MITARAI KIYOSHI'S GOLEM STRATEGY ANALYSIS

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INTRODUCTION

The book is **Murder in the Crooked House** by **Soji Shimada**, published in Japan in 1982 and translated into English in 2019.

THE STORY

A diesel engine millionaire builds a house on a cliff at the northern tip of Hokkaido. The whole building leans about five degrees. The floors slope, one staircase skips an entire storey, two rooms cannot be reached from indoors, and a mirrored tower tilted at the angle of Pisa is attached to the side. One room is covered floor to ceiling in tengu masks. He collects life-size dolls and leaves them standing around. He invites a small party for Christmas.

Christmas night, one guest is stabbed to death in a room bolted from the inside, with unbroken snow outside and no footprints anywhere in it. The body is left in a strange posture, both arms raised over the head and the right wrist roped to the bed. The Golem doll from the collection has been pulled apart at the joints and scattered in the yard, head missing. Half an hour after the man was already dead, someone screams outside and a face appears at a third floor window.

Two nights later, in a blizzard, with four police officers asleep in the building, a second guest is stabbed in the back in a windowless basement room locked three ways from the inside with furniture piled against the door. They open it with an axe. The police pull the walls and ceilings apart and find nothing, and the man with the only visible motive turns out to have the strongest alibi in the house.

Five days in, out of ideas, the chief investigator wires Tokyo for help. Tokyo sends an astrologer.

THE PEOPLE

Kozaburo Hamamoto, sixty-eight, owns the house. **Eiko**, twenty-three, is his daughter. **Eikichi Kikuoka** is the visiting business partner, with his secretary and mistress **Kumi Aikura** and his driver **Kazuya Ueda**. Also present: **Michio and Hatsue Kanai**, **Kohei and Chikako Hayakawa** who keep the house, **Haruo Kajiwara** the young chef, two students named **Shun Sasaki** and **Masaki Togai** who are both circling Eiko, and **Yoshihiko**, the grand-nephew.

Chief Inspector Ushikoshi leads the investigation and is honest about being stuck. **Sergeant Ozaki** is hostile to everyone. **Inspector Okuma** and **Constable Anan** round out the police.

Then **Kiyoshi Mitarai**, who reads horoscopes for a living in Yokohama and detects as an amateur, and **Kazumi Ishioka**, an illustrator, his flatmate and the narrator. Mitarai has no badge, no rank, no power of arrest and no forensic access. He is rude to the officers running the case, he cannot retain anybody's name, and he swings between talking non-stop and going flat for a day at a time. Half the household writes him off within minutes of his arrival.

That last detail is where the interesting part starts. He is not trying to build a court case. He is trying to produce a confession, and those are different targets that permit different methods.

CONTEXT

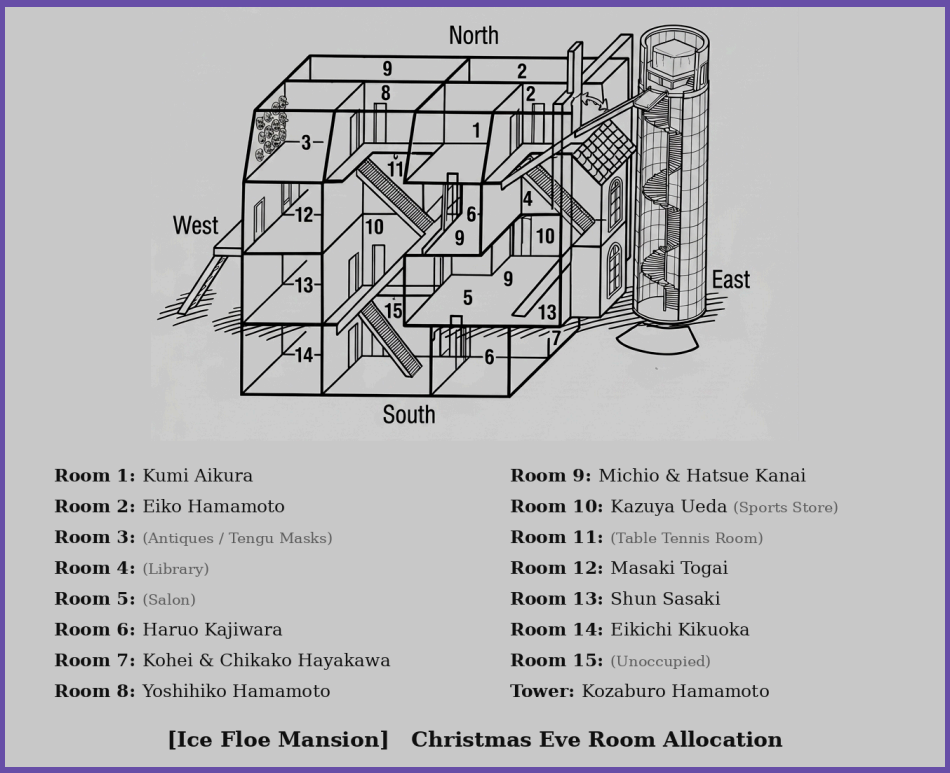
Before any of the strategy makes sense you need the board.

A man with zero authority, zero evidence, zero jurisdiction and roughly four days on the clock builds a cage around a killer who has been planning his murder for **forty years**, and gets a full confession out of him without laying a finger on him or asking him a single accusatory question.

On a casual read it looks like the detective sat in a chair wearing a mask. Once you unpick it you find one of the tightest orchestration feats in classic detective fiction, hiding in plain sight, because Shimada writes Mitarai as a lunatic and you are not supposed to notice him working.

THE BOARD

The Ice Floe Mansion sits on a cliff at the northern tip of Hokkaido, above the Sea of Okhotsk. Ten minutes' walk uphill from the nearest village. There is no telephone in the building because the owner hates the sound of the bell, which isolates the entire cast for the whole book.



Room 1: Kumi Aikura
Room 2: Eiko Hamamoto
Room 3: (Antiques / Tengu Masks)
Room 4: (Library)
Room 5: (Salon)
Room 6: Haruo Kajiwara
Room 7: Kohei & Chikako Hayakawa
Room 8: Yoshihiko Hamamoto
Room 9: Michio & Hatsue Kanai
Room 10: Kazuya Ueda (Sports Store)
Room 11: (Table Tennis Room)
Room 12: Masaki Togai
Room 13: Shun Sasaki
Room 14: Eikichi Kikuoka
Room 15: (Unoccupied)
Tower: Kozaburo Hamamoto

[Ice Floe Mansion] Christmas Eve Room Allocation

The Ice Floe Mansion and the Christmas Eve room allocation. Room numbers run outward from the tower room, so the numbering is a distance ranking rather than a floor plan.

THE HOUSE IS THE WEAPON

The whole structure tilts about five or six degrees north to south. Attached to it is a cylindrical tower clad in mirrored glass, leaning at the exact angle of the tower at Pisa. Inside, everything is wrong on purpose:

- The east staircase skips the second floor entirely and runs from the drawing room straight up to the third.
- Rooms 10 and 11 cannot be reached from inside the house at all. You have to go out the front door and up an external stair in the snow.
- The L-shaped corridors on every floor are steel and they fail to meet the wall. There is a gap of about twenty centimetres at each end, which the owner blames on a young architect and says he kept because it reminds him of Piranesi's prison engravings.
- Every room has a twenty by twenty centimetre ventilation hatch opening onto the stairwell.
- Room 3 is called the Tengu Room and its entire south wall is covered floor to ceiling in tengu masks. Its interior facing window is permanently left open about thirty centimetres.
- The bed in room 14, in the basement, is bolted to the floor, unusually narrow, and made up with a thin electric blanket in place of a duvet.
- There is an external iron stair running up the outside of the building to the roof.

And one line that the police say out loud in front of everybody without anyone reacting to it. The west wing rooms, **8, 10, 12 and 14, stack on top of each other like a child's bricks, and the ventilation hatches in all four are cut in the same corner of the same wall**. Rooms 9, 11, 13 and 15 form the matching stack on the other side. Somebody describes the delivery chute out loud, in a briefing, days before anyone works out that a delivery chute is what it is.

The owner built the murder weapon, and then he invited everybody to come and stay inside it for Christmas. Here is the delivery route as one continuous run:

- Start at the top of the tower, where the ice is brought out of storage.
- Drop the drawbridge and the tower stair becomes a rail continuous with the house.
- The five degree tilt forces anything sliding to hug the south edge for the entire descent, so the object steers itself.
- The twenty centimetre gaps at the ends of the L-shaped corridors let the object pass the corners rather than jamming against the wall.
- The permanently open window of room 3 is the entry point on the way through.
- The wall of tengu masks is the guide inside room 3, with the projecting noses acting as the supports that hold the line.
- The object exits room 3 and continues down the aligned hatches of the west stack to room 14.
- The hatch delivers it into a basement room where the only bed is narrow, fixed in place and directly under the hatch, so the target cannot be anywhere else.
- The heating is turned up, the electric blanket is running, and by morning the weapon is water.

Nine steps, and the owner poured concrete around every one of them years before the guests arrived.

THE TWO MURDERS

The night of 24 December 1983, in the small hours of the 25th, between midnight and half past. Ueda is stabbed to death in room 10. Snow stopped falling at 23:30. There is not a single footprint anywhere in the snow. The door is bolted from inside. The body looks arranged, almost like a dancer: right wrist roped to the bed, both arms up over the head, hips twisted so the legs sit at right angles to the torso, and a neat little circle of blood smeared beside the left hip. It is not arrangement. The victim did it himself and it is the closest thing to hard evidence anyone in the book ever gets. The knife has a metre of white cord tied to the handle.

Outside in the snow the life size Golem doll from the collection room has been pulled apart at the joints and scattered, head missing, later found buried deep in the snow a long way off. Two wooden stakes were seen standing upright in the snow about two metres out from the eaves, parallel to the wall, and by morning they were gone.

At 01:05, half an hour after the estimated time of death, a man screams somewhere outside and Kumi sees a face staring in at her third floor window.

25 December, around 23:00, in a blizzard, with all four police officers in the house. Kikuoka is stabbed in the back in room 14 in the basement. No windows. Thick wooden door with three separate locks, all of which can only be engaged from inside, and he had shoved a sofa and a table against it as well. They had to take an axe to it. Same knife, same white cord. That hour is exactly when the chief investigator was upstairs in the tower drinking brandy with the owner, while the constable was downstairs at the billiard table with the owner’s daughter and grand-nephew. Two of the four officers in the building were awake and both of them were where the owner had put them.

By the time Mitarai gets there the police have already stripped the theory space bare. No passages. No false ceilings. No fishing rods, no rigged guns, no rope anywhere in the building, no collapsible ladders. Nobody appears to have a motive for Ueda. The two people with an obvious motive for Kikuoka have the strongest alibis in the house.

One structural point, since it explains a great deal and the police never get near it. There were **two separate murder plots running in that house, aimed at the same victim**. Kohei Hayakawa, whose daughter died after Kikuoka discarded her, had paid Ueda to kill the man. Hamamoto found out and told Kohei to buy the contract back. Kohei agreed. Ueda refused, partly out of stubbornness and partly because Kikuoka had insulted his mother over a property dispute. So Hamamoto killed Ueda, and he says so plainly at the end: killing Kikuoka was the promise, killing Ueda was selfishness. A rival killer would have taken the death he had spent forty years preparing to deliver himself. He regrets Ueda and does not regret Kikuoka.

MITARAI ARRIVES WITH NOTHING

Night of 30 December. **Five days** after the first body. Ushikoshi has given up and wired Tokyo, and Tokyo sends him an astrologer.

Here is the full inventory of what Mitarai has when he walks through that door. No badge, no rank, no power of arrest, no power to search, no forensic access. Three of the four coppers in the building already despise him before he arrives, since Ozaki calls him a lunatic on the basis of the telegram alone. The owner sticks him in room 10, which is the room where the first murder happened, with no bath and no toilet, and Ishioka notes drily that this tells you exactly how welcome they are. The physical weapon evaporated five days ago. Every suspect has already been interviewed to death. His entire operational manpower is one bloke called Ishioka who, by Mitarai's own assessment, cannot act to save his life.

That is the starting position. Everything below has to be weighed against it.

THE REASONING THAT BUILT THE STRATEGY

Mitarai solves the case **fast**. The solving is the smaller half of what he does, because it gets him absolutely nothing.

P1 The Golem's face appears at a **third floor** window at 01:05.

P2 There is no ledge and no eave under that window, and no footprints in the snow beneath it.

P3 The doll's head is found buried deep in snow at a distance consistent with being hurled as hard as a person can throw.

P4 The torso and limbs are found separated and laid out in a line running from the corner of the building towards the stairs of room 10.

P5 The two stakes stood in the snow two metres out, **parallel** to the wall, and vanished by morning.

P6 The ground under that spot is paved. You cannot drive a stake into it.

P7 The snow was dry powder, it stopped at 23:30, and the air was still.

P8 Eiko woke up cold at about 00:30, went to shut the drawbridge door to the tower, and found it was not closed properly.

P9 The male scream comes thirty minutes **after** the victim was already dead.

P10 In the Ueda killing the cord on the knife is soaked in blood.

P11 In the Kikuoka killing the cord on the knife is **clean**, despite far more blood soaking the nightclothes.

P12 The bed in room 14 is bolted to the floor, unusually narrow, and sits directly under the ventilation hatch.

P13 Hamamoto had the heating turned up unusually high that night, and personally advised Kikuoka to take two sleeping pills.

P14 Kajiwara heard a noise like a snake sliding, mixed with a woman sobbing, at around 23:00, and only on the blizzard night.

P15 Hamamoto dragged the chief investigator up the tower for brandy at exactly the right time, and pushed his daughter, his grand-nephew and a constable into an all night billiards session because, he said, having police around made him feel safe.

P16 Ueda's right wrist was roped to the bed frame and both his arms were raised over his head into a **U shape**, with the hips twisted so the legs sat at right angles to the torso.

P17 Ueda was ex Self Defence Forces, and had picked up **flag semaphore** at some point in that service.

P18 A small circle of blood, about five centimetres across, was smeared on the sheet beside his left hip, within reach of a hand that could still move.

C1 Nobody erased the footprints. They were buried. You have dry powder, no wind, an external iron stair to the roof, and a house that leans. Shake the roof snow off and it lands about two metres out along the line of the tilt rather than dropping at the eaves. The stakes held nothing up, they were markers, a straight line to walk along so that you do not stray out of the strip that is about to get covered. He chose to walk where the snow was going to fall on his tracks.

C2 The doll is a stepping stone. The stretch from the corner of the building to the room 10 stair sits outside the fall line, so he needed something to step on, and he picked the one figure in the collection that comes apart at the joints. That accounts for the dismemberment. That accounts for **that** doll being chosen over a more valuable one.

C3 The head was his rope trick. Eiko shutting the drawbridge door stranded him up top. He had a short length of rope off the water tank, so he lowered the head to Kumi's window to make her scream, which pulls Eiko out of her room. Then he shifts the rope over to Eiko's side and shouts, which accounts for your thirty minutes late male scream, since the killer was being loud on purpose. Eiko opens her window, sees nothing, goes next door to Kumi. He climbs in through Eiko's unlocked window and hurls the head as far west as he can manage.

C4 The killer is whoever **owns the tower**. That plan only occurs to a man who can reach the roof through the drawbridge, who knows the drawbridge can be left ajar without waking the house, and who knows his daughter well enough to predict that she will check her own window first and then go and knock next door. That is Hamamoto. Identified.

C5 The weapon is ice. The clean cord against the bloody cord is the whole tell. One killing has the blade driven in by hand, the other has the cord frozen **inside** the ice where it never touches blood. Hang a knife under the eaves, let the icicle build around it, dip the tip in hot water so the edge is exposed, keep it in the freezer. The cord on the first knife was pure theatre, there to teach the police that cord is the killer's signature so that nobody ever asks what it is mechanically **for**.

C6 The delivery system is the house, exactly as laid out in the nine step run above.

C7 The posture is not staging. It is a **dying message left by the victim**. Both arms raised into a U is the semaphore character **Ha**, and the detail that makes it usable is that almost every other character in that system needs two separate arm positions to spell, while Ha is the only one a man can produce in a single motion. A dying man with one wrist tied and seconds left has exactly one character available to him, and it happens to be the first syllable of **Hamamoto**. The blood by the left hip and the twisted hips are the rest of the attempt, made with the hand and the body he could still move.

C8 The killer built the accusation himself. Hamamoto admits at the end that he tied the right wrist for no planned reason at all, in a panic, because his victim was a large trained man and he was frightened of that arm. That improvised knot is the only reason Ueda realised he could signal, and it also produced the impression that the murderer had been inside a sealed room, which is the impression the second killing needed in order to work. Every part of it came from the killer.

Brilliant. Airtight. Completely useless to him.

The mechanism does not name a person. Release the thing from partway down in place of the top and arm strength is enough to work it, so rooms 1 and 2 are now in play, so the housekeeper is in play, since she genuinely did go up the tower that night. Anyone with a window could have grown the ice outside it. The weapon melted five days ago. There are no prints. There is no rope in the building. The motive is buried forty years deep in a war story with no paper trail anywhere in the world, and the police had **already** struck Hamamoto off the list, since on paper the two men were mild business acquaintances who met fewer than ten times.

C9 There is no evidence left to find, and the only route remaining is a confession. A body that spelled one syllable with its arms is not an exhibit. It is a message that only means anything once somebody reads it, and in that house exactly one person can. This is the third time the same thing happens: the truth is available and it is worth nothing.

So Mitarai's problem has nothing to do with identifying anybody. His problem is that he knows, he can prove the method, and he cannot prove the man.

Then he adds a constraint to **himself** that nobody asked for. He rules out beating it out of him. He says this while looking sideways at Ozaki, who a few chapters earlier suggested that if the servants will not talk you clip them round the head a couple of times. He picks the harder road on purpose while the easier one is sitting right there in the room.

> That is the moment the strategy starts.

THE ACTUAL STRATEGY

The strategy is composed of five stages. Each one is doing several jobs at once, and the jobs overlap across stages.

THE CLOWN

He walks in and delivers a rambling lecture about puppets, about labour degrading mankind, about machines and civilisation, about the end of year sales in Tokyo, and then announces he has solved it and the culprit is the Golem doll. Also, he says, do not worry, there will be no more bodies.

Everyone files him under harmless idiot within about four minutes. Ozaki wants him thrown out.

Now, people read this as characterisation. That reading is incomplete at best. Look at who he is playing against. This is a man who waited four decades, built a house as a murder machine, ran physical trials of an ice weapon until he knew exactly how thick it needed to be, and arranged his own alibi by walking the chief investigator up a tower. Worth being accurate about the shape of that competence, though: it is narrow. On the Kikuoka killing he is close to flawless. Everything around it is improvisation, and by his own account panicky improvisation. He tied Ueda's wrist for no reason he can articulate, he got himself stranded on the roof when his daughter shut a door, and his way out of that was invented on the spot with a doll's head, three feet of rope and an explicit bet on how his own daughter would behave. He is a superb planner inside one plan and an ordinary frightened man everywhere else. If Mitarai shows a single flash of competence on night one, that man raises his guard and burns every contingency he has. The clown act is armour, and it buys him something considerably better than safety. It lets him do his **actual preparation** out in the open where everybody can watch it happen and nobody counts it as work.

Which is exactly what he does next. He starts insisting, loudly, that the Golem doll is indecent standing there naked and needs clothes. Sends Ishioka to fetch old jeans and a jumper from his own bag and dresses the thing. Then insists that this is still not enough, it needs a hat, until Kajiwara offers a leather cowboy hat, at which point Mitarai goes so overboard thanking him (gift from God, most valuable man in the case, the lot) that the room takes it as final proof he has cracked.

One piece of nonsense, four objectives.

- **First objective.** He has now installed a silhouette in everybody's visual memory. For five days every person in that house sees a Golem in jeans, jumper and a wide brimmed hat as the normal state of that corner. When a man in exactly those clothes sits in exactly that spot in the dark on 4 January, the eye fills in the rest by itself.
- **Second objective.** The hat covers the head, which means that when he removes the head for re-examination nobody clocks the difference, and when it comes back nobody inspects it. A doll maker friend in Kyoto copies the face down to the cracks in the paint on the cheeks.
- **Third objective.** He has tested the owner. Hamamoto is possessive about that collection and lets it happen anyway, because you cannot argue with a madman. The killer therefore personally signs off on the manufacture of the thing that catches him.
- **Fourth objective.** He cuts the cord the killer tied round the doll's wrist, in front of everybody. That is him telling the murderer, quietly, that he is refusing the bait, and the clown context is so thick that nobody in the room reads it, **including the murderer**.

On the Kyoto job, be careful how you phrase this one, because the novel is deliberately vague about it. What the text gives you is this: something leaves the house on the evening of 31 December, the work takes two full days

and cannot be finished before the morning of the 3rd, Mitarai had phoned ahead in advance, and he flatly denies sending a police officer to do it. It also tells you that a police officer hands the doll's head back at midday on the 3rd after forensic sampling. When Ishioka asks point blank when the finished mask reached him, Mitarai brushes the question off as a triviality and changes the subject. So lean on the **scheduling**, which is explicit and which is the part that matters, and do not assert a courier arrangement the book declines to give you.

The timeline on this is the strongest single number in the whole book. He arrives on the night of 30 December and the Kyoto job is in motion inside twenty four hours. In that window he has read the file, identified the killer, worked out that the evidence will never exist, designed a five stage trap, cast it, and started the longest lead time item **first**. That last detail is the giveaway. Starting with the two day fabrication job is what a man does when he has already worked backwards from the ending. Improvisers behave differently.

THE CORPSE

31 December, 15:04. Everyone hears a scream. Sasaki is found in room 13 with a knife in him, white cord on the handle, and a threatening note nailed to the wall promising revenge on the Hamamoto family.

The casting here is deliberate and Mitarai says why out loud. Sasaki is a sixth year medical student, so he knows how much blood a wound near the heart should produce and he can control his own pulse and breathing under an expert's eyes. No ketchup required. He is also a guest who was already **in** the house, which puts more pressure on the owner than an outsider dying would. Ishioka is excluded from the part because Ishioka would have somebody pull the knife out and tell him to get up.

The staging around it is where it gets filthy.

The ventilation hatch in room 13 had been sealed that very morning, so the sealed room is more sealed than either real murder. The effect on the police goes well past being fooled, since the hatch was the only route they had left and this **demolishes** their entire working theory.

The forensic pathologist happens to be sitting in the drawing room drinking tea, because Mitarai got a lift back from town with him that lunchtime and invited him in. So the body gets certified and moved by an expert immediately and nobody so much as asks to look again.

And Mitarai bolts straight for room 13 without a second's hesitation, then lets the police shove him out of the crime scene and goes meekly. Both halves are deliberate.

Now count what that one fake corpse buys him.

- **First objective.** He had promised there would be no more bodies. There is immediately another body. His credibility is now zero, which is the entire point, since you cannot make a forty year planner relax while he still respects you.
- **Second objective.** The police spend the whole of 1 January tearing the walls and ceilings out of rooms 13 and 14, and the whole of 2 January putting them back. Those are precisely the two days he is waiting on Kyoto. His opposition removes itself from the board and knackers itself doing so.
- **Third objective.** It publicly certifies that room 14 has no hidden mechanism, which he needs later, because when he puts a drugged girl to sleep in that room nobody is going to be able to propose an alternative explanation.

- **Fourth objective.** The revenge note plants the idea of an unknown enemy hunting the family. On the evening of 1 January that idea produces a concrete result on its own: Hamamoto stops sleeping alone in the tower and moves down to room 12 under guard, which is the first time in the book that the killer's own movements are dictated by something Mitarai wrote.
- **Fifth objective.** It takes Sasaki off the board. A dead man can be moved out of the house without a single person asking where he is going, and a dead man can work in the open for the rest of the week.

THE TWELFTH MAN

One scheduling detail here matters more than it looks, and it is the easiest thing in the book to misremember.

The haunting is not a slow drip across 1 and 2 January. On those two days nothing happens at all except police demolishing walls and then rebuilding them. Every single manifestation lands on **3 January**, and they land almost on top of each other:

- **Dusk.** Kumi insists she can hear faint human breathing through the ceiling of her own room.
- **Dusk.** Hatsue says she has seen a dead man standing out in the falling snow, and goes half hysterical.
- **Dinner.** White smoke drifts down the drawing room stairs. The bed in room 2 is burning.
- **After dinner.** Yoshihiko, coming down from the third floor, catches the light in the room 10 ventilation hatch going out. He runs to the drawing room and counts heads.
- **Same conversation.** Kajiwara admits that ham and bread have gone missing from the refrigerator.
- **An hour later.** Hatsue, alone on the stairs, watches the Golem glide along the basement corridor and turn its head to look at her. She screams herself into a blackout.

One man does all six. Sasaki says so himself at the end, cheerfully, listing a week of no food and no water, hiding in room 10, waiting outside in the snow, and folding himself into the wardrobe in room 2.

Every one of these happens while the household is sitting together, and Yoshihiko explicitly verifies it by counting the room. The only surviving explanation available to everyone, the killer included, is that there is an outsider hiding in the building.

This is the engine of the whole strategy. If Hamamoto knew the threat to his daughter was coming from Mitarai, he could negotiate, expose him, or simply stay awake and watch him. Because he believes it is an unknown avenger, and he assumes one of Kikuoka's people, he cannot say a single word to anybody. Explaining how his daughter is going to be killed **is** a confession. Explaining why he knows the method **is** a confession.

Mitarai severs every communication channel his target has while never once addressing him. He does not threaten the man. He does not even talk to him about it. He changes what the man believes about the room he is standing in, and the man locks himself in.

And note what the schedule does to the scaling. Six manifestations, one arson, one sedation and the confrontation itself are all compressed into a single evening. The two quiet days before it are not part of the haunting at all, they are pure lead time management.

CLOSING THE DOORS

Same night. Walk the target's options.

Move his daughter somewhere else? Mitarai sets fire to the bed in room 2 during dinner while the whole table is seated, so it reads as the twelfth man again. When Hamamoto asks for Eiko to be moved back to her own room, it is **Ozaki** who tells him the bed has been burnt. The refusal comes out of a policeman's mouth.

Wake her up, then? Mitarai personally carries two teacups over, hands one to Ishioka and one to Eiko, fussing over the saucer so much that Ishioka jokes about the service today. Later, when the father asks whether she can be roused, the answer is that the dose was too strong.

Seal the room 14 hatch? From the inside you would have to stand on the bed with the sleeping girl on it. From the outside, Mitarai objects that hammering next to the ear of someone who has taken sleeping pills will give her a headache when she wakes. He frames the whole thing as concern for her, which means nobody can argue with it without looking like a monster.

Sit in the room with her all night, then? Ushikoshi, who is the one policeman Mitarai read in and turned, plants Anan outside the door with the only key, and announces that nobody at all is going in, expressly including himself and his own colleague, on the grounds that the culprit could be one of them.

Tell the police the truth? Already impossible, see the previous stage.

Every door is shut except one. Go and destroy the mechanism yourself.

While the room fills up he stalls by inventing an Ainu legend on the spot about a young man who threw himself off a cliff and the girl called Pirika who followed him, and the blood coloured irises that bloom there every spring. Ishioka works out that it is fabricated, because Pirika was the name of the restaurant they ate at on the first night and there was an iris picture on the wall. It is there to burn the minutes until the sedative lands, in front of witnesses, so that everyone sees the girl go under at a moment of his choosing.

For the record he did **not** know which countermeasure the man would pick. What he knew was that every branch, brick the west stair, block the east one, strip the tengu masks, is an action only the murderer performs, at one in the morning, in a house full of police, on the night his daughter has been sedated in the basement. He bet on the masks because that is the branch where the man cannot talk his way out of it afterwards.

THE SEAT

Last problem. Where do you watch from?

Hide in the library next door? He will check the adjoining rooms first, and if you are caught there he can still claim he has this minute worked out how the murder was done and came to deal with it himself. Wait and burst in afterwards? Same excuse available to him, and worse, by then the route is already sealed so calling the police actively helps him. Try to out hide a man inside a house he designed? Mitarai flatly concedes he would lose that.

So the standard he has to meet is this. The man has to be caught mid act, and he has to **see** that he has been seen. That kills the trial before it starts.

The best seat in the room is therefore the doll's seat. Propped against the window frame, legs out, facing the south wall, which is the one position with a clean view of the mask wall, wearing clothes the entire household has been ignoring for five days, under a face copied in Kyoto, under the hat that a chef happened to offer.

Hamamoto lets himself in. He never once looks at the doll. He starts lifting masks off the wall, stacking some, cradling about ten of them, until a white circle of bare plaster opens up in the middle. Then he bends for a brick in the corner, turns round, and the doll is standing up.

The line Mitarai closes with is a question rather than an accusation. Why those masks? Because exactly one man alive knows those masks killed Kikuoka.

Hamamoto folds instantly. Does not argue. Not one word of defence.

The underrated part is that Mitarai builds him a dignified exit at the same time as the trap. This is a man who cares about living elegantly. Losing cleanly to an opponent who beat him inside his own game is the only version of the ending where he keeps his self image, so he takes it, and he hands over the entire forty year motive, a promise made to a dead friend about a wartime officer, a killing in the ruins, a wife and a factory acquired on the back of it, which is information no investigation on Earth was ever going to reach.

One more thing, because of what it shows about how he handles a beaten opponent. Asked outright on the last morning whether he had solved the flower bed, he said no. Hamamoto refused the courtesy, said that if the puzzle stood unsolved he would not consider himself properly beaten, and Mitarai promptly invited the whole party out for a walk up the hill, which settles what the answer to the question had actually been.

The fan shaped bed in the garden, seen as a reflection in the mirrored cylinder of the tower from a specific spot on the hill at a specific angle, resolves into a chrysanthemum with a broken neck. Chrysanthemum, kiku, Kikuoka. He stood on that hill with his hand over his eyes waiting for the low sun to stop glaring off the glass, which is the whole trick, and then read it. He also ran it backwards. The bed is invisible from ground level and needs to be seen from above and at distance, the hilltop is the only vantage point in the landscape and is still not quite high enough, and therefore **the tower leans in order to bring the image into view from that one spot**. The most conspicuous feature of the entire property turns out to be a viewing angle. Togai stared at that flower bed for the whole book and got nowhere, and the clue was seeded early and quietly: Hamamoto drew the design on **tinfoil**, borrowed off his own chef and never returned.

THE OPERATION, HOUR BY HOUR

Everything above is easier to argue with when it is loose prose, so here is the same thing as a schedule. Left column is what the house saw. Right column is what was actually being built. Roughly a hundred hours from arrival to confession.

WHEN	WHAT THE HOUSEHOLD SEES	WHAT IT IS DOING
25 Dec, 00:00-00:30	Ueda killed in room 10	Real murder one
25 Dec, 01:05	Scream outside, face at Kumi's window	Killer stranded on the roof, improvising an exit
25 Dec, approx 23:00	Kikuoka killed in room 14	Real murder two, ice delivered through the house
30 Dec, night	Mitarai arrives, lectures, blames the doll	Clown armour goes on, first read of the board
30 Dec, night	Doll dressed in jeans, jumper, cowboy hat	Silhouette planted, head made removable, owner tested

30 Dec, night	Cord on the doll's wrist is cut	Bait declined in public, unread by everyone
31 Dec, morning	Hatch of room 13 sealed	Sealed room built tighter than either real one
31 Dec, midday	Mitarai returns from town with the pathologist	Expert seated three hours before he is needed
31 Dec, 15:04	Sasaki found stabbed in room 13	Credibility destroyed on purpose, police redirected
31 Dec, evening	The body is taken away	The Kyoto job leaves the house
1 Jan, all day	Police tear out the walls of rooms 13 and 14	Room 14 certified mechanism free by the opposition
1 Jan, evening	Hamamoto leaves the tower for room 12 under guard	The forged note starts moving the killer around
2 Jan, all day	Police put the walls back	Two day Kyoto lead time absorbed by the distraction
3 Jan, midday	The doll's head comes back from forensics	The head is restored and re-hatted in room 3
3 Jan, dusk	Breathing above Kumi's ceiling, dead man in the snow	Twelfth man opens
3 Jan, dinner	The bed in room 2 burns	Exit one sealed, by Ozaki's mouth
3 Jan, after dinner	Light in room 10, ham and bread missing	Twelfth man made unarguable, heads counted
3 Jan, an hour later	The Golem walks the basement corridor	Terror pushed to its ceiling before the ask
3 Jan, late	Eiko is put in room 14, Anan on the door	Exits three and four sealed, by Ushikoshi's mouth
3 Jan, approx midnight	Tea handed round, Ainu legend told	Exit two sealed, timed in front of witnesses
4 Jan, within the hour	Hamamoto enters room 3	Only remaining exit taken
4 Jan	The doll stands up	Confession, witnessed, unforced

Two things fall out of that table that are hard to see in prose. The first is that the two day Kyoto job and the two day police demolition are the same two days, which is a scheduling decision made before either event happened. The second is that on 3 January the entire endgame, six manifestations and four sealed doors, executes inside about six hours, and Mitarai's own mouth is responsible for exactly one of those doors.

WHERE IT HOLDS AND WHERE IT BREAKS

He never designs a **separate pathway** to victory, and that is the criticism worth having. What is worth arguing about instead of whether a Plan B exists off page is the three structural properties that do part of a failsafe's job.

First property. Every branch of the countermeasure decision produces a catch. A man found stacking bricks on a staircase at one in the morning, on the night his daughter has been sedated in the basement, still has to explain the bricks. So the brick branch is not a loss condition, it is a **degraded win**: same outcome, weaker evidentiary grade, more room for the man to wriggle. The masks were chosen because that is the branch where wriggling is impossible, not because it is the only branch where anything is caught.

Second property. The police net is live, not decorative. Ushikoshi is read in, headquarters has signed off on the operation, and Anan is sat outside room 14 all night holding the only key with orders that nobody enters, explicitly including the other officers. So if the target moves anywhere in that building at one in the morning, he is not moving through an empty house. Flagging this honestly: the text does not spell out where the rest of the officers are positioned that night, so treat the coverage as an inference rather than a cited fact. If you carry it forward, carry the caveat with it.

Third property. Sasaki is a dead man who can work. The entire world believes he is a corpse, he can walk, wear the costume and be deployed at will, and his existence is unknown to every person outside the operation including the police who are supposedly running the case. That is not only a labour supply. It is an **alibi engine**, and the next section is where it earns its keep.

And underneath all three, the thing that actually makes the strategy more tolerant than it looks: the win condition is a **confession**, not a courtroom exhibit. Hamamoto does not fold because the evidence is airtight. He folds because he was seen, and because Mitarai built him an exit that lets him lose with his self image intact. That psychological mechanism works on a scruffier catch too. It just costs more risk to get there.

Now the part that cannot be closed. If Hamamoto sits still until sunrise, Mitarai has nothing. The cost of sitting still is enormous, for reasons set out under Fortitude below, but enormous cost is not the same as impossible, and there is no tactic anywhere in the plan aimed at that branch. That is a genuine hole and it stays a hole.

Now the same question from the other side. Listing only what went right would be a highlight reel, so here are the branches where it comes apart, sorted by how live the risk actually was.

BEATS HIM OUTRIGHT

- Hamamoto decides the sedated daughter is a trap and accepts the risk until sunrise. He came close, and states afterwards that it smelled wrong and he went in anyway.

DEGRADES HIM RATHER THAN BEATING HIM

- Hamamoto bricks the west stair or blocks the east one and never goes near room 3. Mitarai still gets a catch. He gets a worse one, and the confession becomes harder rather than automatic.

LOOKS LIVE, AND IS ACTUALLY CLOSED BY DESIGN

The absence pattern. This is the moment that looks like the near miss and turns out to be the proof. When Yoshihiko sees the light in room 10 he runs to the drawing room and counts the household, and the count comes back with exactly two people missing: Mitarai and Ushikoshi. Ozaki turns to Ushikoshi and asks him directly whether either of them has been to room 10.

Ushikoshi does not have to lie. He says the two of them were in room 13 the whole time, which is true, and the room reads him as truthful because he is. The light in room 10 was made by a man everybody at that table believes is dead. This is what the third property buys: because the operative is a corpse, the two men actually running the operation have a genuine alibi every single time the twelfth man moves, and neither of them ever has to act under questioning. Anyone tracking who is absent will keep finding the same two names and keep finding them innocent.

LIVE, AND PRE-EMPTED RATHER THAN ELIMINATED

- Sasaki fails to hold his pulse and breathing under the pathologist's hands. Mitarai chose a sixth year medical student specifically to shrink this, and it stays a human being lying still under an expert.
- Somebody asks to view the body a second time. Mitarai closed this by having the certification done immediately by a pathologist he had already seated in the drawing room, which is prevention rather than a fix.
- Hatsue or Kajiwara gets a clear look at the Golem in the basement corridor and recognises Sasaki's build. The costume, the mask and the dark are doing all the work here.
- Ozaki searches Mitarai's room out of spite and finds the Kyoto arrangement. The clown act is the only thing standing between him and that search.

NOT REALLY LIVE, AND WORTH SAYING SO

- The police solve it first. They had already exhausted their theory space before he arrived and the fake murder took their last remaining route off the table.
- Hamamoto confesses to somebody else. Impossible by construction, since any explanation he can give is itself the confession.

That is one branch that beats him outright, one that degrades the win rather than denying it, four held shut by judgement, and one that looks like the worst exposure in the book and turns out to be sealed by the architecture of the operation. It is a strong plan with a thin spine, and an honest reading says all of that rather than only the middle of it.

HOW THIS SCALES

THE TWO ACHIEVEMENTS ARE SEPARATE

There are two achievements stacked on top of each other here, and they collapse into one very easily. The first is the deduction, which is excellent and which the book resolves inside a day. The second is what he does with a solution that carries no legal weight whatsoever, and that second achievement is the one worth the attention, because it is the one that looks like sitting in a chair.

STRATEGY BUILDING

Mitarai never once fights on a field where he is behind, and he is behind on nearly all of them. No forensic evidence, since it melted. No legal authority, since he has none. No knowledge of the building, since the target designed it. So he relocates the entire conflict onto the target's psychology, which is the only board where four decades of preparation, a private fortress and the loyalty of everyone in the house convert into exactly zero points.

The operation runs almost entirely on things that were already in the building, and most of them belong to the killer. His doll. His only key. His masks, which are structural parts of his own weapon. His basement study as the holding cell for his daughter. What Mitarai brings in from outside is a pair of old jeans, a jumper, a borrowed hat and one telephone call, which is a statement about how little new apparatus the plan requires rather than a literal inventory.

He also knows when to stop being clever. He could have out argued the police, and he made himself contemptible instead so that they would ignore him. He could have confronted Hamamoto, and he avoided addressing him about the case at all until the man was stood in a room holding the evidence.

FORTITUDE AND SUCCESS RATE

The cage genuinely closes. Move her, wake her, seal the hatch, guard her, tell the truth. Five exits, five sealed, and crucially most of them are sealed by **other people's mouths**, Ozaki on the bed, Ushikoshi on the door, so that the target never perceives a single opponent applying pressure.

Worth being precise about what kind of sealing each one is, because they are not the same thing. The arson and the sedative are pre-planned counters, and the arson especially, since the bed is burnt at dinner, hours before anyone has any reason to want Eiko moved. The guarded door and the hatch are environmental control exercised through a co-conspirator on the night. The last exit, telling the truth, is not a tactic at all but a structural consequence of the twelfth man. One plan, three different mechanisms.

The one remaining option is to do nothing, and the reason that fails to be a real option is beautiful. The threatened method is the target's **own** method, which he personally trialled until he knew it worked. Nobody on this planet has better evidence that it kills than the man being blackmailed by it. The cost of sitting still is unbearable precisely because of his own expertise. That is the sharp end of the whole design: the plan does not eliminate the target's options, it makes the target's own psychology the mechanism that eliminates them.

The best proof of fortitude in the whole book is that it works even though he half suspects it. Hamamoto admits afterwards that the girl falling asleep felt like a trap, and he walked in anyway, because the chance that it was genuine was unaffordable to ignore. A trap that survives suspicion is running on arithmetic. The mark can see the shape of it and still be forced to walk in.

Ceiling on this category is the do nothing branch. High Fortitude, short of perfect Fortitude.

LOGISTICS

Headline item first, because this is the item that gets buried. A man with no rank, no badge, and a public reputation as a lunatic astrologer turns the chief investigator into a co-conspirator who will stage a fake murder, keep it from his own subordinates, and push the operation up to headquarters for approval, inside twenty four hours of arriving. Half the reason the cage closes is that the crucial orders come out of a uniform's mouth instead of Mitarai's, and that only exists because he flipped the one policeman worth flipping and left the other three as useful idiots.

And it is more than one recruitment. Identify the target, establish that no evidence exists, decide a confession is the only win condition, design the operation, obtain police cooperation, arrange medical certification, cast and run a fake corpse, direct police movements without authority, hold cover for five days, stage a six part haunting, place the daughter, control the timing, force the movement, and set the confrontation. Fourteen moving parts, four days, two assistants, no authority.

Sequencing is immaculate and the table proves it. First action taken is the two day Kyoto fabrication, which is to say the longest lead time item goes first, and the two days it eats are the exact two days the police spend demolishing and rebuilding walls because of the fake murder. The distraction and the manufacturing run in parallel by design.

Casting is done on capability. Availability has nothing to do with it. Sasaki gets the role because a sixth year med student can fake a chest wound and a death under a pathologist's eyes. Ishioka is deliberately excluded from the entire operation because he would blow it. Ushikoshi is turned because Mitarai needs an order to come out of a uniform. The police pathologist is manoeuvred into the drawing room over a cup of tea three hours before he is needed.

COMPLEXITY

Genuine multi layered fabrication. A staged murder, a forged revenge note, a haunting in six parts, a theft, an arson, a drugging, an invented folk legend, and a disguise, all pointed at producing **one specific voluntary movement** by one specific man.

The layers overlap rather than stack, which is where the real depth comes from. Dressing the doll is simultaneously the clown act, the cover for removing the head, and the manufacture of the silhouette he will later wear. The fake murder is simultaneously credibility suicide, a two day police distraction, a certification of room 14, a lever that moves the killer out of the tower, and the creation of an operative nobody can suspect.

Nobody decodes it. The police fail, Ishioka fails while standing next to him the whole time, and the target manages at best a bad feeling he cannot act on.

Ceiling on this category is scale. One man, one house, about a hundred hours from arrival to confession, with the operative part compressed into a single evening. It is complex for its arena and modest in absolute terms.

ADAPTABILITY, AND THE COUNTER-MOVE QUESTION

The strongest objection I can build against all of this is that he only survived because the target never counter-moved. It is half right, and the half that is wrong is instructive. Hamamoto counter-moves constantly. He manufactures his own alibi by walking the chief investigator up the tower during the murder window. He parks his daughter and grand-nephew in a billiards game with a constable. At the end he admits he had a bad feeling the sleeping girl was a trap and went in anyway. The man is playing the whole time.

What he never does is counter-move at **Mitarai** specifically, and that is not passivity. It is the direct output of the information control. The twelfth man gives him a phantom enemy to fear, and the fake murder makes the real opponent look like a failure. Never being targeted is a product of the plan rather than luck, and the luck reading has to explain away two entire stages of the strategy built for precisely that purpose.

But here is where the criticism lands properly. A plan that never gets hit is not evidence of a plan that can take a hit. Those are separate claims and only one of them is demonstrated here.

This is the weak leg, and there is no point dressing it up. The framework rests on **one lever**, which is that this man loves his daughter enough to wreck his own plan for her. Remove the daughter, or make him the sort of man who would sacrifice her, and there is no reduced version of this strategy waiting underneath.

And the book never tests him on it. The plan is never forced off its rails, not once, so Adaptability comes out of this feat **unproven rather than low**. He is never shown failing to adapt. He is simply never made to. That silence sets the ceiling on the whole feat, because the tightness of a plan and the durability of a plan are not the same property and this book only demonstrates one of them.

BUILDING > FORTITUDE >= LOGISTICS >= COMPLEXITY >>> ADAPTABILITY

Strategy Building, Strategy Fortitude, Strategy Logistics, Strategy Complexity, Strategy Adaptability, Strategy Formulation Speed, Concealment, Trap Setting, Fabrication, Misdirection, Acting Skills, Indirect Manipulation, Emotional Manipulation, Emotional Understanding, Logical Manipulation, Prediction, Anticipation, Risk Calculation, Risk Management, Deductive Reasoning, Abductive Reasoning, Analysis, Pattern Recognition

CATEGORY

STRATEGY BUILDING

- Relocates the fight onto the only board where the opponent's forty years of preparation are worth nothing.
- Builds the trap almost entirely out of resources already inside the opponent's own house.
- Brings in from outside: jeans, a jumper, a borrowed hat, one telephone call.

TACTICS

- Dressing the doll does four jobs at once.
- The fake corpse does five more, and manufactures an operative who cannot be suspected.
- The Ainu legend burns the exact number of minutes required, in front of witnesses.

DEDUCTIVE AND ABDUCTIVE REASONING

- Reads the buried footprints off snow conditions, roof access and a five degree tilt.
- Reads the ice weapon off one clean cord and one bloody cord.
- Reads the killer's identity off who could have left the drawbridge ajar.
- Reads a semaphore character off the posture of a corpse.
- Reads a chrysanthemum with a broken neck out of a garden reflected in a curved mirror, and reads the tilt of the tower backwards out of the same image.

FORMULATION SPEED

- Under twenty four hours from arrival to first executed step, with the longest lead time item started first.
- The chief investigator is flipped inside the same window, along with headquarters approval.

EMOTIONAL UNDERSTANDING

- Understood Hamamoto's love for his daughter well enough to build a lever out of it.
- Understood Hamamoto's vanity well enough to leave him a dignified exit.
- Understood Ozaki and Ushikoshi well enough to know which one to turn and which one to use as a mouthpiece.

- Understood Ishioka well enough to keep him out of the operation entirely.

ACTING AND CONCEALMENT

- Five days of sustained clown performance in a house containing four police officers.
- Concealed the strategy from the police, from his own partner and from the target.
- Built the operation so that the two people running it never need to lie about where they were.

INDIRECT MANIPULATION

- Never addresses the target about the case even once before the confrontation.
- Every refusal the target receives comes out of a policeman's mouth.

FABRICATION

- A corpse, a threatening note, a ghost, a theft, an arson and a folk legend.

RISK MANAGEMENT

- Certified room 14 as mechanism free through the police themselves before using it.
- Got the pathologist into the building three hours before the fake death.
- Cut the cord on the doll's wrist to decline the bait without anybody noticing.
- Ran the countermeasure branches for evidentiary quality rather than for whether a catch happens at all.

LIMITS

- One lever and no separate pathway, though three structural properties do part of a failsafe's job.
- One branch that beats him outright, with nothing in the plan aimed at it.
- Four branches held shut by judgement rather than structure.
- Adaptability untested, because nothing in the case ever forces the plan off its rails.

THE PRICE

The bit that gets waved through is what it costs. He drugs a woman who never consented, uses her as live bait in a trap aimed at her own father, terrifies a middle aged woman into a blackout with a costume, commits arson in someone else's house, and lies to an entire police division. In the real world that is about six charges. Mitarai obviously knows it, because at the end he declines to explain any of it to Eiko himself and gets permission for someone **else** to tell her. That is the most self aware thing he does in the whole book and it is one line long.

Catching a murderer was never what happened here. He built a room where the murderer had to walk out and arrest himself in front of witnesses, using the murderer's own furniture. That is what is on the table. Go and check it against the book.