



Holmes of Kyoto

~The Endeavors and Indecision
of a Curator-in-Training: Part 2~

17

Mai Mochizuki



Holmes of Kyoto

~The Endeavors and Indecision
of a Curator-in-Training: Part 2~

17

Mai Mochizuki

Kiyotaka Yagashira

Nicknamed “Holmes,” he has an incredibly sharp mind despite his gentle demeanor. He is currently undergoing training to learn about the outside world before taking over the antique store Kura.

Aoi Mashiro

A second-year university student who moved to Kyoto from Omiya, Saitama and began working part-time at the antique store Kura. She is developing her potential as an appraiser under Kiyotaka’s guidance.





Akihito Kajiwara

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



Rikyu Takiyama

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

Ensho

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



Seiji Yagashira (Owner)

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

Yoshie Takiyama

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



Takeshi Yagashira (Manager)

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



Table of Contents

[Cover](#)

[Characters](#)

[Prologue](#)

[Chapter 1: Gears in Motion](#)

[Chapter 2: Interviewing and Investigating](#)

[Chapter 3: Fetters of the Past](#)

[Chapter 4: Scars of Light and Shadow](#)

[Chapter 5: An Exhibition for One](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Short Story: A Chat Between Childhood Friends](#)

[Extra: Christmas for Two](#)

[Afterword](#)

[Color Illustrations](#)

[Maps of Kyoto](#)

[Bonus Translator's Corner](#)

[About J-Novel Club](#)

[Copyright](#)

Prologue

“I don’t want Tomoka to marry that man named Sada. I want you to break them up.”

Ensho (real name: Shinya Sugawara) and I stood in silent shock at the kimono-clad woman’s declaration. I felt the temperature in the office drop. It must’ve been because of the chilly aura she was exuding.

Sorry for the abrupt start. My name is Katsuya Komatsu, and I’m a detective. (I’ve always wanted to do an introduction like this, so I’m a bit giddy now.) That said, my job is a lot different from the detectives you see in books and on TV. Background checks make up the bulk of the work. My specialty is internet-based investigations, so lately, I’ve been receiving more requests to identify people who are committing online slander. It makes me realize that this is the time we live in.

Still, it’s hard to live on detective work alone, so I recently took on game programming as a side job. Ironically, it pays better than my main job. In my defense, part of the reason it’s hard to keep the detective office running is the high rent. The Komatsu Detective Agency is located in Gion, south of Kiyamachi-Shijo. I like it here in this renovated wooden townhouse, but unfortunately, the location makes it too expensive.

Several people told me I should’ve gotten a different place, and I agree. This townhouse was originally inhabited by past clients of mine. They were looking for someone to rent it, and I went along with it. It was right after I’d gained fame from solving a big case in Kyoto, so business was booming at the time, with requests coming in right and left. That was why I got ahead of myself and thought an office in Gion was a good idea.

Sadly, as history has taught us time and time again, nothing in this world lasts forever. I probably had it coming, seeing as it wasn’t even me who’d solved the big case. I took the credit and reveled in success, only for my revenue to drop

like a rock. Such are the ups and downs of life.

The person who actually solved the case was a handsome, sharp young man named Kiyotaka Yagashira. He's an appraiser, and although he calls himself an apprentice, anyone would consider him a skilled professional. His exceptional eye for observation and appraisal earned him the nickname "Holmes of Kyoto." In fact, he's probably a better detective than me, as much as I hate to admit it.

Anyway, Kiyotaka's grandfather and teacher, nationally certified appraiser Seiji Yagashira, told him to broaden his views before taking over the family business, so he underwent training at a bunch of places. Well, it was basically temporary job assignments. Kiyotaka's quick-witted, sensible, and works fast. Wherever he went, he did his job with ease, and his colleagues all appreciated him for it. Watching from the sidelines, I found myself thinking, "How is this training? Did they mistake him for hired help?"

And now, it's the Komatsu Detective Agency's turn with that hired help. I'd thrown my name into the pot, but I hadn't expected him to actually choose me out of all the applicants. "You've been helping me out, so I wanted to repay the favor," he'd said with a gentle smile. But no matter how you look at it, he's the one who's been helping me.

The office is within walking distance of his grandfather's antique shop, Kura, so he must've thought it'd be convenient to work here. Accordingly, I told him he could come and go as he pleased.

On his first day here, I was surprised to see him accompanied by former counterfeiter Ensho, who he said was his temporary apprentice. Ensho had already washed his hands of the forgery business, and I'd heard that he was atoning for his sins by training under Shigetoshi Yanagihara, an appraiser just as famous as Seiji Yagashira. It turned out that Yanagihara had advised him to work with Kiyotaka as part of his studies.

Kiyotaka and Ensho used to be rivals, appraiser and counterfeiter. Although they were now on the same path, they still got along like cats and dogs. Ensho was constantly hostile towards Kiyotaka, and there was no end to their petty fights at work. Being stuck between them gave me stomachaches, but I couldn't

deny that their arrival had instantly revitalized the office. Kiyotaka had also introduced me to his acquaintances in Gion, expanding my social network.

The three of us solved a few cases together, and before long, all I had to do was walk around town to have people greeting me by name and jokingly saying things like, “Are you on patrol? Thanks for keeping an eye out.” Business hadn’t returned to its former glory, but at least the wheels were turning.

Around that time, Yilin Jing—daughter of a rich man in Shanghai named Zhifei Jing—paid the office a visit. She invited Kiyotaka to appraise at an event in Shanghai. Ensho went with him, and for some reason, I was allowed to go too.

A lot of things happened there. Ensho’s pent-up frustrations exploded and he ditched Kiyotaka. Shiro Kikukawa coerced Kiyotaka into stealing a painting for him if he didn’t want Aoi Mashiro, who was in New York, to get hurt. It took a lot of work, but in the end, all of the problems were solved. Kikukawa was arrested and Kiyotaka protected Aoi. Well, it wasn’t just Kiyotaka. Ensho helped too. In order to save Aoi, he took up the brush and painted a beautiful work of art in no time at all.

After that, Ensho decided to take the path of a painter instead of an appraiser. I was so sure he’d leave the office and go somewhere else, but then he asked if he could sublet the second floor. I was hesitant at first, but for someone who was constantly worrying about the high rent, it was a real blessing. I’d even considered leaving Gion, but if he was willing to stay here, I’d gratefully accept his offer. Now I could restart my detective work from a clean slate!

Or so I thought, but a project came in from my programming side job. Since there was a fixed deadline, I decided to temporarily suspend operations and focus on my side job for a while. During this time, Kiyotaka went back to working at Kura.

That was when Atsuko Tadokoro paid us a visit.

Atsuko’s a woman in her fifties who teaches flower arranging in Gion while running a legal secret club. Maybe because of her work, she’s got both

youthfulness and captivating beauty. I met her through a certain case, and we're on friendly terms now. If we see each other on the street, we'll stop and chat.

When Atsuko found out that I was taking a break from my detective work, she first went to see Kiyotaka at Kura. Apparently, she brought one of her flower arranging students, Tomoka Asai, with her. Tomoka was a pretty lady in her mid-twenties with a fiancé about a decade older than her. That fiancé was acting strange, so she asked Kiyotaka to find out if he was cheating on her.

According to Tomoka, her fiancé was a wonderful person whom she didn't deserve. She'd had to put an effort into getting his attention before he eventually started dating her.

Her intuition as a woman was telling her that something was off, but what convinced her that he was cheating was the fact that he hadn't seen her on her birthday, claiming that he was busy with work. Her own investigation revealed that he *hadn't* been working that day.

Kiyotaka told the depressed woman that if she wanted to maintain her relationship, she should talk to her fiancé herself instead of hiring a detective. Tomoka didn't want to break up with him, so she conceded. Her response seemed to disappoint Atsuko, who asked, "Are you sure about this?"

Kiyotaka, concerned by Atsuko's reaction, immediately asked me to investigate what Tomoka's fiancé was doing on her birthday. It turned out that he'd stayed home all day, keeping his restaurant closed. But the day before, he was with none other than Atsuko Tadokoro. According to witness testimony, Atsuko had told him to break up with Tomoka because he wasn't good enough for her.

Now, why did Atsuko do that? Since Tomoka said she didn't deserve her fiancé, I was imagining someone as gorgeous as an actor, but he was actually a kind-looking, short, and stout man. He was a chef at a self-owned Italian restaurant and an all-around good guy who volunteered on his days off. Apparently Tomoka had been referring to his personality, not his appearance.

We had one theory, which was that Atsuko wanted to hire Tomoka for the high-end club she was opening. Someone like Tomoka, who was beautiful,

good-natured, and didn't judge men by their looks, would be an ideal employee. That could be why Atsuko was trying to break them up.

"But I don't think she's the kind of person who'd get a girl to break up with her fiancé just because she wants to hire her either." I really did think that. Even Kiyotaka said, "It isn't out of the question, but I still feel that she wouldn't go so far for such a reason."

But when I told Ensho about it, he flat-out said, "Dunno. That obasan's the type to do anything to get what she wants."

"Hey, that's going too far."

As we were having that conversation, Atsuko showed up at the office.

That ended up being a long recap. Anyway, it was me, Ensho, and Atsuko Tadokoro at the Komatsu Detective Agency. She smiled when she greeted us, but her eyes were dead serious.

After a bit of small talk, she got straight to the point: "I trust that you've heard about Tomoka from Kiyotaka?"

"Yeah. You wanted him to perform an infidelity investigation, right?"

"Yes." Atsuko folded her hands in her lap. "I'm not going to be so roundabout anymore."

"Huh?"

This was when she hit me with those lines at the beginning: "I don't want Tomoka to marry that man named Sada. I want you to break them up."

At the time, there was no way I would've realized the truth behind her words, so all I did was stare wide-eyed at her.

*

Meanwhile, the antique store Kura also had a visitor.

The door chime rang as a young man stepped inside. I—Aoi Mashiro—and Kiyotaka "Holmes" Yagashira turned towards the door in surprise.

“Good evening,” the man said with a reserved bow.

“Welcome, Haruhiko,” Holmes and I said in unison.

This was Haruhiko Kajiwarara, the younger brother of our actor friend, Akihito. The other day, he’d learned the shocking secret behind his birth, but after some twists and turns, the matter had been resolved. I was worried since I hadn’t seen him since then, but from the look on his face, he was in a cheerful mood. It was a relief to see him the same as before.

“Thank you so much, Holmes. I’m sorry you got wrapped up in our family’s problem.” Haruhiko lowered his head apologetically.

“It was nothing,” Holmes said with a smile. “Please have a seat.” He gestured towards the chairs at the counter.

“Sorry to impose.” Haruhiko sat down. “Oh, this is for you.” He placed a box of sweets on the counter.

“Thank you.” Holmes picked up the box and smiled happily. “Ah, these are Kogetsu’s Senju Senbei treats.” Kogetsu was a famous Kyoto sweets shop.

“Are these from the Kogetsu in Shin-Omiya?” I asked out of curiosity.

“Yep.” Haruhiko grinned and nodded.

Kogetsu’s Shin-Omiya location was cooperating with the Mount Funaoka Area Revitalization Project.

“It was hard to choose between all of the great shops that are helping with the project, but this time, I wanted to pick something with a long shelf life,” he added.

“I love Senju Senbei, so thank you,” Holmes said. “I’ll make coffee. Aoi, you can take a break too.” He went into the kitchenette.

“Still, I’m surprised that Akihito pushed the responsibility onto me,” Holmes said as he placed mugs of coffee and café au lait on the counter. They were Kura’s custom turquoise ones that were now a familiar sight. The café au lait was for Haruhiko, who disliked black coffee.

“Ahhh...” Haruhiko scratched his head. “Sorry again. I’m sure you didn’t want

to deal with it, but that was the best plan my brother could think of.”

I froze as I was about to sip my coffee. Holmes stopped too, a curious look in his eyes.

“The best plan?” Holmes asked.

“Yes. He thought your interpretation would sound better than his and Fuyuki’s assumptions. I think Akihito really trusts you like family—no, maybe even more than that.”

“I’m flattered, but...” Holmes shrugged. Most likely, no amount of trust would make him appreciate being passed the buck like that.

Haruhiko and I smiled sympathetically.

“Well,” Holmes said, regaining his composure, “were you able to calm down after that?”

“Yes, I came to terms with everything. I realized again how blessed I am.”

“That’s good to hear.” Holmes narrowed his eyes softly. “By the way, I hear that this incident made you grow a lot closer to Kaori.”

He touched upon the subject so casually that I choked on my drink. As he said, there had been a development in the relationship between Haruhiko and my best friend, Kaori Miyashita. Learning the partial truth behind his birth had shocked Haruhiko, and it was Kaori who had rushed to his side and confessed her feelings on the spur of the moment. But they hadn’t started dating.

According to Kaori, Haruhiko had told her, “What you said that day made me really happy. But I’m still not sure about my own feelings. It’s like...I can’t make a decision about dating right away.”

And Kaori had replied, “Don’t worry about it. It took a long time for me to understand how I felt, so I’m not expecting a quick answer. Let’s just keep having fun like before.”

So in the end, nothing had changed. Kaori wasn’t upset about it either. In fact, she’d even said, “I feel warm and fuzzy when I’m with Haruhiko, and that’s good enough for me. It’s like my world is pastel-colored now.” So she was probably satisfied with the status quo.

Still, I was curious about what Haruhiko thought. And just as I had been thinking that, Holmes had brought it up, hence my choking. I wiped my mouth with my handkerchief and looked across the counter at Haruhiko. Surprisingly, his face was bright red.

“No, um...we haven’t exactly grown closer,” he said, flustered.

“Is that so? You seem to get along very well. I think you have a nice thing going on.”

“Yes, I think so too,” Haruhiko muttered, averting his gaze.

“You know how she feels about you, don’t you?”

He gave a vague nod. “Yes...well, when she found me the other day, she...”

Unable to say anything, I raised my mug to my mouth to hide the expression on my face.

Holmes hummed and folded his arms. “Is there perhaps someone else on your mind?”

Haruhiko looked up with a start. “Wait, how did you know?”

My heart pounded with unease. Kaori’s struggle with her past heartbreak had prevented her from trying again, but then she finally met someone she could honestly say she loved: Haruhiko. I didn’t want her to get hurt again.

Whether or not he knew what I was thinking, Holmes continued with his usual nonchalance, “You know Kaori well and you think you’re like-minded. If you still can’t take the plunge despite that, there must be something stopping you.”

“You saw right through me,” Haruhiko said weakly, placing his hand on his forehead. “But it’s not that I’m interested in someone else, per se...”

“Huh?” I furrowed my brow, confused.

Meanwhile, Holmes seemed to already know the answer. “Is it your previous girlfriend?”

Haruhiko fell silent for a moment before saying, “Yes.”

“Meguro...” I murmured.

Haruhiko gave a soft nod. He used to be in a relationship with Akari Meguro, a

member of the flower arranging club Kaori was in. In fact, Kaori had first befriended Haruhiko when she found him crying at the Kamo riverbank after Meguro broke up with him.

“It’s as I suspected, then,” Holmes muttered.

“Yes. I think it’s because she dumped me at a time when my feelings for her were really strong. I tried a lot of new things to distract myself from the pain, but I keep remembering her all of a sudden.” Haruhiko sighed. “I know I’m being a coward and I need to move on. But if I were to accept Kaori when I’m like this, it’d be like I’m using her to forget my ex, and I don’t want that,” he said, gazing up at the ceiling.

I felt relieved as I watched him. It wasn’t easy to forget someone you dated for so long, and it was very like him to not want to go out with Kaori in that state.

“You’re really sincere,” I said.

His eyes widened in surprise. “Huh? Am I?”

“Yes,” said Holmes. “A cunning man would’ve taken her hand right away. After all, there’s a saying that goes, ‘the best remedy for a broken heart is to fall in love again.’”

“I’m not that dexterous. Honestly, I have no idea what I should do.”

“Well, I think time will solve that problem for you.”

“I hope so... Oh, right.” Suddenly feeling embarrassed, Haruhiko clapped his hands and changed the subject. “Don’t forget about the Senju Senbei.” He noticed that we hadn’t touched his gift yet.

“Let’s eat them now, then,” Holmes said, carefully opening the box and taking out one of the treats.

Senju Senbei was a new type of Japanese sweet consisting of waffle crackers sandwiched around sugar cream.

I looked at the wave-patterned crackers as I took one for myself. “I’ve heard the name, but I’ve never had them until now.”

I bit into it. It was really crisp—similar to a cookie but lighter. The sugar cream

filling wasn't too sweet. Since it was a Japanese dessert, it would naturally go well with green tea, but it also felt like it'd be a great match for coffee or black tea.

"Oh, this is good." I put my hand over my mouth in awe. "I love it."

"The store name 'Kogetsu' comes from the words 'drum' and 'moon.' It represents a drum, which, when struck, resonates and sends their name across the heavens to the moon. It would appear that their famous sweets have resonated with you, Aoi," Holmes said with a chuckle.

"I had no idea. What a lovely name."

There was also a silhouette stamped in the center of the crackers, which Holmes explained was a flying crane. The crane and the name "Senju" both represented long life.

"So this is a crane..." I looked up and saw Haruhiko's eyes wide open. "What's wrong, Haruhiko?"

"Oh, nothing. I was just surprised that Holmes can explain anything. I didn't expect him to know about sweets too."

"It was a coincidence," Holmes said with a shrug. "Let's just say that my knowledge is extremely biased."

Indeed, he loved his hometown and had a wealth of knowledge about Kyoto. But he also knew a lot about other things, so I wouldn't say he was biased.

Haruhiko and I glanced at each other, wondering why Holmes would say that.

Regaining his composure, Haruhiko took a bite of one of the sweets. "Well, I'm glad you like the Senju Senbei. By the way, is Kogetsu an old store?"

"I think they were founded after the war."

Haruhiko hummed and looked around. "What about Kura? How long has it been here?"

"The original store was apparently located near the current Yagashira residence, but this one was opened in the year of Taisho 8—at the start of 1919."

My eyes widened. “That means the hundredth anniversary has already passed, hasn’t it?”

Holmes clapped his hands together. “Now that you mention it, yes.”

“Are you going to make any commemorative goods?” asked Haruhiko.

“Like towels?” Holmes replied with a straight face.

Haruhiko and I burst out in laughter.

“Towels?!” I exclaimed.

“It does sound like something people give out, but...”

For some reason, it was so funny that we couldn’t stop laughing.

Holmes looked at us and pouted. It was rare to see him sulk. “Yes, yes, my way of thinking is old-fashioned,” he grumbled.

“No, that’s not true,” we said, hurriedly shaking our heads and waving our hands.

“Making commemorative goods isn’t a bad idea, though,” Holmes said. “What would you suggest?”

I hummed and thought about it. *The Kura mugs are good, but I want to keep them exclusively in-store. A tote bag to put things in might be nice, but it lacks excitement. Something you’d be happy to receive, that wouldn’t be a burden...*

“How about a Kura notebook?” I asked.

Haruhiko’s eyes lit up. “That’s a really good idea.” As an aspiring writer, he was fond of notebooks.

“I like that,” Holmes said with a smile. “We could give them out at the exhibition, first come, first served.”

“Oh, you’re right,” I said.

“I’ll look forward to it,” Haruhiko said.

I smiled, but hearing the word “exhibition” suddenly made me feel tense. It was finally time to get things moving. Although it was only a very small-scale event at the Yagashira residence, the painter named Ensho now had the

attention of one of the world's richest men.

Thinking about it, Ensho's first exhibition was going to be held in the home of his only rival. I had a bad feeling that something would happen. *Either way, I'll do my best.* I clenched my fists to shake off the unease.

Chapter 1: Gears in Motion

1

The antique store Kura in Kyoto's Teramachi-Sanjo district was always quiet and peaceful. The small chandelier on the ceiling bathed the interior in a mellow, warm light. The neat rows of vases, tea bowls, teacup sets, candlestands, and bisque dolls were accompanied by soft jazz music and the ticking of a grandfather clock.

I was working diligently on decorating the display window. Visitors to the store often said that it was as if time had stopped in here, and I felt the same way. That was what I liked about Kura. But when something is unchanging, it also gives the impression of rejecting change. I didn't think that was ideal, especially if it meant that people who found the store unapproachable would continue to ignore it forever. So I got Holmes and the manager's permission to change the front display every month, hoping that a little bit of change would attract the attention of passersby.

October's theme was the Meiji period and Taisho romance, and it was quite well received. In November, I wanted to change it, but my mind and body weren't in the right place, so I left it as it was. Now that it was December, I needed to do something about it.

I decorated the display window with Western-style ceramics and placed a large tree behind them. In other words, the theme was Christmas.

When I stopped and stood back up, Holmes smiled from behind the counter and asked, "Have you reached a stopping point?"

"Yes, somehow."

Holmes looked at the Christmas tree I'd just finished decorating and chuckled. "The tree makes it suddenly feel like Christmas. I suppose it's already that time of year."

“Time flies, huh? The shopping street is already full of Christmas decorations too.” I gazed out the window and saw boys and girls walking hand in hand. There seemed to be more couples than usual. They looked happy, which made me smile fondly. “It’s also the season for lovey-dovey couples, huh?”

“Indeed. However, my fiancée appears to be more engrossed in Ensho’s exhibition than love,” Holmes said with a grin.

My eyes darted around, flustered. “I’m not *engrossed*. It’s just that I have a lot of work on my plate.”

“I’m kidding.” Holmes laughed. “Your jealousy the other day was more than enough to keep me happy.”

I looked down in shame. He was talking about when I had overheard him saying that Mitsuoka was his type and sulked, thinking that he liked a woman by that name. The truth had turned out to be a complete nonissue: he was referring to Mitsuoka Motor, a car company. I thought it was needlessly confusing, but at the same time, I only had myself to blame.

“Oh, but that doesn’t mean I’m all right with not being able to touch you at all,” he hurriedly added.

I fell silent.

“You’re exasperated again, aren’t you?”

“No, that’s not it.” I actually felt the same way, but I stopped myself from saying it. It would indeed feel lonely not being able to touch him at all. Suddenly feeling embarrassed, I changed the subject. “Speaking of Mitsuoka, did you decide on a new car?”

The whole Mitsuoka thing had started because the owner’s Jaguar was getting old and they were looking into a replacement. Holmes had suggested MINI and Mitsuoka Motor as his candidates.

“Well...” Holmes slumped his shoulders. “My grandfather doesn’t like the cars I do. The problem isn’t so much the retro-modern or classic design, but in his words, ‘I like cool cars more than cute ones.’”

“Cool cars...” *Despite being in his eighties, the owner has a childish streak.*

“We considered a variety of options, but in the end, my grandfather really likes his current Jaguar, which is a slightly older model. He doesn’t want to part with it. So we decided to restore it and continue using it.”

“Restore?” I wasn’t sure what that entailed.

“Yes.” Holmes looked up. “In this case, it means bringing a deteriorated car back to life. We keep the exterior the same but make the inner parts, including the engine, as good as new.”

“That’s amazing. I didn’t know you could do that.”

“Yes, but it’s expensive enough that some would say you might as well buy a new car. Personally, I find it touching that he wants to keep driving his current car even if it means paying to restore it.”

“Yeah.” I nodded and smiled. “It feels like something the owner of an antique store would do.”

“Perhaps. Both the car and the house reflect his nature. Oh, speaking of the house, all of the paintings should arrive this Saturday as planned.”

“Right, this Saturday.” I’d already heard that the paintings would be arriving on the first Saturday of December. I took my notebook and pen out of my pocket and wrote “confirmed” next to the date.

“By the way,” Holmes said, leaving the counter and going to the window, “is the display finished?”

“Mostly. The concept is a Christmas tea party.”

I had put together an afternoon tea set using a three-tiered cake stand and Western-style ceramics such as Meissen. A bright white teddy bear sat in front of it, while antique dolls—a boy and a girl—were propped up nearby. The idea was that the dolls were on their way to the teddy bear’s tea party. A large Christmas tree stood at the back with round silver ornaments, giving the display an overall white and silver color scheme.

“A Christmas party held by a teddy bear, I see. It’s cute, imaginative, and eye-catching. I’d never be able to come up with such a wonderful display,” Holmes said, sounding genuinely impressed.

“Thank you,” I said shyly.

“You must be tired. Shall we postpone the study session to another day?” He looked at me, concerned. He was supposed to be giving me a lecture on glass art today, and I was looking forward to it very much.

“No, I’m not tired. Besides, you were the one who carried all of the large items for the display.”

“Let’s begin after a short break, then.”

“I don’t need a break— Oh, but the display isn’t complete yet. There’s one more thing I want to add.”

“What is it?”

I picked up a painting that was leaning backwards against the wall. “I found this on the second floor. Is it okay to display it?”

I showed Holmes the painting. It depicted a European townscape just after sunset, with snow falling from the starry blue sky. Brightly lit tents stood in the center between a brick church and a theater. There were silhouettes of people drinking and making merry. It was probably a Christmas market, in which case, they might’ve been drinking mulled wine.

When I first found this painting in a cabinet at the back of the second floor, I couldn’t help but say, “Wow!” Christmas markets originated in Germany, but this setting looked more like Northern Europe. The stars, snow, buildings, and tents all sparkled beautifully. It was a fantastical scene that seemed like it could exist somewhere in the real world, but also felt like it was in a dream—a wonderful work of art that made my chest swell with excitement. I wondered who the painter was, but there wasn’t a signature, and I didn’t recognize the artistic style. When I turned it over, I found the name “Fuga” on the back.

Holmes’s eyes widened in surprise the moment he saw the painting. “Aoi, where on the second floor did you find this?”

I tilted my head, confused by his clear change in countenance. “It was at the back, over by the shelf labeled ‘Paintings.’ There were pieces by other artists there too.”

“I see.” His expression was bitter.

“Is it something that can’t be displayed?”

“It’s more that we’re holding onto it for someone else,” he said with an apologetic smile.

“Oh, then it wouldn’t be right to put it on display.”

“I’m sorry.” Holmes frowned.

“I’ll put it back where I found it, then.”

“Thank you. I’ll start setting up for the study session.”

“Okay.” I nodded as cheerfully as I could and went up to the second floor with the painting. “I wonder what happened?” I murmured softly at the top of the stairs.

Does he know that he always smiles the same way when he lies to me? Something must’ve happened to the owner—or the creator—of this painting.

I put the frame down on a table and took out my phone. I tried searching for “Fuga painter,” but nothing about this painting’s artist came up. I silently took a photo of the painting before returning it to its place.

“All right, time for the study session,” I told myself, regaining my composure before going downstairs.

2

“These two vases are both called cameo glass,” Holmes said, looking down at the table where the pieces in question stood side by side. He gently touched them with his white appraisal gloves.

I silently examined the two vases. Holmes had brought them from the Yagashira residence after finding out that I wanted to learn about glass.

The first one had a low, oval-shaped body that narrowed towards the top, where the lip opened up like the petals of a flower. It was a reddish-purple color and engraved with violet blooms and leaves. It was probably meant to hold flowers, although its strong presence would’ve overshadowed them.

The second vase had more of a jar-like shape. It bulged outwards at the shoulder before thinning towards the bottom in a long straight line. It was light green with a raised pattern of deep green trees.

“Cameo glass is composed of several layers of colored glass,” Holmes explained. “Various techniques are used to etch into them, leaving a pattern. If you trace the surface, you can feel that it’s a shallow raised relief.” He gently ran his index finger along one of the vases. “This process has been passed down from ancient Rome. One of these was made in the Art Nouveau era, while the other is a ‘faux’ made in recent years.”

I took my eyes off the vases and looked at Holmes. “Faux?”

“It means ‘fake’ in French and is used to describe imitation or counterfeit cameo glass. The word is also used for rubies, by the way.”

I hummed and wrote it down in my notebook. *Basically, one of these vases is real and the other is fake.* “I can’t be sure, but...” I hadn’t seen enough glasswork to be able to determine their authenticity. “The reddish-purple one reminds me of Gallé.”

I had seen Émile Gallé’s art the other day at the Asahi Beer Oyamazaki Villa Museum of Art, and I sensed his handiwork in this vase. Plus, many of his works included his name in the pattern, and sure enough, there was a stylized signature on this one.

“Correct,” Holmes said with a crescent-eyed smile. “The reddish-purple vase is Gallé, while the light-green one is a faux. Well done.” He clapped his hands together.

I blushed. “Thank you,” I said, lowering my head shyly.

“Now, let me teach you what to pay attention to when appraising.”

I unconsciously leaned forward.

“Authentic cameo glass is produced by hand, but faux cameo uses acid to make the patterns.”

“Acid?”

“Yes. First, the areas to be preserved are coated in an acid-resistant layer.

Then the uncoated areas are corroded with acid. This inevitably results in a lack of detail.”

I brought my face close to the faux vase as he spoke. Indeed, it didn’t look detailed enough to be handmade. Also, the colored layer was thin.

“It seems flatter than the authentic one,” I murmured to myself.

“Yes.” Holmes nodded. “Real cameo glass is made with several layers of colored glass, but faux ones usually only have two, making them smoother in comparison. Using acid allows for mass production. If a piece claims to be Gallé cameo glass but is inexpensive, you should suspect it of being a faux.”

I hummed and took notes. “You’re knowledgeable about glass too, huh?”

Holmes gave me a blank look. He seemed to find it strange that I would say such a thing.

“Oh, sorry. There isn’t much glass art in this store, so I thought you might not be as well versed in it compared to other antiques.”

“I *am* less familiar with it than ceramics. As you said, we don’t deal with glass very often.”

“Why is that?”

He tilted his head. “I think it’s just a coincidence. This store used to only deal in Eastern antiques. Then my grandfather took over, and since he likes new and unusual things, he started to deal in art from other countries. But it’s still mostly ceramics, which may simply be due to his preferences.”

I nodded.

“Now then, it’s almost closing time, so let’s end today’s lesson here.” Holmes carefully placed the cameo glass on the shelf.

“Thank you. Your explanations are always so easy to understand.”

“I’m flattered.”

Holmes provides straightforward examples and teaches in a way that my brain absorbs quickly. He really is the best possible teacher for me.

I suddenly remembered what Keiko Fujiwara had said. Her boss—world-

famous art curator Sally Barrymore—had wished to hire me as her assistant as well. It was a great honor.

As I clutched my notebook closer to my chest, the door chime rang. I looked up with a start. Standing at the door was a man in his forties. He had messy hair, wore a beige trench coat, and held a fake cigarette in his mouth. This guy who looked like he came out of a detective show was...

“Why, if it isn’t Komatsu. Welcome,” said Holmes.

It was Katsuya Komatsu, a detective based in Gion.

“Hey,” he said, listlessly raising his hand. He staggered over to the counter and proceeded to flop down over it. “I’m in over my head, kiddo.”

“What happened?”

“Well, you see...” Komatsu sighed. “Atsuko came by the office.” Atsuko Tadokoro ran a flower arranging school.

Holmes gave a slight frown. “What did she ask of you?”

“She straight-up told me to break those two up.” He was referring to Atsuko’s student, Tomoka Asai, and her fiancé, Yutaka Sada.

Holmes hummed and stroked his chin. “That’s more direct than I would’ve expected. How did you respond?”

“I said, ‘This is a detective agency, not a break-up shop, so I can’t take on your request.’ Then she smiled and said, ‘My apologies. Don’t tell Tomoka about this, okay?’ And then she was gone.” Komatsu looked up at Holmes. “Do you think I did the wrong thing?”

“No, I’d say you gave the obvious reply.”

“Thank god.” The detective placed his hand on his chest. “As she was leaving, I asked her why she was so intent on breaking them up, and she said, ‘I have no obligation to tell you.’”

“Well, that’s to be expected,” Holmes said with a strained smile.

“Ensho was there too.”

“He was? Did he say anything?”

“Yeah, the same thing you did. ‘She’s against the marriage ’cause she wants to hire the girl for her luxury club.’”

“That’s not what I said. I only gave that as one of many possibilities,” Holmes answered, displeased.

“What do you think now, kiddo?”

“Who knows? How about you, Komatsu?”

The detective hummed. “I’m not convinced. Atsuko runs a flower arranging school, but she has a secret club operating legally in the basement. She also inherited a ridiculously valuable blue diamond. Well, she isn’t exactly an ordinary person. But how do I put this...I feel like she’s straightforward at her core.”

“I agree.”

“Yeah, so I can’t help but think that something’s going on. I’m curious, but I can’t go investigating things that aren’t for work.”

“Yes, we can’t probe any further into this.”

Komatsu sighed. Then, the chime rang once more. We turned to look at the front door.

“Good evening.” The person at the center of the drama gave a reserved bow.

“Tomoka...”

“Kiyotaka, Aoi, thank you for your advice the other day,” said Tomoka Asai, lowering her head. She was sitting in front of the counter, while Holmes and I stood inside. Komatsu was peeking at us from a seat at the end of the counter, feigning ignorance.

Holmes and I shook our heads. “It was nothing.”

Tomoka had been on the verge of tears when she came to Kura the other day to ask Holmes to investigate her fiancé. She no longer gave off that vibe, but her expression wasn’t cheerful either. She seemed confused.

“Did the two of you clear up the misunderstanding?” Holmes asked with a

smile.

“Oh, yes.” Tomoka gave an awkward nod. “I broke down crying and asked him, ‘Do you want to break off the engagement? If so, just tell me. I don’t want the person I love to suffer.’ He started crying too and told me the truth.”

I gulped.

“What did he say?” Holmes asked softly.

“Apparently Atsuko called him out on the day before my birthday, and she kept telling him things like, ‘You’re not good enough for Tomoka’ and ‘You should back off.’” Tomoka lowered her gaze and paused for a moment before continuing. “He knows I look up to Atsuko as my mother figure in Kyoto, so he thought that maybe he really should back off. That’s why he distanced himself from me.”

It was understandable. If I were in Sada’s position—say, if Ueda, who was like a father to Holmes, told me, “Sorry, but I don’t think you’re a good match for Kiyotaka after all. Could you quietly leave him for his own sake?”—I would definitely be conflicted.

As I was empathizing with Sada and making myself depressed, Tomoka said in a soft voice, “But he also said, ‘I still love you, so I couldn’t break up with you.’”

I related to those words as well. *When you truly love someone, you can’t make that decision easily, no matter what anyone tells you.*

“I see,” said Holmes. “Now that you know why he was avoiding you, you don’t have any more ill feelings, do you?”

Tomoka nodded. “But now there’s something else bothering me. Why did Atsuko say that to him? She was so supportive of us at first.”

“How so?”

She looked up at the ceiling as she searched her memory. “I met Yutaka through volunteer work. I thought he was a wonderful person: cheerful, kind, and a good leader.”

I, too, had been doing volunteer work with her fiancé, Yutaka Sada. Like she said, he was a bright person with the ability to bring people together.

“As we continued to work together, I fell in love with him. I told Atsuko about it, and she said she wanted to see him, so we went to eat at the Italian restaurant he runs in Kita-ku. When she saw him, she said, ‘He’s not handsome, but he’s a good person. I think you’ll be happy marrying someone like him, so do your best.’ Her words made me ecstatic. Atsuko is a strict but accurate judge of character. I felt like she’d given me her seal of approval, so I made up my mind to ask him out.”

Tomoka took a breath before continuing.

“After confirming that he wasn’t in a relationship, I confessed my feelings. He looked a bit troubled and said, ‘I’m really happy to hear that, but I’m almost ten years older than you. You can do better than me.’ The rejection came as a huge shock. But when I told Atsuko about it, she said, ‘He really is a good man. I like the modest ones more than those who are easily swayed by young, pretty women.’ Her words gave me courage. This time, I decided to wait for him to learn more about me before confessing again. Three months after the first confession, I told him, ‘I can’t give up on you after all,’ and he replied, ‘If you say that, I won’t be able to give up either.’ He accepted my feelings and we started dating.”

“Tomoka...you really did persevere,” I said without thinking.

“Indeed.” Holmes nodded.

“Yes,” Tomoka said with an embarrassed smile. “I held strong.”

“I think the second confession was a smart move.”

“Huh?” She looked up at Holmes in surprise. “Why?”

“Sada was probably startled when you confessed the first time. People are often surprised and shy away when they’re suddenly asked out by someone they aren’t romantically interested in. They end up rejecting the person without really understanding them. But with time, they come to realize, ‘That person felt that way about me,’ and they suddenly begin to see them as a potential partner.”

I felt like I could understand. When my ex-boyfriend, Katsumi, first asked me out, I had accepted his feelings right there in the classroom. But I had actually

heard beforehand that he supposedly liked me. The rumor had sparked my curiosity, making me wonder if it was true—and if so, *why* he liked me.

“After a little while, they’ll think, ‘Maybe I was too hasty in rejecting them’ and ‘I wonder if they still love me?’ They start to take interest in the person who confessed to them. This is when the second confession should be made. It’s a last-ditch effort for the confessor, and the recipient knows that if they reject them again, there won’t be another chance. So I think that confessing twice is a clever strategy.”

Tomoka and I stared at him in amazement. Komatsu was also reacting similarly.

“If you’re intentionally going to make two confessions, it might be more effective if the first one stops at ‘I just wanted to tell you how I feel,’ without asking for a relationship,” Holmes added. “After a bit of time has passed, you can confess again, this time asking the person out.”

Tomoka was taken aback. “Kiyotaka...you’re a genius.”

“No, it’s just an unsubstantiated opinion based on observing people. When I was working as a cram schoolteacher, I entertained the class during breaks by telling them theories like this.”

Holmes had taught at a cram school for a while as part of his training. According to Akihito, who had seen him there, all of the students were boys who had become devoted Holmes followers. It had apparently been kind of scary. I couldn’t help but wince at the thought of all of those boys becoming “two-time confessors.”

“You’re like a romance expert, though,” said Tomoka.

“No, not at all. My head is full of armchair theories. When I’m actually in front of the person I love—Aoi—I get so flustered that I can’t do anything. Isn’t that right?” Holmes looked over at me.

Tomoka and I both blushed, while Komatsu shrugged and muttered, “You never change, kiddo.”

Embarrassed, I forced the conversation back to its original topic. “Um, Tomoka, how did Atsuko react when you started going out with Sada? Was she

opposed to it?”

“No. When I told her we were dating, she was really happy for me. The three of us had dinner together, and she smiled and said, ‘I can relax knowing you’re with such a good person.’ Yutaka and I continued to date for a while, and eventually, we got engaged.” Tomoka’s expression darkened. “Thinking about it, that’s when it started. Atsuko didn’t talk about him as much as before. Instead, she’d say things like, ‘I’m surprised you got engaged so quickly. Wouldn’t it have been better to get to know each other more first?’ and ‘Sada’s a good person, but you’re still young. You can still meet more people.’ I never thought she’d tell him to break up with me, though...”

From Tomoka’s perspective, it must’ve made no sense. Why had Atsuko suddenly changed her tune?

“Tomoka, there’s something I’d like to clarify,” said Holmes. “You said that you looked up to Atsuko as your mother figure in Kyoto. How long have you known her for?”

The woman straightened her back. “I’ve known Atsuko since my first year of university, when I started attending her flower arranging school. So it’s been about seven years.”

“I imagine there are many flower arranging schools in Kyoto. How did you decide on hers?”

“I’m from Kanto, but I decided to go to a women’s university in Kyoto because I liked the city. I especially liked the atmosphere in Gion, so I often took walks there after school,” Tomoka said, smiling with fond remembrance. “While I was doing that, I happened to notice Atsuko seeing off one of her students. I couldn’t help but admire how she looked in her kimono and the way she carried herself. That was when she called out to me, saying, ‘Miss, are you interested in flower arrangement? You can try it for free.’”

“I see,” said Holmes.

Women’s universities in Kyoto are private schools. If Tomoka moved here from Kanto to attend one and was taking flower arranging lessons on top of that, perhaps her family is quite rich.

Holmes seemed to be thinking the same thing. He asked politely about her family's finances.

Tomoka shook her head. "No, we're a normal family like any other. My father is a civil servant and my mother works part-time. Atsuko gave me a special discount on the monthly fee on the condition that I help her."

Holmes nodded. "In that case, I can understand why you admired her as a mother figure."

"Yes. She also said, 'I only have a son, so I wish I could have a daughter like you.'"

Based on that, it seemed unlikely that Atsuko was against the marriage because she wanted to hire Tomoka at her high-end club.

"Do you really have no idea why she began to oppose your marriage after your engagement?" Holmes asked.

Tomoka tilted her head in thought. "I can't think of anything. That's why I wanted to ask you for a favor, Kiyotaka."

"What is it?"

"I hear that you have exceptional observation skills. If I bring Yutaka here tomorrow, would you be able to judge him with your own eyes? If you can determine why Atsuko is so opposed, please tell me."

Holmes hummed and folded his arms. "If I were to agree with Atsuko's assessment, would you break the engagement?"

Tomoka smiled wistfully at the cruel question but answered without hesitation, "I don't think I would. I just want to know the reason."

I was touched by her words.

"I see." Holmes gave an impressed nod. "Very well, I'll help you. However, I can't guarantee that my observations will be accurate," he said worriedly, placing a hand on his chest.

Tomoka and I looked at him in disbelief. I had the feeling that we were both thinking, *How can he say that at this point?*

And so, the next afternoon, Tomoka brought her fiancé, Yutaka Sada, to Kura.

“Yagashira, I heard that you advised her not to be hasty,” Sada said after introducing himself. “Thank you.” He bowed deeply to Holmes.

“Thank you again,” said Tomoka, lowering her head as well.

The couple was sitting on the sofa for guests. Holmes sat across from them, waving his hand and saying, “No, I didn’t do anything.”

Aside from me and them, the only other person in the store was Komatsu, who was sitting at the counter and pretending he had no involvement in what was going on. After serving everyone coffee—including Komatsu—I took my seat next to Holmes.

Sada smiled at me. “I didn’t expect to see you here, Mashiro.”

“Me neither. What a coincidence.”

We chuckled together.

Tomoka looked back and forth between us in surprise. “Huh? You know each other?”

“Yes,” I said. I told her about the Make Kyoto More Beautiful Project (KyoMore) at my university. “We’re working with the Kita-ku ward office right now to revitalize the Mount Funaoka area, and Sada is participating in that.”

“I see.” Tomoka placed a hand on her cheek in relief. “I get anxious so easily these days. Even now, I panicked at the thought of you meeting each other without my knowledge. I’m so hopeless.” She sighed.

“It’s my fault for making you feel insecure,” said Sada. “I don’t deserve someone as amazing as you.”

“Yutaka... No, I’m the one who doesn’t deserve you. You’re kind, proactive, and full of warmth. I only doubted you because I thought anyone would fall in love with you if they got to know you.”

I didn’t know where to look as they gazed into each other’s eyes. Meanwhile, Holmes watched them with a smile and quietly put his hand in his pocket.

Noticing our stares, the couple apologized and regained their composure.

Holmes shook his head. "It's fine. It looks like the misunderstanding has been cleared up."

"Yes," said Sada. "We had a proper talk."

"That's good to hear."

Suddenly, Sada's phone buzzed. "Sorry," he said, picking it up from the table. "Oh, it's Kajiwara. Please excuse me for a minute." He stood up and left the store.

The call was from Haruhiko Kajiwara. In fact, Holmes had planned this in advance. When he put his hand in his pocket just now, he was signaling to Haruhiko to call Sada.

After making sure that her fiancé was outside, Tomoka nervously looked up at Holmes. "Um, what do you think now that you've met him?"

"Well..." Holmes looked out the window at Sada, who was speaking cheerfully on the phone. "I think he's a ty—a good-natured person. It doesn't seem like he's hiding anything."

I could vaguely tell that Holmes was initially going to say "a typical good person." I could understand why he'd think that. Sada wasn't pretending—it felt like he was naturally a good guy.

"Thank goodness," Tomoka said, placing her hand on her chest in genuine relief.

I found myself feeling relieved too.

"It appears that Sada was originally self-conscious about his appearance, but he used that insecurity as a springboard to better himself," Holmes murmured, looking out the window again. "Everything he's done has given him confidence. However, since he wasn't able to completely get rid of his complex, he couldn't accept your confession immediately."

My face stiffened at Holmes's demonstration of his keen observation skills, as did Tomoka's.

After a while, Sada finished his call and came back inside. "Sorry about that."

He sat down on the sofa and looked Holmes straight in the eye. “Yagashira, I actually have a request for you.”

“For me?”

“Yes. I heard that you’re an appraiser but you also do detective work. Is that true?”

“Yes...well, temporarily.” Holmes nodded reluctantly.

“I want to hire you.”

“What kind of request is it?”

“Tomoka’s flower arranging teacher, Atsuko Tadokoro, is against our marriage. When I asked why, she said it was because I’m ‘not good enough for her.’ But when I first started dating Tomoka, she said we were a good match.”

It was the same story we had heard from Tomoka the day before. However, she probably hadn’t told Sada about that visit, so we acted like we were hearing it for the first time.

“At first, I thought she was fine with me being Tomoka’s boyfriend but didn’t think I was a suitable husband. But I just couldn’t understand—or accept—it. Would you be able to investigate why Atsuko is opposed to our marriage? I’ll pay you the proper fee, of course.”

Holmes folded his arms. “You’re willing to go that far? You do have the option of ignoring her and getting married anyway.”

“I know, and if there’s really nothing we can do to change her mind, then we will. But Tomoka cares about Atsuko a lot, and I don’t want to cause a rift between them. I also want to know why Atsuko doesn’t like me anymore.”

I was struck by his firm tone of voice.

Holmes seemed persuaded too. “I understand. I formally accept your request on behalf of the Komatsu Detective Agency.” He turned around to face Komatsu, who was sitting at the end of the counter. “You’re fine with that, right, chief?”

“Huh?” Sada and Tomoka both looked at the counter in surprise.

“Yeah, of course,” Komatsu said awkwardly.

“Wow. He’s the chief?” asked Tomoka.

“Is this a detective agency?” asked Sada.

Holmes shook his head. “No, this is just an antique store. The office is in Gion.”

“A detective office in Gion? That’s amazing,” said Sada.

“Indeed. They call Chief Komatsu the ‘Gion Detective.’”

“Stop it,” Komatsu said, grimacing.

Holmes chuckled and looked at Sada and Tomoka. “In summary, you want to know why Atsuko, who supported your relationship when you began dating, changed her mind when you got engaged and is now against your marriage. Is that right?”

“Yes,” the two said at the same time.

“Let me ask Tomoka something, then. Did Atsuko learn anything new about Sada after your engagement? For example, was there anything you knew about him that you hadn’t mentioned to her before?”

Tomoka thought for a while, going through her memory. “Oh...” she murmured, looking up at Sada. “It might’ve been the first time that topic came up...”

“What topic?” Sada tilted his head.

“At our engagement party, you talked about your mother, didn’t you?”

“Oh, right.”

“Could you tell me more?” Holmes asked.

“Of course.” Sada nodded. “I told Atsuko that my mother was thrilled when she met Tomoka.”

It turned out that Sada had been raised by a single mother. He had caused her a lot of hardship and worry over the years, which he had tried to make up for after becoming an adult. But his mother was always saying, “You don’t need to do that. All I want is to see the face of your future wife as soon as possible.”

Sada looked up. “So I told Atsuko, ‘Now that I’ve introduced someone as wonderful as Tomoka to my mother, I feel like I’ve finally done my duty as a child.’”

“How did Atsuko respond?”

“She looked really surprised,” Tomoka answered in his stead. “She said, ‘I didn’t know you were from a single-parent family, Sada. You must be so grateful to your mother.’”

Holmes hummed and crossed his arms.

“Do you think this has something to do with it?” Sada asked quietly.

“The possibility exists,” Holmes said reluctantly.

Tomoka looked up, flustered. “But Atsuko is a single parent herself! After her husband passed away, she raised her son on her own.”

I knew what she was trying to say. Komatsu nodded firmly, seeming to feel the same way.

“That in itself could be the issue,” Holmes said. “But in the end, it’s only a possibility.”

Tomoka lowered her eyes, unwilling to accept it. However, she seemed to remember something. “Come to think of it,” she said, placing her hand on her cheek, “I think it was after that dinner party—not the engagement itself—that Atsuko changed.”

Holmes hummed and stroked his chin. “The party seems to be the key. Do you remember what else you talked about?”

The couple furrowed their brows, deep in thought.

“Well,” said Sada, “after that, I talked about my mother a bit more... Oh, and then my phone rang. When I took it out, my good luck charm fell out of my pocket, so I ended up talking about that as well.”

“A good luck charm?”

“It might not be an amulet from a shrine or anything, but I’ve had it for as long as I can remember, so to me, it’s a good luck charm.”

“May I see it?”

“Yes, of course.” Sada took a small cloth drawstring pouch out of his inner jacket pocket and placed it on the table.

Holmes deftly put on his white gloves, carefully opened the pouch, and took out what was inside.

“It’s okay,” said Sada. “It’s nothing special.”

The object inside was a crystal bracelet. It looked like one of those natural stone bracelets you often saw being sold, but one of the beads was in the shape of a magatama.

“I heard it was quartz, but it might just be glass beads,” said Sada.

Holmes shook his head lightly. “No, I think this is real quartz.”

“Wow!” Tomoka’s eyes lit up. “You can even appraise gemstones, huh?”

“No, it’s not my field of expertise, so I don’t know the specifics. It’s just that quartz has high thermal conductivity, which means that heat escapes from it quickly. That makes it feel harder and colder than glass beads.”

“Now that you mention it, it *is* cold all the time,” said Sada. “Is it worth anything?”

“Well...” Holmes looked down at the pouch and bracelet. “Like you said, it appears to be a charm from somewhere. Rather than the gemstones being valuable, it’s more about what a charm enthusiast would price it as.”

“Oh, yeah. Nowadays, you can buy charms from all over Japan on marketplace apps.” Sada looked at the bracelet. “Do you know where this is from?”

Holmes gave an apologetic frown. “Sorry, that isn’t my field of expertise either. I know a specialist who might be able to identify it, though. Would you mind if I held onto it to show him?”

Sada shook his head. “Sorry, I was told as a child to keep it on me at all times. I’d prefer it if you could take a picture instead.”

“I understand. Let me do that now, then.” Holmes took out his phone and

began taking pictures of the quartz bracelet. “By the way, is there a reason you don’t wear it on your wrist?”

“I did at first, but it broke apart. I was able to pick up all of the pieces and put it back together, but I didn’t want it to break again, so I put it in a pouch.”

Holmes hummed and looked down at the bracelet.

“Is the specialist the exorcist who visited us before?” I asked softly.

He paused his photo-taking and smiled. “Yes, it’s Reito Kamo.”

4

After Sada and Tomoka left, Komatsu, who had been hiding at the counter, raised his fist in the air. “Yes! A formal request! Now we’re free to investigate. You have no idea how much it was bothering me.”

“Indeed,” Holmes said, moving behind the counter. “What about your side job, though?”

“There’s work to do, but I’ll figure it out. I can’t focus on my side job when there’s such an intriguing case to solve.” The detective scratched his head.

“I see.” Holmes smiled. “Let’s determine Atsuko’s true motive.”

“Yeah. Do you really think Sada’s family situation is related?” Komatsu rested his cheek on his hand and looked up at Holmes.

“Well, it’s possible. Atsuko knew about his occupation and appearance before they started dating, and she only found out he was raised by a single mother after the engagement.”

His words made me feel bitter. “Like Tomoka said, Atsuko worked hard to raise a child by herself too, so it doesn’t make sense if that’s why she’s opposed to him.”

Komatsu looked up at the ceiling. “I thought the same thing, but when the kiddo said ‘that in itself could be the issue,’ I remembered something.”

“What would that be?” asked Holmes.

“Their parent-child relationship seemed complicated.”

“As in the relationship between Atsuko and Hiroki?”

“Yeah. Atsuko called her own son, Hiroki, her ‘bad karma.’”

“Karma, you say?” Holmes frowned and crossed his arms. “We may discover a clue if we investigate those two.”

“Maybe, yeah.” Komatsu nodded and looked around the store, his gaze settling on the shelf with the cameo glassware from Holmes’s lecture the day before. “Y’know, I noticed this yesterday, but that reddish-purple vase...”

“Yes?” Holmes and I looked at the vase—the authentic piece by Gallé.

“It kind of looks like Atsuko.”

The Gallé vase was beautiful, but something about it felt dangerous—poisonous, even. Since I didn’t know Atsuko well, I couldn’t quite tell what he meant, but Holmes seemed to understand. He hummed and placed his hands on his hips.

“Perhaps you’re right and the situation is similar to that cameo glass,” he murmured.

Komatsu and I looked at each other, clueless as to the intent behind Holmes’s words.

“For now,” Holmes continued, “let’s carve out her hidden thoughts.”

“Yeah.”

Komatsu nodded happily. I did the same as I watched from the sidelines, excitement welling up in my heart.

It’s finally time for the investigation to begin.

Chapter 2: Interviewing and Investigating

1

After receiving the formal request from Tomoka Asai and Yutaka Sada, Komatsu and Holmes remained at Kura to discuss the case.

“Shall we enlist the help of someone who’s knowledgeable about Gion gossip to find out the connection between Atsuko and her son, Hiroki?” Holmes suggested.

Sometimes, people on the inside knew more than what you could find while investigating from the outside. And there were always well-informed ladies around. In this neighborhood, that role probably went to Mieko from the clothing store.

“Kazuyo, huh?” Komatsu replied on the spot. It seemed that he had become familiar with Gion’s residents.

“Yes, I think I’ll go ask her. Could you look into Sada’s past and home environment? You might find something that he doesn’t know himself.”

“Leave it to me.”

Seeing them so motivated got me pumped up as well. “Let me know if there’s anything I can do to help!” I said, clenching my fists.

“No.” Holmes shook his head. “You have a lot on your plate already, Aoi. Please don’t burden yourself even more.”

I had no response to that. He was right. I was supposed to be focusing on the exhibition. “Okay,” I said meekly.

“Ha ha ha!” Komatsu laughed. “I thought the kiddo was soft on you and let you do whatever you want, but he does scold you sometimes, huh?”

I shook my head. “No, he doesn’t let me do anything I want. When it’s not okay, he tells me so.”

“Is that so?” Holmes tilted his head.

At that moment, the door chime rang and someone came in. “Is Aoi here?”

It was a beautiful boy with longish light-brown hair tied in a ponytail. He wasn’t actually the age to be called a boy anymore, but his dark gray duffel coat and green scarf did make him look younger. His name was Rikyu Takiyama. He was Holmes’s younger brother figure and technically staff here at Kura. He helped out at the store sometimes.

His eyes lit up when he saw Holmes. “Oh, Kiyo! I didn’t know you were here today.”

“Yes, I’m here relatively often these days.”

“The owner told me that you’re making commemorative Kura notebooks.”

The owner was currently living with Rikyu’s mother, Yoshie—in other words, at Rikyu’s house.

“Yes, that’s the plan,” said Holmes.

“Let me design it. You guys left me out of the loop when you were making the mugs. I’m Kura staff too! I wanna be involved.”

“Sure.” Holmes nodded. “We haven’t decided on anything yet, so your help would be appreciated. By the way, why were you looking for Aoi?”

“Oh, right.” Rikyu looked at me. “Here, Aoi. I made the thing you asked for. The papers and USB are inside,” he said curtly, placing a manila envelope on the counter. He then turned to Komatsu and said, “Good evening.”

“Thank you, Rikyu,” I said, picking up the envelope and holding it in front of my chest.

“Ah,” said Holmes. “Is it the floor plan for Ensho’s exhibition?”

Holmes had given me permission to have a professional create the floor plan, so I had asked Rikyu to do it.

“Yeah, she made me help her again,” said Rikyu. “But this time, it’s a proper job, not volunteer work.” He shrugged and sat down on a chair.

Rikyu was studying architecture at the Kyoto Institute of Technology. I had

asked him to make the floor plan for the exhibition in New York as well, and it was still fresh in my memory how he had guessed what I had wanted. I trusted him much more than a professional I didn't know.

Komatsu looked over at us, excited. "Oh yeah, you're planning an exhibition for Ensho, aren't you? Thanks."

"Thanks?" We laughed at how he spoke as if they were family.

"Maybe it's because we started spending time under the same roof, but he kind of feels like a family member now. Believe it or not, he has conversations with me." Komatsu scratched his head, embarrassed.

"Do you feel like his dad?" Rikyu asked.

"No way. I'm probably only about ten years older than him. If anything, I feel like his big brother."

"Sorry." Rikyu laughed. "Speaking of which, how has he been?"

"Uh...well, he's fine. But he gets up in the evening, so it's like his day and night are reversed. He's always so quiet that I can't tell if he's there or not."

"Does it seem like he's painting?" I asked.

"Nah, I don't think he is. He gets cranky when I ask about it. He might really not want to paint anymore."

"I see..." I couldn't help but feel down.

"Don't worry," Holmes said with a smile. "I'm sure he just feels hollow after painting such a masterpiece. My father often falls into that state too, doesn't he?"

The manager—Holmes's father, Takeshi Yagashira—was an author. Thinking back, whenever he finished writing a long book, he was unable to start a new piece for a while. Perhaps it was a common struggle for creators.

I suddenly remembered something. "Oh, right. Um, Komatsu..."

"Yeah, little miss?"

"I'd like to do close coverage of Ensho sometime soon."

"Close coverage?!" everyone exclaimed. Komatsu and Rikyu stared blankly at

me, while Holmes had his eyes wide open.

“Yes. I want to learn more about Ensho as a creator in my own way. What time is he usually at the office?”

Holmes panicked. “*C-Close?* I’m afraid that isn’t allowed.”

“Kiyo, it’s not like their *bodies* are going to be close.” Rikyu snickered.

Holmes gave him a sharp look. “I know that.”

“You do?” asked Komatsu.

“Of course. However, they’re going to have a long, deep conversation by themselves, aren’t they? That really is dangerous. It’s akin to placing an adorable rabbit in a cage with a ferocious beast.”

“The little miss? An adorable rabbit? If anything, she’s an ermine.”

Rikyu hummed. “Aoi’s an ermine? Yeah, I can see that.”

“Right? She just has that image.”

“Yeah, she looks like she’d pop out from behind a rock.”

A rock... My face stiffened.

Even though there was so much to disagree with in this conversation, Holmes seemed to take no notice.

“Hey, the kiddo’s in trouble,” said Komatsu.

“Yeah, Aoi,” said Rikyu. “I don’t wanna see Kiyo looking like that. Can you do something about it?”

“Like what?” I looked up at Holmes, puzzled. “Um, Holmes, I shouldn’t have used the word ‘close.’ I just want to hear about his work, that’s all. If you’re worried, why don’t you come with me?”

“Yeah, Kiyo,” said Rikyu. “If you go with her, you won’t have to worry.”

“That solves the problem,” said Komatsu.

Holmes fell silent for a second before shaking his head, seeming to have regained his composure. “No, I think he’d be too tense to do an interview with me present. You can talk to him as much as you want, as long as it doesn’t take

too long,” he muttered reluctantly.

Rikyu and Komatsu trembled as they tried to hold back their laughter. Not a moment later, Holmes glared at them, and they straightened their backs.

“Oh, right,” Komatsu said hurriedly. “I feel like Ensho’s usually at the office around 3 p.m.”

“Thank you,” I said with a bow.

“Now then.” Holmes looked at me and Rikyu. “I think I’ll head over to Gion now. Can I ask you two to watch the store? Aoi, if I’m not back by closing time, you can go home and let Rikyu handle the procedures.”

It was five in the evening, so there was a good chance that Holmes wouldn’t be back in time.

“Okay, got it.” I nodded.

“What?” A displeased Rikyu pointed at himself. “You’re making me do it?”

“You *are* Kura staff, after all,” said Holmes. “Do you have something to do tonight?”

“No, but...” Rikyu pouted. “Oh, then at least have dinner with me tonight. We hardly ever get to eat by ourselves.”

“Sure.”

“Yes!” Rikyu clenched his fists.

He really does love Holmes.

“Well, I’m gonna go back and start investigating,” said Komatsu, standing up.

“Aoi, Rikyu, please take care of the store.” Holmes put on his coat and left with Komatsu.

“Guess I have no choice,” said Rikyu, planting himself on the sofa.

“I’ll make coffee,” I said.

“Thanks. Oh, put it in the Kura mug, all right? Since I’m Kura staff.”

“Okay.” I nodded and went to the kitchenette to brew the coffee. It went quickly since I only had to make one serving. I poured it into a Kura mug and

placed it in front of Rikyu. “Here you go.”

“Thanks. So, did you finish the proposal?”

“Almost. It’ll be done once I add the floor plan you made.”

“You know those Kobe glass artists you’re collaborating with? They’re called Kobe Kiriko, right?” Rikyu asked, holding the mug.

“Yeah.” I nodded.

Kobe Kiriko was a team of young creators who had been inspired by Edo, Satsuma, and Tenma kiriko glass. Their aim was to create beautiful kiriko in the modern era. As Rikyu said, I was working on collaborating with them for Ensho’s exhibition.

“You don’t think they’ll...affect how the paintings are perceived?” Rikyu asked slowly, choosing his words carefully.

Ensho’s paintings left a deep impression on the viewer. Rikyu must’ve been thinking that there was no need for decorations or collaborations—if anything, they’d just get in the way.

“I know what you’re trying to say,” I said. “But I have a feeling that it’s going to be great.” I had an image in my mind, and it was a little frustrating that I couldn’t convey it well.

“Oh.” He put his mug down. “That’s fine, then.”

“Huh?”

He gave me a toothy grin. “Since you seem confident.”

“I-I’m not...”

“I saw the new display window from outside. It’s pretty good. People were looking at it as they passed by too.”

Unlike Holmes, who was always singing my praises, Rikyu hardly ever complimented me. The rare occurrence made me feel more uneasy than happy.

“But...” He rested his cheek on his hand. “It feels like it’s missing a little something.”

His sharp observation startled me. The display was originally supposed to

include the painting of the Christmas market. It was incomplete as it was now.

I remembered the pained expression Holmes had made. *Maybe Rikyu knows something?*

“Um, Rikyu...there’s something I want to ask you.” I timidly took my phone out of my pocket.

“What is it?” He tilted his head and looked up at me.

“Do you know anything about this painting?” I showed him a photo.

His expression instantly changed. “Why do you ask?”

“It was in the second-floor storage.”

“So it’s still here...” Rikyu muttered to himself.

“Still?”

He scratched his head weakly and stood up. “Oh, uh, I have to work on a report, so I’m gonna go to that cafe over there. I’ll be back by closing time.”

As I watched him leave as if running away, I looked down at my phone, confused. *It’s such a soft and warm painting.*

“What secret could it possibly be hiding?” I tilted my head.

2

Meanwhile, Kiyotaka went to visit Kazuyo in Gion—only to wind up at the Komatsu Detective Agency anyway. He happened to run into her near Kiyamachi Street.

“Oh, you were looking for me? This works out perfectly, then.”

The elderly Kazuyo sat on the office’s black leather sofa, giggling as she held her teacup. She was a former geiko—a Kyoto geisha—who ran her own geisha house. After retiring, she now lived in a townhouse in Gion. She was well known in the neighborhood, and geisha house proprietresses went to her for advice.

“I made lots of ohagi, so I was coming here to share them with the office,” she said, moving the cloth-wrapped package next to her onto the table. Ohagi was a

confection made with glutinous rice and red bean paste.

“I see. Thank you.” Holmes smiled from the sofa on the other side of the table.

“Sorry for the trouble,” said Komatsu, staying at his desk so that he could work at his computer while listening. “I appreciate the ohagi. Thank you,” he said awkwardly.

It wasn’t the first time Kazuyo had brought food to the office. She had shared sweets and inari sushi with them several times. This was the second time for ohagi, so he already knew they were delicious. He was sincerely happy.

“It’s fine,” Kazuyo said with a laugh, looking up. “I wanted to see dear Ensho’s face too. I’m glad he’s here today.”

Ensho had just come downstairs after hearing the noise. “‘Dear’?” He gave a strained smile.

Komatsu’s shoulders twitched slightly. Surely, no one had ever called this man “dear” before. Thinking about it, there was a lady on Teramachi Street who called Kiyotaka “dear” too.

“Kyoto women are fearsome,” he muttered quietly, his expression softening.

Ensho headed to the kitchen, exasperated, and took a bottle of mineral water out of the fridge.

“So, what did you wish to know?” Kazuyo asked with a warm smile, putting down her teacup. There was something intimidating about her aura. She must’ve been wary of what Kiyotaka was going to ask.

The young man smiled and said, “It’s regarding the parent-child relationship between Atsuko Tadokoro and Hiroki.”

Kazuyo blinked as if she hadn’t been expecting that subject. “Did something happen with them again?”

“Did you know that they’re opening a second shop in Gion?”

“Of course. This time, Atsuko is the owner and Hiroki is in charge of running the place. Are you concerned about that?”

“A little, yes.”

“I understand, but he’s not going to scam people anymore.”

“I hope so. However, Atsuko called Hiroki—her own son—her ‘bad karma.’ I’m curious about why those words came up.”

“Ah.” Kazuyo gave a bitter expression.

Ensho came out of the kitchen and sat down unassumingly at the desk he used to use. He seemed to be interested.

“Yes, well...” Kazuyo sighed. “As a child, Hiroki was a good boy, but after puberty, he took a problematic turn. Whenever something didn’t go well, he’d often say things like, ‘I’m destined to fail at everything I do anyway.’”

“Destined?” Kiyotaka asked softly with a slight tilt of his head.

Komatsu awaited Kazuyo’s next words, feeling similarly confused.

“I’m not quite sure what he meant. He seemed desperate. He struggled to find success, and eventually he stopped caring about morals. He tried getting rich quick through gambling, extorting people by way of faking accidents, scamming people with fake accusations... He was once called by the police because he was suspected of running a badger game scheme. Every time he got into trouble, Atsuko would clean up his mess. His personality became twisted too. Whenever someone does something to him, he always tries to get revenge.”

“What a scumbag,” Ensho muttered.

“Don’t say that out loud,” Komatsu said with a strained smile even though everyone was probably thinking the same thing.

“It seems that Hiroki calms down when he has some money,” Kazuyo continued. “He was in high spirits when he was running the clip joint. However, when sales fell, he would get tense and yell at the staff.”

Kiyotaka nodded in understanding. “So now that the shop is gone, Atsuko is in a difficult situation again.”

“Yes. Atsuko tried to get him a proper job, but normal work doesn’t make you rich quick. He didn’t last long no matter where he went.”

“I understand that she’s having a hard time with Hiroki. But why do you think she called him her ‘bad karma’?”

“I haven’t the foggiest.” Kazuyo tilted her head. “I once said to Atsuko, ‘It must be difficult raising a child by yourself,’ and she replied, ‘There’s nothing that can be done for him.’ I also told Hiroki, ‘You shouldn’t worry your mother too much,’ and he said, ‘There’s no hope for me.’”

Both mother and son had said that he was beyond saving.

Kiyotaka furrowed his brow and crossed his arms. “Why would they say that?”

“I don’t know.” Kazuyo placed her hand on her cheek. “But Atsuko ran away from her husband in Kobe, didn’t she?”

“Oh?” Kiyotaka tilted his head. “Was she not a widow?”

“That’s what I thought too,” said Komatsu.

Kazuyo covered her mouth. “Forgive me. That was a slip of the tongue. Back then, returning to your hometown after a divorce was worse for appearances than it is now, so she said her husband passed away.”

“I see,” said Kiyotaka.

“Still, there are those like me who knew the truth. When Atsuko had just come back to Gion, she was covered in bruises. Her husband was very wealthy, but he had a violent temper. Hiroki didn’t have a single scratch on him. Atsuko must’ve protected him with her own body.”

Komatsu shook his head, trying to get rid of the painful image in his mind.

Kazuyo sighed. Then, she noticed the time and stood up. “I should get going. I have a shamisen lesson.” She was the teacher, of course, not the student.

“I’m sorry for taking up your time,” said Kiyotaka.

“It’s no problem. See you next time.” She smiled and left the office.

Once she was out of sight, Komatsu let out a sigh. “Atsuko’s had a hard time, huh?” he murmured. “Hearing these stories makes me wonder if there’s something deeper behind her opposition to Tomoka and Sada’s marriage.”

“Indeed.” Kiyotaka walked up to Komatsu. “For now, would you be able to

look into Atsuko's ex-husband?"

"I'm on it." The detective reached for the keyboard.

"This is too depressing," Ensho muttered, standing up. "But from the sound of it, Hiroki's a spiteful guy. You insulted him and ruined his shop. Ain't he gonna get revenge?"

The thought had crossed Komatsu's mind as well. He feared that Hiroki might hold a grudge against Kiyotaka and the detective agency.

Kiyotaka chuckled. "If he did, I'd beat him at his own game and make sure that he never considers challenging me again," he said with a smile.

A shiver ran down Komatsu's spine. *Right. This guy is hundreds of times more terrifying than Hiroki.*

"Scary," Ensho said mockingly with a shrug. He turned away and put on his jacket. Apparently, he was heading out.

"Oh, Ensho," said Kiyotaka.

The man stopped to listen.

"Aoi would like to speak with you. If you aren't busy, would you please go to Kura?"

Ensho hummed with a smirk. "You're fine with us being alone in the store together?"

"Rikyu is there as well," Holmes said smoothly.

"Oh, so that's how it is. Well, if I feel like it, I'll consider going," Ensho said indifferently as he left. His gait seemed to have quickened.

"He's heading over right now, huh?" said Komatsu. "He's surprisingly cute."

"Cute? Personally, I find that irritating," said Kiyotaka.

Komatsu burst out laughing. "Well, yeah. But you really planned this out, huh? There's no danger in an interview at Kura when Rikyu's there." He nodded.

Kiyotaka gave a small sigh. "I do know it's fine, though," he murmured.

“Huh?” Komatsu looked up.

Kiyotaka chuckled.

3

Upon stepping outside, the chill gradually seeped in. In terms of perceived cold, Kyoto was probably the coldest city in Kansai.

Ensho shivered slightly and put on his hat. It made it easier for his bald head to bear the cold.

“Now then.”

He walked out onto Shijo Street and stopped. If he continued to the right, he’d reach Ponto-cho. He didn’t have anything in particular to do. Before leaving the office, he figured he’d wander around town and have some drinks. But now, Kiyotaka’s words were firmly ingrained in his mind.

“Well, it’s a way to kill time,” he murmured as an excuse.

He went left—west—on Shijo Street. Upon reaching Teramachi Street, he would go north and find Kura. Aoi would be there, holding a feather duster as usual. His expression relaxed a little as he thought of her. She probably wanted to talk about the exhibition.

“Exhibition?” Ensho murmured to himself with a chuckle. Regardless of how extravagant the Yagashira house was, it was still a private residence. In other words, this was a “pretend exhibition.”

Still... He looked down at the palm of his hand. After spending so much of his life painting forgeries, he never would have dreamed of holding his own exhibition. His career had begun with counterfeits in the first place, when he had started painting in place of his father, who had become an alcoholic and could no longer hold the brush.

Ensho reflected on the past as he walked, and a self-deprecating smile rose to his face. He had continued to create forgeries after his father’s death, and right when he had gotten sick of it all, he remembered the last painting he finished under his father’s name: *Mandala of the Womb Realm*. The Buddhist world of

enlightenment. Wanting to throw himself into it, he had joined a certain temple.

“It was the mandala that got you interested in Buddhism? In that case, you should go to Toji, not here,” the senior priests had said with a laugh.

Mandalas were Kukai’s visual representations of the esoteric Buddhist world. In Kyoto, the temple most associated with Kukai was Toji-in.

“It was just the first thing I got interested in, that’s all,” Ensho had replied. But in reality, he had never learned any of that. All he had done was paint the requested mandala and found it fascinating. He thought Buddhism had the same roots everywhere. Why had he chosen Nanzen-ji Temple, then? Because he had visited various temples and Nanzen-ji had appealed to him. The aqueduct that blended into the temple grounds felt as though it would gently accept his heresy. He had wanted to spend the rest of his life there.

However, his peaceful retired life had come to an end once he learned about Kiyotaka Yagashira. He now understood why he had overreacted back then. It was because Kiyotaka was blessed with good looks, talent, and a healthy environment—a combination of all the things he longed for.

After several clashes, he had decided to take the path of an appraiser. On the surface, he had wanted to stand in the same ring as that man and beat him fair and square. To make him lower his head and say, “You win.”

However, it had only brought his inferiority to the forefront, making him realize that no matter what he did, he would never become Kiyotaka Yagashira. Thinking rationally, it should have been obvious. But his emotions couldn’t keep up. In Waitan, Shanghai, he had given up on becoming an appraiser and run out of the hotel. Later, Kiyotaka had called him, and he had lashed out at him over the phone, almost to the point of tears.

When he thought back to that night, he wanted to run away in shame. Never before in his life had he exposed his heart and taken his emotions out on someone like that. At the same time, he couldn’t help but laugh at himself.

“It’s weird, eh?”

After that, Kiyotaka had begged him to save Aoi. In order to rescue her, he

had to paint. The thought had given him a surge of strength. He could already see the picture on the big white canvas. All he had to do was paint it as beautifully as he could. The brush had become an extension of his body, to the point where he wondered if his blood was flowing through it. And so, he had painted *Yu Garden by Night*.

Not long after, he had learned his father's secret—the truth behind Taisei Ashiya. And after resolving everything cleanly, Kiyotaka had immediately left Shanghai and set out for New York to see Aoi. Normally, Ensho would have rolled his eyes, but at the time, it had actually felt refreshing.

Ensho narrowed his eyes as he remembered what had happened next. Right after Kiyotaka left, Yilin Jing's father—Shanghai billionaire Zhifei Jing—had summoned him to a separate room. With a serious look in his eyes, he had asked Ensho to sell him *Yu Garden by Night*, placing a pen and blank check on the table.

"Write your price."

"Huh?"

"I want you, the painter, to decide its worth."

Jing was going to buy the painting at the asking price. Ensho had never put a figure on his own work before. It was hard to describe how he felt at that moment. Naturally, he had contemplated it. How much *was* it worth? The buyer was incredibly rich and said he could name his price. He could ask for hundreds of millions of yen. If he wrote one billion, what face would this man make? How many zeroes were there in a billion anyway?

As those mocking thoughts ran through his mind, he had realized that the hand holding the pen was trembling. His gulp had seemed to echo in the quiet room. Was his work really worth that much? He had tried to visualize the painting, and Aoi's face appeared at the same time. He had put down the pen and chuckled.

"Sorry. I can't sell that painting after all."

In his head, he had told himself it was because he had painted it for *her*. However, it had only been an excuse—a way to make him feel better about

himself. In reality, he had gotten cold feet. He had never been fazed by the high prices people had paid for his counterfeits of famous paintings. After all, they had believed that those forgeries were the original artists' work. It made sense. But when it came to his own work, he didn't know what price to set. So he had run away.

He had even found himself wishing that Kiyotaka had been there. That man wouldn't have allowed him to sell himself short. He would have suggested a fair price for *Yu Garden by Night*.

Ensho's reminiscence was interrupted by the realization that he was already in front of the antique store Kura. He stopped and craned his neck. He could see a bit of the interior from the window. As expected, Aoi was cleaning. He couldn't see the counter, but Rikyu was probably there, reluctantly watching over the store.

Rather than being disappointed that Aoi wasn't alone, Ensho felt at ease. He opened the door and the chime rang as usual.

Aoi turned around. "Oh!" Her eyes widened. "Welcome, Ensho."

"Evening. I heard you wanted to talk?"

"Did Holmes tell you?"

"Yeah."

Aoi giggled. "Yes, I wanted to talk to you. Please have a seat." She pulled out a chair.

Ensho hung his hat and jacket on the pole and looked at the counter. Rikyu wasn't there. "Are you by yourself?"

"Yes. Rikyu was here too, but he went to a nearby cafe to work on a report. He'll be back by closing time."

"I bet that guy didn't see this coming," Ensho muttered, sitting down and putting his hand on his forehead. "We ended up alone together anyway."

Aoi didn't seem to hear him. "I'll make coffee." She casually made her way behind the counter and into the kitchenette. "Oh, right," she called out from inside. "We made mugs for Kura staff. We call them 'Kura mugs.' Would you like

to use one?"

"Does being Kura-exclusive mean they're valuable?"

"No, they're ordinary mugs. We made them so that the manager could use them without worry."

"I'll go with that, then. Expensive stuff doesn't suit me."

Aoi giggled and came out with a tray. "Here you go."

As she said, it was a normal mug. It was a mellow turquoise blue, and it widened slightly towards the rim. "Kura" was written in cursive at the bottom.

"Thanks." Ensho took a sip. The coffee Aoi made was quite good. Being alone with her made him feel a bit nervous and uncomfortable. He narrowed his eyes slightly. "So what'd you want?" he asked, unable to bear the silence.

Aoi took a pen and notebook out of her pocket. "I'd like to ask questions about your life as a painter," she said with a serious expression.

Ensho burst out laughing. He felt his mild anxiety disappear. "What the heck?"

Aoi paid no mind to his reaction and continued, "Do you have a preferred time for painting?"

"Huh?" Ensho furrowed his brow.

"For example, if you often start painting when you wake up in the morning and the sun is shining brightly."

"Oh." Ensho rested his chin on his hand. He'd never considered it before. "Well...now that I think about it, I usually start at night." He'd pick up the brush and paint with extreme focus, only coming back to his senses when he felt the morning sun. By that point, the painting was usually almost finished.

Aoi giggled at his explanation.

"I also get really cold, so I take a hot bath afterwards." It was a moment of bliss, now that he thought about it. Soaking in the hot water made his chilled skin tingle. A sense of accomplishment would spread through his entire body.

Aoi had been listening with great interest, but this point confused her. "Why do you get so cold?"

“Oil paints have a really strong smell, so I paint with all the windows open.”

It wasn't easy using a cramped room as a studio. His father had also painted in one room of their apartment with the windows open. It had greatly annoyed the neighbors, so instead of continuing to use oil paint in their small home, he had switched to watercolors and acrylics.

Acrylic paint was easy to handle like watercolor paint, but it also had the weightiness of oil paint. It didn't have a strong odor, and it dried quickly. Most of his father's paintings—in other words, Taisei Ashiya's—used acrylic paint. So did *Suzhou*—the painting Ensho had given Kiyotaka, which was now on display at Kura—and *Yu Garden by Night*.

Before starting on *Yu Garden by Night*, Kiyotaka had instructed him to use the same technique as *Suzhou*. If it had to be an oil painting, then he would've needed to rent a studio instead of painting in the hotel room.

Many old masterpieces were oil paintings. In his forgery days, his studio had been a room in an old apartment in Adashi Moor with few residents. He had chosen it because it was close by, and perhaps also because it resembled the apartment he used to live in. He remembered the time he had lured Kiyotaka there and made him crack a code.

“Do you listen to music while you work?”

The question instantly brought him back to the present. Upon processing Aoi's words, his shoulders shook as he tried to suppress another laugh. “Music? My work ain't that leisurely.”

“What do you think about when you paint?”

He froze. He'd been asked that sort of question many times before, and each time, he'd given an indifferent answer like “Eh, stuff,” or “Nothing really.” But now that he thought about it again, what *did* he think about? He fell silent and crossed his arms.

Aoi patiently waited for his answer.

“I dunno. It's like I think about a lot of things but also nothing. What matters more is that I'm inside the painting.”

“Inside the painting...” Aoi gulped. “What is that like?”

“Uh...” Ensho tilted his head. “This might sound extreme, but it’s like having your feet on the ground while your upper body’s inserted into the world of the painting.” It was the first time he had ever put that feeling into words, and even though he was the one saying it, he found it comical. *What the heck am I talking about?* He scratched his head.

“That’s wonderful,” Aoi murmured.

Ensho looked up.

“That’s how immersed you are when you’re painting, huh?” she continued, coming out from the counter and walking through the store. Just as Ensho was wondering where she was going, she stopped at the Chinese antique section where *Suzhou* and *Yu Garden by Night* were on display. “Were you immersed in these paintings as well?” she asked.

Ensho stood up and walked over to her. She was looking straight up at the paintings, and he felt a bit nervous standing next to her.

“I guess, yeah,” he said.

“They’re both truly brilliant,” she said passionately.

Embarrassed, Ensho clicked his tongue without thinking. “Well that’s a forced compliment if I’ve ever heard one.”

“But I really do think that.”

Which do you like more, then? He almost asked that, but he kept his mouth shut. He figured she would just say “Both are lovely” anyway. He didn’t want to hear a boilerplate answer from her mouth.

“I should get going,” he said. If he stayed any longer, he’d probably blurt out something he shouldn’t.

“I’m sorry I couldn’t provide you with anything...”

“The coffee was plenty.” He took his jacket from the hanger and put it on.

“Oh!” Aoi’s eyes widened as if she’d just remembered something. “Sorry, Ensho, there’s something else I wanted to ask you. Do you know anything about

the person who painted this?”

She took out her phone and showed him a photo. It was a watercolor painting of a Christmas market, gentle with an air of fantasy.

“Seems like something you’d like,” Ensho said with a chuckle. He didn’t recognize the painting, but he felt as though he’d seen the artistic touch somewhere before. “There’s no signature, eh? What’s the painter’s name?”

“‘Fuga’ was written on the back.”

Ensho thought for a bit before shaking his head. “Never heard of ’em. Are you looking for that painter?”

“Um, yes. I’m curious about them.”

An unbearable feeling came over him at the thought of Aoi being interested in another painter’s work. He unconsciously averted his gaze. He felt his face contorting and lowered his hat to hide it.

“Well, see ya.”

“Yes, thank you for today. I’ll do my best for your exhibition. Thank you for working with me.” She bowed deeply.

The negative feelings that had overtaken him suddenly faded. “It’s just my exhibition, so you don’t gotta push yourself.”

“Don’t say that!” Her eyes widened and she shook her head.

Ensho glanced sideways at her as he left the store. The air was as cold as ever, but it felt pleasant. He smiled softly as he walked towards Gion.

4

The clacking of a keyboard echoed through the Komatsu Detective Agency. Komatsu’s eyes were fixed on his computer screen. Kiyotaka stood next to him in silence, looking down at the monitor with his arms folded.

“Well, it looks like Atsuko’s ex-husband’s name is Koji Sato,” Komatsu said.

“Koji Sato...a very generic name.”

“Yeah.” Komatsu laughed. “He’s way richer than the average guy, though. He runs a bunch of businesses out of Kobe,” he explained as he tapped away at the keyboard.

The screen showed a white-haired elderly man. There was quite an age gap between him and Atsuko—he was probably nearing eighty. He bore a vague resemblance to Atsuko’s son, Hiroki Tadokoro.

“I see,” said Kiyotaka. “They certainly are father and son.”

“Yeah, Hiroki looks more like him than Atsuko.” Komatsu nodded. “Oh! Looks like Koji Sato’s known for being an art collector. I found an article about him bidding a hundred million yen on Chinese porcelain. Have you heard of this guy, kiddo?” He looked up at Kiyotaka.

“No, I have not.”

“Weird.”

“It could be that his name was too generic to leave an impression. However, from the photo, I can say for sure that I haven’t met him before.”

“Anyway, Koji Sato’s been married three times, and Atsuko was his second wife. He had a daughter with the one before her. Maybe he was waiting for a son like Hiroki... Hm?” Komatsu moved his face closer to the screen. “Whoa!”

“What is it?”

“Don’t be too shocked when you hear this. After divorcing Atsuko, Koji Sato remarried right away and had another son soon after. The son’s name was—”

“Yutaka, right?”

“Um, does this mean what I think it does?” Komatsu tapped the keyboard. “Oh god, it does. Hiroki and Sada are half-brothers.”

Kiyotaka looked at the screen without saying anything.

“His third wife’s name was Keiko Sada, but he divorced her right away too. Koji Sato married three women and had three kids, but none of them stayed with him. Maybe he treated them badly.” Komatsu scratched his head.

“Now we know one of the reasons, though. Atsuko’s son, Hiroki, is Yutaka

Sada's half-brother. That must be why she was opposed to the marriage."

"Wait, but..." Komatsu looked up at Kiyotaka. "It's a surprising connection, yeah, but it doesn't have that much to do with Tomoka. Why would Atsuko be against them getting married?"

"Well..." Kiyotaka put his hands on his hips. "I have the feeling there's something wrong with the father, Koji Sato. It seems that all of his wives switched back to their maiden names, after all. Since he's so wealthy, you'd think they'd at least keep the children's surnames the same so that they could aim for an inheritance."

"Yeah. It's like they wanted to cut all ties with him." Komatsu looked up, realizing something. "Hey, what if Koji Sato's doing some kind of shady work behind the scenes? And his upstanding wives ran away with the kids when they found out?"

"It's very possible." Kiyotaka folded his arms. "Komatsu, you mentioned that he bid a hundred million yen on Chinese porcelain. What kind of piece was it?"

"Gimme a sec." The detective tapped his keyboard again. "Here."

The screen displayed a vase with a narrow mouth. It was cobalt blue with a flower-like pattern.

"Ah." Kiyotaka clapped his hands together as if he'd remembered something. "A fuyode vase from the Ming dynasty..."

"Fuyode?"

"It's a type of ceramic with a pattern that looks like flower petals opening up. The material is thin, the glaze is transparent, and it has a very light feel. So this was what he bought." Kiyotaka nodded. "I didn't know of Koji Sato, but I knew that this fuyode vase was auctioned for one hundred million yen. It was very surprising."

"Yeah, I can't believe it's worth that much."

"You have it backwards." Kiyotaka shook his head. "I was surprised that it *only* fetched a hundred million. It wouldn't have been strange if it had sold for three times that."

“Urgh...it’s really worth *that* much?”

“Assuming it’s genuine. Was the auction Sotheby’s?”

“No, it looks like it was in Hong Kong. It says it’s this one.” Komatsu showed Kiyotaka the name of the venue.

Kiyotaka looked at it and hummed with a nod. “It’s not very famous. Perhaps it was staged so that the piece could be resold...”

“What do you mean by ‘staged’?”

“Having someone under your employ put the item up for auction and bidding a hundred million on it yourself. The news will spread across the world, and some will come to you saying they’ll pay double the price.”

“When a rich businessman bids on an antique, it’s like he’s giving it his seal of approval, huh?”

“Yes.” Kiyotaka moved his face closer to the screen. “It’s hard to tell from the low-quality image, but I wonder if the piece was genuine to begin with,” he murmured with a frown.

“He’s really something if he’s doing stuff like that with forgeries.”

“Still...” Kiyotaka straightened his back. “While the mystery isn’t fully solved yet, I have a general idea now.”

“Same. Atsuko really doesn’t want her precious Tomoka to get involved with the Sato family.” Komatsu began typing again, putting together his report in a practiced manner.

Kiyotaka reached his hand out. “Sorry, but could you hold off on the report for now? I’m still not fully convinced, and there’s one more piece of information I’m waiting on.”

“Information?” Komatsu looked up at him.

“I emailed a specialist about the charm that Sada keeps on him at all times, but he hasn’t replied yet.”

“Oh, you did mention that. All right.”

At that moment, Kiyotaka’s phone buzzed in his pocket. He checked it and

saw a message from Rikyu.

"It's 7 p.m., so I sent Aoi home."

"Thank you," Kiyotaka replied before looking at Komatsu. "I should be returning now."

"Oh, are you worried about Ensho after all?" The detective grinned.

Kiyotaka shrugged. "I don't like the idea of them being together, but I'm not actually worried. I understand that there's no danger no matter where they are, even if no one else is around. In fact, I think she's safe with him. He won't do anything to hurt her anymore, and if something were to happen, he'd risk his life to protect her," he muttered to himself.

Komatsu was stunned by the unshakable trust he sensed in Kiyotaka's quiet words. "You guys really do have a weird relationship, huh?"

"Yes, I think so too." Kiyotaka smiled fondly. "Well then, see you." He put on his coat and left the office.

Chapter 3: Fetters of the Past

1

After finishing the interview with Aoi, Ensho didn't feel like going back to the Komatsu Detective Agency, where Kiyotaka was bound to still be. He wandered around town and stopped just before Shijo Bridge. Minamiza Theater was on the other side, and the crowds of people continued beyond it. The shopping district bustled with the energy of a festival all year round. Yasaka Shrine stood at the end of the road, looking fantastical with its lights.

"Gion's picturesque too, eh?" he murmured in a good mood.

Suddenly, he remembered how Aoi had expressed an interest in a painter named Fuga and immediately felt irritated. He knew what this feeling was: jealousy.

"What the heck?"

Ensho clicked his tongue as he recalled Fuga's painting. It wasn't as if Aoi had said it was better than his. Even if she *did* think that way, art was subjective. Everyone was free to have their own preferences.

It was a strange feeling—much more frustrating than imagining Aoi in Kiyotaka's arms. The two of them had already been together when he'd first met them, so no matter what they did, it felt normal—if annoying at times. But painting was another story.

"Guess it means I had some pride in my paintings."

He laughed self-deprecatingly and crossed Shijo Bridge. Normally, he would've gone back to the Komatsu Detective Agency at this point, but he felt like walking a little more.

Kyoto's most famous bridge was as crowded as always. As he was crossing, he passed by the man who had been the topic of many of Komatsu and Kiyotaka's conversations lately: Atsuko Tadokoro's son, Hiroki. With his glasses and suit, he

looked like an ordinary office worker at first glance.

Kazuyo's story instantly came to mind, and although Ensho knew it was none of his business, he felt irritated. Perhaps that was why he found himself calling out, "If it ain't the lad from Gion."

Hiroki turned around, annoyed. "One of the three nuisances from the Komatsu Detective Agency, huh?"

I ain't working there anymore, Ensho thought, but he couldn't be bothered to explain, so he changed the subject. "Heard you quit the clip joint and now you're opening a club?"

Hiroki's eyes narrowed behind his glasses. "Yeah, but we're selective with our customers, so you guys aren't invited."

"You choose people who'll fall for your scams?"

"Shut up."

Losing his cool, Hiroki grabbed Ensho by the collar. However, Ensho seized his wrist and twisted it hard.

"Aaahhh!" Hiroki shouted pathetically, sitting down on the spot.

"Huh, all bark and no bite. You really are just a lucky rich kid."

"Who're you calling a lucky rich kid?"

"You look plenty lucky to me."

"Don't talk about things you don't know," Hiroki spat, brushing Ensho's hand away.

Ensho hummed and narrowed his eyes. "So you don't think you're lucky?"

"As if. I'm *cursed*."

"Cursed? What?"

At that moment, Ensho heard a familiar voice. "Yo, Shinya."

He spun around and saw two men heading towards him. The one who had called his name was a former colleague from his counterfeiting days—the man he had caught snatching brand-name purses in Gion.

“Takashi? Whaddya want?” Ensho asked. He didn’t know if Takashi was his real name, but that was what he called him. He almost spat at him, “Don’t show your face in front of me,” but stopped in surprise upon noticing the man who was behind him.

“Long time no see, Shinya. I hear you go by ‘Ensho’ now?” It was a man in his forties, wearing a black coat over a black suit. There was a crooked smile on his face.

Making forgeries alone wasn’t enough to bring in money. You needed a route to sell them to rich people. That was this man’s role—in other words, he had been their ringleader.

Ensho didn’t want to be involved with him, but he couldn’t deny that he had him to thank for his survival. He returned the crooked smile and gave a small bow. “It’s been quite a while, Yosuke.”

Hiroki’s eyes widened in surprise at Ensho’s polite tone and mannerisms.

“Yeah, eh?” Yosuke smiled cheerfully. When working as a businessman, he used a polite, gentlemanly tone, but when talking to subordinates and whatnot, he spoke in a somewhat rough Kansai dialect. “I’ve been looking for you. Let’s chat.”

“Me?”

“I want you to paint something for me. Just one thing, by the Chinese Picasso. He’s really popular on the mainland right now,” Yosuke said, seeming to be in a good mood.

The “Chinese Picasso” was Baishi Qi, a painter, calligrapher, and seal engraver who had been active during the late Qing dynasty. His painting style wasn’t especially remarkable at first glance. His works had a cute aesthetic to them, and some called them “crude but charming.” But they were popular for their strong sense of individuality.

As for why he had that nickname, it was because his paintings fetched prices just as high as Picasso’s. It was well known in the art world that one of Baishi Qi’s works had sold for 15.8 billion yen. There was also another reason: the story that Picasso himself had once praised Baishi Qi’s *Dove of Peace*.

“I refuse,” Ensho said clearly.

Yosuke’s eyebrow twitched. “Why?”

“What? I’m grateful to you for helping me get by, but that goes both ways. Haven’t you used me enough? I’ve already washed my hands of this business. I ain’t interested in working with you,” Ensho spat, turning away from them.

“Wait, Shinya. I looked into you. You inherited your dad’s alias, Taisei Ashiya, didn’t you?”

“Yeah,” Takashi said with a firm nod. “Shinya thinks he’s a real painter now.”

Ensho snickered, still facing away.

“You should give up on being an honest painter,” said Yosuke. “You can’t make a living off it in this day and age. Don’t get your hopes up or you’ll regret it big time.”

Ensho turned around. “I know that,” he said with a cynical laugh. “I wouldn’t be so persistent if I were you, Yosuke. I know all about you, and I won’t hesitate to expose you to the world. You don’t wanna lose your current position, do you?”

Yosuke awkwardly averted his gaze.

“Well, goodbye.” Ensho waved and continued walking across the bridge.

“Dammit, doesn’t that guy have any weaknesses? Like a parent or a woman?” Yosuke muttered softly.

Takashi tilted his head with a sour look on his face. “He doesn’t have any relatives anymore, and he’s always been a lone wolf.”

“Um...” Hiroki stepped in front of them. He had witnessed the entire conversation.

Yosuke furrowed his brow in suspicion, wondering who this man was. Meanwhile, Hiroki stealthily examined him from top to bottom. A well-tailored suit, a Rolex Cosmograph Daytona on his left wrist... It was the model that Hiroki wanted, and it cost as much as a car. This guy was definitely rich, *and* he wanted to know about Ensho. Hiroki couldn’t pass up this opportunity.

“I run a place in Gion and I know that guy. Would you like me to figure out his weakness?” Hiroki asked, taking out a business card from his mother’s shop.

Yosuke took the card, hummed as he looked at it, and put it in his pocket. “All right, do it. I have other work to do, so I’m leaving this to you, Takashi.”

“Understood,” Takashi said, giving a ninety-degree bow.

“Bye, then,” Yosuke said, leaving.

Takashi looked at Hiroki nervously. “Are you really capable of finding Shinya’s weakness?”

“Yeah, you can count on me. The first step is to gather intel, and for that, we’ll need a box of sweets. Let’s go get one.”

“Sweets?” Takashi furrowed his brow.

*

Komatsu stayed in the office after Kiyotaka left and continued to work. After tapping away at his keyboard for a while, he stretched and said, “Maybe I should get ready to leave too.”

Just as he reached to close his laptop, the intercom rang.

“Who is it?”

The intercom was connected to his computer, so with a click of the mouse, he could see what was on the monitor outside. It was a man he hadn’t been expecting: Hiroki Tadokoro.

“Speak of the devil, it’s Atsuko’s son...” Confused, he activated the microphone. “The door’s open. Come in.”

He heard the sound of the sliding door open as Hiroki entered the office.

“Hello,” the man said with a bow. He was carrying a box of sweets.

“Welcome. So...what’s your business with me?” Komatsu stood up and walked up to Hiroki.

“Oh, well, I came with a token of gratitude from me and my mom,” Hiroki said stiffly, holding out the box.

“*What?*” Komatsu blurted out without thinking, baffled by the turn of events. *Why would this man bring me a thank-you gift of sweets?* He looked at Hiroki with blatant suspicion.

“My mom kept nagging me to do it,” Hiroki said with a weak smile. “Honestly, I didn’t want to.”

“Oh.” Komatsu finally relaxed his shoulders. *Maybe he needs to make the rounds since he’s opening a new shop.* “I don’t recall doing anything to help you, though... Sorry.” He awkwardly accepted the box of sweets.

Hiroki seemed relieved. He then made an obvious show of looking around the office. “Huh, are you by yourself today?”

“The kiddo—I mean, Kiyotaka Yagashira—was here, but he went home. Ensho’s out somewhere.”

“Ensho’s the bald one, right? I saw him in Gion just now.”

Komatsu hummed. *That means he left Kura a long time ago.* “How was he?” *Maybe he was in a good mood since he saw Aoi.*

“How?” Hiroki frowned. “He was walking with a swagger.”

Komatsu imagined the sight and burst out laughing. “Yeah, he’s always like that, huh?”

“Um...does that guy have any weaknesses?” Hiroki asked as if it was the most ordinary small talk in the world.

Komatsu stared blankly at him. “Weaknesses?”

“Oh, um, it’s just that he always seems so invincible.”

“Invincible, huh?” Komatsu laughed again. “Ensho’s weakness...”

He folded his arms. His immediate thought was, *It’d have to be the little miss*, but he abandoned it because there would be chaos if rumors of a love triangle spread in Gion. However, when he thought about it again, he wondered if Ensho’s weakness *wasn’t* Aoi. After all, he did maintain his composure in her presence. There was only one person who could ruffle his feathers and make him face his true feelings. Thus...

“I think the kiddo is Ensho’s weakness.”

“Kiyotaka Yagashira?” Hiroki’s eyes widened in surprise.

“Yeah.” Komatsu nodded firmly. He was almost certain at this point. Those two were antitheses—the one and only for each other. “I’m sure of it. Ensho’s only weakness is the kiddo.”

Hiroki gave an overjoyed smile.

“Why do you look so happy?”

“Oh, sorry. I just found it *very* interesting.”

“Well...yeah, I guess.”

“I’ll be going now, then.” Hiroki hurriedly left the office, smiling the whole way.

Was it really that interesting? Komatsu tilted his head.

2

Meanwhile, Kiyotaka left the Komatsu Detective Agency, continued west on Shijo Street, and turned north at Teramachi Street. His watch indicated that it was 7:20 p.m. Perhaps because it was December, the shopping street was still rather crowded at this hour.

Before long, Kura’s shopfront—and the Christmas display window that Aoi had designed—came into view. Rikyu was inside, so the lights were still on.

Aoi’s display was catching the attention of women passing by. Kiyotaka stopped in front of it. Inspired by a white Christmas, it had a very soft and charming aesthetic. However, it felt slightly lacking, and he knew exactly why. He averted his eyes from the display and peered into the store. Rikyu was behind the counter, looking down at his laptop.

He opened the door, and Rikyu looked up at the sound of the chime.

“Oh, welcome back, Kiyo.”

“Thank you for watching the store for me, Rikyu.”

“It’s fine. I was doing schoolwork here anyway. I’m starving, though.” He grinned mischievously.

“Of course. What would you like to eat?”

“That’s what I can’t decide.”

“How so?”

“I’m in the mood to chow down on meat, but since it’s winter, I also think hot pot would be nice,” Rikyu said, folding his arms.

Kiyotaka laughed.

“Did I say something funny?”

“No, I have a theory that ‘healthy young men should be given meat,’ and I laughed because you’re no exception.”

“What kind of theory is that?”

“Well, let’s go somewhere that can satisfy both of your wishes.”

Rikyu blinked in confusion.

After closing the store, the duo headed to Ponto-cho, an alleyway lined with traditional shops. Even though it was a weekday evening, it was quite crowded. A little further down the road, they saw a red lantern with the words “Motsunabe – Ponto-cho Kamehachi.”

Rikyu giggled. “I haven’t been here in a while. You’re right—motsunabe fits both of my cravings.” It was a type of hot pot made with tripe.

“Yes, it’s the season for delicious hot pot.”

They chatted as they entered the restaurant. After a short wait, the motsunabe arrived at the table, already cooked and ready to eat.

Kiyotaka and Rikyu toasted with beer and soda respectively. After taking a sip, they picked up their chopsticks and said, “Let’s eat.”

“Whoa, this is good,” said Rikyu. “It’s so juicy.”

“There’s no odor at all.”

“Yeah, you can’t achieve this at home.”

“I appreciate that motsunabe has delicious vegetables too.”

“Yep.”

Other dishes, such as fried chicken, arrived at the table as well. Rikyu cheerfully reached for them with his chopsticks, only to look up and squint at Kiyotaka’s smiling face.

“I bet you’re thinking, ‘This place is close to Kura, so I’ll bring Aoi here sometime,’ aren’t you?”

“You know me well.”

“It’s because you’re always like this,” Rikyu said, slightly annoyed. He picked up his cup of ginger ale and took a gulp. “Speaking of Aoi, she asked about that painting today.”

“I see.” Kiyotaka put down his beer mug. “What did you tell her?”

“Nothing. I changed the subject.”

“I’m sorry you had to cover for me.”

“It’s fine.” Rikyu shook his head. “I wasn’t expecting it to still be at Kura, though.”

“Me neither. I don’t recall putting that painting away in the first place. Aoi said it was in a cabinet at the back. I knew there were some paintings in there, but I hadn’t opened it.”

“Wait, so you haven’t told Aoi about it?”

“I wasn’t trying to keep it a secret from her. It’s just not something I’d want to talk about willingly...”

“I see.” Rikyu sighed. “If you don’t want to tell her yourself, should I do it for you?”

“No, I’ll tell her when the time is right.”

“How old were you back then, Kiyo?”

“Fourteen.”

“If you don’t want to talk about it willingly, that means your wounds still haven’t healed, right?”

“I’m not sure.” Kiyotaka tilted his head.

“It was actually traumatic for me too. I don’t want to see you like that ever again.”

“I’m sorry you had to witness it.”

“That’s not the issue.” Rikyu lowered his eyes, not knowing what to say.

“Forget about me—how is your girlfriend doing?” Kiyotaka asked in a cheerful tone, trying to lighten the mood.

“What do you mean, my ‘girlfriend’? Call her by her name, Haruka.”

“I wanted to see how you would react.”

“Well? Did I blush?”

“No, your face didn’t change.”

“Well, yeah.” Rikyu nodded as if it were a matter of course. “Haruka’s the girl I promised to marry. I’ve always thought of her as a girlfriend, so I’m not gonna get flustered all of a sudden. Well, I can’t say the same for her.”

Kiyotaka’s shoulders shook as he chuckled. “You’re very noble. I’d expect no less from the descendant of a samurai.”

“The descendant of a samurai? But *you’re* my lord, Kiyo.”

“I’m a mere merchant.” Kiyotaka laughed. “By the way, is Haruka going to come back to Japan at all?”

“It seems like she’s coming back before Christmas, and she’ll be here until the New Year.”

“I see. That’s something to look forward to.”

“Yeah. Haruka wants to see you and Aoi too. It’d be nice if we could have a party on Christmas or New Year’s Eve.”

Kiyotaka furrowed his brow. “How about spending those days with just the two of you?”

“Kiyo, stop making that face that clearly says you don’t want us around.”

“I can’t help it. I really *don’t* want you around. I want to spend special occasions alone with Aoi.”

“Hey, that’s mean. You and Aoi are together all the time anyway.”

“Usually at the store. It’s like being stuck in limbo.”

“Limbo?” Rikyu laughed.

“Besides, don’t you want to be alone with Haruka too?”

“Hmm...” Rikyu tilted his head and picked up the menu. “More importantly, Kiyo, it looks like we can choose ramen or rice to put in the leftover broth. Which one do you want?”

“Since it’s motsunabe, I’d prefer ramen.”

“Yeah, me too.”

After having ramen and dessert, they left the restaurant.

“Ahh, I’m full. That was great, Kiyo.”

“Yes, it’s been a while since I’ve had motsunabe, so I enjoyed it.”

They walked leisurely down the alleyway, heading south.

“You don’t have to escort me home,” said Rikyu.

“I wanted to take a walk anyway.”

Rikyu lived in Arashiyama. The closest station for him was the Hankyu Kyoto Line’s Kyoto-Kawaramachi Station at the intersection of Shijo Street and Kawaramachi Street.

“Kiyo, did you notice?” Rikyu whispered as they walked.

“Yes.” Kiyotaka nodded. “We’re being followed.”

“Yeah. Are there four of them?”

“I believe so.”

“What do they want?” Rikyu frowned, annoyed.

“Well, we’ll find out soon.”

There was a small park in Ponto-cho that was simply called Ponto-cho Park. It was jarring to suddenly come across a children's park in the middle of a busy street, but it made the area feel lived-in and provided a sense of security. Children played there during the day, and couples chatted there at night. However, right now, there was no one around.

Kiyotaka and Rikyu intentionally entered the park. Not one moment later...

"Hey, do you guys have a minute?" one of the men called out to them.

"What is it?" Kiyotaka turned around, placing a hand on his chest with a smile.

*

While that was going on, Hiroki Tadokoro was at his shop in Gion with Takashi.

"Sorry, this is all I've got right now," Hiroki said, preparing a whiskey on the rocks at the bar and offering it to Takashi.

"It's more than enough." Takashi cheerily took a sip from the glass. "Thanks for letting us use such a nice place too." He looked around the empty shop. It was the club that Hiroki was going to be opening, and since it was still being set up, there were a lot of things scattered around.

They had received word that Kiyotaka Yagashira had left the antique store and gone into a motsunabe restaurant in Ponto-cho. And now, he had exited from there. Takashi's friends would capture him soon and bring him to this shop. Hiroki's face naturally relaxed into a smile as he imagined Kiyotaka tied up and looking pathetic.

"It'll be hard to keep him here for multiple days, though," said Hiroki.

"Nah, if Shinya wants to, he can finish the painting in one night. It won't be a problem." Takashi looked down at a picture of Kiyotaka. "I can't believe this guy is his weakness, though..." He rested his chin on his hand.

It didn't make sense to him, but the photo had convinced him. It showed Kiyotaka and Ensho walking together in Gion. Hiroki had secretly taken it back when they'd bested him at his previous shop, hoping to be able to get revenge on them one day.

“Man, he gets more good-looking the more you look at him. This is what that guy likes? I thought for sure he was into women. Well, whatever.” Takashi put a cigarette in his mouth. “It’s easier if it’s a guy since we won’t have to show restraint. Once we’ve captured this pretty boy, Shinya’s bound to cave and do that painting for us.” He had absolute faith that things would go without a hitch.

Hiroki’s expression clouded over.

“What’s wrong, Hiroki?”

“This pretty boy’s stronger than he looks. I hear that he’s trained in martial arts. Takashi, your friends are strong, right?”

The two men had hit it off quickly since they had the same goal. They were already on a first-name basis.

“Don’t look down on us,” Takashi said with a snort. “We’ve been living by our fists in a dangerous part of town, even by Western Japan standards, and he’s up against *four* of us. A rich boy who’s taken a few martial arts lessons won’t stand a chance.”

“That’s good, then.” *Now I’ll be able to get revenge on those bastards.* Hiroki unconsciously trembled with excitement.

Takashi’s phone rang. “Oh, it’s them.” He left his phone on the bar counter and tapped the speaker icon. “Are you done?”

“*S-Sorry. It was an instant KO,*” Takashi’s colleague reported weakly, out of breath.

Takashi and Hiroki looked at each other.

“What do you mean?” Takashi asked.

“*We thought it’d be easy because Kiyotaka Yagashira was with a cute girl, but both of them were ridiculously strong. They seriously knocked us out instantly.*”

Hiroki was lost for words.

Takashi’s eyes widened. “So what happened next?”

“*We were all captured—or, well, pinned down. They interrogated us and we*

let it slip that it was to make Shinya paint a forgery. Someone mentioned your name too."

"What?" Takashi gaped.

"And then they took pictures of our faces and even our driver's licenses..."

Suddenly, there were shrieks from the other end of the line.

"What happened?" Takashi asked.

"Good evening. Is this Takashi whom I have the pleasure of speaking with?" came an unsettlingly calm voice.

Takashi was rendered speechless. Meanwhile, right in front of him, Hiroki whispered, "It's Kiyotaka Yagashira..."

"I heard about the situation."

Kiyotaka didn't raise his voice, but they could sense his anger. Hiroki fell silent, while Takashi replied with a vague, "Y-Yeah."

"I've identified your colleagues. Now, don't approach Shinya Sugawara ever again. If you do..." Kiyotaka paused. *"You know what will happen, yes?"* He chuckled.

At that moment, Takashi and Hiroki both shuddered, feeling as though their entire bodies had been doused with cold water.

"That is all I had to say."

The call ended.

"I feel like I just spoke with the devil." Takashi placed his hand on his forehead, his face pale.

Hiroki bit his lip.

*

"Unbelievable."

Having rounded up the men who had suddenly attacked them and finished the call with Takashi, Kiyotaka clapped his hands together as if dusting them off, exasperated. The moment he gave the phone back, the men scattered to the

winds. He and Rikyu were the only ones left on the path.

“Why would they use me as bait to make Ensho paint a forgery? What on earth were they thinking? Ensho would *clap his hands in delight* if I were kidnapped.” Kiyotaka tilted his head, baffled.

Rikyu laughed. “He does seem like he’d do that. But you never know. I’m pretty sure he wouldn’t want his rival to be kidnapped, nor would he want to owe you anything. He might’ve actually done as they said.”

Kiyotaka hummed and frowned. “Would someone so simpleminded think that deeply about it?”

“Who knows? But more importantly, shouldn’t you have turned those guys in to the police?” Rikyu asked in a disapproving tone.

Kiyotaka gave a slight smirk. “Not yet. This way, I’ll be able to stop them.”

“You have an evil look on your face, Kiyo.”

“Ah, my apologies.”

“No, I think it’s cool.”

“You never change.” Kiyotaka chuckled. “Well then, shall we head back?”

“Yeah. It’s nice that we got to exercise after dinner.”

“Indeed.”

The two walked away with a spring in their step.

*

After that, Takashi, who was still at Hiroki’s shop, downed the rest of his whiskey all at once and slammed the glass onto the counter.

“I told you he was skilled,” said Hiroki.

“But he was up against *four* of us. You wouldn’t think he’d be *that* strong.” Takashi sighed and looked up at the ceiling. After a pause, he scratched his head and said, “Guess it’s a job for the experts. I’ll try asking *him*.”

“Him?”

“Yosuke’s younger brother.”

“Is he strong?”

“In a way. He might be too strong and end up crushing Shinya’s heart *and* his will to paint. That’d be a problem,” Takashi said, resting his cheek on his hand.

Hiroki snorted. “But that guy doesn’t seem like he’ll listen to you no matter what you do. Won’t you feel better crushing his heart and making him give up the brush?”

“Well...it *does* piss me off to see him succeed as a painter.”

“Right?”

The two looked at each other and grinned.

3

After finishing my classes at university, I went straight to Kura, parking my bicycle on Oike Street and heading south. The Teramachi shopping street had the same relaxed atmosphere as always, although it was already December, so there were more Christmas decorations than before.

Tomorrow would be the first Saturday of the month. Ensho’s paintings would finally arrive at the Yagashira residence. The thought made me nervous. Trying to calm myself down, I took deep breaths as I walked.

I stopped in front of Kura and opened the door. The chime rang, and my eyes were met with the store interior. There was a guest sitting at the counter. I couldn’t see Holmes from this angle—he was probably in the kitchenette.

The visitor was an incredibly beautiful young man wearing a light-gray kimono and haori coat. A gray scarf was placed at his side. Like Holmes, he had black hair, pale skin, and an elegant face, but he gave off a slightly different vibe.

“Hello, Aoi,” he greeted me in a Kyoto accent with a smile. “I’m intruding on you today.”

“Oh, hello, Reito. It’s been a while.” I bowed.

His name was Reito Kamo. He was the heir to a unique family trade, different from Holmes’s. There were many words that described his occupation: exorcist,

shaman, even diviner. Kyoto really was a mysterious city in that you could meet people with such eccentric jobs.

Holmes came out of the kitchenette with a tray. “Ah, Aoi.” He smiled when he saw me, then turned to Reito and placed a cup and saucer in front of him. “Here you are.”

“Why thank you. Is this a glass cup?” Reito’s eyes widened in curiosity.

“It’s Turkish glass.”

The cup and saucer had an exotic design, deep blue with gold trim. Holmes had purchased it recently as a result of my new focus on glass art.

“It’s breathtaking,” said Reito.

“The inherent danger of glass enhances its beauty, doesn’t it?”

Holmes tended to choose cups that suited our visitors. I agreed that the flashy yet mysterious Turkish glass cup and saucer were a good fit for Reito.

Reito sipped his drink and gave a satisfied sigh. “You make a truly delicious cup of coffee, Kiyotaka.”

“Thank you.” Holmes smiled fondly.

“Now, on to business. I thought talking to you in person would be faster than discussing over email. This bracelet you sent me...” Reito brought up an image on his phone. It was the crystal bracelet that Yutaka Sada kept on him at all times. “As you suspected, it’s a charm. From Kenmi Shrine.”

“Kenmi Shrine?” Holmes tilted his head. Apparently, he didn’t recognize the name.

“It’s in Tokushima Prefecture.”

“I’ve never heard of it. Is it famous?”

“Among our crowd, yes.”

Holmes hummed. “What kind of shrine is it?”

“It has a rather long history. It was founded by Emperor Ninken at the end of the fifth century. It enshrines the guardian deities of bountiful harvest and maritime safety. And...”

Holmes and I remained silent throughout the words that followed. After the explanation was finished, Holmes nodded firmly as though he now understood everything.

“I can think of a single reason why a mother would tell their child to carry such a charm on them at all times.”

“I believe you’re right.” Reito nodded.

“That’s the ‘bad karma’ that Atsuko was talking about...” Holmes said to himself, stroking his chin.

Filled with a strange apprehension, I couldn’t say anything. Sada had mentioned that the special charm had once broken apart. *Is he going to be okay?*

“Right,” Holmes said as if he was thinking the same thing. “Reito, I’d like to ask you something about the charm...”

4

The next day, I was waiting at a Western-style stone house near the Philosopher’s Walk—the Yagashira residence.

Holmes fully opened the front door. “Please come this way.”

The visitors were staff from a partition rental company and art transport specialists. With careful, practiced movements, they carried the partitions and paintings into the house.

The exhibition room was originally a special hall that displayed the Yagashira family’s collection. It was now completely empty, the pieces having been moved to another room. The staff used the tape markings on the floor to set up the partitions. The work went quickly, and less than an hour later, they began to leave.

We thanked them and looked around the exhibition room again. The empty hall was now divided with partitions. It was the manifestation of my proposal, which Rikyu had turned into a proper blueprint. Even though the walls were still bare, my heart was already racing with anticipation.

“Aoi, is something wrong? You’re spacing out,” said Holmes.

“Oh, no. I was just touched. The divisions make it feel like a real museum.”

“There’s still more to come. Let’s check the pieces that arrived.”

“Okay.”

The paintings had been left at the entrance for the time being. Holmes pointed at them as he referenced the list. “These are the ones that Takamiya provided. His collection is mostly by Taisei Ashiya—Ensho’s father.”

Takamiya was a wealthy man who lived in Okazaki, Kyoto. He loved art and was dedicated to fostering artists. In the past, he had recognized Taisei Ashiya’s ability and supported his talent. It was only natural that he possessed many of his works. And now, father and son’s paintings were gathered here.

“Which one is Ensho’s?” I asked.

“Which do you think it is?”

Having the question turned back around made me nervous. Takamiya had provided six paintings. Two depicted Japanese landscapes, three depicted Chinese landscapes, and the last one was a mandala. Out of these, four were size 10—the standard painting size with a length of 53 centimeters. Two of them were much larger: the mandala and one of the Chinese landscapes. Both of them looked to be size 100—a length of 162 centimeters.

The list said that one of the paintings was titled *Chang’an*.

“*Chang’an*...”

When I looked at it, it all clicked. The townscape was divided into neat sections like Kyoto. It had a beautiful, bright vermilion palace, birds, large peonies, and dancing female entertainers. It was gorgeous and full of life. I felt as if I could peer into the painting and hear the sounds of its world. Looking at it made my eyes watery.

“This *Chang’an* is by Ensho, right?”

“Yes.” Holmes nodded.

“It’s incredible. It reminds me of how moved I felt when I saw his painting of

Suzhou for the first time.” I pressed a finger to the tears forming in the corners of my eyes.

Ensho’s paintings on display at Kura, *Suzhou* and *Yu Garden by Night*, had already been brought here. Those had been size 100 as well.

“It was the same for me,” said Holmes.

“Huh?”

“When I saw *Chang’an*, it had the same impact as *Suzhou*.”

“Come to think of it, you said that when you were in Shanghai, you realized the truth behind Taisei Ashiya when you saw *Chang’an* through the security cameras.” *I was impressed when I heard the story, but now that I’ve seen the painting for myself...*

“It’s clear as day, isn’t it?” Holmes said as if reading my mind.

I couldn’t help but laugh.

“Oh, right. His *Mandala of the Womb Realm* is brilliant too. Hm? It appears to be missing. The other paintings that Yilin sent are here, though...”

Holmes frowned as he checked the paintings that had been carried into the exhibition room. Almost all of them were still in their packaging, though.

“Can you tell it’s missing without looking inside?”

“Yes, because it’s the same size as *Mandala of the Diamond Realm*.”

“Oh, I see.”

The two mandalas formed a pair. Ensho’s father had painted *Mandala of the Diamond Realm*, while Ensho himself had painted *Mandala of the Womb Realm*. Since they went together, they were both the same size—100. None of the other packaged paintings were that large, so you didn’t need to open them to tell that one wasn’t there.

“What if he changed his mind about lending us *Mandala of the Womb Realm*?” I asked, suddenly worried.

Holmes chuckled. “I doubt that’s the case, but let me ask.” He took out his phone and emailed Yilin. The reply seemed to arrive right away. He looked at

the screen and turned around to tell me, “She said there’ll be a slight delay for that painting.”

“Oh, good.”

As we were talking, the intercom rang.

“Ah, is that Kobe Kiriko?” Holmes asked.

“Huh? It’s already time?!” I looked at the clock in mild surprise.

The Kobe Kiriko team was scheduled to come here at 4 p.m. to see the venue and discuss the collaboration. According to the clock, it was currently 3:50 p.m.

I hurried outside to greet them at the gate, but only found Kobe Kiriko’s designer, Yoshitaka Sakaguchi. He was nicknamed Yuki because it was an alternate reading of the kanji characters in his name. He was fair-skinned with beautiful features and a delicate air. At first glance, he looked like a woman with a pixie cut. The name “Yuki” suited him very well, and I had started calling him that in my emails and over the phone.

“Huh? Are you by yourself, Yuki?” I asked.

“Yes.” He nodded shyly. “Since I’m the one in charge of design, the other members said they would leave everything to me.”

Kobe Kiriko was currently a team of three. The other two members were craftsmen. They probably had complete trust in Yuki’s aesthetic sense.

“Understood. We’ll be working together today, then. The exhibition room is this way.” I turned around and led him into the house.

I saw Yuki stop as he was following me. His shapely eyes widened at the sight of Holmes, who was standing in front of the door.

“What a surprise,” Holmes said, looking similarly stunned. “It’s been a while, Yuki.”

“Is that you, Yagashira?”

“Yes. Thank you for your assistance that time.”

“Oh, no. I wanted to thank you again as well.”

Their conversation confused me, but I remembered having a nagging feeling

back when I first met Yuki. At the same time, memories of the past suddenly flooded back to me.

“Um, is Yuki...?” I asked.

“Yes.” Holmes nodded. “This is the Yuki who Ensho cherished like a brother.”

I covered my gaping mouth with my hand. The dots connected, and the strange relationship web suddenly became clear.

5

“Now that’s a surprise. I can’t believe Shinya’s holding an exhibition,” Yuki murmured as he looked around the empty exhibition hall.

All he had been told was that it was an exhibition for Taisei Ashiya. Now that we knew he was Ensho’s childhood friend, we told him the truth behind the painter.

After hearing everything, he smiled happily. “I see. So it’s a competition between father and son. I’ll have to do my best, then.”

“I’m sure Ensho will be delighted to know that you’re participating,” I said.

He shrugged, then thought of something and looked up with a cheerful expression. “Oh, I know. Can you keep my involvement a secret from Shinya?”

“Huh? A secret?”

“Not forever. I want to surprise him at the end.”

“Oh, I like that idea.”

The meeting continued.

“I want to display Kobe Kiriko’s lamps here, like this,” I said.

“Hmm, I see. That’s the concept of this proposal, right? Will the outside light be fully blocked out?”

Holmes answered this question. “The blackout curtains here don’t let in any light at all. This was originally a special room used for displaying art.”

“I see. It might be a good idea to let outside light in after nightfall, though.”

Yuki looked out the window as he spoke. “Oh?” He blinked. “Wow, a Lincoln just drove in. And a gorgeous woman came out of it.”

“A gorgeous woman showing up in a Lincoln...” I looked up at Holmes.

“I can only think of one person who might fit that description,” he said.

“Yeah.” I giggled.

It was Yilin Jing, the daughter of one of the richest men in the world, who was based in Shanghai. Holmes and I excused ourselves and went outside to welcome her.

“Hello,” she said.

“Yilin!” I beamed as I ran up to her.

“Long time no see, Aoi. I’m glad you seem to be well,” she said with a smile. Her Japanese was as fluent as ever. She looked at my companion and said, “You too, Holmes.”

Holmes placed his hand on his chest as usual and bowed. “Thank you very much for working with us for this exhibition. Did you perhaps come to deliver *Mandala of the Womb Realm* in person?”

“Yes.” Yilin shrugged and looked behind her. A truck pulled in behind the Lincoln. Men in suits—probably the Jing family’s employees—carefully took a size 100 painting out of the cargo bed. “My father told me to. He’s very fond of it, to the point where he wouldn’t have lent it if it were anyone but you.”

“I’m honored.”

“So, where is the exhibition room?”

“This way.” Holmes turned to lead Yilin to the room.

Suddenly, a clear voice rang through the yard. “Aoi.”

We stopped in our tracks and looked in the direction of the voice. Ensho was standing by the gate, dressed casually in a hat, jacket, and jeans. He was looking at us, his expression dead serious.

“Ensho?” I walked towards him, confused. When I reached him, he looked down at me apologetically. He looked so sad that I couldn’t even say, “Your

paintings have arrived. Would you like to come inside?" Instead, I could only ask, "What's wrong?"

"Aoi, forgive me."

I tilted my head, clueless as to why he was apologizing.

"I want to call off the exhibition. Please cancel it."

"Huh?" My eyes widened.

"I'm truly sorry." He bowed to me.

"Um, Ensho—" I tried to follow him as he left, but Holmes grabbed my hand. I didn't know why he was stopping me, but that question was soon answered.

"Wait, what's the meaning of this?" Yilin asked, chasing after him.

Ensho ignored her and continued to walk at a quick pace.

"Wh-What should we do...?" I asked, panicking.

Holmes placed his hand on my shoulder to calm me down. "Aoi, let's leave this to Yilin for now and continue with the preparations."

"Holmes..."

I gulped and looked in the direction that Ensho and Yilin had gone in. They were already out of sight.

Chapter 4: Scars of Light and Shadow

1

“A guy I’ve never met showed up at the office and said, ‘I want to talk to Shinya,’” Komatsu said, heaving a sigh.

It had been nearly an hour since Ensho had disappeared after saying he wanted to call off the exhibition. Komatsu had come to the Yagashira residence to provide his input on the situation.

We were sitting on the cream-colored L-shaped sofa in the second-floor living room. The order was Holmes, me, Yuki, and Komatsu. Yuki had secretly been watching the exchange with Ensho from inside the house.

“Ensho was on the second floor at the time, so I told the guy that, and he said ‘Thanks’ and went upstairs,” Komatsu continued. He scratched his head weakly. “After that, I suddenly felt nervous, like maybe I shouldn’t have just let him through. I didn’t even ask for his name because he didn’t have a suspicious vibe at all. So I decided to go upstairs under the pretext of serving coffee, and I overheard their conversation.” He narrowed his eyes, a pained look on his face.

*

“Who the hell are you?” Ensho asked, annoyed.

Komatsu slumped his shoulders in shame. *I really shouldn’t have let the guy pass. I should’ve asked for his name and checked with Ensho first. Then again, it’s not like I’m his manager. Do I really need to do that?* Hesitating, he froze halfway up the stairs.

“What if I told you that I’m Yosuke’s younger brother?” the visitor continued cheerily.

“What would his brother want with me? Are you gonna tell me to paint the forgery too?” Ensho spat.

The man chuckled. “Well, that’s what my brother wants, but I don’t really

care. If you do it, you'll get rich too, but it's a crime, so I'm not going to force you if you don't want to."

"Then what the hell do you want?"

"I saw your work—as Taisei Ashiya—in Shanghai. It's incredible."

Ensho said nothing.

"You lived your life as a counterfeiter. Then you turned yourself in and atoned for your crimes. Now you're trying to become an honest painter. It's admirable," the man said earnestly.

Ensho remained silent. Even though Komatsu couldn't see him, he could tell that he had his guard up.

"That's why I wanted to tell you that you should give up on making an honest career out of painting."

"Huh?" Ensho asked, baffled. "What're you trying to say?!"

"Exactly that. If you keep pursuing that path, you'll definitely break down."

"Whaddya mean?"

"Because you're a fake to begin with."

"*What?*"

"Oh, don't be upset. When I saw your forgeries, I thought, 'This counterfeiter's work is almost as—no, even more powerful than authentic paintings.'"

"And...?"

"And now you've gained recognition as Taisei Ashiya—your father's counterfeiter. In other words, you're a copycat. There are a lot of people in the world who can paint better than Van Gogh. If they imitate him, they'll gain attention for their work being better than the original. But no matter how far they go, they'll never *become* Van Gogh. You're one of those people. You only shine because you have someone to imitate. You'll never become the original."

Ensho fell silent. The words must have been like a stab to his heart.

"Someone like that shouldn't get the wrong idea in their head," the man

added as if pouring salt into the wound.

Komatsu heard him stand up and went downstairs so that he wouldn't be caught.

*

"That's what happened."

The man had confronted Ensho with a veiled condemnation: "You're only a copycat. Don't get your hopes up." The words were too cruel for Ensho, who had finally become optimistic about entering the world of painting.

I was lost for words. Yuki seemed equally stunned; he was as pale as a ghost.

As for Holmes, he had a stern expression. "Komatsu, what did this man look like?"

"Hmm..." Komatsu looked up at the ceiling. "I think he was in his mid-thirties. He was tall and lean. Looked like he could be an athlete. He was smiling, and, well, he seemed nice. That's why I let him through without thinking."

From the sound of it, he didn't come across as a bad person. I looked up at Holmes, wondering what he thought, and was surprised by what I saw. He was covering his mouth, his eyes wide open.

"Holmes?" I asked.

"What, do you know him?" Komatsu asked.

"Um, did that man have a mole on his face?" Holmes pointed at his left cheek, slightly above the corner of his mouth. "Around the dimple area?"

"Oh, yeah." Komatsu clapped his hands together. "Almost the same place as Marilyn Monroe's."

"I see..."

"You've got an idea of who it is, don't you, kiddo?"

"Yes...well, it's only a possibility," Holmes said evasively, averting his gaze.

Meanwhile, Ensho had returned to Gion—to his room on the second floor of the Komatsu Detective Agency. He picked up the blank canvas in the middle of the room and broke it in half.

Yilin, who had followed him, ran into the room and immediately asked, “What on earth are you doing?”

“I don’t need these anymore,” Ensho spat, throwing his box of paintbrushes into the trash bin.

“Why?”

“Cause I ain’t painting no more.”

“Why not? And why did you say to cancel the exhibition?”

“People’ll just laugh if someone like me holds an exhibition.”

“Someone like you? What are you talking about? Your paintings are incredible! My father openly praises them, and he’s seen paintings from all over the world!”

“What, you think they’re good ’cause your daddy praises them?”

“No. I think so myself as well.”

“Well, you’re mistaken. It’s like that guy said. The stuff I paint, it’s all worthless fakes.”

“Which guy?”

“Never mind.”

“You aren’t worthless. You’re a brilliant creator, and I personally, um...”

Ensho narrowed his eyes at Yilin. “What?”

“Um...ever since last time, I started to take an interest in you.” She lowered her gaze, blushing.

Ensho snorted. “Don’t make me laugh. You’re lying.”

“I-It’s not a lie!”

“Then you’ve got the wrong idea,” Ensho spat, shrugging.

“Why do you say such things?”

“The one you really like ain’t me; it’s Holmes.”

Yilin was stunned. “Why...would you say that?”

“When you talk to Holmes, you blush and get nervous. That cutesy tone you use is your way of hiding it, ain’t it?”

Yilin fell silent.

“But he’s got Aoi, and he’s obsessed with her to the point where it’s painful to watch. Since you know that, you forced yourself to put a lid on your feelings. Holmes and I are totally different, but we have some similarities. You got hung up on that, that’s all.”

“Don’t assume things!” Yilin shouted. “That’s not true. You don’t get to decide how I feel. I’m not in love with Holmes, and the reason I’m interested in you has nothing to do with him at all.”

Ensho sneered at the sight of her desperate denial. He grabbed her wrist and pushed her onto the floor. “Are you fine if I do this, then?” he asked, looming over her.

Yilin’s face stiffened. She trembled, fear in her eyes.

Ensho snickered. “See? You’re terrified.”

“Well, yes. Anyone would be scared in a situation like this, even if it’s the person they like.”

Ensho hummed. “What about this, then?” He breathed in and suddenly put on a serious expression. “Yilin, please don’t be afraid,” he said in a tone identical to Kiyotaka.

Yilin’s eyes widened in shock.

“Don’t worry. I won’t hurt you. I’ll be gentle. Yes, if you’re uncomfortable, tell me and I’ll stop right away.” Ensho gently lifted a lock of her hair, kissed it, and chuckled.

Yilin panicked as an image of Kiyotaka overlapped with the completely different person staring down at her. It was as though Ensho was being possessed by him. “Who are you...?”

“Oh, please don’t look at me like that. Here, close your eyes. Then it’ll feel like it really is me making love to you.”

“Stop!”

The moment Ensho brought his face to Yilin’s ear, he was shoved back.

“Pretty close, right?” said Ensho. “I’m a professional imitator. This kind of thing’s my specialty. Your heart raced ’cause it was your beloved Holmes, right?”

“Don’t make fun of me!” Yilin slapped him on the cheek. “It’s true that Holmes made my heart race. After all, he’s stylish, knowledgeable, and kind. I think he’s a wonderful person. But,” she continued breathlessly, “like you said, he has Aoi. She’s always on his mind. So I stopped my feelings there. But since he’s such a wonderful person, I still felt excited around him. It was purely out of admiration, though. And I’ve only seen him from a distance to begin with. I don’t know him well enough to even say whether you’re similar to him or not. But it’s different with you.”

“How so?”

“You treated me like a normal girl. You acted cold and dismissive, but you put in a good word for me to my brother.”

“What?” *You like me ’cause I treated you like a normal girl? Rich girls are so easy.* He stopped himself from saying that because her words reminded him of a time from the past, when he had been fighting with Kiyotaka and Aoi had jumped between them. At the time, she had shouted, “We’re in the middle of a party. Cut it out, both of you!” Instead of singling Ensho out as the bad guy, she had treated him and Kiyotaka as equals, and that had moved his heart.

I’m easy too. He laughed self-deprecatingly. *Maybe that’s all it takes to get you to like someone.*

Panting, Yilin wiped the tears from her eyes with the back of her hand. “I admire your talent too. I really do think it’s amazing. I believe that in the long history of mankind, there are countless talented people who have gone unseen. Luck plays a big part in whether you get noticed or not. Now, you’ve been blessed with both talent and luck. Please don’t throw those awa—”

“Shut up already!” Ensho yelled, glaring at her.

Yilin flinched.

Ensho quietly turned away as if ashamed of his angry outburst. “Can you leave now?”

The woman said nothing.

“I want to be left alone,” he continued without turning around.

Yilin silently stood up and left the room.

3

At the Yagashira residence, Komatsu and Yuki were getting ready to leave.

Komatsu began to stand up, only to say, “Oh, right,” and sit back down.

“Hiroki Tadokoro came by the other day.”

“Huh?” I tilted my head. “That’s Atsuko’s son, right?”

“Yeah.” Komatsu nodded and scratched his head. “He asked me something weird out of nowhere.”

“What was it?” asked Holmes.

“He wanted to know Ensho’s weakness.”

Holmes’s expression changed. He was probably concerned about Yuki, who was surely Ensho’s weakness. “What did you tell him?”

Yuki nervously waited for Komatsu’s next words.

“Uh, well, I thought about it for a bit, and then I said, ‘I think it’s the kiddo.’”

We all blinked at the unexpected answer.

After a pause, Holmes placed his hand on his forehead. “So that’s what that was about...”

“Did something happen, kiddo?”

Holmes regained his composure and looked up. “No, nothing major. More importantly, I think it was wise not to name Yuki or a woman. That was a good

on-the-spot decision, Komatsu.”

“Oh, no.” The detective shook his hands weakly. “I’d heard about Ensho’s beloved childhood friend, but I didn’t know his name anyway. Besides, I was pretty serious with my answer. I figured the person who could affect Ensho’s state of mind the most was you. When you’re around, he loses his cool. It’s like he becomes a helpless kid.”

Holmes furrowed his brow.

“I can’t even imagine Shinya losing his cool,” Yuki murmured in surprise.

“Um, Yuki,” I said. “What kind of person is the Ensho you know—the Shinya from the past?”

“Well...” Yuki clasped his hands in his lap. “To me, he was like a kind, strong hero. His dad often passed out drunk in front of our apartment building, and he’d carry him up to their room without a fuss. When I was being bullied, he’d get revenge for me, and when I was starving, he’d bring me food. But...” He had a distant look in his eyes. “Although he was often angry, when I think about it, it was always when he was beating up my bullies. I’ve never seen him lose his cool. I feel like he’s cold towards himself, like he’s given up.”

I nodded in silence.

“I see,” Holmes said in a gentle tone. “Perhaps him losing his cool now is a sign that he’s finally trying—and struggling—to get his life back together.”

Maybe Ensho, who had completely given up on himself, was trying to get back on his feet.

“Now then,” Holmes said, putting his hands on his hips and looking at Komatsu. “In addition to the exhibition, I have to sort out the issue with Hiroki Tadokoro. I think I’ll be able to answer Sada’s request too, thanks to the report from Reito.”

“Oh!” Komatsu’s eyes widened. “Did you figure out the truth?”

“The outline is becoming clearer. Now I just need you to look into Hiroki Tadokoro and Yutaka Sada’s father, Koji Sato.”

“I already did a quick check on him.”

“I want you to investigate the Sato family’s roots, not Koji himself. Including the rumors about them.”

“Uh, all right.”

Komatsu left the living room, saying he was going straight back to the office to perform the investigation.

“I’ll be going too, then,” said Yuki, standing up.

“Yuki, thank you for coming today,” I said. “I really want to hold the exhibition no matter what, so could I ask you to proceed with the project? If it ends up being too difficult, we can turn it into a Kobe Kiriko exhibition instead,” I added with a serious expression.

Yuki laughed in amusement. “If you’re that determined to hold the exhibition, then don’t be so pessimistic.”

“Okay.” I slumped my shoulders. “Um, I’m thinking of going to persuade Ensho. Would you be able to come with me?” I asked timidly.

He shook his head apologetically. “No, I think it would only have the reverse effect. Shinya won’t want to show me his weak side.”

“Yes,” Holmes agreed.

“When a creator is being moody, I think it’s the curator’s job to do something about it. You’re the curator of Shinya’s exhibition, so please do your best, Aoi. The Kobe Kiriko team is honored to be able to add our touch, so we’ll put our utmost effort into making our part shine more brightly,” Yuki said with a smile.

My impression of Yuki had been that of a delicate, frail person. But that was now a thing of the past. He looked dignified and dependable. I wanted to show this Yuki to Ensho.

“Yes, I’ll do my best,” I said with a firm nod. “I look forward to working with you.”

“I believe Ensho’s visitor was Fuga.”

After Yuki left, Holmes and I had dinner and then retired to his room, where we sat on the sofa and drank wine. Since I had expected the meetings and work to drag on, I had told my parents in advance that I would be staying the night. So there was no need to worry about the time.

Cafe music was playing in the room, and the large TV screen, which was turned off, reflected our images like a mirror.

“Fuga? As in the artist of that painting?” I asked, remembering the painting of the Christmas market.

“Correct,” Holmes said, staring into space. “That painting’s creator. I think this is a good time to tell you the story of me and Fuga. Will you listen?” He looked at me.

“Yes.” I nodded.

“It happened over ten years ago,” he began quietly. “When I was thirteen, I bought the first painting that I had ever truly wanted. It was a Parisian townscape. I had originally seen it in an antique store in Paris when I was ten, and I had longed for it ever since.”

I listened in silence.

“However, the moment I acquired it, my longing faded as if it had only been an illusion. I was confused, so I began to test myself.”

“Test yourself?” I tilted my head.

Holmes gave a strained smile. “I would find a work of art that I liked very much and purchase it to see how I felt. I did this repeatedly, and the result was always the same—I learned that the moment I acquired something, my feelings about it would fade.”

I recalled what Holmes had said about antiques shortly after we first met:

“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.”

At the time, I had simply thought, “So that’s the kind of person he is.” However, it was his experience with acquiring art that had made him this way.

“A little later, I met a Kyoto art university student who went by the pseudonym of Fuga,” Holmes continued. “His real name was Futa Hiramasa. He thought his real name sounded childish, so he came up with his alias by mixing and matching two characters from it.”

Fuga’s real name was Futa Hiramasa. Although “Fuga” and “Futa” were only one letter apart, they gave off very different impressions. “Fuga” was written with the characters for “wind” and “elegance.”

“From my perspective, the ‘childish’ name suited him more. He was a cheerful and pleasant young man. He had a mole on one of his dimples, and when he smiled, you could see his protruding canines. He seemed more like an energetic sports athlete than an art student, and in fact, he had been in the basketball club until middle school, when he broke his knee and could no longer play. Wanting to do something, he picked up painting, which led to him pursuing a career in art.”

Komatsu had said that Ensho’s visitor had been a tall man. Perhaps that had something to do with his history in basketball.

“I discovered his work at an exhibition for art students. It was the same Christmas market painting that you saw—gentle, warm, and fantastical. It captivated me, and I wanted it so badly that I purchased it.” Holmes lowered his head. “I’m sorry. I lied when I said it belonged to someone else.”

“I knew,” I said quietly. “How did your feelings change when you bought it? Did your enthusiasm die down even though you wanted it so much?”

“Yes. Once again, my strong feelings towards the painting faded the moment I obtained it. However, it was true that the creator, Fuga, had captivated me. I wanted more people to see his work and to spread his talent to the world. I felt this way even at my young age.”

“You were still in middle school at the time, right?”

“I was fourteen.”

“So a third-year, then.”

“Yes. At the time, the internet wasn’t as widespread as it is now, so the average fourteen-year-old wouldn’t have been able to do anything. However, I had my grandfather’s connections. I knew authorities in the art world as well as esteemed art critics. With my grandfather’s help, I could get influential people in the industry to see Fuga’s work. If they acknowledged him, it would open many doors for him.”

Through connections, one can set up opportunities to be seen by famous people. Some might find it unfair, but if the work itself isn’t good, no number of opportunities will give it the acclaim it needs in order to succeed. When your work catches someone’s eye, that’s when you make more connections and become famous. It requires luck on the creator’s part.

“I admired both his paintings and the man himself. He was bright and sincere, and as his work showed, he was very warm. At the time, I often visited his studio. He was amused by my precociousness and doted on me. People said we looked like brothers,” he murmured in a nostalgic tone.

Holmes had said before that he had no creative talent, and because of that, he strongly admired creators. He must’ve sincerely idolized Fuga at the time.

“Through my grandfather’s connections, Fuga’s work soon caught the attention of influential people in the art world. It was well received, and eventually, he was asked if he wanted to enter a major international competition. Only specially chosen people could enter, so he was very excited and thanked me. He said he was going to paint a masterpiece.” Holmes lowered his eyes. “However, after that, he lost the ability to paint. He felt pressured by the expectations of the people around him. Still, he struggled, not wanting to lose the opportunities he’d been given.”

I felt like I could understand how Fuga felt. I, too, had found myself stuck because of pressure, although my task hadn’t been on an international scale.

“Before long, he got involved with something nefarious.”

“Something nefarious?”

“Drugs.”

My heart pounded with unease.

“I had never interacted with a drug user before, so while I thought his change in behavior was strange, I chalked it up to emotional instability caused by the upcoming competition. Plus, he had encouraged me to stay away because he ‘wanted to focus on painting’—all the while falling deeper and deeper into drugs. Eventually, he no longer cared about dignity.”

“What do you mean?”

“Illegal drugs cost a lot of money. When he could no longer afford them, he came to me in desperation and said, ‘Kiyotaka, I want to try painting expensive antiques. Could you lend me something from your store?’”

My eyes widened. “That means...”

“Yes.” Holmes nodded with a pained expression. “I didn’t want to be suspicious of someone I admired, but I did find his request strange. So instead of giving him an expensive piece, I brought out an ordinary flower vase. Sure enough, he tried to sell it.”

“Oh no...” I frowned.

“He lied to me and even tried to use me to get money for drugs. He was no longer the person I knew. As I told you before, drug addicts have their brains rewired to prioritize drugs over everything else. This event convinced me that he was being controlled by them. Well...in reality, I had already been faintly aware of it, but I didn’t want to believe it.”

After a pause, he continued.

“Birds of a feather flock together, so as he did drugs, he made like-minded friends. When you have friends doing the same thing, you reinforce each other’s behavior, lessening the guilt, and making you bolder. His transformation continued until he was even holding drug parties at his studio.”

I felt my face growing pale as I listened to the story.

“One night, I found out that he was holding one of those parties and reported it to the police. Perhaps there was a better option, but at the time, it was the only thing I could think of. I just wanted him to wake up.”

“What happened next?”

“Everyone at the party was arrested, including him.”

I quickly looked up at Holmes’s face. His expression was eerily blank. “What happened to Fuga after that?”

“He wasn’t sentenced to prison, but he quit painting.” Holmes lowered his gaze.

I fell silent. After all this time, I finally knew why he hated drugs so much.

“Please don’t look so concerned. I’m fine now. It was in the past. I already went through the depression and incessant self-blaming.”

He looked down at me and smiled. It was the smile he put on when he was lying. If he really was “fine now,” he wouldn’t have reacted the way he had when I showed him Fuga’s painting. The guilt still lingered within him.

Just as Takamiya had helped Ensho’s father, it was natural for an art enthusiast to want to support great artists. And creators had the right to decide whether to go for the opportunities that came their way. Fuga had happily taken the chance that Holmes had provided, but he had gotten scared and run away, and he only had his own weakness to blame for that. It wasn’t anyone else’s fault.

I almost said that out loud, but shut my mouth. There wasn’t any point in telling Holmes what he already knew. He must’ve turned it over in his mind thousands of times already. *“It’s not my fault... But if he hadn’t met me, he wouldn’t have fallen so far.”*

“Holmes...” I gently reached out and hugged him. “You went through a lot.”

His body trembled slightly. No matter how smart he was, he had only been a middle schooler at the time. At the impressionable age of fourteen, he had witnessed the fall of a creator he respected and admired, and to make things worse, he had been involved in it.

“It must’ve been painful,” I murmured, my heart aching for him as I stroked his back.

“Thank you,” he whispered, his voice hoarse. He hugged me back.

“Kiyotaka...”

I cupped his face in my hands and gently touched my forehead to his. He responded by bringing his lips to mine.

“I love you, Aoi.”

The sad tone in his voice made my heart ache even more. As we embraced each other, we shared a very long kiss.

It hadn't been out of consolation or sympathy. We had simply desired each other. Feeling languid from the afterglow of our several sweet deeds, I lay on my back on his bed and looked up at the ceiling. Holmes was snuggled up with me with his eyes closed, his hand still clasped in mine. He looked adorable, like a child being spoiled, and I squeezed his hand.

He slowly opened his eyes and whispered in my ear, “Are you signaling that you want to do it again?”

“What?” I giggled and shrank back. “I wasn't expecting that from you, Holmes.”

“Why?”

“You seem like the passive type at first, don't you?”

“Hmm, I don't think I am.”

“Really?” I looked at him.

“Yes, generally speaking, I always want you. But when you don't seem to be in the mood, I wait. I'm your standby Kiyotaka.”

“Standby Kiyotaka?” I laughed.

“A man can only go as far as a woman allows. I think that's natural as far as living beings go.”

Indeed, in the animal world, there were many cases where a male could only engage in intercourse with the female's consent.

“So you can give me the signal at any time,” he continued. “I'll come running at full speed.” He laughed mischievously and brought his forehead to mine.

“Jeez,” I said shyly. I was glad that his mood had brightened, though. “Come to think of it, what time is it right now?”

“Almost midnight.”

“The day’s about to end, huh?”

It had truly been a turbulent day. A lot of things had happened, the most shocking of which had been Ensho’s declaration and Holmes’s confession about his past. I thought about the man named Fuga, a talented painter who had met Holmes and been blessed with a great opportunity, only to run away from the pressure, turn to drugs, and quit his art. And now this man had broken Ensho’s will.

“It’s so strange how everyone was connected,” I said. “It’s kind of hard to believe.”

“Not necessarily.” Holmes raised our clasped hands towards the ceiling. “When you unravel the history of humankind, you often find surprising connections. Anderson once said, ‘Every man’s life is a fairy tale written by God’s fingers.’ Sometimes I’m so amazed by a turn of fate that I can’t help but think of that.”

“‘A fairy tale written by God’s fingers’... That’s so romantic.” *But...* “It doesn’t quite click with me, though. Maybe it’s because I want to write my own story instead of letting God do it.”

“Is that so?” Holmes looked at me curiously.

“I think God prepares a stage for us, where each person can make their own choices and write their life story. God observes us, sometimes helping us, sometimes showing us surprising connections...”

If you think of the Earth as God’s miniature garden, then it makes sense that this seemingly vast world is actually so small. Maybe a higher power is enjoying looking down at us as we do our best to live in his diorama.

“I’m a little envious of the gods’ pastime,” Holmes said with a chuckle.

“Envious?” I giggled.

In this miniature garden, there’s someone out there who’s your mirror image,

and it's up to fate whether you meet them or not. Maybe most people don't. But Holmes and Ensho did. To me, it makes sense that Ensho's weakness is Holmes, so the reverse must be true as well. In which case...

"Holmes—"

He chidingly placed his index finger over my mouth. "How many times must I ask you to call me by my name when we're in bed?"

"Oh, um, Kiyotaka."

"It turns me on more when you use the sweet voice you used earlier..."

I pouted.

"What were you saying?" he asked, amused.

"I have a favor to ask," I said with a serious expression, prompting him to regard me with seriousness as well. I was making this request as the curator of Ensho's exhibition. After I relayed it to Holmes, he smiled and nodded.

"Understood."

"Thank you." I leaned closer to him. "I have one more request."

"What is it? Your wish is my command."

"I want to go on a date tomorrow."

He blinked.

*

The next morning, we woke up leisurely, had brunch, and left the Yagashira residence. The skies were clear and the sun was warm, but it was still December. Kyoto's chilly air seeped into my body.

"It's been a while since we went on a date, huh?" I said.

"Yes, I was happy when you invited me," said Holmes.

Being on a date made even the cold weather enjoyable. We were heading to Gion, and our first stop was Yasaka Shrine. We passed through the west gate, prayed at the shrine, and left through the south gate. It was the orthodox route that Holmes had shown me in the past.

“I wanted to take the tour again before getting into the display setup,” I said.

We continued south, and as soon as we turned east at the end of the road, a five-story structure—Yasaka Tower—suddenly appeared. Even though I knew it was there, I couldn’t help but be a little startled by its majestic form.

“No matter how many times I see it, it’s still impressive,” I murmured, looking up at the tower. “I love this route.”

“Then I’m glad I took you there that time.” Holmes smiled fondly.

We continued up the Nineizaka and Sanneizaka slopes. This area always had a festive atmosphere. It was one of Kyoto’s representative locations.

Next, we went to Kiyomizu-dera, which Holmes had said was his favorite temple. We prayed at the main building and followed the designated route, stopping when we reached the spot overlooking the protruding Kiyomizu stage. The wooden structure had been built over Kinunkei cliff using a technique called “kakezukuri.” Not a single nail had been used in the construction of this lattice of enormous zelkova pillars. On the other side of the temple, you could see the sprawling city of Kyoto.

“Wow!” A puff of white breath left my mouth. “It feels like it’s been a while, huh?”

“Indeed.”

How many years ago had I come here with Holmes? The scenery hadn’t changed much at all, filling me with both relief and awe.

“Can you see Mount Funaoka from here?” I asked, holding my hand up to my forehead like a visor and craning my neck.

“It’d be difficult because of all the trees. You might be able to see it from the south side of the west gate.”

“That’s a shame. Then again, you can’t see Kiyomizu-dera from Kunimi Hill either. But you can see Kyoto Tower from both of them, huh?”

“Yes, it truly is a symbol of Kyoto.”

As we chatted and laughed, I thought back on the first time we had come here and what Holmes had said when I’d asked him why it was his favorite

temple.

“I feel like this place encompasses all of Kyoto. The temple’s beauty, its tremendous history, the modern landscape, and the unchanging view all draw people in, myself included.”

I remembered his words and elegant face as if it were yesterday. Everything he had told me, taught me, and showed me made me who I was today.

“Yeah, my feelings haven’t changed.” I’ll email Keiko and let her know.

“About what?”

“Oh, um, I really do think I’m like Little Genbu.” A turtle that’s happy to have a snake wrapped around it. I gently clung to Holmes’s arm.

“But I...” He closed his mouth.

I looked up at him, wondering what he was going to say.

“Never mind, it’s nothing.” He smiled and peered into my face. “By the way, have you sorted out your thoughts yet?”

“Huh?” I blinked. “What do you mean?”

“You’re going to find Ensho after this, aren’t you?”

“Oh...” *That* was what he meant. I placed my hand on my chest in relief. He was right, though—I *was* going to visit Ensho after this. I regained my composure and gave him a confident look. “I’m ready. I’m thinking of going there now.”

“Let’s go, then. I assume you want to meet him alone, so I’ll accompany you to the office door.” Holmes held out his hand.

“Thank you.”

I took his hand and we left Higashiyama together.

5

“Hello, Ensho.”

It was evening when Aoi paid a visit to the second floor of the Komatsu

Detective Agency, where Ensho's room was. Ensho had expected her to come, but he couldn't hide his mild anxiety. Instead of letting it show, he remained silent, lying on the tatami floor.

"I have a favor to ask," Aoi said, bowing deeply as she knelt in the hallway.

Ensho had intended on ignoring her, but he found himself instinctively sitting up, not wanting to see her like that.

"Cut that out, will you?" he said in a firm tone. "I ain't doing the exhibition no matter what you do. If you keep lowering your head, I'll leave this room."

Aoi looked up. "I want you to have this." She took an envelope out of her bag and placed it in front of Ensho.

"What's that?"

"An invitation."

"Huh?" Ensho furrowed his brow.

"I want to proceed with the exhibition preparations. On the scheduled date, December 19, I'd like you to see it by yourself. If you still don't want to open it to the public after that, then I'll give up."

The exhibition at the Yagashira residence was originally going to have a pre-opening on the nineteenth before the grand opening on the twentieth.

"Are you stupid? You're wasting your effort." Ensho sneered.

Aoi's expression didn't change.

"You must think that if you set everything up, I'll feel compelled to agree. Sorry, but I ain't that considerate."

"That's fine, of course. I don't want you to be considerate of me," Aoi said with calm, dignified eyes.

Ensho looked away, unable to meet her gaze.

"Make sure to come, okay?" Aoi bowed deeply again before standing up.

Ensho remained silent, continuing to avert his eyes.

And so, we began the final preparations for Ensho's exhibition—which would be for Ensho's eyes alone. For some reason, I felt even more nervous than when I had been expecting many viewers. However, I didn't freeze up from the pressure. I wanted him to see the exhibition and understand how wonderful his paintings were, no matter what it took.

My motivation seemed to be contagious. The Kobe Kiriko team set up pieces that fit the aesthetic. The exhibition hall was completed the day before the scheduled date. Gathered in the room were me, the three Kobe Kiriko members, and the KyoMore members who had volunteered to help, including Kaori and Haruhiko.

"We did it, huh?" I said.

"Yeah," said Kaori.

We all clapped and congratulated each other on a job well done, feeling relieved.

I looked around at everyone and bowed. "It turned out even better than I expected. Thank you so much, everyone." I looked up at the Kobe Kiriko team: Akamatsu, Igawa, and Yuki. "Thank you again for providing such beautiful pieces."

"It was nothing," they said, shaking their heads.

"We're happy to be able to collaborate with these amazing paintings," said Akamatsu.

"Yes, thank *you*," said Igawa.

Unlike his smiling team members, Yuki looked glum.

"What's wrong, Yuki?" I asked. "Did you notice an issue with the exhibition?" Despite his soft appearance, Yuki was quite picky. He may not have been fully satisfied yet.

"Oh, no," he said, snapping back to attention. "It's very well made...which is why I'm worried."

“Worried?”

“I’m scared that Shinya might not come. When he says he won’t do something, he really doesn’t.” As Ensho’s childhood friend, Yuki knew just how stubborn the man was.

I giggled. “I’m sure it’ll be fine. He didn’t *say* he wouldn’t come. Besides...”

“Hmm?”

“I asked someone to bring him here.”

“Who?” Right after saying that, Yuki’s expression softened as he realized the answer. “That was a silly question, huh?”

“I wouldn’t call it silly.” I laughed.

There was only one person who could make Ensho take action.

Chapter 5: An Exhibition for One

1

It was the day of the exhibition. The grandfather clock in the Yagashira residence's entrance hall rang out loudly, signifying that it was 4 p.m. The sun was already beginning to set, and the sky was changing color.

I was with the three Kobe Kiriko members and Rikyu. No one said anything. We simply sat on the sofa in the entrance hall and waited for Holmes to arrive with Ensho.

The grandfather clock rang four times, and then it was back to complete silence.

Yuki had a look of despair on his face. "He really isn't coming," he muttered.

Before I could respond, Rikyu said, "No, he definitely will. Kiyo went to get him, after all."

I smiled slightly at the sight of the two of them. I'd thought the same thing when I'd first met Yuki, but although they were both the same "beautiful boy" types, they had very different auras.

"Man, I can't wait for Kiyo to see these. I'm glad they were done in time." Rikyu looked down at the cardboard box beside him. It contained the commemorative notebooks for the hundredth anniversary of Kura's Teramachi-Sanjo store, which were going to be handed out at the exhibition first.

Rikyu's complete faith that Holmes would show up with Ensho softened the tension in the air.

"I want to see those notebooks too," I said. I tried to peek inside the box, but Rikyu closed the lid.

"No way. I'm showing Kiyo first."

"Aww..."

The others laughed.

2

If I don't show up, she'll come get me. That was Ensho's reasoning for leaving the Komatsu Detective Agency the day before the exhibition. His plan was to stay cooped up in a hotel room until it was over, but, feeling restless, he went out in the afternoon. Without anywhere to go, he unconsciously headed towards Nanzen-ji Temple, the place where he had once wished to spend the rest of his life.

The Sanmon gate was as majestic as ever. Ensho stopped to look up at it in all its twenty-two-meter glory. *If there really is a world after death, it might have a gate like this.* He chuckled and passed through it.

After walking for a while, he cast his eyes over the head priest's residence, where he had first met Kiyotaka. That day, he had been anticipating the young man's arrival. It had been difficult to suppress the joy of finally being able to confront the person whom he had only seen in pictures and from afar. He had never felt that way before.

"What the hell? I'm grossing myself out," he muttered with a self-deprecating laugh.

He moved on to the aqueduct, a brick bridge built in the Meiji period. The beautiful arches were reminiscent of ancient Rome's historic buildings.

Ensho was captivated by how the aqueduct and prestigious temple blended in naturally with the scenery. It was what had originally made him think that this temple would accept him despite his heresy.

"Hello."

Ensho spun around at the sound of the voice. His bad hunch was right—Kiyotaka had emerged from behind a pillar. Dressed in a black coat over a black suit, he looked like the personification of death.

"What're you doing here?" Ensho asked.

"I had a feeling you would come here."

“How did you know?” Ensho clicked his tongue. He had only come to Nanzen-ji Temple on a whim.

“It was obvious. You’ve been absent from Gion since yesterday. It’s because you were afraid that Aoi would visit you yesterday or this morning, isn’t it? And you didn’t go to Yanagihara’s place or the apartment in Adashi Moor. Thus, I concluded that you wanted to wait things out at an accommodation in the city where you could guarantee that you wouldn’t be found. However, you also didn’t want to spend the day doing nothing. The only place that could heal your conflicted heart was Nanzen-ji Temple, your second home.”

Ensho frowned in annoyance as he watched Kiyotaka’s mouth ramble on as usual.

“Could you stop giving me that look of disgust?” Kiyotaka asked.

“Can’t help it. You *are* disgusting.”

“It’s because I’m right, isn’t it?”

“You piss me off so much,” Ensho muttered.

“Allow me to add fuel to the fire, then. This place is not far from the Yagashira residence. Is this not a sign of regret?”

The moment Ensho heard those words, he glared sharply at Kiyotaka. “Shut up.”

Kiyotaka continued to smile.

Ensho clicked his tongue and looked away. “So what? Did Aoi ask you to change my mind?”

“That’s the reason I’m here, yes. However, to be honest, I don’t care whether you come or not.”

“What?” Ensho turned around.

“If you come and the exhibition is a success, Aoi will gain an achievement on her record. But even if you don’t come, her reputation will not suffer drastically. She will be sad, of course, but I will comfort her.”

Ensho snorted. “You sure are a rich lad, not caring if the exhibition you put so

much money into building all goes to waste.”

“There’s nothing to worry about on that end. We still have the team of glass artists that caught Aoi’s eye. We were originally planning to collaborate with them to enhance the exhibition’s presentation, but if we can’t display your paintings, we’ll switch to a solo exhibition for them.”

“What, so there’s a backup plan?”

“It frustrates you, doesn’t it?” Kiyotaka chuckled.

He was right on the mark. Ensho looked away and changed the subject. “Then why’d you come here? Surely it ain’t just a token effort ’cause Aoi asked you to find me.”

“I have a reason, of course. There’s something I’d like to say to you.”

“What is it?” Ensho narrowed his eyes.

“I heard that a certain man said to you, ‘You’re a copycat. Don’t get the wrong idea.’ That’s why you wanted to call off the exhibition.”

Ensho’s heart pounded with unease. He panicked for a second, thinking, *How does he know about that?* But then Komatsu’s face immediately came to mind. *He was listening, eh?* Ensho sighed.

“So? What’s your point?”

“I’m happy for you.”

In contrast to Kiyotaka’s crescent-eyed smile, Ensho’s eyes widened. *What’s happy about this?* He trembled, too shocked to speak.

“You were afraid to go on as a painter. Painting as a hobby was fine, but you started attracting attention from the wealthy. You wanted to run away, and this whole time, you were hoping for a reason to escape, weren’t you?”

Ensho’s heart was beating furiously.

“Just when you needed it the most, someone said it for you in no uncertain terms. You now had justification: ‘There’s no way I can continue painting after being told that.’ Now you really can leave the world of painting. Congratulations.” Kiyotaka’s smile looked twisted. “Still,” he sighed, “you

always used to say you were ‘at the bottom,’ didn’t you? You spoke as if you wanted to get out of there, but your actions were always the opposite. Whenever you’re about to climb out of your so-called ‘bottom,’ you run away. In the end, you like it there. You enjoy hurling abusive words at successful people, don’t you?”

“You!” Before he knew it, Ensho was grabbing the collar of Kiyotaka’s coat with both hands. “You—what would you know?!”

“I know everything,” Kiyotaka said with a serious expression. “I understand it quite clearly.”

“How? I ain’t—”

“Yes, in reality, you’re so frustrated that you can’t stand it, right? Frustrated by the words that were said to you, and frustrated with yourself for running away. Most of all, this angry outburst is a reflection of your inner opposition, isn’t it?” Kiyotaka paused for a second before looking straight at Ensho. “It’s your *pride*, isn’t it?”

Ensho gritted his teeth and let go.

“The reason you’re always stuck in the same place is simply that you’re afraid of the unknown. And somewhere in your heart, you’re aware of that, and it brings you shame.”

Kiyotaka spoke as if he had seen into the depths of Ensho’s eyes, and Ensho instantly turned away in fear.

“But there’s no need to be ashamed.”

There was a flicker of confusion in Ensho’s eyes.

“I think there are many people like you, who are unable to escape from an environment they loathe. It’s because they’ve been in the same place for so long that they can’t imagine leaving it. For example, if you’ve never been abroad and you don’t know anyone who has, you wouldn’t be able to suddenly agree to living in another country. It’s only natural. However, those in more blessed circumstances can go on a trip there to see what it’s like and receive support from people living there. They won’t be as scared because they can imagine themselves living in a new world.”

Kiyotaka reestablished eye contact.

“Ensho, you’re stuck in place because you didn’t have anyone in your life to lead you down a brighter path. It’s nothing to be ashamed of. It’s normal.” Kiyotaka folded his arms. “However, now that you’re an adult, you need to analyze yourself and make up for what you lack. It’s the same as the work of a curator—you don’t have to supply everything yourself. Delegate the things you can’t do to someone who can, and focus on your own creations.” He slumped his shoulders as if remembering something. “Akihito excels at this.”

“‘Someone who can’... But I bet you think the same thing about my creations. In the end, I’m just a fake. A counterfeiter.”

Ensho had entered this world through forgeries. He had been a fake from the very beginning.

“Good grief.” Kiyotaka shrugged. “For all your confidence, your self-esteem is staggeringly low. You’re terribly unbalanced. I’m sure your upbringing made you this way, though. I imagine your father only praised you when your paintings looked exactly like his work.”

Ensho fell silent. It was true. No matter what he did, his father never praised him. The only exception had been when he painted something identical to his father’s style. The deadline had been closing in, and his father, who was struggling because he wouldn’t have finished in time, had exclaimed, “Shinya, you’re a genius!” Ensho knew now that his father had only said that out of relief in regard to the deadline, but at the time, the compliment had made him tremble with joy. It had also made him believe that he was a genius at painting imitations.

“The words that man said to you were what we call a ‘personal opinion.’”

“What?”

“You’re concerned because you entered the world of creation through imitations of your father’s work. You seem to be extremely hung up on this fact, but in Japan, there is a long-standing tradition of beginning a profession by copying one’s master. For example, in the world of ukiyo-e, apprentices honed their skills by repeatedly copying their teachers. Everyone gets their start somewhere. In the end, the result is that you’ve become a great creator by

absorbing your teacher's technique, then you've won."

Ensho found it strange to hear "you've won" coming from Kiyotaka's mouth. The man didn't seem to think in terms of winning or losing unless there was a clear-cut competition. On the other hand, Ensho himself cared a lot about it. Perhaps Kiyotaka had deliberately chosen those words because of that.

"If you continue to paint, you'll eventually find yourself showered in ten thousand praises and one thousand criticisms. Even though the voices of praise are clearly the majority, all it takes is a single cutting remark to hurt your feelings. This makes sense, because if you receive ten thousand flowers and there's a single knife among them, you get hurt and forget all about the flowers. It's only natural. There will be times when you want to give up painting. However, after some time, you will pick up the brush again. As proof, even when you became a monk and when Yanagihara took you under his wing, you continued to paint."

Ensho remained silent and still as Kiyotaka accurately described his mentality.

"In the end, you feel compelled to paint. And so long as you paint, you'll want someone to see your work. You can't be satisfied with painting for yourself as a hobby. That's the kind of creator you are."

"What makes you think that?" Ensho muttered, barely audible.

Kiyotaka smiled. "You were once a priest here, but it wasn't my fault that you left. You simply used me as an excuse. On the inside, you wanted to create, and you were screaming that you wanted someone to see your creations, weren't you? The true reason you challenged me was because, deep down, you wanted me to see your work. Am I right?"

Perhaps he was. On the surface, Ensho had repeatedly challenged Kiyotaka to catch his counterfeit works. But in reality, he had just wanted them to be seen by the one man who had detected his forgeries.

Ensho fell silent. Exposed like this, his anger faded, replaced by lethargy. He realized what a troublesome person he was. His shoulders shook slightly as he reflected on himself.

Kiyotaka, who had been pacing leisurely, stopped and turned to Ensho. "Now

then, how about seeing the exhibition before you decide whether to continue or quit painting? You're tired of being indecisive, aren't you? I think this exhibition is the best opportunity you could ask for. And if you do choose to continue..."

The sky turned crimson as dusk approached. With the sun behind his back, Kiyotaka's face was too dark to see clearly.

He extended his hand. "Will you hire me, Ensho?"

"Hire?" Ensho blinked at the unexpected request.

"It's the delegation I mentioned earlier. I'll be your agent. You can pay me by piecework."

Kiyotaka's deathly black coat fluttered in the wind. What had landed in front of Ensho was not an angel. It was the reaper—no, the devil offering him a contract.

"Agent?" Ensho laughed. "You mean manager. As if I'd be able to put up with you. You wouldn't wanna take a back seat to me anyway."

Kiyotaka snorted. "It's already happened."

"What?"

"From the moment you appeared before me, I had a feeling that I would become a shadow compared to your intense light. So I instinctively hated you and tried hard to get rid of you. But now, I don't care. I'm not the type of person who wants public attention anyway. It suits me better to support someone from behind the scenes."

"What the hell? You're gonna use me to make a killing?"

"Yes, of course. If I'm going to do this, I'll do it well."

"This is fishy." Ensho averted his eyes.

Indeed, there was no one shadier than Kiyotaka. But at the same time, Ensho knew that he could look anywhere in the world and not find anyone more trustworthy. He was reminded of when Mr. Jing had presented him with a blank check. At the time, he had come up with an excuse, when really his hand had been shaking too much to write. If Kiyotaka had been with him as his agent, he

would've written down a number without hesitation.

"Well, let's go," said Kiyotaka. "The car is in the parking lot."

He said, "Let's go" instead of "Will you go to the exhibition?" as if the answer had already been decided. And he set off, his black coat fluttering in the air. He really did look like a devil.

"You seriously piss me off so much." Ensho clicked his tongue softly, not moving from his spot.

"Oh, right." Kiyotaka turned around. "I think that person's criticism was probably eighty percent jealousy."

"How would you know that?"

"Because he was a painter too. He went by the alias 'Fuga.'"

Ensho recalled the painting that Aoi had. "That man was Fuga..." He felt his temperature rise instantly. Anger was indeed a driving force.

"Let's go," Kiyotaka said again with an all-knowing expression.

Ensho reluctantly followed him in silence.

3

The grandfather clock in the entrance hall rang five times. It was now 5 p.m. As we sat on the sofa in silence, looking out the window, we saw a Jaguar pull in. Everyone quickly stood up. Rikyu, who had been acting perfectly calm until now, was the first to crack open the front door.

"I apologize for the wait," Holmes said, bowing to us before opening the car's back door.

After a pause, Ensho emerged, looking at us with an awkward expression and giving a small nod. We nodded back, suppressing our excitement.

Yuki looked relieved and quickly retreated to another room. He wanted Ensho to first see the exhibition without knowing about his involvement.

Once Yuki was out of sight, I swung the door open the rest of the way. "Welcome, Ensho."

I really don't wanna be here, Ensho thought, a sour expression on his face. Unfortunately, Kiyotaka's eyes watching him from behind had become a linchpin preventing him from running away in embarrassment. He entered the Yagashira residence, resigning himself to his fate.

There was a standing sign in front of the room that usually housed the family's art collection. It said "Ensho – Exhibition." The chicness of the design made him give an awkward shrug.

"Right this way," said Aoi, stepping forward.

The room was divided with partitions, creating a mazelike path. Upon entering, Ensho immediately noticed exotic lamps hanging from the ceiling and walls. The various colors shone vibrantly in the dark hall.

"Is this...Turkish glass?" Ensho murmured, not confident in his guess.

"No." Aoi shook her head. "It's the work of Kobe Kiriko, a team of glass artists. Their goal is to create stunning kiriko glass for the modern era."

"I see." Ensho nodded. It looked like Turkish glass, but the designs had all been cut and shaped by hand. The sharp details were incredibly beautiful. "Feels like walking into a kaleidoscope."

Aoi smiled happily.

They continued to the end of the aisle, where the windows were decorated with lamps as well. The difference here was the usage of potted plants. The lamps reflected off the window, creating a fantastical look. Ensho felt as if he'd wandered into another world.

They walked along the windows until they reached a blackout curtain. Aoi motioned towards it and said, "Go ahead."

The paintings must be in here, Ensho predicted as he passed through the curtain.

A view unfolded before his eyes—a pure white world, in the middle of which stood two paintings. One was his father's *Mandala of the Diamond Realm*, and the other was his own *Mandala of the Womb Realm*. Even though they were his

and his father's works, he was taken aback when he saw them. At the same time, he felt a sense of déjà vu. The elements of the *Mandala of the Diamond Realm* were arranged in a grid of squares, while the elements of the *Mandala of the Womb Realm* were arranged in layered circles.

"Genko-an, eh?"

"Yes," said Aoi, who had appeared next to him without his realizing. "The square Window of Confusion and the round Window of Enlightenment."

Ensho could clearly envision the two windows.

"The first time I visited Genko-an Temple," Aoi continued, "I thought, no matter how hard you try to attain enlightenment, it's human nature to falter. You live in confusion, and occasionally you understand, but in the end, you go back to being lost. It made me feel that if I was ever hopelessly lost, I'd want to go there again to look at that perfect circle—that window to the universe."

Mandalas were a visual representation of the state of enlightenment in Esoteric Buddhism. In other words, they were believed to be a visualization of the truth of the universe. The Mandala of the Diamond Realm represented Dainichi Nyorai's—Vairocana's—wisdom, while the Mandala of the Womb Realm represented his compassion; that is, his love.

Because of wisdom, people found themselves confused, and through love—something uncertain yet profound—they were saved. Thinking about it that way, these two mandalas were connected to the windows at Genko-an Temple.

Ensho could tell that Aoi hoped for this display to save lost hearts. As frustrating as it was to admit it, it had worked. He had been moved by the two paintings to the point where he didn't care about the hurtful criticism anymore.

I can't believe I'm being saved by my own painting. He smiled bitterly.

"It's interesting how it goes from Kobe Kiriko's lamps to this," Ensho remarked.

Aoi's expression brightened. "I got the hint from the streets of Kyoto."

"The streets of Kyoto?"

"When you walk from Yasaka Shrine to Kiyomizu-dera Temple, there's a bend

in the path where Yasaka Tower suddenly comes into view.”

Ensho gave a silent nod. He knew the spot she was referring to.

“I was awestruck.”

“Ah.” Ensho folded his arms.

Walking along the streets of Kyoto, there was a point where one would turn a corner and a five-story tower would appear out of the blue. However, that didn’t mean that the path leading up to it only existed to support Yasaka Tower. Entering Kyoto was already like entering a different world, and one would suddenly be presented with the world of Buddhism on top of that. Aoi had replicated that through her collaboration with Kobe Kiriko.

Just like the real fun on the road to Kiyomizu-dera Temple had yet to come at that point, with Nineizaka and Sanneizaka still left to enjoy, the paintings in this exhibition continued to entertain the viewers even after they passed the mandalas. And at the very end, *Suzhou* and *Yu Garden by Night* hung side by side.

Aoi sighed in awe at the two paintings. Ensho felt a sense of fulfillment from her reaction and inadvertently uttered the words he’d refrained from asking before.

“Which one do you like more?”

Aoi hesitated before saying, “They’re both wonderful, but if I had to pick one, it’d be *Yu Garden by Night*.”

Ensho hadn’t been expecting such a clear answer. He was sure that she would’ve said, “I like both of them.” *Yu Garden by Night* had been painted to save Aoi’s life. The court lady standing in the palace, though only a silhouette, had been based on her.

Ensho began to panic, wondering if she’d realized. He looked at her, but she was still staring at the painting. “Huh, why that one?” he asked, feigning composure as his heart pounded.

Aoi blushed slightly. “The court lady looks lovely.”

“Wha?” The response came as a complete surprise. “How? She’s just a

silhouette.”

“Her back is straight and she looks dignified and noble—yet feminine. I really admire that since I used to have bad posture.”

“Really?” That certainly wasn’t the case now.

“Yes. You know how Holmes has really good posture?”

“Yeah.”

“Looking at him inspired me to improve my posture. I made a conscious effort to fix it, although it was tiring at first.” Aoi laughed.

“I see.”

Thinking about it, the first time Ensho had seen Aoi, he had wondered, “Why is Holmes with someone like her?” He had the feeling that her posture had been worse at the time. Posture was a mysterious thing—simply correcting it could make your body function better and lose weight more easily. Perhaps her current refined aura was partially the result of improved posture.

Ensho felt annoyed again that Kiyotaka had a hand in everything he liked about Aoi. However, Aoi’s next words dispelled his rising frustration.

“You have really good posture too, Ensho.”

“Well, in my case, it was to stop people from looking down on me.” If he had a hunched back, people would take advantage of him. He wanted to make himself look as large as possible.

Aoi laughed.

“What’s so funny?”

“Maybe Holmes has good posture for the same reason.”

“The same reason?”

“To intimidate people. Whenever he does it to Akihito, he always stands up straighter and looks down at him.”

“Could be.” Ensho chuckled.

“Anyway, that’s why I’m so drawn to this painting.”

Ensho felt awkward and embarrassed, but at the same time, his heart felt warm. He repressed the urge to point at the court lady in *Yu Garden by Night* and say, “This is you.” Instead, he looked at Aoi and said, “Thanks. Honestly, it’s a really nice display. You can do whatever you want with the exhibition.”

Aoi looked up at him in surprise. “So...I can open it to the public?”

Ensho almost laughed at how wide open her eyes were. “Yeah, whatever you want,” he said bluntly, leaving the room. He was planning to go straight home—until he saw someone and stopped in his tracks.

“Good evening,” said a smiling Yuki.

“Yuki?” *Why is he here?*

His question was quickly answered by Aoi, who had followed him.

“Ensho, let me introduce you to Kobe Kiriko’s designer, Yoshitaka Sakaguchi.”

“I’m delighted to be able to embellish your amazing work, *Ensho*,” said Yuki, grinning mischievously as he bowed.

“I told Yuki that your paintings have the feeling of being deep in a forest, and he came up with that wonderful design.”

“When I heard the concept, I thought of making a kaleidoscope forest. I only did the design and setup, though. It was my teammates who created the—”

Before Yuki could finish his sentence, Ensho found himself hugging the boy tightly. That young and frail Yuki, who couldn’t express himself or even cry, was actively pursuing his own path in life. He was expressing himself through creation. The sight filled Ensho’s heart with warmth and joy.

Yuki widened his eyes in surprise. He was soon blushing in Ensho’s arms, tears welling up in his eyes. “Congrats, Shinya. I’m glad you became such a great artist. I was surprised.”

“That’s my line. Thanks.” Ensho let go of Yuki and ruffled his hair. “You’ve really grown up.”

Yuki narrowed his eyes and shrugged in disappointment. “So that’s what that hug meant...”

Ensho patted his childhood friend on the back, bowed to Aoi, and headed for the entrance hall. The front door was still open, and Kiyotaka was standing there like a butler.

“Thank you very much,” Kiyotaka said, placing his hand on his chest. “Shall I escort you home, sir?”

“Sir?” Ensho burst out laughing. “Sorry.” He glanced outside, where Yilin was looking nervously in their direction. “I’d rather ride in a Lincoln than a Jaguar.” It wasn’t that he had feelings for her. He just wanted to apologize for the terrible way he’d treated her the other day.

“Understood.” Kiyotaka smiled. “Knowing you, you must’ve offended Yilin, so you owe her an apology.”

“Seriously, shut up,” Ensho snapped impulsively at the man’s mind-reading ability. “Well, I’ll make up for it by treating her to something a rich girl’s probably never had.”

“How about motsunabe in Ponto-cho? I had it the other day for the first time in a while, and it was delicious.”

True, it doesn’t fit the image of a rich girl. “Thanks, I’ll consider it.”

Ensho continued down the stairs. Behind him, he sensed not only Kiyotaka, but Aoi and Yuki watching him as well. Not wanting them to see the grin on his face, he headed towards Yilin without looking back.

4

The next day was December 20, the grand opening of Ensho’s exhibition. Many congratulatory wreaths had already arrived, cramming the entrance hall full of flowers.

The admission fee had been set slightly higher than that of a typical museum, in accordance with Holmes’s opinion that he didn’t want to undersell Ensho’s talent. We couldn’t promote the exhibition in advance because we didn’t know if it was going to be held until the day before, but after it opened, the Yagashira family’s friends, members of KyoMore, and other students helped spread the word.

Many visitors came, including quite a few from abroad—people from the art industry who had heard that Sally Barrymore’s honor student had planned an exhibition solo for the first time, for a painter favored by Zhifei Jing. The people who came on a whim were stunned by the impact of the paintings and left the Yagashira residence speechless. A lot of them returned for a repeat visit, bringing along people they knew.

Kobe Kiriko’s works also gained attention. They were already receiving orders.

Holmes and I asked the manager to watch Kura as we stayed at the Yagashira residence, working the reception desk and introducing visitors to the works. Ensho, the star of the show, on the other hand, was still at the Komatsu Detective Agency—but not as a lodger. Apparently, he had told Komatsu that he wanted to go back to being a staff member like before. It wasn’t in his nature to sit and do nothing, so helping out at the office was just the right amount of activity.

Four days after the pre-opening, on December 23, Holmes left in the afternoon to go to the Komatsu Detective Agency for the conclusion of Sada and Tomoka’s request.

*

Yutaka Sada and Hiroki Tadokoro were at the agency. Tomoka Asai was not present. The two men reluctantly sat side by side on the sofa for visitors. Kiyotaka sat across from them, while Komatsu and Ensho were at their desks as usual.

“Um,” Sada said, looking at Kiyotaka in confusion. “You said that you investigated and found out the reason. But why did you only call me here?” He had been asked to come by himself, without his fiancée.

Kiyotaka smiled. “It has to do with your birth, so I decided to only tell you for now.”

“What about him, then?” Sada glanced sideways at Hiroki, who looked away with a grumpy expression, as if to say, “That’s my line.” Hiroki had been half-threatened into coming.

“He’s Atsuko’s son, Hiroki, and he’s involved in this request.”

“Oh.” Sada bowed to Hiroki, still confused. “You’re Atsuko’s son? It’s nice to meet you. My name is Yutaka Sada. I’m the owner and chef of an Italian restaurant in Kita-ku.”

“Nice to meet you,” Hiroki said flatly.

“Sada, could you show him the charm you said you have on your person at all times?”

“Oh, sure.” Sada pulled the cloth pouch out of his pocket, took out the crystal bracelet, and placed it on the table. One of the beads was shaped like a magatama.

Hiroki’s eyes widened the moment he saw it.

“Hiroki, could it be that you have—or *had*—the exact same one?” Kiyotaka asked.

The man nodded hesitantly. “Y-Yeah...well, I was given it when I was little.”

“By ‘given,’ you mean you were told to wear it at all times.”

“Yeah,” Hiroki said curtly.

“Do you still have it on you now?”

“No, it broke at some point and I lost it.”

“Did you tell Atsuko this?”

“When I was little, I was too scared she’d yell at me. In high school, I told her, ‘That thing is long gone.’”

“I see.” Kiyotaka nodded.

Sada tilted his head. “What’s the deal with this charm?”

Kiyotaka held up his hand. “Before I answer that, please look at this.” He tapped his tablet and placed it on the table. The screen showed a man who looked to be in his eighties. “This is Koji Sato, a businessman in Kobe.”

Sada and Hiroki didn’t seem to recognize him. Their expressions read, “What does this old man have to do with anything?”

“He is your father.”

The two men’s eyes widened in shock.

“Koji Sato married three times. His second wife was Hiroki’s mother, Atsuko, and his third wife was Sada’s mother.”

One of the two gulped. Sada covered his mouth with his hand, bewildered.

“So the reason Atsuko was against the marriage was because I’m her son’s half-brother?” As he spoke to himself, he tilted his head, unsure why it was an issue.

Ensho frowned, seeming to be thinking the same thing. “Why would the woman be against the marriage ’cause of that? It ain’t relevant.”

Sada nodded in agreement.

“Because she cares about Tomoka, whom she loves like a daughter,” said Kiyotaka.

“What does that have to do with it?” asked Sada.

“Although you aren’t related to Atsuko by blood, you are her son’s younger brother. She can’t be happy about that connection.”

“Because our dad’s cursed,” Hiroki said with a self-deprecating laugh.

“Huh?” Sada turned to him. “Cursed?”

Hiroki looked away, unwilling to elaborate.

“So, Hiroki was aware...” Kiyotaka murmured softly.

“In high school...when I told her the charm was gone, she was really upset. I asked her about it and she told me.”

“What is this about?” Sada furrowed his brow. “You investigated it, right? Please tell me.”

“Yes...” Kiyotaka turned to Hiroki and clasped his hands in his lap. “Our chief looked into your father, Koji Sato. His surname, Sato, is very common, but it was changed after the war. His surname at birth was something else.”

Sada listened in silence.

“His family originally prospered through the use of evil sorcery—specifically, a type similar to inugami where animals were killed in cruel ways, their grudges used to gain wealth. Like inugami, it was a horrifying and taboo practice that was banned in the Heian period.”

Hiroki seemed to have known this already. He had a bitter look on his face.

“Koji Sato’s three wives all left home after giving birth. They probably ran away after learning that fact.”

“But...” Sada frowned. “Why didn’t they get divorced before having children?”

“They didn’t know until it was too late,” Hiroki said, disgusted. “When the kid turned three, there was a ritual to show him to the horrible god the family worshiped. A hidden altar was brought out, and the mother was told, ‘Our family has prospered because of this god. If you want to continue to live in prosperity, you must be quiet and obey.’ My mom was so shocked that she ran away from home with me.”

Sada was lost for words.

“Sada, the charm you keep on you appears to be from Kenmi Shrine,” said Kiyotaka.

Sada gently picked up the crystal bracelet. “Kenmi Shrine?”

“It’s in Tokushima Prefecture. It enshrines the guardian deities of bountiful harvest and maritime safety, and it has long been known as the shrine with the greatest power to lift curses such as inugami and kitsune possession. I asked a specialist I know to look at the charm, and he said it was without doubt used for a special exorcism.”

Sada looked down at the bracelet in silence.

Hiroki gritted his teeth. “My mom did the research,” he said bitterly.

“Huh?” Sada looked at him.

“When she came back to Kyoto, she went to a famous shrine and asked the head priest for help. He advised her to pray at Kenmi Shrine in Tokushima and make me hold onto the charm. Mom’s a do-gooder, so when she found out the third wife got divorced, she probably told her about it.”

“Atsuko told my mother...” Sada stared at the charm in his hands. “So when she saw this, she realized I was Keiko Sada’s son. She was against my marriage with Tomoka because of my heinous blood...”

“Yeah, that’s right,” Hiroki said, standing up. “We have evil blood flowing through our veins. We’re cursed! Plus, after my mom ran away from that house, she came back to Gion of all places. Think about it, a mistress’s child coming back to her hometown. She said she was a widow for appearance’s sake, but everyone knew it was a lie. Do you know what it means for someone like her to live in a cliquy neighborhood like Gion? It means she’s always on a bed of nails. People smile at her on the outside, but they’re always talking behind her back. Do you know what I’ve gone through? I’ve had nothing but misfortune in my life!”

Ensho chuckled at the man’s rambling.

“Wh-What’s so funny?”

“All of it. Well, everyone’s free to think what they want, but personally, I don’t see what’s unfortunate about that.”

“What?!” Hiroki’s eyes widened.

“Your mama knew it’d be a bed of nails, but she came back anyway ‘cause it was the only place she could live, right? It was all for the sake of raising *you*. Also, who cares if people are talking behind your back? As long as they’re good to you on the outside, it don’t matter. Let ‘em do what they want.”

“Don’t you know how vicious Gion is?!” Hiroki objected. “They’re nice on the surface, but on the inside, they’re pure evil!”

“I know that full well.” Ensho glanced at Kiyotaka, who shrugged. “I’ve never liked Kyoto people, but thinking about it, that’s a lot better than having ‘em say things to your face.”

“What? Are you serious?”

“When you were a kid, adults never told you things like, ‘You’re an eyesore’ or ‘Get out of here,’ right? A lotta people say, ‘Tell me to my face instead of whispering behind my back,’ and I get how they feel, but that’s between adults. Even adults can break when someone says something hurtful to their face.

When you think about it that way, adults talking behind a kid's back is nothing compared to if they attacked 'em head-on. Gion's clique is charming if anything. Above all," Ensho continued, "your mama didn't abandon you even though you were a cursed kid."

The weight of those last words seemed to reach Hiroki, even though he didn't know Ensho's circumstances. "Y-Yeah, she didn't abandon me, but she regrets it because my blood is cursed—"

"No," Kiyotaka interrupted him, shaking his head. "Hiroki, you did not inherit the curse of your father's family. Needless to say, this goes for Sada as well. Please relax."

"Huh?" the two men said.

"How do you know that?" asked Sada.

"The curse is attached to the house, not the bloodline. It's not genetic to begin with. For example, if there's a blood-related son who cut ties with the family and a non-blood-related adopted heir, the adopted son will inherit the curse. The two of you cut ties when you left the house and had your surnames changed. Also..." Kiyotaka looked at the crystal bracelet in Sada's hands. "Your bracelets both fell apart naturally, although Sada happened to be able to pick up all of the pieces and put his back together. According to the exorcist I know, when these bracelet charms fall apart by themselves, it means they've completed their duty. If there was anything left on you, such as your father's lingering grudges, the charms would've absorbed them all for you."

Sada squeezed the charm in his hands.

"So if there's a curse, it's self-inflicted. Sada and Hiroki, you have the same blood, but your ways of life are completely different. That's because Sada lived an optimistic life of self-affirmation, while Hiroki was convinced that there was no point because he was cursed. These curses are something you cast on yourself."

Hiroki trembled as if something had come to mind. "So when mom said, 'That boy is my bad karma...'"

"Perhaps Atsuko also believed the curse was hereditary. But as Ensho said,

she didn't abandon you. She might not be blaming you for the bad karma, but herself for jumping into marriage without thoroughly researching her partner."

Hiroki fell silent, bit his lip, and looked down.

"Don't worry. I'll explain the misconception about the curse to Atsuko, so—"

"No." Hiroki shook his head. "You don't have to." There was conviction in his words. Even without further elaboration, it was clear that he was thinking, *I'm not going to be further indebted to you*. In other words, he was determined to convince his mother that the curse never had anything to do with him.

Kiyotaka and Komatsu looked at each other and smiled. Ensho gave an exasperated shrug.

As they were leaving, Sada turned to Hiroki with a happy grin. "That was really surprising, but I'm glad to know that I have an older brother. Um, if it's all right with you, I'd like to keep in touch from now on."

"You said you're the owner and chef of an Italian restaurant in Kita-ku?" Hiroki asked hesitantly.

"Oh, yes. It's small, but I'd love it if you'd come over for a bite. It'll be family bonding."

Hiroki looked away in embarrassment and gave a vague nod. "I used to run a French restaurant in Gion, but it went under. I wasn't the chef, though."

"Opening a restaurant in Gion sounds tough."

The two brothers left the office.

After that, Sada told his fiancée, Tomoka, that Atsuko had been opposed to their marriage because she was shocked after finding out that he and Hiroki were half-brothers. He purposely didn't mention the curse.

That's for the better, thought Komatsu. *Because curses are created by the human mind.*

And so, the strange request that came to the Komatsu Detective Agency was successfully resolved.

When Sada and Hiroki were out of sight, Komatsu murmured, "It ended up being a good meeting for them, huh? That's nice."

"*That's* what you finally say after being silent the whole time?" said Ensho. "You really ain't the sharpest tool in the shed."

"Don't say that!"

Kiyotaka smiled and said nothing.

"Don't you laugh at me too, kiddo," said the detective.

"No, I wasn't smiling because of the insult. I was thinking about the other day. You saw the cameo glass on our shelf and said it looked like Atsuko, didn't you?"

The sudden change in subject had Komatsu staring blankly for a few seconds. "Oh, yeah. The reddish-purple vase at Kura with the funny shape, right?"

"I'm reminded of how excellent an observation it was."

"Huh?" Komatsu's eyes widened.

"Cameo glass is composed of several layers. By removing and etching away sections, one creates a raised relief pattern with varying color depth. It really is just like Atsuko."

"Oh, I get it." Komatsu folded his arms. Atsuko's thoughts were also layered like cameo glass, with her true feelings hidden inside. "We chipped away the layers of glass to reveal her feelings."

"Yes. Fortunately, the pattern showed that she was truly thinking of Tomoka's well-being."

Kiyotaka's words warmed Komatsu's heart.

Meanwhile, Ensho laughed again. "'We'? You didn't do anything this time, old man."

"You sure are mean today," said Komatsu.

"No, I couldn't have solved the case without your research," said Kiyotaka.

"Either way, the job's done." Komatsu raised his hands and looked at the computer screen. *Then again...*

He still had one concern on his mind. Through this investigation, he had learned that Sada and Hiroki's father, Koji Sato, was suspected of secretly dealing in forgeries. His suppliers were two brothers, Yosuke and Futa Hiramasa. The older brother, Yosuke, was a businessman by day, while Futa helped him with his work.

Komatsu had been surprised when he'd seen their photos. The younger brother, Futa, was the man who had come to the office to criticize Ensho. The strange connection was alarming. Normally, Komatsu would've reported his findings to Kiyotaka right away, but he didn't want to bring it up when they'd *just* resolved everything.

"Is something the matter?" Kiyotaka asked, noticing that the detective had fallen silent.

He's as sharp as ever. Komatsu scratched his head. "Oh, no. I was just thinking that their father isn't who he looks like on the outside either."

"Indeed." Kiyotaka nodded.

"Well, it's over now, so whatever." With a click of the mouse, Komatsu closed the report. "Come to think of it, it's almost Christmas, huh?"

"Oh, that's right." Kiyotaka clapped his hands together. "I have something for both of you." He took two envelopes out of his bag and placed one on each of their desks.

"What's this?"

Ensho and Komatsu looked down at the envelopes. The word "Invitation" was written on them.

"What, *another* invitation?" Ensho asked.

"The exhibition is scheduled to run until 5 p.m. on New Year's Eve, but it's already quite the success," said Kiyotaka. "It looks like we'll make a profit, so we're going to hold a party on the night of Christmas Eve to celebrate. Ensho, you're the star of the show, so please come. The people who helped with the exhibition will be there too."

"Ohhh!" Komatsu's eyes lit up. "That's amazing, Ensho."

Ensho shrugged and rested his cheek on his hand. “I’ll pass. Fancy parties ain’t my thing.”

“Don’t say that,” said Kiyotaka. “Who do you think the exhibition’s biggest sponsor was?”

Ensho furrowed his brow. “It’s gotta be that rich guy in Shanghai, right?”

“Bzzz.” Kiyotaka held up his index finger and shook his head.

“‘Bzzz’? Did you suddenly turn into a little kid?”

“I didn’t ask Mr. Jing because it was a small-scale, essentially handmade exhibition. I’d like to invite him to the party, though.”

“Who was it, then? The rich guy in Okazaki?”

“It was Yanagihara.”

“Huh?” Ensho’s eyes widened as he looked up.

“He cried when he saw your paintings, and it was quite the ordeal. I wish you could’ve seen it.”

“I...don’t care.” Ensho looked away.

His words are blunt, but you can sense his joy, Komatsu thought with a smile.

Epilogue

On December 24, Christmas Eve, the exhibition closed at 3 p.m. Only invited guests were allowed in after that, and a party was held to celebrate the successful project. The party venue was the Yagashira residence's first-floor hall, where various other events had been held, such as the owner's birthday party, a New Year's party, and even my own birthday party. As before, the food was served standing buffet style, with all of the guests enjoying themselves in their own way.

Holmes, the owner, and Yoshie were talking with the exhibition's donors and sponsors: Yanagihara, Yilin and Zhifei Jing, and Takamiya. The manager and Ueda were chatting with Kura's regular customers, including Mieko.

Meanwhile, I was going around and greeting people. I was currently with Kaori, Haruhiko, and the other KyoMore members: Akihito, Rikyu, and Haruka, who had just returned from New York.

"Man, Ensho's paintings were really something. I've changed my opinion of him," Akihito said enthusiastically. He had a radio program tonight, but he was here because he wanted to attend the party for as long as time allowed.

"Yeah," Rikyu said with a nod. "When you put it that way, it feels like I've been misjudging him all this time, but, well, it's true."

"Oh, Rikyu." Haruka shrugged.

Haruka's hair had been short when I first met her in New York, but now it was an even shorter pixie cut. Apparently, she had always preferred it this way, but she had tried her best to grow it out under the assumption that Rikyu liked girls who were more feminine. It didn't feel right to her, though, so she'd asked him, "You like long hair more, right?" and he'd said, "It doesn't matter. You're you either way." So she'd decided to cut it short. She looked more refined now, perhaps because she was sporting the hairstyle of her choice.

"Aoi, I was moved," Haruka said, turning to me. "The exhibition was

wonderful. I thought this in New York too, but the spaces you create are so dreamy. I love them.”

Her unreserved praise made me feel happy and somewhat nervous. “Thank you,” I said shyly, feeling my cheeks heat up.

“But where’s Ensho?” Akihito asked, craning his neck to look around the hall. It was crowded with people, but there was no sign of the painter.

I gave a light shrug. “He’s not here. Apparently, he said, ‘Fancy parties ain’t my thing.’”

“Huh?” Akihito blinked. “Isn’t this party *for* him?”

“Well, yeah.” Rikyu gave a stiff smile. “That’s the problem, isn’t it? Despite how he looks, he’s shy.”

“How is this even possible? If there was a party being held for *me*, I’d run over no matter what.”

“I’m sure you would.”

“Where would he have gone on Christmas Eve, anyway?”

I lowered my gaze. I didn’t want to force Ensho to attend, but the thought of him spending Christmas Eve all alone made me feel sad. *Did he really not come?* I looked around the hall and realized that I couldn’t find Yuki either, even though the Kobe Kiriko members had all been present during the initial greetings.

“Aoi, are you looking for someone?” Holmes called out to me.

“I’m wondering where Yuki went.”

“Ah.” Holmes looked out the window. It was beginning to snow, and the guests cheered in delight when they noticed. “Yuki knew that Ensho wouldn’t be coming, so he asked me where he might be. I had an idea of where Ensho might’ve gone today, so I told Yuki and he ran out of the hall as fast as he could.”

“So he went to find Ensho. Where do you think he is?”

“A cemetery.”

“Huh?”

“Komatsu happened to hear from Ensho that when Ensho’s father passed away, he was buried in a public cemetery in Hyogo Prefecture because they didn’t have the money for anything else. But it seems that Ensho regretted it. He burned his father’s memento—the paintbrush he used all his life—and sprinkled the ashes on what he thought was the ideal gravesite. Ensho said that he thinks of that place as his father’s grave.”

“But would he really go there now?”

Ensho had once called Holmes to a particular temple’s burial ground. We had thought that it was because it was close to his atelier, but it was the other way around—he had set up his atelier close to his father’s grave. It was a special location for him: Nenbutsu-ji Temple in Adashi Moor.

“So he went to Adashi Moor to visit his father’s grave,” I murmured.

“I believe so.”

“And Yuki headed there too.” *There’s nothing to worry about.* I placed my hand on my chest, relieved.

Nearby, Akihito was holding his hand out to Rikyu. “Anyway, give me one of those notebooks too. The one for Kura’s hundredth anniversary—or was it higher than that? Either way, I haven’t gotten one yet.”

“Oh, right.” Rikyu nodded. He had designed the notebook commemorating Kura’s more than one hundred years of business. It was black with decorative gold borders, lettering, and ring binding. The chic yet extravagant design had apparently been made “in Kiyo’s image.” The cover had the words “Antique Shop Kura – Holmes of Kyoto Teramachi-Sanjo” on it.

As for why Holmes’s name was on it...the notebooks had been manufactured by a printing company connected to Ueda, and Rikyu had fervently explained to him, “I want to record that this amazing person named Kiyo was here when Kura had its hundredth anniversary.”

Ueda had replied, “Well, you gotta include that he was nicknamed Holmes. That’s important,” and Rikyu had honestly thought, “I guess that’s true.”

As for Holmes himself, when he first saw the finished notebook, he had hung his head and said, “*Holmes?*” Even now, he gave a strained smile whenever he heard someone talking about it.

Suddenly, the hall broke out into cheers.

“Is Ensho here?” Akihito asked.

We looked in the direction of the voices, but it wasn’t Ensho—it was Sally Barrymore and Keiko Fujiwara.

“Sally! Keiko!” I exclaimed in surprise, running up to them. I had sent them invitations, but I hadn’t expected them to actually come.

“We saw your exhibition. It was quite good,” Sally said with a grin, showing her pearly whites. She could speak Japanese because she used to date a Japanese curator, although she had a foreigner accent.

“Thank you.” I gave a slight bow.

“But only at the honor-student level,” she continued. “If I were evaluating it at a professional level, I wouldn’t be able to give it high praise. It was rough around the edges and showed complacency. There were many areas that were redeemed by the artwork. That said, it did directly convey how you wanted people to view Ensho’s work.”

I nodded.

Keiko whispered in my ear, “Aoi, she’s actually complimenting you. If she didn’t like it, she wouldn’t have said, ‘at the honor-student level.’ She would’ve said, ‘I can’t call *that* my honor student’s work.’”

Sally awkwardly looked away, seeming to have overheard.

“Also, Sally was frustrated,” Keiko added.

“What?” I asked.

“Despite creating the honor student program, when you and the others came to New York, she mostly left you to your own devices because she was too busy with other things. So she wanted to teach you properly, but you declined her offer. She was turned down before she had the chance to show how good of a teacher she could be.”

“Oh no.” I slumped my shoulders.

Sally looked at me and smiled gently. “Would you be willing to reconsider working for me?”

The other day, when I had heard from Keiko that Sally still wanted me as an assistant, my heart had swayed again. However, this time, after everything that had happened, I knew that being with Holmes gave me a great sense of affirmation. I felt safe knowing that he was supporting me and could exceed the limits of my abilities. But the biggest reason was very simple: I loved him, so I wanted to be with him. I didn’t want to leave his side. The “Mitsuoka incident” had made this painfully clear. I didn’t have the confidence to think, “A true bond will last even when we’re apart. He’ll never change his mind.”

I had already told Keiko my honest feelings over email, but it seemed that she hadn’t relayed them to Sally. I looked questioningly at Keiko.

“Oh, believe me, I did tell Sally how you felt,” Keiko said. “But she got worked up, saying, ‘I’ll talk to her directly,’ and so we came to Japan.”

“It’s as she says,” Sally said, taking a step forward. “I wasn’t able to teach you girls anything. I extended the same offer to Amelie and Chloe, who both accepted immediately. But you didn’t, and that didn’t sit well with me. I didn’t want you to decline before getting to know me. To be honest, part of me thought, ‘Focusing on love won’t do you any favors.’ But...” She looked into the distance. “When I saw your exhibition, I retracted those words. I could tell that you were able to develop your talent because you had Kiyotaka Yagashira as your teacher. Your exhibition was relaxed and carefree.”

Keiko spoke next. “Sally recently changed her policy to ‘Instead of overcoming your weaknesses, develop your strengths.’ It looks like she realized that you’re doing exactly that when you’re with Kiyotaka.”

“Thank you...” I bowed shyly.

Now that they mentioned it, although Holmes had provided flawless assistance for this exhibition, he hadn’t suggested any ideas at all. If I asked him for a hint, he’d give me his opinion, but that was all. Normally, it wouldn’t be possible to have so much freedom.

“But...” Sally crossed her arms. “I’ll say it anyway: come train under me.”

I gulped and instinctively turned to Holmes, only to realize that he was standing next to me. I looked up at him in silence.

Holmes placed his hand on his chest and bowed to Sally. “Please look after her.”

My eyes widened in surprise. Holmes looked down at me with a gentle smile. It wasn’t the “lying smile” he showed every so often.

“Holmes...”

“However,” he continued, looking at Sally as if he was going to set a condition. “I think it would be better to wait until she graduates from university. I believe there are many things she can only learn at a Japanese school.”

Is he forcing himself to say these things again?

“Yes,” he said to me with a chuckle. “I’m putting up a brave front again. But I do mean it. Ever since I read Sally’s article, I’ve wondered if declining her offer was the right thing to do.”

I had no idea he’d been thinking that.

“Aoi, after I finished graduate school, my grandfather told me to undergo training, didn’t he? As a teacher, he didn’t want me to be ignorant of the rest of the world.”

“Right.” I nodded. The owner had wanted Holmes to have a broader perspective.

“I feel the same way. The other day, we talked about being in God’s diorama, but I want you to see more of the world than a tiny garden, even though as your fiancé, I don’t want to be apart from you for even a moment.” He gave a strained smile.

I could tell that these were his genuine feelings. As my fiancé, he would miss me. But as my teacher, he wanted me to cross the ocean and see the vast world.

I looked at Sally. Her offer was an honor I didn’t deserve. “Thank you. I’ll consider it. As he said, would after graduation be okay?”

“Yes.” Sally smiled happily. “I’ll be waiting for you...with Amelie and Chloe.”

“I’m looking forward to it too,” said Keiko.

I thanked them again and bowed deeply.

“Your teacher sure is handsome, though.” Sally giggled. “I can see why you don’t want to leave him.”

I blushed.

Not too far away, Rikyu was handing Akihito a Kura notebook. “Here you go.”

Akihito took the notebook and whistled. “Damn, that’s cool. What does it say?” He brought it closer to his face and burst out laughing. “What the heck? It says ‘Holmes’ on it!”

“Kiyo’s the symbol of the current Kura.”

“Yeah, that’s true. When you think of Kura right now, you think of Holmes. He’s the ‘Holmes of Kyoto,’ after all.”

Akihito’s voice carried well. Sally seemed to hear it too. She looked up at Holmes, stunned.

“People call you the ‘Holmes of Kyoto’?” Sally asked.

“Yes, well...” Holmes gave an awkward smile. “I’m called ‘Holmes’ because my surname is written with the characters for ‘home’ and ‘head.’” He smiled and placed his hand on his chest as usual.

The rest of us laughed at how he gave the same response to everyone, no matter who.

Short Story: A Chat Between Childhood Friends

Adashi Moor was once a burial ground. It was where Kukai's weather-beaten remains were buried, leading to people holding memorial services there.

In Buddhism, Adashi Moor represented transiency and emptiness. It was said to symbolize the wish to be reincarnated in this world or move to the pure land of Amitabha.

Saigyō Hoshi wrote a poem about it:

"Who can remain in this world? We are glistening dew clinging to every blade of grass in Adashi Moor."

And in *Tsurezuregusa*, it said:

"The dew upon Adashi Moor never fades, nor does the smoke on Mount Toribe ever disperse; if we too were eternal, why, there would be no pathos. The world is remarkable because there is no certainty."

Despite being written by different people, the two quotes seemed to be linked.

Saigyō Hoshi: *Can anyone remain in this world? No. Everyone dies eventually. We are all fleeting presences, like the glistening dew clinging to each blade of grass in Adashi Moor.*

Tsurezuregusa: *The dew in Adashi Moor and the smoke in Mount Toribe don't disappear, but if it was customary for humans to live in this world forever too, then that would mean having no emotions. The transiency of this world is what makes it wonderful.*

Connecting the two, you could form the thought, "People are fleeting like the glistening dew, but that is what makes them wonderful."

To think the day would come when I'd make such an interpretation. Enshō smirked as he gazed upon Nenbutsu-ji Temple's sea of stone statuettes. He looked up at the sky. The sun had already disappeared, painting the western

skies orange. A silver moon hung in the east.

The sun set early in winter. This temple would soon close for the day as well.

When was the first time I came here? Ensho narrowed his eyes. “Well, must’ve been after dad kicked the bucket.”

His father had died of acute alcohol poisoning, but Ensho hadn’t been home at the time. He hadn’t even found out until two months after the fact. It was the landlord who had discovered his father’s death while visiting the apartment to collect the rent. Thus, his father had been buried in a public cemetery without a funeral.

When Ensho was told this, all he could say was, “I see. I’m sorry for all the trouble you had to go through.” After apologizing to the landlord, he began to go through his father’s things. Almost all of it was garbage. The paints were also useless by that point, so he threw them out without hesitation. However, he couldn’t bring himself to throw away the paintbrush. His father had treasured it all his life, and it felt as if it were a part of his body—a piece of his soul.

Ensho didn’t love his father. Not after all the hardship he went through because of him. But unlike his mother, his father hadn’t abandoned him. Yet Ensho hadn’t been able to give him a satisfactory funeral. He decided to at least bury the paintbrush in a nice place—a grave for the soul, so to speak.

He looked around at various cemeteries, but none felt right. He was beginning to think that if he really couldn’t find a good location, he’d bury it in Ashiya, the place of his father’s dreams. That was when he found Adashi Moor’s Nenbutsu-ji Temple and its small sea of graves called the Western Riverbed, a reference to Buddhism’s Riverbed of Death. The moment he stepped into this place, which felt like the far end of the Earth, tears spilled from his eyes for some reason. He thought, *His grave must go here.*

“But maybe Ashiya would’ve been better.” After all, his father had given himself the alias Taisei Ashiya. “Seriously, what a silly name.” Ensho gave a strained smile. “Forgive me, pops, but I ain’t fond of Ashiya.”

He looked up. The orange sky was now a deep blue. Just as he was thinking it’d gotten rather cold, white flecks came fluttering down.

“Figures it’s cold. It’s snowing.”

It was Christmas Eve. A party was being held at the Yagashira residence to celebrate the exhibition’s success.

Is everyone getting excited about the snow right about now?

He didn’t feel like he was missing out. His heart felt satisfied even though he wasn’t attending his own party. This was much more comfortable than being subjected to awkward feelings.

Ensho heard footsteps behind him. Had someone from the temple come to tell him to leave because they were closing? He turned around and was rendered speechless. Yuki was bowing shyly.

“Shinya.”

“Yuki...what about the party?”

“I went, but you weren’t there.”

“So you came to get me?”

“No way.” Yuki shook his head. “I just wanted to have a wrap party.” He held up the convenience store bag in his hand. It seemed to be crammed full of beer cans and snacks.

Ensho chuckled. “Sure.” He nodded. A strange twist of fate had led to him collaborating with Yuki. “I’ve got a place near here.”

“Huh? A place?”

“An apartment I rent as an atelier. Haven’t been there in a while, though, so it’s probably caked in dust.”

“That’s totally fine. I’ll clean it up for you.” Yuki followed Ensho with a spring in his step. “You’re renting an apartment as an atelier. That’s so cool.” He blushed slightly, white puffs escaping his mouth as he spoke.

“You’re probably misunderstanding.”

“Huh? No, of course not.” Yuki shook his head, flustered. “Just because you’re inviting me to your place doesn’t mean I’d think—”

“That ain’t what I mean.”

Ensho stopped in front of an old two-story apartment. The outdoor staircase was rusted and looked as if it could break at any moment.

"This is my atelier."

"Oh..." Yuki stared blankly at the apartment.

"You were imagining a nice place, weren't you?"

"Yeah." Yuki nodded and giggled. "But this suits you."

"What the hell is that supposed to mean?"

"Well, it looks a lot like the apartment building we used to live in."

"Yeah, you're right."

Ensho laughed and climbed the staircase. Yuki followed close behind him. The rusted iron steps clanged under their feet.

Upon unlocking the door and stepping inside the dim room, they were greeted by the musty smell of dust and old paint.

"This is a nostalgic smell," said Yuki.

"What, the mold?"

"The paint. I'm going to let some fresh air in."

Yuki placed his bags on the floor and opened the window. A strong gust of wind blew towards the front door, seeming to replace all of the stagnant air at once.

"Brr!"

The dustiness and odor were mostly gone, but instead, the room was now freezing. They tried to turn the heating on, but the button didn't do anything. In fact, the light switches weren't working either.

"Damn." Ensho chuckled. "Now that I think about it, I only paid the rent, not the electricity bill."

"Oh! I have just the thing." Yuki's eyes lit up as he reached inside his bag. "Use this." He took out one of Kobe Kiriko's lanterns. "It's a candle-type. I have a candle and lighter here too." He lit the candle and put it inside the lantern.

“You walk around with that stuff?”

“Of course not. This was a Christmas present for you.” Yuki shrugged and laughed.

Ensho looked down at the lantern again. It was red with an exotic pattern. “Is it red ‘cause of Christmas?”

Yuki said nothing. He took the beer and snacks out of the convenience store bag. “Let’s have a toast. I bought a bunch of stuff.”

“Thanks.”

They clinked their cans together. An assortment of snacks was laid out on the table, including cheese sticks, smoked salami, nuts, takoyaki, and custard pudding.

Ensho laughed. “You still like takoyaki and pudding, eh?”

“Yeah. I end up buying them whenever I see them. You used to give me takoyaki a lot, and the pudding you made was the most delicious thing in the world.”

“You’re bringing up that ancient history again?”

“I can’t help it.” Yuki laughed.

As they chatted, the number of empty cans on the table grew. Quiet voices came from Yuki’s phone on the table. He had thoughtfully turned on the radio for background music. Since it was Christmas Eve, there were a lot of requests for holiday songs.

Yuki looked at the lantern on the table as they listened to the Christmas hits everyone knew and had heard countless times before. He murmured to himself, “You know, at first, I was totally going to bring you to the party. I felt like you had to be there since you were the star of the show. But on my way, I realized that you probably wouldn’t come if I came to get you. I thought it’d be fun to drink together instead, so I dropped by a convenience store.”

“If *you* came to get me? Who do you think would be able to get me to go, then?”

Yuki hummed and stared into space. “It’d have to be Yagashira, I guess. He’s

really strong. I didn't think he'd actually manage to bring you to pre-opening day."

Ensho brought his can to his mouth to hide his ashamed expression. "That guy ain't human. He's the devil in disguise."

"What?" Yuki burst out laughing. Then his face turned serious. "The other person who can get you to do things is Aoi."

Ensho choked.

"Shinya...the girl you said you were interested in was Aoi, right?"

"Where the hell did that come from?" Ensho played dumb.

"I was kind of surprised when Aoi said she thought of you as being 'deep in a forest.' And frustrated, because I really could imagine you lost in a forest." Yuki rested his cheek on his hand. "So I ended up competing with her."

"How?"

"With this." Yuki looked down at the lantern. "I designed it with you in mind."

"That's why it's red?"

"Yeah. Because red is the color of superheroes."

"Superheroes?" Ensho laughed.

"But..." Yuki's eyes narrowed in sadness. "As I was drawing the design, I thought, 'This isn't the image I have of Shinya, it's my feelings.'"

The candle flame flickered inside the red lantern like a fire hidden within one's heart.

"Shinya, you know how I feel, right?" Yuki looked straight at Ensho, who fell silent.

Ensho had always thought of Yuki as a younger brother—the only family member he wanted to protect. But Yuki had developed special feelings for him.

"Yeah." Ensho nodded. He had known the moment he'd seen the lantern—no, long before that. He had thought he was acting oblivious for Yuki's sake, but he couldn't deny the fact that he had been avoiding seeing him because it pained his heart. Now that Yuki was confronting him with his feelings, it was a

good opportunity to set things straight. “Yeah, but I can’t reciprocate. You’re—”
My real family, he was going to say before he was interrupted by Yuki’s tears.

“Thank you. I already knew, but sometimes I got my hopes up and it was painful. I’m glad I have a clear answer now,” Yuki said with a smile.

“I...”

“Hmm?”

“I didn’t wanna see you force yourself to smile. You were always the kind of kid who’d hold back their pain. So I didn’t wanna be the one to make you put on that face,” Ensho murmured softly, looking away.

“Shinya...”

“I once yelled at Holmes, ‘Don’t brainwash Aoi.’ Those words came outta my mouth ’cause that’s exactly what I did. I was a worthless human being and wanted just one person in the world to love me. I think that’s why I unconsciously controlled your heart...and made you like me.”

And yet Ensho couldn’t reciprocate the boy’s feelings. He had no right to criticize Kiyotaka. That man simply did what he had to in order to win over the girl he loved.

“I’m really sorry.” Ensho lowered his head.

Yuki gave an exasperated shrug. “It feels like you’re making fun of me, saying my feelings are the result of brainwashing.”

Ensho couldn’t say anything in response to that.

“You know, Shinya...”

“Yeah?” Ensho looked up.

“It took a lot of courage for me to confess my feelings because I knew I’d get rejected. But I also knew that if I didn’t do it, I wouldn’t be able to move forward. So even though you rejected me, I don’t regret it. I’m glad I went through with it. So you should too.”

“Me?”

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

how you feel,” Yuki murmured softly.

Ensho’s eyes widened.

A cheerful “Merry Christmas!” came over the radio. Outside, it was still snowing.

On this very quiet Christmas Eve, two childhood friends were able to have a relaxed chat for the first time in a long time.

Extra: Christmas for Two

It was December 25.

“In the end, we didn’t get to spend Christmas Eve together privately.” Holmes sighed in disappointment as he sat down on the sofa.

We were in the Yagashira residence’s second-floor living room, having just finished cleaning up the hall where last night’s party had been held. The KyoMore members had come to help, so it had gone quicker than expected. Holmes and I were now taking a break after seeing them off.

Since it was the day after the party, the exhibition was closed today. No one was in the living room besides us. On the table was the spiced wine Holmes had prepared for us. The gold-rimmed Kobe kiriko glass mugs were filled with red wine, orange and lemon slices, honey, apples, cloves, and cinnamon sticks. The nice aroma made my expression relax into a smile.

“And I’ve been banned from giving Christmas presents,” Holmes continued with a slight pout.

I knew that if I let my guard down, he’d gift me with expensive things, so this time, I had decided that we’d give each other matching items—fountain pens. Mine was a deep indigo that I’d chosen because it was the color I associated him with in my mind. It had “Kiyotaka Y.” on the barrel instead of my own name. Holmes’s fountain pen was a deep scarlet and said “Aoi M.” We’d put each other’s names so that whenever we had to be apart, we could look at the pens and think of one another.

I knew it was the epitome of something a passionate couple would do, but still, whenever I looked at my pen, I couldn’t help but grin. I happily looked forward to writing in the Kura notebook with it, but perhaps it wasn’t enough for Holmes.

“Are you unsatisfied with the fountain pen?” I asked timidly.

Holmes’s eyes widened. He shook his head fervently. “Of course not. I derive

happiness from carrying it in my chest pocket at all times.”

“That’s good.” I clapped my hands together.

“When you’re off in New York, I’ll hug it when I sleep.”

I gave a strained smile, feeling apologetic. “Um, sorry. Even though I turned down Sally’s offer the first time...”

“No, it’s fine.” He shook his head again. “My feelings on the matter are exactly as I said. Besides...”

“Besides?”

“I expect to be going to New York frequently for my new job. So I imagine we’ll be able to see each other more than you think.”

“What’s this new job?”

“I’m going to be an agent.” Holmes grinned and looked at me.

“An agent?” I tilted my head, clueless.

“However...” He folded his arms. “It doesn’t change the fact that we need to treasure the time we have together from now on. Personally, I’m disappointed that we didn’t get any time for ourselves on Christmas Eve.”

Suddenly, an amused smirk came to his face.

“What’s so funny?” I asked.

“I was just thinking that usually it’s women who sulk about such things.”

“Oh, I guess so.”

“My fiancée can be so stoic at times...”

“That’s not true.” I shook my head. “We had a party with everyone on Christmas Eve, but the real Christmas is today. And see, it’s just the two of us here right now, isn’t it?”

Holmes put his hand around my waist and pulled me closer. “You’re right. It’s just the two of us right now,” he whispered in my ear.

I flinched.

“I didn’t know you were so bold, Aoi. Really, a place like this?” he asked with

an amused smile.

I blinked, taken aback. “Bold? Wait, that’s not what I meant.”

“But you said, ‘It’s just the two of us here right now, isn’t it?’ I expected the next words to be, ‘So we can do whatever we want.’ Was I mistaken?”

“Um...” Now that he mentioned it, he was right.

“Remember, I said I’d come running at full speed.” He hugged me, burying his face in my neck.

“Holmes, wait!”

“You don’t want to...?” He looked up at me, peering into my face with puppy dog eyes.

My cheeks flushed. “I do...” I whispered.

What happened next was our little secret.

Afterword

I'm sorry for the short wait between the two parts of this story.

Though I began with an apology, thank you for reading. I'm Mai Mochizuki. The series has reached volume 17. Including volume 6.5, that makes eighteen books.

This time, I wrote while thinking, *Let's give this volume a sense of closure!* There were so many things I wanted to include and depict that it ended up being stretched across two parts. The second part took especially long to finalize the story and flow.

And so, this volume plays out like a finale, but I've actually written finale-esque developments several times thus far. There was volume 7, where Holmes settled the score with Ensho; volume 10, where our main couple became one; and volume 14, where Aoi made her decision. Each time, I wrote with the serious intention of concluding the story. Thankfully, I continued to receive requests to write more, and of course, I myself wanted to write more as well, so here we are today.

In my case, it seems that there's a part of me that can't move on to the next development without giving the current one closure first. This volume was yet another conclusion, but the editor has said that they would like me to continue, and I want to stay in touch with the world of *Holmes of Kyoto* too. If possible, I'd like to continue the timeline a bit more, so I hope I'll be able to do that at my own pace.

The extra story at the end was a bonus scene written with my gratitude for everyone's support. Holmes and Aoi were a little more on the lovey-dovey side, but it was a Christmas episode, so I hope you'll tolerate them.

As usual, please let me use this space to express my thanks. I'm grateful for all of the connections surrounding me and this series. Thank you all so much.

Mai Mochizuki

References

Nakajima, Seinosuke. *Nisemono wa Naze, Hito wo Damasu no ka?* (Kadokawa Shoten) Nakajima, Seinosuke. *Nakajima Seinosuke no Yakimono Kantei.* (Futabasha) Namba, Sachiko. *Gendai Bijutsu Curator to Iu Shigoto.* (Seikyusha) Miller, Judith. *Seiyo Kotto Kantei no Kyokasho.* (PIE International) Degawa, Naoki. *Kojiki Shingan Kantei to Kansho.* (Kodansha)

Nakayama, Kimio (supervision). *Sekai Glass Kougeishi.* (Bijutsu Shuppan-sha) Suzuki, Kiyoshi. *Shotor Museum: Hikari no Majutsushi – Émile Gallé.* (Shogakukan)

Mai Mochizuki

Born in Hokkaido and currently resides in Kyoto. Debuted in 2013 upon winning the first prize in the second installment of EVERYSTAR's e-publication awards. Won the Kyoto Book Award in 2016. Other works include *Wagaya wa Machi no Ogamiya-san* (Kadokawa Bunko), *Alice in Kyoraku Forest* (Bunshun Bunko), and *Kyoto Karasuma Oike no Oharai Honpo* (Futabasha). (As of August 2021)

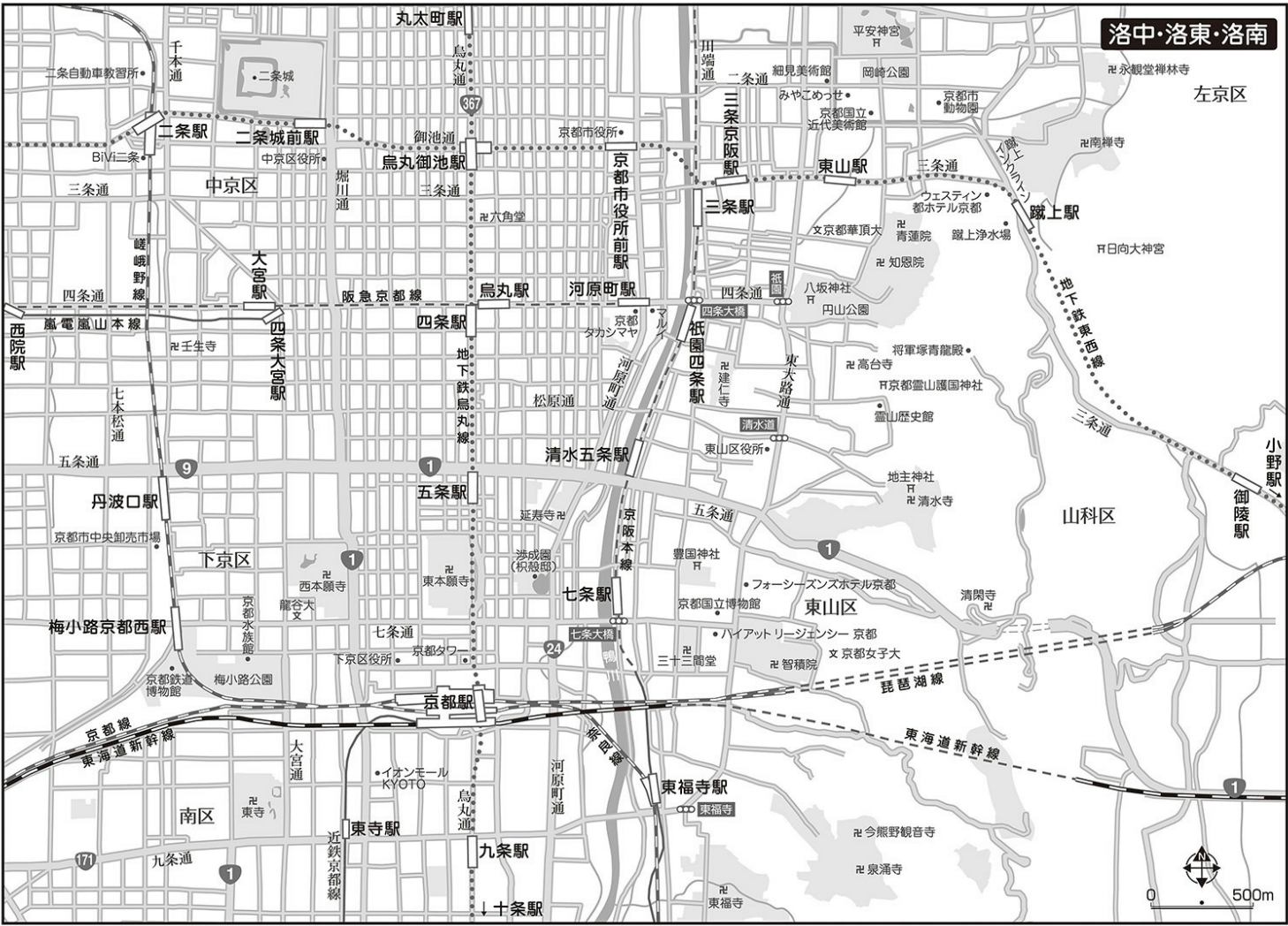


Aoi at the Yagashira Residence

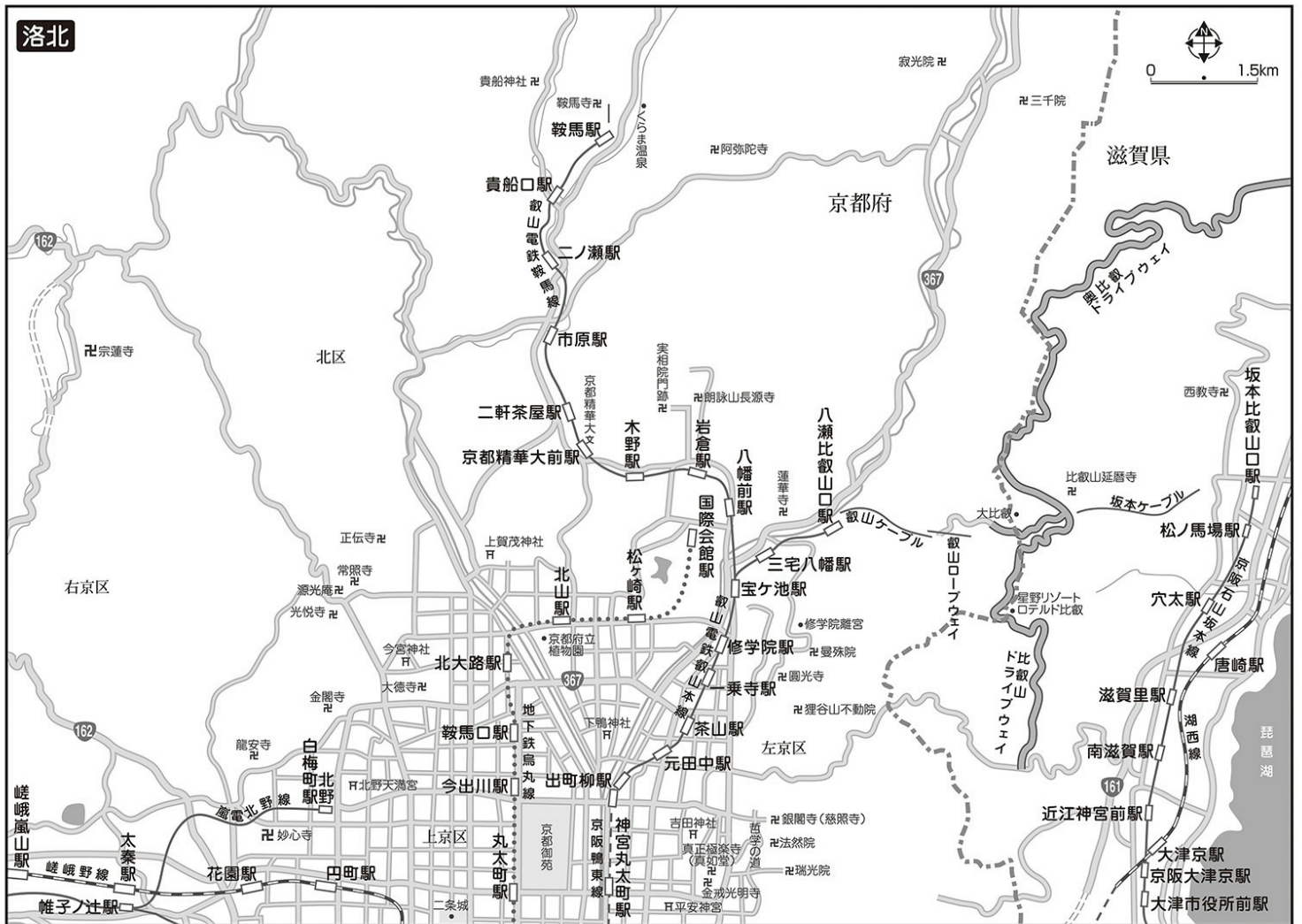


Ensho at Nanzen-ji Temple

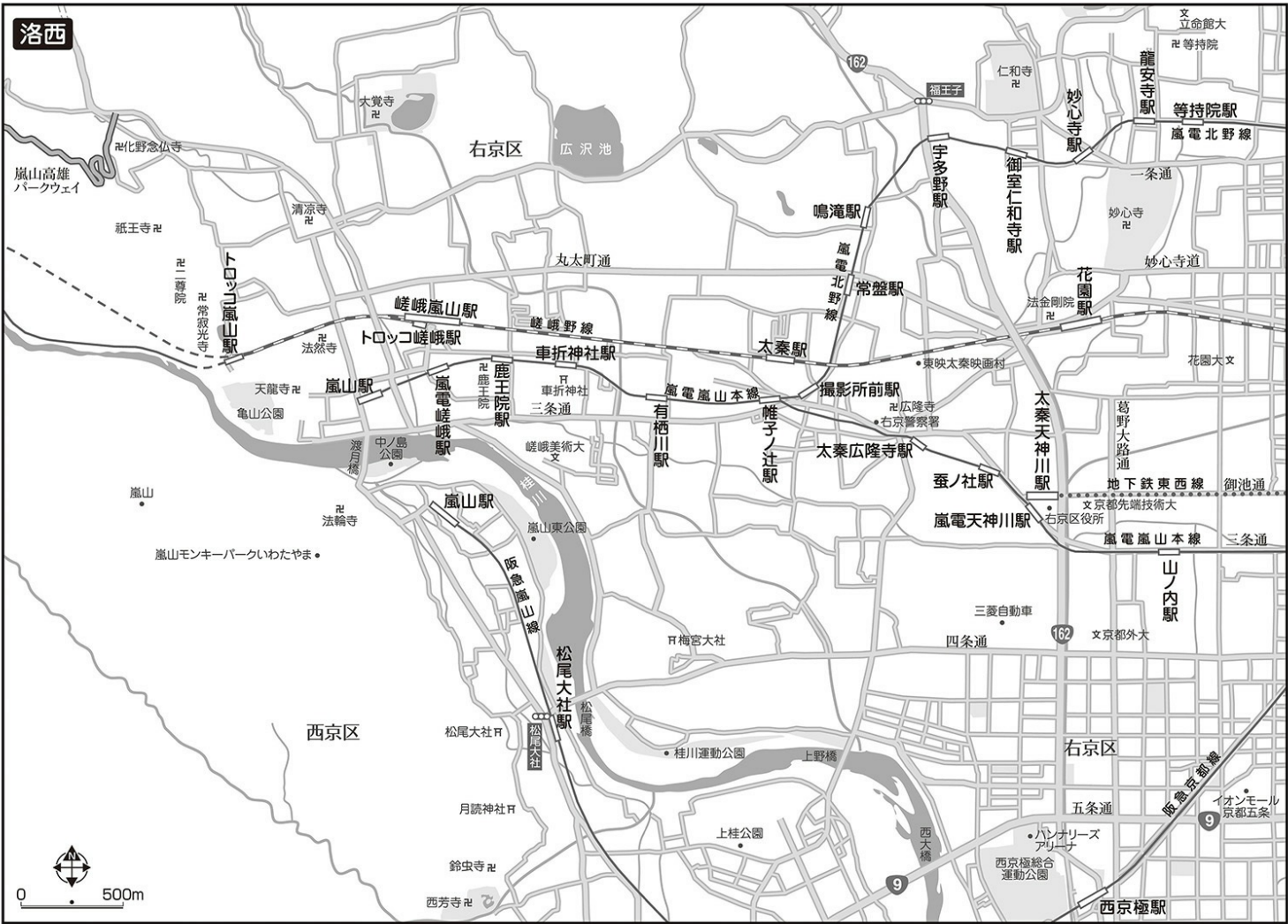
Map of Central, Eastern, and Southern Kyoto



Map of Northern Kyoto



Map of Western Kyoto



Translator's Corner

Thank you for reading *Holmes of Kyoto* volume 17! This edition of translation notes turned out to be a bit morbid, so...hopefully it doesn't dampen the mood after that saccharine short story at the end? (I'm sorry.)

Towards the end of the volume, Yuki finds Ensho at Adashi Moor, a location that was previously visited in volume 5. It's described as a former burial ground, and Nenbutsu-ji Temple has roughly eight thousand stone statuettes and monuments dedicated to all who were buried there. However, what hasn't been mentioned in either volume is that Adashi Moor was a place for what were called wind burials or aerial sepulchers—abandoning bodies out in the open to be disposed of by the elements—as was customary for common people in ancient Japan. In other words, it wasn't the kind of graveyard we would imagine today.

It's also noted that the sea of stone graves at Nenbutsu-ji Temple is called the Western Riverbed as a reference to the Riverbed of Death (both are pronounced "Sai no Kawara"). The Riverbed of Death is associated with the Sanzu River, which is similar in concept to the River Styx in that souls must cross it in order to reach the afterlife. The riverbed is also known as Children's Limbo because it is the destination for children who died before their parents. There, they must suffer in retribution for not fulfilling their responsibility of filial piety, piling up stones into towers as offerings, only for demons to come and destroy them before they're completed. But in the end, they'll be saved by Jizo, the patron deity of deceased children.



Sign up for our mailing list at J-Novel Club to hear about new releases!

[Newsletter](#)

And you can read the latest chapters (like Vol. 18 of this series!) by becoming a J-Novel Club Member:

[J-Novel Club Membership](#)

Copyright

Holmes of Kyoto: Volume 17

by Mai Mochizuki

Translated by Minna Lin Edited by Tess Nanavati

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

Copyright © Mai Mochizuki 2021

Cover illustrations by Shizu Yamauchi Cover design by Noriko Kanagami

All rights reserved.

Original Japanese edition published in 2021 by Futabasha Publishers Ltd.

This English edition is published by arrangement with Futabasha Publishers Ltd., Tokyo English translation © 2024 J-Novel Club LLC

All rights reserved. In accordance with the U.S. Copyright Act of 1976, the scanning, uploading, and electronic sharing of any part of this book without the permission of the publisher is unlawful piracy and theft of the author's intellectual property.

J-Novel Club LLC

j-novel.club

The publisher is not responsible for websites (or their content) that are not owned by the publisher.

Ebook edition 1.0: March 2024