

Holmes of Kyoto

~The Exorcist and the Appraiser~



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Mai Mochizuki

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Kiyotaka Yagashira

He is the grandson of the owner of Kura, an antique store in Kyoto's Teramachi-Sanjo district. Nicknamed "Holmes," he has an incredibly sharp mind despite his gentle demeanor. Sometimes he acts like your typical mischievous, "wicked" Kyoto boy.

Aoi Mashiro

A student at Kyoto Prefectural University who moved to Kyoto from Saitama and began working part-time at the antique store Kura. She is developing her potential as an appraiser under Kiyotaka's guidance.





Akihito Kajiwara

An up-and-coming young actor. He has good looks but also tends to be the comic relief.



Rikyu Takiyama

Kiyotaka's younger brother figure. He admires Kiyotaka so much that he used to be averse to Aoi, but...

Ensho

His real name is Shinya Sugawara. He is a former counterfeiter and Kiyotaka's archnemesis, but after a series of twists and turns, he has now decided to pursue a career as a painter.



Seiji Yagashira (Owner)

Kiyotaka's grandfather. He is a nationally certified appraiser and the owner of Kura.

Yoshie Takiyama

Rikyu's mother and the owner's girlfriend. She is a career woman who runs an art-related business and has a first-class architect license.



Takeshi Yagashira (Manager)

Kiyotaka's father. He is a popular writer of historical novels.



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Prologue

“Aoi has been shooting me glances as of late,” the handsome young man murmured with a sigh. His melancholic expression was straight out of a literary novel.

The office was rather lively whenever conversations got going, but otherwise, it was quiet as everyone did their own thing. That was the case at the moment, with the only sound being the tapping of a keyboard. The whispers of the wistful young man—Kiyotaka Yagashira—were therefore clearly audible. Thus, a response was necessary.

“Glances?” The detective agency’s chief, Katsuya Komatsu, stopped his work and looked up.

Kiyotaka had his hands folded in front of his chin and a distant look in his eyes. His expression was completely serious. When he was like this, his clean features made him appear even more handsome.

Kiyotaka was an appraiser with a brilliant mind and an exceptional eye for observation. He called himself an apprentice, but Komatsu already considered him a professional. This talented man wasn’t here just to mutter to himself, of course. In addition to helping with the agency’s work, he was now providing consultation services. It wasn’t anything fancy, just a poster on the front door saying, “We offer thirty-minute consultations on anything. Pay what you want.” But even though it was only targeting visitors who saw the poster, it was quite popular.

Kiyotaka could give advice on anything, be it restaurant management, Kyoto attractions for tourists, or relationships. And some people just wanted to chat with a good-looking man. Satisfied customers recommended the service to their acquaintances, and its reputation steadily grew.

People looking for consultations typically came after 3 p.m., and it was currently 2:30. Since there wasn’t much going on at this time, Komatsu was working on his programming side job as usual, while Ensho (real name Shinya

Sugawara) was playing online mahjong and Kiyotaka was reading a magazine.

That was when Kiyotaka had murmured those words. This man *seemed* perfect, but he had a fatal weakness—his fiancée, Aoi Mashiro. The topic he was bringing up was probably going to end up being much more trivial than his serious expression suggested. Then again, the words he said were *already* trivial...

Ensho put a hand on his head, which was shaved bald like a monk's. "What is it this time?" He clicked his tongue. "More bragging about your girl? I can't stomach any more of this."

He was as harsh as ever, but this time, Komatsu agreed.

"I've had enough too," the detective said. "I'm just about ready to ban it from the office."

"No," Kiyotaka said, holding up his hand. "I'm not trying to brag."

"Huh?"

"Aoi has always been the type to focus on her work. I could understand if it was during downtime, but normally, she would never glance at me while doing her job."

Komatsu imagined Aoi Mashiro in his head. The girl *was* the type to get fully absorbed when she was hard at work. On several occasions, he had seen her cleaning the store or rearranging the small display in the window without looking away for a single moment.

"But recently, she's been glancing at me while cleaning, checking the inventory, or preparing a new display."

Komatsu and Ensho frowned at the same time.

"What's wrong with that?" Komatsu asked.

"You *are* bragging," Ensho spat.

Kiyotaka sighed. "I'm happy that she's looking at me, of course. However, it's not what you're thinking. Her eyes are extremely calm. It feels less romantic and more like she's observing me. I have no idea why she's looking at me like that." His face paled as he spoke. Everyone recognized this man's sharp

observation skills, but when it came to Aoi, he was useless.

Komatsu and Ensho looked at each other.

“Seems pretty obvious to me,” said Ensho. “She’s appraising you.”

“What?” Kiyotaka furrowed his brow. “Isn’t it a bit late for that?”

“You don’t get it. Aoi’s been maturing by the day. She’s been happily playing fiancée until now, but reality’s starting to sink in.”

“Reality...” Kiyotaka gulped.

“She’s getting close to marrying age, so she’s probably thinking, ‘Should I really marry this person?’ And her hesitation’s manifesting in her glances.”

“Huh?” Kiyotaka was lost for words. The explanation was strangely plausible.

“The other day, you said you finally bought your own car, right? Knowing you, it was probably some super expensive import that normal people would be put off by.” Ensho folded his hands behind his head.

Indeed, Kiyotaka had mentioned buying a car half a month ago. The reasoning had been that the owner—Kiyotaka’s grandfather, Seiji Yagashira—had recently moved in with Yoshie Takiyama, so the Yagashira residence often didn’t have a car available to use. Also, although the owner was elderly and hadn’t turned in his driver’s license yet, it wasn’t a concern because Yoshie did the driving, not him. *“The time has finally come for me to buy my own car.”* Kiyotaka had said those words with a sense of resignation.

“No, I bought a modestly priced Japanese car,” Kiyotaka said.

Komatsu hummed in surprise. He’d assumed that it was the German MINI, since Kiyotaka had been saying for a while that he liked it. “Did you get an electric car?”

“I considered it, but this time, I went with a design that I liked.”

A Japanese car design he likes? What could that be? Komatsu wondered.

Ensho’s eyes lit up a bit. “What, was it a Honda NSX?” Apparently, that was Ensho’s car of choice.

Kiyotaka gave a small shrug. “It was nothing that expensive. I said it was

modestly priced.”

“I can’t trust your definition of ‘modest.’ Was it a Mazda Miata, then?”

“No. I do like the Miata’s design, but a two-seater convertible isn’t suited for daily use.”

“You sound like a housewife.”

“I’m in charge of the family’s finances and housework, so that description isn’t too far off.”

“If you’re a housewife, does that mean Aoi’s the husband?”

“That sounds nice. I’ll cook my best dishes and wait for her to come home.”

“Seriously, stop bragging.”

“You’re the one who asked.”

“So what’d you buy, kiddo?” Komatsu asked impatiently.

“The Mitsuoka Viewt.”

“Oh, yeah, you did talk about that one,” said Ensho.

“It’s a retro-style car, right?” asked Komatsu. “I can see the kiddo liking that.”

Kiyotaka smiled happily. “Yes. It’s very cute, with a cream-colored body and red seats. Aoi also said it was great.” He placed a hand over his mouth, startled. “Could it be because I bought another car despite previously saying that one was enough for us? Perhaps she thought, ‘This person is throwing his money away; I’m concerned about his future.’”

This guy went from excitedly talking about his new car to worrying about Aoi again. Komatsu held back the urge to laugh and put on a serious expression.

“Nah, there’s no way she’s worried about your future.”

“Komatsu...” Kiyotaka looked at him, relieved.

The detective came close to laughing again—Kiyotaka would normally never show him that expression—and held it in by pinching his thigh. “I don’t think it’s anything like that. It’s probably something simpler that’s worrying her.”

“Like what?”

“Maybe she thinks you’re cheating on her.”

“What?” Kiyotaka frowned. “That’s impossible.”

“She doesn’t know that,” Ensho butted in.

Komatsu hid his grin behind his hand and continued. “What I’m trying to say is, maybe you did something to give her the wrong idea without realizing it.”

Kiyotaka hummed and folded his arms. “It *has* happened before. But I don’t think it would have happened again.”

“No, you never know. My wife suspected me of cheating when I was really busy with work. The way she looked at me was terrifying.”

That was the truth. Some time ago, when Kiyotaka had solved the cannabis cult case, the agency had seen a surge of interest. Because Komatsu had suddenly become so busy with work, his wife had grown suspicious of him. Remembering her glare at the time made him hug himself in fear.

“How did you resolve her misunderstanding?” Kiyotaka asked, curious.

“Well...” Komatsu looked up at the ceiling. “I actually didn’t do anything. My wife checked my phone while I was asleep. There weren’t any suspicious chats—it was all work emails. So she understood that I was just very busy.”

“I see. I could offer Aoi my phone, then.”

“That’d make her even more suspicious,” said Ensho.

“Oh, I suppose you’re right.” Kiyotaka nodded.

Just how stupid is he when it comes to Aoi?

“In that case, I need her to secretly check it...”

“What?” Ensho frowned. “You want her to see your phone without permission? I’d never be okay with that, even if I didn’t have anything to hide. If my partner did that to me, I’d stop caring about ’em right then and there. I don’t even know why the old man forgave his wife for doing it.”

“Uh, well, it *was* scary at the time, but she apologized later,” Komatsu hurriedly added. He felt bad that his casual small talk had damaged his wife’s reputation.

“You just don’t get it.” Kiyotaka slumped his shoulders dramatically.

“Get what?” Ensho asked.

“Komatsu’s wife was well aware that looking at her partner’s phone without permission is a very bad thing. She wouldn’t have wanted to do it. But she was so tormented by anxiety that she couldn’t help herself. If Aoi were to look at my phone without permission, I would blame myself for pushing her to that point,” Kiyotaka said earnestly, placing a hand on his chest.

“Kiddo...” Komatsu was impressed by his convincing argument.

Ensho’s expression, however, was cold as usual. “Oh yeah? Good for you.”

Kiyotaka ignored him and picked up his phone. “Now then, I’ll go right ahead and leave my phone somewhere where it’ll be easy to find. I’ll also change the password to something simple and find a roundabout way to tell her.”

“Wait, kiddo.” Komatsu held out his hand. “Look, my wife regrets sneaking a peek at my phone. Every now and then, she remembers what she did and feels bad about it again. You don’t wanna make the little miss feel that way, do you? If you don’t know what you did wrong, you should just stay confident. Don’t do anything unnecessary.”

Kiyotaka froze. The words seemed to resonate with him. “You’re right.” He gloomily put his phone down on the table.

Komatsu held back the urge to laugh yet again. “Regardless of what’s worrying her, why don’t you just try to make her fall in love with you all over again?”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, you’re the Holmes of Kyoto. I think you look really cool when you’re brilliantly solving cases.”

“You’re trying to make me help with your detective work again, aren’t you?” Kiyotaka’s gaze suddenly turned cold. Komatsu flinched.

Ensho laughed. “He’s oblivious when it comes to Aoi, but you can’t trick him otherwise.”

“Of course.” Kiyotaka shrugged. “I’m sensitive to when people are taking

advantage of me.”

“That’s rich, coming from someone who’s spent his life taking advantage of everyone around him.”

“I won’t deny that.”

Komatsu looked back and forth between the two men’s icy smiles. “Wait, I wasn’t trying to take advantage of you, kiddo.”

“I’m just kidding.” Kiyotaka laughed in amusement. “But I think Aoi likes me more as an appraiser than a detective. In other words, I just have to do better at my original job. I think I’ll go back to the basics and work harder at Kura.” He stood up.

“Hey, wait, kiddo. People are gonna come in for consultations soon.” Komatsu checked the time. It was ten minutes to three.

“No, I think it’s about time to close my consulting business.”

Kiyotaka’s training period at the Komatsu Detective Agency had long since ended. He had only stuck around because of the new consulting service. Closing it could only mean that he was going to stop helping them.

Komatsu panicked. “But you said you started consulting here in preparation for something new you were gonna do in the future.”

“Yes, and I think I’ve prepared enough. I was already feeling that I should return to my original focus as an appraiser, so this conversation is a good reason to do that.”

“Aw, kiddo...” Komatsu scratched his head. *I shouldn’t have said anything.*

Ensho didn’t seem to care that Kiyotaka would no longer be around, but he did have one question on his mind. “Hey. What’s the new thing you’re trying to do, anyway?”

“Did I not tell you?” Kiyotaka asked. “I’m thinking of starting a new business alongside running Kura.”

“I know that. I’m asking *what* the business is.”

“Patience. I was about to explain.” Kiyotaka cleared his throat and held his

index finger in front of his mouth. "I'm thinking of becoming a Kyoto consultant."

"A Kyoto consultant?" Komatsu and Ensho asked.

"That's right," Kiyotaka said proudly. "Someone who can help with anything related to Kyoto, be it sightseeing information, organizing events, preparing for the Kyoto Tourism Culture Certification Test, advice on moving to Kyoto for school or work, or, with Ueda's assistance, business management consultation. I'd be able to do it without leaving Kura." His shapely eyes narrowed fondly as he smiled.

"Makes sense," Komatsu said with a firm nod. "Normally it costs money to start a business, but that's something you can easily do without really losing anything."

Ensho hummed and rested his chin on his hand. "Well, I guess it suits a Kyoto-obsessed guy like you."

"Right?" Kiyotaka said proudly. "Providing consultations here was a way of preparing for that. And meeting people who do business in Gion, the heart of Kyoto, will help me expand my web of connections in the future."

"But didn't you also wanna turn Kura into a café and the Yagashira residence into a museum?" asked Ensho. "Did you give up on those?"

"No, I still want to, but it's too early for all that. As Komatsu said, I can start the Kyoto consulting business without any difficulty, so I'm going to begin there."

Komatsu nodded, impressed. "You're the responsible type, after all. So the consulting you did here was a stepping stone for that, huh?"

"Yes, but now is the right time to move on. I'll be returning to Kura."

"Kiddooo..."

"I'd like to continue cooperating with you, of course, so if anything comes up, please contact me. I'll help in any way I can."

Despite Kiyotaka's reassurance, Komatsu predicted that if he really did contact him, the younger man would decline, saying, "No, I can't help with

that.”

“No, wait, kiddo...” *Is there any way I can stop him?*

Kiyotaka wasn't the kind of person who could be swayed by higher pay. Most things in the world could be solved with money, but he was an exception.

Ding dong! The intercom rang as Komatsu was panicking over what to do.

“Oh, is someone here for a consultation?” Komatsu excitedly reached for the mouse to check the door camera, which was linked to his computer.

“I'm not here,” Kiyotaka said immediately.

Komatsu's eyebrows drooped. “Have a heart, man.”

When Kiyotaka wasn't present, Komatsu would take on the request instead, so the absence technically wasn't an issue. However, most people turned around and left when they found out he wasn't there, so in that sense, it was a huge problem.

Komatsu slumped his shoulders as he looked at the screen. “Huh?” He squinted. Standing at the door was a smiling young man in a kimono and haori coat. It was a friend of Kiyotaka's.

Seeing Komatsu's troubled expression, Kiyotaka quickly sensed an issue and looked at the screen. “Oh,” he said with a pleased smile. “If it isn't Reito. Please come in.”

He stopped pretending to be away and stood up to greet him. Apparently, this man was special.

I'm still hanging by a thread, at least for now. Komatsu placed a hand on his chest.

And so the handsome young man—the epitome of beauty—entered the office.

“Greetings,” Reito said with a bow. He had an even stronger Kyoto accent than Kiyotaka.

“This guy's like a maiko,” Ensho muttered.

“W-Welcome to the Komatsu Detective Agency,” Komatsu declared loudly,

trying to cover up Ensho's words.

"I apologize for visiting unannounced," Reito said.

"I'm Komatsu. I've heard all about you. Thank you for your help with Sada's case."

"It was nothing." The man shook his head.

"The kiddo—I mean, Yagashira's making coffee right now, so please have a seat while you wait."

"Thank you." Reito sat on the sofa in the reception area.

"Who is this guy?" Ensho asked quietly.

Komatsu shot him a look before taking out his phone and sending him a text. *"His name's Reito Kamo. He's a descendant of a well-known family of mediums, and he's basically a modern-day medium himself, doing exorcisms and stuff. On Sada's case, he helped us out by identifying which shrine the crystal bracelet came from."*

Ensho hummed and sent his reply. *"He's as fishy as a seafood market, then."*

Komatsu gave a strained smile. Well, it was natural to be skeptical of a modern-day diviner. The simile was a bit overboard, though...

"He kinda seems similar to Holmes."

Upon reading the second message from Ensho, Komatsu looked towards the two men. Kiyotaka was preparing coffee in the kitchen, while Reito was sitting on the sofa, curiously gazing around the office. They did have many things in common—their Kyoto heritage, black hair, pale skin, attractive features, gentle demeanor, elegant mannerisms... One could come up with so many examples just from a glance. If someone told him they were brothers, he would've believed it.

What was different were their auras. Kiyotaka was sharp-witted, while Reito was gentle and calm. Kiyotaka was the type that girls would call "cool," but when it came to Reito, Komatsu could imagine them whispering about the "beautiful man" instead.

What do two Kyoto boys talk about when they're together, anyway? Komatsu

wondered. Would they partake in the typical Kyoto sarcasm, chuckling all the while?

“Kiyotaka, would you like to go for bubuzuke?”

“Certainly; perhaps another time.”

Komatsu’s expression relaxed as he imagined it.

Kiyotaka arrived with the coffee and sat down across from Reito. “Thank you again for all of your help last year,” he said with a bow.

“It was nothing.” Reito shook his head. “This time, I have a favor to ask.”

“For you, anything.”

Komatsu gaped at how quickly Kiyotaka responded. If those words had come from anyone else, he would’ve asked, “What exactly is the request?” He wouldn’t have even tried to hide his wariness.

“Including relationship advice,” Kiyotaka added jokingly.

That seemed like the last thing such a gorgeous young man would need. Was this another Kyoto-style joke? A way of saying, “You wouldn’t need relationship advice, would you?”

Reito nodded shyly. “After what you said last time...I think I’ll try my best to remove the obstacles in the way. I’ll keep you updated.”

Apparently, he really *had* asked for relationship advice. But what were these “obstacles” he spoke of?

“This time, though, I wanted to ask you to do a job for me,” Reito continued.

Kiyotaka’s expression immediately turned serious. “What is it?”

“There are two parts to it. First, I’d like you to look at something for me.”

“Am I correct in assuming that it’s an appraisal job?” Kiyotaka asked in a happy tone.

“Yes. The other part is a request for everyone at the Komatsu Detective Agency, including you.”

“Huh?” Komatsu murmured.

“So it’s an investigation?” Kiyotaka asked.

“Correct. However...” Reito lowered his gaze as if hesitant to continue. The peculiar pause made Komatsu gulp as he awaited his next words.

“Is it a troublesome case?” Kiyotaka asked.

“Indeed.” Reito gave him a strained smile. “For now, I’ll just say that I need you to come with me to a haunted house.”

Komatsu and Ensho looked at each other in surprise. Kiyotaka, on the other hand, nodded without hesitation and said, “Understood.”

“I also wanted to ask you something. Kiyotaka, how much tolerance do you have for the supernatural?”

“The supernatural?” Kiyotaka folded his arms.

At this point, Komatsu already had a hunch that this was going to be a bizarre request, the likes of which he’d remember for the rest of his life.

This was the story that was about to unfold...

Chapter 1: That Which Changes and That Which Doesn't

1

The antique store Kura seemed to never change—it was actually the opposite. The antiques didn't stay there forever; they'd find their way into someone's hands, and at some point, other items would come to take their place. The storefront display changed every month.

However, there were some things that remained the same. The Shino tea bowl, the antique doll, Ensho's painting...each item was filled with memories. Then again, that must've been true for every item in the store. They all contained someone's memories. Thinking that made me want to straighten my back.

Today, I was working at Kura again. As my hands moved, I sneaked a peek at the counter, where Kiyotaka Yagashira sat. The handsome young man was dressed in his usual attire: a black vest over a white shirt, black slacks, and arm garters. He was doing the accounting, but he noticed my gaze immediately and smiled.

I returned the smile and went back to work. As I looked down, I gulped and thought, *He really is perceptive enough to be nicknamed Holmes*. He caught on to every small motion or implication a person made, and sometimes, he guessed what they were thinking to the point where you'd wonder if he was a mind reader.

However, he wasn't like that twenty-four seven. His exceptional powers of observation only kicked in when he had his antenna pointed at someone or something. When he was focused on something else, such as reading or studying, his perceptiveness was halved—still sharper than the average person, but not so keen that he would notice my gaze while he was looking down at the account book. Recently, something had changed. If I so much as looked vaguely

in his direction, he would react immediately. He was definitely being more conscious of me than usual. In other words, he was aware of my persistent glances.

Perhaps he knows what I'm thinking...

*

He closed the account book and looked at me. "You've been sneaking glances in my direction as of late. Are you plotting something?"

I flinched at his stern voice.

"Surely you aren't doing what Aigasa did, are you?" he continued, not showing me any mercy. "Can I take your silence as an admission of guilt...dad?"

So he did realize. I raised my head, resigning myself to my fate. "Well..." I scratched my head and laughed like it wasn't a big deal. "I received a request to write a contemporary novel, and I decided to accept." In other words, a novel taking place in modern times.

"That's unusual for you."

"Yes, it's been a while."

I, Takeshi Yagashira, mainly wrote historical novels. They were quite popular too, so I rarely received requests for stories set in the present day. Even when I did, I would say, "I think there's more demand for my historical novels right now," and stick to promoting my specialty. However, I'd recently had a change of heart. I'd started thinking that it might be nice to write something different, and that was when the contemporary novel request had come.

"And I was thinking of making you the main protagonist," I added hesitantly.

"Good grief. Not this again." Kiyotaka slumped his shoulders.

From his tone of voice, I could tell that, although he wasn't enthusiastic about the idea, he wasn't completely opposed to it. He was more intimidating than that when he really wanted you to stop. If I kept pressing, he would reluctantly agree. After making that judgment call, I continued to explain.

"I'm thinking of writing a mystery revolving around a narrative trick, and I was practicing just now."

Kiyotaka's eyes widened. "Practicing a narrative trick?"

"Yes. I was writing a scene taking place at Kura. It makes the reader think it's from Aoi's point of view, when actually, the narrator is me." I looked around the store and chuckled.

The goal of a narrative trick was to not reveal everything to the reader, instead drawing their attention to other things before the truth came out at the very end. In this case, the trick made the reader think, "I thought the story was from Aoi's point of view, but it was the manager." Of course, it was also necessary to include hints that Aoi wasn't the narrator—for example, the phrases used and the vagueness of the narrator's actions. It had to make the reader think, "It seems like Aoi, but it feels a little different." Then, when the truth was revealed, the reader's momentary confusion should be followed by understanding, when they realize that something *had* felt off all along.

This was the kind of mystery I was aiming for. When I was asked to write a contemporary novel, I knew I wanted to write a mystery, but I wasn't suited to writing extravagant tricks. However, perhaps I could pull off a trick relying on narrative deception.

Kiyotaka sighed as I explained my mindset. "You should give up on that mystery."

"Huh?" I looked up, surprised. "Why? You like narrative tricks too, don't you? I see you reading them all the time."

"I do. This isn't about my preferences—it's about the fact that you're better off not writing it."

"And why is that?"

"You're trying to make me the main protagonist because you're aiming for a multimedia franchise, aren't you?"

In the novel industry, a multimedia franchise referred to an original story being adapted into other forms of media, such as a TV drama, film, or stage play. Kiyotaka's accusation was so blunt that, for a second, I forgot to breathe.

"How—"

Before I could finish my question, he continued, “Your books are successful, but none of them have been adapted yet. It’s likely because they focus on the subtleties of the human heart rather than the poetic justice that people typically expect from historical fiction. The drama is also rather messy.”

He was correct.

“One of your author friends, Kurisu Aigasa, recently released her new book, and a stage adaptation was announced soon after. That book was a mystery modeled after your own son. It must have been quite the shock.”

Absolutely.

“Then you received a request to write a novel set in modern times. You saw this as an opportunity to write your own mystery based on me, didn’t you?”

I placed my hand on my forehead, speechless. To be honest, I hadn’t even realized it myself. I personally knew many authors whose works had been adapted into TV dramas, films, anime, and stage plays. Naturally, I envied them. However, I was aware that my books weren’t suited to such adaptations. I figured an offer would come eventually and patiently waited for that day. But when Kurisu Aigasa wrote a story based on Kiyotaka, and it later received a stage adaptation, my heart had grown restless. I was frustrated because it should have been me—I was the one closest to him. I felt compelled to write my own story about him.

I had assumed that my frustration had simply been due to not realizing that such good material existed so close to me until another author wrote it first. But hidden below that was an earnest wish for one of my works to receive an adaptation. Kiyotaka had revealed a darkness in my heart that I hadn’t noticed myself, but it felt more like he had reached even deeper into my organs and pulled out the corrupted pus with his bare hand.

“By the way, why are you against my writing a narrative trick?” I asked after calming down a bit.

“Isn’t it obvious? It’s not suited for multimedia.”

“Oh!” I covered my mouth with my hand.

“A mystery revolving around a narrative trick shines because it’s in text

format. There have been plenty of adaptations of such stories, of course, but those productions require quite a bit of ingenuity. I think it would be difficult to get an adaptation unless the work was extremely popular. The genre just isn't suited to it."

He was right. The point of this kind of mystery was to deceive through writing. You could make the reader think the narrator was a woman when it was actually a man, or that it was the daughter when it was actually the mother. But when adapted into visual media, it was, to put it bluntly, completely obvious. You wouldn't be able to deceive the viewer unless you incorporated even more clever tricks.

"If you're seriously aiming for a multimedia franchise, it would be better to write a story that can be adapted visually without requiring special techniques," Kiyotaka said, folding his arms and looking up at the ceiling. After a while, he shifted his gaze to me. "Sorry, I shouldn't have gone that far."

"No, it's fine." I shook my head. "I just find myself afraid of your perceptiveness, as usual." Since I hadn't realized that I wanted an adaptation so badly, I hadn't thought to write the kind of story that would make that happen.

"Oh, so it was a subconscious feeling that you were unaware of. In that case, I'm even more sorry."

Once again, he easily read my mind. *I swear, this son of mine...*

I put my hand on my forehead.

Our conversation was interrupted by the door chime.

"Good morning," Aoi said as she entered the store. It was currently the afternoon, but at Kura, we usually said "Good morning" when entering, as was customary in the antique industry.

The atmosphere in the store immediately brightened.

"Good morning, Aoi," Kiyotaka and I said in unison.

Kiyotaka was smiling happily. In his heart, he was probably even more lovestruck than his smile suggested, but he didn't let it show. Instead, he greeted her with a seemingly calm and gentle expression.

Aoi bowed and looked at me. “Manager, why the long face?”

“Kiyotaka was bullying me just now,” I said.

“Huh?” She turned to face Kiyotaka in surprise. “Is that true, Holmes?”

“No, of course not.”

Seeing Kiyotaka’s panicked expression gave me a sense of satisfaction. “I’m just kidding,” I said with a grin. “We were actually talking about Aigasa’s book that’s getting a stage adaptation.”

“Oh!” Aoi beamed like a blooming flower.

“You’re looking forward to it, aren’t you?” I asked.

“Of course. I can’t wait to see Kisuke Ichikata play Holmes.” She clasped her hands in front of her chest. “But...” She sighed. “It’s still a long way off.”

“Yes, I believe it’s at the end of July.” I looked at the calendar. The play was going to be performed during summer break, but it was only early February now. “I’m sure the time will fly by.”

“Yeah.” She tilted her head. “But why did talking about Aigasa’s book lead to Holmes bullying you?”

“As I said, I didn’t bully him,” Kiyotaka insisted.

“He was just making observations that were too sharp,” I explained. “Well, it’s what he always does, anyway.”

Aoi seemed to understand immediately. Kiyotaka cleared his throat and changed the topic.

“Right, Komatsu’s agency is going to be helping Reito with a job. I might be away from Kura for a few days.”

“Got it,” said Aoi. She didn’t look surprised, perhaps because she’d already heard.

“Dad, if you’re busy, I’ll ask Rikyu to watch the store.”

“All right. What’s the job, by the way?” Right after asking, I slumped my shoulders. “Sorry, these things are supposed to be confidential, aren’t they?” For all its flaws, it was still a detective agency.

“Yes.” Kiyotaka nodded. “However, part of it isn’t detective work, but an appraisal job.”

“Huh?” Aoi looked up, surprised. “It’s an appraisal job?” Apparently this was news to her too.

“Yes, and I was about to ask if you wanted to come along. Would you be interested?”

“May I?”

“Of course. Reito said you were welcome to join us.”

“I’d love to, then.”

Behind Aoi’s cheerful expression was a determined gaze. Her enthusiasm had suddenly spiked after hearing the word “appraisal.” After all, although she was Kiyotaka’s fiancée, she was also his apprentice.

I nodded in approval. “That means Reito has more than one request for you, doesn’t it?”

“Yes. The other one is for the Komatsu Detective Agency as a whole. I can’t tell you about it, but to be honest, I haven’t heard the details yet either. There was one thing Reito asked me that struck me as odd, though.”

“What was it?” Aoi and I asked in unison.

“He asked, ‘Kiyotaka, how much tolerance do you have for the supernatural?’”

The supernatural. “As in spirits and the like, right?” I asked.

“Yes.” Kiyotaka folded his arms.

“What did you tell him?” Aoi asked.

“I was only able to give a vague ‘I’m not sure.’ I don’t know if I have any resistance or not.” He gave a strained smile.

“I think you’re probably fine,” Aoi said hesitantly.

He looked at her, surprised. “What makes you say that?”

“I mean, you seemed to be fine when you were solving the Gion ghost

problem, as well as a long time ago when something supernatural happened at Akihito's relative's house."

I knew about the Gion ghost problem. It was a request that had come to the Komatsu Detective Agency, and they had solved it. But this was my first time hearing about a supernatural event happening to a relative of the actor Akihito Kajiwarara.

"What happened at the house?" I asked, sensing that it would be good material for a story and quickly preparing my pen and notebook.

Kiyotaka, however, continued to face Aoi as he nodded. "Now that you mention it, yes, that did happen. That brings back memories."

"Akihito and I were shaking with fear, but you seemed to be enjoying yourself," Aoi said.

"It's because you two were so scared. The entertainment overpowered the supernatural phenomenon."

"What? That's so mean." Aoi looked up at him with a pout.

As expected, this display of hers was like an arrow through Kiyotaka's heart. He raised a hand to his mouth in shock, seeming to be holding in his joy because they were at work.

"The appraisal is likely going to be this Saturday," he told her. "Is that all right with you?"

"Oh, yes. I was going to be working at Kura that day anyway. But..." She looked at me, worried.

"I'll be fine," I replied. "I was going to stay here for a while to work on my new novel anyway." *My mystery idea just got scrapped, though, and I haven't decided what else to write,* I added in my mind. That was why I was so sensitive to interesting material. "By the way, what happened at Kajiwarara's relative's house?" I asked again, inadvertently leaning towards Aoi.

"Dad, please don't hound Aoi like that." Kiyotaka pushed me back, then turned to Aoi and resumed their earlier conversation. "As for my tolerance for the supernatural, now that I think about it, my curiosity outweighs my fear, so it

might not be an issue after all.”

“Yes, you’ll be fine,” she assured him.

“You’ve given me your seal of approval, so I’ll have confidence in myself.”

Their friendly chat continued. Feeling excluded, I sullenly opened my notebook and drew a big “X” over the words “Narrative Trick Mystery Proposal.”

2

The day had arrived, and Holmes and I were now heading north by car. It wasn’t the usual company car, but the new one Holmes had bought a little while ago, which had just been delivered this month.

“I received the new car just now, and I’m heading over to pick you up, but would you like to go for a little drive first? I want you to be the first to ride in the passenger seat.”

When I received that message from Holmes, I’d immediately replied, “I’d be honored.”

Our first “little drive” had ended up being on Kinukake-no-Michi, a scenic road that connected Kinkaku-ji Temple, Ryoan-ji Temple, Ninna-ji Temple, and Arashiyama. It featured lush greenery, with cherry blossoms in the spring and colorful foliage in the fall, making it popular for hiking, cycling, and driving. That day, we’d driven down Kinukake-no-Michi all the way to Arashiyama, visited the Fukuda Art Museum to see the seasonal exhibits, and enjoyed tea at a Japanese-style café.

Today was my second time riding in Holmes’s new car. Since this was an appraisal job, Komatsu and Ensho didn’t come with us. It was just the two of us. A fun local program was playing on the radio as I gazed out the window. I’d heard that our destination was Nakagawa, a mountainous region in northern Kyoto. I lived in the north too, so I hadn’t thought it would be that far, but we’d already been driving for almost forty minutes.

Holmes chuckled from the driver’s seat. “We’re almost there.”

He'd read my mind again. Embarrassed, I looked at him and asked, "Nakagawa is pretty far, isn't it?"

"Somewhat, yes. It's about fifty minutes from your house. If you were to take the bus from Kyoto Station, it would take an hour and a half. It's still part of Kita-ku, though."

"Now that you mention it, when I first came to Kyoto, I was surprised by how big Sakyo-ku was, but I guess Kita-ku is big too." Sakyo-ku was the ward I lived in. It was centered around the Shimogamo area and included Okazaki to the south, Ohara to the north, and Mount Kurama.

"Yes, it's the third-largest ward in Kyoto City."

"The biggest is Sakyo-ku, right?"

"No, that's Ukyo-ku."

I blinked in surprise. "Oh. I thought for sure it'd be Sakyo-ku..."

"Ukyo-ku expanded in recent years when the town of Keihoku merged with Kyoto City. Sakyo-ku is a close second. Kita-ku is only about a third of Ukyo-ku's size, but it's still very large. The rest are meaningless to compare, but the smallest ward is Shimogyo-ku."

Shimogyo-ku spanned from Shijo-Karasuma to Shijo-Kawaramachi and included Kyoto Station. Although it was small in area, it had a major train station, bus terminal, downtown area, and business district, so it was probably the busiest ward in Kyoto. The unexpected trivia made me realize that I still had a lot to learn.

"We have quite a bit of time before our appointment, so why don't we visit the local shrines and temples while we're here? We can see the origin of the Kamo River too, and then have lunch."

"Yes, let's." I nodded enthusiastically.

Holmes told me about the mountainous regions in Kita-ku as he drove. They were divided into three areas: Nakagawa, Onogo, and Kumogahata.

"Industries such as forestry thrive here. It's a beautiful place with lush nature."

I looked out the window as I listened to his words. Before I knew it, the scenery had become completely rural. Since it was winter, it looked a bit dreary outside, but I could imagine the area sparkling with fresh greenery in spring and being full of vivid colors in fall.

“First, let’s visit Onogo’s Iwato Ochiba Shrine,” he suggested, gently turning the wheel. “It appears in *The Tale of Genji*.”

We drove deftly down the mountain roads, taking the Shuzan Highway north to the point where the Kiyotaki River and Iwato River met. There, we got out of the car and looked up at the vermilion torii gate. It had a plaque with the words “Iwato” and “Ochiba” written vertically side by side, with “Shrine” underneath. The stone monument next to it had the name laid out the same way.

“That’s an unusual way of writing it,” I remarked.

“This is a combined shrine. Iwato Shrine was originally located a little farther away, but it was moved here after a fire.”

“So that’s why the names are written side by side.”

I could see the performance hall behind the torii gate, and beyond it, two small shrines. The deities enshrined here were Ame-no-Miso-Orime-Wakahime-no-Kami, Mizubanome-no-Kami, and Seoritsuhime-no-Kami.

“Iwato Shrine was originally a ‘taisha,’” Holmes explained. Taisha was a rank indicating a shrine with especially effective powers that was highly revered by the people and had a connection to the imperial family. “On the other hand, Ochiba Shrine was associated with Emperor Suzaku’s daughter, Ninomiya, also known as Princess Ochiba.”

“Oh! Was she the model for Princess Ochiba in *The Tale of Genji*?”

“Indeed.” Holmes nodded firmly.

Princess Ochiba’s story didn’t center around Genji Hikaru, but his son, Yugiri, whose best friend was her husband, Kashiwagi.

“I remember it being a sad story, or rather, unfulfilling,” I murmured.

Princess Ochiba was the second daughter of Emperor Suzaku. She married Kashiwagi, but Kashiwagi was in love with another woman: Princess Ochiba’s

half sister and Genji Hikaru's wife, Onna Sannomiya. Kashiwagi was obsessed with his forbidden love to the point where, not only did he not care for his wife at all, he even composed a poem about "receiving a dull fallen leaf." That was why Ninomiya had later become known as Princess Ochiba, "fallen leaf."

Kashiwagi's anxieties led him to an early death, but on his deathbed, he finally felt sorry for his wife and asked his best friend, Yugiri, to take care of her. Unlike his frivolous father, Yugiri was a very serious man. He faithfully adhered to his best friend's dying wish, visiting Princess Ochiba to check up on her. Princess Ochiba found him bothersome, but she couldn't turn him away because he was her husband's best friend.

However, before long, Yugiri fell in love with Princess Ochiba. It was the serious man's first time experiencing such passionate feelings, so he made many mistakes, unable to understand a woman's heart. Everything he did backfired.

Princess Ochiba abhorred the idea of becoming one of Yugiri's wives, so she continued to reject him. But after her mother passed away, she had no one left to rely on. Realizing that she wouldn't be able to survive on her own, she had no choice but to marry Yugiri.

It really was a painful tale. I looked up at the shrine with mixed feelings. "Was the real Princess Ochiba similar to the one in the story?" I asked.

"I'm not sure." Holmes looked at the shrine as well. "From what I hear, the real Princess Ochiba didn't marry a man she detested. Instead, she lived out the rest of her life here."

"I see. I wonder why Shikibu Murasaki wrote that story based on her, then," I murmured to myself.

In *The Tale of Genji*, Princess Ochiba lived a miserable life subjected to the whims of two men. It was a shame that the real Princess Ochiba, who had lived a peaceful life here, had to become the heroine of such a cruel tale.

"Shikibu Murasaki didn't know Princess Ochiba personally, did she?" I asked.

"No, she wouldn't have. Princess Ochiba lived during Emperor Suzaku's reign, while Shikibu Murasaki served at the imperial court five generations later,

during Emperor Ichijo's reign. They lived in different eras."

In other words, Shikibu Murasaki was a writer who was around after Princess Ochiba had passed away. Hearing Princess Ochiba's story must've inspired her.

"At the time, it was likely common for women to live the remainder of their lives in seclusion like Princess Ochiba did," Holmes murmured. "Human nature hasn't changed much since ancient times, so there were probably those who pitied such women. However, being forced to marry and serve a man you disapprove of isn't desirable either. Perhaps the intent was to convey that it wasn't so bad to live peacefully, away from the hassles of the world."

The Tale of Genji did have a lot of encouraging stories for women, now that I thought about it. Hikaru Genji's love interests weren't only noble and beautiful, but also women of low status or average appearance. It gave the reader hope that they, too, could be loved by a nobleman. Princess Ochiba's story might have also been a message to women who lived the rest of their lives alone, saying, "Your life right now is much more comfortable than having to spend every day with a man you don't like."

"But I don't know for sure," Holmes added with a smile.

"Thinking about it that way makes me feel better, though."

"Indeed. Shall we pray now? It's said that one can receive blessings for traffic safety here."

"Oh, that's perfect for you."

We prayed at Iwato Shrine and Ochiba Shrine and had a look around the grounds. There was a large tree with branches hanging over the torii gate.

"That's a ginkgo tree," Holmes said. "In autumn, the grounds will be covered in a yellow carpet of fallen ginkgo leaves."

My expression relaxed as I imagined the sight. It would probably be very beautiful. "I'd like to come back in the fall, then."

"I'll happily bring you here."

We looked at each other and giggled.

Our next destination was a mountain temple called Iwayasan Shimyo-in. The Kamo River's source could be found in its precincts.

After parking the car and climbing the stone steps, we came to an old two-story gate with a historic aura. Its majestic appearance made me stop in my tracks for a second. The stairs continued past the gate. It looked like an entrance to another world, and I felt like I was going to get goose bumps.

"What an incredible place," I murmured.

"It has quite the atmosphere, doesn't it? That old gate was built in the Muromachi period, and part of it has remained unchanged since then."

"No wonder." I gulped.

"This temple was established in the year 650 by En no Gyoja, the founder of the Shugendo religion. In 829, it was restored by Kukai on Emperor Junna's orders."

Holmes explained that the temple grounds encompassed a cave where Kukai had undergone ascetic training, a spear dedicated to a dragon god, and a rock from which the first droplets of the Kamo River trickled. It was all so overwhelming.

"The area beyond the gate is a sacred ground, so photography isn't allowed," he said.

"It really does feel sacred."

It was similar to our visits to Kifune Shrine's rear shrine and Manai Shrine in Tango. The atmosphere was so grand that it felt more like a sanctuary where mountain deities and spirits resided rather than a shrine for humans. Thinking about it, those two shrines had also been dedicated to dragon gods—deities associated with water. Perhaps this was what the lands where dragon gods resided were like: pure as crystal clear cold water, with a tingly, tense atmosphere.

As I looked at the gate, lost in thought, a bald man in monk garb greeted us.

"Hello," he said, placing his hands together and bowing.

“Hello,” we replied, bowing back.

“This is Shimyo-in Temple’s head priest,” Holmes said.

“This temple’s formal name is Kinkoho-ji Temple, but it’s commonly referred to as Iwaya Fudo,” the head priest explained with a smile. “Many people visit in spring to see the beautiful rhododendron flowers.”

“Correct me if I’m wrong, but I heard that Ryotaro Shiba once stayed at this temple.”

“As in the author?” I asked, surprised. Even someone like me, who had only read historical novels written by the manager, recognized the name. Many of his works had been made into films, such as *Ryoma Goes His Way* and *Moeyo Ken*.

The head priest nodded. “Ryotaro Shiba once stayed here while writing. He had many strange experiences during that time and called this a temple of evil spirits.”

“A temple of evil spirits?” I repeated without thinking.

“Yes.” The head priest nodded again. “There was no electricity at the time, so at night, he would write using the light of a paper lantern. As he did, he’d hear sounds like a sumo wrestler stomping on the ground or a crying baby. Or the sliding door would suddenly open by itself, revealing a floating ball of fire.”

Writing a book in a temple this deep in the mountains, one was bound to run into the supernatural. I shrank back in fear.

“If I’m not mistaken, he wrote about it in his essay collection, *Ryotaro Shiba’s Thoughts*,” said Holmes. “It was the first entry, *Rhododendron Ghost Story*.”

“Yes, that’s correct,” the head priest confirmed with a laugh. “He doesn’t name the temple, but it’s this one.”

“Um, have you had any supernatural experiences here yourself?” I asked the head priest.

“No. I studied biology, so I know that the strange voices I hear at night are probably thrushes, and the noises are probably flying squirrels. It makes it hard to be scared. I know it doesn’t sound exciting that way, though.”

Holmes nodded firmly. "I understand. I'm like that too."

I kind of envied them.

"However," the head priest continued, "I did have a strange experience when I was young. Nowadays, I assume it was just a dream, but I still remember it clearly."

"What happened?" I asked.

"It sounds absurd, but I met a tengu in the mountains over there. It looked exactly like you'd expect. It had a large leaf like a round fan, wore single-tooth geta sandals, and stood firmly on top of a tree branch. I was so scared that I stumbled all the way back down. It might've just been a dream, though." He looked back at the mountains. "The mountain on the right has had rumors of tengu sightings since ancient times, and I think hearing those probably played a part in what I saw. That was the only strange experience I've had."

Listening to his story made me feel like I'd had a supernatural experience too. I gulped quietly.

"Now, please go ahead and pray at the temple. We've been praised as a spiritual hot spot in recent years," he said with a smile.

"Thank you," Holmes and I replied. We bowed in front of the gate before passing through.

The stone steps were covered in fallen leaves. It was very much a mountain path, with tree roots stretching across it. To the right, we saw a tower with a rather large temple bell. At the top of the steps was the main building.

"According to one theory, this guardian statue was the work of Unkei and his son, Tankei," Holmes explained.

We stood side by side in front of the building and paid our respects.

"The cave where Kukai trained is this way." He led me down the narrow path to the left.

We walked along the mountainside until we reached a gaping cavern. *If dragons really existed and lived in holes like snakes do, it'd have to be a cave like this*, I thought. It was dark inside, with stone Buddhas dimly illuminated by

candlelight. It made me feel like I had to stand up straighter.

“The head priest said this was a spiritual hot spot, but...it feels a lot less superficial than that,” I murmured softly.

“Indeed.” Holmes smiled.

We prayed at the cave and then headed for the source of the Kamo River. There were stairs on the side of the main building that led to a platform made of steel beams. Apparently, it used to be made of wood but had been rebuilt due to deterioration. After climbing onto the platform, we found a large boulder from which water was dripping.

“This is said to be the origin of the Kamo River,” Holmes said.

It was strange to think that these falling droplets would become a puddle that became a small stream, leading all the way to Kyoto’s famous Kamo River. That said, every river probably had a tiny source, not just this one. The same could be said for human connections. Something that started out as a small connection could eventually become huge. The thought was enlightening.

“I’m glad I got to come here,” I murmured.

Holmes smiled fondly. “I’m glad you liked it. It’s already past noon, by the way.”

“Oh, you’re right. I *am* getting a little hungry.”

“Let’s have lunch. I know a place nearby with delicious soba noodles.” He held out his hand.

“Okay.” I nodded and took his hand.

We went to the nearby restaurant and ordered their soba and tempura set. The warm noodles were adorned with many mountain delicacies, and the delicious flavors seeped into my chilly body.

After we finished eating, I checked the time. It was 1:30 p.m., and Reito had asked us to come by at 2:00 p.m. It was about time for us to head over to our client’s house.

We got back in the car and Holmes told me more about our destination, Nakagawa, as he drove.

“Kita-ku’s mountainous region has a thriving forestry industry, but Nakagawa is especially known for the Kitayama cedar. Look, those are the ones.” Holmes’s gaze was directed at a forest of trees that had almost all of their branches cut off, leaving only the leaves at the top.

“The shape kind of reminds me of horsetails.”

Holmes chuckled in amusement. “Kitayama cedars are pruned regularly. Doing so gives them sturdier trunks with tightly packed rings. The trunks are carefully developed into the beautiful pillars you see.”

I hummed as I listened to the explanation. “Does our client work in the forestry industry?”

“I haven’t heard the details, but it isn’t he who lives in Nakagawa—it was his late father. Our client was sorting through his possessions and found some antiques he wanted to know the value of.”

“So he asked to be introduced to an appraiser.” It was a common scenario.

“His late father was friends with Reito’s grandfather.”

“Oh, so that’s where the connection was.” I was always impressed by Kyoto’s web of contacts.

Holmes craned his neck. “It should be that house over there.”

A traditional Japanese residence with a tiled roof could be seen behind a white fence, alongside a storehouse with earthen walls. It was rare to see such a large house in Kyoto. It was old-fashioned but didn’t seem to be deteriorating, meaning it had probably been well maintained.

“Wow!” I exclaimed as I looked up at it from the passenger window. “It even has a storehouse. What a magnificent home.”

“Yes, it seems he was quite wealthy.”

In front of the gate, there was a man dressed like an ancient court noble. He wore a suikan robe and an eboshi cap, and he was holding a Shinto purification wand.

“Is that a priest?” I asked.

“That’s Reito.”

“Huh?” I blinked.

Reito noticed us and bowed in our direction. He gestured for us to park in the lot to the side. Holmes nodded and did as instructed, then we got out of the car and headed to the front gate.

Reito was standing in front of a distinguished nameplate that said “Endo.” His beauty was otherworldly to begin with, but dressed the way he was, it was as if a mountain god had sent a messenger to greet us.

“Hello, Kiyotaka, Aoi.” He bowed again as we approached. As usual, he was the personification of grace.

“Hello, Reito,” I said. “Thank you for allowing me to join you today.” I bowed.

“It’s fine,” he said, calmly shaking his head.

Holmes examined Reito from top to bottom and asked, “Why are you dressed like that? You said we would be appraising antiques today.”

“I had work in the morning. I was going to change first, but it seems that I’ll be performing an exorcism here as well.”

“I see.”

“For the record, I don’t need to be dressed a certain way to do it, but people find it more convincing when I look like this.”

“Ah, yes, I imagine so.”

“Um, what’s this about an exorcism?” I asked.

Holmes had said that he would be appraising antiques that had belonged to the client’s late father. Was there a local custom that involved exorcizing items left behind by the deceased? I looked at Reito, praying that was the case.

“My apologies,” Reito said, sensing my worry. “It seems that after the client’s father passed away, strange things began happening. It’s most likely the work of spirits, so I was asked to perform an exorcism.”

“What?” I asked weakly. I wasn’t good with scary things.

Holmes looked at me, concerned. “Aoi, antiques are—as the name implies—very old items, so as you continue to appraise them, you may encounter strange phenomena.”

Come to think of it, Holmes had once had Reito exorcize a possessed hair ornament for him.

“Reito is accompanying us this time, so we will definitely be safe. I think this is something you should experience.”

Reito chuckled. “‘Definitely,’ you say? I’m honored that you have such faith in me.”

“However,” Holmes continued, “if you really aren’t up for it, you can wait for us at a nearby café. There’s a very nice one here.” He smiled.

Ghosts were scary, but it was a warm, sunny afternoon and we had a professional(?) spiritualist with us, as well as Holmes, who could enjoy himself in any kind of situation. It’d probably be fine.

“No, please let me come with you.” I clenched my fists, steeling my resolve.

4

“Welcome.” We were greeted by a middle-aged man with a cheerful smile.

We exchanged introductions at the front door. His name was Tatsuo Endo, and he was in his early forties with a medium build. His face was red and swollen like the skin was inflamed.

“It has been quite a long time, Tatsuo,” said Reito.

“Likewise. You still look just like your sister. I’ve been watching Anna on TV.”

“Thank you for your support. I’ll be sure to let her know.”

Reito’s older sister had originally debuted as a model, and now she was an actress as well. As Tatsuo said, the siblings looked very alike.

“Tatsuo, you and Reito know each other through your families, don’t you?” Holmes asked.

“Correct. My father asked Reito’s grandfather for help a long time ago, and

our families have been close ever since. Right?” Tatsuo asked, turning to Reito. The formality of his speech completely changed based on who he was talking to.

“Yes, we might as well be relatives at this point,” said Reito. “More importantly, what happened to your face?”

“Ah, well...” Tatsuo weakly raised a hand to his cheek. “It swelled up at some point, perhaps because I was going into the mountains. But once I go back home to Okazaki and put some medicine on it, it’ll heal.” Apparently the swelling was only temporary. “Anyway, please come in.” He gestured for us to enter the house.

We bowed and went inside. I was surprised to find that, despite the exterior looking old-fashioned, the interior was brand-new. There was a garden in the middle of the residence, surrounded by hardwood hallways. The courtyard was paved with gravel, and it had a shishi-odoshi made of three pieces of bamboo.

Holmes looked at the beautiful, smooth, white pillars and said to me, “These are the Kitayama cedars I was telling you about.”

“They really are pretty,” I murmured, staring at them.

He surveyed the home’s interior and let out an impressed sigh. “A house with corridors around the courtyard... It’s lovely.”

“Thank you,” Tatsuo said, scratching his cheek. “My father loved the traditional Japanese aesthetic. After my mother passed away a year ago, he’d hole himself up in here and do nothing but drink tea while gazing at the courtyard. Actually, it was just after the first anniversary of my mother’s passing that he first collapsed. I was planning on living with him since it wasn’t safe for him to be alone anymore, but...”

“Were you going to move back to this house?” Reito asked.

Tatsuo shook his head. “It’d be difficult for me to live in Nakagawa because of my work and my kid’s schooling. I was going to have him move in with me, and at first he didn’t want to, but he recently started packing his things. Maybe the loneliness was taking a toll on him. Now that I think about it, that might’ve been a sign that something was wrong. He died because his chronic condition got

worse.”

Tatsuo stopped in front of a closed sliding door and turned around to face Holmes.

“Before my father passed away, he said, ‘If something happens to me, have this collection checked by someone who’ll understand its value.’ I gathered everything in here.”

Holmes nodded, and Tatsuo slowly opened the door. A moss-green cloth was laid on the tatami floor, with antiques lined up on top of it. All of them had to do with tea: tea bowls, kettles, tea urns, tea caddies, and tea ceremony utensils. The tea bowls were brilliant Raku, Seto, and Oribe wares, and they still had their boxes too.

“Oh!” Holmes and I both exclaimed.

“What a great collection of teaware,” I remarked.

“Indeed, they’re wonderful,” said Holmes. “They’re also in good condition, and they even have their boxes.”

“Holmes, this is a Setoguro tea bowl, right? It’s been a while since I’ve seen one.”

“Now that you mention it, we haven’t gotten any at Kura lately.”

Tatsuo hummed as he listened to our chatter. “I assumed that black one was Raku ware. Is Setoguro related to the famous Kizeto ware?”

Holmes nodded and glanced at me. He was signaling that he wanted me to handle the explanation.

“Yes,” I said. “Um...both Setoguro and Kizeto ware are types of glazed pottery that were made in Mino Province during the Azuchi-Momoyama period. Kizeto uses a yellow glaze, while Setoguro was made by cooling the pottery immediately after taking it out of the kiln, causing the glaze to darken into this black color. It’s also called ‘pullout black’ because of that.”

I looked at Holmes to see if I’d gotten anything wrong, but he smiled in approval. He then added, “Setoguro is also known as ‘Tensho black’ because it appeared during the Tensho period, when Nobunaga Oda tried to unify the

country.”

“I see,” Tatsuo said with an impressed sigh.

“All of the items here are good enough to be displayed in a museum. It’s a wonderful collection. I can tell that your father truly loved the art of the tea ceremony.”

“Thanks,” Tatsuo said shyly. “My father was fascinated with it and spent his whole life collecting antiques, but I’m ashamed to say that I have no interest in it.”

“Don’t be. There are many people in the same situation as you.”

“Yes, and perhaps you’ll get into antiques after this,” Reito added.

“Nah, I don’t really get them,” Tatsuo said, shaking his head. “I was thinking it’d be better to listen to my father and give them to someone who understands their value, since I wouldn’t be able to appreciate them. Well, what I mean is, I’m thinking of selling them.”

Holmes’s face brightened. He must’ve been eager to buy them for Kura.

“But...” Tatsuo lowered his gaze. “Maybe that’s not what my father really wanted. Maybe he’s angry with me for taking his words at face value and trying to sell his precious collection.” His hands were trembling, not out of sadness or grief, but fear.

Reito, who had been listening quietly, stepped forward. “It seems that this has entered my jurisdiction. Tatsuo, you said that strange things have been happening. Could you elaborate? Did your father perhaps appear in your dreams?”

“No, not a single time. It started seven days after my father’s death, when my son said something unusual.”

“If I recall correctly, your son is six years old, yes?”

Tatsuo nodded and explained that his son used to love this house so much, he would beg to go to Nakagawa every weekend. However, after Tatsuo’s father passed away, everything had changed.

“He says he doesn’t want to come here anymore—that the house is scary. I

asked him why he thought it was scary, and he said there were ‘fire ghosts.’”

I shivered and shrank back.

“Fire ghosts,” Reito repeated with a slight frown.

“After that, both of our faces swelled up. But like I said earlier, after we went home and put on some medicine that I got from a dermatologist, it healed right away.”

“How was your wife’s skin at the time?” Reito asked.

Tatsuo shook his head. “There was nothing wrong with hers. That’s part of why I didn’t think much of it—I figured it was a rash from some plant we came in contact with in the mountains. But it happens every time I come to this house, so I’m starting to worry.” He weakly stroked his cheek.

“When you say your skin gets inflamed when you come here, does that include very brief stays?”

“No, nothing happens during day trips. It’s only when I stay overnight. I came yesterday to sort out my father’s things, and as you can see, after staying the night...”

“From what I could tell when I attended your father’s funeral, there weren’t any issues with his skin. Is that correct?”

Tatsuo nodded.

Holmes, who had been listening in silence, spoke up. “Did something happen last night?”

“Huh?” The man looked at Holmes in surprise.

“You had a frightening experience, didn’t you?”

“How did you know that?” he asked in a hoarse voice.

“Until then, you’d thought the skin condition was strange, but you doubted it was serious. However, today, you suddenly asked Reito to perform an exorcism. It’s because you experienced something unsettling when you stayed here last night, isn’t it?”

Tatsuo’s body was trembling.

“Did you see fiery ghosts like your son did?”

“Maybe...” Tatsuo murmured.

“What happened?” Reito asked immediately.

Tatsuo tilted his head weakly. “It might’ve just been a dream.” He took a deep breath in an attempt to regain his composure. “Last night, I slept very poorly. At one point, I was in that vague state where I couldn’t tell if I was awake or asleep, and I saw a blurry image. It was probably a dream... A dream of fire.”

“Fire?”

“Yes, there were flames crackling in front of me. Even though they were unbearably hot, I was leaning closer and closer to them of my own volition. I woke up because my face actually did feel hot, and when I opened my eyes, I saw the faces of countless men. They were all red and swollen, and they were staring at me with hollow expressions.”

“Eek!” I squealed. *Waking up from a dream to find countless faces staring at you...* I trembled as I imagined Tatsuo’s horrifying experience.

Reito hummed and gently extended his hand towards Tatsuo. “Do you mind if I touch your face?”

“Oh, go ahead.”

Reito wrapped his hands around Tatsuo’s cheeks, carefully examining his skin. Tatsuo looked away during the process as if he were eager to leave.

“It does seem more like burns than a skin disease,” Reito remarked. “Sorry, I’m done now.” He removed his hands from the man’s face.

“Oh, no, it’s fine.” Tatsuo lowered his gaze. Somehow, his face seemed to be even redder than before. It seemed to be out of embarrassment rather than the inflammation worsening. Perhaps even a man could feel shy about having a person of such otherworldly beauty touch his cheeks and peer into his face.

“The fire ghosts your son spoke of were likely the same as what you saw,” said Reito.

“I think so too. That’s why I wanted to ask you, what are those red-faced men? Are they evil spirits?” Tatsuo asked bravely.

Reito slowly looked around the house and furrowed his brow. “To be honest, I do not sense any demons or evil spirits.”

“Huh?” Tatsuo and I replied.

“So there aren’t any here?” I asked.

“Does that mean the rashes weren’t caused by spirits?” Tatsuo added.

“No.” Reito shook his head. “I cannot say that. There *is* some kind of spiritual imprint on your skin, but it is weak. That is why it heals when you leave and apply medicine to it.”

Reito closed his eyes, and the room fell silent as everyone waited with bated breath. After a while, he slowly opened them.

“There are only thoughts here,” he concluded.

“Thoughts?”

“Yes. *Something* rather than *someone*.”

“Ah, I see. That’s what you meant,” said Holmes, seeming to understand. Meanwhile, Tatsuo and I tilted our heads in confusion.

There aren’t any demons or spirits, but there is something bad.

“Oh!” I covered my mouth with my hand. “Could it be that something is possessed by negative emotions, like that comb hair ornament was?”

“Correct.” Reito nodded.

“It’s said that fine products choose their owners,” Holmes said. “The problematic item here likely recognized Tatsuo’s father as its owner.”

Tatsuo nodded in understanding. “Oh, so because he passed away...”

“Yes, its next owners are his blood relatives, you and your son,” said Reito. “However...” He didn’t finish his sentence, but the implication was clear: the item was unwilling to recognize them as its owners.

“So, Reito, is that item in this room?” Holmes asked, looking at the assortment of antiques.

I reexamined the tea utensils laid out neatly on the sheet, but since I didn’t

have the ability to identify possessed items, they all looked wonderful to me.

Reito shook his head gently. "No, it is not."

"I had a feeling that would be the case," said Holmes. "Tatsuo, your father owned other antiques too, didn't he?"

"Oh, yes," said Tatsuo. "These are only the ones he knew were especially valuable. The others are still where they were before he passed away."

"Now that you mention it, there are others on display in this very room," I remarked, looking around.

The alcove had a hanging scroll that depicted plum blossoms and bush warblers. Below it was a Kakiemon vase holding a single flower, which was also a plum blossom. They were both lovely pieces but not particularly expensive. Tatsuo's father had probably placed them there to match the current season.

I should change the display at Kura soon too.

"Yes, they're all over the house," said Tatsuo. "I'm sure the possessed item is here somewhere, but..."

Finding it was going to be difficult. I braced myself for the hard work to come.

"It's over there," Reito said, looking out the window. "I sense a powerful thought."

"Huh?" We turned in the direction he was pointing and saw the earthen-walled storehouse.

"It's inside the storehouse?" I asked.

Reito nodded. "Without a doubt."

"My father did keep a lot of things in there," said Tatsuo.

"Let us take a look, then." Reito quickly left the room. He seemed to be in a rush, which was unusual for the laid-back man.

Does he want to settle this before it gets dark outside? I checked my watch. It wasn't even 3 p.m. yet. Even though it was winter, there was still quite a bit of time before sunset.

"Reito explained this to me before," Holmes said as we walked.

“Hm?” I looked up at him.

“Throughout the day, there are ‘yin hours’ and ‘yang hours.’”

I gave a silent nod.

“From dawn to 3 p.m. is yang, while the remaining hours are yin. It’s said that the ideal time to visit shrines is before 3 p.m. Of course, that doesn’t mean it’s bad to visit after that time. Also, it’s said that yin energy is at its strongest in the dead of night, during the hour of the ox. That’s when terrifying supernatural phenomena are more likely to happen.”

“Oh!” I covered my mouth with my hand. “So Tatsuo and his son had their skin swell up because they were here when the yin energy was at its peak.” It had only happened after staying overnight.

“That may be the case. At any rate, that must be why Reito is trying to resolve this while it’s still yang hours.”

“Huh?” Wouldn’t it have been better to come in the morning, then? Oh, but Tatsuo didn’t request the exorcism until today, and Reito was busy with another job in the morning.

I checked my watch again. It was 2:50 p.m. Yin was fast approaching.

“Holmes, let’s go!” I hurried after Reito even though I wasn’t going to be of help. We had to leave the house in order to reach the storehouse, so I rushed to put on my half boots and head over.

Holmes, on the other hand, came over slowly. He looked up at the storehouse and breathed a sigh of admiration. “Such splendid architecture.”

“Thank you,” Tatsuo said shyly.

What an easygoing conversation, while I’m over here panicking. Holmes really is unshakable.

The storehouse had a sturdy padlock on the door. Reito turned around and asked, “Tatsuo, may I have the key?”

“Oh! I-I forgot to bring it.” Tatsuo quickly went back to the house.

Oh no, the clock is ticking. Are we going to make it?

Holmes peered at me, worried. “Aoi, your face is pale. Do you want to wait in the car?”

“Oh...no, I’m fine.” I’d already come this far, so I wanted to see it through to the end. Or so I thought, but I was getting anxious about how long Tatsuo was taking to return.

After a while, he finally came back with the key. “Sorry, it took a while to find it.”

I unconsciously checked the time. It was 2:55 p.m. We only had five minutes left, but I was glad that he’d made it in time. I clenched my fists, determined.

“Aoi, three in the afternoon is only a rough estimate,” Reito said awkwardly.

“Huh?” I looked at him, confused.

“The hours of yin and yang change depending on the season and even the weather. They are not exact. In fact, they are fairly ambiguous.”

“What is it right now, then?” I looked up and saw that the sun was hidden behind gray clouds even though the sky had been clear earlier.

“It is already the time of yin.”

“What?!” I murmured, aghast.

“I’m sorry, Aoi,” Holmes said, placing a hand on my shoulder to comfort me. However, his hand was shaking slightly. I looked at him and saw his face turned away as he held back his laughter.

I glared up at him out of spite. It might have seemed funny to him, but to me, this was serious. “You’re laughing at me again,” I said with a pout.

“He isn’t amused—he’s in agony,” Reito whispered.

“Huh?”

Reito took the key from Tatsuo and unlocked the door. It was thick, like a door to a soundproof room, and it swung open with a rusty creak. My cheeks were hit with a chilly air, as though I’d opened a refrigerator. The storehouse had a small window, but it was dark like a cellar, so I couldn’t see inside.

Tatsuo quickly turned on the pendant light, illuminating the room. Relieved, I

looked around. I was expecting it to be messy like our storage room at home, but it was actually very clean and tidy. It was more like a collection room than a storehouse. The shelves were lined with glass cases with doors, inside of which tea bowls and jars were neatly arranged on display, their boxes placed behind them.

“The items in the room were originally in here,” Tatsuo explained. The ones he’d gathered on his father’s behalf had been the best of the best—the first-string players, so to speak. The ones left in the storehouse hadn’t made the cut, although they were still part of his father’s beloved collection.

From what I could see, his father had judged correctly. Kura probably wouldn’t buy any of the items here for more than ten thousand yen. Even so, they had beautiful colors and interesting shapes, showing that his father had collected them out of genuine love, not for their value as antiques.

“He really did love tea utensils, huh?” I remarked.

“It appears so,” Holmes replied. “Look, Aoi. This tea bowl was made by a modern-day potter. It has an interesting bold form.”

“It’s lovely. Oh, now that I look more closely, there are a lot of tea bowls by modern artists.”

“Indeed. He must’ve been supporting the creators of today as well.”

“Just like Takamiya, right?”

“It’s thanks to people like them that artists can flourish.”

“How wonderful...”

Reito gave a strained chuckle as he listened to our conversation. “I envy you two for not being affected by this ill-omened thought. My face is hot and it’s difficult to breathe.”

“Huh?” I turned around and saw that he really did look like he was struggling. His face was red—apparently this place felt hot to him.

“Are you all right?” Holmes asked, walking up to him.

“Thank you for your concern, but I am fine,” Reito replied. “I am used to it.” He held up two fingers in front of his mouth and began to recite some sort of

incantation. “Strengthen this pillar, eight corners and eight energies, five yang and five gods, two divine yang strikes, expel harmful energy, protect the four divine pillars, open the path for the five gods, repel evil, illuminate the four corners with miraculous light, strengthen this pillar, and attain peaceful tranquility, I humbly pray to the five yang gods.” His flushed skin quickly returned to normal. He let out a sigh and looked up. “Tatsuo, I just remembered.”

“Hm?” The man looked at him.

“I’d completely forgotten because I was a child when I heard about it, but a long time ago, your father asked my grandfather for help.”

“Oh, for an exorcism, right?”

“Not quite.” Reito gave a strained smile. “Your father had obtained an antique with a very concerning history. He really wanted to keep it close at hand, so he asked my grandfather if there was anything that could be done.”

“Huh?” Tatsuo blinked. “Wh-What did your grandfather say?”

“He recommended donating it to a temple because it was not something that an individual person could handle. However, your father said, ‘I want to keep it, even if it’s only until I die.’ So my grandfather sealed the powerful thought inside the item, on the condition that it would only work if it approved of your father, and it would only be for a limited time—while your father was still alive.”

Tatsuo gulped. “So now that he’s dead...”

“It was released.”

“Which item is it?”

“It is at the far end. I am going to write a talisman, and then I must wrap—”

“Is it this tea bowl?” Holmes asked, surprised.

The glass case he was looking at held a bulky, loquat-colored tea bowl. It had a fully glazed body and a rough-textured foot. I gulped at the thought of it being possessed.

“Huh? It’s this one?” Tatsuo opened the case’s door.

“Wait, you mustn’t open it!” Reito exclaimed. “What little remains of the talisman’s power will run out!”

“S-Sorry.” Tatsuo quickly closed the door, but it was too late. The temperature in the room rose, and a burning smell tickled my nose.

My cheeks were starting to feel hot. Even someone like me, who couldn’t sense the supernatural, could tell that this was a bad situation. *At this rate, my face might swell up too.*

“Aoi!” Holmes, perhaps thinking the same thing, rushed over to me and hugged me to his chest.

“Everyone, get behind me,” said Reito.

We quickly did as we were told.

With a sway of his kimono sleeves, Reito clasped his hands together and recited, “At the command of Kamurogi and Kamuromi, our ancestral god and goddess who doth sleep in the High Plain of Heaven, all deities hath gathered, and after countless meetings and discussions, Amaterasu Omikami hath declared, ‘My descendant, Sumemima no Mikoto, govern the land of abundance, where the reeds grow thick and the rice grows lush, as a peaceful and tranquil nation.’ However...”

It was a different incantation than the one earlier.

“It’s the Great Purification Rite,” Holmes whispered.

Reito’s Shinto prayer made the heat subside, and I touched my cheeks in relief.

Holmes seemed to have calmed down as well. He slipped away from me to look at the tea bowl and placed his hand on his chest with a smile. “Hello, my name is Kiyotaka Yagashira, and I run an antique store. I will act as Endo’s agent to find you the owner that you truly desire. If you wish to go to a temple, I can arrange for that as well. I vow to find you a good match.”

Reito gave a small sigh. “It has settled down.”

“Huh? Already?” Tatsuo peeked out from behind the exorcist.

“Kiyotaka’s words have persuaded it for the time being.”

“No, it was all because of your prayer,” Holmes insisted.

The two young men looked at each other and chuckled.

“We’re safe now, right?” I asked.

Reito shook his head. “No, it has only calmed down temporarily, so we cannot consider this ‘safe’ yet. I will write a new talisman now.”

He took a brush and paper from his inner pocket and swiftly wrote something. It seemed to be a single kanji character, but I couldn’t tell what it said. To my layman eyes, it even looked like a dragon. As soon as he was done, he took out the tea bowl, put the talisman inside, and wrapped them together in cloth.

He sighed and looked at Holmes. “You singled out the correct tea bowl without hesitation. Did you sense something?”

“No, I didn’t sense any sinister thoughts.” Holmes shook his head and looked affectionately at the tea bowl. “I simply knew.”

“You knew?”

Reito and Tatsuo looked at each other blankly.

5

“This is an Oido tea bowl,” Holmes explained.

A talisman had been laid underneath the tea bowl from the storehouse. After the whole commotion, Reito had purified the room—and us—and we were now back in the Japanese-style room from earlier, listening to what Holmes had to say.

“Oido tea bowls are the largest and grandest of Ido tea bowls, which are one of the favorites of Japanese tea ceremony masters. In fact, there’s even a saying that goes, ‘First Ido, second Raku, third Karatsu.’ The most famous Oido tea bowl is Kizaemon, named after Kizaemon Takeda, a merchant who once owned it.”

Reito and Tatsuo hummed. As for me, I had seen an Oido tea bowl at an art exhibition before, and Holmes had taught me about Ido tea bowls at that time.

But this was my first time seeing one in the wild.

“It’s said that Kizaemon Takeda developed boils all over his body just from having the Oido tea bowl, yet he still refused to part with it for his entire life. The people who owned it after him were also afflicted with boils.”

Tatsuo’s eyes widened in surprise.

“In the end, it reached the hands of Fumai Matsudaira, a tea master and feudal lord of the Edo period, but he, too, developed boils. And when his son inherited Oido Kizaemon, the same boils appeared on him.”

I looked at the tea bowl. “Does that mean this is...”

“Yes, I suspect that it was fired in the same kiln as Oido Kizaemon.”

“In other words, they have the same creator, yes?” Reito asked.

“Most likely.” Holmes lowered his gaze. “Ido tea bowls were produced in what is now the Korean Peninsula, during the Yi dynasty. They were highly valued in Japan because they caught the eye of Hideyoshi Toyotomi, but in Korea, they were treated as tools for everyday use. That’s why we don’t know who their creators were.”

Indeed, it was Hideyoshi Toyotomi who had made Ido tea bowls known to the world. There was a story about him that went as follows.

Hideyoshi once invited Yusai Hosokawa and others to a tea ceremony he was holding. There, a page made a careless blunder and broke Hideyoshi’s prized Ido tea bowl, which was called Izutsu. Hideyoshi was furious and tried to kill the page, but Yusai Hosokawa intervened by reciting a poem on the spur of the moment: “Compared to before, the Izutsu tea bowl is split into five, but allow me to bear the punishment.”

It was a play on a famous poem from The Tales of Ise: “I compared my height with the well curb (izutsu), and in the time I have not seen you, I have surpassed it.” Thanks to Yusai Hosokawa’s quick wit, Hideyoshi’s mood quickly improved, and the ceremony ended without incident.

Whether it was Kizaemon or Izutsu, Ido tea bowls had dramatic stories associated with them. That was probably the secret to their lasting popularity.

Reito was staring intently at the Oido tea bowl.

“Do you know who made it?” Holmes asked.

The exorcist shook his head apologetically. “I cannot identify a specific person. All that remains are blazing thoughts. Perhaps it was created under harsh conditions.”

“Ido tea bowls were originally treated as everyday tools for commoners, so that may be the case.”

“The creator continued to make them even when their face was burned by hot flames. Not unwillingly, though. I can sense their determination and tenacity from this vessel.”

The flames Tatsuo had seen must’ve been from a kiln.

“Who were the red-faced men Tatsuo saw, then?” I asked quietly.

Reito looked down at the tea bowl. “Those were the thoughts of the people who were possessed by this tea bowl. Even if their faces swelled or they fell ill, they couldn’t let go of it until they died.”

“What?” I grimaced.

“You sometimes hear about it in the antique world,” Holmes murmured. “The creator’s persistence becomes an allure that captures people’s hearts and doesn’t let go.”

“Yes,” said Reito. “And this tea bowl has even taken on the obsession of its past owners.”

“That’s terrifying,” Tatsuo whispered, looking at it. “Are all Oido tea bowls cursed like this?”

“Of course not.” Holmes laughed. “Most of them are completely normal. However...” He picked up the tea bowl. “Ido tea bowls themselves must have a strong sense of pride. It may be why they came to Japan from Korea, not satisfied with being used as everyday tools by commoners.”

I smiled. “They came to Japan because they wished for it themselves... That’s a nice thought.”

The Ido tea bowls hadn't been appreciated at all in their home country, so they had crossed the great sea to Japan in search of those who would recognize their value. Among them were those who continued to choose their owners to this day: Kizaemon and the one in front of us.

"So the tea bowl approved of my father," Tatsuo murmured, a hint of pride in his voice.

Holmes turned to Tatsuo and asked, "Would it be all right if we took this tea bowl into our custody for a while? I promise I'll find the right place for it." He bowed.

"Oh, of course; I couldn't ask for anything better," Tatsuo said hurriedly. "Please do so."

That settled it. But I couldn't help but think, *What if Holmes ends up with the skin condition?* I looked at him, worried.

"It'll be fine," Holmes said. "Reito's talisman is on it, and besides, I'm only acting as an agent. I'm not its owner."

I choked. He'd read my mind again.

Reito chuckled. "Kiyotaka may not have spiritual powers, but he does have a special ability."

"Not at all." Holmes shook his head.

"No, you most certainly do," said Tatsuo. "The way I see it, there's no difference between you and Reito."

"Definitely," I agreed. We exchanged knowing looks.

"Now then..." Tatsuo stood up. "Would you be interested in having a cup of tea while admiring the courtyard? I still have some of my father's prized tea leaves."

"Of course," the rest of us said, smiling and standing up.

I stopped to look at the Ido tea bowl again. When dealing with antiques, you sometimes ran into incidents like this one. I was glad that this supernatural experience hadn't been more dangerous than it was. Feeling relieved, I followed the others out of the room.

The problematic Oido tea bowl was temporarily entrusted to a museum, with one of Reito's sealing talismans slipped under it. We later heard that Tatsuo's skin had recovered, perhaps as a result of that.

"I really didn't know what was going to happen," said Reito, who was visiting Kura. He was wearing a haori coat over a kimono and sipping coffee at the counter.

I was cleaning the store, while the manager sat at the end of the counter with his pen and notebook, listening to Holmes and Reito's conversation with great interest.

"Even with your wealth of experience?" Holmes asked. "Was it that fearsome?"

Reito shook his head. "The exorcism itself was simple. However, if Aoi's face had swollen for even a brief moment, the thought of her reaction—and worse, yours—had me in a cold sweat."

"Ah, so that's why." Holmes laughed.

He didn't deny it. I stopped cleaning and gave a strained smile.

"Honestly, I'm sure it was quite the struggle since you can see things that we can't," Holmes continued.

I was curious about that too, so I stepped behind the counter and asked, "Um, what did the scene look like to you, Reito?"

"Hm, well..." Reito put down his coffee cup and explained what he had seen that day. First, the moment he had opened the storehouse door, he had felt burning heat, as if it had been the door to a furnace instead. His face and body had been so hot that it had been difficult to breathe, but he had managed to step inside, and there he had found a cluster of flames at the far end of the room. Inside the fire, he had seen faces of men, red, swollen, and groaning.

"Oh my gosh," I murmured. I couldn't believe that the scene had been so different through his eyes.

Reito explained that the flames had been the passionate thoughts of the tea

bowl's creator, while the faces had been the thoughts of those who had died while captivated by it. "It was a large blaze, but at the time, it didn't seem like it would be possible to move it from that spot."

"Why is that?" Holmes asked.

"My grandfather's seal was still in effect. Since the tea bowl was in a glass case, my grandfather had turned the case into a sealing barrier."

Holmes hummed and folded his arms. "That's a clever idea. If it's in a glass case, you can admire it without taking it out."

"Indeed. But the warding effect was also tied to Tatsuo's father's contract, so it weakened when he passed away."

"Despite being a contract, it wasn't annulled on death?"

Reito nodded. "It was barely able to remain because it hadn't been forty-nine days since his death. However, at times when yin was strong, what little was left of the effect diminished even further, allowing the thoughts to wander around the house. I was planning to wrap the tea bowl in a new talisman right away, but then Tatsuo opened the case." He slumped his shoulders.

"That must've been a shock." Holmes and I gave a strained chuckle.

Reito explained that the moment the glass case had been opened, the flames had expanded and the red-faced men had roared loudly. Evil spirits could be exorcized with a ritual prayer, but these had been thoughts absorbed by a physical object. His only options had been to break it into pieces and bury it in the ground, or seal the thoughts within. If it hadn't been a valuable object, he would have chosen the former without hesitation, but this situation had called for the latter.

"So I hurriedly recited the prayer, but Kiyotaka began speaking to the tea bowl."

"I remember that." I nodded.

"The flames dwindled and the red-faced men stopped groaning. The thoughts must've been happy to be able to go where they pleased."

"I see." I thought back to what had happened. "So Holmes won the tea bowl

over.”

“Yes, Kiyotaka is truly skilled at seduction.”

“What?” Holmes slumped his shoulders. “As I said at the time, if my words reached the tea bowl, it was only because of the prayer you recited.”

I agreed with that. “Which means it was a joint performance by Kyoto guys.”

“A joint performance?” Reito repeated.

“Yes, it was an impromptu concert,” said Holmes.

The two men looked at each other and chuckled.

I took the opportunity to ask something I had been wondering about. “Reito, you recited something before entering the storehouse, didn’t you? Was that an incantation to ward off evil?”

“Yes,” said Reito. “‘Strengthen this pillar, eight corners and eight energies, five yang and five gods, two divine yang strikes, expel harmful energy, protect the four divine pillars, open the path for the five gods, repel evil, illuminate the four corners with miraculous light, strengthen this pillar, and attain peaceful tranquility, I humbly pray to the five yang gods.’ It’s an incantation to exorcize calamities that befall oneself. It works on everything, not just evil spirits, so some of my colleagues also use it to pray for their families’ safety.”

“Ooh,” I murmured, impressed.

I heard the sound of pen on paper and turned to see the manager jotting something down as quickly as he could. He’d mentioned working on a new story, so perhaps he’d thought of a good idea.

“I should get going now,” said Reito. “I’ll see you next week.”

“For that haunted house, right?” Holmes asked.

“It’s a fine work of architecture, so I don’t mind if you bring a large group to see it.”

“Huh? Are you sure that would be okay?” I asked.

“Yes, the livelier it is, the stronger the yang energy will be.”

“Oh, that makes sense.”

Next to me, Holmes grinned mischievously and asked, “Would you like to come with us, Aoi?”

I shook my head vigorously. “No, thanks. I’ll stay here and watch the store!” It didn’t matter how nice the building was. I was *not* interested in haunted houses.

“Well then, I’ll be taking my leave,” said Reito. The chime rang as he left the store, and the door shut softly behind him.

Once he was out of sight, I giggled. “You really are incredible, Holmes.”

“Huh?”

“Reito requested your services, which means you have such a keen eye that even a diviner can notice.”

“No, that’s not true.” Holmes shook his head. “There are things that I can’t determine through sight.”

“Like what?”

“For example, the reason you’ve been glancing at me recently.”

“Huh?” I blinked. “H-Have I been looking at you?”

“Oh? Were you unaware?”

It wasn’t that I was unaware. I *had* been looking at him, and the reason was trivial, but I didn’t want to talk about it at the moment.

“Um...” I looked down. “I was looking at you and thinking, even after all these years together, I still think you’re amazing.”

His eyes widened.

Oh, drat. That was probably too obvious. It’s not a lie that I think he’s amazing, but knowing him, he’ll instantly notice that the real reason is something else.

Holmes blushed and put his hand over his mouth. “Is...that so? I’m honored to hear it.” He lowered his gaze.

His reaction was making *me* embarrassed too. From the corner of my eye, I saw the manager give an exasperated shrug.

After witnessing Kiyotaka and Aoi's saccharine exchange, I looked back down at my notebook. Under the crossed-out "Narrative Trick Mystery Proposal," I'd written "New Horror Story." I was planning on showing these notes to my editor at our upcoming meeting.

I picked up my pen and added "two men working as partners." *How about it? Two Kyoto men with camaraderie become ghostbusters. It's a promising idea. What should the title be? Hmm, but research comes first.*

Reining in my excitement, I looked up and said, "Oh, right, I didn't get to ask the other day... What was the supernatural event that happened at Akihito's relative's house?"

For some reason, Kiyotaka chose to continue his conversation with Aoi instead.

"By the way, I decided to continue my consulting work at the Komatsu Detective Agency for a little while longer," he told her. "I did accept Reito's job, after all, and I feel like this might be leading to something."

"Okay," said Aoi. "Best of luck."

Neither of them cared to answer my question. I slumped my shoulders.

"Oh," said Aoi, turning around. "Manager, I'll tell you about the supernatural event at Akihito's relative's house."

She really was a kind girl. No wonder my obstinate son had chosen her.

"Please do," I said, picking up my pen.

Interlude: Their Emotions

1

As the sun began to set, Shijo Bridge, which spanned the Kamo River, grew even busier. To the southeast, one could see Minamiza Theater all lit up. Walking northeast for a bit, one would find Cacao Market, a chocolate store marked by a large clock face, elegantly illuminated by the setting sun.

Ensho stopped in the center of the north side of the bridge and looked out over the river for a while. He could see couples sitting interspersed along the riverbanks down below. It was a famous Kyoto sight at this point.

“I’m surprised they can do that when it’s this cold,” he grumbled. Then he thought about himself and shrugged. He’d been on this bridge, absentmindedly staring at the Kamo River, for over thirty minutes now. “Something that catches my eye...”

That was what Aoi had said to him last month at the Jakuchu exhibition, when he had been wondering why the famed artist had painted chickens of all things.

“I think he painted them because they caught his eye.” She had followed it up with, *“If something catches your eye, it must be beautiful, interesting, or charming, right? When I look at Jakuchu’s work, I feel like I’m seeing God’s point of view. He makes everything seem beautiful, powerful, and loved by the gods. I think Jakuchu was moved by everything he saw, like every single bird feather or fish scale was a miracle of the universe.”*

Only the man himself would have known what had truly been going on in his mind, but Ensho had been convinced by those words.

“Something that catches my eye...” he muttered again.

What he saw now was the swift Kamo River drawing a line to the north and south, the Gion townscape on either side of it, and couples being lovey-dovey on the riverbanks in the freezing cold.

“They must all be crazy, like those two.”

The couples started to look like Kiyotaka and Aoi, but it didn’t annoy him. All he thought was that they were idiots. At times like this, he didn’t know how he felt. Aoi was definitely special to him, but in what way? She and Kiyotaka would probably get married eventually, but imagining their wedding didn’t make him feel frustrated or angry. Was it because he’d long since given up? He suddenly remembered what his childhood friend, Yuki, had said.

“Instead of running away, I think you should tell the person you love—Aoi—how you feel.”

“It ain’t that simple...” What would happen if he told her? He didn’t understand his own feelings to begin with. “I’m no different from that kid.”

He was reminded of Haruhiko Kajiwarra, who had come to the Komatsu Detective Agency for relationship advice. Kiyotaka’s questioning—which had been gentle in tone, but not much else—had forced the young man to realize that he didn’t understand his own heart. *“I’ll sort out my feelings and talk to her.”* Those were the words he had said before stumbling out of the office.

“I’ve got no right to laugh,” Ensho muttered with a sigh. He’d always thought he was a sharp fellow—though not as much as Kiyotaka—but no one truly understood themselves. “Speaking of not understanding, there was that rich girl too...”

She had gone all the way to his apartment atelier but hesitated at the door, unable to step inside. Clearly, the daughter of a billionaire wouldn’t want to take off her shoes and enter such a run-down apartment. He knew it wasn’t really her fault, but it had honestly annoyed him at the time. His apartment might have been too dingy for a rich girl, but it was still his atelier, and he had spent time there with Yuki not long before that.

“You don’t gotta force yourself to come in, missy. Why don’t you just go home?”

His tone had probably been on the harsh side. The girl had apologized until she’d burst into tears, then left. Later, at the Komatsu Detective Agency, she had averted her gaze from him. When their eyes met by chance, she had looked away immediately with a hurt expression.

“What the hell?”

Remembering it ticked him off. If anyone was the victim, it was *him*. Why had *she* looked hurt? Come to think of it, Kiyotaka had said...

“There might have been various sentiments behind her actions.”

What sentiments? Ugh, this is such a pain in the neck. Ensho heaved a sigh.
“For now, I’ll just draw what I see.”

2

“It’s hardly strange that Holmes noticed you looking at him,” my best friend Kaori Miyashita said as though pointing out the obvious. She cupped her hot chocolate in her hands and blew on it.

We were at a chocolate store on Sanjo Street called MarieBelle. It was my first day off from work in a while, so Kaori and I had watched a movie at Movix Kyoto before coming here for tea.

MarieBelle was affiliated with Cacao Market, a shop Holmes had once taken me to in Gion. While Cacao Market had a fairy-tale Western-style exterior, this store had a Japanese-style storefront since it had been renovated from a traditional wooden townhouse. There was a large lantern at the entrance that said “MarieBelle” on it, and the double doors were painted turquoise, what they called “MarieBelle blue.” The walls inside were the same color.

MarieBelle’s flagship store was in New York. This branch blended that Western taste with the atmosphere of a Kyoto townhouse, resulting in an exquisite fusion of antiquity and novelty. I got the sense that if Cacao Market was like a young girl, MarieBelle was like an adult woman.

“Like I said, Holmes usually isn’t that perceptive when he’s focusing on work,” I said. “I didn’t think he’d notice me observing him.” I sighed.

“Huh? Observing?”

“Yeah.”

“You weren’t just admiring him?”

“No, I try not to do that when we’re at work,” I replied, fully serious.

Kaori’s eyes widened, and then she burst out laughing. “Oh, is that so? Well then, why were you observing him?”

“It’s almost February 14th, isn’t it?”

“Oh, Valentine’s Day?”

“Yeah. It’s also his birthday.”

“Oh, right.”

“So I’ve been trying to figure out what he’d like.”

“Hence the observing. Okay, but this is Holmes we’re talking about. Wouldn’t he love anything you gave him?”

“That’s not it. I want it to be something he’d *truly* love.”

“Huh?” Kaori tilted her head.

“Let’s say I give him a gift. Like you said, if it’s coming from me, he’ll definitely love it. But what if someone else gave him the exact same thing? If he doesn’t care for it then, doesn’t that mean it wasn’t something he really wanted?”

Kaori nodded firmly, seeming to get it. “That’s true. He’ll be excited about anything you give him, but that doesn’t apply to gifts from others. You want to give him something he’ll genuinely love on its own, right?”

“Yeah.” I nodded back.

“But you’ve been with him for so long. Don’t you already know what would make him truly happy?”

“Well...” I frowned. Holmes loved art, but he had no desire to own it. He would probably be happy to receive coffee or wine, but I didn’t know what his true favorites were. “I’m ashamed to say that I don’t.”

“What? He really loved that mug you made for him, didn’t he?”

“Yeah, he was extremely happy with it.”

At this point, he wasn’t even using it anymore for fear of breaking it. He used Kura’s mugs instead. That had been a bit of a relief—not because it was less

likely to break now, but because I had felt awkward every time I saw him using my crude creation as if it were a precious treasure.

“To be honest, that mug was what got me thinking about this,” I said.

“Huh?” Kaori blinked.

“I’m pretty sure he wouldn’t have been thrilled to get that poorly made mug from anyone else, which is really embarrassing to think about...”

“Don’t be silly,” Kaori said, exasperated. “That’s just how it is. Couples are basically each other’s idols, aren’t they? It’s a universal fact that a present from your idol is precious.”

“A universal fact...”

“Yep. Even trash can be a treasure.”

“Okay, but if you were giving a present to your idol, you wouldn’t give them trash, would you? Wouldn’t you want to give them something they would really love?”

“That’s true.” Kaori folded her arms. “You seriously can’t think of anything he’d like?”

“I think he likes fountain pens, which is why I had us exchange them for Christmas.”

“Oh, it does seem like he’d like those.”

“But I’ve already given him one, so... Actually, everything that comes to mind is something I’ve already given him.”

“Now that I think about it, you’ve been going out for a long time.”

“Totally.”

“What have you given him so far?”

“Um, a handmade necktie, a Glasritzen wine glass...”

“Ohhh. Yeah, I can see Holmes liking those. You put a ton of thought into your gifts every time, so it’s no wonder you’re out of ideas.”

“Exactly.” I covered my face with my hands.

“It must be tough.”

“No, it’s still a fun challenge.”

“That’s good, then.” Kaori laughed. “Which gift made him the happiest? Let’s start there.”

“Let me think...” I rested my cheek on my hand.

“It’s a hard question, huh?” She laughed again and took a bite of her marble cheesecake. “This hot chocolate and cheesecake with a hint of lemon flavor are both to die for. What a sinful combination,” she said, her voice trembling with joy.

“Aha ha ha. The hot coffee and chocolate cake set I got is amazing too.”

“You can’t go wrong with that.”

“Nope.”

“There’s a gift you ‘can’t go wrong with’ for Holmes too, isn’t there?”

“Huh?”

“At the end of the day, it has to be handmade ceramics.”

“Really?” I murmured.

“Sorry.” Kaori pressed her hands together.

“Huh? Why are you apologizing?”

“I was leading you in that direction on purpose because I wanted you to come to the pottery club again.”

I giggled. “I *have* been meaning to go back there.” I hadn’t participated in a while, since the New Year’s season had been so hectic. “You go often, don’t you?”

“Yeah, we’re planning a little event.”

“What kind?”

“Last Saturday, the vase I was working on arrived, and...”

Kaori explained that her flower vase had finished firing the other day, and the girls in the club had said, “It’d be nice to display some flowers here while we’re

at it. Oh, Miyashita, you used to do flower arranging, didn't you?" From there, it had turned into a sudden flower arranging class taught by Kaori.

"Wow, that sounds fun!" I exclaimed.

"It was really fun. Everyone in the club wished you could've been there too."

"Last Saturday...I was away for an appraisal."

"I know." Kaori giggled mischievously.

"So, what's this event?"

"Oh, right." She fixed her posture. "Remember in first year, when the flower arranging club held an exhibit in Demachiyanagi?"

"Yeah." The club had borrowed a space in a café to exhibit their pieces at the Demachi Masugata shopping street festival. The theme had been "flowers and poetry," and the café had served matcha tea. It had been quite successful. "It feels like so long ago now. It was a Setsubun festival, so it was around this time of year, huh? It was so much fun."

"This year, they're calling it a Thanksgiving festival. There'll be a bunch of things going on for the two weeks between Setsubun and Valentine's Day."

I hummed. "Two weeks is pretty long."

"It's just small stuff like sales and raffles, though. Anyway, the other day, the café asked me if we could do another exhibit on Valentine's Day, since they're going to bake chocolate sweets."

I nodded and waited for her to continue.

"But the only official members of the flower arranging club left are you and me, and you only come sometimes. I figured it'd be impossible, so I held off on answering. But when I brought it up with the pottery club as I was teaching them, they were all interested in doing it."

"So you're going to do the Valentine's Day exhibit?"

"Yep. It's going to be a 'Pottery and Flowers' exhibit, with arrangements in vases we made ourselves. If we start now, we'll finish just in time."

Pottery needed time to dry. If it was the rainy season, it'd take even longer,

but right now, it was like she said—they would probably make it in time for Valentine's Day.

"If you're interested, you can join us."

"I want to. It sounds like fun," I said eagerly. But then I remembered that day was Holmes's birthday. "Oh, but I might not be able to stay at the exhibit all day..."

"The club has a lot of members, so it's fine. Holmes might hate me for inviting you to an event on his birthday, though."

"I'll go out for dinner with him afterwards, so it'll be okay."

"Thank goodness." Kaori placed her hand on her chest. "But if your boyfriend's birthday is on Valentine's Day, does that mean you have to prepare both chocolate and a gift at the same time? Is that what you do, Aoi?"

"Yeah, I do. What'll you be—"

I was going to ask what she was going to do for Valentine's Day, but I shut my mouth. Kaori was in love with Haruhiko, but she had sealed those feelings away because of what had happened on Christmas Eve. After the party at the Yagashira residence, she and Haruhiko had gone for drinks by themselves. I thought back to that conversation.

"Afterwards, Haruhiko offered to walk me home, but we were both still giddy from the party, and we didn't want to go home yet. So we went for drinks, just the two of us." She had paused, then shaken her head. *"Never mind; I can't do this. I haven't sorted out my feelings yet, so I can't talk about it. Can you give me some more time?"*

A little later, she had buried her face in her hands. *"Ugh, when I remember that night, I want to crawl into a hole and die. We're done talking about this."*

I'd heard that some time later she had said to Haruhiko, *"Can you pretend my confession never happened? I'd like to keep being normal friends and colleagues, just like before."*

The words had come as a great surprise to Haruhiko. In the end, I hadn't been able to ask Kaori what had happened between them.

“Aoi, don’t look so troubled,” Kaori said. “I’m fine.”

I snapped back to attention and looked up. She was giggling. I was curious about how she currently felt about Haruhiko, but I wasn’t going to force her to talk about it if she didn’t want to.

Kaori giggled again, seemingly guessing what was going on in my head. “You really are a nice girl, Aoi.”

“Huh?”

“If I were you, I wouldn’t be able to stop myself from asking.”

“I...” I gave a strained smile.

“I think the reason I always ask for details is that sometimes I want people to ask me too.”

I finally realized that Kaori simply felt awkward about bringing it up herself. It was safe to ask her about it now.

“Something happened on Christmas Eve, didn’t it?” I asked.

“Yeah. It made me want to give up.”

“Why?”

“Well...” She looked down weakly. “I think you’ll look down on me if I tell you.”

“What do you mean? Did you get drunk and do something illegal?”

“No way.” She shook her head and took a deep breath. She seemed to be ready to talk after hearing those words. “I told you that after the Christmas party, I went for drinks with Haruhiko, right?”

“Yeah.” I gave a small nod.

“We were drinking near Demachiyanagi Station, and Haruhiko mentioned that he had moved out from home and was living in that area now.”

“I didn’t know he was living by himself.”

“He said the commute from Kurama was tough to begin with, and after learning the secret behind his birth, he wanted to let his mom and Kurashina

live together by themselves.”

“I see.” It probably *was* difficult to commute to our university from the mountain lodge in Kurama. Then again, they were both in Sakyo-ku...

“Anyway, we had a lot of fun that night, and we drank so much that I missed the last train. Thanks to the alcohol, I went and asked, ‘Can I stay at your place until the first train?’”

“Huh?” I looked at her in surprise.

“See? I knew you’d be disappointed.”

“No, that’s not it.”

Kaori was wary of men. I was surprised that she would have asked to go to a man’s place. Of course, I *was* worried about whether she had been all right, but at the same time, I understood why she hadn’t been able to tell me about it. She was ashamed of what she had said while drunk. I understood the feeling—I was still mortified whenever I remembered the dangerous bet I’d impulsively agreed to that night on the 7 Stars.

“I didn’t mean it like *that*,” Kaori said. “But Haruhiko suddenly got really serious and said, ‘You can’t. Let’s hang out by the river until the first train.’”

I placed a hand on my chest, relieved. Come to think of it, Kaori had said that Haruhiko had been a perfect gentleman that night.

“So he went to his place and grabbed a bunch of stuff, like coats, shawls, and pocket heaters, and he really did hang out with me on the riverside until morning.”

“He’s a great person, huh?”

“Yeah. I was touched by his sincerity, but...” She sighed. “After spending that whole night with him, I realized that he doesn’t have any feelings for me at all. Obviously part of it was because he’s a good guy, but he didn’t invite me to his place because he didn’t want us to be more than friends.”

I wanted to proclaim that it wasn’t true, but I couldn’t make assumptions without knowing how Haruhiko felt, so I swallowed my words.

“Haruhiko just wants to be friends, and I’m fine with that. So I told him to

pretend that my confession never happened.”

So that was what had happened. “I actually think he’d be pretty shocked that you withdrew your confession.”

“I don’t think so. He’s probably relieved.”

“You say that, but you don’t know how he really feels, do you?”

Kaori hummed. “I don’t, but I doubt he has feelings for me.”

Her declaration gave me pause. It seemed that Haruhiko had said or done something at the riverside that had made her think she didn’t have a chance with him.

“Well, I say we’re going back to friends, but I end up avoiding him because it’s embarrassing and awkward, so I know I’m not doing a great job. It’s honestly still bothering me.” She laughed weakly.

“I see.” I put my hand on my forehead, wondering what to do. Kaori was trying to let her love fade away. Maybe she didn’t have much of a choice, but I still wanted her to sort out her hazy feelings. I looked up at her and said, “Um, this is unrelated, but I thought of an idea for Holmes’s present.”

“Oh, really?”

“I might give him the piece I make for the exhibit.”

“Oh! ‘Pottery and Flowers,’ right? I think it’s a good idea.”

“Why don’t you try putting your current feelings into your piece too?” I thought back to her previous flower arrangements. They had been very dignified and beautiful. Her heart was surely at peace when she was arranging flowers.

“Huh?” Kaori’s eyes widened at my suggestion.

3

“Kiddo, Ensho sent an email saying he wouldn’t be coming in for a while,” Komatsu said, facing his computer screen as usual.

Kiyotaka was still with the Komatsu Detective Agency, although he no longer

showed up on a daily basis. He seemed to have changed his mind about leaving after Reito Kamo's visit the other day. Wanting to keep his consulting services open a little longer, he now came to the office a few days a week.

For Komatsu—and probably other employers as well—Kiyotaka was a god of fortune. The detective was grateful to have him around at all, even if it wasn't every day.

Kiyotaka hummed and smiled. "That's good."

"Because you don't have to see him?"

The young man chuckled. "Yes, but also, it means he's finally doing something."

"Huh? Is he painting again?"

"Most likely." Kiyotaka nodded. "I imagine he'll be cooped up in his Adashi Moor atelier for a while."

"You look happy, kiddo."

Kiyotaka's smile suddenly vanished. He must not have been aware of it. "Well, I think it's a good thing when any talented creator—not only Ensho—resumes their activities," he said coolly.

He should just admit that he's happy Ensho's painting again. Komatsu chuckled, only for Kiyotaka to give him a cold glare. He flinched, cleared his throat, and changed the subject.

"Oh, so how'd Reito's job go?"

Kiyotaka had gone to Nakagawa the other day for Reito's appraisal job, and this weekend, they would be going to the so-called haunted house.

"Ah, well...a lot happened, but everything was sorted out," Kiyotaka said.

"Huh? How did 'a lot' happen during an appraisal?"

"I'll tell you the story another time."

"Fine, I guess. Oh, what about the little miss's glances? Did you figure that out?"

"Yes." Kiyotaka looked up. "I asked her directly why she was looking at me."

“Ooh, what’d she say?”

“She said, ‘I was looking at you and thinking, even after all these years together, I still think you’re amazing.’” The young man beamed with joy.

Komatsu gaped. He could understand Aoi glancing at Kiyotaka with that in mind during their private time, but it was hard to believe that she’d do that during working hours. She was a very diligent girl, so the real reason was probably something else.

“Uh...did you believe her, kiddo?” the detective asked hesitantly.

“No, of course not,” he replied, surprisingly casual.

“Huh? You didn’t?”

“No. I think she was looking at me for a different reason. But even if she was trying to hide something, I’m still happy that she said that. I have faith that the words themselves were true.”

Komatsu sighed. “You’re crazy about her, but not all the way, huh?”

“Indeed. If I were to compare my feelings to hot water, I’d say they’re at around ninety-three degrees Celsius.”

“Why specifically ninety-three?”

“It’s what I believe is the most delicious temperature for coffee.”

“What the heck?”

“But it also means that it only takes the slightest thing for me to boil over.”

“I know.” Komatsu laughed. The intercom rang, and he quickly checked who the visitor was. “Oh! You have a customer, kiddo.”

“Huh? I do?”

When someone came for a consultation, after being let into the office, they were asked who they wished to consult with. Regardless of the fact that almost everyone chose Kiyotaka, the pair still had to follow protocol. It shouldn’t have been possible to determine who the client was for so early on, but this case was an exception.

“Oh, it’s you, Haruhiko.” Kiyotaka smiled the moment he looked at the screen.

“Please come in.”

Haruhiko Kajiwara was Akihito’s younger brother, but at this point, he might as well have been Kiyotaka’s next younger brother figure after Rikyu. Thinking about it, Kiyotaka showed no mercy to his elders, but he was nice to those younger than him. Komatsu wished Kiyotaka would spare some of that kindness for the older men like him.

“Sorry, I’m not here for a consultation today,” Haruhiko said. “I have something to report on.” He bowed and entered the office.

“Have you sorted out your feelings?” Kiyotaka asked.

“Pretty much.” Haruhiko blushed slightly.

“Please have a seat.” Kiyotaka motioned to the sofa and began preparing coffee.

Haruhiko’s previous visit had been to ask for relationship advice regarding Aoi’s best friend, Kaori Miyashita.

How did it go again? Komatsu crossed his arms and reflected on the events thus far.

Haruhiko Kajiwara had originally been dating another student at their university, an older member of the club Kaori was in, but she had dumped him, sending him into depression. To distract himself from the shock and heartbreak, he had started his own club of sorts—the “Make Kyoto More Beautiful Project,” or “KyoMore” for short—and poured all of his energy into it. Kaori had joined the group, and the two had become close.

As they spent time together, Kaori had realized that she was in love with Haruhiko. However, she hadn’t confessed to him, thinking that he still had lingering feelings for his ex-girlfriend, and had continued to treat him as a friend.

One day, Haruhiko had gone missing after learning the shocking secret behind his birth. He had simply wished to be alone, but everyone had been in a panic, fearing that he might make a mistake in his tormented state. It was Kaori who had found him then, and she had confessed her feelings out of desperation to save him. It had been her way of telling him, “There are people who really care

about you, so don't do anything rash." She hadn't asked him for a response to her confession. After that, they had continued to work together as friends, and Haruhiko had started to take an interest in her.

During his previous visit, Haruhiko had said, *"After she confessed to me, I became more conscious of her. It's like we're on the same wavelength. I really enjoy being with her. And most of all, she's really honest and nice."* But one day, Kaori had suddenly said to him, *"Can you pretend my confession never happened? I'd like to keep being normal friends and colleagues, just like before."* Anxious and confused, he had come in for a consultation. *"After she said that, my mind went blank. I keep trying to figure out what I did wrong."* He didn't know why Kaori had rescinded her confession.

Kiyotaka's blunt answer had been, *"Rather than making assumptions about Kaori, why don't you ask her how she feels?"*

"It's...hard to ask. I feel like we wouldn't be able to go back to being friends," Haruhiko had replied half-heartedly.

Kiyotaka had proceeded to barrage him with a series of merciless reprimands. *"Would you even want to be friends with the girl you love?" "I certainly wouldn't want to prolong my suffering like that." "If you wanted to stay friends with her to aim for another chance or prevent other men from getting close to her, I would understand. In fact, if you want to come up with a plan for that, that's another discussion entirely."*

Not knowing what he wanted to do, Haruhiko had left to sort out his feelings. That was last time, and now...

"Am I correct in assuming your 'something to report on' is Kaori?" Holmes asked, placing a cup of coffee in front of Haruhiko.

"Yes." The man nodded. "I faced my feelings and determined that I really do love her."

The straightforward confession made even Komatsu blush with embarrassment. Kiyotaka, on the other hand, was smiling and nodding.

Haruhiko suddenly put his hands on his cheeks and looked away in shame. "Sorry, you probably don't know what you're supposed to do with that

information. Last time, I left because I was indecisive, so today I came to declare my feelings and force myself to commit.”

“So you’ll be pursuing her in earnest now?” Kiyotaka asked cheerfully.

Haruhiko shrank back. “Yes...is what I want to say, but ever since she took back her confession, she’s been avoiding being alone with me, ha ha.” He laughed self-deprecatingly. “To be honest, I’ve kind of lost my nerve. Unlike your stance, I still want to be friends with her even if I can’t go out with her, so I can’t help but be cautious...”

It wasn’t hard to imagine how he was feeling.

“Kaori’s nice, so even if she doesn’t like me anymore, she probably wouldn’t say it. Maybe that’s why she phrased it that way...” His expression grew darker by the second.

Kiyotaka hummed and folded his arms. “Let me ask you again—are you sure you don’t know why she would rescind her confession?”

Haruhiko gulped. “Yeah, um, I’m sure.” He scratched his head and stood up, restless. “Anyway, that’s all I came for today, so I should get going.” As he was leaving, he stopped and turned around. “Oh, and thank you. I wouldn’t have sorted out my feelings if it wasn’t for you, Holmes.”

“No, I didn’t do anything. Best of luck.”

“Thanks. I’ll do my best.” Haruhiko smiled and left the office.

“Man, that kid’s as fresh as a spring breeze,” Komatsu muttered.

“Indeed.” Kiyotaka nodded. “I hope it goes well for him.”

“But why do you think she took back her confession?”

“I don’t know, but I think Haruhiko might’ve thought of something.”

“I thought so too. Well, good luck, youngster.” Komatsu grinned.

Chapter 2: Twilight House of Horrors

1

“Oh man, it’s finally time for the haunted house. I can’t wait,” Akihito Kajiwarara said in between humming a song. He was sitting in the passenger seat of the car. Kiyotaka was driving, while Komatsu and Rikyu were in the back.

“You say that like we’re going on a picnic.” Komatsu shrugged and looked out the window.

The four of them were heading to a certain residence as per Reito Kamo’s request. Reito had given them permission to come in a group, because “the livelier it is, the stronger the yang energy will be.” After hearing this, Kiyotaka had invited Akihito—the epitome of positive energy—to join them, and he had accepted immediately.

Akihito was clearly excited. Komatsu could kind of understand—it was like a test of courage. Kiyotaka’s car also had that brand-new smell, which made his heart flutter even more.

“Sorry I’m not Aoi,” Akihito said teasingly as he occupied the passenger seat.

Rikyu looked displeased. He had wanted to be the one to sit next to Kiyotaka. “Hey, Akihito, do you have a lot of free time these days or something? *Local Rangers* ended pretty fast, now that I think about it. Are you on break until your summer plays?”

Asking an entertainer if they had a lot of free time was probably taboo.

Akihito whirled around and said, “*Local Rangers* didn’t end ’cause it wasn’t popular enough. It ended ’cause all of the rangers got *too* popular and moved on from the show!”

“It’s true,” said Kiyotaka. “They’re all very successful.”

“That’s right. Anyway, I have a lot of jobs in Osaka right now, and I just happened to be free this week. You guys lucked out.”

Lucked out? Kiyotaka, Rikyu, and Komatsu exchanged looks in the rearview mirror.

“So where’s this haunted house?” Akihito asked.

“It’s in Atagoyama,” said Kiyotaka. “Northwest of Adashi Moor.”

“Adashi Moor, huh?” Komatsu suddenly thought of Ensho.

“Hey, Kiyo, aren’t you curious if Ensho really is at his apartment in Adashi Moor?” Rikyu asked.

“I was thinking the same thing,” said Komatsu.

Ensho had yet to return to the office after his last email saying he’d be away for a while. At first, Komatsu had been happy for him, since he was probably painting at his atelier. But the artist had been gone for so long that Komatsu was beginning to worry. He wasn’t the man’s brother or father or anything, though, so he didn’t want to ask him when he was coming back.

“You’re like his guardian,” Kiyotaka said with a laugh. “Shall we pass by the apartment on the way, then? If he’s there, his bike will be parked outside.” Ensho used a 250cc motorcycle when traveling long distances.

“Oh!” Akihito clapped his hands together excitedly. “Let’s do it. Heck, we can even invite him to the haunted house.”

“I doubt he’d come.”

“Agreed,” said Komatsu. “Oh, but first, kiddo...”

“Yes?”

“What do you mean by ‘life and death’? We aren’t in danger, are we?”

The car fell silent for a moment. Upon realizing the misunderstanding, the others all burst out laughing.

“Huh? Did I say something funny?” Komatsu asked.

“Really, Koma?” Akihito cackled.

“Yeah, it’s a matter of life and death, all right.” Rikyu giggled.

Kiyotaka chuckled a bit too before regaining his composure. “My apologies. In

Kansai, we say 'ikishi ni' or 'ikishina ni' to mean 'on the way,' but the former happens to be a homonym for 'life and death.'"

"Oh," said Komatsu. "Well then, let's do that 'ikishina' thing."

"You adapt fast, huh, Koma?"

Komatsu folded his arms and nodded.

"Understood," said Kiyotaka.

And so they drove west on Marutamachi Street, passed the busy area around Arashiyama in no time at all, and headed northwest. It was quiet when they reached Adashi Moor's Nenbutsu-ji Temple, and they saw few oncoming cars. Every now and then they'd pass by a foreign luxury car, and Akihito would let out a small whistle.

"Dang, a Benz. Leaving the city makes me realize just how many foreign cars there are in Kyoto."

"I've always thought the same thing," said Komatsu.

"They have a high ownership rate," said Kiyotaka. "The one we just passed by had a Kobe plate, though."

Akihito looked at the rearview mirror. "Oh, really?"

"Well, Kyoto also attracts a lot of wealthy tourists, which makes the number of foreign cars even more prominent."

"So rich people gather in Kyoto, huh?" Akihito hummed and folded his hands behind his head.

"By the way, compact cars have a high ownership rate here too."

"I see them all the time, yeah."

"The roads are narrow, after all." Komatsu nodded.

"Oh, that's Ensho's apartment," said Kiyotaka.

Komatsu looked out the window with a start and saw an old two-story apartment with an outside staircase.

"Whoa, it's just as run-down as you said," Akihito commented with an

impressed sigh.

“The rusty stairs look like they could fall apart at any time,” Rikyu said with a grimace. “Why doesn’t he rent a different place?”

“He painted in that environment his whole life, so I imagine he feels at ease there,” said Kiyotaka.

Komatsu was relieved to see Ensho’s black motorcycle parked in front of the building. “He really is here.”

“Yes, I’m sure he’s cooped up inside with his paints and easels.”

“We should’ve brought crème caramel for him,” said Komatsu.

“Nah, he’d just call us annoying and slam the door on us,” Akihito replied.

“Definitely.” Komatsu laughed.

Kiyotaka continued past the apartment and drove along the mountain roads until a small tunnel came into view. It seemed to only have a single lane, and there was a traffic light in front of the entrance that happened to be green.

“Is everyone all right with going in?” Kiyotaka asked with a chuckle.

“I don’t mind,” said Rikyu.

“Why is this even a question?” Akihito asked.

“Yeah, the light’s green, so just go,” said Komatsu.

“This is called the Kiyotaki Tunnel,” Kiyotaka replied. “It’s famous for being haunted.”

“Oh, so this is the Kiyotaki Tunnel,” said Akihito. “I’ve heard of it.”

Komatsu hummed. Tunnels were a common setting for ghost stories. *Kyoto has places like this too, huh?* he thought with a yawn.

“There are many stories about this tunnel, but the most famous one says, ‘If the light is green when you arrive and you continue inside, you’ll encounter a ghost.’ Another says that you’ll be taken to the underworld.”

Everyone fell silent.

“It’s said that a female ghost appears in the tunnel. You can hear her groans

and see falling water drops in the shape of handprints. In order to avoid her, you should stop at the traffic light until it turns red and then green again before entering.”

“L-Let’s do that, then,” Akihito said, frightened.

“Yeah, let’s stop and wait,” Komatsu agreed.

“But you’re not scared of that stuff, are you, Kiyo?” Rikyu asked.

“No, those stories don’t bother me.”

“Seriously?” Akihito and Komatsu squeaked.

They looked at the tunnel ahead. It was small and secluded, like an entrance to the underworld. Komatsu had never been to a haunted place before, so he didn’t know what to expect. But as they approached the tunnel, fear began to take root in his heart. There were obviously lights inside, but he couldn’t see through to the other side. Anything could appear while they were in there.

“No, Holmes, I have a bad feeling about this,” said Akihito.

Komatsu completely agreed. His instincts were telling him that the tunnel was dangerous. The moment he clenched his eyes shut, Kiyotaka stepped on the brake.

“Huh?” The detective opened his eyes. “Did you decide to stop?”

“I was planning to stop all along,” said Kiyotaka. “Sorry.” He chuckled mischievously.

Akihito gave a languished sigh. “Jeez, don’t scare us like that, man. I bet you were scared of the superstitions too.”

“No, the Kiyotaki Tunnel is longer than you would expect. Even if the light is green, it can be dangerous to continue forward. That’s why people say it’s better to stop and wait for the next green light.”

“Is that for traffic safety?” Komatsu asked.

“Yes.” Kiyotaka nodded.

It seemed to be the right decision—the light turned red a few seconds later. If they had entered the tunnel, they could have run into a car coming the

opposite way.

“Just say that, then,” Komatsu complained.

“I’m sorry. I’m afraid I have a wicked personality,” Kiyotaka answered nonchalantly.

“We know.” Akihito pouted. Everyone laughed.

After a while, the traffic light turned green again, and Kiyotaka slowly accelerated. “Here we go...” he said in a deliberately low voice.

Akihito clicked his tongue. “Don’t be so dramatic. Just go.”

“Sure.”

Kiyotaka took them into the narrow arch-shaped tunnel. The mortar walls were dimly lit by orange lights, but it was hard to shake the feeling of darkness. Whenever the wind blew through, it sounded like a scream. Komatsu couldn’t look to the side for fear that a long-haired ghost would be standing in the shadows outside the window. He couldn’t look up either, in case an unknown woman was reflected in the rearview mirror. He prayed that they would pass through quickly, but as Kiyotaka had said, it was quite a long tunnel.

“It really is long,” Akihito whispered.

“It’s about five hundred meters,” Rikyu explained.

“That’s not so bad for a tunnel like this,” Komatsu murmured. “I guess it feels longer ’cause it’s so narrow.”

“It’s narrow because it was originally used by the Atagoyama Railway. It became a road after the line was shut down.”

“It does feel like a train tunnel, now that you mention it...”

A drop of water suddenly landed on the windshield.

“Eek!” Akihito recoiled, and Komatsu jumped at the sound of his shriek.

“Are you scared?” Kiyotaka asked with a grin.

“No way,” said Akihito. “It just startled me because of the story you told us.”

“Yeah, we’re just on edge because you told us this place was haunted,”

Komatsu added.

“Aren’t you guys being *too* paranoid?” Rikyu asked, exasperated.

“Some people would’ve thought that the droplet just now was in the shape of a handprint,” Kiyotaka said, amused.

Komatsu and Akihito found themselves annoyed by his remark.

“Holmes, do you *really* not find haunted places scary at all?” Akihito asked.

Kiyotaka hummed and furrowed his brow. “I’m not sure how to answer that. I can’t see them through that lens to begin with.”

“What do you mean?”

“When I drive through a tunnel like this, I’ll take an interest in the architectural structure, spot deteriorating parts and worry about them, and so on. Since my mind is focused on those aspects, I don’t develop a fear of the supernatural.”

“Makes sense,” said Komatsu.

Kiyotaka was someone who instantly processed everything he saw as information, simulated what could go wrong, and took countermeasures. He wouldn’t imagine things that weren’t real, let alone be afraid of them.

“What would you do if you saw a ghost, kiddo?”

“That’s a good question.” Kiyotaka’s expression relaxed. “I’ve never seen one, so I don’t know.”

As they were talking, they finally reached the other end of the tunnel.

Akihito placed his hand on his chest, relieved. “Once we’re out, it’s like it was just an ordinary narrow tunnel.” He reclined in his seat, suddenly feeling confident.

“There’s a mountain pass near here called Kokoromi Pass,” said Kiyotaka. “It has a curved mirror that is placed in a very strange way.”

“Huh?”

“It faces downwards, reflecting the ground with nothing of interest on it. If you walk directly under it and don’t see yourself in the reflection...”

“What happens?”

Komatsu gulped as he listened to their conversation in silence.

“You die,” Kiyotaka said in a serious tone of voice.

“What?” Akihito burst out laughing. “That’s it? Well, that’s how the story typically goes, I guess.”

“Yeah, there’s no way you wouldn’t show up,” Komatsu said with a shrug.

“Indeed,” said Kiyotaka. “Since it’s close by, would you like to try?”

“S-Stop it,” said Akihito.

“Yeah, you shouldn’t go to haunted places for fun!” Komatsu exclaimed.

Rikyu chuckled at the two annoyed men.

“You’re right,” said Kiyotaka. “Let’s head to our destination, then.” He grinned as he continued driving.

2

Komatsu had been expecting a Japanese-style residence, but it turned out to be a sprawling Western-style building with a centered front door. The white walls were framed by dark brown beams and had brick-shaped tiles inlaid here and there.

“Wow!” Rikyu’s face lit up. “It’s Tudor architecture. It has scratched tiles, although they look pretty old.”

“Scratched tiles?” Akihito tilted his head.

“Tiles with a scratched pattern on the surface. They were popular in the early Showa period.”

Komatsu looked at the walls again and saw that the brick-shaped tiles had thin vertical grooves in them.

“I heard from Reito that the house was originally built during the Meiji period, but it has since been renovated,” Kiyotaka said.

“The Meiji period, huh?” Komatsu nodded. “Sure looks like it, yeah.”

The door opened, and Reito Kamo came out. “Thank you for coming today,” he said with a bow. He had already spoken with the homeowner and been making preparations.

“Dang, I heard the rumors, but you really are good-looking,” Akihito said, genuinely impressed by Reito’s beauty.

“You must be Akihito Kajiwara,” Reito replied. “I’ve seen you around. You’re more handsome in person than you are on TV. It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

“Oh, uh, thanks.” The actor seemed bewildered by the direct compliment, as he was used to dealing with Kiyotaka’s harshness. He gave an awkward nod and whispered to Komatsu, “They’re both Kyoto guys, but Reito is way nicer than Holmes.”

“Oh? I’m sorry for being one of the mean Kyoto guys, Akihito,” Kiyotaka murmured from behind them.

Akihito flinched but quickly regained his composure. “What, you’re offended? *You* call yourself black-hearted all the time. It’s not slander if it’s the truth.”

“Yes, and I was simply stating the truth as well. That said, it’s also true that while I don’t mind saying bad things about myself, it hurts when I hear others say them about me.” Kiyotaka placed his hand on his chest and lowered his gaze sadly.

“Huh? Do you feel hurt, Holmes?”

“No, I do not. I was just kidding,” Kiyotaka said nonchalantly.

“What?” Akihito squeaked. “Ugh, this is exactly what I was talking about.”

After that silly exchange, the group finished their introductions. Rikyu hadn’t met Reito before either.

“I heard that my grandfather, Ukon Saito, requested your family’s services many times,” said Rikyu. “Thank you.” He bowed.

“Ah, you’re Ukon’s grandson. I hear you’re very bright.”

“No, not at all.” Rikyu shook his head, seeming happy.

Akihito tilted his head. “Why would Rikyu’s grandpa need an exorcist?”

“Ukon is a connoisseur, so he sometimes finds items with questionable history,” Reito explained.

“Questionable?” Akihito repeated.

“It means they’re possessed by horrifying grudges,” Kiyotaka whispered in the actor’s ear.

Akihito noticeably trembled. Apparently Kiyotaka took pleasure in scaring people.

“Jeez, Holmes, you’re really malicious today,” Akihito grumbled. Komatsu completely agreed.

“My apologies,” Kiyotaka said with a chuckle. “By the way, Reito, I noticed that you aren’t in your exorcist garb today.” He seemed mildly disappointed to see Reito wearing a regular jacket and pants. Truthfully, Komatsu was too—he had been looking forward to seeing the archetypal suikan robe and eboshi cap.

“The family requested it this way,” Reito explained. “Ostentatious appearances make them uncomfortable.”

“I see.” Kiyotaka smiled. “It’s the opposite of last time.”

Sometimes the extra pomp was necessary, but sometimes the opposite was true. Komatsu crossed his arms, wondering which way he’d prefer.

“I think you would like the ‘excessive’ style, Komatsu,” Kiyotaka said, suddenly appearing in front of the detective’s face.

Komatsu choked. He remembered how Aoi would sometimes have the same reaction when she was with Kiyotaka. *I know how you feel*, he thought with a strained smile. “Stop reading people’s minds like that.”

“I didn’t read your mind. I simply looked at your face.”

“My face?” Komatsu touched his cheek.

“It was written all over it: ‘Which would I prefer?’”

The detective shuddered at the accurate reading. He often wondered how Aoi could stay with such a man. “Well, why do you think I’d like it?”

“You said before that you admired the old-school detective archetype, didn’t

you? I think you're the type to care about appearances."

Spot on. "What about you, kiddo? Which do you prefer?"

"I'd say I'm fond of stylistic beauty."

"So basically, you care about appearances too."

"I suppose, yes."

As it turned out, phrasing made a big difference in how things were perceived.

Komatsu regained his composure and looked at the residence, which stood alone in a secluded mountainous area. It had a very large yard, but it wasn't beautifully landscaped—in fact, it seemed like only the bare minimum of effort had been put into mowing it. There were no fountains, no flower beds, nothing. Since it was surrounded by mountains and nature, he couldn't tell at a glance how far the owner's property line extended.

"The homeowner is waiting, so please come in," Reito said, swinging the front door wide open. "This house was neglected for a long time, but it was recently given a thorough cleaning, so it isn't as musty anymore."

Upon entering the house, they found themselves in a large hall. There wasn't an area for them to take off their shoes.

"Please keep your shoes on," said Reito.

The floor was stone-paved and the walls were inlaid with brick-patterned tiles here and there. There was a set of sofas in the center of the room, and past them were the stairs to the second floor. The windows were partially stained glass, and there was a large grandfather clock against the right-side wall that reminded Komatsu of a famous nursery rhyme.

"It's like a foreign hotel lobby," the detective murmured, staring at the high atrium ceiling.

Kiyotaka, on the other hand, was happily examining the clock. "A German-made Urgos grandfather clock! How marvelous."

Komatsu didn't really know what Kiyotaka was talking about. At any rate, the house was definitely not lived in. All of the curtains had been removed, making

the place feel deserted. The German-whatever clock was stuck, maybe because it was broken.

Rikyu's eyes were gleaming too. The boy really did love architecture. "It must be inspired by Vories. It feels kind of like Daimaru Villa. I can't believe there's such a magnificent mansion out here in the mountains."

"It's also hidden behind the trees," said Kiyotaka. "I'm impressed too." He turned his attention to the corner of the room and chuckled. "They've even placed salt at the entrance for good luck."

Komatsu looked at the corner in question and saw a small white dish piled with salt. There was a talisman placed on the table, but the characters on it were too complicated for him to read.

Reito cleared his throat. "This residence was originally built during the Meiji period, but a wealthy American living in Japan rebuilt it to his liking. I was asked not to reveal his name, so I will be referring to him as John Smith."

That's an easy name to remember, Komatsu thought.

"John was a successful businessman involved in many projects, but he was also a skilled architect. During his numerous business trips to Japan, he met a woman from a wealthy family in Kyoto and married her. After that, he bought this house."

"Wait, does that mean he lived here?" asked Akihito.

"No, his primary residence was near the imperial palace. This house was only used as a vacation home."

Akihito nodded. "That's what I thought. Living this far out in the mountains would be a pain."

Kiyotaka surveyed the hall. "Considering that the front door leads straight to a reception area, it's clearly a villa for entertaining guests."

"Correct." Reito nodded. "However, John's marriage did not last long. He divorced his wife when their daughter was still young and returned to America, keeping the rights to this house so that his wife and daughter could use it. Later, he fell ill and passed away. It happened quite a long time ago, but his diary was

recently found, and in it, he had written, ‘My treasure might have been left in the Kyoto villa.’”

Everyone hummed.

“No one had cared about this residence until then, but once the diary was discovered, one of John’s relatives immediately came to Japan and had a janitorial company give the place a thorough cleaning.”

“I see,” said Kiyotaka. “So that’s why it was suddenly cleaned.”

“Yes. Apparently the house had been in such disrepair that he was hesitant to even enter it before the cleaners came. The yard was so overgrown that quite a few trees had to be cut down.”

“Did he find the treasure?” Akihito asked enthusiastically.

Reito shook my head. “No. Another matter took precedence.”

“What happened?”

“The staff members were all panicking about seeing a ghost. The relative called it ridiculous and came here himself, only to also encounter the spirit. During that visit, he also met the homeowner, John’s only daughter, Mari.”

“Oh?” Kiyotaka looked up. “Is that her over there?”

“Huh?” Everyone followed his gaze and saw a young woman peeking out from behind a pillar.

“Yes,” said Reito. “‘Mari’ is her real name, written with the characters for ‘truth’ and ‘village.’ Her surname will remain concealed, though.” He turned to the woman. “Mari, these are the detectives I hired.”

The woman hesitantly walked towards them and stopped a short distance away. “I-It’s nice to meet you. I’m Mari.” She bowed.

Everyone smiled and returned the greeting.

Mari had been born to an American father and a Japanese mother, but she looked fully Caucasian, with wavy, voluminous red hair tied in a ponytail, light brown eyes, and freckles. Komatsu could imagine someone like her wearing a cowboy hat and riding a horse, but instead, she wore a simple outfit consisting

of a white blouse and a black skirt. Contrary to her appearance, she seemed to be introverted.

Komatsu wondered how old she was. At a glance, he guessed around eighteen, but it was possible that she was younger than that.

“You must be shocked by my appearance,” Mari said, stroking her hair. “My hair is a weird color like an oni’s, and no matter how I tie it, it always ends up so puffy.” She seemed to be self-conscious about it.

“It’s a lovely light auburn color,” Kiyotaka replied with a smile.

Mari’s eyes widened in surprise. She then bit her lip and lowered her gaze.

Good grief. Kiyotaka is such a sinful man.

“Um, I’ll prepare tea,” Mari said, heading to the kitchen.

“She seems kind of shadowy despite her appearance,” Komatsu whispered.

Kiyotaka hummed and folded his arms. “Listless, perhaps. Shadowy isn’t quite accurate.”

“You think so?”

Mari stopped on her way to the kitchen and came back as if she’d remembered something. “Um, sorry, this house doesn’t have electricity or running water at the moment.”

“It’s fine,” said Kiyotaka. “Don’t worry about it.”

The others nodded in agreement.

Mari apologized again and placed her hand on her chest as if trying to ease her anxiety. “As Reito explained to you, when my father separated from my mother, he left us this house to use as we wished. But my mother hated it, so it was abandoned for a long time.” An isolated manor this deep in the mountains would certainly be too inconvenient to live in. “This is an important place filled with memories,” Mari continued. “But since my father also passed away and there are rumors of it being haunted, I’ve decided to let go of it at last. I’m grateful to my relative for arranging for an exorcist, but...”

“An exorcist?” Everyone looked at Reito.

The man nodded and raised his hand. "That would be me."

"I do want to have the ghost exorcized, of course, but from what I hear, doing so will also remove all of the thoughts and feelings that were left here. I've always wanted to know the secret of this house, and it's possible that the ghost knows what happened here. So, um, could you please search for the secret before you perform the exorcism?"

Kiyotaka tilted his head. "Does the secret have something to do with the treasure your father left behind?"

"Maybe, but maybe not." Mari looked down, wondering how to explain the situation. "I don't really know what it could be. My mother used to say that my father was a terrifying person. When I was little, I once heard her murmur, 'He might be doing bad things in that manor.' I don't know why my parents got divorced, but maybe it had something to do with this place. I feel like there's some kind of secret hidden here."

Suddenly, the grandfather clock gonged twice. It was currently 1:20 p.m., so it wasn't supposed to do that.

"That clock broke down a long time ago, but sometimes, it rings out like that, with the hands still pointing at 2:00," Mari muttered without looking up.

Akihito gulped and turned to Reito. "Uh, hey, Reito, is there actually a ghost in here?"

"Yes," the exorcist answered easily. "Many, in fact."

"*Many?*" Akihito and Komatsu both whimpered and shrank back.

"Yes." Reito nodded. "Ghosts can generally be found anywhere, like dust. So there isn't anything strange about an uninhabited manor having them. However, the ones here are strong. I can see why this place is considered a haunted house. I was going to exorcize them right away, but after hearing Mari's story, I decided we should all investigate the house, including the ghost sightings."

"But..." Rikyu tilted his head. "Wouldn't it be best if you investigated by yourself, since you can exorcize the ghosts? I don't think the Komatsu Detective Agency is needed here."

“Agreed,” Komatsu muttered.

Reito gave an apologetic shrug. “Forgive me. Unlike items possessed by thoughts, little ghosts will run away when I approach them because they don’t want to be exorcized.”

“Huh? The ghosts can run away?” Komatsu asked.

“Must be nice to be able to cheat like that,” Akihito said, impressed.

Reito turned to address everyone again. “John’s relative requested that I exorcize this house, so I do intend to do that at the end. But before that, I would like to grant Mari’s wish. That is why I asked for your help.”

Mari’s wish was to find the house’s secret, which was potentially related to the treasure John Smith had left behind. Komatsu and Akihito looked at each other with strained expressions.

Rikyu gave an exasperated sigh. “Didn’t you guys know from the start that we were gonna be investigating a haunted house? Come on, let’s get to work.”

Komatsu had no retort for that. The boy was completely right.

“Indeed,” Kiyotaka said with a smile. “For now, let’s start by checking every last corner of this manor.”

“All right,” Komatsu agreed, nodding in an attempt to motivate himself.

“I’ll be in this hall, so please call me if something happens.”

“If ‘something happens,’ Reito will come save us, right?” Akihito implored.

“Of course,” Reito replied.

Relieved, Akihito heaved a sigh.

“Let’s do this, then,” Komatsu said, straightening his back. *This is a job the Komatsu Detective Agency took on.*

“First, here is the floor plan.” Reito unfolded an A3-size sheet of paper onto the table.

The atrium they were in now was in the center of the manor, and there was a kitchen in the far back behind a counter. The first floor had two rooms on either side of the hall, for a total of four. There were two sets of stairs to the second

floor, on the left and right side of the space between the hall and the kitchen. The second floor had the exact same layout as the first, with two rooms on either side of the atrium. Lastly, there were bathrooms on both ends of the first floor.

“So it’s basically a huge, fancy 8LDK,” Akihito murmured. It was an abbreviation used to describe apartment layouts, with the numeral representing the number of bedrooms and the letters standing for “living room,” “dining room,” and “kitchen.”

“Even if you assume the central hall is a living room, there is no dining room, so it would be an 8LK,” Kiyotaka replied.

“Why do you always gotta be so nitpicky, Holmes?”

“Either way, I see quite the fixation on symmetry in this floor plan.”

Mari nodded. “That was also what my father liked about my mother—her symmetrical face.” She touched her cheek. “My face isn’t symmetrical like hers, though. Maybe that’s why he abandoned me.”

As a dad, Komatsu wanted to declare that no father would ever abandon his daughter just because he didn’t like her face, but he knew he couldn’t speak for everyone. From what Komatsu had seen of the manor, John had been an artist who was very particular about his preferences. He and Komatsu were nothing alike.

“Looking at this residence, I can tell that it was renovated with great attention to detail. It must be full of your father’s ideals, and yet he left it to you. Perhaps there was a reason he had to leave,” Kiyotaka said calmly, looking at Mari.

“Huh?” The woman looked up, surprised. Her face slowly turned red. “Maybe...”

The cold atmosphere warmed up immediately. Komatsu was impressed, but it also reinforced his belief that Kiyotaka was a sinful man.

“Now then...” Kiyotaka straightened his back. “Let’s begin the investigation. For the sake of efficiency, we’ll split into teams of two.”

“Oh, then I’ll go with you, kiddo,” said Komatsu.

“Nope, Holmes is teaming up with *me!*” Akihito objected.

“No, *I’m* going with Kiyotaka!” Rikyu clung to Kiyotaka.

Komatsu couldn’t afford to back down. “Sorry, but let me have him! Have some mercy on this old man!” He clapped his hands together loudly.

“Like I care about mercy,” said Akihito. “That’s a small sacrifice to make to protect myself.”

“Komatsu, as the chief, you should let the guest have the honors,” Rikyu insisted.

Reito laughed in amusement. “You’re so popular, Kiyotaka.”

“I’m not happy about it at all, though.” Kiyotaka shrugged.

“Why don’t you make the decision yourself?”

“Me?” Kiyotaka looked at Akihito, Komatsu, and Rikyu, who were standing in a row. The three men had their eyes tightly shut and their hands clasped, each praying to be chosen. “It’s hardly a decision that requires thought. I’m pairing up with him,” he said, patting Rikyu’s head.

“Yay! I knew you’d choose me,” the boy said, beaming.

“Of course. I’m counting on you, Rikyu.”

Rikyu was happy to be chosen by Kiyotaka, while Kiyotaka was proud to be accompanied by his faithful retainer. Their interests(?) were in alignment. Komatsu and Akihito looked at each other with weak smiles.

“Lemme use the bathroom before we start,” said Akihito. “Wait...” He put his hand over his mouth. “There’s no running water, right? Does that mean the toilets don’t work?”

“The water isn’t running, but the toilets aren’t connected to the water supply anyway, so they can still be used,” Mari replied.

“The toilets aren’t connected?” Akihito’s eyes widened.

“This house uses pit toilets,” Reito explained.

“Oh...” Akihito headed down the right-side corridor, muttering, “Outhouses in this day and age?”

“Bathroom, bathroom...”

Akihito walked down the hallway with a spring in his step. If it had been the middle of the night, he’d probably have been shaking in fear, but it was only 1:30 p.m. The sun was shining through the windows, brightly illuminating the house. *Piece of cake*, he thought. But as he approached the end of the corridor, the trees outside blocked the light, making his surroundings darker.

“Gah, it’s dark.” He couldn’t help but feel scared since he’d been told this was a haunted house. “Dammit, this hallway’s so long.” He grimaced as he hurried forward.

When he reached the end, he found stairs leading to the second floor. It was a half-turn staircase, so he couldn’t see what was above. It was also pitch-black because the lights weren’t on. A chill ran down his spine as he imagined someone peering at him from the landing.

He shook his head and opened the door at the end of the hall, revealing a sink, a door for the toilet, and a sliding door for the bath.

“Ooh, what would a retro mansion’s bathtub look like?”

Curious, he opened the sliding door and his jaw immediately dropped. It was a stylish bathroom with a white clawfoot tub, like the ones he’d seen in foreign movies, but that wasn’t why he was shocked. The problem was that the bathtub, walls, floor, and mirror were all stained with bright-red blood. The smell of rusty iron invaded his nose.

“Aaahhhhh!”

He ran out of the bathroom, sprinted down the corridor with all his might, and burst into the central hall.

*

“Oh my god! The bath’s covered in blood!”

“Huh?” Everyone interrupted their chatting and turned from where they were seated on the sofas.

Kiyotaka tilted his head. “Why are you talking about the bath when you were supposed to be using the toilet?”

“Is that really what you should be asking right now?!”

“Surely you weren’t trying to do your business in the bathtub...”

“No!” Akihito shrieked. He approached Kiyotaka, his eyes wide open. “Listen to me! The bath’s seriously messed up!”

“Well, did you finish your business?”

Akihito blinked, coming back to his senses. “No, not yet.”

“Do that first, and then I’ll take a look.”

“No, I really can’t. There’s no way I can go by myself. I’m begging you, Holmes, come with me.” He grabbed Kiyotaka’s arm.

“You’re not a child. Surely you can handle going to the bathroom by yourself.”

“If going to the bathroom alone makes me an adult, then I don’t wanna grow up. I’ll stay a kid for the rest of my life. So please, man, come with me.” Akihito looked desperate.

“Good grief,” Kiyotaka said, standing up. “Let’s all go have a look, then.”

“Right,” Komatsu agreed, standing up as well.

“Y-Yeah, trust me, you’ll all freak out too,” said Akihito.

As they walked, the actor clung tightly to Kiyotaka’s arm.

“Akihito, could you please stop that? Linking arms with you makes me extremely uncomfortable.”

“It’s not like I wanna link arms with you either. It’s just a necessary sacrifice, you know? Can’t make an omelet without breaking eggs and all that.” Akihito gave a strained laugh.

Kiyotaka frowned. Komatsu, on the other hand, gulped. Considering Akihito’s unusual behavior, it was possible that the bathroom really was covered in blood.

The door at the end of the hall was still open, as was the sliding door for the

bath.

“There isn’t any blood,” Holmes remarked.

“Huh?” Akihito leaned forward.

The room had a white bathtub. It was February, but the leaves outside the window were still red, and the mirror and sunlight reflected the color onto the tub and walls.

Komatsu and Rikyu burst out laughing.

“What, did you think the red leaves were blood?” the detective asked.

“Jeez, Akihito.” Rikyu shrugged. “You’re just being paranoid.”

“Wait, no, when I came in here...” Akihito looked around the bathroom, confused.

“Anyway, finish your business,” said Kiyotaka. “The rest of us will head back.” He and Rikyu left immediately.

Akihito grabbed Komatsu’s arm, since he happened to be standing closest to him. “Please, Koma, stay here.”

“What?”

“It’ll be the fastest leak I’ve ever taken, I swear.” He dashed into the toilet room. After a while, he came out with a sigh. “Ahh, that’s better. All right, let’s go back.”

Seeing the actor’s cheery face made the detective feel like taking a leak as well. “You go first. I’ll use the bathroom too while I’m here.”

“Okay, I’ll run back, then.” Akihito zoomed down the hallway at lightning speed.

“In the end, there wasn’t any blood, was there?” Reito asked.

When Komatsu returned from the bathroom, he found the others sitting on the sofas in the central hall. There were two loveseats and two armchairs arranged around a table. Mari and Reito were sitting in the armchairs. Kiyotaka and Rikyu occupied one of the loveseats, while Akihito sat alone on the other

one across from them.

“Scuse me,” Komatsu said, sitting down next to Akihito.

“There was not,” said Kiyotaka, answering Reito’s question. “The mirror was reflecting the red leaves outside. It was beautiful, wasn’t it?” he asked, glancing at Akihito.

The actor had a bitter look on his face. “No, I seriously thought it was blood.”

Reito hummed and stroked his chin. “You’re surprisingly susceptible, Akihito.”

“Argh!” Akihito buried his face in his hands. “Even the exorcist thinks I hallucinated ’cause I was scared.”

“No.” Reito shook his head. “I think what you saw was indeed blood.”

“Huh?” Akihito blinked and leaned forward. “You believe me?”

“Of course.” The exorcist folded his hands in his lap. “Ghosts are not seen with the eye in the first place. Some people with strong supernatural senses can see ghosts so clearly that they think they are perceiving them visually, but in reality, it is a projection here, in the brain.” He pointed to his temple. “As I said earlier, ghosts are everywhere, but most people do not notice their presence. It is like using a radio. Even if the radio is on, you cannot hear anything unless it is tuned to the correct frequency. That is how it *should* be—it means that all of you are healthy. On the other hand, I am akin to a broken radio that picks up every wavelength.” He slumped his shoulders.

Komatsu hummed and crossed his arms. “Sounds like people who can sense the supernatural have a hard time.”

“Indeed. It is very troublesome to be able to see and hear things that others cannot. I suffered a lot before I was able to live normally.”

“I’m sorry to hear that.” Komatsu grimaced.

“But,” Reito continued, a stern look in his eyes, “on very rare occasions, even ordinary people can see ghosts. It happens when their frequency happens to align with the spirit’s, or when the spirit’s thoughts—for the sake of simplicity, I’ll use ‘radio waves’ as an analogy—when the radio waves sent out are so strong that normal people can pick up on them.”

“Is that how a ‘haunting’ occurs?” Kiyotaka asked.

“Yes. That is when people like me are dispatched. In this case, the entire manor is covered in powerful radio waves, which give strength to low-level spirits that normally would not be visible. As a result, we see malicious phenomena like the one just now.”

“So what I saw was the work of a low-level spirit?” Akihito asked.

“Correct.”

“Does that mean there’s a decent chance that the rest of us who normally can’t see ghosts will see them here?” Rikyu asked.

“Yes, but no matter how strong the radio waves are, there will always be some people who pick up on the spirits and some who do not. It depends on one’s state of mind.”

“State of mind?” everyone repeated softly.

“More specifically, fear. Why do you think ghost sightings are more common late at night? It is because fear is born in people’s hearts. The feeling puts you in a state where you can pick up the radio waves more easily. Akihito, were you afraid when you were on the way to the bathroom?”

The actor nodded so vehemently that Komatsu wondered if his neck would break. “Y-Yeah, I was.”

“That allowed a low-level spirit’s radio waves to access your brain directly and show you that unsettling sight. They attack your senses of sight, smell, and hearing, so it’s truly malicious.”

“So that’s what happened. I didn’t just see the blood, I smelled it too. That’s why I seriously thought it was real.” Akihito placed a hand on his chest, genuinely relieved.

Kiyotaka, on the other hand, was intrigued. “I see. They take advantage of unstable minds.”

“Exactly,” said Reito. “Sometimes people temporarily become more susceptible when they are bedridden with a high fever or have a mental health problem.”

“Oh!” Rikyu clapped his hands together. “I think I know what you’re talking about. I was weak as a kid, and whenever I had a fever, I’d have weird dreams.”

“But if someone with a mental illness sees a ghost, won’t that make it even worse?” Komatsu asked.

“Yes. They will suffer, not knowing whether it was real or a hallucination, while others will dismiss it as part of the illness. But sometimes, a spirit may be connected to a sort of collective unconsciousness and provide a person with information or wisdom that they should have no way of knowing. Someone may hear from a spirit about the truth about a past incident or something that will occur in the future, and it may turn out to be real. These people are sometimes hailed as diviners or mediums. However, nothing good comes from being connected to a spirit while your mind is unstable. It will only make your condition worse.”

Everyone hummed.

Reito gently placed his hand on his chest. “The heart comes first in everything you do. Health comes from the mind too. Mental stability is the most important thing of all, so if someone starts to get affected by spirits because they are unstable, I suggest that they go to a hospital for proper treatment.”

“But if you tell your client to see a doctor, won’t they call you a phony exorcist?” Rikyu asked.

Reito tilted his head and folded his arms. “My colleagues often feel glum after being called that, but no one has ever said it to me. Instead, I have been asked many times, ‘Are you really a living human being?’”

“Oh,” everyone said, nodding in understanding.

“You were supposed to laugh.”

“You’re so far removed from the world that it didn’t sound like a joke,” Kiyotaka quipped.

Reito chuckled. “I don’t want to hear that from you.”

“You both are,” Komatsu muttered with a strained laugh. Looking at Reito again, he sensed something about the exorcist that was unlike a normal person,

but in a different way from Kiyotaka. Perhaps it was hard to call someone like him a “phony.”

“Anyway, thanks to Reito, I feel a bit better,” Akihito said with his usual cheer, folding his hands behind his head.

“Should we get started on the investigation, then?” Komatsu asked.

“Yes,” Kiyotaka replied. “We’ll have to proceed with caution.” He stood up, and Akihito, Rikyu, and Komatsu followed suit.

“I’m counting on you all.” Reito smiled fondly and bowed.

4

Akihito insisted that the group stay together throughout the investigation instead of splitting into pairs. “We’ll be less scared that way.”

Komatsu had no objections, but Kiyotaka muttered, “How inefficient.”

“Let’s start on that side,” Akihito said, pulling on Kiyotaka’s arm as he headed for the left-side hallway. He’d just had a scary encounter on the right side, after all.

The corridor had windows on one side and two rooms on the other.

“It’s kind of laid out like a school,” Akihito remarked.

“Or a hotel,” Komatsu murmured.

The windows had stained glass in places.

“Oh!” Rikyu’s eyes lit up. “This stained glass is by Sanchi Ogawa. He was a stained-glass artist active during the Taisho and Showa periods.”

The group stopped in front of the first door. Komatsu and Akihito unconsciously stepped back, not wanting to touch the doorknob.

“You guys are so pathetic,” Rikyu said, opening the door without hesitation.

There was a large desk near the center of the room, and the wall was lined with glass-doored bookcases.

“It appears to be a study,” Kiyotaka remarked, walking up to a bookcase,

opening the glass door, and taking a book out. “They seem to have been wiped clean. Oh?” He retrieved a book that looked old from a cardboard box. The title, *The Wind Rises*, was written right-to-left on the cover, further emphasizing its age.

Akihito peeked at it. “*The Wind Rises*? Is this the book the animated movie was based on? It was about war, right?”

“Yes, the book is based on the real-life experiences of Tatsuo Hori, who was born during the Meiji period and began his career as a novelist during the early Showa period. The animated film differs from it in many ways. The original story wasn’t themed around war.”

“Really?”

“Yes. The book takes place in Karuizawa during the early Showa period. The first-person narrator is a writer who meets a woman with tuberculosis and marries her. It’s a beautiful love story in which he faces life and death, treasuring the remaining time he has with his beloved while knowing she is not long for the world. It’s based on the author’s own experiences and is filled with powerful emotions. By the way, the title is a quote from Paul Valéry’s poem ‘Le Cimetière marin,’ or ‘The Graveyard by the Sea.’ Anyway, this is quite a rare find.”

“Why is it rare?” Rikyu asked.

“It was published by Noda Shobo.”

“Never heard of them before,” Komatsu murmured.

“It’s a defunct publisher,” Kiyotaka replied, not looking up from the book. “They ceased operations in 1938 when the proprietor, Seizo Noda, committed suicide.”

“Oh,” Komatsu said. It was hard to comment further on something like that.

“The author, Tatsuo Hori, had very high aesthetic standards, so when he was publishing his book, he wanted it to be done by Noda Shobo, which prided itself on producing beautiful books. He also had a lot of input in the design.”

“You really know everything,” Akihito said, sounding more exasperated than

impressed.

Kiyotaka ignored him and continued. “As for how rare this book is, only five hundred copies were ever published.”

“Oh!” Akihito’s eyes lit up. “Does that mean it’s valuable?”

“Yes, it’s very rare. In fact, that is the case for many of the books on this shelf.” Kiyotaka put *The Wind Rises* back and picked up a different book. The title, *Im Westen nichts Neues*, was written on the cover in bold black letters.

“What does that say?”

“It’s German. This book has been published in Japan too. You may know it by the name *All Quiet on the Western Front*.”

“Oh!” Komatsu exclaimed. “There was an old war film with that name.”

“Have you seen it?” Kiyotaka asked.

“Yeah, there was a time when I was addicted to movies.”

The film depicted the ruthlessness of war without glorifying it. It was a masterpiece that made the viewer fully believe that war was wrong.

Kiyotaka tapped his phone several times and murmured, “Published in 1929...”

Noticing his older brother figure’s conflicted expression, Rikyu asked, “Kiyo, what’s wrong?”

“Nothing.” Kiyotaka uncrossed his arms. “Let’s examine the next room.” He exited the study with Komatsu and Akihito racing after him, not wanting to be left behind.

The second door on the left side of the first floor was a guest room with a bed and a desk. At the end of the hall was the same bathroom they had seen on the right side, with a sink and doors for the toilet and bath. Looking at it again, it wasn’t very large relative to the size of the manor. It was just a normal bathroom.

The group didn’t find anything out of the ordinary, so they went up the stairs to the second floor.

“Now that I think about it, the right side had stairs like this too,” said Akihito.

“It’s nice that we’ll be able to go around the entire house without backtracking to the hall,” Rikyu replied.

They continued upwards, with Rikyu taking the lead, followed by Kiyotaka, Akihito, and Komatsu in that order. There was a mirror on the landing, which made Akihito flinch. Seeing his reaction made Komatsu tense up as well.

“What should we do if we see someone else’s reflection?” Kiyotaka asked, turning around and grinning.

“That’s going too far, Holmes! How could you say that at a time like this?!”

“He’s right, kiddo!”

Kiyotaka smiled in amusement. “My apologies. But that took care of your fear, didn’t it?”

“Wait...” *It’s true*, Komatsu realized. The slight fear that had sprouted in his heart was gone.

“Anger is the strongest emotion of all. When you feel afraid, you should get as angry as you can,” Kiyotaka explained nonchalantly, continuing up the stairs.

We’re no match for him.

Komatsu and Akihito exchanged looks before following him.

As with the first floor, the second floor had two rooms on either side of the central atrium. Opening the door to the closest room to the stairs, they found a retro foot-pumped organ.

“Ooh, an organ,” said Komatsu. “That’s pretty nostalgic.”

“Oh, I saw one of those in the music room at school,” said Akihito.

“But this one’s as antique as it gets,” Rikyu remarked.

Kiyotaka followed the three men to the organ, his arms folded. “A Yamaha pump organ, model nineteen...”

“Is it really old?” Komatsu asked.

“Yes.” Kiyotaka nodded. “How fascinating,” he murmured, leaving the room.

The next room had a bed without sheets, a desk, and a chest of drawers. There was a shelf lined with large-eyed felt dolls.

“Looks like a kid’s room,” Komatsu muttered.

“Yes, I imagine this was the room Mari once used,” said Kiyotaka.

“These dolls sure are old-fashioned,” Akihito remarked, peering closely at them.

“They’re ‘cultural dolls,’” said Kiyotaka. “They appear to have been cleaned as well.”

“Cultural dolls?” the actor asked.

“They’re a type of doll from the Taisho and early Showa periods. They’re made of cloth and wear Western-style dresses.”

Akihito hummed and looked up. “These look old and handmade. Maybe Mari’s grandma made them.”

The group left the room and continued down the corridor connecting the two sides of the house. It overlooked the first-floor hall, so they could see Reito sitting on an armchair and Mari standing by the grandfather clock.

“Oh! Reito!!!” Akihito waved towards the man.

Reito looked up, smiled, and waved back.

“Man, he really is good-looking. Holmes, why don’t you team up with him and make your debut as ‘The Kyoto Boys’?”

“Can’t you do something about that name?” Rikyu frowned.

Kiyotaka sighed. “I’ll pass, and I think Reito would say the same thing.”

“What a waste,” said Akihito. “You guys could become stars. Don’t you agree, Rikyu?”

“I think the fact that he doesn’t use his looks for showbiz is part of what makes Kiyo so cool,” the boy replied.

“Oh.”

As they were talking, Kiyotaka stopped and looked down at the hall below.

“What’s up, kiddo?” Komatsu asked.

“I get it now,” said Kiyotaka. “Reito is inside a star.”

“Huh?” Akihito asked.

“Do you remember the pile of salt?”

“Yeah.” There had been a small white dish piled with salt.

“From this perspective, you can see that there are six in total.”

“Hm?” Komatsu leaned forward to look. There were small dishes of salt scattered around the hall. One was near the kitchen, another was on top of the grandfather clock... Counting them, there were indeed six in all. “You’re right,” he murmured.

“But what’s this star you’re talking about?” Akihito asked.

“There are six of them, so I thought they might be a hexagram.” Kiyotaka chuckled and continued walking down the corridor.

“Like the Star of David, huh?” Komatsu traced a path between the dishes with his finger. Realizing that everyone had already entered the next room, he hurried after them. It seemed to be the mother and father’s bedroom.

The final room, on the far-right side of the house, was a music room with an old-school phonograph and a collection of vinyl records that included classical pieces and jazz artists like Louis Armstrong and Ryoichi Hattori.

“Huh, the guy really was an enthusiast,” Akihito remarked, looking curiously at the records.

Kiyotaka hummed and folded his arms. “The rooms on the far ends of the second floor are both music rooms, while the inner ones are both bedrooms.”

“He sure was obsessed with symmetry.”

With their inspection of the second floor complete, the group went downstairs, checking the bathroom that had given Akihito the scare of his life again before opening the door to the rightmost room. Like the leftmost room on this floor, this one was also a guest room with a bed and a desk.

The group entered the final room. *The corresponding room on the left side*

was a study. What will this one be? Komatsu wondered.

Just as he was about to go in, a feminine voice called out from behind him.
“Um...”

Komatsu flinched. There hadn’t been anyone behind him when they were walking down the hallway. He turned around fearfully to see an elegant woman in a kimono. Somehow, he managed to hold back his scream. *It’s probably just someone Mari knows.* The woman looked to be in her midthirties. Her long hair was tied in a ponytail, and she was very pretty, with balanced features. Frankly, she was Komatsu’s type. The detective couldn’t help but stand up straighter.

“Is something the matter?” he asked in a calm tone.

The woman looked down and muttered, “My child...”

“What?”

“I’m looking for my child. Have you seen her?”

“Huh?” Komatsu blinked. “Did a child get into this house?”

The woman fell silent. The next second, she vanished into thin air.

“Huh...?” It had been a ghost. But surprisingly, Komatsu didn’t feel scared. Instead, he was excited to have experienced a mysterious phenomenon.

“Kiddo!” He burst into the room everyone was investigating. “A woman was looking for her child!”

The rest of the group looked at him, surprised.

“Huh? Did a kid sneak into the house?” Rikyu tilted his head.

“No!” Komatsu clenched his fists. “A woman in her midthirties with long hair appeared and said she was looking for her child. Then she disappeared. It was a *ghost*. I finally saw one too.” Reito had said that ghosts weren’t perceived with the eye, but Komatsu had absolutely felt as if he’d seen it.

“Really?!” Akihito exclaimed loudly.

“Really!” Komatsu replied, joining the actor in overreacting.

“Okay, so...” Rikyu crossed his arms. “Was it the ghost that was seen here before? The one Reito said had ‘strong radio waves’?”

“It might’ve been,” said Komatsu, breathing heavily. “It totally seemed like a real person.”

He stepped into the room to find Kiyotaka, and saw the contents of the final room for the first time. The corresponding room on the left side had been a study. This room also had a desk and bookshelves, but unlike the study, the books on the shelves here had titles like *Grimms’ Fairy Tales*, *Alice in Wonderland*, *Shonen Club*, and *Sherlock Holmes*. They were all stories and illustrated guides for children.

“Oh, so this is a reading room for kids,” Komatsu remarked. Perhaps that was why it was smaller than the study.

“Did the ghost woman looking for her child have a well-balanced face?” Kiyotaka asked.

“Y-Yeah! How’d you know?”

“It’s simple. Remember what we heard about a woman with a symmetrical face?”

“Huh?” Everyone’s eyes widened.

“That was what Mari said about her mom, wasn’t it?” asked Rikyu.

“Oh, yeah,” said Akihito.

“So that ghost was Mari’s mother?” Komatsu asked.

Kiyotaka smiled and said nothing.

“But that would mean her mother is dead, wouldn’t it?” Komatsu mused. *Why would she be roaming around this house, then?* Suddenly, he had a terrifying thought. He shuddered at the cruelty of it, but he just couldn’t dismiss it. “Kiddo, I thought of something.”

Kiyotaka remained silent and looked at the detective.

“What if John killed Mari’s mother—his own wife—in this house?”

“What?” Akihito and Rikyu frowned at the absurd accusation.

Kiyotaka, on the other hand, asked calmly, “What makes you think that?”

“First of all, Mari’s mother thought her husband was terrifying, didn’t she?”

Komatsu thought back to Mari's story. The girl's mother had speculated that her husband might've been doing "bad things" in this manor. "This place is out in the mountains. If you committed a crime here, it wouldn't be discovered easily."

It was certainly possible to gather people here to use drugs or gamble illegally. But what if they weren't satisfied with indulging in vices by themselves? What if they also hurt others? What if they made a hobby of killing people? What if they were kidnapping children every night and dismembering them? That was what the wife had feared. But when she caught on to her husband's wrongdoings, he murdered her and fled the country.

"Reito said he couldn't reveal John Smith's real name," Komatsu continued. "What if it was because he was problematic?"

Akihito's face went pale, while Rikyu grimaced.

Kiyotaka stroked his chin and said, "I see. It's true that no one would notice the screams this far in the mountains. Anything could happen here."

"Right?!" Komatsu exclaimed.

"That said, it's hard to believe that he was partaking in killing sprees here. I won't deny the possibility of drugs or gambling, though."

"Why wouldn't he?"

"From what we've seen of this estate, John was a perfectionist with high beauty standards. If he relished in murder, I think he would've designed the house differently."

"Huh?" Komatsu and Akihito blinked.

"First, look at the floor. It's stone-paved with lots of grooves."

"Yeah," Komatsu confirmed, looking down at his feet. The floor resembled a foreign pedestrian mall.

"If you were slicing people up here, cleaning up the blood spills would require effort. If I were a murderer, I would make the floor easier to wipe clean."

He was right. Cleaning up bloodshed here would take a ton of work.

“I’d also make the bathrooms bigger, since I’d be doing a lot of washing in there. The bathrooms in this house are very average in size, to the point where they seem small compared to the rest of the building.”

“True.” Komatsu nodded.

“Alternatively, I might set up a shed in the yard for dismembering, with a large incinerator next to it. There isn’t anything like that here.”

Akihito’s face stiffened. “Dude, you’re kind of scary.”

“Anyway...” Komatsu scratched his head. “Whatever the truth is, Mari’s mother is dead, and we need to figure out if John was involved in that.”

“Yeah,” said Rikyu. “We can tell based on when she died, right? If it was while John was in Japan, or after he left.”

“Indeed.” Kiyotaka nodded. “We can find the answer to that right now. Let’s ask Reito.” He left the reading room and headed to the hall.

Reito, who was sitting on a sofa, looked up and said, “Welcome back. Did you figure out the truth?”

“Perhaps, perhaps not.” Kiyotaka smiled. “Before getting to that, I’d like to ask you something. To put it bluntly, did John murder Mari’s mother? Could he have fled the country because of that?”

“No.” The exorcist shook his head. “That isn’t possible. Mari’s mother was still in good health when John went back to America.”

Komatsu didn’t know whether to be disappointed or relieved that his hypothesis was incorrect. He weakly slumped his shoulders. However, he noted that Reito hadn’t said that Mari’s mother was still in good health now.

“I see,” Kiyotaka murmured as if all had been made clear. “I’ve arrived at a conclusion.” He turned to the other person in the room. “Mari, could you come over here?”

The girl, who had been standing motionless in a corner of the hall like a servant, nervously walked up to them.

“I’ve figured it out,” Kiyotaka said.

Mari looked at him, confused.

“The secret of this house, and your father’s treasure...”

Komatsu gulped. *Is he going to say, “They’re your mother’s sentiments”?*

“It’s you, Mari.”

The girl’s eyes widened, and the rest of the group froze.

“Uh, Holmes? What did you just say?”

“Yeah, what’s that supposed to mean, Kiyo?”

“Seriously, kiddo.”

The three men questioned Kiyotaka anxiously.

Mari placed a hand on her chest, stunned. “I’m the house’s secret and my father’s treasure?”

“Yes,” Kiyotaka replied. “I’m sure you’ve begun to suspect it too—the fact that you aren’t alive.”

The girl’s eyes widened again. Then her figure blurred, like an image on a malfunctioning TV. Komatsu and Akihito gasped, and the hall fell silent.

Rikyu rubbed his eyes and held on to Kiyotaka’s sleeve. “Seriously, Kiyo, what are you talking about?” Even he was confused.

“Good grief.” Kiyotaka shrugged. “That’s what I should be asking you. Can’t you tell when this house was renovated?”

“When...” Rikyu surveyed the hall and froze upon looking at the wall. “Ohhh.” He covered his face in shame. “Since the house was originally built in the Meiji period, I totally overlooked it, thinking it was normal for old houses. Sanchi Ogawa’s stained glass and the scratched tiles in the exterior walls were popular in the early Showa period. This house was built in the Meiji period, but it wasn’t renovated recently—it was renovated in the Showa period.”

“What?!” Komatsu and Akihito were taken aback.

“That’s right,” said Kiyotaka. “We were told that it was abandoned for a long time, but that ‘long time’ wasn’t a decade or two. It was ever since the early Showa period.”

“But...” Akihito looked around. “It doesn’t look *that* old.”

“I agree,” said Komatsu. “Wouldn’t it be falling apart if it hadn’t been touched since then?”

“I get why you’d be skeptical,” said Rikyu. “But this house is sturdy because it’s made of stone and reinforced concrete. People often say that houses in other countries can last for a century, don’t they? That’s what’s going on here.”

“The thorough cleaning also factored into our perception,” Kiyotaka added. “Everything was wiped clean, including the dolls and books.”

Akihito hummed. “Oh!” He put his hand over his mouth. “You know what, it does make sense. That’s why the house has pit toilets. If it was renovated recently, they would’ve been flush toilets.”

“True,” said Komatsu. “Wait, is that also why there was an organ instead of a piano?” It seemed strange for such a grand estate to lack a piano, but it was natural when one considered that it hadn’t been touched since the early Showa period.

“Correct.” Kiyotaka nodded. “Organs were used in Kyoto schools from the Meiji period to the early Showa period. The study was also full of early Showa books. Cultural dolls were popular around that time as well. This manor was renovated in the early Showa period. And besides...” He paused before continuing, “Mari, you don’t have a shadow.”

The evening sun was shining through the windows. Everyone was casting long shadows on the floor, except for Mari, who had none.

“Wait!” Komatsu grabbed Kiyotaka’s arm. “Is that why you objected when I called her ‘shadowy’ at the start?”

“Yes,” Kiyotaka said bluntly. “No matter how you look at it, Mari doesn’t have a shadow. She must’ve been the ghost that John’s relative saw. I assumed that Reito used some kind of technique to allow us to see her as well, but since he didn’t say anything about it, I kept quiet because I didn’t want to scare everyone.”

“Really now?” Akihito’s face twitched. “You didn’t want to scare us? *Really?*”

Komatsu completely agreed with the actor's skepticism.

"When I looked down at the hall, I realized that there was a hexagram set up," Kiyotaka continued. "There's a secret behind that, isn't there?" He looked at Reito.

"Yes." The exorcist nodded. "When I sealed Mari inside the barrier, it condensed her energy. But I was surprised that doing so allowed you all to see her."

"So you didn't reveal her to us on purpose?" Rikyu asked.

"No. Mari's energy has grown over the years. She is powerful but unstable, and sometimes she links with low-level spirits and causes trouble. When the cleaners came, she panicked and went on a rampage, threatening them."

"Yikes," Komatsu and Akihito said, grimacing.

"I managed to suppress her power, though. With the owner of the powerful radio waves sealed, the low-level spirits in the house cannot cause any serious harm."

Kiyotaka nodded. "That's why Mari has been loitering here, unable to leave the hall, isn't it?"

"Correct. She doesn't want to be near me because I'm an exorcist, so she has been staying as far away from me as possible."

Kiyotaka turned to face the girl. "Mari, you knew that your mother had already passed away, didn't you? When you spoke about your father, you said that he 'also' passed away."

Mari nodded in silence.

"You also knew that your late mother was wandering in search of you, didn't you? But when you sensed her coming out to look for you, you hid yourself."

Mari nodded again.

"Why did you do that?"

"Because...she abandoned me."

"Huh?" Akihito furrowed his brow. "Wasn't it your dad who abandoned you?"

“Yes, my father left me and my mother to return to his homeland,” said Mari. “After that, my mother confined me to this house. She said she didn’t want people to see me because I looked like this.” She clenched her hands in front of her chest. “But even though she lived in town, she would still deliver food to me. That went on for years until she suddenly stopped coming.”

“I see.” Kiyotaka lowered his gaze. “And as a result, you passed away as well.”

“I don’t really remember. Did my mother and father abandon me? Did I...” Mari trembled and looked down. She didn’t need to finish her question for them to know that it was “Did I die here?”

“You weren’t abandoned,” Kiyotaka said confidently.

“But...” Mari looked up with tears in her eyes.

“I don’t know how much you were told. Perhaps you were hidden away in this mountain without knowing anything.”

“Hidden away?” Akihito tilted his head.

“Mari, your mother and father likely separated because World War II began, putting Japan and America at war with each other. Were you aware of that?”

The girl’s eyes twitched, but she said nothing.

“Your father returned to his homeland because he could no longer stay in Japan. Once the war began, society was in an abnormal state. It’s easy to imagine that many people would not have taken kindly to your appearance since you resemble your father. Your mother hid you here to protect you from the world.”

Come to think of it, Mari had described her hair as “a weird color like an oni.” Perhaps people had harassed her, calling her “an oni’s child.”

“However,” Kiyotaka continued, grimacing, “your mother most likely died in the war.”

“Huh?” Komatsu furrowed his brow. “Kyoto didn’t get bombed during the war, did it?”

Kiyotaka shook his head. “This is a common misconception,” he said firmly. “Kyoto was also subjected to air raids.”

He explained that Kyoto had been struck five times in 1945, between January 16 and June 26. The targets had been Umamachi (in Higashiyama-ku), Kasugamachi (in Ukyo-ku), Uzumasa (in Ukyo-ku), the Kyoto Imperial Palace (in Kamigyo-ku), and Nishijin (in Kamigyo-ku Demizucho). Due to news blackouts, the details of the damage were unknown, but many people were said to have died.

“The ghost of your mother, who appeared earlier, was in her midthirties. In other words, she was still young. We were told that your parents’ primary residence was near the imperial palace, so it’s possible that she died in the air strike there. That’s why she was no longer able to come here.”

Mari bit her lip as she listened. “Then why did she say that my father was terrifying?”

“This is speculation on my part, but I think your father might have been opposed to the war. At the time, it was considered unacceptable to voice that opinion loudly.”

“What’s the basis for that speculation?” Akihito asked.

“As I said earlier, Mari’s father had high beauty standards. It’s hard to believe that he would find any beauty in a war that would violently destroy the things he created. His bookshelf had me all but convinced. *All Quiet on the Western Front* is a story about the brutality of war, while *The Wind Rises* is—”

“Oh, I know this one. It’s a story about love, right?”

“That’s right. And that story contained the message, ‘One must live, no matter what happens, even if a loved one dies.’”

Everyone fell silent at the emotional words.

“However, Mari’s mother, who was born and raised in Japan—in Kyoto, at that—must’ve found it terrifying that her husband would speak his mind, refusing to conform to his surroundings. He might have even been holding anti-war gatherings in this house. But it seems that in the end, he couldn’t stay in this country any longer, so he retreated to his homeland.”

The grandfather clock gonged again as if reflecting Mari’s conflicted feelings.

“Mari, your father told you the secret of this house, didn’t he? There’s a secret room here that no one else knows about—not even your mother. Did he tell you to hide there if you were in any kind of danger?”

“How do you...” Mari’s voice trembled.

“Your mother couldn’t find your body—that’s the reason she continued to search for you after becoming a ghost. You followed your father’s instructions and never told anyone about the secret room.”

Mari lowered her gaze with a pained expression.

“Your father might have been informed of his ex-wife’s death in the Kyoto air strikes, and that you had gone missing. He would have assumed that his daughter had also died in the war. But perhaps it suddenly dawned upon him: ‘What if my daughter is in the secret room I told her about?’”

And so he had left that note in his diary.

“Then the ‘treasure’ John was talking about is his daughter, Mari?” Komatsu asked, feeling goose bumps on his skin. It all lined up perfectly.

Kiyotaka turned around to face the grandfather clock. “This clock reminds me of ‘The Wolf and the Seven Young Goats’ from *Grimms’ Fairy Tales*. The chime it makes from time to time is almost like the cry of the young goat that still hasn’t been found.”

Akihito gulped. “So Mari is...”

“Inside the grandfather clock?” Komatsu finished the thought.

The two men looked nervously at the clock, but neither of them could bring themselves to approach it knowing that there could be a dead body inside.

“You guys are so pathetic,” Rikyu said, opening the grandfather clock’s door without hesitation. However, nothing was within. “She’s not there,” he said, disappointed.

“Close, but not quite,” said Kiyotaka.

“How so?”

“I found it strange that this clock was placed along the right-side wall in a

house where everything is symmetrical. I felt that John would've either placed it in the center or put something similar on the opposite side."

He had a point.

"And aside from this grandfather clock, there was one other part of the house that wasn't symmetrical. Do you remember what it was?" Kiyotaka held his index finger in front of his mouth as though posing a riddle.

"Something that wasn't symmetrical?" Komatsu asked. Honestly, everything had been slightly different. One of the music rooms had an organ, while the other had vinyl records. One of the bedrooms was for Mari, while the other was for the parents. And one of the studies was for an adult, while the other was a child's reading room.

"Oh!" Rikyu exclaimed. "It's the reading room, isn't it? It's slightly smaller than the study."

"Correct." Kiyotaka nodded. "The reading room is on the other side of the wall from the grandfather clock, and it's smaller than the corresponding study on the left side of the house. There must be a space between the walls."

He reached into the open grandfather clock and felt around the back wall until he found whatever it was he was looking for. With a bit of force, he slid the side wall over, revealing a set of stairs to the basement. There was probably a makeshift bomb shelter down there.

The cheers lasted only a brief moment before everyone spotted the skeletal remains on the staircase and shut their mouths. It appeared that the human Mari had died while sitting there.

Kiyotaka turned around. "I found you, Mari. You must've been lonely for a very long time."

"Yes..." Mari clenched her fists in front of her chest. "Thank you," she whispered, tears streaming down her face.

"Well done, Kiyotaka." Reito, who had been watching from a distance, walked up to them.

"Reito, this was rather malicious of you," said Kiyotaka. "Couldn't you have

figured out the truth behind her mother's death and the location of Mari's body by yourself?"

"Certainly not." Reito shook his head. "My only ability lies in exorcizing spirits."

"You're still going to make that claim?"

"It's true. When Mari first saw me in my suikan robe, she was so terrified that she refused to open up to me."

"Oh, so that's why you're wearing normal clothes today," said Rikyu.

Mari must've sensed that she was a ghost, so the arrival of an exorcist frightened her. "I get it now." Komatsu nodded firmly.

Reito turned to the ghost and asked, "Mari, do you feel satisfied now?"

"Yes," Mari said shyly with tears in her eyes. She had wanted to know whether her parents had truly abandoned her and where her body was. She hadn't wanted to be exorcized without knowing anything, with her body missing forever. Komatsu could sympathize.

Reito placed one of the small white dishes of salt on the table, releasing the hexagram barrier. He then placed his hand on the spirit's back. "Mari, she has come to get you."

The hazy figure of a woman in her midthirties appeared in the right-side corridor. She had looked gloomy earlier, but now, she had a gentle smile on her face. Mari wiped the tears from her cheeks as she went to her mother.

Reito clasped his hands together and began muttering a prayer. As Mari approached her mother, she became more and more transparent. The reunited mother and daughter shyly held hands. Then they looked at the group, smiled, and said, "Thank you."

A moment later, they disappeared into the light, as if dissolving into the orange sunset.

After finishing his prayer, Reito let out a sigh. The manor fell silent.

“Now then,” said Kiyotaka, folding his arms and looking at Reito, “would you mind explaining the situation to us?”

“Forgive me.” Reito gave a strained smile. “It all began when John’s grandson found his diary.”

“Grandson?”

“Yes. I kept quiet about it in front of Mari, but the relative in question was John’s grandson. He would’ve been Mari’s nephew. After discovering that his grandfather had left a treasure in an abandoned house deep in the mountains of Kyoto, he came here in high spirits, expecting to find gold. However, the house was so black with mold that he couldn’t even breathe inside. So he hired a cleaning company.”

“And the cleaners saw a ghost, right?” said Rikyu.

“Correct. The grandson, who didn’t believe in such things, said, ‘That’s impossible’ and went in himself, only to encounter the ghost and faint. Then he said, ‘I don’t care how much money it costs—just get rid of the ghost in that house.’ The request ended up coming to the Kamo family, hence my involvement. I’d heard that Mari had gone missing, but I’d assumed she had died in an air raid. However, her spirit was here, and it was incredibly powerful.”

Kiyotaka hummed and folded his arms. “So you were convinced that her body was in this house.”

“Yes. I tried to locate it, but her influence was so strong everywhere that I couldn’t tell. I tried to question Mari, but she panicked when she saw my exorcist garb, and it was quite the disaster. She must have instinctively sensed that she was going to be exorcized. So I calmed her down and asked her again, but after so many years had passed, she couldn’t remember where she had died. To make matters worse, she was wary of me and would not open up to me. Suddenly, I noticed a detective novel on her bookshelf. I wound up promising her that I’d call a detective who could solve her problem.”

“And that’s when you came to us.” Komatsu nodded in understanding.

“I asked you to come with a group because Mari was lonely here for many years. I thought that if you all came, it would be livelier and more enjoyable for her. Perhaps she would even forget for a moment that she was dead and have fun with you.”

“Ah, I see,” said Kiyotaka.

“It *was* pretty lively, yeah,” said Rikyu.

The appraiser and his loyal retainer agreed with the reasoning, but Komatsu and Akihito facepalmed and said, “But was it enjoyable?”

“Now then, I think I’ll give the house a final purification before we leave,” said Reito.

First, the exorcist burned incense. Then everyone split up to scatter coarse salt around the house and sweep away the dust while Reito recited a prayer. It was just past 5 p.m. when they finished everything.

They went outside and found a man in his midthirties peering at them anxiously. The moment Reito made eye contact with him, the man bowed.

“That is the grandson, Wataru,” Reito explained.

“Huh?” Akihito sounded surprised. “I didn’t think he was Japanese.”

“He’s an American citizen. After John returned to America, he remarried a Japanese woman, and their son married a Japanese woman as well. By the way, Mari and Wataru were both named by John. He chose beautiful symmetrical kanji characters for their names.”

His new wife probably had a symmetrical face too, Komatsu thought.

“Speaking of John...” Kiyotaka folded his arms. “Who owns this manor now?”

“Wataru’s father, but Wataru is going to be taking care of it.”

Kiyotaka hummed.

Wataru nervously walked up to them and looked at Reito with pleading eyes. “Um, how did the exorcism go?”

“Everything is fine now,” said Reito. “The spirit has moved on. There won’t be any more hauntings.”

Wataru heaved a long sigh of relief. “Thank god. I don’t want any more scary encounters. Now I can go inside.” Despite his words, his hands were trembling slightly. His experience must have been truly horrifying. Komatsu’s group had only gotten away with minimal trauma because Reito had put up a barrier to keep Mari’s spirit under control.

“Yes, but...” Reito had a serious expression on his face. “We must call the police, Wataru.”

“The police?” The man’s eyes widened. “Why?”

“We found skeletal remains in the house.”

“Huh?” He froze, dumbfounded.

Kiyotaka smiled. “It belongs to your aunt, Mari.”

“Aren’t you glad she was found?” Akihito asked with a grin.

“Please give her a proper burial,” Rikyu added.

“Skeletal remains...” Wataru muttered quietly, sinking to the ground. His face was ghastly pale.

I don’t blame the guy, Komatsu thought with a shrug.

That bright evening, the Komatsu Detective Agency solved the strangest case they had ever encountered.

6

“It really was a haunted house...” My cheerless voice echoed softly in the quiet store.

It wasn’t long ago that Reito had turned up unannounced at Kura and sat down at the counter, sipping the coffee that Holmes had brewed for him.

As the two of them had chatted, the topic of the recent bizarre request had naturally come up, and they had told me about the many things that had happened in the mountains (confidential information excluded). As I listened with rapt attention, the manager had written in his notebook nonstop.

“I’m glad I didn’t go,” I said, shrinking back as I remembered how Holmes had

invited me.

“Thanks to Reito’s planning, it wasn’t scary at all,” Holmes insisted.

“No, nothing frightening happened,” Reito agreed.

“What?” It was hard to believe that after hearing their story.

Reito bowed to Holmes. “Thank you again for your assistance.”

Holmes bowed back. “Thank you as well for the valuable experience and, more importantly, the higher-than-expected compensation. Komatsu, Akihito, and Rikyu were all thrilled.”

Reito laughed mischievously. “That was from Wataru. He was overjoyed to find that the ghost’s presence was truly gone. His family is wealthy, so there’s no need to worry about him.”

I hummed. The family of the haunted house’s owner, “John Smith,” seemed to be much richer than I’d imagined. No wonder they had been able to leave such a huge villa in the mountains of Kyoto untouched.

Reito gulped down the remaining half of his coffee and stood up. “I should get going now.”

“Huh? Already?” The words came from not me or Holmes, but the manager, who had been mindlessly jotting something down in his notebook the whole time. Apparently, it hadn’t actually been mindless—he had been listening intently. “Sorry,” he added immediately, shrinking back.

“I’m afraid I have something to attend to,” Reito replied with a smile. Today, he was dressed in a regular jacket and jeans rather than the traditional clothes I usually saw him in. He also wore a simple but stylish wristwatch. He looked like he could be a model.

“Please give my regards to Koharu,” Holmes said, grinning.

Reito blushed slightly. “How did you know I was going to meet with her?”

“Is it because he’s wearing normal clothes?” I asked.

“No,” Holmes replied. “Look at his watch.”

“This?” Reito looked down at his watch. “But it’s nothing fancy at all.”

“It isn’t a matter of design. As far as I’m aware, you’ve never been the kind of person to wear a watch. And when you came here, you sat down gently, which told me that you didn’t intend to stay long in the first place. That meant you were planning to meet with someone afterwards, and you had probably stopped by because you had some time to kill. The person you’re meeting is someone you absolutely don’t want to keep waiting, so much so that you would wear a watch even though you normally don’t. That could only be Koharu, couldn’t it? I hear that she isn’t living in Kyoto right now, so it must’ve been a while since you last saw her. Am I correct?” Holmes smiled.

Reito chuckled. “Kiyotaka, you ought to become a diviner.”

“I’ll pass,” Holmes said nonchalantly.

“Of course.” Reito laughed, amused. “I’ll call on you if I need anything again.” He bowed and left the store. The chime rang, and then all was quiet.

Once the exorcist was out of sight, I giggled and said, “Reito’s surprisingly cute.”

“Yes, he changed quite a bit after meeting Koharu. Kazuto said he was happy that his younger brother, who had always been detached from reality, seems human now.”

Kazuto was Reito’s older brother, a medical student. The two of them also had an older sister, Anna, who was an actress. Out of the three siblings, Reito was the only one with spiritual powers.

“Now that you mention it, he does seem more human compared to when I first met him,” I remarked.

“Indeed.”

I giggled and looked up at Holmes. “That goes for you too, though.”

“I get that a lot. I feel like I finally gained human emotions after meeting you. I’m lucky to have you in my life.”

He says these things so easily. I blushed and looked down.

The manager stuffed his notebook and pen case into his bag.

“Manager?” I asked.

“Sorry, I just remembered something I wanted to ask Reito,” he said. “I feel like I’ll be able to write today, so I’m going to leave early.” He quickly exited the store.

I looked at the door, dumbfounded. “Is he being considerate of us?”

“No, I doubt it. Look,” said Holmes, pointing at the window. The manager was running as fast as he could to catch up to Reito. Before I knew it, he was out of sight.

“What do you think he wants to ask Reito?”

“Considering his work, I imagine he wants to learn more about exorcists. I just hope he doesn’t get in the way of Reito and Koharu’s reunion,” Holmes said, feeling bad for them.

I couldn’t help but laugh. “It’ll be fine. The manager is a considerate person, so he’ll leave once he’s finished with his questions.”

“I hope so.” Holmes shrugged.

I picked up a tray to clear the cups off the counter and noticed a crumpled piece of paper where the manager had been sitting. You could really tell that an author had been working there. I giggled and put the paper on the tray as well. As I did so, it unfolded. Phrases like “A Strange Tale in the Ancient City,” “Exorcist Detective,” and “Kyoto Ghost Story” were crammed on the page, and every single one was crossed out.

“He must be struggling to come up with a title for his new book,” Holmes remarked, looking at the page from behind me.

“Seems like it. But is it just me, or...”

“Yes. He’s trying to write about me and Reito.”

“I knew it.” I laughed.

“What kind of title would you choose, Aoi?”

I looked down at the paper. None of the titles were bad. They all seemed interesting. But if Holmes and Reito were going to be the protagonists, then...

“How about ‘The Exorcist and the Appraiser’?”

Holmes chuckled. “That does sound like us.”

“Right?” I laughed.

I brought the tray to the kitchenette and washed the cups. After finishing my task, I glanced out the window and saw the manager walking by. He seemed to be in a good mood—Reito must’ve answered his questions. I also noticed the mailman putting letters in the mailbox outside the store.

“Oh, I’m going to check the mail and sweep outside while I’m at it,” I said.

“Ah, thank you. Please do.”

I grabbed a bamboo broom and garbage bag from the utility closet. As I was leaving, I remembered something. “Oh, right. I have a favor to ask you, Holmes.”

“I’ll do anything if it’s for you.”

I couldn’t help but choke at his immediate reply. I wished he’d at least wait until he knew what the favor was.

“Do you remember the exhibit the flower arranging club held at the shopping street in Demachiyanaagi?” I asked. “It was at the end of my first year of university.”

“Of course. The theme was ‘flowers and poetry,’ wasn’t it?”

“Right. We’re going to be doing it again this year. Kaori’s the leader this time, and we’re working with the pottery club to put together a Valentine’s Day exhibit.”

“That sounds wonderful.”

From the way he smiled, I knew the compliment was genuine. “So I was hoping you could—”

“I’ll definitely come see it,” he said before I could finish my sentence.

“Thank you.” I bowed shyly. “I was also hoping that Haruhiko could come...”

“I’m sure he’ll be able to make it,” he replied, instantly understanding what I was getting at. “Somehow these Demachiyanaagi exhibits always involve romance.” He smiled. “I hope this can untangle the confusion between those

two.”

By “those two,” he meant Kaori and Haruhiko. He probably hadn’t realized that my own feelings were part of the plan too. I hurried out of the store before he could guess what I was thinking.

First, I checked the mail. There was a postcard that looked like an advertisement addressed to Aoi Mashiro.

“Huh? It’s for me?”

I looked at it more closely. The photo showed Lake Biwa and a Canadian-style guest house with two-tone exterior walls that were part brick and part white. It also had a large terrace.

“The Lakeside Guest House—Valentine’s Day offer available until the end of February! Half price for reservations made by women. Take this opportunity to invite your partner!”

It seemed to be a campaign targeting women. The discount being offered was quite large too. They probably thought it would motivate women to invite their partners on a Valentine’s Day trip.

“But why would a guest house send me an ad?” It also didn’t make sense for my mail to be delivered to Kura. I tilted my head in confusion as I turned the postcard over. There was a handwritten message on the back.

“Dear Aoi, it’s been quite a while. It’s me, Hino. I started working at the guest house at Lake Biwa that I told you about. It’s almost Valentine’s Day, so we’re running a campaign for women. Please come visit with Yagashira if you’d like.”

“Oh!” I nodded in understanding.

It was one of Holmes’s seniors from high school, who had been ashamed of the fact that he’d had a mental breakdown at the big company he worked for and left it after only two years. Talking to Holmes had helped him to move on—he had come to Kura with a gloomy face, but by the time we parted ways, he had been smiling brightly. His longtime girlfriend’s family ran a guest house on the shore of Lake Biwa, and he had expressed his desire to marry her and help with the business.

“So he really did marry her, and now he’s working at the guest house.”

I happily put the postcard in my apron pocket, picked up the broom, and began sweeping. There was quite a lot of litter on the ground.

“Aoi,” came a voice from the side.

Startled, I looked in the direction of the voice.

“What’re you grinning about?” Ensho asked with a smirk.

“What? You’re the one who’s grinning,” I said.

“I was born with this face,” he said, deliberately broadening his smile.

“As if.” I shrugged, knowing that he hadn’t been able to put on such a bright expression until recent years. “If you’re looking for Holmes, he’s inside.”

Ensho shook his head. “My business is with you.”

“Me?” I looked up at him, confused.

Final Chapter

It was February 14th, and the area around the Demachi Masugata shopping street was as bustling as ever. After parking my car in the underground lot, I went up to the street and saw a long line of customers waiting to buy mame mochi, rice cakes embedded with black soybeans.

It's become a real Kyoto specialty, I thought as I stepped into the shopping arcade.

There were colorful banners and flags hung up that said "Thanksgiving Festival." The arcade was smaller than the ones around Teramachi-Sanjo, but that gave it a more local, homey feel. Since there was a festival going on today, it was more crowded than usual.

Whenever I came here, I secretly enjoyed looking at the chalkboards with anime character drawings on them and checking the Demachiza movie theater's screening schedule. But right now, I was in no mood for a leisurely stroll. I walked quickly, eager to see Aoi's exhibit. The venue was a café where her club had held an exhibition before. Like Kura, its entrance was small, but the store extended quite far inside and had a good amount of space.

I stopped near the café. Haruhiko Kajiwarara was peeking inside from in front of the floor sign that said "Pottery and Flowers Exhibit," positioned such that he couldn't be seen from inside.

"Hello, Haruhiko," I said.

The man flinched before turning around. "Oh, Holmes. Hey."

"Are you not going inside?"

"No, uh..." He hesitantly turned his gaze to the window.

I peered inside the café and saw the reason for his reluctance. Ensho was there. For a moment, I felt blood rush to my head, but as it turned out, Ensho was chatting with Kaori, not Aoi, so I was able to remain calm. Kaori looked happy as she talked with him, her cheeks flushed.

"I think she really does like him now," Haruhiko said dejectedly, placing his hands on the wall.

"You can't say that for sure."

Haruhiko continued to hang his head. The words weren't much of a consolation when he'd just witnessed Kaori's happy smile.

It wasn't a stretch for Kaori to be attracted to Ensho. This was a girl who was obsessed with celebrities and two-dimensional characters and devoted herself to supporting them as a fan. It wouldn't be surprising for her to admire someone with exceptional talent. But whether that would lead to romantic feelings was another matter. It felt unlikely to me, seeing as she had been drawn to Haruhiko for his honest sincerity and soothing personality.

"Haruhiko, I do think Ensho possesses immense appeal," I said.

The man looked at me pathetically. "Come on, don't rub salt in my wound..."

"Let me finish." I shrugged. "Have confidence in yourself. You have many attractive traits as well."

"Ugh...I don't need your forced compliments," Haruhiko said with a pained expression.

"I'm not saying it to comfort you. If I were a woman, I would choose you, not Ensho." *Because you're a little bit like Aoi*, I thought, but I refrained from saying it out loud. Haruhiko had a soft and warm vibe, and he was accepting of everyone. At the same time, he was somewhat prone to putting himself in danger, and he resembled Aoi a bit in that way. Only a very tiny bit, of course.

"Huh?" Haruhiko's eyes widened. "If you were a woman, you'd choose me over Ensho?"

"Yes." *Because you're like Aoi*, I added in my mind again. "If I were a woman, I definitely wouldn't want a troublesome man who only has raw talent, with no ability to plan or keep his mood swings under control."

Haruhiko laughed. "Thanks. I feel a little more confident knowing that you'd rather have me."

"Oh my," remarked the women leaving the café, who were looking in our

direction.

“I feel like this conversation can easily be misinterpreted, so let’s stop there,” I said. “At any rate, you don’t want to be left hanging, do you? Why don’t you just go for it already?”

Haruhiko recoiled slightly—perhaps the look in my eyes was too intense. A moment later, he nodded, said, “I will,” and strode into the café. I waited a bit before entering.

At the previous exhibit here, which had been themed around flowers and poetry, the space had been decorated with benches covered with red cloth and a vermilion umbrella. But now, it was completely different. The entire café was colored white, with antique white chairs, white tables, and white chests with artworks and wrapped baked goods displayed on top of them. The ceiling was decorated with white and pink roses arranged in the shape of a chandelier.

Ensho gave a weak shrug when he saw me. “I didn’t think they’d be displayed in a cutesy place like this.” He laughed in vague amusement and left the café.

What is he talking about? My question was answered immediately when I realized his work was on display. They weren’t finished paintings, but rather sketches with a tinge of color added. There were three illustrations in all, depicting Kyoto scenes as seen from Shijo Bridge: Cacao Market, Tohka Saikan, and Minamiza Theater. They looked fantastical, as if they were foreign landscapes. *These are...* I was stunned.

“Oh, Holmes!” Aoi came over and looked up at me.

“Where did these Ensho illustrations come from?” I asked, puzzled.

“Surprising, aren’t they? He came to Kura the other day.”

According to Aoi, Ensho had shown her his sketchbook, saying that he had drawn a few pictures, which were the three on display now.

“They’re beautiful,” Aoi said. “They’re Kyoto scenes, but they look like foreign landscapes.”

Ensho tore the three sheets out of his sketchbook without hesitation and handed them to her. “They’re just doodles, so if you like ’em that much, you can

have 'em."

"I can't accept these," Aoi said, startled. It seemed like Ensho would throw them out if she gave them back, though, so she decided to take them anyway.

Ensho had called them doodles, and indeed, they were rough sketches that he didn't seem to have taken very seriously. But they were still good drawings that had the power to capture the viewer's heart.

"Um, I'd like more people to see these," she said. "May I display them at the upcoming Valentine's Day event at the Demachiyanagi shopping street?"

"They're yours now, so you can do what you want with 'em," Ensho replied before taking his leave.

"I didn't say anything because I wanted to surprise you," Aoi said with a mischievous laugh. "Did it work?"

"Yes, I'm very surprised. I didn't know that Ensho could draw like this..."

The soft, fantastical touch reminded me of Fuga, whose work had once captivated me. Come to think of it, Ensho was aware that Aoi had been drawn to one of Fuga's paintings before. Perhaps he had added this touch on purpose, not to imitate the other artist, but to challenge him.

I sighed, remembering what I had just said to Haruhiko: *"If I were a woman, I definitely wouldn't want a troublesome man who only has raw talent, with no ability to plan or keep his mood swings under control."* Ensho's exceptional talent made me burn with jealousy.

I glanced at Haruhiko, who was exchanging greetings with Kaori. They both had tense looks on their faces.

"Kaori was really impressed by Ensho's drawings too," Aoi said.

"I see." No wonder she had looked so happy. "Is that Kaori's piece there on the wall?"

"Yeah."

Kaori had made a ceramic wreath with a woven texture, decorated with light-purple statice flowers and tied with a white ribbon. It was noble and dignified, yet sweet, just like its creator.

“Y-Your piece is really nice,” Haruhiko said nervously.

Good grief. I shrugged. I considered telling him that in the language of flowers, statics represented “unchanging feelings,” but decided against it. If he didn’t know, he was better off doing the research himself.

“Um, Kaori, do you have a minute?” he asked, making up his mind. “It won’t take long, I promise.”

Kaori blushed and nodded. She signaled to a nearby friend to let them know that she was stepping out for a bit and left the café with Haruhiko.

*

After leaving the Demachi Masugata shopping street, a short walk took them to the Kamo River delta, a triangular patch of land where the Takano River joined with the Kamo River.

When they reached the riverbank, Haruhiko checked to make sure no one was nearby before turning around and saying, “Um, Kaori...”

“Yes?” Kaori replied awkwardly.

“I wanted to ask why you took back your confession...”

“Huh?”

“Have you lost interest in me?”

“Of course not.” Kaori gave a strained smile. “But why would you ask me that? It’s not like it matters.” *If this were a drama, this is the part where I’d say, “You don’t even love me,”* she thought self-deprecatingly.

“It does matter,” Haruhiko said with a serious expression.

Kaori held her breath and said nothing.

“I didn’t really understand back when you confessed to me, but now I know that I...” Haruhiko started off brave, but his voice trailed off as his courage died down. He clenched his fists and looked up. “I love you, Kaori.” Mere moments after his confident declaration, his face turned bright red.

Kaori couldn’t help but grin.

“Hey, don’t laugh,” Haruhiko pleaded.

“I’m not laughing. I just...can’t believe it.”

“Why not?”

“I mean, that time we spent all night at the riverside...”

That night, the two of them sat down on a bench and shot the breeze until morning came. Haruhiko’s considerate and sincere personality made Kaori’s feelings of love grow more and more—and then the alcohol took over.

She suddenly remembered the end of her previous crush, when she had (mistakenly) thought that the manager was going to kiss her and instinctively rejected him. That was when she had realized that she wasn’t truly in love with him. What about this time? Was this love real? She wanted to know, and again, part of it was the alcohol doing the talking.

Kaori gently leaned on Haruhiko’s shoulder and presented her lips. However...

“You pretended you didn’t see it,” she muttered, biting her lip. What could be more embarrassing than asking for a kiss from the person you loved and being rejected?

“Huh?” Haruhiko’s eyes widened. “Was I really supposed to, um, kiss you there?”

Kaori looked away, unable to say anything. Her cheeks were burning up.

“I didn’t think you’d want me to do something like that, so I thought I had to be getting the wrong idea. I almost kissed you on impulse, but I desperately restrained the urge. I was even praising myself like crazy for holding back!” Haruhiko exclaimed quickly and rather loudly.

“Ahhh!” Kaori covered her ears. Feeling like her face was going to catch on fire, she turned away from Haruhiko, only for him to grab her by the wrist.

“Please don’t run away, Kaori.”

“I-I was just turning around. I’m not going to run away.”

“Sorry.” Haruhiko let go of her wrist. “So, um, can I have a second shot at what happened that day?”

“N-No, you can’t!”

“What?!” He instantly deflated. The adorable sight made Kaori’s heart skip a beat.

“That was because I was drunk... There’s no way I’d have my first kiss in a place like this sober.”

“Oh, right. Sorry.” Haruhiko held out his hand. “Can we go on a date sometime, then?”

Kaori shyly took his hand. “I’d, um...love to.”

*

“Is Kaori gonna be okay?” Aoi murmured, looking out the window.

“She’ll be fine,” I said with a smile. “I’m sure they’ll both come back beet red.”

Aoi giggled.

“So which piece is yours?” I asked.

“Oh, right. It’s over here.”

She walked towards a white chair in the back of the café where jasmine flowers were on display. The flowers were arranged in a round shape like a hot-air balloon, and the vase was wrapped in a red ribbon, hidden from sight. A sweet fragrance rose from the flowers as if the hot-air balloon were taking off, but I was too distracted by the fact that the vase was concealed to appreciate it.

“Aoi, why did you hide the vase with a ribbon? You made it, didn’t you?”

“Um...” She pointed at the end of the ribbon, embarrassed. “This is your birthday present.”

“Huh?” My eyes widened.

“Happy birthday, Holmes. Oh, but this isn’t your only gift. Just pull on the ribbon first.”

My heart pounded with anticipation. I gently tugged on the ribbon and it easily unraveled, revealing a round vase in the shape of a car. It was white with a red interior, and there was a heart-shaped piece of chocolate placed beside it.

“Is this...my car?” I asked.

“Yes,” Aoi said shyly. “I tried my best to make it look like it. You can also use it as a pen holder.”

It wasn’t elaborate, but I could tell at a glance that it was a Viewt. The rounded car-shaped vase was very lovely.

“Oh no,” I said, covering my mouth. “Even a living national treasure would be surprised to see this.”

“Um, I think I’d be the surprised one if that happened.” Aoi gave a strained smile. “I chose these flowers because you sometimes smell like jasmine. Also, in the language of flowers...” She trailed off, blushing slightly.

Her body language was telling me, “I don’t need to say it because you already know what it means, don’t you?” Indeed, in the language of flowers, jasmine meant “I want to be with you forever.” My heart swelled, and I gripped the chest of my shirt in agony. *Cute. Lovely. Precious. My beloved.* If you were to look up those words in my dictionary, every single one would be defined as “Aoi Mashiro.”

“Aoi...I have a problem. I want to hug you.”

“Y-You can’t.”

“I figured as much. When we’re alone, I’ll make up for it—and more.” I took a deep breath to calm myself and turned my attention to the vase.

Aoi was looking down, her face bright red. By “and more,” I had meant that I would hug her many times, but she seemed to have interpreted it in a more suggestive way. Naturally, I had no problem with that. In fact, it benefited me for her to be expecting it, so I wasn’t going to correct her.

“I’m so happy,” I said. “Thank you. I’ll treasure it forever. When I die, I’ll have it buried with me in my grave.”

“What?” Aoi recoiled. “Don’t put it in your grave. I’m glad you like it, but to be honest, it’s more of a secondary gift.”

“Secondary?” Come to think of it, she had said this wasn’t my only present.

“This is the main one,” she said, awkwardly taking an envelope out of her pocket and holding it out towards me.

“What could it be?” I opened it and looked inside. It contained a voucher for a place called the Lakeside Guest House.

“Happy birthday, Kiyotaka! Thank you for everything. It’s not much, but I prepared a birthday gift for you—a voucher for Hino’s guest house. I thought it’d be nice to go on a little trip together, even if it’s not far from here. I made the car-shaped vase and hot-air balloon flowers with the hope that I can continue to travel with you on the journey called life. (I’m sorry for acting suspicious by glancing at you when I was trying to think of a present.) From Aoi”

“Oh no...” Despite being able to maintain my composure in the face of a ghost, sometimes my love for Aoi made my mind go blank.

I won’t say much about what happened next, but I cannot deny that she scolded me with an “Ah! Holmes, not in public!”

*

Riding his motorcycle from Demachiyanagi, the sun was already setting by the time he reached Adashi Moor. Ensho parked in front of the apartment he used as an atelier, took off his helmet, and sighed. His expression relaxed—not just because his head was freed from the helmet, but because he had been in a good mood throughout the ride.

“They’re overreacting,” he said. He didn’t feel bad, though. The drawings he’d given Aoi were drafts of what he was currently working on. He had shown them to her and said, “I decided to draw whatever catches my eye, just like you told me to.” They were just doodles, so he wouldn’t have cared if they were thrown out. But instead, Aoi had been delighted to receive them. She had displayed them at her club’s important event, and Kaori had been impressed too. And that man...

Ensho put his hand over his mouth, which was widening into a grin as he recalled Kiyotaka’s reaction. After leaving the café, Ensho had secretly spied on Kiyotaka from outside, dying to see how the man would react. It had been so obvious that the sketches had captivated him. Ensho couldn’t help but feel giddy when he remembered the sight of Kiyotaka frozen in front of the drawings, his eyes wide.

“Seriously, why would he be so excited about those?” Ensho wondered what

face Kiyotaka would make when he finished his current piece and unveiled it. He usually finished his work quickly, but this time was different. He was painting carefully, bit by bit.

Ensho stopped before entering his atelier. He spotted a white Benz with a Kobe license plate stealthily parked at a distance. He clicked his tongue. That car had been loitering around his apartment as of late, as if monitoring it. It had to be related to Yilin's father. Ensho was perfectly fine with his paintings being desired, but being followed around was creepy.

"Why the hell are you following me? Are you a stalker?"

The backseat door opened, and a man in his midthirties came out. "Hello," he said with a cheerful smile. He was wearing a tailored suit, but he wasn't one of Yilin's men. "Sorry for making you uncomfortable. You looked like you were working on something, so I didn't want to disturb you."

Ensho knew this man. On the outside, he seemed pleasant. He was tall, handsome, and had a friendly smile.

"I wanted to discuss something with you again," the man said. "Do you have time?"

Ensho frowned, annoyed. He had the feeling that something bothersome was going to happen again.

Afterword

Thank you for reading. I'm Mai Mochizuki.

Holmes of Kyoto has reached its nineteenth volume! When I first began this series, I never dreamed that I would be able to continue writing it for so long, so it's very moving. It's all thanks to your support. I'm very grateful.

Since the previous volume ended with the announcement that Akihito would be starring in the stage adaptation of Kurisu Aigasa's novel, I imagine many readers were looking forward to reading about it in this volume. I wanted to include Kiyotaka's birthday story first, though, and I also wanted to write a crossover with my second-longest-running series, *Wagaya wa Machi no Ogamiya-san*, to commemorate its ending. As a result, the stage play was postponed. I'm very sorry to everyone who was waiting for it. It's definitely coming in the next volume—which is a round number, twenty, so I'm looking forward to writing a spectacular story for it.

This volume contains many scenes that I was able to write with the cooperation of the locations involved. I'd like to express my sincere gratitude to everyone I worked with.

Chapter 1 came about after visiting the Kyoto National Museum's special exhibition, "Chanoyu: Tea in the Cultural Life of Kyoto." Seeing an authentic Oido tea bowl for the first time and hearing various tales gave me the idea for the story. As with the previous volume, thank you to the Kyoto National Museum.

Thank you as well to the people from Nakagawa, Onogo, Kumogahata, and the Kita-ku ward office, who helped me research Kita-ku's mountainous regions. Among them, I was able to hear many strange tales from the head priest of Iwayasan Shimyo-in Temple. Thank you for sharing the story of the tengu you encountered and allowing me to write about Shimyo-in Temple in this book.

Also, in the autumn of 2022, Kyoto City held an event called the Kyoto Modern Architecture Festival, which opened notable modern buildings to the

public for a limited time. At this event, I was very fortunate to be able to participate in a tour of Daimaru Villa, a Western-style mansion on the east side of Kyoto Gyoen National Garden. It was the residence of Shotaro Shimomura, the first president of Daimaru. It was built in the early Showa period, and it normally isn't open to the public. The tour guide told us about how difficult it had been to clean it before the event, and I was moved by the beauty of the retro-classic house. I applied this experience to chapter 2's story. Thank you to the Kyoto Modern Architecture Festival Executive Committee and Kyoto City for organizing this wonderful event.

Lastly, thank you to Mitsuoka Motors for giving us permission to include the Viewt on the front cover of this book. And thank you as always to Shizu Yamauchi for your wonderful illustrations.

As usual, please let me use this space to express my thanks. I'm grateful for all of the connections surrounding me and this series. Thank you all so much.

Now then, I've also included an extra story after this. Please enjoy.

Mai Mochizuki

Extra Story

This is a story that took place some time before Reito requested that Kiyotaka perform an appraisal.

Kiyotaka arrived at Shinkokan, the café on Yoshida-Sanso Inn's premises. He went to the second floor and looked around the familiar Showa-esque interior. Perhaps because it was the offseason, there was only one other customer: Reito Kamo, who was sitting by a window.

"Hello, Reito."

"Ah, Kiyotaka. Thank you for coming all this way." Reito rose slightly from his seat and bowed.

"It's no problem. I often come to Shinkokan because it's close by." Kiyotaka sat down across from his friend.

"Oh, right. Seiji's house is near the Philosopher's Walk, isn't it?"

"Yes. How has the Kamo family been, by the way?"

"Everyone is doing well, as always. My brother sends his regards."

"I haven't seen Kazuto in a while. Please tell him that we should have dinner sometime."

"I will." Reito nodded.

Their coffee arrived, and the two men continued their leisurely chat, updating each other on how their relatives were doing.

Kiyotaka gave a small sigh. "I see. So Koharu is in Tokyo now?"

"Yes, she is."

"Did another problem come up over there?"

"No, not at all. You see..." Reito explained Koharu's situation.

"I see," Kiyotaka said with a serious expression. "That's what you want my advice on, isn't it?" he asked bluntly.

Reito slumped his shoulders in defeat. “You really do possess a special power, different from ours. I appreciate the time saved on explaining, but...”

Kiyotaka silently waited for him to continue.

“It isn’t necessarily advice. I just wanted to ask you something.”

“Yes?”

Reito averted his gaze. “How did you, um, take the next step with Aoi?” he asked in a whisper.

Kiyotaka blinked.

“Oh, Koharu is still a minor, so I’m not thinking about doing it right now,” Reito hastily added. “It’s just, you and Aoi seemed to be in a chaste relationship for a long time too, so...I was wondering what led to going further.”

“Well...” Kiyotaka folded his arms. “After closing the store, I couldn’t hold back anymore and pushed her down on the sofa.”

“Huh?” Reito furrowed his brow, a judging look in his eyes.

Kiyotaka smiled. “I’m kidding. We went on a trip together.”

Reito breathed a sigh of relief. “Oh, a trip...”

“Yes. It was for Aoi’s twentieth birthday.”

“I know she was an adult, but did her parents approve?”

“It was less that they approved and more that they had no choice but to silently accept it.”

Reito hummed, deep in thought.

“You’re thinking about your future with her, aren’t you? I think it’s important to fill in the outer moat, so to speak.” It was a metaphor for clearing the obstacles in one’s way, as one would when attacking an enemy castle.

“The outer moat...” Reito murmured with a distant look in his eyes. “Unlike you, I think the excavation work will take me a long time.” He must’ve been struggling with various uncertainties and inner conflicts.

Kiyotaka chuckled. “I received a title back then, which I think I’ll pass on to

you.”

“A title?”

“The Celibate Prince.”

The café employee who came to refill their water burst out laughing.

And so went that silly conversation one afternoon at Shinkokan.

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Cooperation

Iwato Ochiba Shrine

Iwayasan Shimyo-in Temple

Kyoto National Museum Special Exhibition “Chanoyu: Tea in the Cultural Life of Kyoto”

Kyoto City Kita-ku Ward Office

Kyoto Modern Architecture Festival: Daimaru Villa Mitsuoka Motors

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Born in Hokkaido and currently resides in Kyoto. Debuted in 2013 upon winning the first prize in the second installment of EVERYSTAR’s e-publication awards. Won the Kyoto Book Award in 2016. Other works include *Wagaya wa Machi no Ogamiya-san* (Kadokawa Bunko), *Mangetsu Coffee-ten no Hoshiyomi* (Bunshun Bunko), and *Kyoto Funaokayama Astrology* (Kodansha Bunko). (As of February 2023.)

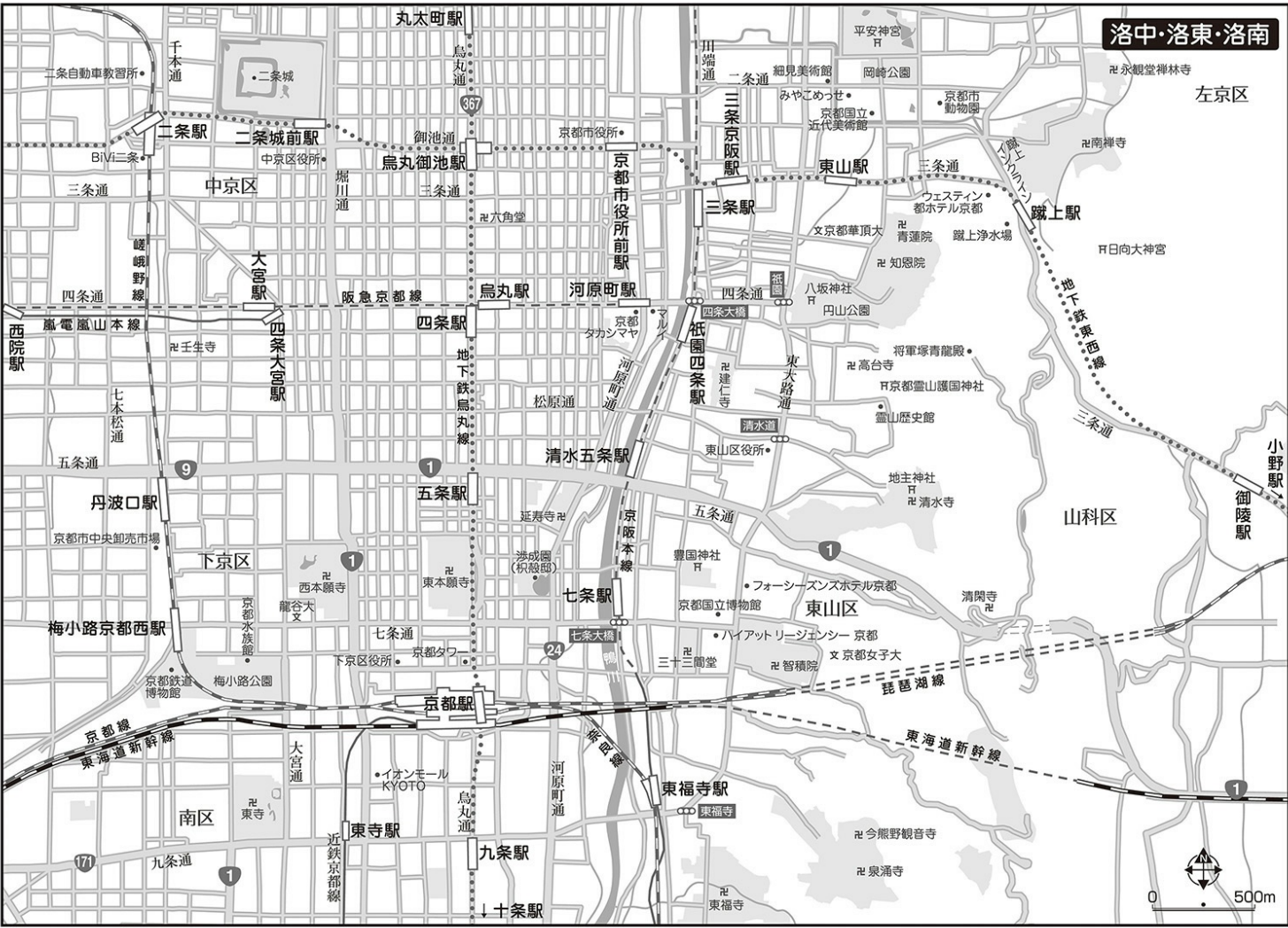


Kiyotaka, Komatsu, and Ensho
at the Komatsu Detective Agency

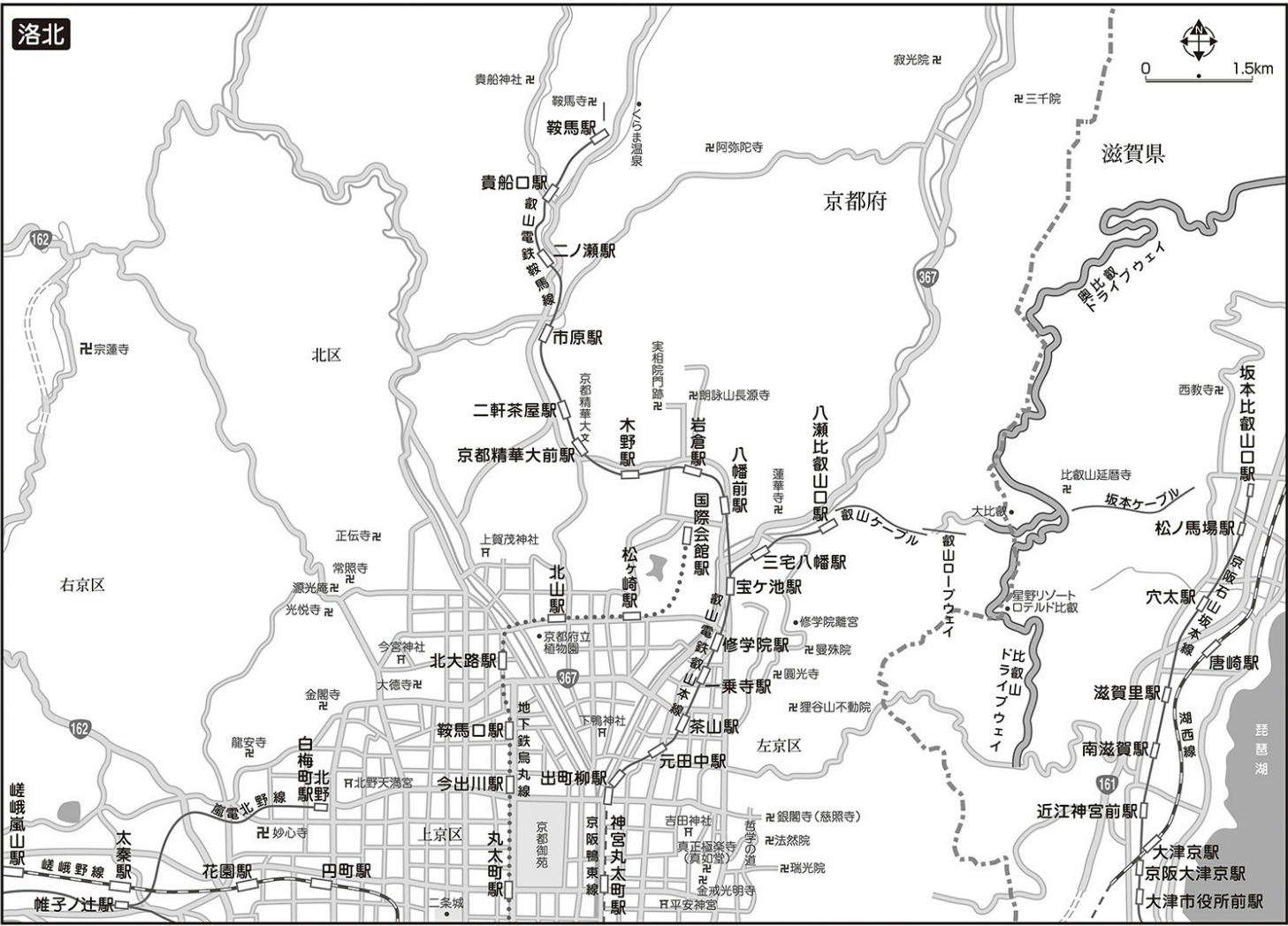


Aoi and Kaori at the café

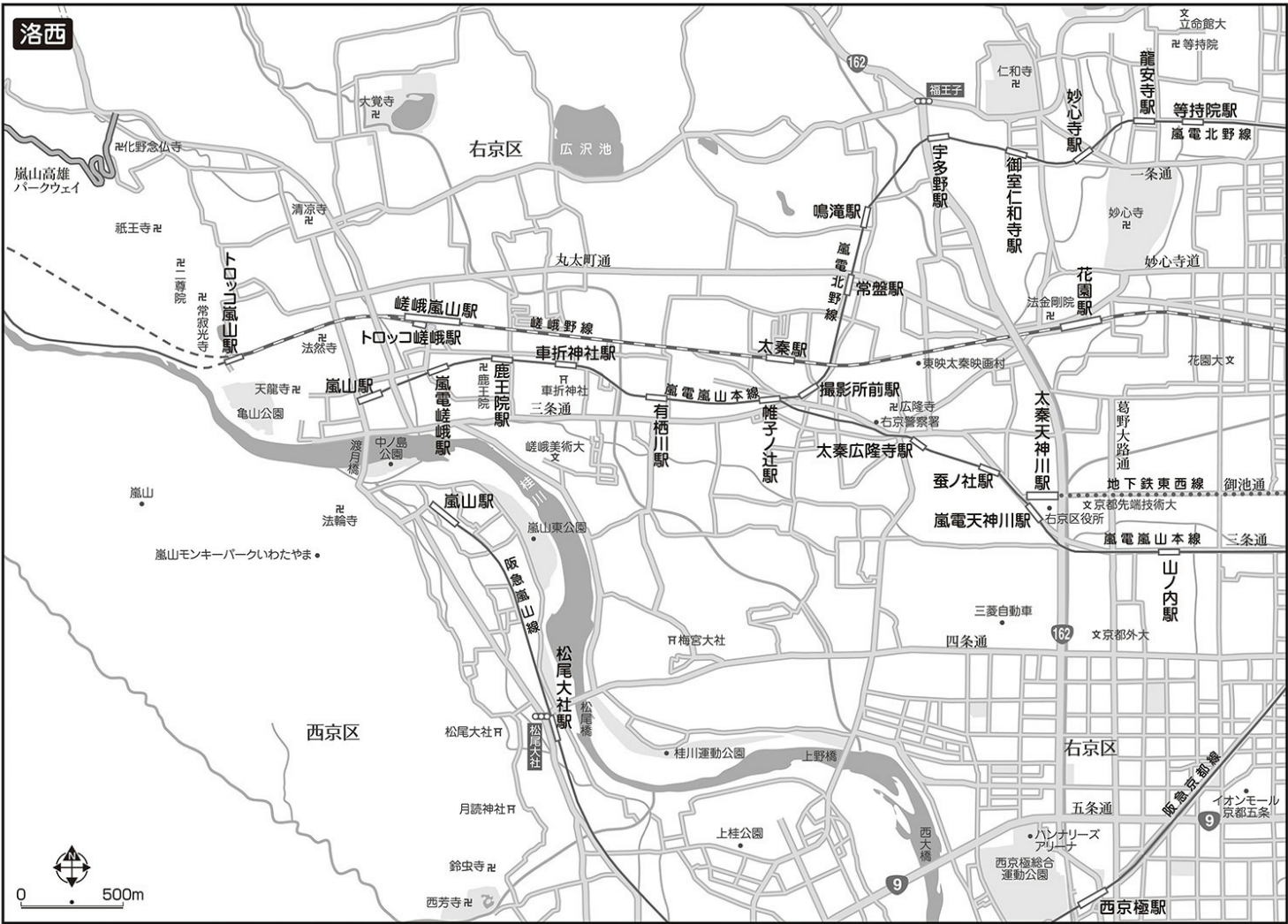
Map of Central, Eastern, and Southern Kyoto



Map of Northern Kyoto



Map of Western Kyoto



Translator's Corner

Thank you for reading volume 19 of *Holmes of Kyoto*! It's time for another round of translation notes.

First, in the prologue, we have Komatsu's imaginary conversation between Reito and Holmes: *"Kiyotaka, would you like to go for bubuzuke?"*

"Certainly; perhaps another time."

I didn't add a gloss because there wasn't an elegant way to do so, but "bubuzuke" is what chazuke—a dish made by pouring tea over rice—is called in Kyoto. It's considered a specialty in Kyoto, where it's eaten in the morning and typically served with pickles. It's so ingrained in the culture that "Would you like bubuzuke?" is a sarcastic way of telling a house guest who has overstayed their welcome to leave, as if questioning whether they plan to stay all night to have bubuzuke in the morning.

Next, in chapter 1, one of Reito's incantations is the Great Purification Rite or "Oharae no Kotoba": *At the command of Kamurogi and Kamuromi, our ancestral god and goddess who doth sleep in the High Plain of Heaven, all deities hath gathered, and after countless meetings and discussions, Amaterasu Omikami hath declared, 'My descendant, Sumemima no Mikoto, govern the land of abundance, where the reeds grow thick and the rice grows lush, as a peaceful and tranquil nation.' However..."*

The full text is longer—this excerpt is less than half of it—and describes the circumstances of an upcoming great exorcism. "Sumemima no Mikoto" is another name for "Ninigi no Mikoto," the grandson of sun goddess Amaterasu. In Japanese mythology, he is believed to be the ancestor of Japan's first emperor, Emperor Jinmu.

Lastly, in chapter 2, we have this dialogue when the detective crew meets Mari: *"She seems kind of shadowy despite her appearance," Komatsu whispered.*

Kiyotaka hummed and folded his arms. “Listless, perhaps. Shadowy isn’t quite accurate.”

It comes back later as part of the solution to the case: (Kiyotaka) *“Mari, you don’t have a shadow.”*

The evening sun was shining through the windows. Everyone was casting long shadows on the floor, except for Mari, who had none.

“Wait!” Komatsu grabbed Kiyotaka’s arm. “Is that why you objected when I called her ‘shadowy’ at the start?”

The punch line(?) lands a bit better in the original text, where Holmes initially said, “She’s listless, but she doesn’t have shadows”—an idiomatic phrase that sounds natural in Japanese, where it just means that she doesn’t seem ominous. There, Komatsu’s retort becomes, “Is that why you said she doesn’t have shadows?!”



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Holmes of Kyoto: Volume 19

by Mai Mochizuki

Translated by Minna Lin Edited by Tess Nanavati

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