Schrodinger's Detective

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Summary

After overhearing an ominous conversation between some suspicious attendees of a heist, the KID Capture Brigade decides to investigate the bizarre disappearance of Kudo Shinichi. But as their attempts to unravel the mystery of his apparent murder progress, and enemies and allies alike close in, they start to realize that some cases should be left closed. Just how can a detective be both alive and dead?

Notes

Warning for profanity and discussion of violence and teenagers being stupid and emotional
Some Nights, I Still See Your Ghost

The Kid Capture Brigade was not the most successful unofficial high school club, and sadly, probably was not going to look that impressive on Saguru's future resume. Not that he was that concerned with his future job prospects, considering he was already well ahead of most his age in professionalism, connections, and experience.

Though, the more heists he attended, the more it seemed that professionalism was tested.

One would think the more heists he was present for, the better his observations, and the better his chances at actually capturing the elusive thief; and yet, if he was honest, Saguru was almost certain he was getting worse, or at least, less effective, while KID improved, pulling bigger, crazier stunts and cackling his way to freedom more easily each time.

His indoctrination into the Brigade had only depleted his already waning usefulness to only slightly above the Inspector's, which wouldn't be such a blow if one was not aware that Nakamori Ginzo had been pursuing KID for over two decades and had absolutely nothing to show for it. The Brigade itself was well intentioned, bless Aoko's sweet heart, but its practicality was severely crippled by one tiny little detail.

And that tiny little detail was currently driving Saguru up the god-forsaken wall.

"Kuroba, would it happen to be impossible for you to shut up for more than half a second?" He growled into his walkie-talkie, attempting to interrupt Kuroba's perfect rendition of Gangnam Style.

Said fellow Brigade member did not even miss a beat. Saguru wondered if he was really singing live at all, or if he had merely set a recording to play while he committed an appallingly large amount of felonies.

Not that he would put it past KID to perfectly mimic the god awful tune while breaking and entering and humiliating the police in full, eye-catching regalia, and to be simply ignoring him.

"Yeah, Kaito!" Aoko's voice came through over the din, "you're gonna ruin the surprise attack!"

No, sadly, the surprise attack was ruined from the start. Mostly because it was difficult to surprise an internationally wanted thief after including said criminal in the planning of the grand strategy.

"Speaking of said attack," Koizumi cut in, "KID is heading to the southeast wing."

"In position, everyone!" Aoko ordered, and Saguru plastered closer to wall. He had changed up his planned position a bit, no need to stick to already compromised plans, and suspected that KID would rush right past the hall he was guarding on his way to the roof exit, which was guarded by five taskforce officers. Hopefully, he could still catch the phantom thief by surprise when he came up behind him while the magician was gassing the guards.

If not, KID would erupt out onto the roof, where Nakamori Aoko was waiting, having set up a trip-wire, which would absolutely be completely ineffectual and the bandit would likely escape unhindered, again.

"Wait, Nakamori-san," Koizumi's voice came again, an odd hardness in her usual crystalline tones, "something's wrong."

"Did KID change direction?" Saguru asked. Still no sign of the thief, even though by his average
running speeds, he should be reached Saguru's position thirty-three point seven seconds ago. The exciting thrill of the heist's atmosphere had disappeared from the air, and it was suddenly as if he was hiding in a creepy museum in the middle of a more threatening night.

"You need to hide, now! I'm coming to you!" Koizumi hissed, probably to Aoko, and Saguru felt a chill creep down his spine. It was not like the idol of their class to sound so harsh. Something unexpected must have come up.

Sometime between their whispering over the walkie-talkies, Kuroba's voice had softened and eventually faded out. That, Saguru expected, was the most ominous sign of all. The sudden absence of noise and cheer was eerie.

"Kuroba?" He asked tentatively into the receiver. There was no reply but the sound of heels clicking against the tile floor down the hall. Koizumi, having abandoned her post, dashed towards where he was hidden around the corner.

"KID hasn't come by yet, has he?" She asked, uncharacteristically breathless, and he nodded. "We have to get Nakamori-san back inside, now!"

"What's going on?"

"KID isn't the only crook on the loose tonight, apparently." Briefly, he wondered how she knew that, but knew better than to ask. The possibilities of her words swept through his mind; there were no murderers or thieves or kidnappers loose in the area that he knew of, if he discounted the star of this particular show, and Edogawa Conan wasn't in the building. That left the occasional other audience of the heists.

They needed to get Aoko inside and safe, immediately.

At the roof exit, there was a flurry of motion and voices as the guards all answered some order they received over their own communicators. After some quick, unquestioning exclamations of 'Yes sir!' the five of them booked it down the way Koizumi came.

"How much do you want to bet that it wasn't Inspector Nakamori that gave that order just now?" Saguru muttered to his classmate, eying where the guards had disappeared and the door they left unmonitored. He hoped it was KID and not someone more deadly calling the shots.

Uneasy, the two of them approached the door, fiddling with their comms. "Nakamori-san, its us opening the door. Come back inside." Koizumi said softly as she inched the heavy exit open, keen red eyes staring into the darkness beyond. When there was no response, she pushed out into the night, Saguru following quickly behind. The trip wire was abandoned at their feet, the line loose and cut, and the cold air was unwelcoming and bleak.

Aoko was nowhere to be seen.

But it was not silent. Carrying through the quiet night air, some strange sounds reached them, of heavy footsteps and the strange shrill shriek of multiple high-speed projectiles smashing into granite.

Saguru couldn't see what was going on, and could only hope that meant that whoever was out there couldn't see them either.

"Nakamori-san?" Koizumi whispered again, tension making her voice harsh. They crept along the wall of the roof's exit; Aoko should have been near the door. Saguru's heart was pounding in his chest, and the sound of voices was getting louder.
And then a hand was wrapped around his mouth, gloved, cold, and vicious. He tried to yell, to struggle, but in an instant he was being dragged upwards by the vice grip on his face and shirt.

Roughly, he was dumped on top of the roof exit, pushed down until he laid flat against it, and a sharp "shhh" accompanied a burst of air in his ear. A moment later, Koizumi was dragged up as well, her crimson high heels kicking in the air, and he realized someone was lying besides him, shaking slightly. In the darkness, it was a struggle to recognize them, but as he grew accustomed to the gloom, Aoko's figure resolved itself, pale and apprehensive. On his other side, Kuroba dragged Koizumi down, and they flattened themselves to the sloped roof of the museum's roof access stairwell.

He wanted to ask what was going on, but the grim expression Kuroba wore, and the sharpness of his indigo eyes, silenced him easily. From...somewhere, Kuroba pulled out a bundle, which was quickly unraveled into a black fleece blanket, which he tossed over them.

And so they settled like that, crammed together like sardines, on their stomachs underneath the cover it provided in the darkness. The damp chill of the concrete underneath them seeped into his clothes, until nothing but the warmth of the bodies pressed along his kept him from shivering.

In the dark, figures crawled onto the roof, all large and imposing, and carrying bulky duffel bags. Somehow, Saguru doubted they were police reinforcements for the heist. He slowed his breathing as much as he could, found Aoko's hand, trembling, and squeezed. Her palm was cool and sweaty with nervousness and fear.

"The target?" Someone barked as the figures shifted around.

"The thief got it."

"And where is he?"

Silence, then static and incomprehensible jumble.

"In the northwest wing!" One of the men answered, a hand lifted to his ear. They had pretty high-tech comms compared to the Brigade's measly walkie-talkies.

As his eyes adjusted to the meager light, Saguru discerned that there were six men on the roof, all dressed in black. One, in a hat and trench coat, seemed to be the leader, growling and snapping at the others like a rabid dog. That did not intimidate him much, but the shine in their hands made Saguru's blood run cold. All of them were heavily armed, and if the bags carried what their size and bulkiness suggested, there were more guns to come.

"You three, with me!" The leader ordered, waving a pistol around like a fool, "We'll corner that bastard inside." With the gun, he motioned at two of the men, and pointed at the door. "You two, mark the door! We won't let him fly away tonight." And in just a few excruciating movements, the other four disappeared into the building beneath them. Aoko squeezed his hand, and the contact, though slightly painful due to her tight grip, was comforting. Maybe it was for the best that they had not remained inside.

The two remaining men settled down, one to the right of the door, the other around the corner, both with guns drawn and pointed, ready to shoot at the first sight of the quarry.

He figured there must have been more intruders than just six that had enter the building another way, and were now herding KID into a trap. These two were just insurance to make sure, if the bandit slipped through their net, that he couldn't escape by air: a solid plan for catching prey less elusive
than a phantom thief. It might have had a chance at success, except, KID hadn't been in the building at all when they arrived, and instead of being slowly enclosed in the museum, was watching warily from above.

That made Saguru want to smile, but worries came from the from what little he knew of what was occurring within. Was KID’s accomplice in the building? How did KID trick both these men and the taskforce? Saguru couldn't even begin to guess. Would the taskforce be all right, and would they remain oblivious if so? It must have been KID on the radio, directing them to safety without their knowledge, but surely they couldn't miss the increase of intruders in the building.

They had noticed oddities before; there had been evidence at previous heist sites of interference by a third party. Gunshots etched into stone, shattered windows, suspicious figures and reports, sniper shots, undeniable proof that someone wanted the Moonlight Magician dead. And yet, to both his own and the Inspector's frustration, all evidence found was either a dead end, or disappeared right from the vaults and records, and requests for an official and formal investigation only ever made it up a few levels in the bureaucracy before being shut down.

Someone, both inside and outside the department, did not want them investigating.

Now, that was foreboding.

As they four of them waited with bated breath and fear pumping in their veins, the men below, part of something big and powerful and dangerous, grew bored as time moved on. Monitoring an unchanging door was apparently not at all interesting for thugs with guns. And so, they started to talk.

"Tch, this is a fucking joke." The one on the right began, shifting impatiently.

The other seemed less hotheaded. "Don't let Snake hear ya say that." Snake? Must be a codename, probably for the leader.

"This place is fucking crawling with cops, and they still make us come here. I don't care what Snake says, this is a motherfucking joke."

A chuckle. "Not just those shit-stains. Apparently some brats running around too, playin' cops and robbers. Really does sound like a shitty joke when ya think about it."

"Teen detectives, by fucking hell. As if this job weren't fucking enough of a joke already."

A touch of nasty-minded sarcasm entered one of the thugs' voices. "Maybe a chance meeting with a celebrity is one of our perks."

The hotheaded one laughed cruelly, the sound grating to his ears. "Heh, I wouldn't mind a chance to cap one of those little bitches."

"Damn straight." The colder one agreed, and the sadism in his tone sent a shiver down Saguru's spine. Aoko pressed closer.

"What's the name of that really famous one? Kudo something. I'd like to blow a hole in his big, shitty head." Kuroba tensed along Saguru's side, the first movement he made since they hid. Despite lying flat on his stomach, he was like a viper coiled to strike at any moment.

"Heh, haven't ya heard?"

"Heard what?"
"That one got offed way back. One of the codenames bashed the bitch's head in." Saguru's breath left him in a rush, and he bit back a sound, but no one seemed to notice. That was—that was impossible. These men were saying Kudo was dead.

"Oh, I think I remember someone telling me that. Man, wished I coulda seen it."

"Wasn't even a body once they were done with him, apparently. What I wouldn't give for picture of that." Saguru had a strong stomach, and had seen plenty of grisly scenes without balking, but the words made his stomach turn and nausea claw up his throat. Something about the thought of someone his own age, so alike to him, dying in such a manner that denied them any sort of identity, or closure, or mourning, without anyone the wiser, was bone chilling. And the sickening twist of sinners dyed with blood finding pleasure is such cruelty only compounded his horror.

"Bet he squealed like the pussy he was, eh? Forget pictures, I want video." Not wishing to think of it, to imagine it, he focused on his companions. Kuroba's eyes were most striking, from the little Saguru could make out, and were lapis lazuli burning with a ferocity he had never seen before, hateful and cold as the fires of hell. Saguru had never witnessed a furious Kuroba, just the usual aggravated and insulted front he put up, and for once it was easy to imagine the phantom thief 1412 in the place of his dear friend.

A harsh whine erupted from one of the thug's comms, and a gruff voice burst through with sharp words Saguru couldn't quite hear.

"No, sir, nobody's been through here. No sign of the target." The man on the left replied, exchanged a glance with his partner. More indecipherable noise on the other end.

Saguru was glad for the interruption.

"Yes, sir!"

"What Snake say?"

"No sign of the bastard thief or the target down below. He gave us the slip somehow. We got to get out of here before the cops get themselves together."

"Tch, another waste of fucking time."

And in just a few brief moments, they were gone, melting back from the shadows they came from. Still, the four of them remained still and frozen for minutes after, waiting for a sign of thugs coming back, but as the silence wore on, they relaxed. Finally, after carefully measuring their surroundings, Kuroba rose and pulled off the blanket.

"Everybody alright?" He asked, helping Koizumi up and off the sloped cement. Saguru pushed himself up as well, mourning the state of his clothes, and offered his hand to the shaky and pale girl besides him.

"Yes," He replied, after inspecting his companions, "but let's get inside and back to the taskforce before anything else happens."

Unnerved and uneasy, they reentered the building and started navigating their way out, walking quickly to warm their chilled bodies and ward off the jittery fear built up in their tense muscles. For a couple minutes, no one spoke, but eventually Aoko pulled herself together.

"They were talking about Kudo Shinichi, weren't they?" She asked as they went down the stairs, brow furrowed and eyes bright. The deep blue of her eyes contrasted eerily with the paleness of her
face, and Saguru winced when her gaze fell on him.

The conversation they had overheard was burned into his memory, and made his stomach turn. His mind was racing with possibilities and thoughts, but without proper time to digest the frightening new information, he didn't want to talk about it and make ill-founded conjectures.

"Most likely," He agreed after letting her question hang. Neither Kuroba or Koizumi had seemed willing to answer it. Though he dared not say so, it was unimaginable that they were speaking of anyone else.

"But, Kudo-san isn't dead, is he?" Aoko pushed on, and Saguru was unable to look at her. There were rumors, of course, but he hadn't paid them any mind. Kudo had been suspiciously absent from the media outside of gossip articles and internet backdraft for over a year now, but he had just thought the other had grown tired of all the attention. He had wondered slightly when at the Sunset Mansion it was mentioned that the other teenage sleuth had been unable to be found or contacted, but hadn't paid it much thought. When again, at the Detective Koshien, he alluded search, he had shrugged and figured that maybe he was globetrotting like his parents or become a recluse.

Geniuses were often flighty like that.

The words that all four of them had just heard were undeniable, though. Dead men appeared in no tales, after all.

But as far as he knew, Kudo wasn't officially reported missing. At least, there had never been any search announced, and even if the police had investigated privately, his father would have surely mentioned it, out of concern for Saguru's own safety.

The Osakan detective, Hattori, was, or had been, close with Kudo, hadn't he? Wouldn't he have investigated the disappearance of his friend? Something was off.

But dangerous, and professional, criminals, in a conversation they had no reason to think was anything but private, boldly proclaimed that not only was Kudo murdered, but that they knew at least something of the circumstances of his supposed death.

That some "codename", someone possibly in the same criminal organization they were working under, had assassinated Kudo and destroyed the body.

Saguru had expected the strange circumstances of the interference at KID's heists to be part of something big, but this was more horrifying than he had imagined. Was the same power that withheld investigation on the third-party after KID also preventing an official search for Kudo Shinichi? Were there some members of the force already aware of the alleged assassination that were covering it up within the police?

"I don't know." He said finally, as the confused and flurried shouting of the task force began to filter through the halls towards them, "I just don't know."

The after-heist debrief meeting of the Brigade the next day began with uncomfortable silence. The frightening events of the dark night before weighed heavily on each of the members minds.

Aoko hated the heavy mood consuming her friends, but couldn't deny that her own usually cheery attitude was struggling to overcome the anxiety of the night before. She had returned home shaking and quiet, and had been unable to sleep. Her father came back even later than she, but riledd up as he was about the escape of his prey and some confusing events she didn't know about, she didn't dare tell him the truth about what happened to her and the Brigade.
Now, even in a safe place with her friends, daylight streaming through the window, her hands shook. Glaring at them defiantly, she clenched them into fists before slamming them into the Blue Parrot's bar, cutting right through the silence and dark thoughts of her friends.

"Aoko wants to know what happened last night," she announced loudly. "Who were those guys? Why doesn't Aoko's dad know about them? How'd they get in and out?" All the unknowns were driving her absolutely crazy. All her friends met her eyes, but only one looked guilty, like he had been keeping secrets.

"Hakuba-kun," she called him out, "What do you know?"

Said transfer student ducked his head and looked uncomfortable, clearly battling with his own indecisiveness. Aoko frowned at him harder.

"At past heists," the blond eventually capitulated, "we've found evidence of the presence of a lot of… unauthorized individuals at the scene of the crime. From what we could tell, they aren't with KID. If anything, they seem to be trying to kill him."

"What?" The exclamation burst from her lips before she could stop it. There were people who wanted to kill KID? Sure, Aoko sometimes felt a little murderous before, during, or after a particularly obnoxious heist, but even she had to admit that as far as criminals went, he was unusually harmless. So long as she forced herself to ignore how he encouraged others to disrespect the law and disturb the peace, that is. The idea of someone, a lot of someones, wanting the vivacious burglar six feet under was near unthinkable.

Hakuba continued on, voice solemn but strong, as if he was going over the clues of a case. Maybe to him, he was. "Announced heists are essentially the only times KID comes out of the woodwork, in costume at least. The rest of the time, considering his skill with disguise and infiltration, he very well could be anywhere as anyone. As such, if someone is searching for KID, the only time he is guaranteed to appear is at his own heists, which he arrogantly announces before hand. He tells everyone where and when he'll appear, and that is the only chance to… get him." Aoko was well aware of the fact that the announcement of KID's targets was the only reason the police seemed to have a chance at catching him at all. If he could steal under such heavy, prepared and alert security, surely he could do the same under less vigilant conditions. But Aoko knew, she just knew, that he didn't do it to be sporting; he did it to boost his own ego and make fools of the honorable police that tried to capture him. Yet, doing so apparently did not just make him vulnerable to capture, but death as well. Was his own arrogance really so important that he would put his life on the line to show-off? She just couldn't understand it.

Unknowing of her confusion, Hakuba continued. "But considering how he is high-profile cat burglar, it isn't unthinkable that he may have enemies in the criminal underground as well as the police force, or that there may be a valuable hit on him. KID may be responsible for a great deal more crimes than we know, as well, and could be involved in just about anything. As such, we expect that a third-party is using heists as an opportunity to kill him." She had never thought about it before, but that troublesome thief probably did spend plenty of time stealing without an audience. And if he managed to infuriate the police so much, surely he had run amuck with other bad guys too.

"...Alright. But how do they get in? Aoko's dad's security is supposed to keep criminals out." She pointed out. Just how did so many bad guys get passed her dad to even have a chance at murdering KID? They can't all be infiltration specialists on the level of one of the greatest thieves in history.

Hakuba nodded. "And usually, it seems, it's successful. Evidence of...confrontation between KID and this third-party is not apparent at all heists, though it's much harder to prevent the snipers." So, the presence of police did give KID some level of defense against his more grisly pursuers. Of course
that infuriating jerk would use her father as a shield. Not only did he take away their time as a family, but he put her dad's life in danger too. She clenched her fists and fought back against the rush of anger. This was not what she wanted to focus on right now. Somebody may not just be in danger of being dead, but may really be dead.

"Snipers?" She asked after seething for a moment. Hakuba measured her with a sympathetic gaze.

"From what we know, snipers have been camping on top of buildings along KID's most likely escape routes frequently. We have yet to actually catch one of them, though."

That was alarming. The way Hakuba said 'we' suggested the whole task force was aware of this. She shuddered in confusion and worry. "But... why isn't Aoko's dad doing anything about this?"

"That's the actual suspicious part of it all. All inquiries we make on the topic don't ever get approved, and evidence disappears as soon as we find it. Somehow, somebody is interfering and preventing the launch of a formal investigation." Saguru said the last part quietly, like he didn't want anyone to hear. Aoko almost wished she hadn't. Was he really suggesting what she thought he was suggesting? Even she had to admit that the justice system was corrupt sometimes, but something on such a scale that snipers and organized attempted murder could go on without investigation... it wasn't right.

Battling with herself, she came to a decision. If no one else would pursue this, she would. "...What do we know about these guys?" She demanded, and Hakuba looked surprised for a moment, before sighing in disappointment.

"Next to nothing." He admitted, and Aoko knew him, knew how he could always pick something out of nothing, and realized that this was way out of her depth. If Hakuba was left empty-handed, catching them must be nigh impossible. "They wear black. They want KID dead, and possibly the jewels he steals. They appear and disappear easily. They are organized, and possibly part of a much, much larger group." All that Aoko could have listed off from just their experience at the heist. Hakuba wasn't kidding about them knowing nothing. He didn't seem discouraged, though, just serious, and his eyes were bright with promise as he continued. "Just last night, though, it seems we learned something new."

"They mentioned someone called 'Snake'." She pointed out, and again, he nodded.

"I believe that's the codename for their leader." How... cliché. Or even, cartoonish.

There was one last thing they knew. "And somebody else with a codename..."

"Apparently killed Kudo Shinichi."

While Aoko battled with herself throughout the conversation, Saguru was carefully monitoring the reactions of their other two members. Koizumi had an expression of quiet curiosity and interest throughout the discussion, but was otherwise unmoved. Maybe she had suspected something like this all along? One could never tell with her.

Kuroba's face was the picture of bored aggravation throughout, which while characteristic of the attitude he brought to the usual meetings of the KID Capture Brigade, didn't quite fit here and now. Wasn't he supposed to be KID's greatest fan? Any fan with any sort of affection or interest in the thief would be horrified by the revelation that there were killers after their idol. Maybe the topic bothered his classmate so much that he couldn't bring himself to put up a more reactive mask, that for him it was easier to close off than pretend. It couldn't possibly be easy, knowing so many dangerous men were out to spill his blood across the pavement.
Deciding to take pity on his friend, he focused on the matter at hand rather than Kuroba's unusual behavior: the possible death of one Kudo Shinichi. He had been too tired to look into the issue properly after the nerve-wracking heist the night before, but he did do some quick web searches. There was a lot of speculation about the disappearance, but nothing remotely conclusive or official. As far as he could tell, discounting the dubious testimonies of many anonymous "witnesses" who claimed to have seen him in the past year, Kudo had genuinely vanished without a trace. No viable or trustworthy pictures had been taken, no official statements, nothing.

The thugs had claimed there was no corpse to find, too.

"Is it possible?" Aoko asked him, brow furrowed. There was something in her blue eyes, but he couldn't tell what.

"...I looked into it last night, and...Yes. Its possible." He confessed, and wasn't that the scariest part? That it was a possibility that Kudo Shinichi could really have been brutally murdered, and no even knew?

As unnerved by the idea as he was, Aoko chewed her lip in indecision. Finally she asked, "Should we tell someone? Aoko's dad?"

Saguru had already considered reporting the events of the night prior to the Inspector, but had refrained after debating with himself over the consequences of revealing that they had been in such danger. The only reason they were allowed on-site at all was because KID was considered a non-violent criminal.

"Do that and we'll all be banned from heists for the next century." Surprisingly, it was Kuroba that answered, which made Saguru raise an eyebrow disbelievingly. Such a ban would only be convenient for KID, considering it would take Saguru out of the picture, and therefore remove one of the few actual hindrances to KID's free reign, and keep Nakamori Aoko, one of his few weaknesses, out of harm's way. Being able to attend as Kuroba Kaito had its uses, but the international jewel thief certainly had other methods. Informing the Inspector would only handicap Saguru, so it was in Kuroba's interest to actually encourage it.

So why was he essentially telling Aoko to keep her mouth shut?

Did he not want the Inspector to know of the threat of the men dressed in black?

Or, he did not want the Inspector to know what they heard about Kudo. That was a possibility; his reasoning could even include both. What was Kuroba's connection to Kudo, anyway? He had been bizarrely angered last night, as if the thug's conversation had discussed the death of someone close rather than a stranger.

Just another question about the enigmatic Kaito KID.

Aoko seemed torn. "We can't just not do anything, though." She insisted, and as soon as the words left her mouth, she seemed to make up her mind. There was a determined line in the turn of her mouth and chin as she suddenly slammed her open palms on the counter again. "Hakuba-kun, you investigate murder cases all the time, right?"

Well, not all the time, but often enough, he supposed, and nodded.

Then he blinked. Was she suggesting—

"Alright! Then from this day forward, the KID Capture Brigade will be taking on the case of the Disappearance of Kudo Shinichi!" She announced resolutely, and Saguru felt, well, a little
impressed. He had been planning to pursue the matter anyway, but to see someone else so dedicated
to the rising mystery, when most turned their heads away, gave him an unusual feeling of
camaraderie.

Kuroba, though, clearly didn't feel it. "Hey, hold on!" The magician groused, "What's Kudo got to
do with KID-sama?" He was frowning, the same disgruntled, 'I don't want to do this' face he always
wore when Aoko suggested something that was inconvenient to him. Another unusual reaction in
this situation though. Why wouldn't he want the main detective that pursued him to be distracted
investigating something elsewhere? The only answer was that he didn't want them investigating this
particular subject. Why? Kuroba was not entirely an apathetic, or unjust, individual, despite his
frequent bouts of insensitivity, and did not like to see cruelty go unpunished. It was not like him
to not care about the possibility of a murdered kid.

"Because, he's the only lead we've got on the creeps that are coming to KID's heists,
and those creeps are the only lead we've managed to get on KID since we established this Brigade!"
Aoko shot back, and it was clear that there would be no arguing with her. Still, it was a fair point,
and when added to the other questions buzzing in Saguru's mind, more than enough.

Maybe, by investigating Kudo, they stood to learn about Kuroba, KID, too.

But Kudo was one of the greatest minds of their generation; certainly the most formidable in terms of
deduction and perception. He had spent the past few years dedicating his life to the pursuit of truth,
the banishment of illusion, and yet, now it seemed that he himself had become a mystery so baffling,
an illusion so deluding, that the whole country was fooled.

It was terribly, sadly ironic.

The least Saguru could do, as a fellow detective, was find the truth Kudo had treasured so much in
the mystery he had become.
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It gets better when you're older and they believe the words she says

Words are mostly meaningless, the only truth that really is

Chapter 2: With Only One Truth, Everything Else is Lies

It was only natural to begin an investigation with the very basics. Kudo Yusaku was a mostly household name, as one of Japan's most renown mystery novelists, and now award winning screen-play writer, and his wife Yukiko was certainly no less famous, featuring in nearly every gossip mag on the planet frequently, over some stunt she had pulled in typical uncontrolled celebrity fashion.

Kudo Shinichi was as famous as his parents, though over the past year his name brought less awe and more intrigue, confusion, and conspiracy theories. Everyone had a different idea of why he disappeared, the most prominent of which being that he was murdered while investigating a case and that his parents were covering it up.

And, what Saguru has most recently overheard suggested that that might well be the truth, if only scraping the surface of it. Neither the Kudos nor the police had made any formal statements, always answering 'no comment' when questioned by reporters on the whereabouts of Japan's finest teen detective.

Saguru had no qualms admitting Kudo was good; the best even. The files on the other's cases he had borrowed with his father's go-ahead revealed that Kudo was efficient, rational, clever, and ruthless. No case he took on went unsolved or failed to end in a conviction. Most of his suspects just plead guilty.

But as informative the files were, Saguru had learnt near nothing about the current whereabouts of the vanished celebrity. The last case Kudo had (by the records, at least) solved had taken place at Tropical Land, and that happened to be right before he stopped attending school.

They would go there next, but for now, they were in front of his home in Beika. The Kudo Manor was impressive, a Western style mansion with white walls and blue tiling and broad, expansive windows that gleamed in the sunlight. Apparently, until a couple months ago, it had also been the scariest home on the block, always dark and foreboding and seemingly abandoned by its three occupants. Then, someone-definitely not Kudo-had moved in. Now the house seemed slightly more welcoming, just intimidating and cold.

"It's quite the place," Koizumi commented, red eyes admiring the manor's size and design. Aoko nodded alongside her, her own eyes gleaming, probably getting some strange ideas about Kudo Shinichi being princely, or something. Which, Saguru had to admit, he apparently really was, if rumor rang true.

"Who needs such a huge house for just three people, though?" Kuroba grumbled, eyebrow twitching. He was clearly still bitter about being dragged out to Beika on a Sunday morning when he could be plotting something mortifying for his next illegal masquerade.

"Well, they have the money for it, so why not?" Koizumi laughed, quick and teasing, while she
approached the intercom with a graceful step. "Shall we see if anyone is home?"

She pressed the button and they waited. Only a few moments passed before a voice answered.

"Hello?"

"Um, good morning! We're classmates of Kudo-kun's, and were wondering if he was here?" Aoko tittered back, voice loud to pass through the speakers.

"I'm afraid he has not been here in quite sometime. I'm the current tenant, and I've never met him. He hasn't been to the school in quite a long time, either. What did you need with him?" The voice on the other end was smooth and relaxed, untroubled but politely curious: it was that of a mature man, but not one that was over thirty. He sounded earnest enough, and Saguru sent a quick, questioning glance Kuroba's way. The genius had been listening intently, a focused frown on his face, but he shook his head. Apparently, the man inside sounded truthful to him as well.

"Well, its for a school project, but if he's not home…" Aoko trailed off, and gave Saguru a helpless look.

"Do you have any idea where we can find him?" Kuroba piped up, voice cheery and friendly. The kind of voice that made parents smile and be glad that their child had made such a charming friend. "What we have to tell him is important to him too."

There was a pause, before the gate unlocked. "Why don't you four come inside? I have tea, and we can discuss the matter further."

Well, Saguru smiled, seemed his obnoxious classmate had his uses.

The man that welcomed them inside was tall and well built, with spectacles and strawberry blond hair, probably dyed. He dressed well, and a little professionally, and would probably be considered quite handsome. Koizumi seemed charmed, at least. They are brought into a well-furnished sitting room, with plush couches and a polished coffee table; but with a quick glance about Saguru could tell it did not see much use. Of course, that was completely natural, a bachelor living alone in a house as huge as this probably didn't have much use for it.

"Please forgive the intrusion," He started as his friends sat down, Kuroba and Aoko on the couch alongside him as Koizumi immediately gravitated towards an armchair. "My name is Hakuba Saguru, and these are my classmates, Aoko-kun, Koizumi-san, and Kuroba-kun." The man set a down a platter of tea and crackers before taking his own seat across the table from them. Though it was hard to tell, due to his naturally squinty eyes, he seemed to be inspecting them each thoroughly.

"I am Okiya Subaru, the current resident of this house. Please make yourselves at home."

"Um, ah, we appreciate the hospitality!" Aoko stuttered quickly, apparently embarrassed about invading someone's home so early in the morning on a Sunday.

"Yeah, I'm sure you probably have better things to do than entertain a bunch of high schoolers." Kuroba grinned self-deprecatingly, coming to her rescue with a great deal more comfort than he probably should have, considering they were currently sitting in the living room of two of the world's greatest detectives. Stupid thief always managed to pretend to be ridiculously relaxed in the most hostile of environments.

"You'd be surprised," Irony laced Okiya's tone, "You're definitely not the youngest visitors I've gotten. I often have local elementary schoolers scrambling around."
Hmmm? Now what did that mean? Children were naturally curious and rambunctious, but even that had its limits. Certainly it wasn't normal for local kids to play around in a celebrity's home.

"But no sign of Kudo-kun?" Aoko frowned, and the man shook his head.

"Kudo Shinichi has not returned here since I took up residence, as far as I know. His mother is the only one of my landlords that I've actually met." So Kudo Yukiko had returned, but not her husband. Evidently, if the couple were so willing to rent out their home, they must believe their son would not be returning to it suddenly for some reason. Did they confirm the murder of Kudo Shinichi, or were they in contact with him somehow?

Unable to actually pursue that line of questioning, Saguru instead asked, "When did you move in, if you don't mind me asking?"

Their host turned his direction with a blank, polite face. He seemed like a man unbothered by curiosity. "Roughly three months ago. My previous apartment got burned down in an arson case. An acquaintance offered to arrange for me to house-sit this manor."

An acquaintance? Saguru wished he would specify whom, but it was not a definite lead. Both Kudos had large social circles, so there was no guarantee the person Okiya mentioned was relevant to the case at all. Asking about them, when it had apparently nothing to do with their supposed classmate, would be suspicious as well.

Forced again to let the lead slip, he inquired about Yukiko's visits. "Did Kudo-san mention anything about her son?"

"Nothing at all, but I thought it would be rude to ask." Okiya responded evenly, shaking his head slightly. Of course it wouldn't be so easy.

Kuroba slipped in next, posture relaxed and face open. Everything about his entire body language encouraged tongues to loosen, but Saguru was not certain Okiya would be affected. He got the strangest impression that this man was far more experienced in interrogation than them. "Have any of our other classmates come by?"

For a moment their host considered the question, before answering smoothly. "Mouri-chan and her friends sometimes come by to help clean; this house is so large that it is difficult to maintain."

Mouri, as in Kudo Shinichi's close friend and possible romantic interest. Just to be sure, though, "Mouri Ran?"

"Yes," Okiya confirmed, "she and Shinichi-kun were apparently quite close. She has been taking care of this manor since he…"

Okiya didn't say the word 'disappeared', but they all heard it, resounding in their minds.

Aoko sighed pitifully, "I guess we should go talk to her next, see if she knows anything." She was not trained to read into conversations like Saguru was, so she probably thought nothing had been gleaned from the exchange so far. Knowing that she wasn't entirely wrong to think that was a little disheartening.

In response to her disappointment, Okiya smiled apologetically. "What project are you four working on anyway?"

For a moment, all four of them were silent, exchanging quick glances. They had all discussed the cover story, but Kuroba, the best liar among them, did not seem keen to take point.
"...We are hunting," Koizumi eventually purred, "a very elusive dove."

Saguru suppressed a sigh. The school’s diva had to make everything sound so dramatic.

"Sounds like an unusual school project." Okiya frowned good-naturedly. Saguru wished he had a better view of the other's eyes, but between the glasses and his facial structure, it was difficult to discern what Okiya was thinking.

Before their host got any ideas that would put them in a particularly suspicious light, Saguru explained, "What Koizumi-san means is that we are doing a project on Kaitou KID, and Kudo-kun actually once faced off with him, some two years ago or so. We were hoping he could tell us about it, give us something that can't just be found with a quick Internet search."

For a long moment, Okiya inspected them each, and his cool, appraising gaze raised goose bumps on Saguru's flesh. This man, though friendly, was unnerving. Thankfully, as tension rose in both the room and in their blood, he cracked an amused smile. "Researching a mysterious phantom thief by chasing an elusive detective seems a bit roundabout."

Saguru hid his relief. Okiya, for all that he was unreadable, was apparently as good-natured as he seemed. Kuroba chuckled, and with no small amount of cockiness, said, "We like challenges."

Still smiling, Okiya rose from his seat and began to beckon them out. "Well, I wish you the best of luck." He began, before guiding them to the door. Only once they had all stepped out of the manor, and he had a firm hold of the doorknob, did he finish. "Whether you are hunting birds or ghosts, you may find them to be always out of your reach."

And with those ominous parting words, the cold, impersonal home of Kudo Shinichi was once again closed to them.

"That guy was kind of scary." Aoko said as they walked away. Saguru was inclined to agree, and was near certain that even the usually unaffected Koizumi felt unnerved by the conversation.

"Yeah…" Kuroba laughed, seemingly relieved to be free of the oppressive confines of the manor, but there was a certain, purposeful tension in his voice that Saguru recognized. It was the tone he used when he was pretending to hide his feelings behind bravado. Aoko would think it real.

Picking up on Kuroba's apparent discomfort, the messy haired girl snapped the bait, eyes wide. "You don't think he's with…"

Saguru himself had been considering that terrifying theory, but still hesitated to confirm or deny her fears. "...It's possible." He admitted, "But I hope that's not the case. After all, they seemed pretty convinced that Kudo was in the metaphorical grave. I don't think they'd have a reason to place an agent within his home."

Aoko relaxed, just slightly. "Yeah…"

"So where to next? Mouri's?" Kuroba cut it, ending the conversation he manipulated them into having, and Saguru wondered exactly what his angle was. It was too soon to go directly to Mouri Ran and expect answers.

"No, I think we should just better acquaint ourselves with Beika. I'd like to question some actual students of Teitan High, but that'll probably have to wait until tomorrow afterschool."

"Hey, what about the neighbors? They may know something."
Just like that, they set their eyes on the house next door. It was another large home, but nowhere near the size of the neighboring manor. The nameplate outside said 'Agasa'.

For some reason, the name seemed familiar to Saguru, but he couldn't quite place the recollection. As they made to approach the gate, there was a sudden crash, a large, explosive noise, from inside. The windows flashed with bright light.

In an instant, Kuroba was over the gate and at the door. Hakuba and the girls followed at a much less impressive pace, but Saguru had to help Aoko over, and well, she and Koizumi were both wearing skirts.

Kuroba threw open the door, which had either been unlocked, or he had picked the lock when Saguru hadn't been looking.

"Is everyone alright? What happened?" He bellowed. The entrance way led into a spacious room, which seemed to be a living room and kitchen combined. But that was not what Saguru noticed first.

After all, there was some… metal contraption smoking on the floor, sparks dancing up from its scorched parts and across the tiling. Collapsed next to it was a dizzy-looking elderly man, who was rubbing his eyes with one hand and clutching his glasses in the other.

"What is that?" Aoko asked, as a little girl—she couldn't be more than eight—walked casually over with a fire-extinguisher and promptly showered the malfunctioning tech with white gas, all with a terribly bored look on her face.

"Nothing, just a heap of trash." The elementary schooler said, pointing the extinguisher in their direction. "What are you?"

Long silence. Eventually, Kuroba blinked away his bafflement. "Uhh, high-school students?"

The girl glared, tiny face pinched in a glower more suited to a mature woman than a child not even in her double digits. "Trespassers more like it."

The pointed jibe made Kuroba's eyebrow twitch. He never had been any good with children outside of performances, Saguru thought with no small amount of amusement. Sometimes it was nice to see the smug and untouchable Kuroba rankled. "Hey, now, kid, we were outside and heard an explosion. We thought people could be hurt!" A perfectly reasonable, and true, explanation for once. The little girl didn't look impressed in the least. Saguru liked her already.

"Not from around here are you?" She huffed, cold gray eyes sweeping over them, as if she was inspecting a particularly nasty heap of trash. On Kuroba's face the gaze lingered, though, possibly because of his resemblance to Kudo.

Aoko, the best among them with kids, leaned down with a confused smile. "Err, what makes you say that?"

The girl was no friendlier at eye level, however. If anything, she seemed to reconsider them with even less esteem, as if they had gone from trash to less than trash, because at least trash could be burned. "This happens at least two times a week." She said, moving away from them to the counters lining the kitchen, where she tucked the fire extinguisher away in a cupboard. Saguru could only assume it was there for quick and easy reach.

"You're kidding." Kuroba said, but nobody laughed.

"Nope."
'Come now, Ai-kun.' They all turned to the old man, having almost forgotten his presence. He seemed to have recuperated, now standing steadily, if a little apologetically. "I'm sorry for the ruckus and worrying you lot, but we are indeed unharmed. Thank you for the concern."

"Are you sure you're alright?" Aoko asked, scanning him for injuries. Besides some oil marking his coat and what looked like ash dusting his nose, their elder was unmarked.

"Yes. My new project just malfunctioned, that's all." He laughed, embarrassed, before smiling welcomingly. "Ai-kun is right, I haven't seen you kids before. Were you just passing through?"

"Well, actually, we were looking for a classmate of ours." Koizumi answered, the lie passing easily from her lips. Her eyes tracked the little girl, Ai, who came to the old man's side with a bored expression, with strange interest.

"A classmate? Do they live nearby?" The elder asked, looking baffled, and maybe a little nervous. Strange.

"Yes, right next door." Saguru replied, measuring his reaction carefully. The old man's bushy eyebrows rose, and he crossed his hands behind his back, but nothing seemed suspicious. In fact, the man's very appearance and nature seemed to emanate trust-worthiness, like a doting grandfather.

The old man, Saguru assumed him to be the Agasa on the nameplate, perked up, but looked a little concerned. "Oh, were you looking for Shinichi?"

"Yes. Seems he hasn't been home in quite sometime, though." Not that he expected anything different. If the supposedly missing detective could be found just lurking within his home, they could close the case now and call it quits; and nothing in any of their lives was ever that simple.

Agasa looked forlorn, shaking his head. Ai's pinched, grumpy face was unreadable. "No, I haven't seen him in…" His voice petered out, and his eyes were downcast behind his large spectacles. Evidently, it had been too long for him to even remember the exact moment he saw his neighbor last.

"Did you know him?" Kuroba asked, face perfectly sympathetic. The little girl glared that much harder. Saguru didn't know it was possible for such a tiny creature to look so intimidating.

"Yes, actually." Agasa replied, regretfully. "I've lived next to the Kudo's for a long time, and they were often busy, so I took care of Shinichi often when he was young." Ah, that connection would explain a lot, particularly the girl's aggression. This must be a stressful and upsetting topic for the elderly man, and Ai clearly didn't like that they were upsetting him.

It could not be helped, though. When investigating a crime, one always had to disturb the mourning.

Pushing aside his own sympathies, Saguru refocused the conversation on the facts, not the emotional background. "Do you know where he's gone?"

"No, unfortunately." Agasa shook his head again, and the girl's sharp eyes promised all sorts of nasty things.

As if following through on her non-verbal threats, Ai broke into the conversation with her own line of questioning. "When was the last time you saw him at school?" She asked, frowning.

As a group, they faltered. "Uhhh, almost a year ago, I think." Kuroba claimed, and the lie was close enough, but their tiny interrogator did not seem convinced.

"Oh, really?" She said with an eyebrow raised. "Not at any school events? Festivals, plays? Even if
he dropped out, he might have still been going to those." Again, they faltered. She raised a fair point; if Kudo hadn't been murdered, he may indeed have slipped into the crowds at a large event, and as classmates, they would know for sure. This girl didn't buy that they were Teitan High students. Why was an eight years old child so suspicious?

Kuroba took the gamble, probably banking on the supposed murder for his answer. "Nope. He's gone, like, poof!" A little hand gesture, like a popping balloon, accompanied the sound effect. The girl was not entertained by his dramatics, glaring with her tiny hands on her hips like a grown woman.

"Then why are you looking for him now?" She asked accusingly, and collectively, they balked. This was embarrassing, getting trounced by an elementary schooler. This kind of thing only usually happened when a certain bespectacled boy was in the vicinity.

They couldn't exactly play up the concerned classmate angle any further, so Aoko fell back onto their cover story. "We need his help with a project." She said, with her best impression of an innocent expression. The little demon disguised as a eight year-old glowered more and opened her mouth to probably spit more acid in their general direction, but the old man cut in, face apologetic.

"Sorry, but I don't think we can help you. We have no idea where Shinichi has gone," He told them, sounding earnest. Saguru couldn't tell, not when the hellion at the man's feet was so distracting.

Realizing they had well over-stayed their welcome, he nodded, "Alright, thanks for all your help." With that, he directed his friends out the door. Aoko and Kuroba fled from the girl's burning cinder eyes gladly, but Koizumi was much more meandering, scarlet eyes still alit with interest.

Akako was starting to enjoy this little excursion, particularly... how enlightening it was. She had been surprised when they arrived at the Kudo Manor and she recognized the consuming, life-draining aura dripping from the home. Only once had she ever felt something similar, and that was at that fateful night at the clock tower nearly two years ago. The same horrible presence had emanated from the passenger of a helicopter; the "rival from East" Lucifer had been so excited to warn her of.

Hakuba had informed them that the detective they sought had attended a single KID heist, and cornered the elusive dove more effectively than anyone else had at that point in time, but she had not realized that the powerful creature she had felt that night was one and the same with their current prey.

Since the building had been home to Kudo for so long, it had soaked up his macabre aura, and each floorboard she stepped on felt like toeing the line between life and death. The whole experience had been wonderfully exciting, if a little terrifying. Her companions remained studiously oblivious of the cloying presence enveloping them once they entered though, and had instead been intimidated by the current resident.

Not that the man living in the gruesome manor wasn't interesting; for someone whose appearance seemed designed to give the impression of harmless, he had a hard, silver-bright spirit, like a sharpened knife or gleaming bullet. Okiya, not that that was his true name, she could tell, was powerful and dangerous.

And the girl next door was no less fascinating. Her soul was significantly older than her body, and was heavy with sorrow and fear. Akako had never encountered such a person outside the realm of magic. While many witches and demons inhabited bodies significantly younger than their true beings, the cause of the girl's bizarre mismatch between her physical and spiritual selves seemed entirely outside the bounds of magic. She was not cursed, she was not blessed, and she was not
possessing another; by some mechanism other than witchcraft, her body had reversed its own growth.

Akako had never once seen anything like it, and had almost hesitated to leave without taking a sample of hair.

Pity her companions had no idea. Though, looking closer, Kuroba did seem bothered by something, a line of tension in his shoulders and wariness in his eyes that suggested he had noticed something that did not sit well with him.

The others had noticed that as well, at least. "Something wrong, Kaito?" Nakamori asked, innocently concerned. Poor creature was always so out of the loop.

Realizing he was worrying his friends, Kuroba brightened. "Nah, it is nothing," he laughed carelessly, "just thinking I should take back what I said earlier! That girl was way scarier than the other dude!"

Nakamori giggled, looking embarrassed and a little relieved, "Yeah! Aoko's glad she wasn't the only one who thought that!"

"Did you see her face? Woo, that was scary!"

"Aoko thought she was going to get us with the fire extinguisher too!"

"More like trespassers!" The magician belted out in a perfect mimicry of the girl's voice, feigning waving an invisible extinguisher threateningly. Nakamori burst into pealing laughter, effectively distracted from whatever had been really bothering Kuroba. Akako shook her head, laughing a little at their antics.

But still, what had Kuroba noticed that the rest of them hadn't? He couldn't possibly detect what she did, but he was far more skilled in other areas. Peering over at Hakuba, she tried to discern what he thought of it all, and sure enough, he was lost in contemplation, probably repeating each encounter over and over for something he had missed initially.

As the laughter died away, Kuroba turned to the pondering detective. "So, where to now? We've still got nothing."

"I still want to speak to some students from Teitan High," Hakuba began, but his pace seemed to be picking up, as if something made him want to hurry, "but it really seems like we'll have to go to Ran-san. Seems like she really was the one closest to Kudo."

"So, are we going to the Mouri Detective Agency next, then?" Kuroba asked with a raised eyebrow.

"This afternoon." Hakuba confirmed, "so in the mean time, let's visit some other places Kudo might have frequented. Apparently, he was an avid reader, so I bet he had a Beika library card. I'm curious to know if he had any books out when he disappeared, and if they have been returned."

Only Hakuba would think of investigating such a thing, but it was a fair point.

"How do we find that out, though? The librarian won't just tell us, right?"

Hakuba gave Kuroba a considering look, and sighed. He reached into his jacket and produced a comb from his inside pocket, which he then offered the magician.

"Oi, you don't mean-"
"Tidy your hair, Kuroba. This kind of job is right up your alley."

A short walk, and some serious trouble combing the bird’s nest that was Kaito's hair, they arrived at the Beika library with a disgruntled looking "Kudo Shinichi" in tow.

"I can't believe we're doing this," Kaito grumbled, and Aoko smiled sympathetically. She didn't like it much either, it was weird to see Kaito with such neat hair, and she was pretty sure impersonating someone, especially if they were possibly dead, was not only morally deplorable, but illegal. Hopefully, they wouldn't have to do anything against the law, though, Hakuba seemed confident that the librarian, if Kudo was as frequent a patron to the library as he suspected him to be, would just mistake Kuroba for Kudo without any effort on their part.

"It won't be so bad," she tried to encourage him, but the baleful look she got in return suggested she failed.

"You all are a bunch of hypocrites, you know that? When KID-sama disguises himself, you both are all 'that's so wrong', but the moment its convenient for you—"

"Yes, yes," Hakuba grumbled over Kaito's complaining, pushing the magician inside the open doors of the library, "Just get on with it." The currently neat haired boy glared and stuck his tongue out, but played his part anyway. His usual careless slouch and meandering steps transformed into a strut that was much more curt and quick, as if he had somewhere to be, and his shoulder's straightened up, his posture prim and elegant.

Aoko was impressed. She had seen Kudo on TV once, and he really did walk just like that. Kaito really was a good entertainer, sometimes. They followed slightly behind, close enough to observe but not enough to be thought of as together with him.

He approached the librarian's desk, where an older woman with cat-eye glasses and a fuzzy sweater sat, tapping away into an older model computer.

"Excuse me," Kaito said, and the woman peered up at him with squinting eyes. For a moment she considered him, before recognition alit upon her face.

"Oh, Kudo-kun! It's been quite some time since we've seen you here. How are you?" She asked, and Aoko had to stop herself from fist pumping in triumph. It worked!

"I'm alright, thanks. How have you been, Jun-san?" Kaito adlibbed instantaneously, eyes apparently having already caught her nametag, and the woman smiled, pleased.

"Oh, I've been great. We've missed you around here, you know. The mystery aisle has been so lonely."

"Ah, that is a pity. I've just been so busy, but I will try to come more often. It's just, it's been so long that I've forgotten if I have any outstanding books out. I think there's one at home, but I just don't remember what it was called."

"Hmm, let me check. Do you have your card?"

"No, sorry, left it at home, I think."

"That's alright, I'll just look you up in the system…" She poked at her keyboard for a moment and stared at the screen, before shaking her head. "No, it seems you're all clear. Your record is as clean as always."
"Really, are you sure? What was the last book I checked out and returned?"

"You took out a Detective Saimonji novel last October, it seems, and returned it just before November, by our records."

Aoko tried to recollect the important dates Hakuba had told them; hadn't Kudo disappeared just before the turn of that month?

Kaito smiled graciously at the woman, nodding. "Ah, I remember now. Thanks for your help, Jun-san, and have a wonderful day."

"You too, Kudo-kun. It's good to see you again."

"That was great, Kaito!" Aoko praised once they were hidden amongst the shelves minutes later, after beating a quick retreat away from the librarian. Saguru nodded, unsurprised and unimpressed.

"Yes, one might even think it wasn't your first time pretending to be Kudo." He said sardonically, and Kuroba huffed.

"Hey, we magicians have to be pretty good actors too, you know." Saguru was sorely tempted to make another half-accusatory remark, but eventually just let it go. He had been the one to suggest this, after all, and they had different mystery to solve.

"So, all Kudo's books have been returned. But, if they were returned just before November, then it's likely that they were only brought back after the last case at Tropical Land." He pointed out, considering that the last case of Tropical Land had occurred on the 26th of October that year.

"So?" Aoko asked, frowning.

"So either Kudo just happened to 'settle his affairs' and return the books before he disappeared, or they were returned afterwards." If the books had been returned right before November 1st, something was off.

"Couldn't somebody else have returned them for him?" Kuroba grunted, waving a dismissive hand. He had a point, truthfully, but something about the whole situation niggled at Saguru.

"Possibly. Maybe Ran-san, considering she also has been taking care of the house." He said, and it was the logical conclusion, but for some reason, it didn't fit. "She might have found them and returned the books in Kudo's place." But if Kudo really had been missing at that point, wouldn't his girlfriend be too worried, too focused on figuring out where he had gone or what happened, to pay any notice to almost-due library books? From an emotional angle, the theory just did not make sense.

But there was no way of knowing. Kuroba, as if sensing his frustration, was soon grousing. "So all that, and we still know nothing." He started messing with his hair, mussing it all around until it was back to its usual levels of chaos.

But Saguru wasn't going to admit defeat that easily. "No, its something. We could even ask Ran-san about it."

Kuroba rolled his eyes at the suggestion. "Well, before we go take on that line of particularly fascinating questioning with the girl with a missing boyfriend, can we get something to eat? Its nearly noon and I'm starved." As if to punctuate the magician's point, Aoko's stomach emit a loud growl. Kuroba immediately burst into laughter, and Koizumi eyed her midriff with a sly look as she blushed bright red in mortification.
Ridiculous; it was a perfectly natural human function. He himself was a little hungry too, and knew his brain functioned best on a happy stomach. "If I remember correctly, the Detective Agency is right above a popular cafe. We could eat there before going up."

"Sounds good to me." Each still pleasantly amused in their own ways, they left the library cheerful and oblivious to the presence waiting outside.

Around the corner of the library's main building, he leaned against the northeastern wall and pulled out his cellphone, fingers dancing over the keyboard to type out a quick message. Moments later, the phone vibrated in his hand, signaling the response.

Once the four friends were well down the street, he tucked away the phone in his sleeve and began to follow, noting that the direction they were heading would take them directly to a familiar Agency.

(We don't really mind) telling lies, telling lies

Maybe that's why I never felt like I could trust any friend of mine

Chapter End Notes

Next Chapter: Kaito tries, and fails, to avoid dangerous individuals and situations, and Ran may or may not be starring in a ghost story.
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

I’m not calling you a liar, just don’t lie to me

I’m not calling you a thief, just don’t steal from me

Chapter 3: The Dead Aren't Supposed to Be Calling

There were days he wondered what the hell he was doing with his life. When he had entered into the police academy all those years ago, he had some grand ideas about being a sort of 90s action star, with the explosions, daring escapes and rescues, and viper-eyed femme fatales in slinky dresses.

Entering into the Secret Police had only excited those silly fantasies.

Which certainly never included juggling seven different tables during the lunch rush of a small cafe in Tokyo and burning his hand on the coffee pot.

What was he doing?

Well, not that he had any room to complain; this mission and station had been entirely of his own choosing. In fact, he could call it quits anytime he wanted, and no one, in either of the shady organizations he worked for, would even be bothered; the decision to remain on and investigate the Sleeping Detective had been his alone.

And it wasn't like his life was entirely devoid of explosions (the debacle on the Mystery Train, for example), daring escapes and rescues (could saving elementary schoolers from kidnappers and a refrigerated van be called daring, though?), and femme fatales (Vermouth, who honestly, he could probably live without if she weren't so damn useful).

But even so, he burnt his shooting hand on a coffee pot. Date must be laughing his ass off in his grave.

Working as waiter was not all that interesting for Tooru, even if he was waiting on seven obnoxiously troublesome tables on his own and had to keep a smile plastered on the entire time, so to keep himself sharp he kept a close eye and ear on the goings on of upstairs.

The ear part was key right now: he was subtly listening in on the taps he had spread throughout both the agency and the apartment above it. Over the receiver he had hidden in his ear, he could make out the echoing buzz of cellphone; not a perky ringtone like Ran's phone, nor a Yoko song like Kogoro's, which meant his target was receiving a call. Only Conan kept such a boring sound.

The sound cut off, and Conan's voice came through, bright and chirpy, meaning either Ran was in the room, or it was Kogoro or that Sera girl calling. Silence followed. Evidently, the person on the other end of the line had a fair amount to say.

Finally, Conan spoke again. "Eh, is that so? That's odd. We'll have to look into it." Look into what? The child must be being purposefully vague; after all, the taps were not so easy to hide form his sharp eyes. Conan obviously didn't like being the target of investigation, but they had been getting along better recently, after Tooru forced himself to reconsider his priorities regarding Akai and the Organization. In fact, their new levels of amiability meant that the little detective usually tolerated his
snooping to a certain extent, allowing the taps he always brutally destroyed in the past to remain for a
certain amount of time, before making a game of moving them. The last batch he had found in
Poirot's pantry, after being baffled by the sounds of rummaging and clanging pans, and had to sift
through heaps of flour, rice, and salt to retrieve.

But despite the playfulness, Conan was careful to make sure he never actually learned anything,
except maybe how bad Kogoro sang when he was drunk. That was not the kind of intel he wanted.

"Oh, he's already on it? That's great. Thanks, Haibara." Haibara Ai, the little friend of Conan's that
Tooru rarely ever saw, who lived next door to Okiya.
The call seemed to end with that, frustratingly uninformative as ever.

"What did Ai-chan want, Conan-kun?" He heard Ran ask, and could easily picture the "innocent"
too sweet grin she was buffeted with in return.

"Just some help on a homework project. I'm gonna go over there to give her a hand." Tooru would
bet his badge and codename that whatever was going to be "looked into" was not an elementary
school homework assignment. Mostly because he was positive Conan finished his in a record-
breaking three minutes and twenty seconds yesterday afternoon. Maybe it had been Okiya on the
phone, and not the little girl. Maybe it was those two bumbling FBI agents. Maybe it was another,
yet unknown to him, puppet of Conan's.

"But first, I gotta find that eraser I lost. Its Kamen Yaiba, and I really like it." Tooru was pretty sure it
was physically impossible for Conan to be careless enough to lose anything ever, but that wasn't
even the most false part of that sentence.

Suddenly, he was near deafened by the merciless, ear-splitting shriek of each of his precious taps
being smashed to expensive little pieces.

That damn, sneaky, vindictive little brat.

Trying hard to hide his wince and keep the plates he was hoisting up steady, Tooru struggled to keep
up his vapid, cheery expression. That had fucking hurt.
He'd have to think of a way to get back at his target later. Maybe find someway to get Ran to ground
him, or something. Maybe interfere in his manipulating of the police at the next case.

But why did he suddenly decide to destroy the taps? It had to be something to do with the call.

A couple minutes later, the boy in question ran down the steps and hopped on his skateboard,
disappearing from sight near instantly. Was he in a hurry? Tooru couldn't follow, unfortunately,
being right in the middle of the lunch rush.

Some time later, an unusual group paused in front of the cafe, paying special attention to the Agency
above, and he fought down a grin.

After all, how could Conan expect him to be anything but curious?

Saguru nearly bumped into Kuroba's back as the shorter male froze in the cafe's doorway, hand
shooting out to grip Aoko's arm and tug her back.

"Stop," he hissed, quick and soft, and some instinct within Saguru's chest shuddered. From behind
Kuroba, he couldn't properly see the other's face, but he knew if he could, he would not see his
friend as much as he would see his adversary.
"Kaito?" Aoko asked, blinking at her childhood friend curiously, obviously confused by his behavior. His stance was rigid compared to his usual lax, as if he expected to have to make a quick escape from somewhere.

Then, quick as anything, all the tension seeped away, and he laughed. "I just realized my wallet's gone. I must have dropped it a few blocks back." Saguru found that very, very unlikely, but didn't contest the point. Kuroba Kaito, who hid countless tricks and traps on his person at all times, drop something important and not even notice? Blasphemous.

Aoko was easily convinced, though. "Oh no! We gotta go get it before someone runs off with it!" Akako nodded, though Saguru expected she thought the explanation as flimsy as he did. Looking again, she herself seemed a little unhinged, eyes warily set on the apartment above the cafe, as if she had heard a suspicious noise or something.

Kuroba's gaze, though, never left the inside of the cafe, carefully tracking one of the waiters as he cheerfully served some customers. He was of ambiguous age, young but difficult to place, with dark skin and unusual light blond hair. Nothing is particular seemed off about him, yet Kuroba eyed him with eyes sharper than Saguru had ever seen them. As he directed Aoko out again, his gaze skittered off and appraised the stairs that led to the Mouri Detective Agency, expression completely unreadable.

What about the waiter had triggered such a reaction? Did Kuroba know that man, or did KID? Was he someone dangerous? Dangerous for civilians, or dangerous for thieves? The questions swirled through his mind as he trailed after the retreat Kuroba was beating back the way they came. Another mystery opened without any progress made on the other. Just what Saguru needed.

Thirty minutes later found them in a fast food place that served garlic sandwiches and fries. Not exactly his first choice, but Kuroba and Koizumi seemed to have deemed the place safe enough, any traces of suspicious behavior wiped away flawlessly.

"Well, should we head back to the Detective Agency? We still need to talk to Mouri-chan."

"I don't think it's best to talk to her there." Kuroba said, finishing his milkshake with flourish. "That's where her father takes cases; if we question her there, it'll feel like one and she may clam up."

A fair point; the Mouri girl may not feel comfortable discussing the possible disappearance/maybe murder of her boyfriend in a room she was used to opening up cases within. She may be more off-guard, and therefore more open with them, if they approached as peers when she was at the school or somewhere more casual. But while it was decent complaint, it wasn't an essential one, and would have had more weight if mentioned earlier. Now, it seemed contrived.

Kuroba was trying to avoid going back there. Why? Saguru needed more clues, and the only way to get them was…

"Nonsense. We already came all the way here. We must go speak with her now, or we'll just have wasted time. And I'm quite certain that, with Kudo's life possibly in the balance and all, we should handle this case quickly and efficiently."

Kuroba glared at him from over the plastic covering of his shake. It was not very intimidating. Aoko, however, nodded, and Koizumi said and did nothing, which settled the point in Saguru's favor.

Unable to press further without raising suspicion, Kuroba capitulated with a huff and an impressive scowl that would probably last the entire trip back to the Mouri's.
They polished off their meals and were herded out the door by an enthusiastic Aoko, all three steeling themselves for their second attempt in their own way, or at least Saguru figured. Why did Koizumi seem apprehensive about the Agency? He had never known her to be fazed by anything, let alone such a mundane building. She hadn't even noticed the supposedly threatening waiter as far as he could tell.

As they approached their destination a second time, Kuroba, with his arms crossed behind his head, made a loud, disgruntled noise. From anyone else he would assume it to be natural, but considering Kuroba was Kuroba and hardly took a breath without a back-up plan, Saguru could only figure it was intentional.

"What is it?" He asked, and Kuroba's indigo eyes turned on him, glaring.

"Just got the most annoying feeling, like we're being watched or something. It's driving me crazy."

Saguru stopped in his tracks, before a sharp, reprimanding look from the magician got him moving casually again. Kuroba would not say something like that unless he was absolutely certain someone was tailing them, and even then, would not mention it carelessly. That he noticed and actually told Saguru about it suggested that he thought Saguru needed to know, right now.

Were they in danger? The waiter? No, Kuroba had kept quiet about the strange server that had unnerved him, but was purposefully now mentioning their tail; the two were probably unrelated.

Why would someone be following them, when they looked like a group of unsuspicious teens just out and about? Whoever it was, they weren't after KID, Kuroba would never bring it up if that was the case, so either one of them was being targeted or…

Their investigation had only begun this morning, and so far had been rather subtle. But maybe not subtle enough. Was the Kudo Manor being monitored?

Feeling significantly less at ease, Saguru followed his unsuspecting fellows back to the Agency.

Kuroba peered subtly through the cafe's windows as they headed to the stairs, but did nothing more, face perfectly blank and unctelling. If Saguru didn't trust his own observations so much, he would probably doubt his friend's reaction to the place was anything out of the ordinary at all and blame the oddity on his imagination. But Saguru knew what he saw, and that was hesitation and wariness. And maybe something more ominous too.

He followed Aoko up the stairs, Kuroba and Akako just behind him, and found themselves knocking on door waiting there.

He hoped their follower would be gracious enough to disappear while they were inside. Not that Saguru would know unless Kuroba elected to tell him. He had tried to inconspicuously locate them during the walk, but discovered nothing and nobody out of the ordinary, so unless Kuroba was just messing with his head, whoever was following their tracks was skilled.

"Coming!" A girl's voice called from inside, and moments later the door opened to a beautiful girl their age, with long brown hair and pretty lavender eyes. Mouri Ran was in less formal clothes than he had first met her in, dressed in fitting jeans and a striped t-shirt, but no less attractive.

"Good afternoon, Ran-san." He greeted, taking the lead.

She blinked, and then looked at him more carefully than the initial precursive glance she gave him initially. "Oh, you're… Saguru-kun?"
"Yes, it's good to see you again. It's been quite a while."

"Yes, months. Please come on in, I'll bring tea in just a moment." She ushered them in and directed them to the couches in the center of the office, before disappearing to fetch the refreshments. They squished themselves together onto one of the couches, and while the tight fit wasn't exactly comfortable, it was kind of nice. Having friends was nice.

A minute or so later, she returned. Saguru half-expected an elementary schooler to be scurrying around her legs, but Detective Mouri's ward did not appear. He must be out somewhere, then. It was probably for the best, considering that child could detect a case faster than a police dog with a keen nose.

"I'm sorry, the office is a mess; Conan was rummaging around earlier. And my father is out right now. I can call him…"

"That's quite alright. We actually came to speak with you, Ran-san."

"With me?"

"Yes. These are my classmates, Kuroba Kaito, Nakamori Aoko, and Koizumi Akako." He motioned to each, and for a moment wondered how she saw them. Him, a formally dressed teen detective, alongside a, to be perfectly honest, immature seeming girl with messy, uncombed hair, a prim, lovely, but dangerous looking young woman, and the more roguish version of the quarry. Ran's eyes had been fixed on Kuroba since they entered, confused, but reacted to one of the introductions.

"Nakamori… like the inspector?"

"Yep! He's Aoko's dad!" The girl in question chirped, and Saguru briefly wondered if he could convince her to talk in first-person while on the case, if only to seem more professional. Though, he supposed, Aoko was like that, wearing no makeup and always acting out, and he didn't really want her to change.

"Oh, how funny, since Saguru-kun's father is the superintendent and my dad's a private detective." Ran smiled sincerely, genuinely interested. "Don't suppose you two follow the pattern?" She asked the other two, who smiled at her lightly.

"Nah, my dad was magician," Kuroba said proudly, but Koizumi just shook her head.

"A magician? That's amazing!" Their host smiled, taking a sip of tea, "But what was it that you wanted to talk to me about?"

Saguru leaned forward, crossing his legs and lacing his fingers atop his knee. Ran reacted to his posture, straightening herself. "We came to ask you about your friend, Kudo Shinichi."

Ran blinked, surprised. "Shinichi? Why? You aren't hoping to challenge him, are you?"

"...What?"

"Never mind, sorry." She laughed, "The last, well, besides Sera-san, teenage detective to come here was looking to challenge Shinichi to a deduction battle." That comment Saguru found interesting. He quickly shuffled through the other teenage detectives he knew and immediately discerned which one she was referring to. Just the thought of the other sleuth made annoyance rise in his blood.

"Don't tell me, Hattori?"
Ran seemed surprised, but nodded. "Yes. Though, that was quite a while ago."

So, they weren't the first their age to investigate Kudo. Maybe he should consider paying Hattori a visit as well, or at least attempt to procure his number and speak with him. Despite his sometimes unprofessionalism and general hotheadedness, the Osakan was shrewd and clever, and could know something useful.

"So, why are you looking for Shinichi?" She asked, but there was no suspicion in the question, just earnest interest. They could not use the classmate excuse here, so Saguru was glad their prior acquaintanceship bought him a certain level of trust in his good will.

"We were hoping to ask about a case of his." He told her, as honestly as he could. It was not necessarily a lie, but still not any nearer to the truth.

"Oh?" Ran didn't seem surprised, or particularly bothered. In fact, she did not seem all that concerned or heart torn over the talk of her disappeared friend. Had she already gotten over it and moved on? She didn't seem the type to give up and let go so easily, though. He always read her as the stubborn, protective type.

The reason why she was acting so nonchalant quickly became apparent with the next sentence she spoke. "I don't know about meeting him, but I could call him, if you like." All of them straightened involuntarily, completely caught off-guard. "He answers the phone?" Aoko squeaked, astonishment plain across her pale face.

"Of course." Ran said, frowning slightly, clearly finding their reactions strange. After a moment, she brightened with a little laugh. "Oh, don't tell me you heard those rumors about him being dead?"

Saguru coughed in an effort to recuperate his composure. "Just a little. We didn't believe it, of course." He wouldn't normally define the discussion of a committed murder by dangerous criminals as rumor, but nothing about this case had been plain and simple so far.

Ran laughed more at the mounting confusion and embarrassment. "It would be silly, coming here to question a dead man. No, Shinichi and I talk once a week on the phone."

They spoke regularly? A detective's daughter and a supposed dead man? Saguru's mind was reeling. What did this mean?

Consider the facts.

A criminal group had reason to believe Kudo Shinichi had been, effectively, assassinated. He had disappeared from the searching public eye a year ago, and no credible sighting of him had been uncovered since. And yet, his close friend claimed to still receive calls and recognize them to be from him.

"Do you know where he is?" He asked, forcing his voice steady and his expression to be politely curious, despite how urgently he wanted the answer. This case had started as a mysterious pool, crystal clear but not easily investigated, but this conversation had taken a bucket of silt and dumped it in, clouding the waters. "His input is very important to our case."

Ran shook her head, and her face grew solemn and disappointed. Her fingers twitched, as if she had the urge to reach for something. "He's a pretty hard guy to find these days. I don't know where he is. We met up in London a few months back, actually, and that was the last time I saw him."

In London? That would explain his apparent absence from Japan but—

"Yeah, it was amazing." Ran was blushing slightly. "I never get to see him, so..." Embarrassed, she stopped there. Something of the romantic nature had occurred, maybe? Aoko continued on, apparently recollecting the current issue, and leaned forward. "And before then? When did he start running off, anyway?"

For a moment, Saguru was certain Ran would clam up and tell them nothing more, that she would find their interest suspicious, but she seemed to think she was just having 'girl talk' with Aoko, and her lavender eyes kept settling on Kuroba. With a look of quiet melancholy, she began to speak; her voice was one of someone lost in memory.

"Ever since a year ago, every once in a while, just a handful of times, he would pop up at a case, right out of nowhere, and then disappear the same way." Saguru sent a suspicious glance Kuroba's way, but his face was unreadable. KID had been known to disguise as Kudo on a few occasions, and there could be plenty of incidences they did not know about. Or maybe, just maybe, for the first time since they opened this case, they had reason to believe Kudo had survived. "He's changed a lot," she laughed a little, but it was a sad sound, like she knew she should be proud but instead felt alienated. "Sometimes, its almost like he's a different person."

Saguru tried to think of a way to keep her talking naturally, without pressuring her, but too soon she was back on topic. "But you guys don't need to worry about that. I'm sure he remembers whatever case you need to ask about. I'll try calling him right now, he usually answers." She slipped out her phone: a red flip with a sea cucumber charm.

They waited, each apprehensive in their own way, but with each ring, the silence among them grew tenser. Ran frowned at her phone. "Weird, the service is bad. One moment please." She rose from the couch and hurried towards the kitchen area, eyes locked on the mobile.

"Alright, quick, huddle," Kuroba hissed, and they quite literally brought their heads together, whispering.

"He answers the phone!"

"She's even seen him!"

"So, he's not dead? What do we say if he answers?"

"Hold on, people don't just abandon their homes and school and disappear from the face of the Earth and still casually call up their girlfriend. There's something totally fish- err, weird about this!"

"What do we say if he answers? 'Sorry, Kudo-kun, we thought you were dead!'"

"...Maybe Mouri-chan is delusional."

"Kaito!"

"What? It's a possibility!"

They all jerked back into a more casual arrangement, playing it cool, when Ran reemerged from the kitchen, her phone still ringing. She looked confused; there was no answer. Eventually, the generic answering machine clicked on, and Ran creased her brow. "That's strange..." Face apologetic, she hung up and smiled softly and retook her seat across from them. "Sorry, guess he's busy right now. I'll call him later and tell him one of your phone numbers, if you like, so he can call you back."

"That would be great, thank you." Saguru agreed, pulling out his notebook and jotting down his number to give to her. "But in the mean time, you might know something about the case. You went
with Kudo-kun to Tropical Land a year ago, didn't you?"

Ran nodded. "Yes. We went to celebrate my victory in the karate tournament."

"Can you tell us everything about that day?"

"Does it have to do with your case?"

"Yes, it's very important."

For a moment, she was silent, eyes contemplative. Her fingers, callused and hard, fiddled with her phone. For the first time, he became truly aware of how muscular she was; the fashionable clothes she wore hid her athletic and powerful build well. He wondered if that was intentional, if she didn't want others to realize just how powerful she was at first glance.

Eventually, she sighed, and thankfully, smiled tiredly. "Alright, sure. We arrived in the middle of the day together. Shinichi was pretty cheerful, though all he talked about was Holmes and cases and detective stuff. We went on a lot of rides, and at a point, he brought me to this fountain that was timed to go off every two hours. It was really pretty. Eventually, though…" Though she began the story sounding bashful and sweet, lost in cherished memories, her voice petered off near the end. She grew a little pale in the face, and Saguru knew why. Just reading the files had been disturbing enough, he couldn't imagine witnessing it.

"You got in line for the Mystery Coaster." He continued for her, recollecting what he had read in Kudo's files about Ran's involvement in the case.

"Yeah, and Shinichi was able to tell all sorts of stuff about the people in front of us." Ran continued, and Saguru tried to imagine Kudo, brilliant mind searching for entertainment in the long line, carelessly observing the people around them. For some reason, his impression of Kudo, by what everyone else said, was that of a much more cautious and reserved young man.

His attention refocused as the story moved on to the tragedy. "When we got on the ride, something horrible happened. A man in front of us was…" Again, Ran could not seem to bring herself to finish the sentence, a look of old horror creeping across her expression.

"Brutally decapitated." He filled in the gap so she wouldn't have to. Alongside him, Aoko choked on her tea, horrified. Even Koizumi seemed disturbed by the image the words implied. They had not read the files, but now he was starting to think he should have told them to, if only to prevent reactions like these. They were unprofessional, and could upset the witness.

Ran, though, seemed sympathetic to the other two girls' reactions. "It was awful. I had nightmares for weeks." She gripped her jeans in her fingers, old ghosts rising in her eyes. Quickly, as if to battle the darkest thoughts off, their host moved the conversation onward; hopefully before she remembered too much of the traumatic experience. "When we got off, the police arrived and Shinichi declared it was murder. The three women and two men that had been on the ride with us were the suspects. I remember the woman who did it was a gymnast, the other two were uninvolved, and the two men were very...strange."

That caught Saguru's interest. He had read the file and remembered the suspects and witnesses listed clearly, but remembered no note of two uninvolved men on the coaster when the crime occurred. Why not? They were essential witnesses of the homicide. Even if they weren't called to testify in court, they should still be on record. "How so?"

"They were dressed in all black, and wore hats and trench coats." All four of the Brigade members tensed, though it was hard to tell with Kuroba. That was a very familiar description. Saguru suddenly had an idea of how this story ended. "One even had this really, really long hair." Ran continued, not
paying their reactions any mind. She probably figured they were still just disturbed by the whole decapitation thing.

"But they weren't involved in the case?" Saguru asked, and Ran shook her head.

"No, Shinichi said they weren't involved. Like I said, the gymnast did it with a necklace." Such a bizarre case; Saguru never encountered anything so sensational.

"What happened after Kudo-kun solved the case?"

"When we were leaving the ride with everyone else after the police let us go, it was getting late. I was crying, so I wasn't really paying attention, but Shinichi suddenly said he had to go and that he would catch up to me." While Ran paid the two suspicious characters on the crime scene little mind, Saguru suspected that Kudo had been implicitly aware of how shady they were, and probably decided to investigate. And considering his supposed disappearance afterwards... "He ran away from the Coaster and into this dark alley of the park... and, well, it sounds silly..."

"What does?" Koizumi asked, surprisingly, as she usually did not have much to say about mysteries in general. Saguru wondered what about this particular tale caught her interest.

Ran laughed a little, but it was not a happy sound. It was the laugh of someone who had seen something supposedly impossible, and felt foolish for being so bothered by it, but was unable to banish it from his or her mind. The laugh of someone who thought they saw a ghost. "I just got this really weird feeling, like I'd never see him again."

Well, that was inauspicious.

Koizumi nodded, a bizarre smile flirting on the edge of her painted mouth. It crept him out, and hurriedly, he turned his mind and eyes back on the story.

"What happened next?"

"I waited for over an hour. He didn't come back." Oh! Ran seemed so heartbroken in that moment, as if she knew something irreparable had occurred but not why. She was also, more than anything, clearly confused. "I tried to look for him from the Ferris wheel, but didn't see him. Eventually, I left. I wasn't too worried at first, but three days later, he was still gone. He hadn't been home, he hadn't called, and I got really worried." Because he was not able to return; that wasn't in question. The issue was why he had gone missing. Because he was dead? Captured? In the hospital? "Then, a week after he left, suddenly, he called from a number I didn't recognize. Apparently he was on a case and lost his cellphone. I was so relieved."

On a case, 'he' supposedly said. But even detectives needed to sleep and eat while investigating, so if he truly was working, he must have been at it somewhere too far away to go home. Or, he had already passed, and someone, somehow, had called in his place; an impostor.

"But you didn't see him?" Saguru asked, a thousand theories swimming in his mind, all frustratingly plausible given their current information.

That question seemed to make Ran very uncomfortable. "Well, I did a little while later, twice, well, no," As she broke off, something crossed her face; for some reason, she looked disturbed, as if there was something she didn't want to think about, or understand. "Okay so I didn't see him, but he was there." That she seemed certain of, but the rest of the sentence baffled both them and her.

"I don't understand, what do you mean?" He prompted, and again, her expression twisted.

"It was Christmas. There was a case he solved, at a karaoke box. He spoke through the intercom, so
we didn't see him. I was sure he was going to go home, so afterwards, I waited outside his house for three hours." Three hours? She stood outside the manor in the cold for three hours? Was this girl crazy? "Then the lights inside his house turned on, so I went inside. Then, there was a blackout. I put my hand on the staircase railing so I wouldn't fall, and he put his hand over mine in the dark." What? "And then, when the lights turned on, he was gone."

…What the hell? What the actual fuck? The whole story was officially the creepiest thing Saguru had ever heard.

"There was just a gift for me on the stairs. I searched the whole house for more than an hour, but didn't find him…" Alright, now it was the creepiest. What the hell, Kudo.

"Then, at another case, a girl had hired him and we caught up to him at the culprit's home. I called him and heard his phone ringing, so I followed the sound. He was hiding from me around the corner of an alley. I was yelling at him, but he didn't come out. I only saw his shadow. Then, before I saw him, he had run away again…" That was freaking weird. He was starting to think Kuroba's theory actually had some ground. Had grief driven Mouri Ran into delusional fantasies, or was 'Kudo' really running around, hiding in the dark?

"It was like, for some reason, he didn't want me to see him."

That… the whole story and the information it provided was very unnerving. Aoko shivered next to him, and Koizumi's scarlet eyes were bright with interest. Saguru was taken aback; for some reason, Kudo, after a very suspicious disappearance, had hidden his face from his apparently very determined, or desperate, girlfriend. Why couldn't he show himself?

Unless, there was no face to show. Just someone only able to reproduce Kudo's voice.

The impostor theory was becoming horrifyingly plausible.

"When did you see him next?" Aoko asked, clearly disturbed, and Ran looked less bothered by this question, but still rather confused.

"At a Diplomat's home. There was a murder, and Hattori was challenging him to solve it, and he showed up." 'Kudo', supposedly missing but still calling, had just reappeared, not only before Ran, but a teenage sleuth. That must have been on purpose; to convince the more suspicious and wary Hattori that 'Kudo' still lived? Ran's perplexity did nothing for his own. "He seemed really sick though, and didn't stay for long. Before I knew it, he was gone again. In fact, whenever I see him these days he seems kind of sick for some reason."

"How sick?" That was a point against the impostor theory. It was possible Kudo had been severely injured, or infected with something, that night in Tropical Land. Something that left him unable to return, or show himself. But if he had been in a hospital, the information on his location would have surely leaked. Unless, he was completely unrecognizable? But Ran's description included nothing about him looking any different.

The storyteller herself seemed concerned about this particular point. "Pretty bad. He's usually sweaty and feverish, or may collapse, struggles a lot, and grips his heart. I'm starting to wonder if it's something really serious."

"That is strange." Saguru agreed, struggling to fit any of the pieces together. They just didn't click into place.

Ran seemed to realize that she may have said more than they cared for, or than she wanted to say,
flushing. "Did any of that help at all? I'm sorry I don't know more, but Shinichi never tells me anything about the cases he's working on. I don't even know if it's the same one, or multiple. Sometimes he'll message me, stuff like 'I'm on a dangerous case, don't contact me!' or 'All clear. It's alright to call me now.' Sometimes, he'll say something like, 'Sorry, its a really tough case. I'll try be best to be home soon.'"

That went against the hospital theory, he'd be unlikely to take any dangerous cases there, but supported the impostor theory; even a fake would have a life of their own. Or, he was in hiding. Too many possibilities, too little clues.

Honestly, Saguru had expected a tough case, but this was an enigma of the most bizarre levels he had ever dreamed of encountering. The one thing he had thought would be easy to decide, whether Kudo was still breathing or not, seemed completely incomprehensible.

"Thanks for all that, Ran-san. I have just one last question: did you return any library books around the time of your trip to Tropical Land?"

"I don't think so. I rarely ever go to the library. Conan does, though—wait, what does that have to do with anything?"

"Just a hunch. Thanks so much for your help, it's been quite... enlightening."

"This," Kuroba announced as they left, "is officially really confusing." His arms were crossed behind his head, and though he was moving casually, Saguru could see his eyes glancing into the cafe as the walked past. The waiter was gone, he noticed.

"It's all so weird!" Aoko said, "He's dead, then he's not dead. And the whole hiding around corners, or talking to her in the dark thing? Creepy!" She shivered, and Saguru thought of all the scary stories he heard and read in England, of trusting young girls talking with precious friends over the phone or meeting them in the dark, only to discover that the one on the other end was long dead.

Koizumi was clearly thinking along the same lines, laughing teasingly at the other girl. "It sounds a bit like a gothic horror story, doesn't it? Maybe he's a ghost."

"Do not say that, Akako-chan. You're freaking me out!" Aoko groused back, rubbing her arms to ward off chills. Funny how that kind of talk got her to acknowledge Koizumi's general uncanniness, and not say, the occasional mentions of Lucifer and the devil.

Kuroba cut in before the teasing went any further, dropping his arms to his hips, clearly disgruntled. "But really, how doesn't she find that totally sketchy?" He waved one hand in front of his face as he continued, "Maybe she is delusional."

Saguru sighed. Ran had seemed to be in almost too sound of mind about her boyfriend's downright bizarre behavior, and didn't seem to question anything he did.

"There must be some explanation." Aoko said, completely disregarding Kaito's rude comment. For a moment she mused, before brightening as an idea struck her. "Maybe he got hurt real bad? Those guys said he got his head 'bashed in'."

Such an injury would certainly put him in the hospital for a substantial amount of time, and that was if he even managed to survive in the first place. Such serious head injuries often resulted in the victim dropping stone dead, just from the severe brain trauma. If he did survive, and somehow managed to get to a doctor or hospital, that would explain his momentary vanishment. Saguru crossed an ambulance off the list of possible mechanisms: they were loud and flashy. Surely, whatever 'code-
name' attacked Kudo would be on alert for such vehicles in the area, and would take measures to ascertain their victim's death.

"Might have something to do with the weird sickness too." Koizumi pointed out, which brought up the point Saguru found strangest about Ran's testimony. Why had Kudo been in such bad health every time she saw him since his disappearance? She specifically mentioned that he gripped his chest often, but that suggested a very serious condition. Had Kudo, if he lived, contracted some kind of heart or lung disease? From what he knew, Kudo was a talented soccer player and the most recent photos of him, not recent enough, obviously, suggested that he was fit and in excellent health.

"Maybe he's pretending to be dead?" The guessing continued.

Kuroba snorted. "But still calls his girlfriend up? Either he's the worst at faking his death, ever, or he's not worried about being found."

Yes, Saguru had been tossing that theory around himself, but the phone-calls were out of place. Unless Kudo had someway of knowing Ran was not being monitored, or was confident in his ability to remain under the radar, they made no sense.

There was also his fame, which made that unlikely, He made sure to toss out that particular two-cents thought. "Plus, celebrities don't just disappear. If he was still in Japan, surely there would be pictures."

"She did say she met him in London." Koizumi added, but Saguru didn't think the other detective, if he had been targeted by a criminal organization, would just flee to another country. If Kudo was half as gutsy as the usual portrayals of him in media, he would undoubtedly remain in Japan in order to bring his "killers" to justice.

"There is another option." He finally said after some hesitation, wondering if it were too soon to say this particular theory aloud.

The other four turned to him with questioning eyes. "What?"

"That the 'Kudo' Ran-san has been communicating with and meeting is an impostor."

_I'm not calling you a ghost, just stop haunting me_

Chapter End Notes

Next Chapter: It's normal for teenagers to go to amusement parks and high school, right?
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

You get separated, somebody's gone,
And I don't know how this is wrong,

Chapter 4: Theatre of the Gone

Much later, they gathered around the bar at the Blue Parakeet, a large whiteboard before them, each armed with a different colored erasable marker.

“Alright,” Saguru began, “right now there are two particular possibilities. A: Kudo is alive.” He drew a circle and marked it ‘alive’, “or B: he’s dead.” A second circle was added on the other side of the board. Kuroba quickly scribbled a little stick figure with exed out eyes and a lolling tongue next to it.

“If he’s dead, then Ran-san lied to us,” Hakuba wrote that down underneath circle B, and after some serious eyebrow wagging from Kuroba, reluctantly added, “possibly unknowingly,” Kuroba nodded sagely, appeased, “or someone is lying to Ran-san.” ‘Imposter’ was written in large, bold letters. Aoko added a bunch of frowny faces around it, incensed by the sheer idea of it.

“On the other side, if he is alive, he may be out of the country, in hiding, or genuinely working so hard on the case he can’t even go back to his own home.” A series of bubbles and a probably unnecessarily large amount of question marks were added to the board, each as fathomless as the next.

Mentally groaning at the whole lot of nothing they had, he moved to the side and started a list of people they needed to question. Suzuki Sonoko. Teitan High School students. Edogawa Conan. The police Kudo worked closely with. Hattori Heiji.

Looks like an eventual trip to Osaka was going to be in order. Saguru checked his phone again; no missed calls. ‘Kudo’, though Ran had promised to deliver his number to whoever was on the other end, had not called. Helplessly, he wished he had been bold enough to ask for his number instead. Maybe Suzuki would be willing to provide it.

Unable to go further, again he started a new list: Kudo Appearances. Underneath, his compatriots excitedly started to scribble about sketchy meet-ups in the dark and bizarre reappearances in the homes of politicians and internationally.

He moved away and left them to it, determinately ignoring the increasingly disturbing theories Koizumi was adding to the board in delicately fine writing. He liked to pretend that they could reasonably still consider necromancy out of the question.

Saguru had a something more realistically terrifying in mind anyway. His favored theory was unnerving to think about, but seemed to fit the broad strokes of the case best. Issue being, the simplest, fastest way to get some form of evidence (of which they currently had none, considering their witness testimonies were questionable at best and possibly fabricated at worst) was…unsavory.
Just how far was he willing to go to pursue this case?

Besides a sense of kinship born of similar circumstances, Saguru had no relation to Kudo Shinichi. He had not ever met him, though he would love the opportunity to, allowing that Kudo still lived, and both he and his companions had little emotional investment in the disappearance of the famed detective.

And yet, all of them, in some way or another, were very invested in the case of Kaitou KID, and his sinister assailants, on whom they had no evidence, no information, and no leads, except for a baffling connection to one vanished celebrity. From the start, Saguru knew the case would be dangerous, considering they would be going up against what could only be a distressingly large criminal organization with expansive connections in even the government and police.

But after just a few hours of innocuously questioning a handful of mundane people, someone was already on their trail. Monitoring their progress, most likely.

If he was really going to do this, really investigate without the backup of the police, who either wouldn’t take such a sensational case seriously or just up straight couldn’t be trusted, he had to commit. Preparation and dedication were key to the successful handling of a stressful case.

Saguru had to be prepared to do what was necessary to find the answers he needed, and dedicated enough to the case to make it through the frustration and confusion that came from its tests and puzzles. But when what was necessary went against his own morals and rules of personal and professional conduct. He found himself tentative to blur the line between what was justified and what was the law; was he making excuses for behavior he would never ever condone from another detective, or was this really the only way?

He would never push his own work ethics for Kudo, oh no, but would he to keep his friends safe? For just a slim shot at the unveiling the murderous shadows that pursued his greatest rival, would he break his own rules?

It was a slippery slope.

The others were finishing up, just about ready to call it a day and head home. He was out of time; and this wasn’t a conversation he wanted to have trapped in the back of his throat all week.

“Kuroba,” he called, and the magician glanced at him, quick and curious. Did he have any idea of what Saguru was about to ask of him? Probably not, but one never knew; he was intuitive like that, sometimes.

The words didn’t come, even as the brunet came to his side, thankfully recognizing that what ever Saguru had to say, he didn’t want the girls to hear. But still, he found it difficult to speak. Rules, laws, and social niceties: they all existed for a reason. What right did he to circumvent them in the name of deduction?

Kuroba was getting impatient. “Oi, idiot, what do you want?”

But he could only continue to deliberate, mulishly overturning the same thoughts over and over in his head.

“Fine, I’m leaving.”

Saguru forced himself to take a deep breath, and mowed on. Sometimes, for the sake of an investigation, a detective had to put his qualms aside, bend the rules, and use the tools at his disposal. It’s what Holmes would do, he knew.
Before his magician friend make good on his word, he caught his arm. "Kuroba, I have a favor to ask of you." He searched for the words to say next as indigo eyes fell on him with exasperated distaste.

“What?” Kuroba huffed.

Before he lost his nerve, Saguru coughed up the question, hoping he looked more stern and confident than he felt. “Can you tap phones?”

Kuroba opened his mouth, shut it with a click, and took a painstakingly long breath in through his nose. “Look, I’ve told you a million times, I’m not--”

“Not as KID.” Saguru cut in, trying to look cool and relaxed. It wasn't working. "I’m not saying you can tap phones because you’re KID. I mean, as a teen magician/prankster, can you tap phones?”

A pause, before...“Yeah, that tech isn’t that hard to get, though it's expensive. Any ‘spy’ store will have it.” Saguru often saw such things in criminal dramas, but he didn't know how available they were in real life. But he did know how illegal they could be. But he couldn't back down now.

“Then, I want you to tap Ran-san’s phone.”

Kuroba gaped at him, appalled. “Woah, that’s illegal.”

“I’m well aware.” His eye twitched in rising annoyance. Who was the detective and who was the criminal here? He didn't need Kuroba of all people to point that out. "But this is important. This case is bigger than us, it's only been a day, and someone is already tailing us. We can’t dilly dally around.” The men they had overheard had been connected to something big and nasty, and Kudo's assailants possibly more so, entrenched in something much darker and more powerful. Already, they were being monitored, and if they indiscreetly cracked the case under the watch of someone who wanted it to remain shut, they could be targeted. And he had his reasons for believing that the phone tap could reveal some seriously case-breaking information. “Please, Kuroba-kun.” He implored, unwilling to go deeper into his reasoning so soon. Without knowing if Kuroba was truly on his side for this case or not, he didn’t want the other to know quite how much he hoped to learn from just a few calls.

Kuroba was clearly hesitant, indigo eyes measuring his expression and posture with surgical accuracy and judgment. His lips thinned, and it was times like this that Saguru wondered how anyone could ever think the person before him was any sort of class-clown and not a carefully calculating genius on the prowl. After long moments of serious deliberation, Kuroba relented. “...Alright. But I don’t usually carry that kind of stuff around, and we’ll need another opportunity to get at her phone.” Saguru doubted that he didn’t have some sort of taps on him, but knew that Kuroba would never admit to it any more than he would admit to one of numerous his crimes.

“I’ll get Aoko-kun to arrange something.” The girl had seemed eager to befriend Ran, unsurprising, considering the mature girl was pretty, pleasant, and had a good head on her shoulders. Aoko could appreciate that kind of person in juxtaposition with her temperamental and tempestuous family and close friends. “I wanted to pay a visit to Teitan anyway.”

“And since you're the one putting me up to this, don’t try to twist it into ‘Kaito is KID’ later, alright?” Kuroba was playing up his typically grousing, but Saguru recognized the hardness in his eyes and understood that the already tenuous trust built between them was hanging on that particular demand.

He didn’t mind, because he agreed, completely and earnestly. “I promise.”
“Come on, Kaito!” Aoko urged, still struggling with her outdoor shoes as she dashed towards the school gates. Her friend was a lot less enthusiastic and clumsy, Aoko hadn’t even seen him touch his shoe locker, let alone switch.

He rolled his eyes as he followed at a much more leisurely pace. “Do I have to come along for this? Surely even a couple idiots like you and Hakuba can handle talking to some students.”

Aoko felt a pout forming, wishing just for one, just once, Kaito could show some interest in what she was trying her best to include him in. Some days, it felt like they had nothing in common anymore.

“We’re a team! So we go together!” She said resolutely as they reached the gate, looking around for the other two members of the Brigade. They had agreed to meet up here, but honestly, since they were all in the same class, they really should have just waited there, in hindsight.

Akako was just leaving the school building, pace relaxed and elegant. If it wasn’t so like her, Aoko probably would have gotten frustrated with her too, but she couldn’t really imagine the other girl hurrying just because someone else said to. Hakuba was a little behind her, frowning at his phone as he jogged in their direction.

“Hakuba-kun?” She said questioningly once he was in hearing distance, having outpaced Akako. He glanced up and gave her a tired smile.

“Sorry, Aoko-kun, but seems Baaya won’t be able to drive us to Beika, we’ll have to take the train.”

“Great.” Kaito groaned, “Bet by the time we get there, even the club kids will have packed up and gone home, and we’ll have wasted the entire afternoon on nothing.”

“It’ll be fine, Kaito.” She said, instead of nagging him like she wanted to, “It’s not that far.”

Did he always have to drag his feet? He hadn’t always been this stubborn and muleheaded, he used to like spending time with her.

Kaito made a face and started on the way to the station without another word. Akako moved alongside him, unbothered by his grumpy mood, leaving Aoko staring after them, feeling a little helpless.

Were they really growing apart?

No, no, no, they’d do something this week or weekend, something, and Kaito would laugh and joke with her like usual. In fact. Friday night they were going to Tropical Land! Surely, they could have some fun there, even if they were investigating too. Kaito may even be less distracted than he usually was when they went out together, with Hakuba around to keep him on his toes!

Significantly cheered by the thought, she ran to catch up to them. That wasn’t all, they were going to Teitan to see Ran again, and that gave her a sort of warm, bubbly feeling. While their last conversation hadn’t exactly been very casual or fun, she seemed like a really nice girl; Aoko wanted to get to know her a little. Plus, it seemed rude to not pursue friendlier interaction after the tight, awkward position they put her in last time; treating her just like a fount of information wasn’t very good manners.

She just hoped Ran was okay with it; after all, there was no guarantee she’d even like Aoko, but she wanted to at least try, even if it made her feel anxious. It was important to reach out to others,
because she would never make friends if she didn’t, and then…

She’d be alone, wouldn’t she?

Teitan High School was similar to their school in both size and layout, but their uniforms stuck out to a near ridiculous degree. Their gakuran and sailor uniforms seemed childish, straight from middle school or the country, in comparison to the neat and professional blazers and ties of Teitan.

“Maybe we should have changed.” Aoko mused, suddenly feeling awkward about storming another school and asking about a celebrity. Thankfully, Hakuba was pretty well known himself, so some of the students may recognize him and they wouldn’t look like a bunch of overly bold fans.

“Too late for that now,” Akako replied, already moving towards the front gates. Not that she had much to be worried about, guys fell over themselves fawning no matter where she went; she really was just that pretty. Aoko hurried after her, eager to see Ran again despite her insecurities. Hakuba had created an opportunity to get Ran’s number after she had regretted leaving the Agency without it the other day; she couldn’t pass up this chance!

Students milling around Teitan’s yard watched them curiously as they entered the building, but Hakuba didn’t seem care. He immediately set about inspecting the shoe lockers, searching for Kudo’s.

It was any different from the others. Nothing setting it apart, though Aoko had no idea what he even expected to find. Dust? Signs of disuse?

Hakuba shook his head after a moment’s glance, evidently recognizing it as an exercise in futility, and turned to Akako.

It was time for her to shine, after all.

To her, the school was just another spot in which humans gathered like flocking flies, quivering, shaking, going through their mating rituals, scrambling to dig whatever they could from the decomposition under their legs and devour it. Oh, their elusive prey’s gruesome aura had touched this place as well, but the feelings of hundreds of other stressed, frustrated students had trampled even his touch into a sort of faint, too-sweet scent, like rot.

Honestly, places like these were just hunting grounds to someone like her, filled with easy and near mindless prey. Like that unsuspecting boy over there, who was peeking at her shyly from hallway. Just another toy.

Akako moved in on him, adding just the slightest sway to her hips. More than a little dumbstruck, the student didn’t have the sense to run while he still had the chance.

“Excuse me,” she purred one she had closed in, and already his wide eyes were catching on her lips. Foolish. “Could you tell me about Kudo Shinichi?”

He blinked as she wound a slip of her around her finger, showing how soft, and sleek it was, how nice it felt to run through. When he found the sense to speak, he stuttered. “Kudo?”

“Yes. When was the last time you saw him?” He was looking at her lips again, blushing a little; she had reapplied her lipstick on the train, and now the vibrant red was enticing him closer.
“So--sorry” He apologized, looking silly and regretful in his near desperation to appease her.
“Nobody has seen him in months.”

“Oh, are you sure?” Those beady eyes of his were starting to move lower, and she pushed out her chest a little. He blushed bright red, clearly embarrassed, and suddenly, his survival instincts seemed to kick in.

“Yes!” He squeaked, before tripping over his own feet at an attempt to both move closer and further away from her. She was pretty sure Kuroba was laughing behind her as their hapless victim fell over himself.

“Thanks anyway.” She said, maybe a little haughtily, and moved on to the next little luckless lamb.

However, the consensus seemed generally the same; Kudo could hardly even still be considered a registered student.

“It’s a pity, we could have used him in the Soccer League.” One less love-struck student huffed. He seemed like a studious, cynical fellow; those one’s usually hid their attraction to her better than others.

“Don’t the teachers find that strange?” Akako prompted, jutting her hip out to show off the curve of her waist.

Mostly unaffected, the boy shrugged. “Well, he’s not the first guy to drop out of high-school, you know? Never seemed to need it much anyway.”

“But isn’t it strange that he’s missing?” She was tempted to up the charm at this point, make this kid squirm a little. He dared to think he could play it cool around a beauty of her stature? Like hell. Akako was tempted to mess with him a little, so she sidled closer, so that he could catch the hint of her perfume on the air.

He didn’t seem to care, shrugging again, carelessly. “I heard something about him going to America with his parents again. Maybe he’s just going to school there.” Then, instead of looking down at the soft curve of her chest, snuck a glance at Hakuba, who was standing back and letting her run the interrogation.

Well, that was a miscalculation.

“Well, we know he hasn’t transferred.” Hakuba said, moments later as they moved to another section of the building, still attracting a fair amount of attention from the grazing sheep. “The school would be aware of it if he did, and they would have given his locker to someone else.”

“If he’s really dead, of course he hasn’t been to school.” Kuroba pointed out carelessly, clearly bored out of his mind. She wondered, occasionally, what he knew about all this. Of all four of them, varied as they were, he was the one most connected to the criminal underground. She had no doubt he had a better idea of what was really going on than he let on. Kudo was probably not dead, at least not in the ordinary sense. It was possible he had moved on to another state of existence, converting from a human being into something a bit more fitting to his bizarre essence. Possible, but not likely. Which meant that surely there was a rational, ‘scientific’ explanation for the strange occurrences surrounding him, and that Kuroba surely felt curious enough about to poke around a little.

How well had the Kaitou KID even known Kudo, if at all?

“It’s strange though, isn’t it?” Nakamori spoke, a crease in her brow, distracting her from her thoughts.
“What?”

The messily haired girl frowned, raising a finger to her cheek. “It seems he was well admired, but no one seems all that close to him.” A fair observation. The more students they spoke with, the more abundantly clear that Teitan’s resident celebrity was well-liked, and amiable, but for some reason, despite what seemed like good relations, no one knew much about him.

“Apparently, a lot of people found him pretty unapproachable.” Hakuba pointed out, and she raised an eyebrow. No one had said that, in fact the opposite had been professed, but the blond detective wasn’t usually wrong; in fact, his hunches were usually right on the mark, as one phantom thief could, but wouldn’t, attest.

“Eh, who said that?” Nakamori asked, confused, and Hakuba shook his head.

“They didn’t say it.” The detective corrected, “Their body language and what they did say suggested so. Many of them claim to have been at least friendly with him, but none of them are even remotely worried about his disappearance. Some even seem relieved that he’s gone; I imagine that secretly, he unnerved them or made them feel inferior.”

Akako thought back of the behavior of their informants, but nothing struck her as strange. Maybe she should have paid more attention to that, instead of how quickly she could reduce a sixteen year-old boy to a gibbering, incoherent mess on the floor.

“Plus, he sounds haughty. I bet it pissed a fair amount of people off, but no one wants to badmouth a celebrity.” Kuroba added casually, and Akako realized he was familiar with that situation. More than a few of their classmates thought Kuroba was a complete showoff and a nuisance, but played nice to his face. There was no way he didn’t know that, being the absolute master of putting on airs.

Nakamori probably hadn’t recognized the connection, though, and continued on. “Even so, he was popular, right? So why isn’t anyone concerned?”

“Maybe they were at first…” But after months, who could be bothered to worry about a cold, genius rich kid when they had their own less advantageous lives to lead?

Hakuba sighed, his own face a little guarded. Just like with Kuroba, he wasn’t all that privately well liked either; in fact, he probably recognized the behavior of the Teitan students not just because he was an experienced investigator. He faced the same issue everyday, which was why he was so gracious (bar Kuroba, maybe) to the few genuine friends he had. “It seems the only ones people really connect him to are Mouri Ran and Suzuki Sonoko.” H pointed out, but even as the words left his mouth, the detective seemed to pause, realization flickering across his face. They stopped in the center of a busy hall, ignoring the attentive eyes of strangers watching them from all sides. “Wait, a minute. That little girl… she said something strange.” He muttered aloud, and Akako stared incredulously. What a change in topic.

Just what was going on in that head of his? Was he referring to that tea-haired girl that lived next door to the Kudo Manor? Why think of her now?

Not bothering to explain, Hakuba jolted back into movement, a slight, expectant smirk on his face. Suddenly, it felt like he was more of a hunter than she.

The next student they caught, their detective bearing down upon him like a lion trapping its prey, was an ordinary looking fellow who was clearly a little uncomfortable. Hakuba took point, pinning the student with sheer intensity rather than any sort of charm, as if watching her work had taught his nothing, sheesh, and he changed the line of questioning drastically.
“Has Kudo-kun been to any of the school events recently? Like a festival?” He demanded, and the hapless student seemed too overwhelmed to not reply.

“Kudo? Uh, I don’t think so? Nobody has seen him in ages.”

Hakuba didn’t seem even remotely satisfied by that answer, bearing down on the poor fellow. “Did he used to come?” They were attracting way more attention now, a small crowd gathering around them with curious, interested eyes. Nakamori seemed visibly uncomfortable, looking almost as if she wanted to pull Hakuba back herself, like she normally would with Kuroba.

The captured student was talking, though. “That guy was never all that involved in anything besides Soccer Club...well, no, there was that play.”

“Play?” That seemed to excite Hakuba further, his usually cool red eyes sharpening with a sort of keen understanding. Like he had sunk his teeth into something good.

The student nodded, a little tentatively, but thankfully, he was also loosening up, looking less like he was being cornered and mugged and more like a willing conversationalist. “A while back, Suzuki-chan directed a play for the school festival. The heroine was Mouri-chan, and the hero wore this costume and mask and was called the ‘Dark Knight’ or something. Anyways, he was played by Kudo. There was a case he had to solve and everything.”

Akako felt her eyebrows rise; this was new, juicy information. Hakuba grinned, quick and victorious, but the student seemed to think it was a friendly expression, relaxing.

“But don’t go spreading that on the Internet, Kudo will kill us all.” He added quickly, laughing awkwardly, and Hakuba nodded, thousands of thoughts obvious spinning behind his eyes, like the gears of a clock coming to life after desperately needing a rewind.

“Right, thank you. Where could we find Suzuki-san?”

Suzuki Sonoko was a busy girl; despite what most thought. Sure, she was admittedly not the best student, or the most dedicated, but in her after school hours she was a member of both the tennis and theatre clubs, and between the two, she was quite occupied. It helped burn time that would be otherwise be spent wasting away in front of the TV with chips, waiting for Makoto to text back. Such was her life, considering her only two close friends, besides Sera (who was often MIA) and Eisuke (who was back in America, the loser) weren't often available. Ran had her hands absolutely full being captain of the Karate club and all, and Kudo had disappeared off the face of the Earth and was off solving murder cases in space—or something. As if Sonoko cared, so long as he still called often enough to keep Ran happy.

Today, however, there was something more interesting afoot in the after-hours of Teitan High.

And she, as the resident gossip queen, simply had to be on top of it.

She had been rummaging through the props closet, trying to find the donkey mask they had for Midsummer's Night Dream, and failing—seriously, they still had every other costume they had ever used, so why was this particular piece missing? —when she overheard something interesting taking place outside.

"Did you see them?” Two guys she vaguely recognized were walking by, and were engrossed in her kind of conversation.
"The students from another school wandering around? Yeah."

"Wonder what they're here for."

"I heard them talking to Keisuke. They were asking about Kudo, I think."

"Huh, that's weird. Did you see that totally smokin' girl, though?"

"The one with the reddish hair? Hell yeah, she's a ten out of ten."

"Wish I could get her number. Think I can ask for a picture?"

The conversation faded out as the two moved further along the hallway, continuing whatever they were doing in the first place. But Sonoko was intrigued, and it's not like struggling her way through boxes full of props was all that interesting.

And so, deciding they didn't really need the donkey head right now, Deduction Queen Sonoko headed out to investigate.

The rumored visitors weren't hard to find, considering how much attention they had grabbed. Curious Teitan students milled by the doors of the classrooms, peeking into the southern hall, where four teenagers dressed in gakuran uniforms were chatting with an assortment of juniors. There were two guys and two girls, and all four were decently good looking. Score.

One of the boys was a tall blond, only half-Japanese by the looks of it, and the other made her double take. Was that Kudo?

No, Kudo would die before he let his hair get that messy, but the stranger was practically a doppelgänger; however, on closer inspection, and a lifetime of growing up alongside Kudo, a number of differences were apparent. The color of the eyes, the curve of the nose, and the slant of the brows were wrong, and their body types were different. Still, he was no less of a hottie for it, and had the bonus of not pissing Sonoko off on sight.

The first girl looked a bit like Ran, if Ran was a flat-chested middle schooler who had never picked up a comb in her life. Still, she had a pretty face.

The other girl, was, well, wow, model much? Slender, elegant, with black hair that shimmered strikingly red in the light, and makeup so perfect Sonoko was tempted to go beg for beauty tips. Well, she was going to go talk to them anyway, so...

Sonoko subtly moved in closer, integrating herself into the students surrounding the group. Maehara, a boy from class 2B that she recognized, was talking to the blond, but spotted her among the others.

"Ah, here's Suzuki-chan now." He told the stranger, motioning towards her. As all four of the visiting students turned towards her, she pointed at herself and raised a questioning eyebrow in Maehara's direction.

He just shrugged.

"Excuse me, are you Suzuki Sonoko?" The blond asked, red-brown eyes on her now, and man, he was handsome. Had some prince from another district fallen for her again? Oh, too good to be true!

"Yes," she responded, feeling her cheeks heat up, just a bit. The half-foreign student smiled charmingly.

"Excellent. I am Hakuba Saguru, from Ekoda High. These are my classmates, Aoko-kun, Koizumi-
san, and Kuroba-kun."

Hakuba, oh man, *did* she know that name. Immediately, all approval his looks earned him flew right out the violently opened window. "Hakuba as in the detective who is always trying to interfere with KID-sama's heists?" She accused, settling her hands on her hips. It didn't matter how taken he was with her, her heart belonged to KID—well, first and foremost, to Makoto, but KID came in close second!

The blonde’s face fell a little, eyes wide at her hostility, before coughing into his hand to recompose himself. That's right, squirm underneath her gaze, nuisance. "Er, yes. I'm a teenage detective, like Kudo Shinichi, who I hear is a friend of yours?"

Sonoko was tempted to point out that Shinichi didn't really have friends, besides his future wife; he had teammates, classmates, and friendly acquaintances. Just in the privacy of her own head, she counted him as a friend, considering they had known each other since they were both ankle biters driving their teacher's up both metaphorical and physical walls. He was one of the few people who never envied or tried to take advantage of her family's wealth; mostly because the Kudos were pretty damn loaded themselves. As kids of influential big shots, they often had teamed up to cause trouble at boring, fancy events; even so, she couldn't imagine him admitting she was a friend. He was way too cold for something as human as that.

"More or less," She summed up, crossing her arms. "You want him for something?"

"Yes, actually." Hakuba admitted. "We heard that he was in a play you directed some time ago."

"Yeah," She agreed, wishing *someone* would get to the point already, "He showed up last minute to play the Black Knight. Why?"

"Actually", the other guy, Kuroba, suddenly cut in with a bashful smile, "he's a buddy of ours, and we're playing a prank on him. Do you happen to have any pictures of him in costume?" His words were a little weird, Kudo didn't have buddies any more than he had friends, but he was cute, and she could appreciate the thought of embarrassing Kudo.

"I think we have some in the storage closet." She replied, marveling a little at the pretty indigo gleam of his eyes and his roguish smile. Ah, life was good when filled with so much lovely scenery.

"Great! Can you show us?" He came up on her side, pointing back the direction from which she came. Eyes still tracing across the broad, strong line of his shoulders, she nodded carelessly. Why not? A guy this hot couldn’t be up to no good; and even if he was, Kudo probably deserved it.

All right, maybe she was a *little* weak to hunky, athletic guys. Though Kuroba was no Makoto, who was hotter than hell and muscular enough to be positively drool-worthy, he wasn't skinny. She could tell he had some serious lithe muscle underneath his uniform jacket. And that made her very, very agreeable.

As they moved back towards the closet she had abandoned, he kept grinning that really, really nice grin, and striking up conversation. "So, Suzuki-chan, I hear you are a KID fan?"

"Oh, my god, yes." Her mouth ran all by itself immediately, and she barely stopped her hand from slapping over her lips and making an even bigger fool of herself.

"Me too!" Kuroba laughed, "Did you go to the most recent heist?"

"Nah, I didn't make it, but I did watch it on TV." She hadn't been able to go, but it hadn't seemed like there was much to see. KID hadn't even appeared before the crowd, unfortunately. In fact, he
hardly ever did, not counting the occasional glimpses of his glider, when a certain crime magnet wasn’t on the prowl. "Did you?"

"All four of us did!" The brunet shot a look at two of his companions, the detective and the girl, Aoko. "Though, these two are total downers and were trying to help the police the whole time."

She felt her own scowl forming at the mere thought of it. Of all the audacity! "Well, KID-sama still easily got away with the jewel, again!" Hakuba and Aoko both looked annoyed and a little embarrassed. Ha, non-believers. Suffer.

Kuroba agreed wholeheartedly, a sly look in his eyes as he noticed his friend's reactions. "Right? The police don't stand a chance!" Aoko looked particularly furious at that remark, shaking a fist in Kuroba's direction. With that threatening manner, she looked much more like Ran than before.

"Even the glasses brat has a better chance than them." She pointed out, only realizing that they might not know whom she was talking about after the words had left her mouth. Hoping they wouldn't comment, god knew she didn't want to have to explain him, she presented them their destination. "Here we are."

She reopened the closet door and guided them in, careful of the mess of boxes spread across the floor from when she had pulled them off the shelves to fight her way through the heaps of cloth, feathers, and various knick knacks that had once served some purpose or another.

The four visitors looked around curiously as she found the box full of pictures from past plays. Finding Kudo's pictures wasn't difficult, considering how often they were requested by the yearbook club and his various fans within Teitan; they were right near the top. Plus, they had multiple copies of each, because Kudo had never actually claimed the ones they printed for him.

She handed them over, and the four gathered around to scrutinize them curiously. One was of him still masked, the dark helmet obscuring his features, and within it he cut an alluringly mysterious figure, cloaked in darkness. The other was taken after the whole mess, with him surrounded by classmates, the helmet finally tucked under his arm.

"Wow, these are great!" The messy haired girl said, blushing a little. Sonoko couldn't blame her that much; Kudo looked good in them. If only his pretty face and long legs could make up for his shitty personality.

The blond detective looked up at one of the shelves, and motioned at a familiar box. "Is that the costume he's wearing?"

"Yeah." She pulled it down and showed them the helmet, which she was still quite proud of. It was well made. "It was a bit big on him, since we made it larger for Doctor Ariade. Still, he pulled it off."

"Doctor Ariade?" Hakuba questioned after taking the helmet from her hands for closer inspection. Maybe he was admiring the excellent handiwork?

"The occasional school nurse," she told them, thinking of the handsome and friendly doctor that she and Ran both liked, "he’s not around often though. Stopped volunteering here as much around the time Jodie-sensei quit." It had been so disappointing to (mostly) lose such great, fun members of the staff at the same time. The other teachers were so boring compared to Jodie.

"That's weird." Aoko said, and Sonoko nodded rigorously. The rumors had been rampant, but she more or less knew the story about Jodie, thanks to Ran. The red-haired girl, thus far thoroughly uninterested, took the helmet from Hakuba. Sonoko wondered if she was ever going to talk, or just stand there. She had only been glancing around, so maybe it was a miracle she had in the very least
shown some interest in the helmet.

"It was. Turns out Jodie-sensei was FBI or something. It was totally weird." She elaborated, for the fun of it. It was a sensational little remark, shocking, perfect for enticing curiosity. And she did so love to make people curious, she thought, grinning as she took the helmet back from the creepy, but totally smoking, like wow, girl when she offered it, and returning it to its proper place. Unlike that stupid donkey head, it was easy to find.

"What was a FBI agent doing here?" Hakuba seemed surprised, blond eyebrows going right up.

"She was on vacation, or something. Decided to teach English to make some money while on leave. Actually, I'm pretty sure she's still in Japan, but I don't think anyone's seen her recently." She shrugged at the last part, missing the days when Jodie would visit restaurants with them. It had always been fun, and her English had improved by leaps and bounds because of the casual, friendly conversation.

"And the doctor?" Kuroba asked, and she could only shrug.

"I dunno. He’s still around every once and a while, but he helps out a lot less. Maybe he’s been working more at his dad’s old practice…" Nobody knew what went on with Ariade. The so far silent girl hummed, scarlet eyes gleaming. They were an unusual color, but she made it look pretty. "Sounds like a bit like Kudo-kun."

Sonoko was surprised by that input, but found herself agreeing after a moment's thought. "Right? That guy is never around when you need him, I swear." That was a personal frustration, though, and with a shake of her head, she ended that line of conversation, waving them out of closet so she could lock it up. And with the turn of the key, barring the dark closet of masks, stories, and fictitious people from the world, she tried to imagine she left her own melancholy behind among the photos of friends long out of reach. Friends came and went; but those who held you truly precious would surely return, Ran would insist.

Sonoko didn’t know it that was true, but sometimes, just a little, she wanted to believe that someday they could all be together, just like those photos, all jumbled up and mixed but full of smiles anyway.

Of course, she had no idea that her few attention-catching sentences, spoke in whimsy but reflecting her own unconscious troubles, had worked far, far too well, as Hakuba Saguru absorbed every lackadaisically provided detail with interest.

And just a few steps away, the Kaitou KID clenched a fist, carefully controlled frustration broiling under his skin.

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*I'm so frustrated, falling behind,*

*You were a friend of mine.*
Next Chapter: Amusement Parks, museums, and crime scenes; these things should be more mutually exclusive than they are. Thankfully, one spunky teen sleuth is all set to take the scene!
Tell me your secrets,  
And ask me your questions.  
Oh, let's go back to the start

Chapter 5: We All Face Some Questionable Initiations

Club time would be ending in about half an hour; the donkey mask would have to wait, and Sonoko was all too glad to leave it for some other time. Her new acquaintances waited for her, apparently not leaving now that they had seen what they wanted to see. As she turned back to them, Aoko shifted nervously, a slight flush creeping into her cheeks.

"Do you know where we can find Ran-chan?" The brunette asked, looking a little embarrassed.

"She should be with the karate club, right now." They were probably having sparring matches like they usually did around this time, having already finished warm-ups, their jogging, and kata practice. Not quite willing to say goodbye to her only excuse to get out of having her nose in cardboard and cheap fabric for the remaining club time, Sonoko motioned them down the hall. "I can take you by there."

"Thanks," The messy haired girl looked relieved, but the blondie was curious as ever. Guys like this always got annoying after a while, unlike her Makoto, who was the strong, silent type.

"She's quite talented, isn't she? Ran-san, I mean." He commented, and Sonoko was conflicted in what to think. On one hand, she wanted to frown, because A) Ran totally already had one troublesome detective boyfriend, and was therefore taken. But also, on the other hand, she wanted to smirk a little, because, B) it hilarious when guys tried to flirt with her gorgeous, but politely uninterested best friend.

And, frankly, Hakuba reminded her of a somehow more snobbish Shinichi, with less of the sarcasm and wit that made her friend genuinely fun to listen to. Basically, he was Ran's type, but that was so not happening so long as Sonoko still breathed the same air as Kid-sama.

Still, any chance to brag about Ran absolutely must be taken full advantage of. "Oh yeah, Ran's the strongest. She's captain and prefectural champion." She told them proudly as she guided them towards where the karate club held their practices. "It makes her a great match for Kudo-kun, since he would be our star soccer player if he ever actually showed up to play." That part she said snidely, unsubtly hinting at Ran's relationship status, and maybe a bit bitterly. If Kudo were more involved in the soccer team and around for games and tournaments, Teitan would have a much better chance as Inter-high. That guy was a real disappointment, sometimes; it made her want to tear her hair out.

"Is he that good?" Aoko asked, and Sonoko nodded furiously. She hadn't forgotten that Shinichi had
gotten an informal invite to the J-League, of all lucky chances, and had the nerve to refuse. He should be more ambitious, like Makoto. Her boyfriend would never pass such an opportunity by.

"If that guy had any sense, he'd be pursuing soccer and not whatever stupid case he's been so obsessed with." She told them, but shut her mouth quickly once they turned a corner of a building and revealed a crowd of students dressed in white exchanging blows. If Ran heard her, she's be in for an earful.

Ran was in front, carefully observing the practice matches of her peers, but with a wave and a half-shout, Sonoko caught her attention. She seemed surprised to see the visitors gathered behind Sonoko, and hurried over.

"Sonoko!"

She grinned at her best friend, tugging her towards the group of four. "Hey, hope you aren't busy. These guys wanna talk to you."

"Sorry for interrupting your practice." Hakuba smiled apologetically, but Ran shook her head, smiling welcomingly.

"It's fine, what do you guys need?" Under Ran's questioning gaze, the three other visitors turned to look at Aoko, who laughed nervously.

She seemed flustered, but determined. "Um, actually, Ran-chan, Aoko was wondering if you wanted to hang out this weekend..." She wanted to be friends! Sonoko couldn’t blame her, after all, Ran was honestly one of the best people on the planet. Ran was caught by surprise, though, and blinked awkwardly before looking all apologetic and guilty.

"Oh, well, Sonoko and I were actually going to go to her family’s—"

"Why don't you come with, Aoko-chan?" She interrupted before Ran could turn down the poor girl, who looked increasingly disappointed with each word. "My sister's friend is using our mountain villa for a wedding in a week, so we're going up there for the weekend to check on the renovations and help with the decorating."

"Well, that was adorable. She wanted to be friends! Sonoko couldn’t blame her, after all, Ran was honestly one of the best people on the planet. Ran was caught by surprise, though, and blinked awkwardly before looking all apologetic and guilty.

"It's fine, what do you guys need?" Under Ran's questioning gaze, the three other visitors turned to look at Aoko, who laughed nervously.

She seemed flustered, but determined. "Um, actually, Ran-chan, Aoko was wondering if you wanted to hang out this weekend..." Well, that was adorable. She wanted to be friends! Sonoko couldn’t blame her, after all, Ran was honestly one of the best people on the planet. Ran was caught by surprise, though, and blinked awkwardly before looking all apologetic and guilty.

"Oh, well, Sonoko and I were actually going to go to her family’s—"

"And, how about you?" She turned to the other girl, who so far hadn’t actually said much, but was more than pretty enough to earn an invitation on that merit alone.

The crimson-eyed girl blinked, looking almost surprised, before glancing at Aoko. The messy haired girl pinned her with a terribly beseeching, puppy-like expression right back.
“That sounds lovely,” Akako yielded under her friend’s pleading gaze, and Sonoko mentally patted herself on the back. She honestly couldn’t have asked for a better brat deterrent. Evidently, this time around, the gods were on her side. Now, to establish contact... "Great, let's exchange numbers!"

Ran pulled out her phone too, and immediately Kuroba, who had been watching their exchange lazily, perked up.

"Hold on!" He grinned mischievously, the expression reminded her a bit of Kudo before he caused a chemical meltdown in the lab, and Aoko groaned, despairingly. What, was something about to become mildly mortifying?

"May I see you phone, ojou-san?" Kuroba asked, extending a hand, and Ran blinked, before slowly handing her phone over. Everyone watched curiously as Kuroba spun it in his hands. "You see, phones are a pretty new innovation in human communication, but the texting feature finds its roots in something much older." He explained, and as his hands turned, colorful balls appeared between his nimble fingers. He was a magician?

Ran watched her phone carefully as Kuroba began to juggle it and the balls with careless ease. "Like letters?" She offered as the red phone disappeared into the blur of flying objects as Kuroba's hands moved faster.

"Oh, writing to exchange information is certainly part of it," He mused theatrically, "but I'm thinking of the mode of transportation. Tell me, how did letters once get from place to place?" Sonoko couldn't even tell which red blur was Ran's phone anymore.

"They were carried by mailmen?"

Kuroba laughed, and the juggling slowed. Sonoko gasped as she realized that there were only balls being thrown and falling in neat little arches. The blocky shape was gone. "Oh, they were carried, alright. But the couriers were a bit more feathery than one might expect." One by the one the balls disappeared, until Kuroba was catching the last one in between his hands.

"You mean, carrier pigeons?" Hakuba looked skeptical, raising an unimpressed eyebrow. Sonoko didn't know what his problem was, she was pretty impressed.

As soon as the words left Hakuba's mouth, there was puff of brilliant pink smoke, and from Kuroba's enclosed hands burst forth a pure white dove, sweeping through the air over their heads in a flurry of ivory feathers and wisps of magenta. The squeal of surprise that erupted from Sonoko’s lips was near deafening.

Ran stiffened as the bird landed on her shoulder after circling them twice, but Sonoko couldn’t keep still.

So cool! Where had he been keeping that? Had he been carrying it the whole time? There was no way, right?

"Wait, where's Ran's phone?" She asked, inspecting Kuroba's hands. They were totally empty, no marks or hints or hidden tricks. Where had he been keeping that bird, and had Ran’s phone replaced it, sequestered away somewhere?

"Hmm," the magician hummed, looking curiously at his own fingers. "That's strange. I lost it. Don't suppose you'll accept my friend there as a suitable replacement?" Sonoko couldn't help but snort as Ran carefully turned her head to look down at the bird, which tilted its head innocently back. They did make a good pair, all pure and saintly and both living embodiments of peace and safety.
Some people clearly didn’t appreciate the image, though. "I think it's missing some of the key features, Kuroba." Hakuba muttered sarcastically, and seriously, a guy pulls a bird out of nowhere and he doesn't even crack a smile? Yeesh, that was so like a detective.

"Ah, you got me there." Kuroba reached for the bird with a sweet, apologetic smile, and the dove happily climbed on to his outstretched hands with a soft coo. "Oh, what's this?" He asked rhetorically, pulling the bird back with wide eyes and amusement flirting on the edges of his mouth, and poked at its wing. Obediently, the feathery limb lifted, and just like that the phone slipped into his fingers. A laugh burst from both her and Ran, as he suddenly looked dramatically indignant. "A thief! A thief!" He gasped in mock shock, sounding startling alike an aghast victim of a certain moonlight magician, and as if making to escape in the fashion of KID, the feathery felon burst into another plume of smoke, disappearing with the wind. "Ah, he got away." Kuroba tutted disappointedly, passing the phone back to Ran before giving the glowering detective a sly look, "Well, Hakuba is used to that, isn't he?"

A snigger left Sonoko's lips before she could help herself. Hakuba looked ready to have a snit.

"That was amazing," Ran complimented, and Kuroba beamed back with a wink.

"I took the liberty to program all our numbers into it, too."

Sonoko gasped, slipping the phone out of Ran’s hands to check. Just like promised, Ran’s contact list had mysteriously expanded. "Wow! You're just like KID-sama!" At her exclamation, he grinned all the wider.

"Oh, I'm much better that that," He boasted, puffing his chest out, and Sonoko was so excited she didn't even mind the slight against her idol.

"You have to show me more!"

"Of course!"

To the side of the growing mess of excitement and showmanship, Saguru pursed his lips and tried to ignore how guilty he felt. It was necessary.

A voice in his head that sounded suspiciously like the magician showing off a little ways away told him to keep telling himself that.

Forcing away the uncomfortable feeling of taking advantage of her amiable and trusting nature, he tapped Ran on the shoulder. Distracted from their excitable friends, she turned to him, still laughing with bright eyes. He felt all the worse for it, but there weren’t exactly many other options; she was the only one with the information they needed after all.

“Ah, Ran-san, you are friends with Hattori Heiji, right?” He asked, ignoring the twist in his gut as her friendly eyes turned on him.

She nodded, grinning, “Yeah, he and Kazuha-chan visit us often, or we go to see them. He and Conan get along really well.” He had seen that for himself on the Detective Koshien case; Hattori clearly recognized how bright little Conan was, and treated him accordingly. But he was more interested in the relationship between the famed Detectives of the East and West.

“He gets along with Kudo as well, right?” He prompted, and something flickered across Ran’s face
at the mention of her ‘boyfriend’ s name, quick as a sparrow.

“Yup. He and Shinichi are really good friends.”

“Even with Kudo being gone so much?”

Ran’s expression shifted to one of mild perplexity and she shrugged slightly, her ponytail swinging. She looked different, dressed up in her karate uniform and a shine of sweat still lining her brow; like this, she looked every part the karate champion Saguru had only ever theoretically known her to be. And just like that, suddenly, he was desperately hoping she never found out how terribly he was about to breach her privacy. Saguru had some fighting experience, but was pretty sure he wouldn’t stand a chance if she decided to beat his face in for being such a nosy arsehole.

Ignorant of his rising concern over the unnervingly high probability of having a broken nose in the near future, Ran continued on. “I actually don’t know too much about it, honestly. I know they first met at that diplomat’s house I mentioned before, but the way Hattori-kun talks about him, they must have met up a lot since then.’

What?

Saguru had been under the impression that Hattori Heiji and Kudo Shinichi had known each other before the latter’s disappearance. But if what Ran said was true, and it probably was, then Hattori Heiji only had interactions with the ‘Kudo’ of after Tropical Land.

He at first had only a couple questions for the Osakan detective, on what he thought of the whole, bizarre situation, but this information changed everything.

If Hattori was close with ‘Kudo’, rather than Kudo, and the fact that he had to make a distinction between the two spoke volumes of how baffling this case really was, then things became much more complicated. Hattori was a hotheaded fool, but one did not become a renowned detective while still in high school without a high level of intelligence and ingenuity. If ‘Kudo’ acted anything like how he did around Ran around Hattori, surely the other detective would recognize how suspicious his behavior was. And yet they supposedly still were good friends.

So, either Kudo was truly still alive and active, somehow, or Hattori was involved with a fake, knowingly, or the other detective had been completely and utterly fooled.

If he was somehow allied with an imposter, then Saguru couldn’t trust him or the information he had, especially not anything he said over the phone. No, if he was going to question Hattori, it would have to be in person, so Saguru could monitor his body language.

And he did have to speak with the Osakan; without a doubt, something essential could be gleaned from a conversation with someone so connected to ‘Kudo’.

Seemed like he had to speak to quite a few people. Suzuki Sonoko had been surprisingly useful, in terms of raising even more questions for him to struggle to solve. ‘Kudo’ had indeed attended a school play since his disappearance, as the (unsurprisingly) mysterious and elusive knight, shrouded in shadows and sweeping in out like mist. The question was why? Everything before this revelation had pointed to ‘Kudo’ keeping himself discrete, showing himself only to the eyes of a couple select people. So why did he suddenly appear in front of over a hundred students, with no guarantee that any of them would keep quiet about it?

Saguru had thought that ‘Kudo’ wanted to be considered missing. So why? It made no sense. What did he have to gain, or what did he stand to lose if he didn’t appear on the stage then?
And even dismissing that, why was an agent of the FBI, of all things, teaching at Teitan High?

Of course, he had no reason to suspect the supposed agent being in Japan for anything but personal reasons, but it didn’t sound like she had any connection to their country, so again, why?

There was a possibility of the reason being casework. Saguru was half-British, which meant he had a better understanding of the USA and its systems than his full-blooded Japanese classmates, but still wasn’t all that knowledgeable. But even so, he was pretty certain the Federal Bureau of Investigation only handled very specific types of cases. Particularly, the domestic kind. As America’s largest law enforcement agency, they did have international offices, usually within their embassies, which coordinated with their host country’s own security services.

He also knew that they did have very shady, secretive operations outside their own borders. But such activities were risky on an international level; they wouldn’t pursue just anything onto foreign turf.

If this uncovered agent was investigating something on the sly, it was no doubt big, dangerous, and either originated in the USA or was considered a severe enough threat to the superpower.

Of course, this ‘Jodie’ could be investigating something on her own, or truly on vacation, or visiting family, or any number of possibilities. But such a teacher coming to Teitan, the school from which Kudo disappeared… it didn’t seem like it could be coincidence.

Maybe one Doctor Ariade could shine some light on the situation.

But Hattori came first.

A long moment had passed since Ran had spoken, while his mind raced through thoughts, but with a fresh intention in mind, he renewed the conversation.

“I wonder if Hattori knows anything about the case…”

“Shinichi hasn’t called you?” That seemed to surprise her.

He shook his head and shrugged helplessly. “No. He must be busy, which is to be expected, I suppose. I would like to go speak with Hattori, but, ah, we aren’t exactly on good terms.” They practically weren’t on any sort terms at all, except for that one, turbulent time they met. He could hardly imagine the Osakan detective welcoming him if he did drop by.

Ran seemed thoughtful. “Well, I could call Kazuha-chan and ask her to organize you something.”

“Kazuha?”

“Toyama Kazuha. She and Hattori-kun are best friends.” The karate captain was smiling happily again; evidently, she was a good friend to this Toyama girl. He could faintly recall Hattori having a female companion with him months ago, a girl with brown hair tied in a yellow ribbon.

Ran was offering him quite the opportunity, and he was grateful. “I would really appreciate that.” He said, earnestly, feeling like the words were inadequate and awkward in the face of her simple compassion. Not many people worked with detectives as easily as Mouri Ran did; Saguru was much more used to having to steamroll his way through others.

In perfect juxtaposition to his helpless embarrassment, she shook her head and laughed. Quick, fast, and happy, like someone had told her a very clever joke.

“What?” He asked, maybe a little defensively, and her smile faded to something a little more
apologetic, but no less bright.

“Oh, nothing, I was just thinking something silly.” Ran explained, “When Hattori-kun wanted to speak with Shinichi, he went through me. And now, you want to speak with Hattori-kun, so you’re going to go through Kazuha-chan. Maybe you two are more alike than you think.”

And just like that, he realized why she was so understanding about his questioning and selfish requests. In fact, he was foolish to have not recognized it sooner. Of course a girl who had been surrounded by detectives all her life knew exactly how they functioned, how they fished for information and sought connections to get them just that bit further with their next lead.

Mouri Ran got detectives, knew their ways and methods and while she herself seemed to reject their practices, she also accepted it all and didn’t begrudge them for any of it. And, that—well, that was something special.

But he still didn’t appreciate being compared to that moron.

Tooru had been waiting for something like this to happen.

He had only managed to listen in to bits and pieces of the conversation that had gone on between Ran and her visitors the other day, but what he had caught, pressed against the door and feeling completely ridiculous, was interesting.

Kudo Shinichi. He had heard bits and pieces about Ran’s supposed ‘detective boyfriend’ from Kogoro, but all of it was vague, and considering how said boyfriend seemed to never be around, hadn’t thought much of it. But now, well, he realized there was much more to the story than a long distance relationship.

He knew of the teenage sleuth; the Security Police had taken note of his impressive abilities and admirably sharp intellect, but recruitment had always been considered very unlikely, mostly due to the high-profile nature of the young detective. His disappearance had raised questions to which there were no answers; they were confident he was still alive and active, but locating him proved impossible.

Meanwhile, despite Conan’s baffling bait and switch, he was still convinced that Okiya Subaru was the new identity Akai had taken up, and after rather forcibly cooling his head, he had decided to more or less not push it. He still had every intention of making Akai pay, and of figuring out the connection between Conan and the Kudo family.

And Tooru had the tantalizing feeling that Kudo Shinichi was part of the answer that still eluded him. After all, Conan had not been subtle about his not wanting for Tooru to overhear the conversation. Ran’s phone trouble suggested that Conan had replaced his broken bugs with his own, which meant that the tiny sleuth felt the talk was worth listening in on, but didn’t actually want to be there for it. Plus, someone had warned him that the group of four was heading over, which meant one of Conan’s pets had been monitoring them.

Now there was the strangest part: four teenagers, one of which he realized was a relatively well-known teen detective (sure seemed like there were a lot of those hanging around recently) and the son of the Superintendent General of the MPD, seemed to be gathering as much information about Kudo Shinichi as they could.

Tooru highly doubted that it was ’just for a case’; or at least, unless Kudo was the case.
And without much of anything better to do, and no other leads about Conan, and where he came from, who he was, and what he was trying to achieve by working with the FBI against them, he would pursue this.

Conan had very few chinks in his armor, after all, so Tooru had to take advantage where he could.

But how? While he had plenty of experience with what essentially amounted to stalking, if Conan’s dog was already tailing them, chances were that he would be spotted within the hour if he tried to do the same. Plus, high schoolers weren’t particularly interesting to follow around, and he did have his part-time job to consider, and his work for the Organization with Vermouth…

He was a busy man: often, Tooru didn’t have time to even properly monitor Conan, let alone add four more, slightly larger brats to the list.

Well, during the week, those four would have school, so until the weekend, he could probably play it by ear. By Saturday, he would need a plan of action.

Easy enough.

Hours later, he began to speculate that nothing was ever easy anymore. Thinking so was just wishful thinking.

As per usual, they had not intended to come across the crime scene.

Nevertheless, there it was. On one end of the street were the remains of a simple accident. All involved cars were long gone, unfortunate but inevitable, but the corner convenience store’s security camera and the traffic camera were both likely to have footage of the incident that he could, if he felt so inclined, obtain later. From the glass, shattered, the tire marks on the street, and the dent in the road’s fender, one car in the furthest lane had swerved into the next, striking the car alongside it before turning back into the railing. The other car, struck, and its driver, surprised, jerked in the opposite direction, overcompensated, and spun, only to be struck in the side by the oncoming vehicles previously behind them.

A nasty pile up had ensued, and in the sudden chaos, in the middle of rush hour, no less, the criminals had struck. The sleek black car that had been in the traffic slightly down the street from the initial accident, had been boxed in as street’s flow came to a grinding halt. Using that opportunity, the criminals, he found it unlikely that there was only one, had approached the vehicle on foot. When the driver opened the door to investigate the cause of the delay, he had been shot dead. Though the car had bullet retardant glass and durable plating, built to defend its precious cargo while still remaining moderately inconspicuous, once the door was open, and the driver bleeding out form three bullet wounds, little could be done. The guard in the backseat had tried to shoot back, opening his own back door and stepping out to return fire, only to be ambushed by the other culprit, who knocked him unconscious with some blunt weapon, and shot the suited man still remaining in the vehicle, stooped over a locked, black briefcase, dead in an instant. The case had been taken, covered in blood splatter, and the culprits had disappeared in the complete pandemonium on the street.

Or at least, that was Tooru’s best estimation of the events that had occurred, from the positioning of the bodies and the blood splayed inside and outside the vehicle.

The surviving guard had long been packed into an ambulance and taken away. He had managed to overhear a report that the man would be more or less fine, if not for a slight concussion. His colleagues, who had not been so lucky, would soon be placed in their body bags.
Conan was slipping around the scene easily as water, not so much as even flinching at the gaping wounds and dried blood, but even for him, there wasn’t much that could be seen by the naked eye. Forensics and eyewitness interviews would probably make or break this case.

Frankly, Tooru really did not care, and could not wait to be on their way. He had been serving other people food all day, had a long night of much shadier work ahead of him, and was more than ready to get dinner. So of course, Conan, being the fascinating little plight on human life he was, had dropped this on them just by existing.

“Did you find out what was stolen?” He asked Kogoro as the detective moved away from Inspector Megure, back from what had evidently not been a friendly conversation. He had nothing better to do while he waited for a certain sleuth to satiate his curiosity and realize actual food was far more appetizing than dead bodies.

“Believe it or not, a jewel.” The famed ‘Sleeping’ detective grunted, lighting a cigarette. Tooru may just be projecting, but he thought he could hear the man’s stomach growl.

“A jewel?” Tooru prompted. The man in the suit in the car had been clutching his cargo close, stooping over it, so when he’d been shot initially, the outline of the case he had held in his lap had remained after it had been extracted from his corpse. Since it was a large, no doubt strong briefcase, he had assumed it had contained documents of some sort, or maybe a drive. Not a jewel.

Kogoro continued on, shaking his head and looking aggravated at the world in general. “Seems like it was going to be the star of some upcoming exhibit. Their plan for transporting it was to have three identical cars going different routes, with no one knowing which had the real jewel.”

“Decoys?”

“Yeah, just as a preemptive measure. They weren’t actually expecting any trouble; apparently even the arrival of the jewel in the country had been kept under absolute secrecy.”

“Somebody still found out, clearly.” Tooru pointed out, before shifting his gaze to the car. It looked like the kind of vehicle that would host someone or something important; they should have been more careful, less noticeable. “Who told the police all that then? I assume even the force wasn’t informed that the jewel was being transported.”

“They would have offered assistance if they did. The exhibit director is on the phone with Shiratori now, and on his way. Everyone’s in a tizzy.”

“Eh…” What a mess. So some rich, arrogant man was putting on a show of a rock, and instead of informing the police of the valuable’s position and accommodations, relied only on some security company he hired. And now the rock was gone, two men were dead, and Conan was making them late to dinner.

Even though, as detectives, there was little they could do.

“Should we offer a hand?” He asked anyway, please say something intelligent for once in your life and say no echoing in his head, and as expected, Kogoro shook his head.

“Nothing we can do besides get out of the way so they can focus on finding actual witnesses.”

They hadn’t seen a thing themselves, as they had only been heading over to Café Columbo for a dinner out when they came across the scene. Conan, the little bloodhound he was, had immediately run off and slipped his way in, forcing Kogoro to go squawking after him, and leaving Tooru, hungry and almost murderous, to wait them both out.
But now, *now* he finally had an opportunity. “Guess I’ll go grab Conan-kun, then. We’ll miss our reservation at this rate.”

Kogoro blinked, frowned, and glanced around his feet, as if he expected his ‘freeloader’, actually the major breadwinner of the family at this point, to be winding around his legs like a cat with a particularly bad personality. “Where’s that little twerp anyway?”

“I think he’s interrogating Officer Tome.” Tooru replied, already heading over to where a certain seven year-old was unsubtely gleaning the crime scene investigator of everything he knew.

Mouri made an answering sound of frustration behind him.

“Neh, Officer Tome, about the surviving guard’s shoes—“

“Conan-kun,” Tooru interrupted, and both child and investigator looked up at him from where they knelted on the asphalt, one bright with faux cheer and the other a little flummoxed, “It’s time to go.”

The child gave him a sharp little look. Tooru refused to back down; no matter how brilliant and unnerving Conan was, a kid would absolutely not boss him around. He wasn’t Akai, after all.

Instantly, the brat changed tactics, pouting. “Can’t we stay a little longer?”

“We’re going to miss our reservations—“

“Doesn’t justice for the victims come before dinner, though?” A tiny hand motioned towards where the bodies were finally being carted away.

“Of course, but there’s nothing…” Tooru petered off as he turned back to Conan, or rather, where Conan had been until he let himself be distracted like a bumbling FBI agent.

The devilish little creature was gone, off to bamboozle some other poor officer, no doubt.

*Why* was he subjecting himself to this again?

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Tropical Land was a relatively new amusement park to the Tokyo area, but it was popular, bright, and creative, with many interesting themes, attractions, and viewing areas. Normally, such things wouldn’t interest her, but going to such a place with friends like a normal girl was refreshing enough of an idea to be enjoyable. Granted, what they were here to do could hardly be considered ‘normal’ and the company was not common in the least.

Hakuba led them around, eyes appraising, no doubt analyzing their surroundings down to the amount of dust gathered in corners.

Akako had never been within Tropical Land before, but she had been to other amusement parks, alone and bored. Most were notable for the jumble of emotions and presences inhabiting them, the laughter and misery of thousands of people seeped into the very ground. The screams of the present and the screams of the past blended into a cacophony of terror and excitement that thundered in her mind and smothered her senses. She did not like coming to places as human as these.

But this particular theme park had a unique undercurrent she had sensed before. As if Death himself had walked the concrete underneath their feet, scorching the very life from it. This presence she was very quickly becoming acquainted with, ever since the beginning of this hunt; everywhere their elusive mark had stepped was left entrenched in blood-soaked tragedy. Such an abomination against life sent shivers down her spine.
“Alright, here we are at the Mystery Coaster.” The detective among them pointed out their destination, but it was unnecessary. Akako could taste the permanent too-sweet rot of murder in the very air around the colorful building. “During the ride Mouri-chan and Kudo-san took, a man was murdered by his ex-girlfriend.” She could tell that too: only scorned loves left such a mournful scent, after all. Hakuba turned from the coaster with a serious look, guiding them away slowly. “From here, they walk out slowly, with the others detained during the investigation.” They moved along, and with each step, Akako knew they were getting closer. Darkness was closing in on them from all sides, the light of the park and the laughter of children fading into the abyss. The others did not notice. If she focused on reality, the bright sunny day refocused itself, swimming back in a whirl of color, and if she extended herself spiritually, she found Lucifer’s laughter thundering around and through her.

Her companions paused. Hakuba had set his eyes on the place Mouri Ran had last seen her crush, under normal circumstances. “And then, suddenly, he runs in this direction, towards that very dark alley. He disappears, and Ran-san gets an ominous premonition that she’ll never see him ever again.” Hakuba continued, and Akako could almost see the image of a running figure being swallowed by the cruel darkness before them, no doubt the same picture that was imprinted on their informant’s very soul. The Mouri girl was gifted after all, able to sense the impending disaster and its conclusion; if only she could make proper use of her ability, but modern skepticism too easily prevented such young talent from entering the fields of magic, particularly precognition.

They themselves moved into the darkness, and it washed over her like being doused with cold water. Almost entranced, she continued on, the other three forgotten. Without knowing where to go, they were observing their surroundings, the cold alley that led towards an abandoned portion of the park, with a building left behind by the renovations just beyond. The three of them, directionless and uninspired, looked at her curiously as she moved towards the corner of the building.

There, she knew, was the place.

She had not forgotten Kudo Shinichi from the brief moment she had felt his presence in the helicopter at the Clock Tower Heist, even if she did not know his name then; his power was not one she could ever banish from her mind. He was a man cloaked in death itself, the emptiness of life-loss exuding from his very skin. As a witch, her powers lied within the supernatural and infernal, and people like the Mouri girl and Kuroba were gifted with more ethereal, celestial abilities, typically called ‘luck’. Both were entirely unnatural, found nowhere in nature or the Earth. But the shroud of black death seeped around Kudo was different: an ancient, natural, incomprehensible influence, that of the very opposite of life; a neutral power, neither good nor evil, but infinite in its potential and mastery. Nothing was beyond the touch of death, not Lucifer, not angels. Death could be temporarily cheated, but not surpassed; it was inescapable.

And death, like all powers, had its agents.

When she heard about the supposed death of such a powerful creature as Kudo, who carried the ruthlessness and aggressiveness of the Devil himself alongside his other burden, she had scoffed. The likelihood of anything ending the detective before his time came was close to nothing, and would require unimaginable, immense power.

Whatever had happened, she was confident Kudo survived.

Being here, her certainty was compounded. Indeed, the tragedy in this place had immense weight, enough to snuff out regular human life, but the result of it felt more akin to a beginning than an end.

Something, she knew not what, and Lucifer offered no hints, had started in this place, and whatever
it was, it was influential and consuming: a story that would rock the world itself and leave lasting cracks throughout the institutions of humans.

Akako was a little awed.

“Koizumi-san, do you see something?” Hakuba asked, as he caught up to her, inspecting the area around them. Though spiritually the evidence of the crime was blatant, nothing existed physically. The wall of the building was worn from natural wear and tear, but nothing stood out as part of a crime scene. The grass under their feet revealed nothing.

“No,” she said.

“Something must have happened here, but what?” Kuroba grumbled, staring on some stones scattered through the green grass, “We have no idea of what Kudo could have seen, heard, or done that caused him to run off.”

“There must have been some kind of case, right?” Nakamori was turning around and looking at with wide, curious eyes, in vain.

“But we have no clue what, and have literally nothing to go on.” They had come here hoping to find something, but clearly for the others, it was a waste of a trip. The chances of anything being found a whole year after the supposed turning point had been thin, but they had hoped.

“Keep looking for something, then.” Hakuba had begun a thorough investigation of the wall and surrounding ground, his trained eyes dissecting the scene with skill the rest did not possess.

They remained for a better part of an hour longer, theoretically sniffing around and wondering. Nothing of interest came up, but Hakuba kept frowning in thought, as if some idea was niggling in the back of his mind. The rest of them grew lackluster and lethargic, bored by the tedious and uninteresting inspection of grass and stone.

Just as they were giving up, it seemed to come to him. He took out his phone, calling out to them, “Hey, wait.”

“What is it?” Nakamori perked up, eagerly hurrying over. The sudden interest was rejuvenating.

“Right around here, site B, a lost kid was found.” Hakuba said, eyes sharp, “Before coming here, I asked for all the reports from the park of the day, because something more than the murder may have caught Kudo’s attention.” He pulled up something on his phone, and began to read it, “There’s one report about this area. A small child, about grade school age, was found with a severe concussion by the security guards. They brought him to the medical room. He wasn’t lucid, and they couldn’t get anything that made sense from him, and there were no reports of missing children, so they decided to take him to local child services, but then he… disappeared?” He ended on a confused note, double-checking the report. Not only a disappearing detective, but a disappearing child? Was it simply a coincidence, or an ominous clue?

“When was that?” Kuroba asked quickly, brows furrowed.

Hakuba flicked the page upwards to check. “About a hour and a half after Kudo left Mouri-chan.”

“And the kid wasn’t found?” Nakamori asked worriedly, brow crinkled in concern.

“No, apparently they called the station and learned nothing. No missing kids were reported, no hospital reports of mysteriously injured children, nothing. It’s thought that the kid just found his way home on his own.” Akako said nothing, but Lucifer’s laughter was near deafening.
“Or, he was somehow involved.”

At Kuroba’s dark tone of voice, Nakamori paled, her lips pursued in concern. “You think a kid had something to do with whatever happened here?”

Hakuba nodded, face solemn. “Children don’t just get serious head wounds.” True, children could be careless and rambunctious, but such dangerous injuries were few and far between, especially in busy amusement parks. “And we ourselves overheard that Kudo ‘had his head bashed in’. I don’t think that’s a coincidence.”

Nakamori ruminated on that for a minute or two, while they all went on their separate trains of thought. Finally, she brightened, “Well, Kudo-kun isn’t the type of guy to let a child be hurt, or leave them alone like that, right? Doesn’t that mean from the time the kid was lying on the ground until the guards found him, Kudo can’t have been here?”

Surprised by her keen observation, Hakuba looked up and gave a curt nod, smiling slightly. “Yes, most likely. However, we have no idea how long the kid was here, or how he ended up hurt.”

“Was he attacked?” Nakamori wondered, looking uncomfortable with the idea. Kuroba shrugged, glancing around the area again. Akako again wondered what he was thinking, and what he knew. So far, his contribution to the case had been minimal, but he had acted oddly at the cafe beneath the Agency. She herself had no interest in eating there, not with the haze of death sinking down from the ceiling, but Kuroba had no way of knowing about the ominous energy Kudo had left soaking the Mouri Agency. Something else had rattled him.

Hakuba hummed. “Maybe Kudo saw the attack? Maybe the kid saw something? We have no way of knowing. But it’s the closest thing to a lead we’ve got.” True, the theories they could draw were infinite, and all based on conjecture, but every stroke of a paintbrush seemed endless in its potential until the picture was complete.

The magician among them, usually so cheerful, did not share the optimism the others clung to. “Some lead.” He huffed, “There’s not even a picture of the kid. He could be anywhere, we’ll never find him.”

Well, Akako could, maybe, if she brought the proper materials and really applied herself, but she had no way of explaining any findings to her companions. Plus, she was not that invested. It was far more amusing to let the investigation continue without supernatural interference. Surely a talented and competent detective could solve this case with the book smarts of a police inspector’s daughter, the questionable assistance of one of the world’s smartest criminals, and her own vague guidance at his disposal. Though this tale may be convoluted and mysterious, with such sharp tools, assuredly an answer could be found.

And, well, Hakuba seemed up to the challenge. He stood resolute among them, determination written in the lines of his visage. “Nevertheless, its something. Remember, we’re not just trying to fit together a puzzle: we have to find all the pieces first.”

After that, investigation complete but fruitless, Nakamori insisted they play around, and honestly, Akako enjoyed it immensely. Particularly how easy it was for her and Kuroba to empty the game stalls of their prizes.

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*Running in circles, coming up tails*
Heads on a science apart,

Nobody said it was easy.
No matter what you say about life

I learn every time I bleed

That truth is a stranger

Chapter 6: Strangers to Truth

Saturday morning found Aoko and Akako disembarking the train in Beika, carrying bags packed for a weekend trip. Elsewhere, Aoko knew, the other half of the Brigade would be heading off to Osaka via the Tokaido Shinkansen. Hopefully, Kaito wouldn't drive Hakuba too far up the wall on the long train ride. Hopefully.

Hopefully.

Oh god, she'd count herself lucky if they both come back breathing. That they avoided strangling each other was probably the best she could ask for. They had been getting along better these days, but the initial tension of their early meetings never seemed to fade. She couldn't help but feel bad for the detective they were going to see, with that bad-tempered and obnoxious tornado heading his way at three hundred kilometers per hour.

As if reading her mind, Akako patted her shoulder sympathetically. "Don't fret too much, Nakamori-san. A little bonding time may be good for them."

Aoko laughed in response to that image. Kaito and Hakuba, bonding? The only thing that could bind them together was a pair of handcuffs, and not ever those lasted long with Kaito's quick fingers. "We both know that's not happening!"

Akako hummed, playfully shrugging. "Well, in the least we can expect them to complete their part of the mission. We have to make sure not to fall behind those two testosterone-fueled monkeys."

At the mention of the real purpose of this trip, Aoko felt her mood dim slightly. Akako was right of course, what they were after was whatever other information on Kudo Shinichi they could get from Ran and Sonoko. But there was something cold about such blatant abuse of Ran's friendly, trusting nature that dampened her mood. Yet, at the same time, this was for Ran too, in order to get to the bottom of her boyfriend's disappearance and the strange phone calls. If it was at all possible, Aoko wanted to find Kudo, alive and well, and drag him back home; after all, if it were Kaito who left her life so suddenly, she would be completely heartbroken. Ran shouldn't have to keep suffering through that like she was right now.

"Yeah," She said, determined, "let's do our best, Akako-chan!"

Akako blinked, surprised by the change in her mood, but smiled indulgently. "Yes, let's."

"Aoko-chan! Koizumi-san!" Ran's voice called out from behind them. Turning, they found the other girl hurrying towards them, struggling to cut through the people milling around.
"Ran-chan! Good morning!" Aoko called back, waving, as Ran stopped in front of them with a harried smile.

"Sorry we're late, were you waiting long?"

"Not at all."

Ran huffed a breath of relief, relaxing. "Thank goodness. Come on, Sonoko and Sera-san are waiting by the car."

She led them out of the busy station to a parking lot, right to a shiny red car and the two people loitering by its open trunk.

"Yo!" Sonoko grinned at the sight of them, nudging a boy at her side with her elbow and nodding in their direction. "Took you guys long enough." She was dressed like a model, in a short skirt and brand-name jacket and high boots. In complete contrast, the boy next to her wore plain clothes, just jeans and a sports jacket. He had a sly-looking face with sharp olive eyes and tussled brown hair, and a sharp canine poked out between his lips when he smiled.

"Good morning!" Aoko greeted, staring at the boy curiously. Was there anyone else coming with?

Noticing her gaze, Sonoko smirked mischievously, nudging her companion in the side. "Ah, Aoko-chan, Akako-chan, this is Sera-san, our classmate who transferred in from America."

Aoko paused. Wait, wasn't Sera supposed to be- "Eh? Sera-san? You're a girl?" The words just burst out before her manners could catch up.

Everyone stared. Aoko clapped a hand over her big mouth before anything else stupid could waltz out, and blushed red. It was official: she had the social graces of a Spanish bull.

Thankfully, Sera only laughed. "It's okay, it's okay!" She waved her hand in the air, dispelling the words with the careless air of someone who couldn't be bothered about appearances. "That happens all the time." Aoko couldn't help but wonder just how often all the time was, to gain such an easygoing reaction, since a high school girl being mistaken for a boy was pretty mortifying. "I'm Sera Masumi, a friend of Sonoko-chan and Ran-chan. You two are Aoko-chan and Akako-chan, right?"

"Yes, it's nice to meet you!" Still flustered, Aoko spoke both too fast and too loudly, but Akako eased into the conversation as gracefully as ever.

"Koizumi Akako, of Ekoda High. Suzuki-san mentioned that you are a transfer from America, Sera-san?"

Sera gave Akako a quick nod, which did little to hide the long considering look up and down she gave Ekoda High's idol. "Yep! It's quite the transition!" She replied cheerfully, not looking like she had suffered from the trip or following adaptations at all.

"I was a transfer myself, so I understand. How have you been settling in?" Aoko herself had forgotten that Akako had only transferred into the class almost two years ago. In fact, it was hard to imagine Ekoda High without the red-eyed beauty, and she honestly still had no idea where Akako attended before melding into their lives like she had always been there. Mystery was something Akako wore like a little black dress and a layer of red lipstick.

Sera, who had the same air of mystery but wore it completely differently, like a worn leather jacket, was something else entirely. She puffed out her chest and gleamed with pride. "Pretty good, all things considered! It'll probably still be a while before the police start taking me seriously, but I do
still have a lot to learn, after all!"

"The police?" Aoko repeated questioningly, but she had the faintest recollection of hearing Sera's name in the relation of police work before.

"Sera-san is a high school detective, too." Another one?

"Really? Like Kudo Shinichi-san?" Akako asked, something sly dancing on the corners of her smile. Aoko couldn't help but envy the ease at which she manipulated the conversation. But then again, Akako tended to make everything seem easy.

Sera had an unexpected reaction to the name Kudo; Aoko would have thought she'd give them a simple enthusiastic nod at best, maybe a disgruntled frown at being compared to the celebrity at worse. Instead, the rough looking girl seemed to beam, eyes alight with something akin to admiration. She chuckled, cheeks flushing, "I wouldn't say we're on the same level yet, but I'm gonna get there before you know it!"

"Oh?" Akako hummed teasingly, and Aoko just knew that these two were going to get along like a house on fire. Despite her pleasant appearances, Akako really loved to mess with logic-orientated people, detectives especially. And by the forward way Sera presented herself, Aoko could only assume she probably could give as good as she got.

Better to change the topic now, then. "So who's driving?" She asked, motioning to the car.

"Ran's dad was originally going to be the driver, but he has to stay home with the brat." Sonoko replied, taking her backpack and Akako's tote bag, and tucking them into the trunk with some others that probably belonged to the other three girls.

"Then..." Aoko trailed off, setting eyes on Sera. She didn't think either Ran or Sonoko could drive, or were even old enough for a car license.

The detective shook her head quickly. "Don't look at me, ha! I've only got a bike license." A teen had to only be older than sixteen to apply for a bike license, rather than over eighteen, like for cars. Kaito had one of those too, didn't he? She was pretty sure he was registered for it, but couldn't think of a time she ever saw him ride one, or even a reason why he'd need one. Then again, Kaito had all sorts of strange, pointless skills, since he was always so bored with things other kids their age struggled with, like academics and upcoming college entrance exams.

"Has everyone arrived?" A voice cut through whatever was about to be said next, smooth and familiar. Aoko tensed, turning to find someone she did not expect standing behind them. Okiya Subaru, strawberry blond hair gleaming pink and red in the bright sunlight, smiled easily in greeting. He didn't seem surprised to see them at all.

"Yup!" Sonoko replied cheerfully, shutting the trunk and dancing up to Okiya's side with a slight blush. "Okiya-san is going to be driving us!" She announced, but Aoko had already figured out that much.

She was suddenly uncomfortably aware of her heart pounding in her chest, and her tongue dried in her mouth, like a child caught out in a lie. This was unexpected; no one had thought that the current resident of the Kudo mansion was actually an acquaintance of Mouri Ran. Had she mentioned them to him, or him to her? Considering how the two cover stories they had told had some pretty glaring differences, namely which school they attended, she sure hoped not. Even if they hadn't yet, it was bound to come out eventually.
This was exactly why Aoko hated lying.

Thirty minutes later found them all packed tightly into the red car, on their way out of Tokyo. It was a rather tight squeeze, but rather than uncomfortable, it was nice in its own way. Conversation came easily, but eventually turned in the direction of Ran's family.

"I'm surprised Conan-kun isn't tagging along." Sera said, turning to the karate captain, sounded almost put out. There was something odd about how she said the name Conan, but Aoko chalked it up to her returnee status and being from America; it was an English name, so Sera pronounced it much more smoothly than the rest of them. Still, a certain fondness laced her tone.

Conan: the adopted little brother Hakuba mentioned once or twice. He was also apparently the same kid as the KID Killer. Aoko was a little disappointed by his lack of presence so far, since some part of her wanted to meet the first grader that could cause the insufferable thief so much stress. Even her father seemed to pay the kid a little respect, when he wasn't working himself up into a rant.

Ran nodded in response, smiling exasperatedly. "He wanted to, but he's grounded."

Sera blinked, surprise flickering across her expression. "Grounded? For what?"

"Messing around at a crime scene, again." Ran shook her head, and that seemed to only surprise Sera more.

The shorthaired girl tilted her head to the side curiously. "Does he usually get grounded for that?" She asked, but the way she said it made the answer sound like no. Aoko was more concerned with the fact that they made it seem so normal for a child to be at a crime scene in the first place.

Ran looked down, twisting her fingers, a smile perking up the corners of her lips. It was a quiet expression, fond and tired at all once: definitely the look of an older sibling worrying about a younger brother. "No, I mean, he's so well behaved normally… but Amuro-san is worried. He says that it might be dangerous for Conan to grow up thinking that's okay, and that since his parents aren't around, we need to establish ourselves a little better as authority figures." That was right, wasn't it? In that detective agency, it was just Ran, her father, and Conan. For a moment, Aoko wondered what happened to Conan's parents; considering adoption and foster parenting wasn't common in Japan, he'd probably had ended up in the Mouri's custody by less official means than a child guidance center. It could not have been on easy Ran, but maybe it served as a distraction, something to keep her mind off Kudo and his strange behavior.

From the front, Sonoko turned around to shoot Ran a mischievous look. "He's got a point."

"I know, that's why I grounded Conan for the weekend. He's stuck at home with Dad. I think it's the right thing to do; I remember my mom was always really strict with me and Shinichi when we got into trouble when were kids." Her mom, huh? Aoko's own mom had never been like that...

"Well, good riddance, I say. We can finally have some proper girl time!" Sonoko cheered, and for a moment, Aoko caught Okiya's expression in the rearview mirror. He looked amused, but something unfathomable lurked in the edges of his soft, bland smile.

Tooru went up to the Mouri's apartment around eleven in the morning, taking a platter of sandwiches and a piece of lemon pie up with him; his best attempt at a peace offering, in case he was still on Conan's stink list. He knew better now than to go up empty handed after inconveniencing the real Sleeping Detective. Kogoro was in front of the TV watching a drama with a beer can already cracked open in front of him. From that first glance, Tooru already knew that no work was going to
get done today. Calling out a greeting, he brought the sandwiches to the fridge, already packed with enough food to last the single father and his charge the weekend while Ran was away, before looking around for his prey.

Except, as far as he could tell, Conan was nowhere to be found. He wasn't in the living room or in Kogoro's room, which left nowhere for him to hide—or rather, nowhere to lie in wait to ambush Tooru.

"Mouri-sensei, where's Conan?" He asked, after inspecting the room thoroughly and finding his hands empty. There were no signs of Conan at all; there never were. Honestly, that was the real give away when it came to Conan. Most children his age were messy and materialistic, with collections of toys that they left scattered behind them. Normally, apartments with a first grader would have scatterings of action figures or cards, but the Mouri's child never hoarded anything of the like, not even a marble or a puzzle. Most days it seemed like Conan left as little physical evidence behind him as possible.

Kogoro turned dull eyes on him, snorting. "Eh, that brat's at the professor's."

Tooru paused, feeling a rush of annoyance. Seriously? On the outside, he just forced on a look of innocent confusion. "Huh? Ran-san said he's grounded for the weekend." By Tooru's own suggestion, even. Part of his excellent payback plan to get a moment to actually observe the brat.

"If I kept him here all day he'd just rat me out to Ran when she gets back." Ah, he hadn't considered that. Once again, he had underestimated his opponent's ability to twist everyone around his little finger and play them for the fools they were. A seven year old had no right to be so damn slippery.

"Hey, that's no good, Mouri-sensei. Children need to be disciplined." He chided, like he had any idea of how to handle children, which was most definitely not his area of expertise. And even referring to Conan as anything close to a normal kid was already a stretch.

"Tch, that should be his parents' job." The way Kogoro's mouth formed around the word *parents* was a little bitter, a little frustrated. An opening, at last.

"Where are Conan-kun's parents anyway? I've never even heard about them..." He trailed off purposely, keeping his tone pleasantly curious, not too interested but still just questioning enough to pry loose an answer.

"Working abroad in America or something." Kogoro muttered dismissively, turning back to the television program with a frown. Conan's parents, in America? Well his name was English, even if he had a typical Tokyo accent. He was also working with the FBI, possibly even others. Had he been sent to Japan, or raised here? By who? Just where the hell did a kid like that come from? His papers were probably fake, Tooru had looked into them himself, but it was hard to verify the existence of a child before first grade, since there were no school records to investigate; only birth records and possible medical reports. Conan's age was convenient for that, at least.

"Then, why didn't you drive Ran-san to the villa?" He asked. Kogoro was a bit protective in that manner: he usually liked to be the one to escort Ran and the Suzuki girl to wherever they were running off to.

"Eh, that guy had already volunteered, since he's going up in that direction to see relatives anyway." Kogoro replied carelessly. "And if I did, Ran would get mad." True. Avoiding Ran's wrath was often the reasoning behind most of Kogoro's decisions.

"That guy?"
"Okiya." Speak of the devil, as American's liked to say.

"Is that so?" So, Okiya was escorting Ran up to the mountains, which not only allowed him to keep an eye on the strange girls from last Sunday, but just so happened to place him in close proximity with Sera Masumi, Akai’s own little sister. That probably wasn't coincidence either, just more of Conan's endless machinations. Once again, Akai and Conan proved to be a pair that could devastate any well-laid plan.

Well, Conan's lack of presence suggested that he had every intention of making himself scarce; leaving Tooru with no further reason to stick around. And from what he had learned beforehand, a certain superintendent's son was heading down to Osaka.

When playing against Conan, it was always best to move hard and fast, not give him a moment to prepare or outmaneuver him.

Okiya dropped them off in the middle of the forest and handed them their bags with a small smile. They had to make the rest of the way to the villa on foot, but it was a short, if convoluted and winding, hike. The fresh mountain air was brisk in Aoko's lungs, and the forest was dark and green, dappled with sunlight. It was a novel experience since she didn't leave Ekoda for natural scenery very often, and even the slight dripping of her nose made her laugh. The walk was over almost too soon, as the trees thinned to reveal a clearing.

Before her eyes, the Suzuki mountain villa unfurled from clutches of the forest, tall, regal, and utterly foreboding. The building was something out of a TV drama, Aoko couldn't help but think as she first lay eyes on it: a huge, expansive mansion of several floors and sloping rooves, with wide paneled windows and a robust color. It seemed to emerge from the trees around them like a mirage, but before it was an immense crack in the ground, a crevice in the mountain terrain gaping like a hungry beast's opened maw.

"Wow," she said, under her breath, eyes caught on the scene laid out before her, like something out of a fairy tale.

Bridging the gap from the path to the villa's garden was a sturdy wooden bridge, wreathed in flowers and lights. The garden beyond was a bustle of activity, adults milling around among huge potted bushes and tending to rows and rows of colorful roses. The trees beyond the villa were being laden with white ribbon and lights by workers on ladders.

Sera was equally impressed, but expressed her awe much more loudly. "Woah, Sonoko-chan! This place is amazing!"

Sonoko chuckled, a faux-haughty look on her face as she winked at them. "Well of course! Nothing less is expected from the Suzuki after all!" That was true; it seemed so natural for old, wealthy families like the Suzukis to have a couple creepy mansions handy, but that maybe was just long nights spent watching movies and dramas talking.

Sera whistled as she gazed down the crag, "Is this meant to be a mote? A little unnecessary, isn't it?" Unnecessary was one word for it, but Aoko could think of plenty others along the lines of ominous, strange, and just plainly a bad idea. She hoped no children were allowed to play around here.

"Actually, my grandfather built this place here because of the gorge." The heiress explained, shrugging her bare shoulders. "This place is older than it looks, actually. Grandfather built it way back when. He was even more out of it than Uncle, you know?" Aoko wasn't sure about who Uncle was specifically, but if she had to hazard a guess he would be that crazy Suzuki Jirokichi, who was always throwing money around and losing to KID.
Their host gave a slightly uneasy smile as she stared down the depths, continuing, "We renovated recently, but, well, nothing can be done about the gorge." Here, she winced, something uncomfortable and dark flickering across her expression before she smiled more tightly. "We can't fill it up, but don't worry, no one's ever fallen in or anything." She waved a careless hand and gestured them across, not meeting Ran's soft gaze as she passed. Aoko couldn't help but feel like she had missed something in the exchange, but Sera, who seemed admittedly more perceptive than she, was still grinning cheerfully. Akako, though, gave the villa a long, unreadable look, before she pursed her lips together. Her crimson eyes were bright with interest, but Aoko had learnt early in their friendship that that was not necessarily a good thing. Akako had strange tastes.

Aoko moved across the gorge slowly, peering curiously into the chasm below, which was deep and dark, but obviously not bottomless. If the trees weren't blocking most of the sunlight, she probably could have seen the rocky base underneath. Nothing to be afraid of, she assured herself, but for some reason, it fell completely flat.

Once they were across the bridge, the strange mood that had settled around them dispersed as they took in the work of the artists. Up close it was more difficult to see the shapes of the bushes, but the skill of the pruning was clearer. The cuts and trimmings had been done carefully and cleanly, with enough precision to render the desired shape without leaving bare branches poking through the bustles of leaves. Past the sculpted bushes were lines of roses on either side of a path, leading right to a beautiful white gazebo wrapped in intricate vines of ivy. The roses were in full bloom despite the season, spreading out gorgeous red and pink petals and filling the air with a sweet perfume. A beautiful set up for a Western wedding, Aoko thought, even if the location wasn't a church. The atmosphere was happy and inviting, but the wood's edge creeping around them gave the area a feeling of privacy and isolation as well.

Her own parent's had had a traditional Japanese wedding; sometimes Aoko took out the pictures from where they had been sequestered away in the storage closet and traced her eyes over her father, in black, and her mother, in white, both grinning rambunctiously at whoever was holding the camera. The wedding being set up here was entirely different, but she liked to think the preparations for it had been as vibrant as this.

"Oh, Sonoko-san! You're here!" Someone called out to them, and abandoning a tree and a huge set of shears, a woman came rushing in their direction. She was tall and athletic looking, with tan skin and dark hair held high in a ponytail. Though she dressed casually, in messy work clothes marked with paint and dirt, she was obviously at least a decade older than them.

"Yamaguchi-san, hello!" Sonoko called back, meeting the woman half way, who grinned at her appreciatively.

Yamaguchi, on closer inspection, was covered in dirt and leaves, and had hard, callused hands which she clasped in front of her as she bowed. "It's good to see you! Thanks so much for coming to help out, I really appreciate it."

"No, no, it's no problem at all. It'll be fun." Sonoko shook her head, before turning and motioning to them each, "These are my friends, Ran, Sera-san, Aoko-chan, and Koizumi-san." Yamaguchi spared them each a sunny smile and a nod, but Aoko got the feeling that each name had gone in one ear and out the other.

"Welcome!" She greeted them exuberantly. "I'm Yamaguchi Mariko, one of the bridesmaids. I'm in charge of setting up the garden." Her dirt-smudged hand swept around, indicating the rows of flowers and painstakingly sculpted shrubbery, and her eyes were bright with pride.

"Then, were the one who shaped all the bushes?" Ran asked, and Aoko couldn't help but feel a rush
of awe. The garden was gorgeous from all angles, and to find out it was the work of a single person was stunning.

"Yeah! I'm a sculptor and topiarist, so stuff like this is my specialty. All the more, since it's my underclassman's wedding." Yamaguchi's smile only grew wider as she spoke, and Aoko noticed as her eyes lingered on certain trees and bushes; the ones she was most proud of, probably. She must have been at the villa working for days, if not weeks.

"Underclassman?" Sera asked as she peered curiously around. She seemed more interested in the various people milling about and decorating than the decorations themselves. Yamaguchi, thankfully, didn't seem to notice, busy rubbing the dirt stuck under her fingernails on her stained trousers.

"Yamaguchi-san was the sempai of my sister and the bride, Nakano-san, in college." Sonoko explained, and Yamaguchi nodded.

"Though it's kind of weird to be planning my kouhai's wedding before my own! Kids sure grow up fast, huh?" Something nostalgic entered her voice, before quickly settling back into a chirpy, teasing tone. "Before I know it, I'll be setting up your wedding, Sonoko-san!"

Sonoko flushed red, but her grin didn't waver. "Hey now, I've still got years of being a free agent ahead of me!" She answered, turning her nose up proudly, and Aoko thought of the supposed karate master that had been mentioned at some point.

"Uh, don't you have a boyfriend, Sonoko-chan?" She pointed out, and immediately Yamaguchi looked ready to pounce.

"That's irrelevant!" Sonoko tried to dismiss it, but it was too late: the elder woman was on her.

"Oh, a boyfriend? I didn't hear anything about this! What's he like, eh?" She prodded playfully, and Aoko couldn't hold back her laughter as Sonoko flushed further, waving her hands helplessly.

"He—hey now, guys!"

"Yamaguchi-san." A voice cut through their laughter like a knife sliding through butter, sharp and unyielding. Behind Yamaguchi a man emerged, carrying a mess of cords and lights, with a sullen, annoyed expression on his face.

Yamaguchi sobered immediately, wilting like a scolded child. "Oh, hey, Takahashi-kun," She replied, shifting out of the way.

"If you're finished with the topiary, I would like to start on the lights, please." He hefted the bulk in his arms higher, strands of greed cord and globed lights falling free, and the jolly lights contrasted with his glowering, stern face.

Regaining her good humor quickly, Yamaguchi laughed, waving a hand as if it could disperse the bad atmosphere. "Of course, yeah, I'll be out of your way in just a sec!" She turned back to them with an apologetic smile, "How about you kids go inside and put down your stuff? Airi-chan is already in there, she'll be happy to see you've arrived safely!"

"Su—sure thing," Sonoko agreed, voice only slightly stumbling as she motioned them all back towards the mansion and away from the uncomfortably dreary man, who watched them go with dark eyes and a twitching frown.

Sonoko led them inside the villa, which was just as lovely on the inside, with plush furniture and carpets in homely, warm colors. Somewhere beyond the lobby, a woman was laughing cheerily, and
Sonoko relaxed. "That sounds like Nakano-san. Let's go see her before we check out the rooms, okay?"

The woman in question was short and pretty, with long brown hair and twinkling eyes, dressed in a flowing pink dress. Her already jubilant face lit up at the sight of them, and she excitedly tugged on the arm of her companion, a tall man with a chiseled jaw and a friendly smile.

"Sonoko-chan!" The woman cheered, rushing over to clasp Sonoko's hands in her own. "I'm so glad you made it!" In a flurry of swinging skirts, she turned to the rest of them. "Are you Sonoko-chan's friends? Welcome! I'm Nakano Airi."

"Nakano-san's the bride," Sonoko added, and Aoko felt a rush of excitement. The bright, cheerful woman certainly looked like a soon to be bride, with her glossy hair and flushed cheeks.

"Congratulations!" Ran told her earnestly, and Nakano beamed like the happiest woman on the planet, the man by her side matching it with a proud smile of his own. "Then is he..." Ran trailed off as she looked towards him, standing off to the side with his grin, and he perked up at her notice.

"Oh no!" He shook his head, laughing. I'm Oshiro Yori, the best man. The lucky groom is outside putting up the lights."

"Eh, you mean—" Aoko started, surprise loosening her tongue again, at roughly the same time Sera cut in and prevented something stupid from getting out.

"You mean Takahashi-san?" That dreary guy and a charming woman like Nakano? Married? Aoko had seen and heard of mismatched couples, but this one seemed particularly unlikely.

Oshiro laughed again, while Nakano blushed prettily, "Yep! They make an interesting pair, don't they?"

"Y—yeah..." Interesting wasn't quite the word that came to mind, but thankfully, no one disagreed.

"Did Mariko-san come in with you lot, or is she still working?" The man continued, looking around and peering down the hallway back towards the entrance.

Sonoko shook her head. "She said she'd meet us inside, after finishing up."

Oshiro frowned at that, looking almost worried before he regained his cheerful look. "Well, then how about you guys take your stuff upstairs? When you come down, we'll get everyone in for some late lunch, how about it?" At the mention of lunch, Aoko's stomach remembered that he hadn't eaten since breakfast, many hours before. The others were the same, nodding eagerly before gathering their things and turning the head back to the stairs. Even Akako, who had been so far quiet and observing, seemed hurried to get something to eat.

"Sounds great!"

Lunch and the time after passed in a flurry of activity and laughter. Aoko and Akako were asked to unpack piles of plates, napkins, and cutlery from the boxes stacked in the dining hall, and count them to assure none were missing. Meanwhile, Ran and Sonoko put up colorful curtains and wiped down dusty windows, chattering away. Yamaguchi and Nakano hung around them, offering hands when taking breaks from their own duties, and joking like long time friends.

When Akako and she finished up, Aoko moved to help Sonoko lift a curtain rail, as some of the other guests, all friends of the bride, wandered through. They were all a little over college age and
former classmates and colleagues of both women.

"Oh, Marioko-san!" A young man accompanied by an older girl called, and Yamaguchi looked up, curious.

"What's up?"

"How's that brother of yours doing?" The man asked, and something in Yamaguchi's cheerful expression faltered. Aoko was only half listening as she unscrewed one of the rail's ends.

"He's okay, at least, last I heard. The doctor says he's not concussed, so they let him out of the hospital, but he's staying in Tokyo just in case." Yamaguchi answered, sounding worried and a little tired.

"Huh, but…" The man seemed to want to say something, but trailed off, looking confused.

"Hm?" Yamaguchi hummed questioningly, and the man only shook his head.

"It's nothing. I'm glad he's okay." That said, he hurried off, and Yamaguchi was left staring after him, brow furrowed.

Had something happened to Yamaguchi's brother? Aoko didn't ask, since she barely knew the woman, and turned her attention back to Sonoko, who was just finishing up some ramble or another about celebrities. She seemed to realize that Aoko hadn't been listening, but didn't seem to particularly mind. Instead, she turned the conversation in a new direction.

"So, did you guys do anything interesting with that photo?" Sonoko asked with a sly smile, and Aoko paused. She had forgotten the cover story they had told Sonoko; all the falsehoods just kept getting too complicated for her to keep her head on straight.

"Uh, not yet…" She confessed, struggling for an excuse, before just falling back on the truth lest she just end up tangled in more lies. "We sort of need to find him first."

Thankfully, Sonoko just sighed. "Yeah, I know what you mean. That guy's harder to find than the Dragon Balls, these days."

The other girl didn't seem to find anything suspicious in what she said, and Aoko held in a sigh of relief. Not only was she in the clear, but also this was the perfect set-up to get some more investigating done. She refused to fall behind the boys, after all. "When was the last time you saw him, Sonoko-chan?"

"Ehhh…I wonder," Sonoko looked upwards in thought, face scrunching in concentration. "When was the last time I saw real him, huh? Who knows at this point…" She mumbled, mostly to herself, clearly perturbed. Aoko perked up at her strange wording.

"Real?"

Sonoko slumped, frowning, but there was an excited gleam in her eyes too. "You'd never believe it, but KID-sama's worn his face a couple times. And there was that totally weird costume party." A smile was pulling at her lips by the end, like she had heard some great gossip and couldn't wait to share it.

"Costume party?" Aoko prompted, recognizing her cue, and Sonoko began to spin her tale with a grin.
"This fancy Halloween thing I went to with Ran's dad a long while back, on a haunted ship. There, you'll never believe this, an actual murder took place! Ran's dad couldn't solve it, but just as it seemed the bad guy would get away, this guy wrapped in bandages, as the Invisible Man, announced that he had solved the mystery! Both Ran's dad and I immediately recognized that haughty voice and that superior attitude; we both just knew it was Shinichi. He threw off his bandages, and there he was—or at least, we thought so. He looked like him, exactly! I grew up with the guy, so I'm telling you, he looked just like Kudo-kun, and even talked like Kudo-kun, sounded just like him!"

Aoko blinked, "I don't get it…" A person that looked like Kudo, sounded like Kudo, and acted like Kudo would have to be Kudo, wouldn't he? Unless Kaitou KID was involved, because common sense, logic, and the law of physics themselves tended to twist in his obnoxious presence. The guy had no respect for anything, not even good sense.

"It wasn't Kudo-kun!" Sonoko told her excitedly, waving her hands as if she had no idea how to illustrate the scene. "The guy rips off another mask of Kudo's face, and bam! There's Hattori-kun!"

"No way!" Aoko gasped, even as she made a connection. That sounded a lot like what KID usually did, actually. Aoko could still remember the slight horror she felt as her father first described KID's disguise skills to her; that he could make flawless, lively latex masks of anyone, and then rip them off, complete with seemingly tearing flesh. When she was a little younger the idea of the thief being anyone at anytime had been a pretty scary thought, and she would imagine a boogeyman wearing her father's shredded face. It was paranoia fuel of the most uncomfortable kind.

"It's true! I was so surprised, and I still don't get it!"

"Why would Hattori-san do that?" It was one thing for a phantom thief to have such a skill, but for a detective? And what purpose did it serve?

"Who knows? I never got a chance to really ask him about it. He just said something about being lonely or something, the weirdo. But hey, he's so obsessed with Kudo, it isn't entirely unexpected that he'd have some weird hobbies, I guess."

Aoko had no idea what to say to that, but their job was essentially finished. A glance up revealed that the others had completed their respective duties, and as evening descended upon the villa, more people were filtering back inside.

Ran and Akako rejoined them as Sera wandered in, having been assisting with something in the garden, and Nakano took one look at them each and waved them upstairs to clean up before dinner. Aoko was glad, since her clothes were covering dust from the old curtains she had to pull down, but she took the momentary pause in activity to send a long text message to both Kaito and Hakuba about what she had learned.

They headed back upstairs, but the bathrooms on the second floor were already occupied by others with the same idea. Not that it was a problem, considering they were guests of the villa's owners. Sonoko led them up another level with a grin, to the thus far unoccupied third floor.

"No one is staying up here, so the baths should be completely free." Sonoko led them through the halls, which were dark and slightly dusty from disuse. But as they turned a corner, something seemed off.

"What the hell is that smell?" Sonoko hissed, a hand rising to cover her nose. "Something reeks."

"It's awful," Ran muttered, turning pale, and Aoko wholeheartedly agreed. The air stank horribly,
pungent and choking. Aoko, at an event once, had opened the door of portable toilet that had been very badly maintained, and the odor of defecation and urine had been nauseating. This was worse, it smelled similar, but there was an underling sickly sweet scent of rot.

Sera's face had sharpened, eyes hard but wide, as her mouth downturned. Suddenly, she burst forward, down the hall. Ran, lavender eyes gleaming in her pale face, shot after her, calling in a panicked voice. "Sera-san, wait!"

For a moment, Sonoko was more hesitant, and a strange sort of dread was engraved on her grimacing features. She jerkily motioned for Aoko and Akako to stay back before she followed, her movements quick and shaky.

Her stoic friend did not pay the order any mind as she glided after them, but looking more carefully, Aoko could see that even her prim steps were less graceful than usual, and there was a sort of stiffness in her limbs.

Akako… was nervous?

She tried not to, and didn't quite understand even why, but instinctively, Aoko gulped. Tentatively, she took a step forward. Then another. The smell was so awful it made her head spin, and for a moment, she considered just not going. Whatever was causing that smell… she probably didn't want to see it.

A sharp cry cut through the hall, followed by a more lasting, horrified shriek: Ran and Sonoko.

Aoko tried to take a deep breath, choked, and instead gasped shallowly in the rank air. Then, gathering her courage, she ran after her friends.

When she turned the corner, heart pounding in her chest, she found the other girls backing away from an open door in the hall, horror carved into their faces. Sonoko was scrambling backwards to the far wall, eyes so wide Aoko could see white completely surrounding her cornea, and Ran was frozen, hand over her mouth.

Akako was so still she could have been a statue, but Sera was the opposite, moving slowly and deliberately further into the room with a furious expression.

Without meaning to, without heeding the stone in her gut and the nausea building in the back of her throat, Aoko looked within.

There was a man lying on the carpet on his back, in a stain of black that contrasted with the paper-white skin of his hands. His discolored face was caught in a grimace, yellowish, and tinged blue, as if the stench was choking him as well.

But his throat—oh god his throat—

Aoko heard a strangled noise, like a child falling off something high and hitting the ground hard, and distantly realized it came from her lips.

The man's throat was gaping open, flesh torn asunder into a valley inches deep, coated in black, coagulated blood and stripped flesh, pink and meaty and oh god oh god oh god—

Aoko screamed. Her were eyes locked on the gaping wound, the sliced open throat, and then, suddenly, the image was gone, replaced by the hall's wall, but she could still smell that horrifying odor, oh god it was the scent of a corpse someone was dead oh god oh god—
And then, Sera was in front of her, yelling.

"Aoko-kun!"

She snapped her head to her new friend, and realized she was shaking, quivering all over, and her stomach rolled.

Bile built in the back of her throat, and Aoko lurched back into movement, jerking herself from Sera's grip—the other girl must have dragged her away from the doorway—to head back the way they came.

Bathroom, bathroom, bathroom—there!

She threw the door open and grabbed at the toilet seat, just in time to retch.

Between the heaving of her breaths and the pressure of her stomach, the vicious, bursting vomiting, cool fingers peeled back her hair properly and rubbed her back. Akako settled beside her, pale like a woman in a black and white film.

The pressure subsided, but Aoko didn't get up, and just sat there on the cold tiled floor, lungs burning as she struggled to breathe. Akako pet her hair and rubbed her arm and god, Aoko had never in her life been so grateful to have someone there for her.

Her friend's soft, elegant hands, her quiet, calming voice, her long, silky hair: it was all just like her mom's. Hazily, she could remember that her mother had done this once, when she had the stomach flu when she was really little. She had held Aoko gently and kissed her head, and whispered little, meaningless things that had still somehow made her feel better.

God, Aoko wanted her right now. She wanted her mom.

There was a corpse a couple rooms over, and it had been so, so many years, she thought she was okay with it, that she had moved on, but now, now of all times, Aoko wanted her mom.

She sunk into Akako's arms, and cried.

______________________________

Don't look back at a new direction
I loved you once, needed protection

______________________________

Chapter End Notes

Sorry this took so long, guys!

Next Time: The villa is host to a murder and an unexpected guest. Can Sera solve this mystery on her own, and will Osaka even survive Kaito and Hakuba?
Tell me a piece of your history that you're proud to call your own

Speak in words you picked up as you walked through life alone

Chapter 7: What Fills the Silence

[8907]: It's as you thought. One of the guests saw him yesterday.

[4856]: Anything left?

[8907]: Tire tracks. Going up the mountain.

[4856]: What's up the mountain?

[8907]: Checking now.

Before returning to Japan, the idea of a bullet train had been a little out-there. Cool, certainly, but England was still very much a country of old-fashioned engines. He had remembered high-speed transit, of course, but it had seemed so distant with thousands of miles of land and ocean between him and Japan.

He'd even looked forward to riding them again, when he finally decided to return, and hopped on the first one he had an excuse enough to board.

Despite the novelty, it had been a terribly mundane experience.

But that Saguru had never once considered that he might someday ride a bullet train with the Kaitou KID absent-mindedly shuffling a deck of cards across from him.

Honestly, Saguru was a little surprised Kuroba had even bothered to show up on the boarding platform. He had expected Kuroba to escape by faking a cold or conveniently not getting on the train before the doors closed.

And, clearly, Kuroba didn't want to go to Osaka. He'd been grudging all week, ever since they started the investigation. He'd made it clear that he didn't want to pursue this case, but he was still coming along. And everyone knew that Kuroba didn't do anything he didn't want to do, not unless he had to. Kuroba's uncharacteristic presence was more unnerving than it was comforting for that very reason; Kuroba felt he had to come, which suggested only one thing: Saguru was still being
"I'm surprised you're still here." Saguru said, once the train was well on its way and Saguru got sick of ruminating over his own ignorance and failing to find anything suspicious about the other passengers in the cabin.

Kuroba blinked, slow and meaningful, with aggravation settling over his features like a familiar blanket. "Hah?" The disgruntled sound made it perfectly clear that Kuroba would have probably been fine continuing this whole trip in silence.

Well, too bad.

"I expected you to make some excuse and ditch me the moment Aoko-kun was out of sight." It had happened before. Aoko's miraculous ability to occasionally reign in their resident chaotic neutral was not something easily replicated.

Kuroba rolled his eyes, too nonchalantly. Saguru thought he could see tension in the other's shoulders, but between Kuroba's slouched posture and his jacket, it was hard to tell. "Who says I don't still plan to?"

"Not even you will have an easy time getting off a bullet train."

"…You'd be surprised."

God, what did that mean? But now that he thought about it, hadn't one of KID's heists taken place on a train? "I feel like there are multiple stories of dubious legality there."

Kuroba awarded him a vicious grin for that comment. "Please, Hakuba. I might be a bit of a trickster, but I'm still just an average high school student." His voice was laced with mock modesty.

Saguru crossed his arms, giving his best dubious look. "There's nothing average about you."

If anything, Kuroba's grin widened to near impossible proportions. "My, Hakuba-kun, was that a compliment?"

"The opposite actually." If Kuroba were average, he wouldn't be the prime suspect of countless cases of grand larceny.

Wouldn't that be something?

Moreover, if Kuroba were average, the conversation wouldn't have veered so off course of Saguru's original intentions. With just a couple throwaway words, he'd derailed from the topic entirely.

Well, Saguru was a detective, so he did what detective's did best: got to the damn point, forthright. "I'll come right out and say it. My deduction is that you're not hanging around out of any interest in this case or willingness to spend time with me. You're still here because—" He hesitated, trying to find words that would seem mundane if someone else were listening in, "because of our chaperone."

For a moment, there was quiet. Saguru waited for the other to speak, but instead Kuroba gave him a heavy-lidded look, before turning his gaze back out the window lazily. "Am I right?" Saguru prompted, unsure of how to interpret that unfathomable gaze.

"You're the detective, aren't you? Have a little confidence in your truth." Kuroba drawled dispassionately, before a mean smile twisted on the corners of his lips. "But you're wrong."
Saguru ignored the clear jibe, confident that he was at least on the right track. "…About which part?"

"Figure it out, Sherlock."

Saguru doubted he was wrong about his last point. And while flattering as the thought of Kuroba being willing to pursue their bizarre friendship might be, it wasn't just improbable: it was downright whimsical. Kuroba was too calculating a person to waste a weekend trying to make nice with Saguru.

But in terms of interest in the case…

Saguru was wrong to imply that Kuroba was disinterested, when he was just as involved as any of them, though on the other end of the spectrum. Rather, Kuroba seemed inclined to see the case go unsolved.

The recurring question was why.

Pity answers were hard to come by these days.

Saguru considered it. Kuroba Kaito and Kudo Shinichi: they bore a strange resemblance to each other, in both face and fate.

"Did you ever meet him? Kudo Shinichi?" Saguru asked the question not truly expecting an honest reply; everything Kuroba said and did was carefully constructed to mislead. He just wanted it out there, and out of his head.

Kuroba gave him a dubious look. "Hmm? Why would I have? The guy's, like, a celebrity." That, as predicted, was not a straight answer in the least.

"I saw the way you looked, that night of the KID heist. You looked really angry."

"I just didn't like the way those bastards were talking about killing people." Fair enough. Kuroba was a lot of things, but he had his own ideas about justice. "I've never met him."

"Do you want to? Meet him?" Saguru tried to imagine it. Surely a clash between Kudo and Kuroba, at a heist or not, had to be nothing less than spectacular. "I'd like to." The simple statement came out more earnestly than he intended it to. Saguru had always admired Kudo's work, from afar, and respected the young man's reputation and prestige as well earned. But before coming upon this case, he had never considered actually seeking the other out. Somehow, even after his return to Japan, Kudo Shinichi had seemed like a distant, illusive concept. But the way circumstances had turned, he couldn't deny the simple, curious desire.

What was Kudo like, in person? Did he feel pressured and unsure around his peers, and then fall into pretentious speech patterns that alienated the very people he was trying to impress, like Saguru did? Or was he more like Kuroba, who always got caught up in his own quick thoughts that he was already finished with each conversation before anyone else had a chance to participate?

Or was he another beast entirely? And was it already too late to find out?

Across from him, Kuroba exhaled a soft breath. The sigh was somehow ambiguous, but maybe there was something wistful in the way his brow furrowed. "…Yeah. I think I would."

Out of everything else Kuroba had said, those words struck Saguru as the most honest.

"Then let's hope he's still alive."
For a moment, there was quiet. Saguru tried to close his eyes, or look away, but as always he was hyper vigilant of his companion. Trying to find something, anything that hinted at Kuroba's true nature.

Nothing. Kuroba had long abandoned his shuffling, and instead was messing around with some sort of handheld 3D puzzle. He attacked the puzzle with little grace, applying pressure to each piece before one of them yielded and clicked out of place. It fell apart in his hands.

Kuroba looked back to him, already fitting the unwieldy piece back together without so much as a glance down. "Think this Hattori guy might really know something?"

Good question. "Hard to say." It was Hattori after all.

"Eh? Come on, you've met him, haven't you?" Kuroba scowled. "You're both detectives; I thought you'd have more faith in him."

"Don't compare me with him." It was aggravating to be equated to the likes of Hattori, when Saguru was clearly the superior detective, at least in temperament. Well, maybe that wasn't fair, Hattori had proved himself as...something at the Detective Koshien. "Hattori and I are very different kinds of detectives. He's—" Saguru broke off, flushing when he noticed Kuroba's mocking grin. His companion seemed delighted by his defensiveness. Arsehole. "Anyway, our methods are incomparable. I have no idea what sort of conclusions he could have possibly come to, or what he might be hiding."

Kuroba burst out a laugh. "Well, this is new! It's a strange day that Hakuba Saguru admits to not understanding somebody."

Saguru could feel his cheeks burning. "I didn't say that."

"You totally did."

"Shut up, Kuroba."

[8907]: We have a problem.

[4856]: What is it?

The girl, Toyama, had sent him a time and a place to meet at: a soba restaurant, and the promise of a good meal and the best damn tour of Osaka they'd ever take. Saguru didn't recall asking for either, but at this point felt like it would be rude to argue with someone who was already doing him a favor.

They found the restaurant easily, close to the station as it was, and as they settled into a booth to wait for their guide, Saguru took another moment to observe his companion. Kuroba seemed more uneasy than before, but unpackaging that took some serious consideration. After all, that Kuroba was showing his emotions more easily might mean that he was in fact feeling more at ease, and therefore was less careful with controlling his body language. Or it could mean their situation was really, really bad and Saguru should maybe be calling the cops.

A toss up, really. Thankfully, their guide came in before he could think too hard about it.

Toyama turned out to be a bubbly, outgoing young lady who took to the role of tour guide with gusto. She carried herself with a sort of eager, but tentative confidence only teenage girls could manage, simultaneously endearing and overbearing.
Saguru took to her immediately. He had always been better at first meetings than at seconds.

Kuroba didn't seem to care in the least. His sometimes friend, sometimes adversary was trying to act relaxed, but there was no mistaking the tight coiling of his muscles, the slightly rigid posture, and the way he didn't just dive right into the conversation: the message was clear, and it was no doubt a message. They still weren't safe.

Kuroba's unusual tension put Saguru on edge as well, but he forced his nerves down and made pleasant small chat with Toyama until their food arrived.

As they ate, though, Saguru took the chance to properly question their guide. "Toyama-chan, have you ever met Kudo Shinichi?"

Toyama made a face as she took a mouthful of noodles. "Ran-chan's boyfriend? Yeah. Just a couple of times, though," Aggravation made her brow crease. "You wouldn't think so, considerin' how often he comes up in conversation."

"What do you mean?"

The girl sighed. "Heiji goes on and on about Kudo constantly. I totally thought Kudo was girl Heiji was in love wit' at first. He's always on the phone with 'im too." Saguru blinked. He had assumed the two were close; Hattori had given the impression before, but not that close. He hadn't considered the possibility of a romantic entanglement.

That would make things rather complicated. Instead of ruminating over jealousy-prompted suspicions of the blurred line between friendship and romance, he focused on what wasn't conjecture. "They speak often?"

"All the time!" Toyama tossed her ponytail like a disgruntled horse, the red ribbon in her hair gleaming in the light. "The only person that probably calls Kudo more is Ran-chan."

Kudo took a lot of phone calls for a supposed dead man, or even one in hiding. "You said you met him? When? He's…" He trailed off, not wanting to say anything she didn't know, or he shouldn't know.

Thankfully, Toyama nodded sagely, filling in the blanks. "A hard guy to find, right? Trust me, I've heard it all from Ran-chan. And it's totally true! One moment he's there, and next thing ya know he's gone and you don't see 'im again for months." That was indeed the impression Saguru was getting. "I'd say Ran-chan is too good for a guy like that, but well, Kudo is a good guy when he's around."

Kuroba spluttered into his soba, swallowing down a mouthful too quickly. "He is?"

"Surprised?" Toyama muttered ruefully. Kuroba was a little too surprised by the assertion, frankly. Toyama breathed in through her nose and back out, her green eyes heavy lidded. "He once saved my life, ya know. There was this mess a while back with a case. Someone was tryin' to kill Heiji. I figured somethin' out, but ended up getting kidnapped." The admission didn't seem to bother Toyama very much. She spoke of the incident very casually. "They tried to use me as bait to get Heiji, but Kudo showed up instead."

"Kudo saved you?" Saguru repeated, trying to imagine it. Somehow, with everything going on, he'd forgotten that there were countless witness reports of Kudo's heroics and chivalry. Saving a girl he barely knew—that really something an imposter would do?

Toyama nodded. A slight smile was pulling at the edges of her lips, like she found the story funny but knew she really shouldn't have. "He distracted the bad guys by dressin' up as Heiji." Interesting.
So Kudo had some level of experience with disguise. "Once Heiji got there, he told Kudo to scram. I think 'cause Kudo wasn't doing too well. He was sick again." The sickness Ran had noticed as well. So, it was prevalent even in Toyama's encounters with the evasive Kudo, despite the time in between the sightings.

"Again?" Kuroba said, looking dubious.

"Kudo is always sick. He needs to eat more green onion or somthin'." That probably wasn't the problem.

Deliberating over the tale, Saguru hummed. "That's quite the story."

"Hmph!" Toyama made a disbelieving sound. "Ya think that was weird? A haven't even heard about the case with the *shiragami*."

"What's that?" Kuroba asked. Saguru hadn't heard such a thing either.

"The other time I met Kudo. We were lookin' into one of Kudo's old cases, one we were told he got wrong."

"Kudo was wrong?" Again, Kuroba choked. He should really have been eating slower.

"You don't need ta sound so shocked! But, no, he was right in the end, I guess-" Toyama broke off, brow twisting in consternation. Saguru knew that face. He saw it on police men all the time. "I don't know, it was complicated."

"What happened?" Saguru prompted, honing in on every word Toyama said, and all the things she wasn't saying.

"There was this crazy guy with a grudge against Kudo. Locked himself up in a cabin and haunted the local forests as this *shiragami* character. He got plastic surgery to look just like Kudo, then tried to frame Kudo for murder."

"...What?" What was this, an episode of *Scooby Doo*?

"Seriously! That happened!" Toyama puffed out a frustrated breath, apparently aghast with the surrealistic twist of her own life. "He pretended to be Kudo, but without any memories and a raspy voice. It was freaky." Freaky was one word for it.

But this? This was riveting. An actual impersonator with Kudo's face. If it could be done once then it could be done twice. Saguru needed to know more—no, he needed to know everything. "Who was with you when this happened?"

"Uhh, Heiji, and Ran-chan and her family. Kudo himself showed up eventually, to catch the criminal." Kudo showed up to catch a fake Kudo. Was there a better way of establishing one's own validity of identity than proving oneself against an imitator?

"What was Ran's reaction to the fake Kudo?" It was strange to say fake Kudo in reference to someone besides Kudo. Every time he thought this case couldn't get any more bizarre...

"She was really confused. We all were. We had no idea what happened to Kudo, or where he had been, so we had no clue what was going on. Ran, though, I think she sort of knew it wasn't 'im."

"How did she know? Did he do something Kudo wouldn't do?"
"Ahh, how to explain it? It wasn't a logic thing. It was more like, when you've haven't seen someone in a long time, ya start to see them everywhere. But then you really do see them again and you just know it's them, ya know?"

No. Saguru really had no idea.

He caught Kuroba's eye. Kuroba shrugged and did some strange movements with his nose and eyebrows. Essentially indecipherable, but Saguru got the memo: this girl was crazy.

No, what Toyama was describing wasn't anything deluded or unnatural; it was simply her interpretation. Toyama was having trouble putting the real phenomenon into words.

Most people in the world were not trained detectives with the skill of observation honed to mastery. But in truth, everyone observed others. Mouri Ran had been inseparable from Kudo Shinichi for the majority of both their lives: she probably knew him, from his habits to his tells to his micro expressions, better than anyone else in the world. Even if she didn't consciously realize how much she knew and observed about Kudo, it was not impossible that her subconscious recognized and didn't recognize things she consciously overlooked.

But that led to an interesting question: did that mean the elusive Kudo had to be real, or was he just that much of a better mimic?

There were too many unknowns to come even close to a satisfactory conclusion. It was practically giving him a headache.

Saguru focused on something simple, straight-forward, and unworrying: his noodles. The rest of the story could wait.

[8907]: Shit.

MESSAGE FAILED TO SEND.

[8907]: Typical.

MESSAGE FAILED TO SEND.

It felt the world was shaking under her feet. Which was weird, because she'd seen more than her fair share of bodies before this one. But this one, this one really stepped up the whole horror factor. It was bloody, it was old, and it was rotting.

Masumi pushed her revulsion down, ignored the turning of her stomach, and took a step into the dark room. It was simple lounge, dusty and out of use. The furniture was old and covered in sheets, the windows locked shut and shuttered, and the lightbulbs burned out: probably next on the list for renovations.

The victim was a man in his late twenties, maybe thirties. He was stocky with a large, steady build, and a close-cropped hair cut. Former military? Maybe. His hands bore the callouses for it, and he had the muscle mass.

No sign of the murder weapon, but plenty of blood splatter. It had been a messy death.

That was as far as she got before she heard the pounding of too many foot-steps. The other guests had arrived.
"Is everybody alright?" Someone shouted-Mariko, Masumi remembered. The artist.

"We heard screaming." The whole group of older guests gathered around the open door, some gasping for breath. Ran, pale, guided Sonoko out of the way. Akako and Aoko were still in the bathroom, most likely.

"What is that smell?" Someone asked, and then, one by one, they looked. Masumi watched the reaction of each guest carefully, eyes scanning over the group. Most went pale, gasping in horror, others kept their color but were wide-eyed, gripping each other with tight fingers. Nothing unusual, nothing suspicious.

Mariko, though, went completely white, her mouth twisting open in a pained wail. "Arata!" she screamed, rushing forward, but one of the men, Takahashi, caught her by the arm, pulling her back.

"Don't!"

"Let me go! Arata! Arata!"

"Call the police!" Masumi's harsh voice broke through the chaos and stilled everyone. Most stared at her blankly, unmoving, but two scrambled for their phones. While they did that, Masumi turned to Mariko. "Did you know the victim?"

Mariko was shaking, eyes blown wide and locked on the body, nearing hysteria."Th-that's my brother. Oh god, Arata."

The topiarist's brother. Masumi could vaguely remember him being mentioned earlier. "Okay, I need everyone to step out of the room. This is a crime scene, we can't mess with it. The police?"

She looked to the two who had taken out their phones: Takahashi and Oshiro. Takahashi met her eyes. He was three shades too pale, and his hands were shaking around his phone. "No signal."

Masumi glared. "Find some!" At her barked command, the two turned on the heels and dashed back down the hallway. Watching them with a bad feeling, Masumi turned back to the others. "Alright, everybody downstairs, now. Stay together. Nobody leaves, got it?" She made pointed eye contact with Ran, who gave her a shaky nod. Ran was in this situation often enough to know the drill, so Masumi could count on her to keep things together.

Ran herded everyone back down the hall, though Mariko had to be all but physically lifted and carried. Letting them go, Masumi turned back to the grisly scene before her. Good thing she carried a pair of latex gloves in her pocket.

Pulling them on, and using the flashlight on her phone to get a better look at things, she began the initial inspection. The victim was lying on his back, arms by his sides. The corpse was already discolored, so it was hard to judge whether the blue spotted on his arms was truly bruising. Had there been a struggle? The victim's clothes, a simple T-shirt and jeans, were rumpled, but there were no obvious rips or tears, just the harsh stain of dried blood. He'd started to bloat, and when she touched his arm, she found that while it was stiff, it seemed to be in the process of loosening.

The wound itself was nasty and jagged, not a clean cut. It hadn't been a sharp, well-crafted knife, and the movement must have been jerky. That suggested the victim had been struggling after all, but Masumi couldn't find an evidence of restraints.

But the more she looked at the blue marking the victim's wrists, the more she thought it looked like the imprint of fingers.
Initial investigation of the carpet turned up nothing but blood, dust, and some gravely dirt that matched the grime lining the victim's shoes.

He had no wallet on him, or ID. In fact, his pockets were completely empty.

"Sera-san!" She heard Ran's voice calling from down the hall, sounding nervous. Immediately, Masumi was back on her feet and out the door. Ran was running her way, followed by a handful of the adults, including a wet-eyed Mariko. Aoko and Akako had rejoined the group as well, but Aoko still looked like she was going to be sick any moment.

"What is it?" Don't tell her, another murder...

"There's no cell signal anywhere. Data's out too. We can't reach anybody." Ran said, lifting up her phone to show the damning no signal sign sitting in the corner of her screen.

The villa didn't have Internet either. There was no way to contact the police.

This was bad. And worse, this was planned: it had to be.

Silence reigned for a moment as everyone took in those implications. Then, one of the men, Oshiro, glanced at Masumi's hands. "Gloves?"

"For investigating the crime scene."

Oshiro stared at her. "What?"

Ran cut in, used to that kind of reaction and always quick to explain. "Ah, Sera-san here is a detective. She's handled many cases before this one."

Masumi didn't miss how many shoulders around her suddenly rose as everyone went tense. Particularly, Mariko, who had seemed to have withdrawn herself, seemed to come back aware. There was a desperate, rabid edge to her face as she turned to Masumi. "Then, did you figure anything out? Do you know who killed Arata?"

If only it were so easy. Masumi shook her head, carefully keeping her voice low and calming so as not to incense the woman. "I was just checking out the corpse. There's very little by way of evidence that I can find just from sight." Masumi turned back to lounge, eyes immediately drawn to the vicious slice taken out of the victim's throat. The police were out of reach and she was the only experienced sleuth in the building: this case fell to her and her alone.

It wasn't often that Masumi had to take on murder cases by herself. She tended to handle small investigations, like background checks and discomfitting rumors. When she came across a murder scene, it was usually an accident, and the police were almost always quick to arrive, if they weren't on the scene already. There was a certain surety that came with working alongside the police; security was maybe the better word for it. Her brother or mother was usually just a text away, and often she had Conan by her side as well.

Now she was here, without any support. She was on her own.

It was about time she proved her mettle as a detective, she supposed.

Taking a quiet breath and ignoring how the air tasted sour in her mouth, Masumi stepped back into the room, fully aware of the eyes locked on her back.

"But going on the progression of rigor mortis, I'd estimate that he's been dead at least two days.
Probably three." Masumi said, carefully releasing the victim's arm. The pale flesh still slapped on the floor like raw meat, and part of her winced. No amount of corpses could have prepared her for something like this.

"What?" Mariko exclaimed, turning to look at her with a furious face. "If you don't know what you're talking about, get the hell away from him!"

Masumi pulled back, away from the red-faced woman, hands instinctually rising in a placating motion. "Hey, now-"

"This isn't some kind of joke, my brother's dead!" Mariko's face was contorted in a vicious snarl, her eyes bright and red with tears. The words hit harder than the anger, though: Masumi could remember clearly the horrible, crushing grief that had hit her in the wake of the news about Shuu's death, and how she'd initially lashed out at everyone and everything. To see that same pain reflected back at her hurt.

Ran cut in, her soft features hardened with a maturity that surpassed her age, but her voice was gentle and comforting. "Mariko-san, I promise you that Sera-san is a capable detective. She knows what she's doing."

"Like hell! Three days? That's impossible!" Mariko wasn't eased, though. If anything, she was just getting angrier. "My brother was still in the hospital Thursday night!"

"Is that true?"

Masumi didn't need confirmation, she remembered now. Yamaguchi Arata was supposed to be hospitalized in Tokyo. So why was he here, hours of travel away, dead?

One of the men bit his lip, looking contemplative. When Masumi caught his eye, he folded. "Uh, actually, I...I saw him just yesterday."

Mariko turned on him next, her shoulders shaking. "You saw him yesterday? But you were here yesterday, Oshiro-san!"

"Yeah, I saw him hanging out by the trees. I thought it was weird, but I figured he was just coming to see you, Mariko-san."

Nagano stepped in. Her expression was open and quietly concerned. "You must have been mistaken, there's no way—"

"No, he's right." One of the other guests cut in, someone Masumi didn't know the name of. She did recall him talking with Mariko earlier, when they were all going about their duties. "I saw him yesterday too."

Masumi took another glance at the body, hyperaware of her fingers and how his body had felt underneath the thin plastic of her gloves. His body had been slackening, his joints relaxing. The stench itself was so pervasive, too. "But rigor mortis has already progressed so far. If he'd been killed sometime in the last twenty-four hours, his body would be stiff for a long time, over a day at least. He wouldn't start going limp again like this until the second or third day."

They all looked at each other, and the body, uneasily.

There had to be some explanation. A trick to obscure the time of death? Masumi had heard of tricks to delay the onset of rigor mortis, but speeding it up? How did that work?
Rigor mortis was caused on a cellular level: without ATP production, the myosin in muscle cells couldn't change configuration, making the muscles rigid and stiff. It took hours for the cells to degrade enough to loosen.

Was it something in the environment? Something the victim had consumed?

Masumi didn't have nearly enough information for this.

She had to focus on what she could do right now. "Alright, let's head back downstairs to the others."

Catching Mariko's harsh look, Masumi amended, "all of us."

As they migrated back to the comfort of the living room, Masumi turned her mind to the next problem: how did they lose cellular signal?

Was there any other way to contact the police?

As everyone settled down, all looking somewhere between sick and uneasy, she turned to Sonoko. "What about the landline?"

Sonoko shook her head. "We got rid of that months ago, after..." Sonoko trailed off, giving Ran a loaded look that was obviously understood. Ran winced, but before Masumi could ask, Aoko spoke.

"We had cell reception just an hour or so ago...I sent a text to my friends." Why did the reception suddenly disappear? The weather outside was still fine, if windy and cold. They were deep in the woods though, and nestled on the slope of an isolated mountain, but there must have been a cell tower nearby. Maybe there was one, higher up the mountain.

Masumi wished she had looked for one over the tree line, but it hadn't occurred to her that something like this might become a problem.

Had something happened to it?

Masumi watched uneasy faces shift around the room, everyone starting to look drawn and exhausted. The happy, friendly atmosphere that had permeated the manor earlier had long faded with the dwindling sunlight.

It was going to be one of those nights.

Toyama brought them to meet Hattori after the meal. Surprisingly, they weren't going to his house or anything, and instead took a series of subways and buses to the edge of the city. Saguru watched the downtown pass them by with only half an eye until they crossed the Yodo River and could see the deadlock traffic of the Meishin Expressway shining in the distance. Toyama led them off from there, into broad parking lot off to the side of the highway and into a mall-style building.

"What are we doing here?" Kuroba asked as they entered into a rest stop area, lined with cafeteria style restaurants and travelers lounging around and over tables.

"Heiji should be here, somewhere." Toyama replied, going on her tiptoes to better survey the wide, bustling room, "He's workin' on some case of somethin' or another. Questionin' rest stops all along the highway."

"Why?" Saguru asked, considering. Hattori must have been performing a preliminary investigation, which always required a lot of tedious footwork. Saguru himself had just traveled for hours to reach the other side of the country to investigate a case for which he was not even getting paid.
"He's searchin' for somebody, I think." Weren't they all.

Saguru glanced around the room, noting a modest fountain surrounded by broadleaf shrubs sitting decoratively in the middle of the cafeteria. There were a couple simple gift shops along with the fast food stands, as well as a handful of vending machines. Various people were scattered throughout the area, but Hattori was easy to spot among them.

His fellow teen detective had not changed much since their last meeting: average height, dark-skinned with striking eyes and thick brows, partially concealed underneath a green baseball cap. He was speaking with one of the restaurant workers, some kind of paper held in his hands.

"Seems we've found him." Saguru muttered, catching Toyama's attention and directing to her where her friend stood, showing the paper to the worker with a frown. She brightened at the sight of him.

"Oi, Heiji!" Toyama called and took off towards her friend, waving wildly as Saguru hurried behind. Hattori glanced up, then dismissed the worker with a couple quick words. Saguru noted the way he tucked the paper into his pocket as he turned towards them.

"Yo, Kazuha." Hattori greeted, carelessly, as Toyama sidled up to his side. They moved naturally in each other's space, like puzzle pieces clicking in place. "Hakuba." The greeting was cold, accompanied by Hattori scrunching up his nose in distaste. The feeling was mutual.

"Hattori-kun," Saguru said with a layer of polite amiability that he didn't quite feel, "It's good to see you again. I'm sorry to interrupt one of your investigations like this."

Hattori, to his credit, didn't buy the charm, but didn't outright deny it either. He shrugged, shoulders lifting and dropping just a tad too stiffly. "Nah, it's cool. Wasn't really getting anywhere anyway." He glanced around Saguru and balked, eyes going wide with surprise. "Ku-Kudo?" He stuttered, shocked, at Kuroba, who was lethargically catching up to them.

"No!" Toyama hissed.

At the same time, Saguru shook his head. "This is my classmate, Kuroba Kaito." The surprise was unexpected. Hattori supposedly interacted with Kudo quite a bit, so why was he so taken aback by the sight of him? It didn't make sense, unless Hattori really did know something the rest of them didn't.

"Yo!" Kuroba greeted, grinning mischievously. The mix-up seemed to have alleviated his bad mood momentarily. Unsurprising, Saguru mused, since baffling people always managed to cheer him up immensely.

Hattori stared for a moment, obviously still reeling, before he got a hold of himself and cleared his throat. "Nice to meet you." He muttered, before refocusing on Saguru. "The Mouri girl said ya wanted to speak wit' me?"

"Yes, if that's all right." Saguru tried his best to give a friendly smile before giving Kuroba a look and motioning to Toyama with his eyes.

Going by the twitch in Kuroba's brow, he understood. Theatrically, he groaned and turned to Toyama, who gave him a sympathetic look. "Ugh, straight to detective business already? These guys are no fun. Wanna go check out the shops, Toyama-chan? I want a couple souvenirs." Toyama seemed relieved by the off, and she happily led Kuroba off towards the shops. Hattori watched them, suspicion and wariness clear upon his face.

Saguru doubted Hattori had missed their brief exchange; there was no mistaking the confrontational
Slope to Hattori's shoulders as he led Saguru to one of the tables. "So, what do ya want?" His tone was too tight to be careless, Saguru noted, layered with faux ease. Hattori was not a careful individual, nor was he a duplicitous one. In fact, Hattori was one of the bluntest and direct people Saguru had ever met in Japan. That Hattori was trying to hide his wariness spoke volumes.

"To question you, actually." Saguru had his own ways of being direct.

"About what?"

"About Kudo Shinichi." There was no mistaking the way Hattori stiffened, his whole body going rigid. His abrasiveness was a lot easier to take at its face value, completely unlike Kuroba's. Carefully, he controlled his facial expression, showing nothing but the slightest tightening around the lips and eyes.

Saguru maintained his neutral, confident smile, enjoying an easy mark after long hours with Kuroba.

Hattori seemed to realize he'd already given himself away, though, and gave up on hiding his defensiveness. He met Saguru's eyes with blatant hostility. "And what exactly does someone like you want with Kudo?"

"Simply his side of a story." Saguru had spent days planning what to say to Hattori, going through the questions he wanted to ask and the observations he wanted to make. In the end, though, he found there was no way of predicting how this conversation would go. "There was an assault a year ago, at Tropical Land." He watched Hattori's face closely. Just for a moment, he caught a flash of recognition, before it disappeared back under the mask of cool hostility. Hattori was not a very good liar.

Hattori shrugged, feigning indifference. The act was almost laughable in comparison to the usual façade's Saguru had to see through. "What's a simple cold assault case got to do with Kudo? Or you?"

"Isn't that the million dollar question?" The American turn of phrase, and the smug way Saguru said it, only seemed to incite Hattori further.

"Well, I can't help ya. I dunno where Kudo is, and I'm sure the Mouri girl gave ya his number." Saguru felt his smile fade, wishing he could replay the way Hattori said that statement, the way his eyes shifted, over and over again and properly analyze it. Was it a lie?

Hard to say. And yet, Saguru couldn't help but think it was.

"He's not answering." Kudo had been stubbornly dodging Saguru's calls. Because of course nothing in Saguru's life could be that simple. "How you and Kudo know each other?" He wanted to ask the question less delicately, wanted to glare into Hattori's eyes and demand to know what the hell was going on.

Thankfully, Saguru had all the practice in the world at being polite.

Hattori frowned at him. "Why does that matter?"

Then again, sometimes playing nice got nowhere. Saguru took a breath, and let the amiability fade. He stared Hattori right in the eye, just to make sure the other detective knew just how serious he was. "It matters because it seems you're one of very few people to come in contact with Kudo Shinichi over the past year. His classmates? His friends? His neighbors? None of them can attest to seeing Kudo more than once since he vanished a year ago." And no one cared. Everyone that should care was being kept carefully complacent with bizarre phone calls and suspicious encounters. "And then
there is you, who, by the sound of things, has met with him often." Everyone else, everyone, had noted that Kudo was hard to find recently. Everyone except Hattori, how just shrugged and said he didn't know. "Is that not suspicious?"

Hattori glared at him, outright, but gave nothing else away. "It's not any of your business." A strange, antagonistic staring contest began between them. Hattori broke away first, relaxing back into his chair. "Look, I dunno what you wanna hear. What Kudo does is up to 'im. I ain't his keeper."

If he weren't talking to another detective, Saguru might have believed that. But he was, so it was complete bull. If something like Kudo's disappearance happened to one of his classmates, Saguru wouldn't rest until he'd figured out the truth. "Toyama-chan told us a funny story, about the shiragami case. About how you, finding your friend in a criminally-implicating situation, decided to hide him from the police." Toyama hadn't said much about it, shrugging Hattori's blatant avoidance of the law off, but Saguru couldn't shake the image of Hattori hiding a bloodstained Kudo Shinichi in a car trunk out of his mind.

Hattori's eyes cut to where Kuroba and Toyama were touring between shops across the cafeteria, obviously frustrated. Saguru felt a little bad, then, for throwing his helpful guide under the bus. Hopefully, Hattori would just blame Saguru for being needling and not Toyama for being gossipy.

After moment of stilted silence, Hattori looked back at him. There was a storm in his turquoise eyes. "What are you implying?"

Saguru took another breath. "Are you protecting Kudo Shinichi? Hiding him?" It was a new theory, not something they had considered before Toyama had spilled everything over lunch. But it was a distinct possibility.

For a long, quiet moment, neither of them did anything, the words settling between them like a tray set on the table. Hattori's posture was still stiff and angry, but he'd been like that all along. His expression seemed crafted from cold, harsh steel.

Finally, Hattori spoke, voice surprisingly even and soft. "I wonder what a guy like ya woulda done in my situation back then. Guessin' you'd leave your buddy," Hattori motioned to Kuroba with a jerk of his head, "to get caught and crucified with no hope of provin' his innocence." Saguru flinched, catching himself too late. Hattori's eyes were copper sharp, ascertaining that Saguru's brief show of weakness was on full display. "But me? I look out for my friends. All of them. Maybe you don't know what that is like." Saguru bristled, indignation making his blood rush and his face flush. He clenched his fists on the table. "So yeah, I am protectin' Kudo, which is exactly why I'm not gonna tell shit ta a guy like you."

He swallowed his outrage, reaching for that calm that usually came so easily to him, even in times of great pressure and stress. "Uncovering the truth is a detective's job."

Hattori's mouth twisted, caught somewhere between a snarl and a smile. "No, it ain't. Not at the cost of people's lives." He stood abruptly. Saguru, still struggling with that final word, followed his gaze to where Toyama and Kuroba were making their way back to them, chatting cheerfully. "Yo, Kazuha!" He yelled, meeting them half way. "We're leavin'!"

Toyama gaped. "Eh? Hold on, Heiji. I promised I'd show them around—"

"Doesn't matter!"

"Don't be so rude!" The two of them paused to argue, and Kuroba sidled up to Saguru's side, one eyebrow cocked questioningly.
"That seemed intense." He said, voice neutral.

Saguru swallowed. His throat was suddenly very dry. "Yes. Yes, it was."

"You alright?"

"Completely. Let's stop them before Hattori storms off. I still have a lot of things to ask him."

"You just can't let things lie, huh." Kuroba didn't sound entirely exasperated. Suddenly, though, he went very stiff, eyes wide.

"Kuroba?" Saguru felt a cool rush of dread, his skin crawling. He didn't like that expression one bit. He followed Kuroba's eyes to Hattori and Kazuha, and then beyond. In the mess of people in the cafeteria, a man in a motorcycle helmet stood a distance away, his visor a sheet of black.

Everything he wore was black.

"Get down!" Kuroba yelled, dashing forward as the man's arm rose.

He was holding a gun.

Kuroba crashed into the arguing pair as they turned to look at him, surprised, and dragged them to the ground just as the deafening crack of a gunshot echoed in the room.

Saguru hit the floor hard, not sure when or how. Already, Kuroba was stooping back up, hurling something in the shooter's direction, even as several more shots tore through the air. People were screaming and yelling all around them; Saguru couldn't keep track of it all.

Smoke erupted everywhere, filling the air with clouds of white. There was a cacophony of noise, chairs scraping and people running and yelling. In the chaos, a hand seized Saguru's arm and dragged him under a table. He tried to yell, but choked on the smoke and forced himself to quiet as he recognized Kuroba's face in the haze.

"Everybody okay?" Kuroba asked, and that's when Saguru realized Hattori and Toyama were there too. Toyama's face had gone very pale, and Hattori's expression had shifted into a grave fury that made his previous glares look friendly.

"Yeah. Thanks." Hattori said. He was peering into the smoke, searching vainly for a figure in black to come bursting through the murky white.

If that had been one of Kid's usual smoke bombs, they only had roughly thirty seconds of cover left.

"We have to get out of here." Saguru said.

"We have to stop that guy before someone gets hurt." Hattori hissed back. Saguru might have agreed if the man had been wielding a pistol, but that had been an assault rifle in the man's hands.

"It's probably too late for that. We might have ducked the shots, but I doubt anybody else did." Kuroba said, reasonably. Unflappable as ever.

"What do we do?" Toyama asked him. Her hands were clenched, her body tensed for something. She was martial artist as well, wasn't she? The kind of person who usually leaned towards fight over flight, like Hattori did.

Kuroba took a breath in through the nose, looking each of them in the eye seriously. "We get out of here. That guy was aiming for us."
Saguru felt his blood freeze.

"What?" Toyama gasped, even as Hattori reached out to grip her shoulder. He turned his eyes to Kuroba, severe.

"What makes you so sure?"

Kuroba shook his head. "There's no time for this. We have to make a break for the exit."

The smoke was already thinning. Saguru struggled to orient them, trying to figure out which way the exit was. Kuroba pointed them in the right direction, indigo eyes sharp and dark. "On the count of three, all four of us run, got it? Don't stop for anything."

They all nodded.

"3. 2. 1. Go!" As one, they burst into motion, dashing into the fading smoke. Saguru turned all his attention forward, refusing to think of where the shooter might be and instead focusing on dodging around tables and fallen chairs. He didn't think about all the people he passed either, terrified and confused. The best thing they could do for the bystanders was to get out.

And they almost did. They could see the door, glass shining in the afternoon sunlight.

And then they saw the figure guarding the door, a black stain against the hazy white and soft gold.

Saguru stumbled to a stop just two meters away, barely catching himself; they all did, freezing like deer as the shooter—the second, maybe, he was identical to the first—hoisted up his weapon.

Everything went so fast, and yet so slowly. Saguru could swear he could see the guard's finger tightening on the trigger as it leveled at the four of them. He should duck, dodge, something—

Then a fist struck the guard's side, hard and fast. Another hand seized him by the shoulder, just as the fist came again and snapped forward, right into the ball of his shoulder. They all flinched at the crack of the guard's shoulder dislocating, but the assailant didn't stop there, knocking the rifle out of the guards other hand and unleashing a quick barrage of jabs into his gut.

The shooter was knocked back into the door, screaming in pain. He forced open the door and scrambled away, around the corner, nursing his shoulder.

"Holy shit." Someone—Hattori said. Saguru felt his legs give out underneath him, sliding to the floor as he struggled to catch up with what just happened. Kuroba was by his side in an instant, catching him by the arm. Hattori had thrown himself in front of Toyama at some point, and they were curled together on the floor, shaking.

But they were alive.

"You kids alright?" an unfamiliar voice asked, and suddenly Saguru remembered their savior, who had so expertly disarmed and incapacitated the man about to kill them.

"Yes, thank you-" Saguru froze, staring up. The waiter from Poirot looked back, dark skin catching in unmistakable contrast with his platinum blond hair.

"Oh no." Kuroba whispered, and the hand around Saguru's bicep tightened, almost painfully. Kuroba was absolutely rigid, like a spring coiled to the point of near breaking under its own tension.

"Yeah." Saguru forced himself to say, "We're okay."
And they were going to stay that way.

_Tell me a piece of your history that you've never said out loud,_

_It is not enough to be dumbstruck_

Chapter End Notes

done. it feels like i just crawled over a finish line. PUBLIC SERVICE
ANNOUNCEMENT: England does have bullet trains lol. But i doubt Hakuba ever
rode em.

Thanks for reading! C+C on the way out, and look forward to...

Next Chapter: The Osaka group struggles to survive the afternoon, and the Villa group
struggles to survive the night. Where are the cops when you need 'em?
A short update! People have been asking for one, so I figured I might as well just post what I've got for you guys... Sorry it's not up to my usual standards...I'm having a rough weekend.

Chapter 8: Might Just Turn Your Blood Cold

I was a law onto myself

When you found me out on my own

Saguru’s father was going to eviscerate him. Or worse, tell his mother and Baaya.

That was, well, if they ever got the chance to kill him for getting himself into this.

The waiter from Poirot, who probably wasn’t just a waiter, watched the smokescreen behind them vanish with a wary eye, something like a snarl sweeping across his face. “Outside, now!” He ordered, as Saguru chanced a glance back. The first shooter was still in the cafeteria area, slowly sweeping the room.

The visor turned to face them.

Hattori and Toyama scrambled up and out the door. Saguru moved to follow, only to jerk to a stop. Kuroba was frozen still, hand clamped around Saguru’s forearm.

“Kuroba!” Saguru jerked on his arm, “We’ve got to get out of here, now!”

Kuroba didn’t move, eyes still locked on the waiter’s face.

“Kuroba!”

Kuroba shook his head, “No!”

“What’s your problem! Let’s go!” The shooter was moving towards them, gun leveled forward. Saguru’s blood was pounding in his ears, fear hitting him all over again like a freight train. “If we don’t move, we’re going to get shot!”

That, at least, seemed to get Kuroba moving again. His face hardened, the slack panic disappearing behind look of cool determination, and then he was dashing for the door. Saguru was dragged with him and the waiter followed not far behind. All three of them burst into the sunlight and dodged left, the opposite direction as the injured shooter.

Uncertain what to do next, Saguru hesitated. Kuroba, expression tight, rounded on the waiter and motioned to the right. “Shouldn’t you pursue him?” He asked pointedly, “He can’t have gone far with that shoulder.”
The waiter gave Kuroba a horrified look. “With that shooter right behind us? I can’t exactly leave you kids alone.” Saguru couldn’t argue with that, and it didn’t look like Kuroba could either. Behind them, the glass panes of the door shattered, what must have been another gunshot echoing terrifyingly through the air. Toyama screamed in fright, and the waiter shoved Saguru and Kuroba towards the parking lot. “Now’s not the time to chat. Run!”

Saguru didn’t have any better ideas. It was hard to think straight and take everything in with his heart pounding and his blood running both too cold and too hot. Together they stumbled as a group into the cover of rows of shiny cars. A few bystanders were mulling around, staring confusedly towards the rest stop entrance, only to scream and yell as a shadow appeared in the door.

“Coming after us, huh?” The waiter muttered, catching Hattori and Toyama by their arms and pulling them down behind a car. He wasn’t even breathing fast.

Saguru was quick to follow, but Kuroba was more hesitant.

“My car’s over there, two rows down.” The waiter motioned further into the lot. “We can get out of here, get to a police box.” Hattori and Toyama nodded quickly in agreement, both looking behind them warily. Someone had probably already called the police, but there was no knowing how quickly they’d arrive and get the situation under control. Not to mention the threat of additional shooters in the area.

They all started to creep down the lot, staying low to make the most of the cover the parked cars provided.

Kuroba, however, was not on board. “No!” He snapped, suddenly grabbing Saguru and dragging him back, under the cover of a minivan. “Are you crazy, we can’t just get in this creep’s car!”

Saguru took a breath, in through the nose, out through the mouth. “He risked his life to save us from that shooter, Kuroba. We’d be dead without him.” Saguru watched Kuroba’s face carefully. He couldn’t—he just didn’t know what was going on. Why were people trying to kill them? Why was the waiter here? Why was the bravest person Saguru even met so scared?

Kuroba’s face was too pale, his eyes too wide, but before Saguru’s eyes, he pieced his mask together, eyebrows slanting down in aggravation. “You seriously buy that? This isn’t an anime! Badass people don’t just show up to help!”

They had to go. They had to get out of here. “We don’t have time for this, Kuroba.”

“He came out of nowhere, just in time! Don’t you find that a little suspicious?”

Saguru glanced to where Hattori and Toyama and the waiter were impatiently waiting for them. Toyama looked terrified. Hattori looked angry. The waiter met Saguru’s eyes with his own, blue as a glacier and thrice as cold. Saguru swallowed around the lump in his throat. “I’d rather risk it with the person who is seemingly not a threat than face the ones that have assault rifles.”

“You seriously don’t see what’s going on here?” Kuroba snapped right back, his voice just a little too frail to pass as just worked up. “It’s a common con! An inside man! When people are faced with obvious enemies, they’re more willing to trust people that seem to be on their side!”

That—that was true. “You think this is a set up?”

“What else could it be?” Kuroba said, like he was trying to make it sound obvious. But why would someone go so far to target a bunch of teenagers? What could possibly make them worth that kind of complex plot?
“Why are you so suspicious of him? He’s the guy that works at Poirot, right?” For the briefest of milliseconds, Kuroba’s expression faltered, shock showing in the cracks of his frustration.

And then, the vulnerability was gone, replaced with a tight-lipped scowl. “Look, I just don’t trust him!” As if Kuroba trusted anyone on the face of the planet.

They were still wasting time. Hattori was starting to look like he was going to come over and punch them both. But Saguru recognized the stubborn set of Kuroba’s jaw: he wasn’t going to budge on this. “Alright, so what do you suggest we do? We can’t stay here like sitting ducks until the cops get here.”

“The bus.” Saguru blinked, surprised. Kuroba lifted up his phone, which clearly displayed the local bus schedule. “The next bus is coming in two minutes. I bet they don’t know about the shooting yet.”

“Seriously?” That didn’t seem like a very good idea. “What if it doesn’t come?”

“I’m willing to bet it’s still running.” Saguru followed Kuroba’s eyes to the bus stop on the other side of the parking lot. “More than I’m willing to bet on this guy’s good intentions.”

Together, the two of them hazarded glances back to the rest stop’s entrance. A figure was glancing around the parking lot hurriedly, clearly searching for where they’d hidden. He was rushing down each aisle of cars, one after another. They didn’t have much time left.

Either way they went, it was risky. Did they place their safety in the hands of a suspicious stranger, or put themselves at the mercy of a public transit system?

Kuroba’s eyes were unwavering.

“Alright,” Saguru agreed. He caught the eyes of the three waiting for them and pointed deliberately towards the bus stop. Three pairs of eyes followed the motion, then looked back at him with varying expressions of confusion.

There was no more time to argue it. Go, he mouthed, and began to move again. It wasn’t easy or graceful to scramble over the concrete with their heads bowed below the cover of the cars, but by some luck the shooter was searching in the opposite direction, heading further along the aisles to the left of the entrance. Saguru watched his figure becoming smaller with one eye and increased his pace, hurrying everyone along. As they reached the bushes that lined the lot and stood in between them and their goal, he heard Kuroba give a triumphant whistle.

“Bingo.” He whispered, and Saguru glanced down the road. Right on time, the bus was driving towards them.

He’d never been so relieved to see a bus before.

They forced their way over the bushes, much to the bemusement of the sole person waiting there, who sat on the bench and watched them with curious eyes. Before he could question them, the bus rumbled to a stop before them.

Saguru’s breath was all but knocked out of his lungs by the relief he felt when they were all on board, the bus’s doors sliding shut. The last to get on, the man that had been waiting before them, tried to press his pass to the scanner and fumbled it, the pass slipping out of his right hand. He hurriedly swept it back up, but Saguru could feel his anxiety mounting for each second that passed. Finally, though, they were on their way.
Collapsing into seats in the back, the five of them could finally ease. Saguru carefully checked everyone over for injuries that could have been missed in the chaos, but for the most part, everyone was fine, if shaken.

But the waiter was frowning at him, obviously frustrated. “What was wrong with the car idea, exactly?”

*Because my friend the international thief thinks you’re sketchy.*

He couldn’t say that, which meant he need an excuse.

Before he could, Kuroba huffed. “We don’t get into cars with strangers.”

“Is now really the time to worry about that?” The waiter raised an eyebrow, then glanced at Hattori. “I'm not a stranger, am I?”

"Nah," Hattori dismissed, glaring at Saguru and Kuroba each. "This guy is the Mouri uncle's apprentice. Of course I know 'im."

Saguru paused, surprised. He hadn't heard anything about the Sleeping Kogoro taking on an apprentice, but that itself wasn't particularly shocking. What was strange was that Kuroba could be rattled by a mere apprentice detective, when he faced professionals on a regular basis.

He glanced at his companion, but Kuroba didn't return his gaze, his eyes locked on the waiter's face. Kuroba's expression was blank, not a crack in it to be seen, but that only worried Saguru more. That kind of empty expression was something he rarely ever saw, except in the worst of situations. It was the face of someone completely shutting down in the face of an unbridled wave of panic.

Was it possible that Kuroba hasn't known that either? But then, why could something so benign rattle him?

Saguru took the waiter's measure once more, but there was nothing that particularly stood out. Except for his obvious exceptional boxing skills and his handsome face, Saguru couldn't say there was anything particularly remarkable about the man.

The waiter glanced over them both in return, his eyes revealing nothing. With a somewhat exasperated smile on his lips, he let it go. “Did you kids at least check to make sure this thing goes passed a police box?”

That was a fair point. Saguru looked over at the Osakan pair, both of which were sure to have a better idea. Hattori seemed mostly focused on comforting Toyama, but he took a moment to glance at the landscape that passed them by outside the window.

“If we get off in three stops, there’ll be one on the corner.”

“Great. We’ll head there for now.”

Saguru gazed at the front of the bus, hearing the echo of sirens. The police were finally en route, some even zipping past them, back towards the chaos they’d left behind. The man that boarded the bus with them pressed the button for a stop with his left hand, and as the bus chimed, Saguru’s companions shuddered.

Everyone was still on edge.

They got off at the stop Hattori pointed out, disembarking on somewhat shaky legs. Without wasting
any time, they made their way to the police box. The officer on duty there was on his radio, but took one look at them, and immediately put it down.

“Hattori-kun!”

Right. Hattori and Toyama were the children of some of Osaka’s highest ranking police officers, and were somewhat notorious.

As expected, the police box passed them on straight to the police headquarters. Partially because of their claims of being targeted by some obviously very dangerous people, but also because some very anxious parents were waiting there with an veritable army of protective officers.

No force was to be spared in the investigation. A mass shooting in Japan was a rare occasion, and was not taken lightly. Especially not when children of no less than three high-profile police officials had been almost killed.

To put things in short terms, the police force was going to be out with a vengeance.

As one by one they were interviewed for their witness reports, Saguru took a moment to call his father and assure him that he was alright. Kuroba, notably, made no such calls, and didn’t seem particularly enthused to be stuck in the middle of a law enforcement Headquarters’ hustle and bustle. He wasn’t even in handcuffs or being accused of anything, and yet he still looked like someone had shot one of his doves out of the sky.

As the waiter was called in for his interview by a soft-faced officer, Kuroba tucked his chin in his hand and looked at Saguru out of the corner of his eye.

In a disgruntled voice, he asked, “If they are after us, how did they know we were at the rest stop?” That was an excellent point. There was no way of predicting where they were going to be by their own actions, and they certainly didn’t tell anyone where they were going.

Saguru considered it for a moment, as bot Hattori and Toyama turned their way from their own seats. “Neither Kuroba or I knew where we were going before we got there. Did you tell anyone, Toyama-chan?”

She shook her head, and then cut a look at her friend. “No. I didn’t even tell Heiji.”

Saguru felt his brow furrow slightly. “What do you mean?”

Toyama laughed nervously, scratching her cheek as the air turned awkward. “Ah, I didn’t want to tell ya, but Heiji didn’t want to talk to ya guys. He actually turned me down when I asked.” Well, that actually wasn’t that surprising.

“Well, why would I? I’m busy, ya know!” Hattori grumbled, obviously embarrassed. Then, he paused, just as Saguru did. Something wasn’t adding up. “Actually, how did ya know I’d be there, Kazuha?”

Toyama blinked. “It wasn’t hard. I just followed the pattern.”

Even Kuroba was starting to look interested, perking back up in his chair. “The pattern?”

“I was with Heiji when he started doing this yesterday, going to all the gas stations and rest stops one by one, starting from the one’s farther from the city along the expressway and working back towards the city.” Toyama explained, pulling up a map of public transit on her phone. “Knowin’ that, it was easy to figure out where he’d be.”
“Why the hell’d ya do it anyway?” Glaring for a moment at the map, Hattori turned his fiery eyes on her. “I told ya I was too busy for this!”

Toyama glared right back, increasingly aggravated with every word out of his mouth. “Ran-chan asked me too! And it’s about Kudo-kun! I thought you’d be thrilled to have the chance to go ‘Kudo this’ and ‘Kudo that’!”

Saguru tugged Kuroba away from the arguing couple and kept his voice low as he surmised. “Did the shooters do the same thing?” It seemed to be the only logical explanation for how they were tracked, but it seemed too unreliable. Any number of things could have gone wrong or gotten in the way.

Kuroba’s brow was twisted in thought. “You think they knew about Hattori’s investigation? Isn’t that strange?”

Hattori wasn’t exactly being subtle about his questioning of employees earlier. If somehow, someone knew they were coming to speak with him, then wouldn’t they just have to keep an eye on where we went next?

Wait. If someone knew…

Saguru looked sharply at Kuroba, his hand rising to cup his chin as his mind raced. “No, what’s really strange was Hattori’s reaction.”

Evidently not following, Kuroba rolled his eyes. “What about it?”

“He didn’t seem surprised to see us or Toyama-chan at all, despite refusing to meet with us.” He’d accepted their presence very easily, actually, with just some agitation and impatience. Not at all like she’d dumped two unexpected and unpleasant guests in his lap. “Did someone tell him we were coming?”

Kuroba considered it for a moment, then shrugged. “You’re overthinking it. It’s not that surprising that we’d show up anyway.”

“You think?” Saguru felt his eyebrows rising.

Kuroba just rolled his eyes. “You overthink everything.”

That was fair criticism. Saguru often mulled stubbornly over all the wrong details, too hyper focused to see the big picture or react to it in a timely fashion.

But he had the feeling that wasn’t the case this time. Somehow, it seemed like he wasn’t thinking enough.

What was he missing?

Things in the manor were tense, to say the least. One of the men had gotten up and started to pace, cursing all the while. “Shit. What the hell should we do?”

Takahashi was more put together. Out of all the adults, he seemed to be holding himself together the best. “We’ll send someone in a car, then, to get the cops.” He suggested, and heads nodded all around the room. Mariko’s friend volunteered, a pair of keys already gripped tight in his hand.
That wasn’t a good idea.

Oshiro opened his mouth, but Masumi beat him to the punch, catching the attention of everyone in the room with the authority in her voice. "Hold it right there! This is a murder. We can't let anyone go so easily.” There was too many opportunities for something to go wrong if they started splitting up into groups now, especially since the sky had gone dark. She turned to the bride, voice tight. “Other than our group, has anyone came or left this villa since Thursday?"

Airi shook her head. "N— no. I mean, we've had trips to pick up groceries and stuff, but everybody who's been here over the past week is still here right now."

"Which means, any one of you could be the culprit. We can't let you leave."

All around the room, the adults grew tense. Some even flinched. Airi met Masumi’s eyes, biting her lip. "You think one of us did this?"

All around the room, pale faces darkened and glared at Masumi accusingly. Masumi didn't back down, "Who else would've been here? Who else would know that that portion of the house wasn't being used?"

Nobody, in all probability, and they all knew it. There was quiet as everyone turned and looked at their neighbors: some with suspicion, others with trepidation.

Mariko, in particular, grew furious. "You really think the murderer is in the villa?"

"There's no guarantee.” Masumi said, trying to sound reasonable and calm. Now was not the time to get everyone in a frenzy, but at the same time, they all needed to understand the situation they were in.

Sonoko moved to Masumi’s side supportively, but even she looked uneasy. “Nobody noticed Mariko-san's brother coming in, right? The murderer could have come and left without anyone noticing."

Masumi didn’t think that it was likely to have been an outsider, though, considering they would have had to know both the layout of the villa and that Arata was there, when clearly no one else had been aware.

Or at least, no one else admitted to knowing.

Airi bit her lip, eyes flickering around the room as Takahashi took her hand in his. He glowered at Masumi, but there was very little anger in the expression. "Alright, we'll send a group. That should be fine, right?"

Masumi’s gut told her to resist, to try and keep the killer trapped inside with the rest of them. She didn’t have to: Oshiro cut in, his forehead shining with nervous sweat. "But, there's only eleven of us. What if..."

What if the group they sent contained a killer, who could attack and escape. What if the group that remained had a killer among them, waiting for a chance to strike again. With how anxious and shaken everyone was, it was easy to imagine the worst case scenarios.

"Alright, we'll send the kids with Mariko to get the cops. The rest of us will stay and keep an eye on each other."

"No! What if— " Oshiro broke off, face pale. His eyes flickered to Mariko.
Mariko stiffened, fury rippling across her blotchy face and until it was flushed red again. "What if what? What if I killed my brother? Is that what you're thinking?"

"No, of course not." Takahashi cut in, but Oshiro snapped right over him.

"But you'd have more motive than anybody! The rest of us barely even know your brother!"

"Stop it!" Airi slammed her hands down on the coffee table in front of her, silencing her friends with the sudden movement. "There's no way any of us would ever kill anybody!"

Oshiro took a deep breath, visibly forcing his shoulders back down. “Look, the mountain roads aren’t that safe at night anyway, plus we’d have to hike through the forest in the dark to reach the cars. For tonight, how about we all stay here and figure things out in the morning? And who knows, maybe the cell reception will come back in a few hours and it will all have been a moot point.”

Again, everyone gazed uneasily at each other, but all the arguments dissipated. Nobody wanted to have to walk through the dark forest with a murderer on the loose, Masumi supposed.

In the brief silence, something else quickly became apparent.

A strange sound was filtering in, through the walls, and a smoky scent.

"What was that sound?" Ran asked, her brow furrowed. “It sounds like… crackling— like a campfire— ” she broke off, eyes going wide as realization struck them all separately. "I don't think any of us are going to like the answer to that question." The red-head girl, Akako, said as they all took off in a run.

Masumi heard the others screaming and yelling before she got there, but it wasn’t difficult to guess what they were screaming about.

"The bridge!"

"Seriously, again?" Sonoko’s voice rose high over the dismayed voices of the others.

The bridge over the ravine was completely wreathed in orange flame, rising high towards the twilight sky. Already, Masumi could feel its heat on her face, prickling unpleasantly against her skin.

“We need water!”

“We can’t put this out with buckets!” With a single glance, Masumi could tell that much. The blaze was intense, and getting close enough to pour water was way too dangerous. But with a garden like this, that couldn’t have been a problem. “A hose! We need a garden hose!”

“Already on it! Out of the way!” Airi called as Takahashi charged past her, the hose already spraying in his hands.

“Somebody put on the sprinklers!” Masumi yelled, watching Yamaguchi rush off in response. It wasn’t likely any of them would reach the fire, but in case anything went wrong, they’d at least impede the fire from spreading.

With their combined efforts, the flames gave way, leaving behind scorched planks and charred railings. The bridge was intact for the most part, but didn’t quite look safe. Masumi would think twice before crossing, that was for sure.

Carefully, she moved through the smoke to inspect it. Mostly, it was the paper decorations and the
flowers that had burned so cheerfully, melting the hanging lights into distorted webs of plastic and wire.

But something was odd.

Noticing the intense scrutiny on her face as she inspected the floorboards of scorched bridge, Ran called to her. "Sera-san?"

It was the light bulbs. Most of them were completely burst, the glass left over in the facets jagged and slightly melted.

But that was the interesting part: the jagged edges had been melted. That meant, the glass bulbs had broken before the fire was raging and reached such fierce temperatures. The light bulbs must have exploded.

The cause of the fire, maybe?

If that was the case, then this was certainly not an accident. It was deliberate sabotage. The lights must have been tampered with before they were strung on the bridge, and exploded when they were switched on as the sun went down.

Masumi stood back up and carefully regarded the people gathered around her. There were so many of them, all practically strangers. With the uncertain timeframe of the murder, any of them could be responsible.

But why destroy the bridge? To trap them all? Why? Had the culprit sprinted over the burning bridge after turning on the lights? Set them on a timer and already escaped? Or was the culprit’s intention to trap them there, in order to commit another crime?

“Shit, what an afternoon.” Kuroba groaned as he collapsed on one of the beds. Saguru entered the hotel room with a bit more dignity.

The Osakan police had been quick to deliver Toyama and Hattori back to their homes and their respective cop fathers, assuming that reputation alone would be enough of a deterrent to prevent any further attacks. Saguru and Kuroba had been assigned a new hotel and an armed guard to stand in front of their door until they left the city and hightailed it back to Tokyo. And the waiter? Saguru wished he knew. All he’d managed to catch in the initial police questioning was that his name was Amuro Tooru and he had come to Osaka for a concert the next day.

“The cops didn’t seem to believe us about the whole being targeted thing, did they?” Kuroba muttered into his crossed arms, facedown in the comforter.

“That can’t be helped.” They had no proof, after all.

Despite his obvious exhaustion, Kuroba shot back up like a startled dog and glared at the everything in the room. “Shit, I’m all keyed up now.”

Honestly, Saguru felt the same. Even though the adrenaline had long faded, it left lingering anxiety in his chest. He wanted desperately to rest, but at the same time, he couldn’t bear the thought of having to sit still and do nothing.

Turning his eyes on the bags they’d brought with him, he quirked an eyebrow in Kuroba’s direction.
“If you’ve got the energy to spare, why don’t we look into that?” He made his way over and began to unpack their equipment.

Kuroba pressed his lips together, turning his eyes towards the laptop he brought with him at Hakuba’s behest. “I want the record to show that this was not my idea.”

“Yes, yes,” Saguru agreed amiably. “Just give me the tapes.”

“Tapes? What is this, the 90s?” Kuroba snorted, but there was none of his usual fire in the mockery. Reluctantly cracking the laptop open, he brought up a series of audio files in editing software and plugged in a heavy set of headphones.

Saguru took the headphones with some hesitation. “Anything I should know beforehand?”

“There’s nothing steamy if that’s what you’re asking.” Despite himself, Saguru felt his face flush. “I can’t imagine a more wholesome couple, seriously.”

That wasn’t what Saguru had been asking, but of course Kuroba would take it that way. Why did he even bother.

He hesitated again before hitting play, caught up in the slightest strings of shame constricting his chest. It wasn’t right for him to be encroaching on Mouri Ran’s personal life like this, but Kuroba had obviously already listened in on everything. The damage was already done.

Still, there was something distinctly invasive about eavesdropping on a conversation between lovers.

“Oh just hit it already.” Kuroba groaned from the couch. “I can practically hear your self-loathing.”

Saguru might have hit play with more force than necessary.

The conversations recorded turned out be almost disappointingly banal. Mouri and Kudo spoke to each other like the closest of friends, no awkward fumblings or stilted words. They casually discussed mundane topics: karate, mystery novels, Suzuki’s boyfriend, Ran’s parents, Kudo’s favorite iced coffee. Both their voices were alight with cheer, even as each conversation eventually ended with the same somber disappointment. Kudo couldn’t come back yet.

All of it was just empty, useless words.

But between the words was something interesting. Something damning.

Saguru replayed each file four times, carefully monitoring the progression of the sound graph on the bottom of the screen. His pocket watch couldn’t keep the time precisely enough, not on such a small scale, so instead he brought up an electronic timer with much more accuracy, down to the nanosecond.

Kuroba eventually slumped off the couch and watched over Saguru’s shoulder with a frown.

“What are you doing? Timing them?”

Saguru hummed and double checked his math, then listened again. Kuroba prodded his side with an aggravated jab. Because of course Kuroba couldn’t go half an hour without attention; just another check to the Kaito KID profile.

“It’s delayed.” Saguru confessed eventually, without raising his head. “Kudo’s voice.” It was—it was a disappointment. Difficult to swallow. Saguru had wanted to be wrong, for once. He wanted
Kudo to be alive, he wanted his theory to be too farfetched to be true.

“Of course it is, he’s talking over a phone.” Kuroba rolled his eyes, and Saguru almost didn’t have the heart to explain aloud.

“No, more than that. I compared the delay in his calls to the delay in other calls Mouri-chan has made. The delay is exactly .1352 of a second longer.”

Kuroba was quiet for a moment. He was sharp, he got the point without needing to be told again. Half-heartedly, he offered, “Bad reception?”

Saguru shook his head. “That would explain it if the delay occurred on only one or two occasions. But I checked every recording we have, and it’s exactly the same in each.” The exactness itself was a dangerous clue. No reception or poor connection would result in the same delay every time. That meant the delay was unrelated to the phone line and instead a product of ‘Kudo’s’ very speech.

Kuroba took a breath, and let it out, weariness clear in the slump of his shoulders. “You think the person on the other end of the line is using a voice changer.”

“...Yes.” And Kudo Shinichi wouldn’t need one.

“You really think someone has been conning Mouri into believing them to be Kudo for nearly a year now.”

“It would explain why they delayed to give her the number for so long. They needed time to prepare the technology for it.” That did explain a great deal, didn’t it? “And possibly to gather information as well.” Despite how much sense it made, it was absurd to even consider. Moreover, it was bad. That was really, really bad.

Kuroba hummed, and Saguru waited for his reaction. Disbelief? Alarm? Concern?

Instead on any of those, Kuroba looked at him hopefully. “Does this mean we can drop the case?”

“What?”

“I mean, we’re not gonna find Kudo, clearly.” Kuroba sat back on his bed, shoulders rolling back. “This was a stupid thing to pursue anyway.”

Stupid.

Stupid.

Saguru’s mouth was open before he could even think to keep it closed. “Kudo Shinichi has been murdered and replaced, by the same people after Kaitou KID, and you want to drop the case?”

How could he even suggest such a thing? Kuroba had always been callous, but he was never particularly apathetic. Especially not to matters such as these. To simply brush of the murder of someone their own age, a detective just like Saguru, a teenager just as obviously as lonely and isolated as either of them—

If they didn’t care, if they didn’t try to solve this, who would?

What if it had been either of them? And if could have been. It could have been Saguru, just as easily. If he’d poked his nose into the wrong KID heist and run into those men in black on his own, it could have been his head bashed in, his blood soaking the dirt. It could have been Kuroba, shot out of the
sky and tumbling to his death.

If it had been either of their bodies to vanish, had been their voices chatting over the phone or whispering in the dark, would anyone even know the difference?

How could they just drop it, and leave Kudo like that? Without even a burial or a gravestone, no shrine for his friends and family to pray at—friends and family that wouldn’t even know to pray for him?

Saguru stared at Kuroba, his chest burning.

But his classmate just stared back. “Yeah. Let’s just get some dinner, go to sleep, and go home in the morning, okay? We’ve stuck our noses into this more than enough! This is dangerous, Hakuba. It's already gotten one teenager killed. I’d rather not make it a pile.”

Kuroba was right; this was dangerous. Someone already seemed to want them dead. But in all likelihood, that very same someone had wanted Kudo Shinichi dead as well, and he hadn’t backed down.

“I am not dropping this case.” Maybe before, he could have. But knowing what he did now, there was no way he could possibly abandon it. Evidently, the matter had gone unresolved for far too long already, left cold and unacknowledged.

He wouldn't leave Kudo Shinichi without justice for a day longer than he had to.

As steady as stone, his determination must have been evident on his face. Kuroba glared at him, biting his lip, but they both knew Saguru would not budge. He may have been well-mannered, but when it came to being stubborn, Hakuba Saguru was unrivaled.

But Kuroba didn't give up easily either. With narrowed eyes, he said, “Fine, but at least leave me and Aoko out of it!”

“Aoko-kun wants to figure this out too.”

“And you shouldn’t be encouraging her! She’s not like us!”

Like us.

Like Kudo.

Saguru opened his mouth to reply, but two chimes interrupted him. Simultaneously, they pulled out their phones, identical messages waiting for them. They were from the girl herself, detailing an odd story she heard about Hattori and ‘Kudo’ from Suzuki. He read the scenario described once, and then twice more, his mind turning over the matter again and again, even as they left their room for dinner.

So, disguising as ‘Kudo’ wasn't particularly uncommon. Already, two completely separate men had been able to pull it off, and that was discounting Kuroba who only needed a comb and an attitude change to pull it off. Furthermore, Hattori was capable of perfectly emulating Kudo, to the point of fooling the close friend of the real thing.

But why? Why had Hattori done such a thing? As a prank on his friend? Or because had he made the appearance at the behest of ‘Kudo’? To help with the illusion, to keep Kudo Shinichi alive?

...They could not, under any circumstances, trust Hattori Heiji. That was the conclusion Saguru came
to, upon returning to the hotel room with a silent and petulant Kuroba in tow.

So, naturally, that was when he received that next, damning call.

“Hakuba-kun!” A shrill voice echoed over the phone, obviously panicked.

“Toyama-chan?” He met Kuroba's eyes, and Kuroba stared back, slowly shaking his head. Saguru ignored him and set his jaw. ”What happened?”

“Heiji's gone!”

Who said the truth's gonna save you?

When the truth can be dangerous

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