



The Poisoned Chocolates Case REDUX

CHOCOLATE INSOMNIA

Insomniac in Dreamland

Story & Illustration
Genma496

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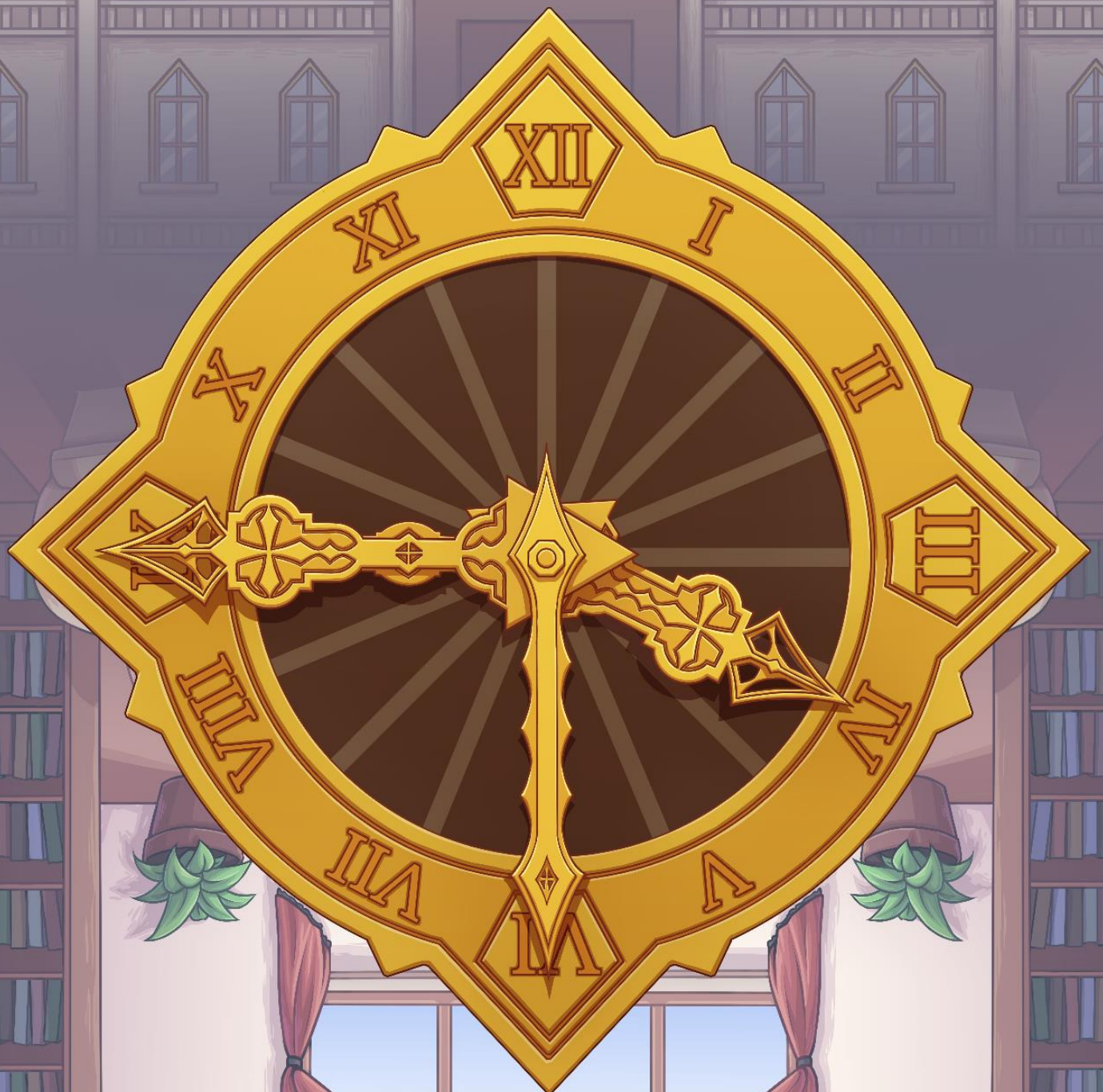




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The Crimes Circle



Shirahama Ryoukai Class 2-A

The president of the Crimes Circle. Grandson to one of Tokiwa Academy's board members. A man with a constant unpleasant smile, whose cordial demeanor always seems insincere. Likes birdwatching and foie gras.

Class 3-B Araya Ryuuo

An infamous delinquent despite his wellborn upbringing, feared for his irritable attitude and mean scowl. A cynic and a realist, he values being right above all else. Has known Damari since elementary school. Is secretly afraid of spiders.



Gekihara Esuzu Class 2-C

The president of the Drama Club. An ordinary girl with an extraordinary love of pomp and circumstance. Best friends with Damari, whom she unequivocally supports. Her weakest subject is PE.

Class 3-C Sekimonji Shisai

A professional novelist despite his young age. Saved his family from poverty with the revenue from his book sales. A genius with no patience for frivolous or irrational things. Has attended every Comiket for 5 years running.



Damari Arisa Class 3-B

An elegant girl with a mysterious aura. Highly observant of others yet impossible to read. The second most senior member of the Crimes Circle. Dotes on Gekihara. Enjoys making fun of Araya.

Class 1-D Kanshou Kisuke

The newest and youngest member of the Crimes Circle. An unassuming boy with a nervous air and a weak presence. Miraculously passed the test to join the gathering despite being poor at deduction.



The Disciplinary Committee



Moribe Class 3-A

The vice chairwoman of Tokiwa Academy's Disciplinary Committee. Determined to bring all criminals (rulebreakers) to justice. Has a thorny expression, but is actually quite gentle. Her glasses are just for show.



Day: Monday

1

Stark marble and stone bricks formed the imposing arches and towers of Tokiwa Private Academy, its sprawling campus and mighty buildings nurturing the new generation of Japan's elite, the sons and daughters of the rich and powerful. And in one small corner of this exclusive space, an intense exchange of stares was taking place.

On the second floor of the main building, overlooking the grand plaza leading to the primary gate, was a spacious room, easily larger than the average classroom; this was the Crimes Circle's office. Instead of school desks and chairs, the room was filled on each side by rows of massive bookshelves. In the very center sat a low rectangular tea table, two couches on either side of it, and beyond that, a wide, sturdy wooden desk and armchair, directly facing the room's entrance.

As if to subvert the luxurious atmosphere of the room, a boy wearing a school uniform sat casually with his legs perched atop the desk, a cup of black tea in his hand and an unpleasant grin on his face, his eyes directed at the guest impatiently tapping her foot in front of him. At either side of the table, five others were seated; all students, enjoying tea and an assortment of snacks, most paying no attention to the scene unfolding around them. And finally, close to the entrance, the bespectacled guest with the stony expression, wearing an armband around the right sleeve of her blazer, was returning the boy's gaze with a glare of her own.

Setting his cup down on the desk and widening his smirk, the boy—the president of the Crimes Circle—addressed the visitor at last, breaking down the tension that had governed the room.

“Representative of class 3-A and vice-chairwoman of the Tokiwa Academy Disciplinary Committee, Moribe-senpai—to what do we owe the pleasure?”

As if resigning herself to the annoyance to come, the girl—vice-chairwoman Moribe—sighed lightly before reequipping her steely facade.

“Shirahama-kun, I... we have a case for you, members of the Crimes Circle.”

Upon hearing that, Shirahama Ryoukai’s smile widened even more, raising one eyebrow as he questioned Moribe.

“Oh? In other words, there’s some unruly fellow out there that the fine ladies and gentlemen of the Disciplinary Committee have failed to pin down?”

Biting her lip, Moribe eventually acquiesced, a look of displeasure on her face, “...That’s right. The Disciplinary Committee is formally requesting your help.”

Upon hearing this, Shirahama leaned back in his chair and brought his hand to his temple. “Haha. To think you ever-so-prideful folks would come to our little gathering for help, hahaha. It’s a real honor for us, genuinely, hahahaha.” Clearly unable to hide his glee, the president of the Crimes Circle desperately tried suppressing his laughter, rattling his armchair back and forth as he held his stomach.

Then, abruptly, his laughter ceased. And, with his expression still hidden behind his hand, he called out, “Well, what do you say, my fellows?”

“It’s a real pain in the ass, but we ain’t got any other choice, do we?” “Let’s just get this over with.” “Sounds like fun! Let’s do it!” “Besides, having them owe us is quite the delightful prospect, wouldn’t you say?” “O-of course, I’ll be happy to help in any way I can!”

An eclectic chorus of voices rang out, each one asserting the individuality of its owner, and yet their words were nonetheless all in accord. Seeing his proposal receive a unanimous agreement, the

president's expression momentarily softened—before it suddenly vanished from sight, covered up.

Without warning, Shirahama put force into the legs he'd until then rested upon the desk, and bent them upwards, forming an acute angle with his torso still laid on the chair. Then, just as suddenly, he swung them back down, catapulting himself off the desk and, in a fluid motion, landed cross-legged atop its edge. Then, after grabbing the teacup next to him and taking one final swig, he addressed his visitor once more, his dull eyes gleaming, "So? Don't keep us waiting. What's this case all about?"

2

The Crimes Circle was an informal student organization acting within Tokiwa Academy. Despite not even being officially recognized as a club, it nonetheless retained a level of influence which could be easily discerned from its luxurious base of operations. The source of that influence could mainly be attributed to its president, Shirahama Ryoukai, who was the grandson of one of Tokiwa Academy's board directors. That being said, the Circle was no mere casual hangout.

Touting itself as a gathering dedicated to the study of criminology and deductive reasoning, the Crimes Circle's membership requirements were stringent. Potential members were required to take a written exam on top of a personal interview conducted by the president. Thanks to that, only five students had managed to earn the privilege of calling themselves participants, yet those five could rightfully be called the best of the best pertaining to matters of the mind.

Aside from the president, the club's current lineup was as follows: Araya Ryuuo of class 3-B, a man gifted in the art of rhetoric; despite his delinquent appearance, it was said he could argue a man into believing the sky red if he wanted to; Gekihara Esuzu of class 2-C, the head of the Drama Club and a bright-eyed girl in constant search of both the tragedy and the comedy of life; Kunugi Eisuke of class 3-B, better known by his pen name Sekimonji Shisai, a published author and a stern individual always seeking to challenge his intellect; Damari Arisa of class 3-A, a charming and mysterious lady with a

sharp mind and even sharper observational skills, able to analyze the deepest recesses of the human mind; and finally, Kanshou Kisuke of class 1-D, the sole first year student in the Circle, an unassuming and unremarkable timid boy whose feat of passing the exam and interview was as surprising as his decision to join in the first place.

Aside from their main activities of studying both present and past criminal cases, the Crimes Circle occasionally also helped out those that came to them for consultation. That being said, one of those requests coming from the Disciplinary Committee was certainly unprecedented.

The Tokiwa Private Academy Disciplinary Committee was a student organization dedicated to keeping the peace and maintaining the academy's school regulations. As such, they had the authority to directly sanction those they determined to have violated these principles. An efficient force of iron-willed students who prided themselves on always catching their targets, it was rare that they would rely on the help of an outside organization like this. That's why Shirahama was sure that whatever Moribe had in store for them, it was to be a challenging affair.

"Very well." Moribe closed her eyes solemnly, pushing away her apprehensions, and responding to the group's expectant gazes. "This case is undoubtedly one of foul play. To be precise, it concerns a certain box of poisoned chocolates."

3

"It happened on Friday, three days ago. In the Nijisou Dormitory."

"Hoh. The Nijisou Dormitory, eh? No wonder you're desperate to resolve this incident."

Even among the elite students of Tokiwa Academy, the name of the Nijisou Dormitory held a special importance. It was no mere student dormitory; the private individual rooms were all furnished with the most expensive and state of the art appliances that money could buy, the meals were cooked by the former personal chef of a foreign nation's royal family, and every inch of the building was designed to bring the maximum amount of comfort a human being

can feel. Naturally, it was reserved for only the most elite of the elite, the kind of paradise that even millionaires can only dream of. With a strict rule against bringing in any outsiders save from close family, most of the academy's students looked upon the grand building with envy in their eyes.

My grandfather is friends with some influential people in the hotel business, you see, Shirahama had explained before. Incidentally, out of the members of the Crimes Circle, the only one currently residing at the dormitory was Sekimonji, who was accepted through a special program where a select few prodigies were allowed to reside there free of charge.

"At 7:30 AM that morning, as he exited his room and went into the lobby, a second year student named Kaneya Yuuta was given a gift package by an employee. The package had been left for him by an anonymous individual, containing only a carefully gift-wrapped box of liqueur chocolates."

At the mention of the name Kaneya Yuuta, a noticeable shift occurred in the expressions of a few of the people in the room. Specifically, Araya Ryuuo's ever-present scowl warped even further, like he'd just swallowed something rotten, while the other two girls exchanged wry smiles.

"It seems that Kaneya-kun assumed the gift had been sent by a secret admirer or some such. Either way, he didn't seem to be in the mood for chocolate at that point. He was debating just throwing it away, but at that point another student entered the lobby, third year Fukusen Koujuurou.

"Noticing what was about to happen, it appears that Fukusen-kun persuaded Kaneya-kun to refrain from throwing the chocolates away, not wanting to waste them, instead taking them for himself."

Pausing for a moment, Moribe took in the expressions of all those present before continuing.

"—Now, some of you may be aware of this, but Kaneya-kun is a member of Tokiwa's basketball team. A star player, in fact.. And it just so happens that there was an interhigh match taking place later that day."

"Get on with it, would ya? Where's the case?"

Araya impatiently butted in, seemingly irritated by something.

“I’ll cut to the chase, then. That box of chocolates was poisoned.”

“Poisoned, you say?” asked Sekimonji, raising an eyebrow.

“Nothing lethal or seriously harmful, of course. Rather, every one of the chocolates was laced with a strong dose of slow acting laxatives. If Kaneya-kun had actually eaten any of them, well, needless to say, his match would have been ruined.”

“So y’mean we just barely missed the opportunity to witness that high and mighty asshole shitting his pants with an audience in the hundreds? God, what a tragedy!” Araya exclaimed, leaning back on the couch with his hands clasped behind his head.

“I don’t suppose there’s any chance of it being an accident?” asked Damari.

“We had the Chemistry Club examine the chocolates. They were tampered with by someone, without a doubt. Whoever it was that did this, they definitely had malicious intent.”

“How terrible...” Kanshou solemnly expressed, the gravitas in his voice perhaps ill-fitting for the rather tame situation.

“A devious plan though it might’ve been, surely the Disciplinary Committee has no need to command its full force against a failed crime without a victim,” Sekimonji said sardonically, seeming indifferent to the affair.

“The Disciplinary Committee always commits itself to cracking down on nefarious activities. Although... a failed crime though it might have been, sadly, we can’t say that there weren’t any victims.”

A dismayed expression emerging from beneath her cold mask, Moribe continues her explanation.

“As I mentioned before, Kaneya-kun gave Fukusen-kun the box of chocolates. And Fukusen-kun, in turn, gave the box as a gift to first year Kiyozumi Juna.”

Fukusen Koujuurou and Kiyozumi Juna’s relationship was somewhat famous. Both being the children of the heads of two large conglomerates, they were already engaged despite their young age, their marriage having been decided since their infancy. In spite of such circumstances, they shared a pure love unencumbered by political machinations, the inspiring romance being a subject of bright-eyed admiration by a large portion of the female students.

Kiyozumi Juna herself was considered the school idol for her pure and honest personality and her strong sense of justice.

“On that same Friday evening, Kiyozumi-san had to attend an important business event held by her family. It seems she was even slated to give a speech.

“Unfortunately, however, some time before she left, she ate some of the chocolates gifted to her by Fukusen-kun. Quite a few, in fact. Enough that they rendered her completely out of commission for the entire event.”

Kiyozumi Juna’s notorious sweet tooth had come to be her downfall.

“That’s awful...” murmured Gekihara, no doubt picturing the unfortunate girl’s plight with the clear vision of a dramaturge.

“Whatever their motives may have been, the irresponsible actions of this miscreant have hurt an innocent bystander. We of the Disciplinary Committee won’t rest until this wrong has been righted.” Moribe’s tone and expression remained level, but her words betrayed her ardent desire for justice.

“Any substantial evidence?” Shirahama, previously as animated as usual, had gone strangely terse, seemingly lost in thought.

“We have two primary leads. First, the wrapping paper that the box was wrapped in. Rather than being a standard store-bought design, after looking into it, we realized that the paper was actually an original creation by the Arts & Crafts Club, and it was created very recently.”

“Second, the time when the box of chocolates was dropped off at the front desk of the Nijisou Dormitory. The box was left there, alongside a form indicating the recipient, during a brief period of time in between shifts when the desk was unmanned, most likely occurring on the evening of the previous day, on Thursday, between 4:45 and 5:00 PM.

“Incidentally, we also checked the security camera footage, but the culprit seems to have navigated through the cameras’ blind spots, because no suspicious figures were caught.”

“Hmm...” Shirahama continued pondering silently.

“Quite the mysterious affair...” offered a dazzled Kanshou.

“What’s mysterious here is the incompetence of this Academy’s agents,” Sekimonji bluntly proclaimed. “This crime is as by-the-book as they come. There should’ve been a million checks to prevent this, and you should normally have had this crook thrown out on his knees already,” he added, clearly fed up with the situation as Kanshou desperately tried to calm him down with a flustered “Now, now.”

“This just means it’ll be a simple matter to resolve, no?” said Damari with her usual amused expression.

“I’d feel bad busting anyone who tried doing the world some good by taking that rat Kaneya down a peg, but well, I guess I oughta blame ‘em for screwing up a great opportunity like that,” remarked Araya with an unpleasant smirk.

“If we work together, we can have this guy crying at our feet in no time!” Gekihara cheerfully exclaimed.

As the members of the Crimes Circle relayed their various comments, one boy remained silent—Shirahama, who, after hearing Gekihara’s remark, finally spoke up.

“Let’s not get ahead of ourselves, now, my fellows.” After making sure all eyes were on him, the president got off of the desk he’d been sitting on, and proceeded to walk to the left of the room—towards the archives.

“Does this case not remind you of anything?”

4

Shirahama’s unexpected question momentarily stunned all those present into silence. The boy advanced through the path between the bookshelves, stopping at a specific point and taking out a certain folder.

“Ah...!” At the same time, a gasp of realization rang out—the voice belonged to Sekimonji.

“As expected of you, Sekimonji-kun—I knew a man such as yourself, with an acute interest in the intellectual puzzle of criminology, would remember this case.”

Saying so, Shirahama returned to the center of the room, opened the folder in his hand and instantly located his target among the multitudinous cases detailed within before placing the file upon the

table such that all Circle members could look at it. Incidentally, Sekimonji insisted upon being referred to with the honorific *sensei*, calling it the reverence a published author like him deserves, but Shirahama was the only one who didn't follow this request on account of being president. The stubbornness of both men never failed to elicit a sigh from the Circle's female contingent.

"It's another case involving a box of poisoned chocolates that took place in England back in the 20's, correct?"

"That's right," Shirahama affirmed. "And what's more, it's a case that the original Crimes Circle took part in investigating."

The concept of Tokiwa Academy's Crimes Circle originated from an organization active in the early 20th century in England, headed by a writer and amateur detective. The original Circle tackled puzzling cases too difficult for the police to solve, helping shed light on the schemes of cunning and meticulous culprits. Shirahama was inspired by their accolades when he created the current Crimes Circle, though the scope of the present group's activities nowhere reached that of their progenitors'.

"The poisoned chocolates case of 1929 remains unsolved to this day. The Crimes Circle performed an experiment whereupon, after being given a week to independently investigate the case, each member of the Circle proposed their theories one by one over the course of a few weeks' time.

"Though each illustrious member came up with some splendid theories in their own right, they were ultimately unable to reach a definitive truth, with the culprit getting away scot-free with their heinous crime. It was a truly tragic outcome."

"That's cool and all, but what's that gotta do with our current situation?" Araya impatiently asked, not paying any mind to Shirahama's spirited and impassioned oration.

"Don't you see what a miraculous circumstance we find ourselves embroiled in, Araya-kun? Nearly a century later, that a fellowship bearing the same title as theirs would wind up tackling a case which mirrors that old crime so flawlessly! I can scarcely imagine an occurrence better described by the word fate!" Shirahama's monologue was growing in intensity, but none of the others present matched his excitement at the revelation.

“So what do you suggest we do, then, President?” seemingly unbothered by Shirahama’s manic outburst, Damari asked in her usual soft, enchanting tone, a glimmer of expectation in her eyes as she decided to humor him.

“What we shall do is nothing other than our duty as aspiring criminologists!” Shirahama declared, the smirk on his face widening by the second. “We shall undertake the same experiment as that of our forefathers, and in doing so overcome them!”

“Ya don’t mean...?” “Oh boy...” “How utterly idiotic.” Various groans of exasperation rang out within the Circle’s room as the members realized their president’s plan.

“Each one of us shall independently come up with a theory, which we will exchange over the course of our meetings. I have faith that by the end of this exercise we will have ourselves a definitive answer to Kiyozumi-san’s ordeal. And who knows, perhaps in doing so we might even uncover a vital clue overlooked for ages past that shall finally put to rest the ghost of the poisoned chocolates’ case. What do you say, my fellows?” Shirahama questioned his compatriots, not a single trace of doubt on his visage.

“Every time I think you can’t possibly come up with a more ridiculous idea, you always find a way to overcome my expectations.” “No way in hell I’m wastin’ any amount of my life on this bullshit.” “You guys know there’s no shot of changing his mind once he gets as hyper as this, right?” “Ugh. I’m afraid you’re right, Gekihara.” “Why not give it a chance?” “Really? Are you sure about this, Ari-san?” “Who knows, it might turn out to be unexpectedly amusing.” “Well, if you’re fine with it then so am I!” “Doesn’t look like I got much of a choice, eh? Goddamn it.” “Might as well fully commit to being a clown, I suppose.” “I-If you guys are fine with it then so am I!”

Clap! The resonant sound of Shirahama’s palms hitting one another signaled the end of the Circle’s debate. “So, it looks like the motion passes with unanimous approval once again, eh?”

“You truly are a despotic leader, you know that?” Sekimonji could only let out a weak sigh.

“So what do we do, then? Do we also take a week to investigate like they did back then?” asked Gekihara.

“What our forebears needed a week to achieve, I’m sure the current members of the Circle can accomplish in a day, don’t you?” replied the president with a wink.

“Well, at least it means I won’t hafta waste my brain power on this crap for too long...”

“What a relief it must be, Araya-kun, especially since you don’t have much of it to spare.”

“Why not go back to pretendin’ you’re clever by grinnin’ to yourself in the corner, eh, Damari?”

“Wawawa-w-wait, you guys! Stop fighting!”

“Very well then! We shall reconvene at the usual time tomorrow to hear the first theory! I have high expectations of you, my fellows!” Paying no mind to Kanshou’s desperate attempts to prevent his seniors from acting on the murderous glares they were sending one another, Shirahama declared the end of the current discussion.

“*Ahem!*” However, preventing Shirahama from going off on his merry way, a profoundly displeased clearing of the throat reminded everyone that vice-chairwoman Moribe was, in fact, still in the room. “Maybe this is all a game to you all, but I will remind you that this is a serious incident in which an innocent student was harmed. I won’t tolerate you making a mockery of it with your games.”

“My, my, Moribe-senpai, I didn’t expect you to start complaining like that right after coming to ask us a favor.” Shirahama’s smile remained unflinching in spite of Moribe’s icy reprimands. “But no matter. If you instead have some other means of resolving this case within a week’s time without our assistance, you’re welcome to undertake them.”

“*Urk...*” It was clear that Moribe had more she wanted to say, but she had no choice but to swallow it down, glaring helplessly at her condescending collaborator.

“It’s a pleasure working with you. Don’t worry—I assure you that by this time next week, Kiyozumi-san’s saboteur will have been brought to justice.”

And so, just as the previous Crimes Circle had before them, Tokiwa Academy's foremost gathering of eccentrics declared the start of yet another cycle of deduction.

The Circle elected to determine the order of the members' presentations through the impartial drawing of lots. And so their turns were decided—Araya Ryuuo, Gekihara Esuzu, Sekimonji Shisai, Shirahama Ryoukai, Damari Arisa, and finally, Kanshou Kisuke.

Thus did the ring of the clock tower's bell signal the reopening of the fools' play. Each one would play their part with elation, not knowing that their empty words were nothing more than sandcastles awaiting the tide. The curtains raise. As it has, so it shall continue:

The Poisoned Chocolates Case was not yet over.



Day: Tuesday

1

Araya Ryuuo was particularly infamous, even among the eccentrics that made up the Crimes Circle. His rebellious style and rough manner set him apart from the prim and proper youths of Tokiwa Academy, but it was a deeper sense of peril wafting off him that had led him to be viewed as an irregular and a threat, and to be alienated accordingly.

This reputation may have been an extreme one, but it was in no way unearned. Quite the opposite—as the prodigal son of a powerful family, upending his standing so thoroughly had been a hard-earned victory, the culmination of a very deliberate attempt to ostracize himself from the masses.

The reason behind this undertaking lies in Araya's very particular mindset. The core principle which drives him is a belief in the power of 'words'. More specifically, it is the belief that the worth of a person is dictated by the weight of his words, in the power of one's words to convince others.

If you were to boil it down, Araya Ryuuo valued being seen as correct above everything else. However, his fundamental precept was a bit more nuanced than that. After all, above the opinions of anyone else, what he desired most was for he himself to be capable of proudly and sincerely asserting his confidence in the power of his words. Araya wished to be able to see himself as right, no matter the situation.

Yet as he grew and matured under the care of his wealthy aristocratic family, he soon realized just how difficult it would be to live according to that principle. He soon realized just how empty, how vapid and how utterly weightless the words of those around him truly were.

As he watched his relatives spew meaningless platitudes and self-serving lies for the sole purpose of pleasing their interlocutors, he thought about how he'd rather die than let his words rot to that extent. He felt no hatred towards his family; as he imagined how it must feel to prattle on and on, day in day out without being able to truly express a single thing, all Araya could feel for those poor, miserable puppets was pity.

Even so, though he might not have hated them, he understood that if he continued on in the footsteps of his parents before him, he too would become no different. He knew well the fallibility of people—however dedicated to their principles they might have been, if you give them the leeway, people will allow cracks to form. They will let themselves get away with too much, and they will ultimately crumble. Be it a harmless unfounded boast or a well-intentioned white lie, whatever the form, empty nonsense will slowly corrupt one's speech, draining away the weight of their humanity.

That is why Araya Ryuuo chose the thorny path of seclusion. If the desire to please others led to dishonesty, he would repulse any and all. If what it took to be right was to be hated by everyone, then that's what he would be. If you were to ask him directly, this is what he might say: *Talkin' is my specialty, y'know? My words mean a lot—so why waste words on a guy, when a punch can do the job instead?*

One might ask, then, why a man such as Araya Ryuuo would join the Crimes Circle, a group founded on debate and discussion. Why join hands with others when he'd dedicated himself to being alone. The reason was simple—maintaining the weight of his words by forgoing speech entirely would have been the emptiest of victories.

If he couldn't prove his worth, there was no point in tempering it in the first place. Left unchecked, people will naturally put themselves on a pedestal—What Araya wanted wasn't that kind of pathetic narcissism. It was only through friction, through interaction with others that he could ascertain his caliber.

That was why Araya chose to enlist within the Crimes Circle's ranks, a place of academic discussion, where logic, deduction and persuasion were foremost. For him, this was no mere afterschool club—It was a battlefield. A battlefield where he would prove himself by challenging adversaries of equal intellect to his.

And today, in the Crimes Circle's office, a battle more glorious than any before was about to rage—one in which Araya was sure to stand victorious.

2

In a scene reminiscent of the previous day's, an outsider stood at the entrance to the Crimes Circle's room, her expression unamused—just like before, it was the vice-chairwoman of the Disciplinary Committee, Moribe.

"Oh? What brings you by at this hour, Moribe-senpai?" inquired Shirahama, as if oblivious to any purpose she'd have for being there.

"What do you mean, 'what'? I may be letting you do as you please, but I should at least have the right to spectate this farce with my own eyes."

"Well, if that's what your heart desires, don't let me stop you. It spares me the effort of writing a report, so as far as I'm concerned, it's a benefit to all involved. Someone, bring her a chair, would you?"

"Why dontcha bring her one yourself, asshole?" shot back Araya, though at that point Kanshou had already gotten up from the couch and, with a hurried bow and an awkward smile to Moribe, went to retrieve a chair from the edge of the room.

"Well, if everyone's ready, then without further ado, let us begin," announced Shirahama with a snap of his fingers, "It's time for the first deduction!"

"Araya-senpai is starting us off, right?" asked Gekihara. "Let's see what you got! Ahh, so exciting!"

"Hah. Well, sorry to all of ya, but I'm 'fraid that all your thinking 'bout the case so far has been nothin' but a huge waste of time." Araya declared with a smirk. "Since I'll be solving this case here and now."

“Fufu, someone sure is eager. You sound like a middle schooler the night before a field trip. Makes all your grumbling from yesterday seem like an illusion,” commented Damari.

“True, it was frustratin’ for sure. I mean, who wouldn’t be angry after having such a *simple and banal* case thrust at ‘em. Felt like havin’ my intelligence insulted, y’know? But then I thought ‘*ahh*, turns out I can squeeze some fun out of this after all—showing these boneheaded simpletons the full truth in a single day should be loads ‘a fun!’”

Unswayed by Damari’s provocation, Araya wore a brutal smile on his face.

“Well then, how about you get on with the explanation? Or maybe you’d like to continue tooting your own horn for a while?” Sekimonji remarked irritably.

Do these people all just hate each other? Watching the exchange with an exasperated expression, Moribe wondered how this group managed to stay intact at all.

“Sekimonji-sensei is right.” The president silenced the clamoring at last. “Araya-kun, the floor is yours. Let the deduction begin.”

3

“As previously mentioned, this case is anythin’ but complex. Like ninety-nine percent of crimes that happen in this world, the motive is as clear as they come: simple self-interest, nothin’ more to it.” Making sure that all eyes were on him, casually leaning back on the couch with one arm hanging behind the armrest, Araya began his deduction speech with that declaration. “When tryin’ to figure out the perpetrator of a crime, it’s best to think who’d have the most to gain out of it, right?”

“Now, the culprit’s goal seems pretty clear. Bungled execution aside, the intent was to render that bastard Kaneya unable to play in his upcoming match, ruinin’ his record and making a fool outta him in the process.

“But the question is, why? Just malice? If so, that leads us to a problem. See, the amount of people who’ve got something against that asshole is almost too much to count. I can think of plenty of folks

who'd gladly do something like this." *Me included*, Araya added with a wink. "Should I take it for granted everyone here is already well aware just what kinda guy our little victim to-be is?"

"Oh, we're very aware, I assure you," replied Damari.

"I assume you're referring to the rumors of uncouth behavior surrounding Kaneya-kun."

"Hah, what a cute way of putting it. That monkey will try to screw everything on two legs that happens to enter his field of vision. Speakin' of, funny how you self-important bunch at the Disciplinary Committee always overlook his stunts. Talk about a waste of the school budget!"

"The Disciplinary Committee is too busy to move over some idle gossip. When concrete evidence of him breaking the Academy's rules surfaces, we will impartially judge him as we would anyone else," Moribe replied, pushing her glasses up with her index finger.

"Heh, whatever you say," replied Araya with a mean-spirited cackle. "Anyway, point is, if I tried treating every ex-girlfriend he's cheated on as a suspect, it'd take me a year to form a proper deduction. So I tried going for a different line of thinking.

"Why now? Why do this now, and in this way? If this crime was just someone's attempt at revenge, then they coulda done it at any time and in any other, more effective and cruel way—Yet they didn't. I'd bet there's some reason for that.

"So then we come back to the question: who'd have the most to gain out of this? Well, if this wasn't just a revenge plan, then the culprit's aim wasn't just to hurt the bastard, it was clearly to keep him from playin' that day.

"And who'd want that? Well, despite normally being a scum-sucking waste of space, as an example of this world's unfairness, Kaneya happens to be a great basketball player. He's not shy 'bout it either, guy never misses a chance to brag about it. Seems like his teammates can't stand him, but they've just gotta deal with it—can't argue with skill, after all.

"But the guy at the top never cares about the struggles of the little guy. For Kaneya, him bein' there's his God-given right or whatever, but others gotta work hard just to keep 'emself in the running.

“—Now, picture this with me, wouldja?” Saying this, Araya stands up off the couch, walking over to the left side of the president’s desk and leaning his waist on it, his back to the audience. “You worked hard to get on the basketball team. You’re not the most talented player out there, but you’re decent enough that the captain keeps you on the lineup for the Inter High competition. But then, right around the time before the semi-finals, you start gettin’ the vibe that you might be benched before you get to play in the finals.

“Right before the final match that you’d been looking forward to for so long? After all the work you put into this thing? And—all the while an arrogant prick who’s never felt that struggle prances around like he owns the goddamn place? Now that just can’t stand, can it?” Araya turns his head to face the others, the toothy smirk on his face deepening. “Now, if you were in that situation, whaddya do?”

“If this hypothetical individual’s goal was getting to play in the finals, why not wait till then to hatch this scheme?” Sekimonji asked.

“Oh, now that’s just a little somethin’ called sportsmanship,” Araya explained. “Our culprit’s above just cutting out a guy he couldn’t stand to keep his own spot. All he wanted was a chance to prove himself, without that ‘star’ hogging the limelight. If, even after that, he was deemed unworthy, he’d just accept it knowin’ he did all he could. Noble, eh?”

“Hmph. Just self-serving nonsense,” Sekimonji bluntly replied.

“Well, either way, our culprit would have to also meet our prior requirements: someone with access to the Arts & Crafts Club’s supplies and without an alibi in the timeframe of 4:45 to 5:00.

“And hey, whaddya know, there just so happens to be someone like that on the basketball team! A guy who, despite always diligently committing himself to practice, conveniently left early the day before the crime, saying that he was feelin’ sick. And after consulting my sister, turns out he also has a girlfriend in the Arts & Crafts Club. Real unlucky guy, eh, just coincidentally matching our culprit’s profile perfectly?”

“...And what exactly is this person’s name, Araya-kun?” Moribe asked hesitantly, not wanting to admit that her interest had been piqued.

“Ahh, should I? Should I really be snitching on this guy? I dunno, right now I’m feelin’ pretty sympathetic. Anyone trying to drag that dickhead Kaneya down a peg seems like an alright guy in my book. Hrm, real dilemma ya put me in!” Araya said, feigned turmoil on his face.

“.....”

“Aw well, ya forced my hand!” He immediately gave in. “Name’s Hide Marihiko. First year, class C. Check ‘im out if ya want.”

“You’re no less of a piece of work yourself, you know that, Araya?” Sekimonji said.

“Why thank you for your input, *sensei*.” Araya said with a wry smile, sitting back down in his place on the couch. “And with that, I think I said it all. Sorry for spoilin’ the whole affair on day one, really. Ya better figure out what else we’re gonna do for the next week now.”

And so ended the first deduction.

4

With Araya’s speech concluded, Moribe excused herself for a moment in order to make a call. Meanwhile, the president of the Crimes Circle decided to congratulate his fellow member on his work.

“Splendid work, Araya-kun. You always know how to paint a striking picture, that’s for sure. I dare say that presentation deserves a round of applause,” Shirahama said, clapping his hands, though none of the others joined in.

“Don’t mention it, Prez. I only said the obvious.” Araya smoothly ignored the glares prompted by his feigned humility. “Oh yeah, just in the spirit of the occasion, I brought a lil’ somethin’ for everyone to enjoy.”

Saying that, Araya went to his bag and roughly fished something out before turning around to show it to everybody. “Oooh!” Gekihara eagerly exclaimed upon seeing the object in his hands—it was a box of chocolates.

“I thought it’d fit in with our theme, y’see,” Araya said, still maintaining his humble facade with his best attempt at a bashful smile. The box was a simple rectangle in shape, bearing the unremarkable logo of a store brand product, containing a number of

round hazelnut chocolates. He set the container on the table and removed the cap, allowing everyone to take some.

“My, awfully generous all of a sudden, huh?” Damari remarked.

“No idea what ya mean. I’m a well-bred gentleman, y’know?” Araya replied sardonically.

“Mmm, this earns you a few points, Araya-senpai,” Gekihara said, still chewing her chocolate. “Not many though~.”

“You’re too easy, woman. Cheap flattery like this shouldn’t be winning you over.” Sekimonji said, though he still ate his share.

“Thank you very much.” Kanshou conveyed his sincere gratitude.

“I’m surprised you’d be celebrating my little idea like this, I have to say. I thought you’d be more dissatisfied with it,” said the president.

“What can I say, Prez, this little gimmick you cooked up has been real fun. I thought I’d have it go out with a bang, since I just went and ended it with the first turn.”

“Oh, but this is just the beginning, Araya-kun,” Shirahama calmly said.

“But what need is there to keep goin’ with it at this point? The truth’s already been made clear.”

“What’s this, Araya-kun, feeling nervous? Are you perhaps thinking that if you let anyone else speak, they’ll tear down your neat little tale?” Damari asked.

“Hah? What, you think you can come up with a more convincin’ theory?”

“I don’t just think that. However forcefully you may have presented it, your theory is still backed solely by circumstantial evidence. Any one of us could have come up with an equally valid idea. Isn’t that right, Esuzu-chan?”

“Well said, Ari-san! Araya-senpai’s thinking is too stiff. No creative spirit at all~!”

“Sorry to break it to ya, but crimes happen for boring reasons just like this. That’s life,” scoffed Araya. “If you think otherwise, then you better put your money where your mouth is, shrimp. Tomorrow’s your turn, after all, right?”

“Sure thing. I’ll kindly show even a brute like you what a dramatic world we live in.”

Watching the sparks fly between the two with a thin smile, a doubt suddenly crossed through Shirahama’s mind, which he reflexively put into words. “By the way, if I may ask, Araya-kun, what makes you so sure that your theory is the right one?”

“Hah? Ain’t it natural to have faith in your own theory? Well, maybe not for Kanshou over there.” Araya sneered as he called out one of his fellow Circle members, though the first year boy in question simply returned a sheepish smile.

“That may be so, but it’s unlike a man of your caliber to stake everything on mere circumstantial evidence.”

“Hmm.” Araya raised an eyebrow, as if appraising his superior, before briefly looking over his back and then acquiescing. “...I admit I’m impressed, Prez. Ya got good intuition, I’ll give ya that.

“Alright, I’ll cough it up. The reason why I’m so certain that Hide’s the one who did it? Well, it’s quite simple, really—It’s ‘cause I’m the one who gave him the idea in the first place.”

“Oho?” “What now!?” “H-huh?”

Even the Circle members who hadn’t been paying attention to the conversation were at once sucked back in by Araya’s unexpected statement.

“Hey, now. Don’t look at me like a murderer. I’m not the mastermind or anythin’, if that’s what you’re thinking,” Araya explained amusedly. “He just happened to start a conversation with me, and we naturally got to the topic of how much we both hate Kaneya’s guts. I guess I must have let slip my idea of how I’d like to poison the asshole, if given the chance.”

“...” Even the normally indomitable Shirahama was left speechless.

“A meathead like him would never have come up with a plan like this without some inspiration. Ahh, too bad. He was a nice enough guy to come up and talk to a dangerous delinquent like me. Guess I was a bad influence, hyahaha!” The others could do nothing but watch as the man at the center of attention let out a truly foul cackle.

“What a lowlife you are, Araya.”

“Brute! You’re a brute after all! I’m taking back all the points!”

“That’s t-terrible!”

“Hmm...” Only Damari maintained her cool, viewing the scene with a sharp gaze. “Oh, Moribe-san, I see you’re back. Did you perhaps glean something new?”

Having finished her phone call, the vice-chairwoman returned to her seat in front of the chaotic group.

“What’s happening here? ...No, never mind. Anyway, I got in touch with the rest of the Committee. I asked them to look into this Hide-kun. Well, not to boast, but our people work pretty fast. I decided to just stay on the line until getting the report.

“—We’ve confirmed that Hide Marihiko has an alibi between 4:45 and 5:00 PM. He really did go home after practice, because he was sick. We have corroborating testimony from one of his friends, who kept him company while he was recovering.”

The meaning of Moribe’s report took a few moments to sink into the minds of those present.

“Uh.”

“Well, how about that?” Araya appeared the most bewildered of them all as Damari’s amiable question perfectly punctuated the ridiculousness of the situation.

“Now h-hold on a moment here,” he finally managed to mumble out. “How’re you sure that friend isn’t just covering for him! Helping build an alibi, it’s a classic trick!”

“We have testimony from a neighbor that saw Hide-kun coming home. And besides,” Moribe added. “It seems he didn’t get to play in the basketball match the following day because he caught influenza. If he really was just making up an alibi, that’d be putting the cart before the horse, don’t you think?”

“Pfff—Bahahaha!” Unable to hold it in any longer, Gekihara burst into laughter, while Sekimonji also formed a rare grin.

“I’m not taking this shit! What’s that friend’s name!? How come I never heard about this!? I’m gonna look into it myself!”

“There’s no need for that. And we respect witness confidentiality at the Disciplinary Committee, so I’m sorry, but that person will remain anonymous.”

“But come on—”

“Araya-kun, how about you just accept your loss already? It’s the sportsman-like thing to do,” the president ordained with a composed smile. “Hey, it was an exceptional showing for your first turn.”

Araya seemingly didn’t hear Shirahama’s comforting words as he blankly gazed at nothing, his face frozen solid. Taking the last piece of chocolate in the box, Damari Arisa delicately put it in her mouth and ate it before speaking up once more.

“I guess you just assumed you were the cause behind it. Seems you were a little overconfident, huh, Araya-kun. What was this called again...” Damari put her finger to her cheek as she briefly pondered something, before seemingly coming to an answer. “—Ah! That’s right. They call this eighth-grade syndrome, don’t they?” she asked with a gleeful smile.

“G-Gggffffh!” As his face twisted in an expression somewhere between fury and intense shame, Araya let out a garbled sound as he turned his back on everyone and ran out of the room.

“Uhhh... Will he be all right?” Gekihara asked awkwardly.

“He’ll be fine if he just gets some time to cool off... Probably,” Shirahama replied, equally flustered.

Grabbing her cup of tea off the table and taking a sip, Damari subtly commented, “That wasn’t too bad, for cheap chocolate.”

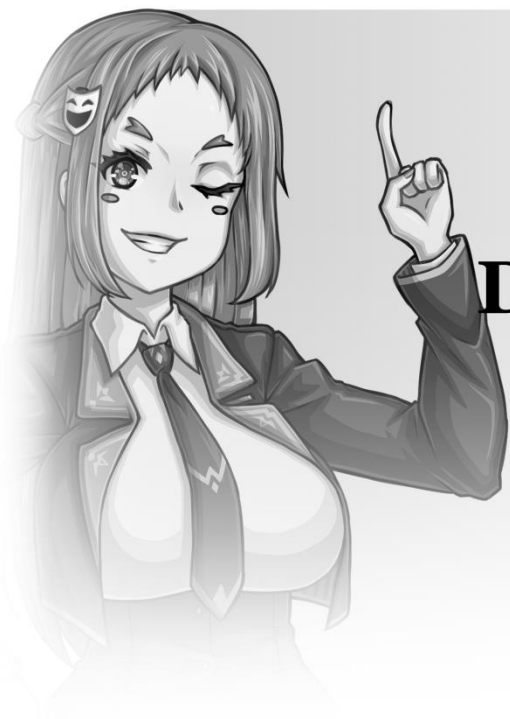
5

And so one deduction came to an end, inviting another to take its place. The truth was yet out of sight, no closer to materializing.

Though it was his own pride that had led to his ruin, Araya Ryuuo could hardly be blamed. There was no particular moment when he went down the wrong path, no fatal error in his judgment. He was merely another domino knocked over by fate’s hands, foolish enough to believe he could grasp anything for himself.

Thus, the chime of the clock tower’s bell signaled the end of the first turn. The Crimes Circle would keep on striving for an unreachable destination.

The Poisoned Chocolates Case was not yet over.



Day:

Wednesday

1

Gekihara Esuzu's life had no semblance of drama in it. There were no twists and turns to be had, and if indeed her existence could be said to follow a three act structure, then far from reaching the climax, the curtains had yet to even be raised.

She was born to a normal, average family and went through a normal, average upbringing bereft of any significant details worth mentioning. The most miraculous moment of her life had probably been her admission into Tokiwa Private Academy, having somehow aced the entrance exam that she'd had no hopes of even remotely passing; she couldn't help but feel that she'd wasted a lifetime's supply of luck in a single instant.

And yet, even having gained a pathway into the world of the elite and powerful, an ecosystem wholly unfamiliar to her, her life had nonetheless continued trudging on on its predictable course, mostly unimpeded by any new obstacles or challenges.

Despite her almost preternaturally uneventful existence, or perhaps precisely because of it, Gekihara developed a strong affinity for the dramatic. Upon becoming a student at Tokiwa, it took her no time at all to become a leading figure in the Drama Club, eventually even earning the position of club president, though she'd never intentionally set out to gain any such influence. Indeed, her sole concern was putting on the show of a lifetime, and it seemed that her

very presence imbued each production with a sense of bustling energy and life.

Gekihara never stepped onto the stage personally, working exclusively behind the scenes; however, instead of fashioning herself a creative, she instead thought herself closer to a part of the audience. If you were to ask her, she'd surely say this—*Even if you know the script ahead of time, even if the characters' actions are entirely predictable, that doesn't change a thing. Drama is the magic of the moment. You could put on the same play a hundred times, but you can never really reproduce those emotions in the same way.*

That reality was one that surely vexed her in her other pursuits—as one seeking to appreciate the dramatic turns of life, an interest in criminology was perhaps a natural result. What else to turn to than the moments of highest intensity in a human's existence, when tempers flare, blood splatters, and lives are irreparably altered.

Yet however enthralling she may have found it reading about these cases, a feeling of frustration inevitably found its way into the back of her mind—however vividly she imagined the emotions of those gruesome scenes, it could never serve as a substitute for actually *being* there, for seeing those climatic instants with her own eyes.

And that was why, upon hearing the proposal of Shirahama Ryoukai, the president of the Crimes Circle, for the first time, she couldn't help but shudder with excitement. For what might be the only time in her life, Gekihara would be able to revel in the drama of a culprit being unmasked before her very eyes—it was a show she wouldn't miss for the world.

2

“Welcome, welcome everybody,” Shirahama said with a pleased smile on his face, “Welcome to the second day of deductions. May the truth fall within our grasp.”

Everyone started clapping unenthusiastically, more out of obligation than anything—everyone, that is, aside from one particular individual.

“I must say, I'm glad to see you among us again, Araya-kun. I was worried you'd be skipping out on our meetings for a while.”

"Hmph. I'm no coward. I'll see this shit through, at least," Araya said sullenly.

"Very good, very good. I'm glad to see we have a full house tonight," said Gekihara, grinning. "I have a wonderful show for you all this evening." Though she'd never acted on stage before, it seemed wasn't at all lacking in showmanship. At least one person, however, wasn't at all appreciative of her flair.

"We're not here for a show, we're here to solve a terrible incident. I'd appreciate it if you took this seriously, for the victim's sake too," said Moribe.

"Now, now, calm down, miss vice-chairwoman," said Gekihara, composed. "There's no philosophy more dramatic out there than punitive justice. Not an ounce of logic there, I'm telling you, it's all about self-satisfaction—so with that in mind, how about you just loosen up and enjoy the show?" *I guarantee it'll be way more fun than a court hearing*, she added with a wink.

"Sigh. I see there's no point trying to argue with you. Just don't waste too much time, okay?"

"Aye aye, m'am!" Gekihara affirmed, grinning.

"Let's hear it then."

"Fufu, I've been looking forward to this."

"Very well. Then without further ado, let the second deduction begin!" Affirming Sekimonji and Damari's words, Shirahama announced the start of the second turn.

3

"Tonight's show is a tragedy of misunderstandings, of bottled-up feelings, of poor souls unable to face one another." Gekihara began her story with a burning ardor, as if about to unveil a deep, fundamental truth unseen by all. "It's a story of three individuals, each a protagonist in their own right, and at once a mere victim swept up in a whirlpool of fate, of passion and taboo!"

The audience listened to her monologue quietly, the expressions on their faces dividing the room. Shirahama and Damari took in the spectacle with amused smiles, clearly enjoying themselves, while Kanshou appeared practically absorbed in the tale. On the other hand,

all Araya, Sekimonji and Moribe had to spare for the performance was an array of cold looks. Appearing not to mind one way or the other, Gekihara continued her speech.

“Some might feel inclined to argue that the motive behind this incident is self-interest, but they couldn’t be more wrong. Don’t let this carefully executed plot distract you from the plain truth—this is absolutely a crime of passion.”

“It’s always crimes of passion with you...” grumbled Sekimonji, to which Gekihara would have no doubt enthusiastically declared that ‘*Committing crimes for money is just so booooring!*’ had she the leeway.

“In order to preface my deduction, I should first lay out some interpersonal dynamics, the knowledge will no doubt come in handy—Let’s call it our *dramatis personae*, shall we?

“First off, let’s talk about Kaneya Yuuta. He’s at one end of the triangle at the base of this incident. As previously mentioned, he’s a real playboy! I’m pretty sure there’s not a single first or second year girl he hasn’t tried to lay his hands on. Heck, he’s even started going after the third years!” *Ari-san and I can both attest to that*, Gekihara added, the two girls sharing knowing smiles.

“I’ve never been approached by him,” Moribe pointed out.

“Of course you haven’t. Even a man such as him must know better than to try picking up a member of the Disciplinary Committee,” replied Sekimonji, crossing his arms.

“Anyway, it’s an undeniable fact that Kaneya-kun has left rivers of broken hearts in his wake. And it’s equally undeniable that there are plenty of people who hate him for it. Kaneya is a man of many enemies—Indeed, one of them sits before us right now.”

Hearing her meaningful comment, Araya raised an eyebrow. Seeing his reaction, Gekihara grinned widely as she continued, “Of course, I’m talking about our very own Araya-senpai. I think he’s made his distaste for Kaneya-kun very clear already—and you’ll find that he’s another of our three core cast members.

“But why exactly does Araya-senpai hate Kaneya-kun so much? Well, that, too, has an easy answer—It’s because of the third and final end of our triangle; Araya Ryuuo-senpai’s little sister, Araya Torayo.

“The story goes that when Kaneya-kun tried going after Torayo-chan, Araya-senpai had a big brawl with him and has hated

his guts ever since. And who could blame him? I'm sure no caring brother would want his cute sister being hit on by a lowlife like that."

"Hoh, so the big, tough Araya-kun has a soft side to him after all?" Damari's clear attempt at getting a rise out of him was met with silence, the man merely continuing to listen patiently.

"Anyway, now that we've set up the actors, there's one other piece of evidence I should put the spotlight on before we can move on." Saying so, Gekihara went back to her bag and pulled out a certain sheet of paper. "I'd like everyone to take a look at this. In case you've not seen it yet, this is the design featured on the wrapping paper that was used to package the box of chocolates."

The design in question was a continuous pattern of white vertical stripes with white hearts overlaid on top of them in alternating orientations, either upright or upside down, all against a light pink backdrop.

"Up until now the only questions that have been raised regarding this wrapping paper were practical ones, like who could have gotten their hands on it, but I'd like to take a closer look and ask why exactly this design was picked.

"At first glance, it just seems like a romantic design, like something you'd give to a lover, but looking at it more attentively leads to a very different interpretation: the hearts, all pierced through the middle by the stripes, leaving them broken in two—There's many conclusions you could draw from that, but in my opinion, the paper was meant to be a warning. A warning to Kaneya-kun, the heartbreaker, about the consequences that his actions might bring."

"—*Sigh*." A heavy exhale cut through Gekihara's explanation—its owner was, expectedly, Araya. "I thought I'd shut up and see where you're goin' with this, but clearly there's no point givin' ya the benefit of the doubt anymore." Shrugging his shoulders lethargically, lacking his usual bite, Araya predicted the remainder of his fellow Circle member's deduction. "Lemme guess, you're gonna accuse me of sendin' the bastard that box of chocolates?"

"Hmm? No, of course not. Don't be silly, Araya-senpai," Gekihara immediately replied.

"Hah?" Araya's self-assured expression faded away, his face morphing into a dubious frown.

“Someone like Araya-senpai would never think of an idea as subtle as signaling his intentions through the design of the wrapping paper,” she said, earning a nasty glare that she smoothly ignored. “No, more to the point, it’d be impossible for you to have done it. You were with me right here at a Crimes Circle meeting during the timeframe when the box was sent. I know for sure you weren’t the one to do it — And also, you’d just be too obvious a suspect. That’d be no fun!” Gekihara’s smug smile returned Araya to his previous state of silence.

“Well then, pray tell, Gekihara-kun, who in the world is the culprit in your view?” asked the president.

“Right, right, I was getting to that. Don’t go interrupting my pacing!

“*Ahem!* Anyway, as I was saying, the pattern on the wrapping paper spells out the motive pretty clearly. This is a threat, plain and simple. ‘If you continue as you have until now, I’ll do something even worse to you.’ Right after ruining his big game, that threat ought to have been quite convincing. Too bad Kaneya-kun turned out to be even more insensitive than our culprit expected.

“So, in summary, our culprit is motivated by passion, has a delicate hand and an eye for detail when it comes to planning, has access to the Arts & Crafts Club’s supplies, and, let’s not forget, is a part of the portentous triangle that I established earlier. With all this in mind,” Gekihara said, spreading her arms wide as she faced her audience, “I think it’s plain to see that there’s only one possible culprit in this case.”

No one in the room responded to her declaration, though their speechlessness was not one of ignorance, having already long understood where Gekihara was going. The awkward silence persisted for a few moments until Sekimonji finally took it upon himself to move the speech forward.

“So you mean to indict Araya’s sister, then?”

“That’s right! Our poisoner is none other than Araya Torayo-chan!” Gekihara declared, brimming with confidence. “Incidentally, she has no alibi during the gap between shifts. She simply claimed to have gone on a walk *all by herself*. Now isn’t that suspicious!”

“*Haaah?*” This time Araya appeared truly fed-up, a scowl on his face as he let out an incredulous cry. “Of all the ridiculous theories you

could've come up with, I didn't expect one this damn absurd. So what's her motive, then? Out to stop Kaneya from stompin' on more pure maidens' hearts?"

"She wouldn't commit a crime like this for a general reason like that. This incident is clearly personal, come on~, " the dramatist replied to his mocking question with a sigh. "I swear, Torayo-chan may have done something really bad, but I can't help but sympathize, having to deal with an older brother this dense."

"Tch. Stop beating around the bush and just say it, then!"

"Very well. I don't think it's my place to reveal something like this, but I suppose there's no other choice," Gekihara said with a solemn tone, before opening on an unusual note. "Kaneya-kun is known for playing with girl's hearts, as we've already noted. I think it's clear that he views women as nothing more than playthings. Still though, does that mean he feels no need for an emotional connection with anyone? Sure, he wouldn't be the first man like that, living merely for his own instincts and nothing more, but I'd like to propose that Kaneya-kun is a deeper individual than we've given him credit for.

"Kaneya-kun *does*, in fact, have a romantic side to him. However, he still shows nothing of that to the girls he takes advantage of. How do we reconcile these two facts? Simple! His drive for a sentimental relationship *is already being met!* Indeed, separate from the girls he uses to satisfy his carnal desires, Kaneya-kun is in fact committed to a secret lover! However, understanding that the scandalous nature of this relationship would lower his standing, he chose to keep it an absolute secret, never to reveal it to anyone else.

"Still, how is it possible to cover up that passion such that no one would realize the truth? Well, for that the two lovebirds cooked up quite the scheme. See, strong passion manifests itself in both love and hatred. So, all they had to do was outwardly pretend that they hated each other, and the public would be none the wiser. Their words of vitriol for one another would be like declarations of love, hidden in a language only they would know. In that sense, our secret lover would be someone simply unable to mention Kaneya-kun's name without throwing in an insult or two, simply unable to let even a moment go without asserting their hatred for him."

Gekihara's enthusiasm overflowing from her every pore, she stands up tall and points her finger at one of the individuals listening wide-eyed to her speech.

"Indeed, Kaneya-kun's secret lover is none other than you, Araya Ryuuo!"

After allowing a few silent moments to pass, Gekihara faced away from him, continuing her speech as she began circling the room. "That on its own would have been plenty dramatic, but this case is one that just keeps on giving. See, despite their best efforts to hide it, one person came to learn of this illicit relationship. With their meticulous precautions in place, it could only have been someone extremely close to one of the two—Yes, it was Araya-senpai's sister, Torayo-chan.

"Were she a normal little sister, she might have simply let things be, allowing her brother to indulge in his secret affair. However, the seeds of this unavoidable tragedy had already been planted long before this. Torayo-chan couldn't allow this relationship to stand—that's because, unbeknownst to anyone, she also held romantic feelings for her own brother!

"Indeed, that is the true nature of this case!" Arriving in front of the entrance, Gekihara turned around and spread her arms wide, as if encompassing all those present. "The beginning and the end, the beating heart of this affair is none other than Araya Ryuuo! A man cursed to bear the brunt of a forbidden love, unwittingly spawning a tragedy through his ignorance! That is all!"

Having concluded her performance at last, Gekihara gracefully bows to her audience. As the echoing embers of passion from her speech slowly peter out, the room's quietude delivers with it the illusion of dimming spotlights and of curtains being drawn.

4

"..." "..." "..." "..." "..." "..."

Though Gekihara's deduction had come to an end, no one in the room dared open their mouths. It was as if masks of darkness descended upon the faces of the spectators, their expressions

inscrutable, not one of them daring to move even a finger as they gazed downward.

Seemingly entirely undisturbed by this atmosphere, Gekihara Esuzu casually walked over to the couch where she'd previously been seated, an innocent smile on her face, and began to sip cheerfully from her cup of tea, softly exclaiming "Phew, my throat sure was parched after that!"

Upon hearing her murmur, all eyes instinctively darted toward one man—Araya Ryuuo. The room's occupants, Gekihara excluded, regarded this man the way one might a live grenade with its pin removed. Unbefitting their level of caution, however, Araya at last let out a sigh, gradually relaxing his body. As he leaned back into the couch, his head angled upwards, he closed his eyes. And he remained that way for a few moments, as if deep in meditation, in a realm removed from the material world. At last, having returned from his journey into the astral plane, Araya softly opened reawakened. Then, in a smooth motion, he turned to look at Shirahama's desk, and called out to him.

"Prez."

"What is it, Araya-kun?"

"May I chuck her out the window?"

"You may not."

The president's pronouncement acting like a trigger, Araya's face turned red like a tomato, veins popping from his forehead. Boiling in anger, he stomped over to where Gekihara sat. Out of the corner of his eye he could see Damari with her hand to her mouth, seemingly unable to hold in her laughter any longer, though by this point he was beyond caring about such details.

Standing just centimeters away from the dramatist, who was still casually sipping her tea, unbothered even as she bathed in the tall man's shadow, Araya glared at her with murder in his eyes. "Oy. What the hell was that, pipsqueak?"

"My deduction, naturally. Please pay attention when people are talking, Araya-senpai."

"I'm feelin' generous, so if ya admit to this just being a big joke, I'm willin' to laugh it all off, okay?"

“Rather than that, could you please move a little? You’re blocking the light.”

“Ggrrrgghh!” Letting out a strange screech of frustration, Araya yelled at the girl in front of him. “What the hell is wrong with you!? Me and that bastard Kaneya? Stop draggin’ me into your damn fantasies, you delusional bitch!”

“It’s no use pretending anymore, Araya-senpai,” Gekihara said, snickering amusedly. “I’ve exposed your tactics. I’m afraid you can’t hide it any longer!”

“Oh, oho, ohohoho, by the time I’m done with you, nobody’s gonna have time to care about that damn box of chocolates!” As if possessed, letting out a strange laugh, Araya seemed just about ready to dismember the smug specimen below his eyes.

“C-come now, let’s all just calm down, my fellows!” A bead of sweat running down his forehead, Shirahama panickedly ran between the two, trying to stop his Circle’s office from becoming a murder scene.

Meanwhile, the rest of those present viewed the scene with a variety of expressions on their faces. Damari was still trying to calm her laughter, Sekimonji and Moribe looked truly haggard as they sighed in exasperation at the chaos, while Kanshou’s face appeared devoid of emotion, the spectacle before him having perhaps crossed the limits of his ability to process it.

“Sigh.” Letting out another long exhale, Sekimonji called out to those with the leeway to hear it. “Do I really need to dignify that with a response? I can’t muster up the motivation to try refuting that...”

“Ah, no, Sekimonji-sensei, pff—” Still assailed by her unshakeable laughter, Damari took a few moments to finally calm down enough to speak. Wiping the tears from the corner of her eyes, she continued, “you don’t have to bother with that. As incredible as it was, I can do the honors of proving that theory wrong myself.” Composing herself and regaining her usual mysterious smile, she begins relating her testimony. “It’s true that Torayo-chan was taking a walk around 4:45 PM that day. I know because I saw her myself. Whenever I see that girl it always makes me think about how much cuter she is compared to her uncouth older brother, so I remember it

quite clearly. She must not have spotted me, so I guess that's why you didn't know, Esuzu-chan."

Although she was currently preoccupied with gazing at the rampaging delinquent in front of her, just barely held back from reaching her by a desperately struggling Shirahama, Gekihara still managed to catch Damari's confession, acquiescing, "Well, guess that idea was wrong then. Whoops, *tee-hee!*"

"Hahahah! Take that, you dumbass! Of course that moronic fantasy you call a deduction was all a bunch of bullshit!" Araya showed a victorious smile, slowing down his violent tempest, much to Shirahama's relief.

"Well, I mean, technically, my idea about you and Kaneya-kun still holds, you know~, " Gekihara added.

Araya's smile twitched as the vein on his forehead bulged once more. "— Seems like this little rat still hasn't learned her lesson!"

"Gekihara-kun, please!" Huffing and puffing as he struggled to keep Araya in place, Shirahama pleaded to the girl. "For the sake of your president's life, if nothing else!"

"Boooo!" She pouted, though relenting at last. "*Fiiiine*. I retract everything. I was toootally wrong!"

The life or death struggle finally abating, the atmosphere of the room relaxed. As everyone returned to their seats, Gekihara let out a brief grunt, having seemingly remembered something. Standing up, she went to her bag and brought out a certain object. "More importantly, here, everyone, have some of this!"

"Ooh!" It was a box of chocolates once again, though this time in the shape of a heart, akin to the kind given out on Valentine's Day.

"It's only right to follow the theme," Gekihara added, grinning. "Come on, don't hesitate, take one!" she said, pushing the box forward towards those who hadn't taken any piece.

As Kanshou hesitantly ate one of the chocolates, Araya absentmindedly spun the tiny chocolate held between his fingers, also shaped like a heart, vacantly looking at it, before finally sighing, "*Sigh*. Can't believe I actually took this shit seriously. If I knew my turn would be followed by this farce, I wouldn't've even bothered showin' up."

“Hey now, no need to sulk, senpai. We both did our best! Isn’t that what matters?”

“*That* was your best? I’d advise you to get your brain checked, if that’s the case. But I’m pretty sure all you tried doin’ was comin’ up with the most surprising idea possible.”

“Isn’t that obvious? The more surprising, the better! There’s no point if it’s not the most unexpected solution.”

“Nah, the world ain’t that interestin’. The most dull, banal theory is always the likeliest to be true,” Araya said, repeating a mantra of his.

“The truth is just anything people can manage to come up with that sounds correct. Whatever explanation happens to stick is just declared to be true, that’s all,” Gekihara replied, before standing up and trotting over to the window. “So it can’t be too much to ask for, for that explanation to at least be interesting, don’t you think?”

“If I’m given the chance, I’d prefer to believe that Jack the Ripper is an alien or a vampire. Even if I wind up proven wrong in the end, well, as long as I seriously bought it for even a second, isn’t that worth something?” The girl asked as she looked serenely out the window. “I know how boring the world really is. To the point that it’s hard to believe anything at all. When each day just flows into the next, it’s tough to believe you’re even alive.” Turning her head around to look directly at Araya, she declared, with a wide smile, “So that’s what a good surprise is for! Reminds you that you’re alive, here and now. Might as well enjoy the moment, don’t you think?”

“...” Araya silently gazed at the girl in front of his eyes, his expression inscrutable. Finally, with a scoff, he turned his head away from her and popped the chocolate in his hand into his mouth, chewing it loudly. Both Shirahama and Damari looked at him with wry smiles on their faces.

Walking back to her seat, Gekihara added out of nowhere, “By the way, my stance on mystery novels is that, as long as the solution is surprising and you can buy it without thinking too hard about it, it passes!”

“You’re going to piss off any serious fan of the genre with flippant comments like that,” Sekimonji commented on her non-sequitur.

“Ahem,” Moribe clears her throat, “I might add, a half-baked theory might be good enough for you, but we’re looking for the concrete truth here, so I’d appreciate it if you took this a bit more seriously going forward.” Her words remained polite, but all Gekihara could do was look away and whistle innocently as she was pelted by her upperclassman’s icy glare.

“Haha, now, now,” Shirahama tried placating her. “I don’t think you’ll have to worry about a lack of seriousness tomorrow evening, Moribe-senpai. Isn’t that right, Sekimonji-kun?”

“Naturally,” Sekimonji immediately replied. “I endeavor to leave no stone unturned, no possibility unchecked. I expect to have narrowed down our miscreant by this time tomorrow.”

“Well, that’s good to hear,” replied Moribe, seemingly satisfied for the moment. And with that, the day’s meeting was adjourned.

5

And so one deduction came to an end, inviting another to take its place. The truth was yet out of sight, no closer to materializing.

Gekihara Esuzu drew the curtains to her own play, satisfied with the showing. Had she learned that she was but an actor fed her lines on a stage grander than she could ever comprehend, she might’ve simply laughed it off and continued on dancing to the rhythm.

Thus, the chime of the clock tower’s bell signaled the end of the second turn. The Crimes Circle would keep on striving for an unreachable destination.

The Poisoned Chocolates Case was not yet over.



Day: Thursday

1

Sekimonji Shisai was, beyond all else, a man of logic. It was his way of life to ultimately always choose the most rational option in any given scenario, unencumbered by impulse or emotion.

Having become a successful author at a young age, it was undeniable that he was possessed of a powerful intellect. Yet beyond all else, it was his maturity, his ability to always make the correct decision, unswayed by sentiment, that invited his great success. It was this exceptional disposition that allowed him to lift his family out of poverty using the revenue from his novels, as well as to score within the fifth percentile on his entrance exams to Tokiwa Academy, granting both himself and his sibling the privilege of attending the prestigious school with heavily reduced tuition fees.

Given Sekimonji's nature, it was perhaps inevitable that he would become involved in the world of mystery novels. The genre, based on logic, deduction and the clever deception of the reader, was the perfect playground within which Sekimonji could apply his talents. His novels, featuring trendy, appealing characters embroiled in gripping plots with exhilarating twists, quickly rose to the ranks of best-sellers, some even being adapted into television dramas. Needless to say, Sekimonji's career was a great success.

It was then perhaps the height of irony that the mystery novels which had earned him wealth and glory were in fact what prevented him from achieving his true wish. Indeed, Sekimonji's passions lied

not with mystery novels but with a much less respected genre: light novels. He loved these nerdy, audience-gratifying low-brow entertainment novels more than any form of literature in the world! Yet despite this adoration, it was his own insurmountable logic that prevented him from ever pursuing them.

He knew that, had he decided to write the kind of novels he truly loved, he wouldn't be able to achieve any success, that he would remain an obscure author read only by a select few very particular fans. And so, he abandoned his heart's desire, exchanging the sword-wielding hero for the detective and the vile demon lord for the culprit as he wrote safe, sterile novels which he was sure would capture the ignorant masses.

Thus, Sekimonji chose to live a life of logic. He did so because he knew that if he allowed himself at this stage to be moved by his emotions, he would no doubt be swallowed by his hatred of anything and everything: his worthless books, the snobbish school he attended and even the empty, useless man named Kunugi Eisuke.

Yes, he had thrown away his emotions—but perhaps even he could not deny that part of him was driven by frustration. Frustration at the Circle member who'd spoken before him, who'd so mindlessly strung together leaps of logic in order to compose that farcical, impetuous deduction. Even though he'd only joined the Circle in order to research crimes and hone his craft, even though it was a logical decision that had nothing to do with enjoyment, there she was spouting nonsense like she was on top of the world, like she couldn't be happier. He couldn't help but resent that careless, free-spirited nature.

And so Sekimonji would retaliate—he would strike back with his most powerful weapon, the flawless, unsurpassable logic that had gotten him this far.

2

“—Even so, don't you think it's a bit too far, accusing one of our members like that?”

“Ahh, it's fine~! It was just a bit of showmanship. He's a good sport, he wouldn't let it get to him.”

The cheerful conversation between the two girls expunged the silence from the calm room used as the headquarters of the Crimes Circle. It was the Circle's female duo, Gekihara Esuzu and Damari Arisa, arriving earlier than usual in anticipation of the day's deduction speech.

"Besides, I know you got this in the bag, Ari-san. There's no point in me trying to pin down the truth by myself. So I thought I may as well have some fun with it!"

"Hey now, I never told you to do something like that. This exercise is worth more when we're all trying our best. You should learn from Araya-kun's example."

Gekihara chuckled at Damari's sardonic bit of advice. "It's *because* he's always so serious that he always ends up the butt of the joke. Really, he already looks like a deadbeat, so he should try taking it easy for once."

"Fufu, you shouldn't let his appearance fool you. Up until the end of middle school he was a short kid with a bowl cut, you know? I always thought that fit him more."

"Ha! You're kidding!" Gekihara burst into laughter at the mental image. "Not even my best costume designer can manage a transformation that drastic."

Unlike Gekihara or Sekimonji, who'd attended public middle schools and only joined Tokiwa Academy's high school department, both Damari and Araya had steadily climbed through Tokiwa's elementary and middle school departments, and they'd been placed in the same class more than once. As a result, Damari knew Araya well, and consistently pushing his buttons had been a personal project of hers for a long time now.

"Anyhow, putting me in charge of detective work was a bad idea from the start," added Gekihara. "You shouldn't put a creative in charge of figuring out the truth, okay? We're allergic to reality."

"I don't think Sekimonji-sensei would like hearing that. Especially since it's his turn today..." Damari pointed out with a strained smile as Gekihara proudly nodded to her own words. "But even then, while I appreciate your vote of confidence, I don't think you should call it my victory just yet, Esuzu-chan. There are plenty of

great minds in our humble little Circle. Like the president, or Sekimonji-sensei—or like the first year boy hiding back there.”

“Eh?”

Damari pointed towards the farthest bookshelf on the left side of the room. A few moments later, a boy sheepishly walked out from the other side, a nervous smile on his face.

“J-just so you know, I wasn’t trying to eavesdrop or anything. I just couldn’t find the right time to say hello...” Kanshou Kiskeya trailed off awkwardly, looking away from the two girls.

“Fufu, don’t worry about it.”

“Oh yeaah! Kanshou-kun, yours is the last turn, right? That means you’re going right after Ari-san,” Gekihara said.

“Yes, well... Don’t get your hopes up too much, please. I’m all out of good ideas. I don’t even know where to begin coming up with another theory,” Kanshou said, distraught.

“Heh heh heh, don’t feel too bad about it. It’s way too spartan, making the rookie follow up after the best mind in our Circle. The president really doesn’t know moderation, does he?”

“Still, I don’t think you have any reason to worry. When the time comes, I’m sure you’ll find your words.” Ignoring Gekihara’s cocky grin, Damari let out some uncharacteristically comforting words.

“T-thank you very much.” Unsure how to respond, Kanshou stuttered some overly-formal words of gratitude, his face red.

“Well, either way, before we need to worry about that, we have Sekimonji-sensei’s deduction to listen to,” Gekihara said, changing the subject. “I doubt a buzzkill like him can provide anything fun though~.”

“I wouldn’t be so sure of that, now.” Damari chuckled, her ever-mysterious smile widening slightly. “You’re the one who said it, Esuzu-chan—Creatives are allergic to reality, after all.”

3

“I won’t waste anyone’s time with pointless preamble. I’m starting. Everyone is fine with that, I imagine?”

As soon as everyone gathered in the Crimes Circle room at the appointed time, Sekimonji immediately got down to business.

“Of course,” said Moribe, her expression having softened slightly, perhaps relieved to be dealing with someone more rational this time.

“No issues here,” said Shirahama, grinning. “It seems you’re confident about this. That’s certainly good to see, Sekimonji-kun.”

“Confident or not, I just see no purpose in rambling formalities,” Sekimonji replied. “That said, I do at least believe my words here will be of some use to the investigation. More so than the previous two theories, at least.”

“Tch.” Araya clicked his tongue at the disdainful remark, while Gekihara just continued sipping on her tea with a gentle expression.

“All of the deductions shared thus far have been nothing more than guesses, just different ways to conveniently link the pieces of the puzzle,” Sekimonji began. “With a case like this, you could find a million different possible explanations, each seemingly valid at first glance. I don’t find it prudent to keep going on in this fashion.”

“What do you suggest, then?” Damari asked.

“Rather than starting from the conclusion, I’ve elected to closely analyze all of the facts once again in order to narrow down our list of suspects as much as possible. Of course, doing this has highlighted just how little we really know about this case.”

Moribe looked down for a brief moment, perhaps feeling personally apologetic at the Disciplinary Committee’s lackluster investigative results. Paying her no mind, Sekimonji continued.

“There are only three concrete, physical clues we can rely on: the window between shifts for the front desk at the Nijisou Dormitory, the wrapping paper from the Arts & Crafts Club, and the laxatives put inside the chocolates. That’s it. I can’t say I blame anyone for jumping to conclusions through circumstantial evidence given these conditions.

“First off, regarding the window between shifts, there are a few useful deductions we can draw from this. The window was between 4:45 and 5:00. At this time, most students would be taking part in club activities, meaning that most would have alibis. In other words, it’s not exactly advantageous for the culprit. But to look at it another way, given that most students would be off doing club activities at this time,

very few of them would have had the chance to even learn of this very convenient window of time.

“Next up is the wrapping paper. Truth be told, I think the value of this thing as a clue has been somewhat overstated. I understand the impulse to latch onto every bit of material evidence we have as the key to some major connection, but I think it might do more harm than good to obsess over it.

“The reality is that the wrapping paper, alongside plenty of other materials created by the Arts & Crafts Club, are freely available for all students to use. For instance, just the other day I was visiting my brother and I happened to notice that he had some of it lying around. In other words, it doesn’t really prove anything like the culprit having some relation to that club.”

“But wouldn’t the club president or whoever remember anyone that showed up and asked to take some of that paper?” Gekihara asked.

“No,” Moribe interjected, “The Arts & Crafts Club has a storage room where they put materials they no longer need. And anyone is free to enter that storage room and take whatever they want.”

“Precisely,” continued Sekimonji. “I think the wrapping paper could very well have been a red herring from the culprit. After all, why else utilize a material that could be used to identify you more easily? I can’t imagine our culprit being that careless.”

After Sekimonji’s decisive statement, the room was momentarily covered by a stiff silence, lifted only by a pointed question from Shirahama. “That’s all well and good, but Sekimonji-kun, if you say our most distinctive clue is functionally useless, what are we left with then?”

“When one man dies, another comes to take his place. Like cogs in a machine, this is the principle which keeps society moving steadily. And on this point, mysteries are no different. When one piece of the puzzle doesn’t fit, all we need to do is find another. There’s no such thing as a perfect crime; as long as it is the work of a human, a way to find the truth must exist.”

“Nice spiel, but d’ya got the evidence to back it up?” Araya asked dubiously.

“Naturally.” Sekimonji’s face was as stern as ever, but his eyes betrayed a dauntless intensity. “The fateful box of chocolates that

started this whole affair — As you know, the chocolates within were laced with laxatives, but doesn't it seem a bit careless to just leave it at that?"

"Hmm?" Moribe narrowed her eyes, raising one eyebrow.

"With a bit of help from the Science Club, I managed to narrow down the exact brand of laxatives used, from a wide selection of samples. The result was as I expected — and quite a telling one."

Sekimonji paused for a moment to take a breath. He looked nonchalant as he pushed up his glasses, but it was undeniable that a part of him was pleased at the enraptured audience before him, faces like those of a mystery reader hoodwinked by an unforeseen trick.

"The laxative in question was liquid in form. It's a rare brand, quite expensive and not commonly found in your average drugstore.

"—And it also happens that the medical cabinet at the Nijisou Dormitory has plenty of it in stock."

"Oh!" Sekimonji's listeners couldn't help but lightly gasp at this revelation.

Aside from accommodation and room service fit for a five star hotel, the Nijisou Dormitory also boasted its own nurse's office separate from that of the school's. Though, calling it a nurse's office might give the wrong impression, as in reality it was more like an entire clinic attached to the dormitory, where students could receive free consultations from a doctor who'd previously worked in the city's largest hospital.

"Frankly, I'd had a vague suspicion this might be the case. Truth be told, I've used this laxative before, and it was potent enough to come with a warning from the nurse." *The stress of being a best-selling author is no joke for one's bowel system, you see*, Sekimonji tacked on, an addendum none of those present particularly wanted to hear. "So as you might surmise, it's the perfect drug for giving someone a very bad day. Unfortunately for the culprit, for all their meticulous planning, they didn't take into account that it could be traced.

"I think it's beyond reasonable at this point to presume that our culprit is a resident of this very same dormitory. If only our previous esteemed speakers could have reached this same conclusion, we could have spared our ears from at least one pointless hypothesis."

The writer's hostile remark was met with a shameless grin and a wink, ineffectually bouncing off of Gekihara. Paying her no mind, Sekimonji continued.

"How about it? I won't claim I've definitively proven anything, but I'd say we've narrowed our range of suspects by quite a fair amount. I believe that alone should be quite helpful to the investigation."

"Indeed, that much is undeniable. Your hard work is much appreciated, Sekimonji-kun," said the president. Opposite to him, Moribe lightly nodded along, deep in thought, surely contemplating her next course of action.

"Well, some people here seem to believe we're running a circus, so I suppose I've failed to bring much entertainment value," Sekimonji quipped, a faint but undeniable prideful smirk coloring his typically joyless face.

"Aw, don't sell yourself so short, Sekimonji-sensei," Gekihara piped up. "No need to apologize yet—after all, that's not all, is it?"

"..." Sekimonji wordlessly glared at her.

"Gekihara-kun has a point. Your deduction so far has certainly been invaluable—but knowing you, I can't imagine you don't have a theory regarding the one behind this incident," Shirahama agreed.

"Hmph." Sekimonji furrowed his brows in consideration, before finally acquiescing. "Well, you're right. I have some ideas. I didn't plan on speaking about anything I wasn't certain of, but I suppose it can't hurt to take them into consideration."

"Yes, anything you can think of, please share," Moribe insisted.

"Very well." Sekimonji took a second to compose himself, before bluntly delivering his next statement. "One of the theories I had was that the crime was committed by the staff member in charge of the front desk."

"Hmm?" "Hoh." "Ooh!" His declaration elicited a number of reactions.

"That someone would be able to pinpoint the exact window between shifts to take advantage of, as well as skillfully avoiding every security camera on the way, while not impossible, is quite unlikely. On the other hand, the only thing that the person at the reception desk would have to do is prepare the box and then hand it over to Kaneya.

Of course, as someone working at the dormitory, they could also get their hands on the laxatives easily enough.”

“But why would they do such a thing?” Moribe asked.

“Who knows? You could imagine countless reasons. People who commit crimes aren’t thinking rationally in the first place. However, if I may offer up the most persuasive motive I can think of, then it’d have to do with Kaneya’s behavior. You should all understand by now how arrogant and rude he is to everyone around him. And of course, that doesn’t extend only to his peers. Even with good pay, I imagine it must be pretty hard for an adult to grin and bear being abused by a spoiled brat.”

“But wait, if the guy behind this wasn’t even a student, then how the hell’d he get his hands on that wrapping paper?” Araya asked.

“I believe their position presents a unique opportunity. After all, if they’re in charge of checking packages sent to the dormitory, then they might have encountered it there. Seeing a chance to misdirect us into thinking a student committed the crime, they quickly swapped the wrapping and kept it for themselves.”

“Hmm.” Shirahama seemed unconvinced.

“The idea of a non-student offender is certainly worth considering,” Moribe began, “but unfortunately, I don’t think the theory you presented is feasible. We made sure to look into the process they have for checking packages at the dormitory, and while it wasn’t enough to detect poisoned chocolates, it’s also not in the least careless. At least two people are in charge of thoroughly examining anything sent to the building at the same time. The culprit wouldn’t have had any opportunity to steal the wrapping paper.”

“And to begin with, how would an employee be able to recognize the significance of that paper anyway? Awful lotta coincidences you’d need to stack up to make that happen. Not exactly logical, eh?” Araya pointed out.

“Well, I agree that theory doesn’t carry much weight. I just thought it prudent to mention anyway,” Sekimonji said, unbothered, before pushing up his glasses and continuing, “Besides—there’s a much more likely solution to this case, as I see it.”

“Hah?”

“Of course, I’m talking about the culprit. You’ve noticed it too, right?”

Everyone in the room looked stumped, wondering exactly what answer Sekimonji was expecting. Finally, Moribe went forward and asked, “...Who are you talking about?”

“Really? The answer has been staring you in the face this whole time. I can’t believe you wouldn’t think of this.” Sekimonji’s tone was lighter than usual, though a clear sense of enmity could be heard from it. As for whom this antipathy was directed towards, it wasn’t quite clear.

Finally, sensing that no one would be uttering the answer he was looking for, Sekimonji took a deep breath, preparing to speak.

Then, his face twisted in disgust, like he’d just tasted something rotten. Finally, through gritted teeth, he let out his final indictment.

“I’m talking about myself, of course!”

4

“...” “...” “...” “...” “...” “...”

All anyone could do was stare in silence at this bewildering declaration. However, while Moribe was flabbergasted, the faces of the other Circle members contained a tinge of exasperation, as if embarrassed by a friend’s bad habit.

“What’s wrong? I’ve given you all the clues. I too live at the Nijisou Dormitory, and I’ve just told you that I had access to both the specific laxative used for the crime as well as that wrapping paper. If you think about it for a second, it’s obvious that I’m a prime suspect!” Sekimonji raised his voice, angrily reprimanding his listeners for their ignorance.

“Uhh, you say that, but...” Moribe tried piecing together something to placate the increasingly agitated man, but failed to come up with a fitting response.

“Not suspecting me just because I’m sitting here talking to you? Bah! Someone who can’t rationally consider all possibilities cannot be called anything except a failure of an investigator.”

“What about your motive?” Shirahama asked calmly, no longer fazed by his upperclassman’s erratic behavior.

“Motive, motive, always on about the damned motive,” Sekimonji grumbled out, “What’d I tell you earlier? Someone who would commit a crime like this couldn’t be acting rationally. Therefore, there’s nothing worth being called a motive.

“‘I did it because he was a waste of space who deserved it.’ There, does that satisfy you? Now on with it!” The writer yelled at Moribe.

“Um... What?” Far from a rigid enforcer of discipline, Moribe now looked no more dependable than a lost child as she tilted her head in confusion.

“What do you mean, ‘what’? I’m a criminal, didn’t you hear? Take me away!” Sekimonji thrust his balled hands forward, as if expecting her to pull a pair of handcuffs. “Expel me, incarcerate me, execute me! I’ll take whatever punishment a loathsome wrongdoer like me deserves, so just hurry it up!”

“...” Moribe now just looked in concern at the pitiful man breaking down in front of her.

“Khhhhhh! Why won’t you just...! Why won’t anyone just...!” Bursting into tears while gritting his teeth, Sekimonji slid to the floor, curling up into a ball and crying out curses. “Why is everyone so incompetent! A useless fraud like me just deserves to be hurt and degraded, so why won’t anyone do it! Damn it! Damn it all!”

By the end, Sekimonji’s furious rant just devolved into incoherent mumbling choked out in between the heavy sobbing. At some point, Kanshou stood up from the couch and crouched down beside Sekimonji, patting him on the back while muttering “There, there.” Meanwhile, the rest of the Circle members either watched the wailing Sekimonji amusedly or shot the still horribly confused Moribe a sympathetic smile.

“I guess you could call it impostor syndrome? His brain can’t reconcile the fact that he’s achieved such success, so sometimes his self-hatred overflows and he has a mental breakdown,” Damari explained casually, clearly finding Sekimonji’s affliction somewhat humorous. “I guess the root cause is having to write shallow novels just to gain sales. Still, you’d never expect it, given how arrogant he usually is, fufu.”

“Really though, they come at such random times. You never know when he’s gonna go crazy like that. It keeps you on your toes, for sure. He really has a flair for the dramatic in that sense,” Gekihara added.

“Huh...” Moribe gave a vague grunt of understanding, her brows furrowed. Inwardly, she couldn’t help but exclaim, *Is there anyone normal in this godforsaken Circle*, though she tried not to let the sentiment show.

Quickly getting the emotions out of his system, Sekimonji soon regained his composure, and just a few minutes after his outburst he was seemingly entirely back to normal, showing no sign of distress.

“I seem to have acted irrationally. My apologies.” And with that terse acknowledgement he settled everything, his face showing no trace of embarrassment or shame. If nothing else, his ability to shove a surge of emotions that powerful under the rug like it was nothing was certainly worthy of respect.

“Understatement of the century right there,” said Araya, cackling, though Sekimonji just ignored him.

“Well, I doubt there’s any real need to do this, but just for the sake of keeping form,” began Shirahama, “Sekimonji-kun couldn’t have been the culprit in this case. The reason being, he was right here with us during the timeframe when the box was sent. We can all vouch for your alibi.”

“Right,” the writer assented. “I formally retract my theory.”

Moribe couldn’t keep her eyelids from twitching as she watched the bizarrely solemn exchange.

“Right...” Heaving a deep sigh, Sekimonji once again spoke up “Though this wasn’t the original intention, I’ve brought something to compensate for my inadequate showing.” Leaving it at that, Sekimonji went for his bag and took something out from it—a box of chocolates.

“Ooooh!” Gekihara greedily eyed the treat. “I wasn’t planning to complain about a spectacle, but if you’re gonna be this generous, then I’d say you should have mental breakdowns more often!”

“That kinda comment shows why you’re gettin’ fat, ya know?” Araya commented with a smirk.

“Hmph. And those kinds of uncouth comments are why girls hate you!” Gekihara pouted, uncommonly affected by his condescending remark.

Not minding the two, Sekimonji placed the box on the table and opened the lid. The box contained about twelve rectangular pieces of dark chocolate, neatly arranged in two rows. If she’d been shown the box just half an hour earlier, Moribe might have thought that it fit Sekimonji’s personality, but now she wasn’t quite so sure.

“...Oh well, I guess what matters is that we got some new information.” Muttering that to herself, Moribe decided to shrug everything off. She wouldn’t get anywhere if she let herself get caught up in all the Circle members’ eccentricities.

“Sure you don’t want another one, Kanshou-kun?”

“N-no, please go ahead and take it, Shirahama-senpai.”

Eyeing the box of chocolates cautiously, Moribe finally decided to just go with the flow and grabbed one of the remaining pieces, unceremoniously taking a bite out of it.

“...Too bitter for my taste.”

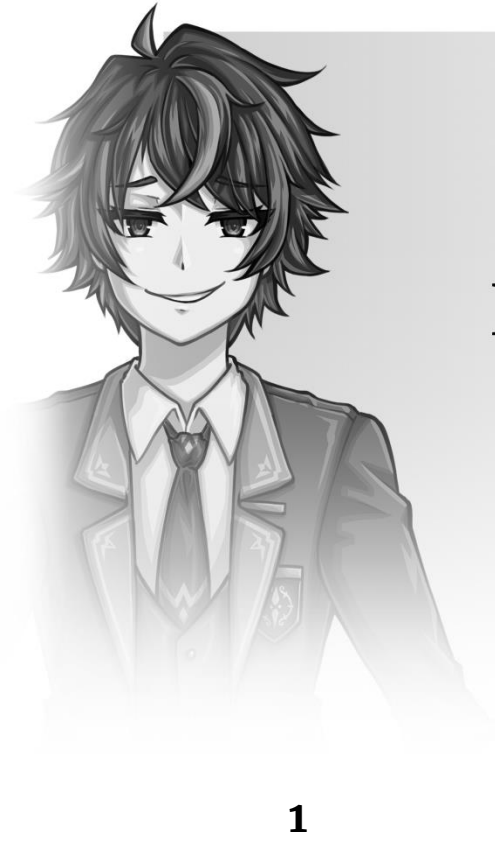
5

And so one deduction came to an end, inviting another to take its place. The truth was yet out of sight, no closer to materializing.

Sekimonji Shisai wielded logic as his sword and reason as his shield in order to triumph against the world, but in the end, the irrationality of his own heart had destroyed him from within. Without being able to meet the world’s insanity head-on, the poor fool had no shot of ever solving this affair.

Thus, the chime of the clock tower’s bell signaled the end of the third turn. The Crimes Circle would keep on striving for an unreachable destination.

The Poisoned Chocolates Case was not yet over.



Day: Friday

1

Approximately half an hour before the appointed meeting time, the Crimes Circle room was dead silent. The only sound that found its way in came from outside the window, from the many sports clubs diligently practicing on the school grounds.

However, that silence did not imply that the room was empty—in fact, there were currently two occupants waiting here.

Sitting on opposite couches, directly facing one another, were Kanshou Kisuke and Araya Ryuuo. An odd pair by anyone's standards, and clearly not one that manifested any sort of lively conversation.

In truth, Kanshou wanted to try talking to Araya, but the young man was already hopelessly timid around anyone, let alone this particular upperclassman, who seemed liable to bite his face off for bothering him, a mental image that kept Kanshou firmly in check.

Thus, the silence stretched on for a while, with Kanshou fidgeting awkwardly and Araya lounging about with a bored expression on his face, until it was at last broken by the sound of the door opening.

"Hoh, already here? I see you two are eager to hear today's deduction. That's very heartening indeed." The intruder was none other than Shirahama Ryoukai, the president of the Circle. Kanshou couldn't remember any time when he'd been gladder to see the arrival of this overly talkative man.

“Don’t flatter yourself too much. I just didn’t have anythin’ better to do,” Araya spat out.

“Oh, but that’s flattering enough already. To think my humble little deduction would be the best entertainment option currently available to a man such as yourself, it’s nothing short of an honor. I’ll make sure to live up to it.”

“...Hmph.” Shirahama’s perpetually grandiose manner of speech made it difficult to tell whether he was being genuine or condescending, so Araya just scoffed and looked away.

A smile still plastered to his face, Shirahama walked past the two and settled in front of the window, overlooking the bustling club activity outside.

And then a few minutes passed by without a word once more. Just as Kanshou began to worry that he would be stuck in a perpetual awkward silence forever, Shirahama called out again, without turning around.

“Out of curiosity, what do you think about these deductions? Do you think we’re getting any closer to the truth like this?”

“Heh, no point askin’ me, at least. I’m one of the losers, after all,” Araya sarcastically pointed out.

“But that’s precisely why I’d like to know your answer, Araya-kun,” Shirahama responded emphatically. “You came up with a theory which you firmly believed to be the truth, and yet it was refuted just like that. I’d like to know the perspective of someone who’s experienced that.”

“...” Araya glared harshly at the president for a while, before seemingly giving up and shrugging. “Hell if I know. Maybe someone smarter than me will figure it out?”

“I see. And what about you, Kanshou-kun?” Shirahama turned his head to look at the first-year boy.

Kanshou looked down, thinking for a few moments before saying, “...I-I’d like to think that if we all work together, we can figure it out.”

“Hah! Just the kinda opinion I’d expect from someone who’s useless on his own,” Araya interjected with a mean-spirited cackle.

"I wouldn't recommend underestimating others, Araya-kun," chided Shirahama. "But I see. Collaboration, huh. I suppose that's a valid way of thinking—"

Shirahama trailed off, starting out the window for a few moments, before bluntly putting forth his next statement.

"—But if you ask me, I think we'll never find the truth of this case."

This declaration of defeat, uttered without a trace of frustration or any other kind of strong emotion, stunned the two young men for a moment.

"...What, you givin' up already?" asked Araya.

"No, no, of course, I have a deduction that I intend to present here today, a deduction I am quite confident about," Shirahama assured. "However... I have a feeling that it won't hold. Just like the others before it, it'll crumble into dust soon enough."

"Well, I dunno, just sounds like you have a shitty theory you don't believe in enough. Don't blame anyone else for that."

"But how can we know the truth? We're just outsiders, just amateurs without a stake in anything. How can we know that we aren't just spinning plausible fantasies to satisfy ourselves?"

Araya stood up from his sofa and glared at Shirahama's back, growling out in a low voice, "Listen, if you're here just to spit out pointless bullshit, have at it, but speak for your damn self. When I say somethin', I mean it."

"I don't mean to imply anything of the sort. I know you gave it your all in coming up with a deduction you fully believed in. I did the same," Shirahama continued, unfazed. "But when your deduction was disproven, was anything hurt except your pride?"

"..." Araya had no response to his question.

"Truth should be something a lot more meaningful than that. What we want isn't the truth, it's just a convenient explanation. One that fits all of the facts, that doesn't violate our common sense, that we can just file away somewhere and be done with it. If this were any old case, it'd just end there. But it seems like we don't have that luxury now.

"So long as the truth remains out of sight, we'll just be piling up empty explanations like stones on the banks of hell."

“...” “...” Both Kanshou and Araya remained silent, with no idea how to interpret or respond to the statement of their smiling leader.

“...So, what then?” Having finally mustered up the will to say something, Kanshou asked that simple question, uncertain what kind of answer he was even looking for.

However, just then, before Shirahama could form any sort of response, another sound rippled through the mysterious atmosphere inside the room. As everyone turned to the door, they saw Moribe come in, suitably early as always. Acknowledging the three young men, she gave a curt bow.

“Ahh, Moribe-senpai, good timing!” Shirahama piped up, walking over to her from his spot near the window. “Regarding that thing I asked you about before, did you find anything?”

“Right.” Expecting the question, Moribe quickly gave her report. “Apparently it’s true. Fukusen-kun and Kiyozumi-san had a picnic date that day.”

“Heheh, just like I thought.” Having apparently come to some kind of conclusion, Shirahama chuckled to himself, before turning around to look at Kanshou, the unshakeable grin still on his face. “To answer your question, Kanshou-kun—Then, nothing. We shall continue as we have been, piling up stones. That’s what the Crimes Circle is for, after all.”

2

“Welcome, welcome.” All the seats in the room having been filled, it was time to start the meeting. “My deepest gratitude for your time. I’ll do my utmost to make it worth your while.” Standing in front of his desk with his hands clasped behind his back, Shirahama addressed Moribe and the Circle members in an overly formal manner.

Then, he casually sat down on the sizable wooden desk behind him, pushing some papers out of the way before continuing, his chin in his palm and his lips stretched in an inscrutable smile.

“You know, ever since I was born, I’ve always felt like I could get my hands on anything I wanted. There’s never been anything entirely out of reach for me. Sure, if I’d wanted the moon, I probably wouldn’t be able to make it mine, but fortunately, or perhaps unfortunately,

I've never been greedy enough to try asking for it. But conversely, knowing that anything I could ever desire would easily become mine, I wound up not really desiring much of anything at all." Shirahama leaned back, propping up his upper body with his arms and shifting his gaze to the ceiling. "Maybe that's why I've always liked cold cases. The truth is forever out of reach. Whether I want it or not, there's nothing to be done. You know, just like the poisoned chocolates case of 1929. Exciting, isn't it?" Lowering his head to face the audience once more, Shirahama changed his tone. "Well, all that is to say, I'm here right now in order to lay my grubby hands on another case's truth. Whether it'll surrender itself to me that easily, or whether it'll keep eluding me for an eternity to come, I guess we'll find out soon enough. Either way, I doubt I've any need to worry about robbing my fellow Circle members of things to say going forward," Shirahama said as he looked at Damari sitting to his right, who returned him a confident smile.

And then, bringing his palms together, the president wrapped up his speech. "With all that said, I believe there's no need to keep you waiting any longer." Widening his arms, as if to embrace the entire world within his grasp, he declared, "let the fourth turn begin!"

3

"If you had to put it in a word, what do you think is the core of this case?" Shirahama began with that rhetorical question. "Over the course of this week, our members have posed various answers to this question. Love, self-interest, disdain—all valid explanations in their own right. But if you ask me, the root cause is something completely different: justice.

"The reason why we've all gathered here today is to help bring justice to the victims of this incident. Nominally, at least. Of course, I think I can speak for everyone here when I say that our true desire is just to kill time in an entertaining fashion, but, well, let's not downgrade the sanctity of this ritual." Shirahama's smile remained unfaltering, even as he was assailed by an icy glare from Moribe. "But even so, given that fact, I think it's worth examining this notion of justice just a little bit.

“Let’s suppose for a moment that Kaneya was targeted for the sake of justice. He’s certainly no saint, that much we’ve established, and him being targeted by someone with a personal vendetta is a very real possibility, but what about an unrelated third party seeking to punish him in the name of justice? Sounds a lot less likely, right? He may be a bad guy, but well, in the grand scheme of things, he’s a forgettable, commonplace kind of bad guy. I can think of plenty others worse than him just from this academy alone. If he’s done some kind of awful crime that none of us know about then it’s a different story, but I feel like one of us would have found out about that over the course of the investigation had it been the case. So ultimately, it’s hard to see some vigilante targeting him of all people.” Shirahama, perhaps treating his deduction the same way he would a ceremonial speech, monologued like a storyteller, throwing out questions without any room for answers.

“At least,” he added, raising a finger and pointing it upwards, “That’s the sensible, rational, commonsensical take. But too much common sense can be a liability. Sometimes it’s not enough to clear the path to the truth—Sometimes all it does is further obscure it.”

“If you wanna take it that way, we also had plenty of theories completely lackin’ in common sense. Sure didn’t bring us closer to anythin’ now, did they?” Araya interjected pointedly.

“Certainly, that’s true. Therefore, though it’s a tall task, I’ll try to skirt the fine line between the extremes. I can only hope that will be enough to finally lead us to our goal.” Though his words were humble, his smile was confident.

Having sufficiently set the scene, Shirahama made eye contact in turn with everyone in the room before continuing his explanation. “So let’s assume that Kaneya was targeted in order to satisfy someone’s sense of justice. Why him, then? By what moral code was he judged?

“Well, to answer that question, we should establish just what it is that’s so different between Kaneya and any other fleabag in this academy. Well, what do you all think?”

“I dunno, instead of having a superiority complex over his daddy’s money, he has one over his ability to throw a ball?” Araya suggested.

“Talent over wealth, that’s one thing.”

“He doesn’t hide behind superficial politeness like an heir would?” Sekimonji asked.

“Indeed, that’s part of it.”

“In other words, you just mean that he doesn’t have any status, right?” Damari reasoned.

“Precisely!” Shirahama pointed at her, looking pleased. “Kaneya got into Tokiwa Academy through a scholarship offer because of his outstanding performance in sports, as part of the recent program to accept gifted students that would normally never be able to afford the tuition fees. And among those elite few, Kaneya was so proficient that he managed to get into the Nijisou Dormitory, a feat that I’m sure Sekimonji-kun can attest to as being an extraordinary one. In other words, Kaneya is something this academy has never seen before. Not here, where only the sons and daughters of influential families used to be allowed.

“So then, how do you figure these privileged youths will react to a commoner barging into their most sacred space and acting even more arrogantly than they do?”

“You sure talk like you’re not one of them, huh?” Araya pointed out.

“I pride myself on being down to earth.” Shirahama said with a wink.

“So in other words, you’re suggesting that Kaneya was targeted because he wasn’t a part of the high class that makes up most of Tokiwa Academy?”

“Indeed. I have to imagine that those who reside at the Nijisou Dormitory view it as the greatest status symbol. In other words, even among these high class ladies and gentlemen, they would be the most extreme. And when those with extreme mindsets set about to enact justice, you end up with situations like these.”

“Hurting someone for the sake of your own self-satisfaction can’t be called justice.” Moribe let out that proclamation in a controlled, yet nonetheless resolute tone.

“I’ve no doubt you sincerely believe that, and I don’t intend to contradict you. But even if you believe that, I have a hard time imagining that most of the Disciplinary Committee, itself made of the very same rich kids we’re talking about, will all concur.”

“...” Moribe looked down, Shirahama’s merciless comment having clearly pained her. After a few moments, though, she raised her head, and shot back, “Be that as it may, I vow that I will do everything in my power to bring the culprit to justice. Who they are doesn’t matter to me.”

Shirahama smiled gently. “I didn’t expect anything else from you. Best of luck to you, though I really don’t envy your position.”

“Tell me, then.” Moribe ignored the president’s flippant attitude. “Who do you say is the culprit? You must have an answer to that question, right?”

“Of course!” Having just been asked the question of the night, the question he’s been waiting for, Shirahama’s grin widened. Spreading his arms dramatically, he delivered unto his audience the answer. “None other than the most pure-hearted and just person in this academy. Who else would take it upon themselves to eliminate the perceived unworthy from their midst? I speak, of course, of the school idol and our paragon of virtue herself, Kiyozumi Juna.”

Everyone’s surprise was evident. They’d all clearly been blindsided by this answer.

“Uh, what the hell are you on about? Isn’t she supposed to be the ultimate goodie two-shoes?” Araya asked, bewildered.

“Sure. From the perspective of the aristocratic denizens of this academy, she is. And she’s only lived up to her name by enacting their definition of righteousness. I imagine that if the story broke out, quite a few people would call her a hero.”

“Kiyozumi-san has an alibi during the gap between shifts. We questioned both her and Fukusen-kun separately, and their accounts matched up,” Moribe countered.

“Sure, after allowing them to get their stories straight, I assume. Not like you could force them to do otherwise.”

“Are you suggesting that Fukusen-kun was an accomplice?”

“Not initially, no. But if she asked him to help corroborate her alibi afterwards, I highly doubt he’d refuse. They are the Academy’s famous star couple, after all.”

“If Kiyozumi is so dedicated to getting rid of outsiders, then why hasn’t she shown any such discriminatory behavior before? Why only target Kaneya? Sure, he might be the worst, but I can’t imagine she would limit herself to him.” Sekimonji argued.

“Oh, except she has shown it. I imagine Kaneya was the only one bad enough to warrant a personal punishment, but Kiyozumi Juna has spared no effort in trying to get rid of all so-called ‘commoners’ from Tokiwa Academy.

“—After all, that’s exactly what she was trying to do on the very day her poisoned chocolates were supposed to punish Kaneya.”

“What?”

“You remember that, on that day, Kiyozumi was supposed to give an important speech at an event that she wound up missing, right? Well, I don’t blame you for not knowing any more than that. This is only something I managed to find out through my connections, after all.

“But, you see, the speech she was supposed to give there was addressed to the board of directors of Tokiwa Academy, at an event personally organized by her family to discuss their upcoming ‘donations’ to the school. And the subject of her speech was about how the scholarships granted by the school should be put to an end immediately. Surely for some reason like ‘damaging the sanctity of the school environment’.”

“Eh!?” Gekihara couldn’t help but exclaim.

“I know, right? Quite the radical, that little lady. She didn’t just want the scholarship programs to be closed for the following generations, she also wanted to revoke the privileges of those currently benefiting from them. Of course, considering the ridiculous tuition fees here, that’d surely lead to most such students being forced to transfer.”

All those present stirred at this damning revelation. It seemed they were beginning to accept the president’s theory.

“But, but! If Kiyozumi-san set all this up, how come she ended up eating her own poisoned chocolates? Shouldn’t she have at least avoided them or noticed that they were the same?” Gekihara asked, her head having clearly been sent spinning by the unforeseen revelation.

“Hmm? Why, Gekihara-kun, I figured that, out of anyone, you’d be able to appreciate a bit of irony as juicy as this. Fact of the matter is, for someone like Kiyozumi, sabotaging Kaneya wasn’t anything of note, no more significant than swatting a fly. She wouldn’t give it a second thought. She might have put in the minimum amount of preparation, but it wasn’t out of any sense of vigilance, but rather just to keep up appearances. After she left that package on the front desk of the dormitory, I doubt Kaneya even crossed her mind again. So when it came to her beloved boyfriend hand-feeding her chocolates during their picnic date, of course she’d accept. Why should she have anything to worry about, when the world is on her side?”

“At least, that’s how I imagine her thinking went. Well, either way, I don’t know about justice, but I guess we can call that a bit of well-deserved karma, huh?”

4

For a time, the room sat still, allowing Shirahama’s words to settle, pushed down by the dense silence and seeping into the hardwood floor below. His eyes closed, the president appeared to soak in the contemplative atmosphere. After a few moments though, he suddenly jerked back into motion, as if remembering something.

“Ahh, yes, that’s right. I’ve brought an offering for you all. Phew, I almost forgot.” Saying that, he turned to his desk and brought something out from within. As he gathered everyone’s silent gaze, he put the rectangular object on the table. Predictably, it was a box of chocolates.

“I couldn’t pass up the opportunity. Please, help yourselves. Don’t worry, these ones aren’t poisoned,” he added with a wink. The box was an ornate one, sporting shiny golden accents throughout its cream-colored base, atop which the name of a luxury brand was inscribed. Inside was an assortment of different types of chocolate, various rich, opulent shades arranged neatly, enough to satisfy anyone’s tastes.

Shirahama presented the box to everyone, urging them to partake. With the exception of Kanshou, who politely refused, everyone took a piece for themselves, eating it in silence. The

president's generous gift did nothing to dispel the strange mood that had settled upon the room.

From amid the withdrawn participants, a single voice cut through the morose tension, questioning the day's orator with a tinge of pity in its tone.

"Is that really what you're going with, president Shirahama?" The voice belonged to the bewitching bespectacled lady of the Crimes Circle, Damari Arisa.

"Oh? Do you have some problem with my theory, Damari-kun?" Shirahama's thin smile never wavered; his gaze was aimed at her, and yet it seemed like his eyes registered nothing, absorbing all light like the starless night sky.

"No, not at all. Only, it just seems to me like you're deliberately trying to sap everyone's hopes of this case ever being solved."

Looking around the room, everyone seemed lacking in vitality, not least of all Moribe, whose typically strong-willed expression darkened in resignation—the sentiment was clear. Not one of them truly believed in the theory that had just been proposed, but more than that, they had now begun doubting whether any truth would be reached at all. That a piece of reasoning as circuitous as this one had been seriously brought to consideration, and by their president, no less, served as the clearest sign of all that their experiment was going nowhere.

"I have no idea what you're talking about. I find this idea plenty believable! Much stranger things have happened in the field of criminology, as I'm sure you know."

"Very well." Damari closed her eyes for a moment, before directing a composed smile at Shirahama. "Then allow me to refute this theory of yours. I am next in line to speak, after all."

"Go right ahead. The floor is yours."

"Shirahama-kun, you fail to understand people in any meaningful capacity. I won't insult you by claiming it's due to your status—after all, you fail to understand even those who enjoy the same privileges as you." The young man in question leaned back in his chair and whistled at this blunt and harsh appraisal. "You tried to justify your hypothesis through some form of psychological analysis,

but I'm afraid it doesn't hold any water. Not for Kiyozumi Juna, and not for any other so-called 'elite'.

"As long as they have a means of reaching their desired end, someone of Kiyozumi's standing would never get their hands dirty directly. Not while being drunk on their own sense of justice. That's because to them, the act of following their established laws, regulations and forms of etiquette is itself what gives them the right to consider themselves above others. Kiyozumi had her method of eliminating those she saw as beneath her, a method that went through all the proper channels—so long as that is true, she would never lower herself by employing the barbaric ways of her lessers.

"That is why Kiyozumi Juna cannot be the culprit in this incident. Though of course, you wouldn't have thought of it like that. After all, you can't quite understand why anyone would commit a crime in the first place, can you?"

The pinpoint accuracy of Damari's comments, the way the intense irises behind her spectacles could seemingly see right through you—these boons of hers were enough to make a grown man feel like a helpless child, but Shirahama merely let out a healthy laugh in response. "How unlucky, to be forced to speak right before you. I just can't win against you." He spoke, seeming genuinely delighted at her counterargument. "My little Circle is hardly deserving of a wit like yours, Damari-kun."

"No need for flattery, president."

"No, no, I'm being genuine here." Shirahama's eyes glided over the room's scenery—the occupied couches, the ample bookshelves, the desk covered in random papers—before finally settling back on Damari. "So then, do you intend to end all this yourself tomorrow?"

"It's never my intention, nor my right, to end anything. I'll just take a little guess at what might lie in someone's mind. If something is to end after that, it'll be on them."

"Wonderful. I couldn't have asked for anything better. In that case, I eagerly await tomorrow's gathering. And with that, I believe tonight's meeting should be coming to an end. Anyone have anything more to add?"

Shirahama's question went unanswered. Gekihara looked back and forth between the president and Damari. Kanshou shivered lightly.

The spectators to the earlier exchange could not claim in confidence that they fully understood it, yet nonetheless they were rooted to their seats, nervous, like they'd been onlookers to a war negotiation.

5

And so one deduction came to an end, inviting another to take its place. The truth was yet out of sight, no closer to materializing.

No sooner had another deduction been put together than it was immediately destroyed. And so the deductions came, one after another, all clawing at the empty air, failing to grab hold of anything. Again and again and again and again, weightless deductions would come and go, galloping forth like the horses of a carousel, destined to return to the very same place. This sleepless, farcical parade was not yet over.

The Poisoned Chocolates Case was not yet over.



Day: Saturday

1

For as long as she could remember, Damari Arisa had liked watching people. There was nothing more to it than that. She liked watching them talk, watching them think, watching them work hard, watching them laze around, watching them fret over their problems, or watching them enjoy the moment carefreely. She had no deeper motivation, and there was nothing she looked for in particular. It was perhaps that absence of bias, that pure, unblemished curiosity, that allowed her to truly understand people for who they were.

Most are too concerned with themselves to ever really pay attention to others. They only look at people when they seek something—be it material or emotional. It is this fundamental disinterest which leads to the fractures between people, the misunderstandings and the inability to coexist with one another. Unhindered by such desires, Damari could easily comprehend other people's feelings, intuit their intentions, guess their secrets, or even predict their next moves.

When she absentmindedly advised her father on how to persuade an important business associate to accept a deal, she did so without really thinking about it. She had just happened to notice, and just happened to tell him about it. Of course, the hunger in her father's eyes told her this would lead to him depending on her, but she didn't particularly mind that, either. And so, idly, passively, she grew her

dad's already successful business into an empire, all the while conditioning him to always dance atop the palms of her hands.

Yet none of this was of any particular note to Damari. Had she some kind of goal she wanted to accomplish, she might have no doubt become a terrifying force as she bent everyone to her will, but the young woman had no such ambition. If there was anything resembling that inside of her, then it could be called a longing. Or, more accurately, a feeling of dissatisfaction, slowly but surely growing. While her fascination with people had remained unchanged, she had begun to tire of all the mundane individuals around her. For how profoundly different and unique people could be, the ones clustered around her tended to be the same sorts—egocentric men and women of status, overly concerned with their appearances, lacking any kind of notable drive besides just maintaining and growing their riches. Such superficial people wouldn't satisfy Damari's appetite for very long. She'd discovered an entertaining boy among the trite students at her school, but he alone wouldn't be enough for her either. And so, soon enough, she found an avenue through which she could explore much, much more interesting specimens.

Criminology presented a clear window to the most extreme mindsets humanity has to offer. Often those that end up committing violent crimes are those lacking some kind of fundamental balance, unable to walk the path of common sense. Such people were always interesting for Damari to read about, and as she grew more and more tired of the mediocre masses around her, she only gravitated more and more towards these fascinating individuals. When she learned of the existence of the Crimes Circle, her joining was an inevitability.

And be it an old criminal case that she studied, or the current affair regarding the poisoned chocolates, Damari's primary concern remained the same. If anything, the current arrangement was one that benefited her greatly. Whenever she researched a past crime, her one regret was that she had no way of directly interacting with the criminal, of being able to see into their hearts for herself. And so this present commotion was her perfect chance to finally be able to examine one such culprit with her own eyes.

Whichever way this case went next, and whatever its eventual conclusion might be, it was sure to be a fruitful time.

Moribe, vice-chairwoman of the Disciplinary Committee, walked briskly through the spacious halls of Tokiwa Academy, her steps heavy and purposeful. Though she was in a hurry, she made sure not to break into a jog, as that would violate school regulations.

“Not gonna stop to say hello, Moribe-senpai?”

As she rounded a corner, a voice stopped her in her tracks. She briefly debated with herself whether or not to respond to the irritating call, but ultimately turned her head and brusquely addressed the boy leaning against the wall.

“I don’t have time to chat with you, Shirahama-kun. I have something to attend to.”

“If you mean the matter with the vandalism in the second gymnasium storage room, I’ve already informed the committee chairman when he passed by here earlier that Horonobe from class 2-D was responsible. They should be wrapping that up right about now, I believe.”

“...” Moribe leveled a nonplussed stare at the smug-looking younger boy behind her, then ultimately heaved a sigh and fully turned around to face him. “If only you brought that kind of efficiency to the table for our chocolate conundrum too...”

“Ah, yes, that’s just what I wanted to ask about. Have you come to regret asking us for help at this point?” Shirahama asked, wearing a wide smile for some reason.

“I come to regret most of my interactions with you and your bunch. But I already knew that before I went to you.” Moribe rubbed her temple, as if nursing a headache. “What, are you already giving up? Isn’t that selling your friends who haven’t spoken yet a little short?”

“I’m doing nothing of the sort. Damari-kun especially is probably the brightest mind in our Circle. But I’m sure that must feel like cold comfort after all the failed deductions we’ve gone through.”

“It doesn’t matter. I’ll wait as long as it takes for this case to be concluded. I’ll see it through to the end.”

“Haha, dedicated as always. Do you really think justice will win out in the end?”

“It must. The weight of sin is impossible to bear forever. It might take a long time, but ultimately, something will have to give. And that’s when justice will be served.” Moribe closed her eyes and crossed her arms as she delivered that assertion.

“What’s that, karma? Surprisingly idealistic, coming from you. Ever since we met, I’ve only ever seen you go on about proof and law and all that,” Shirahama remarked, before suddenly making an uncertain face, holding his chin as he questioned, “Come to think of it, how did we first meet again?”

“That doesn’t matter right now,” Moribe replied tersely. “Even though you might have given up on solving this case, you should know that other people are still working tirelessly. For some of us, this isn’t just a game.” With that, the vice-chairwoman turned her back on the boy behind her and prepared to leave.

“That really upset you, huh. My apologies. I certainly don’t intend to demean your work.” Shirahama attempted to placate Moribe, though the smile never left his face.

However, before she could take off, a new voice ringing out from behind her stopped Moribe in her tracks.

“‘Working tirelessly’, huh. It looks to me like all you’re doing is waiting for something, though, Moribe-san.”

“...” Moribe turned her head back to look at the interloper, though she’d already recognized the voice.

“Hello there, president, Moribe-san.” It was Damari Arisa.

“Oh, if it isn’t Damari-kun. I surmise you’ll have a good showing for us today.”

“Nothing like what you’re hoping for. I won’t be the one to end this. I just have a few observations I’d like to share.” Damari said, before narrowing her eyes and adding, “Then again, that might actually be exactly what you’re hoping for, Moribe-san.”

“What did you mean by that?” Moribe asked, cutting in without regard for their exchange.

“Nothing more than what I said. It just seemed like the case. And if so, I figure we’re about the same in that regard.”

“...” After hesitating for a few moments, Moribe asked, “If that’s the case, then why not do something about it?”

“It’s not my place to do so. The most I’ll allow myself to do is just nudge things forward a bit.”

“I see...” The vice-chairwoman wore an inscrutable expression.

“Eh? What’s all this about? Is this what they call ‘girl talk’.” Shirahama asked, tilting his head in confusion.

“Yes, that’s exactly it, president. Don’t worry about it, just wait for the Circle meeting.” Damari said, clasping her hands and wearing a sweet smile.

“Hmm. I feel like I’m being kept out of the loop somehow, but very well.”

From a few feet away, Moribe watched the two Circle members have their energetic exchange. Whatever emotion she was feeling, her cold eyes and stony expression blocked off any possible avenue of ascertaining it. Eventually, she looked away, and murmured in a low voice, more for herself than anyone else, “Well, whatever the case, this will be over soon. For you two, at least.”

“Hmm? Yeah, I suppose two days from now, our experiment will be over, huh. With that, I guess the Crimes Circle’s involvement in this case will be over too. Thinking of it makes me feel a little melancholy.” Shirahama said.

“Hmph. Yeah.” Moribe said, a slight smile crossing her lips in unusual fashion, though it disappeared just as quickly. “Well, if you’ll excuse me. I have to go.” And with that, she turned her back on the two, nothing else stopping her this time.

“Well then, Damari-kun—Hm?” Shirahama called out to his fellow circle member, but as he turned to her, he saw an unusually pensive Damari, gazing in the direction of the girl who’d just left and appearing lost in thought. “Is something wrong?”

“...No, it’s nothing. See you at the Circle meeting. I’m sure it’ll be entertaining for you, if nothing else, *president*.” And with a note of condescension in her voice, Damari also left, walking in the opposite direction from where Moribe headed.

Left alone and with his back to the wall, Shirahama pondered something with a troubled expression for a while, before looking up

and asking a question no one else could hear. "...Have I said something wrong, perhaps?"

3

"Thank you. I appreciate everyone gathering to hear me talk today."

It was time for the Crimes Circle's meeting, the fifth to discuss the mystery of the poisoned chocolates. As per the order established at the beginning of the week, it was now time for Damari Arisa to give out her deduction.

As ever, the mature-looking girl maintained an air of composure, and like a gambler at a poker table, she showed no openings, seemingly in perfect control of the situation as the others watched her expectantly.

"Came this far, might as well see this thing through to the end." Araya gave a perfunctory remark.

"I know you can crack this case, Ari-san! Whoop their asses!"

"You know you're a part of these 'they' too, right?" Gekihara cheerfully rooted for her friend while Sekimonji sighed next to her.

"Fufu, thanks for the vote of confidence, but I'm not here to crack anything. All I want to do is put forth a few propositions regarding the true character of this incident. Whether they'll actually make any difference remains to be seen, I suppose."

"Either way, your insight is appreciated, Damari-kun," the president said. "Now then, shall we begin?" At Shirahama's indication, the spectators stopped chatting amongst themselves and turned their gazes back to Damari, paying close attention.

"Conflict is a scary, complicated thing, and to make their lives easier people love to simplify it however they can. Whenever a tragedy occurs, everyone is always quick to label people as victims and perpetrators. But a little time on this Earth is all you need to realize that true villains don't exist, and in that same way, true, pure victims are tough to come by.

“Sure, unforeseen accidents, unprecedented misfortunes, these things do happen. But conflict, that’s a matter of human wills, like a row of dominoes. And tragedy is just its natural result.

“All that is to say—what do you think you'd have to do, for someone to want to murder you? What do you think it'd take? Maybe hardly anything worth being blamed for—but certainly not nothing. Well, we're not talking about murder here, but the same logic applies.”

“Do all of ya really need these damn philosophical preambles just to get to the damn point?” Araya made his impatience clear.

“I can’t say, but it certainly wouldn't have hurt if you'd thought a little longer before getting to yours.” The delinquent couldn't help but scowl at the pointed remark, which only deepened Damari’s self-assured smile. “Well, okay. I’ll get to my first observation. First, though, just one question for everyone—why do you all believe in the victim’s innocence so much, anyway?”

Nobody could hide their confusion at Damari’s baffling question. They all sat in silence for a moment, sending confused glances each other’s way, until Sekimonji finally decided to put their uncertainty into words. “I’m not entirely sure what you mean by that question, but I don’t think any of us assumed Kaneya Yuuta to be entirely innocent. We’ve already discussed his misdeeds before.”

“Sure, but I’m talking about the victim, not about Kaneya.”

“...But he was the one to receive the chocolates—”

“And yet he suffered no damages. That being the case, I don’t see how you can call him a victim.” With no adequate reply to her statement, Sekimonji fell silent once more as Damari continued on. “Really, everyone’s been thinking about this case as if Kaneya and only Kaneya stands at its center, when in fact the victim is obviously Kiyozumi Juna. I don’t understand how nobody has challenged this presumption until now.

“That’s what I mean when I say you believe in the victim’s innocence too strongly. Or maybe ‘passivity’ is the better word? You don’t doubt the idea that her suffering was just the result of a cruel twist of fate. Is that the result of reading too much about indiscriminate serial killers, I wonder?” Damari delivered her piece with the unrivaled elegance and confidence she was known for, as though she could see through it all.

“So you’re saying that she was actually the target all along!?” Gekihara shrieked in shock.

“Ordinary people like you and me might not understand it, but athletes won’t allow themselves to eat whatever they please at any given moment. Someone with the determination to perfectly control their diet in order to achieve the best possible physical performance won’t just turn around and snack on a random unexpected gift. Especially not right before a match, and especially not someone like Kaneya, who gets all his confidence from his athletic abilities. It doesn’t take a genius to arrive at that conclusion; nobody actually planning to sabotage him would ever choose a method like this. Yet because that’s what appeared to have happened, I suppose all of you just took it at face value.” Though Damari’s smile was unfaltering, a clear note of irritation carried through her words, as though asserting that someone else should have figured it out already.

“Okay, but if the target was that chick all along, then how the hell did they predict that Kaneya would give it to her boyfriend, and that it’d then end up in her hands?” Araya asked.

“Manipulating people like that requires a certain level of delicacy, so I understand why you’d find it incomprehensible. But as long as you pay attention to people’s habits, it’s really not that difficult.

“For example, noticing that both Kaneya and Fukusen tend to wake up early and go straight to the lobby at around the same time, or that Fukusen is the only person nice enough to actively strike up a conversation with Kaneya within the dorm, or that Fukusen would be thoughtful enough to stop him if he tried throwing them away.”

“But isn’t that still leaving a lot up to chance though?”

“It is. Dealing with people is always a gamble. This one just happened to be successful,” Damari replied without hesitation. “And in the event of the plan failing, there wouldn’t be any risk to the culprit. Those are pretty good conditions. For all we know, they might have hatched multiple such schemes simultaneously, knowing that any number of them could fail.”

With no reasonable way to refute Damari’s explanation, Araya reluctantly backed off. Satisfied, she continued her speech.

“Our culprit is subtle, very attentive and, most importantly, highly determined. They would never execute a plan this complex otherwise. And no wonder why—after all, their opponent is someone who threatens to take away their very place at this academy.”

Damari’s smile widened as she reached her most important point.

“Yes, regarding my previous question, it seems Kiyozumi Juna has done quite enough to make someone want her out of the picture.

Things like consistently advocating for the removal of any ‘commoners’ from Tokiwa Academy. Of course, with an innocent, benevolent smile on her face, and with the full approval of most of the academy’s affluent students. In fact, that’s what she was about to do on the very day she received those chocolates, and in front of the academy’s board of directors no less.”

The room fell into a stunned silence once more as everyone considered Damari’s proposition. Damari herself, however, made no effort to break this silence as she stared intently at her audience with an expectant gaze.

Eventually, the president himself, Shirahama Ryoukai, stepped forward and asked the all-important question.

“So then, Damari-kun, who do you say is the culprit behind this case?”

Upon hearing his question, Damari closed her eyes, and, her lips twisting once more into a self-deprecating smile, she lightly shrugged before saying, “Who knows? Maybe it’s Kaneya Yuuta himself, don’t you think? It would certainly make a lot of the plan’s details fit better.”

4

“Good job, Ari-san! You killed it!”

With the day’s deduction all wrapped up, the Crimes Circle’s room was filled with chatter. Gekihara excitedly congratulated Damari on her speech, way prouder of her friend’s performance than she’d been of her own.

“Oh, it wasn’t anything all that impressive.” Damari humbly dismissed the words of praise with a mature smile. “Ah, right, before I forget.”

The lady of the hour went to grab her bag, and produced a box from within. It was finally time for the usual offering: this time, an ornate box of white chocolates, tied with a red ribbon. "Here, everyone can take some."

"Aw, sweet!" Gekihara exclaimed as she took a big mouthful of chocolate.

"Thank you for your consideration, Damari-kun," the president said.

Damari didn't return to her usual seat on the couch, instead watching from the sidelines as everyone in the room talked amongst themselves while enjoying their chocolates, her expression inscrutable. After a while, Shirahama walked up next to her.

"Really, I can never outdo you. Maybe it was a blessing in disguise that I ended up speaking before you. I have no idea how I'd possibly top that."

"You give yourself too little credit, president. I'm sure you could come up with something suitable."

"Haha, that stings, you know? Although..." Shirahama hesitated for a moment. "I'm not sure what to think about naming Kaneya as the culprit. Something doesn't feel right about that."

"Well, you can always use your own brain to figure out a better candidate. And either way, I told you beforehand that I wouldn't be the one to end this case, didn't I?"

"That you did. But why would I use my own brain when there's still some brains left to pick. Such as Kanshou-kun over there!"

Kanshou Kiskeya, who'd been awkwardly standing to the side of the rest of the members' conversation, snapped to attention upon hearing his name, and after staring blankly at him for a few seconds, reluctantly sidled up to Shirahama.

"Hello there, Damari-senpai, Shirahama-senpai..."

"Kanshou-kun," Damari said. "You still haven't had any chocolate, have you? You should take some while it's still there."

"Ah... Thank you, but I'll refrain. I've gotten a bit sick of chocolate..." Kanshou scratched his cheek apologetically as he meekly refused the offer.

“So, what do you think, Kanshou-kun? Do you feel like you’ve got what it takes to upstage Damari-kun?” Shirahama said with a sly grin.

“Oh, t-that’s definitely impossible!” Kanshou stammered out a quick denial.

“Will you ever grow up, I wonder.” Damari shot Shirahama a glare before turning a gentle smile to Kanshou. “You don’t need to ‘upstage’ me or anything. All you need is to bring some new information to light. I’m sure there’s plenty of holes in my deduction.”

“Well, I’m not too confident I can come up with anything... But who knows, maybe a miracle will happen?” Kanshou said casually, though his tone was resigned.

“Fufu, I don’t think you need a miracle. You just have to trust in yourself a little more. I happen to be rooting for you, you know?” Damari replied.

Kanshou looked up at the older girl, his eyes wide open. “Why’s that?”

After pausing to choose her words for a moment, Damari answered with a wink. “Having the last speaker overturn the entire case would be the most dramatic outcome, right?”

Floored by that answer, Shirahama’s usual smile had been wiped off his face. “...I don’t suppose Gekihara-kun’s been rubbing off on you, has she?”

As he watched his two seniors continue to quip lightheartedly from a slight distance, Kanshou contemplated Damari’s words.

“...The last, huh?” The boy smiled wryly to himself, a slight expression that no one else would catch.

5

I woke up in my room. Heeding an instinct that had been carved by time into my bones, I shed my drowsiness like a snakeskin as I turned my head to look at the alarm clock. It read 6:02 AM. Monday.

The Poisoned Chocolates Case was not yet over.



Day: Sunday

1

The Crimes Circle's room was buzzing with chatter as everyone readied themselves for the final turn of this week of deduction. The atmosphere in the room never felt too heavy, but if one were to look into the eyes of anyone present, they'd surely sense the burning anticipation beneath their casual facade. Moments like these were surely what the members of the illustrious Circle lived for.

"Still, it's a real shame that Moribe-senpai can't be here today for the final time," exhaled Shirahama.

"Seriously, it's the grand finale! What sudden urgent business could be more important than this!?" Gekihara yelled out, prompting Sekimonji to remark, "I can think of a lot."

"It ain't like I'm gonna miss that stuck up lady or nothin', but I guess I did get used to her bein' here all the time," Araya said.

"Alas, such is life. But don't let that stop you, Kanshou-kun. I'll relay everything to her later, so please, tell us your deduction without any reservations," urged Shirahama.

"Of course." Nodding resolutely, Kanshou stood up from his seat and walked up to the head of the table. Though he tried to seem sure of himself, it was clear from the stiffness of his movements that he was nervous. Still, as he balled his hands into fists and looked over his audience, he truly seemed like he would be the one to finally put an end to this case.

“Whenever you’re ready,” the president gently urged. Damari watched the younger boy with careful eyes, careful not to miss any of the subtleties in his expression, and even Sekimonji abandoned his usual mask of indifference, watching his junior carefully.

“...Okay. Let’s begin.” After taking a deep breath, Kanshou resolutely declared, “It’s time for the final turn.”

2

“Well done! Kanshou-kun, you’ve outdone yourself,” the president praised, standing up from his seat and bringing his hands closer for an applause. His gesture was what broke the stunned silence in the room as everyone’s faces of wide-eyed surprise turned to those of admiration.

Kanshou, having just finished his deduction, remained standing somewhat stiffly in front of everyone, as if he wasn’t sure where he should go. His face blushed faintly at the praise, and he unsuccessfully tried to stifle a crooked smile.

“But wow, I guess that really seals the deal, huh?” Gekihara asked.

“I’d say so. There’s really no doubt about it left, is there?” Damari added.

“Yeah, hate to admit it, but he’s got it in one. You really showed us up, huh, you little twerp,” Araya said.

“Good work, Kiskeya.” Sekimonji’s curt words of congratulation were alone among a burst of excited conversation. The other members breathlessly discussed the theory their underclassman had just spun, a theory they all clearly believed in.

“Hehe, I’m nowhere near as smart as all of you, but I just did my best to piece together everything I could from everyone’s stories. If I hadn’t been the last one to go, I probably wouldn’t have been able to do anything. So, um, it’s all thanks to you, really.” Saying that, Kanshou bowed deeply to everyone.

“Hah, ‘preciate the humility at least, kid. It’s important to know your place,” Araya said, nothing to himself with a satisfied grin.

“You don’t need to be quite so humble, though, Kanshou-kun,” Damari said. “If you can put together a deduction like that, I’m fairly

certain you're smarter than some of us already. Definitely smarter than Araya-kun, at least."

"...Kanshou, look at this chick. She's the definition of what they call a twisted personality. Make sure ya don't wind up like her, alright?"

Electing not to comment on their exchange one way or the other, Kanshou just laughed awkwardly, rubbing the back of his head. Then, remembering something important, he said "Oh right," and, lifting up his bag and taking something out of it, he continued, "I actually brought something for everyone. It's just a little gift to celebrate the end of the case."

The rectangular box contained what else but liqueur chocolates—the very same type as what had started this case to begin with.

"Heh, how on the nose. That's the kinda tastelessness I'd expect from the prez, not you."

"Why, that's just terribly rude of you, Araya-kun," Shirahama said, throwing his arms up in an exaggerated manner.

"Hey, don't mind if I do!" Gekihara immediately jumped at the chocolate box, with Damari and Sekimonji wordlessly following suit and calmly taking pieces for themselves.

With everyone now gathered around the table, throwing good-natured jabs at each other and enjoying snacks, the atmosphere of the room became much farther from that of a group of investigators trying to find the truth of a case and much closer to that of an average after school club.

As everyone enjoyed themselves in their typical fashion, Kanshou looked down at his trembling hands for a few moments, and, after summoning his courage, called out. "Hey, everyone, um, may I have a few words?"

"Oh? Certainly you may, but what is it? You rarely speak up like that, Kanshou-kun," the president said.

"No, it's nothing big, it's just... It's always been kinda tough for me to keep up with everyone in the club, and sometimes it feels like I don't belong, but... I just want you to know that I really appreciate being here and you letting me join!" With a wavering voice that finally boomed in certainty only at the end, Kanshou delivered his simple yet heartfelt words of gratitude with a deep bow.

For a few moments, everyone stared in surprise at him. But then, what finally broke the silence was Araya's rough tone. "Man, you were really worryin' about it that much? You don't waste words, but ya sure waste your time, not to mention brain cells." He seemed fed-up as he grumbled all that out, before directing an intense stare at the younger boy and saying directly. "You're one of us. Nothin' more or less to it than that. So no use botherin' to doubt that."

"Fufufu, you can say some good things sometimes too, huh, Araya-kun," Damari said, her voice gleeful. "He's right, you know. I couldn't imagine this circle being what it is without you around, Kanshou-kun."

"Kisuke, the best book is not the one with the highest word count, but the one with the words that matter most," Sekimonji stoically added. "And today you've clearly proven that you're akin to the latter."

"Yeah, whatever he said! It's great having you," Gekihara said with a wide smile.

"Guys..." Evidently touched, Kanshou could say nothing more.

"I think you've gotten your answer by now," Shirahama concluded. "You're one of the exalted few who deserve to call themselves members of the Crimes Circle. Of that, there was never any doubt."

"I mean, honestly, look at what a twisted douche our president is, Kanshou-kun. Having a sensible guy like you here is a lifesaver!"

"*Et tu*, Gekihara-kun!? Must all my friends hurt me today!?" Everyone broke into laughter at Shirahama's theatrical reaction.

It was just another day in the Crimes Circle's room, a day like no other. Just as the previous day was one of simple, straightforward fun, the next one would surely be the same. As he watched everyone's faces twist and distort in laughter and mirth, Kanshou felt certain of that fact, and he was happier than ever.

The Crimes Circle would never end. Though one case might reach its conclusion, another would surely find them, and the days of fun would continue all the same.

3

Moribe walked through the halls of Tokiwa Academy, illuminated by the warm light of dusk, headed for a room she'd become closely acquainted with at this point. She knew her official business had prevented her from seeing the entirety of the day's deduction, but she still hoped she might catch at least the tail end of the proceedings.

Her heavy footsteps echoing across the empty corridors, she soon reached her destination, the large hardwood doors in front of her being the one layer separating her from her target. With no wasted movements, she grabbed the doorknob and twisted it without hesitation.

And in the center of that room filled with bookshelves she saw—
“—”

Sitting on the low table in the room's center, I languidly directed my gaze towards the new sound that filled the otherwise perfectly still chamber. At the other end of it was—the 3rd year girl from the Disciplinary Committee, Moribe-senpai.

At first she looked stupefied by the scene. Not that I could blame her. She slowly edged closer and closer, her legs trembling, and as she did her expression gradually gained the flavor of absolute terror.

I didn't feel like calling out to her, and for the moment she didn't seem capable of saying anything either, so for a while, we just stared at one another in complete silence.

Eventually, I don't know if her rational mind finally kicked into gear or something, but she hesitantly called out to me as she slowly raised a trembling hand to point with.

“K-Kanshou-kun, w-what's *that*?”

At her urging, I directed my lazy body to turn its gaze to its sides, allowing me to look at the *things* all over the room.

Twisted, ugly faces of torment. Their eyes, bloodshot and seeming as if about to burst out of their sockets, lacked any focus. Direction without intention. Almost all had their mouths wide open, some with their tongues out too, swaying in the wind like they're

trying to lap up all the oxygen they can. I hadn't tried touching them, but I wondered for a moment if they'd be cold to the touch.

"They're my fellow members of the Crimes Circle, of course," I said.

"W-what happened? What have you *done!*?" Forcefully steadying her own quaking voice, she yelled out that question.

"...Most of the time, it was Shirahama-senpai who brought them," I began.

"What?"

"The chocolates. One person or another always brought them. And once someone did, no one else would. They wouldn't want to be seen as stealing someone else's ideas, I suppose. Most of the time, it was Shirahama-senpai—I guess it makes the most sense for him to do it, given his position."

"..." Unable to understand what I was talking about, it seemed that Moribe-senpai couldn't find the words to interject.

"The second most common one to do it was Gekihara-senpai. I guess she saw it as a pretty dramatic prop. I'd say it was her who brought them about a third of the time.

"Conversely, Araya-senpai and Sekimonji-sensei almost never did it. I don't know what kind of royal flush of a good mood it takes to make a guy like Araya-senpai feel generous, but given enough attempts, even that's possible, I suppose. Same idea with Sekimonji-sensei.

"And when neither Shirahama-senpai nor Gekihara-senpai did it, Damari-senpai always took it upon herself instead, whenever that rare circumstance came about. Meaning that I never got the chance to be the one to bring the chocolates before—not until today, that is. This is the very first time I get to be the one to treat all the others in the Circle. I can only hope they enjoyed it."

"...I don't understand." Moribe-senpai quietly listened to me, her face angled down such that I couldn't see her eyes. After I was done, that's what she had to say, her clenched hands trembling. "I don't understand, but—you're not the same Kanshou-kun that you were a week ago, are you?"

"Heh." I couldn't suppress a chuckle at her question. "I suppose it must seem like only a week has passed, to you."

I leaned back, supporting my upper body with my arms on the table. Turning my head up, I looked at the ceiling. For the first time in quite a while, I felt somewhat free. I drew in a deep breath. Ah, what the hell, I guess I could try my hand at explaining it to someone again. It was something I hadn't done in a long while, and if memory served me right, I'd never tried to tell Moribe-senpai. Her reaction might feel somewhat fresh.

Lowering my head to face her once more, I bluntly stated the truth that I alone knew. "This week is repeating. It has repeated an unfathomable amount of times by now. As far as I know, I'm the only one who keeps my memories across the loops. That's why to you, it might seem like there's nothing amiss. But come tomorrow, you'll have forgotten everything and returned to the beginning."

Moribe-senpai looked flabbergasted at my explanation. "Heheh, you don't buy it, do you? I wouldn't blame you. That's what most people I've tried telling this to think.

"Some people believed me, too. Not that it did any good, ultimately. So I won't hold it against you if you just think I'm crazy."

"...Why?"

"Hmm?"

"Why is this happening?"

"Beats me. Beats me, but... Well, there's only one thing that seems like it could fix this."

"Well, what's that—!?"

"This case." She was at a loss for words at my brief answer.

"Well? Can't think of what else it could be. After all—each and every single time, everyone always brings a different theory."

That's right. With every loop, certain things change. Not just who happens to bring the chocolate, but also what deductions they present. Each and every time, it's always the same variables, and yet they manage to connect them in vastly different ways. Sometimes they're brilliant, other times they're idiotic, but whatever the case, they're unmistakably ideas which only they could've come up with.

"I don't know if this is the one case God wants solved above all else or what, but either way, I must have heard every possible deduction by this point. From a freak manufacturing accident to a yakuza scheme to evidence of alien life on Earth, I've heard it all. And

yet, they've all been rejected. I guess the only way out of this hell must be to solve the case myself," I said with a self-deprecating grin as I looked away.

"W-well then, just sit down and solve it!" Moribe-senpai said, a trace of frustration in her shaking voice.

"What, you think I haven't tried!?" I couldn't help but snap at her. "I've spun countless theories! I had all the time in the world to think about it, after all! I'm sure at this point that I could give you a more convincing answer to this puzzle than anyone in the world. But no matter what I do, God, the universe or whatever else is behind this won't accept it!" My anger having slowly melted into self-hatred, I ended my speech with a misshapen grin. "I'm sure this seems like a trivial incident to anyone else, but to me, it's the biggest mystery in the whole wide world."

"..." Apparently having nothing to say to that, Moribe-senpai looked away with an expression of consternation.

"...For the first few dozens of loops, I earnestly tried to solve the case. I gave it my all—there was nothing I thought about more than this. But eventually, I realized that would lead me nowhere. I guess I'm just not the kind of great detective this world is looking for.

"So then I got into a rebellious phase, if you wanna call it that. I tried to break out of this situation however I could. I talked to everyone I know. Some even believed me. I tried leaving this city, but that doesn't seem possible. I'd always wind up back here again, some way or another.

"I tried dismantling the club. I even set this room on fire. But that didn't really accomplish anything, in the end. A week later, everything would always be back to the way it always was.

"So then I got depressed for a while. I didn't really feel like doing anything. I just went through the motions for a few hundred loops. But eventually, I noticed the chocolates. It wasn't a determined fact, who would give them out. It was probabilistic. Which meant that there was a small chance that task would fall to me.

"People can't live without hope for the future, you know? That tiny chance became my hope. Every week I would look forward to the possibility of it falling to me. And none of the disappointments were

all that crushing, because I always knew that the following week might be my lucky chance.

“I’m not sure when it was—that I started putting poison in the chocolates.”

As if a weight had just been lifted from me, I let myself fall back on the low table behind me. The edge of the box of chocolates still haphazardly left on the table stabbed into me, but I didn’t mind. My arms spread to the sides, I spoke blissfully. “And today, finally, the time has come.”

“...Did you really hate them that much? Your fellow Circle members.” Moribe-senpai asked sadly.

My expression of rapture frozen in its tracks, I eventually sighed and, slightly lifting up my upper body and supporting it with my elbows, I addressed the girl. “I wish you wouldn’t misunderstand, Moribe-senpai. For one, it might be taking a while to kick in, but I’m just as poisoned as the rest of them. I won’t be bothering you for long. But more importantly, I feel nothing but awe and respect for my seniors.

“Listen. I’m just a nobody. Even if I was stuck here forever, it wouldn’t be much of a loss to the world. But everyone else in the club, they’re different. They’re all brilliant in their own right. I’m sure they’d be able to achieve some wonderful things in the future.

“That’s why it’s so painful—the fact that those futures will never be. They’ll just waste away in this pointless loop without ever even knowing it. I can’t bear to watch it. At the very least, they deserve a proper end. And that’s what I’ve given them.”

“So it’s just for your own self-satisfaction...” Moribe-senpai muttered through gritted teeth. “Do you really think this means anything!? If everything you just said is true, won’t they all just come back to life by tomorrow? What’ll you do then!?”

“...You really know how to rain on a guy’s parade, lady.” I couldn’t contain a sigh. “I wish you’d at least let me enjoy this achievement for a day, but... You’re probably right, yeah. This is my first time killing anyone, but I’m sure they’ll come right back to life. I guess I should hope I’m not so lucky. Maybe I’ll be gone for good, replaced by some ignorant version of me.”

“You’re a fool, you know that. Even if you die, I’m sure you’ll just wake right back up the next week!” Moribe-senpai was shouting at me for some reason now. It was getting kind of annoying dealing with her.

“Oh yeah? Well, guess I’ll just give up on life after that, then,” I said dismissively, lying back down with my back on the table. “Now, if we’re done here, could you leave me alone? I feel like I haven’t slept in ages, so I’d like a good rest.” Closing my eyes, I elected to ignore whatever further comments she might’ve had. She’d probably call the police soon enough, but well, I’d be dead in a couple minutes max, so it didn’t make a difference to me. The poison was late to kick in for whatever reason, but I was sure I’d taken a comfortably fatal dose. Whatever righteous justice she may have wanted to inflict onto me, it was far too late by this point.

Resolved to rest while I still could, I took my mind off the situation. I used to be a pretty nervous sort in the past, if memory serves me right. But in this infinitely repeating week, where nothing is of consequence, it didn’t take long for me to learn just what a waste of energy it was to be so caught up in everything. I was confident I could happily snooze away, even while trapped in a tiger’s den.

Still, for some reason, no matter how long I waited, my consciousness refused to melt away. What a pain in the ass. Sick of just lying around, I finally opened my eyes again, belatedly noticing that Moribe-senpai was still there in the room, muttering something under her breath. “Hn?” Moved by idle curiosity, I tried leaning in to better hear what she was saying. And in that moment, I witnessed a drastic change in her.

Moribe-senpai harshly gritted her teeth, her helpless fear giving way to anger. And then, meeting my half-opened eyes with her own, Moribe-senpai said with a furious scowl, “Must be nice, pretending to be the victim like that.”

“...What, are you still doubting my story? Well, whatever, I guess I should've expected—”

“Shut up, murderer!” Moribe-senpai cut me off as she spat her vitriol at me. “You’ve made enough excuses for yourself. I’ve been quiet for way too long. It’s my turn to talk now.” However detached from reality I might’ve thought I was, her words of pointed

antagonism pulled me right back to the ground. In all my unmeasurable time in this world, I'd yet to be yelled at like that.

"Trapped in a loop, you did your best to solve this case, but no matter how hard you tried, it just wasn't enough—You've got to be kidding me. The only time you ever do your best is when making excuses, Kanshou Kisuke!"

Caught off-guard by her intensity, I just stood there with my mouth agape like an idiot for a few moments, before I managed to muster up the indignation to hit back at her. "What the hell do you know about what I've been through!? I went through every possibility I could think of, I racked my brains for so long—If you think you can do better than that, go ahead!"

"Very well."

"That's right—Huh?"

"I'll solve this pathetic farce of a case here and now. It wasn't my place to do it, but my patience has just about run dry!"

Cowed by her daring declaration, I could do naught but stare in silence at her. Perhaps amused by my pathetic reaction, the trace of a grin visited Moribe-senpai's for what felt like the first time in however long we've known one another.

"Shut up and open your ears—it's time for the final turn."
And with that, everything began to unravel.

4

"The intended victim of this case is and always has been Kiyozumi Juna. That much is obvious. This is no botched attempt—it's a perfectly executed crime. Fate clearly smiled upon the culprit that day.

"I'm sure this much, you've heard plenty of times before. Others have surely reached this conclusion already."

She was right. Most of the time, president Shirahama was the one to draw that connection. Sometimes, when not caught up in one of his mental breakdowns, Sekimonji-sensei would also realize it. And even when everyone else failed, Damari-senpai always caught on to this fact.

“All of your friends, they always get part of the picture. By the time the cycles reach their end, I’m sure all the necessary pieces are on the table. And yet, the one meant to connect them never does. What an unsightly dereliction of duty,” Moribe-senpai says, still glaring at me. *She sure has one hell of a nasty glare, this woman.* Well, she was the vice-chairwoman of the Disciplinary Committee, so I guess it only made sense.

“Naturally, the culprit isn’t a part of the Arts & Crafts Club. The wrapping paper used to package the box of chocolates was chosen as a form of misdirection, to make people suspect a member. But of course, that’s just the first layer.

“The next layer was obfuscating the intended target. By making Kaneya out to be the target, the culprit could mask their true motive. But even once we discover the true victim, we still have one final layer of misdirection to contend with—” Moribe-senpai spoke fluidly, confidently. *Man, I’m jealous,* I thought. I never managed to be that sure of myself. Even as I wove that bullshit deduction earlier to satisfy everyone, I knew I was just desperately stringing along whatever ideas I could.

Unburdened by my unspoken envy, Moribe-senpai went on in her didactic tone. “This is probably the layer that everyone got stuck on. The poisonous idea that led everyone astray. Not that I blame them—it’s quite the obvious, logical assumption. And yet despite that, this logical assumption is wrong.

“Namely, the idea that *the culprit is a resident of the Nijisou Dormitory to begin with.*”

“...”

“For them to create this plan, the culprit would have to have understood a lot about the dynamics of this dormitory, and of the relations and tendencies of the people within. In other words, it would have been impossible for anyone who didn’t regularly visit it to pull off. And yet, students residing at the dormitory aren’t permitted to bring over friends from the outside—However, *bringing family in is not forbidden.*”

“...”

“This idea isn’t an obvious one. After all, if a family had the kind of money required to send one of their children to live at the Nijisou

Dormitory, they would most likely have the money to send all of them there. Thus, most sets of siblings would naturally all be residents of the dormitory, thinking about it normally.

“And yet, exceptions do apply. Specifically, to the select few students who live at the dormitory free of charge—the best of the best, those lauded geniuses. For example—those like Sekimonji Shisai.”

“...”

For a few moments afterwards, Moribe-senpai said nothing. She just looked into my eyes. Her gaze was so bright it hurt. It was like staring into a searchlight, or maybe one of those lights they’d always shove in people’s faces in interrogation rooms. After some quiet ticks of the clock passed just like that, she spoke up again.

“You’re really saying nothing, at this point? I suppose I shouldn’t be surprised. There’s just one thing you’ve achieved mastery of, Kanshou Kisuke, and that’s evading responsibility.”

“No idea what you’re talking about,” I said, looking away from her. “If you wanna say something, why not say it clearly?”

“Very well, then. I’ll just skip straight to the point. We’ve wasted more than enough time, after all.” For whatever reason, Moribe-senpai took her glasses off, and stashed them in her skirt pocket. Then, she lifted her finger up, and pointed it *right at me*. “You, Kanshou Kisuke, the youngest member of the Crimes Circle and *the younger brother of Sekimonji Shisai*, are the culprit behind this case.”

I couldn’t help but grin. “Sekimonji-sensei... or rather, nii-san. He sure is a twisted guy, huh? Making his own little brother call him something so stuffy. Isn’t that cold?” He made me call him that in private too, for the record.

Sekimonji Shisai. Or rather, Kunugi Eisuke. And then there’s me, Kanshou Kisuke—formerly, Kunugi Kisuke. The prodigal first son, and the useless second son. The genius and the nobody. There’s not much behind the name difference—just a typical broken family, the kind you might find anywhere. Perhaps I chose to keep a different name from him in order to distance myself from him, to keep myself from wondering what a nobody like me’s doing being related to him. But then again, I sure didn’t hesitate to follow him around like a leech once I got accepted into this academy—which, naturally, was also all thanks to him.

“...” Seeing my reaction, Moribe-senpai lowered her finger, though her glare alone pointed me out well enough. “So? What do you have to say for yourself, criminal?”

“Say for myself? Not much. I don’t think I need to dignify a ridiculous accusation like that with a response—but, well, if you insist, I’ll just break it down as easily as possible.

“I have an alibi. The same alibi every other member of the Crimes Circle has. Between 4:45 and 5:00 PM on that day, the regular Circle meeting was being held. It feels so distant to me now, like it happened years ago—but ask any one of the other members, and they’ll vouch for me. So tell me, *senpai*, how the hell could I have managed to fake an alibi like that?”

“How?” Though I asked that question in full seriousness, it only elicited a laugh from Moribe-senpai—a scornful, mocking giggle. “I’ll tell you how. You did it by being Kanshou Kisuke—you did it by knowing exactly the kind of person you are.

“Sure, you were there that day, when the meeting started. And sure, you were there when it ended. But *what about the rest?*”

“—” *Shut up. Don’t say it, you bitch. Shut up!*

“The reality is, you could have stepped out of that room at any time and been gone for any amount of time and *nobody would have noticed.*” *Shut up!* “You could have excused yourself, saying you’d go to the bathroom, maybe. And then later, when you returned from handing over the chocolates, you’d just slip in unnoticed. *Not like your presence makes any difference either way.* After all, you’re a spineless wimp who needs an eternity of practice just to be able to contribute to a conversation.”

“—” I wanted to kill her, then and there. She’d just come back to life the next day, wouldn’t she? So it’d be all right, wouldn’t it? I could be forgiven for it, couldn’t I? Gritting my teeth, gripping my knees with all the force I had in me, I managed to squeeze out words. “If—if I’m the culprit, then what the hell is all this, huh? If I’ve known the answer all along, then what does the world want from me? Why am I trapped in this hell!?”

And as if to spite my shivering, quaking self, Moribe just looked straight at me with unclouded eyes, everything about her perfectly

even, perfectly controlled. In a clear voice, she answered my stuttered question with a simple answer.

“It’s your wish.”

“...My... wish?”

“The very same wish that drove you to plan that desperate, childish crime, and the same one that led you to create this place.”

“.....”

“Must I spell it out? Very well, then.” Moribe-senpai narrowed her eyes at my sorry display of shell-shocked silence. “Kiyozumi Juna wanted to drive out all ‘commoners’ from Tokiwa Academy. And to achieve that, she intended to present a speech to the Academy’s board of directors during an unofficial gathering. Quite the underhanded move, isn’t it? I guess it’s understandable that you’d respond in kind.

“How exactly you learned of this plan of hers to begin with, I can’t say with certainty. But you do have a track record of listening in on conversations that shouldn’t be any of your business—sorry, I guess you’d call it ‘accidentally overhearing things.’ And with you coming and going out of the Nijisou Dormitory so often, and always being around someone like Shirahama Ryoukai, it follows that you might have heard about it from somewhere.

“Faced with a threat like this, you panicked. You couldn’t just leave it be. Someone who got into this academy through their own superior skills, like Kaneya or your brother, might be spared, but a tagalong like you who got in through charity would be the first on the chopping block. That’s what drove you to act, and even though your plan was a mundane imitation, through some twist of fate, it succeeded.

“If you were any dumber, you might have just stopped to celebrate a job well done right then and there. But unfortunately, you understand the fact that you can’t change where the winds are blowing. Even if you stopped one person from espousing their ideas on one particular day, it would only delay the inevitable. One day, maybe even sooner rather than later, you might wind up driven out of the one place you’d finally found. The clock kept mercilessly ticking.

“And so, you did the one thing you could—if that world of mercilessly change would forsake you, you’d pray for a world that would always stay the same. Where you could keep enjoying the same

club activities, where you could see the same familiar places, and where you could continue to sit in the same seat you always had forevermore.”

Compelling my numb legs to move, I slid off the table at the center of the room and hobbled to the side, taking a seat on the couch to my right. The stiff, crooked corpse of Damari Arisa sat next to me, her enchanting face now blue and twisted, partially obscured by a rogue strand of hair that had fallen out of place while she spasmed. I didn’t mind. Her being there with me was enough.

“But even though you’d been granted a miracle, you couldn’t accept it. Because the guilt ate at you — ‘How dare I be allowed this happiness?’ Because you hate yourself more than anyone, you couldn’t allow yourself that bliss. And yet, because you’re more cowardly than anyone else, you couldn’t admit to your sin and abandon it. And so, you pretended to be in hell. You pretended to despise this repeating world, enjoying the spectacle to the fullest all the while. And now, finally, you’ve reached the moment you’d been waiting for.

“You’ve finally tasted hell for long enough that you could justify letting go. *Letting go of your guilt*, I mean. You’ve convinced yourself that you’ve suffered for long enough, and so now, you’re worthy of that pure, everlasting bliss.

“You said you’d ‘give up on life’? Well, maybe that’s an accurate description. After all, you planned to just keep on enjoying these deductions, without thought, like a vegetable, for the rest of time. And yet, that’d be no punishment for you — it would be the one thing you’ve always wanted.”

“.....” I listened to her words to the end, saying nothing. At some point, a bitter smile had crossed my lips. A smile of resignation. *Ah... I was so close, too.* Couldn’t she have allowed me just one week? Just one week of that perfect, uncompromising bliss? But I knew that even if she had, it would have been no different from the previous one. All these weeks of phony deduction, of frantic debate, of aberrant conclusions and of chocolate, they’d all been so much fun.

“...You know,” I finally said, once it was all over. “I never really cared all that much, about perfect crimes or mysteries or answers. Hell, I couldn’t even come up with a scheme of my own without

copying it from somewhere. I'm not all that smart, and I can barely string together a couple of words, let alone a perfect deduction. But even so," I said, my vision blurring. "Even so, I really liked it, being here. I liked it, watching them butt heads and tease each other and get mad. I liked seeing what crazy ideas they'd bring out next. I liked how loud it was around here. I might not have belonged, but I didn't mind. I didn't mind that nobody was looking at me. Because I was always looking."

For a while, the room fell into silence again. I just looked down at my feet. Moribe-senpai kept watching me, the angry, accusatory glare replaced by what felt like a gentle, sympathetic, yet firm reminder of the end.

Eventually, she spoke up again. "You know, Damari-san figured out that it was you."

"Huh?" That out-of-nowhere revelation left me bewildered.

"Every single time, she noticed that you were the culprit."

"B-but then, why didn't she—"

"Accuse you? She could have. But she must have thought that her pointing you out wouldn't help anything. I think she wanted you to be the one to come clean. Of course, even she had no way of knowing what kind of bizarre situation you'd created."

"T-that means..."

"Yes. I said before that no one would have noticed you. I'm sorry, that was a lie. The truth is, at the very least, she noticed. She always looked at you. And I think that she looked out for you, in her own way."

"....." I looked to the girl on my left. She always seemed like an enigma—she always knew what other people were thinking, yet no one could tell what was in her heart. But I understood that it was just a facade—she was nothing more than a kind girl, who always thought of others. I couldn't hold my tears back. *I'm sorry, Damari-senpai.*

Not just her, all of them, they were no different. Araya-senpai was true to himself and honest to a fault, even if his demeanor intimidated others. Gekihara-senpai was a nice and fun-loving girl; the room just felt too quiet when she wasn't around. Nii-san was tough on others and especially on himself, but he was always fair and reasonable. And Shirahama-senpai—I think he found his life to be just as empty as I did. And so he just wanted to have fun, to enjoy

himself with friends, nothing more than that. *Yeah, that's right...* They were all my great, wonderful friends, far better than I had ever deserved.

After futilely attempting to stifle my sobbing for a few minutes, I wiped my eyes with my sleeve and raised my head. I knew it was clear what a pathetic mess I was at this point, there was no more need to hide it. Still trying to distract myself nonetheless, I asked a pointed question.

“Hey, Moribe-senpai. What are you, anyway?”

“Hmm?”

“You really tried to pretend you were a normal person, but the act kinda fell through after a while, you know? For someone who's been pretending for however many loops, you really broke character at the end.”

“And just whose fault is it that I had to go through all that, huh?” Moribe-senpai shot me an annoyed scowl as she said that, then quickly reverted to her regular, stern expression. “I'm just the vice-chairwoman of the Disciplinary Committee. Nothing more. Nothing that matters to you in this moment, at least.”

“Haha, fair enough. Then can I ask just one more question?”

“What is it?”

“What's your first name, anyway? All this time, and I've yet to hear it once.”

“...” She clearly didn't expect that question, raising her eyebrows in surprise. Then, a brief moment later, her expression melted into a gentle smile, one I'd never seen on her face before. Succinctly, she answered. “Rinne. My name is Moribe Rinne.”

Rinne. *Reincarnation*. What a poignant name. “I'll make sure to name my kid that if I ever get the chance.”

“So,” Rinne asked, ignoring my stupid joke. “Are you ready? Ready to leave this place behind?”

“Yeah... No, to be honest, I still want to stay here. I'd really stay here for eternity, happily. But...” Rising from my seat, I took a look around the room once more. “This is the kind of stuff I'll do to my friends if I'm given the chance. So I need to end this. These people are too wonderful to spend the rest of eternity dancing in my palms.”

“Want a moment to say goodbye?”

“Nah,” I said, turning my back on the Crimes Circle room. I began walking towards the door, Rinne following closely behind. “I’ve had more than enough moments.”

5

The room was empty. No figures adorned the two couches on either side, and the president’s chair was unoccupied.

In the center of the room, on the small table, lay a box of chocolates. White and circular in shape, its lid sat separated, leaning on the edge of the box, a blue ribbon left to the side, untied.

Within the box—was nothing.



Epilogue:

The Day

an Insomniac

Woke Up

1

The spacious room serving as the Crimes Circle' headquarters was put together as always, the tall bookshelves on either side making for a striking image.

And in the room's center, seated around the low table, was the full lineup of the Circle's esteemed members. Rather than engaging in any boisterous discussion, they merely sipped on their beverages in silence, as if waiting for something.

And sure enough, the tranquil scene was eventually broken by the arrival of a certain individual. The large door to the room swung open, and from behind it appeared—an unfamiliar girl.

The color of her tie as well as her short stature suggested that she was a first year student, but her steely expression suggested an intensity beyond her years. Her most distinctive features were her twintails, as well as the distinctive armband around her sleeve.

“Welcome, welcome. You must be from the Disciplinary Committee, huh?” Shirahama was the first to address the newcomer.

“Nice to meet you, senpai.” She gave a light, courteous bow. “I’m Okuoka Ouka, from class 1-B. I’m here to see you as the newly elected vice-chairwoman of the Disciplinary Committee.”

“Oh? Hmm.” Something about her statement clearly confused Shirahama in some way, as he put his hand to his chin in consideration. And the reason for his confusion—

“Hah? Didn’t know they allowed shrimp like you in that kind of position.” Araya unceremoniously stated what everyone had been thinking.

“I-I’ll have you know I was specially elected by the chairman even though I’m a first year! All because of my superior skills!” It became quickly apparent that Okuoka’s pride was easily hurt.

“Hoh, for real? Can’t imagine you bein’ able to intimidate anyone into followin’ the rules though.”

“H-how dare you! My methods are very effective, I’ll have you know—”

“Why are you getting so worked up over a worm like that? You’ve gotta be tougher than that if you wanna succeed me, vice-chairwoman.” Interrupting Okuoka’s enraged rant, another new voice filled the room. And soon enough, its owner revealed itself—a tall, fox eyed man. His tie indicated him as a 3rd year student, and his sleeve bolstered the same armband as Okuoka.

“Ah! Chairman, I’m so sorry about my shameful display!” Okuoka turned to him and repeatedly bowed deeply as she apologized.

“Hoho, this must be a pretty important matter for you to show up in the flesh, Karakuri-senpai.”

“I’ve decided to grace your nest with my presence. You should be honored, worms,” the man said with an arrogant smirk. There wasn’t anyone in the room who didn’t recognize him—the foremost enforcer of order, the dictator of Tokiwa Academy: Karakuri Kuroro, chairman of the Disciplinary Committee.

“How about we get to the point already?” With a note of irritation in his otherwise monotone voice, Sekimonji urged the conversation back on track.

“The Disciplinary Committee has come to you members of the Crimes Circle with a formal request for assistance concerning a certain incident,” Okuoka informed.

“In other words, I’m giving vermin like you a chance to contribute to society. Aren’t I just the most generous guy in the world?” Karakuri added, laughing pridefully.

“It’s really impressive how he can still be that arrogant while asking for help,” Gekihara said, exasperated.

“The scariest part is that he really believes it, too,” Damari said, even her elegant smile straining in the face of the chairman’s overwhelming character.

“Very well. We accept,” Shirahama quickly responded. “If you’re here in person, Karakuri-senpai, I’m sure this case will prove entertaining enough. Besides, I won’t pass up the chance to have you in our debt,” the president added with a wink.

“Don’t get ahead of yourself, now, worm. Try actually accomplishing something before you go looking for treats.”

“And? Will you give us the details of this incident?” Interrupting the burgeoning duel of smug smiles between the president and the chairman, Sekimonji put out this very practical request.

“*Ahem*. It will be more efficient if you come see the scene for yourself,” Okuoka said.

“I don’t know what kind of armchair detectives you fancy yourselves as, but my committee likes to do things thoroughly.”

“I see no reason to refuse. I suppose we could use the exercise. All right then, Crimes Circle, moving ou—”

“A-ah, wait!” An interruption to the president’s declaration came from an unexpected place—Kanshou Kiskeye, who’d until then merely listened quietly to the proceedings.

“What is it, Kanshou-kun. I was just getting excited!”

“U-um, I have a question for you two.” Ignoring the disappointment in Shirahama’s voice, Kanshou turned to the members of the Disciplinary Committee. “Err, do you perhaps know what happened to Moribe-senpai?”

“Hah? Moribe? I don’t know anyone by that name,” the chairman said dismissively.

“Sorry, the name doesn’t sound familiar to me either,” Okuoka added.

“I see. Nevermind, then.” And with that, Kanshou retreated. The unexplained question puzzled Karakuri for a second, but he just as quickly shelved it as useless drivel.

“Okay, are we good now?” Shirahama looked around the room briefly before once again declaring, “Then, Crimes Circle, rolling out!”

And with that, they were gone, leaving the spacious room empty once more.

Well, empty aside from me, that is.

I didn't even have the chance to say I'd stay behind for a bit, they'd just left me behind like it was nothing. Well, that's nothing new, so I won't hold a grudge.

I know I'm a pretty twisted guy—no, well, that's probably an understatement. Still, I figure most people are a bit twisted in their own right, too, they just never have a chance to express it. So I'm not too hung up about it, all in all. Maybe that's a pretty normal thing in its own right, downplaying your own mistakes to make yourself feel better.

For the moment, things resolved themselves. It didn't take much—just a small confession to our esteemed president.

“Oh boy, I sure feel like a total failure as a president right about now,” Shirahama said, his expression betraying his disappointment in himself.

“W-why's that? You did nothing wrong. It was me who—”

“I failed to notice that a precious member of my Circle was going through so much right under my nose. If that's not a failure, I don't know what is.”

“Aw, I wouldn't say I'm much of a 'precious' member...”

“Nonsense. Anyone who passed the test and officially joined this gathering is a precious member, no ifs, ands, or buts. Besides,” he continued, his mouth curling into a grin. “You really managed to trick me, this time. If that's not proof enough of your worth, I don't know what is.”

“T-that's...”

“This is the Crimes Circle, you know. Our subject of obsession and of adoration is crime. In other words,” saying that, Shirahama bowed in a grandiose gesture, like an actor at the end of a play, “I've no choice but to pay my respects to a grand criminal like you, haven't I?” Raising just his head, he gave me a playful wink.

And then he said he'd take care of everything for me. Since then, I haven't heard anything about the incident or about Kiyozumi Juna. Seems a bit anticlimactic, huh?

Still, it's not like that solves everything. Shirahama-senpai is just one man. However influential his relatives might be, if the winds happen to be blowing in the wrong direction, not even he would be able to do anything.

And even supposing that he did manage to quell this wave of hostility against common people like me, that wouldn't really solve the underlying problem, would it?

The reality is that, no matter what I do, in a year's time, most of the Circle's members will graduate; in two years' time, everyone but me will graduate, and in three years time, I myself will have no choice but to leave. The one place I've finally managed to find will evaporate with time, just like that.

It's not like I didn't know that all along. In the end, all I did was viciously take out my frustrations on some girl. I suppose we're not all that different in that sense, me and her. In that same way, she must've taken out her own frustrations on people like me. Maybe that's why I can't feel too bad about it.

Sigh. Tough being an average loser, isn't it? Unlike my brother, I'm not some genius that can always look to the future. I end up attaching myself so badly to whatever scraps of fulfillment I can find that it becomes impossible to let them go. Maybe learning to let go of stuff like that is part of becoming an adult. Ah, what do I know?

And then, as I walked between the large bookshelves in the Circle room, the discovery of one book in particular threw me out of my reverie. It was an unassuming little paperback in one corner of the fiction shelf.

The Poisoned Chocolates Case by Anthony Berkeley.

Ah... That's right. For some reason, I had totally forgotten about the existence of this book while in those loops. I—We'd all thought the events that happened to the Crimes Circle in London almost a century ago to be reality, not fiction. In truth, our club sharing that group's name was just a coincidence—perhaps it was what had made me so fascinated with it to begin with. Despite Shirahama's assertions,

I wasn't some kind of criminal mastermind, so I'd lifted my plan wholesale out of this novel.

I figured even if someone noticed the similarity, it wouldn't help them solve the case any better. Real life isn't like a novel, after all, and no one would assume that it is. If anyone out there thinks they'd be able to solve a real life incident just because they read a lot of mystery novels, they're either extremely naive or delusional.

"Heh." Picking it up off the shelf and gazing at its cover, I couldn't stifle a sympathetic laugh. This might sound weird, but I felt a kind of kinship with this book.

Both of us have no idea when to let things end, I guess. Even met with its final predetermined conclusion, it still refused to conclude. No, I guess it was those who read it that couldn't help wanting to keep it going. People like me, perhaps?

Everything I've done and everything I'll do will probably end up being forgotten, but this book—I'm sure it'll find someone else soon enough, someone who'll want to keep it alive for just a little bit longer.

All right then, once more to seal the deal! I'll do the honors.

The Poisoned Chocolates Case is not yet over.



Afterword:

Somnambula

If there's one emotion I rarely catch myself feeling, it's boredom. There's just too much to do in this world and so little time! I wonder how often I've wished for days to last twice as long, or fantasized about being able to stop time like a certain vampire. I even felt that way while trying (and failing) to meet my self-imposed deadlines on writing this very story. Though realistically, if I did have twice as much time, I'm sure I'd just procrastinate twice as much too, so really it's all just me blaming the ticking of the clock for my own faults.

This novella was originally meant to be a short story, and more to the point, the challenge I was originally given was to write an additional ending for *The Poisoned Chocolates Case*, as per tradition. But after actually reading the book, I was mildly possessed by this foolish idea and ended up turning what should have been a casual little experiment into a months-long writing project that only kinda sorta maybe meets the goal of the challenge through a technicality (not really). I'd like to think I at least came through on the spirit of it (coping).

Regardless, I'm glad I got to do this. *The Poisoned Chocolates Case* really is a wonderful example of taking a very simple idea and turning it into something memorable through its format and execution. Of course, I hardly think my execution came anywhere close to that of Anthony Berkeley's succinct elegance, but I wanted to follow through on the novel's light-hearted tone and have some fun with it. I sincerely hope you've felt at least a bit of that fun reading it.

Onto the acknowledgements—I'd like to thank Jared E. Jellson for giving me this writing prompt to begin with and for recommending the original novel to me, as well as Sam for the proofreading and feedback, which has been hugely helpful. Of course, I'm also grateful to Anthony Berkeley, whose witty and creative novel has inspired many over the years, and whom I can only hope isn't rolling over in his grave at what I've done to it. But most of all, thank you, for sparing some of your time on this little tale of mine.

Make sure to enjoy the little moments. See you next time.

Genma496,
(listening to “chocolate insomnia”
by Horie Yui and Kosaki Satoru)

Character Files 1/10



Shirahama Ryoukai

白浜了介

Age 17 Class 2-A Group Crimes Circle

Height 171cm Blood Type O Birth Date Feb 6

Based on Roger Sheringham

Of all the characters, he perhaps turned out the closest to his inspiration, at least superficially. Roger Sheringham is kind of a condescending prick, but he always wears that mask of politeness that makes him so entertainingly insufferable. Of course, the most fun part of the original character is watching him make a fool of himself, but in Shirahama's case he doesn't take himself seriously enough for that to really happen. His uniform fits his hair color the best. Maybe he commissioned it himself, just so that it'd look good on him.

Character Files 2/10



Araya Ryuuo

荒野竜雄

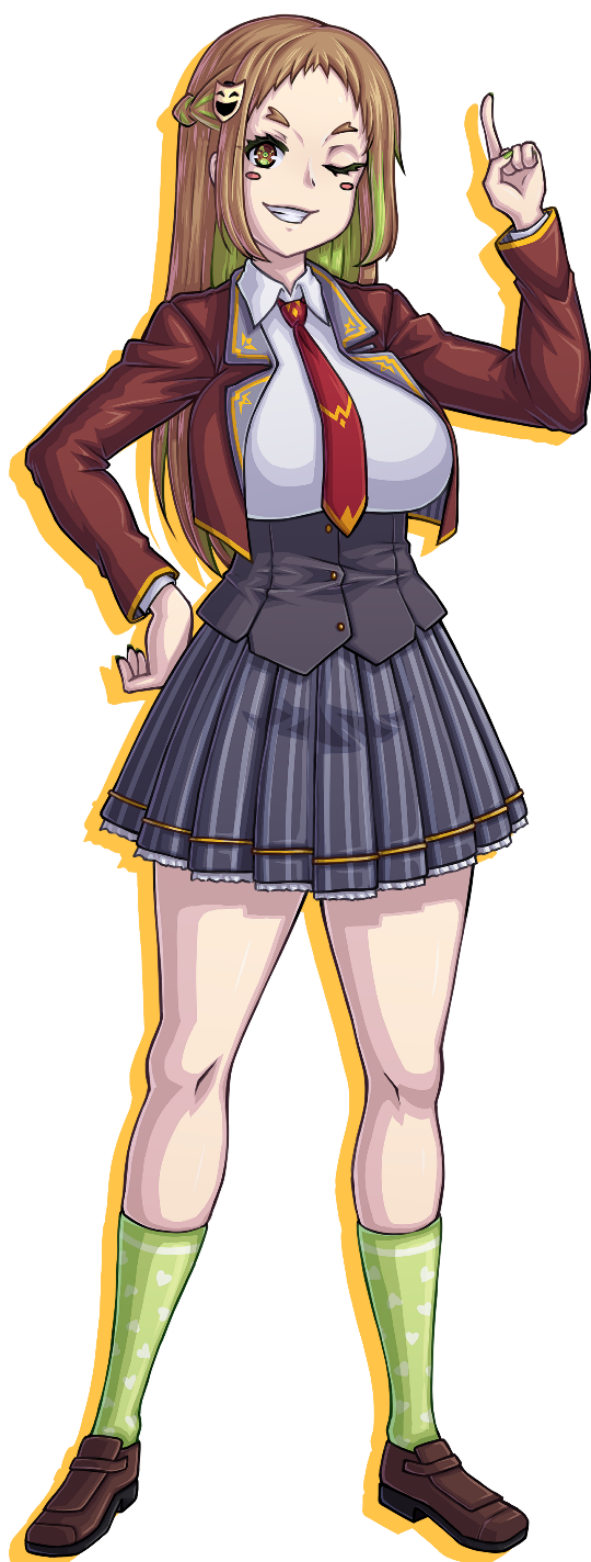
Age 18 Class 3-B Group Crimes Circle

Height 174cm Blood Type B Birth Date Jun 9

Based on Charles Wildman

Personality-wise, he is by far the most different from his inspiration. Charles Wildman the lawyer is unbearably irritating to me, which is no doubt the intention, but I decided to go in a totally different direction, and in so doing, Araya became my favorite character. If there's one thing that he retains from his origin, it's how very convincing he is—or, rather, how convincing he thinks he is. I'm a big fan of shark teeth, so I had to add a character sporting them. His middle school bowl cut self is one you'll have to use your mind's eye to see.

Character Files 3/10



Gekihara Esuzu

劇原愛鈴

Age 16 Class 2-C Group Crimes Circle

Height 152cm Blood Type B Birth Date Nov 11

Based on Mabel Fielder-Flemming

Ms. Fielder-Flemming, the dramatist enamored by love triangles, is a character I found quite endearing while reading the novel, so I decided to turn up the cuteness to the max for the character she inspired. Mabel's constant support for her only other female companion in the Circle was also a trait I wanted to carry over. The original's characterization suggested that her adoration for taboo romances was only superficial, but I have a feeling Gekihara would welcome such developments with open arms. Her hairstyle is my favorite among all the characters.

Character Files 4/10



Sekimonji Shisai | Kunugi Eisuke

石門寺詩齋・功刀詠助

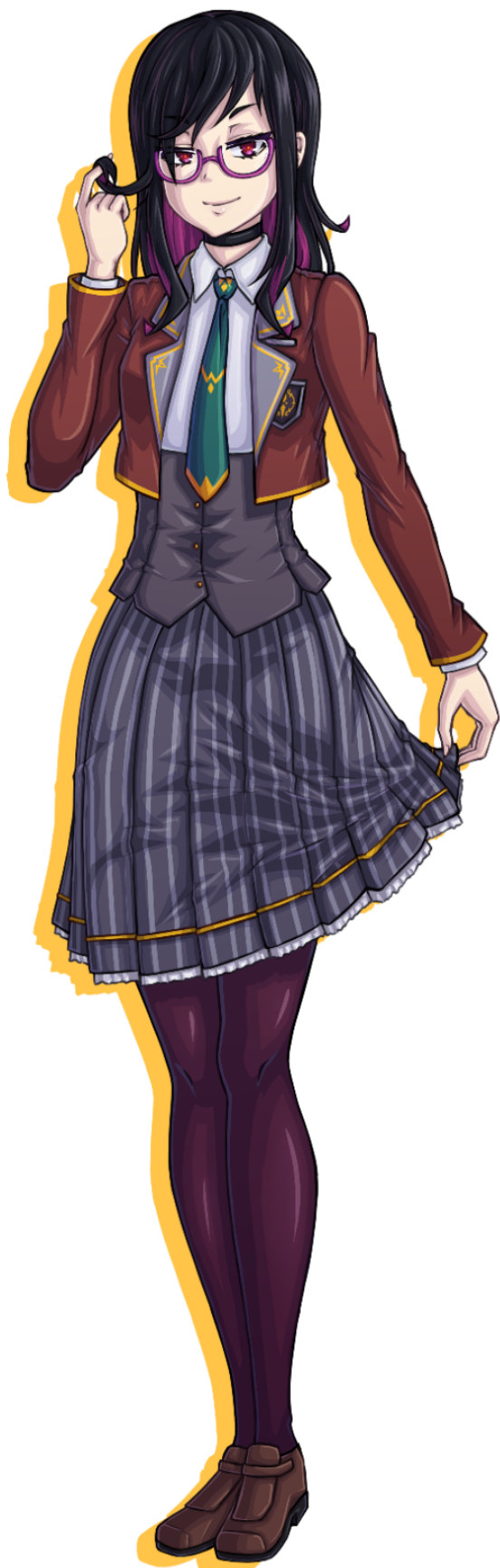
Age 18 **Class** 3-C **Group** Crimes Circle

Height 178cm **Blood Type** AB **Birth Date** Dec 25

Based on Morton Harrogate Bradley

Morton Harrogate Bradley, real name Percy Robinson, is a much more snarky character than Sekimonji turned out to be, but both men are equally bitter about their lives, I think. Bradley's deduction in the original is probably the most memorable one in the novel simply due to how funny it already is, so I wanted my own variant of it to outdo its ridiculousness. My original plan for the character was that he was a fan of mystery novels yet wrote light novels which he hated, but I figured that'd be too insincere for a work like this. Let's all love anime garbage.

Character Files 5/10



Damari Arisa

田巻アリサ

Age 18 Class 3-B Group Crimes Circle

Height 166cm Blood Type A Birth Date Aug 23

Based on Alicia Dammers

Alicia Dammers is probably the most interesting character in the original novel. Damari, in comparison, takes a very passive role in this story, but I hope some of the elegance of the original character still shows through. I didn't set out to have any special dynamic between her and Araya, but it just naturally came about after putting the most teasing character and the most teasable character in the same room. Outside the school uniform, her character design is pretty much identical to how I pictured Alicia while reading the original novel.

Character Files 6/10



Kanshou Kisuke

神漿記助

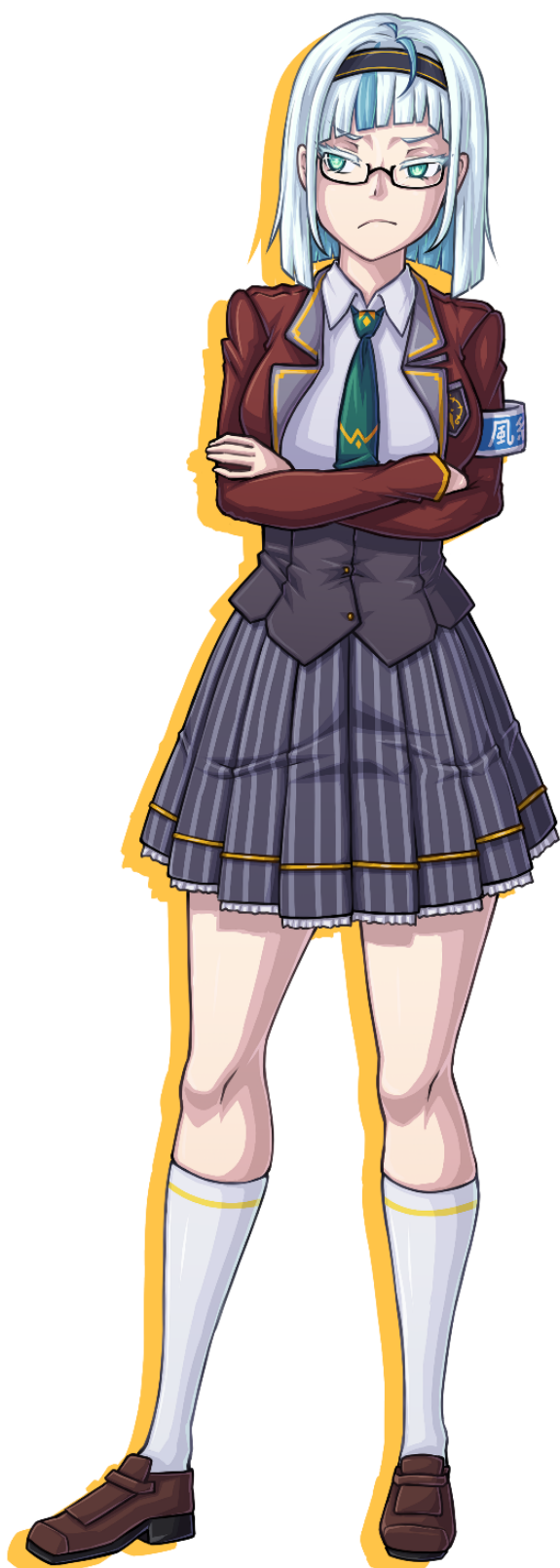
Age 16 Class 1-D Group Crimes Circle

Height 160cm Blood Type O Birth Date Dec 31

Based on Ambrose Chitterwick

Ambrose Chitterwick is the nice, timid and unassuming man who, despite being underestimated by everyone in the Circle, eventually ended up solving the case that no one else could. For that he is my favorite member of the group, but sadly, Kanshou doesn't get to have such miraculous talents. He is an ordinary person who is ordinarily bad at solving mysteries (at least, as bad as I'm sure I would be), and he would need a hundred years to catch up to the others. Even so, I hope this horrible boy has managed to make an impression on you nonetheless.

Character Files 7/10



Moribe Rinne

森辺輪廻

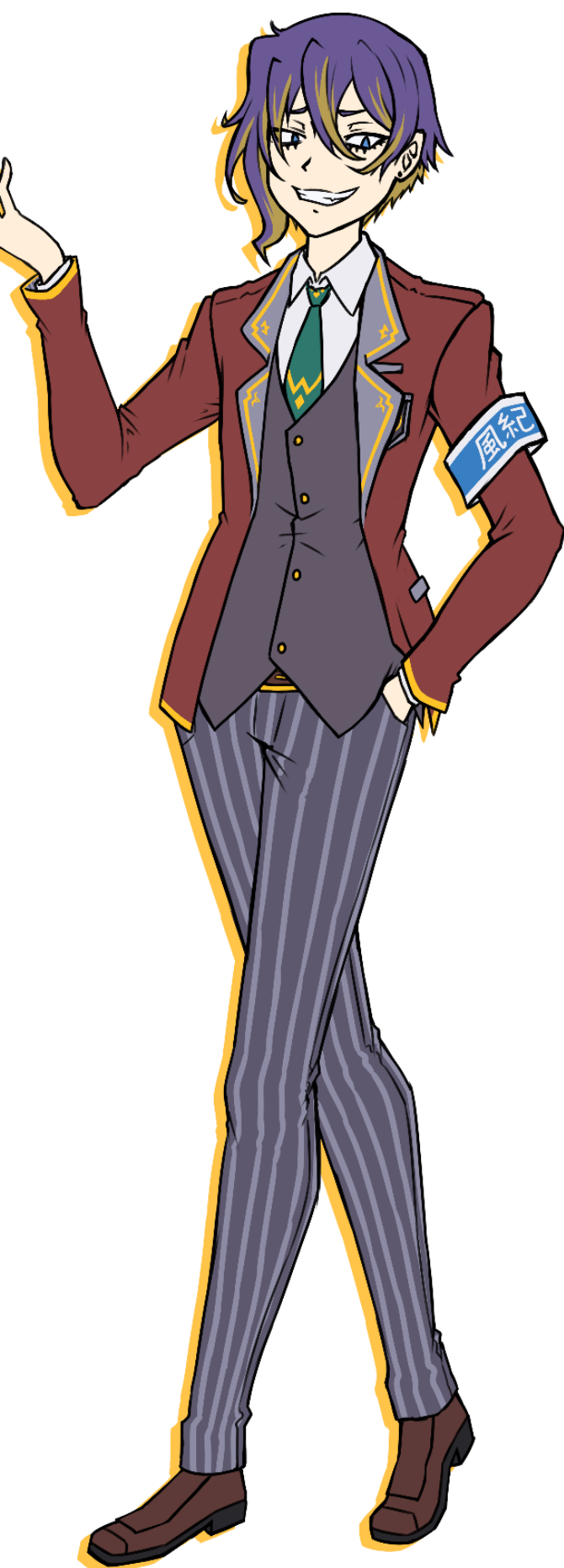
Age 18 Class 3-A Group Crimes Circle

Height 155cm Blood Type A Birth Date Jan 1

Based on Inspector Moresby

There's not all that much that Moribe has in common with Inspector Moresby except for their roles being similar. I did wonder while reading the original novel what kinds of reactions the inspector would have had to the various goofy theories that the Circle members put forward over the course of that story, had he been present to hear them, so that's partly why I made Moribe a lot more involved of a character. Either way, I doubt his headaches would have been as bad as the ones she has suffered. She sure had to put up with a lot, in more ways than one.

Character Files 8/10



Karakuri Kuroro

絡繰枢

Age 18 Class 3-A Group Disciplinary Committee

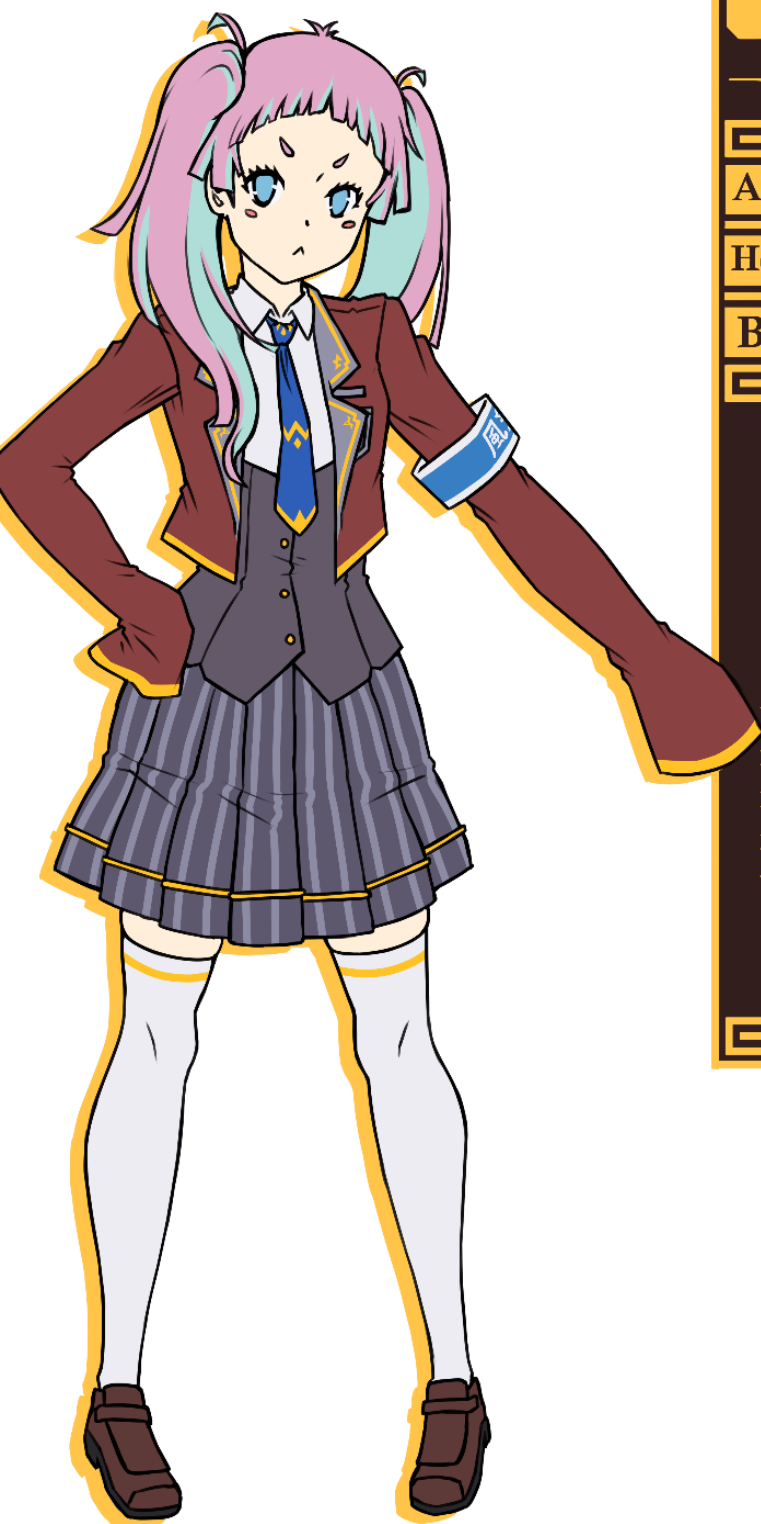
Height 179cm Blood Type O Birth Date Oct 11

Based on

-

Though he only appears for a few pages at the end, I hope he's managed to nonetheless make a strong impression. Unlike the others, he isn't based on anyone in the original novel, and his existence indeed just represents a bit of an indulgence on my part, but I hope he's managed to widen the small world of Tokiwa Academy a little bit. Just like Shirahama, he is also a family member of one of the school's board of directors, and he views it as his kingdom to rule over as he sees fit. He treats his underlings well. His favorite things are ferrets, milkshakes and himself.

Character Files 9/10



Okuoka Ouka

奥岡桜花

Age 15 Class 1-A Group Disciplinary Committee

Height 145cm Blood Type AB Birth Date Apr 4

Based on

-

She, too, is a fully original character that only appears for a short while. As the new vice chairwoman of the Disciplinary Committee, she has big shoes to fill, but I have a feeling she'll be just fine in the end. She has a secret crush on the chairman, but he loves himself too much for her to rival it. She likes gangster movies and chameleons. She is the only other first year featured in this story, and I ended up making both of them quite babyfaced, even though there shouldn't really be that big of a difference between them and the others. Her sleeves are custom made.

Character Files 10/10

Other Characters

Name	Based on	
Kaneya Yuuta	金爺遊太	Eustace Pennefather
Kiyozumi Juna	清泉純愛	Joan Bendix
Fukusen Koujuurou	福選幸十郎	Graham Reynard Bendix
Araya Torayo	荒野虎依	Dora Wildman
Hide Marihiko	日出毬彦	-
Horonobe	幌延	-



**Tokiwa Academy
Seal**

Locations & Organizations

Name	Based on	
Crimes Circle	犯罪サークル	Crimes Circle
Nijisou Dormitory	虹荘学寮	Rainbow Club
Tokiwa Academy	時輪学園	-

A classic mystery's sweet-toothed redux!

A century ago in London, a certain group of amateur sleuths known as the Crimes Circle met its match against the unknown mastermind of the so-called Poisoned Chocolates Case, an affair tangled like a spiderweb whose apparent simplicity belied its true depth.

Flashforward to modern day Japan—the Crimes Circle is back in an unexpected form. Tokiwa Private Academy is a school for the youth's elite. Among them exists an unofficial gathering of eccentrics, fascinated by the dark world of criminology—when this bunch find themselves embroiled in an affair endlessly similar to that which their forefathers had been stumped by, they have no choice but to try their hands—and heads—at solving it. And in classic fashion, they'll take turns doing so!

