to making a work that represents my life as a framer—until my work is complete, I want you to protect my workplace and make sure no one hinders me.”

“...”

When an old man speaks of his life's work, a youngster swallows his breath. It practically meant it would be the last work of his life—a word too heavy for someone in his twenties. While old Wakui didn't see the fact he got me fired as very serious at all, I see, perhaps from his point of view, I was at an age where I could start over as many times as necessary.

And to an old man who had tread the long path of life, one's occupation must hold a far deeper meaning than I thought...

Protecting paintings, protecting frames, and protecting workplaces, the amount of work for an individual didn't change much... but when it came to that point, it was difficult to decline his invitation.

The Testimonial of Okitegami Kyouko

At the very least, hard to do over the phone... and honestly speaking, I was simply interested. By a detective's evaluation, he was a craftsman who could make frames that dragged the price of a two-million-yen painting to two hundred million. Just what sort of piece could be his life's work

Even if the world of art was dark to me, as a person who worked at a museum for a period of time, I couldn't help but be somewhat curious.

While at the current point, I couldn't decide whether I'd take it up or not, I wanted to prolong the talk as long as possible to hear the details—the probability I would decline in the end was stronger, so I told him not to get his hopes up as my form of consideration, but,

“Oh! I see, I see!”

The old man innocently rejoiced. Rather than old, his conduct was like a child's.

“Then we have to meet up and talk. We won't get anywhere if I don't have you see the workplace you'll be protecting—oh, it's nothing so grand. It's not like I'm trying to decide your life with this job... think of it as a temporary part-time job.”

“Part-time... is it?”

“Yes. Of course, I'll up your wages. You'll get around double what you made working. Your period of employment will be a few months, half a year at most... for a youngster like you, that's no time at all.”

Said old Wakui.

“But to an old man like me, it's a life-draining period.”

To make sure nothing happens, I've got to do everything in my power to protect it—said old Wakui.

“... Where do I have to go?”

I asked... I had no choice but to change the day's schedule.

To a laborer, double wages were honestly captivating but a job to protect an old man's 'time' was definitely a worthy one... though I still couldn't assent just yet.

The Testimonial of Okitegami Kyouko

After meeting him directly, if it came back around to refusal, while he was an old man who hated organizations, I'd introduce him to the security firm I used to work at—even if it was the organization that dismissed me, it's not as if I didn't have a single trustworthy superior or colleague I could consult with.

“Atelier House. Come to Atelier House.”

“Atelier House...?”

“Yeah, that's right. It's where I work—”

A large voice from beginning to end, as if he was constantly shouting, only there did old Wakui lowered his voice in thought.

“—And where I'll die.”

Atelier House.

Since he called it that, I ended up lured by the image of the word, picturing some two-story wooden housing complex, but when I arrived at the designated address, what stood there—what towered there was a high-rise tower I had to look up to see.

What's so 'house' about it? I wanted to say.

This building was more suited to fanciful western words such as Maison or Chatelet, and for some reason, rather than a joke, that naming just sounded in bad taste.

“Ooh, good of you to come, Mamoru. Over here, over here. What are you dazing out for?”

As I looked up at this complex complex in timid bewilderment, a self-locking automatic door opened, and old Wakui emerged from within—it did seem I hadn't mistaken his address.

Of course, the old man who exited the complete contemporary western-styled construction wore a monk's working clothes, and that was in itself another mismatch—a bandana on his head, no, he had wrapped around a hand towel; that form truly was one of a workman of old.

When he came to the museum in a hakama, that was apparently his formal dress—yet his casual clothes or perhaps work clothes, these monk garments did suit the old man exceptionally well. If a painting's frame could be likened to its clothing, then to old Wakui, that look was the most appropriate frame... thinking over the details, it may seem obvious, but he gave off a far more favorable impression than when I met him at the museum.

He had a mind of rage back then, and now as he welcomed me, his carefree smile was such a sociable one, I almost carelessly forgot it was thanks to him that I was driven into unemployment. I had to take care

that, led along by the mood and led along by emotion, I didn't thoughtlessly acquiesce to his job offer... I focused my mind,

“Is this your workplace?”

I asked the old man.

“Yeah, that's right. A beau, ain't it?”

“Yes... a masterpiece. But Wakui-san, telling me to protect it, no matter how you slice it, it's too much for me...”

“No worries, no worries. It isn't like I'm asking you to guard this entire mansion.”

The old man said, before forcefully shoving me into the building's entrance—the autolocking automatic door came undone with a no-touch card key. On brief inspection, there was a dome-shaped surveillance camera in a corner of the ceiling, keeping watch of people coming and going—just from what I could see, this didn't look like a complex with lax security, but... or so, as a habit from my security guard days, I carried out checks as I arrived at the elevator hall.

When Old Wakui pressed the button, the elevator immediately arrived—what's this? The point that caught my attention was that he had pressed the down button.

“My atelier's in the basement.”

While I doubted he sensed my question, Old Wakui said it anyways and boarded the box. I followed behind. The elevator's insides were expansive enough for me to wonder if it was a service elevator—if they were packed in tightly it looked like it could board more than twenty people. Old Wakui pressed the B1 button.

From outside, the towering apartment complex looked to have too many floors to count, but now I was sealed away in this box, from the number of buttons lined vertically, the story was clear—thirty-two floors plus one basement.

Once again, the building went against the name Atelier House, I thought. No, when you got down to it, at present, the only contrary portion was the

single syllable ‘house’, and I wasn’t yet at a stage where I could say anything about the ‘atelier’.

The elevator came to a complete stop. Once we stepped down and opened the door beyond it, what lay in wait was truly an ‘Atelier’.

A construction site as if the complex I saw from outside was a lie expanded before my eyes—across a full wall of the extensively vast entrance parlor, various tools and materials were narrowly packed and lined.

On the steel shelves lining the wall were various documents, binders. Two large work desks in the center of the room, on top of them the paint supplies to draft, and all manner of stationaries... bar and bench, rasps in shapes I’d never seen before, and vice... if I had to say, it had the air of an art room from my student days, but I had to guess the tools assembled were of a standard several tens of times higher.

The strongest impression was left by the giant power saw stationed directly to the right of the entrance—while it may be a tool to cut wood, it held a strange intensity which could only leave me to imagine it would split metal right in two.

A tried and true atelier. The word fit this place nicely—that being the case, if I had seen this room not knowing Old Wakui’s occupation, I doubt I would have any idea what sort of thing was made in this room. Even upon looking at the numerous frames casually littered around the room.

“... Is this your workplace?”

“Yeah, that’s right. Amazing, right? Normally, this isn’t somewhere a complete amateur like you should be allowed to enter, you know?”

Old Wakui said in high spirits.

Being called an amateur didn’t really irritate me—I was definitely an amateur, and even I had to question whether it was alright for me to enter such a true workspace of a craftsman. It may be an exaggeration to call it holy ground. But this definitely wasn’t the place for someone to just waltz into even if they had been invited—I was one-sidedly overwhelmed, and yet here I was, somewhere in my heart thinking, ‘the place is all jumbled

up and scattered, it's a right mess. It looks like it would be more efficient if it was put in order'. I knew it was boorish and profane—the point being, I lacked the capacity to accept this atelier as it was.

The old man, on the other hand, didn't seem to intend to take my inner conflict into consideration,

“Here, sit.”

He recommended me a chair—no, not a chair, a weathered wooden box of which I couldn't really tell what it was used for. Taking my build and weight into consideration, I wondered if it was cave in the moment I sat on it, but that was a needless worry—the box was apparently sturdier than it looked. Of all else, after Old Wakui himself lowered his hips down onto a box much the same, I couldn't quite complain.

His offer to give me tea wasn't just social courtesy, and as truth would have it, he brought out two teacups from the backroom I assumed to be Old Wakui's living quarters and placed them on a work desk. The liquid inside of them was pitch black, it seemed to be coffee—recalling Kyoukusan who enjoyed her share of coffee, I held it in my mouth with a, “thanks for the treat.”

While this was a practical room that could be called a land of dreams, it had some sort of otherworldly element to it, or perhaps I should say, struck by its atmosphere, my consciousness had grown hazy, and I wanted to stabilize myself through caffeine intake.

After drinking that hot coffee and cooling down a bit, I grew curious about something realistically.

“... They don't get mad at you for overhauling the apartment's basement like this? You've properly received permission from the owner, I'd assume?”

“The owner is me.”

The old man answered simply.

“The so-called landlord, that's me.”

“.....”

That response put me at a loss for words, but thinking back, that would explain the service-sized elevator. Without at least that much capacity, he wouldn't be able to load in larger works—but that being the case, from a renter's position, the inside of the room was one thing, but he wouldn't be able to modify the shared space of the elevator.

Unless he was involved from the planning stage... but moreover, was it really possible for a single old man to hold ownership over this multistory complex? Normally, wouldn't an apartment on this scale be managed by a real-estate company...

No, still, from what I'd found out, the earnings of a first-rate framer were apparently astronomical—while he might not be able to raise the value of every painting a hundred times over, with an alchemistic skill to produce value from nothing, would he be able to erect a building on this scale... in that case, Atelier House was a name given by him—it's good I didn't say anything unnecessary.

Whatever the case, as I was unable to give a decent reaction to a world so different from my own,

“Well, you can call me a landlord, but I've got no rental income.”

Old Wakui added on.

“No rent income...? What do you mean?”

I was under the assumption that this old man did apartment management, a job considerably distanced from the image of a framer, as one of those so-called tax avoidance side jobs, but...

“This is something of a hobby... I'll explain that one as it comes.”

Old Wakui said something evasive. And,

“What I want you to guard is this basement room.”

He entered the main issue. Right, I wasn't here to observe the worksite of a frame designer—while I wasn't wearing a suit, if I had to say, I had come for an interview.

“As I told you over the phone, I am about to take on my largest job as a framer... during that time, I want you to make sure there is nothing to get in my way.”

“What sort of things... would get in your way?”

“Mn?”

“No, I mean specifically, I was just wondering what sort of threats we might be dealing with... for example, the danger of a theft in the middle of work?”

I tried asking. From the time I entered to the time I reached the room, I thought the security was in order, for argument’s sake. If he wanted anything more, I was sure there had to be some sort of concrete reason

“Or perhaps, do you have someone in mind who would get in the way of you making your life’s work... a threatening letter or something?”

“A threat letter? Hahaha, what’s with that—you’ve got a wild imagination. Hey, you might actually be cut out to be a painter yet.”

He ended up telling me teasingly—the threat letter may have been my imagination going so far, but a name as big as Old Wakui— a lord of a landlord—about to make what would be the largest (and final) work of his life, while it didn’t hit home with a non-specialist like me, naturally, that should be a considerable affair in the industry.

There should be those that lose out, and those who gain from it—then there was no guarantee there hadn’t been any suspicious movements...

“This is just a precaution... I simply strive for perfection. It isn’t that I have any ideas.”

Old Wakui said. I couldn’t measure out his sincerity. I couldn’t determine whether he was telling the truth or not. I’m not saying I wanted to doubt Wakui. I mean, honestly, he didn’t look like the most honest old man, but ‘the client tells lies’ isn’t just an ironclad of the detective industry.

Those who seek out security should have enough reason to do so—of course, the reason of striving for perfection could be reason enough.

The Testimonial of Okitegami Kyouko

“In regards to your wages and term of employment, it’s as we’ve discussed... I shall pay double what you earned while working at that museum. Extraordinary for a part-time job. Not a bad deal, eh?”

“Wai, wait a second.”

“What. Does double not cut it?”

Whatever the case, I restrained the old man’s impatient attempts to press forward—it would be quite troublesome if the matter was settled without any plan.

“Then three times? You’re a greedy one. If you’re noisy about money too young, you’ll never grow into an adult, whelp.”

“No, I’m not criticizing the money...”

When he was pretty much smacking my face with money, I was surprised he had it in him to lecture me. Even so, three times is...

But if he managed an apartment complex on this level, perhaps he did just have that high of an income.

“I told you I have no rental income. This Atelier House is my hobby... no, half a hobby, half service-spirit perhaps.”

“Service spirit?”

What’s that supposed to mean? A term inappropriate of this old man had come out, but—does he mean to say he’s managing this place as volunteer work?

“You’re lending rooms to people without anywhere to live free of charge... is that what you mean?”

If I considered it a temporary refuge or shelter; still, this tower complex did seem just a tad too luxurious for that—of course, I wouldn’t say luxury is a bad thing, but that would prove somewhat inefficient for volunteer work. If the grade of the institution was regulated, a far greater number of people could be helped—granted, you could also say looking at volunteer work through efficiency’s perspective was outrageous, and you’d be right. No matter, it seemed I had made some fundamental misunderstanding, and, “Hahaha,” the old man sent my incomprehension off with a laugh.

“Do I look like such an admirable person?”

“Not in the slig... whether you look it or not, in that case, what do you mean by service spirit?”

“The occupation of a framer cannot come to be without the painter.”

Old Wakui suddenly spouted what was in itself a laudable preface, and I stood at the ready for what was to come- while I thought that wouldn't make for any answer to my question, the way he spoke gave me no space to weigh in.

“At my age, I've finally been lifted up at first-rate, but back when I started out, you can't imagine the troubles I went through... though a young'un might not be interested in an elder's hardships.”

With a quick glance, Wakui peeked at my reaction—rather than peeked, I got the feeling he was blatantly probing it out. What was the proper response in this scenario? I didn't know if it was right, but whatever the case, I went with, “Oh no, I'd love to hear it”

It kinda felt like I was being dragged into a bog—or perhaps an antlion pit.

“I came to be like this- choosing work at my own discretion- only through the existence of the artist. That's why, around ten years ago, was it? When I got a look at the life I had left, I got an idea in my head to pay it back to them—however, I'd be paying back their future.”

“Their future...”

“Artist is yet another occupation that finds it difficult to stand and feed one's self on one's own, after all. I've witnessed many talented youngsters without savings distancing themselves from the path—talents unable to bloom are a tragedy, and having talents yet not using them is a condemnable sin.”

“.....”

His words were strong—and harsh.

More so, in the current times, I think the way of looking at talent's shifted towards the ability to make a living without exerting yourself to your best. Come to think of it, I had heard another harsh opinion in regards to

talent—where did I hear it again? I tried to recall but, “therefore,” the old man’s words interrupted.

“To those still developing young painters unable to make a living, I decided I would rent out an atelier and living space free of charge—and what I built was this Atelier House.”

“Oh... then,”

I looked up. I wasn’t looking at the ceiling, but seeing through to what was beyond it—the thirty-two story high-rise apartment. Then don’t tell me the denizens holding a residence in this tower, each and every one of them—

“Yeah, that’s right. The tenants are all painters—to be more precise, the eggs of painters.”

“Eggs of... painters.”

I see, then in that case, while luxury still wouldn’t be a necessity, a certain extent of vastness might prove indispensable—since it wasn’t just living space, but atelier space as well.

Would this be something different than taking on a disciple? Of course, for old Wakui whose livelihood lay in frame making, he may have a view of art incomparable to a layman’s, but it wasn’t as if he painted pictures himself—then was he something of a patron? I get the feeling his scale as a patron was too large, but...

“That’s not true at all. Generally speaking, even if their business is unrelated, a major corporation will sponsor a sports athlete—it’s not much different.”

The old man said, but taking that the other way, that would make Old Wakui an individual rivaling a major corporation. That in mind, I was facing such an outrageous individual, it made me want to correct my posture—but it wasn’t charitable work, and major corporations didn’t really support athletes out of a volunteer spirit. There was a meaning in raising a star player to serve as an advertising billboard; they supported them as a sound investment... then was that what Old Wakui’s apartment management meant as well?

“Hm. I can’t say it’s not an investment—among the painters who’ve left this Atelier House are some performing on the front lines. Those who I’ve personally prepared frames for as well.”

“Is that so...”

I tried nodding, but I got the feeling it wasn’t adding up as an investment. Rearing an artist couldn’t be too smooth of an enterprise, and growing one into an ideal form like that should actually be a rare case.

But, well, in this case, perhaps not making a profit was better—as a framer, providing such selfless investments towards artists with a future would improve his image considerably.

I’m sure it would lead to his next job opportunity.

... Honestly, the reason I couldn’t obediently accept it as volunteer spirit had to be because I witnessed the scene of him losing to anger and smashing a painting—I didn’t think his gratitude to the artist was a complete lie, but I couldn’t help but think about the other components.

Even subtracting that, I still ended up thinking that, as a hobby, lending out a complex on this scale for free was overdoing it from a common-sense standpoint.

Of course, if hypothetically, his strategy was to improve his perverse and stubborn image, that wouldn’t make it bad. The train of thought that a volunteer must always be working under pure goodwill is narrow-minded and disastrous.

“Mn? What’s wrong, Mamoru. Do you have something to say?”

“Not in particular... then if I said I wanted to live here and strive to be an artist, would you let me?”

I couldn’t just ask him to his face if he was doing it to manipulate his own public image, so I tried saying something to change the topic—but while it didn’t incur his wrath and he didn’t yell at me, in a harsh tone,

“If you’re being serious, I would let you test it out—if you have a spirit strong enough to line up with the residents here.”

He told me.

His intensity caused me to hurriedly shake my head.

It wasn't that I didn't want to anger him, I reflected that my statement was far too carefree—thinking of the weight of responsibility shouldered by the tenants living in such a complex free of charge, it couldn't just be simple support.

And there had to be something like an examination... this wasn't the sort of loose place where all applicants were accepted, it seems. If talent wasn't just an ideal, then this Atelier House couldn't be an ideal either.

“Is everyone who lives here a painter without exception? Or as long as they yearn for the arts, do you not care if they're a sculptor or potter?”

“They're all painters, not a single exception. There are some who sculpt statues to paint pictures of them, but their main field is painting.”

Which means there wasn't the freedom of an arts college. While I was kinda getting around to thinking of it as a private school supervised by Old Wakui, as long as he didn't take up the brush himself, I had to see it differently— but could I really conclude Old Wakui didn't paint at all? There were paint tools and colors in this basement room...

“If I'll be protecting this apartment, does that also mean I'll be protecting its residents, those eggs of painters?”

“Mn? Aah, no, my request to you is no more than protecting this basement room.”

As if only now recalling he hadn't called me here to show off Atelier House, Old Wakui returned to the conditions of my employment.

“Nine to six every day, you just have to stand in this room—I don't mind if you take Sundays off. I'm getting on in years, it'll be hard for me to work any more than that.”

So nine hours of labor six days a week.

Considering the time I worked in the museum, it was becoming a bit of, no a considerably high-intensity job, but it wasn't to the level of unreasonable, and if the wages were doubled from that time, you could also call them proper employment conditions.

“Lunch and travel expenses provided separately... naturally, no disclosure of the job I’m about to accomplish. I don’t want the world to know I’m undertaking what will become the culmination of my life. You will be placed under a duty of confidentiality. Think of that as being included in your wages.”

“Confidentiality...”

The word made me recall Kyouko-san—the forgetful detective. Not wanting it known wasn’t particularly to make it a surprise at completion, if a frame making expert on Old Wakui’s level returned, that alone would cause a huge ruckus top to bottom.

If he was restrained, that might become a hindrance to the advancement of his work—his hiring of me included, one might call him oversensitive, but to the man in question, perhaps it was simply the natural level of vigilance.

“So how about it? I don’t think I’m being unreasonable. Forget the entire mansion, for just a single basement room, you should be able to protect it alone.”

“Let’s see...”

Scale-wise, sure enough, I could conclude it wasn’t a problem—but as someone who had already failed to protect a piece of art (from none other than Old Wakui), I couldn’t adopt the decision so lightly. If I carelessly took it, it would be no joke if I couldn’t protect it once more—that was something that should never be allowed to happen a second time.

At that moment, there was something I suddenly noticed.

While it may be his culmination and his final work, as long as it entailed making a frame, it could not come to form on its own—yet that painting didn’t seem to be in this Atelier.

Just what sort of painting was Old Wakui going to furnish with his greatest work? If it was a painting of such an extent that a frame maker of his renown would swing his arms with all his might, naturally, it couldn’t be anything half-baked, but—

“What sort of painting are you making a frame for? You said I wouldn’t be guarding a painting, but in the time until the frame is completed, I do think that painting will be included among the targets I have to protect.”

“The painting isn’t here yet.”

“Not here yet? Yes, I can see it doesn’t seem to have been brought in yet... but when you get down to making the frame, it will be brought down to this basement room, won’t it?”

“Not that, I mean it doesn’t exist in this world yet—still in the process of being painted. Not in this underground, above us.”

“An upper floor...?”

Which means one of the painters’ eggs he supported was making it?

He did say that among the people who left this complex were some he provided frames for, but—while they still lived here, their talents were already discerned; there was an extraordinary painter from the egg phase?

His face got around the museum, he should have any choice of paintings to make a frame for, yet he took it upon himself to appoint an as-of-yet unknown painter, so they must be quite a talent.

“Then does that mean you’ll be waiting until the painting is complete before you get to work?”

“Yes of course, but it’s not like I have too much time remaining. There are some preparations I must carry in advance—the spadework so to say.”

“Which means you’ll be working concurrently. In that case, it kinda feels like a joint project. Sounds difficult...”

“If you look at it as a joint project, it might actually be easier. I mean, I get to see it being painted with these very eyes—I get to know just how the creator painted it. To a frame maker, this is valuable material.”

He had a point. If the object was in an incomplete form, that the outside border couldn’t be made was just my thoughts as an amateur, and if he could see it mature from its incomplete, rough unripened form from the very first step, that might increase the perfection of the frame he ends up with.

“So personally, as fast as possible—tomorrow even, I want to get to work. I’ve already ordered the materials, all that’s left is your response. If you’re unsatisfied with your terms, I’m willing to negotiate to an extent—say what’s on your mind.”

“.....”

It seemed we were already at a point where I had to decide, so I thought.

Well, from what I had heard, in the end, whatever institution this Atelier House may be was irrelevant to the job I’d been given—what I had to consider was whether or not I as an individual could protect this work side. Judging by the conversation, it was hard to think there was any definite threat—this was just the caution of an old man, an investment so Old Wakui could concentrate on his work, and my actual job would probably entail gazing at him making a frame over the course of each day.

Following the logic that the frame wasn’t a complete piece on its own, there shouldn’t be anyone trying to steal it yet—but I couldn’t help but remain anxious.

That was of course because I had allowed a large failure once before, but before that, it wasn’t as if my experience as a security guard was too long; I was more on the shallow end. Even in a job of simply ‘gazing’ at this old man’s ‘final job’, I wasn’t confident I would be able to accomplish it, or rather my anxieties were—in that case, I just had to refuse, but things weren’t so simple.

I really shouldn’t have come here.

At the point I was offered a job with a duty of confidentiality, you could say I was already amply involved—even if I turned him down, now that my contact information had been leaked by the museum, the fact that some request was made to me would surely get around.

In that case, without Old Wakui’s patronage, it was unavoidable that the museum I once guarded would probe into the matter—when my employment was as of yet undecided, I didn’t want to be wrapped into something so troubling.

Just taking the plunge was a means around that—not that I thought it was alright to decide my next half-year over such ‘resignation’. The old man told me to think of it as a half-year part-time job at most, but looking at it the other way, that meant my loss of employment in half a year was guaranteed, and the job searching I had to do would be half a year behind—this wasn’t just a matter of half a year, whether I shook my head up and down or left and right would swing my life.

Life’s turning point.

In the end, would I slip up here and take a tumble— If I were to simply strip away all those calculated conflicts and weight it on pure curiosity and interest, it did intrigue me.

Just what sort of ‘job’ would bring a close to the life of a single human—I had only just found employment and gotten laid off halfway, it was something I had yet to see, and no matter how I worked in times to come, I couldn’t think I would be blessed with too many opportunities to witness it.

Perhaps these were imprudent feelings.

It wasn’t much different from a child saying they wanted to see the moment someone died. Perhaps they were a whim I should restrain, but—an investigator who had always probed out that single ‘path’, my desire to witness the instant they stopped in their tracks was uncontainable.

The opportunity had come to suddenly; I couldn’t decide whether or not to let it slip by.

... So suddenly? Come to think of it, I neglected to confirm that portion.

“Wakui-san. Could you tell me why you picked me?”

“Mn? I just couldn’t think of anyone else I could entrust it to. When I heard you lost your position, I thought it worked out just fine.”

“But to the contrary, you wouldn’t normally think to hire a security guard who got fired to guard a precious work. If you were using our exchange back then as a criterion—”

When I saw through that painting as the ‘earth’ and appraised the smashed picture at zero yen, those couldn’t serve as criteria. The former was second-hand, the latter was conjecture. Being evaluated for it would be troubling, honestly speaking—hypothetically, well, let’s say luck is a form of strength, but to be blunt, you could also say that ‘aesthetic sense’ has no relation to a guard’s abilities.

“Huh? Exchange? Did we discuss anything?”

“Eh?”

“Back then, the blood rushed to my head, so I don’t remember whatever conversation I had with you.”

“B-but, in that case, even more so.”

“I said it, did I not? No matter what it is, I’ll see with it my own eyes ... that’s all there is to it.”

Old Wakui said sounding irritated—but to me, that was the most important point.

“Unless you tell me why you can trust me, I won’t be able to work,” I hung on.

“To not even know what you’re being appraised for, you’re a pitiful one. Even the painters’ eggs living in this Atelier House, they all each have an understanding of their own worth.”

“Hmm...”

“It’s because it’s my fault you were fired.”

Old Wakui said. Then in the end, was he atoning? No, there’s no way with that laudable personality of his—as I quietly waited for his words to continue, reluctantly, as if not wanting to go out of his way to say it,

“It’s because, while unreasonable laid off because of me, you accepted it.”

He tried to make it easier to understand.

“... Does that mean you thought I was biddable?”

Sure enough, from the hiring side, a laborer who didn't complain and just left when they were fired was a thankful thing to have—but if I was being hired under reasons such as 'easy to discharge' and 'will fold to irrational orders,' I'd much rather not.

"Wrong."

But old Wakui refuted my question.

"I don't know how it really is. But I determined the reason you went with your firing to be because you 'accepted it'—to you, that discharge was not unreasonable at all. I thought you had punished yourself for not protecting the painting you were charged with. That is the sort of person I can trust."

Everyone fails, but it is in how they face that failure that a human shows their worth—Old Wakui declared so grandiosely I could no longer grasp the truth of the statement.

"....."

I couldn't react.

By which I mean, I kinda felt like I'd been seen through—perhaps he really did evaluate me, but at the same time, it was the same as saying I was an open book.

In the first place, that was again hard to label as my own achievement—it wasn't as if I had accepted being cornered into unemployment so easily.

Before I accepted it, I needed someone's help.

I could only call it shrouded in mystery, I didn't know what was going on; it was unreasonable and irrational, and it was precisely because a great detective pulled me out from the bottom of the bog—that I got to face my own failure.

However, if I said that here, it would only sound like an excuse—I now know what connected where, but it did seem I still had to give an answer here and now.

No matter how I might regret it later—either choice would be shadowed by regret, which in that case, might mean what I was really choosing was what regret I wanted.

With this decision here, just what sort of regret would I be satisfied with—

“... You said I could negotiate my employment terms, did you?”

“Yeah. Got something in mind? I’ll swallow down most conditions.”

“The scope of my guard duty aside, realistically speaking, I think it’ll be difficult for me to guard this basement room alone over the space of half a year. There will definitely be things I fail to see, and there’s no guarantee my health will never take a turn. At the very least, I want you to hire one more person and set up a shift.”

It seemed my request was unexpected, and the old man shut his mouth—before he said anything, I pressed for an answer.

“If you say you can triple my salary, then you’re better off using that amount to increase the number of people... if you swallow down that condition, I’ll happily work for you.”

Looking at it the other way, if that didn’t work, I planned to decline—that point was the common ground.

“You’ve put out quite a difficult one.”

He said, a little time passed. He wasn’t saying it as a negotiation tactic, he really did make a difficult face.

“... If you’re striving for perfection, I do think you’re better off the more people you have.”

“The problem’s not so simple—I said I’m imposing confidentiality. Unless I know I can trust them, it’s out of the question—and I don’t have anyone in mind. I told you, I don’t have any other candidates.”

“I do have an idea. Are you taking recommendations?”

“Mn? Some connection from the company you worked at? I told you that too, I can’t trust organizations.”

The Testimonial of Okitegami Kyouko

“It’s alright. The one I want to introduce isn’t an organization but an individual.”

“An individual... oh?”

Doubtfully, old Wakina looked over me scrutinizingly. While losing mentally to his dubious eyes, “Of course, I guarantee the height of their abilities,” I continued. “I think they’re far more reliable than myself—if I have their support, I think I can face this guard duties with no qualms whatsoever.”

“Hmph. In that case, I can’t say I won’t consider it... but before their abilities come into question, tell me if they’ve got a tight lip.”

With that as the premise to everything, Wakui sought confirmation—that question was one I could answer with confidence.

“Yes. I guarantee it.”

Strictly speaking, her lips weren’t tight—she was just prone to forgetting.

On the way back from Atelier House, I reunited with an unexpected individual—old Wakui came to greet me when I came, but he wouldn't see me off (perhaps I'd ruined his mood with a difficult condition—in which case, from my point of view, the difficult one was the old man), so at the time I was alone.

“Ah, old-timer.”

A voice called over to me. For a moment, I couldn't tell where the voice was coming from, but when I tried dropping my gaze, I found a young boy carrying a sketchbook under his arm.

“U-umm...?”

“It's me, you know, me. Hakui Riku—don't remember me? Well, we only met once anyways.”

“N-no, I do remember.”

As an episode, those events had left quite an impression—but sure enough, we only met once, and it wasn't as if I clearly remembered his face, so if we passed by one another, I probably wouldn't notice.

I was even surprised Hakui-kun remembered someone who was no more than a single security guard—did that part have something to do with the extraordinary memory power of one who paints pictures?

“What are you doing in these parts, in the middle of the day? Shouldn't you be at work?”

Hakui-kun brazenly asked. It was quite apparent he had yet to develop the tact to understand an adult not working in the middle of the day usually involved some circumstances that should never be asked about.

“Yeah, truth is, I left my job at the museum.”

To be more precise, I was fired from the security company, but I thought explaining it all would just make it more convoluted, so I kept the details vague on that point.

“I failed a bit on the job. Right now, I’m in the middle of jobhunting. What about you, what’s brought you here?”

I couldn’t think there’d be any motifs for a painting in the middle of town, and if he kept walking, just about the only thing he’d run into was the high-rise complex—Atelier House.

“Nothing’s brought me here. This is the way to my house.”

“Hmm... wait, don’t tell me!?”

I turned to Atelier House behind me—a great many painters’ eggs, the housing complex receiving support from the renowned framer.

“Hakui-kun, you live there!?”

“Is it really that surprising...?”

Hakui-kun said suspiciously. There, it seemed he noticed, “Mn? What, old-timer, you know what sort of place this apartment complex is?” He asked another question.

“n wait, there’s nothing but Atelier House down the road you came from... jobhunting? Then don’t tell me, old-timer, you had an interview with teacher?”

I cringed at the rapid succession of questions.

If I wanted to, they were all questions I could answer, but I had already been placed under confidentiality, and just because I was dealing with a child, I couldn’t just readily reply.

If Hakui-kun said he was a resident of that complex, all the more so—could it be as a resident he already knew the situation? In this instance, it was clear that teacher pointed to old Wakui after all—at the museum, he used the word teacher I thought ill-matched to a cheeky brat, but it looks like he didn’t mean a painting teacher.

And late as it was, the number Wakui called from, that number that wasn't recorded in my address book, I finally understood why I thought I remembered it— it was the same as the contact information Hakui-kun wrote on my hand at the museum.

But to think even a boy his age lived there—once again, I affirmed Atelier House was no game. Though old Wakui did say it was half a hobby.

“Errr... I don't know how much I'm allowed to talk about.”

“Ah, I get it, old-timer. Were you fired because of teacher? Got to say sorry for that—it was indirectly my fault.”

The young boy said without particularly shying back—one could say that attitude was somewhat reminiscent of old Wakui.

“It's got to be because I snitched to teacher. The painting's frame was switched out, I said—but, well, if I noticed it, I couldn't really keep silent. After that, before he had even finished the job he was working on, I heard teacher stormed into the museum and caused a ruckus. I can't say I didn't wonder what happened to you... so anyways, did teacher introduce you to some work?”

While it was rough reasoning, he was largely on the mark. When he wasn't even a detective, what a sharp kid.

In this specific instance, rather than sharp, his frank manner of speech that came precisely because he was a child might have just made him sound sharper than an adult who would beat around the bush. My apologies to the word snitch, but if I had to deduce, it looks like the one who informed old Wakui of the frame change was Hakui-kun after all—thought it was a bit beyond my expectations that he had connections to Atelier House.

“Was Wakui-san the one who told you to copy that painting? He didn't say anything that made it sound like he could teach art.”

“Ahh, as a front, he's not supposed to do that sorta thing, but over here, I'm someone's he's letting live there for free. No matter what he says, can't go against the patron's orders. This world ain't so simple, you know?”

“I see...”

That was something I experienced all too recently—the world was detestably convoluted, and you never know what connects where.

“And for the artists living in Atelier House, having teacher furnish them with a frame is one of their goals—learning from a picture teacher actually framed before is like a compulsory subject.”

Hakui-kun, said, flip, flip, flip, and showed me the contents of his sketchbook—the pages had increased from the time he showed me that day.

“Ah, then the paintings in that sketchbook are all...”

“Right. I guess I’ve pretty much finished copying all the ones open to the public... but, see, I can’t spot a single point in common.”

Haven’t really learned anything, Hakui-kun sighed.

He was cheeky, he didn’t go to school, and he was liable to look insincere, but his posture was earnest, and he seemed very serious—to think a person with talent who confronted that talent head-on could appear so radiant, without any particular reason, I fell into self-loathing.

And the fact that violent man was, at the very least, considerably respected by these painters (eggs?), it was pretty obvious if you thought about it, but I fully came to realize.

In that case, perhaps it was best I didn’t say anything rash. That Wakui was thinking of retirement, and that he was about to embark on the last job of his life—no way, but didn’t he say someone in Atelier House was painting it? At the very least, that tenant should know the situation—

Could it be that painter was Hakui-kun? My intuition led me along that tangent. The logic that he was just a child couldn’t apply the moment he was allowed to live in Atelier House.

With all the talent he had, what’s more, if he said old Wakui was treating him specially, then couldn’t he have the qualifications to tag along on the man’s final job—I thought, unconsciously staring hard at the boy.

The Testimonial of Okitegami Kyouko

He must have been well attuned to that look as sure enough, “It’s probably not what you’re thinking,” came his bored-sounding words.

“Eh... w-what could you be talking about?”

“No, I mean what teacher wanted... the reason he called you after you’d been fired, I’ve got a hunch—including the reason you’d want to keep it hidden for me. But I’m not even a candidate for that one.”

“.....!”

It was exceedingly difficult to maintain my poker face... of course, it wasn’t as if Hakui-kun was saying he had seen through everything but at the very least, he knew the circumstances—apparently. But still...

“You’re not a candidate for it...? What do you mean by that?”

While my guess Hakui-kun would accompany him seemed to have missed the mark, candidate was quite the peculiar word. Judging by old Wakui’s tone, I got the feeling he’d already decided who’d be painting the picture...

“That all comes down to teacher’s secretiveness. There was no way he could hide the fact he was going to get into a large job, so he had various residents get to painting paintings that fit the part—call it a secret project if ya want, but the walls have ears, so by putting out orders in bulk, he made it so even the one painting it doesn’t know which one is the real one—that’s how he set it up.”

“W-well that’s.”

I heard something like that happens in the filming of mystery and suspense dramas. By filming the last scene along numerous routes and numerous patterns, they make it so even the performers didn’t know which plot is the real one— by doing so, they’re able to prevent the information ever actually being leaked before release, if I had to say a risk that came with the production process...

He put painters up to it? While he called them candidates, the ones who weren’t the real McCoy were painting pointless pictures and—from the way he said secretiveness, you could also say it was already impossible to cover up.

To not even tell the one painting it, as a patron, he wasn't being frank to the people he supported, and when it came down to it, it became hard for me to think that old man was managing Atelier House out of honest goodwill or repayment.

What's more, that Hakui-kun wasn't even included among the fake candidates was a shock that made me shudder—just what terrifying level were those painters' eggs living in that complex at?

“Well... he's going a little too far, is what I humbly think. I admit, just 'cuz it's art, doesn't mean it's got nothing to do with competition. Having us all live in the same place, and cultivate ourselves to set out for number one is a good idea. A management policy I'd even call too respectable for teacher. But when it comes to his handling this time around, in the opposite sense, I think it's not like him—kukuku, though it's got no persuasive power coming from a kid who they wouldn't even let into that battle.”

“.....”

“If he's already at the stage where he hires an old-timer like you, teacher's finally going to start moving for real—if today was the interview, did you get the job?”

“Y—yeah.”

I did, but when I heard it was such a terrifying place where man had to strive but to remain man, it brought a doubt to my choice. As if to boost that doubt even further, Hakui-kun spoke.

“You're better off giving up on it. You've seen teacher's intense nature, 'r how should I put it, strong character or something; a good-natured-looking old-timer like you looks like he'll get corrupted too easily.”

“Corrupted...”

If that was where he was going, I was already corrupted.

Without any major experience, forget that, nothing but experience of failure, for me to personally take up the guard of a very important person on their very important job wasn't a sane state of affairs—corrupted by the sort of VIP who could hold clout against a single museum on his own,

perhaps I had also come under the misunderstanding I would be able to accomplish something on my own. When I left Atelier House and looked back on it rationally, that's how I got to think of it.

At the end of the end, I succeeded in pulling the conditions out of the old man, but—apart from that, in the end, now that it was over, I was at the whims of that arrogant man.

I of course didn't reach him in talent or artistic prowess, but to strive for perfection, as a stepping stone there just in case, perhaps I wasn't too different from the young painters living in Atelier House.

“It's not just talent or dreams or futures... perhaps working is surprisingly not an ideal.”

Old Wakui's culmination, what would become his final work; as I listened to Hakui, I realized it might not be the sort of thing I wanted to watch over and see off. At the point I thought of labor as an ideal, you could also say I was still considerably young...

“Haha. Because the ulterior motives of all sorts swirl around. From my sense, it's definitely not an ideal. It's dirty and stained. Makes me want to paint it all over in black.”

“.....”

“Whether you're working or not, old-timer, if you think that Atelier House is where youngsters dreaming of a future gather, some group of creators overflowing with a creative spirit, then you should at least know that's completely wrong. More than youngsters dreaming of a future, me included, this is where the monsters who live devouring dreams come together. Get it in your mind there's no telling what that lot will do, 'kay?’”

Well then, I'll be off, Wakui-kun said passing by my side—just as he said, he was returning to Atelier House. For argument's sake, he did try to stop me, but he didn't have a particularly strong opposition to my employment, it seems—I guess that part's how kids are these days, a dry sort of feeling.

I simply saw him off... in the first place, even if it was still an oral promise at present, as I had already exchanged a contract of employment with old

The Testimonial of Okitegami Kyouko

Wakui, it was impossible to scrap it. At the risk of my own livelihood, it would be possible to overturn it, but when I thought of my mental state, in a battle of lawsuits against that rough-tempered old man, that alone made me fed up.

If I had just met Hakui-kun before Wakui, and heard what he had to say, perhaps it would have been different, but come so far, I couldn't take his advice—well, if I commuted here half a year, I would surely have another chance to meet him as a resident, so when the time came, I'd ask a bit more in depth.

Thinking back on it later, that was quite an optimistic notion, and far too late, yet I had not the sense of an artist nor the reasoning of a detective. No, on the contrary—as a security guard, I couldn't even watch over the job of the old man who trusted me.

Without being shrewd, if I properly took Hakui-kun's warning there, perhaps a different future would lay in store. But such a future wouldn't come upon me.

The state of affairs developed rapidly—it developed, and fell.

While my final conclusion was that I never should have taken up the guard request, my calculations fell off on other finer details as well.

The sole right I won in my negotiations with old Wakui—it was the right to invite a capable person to help me out on the job, but it wasn't long before I came to know I wouldn't be able to use it as I wanted.

“My apologies, but our office will not be able to accept that request.”

While still listening to the important points of the story, the head of the agency, Kyouko-san, went beyond polite to respond in a tone as if it was someone else's business.

No, it really was someone else's business.

Kyouko-san only has today—not only that I made a request the other day, she had completely forgotten who I even was.

To her, every client was a first-time customer and a first-time meeting—the more you tried to act like a regular, the more embarrassing it was.

Naturally, I should have been fully aware of that, but when I actually tried experiencing it, it was a considerable shock. I felt like cold water had been dumped on me. Even if it was only over the phone, that tone and that reaction notified me Kyouko-san 'really' had forgotten.

That being the case, being shocked wouldn't get me anywhere—the reason Kyouko-san declined the request wasn't particularly because I was a 'first-time customer'. If she did that, the forgetful detective would end up declining every case, and she would never be able to set up an enterprise.

“W-why is that? We'll properly pay your regular fees. Your reward. Your wages. Your money.”

“... Please quit repeating money like that. Is that all you care about?”

She said coldly.

Personally, I thought I was matching Kyouko-san's interests, but it seems I was acting too familiar as a first-time client over the phone—this sense of distance was difficult. For her to even doubt my character, I did the full rounds to a peculiar feeling.

“This is not a problem of money. It is the official regulation of our agency... generally speaking, we are only able to accept requests that can be completed over the course of a day. Requests that carry over day after day are mainly declined.”

“Ah...”

That's right. I forgot about that.

Rather than a sales pitch, the ‘We'll solve your troubles in a day!’ on her business card was an indication of her demerit.

Once the day carried over, forget the truth of the case, Kyouko-san would even forget it happened, so no matter the incident, she had to resolve it ‘within the day’—in that case, with a job that could take half a year at most, without even listening to the details, she could only turn me away at the gate.

This was my overeagerness. If Kyouko-san, who had become a turning point in my life rivaling Wakui Kazuhisa, would guard alongside me, it would set my heart at ease, or so I thought it was a nice idea if I did say so myself. As truth would have it, it seems I said something completely absurd.

In the first place, the thought that a great detective on Kyouko-san's level would be confined for an entire half year was exceedingly self-absorbed, or rather, self-centered—I wouldn't blame you if I thought I got on my high horse, thinking we'd become close after making a single request.

“Is that so, then my apologies... sorry for taking your time.”

Discouraged, and more embarrassed than that, I was about to hang up the phone, but,

“Oh, no, well, no need to be in such a hurry. Oyagiri-san, was it?”

I was stopped by none other than Kyouko-san.

The Testimonial of Okitegami Kyouko

“I cannot accept a request on those conditions, but that doesn’t mean I can’t help you out in the slightest. Of course, you can consult with me if you wish.”

“Huh?”

“Now about that money... no, when there’s a troubled person before me, it would desecrate my character as a detective if I were to be so cold as to be bound by trivial office regulations. I’m aiming to be a cheerful, fun, endearing detective.”

At the point she started off by bringing up money, I had to think she was distant from cheerful, fun, and endearing, but... if I had to say, I had a bad feeling the exchange rate would be high.

In the first place, great detectives never had an image of ‘cheerful and fun’... just what sort of thing could the concrete image of a detective Kyouko-san was setting out for be?

“The Okitegami Detective Agency is not a bureaucracy. It is the urgent care center of the detective agency. We must do things quickly, so if there’s something that can be done quick, we’re quick to do it.”

While it may have been a reliable statement, there was nothing more bureaucratic than the urgent care center... no, this wasn’t the time for such idle exchange.

If she was going to help me, there was nothing I could want more—I had made such a grand gesture to old Wakui, if I ended with, ‘my lead turned me down,’ it would be far too uncool.

“Well then, Kyouko-san, specifically speaking, what do you have in mind...?”

“Yes, well in the first place, you can’t call bodyguarding a detective’s field of expertise... I don’t have the confidence to involve myself in rough affairs. There’s no surprise twist I was actually a Kungfu master or anything of the sort.”

Not that I was expecting anything like that to begin with.

The Testimonial of Okitegami Kyouko

“However, even so, I think it’s possible for me to provide adequate advice. While it may be presumptuous for me to advise someone serving in the field, a pro in their own regard, perhaps I can give the sort of inspection of the guard site that can only be given from a detective’s perspective.”

A detective’s investigation—right, that was what I had originally been expecting from Kyouko-san. Even if she didn’t guard Atelier House with me for an entire half year, at least the first day—or perhaps, if I could indulge myself, she could periodically check to see if there were any holes at the scene, any openings in my guard, that would be enough.

“It would be a huge help if you could do that for me.”

“I’m just glad I can be of service—by the way, in that case, would that mean I would receive half a year’s worth of guard reward in just one day?”

“O-oh no, that’s probably pushing it. I think you’ll be getting a day rate.”

“Is that so... well, I was only joking.”

That was a joke?

She didn’t accompany it with nearly enough joy in her tone for that, but... I was beginning to suspect that rather than being firm with money because she was in charge of the finances for her own agency, this person just acted gentle, and she was simply that greedy.

Perhaps that she used her superior intellect to act not as a swindler but a detective was this world’s saving grace.

“Well then, if you’ll accompany me to the scene at a later date...”

“There is no need to wait for any later date. Will today, right now not work?”

When it came to taking action, Kyouko-san was speedy—today, now? I thought I’d make an appointment over the phone, meet her directly, and discuss the specifics—the terms of employment old Wakui presented and such— and that’s why I called her in the morning, but to think she would start moving immediately on the request she just accepted today.

Even if it was bad for a case to cross dates, I’m pretty sure she’d be able to manage without too much hassle if appointments straddled different

days, but—when I heedlessly began thinking along those lines, the thought struck me it might be to prevent double bookings.

If my reservation met up with someone else's she accepted on a different day, and she forgot when she booked both of them, there was no way for her to set precedence—in that case, perhaps she took a stance it was better off for her to work within the scope of her memory.

The fastest detective—and the forgetful detective.

“But if it's going to be now... I'll have to establish contact with Wakui-san.”

“Just leave those formalities to me—setting aside the fact I am the forgetful detective, I think we would be better off examining the state of Atelier House as soon as possible. While I don't have any definite basis, when I was hearing your story, I felt a somewhat unrestful air—”

“An unrestful air, is it?”

“Yes... thought I can't say it's anything concrete.”

However, I feel it's dangerous to take Wakui-san's notion of hiring security because he's undertaking his final job at face value—Kyouko-san said.

“The clients do lie, after all.”

“.....”

“Of course, Wakui-san himself might not be aware he is lying. Perhaps he sensed some unrest with his sensitivity as a framer, a so-called bad premonition—if he just wished to strive for perfection, instead of hiring temporaries this time around, he should keep security guards employed on a regular basis and all.”

That definitely made sense.

For a framer on old Wakui's level, apart from his grand culmination, in his standard work as well, shouldn't he keep security in mind—yet this time specifically, that he strengthened it should be seen as him sensing some sort of risk.

The Testimonial of Okitegami Kyouko

If I had Kyouko-san reason out the reason to push his way through, taking in unreasonable conditions to hire me at urgent notice—I think it would make my job considerably easier to do.

“Yes... I think I can prove useful in that regard. If can I speak with Wakui-san directly and listen to the circumstances—that is a detective’s field of expertise.”

“... But he is an elder of harsh temperament, so if you try forcing it out of him, he might fly into a rage. He might end up screaming you out.”

“Ah, I don’t care about that. No matter how he screams, no matter what reckless words fly, in the end, I’ll have forgotten it by tomorrow.”

When she declared it quite indifferently, I had no words to return—still, as the forgetful detective, that forte was definitely a large potential advantage when hearing people out.

In communication, not giving a damn about the other person hating you was practically a monstrous strength—I thought that brazenness ran contrary to Kyouko-san’s calm, gentle demeanor, but rather than contrary, perhaps it was two sides of the same coin, and that nature surprisingly gave rise to Kyouko-san’s bafflingly strange shows of composure.

“To add onto that, apart from listening to Wakui-san’s story, I’d like to see Atelier House itself, the sooner the better.”

“? Ah, you’re right. If you can see from a detective’s perspective if there are any gaps in security as a whole...”

I answered, but it seems what Kyouko-san was about to say meant something else entirely.

From a more fundamental level.

“I think is an underlying factor.”

“Factors”

“Yes, the conditions to bring about an incident are all together... I don’t think that complex is the best of places.”

“.....?”

Not the best of places? What did she mean by that? She sounded like she was speaking off of intuition, but it was unclear where her misgivings were coming from, or rather... far too vague.

“Oh no, I think it’s something you’ve somewhat picked up on yourself—that’s why you hesitated to accept the extraordinary conditions he scouted you under, and why you thought to make a request to me.”

From what I have heard, that building is an extreme, with an immoderate inclination—Kyouko-san said. While that was also a vague expression, this time, I kinda understood what she was refraining from saying—a high-class apartment complex with nothing but painters’ eggs living there, no matter how anyone looked at it, was extreme. It was inclined.

“But is having an incline a bad thing? I think that’s something Wakui-san intentionally inclined it towards...”

“When it inclines, it makes it easier to collapse.”

Easier for an incident to occur.

The detective said—definitively.

“That is what I mean by underlying factor—offering a living and atelier space to youngsters aiming to be painters free of charge might look like an entirely good thing, but I think it’s considerably risky. No choice but to become a painter, excuses don’t work, placed in such a situation, sure it may be easier to become a painter, but it becomes hard to become anything else.”

“... But everyone moved in because they wanted to become a painter, so doesn’t it work out?”

“If the painters’ egg fails to incubate, that means it can’t hatch into anything. You can’t imagine how dangerous that is? They should be left with spaces for excuses, a path to run away.”

“I see...”

What Kyouko-san said didn’t hit right with me—the problem wasn’t evident. What speculation old Wakui made when he erected Atelier

House, that idea in itself should be something desirable by youths aspiring to be painters.

“Don’t you think youths with a future should have other choices prepared for them as well? Even if a painter has talent, it is fine for there to be the path of not being a painter. That’s what I’m saying. Did you get that?”

I did not.

More than that, I felt it was what Kyouko-san was saying that put a hold on youngsters’ futures—in regards to old Wakui’s nature, I had a mountain of things to say, and I did incur actual damage from it, but was his way of life of pursuing a single path not something anyone could admire?

“Yes, it is because the institution was planned by this Wakui-san that the intention is reflected, however—that’s a considerably dangerous train of thought, you know? You can call it narrow-minded—”

“.....”

Failing to gain agreement with Kyouko-san made me feel somewhat impatient—that was surely because her posture in her pursuit of a strange job like detective had many portions I found myself sympathizing with. She was young, and yet she had her path in life clearly decided, I felt something lose to respect—yet as she said things so blatantly contrary to that image, while it was just my own selfishness at work, I couldn’t bring myself to accept it.

“Of course, until I actually see it, I can’t say anything further. All I can say now is that it’s easier for an incident to occur at an inclined place, a simple general consensus—there’s no guarantee anything will happen. To a detective, preventing an incident is a greater achievement than resolving it—it should be the same for a security guard. There’s nothing better than nothing happening.”

“Yes, you’re right... umm, Kyouko-san?”

Said I. Perhaps I shouldn’t have said it, but only wanting to wipe about this hazy feeling of our views not coinciding, I ended up saying it.

The Testimonial of Okitegami Kyouko

“Why did you decide to become a detective?”

Her answer to that question was truly to the point.

“The reason I work as a detective—is to find out the reason I work as a detective.”

6

There is a limit to human concentration; come to think of it, I'd heard that somewhere before—I don't know how related that was to what Kyouko-san said, but in my exchange with her, that was what I recalled.

A human's time is limited, and so is their concentration.

For that very reason, if they concentrated their attention in a single point, regardless of whether or not they were talented, an exceptional result would come about—what first-rate professionals shared had to be the overwhelming quantity of time spent in effort.

This was no ideal, it was simply as Hakui-kun said—meaning as Wakui asserted, 'talent is a qualification to put in a higher quality of effort,' that uncouth platitude. With that alone—when that piled up effort inclined, crumbled, and failed, what happened next was beyond anyone's imagination. Was that what Kyouko-san wanted to say?

In that sense, certainly, excluding its basement, Atelier House was a building specialized solely in 'painting pictures', a sea to your back, enemies on all sides, all the escape paths sealed off. It might be cool when you succeed but on failure, all that was left was to drown—of course, the tenants may have been resolved for it, but whether that resolve weight up against the risk, in the end, no one could tell until the moment came.

Come to think of it, on her off days, Kyouko-san loitered around the museum, she went out for dinner with me, she was able to change gears—I certainly couldn't say the same for Hakui-kun who didn't go to school, pushing forward with nothing but painting pictures.

No, even I was the same—

“So this is Atelier House? It definitely is a high-rise complex difficult to picture from its name—that's thirty-two stories.”

We arrived at Atelier House before noon—a wrap-around skirt and a pink blouse, a light sweater over that, Kyouko-san correctly guessed the number of floors at a single glance. Just how effective were her glasses, I

wondered, but was this also part of an observing eye? I heard that counting things in numbers was actually considerably difficult.

A mere few hours after I called her for the request, we had arrived at the building in question, so I had to hand it to her. She really was the fastest detective. Her speed even dragged me into the midst... and not getting shaken off was the most I could manage.

To this point I had—put poorly, evasively—cautiously dealt with old Wakui's offer, but the developments after consulting with Kyouko-san were terribly swift—perhaps her claim to be the urgent care of the detective agency wasn't necessarily a joke.

No, in all actuality, when I'm the one who brought the talk to her, a part of me couldn't keep up—and belated as it was, I reported.

“Umm... Kyouko-san. I know I should have said this sooner.”

“Oh? What could it be?”

“This is all happening so suddenly, I was unable to secure an appointment with Wakui-san. No matter how many times I call, he won't pick up... so it's possible he's out at the moment.”

He didn't carry a cellphone, it seems. I did put in a message with the answering machine for what it's worth, but... well, he was getting on in years, so he couldn't take long trips too frequently, I arbitrarily convinced myself and came all the way here.

“Is that so—you can't get in touch?”

Kyouko-san said abstrusely, moving left and right to a grasp of Atelier House as a whole—it seemed her activity as a detective had already begun.

“Well, if he's out, we can wait for him to get back.”

Instead of coming back later, how she chose to wait made me feel her strong mentality as a detective—that being the case, there would be nothing better than if he was at home, so I took the lead to enter the building.

At the entrance, I stood before the intercom button to summon old Wakui—the back room of his workspace was a living space, and that basement room was simultaneously his residence.

Come to think of it, it wasn't just the basement, every room in Atelier House combined living and atelier space—I had somehow or another accepted that as natural, but to have where one slept be the same as their workplace would in itself destroy escape, perhaps it was structured to make one lose the right time to switch on and off.

In actuality, even if they had a job they could do at home, I hear a great many creators establish a separate workplace...

“What’s the matter? Oyagiri-san?”

As I indulged in thought before the intercom, Kyouko-san urged me from behind—perhaps that was also the fastest detective at work, but I got the feeling she was pushing it a bit too far. Rather than the fastest detective, was she the fuss-test detective, or so I thought something stupid as I pressed in the number of the basement room.

“.....”

I tried waiting, but no response.

Once again, I repeated and tapped in the button, but the result was the same—my misgivings were on the mark, it did seem Wakui was absent.

“Or possibly, he’s so enthused in his world, he’s pretending he isn’t there.”

From the side, Kyouko-san pointed out a possibility I didn’t even think of.

“Even if it isn’t a job, he could have a previous visitor.”

“I see—for now, I’ll try calling again.”

I took out my cellphone, and redialed old Wakui’s landline—but there was no response, and only the answering machine I’d grown sick of hearing played back.

“Then... let’s wait. If there’s a café or something around, we’re in luck...”

“From what I can remember from the way here, there wasn’t.”

Kyouko-san said—looks like she properly remembered the way. This was my second time coming, but whether there was a café or not, I didn't remember in the slightest... what she forgot was only the events up to the previous day, and for the happenings of the day in question, she boasted memory capabilities far exceeding the average, it seems.

“It isn't just cafes, there were barely any amusement facilities... in that sense, these are some harsh conditions.”

“Harsh... is it?”

“If you think of Atelier House as a company, they haven't invested anything into their welfare plan—just where could the people living here be taking a breather, I wonder?”

She muttered as, not the road she came down, she began circling around the building—judging by her tone, she didn't have a very good impression of Atelier House itself after all.

Not a place of dreams where youths desiring the arts gathered, she spoke of it almost like a slave labor camp—while Hakui-kun said something similar, I had to think it was pushing it to look at effort for the sake of dreams as slave labor.

Whatever the case, she looked like she'd disappear the moment I took my eyes off of her, so I frantically gave chase. Right around the center of the back side, she finally stopped her feet. It looked like a parking lot attached to the complex—I never noticed there was a place like this behind it. Of course, if you wanted to get in from here, you still had to clear a security check.

“Oyagiri-san. Can you stand in front of that fence for a second?”

“Pardon? Well sure, I don't mind... but even with my height, I won't be able to see inside.”

“I don't mind. Just stand there, and take a stance as if you're about to receive a volleyball.”

“Like this?”

Kyouko-san's starting dash came faster than my question.

She charged straight at me, and when I thought she jumped off her right foot, she used the hands locked in front of my stomach to jump another level higher, passing right over my upright head—by the time I turned in surprise, her body had already disappeared into the parking lot.

No, strictly speaking, she hadn't disappeared yet. From the opposite side of the wall, she hung one arm over.

“Oyagiri-san, please take my hand. I'll pull you up.”

From across the fence, I heard an at-ease voice I couldn't imagine from someone who just pulled off such acrobatics. From my point of view, I had no idea what was going on, more so, I wanted to pull her back, but I couldn't leave her hanging up over that wall forever.

“Hurry up, hurry up.”

“Y-yeah.”

Under her urgings, I clambered up the wall. I did try taking her hand, but to be blunt, her slender arm was of absolutely no use in pulling me up, and I scaled the wall pretty much on my own strength. I landed first, and upon that, Kyouko-san let go of the wall. ,

“There we go,”

She landed on her feet.

In short, all too easily, the two of us succeeded in infiltrating the parking lot—yet my heart wasn't dancing at that success, more so, I was left wondering what the hell I'd let myself be drawn into.

“W-what are you doing, Kyouko-san!? This is trespassing!”

“In that case, you're complicit, Oyagiri-san.”

Kyouko-san smiled sweetly, not one to shy back.

“It's a security check, a security check—just because there's an automatic auto lock door, as long as it's not perfectly sealed, there are going to be gaps to exploit, aren't there.”

The Testimonial of Okitegami Kyouko

A security check was definitely what I asked for, but if she was going to do that, I'd appreciate if she told me first—what was I supposed to think when she suddenly charged at me?

“I mean, if I told you, you'd stop me.”

Of course I would. But even if she said it as if it was the natural order of things, I couldn't accept it—When I made that request the other day, and we finished matters talking in a café, I couldn't tell, but it did seem this person boasted an unexpected degree of dynamism.

Climbing the wall was one thing, but would you usually consider jumping over a man of my height? She seriously jumped over me in a skirt...

“This way, right?”

No time to stop in the parking lot, Kyouko-san rapidly moved into complex—in the end, we reached the elevator hall avoiding going through any locked doors.

I see, with that method, you could avoid the auto lock... well, with how flashy her movements were, it was hard to call covert. With those actions, if there were any witnesses, it wouldn't be strange if she got arrested.

“There is no guarantee a criminal will always move with secrecy on their mind—more so, it is the culprits that move covertly, so as not to be seen that help out detectives the most. In most cases, their cover-up attempts end up adding to the evidence-- and from a security point of view, what you should look out for is a hoodlum who will forcefully breach the defenses. Take it to the extreme, and an auto-locking automatic door will break if you smash it hard enough with a rock.”

While her opinion defeated the purpose, she did have some point—just like a security guard being stationed didn't prevent a single old man from destroying a painting. There's no perfect security, and it's difficult to deal with a ruffian who thinks not of his own safety—if I wanted to guard to that extent, it really would be too much for me alone.

“The place Wakui-san works was in the basement, correct?”

Kyouko-san was already pressing the elevator button—even if she wasn't a ruffian, this person was a detective who thought not of her own safety.

Just because she would have it all wiped clean tomorrow, I do think there are things you just don't do... and places where, 'sorry, I don't remember' doesn't pass.

"Yes, the basement... but."

"Huh?"

As I answered, Kyouko-san pressed the down button again, but that didn't make it light up—it was reactionless.

"Huh? Huh?"

She mashed it, but still no response.

It wouldn't indulge her in any way.

"Is it broken... it looks like the elevator isn't moving."

I recalled the service-size elevator I rode yesterday—at the time, I didn't sense any defects. It would surely be inconvenient if the only elevator broke down, , I had nothing but sympathy for the residents, while feeling somewhat relieved—while Kyouko-san's dynamism at a level that made me draw back, drew me into lending a hand in her trespassing, the elevator not working here could be interpreted as God telling us to go away.

I returned my eyes to convey it to her, she was already gone—she had already gone and opened a door at the side of the hall.

Blending in with the marble wall, that door whose existence was hard to make out, led to an emergency stairway—her eyes were way too sharp. She had no mind to lend any ear to God's warning.

"This way, Oyagiri-san."

She invited me without turning around, before immediately descending the stairs down—she didn't even give me the opportunity to stop her.

Looking back on it now, at the time, Kyouko-san must have had a premonition—no, to speak of premonitions, at the point I made a request to her, she already had a sort of premonition. Ir could I call it foresight? A

The Testimonial of Okitegami Kyouko

knowledge of the dangers contained within this building called Atelier House—by that point, she had already noticed the underlying factor.

Come there, perhaps she felt something serious at a situation where it was impossible to contact old Wakui, and forcefully breached the security—lending no ear to the divine.

Of course, speaking of possibilities, the probability that foresight ended in vain was far higher—the presumption she pierced forward under was based in an unreliable premonition barely worthy of consideration.

That day, the process of elimination, scratch that, reduction ad absurdum she showed at the café—no matter how trivial or small it was, it should have been part of her style to destroy possibilities one by one in turn, and yet. Only at a time like this—she hit the mark in one shot.

The door at the bottom of the stairs was thrown open, in the basement room Kyouko-san had reached not as a detective but phantom thief, old Wakui was collapsed, lying on his side.—a painting knife stuck into his lower abdomen.

A shocking state of affairs before my eyes, I came to know Kyouko-san's dizzying movements to that point had been her slamming the brakes—what happened after that truly was the fastest.

“Oyagiri-san! There was an AED in the elevator hall, go get it!”

Just as she cried out, Kyouko-san raced towards the old man's body—she didn't freeze up for a single instant. Contrarily, unable to stir, I followed her order like a robot—AED? Was there one of those around? There was.

When I climbed back up the stairs, it was lined next to the fire extinguisher diagonally across the hall—so Kyouko-san even checked a place like that.

Confirming the location of an AED was admittedly, the basics of the basics, but in most cases, it's a basic recalled alongside a feeling of regret—I should've checked where it was, that sort of sentiment.

Incorporating every possibility, it seems she had gotten rid of that regret beforehand—but now wasn't the time to be impressed.

I opened the door to the base, carried out the AED, and brought it back to the basement—while trying my best to remain calm, I was flustered, and I ended up pushing the elevator button once; right, it wasn't operational.

Calm down your heart, think—as I recall, and AED should be a device to return a chaotic pulse to a normal state, and it won't have an effect on someone's whose heart has completely stopped. In that case, Kyouko-san determined old Wakui wasn't dead yet?

When I saw him collapsed, pierced with a knife, I reflexively concluded he had been 'killed'—but the knife was stabbed into his lower abdomen. Did it miss the vitals...? No, if any internal organs were punctured, that would still be considered a vital, wouldn't it?

The Testimonial of Okitegami Kyouko

It seemed like I was thinking, but I really was not—my thoughts turning round and round in circles, by the time I returned to the basement room, I found Kyouko-san had already finished taking that appropriate measures.

Setting old Wakui face-up, she rested his head on the sweater she'd been wearing—with his monk work clothes torn open, the old man's upper body was exposed.

A bandage(?)—like cloth had already been wrapped around the wound, she had done everything she could to stop the blood—however, the knife itself hadn't been removed.

At a time like this, there are some who say it's better off not to remove the blade, and some who'd disagree but by some criteria, Kyouko-san had chosen to firmly fix the blade in place.

I wondered what she used to cut open his clothes and substitute a bandage, but this was a framer's workspace, with surely no lack of tools. Meaning Kyouko-san used anything she could get on hand for emergency measures—no, life-saving measures, apparently. Though for that, the old man's face showed too few signs of vitality.

“—Is he alive?”

“His spontaneous respiration's been restored.”

Kyouko-san answered to-the-point.

On close inspection, right beside him, a simple artificial respiration device likely fashioned out of a PET bottle was littered—It would also have to have been improvised.

“His heard had stopped, but it's been restored with a massage. Please connect up the AED. Hurry! Get it moving, and the machine will tell you the rest!”

Kyouko-san said as she pulled out a cellphone—I thought it was a familiar smartphone, before realizing it was mine.

She must have swiped it from my pocket when she raced off—as modern-day phones were now more of a high-efficiency storage medium than a means of communication, the forgetful detective couldn't carry one

around. Of course, I considered myself more secure than average, and the phone was locked, but you didn't need a passcode to dial emergency numbers.

While Kyouko-san placed a call to the fire department, I hastily stuck the defibrillator parts onto the old man's body—at the time, my hands touched him, and from his heat, I finally knew for sure old Wakui was alive. But something felt strange—it probably happened when Kyouko was giving him a heart massage, but his ribs were broken. It told me just how much power Kyouko-san must have put into those slender arms when she massaged him...

“When there's such a large wound in his stomach, is it alright to send electricity into him?”

I raised my face to ask her, and she wasn't there—all that remained was my phone, discarded on the floor.

“It's made to not flow a current if it's not supposed to, you're fine!”

The answer returned from a different direction—when I looked, Kyouko-san was restlessly moving all over the basement. She did seem to be gathering timber, but I couldn't tell what exactly she was doing... just looking at her, it could also look like she was simply confused and taking meaningless action... the sort of panic that would have one make off with the blanket from the scene of the fire.

But when she had taken such pertinent emergency measures, there was no way I could shout something as off-the-wall as 'calm down'—more so, the one who needed to calm down was me. Believing she was surely doing something meaningful, I entered the AED procedure, of which this would be the first time I conducted in a real situation.

Right, back when I worked at the security firm, I'd experienced it in practice—this was a device made so anyone could use it without specialist knowledge.

'Preparing shock. Please move away from the patient.'

The Testimonial of Okitegami Kyouko

The sound played, as I quickly abided, a sound similar to hitting the floor with a blunt weapon resounded—the sort of sound that, forget his rib cage, made me wonder if old Wakui’s slender body itself would break.

Even if I knew what I was doing, I flinched, wondering if I might have used it wrong,

‘Heart rhythm restored,’

The sound flowed from the AED—putting me at ease.

Of course, it didn’t change that he was in critical condition, but whatever the case, if his heart was beating at a regular rhythm, it was certain we’d crossed one peak.

The rest had to be wagered on old Wakui’s life force. In the time I pat my chest, “Over here!” Kyouko-san cried. Her orders were to the point, with no space to mishear—while it was as if she was accustomed to this sort of situation, was it even possible for the forgetful detective who didn’t pile up experience to grow ‘accustomed’ to anything?

I moved as instructed, then doubted my eyes—something that made me doubt my eyes had been completed. A stretcher made out of cloth and wood that had been lying around the place. It wasn’t put together with nails, but with rope and thread, firmly fastening each part in place—it looked sturdy enough.

You’re telling me she made that in the few minutes I took my eyes off of her? No, it was definitely a simple construction, but there should be a limit to DIY—no matter, in the present state where the elevator was unusable, it was an absolute necessity.

Where we were in a race against every minute, every second, did she plan to get Wakui’s body aboveground before the ambulance arrived?

“Hey, quit spacing out! Gently place Wakui-san on top! We’ll be climbing the stairs, so you take the feet, Oyagiri-san!”

To make sure his body didn’t fall off by any mistake, Kyouko-san fixed it with spare cloth strips—she was too dexterous, at a level I couldn’t capture her speed with my eyes.

So expedited one was better off calling it violent. But at the important parts, she came with a carefulness that would certainly never rush. And when less than ten minutes had transpired since we discovered a collapsed Wakui, Kyouko-san succeeded in carrying his serious condition body above ground—it came at practically the same time as the ambulance.

“He’s seventy-two years old, blood type A. It seems he has a number of chronic ailments. Here’s his medication.”

Just when did she find that? Kyouko-san handed over what looked like his medical history to the emergency team.

Just how attentive could she be? Though it seems it was the professionals who wound up surprised,

“Please hurry. His consciousness level is dangerously low, there is no telling what will happen with Wakui-san’s condition.”

Kyouko-san urged them on—thus, with a flashy blaze of sirens, the ambulance with old Wakui took off for the nearest hospital.

“Ffu...”

Kyouko-san finally took a breath.

Perhaps with the recoil for moving at full speed, it seems she could no longer stand on her own,

“I’ll be borrowing your shoulder for a bit.”

She leaned against me.

With a plop, she wholly entrusted me her white-haired head.

“Whoah...”

As I hurriedly supported her up, I braced my legs, but there was no need—her body was too light to require it.

To think this small body showed such movements, such specs, such performance... while I do think I placed some part, I was fundamentally just following her orders, and I probably wouldn’t have been able to do

much alone. No doubt I would have panicked every which way before a collapsed old Wakui—not to mention, if I were alone, I wouldn't have even been able to discover him in his predicament.

“... Do you think he'll be alright?”

I spat the phrase with a sense of powerlessness.

My formal employment had yet to begin, but that had nothing to do with it—once again, I failed to protect what I was supposed to protect. My apologies to my grandfather, but I wanted to throw away a name like Mamoru.

“I don't know.”

The detective wouldn't provide some arbitrary consolation.

While she certainly gave the fastest, optimum measures, there was definitely a limit to that—there was his age to consider ant all.

“But... Kyouko-san, are you sure we shouldn't have gone with him?”

With that momentum, I was sure she'd board the ambulance, and follow him all the way to the hospital, but... id we really not have to explain the situation to the doctor?

“We're not friends or relatives. Even if we followed, there'd be nothing we could do—and no circumstances we'd be able to explain.”

“You do have a point...”

“More importantly, how about we do our own job?”

“O-our job?”

“Yes. Our job.”

With that, Kyouko-san parted from my body—the fastest girl's rest time didn't fill thirty seconds.

With a strong pace, she turned—she turned to Atelier House.

The Testimonial of Okitegami Kyouko

When an ambulance had come and gone with a shrill siren, not a single soul had left its confines—perhaps it could be summed up in the apathy of the big city, but considering the circumstance this high-rise complex carried, and the eggs under its wings, that only made it all the more ominous.

Kyouko-san—the forgetful detective pointed out Atelier House, the embodiment of the danger of bad eggs, and strongly presumed.

“— The culprit is in our midst.”

Chapter 3:

Kyouko-san
Advises

Where a detective goes, an incident follows.

This was something of a law in the world of detective novels, so it was occasionally teased ‘you should never travel with a detective,’ but in this instance, my way of thinking changed.

I see, given that was their livelihood, a detective’s encounter rate with crime was undoubtedly far higher than the average person, statistically speaking; but if you tried to correlate that with them causing those tragic accidents and incidents, that was surely not the case. Far from it, a detective was capable of preventing a tragedy that would otherwise have occurred—they’re capable of counteracting the trouble they encounter.

Kyouko-san taught me so.

From my heart, I was glad she was there with me—I doubt I’d ever be able to deal with this time’s circumstances on my own. Unable to think of the measures to save Wakui’s life, the blood loss would already conclude him as deceased, and flustered in a feverish haste, I might have remained their unmoving on the spot.

Being able to encounter numerous incidents meant she could cope with that many incidents—at the very least, Okitegami Kyouko was that sort of detective. She splendidly saved a victim.

Perhaps that would mean she saved the culprit as well—but that aside, I was greatly repentant on that point, and even if I wished to learn from her example, was ‘The culprit is in our midst’ not just a tad too far?

Atelier House.

A peculiar tower complex where every resident was a painters’ egg.

A building whose very existence was questionable, but it was simply too soon to conclude the culprit was within it. Fastest detective she may be, but what basis did she have for that conclusion? Before I could ask that, the forgetful detective had slickly, quickly begun to move—continually

The Testimonial of Okitegami Kyouko

grasping her speed was no easy feat, but I wasn't going to take my eyes off of her again.

The culprit is in our midst.

She returned to the building she had made the declaration to—and I followed behind.

While return she did, Atelier House had an auto lock, and there was a proper procedure she needed to go through to infiltrate—meaning, just as before, Kyouko-san used me as a stepping stool to climb over the parking lot fence and enter the structure.

However, I confuted that jumping over it was way too tomboyish, so I stuck my hands into the fence, letting her climb up my back like a ladder.

“I really do envy those with larger bodies. It’s nothing but tight turns for me.”

Kyouko-san said such a thing, but I personally wanted some better maneuverability myself—even if this hulking build had enough energy to spare, if I couldn’t move it, it was of no use at all.

And to the complex basement we went—where a blood stain spread ominously across the floor.

When I thought of how someone I knew was collapsed there only a moment ago, my heart felt like it was being strangled. He had a bad mouth, I couldn’t say he left a good impression—he was the person who created the reason I was fired... up to this moment, I was in a confused panic, but now that I could calm down a bit, I felt crushed by the scale of the incident that occurred. As a guard, and as a person.

Despite that, it seemed I was the only one growing so sentimental, Kyouko-san had promptly gone into an on-site investigation.

Thrusting her hands all over as if it weren’t already enough, flipping things, making a mess—that state of affairs really was more of a burglar than a detective.

“U-um, Kyouko-san.”

“Yes?”

The Testimonial of Okitegami Kyouko

Continuing her search without turning around, Kyouko-san responded—she wasn't just swift, it seemed she could multitask. Certainly, when rescuing old Wakui, she was performing two or three tasks at once.

In that case, holding conversation with a giant as she investigated a scene might be right in her ballpark—emotionally, I'd have liked it if she at least looked at me, but there's a time and place for everything.

“Are you sure it's alright to scatter everything like that? Umm... when an incident occurs, I've heard it's vital to preserve the scene.”

That wasn't something anyone taught me as a guard, it was just knowledge from cop shows, but I think it's classified as general knowledge.

On my question, Kyouko-san pulled her hands out of the wall-side shelf, raising them up high—when I wasn't looking, she had put on gloves.

She either carried them around with her, or one-sidedly borrowed a pair of work gloves from the atelier (they looked like work gloves, so for the fashionable Kyouko-san, the probability of the latter was higher), but for the time being, it seems she was saying there was no danger of fingerprints.

“I remember how it was scattered, so I can return it to normal later. Whatever the case, right now, speed is the priority.”

We don't have any time, Kyouko-san said— she remembers how it was scattered, she threw it out to casually, but that was an intense line.

Yet even if I were to trust Kyouko-san on that point—in the first place, that wasn't the problem. It wasn't whether or not she could return it to normal afterward, I was trying to say Kyouko-san had no reason to investigate the basement like that.

With saving a life, yeah, that was an emergency so I could consider it natural no matter what she did, but after that was a different story—the investigation of the incident should be left to the police.

Kyouko-san's speed, meaning her momentum had dragged me into the mix, but what we had to do now was preserve the crime scene to the best

of our abilities until the police arrived, and definitely not turn all the room's drawers inside out...

"The police aren't coming, you know?"

Kyouko-san said.

"I mean, I didn't report it."

"I see, is that so. I guess that works out then... what?"

Of course it doesn't. She didn't report? I mean...

"What do you mean you didn't report it?"

"No mystery about it, I said... what. I. Meant. There we go."

She wasn't answering rhythmically, at that time, she was meeting some difficulties in her work—rather than having difficulties, she was taking care of difficult work just fine.

Of all things, she was picking a locked drawer—opening drawers was one thing, but when she started opening up closed locks, she was finally just a thief.

She had tread into a domain where, as her compatriot, I had to stop her for real—I raced over; it was too late.

Kyouko-san succeeded in her picking, took out a clearly important-looking file from inside, and had already opened it at her chest.

"This is seriously bad, Kyouko-san—"

I spoke belatedly.

"— And why didn't you file a report? Did you forget?"

That was hard to imagine. After such perfect lifesaving measures... while carefully contacting the fire brigade, for her to forget to report it to the police, there was no way such forgetfulness could come to pass. It was quite clear Kyouko-san intentionally didn't report it—

"Though that'll only buy us some time."

Kyouko-san finished reading the file, and reached for the next document. Even if she was speed reading, that was way too fast—she was probably just skimming off just the main points; but skimming off art-related documents she was surely not an expert of was still considerably extraordinary.

“The wound in his stomach was clearly a stab wound, and the painting knife was left in... when the treatment is over, naturally, the hospital will direct the proper report to the police. With a hopeful estimate, that buys us half a day’s worth of time—in that space, I want to investigate as much as possible.”

“... But Kyouko-san. Shouldn’t you leave the investigation to the specialists?”

“I am a specialist.”

I’m a detective, after all, Kyouko-san said.

I mean yeah, a detective’s also an investigation specialist, but even if that were the case, she didn’t have the authority to investigate this one. That was likely precisely why she bought time without reporting... but the problem was why she went that far.

It was certain what she was doing now would get her told off later... played poorly, and it wouldn’t just be a scolding, it was a deed that would grant her legal retribution.

Tentatively, as the one who found the body, and as a coworker of me, Wakui’s bodyguard, perhaps this was an extension of the duties she was supposed to conduct anyways... even so, intentionally not reporting was in error of being the first responder, and at the present point, Kyouko-san had yet to be directly hired by old Wakui.

Meaning, when no one even asked her—she hadn’t received a request, she had arbitrarily begun investigating the case. That was nothing praiseworthy...

What’s more, something felt off. Among the detectives who appeared in novels, there were some who immersed themselves so much in a case they surpassed the boundaries of the law, and those with nothing but solving

the mystery as their objective who wouldn't seek police cooperation—but that was only permitted in the world of fiction.

Hypothetically, if such a detective existed in reality, I couldn't see Kyouko-san as the type—it's not as if I knew her for too long, but if I had to say, I thought she had a high professional sense, with her ethics properly in order.

To distance the police here and investigate on her own, solving the case of her own accord and get the achievements—I couldn't think she held such petty notions either.

In the first place, this case didn't look like such an appealing mystery to me—A break-in burglar stabbed the man he happened to run into, got cold feet and ran. Couldn't this just be one of those tragedies that unfortunately plague the world? At a glance, there didn't seem anything missing from the basement, but if it were a burglar who ran in fear, it wouldn't be strange if they ran without taking anything.

There were no whimsical mysteries to pull at the instinctual heartstrings of a detective—if I had to say, the old man who suddenly destroyed a piece displayed at the museum with his staff was far more mysterious.

Yet why did Kyouko not stop at just saving his life, instead going as far as to throw off the police to embark on her own investigation? Even if that culprit lived at Atelier House, that didn't mean—

“R-right, Kyouko-san. Can I ask you one question?”

“I do believe you've been doing nothing but asking questions for a while now, but... please, do go ahead.”

“Why is the culprit in our midst?”

She declared it so naturally I felt overwhelmed, and I felt a considerable amount of persuasiveness, but come to think of it, there wasn't a single bit of evidence pointing it to be so.

Because the weapons stabbed in his abdomen was a painting knife, the painters are suspicious: not only was that not evidence, it wasn't even a basis—painting knives could be sold anywhere, and if you want to bring that up, there just as well could have been one in this room as well. The

culprit used a painting knife in arm's reach to impulsively stab him, that was actually a reasonable expectation.

For argument's sake, if you expand the term, this apartment complex was a locked room, then you could call the residents with keys would could come and go through the auto-lock most suspicious, but just as Kyouko-san and I were able to infiltrate, it was hard to call the security of this complex solid by any stretch of the imagination.

... If I really had to say it, then the ones with the deepest suspicions as candidates to the crime, rather than the residents of Atelier House, were the intruders, me and Kyouko-san. Even I knew to doubt the first to come upon the body. It was the A B Cs of mystery...

“Take it easy, Oyagiri-san. I didn't make a dramatic show of, ‘the culprit is in our midst’ under such shallow reasoning...”

“I see...”

Shallow, when she called it shallow, she made me feel a tad downhearted for actually considering it, but this wasn't the time to be shocked.

“Have a look. At the place Wakui-san collapsed.”

“Where he collapsed?”

I turned at her call—to the blood stain still reflecting a vivid fluorescent light. I felt I would reflexively avert my eyes. Was it because I couldn't look right at it, that I overlooked something?

“... If you're not feeling well, I don't mind if you take a rest somewhere.”

Perhaps sensing my mentality, Kyouko-san spoke mindfully—I appreciated the sentiment, but if I went all groggy while Kyouko-san was hard at work, just how shameful would that be for a professional security guard? At present, I'd failed in my professional duties twice in a row, and was already considerably deplorable, but—I couldn't show any further unsightliness.

“I'm fine.”

I put on a strong front.

“You don’t have to force yourself, okay? In my case, no matter what gruesome crime scene I see, I know I’ll just forget it tomorrow, so on the contrary, you can say I don’t have to worry about it—no matter the incident, I can never be traumatized.”

I see, now that she mentioned it, that did seem like quite an advantage for a detective... but turning that around, no matter how many crime scenes she experienced, she could never grow accustomed to bloodshed. That she was the forgetful detective could never be the sole reason she remained firm—despite her fluffy air, she was fundamentally strong at the core.

I wasn’t irritated to compete with her, but I really had to learn—that was what I thought.

“But Kyouko-san. I can’t see anything strange about the spot Wakui-san collapsed...”

“Are you sure you’re not mistaken?”

“... Yes. I don’t think I’m mistaken.”

I lost some confidence when she insisted it, but from what I could see, there was nothing but a tragic trace of blood—just from the present state, it was a scene that made it possible to think someone had just spilled paint over the area.

“Is that so? I think so too.”

Kyouko-san answered like it was a trick question—then what, I thought and turned back to Kyouko-san. At present, she had a binder open, with her eyes focused on that—I thought she had already reached for another, but I recognized it at the same one as before.

“There’s nothing strange about it—that’s why it’s so peculiar.”

“? What does that...”

“He didn’t leave any dying message, did he?”

Kyouko-san said.

“A dying message... is it?”

I hesitated to answer—as I recall, it was a mystery novel term. A message left at the time of death—something the victim leaves at the scene to signal out the one who harmed them... was that it?

“Yes, that’s it. You’re quite knowledgeable. We can’t make any guarantees, but for now, Wakui-san’s life has been prolonged, so to be more precise, it might be a near-dying message but—at the place Wakui-san fell, there was no message left behind. Don’t you find that strange?”

“Strange, well... no, I wouldn’t think so.”

Knowing she was looking for a different answer, I still answered honestly.

“I mean, even if he wanted to leave a message, if he didn’t have a pen or pencil, he had no way to leave it..”

“Certainly, he may not have had the stamina left to get a pen, pencil or brush... but he didn’t have the need, did he? He had all the necessary told with him to leave a message, he didn’t even have to get up.”

“Necessary tools... because Wakui-san is a professional, he must carry writing materials around regularly, is that your train of thought?”

That may have been the case, but even if he was a professional Wakui was a framer, not a painter—whether he regularly carried around writing utensils, as someone who had met him before, I couldn’t say for sure.

“I would also find it difficult to conclude so. If he was going out, it might be a different story, but I’d question even a painter carrying a brush around the house.”

“As I thought... then...”

“But without making such high-level judgments, if he just wanted to write a message, it would be simple enough—with blood and a finger.”

The blood was flowing ceaselessly from the wound, and his finger wasn’t severed after all—Kyouko-san said something repulsing. No, while it was repulsing, for dying messages, that was certainly the standard—blood letters left on the scene. But while I thought old Wakui’s blood was like a pool of paint spilled on the scene, I didn’t even consider him actually using it as paint—I should curse my own lack of imagination.

But while discerning what was left in blood letters was something even an amateur could do, discerning something from the lack of blood letters was something even a detective couldn't.

“He had the chance, he had the means, yet he didn't leave anything to signal out the culprit—what do you think of this, Oyagiri-san?”

“D-don't ask me...”

It was hard for me to think of it as any particular problem—just because they had the time and means, a dying message wasn't something just anyone could leave. Even if the wound wasn't one that would kill him on the spot, it still should have been considerably painful... I think that could have been the last thing on Wakui's mind.

“Yes, if you put it like that, there's all there is to it—but what if that wasn't the case. As a test, try thinking of another possibility.”

“Another possibility...”

It was kinda turning into a thinking game.

It was also somewhat imprudent to give a quiz on the scene of an actual crime. Without putting on airs, she could just say it, I looked at Kyouko-san half-condemning, but she remained trained on the cinder—what's this?

Not only was the binder the same, it was open on the same page I saw before—though I couldn't see what was written from my angle (and I doubt I could understand even if I saw it), but was there anything there that would halt Kyouko-san's speed?

Is that why she could no longer multitask with my obscurity—in that case, it wasn't very praiseworthy to demand the effort of a detailed explanation from her here. What's more, after I decided to learn from her, I couldn't just remain pampered, I couldn't just abandon thought—so I thought.

When he had the time, he had the means, a reason he wouldn't leave the culprit's name or appearance on the spot—or perhaps a reason he couldn't.

“Because he didn't know who it was that stabbed him... perhaps?”

“Yes, in that case, he had no way of leaving a message—even if he wanted to, he wouldn’t know who specifically to call out.”

Kyouko-san said, but her eyes didn’t leave the binder—she stared fixedly at the same page. No, she reread it over and over again—when she had such confidence in her short-term memory, that should have been an excessively illogical action, but likely knowing full well of that, Kyouko-san busily raced her eyes as she answered me.

“However, while that would hold up if he was stabbed or hit from behind, Wakui-san was stabbed in the stomach. I don’t think there’s any mistake in assuming he was stabbed from the front—it’s hard to think he didn’t see the culprit.”

“Right... ah, but is there a possibility they were wearing a mask? He didn’t know who it was.”

To adopt the line of reasoning he ran into a burglar, it was possible enough—though I did feel something off about a burglar who prepared a mask beforehand, but not a weapon.

“No. If we suppose the culprit was a professional burglar, then it’s strange that they left the painting knife at the scene, without confirming Wakui-san’s death—of course, while it’s strange, it’s not impossible. And that’s also something you can say, and that’s all there is to it—but I can think of one more case that couldn’t be written off so easily.”

“Can’t be—written off?”

“That Wakui-san clearly identified who the culprit was, yet despite that, didn’t leave any message.”

With a click, Kyouko-san shut the binder. Her spirits were low—rather than closing the page because she reached an answer, hers was a gloomy face that gave off the sense she had given up for the time being. And it was because she gave up, that she put a strenuous effort into checking answer with me—

“A case where he had the chance, he had the means, the message he should leave was clear—meaning, the culprit was an acquaintance of Wakui-san, and Wakui-san is covering for them.”

“C... covering? He is?”

“Yes. Which means—”

Kyouko-san moved as she explained. At first, I wondered where she was going, but it seems she was heading for the door in the back of the basement, the one that continued to old Wakui’s living quarters—She had revived her free multitask mode.

His workplace was one thing, but was sticking a hand in his home going too far—no, the present situation was already considerably too far, but Kyouko-san showed no signs of shying back, “which means,” she continued on.

“The culprit who stabbed Wakui-san was the sort of individual Wakui-san would stick up for. For example, a family, a close friend—or perhaps a painters’ egg whose talents he recognized.”

“! Don’t tell me that’s—”

That’s the truth of ‘the culprit is in our midst’? The culprit wasn’t just an acquaintance... because it was a painter whose future he placed his hopes on, Wakui didn’t want to identify him or her as the culprit—of course, it was a forced train of thought, and somewhat absurd.

To cover for the person who stabbed you was normally hard to imagine—but the conditions he was stabbed under were already plenty abnormal. With a large wound in his abdomen, in his chaotic thoughts, perhaps a human could all of a sudden make such a decision.

Then surely she had just raised an easy-to-understand example, and by no means had Kyouko deduced that solely on the presence of a dying message—while it was thinkable that Wakui was still conscious at first, he himself didn’t report it to the police or fire brigade.

There was no doubt that could help form a basis he was covering for the culprit—normally, it could be concluded he couldn’t move from the pain and was unable to, and even now, that possibility seemed to be far higher.

Thinking too hard, deducing too far.

The Testimonial of Okitegami Kyouko

But being well aware of that, Kyouko-san purposely discarded the notion, and focused her attention on a low possibility—the reason being.

“The reason being, that in itself is the message Wakui-san left. I want to cover for the culprit, I don’t want the culprit to be identified, I don’t want the culprit to be punished—that is the message that Wakui-san left us.”

“.....”

“Of course, he’s wrong. Whatever the details, for someone who stabbed someone to be forgiven without retribution is, at the very least, not recognized under the constitution of our country—even so, I must place great weight on the message an aging old man put his life in danger to leave. So, at the very least,”

Before the mess of a police investigation comes in, we’ll identify the culprit—and urge them to turn themselves in.

Okitegami Kyouko made a determined declaration.

3

The time limit was- at most- half a day.

It couldn't be called long—what's more, as things stood, that was a generous estimate, and it was amply possible that the police received a report from the hospital, and barged in at this very moment. While it wasn't as if there was nothing Kyouko-san said that I could sympathize with, I couldn't think it very realistic at all.

Even if Kyouko-san was the fastest detective, normally in investigating these cases, wouldn't you need a few days at the very least—no, well, if it demanded multiple days, before being the fastest, she was the forgetful detective, so that was impossible from the get-go.

In the end, In the end, receiving old Wakui's dying message- scratch that- near dying message, and inheriting what could possibly be his will, it looked like it would be quite difficult for Kyouko-san, an individual with no organizational power, but the woman in question didn't seem ruffled.

“Don't worry, Oyagiri-san. It'll be alright-- even if it was a provisional contract through oral promise, an employment relationship was established between you and Wakui-san. Unfortunately, you were unable to protect Wakui-san, but if you succeed in identifying the culprit and having them turn themselves in, I foresee it being plenty possible for you to cheat... negotiate the job payment from Wakui-san.”

She said. Not that anyone here was worried about working for free. What's more, for a moment, she used quite an improper word there—it was almost like a high-pressure sale, and a right mess.

That being the case, it's not like I could just say it was futile because we wouldn't make it in time anyway, leaving Kyouko-san behind in Atelier House and taking my leave—I didn't know what her plan was after the basement investigation was over, but I could only assist her to the best of my abilities.

Possible or impossible aside, there was no doubt I resonated with Kyouko-san's behavioral principle of succeeding old Wakui's will. It wasn't like I

would be able to do much... a match of endurance aside, mental labor was out of my expertise. Whatever the case—it was thus impossible to determine when the bells would ring; a case investigation with a time limit had begun.

Naturally, when that happened, I thought Kyouko-san would move to her next action non-stop, but,

“Well then, Oyagiri-san, please wait here a moment. Before we get into a full-blown investigation, I’ll go take a shower.”

She said something so carefree my ears might come off, and of all things, she entered the bathroom in the inner living space. When the place she headed was a bathroom, there was no possible way I could chase her—it was a surprise that the searches to that point hadn’t been ‘full-blown’, but she was going to take a shower in this situation? No, admittedly, recalling her intense movements while saving old Wakui, perhaps she did sweat up a storm, but—this race against time was no place for a bath, even an amateur in investigations like me could tell.

Just how did Kyouko-san plan to explain herself if the police arrived at this very moment—as a detective, she might be able to stand her ground, but I couldn’t think anyone would be able to provide any logical explanation as to why they were taking a shower in the victim’s room.

In the first place, the notion of washing away one’s sweat in the bathroom of a complete stranger who she’d never even spoken to before was considerably shameless, and similarly, taking a shower in the midst of acting alongside a complete stranger such as myself was an act that made me doubt my nerves. This wasn’t at the level of being flippant.

In regards to a lady’s personal grooming, there are some things that are difficult to stick one’s mouth into—but whatever the case, left with nothing to do, all I could do was loiter around old Wakui’s basement workplace, nervously imitating an investigation.

What’s more, it was after Kyouko-san had finished without oversight, so I couldn’t find any new lead or piece of evidence—in the first place, it wasn’t as if Kyouko-san even found anything while making a mess of the whole room.

I didn't have the tools for a scientific investigation, nor the know-how for a formal one; there was, of course, a limit to the information that could be obtained with the naked eye, and—as things stood, my deductions hadn't progressed.

If there was anything it had to be then... that binder she had open when she explained how she concluded the 'culprit is in our midst'. When her on-site investigation had gone on at a pace I couldn't follow with my eyes, only once did she slam down on the brakes... what was that?

In that regard, Kyouko-san didn't tell me anything. Perhaps there was some vital clue in there—a lead to reach the culprit who stabbed old Wakui. The culprit was a resident of Atelier House, that's why Wakui covered for them—Kyouko-san's reasoning, now that I was here, calmly thinking about it on my own, while it wasn't an impossible route by any means, it still had to be quite forced.

Even if I recognized that old Wakui was covering for someone, as Kyouko-san had said with confidence, that subject could be family or friend—to conclude them the culprit despite that was no joke to the irrelevant-in-most-cases residents of Atelier House.

Was there some basis apart from that—no, there probably wasn't. Kyouko-san wasn't a god or anything—and it was precisely because she was no god, she did only what she could. Perhaps she had decided so.

Whatever she could—as best she could do it.

In the case the culprit wasn't a resident of Atelier House, they would be out of Kyouko-san's range, there would be no choice but to leave it to the police. Although, if the one Wakui wanted to protect was an Atelier House resident, at that time—

If hypothetically, it went as Kyouko-san deduced, and the culprit lived here, in that case, what would the motive of the crime be? Why would an art-aspiring resident receiving financial support from Wakui stab a painting knife into him, their so-called benefactor—it was simple if I was it as a burglar after his money, but in this case, the motive was a complete unknown.

Talk about paying back the favor.

While I didn't know what the culprit intended, stabbing old Wakui, he was injured in such a way, it wouldn't be strange in the slightest if he died had Kyouko-san not found him, and even now, we couldn't get our hopes up. At the point they left an old man in that state and fled, it was inevitable I assumed they intended for him to die—what sort of circumstance would have them want to kill someone they're so greatly indebted to? ... Was I being too rational?

This wasn't a detective novel, and it could be at-times impossible to decipher everything logically—in reality it was, well, possible to impulsively harm someone who's taken great care of you. And calling Wakui the grand benefactor of the residents, what is this feeling, come to think of it, I was unilaterally taking his side—He was also an individual of fierce temperament, the sort who would fly into a rage and destroy a work of art. While living in the art world making frames, he was the one to impulsively destroy art and frames.

It was hard to think he didn't incur and grudges with that personality—to take that to the extreme, old Wakui could have been the one to smack the culprit, and the culprit fought back, that line of legitimate self-defense was plausible. Albeit, there were no traces of a struggle at the scene... but considering his possibility, at least I thought it was plenty possible.

If like at the museum, he let his emotions rule for a brief moment, and that was the result of him getting into a fight with someone, I could see a scenario where the victim would cover for the assailant—and while I was putting together my own reasoning,

“Sorry to keep you waiting.”

Kyouko-san returned to the work-site.

Thinking she really did keep me waiting, I turned towards the voice and winced back—no, my heart didn't race at Kyouko-san out of the bath, it wasn't something so glossy.

I wondered who had just appeared.

Of all things, Kyouko-san's characteristic white hair had been dyed brown—what's more, the clothes she wore had changed entirely.

Up to a moment ago, she was in a somewhat-loose skirt, yet now, she was in a pair of slender pants and a jacket, she had changed into formal—on closer inspection, the pink blouse under the jacket was the same, but by pairing it with that jacket, the impression it gave off had magically changed.

Did she change in accordance with the job?

Even if that was the case, I found it hard to believe she had such an unwieldy change of clothes prepared... and the clothes aside, what about her hair? Why did she turn that white hair a light brown—while it completely changed her impression, was it supposed to mean something? Did she wash away her white dye in the shower?

“Oh, this?”

Kyouko-san touched her hair.

“I dyed it. Rather, I borrowed the shower room so I could dye it.”

“That’s why—”

So that was—her intent. No matter how I looked at it, entering the bath at this time was irrational, but I see, she did have a goal. But that didn’t get rid of the fundamental question of why.

In the first place, where did she even find brown hair dye?

“No, it’s not as if I was carrying something like that around with me, I just substituted a paint that was lying around.”

“That’s paint?”

Are her follicles alright? The base was white so she could color it as vividly as a canvas, but looking at it from a hair-care point of view, I felt considerably anxious.

But it seems that was just my presumption as an amateur and, “It’s alright,” Kyouko-san declared.

“They sometimes call paints pigment, don’t they? Originally, paints were an ornamental coloring made to rub on your face—there’s no way

something that's fine to rub on your face would be no good for your hair, right⁵?"

"Oh really—"

Well, there were different types of paint, so it couldn't be unconditional, but naturally, Kyouko-san must have picked out a harmless paint.

"Then what about the clothes? Were you keeping a change somewhere? Or is that also borrowed?"

"Borrowed, I guess you could call it borrowed..."

Kyouko-san hesitated for a bit. What could I be, I wondered, but hearing her next words, the reason became clear.

"Yes, the truth is, I took apart some of Wakui-san's clothes in a closet in the back room, and sewed and fit them. A so-called hand-made haute couture."

I see, that makes things awkward. Borrowing paint was understandable, but arbitrarily cutting up his clothes was too far—a closer look showed the jacket's lining to be strangely Japanese-textured. She must have made it out of his work clothes.

I thought she was taking a long, comfortable bath to wash away the sweat, but to think she put together a full set of clothes... putting together a stretcher and assembling apparel, this was almost like a high-level home ec class.

Isn't this person's hand-crafting power way too high? I'm beginning to believe that rather than detective, there's a job out there she's far more suited to.

"Oh no, I just threw it together, they're improvised clothes after all. It might look well crafter at a glance, but it's pretty much like papier mache, and where you can't see, the inner stitching and such is quite arbitrary. If

⁵ This doesn't really work in English, but the Japanese word for pigment consists of the Kanji 顔料, face material. It's for faces.

I move to flashily, it is fated to fall apart. In that sense, wearing it makes my heart race.”

“But... why did you do that? Dying your hair and changing clothes... that’s practically a disguise.”

“It is a disguise.”

Kyouko-san stuck up a finger.

“We have no time after all—no time to gradually make our way in by filling in the outer moat. From here on, I think I’ll go around asking the residents of Atelier House.”

“You’re going to ask all of them?”

“Yes, direct negotiations.”

Well, that was proper—more legitimate than I thought.

Perhaps she was just fast, and the actions she took weren’t all too strange—what was so fast it seemed strange was fundamentally detective work by the cook. Since she determined the residents were the suspects, naturally, her next action was to hear out the circumstances from them.

“But you haven’t narrowed down the suspects, have you? Pointing out, ‘You are the culprit’ is one thing, but if you go around asking, ‘are you the culprit?’ I don’t think you’ll find anyone who honestly says ‘yes, I am’...”

In that case, Kyouko-san wouldn’t even have to do anything for them to turn themselves in.

“Yes. And so, instead of as a detective, I shall take on a different title, and go around hearing their stories- that white hair is a tad too conspicuous for the job.”

I see, in the case one of the residents knew of the ‘forgetful detective,’ they might identify Kyouko-san from her characteristic white hair—to take that even further, there was even a possibility that among the residents of Atelier House was a previous client of the Okitegami Detective Agency. In that case, Kyouko-san would be the one who couldn’t tell—she’d have forgotten them.

The Testimonial of Okitegami Kyouko

In that case, even if she feigned her standing, she'd be seen through too easily—that white hair was better off kept hidden.

The formal wear was because she planned to impersonate that sort of occupation, huh... was she taking some form of public survey or something?

“If I can hear them out five minutes each, it should be enough. We should be able to pay a visit to every room in five hours at most—though if the culprit is identified before that, naturally, I've nothing left to say.”

“T-that may be true... but are you okay with that?”

“Yes? About what?”

As she blankly asked back, my words piled for a moment, but I simply had to confirm it.

“I kinda got the feeling that your white hair, was to you, your identity as a detective, or rather... something like your flagship as a detective. Are you okay with haphazardly coloring it out like that, what's more with paint... I was just wondering.”

I thought so at first, but come so far, I found it hard to believe it was just fashion.

There had to be some circumstances behind her white hair—but boldly she wore it without an attempt to hide it away, without wearing a hat, she showed it off to the world, surely her principles were embedded into it, so I thought.

“You say some silly things, Oyagiri-san.”

Kyouko-san said with a truly amused laugh.

The identity, the flagship.

“The true show of a detective can't lie in anything apart from solving crimes.”

Hearing that—in my heart, I quietly revoked a previous statement. There was no job in the world she was more suited for than detective.

We're saved, I honestly thought. It struck me when we climbed aboveground from the basement atelier and found we could use the elevator—This was a thirty-two-floor tower apartment complex, after all

If we were to visit every residence, that along would be a great amount of labor, and if you added climbing the stairs to that, it would be nothing to scoff at—confident as I was in my stamina from my occupation, even I'd find it harsh. Kyouko-wan was tougher than she looked, but her build was slender, there wasn't much to say about that—at the time, with an innocent look, "Well then, let's get going," she set out on the stairs.

When Kyouko-san made the move, I couldn't whine myself; I made my own resolve and followed behind her, but once we'd gotten a floor up from the basement,

"Pardon me,"

Kyouko-san opened the door to the elevator hall. She never waited for my opinion before taking action, and she wouldn't explain anything either, not only was she speedy, she took arbitrary action skipping over the process, so when her route suddenly bent, I asked after the fact to find out she, 'heard a sound,' apparently. My mind was already on the second floor and beyond that, and I was devoted to climbing stairs so I didn't hear it, but Kyouko-san's antenna was perpetually directed in every direction.

Beyond the door were two men in workers' clothing—with stepladders and such, they held large parcels, their preparations to leave already over, as they were already set to depart from the complex.

"I'm a resident of this complex but, pardon me, is the elevator working now?"

Kyouko-san struck up conversation with them. She was brazenly lying from her very first word, and listening to her from the side, for an instant, oh, so Kyouko-san lives here, I was in danger of accepting it.

What's more, my mind taken by the lie, it was hard to pick it up, but the way she asked was clever—instead of asking the workers, 'what are you doing,' she asked 'is the elevator working,' a question quite a few steps down the road.

It was a casual fine play, or rather, from the moment she lied she was a resident, it would be unnatural for her not to know about any work being done inside and would give rise to a contradiction—the greatest necessity of a liar wasn't the ability to skillfully lie, it was the ability to never forget a lie told.

The forgetful detective Kyouko-san, while only restricted to the span of a day, held an exceedingly high capacity in that ability, it seems.

"Yes. The inspection's over. Sorry for any inconvenience."

One of them said.

"I see, no, thank you."

"Oh no, this is our job."

"By the way, from when were you working on it again? I think you started earlier than scheduled."

"? No? Just as scheduled, we've been here since nine in the morning."

"Is that so—it must have been my mistake. I apologize for holding you up here."

Kyouko-san lowered her brown-dyed head.

"Oh not at all, well then if you'll excuse us," with some sociable greetings, they left—apparently, the elevator was unusable due to a scheduled inspection completely unrelated to the incident. The apartment I lived in was two floors, and it didn't have anything as extravagant as an elevator installed, but I see, it was a mechanism that couldn't risk the one-in-a-million chance of an accident, so it would need that sort of maintenance every few months. If the only elevator was unusable thanks to regular maintenance, during that time, the residents on the upper floors really had their work cut out for them but, well, it was only a few hours.

The Testimonial of Okitegami Kyouko

Whatever the case, with the elevator in working order, it looked like we could avoid the climbing that came with visiting every residence, and I was relieved.

“That’s a relief, Kyouko-san.”

I said,

“Hmmm,”

Though Kyouko-san was curiously tilting her head—her eyes chased the two leaving men as she tapered her lips. In a way, she looked disappointed that the stair climbing she had decided to challenge herself with had been called off, but I didn’t want to believe that could be the case.

Still, then what could she be thinking about? As I was unable to keep up with her thought speed, “What’s wrong, Kyouko-san?” I naturally asked.

“Eh? Oh, no, my apologies. I was just considering the possibility that those people were the culprits.”

“I-I see, is that so.”

She answered in a maybe sort of tone, so there wasn’t much weight on the words themselves, but after she questioned them like that, and carried such a friendly, good-natured conversation, casting doubt on them was surely not a light act.

If you called her faithful to her station as a detective, perhaps—but with how calmly she lied, this person was definitely not as ditzy as her appearance and conduct might suggest. Not restricting her suspicious to the complex’s residents, her shrewdness in properly looking at outsiders with doubt might be something to praise...

But as one acting alongside her, it did make me anxious—she smiled and spoke so kindly to me, but in my heart, I ended up wondering if she was actually doubting me as well. In truth, having just met old Wakui, the possibility of us arguing over my employment terms wasn’t unimaginable—naturally, I should be under suspicion. Taking it back even further, I was sacked from my previous workplace thanks to Wakui—one might say I have a motive. That hazy something within me had cleared as I consulted with Kyouko-san, but if that wasn’t the case, even if I didn’t

embrace murderous intent, there was a chance I might stop by this Atelier House to launch a complaint at old Wakui.

... Perhaps that's what it really meant when they say one shouldn't travel with a detective—not because the incidents break out, but because you're also suspect in them.

“But that doesn't seem likely—if we're just talking about possibilities, of course, it's possible, but if someone disguised as an inspection worker to murder him, then I highly doubt they would forget to hand up an ‘inspection in progress’ sign.”

And Wakui-san wouldn't have any reason to cover for them—Kyouko-san removed her eyes from the automatic auto-lock door, walking over to the elevator that had cleared inspection.

Come to think of it, if it was being inspected, then they could at least put up a sign—it was a plausible careless mistake, but if someone disguised and deliberately carried out this plan, it was reasonable to assume there was no way they would make such an oversight.

It was crude, as far as deductions went, but that was probably Kyouko-san's technique as a detective. Placing speed over accuracy, the verification could be carried out after she reached her conclusion—imprecise, yet rational and efficient. Of course, that was a rational and efficiency built over Kyouko-san's speed as a premise—from my point of view, that was a crude deduction in and of itself.

At the same time, I felt relieved. Even if Kyouko-san suspected me, I could be taken off the suspect list for the same reasons—old Wakui had no reason to stick up for me.

“Oyagiri-san? If you don't get on fast, the door's going to close.”

On her urgings, I hurriedly boarded the elevator compartment—Kyouko-san didn't hold the open button for me, so if I was late, perhaps she intended to leave me to my own devices.

“Hup.”

She stretched out quite a bit and pressed the button for the top floor—button ‘32’.

Oh? Just from what I'd heard, I thought she was going to make her rounds starting from the second floor, but—was there a change of plans?

Top down or bottom up, if she was seeing them all anyway, there really wasn't much of a difference.

“Oh no, I just thought of something... and because of that starting from the top and starting from the bottom are no longer the same.”

“? I see...?”

She said that which I couldn't understand. But when she spoke incomprehensibly like that, I was kinda starting to understand those were the times when her mind was working on that, and that alone. IT was the same when she was looking at the binder in the basement—come to think of it, that binder, what even was it in the end? I was so taken aback by Kyouko-san's transformation I forgot to ask—even if I did, she might not answer.

But a confined elevator was an awkward space to be, and seeking a conversation to fill a few dozen seconds, I turned the talk towards it.

“What sort of documents were in that binder? You seemed to be paying it quite a bit of attention...”

“Oh, that? Yes, well—I wouldn't say it's that important.”

Kyouko-san's response was expectedly tepid and vague. Hmm, she hesitated some as, “Oyagiri-san, what do you think about it?” she asked back.

“What... about what?”

“The culprit's motives. In my inspection of the site, rather than searching for physical evidence, that was what I was placing emphasis on.”

Motive. My heart skipped a beat; that had been exactly what I was thinking about. Of course, it did seem Kyouko-san had begun considering it far before that—not that I was going to be surprised by her speed at this point.

The Testimonial of Okitegami Kyouko

“We are short on time, you see. I was wondering if there was any way we could identify the culprit from a motive perspective—in that case, what comes to mind is the job Wakui-san was about to embark upon.”

“Yeah, I’d say so too.”

Or so I agreed, but come to think of it, I’d completely forgotten. Wakui called me to Atelier House to guard the frame making he would set out on as his final project. With an incident happening at this timing, it was only natural to assume it had some relation—in that case, it made me sink further and further down.

My failure to protect old Wakui went without saying, but I couldn’t even protect the opportunity to see his final work with these eyes—even if his life was locked in place, when he’d suffered such a large injury, there was no guarantee he’d be able to work as he had before. He would require a considerable hospitalization period, and there might be some lingering effects...

Thinking about that got me down, and at the very least, I felt like carrying out his will—and Kyouko-san must have reached that point ages ago. Even if she pressed forward with hopes of a reward, she was a detective by trade who didn’t move on a sense of justice or curiosity, and the fact she was moving on the fly was more than I could hope for.

Or perhaps from the start, Kyouko-san san sympathized indirectly with Wakui’s character she had heard from me—while they were different in form, they each waged their all on their own occupation.

That she changed her clothes, dyed her hair, and pretended to be someone else as she investigated, it really did give off the feel she had deviated from the proper path. That wasn’t much different from old Wakui who felt his trade had been insulted and caused a ruckus at the museum.

Birds of a feather, perhaps not, but there were some things in those that work, that only fellow workers could understand—thinking over that, and turning it over in my hands, I thought it truly unfortunate I never got to see Kyouko-san and old Wakui’s discussion.

In the future, sometime, someplace, I can only hope the chance arises...

“If hypothetically, that final job was the trigger for this incident—in that case, the Atelier House residents’ involvement with the case should be obvious.”

“Oh... of course.”

When she used the word obvious, I was pressed for a response with no room for mistake. But where speed was a higher priority than caution, I started out with an answer. You could say it was similar to giving up on misplaced thought. I spoke what came to mind without much deliberation.

“It was the... contents of his final job, his final frame, after all. Someone living in Atelier House... is supposedly painting that painting at this very moment.”

“Yes, precisely.”

Kyouko-san nodded.

“Which leads to two possibilities. First, the possibility that the culprit is that very resident painting the painting. Second, the possibility that the culprit is a resident who is not painting that painting.”

“.....?”

Mn? No, without brandishing that train of thought, wasn’t she just saying what went without saying? Either A, or everything not contained within A, was all it was. I couldn’t think that narrowed the possibilities at all.

“Oh no, it’s actually a considerably important point. Meaning an argument broke out with the person painting the picture about its completion... and it devolved into that is one possibility— otherwise, a resident dissatisfied that the honorable Wakui didn’t choose them for his final work and dropped down to the basement to talk with him directly, and one thing led to another, is the other possibility. These two are completely different, and based on which it is, the approach I should take will change.”

“Hmmm... well, when you put it like that.”

Sure enough, the former could restrict the suspect to a single person, but the later only decreased the suspect pool by one, which couldn't be called very productive. But impression-wise, I felt the latter was higher—as Wakui maintained secrecy in regards to his final work, he applied a camouflage to make it difficult to figure out who was painting that picture.

Applying camouflage might make it sound like he used some advanced technique of his traded, or carried out some high-level risk management, but all he really did was have a great many residents paint fake pictures.

I couldn't even imagine how an artist tasked at painting a pointless painting that wouldn't be used would feel, but if they were put up to it, I doubt they'd be able to maintain their motivation, and perhaps their anger and resentment at old Wakui would build up.

“Naturally, there's an entirely different possibility as well. Even if we narrow down the suspects to the residents of Atelier House, it is possible that the motive is completely irrelevant to the painting or Wakui-san's job. But even if that is the case, there is meaning to be had in identifying the individual he appointed to create the painting. There should be information only he or she is aware of.”

“... And was that what was written in that binder's documents?”

I surmised that must have been the reason she stopped on it, but, “No, it was not detailed,” Kyouko-san shook her head.

“Unfortunately, I searched that work space and residential space high and low, but I was unable to identify any of the residents Wakui-san appointed, fakes included.”

“I see... that sounds about right.”

He had kept so secretive about his final job, I doubt he would leave any written records detailing the individual he selected. Even if he did record it, it was more than possible the culprit collected and made off with it as they fled—they may have promptly gotten rid of any information that identified them. In that case, it was possible the culprit would be the former... meaning the individual old Wakui entrusted the grand task to. Though the fact the one drawing the real picture didn't even know it was real was the bottleneck of that theory...

“Huh? But Kyouko-san, in that case, why were you staring at that binder so intently?”

“This is a phrase I don’t really want to use as a detective, but—I didn’t really get it.”

“...?”

“You might say I found myself confused upon coming into contact with information completely different from what I was looking for... no, I’ll tell you about it later.”

Just as Kyouko-san finished up with that, the elevator arrived at the top floor, and the door opened. A hallway far vaster than I had anticipated opened up before my eyes.

“For now, let’s start by making rounds—collect as much information as possible. I’ll change my title around a bit depending on who we’re dealing with so, Oyagiri-san, just do your best to play along.”

“My best, eh... yes, understood.”

I was a clumsy soul, so it would be troublesome if I was requested a lie on Kyouko-san’s level, but if it was just playing along, it might work out—generally speaking, I could just stand behind Kyouko-san as she argued her case, casting a silent pressure on whoever she was talking to. Reluctant as I am to admit it, I’m quite good at letting off an intimidating air with the size of my body.

Brazenly walking to the depths of the hall, Kyouko-san pushed the intercom button without hesitation.

“Oyagiri-san, a step to the right please.”

I wondered what she meant at first, but it seemed she was contriving to put my large build outside the range of the fisheye lens. Certainly, while it was a complex with an auto lock, for there to be a direct visit on each individual room would, in itself flare up the suspicious of those inside—laying down pressure before the door had even be opened might have them pretend to be out.

The Testimonial of Okitegami Kyouko

On the contrary, if all they could see through the lens was a single small-built lovable brown-haired woman, there was a higher likelihood they would lower their guard and open the door—in that case, perhaps that was the purpose of the disguise.

Sometime later,

“Who is it?”

Without going through the intercom, a response came directly across the door—the resident had undoubtedly taken in Kyouko-san’s form through the fisheye lens.

Whether mindful of their eyes or not, Kyouko-san held up a writing pad she must have swiped at some point from the basement room as a prop in one hand and smiled.

“Pardon my visit, I’m with city hall.”

She greeted them.

Naturally, she was no civil worker, nor has she come from any official channel.

A visit to every resident of the complex. Where just imagining it tired me out, just mentioning it made me reluctant, such plain, honest work. It was like busy work, or rather, as work goes, it was honestly considerably labor intensive.

I mean yeah, unlike detective novels, a majority of real detective work consisted of these sort of investigation and listening duties, requiring a great deal of patience—it couldn't be carried out with a straight face like a machine, how Kyouko-san adapted herself to every encounter really wasn't normal.

To speak from conclusions, there was nothing to end the visit to every door along the way, it finished in just under four hours—I estimated around five, so my plans were just compressed a bit.

Of course, there were people who were out, and those who were (probably) pretending to be out—but we managed to meet the larger majority of over fifty residents.

We met and heard what they had to say. I'll say this, it was a job that could only be done with Kyouko-san's character—of course, the fact we were unable to end it along the way came as a set with a futility that we didn't gain much information.

Perhaps I should be thankful just that the police didn't barge into the complex from a police report in the middle of investigations... we were hiding our identities and the incident itself to question, so perhaps there was a restriction on the questions we could pose.

What we heard from each resident was their relation to old Wakui, and about his 'work' these days—then about their personal life habits, Kyouko-san was able to nonchalantly draw out information, yet you could say we barely gained anything.

At most, that old Wakui had a considerably pure reputation among the residents—to think, without knowing the one in question was at present wandering the boundary of life and death at the hospital, those residents

would unveil such language and vilification without reserve or consideration to Kyouko-san, someone they were seeing for the first time.

He was supposed to be their patron, and someone they were indebted to, but should I say surprisingly, or should I say I saw it coming, he was quite hated by his tenants—that being the case, just from what I'd heard from the side, it was hard to think that was connected to murderous intent.

I can't say what Kyouko-san thought about their words, but as one who looked after them, and someone they shared a house with, it was foul language that came with a sense of closeness—I'm sure there was that side to it as well.

I may be repeating myself, but while one may surmise a motive, when you get down to it, there's no way one could understand anyone's inner workings—it's between family, friends, lovers than quarrels are easiest to break out. If they got along poorly enough for the seeds of murder to sprout, then they were never within arm's reach, they were growing apart, such people—when you boil it down, no matter the relationship, one could say a case was likely could happen, and another could say it was not.

But if one were to ask if those four hours were wasted, that wasn't the case.

Even if one's innermost thoughts remain unclear, simple pros, cons, and interests there are such definite difficult-to-shift entities. In that regard, including those who were out, pretending to be out, and those we couldn't have a decent conversation with regardless, it was clear not a single resident of Atelier House stood to gain from murdering old Wakui—more so, a majority of them novice artists, they would generally be at a massive loss.

That wasn't simply because they would lose support from an influential person. While this Atelier House held the appearance of a towering apartment building, it apparently was not registered as a housing complex.

One of the residents told us.

The Testimonial of Okitegami Kyouko

On paper, this place was treated as Wakui's personal residence. In short, that would make every resident living here a freeloader with no right of residence.

If it was a housing complex, a lease contract would have been exchanged, and even if the owner of the complex were to change, even if there was a problem in paying rent, at the very least, they'd be able to live there a while longer, but in the case old Wakui died, and the complex's owner changed, they would be promptly driven right out—even if we were in a recession, it was a generally prosperous country we lived in, albeit even if they didn't end up on the streets, they would be placed in quite a painful position.

Losing Wakui their patron wouldn't set them back to zero, it would put them into the negatives—was there any resident here who would really ignore that logic to harm their landlord? Would they really grow so emotional that such profit and loss calculations stopped working—Kyouko-san's 'the culprit is in our midst' theory, upon making our rounds, suddenly grew dubious.

"You mustn't jump to conclusions, Oyagiri-san. They could also see it like this—say they're a resident who chose to give up on their talent, and were to soon have their support cut off, if they were going to be driven out regardless, they decided to bet it all and resort to violence in the end, bringing about such a tragedy. How does that sound?"

Kyouko-san said—it was certainly possible. Rather than betting it all, that was practically desperation, but... if we surmise they wanted to clear up their resentment at the end, that would make it easier to reach our current predicament.

In that case, the following deductions would be simple. We just had to make another round, and identify a resident who was about to be cut off—even if it was just on the level of gossip between floormates, identifying candidates shouldn't prove too difficult.

"Of course, in that case, would Wakui-san really cover for a resident he was about to cut off? That births a new question."

The Testimonial of Okitegami Kyouko

Kyouko-san turned over the deduction she made herself—it did seem that was one of her specialty shows of round-robin reasoning. Through we already spent too much time to go through every possible theory.

“And of course, there’s also the possibility of complicity, isn’t there? Two, maybe even more people tried to kill Wakui-san...”

“It’s possible. But the residents are all rivals, and as long as they were urged into a competition, it’s hard to think it would be easy to form a complicit relationship on the level of conspiring.”

“Competition... is it.”

Right, even if they had to mingle to an extent, living in the same complex, as they were peers holding the same title, they couldn’t grow any closer than necessary—or rather, in the first place, there were signs old Wakui measured it out so they wouldn’t get along too well.

The way he stuck up camouflage for his final job was the same—with no one knowing who was real and who was a fake, a certain seed of paranoia would sprout. This was something one of the residents we heard out (anxiously) spoke of, but old Wakui apparently preached the harm of fellow artists getting together at every opportunity. There is nothing that degrades art further than artists colluding—apparently.

While those words were harsh, I could see what he was getting at—rather, it was a single possible outlook. If aspiring artist gathered to simply form a group of friends or support circle, that would undoubtedly differ from the Atelier House old Wakui had in mind.

Though was it excessive to purposely produce an environment where they’d hate one another... to add to that, in each house visit, we could see through the gaps the residents’ living conditions. To an outsider like me, I thought them severely limited.

Among those interviewed were friendly and sociable ones and, perhaps feeling an intimacy with the visitor Kyouko-san (though never with me), quite a few of them let her into their room, but while the rooms’ make itself was luxurious, their state was specialized to paint pictures, it was a space for that alone.

Put simply, excluding the minimum necessary essentials for life, only art supplies were left around the room—old Wakui’s support seemed to be limited to art matters in the strictest possible sense. He would always oblige requests like I’m out of paint, or I need a brush, but his support for food and clothing expenses were drops in a bucket.

When he was told it would be used to paint, he bought bread, when he was told it would be used as a motif, he bought fruit, there were residents with episodes that brought tears to my eyes—old-fashioned episodes I couldn’t think would come from any human living in a high-rise complex.

To add onto that, pets were prohibited, living with family was prohibited, letting friends or lovers stay over was prohibited, It had rules set down like a strict student dorm.

No hunger or cold, if you ignored the luxuries, it didn’t lack any freedoms, but if you lived here, taking any action apart from ‘painting paintings’ was quite difficult—considering how Atelier House was old Wakui’s private residence, there was a time I held an impression of a salon where artists gathered to hold an exhibition, but hearing of the real conditions from the one in question, I was even leaning towards calling it a forced labor institution.

Of course, it wasn’t as if there was any quota, and in the case their paintings sold, he wouldn’t even take a commission, the artist would simply receive the money, so calling it forced labor might be going so far—but if one spent too long under these living conditions, there was no doubt in my mind it would place a burden on the heart.

At the very least, looking at it from the perspective of a welfare program, it was wholly inadequate—the outside might be splendid, but the contents weren’t fit for life. No, there were kitchens and bathrooms, so perhaps only the blessed could say it wasn’t fit for life, but still, it was undeniable that rather than living, it was a space where art was placed on a higher plane.

With that rose another possibility, that mentally cornered, no longer able to discern what was what, and unable to distinguish profit or loss, a resident might have murdered with no motive at all—so the only ‘definitive’ thing that became clear after the visits was perhaps that the

residents of Atelier House were generally not living in any decent environment.

To be honest, I didn't get it.

When Kyouko-san deduced that old Wakui was covering for the culprit, I felt like she had seen his aptitude as a landlord, but in his management of Atelier House, that sweetness and calmness was nowhere to be found. More so, it was terribly cruel—with such reverence to the artistic attributes, the human attributes were sacrificed.

“Do you mean you can't tell if Wakui-san is a good person or not?”

Kyouko-san asked, seeing through my hesitation; I could only nod—it kinda made me feel embarrassed I had tried to classify him under an infantile black and white scale of good person and bad person, but it was an honest point I couldn't cover up.

“How should I put it... I ended up wondering if you really had to put in so much effort to succeed his will—if this situation was brought about by him reaping what he sowed.”

“You're kind, you know that, Oygiri-san. I'd call you a good person.”

Kyouko-san gave a peculiar laugh.

“Then why not try thinking about it like this? If you don't know if Wakui-san is a good person or bad person, for now, why don't we continue investigating until we know for sure? If he is a bad person, you can just stop then—but if we stop now, in the case Wakui-san is a good person, there's no way to turn back.”

That was definitely one way to look at it. That so-called 'better to regret doing than to regret never having done,'—I didn't like the words too much, but to Kyouko-san, the forgetful detective, that strategy was exceedingly effective and applicable.

Regret or not, once tomorrow came around, Kyouko-san would forget everything she did today—do it or not, there were no regrets. Then she just had to do what she had to.

Even if the result had it all end in vain, that was fine in itself—If it went well and she forgot, it was quite much the same. Because she couldn't regret, she could bravely challenge things at full speed—thinking about it normally, only having a day's worth of memory looked like nothing more than a huge demerit in the detective agency, but the more I thought about it, the more of an advantage it was to her.

Of course, there were surely things she could do precisely because of who she was—there was no guarantee anyone could do the same.

... And, no matter what job she accomplished, just as there was no regret, there was no achievement or worth in doing it—I wonder how that balance was settled in Kyouko-san.

“Kyouko-san, err... what do you think at the moment?”

“Meaning? About whether Wakui-san is a good or bad person?”

“There's that too... but about the environment of Atelier House itself. I can't really tell if this environment is a good thing or not—”

“That's the difficult part. I personally think leaving myself to this environment would be too tiresome, and I'd have to take a pass, but for one with artistic inclinations, it is unknown how they would think. Everyone, despite what they said, didn't seem to have the slightest intentions of leaving this place—perhaps to an aspiring artist, this place is a heaven, and also a hell.”

Once you station yourself here, you can never get a break even if you want to, Kyouko-san put it together. Putting it all together, for anyone aspiring to be an artist, being able to receive unlimited support undoubtedly made this a dream-like environment—there was also no doubt the environment itself was making them spoiled.

“Good or bad, vice or virtue, it depends on the person experiencing them—I would say? It's like appraising a painting.”

Having long since forgotten the happenings of that day, Kyouko-san might have said it without any particular intentions, but those nonchalant words had me recall how the same picture's value could change between two hundred million and two million. That appraisal—that pricing was

Kyouko-san's personal opinion, and once again, I priced the smashed painting at zero yen.

Yet back then, perhaps I was the one who was truly being appraised—insisting he would judge everything with his own eyes, with his question, old Wakui surmised the human known as Oyagiri Mamoru.

Someone who tried to see value in me, eh? Someone who tried to know my worth—if that was the underlying reason behind my hiring, then that was similarly the reason Kyouko-san was here. As a result, that decision was the one that saved his life, but...

How to see old Wakui, and how to see this Atelier House—I couldn't determine what decision I'd reach after that, but perhaps that conclusion would paradoxically manifest my values, my value as a person.

“And also, Oyagiri-san.”

Kyouko-san said.

“For a while now, you've been speaking as if those visits were a wasted effort, but that wasn't the case at all—don't tell me you've forgotten the two large gains we made?”

“Umm...”

When she urged me, I see, sure enough, it wasn't like the investigation ended with nothing at all.

There were two special mentions. It's just, I couldn't determine whether to call them large gains or not—especially when one of them was just a trouble that put the progress of our investigation in danger. For the other, not only did it complicate our outlook on the case, it was hard to say it got us any closer to a resolution.

“That's not true. Try remembering, Oyagiri-san.”

When the forgetful detective was telling me to remember, there's wasn't much else to do—I reflected on them one at a time. Right, that one happened not long after the investigation had begun... on the thirtieth floor if I recall correctly—

“That’s a lie.”

He immediately told Kyouko-san, when she went the standard route of introducing herself as a city official. Right, among the over-fifty residents of Atelier House, only a single person saw through Kyouko-san’s false self-introduction.

It was on the thirtieth floor, meaning not even near halfway from when we started, and I find it difficult to describe the panic I felt at the time—though upon including every floor thereafter, he was the only one to see through Kyouko-san’s lie.

No, well, granted, it was just a bit pushing it to list that as his achievement—the reason being, he was acquainted with the man who was originally just supposed to put down pressure from behind Kyouko-san. If he knew my identity, then it was understandable that he doubted my compatriot Kyouko-san’s introduction—if a former museum security guard about to be employed by old Wakui accompanied a worked from city hall, anyone would find it unnatural.

Meaning, the him I’m talking about—the resident of that room was a certain young Hakui. Right, an oversight on my part.

I should’ve properly informed Kyouko-san there was someone who knew me among the residents—if she knew, she might have put up proper countermeasures in advance, but even a detective couldn’t act against what they didn’t know.

“Huh? What’s with your hair? Did you dye it with paint?”

Hakui said, crudely pointing at Kyouko-san’s head—once he knew something was off, naturally, a paint specialist would notice the improvised browning.

“Yes, that’s right. Isn’t it pretty?”

When her disguise was seen through, I thought she might get into a panic, but Kyouko-san nonchalantly replied. She didn't seem moved in the slightest.

I see, I noticed. Just because her lie of coming from city hall was seen through, that didn't mean the fact she was a detective, and the incident in the basement had come to light—at that very moment, to Hakui-kun, her identity was shrouded in mystery.

Then there was no need to rush and confess everything—no need to tumble on your own, or so Kyouko-san was firmly dealing with this pinch. In that case, as the least bit of assistance I could offer,

“Hey, it's been a while, Hakui-kun.”

Alongside his name, I emphasized he knew who I was—while it didn't come out casually at all, I thought Kyouko-san should know why he was able to see through it.

“A while? We just met yesterday, old timer—”

He said dubiously. His attitude as impertinent as ever.

“What? Did you already start working? Then is this lady over here—your girlfriend or somethin'?”

“Yes, something like that.”

Containing my hurried attempt to deny it, Kyouko-san ambiguously affirmed the notion—while I didn't know her end game, as long as she said that, I couldn't disturb her pace any further.

“HMMMM...?”

After staring fixedly at Kyouko-san a while, Hakui-kun looked to me.

“So why did your girlfriend lie to knock at my door? Are you trying to draw some information from me?”

I just got back from a museum, could you just let me rest—he said, raising his guard.

If he went to a museum, I guess that meant he was studying paintings again, like when he first met me. When he said he'd pretty much finished copying the ones he was after, there was yesterday and then today, looks like he's still got his work cut out for him—don't tell me he's on new game plus.

“Yes, to tell you the truth,”

Kyouko-san said with a smile. Just because she was dealing with a child, her attitude didn't seem to have changed—in the door-to-door visits up to then, she generally took the same attitude.

Granted, putting aside him seeing through her lie, at the point he lived at Atelier House, she probably presumed he wasn't just any young boy.

“Wakui-san put in a request. We're in the middle of investigating how work's going for the residents of Atelier House. I apologize for telling a lie, I'm sorry.”

Kyoko-san lowered her brown head, but in essence, she was apologizing for her lie with a lie. I kinda get the feeling if I operate with this person for too long, I'm going to develop trust issues—but that lie didn't work on Hakui-kun either.

“That's also a lie.”

He definitively declared. I had erased my presence to the best of my abilities, so that one was just him purely deducing a lie—even so, not flustered in the slightest, Kyouko-san simply raised her head.

“Oh? What makes you think so?”

She said, and he unraveled his basis.

“There's no way teacher would care about how our work's goin'. All that person cares about is the results we put out—though it'd be a different story if he was observin' if anyone was slackin' off.”

“Hmm. Then that's the lie I should have gone with.”

Kyouko-san didn't shy back. While she was smiling, she was definitely a bad influence to this child.

Hakui-kun seemed let down by that joking attitude, “Who the hell are you?” he threatened. Though his age chipped whatever intensity the threat might have...

“Who knows? Who do you think I am? I’m the one who wants to know my identity the most.”

That evasive phrasing sounded like it was meant to rile Hakui-kun even further, but—surprisingly, that may have been her honest answer. As the forgetful detective with no memories beyond today, there was no greater mystery than her own identity—her own past.

“Come to think of it, on the way back, I passed by ‘n ambulance—don’t tell me, did something happen to teacher?”

“!”

With that suddenly pointed out, I froze up—perhaps Kyouko-san would have succeeded in warding it off, but it looked like my reaction alone was enough for Hakui-kun.

“Tsk...”

Clicking his tongue, Hakui-kun turned his back to us.

“So that’s what’s up—I always thought it would happen one of these days.”

“N-no, what are you talking about, Hakui-kun? Wakui-san isn’t particularly—”

“Don’t hide it.”

His back still turned, he spoke.

“If you plan on hiding it, why don’t I invite a few other residents in the area, so we can all pay a visit to the basement?”

I shut my mouth. If he did that, all of Kyouko-san’s schemes would collapse—a huge ruckus was unavoidable, and even if that wasn’t the case, if they saw the bloodstains in the basement, surely someone would immediately report it to the police. Kyouko-san’s intent was the identify the culprit before the case went public, we couldn’t have Hakui-kun do anything at this stage.

I panicked, but,

“We don’t plan on hiding anything. If it pleases you, I’ll properly speak on the matter—but the entranceway is not the best place for such matters, won’t you let us into your room?”

Kyouko-san quite literally stuck her nose in.

When she was found out and the lie was practically exposed, she didn’t intend to slow the investigation, forget that, she brazenly used it to push her way into the boy’s room—her heart was way too strong.

“OK. Get in.”

Hakui-kun said, before walking right off into the room—Kyouko-san followed behind, and with nothing else to do, I trailed her back. In the process of visiting every apartment in Atelier House, there were a few others who invited her in—as I’ve said before, but even among them, Hakui-kun’s room was strange.

A child was living alone, so you could call the mess inevitable, but without much exaggeration, there was absolutely nothing that wasn’t a painting too. The trash cramping up the floor space, nothing but crumpled up balls of paper, broken pencils, old art magazine—it was a room that made me anxious at whether or not he was properly eating.

“Make somewhere to sit on your own.”

Said Hakui, lowering himself into a seat before an easel—despite his invitation, this was a room I didn’t feel like sitting in. With barely anywhere to step, it was a chaos I didn’t want my shoes mixed up in if I could avoid it.

“.....”

After intently observing the room, Kyouko-san reached a hand towards the floor—I thought she intended to clear away things to make a place to sit, but instead, she began separating garbage. It seems she had arbitrarily begun cleaning the room—is she supposed to be his mother or something?

Her dexterity was impressive when she was inspecting the basement room, but it seems she was good at keeping things tidy to begin with—or perhaps mysophobic.

Fitting of a boy his age, Hakui-kun grimaced at having his room cleaned up, but after he had said, ‘Make somewhere to sit on your own,’ he was unable to stop that action. At most,

“It’s almost like Des Glaneuses.”

He spouted some incomprehensible insult—certainly, as she slouched over the clean the room, Kyouko-san’s form was quite like that painting even I knew about.

“So? What’s going on? What happened to teacher? Down from illness—don’t even go there, in that case, you wouldn’t go around lying and investigatin’ would ya?”

Hakui-kun spoke with detective-like deductive reasoning. As someone who saw his sketchbook at the museum, I knew I couldn’t make light of him for being a child, but was an artist’s sensitivities really something so sharp?

Kyouko-san said she wasn’t going to hide anything, and as things stood, even if she did, perhaps Hakui-kun would perceive it again.

“The owner of this Atelier House, Wakui Kazuhisa-san, was stabbed by someone with a knife.”

Perhaps thinking the same, Kyouko-san clearly started out with that—though her cleaning hands didn’t stop.

Even if he half-expected it, it must have been quite a shock, Hakui-kun was silent—no matter how you cut it, that was too honest, or rather, was that phrasing not lacking in tact?

“... Is he dead?”

Eventually, quietly, Hakui-kun asked.

“In critical condition. He was brought to the hospital senseless, and is in the midst of an emergency operation—”

As if she was more absorbed in the cleaning, Kyouko-san answered in a curt tone—I felt an off sense at those expressions.

Critical condition. Senseless. Emergency operation.

They were all quite shocking, strong words—while they were definitely the truth, he’s alive for now, he’s being treated right now, there were other ways to put it. Of course, that didn’t mean anything would come of softening it—but if Kyouko-san purposely chose to say it strongly here, that was quite a brutal strategy.

By purposely expressing Wakui’s state as blatantly as possible, cornering Hakui-kun’s mental state, contriving to make it easier to draw out information, from a third person perspective, it looked transparent—just exciting someone to put them in an abnormal state would make it easier to leak information in and of itself.

Even if that wasn’t a strategy to take against a child, turning it around, that just showed that Kyouko-san was serious, and she didn’t think of him as a child. Just how much of it was intentional? Regardless, I couldn’t determine how effective the strategy turned out, but Hakui-kun remained silent a while.

“Lady.”

He called out to Kyouko-san. Lady; the way he called someone he was seeing for the first time was quite overly familiar—I did think, but come to think of it, Kyouko-san had yet to tell him her name. In the visits up to then, she had used a fake name (If she called herself Okitegami Kyouko, there was the slim chance someone would recognize it as the name of a detective), but Hakui-kun had penetrated the falsehood before she even reached that point.

“You just said you wanted to know your identity, didn’t you?”

“? I sure did. Something wrong?”

“No...”

Hakui reached and took the sketchbook left hanging against the easel and opened to a new page. He held up the pencil he had kept in his hand the entire time.

“If you’re up to it, I could try capturing’ that identity of yours... could you model for me?”

“Model... is it?”

Hearing that, she raised her face—with her multitasking, her cleaning still hadn’t stopped, but Hakui-kun’s statement had caught her interest.

To tell the truth, up to that point—and beyond as well—when visiting, quite a few Atelier House residents had brought up similar proposals. Whether their artistic creative urges were stimulated, or they simply thought Kyouko-san was cute, or perhaps as an aspiring artist, it was something of social courtesy, but what I’m trying to say was that Hakui-kun wasn’t the only one to try drawing Kyouko-san.

It’s just the way he said it was unique. Capturing her identity— of all things.

All requests of that sort had been softly, yet immediately declined, but perhaps the reason Hakui-kun was the only one whose request she showed interest towards lay in his phrasing.

“Just a rough sketch, it’ll be one in no time. I won’t hold you up... one minute.”

As he said that, Hakui-kun’s pencil was already racing around his sketchbook. Those movements closely resembled the day I first met him at the museum—he had finished forging a painting on display before I could stop him, those speedy pencil strokes.

No, he was even faster than back then—he was at his fastest to depict the fastest detective, with that in mind, what a tasteful scene. Why Hakui-kun suddenly tried to draw Kyouko-san was something I didn’t understand, but with his mind cornered by those strong words, perhaps drawing was a sort of ritual to regain his composure.

Or perhaps Kyouko-san was simply appealing as a model—and he was just curious.

“If you let me draw you, I don’t mind tellin’ ya what you want to hear.”

“But you’re already drawing... what do you think I want to hear?”

“Don’t play dumb. You’re tryin’ to find the residents involved in teacher’s final work, aren’t you?”

With one eye closed, using his pencil to measure out the distance (?) to Kyouko-san Hakui-kun spoke.

“Don’t know the reason, but you and that old timer are searchin’ for the culprit... I heard ambulance sirens but never heard no police. You haven’t reported it... am I right?”

“Oh I wonder.”

“I’m tellin’ you, don’t play dumb... if anyone had a motive to stab him, it would have to do with ‘is final work, it’s easy enough to guess.”

By the way, I’m completely irrelevant to that, he added on—I already heard that yesterday. Forget the real painting, he wasn’t even told to paint one of the disguise paintings—at the time, I felt like the high level of Atelier House had been hammered in.

“Do I have to take a pose?”

Said Kyouko-san. She gave implicit consent to the modeling—“If you want to, you can pose however you want—if you really want, I don’t mind if you take off your clothes,” Hakui-kun jokingly chimed in,

“I’m great at nude sketches.”

“Oh my, this child says some mature things.”

Kyouko-san giggled.

“I wouldn’t mind stripping but, well, I’ll give up on that for now—we don’t have the time, and I’ve got some circumstances preventing me from stripping down.”

A reason not to strip? That was a strangely roundabout way to put it.

“Just like this, if you will. Don’t tell me you’re to stop at a rough sketch are you? If you think—you can capture my identity.”

“Hmph.”

With a scoff, Hakui-kun faced his sketchbook—with the drawing time that had suddenly begun, I felt like I'd been left to the wayside. For some reason, in what seemed like an exchange between geniuses, there was no space for a pleb such as myself to enter.

Did these two humans of superior talent connect with one another—or were they in conflict, a space hard to approach was birthed between them, and I could only wince.

“You said you always thought this would happen someday—has there been any similar trouble before? Between Wakui-san and the residents?”

“Trouble’s day in and day out. Nothing but fights between me and teacher... you know how teacher is, and the folks living in Atelier House are, generally a bit off. There’s a lot of collisions... but if ya ask if it was enough to stab the guy, naturally, I’d have to say no.”

“I see. Then do you have any idea why it came to that this time?”

“Gots to be because he went too far.”

Hakui-kun said without stopping his pencil.

“Being partial to a single resident, having them craft up a painting, that’s all well and good—but making loads of fake paintings to hide it was going too far. Treat aspiring artists like that, and there’s no way it’ll end well. Mass production is what an artist hates most. There’s no way teacher didn’t know that—”

Hakui-kun explained with a cynical air—it also felt like he was saying there was no room to sympathize with old Wakui. While just like Kyouko-san, he thought the motive of the crime lay in trouble surrounding his final work—because they were close, perhaps I felt the idea more keenly when it came from his lips.

However, following Hakui-kun’s logic, the culprit would have to have been a painter put up to painting a fake—one of the residents made to paint. It was a reasonable thought, but in that case, it would become difficult to identify the culprit—the fakes made to conceal the real painting would become fakes to conceal the culprit.

“Do you really have to think so hard about it? If the police investigate, they’ll identify the culprit in no time. Then that’s a wrap.”

“Then there won’t be any meaning. What I want is for the culprit to turn themselves in.”

Kyouko-san said—bluntly.

“If you’re the culprit, I’d very much like it if you told me now.”

“... Are ya suspectin’ me? I already told ya. Unfortunately, I wasn’t even put up to paintin’ a fake. If I hated teacher for that, that’s what ya would call not knowin’ where I stand.”

“I see.”

“So, now about who was involved with the final painting... as promised, I’ll tell ya all I know. I don’t know all ‘f them, and obviously, I don’t know who was the real one.”

Said Hakui-kun, before bringing up a few names and room numbers—that was the first time we gained any concrete information, so I hurriedly tried to note it down, but Kyouko-san stopped me. I wondered why, but, oh, I see, that was the Forgetful Detective’s regulation—to cleanly forget everything at a later date, whether it be handwritten or digital, leaving any records was taboo.

She could only memorize it in her head.

While it may work for her, remembering all the names and numbers I heard was impossible for me; I could only leave it all to Kyouko-san. How pathetic—if that’s how it was, I really was just standing here.

“I see, that should prove useful... however, Hakui-kun.”

After she’d finished hearing them all out—by the time I noticed it, the area around her had been completely tied up. It wasn’t as if she actually took out the trash, so the number of items hadn’t decreased in itself, but there wasn’t even any use comparing the room’s floor space to how it was when we entered—when she arranged it to this extent, I wondered if Hakui-kun would actually be able to tell what was where anymore.

“There was actually something else I wanted to hear... will you be able to answer that question as well?”

“Huh?”

For a moment, Hakui-kun’s hands stopped.

“There’s somethin’ else...? What is it, my alibi or somethin’? Proof I wasn’t at the scene? I said it before, but up to a moment ago, I was at the museum.”

“Ahaha. Unfortunately, we have no idea when exactly the crime took place. Alibi? You’re reading too many mystery novels.”

What was to come of a detective saying that? Whatever the case, Hakui-kun’s stagnant hands once again began moving with the speed of a hawk. “Never read one in my life,” he said.

“So what is it you want to ask?”

“Well, thinking I might be able to figure out who was drawing the real picture, I had a look through the documents in Wakui-san’s room.”

Rather than having a look through, more precisely, she arbitrarily stole a look. She said it as if she got permission and filled out the proper paperwork—her ability to implicitly lie was also soaring, it seems.

Quite likely half-figuring that, “And so?” the young boy urged her on—more than his conversation with Kyouko-san, he looked to be prioritizing drawing his picture.

“Did you learn anything?”

“No, I didn’t learn anything. It does seem he made so as not to leave records. If I searched harder, I might be able to find some sort of information, but—”

“Don’t think that’ll work out. He was a wary old man, in that area. Wary, ‘r maybe devout—from how he didn’t even tell the person paintin’ the real one, and how he hired that old timer only in his final job, can’t ya tell?”

The Testimonial of Okitegami Kyouko

Certainly, running contrary to his broad-minded bearing, there was no doubt he was a dainty, discrete person—his tendency to anger, turn it around, and you can take it as delicate to boot.

“Yes. However, instead, and I’m not sure if I should say this, but I noticed something strange.”

“Something strange?”

“Yes. The papers were filed in a certain binder—it was a photocopy of a purchase order.”

Kyouko-san said.

The binder documents... that matter we discussed in the elevator. The sold document that stopped Kyouko-san in her tracks—its identity was a purchase order?

“It seems Wakui-san was a detailed, or perhaps—a methodical person. He bound his purchase orders chronologically, and what caught my eye was the latest entry—I presume it was meant for the final project he would start on, an order for the materials and ingredients to make the frame. Though it seems it hasn’t been delivered yet—”

“... What of it? Yeah, of course he’d be methodical. Even if he’s a frame maker who can raise the price of a painting, he’s no magician, ‘s not like he makes a frame from zero. It’s only natural he’d need materials.”

“Yes. I understand that—but, it’s too much.”

“What?”

“The quantity of material he ordered is too much. Wakui-san ordered so much it can’t eve be explained away by spares and surplus—I can’t think that the culmination of a framer, the last job of his life consisted of only a single frame.”

That’s the part I don’t get, Kyouko-san raised her face—by stopping her cleaning hands, and looking straight at Hakui-kun, she changed from her multitask to her single focus mode.

Similar to how she fixated on the binder.

The Testimonial of Okitegami Kyouko

At the time, it looked like Kyouko-san was reading the same document over and over again, but it looks like she wasn't just reading it, she was mentally calculating out the quantity of material ordered...

It was like a single question had thawed, but then the question she presented was a plausible one.

“... Ain't that also just a camouflage? If he just ordered exactly what he needed, it'd get out what sort of frame he was making—by purposely ordering unneeded ingredients and meaningless materials, maybe he was tryin' to make it so even the company he ordered from would be ambiguous on what he was plannin' on makin'. Teacher has the financial power, you can already tell by the size of Atelier House, this mansion he built on a whim, right?”

“Yes, of course. Of course, I thought so too, and naturally, I'm sure he included that in his intentions—but even subtracting that, it's still too much. An order of that degree wouldn't even fit in that basement room.”

That definitely is startling.

Kyouko-san, who was placing things so orderly as she tidied, as if deliberately forming a wooden mosaic, was the one saying it, so if she predicted it 'wouldn't fit in that basement room,' it was probably alright to trust her.

On top of having financial leisure, he was the one who actually did have Atelier House's residents paint numerous camouflage paintings, so it was hard to think he would consider anything 'a waste'—but even ignoring that, ordering so much material it would hinder his movement in the workplace surpassed the bounds of camouflage.

It was only normal to think he had a separate goal—what's more, that was the main goal.

At first, it seems Hakui-kun classified her question as, 'nothing special, just the usual teacher,' but when she pushed it that hard, even he felt something was off. In desperation,

“... Then wasn't it an orderin' error? Like he carelessly was off by a digit when he ended up placing the order...”

He voiced his theory. While it was a plain theory, that would be the realistic deduction—I couldn't find another answer either. On a stage as grand as his final job, I wondered if he really would make such a boneheaded slip-up, but to not know what mistake you'll make on what field is human.

It wasn't good to blame it on his age, but old Wakui was at a year where it wouldn't be strange for him to make a careless mistake—that's precisely why he resolved to retire as a framer.

“I don't think that's the case. The quantities were far too detailed to be off by a digit—they were clearly indicated down to the one's place, so there is no mistaking the numbers were intentional.”

“.....”

After silently thinking,

“Then what do you think, lady?”

In the end, unable to think up any other ideas, he returned the question to Kyouko-san.

“This is also just a hypothesis, but—”

Kyouko-san took the pose she was told she didn't have to take. Just because she was done cleaning, even if she took a pose not, it wasn't as if Hakui-kun could change his composition... and as an amateur, I couldn't tell in the slightest what sort of pose that was supposed to be.

I got the feeling I'd seen it somewhere before, but... that pose she took back at the café? No, that's not it—and Kyouko-san doesn't have any memories of that day.

Keeping that mysterious stance, Kyouko-san continued on.

“—The orders were all real, is that not a possibility?”

“...? All of them? What do you mean? He intends to use all the materials he ordered? Just how big would that make it?”

The Testimonial of Okitegami Kyouko

“I’m not talking about the frame materials, I’m talking about the orders he issued to the residents of Atelier House—perhaps he intended to make a frame for every single one of them...”

“There’s no way that’s true!”

He yelled. Hakui-kun—reflexively, and emotionally.

His emotions exploded much like old Wakui, when he rampaged at the museum—therefore, I thought he might have a go at Kyouko-san, so I immediately took a stance, but luckily, Hakui-kun quickly returned to his senses.

“A-ah.”

He awkwardly faced his sketchbook. With a grinding sound, he moved his pencil even more intensely than before—as I thought, the act of ‘painting pictures’ was something of a mental therapy for him.

“Sorry, I raised my voice...”

He apologized in a faint murmur.

While he didn’t take on an apologetic attitude, when it came to Kyouko-san, who’d just been screamed at, she didn’t even stir from her bizarre pose.

“Oh no, I don’t mind it at all.”

She answered at ease. From the smile she made, I couldn’t read her mind in the slightest.

“But, if you could, would you please tell me your basis of saying ‘there’s no way that’s true?’”

“.....”

“Personally, I think it’s a relatively proper deduction—while placing the orders saying they were camouflage, they were all actually real. Instead of evaluating only a single resident of Atelier House, he evaluated a great many of them—doesn’t that sound like Wakui-san?”

The Testimonial of Okitegami Kyouko

Kyouko-san had never met Wakui, so that final portion was arbitrarily tacked on, but along the way, I grew to accept it a bit. Right, just because it was his final job that didn't mean it was limited to a single piece—wasn't it possible he planned on making multiple frames? His camouflage was in itself a camouflage, and he actually ordered a great many real pieces from the residents of Atelier House—

Was that malicious spirit like old Wakui, was it not?

“That ain't him.”

Hakui-kun said.

“Atelier House is a place for competition—there's no way teacher would ever think up somethin' like 'let's all get along and cross the finish line together'. And—”

“And?”

“... I get it, if he wanted to choose one person, one picture, I could see it, but if he was thinkin' to make frames for so many paintings,”

There's no way I wouldn't be chosen.

Still directed at his sketchbook, yet with a strong tone, Hakui-kun asserted—I see, so those thoughts were linked to his previous outburst. While a young boy, while still a beginner painters' egg, he still had a firm clasp on his pride—if we were to accept Kyouko-san's theory, then the fact he wasn't even entrusted a fake would weigh on him even heavier.

No, if he wasn't entrusted a fake, he could maintain his pride by saying he never wanted to paint a fake in the first place—but if the ration was actually one to one, it would be an unbearable disgrace for an artist.

This wasn't an entrance exam, so I'm not sure if art could be measured with rations, but...

“Hypothetically,”

Kyouko-san pressed him further—her posing hadn't changed, so she still maintained a somewhat foolish atmosphere, but her tone was the epitome of seriousness.

“If something like that happened—would you hold murderous intent towards Wakui-san, who didn’t choose you?”

“I would.”

An extreme answer for an extreme question.

“I think I’d want to kill him... anyone would.”

He violently declared before clapping his sketchbook shut with comparatively delicate hands—The pencil that barely had any lead left was left on the easel.

“Oh. Have you finished drawing? Then let me have a look—at my identity.”

“Unfortunately, it’s still unfinished... no way I could capture it in a minute, who you are. After I calm down a bit, I’ll finish it up, so come for it later.”

Like that, Hakui-kun rather blatantly drove Kyouko-san out—I couldn’t blame him. Kyouko-san’s questions had gone beyond what was permissible in a detective’s questioning—even ignoring the fact she was dealing with a child, she was at a level that would need a warrant.

Before the crime was reported, it wouldn’t be strange if Kyouko-san herself was reported—from Kyouko-san’s point of view, this conversation had already largely gone over the planned one minute.

It seemed she decided it was time to pull out.

“Well then, I’ll drop by eventually. I can’t wait to see it completed.”

She undid her mysterious pose. While she surprisingly really did sound like she was looking forward to it, she was far too good at lying. I couldn’t tell her intentions.

Anyhow, Hakui-kun seemed fed up with her words, but even so, as a painters’ egg, before he drove her out, he couldn’t stand but to ask.

“Lady, what sort of pose was that?”

The Testimonial of Okitegami Kyouko

He tossed the question to Kyouko-san. I held the same impression, and, “I get the feeling I’ve seen it somewhere before, but...” I added on.

“Oh, this?”

Kyouko-san took the pose again. It was identical down to the finer details, just like shame memory alloy—that power of reproduction didn’t bring to mind a forgetful detective.

“As you can clearly see, it’s Milo’s Venus.”

“Milo’s... ah.”

Hakui-kun let out a plainly surprised voice—while it didn’t reach my voice, I also recalled upon the mention. It was hard to make out with the arms, but the turn of the torso and tilt of the neck really did belong to the Milo de Venus. That statue that was world famous by no exaggeration—

So this time a statue was the right answer... come to think of it, for her to personally impersonate Venus, while she looked so unassuming, Kyouko-san was quite the brazen one.

“... If you’ve got arms, it ain’t Venus anymore.”

Hakui-kun said, but, “You think so?” Kyouko-san spoke maintaining the pose.

“One side says Milo’s Venus is beautiful because she lost both arms, but—don’t you think that’s quite a selfish argument? Now that they’re gone, that’s all they can say, but I’m sure the maker would have liked someone to evaluate the statue in its completed form—Hakui-kun, you wouldn’t be happy if an unfinished, or broken, or failed painting was evaluated, would you?”

Upon hearing that, Hakui-kun—couldn’t answer.

In the process of visiting every room in Atelier House, of the two noteworthy events, the first was our encounter and exchange with young Hakui—it was my fault Kyouko-san’s false premise was seen through, but looking at the result, she succeeded in her questioning, and with no choice but to touch up on the case, we were able to speak on deep matter we couldn’t discuss elsewhere, so while the root of the problem still remained, you could say it wasn’t a serious error.

Yet the mystery of the binder she revealed there still had no answer—even as we went around hearing out Atelier House residents after that, we never reached any conclusion. The ‘they were all real’ theory Kyouko-san proposed was plausible, as things stood, but as we listened to the stories—the insults directed at Wakui from the residents, I couldn’t think of him as the sort of old man who would set up such a mischievous surprise.

It was more natural to think the large order served a different purpose—as Kyouko-san had done, at the present time, we could only place that question on the shelf.

And so, let me reflect on the other noteworthy event—it happened in the late game of our rounds around Atelier House. Despite our trouble with Hakui-kun at an early stage, by that time, I had grown accustomed to walking around and visiting the unfamiliar painters’ eggs in turn—but there, Kyouko-san and I made an unexpected discovery.

Come to think of it, I postponed talking about it, but in Kyouko-san’s visits to the rooms of Atelier House, why instead of bottom up, she changed to encompass it from top to bottom was something I immediately understood without her having to explain it—once you understood it, it was blatantly obvious, and this might become a depiction of my own dullness, but considering how we were asking around every resident in this high-rise building, using an elevator was truly inefficient.

With the inspection over, I was relieved to find out we wouldn’t have to heave ourselves up and down the stairs—but using an elevator to move just one floor was, to be blunt, a waste of time. Even more so if there was

only one elevator—when time was of the essence, we had no time to wait for the elevator's arrival all carefree.

In that case, the question of why the assault on Atelier House began from the top instead of the bottom, in short was a decision between climbing up floor by floor and taking the elevator down at the end, or starting by riding the elevator to the top, and taking the stairs down floor by floor—naturally, with stamina in mind, it was only natural for one to choose descending over climbing.

Her choice to start from the top floor was unlucky in that we encountered Hakui-kun—who lived near the top—quite early, but whichever way it went, it was only a matter of sooner or later—say we were to put some rest between floors, but climbing thirty flights of stairs would still be harsh.

Anyways, what I'm trying to say is that it was terribly reasonable for Kyouko-san to ride the elevator to the top floor. If the elevator coincidentally happened to be on the floor, it might be fine to use it, but Kyoukos-san didn't have to the time to confirm the elevator's present location each and every time, so we didn't even try it.

That being the case, we used the emergency stairs to move between every floor in the building, sparing the roof—but in regards to that, if you'd let me give my opinion, as a former security guard, I felt there was something off about this complex's interior.

When I came by on Wakui-san's invitation the day before, I confirmed a surveillance camera in the entrance way with the auto lock, so he was tentatively keeping secure—or so I thought, but once I was actually inside, there wasn't any such security system stationed on any ceilings.

As a modern housing complex, I had no choice but to say his awareness was low—if I had been shown this first, then I'd be able to see where he was coming from when he told me he needed a security guard for his final work.

However, as we had heard from one of the residents, this building wasn't legally a housing complex, but a private residence—whether wide-angle cameras were installed on the ceiling or not was all for Wakui to decide. In that case, how should I see the absence of cameras?

... In the case of stores and such, maintaining security cameras was surprisingly tiresome, and a considerable expense—to contain unneeded expenditures, it was plausible to reduce the number of cameras. You don't see a burglar every day, is the thought process.

With only one elevator in a thirty-two-story high-rise complex, and even that elevator didn't have buttons on both sides; for an owner, the aging old Wakui could be a bit lacking in the spirit of removing obstacles, and I couldn't think of this place as one built taking ease of living and convenience into consideration, so perhaps the absence of cameras was an extension of that.

But there were other ways of thinking about it—cases where the one in charge wanted to keep the shop's insides a black box, purposely not recording any footage. Meaning, a situation where illegal extreme labor was being carried out inside—the footage would be left as evidence of their own crime, so the thought process was to avoid any form of records.

Unless I asked a specialist, I couldn't determine where Atelier House stood legally—but if it did have a side similar to forced labor, then perhaps leaving as few reels as possible was the landlord's deliberate intent, I ended up suspecting.

Of course, this was an address where only those aspiring to be artists lived, so to preserve the 'trade secrets' of the creators, there were no security cameras stationed inside, maybe I should take it simply—

Well, no matter his intentions, or lack thereof, say he was just cutting costs, but what was certain, at the very least, was that when the police barged in later, identifying the culprit who stabbed Wakui from police footage would prove to be quite difficult—in visiting all houses, that alone was the most I could say using my life experience.

When we got to that area, Kyouko-san was an investigation professional after all—and from here on, I'll be mentioning the second noteworthy event—unrelated to hearing out Atelier House's residents, we did make one discovery. You could call it the only clue-like clue we found since detective work began—it happened around the middle of our visits.

When we had finished going around the eighteenth floor and were about to move on to the seventeenth—generally one to seize the initiative,

The Testimonial of Okitegami Kyouko

Kyouko-san would take the lead, but in accordance with general manners, only when descending the stairs, I would stand in front of her. It was there,

“Stay!”

Kyouko-san curtly declared—a command like that surprised me, but as a result, my body froze up, and I succeeded in stopping; all’s well that end’s well.

“What is it, Kyouko-san?”

“My apologies. Please pull back that half-raised foot—”

Kyouko-san said, circumventing me as she lowered herself onto the landing—no, the word lowered was too tepid, like a middle school student, she leapt down the stairs.

She’s way too hoyden—I didn’t have time to think before she turned around, crouched down, and drew her face close to the step I was about to step down on. Making sure I didn’t tread my giant shoe on her face, I went back a step just in case—but rather than that, “Oyagiri-san, come look at this,” Kyouko-san invited me in.

“Right here.”

“...?”

I leaned down over the stairs, looked at the spot Kyouko-san pointed out—and noticed

A small, red ‘circle’ that was there.

It was so small I might overlook it, but as if someone spilled red paint when going up or down the stairs—no, could it be that wasn’t paint...?

“Is it... blood?”

“I can’t say for certain. But the possibility exists.”

Kyouko-san said as she moved herself, looking—inspecting the bloodstain (?) from various angles.

“Judging by the color, it’s not an old one—of course, supposing that’s blood and not paint.”

“.....”

“Well, we’re in Atelier House after all. I can’t deny the possibility someone spilled paint while they were moving—but in the case this really is blood, there are two possibilities that come to mind. One, that this is Wakui-san’s blood—the other, that this blood has no relation to the incident.”

She was surprisingly collected. I almost latched onto it as a new clue, but certainly, it was a bloodstain where so many people lived, and as we had no means to conduct a blood test, it was effectively impossible for us to identify who it belonged to.

“Is it unthinkable this was the culprit’s blood? Perhaps they got into a scuffle with Wakui-san, and at the time, the culprit was injured as well...”

“I can’t refute that, but from what I could see of the crime scene, I can’t think they such an intense scuffle—if the culprit was bleeding, I thought the blood spots would have been spread a little wider across the scene.”

Kyouko-san noted as she stood. It seems she gave in, any further inspection was meaningless—she was quick to decide that.

“However, this is sufficient to set up an estimate that the culprit used these stairs—meaning, when committing the offense, they were bathed in the blood spurt, and some of it dripped here.”

“Well... rather than set up, that’s the easiest to imagine.”

While I did immediately connect this spot to Wakui-san’s blood, in essence, it was a little hard to imagine an old man stabbed in the abdomen came all the way here, left a blood stain, and returned underground. If I tried a pseudo-Kyouko-san round robin deduction, perhaps this was the real crime scene, and he simply descended the stairs, but with his abdomen pierced so deep, I didn’t think that was possible.

“The elevator was in under inspection and unusable, after all. Is it possible the culprit used these stairs to return to their room?”

I said as a flash hit me—no, a flash was an exaggeration. That was also something obvious, and I simply obviously noticed it—but if after the crime, the culprit used these stairs to go to their room, the fact a trace was here would inevitably mean the culprit’s room was on the eighteenth floor or higher. Otherwise, there would be no reason a bloodstain would remain around the landing from the seventeenth to eighteenth floor—in which case, this was a large find.

If it wasn’t all thirty-two floors, but only eighteen to thirty-two, a simple calculation whittled the possible suspects by more than half—but,

“Yes, in the case this blood belongs to Wakui-san, it might be fine to think of it like that.”

In contrast to my excitement, Kyouko-san played it calm.

“But even if this isn’t blood, the possibility it is irrelevant blood is considerably high, so it is too early to make any conclusions.”

“... You’re right.”

To tell the truth, at the time, I had a light hope by narrowing the suspects, we could cut out the process of visiting floors seventeen to two, but even with Kyouko-san’s priority on speed, it seems she wouldn’t be that dishonest.

“Of course, none of the people we’ve heard out to this point seemed to be injured, but—granted, there’s no way of knowing what’s under their clothes.”

“.....”

“And another thing, there is a possibility this is the culprit’s diversionary camouflage.”

“Diversionary camouflage...? So you mean the culprit really does live below the seventeenth floor, but they purposely climbed here, and purposely left a bloodstain...? To make it seem like the culprit was a resident of floor eighteen and up?”

“Yes, that is what I mean.”

... Is that possible?

If you thought it out that far, the round-robin deductions would never end... and while the sharp-sighted Kyouko-san found it, just as I almost carelessly tread on it, first off, if you used the stairs normally, you wouldn't notice such a small blood spot... it was too plain for diversionary measures. If she wanted to call it that, wouldn't they have at least left some blood a bit more conspicuously?

“Yes, I think so too—the line of this being a diversionary measure is faint. But perhaps it was meant to have us think precisely that—to not make it look diversionary is the first rule of diversions.”

With those words, Kyouko-san moved to the side of the landing—it seemed like she was making a path for me to go down first, as we had done to that point.

At the same time, it indicated there was no change in her policy to hear out the residents seventeen and down as she had done before—well, apart from confirming the suspects' identities, we were also probing out who was painting the real picture old Wakui would adorn with his final frame, so whatever the case, the questioning would continue...

Yet be that as it may, while it may have been a misunderstanding, with my tensions momentarily cut by the notion we wouldn't have to go around anymore, as a result, the residents after that came with an even greater sense of wasted effort—

— Which brings us to where we are now.

A whole day spend searching and stopping by every residence in Atelier House, for a third time, we returned to the basement room—we had spent around four hours walking without rest, and tired out, regardless of what was going on, I ill-manneredly sprawled myself out in an open floor space of the workroom.

Kyouko-san was unbelievably tough for her physique, and while she couldn't conceal the colors of fatigue, she of course didn't do something so unruly, nor did she rest. The first thing she did upon arriving at the basement space was wash off her hair in the sink fastened to the workroom wall.

I guess the brown hair was no longer needed with the questioning over—if speed along was stressed, perhaps it wouldn't matter if her hair color remained brown, but thinking about it normally, having your hair uniformly plastered in paint must be unbearably uncomfortable. Something that would throw off her concentration—and spending her break time washing her head should serve as a good change of pace.

That she used the sink meant she had determined there wasn't enough time for another shower—right, while the police had yet to arrive, more than five hours had already transpired since the investigation commenced.

By Kyouko-san's estimate, the time limit was at most half a day—even that 'at-most' wasn't long to go.

Additionally, the fact the police hadn't rushed into Atelier House yet wasn't simply something to rejoice in. It meant the hospital old Wakui was carted off to hadn't reported it to the police yet—perhaps that meant Wakui's emergency operation was still ongoing.

If anything happened to old Wakui, it would be hard to explain what Kyouko-san was even conducting detective work for—to add onto that, a detective by trade, if Kyouko-san lost Wakui, she'd lost a client, and

wouldn't make a single yen... the investigation's progress none too favorable, the situation was reaching a dead end.

"... You don't have to change clothes?"

Unable to rest forever, I raised my upper body to ask Kyouko-san,

"Yes, well, even if I wanted to, when I was making these pants, I took apart the clothes I was wearing and used them as material."

Kyouko-san answered, having finished washing up her hair—I see. How should I put it, by that point, I wasn't going to be surprised, but she did something that couldn't be undone, or perhaps, acted without proper foresight.

That being the case, those handmade clothes suit her well, so that wasn't anything major—of course, I'm someone who for the longest time thought a cashmere muffler was just a muffler that cost a lot more cash, so even if I thought it fit her, that was no guarantee.

"Phew. Sorry to keep you waiting."

Wiping her head with a towel, Kyouko-san returned—her hair had splendidly returned to all white. While she said that wasn't an identity or her flagship, that look really was more Kyouko-san-esque—it made me think that was Okitegami Kyouko.

"I wasn't really waiting—I'm the one who should apologize for being of no use. Forget that, I've just been dragging your feet..."

I wasn't being humble, I spoke from my heart as I stood—even if there was nothing I could do upon standing, when Kyouko-san hadn't taken a seat, I couldn't just lie on the floor.

"Drag my feet? Oh, if you're talking about how Hakui-kun noticed the lie, don't worry about it—as a result, we managed to hear what he had to say. That was far better than if we hadn't heard him out."

"Hmm..."

I was happy to hear her so generous, but I felt guilty she was just being considerate. In the first place, I was the one who dragged Kyouko-san into

Atelier House, somehow or another, I wanted to be useful in a more proper way...

But nothing begins with getting down. I forcefully shifted my mood that felt like it would keep sinking without end if I let it be.

“What are we going to do now?”

I asked Kyouko-san.

“Carrying out the questioning didn’t really yield any progress, but... or did you figure something out? Any suspicious individuals among the ones you interviewed...”

“Unfortunately, I was unable to identify the culprit. Furthermore, I was unable to tell who painted the real painting he would decorate with his final frame—however.”

Kyouko-san placed her towel to the side and spoke.

“For now, if we compare everyone’s stories, while what’s real, and what’s a disguise is unclear, I think we’ve managed to identify every resident Wakui-san told to paint a picture.”

“O-oh really.”

I was generally supposed to be around listening to the same stories as Kyouko-san, but it was impossible for me to memorize the information we gained from every resident, and to compare them in my head on top of that was an even greater impossibility. I’d already pretty much forgotten the names Hakui-kun went to the trouble of naming.

“... Then that also means we’ve also identified the residents like Hakui-kun, who weren’t even asked to produce a fake, doesn’t it?”

“Yes. You could find them through subtraction. What about it?”

“Well, how should I put it...”

Even if I had forgotten the finer details, there were words in Hakui-kun’s story I definitely couldn’t forget—even if Kyouko-san provoked him, and those inflammatory words were likely a tit for tat.

I think I'd want to kill him—he admitted so.

“Oh, dear Oyagiri-san, don't tell me you're still bothered by what Hakui-kun said? Dear me, you shouldn't take those too heavily. They're the words of a child, you know.”

And who's the one who provoked a child to that degree, I wanted to say, but I held it in—well, if Kyouko-san didn't suspect Hakui-kun for those words, then so be it. We were just slightly acquainted, and it wasn't as if we were friends, or that we got along, yet still, thinking over how a child like that could have caused such an incident wasn't a great feeling to have. Even if the fact he was a Resident of Atelier House meant he was one of the suspects...

“But Hakui-kun's ‘I think I'd want to kill him’ only holds true in the case that every Atelier House resident Wakui placed a request with is painting the real deal—there were a considerable number of people painting those ‘real’ pictures, weren't there?”

“Yes, you're right. I'm forced to say as things stand, the possibility isn't low by any means.”

Kyouko-san ruffled up her white hair into a mess as she spoke—I thought that might be body language to show her distress, but it seems she was simply confirming how her hair was drying. With people able to think out more than two actions at once, it was difficult to probe out their thoughts from their actions. I wouldn't be surprised if I found out Kyouko-san purposely never concentrated her thoughts and actions on one thing, setting multitasking as a basis so no one could see through to her real intentions. Albeit, this time she seemed to just be worried about her drenched hair...

“So it's... not low.”

“If the materials Wakui-san ordered are just to make a single frame, it is clearly excessive; that is a fact... something even an amateur could understand.”

Kyouko-san said so, but an amateur probably couldn't tell. While I had a look at the same documents, I couldn't make heads or tails of it... this theory only came to be with Kyouko-san's intellect.

The Testimonial of Okitegami Kyouko

“If it was his last job, he would want to do his best possible job as a framer—however, it’s art we’re dealing with, a form of culture. Best is one word, but it takes on various forms. To equate it to paintings, the best landscape and the best abstract are completely different, aren’t they?”

“Well yeah, that’s right...”

To take that even further, landscapes could be broken down by technique, and in the first place, whether they considered it the best would depend on the values of the beholder—thinking about it like that, one might say there was an infinite supply of bests.

“To make frames of all sorts of bests, he ordered paintings of various types from the residents of Atelier House—as a matter of fact, the residents who were asked to paint pictures by Wakui-san all depicted different sizes and motifs.”

Come to think of it, she was right.

Camouflage or real aside—unlike a school art period, it wasn’t as if everyone was painting the same picture, the paintings old Wakui ordered were truly rich in variation.

Among the residents, those with whom Kyouko-san could make a case hard enough they would secretly show her their half-finished pictures were in no few numbers—they all looked completely different. Just because I worked at a museum a bit, I don’t intend to brag that I have a good eye, but... even so, it would be a different story if they all looked the same, but with how different they looked, they really had to be different.

In that case, was Kyouko-san’s theory gaining a layer of reality?

“Let’s say Wakui-san planned something like that; that would mean the suspects would only be limited to a few.”

“Eh? Just a few...? What do you mean by a few?”

“Oh, if all the residents ordered to make a painting were real, that would make the ones like Hakui-kun who didn’t even receive a request the suspects—truth be told, there are only a few of them.”

The Testimonial of Okitegami Kyouko

That was the logical result, and I'm sure she was right—even if we didn't take Hakui-kun too seriously, if an adult were placed in his position, their disgrace and rage would undoubtedly be intolerable.

Naturally, in order to embrace that rage, the condition would be that that unselected resident had to know what sort of plan old Wakui was advancing in secret...

“To be blunt, Kyouko-san, do you think the culprit is among those people?”

I intended to muster quite a bit of courage, but once it had come out of my mouth, perhaps it was just a dishonest question. What I didn't want to think, I was making Kyouko-san think in my stead. However Kyouko-san didn't seem to feel burdened at all in answering, “Whether I think it or not aside, I'm sure it is very possible,” she said.

“By the way, I must mention one more thing—of those few names, the only one who lives above the eighteenth floor is the resident of the thirtieth floor, Hakui-kun.”

“!”

“Of course, that won't serve as any evidence. We don't have any evidence to indicate the identity of that slight trace of blood.”

Kyouko-san took the lead. Thanks to that, the shock I received was suppressed at about half, but half was plenty impactful at that.

“On the contrary, one might conclude it was impossible for a child to carry out the crime, and that's precisely why that blood stain must have no relation to the incident; that's one way of thinking of it.”

“... No,”

Said I—I wasn't there to console Kyouko-san.

“I don't plan on denying the real murderous intent everyone holds sometime as a child.”

“I'd think not.”

Kyouko-san turned her hand.

“The times one cannot control their wild murderous intent comes not with the ability to enact it, by the time they gain that ability, they are able to control those urges that stir them. Perhaps that is what it means to grow—if we see Hakui-kun as the culprit, the reason Wakui-san’s life could be saved brings about a sort of inevitability, does it not?”

“? What inevitability would that be...”

Oh, so even if he stabbed him in a flight of rage, the one he stabbed was his landlord he called teacher, and he immediately returned to his senses—is that what she meant? In that case, it might be the same with any other resident. While they spoke spitefully of him, as long as they were artists, in some fundamental place, they all respected the legendary framer Wakui.

“Oh no, there’s that as well, but—it’s just, even if I won’t go as far as to say we should doubt him, there is another reason we can’t exclude Hakui-kun apart from him being a child.”

“Another... specifically what?”

“To sum it up, he’s too perceptive.”

Kyouko-san said, pinching at her own hair.

“If it was just perceiving that my brown hair was paint, you could call that a pertinent observation... but deducing something had happened to Wakui-san just from our visit and passing by an ambulance was going a little too far.”

“... Really...”

Are you one to talk—I felt like saying, but precisely because Kyouko-san was saying it, perhaps those instincts really couldn’t be explained logically. Those weren’t just deductions that put detectives to shame, it was precisely because he knew about the incident in the basement beforehand, that he could act like he perceived it—was that what she wanted to say?

Then why did he know? When at that point, the fact Wakui was stabbed was something only Kyouko-san, I and the real culprit should know—

“If you’re looking for suspicious behavior, the way he suddenly began drawing was suspect—when we had come to question it, don’t you think he could have been focusing his mind to hide his unrest?”

“.....”

I interpreted it as him drawing to hide his unrest at the fact Wakui was stabbed, but—you definitely could look at it that way. While it was a malicious outlook, it wasn’t as if there was any necessity to purposely take a kind outlook with him... so this is what it means to be at a loss for words.

And yet—I thought.

If back then, the murderous rage he cried out with was the real article, then up to that point—that means until Kyouko-san provoked him, he had yet to reach the possibility that all the residents who received an order from Wakui-san were real.

“Perhaps we simply hit the nail on the head? With the core of his motive brushed against, maybe his rage was resuscitated—”

“Resuscitated—rage.”

“I did save Wakui-san’s life, after all—perhaps he held a rage that wouldn’t be satisfied with killing him all over again. Well then, Oyagiri-san. How about it? In the case we supposed Hakui-kun was the culprit, does anything contradict? Why don’t you try thinking about that?”

“Yes... I’ll try thinking.”

When Kyouko-san told me to think like that, it was when she was thinking about something else; I had learnt that through experience. Supposing Hakui-kun was the culprit made me feel something was off, and while it did pain my heart, it was a thought experiment there was some worth in carrying out.

If I simulate Hakui-kun as the culprit... right, I don’t have to set the motive. While I can’t determine the reason, whatever the case, let’s say he stabbed the person he calls Teacher.

The Testimonial of Okitegami Kyouko

Old Wakui falls to the floor—his head clears, he gets scared, after that, Hakui-kun flees from the basement room.

To his own room... using the stairs.

That's right, it appears like he used the stairs—I mean, what singled him out was the bloodstain between the seventeenth and eighteenth floors, so if instead used the elevator, things start getting strange.

Yet his residence was on the thirtieth floor. I didn't have to say that was a considerably high one.

Climbing so many stairs was practically penance—it was the same even for an adult man like me, not to mention a common ten-year-old buy like Hakui-kun.

Why did he use the stairs instead of the elevator? Well of course, that's because the elevator was unusable. Under inspection—perhaps he was able to use it to come down, but at the very least, that would mean, he didn't use it to climb up.

Bathed in the blood spurt, he may have exercised the utmost caution, but only a single drop of that blood dripped onto the stairs—it was a small trace of evidence only Kyouko-san could notice, so perhaps he didn't notice either? If he did, he would've wiped it...

So, after that, in his room, he changed out of his blood-soaked clothes, and took a shower... perhaps?

We met him not long after we began going around, and even if I can't determine what sort of suspicious Kyouko-san held towards him at that point, if she suspected him for being 'too perceptive', then the reason she casually cleared up Hakui-kun's when no one asked might have been her searching for physical evidence. Though I doubt he'd just leave a bloody shirt or the towel he used to wipe off just lying there—I was amazed to see there really was meaning in all of Kyouko-san's actions.

What looked like a hit-or-miss method of just start moving and see what happens, actually held a strategy in each move—in any case, I was beat. I tried simulating it, but didn't see any contradictions—in that case, what was that off feeling of mine?

Was I simply displaying a selfish mindset of not wanting someone I know to be the culprit?

... Perhaps I also thought it would be a waste.

Those talents he showed me at the museum.

Able to depict such a picture with a single pencil, to think the news of him would turn to him being the culprit of a criminal case—but perhaps it was precisely because he felt the same way, that old Wakui didn't leave any blood letters, and took a step to cover for the culprit.

Covering for the culprit was an action others might find hard to understand, but if we say it could be possible for a talent he was supporting—and even among them, the culprit was a tender child with a future, so wasn't that surprisingly plausible.

“Realistically speaking, with Hakui-kun, stabbing someone won't have him tried under criminal law. The meaning behind the victim not leaving a dying message may have been a desire for the culprit not to be caught, and if someone who couldn't be punished anyways was the culprit, the point of leaving a message fades—therefore, he did not leave a message. You can look at it like that.”

What Kyouko-san said was right on the money, but when it rationally went so far, I started feeling down. Despite her smiles and the gentle air around here, this person was a detective through and through.

In contrast, how emotional was I being? In that regard, I'd like to think it wasn't a legal matter, Wakui didn't want that talent of Hakui-kun's to go wasted—but if there were no camouflage paintings in his orders to Atelier House's residents, and all of them were real, that would mean Hakui-kun's ranking was considerably low. Meaning old Wakui didn't evaluate Hakui-kun too highly—and while that might become Hakui-kun's motive to kill, at the same time, wouldn't that also mean old Wakui would have no reason to cover for him? No, wait a second. You don't even have to make it that complicated.

That's right, it totally slipped my mind, Hakui-kun just said it a moment ago—like when he met me today morning, Hakui-kun had gone out to draw pictures at a museum.

Saying alibis were the product of reading too many detective novels, Kyouko-san had let the evidence for that one slip by... however, if we managed to narrow down the time of the crime, then proving he wasn't there would hold a definite meaning. If Hakui-kun was the culprit, the basis behind that, the bloodstain would lead us to believe he used the stairs. He used the stairs because the elevator was under inspection and unusable.

And Kyouko-san had confirmed it with the two workers—the elevator was unusable from nine in the morning, up to around one in the afternoon, when we met them in the elevator hall.

Right, even if we couldn't identify the exact time old Wakui was stabbed, the time the elevator couldn't be used was clear—if Hakui-kun's claim he was at the museum in the morning was true, that would mean he had an alibi: an alibi that was easy enough to confirm. When he left and came back, he would have been captured on the ceiling security camera near the door, and unlike Atelier House, from a crime-prevention point of view, the museum would definitely have security cameras—if they captured him, that would be a tried and true alibi. Not even that, if he wasn't captured due to odd angles, he hadn't gone there to appreciate the pieces. A child copying like that in the middle of a museum would leave quite an impression. Just as I had, perhaps a guard singled him out—of course, while there was no alibi I nor Kyouko-san could confirm here and now, behind his violent attitude, Hakui-kun seemed smart enough, and it was hard to think he'd tell a lie that could be proved wrong so easily.

That was the contradiction.

I don't plan on saying a contradiction I had to think so hard to reach was my off-feeling, but—wait, don't panic. Perhaps Kyouko-san had a different outlook.

I cautiously sought the detectives verdict—indeed,

“Yes, generally speaking, I think that's exactly right.”

Kyouko-san approved.

“That's why I told you. They're just the words of a child.”

“.....”

Rather than approved, it seems she had long since finished thinking over that one—come to think of it, when we were riding the elevator to the top floor, she seemed to be absentmindedly thinking over something.

Perhaps at that time, having found out the elevator was not working due to inspection, she was checking what influence that would bring to the crime—instead of using the elevator, we went down the stairs not only because it was faster, but because if the elevator was being worked on during the crime, and the culprit used the stairs, there might be some clue somewhere in the emergency stairwell—maybe?

In that case, no wonder she didn't take a second look at the elevator. Then perhaps finding that blood spot was by no means a coincidence, from the start, her she was consciously searching out those traces—she was constantly a step or two ahead of me.

... Anyhow, I was relieved. What was there to be relieved about? I just set up some suspicious on my own... but decreasing the suspects by one, small as it was, was undoubtedly progress.

“And Kyouko-san, there are similarly quite a few residents with alibis, aren't there?”

I didn't remember the details, but when she was asking around, she also questioned the residents on their lifestyles—while it sounded like meaningless gossip, wasn't she actually confirming their alibis? She said Hakui-kun was reading too many mystery novels, but she actually had a firm grasp on that side, I see.

But unfortunately, it seems the results were none too favorable.

“It was morning, after all. As none of them are salaried workers, they were generally sleeping until close to noon, apparently—those zealous in their studies like Hakui-kun were actually the small minority.”

“I that so... it would be quicker if we could just ask Wakui-san what really happened.”

I said—my tone naturally grew tired.

“At the very least, I hope his surgery is going well...”

“The way you’re saying it, you make it sound like our reasoning isn’t going well.”

Kyouko-san said, a blank look on her face, “Let’s leave that one to the doctor. We’ll just do what we can,” she continued. Do what we can—with all we have.

“And even if Wakui-san safely recovers, he won’t tell you the culprit’s name. Wakui-san is covering for the one who stabbed him, after all.”

“Yeah... that’s right.”

If Kyouko-san’s interpretation of his lack of message hit the mark, Wakui-san would probably continue his silence after recovery—he might even say he stabbed himself in a work-related accident.

“Yes, he might. But I doubt that one will pass. A look at the wound and they can at least figure out if he stabbed himself or not.”

“... Even so, I think the culprit will still be on the edge. Wondering if Wakui-kun will spill the beans when he recovers.”

“That depends on how the culprit recognizes the present situation. Do they think Wakui-san is alive, or that he’s dead? Do they think the incident has been discovered, or has it yet to come to light—no one left the apartment complex when the ambulance arrived, but did they manage to connect the sound of sirens to the incident, or did they let the sirens pass as the sounds of daily life—there are various conceivable patterns.”

“At the present time, the only resident Atelier House with a clear recognition of the crime is Hakui-kun, right?”

“Strictly speaking, the only one who managed to recognize that we recognized the crime was Hakui-kun.”

Kyouko-san expressed it more strictly, or rather precisely.

“The culprit who stabbed Wakui-san, naturally, has to be aware of the incident, but they wouldn’t mention that themselves—if I was able to dig in deeper with everyone’s questioning, I might have been able to probe

that out, but for that sake, we would have to divulge some information from our side, and there is a danger the situation would go out of control.”

“Yeaahh.”

I naturally found myself groaning.

My hands were full just simulating Hakui-kun alone; if on top of that, we began hypothesizing the culprit’s current mental state, I was right about to burst. While she called it round-robin deduction and *reductio ad absurdum*, processing various forms of information simultaneously was a difficult task for me. Those logic puzzles that had one encompass every pattern at once were poison to my brain—I was even driven by an impulse to toss it all out.

“A logic puzzle... is it? Classic mystery novels are occasionally referred to as puzzlers.”

Upon receiving my words, Kyouko-san started to motion. She began dragging a thin board of wood leaned against the side of the workplace—it was probably a drawing board for working outside: the aged paint stains spread out uniformly, transforming it in itself to a single abstract piece.

A marbled pattern perhaps... though you didn’t have to be Hakui-kun to simply consider it ‘filthy’. Could it be, since I said logic puzzle, she planned to use that as a backboard to map out our current state on paper?

Certainly, while it might be hard to make sense of thoughts in your head, if you write out the data on paper, something might come into sight—but that couldn’t be so. The forgetful detective Kyouko-san would never write down information.

When she could do practically everything in her head, was there even any point in going to the troubles of writing it out—then what did she plan on doing with that board she salvaged?

Before I could ask, she had already acted—with what was stationed near the entrance of the basement room, that large-scale power saw.

Just as I noticed her push in the plug, Kyouko-san turned it on and began carving up the board. She didn’t shy back in the slightest from the intense sound the machine let out, skillfully and nimbly moving the board,

turning it into a jumbled pile of parts in no time—honestly, it looked so dangerous I couldn't stand to watch; yet, be that as it may, if I raised my voice or tried to stop her by force, it would be even more dangerous—in the end, unable to get close, I had no choice but to watch over her work.

“This power saw is more precisely a jigsaw... instead of a logic puzzle, if we tried solving it as a jigsaw, where would that get us?”

With the twenty-odd parts of the disassembled board in hand, Kyouko-san returned to the center of the room—instead of parts, would that make them pieces?

Brushing off the sawdust on her clothes, “Are you aware of the rules behind solving a puzzle?” She asked me.

“Umm... you start from the border, don't you?”

“Yes. From the border—because one side of the piece will be a straight line, the border pieces are easy to pick out. First, you place the border's four corner pieces and put it together in sequence. That is the first stage.”

As she said that, Kyouko-san divided the board pieces between the 'border' and 'other'.

“The second stage is to separate pieces by color. Of course, I won't say it's a rule, but generally, neighboring pieces tend to have similar colors. And the third stage is piece shape, you look at how each one is arranged—finally, it becomes round-robin, but the interesting part is that the further you go, the simpler it becomes to advance the puzzle.”

The number of pieces goes down, see, she said, as in the order she mentioned, Kyouko-san completed the puzzle. It was a puzzle she made herself, and there weren't too many pieces, so perhaps it was obvious she completed it so easily, but admittedly, her hands still did quick work.

“Do you see? No matter how complicated a puzzle looks, if you properly go through the process, you'll be able to complete it eventually. Just because you get stuck, please don't turn back on your progress.”

“.....”

It did seem she was trying to console me again—that alone was pathetic, yet that my own inadequacies had Kyouko-san waste her time was even more pathetic.

“... But, if even so, the puzzle can't be completed, what are you supposed to do? With this many pieces, you might be able to work it out round-robin, but what if it were a more difficult puzzle?”

“There are three things that can make a puzzle difficult. Perhaps there are simply too many pieces—like a thousand, two thousand, ten thousand. Another possibility is a puzzle you can't separate by color—have you ever seen them before? Those puzzles where every piece is pure white. Astronauts do them in training.”

“Hmm, I see... what's the final one?”

“A puzzle without enough pieces.”

In that case, there's no way to complete it, she said, lifting one piece up from the improvised puzzle lining the ground.

“If you don't have enough pieces, the puzzle will never be complete—what makes it even more unpleasant, is the fact you can't notice an absence of pieces until the puzzle is considerably close to completion. If the final piece is missing, you'll taste a great sense of wasted effort.”

I was familiar with that one. Sadly, the more pieces the puzzle had, the more prone it was to happening. When you boiled it down, I was at that moment working on a puzzle where I had no idea what the finished product looked like, with not nearly enough pieces—even the pieces I had were too much for me.

“But that's nothing to feel down about, Oyagiri-san. There was never any need for us to complete the puzzle—even when lacking in pieces, as long as we can build it far enough to predict the completed picture, that is enough.”

That explanation was definitely one way to look at it.

Without any rights to investigate, Kyouko-san couldn't help but have restrictions placed on her, but taking it the other way, precisely because we didn't have investigations right, grasping solid evidence and the full

details of the case weren't being asked of us. Even a deduction eighty percent filled in could let us speak directly with the suspect—and urge them to turn themselves in.

“If you just want an idea of the full picture, then the proper method of making the border might just be a detour. Even if you make just the border, if the center is left empty, there's no way you could anticipate what it will look like—it might just be quicker to make it form the center.”

All the way thinking I was saying some unreasonable things, I imitated Kyouko-san, picking up pieces, leaving only the outside border.

“Ahaha. I'm sure it'll be difficult to make a puzzle from the center. Difficult for me even. Be it a detour or not, you've still got to make the border—though if you're lacking the pieces to make the border, it's going to drop your motivation for the rest.”

“Yeah. But to anticipate the completed picture in our current state would be like looking at just Wakui-san's frame, and predicting the painting it was meant to border, isn't it?”

A puzzle was like a painting, and when it was completed, it could go in a frame, so I tried equating it to old Wakui—that really was the only meaning I put into it, I wasn't thinking too deeply.

No, if I wasn't thinking too deeply, Kyouko-san was the same—the way she suddenly used the jigsaw to make a puzzle didn't have any particular meaning, just by tying the word puzzle I happened to say, the board she saw at the side of the workspace, and the power saw with a clear presence in the basement, she thought she would be able to make a puzzle, so she tried making one. I had no doubt that's all there was to it.

Without fearing wasted efforts, she would do everything within her capabilities, it was nothing more than a part of her normal conduct—however.

“Yay!”

Kyouko-san suddenly latched onto me. It was quite a strong hug, a hugging method that made me feel like my entire body was being

compressed in a fervent embrace. In my surprise, I reflexively dropped the puzzle pieces in my hand.

“K-Kyouko-san!? What’s wrong!?”

“Nice work, Oyagiri-san.”

She said, and when I thought she had separated from me, she gripped my hand—lacking any restraint, she shook it up and down.

“Thanks to you, I’ve got it.”

“G-got it...? Got what?”

To that point, whatever happened, she had quite often taken erratic actions, so I had readied my heart to not be surprised no matter what she did next—so when she suddenly started making a puzzle with makeshift tools, I hid my confusion, and accepted it as collectedly as I could—but I never thought she would embrace me, so there was nothing I could do when I was thrown into a fluster.

“D-don’t tell me the culprit?”

“No, I don’t know anything about the culprit yet.”

Kyouko-san easily denied it—then what?

“However, I understand why, when it came to his final job, Wakui-san didn’t have Hakui-kun paint a picture.”

“.....?”

“You were wondering, weren’t you? In the midst of cleaning his room, I had a look here and there, and I do think Hakui-kun’s artistic ability is considerably high, even from a layman’s perspective—at a level where a fake painting of course, it wouldn’t be strange if he was asked to paint the real one. At the very least, in Atelier House, it’s very hard to believe you’d find him ranked closer to the bottom.”

So she was putting the room in order while probing out Hakui-kun’s artistic abilities; that’s a stable concurrent throughput, but I did share that opinion. His didn’t fall short of the paintings the residents showed us

in our visits by any considerable margin—though it was because I was a layman, that I thought I was being led by surface-level traits.

“So you mean... not in regards to the culprit of this case, you’ve solved the mystery behind Wakui-san’s final frame? The large order of materials you were worried about... it really wasn’t a mistake?”

“Yes. Nor was it camouflage to conceal what he would really be using—he may have meant for some of it to be so, but that was only secondary. And the theory everyone was real was also wrong.”

“! Really?”

In that case, the suspicions against Hakui-kun would run even thinner—it would mean the reaction he gave on Kyouko-san’s provocation would have been built on a theory with a mistaken premise.

But in that case, that would put us back at the plate on who the real one was—and the meaning behind the mass order?

“And I’m saying I figured it out—all thanks to you.”

“Thanks to me?”

“The idea of ‘thinking just with the border’ had never occurred to me. Right... The painting can’t come to be with the frame alone—however, we can calculate back from it. Just by looking at the frame, it is possible to deduce what sort of painting would have gone in it. Yay!”

In her continuing high spirits, she demanded a high five, and I did oblige, but—our hands did make a nice hand slapping against one another, but—but was it really possible to deduce that?

Just by looking at the frame, hitting on the picture inside it felt like more of a psychic power than deductive reasoning—when I’m the one who became a hint, I didn’t really want to say it, but I highly doubted she was capable of such a thing.

“Oh really? But sometimes, you decide whether or not to buy a book at the bookstore just by the cover, right? You can say the same for a CD album’s cover art—it’s one of those hopeful buys.”

“I mean, it happens.”

“We’re not talking about a mass-produced frame, this is a frame provided by a framer—an appearance designed for the sake of its contents would inevitably point out its contents, wouldn’t it?”

When she put it like that, I could somewhat see it—but in this case, the problem was that the frame in question wasn’t even finished yet.

To estimate the sort of frame Wakui would make from the materials, and on top of that, picture what sort of painting would be worthy to contain in it. If she succeeded in picturing that, she just had to identify a resident Wakui placed an order with who had a similar picture—and he or she would be the real artist.

Logically, it made sense, but that was impossible to implement—a framer with a skill level equal to Wakui’s, perhaps, but Kyouko-san was, to the end, a detective. Her artistic sense shouldn’t exceed the realm of a spectator—

“Yes. You’re right. I might not be able to definitively declare it—but I still have to verify, don’t I?”

Kyouko-san looked at her wristwatch.

When her detective work had been a race against time, come to think of it, this was the first time she ever distinctly looked at a clock—yet now akin to measuring her lap time.

“Yes. It should be done around now; my identity.”

“? What is... my identity?”

“Remember, the painting we had Hakui-kun draw up. I became a model, did I not?”

“Aah! That’s right.”

“No matter how scrupulous he was, it should be done by now—and while I go get it, there are a few things I’ll have to go confirm with him.”

“I see... understood, we should get going then.”

I hadn’t the slightest idea what inspiration the words I happened to say served as a trigger for, but it was certain that staying here wouldn’t better

the situation—if Kyouko-san’s flash was on the mark, then at the very least, our current stalemate would end. If we were able to identify the resident painting the real picture...

And while I knew it wasn’t the time, I was also curious how Hakui-kun drew Kyouko-san.

But, “No, Oyagiri-san, you stay where you are, I have something else I need you to do,” Kyouko-san held up one hand to stop me as I was to naturally accompany her. Naturally, that hand wasn’t asking for a high five anymore--- huh?

“The deadline is approaching, after all. Let’s split up—I want you to check the books on that bookshelf one by one.”

Kyouko-san pointed out what wasn’t on the level of a bookshelf, a two-row rack placed in the corner of the workplace. It was lined with large books, presumably art-related references.

“You can just do it roughly, try and see if there’s anything strange stuck between any of the pages.”

“What sort of thing...?”

“I can’t say yet. If you’ll just perform a check with your own senses, no preconceptions—I’ll help out as soon as I’m back from Hakui-kun’s room, but please get as far as you can.”

When she told me to use my own senses, I felt like I was being tested, but Kyouko-san who could do anything on her own was leaving it to me, so it had to be something even I could do—rather, what was I supposed to do if I couldn’t even check if something was sandwiched between book pages?

I was more worried whether it was alright for Kyouko-san and Hakui-kun to meet alone—last time they were together, I felt an explosive presence a number of times. There’s no telling what chemical reaction would occur when genius and genius meets... though, Kyouko-san was right in saying there was barely any time remaining.

“... How long will you be?”

The Testimonial of Okitegami Kyouko

I asked Kyouko-san—I wanted a standard so I could race over in the million to one chance some trouble broke out.

“Since I’m at it, I think I’ll be climbing the stairs up to the thirtieth floor, so it might take a bit—but I’ll definitely be back within thirty minutes.”

The stairs to the thirtieth floor? Since she’s at what? I thought, but I immediately hit on it—Kyouko-san was trying to trace the culprit’s moves.

If the blood on the stairs had some relation to the case, that would mean the culprit climbed the stairs to their room—she was testing to see if there was anything to be gained in tracing those actions.

When the mystery behind Wakui’s final job was on the verge of being solved, she didn’t forget investigation the crime, Kyouko-san was a woman of action brimming with endless vitality...

“Well then, see you later. Best regards.”

Before I could dispute it, Kyouko-san had already moved—in no time at all, she was gone from the basement. I was about to tell her going with that white hair would surprise Hakui-kun, but I didn’t make it in time. She was definitely quick to move, but she was also simply quick on her feet.

Well, she didn’t have the time to dye it again, and her false identity was already exposed to Hakui-kun, so it probably wouldn’t become a problem.

With the pure-white Kyouko-san, and Hakui-kun who only painted in black—they seemed so contrastive, but there had to be some common ground. Perhaps having geniuses meet wouldn’t result in the sort of trouble I was worried about—more importantly, I needed to solemnly prioritize the job I was tasked with.

As instructed, I went over to the two-shelf rack, and started by taking out all the books in it.

If it was just a book, I probably didn’t have to worry about fingerprints... come to think of it, I recalled Kyouko-san had properly looked through that rack in her noon inspection of the crime scene—but was there ‘something’ she overlooked?

The Testimonial of Okitegami Kyouko

I didn't know if I could find 'something' that Kyouko-san overlooked, but I had to give it a try—Putting the books on their side, I got to flipping pages starting at the top.

Like that, I worked myself up for the challenge, but reading through every book—no, I didn't have to read them, for most, I was just flipping the pages—it didn't take that much time. It's just, it didn't come with any sense of achievement that I was accomplishing a job I'd been entrusted—because in the end, there wasn't any 'strange' looking 'something' stuck between any of the pages.

I was told to look without any preconceptions, but I couldn't bring myself to believe Kyouko-san was looking for normal bookmarks or pamphlets—just in case, I removed the covers, and checked if there was anything stuck there, but to no avail.

I felt disappointed—I thought I might be able to lessen Kyouko-san burden if only in the slightest, but the way things were going, it looked like Kyouko-san would have to do another check once she was back. At the very least, to make it easy for her, I thought I'd arrange the books by size.

My hands stopped on a single magazine.

It wasn't as if anything peculiar about it—when I was flipping through the magazine pages not too long ago, there had been a special feature that had caught my eye.

It was a special on Atelier House, none other than where I was, and it contained interviews with old Wakui, and a few of the residents—rather than Wakui preserving a back issue, it felt more like the article just coincidentally happened to be in it. I only had limited information on it, but as expected, this Atelier House was a relatively famous facility in the industry.

To a layman such as myself, it looked even odd and abnormal, but in a place it was naturally supposed to exist, it was considered only natural—for those in the know.

The Testimonial of Okitegami Kyouko

Strangely, when I looked at what was written in the article, that shady feeling I'd been getting seemed to clear away—of course, it wasn't as if a feature in this sort of magazine would detail it down to its true nature.

It's just, while I didn't properly read it, I inputted it in my head as new information, the idea behind old Wakui building Atelier House was introduced in the article, and I found it intriguing.

To repay the world of painting, like service—he had told me, but even if that was his first objective, it seems he had some personal circumstance as well.

Perhaps I should call it the troubles of his youth... according to the article, there was a time Wakui set out to be a painter, but something led him to give up on that path, and he became a frame maker. As a result, he achieved greatness as a framer, and I think that was for the best, but, he didn't want any youngsters to taste the same setbacks—he didn't want them to give up on their dreams just because the 'environment wasn't in order'.

With that in mind, old Wakui built Atelier House.

... It was an interview, it was unknown how much of it was true, but it was easier to understand than just simple repayment. The reason the support was specialized only for painting—the sort of stoicism that filled Atelier House as a whole was based in Wakui's past setbacks.

To entrust youngsters with a dream—when you described it like that, the nuance did change, and I couldn't unconditionally say that was a good thing—even more so than before, I didn't know what to think of Wakui's personality. Was he a good person or bad person?

Perhaps those expressions were nothing more than a label—a label, or maybe—the outside border.

Nothing more than a frame to decorate a person. Just as the same action can make a good or bad person of someone, depending on the nuance—

“.....”

Even so.

The Testimonial of Okitegami Kyouko

I noticed Kyouko-san was late to return—while I was running through some worthless thoughts, thirty minutes had gone by long ago.

While I certainly had some panic in me from wasting our already scarce time, but through that, I was still worried that Kyouko-san hadn't returned from her journey to Hakui-kun's place. She may have used the stairs, but if she just received the piece, and confirmed a few details, it wouldn't be strange if she was back long ago—she said she would definitely be back in thirty minutes... just as I thought, did some trouble break out?

Kyouko-san was an easygoing person, but Hakui-kun did seem to have a short fuse.

It wasn't long before I made my resolve to make for the thirtieth floor. It was far to belated to call the fastest, but come so far, perhaps I was finally learning from Kyouko-san's line of flow.

But I learned a bit too much. When I thought about it calmly, if I wanted to go get her, I could have just used the elevator, but tugged at by what Kyouko-san said, I ended up choosing the route of reaching the thirtieth floor by stairs. I may have just been being stubborn. When Kyouko-san climbed thirty flights, I felt a competitiveness that wouldn't let me take the easy way out—Kyouko-san said she'd go up on the stairs, but she never said she was taking them down (we'd already gone down them once anyway), so if I headed to the stairs, I might miss Kyouko-san coming down by elevators.

Along the way, I thought I might at least leave a message in the basement in case we missed one another, but if I purposely returned to the basement for that, I would lose sight of what I was doing in the first place—I was fine simply climbing.

No matter how my competitive spirit blazed on that point, while I fell short of Kyouko-san, if I were to find a clue towards resolving the case on my climb, it would be indubitably rosy—I thought over such things as I tapped my feet against every other step, but unfortunately, I couldn't spot anything so conveniently.

There was no way someone as simple as me could multitask, climbing stairs in a hurry, while simultaneously looking for clues—then like in trail

running, should I just make a run for the thirtieth floor all at once? That was definitely something Kyouko-san couldn't do, and only I was capable of—it happened when I made my resolve.

Floor-wise, I guess I had reached around the tenth.

From right above me—came a large sound.

“!?”

I reflexively looked in the direction of the sound, but all that entered my eyes was the bottom of the stairway leading to the eleventh floor, and it wasn't as if anything had happened to it—an emergency stairwell was, in a sense, an irregular atrium, and even if it was right above me, there was no way of knowing what floor it happened on.

The sound didn't come once, it repeated a few times, a short gap between each. A consecutive banging—my intuition told me it was the sound of 'something falling down stairs'. The sort of sound you hear when you carelessly drop a somewhat large parcel you're carrying.

Thinking normally, it was reasonable to assume a resident using the emergency stairwell carrying a canvas or modal statue's hand slipped—then I should change my plan.

During the visits, I had met face to face with a majority of Atelier House's residents—the one who spoke with them directly was Kyouko-san, so perhaps I left a light impression, but for the 'investigator from city hall' letting off pressure from behind Kyouko-san to still be loitering around the complex's emergency stairs might come off as unnatural. Kyouko-san might be able to pull it off with an innocent look, but I was the sort who shied it on his face, so there was nothing better than avoiding a meeting.

But... thought I. While it was the sound of 'something falling down the stairs,' it could simultaneously be the sound of 'someone falling down the stairs', I instinctively thought. It wasn't a hand that slipped but a foot.

“Kuh...!”

I couldn't confirm which from where I was, but if it was the latter, they may require assistance. I was definitely reading too far into a flashy sound, and even if someone had slipped, there was no guarantee they

were injured—there were other things I had to do, and really no need for me to surge in.

Before the logic had settled, my body had moved—I reflexively raced up the stairs, fast as I could.

There was nothing else I could do, once the worst possible scenario crossed my mind. Good grief, I was completely taking after Kyouko-san. I ended up hoping I could take action like that person. Not that imitating her today would suddenly make me like her.

But as I ran up, those chilled feelings disappeared—that’s right, I was just running up some stairs. There was nothing to be lost. If that alone could eliminate the worst possible scenario, it was a cheap buy. And if mothering happened, I could be relieved that nothing happened, couldn’t I? It wasn’t as if I was trying to do anything I was incapable of—I was just doing what I could. What I could, to the best I could do it.

What awaited me around ten floors up, as I picked up speed and climbed, was something greater than the worst possible situation—not greater, should I say worse?

Whatever the case, the scene hadn’t crossed my imagination—that sort of scenario.

“K—Kyouko-san!?”

In the landing between the seventeenth and eighteenth floor of Atelier House—the forgetful detective, Okitegami Kyouko had collapsed.

She was in a state that had me troubled where to look.

The pants she had been wearing were pulled down, putting her ribbon-adorned laced panties on full display—no, pulled down wasn't the proper term, it was more accurate to say her pants were broken.

The handmade western-style outfit she made on the spot for a disguise—come to think of it, she did way it might come apart if she moved too vigorously. Apparently, the seams tore apart while she was falling down the stairs.

“.....!”

Whatever happened, I rushed over to Kyouko-san. Pulling off my coat, I draped it over her lower body as I squatted down beside her.

Her eyes were closed, she seemed unconscious—but when I touched her neck I could feel a heat and a pulse. When I brought my ear close, I heard normal breathing. That's good, it looks like we avoided the worst of the worst of the truly worst scenario.

I arranged her into a comfortable posture—while I couldn't be as nimble as Kyouko-san, as someone who worked at a security company, I at least had the general process hammered into my head. While the landing couldn't be called vast, Kyouko-san had a smaller build after all, and I managed to lay out her legs. For a pillow, I bunched up the scattered fragments of broken pants, and put them to new use—I had learned by example, or rather, I would never say something of this degree could achieve Kyouko-san levels of DIY.

She had no external wounds or bleeding, no fractures I could glean just by looking—then there was nothing more I could do. More than that, I was better off not doing anything more. Judging by the sound, it did seem she had fallen quite showily, and if I moved her here without proper planning, there was a low chance of causing brain hemorrhaging. Her breath was calm, and just by appearances, one might think she was just asleep; I didn't think it was anything major...

“.....”

But I didn't have time to rest, I looked at the upper level from the landing. At the end of the stairs: the door leading to Atelier House's eighteenth floor. Did Kyouko-san fall from around there—no.

She didn't fall.

Even if it was only for half a day, I had acted alongside Kyouko-san—I knew she would let her feet slip up, by any stretch of the imagination. Able to work on multiple tasks at once, one might think of her as a detective liable to distractions but—on the contrary, as she was capable of doing so much at once, even in the midst of doing something, she would never neglect to watch where she stepped.

Right.

Back then, I thought of the sound from an upper floor as 'something falling down stairs' or otherwise 'someone falling down stairs'—even that was amply reading too deeply into it, yet if I were Kyouko-san, I'm sure my thoughts would have been a step ahead.

Namely, the sound of 'someone being pushed down stairs' – looking at Kyouko-san's current state, that wasn't in any way reading too deeply, It was the natural and proper train of thought.

In the first place, I shouldn't have let Kyouko-san go off on her own. No matter what she said, instead of splitting up, I should have accompanied her. I mean, if her reasoning was correct, there was someone in Atelier House who had just stabbed someone.

What a blunder.

Was it because I had the preconception of Wakui trying to cover for them, that some part of me ended up thinking the culprit was a 'good person'—as if they were harmless?

Thinking about it normally, they stabbed someone—what's more, in a way where they would die if left be, where even now we couldn't be certain. Just how dangerous would it be to chase that person around? In my foolishness, I hadn't thought about it at all.

The Testimonial of Okitegami Kyouko

To identify the culprit, and urge them to turn themselves in.

While Kyouko-san's actions upon receiving Wakui's message may have been clad in a shroud of nobility, she had completely ignored the risk—confronting the culprit who brought about the crime face-to-face, thinking nothing would happen was a tad too optimistic.

Say the culprit was among those we interviewed when we were going around—even if they didn't outright say it like Hakui-kun, what if someone apart from Hakui-kun had seen through her lie?

It wouldn't be the least bit strange if that resident moved to inflict harm onto Kyouko-san, who was snooping around the incident. If they were under the impression they killed Wakui, one murder's the same as two, they might end up with some outrageous leap of logic—it was neither a rational or efficient decision, yet taking that action was what it meant to be human.

I really had nothing more to say than that I was stupid.

Not having investigatory rights simultaneously meant if something happened, we didn't have the means to protect ourselves—In such a position, conducting detective work that no one asked for, even if Kyouko-san was pushed down the stairs by someone, perhaps it could be said she got what was coming for her.

Perhaps there was no space to sympathize with her.

But I felt nothing but anger towards the culprit—she tried urging them to turn themselves in before the police got involved, and this is where it left her.

I didn't know what details were behind the culprit stabbing Wakui, and at the present point, their motive was unknown—in that regards, perhaps I wasn't standing where I could say anything. Whether an outsider to Atelier House like me had the qualifications to stick his mouth here and there was uncertain. But at the very least, there was no was the culprit of this case had any good reason to inflict harm unto Kyouko-san.

I wouldn't forgive them, I thought.

While it might go against old Wakui's will, and Kyouko-san's will as well, since it had come to that, I couldn't persist with soft ideals of covering for them or persuading them.

I immediately called 110, I phoned up the police—two cases of attempted murder. While Kyouko-san and I might get scolded severely for arbitrarily investigating, this wasn't a scene to hesitate.

If we were considering possibilities, it wasn't like there was absolutely no chance Kyouko-san slipped, and even if she was pushed, perhaps there was no guarantee that was by the hand of this time's culprit—but if I didn't report it, the culprit might get away from Atelier House.

When it came to that, whatever the case, covert detective work would become impossible—while it seemed there was some of the time limit remaining, this was the time to give up.

I took out my phone—no, I tried to, but I couldn't find it in my pant pocket. Ah, did I end up leaving it in the basement?

No, that's wrong, I put it in the pocket of the coat I draped over Kyouko-san. Noticing that, I reached my hand towards it—and it was precisely at that timing,

“.....”

Kyouko-san quietly opened her eyes.

“Uu... uwah.”

I hurriedly pulled back my hand. No way I would let her misunderstand I was trying to do something indecent while she was unconscious—while I failed to retrieve the phone, anyways, if Kyouko-san was up, that was cause for celebration.

“Kyouko-san, are you alright! Ah, you don't have to force yourself up, you're better off staying in that position.”

If she got up like that, my coat would fall off, or so I wouldn't say, but following my orders, Kyouko-san viciously raced her eyes around as she remained sprawled out over the landing. She seemed pained to recognize the current situation, rather, expectedly confused—I wouldn't blame her,

being thrust down the stairs, just remembering it would be a terrible fright.

No, wait?

Could it be when Kyouko-san was pushed, she saw the perpetrator?

Thinking about it time-wise, on the way back from dropping by Hakui-kun, for some reason she chose to go down by the stairs instead of the elevator, so it would be normal to assume she was pushed on the back—but if she tumbled down the stairs, perhaps her posture did change, and she fell face-up. Right before she clacked out, there was a high probability she saw who did it to her—in that case, we could solve the case here and now.

Exposing herself to danger, Kyouko-san had grasped the means to resolve it— with that in my head,

“Kyouko-san, do you remember who did you in?”

I enthusiastically asked. One-sidedly concluding she remembered would be overeager, but still lying down, Kyouko-san shook her head and said this.

“Well about that, I don’t even remember who you’re supposed to be...”

Kyouko-san only has today.

The forgetful detective who forgets yesterday come tomorrow—but I had terribly misunderstood the implications behind that. Perhaps I should simply say Kyouko-san’s explanation was lacking... but come to think of it, she can say today and tomorrow all she wants, but the human brain wasn’t made for such a mechanical system as resetting precisely at midnight every day.

One’s internal clock doesn’t necessarily align with the rotation of the earth.

In that case, what specified ‘today’—apparently, it was quite simply defined as, ‘when I wake up’.

Meaning Kyouko loses her memory when she falls asleep.

That wasn’t limited to pure sleep, if she fainted or swooned, lost consciousness in any way, that was included in its scope.

I had always thought it a crazy tale, but rather than memories disappearing every day, it was much easier to intuitively understand it was sleep and awakening that reset her memory—rather, I had no choice but to accept it.

Because that was precisely how it was spelled out on her own arm in her handwriting, there was no way to doubt it. ‘I am Okitegami Kyouko. A detective. My memory resets each time I fall asleep’—it was written in thick magic marker over the white skin she rolled up her sleeve to.

Kyouko-san recognized it as her own handwriting.

For the forgetful detective who didn’t take notes, perhaps that could be called her sold memorandum—while I wouldn’t say she would have stripped had that not been there, when Hakui-kun jokingly requested a nude sketch, the ‘reason not to strip’ she mentioned must have been these words across her bare skin.

The Testimonial of Okitegami Kyouko

Thanks to this minimum precaution, she at least wouldn't lose sight of who she was—therefore, naturally, even if Kyouko-san saw the face of whoever pushed her, she wouldn't remember.

Not only that, when I had worked with her for half a day, I had disappeared—she ended up forgetting why she was in this apartment complex in the first place.

Our relationship had once again rewound to a first meeting, and of course, she had absolutely no memory of the case of Wakui being stabbed.

The visit to each room in Atelier House, and the very nature of the place had been wiped, and that flash of inspiration, the idea about the framer Wakui Kazuhisa's final job—was of course, forgotten.

Every last little thing about the case was lost.

Half a day of detective work had returned to nonexistence—this was an undeniable fact I couldn't help but feel discouraged at. At the very least, I should have heard out her estimate one who it was painting the real picture—the thought occupied my mind, and I also wondered if this had been for the best.

Whatever the case, Kyouko-san had regained consciousness, and it seemed apart from lost memory, she didn't have any major injuries. In that case, I could call it convenient she forgot about the case, and my apologies to old Wakui, but this really was the time to pull back.

“Let's go to the hospital, Kyouko-san—you don't seem to hurt, but you should get a proper examination just in case.”

“I see—you're right.”

Kyouko-san answered, still somewhat spaced out. While she had completely forgotten who I was, she had with her natural perceptiveness figured I came to her aid when she fell down the stairs, and she wasn't any more wary than necessary towards an unfamiliar man.

“Umm, Oyagiri-san... was it? May I continue to borrow your coat? These torn up pants don't look like they'll be of any use... please let me wrap it around my waist.”

“Oh, sure. Go right ahead, you can have it.”

I wasn't in my right mind, I ended up giving a half-thought-out answer.

“But I think there's a phone in my pocket, so if you could just return that? I'll call an ambulance.”

“I think you're making too big of a deal out of this...”

Kyouko-san said as she pulled my phone out of the coat and handed it over. Was she showing weakness at having been saved? She was acting somewhat obedient—as meek as a lamb.

We went down from the landing to the seventeenth floor and walked out into the hall—naturally, I intended to take the elevator to the first floor. She looked curiously around the Atelier House halls she had seen once before, following behind me to board the elevator compartment.

When she wasn't working, she was kinda just a spacy person... well, if she rushing around like that in her private life, I doubt I'd even be able to take her to the hospital.

“... Mn.”

I considered doing the multitasking I had picked up from Kyouko-san on the job, and thought to call an ambulance as we moved, but the elevator had no reception.

Right, not just an ambulance, I intended to call the police too—it's just, should I do that after seeing Kyouko-san off to the hospital?

If I divulged the existence of the case to her, there was no guarantee Kyouko-san wouldn't start rushing around again—at present, it seemed she wasn't thinking too deeply on why she was here, but some trigger could make her notice she was here on a job, and I couldn't foresee what would come next.

Before that happened, I wanted to shove her into an ambulance—when it didn't seem major, I wanted to call one for that reason as well.

Yet as we stepped out into the first-floor elevator hall, once again, I was unable to dial 119—by which I mean, I ran right into a face I recognized.

The Testimonial of Okitegami Kyouko

Before me stood none other than Hakui-kun, waiting for the elevator—he was an Atelier House resident, so naturally it was possible to meet him like this, but how troublesome, I thought.

Kyouko-san had just met him a moment ago—I had nothing against the kid, but if he and Kyouko-san talked again, the existence of the case might come to light (for her).

No, wait a second, there was no guarantee Kyouko-san got to meet Hakui-kun when she dropped by. Since we happened upon him on the first floor, that meant Hakui-kun was outside to this point—the museum again? Anyways, he went out somewhere to draw, and there was a possibility Kyouko-san knocked while he was out.

In that case, this would be the first time Hakui-kun witnessed her white hair—but he didn't seem surprised. As I thought, he must have met Kyouko-san at the room, and he just went out for a bit now? If he wanted to go out drawing, he didn't have a sketchbook or pencil...

“Oh, what a cute kid. Is he a friend of yours, Oyagiri-san? It's a pleasure to meet you.”

Kyouko-san spoke optimistically and lowered her head.

Even if she acted like she liked kids at this point... perhaps that was the case when off the job, but if possible, I'd prefer it if she didn't say anything that would complicate things.

“Old-timer.”

Luckily, Kyouko-san's words were ignored—Hakui-kun pointed at the cellphone in my hand.

“Can I borrow that phone?”

“Yes... I don't see why not. Who are you calling?”

“Police.”

Said Hakui-kun.

In an unchildlike terribly unintonated tone.

The Testimonial of Okitegami Kyouko

“The police...? Why?”

“You’re really asking that?”

There, Hakui-kun turned towards Kyouko-san for the first time—he turned to the white-haired detective. After staring at her fixedly a few seconds—he quietly spoke.

“Cuz I’m the one who stabbed teacher.”

A sudden development was bringing the case to its resolution—though I understood far too little to consider it so. A backward glance at me as I was taken by a vortex of confusion, Hakui-kun used my phone and really did call the police. He briefly gave his name, gave his residence, and said he stabbed someone—and lightly tossing back my phone, he passed by my side as he entered the elevator. By that point,

“H-Hakui-kun—”

I finally managed to call out to him.

“W-why—”

“Could you leave me alone? You can read all the details in tomorrow’s morning paper. I’m sure it’ll be at least half true.”

The conversation apparently over, Kyouko-san turned to Kyouko-san, “Ah...” he almost said something but, “Nah, it’s nothin’” he finished up.

“Bye-bye, Kyouko-san.”

And like that, he pushed the close button.

“.....”

Incredulous to whatever was going on, I thought I couldn’t just let him go. I tried pressing the up button to stop the elevator, but my arm was grasped—it was Kyouko-san.

She shook her head, “Let him go,” she said.

“But—”

“If you want an explanation, I can give it—Oyagiri Mamoru-san.”

When she called me that, I knew something was off. What was it? That’s right, since helping out Kyouko-san on the stairs, I had yet to fully introduce myself—I only gave her my surname Oyagiri. Of course, I was in my normal clothes today, and I wasn’t wearing any nametag. Yet did

Kyouko-san just bring up my first name Mamoru? Wasn't she supposed to have forgotten about it?

While that was going on, the elevator climbed—no matter how I mashed the button now, I wouldn't be able to halt it.

“Come this way.”

Kyouko-san walked towards the emergency stairwell—still in confusion, I followed her back—there wasn't the time for a leisurely chat at the crime scene.

“Five minutes is enough—I'll exhibit my fastest puzzle solving, so rest assured.”

Kyouko-san nonchalantly said and climbed down the stairs—her footing was firm and steady. Walk a hundred years, and I couldn't see those feet slipping—more so, she spoke in a tone as if she clearly remembered what was in the basement. Unable to hold my silence, just as I entered the workspace,

“Kyouko-san, don't tell me... you haven't forgotten about this time's incident?”

I asked.

“Yes. I remember it quite clearly.”

“B-but how can that be? Doesn't the forgetful detective's memories reset upon sleep...”

“Yes. That part wasn't a lie. There's no way I would deceive you, Oyagiri-san—it's simply that at the time, I did not fall unconscious”

I was merely pretending to be unconscious. That's why I didn't forget.

Kyouko-san boldly declared it—but no matter how brazenly she said that, wouldn't that still mean she was deceiving me... good god, after seeing her lie to Atelier House's residents so many times, I was even wary of it, but I completely fell hook line and sinker.

But why would she tell such a lie, what's more, to me?

“Then... do you also know who pushed you down? Was it perhaps Hakui-kun...?”

“I wasn’t pushed—That was me falling on my own. Because I fell on my own, I got away without being knocked out.”

“.....?”

That was a bizarre phrasing that made it hard to swallow, but at the very least, the implication didn’t seem to be that she carelessly slipped—though it didn’t change my incomprehension. What exactly happened in the mere thirty minutes since Kyouko-san left me in this basement room to operate independently?

“I’m telling you, I’ll properly explain. No need to rush—no need to do anything really; now that Hakui-kun’s confessed, the case is already resolved.”

“I-I see... but,”

I turned an eye to the rack in the corner of the room. Beside it, the books I’d pulled out were piled up.

“What about those? I haven’t found anything between the pages yet.”

“Oh, that’s perfectly fine. If you actually found something, I’d be startled out of my wits. That was an excuse to let me take separate action from you.”

While she easily admitted it, did that not mean she put me up to busy work? When she said she’d split the work and rooted me to the basement... she used that time to speak face to face with Hakui-kun? I’ll admit, going over something Kyouko-san had already gone over once before did seem like double the effort from the start, but...

“I wanted to go see Hakui-kun alone no matter what—by the way, I was short on time, so I took the elevator up.”

“I-I see...”

If this was supposed to be an explanation, she was doing a good job keeping everything shrouded in mystery. I was left on the receiving end of confusion.

“So, in essence...? Back then, you didn’t go up to question Hakui-kun in order to confirm some things regarding Wakui-san’s final job, you went to meet him so you could urge him to confess?”

“Mnn. Well, that’s right. Though I haven’t gotten into the specifics.”

“... But as I recall, Kyouko-san, you said at that point you still didn’t know who the culprit was.”

“I lied.”

Oh, so she lied

I was even developing a form of admiration for that undaunted attitude that wouldn’t shy back from anything—of course, tired out from all the lies, and with one of them, namely her playing unconscious, seriously getting me worried, I had quite a bit I wanted to say, but more than that, I wanted to know how she figured out Hakui-kun was the culprit.

“Then from when—at what pointed did you suspect Hakui-kun?”

In mystery novels, that was a pretty standard question to toss at the detective—in most cases, the detective would answer, ‘from the moment I met him,’ but the fastest detective preceded even that.

“From the moment I saw Wakui-san collapsed here.”

“W... what?”

Wouldn’t that mean from the moment she learned of the incident—in the course of such prompt lifesaving measures, Kyouko-san had already finished her deductions? The investigation after that was all just her checking her answers?

That was—way too fast.

She hadn’t even met Hakui-kun yet.

“Yes, strictly speaking, it wasn’t as if I knew Hakui-kun was the culprit yet—but from the very onset, I suspected a child like him might have done it.”

“Why’s that?”

“The location of the wound.”

Kyouko-san pointed at her lower abdomen. At present, it was wrapped in my coat and hard to make out, but I could recall old Wakui was stabbed somewhere around there.

“The entry point was too low. If an adult was stabbing an adult, the wound would have quite likely been off another ten centimeters up.”

“.....”

Now that she mentioned it, it really was nothing at all, she was right—a difference in height.

Just as the blade’s angle could make out if someone stabbed themselves, from the wound, one might be able to determine the height of the assailant—and in her emergency measures, Kyouko-san surely analyzed the wound.

“That’s also why we were able to resuscitate Wakui-san. With the height difference, stabbing the heart was impossible.”

“Was that the— certain inevitability you mentioned?”

To add onto that, as Hakui usually used nothing but a pencil as his drawing tool, he likely couldn’t properly grip the painting knife that was just lying around. Perhaps that was also an inevitability.

“If they had a scuffled and the painting knife was stabbed in, it wouldn’t be strange no matter where it was stabbed, but that didn’t seem to be the case—so at that point, I estimated that the culprit was a child, or otherwise an individual of diminutive stature.”

I see. Come to think of it, in her visits around Atelier House, when she confronted Hakui-kun, I placed my attention solely on the fact he saw through her lies... but I should also have taken note Kyouko-san wasn’t in the least bit surprised to find a child living in Atelier House. At that point, she had already foreseen a child in the apartment complex.

“That’s why, when I was questioning him, I tried a few things. To shake him up, one might say.”

“... Like delivering Wakui-san’s condition in an intentionally negative light?”

“Yes. And calling the weapon a knife, waiting for him to slip up and say painting knife... but that didn’t quite work out, or rather, he didn’t fall for it.”

So it seems she was doing that—I thought it was just intel gathering, but the battle between detective and culprit had already begun.

“Whatever the case, when the visits were all over, I knew Hakui-kun was the only child living in Atelier House and had him pretty much pinned down as the culprit. At the very least, the other residents seemed to be taller than me.”

It seems she was using herself as a measuring stick—no wonder she was so fixated on meeting them in person. Are you going to tell her every action had meaning... but if that was the case, wouldn’t it be alright if she told me at an earlier stage?

“There’s no way I could tell you. I didn’t particularly wish to show off my puzzle solving abilities, to the end, I simply took over Wakui-san’s will... in that case, when the time came that Hakui-kun finally considered turning himself in, there couldn’t be anyone who knew of his crime. Otherwise, he wouldn’t truly be turning himself in—neither you, Oyagiri-san, nor me.”

“.....?”

Mnn? What did that mean? He wouldn’t be turning himself in?

“And I’m saying... for example, if I solidified the evidence, cornered the culprit with airtight reasoning, and told them to please turn themselves in, that would, as a matter of fact, be like threatening them with no other alternative, would it not? Unless the culprit turned themselves in under their own free will, it wouldn’t make for succeeding Wakui-san’s will.”

Well yeah—idealistically, perhaps, but such a thing was in itself effectively impossible. Someone who would turn themselves in of their own free will would turn themselves in even if she didn’t do anything at all—no, not

that, it's because the culprit fled from the scene that Kyouko-san had to set out as a detective—detective.

The forgetful detective.

Aah—that's right.

That's why Kyouko-san pretended to pass out and forget her memory. I don't know the details, but... when Kyouko-san confronted him a second time, she met Hakui-kun as the forgetful detective. She exposed her white hair, and on top of indicating who she was, she created an excuse to call him to the emergency stairs and delivered her deduction—on top of that, she probably pretended to slip before his eyes and fell down the stairs.

She lost her memory. She pretended to.

When she met him in the first-floor elevator hall, she deliberately emphasized her 'pleasure to meet you'—she played a first meeting. She made Hakui-kun believe upon pointing out his crime, she forgot about it.

By doing so, she granted him the option of turning herself in. On top of driving him into a corner, she afforded him a way out.

A confession of his own free will—

“Fufu. My pants tearing up was unbearably embarrassing, or should I say beyond my calculations, but—I knew you'd come around to help when thirty minutes had gone by.”

Though Hakui-kun temporarily fled at the sound of you rushing up the stairs—Kyouko-san said, but what is it, I ended up wondering if even that much was part of her plan. Thought I think beyond calculations wasn't enough to write off her pants falling apart.

Even if she wasn't reaping what she sowed, this had to be some comeuppance for all the lies.

“What did you plan on doing if you really did lose your memory...”

“That would be perfectly fine. With Hakui-kun in mind, that way would have been better... but Oyagiri-san, I couldn't quite let things end without offering you an explanation.”

“.....”

“That being the case, I’m reluctant to admit it’s true there was a mystery I couldn’t solve to the end— it took the name of Wakui-san’s final job as a framer. As long as it was clear that was related to the motive, I could not neglect it—so I really am thankful, Oyagiri-san. It’s thanks to you that the mystery was solved.”

“I-Is that so...”

With all the lies she told, I wasn’t going to believe anything she said anymore—or so I felt, but not too surprisingly, when she said she really was thankful, it honestly made me happy.

I feared this person, with her smiling, virtuous face, was an outrageous vixen. Yet more than the ability to lie, more than the ability to never forget a lie she had told, perhaps her ability to be forgiven for telling a lie was most worthy of mention.

“Come to think of it, you were probing out the motive the whole time.”

I was sure she was trying to whittle down the possible suspects through motive, but instead of that, as a card to urge the culprit towards turning themselves in, she wanted a firm grasp of their motive for the offense.

In her pursuit of speed, she never neglected the fundamental portions—so that was the fastest detective.

But in the case her thanks for me weren’t a lie, when I was the one who gave the hint, I pathetically didn’t have any clue as to what sort of frame old Wakui was making.

In my fixation on that point, I had yet to accept Hakui-kun as the culprit. Even if I conceded he was—I mean,

“That’s right, what about his alibi?”

“Alibi?”

“Remember... we just talked about it here. A blood spot was left on the stairs, so the culprit must have carried out the crime while the elevator was under inspection... in that case, it would be impossible for Hakui to

have done it when he was out at the museum... was that bloodstain irrelevant? Or could it be he lied about going to the museum?”

“Going to the museum was apparently true. It’s probably alright to consider the drop of blood as having fallen when Hakui-kun was climbing the stairs—maybe we just haven’t found them, and a search will turn up even more.”

“Then...”

“As I wanted Hakui-kun to turn himself in, when we were speaking here, I didn’t want you to doubt him too much, so I didn’t quite deny it... but his alibi doesn’t hold up. You simply have to consider that the crime took place before the elevator was under inspection.”

Forget not quite denying it, I get the feeling she assertively affirmed it, but that aside, I didn’t get how the alibi didn’t hold up. If the elevator wasn’t undergoing maintenance, would a resident of the thirtieth floor, Hakui-kun really use the stairs?

“Oh no, there’s no guarantee. Even if the elevator is moving, the stairs are still readily available.”

“Well yeah...”

Those aiming to be healthy and other such people might choose the stairs over the elevator or escalator—it’s not like the stairs were ever sealed off. But I didn’t really see Hakui-kun as the health-crazed sort...

“Yes. But if he had no use but to use the stairs, he’d use them, wouldn’t he?”

“Hmm... well yeah, I mean if he had no choice.”

“The height difference.”

Kyouko-san said.

“You look like you’ve had a large build since you were a child, so it might not have hit you... but there are times a child might be unable to press the top buttons of a high-rise elevator.”

“Ah.”

No, I started growing in high school, so I got what she was saying—It was a hackneyed complex I'd rather not assertively go on about, but based on the model, an elevator's button might be stationed outside the reach of a child.

As a matter of fact, Kyouko-san had to reach out for the button to go to the top floor—there was no way a child like Hakui-kun could reach it. Additionally, considering his impertinent attitude, there was no way he would seek out help.

... But what if, hypothetically, the highest button he could barely reach was somewhere around the seventeenth floor? Wouldn't he take the elevator to the seventeenth—and climb the stairs from there?

When he said he wanted to be left alone and returned to his room, was Hakui-kun going through that process right now? In that case, it wouldn't be strange to find blood there.

This apartment complex never focused on removing obstacles, it seemed difficult for the elderly Wakui to live here—or so I thought, but by no means was it kind on a child either.

I guess it was inevitable if you wanted to call him that. Letting a kid around ten live in Atelier House was probably something old Wakui never anticipated—

“Then... you're saying the crime happened before nine o'clock? When Hakui-kun went to the museum after that... was it to create an alibi?”

“No, according to him, he didn't have any alibi forging intentions. He was panicking, and just went out to run away... if you're distressed, draw a picture, that's the kid's mindset, as I feared.”

What was I supposed to think having heard that? Should I be happy Hakui-kun didn't try to make up a makeshift alibi—what should I think of a kid who even at a time like that could only draw pictures?

“I used that spot of blood as a pretense to call him to the emergency stairwell—but my real intent was what came after, to have myself fall down the stairs—it seems he never noticed blood had dripped, after all.”

The Testimonial of Okitegami Kyouko

If the police actually got involved, forget half a day, this is a case they would have worked out in three hours, Kyouko-san casually threw out.

But if she was really up to it, Kyouko-san managed to solve the case three seconds after seeing the wound—and didn't choose that route. Not only that, when I started doubting Hakui-kun, she nonchalantly sealed off that route, and in the end, even led me to arbitrarily imagining up an alibi that could never come to be.

With every means available to her, she tried to have the culprit give themselves in—if I pointed it out, she probably wouldn't admit it, but just maybe she tried to so not just because Wakui tried to cover for them, but also because the culprit was a child? Kyouko-san had no mercy for children.

When confronting Hakui-kun one on one, I'm sure she didn't hold back—she cornered him with an adult's wiles. But, even so, to the end, she fixated on having him recognize his own crime.

Rather than catching him, she fixated on having him reflect—I don't know how many detectives there are in the world, but I'm sure Kyouko-san was the only one who would do that... Albeit, it was something she could never do if she wasn't the forgetful detective.

“I already said it, but he's at an age the law can't judge. Considering how Wakui-san was covering for him, even if he was caught, he might get off with no punishment at all—in that case, it all comes down to what Hakui-kun himself thinks about what he's done.”

Sure enough... in hindsight, all that happened was a child who did something wrong got scared and ran away, but with nowhere to go, he ended up coming back—no, Kyouko-san contained the case as that.

“... In the end, what was the motive? Why did Hakui-kun stab Wakui-san?”

It wouldn't be strange if a scuffle broke out between the two. Birds of a feather, or rather, they both shared a nature easy to fly into a passion—but even so, there had to be some sort of trigger. That's what Kyouko-san must have been mindful as well—was it tied into old Wakui's last job after all?

“Yes. He told me himself. Rather, it was just as he told the both of us—reaching the conclusion that Wakui-san’s painting orders to Atelier House’s residents weren’t fakes but all real, he went to talk to him directly. I reached the notion from the material orders, but it seems the thought struck Hakui-kun as he spoke to the residents painting the pictures. Well, I’m sure he saw there were far too many residents who received an order.”

“.....”

When I passed by him the day before, come to think of it, he did seem to suspect that ordering fakes was ‘not like him’—in that case, by that point, his suspicions were considerably solidified. Knowing the project was entering the final stages of hiring a security guard, he finally sprung to action—something like that.

No matter the situation, the boy could only draw.

To that boy—to be among the very few who weren’t chosen was a humiliation of the greatest order.

To be blunt, it was a feeling I couldn’t understand. Sure, it may be humiliating, but realistically speaking, was that reason to hurt someone—it wasn’t as if he was being denied in his entirety.

... Was he being denied in his entirety?

To Hakui-kun, perhaps.

“Wakui-san should have properly explained it—of course, it’s Hakui-kun’s fault for snapping, but Wakui-san is also responsible.”

“Is that... as his patron?”

“Well there’s that too—but he should have properly told him. Being secretive is good and all, but there should be a limit to such things.”

“.....?”

Should have just told him... she might say, but if she told him, wouldn’t that just hasten the strife? No matter how cruel or harsh, the facts were simply facts—mn?

But didn't Kyouko-san distinctly reject the theory they were all real? Was that also a lie to take me in—but it was by gaining the answer to that question, Kyouko-san determined she had all the cards she needed to negotiate and left me in this room to face Hakui.

“Yes. Looking at the result, the sort of thing Wakui-kun's final job would entail did not directly tie in to the motive—if I had to say, the motive was Hakui-kun's misunderstanding, but reaching the truth of the matter was by no means a wasted effort. If I didn't inform him of that truth, I'm sure Hakui-kun wouldn't have decided to turn himself in—he couldn't have.”

Sure enough, if the anger of being removed from the many real paintings was the motive, and that's all there was to it, Kyouko-san would have had all the components on her first confrontation. I was lacking the viewpoint that a misunderstanding could become a motive too.

But if the story ended there, Hakui-kun wouldn't reflect—he couldn't reflect. It would end as a simple competition of obstinacy between himself and old Wakui... there would be no space for Kyouko-san to intervene. But if that motive was wrenched in a misunderstanding—then pointing out that misunderstanding might free up Hakui-kun's coagulated heart.

“But... what sort of misunderstanding was it? What did Wakui-san have in mind when he ordered such a large quantity of materials and a large number of paintings?”

I asked, worrying about the time.

Now that Hakui-kun had called the police himself, there was no further need to mind the time limit, but more than four minutes had gone by since the puzzle solving began, and it was right time for the police car he called to roll in. As the first people to discover the body, there were many circumstances we'd have to explain, and once they came in, I'd lose the situation to speak with Kyouko-san.

The fastest and forgetful detective. It was her fate to constantly be on the run from time.

Then at the very least, I had to hear out that truth—what sort of job was old Wakui going to have me protect? The last job of a legendary framer's life...

“All of the paintings couldn’t have been real, right... then that would mean a single someone would be chosen. Could it be that was actually Hakui-kun, or something like that?”

While I didn’t know if that was consistent with what she had said to that point, I suggested that hypothesis. Meaning, that right now, every single resident who received an order was fake...

“That would make for quite a moving tale, but it would make far too sad of a misunderstanding. As long as Hakui-kun didn’t receive an order for a painting, that possibility does not exist.”

“Then... as we thought from the start, a single one of them was real, and the other residents were asked to, made to paint camouflage paintings?”

If she could prove that, it might offer some consolation—though when you boil it down, it didn’t change the fact he was left to the wayside, and in the strictest sense, I got the feeling it was difficult to call a misunderstanding.

I didn’t get it. Just how did Kyouko-san unravel Hakui-kun’s heart?

Just cornering them with reasoning, the culprit of the case might confess, but they wouldn’t turn themselves in—anyone could say ‘I did it’. Just what did she have to do to make him accept ‘I was in the wrong’?

“And I’m telling you you’re the one who told me the answer—the notion to calculate back from the frame.”

“No, you say that... but I really don’t that’s as easy as you make it sound. When it would be difficult just to imagine what sort of frame a framer would make from that mass quantity of materials, whatever sort of painting he planned to contain in that frame is...”

“Hm? Ah, no, you don’t have to think that hard, you know? This is just a simple analysis from the material quantity.”

“Huh...?”

Quantity? The large order of materials... no, that would put me back at the starting line. This all started from Kyouko-san questioning that the order was too large...

If Wakui-san planned to use every material he had prepared, or at least a majority of them, that would bring us to Hakui-kun's hard-to-accept conclusion that every one of them was real.

"It's not that each painting was real."

Kyouko-san repeated for emphasis.

"However—every painting was real."

".....? I'm not really getting what you're saying..."

My apologies I couldn't return an adequate reaction for the great detective's long-awaited deductions, but that's how I honestly felt.

"In short, you're saying Wakui-san intended to use up the materials, correct? It's because he ordered a great many paintings, he intended to make a great many frames, so he ordered a great many materials..."

"Not quite. For those great many paintings, he was trying to make only a single frame—a sizable frame that would hold a great many paintings. A huge frame that would use up a majority of a great many materials."

"A g-giant—frame?"

"And I'm saying—it's a puzzle."

Kyouko-san dropped her gaze to the floor as she spoke—where the pieces of Kyouko-san's handmade board puzzle were scattered about.

"The sizes of the paintings Wakui-san ordered from the residents was greatly diverse—if you lined them all up like a tangram, I believe they'll make a tidy rectangle. Regarding that as a single canvas—Wakui-san was going to provide a frame for it."

".....!"

So that's why each individual one wasn't real, but every one made up the real. Gathering so many paintings, only together did they complete a single painting...

A joint project between the residents of Atelier House—was the sort of painting old Wakui schemed to make. If Atelier House itself could be

thought of as a single one of his works, then there was no scale more worthy for his final job—the culmination of his life.

That also solved the mystery of why he chose the paintings of his painters' eggs instead of some famed expert's work for the final frame of his life—more so, I could even believe old Wakui erected Atelier House ten years ago for that sole purpose. It fit him far better than returning the favor, a service spirit, or perhaps a hobby.

Lining up every painting he ordered, he would build a painting like a puzzle.

Sure enough, if that would be the case, it would use up a large quantity of materials—what's more, the secret wouldn't come out. It was a divided work... even the ones painting them wouldn't know what portion of the completed painting they were making.

But for a giant frame... he did say he was starting on his largest job, but I never thought he meant it literally. In that case, it would also lift the veil on the inevitability of old Wakui hiring me—making a piece on that scale would be impossible in that basement room. Kyouko-san anticipated not even the materials would fit in there—in that case, he would have to rent out some separate warehouse.

That's why his real request wasn't guarding inside Atelier House, but guarding him on the move—to add to that, since I visibly looked like I had stamina, perhaps he intended for me to help out in odd jobs or so.

“B-but... as with the sizes, the types of paintings everyone was painting were all over the place, weren't they? If you lined them up, would they really make a piece? It's all mismatched, or mixed up... I get the feeling it'll turn out as just a miscellaneous display.”

“Do you know about mosaic art? It's often done with photographs, but... by separating a great many pictures by color, it's a technique to make a single completely different picture... I think Wakui-san was trying to do something similar...”

“Lining photographs to make a different photo...”

The Testimonial of Okitegami Kyouko

It wasn't really hitting home, but come to think of it, I'd seen it somewhere before. Though instead of photos, I get the feeling it was made using anime screencaps... the point was, the general color of each picture was taken as a dot, and by lining them up with intent, a single picture would appear.

A color-divided—puzzle.

Kyouko-san might have rooted me to the basement just to buy time, but in a magazine on that rack, I touched on the information that old Wakui once set out to be a painter.

To one who had once given up on the painter's path, this may have been his final act of defiance—using paintings themselves as the material, he was trying to make a single giant piece.

That concept, and that scale. That vindictiveness impressed me. Though with my admiration, I also felt fed-up. He was too out there I couldn't keep up—to the residents of Atelier House dragged into it, it was honestly a right brother.

While I could accept it at once, the way he kept it a secret from Atelier House's residents as he schemed wasn't too praiseworthy... but, well, rather than painting a fake, making a piece was an improvement.

A joint project among the residents of Atelier House.

If that would decorate the path to old Wakui's departure, then the residents might... no, wait?

That didn't change the fact Hakui-kun was left out. Hakui-kun, and the other few residents who didn't receive an order.

More so, was that not in itself a humiliation—not allowed to participate in the joint project and left out of the group, to Hakui-kun who respected old Wakui as his teacher, as I thought—just maybe that would be even harder to forgive.

Even if you told him old Wakui's true intention, wouldn't Hakui-kun just turn more obstinate—

“That’s not true at all. He immediately accepted it—he was- in his own way- quite ashamed of jumping to conclusions.”

“R-really? I’m pretty sure ten’s around the age where one hates being left out the most—”

“Ten or not, he’s an artist, after all.”

Kyouko-san shrugged her shoulders.

“It was the same when he had me model—see, whenever Hakui-kun paints, he only uses black.”

“Yes, that’s right... when I first met him, he said something about colors being disgusting and filthy...”

While the words were on my lips, I belatedly noticed—and “Yes, that’s how it is,” Kyouko-san nodded.

“Wakui-san had no plans to used black in the work he was trying to depict—it seems the other residents who didn’t receive an order generally had similar circumstance.”

When painting a painting, there were colors that occurred with low frequency, and those that weren’t used at all—it wasn’t a matter of ability, but a matter of color.

With a backward glance to Kyouko-san, I recalled how old Wakui put Hakui-kun up to drawing that marbled view of earth. Even that ended up in monochrome—but would it be reading too deeply if I saw his orders as trying to get Hakui-kun to paint other colors up to the very last moment?

“As I recall... black is quite unmanageable when painting a picture. It kills the other colors, and strictly speaking, they say it’s a color that doesn’t exist in the natural world...”

But that didn’t mean he could match the other colors solely to compensate for it—if he forced it, it would end up as a single dead pixel. If Hakui-kun truly set out to be a painter, this was truly a truth he could have nothing to say against.

“That’s right. And so, I offered him some advice.”

“Advice?”

“Yes. He seemed oh so surprised and depressed at what Wakui-san had schemed... my apologies, thought up, so before I slipped myself, I went just a little beyond a detective’s reach and gave an amateur’s advice. ‘In that case, why don’t you work with the other residents who weren’t chosen for the final stroke, you can just sign it ‘Atelier House’ can’t you?’ I told him—if it’s a signature, I’m sure black won’t be a problem.”

“.....”

I see, that statement did go beyond a detective’s reach—but Hakui-kun resolved to turn himself in, not because of the truth or the puzzle solving, but perhaps because of that amateur advice.

With that boy who called the speckled marbling disgusting—mixing in with all other sorts of colors, would something change?

The moment I thought that, I heard the sirens.

The police car sirens—and the sign time was up.

“Now then,”

Kyouko-san said.

“How about we take a page out of Hakui-kun’s book and apologize to the good coppers? Let’s say we’re sorry we went and investigated without reporting, and didn’t accomplish anything. They’re going to scold us plenty until we cry.”

“... You’re right.”

Now then, the detective would say once everyone was gathered—but this detective didn’t gather anyone, what’s more, after all the puzzle solving was over, the now then finally came.

Sure enough, as an adult, the real trial was soon to come.

Additional Notes

And half a year went by. Even if I wasn't the forgetful detective, it was a time that might make me forget various things, yet it was then that a call came to my home—it was a number registered in my phone book, and the screen displayed 'Okitegami Detective Agency'.

It's a strange tale. I hadn't met Kyouko-san since then—since we were firmly wrung out by the police—and it goes without saying she must have completely forgotten about me alongside the case.

As expected, "It's a pleasure to meet you, I'm called Okitegami Kyouko," she said—before continuing on.

"If it suits you, could you make your way to my office later today—I have something important to talk about that can't be settled over the phone."

"...?"

What could it be, I could only doubt, but, well, in the end, it wasn't as if my next employment had been decided any time after that, and I had plenty of time on my hands, so without thinking too hard, got it, I replied.

It would be a lie to say I wasn't happy to be able to see Kyouko-san after so long—but she had forgotten about me, so I highly doubted she was asking me out on a date.

If Kyouko-san remembered the incident at Atelier House, then it may have been an invitation to see the special new exhibit at the museum I once worked at, showcasing the groundbreaking new piece of the framer Wakui Kazuhisa and all the residents of Atelier House, but when it came to the forgetful detective, there was really no way—well, I did get an invitation from Hakui-kun, so I planned to see it on my own at a later date. Though honestly, it was a place I'd been sacked from, so it was exceedingly hard to go alone... unfortunately, I didn't have anyone close enough to go to the museum with.

I guess the reason the exhibition was at that museum was the least apology old Wakui could give for causing such a ruckus—thanks to that, it

The Testimonial of Okitegami Kyouko

was awkward for me to venture, but if that old man had such admirable emotions, I should just endure it.

After his discharge, the frame he made for rehab was provided to the artist whose work he smashed with his staff that day, after all.

... While old Wakui safely recovered without any significant lingering effects, I heard he would've been in danger had he been found just a little later—to add to that, Kyouko-san's measures were as appropriate as a doctor's. That's precisely why, no matter how angry they got at us, the 'playing detective' we got up without reporting was eventually written off.

It's just, altogether forgetting that harsh rebuke, in that regard, Kyouko-san really is underhanded. Naturally, Hakui-kun didn't get off that easily for stabbing Wakui-san, but as he turned himself in, he was deeply reflecting on it—and he was a close friend of the victim Wakui, he just barely got off with probation.

The reflection wasn't just for the stabber, but the stabee as well; when his rehab was over, and he was to once again challenge his final work, I hear old Wakui spoke to every resident of Atelier House—while some were angry, seeing how they managed to reach the piece's completion, they must have come to some agreement in the end.

In that case, I can decide my evaluation of old Wakui and Atelier House upon seeing the piece—whether there was an artist among them or not, the answer would undoubtedly be put on display. Along with whatever sort of signature was written in with Hakui-kun's terrible handwriting. My curiosity was bottomless.

With that on my mind, I arrived at the Okitegami Detective Agency—I was surprised at first glance. She said it was a personal office, so I had kinda imagined a single room in a multi-tenant building, but it was of all things a standalone structure.

A brand-new three-story building—while it didn't quite reach old Wakui's Atelier House, Kyouko-san possessed such a building on her own.

She must be outrageously rich.

And yet, she's so fixated on money... no, in the end, it seems she didn't get a reward in the Atelier House case. The date had changed before old Wakui regained consciousness, so she had to give in as the forgetful detective.

But when I recalled her form, her entire body regretting the fact she had done free work, more down than when the police were shouting at her, I burst into laughter—if she wasn't that greedy, perhaps she'd never have been able to set up this building.

Whatever the case, entering that building—evidently the Okitegami Detective Agency—and admiring all the latest security systems, I passed into the spacious parlor on the second floor and reunited with Kyouko-san for the first time in half a year.

While it was a reunion to me, it was a first encounter to her.

A blouse with a large embroidered design, a tight leather skirt, tights and heels, her fashion was somewhat flashy, but peculiarly, when Kyouko-san wore it, it gave off a soft impression.

She looked somewhat female-boss-ish and fit the building well enough.

As I'd heard, there were no other employees, and Kyouko-san personally brewed two cups of coffee, lining them up on the table between the sofas. She spoke.

“Welcome, Oyagiri-san. I have called you here for no other reason than this—I'll get right to the point. The truth is, I want to employ you.”

“Huh?”

Her straight-to-the-point was so straight to the point, I didn't get what was being said. With an intrigued smile at my fluster,

“Yes, when you work as a detective, you often invite in the resentment of other—so I do take great care with my security.”

She said.

Well, she wasn't just any detective—even if someone resented her, she'd forget it, so the risk was more than double the norm. It seemed that might be precisely why the security of this building was so firm...

The Testimonial of Okitegami Kyouko

“Yes. But if you leave risk management solely to the machines, it leaves something to be desired... I’ve been thinking day after day I should leave it to someone I can trust.”

“Day after day?”

Did she mean think, forget and repeat...?

“I knew it was discourteous, but I did some digging into you. I heard that at present, you are searching for a job in security.”

Said Kyouko-san.

Investigating—a detective’s main occupation, I guess.

It was a little embarrassing that she knew of my unemployment—if you’ll let me make an excuse, my messy resignation from the museum was still resounding.

It was a small industry in these parts.

That job guarding old Wakui’s frame making was left in purgatory, now that the need for secrecy towards the residents had disappeared... in that sense, Kyouko-san’s invitation was not only a lifeboat, but a lifesaver to the drowned, a spider’s thread dangling from the heavens.

“I’m sure you’re aware, but I am a detective with a bit of a unique characteristic... I think I’ll be asking for somewhat complicated employment conditions, but for that portion, I’ll splurge on your salary.”

The salary portion came from a miser’s mouth, so I didn’t place any trust in it, but I was thankful to be able to get the sort of job I was looking for. Yet...

“While I appreciate the sentiment, Kyouko-san, I am not capable of doing this job.”

“Oh? Is that so?”

“Yes... my apologies, but I am not confident I’ll be able to protect you... while I’m sure you’ve forgotten, there has been a time before where I failed to protect you.”

Strictly speaking, Kyouko-san fell down the stairs at the own, what's more, she just pretended to be unconscious, so it was quite hard to say it was a failing on my part... but even subtracting that, I couldn't think I was worthy enough to guard Kyouko-san.

It was simply too heavy of a burden.

She was uninhibited, uninhibited such that there was no telling what she'd do if you took your eyes off of her, and with her speed, I couldn't think I could protect her—what's more, she was a talent it was inexcusable not to protect.

“Hmmm?”

Kyouko-san tilted her head.

“But the person who recommended you to me didn't seem to think so.”

“.....? A recommendation? Someone recommended me?”

Come to think of it, I had yet to hear why Kyouko-san called me when she was supposed to have forgotten about me.

“Who could have recommended the likes of me?”

“Why I did.”

Kyouko-san took out a piece of paper and placed it on the table. On it, in her familiar penmanship, it was written.

‘As the head of security of the Okitegami Building, I nominate Oyagiri Mamoru.’

“When I got it in my head to hire a guard, I found this letter left behind. It looks like I set it up so I'd find it when I decided to do so. I don't know what sort of case we experienced together or how it went, nor do I have any intention to pry into the matter—but you seem to have gained quite a bit of my trust.”

From that day's me.

Kyouko-san said.

The Testimonial of Okitegami Kyouko

“A testimonial from Okitegami Kyouko—to me, there is no greater guarantee. Won’t you consider thinking over it again? The offer will always be on the table.”

I lost my words, feeling like curling my body up—the excessive words were one thing, but when I was evaluated so, I felt embarrassed for speaking so ill of myself.

A message the forgetful detective presumably wrote after the case, before her memories reset—would I be able to turn it down? Wasn’t answering that trust the most I could do—

My mood taking an unsettled, uncomfortable turn, to escape from the gaze of Kyouko-san, who stared straight at me, I turned my eyes to the interior of the parlor. There wasn’t anything particularly strange, it was a room emphasizing white that could be called fitting of Kyouko-san, but—there, my eyes suddenly stopped at the painting on the wall.

Not in a frame, what looked like a sketchbook page stuck on with masking tape—drawn out in the deep black lines of a pencil, a white cat.

“Oh, that picture? I must have received it from someone somewhere... isn’t it cute? I’m hoping it’ll have accumulated some value by the time I forget about it.”

“... I’m sure it will.”

Tomorrow’s genius drew out today’s genius, so I’m sure it’ll remain as a show of his past—or so I didn’t say. If Kyouko-san really thought it was valuable, I doubt she would stick it up with masking tape—so instead,

“It’s quite a nice picture.”

I curtly agreed.

“Black and white—yet the way it’s so hard to pin down is especially nice.”

“I know, right?”

Kyouko-san spoke happily as if she had personally been praised.

The Testimonial of Okitegami Kyouko

After running around so much for the Atelier House case, the forgetful detective seemed vexed from the depths of her heart that she ended up working for free, but—looks like she did gain something.

There's no telling when a turning point in life will come about—but always moving so eagerly within that, perhaps someone like Kyouko-san was like an agile white cat, made to be rewarded no matter where she fell.

“So, Oyagiri-san. What will you do? If you can't decide, I don't mind if we start with a trial period. Though I'm afraid I'll have to keep your salary during that period at half.”

When she said the offer was always on the table, she really was rushing me—well, Kyouko-san only has today, so it was only natural she demanded a speedy decision. And a half-price trial period was quite a nasty deal in the industry.

Good grief... it looks like it's going to be quite a hassle, working with this person.

If it was inexcusable not to protect her, I just had to protect her myself.

“... Can I give just one condition?”

Turning back to face front, I spoke.

“Oh my. Are you fine with just one? In that case, go right ahead. I'll do whatever's within my capabilities.”

“Well then,”

I started out.

“Please go to the museum with me. There's a painting I want you to see by all means.”

The last work of the framer Wakui.

I couldn't wait to see just how Kyouko-san would price it.

Postscript

Distinguishing right from wrong isn't as clear as one might think, and an ought-to-do right to someone may become an unforgivable evil to another, while the reverse is just as common. Well, it would be scarier to think absolute ethics exist, but I'm not talking about anything as grandiose as the duality of all things, just the right and wrong aren't dependent on how you take them, or anything instinctual, they simply depend on a posteriori teaching. The point is, humans think what they're taught is right is right, and what they're taught is evil is evil, perhaps. A step out of the group, organization, or social sphere you're a part of, and things move under completely different values, and what you always thought was common sense might not get across to a comical extent. To always adhere to your convictions, or to never change your motives, you hear it and it sounds upstanding enough, and I think it's the proper way a person should be, but if you adhere where those convictions won't hold, and fail to change where those motives are held in disdain, you really won't find much praise for that. When you think it's difficult for the outside to enter a closed space, there are times where it might actually be the outsides that are closed off, and perhaps between in and out, right and wrong can too easily be flipped on their head. When someone tells you 'hey, you're wrong,' you'd think the one saying it is wrong, while on the other hand, when someone who you think is wrong tells you 'you're in the right,' you just feel conflicted. That being the case, overturning the sense of values you've been brought up to hold is never easy. If you develop a tendency to regularly look at things from the other side, when it comes down to it, I think you'll be able to go on without confusion, but I wonder.

This is the second volume of the Forgetful Detective series. A series depicting the service of the head of the Okitegami Detective Agency, Okitegami Kyouko-san. That being the case, Kyouko-san's memories are reset every volume, so go ahead and start reading from this volume if you want (I always wanted to say that line). Just what sort of person, what sort of detective is Kyouko-san? It's hard to say even I as the author have a complete grasp of it, but, well, I think it would be nice if that was clarified as I wrote on. But if I run out of things to depict for the character, the

The Testimonial of Okitegami Kyouko

series is up, so I want her to always be shrouded in mystery. This time was a long, overarching case, but I want to keep it so short story, mid-length story, anything goes with Kyouko-san. And like that, came The Testimonial of Okitegami Kyouko-san.

My thanks to VOFAN-san, for drawing such wonderful cover to match the contents. I think I'll be on my fastest to write the third volume, so I'm in your capable hands. To everyone in the third publishing department, please stick with me forever.

Nisio Isin

The Testimonial of Okitegami Kyouko

Author: Nisio Isin

Born 1981. He made his debut in 2002, with his work 'The Beheading Cycle', winning him Kodansha Novel's 23rd Mephisto Award. Starting with his Zaregoto Series, and the Monogatari Series, of which the first novel 'Bakemonogatari' became his first work to be adapted into an anime, he had written a great many novels.

The Testimonial of Okitegami Kyouko

Illustrator: VOFAN

Born 1980. A citizen of Taiwan. His representative work is the Colorful Dreams Series (MAXPOWER Publishing Taiwan), a collection of poems integrated with artwork. From 2006 onwards, he took charge of the illustrations and character design for the Monogatari series (Collaboration with MAXPOWER Publishing).

The Testimonial of Okitegami Kyouko

The Testimonial of Okitegami Kyouko

Published May 1st 2015

NisiOisiN

©NISIOISIN 2015

Publisher: Suzuki Satoshi

Publishing House: Kodansha LTD.

Tokyo Bunkyouku Otowa 2-12-21

P.O. Box 112-8001