

# Holmes of Kyoto



Mai Mochizuki





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### **Aoi Mashiro**

Age 17. She is a second-year high school student who moved to Kyoto seven months ago from Omiya, Saitama. In an unexpected turn of events, she winds up working part-time at Kura. She still hasn't moved on from her ex-boyfriend at her previous school.



### **Kiyotaka Yagashira**

Age 22. He is a first-year graduate student at Kyoto University. Nicknamed "Holmes," he has an incredibly sharp mind despite his gentle demeanor. His grandfather is the owner of Kura, an antique store in Kyoto's Teramachi-Sanjo district. Sometimes, he acts like your typical mischievous, "wicked" Kyoto boy.



# Table of Contents

[Cover](#)

[Characters](#)

[Prologue: Holmes and the Zen Priest Hakuin](#)

[Chapter 1: Let Me Die in Spring, Under the Cherry Blossoms](#)

[Chapter 2: Time of Aoi](#)

[Chapter 3: A Million Prayers](#)

[Chapter 4: The Case at the Mount Kurama Lodge](#)

[Chapter 5: After the Festival](#)

[References](#)

[Afterword](#)

[Bonus Translator's Corner](#)

[Bonus Editor's Corner](#)

[About J-Novel Club](#)

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## Prologue: Holmes and the Zen Priest Hakuin

*“Do you have any antiques hidden away at home? We buy and appraise.”*

If you walk down the bustling shopping arcade of Kyoto’s Teramachi-Sanjo district, you’ll find a small antique store nestled within the rows of buildings. The sign outside displays a single word, seemingly the store’s name: Kura, meaning “storehouse.”

My first impression of this place was, *huh, antique stores are usually called ‘Such and Such Gallery,’ or ‘House of Antiques,’ or ‘Vintage Treasures,’ or something. A one-word name like ‘Kura’ is pretty minimalistic.* And inside, it seemed more like an old-fashioned cafe than an antique store. The architecture was a blend of Japanese and Western concepts, reminiscent of the Meiji and Taisho eras. There was a small cafe area next to the entrance, and the items for sale were lined up further inside. I also saw an elderly man and woman having coffee and chatting away merrily. Really, if it weren’t for the sign, I would’ve assumed it was a cafe.

As I was stealthily peeking inside the store, I realized that passersby were giving me curious glances.

After a pause, I hurried to straighten my posture and look unassuming. People might find it weird that a high school girl would be loitering in front of an antique store. They might think, “That girl wants to go in, but she can’t.” And, well...they’d be right. Indeed, at that moment, I am a pitiful high school girl who wants to enter this antique store, but instead is awkwardly standing outside. I mean, if it were a more casual shop or a European-style general store, then it might be fine; but I couldn’t just waltz into a “real” antique store like this.

*“We buy and appraise.”*

Those were the words that originally caught my eye. I’d considered going inside many times already, but in the end, I always continued past.

It wouldn’t be a stretch to say that Kyoto is Japan’s number one tourist

destination. Visitors flock here from all around the world at all times of year. But, for us high school students who live here, there isn't really anything to do. Sure, the shrines and temples are fascinating, but you wouldn't hang out at those with your friends. If you want to have fun, your options amount to karaoke, malls, the movie theater in Sanjo, and wandering around the rest of the shopping street.

By the way, the Sanjo shopping district has a pretty cute mascot called the Sanjo Birdie. I like it a lot, to the point where I'll be like, "Oh, this store has a Sanjo Birdie poster on the door! Ahhh, it's so cute!" Anyway, whenever I came to Sanjo, I'd glance at Kura out of the corner of my eye and pass right on by.

*Well, I can't exactly loiter around outside forever.* I tightly gripped the handle of my paper bag. *Here I go!*

Right as I'd made up my mind, a middle-aged man wearing a suit slipped past me and opened the door with a clatter. "You in, Holmes?" he asked as he entered the store.

*Holmes?* I was skeptical, but nonetheless I found myself following the man inside. The first thing I saw upon entering was an antique sofa—the kind you might expect to find in an old-fashioned Western house. There was a middle-aged woman enjoying her coffee. A small chandelier dangling from the rather low ceiling. A hefty pendulum clock hanging on the wall. And an assortment of antiques and miscellany lining the many shelves that took up the back of the store.

The store looked rather small from the doorway, but it seemed to extend quite far inside. Next to the reception area with the sofa was a counter, where a young man—most certainly a university student—was sitting. The student-looking man smiled at us and said, "Welcome." He was pale skinned with a slender build, slightly long bangs, and a fairly...no, *very* attractive face. Handsome, even. Was he a part-time worker here?

"Hey, Holmes, could you take a look at this for me?" The man in the suit took a seat and placed a wrapped object on the counter.

"Ueda, could you please stop calling me 'Holmes' already?"

"It suits you."

The handsome young man referred to as “Holmes” shrugged his shoulders at “Ueda’s” brazenness, put on a pair of white gloves, and carefully unwrapped the cloth around the object. Inside was an extravagant-looking rectangular wooden box, and opening that box revealed a thick roll of gold mounting. It seemed to be some sort of hanging scroll, and it radiated an expensive aura.

“A gold brocade mounting...” Holmes murmured his surprise and looked back up at the man. “It’s very dressy.”

“Right? I thought so too.”

I tilted my head at their conversation. *Dressy?*

At the same time, the woman who was drinking her coffee stood up and said, “Oh my, a dress?” She leaned over to look. “Ah, you said ‘dressy,’ but it’s a scroll, not a dress. Looks exquisite, though.”

Holmes smiled at the outspoken woman and replied, “By ‘dressy,’ I did mean ‘overly exquisite,’ Mieko.”

They seemed acquainted with each other, so the customers were probably regulars here.

“Is there a problem with being overly exquisite?”

“Yes. Just like how a liar smoothly strings his words together, counterfeits usually have overly exquisite mounting and packaging. We call those ‘too dressy’ or ‘inconsistent.’”

I nodded as I listened in on his calm explanation.

“Ahh, I see. It’s like a bluff. Would you say that’s a fake, then?” Mieko asked, looking down at the scroll.

Holmes shook his head and said, “That’s what I’ll be determining now. It’s important to not let preconceptions cloud your judgment.” He gently picked up the scroll and unraveled it, revealing a painting of Mount Fuji mounted on the gold brocade. In the foreground was a cherry blossom tree, beyond which towered the solemn mountain. Peeking over at the scroll, I felt as though it was drawing me in. *Wow.* I felt overwhelmed by the Mount Fuji it so imposingly depicted.

“Oh, this is *something* all right,” Holmes uttered, seemingly impressed.

“It’s great, yeah?” Ueda’s eyes gleamed as he leaned in.

“Taikan Yokoyama’s *Fuji and Sakura*. A lovely work of art.”

“Uh huh. It’s in good condition too, so it’s gotta be up there, right?”

“My, if it’s Taikan Yokoyama, it must be expensive,” Mieko chimed in.

“A real Taikan piece is in the millions,” said Ueda. “Maybe this one could even be ten?!”

“Ten million?! Congratulations, Ueda!”

“I’m rich!”

Holmes frowned, looking somewhat apologetically towards the excited pair.

“Indeed, it’s a beautiful piece, and it’s in great condition...but unfortunately, this is a reproduction.”

Ueda froze in place and narrowed his eyes in suspicion.

“Really? Wouldn’t a Taikan reproduction have the word ‘reproduction’ stamped on it somewhere? I don’t see it anywhere, so it’s gotta be real!”

Holmes replied curtly, “No, this is most certainly a reproduction.”

Ueda’s shoulders suddenly slumped. I didn’t really know what they meant by “reproduction,” but at any rate, the scroll seemed to be a fake. *Oh well*. Just like Ueda, I found myself disappointed. It was such an intense painting, after all.

I must be pretty sad if I can be moved by a fake hanging scroll. Then again, it must’ve been a huge shock for the man who brought it in thinking it was real. *I’m sure he can’t accept that appraisal, especially from such a young shopkeeper*, I thought. *He won’t say it out loud, but he must be thinking to himself, “He’s probably still inexperienced, right?”*

Ueda recovered from the shock surprisingly quickly, and said, “Oh well. I was just thinking I *maybe* struck gold. Well, if you say it’s fake, it’s fake.” He sighed and rested his chin in his hands.

*Huh, he backed down pretty quickly*. It felt anticlimactic. Still, he must trust that young shopkeeper quite a bit if he accepted his appraisal so readily. Even



though the guy just looks like an attractive university student to me.

“Hey, Holmes, what price would you put on this?”

“Hmm... It’s in good condition, so a hundred thousand yen, perhaps? Would you like to sell it to us?”

“Nah, I’ll take it to a more gullible shop,” Ueda answered without hesitating. He then proceeded to wrap the hanging scroll back in the cloth.

A hundred thousand yen. That’s a lot in itself. Personally, I’d be more than happy to receive such a sum.

It would’ve been awkward to continue staring from a distance, so I wandered farther inside the store. I couldn’t help but gasp at the sight of the pottery and tea bowls neatly adorning the rows of shelves. On the opposite side were Western-style items like candle stands and tea sets. Everything was arranged beautifully—though the items varied from expensive pieces to low-price sundries that even I could afford, it didn’t seem disorderly at all. It looked like everything was being treated with extreme care.

*They really do have all kinds of things.* There were vases, dressers, and tea ceremony utensils that looked like they came from a Chinese palace, as well as a beautiful antique Western doll with porcelain skin, big blue eyes, and silky blonde hair. Staring at the doll made a chill run down my spine for some reason. It was beautiful, but also kind of creepy. I hurriedly averted my gaze and looked at the other items.

*Oh, there’s some nice ornaments over here.* There were even rare packages of tea. I was starting to have fun looking at all of the different things, and I stopped in front of a tea bowl in a glass case. It was white with a reddish-brown pattern on it, and at first glance, it looked warped out of shape. Its appearance was unsophisticated, but for some reason, I found myself attracted to it. As I stood there, staring at it...

“Do you like it?”

I turned in surprise at the sudden voice, and saw Holmes standing behind me, smiling gently. I shakily replied, “Ah, um, I don’t know. I just thought it was, um, nice.” *Th-This guy is even more handsome up close.* Silky hair, tall stature, long

legs. Above all, he seemed really refined. As my eyes darted around, another gentle smile rose to his lips.

“I see. Feel free to take your time looking around.”

He began walking away, and I called out to him on the spur of the moment, “E-Excuse me!”

He turned around. “Yes?”

I wanted to hold out my paper bag and say, “I’d like you to appraise this,” but the words weren’t coming out.

“Umm... Why are you called Holmes?”

He blinked in surprise at my sudden reckless question.

“I-Is it because you figure out things like Sherlock Holmes?” My embarrassment compelled me to continue.

Holmes grinned, his eyes narrowing into slits. “Let’s see... You’re a student at Oki High, but you were originally from Kanto, not Kansai. You moved to Kyoto around half a year ago. You came to this shop to have something appraised, but it doesn’t belong to you. That’s what I can tell so far.”

“W-Wow.” My jaw dropped at the accuracy of his deduction.

“Anyone could figure out as much. You’re wearing the Oki school uniform and you have a Kanto accent.”

I immediately looked down at myself and saw the navy blazer and checkered skirt. Indeed, I was wearing my school uniform. How silly of me.

“Wait, but, how did you know I moved half a year ago?”

“That was just my intuition. You don’t seem like you just moved here, but you don’t seem too accustomed to being here either. So, I guessed that you moved here during summer vacation.”

He was spot-on. I transferred to this high school at the end of summer vacation. It’s March now, so it’s been half a year.

“Then, how did you know that I want to appraise something that doesn’t belong to me?”

“A high school student wouldn’t own the kind of thing that you’d get appraised here. So, it’s natural to assume that it probably belongs to a grandparent. On top of that, you seem hesitant to get it appraised—because it’s not yours. Am I mistaken?”

I was at a loss for words. He said that *anyone* could figure out this much, but was that really true? No, a normal person wouldn’t think that way. *That’s probably why he’s called Holmes.*

“However, you’re currently in desperate need of money. That’s why you brought that here without permission, right?”

My pulse skyrocketed.

“H-How...”

*...did you know?* My voice gave out in the middle of the sentence.

“If you had permission, then you wouldn’t be hesitating.”

I couldn’t breathe. It was as though a knife had been thrust at my throat.

“The fact that you’re displaying hesitation suggests that you’re not the kind of girl who would sell off her family’s things. But the reality is that you’re here. So, you must be truly pressed for money. You’re being cornered by something. Am I correct?”

I was too shocked to remember to blink or close my gaping mouth. As I stood there, utterly defenseless, Ueda sighed and said, “Hey, Kiyotaka, you’re scaring the poor thing. I keep telling you to stop that. This is why you’ll always be ‘Holmes.’” Judging from that, Holmes’s real name was Kiyotaka.

The young shopkeeper smiled wryly and said, “Oh, sorry. I got carried away.” He looked apologetic, and I shook my head, telling him not to worry about it. But my heart was still beating a mile a minute.

“By the way, I’m not called Holmes because of Sherlock. It’s just a nickname.”

“B-Because you can figure out anything, right?”

“No, because my surname is Yagashira, written with the characters for ‘home’ and ‘head.’ So, it’s more like they’re calling me ‘Homes.’” He pointed at the nametag on his chest, and I paused to look. He was right.



“Oh, I get it.” I suddenly didn’t care anymore.

Mieko leaned over and proclaimed proudly, “That’s not all. Dear Kiyotaka’s so smart, he’ll be attending graduate school at Kyoto University this spring.”

*Grad school at Kyoto University? He really is a student, then...at Kyoto University, no less.*

“Th-That’s incredible,” I murmured, honestly impressed.

Kiyotaka, a.k.a. Holmes, smiled in amusement and said, “That’s not what’s incredible about me.”

“Huh?”

“My father and grandfather both went to Kyoto University, so I always wanted to go there too.”

“Okay...”

“However, I didn’t pass the entrance exams, because I was always playing with my grandfather.”

Wait, what? Did he just say he was playing with his grandfather? No, I must’ve heard wrong. How could you play *that* much with your grandfather? Anyway, does that mean Holmes failed the entrance exams but kept trying so that he could get in the next year? *That really is incredible. If it were me, I’d be satisfied with just going to whatever university I could get into.* I nodded, and Holmes continued, holding up his index finger, “So, I decided to go to Kyoto Prefectural University.”

“What? Kyoto Prefectural University?”

“Yes. However, this spring, I’ll be attending Kyoto University’s graduate school. When I’m finished there, what do you think my final academic record will be?”

“U-Um, a Kyoto University graduate?”

“Exactly. It’s pretty easy to get into Kyoto University as a grad student, and the prefectural university has a program that lets you skip the line. Isn’t it a brilliant strategy?”

My face twitched as I listened to his enthusiastic boasting. *Th-That's kind of underhanded.*

"Just now, were you thinking I was underhanded?"

"N-No."

*What the heck?! This guy really is Holmes!* I felt like I was going to break out in a cold sweat again.

"What's your name?"

"Aoi Mashiro."

"That's a lovely name. Was it given to you by your grandparents?"

"Yes, it was."

"I see. So, your family moved into your grandparents' house?"

"Y-Yes."

"Do they live in Sakyo-ku?"

"Y-Yes."

"Close to Shimogamo Shrine?"

"Y-Yes. How do you know that?"

I stared at him in shock, and Ueda and Mieko burst out laughing.

"How indeed?" quipped Ueda.

"Yes, about that..." continued Mieko.

"When you hear 'Aoi'..."

I had no idea what they were laughing about. As I tilted my head in confusion, Holmes regained his composure and slowly looked me in the eye.

"Aoi, this store doesn't purchase from minors. You'll need to be accompanied by a legal guardian or have formal authorization."

I felt all the tension leave my shoulders. I was disappointed, but relieved at the same time. It was like being a criminal that got caught before committing an actual crime.

“However, appraisals are allowed. Would you show me what you brought? It might be something valuable, if it’s coming from you,” he said with a grin.

“Huh?” I stared at him. *What does he mean by that?*

“I’ll make coffee. Would you like some?”

“Ah, yes, please. Do you have milk and sugar?”

“I’ll make café au lait, then. Please take a seat on the sofa.”

I watched him merrily make his way to the back of the store as I gingerly sat down on the sofa in the cafe area.

Mieko leaned over and asked, “Where are you from, dear? Tokyo?”

I shook my head in response. “No, I’m from Omiya in Saitama.”

“Was it a job transfer?”

“Yes. My grandfather passed away two years ago, so my family wanted to move in with my grandmother to keep her company. My father’s transfer request finally went through, and we moved here last summer.”

“Are you used to living here yet?”

“...Yes.” I nodded, and at the same moment, the scent of coffee drifted our way. I looked up and saw Holmes carrying a tray.

“Here you are. Our store always provides complimentary beverages for our customers. It’s something I like to do,” Holmes said, placing a porcelain cup in front of me. My eyes lit up at the delicious-looking café au lait.

“It was hot last summer when you moved here, no?” Holmes asked, sitting down across from me.

“It was, but it’s the same in Saitama. I was surprised by how cold the winter is here, though.” I gently picked up the cup and brought it to my lips. Even though it was March, the temperature difference was extreme. The coffee’s warmth seeped through my shivery body.

“Indeed, Kyoto’s winter is dangerous. Chills you to the bone,” quipped Mieko.

“Uh huh, it was a real shock coming over from Osaka.”



I guess Ueda is from Osaka.

Holmes nodded and said, “Shimogamo is to the north, so it must be even colder there.”

Come to think of it, Holmes was speaking in standard Japanese. Where is he from?

“Oh, I’ve always lived in Kyoto. I’m sure it’s hard to tell since I speak formally.”

I almost spit out my coffee in surprise at his response to my inner thoughts. *J-Just how perceptive is this guy?!*

“Oh Holmes, when will you stop that? You’re scaring poor Aoi, right?”

“Y-Yeah. Is he always like this?”

“No, I usually take care to keep my thoughts to myself. I wonder why today is different,” Holmes pondered, tilting his head.

*Then, he really is this perceptive all the time. Is that what it takes to be able to appraise antiques?*

“Aoi, could you show me what you brought?” Holmes asked, seemingly having pulled himself back together. I agreed and handed over the paper bag. As Ueda and Mieko eagerly looked over, I felt like I wanted to run away.

“Lessee!”

“There’s two things!”

“Ah, hanging scrolls.” With his hands clad in white gloves, Holmes carefully picked up a scroll. He gently unrolled it, and his eyes opened wide in amazement. The scroll bore a striking painting of Bodhidharma. The dark, inky lines and intense eyes left quite the impression.

“It’s a Zen painting by Ekaku Hakuin. Now this is a surprise—it’s genuine.” Though his voice was calm, I could tell he was excited from the gleam in his eyes.

Mieko gleefully piped up, “Never heard of Ekaku Hakuin, but I’ve seen this painting somewhere before. This here’s the real thing, then?”

Holmes nodded and continued, “Ekaku Hakuin was a Zen priest in the mid Edo

period. He is regarded as the reviver of the Rinzai school.”

“The reviver of...what?”

“Rinzai is one of the sects of Zen Buddhism. In short, he was a major player in the revival of a declining Zen school.”

“Oh, I see.”

“Hakuin preached Zen teachings in an easy-to-understand way and was named the father of the revival. He was so renowned that it was even said, ‘Suruga Province has two things too great for it: Mount Fuji and Hakuin of Hara,’ comparing his greatness to the likes of Mount Fuji.” Holmes looked back down at the hanging scroll. “This really is a surprise. A Bodhidharma in good condition—a stunning one at that.”

Ueda interjected, “Hey Holmes, how much for this one?”

“...Hmm.” Holmes narrowed his eyes. “In the realm of two point five million yen, I’d say.”

“T-Two point five million?” my voice squeaked. *It’s worth that much?* It was a hundred times more than what I’d been hoping for. My heart raced at the unexpected revelation. I couldn’t believe that I casually put such a treasure into a paper bag and brought it here.

“Let’s take a look at the other one.” Holmes eagerly reached into the paper bag, ignoring my state of shock.

“Oh, I think that one is by the same person. It’s not Bodhidharma, though.”

“I’m looking forward to it,” Holmes said. He unraveled the scroll and came to a sudden stop.

“Oh, this one’s a baby. Cute, eh?” remarked Ueda.

“Huh, so Hakuin drew this kind of thing too?” said Mieko.

In contrast to the two excited customers, Holmes stared wide-eyed at the painting in still silence. His face seemed somewhat pale.

“What’s up, Holmes?” asked Ueda.

“Ah, it’s nothing. I...have seen a Hakuin painting of an infant before, but this

one is new to me.” His hands were trembling as he held the scroll.

“Is it really that great?”

Holmes paused before answering, “Yes. I...don’t think I can put a price on it,” he murmured quietly.

“Huh?” I was bewildered. He couldn’t put a price on it?

Holmes looked up at me and asked, “Aoi, who does this hanging scroll belong to?”

“It’s...my late grandfather’s. He was an avid collector of antiques.”

“I see. This is a completely unrelated question, but are you so in need of money that you’d sell your grandfather’s belongings?” He looked me straight in the eye, but his tone of voice was gentle and caring. I cast my eyes down, unable to meet his gaze.

I hesitated before saying, “It’s for the bullet train fare. I really need to go back to Saitama.”

“Oh yes, spring vacation is coming up,” said Mieko. “You must want to see your friends, right? But, wouldn’t it be better to ask your mom?”

Holmes quickly put his finger in front of his mouth, signaling her to be quiet. Mieko hastily shut her mouth and shrugged.

“Did something happen?” said Holmes.

I hung my head and bit my lip at his concerned question. After a moment, I tried to speak up, and burst into tears. “L-Last month, my boyfriend said he wanted to break up.” I spoke as though spitting out the words. Mieko and Ueda had meek expressions on their faces. “A-At first, I accepted it. We couldn’t see each other much because we were so far apart, so it was only natural that his feelings would fade away...even though it was unbearable for me...”

We’d been dating since middle school, and we went to the same high school, too. I thought we’d be together forever, but then I had to move to Kyoto...

When I left, he told me, “Nowadays we have the internet to connect us, so a long-distance relationship isn’t a problem. I promise I’ll go to a university in Kyoto.” Despite that, our conversations gradually became more and more



intermittent. Finally, he told me, “Sorry, I can’t do this anymore,” and broke up with me. I had a feeling it would happen. It was painful, but I accepted it...and I even felt sorry because it was my family’s circumstances that led to it. And yet...

“But, it looks like he started going out with another girl right away. And that girl...is my best friend. I found out the other day.” Yeah, that girl was my best friend...or at least, I thought she was. She was one of the first friends I made in high school. We did everything together, and I really loved her. She even told me, “You and your boyfriend look really good together. I’ll watch him to make sure he doesn’t cheat on you, so don’t worry about going to Kyoto.” Did she get closer to him after I left? Was she glad that I moved away? I can’t believe he’d go out with my best friend. It’s so frustrating. So painful. So miserable.

I didn’t know what to do, but I wanted to go back to Saitama immediately.

“I see, so you wanted to rush back,” Holmes said with a nod.

Mieko smiled sympathetically, and said, “That’s understandable. But, what will you do when you go back?”

I clammed up. *What am I going to do? I’ve asked myself that very question many times.* “I...I want to see for myself. And I’ve got a lot of things to say to them! I want to tell them how awful they are, and that I’ll never forgive them! Because it really is horrible! It’s too cruel!” The dam holding back my emotions broke, and everything came rushing out. I never cried about it at home, because I didn’t want my family to worry. And I wasn’t close enough to anyone at my new school to talk to them about personal issues... I’d been enduring it all by myself, when really, I just wanted to scream and cry.

I slumped onto the table and cried loudly. Then, I felt a large hand gently stroke my head.

“Aoi, please look at this painting you brought—the one of the baby.”

Still sobbing, I slowly raised my head. The baby was drawn with gentle, curving lines. It was asleep, but it looked like it was smiling, too.

“Do you know about Hakuin?” Holmes asked softly, and I shook my head. I brought this painting because it looked like it might be valuable—I didn’t know anything about the artist.

“As I said earlier, Hakuin was a priest so renowned that he was compared to the likes of Mount Fuji. However, there was a time when he’d lost all his honor.”

“Huh?”

“When Hakuin lived at Shoin Temple, there was an incident where a daughter of one of the temple’s supporters became pregnant. The father interrogated the daughter as to whose child it was, and in a panic, she recalled that her father revered Hakuin and lied that it was his. She thought that he would calm down if she named Hakuin as the father. However, her father was enraged, and when the baby was born, he took it to Hakuin and shoved it at him, declaring, ‘You’re a horribly corrupt priest, getting my daughter pregnant. Now take this child.’”

“Wow... What did Hakuin do?”

“Even though the accusation was completely false, Hakuin took the baby without giving any excuses. After that, the people scorned him as ‘the corrupt priest,’ while he desperately searched for a wet nurse so that he could raise the child. The girl who gave birth to the child couldn’t bear to see this. Tormented by her sins, she tearfully told her father the truth. Shocked, he went straight to Hakuin to apologize. Hakuin merely said, ‘Ah, so this child does have a father,’ and returned the child without a single word of criticism towards the daughter or her father. Now, how do you think Hakuin really felt about this situation?”

I didn’t have an answer to his question. Hakuin was betrayed, falsely accused, and scorned, yet he didn’t defend himself and earnestly tried to raise the child. He then returned the child to the father who’d made the mistake. How did he feel about that...? Maybe he was angry at their selfish accusations.

Holmes gazed at the painting of the baby and said, “Perhaps the answer can be found in this painting?”

The baby seemed happy as it slept. All I could feel from the painting was “love”...

I gasped, and the tears came pouring again. No matter what unfair treatment Hakuin was subjected to, he would accept it and encompass it with love—even when things were forced onto him or taken away from him. I felt ashamed of

my hatred and resentment and of my lack of forgiveness. Ashamed that I would sell my grandfather's beautiful treasures just so that I could make complaints.

...But it still hurt. It was still unbearably painful. I couldn't stop crying.

"Aoi, would you like to work here?"

"Huh?" I looked up in bewilderment at the sudden suggestion.

"You have a good eye for these things. Instead of selling off family treasures in secret, why don't you work to earn your travel fare on your own?"

"B-But..."

"If, when you've saved up enough money, you find yourself still wanting to go to Saitama, then I think it'd be good to go and take the weight off your shoulders."

When I looked at Holmes's beaming smile, I felt something warm well up inside my chest. He was right. It was because I wanted to go back and give them a piece of my mind immediately that I thought I needed the money ASAP. I didn't think I had time to work, and I overlooked a lot of things in my hasty, shock-driven actions. And now, it's as though I'm being told that there's a path prepared for me. I want to learn something here, under this mysterious man's tutelage.

"Okay... Please let me work for you." I bowed my head, and Ueda and Mieko both clapped their hands and congratulated me.

"Great. I was actually in search of an assistant," Holmes said with a gentle smile.

I placed Hakuin's hanging scrolls back inside the paper bag and bowed again. "Thank you so much for today. I look forward to working with you."

"Likewise," replied Holmes, and he bowed back.

"I'll be on my way now." I was about to leave the store, but I stopped and turned back, since something was nagging at me. I asked, "Um, why did you say that I have 'a good eye for these things'? And how did you know where I live?"

Holmes chuckled in response and said, "The tea bowl that you stopped to look at earlier is called a Shino tea bowl. It's one of my grandfather's prized



possessions.”

“What’s a Shino tea bowl?”

“It’s a national treasure from the Momoyama period—said to be a masterpiece that can never be replicated once lost. It would be valued at around sixty million yen.”

“S-Sixty million? Is it okay to put something so valuable on display?”

“This is a secret between us.” Holmes held an index finger to his mouth and grinned mischievously.

“But, I was also really impressed with that painting of Mount Fuji earlier. That was a fake, right?”

“Yes, it’s a type of replica called a *reproduction*. Taikan himself wanted more people to see his work, so he was very supportive of reproductions, even going as far as giving the creators the ink that he used. Since these works are recognized by the original artist, they have quite a bit of impact despite not being the real thing. I think that being impressed by it is another sign of your keen eye.”

“O-Oh. Okay then, but how did you know where I live?”

“Ah, well... I think you’ll find out soon,” Holmes said with an amused chuckle.

*I’ll find out soon?* Still confused, I gave my thanks again and left the store.

The sky was already growing dark. Sanjo’s main street was brightly illuminated, bustling in a different way than it did during the day. *Well, time to go home... From now on, I’ll be working hard at this store.*

On this chilly spring day, I felt a strange premonition—as though the events of today would shape my future.

# Chapter 1: Let Me Die in Spring, Under the Cherry Blossoms

## 1

*“Aoi, would you like to work here?”*

It’s been three weeks since Kiyotaka “Holmes” Yagashira, a mysterious young man at the antique store Kura in Kyoto’s Teramachi-Sanjo district, invited me to work part-time at his place. It is now early April, on a Saturday, to be precise.

“I’m leaving now!”

After meticulously arranging my hair, I noisily ran down the stairs towards the front door.

“Hey, don’t run down the stairs, Aoi!” my mother shouted as she came out from the living room. I said simply, “Okay!” in response and slipped my sneakers on.

“Do you have work today?”

“Yep.”

My mother looked at the clock and asked, “Isn’t it still early?”

“I’m going to bike around a bit first. Anyway, bye.”

I sprang out the door and got on the bicycle waiting for me outside. The moment I pushed down on the pedal, a gentle breeze caressed my cheeks. The air was warm, carrying the spring scent of fresh leaves. *This is nice*, I thought. Summer is too blisteringly hot for me, so this is my favorite time of year.

I biked along at a quick pace, heading south down Shimogamo Main Street. When you pass Imadegawa Street, which goes east-west, Shimogamo Main Street turns into Kawaramachi Street. In order to get to Teramachi-Sanjo, where my workplace is, all I have to do is keep going south down Kawaramachi.

Normally I just go straight down the whole way, but today I decided to turn left at Imadegawa, heading east towards the Kamo River.

Imadegawa Street overlooks the junction where the Takano River joins with the north part of the Kamo River, which is named after the ancient Kamo clan. The resulting river is also called the Kamo River, but the kanji changes to one that means “wild duck.” And apparently, there’s a so-called energy vortex at this junction.

Now, the reason why I chose to take a detour before work...was *not* because I wanted to see this mystical river junction. What I wanted to see were the rows of cherry blossom trees in full bloom along the riverside.

“Wow, they’re so pretty!” I exclaimed as I pedaled my bike.

It was peak cherry blossom season in Kyoto, and bright sun rays shone upon the sparkling Kamo River and the countless petals drifting in the air. It was truly a sight to behold. I’m sure many people travel here from afar to see this scenery, and perhaps I’m very fortunate to be able to bike here on a whim.

I descended to the riverside and headed south, the cherry blossoms over my head as I gazed sideways at the Kamo River. It was amazing, and it would’ve been even better if it weren’t for the couples flirting on the riverbank. Seeing them made me remember my ex, and I felt a throbbing pain in my chest. The pain got worse when I imagined him getting closer to my best friend.

*This isn’t going to work. The painful thoughts are looping in my head.* The breakup, finding out he was going out with my friend, and questioning “Why?” just kept going round and round in my mind.

Then again, I only found out they were dating through someone else. It could’ve been a false rumor. Maybe there was a misunderstanding. I really wanted to go to Saitama and find out.

*But thinking about it now won’t change anything. I need to stop.*

I shook my head and looked back up in front of me. Cherry blossom petals fluttered in the gentle breeze. Their beauty was soothing to my torn heart. For now, I needed to focus on earning money at work. *I’ll think about the next step when the time comes.*

I gripped the handlebars tighter and pedaled on. After around fifteen minutes, I saw that I'd reached Oike Street, and climbed back up the riverbank to the street. A little further west was Kyoto City Hall, which is, perhaps surprisingly, a Western-style building made of stone. It was supposedly built during the onset of the Showa era, but had a lovely old-fashioned aesthetic and imposing presence that were reminiscent of the Meiji and Taisho periods. When I first saw this city hall, I was so surprised, thinking, "Kyoto really is full of wonders."

I parked my bicycle in a designated area on Oike Street and continued towards the Sanjo shopping district on foot. It was 10:50 a.m., and my shift was at 11:00 a.m. It looked like I wasn't going to be late.

## 2

As always, I calmed my breathing outside the shop before opening the antique door. As the door chime rang out, I spotted two men sitting at the counter.

"Good morning."

"Good morning, Aoi," said the first one, Kiyotaka Yagashira, also known as Holmes. He was the one who had offered me this job.

"Good morning, Aoi." The second one was Holmes's father, Takeshi Yagashira. He had a slim build and wore glasses and a vest. His gentle smile was similar to Holmes's.

"I'll do my best today," I said with a bow.

It'd been a while since I started working here, and I'd finally gotten the hang of it. Back when Holmes offered me the job, I'd assumed he was a young shopkeeper, but it turned out that the real owner of the shop was his grandfather. Apparently that grandfather of his is known as a legendary appraiser, and being a nationally certified expert, he travels all over the country and even around the world performing his services. While the real owner is away, Holmes and his father take turns managing the shop in addition to working hard in their main professions.

Holmes's father's main profession is—I glanced at the counter in front of him. His right hand held a fountain pen, which he was using to write prose on Japanese grid-style writing paper. That's right: his father is an author. He writes things like historical novels and columns, and he's always writing while tending to the store.

*Oh, and by the way, Holmes's main profession is being a student, as you'd expect.*

Perhaps having noticed I was looking at him, the father looked up from his work and smiled warmly at me, saying, "Your presence brightens up the shop, since we didn't have any girls around before."

"It's not that big of a deal," I said shyly, hastily putting on my apron.

According to what the regular customers have told me, there are no women in the Yagashira family. The owner was a free spirit and he had divorced his wife long ago, while the father's wife—in other words, Holmes's mother—passed away due to illness when Holmes was two years old. So, the Yagashira family only consists of men. Since the three of them have the same surname, the grandfather is called "Owner," the father is called "Manager," and Holmes is called either his nickname or "Kiyotaka."

It's rare to see father and son together, though. Usually only one of them was at the shop.

"Oh, I'll be heading out soon. My father will be in charge today," said Holmes, looking my way with a smile. I choked on my breath in shock.

"C-Can you please stop reading my mind already?"

"Ah, my apologies. You seemed curious because you were looking back and forth between us."

Holmes possesses an extraordinarily keen eye. He doesn't actually read people's minds, but he can infer things that are unspoken from their words, actions, and behavior.

"Reading minds? You're ever the exaggerator, Aoi," he continued with an amused chuckle.



My face stiffened. His constant, unexpected guesses about my thoughts sure seemed like mind reading to me. I definitely wasn't exaggerating. The way he responds to my inner thoughts is seriously bad for my heart.

"Oh right. Aoi. Come to the second floor with me," said Holmes, getting up from his seat.

"Ah, okay," I replied, slightly startled.

When Holmes calls me to the second floor, it's always to show me *something*. I climbed the stairs feeling somewhat anxious. When we reached the top, he removed the keyring at his waist and unlocked the door there with a *click*, revealing a plain room with a small window and a ventilation fan. Products and boxes were stacked on the shelves. As its appearance would suggest, this room was called the "storeroom."

Holmes cut straight through the storeroom and stopped in front of a door on the opposite wall. The first thing that caught my eye was the padlock. There was nothing else special about the door, but it was locked. On the wall next to the door was a cover pretending to be a power outlet, and opening that cover revealed a number pad. It was a digital lock with a numerical password.

Holmes deftly entered the password and then unlocked the padlock. At a glance, it was simply a small room at the back of the storeroom, but that wasn't all. It had a high level of security.

The door finally opened. Holmes turned on the light, revealing a small, clean, windowless room that was kept cool with an air conditioner. In the middle was a table, and *something* lay on top, completely covered by a sheet.

"My grandfather brought this home with him last night," Holmes said, swiftly putting on his white gloves and removing the sheet. Underneath was a box around fifty centimeters tall, wrapped in cloth. Holmes skillfully unwrapped the cloth, revealing a simple wooden box. He opened the lid. Inside was a vase, around forty centimeters tall. The vase was painted with broad, smooth curves, and it had a wide body that gradually narrowed towards the bottom. The cobalt blue pattern on its white body was breathtakingly elaborate.

"Wow!"

Was the pattern a grapevine? It was drawn beautifully and cleanly, all the way to the tips of the leaves.

“It’s...amazing.” *Curse my limited vocabulary.* But that was all I could say.

“It’s Chinese porcelain known as ‘blue and white pottery.’ This one hails from the Yuan dynasty.”

“How is porcelain different from earthenware?”

“They’re similar, and there isn’t a strict boundary between them, but when unglazed, porcelain is white and translucent, and it makes a metallic sound when you tap it.”

“I see. Is this genuine?”

“Yes, a Kyoto department store will be having an exhibition soon, and this piece is being borrowed from overseas. They asked my grandfather to appraise it beforehand.”

“So the department store requested for the owner to appraise it?”

“Yes, even though they’re borrowing pieces from other countries, it’d still affect their reputation if they were to display a counterfeit.”

Since the owner was a nationally certified appraiser, he’d sometimes receive requests like this and bring rare antiques here, the likes of which a commoner like me would normally never be able to see up close. And whenever such an amazing piece was here, Holmes would always show it to me.

“This cobalt was brought over from the Islamic world. It’s a beautiful, deep indigo, don’t you think?”

“Yes, it really is lovely.”

“The shape is very uniform and feels balanced. It has a beautiful form, developed to perfection all the way to the brim. And most of all, this *pattern*. Isn’t it stunning?” Holmes gazed fondly at the vase, describing it passionately as if it were his own pride and joy. I was charmed by his genuine love for antiques, but I could also understand where his passion came from. Even an amateur could tell that this vase was amazing. But, as a lowly commoner, what I wanted to know was...

“Around how much is this worth?”

“Let’s see... In the past, I saw in the news that a piece of Yuan blue and white pottery went for 3.2 billion at an overseas auction.”

“Th-Three *billion*? For this?”

“Not for this specific piece, but it means that there’s someone out there who would value it that highly,” Holmes answered happily.

“I-I see.”

This world was so foreign to me that I couldn’t keep up. Some people have their hearts stolen by money or jewels, but others are charmed by antiques. As an antique collector, my grandpa must’ve been one of them.

“Holmes, if you were rich, would you want this vase badly enough to pay a large sum for it?”

“No.”

I looked up in surprise at his swift response.

“Oh, really? But you love antiques, right?”

“Yes, I do. However, I don’t have the desire to own them. I’m happy being able to see such wonderful pieces, and I want to see as many as I can during my life. To that end, I’m willing to go anywhere in the world. But I don’t want to own them. I’m satisfied as long as I can look at them like this and store them in my heart and memory,” Holmes replied, placing his hand to his chest with a gentle smile on his face.

“I...see.” I nodded hesitantly. His answer was unexpected, yet appropriate.

“In my case, it’s not just pottery and scrolls that appeal to me. I also love temples, shrines, and foreign castles and towers. Those are things I’ll never be able to own, let alone decorate my house with, right?”

Holmes grinned mischievously. I smiled too, saying, “You’re right.”

“The staff will be coming to retrieve this soon, so I’m glad I was able to show it to you first.”

Holmes put the lid back on the box and wrapped it securely in the cloth. We

left the room together, and I watched him absentmindedly as he locked up.

I knew he was being careful, but was it really okay to put something worth 3.2 billion here? Perhaps it wasn't my place to judge, but I couldn't help but worry.

"Don't worry. Our security is tighter than you think," Holmes said, key in hand.

I choked on my breath again. "I-It's seriously bad for my heart when you read my mind."

Holmes laughed cheerfully at my stiff expression.

We descended the stairs, and I spotted Ueda, one of the regulars, lounging on the sofa in the cafe area.

"Hey there, Holmes and Aoi!" The instant he saw us, Ueda waved with a big grin on his face.

"Welcome, Ueda. Did you come to see my father?"

Apparently Ueda was college friends with the manager, making him a Kyoto University alumnus as well. He works as a management consultant in Osaka, and developed an interest in antiques due to the Yagashira family's influence. When he finds something that might be good, he comes to Kura to have it appraised.

"Uh huh. I bought his new book today and I wanna get it signed."

Ueda took out a book from his bag titled *Women's Quarters*. I instinctively leaned in. "Wow, is that the manager's book? I keep asking him what kind of books he writes, but he always refuses to answer."

I looked at the cover and got excited when I saw the author listed as "Takeshi Ijuin."

"Your pen name is Takeshi Ijuin, huh? It's very nice."

The manager brought his hand to his forehead as if troubled. "Uh, Aoi, feel free to forget what you just saw."

"Huh? Why?"

“This guy’s shy, Aoi,” said Ueda. “Here, I’ll even give it to you, so read it thoroughly.”

“Thank you, Ueda! I’m so happy.” I accepted the book and held it tightly to my chest.

The manager averted his gaze and said, “It’s extremely difficult to read, so I can’t recommend it.” His cheeks were faintly tinged with red. It was kind of cute.

“C’mon man, you’re a veteran author now. Hurry up and get used to it!” Ueda slumped his shoulders, exasperated, and the manager looked away.

“An insensitive Osakan man wouldn’t understand.”

“Pfft, I don’t wanna hear that from a guy who brags about being raised in Tokyo. You’ve got Kansai blood flowing through your veins, but you sold your soul to Tokyo.”

Right, Ueda had told me that the manager was born in Kyoto, but raised in Tokyo. The owner got divorced when the manager was still young, and he was too busy to raise a child by himself, so he sent his son to his relatives in Tokyo. The manager didn’t come back to Kyoto until he started university, and that’s why he usually speaks in standard Japanese. Maybe that’s why Holmes uses standard Japanese, too.

“I’ll make coffee,” said Holmes, heading towards the kitchenette in the back.

“Thanks, pal. There’s something I wanted you to take a look at too, when you’re done with the coffee.”

“Certainly. I had a feeling that was the case.” Holmes chuckled and went into the kitchenette.

“Saw right through me, huh? That’s Holmes for you.” Ueda shrugged and then looked at me with a grin. “Didja know, Aoi? It was me who nicknamed him ‘Holmes.’”

“Huh? Wasn’t it because his last name has the character for ‘home’ in it?”

“That’s what he tells other people, but the truth’s something else.”

“What do you mean?”

“It was back when he was in early primary school, I think? He came to my place to play and said he wanted to solve riddles.”

“Ahh yeah, young children like that kind of thing.” My relatives’ kids always want to do quizzes or play word games too. It never ends.

“I know, right? So, I gave him some problems, but he was a smart kid and solved ’em right away. No matter how many questions I gave him, he kept asking for more, and it got really annoying, so I went, ‘All right then, how many stairs does my staircase have?’ and he instantly answered ‘Fifteen.’ I was surprised and accused him of making up an answer, but he said, ‘I didn’t make it up. I know because I climbed them once.’ And then when I counted, there really were fifteen. Aoi, do you know how many stairs *your* house has?”

I was at a loss for words. Thinking about it, even though I go up and down those stairs every day...I don’t know how many steps there are.

“I-I don’t know.”

“Right? Don’t look so glum. It’s normal not to know. Anyway, when that happened, I thought ‘This kid is Holmes.’”

I tilted my head. “But why?”

The manager chuckled, saying, “That’s the kind of person Sherlock Holmes was made out to be. When he sees a staircase, his brain even observes the exact number of stairs it has.”

“I-Is that so? Wow.” I was impressed from the bottom of my heart.

“It’s something you have to be born with,” he continued. “If everyone is looking at the same thing, most people will overlook part of the information, but Kiyotaka takes everything in and processes it.”

“That’s why he can do appraisals, right? Is the owner like that too?”

“No, my father... It’s a bit different. He has the unique ability to determine authenticity.”

“And *you’re* hopeless at it,” Ueda piped in immediately.

The manager grinned snidely and said, “Well I’m sorry for not being able to help.”



“Nah, it’s fine,” Ueda replied, with a similarly snide grin.

As I was anxiously looking between the two of them, Holmes appeared, accompanied by the scent of coffee.

“I’m glad you’re getting along, but you’re making Aoi uncomfortable.”

There were four porcelain coffee cups, one of which was café au lait. That one was mine.

“Thank you.”

It was delicious, as usual. I really love Holmes’s café au lait.

“Thanks. So, this is what I wanted you to look at.” Ueda gulped down his coffee and hurriedly took a box out of a paper bag. “One of our clients, their director had this in his house. Caught my eye, so I borrowed it to show you.”

“Understood. Allow me to examine it.” Holmes donned his white gloves again and gently opened the box. Inside was a small vase made of white porcelain with a blue pattern.

“...Well then.”

“It’s blue and white pottery, right? From the Yuan dynasty?”

“This is...quite the coincidence.” Holmes smiled in amusement and glanced at me. “What do you think, Aoi?”

“Huh?” Bewildered by the sudden question, I looked at the vase. *This is the same type as the one I just saw upstairs, right?* I gulped and took a closer look. *If it’s worth the same as the one upstairs...* No, this blue wasn’t as beautiful. The one I’d seen before was a very beautiful cobalt blue, but this one was obviously just “blue.” And what’s more, the pattern—the one upstairs was extremely elaborate, drawn as though there were nerves reaching all the way to the pointed tips of the leaves. This one didn’t have the same tension. The same went for the shape: the curve around the upper brim was a bit concerning.

I could tell that this vase was trying to imitate the other one, but there was no hiding its faults. The one upstairs had a mysterious, overwhelming *something* to it. Compared to that, I didn’t feel anything from looking at this one. To be honest, it was really shabby.

“Umm, I think it’s a fake,” I mumbled, and Holmes nodded in response.

“Correct.”

Ueda’s eyes opened wide. “Whoa now, does Aoi have an eye for this too?”

“Indeed. Aoi has good eyesight, and most importantly, as long as she’s seen the genuine article beforehand, she can identify forgeries well.” Holmes looked towards me as though seeking my agreement.

“Y-Yes, just a little while ago, he showed me one that’s going to be used in an exhibition.”

That’s why it felt so different. If I’d only seen the one that Ueda brought, then I might’ve thought it was amazing.

“My grandfather always said, ‘Try to only look at genuine articles whenever possible.’ That way, when you see a fake, you’ll sense its low quality.”

*I see; I can totally relate.*

“Everyone is blessed with the opportunity to see the real thing, because wonderful works of art are always on display at museums and galleries. I want people to make use of those facilities. It feels like such a waste that they pass up the chance to see beautiful works,” Holmes sighed.

Ueda laughed. “What are you, a secret agent?”

“I might be.”

Everyone giggled at Holmes’s shameless admission.

“But man, this is a fake? Well, I guess Yuan blue and whites aren’t something you see every day. Shouldn’t have gotten the guy’s hopes up.” Ueda looked disappointed as he put the box with the vase back into the paper bag.

“It’s not a bad piece, though.”

“How much, then?”

“About fifty thousand, perhaps. How much did he pay for it?”

“Don’t ask,” Ueda said, slumping his shoulders. I felt my expression stiffen too, assuming that the price must’ve been missing a digit or two.

“As long as he likes it enough to keep it in his collection, that’s what matters most. In cases like this, the value is up to the owner to decide.” Holmes smiled merrily, then looked at the shop’s grandfather clock. “Ah, it’s time. I’ll be leaving now, Dad.”

“All right.” The manager nodded, then looked at me. “Oh right, why don’t you go with him, Aoi? You might learn something.”

I looked back at him blankly. “Um, where is he going?”

“I’m going to Ninna Temple. It’s the best time to see the cherry blossoms. Since my father suggested it, shall we go together?” Holmes answered with a smile.

I nodded eagerly. “Yes!”

### 3

A long time ago, I heard someone say that Kyoto’s springs and autumns were “special.” When I told that to my late grandfather, he patted my head and said, “It’s not just spring and autumn. In Kyoto, all four seasons have their charms, and each season has its own scenic places.”

“What’s the best place to see cherry blossoms, then?” I asked, and his answer was, “Hmm, there’re quite a few, but the top one’s gotta be Ninna Temple.”

Ever since then, I had it in my mind that the best place for cherry blossoms in Kyoto was Ninna Temple...but I’d never gone there.

“Is that so? You still haven’t been to Ninna Temple, Aoi?” Holmes asked, and I nodded a “Yes” while peeking at the logo visible through the windshield of the Jaguar he was driving.

“Ninna Temple does come to mind when I think of cherry blossoms, but there are plenty of other noteworthy locations, like the Heian Shrine and the Hirano Shrine. The Philosopher’s Walk is a good one too.”

I vaguely nodded along to Holmes’s excited explanation, unable to stop focusing on the Jaguar logo. *I mean, this isn’t the kind of car a student would*

*ride in, right?*

“Umm, Holmes, this is a really expensive car, right?”

“Ah, it’s the owner’s car.”

“Y-Your grandfather’s?”

“Yes, he likes Jaguars. Apparently, he was very impressed by the ideology of the company’s founder, Lyons: ‘Beauty sells.’”

“I-I see.”

“But he rarely gets the chance to drive it, so it’s become Kura’s company car.”

“It’s an amazing company car.”

Holmes laughed in amusement at my strained expression.

After driving for around half an hour, we arrived at Ninna Temple. Since it was a Saturday during cherry blossom season, the parking lot was packed full, but because we were invited guests, we were directed to a separate area.

At the entrance to the grounds was the giant, imposing Nio Gate.

“It’s huge, like, really grand. I can feel its history.” *My lousy vocabulary strikes again.*

Holmes smiled in response, and said, “Indeed, the Ninna Temple has a long history. It was built in the Heian period and remained a top-class *monzeki* temple—meaning that its head priest was a member of the imperial family or an aristocrat—until the Kamakura period. Unfortunately, most of the temples on this mountain burned down during the Onin War. The Ninna Temple wasn’t rebuilt until the Edo period.

“The Nio Gate you see in front of us was built then, but the cylindrical columns, the interlocking wooden brackets above them, and the bargeboards are all in the traditional style of the Heian period.”

Holmes’s extensive knowledge flowed from his mouth like water, and all I could do was make vague sounds of admiration.

Upon passing through the Nio Gate, a spacious road came into view. Because of the season, the place was bustling with people. The next gate we passed

through was a bright vermillion, and there was a row of cherry blossom trees immediately to the left.

Now *this* was a spectacle. What caught my attention was that all of the trees were short. Around two or three meters tall, maybe?

“The cherry blossom trees here are all small, huh?”

“Yes, the ones here are called ‘Omuro’ cherry blossoms, and strangely enough, they’re all short in height. It’s said that their roots are restrained as though in flowerpots, preventing them from growing any bigger, but the truth isn’t fully known yet, so providing a scientific explanation would likely require research.”

“Huh? Scientific research? It’s not just a species?”

“Right, it’s not a unique species. By the way, some people in Kyoto jokingly call people with low noses ‘Omuro blossoms,’ since the word for ‘nose’ is pronounced the same way as ‘flower.’”

“Low noses are Omuro blossoms? Even Kyoto’s teasing is elegant,” I said with a shrug, and Holmes chuckled, “Indeed.”

A lone priest approached us with a smile, wearing the black kimono called a ‘sky vestment.’

“Welcome, Mr. Yagashira. The *monzeki* is waiting for you.” He bowed, and we bowed back.

“Please, right this way,” the priest said as he began to walk.

“Um, what is the *monzeki*?” I asked feebly.

“This temple’s head priest,” answered Holmes.

We entered the temple and were led to a Japanese-style room, where we were instructed to wait. Tea and sweets had already been prepared for us on the table. The two of us sat down next to each other and looked outside. The paper sliding door had been left open, and the comfortable spring breeze gently blew in. The cherry blossoms were gorgeous under the dazzling blue sky.

After we had gazed at the cherry blossoms for a short while, the screen door slid open and the *monzeki* came in.

“My apologies for keeping you waiting.”

“Long time no see.” Holmes bowed, and the *monzeki* narrowed his eyes fondly.

“My, you’ve grown, dear Kiyotaka.”

*I guess they know each other.*

“I’m sorry it’s me here today and not my grandfather.”

“It’s quite all right—Seiji said that you’d be able to handle this case.”

Seiji is the owner’s name. Now I understood; this was originally supposed to be the owner’s job, but he sent Holmes in his place.

Holmes and the *monzeki* made lively small talk for a bit before moving on to the real topic.

“So, today I’d first like you to take a look at this.” The *monzeki* gently placed a wooden box on the table.

“As you wish.” Holmes put on his white gloves as usual and pulled the box towards him. He opened it carefully, revealing a matcha tea bowl that he picked up and examined closely. It was beautiful, with cherry blossoms painted on the side.

“It’s Kyoto ware, I see. The lines are soft and full. It’s undeniably the work of Ninsei Nonomura. A splendid piece.” Holmes smiled, and the *monzeki* smiled back. “Is that so?”

*Ninsei Nonomura... Who’s that?* Just as I was wondering...

“Ninsei Nonomura was a potter from the first half of the Edo period. His real name was Seiemon. Nonomura was the name of the place where he was born, and the ‘nin’ in Ninsei is the one used in Ninna Temple’s name. The ‘sei’ was taken from his name, Seiemon.”

As usual, Holmes readily answered my unspoken thoughts.

“So basically, he became Ninsei Nonomura because he was Seiemon of Ninna Temple, born in Nonomura?” I asked. *But why did his name include Ninna Temple’s ‘Nin’ in the first place?*



“He was an exceptional potter, considered the founder of the style of Kyoto ware that uses overglaze enamels. He was granted the art name ‘Nin’ by the *monzeki* of Ninna Temple at the time and thus became Ninsei.”

He answered before I even had a chance to ask. Truly terrifying.

*So in other words, this piece is the work of someone who had ties to this temple. That’s why they wanted to have this tea bowl appraised, right? Does this mean the job is done?*

“But you wanted more than an appraisal, right?” Holmes looked up from the tea bowl.

The *monzeki* looked mildly surprised and responded, “That’s correct. There’s actually someone else who wanted a consultation regarding this tea bowl. Please wait a minute.”

He exchanged looks with the priest waiting in the hallway. The priest hurried away and soon returned with another man. The man entered the room and sat formally before us, bowing his head.

“My name is Kishitani. It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

He looked like an ordinary middle-aged man, although a bit on the tired side.

“This tea bowl belongs to him. Kishitani, he says it’s authentic,” relayed the *monzeki*.

Kishitani scratched his head. “I see.” For some reason, he didn’t look very happy.

“Is there something you don’t understand?” inquired Holmes, not missing a beat.

Kishitani lifted his face in surprise and replied, “Ah, yes. I received this from my old man. He departed the other day, and in his will he wrote, ‘That Ninsei tea bowl contains all of my feelings.’ I heard that Ninsei Nonomura was connected to Ninna Temple, so I came to consult with the *monzeki*.”

I was momentarily confused at his usage of “departed” to mean “passed away.” I was still not entirely comfortable with the local dialect.

“I couldn’t tell if the piece was authentic, so I asked Seiji for help,” continued

the *monzeki*, and Holmes nodded in acknowledgment. “However, Kishitani, could it be that its authenticity itself represents your father’s feelings? Perhaps he thought that it would benefit you to sell it to a suitable buyer. How much would it fetch, Kiyotaka?”

“Hmm, it’s in good condition and the cherry blossoms are beautiful, so someone might be willing to pay five for it.”

*Five.* Obviously he didn’t mean five yen, but five million yen. The world of antiques is literally orders of magnitudes beyond mine.

“No, that’s not it. While he was alive, he told me not to sell this tea bowl, no matter what.”

“Is that so?” The *monzeki* crossed his arms, perplexed.

“Excuse me for the impudent question, but do you draw, Kishitani?”

Kishitani looked surprised by Holmes’s sudden question, but nodded. “Ah, yes. Kind of. How did you know?”

“You have a callus on your middle finger, and there’s something like ink on your nails... I suppose you’re not a painter, because that wouldn’t result in that kind of callus. You also said ‘kind of’ instead of naming your profession. Are you perhaps...a manga artist?”

Kishitani’s eyes opened wide as though he’d been caught off-guard, and the *monzeki* also looked surprised.

Well, I was surprised too.

“The fact that you didn’t name your profession right away implied that you weren’t in an environment where you could say it proudly. Was your father opposed to your career?”

Kishitani’s hands trembled in response to Holmes’s question. His face was pale, implying that it was spot-on.

*I know how you feel, Kishitani. I totally do. It’s scary how he reads you.*

After a moment of silence, Kishitani nodded. “Yes...he was. He was always against it, telling me that manga was worthless. But I didn’t give up on my dream. I fled the house and went to Tokyo, and it paid off because I managed to

debut.

“I had a belief: through manga, I could express my thoughts to anyone, regardless of age or gender, without having to put on a bold front. I didn’t care about social standing; I just wanted everyone to enjoy my work and get something out of it.

“But...I didn’t gain the slightest bit of popularity, and my work didn’t sell. I struggled the whole time, so I couldn’t even return home in that state.” Kishitani smiled in self-deprecation.

“However, after that, you drew a popular manga, right?” Holmes continued.

Kishitani looked up at Holmes in shock again. “Y-Yes. I wouldn’t be able to stay alive at the rate I was going, so I listened to my editor and began drawing a genre that was popular at the time. Once I did that, it sold an unbelievable number of copies, and my lifestyle became much richer.”

“Was that when your father sent you this tea bowl?”

Kishitani flinched again. Apparently so.

“Y-Yes. My old man loved Kyoto ware and was especially attached to Ninsei Nonomura’s work. When I received it, I thought that I’d finally been acknowledged—that he was congratulating me. I wanted to return home right away, but couldn’t because I was busy with work. Then he passed away from illness, and I was finally able to come back for the funeral.

“When I read his letter, I thought that this tea bowl was meant to send a different message. What feelings are contained in this cherry blossom-patterned tea bowl? What did he want to tell me?” Kishitani looked at the tea bowl on the table, wondering to himself.

Holmes gently picked up the tea bowl and turned it over to the bottom. “Kishitani, have you seen the ‘Ninsei’ seal that was stamped here?”

“Y-Yes. That means it’s genuine, right?”

“Not necessarily. There are counterfeit Ninsei works running rampant that do bear the seal. What your father wanted to tell you has to do with Ninsei Nonomura’s seal,” declared Holmes.

Kishitani looked confused. Holmes continued, “Ninsei Nonomura was considered a pioneer because he stamped his own works. What had been a tea bowl created by an ordinary potter was now Ninsei’s work; in other words, he was asserting his brand. It was a mark of pride, proving that his work was unlike anyone else’s.”

Kishitani silently opened his eyes wide.

“Kishitani, could it be that your father wanted you to create works that contained your own feelings, rather than imitations of others? Did he want you to have pride in your brand like Ninsei Nonomura did, and draw your own work? And did he entrust his feelings to this tea bowl because he couldn’t say them out loud after being opposed to your career?” Holmes asked, holding the bowl in his hand.

Kishitani trembled, and the *monzeki* nodded with a warm smile.

“That must be true,” the *monzeki* said. “Being a manga artist is a tough job. As a parent, he wouldn’t agree to it so easily, because he wouldn’t want you to tackle it half-heartedly. He wanted you to be so fervent that you wouldn’t even care if your family cut you off over it. I’m sure that he was always reading your work, and he felt disappointed when you gave in to the current trends.”

“Ahhhhhh!” Kishitani broke down into tears at the *monzeki*’s kind explanation. It was clear how much suffering he’d endured, and I felt like I was going to cry too.

He’d set his sights on becoming a manga artist, defied his father and ran away from home, but had nothing to show for it. He then panicked, thinking that his father would never acknowledge him at that rate, and ended up drawing something different from what he’d intended. Still, he thought his father would be happy about his success...but he was wrong. His father was sad that his son had abandoned his goal. Kishitani’s feelings now after finding that out must be indescribable.

Kishitani wiped his tears with the cuff of his sleeve and slowly looked back up.

“To be honest, I’ve always struggled with the fact that what I want to draw doesn’t align with what sells. I forgot about my goal because of the hardship I was going through. But I’ll listen to my old man’s dying wish and stop trying to

appeal to the public. I'll draw what I want to express, and it's okay if I'm not popular."

Kishitani clenched his fists in his lap. *Dreams, reality, ideals...* I'm still a high schooler so I don't understand it that well yet, but it must be difficult for these things to coexist.

As the bitter feelings lingered, Holmes added, "I think there's one more message in this tea bowl. Please look at the design." He turned the bowl back to its original orientation.

"Cherry blossoms...right?" Kishitani said in confusion.

"Yes, cherry blossoms. In my opinion, cherry blossoms are popular with everyone. In other words, this tea bowl depicts something that's popular with everyone, but it's undeniably Ninsei Nonomura's brand."

Kishitani looked like he had a sudden realization.

Holmes continued while holding the tea bowl affectionately, "I think it's fine to draw things that'll sell. After all, I don't think someone who only draws what they like can be considered a professional. What's important is that it includes your brand—your soul, don't you think? That's different from imitating others."

Kishitani looked down. After a period of silence, he slowly looked back up, and a single tear streaked down his face.

"Mr. Yagashira, I may have been searching for those words all along. Thank you so much."

He bowed so deeply that his forehead must've touched the tatami floor, and Holmes hastily shook his head, insisting that he did nothing.

"You really are Seiji's grandson," the *monzeki* sighed, impressed.

As I sat there, I realized that I may have witnessed the birth of an amazing manga artist. I got goosebumps thinking about it.

## 4

"You were amazing again, Holmes!" I exclaimed excitedly after we left the

temple.

Holmes gave a strained smile and said, "You exaggerate, Aoi."

"It's not an exaggeration! The first thing that surprised me was when you figured out he was a manga artist by the callus on his finger."

"Ah...that was actually something else."

"Huh?"

"I knew he was a manga artist because of the screentone traces in his hair and on his forehead, but it was awkward to tell him that. When I looked at his hands, I saw a writing callus and made use of that," Holmes said with a shrug.

So it was traces of screentone. That *would* make it easy to identify a manga artist. He really does have a keen eye though; I didn't notice them at all.

"But how did you know that his father was against his career, or that he's selling well now?"

"As I said before, it was because he didn't seem to want to admit his profession. People who are like that often have parents who are opposed to it. From his accent, I sensed that he'd lived in Kanto for a long time. And the fact that he had screentone on him despite returning to his hometown meant that he was still drawing manuscripts even in these circumstances. In other words, he was in demand."

"I-I see."

That's Teramachi-Sanjo's Holmes for you.

"Also, the facts regarding Ninsei Nonomura's seal are something that everyone in this industry would know, so it came to mind immediately," Holmes said as though it were nothing.

"I thought the part after that was great too, though. About cherry blossoms being popular with everyone. You read so deeply into Kishitani's and his father's hearts."

"However, I have no conclusive proof."

"It was convincing, though."



“It could’ve been that that really was what his father wanted to convey, but it also could’ve just been my wishful thinking.”

“Wishful thinking?”

“Yes. As I said before, if you only create the things you like, you can’t call it professional work. It’s only a hobby. I believe that being a professional means creating what the public wants while trying to express yourself as much as possible.

“Even Beethoven and Chopin were frantically trying to compose songs that would please the aristocrats that sponsored them. In any era, professional creators are fated to create what people are looking for. This is because art has to catch the eye,” Holmes said, looking at the five-storied pagoda towering over the grounds. It was an elegant, imposing work of art. Together with the cherry blossoms, it looked like something out of a painting. This tower must’ve also been built with the intent of catching the eye of renowned people and pleasing them.

The spring breeze gently blew between us.

“Isn’t it a nice scene? The five-storied pagoda towering beyond the cherry blossoms. I’m truly happy to be able to see something so beautiful,” Holmes said with a serious expression.

Even though I had gotten used to it, it still felt strange hearing such refined words come from the mouth of a young, attractive guy, and I almost laughed. He was right, though. It was beautiful.

“Oh yeah, there was a poem like this, right? *Let me die in spring, under the cherry blossoms, during the full moon of the second month.* It reminds me of you, Holmes. I can imagine you saying it under the beautiful cherry blossoms and the moon,” I said with a giggle.

Holmes looked me in the eye. “That’s incorrect, Aoi. The poem goes ‘under the flowers,’ not ‘under the cherry blossoms.’”

“Wuh?” I accidentally made a weird sound.

“*Let me die in spring, under the flowers, during the full moon of the second month.* The poem is by Saigyō Hōshi. He admired the Buddha so much that he

wanted to die during the full moon of the second month—in other words, February fifteenth, the same day that the Buddha died. Unfortunately, he passed away on the sixteenth of that month. He missed it by a hair.”

I was lost for words.

*Wait, I'd gotten it completely wrong.*

“O-Oh, so it wasn't about cherry blossoms and the moon. It was about yearning for the Buddha.”

*That was embarrassing. It's time to stop showing off my lack of knowledge in front of actual scholars.*

“However, in the world of poetry, the word ‘flower’ indicates cherry blossoms, so I don't think you were wrong. The second month also refers to the lunar calendar, which would set the poem in spring now.”

“S-Sure.”

“And your version of the poem was nice, too. It's dreamlike.

*“Let me die in spring, under the cherry blossoms, during the full moon of the fourth month. A modern form would sound like this, I suppose? It'd certainly be fulfilling to breathe your last under the cherry blossoms in full bloom and the light of the full moon, after burning many beautiful sights into your memory.”*

Holmes smiled warmly, and I felt my cheeks grow hot. He'd said that immediately, knowing that I felt awkward.

How do I put this? He seems kind, but the way he does these things so easily makes it feel like I'm being teased.

“Holmes, you're kind of mean, huh?” I said with a pout.

Holmes looked surprised. “Mean?”

I couldn't say anything in response. How was I supposed to answer if he asked why? *He's actually being really nice, after all.*

Holmes chuckled. “Forgive me, Aoi.”

“Huh?”

“...Kyoto men are wicked, you see.”

It was the first time I'd heard him speak in Kyoto dialect.

He lifted his index finger and grinned mischievously, and I felt my heart skip a beat.

"Shall we get going?"

With his usual smile, Holmes began to walk, and as I looked at him from behind, I murmured, "Kyoto men... I might be a fan." But don't tell anyone I said that.

## Chapter 2: Time of Aoi

### 1

It's now mid-April, and the city of Kyoto was suddenly abuzz with the announcement of this year's "Saio-dai."

"My, did you see the news? This year's Saio-dai is a student at that university for wealthy young women, and her family owns a long-standing kimono fabric store! They picked quite a pretty one this year."

Mieko, who was visiting Kyoto Teramachi-Sanjo's antique store Kura, spoke enthusiastically about this year's "Saio-dai." That's right, Mieko, the elderly woman who was there when I first got this job. She manages the women's clothing store diagonally opposite from us, so she occasionally comes over to kill time. She said she was an old friend of the owner's, but despite that, it doesn't seem like she knows anything about antiques.

Mieko lifted her cup of Holmes's brewed coffee with a look of anticipation, but then turned to me as though she'd suddenly remembered something.

"Ah, Aoi. Do you know why dear Kiyotaka was able to guess where you lived solely based on your name?"

"Oh...yes, I found out," I murmured, blushing. Mieko and Holmes chuckled.

Right, it happened on the day I was offered this job. After hearing my name, Holmes asked, "Does your family live in Sakyo-ku, close to Shimogamo Shrine?" and I said, "Yes, how do you know that?" all wide-eyed in shock. Back then, I was amazed that he could pinpoint where I lived just from my name, but I found out why immediately afterwards. Up until then, I'd been taking the bus to school. I didn't start riding a bike until I got the part-time job at Kura. Doing that showed me things I hadn't been able to see before.

"Aoi Elementary School," "Aoi Dry Cleaning," "Aoi Apartment," "Aoi

Bookstore,” “Aoi Cafe,” “Aoi Building”; the list went on and on. How do I put this... The area around Shimogamo Shrine was overflowing with the name “Aoi.” If I were from Osaka, it’d make me go, “Y’all love ‘Aoi’ too dang much!”

Apparently, it’s because of one of Kyoto’s three major festivals, the “Aoi Festival.” Now, even I’d heard of the Aoi Festival before, but I didn’t know this neighborhood had *that* many Aoi names.

So I realized that there was nothing strange at all about Holmes guessing where I lived based on my name. It was one of those things that all of the locals knew: Aoi = Shimogamo neighborhood.

Coincidentally, the “Saio-dai” that Mieko was so excited about was the star of the Aoi Festival. This year’s Saio-dai was announced the other day, and the locals were quite enthusiastic about it.

“Being chosen as the Saio-dai is a really big deal, huh? I was surprised that there was even a press conference for it on Kyoto TV,” I said to myself, but Mieko swiveled around to face me.

“But of course! Being named the Saio-dai is the greatest honor a Kyoto woman can have!”

“Th-The greatest honor?”

“Mhmm. After all, only the most refined of women can be chosen, with emphasis on intelligence, character, and pedigree. It isn’t a superficial beauty pageant. Their looks vary because of that, but everyone’s high class. And this year’s Saio-dai sure is pretty—the ceremonial kimono will look wonderful on her. I’ll have to take a picture,” Mieko explained passionately, while I made vague sounds of acknowledgment throughout.

Holmes smiled in amusement at my inability to relate to her excitement. “The Aoi Festival is a tradition dating back to the Heian period, and it appears in *The Tale of Genji* as well.”

“Wait, it does? I’ve read *The Tale of Genji* before, but I didn’t know that.” *It was a manga adaptation that I read, though.*

“Do you know the scene where Hikaru Genji’s legal wife and his mistress both go to see a festival and fight over carriage locations?”

“Oh, do you mean the conflict between Lady Aoi and Lady Rokujo?”

It was a scene where the mistress (Lady Rokujo) was overpowered by the wife (Lady Aoi) and backed down. Wives are strong, no matter the era. *Wait, that's not what we were talking about.*

“Yes, and that festival was the Aoi Festival. Supposedly in the Heian period, saying ‘festival’ implied the Aoi Festival.”

“I see. By the way, what’s the ‘Saio-dai’ supposed to represent?” I figured it was a stupid question, but I still asked.

“Well, she’s the star of the show! During the parade, she wears a traditional twelve-layered kimono and is carried in the portable shrine,” Mieko answered, looking proud.

I felt somewhat relieved knowing that there were people who’d lived in Kyoto all their lives and still didn’t know what exactly they were getting so excited over.

Holmes explained in her place: “The ‘Saio’ refers to a shrine maiden from the Imperial House. In the Heian period, an unmarried imperial princess would be chosen to serve Kamo Shrine or Ise Grand Shrine as a shrine maiden, and such a woman was called the ‘Saio.’ Today, the ceremony is only for the festival’s sake, so a local woman is chosen, and she’s called the ‘Saio-dai.’”

“Oh, I see, the suffix is because it’s a substitute role.”

“The one chosen to represent Kyoto is always a refined woman of the proper lineage, and the term has become synonymous with ‘a woman gifted with both intelligence and beauty.’ It’s certainly a great honor to be selected.”

“Yes, they even say that a woman who’s been chosen as Saio-dai will never have trouble finding a husband!” Mieko piped in.

“R-Really?! But how do you get chosen?”

“The process is not made public, but I’ve heard that the shrine approaches them,” said Holmes.

“I heard that tea ceremony and ikebana teachers go around to their students!” Mieko said. Ikebana is the traditional art of flower arranging.

“Wow...” I was kind of overwhelmed by their words. There really are a lot of things that only the locals know. An ordinary person like me wouldn’t feel any connection to the Saio-dai just from watching the festival... But little did I know, this ordinary me was going to get involved with the Saio-dai thanks to Kura.

## 2

Several days later on a weekday, I was helping out at Kura after school as usual.

“All right, Aoi. I think it’s time we changed the window display, so could you take down the current one for me?” Holmes asked, approaching me with a box.

“Sure,” I nodded enthusiastically. My duties here generally only consisted of cleaning and watching over the store, so I was happy to get a more meaningful task. Even cleaning didn’t make me feel useful at all, since the place was already clean when I got here. Holmes and the manager were apparently more grateful to have someone to keep watch than I would’ve thought, because they both had the tendency to want to suddenly leave the store—but I still wanted to be of more use, so I couldn’t have been happier.

The window display had tea utensils arranged in it. One by one, I dusted them off, wrapped them in paper, and placed them inside the box. The tea utensils were cherry blossom themed.

“Kyoto’s cherry blossoms are ending soon, huh?” I murmured while staring at the patterns.

Holmes, who was doing the accounting, quietly answered, “Yes,” with a nod.

“What will be going here next?”

“I was thinking we’d theme it around the Aoi Festival.”

“Oh, I see.”

As we were talking, I noticed an elderly man determinedly walking towards the store. Just as I was wondering about him, he opened the door rather forcefully.

“Hey, Kiyotaka.”



*Whoa, what's with this person?*

He had a mustache and wore traditional Japanese clothes and a hat with a visor. He looked totally retro but radiated a “chic” fashion sense and cleanliness. There was something intimidating about this gentleman.

Holmes gaped at him before saying, “Owner.”

“Huh?” My eyes opened wide as well. Owner? This person is Kura’s owner? The nationally certified appraiser, Seiji Yagashira?

In other words, Holmes’s grandfather?

“Hey, looks like you’re doing well.” The owner smiled heartily and glanced at me. “Huh, you got a girlfriend? Now that’s exciting.”

I was startled, but before I could deny it, Holmes responded, “This is Aoi Mashiro, who’s helping us with the shop. I told you over the phone that we hired a high school girl as a part-timer. Did you forget?” Holmes sighed, exasperated.

“Oh yeah, you did say that. Aoi, my grandson is a real oddball, but please bear with him.”

The owner extended his hand for a handshake, and I hesitantly shook it, saying, “Yes, please bear with me as well.”

The owner withdrew his hand and said, “What a cutie. Would you like to get coffee at that cafe over there?”

“Huh?” My eyes widened.

Holmes instantly cut in. “Please don’t hit on the high school girl who’s here to work.”

*H-His grandfather was hitting on me?*

“Don’t say it like that. I was just trying to be friends,” the owner pouted, not looking very happy.

Holmes closed the accounting book and sighed. “More importantly, you brought something troublesome here again, right?”

“Now that’s my grandson,” the owner said, folding his arms and looking

proud.

“I see a mother and her daughters looking nervous outside the shop. You invited them here, right?”

The owner quickly turned around and opened the door for them, like a gentleman. “You came! Welcome.”

“Hello.” The group bowed as they came in. There was a middle-aged woman dressed in an expensive-looking kimono, a pretty woman in a dress who looked around university age, and a girl who looked around the same age as me.

*Wait...that last one looks familiar.* As I was squinting at her, she asked, “Are you...Mashiro from Class 1?”

“Y-Yeah, you’re Miyashita from Class 2...right?” Now I remember; she goes to my school and we’re in the same year. We’re in different classes so I don’t know what she’s like, but I know her name and face because we’ve been in combined classes before. Her name is Kaori Miyashita.

“Why are you here, Mashiro?”

“I-I work here.”

“Oh, I see.”

As we were having our awkward conversation, the owner smiled and said, “Oh, you’re friends with Miyashita’s youngest daughter? What a coincidence!”

*Um, I wouldn’t say we’re friends...*

Ignoring my hesitation, he continued, “Come and take a seat, Miyashita.” He guided the guests towards the sofa. “Kiyotaka, prepare tea. Aoi, bring the standing signboard inside and put up the ‘Closed’ sign.”

“O-Okay.”

*Wow, he’s closing the store. What on earth is happening?*

Feeling a bit anxious, I changed the front door’s sign to “Closed” and brought the signboard inside.

“Nishijin’s Miyashita Kimono Fabrics is a long-standing store with three hundred years of history, after all. You handle everything from kabuki and traditional Japanese dance costumes to kimono for influential enka singers,” the owner began talking as he sat down on the sofa.

I’d just brought the signboard in and was in the process of closing the door when his statement caught me by surprise. *Wow, three hundred years!* The oldest stores I’d seen in my hometown were only a hundred years old at most. That’s Kyoto for you; even their stores have impressive histories.

“It’s only because we’re old. Even though we opened a store in Roppongi, I wouldn’t say it’s gone the way we would’ve liked,” Miyashita’s mother said with a wry smile.

It seems that they opened a branch store in Roppongi. Still, Miyashita’s family must be amazing if they receive kimono orders from influential enka singers. I began cleaning, pretending not to listen in on their conversation.

“Miyashita Kimono Fabrics, was it? Congratulations,” Holmes said with a smile, bowing his head.

What was he congratulating them on?

“Why thank you. It’s always been my dream for my daughter to be the Saio-dai.” Miyashita’s mother gave a posh laugh, placing her hand on her cheek.

S-Saio-dai? Startled, I turned around and saw Miyashita’s older sister huddled up in embarrassment. Come to think of it, Mieko was saying that this year’s Saio-dai was the daughter of a long-standing kimono fabric store. It’s Miyashita’s older sister, then. I could see why Mieko was so worked up about her looks—she was an elegant beauty. Miyashita was also pretty with a nice face, but her sister was exceptionally eye-catching.

“So, your business today has to do with the Saio-dai. What might it be?” Holmes said with arms crossed. The three Miyashitas twitched in surprise.

“Kiyotaka. After the Saio-dai was announced, Saori began receiving suspicious mail,” the owner informed him in a low voice. Holmes frowned.

Saori, the older sister, shrank back. *Seeing as how the younger sister’s name is “Kaori,” perhaps fabric stores are fond of using “ori,” which means “weave.”*

“Suspicious mail, you said?” Holmes asked.

“Yes,” Saori answered with a slight nod, taking a brown envelope out of her handbag. “This is it.”

“Would you mind if I took a look at it?”

“No, please do.” Saori bowed.

Holmes put on his usual white gloves and picked up the envelope. He looked at it intently before taking out the white sheet of paper inside.

*“You aren’t fit to be the Saio-dai. Announce your withdrawal immediately.”*

“They cut out letters from a newspaper and glued them onto printer paper? This really is a stereotypical harassment note,” Holmes remarked, seeming slightly impressed. I stiffened up. Miyashita’s mother probably hadn’t noticed, but I could tell that Holmes was amused.

“Did you talk to anyone else about this?” continued Holmes.

Miyashita’s mother shook her head. “It’s too disturbing. Perhaps it would’ve been better to go to the police, but the sender didn’t write any threats, and we didn’t want to cause an incident right before such an important festival. I asked my husband, and he suggested talking to Seiji’s grandson.”

*I see. So, the owner and Miyashita’s dad know each other. Maybe it’s because they’ve both done business in Kyoto for so long.*

“U-Um, my father said that you’re very smart, and that people call you ‘Holmes,’” Saori suddenly spoke up enthusiastically. Her cheeks were flushed, which caught me by surprise. Holmes is a bit of a bully and a weirdo, but he has a refined aura and is extremely good-looking. Perhaps even this year’s Saio-dai was no match for his outward charms.

“Not at all. They only call me ‘Holmes’ because of my surname.” Holmes responded with his usual answer...even though it wasn’t the truth. “How did you receive this letter?”

“It was inside my bag.” Saori shrugged.

“Your bag?”

“Yes. I came home from university, and when I was emptying my bag, there was an unfamiliar envelope inside.”

“Did you stop by anywhere else?”

“My ikebana class.”

“Also, was this the only letter?”

“Oh, no.” Saori shook her head.

At the same time, their mother leaned in, saying, “When I first saw the letter, I was ever so disturbed—I didn’t know what to do. However, nothing came of it, so we thought it was simply someone being jealous. But then, we received another one.”

“This is it,” said Saori, this time bringing out a white sheet folded into four. Holmes took it and opened it with care.

*“Hurry up and withdraw. You’re an eyesore.”*

“This one is made with newspaper clippings too, I see. Did it not come in a brown envelope?” asked Holmes.

“No, it came as-is. It was placed inside my bag, too,” answered Saori.

“I see. From what I gather, you have an idea of who the culprit is, right?” Holmes asked, looking her in the eye.

Saori startled. “Wh-What makes you think that?”

“You seem remarkably calm despite receiving these letters, which wouldn’t be the case if you had no idea who the sender was. In your mind, you’re thinking, ‘It could be that person,’ right?” Holmes explained. *That sounded right to me.*

I could hear Saori gulp from all the way over here. She hesitated before saying, “Yes. There’s someone I think it might be.”

“My! Is that so? Why didn’t you tell me?” the mother exclaimed in surprise.

It was then that my schoolmate Kaori spoke up for the first time. She looked angry. “It’s because you make a big deal out of everything even when you don’t have proof. Remember when you went over to some girls’ houses and yelled at them just because Sis was being left out? That was *so* embarrassing. After that, she got picked on even more! You just don’t get it, Mom.”

“Kaori...” Their mother looked surprised, while Saori looked troubled.

“It’s fine, Kaori. Holmes, I actually think it might be that girl’s family who did it,” said Saori with a sad look. Holmes remained silent and waited for her to continue. “I was friends with two girls in high school. One of their families ran a small restaurant while the other ran a Japanese-style inn. Since they were both from well-known long-standing establishments as well, they went to the same ikebana school as me, and we were a friendly group of three. A minor thing led to me getting left out, and I was really worried about it... So I asked my mother for advice, but she got enraged, stormed over to both of their houses, and started screaming, ‘How dare you shun our Saori from your group! We’ll never do business with your store again, and we won’t refer customers to you, either!’”

I frowned as I listened to her story. *Whoa, that’s some extreme helicopter parenting.*

“It destroyed my friendship with them, but I couldn’t avoid them, because now we go to the same university and the same ikebana school,” she continued.

*Now that’s a shame. I wouldn’t have been able to stand it.*

“When I was selected as Saio-dai, I told my ikebana instructor. She was delighted for me and announced to everyone that someone in our class had been selected. I think those two girls misunderstood, because they looked really excited, as though they thought their own names might be called.”

Mieko’s words flashed through my head: “I heard that tea ceremony and ikebana teachers go around to their students.” That rumor might’ve given them the idea that the teacher was going to approach them.

“Right after that, she said, ‘It’s Saori Miyashita!’ and I’ll never forget the looks on their faces. Up until then, they’d simply been giving me the silent treatment,

but now they're being openly mean to me..." Saori cast her eyes down.

"I see," Holmes said with a nod. "Would I be able to meet those two?"

Saori's eyes widened. "Are you going to ask them directly?"

Holmes shook his head. "No, I'd like to meet them without revealing that I'm acquainted with you."

"In that case...our ikebana class is presenting an exhibit this weekend. All of the students will be there."

"That sounds great. I'll be sure to drop by," Holmes said with a smile.

## 4

After the Miyashitas left, Holmes remained seated and stared intently at the two letters. His eyes were serious, but his lips were curled in a smile.

"Did you figure something out?" I asked.

"Yes, somewhat." He stopped at that, and I understood that he wasn't going to explain further.

"Well then, I'm counting on you, Kiyotaka," the owner said while putting on his hat.

Holmes didn't hide his frown. "Where are you going?"

"Oh, just Ponto-cho."

"Good grief. Just when I thought you finally decided to pay us a visit, you push a problem onto me and then immediately go off to play. Why did you bring me this case in the first place?" Holmes sighed in exasperation, holding the letters.

The owner laughed heartily. "Well, Miyashita didn't wanna make a big deal outta it. She didn't want any rumors to start up either, so she couldn't go to the police. Since she was in a bind, I went, 'In that case, you can ask my grandson. He's the Holmes of Kyoto!' without really thinking."

"Would it kill you to think first? First of all, this is *your* store, but you're never around, and yet you don't want to close it either. You're so selfish. Father and I have our own work to do, too; meanwhile, you're pretending to be a busy

appraiser and going on overseas trips with women. On top of that, you even tried to hit on our part-timer Aoi.”

As Holmes went into his lecture, the owner covered his ears. “I can’t heaaar you!” *Is he a child?* “Did you forget that it was me that developed your talent? You should be thanking me, not lecturing me.”

“That has nothing to do with this.”

“Anyway, that’s how I am. Refining my sensibilities is part of my job, whether it be through meeting people or talking to the ladies. Now then, I’m off to the Hanamachi.” The owner dashed out of the store as though running away.

“I had to check something with him, too. I’ll have to call him later,” Holmes said to himself with a sigh. *I wonder what it is?*

Moving along...

“You and the manager have similar auras, but the owner is completely different, huh?” I murmured.

Holmes smiled wryly. “Indeed. My father and I do respect him, but sometimes it’s hard to refrain from laughing.”

“I-I see. By the way, he said he was going to Ponto-cho at first, but when he left, he said Hanamachi instead. Which one is he actually going to?” I asked.

“Ponto-cho is also called Hanamachi.”

“Oh, is that so? I thought Hanamachi referred to Gion.”

“Yes, that is also correct. There are six geisha districts that are called Hanamachi: Kamishichiken, Gion Kobu, Gion Higashi, Shimabara, Ponto-cho, and Miyagawa-cho. Together, they’re known as ‘Kyoto’s Six Hanamachi.’”

“I didn’t know that.” I’d only heard of Gion and Ponto-cho before, but knew of the refined impression presented by these districts of Kyoto.

“Oh! Aoi, could you accompany me to the Saio-dai’s ikebana exhibit? A lone young man would stick out like a sore thumb there,” Holmes said with a smile.

I nodded fervently. “Ah, okay. I was interested too, so I’d love to.”

“Hmm, now it seems like I’m the one hitting on you, albeit not as brazenly as



the owner,” Holmes said with a chuckle. I clammed up and felt my cheeks get hot. “I’m just kidding,” he continued right away. “There’s no ulterior motive, so don’t worry.”

I felt the strength leave my body. “You really are wicked,” I said, slumping my shoulders. Another grin rose to his face. It felt like he had me in the palm of his hand, and it was a bit frustrating.

*How much has Holmes grasped about this case? When we go to the exhibit and meet the two supposed suspects, I’m sure he’ll figure out something new.* I suddenly got excited at the thought. I was really looking forward to it now, for more reasons than one. It was probably disrespectful to be enthusiastic when the Saio-dai was being troubled by harassment mail. But I also hoped we could resolve this case quickly for the sake of clearing her anxiety, and clenched my fists tightly as I prayed.

## 5

Saturday arrived. Leaving Kura in the hands of the manager, Holmes and I headed for the hotel where the ikebana exhibit was being held. The venue was an event hall in Kyoto Hotel Okura, which was located near city hall. In other words, it was within walking distance of Kura.

“Aoi, did Saori’s younger sister say anything to you at school?” Holmes asked as we walked.

“Ah, yes.” I nodded. “The next morning, she was waiting at the entrance, and when she saw me, she warned me, ‘Please don’t tell anyone about yesterday.’”

“Understandable. If the girls at school heard about the Saio-dai receiving suspicious letters, I imagine the news would spread like wildfire. Was she nervous that you might’ve already told someone by then?”

“I think so. But either way, I didn’t tell anyone, and I wasn’t planning on it,” I answered with a strained smile.

Holmes squinted. “Do you have any friends you trust at your current school?”

I hesitated before answering, “Not at my current school.” Ever since I was faced with the fact that my closest friend was dating my boyfriend behind my

back, I kind of lost faith in the idea of friendship. If all I do is go to school, make small talk, eat lunch with people, wave goodbye, and go home, then nothing will go wrong. Since I don't talk to anyone about my worries and pain, I also don't have any friends I can share secrets with.

*"You and Katsumi make a really good couple! I'll watch him to make sure he doesn't cheat on you, so don't worry about going to Kyoto."*

The words of my once-best friend Sanae rang in my head, and I felt a stinging pain in my chest. *Why, Sanae? Why would you go out with Katsumi? You should've known how I felt, right? Did you think it didn't matter since I wasn't around anymore? Or were you only pretending to support us, when really, you'd always liked him? Were you suffering? In that case, were you happy when I went away?*

I started having trouble breathing. This always happens. I keep questioning myself, unable to find an answer. It hurts, I can't stand it, and I'm dying to know the truth.

"Isn't the weather nice today, Aoi?" Holmes asked cheerfully, looking up at the sky.

I came back to my senses and looked up. The cloudless, bright blue sky looked like it was shimmering. "You're right, it is."

Come to think of it, ever since I started working at Kura, it feels like I've been spending less time trapped in my painful thought loops. It's as though every time I fall in, Holmes's nonchalant words lift me back up.

I looked over at Holmes, and he smiled back. My cheeks flushed. It's scary how perceptive he is, but he's also saved me many times. It was wrong of me to try to sell my family's belongings, but I'm truly glad that I went to Kura and met Holmes.

After some more walking, we arrived at the event hall in Kyoto Hotel Okura. At the entrance was a sign that said "Hanamura School Ikebana Exhibit." I'm sure it must've been written by an esteemed calligrapher. Visitors were greeted by a large flower arrangement in the center of the hall, and the students' works were lined up on all four walls of the room.

“Spectacular,” Holmes said, looking fondly at the central flower arrangement, which was wider than the average arm span. I assume he likes flowers.

“It looks like this is the teacher’s work,” I remarked.

“Yes, it depicts the brilliance of spring in Kyoto. Despite its size, it manages to be both delicate yet bold. I can sense the artist’s passion for this exhibit.”

I looked at the flowers again. At first, I’d only thought, “Wow, it’s huge!” but after hearing him say that, I realized that it *was* delicate despite being so big. Just like the pattern on the Yuan blue and white pottery, it felt like there were nerves reaching to the tips of the leaves. *Flower arrangement is profound too, huh?*

“As expected of the school’s head. The exhibit is a success, too,” Holmes continued.

“It really is,” I replied. Most of the visitors were women in traditional clothes. Many of them were elderly, but I also caught sight of students like us, as well as the school’s students, including Saori Miyashita.

“Umm, we’re pretending not to know her, right?”

“Yes. For now, let’s look at the displays.”

“Okay.” I nodded and looked at the creations laid out on the white cloth. Each student had two works on display. As I was looking at everyone’s arrangements, I overheard someone speaking.

“My, it’s the work of this year’s Saio-dai. How lovely.”

I spotted Saori bowing thankfully to a visitor. She paused for a moment when she saw us, but then bowed gracefully like she did to everyone else. We bowed back and turned to her works.

One of them was a dynamic piece that used tall flowers. The other was small, but displayed a perfect sense of balance with its horizontal branches and small flowers. It looked delicate and fleeting, yet gave off a feeling of steadiness.

*There’s something about these two works...* I absentmindedly crossed my arms.

“These two works give quite the different impressions,” Holmes murmured

softly, apparently thinking the same thing as me.

Saori heard him and began to speak, but was interrupted by a firm voice coming from behind us: “That’s because they were made in different ways.”

Surprised, I turned around and saw a middle-aged woman in a kimono smiling cordially at us.

“Ah, Hanamura-sensei,” Holmes said with a bow. My eyes widened at him in surprise. So, this person was the ikebana teacher. Wait, Holmes knows her?

“My, is this Kiyotaka from Seiji’s place? You’ve grown up,” said the teacher.

“Long time no see.”

“You attended the prefectural university, if I recall correctly?”

“I’m at my dream school now, Kyoto University.”

“Oh, you got in for grad school? Impressive!”

“It’s fine; go ahead and call it sneaky.”

“Why, I would never!”

I felt overwhelmed by their cheerful conversation. Apparently, he knew this ikebana teacher through the owner. Kyoto really is impressive with all of these connections.

Holmes looked toward the two flower arrangements and changed the subject. “These are the Saio-dai’s works, right?”

The teacher nodded emphatically. “The large one was created in the classroom, while the small one was brought home to work on. Miyashita’s talent seems to manifest when she’s focusing at home by herself, so the small one has better craftsmanship.”

I inadvertently nodded at her explanation. It was true that the small one was much better. It showed the same attention to detail that I’d sensed from the teacher’s work. Perhaps Saori couldn’t maintain her composure in the classroom where her ex-friends were present. It’d be hard to get into the mood for elegant flower arrangement when you’re next to people who might’ve sent you harassment notes, after all. It’s only natural that she’d be able to make

something better alone at home. I had no doubt that it was like lying on a bed of nails for her.

“The work of young artists is so nice and lively. Are there any works by young people besides the Saio-dai?” asked Holmes nonchalantly.

The teacher chuckled. “Young people’s work? You talk like an old man, Kiyotaka.”

“You know how my grandfather is. I guess I’ve finally ended up the same way.”

“That I understand. Seiji’s a rascal, after all. Right, besides Miyashita, we have two other university students,” said the teacher before walking away briskly and stopping in front of the works further ahead. Two university-aged girls dressed in kimono were there, possibly the two that had sent Saori the letters. Their eyes lit up when they saw Holmes.

“Oh no, he’s hot.”

“Ah, he’s coming this way!”

“Kiyotaka, this is Keiko Kawase—her family owns a Japanese restaurant in Ponto-cho—and Yuuko Mikami—her family runs a long-standing inn in Gion,” the teacher said.

Keiko and Yuuko. They seemed completely ordinary—it was hard to believe that they could’ve sent the letters. They were so normal that I might not have been able to tell they were from honorable families if it weren’t for the kimono.

“Girls, this is Kiyotaka, the grandson of a famous appraiser named Seiji Yagashira. He attends Kyoto University and assists at Kura, an antiques store in Teramachi-Sanjo with a long history.”

After the teacher’s introduction, the two girls bowed and said, “It’s nice to meet you.” Holmes returned the gesture with grace, and they both blushed.

Then, as though having just noticed my presence, the teacher smiled and said, “Kiyotaka, is that lady beside you your...?”

“No, she’s a high school student working part-time at our shop. She’s here with me today for educational purposes,” answered Holmes.

“Ah, I see. A high school student—how cute! Please enjoy the exhibit at your leisure.” The teacher smiled warmly at me and I hastily bowed in response, saying, “Th-Thank you, I will.”

“Allow me to take a look at Keiko and Yuuko’s works.” Holmes immediately set his eyes on the arrangements, which had their flowers and branches reaching towards the sky. They seemed vibrant and full of life. Perhaps it was because I was used to seeing Kura’s antiques? Is this what they call youthful energy? They lacked detail, subtlety, and any sense of transience, and the craftsmanship itself may have been poor, but I felt myself being drawn to them.

“They convey your enthusiasm,” Holmes said with a graceful smile. The girls blushed again as though they’d been shot through the heart.

“Indeed. Only today’s youth could produce such works,” said the teacher with a chuckle.

“You must be proud that one of your students was selected as Saio-dai.”

I was startled by how suddenly he dived into the heart of the matter. *H-He’s already going to ask?* I immediately peeked at the girls, who now looked somewhat unamused.

At that moment, Holmes went, “Ah,” and took out his smartphone. “Sorry, I received a phone call. I’ll have to excuse myself. Aoi, please stay here.”

I stood there dumbfounded as Holmes sped out of the hall, holding up his phone. *What was that all of a sudden?* With Holmes gone, the teacher said her courtesies and left as well. I stood there all alone, not knowing what to do, until I received a text message:

*“Aoi, I think there are things that girls will only reveal to other girls, so please ask Keiko and Yuuko some questions. I’d appreciate it if you could ask, ‘Aren’t you frustrated that someone else from your class got chosen as Saio-dai?’”*

It was from Holmes. I stared at it for a bit.

Wait, what? He was planning on using me from the very start! And first of all, how could I possibly ask something like that?!

As I was glaring at the phone screen, someone suddenly called out to me,

“Hey, high school girl.”

Surprised, I turned around. “Y-Yes?”

“Are you going out with that guy?” It was Keiko, smiling yet looking dead serious. I felt outmatched.

“N-No, I’m just a part-timer. Really.”

The two looked at each other gleefully.

“Thank goodness! You don’t come across good-looking guys like that every day.”

“Yeah, and he goes to Kyoto University!”

I was rendered speechless by their lack of tact.

The two then hushed their voices.

“Wait, oh no! She’ll hear.”

“Yeah, I saw she had her eyes on him.”

“Are you talking about the Saio-dai?” I asked meekly.

“Yeah. Look, it’s her.”

I peeked over at Saori.

“She’s super pretty, right? She’s always been popular with the boys.”

“She always gets the spotlight. And now she’s the Saio-dai.”

“Ugh, I can’t believe it.”

I was rendered speechless again, this time by how they could be so open in front of someone they were meeting for the first time.

“I-It’s frustrating that someone else from your class was chosen, right?” I didn’t think there was any way I’d be able to ask it, and yet it came out surprisingly easily.

“It’s nothing new.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“We’ve been frustrated for a long time already.”

“The guys all like Saori the best. The ones we liked also said they were into her.”

“We were done being her foils, so we cut her off, and then her mom came and yelled at us.”

“Seriously, it was ridiculous. But thanks to that, we got to break ties with her. I’m glad we’re not stuck making her look better anymore.”

“Yeah, it sucks being with the pretty girl who gets all the guys.”

“And now she’s the freaking Saio-dai. Can she be any more perfect?”

“Isn’t her family overreaching, too? Going for Saio-dai when they aren’t as influential as they used to be?”

“Uh huh, there’s nothing special about them now. She only got picked because the store’s name is famous.”

“Her mom’s a big show-off, too.”

They spoke frankly as though they’d forgotten I was there. I was stunned.

Saori, Keiko, and Yuuko were good friends in high school, but Saori was much prettier than the others, and everyone’s eyes were always on her. When the guys Keiko and Yuuko had crushes on praised Saori, the girls’ pent-up jealousy exploded, and they cut Saori from their group. When Saori’s mother found out, she got angry and stormed over to their houses. That severed their friendship for good.

Now they turned to me. “Anyway, what do you think of that guy?”

“Do his good looks make your head spin?”

The two started pressing me for answers, as though they’d suddenly remembered why they were talking to me in the first place.

“W-Well, he certainly is good-looking.” *Honestly, he does make my head spin sometimes.* “He’s...kind of eccentric.” The moment I said that, the girls stiffened up. *Huh, was it that off-putting?*

“I’m sorry to hear that, Aoi,” said Holmes from behind me. This time it was my face that went pale.



"S-Sorry, Holmes," I said apologetically for a second time, putting my hands together. We had left the venue and gone to the cafe adjoining the hotel's first floor lobby.

Holmes smiled. "Don't worry. It doesn't bother me all that much."

"R-Really?" *He's not angry behind that smile, right?*

"Yes, my relatives often treat me as an eccentric, so I'm used to it. In fact, I've even been thinking about making 'Eccentric' my middle name," Holmes said nonchalantly, bringing his cup of coffee to his mouth.

My eyes widened in shock. "I-It *is* bothering you! Look, I didn't mean it in a bad way. I just meant you weren't an ordinary person!"

Holmes burst out laughing at my frantic excuses. "I'm just kidding, Aoi." He continued to chuckle, and I felt my cheeks turning crimson. *H-He got me again.*

"This is what they call 'wicked Kyoto guys,' huh?" I pouted as I drank my coffee.

"Aoi, it's 'Kyoto men,' not 'Kyoto guys.'" He held up his long index finger and spoke in a chiding tone, but his mouth was smiling.

"Oh, is that so? But, for some reason, I feel like 'Kyoto guy' suits you more." Right, an elegant but somewhat mean guy from Kyoto.

"That phrase doesn't exist, but I do like how it sounds softer than 'Kyoto man.'" Holmes seemed amused, narrowing his eyes into arcs. *I guess he likes it.*

"So, did you hear anything from Keiko and Yuuko?" asked Holmes.

"Ah, yes. More than expected."

"Oh? How so?"

"They were blabbering on and on. I was so surprised." They were so unreserved that I was hesitant to tell Holmes everything. After all, they'd set their sights on Holmes, and I wouldn't want to get in their way. But, this was an important investigation, so I relayed to him every last detail.

"I see. They were very open about their jealousy towards Saori, then. That's surprising." Holmes nodded, crossing his arms.

I impulsively leaned forward. "R-Right? You wouldn't normally say those things to someone you met for the first time, right?"

"Indeed. This essentially means that those girls are used to speaking poorly of Saori on a regular basis."

"That's terrible."

"It further proves how Saori was and is the school's idol. Since she's so brilliant, they don't feel guilty about it."

*Since she's so brilliant, they don't feel guilty about it?*

"Umm, what do you mean?"

"It's similar to how ordinary people are fine with speaking poorly about idols. Those girls may be justifying it in their heads as, 'Saori's so pretty and popular with the opposite sex. She has lots of positive feelings already, so it doesn't matter what bad things we say.'"

*It's a similar philosophy to ordinary people saying bad things about popular idols, huh? I can't believe it'd happen between close friends, too... Or maybe their jealousy was magnified because they were close friends.*

"But even then, how could they say those things so openly?" I lamented.

"You're right; it's poor behavior. If anything, they probably don't care if Saori hears them herself. They might *want* to cause her discomfort."

"What?! I feel so bad for Saori."

"Likewise."

"Wait. Saori *is* pretty, but is she really the type to be *that* popular with guys? To the point of making other girls *that* jealous?" *After all, some say that beauty is only skin deep*, I added mentally.

"Well," Holmes said, taking a sip of his coffee. "It could be that the combination of her delicate beauty and air of vulnerability stir up a man's protective nature."

In other words, she has something that makes men want to protect her.

“Holmes, do you prefer girls like Saori too?” I asked.

“Who knows?” Holmes tilted his head.

“Why are you dodging the question? You do think she’s pretty, right?”

“Perhaps I do, but my principles dictate that when I’m with a lady, I shouldn’t praise another,” Holmes said with a smile.

“Huh?” My eyes widened. Was he...referring to me as that ‘lady?’ I blushed the instant I realized. “Wh-What’re you talking about? I don’t qualify as a ‘lady,’ right?”

“You’re not a lady, Aoi? Please excuse my rudeness.”

“Wait, I definitely am!”

Holmes laughed at my angry outburst. *Ugh, he really is mean. A wicked Kyoto guy through and through.* I sulkily puffed my cheeks, and Holmes continued to chuckle at me.

“Kiyotaka!” I heard a woman’s voice from behind me and quickly turned around in surprise. Saori, Kaori, and their mother were all there. Kaori was wearing a dress, while the others were in kimono. All three looked nervous.

Holmes quietly stood up, and I followed suit. We went over to them.

“Thank you for going out of your way to come here today,” began their mother. The three of them bowed.

“No, I was delighted to be able to encounter such fine works,” Holmes said, gracefully smiling and placing his hand to his chest. His whole body exuded elegance. Honestly, that aspect of him was deserving of respect. Maybe that was what made his eccentricities stand out so much.

“My, is that so?” The mother paused before continuing in a hushed voice, “So, um, did you learn anything?”

Holmes nodded. “Yes, but I’d like to take the time to have a proper chat about it. Are you free tomorrow, preferably in the morning?”

“I have an appointment with Shimogamo early in the morning.”

“When is it?”

“It starts at nine, and then I have to be back at this exhibit from noon onwards.”

“In that case, let’s meet at eight, in Shimogamo Shrine’s ‘Tadasu no Mori.’ There shouldn’t be anyone there at that hour, so I think it’ll be ideal.”

“A-All right.”

The three nodded, but looked confused at his proposal.

“Um, did you figure something out?” asked Saori.

“Yes, I did,” Holmes answered readily.

The Miyashitas and I were all surprised. “Huh?” we said in unison.

“W-Wait, how much did you figure out, Holmes?” I asked.

Holmes took out the folded letters from his jacket’s inner pocket. “I know who sent these, of course,” he said with a smile.

## 7

After returning to Kura, I impatiently exclaimed, “H-Holmes, do you really know who the culprit is?”

Holmes frowned. “Please don’t say the word ‘culprit’ so loudly. People will think this is a dangerous shop.”

I gasped and covered my mouth. The manager, who’d been watching the store, chuckled. “Ever the lively one, I see.” He smiled warmly as he wrote in his manuscript with his favorite pen.

Holmes and the manager really do resemble each other—you can tell that they’re father and son. The grandfather’s completely different...but let’s ignore that for now.

“I-I’m so sorry,” I said with a bow.

“Take a seat for now, and let’s have some coffee.” Holmes walked to the back room with light steps. Feeling restless, I sat down on the sofa.

“How was the exhibit?” the manager asked gently.

“Oh, it was wonderful. The students’ works were full of energy, and the teacher had a large arrangement at the entrance that blew me away,” I answered.

“I see. Perhaps I should have a look too.”

“Okura’s within walking distance, so that makes it easy.”

“After seeing the exhibit, I want to eat their famous cream-filled red bean buns before coming back.”

“Cream-filled red bean buns?”

“Yes. There’s a cafe connected to Okura that has them, although they’re dine-in only. The cream isn’t too sweet, and it complements the red bean paste superbly.”

“Wow, I guess they make a surprisingly good combination!”

As we were chatting, the smell of coffee tickled my nose. I looked up, and Holmes had arrived with a tray.

“Good work today, Aoi,” he said, placing the usual café au lait in front of me.

“Thank you.” I couldn’t help but grin—I love this café au lait so much.

Holmes set the rest of the cups down on the table and then sat down on the sofa.

“U-Um, can I come to Tadasu no Mori tomorrow, too? It’s like, I’ve already come this far, so I can’t help but be curious...” I asked, finding it difficult to explain the feeling.

Holmes nodded with a bright smile. “By all means. You’re already a full-fledged member of the investigation, after all.”

*Phew. I really want to see the truth for myself.*

I leaned in and asked in a quiet voice, “So, who do you think sent the harassment notes?”

Holmes took the letters out of his inner pocket again and laid them on the table. “Aoi, could you take a close look at these?”

*“You’re not fit to be the Saio-dai. Announce your withdrawal immediately.”*

*“Hurry up and withdraw. You’re an eyesore.”*

They were both composed of newspaper clippings.

“Do you notice anything about them?” asked Holmes.

I stared at them intently for a bit, then said “Oh! There’s something different between them.” In the first one, each letter had been carefully cut out and pasted, but the second one was more sloppily put together.

“Do you feel anything when you see these?”

Holmes’s eyes lit up, but I didn’t know what to say.

## 8

“Tadasu no Mori” is the name of the forest that covers much of Shimogamo Shrine’s grounds. At the shrine’s Mikage Street entrance is a large stone monument that says “World Heritage Site.” A straight path extends from there to the main shrine, and Tadasu no Mori is the vast, old-growth forest surrounding that path. I’ve heard that the forest itself is part of the World Heritage Site.

While I’m at it, this place is also considered a famous energy vortex. To be honest, I used to think that those were a hoax. It wasn’t until very recently that I changed my mind, after moving to Kyoto. Visiting places like this deserted Tadasu no Mori—especially early in the morning—makes me feel like I can understand why they’re called energy vortexes. They have a special, tranquil atmosphere, as if I’ve entered a deep forest or climbed a high mountain, even if I’m on level ground.

I arrived at the forest ahead of our scheduled 8 a.m. appointment and took a short walk, breathing in deeply. *Ah, this feels great.* Dazzling rays of sunlight filtered through the leaves while the chirping of birds echoed all around me. I closed my eyes and focused on the sounds of the forest. It really did feel like I

was in a dense woodland.

Just then, I heard soft footsteps approaching me.

“Good morning, Aoi. You’re early, I see,” came the sound of Holmes’s voice.

I opened my eyes, turned to face the source of the voice, and there he was. A sight for sore eyes indeed. In this empty forest, he had the appearance of a prince—no, an aristocrat from the Heian era.

“G-Good morning. Yes, I live nearby, so...”

Holmes came right up to me and peered at my face. “Your eyes are a bit red. Were you so curious about the truth that you couldn’t sleep well?”

I blushed. “O-Of course I was curious. It’s only natural.” I’d asked him again after yesterday’s events, but he’d dodged my question, saying, “I’ll explain everything tomorrow.” How could I *not* be curious?

“You’re right. And it looks like our other curious parties have arrived,” Holmes said, straightening up and looking back over his shoulder. Startled, I did the same. Behind us, I saw the Miyashita family entering the shrine grounds with concerned looks on their faces.

The forest was empty aside from us, with only the chirping birds and rustling breeze breaking the silence until they were joined by the footsteps of the approaching Miyashitas. They stopped about three steps away from us and bowed deeply.

“Good morning.”

“Good morning. My apologies for calling you here so early in the morning,” Holmes said, placing his hand to his chest and bowing his head. Standing behind him, I bowed as well.

“So, um, is it true that the culprit will be coming here?” the mother asked, looking around the quiet grounds.

Holmes smiled. “Yes. In fact, they’re already here.”

The three Miyashitas opened their eyes wide in shock. Holmes took one of the letters out of his pocket and directed his stern gaze towards a certain person.

“The person who created this anonymous letter...was you, right, Kaori?” Holmes declared, looking at her intently.

The mother was obviously surprised, but I was too, and instinctively went, “Wh-What?” *Kaori? The Saio-dai’s younger sister and my schoolmate, Kaori?*

Holmes didn’t react to my bewilderment, maintaining his calm expression. Kaori remained frozen stiff at first but then began to tremble.

“Wh-What makes you think that?” she asked in a shaky, high-pitched voice.

“Let’s see. First, there was something I simply found suspicious. Saori attends a famous private university, but Kaori attends a run-of-the-mill public high school. Why is that the case? I’m sure anyone else would wonder the same.”

I nodded at his words. It was true that I’d also wondered the same thing. Why does Kaori go to a regular school when her older sister goes to a school for wealthy young women?

Holmes continued, “After asking my grandfather, I found out that you both went to the same private school until middle school, and it was starting in high school that you switched to a public school. You begged your parents to let you go to Oki High, saying that several of your good friends were going there. Oki High is a regular public school, but it’s still fairly reputable with a long history. So, your parents permitted it without any particular fuss.”

Their mother nodded in silent agreement. Come to think of it, Holmes said there was something he wanted to check with the owner. It must’ve been this—the reason why Kaori switched to a public school.

“But that wasn’t the real reason, right? Kaori, when you were in your second year of middle school, Miyashita Kimono Fabrics opened a branch store in Roppongi as a friend had suggested. However, business went poorly and they withdrew from the market after a year. Did you decide to switch to a public school out of consideration for your family’s finances?” Holmes asked in a gentle tone.

Kaori clenched her fists, not saying anything in response.

Holmes continued, “Then, Saori was selected as Saio-dai. Were you not worried for your family?”



“Hm?” I furrowed my brow. “U-Um, why would Saori being selected as Saio-dai make her worried about her family?”

“I’m not sure how much of this is true, but I’ve heard that the preparations are mostly paid for by the girl’s family. It’s rumored that the costume alone costs five million yen, and the total expenses come out to ten million.”

“T-Ten million...”

“They say that that’s the reason why only the daughters of distinguished families have ever become Saio-dai.”

*I see. So that’s why Keiko and Yuuko said her family was overreaching.*

Accepting her defeat, Kaori grit her teeth and swung her face back up to look at him. “That’s right! Our store is old and famous, but we’re in the red! Sure, a long time ago we made outfits for a bunch of famous singers that wore them to the biggest musical event of the year, but that’s all in the past. No one comes to expensive places like us anymore! Despite that, we got tricked into opening a store in Roppongi and failed miserably! And just when I thought we’d finally recovered, Sis was selected as Saio-dai! You’ve gotta be kidding me! Mom and Dad were too prideful to turn it down, so I thought making that letter would be for the greater good! I made it, but...!” Kaori choked.

Holmes narrowed his eyes in a gentle smile. “Ah, so I was right about *that*, too.”

“Huh?”

“You *made* a letter, but you didn’t *send* it. Right?” Holmes said.

He must’ve been spot on, because Kaori was visibly taken aback. She clenched her fists and nodded.

“Yes. I finished making it, but I was still hesitant. Then, Mom and Dad said, ‘Saori being chosen as Saio-dai is the lucky break we needed. It might cost money, but it’s a cheap price to pay for that much exposure.’ When I heard that, I realized how short-sighted I was... I wanted to throw out the letter, but...” Kaori looked down at the ground as she spoke.

“But, at some point you lost the letter and it wound up in your sister’s bag?”

Holmes said.

Kaori gulped and nodded. “It was still in the brown envelope, so it might’ve gotten put in there by mistake for some reason.”

“I don’t think so. Saori found the letter and put it in her bag herself, right?” Holmes asked, quickly turning to look straight at Saori, whose face had gone pale with shock.

Their mother exclaimed, “Huh? Really? How come? Weren’t you happy to be Saio-dai? You were all worried when the harassment note came!”

Saori looked down with a pained expression.

“Furthermore, Saori created another one herself. That’s what this second note is,” Holmes said, taking the second letter out of his pocket.

After a short period of silence, Saori quietly answered without looking up from the ground, “How did you know?”

“It was the two flower arrangements at the exhibit. The smaller one that was done at home—that was made by Kaori, right? Not you.”

Saori and Kaori both looked up quickly, as though caught off guard. “H-How did you...?”

“The instructor said they were ‘made in different ways,’ but that’s not the issue. The smaller one looked like it *had* to have been created by a different person. I came to the conclusion that if the one created during class in the teacher’s presence was yours, then the one created at home must’ve been the work of another.

“Then, there’s the issue of these harassment notes. The first one shows an astonishing amount of precision in how the letters were cut and pasted. However, the second one doesn’t show the same attention to detail. I suspect the creator also realized this, because they kept the message short. So, two people created the notes, and two people created the ikebana pieces. Naturally, Kaori and Saori came to mind. However, it would appear that they had different motives for constructing the letters,” Holmes explained calmly.

I gulped. *Right, Kaori’s motive was in consideration of their family’s finances.*

*In that case, what about Saori?* I stole a peek in her direction. She hung her head, looking crestfallen, and seemed to be on the verge of tears.

After a short silence, Saori murmured almost inaudibly: “I-I...didn’t want them to hate me even more.” She paused before continuing, “In high school, Keiko and Yuuko suddenly started avoiding me for some reason, and our friendship was broken for good when Mom yelled at them. But, I always wanted to go back to the way we were before. After a while, their hostility finally died down, and I thought we might be able to become friends again soon, but then I was chosen as Saio-dai. I hoped they might congratulate me and we could reconcile, but it had the reverse effect. They completely hated me... It hurt so much. I thought maybe, if I got a threatening letter and withdrew, they’d be nice to me and show some sympathy. Maybe then, we could go back to being friends.” Tears spilled down her cheeks as she told her story.

I didn’t know what to say. I knew she’d been suffering, but I hadn’t expected her to go to such lengths for her friends’ pity. *First of all, those two are so jealous of her that I don’t think anything can make them friends again. It’s like, their shallowness puts me at a loss for words.*

But when I looked at Saori, who was trembling and crying her eyes out, I was reminded of myself. I had tried to return to Saitama by selling my late grandfather’s belongings. From an outsider’s perspective, it’s a hopeless cause, but to the person involved, it can mean everything. Saori had been studying alongside her ex-best friends at the same university and ikebana school, suffering the whole time.

“Sis, you idiot!” I looked at Kaori in surprise as her voice seemed to reverberate through the forest. “I thought you did it because you were worried about the money too, but *that’s* why?! That’s so pointless! I’m gonna cry!” *Whoa there, Kaori. I can sympathize, but that’s still harsh.*

“You wouldn’t understand, Kaori! You don’t know how I’ve felt this whole time!”

“Exactly, I *don’t* understand! Why would you cling to those jerks? You don’t even like ikebana that much, but you still kept studying it just because you wanted to make up with them eventually! Stop obsessing about those idiots

who only badmouth you because they're too blind to see your good traits! Move on to a new, better world! Become the most beautiful Saio-dai ever, so that one day, those two will brag about how they used to be friends with you!" Kaori shouted with all her strength.

I was overwhelmed. Her words seemed to resonate with Saori's heart too. "Kaori..." she whispered before starting to cry again, her face bright red. The group fell silent.

Suddenly, Holmes began clapping his hands. "That was brilliant, Kaori."

Kaori blushed, as though his words had brought her back to her senses.

"So, I'll be returning these to you," Holmes said, offering the two letters to their mother.

"This is truly embarrassing. Thank you very much," their mother said sullenly, taking the letters.

Saori and Kaori bowed their heads to Holmes, saying, "We're very sorry for the trouble, Kiyotaka."

"Don't worry about it," Holmes replied, shaking his head. "Saori, I agree with what Kaori said. Please strive to become a stunning Saio-dai who captivates all who set eyes on her."

Saori nodded, wiping her tears with a fingertip.

"And Kaori, there's something I wanted to ask you," Holmes continued.

"Y-Yes?" Kaori replied with a slightly wary look in her eyes. She was probably scared because of how much Holmes had guessed correctly.

"You switched to a public school for your family's sake and you arranged flowers for the benefit of your sister. What made you so devoted? Why did you let your sister take the ikebana lessons even though you enjoyed the art yourself?"

Kaori stared at him in surprise for a moment before chuckling. "Oh, well, I'm the second daughter, so one day I'll be able to leave the house and become free. But my sister will have to get married and inherit the store. That's why I think it's only natural for her to go to a good school and take lessons, since it

affects our family's prestige. I respect her, but I also feel a bit bad for her, so I want to support her as much as I can. She's pretty, but she's actually completely useless when it comes to everything else." Kaori spoke with a cheerful smile, and I felt my mood brightening up too.

Kaori looked at her wristwatch and said, "Mom, it's time to go to the shrine office," startling both Saori and their mother.

"You're right. Kiyotaka, you have my humblest apologies for troubling you with our family affairs. Um, if possible, please don't..." their mother trailed off.

"Worry not. I won't tell anyone," Holmes replied.

The three looked relieved at his answer. They bowed deeply and walked off towards the main shrine.

As I watched their retreating figures, I inadvertently opened my mouth to call out, "K-Kaori!"

She turned around, presumably wondering what I wanted. I suddenly got really nervous. *Wait, why did I stop her in the first place?*

"U-Um, I heard that Hotel Okura has cream-filled red bean buns. A-And, they're dine-in only. I-I can't go by myself, so um, would you like to go someday?" I said in a squeaky voice.

Kaori looked a bit surprised, but smiled and said, "I've heard about Okura's famous buns! I wanted to try them too, so I'll definitely go with you!"

"Th-Thanks!" I waved goodbye, my heart pounding with joy.

"I'm glad you were able to meet someone you clicked with," Holmes said with a gentle smile. I quietly nodded. Right, there wasn't any particular reason for it. I just spontaneously thought, "I want to be friends with this person."

I took a deep breath and looked at Holmes again before saying, "I'm glad the incident was resolved peacefully."

"Indeed. The location may have also helped them be honest."

"Oh yeah, this place has a really sacred atmosphere."

"That's true, but do you know the story behind Tadasu no Mori?"

“Huh? What story?”

“It’s said that the name comes from ancient mythology. Shimogamo Shrine’s enshrined deity Kamotaketsunumi-no-Mikoto carried out trials here, hence ‘Tadasu’ which means ‘to investigate.’ This place was the courthouse of the gods,” Holmes explained as he looked up at the sky.

My eyes opened wide. The courthouse of the gods... I didn’t know Tadasu no Mori was such a sacred place.

A cool breeze blew by. “Now then, shall we make a visit to the main shrine?” Holmes asked.

“Oh, sure. We’re already here, after all.” I nodded and we walked along the shrine path.

Past the bright red torii gate archway, I could see a grand two-story gate of the same color. And in front of us to the left was a mysterious tree that was the product of two trees that grew together into one trunk. Apparently, it’s known as the sacred tree of marriage.

We passed through the next gate towards the main shrine, and surrounding us were the rows of shrines dedicated to the god of the twelve zodiac signs. Up ahead was the large main building of the shrine, which didn’t have the usual bell. I once heard a tour guide say that many shrines that’ve been around for a very long time don’t have bells.

After praying at the shrine, Holmes checked his wristwatch and said, “It’s still before nine. Would you like to get breakfast, Aoi?”

“O-Oh, sure. I actually haven’t eaten anything yet.”

“Great. I know a good cafe nearby.”

“Ooh, I’m looking forward to it. Oh, but before that, can I draw a fortune?”

“By all means. Shimogamo’s fortunes have proverbs written on them too, so they’re very interesting.”

“You really do know everything, huh?”

We chatted like that, drew our fortunes, and left the shrine.

May fifteenth was the day of the Aoi Festival.

The Aoi Festival is formally known as the Kamo Festival, and it's one of Kyoto's three major festivals—the other two are the Gion Festival and the Jidai Festival. It is said to be Japan's oldest festival.

During the Asuka period, there was a time when Japan was devastated by natural disasters. Concerned for his people, Emperor Kinmei consulted with a renowned fortuneteller and was advised to hold a festival in honor of the Kamo deities. That was supposedly how the Kamo Festival began.

After the Heian relocation of the capital, Emperor Saga sent his beloved daughter, Imperial Princess Uchiko, to serve as a shrine maiden at Kamo's shrine. The ritual became a national festival called the "Aoi Festival," where an imperial princess was offered as "Saio" to devote herself to serving the gods. She would ride in a palanquin to the shrine building while the people gave her their blessings. In modern times, a young, unmarried Kyoto woman is chosen as a substitute. This "Saio-dai" rides the palanquin and is the star of the festival.

Learning the full history reaffirmed for me that it was an honorable position. And after all that happened, Saori made up her mind to be this year's star. When the palanquin emerged from the Imperial Palace, everyone sighed in awe at the beautiful Saio-dai dressed in the traditional twelve-layered kimono. She looked divine. I sensed strength from her expression, as though she'd broken free from the past.

The Aoi Festival is usually only covered by Kansai media outlets, but Saori was so stunning that she made national news. It wasn't long before she was even requested to make an appearance on TV, but that's a story for another time.

As Holmes and I watched her from the spectator area, I felt glad from the bottom of my heart that the suspicious mail incident had been resolved cleanly, without any strange complications. The fresh, early summer breeze felt soothing in this time of Aoi.

## Chapter 3: A Million Prayers

### 1

June is the rainy season in Kyoto, as it was in my hometown.

Quiet jazz music was playing at Kura, accompanied by the sound of the manager's pen gliding along his manuscript paper. Clipboard in hand, I was checking our inventory when suddenly I found myself pausing to look out the window. The people walking outside were carrying folded umbrellas. *It must be another rainy day. It's as if the sky is crying during this season.*

"Is something wrong, Aoi?" the manager asked.

Brought back to my senses, I readjusted my grip on the clipboard. "Ah, sorry. I spaced out for a minute."

"If you're tired, feel free to take a break. You can even do your homework if you want. Kiyotaka and I are always doing our own things here too." Behind his glasses, the manager's eyes narrowed into a warm smile.

I shook my head. "No, I'm being paid, so I'll work, even if it doesn't amount to much... Although I guess I shouldn't be saying that when I was spacing out." I slumped my shoulders and the manager chuckled. Honestly, he's just like Holmes when he's like this.

By the way, right now Holmes is at university, while the owner is apparently running about somewhere as usual.

"As you can see, we don't get many customers. But that doesn't mean we can leave the shop unattended, so just having someone to keep watch is much appreciated. Plus, you've been assisting with the cleaning, displays, inventory checks, and wrapping items. We really are thankful for your help," the manager said with a gentle smile, making me feel a bit warm and fuzzy inside.

"Th-Thank you for saying that."

"There's no end to the inventory checks, so why don't you take a short break



and we can have some coffee?”

“Oh, in that case, I’ll prepare it.”

Unlike Holmes who brewed coffee as a hobby, the manager wasn’t good at such things. So when Holmes wasn’t around, it became my job. I diligently prepared the coffee and placed it near him, being cautious since his manuscript was there. “Here you go.”

His penmanship was so excessively artistic that I couldn’t read any of it.

The manager picked up the cup and said, “Handwritten manuscripts are anachronistic these days, right?” as though having noticed my gaze.

“Ah, yes. I thought everyone was using computers now.” I nodded and sat down next to him, ready to greet a visitor at any time.

“They’re calling me the bane of my editor.”

It might be true, considering they’d have to input the entire manuscript. I also found myself impressed that his editor could read that handwriting.

“Are you bad with computers?” I asked.

“Not particularly. I discuss things over email, and our store management is done in Excel.”

*Huh, that’s unexpected. I thought he was writing by hand because he was bad with computers.*

“Why don’t you use the computer for this, then? Isn’t it more tiring this way?”

“That’s a good question... I started off writing by hand, so I’m used to it. But most importantly, when I’m typing on a keyboard, I feel like I can’t put my soul into it.”

“Your soul?”

“Everyone is different. Personally, I feel like I can pour more into my writing when I do it by hand.”

“You might be right. It feels like that with letters too.”

“Indeed. I really hope that handwritten letters remain part of our culture. But when it comes to published works, the editor will turn it into data anyway, so it

might not matter in the end. It's my state of mind that's the issue," the manager said with a chuckle.

*His soul will stay bottled up inside, huh?*

"I've been slowly making my way through your book. It's amazing—it's like it really does have a soul."

*Women's Quarters*, published under the manager's pen name, Takeshi Ijuin, takes place in the women's quarters from the Heian period—in other words, the Emperor's harem. The story depicts a storm of jealousy involving an official who kicks others down for his own ambitions and the concubines who are desperate to curry favor with the emperor. To put it bluntly, it's a messy love-hate drama. It's written in such realistic, excruciating detail that I had to stop at one point because I got too immersed and it hurt to read. I was surprised that the calm and gentle manager could write such a sordid story.

"Ah, you really are reading it? Do you understand now why I didn't want you to?" The manager smiled sheepishly as he took a sip of his coffee.

"Oh, u-um, well, how do I put this... I was surprised at how sordid it was." I accidentally answered honestly.

The manager chuckled. He looked out the window and murmured as though talking to himself, "All of my hidden darkness is spewed into my works."

"Hidden darkness..." I found myself mimicking him by looking out the window too.

*I think I understand what he's talking about, sort of. I, too, have a dark part of me that I can't get rid of.*

"I lost my mother when I was young. She didn't pass away, though—it was a divorce. It was just me and my father left, but as you can see, my father is always running around. So, I was raised by our relatives in Tokyo." The manager began telling his story in a calm tone akin to the jazz notes that were currently playing in the store. I patiently waited for him to continue.

"Those relatives were my father's younger brother and his wife. They didn't have children of their own, so they treated me very well. Still, they weren't my real parents, so a part of me always felt lonely. I missed my father and came

back to Kyoto during long vacations, but even when we were together, it felt unbearable for some reason. It was awkward with just the two of us guys.”

I could sort of see what he meant by that, too. A mother and son wouldn’t be too bad, but a father and son suddenly stuck together by themselves sounded like it’d be awkward and clumsy.

“My father didn’t know what to do with me, so he brought me with him to work. Art galleries and wealthy families would ask him to do appraisals, and my young self was fascinated by how he could instantly see through counterfeits. He was just like Sherlock Holmes, who could instantly expose criminals. Ah, I was a bookworm of a child,” the manager added. I smiled and nodded.

“I fiercely admired my father and wanted to become an appraiser like him one day. I worked hard to get into Kyoto University solely because I wanted to return to his side.”

“I see...”

“However, I realized that I didn’t have a ‘discerning eye.’ There wasn’t anything I could do about it, so I gave up on my dream and got a job at a publishing company. My dream was lost, but I did marry the woman I’d been seeing. We were blessed with Kiyotaka and lived a happy life. Kiyotaka was my father’s first grandson, so he was doted on very much.”

“I can imagine that.”

“It’s embarrassing to admit, but I was jealous of my son because I didn’t have any memories of my father doting on me. I did cherish Kiyotaka, but I also envied the love my father poured out for him.”

I felt a small pang at his words. It sounds unbelievable to be jealous of your own child, but in his case, it might’ve been inevitable.

“When Kiyotaka was two, my wife fell ill and passed away... It was initially only a minor cold, but there were severe complications.”

“Oh no...”

“Since it all began with a simple cold, my father became terribly fussy about Kiyotaka. He’d insist, ‘His body is still developing, so I can’t let him go to places

that are full of germs like kindergarten.’ Even though others and I told him that exposure to bacteria through communal living is how children become healthy and strong, he wouldn’t hear a word of it and started supervising Kiyotaka at all times. My son was an obedient child, so my father would bring him everywhere he went, whether it’d be appraisal sites or auction markets.”

I was surprised. That meant that Holmes didn’t go to kindergarten.

“Kiyotaka had a special ‘eye’ from the start, and his talent was further refined by all of the genuine articles he saw from a young age. One time, my father, Kiyotaka, and I went to an antique market at a temple. Kiyotaka tugged at my sleeve and said, ‘Wow, they have a Tsukinowa Yuusen bowl here!’ To me, it only looked like an ordinary bowl, but my father’s eyes lit up and he shouted, ‘You’re a genius!’ As a parent, I should’ve been proud too, but instead, I felt helpless in my envy,” the manager said, casting down his eyes.

My breath caught in my throat. I didn’t know what to say.

“I loved Kiyotaka dearly, but I was painfully jealous. Not knowing what to do with those feelings, I picked up a pen and wrote a historical tale about a teacher who was hopelessly jealous of a talented young person. I won the Best New Writer award with that story.”

“Wow, really? That’s amazing.”

“Thank you. That’s what led to me debuting as an author. But even now, I still feel a burning jealousy towards Kiyotaka’s talent. I vent all of those negative emotions into my writing,” the manager explained quietly before sipping his coffee again.

*I see... It’s definitely painful to be jealous of the person closest to you.*

The manager smiled wryly at my inability to say anything. “I’m sorry for bringing this up so suddenly. I’ve never spoken honestly about this with anyone before, so perhaps there’s something special about you.”

“O-Oh, not at all. I think it might be because we have similar feelings. I have negative emotions swirling in my head too.”

“Towards your ex-best friend who stole your boyfriend?” the manager asked calmly.

I nodded. "Yes, towards both of them."

"You should almost have enough saved up to go to Saitama, right?"

"Yes, I managed to save enough for the train fare."

"There aren't any long holidays in June, but you should be able to go back next month during summer break, right?"

I hesitated, unable to answer.

The manager smiled gently and said, "There's no need to rush. Take your time thinking about it."

I nodded.

The manager looked towards the door and squinted. "Ah, Kiyotaka's here."

I looked over at the door too. The chime rang as Holmes entered. He greeted us and placed his umbrella in the stand.

"How's the rain?" asked the manager.

"It's already stopped. Tomorrow should be sunny."

"Ah, tomorrow's the fifteenth," said the manager, looking at the calendar on the desk.

*Tomorrow's a Sunday, so I'll be here again for my shift.*

"Will you be going this month too, Kiyotaka?"

"Yes, I'd like to."

"In that case, you should invite Aoi to go with you. I'm sure it'll be educational for her," the manager suggested as though he'd just gotten the idea.

"Huh?" I looked at him, startled. "Umm, go where?"

Holmes smiled and said, "Hyakumanben Chion-ji Temple's handicraft market. They hold a flea market on the fifteenth of every month, and sometimes you can find some remarkable treasures there. As my father said, I think it'll be educational for you, so please do come along. It'll be considered part of your work, of course."

I didn't quite understand, but I agreed nonetheless.

The next day, I headed towards Hyakumanben on my bicycle.

Hyakumanben Chion-ji Temple isn't too far from my house—in fact, it's much closer than Teramachi-Sanjo. To get there, you go south down Shimogamo Main Street and turn east when you reach Imadegawa Street. Before long, you arrive at the busy Hyakumanben intersection. Diagonally opposite is Kyoto University. Hyakumanben Chion-ji Temple is a little further east from that intersection.

However, since I was supposed to meet Holmes at Kyoto University's bicycle lot, I went into Kyoto University's campus grounds instead. Even though it was a Sunday, many students were coming and going. Some of them were wearing regular shirts and jeans, but others had messy hair and were wearing tracksuits or sweatpants. It was shocking how little regard they had for their appearances.

Come to think of it, I did hear someone in class say, "When I see an unmotivated-looking student, I automatically assume they're from Kyoto U." There really *were* a lot of unmotivated-looking students here. Are they so focused on their studies that they don't care about how they look?

I was nervous because it was my first time visiting Kyoto University, but seeing people's homely attire helped calm my nerves.

*But more importantly, the bicycle lot is huge. Where should I park my bike?*

I was looking around in confusion when I heard Holmes's voice: "Good morning, Aoi." Turning around, I saw him there, sporting a simple yet sharp look consisting of a casual jacket over a V-neck shirt and jeans. He really was good-looking, and it felt like the scholarly location highlighted his charms even more.

"G-Good morning. How did you know where I was?" I asked.

"I knew you'd be heading from Imadegawa towards Chion-ji, so if you were to enter Kyoto University, it'd probably be from that entrance behind you," Holmes responded swiftly.

*It was a stupid question. I regret asking.*

"Am I allowed to park my bike here?"

“Yes, go ahead.”

“Come to think of it, Holmes...” I stopped mid-sentence. *It might be too late to realize this now, but calling him “Holmes” in public is kind of embarrassing. Plus, this is a university campus. Should I call him Kiyotaka, then? Or Yagashira?* I anxiously thought while locking my bicycle.

At that moment, a female student who was passing by called out to him, “Oh, you came to school today, Holmes? Are you sticking around?”

I almost choked.

“Nah, I’m going over to Chion-ji Temple. What’s up?” Holmes replied in Kansai dialect.

“Chion-ji! Oh yeah, it’s the fifteenth, huh? I was hoping you could look at my report, Holmes. It doesn’t have to be today, so can you?”

“Sure.”

“Thanks. See ya!” The girl waved and left.

Perhaps it was only natural since they were fellow students, but hearing Holmes speak casually *and* in Kansai dialect felt new.

*Wait a second...*

“You’re even called ‘Holmes’ at school?” My high-pitched voice revealed my disbelief.

“Yes, I’ve been called that ever since elementary school. It’s because my surname is Yagashira,” Holmes said, switching back to his usual tone of voice. It felt kind of strange. “Come to think of it, weren’t you about to ask me something, Aoi?”

“Oh, right. What are you majoring in, Holmes? I never asked until now.”

“I’m studying philology and literature.”

“Philology and literature...” *I don’t really know what that means, but I guess it sounds like him.*

“Shall we get going?”

“Ah, okay.”

Holmes and I walked side-by-side towards the exit. Other students glanced at him as they passed by. *Yep, Holmes is attractive. He's tall, too. During the Aoi Festival case, even those girls and the Saio-dai livened up around him. He must be popular. Which makes me wonder... Does he have a girlfriend? We've been working together for about three months, but I've never thought about it since he shows no signs of having one.*

After we walked in silence for a while, Holmes peered at my face and asked, "Is something wrong?"

"Wh-What?" I squeaked.

"You seem to be thinking about something."

"O-Oh, I guess so. Then again, you probably already figured out what I was thinking about, right?"

"I often can, but this time I'm not quite sure, hence why I asked."

My cheeks grew hot. I couldn't possibly say, "I was wondering whether or not you have a girlfriend." He might misunderstand.

"I-It wasn't anything important," I said instead.

"I see. I had a feeling that was the case."

"That's so mean!"

We laughed as we left the campus. The Hyakumanben intersection came into view again. It was a busy area, as you'd expect from a university town. We were surrounded by restaurants dedicated to dumplings, beef bowls, hamburgers, chicken skewers, and so on, as well as bars.

"There are so many restaurants here," I remarked.

"Indeed, it's a lively place."

"Do you go to bars after class, Holmes?"

"Occasionally, but not much because of the shop."

"Oh right, you have to work."

We crossed the street and walked east. The old majestic temple gate immediately came into view. There was a sign that said "Handicraft Market,"



and it was extremely crowded inside. All sorts of wares were lined up under parasols and tents, and the area was packed with customers.

“W-Wow, that’s a lot of people,” I said, already overwhelmed before even stepping foot inside.

Holmes chuckled and nodded. “The market is held every month on the fifteenth, but it does get more crowded when it falls on a weekend.”

“Oh right, today’s Sunday. I guess it’s more manageable on weekdays, then.”

We went into the jam-packed market and walked slowly, looking at the items for sale. Some of the clothes looked like things you’d find at any other flea market, but as you’d expect from Kyoto, there were also many vendors selling kimono, sashes, and miscellaneous fabrics. One person would be selling cute animals made of wool felt, while the next would be selling bags and shoes made of genuine leather. There were accessories, purses, wallets—even pickled vegetables, dried sardines, cookies, and coffee. I was surprised and excited by the variety of goods.

“This is fun. It’s like a festival,” I said.

“I’m glad you’re enjoying it. Finding treasures such as this is part of the fun too,” Holmes said, picking up a ceramic cup. “This is a fine cup. The color is deep and it has a nice, elegant shape.”

As he said, it was a lovely cup. It was black mixed with a deep indigo, and it had a soft, round form. But the price tag on the handle said “1,500 yen”—a completely normal price.

“Is that a secret treasure? Was it made by a great artist from the past?” I whispered.

Holmes shook his head. “No, I believe that this is an authentic work of the seller over there.”

I followed his gaze to a rough-looking middle-aged man with unkempt facial hair who was sitting imposingly on a folding chair. *Wh-Whoa, he looks like a bad-tempered potter!*

“He must be a very kind, sensitive man,” Holmes said softly while gazing at

the cup.

“Huh?” My mind stopped in its tracks. “Wh-What do you mean? He looks like the kind of person who’d fight bears on a mountain,” I whispered even more quietly.

Holmes chuckled.

The bearded bear-fighting man frowned at us suspiciously and walked over. “What’ll it be, boy?”

“I’d like to buy this excellent piece. The shape and color are exquisite,” Holmes said with a smile. He offered the money and the man, perhaps embarrassed, said nothing as he wrapped the cup in newspaper and placed it in a plastic bag.

“Here you go. Take these too,” the man said, throwing in two pieces of candy.

*H-He added a bonus! Holmes’s praise must’ve made him happy!*

“Thank you. I’m looking forward to your next masterpiece, *Sensei*,” Holmes said as he took the bag.

“D-Don’t say that. Who are you calling ‘Sensei’?!” The man’s face was clearly bright red now.

*Oh, I see. Maybe he really is a kind, sensitive man.* It sort of made sense now.

“I’m glad I was able to make an unexpected discovery right off the bat,” Holmes said, looking pleased with himself.

“Do you think he’ll become famous one day?” I asked.

“Who knows? I think he has great talent, but becoming famous is a matter of chance... Plus, none of his other works were as brilliant as this cup. He may be lacking in consistency.”

I giggled at that last part. “Maybe this cup was his once-in-a-lifetime success.”

“It could be, but at the same time, it means he does have the skill to make something of this caliber.”

“Maybe being called ‘Sensei’ opened his eyes.”

“I hope that’ll be the case. I really am looking forward to seeing where he

goes.”

“Now I want to go treasure hunting too.”

“Yes, feel free. I invited you along so that you could get experience.”

“Oh right. I’ll do my best.”

“You don’t have to treat it like work. Please enjoy yourself.”

“Okay.”

We laughed together as we continued browsing the market. As we were pushing our way through the crowd, a priest came out from the main temple building.

“The story of the origin of Hyakumanben’s name will be presented shortly in the main building. If you’re interested, please come and listen,” bellowed the priest, but the customers remained absorbed in their shopping as if they hadn’t heard him.

“Aoi, while we’re here, would you like to listen to the story?” Holmes asked with a smile.

I nodded and said, “Yes.”

We headed to the main building. The first things I saw inside were an impressive gold altar and a Buddha in the center of the room. Lanterns and canopies in the same gold color hung down from the ceiling.

“Excuse us,” we said as we entered and took off our shoes. We kneeled on the tatami floor. There were only a few others present when we arrived, but the priest continued inviting people in, and before long, a crowd had gathered. The priest smiled as he looked around at us, then bowed.

“I’m happy that you’re enjoying the bazaar, but at times like this, I do recommend visiting the temple and hearing its stories. It’s perfectly fine to wait until after you’ve nabbed your deals, of course,” the priest said. The audience, including me, giggled. It was so unexpected to hear a Buddhist priest say “nab your deals.”

“Now then, I’d like to begin the tale of how Hyakumanben got its name. Please feel free to unwind and sit however you like.”

After hearing him say that, I quickly relaxed my sitting posture.

The priest's story was as follows:

Around 680 years ago, a terrible plague spread throughout Kyoto, and the situation became dire. Many succumbed to the illness, to the point where their bodies had to be lined up on the Kamo riverbank. The ruler at the time, Emperor Go-Daigo, grieved upon seeing the scene. He asked Kyoto's Shinto and Buddhist priests for help, but no one was able to solve the crisis.

After several failed attempts, Emperor Go-Daigo went to a well-known priest named Zenna from Chion-ji Temple. Zenna's solution was to shut himself inside the Imperial Palace and chant "Hail to Amitābha Buddha" over and over again. After seven days of this, his prayer must have reached the Buddha, because the vicious plague subsided.

When he finally emerged from the palace, Emperor Go-Daigo asked him: "Zenna, how many times did you chant the name of Buddha?"

The man smiled gently and said, "One million times"—in Japanese, *hyakumanben*.

"And that's how this temple became known as 'Hyakumanben Chion-ji,'" said the priest, and everyone in the audience clapped.

### 3

"That was a really interesting story. I'm glad I listened to it," I said excitedly as we left the temple building.

Holmes smiled warmly and replied, "Indeed. When visiting places like this, I think it's extremely worthwhile to listen to what they have to say if you have the time."

"I agree. That Zenna had a way with words though, huh? If it were me, I probably would've said something boring like, 'I didn't count, but I chanted with all my heart.'"

“Indeed. Replying with ‘one million times’ showed that he was both clever and humorous.”

We continued to chat as we returned to the busy handicraft market. Upon looking at the antiques section, Holmes squinted and suddenly stopped walking.

I looked back at him in confusion and asked, “What’s wrong, Holmes?”

“Oh, it’s nothing. I happen to recognize the person selling those antiques over there,” Holmes said, looking towards a middle-aged man. “His name is Kanebayashi. He used to run an antique store as well, but I believe it closed down last month.”

“He must be selling his leftover inventory, then.”

“I suppose.”

As we were talking a short distance away, an elderly woman approached the stall.

“My, is that you, Kanebayashi? I was so worried when I heard your store closed down,” she said loudly.

Kanebayashi smiled at her and said, “Long time no see, Nakamoto! Yeah, it went under. Antiques just don’t turn a profit, so I made up my mind to close shop and do business in Osaka instead.”

“Oh, that’s good to hear. Is this a clearance sale, then?”

“Yep, take a look. Oh, but this one’s just for show.” He pointed at a ceramic sake bottle on the table. “It ain’t for sale.”

“Ooh, is this something special?”

“Uh huh. This here’s a salvaged Bizen ware. I’m sure you’ve heard of ‘em, right?”

“I’ve heard the name before. Are they rare?”

“Well, yeah. It’s real hard to get your hands on one of these. That’s why I keep mine here as a good luck charm, and I won’t sell it to no one.”

I glanced at Holmes while listening to their conversation. “Holmes, what’s a

salvaged Bizen ware?”

“Ah... In 1940, a capsized ship was found in the Seto Inland Sea. It was carrying old Bizen wares from the Momoyama period, which was major news for the antiques industry at the time. Those are what we call ‘salvaged Bizen wares.’”

“So they were treasures hidden in a capsized ship.”

“Indeed.”

Holmes had been staring at Kanebayashi throughout his whole explanation.

“If you were to sell it, how much would it cost?” the woman asked.

“Three hundred grand, I’d say. I won’t have to worry about that, though—ain’t no one here gonna pay that much. I’m counting on it to go up in value over time, too.”

“Three hundred thousand, and it’s still going to appreciate? That’s amazing,” the woman said, staring intently at the bottle.

“Don’t just look at that. There’s plenty of other things on sale,” Kanebayashi said with a smile.

“If I pay you three hundred thousand, will you sell this to me?” the woman said with a serious face.

Kanebayashi frowned. “It’s still my treasure, you know? But...three hundred grand, huh? I *do* want more capital for starting my new business...but...”

His reluctance seemed like an act.

“Hold on, I’m going to withdraw the money,” the woman said before darting away.

“Oh dear,” Kanebayashi said, breaking into a grin.

*I guess bluffing is his standard sales tactic.*

Now Holmes walked briskly towards him. “Long time no see, Kanebayashi.”

The man looked surprised to see him. “You’re...from Seiji’s place.”

*Geez, everyone knows the owner, huh?*

“Would you mind letting me see the salvaged Bizen ware too? If it’s in good condition, we’d be willing to pay five hundred thousand for it,” Holmes said with a sharp look in his eyes.

Kanabayashi’s expression stiffened. “I-I can’t. I wasn’t planning on selling it to anyone in the first place.” He hurriedly reached for the bottle, but Holmes picked it up first.

Holmes examined it in silence for a while before a smile rose to his face.

“Unfortunately, Kanabayashi, this is a fake.”

“I-I don’t need to hear your false accusations!”

“It’s the truth. There are various issues with this piece, but the most obvious one is here. Please look at the bottom,” Holmes said, turning the bottle over. “All salvaged Bizen wares have an inner circle on the bottom, whereas this one does not. It’s an ordinary Bizen ware.”

Kanabayashi couldn’t come up with a retort, but he also looked shocked to hear the truth. Perhaps he himself wasn’t confident it was real but believed it could be. It was possible that someone had told him it was salvaged Bizen ware.

“I doubt you’re selling a counterfeit on purpose, but in the end, I feel that it’d still be unethical to sell it for three hundred thousand.”

“Why you little...!” The man stood up with a swagger and headed straight for us.

“Holmes!” I shouted, frozen stiff with my hands over my mouth in fear.

It happened in the blink of an eye. It looked like Holmes had grabbed Kanabayashi’s hand, but the very next moment, the man was lying on the floor.

“Huh?” I said, dumbfounded.

“Ever since I was young, I was made to learn *aikido* as a means of becoming stronger,” Holmes said nonchalantly. Aikido is a defensive martial art that aims to not injure the aggressor.

Just then, the bearded potter from earlier ran over, looking shocked.

“What happened over here? Everything all right?” he asked.

“We’re fine. He just tripped,” Holmes said, quickly holding his hand out to Kanebayashi.

“Hmph.” Kanebayashi ignored Holmes’s hand and stood up, brushing the dust off of him. He silently began packing his goods into a cardboard box, presumably preparing to leave.

“Kanebayashi, you truly aren’t suited for running an antiques store. I think you made the right decision closing shop and switching to a different trade,” Holmes said to the merchant, who had his back turned to us.

Kanebayashi swiveled around with a mean look on his face. “What’d you say?” His anger was justified. Why would Holmes pour gas on the fire?

As I was watching them anxiously, Holmes took a pair of white gloves from his inner pocket and slipped them on. This was something he always did before an appraisal or before picking up an expensive item.

“I really was surprised,” Holmes said, picking up a red tea bowl from the scattered tableware. He squinted at it before saying, “Yes, I wasn’t mistaken. Truly a surprise.”

“What?” Kanebayashi said, glaring at Holmes.

“This is a genuine tea bowl by Handeishi Kawakita. I’m shocked that you would treat it like an ordinary tea bowl, not realizing what a rare treasure you had,” Holmes said with a grin.

Kanebayashi’s eyes opened wide. “A Handeishi Kawakita tea bowl...and it’s real?”

“Without a doubt. Please take it to a proper establishment and have it appraised. You’ll have the funds to start your new business.” Holmes gently placed the tea bowl back on the table.

“How much are we talking?” asked the bearded potter, who’d been listening from off to the side. *Thanks, Mr. Potter. I wanted to know too.*

“Let’s see... I think two million would be an understatement,” Holmes declared flatly.

The potter, myself, and of course, Kanebayashi, were all rendered speechless,



our eyes wide in shock.

“R-R-R-R-R-Really?”

“Yes, please take good care of it.”

“W-Will do. Thanks so much, man.” Kanebayashi grabbed Holmes’s hand and shook it vigorously. *Didn’t his attitude change too drastically?!*

Just then, the woman from earlier ran over, panting for breath. “Kanebayashi, I withdrew the money. Could you sell me that salvaged piece?”

“Ah, my apologies, Nakamoto. I really can’t sell this to you. I don’t have a certificate of authenticity or any other kind of proof. Sorry ’bout that.” He bowed apologetically, unable to say that it was a fake.

“I see... That’s a shame.”

“Today’s a clearance sale, so there’s big discounts on everything. See if there’s anything else you like,” Kanebayashi said with a grin.

The rest of us quietly left the scene. Then, I heard the bearded potter mumble, “Huh, so the boy’s the *real* sensei.” I couldn’t help but laugh.

At any rate, Holmes’s discerning eye was as amazing as ever.

## 4

How do I put this...

“I think I can understand why he’d be jealous,” I murmured as we walked.

“Hm?” Holmes looked at me.

“Oh, it’s nothing,” I said, flustered. I couldn’t possibly tell him that his father was conflicted because he was jealous of his son.

“Aoi, would you like to get some coffee and drink it next to the temple?” Holmes asked, pointing at a hand-drawn sign that said “Homemade Coffee for Sale.”

“Oh, sure. That sounds nice.” I nodded.

Holmes got it black, while I had sugar and milk put in mine. We went to a

quieter area away from the market and sat down on the temple stairs.

I drank my coffee and felt my cheeks loosen up. “It’s delicious.”

Holmes looked at me and asked in a soft voice, “Aoi, I think you’ve already saved up enough to go to Saitama. What will you do?”

I looked down at the milk coffee in my cup. The wind was blowing and I could hear the hustle and bustle of the handicraft market.

“To be honest, I hesitate when I think about going back. I was so sure that I’d go right away once I had the money, so it bothers me how wishy-washy I’m being.” I smiled in self-derision.

Holmes breathed a small sigh. “I understand how you feel. You don’t need to force yourself to go. Let it happen naturally.”

“Holmes...” *He really is nice—wait a second.* “I’m surprised you’d understand how I feel,” I said with a bit of a laugh.

Holmes smiled wryly and shrugged. “The truth is, it wasn’t only your keen eye that made me offer you the job.”

“Huh?”

“To be honest, I’ve gone through the same thing as you before.”

“H-Huh? What do you mean?”

“I’ve had my girlfriend taken from me, although it wasn’t by my best friend.”

“R-Really?” *I can’t believe it!* “Wh-When was this?”

Holmes paused before answering, “It was when I was in high school.” He sighed softly before beginning his story. “When third year had just begun, a classmate confessed her feelings to me and we began dating. We were a very normal couple and enjoyed spending time together. Since we were third-years, we’d study for entrance exams together too.

“However, I’ve always been surrounded by adults, and that’s never changed. They’d often tease me saying, ‘You’re not going to be able to focus on your studies when you have a girlfriend’—but not in her presence, of course. I didn’t take their comments seriously, but I did think they had a point. Since it was an

important year in deciding our futures, I vowed not to let things go too far yet, for our own sakes. ‘Kiyotaka’ means ‘pure and noble,’ and thus was our relationship.”

“I-I see.” *Was that last part about his name really necessary?*

“In my mind, I thought that once we both got into university, we could move on to the next stage. Until then, it’d be best to prioritize our entrance exams.”

“That’s the right thing to do.”

“Indeed, but it’s not always about doing the right thing. Right after we got into university, my girlfriend accompanied her friend to a group date. There, she met a pushy, egotistical Osaka man, who immediately stole both her heart and body.”

“Wh-What?” I squeaked in disbelief at the sudden turn of events.

“According to her, I was too passive, making her feel lonely and uncertain. I’d been doing it for both of our sakes, but that hadn’t gotten across to her at all. I did realize that she wanted to go beyond kissing, but I hadn’t realized that she’d been harboring feelings of loneliness and uncertainty.

“The pushy, egotistical Osaka man found his way in through those insecurities and wound up stealing everything. I was so shocked, envious, and frustrated that I considered going to Mount Kurama and taking up priesthood.”

“M-Mount Kurama? Priesthood?!”

“And later on, I went a bit crazy and spent part of my university life doing the complete opposite of what a priest would.”

“Wh-What?”

“Well, let’s not talk about that. Anyway, because of my past, I know exactly how you feel, Aoi,” Holmes said with a smile.

I felt a tightening in my chest. I had no idea that Holmes had such an unpleasant past.

“You’re a normal person too, huh?” I said without thinking.

Holmes’s eyes widened, and then he chuckled. “What do you mean by that?”

“I-I mean, you’re such a genius. The owner is an amazing appraiser and the manager is an amazing author, but even they recognize your talent, right?” *To the point where the manager was jealous of his own son.*

“Aoi, did you read my father’s book?”

“Umm, about half of it.” I got stuck and couldn’t go further because the jumbled-up feelings of jealousy were too realistic.

“It might be a difficult read for you right now.”

As usual, he saw right through me.

“But hang in there. Please read it to the very end,” he continued.

“Huh?”

Holmes looked down and placed his hand on his chest. “Once you reach the end, your heart will be left with something beautiful beyond comparison.”

*Something beautiful...*

“When all of your emotions are laid bare and it’s too painful to do anything, the view you see when you finally look up again is a very beautiful sight. That’s what that book teaches. My father is truly a great author, if I may say so myself.”

Watching Holmes praise the manager with the most genuine of smiles made it difficult to breathe. “Holmes, do you know what the manager feels inside his heart?” I asked quietly. *Since it’s Holmes, he might’ve seen through his father too.*

“Hmm... I know that my father strongly admired my grandfather and dreamed of becoming an appraiser as well, but was discouraged by his lack of talent and gave up. He feels that I have the innate talent that he doesn’t and harbors something resembling jealousy towards me,” Holmes said without hesitation.

I was stunned. He knew everything all along! That’s Holmes for you.

“Oh, sorry, was that not what you were talking about?”

“N-No, that was it... How do you feel about it?” I felt awkward asking that.

Holmes looked conflicted. “How do I feel? I suppose I think he’s naïve,” he

said flatly.

“N-Naïve?” I goggled at him.

“Yes. My father gave up on becoming an appraiser because he didn’t have the innate talent for it. What kind of talent do you need to become one? Perhaps I have keener eyes than the average person, but that doesn’t mean my grandfather does, and he’s the one my father admired.”

“Huh? Really?”

“Yes. When my grandfather was fifteen, he became an apprentice of a master appraiser who ran an antiques store. The master had many other apprentices too, and in order to be acknowledged among them, my grandfather studied as much as he could from him, training his mind’s eye. He worked so hard that he bled, and that’s how he became the nationally certified ‘Seiji Yagashira’ we see today.

“So, if my father wanted to become like my grandfather, he should’ve put the same amount of effort in—or more. Instead, he decided that he ‘didn’t have the talent’ and changed course. After completely forgetting about his dream of becoming an appraiser, he had me and was shocked to sense that talent in me.”

“O-Oh.”

“My father may think that I can easily perform appraisals because of the talent I was born with, but that’s not true. For certain reasons, I never went to kindergarten and instead accompanied my grandfather everywhere he went...”

I nodded, knowing why.

“Whenever my grandfather took me to work, he said, ‘You’re my assistant, so stand next to me and don’t get in the way.’ It may have been a silly thing to say to a young child, but those words meant a lot to me. I was the assistant of the acclaimed Seiji Yagashira. From a very young age, I was training hard to not embarrass myself in that position.

“Standing next to my grandfather, I’d look at the antiques and think about the differences between the genuine pieces and the counterfeits, the traits of each era, and what the counterfeits had in common. I’ve been studying for as long as I can remember.

“However, I still haven’t caught up to my grandfather, because at the same time, he’s also continuing to study and gain experience. It’s an endless world. You’ll never be done learning, and sometimes things will go against common knowledge. My father turned tail before even stepping foot into this world, which is why I can only think of him as naïve for being jealous of me,” Holmes declared.

I gulped, overwhelmed by his intensity. Holmes was right. It was naïve to be jealous when he hadn’t put in the blood, sweat, and tears.

“However, I do understand how he feels. So, as long as my father envies me, I have to aim higher.”

“Higher?”

“Yes. For example, if a high school baseball team loses to their rival in the regional tournament, they’ll want that team to keep going and win the national championship, right?”

“Oh, true.”

“I’m going to experience that in reality, too.”

“In reality?”

“Yes. I hear the girl who left me and that pushy, egotistical Osaka man are going to get married.”

“Wh-What?” That was another surprise. Who would’ve thought those two would make it that far?

“Them going that far actually makes me feel redeemed. If their bond is so strong that they’d reach the point of marriage, then it was inevitable that she’d leave me.”

“Th-That might be true.” Honestly.

“So, I think that when someone is jealous of you, you should work harder for their sake too. And in my father’s case, his envy and inferiority complex are what allow him to write masterpieces. He may not have realized it yet, but I believe that that’s his calling.”

“In that case, it was fate that he became an author despite wanting to be an

appraiser.”

“That’s what I think. Besides, if you *really* want to become something, you’re not going to give up just because you ‘don’t have talent,’ right? I believe in the story of Zenna that we heard earlier: if you have a wish you truly want granted and you put in as much effort as a million prayers, it’ll surely come true,” Holmes said, looking up at the deep blue sky.

I felt my chest grow hot. *A wish you truly want granted will come true with the effort of a million prayers... Now that I think about it, do I really want to see him that badly? Maybe I’m naïve too, just like the manager. I’m frustrated, but I won’t do anything about it.*

I clenched my fists tightly in my lap. “Holmes, I think...I’m going to give up on going to Saitama.”

“Huh?” Holmes looked surprised—a rare sight. He must not have expected that.

“I-I mean, the train fare alone is tens of thousands of yen, right? I worked so hard for this money, and I don’t want to use it on that. M-Maybe I’ll go hiking in Mount Kurama instead, haha!”

Holmes smiled gently at my forced laughter. “I see. If you wait a little longer, the Eizan railway will have its best view of green maples.”

“Oh, is that so? I usually associate maple trees with fall, but I guess people enjoy looking at green leaves too.”

“Yes, it’s invigorating. I’ve been meaning to go again too. Would you like to go together?” Holmes peered into my face with a smile and my heart skipped a beat.

“Y-Yes. I was thinking it’d be lonely by myself, so I’d be happy if you came along.” *O-Oh no, my voice is cracking.*

“I’m looking forward to it.”

“S-S-S-S-Same here.” My heart was beating a mile a minute.

“Shall we get lunch now?” Holmes said, standing up straight. I followed suit. “Aoi, what do you want to eat? There are a lot of restaurants around here, but

most of them are rather loud.”

“Oh, I-I’m fine with anything.”

Our awkward conversation continued as we left Hyakumanben Chion-ji Temple on this June the fifteenth. Since it was a lull in the rainy season, the uncertainty in the sky felt like a reflection of my own heart.



## Chapter 4: The Case at the Mount Kurama Lodge

### 1

It's the beginning of July, the time when leaves turn a deep green.

When I said I was going to Mount Kurama, Holmes said, "Would you like to go together?" and my chest tightens every time I remember the gentle smile on his face.

Friday evening after school, I went to Teramachi-Sanjo's antique store Kura for my shift. My heart was secretly aflutter as I diligently cleaned the dust from the valuable goods.

Today was unusual because both Holmes and the manager were at the shop. Holmes was doing the accounting, while the manager was engrossed in his manuscript as always.

"Oh right, Kiyotaka, Aoi," the manager said, pausing his writing and looking up.

"Yes?" we both replied.

"You said you were thinking of going hiking in Kurama in July, right?"

Since it was going to be on a weekend when I was likely to have a shift, we had told the manager in advance.

"Yes. Now that I think about it, it's already July." Holmes looked at the tabletop calendar as though he'd just realized. Meanwhile, I'd been looking forward to July this whole time...

"I know this is sudden, but could you take your trip tomorrow?" the manager said with a serious expression, surprising the both of us. "You see, one of my author friends has a mountain lodge there."

"Right," Holmes said with a nod. "Kajiwara, was it? I heard he passed away three months ago."

“Yes, and his family would like to consult with you about something. Could you stop by their place after your hike?”

Holmes hesitated before answering with an unenthusiastic “Fine.”

“Sorry about this, Aoi. Oh right, you and Kiyotaka can have lunch at one of Kibune’s river terraces. I’ll make a reservation for you,” the manager said as if to sweeten the deal. He probably felt bad asking us to do him this favor on our day off.

“A Kibune river terrace? Really?” I asked in disbelief. When it comes to river terraces, the Kamo River comes to mind first, but Kibune’s are a whole other beast. They’re called the epitome of summer luxury, with clear water flowing beneath the floor. I saw them on a travel show and was enchanted, wishing I could go just once in my life. I never would’ve thought it’d actually be possible. Going to Kurama and eating lunch on a Kibune river terrace would be like a dream come true!

While I was off in my own little world, Holmes sighed. “All right, it seems like Aoi doesn’t mind, so I’ll do it.” He shrugged halfheartedly.

“I’m sorry to impose this on your hiking trip,” the manager said, although he looked relieved. He made it sound like he’d suddenly remembered, but he definitely could’ve been waiting for a chance to ask. Maybe he has difficulty asking Holmes to do things, unlike the owner?

“It’s okay. We’re just stopping by on the way back, so it’s no big deal,” I said, waving my hands. Honestly, I was happy that we could go so easily.

At the time, we weren’t aware of the bizarre mystery that’d occurred at the Kajiwara mountain lodge or the family trouble that we were going to get pulled into.

## 2

The next day, Holmes and I were to meet at 9 a.m. at Demachiyanagi Station. I arrived a little bit early and carefully secured my bike in the bicycle lot next to the station.

“There we go.”

By the way, Demachiyanagi Station is close to the junction between the Kamo River and the Takano River that I talked about before. The Keihan subway and the Eizan railway are both accessible from it, and you can board the Keihan Main Line to Osaka from here as well, making it a busy station.

I exited the bicycle lot and went to the ticketing area. There, I saw that Holmes had already arrived.

“Good morning, Aoi.”

“Ah, good morning.”

“Shall we go?” he said, holding out a ticket.

“Oh, you didn’t need to buy it for me.”

“It’s not a problem. I’m sorry that this trip had to be so sudden.”

“Don’t be!” For me, this worked out perfectly.

We passed through the small ticket gate directly onto the platform where a train with only two cars was on standby. Even though this was the starting point, it still felt oddly impactful to see the train cars so close.

“Let’s take the front car. We’ll have a nicer view of the mountain there,” Holmes said.

“Okay.” I headed for the front car in a cheerful mood. The interior layout was the same as the city trains, with a horizontal row of seats on both sides. That said, the empty two-car train felt more like a rural train up in the mountains. I got excited, feeling like we’d already traveled far away.

I sat down and enthusiastically looked around the train. I noticed that a single one of the hanging straps was in the shape of a pink heart and stared at it in confusion. “Holmes, that one strap is a pink heart, right?” I asked.

“Yes.” Holmes nodded. “The Eizan railway’s train cars have heart-shaped straps. According to superstition, they’re ‘happiness straps’ that grant the holder happiness.”

“Happiness straps!”

“While we’re here, you should try holding onto it too.”

“Oh, um...okay. I might as well.” I awkwardly stood up and grabbed onto the heart-shaped strap. Then, the train started moving, so I hurriedly sat back down. “A-Are you not going to do it, Holmes?” I asked, trying to hide my embarrassment.

“It’s not my first time riding the Eizan line,” Holmes said with a grin.

It’s not his first time. In other words, he’s held onto that strap before. He doesn’t seem like the kind of person who’d do that if he was by himself, so could it be that he rode this train with his ex-girlfriend and they held it together? Or was it with someone else? He said that after he fell out with his ex, he ‘spent part of his university life doing the complete opposite of what a priest would.’ That means fooling around with girls, right? Thinking about it, such an attractive, highly educated guy *has* to be popular. I heard about his past, but what about right now? Does he have a girlfriend?

*I think I’ll ask.*

I peeked over at Holmes, who was sitting beside me, gazing out the window. His side profile really was handsome.

“If there’s something you want to ask me, feel free,” Holmes said nonchalantly. His usual perceptiveness made my heart skip a beat.

*If I ask him in this situation whether or not he has a girlfriend, I think he’ll misunderstand for real.*

“N-No, it’s nothing.” I shrugged and looked out the window. The train’s course went through the mountain, and the vast rural scenery looked nothing like where I lived. It was hard to believe we were still in the same district. It really did feel like we’d traveled somewhere far away.

Before long, we entered a lush green tunnel. These were the fabled “green maples.”

“Wow, they really are pretty!” I exclaimed.

“They have a different aesthetic from autumn leaves, right?”

“Yes, they’re lovely and fresh.”

“I wouldn’t have minded driving to Kurama, but the train has its own

advantages.”

“I like it, because it feels more like a journey. After all, this is...” *A trip to relieve heartbreak.* I shut my mouth before finishing the sentence.

“You’re right. This is a *hiking trip*, after all,” Holmes continued for me.

I felt relieved. “Exactly,” I said with a small chuckle, looking out the window. The green maple leaves were dazzling under the bright sun rays.

### 3

At last we arrived at the final stop, Kurama Station. It was a very small and old-fashioned station.

“This reminds me of the movie *Poppoya*.” Wait, didn’t that take place in Hokkaido? Maybe all of these small, timeworn stations have something in common. At any rate, the Yoshitsune and Benkei portraits decorating this station definitely made it feel like Kurama, since they are both part of the local legends.

Right after exiting the station, we immediately found ourselves facing a statue of a large tengu face.

“Wow, that’s a big tengu—and it’s only the face!” A bright red face, sharp, glaring eyes, and an outstretched nose. Fitting for Kurama, the tengu mountain.

“Many people take commemorative photos here. Would you like to?”

“Oh, no, I’m fine.”

Holmes looked surprised at my instant refusal.

“I don’t like having my picture taken,” I explained. “I do like taking commemorative pictures, though.” I forced a smile as I took out my smartphone and snapped a photo of the tengu.

“Does that mean you don’t like photo booths either?”

“Hmm...those are all right.”

“I see. Are you the type who always squints in photos?”

I could feel the blood rushing to my cheeks. “H-How did you know?”

“I thought that might be the case, since you dislike having your picture taken but you’re fine with photo booths. Because in the latter, you can edit the image,” Holmes answered in an amused tone.

“You don’t have to read that deeply into it,” I said with a pout.

“My apologies. I wouldn’t have said that to anyone else, though,” he said as though talking to himself.

“Huh?” I froze.

“Let’s go to Kurama Temple first, Aoi.”

“Ah, okay.”

Next to the station was a series of souvenir shops. What stood out to me most were the rows of tengu masks, but there were also banners saying “Ushiwaka Mochi”—fitting for Kurama, seeing as how Ushiwakamaru was Yoshitsune’s childhood name.

After walking uphill for a while, Kurama Temple’s Nio Gate came into view. The faded vermilion two-story gate was exactly what I would’ve expected from a mountain temple.

“This gate was built by Tankei, a sculptor from the Kamakura period, and enshrines the Nio, the two guardians of the temple. It forms a barrier between the secular world and the sacred grounds,” Holmes explained.

“D-Does that mean the area past this has been purified?”

“Indeed. This is a fairly famous ‘energy vortex,’ as people like to say.”

“Right. I’ve heard of it too.” I nodded and passed through the gate with Holmes. *We’re on sacred ground now...* “The air *does* feel different,” I said with a serious face.

Holmes burst out in a short laugh.

“Were you thinking that I fell for the placebo effect?” I asked.

“I was, but I think that’s a good thing. For example, when you pass through this Nio Gate, your perception will change based on whether or not you know

its story. It *is* placebo, but you'll get more out of the act if you use that knowledge to enjoy it more."

He might be right. I get the feeling that knowing this was a sacred ground made passing through the gate seem more special than if I hadn't known.

After walking some more, we came upon a small shrine called Kiichi Hogen Shrine.

"It is said that Kiichi Hogen, the martial arts master who taught Ushiwakamaru the art of war, is enshrined here," Holmes said.

"I heard the legend that Ushiwakamaru was trained by a tengu, but it was actually this person, huh?"

"However, some say that Kiichi Hogen was a fictional person as well."

"Huh, is that so?"

"Yes. Minamoto no Yoshitsune is a mysterious person in various ways."

"He really is." I nodded. "But it's true that he was raised here on Mount Kurama, right?" I asked as we slowly walked on the mountain path.

"Yes. Ushiwakamaru was the third son of the head of the Minamoto clan, Minamoto no Yoshitomo, and his favorite concubine, Gozen Tokiwa. When Yoshitomo was defeated by the Taira clan, he feared there was a high chance that his children would be killed as well. However, in the end, Taira no Kiyomori took mercy on them, and Ushiwakamaru was raised here in Kurama."

"Why was he spared?" *Wait, this is probably common knowledge for anyone who took history class seriously, right? I drilled all those era names into my head, but the details are hazy. I'm sorry for being such a pathetic student, I swear.*

"According to one theory, Ushiwakamaru's mother, Gozen Tokiwa, was an incredible beauty. Kiyomori fell in love with her at first sight and asked her to become his concubine, to which Gozen Tokiwa said, 'Only if you spare my children's lives.' He agreed to her condition."

"H-Huh? Does that mean Gozen Tokiwa became the mistress of the enemy commander—the one who killed her husband—in order to save her children?"

“Yes, it does.”

“And in the end, Kiyomori was defeated by the child he spared, right?”

“Yes, such is karma.”

I took a deep breath. It really was karmic. “Someone as powerful as Kiyomori must’ve had plenty of beautiful women around him. Why did he go to the trouble of making his enemy’s wife his mistress? Was she *that* beautiful?”

“That’s a good question. Gozen Tokiwa was said to be selected from among a thousand women. She was a winner of Japan’s first beauty pageant.”

“Huh? What do you mean?”

“The empress consort at the time—in other words, the emperor’s wife—loved beautiful things and wanted to select beautiful people to be her servants. She gathered a thousand of Kyoto’s beautiful women for judging, and the final person she chose was Gozen Tokiwa. So, Gozen Tokiwa was indeed the most beautiful woman in Kyoto. Of course, there’s no telling how much of this story is true.”

“W-Wow, that’s interesting.”

“Indeed.”

As we talked, we finally reached Kurama Temple. The lone mountaintop building was more modest than I’d expected. It had a simple exterior, perhaps fitting for a mountain temple. What intrigued me was that the stone guardians weren’t the usual lion-dogs.

“These are tigers, right?” I asked.

“Yes, this temple has tigers as guardians.”

And the most eye-catching of all was the large hexagon on the ground in front of the main hall. At its center was a triangular stone tile.

“This is the most famous energy vortex here,” Holmes said.

“Oh, I’ve seen this on TV! They said that energy pours into it from space. I’m going to try standing on it.” Being the enthusiast that I was, I stepped onto the triangle at the center of the diagram. The moment I did, I felt a static shock in



my right hand—"Whoa!" I panicked and clenched my fist. *What was that just now?* I quickly stepped off the hexagon, bewildered. I tried stepping on it again, but this time, nothing happened.

"Did something happen?"

"Oh, no, nothing..." I was too embarrassed to say something clichéd like "I felt a shock in my hand." The temple looked plain, but maybe it really was amazing.

I looked at the building and changed the topic. "Is this where Ushiwakamaru lived?"

Holmes nodded. "Yes. He grew up strong and healthy on top of this mountain, so I can understand how he'd be tougher than most people."

"Right," I giggled.

He was born to a beautiful woman selected out of a thousand, and it was his mother's love that allowed him to survive. He was then raised in this temple, and when he finally descended to the city, he met Benkei at Gojo Bridge. There they dueled under the moonlight, and it's said that the young Ushiwakamaru was handsome, slender, and fought nimbly as if dancing. I don't know how much of that story is true, but it really does sound awe-inspiring.

Next, we walked along the "Tree Root Path" towards the village of Kibune. The weather was even nicer than I expected. Since we were up in the mountains, the wind was much cooler than it usually was in July, and it felt absolutely amazing. It was the perfect weather for hiking.

At last, Kifune Shrine and its beautiful red torii came into view. It's said that the deities of water have been worshiped here since ancient times. Red garden lanterns lined both sides of the stone steps. Many bamboo trees were planted throughout the shrine grounds, and colorful paper strips hung from them.

"Oh right, it's almost time for the Tanabata festival," I remarked.

"You can write your wish and hang it from one of the plants. Would you like to?" Holmes asked with a smile.

"Hmm..." I saw a paper strip that said "I hope my boyfriend and I will be in love forever" and immediately turned away. "I think I'll pass this time."

“All right. Shall we visit the shrine?”

“Okay.”

We prayed at the shrine together and decided to do the famous water fortune telling. There was a special basin near the main hall where you could float blank fortune slips on the spiritual water to make words appear.

“This is neat, huh?” I said.

“Indeed,” Holmes replied.

We bought our fortunes and placed them on the water. Before long, I saw the words “Great Fortune” emerge on mine.

“Wow, great fortune! Yay!”

“Mine says good fortune.”

“That’s good too, Holmes!”

“Indeed.”

We picked up our fortunes and laughed together.

Holmes checked the time and said, “I think it’s time for lunch.”

I nodded with a slight smile. “Oh, okay. I’m actually pretty hungry.” It was finally time for the river terrace. My heart was racing with anticipation.

## 4

We left Kifune Shrine and walked along the river, slightly downhill. The path led to a row of restaurants set up on the riverbed. *There are a lot of these, huh?*

The restaurants had varying aesthetics. One had red parasols over its tables, while another was Western style. From our higher elevation, we could see people eating on the river terraces, and I couldn’t help but feel elated.

“This is my father’s favorite,” Holmes said, gesturing towards a traditional Japanese restaurant that looked like it had a long history. He stepped inside without hesitation.

In the wide entryway, a waitress wearing a dark blue kimono bowed to us.

“Welcome!”

“We have a reservation under the name of ‘Takeshi Ijuin,’” Holmes informed her.

The waitress smiled and nodded. “Understood. Are you his son? I can see the resemblance.” She smiled happily and walked ahead of us into the passage leading further inside. “Right this way.”

The passage led straight outdoors. The door on the other side had been left open, and looking down, we could see the rippling stream and the platforms that had been built above it. The platforms themselves had soft rush mats laid over red carpet and blackish rectangular tables with soft rush floor cushions. The ceiling had bamboo screens acting as sunshades. It was truly Japanese-style luxury.

“This is amazing...” I stood stock still in admiration.

The waitress giggled and said, “Come this way.”

We descended the stone steps in the outdoor-use slippers that’d been provided for us. The chilly mountain breeze caressed my skin, which was hot from hiking.

“Wow, it’s so cool in here,” I said in surprise.

The waitress nodded. “Even in the middle of summer, it only gets to around twenty-five degrees Celsius here. Right now, it’s about twenty-three. Here is your table.”

The table that’d been prepared for us was the one furthest upstream, with possibly the best view of the river. Even further upstream was a man-made waterfall.

“H-Holmes, am I allowed to experience this much luxury at my age?” I murmured without thinking.

Holmes and the waitress both looked surprised for a moment before laughing.

“I think there’s good luxury and bad luxury. If you experience luxury and are able to use it as motivation, then that’s good luxury and a wonderful lesson

learned,” Holmes said, sitting down on one of the cushions.

“O-Okay. This is life experience, right?” I sat down across from him, feeling out of my league.

“Besides, it’s not about age. Thanks to my grandfather, I’ve been taken to all sorts of surprising places ever since I was a toddler, where I encountered rare antiques worth hundreds of millions.”

“You’re right.”

All of that became Holmes’s motivation, and that’s why he became the person he is now. I nodded to myself as I came to terms with it.

Soft rays of light streamed in from the gaps in the bamboo screens. The soothing wind blew. We were surrounded by the sounds of the waterfall, stream, and mountain birds. It felt like all of my everyday struggles were being washed away...

*Now, if someone asks me what Kibune’s river terraces are like, I’ll be able to give a proper answer. It’s a topic of conversation I’ll be able to use forever.* When I thought about it that way, this luxury was a valuable experience, albeit a little excessive. *All of the places I’ve been hesitant about before because they were “beyond my means” might turn out to be similarly wonderful experiences if I force myself to go.*

As I was absorbed in listening to the sound of the flowing water, our meal arrived. An appetizer of clear broth soup, a sashimi platter, and salt-grilled sweetfish was followed by seared beef, seasonal tempura, parboiled eel, and fresh tofu skin garnished with okra. Lastly came shirataki noodles, more soup, pickled vegetables, rice, and fruit. It all looked so delicious.

The individual servings were small, so at first, I wasn’t sure if it’d be enough. But after finishing everything, I was surprisingly full. If it’d all been brought out at once, I’m sure that wouldn’t have been the case. I was only this satisfied because the food had been brought out bit by bit. How do I put this... It felt like the meal was gentle to my body.

“That was really good. I’m already full,” I said, taking a bite of melon regardless. It was delicious and felt velvety on my tongue.

“Fruit after a meal tastes especially good even when you’re full, right?” Holmes said with a smile. He really blended in well at places like this because of his elegant behavior. Meanwhile, I constantly felt out of place. If it weren’t for the manager, this never would’ve happened. In fact, I might’ve gone my whole life without being able to come here. I really needed to thank him again.

“Come to think of it, does the manager often go to places like this?” I asked.

“I think he comes here once a year. He often ate here with Naotaka Kajiwara, his author friend who owned the mountain lodge in Kurama.”

“Kajiwara passed away three months ago, right?”

“Yes. He’d only just turned sixty, but his diabetes led to complications.”

“Diabetes...”

“He was a rather hearty man from Kyushu and quite the heavy drinker. Apparently, he ignored all of his doctor’s warnings, saying that he’d eat and drink as he pleased. This could be considered a bad luxury, but if he was aware of the risks, then perhaps it was his form of happiness.”

“He was a different type of author from the manager, huh?”

“That could be exactly why they got along.”

Just then, the waitress walked over to us. “Excuse me, you have a phone call from the Kajiwara household.”

“Ah, all right,” Holmes said. He got up and followed the waitress.

Speak of the devil. *I guess they’re asking what time he’ll arrive.*

Still, the thought of two authors conversing on a Kibune river terrace was awe-inspiring in its own right. The rippling stream and the tree leaves fluttering in the wind... If I had any creative talent, it’d make me want to write something too. *Since that’s not possible, maybe I can at least come up with a haiku.*

“The rains of summer, gathering into swift flows...” *No! At this rate, I’ll be plagiarizing Basho Matsuo! And besides, this river isn’t fast enough to be called a “swift flow.”*

“What was that about rains of summer?” came Holmes’s voice from behind

me.

I jumped in my seat. “Oh, nothing, really.”

“Are you talking about Mogami River?” Holmes asked. That was the last line of the famous haiku.

“Y-You were listening all along! That’s so cruel!” I exclaimed, my face bright red.

“By the way, this river is called the Kibune River,” Holmes explained with a grin on his face.

Argh, that confident smile with a hint of meanness. A wicked Kyoto guy, through and through.

“A-Anyway, what was the call about?” I pouted, changing the subject.

“Ah, sorry. The person said he’d come pick us up, if that’s all right with you. Would you like to explore Kurama some more first?”

“Oh, I’m fine. We hiked for a long time, so I don’t mind going over now.”

“I’ll let him know, then.” Holmes turned around to leave.

“Wait, is he still on the line?”

“Yes. I wanted to get your approval first.”

“Y-You didn’t have to be so considerate,” I said, although I was secretly happy. Holmes really was a gentleman. *A mean one, though.*

Still, I wondered what the family of the deceased author wanted to discuss with Holmes. Did he leave behind antiques that they wanted to get appraised? *If that’s the case, it shouldn’t have to be Holmes.*

I gulped down the cold plum juice as I pondered.

## 5

We drank tea while we waited and I tried sticking my hand into the river (which was indeed cold). Twenty or thirty minutes later, the person from the Kajiwara household arrived to pick us up from the restaurant, and we met him

outside the entrance.

“I’m Kajiwara’s secretary, Kurashina,” he said with a bow. He was a slim man in a suit who looked to be in his forties.

*Kajiwara had a secretary? That’s kind of impressive.*

“I’m Kiyotaka Yagashira.”

“I-I’m Aoi Mashiro.”

Kurashina smiled in response to my introduction. “It’s nice to meet you.”

“Thank you for coming to pick us up,” Holmes said.

“It’s the least we can do, after suddenly forcing this request on you. Please get in the car,” Kurashina said, opening the rear door of the Benz parked in front of the restaurant.

*A Benz! And it’s black!*

“Authors sure are rich, huh?” I murmured to myself, impressed. Holmes and I got into the car.

“Aoi, do you know of the film *Struggle for Power*?” Holmes asked.

“Yes, I’ve heard of it. It’s about politicians and yakuza fighting and stuff, right?” I didn’t watch it because I wasn’t interested in the genre, but it was a famous film that got turned into a TV series.

“Kajiwara wrote the book that that film was adapted from.”

“Oh, really? Wow.”

Kurashina chuckled as he sat down on the driver’s seat. “It’s not exactly aimed at young ladies.”

“S-Sorry. I think my dad watched it, though.” I vaguely recalled the plot being really complicated.

“Kajiwara was a student at Tokyo University during a time rife with student protests. After he graduated, he became a lawyer and occasionally got a glimpse of the underworld. He wrote *Struggle for Power* using many of his personal experiences and won the Best New Writer Award. That book became a smash hit, receiving TV drama and film adaptations and propelling his career as

an author to great heights,” Holmes explained as usual.

“You know a lot, Kiyotaka.”

“Yes, of course. He was close with my father, so I was personally proud of that connection as well,” Holmes said with a first-rate smile. *He always has a perfect answer for everything.*

“However, Kajiware wrote more than just *Struggle for Power*. He also wrote beautiful stories such as *Flowers of All Kinds* and *Forbidden Fruit*,” Kurashina said cheerfully as he drove. He’d said it casually, but I could sense passion in his words.

“Indeed, Kajiware’s books about taboo subjects are also a great success. You must be quite the enthusiastic fan yourself, Kurashina.”

Kurashina hesitated before saying, “But of course. I might even be his biggest fan.” He seemed embarrassed that he’d been seen through.

The car ascended the mountain road.

“Wow, we really are deep in the mountains,” I commented, looking out the window. The green leaves were almost dazzling. This view might’ve been the same hundreds or thousands of years ago, and I found the thought moving.

We turned from the main road onto a smaller road, and before long, a conventional wooden cabin appeared amidst the trees.

“Wow, this is lovely!”

“Thank you. This was Kajiware’s studio.”

“Would he hole himself up in here when he was writing?” Holmes asked.

“Yes,” Kurashina answered with a nod. “His wife and I would also come here, so you could call it his second home.”

“Where’s the main home?”

“Right now, it’s an apartment in Shijo. He lived in a house in Kinugasa when his sons were young, but after all three grew up and moved out, he and his wife moved to an apartment because the house was too big for just the two of them.”



Kurashina parked the car in front of the mountain lodge and we quickly got out. The refreshing breeze carried with it the scent of leaves.

“The air is so nice,” I said, stretching my arms and taking a deep breath. It felt like the atmosphere was full of Mount Kurama’s spiritual energy. I could understand why an author would seclude himself here to write.

“Please come in,” Kurashina said. The moment he started walking towards the lodge, the front door opened, revealing a woman who I assumed was Kajiwara’s wife.

“Thank you for coming. I’m Kajiwara’s wife, Ayako,” the woman said, bowing deeply. I’d guess that she was in her fifties. She was thin and pretty enough to be an actress.

“Nice to meet you. I’m Kiyotaka Yagashira. My father has always enjoyed talking about you.”

“My, what has Ijuin been saying about me?”

“Every time he returns from meeting you, he always says, ‘She’s so beautiful. I’m jealous of Kajiwara.’”

“Such a flatterer. That aside, you look just like him, Kiyotaka.” She giggled. From her accent, I could tell that she wasn’t from Kansai. “I’m so sorry to intrude on your date,” she said, glancing at me. I was taken aback. *A d-d-d-d-date?!*

“So, what did you want to ask me about?” Holmes ignored the comment and swiftly moved on with the conversation. *Wait, is he acknowledging that it’s a date? Then again, it obviously is one, no matter how you look at it.*

“Oh, do come inside first.” Ayako opened the door all the way for us.

“All right.”

We stepped into the mountain lodge. The living room had a retro, Showa-era feel to it. There was a black chandelier, a large grandfather clock similar to the one at Kura, a bar counter, and a billiards table. Three men were sitting on a velvet couch. They stood up when they saw us and said one after the other:

“You must be Ijuin’s son...”

“...and Seiji Yagashira’s grandson.”

“Thank you for coming today.”

They were probably Kajiwarara’s sons. From oldest to youngest, they looked like they were in their early thirties, mid-twenties, and early twenties respectively. The three brothers seemed mildly concerned at how young Holmes was, although they didn’t voice it out loud.

“Nice to meet you. I’m Kiyotaka Yagashira.”

“I-I’m Aoi Mashiro.”

“Nice to meet you. I’m the eldest son, Fuyuki,” said the man in his early thirties. My first impression of him was that of a young businessman.

“I’m the second son, Akihito.” The man in his mid-twenties looked frail and had the aura of an artist. He was quite good-looking, perhaps resembling his mother.

“I’m the third son, Haruhiko.” This one looked around the same age as Holmes. He was all smiles with a gentle aura and seemed like a good guy.

Based on their outer appearances, I assumed the eldest son, Fuyuki, resembled their father—who I’d never met, but knew was a strapping man from Kyushu—while the second son, Akihito, resembled their mother, and the third son, Haruhiko, was a mix of the two. Also, you could tell from their names what seasons they were born in, with “Fuyu” meaning “winter,” “Aki” meaning “fall,” and “Haru” meaning “spring.” They were rather unimaginative names coming from an author...

“Well, it’s not strange for an author to have a hard time assigning names,” Holmes whispered quietly enough that only I could hear. I started. *Don’t read my mind! It’s terrifying!*

“Please have a seat,” said Ayako. As prompted, we sat down on the velvet couch. Coffee and biscuits were brought out for us immediately, and I was relieved to see that milk and sugar were provided as well.

“Kiyotaka, I hear that you go to Kyoto University just like your father did.”

“Yes, although I started from grad school. I was at Kyoto Prefectural

University before that,” Holmes answered with a smile.

“Ah, KPU. Haruhiko is in his second year there right now.”

“Maybe I’ll try to get into Kyoto University for grad school too,” Haruhiko said with a laugh. *If Haruhiko’s a second-year university student, that puts him at around 20 years old.*

The second son, Akihito, who was sitting at the counter, shrugged. “I never went to college, so that stuff’s all foreign to me.”

“That’s because you ran off saying you’d become an actor,” said the eldest son Fuyuki with a bitter laugh.

“Since you went to the University of Tokyo just like Dad did, I felt bad that I sucked at school. But hey, since you moved to Tokyo, I was able to go there too.”

“Only because you moved in uninvited and leeches off of me. Geez.”

Ayako interrupted, “My husband acted like he was against it, but on the inside, he was willing to help Akihito if he truly wanted to become an actor. But Akihito said he didn’t want to become famous because of his parents’ influence, so he studied acting while hiding the fact that he was Naotaka Kajiwara’s son. His hard work slowly paid off, and now he’s appearing in films and TV shows, albeit in minor roles.” She seemed embarrassed yet eager to share her son’s story.

“I heard that you originally wanted to become an actress too, Ayako. You met your husband through an audition, right?” Holmes asked, drinking his coffee.

Ayako nodded. “Ijuin told you everything, huh? Yes, that’s right. I didn’t have the talent to become an actress, but fortunately, my son has inherited my dream.”

*Ayako, it’s not that the manager told Holmes everything. It’s that Holmes figures out everything in the blink of an eye,* I secretly thought to myself while listening to their conversation.

Holmes placed his coffee cup on the table with a *clunk*, looked up, and asked, “So, what did you want to talk about today?”

Ayako and the Kajiwara brothers looked at each other, as if unsure where to begin. Then, the secretary, Kurashina, stepped forward. “Please allow me to explain the situation.”

The friendly atmosphere in the living room was replaced with an air of tension.

“When Kajiwara passed away, he left two wills with his attorney. The first one was unsealed immediately and was a formal will detailing how his assets should be distributed. For the second one, we were instructed to unseal it three months later in this mountain lodge. The three-month anniversary of his death was three days ago, so we came here to receive the will from the attorney. Inside was written, ‘I wish to give each of my three sons one of my prized paintings,’ as well as the password to a safe. The safe contained three hanging scrolls.”

I gulped as I listened to the story.

“Hanging scrolls, you say?” Holmes said quietly.

They must’ve called him here for an appraisal. Three hanging scrolls left by a famous author to his sons... How much would they be worth? I started to get excited.

As I sat next to Holmes, anxiously waiting for the scrolls to be brought out, Kurashina sighed and dropped his gaze. “Yes. A painting of Taira no Kiyomori for Fuyuki, the eldest son; a painting of Mount Fuji for Akihito, the second son; and a painting of Taira no Tadamori for Haruhiko, the third son. Thinking they might be worth a great sum, we immediately called for an appraiser and found that they were all reproductions with no particular value as antiques. We then speculated that Kajiwara simply wanted to give his sons his favorite pieces of art.”

I stared blankly at him. *The appraisal has already been done? Why did they call Holmes here, then?* Meanwhile, Holmes’s expression remained unchanged as he waited for Kurashina to continue.

Instead, Fuyuki sighed deeply. “That day, we shared drinks here in this mountain lodge while talking about how we were going to take good care of the scrolls. Everything was peachy when we fell asleep, but the next morning,

something terrible had happened.”

“What do you mean?” Holmes and I asked in unison.

“All three scrolls were burned in the incinerator out back,” Haruhiko murmured, twisting his face in grief.

“What?” We gaped, not knowing what to say.

“Burned... Does that mean there are no traces left?” Holmes asked, grimacing.

Kurashina shook his head. “No, the rods and whatnot are intact. But the artwork itself has been burned away.”

“Who would do such a thing, and why?” Ayako questioned, quivering and biting her lip.

Akihito shrugged dramatically. “Mom, it was obviously someone here.”

“Right, we were the only ones here in the mountain lodge that day,” Fuyuki said, looking intently at Holmes.

“Yeah, but like I keep saying, who here would burn the scrolls? Stealing them would make more sense,” Haruhiko said with irritation in his voice.

“What if they *were* stolen, and the burned scrolls were a decoy?” Akihito suggested with a smile, as if enjoying the situation.

“Why steal them? The paintings themselves weren’t worth much. The appraiser said they’d only be a few tens of thousands of yen if sold,” Fuyuki retorted.

“Even if the paintings weren’t worth anything, Dad could’ve hidden something in them. You know, like a secret fortune,” Akihito replied.

“Hmph, you’re the only one who’d say that. After all, you’re the most strapped for cash out of all of us, right?”

“Say that again?”

Fuyuki and Akihito stood up, but were interrupted by Ayako shouting “Cut it out!”

*Wh-What have we gotten ourselves into?!*

Meanwhile, Holmes continued drinking his coffee, completely unaffected. His expression was calm, but I could tell from the slightly curved corners of his mouth that he was amused in some way.

“Wait, Holmes. What’re you thinking?” I whispered in an accusing tone, poking him with my elbow.

“Oh, I’m sorry. I was just surprised by the uncanny resemblance.” Holmes put down his cup gently and looked back up.

*The uncanny resemblance?*

Between who and who? The three brothers?

*I don’t know about their personalities, but their appearances are all different.*

The late Kajiwara and his three sons?

*I don’t know Kajiwara, so I can’t tell.*

Ayako and Akihito?

*They do have similar faces.*

As I tilted my head in confusion, the heated quarrel continued to play out in front of me.

“Please calm down.” Holmes’s voice was relaxed but pierced through the room. Everyone stopped what they were doing. “Considering you called me here, I assume you didn’t go to the police?”

“Of course. It had to have been someone here, so we aren’t going to get the police involved,” Fuyuki declared.

I found myself nodding in understanding. If the culprit was absolutely someone here, then they wouldn’t want the police to handle it. But, since they still wanted to solve this inexplicable incident...

“When we talked to Yanagihara, who did the appraisal for us, he said that Ijuin’s son was a mastermind nicknamed ‘Holmes’ with the ability to see invisible truths with the mind’s eye,” continued Haruhiko.

Holmes placed his hand on his forehead as if annoyed. “I see. So it was Yanagihara who did your appraisal.”

“Do you know him, Holmes?” I asked.

“He’s an old friend of my grandfather’s.”

“Oh, I see.” It was another one of those connections.

Holmes regained his composure and looked at everyone else. “If Yanagihara was the one who looked at the paintings, then their valuation should be correct.” In other words, it was safe to believe that they weren’t priceless works of art.

“Well, I don’t care about that anymore. What I want is for you to interrogate us and figure out who burned the scrolls, Detective ‘Holmes.’ I’m a Sherlock fan, so I wanna see how good you are,” Akihito said with a mischievous grin. *He’s good-looking, but he kind of bothers me. He doesn’t seem to be taking this seriously.*

“The reason I’m called ‘Holmes’ is because of my surname, so I’m not sure if I’ll meet your expectations,” Holmes said, returning the smile and proving that he was indeed a calm and composed adult.

“You’ll accept this case, but you’re already stuck, huh?” Akihito said provokingly. I was taken aback. *Why is he being so aggressive? Are they clashing because they’re both good-looking? Or does he dislike that someone’s being called “Holmes” because he really is a big Sherlock fan?*

I felt nervous, but Holmes smiled coolly and replied, “Indeed. I have figured out who the culprit was, but unfortunately, I don’t have proof.”

“Wh-What?” Everyone voiced their surprise.

“R-Really?”

*How could he figure out the culprit with this little information?*

“You’ve gotta be kidding me,” Akihito said with a blatant frown.

“Do you really know?”

“Wh-Who is it?”

Everyone leaned in.

“My apologies, but I can’t say who until I have proof. Please allow me to

question you thoroughly.”

*Huh, Holmes must’ve gotten pretty worked up if he’d say something like that without proof. He acts aloof, but perhaps he’s more competitive than I thought. It seems like Akihito didn’t like him, but maybe the antagonizing went both ways?*

“You’re right. I’m not fond of frivolous ‘pushy, egotistical, good-looking men,’” Holmes whispered in my ear, reading my mind. I almost spat out my coffee.

“So, I’d like to speak with each of you individually. First, Fuyuki. Could you introduce yourself again? State your name, age, and profession.” Holmes folded his hands in front of his chest and looked at Fuyuki.

“Starting with my name? All right. Fuyuki Kajiwara, thirty-two years old. I majored in economics at the University of Tokyo and started my own IT business.”

Fuyuki was thirty-two—my guess was correct.

“So you’re an entrepreneur? Could you tell me the name of your company?”

“Yes, it’s called West Japan.”

“Ah, an elite, well-regarded company, the stock value of which is on the rise.”

“Thank you,” Fuyuki said hesitantly. He looked surprised that Holmes was immediately able to describe his company. He’d probably assumed that the young man wouldn’t have heard of it.

“Were you satisfied with the distribution of assets three months ago?” Holmes asked bluntly, surprising me.

Fuyuki didn’t seem bothered though and he nodded. “When our father was alive, he said that the three of us would each get the same amount, and it was true. So, I wasn’t surprised. Besides, our father was a reckless spender, so there wasn’t that much left.”

“I see. What did you think when you saw the hanging scroll left to you by your father? Could you tell me your candid impressions?” Holmes looked him straight in the eye.

Fuyuki scratched his head. “Er, my father liked Kiyomori, so I didn’t really



think anything beyond that... I also wasn't sure what to do with it, since I don't have anywhere to put it up."

It seemed like those truly were his honest impressions. He must've been excited to see what he'd be inheriting, so maybe he was disappointed that it was a hanging scroll he wasn't interested in.

"Thank you. Next, Akihito, if you may." Holmes shifted his gaze to Akihito, who was sitting on a chair in front of the counter.

"Why do we have to give our names when you already know them? Whatever. Akihito Kajiwarara, twenty-five. I'm an actor affiliated with AK Company," the second son said, shrugging his shoulders exasperatedly.

"AK Company is quite a famous talent agency. How did you feel about the distribution of assets, Akihito?"

"Well, Dad was always telling me 'I don't have a single penny to give a prodigal son like you,' so I was amazed I even got a share."

"That's not what Fuyuki said."

"I dunno what Dad told him, but he told *me* I wasn't getting any, so I was surprised for a different reason, I guess."

"How did you feel when you saw the scroll?"

"Oh, I was pretty dang happy. I like Hokusai, the artist, although it turned out to be a reprint," Akihito said with a lighthearted laugh. He really was frivolous.

"All right. Haruhiko, you're next." Holmes abruptly turned away.

"Wait, are you done with me already?" Akihito complained.

Haruhiko chuckled at Akihito before composing himself. "Haruhiko Kajiwarara, twenty years old. I'm a second-year at Kyoto Prefectural University."

"Haruhiko, how did you feel about the distribution of assets?"

"Honestly, I thought our family was richer than that, so I was confused at how little I got. I knew our father was a spendthrift though, so I came to terms with it." Akihito laughed to cover up the awkwardness. This opinion felt genuine too.

"What made you think your father was a spendthrift?"

“He was very generous. He’d gather a bunch of people who’d helped him in one place and treat them to a feast. If he was in a good mood, he’d go to his favorite bar and pay for everyone’s tab—including complete strangers—encouraging them to drink as much as they wanted.” Haruhiko’s expression relaxed into a smile, presumably because he was recalling his father’s generosity. From that, I could tell that he loved and respected him.

“As the youngest son, was your father particularly strict with you, or was he lenient instead?” Holmes asked.

Before Haruhiko could answer, the two older brothers voiced their discontent:

“Our father always spoiled him.”

“Yeah, must be nice to be the youngest.”

“Maybe it’s because I was well-behaved, but he was always nice to me. Then again, my brothers often got yelled at, so I tried to be careful not to do anything to get yelled at myself.”

*I think that’s a common privilege for the youngest kid. I have a younger brother too, who just started middle school, and he has an easier time because he sees the kinds of things I get scolded for.*

“Haruhiko, what did you think when you saw the hanging scroll?”

“Hmm, I guess I didn’t understand it.” Haruhiko smiled and crossed his arms.

“What do you mean?”

“Well, my brothers’ scrolls were instantly recognizable as Kiyomori and Mount Fuji, but mine was an unknown warrior. I asked Mom and my brothers who it was, but they didn’t know either. It was the appraiser Yanagihara who told me it was Taira no Tadamori,” Haruhiko explained with a bitter smile. I could tell that he was disappointed by his painting.

“I see. I’ve been meaning to ask this, but could you all tell me more about the paintings on the hanging scrolls? Fuyuki, yours was Taira no Kiyomori, but what was it like?”

The three brothers looked at each other.

“Let me think... Kiyomori was wearing a golden kimono, and there was a bright red sun and a large folding fan,” Fuyuki said, recalling the painting.

Holmes smiled knowingly and nodded. “Was it ‘Kiyomori Calls Back the Setting Sun?’”

“Kiyomori Calls Back the Setting Sun?” we all asked in unison.

“It refers to Kiyomori’s appearance in the kabuki play *Beckoning at Itsukushima*.”

“Oh!” Ayako exclaimed. “Now that you mention it, my husband liked kabuki.”

“My father does too, and occasionally went with Kajiwara to see a show.”

“You’re right.”

Holmes and Ayako giggled together.

“Now then, what was Akihito’s Mount Fuji painting like?” Holmes asked, returning to the topic at hand.

Akihito crossed his arms. “Hmm. It was overall yellowish-brown and had a sharp-looking Mount Fuji with a black dragon rising up in the sky.”

“‘Dragon Over Mount Fuji,’ then. Duly noted. Your turn, Haruhiko.” Holmes quickly turned around.

“U-Uh, is it just me, or have I been getting the cold shoulder?” Akihito sounded unamused.

“Interesting of you to complain, when you provoked me first,” Holmes said, turning around with that first-rate smile on his face again. Akihito stopped in his tracks, overwhelmed by its impact.

*There it is—his wicked attack with a smile. He doesn’t outright trash talk his opponent, but his words pierce through them nonetheless. That’s how a Kyoto guy rolls!*

I found myself clenching my fists at this abstract battle.

“So, what was Haruhiko’s painting like?” Holmes asked, quickly resuming his serious expression. The air of tension returned.

“Oh, the painting on my scroll depicted a warrior and an old priest carrying a

lantern in a forest.”

“A priest carrying a lantern...” Holmes fell silent for a moment before saying, “I see. Thank you.” He then shifted his gaze to Ayako. “Could you reintroduce yourself as well, Ayako?”

She looked up, surprised. She probably didn’t expect to be questioned. “Oh, me? All right. My name is Ayako Kajiwarara... I’m fifty-three,” she said, hesitating before saying her age.

“When did you get married?”

“I met Naotaka when I was eighteen, and we got married when I was twenty.”

“He was seven years older than you, right?”

“Yes.”

“Did you know that he’d prepared hanging scrolls for your three sons?”

“No, I had no idea.”

“Did he not prepare anything for you?”

“No. Oh, but...” Ayako showed us the shiny light blue gemstone on her left ring finger. “He gave me this before he passed away. It’s a ring with my birthstone.”

“Aquamarine. You were born in March, then.”

“Yes. You’re very knowledgeable, Kiyotaka.” Ayako touched the ring, looking happy.

“Ayako, what did you think when you saw the paintings?”

“Hmm, I was so sure that they must’ve been valuable art pieces, so I was a bit confused when I heard that they weren’t.”

“Did your husband like hanging scrolls?”

“He was interested in anything and everything, so that was part of it. It was a bit surprising though, because we didn’t have any hung up in our apartment or this lodge.”

“Understood. Thank you.”

Next, Holmes turned to Kurashina. “Lastly, Kurashina, if you would.”

“Of course.” Kurashina nodded with an earnest face. “Yohei Kurashina, forty-two years old. I work as Kajiwara’s secretary.”

“Were you aware of the hanging scrolls beforehand, Kurashina?”

“No. Only the attorney who had the second will knew about them.”

Holmes paused for a moment. “I see. By the way, what led to you becoming Kajiwara’s secretary?”

“It’s embarrassing to admit, but I used to be part of a biker gang,” Kurashina said with a bitter smile.

“Huh?” I was the only one who was clearly surprised.

“It’s hard to believe when he’s so serious now, right?” Ayako giggled. The three brothers laughed too. It seemed that the entire household already knew. *And Holmes probably did, too.*

“When I was eighteen, my mischief landed me in trouble with the police, and Kajiwara was the lawyer that helped me. I admired him because of that and I’d hover around him wanting to be of use somehow. He hired me as his driver, and two years later, he said, ‘You’re pretty useful’ and allowed me to be his secretary,” Kurashina explained cheerfully.

The three brothers nodded emphatically.

“Kurashina might’ve been an ex-delinquent, but he’s extremely smart.”

“Academics ain’t everything, after all.”

“And most importantly, he saved our father’s life!”

Holmes’s eyes widened at the last statement. Evidently it was news to him.

“It’s true. After our father wrote *Struggle for Power*, he angered the yakuza group he’d based it on. One of the more impulsive members charged at him with a knife, and Kurashina stood in the way, getting stabbed in his place,” Fuyuki explained.

“I...did not know that.” Holmes folded his arms, looking impressed.

“It wasn’t such a big deal. It only took two weeks to make a full recovery, and

since the incident wasn't made public, Kajiwara was able to reconcile with the yakuza. All's well that ends well," Kurashina said with a smile.

"Our father promoted Kurashina from driver to secretary out of gratitude. But of course, it was also because he was capable of the job," Fuyuki said.

"I see." Holmes nodded. "I have another question for you all. When did Yanagihara perform the appraisal for you?"

"We had him come right after we and the attorney obtained the hanging scrolls here."

"You had Yanagihara come here?"

"Yes. We said we'd go to him, but he knew about this mountain lodge and drove here himself. He said it was on the way, because he was going to Kurama Hot Springs afterwards."

"And approximately half a day passed between obtaining the scrolls and the burning? Did anyone leave this lodge during that time?"

Everyone looked at each other.

"No, no one left."

"Yeah, we bought food and stuff before coming here."

Holmes continued, "After Yanagihara's appraisal, you shared drinks here, right? Where were the hanging scrolls while this happened?"

"On the counter," Akihito said, putting his hand on the counter.

"Did you pass out right here in the living room?"

"No, the only one who passed out drunk was Akihito. The rest of us went to our bedrooms," Fuyuki said, causing Akihito to scratch his head in embarrassment.

"When you left the living room to go to sleep, were the hanging scrolls on the counter?"

The brothers tilted their heads in contemplation.

"I think so. Actually, I'm not sure."

“I don’t remember either.”

“Same...”

“By the way, was the incinerator one that anyone could use?” Holmes asked.

“Yes. It was originally used by our father to burn his scrapped manuscripts so that no one would read them,” answered Fuyuki.

“I see.” Holmes nodded. “This is...difficult.” I was shocked. It was rare to see Holmes so distressed. Did he lose confidence in his answer after talking to them? Maybe he suspected Kurashina because he wasn’t a family member, but hearing his story changed his mind? *Holmes, are you okay?*

As I was freaking out, Akihito laughed. “Still don’t know, right? Wanna look at the burned up scrolls, then? You can pretend to check if they’ve been swapped out.” He picked up the bundle wrapped in cloth from the counter, placed it on the table in front of us, and uncovered it. Inside were the tragic remains of three hanging scrolls with only the rods left intact.

Holmes gently held one up and declared, “No, they were not swapped.”

Everyone froze. “What?”

“No one here knew what the second will was about. In other words, no one knew beforehand that you’d be receiving hanging scrolls. From the way you spoke, I could tell that you weren’t lying. Basically, everyone found out about the scrolls at the same time, and Yanagihara performed the appraisal right after. The burned scrolls were discovered the next day, and no one had left the lodge in that time. There wasn’t time to prepare decoys. Plus, even if someone had snuck out unnoticed, there isn’t anywhere to procure decoy scrolls out here in the mountains.”

Everyone nodded in agreement.

“But more importantly, it’s not pinpointing the culprit that I find difficult.” Holmes murmured softly, his face twisting into a grimace.

*It’s not pinpointing the culprit that he finds difficult? What does that mean?* Everyone wordlessly shared glances, seemingly as confused as I was.

Akihito slammed his hands on the table, breaking the silence. “What’s that

supposed to mean? If you know something then tell us. Or are you too stubborn to admit defeat?”

“Akihito! Don’t be rude to our guest,” Ayako chided.

“I mean... Okay,” Akihito mumbled, perhaps out of shame.

Fuyuki stepped forward and bowed. “I apologize for Akihito’s rudeness, Kiyotaka. If you’ve figured something out, could you please tell us?”

“I want to know too. Was there really a secret message in the burned scrolls? Something leading to hidden treasure?” Haruhiko asked, cheerful despite the circumstances. Maybe he thought of this as a riddle-solving game.

“Well...the paintings did contain messages for each of you, although not relating to hidden treasure,” Holmes began. Judging from his tone of voice, he was reluctant to continue. Everyone awaited his next words with bated breath.

“First, Fuyuki’s ‘Kiyomori Calls Back the Setting Sun,’ which depicts a scene from the kabuki play I mentioned earlier. In this scene, the sun is about to set before an important ceremony, and Kiyomori, inspired by a mythological Chinese king who had nine suns shot out of the sky, beckons at the setting sun with a folding fan in an attempt to make it rise back up. Upon doing so, the sun really does begin to ascend, and everyone prostrates themselves before Kiyomori, who has control over the sun.

“This play was a somewhat satirical depiction of Kiyomori’s limitless power and authority during an era when it was said, ‘If you are not of the Taira clan, you may as well not be human.’

“However, you must be aware of how Kiyomori ended up. Kajiwara liked Taira no Kiyomori, and seeing your business accomplishments, I believe he wanted you to embody Kiyomori’s rare charisma to aim for greater heights, while not making the same mistake of letting it go to your head,” Holmes said quietly.

Fuyuki began to quiver, his eyes puffing up. “Our father wasn’t the kind of person who’d tell us these things specifically. I do think I’ve been arrogant because of my successful company. It was foolish of me to brush off a painting he put so much thought into giving me,” he said, holding back his tears. He must’ve been devastated about the burned scroll.



My chest hurt, too. As I looked at Fuyuki, Akihito weakly brushed his hand through his hair. “So, um, what about mine...?” he asked with great difficulty. He must’ve been embarrassed to ask because of all the mocking he’d done, but he still wanted to know.

“Right. Akihito’s ‘Dragon Over Mount Fuji’ was painted by Hokusai three months before his death. Hokusai was almost ninety when he left this world, but his final words were ‘If only Heaven would permit me another five years, I could become a true painter.’ He lamented on his deathbed that he wanted to paint more and improve his skill. You could say that he was a true artist.

“I believe Kajiwaru wanted to say, ‘If you really want to pursue a career in entertainment, then do so with the proper amount of passion. Don’t go at it halfheartedly. And just like the Mount Fuji in the painting, become the best in Japan. Become a star, like the dragon ascending in the sky.’ I’m sure he was supporting you, even if he couldn’t say so.” Holmes smiled warmly.

Akihito’s eyes opened wide. “Dad...” he said, trembling. He silently turned around and sat down on the bar stool, not wanting us to see him cry.

“Lastly, Haruhiko’s painting...”

“Stop!” Ayako screamed, interrupting Holmes.

“Huh?” The rest of us turned around, confused.

“Please, just stop. I...I burned the scrolls. You can stop now, right?”

Everyone gaped at her, myself included.

“What... Mom? Why?”

“I-I know he gave me this ring, but I was upset that my name didn’t come up at all in the second will! Since the scrolls were cheap and uninteresting anyway, I burned them in a drunken rage!”

“Th-That’s why?” Haruhiko looked flabbergasted.

“Yes! I didn’t know they had messages in them! It’s all my fault! So please, I’ve had enough! Kurashina, give them something for their time and take them home!” Ayako sprang up from her seat and dashed out of the living room.

“Mom, wait!”

“Ayako!”

Haruhiko and Kurashina hurried after her. Fuyuki, Akihito, and I stared blankly at the door she’d run through. Holmes was the only one who seemed relieved. He placed his hand on his chest and said, “The mystery has been resolved. Let’s go home.”

“Huh? You call this resolved?” I asked.

“We know who burned the scrolls and the reason why.” Holmes stood up.

“Wait. You still haven’t told us about Haruhiko’s painting.” Akihito stood between us and the front door, blocking our way.

Fuyuki bowed deeply. “I want to know too. It seemed like our mother was trying to prevent you from explaining it.”

Holmes sighed and said quietly, “It might be something you’ll wish you hadn’t known. At the very least, Ayako doesn’t want you to know.”

“I’m all right with that.”

“Yeah, we’ll keep it to ourselves.”

The two looked earnestly at us, and Holmes nodded. “The painting for Haruhiko was the tale of ‘Tadamori and the Lantern.’”

“‘Tadamori and the Lantern?’” I repeated. I had no idea what that was.

“One night, when Emperor Shirakawa was passing through Gion to meet with his favorite concubine, Nyogo Gion, he saw a demon-like being on the path ahead and ordered his bodyguard, Taira no Tadamori, to kill it. However, Tadamori captured it alive to ascertain its identity and found that it was an old priest. The emperor was very grateful for Tadamori’s prudence, because it meant that his misconception didn’t result in an innocent priest being killed.

“Now, one theory states that as a reward, the emperor gave his beloved Nyogo Gion to Tadamori, and thus was Kiyomori born.”

The living room fell silent. *What...?*

“What does that mean, giving Nyogo Gion to Tadamori?” I asked.

Holmes grimaced. “It means that he allowed Tadamori to spend a night with

Nyogo Gion.”

“H-Huh? A-And that led to Kiyomori being born?”

“I can’t speak as to whether it’s true, but there is such a theory.”

*I-I can’t believe it. In plainer terms, he “lent” his woman to his subordinate for a night, right? But then, Kajiwara giving that painting to Haruhiko would mean...*

“Wh-What? Are you saying that Haruhiko isn’t Dad’s kid? But who else could it possibly—” Akihito stopped in his tracks.

Around twenty years ago, Kurashina risked his life to protect Kajiwara. If Kurashina secretly desired Ayako and Kajiwara knew, then Kajiwara might’ve given him the ultimate proof of his gratitude.

Kurashina...and Ayako...and then Haruhiko was born.

*Does that mean Kajiwara was raising Kurashina’s child as his own?* I felt chills run down my spine.

“Ayako most certainly didn’t want it to be known. Even if she didn’t know what the Tadamori painting meant, I’m sure she would’ve looked it up. And then she may have panicked when she discovered the truth,” Holmes explained calmly. The rest of us stood stock still, unable to say anything.

“I-If they kept it a secret for this long, then Dad could’ve left it this way forever. Why did he give Haruhiko a painting of Tadamori?” Fuyuki asked, tightly clenching his fists.

*Exactly. Why would he confess three months after his death, by means of a painting?* It felt irresponsible.

“This is simply speculation on my part, but was it Haruhiko’s twentieth birthday recently?” Holmes asked.

Fuyuki and Akihito nodded. “It was two weeks ago.”

“I think the ‘three months later’ may have been because Kajiwara was firm on waiting until after Haruhiko turned twenty to tell him the truth. However, from my perspective, it’s still a bit too early for him. Ayako likely felt the same way.” Holmes frowned.

*Oh, so that's why Holmes said it was "difficult"!*

"I'll be taking my leave now. I'll speak with you at a later date, Fuyuki," Holmes said.

"What about me?" Akihito spoke up from beside us. Holmes ignored him.

"Thank you for telling us. What should we do about this situation?" Fuyuki asked with a grave expression.

"When you feel that Haruhiko is ready, please tell him the truth. Do not carry the secret with you to your grave," Holmes cautioned.

"Why can't we just keep it a secret forever?" Akihito asked, furrowing his brow and tilting his head. I thought the same thing. I felt as if it'd be better that way.

"Ignoring your ancestors will always lead to familial strife. Haruhiko is part of the Kajiwara household, but his blood is inherited from Kurashina. He needs to be aware of that." Holmes's words carried incredible weight, and the rest of us gulped again. "Now then, shall we go, Aoi?" Holmes looked me in the eye and I nodded, still bewildered.

"I'll take you. Where do you live?" Akihito said, taking out his car keys.

"Thank you. Kurama Station will be fine."

"Oh yeah?"

We left the living room.

"Wait, Kiyotaka. This is for you." Fuyuki ran up to us, holding an envelope.

"I'm afraid I must decline."

"Just take it. They're tickets to a kabuki show."

Holmes hesitated. "In that case, thank you very much." He accepted the envelope with both hands. *You'll accept a reward if it's kabuki tickets?! I thought to myself.*

As we exited the mountain lodge, the sky to the west was lit up by the radiant setting sun. *Oh, it's already sunset. I can't tell if that time felt long or short.*

"I wonder if our mother is all right," Fuyuki said, looking up at the sky.

"Kurashina ran after her, so she should be fine," Holmes said, turning around after reaching the car. "Oh right, please tell Ayako this for me when the time is right: the aquamarine ring Kajiwarra gave her symbolizes more than just her birthstone. It also means something in the language of gems."

"The language of gems?" Fuyuki looked confused.

Holmes nodded. "It's the gem equivalent of the language of flowers."

"I've heard of it. What does aquamarine mean?"

"Aquamarine symbolizes calmness, wisdom, and...freedom."

*Freedom... I get it. Kajiwarra wanted Ayako to live a second life after his passing. Maybe this time, he's entrusting her to Kurashina for real.*

Fuyuki and I were speechless, but Akihito sighed loudly. "Man..."

"Huh?"

"I'll admit it. You're Holmes." He smiled and opened the back door. "Take a seat, Holmes." He placed his hand on his chest in gratitude, but with an almost unpleasant grin on his face.

"Thank you," Holmes replied with his first-rate smile. He got into the car, and I followed suit. Their battle was as incomprehensible as ever, but watching the verbal competition between these two different good-looking men was certainly a treat.

"Thank you so much for today, Kiyotaka. I'm ashamed of what you had to see. Please allow me to express my thanks again later." Fuyuki bowed at Holmes from outside the car.

Holmes shook his head. "I don't need any more thanks, but please come visit whenever you want."

"Thank you." Fuyuki bowed again, and we bowed back.

"All right then," Akihito said, shifting the car into drive. We drove along the

narrow road for a bit before reaching the main road.

“You really are amazing, man,” Akihito mumbled while driving. I almost laughed out loud.

“That’s not true,” Holmes said.

“When did you figure out the truth?”

*Oh, I wanted to ask that too.*

“Well, when I first saw Haruhiko, I knew that he was Kurashina’s son,” Holmes said nonchalantly. Akihito and I choked.

“S-Seriously?” Akihito balked.

“H-How on earth could you tell?” I asked, baffled as well.

“They looked too similar,” Holmes said, as though it were the most obvious thing in the world.

“Huh? What part of them was similar?”

“Their ears.”

“E-Ears?” Akihito and I responded shrilly.

“Yes. Kurashina and Haruhiko’s ears were the exact same shape, which would be impossible unless they were parent and child. Knowing that, I wondered if Ayako had had an affair with Kurashina.”

“Wait, you were thinking that behind that graceful smile of yours?” I asked.

“Yes. Is there a problem?” Holmes replied without hesitation.

I felt chills run down my spine. “You really are too scary.”

Akihito burst out laughing. “I thought you were some obnoxious academic, but you’re pretty funny, huh?”

“I also found you obnoxious, but you’re quite amusing yourself,” Holmes retorted instantly.

“Obnoxious?” Akihito flinched.

“Please don’t get depressed over a word that you used first,” Holmes said, exasperated. Akihito pouted in response, and I couldn’t help but laugh.

“Oh yeah, you guys were on a date today, right? Sorry you had to get dragged into our issues.”

I blushed. *H-He called it a date.*

“Indeed. Would you like to use these tickets to see a kabuki show, Aoi?” Holmes said, smiling warmly at me.

“Y-Yes!” I nodded eagerly.

“Damn you two, having fun back there. Let’s get this drive over with.”

I laughed again at Akihito’s grumbling as the car sped down Mount Kurama. Outside, the setting sun illuminated the green leaves in bright red on this lovely summer evening.

## Chapter 5: After the Festival

### 1

A cheerful rhythm could be heard as I walked through town: *kon-chiki-chin, kon-chiki-chin*. It's played by the Gion Festival musicians to drum up excitement for the coming festival.

Although “kon-chiki-chin” is the traditional onomatopoeia for the Gion Festival's distinctive rhythm, personally, I can't hear it that way. It sounds more like “pyo-pyo kon-kon kan-kan-kan.” I honestly have no idea what part of it is supposed to sound like “kon-chiki-chin,” but that's what everyone else calls it, so I guess I should too.

The Gion Festival is the most famous of Kyoto's three major festivals. The city was filled with a joyous air leading up to the biggest event of the summer. I was excited for it too, but... Right now, something else had my attention. I was in a state of shock from a text message I received out of nowhere.

I took a deep breath and stared at the *yamaboko* that were already starting to be set up. Yamaboko are a type of festival float with a long spear or polearm atop a mountain-shaped platform. During the climax of the festival, there is a procession featuring many of these floats.

The city is packed with tourists every year at this time. It's probably natural to think that if you're going to visit Kyoto, you should time it for the cherry blossom season, the autumn leaves, or the Gion Festival.

I took another deep breath and entered Teramachi-Sanjo's “Kura” as usual. The door chime rang through the store.

“Oh, hey there, Aoi,” someone said at the same time. In the cafe area was a handsome man grinning and raising his hand. Next to him was Mieko, who had a relaxed smile on her face. That handsome man was...

“Akihito?” I said. That's right—it was Akihito, the actor and second son of the



Kajiwara family who we met around ten days ago at the Kurama mountain lodge. “Wh-Why are you here?”

“He said he came to see dear Kiyotaka. Kiyotaka’s good-looking, but Akihito is quite handsome too. I was so surprised to hear that he’s an actor,” Mieko said excitedly. I could understand her enthusiasm. Akihito *was* attractive, although he seemed a bit—no, *very* frivolous despite already being twenty-five. Holmes was *much* more mature than him in comparison.

“I came on behalf of my family to give our thanks again, although I wanted to come earlier than this,” Akihito said. There was a large box of sweets on the table.

“Where is Holmes, anyway?” I asked.

As I looked around the store, Holmes came out from the kitchenette in the back and said, “Coffee’s ready.”

I gasped when I saw him—he was wearing a dark blue yukata, the casual summer version of the kimono. *Holmes looks so good in a yukata!* It complemented his lustrous black hair and elegant neck, adding a hint of sensuality to his usual charming self. *O-Oh no, my heart is racing.*

“I’ll make your café au lait right now, Aoi,” Holmes said with a smile that pierced straight through my heart.

I stood frozen in place, lost for words.

“Is something wrong?” Holmes tilted his head.

“Oh, no, I was surprised by the yukata.”

“Ah, the owner said to wear it from the tenth until the end of the Gion Festival. Apparently it’s how people who do business in Kyoto show their festive spirit. My father also wears one when he comes to the store,” Holmes said with a chuckle.

*I see. Good job, Owner!*

“Oh yes, it was Seiji who asked me to come here, too. He said to give this to you,” Mieko said, handing me a paper bag.

“What’s this?” I asked.

“He told me to prepare a yukata for the ‘cute part-timer.’ You’ll be wearing one too,” she explained with a mischievous grin.

“A yukata? For me?”

“Yes! I brought it from my store.”

*Oh right, Mieko owns a women’s clothing store in the same shopping street as Kura.*

“Kids these days don’t know how to put on a yukata by themselves, so I adjusted the length for your height, like we do for children’s yukata. Try putting it on by yourself first. I’ll teach you how to tie the bow on the sash another day, but for now, you can use a pre-tied one.” Mieko eagerly held out the bag and I accepted it, still taken aback.

“I-I see. Thank you very much.” I passed through the kitchenette to get to the changing room.

“Looks like I came at a great time! I get to see Aoi in a yukata,” Akihito said loudly enough that I could hear. *Well, that’s embarrassing. I’m amazed he can say that so easily. That aspect of his personality probably doesn’t sit well with Holmes.* I imagined Holmes frowning in disapproval and smiled.

*All right, let’s do this. I’ve worn a yukata with my friends before in Saitama, so maybe this won’t be too disastrous,* I thought, taking the yukata out of the bag.

“Wow, this is cute!” It had a clean yet flashy design, with bright red carnations on white fabric. I didn’t know Mieko had such good taste. That’s a clothing store owner for you.

*Umm, it goes right side first, right?* I thought as I put on the yukata. Since Mieko adjusted the length for me, it was easier than I expected. I then put on the simple, pre-tied sash and straightened it.

“I-I’m done,” I said softly, gingerly stepping out.

“Oh, how cute!—Wait, you’ve become a ghost!” Mieko immediately said upon seeing me.

“Huh? A ghost?” My eyes widened in confusion.

“Your yukata is backwards, Aoi,” Holmes said, chuckling. *Oh no. I’d put the*

*kimono on in the way a dead body is dressed for a funeral.*

My face flushed. “H-How silly of me. W-Wait, but I thought kimono are worn right side first.” That’s why I put the right side on top of the left.

“‘Right side first’ means having the right side on the inside,” Holmes explained gently.

“Yep,” Akihito said, nodding and standing up. He went around behind me. “An easier way of understanding it is, when a man hugs you from behind, you want his right hand to be able to easily slide in.” He wrapped his arms around my shoulders and peered around into my face.

“U-Um...”

“Kimono are designed in a dirty way,” Akihito said with a suggestive grin. My cheeks were burning. *H-His face is so close. He really is a playboy!*

“Excuse me, but could you refrain from sexual harassment in our store?” Holmes quickly grabbed Akihito’s wrist and twisted it.

“Ouch, ouch, ouch! I-I get it, okay?!” Akihito pulled away from Holmes and rubbed his wrist.

“Ahaha, you got your just deserts, Akihito. Aoi, go and fix your yukata. You don’t deserve such an early death,” Mieko said, laughing.

“Oh, right.” I hurried back to the changing room.

*G-Geez, Akihito’s something, all right. But thanks to him, I don’t think I’ll ever forget how to wear a kimono. “When a man hugs you from behind, you want his right hand to be able to easily slide in.”* I imagined being embraced from behind by the person I like. His hand slides under the kimono, onto my chest...

Suddenly, Holmes’s face came to mind.

*A-Ahhh! What am I thinking?!* I shook my head to clear it and fixed my yukata.

“Geez, didn’t realize you had a jealous streak, Holmes,” I overheard Akihito saying in an amused tone. My heart skipped a beat. *J-Jealous?*

“It was the natural course of action to take against someone harassing our valuable part-timer.”

“Part-timer? Does that mean you and Aoi aren’t going out?”

“Correct. She’s a student working part-time at our store.” Holmes’s nonchalant answer made my chest ache a bit for some reason. *It’s the truth, though.*

“Huh. Well anyway, yukata sure are nice. Now I want to wear one too. And then have a girl slide her hand inside from behind.”

“Why don’t you shove your own hand in?”

“You *are* mad at me, aren’t you?!” Akihito exclaimed.

I secretly smiled to myself. Holmes’s sharp remarks were more pointed than usual. *My condolences, Akihito.* Holmes dislikes guys like him to begin with, since they resemble the person who stole his former girlfriend. But if he still dislikes that personality type now, does that mean he has lingering feelings for her? My chest tightened ever so slightly. *What was that?*

I pulled myself together and came back out. “I fixed it.”

“Ooh!” everyone exclaimed.

“Lovely!”

“Yep, you’re a real cutie, Aoi.”

Mieko and Akihito openly praised me. *But what does Holmes think?* I surreptitiously looked towards him.

Holmes met my gaze and smiled. “Very cute. It looks good on you.”

“Th-Thank you.” *Ahhh, my cheeks are burning up.*

“Good, good. Ghost incident aside, you wear it very nicely. Since there’s nothing to worry about, I’ll be returning to the shop. I’ll prepare a few more for you, so keep it up until the festival is over, okay?” Mieko gulped down the rest of her coffee and hurried out of the store. She was like a small typhoon.

After she left, Akihito chuckled. “Man, that was a lively old woman, huh?”

“She runs a clothing store on this street. She’s also an old friend of my grandfather,” Holmes said, placing my café au lait on the table with a *clunk*.

“Since Akihito brought konpeito from Ryokujuan-Shimizu, let’s have tea.”

Konpeito is a type of sugar candy that comes in different colors and flavors.

“Ryokujuan-Shimizu?” I tilted my head.

“Huh, you don’t know them? Their premium konpeito is famous in Kyoto.” There was a hint of pride in Akihito’s smile.

“Ryokujuan-Shimizu is a shop located in Sakyo-ku that specializes in konpeito. They were founded in 1847, meaning that they’ve protected their traditional manufacturing technique for over a hundred and fifty years. Even the Imperial House purchases from them, so it’s certainly high class. They have many different flavors, but all of them taste delicious and refined,” Holmes explained cheerfully.

“Ugh, this is why I hate educated guys,” Akihito said, clicking his tongue.

“My academic background is unrelated to konpeito. Could you not take out your insecurities on me?”

“I-I’m not insecure!” Akihito snapped.

Holmes grinned. “Forgive my rudeness then. Oh, but since you chose the path of entertainment, it’d be good to develop that further. That path is one where if you have even the slightest complex, you can use it to stimulate your career.”

Akihito clammed up for a moment, perhaps overpowered by Holmes’s smile and words. “Y-Yeah. I’m gonna take Dad’s parting words to heart and become the best damn actor you’ll ever see.”

The author Kajiwara had left Akihito the painting “Dragon Over Mount Fuji” by Hokusai. It contained his hope for Akihito: “If entertainment is your passion, then master it.”

“Was Ayako all right after we left?” Holmes asked quietly.

Right. That day, Ayako ran out of the mountain lodge before Holmes could finish explaining Kajiwara’s gifts. I was worried about her since we left without seeing her again, and it seemed that Holmes was concerned as well.

“Yeah, after I dropped you guys off at the station and went back to the lodge, she was already there in the living room. Afterwards, Fuyuki talked to her alone. He said she broke down in tears when he told her the meaning behind the

aquamarine ring. Maybe she felt guilty all this time,” Akihito said, a bit hesitantly.

Holmes and I silently nodded along.

“My parents were really close. Even I thought Mom was like an ideal wife, and Dad loved her a lot. But it’s like, now I’m wondering if they were only like that because of guilt, and I don’t know how to feel about that.” Akihito sighed.

*True, that’s complicated.*

“That’s a problem between them,” Holmes said gently. “It’s not for you to bear, Akihito. I’m certain that the happiness you saw between them as a child was the real thing.”

Akihito clammed up again before collapsing onto the table with a *thud*. “Wait, Holmes. How old are you again?”

“Twenty-two. Why?”

“I gotta get myself together...” Akihito muttered, still face-down on the table.

*Pretty much...* I thought. It would be way too rude to say it out loud.

Afterwards, we enjoyed the premium konpeito and engaged in silly conversation.

“Come to think of it, don’t you live in Kanto, Akihito? Are you able to stay here for so long?” Holmes asked.

“Yeah, I have a job over here. The Gion Festival’s starting soon too, so I might take it easy this year and check it out.”

“That’s good. Please enjoy the festival.” Holmes smiled happily as if he were a tourism ambassador.

“Gion Festival, huh...?” I said. “All of my classmates said not to go, because it’s too crowded. But even though they said that, they gladly went to the festival at Demachiyanagi’s shopping street.”

Akihito laughed. “I get it, though. That’s just how locals are. Back when I lived in Kyoto, I didn’t go out of my way to see the Gion Festival either.”

“Perhaps, but personally, I’d love to get a close look at each of the yamaboko.

They call them a moving art museum, after all.” Holmes had his usual smile on, but he declared that rather strongly.

“A moving art museum?” Akihito and I asked in tandem.

“Yes. The Gion Festival originated over a thousand years ago. During the festival, the yamaboko were taken around the town to purify it and ward off disasters.” Holmes retrieved a heavy book from the bookshelf behind him and placed it on the table where we could see it. He flipped it open to a photo of a yamaboko resembling the ones I’d been seeing around town lately. “The Gion Festival’s yamaboko have been in the custody of the thirty-three neighborhood associations for a thousand years. They appear to be identical at first glance, but they all have differences. Please look at these.”

Holmes pointed at photos of two yamaboko named “Yamabushi-yama” and “Taishi-yama.” The decorations on the sides clearly didn’t look Japanese.

“Oh, this one looks kind of Chinese,” I murmured, looking at the photo.

“Yeah, and this one looks Indian,” Akihito remarked.

Holmes nodded. “These wall hangings were brought over from China’s Ming dynasty, while this yamaboko came from India. There’s also an extremely intriguing one named Koi-yama.”

The tapestry in the photo he pointed at had to be European. It depicted a king wearing a crown.

“Is this from Europe?” I asked.

“Even though it’s at the Gion Festival?” Akihito asked, surprised.

Holmes nodded again. “This was created at the start of the seventeenth century in Brussels, Brabant—in other words, Belgium. The design depicts a scene from Homer’s *Iliad*, featuring Priam, the King of Troy, and his queen, Hecuba. It was brought to Japan and wound up being used for the Gion Festival. It’s still in use to this day.”

“Wait, but wasn’t Japan closed to foreigners during that time?” I asked.

“Yes. However, it’s said that the tapestry passed through Holland, which is now part of the Netherlands. It was the only European country that Japan

traded with.”

“Why *was* it only Holland, anyway?” Akihito asked, even though his question was blatantly unrelated to the Gion Festival. It was a completely ordinary matter of history...but while I’m ashamed to admit it, I’d also wondered the exact same thing. Why *was* it only the Dutch that were allowed to trade with Japan?

“The extremely short answer is that they didn’t bring Christianity with them.” Holmes’s response was indeed extremely short. It was so straightforward that both of us nodded firmly and said, “I see.”

“Next, ‘Tsuki-hoko’ is decorated with a rug from the Mughal Empire. The Metropolitan Museum of Art requested it once, so it was displayed there for a period of time.”

“Wow, the Met!”

“The yamaboko that leads the procession is ‘Naginata-hoko.’ It’s not clear where this rug originated from, but it’s suspected that it may have come from the Mongol Empire. There doesn’t seem to be anywhere in the world that has the same one.” Holmes pointed at a brown rug on the side of the float. “It’s practically a miracle that Yamabushi-yama’s tapestry and this rug from the Mughal Empire have been preserved in such good condition. The neighborhood associations have maintained them very carefully for the past thousand years, only displaying them during the festival. We’re blessed with the opportunity to see wonderful, historical works of art, the likes of which the Metropolitan Museum of Art would request. It wouldn’t be an understatement to say that the Gion Festival is a festival of miracles,” Holmes said with an intense look in his eyes.

I was floored. It...really could be called a moving art museum. A festival of miracles. That’s how amazing it was.

“Now that you know this, I think you’ll have a different experience participating in the festival. Since you live so close, you really should go and take a close look. The yamaboko parading through the streets are treasures that were lovingly crafted by townspeople a thousand years ago.”

I felt my heart grow warm.



“Thanks for the lesson, Holmes. I feel like being around you makes me smarter,” Akihito said seriously. I unintentionally giggled.

Akihito looked at the grandfather clock and said, “Oh, that’s it for me. I have to go to practice.” He stood up to leave.

“Practice?”

“I’m doing a play in Osaka right now. Feel free to come watch.” He took out a flier from his bag that was headlined “A Midsummer Night’s Dream.”

“Shakespeare?” I asked.

Holmes took the flier and examined it with great interest. “Akihito’s role is Lysander, I see. That’s a good fit.”

“Lysander?”

“To put it simply, the character is a ladykiller.”

“Oh, I see.” It made perfect sense. Holmes’s explanations are always so easy to understand.

“I do think I’ll go see your play,” Holmes said with a smile, making Akihito scratch his head bashfully. *Maybe Holmes likes all forms of theater, not just kabuki. It’s art, after all.*

“Yeah, feel free. See you later, guys.” Akihito waved goodbye and left Kura.

## 2

After Akihito left, the store suddenly became much quieter, with only the soothing jazz music playing in the background. Holmes was organizing documents and I was putting the empty coffee cups on a tray.

“It really is hard to get used to wearing a yukata. I think work will be slower than usual.” The sleeves kept getting in the way. *Maybe I should tie them back?*

“It’s not what you signed up for, so you don’t have to work too hard during this period.”

“Oh, I couldn’t do that. One of my classmates works at a small restaurant, and she said she has to wear a kimono all the time. If she can work hard in that,

then I will too.”

Holmes chuckled. “Your sincerity is commendable.”

“Huh? Sincerity...?” No one had ever called me sincere before.

“Yes. Even though my father and I always say we’re grateful just to have someone to watch the store while we’re gone, you try to find ways to help out because you want to work for your pay. I can see that you stick to your virtues.”

“I-It’s nothing that impressive. If I listened to you two and got paid to sit around doing nothing, I wouldn’t be able to handle the guilt. And besides, it’s boring to do nothing.” It was embarrassing hearing his overestimation of my character. “Plus, I’m not sincere. I get swayed by the most minor of things.” I started wiping the table with a tea towel so that I wouldn’t have to make eye contact with him. If I did, he’d probably see through me...

“You haven’t seemed too happy lately. Did something happen?” Holmes asked quietly.

*Oh, he already did.* I smiled in self-deprecation and stopped wiping the table. I looked up and saw the throng of people walking outside the display window. The tranquil store interior made me feel like I was in a different world.

“You see... umm...”

Just as I hesitantly opened my mouth to speak, the door chime rang. A young woman in a dress had entered the store. She had a slim figure, wavy hair that reached her shoulders, and a sweet aura, but she also had a somewhat scared look in her eyes. I was so surprised by her sudden appearance that my greeting was delayed by a moment.

“Izumi...?” Holmes said, seeming surprised.

“H-Hello, Kiyotaka.” The woman shrugged her shoulders.

Holmes looked ever so slightly bewildered for a moment before returning to his usual smile. “Long time no see. I’m glad you seem to have been doing well.”

“Oh, don’t be so stiff,” she said, seemingly troubled by his attitude.

Holmes simply continued to smile. “I heard you’re getting married. Congratulations.”

*Married.* I had a hunch, but that word convinced me. This was Holmes's ex-girlfriend. Her name was Izumi, and she was beautiful and sweet. Her frail aura felt similar to Saori, the Saio-dai.

"I actually have something I'd like you to appraise." Izumi fidgeted as she walked up to him.

"Please have a seat," Holmes said, standing up and pulling a chair out.

Izumi hesitated before sitting down. "Thanks."

The store was consumed by an indescribable tension. I silently went to the kitchenette and started making coffee. Holmes always does it when he's here, but...for some reason, I didn't want to let her drink his delicious coffee.

"As you said, I'm...getting married." I could hear her strained voice from here.

"Congratulations," Holmes repeated in a calm tone.

"Thanks. So, I received tableware as a celebratory gift from my aunt in Kobe. My fiancé said to find out how much it's worth..." She seemed hesitant to ask.

To be honest, I was surprised. It was a gift from *her* aunt, right? Not her fiancé's? And yet he told her to get it appraised? It was a bit hard to believe. Well...maybe he had no intention of selling it and was just curious about how much it was worth? I smiled wryly as the coffee dripped into the pot. Its fragrant aroma drifted through the store.

"Here it is." Izumi gently placed a box on the table. Holmes put on his usual white gloves. I wanted to see it too, so I hurriedly poured the coffee into cups and set them on the table.

"Allow me to take a look, then," Holmes said, carefully opening the box. Inside was a square dish with a landscape painted on it. The colors were pale and elegant. It was clearly from the West—did Holmes know how to appraise Western antiques? The store had items from all sorts of countries, but thinking about it, I'd never seen him appraise a Western antique before.

"Royal Copenhagen, I see."

"Oh, so it really is. That's what my aunt said, but we only knew Royal Copenhagen for their Christmas plates." Izumi shrugged sheepishly.

*When you think of Royal Copenhagen, you think of their yearly Christmas plates.* Sadly, my knowledge was on par with hers.

“Indeed, the Christmas plates are their most famous products. After all, the tradition has continued since 1908 without fail,” Holmes explained with ease.

“Oh, really?” Izumi looked surprised. Was this her first time seeing Holmes doing his job like this? Although to be honest, I was also secretly impressed that Holmes was knowledgeable about Western antiques as well.

“My fiancé said, ‘Copenhagen always has cobalt blue designs, so this might be something else.’”

“It’s true that Royal Copenhagen has long been heavily influenced by Japan’s Imari ware from the Edo period. They’re known for their hand-painted cobalt blue patterns, but they also have many other products. This one is from a series created over sixty years ago, depicting various European landscapes. As for the price... There are a lot in circulation, so I’d put it at twenty to thirty thousand yen.”

“Twenty to thirty thousand...” Izumi nodded. She looked neither happy nor disappointed. “I’m glad I found out. It’s a lovely plate, so I’ll take good care of it.” Her tone of voice became more formal, perhaps due to Holmes’s influence.

“Please do.”

I breathed a small sigh and turned away to dust a shelf a short distance away from them.

“Kiyotaka...that was amazing. I knew you could do appraisals, but I didn’t think you’d be *this* good.”

“Well...it’s the family business.”

“You said ‘long time no see,’ but for me, that’s not the case,” Izumi said boldly. I instinctively stopped in my tracks.

“Huh?” Even Holmes was confused.

“I’ve passed by this store several times and caught sight of you. I’ve also been to Kyoto University’s campus. You’re going there for grad school, right? That’s amazing.”

Holmes hesitated before saying, “Thank you.”

“I-I’ve actually considered breaking up with my fiancé many times. He keeps cheating on me...” Izumi cast her eyes down, her cheeks bright red.

Holmes said nothing in response. Apparently the “pushy, egotistical, good-looking man” hadn’t changed his style and was using the same approach on other women as well.

“But every time I caught him, he said, ‘You’re the only one for me’...and I just went along with it. But each time, I remembered you and wanted to see you again. It was too late, though, so I always passed right on by.”

Holmes continued to remain silent as he listened to her pour her heart out.

“But then, when I finally couldn’t tolerate his two-timing anymore and told him I was breaking up with him, he cried and apologized and asked me to marry him. I was touched at the time and agreed, but I’m worried about when we really do get married. Will he keep cheating on me either way? Is this really the right person for me? And whenever I think about marrying him, your face always comes to mind. You treated me so well, but I was too young to understand. I was such a fool.” Izumi trembled as she spoke, tears streaming down her cheeks. This was that weakness—that vulnerability that stirs up a man’s protective nature... I felt uneasy.

Just as Holmes opened his mouth to speak, Izumi cut him off. “You don’t have to say anything. I know I’m being stupid.”

Holmes closed his mouth in understanding.

*I assume she’s feeling worried before her marriage and came here to vent. But is that really all it is?*

Amidst the silence, Izumi wiped the tears in her eyes and sighed. “Kiyotaka, do you still like classic poetry?”

“Classic poetry...? Yes, I suppose.”

I’d been listening attentively to their conversation, and her sudden irrelevant question confused me greatly.

“Please look at this too. I’ll be back in two days to pick it up, so before then,”

Izumi said, taking a small box out of a paper bag.

“By the day after tomorrow?”

In other words, the fifteenth.

“Yes, please take your time looking at it... It was made on a mountain in Shiga prefecture.” Izumi quietly stood up.

“A mountain in Shiga...” Holmes knit his brows ever so slightly.

Izumi placed her hand on the door and turned around to face him again.

“Thanks for today. I’m glad I made up my mind to come here. That yukata suits you really well,” she said with a smile.

“Thank you.”

Izumi left the store. Without saying a word, Holmes opened the small box she’d left behind. Inside was a pale orange matcha tea bowl with a design of green...

“Are these leaves?” I asked without thinking.

He nodded. “Yes, it’s Japanese mugwort.”

I leaned in a bit. “Is this valuable?”

Holmes said nothing in response and continued to squint at it. It didn’t seem like he wanted to talk about its value at the moment.

“You like classic poetry, Holmes?” I asked, changing the topic.

He smiled slightly at that and said, “To a normal extent. Classic poetry...was how we got to know one another.”

“Really?”

“Yes. In our second year of high school we went to Tofuku Temple as part of a school trip. It’s in Higashiyama-ku, which is famous for its autumn leaves.”

“A school trip...” I was a bit startled.

“When she saw the bright red leaves floating down the creek, she said, ‘Oh, this reminds me of that famous poem! *Even in the age of gods and miracles, I have never heard of the Tatsuta River...* Um, how did the rest go again?’ and I

answered, 'The Tatsuta River's waters dyed in such crimson.' It was the famous poem 'Chihayaburu.' After that, she apparently fell in love with me, thinking that I liked classic poetry."

"I-I see." Having such an attractive guy complete her poem while she was already moved by the sight of the river covered in bright red leaves was bound to rouse her heart.

"But, while I liked classic poetry, I didn't love it to the extent that she thought I did." Holmes shrugged sheepishly and I couldn't help but giggle. *He only said the line because he knew the answer.*

"Women are easily swayed, huh?" he murmured to himself, holding the tea bowl.

I sighed. "You might be right." I get swayed by minor things all the time.

"Oh right, we were interrupted earlier."

"Huh?"

"We were discussing how you seemed unhappy lately. What happened?"

"Oh...well, my previous school in Saitama...is apparently coming to see the Gion Festival as part of a school trip kind of thing."

Holmes's eyes widened in surprise.

"It's for cultural research or something. So, a girl from my friend group texted me saying she wanted to see me, and she asked me to go to their hotel lobby. My ex-friend's in that group too, so I'm scared that I might run into my ex...but I do want to see my other friends, so I ended up agreeing to go." I laughed hollowly.

"I see..." Holmes stood up slowly. "I think it's a good idea. You still feel uneasy, right? Since they're coming here, you might be able to get the closure you need without having to go all the way to Saitama yourself," he said, looking down at me with a firm gaze.

"Yes...you're right."

"When are you going?"

“The fifteenth—*yoi-yoi-yama*. She said to come to the hotel on Shijo-Muromachi Street at 7:30 p.m.”

The days leading up to the Gion Festival’s main procession are a countdown, with *yoi-yoi-yama* being two days before. Food stands and illuminated *yamaboko* line the streets, celebrating the start of the festival. On that day, I have work at Kura until 7 p.m., so I’ll be able to head straight there afterwards.

Just like Holmes said, I thought it was a good opportunity. Still, I couldn’t shake my fears.

“Don’t be so anxious. Remember, action is worry’s worst enemy.” Holmes patted my head and smiled warmly.

My chest tightened. “Holmes...”

Just then, his smartphone buzzed. He looked at the screen and said, “Right, I need to deliver some documents. I’ll be right back, so please watch the store while I’m out.” He took out a brown envelope from a drawer and hurried outside.

“Oh, okay,” I replied, though he was already gone by then.

My eyes gravitated towards the tea bowl that’d been left on the table. Japanese mugwort... I’ve been working at Kura for a few months now, and my eyes have been trained a considerable amount in this time. This tea bowl...was clearly made by an amateur. Was it made by Izumi, then? Did she want him to appraise her own work?

*“Kiyotaka, do you still like classic poetry?”*

That’s what she said before presenting this tea bowl. She also said it was made on a mountain in Shiga... It might have something to do with a poem. *Right, that has to be it! It contains a message based on a poem!*

I immediately looked up and turned to the bookshelf and its neat assortment of reference materials. I took out an atlas first to see where Shiga’s mountains were. They were listed in alphabetical order in the index. Mount Bungen, Ibuki, Kanakuso, Oike, Shirakura... There were many more than I expected.

“I can’t tell which one...” I stared at the names for a while but nothing came



to mind at all. Shiga was famous for ceramics and Shigaraki ware anyway, so maybe the Shiga mountain part wasn't too important. Let's try Japanese mugwort, then.

*"Mugwort is called 'four-directional grass' in Japanese because its roots grow in four directions. It goes by a variety of other names as well, and is called sashimogusa in classic poetry. It's mentioned in two poems from Hyakunin Isshu."*

*"Hyakunin Isshu..."* That was an anthology of one hundred poems by one hundred poets—the same one that *"Chihayaburu"* was from.

This time, I opened up a poetry compilation. *Sashimogusa... Sashimogusa...*

Before long, I found the two poems that contained the word.

*"My life relied on vows that were as dew on sashimogusa. Alas, another autumn has passed. — Fujiwara no Mototoshi"*

And the meaning...

*"Your words of promise were as transient as the dew on mugwort. I lived a long life believing in them, but in the end, my wish was not granted."*

*"Explanation: The author asked for his son to be promoted, but his wish was not granted. The poem was written as a complaint."*

Uh... it's probably not this one. Let's take a look at the other one.

*"Though I am like this, I cannot say. Like the sashimogusa of Ibuki, unknown, my feelings burn. — Fujiwara no Sanekata"*

The sashimogusa of Ibuki... Shiga's Mount Ibuki. I looked up the meaning with a trembling finger.

*"I love you so much, but I can't say it. Since I can't say it, you must not be aware. My feelings burn for you like the mugwort of Mount Ibuki."*

My heart leaped. This tea bowl...contained Izumi's wholehearted confession. She must've thought that giving him a tea bowl linked to a classical poem would reach his heart more than simply saying "I still love you; I can't forget you." Like when she fell in love with him after he finished her poem.

She wanted him to look at this tea bowl, sense her feelings...and accept them. That's why she's coming back in two days—to hear his answer.

Holmes would've identified the message at first glance. What is he going to do? He loved her so much. He'd *have* to be swayed by such a sweet confession wrapped in a riddle, right?

*"I love you so much, but I can't say it."*

Cold sweat formed on my forehead as I quietly returned the books to the shelf. I sat dazed for a while before the door chime rang, signaling Holmes's return.

"Sorry, that took longer than expected. Was everything all right?"

"Yes. There weren't any customers, and no one called." I smiled, picked up the feather duster, and turned away.

On the fifteenth, the streets will be adorned with yamaboko for yoi-yoi-yama. By a strange coincidence, I was also going to have to settle something for myself that day.

### 3

July fifteenth, yoi-yoi-yama. This marks the second day before the climax of the Gion Festival.

The city of Kyoto was bustling with all of the tourists who came to see the yamaboko on display. Men and women of all ages dressed in yukata were shopping around the stalls lining the streets.

That day, I headed for Kura right after school as usual.

"Good morning." I always say this upon entering the store, no matter what time it is. It's the tradition in the antiques business.

Immediately, I heard a voice say, "Oh, you're here, Aoi! I'll help you with your yukata today."

"Huh?"

Mieko, who'd apparently been waiting for my arrival, pulled me into the small

changing area and tied a cute bow around my yukata with a vermillion sash. The yukata was the white one with red carnations that she had given me the other day.

“There we go. Now it won’t slip out of place. It looks great on you.” She nodded firmly, looking proud.

Mieko herself was wearing a vibrant light purple yukata. You could tell she was a seasoned Kyoto woman. She looked accustomed to it and she wore it well.

“Thank you. Your yukata is lovely too, Mieko.”

“Why thank you. It’s nice, right? I like this color very much.”

“It suits you well, and the one you picked for me is really cute too. I think you have great taste,” I said, touching my sash.

Mieko’s eyes opened wide. “Ah, well, perhaps I do, but the one who chose your yukata was Kiyotaka.”

“Huh?” My heart leapt.

“The owner did ask me to provide it, but I’m not familiar with what young folk like, so I asked Kiyotaka and he suggested this one. I thought something bolder would be better, but this one does suit you very well. He certainly has an eye for everything,” Mieko said cheerfully. I looked down at the floor, unable to say anything.

Mieko then hurriedly left the store, saying that she had things to do. It was back to just me and Holmes, who was sitting at the counter and doing the accounting. Today he was wearing a dark gray yukata with a black sash. I liked the dark blue one too, but this one had an even more mature look that made my heart race. *Seriously, how can someone look so good in a yukata? What a real Kyoto guy!*

“Was it crowded outside?” Holmes asked, still looking at the ledger. I snapped back to attention and looked up at him. I could tell I was blushing furiously. I was too happy knowing that he was the one who picked out my yukata.

“Oh, yes. It really is a big event, huh?”

“It’s already yoi-yoi-yama. You were going to meet your friends from Saitama today, right?”

This time, my heart leapt for a different reason.

“Yes, umm, at the lobby of a hotel called ‘Ryokuen.’”

“Ah, Ryokuen. That hotel has been hosting students on field trips for quite a long time.”

“I see.” I nodded and glanced at the paper bag on the counter. It was the tea bowl made by Izumi. “Come to think of it, Izumi’s coming today, right?” I was extremely curious, but asked nonchalantly as if it didn’t concern me.

“Yes. She did say that,” Holmes answered quickly, also as if it were nothing important.

*Could it be that he didn’t notice her confession? No, that can’t be true. Holmes of all people would never miss that. When Holmes accepts that tea bowl, it’ll be the same as accepting her feelings. For better or worse, I’ll be able to witness it myself. And then I’ll be going to see my friends from Saitama... What a day!*

## 4

It felt like time was passing much slower than usual. The shopping street was full of people, but no one stopped by Kura. It wasn’t the kind of store that one would casually drop into on a whim, especially with an event going on. Since there were no customers, time was trickling by. There was no sign of Izumi either.

Due to the festival, Kura was going to close at 7 p.m. today. It’s usually open until eight, but Holmes said there weren’t going to be any customers anyway.

Time passed and it was now 6:50 p.m. Izumi had yet to appear. *Why isn’t she coming? Did she change her mind?* I was restlessly wondering when she’d show up, but Holmes seemed the same as always. *Maybe she already texted him saying she wasn’t coming?* I felt the anxiety coming on and shook my head to clear it.

It was almost seven. I took a breath and said, “Um...I should change out of my

yukata now.”

Holmes looked up at the clock. “Oh, it’s already time. Since it’s the Gion Festival, why don’t you keep the yukata on?”

“Huh?”

“Your friends are here to experience the festival too, so they might be wearing yukata as well.”

“Oh...you’re right.”

“And most importantly, it looks good on you.” Holmes grinned.

My face went red. “R-Really? Okay, I’ll go there like this, then. I have a drawstring purse too, so this works.”

Then, the door chime rang. It was Izumi.

“Kiyotaka...” she greeted hesitantly.

“Welcome. Please have a seat,” Holmes said with his first-rate smile. I felt a sting in my chest.

“Thanks.”

“It looks like the festival’s in full swing.”

“It really is.”

They exchanged smiles. The tension from last time was gone... There was a friendly atmosphere between them.

*Oh, maybe she knew we were closing at seven and purposely came at the last minute?* Maybe she thought they could enjoy the festival together. Maybe they had already agreed to beforehand. Either way, I was the third wheel, and it was time for me to leave.

“Um...I’ll be going now. See you.” I bowed and fled the store. The moment I stepped outside, I winced at the hot summer air. Crowds of sightseers were moving to and fro beneath the dim sky.

There were thirty minutes left until our scheduled meeting, so I walked slowly towards the hotel. *Is this heavy-hearted feeling because I might run into my best friend and ex-boyfriend? Or is it because of Holmes and Izumi? Everything’s*

*bothering me, and I have no idea what I'm hoping for. Maybe it's because I'm like this that I can't be happy,* I thought, a self-deprecating smile rising to my face.

*Kon-chiki-chin, kon-chiki-chin,* went the festival rhythm. Colorful yamaboko contrasting with the darkening sky, paper lanterns illuminating the road... It was such a Japanese scene, and yet it felt magical, as though I'd wandered into another world. I had to walk slowly because I wasn't used to the yukata, so even though the hotel was close by, it took almost twenty minutes to get there.

I checked the sign that said "Ryokuen" and entered the lobby. It was a small, old-fashioned hotel that didn't look particularly traditional. The moment I stepped in, I heard a delighted voice: "Oh, it's Aoi!" Surprised, I turned towards the voice and saw the group of friends I used to hang out with. I looked around for Sanae, my best friend who'd snatched away my boyfriend, but I didn't see her. Relieved, I smiled back at my friends who I hadn't seen in a long time. Holmes was right—they were all wearing yukata. I was so glad that I'd kept mine on.

"Long time no see, everyone!"

"You look like you're doing well, Aoi!"

"Aoi, you look so cute in your yukata!"

They greeted me with bright smiles. I was so happy to see that they hadn't changed. *I'm glad I worked up the courage to come here,* I felt from the bottom of my heart.

"Hey so, Sanae and Katsumi said that they really want to talk to you about something," one of my friends said with a serious face.

My heart leapt. "Huh?"

The very next instant, as if they'd planned this in advance, my ex, Katsumi, and my best friend, Sanae, came out from behind a pillar. They both wore grave expressions on their faces. My heart was beating a mile a minute at their sudden appearance, and to be honest, it was a struggle to even remain standing.

They walked up to me with pained looks.

“Sorry, Aoi.”

“We’re so sorry.”

Both of them bowed deeply.

“You’ve probably already heard, but the two of us are going out now,” Katsumi said, revealing the truth that I didn’t want to hear. My heart sank.

“After you left, Katsumi and I were really lonely without you, and we ended up hanging out a lot since we both wanted to distract ourselves from missing you...”

“Wait, I’ll explain. I really am sorry, Aoi. Sanae and I both loved you, so it was really painful losing you...and we started going to karaoke and stuff as a distraction.”

“I-It was my fault. I ended up falling in love with Katsumi.”

“No, it was my fault for not being able to distance myself from Sanae...”

“We really are sorry!” They bowed over and over again, as if competing to see who was more remorseful.

My friends chimed in, as if covering for the two. “Aoi, we thought it was terrible at first too, but Sanae really was thinking about you too much, to the point where she wasn’t eating enough.”

“Yeah, and besides, they didn’t start dating until after Katsumi broke up with you.”

*What’s the meaning of this...?*

*Oh, I see. So that’s how it is. My friends said they wanted to see me, but that wasn’t the real reason they called me here... Those two just wanted to clear their feelings of guilt. No one here cares about me anymore.*

*If they apologize profusely and I say, “It’s okay,” then they won’t have to feel bad about their relationship anymore, right?*

*What should I do? Well...I clearly don’t have a choice but to smile and give them my blessing. But what would happen if I said, “Isn’t that just your excuse?”*

*Think about how I feel having your apologies forced onto me!"*

*It's all a farce. They're doing this assuming that I'll forgive them.*

I clenched my fists to try to hide my trembling. I felt like I could cry at any moment, but I managed to hold my tears back and form a smile.

"I-It's okay. It didn't work out between us because we got separated, so..." I wasn't saying it for their sake. It was for myself, because I didn't want to feel any more miserable. "I honestly feel conflicted about my ex-boyfriend going out with my best friend...but there's nothing I can do if you fell in love with each other." *I'll tell you what you want to hear the most, so please, get out of my sight.* "Don't worry about me. I hope it goes well for you." I was positive I was able to maintain my smile until the end.

"Oh!" my friends exclaimed.

"Thank yooou!" Sanae cried, and Katsumi gently patted her on the head. It left a bitter taste in my mouth and I could feel tears starting to well up. *Now what? I really am about to cry. It's so frustrating. I'm pathetic. I hate this...*

"Aoi, you're so cool!"

"Yeah, I admire you!"

"Hey, does everyone wanna go to the festival together?"

*They can say those things because they're excited. Please...just stop. I wish I could leave.* It took everything I had to hold back my tears.

"C'mon, let's go!" one of my friends said, holding out her hand.

"Aoi?" Holmes called out, his voice echoing across the lobby.

"Huh?" I turned around, and sure enough, there was Holmes in his yukata. My mind went blank. Why was he here? The only thing I could hear in my bewilderment was my racing pulse.

His sudden appearance didn't go unnoticed.

"Who's that? He's really good-looking!"

"Guys in yukata are so cool!"

"Do you know him, Aoi?"



My excited friends exchanged looks.

“Oh...yeah, I do.” I nodded hesitantly.

Holmes walked right up beside me and smiled. “Hello, I’m Kiyotaka Yagashira. Thank you for coming all the way from Saitama to see our Gion Festival,” he said, with the air of a tourism ambassador. *Why does he always take responsibility for promoting Kyoto and works of art?*

“Umm, do you work for the festival?” a friend asked. It was a reasonable suspicion.

Holmes chuckled. “No, I’m a university student studying philology and literature. Oh, you’re all in high school, right? If you’re interested in Kyoto University, feel free to visit. I’ll show you around.”

“Wait, Kyoto University?”

“Whoa!”

Everyone exchanged glances, hands over their mouths in shock. As I stood there astonished, Holmes looked down at me, gazing intently as if he were seeing into my heart. “Are you finished here?” he asked.

“Oh... Yes.”

“Shall we go see the festival, then?” he said, holding out his hand. I felt like I was going to cry. No one here understood me, but Holmes...Holmes knew. He could tell that I wanted to get away. I was on the verge of tears, but I wasn’t going to cry here.

“Yes, let’s go.” I nodded firmly and took his hand.

Everyone’s faces lit up.

“I see how it is, Aoi! So that’s why you’re wearing a yukata!”

“I can’t believe you have a hot boyfriend that goes to Kyoto U! I’m so jealous!”

“And you’re going on a festival date! Tell us all about it later!”

As they were all chattering excitedly, Sanae seemed relieved yet conflicted, while Katsumi looked dumbfounded and didn’t say a word.

“O-Okay. See you next time, guys.”

“Let’s go, Aoi.”

I took Holmes’s hand and we were about to leave when Katsumi sprung forward and grabbed my wrist. “A-Aoi!”

“Huh?”

“What’s the meaning of this? We only just broke up, but you’re already dating a guy from Kyoto U?”

Everyone, not just me, was shocked by his words.

“Wh-What are you trying to say?” I asked, bewildered. But before I could defend myself, everyone else stepped in.

“Hey, Katsumi! What’re you saying when you already have Sanae?”

“And *you’re* the one who betrayed Aoi in the first place!”

“Yeah! But you regret it now that you know she’s hitting it off with a super hot guy from Kyoto University? Are you serious? I can’t believe you.”

My friends criticized him in unison, and Sanae ran away, unable to endure it.

“Sanae, wait!” Katsumi panicked and chased after her.

*What on Earth? First it was a farce, and now it’s turned into a soap opera...*

After the shock passed through me, I smiled weakly. It felt like everything that’d been bottled up inside me had disappeared in a flash. *Is this what they call “getting over it?”* I was glad, though. Now I felt as though I’d truly, *truly* managed to settle my past love. There was no need to pretend anymore.

As I stood there in place, Holmes said, “Aoi.”

“Oh, right.”

He held my hand firmly and led me outside the hotel.

We walked out onto the street and explored the bustling, festive town...while still holding hands. The paper lanterns hanging in the air illuminated the streets with their warm light.

“It’s too crowded. We’ll be able to walk more easily if we cut through here,” Holmes said, slipping into an alley. It was a very Kyoto-esque narrow path that could only be passed through in single file. It was so peaceful and quiet in there that it was hard to believe we’d just gotten out of a flood of people.

“I-I’m surprised you came, Holmes.” There were so many things I wanted to ask him about, like what happened with Izumi after I left, but those were the first words that left my mouth.

Holmes stopped walking. “I was a little worried. I had a feeling...that you were crying.” Those words pierced my heart. *He...really does see through everything.*

“Y-You really do know everything, Holmes,” I murmured. He silently turned around and looked at me gently. “I was at my limit. They forced their apology on me, and all of my friends sided with them. No one would consider my feelings... That’s when you showed up, and I was really so surprised.” He’d truly saved me. “I-I gave them my blessing, but the whole time I was thinking, ‘This is for my own sake, not yours.’ That’s...wrong, right? If I was going to give them my blessing, then I should’ve said it sincerely. But it wasn’t possible for me... I’m glad, though. I’ve been an indecisive coward all this time, but now, I’m finally over it. Thank you for being worried about me and coming to save me.” I managed to put on a smile before bowing.

Holmes sighed deeply. “You don’t have to force yourself to smile. That was utterly ridiculous,” he declared in a somewhat angry Kyoto accent.

“Huh?” I looked back up at him, surprised. He was frowning.

“If they felt guilty and genuinely wanted to apologize, then they wouldn’t have had to get your friends to back them up. The way they went about it was absolutely rotten.”

It was hard to believe that that strong language was coming from the calm and elegant Holmes. From those words, I could tell that he was genuinely angry. He was angry...because of what happened to me...

“Holmes...” The burden on my heart was lifted, and warm joy took its place. *I’m so happy that Holmes came for me...* The moment I looked down, a large hand tenderly patted my head.

"It must've been hard, Aoi," he said gently.

Suddenly, the dam holding back my tears burst. "Holmes...!" I cried.

"Let it all out. You deserve it," he said, patting my back softly.

Before I knew it, I'd flung myself into his chest and started bawling loudly. *I'm...not going to try to hold it in anymore.* It hurt so much seeing my ex, best friend, and even the rest of our friend group distancing themselves from me. I couldn't cry in front of them. I absolutely did not want to let that happen. But here, it was okay to cry. *Holmes!*

I was enveloped in his warm chest and the gentle motions of his hand. There was a faint, sweet scent coming from his yukata. The red lanterns were blurred by the tears in my eyes.

Somewhere nearby, the sound of the festival rhythm softly rang out.

## 5

Afterwards, we walked around and looked at the yamaboko before returning to Kura in Teramachi-Sanjo. I'd remembered that I'd left my school uniform and shoes there.

The shopping street was quiet at night. Kura was the only store showing signs of life, lit up by a dim lamp.

"Enjoy." Holmes made my usual café au lait.

"Thank you." I lifted the cup and brought it to my mouth, feeling the warmth of the delicious drink seep through me. I then looked at the counter and saw that Izumi's tea bowl was gone.

"Holmes, did you notice the message in Izumi's tea bowl?" I asked tentatively.

Holmes widened his eyes, looking slightly surprised. "Yes, but I'm impressed that you did too, Aoi."

"Oh, well, um. Yeah." I couldn't exactly say that I'd secretly done my research. "So, um, what was your answer?" I asked, quickly moving on so that he wouldn't press further.

Holmes gently put down his cup. “When I received the tea bowl from her, I sensed that she was expecting a response poem. So, I provided one.”

*That means he replied with a classic poem, right? That’s Holmes for you!*

“Wh-What was it?”

*“’Twould be lamentable to submit to a whim, and sully my name for a mere summer night’s dream.* I modified a poem by Suo no Naishi and gave it to her together with her tea bowl.”

“And...what does that mean?”

“The original poem goes, *’Twould be lamentable to rest upon your arm, and sully my name for a mere spring night’s dream.* It means ‘I would hate for unsavory rumors to spread about us simply because I used your arm as a pillow for a moment as fleeting as a spring night’s dream.’”

*“I-I see.” So that means...“I would hate for unsavory rumors to spread about us simply because I followed your whim, which is as fleeting as a summer night’s dream.” In other words, he turned her down. He always manages to be graceful yet sharp. That’s a Kyoto guy for you.*

“B-But, weren’t you swayed? It was a wholehearted confession from someone you used to love dearly, right?”

“I wasn’t. It’s true that I once wanted to get her back, but that desire already disappeared long ago. Plus, even though it looked like a wholehearted confession, the lines on the tea bowl showed strong signs of selfishness and hesitation. It told me that her rekindled feelings for me were nothing more than escapism.”

“The lines...” I gulped.

“Yes. All works of art reveal the artist’s true nature—the same goes for my father’s books. After giving her my frank answer, I also gave her some unsolicited advice: ‘If you’re that hesitant about getting married, have a serious talk with him and his parents again, or else you’ll regret it for the rest of your life.’ Then she pouted and left in a huff.”

“I...see.” Holmes really was calm and composed. Instead of falling for her

whimsical confession, he saw through to her true character... Then again, in his mind, it was truly over between them. Realizing that made me somewhat relieved, which confused me. Why was I relieved?

As I was thinking, it occurred to me that I'd been crying my eyes out on Holmes's chest, and my face flushed.

"Is something wrong, Aoi?" He suddenly peered into my face and I reflexively recoiled.

"N-No, it's nothing. Really." My heart was beating a mile a minute. *What's gotten into me?*

Suddenly, the door swung open with a *clang* from the chime.

"Huh, was wondering why there was a bit of light coming from here. Door's open."

"It must be Kiyotaka."

The owner and the manager came in. They were both holding paper fans; presumably they were on their way back from the Gion Festival.

Upon seeing us, the owner perked up. "A young man and woman alone in the dark? What naughty things are you up to?"

"Get your mind out of the gutter. You're being rude to Aoi, you know? Anyway, I'll make coffee," Holmes said, standing up. He was immune to the owner's teasing.

As for me, I didn't know why, but my heart felt like it was going to explode. *Why is this happening?*

"What did you think of yoi-yoi-yama, Aoi?" the manager asked in a kind voice, bringing me back to my senses.

I looked at him and answered, "It was wonderful, like something out of a fairytale."

"This year was busier than last year," Holmes said, emerging from the kitchenette with a tray. As he was placing the cups in a row on the table, the door opened with a *clang* again. This time, it was Mieko popping in.

“I noticed the light was on, and you’re all here! I caught Ueda and Akihito at the festival, so they’re here too.”

“That coffee smells good!”

“I came to see the Gion Festival, as promised.”

Ueda and Akihito came in after Mieko, chattering all the while. It was somewhat relieving to see the usual cast.

“Can you make us coffee too, Holmes?”

“I could go for wine.”

“Yes, yes.” Holmes nodded before looking at me again. “Would you like a second café au lait, Aoi?”

“Oh... Yes, please.” My pulse quickened again. *Okay, seriously, why is my heart beating so fast? It must be because I cried on Holmes’s chest. Because of his broad chest, sweet scent, and large, warm, gentle hands.* Remembering it made me nervous, but at the same time, it was a really nice feeling...

*I think I’ve finally gotten over the past once and for all. I’m going to use this festival as a turning point. I’ll say farewell to the me who was always looking back. From now on, I’ll walk forward.* I nodded to myself and smiled as I sipped the café au lait.

It was a lively and fun night in Teramachi-Sanjo—the time of happiness that comes after the festival.

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## Afterword

Hello, my name is Mai Mochizuki.

Thank you so much for reading *Holmes of Kyoto*.

I became a citizen of Kyoto in the spring of 2013. I was originally from Hokkaido, so it wouldn't be a stretch to say that the ancient city of Kyoto was the complete opposite of my hometown. Everything was new to me, and I couldn't get enough of it all. One of the reasons I wrote this book was that I absolutely *had* to write about Kyoto before my outsider's perspective and perception faded away. Another was that I'd always wanted to write the "light mystery" genre. I loved the idea of lighthearted mysteries where no one dies.

"All right then, I'm going to write a light mystery set in Kyoto!" I thought, and the title that popped into my mind was *Kyoto Teramachi Sanjo no Holmes*. For this book, the title came first, and the rest of the story expanded from there. *Kyoto Teramachi Sanjo no Holmes (Holmes of Kyoto)*. Yep, that's got a nice ring to it! It's settled!

Next, I decided to make Holmes a derivation of the surname Yagashira. Things were smooth up until here, but up ahead lay a path of thorns. I had to do more research into Kyoto and antiques than anticipated, and my days were devoted to accumulating piles of books and taking notes.

Also, as I was writing this book, I read the appraiser Seinosuke Nakajima's books enough times that I'd practically memorized them. I've always been a fan, but my admiration grew stronger because of how he wrote about the world of antique art in an interesting, easy-to-digest way. Thank you so much.

So, the model for Seiji Yagashira a.k.a. the owner was... Well, as much as I'd like to say, the owner is a very free-spirited character, so I'll refrain.

Conceiving this book was a struggle unlike anything I'd experienced before, but that made me all the more thrilled when I finished writing it. I'm very

emotionally attached to it. So, I'm truly delighted that you picked it up, and I hope that reading it has left you with the desire to visit Kyoto.

Lastly, I'd like to use this space to express my gratitude: To the readers who are always supporting me;

To my precious friends with whom I engage in mutual encouragement; To my beloved family who approved of my writing career and cheered me on; To EVERYSTAR, the mobile novel publishing website that made my dream come true, and Ryuichiro Kawasaki, the editor who work hard towards the publishing of this book; To Shin Miyazawa from Futabasha, who guided me with apt advice; To Shizu Yamauchi, who provided such lovely illustrations; And to you, who picked up this book.

I'm truly thankful to all of the connections surrounding myself and this book.

I'm also thankful to Conan Doyle, who I respect and adore, for creating the universally loved character Sherlock Holmes.

Thank you all so much.

Mai Mochizuki

## **Mai Mochizuki**

Born in Hokkaido and currently resides in Kyoto. In 2013, won first prize in the second installment of EVERYSTAR's e-publication awards. Other works include *The Celebrated Miss Miyu Ayanokoji's Secret!* (Shogakukan Angel Bunko) and *Cheat & Harem Girl* (Shufunotomo Co., Ltd.). Interests include cafes and visiting shrines and temples. (As of January 2016)

## Translator's Corner

Thank you for reading the English release of *Holmes of Kyoto!* As you may have noticed, this series is steeped in historical and location-based references, and a lot of research was needed to make sure the translation was factually sound. I've been given this space to share some of the challenges and considerations made in localizing this series.

**Speech:** Kyoto is in the Kansai region, where a notably different dialect of Japanese is spoken. To be specific, Kansai dialect is actually a group of dialects, each with their own nuances—and this series often has multiple in the same conversation. For example, Mieko speaks Kyoto dialect, which has an elegant, feminine nuance, while Ueno speaks Osaka dialect which has a casual, playful feel. So, it was necessary to incorporate these implied tones into the dialogue.

**Obscure Information:** Most of the more obscure knowledge was explained in the original text, but since it was written for a Japanese audience, there were some things that were assumed to be common knowledge: religious traditions, famous poems that would be taught in school, *etc.* The benefit of the novel format (as opposed to manga or anything else with limited space) is that it's easy to weave in as many extra explanations as we want, and we were generous with those so that English readers (hopefully) wouldn't be too confused.

**Mapping:** This series is based in the real city of Kyoto and references existing locations and street names. Whenever Aoi was visiting a new location, I would often bring up a map of the area to better visualize the streets, shrine layouts, *etc.* The only made-up location in Volume 1 is Kura, but for those who are curious, it was modeled after a similar antique shop + cafe combo in Teramachi-Sanjo called "Wright Shokai." Also, when deciding how much to localize location names, we generally went for names that would allow readers to find them if

they wanted to learn more. For example, “Tadasu no Mori” was kept in Japanese because Shimogamo Shrine’s English website doesn’t translate it either.

**Antiques:** Similar to above, since the series references real artists and types of pottery, a lot of research was done to make sure the correct terminology was being used. Some things were rather specific to Japanese traditional art and didn’t have a whole lot of English coverage, so it was necessary to say, look up what a piece of pottery might’ve looked like and describe it accordingly.

## Editor's Corner

As readers of this series, we're fortunate that Aoi is new to Kyoto and to the antiques business. That means Holmes is often explaining things to her — and at the same time, to us. It's OK that none of us know who Ekaku Hakuin was, because we've got Holmes to inform us that he was a Zen priest in the mid Edo period, etc, etc. Holmes knows more than even the average Japanese reader would know about art and antiques and about life in Kyoto and he's always telling the other characters about these things, so those cultural details are explained right there in the original text. But Aoi and Holmes and the Japanese reader also share a lot of knowledge that is not obvious to English-speaking readers. This means that my job as editor involves repeatedly having one of these two thoughts:

1. Wait, does everyone know this?
2. What??

Here's the thing: Although we often use Japanese words in this series, we don't want to use words the reader won't understand. There's nothing that takes you out of enjoying a story faster than having to wonder what the heck a word means. It's not supposed to feel like taking the SATs.

But where do we draw the line? What Japanese words can we assume the reader already knows? Some are obvious: while 19th century travel guides in English talked about "raw fish with vinegared rice," we can use the word "sushi." Others might be more of a judgment call, but in a chapter that mentions "yakitori" just once in passing, it's easy to be cautious and use "chicken skewers."

Then there are cases where I have to stop and remember that I can't assume the reader has the same obsessions with Japanese culture that I do. So for example, at first I blithely sailed past the mention of ikebana in chapter 2. Then I had second thoughts. Is that word common knowledge, or is it something I only know because I personally have been reading, writing, and thinking about

Japanese gardening and Japanese crafts for many years?

Yes, it would have become pretty clear further along in the story. But while this book is full of mysteries that don't get solved till later, this wasn't supposed to be one of them. Still, the word is used over and over again, so replacing it with "flower arranging" every single time seemed awkward.

So we used the word, but the first time it appeared, added a sentence explaining that ikebana is the art of flower arranging. Aoi often explains things in her narration that the reader may not exactly need to know, such as her precise, turn-by-turn bike route to see cherry blossoms on the way to work at the store. So a little added explanation won't stand out as unnatural, and removes a bump in the road for the reader who's hearing the word for the first time or who only has a vague notion of what it is.

It's not always about individual words, though, like in another case where we realized that a little cultural knowledge was needed to appreciate what was going on. While preparing for the Festival, Holmes and Aoi have the following exchange:

"Your yukata is backwards, Aoi," Holmes said, chuckling.

My face flushed. "H-How silly of me."

As it becomes clear in the next sentences, she's not literally wearing it backwards, like with the front opening in back; they're just talking about how she closed the front flaps. That doesn't seem like that big a deal, so why is she so embarrassed? We added the unspoken realization that the Japanese reader would know is behind this:

*Oh no. I'd put the kimono on in the way a dead body is dressed for a funeral.*

Without knowing this, the reader might think it's just some silly fashion rule, and Aoi might seem to be overreacting.

But as well as cases like those where I more or less knew what problem

needed to be solved, things came up that I didn't know, either. When I read this line in chapter 5:

*“Good morning.” I always say this upon entering the store, no matter what time it is.*

My margin comment was “uhhh why?”

Minna explained to me — as we added at the end of that sentence — that that's the tradition in the antiques business. In fact, it's true in a number of businesses, including the entertainment industry, that you say “ohayou gozaimasu” the first time you see someone on a given day. It doesn't really exactly mean “good morning” but more “it's early.” It's definitely true that “early” is a very relative concept, and people I've known in the entertainment business definitely keep odd hours, so it kind of makes sense. But no one told me that in Japanese class! It's just one of the many things I'm enjoying learning about Japan and Kyoto while editing this series.



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Holmes of Kyoto: Volume 1

by Mai Mochizuki

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Cover illustrations by Shizu Yamauchi Cover design by Noriko Kanagami

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Original Japanese edition published in 2015 by Futabasha Publishers Ltd.

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Ebook edition 1.0: September 2020