

AI-Generated Graded Readers

Masaru Uchida, Gifu University

Publication webpage:

https://www1.gifu-u.ac.jp/~masaru/a1/ai-generated_graded_readers.html

Publication date: April 6, 2026

About This Edition

This book is a simplified English adaptation created for extensive reading practice. The text was translated from Japanese into English and simplified using ChatGPT for intermediate English learners as part of an educational project.

Target reading level: CEFR A2-B1

The adaptation aims to improve readability while preserving the narrative content and spirit of the original work.

Source Text

Original work: Kokushikan Satsujin Jiken (黒死館殺人事件)

Author: Oguri Mushitarō (小栗虫太郎)

Source: Aozora Bunko (青空文庫)

<https://www.aozora.gr.jp/>

Original Japanese text available at:

<https://www.aozora.gr.jp/cards/000125/card1317.html>

The original work is in the public domain in Japan.

Copyright and Use

This simplified English edition is an educational adaptation intended for non-commercial use only.

The source text is provided by Aozora Bunko, a digital library that makes Japanese public domain literature freely available.

For information about Aozora Bunko and its usage policies, see:

<https://www.aozora.gr.jp/guide/kijyunn.html>

This edition is an AI-assisted translation and simplification prepared for educational purposes.

Disclaimer

This edition is an independent educational adaptation and is not affiliated with or endorsed by Aozora Bunko.

Oguri Mushitarō, *Black Death Hall Murders [Kokushikan Satsujin Jiken]*
(Simplified Edition, Adapted and Simplified from Japanese by ChatGPT)

Part 1

Ten days had passed since the murder at Saint Alexei Temple. Norimizu had not announced his answer, and people had started to whisper that the case would never be solved. Then a new fear rose and pushed that older case aside. In the Furiyagi mansion, which people called the Black Death Mansion, a poison killer seemed to begin moving like a black wind through the house. For years people had said that some terrible event would one day break out there. The house itself seemed to invite such dark talk.

The mansion stood in a lonely place, and it looked unlike any other house in Japan. It was built in a rich Celtic Renaissance style, with towers, sharp roofs, and strange lines that made people feel they were looking at a picture from an old book. Long ago, when it was first built, it had seemed bright and wonderful, almost like a dream palace. But that first bright beauty had faded. Now the house seemed to wear a cold mist of secrets. The true cause of that feeling was not only the stone walls or the old shape of the building, but the many mysteries that had gathered inside it.

Three strange deaths had already taken place there over the years, and no one had ever found a clear motive for them. The present head of the family was young Hatataro, only seventeen. Besides him, there were four foreign musicians in the house who formed a string quartet, and people said they had lived there for forty years without once stepping outside. Such stories grew larger each time they were retold. Some people thought the family line itself had rotted from within. Others thought the dead scholar Dr. Santetsu Furiyagi had left behind an evil air that still filled the mansion.

Since Santetsu's strange suicide ten months earlier, that evil air had grown worse. People felt that some deep crack had opened in the family, and that something dark might come out of it. Outwardly the family still looked calm, but

under that still surface something had already begun to move. It was like a great hidden fall of black water running under quiet ground. At last that hidden force burst out and turned into murder. Norimizu would soon have to fight not only a clever living criminal, but also the power of the dead.

On the morning of January 28, Norimizu was still tired from the earlier case. He had never been strong, and the cold dawn work had left him worn out. So when Prosecutor Hasekura arrived and said, "There has been another murder," Norimizu made a face and looked annoyed. But Hasekura added, "It is at the Furiyagi house. The first violinist, Mrs. Grete Danneberg, has been poisoned." At once a different light came into Norimizu's eyes. He stood up, went into his study, and came back carrying a heavy armful of books.

"Do not hurry me," he said as he dropped into his chair. "If a murder has happened in the strangest family in Japan, we need knowledge before we need action." He pulled out one beautiful old volume and opened it to a page with a strange crest. Then he showed Hasekura a design with the letters FRCO inside an olive wreath. "This is the Furiyagi crest," he said. "It begins with Chijiwa, one of the boys sent to Europe in the Christian mission long ago. But why is there also a sign linked to Florence? Read this note."

The old note told a wild story. A knight had appeared before Chijiwa and said that Bianca Cappello, wife of the Grand Duke Francesco, had secretly given birth to his child. The baby girl was handed over with a black nurse outside a hedge, and later that child became the start of the Furiyagi line. Norimizu said quietly, "If this story is true, then the family begins with Bianca Cappello. And behind her stands Caterina de' Medici. Mother and daughter were both linked to cruelty, murder, and poison." Hasekura frowned and asked, "And you think blood from four hundred years ago matters in a murder today?" Norimizu smiled faintly and said, "Sometimes family madness lives longer than memory."

He showed Hasekura another piece, a newspaper story from England. It said that the young Santetsu, then still called Koikichi, had been driven out of medical study after dealing closely with a magician named Ronald Quincy. From that man he had received many terrible books and objects: magic texts, cabalistic writings,

strange formulas, and even a thing called the Hand of Glory. Norimizu tapped the page and said, “Most of these things are foolish darkness. But one of them matters. The Wichigs magic book is different. It hides exact science inside the clothes of evil and magic. If that book still lies somewhere in the Black Death Mansion, then we may have more than one enemy waiting for us there.”

While Norimizu changed his clothes, Hasekura looked through another old article. It mocked Santetsu as an odd scholar and described how he had built the great western-style mansion as a gift for his French wife, Therese Signoret. But she had died on the voyage home, and after that the house gained its black name. When Norimizu returned, he went on with the family history. Santetsu had studied medicine, won degrees, and then lived in seclusion. Strangest of all, he never truly lived in the mansion and later had its inside rebuilt from the original plan. “He changed the house at its heart,” Norimizu said. “That matters more than people think.”

Then he told Hasekura about the earlier deaths. First Santetsu’s brother Denjiro had been killed by his lover Misao, who then killed herself. Years later, another woman of the house, Fudeko, had been strangled by an actor named Arashi Taitaro, and he had hanged himself at the scene. Both crimes lacked a clear motive. Much later, after many quiet years, Santetsu himself had died by an apparent suicide, stabbing his own heart in a locked room after entering with a life-sized doll made in the image of Therese. “Do you see the pattern?” Norimizu asked. “Different years, different people, but always death without a clear reason. Something invisible moves through this family.”

Hasekura was not fully convinced. He said the second case broke the pattern because the actor was not a Furiyagi by blood. Norimizu answered by speaking of another ruined family in an old crime study, where three terrible events had later been explained by an inherited physical defect. His point was simple. What looked like fate might hide a long chain of cause. Still, he said the Furiyagi case seemed larger and darker than mere heredity. Then he returned to the strangest living part of the house: the four foreign musicians. Santetsu had brought them from abroad as babies and kept them inside the mansion for over forty years.

“Why did he do that?” Norimizu said. “And why did they obey? That mystery may be as important as the murder.”

He had even found an American church magazine that gave their backgrounds. Grete Danneberg came from Tyrol, Garibalda Serena from Italy, Olga Krivov from Russia, and Ottokarl Levez from Hungary. All were born in good families, yet all had vanished into this one sealed house. Hasekura could not make all these facts fit together, but one thing remained bright in his mind like a white flower seen in a dream: the name of the Wichigs book. Soon the two men would leave for the Black Death Mansion. Norimizu did not yet know that one of the strangest bodies in the history of murder was waiting there for him.

Part 2

The private railway line ended at last, and beyond that point the land was already in Kanagawa. Until they reached the hill from which the Black Death Mansion could be seen, the road passed through ordinary country scenes, with oak windbreaks and stands of bamboo. But when they climbed high enough to look down, the whole view changed at once. The land below looked bare, gray, and severe, like some hard northern place far from Japan. It was as if a part of Scotland had been dropped there without warning.

There were almost no trees on the slope around the mansion. The wind that came from the sea seemed to have lost all its wetness before it reached that place, and the dry ground looked pale and rough, almost like salt. At the bottom of the wide hollow rose dark walls, and within them stood the mansion itself. The sky was heavy after the freezing rain of the night before, and thick clouds hung low over the towers. At times a weak flash of lightning crossed the clouds, followed by a dull sound of thunder, as if the air itself were tired and angry.

The great house stood in two main stories, but its central chapel tower and the side turrets rose much higher, so that the whole building looked larger than it truly was. A low red fence covered with climbing roses ran behind the outer wall, and beyond it spread a formal garden laid out in exact shapes. Paths crossed

through it, and statues stood here and there, with little pavilions and fountains placed between trimmed hedges. Even the paving was arranged with care, and the clipped yew and cypress trees had been cut into strange forms, like symbols rather than plants. The beauty of it all only made the place seem colder.

As Norimizu and Hasekura walked toward the house, a fountain suddenly burst into life with a strange cry and sent water flying at them. “This is a water surprise,” Norimizu said, stepping aside from the spray. “The sound and the sudden jets are all made by pressure.” Hasekura said nothing, but the playful trick did not amuse him. In that dark place, even a joke seemed to come from a cruel mind.

Norimizu stopped before the main building and studied it closely. The central part pushed out in a half-circle, and on both sides were chapel-like ends built in a different style from the rest of the house. There were round windows with colored glass, old stone shapes from one age, and arches from another. Norimizu looked up and down the walls more than once, his eyes moving with quick care, as if he were measuring invisible lines. Hasekura could feel that before seeing the body, Norimizu was already taking the house itself into the case.

Inside, an old butler led them through the entrance hall and toward the great staircase. The floor was made in colored patterns, and above it a round passage ran near the ceiling, with paintings all around the walls. At the center hung an anatomical picture, and beside it were large copied paintings of plague and punishment. In front of them stood two armored figures holding banners. Norimizu asked at once whether they were always placed there, and the butler answered that they had been moved only the night before.

“They were first below the stairs,” the old servant said. “Then later they were found above.” Norimizu nodded and had Hasekura touch them. The figures were lighter than they looked. “They belong here now,” he said quietly. “Look at the three great paintings. Disease, punishment, and dissection. Someone has added a fourth thing by moving these figures. That fourth thing is murder.” Hasekura stared at him, and Norimizu went on, saying that the banners had been reversed from their proper positions. To him it looked like a sign, almost a silent

declaration that the killer had already begun a grim design.

Then they passed on to the room where Grete Danneberg lay. It was an old room, deep and dim, with a smell of age and closed air. Dust lay thick upon the mantel, and when the heavy curtain was touched, a dry gray powder rose and drifted down like fine ash. It was plain that the room had not been used for years. Norimizu pushed the curtain aside and looked in.

For one moment all feeling stopped. Danneberg's body lay there, and from it came a pale and holy light. A faint blue-white glow surrounded her at a little distance from the skin, as if a cool mist of light were holding her whole body. The face of death, which should have been ugly, seemed calmer and more noble under that strange shining veil. The effect was so solemn that even Hasekura, who did not believe in miracles, felt as though he had stepped into the edge of a church vision.

Men crowded in, but none spoke freely at first. Then an old woman named Tago Shizuko, who had already been in the room, said in a low voice, "I knew this would happen. Shall I tell you what I expected? The body would be wrapped in pure glory." Hasekura and Inspector Kumashiro were shocked. No one should have known what the corpse looked like before entering the room, yet she had said it openly. Her eyes turned toward Norimizu, and her next words came like a test. "Do you know of other cases in which a body gave out holy light?"

Norimizu answered coldly that such stories had existed before, but most were frauds or errors. Shizuko then asked him about an old Scottish case from 1872. Norimizu explained it at once. A minister named Wolcott had gone to a lake with his wife and a friend. The friend disappeared first. Later villagers saw what seemed to be the minister's shining body over the dark water and thought they were seeing a sacred wonder. But Norimizu said it was no miracle. Gases from decay could burn with a faint light, and the strange shape of the frozen lake had helped deceive those who saw it. The glow had been real, but its cause had been natural.

"But Mrs. Danneberg's case is not like that," he added. Shizuko listened without changing color. Then she took out a folded sheet and said, "Please look.

Dr. Santetsu himself drew this. It shows the evil spirit of the Black Death Mansion.” The drawing was shown around, and it gave a strange form, half woman and half thing from a dream. While the others were still uneasy, Norimizu kept looking from the paper to the room, and then to the dark lacquered door near the great staircase outside.

At last he led them back and made them stand at a certain distance. There, on the door, a dim figure seemed to appear. When they had first seen it, it had looked only like a vague and unpleasant shape. But now, from the proper place, the scattered colors and lines came together. The form became clear enough to strike fear into everyone present. It was the face and figure of Thérèse Signoret, the dead woman whose memory still ruled the mansion.

The people around him could only stare, but Norimizu calmly explained the trick. The effect, he said, began with a pointillist arrangement, in which broken colors became one image only at the right distance. Yet that alone would not have been enough. Light had also been sent across the picture from the side, like the method used in dark-field illumination, where the thing seen shines only because the background remains dark. The image had been built from layers of careful design, from painting, from position, and from controlled light. It looked like a ghost, but it had been made by skill.

Even so, the explanation did not make the house less fearful. If anything, it made it worse. A false ghost produced by exact knowledge was more dangerous than a foolish superstition. Norimizu understood that now with perfect clarity. In the Black Death Mansion, art, science, and madness were already working together, and Danneberg’s shining corpse was only the first sign of what waited ahead.

Part 3

“I cannot think of it any other way,” Hasekura said at last, still shaken as he spoke with Kumashiro about the Furiyagi crest and the strange mark cut into the dead woman’s skin. “It was not enough for the killer to stop her breath. He had to

do something more, something ugly and hard to understand.” Norimizu listened in silence for a moment and then, for the first time that morning, put a cigarette between his lips. “What shocks me more,” he said, “is another point. This carving was made only a few seconds before death. It was not made after death, and it was not made before the poison took effect.”

Kumashiro stared at him and almost laughed from surprise. Norimizu then explained in his calm, cutting way. Cyanide, he said, could strike fast, but the heart did not stop in the same instant that the body lost power. There was a short space of time in which signs of both life and death could appear together. The wound on Danneberg’s skin had a slight swelling and seepage that belonged to a living body, yet the cut surface also showed the thin dry look of a corpse. “That is the contradiction,” Norimizu said. “The body was dying, but not yet wholly dead.”

Hasekura felt colder as he listened. The pure glow around the corpse now seemed not holy, but cruel. He said as much, and Norimizu answered that the killer had not wanted a crowd or applause. He wanted a mental wound in those who looked. He wanted horror, confusion, and a feeling that ordinary reason had been broken. “That is why the act is so offensive,” Norimizu said. “It is not only murder. It is a design made to damage the mind.”

Kumashiro then began to report what had been learned. The strange glow, he said, had first been noticed around ten o’clock, when the lamp was turned off and the shutters were closed after the first examination. Before that, many people had not seen it. Then he went back to the start of the night. A family gathering had taken place at nine, and during it Mrs. Danneberg had cried out and fainted. After that she had been carried to this room, where Kuga Shizuko and the head servant Kawanabe Ekisuke stayed with her through the night.

Around midnight, Kumashiro said, Danneberg had eaten part of an orange, and the first piece she put into her mouth had been filled with cyanide. The poison had been found in the fruit left in her mouth, and the timing of death matched that act almost exactly. Even stranger, no poison had been found in the other pieces on the plate. “So the killer hit the exact target at the first try,” Kumashiro said. Norimizu touched one of the bedposts and murmured, “Then another puzzle

appears. The murderer seems, in one sense, to know nothing about poison.”

Kumashiro did not understand him. He explained that the room had been locked by about half past eleven, and the windows and shutters were so rusted that no one could have entered from outside without leaving clear signs. No servant seemed suspicious, and both Shizuko and Ekisuke said the victim herself had chosen the fruit from the dish. There had also been pears on the same plate, and everyone agreed that she liked pears far better than oranges. Norimizu said that this was exactly why the method was frightening. The orange was a poor hiding place for such a poison, with its smell and bitter taste, yet the killer had chosen it on purpose and had still won.

Kumashiro pulled out the silver fruit dish from under the bed. It was large and heavy, with harsh old designs on the outside and a strange beast-shaped support beneath it. The pears and oranges upon it had all been cut open for examination, but only one fruit mattered. It was not an ordinary orange at all, but a large blood orange, dark red and almost black in places, like thick blood beginning to dry. Its stem had been removed, and from that point, they believed, the muddy cyanide had been pushed inside. The sight of it was ugly enough to make even the fruit seem part of the crime.

After that Norimizu walked slowly around the room itself. The space behind the curtain was dull and gray, with bare walls, a colorless carpet, a dark hanging, and only a cabinet, a note, a broken pencil, a pair of very strong glasses, and the lamp beside the bed. Dust fell from above as he moved. Hasekura tried once more to ask about miracle and mystery, but Norimizu said only that the light and the carved mark must both have been necessary parts of the act. “The poison alone was not the whole crime,” he said. “Those two things completed it.”

There were no useful fingerprints, and there were no footprints either, because the room had been cleaned in haste the night before. Yet Norimizu found two things that caught his mind at once. On one wall there was a fresh mark where some framed object had recently been removed. Then he asked Hasekura to shut the window and lit the old table lamp, whose bulb gave off a dull reddish light from an old carbon filament. He watched the half-circle of light, marked a place

on the floor, and when Hasekura asked what he was doing, he answered, "I was trying to build a man who could be seen by no one."

Just then Kumashiro produced the note that had been found under the bed. On it was written one terrible word: "Therese." At once Hasekura understood the name. It referred to the life-sized doll made in the image of Therese Signoret. Kumashiro said that Nobuko had identified the writing as Danneberg's own hand, explaining that the violinist had a very unusual way of holding a pencil and that the broken point matched the faint lines on the note. Norimizu did not fully surrender to the idea, but he admitted that the doll and the wound now had to be considered together. So he proposed that they examine the automaton before questioning the family.

When they sent for the keys, bad news came back. The key to the doll room was missing, and so was the key to the medicine room. That made Norimizu more alert, not less. The doll room lay behind the great staircase at the end of a narrow passage, and its carved door showed King Herod killing the children of Bethlehem, while the door to the death room bore another old gospel scene. The door would not open, so they carefully cut a square hole in its lower part and went inside with a flashlight. There, in the dark, the side of Therese's face suddenly shone out from the wall, and all three men stopped breathing for a moment.

When the light was found and turned on, the whole figure appeared. It was a large wax-dressed automaton, beautiful in a dangerous way, with golden hair, lifted lips, and a face too living for comfort. The body below the shoulders was made broad and heavy so that it could stand and move without falling, and the feet were unnaturally large. The key was still on the inside of the locked door, and on the floor there were only the flat, repeated tracks of the doll's feet. Norimizu studied them and said that the murderer had first walked in the doll's path and later made the doll walk over those same marks, erasing the human trace. Then, using thread through the keyhole, he had made the doll pass the door and turn the key from within.

To prove it, he used Hasekura as a model and showed how the thread could pull the long key round as the moving body pressed it at the right moment. The

lock fell into place, the thread snapped, and the trick was done. Inside the doll's back they found a delicate mass of wheels, rods, springs, and small controls. The machine could walk, stop, move its arms, and grasp or release an object, but Norimizu said it could not itself carve the mark on a living, dying woman. Then they set it walking, and with every small step it gave out a fine trembling metallic sound, as if a hidden string were ringing inside it. That sound stayed in Norimizu's mind as they left the room, crossed the gallery, learned that Ekisuke had vanished, and returned to find Hasekura writing down a list of unanswered questions. Norimizu read them, added one more about why the armored figures had been moved from the foot of the stairs, and at that very moment Kuga Shizuko entered the room.

Part 4

The door opened softly, and Kuga Shizuko came in. She was dressed all in black, and the dark cloth made her face look even paler than before. She did not seem confused like the others in the house. Instead she carried herself with a tight, almost religious self-control, as if she had already lived for many days inside her own fear and had made a place for it in her mind. Hasekura felt at once that she had come not simply as a witness, but as someone who had been standing very near the center of the evil that now filled the mansion. Norimizu asked her to sit, and when she began to speak, her voice was low but steady.

She said that since Dr. Santetsu's death the whole atmosphere of the house had changed. Before that time, even if the family had been strange, it had still possessed a kind of order. But afterward each person had begun to lose calm in a different way. The four foreign musicians, who had once lived together without open quarrel, had grown silent and watchful. As the new year began, they came out of their rooms less and less, and every day their fear became easier to see. Danneberg, Shizuko said, had grown worst of all, and in the last days had allowed almost no one to approach her except Shizuko and Ekisuke.

Norimizu asked whether she had any clear idea of the cause. Shizuko

answered that she could not explain it in ordinary terms. There might have been no simple fight over money, and the four musicians had no direct claim to the family estate. Yet that did not matter, because the fear in the house had gone beyond such common motives. "I do not know why," she said, "but they all believed that their lives were in danger." When Norimizu pressed her about why the feeling had become sharper only recently, she answered with a little bitter smile that unless she were Swedenborg or John Wesley, she could not name the spirit that walked there. Still, she knew this much: Danneberg had been trying desperately to escape from some evil presence.

Then she explained what had happened the night before. At Danneberg's own request, a "Judgment of God" had been held at nine o'clock. The center of that ritual was one of the strange objects left behind by Santetsu: a Hand of Glory, a dried hand said to have been taken from a hanged corpse and preserved in vinegar. On each finger of that dead hand they set a corpse-candle made from the fat of an executed criminal. The old belief, she said, was that if such candles were lit, any guilty person present would lose strength, stiffen with terror, and betray the truth of his heart. The persons present had been Hatataro, the four foreign musicians, Shizuko herself, and Kamitani Nobuko. Tsutako had been staying in the mansion for a time, but she had left early that very morning.

Hasekura asked in a strained voice who had been struck by that terrible light. Shizuko lowered her head before answering. "It struck Mrs. Danneberg herself," she said. The moment the corpse-candles were lit, Danneberg had cried out, "Santetsu!" and then fallen senseless. That cry had shaken everyone in the room, because the dead scholar's name had burst from her with no warning and with unmistakable terror. Yet even that had not been the only strange thing. At almost the same time, Ekisuke, who was near the neighboring room, reported that he had seen a bizarre human shape on the projecting outer ledge beyond. No one in the gathering had left the room, and still that shadow had appeared.

There was more. Directly below that ledge, on the ground outside, marks had later been found that did not look like ordinary footprints at all. They formed two lines in a way that seemed to ignore the natural movement of a human body, and

where the two lines met there were scattered fragments of a broken photographic plate. The four details stood close together in time, yet they did not seem to belong to one easy pattern. Danneberg's collapse, the figure outside, the impossible marks below, and the shattered plate all seemed to point in different directions. Hasekura felt that the case was widening instead of narrowing. Norimizu, however, did not show confusion. If anything, his eyes became calmer as the mysteries multiplied.

He repeated several of the facts aloud, not as if speaking to the others, but as if arranging them inside his own mind. Then he said that the glowing corpse and the carved crest-wound could not be understood by themselves. However strange those two things looked, they had been prepared by something earlier. "We must go back," he said, "to the Judgment of God." Hasekura asked whether he truly believed that dead candles and old magic could explain murder. Norimizu answered that he did not believe in miracle, but he believed very strongly in human design. Whenever men spoke of a wonder, he said, it was wise first to ask what sort of machine, light, heat, shadow, or chemical trick had been hidden inside it.

He then spoke of an old case described in a foreign record, in which a dead body had seemed to move its hand and make the sign of the cross. Many had taken it for a sacred event. But by examining the report closely, he had concluded that the so-called miracle had been caused by five candles arranged with calculated skill. Four short candles had been cut on the slant and set around the body, while a fifth, longer wick stood in the middle. Once lit, the heat and wax vapor from the slanted sides would rise in crossing currents and make the central flame turn. The moving light would throw a shifting shadow that looked like a dead hand making a holy sign. "If such a deception could be built once," Norimizu said, "it can be built again."

That idea did not comfort anyone. It made the mansion seem even more dangerous. A false miracle made with exact knowledge was harder to fight than a foolish ghost story, because it could wound both the nerves and the reason at the same time. Shizuko listened with her hands folded, and though her face scarcely

changed, Hasekura could see that Norimizu's explanation had not freed her from fear. She had lived too long in the poisoned air of the house. To her, science and evil were no longer enemies. In the Black Death Mansion they had already joined hands.

After Shizuko had said all she could, the room fell quiet. Norimizu did not hurry at once to call in the next witness. Instead he turned and looked again at the old bed in the dead woman's room. A strange feeling came over him there. The coldness of the place was not the dead cold of stone alone. It was different, more like the touch of living fish-skin, as if some faint pulse still moved through that little space and guided it like an unseen organism. He studied the canopy bed more closely than before and saw how rich and violent its design was. On the mahogany posts were pine-cone finials, and below them, carved with cruel care, ran the image of a fifteenth-century Venetian state galley.

At the center of the carved ship spread the wings of a headless Brandenburg eagle, straining into an invisible storm. The whole design was strange enough to seem almost like a sentence written in symbols rather than decoration. For a while Norimizu stood before it in silence, and Hasekura felt that he was trying to read not the bed itself, but the buried intention behind it. Then the spell of that thought broke. The others came back into the room, and the ordinary weight of human presence scattered the sensation. Still, Norimizu did not wholly let it go. He seemed to carry that uneasy impression with him, as though the furniture of the house itself had begun to testify.

At last, as he lifted his face from the carved eagle, they heard the quiet turn of the doorknob. The next witness had come. Kamitani Nobuko entered the room.

Part 5

Kamitani Nobuko's entrance changed the whole room. It was as if the case had climbed to its highest point and now stood on a knife-edge between the human world and something darker. One by one, the other people connected to the crimes had been tested, questioned, or pushed aside, and now only Nobuko seemed to

remain as the last living center of hope and fear. Norimizu felt it at once. If he failed here, the long black curtain hanging over the case might fall at last by the killer's own hand.

Nobuko was about twenty-three or twenty-four. She was not thin, but had a full, strong body, and the lines of her face and figure gave the impression of a woman from an old Flemish painting. Yet her face was sharply cut in a way rare among Japanese women, and that fine shape seemed to speak of unusual inner depth. Most striking of all were her round shining eyes, like dark grapes, bright with quick intelligence and restless heat. At the same time, there was something sick and hidden in that brightness, as though another light, less healthy and more dangerous, lay beneath the first.

She looked terribly worn. For three days, she seemed to have been fighting despair and pain without rest, and now little strength remained to her. Even from where the three men sat, they could see the hard rise and fall of her throat and collarbones as she struggled to breathe. When at last she reached her seat, she closed her eyes and crossed both arms tightly over her chest, as if trying to hold herself together by force. The sharp reeds in the pattern of her black mourning dress rose around her neck like the points of spears, and the accidental arrangement gave her the look of a woman being judged in some old medieval court.

Just as Norimizu was about to begin, Nobuko opened her eyes and struck first. "I will confess," she said suddenly. "Yes, when I lost consciousness in the carillon room, I was holding the dagger. Before and after Ekisuke was killed, and again in today's affair with Mrs. Krivov, I alone had no alibi. In truth, from the beginning I have stood at the end of this whole chain. So what use is there in endless foolish talk? There is no room left for debate in such a situation." She spoke with effort, stopping to breathe, and then forced herself onward. "I have my own mental disorder. At times I suffer hysterical attacks. Is not that so? I have heard it said that such illness can live beside great brilliance, and that deep disturbance may open the way to terrible actions. Everything is in place, almost too clearly in place. I am tired of saying I am not the criminal."

It was a desperate speech, yet there was something childlike in it too, almost like a defiant performance meant to seize control before anyone else could wound her. When she finished, the hard tension seemed to fall out of her body, and deep weariness came into her face. Norimizu answered in a voice so calm that it sounded almost kind. "If you can tell us the name of the person you saw in the carillon room, your mourning dress may not be needed for long." Nobuko looked at him with careful emptiness and repeated, "The person I saw?" But the stillness in her face was not innocence. It looked more like fear pressing up from below.

Kumashiro could no longer wait. He brought up the written note she had made in her clouded condition, the one that seemed to rise from some hidden part of her mind, and demanded again that she speak plainly. He told her that only two points now mattered, and that those two points could decide the whole course of her life. Then Hasekura added, in a gentler tone, that even when the mind was disturbed, truth could sometimes appear with unusual sharpness in a single instant. "Say the real value of that X," he told her. "Whom did you see? Was it Furiyagi Hatataro? Or someone else? Tell us clearly."

Nobuko whispered, "Furiyagi..." and then stopped. Her face grew whiter and whiter as if something inside her were tearing itself apart. She swallowed several times, and then suddenly a hard quick intelligence flashed across her features. "Ah," she said in a strained high voice, "so it is that person you want. Then perhaps you should ask the bats hanging in winter sleep above the keyboard recess. There was also one large white moth still alive there. If you know enough about how such creatures turn toward light, you may shine a lamp and make them tell you everything. Or, if you prefer to follow the pattern of this case, shall I simply say it was Dr. Santetsu?" She had chosen her path. Even if it destroyed her, she meant to keep silent on one certain point.

Yet after saying this, she herself seemed frightened by her own words. Kumashiro bit his lip and glared at her, but in the same instant a strange light appeared in Norimizu's eyes. Folding his arms, he leaned heavily onto the table and threw out one of his odd questions. "Santetsu? Do you mean the king of spades, that sign of evil?" Nobuko answered at once, almost without thinking.

“No. If it were Santetsu, he would be the king of hearts.” Then she gave a deep breath, as if she had revealed more than she meant to. Norimizu caught it at once. “Hearts,” he said softly. “Then love and trust.” His eyes flickered with sudden alertness. “And these bats of yours—on which side were they hanging?” Nobuko replied without hesitation, “From the keyboard, if you looked up, just above the center.”

She continued in the same strange half-symbolic manner. The bat, she said, had hung near the moth that should have been its prey, yet as long as the moth kept silent, even a cruel bat would not strike. But in real life, she said, the allegory had turned out the other way around. Then she explained that it was Mrs. Krivov who had ordered her to endure that trial in the carillon room and to play the great heavy instrument three times alone, though it was usually Levez who played it. For one moment cold anger crossed her face and was gone. She said that by the middle of the first motet her hands and feet had already begun to fail, her sight had grown dim, and a strange mental condition had come over her. While she played, she felt cold currents touching her face in broken waves, like a pattern of pain and wind. Then the requiem rising from the chapel below seemed to move away and return in exact repeating rhythm, until that rhythm dulled her suffering and drew her almost into sleep.

After the music ended and her limbs began to move again, she said, she heard no true bell tone anymore, only that pleasant empty rhythm. Then something suddenly struck the right side of her face. It burned hot at once, and in that same instant her body twisted to the right and all sense left her. It was at that very moment, she said, that she saw the moth on the hollowed ceiling. But when she returned in the morning, the moth had vanished, and only a bat hung there in its place, looking innocent. Her statement ended, and the three men looked at one another in helpless uncertainty. Mrs. Krivov, who had only recently seemed to have escaped one suspicion, now returned to the very center of danger. Kumashiro pressed her again, saying that if something had attacked her from the right, then the force must have come from the door at the end of the stair. But Nobuko refused him bitterly. She said she would never go near such a dreadful dragon, and that

even today, in the red-haired victim's case, she alone once again had no alibi.

Part 6

After Nobuko's last bitter words, no one spoke for a short time. Her face had taken on a strange emptiness, as if she had spent the last of her open strength and now would defend herself only with silence. Kumashiro looked ready to attack her again, but Norimizu did not move at once. He kept his eyes on her with a fixed, searching calm, as though he were trying to decide which part of her speech had been true, which part had been false, and which part had been true in spite of itself. At last he let her go no farther and turned the force of the room in another direction.

He began to speak, but not to Nobuko alone. He spoke to all of them as if he were laying out a thought that had been slowly hardening inside him since morning. He said that the case had already become too strange to be held inside the usual frame of murder, witness, and weapon. Too many things pointed backward, toward Santetsu, toward the old deaths, and toward the house itself. If that path was false, then everything before them would sink into superstition. But if that path was true, then the heart of the case lay not in Grete Danneberg's room alone, but in the older death that still ruled the mansion from below.

At those words, Kuga Shizuko changed color for the first time. It was only a slight change, but Norimizu saw it and fixed on her at once. He asked her, with almost cruel gentleness, whether Santetsu had possessed any bodily peculiarity of real medical importance. Hasekura did not at first understand what he meant, but Kumashiro did, and his face grew tense. Then Norimizu said the thing openly. "Was Dr. Santetsu one of those rare people whose heart lies on the right side?"

Shizuko stood frozen under the question. She looked not like a woman who wished to deceive, but like one who had long carried a dreadful truth and had suddenly found that the last cover over it had been torn away. For a few moments she could not speak. Then something desperate and honest rose in her, and she gave in all at once. "Yes," she said. "He was such a man. His heart was on the right." That one sentence seemed to shift the air in the room.

Norimizu at once pressed the next point. If Santetsu had driven a dagger into the left side, then the act could not be accepted as a simple and natural suicide. Shizuko answered that this had long troubled her. She had never been able to believe that a man of Santetsu's exact knowledge would make such a mistake in killing himself. Because of that doubt, and because fear had already filled the house, she had dared a hidden test after death. Under the skin of the corpse she had injected ammonia, and the flesh had answered with the clear red reaction seen only in a living body.

Hasekura felt sick as he heard it. A man declared dead, buried with honor, and yet perhaps still alive at the moment he was laid away underground—that thought was worse than many murders. Shizuko went on in a shaking voice. Santetsu, she said, had long feared premature burial. It was one reason why, when the house was first built, he had ordered the making of a large underground crypt beneath it. There had also been a special signal arrangement, a thread and bell mechanism, by which a buried man might call the living if breath still remained in him.

Then came the most terrible part. On the morning after the burial, the signal thread had been found broken. Shizuko had seen it with her own eyes. Yet she had not had the courage to go down to the crypt and face what that might mean. She had lived ever since with the thought that Santetsu might have woken in the coffin, called for help, and received none. When she said this, even Kumashiro lost his rough voice and stood silent. No one in that room could keep the mind from painting the scene.

Norimizu did not let emotion master him, but Hasekura could see that even he had been struck hard. If Santetsu had not died when people thought he died, then the whole line of past and present crimes had to be examined again from the ground up. It would mean that the dead scholar's last hours had been hidden by a false appearance, and that the crypt under the mansion might preserve material signs that no living witness could give. "Then we have delayed too long already," Norimizu said. "The house below must be opened."

Even so, he did not rush blindly. He asked again about Santetsu's habits, his

fear, his manner of burial, and every small practical detail Shizuko could remember. He wanted to know the route to the underground chamber, the method of closing the coffin space, and whether anyone had gone near it since the burial. Shizuko answered as best she could. Her words were no longer those of a guarded witness. They came like those of a woman who had at last stopped resisting the truth and now wanted only to hand over the burden.

When she finished, the room felt older than before, as if the present day had thinned and some buried time were pushing upward through it. Nobuko was forgotten for the moment. Danneberg's glowing corpse, the carved crest, the locked rooms, the vanished key, the automaton, the prophecy, and the strange trial in the carillon chamber all remained important, but beneath them now opened another layer. The Black Death Mansion had ceased to be only the scene of a new murder. It had become a place where a former death was rising again to accuse the living.

Part 7

When Kuga Shizuko finally left the room, the air that remained behind her felt empty in a strange way, like a place from which all breath had been drawn out. For a little while no one moved. Even the sounds outside the house came back with painful sharpness: a crow in the trees, a faint crack from winter ice, a small dull noise somewhere in the walls. Hasekura rubbed the back of his neck and tried to force his thoughts into order, but the facts refused to stay still. Santetsu's heart on the right side, the false wound, the red reaction in the skin, the broken thread after burial, and the underground crypt now stood together like the parts of a machine that had only just begun to turn.

At last Hasekura spoke. He said that Shizuko seemed to have followed only the visible facts, while Norimizu, on the other hand, kept reaching for some hidden abstract design behind them all. Yet both paths, he said, had now led to the same dreadful edge. "What rule can cover such a case?" he asked. "If this is still reason, it looks very close to demonology." Norimizu answered in a voice almost

without color. He said that behind the prophecy sheet already known to them, he kept feeling the existence of another missing half, one no one had yet seen. That unseen page, he believed, would connect Santetsu's book-burning, the strange house, the murders, and the deeper intention of the killer. Kumashiro listened and then added that even Ekisuke's report of the figure outside the room might belong to that same hidden order.

They might have gone on arguing longer, but Norimizu suddenly stopped listening to them. He bent his head, as if catching a far-off echo. Then, without warning, he turned and led the way out. The others followed at once. The passage through the mansion seemed narrower than before, and in the lower light of late day the carved walls and dark corners looked more watchful than human. Norimizu moved quickly now, with that dangerous stillness he sometimes showed when thought and instinct had joined hands.

The way they took led them toward the concealed lower parts of the house. At one point Kumashiro shone his light into darkness, but the beam ran uselessly across empty blackness and showed nothing. Then he stepped forward and raised it higher. At once three faces leaped out of the dark above them, so ugly and fixed that Hasekura almost cried out. They were not living men, but carved figures supporting the wall, saints and martyrs twisted into heavy stone shapes. Norimizu counted them under his breath, then broke off in a trembling voice that none of them had heard from him before. "The crypt," he said. "At last we have come to Santetsu's crypt."

Kumashiro swept the round light forward, and stone coffins flashed in and out of view. There could be no doubt now. This underground chamber had been prepared for burial from the beginning, and the cold order of it made the upper rooms of the mansion seem almost innocent by comparison. The sound of their own breathing grew loud. On the stone floor, clear even in that uncertain light, ran a line of slipper marks. They went straight toward the largest bier in the center, the one that had to belong to Santetsu. Hasekura remembered a strange phrase spoken earlier in the case, words that had sounded like nonsense when first heard, and now seemed to have been pointing to this very descent beneath the house.

Santetsu's bier differed from the others in one striking way. It had no visible legs beneath it, but seemed to rest on a solid mass of marble blocks, as if the coffin had been built into the structure of the crypt itself. Across the lid lay a light metal figure of Saint George, serving as a guardian. Kumashiro touched it and found that it could be raised. In that instant all three men felt the same terrible thought, though none spoke it. Perhaps there would be no body in the coffin at all. Perhaps the bier concealed another shaft, another tunnel, and the dead scholar had in some fashion passed out of it after burial. For one suspended moment that seemed almost more bearable than the truth.

Then the lid was lifted.

What lay inside was worse than any ghost, because it was entirely human. Santetsu was there. But the body was not arranged in the peace of burial. It was twisted in violent suffering, every line of it crying out that life had returned after the coffin was closed. The mouth gaped with a last desperate need for air. The hands had risen and clawed upward in frenzy. Even the posture of the chest and shoulders spoke of a man who had fought not death itself, but the knowledge that help should have come and did not. Hasekura felt the skin of his own face pull tight with horror. Kumashiro, though harder in nerve, stood fixed like a man looking at some judgment on the whole race of the living.

Norimizu bent lower and forced himself to see everything. On the breastbone, cut straight down in tall Latin letters, was an inscription. He read it aloud in a hushed voice: "Pater! Homo sum!" Then he translated it. "Father, I too am human." The sentence seemed less like a message to the world than a cry thrown upward from the inside of the coffin. And that was not all. Around the carved letters tiny golden grains still clung here and there, glittering faintly in the beam. Norimizu touched them and murmured that this must be part of the killer's ritual, something deliberate, theatrical, and horribly cold.

Another thing caught his eye. Between the broken teeth something small had been forced deep into the mouth. At first it looked like a bit of splintered bone, but then they saw it was the skeleton of a tiny bird. Norimizu straightened a little and spoke with a kind of grim certainty. The crypt, he said, had been fitted with a

safeguard against premature burial. A thread or line from the coffin would ring a bell if the man within still lived and moved. But if a bird's body had been jammed into the mechanism at the right place, the bell would never sound. "That is it," he said. "Santetsu revived in the coffin. He pulled for help. And the killer had already blocked the signal with a little tit chick." The words hung in the stone chamber with a force almost greater than a scream.

Now everything in the body's position became unbearable in its clarity. This was not merely a dead man disturbed after burial. It was the record of a living man's final struggle inside a sealed box. He had awakened in darkness, understood at once where he was, and called with all the strength left in him. No answer came. He had fought upward, scratched at the lid, torn at the space before his face, and at last failed there among the dead. The cruelty of the act went beyond murder. It turned another person's last human panic into an object of method and will. Even Norimizu, who had seen much, seemed for a second unable to speak.

At last he did speak, but his voice had changed. He said that the murderer had left behind not only murder, but a statement. The little bird, the blocked signal, the carved sentence, even the gold dust, all formed part of a deliberate intention. Someone had wanted this death to be read. Someone had wanted Santetsu's return to consciousness to end not in rescue, but in full knowledge of betrayal. No ordinary revenge could explain such careful moral cruelty. Hasekura, still staring at the coffin, understood then why Shizuko had called it the most ruined form of morality. It was not rage alone. It was judgment, or something that wished to look like judgment.

When at last they lowered the lid again, none of the three men was the same as when they had entered. Above them the Black Death Mansion still held its locked rooms, its mechanical doll, its poisoned fruit, and its prophecy of further deaths. But below it now lay the proof that the case had already crossed a boundary from which it could not return. Santetsu had not died in the clean manner recorded by the living. He had passed through burial, awakening, terror, and final abandonment in the dark. And somewhere in the house there still moved the mind that had arranged all of it.

Part 8

After the lid was lowered again, the three men forced themselves to examine the floor of the crypt. The slipper marks that Norimizu had noticed were now followed with greater care. They ran from the lower passage up toward the door above, and from there toward the burial platform that held Santetsu's coffin. This at last made one part of the killer's path clear. The murderer had entered from the passage connected with Mrs. Danneberg's room, opened the burial structure, and later gone out again toward the back grounds of the mansion.

There were other traces too, though less clear. In the dust lay scattered marks so old and faint that they seemed almost part of the stone itself. Yet they were enough to show that the hidden place had not been left untouched since Santetsu's burial. Some strange intruder had moved there before the present discovery. That fact deepened the horror rather than easing it. The crypt was not simply a grave below the house, but part of the living machinery of the case.

When the search could give no more, the three men closed the stone coffin with hurried hands and escaped from that crushing air. As they went back through the passage, Norimizu began at once to arrange the facts inside his mind. He spoke in fragments at first, almost as if making notes to himself. The sentence cut on Santetsu's breast, he said, was a speaking symbol, one that could not be dismissed as the random cruelty of a madman. Yet the deeper question remained. Among the few people close enough to the dead scholar, which one had received from Santetsu's life, work, or secrets the fatal push that had turned hidden disturbance into active crime?

The little bird's skeleton, the blocked warning device, and the carved Latin words all seemed to belong to one cold moral design. Norimizu said that the killer had not been satisfied with mere death. He had wanted Santetsu to wake, to understand, to call, and to fail. Such a purpose could not be explained by profit alone, or by passing anger. It suggested a mind steeped in symbol, memory, and judgment. Hasekura listened with growing unease, because the shape of the case

was moving farther and farther away from anything that could be called ordinary.

Once they were back above ground, Norimizu's line of thought changed direction. He began to speak about the strange five-point spell that had already appeared in connection with the murders, and about the four elemental spirits hidden within it: the water spirit, the air spirit, the fire spirit, and the earth spirit. Until then, he said, those names had seemed no more than a dark decorative system, something theatrical laid over the crimes. But now he believed they formed part of a precise criminal formula. The symbols were not there merely to frighten. They were instructions, or at least a map of method.

He said that the crimes had to be read like a machine built out of symbol and act together. The water spirit had already been linked to the opening of a door by water, and the air spirit to resonance, vibration, and performance. If the whole design were followed properly, the remaining symbols would not stay abstract for long. Each would point toward a concrete operation in the real world. Kumashiro, who had little patience for such theory, protested in rough disbelief. But Norimizu only answered that truth sometimes arrived dressed like a bad joke, and that one had to accept the ridiculous if the evidence demanded it.

This change in his thought led him toward another source. He asked for books connected with the legend of Doctor Faustus, and most of all for Marlowe's play about that figure. Along with it he wanted studies of the old Faust books, of hysterical sleep states, and of hereditary disorder. Hasekura gave him a tired look, but there was no laughter in it now. The case had grown too monstrous for easy mockery. If a murderer had chosen Faust as a mask, then even that mask had to be read with care.

From there they turned to the medicine room, since the missing key had at last been found. The room stood on the upper floor toward the back grounds, near the chamber where the Judgment of God had been held, and beyond an empty room that had once been meant for Santetsu's experiments. The moment they entered, a heavy medicinal smell met them. Tracks from slippers crossed the dusty floor in many directions, but none could be tied with certainty to a single person. So the search had to depend on smaller signs.

Thick dust, which might have hidden evidence in another place, here became their ally. It showed where bottles had recently been touched and where boxes had been moved. The first object that caught Norimizu's eye was a bottle of potassium cyanide with its stopper loose. That by itself proved nothing final, but it confirmed that the poison used on Danneberg could indeed have come from within the house. The room had therefore served the killer not merely as a background feature of the mansion, but as a practical source of death.

Still, even that did not satisfy Norimizu. He kept searching the shelves and cabinets, weighing not only what had been taken, but what had been left undisturbed. He was no longer hunting simply for poison. He was looking for the hidden grammar of the crimes, the exact point where symbol, chemical method, and inherited terror joined each other. Hasekura could feel that the case had entered another stage. The crypt had given them proof of one older murder, but the medicine room suggested that the next blow had been prepared with equal care by a mind still moving freely inside the Black Death Mansion.

Part 9

In the medicine room, the thick dust helped more than it hid. Norimizu and the others began with the shelves, the drawers, and the rows of bottles, looking for anything that had been touched or moved. The first thing that caught their eyes was a bottle of potassium cyanide with its stopper loose. That matched the poison used on Mrs. Danneberg, but it did not solve anything by itself. If anything, it made the method look even stranger.

Kumashiro repeated the facts in a rough, impatient way. Mrs. Danneberg had eaten the poisoned orange around midnight, and the doctor's estimate of death matched that time closely. Yet the room had been locked, no one had entered after eleven, and the victim herself had chosen the fruit. Worse still, she preferred pears to oranges, but for some reason she had taken the orange and had put the very first poisoned section into her mouth. "That is the true wonder," Norimizu said. "The killer used a crude hiding place for a very sharp poison, and yet the result was

perfect.”

He looked again at the large silver fruit dish. One orange stood out from the rest, a dark blood orange, red enough to look almost black in places. It seemed less like fruit than like something meant to disturb the nerves of anyone who saw it. The stem had been removed, and it appeared that the muddy poison had been pushed inside from there. Norimizu said that a mind capable of such clumsy brilliance was far more dangerous than a merely careful poisoner.

Then he turned from the dish and slowly examined the room itself. It was gray, bare, dusty, and heavy with old still air, with only a cabinet, the lamp, the victim’s strong glasses, and a note with a broken pencil near the bed. As he walked, he said that the glow and the carved wound had not been accidental additions after the murder. They had been needed parts of the act, helping complete the crime in some deeper way. Kumashiro mocked this, but Norimizu did not yield. He added that even the twisted right hand and the small tear near the right shoulder still asked questions no one had answered.

At the far wall he found a fresh mark, where some framed thing had recently been removed. Then he had Hasekura shut the window and lit the old table lamp, whose weak red light spread in a half-circle on the floor. He watched that light closely, marked a place on the floor, and then let daylight in again. When Hasekura asked what he had been doing, Norimizu answered, “I was trying to make a person who could stand here and yet not be seen.” At once Kumashiro pushed the note toward him and said there was no need for such guesses, because the victim herself had left a message.

On the paper was written one name: “Therese.” Hasekura said in surprise, “The automaton?” Kumashiro nodded and explained that Nobuko had identified the writing as Danneberg’s own. The violinist, he said, held a pencil in a very unusual way, and the weak rubbing of the letters matched the broken point of the pencil on the cabinet. Norimizu did not dismiss the idea, but he did not fully trust it either. Still, he admitted that the doll and the carved mark now had to be considered together, and he proposed that they inspect the doll before questioning the family any further.

When they sent for the key to the doll room, the answer came back at once and made the case darker again. The key was missing. So was the key to the medicine room, which explained why they had entered that room only after a delay. Norimizu said that the missing keys were not small accidents, but a way of measuring the depth of the killer's planning. Then the three men went to the room behind the great staircase, at the end of a narrow dead passage.

The carved panel on the door showed King Herod killing the children of Bethlehem. Norimizu remarked that the murder room door showed another gospel illustration from the same old source, and he wondered if there was a hidden link between the two. The door would not move, so instead of smashing it, they quietly cut a square opening near the bottom and crawled inside. At first the flashlight showed nothing but floor and wall. Then suddenly, out of the darkness close beside them, Therese Signoret's face seemed to rise like a ghost.

Even after the room light was turned on, the thing remained disturbing. The doll was almost life-sized, with a beautiful but dangerous face, golden hair, and clothes of blue layered cloth, yet its body below the shoulders was made too large and heavy for grace. The key still stood on the inside of the locked door. On the floor were only the broad flat tracks of the doll's feet, crossing the room in repeated lines. There were no clear human footprints where the killer should have stood.

Hasekura could make no sense of it, but Norimizu did. He said the killer had first walked in the doll's own step-length, then made the doll walk over those human tracks and erase them. After that, the killer had left by using the same line again. The only remaining question was how the door had been locked from inside, and Norimizu answered at once, "With thread." He then set up an experiment, used Hasekura in place of the doll, and showed how the body passing the threshold could pull the key by means of thread looped through the keyhole. The lock turned, the bolt fell, and the thread snapped exactly as he had expected.

After that they opened the doll's back and looked at the machinery inside. It was a dense and delicate mass of wheels, rods, springs, and controls, fine enough to look like several clocks joined into one body. Kumashiro searched for prints or

stains, but found nothing useful. Norimizu judged that the machine could walk, stop, move its arms, and grip or release an object, but could not by itself carve the strange mark found on the dead woman's body. Even so, one thing startled them when the doll was set walking. At each slow step it gave out a thin beautiful metallic trembling, as if some hidden wire inside it were singing.

That sound stayed in Norimizu's mind even after they left the room. Instead of going directly back to the medicine room, he turned into the arcade lined with armor and old pictures and stood there in sudden thought, asking one of his strange questions about a law of planetary distance. Hasekura answered with irritation, and Kumashiro with open contempt, but Norimizu seemed hardly to hear them. Then they returned to the death room, and there new trouble was waiting. Kawanabe Ekisuke, the chief servant who had watched over Danneberg during the night, had disappeared.

Kumashiro at once took that as proof of guilt. He pointed to the nearby figure of a hunchback in the decoration and said he had long suspected what part that bent little servant had played in the affair. Norimizu looked at him with quiet dislike and gave only a cold answer. Then he walked over to the carved figure and studied it closely. "This hunchback is healed," he said at last. "That is curious. On the door outside, Christ is curing the bent man. But here inside, he already stands whole." Then Norimizu added in a low voice, "And Ekisuke is likely mute now."

Part 10

Two days later, on the afternoon of the Black Death Mansion's yearly public concert, Hasekura and Kumashiro met Norimizu again in an old room of the local court building. It was already past three o'clock. The moment they saw him, both men felt that something had changed. He looked tired, but there was a hard heat in his face, and his eyes held the tense brightness of a man who had reached at least one strong conclusion. After a short silence, he put his hand on the table and said that he would now go through the case point by point, not in the confused order in which things had been discovered, but in the order in which they could

be understood.

He began with the plaster casts of the footprints. There were two main kinds, he said. One was small and made by a pure rubber gardening boot. The other belonged to a larger overshoe. At first glance the prints meant little, because the ground had been crossed, recrossed, and confused by later movement. But once the casts were made and compared, a small but important fact appeared. The smaller prints had a strangely short step for their size, and their line of movement ran in a broken zigzag, as if the wearer had not walked in a natural human rhythm.

Norimizu then turned to the question of time. Around fifty prints had been preserved in soft ground, and muddy water had gathered inside them, yet their edges were still sharp. That meant rain had not fallen on them after they were made. Since the weather had cleared around half past eleven that night, the prints must have been made after that hour. More important still, at one place near the broken photographic plate, the larger overshoe print lay over one of the smaller marks. "So," he said, "the person in overshoes came either at the same time as the wearer of the rubber boot, or afterward. Never before."

After that, he had searched the gardening storehouse. It was a rough chalet-like shed with no true floor, full of tools, sprayers, and odds and ends, and it connected to the main building by a single door. There, by the entrance, he had found the rubber boots themselves. They were long, wide-topped boots used for garden work, reaching high up the leg, and in the mud on their soles tiny shining grains could be seen. Those grains proved to be fragments from the broken photographic plate. Later, the boots were identified as the property of Kawanabe Ekisuke.

Kumashiro nodded grimly at that point, but Norimizu warned him not to jump too fast. The facts were dangerous exactly because they suggested guilt too easily. Ekisuke's boots had indeed gone from the shed to the place of the plate and back again. But the odd short stride and crooked motion did not fit the free walking pattern of a healthy man moving with purpose. "The boots are real evidence," Norimizu said, "but they may not show us the true nature of the movement. In this case, the simplest reading is often the wrong one."

He had therefore ordered three additional checks at once. First, he asked when the dead grass nearby had been burned. Second, he had the icicles on every shutter along the back grounds examined. Third, he questioned the night watch about anything seen or heard in the back garden after half past eleven. These were not random details. The burned grass might show when a path had been made. The icicles might reveal which shutter had opened during the freezing night. And the watchman's report might tell whether some movement outside the house had taken place after the poison death but before dawn.

From there Norimizu turned to another branch of the inquiry. The search of the grounds had led him to the old gardener who watched the winter plants, and pressure on that man had at last shaken loose two names. On the afternoon of the murder day, Hatataro had unusually appeared near the greenhouse. Then, on the following day, Serena had also come there, drawn by a rare orchid she especially liked. The old man had not noticed the detail of the dwarf yew leaves until Norimizu forced him to look. "That gave us two fresh flowers on the branch of suspicion," Norimizu said. "Even those who seemed most harmless had now touched the outer edge of the hidden design."

Hasekura let out a breath and said that by that point everyone connected with the mansion had become suspect. Norimizu agreed. He said the second day of the case had been the height of confusion, the point at which the killer's maze-like mind seemed to mock every effort to reach a center. That was why he had withdrawn for two days. He had needed to stop chasing single shocks and begin reading the structure beneath them. "The murderer is not merely hiding," he said. "He is composing."

Kumashiro frowned at that word, but Norimizu continued without caring. He said that the Black Death Mansion crimes could not be understood only through poison, footprints, and locked rooms. Those were real enough, but the killer had arranged them as parts of a larger pattern. That was why Norimizu had asked for certain books: Marlowe's play about Doctor Faustus, a study of the old Faust book tradition, a work on hysterical sleep states, and another on heredity in royal bloodlines. He did not claim that the culprit was a magician or scholar in any

simple sense. Rather, he believed the killer was borrowing an old dramatic structure and forcing real deaths to move inside it.

Hasekura asked whether this meant the elemental words and strange phrases were no longer mere decoration. Norimizu answered that they had probably never been mere decoration. The symbols were a criminal shorthand, a way of binding method, staging, and moral intention together. The killer was not satisfied with death itself. He wanted each death to appear as part of a chain of meaning, almost like scenes in a black ritual play. That was why an ordinary piece of evidence, such as a gardening boot or a loose bottle stopper, could not be treated as ordinary. Each one had to be read both as fact and as sign.

At last he came back to the medicine room. When the missing key was found, he and the others had gone in and discovered only the usual medicinal smell, thick dust, scattered slipper marks, and shelves of bottles. But the dust had helped them. It showed which containers had been touched and which had been left alone, and the first thing to catch the eye was the loose-stoppered bottle of potassium cyanide. That did not prove the whole case, yet it proved enough. The poison that killed Grete Danneberg had not needed to come from outside. It had been near at hand within the house itself, waiting for someone who knew exactly how to use it.

Then Norimizu leaned back and looked from one man to the other. "So here is our position," he said quietly. "A servant's boot may have been used in a movement stranger than walking. A broken plate drew two different paths together. People who seemed far from the center are no longer far from it. The killer arranges action like a dramatist, but chooses materials like a chemist and a mechanic. And in the middle stands that house, still hiding the one relation that will make all these fragments obey a single law." Neither Hasekura nor Kumashiro answered at once. They could both feel it: the case had passed beyond mere accumulation of clues. It was bending toward a single terrible form, though its full outline had not yet come into view.

Two days later, on the afternoon of the Black Death Mansion's yearly public concert, Hasekura and Kumashiro met Norimizu again in an old room of the local court building. It was already after three, and the moment they saw him, both men felt a change in him. His face was slightly flushed, and his tired body seemed to hold itself up by a fierce inner force. He looked like a man who had reached at least one hard point of certainty. After a short silence, he said that he would now explain the case item by item, in an ordered way.

He began with the footprints. Lifting the two plaster casts from the table, he said there was no need for long explanation about where they had been found. The smaller prints belonged to a pure rubber gardening boot, the kind Ekisuke used, and they ran from the garden storehouse to the place where the broken photographic plate had been found and then back again. But the line of movement was wrong. The steps were too short for the size of the boot, and the path moved in a jagged zigzag instead of a natural human line.

The shape of those smaller prints troubled him even more. He asked the others to think carefully about what such a boot ought to look like on the ground if it were truly worn by a small bent servant like Ekisuke. Yet the widths of the impressions were not steady from one mark to the next, and the toe looked too small when compared with the middle part. Most striking of all, the heel showed unusual force, as if the weight had been driven down there again and again. "The boot is real," Norimizu said, "but the movement inside it is not easy to call ordinary walking."

Then he turned to the larger overshoe prints. These began from a side door at the right end of the main building, curved along the outside of the central chapel apse, reached the broken plate, and returned by nearly the same path. Their line was more orderly than the smaller tracks, though even here the step was somewhat shorter than expected. Yet the true oddity lay not in the walking line, but in the shape pressed into the ground. The toe and heel were both strongly hollowed, the inner side curved inward, and the middle grew shallower, as if the foot inside had been twisted or bent in an unnatural way.

Norimizu then came to the question of time. Nearly fifty prints had been

preserved, and muddy water had gathered inside them, yet the edges remained sharp. That meant the rain had not struck them after they were made. Since the weather had cleared around half past eleven that night, the prints must have been laid down after that hour. More important still, at one point near the broken plate the larger overshoe print lay over one of the rubber-boot marks, so the overshoe wearer had arrived at the same time or later, but never earlier.

After that, he said, the investigation had naturally moved to the garden storehouse itself. It was a rough little chalet-like building without a proper floor, packed with tools, sprayers, and other garden things, and it connected directly with the mansion by a single door. There, close to that entrance, he found the rubber boots. They were high, wide-mouthed gardening boots, large enough to rise halfway up the thigh. Stuck in the mud on their soles were tiny bright grains from the broken photographic plate, and later it was confirmed that the boots belonged to Ekisuke.

Kumashiro gave a grim nod at this, but Norimizu warned him not to jump too quickly to a simple answer. The evidence was real, yet too perfect in the wrong way. A boot may belong to one man and still tell a story stranger than that man's own movement. He said that was why he had looked not only at the casts, but also at other surrounding details. He had ordered checks on the burned grass nearby, the icicles hanging from certain windows and taps, and anything the night watchman had seen or heard after the rain stopped.

Norimizu next explained why, in the middle of all this, he had suddenly asked for books. To men who did not know his purpose, the request might have looked like one more eccentric turn of mind. Yet he said the criminal design was no longer understandable through footprints and poison alone. For that reason he had wanted Marlowe's play about Doctor Faustus, a study of the old Faust books, a work on hysterical sleep states, and another on heredity in royal families. The killer, he believed, was not only committing murders, but arranging them inside an old dramatic and symbolic form.

From there he moved to the medicine room. Now that the missing key had been found, they had been able to enter the room on the upper floor toward the

back garden, beyond the empty chamber once meant for Santetsu's experiments and beside the room where the Judgment of God had been held. The air inside had the deep spreading smell of drugs. Slipper marks crossed the floor in every direction, but they were useless as proof. So the search had depended on dust, moved bottles, and the loss of contents.

The first thing they saw there was the loose-stoppered bottle of potassium cyanide. That matched Danneberg's death, but three other substances had also been disturbed. These were magnesium sulfate, iodoform, and chloral hydrate, plain enough things in themselves: a purgative salt, a disinfecting agent, and a sleeping drug. Hasekura had wondered what a murderer could want with such ordinary materials. Norimizu answered that the answer did not lie in the room alone, because one active substance he had in mind, pilocarpine, might also come from a plant kept elsewhere on the grounds.

So he had gone at once to the greenhouse behind the vegetable garden, beside the animal sheds and bird house. When they opened the door, a rush of thick warm air came out, heavy with pollen and the sweet overripe smell of flowers, almost too rich to breathe. Under the hanging leaves of old ferns, the place looked dark and full of wet life. Then, among the tropical plants, Norimizu found the one he wanted. It was the Yaporange plant, and on its stem there were six fresh scars where leaves had very recently been plucked away.

At that sight his face had tightened with alarm. "Six minus one is five," he said to Hasekura. "And those five can have a poisonous effect." But he added at once that in Nobuko's case all six leaves would not have been needed. That made the matter worse, not better, because it suggested selection, dose, and intention rather than blind use. The greenhouse was no longer only a place for rare plants. It had become part of the path by which living leaves, common drugs, and human nerves were being turned into instruments of crime.

Finally he described what the old gardener had told him under pressure. At first the man had tried to protect everyone in the house, but at last he named two people who had recently come near the greenhouse. On the afternoon of the first dreadful day, Hatataro had appeared there, though such a visit was unusual for

him. Then on the following day Serena had also come, drawn, the gardener said, by a rare orchid she liked very much. “So,” Norimizu said quietly, “two more flowers bloomed on that branch.” With that, the circle of suspicion widened again, and the meeting room fell silent. Every person in the Black Death Mansion now seemed capable of touching the hidden design, and yet the true center still remained unseen.

Part 12

Norimizu did not stop with footprints, poison, and the greenhouse. He said there was still one central problem left from the earlier phase of the case, and unless that one point was made clear, the whole design of the crimes would remain broken. That problem was Nobuko in the carillon room. She had been found collapsed before the bell-keyboard, still holding the dagger-like awl in her hand, and for a time it had looked as if that scene must place her near the center of guilt. Yet Norimizu now said the opposite. The scene had been arranged to make her look guilty, while in truth it showed how carefully she had been used.

He reminded the others of the facts. Nobuko had been ordered to play the great instrument alone, and not once, but three times. During the performance she had felt her body weaken, her sight blur, and a strange sleep-like state come over her. She had also said that something touched the right side of her face with a burning sensation, and that after that her senses failed. Kumashiro had treated such words as confused talk from a hysterical woman. Norimizu said that was a mistake. Her account had been clouded, but its structure was sound.

He began with the keyboard itself. The carillon keys were arranged in two levels, and when the lower keys were in motion, a player staring through the fixed upper row could be led into a powerful visual distortion. The ends of the moving lower keys seemed to bend, narrow, and slide into the shadows of the still keys above them. If the player was already tired, frightened, and made to repeat the same heavy motions again and again, the mind could be drawn into a single narrow line of strained attention. In such a state, ordinary balance of mind might

begin to fail, and a fixed attack or trance could be brought on.

“That,” Norimizu said, “is why the three performances matter.” If one could identify the person who insisted that Nobuko repeat the piece three times, one would have a direct line toward the true criminal. The order had not been an innocent musical request. It had been part of the attack. The repeated effort weakened her body, narrowed her sight, and prepared her nerves to accept the next stage of the trap. Kumashiro objected at once. Even if such visual strain were granted, he said, it still did not explain why her eyelids dropped, why her body became stiff like wax, or why the awl ended up in her hand.

Norimizu smiled in that sharp, dry way of his and took up a pencil. On a sheet of paper he quickly drew a knot and said, “This is called a cat’s-paw knot. Criminals have used it because it moves in one state and disappears in another.” Then he explained its trick. When the lower cord is pulled, the knot slowly travels downward. But once the trapped object slips free, the whole thing comes loose and becomes an ordinary line again, leaving little behind to show what has happened. In other words, the knot could create a moving action and then destroy the evidence of its own form.

He said the culprit had tied the hilt of the awl to the upper line connected with the moving key and the striker mechanism. Beforehand, the criminal had calculated both the number of strokes to be played and the height from which the knot should begin its descent. So, as Nobuko continued to perform in her blurred half-sleeping condition, the awl slowly came down before her face while turning in the air. Its bright edge flashed first one way and then another, horizontal, vertical, vanishing, and returning, like a thin strip of light in a toy water trick. The weapon did not simply hang there. It descended with rhythm and glitter.

At about the second round of the anthem, that moving blade reached the right height to pass before her eyes again and again. This, Norimizu said, was the true heart of the operation. The repeated flashing before the eyelids worked like a hypnotic pass. In certain states of nervous strain, such a light could force the lids downward, deepen confusion, and bring on a fixed bodily condition very close to wax-like rigidity. That was why Nobuko later seemed to show a contradiction

between movement and stiffness. She had not freely relaxed into that state, nor had she been acting it. It had been made in her.

Kumashiro asked then whether the drug question had been false from the start. Norimizu answered that the supposed pilocarpine administration had indeed been part of the theatrical side of the crime. The greenhouse had mattered, the missing leaves had mattered, and the chemical knowledge of the murderer still mattered. But in Nobuko's own case, the visible symptoms had been shaped at least as much by nervous manipulation, fatigue, and controlled optical attack as by any straightforward poisoning. The criminal wanted the observers to think in one direction while the real mechanism lay in another. That was the method seen everywhere in the mansion: one layer for the eye, another for the truth.

Hasekura asked how the awl came to be left in Nobuko's hand. Norimizu answered that once the descending knot reached its final point and the trapped part slipped free, the line would loosen and vanish into simplicity. The weapon would then fall into the range of her altered grasp at just the moment when her body was no longer acting under ordinary control. In that condition she could close her hand around it without conscious intention, and afterward be found holding it like an accusation made by her own fingers. The scene would look criminal, but the hand would only be the last stage of the trap.

He then returned to one detail from Nobuko's own testimony. She had said that something hot struck the right side of her face. Norimizu said this too now became clear. As the flashing awl descended and turned, it need not have cut her deeply to mark the moment of collapse. A strike or burning touch from the bright moving metal near the face was enough. That single contact, following exhaustion and repeated visual strain, could break the remaining balance of her senses. What she described as a sudden burning blow was therefore not nonsense at all, but an exact memory from the center of the attack.

When Norimizu had finished this explanation, the room stayed silent. What had seemed one of the most confused episodes in the entire case now stood before them as a piece of cold mechanical planning. Nobuko's collapse had not been the wild act of a guilty woman. It had been staged through rhythm, light, fatigue, and

a disappearing knot. And from that, Norimizu drew the conclusion he most wanted them to face. The person who ordered her to repeat the performance three times, and who had access to prepare that device at the keyboard, stood not at the edge of the mystery, but very near its center.

Part 13

They rushed up the bent staircase and came out into the key-shaped corridor above. Three doors faced them there, one in the middle and one on each side, and for a moment both Hasekura and Kumashiro felt the same sharp fear. It seemed possible that some inhuman figure might still be crouching behind one of them, waiting inside the trap it had made for others. Then the door at the far right opened. Kumashiro saw something beyond it and ran forward at once.

Nobuko was there before the great carillon keyboard. Her lower body still rested on the player's seat, but the rest of her had fallen backward, and in her right hand she gripped the narrow awl-like dagger so hard that it seemed fixed there by force. Kumashiro lost control and stamped down near her shoulder in blind anger, crying out that the truth had at last shown itself. But at that very moment Hasekura noticed that Norimizu was not looking at Nobuko at all. He stood almost dazed, staring at the middle door high above eye level.

Against the pale yellow paint of the panel a white square had been fastened. When they came close enough to read it, both Hasekura and Kumashiro felt their bodies stiffen. Written there, in harsh angular Gothic letters, was another line from the black five-point spell: "Sylphus, disappear." The cruelty of it lay not only in the words, but in the timing. Just when Nobuko had been found collapsed in a way that seemed to accuse her, the invisible hand behind the case had once again spoken first and had named the next spirit before anyone else could.

Norimizu read the line twice without moving. Then he said quietly that the joke had become more dangerous. The same strange change of sex had appeared again. The airy spirit should have been feminine, yet the writer had made it masculine, just as before. Hasekura asked if that mattered so much, but Norimizu

answered that in this case even a small grammatical violence might hide a precise criminal necessity. The person who had escaped from that corridor had not merely left a mocking message. He had left a clue in disguise.

The corridor itself made escape seem impossible. The mansion had been surrounded, men had been set in place, and the stairs below were under watch. Yet the paper was there, Nobuko was there, and the writer had vanished. It was possible, of course, that Nobuko herself had been the author and had somehow turned the snare on those watching her. But even that explanation brought no peace, because it still failed to account for the locked pattern of movement and the timing of the message. Somewhere in the case there was a second line of action, hidden behind the obvious one, and it had shown itself again.

Norimizu ordered that Nobuko be carried away carefully and that no one touch the paper until he had examined the door and the surrounding wall. He found nothing plain enough to call a direct answer. The handwriting had once again been concealed by the stiff angular style, and the line itself gave no personal mark except its deliberate use of the masculine form. Even so, that one choice deepened his suspicion that the four elemental words were no longer to be read as decoration alone. They were beginning to act like names.

Later, when the first violence of the discovery had passed, Norimizu turned his attention to the surviving members of the quartet. Levez came forward full of outward force, while Mrs. Krivov remained cold and almost proudly hostile. Norimizu said in an even voice that he could not believe the insane play would end merely with the burning of a doll or the collapse of a frightened woman. Somewhere else in the house, he said, another puppet was still being made to dance. Then he looked directly at Levez and spoke the question that had been hardening in him since he saw the new message.

“The first act gave us the water spirit,” he said. “The second gives us the air spirit. And now the charming airy creature has escaped after performing an astonishing wonder. Tell me, Mr. Levez, do you know who that Sylphus is?” Levez leaned forward with sudden force, then seemed to lose his breath halfway through his own answer. He tried to turn the question aside as a joke, but the effort

failed. What broke the moment, however, was not Levez's unease. It was the sudden change in Krivov.

Until then she had been defiant, almost insultingly firm. Now a shadow ran across her face, and when she spoke, the voice did not sound wholly like her own. "I saw him," she said. "I truly saw that man. The one who came into my room last night may have been that Sylphus." Kumashiro cut in at once and asked whether her door had been locked. She answered that it certainly had been. The reply should have made the whole thing useless, but instead it only drew Norimizu in more deeply.

He asked her to describe exactly what she had seen. Krivov said that she had been alone when she became aware of a presence in the room. She had not heard the normal sound of entry, and at first she thought she was still near sleep. But then she saw, not clearly enough to give a face, yet enough to know that a man stood there. The moment had been short and dreadful. Before she could do more than seize the reality of it, the figure was gone again, and the locked room remained locked.

Hasekura felt the old chill return. A locked-room intruder, a vanished man, a masculine air spirit, and a woman who spoke as if she had half seen a dream and half remembered a fact—these things belonged too easily to the diseased world of the mansion. But Norimizu was listening with a different purpose. He was no longer asking whether the figure had been real in the simplest sense. He wanted to know what kind of imagination the killer had tried to awaken. The word Sylphus, he thought, had not been chosen only because it sounded strange. It had been chosen because it called up a very special kind of false presence: light, invisible, entering where entry seemed impossible.

That idea led him toward the library. He had already noticed that certain books of poetry had been taken down and recently opened. If the murderer had built one part of the crime from old dramatic and magical forms, he might also have fed his mind on poetic pictures of airy spirits, false visions, and delicate supernatural beings. Norimizu therefore began to suspect that the killer was not simply staging terror, but borrowing ready-made images from literature and

forcing living people to act inside them. In that case, the question “Who is the Sylphus?” was not a foolish fancy at all. It was the nearest thing to a real name that the criminal had yet dared to leave behind.

By the end of that interview, no direct solution had been won, but the ground under the case had shifted again. Nobuko’s collapse no longer stood alone. It now belonged to a sequence: first the water spirit, then the air spirit, each joined to a crime and each made masculine by intention. Krivov’s statement, however dark and uncertain, had given Norimizu something he could use. Somewhere in the house moved a mind that wanted to be understood through symbols before it was understood through law, and that very vanity was beginning to expose it.

Part 14

Later, when Hasekura asked how he had first begun to break the wall around the air-spirit mystery, Norimizu answered that the method had not started in the corridor at all. It had started in the library. Before the scene with Nobuko, he had examined the shelves there and had noticed that several books of poetry had recently been opened. Among them were volumes by Pope, Falke, and Lenau. That detail, small in itself, changed the whole color of the case for him.

He said that a criminal mind of the ordinary type might borrow a single phrase and be satisfied with that. But the mind at work in the Black Death Mansion was not ordinary. It did not merely hide behind masks. It delighted in gathering images, turning them over, and then forcing living people to move inside them. “That is why,” Norimizu said, “I did not ask myself only what the word Sylphus meant. I asked what kind of imagination would choose it.” The answer brought him not to law books or chemistry manuals, but to Pope’s poem *The Rape of the Lock*.

In that poem, he explained, the sylph is not a rough spirit of the wind in any simple folk sense. It is a fine, false, glittering thing, made for deception, vanity, surface movement, and unreal presence. It belongs perfectly to a mind that wishes to produce an impossible visitor in a locked room, or a visible figure that may in

truth be no solid intruder at all. For that reason, when Krivov said she had seen a man enter her locked chamber, Norimizu did not first ask whether the statement was true in the bluntest sense. He asked what sort of image had been planted in her mind, and what sort of literary mask the killer had chosen for that planting.

That was why he turned to Levez and threw the word back at him like a hook. The question itself was simple enough. Did he know who this Sylphus was? But the true point of the question was not Levez's surface answer. It was to see what chain of association would begin moving in the minds around him. If a person had recently lived in those poetic images, the name would not remain an empty name. It would pull after it a whole cluster of hidden pictures and half-conscious responses.

Norimizu then admitted that this test was risky. If he had been wrong, it would have looked like one more of his useless learned tricks. But he had trusted the strange power of loosened mental states. "A mind under strain," he said, "will often hide a fact and reveal an image. It will refuse to give you the criminal directly, and then, in the next breath, hand you the shape of the criminal's theater." So he waited, and he watched not only what was said, but what kind of inner world each speaker suddenly showed.

Krivov's statement about the man in the locked room at first seemed only to deepen the confusion. Yet to Norimizu it did something far more useful. It did not give the culprit's face, but it revealed the exact dramatic effect the culprit wished to produce. A delicate male air-spirit, an impossible visit, a silent entry, a vanishing form, a witness left trembling between dream and certainty—these belonged together too neatly to be accidental. "That," Norimizu said, "was the moment I knew I was no longer dealing with a mere practical murderer. I was dealing with a diseased stage-director."

Still, that knowledge alone was not enough. He needed to know whether the literary images in the house had been passively admired or actively used. So he tried another method. Instead of accusing, he quoted. He gave half-lines from well-known dramatic and poetic passages and waited to see whether those near him would complete them naturally, too naturally, or with some revealing

distortion. This was not a school exercise. It was a nerve test. In a relaxed mind the response might be careless, but in a strained and guilty or half-entranced mind the choice of the next line could expose secret preoccupation.

One of these trials gave him an answer he had hoped for. A line was answered with another that contained the word “thrice,” yet the speaker used it smoothly, almost unconsciously, as if the number three carried no special weight at all. But to Norimizu it mattered greatly, because by then he already knew that the repetition of acts in this case was never innocent. Nobuko had been made to repeat her heavy performance three times. Other movements in the case also returned in calculated pattern. So when a response came back carrying that word without hesitation, he treated it not as ornament, but as another accidental confession from the world of the crime.

He then tried a similar pressure from another side and received in answer a line about the mark of a dagger and the shudder it sent through the body. That, too, mattered. The mansion case was full of wounds, marks, and imprints: the carved crest on Danneberg’s body, the cut words on Santetsu’s breast, the descending awl before Nobuko’s face, the symbolic messages left on doors, and even the strange attention paid to seals, stamps, and family signs. The reply therefore showed not only literary knowledge, but a mind already vibrating in sympathy with the same narrow band of images that governed the murders.

Hasekura asked at this point whether Norimizu meant that everyone in the house had become infected by one shared nightmare. Norimizu answered that such a description was not wholly wrong. But he added that shared nightmare and individual guilt were not the same thing. Several minds in the Black Death Mansion had clearly been living too long among poison, secrecy, hereditary fear, religious drama, and symbolic play. Yet only one of them had the cold power to turn that shared diseased atmosphere into exact action. His task, therefore, was not merely to identify who understood the symbols. It was to identify who commanded them.

Then he returned, at last, to Pope’s poem itself. In the second canto, he said, the sylph does not act alone. Around it move lesser airy beings, each assigned to

some delicate office. One is linked to the combing of hair. Others attend small objects of adornment and vanity. That was why he had called the answer simple. Once he saw that the murderer was using the sylph not as a random occult term but as a poetic system, he no longer looked at the women of the house merely as persons. He looked at them as figures being placed inside roles. And from that moment, he said, Krivov ceased to be only a witness who feared a vanished man. She became a central interpreter of the very airy fraud that the criminal had chosen to perform.

Yet Norimizu did not say that this alone proved her guilt. He was too careful for that. What it proved, he said, was something subtler and in a way more dangerous: Krivov's statement had not risen from ordinary fright. It had been shaped inside the same imaginative field from which the murderer was drawing strength. Whether she stood at the center of that field or only beside it still had to be settled. But by then one thing had become certain. The air-spirit was no longer a mere word pasted on a door. It had become a working key, and through it Norimizu had begun at last to see the outline of the hand that moved behind the whole black performance.

Part 15

Norimizu said that the answer he drew from Pope's poem was, in one sense, very simple. In the second canto of *The Rape of the Lock*, the airy spirit does not stand alone. Around it move four little attendants, each with a special task in the world of dress, hair, and surface beauty. The first of these is Crispissa, the fairy who attends to the combing and ordering of hair. "That is where I began," Norimizu said. "Not with a name in law, but with a function in a false poetic world."

Hasekura frowned and asked what such a literary toy could possibly prove. Norimizu answered that in ordinary cases it would prove little or nothing. But this murderer was no ordinary murderer. He was building a black drama out of symbols, verse, ritual, and bodily acts. So once the word Sylphus appeared, and

once he knew that books of Pope, Falke, and Lenau had recently been opened in the library, it became necessary to ask which living person in the house best matched the criminal imagination behind those images.

He turned then toward Mrs. Krivov, and his voice grew thinner and more exact. Until then, he said, he had observed her from the outside only in fragments: the red hair, the scattered freckles, the line of the nose, the form of the brooch at her breast. None of those things was proof by itself. But taken together, they formed a strangely sharp image, one he could not dismiss. He even added, with a cold harshness Hasekura disliked, that her ornaments suggested an old symbolic habit, almost like a private creed worn on the body.

Hasekura interrupted him at once. He said this kind of reasoning was too thin and too strange, like looking at an insect specimen through glass instead of speaking of a living soul. "Tell me her mind," he demanded. "Tell me the movement of her heart and the smell of her breath. I do not want a cabinet of signs." Norimizu nodded as if he had expected the objection. "Very well," he said. "Then I will not begin with her body. I will begin with her inner forest."

That was when he named the poem again: *The Birch Wood* by Gustav Falke. Hasekura remembered at once that Norimizu had already spoken in that strange way before the three surviving foreigners, and had thrown the title out like a piece of bait into dark water. Norimizu then reconstructed the earlier scene for them. He had asked, almost casually, whether anyone knew who had written a certain poem. Krivov had answered stiffly that she did not know. But Serena, calm and dry as ever, had said it was Falke's *Birch Wood*.

Norimizu said he had at once become satisfied with that answer, though not for the reason the others thought. What mattered was not only the name of the poem, but the effect that its title had on the people before him. He had then said that the criminal who moved outside the dead woman's room had surely seen that birch wood, yet could not speak of it plainly. Krivov, instead of remaining silent, had answered in sudden bright excitement with a different poetic line, one that seemed almost playful. To Norimizu this mattered very much. A mind truly untouched by those images would not leap so quickly from one poem to another

under pressure.

More important still, her correction of the imagined movement had betrayed her. She seemed to prefer the idea of gliding motion, of a figure slipping away in quiet ease, almost like a dream. But Norimizu answered her at once that the man had not glided at all. He had gone away in a stagger, unsteady and burdened. That correction was not random. The case had already shown signs of distorted walking, broken step, and forced bodily movement. So even here, in a talk about poetry, the murderer's world had begun to bend back toward physical fact.

Hasekura listened with growing unease. He could now see what Norimizu meant by using literature as a nerve test. He was not proving guilt through poetry in any childish sense. He was forcing those under suspicion to reveal the hidden pictures with which their minds were already crowded. In that light, Krivov's answers no longer looked like cultured conversation. They looked like involuntary movement inside the same symbolic theater from which the crimes themselves had been drawn.

Norimizu pressed farther. Crispissa, the hair-fairy, could not be separated from Krivov's visible presence. The image of hair had already appeared again and again in the case, not only as ornament, but as a material thing. Hair had been caught, marked, burned, and used to create effect. A person whose whole impression began with vivid hair, and who responded so quickly to the airy world of Pope and Falke, could not lightly be pushed back to the edge of the mystery. "That is why," Norimizu said, "I began to think not merely that she knew the criminal theater, but that she may have helped direct it."

Kumashiro was delighted by this turn and wanted to move at once to accusation. But Norimizu still held back from the final leap. He said that suspicion had sharpened around Krivov, yes, but sharp suspicion was not yet the same as secure truth. What he had gained was the outline of a personality: proud, bitter, steeped in imagery, quick to answer through symbols, and perhaps capable of using the fears of others as material. Whether she was the central hand or only one dangerous branch of the design still remained to be seen. Yet for that very reason, he said, she had to be watched more closely than ever.

The watch was in fact so tight that no one believed further harm could come to her. The mansion was ringed with men in plain clothes, and every important path was under attention. Afternoon sunlight fell strongly on the central front of the house, and for a little while the place almost seemed less like a den of mechanical horror and more like a heavy old country house trapped inside ordinary day. At about two-forty, Krivov was in the armory room on the second floor, almost directly beneath the central tower, reading by the stone table near the window. No one imagined that the next marvel of cruelty was already about to strike.

It came from behind her without warning. One of the decorative Finnish fire-crossbows in the room was suddenly discharged by an unseen hand. The bolt shot past the side of her head, grazing her hair, and its force dragged her body up and sideways before hurling her toward the shutters. The pronged arrow lodged fast between the bars, while her hair caught and twisted around the rear notch. In the next instant her body was thrown out through the window, and there she hung in the open air, caught by that single brutal line, turning and spinning above the ground like a living puppet.

Those who saw it were struck dumb. It was exactly the kind of scene the Black Death Mansion seemed to desire: not only blood and danger, but a grotesque theatrical picture forced upon every eye at once. Krivov, who had so recently stood near the center of suspicion, was now herself turned into a marionette in full daylight. Once again the hidden intelligence of the house had acted under heavy watch and had escaped. And as Norimizu looked up at the spinning body in the winter sun, he understood that the case had changed yet again. Whether Krivov had been criminal, accomplice, or prey, the invisible stage-director behind the Black Death Mansion was not finished with any of them.

Part 16

The first wild shock passed, but the house did not return to calm. Men ran below the window, servants cried out in confused voices, and for a little while no

one could tell whether Mrs. Krivov was still alive or already lost. When at last the movement around her body grew more ordered, the investigators turned at once to the question that now stood before them. If this attack had been made in full daylight and under heavy watch, then either the murderer had become mad with boldness or the whole arrangement of the house still hid some path no one had yet understood. Norimizu did not speak much at first. He watched, listened, and seemed to be measuring some inner line that had only now begun to show itself.

Serena and Levez were questioned again before the day was out. Serena answered without delay that at the time of the new attack she had been in her own room, cleaning Gioconda, the great Saint Bernard dog. Then, turning at once toward Levez, she added that he had been near the Water Surprise fountain. At that, a shadow crossed Levez's face, sharp enough to be seen even before he spoke. But he forced a laugh and replied with strained lightness, saying something foolish about how a crossbow would break if the bolt were set in the wrong direction. The answer was too quick and too unnatural to comfort anyone.

The two surviving musicians did not stop there. They went on in a sour and cruel way to criticize Tsutako's movements, as if by speaking enough of another person they might push suspicion away from themselves. When they finally left the room, men in plain clothes came at once with fresh reports on the others. Hatataro and Kuga Shizuko had been in the library. Tsutako, now recovered enough to move about, had been downstairs in the salon. Only Nobuko remained again without a firm alibi. No one had clearly seen her at the crucial time.

Hasekura looked almost satisfied as he heard that. He said that everything now seemed to be gathering around Nobuko and that the road before them had become nearly straight. But Norimizu did not share that mood. He took the report and pushed it into his pocket with a face so troubled that Hasekura felt at once the matter had grown worse rather than simpler. Then Norimizu brought out the rough sketch of the grounds and the glass fragments found near the tracks outside. When the wrapping was opened, another surprise leaped out. The broken pieces were not from some common bottle or window, but from a photographic plate.

That discovery struck them with its own strange force, because it belonged

to a different order of thought from poisoned fruit, hanging bodies, and mechanical dolls. A photographic plate meant recording, fixing, preserving, and perhaps hiding. For a moment even Norimizu seemed unable to speak. Then he drew a long breath and said that today's event had done exactly what he had feared it would do. Instead of clearing the case, it had made the blindfold thicker. The criminal, he said, had once again acted in such a way that the visible violence only covered a deeper and less visible motion.

He then gave what Hasekura privately thought was his third great strange theory of the day. Norimizu said that the killer, that beloved enemy of his, had begun more and more openly to play with the prophecy itself. "The text is no longer being obeyed in a plain way," he said. "It is being mocked." The words were startling enough, but he went on more sharply. Serena, he said, had been foretold to die upside down, yet that form had already appeared in Nobuko's fainting body before the true death. Krivov was marked to die with her eyes covered, and today the event that had just taken place might not be the final form of her fate at all.

Hasekura objected that this sounded like mountain-spirit nonsense, and Norimizu answered him without irritation. He said that if the criminal had chosen to stage murder through symbol, then one could not solve the case by refusing to read symbols. The water spray from the fountain, the fire hidden in metal, the shifting of one elemental figure to another, and the deliberate failure of a murderous act all mattered. "What you call fantasy," he said, "may be nothing but exact criminal language in disguise." Then he added that if his instinct did not fail him, the day's event would not close anything. It would only lead them deeper into the black machinery below it.

From there his thought turned in a direction even stranger. He said that Levez's figure had clung to his mind all day with unusual force, not merely because the man was large, foreign, and outwardly brave, but because he seemed to belong to a cast already half formed in Norimizu's thoughts. The names of the murdered and the living musicians had begun to remind him of a historical list, one tied to battle, command, and death. The connection was not yet complete in

Hasekura's mind, but to Norimizu it had already begun to harden. "The plot is being cast," he said. "The names are not standing alone."

He then turned his mind on Krivov with cold and almost cruel precision. At first, he said, he had looked at her in one way only from the outside: the red hair, the freckles, the shape of the nose, the little signs worn on the body, all of them pointing toward a particular heritage and a particular symbolic habit. But that was not enough by itself. It only told him that she was a woman who might live among signs, loyalties, and hidden patterns. The harder question was whether she merely belonged to that world or was using it as a weapon.

Norimizu said that even the wall Krivov had built around herself, all her pride, coldness, and seeming control, might not withstand a direct blow forever. He believed that one could still break through it. Yet he also admitted that this did not prove her guilt in the simple sense Kumashiro wanted. A person might carry the same symbols as the killer and still not be the guiding hand. What mattered now was that Krivov, Levez, Serena, Nobuko, and Hatataro no longer stood in separate circles. The case was beginning to pull them toward one design, as if each had already been placed in a role.

By the time evening drew in, no one in the Black Death Mansion could still believe that the investigation was moving in a straight line toward an easy end. The attack on Krivov had not merely added one more crime. It had changed the shape of the whole case. The prophecy was being bent, repeated, and half fulfilled before the true deaths themselves. Hidden records had begun to appear in the form of glass plates. Alibis pushed suspicion toward Nobuko, yet Norimizu's mind kept refusing the easy road. Somewhere behind the day's violence, he felt, the criminal had made one more move on a board that the others still could not fully see.

Part 17

After the attack on Krivov, the investigators gathered again in a room that felt colder than before, though no window stood open. The case had now passed beyond ordinary fear. A poisoned musician, a buried man who woke in his coffin,

a woman struck down before the carillon, and now another woman thrown out into daylight like a hanging doll had formed a chain too dark for chance. Norimizu stood silent for some time, and when he finally spoke, he said that the name Sylphus could no longer be treated as a mere theatrical joke.

He reminded Hasekura and Kumashiro of the strange point that had troubled him from the first appearance of the word. The spirit of air should not have been given a masculine form, yet the author of the note had forced it into that shape on purpose. That violence against the natural form of the image mattered. It meant that the murderer was not simply borrowing occult language, but bending it to fit some real person hidden behind the symbol. “The alias matters,” Norimizu said. “A spirit is being used here as a mask for a human name.”

He then returned to the books that had recently been opened in the library. Pope, Falke, Lenau, and others had not been touched by accident. Someone in the mansion had been living inside poetic images of air, beauty, frailty, and false apparitions. That was why the word Sylphus had immediately led him toward a chain of feminine attendants, ornaments, hair, and surface grace, even though the note itself used a masculine form. The image had begun in poetry, but the criminal had forced it into another body. That made the symbol more exact, not less.

Hasekura objected that such reasoning still seemed too delicate for a murder case stained with poison and blood. Norimizu answered him sharply this time. He said that in the Black Death Mansion, no physical fact ever came alone. Each one arrived dressed in image, rite, or theatrical framing. If he ignored that second layer, then the murderer would always remain one step ahead. What mattered now was not only who had touched which object, but who had learned to think in the same symbolic grammar as the crimes.

From there he moved toward the question that had long stood at the center of the whole case: Nobuko’s motive. That question, he said, had seemed impossible because everyone had been asking it in the wrong way. If Nobuko were merely taken as a young woman caught in hysteria, jealousy, or confused guilt, then nothing fit. Her position in the chain of deaths was too strange, too central, and too cruelly prepared. But if one stopped asking what common desire moved

her, and instead asked what hidden place she occupied in the very blood-structure of the house, then a new road appeared.

At that moment he drew something from his pocket and laid it on the table. It was not a letter, not a photograph, and not a legal document in any clean form. It was a reconstructed photographic plate made from shattered fragments that had been hidden inside the torso of Rodin's *The Kiss*. Hasekura and Kumashiro bent forward at once. Even before the words could be read clearly, they understood that this broken dark plate carried a kind of truth more dangerous than a spoken confession, because it had been prepared long before the present murders and had waited in silence for the right hand to bring it back to light.

Norimizu had pieced the fragments together with great care, and now the hidden writing appeared in broken but legible lines. One section referred to Danneberg and a dangerous trait linked to arsenic. Another concerned Kawanabe and a risk connected with the thymus and sudden death. But the last section was the one that shook the room. It said that the writer could not bear to sacrifice his own child, and so the girl born to him had been exchanged for a boy and later kept close as his secretary. That girl, the text declared, was Kamitani Nobuko.

No one spoke for several seconds. The silence was not the silence of confusion now, but of blow after blow landing in exact sequence. If the plate told the truth, then Nobuko had not stood near the center of the case by accident at all. She was Santetsu's own daughter, hidden in plain sight, raised under a false relation, and forced from childhood into the poisoned architecture of the house. Hatataro, according to the same record, did not belong to Santetsu's true bloodline in the same direct way. At one stroke the moral and emotional map of the mansion changed.

Norimizu said quietly that this was the answer to the so-called impossible motive. Nobuko's place in the case had not been created by sudden desire, ordinary greed, or passing madness. She had been made into a living knot of inheritance, concealment, duty, and sacrifice long before the first scene of the present murders began. Her nervous suffering, her strange centrality, and the repeated effort to stage her as culprit now took on a different meaning. She was

not simply a suspect. She was one of the deepest products of the black design Santetsu had left behind.

Yet even this revelation did not finish the matter. If anything, Norimizu said, it made the case even more severe. A hidden daughter explained Nobuko's position, but it did not by itself identify the guiding criminal hand still active in the mansion. Someone had known, or partly known, this buried structure and had used it like a playwright's secret script. The prophecy, the symbols, the staged attacks, the manipulation of alibis, and even the selective exposure of old facts all showed that the killer was not merely avenging the past. He was exploiting it with cold artistic calculation.

Kumashiro, unable to contain himself, said that this at last proved Nobuko guilty, since no one else stood so near the forbidden center of blood. Norimizu turned on him with open irritation. He said that such a conclusion was lazy and blind. Nobuko's hidden birth explained why she could be used, feared, and placed at the heart of appearances, but that was not the same as proving she had directed the machinery. "A person may stand at the center of a trap," he said, "and still not be the hand that built it." That distinction, he added, was exactly what the murderer had counted on others to miss.

By the end of that meeting, the case had entered a new and harsher light. The spirit-name Sylphus had become more than a mockery on a door. The broken plate had transformed Nobuko from an uncertain figure into Santetsu's concealed child. And the Black Death Mansion itself seemed more than ever like a place where family, artifice, symbol, and science had fused into one long act of moral corruption. Yet the final name still had not been spoken. Somewhere within that ruined household, the true ruler of the black performance remained hidden, and Norimizu knew that the next step would have to strike not at appearances now, but at the secret power behind them all.

Part 18

The broken photographic plate lay on the table between the three men, and

for a long while no one touched it. The fragments had not merely given them one more clue. They had torn away the last veil from the deepest mystery in the house. Kamitani Nobuko, whom everyone had watched as witness, victim, suspect, or decoy, was now shown to be Santetsu's hidden daughter. In that one revelation, motive, inheritance, secrecy, and suffering all came together with terrible force.

Norimizu did not rush into loud accusation. His voice, when he spoke again, was quieter than before, and that quietness made the room feel even harder to breathe in. He said that the plate did not act like a legal confession written for a court. It was older, colder, and in a way more truthful than a spoken statement. It belonged to the secret structure of the Furiyagi house itself, and because of that, it explained not only who Nobuko truly was, but why her place in the case had been so unnatural from the beginning. She had not drifted toward the center by accident. She had been placed there long ago by another will.

From that point, he said, her later conduct could at last be read in the right order. Nobuko had not moved through the case like a simple criminal driven by money or common jealousy. She had lived her whole life inside a false relation, close to the house and yet denied her true name. Santetsu had hidden her, kept her near as a secretary, and at the same time preserved Hatataro as the visible heir. Such an arrangement could only deform the heart of anyone forced to live within it. By the time the present crimes began, Nobuko's mind had already become one of the mansion's most dangerous chambers.

Hasekura asked whether that alone was enough to explain murder. Norimizu answered that it was not enough by itself, but that nothing in the Black Death Mansion ever came alone. Hidden blood, false rank, bodily fear, symbolic theater, and long moral poison had all worked together there. Nobuko's nervous attacks, her strange confessions, and her repeated presence at the crucial scenes had therefore been both real and misleading. She was not a woman whose sickness proved innocence, but neither was she a simple madwoman striking blindly. She acted within a pattern that had grown around her for years.

He then returned to the matter of the supposed pilocarpine poisoning. That episode, he said, had been one of the cleverest false pictures in the entire case.

Leaves had indeed been taken, and the greenhouse had indeed been used to point suspicion in a certain direction. But the appearance of poisoning had been enlarged and dramatized beyond its true value. Nobuko needed observers to believe that her body had been mastered by strange medicine, because that belief helped cover the more exact workings of fatigue, hypnotic attack, planned collapse, and deliberate staging. In that sense, the drug story had been a painted scene hung in front of a mechanical wall.

After that, Norimizu spoke of Ekisuke, and for the first time in many hours something like pity entered his face. He said that the old servant had been less a partner than a tool. Nobuko had drawn him into the machinery of the crime, made use of his obedience, and at some point had even forced him into absurd costume and movement that he scarcely understood. The gardening boots, the strange gait, the armor, and the grotesque appearances in the half-lit parts of the house all belonged to that exploitation. "Of all of them," Norimizu said, "he may have been the most miserable, because he served evil without ever becoming equal to it."

Kumashiro asked then about the final chapel scene, the one that had remained clouded by darkness, sound, and panic. Norimizu said the explanation there was now plainer than it had first seemed. Two low sounds had been heard in the dark, and people had tried to decide whether they came from Nobuko or Hatataro. But that question, he said, had been asked too crudely. Mrs. Krivov had stood in a position where Nobuko's pedal-made groan did not strike her clearly, while the faint sound made by Hatataro's bow or cue reached her with unnatural sharpness because of the acoustic focus of the place.

So when Krivov moved toward Nobuko, thinking the danger or appeal lay there, she exposed herself to the true stroke. In that shift of position the chapel itself became part of the murder weapon. The dark, the music, the resonance, the dead points of sound, and the false direction of the human ear all served the killer at once. Then came the thrust from behind. "That was the moment," Norimizu said, "when the last illusion of uncertainty should have ended. The scene was not confusion. It was composition."

Hasekura asked what part Hatataro had truly played, since his name seemed

always to stand too near the edge of the darkest acts. Norimizu answered that Hatataro had indeed been present at certain central points, and that even his manner of holding the violin had told against him. A naturally left-handed boy had been made to stand and act against his own easier motion, and such strain was never meaningless in this case. Yet that did not make him the full master of events. He belonged rather to the tragic material of the house, used, placed, and drawn into positions whose true design had been formed elsewhere. In other words, he was necessary, but not sovereign.

Then Norimizu went back once more to Nobuko, because all roads now returned to her. Her motive, he said, was not to be spoken of as if it were one clean desire. It was a knot made of hidden birth, sacrificial substitution, false service, injured inheritance, and the black imaginative world Santetsu himself had built around the mansion. When she acted, she was not merely seeking gain. She was striking out of a life arranged as concealment from the first day of consciousness. The photographic plate did not excuse her, but it made her finally intelligible.

No one in the room answered him after that. The case, which had begun as a poisoned fruit in a sealed chamber, had ended in the exposure of a hidden daughter and a whole household poisoned over generations. Norimizu looked down at the broken plate and said only that there was nothing more to argue. The law could name the dead and sort the acts, but it could not undo the moral ruin that had made them possible. And as the winter light thinned outside the old court windows, Hasekura understood that the Black Death Mansion had not merely produced a murderer. It had produced its own last child of darkness.

Part 19

For a little while after that revelation, no one in the room could speak. The broken photographic plate still lay between them, dark and sharp like a piece of frozen night, and yet Norimizu's mind had already begun to move away from it. The truth about Nobuko had answered one of the deepest questions in the case, but it had not brought him peace. Instead, another line of thought began creeping

back toward him, one he had pushed aside only because the hidden-daughter mystery had demanded all his strength. Now that line returned with cold force. It concerned Levez, Krivov, and the strange rainbow-like light that had flashed at the edge of recent disaster.

Hasekura saw the change first. Norimizu no longer looked like a man closing a case, but like one who had suddenly remembered that an earlier door, thought to be shut, was standing open after all. He drew a long breath, rose from his seat, and said that the affair of Levez had to be reopened at once. Kumashiro protested in annoyance. He said that once Nobuko's true position was known, it was absurd to go back to a foreign musician who seemed now only a secondary figure in a much darker domestic ruin. But Norimizu cut him off with a dry gesture and answered that a second-line actor might still carry the print of the main hand.

They returned to the mansion, and from the first moment the place felt wrong again. It was not merely the weight of old crimes that pressed on them now, but the sensation that the house itself had begun to rearrange the order of its masks. The surviving people moved in a strained half-silence, and each face seemed to ask whether the hidden daughter of the dead scholar had truly been unmasked at last. Yet Norimizu did not seek Nobuko. He asked instead for Levez, and his voice was so level that even the servants felt something dangerous in it.

When Levez appeared, he tried to stand as he always had, with large rough dignity and a kind of heavy foreign pride. But the strain in him was plain. His shoulders were too stiff, and his face, which had once carried a blunt kind of force, now looked darkened from within, as if some private pressure had begun to rot it. Norimizu did not attack him by law or by witness first. He chose a sharper weapon. He said that the rainbow image Levez had spoken of so often, the one tied to repentance and high poetic sorrow, had never been mere poetry at all.

Then, with terrifying suddenness, Norimizu leaned forward and said, "Let us speak plainly. That seven-colored mist was not a vision, and it was not confession. It was the glitter of a murderous blade. You struck at Mrs. Krivov through that rainbow haze, did you not?" The effect of those words was immediate and violent. Levez did not deny them at once. Instead he seemed to lose the very power of

movement, as if some lightning had fallen inside his skull and turned him to stone. Hasekura understood then that Norimizu had not guessed wildly. He had struck a true nerve.

For one instant Levez's whole intelligence seemed to vanish. Surprise, fear, and inward collapse passed across him too fast for speech to follow. Then he forced himself back into shape and tried to answer with bitterness. He complained that all this was cleverness without legal weight, that Norimizu's learning, symbols, and poetic connections had become almost unbearable to him. He admitted that the rainbow memory would remain with him forever, and even that he had tried to send such an image so that his heart might somehow be understood by Nobuko. But he insisted that none of this proved where his face could be fixed in the chain of actual crimes.

Norimizu answered that motive was no longer the question. There was enough motive in the house to drown ten trials. What mattered now was criminal meaning, the one exact place where an image, an act, and a human hand came together. He said that Levez's own half-poetic speech had guided him. The rainbow was not only memory. It was a method. The shimmering color had hidden the flash of sharpened steel, and the moral language of confession had been used to cover a physical attack. In that way, Levez too had become one more artist of fraud within the Black Death Mansion.

The interview broke there in an ugly way. Levez did not confess, but the violence of his reaction spoke more loudly than any clean denial. He withdrew with the look of a man driven backward toward a wall he had not known was there. Norimizu watched him go, and though Hasekura expected some expression of triumph, none came. Instead Norimizu seemed more troubled than before. "This is wrong," he said at last. "True, but wrong. He bears guilt, yet not the whole architecture of guilt. The line reaches him, but it does not end in him."

Not long after that, a cry rose from the lower part of the mansion. By the time they reached the place, the last scene had already arranged itself with almost insulting neatness. Levez was dead. He had hung himself from a leather strap, and all visible signs pointed toward suicide. His body, dressed like one of the house's

old court musicians, hung with a horrible sea-beast heaviness, and the mark at the neck bit deep enough to silence quick doubt. Kumashiro, staring up at the corpse, let out a rough breath and said that Faust's affair seemed at last to be over.

But Norimizu did not accept the ending. He stood looking at the body for a long time, and even in that moment of apparent closure his face showed dissatisfaction rather than relief. The death was too timely, too convenient, too eager to gather loose threads into a false knot. Levez had clearly carried guilt. He had indeed moved within the black drama of the house, and he had almost certainly struck at Krivov. Yet the whole case still seemed larger than him, colder than him, and more exact than any despairing final act he could have staged alone. So while the others looked upon the hanging body as a curtain-fall, Norimizu felt only that the Black Death Mansion had once again tried to end the play before its true last scene.

Part 20

When they gathered again after Levez's death, the room felt less like a place of judgment than like the chamber before a curtain rose on some last cruel act. Hatataro was there, pale and unsteady. Serena too remained in the room, though her face was so controlled that it seemed almost carved from wax. Nobuko sat apart in exhausted silence. Hasekura, who had thought Levez's suicide might close the matter, now understood from Norimizu's expression that the case had not yet reached its true core.

Norimizu began not with a moral speech, but with a correction. Levez's death, he said, was not murder in the simple form others imagined. It was indeed suicide. Yet even that suicide had not arisen from free inner despair alone. Another will had been laid over it, narrowing the man's air, closing him in, and driving him toward self-destruction. "There were two wills at work in that death," Norimizu said. "The dead scholar's false thumbmark lay on his throat, but over that mask was pressed the very real agony of Levez himself."

Then he produced Levez's collar. When he tore the lining open, a shriveled

brown net-like band appeared between the layers of cloth. It looked almost like dried plant skin. Norimizu said it was a kind of orchid, one that contracted under rising moisture and heat. The method, he explained, was grotesque but exact. Once Levez entered the inner death room, the murderer made a hot cascade-like vapor rise there. As the air grew wet and close, the hidden orchid material in the collar began to tighten. Bit by bit, Levez's breathing became harder, his panic deeper, and his mind more desperate.

“That,” Norimizu said, “does not mean another hand strangled him. It means another intelligence created the conditions in which he was driven to finish the act himself.” Hasekura felt the force of the distinction at once. Levez had borne guilt, had struck at Krivov, and had moved inside the black drama of the mansion, but even his last death had been exploited as one more instrument. He had not stood at the top of the design. He had been used by it.

Hatataro tried to gather strength and answer with anger, but his voice had already begun to fail him. Then Norimizu turned on him fully. His eyes had been narrow and cold before, yet now there was something harder than coldness in them. He said that the so-called dragon of the case, the hidden thing that kept tearing the chain and pulling away before the last grasp could close on it, had finally shown its body. And then, instead of pointing at Levez or Nobuko, he fixed his gaze directly on Hatataro.

Before the others could react, he laid out another detail. The note that seemed to say “Therese,” the one found beneath Danneberg's bed, had been wrongly read from the start. The dead woman had indeed tried to write what Norimizu wanted from her, but the result differed from that intention because of the conditions of the moment and the distortion of the failing hand. Norimizu wrote the letters out, separated them, and circled the hidden middle. What emerged from the broken name was not merely Therese, but Serena buried within it. The effect on the room was immediate. Serena stared at Hatataro in blank shock, as if even she had not expected this exact cruelty of language.

Hatataro tried then to fight back. Sweat poured down his face, and the effort to speak twisted his whole body. He accused Norimizu in turn, called him the true

dragon, and asked whether the false thumbprint of Santetsu on Levez's throat was also one of Norimizu's learned tricks. But Norimizu did not raise his voice. He answered that a dragon had indeed stood in the death room, but one part of that two-bodied monster had been nothing more than the orchid hidden in the collar. The other part was the human will that had prepared the device and had known how to press Levez toward self-murder. And that human will, he said, no longer needed to hide behind foreigners, spirits, or dead scholars.

He then said the most terrible thing of all: that Hatataro's youth had been one of the best masks in the whole case. People had seen in him a delicate heir, perhaps strained, perhaps damaged by the atmosphere of the house, but still too young to be the full architect of such horrors. That had been their mistake. The black inheritance of the mansion had ripened early in him. He had not merely lived inside Santetsu's diseased symbolic world. He had learned to operate it. He had turned prophecy, music, ritual, mechanics, chemistry, and the suffering of others into tools with a precision beyond his years.

As Norimizu spoke, the last force went out of Hatataro's resistance. His body first wavered, then stiffened as though a rod had been thrust through him. A moment later he fell forward flat onto the table. No one moved at once. The spectacle was too ugly in its suddenness, too much like the breaking of a figure wound too tightly for too long. Then Norimizu ordered him removed. Serena gave a slight bow, pale and emptied of expression, and followed after. Their departure left the room terribly still.

Now only Nobuko remained. For a little while there was no speech between her and Norimizu. Hasekura felt that something more than law was present there now. Hatataro had been named, and the criminal design had finally received a human center. Yet Nobuko still sat within that ruin not only as witness and sufferer, but as someone whose life had been twisted into the machinery from the start. Norimizu at last sat down across from her, folded his arms heavily on the table, and spoke in a quieter voice than he had used with Hatataro.

He said that the case could not end with the naming of a clever young monster. That would be too easy, and too false to the deeper truth. Nobuko had stolen the

hidden plate from Rodin's *The Kiss*, he said, probably at first from no grand purpose at all, but from some sudden impulse, some restless mischief of mind. Yet when she learned what the plate contained, the effect on her must have been like being struck by monstrous moonlight. In one instant the secret of her birth, her false position, her sacrifice, and her whole hidden life under Santetsu had risen before her.

“At that moment,” Norimizu said, “death, loss of self, and destiny all rushed together.” The words were not accusation now. They were explanation. He said that such a discovery would not merely pain an ordinary mind. It would shatter the balance between opposing forces inside it. Everything that had held Nobuko together until then—obedience and revolt, love and hatred, service and buried inheritance—would have broken against one another at once. And from that destruction there had come not mere wickedness, but a terrible sacred frenzy.

He refused to call her simply morally insane. That phrase, he said, was too dry and too small. Nobuko was rather a child of destiny, one of those beings in whom life and doom become tangled until action itself turns into a kind of poem written in blood and symbol. Hasekura, listening, felt again that strange unease he had felt several times during the case, when Norimizu seemed less like a detective speaking over evidence and more like a man reading the final lines of a human tragedy. Nobuko did not answer. She sat very still, and the silence around her seemed no longer defensive, but final.

Part 21

Nobuko remained silent for some time after Norimizu spoke of destiny. The room had become so still that even the smallest sound seemed to stand apart from the others. Hasekura felt that the case, which had begun in poison, mechanism, and grotesque trickery, had now reached a region where ordinary legal language could no longer fully contain it. Yet Norimizu did not let the mood drift into pure pity or vague tragedy. He said that even a life ruined by hidden birth and moral poison did not move by itself into murder. Something had happened that shattered

the last balance in her mind.

He said that Nobuko had most likely stolen the photographic plate from Rodin's *The Kiss* almost by accident at first, with no full plan in view. It may have begun, he thought, as a sudden impulse, a restless act, one of those small dark movements by which a strained person tests forbidden space. But the instant she learned what the plate contained, the effect on her must have been overwhelming. Her true birth, Santetsu's concealment, her substitution, her false position in the house, and the denial of her rightful existence had all stood before her in a single light. That light, Norimizu said, was not gentle revelation, but something more like terrible moonlight cast by magic over a dead field.

In that moment three forces had rushed together: the sense of death, the loss of self, and the pressure of fate. Until then some inner balance had still remained in her, because opposite forces had held each other in check. Service had been set against revolt, buried love against bitterness, obedience against hidden claim. But the discovery of the plate destroyed one side of that inner struggle at a stroke. When that counterweight was crushed, the whole burden of her mind swung violently in the other direction and broke into action.

Norimizu said that this was why the later crimes around her could not be read as the work of a common schemer. Nobuko had indeed acted, manipulated, and drawn weak people like Ekisuke into grotesque service. She had made use of false poisoning, arranged scenes, and moved through the symbolic machinery of the house with dreadful intelligence. Yet even those acts did not belong to the dry category of moral insanity. "I will never call her that," Norimizu said. "She was something worse and sadder, something made by blood, concealment, and a poisoned world." To him she was what Browning had called a child of destiny, and the whole case had become, in the end, the living poem of one ruined human being.

Hasekura listened in silence, and when at last he raised his eyes to Nobuko, he no longer saw only the suspect who had stood under repeated clouds of guilt. He saw the last broken figure produced by the Furiyagi line itself. She had not been born free into the world, but had entered life already hidden, already

exchanged, already bent under a secret arrangement made by another hand. The house had taught her symbols before it taught her peace. It had given her beauty without safety, nearness without name, and intelligence without moral shelter. In such soil, even brilliance could ripen into black fruit.

Norimizu then turned toward the wider ruin. The Black Death Mansion had not merely sheltered a sequence of crimes. It had generated them over decades through the union of false heredity, scientific cruelty, symbolic obsession, and theatrical self-deception. Santetsu's will had shaped the place long after his death, and those who lived under that will had grown into distorted forms of themselves. Hatataro had become an early monster of method. Levez had become an instrument pressed toward self-destruction. Ekisuke had become a dim servant of horrors he scarcely understood. And Nobuko, hidden daughter and denied heir, had become the last and deepest wound of all.

No answer came from Nobuko even after all this. Yet her silence had changed. It no longer looked like resistance or calculation. It looked final, as if the inward movement that had carried her through fear, rage, performance, and secret knowledge had at last come to rest. Hasekura could not tell whether she had accepted Norimizu's reading or had passed beyond caring about any reading at all. But he felt, with sudden certainty, that the line of the Furiyagi family had ended there in spirit even before law or burial could complete the fact.

Then Norimizu looked at Hasekura with eyes suddenly clear and calm. The hard fever of pursuit had passed from him, and in its place there was something like grave tenderness. "At least," he said, "let us send her off in a way that suits the last member of this sacred family." Hasekura did not answer at once. There was nothing useful to add. The investigation, the logic, the traps, the crypt, the poison, the false miracles, the symbolic spirits, and the shattered plate had all led to this one human remainder.

So the final rites were prepared not as for an ordinary criminal case, but for the last descendant of a strange and terrible house. Nobuko's coffin was covered with the civic flag of Florence, recalling the bloodline that had begun far away under the shadow of Bianca Cappello. Four priests in plain linen lifted the bier

onto their shoulders. Around them rose smoke from incense and the great sound of choral voices. Under that sound, the coffin moved slowly out toward the burial place in the back garden.

Hasekura watched it go, and the whole dark history of the mansion seemed to pass before him in one long final motion. Ancient blood, hidden birth, old suicides, false locked rooms, poisoned fruit, mechanical dolls, buried terror, and the last cruel flowering of destiny all moved together behind that coffin. The Black Death Mansion had promised mystery at the beginning, but in the end it gave not wonder, only ruin. Its final gift to the world was not an immortal legend, but a dead young woman carried away under a foreign flag.

The singing rose higher as the bier passed through the curling smoke and disappeared toward the grave. No further revelation remained to be made. No deeper chamber waited below the house. The black performance, with all its devices and symbols, had spent itself at last in silence, ash, and earth. And thus the coffin of Kamitani Nobuko, the last one of the Furiyagi sacred family, was borne away into the back garden through the swirl of incense and the rising choir.