



Holmes of Kyoto

~A Lady's Mission~

18

Mai Mochizuki



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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.



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.



Rikyu Takiyama

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



Seiji Yagashira (Owner)

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

Yoshie Takiyama

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



Takeshi Yagashira (Manager)

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



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Prologue

It was the start of a new year.

I—Aoi Mashiro—was visiting Kitano Tenmangu Shrine with my friend, Kaori Miyashita. I wished I could say we were there for the first shrine visit of the year, but we weren't. It was already January 5th, and we had already done our first visits separately. So today was a more casual New Year's visit.

"It's so crowded since everyone's still on winter break," I remarked, craning my neck to look around while we lined up to pray.

"Uh-huh," said Kaori. "It's mostly middle schoolers. They've got entrance exams coming up, after all."

"Yeah." I nodded. "I bet they're taking this prayer really seriously."

Tenmangu shrines were dedicated to Sugawara no Michizane, the god of learning, and this was their head shrine in Japan. It was known for providing academic blessings.

As I looked at the students, I thought back to my own university entrance exams. At the time, I'd been desperate—maybe not desperate to get in, but desperate for an escape. I'd buried my head in my books in order to shake off the heartache of Holmes breaking up with me. *If it wasn't for that temporary breakup, I might not have gotten into my current school...* Thinking that way made me feel conflicted. And now, time had flown by.

"We're going to be third-years this spring, huh?" I murmured.

"Yeah." Kaori nodded, then laughed, her bobbed hair shaking slightly. "You're still a Tokyoite, eh?"

"Huh? Where did that come from?"

"We say 'third-rounders' here."

I giggled. "Yeah, I guess that's what people in Kyoto—or, well, all of Kansai—say."

“I always thought it was a nationwide thing.”

“It does feel more general than a local dialect.”

As we chatted, we reached the shrine building. We bowed once and clapped twice, keeping our hands together as we closed our eyes and prayed. I asked for an educational and productive year, then gave one last bow. After finishing our prayers, we quietly left the line.

“All right, shall we go?” asked Kaori. “I can’t wait to try that castella.”

“Yeah.”

Kaori and I had two reasons for choosing Kitano Tenmangu for our New Year’s shrine visit. One was that we wanted academic blessings, but we also wanted to check out a Portuguese sweets shop that was right next to the torii gate. Their specialty was castellas, but not the kind we knew and loved. Portugal didn’t actually have a dessert called “castella”—this shop served what was said to be the castella’s predecessor, “pão de ló.” There wasn’t much to the recipe: whisk eggs and sugar together, add flour, and bake. However, people said the simple flavor was very delicious.

“I’m glad they take reservations,” I said.

“Totally. At this time of year, it’s impossible to get into places without them.”

We left the shrine grounds and looked towards the shop. It had a sake brewery-esque exterior, with a Portuguese flag and exotic curtain on display. Despite the cultural mismatch, the design worked well.

As Kaori had predicted, there was quite a long line outside. But from the look of it, most of the people were there for takeout, not to dine in the café. We hurried past the line and entered the store. The lovely, chic interior made us gasp with delight.

The staff guided us to our table, and we looked at the menu. In addition to the pão de ló, they also had the castella we were familiar with. One of the recommended sets included both, so you could compare them. It said it went well with port wine, which struck me as quite a Portuguese choice. In Japan, castellas typically would’ve been paired with coffee or tea.

Since we were there for the experience, we each ordered the comparison set and a glass of port wine. Large plates were brought to our table, adorned with castellas and three types of pão de ló. We raised our wine glasses and took a bite of the pão de ló.

“It’s delicious,” I said. “You can really taste the eggs.”

“It has a gentle sweetness.”

For some reason, even though it was my first time eating it, the flavor felt nostalgic. We took a sip of the port wine and closed our eyes in bliss.

“I wasn’t sure about having wine with castellas, but they do go well together,” I said.

“Yeah. Drinking in the middle of the day feels immoral, huh?”

“Immoral?” I laughed. “Well, I know what you mean. It seems too extravagant for us, so it feels like a guilty pleasure.”

“Exactly. But it’s still New Year’s, so it’s fine.”

“Yeah.” We laughed together.

“How did you spend the holidays, Aoi?”

“Well...” I looked up at the ceiling and swallowed the piece of castella in my mouth before continuing. “I spent New Year’s Eve at the Yagashira residence.”

“With Holmes’s family?”

“Yeah. Ueda, Yoshie, and Rikyu were there too, and Akihito joined us later on.”

“Sounds like fun.”

“It was really fun. We played cards and board games while drinking wine. Holmes will do anything to win, so Akihito got mad at him.”

“I can imagine,” Kaori said with a laugh.

The festive mood had soared when the New Year’s bell rang. Deciding to do the first shrine visit of the year together, Holmes, Akihito, Rikyu, and I had left the house to go to Yasaka Shrine.

“It must’ve been super crowded,” said Kaori.

“It was.” I slumped my shoulders. *There were so many people. I didn’t think we’d ever make it to the shrine building.* “So we gave up on getting to the altar and prayed from a distance, facing it.”

“Wise decision. Gods should be able to hear your prayers even if you aren’t right in front of them.”

“Yeah.” I smiled. “We did get to do the okera mairi afterwards, though.”

“Okera mairi” was a Yasaka Shrine tradition where visitors lit a good fortune rope at the bonfire and rotated the tip as they went home so that the flame wouldn’t go out. The flame was then transferred to a candle in a household shrine or used to boil New Year’s soup as a prayer for good health. Holmes had suggested brewing coffee with it, so we had gone with him to the apartment in Yasaka where he and the manager lived.

“That sounds so nice,” Kaori said. “I bet the coffee was great.”

“It was.” I nodded. The coffee Holmes brewed that night had seemed especially delicious.

“So what happened next?”

“Since we were still up, we decided to watch the first sunrise too. So we stayed up chatting and managed to catch it, but everyone was sleepy and shaky on their feet by then.”

“Well, of course you’d be. Did you fall asleep right after?”

“Yeah. I borrowed a bed, but everyone else slept on the living room sofas and rug.”

“That’s...an incredible image,” Kaori said, crossing her arms.

“It really is.” I laughed. “In the afternoon, Holmes sent me home.” He’d wished my family a happy new year, presenting a box of sweets that he’d prepared at some point. “And he ended up having dinner with us.”

“Ooh. What was that like?”

“My mom, grandma, and brother seemed really excited, but my dad looked

conflicted.”

“That’s just how dads are. Mine always has mixed feelings when he sees how spindly my sister’s fiancé is.”

“Oh, Yoneyama?”

Yoneyama was a former counterfeiter who had turned over a new leaf and was now a brilliant painter. Thinking of former counterfeiters made Ensho come to mind, but Yoneyama was completely different from him. He was delicate and had a fluffy vibe like dandelion fuzz.

“Does he visit your place often?” I asked.

“He’s actually moved in with us.”

“I had no idea.” I placed my hand over my mouth, surprised. “They’re already living together?”

“Well, he did it to learn about kimono fabrics. His room is separate from my sister’s.”

“Is he preparing to inherit the family business?”

Kaori hummed and furrowed her brow before shaking her head. “Not exactly. My parents recognize his talent and want him to continue painting. But they also think it’d be nice if he could help out with the store a bit on the side.”

“So he won’t have to stop painting, then. That’s good.” As a fan of Yoneyama’s paintings, I was happy.

“He painted a scroll to hang up at the entrance of the store, and it was so well received that some of our customers asked him to paint for them too.”

“I’m not surprised.”

“My sister’s also gotten in gear. She thinks she should be the one in charge of the store while Yoneyama supports her. I guess when two passive people get together, one of them has to take the lead,” Kaori murmured to herself.

“That’s good for her.”

Kaori shrugged. “Yeah. I wasn’t sure about it at first, but they’ll manage. I’m sure they’ll be planning the wedding soon enough.”

“Ooh.” I smiled. “Did Yoneyama join your family’s New Year’s Eve get-together, then?”

“Yep.” She nodded. “But it’s not like my family sits at home chatting the whole day.”

“Huh? What do you mean?”

“We do our own thing for the most part. I went to my favorite singer’s New Year’s Eve concert, and January 1st was the first cleanup of the year.”

“I see. What’s this about a ‘first cleanup’?”

“It’s how KyoMore kicked off our activities for the year.”

KyoMore was short for the Make Kyoto More Beautiful Project, a student group similar to a university club. It was led by Akihito’s younger brother, Haruhiko Kajiwara.

“There was a recruitment post on the website,” Kaori continued. “A casual one, like, ‘We’re doing this; if you’re interested, please join us.’”

“Right.” I nodded. I knew that they were always advertising their activities online.

“New Year’s Eve produces a lot of litter, so Haruhiko invited us to help clean up the next morning, after our shrine visit.”

I was involved with KyoMore too, but I hadn’t expected them to be working over the holidays, so I hadn’t checked the website.

“How many people showed up?” I asked.

“Including me and Haruhiko, six in all.”

“You all check the site regularly, huh? That’s impressive.”

Kaori gave an awkward shrug. “I wasn’t actually checking it. I only knew because Haruhiko messaged me saying that he posted something.”

“Oh, I see.”

“The cleanup took us almost the entire morning, but Sada—the one who runs the Italian restaurant—saw the post and brought us boxed lunches. We ate them at the Demachiyana delta and everyone was amazed by how delicious

they were. That's a professional chef for you."

"That's a wonderful way to spend New Year's."

"Yep. It was a great kickoff."

"It's really nice that KyoMore was doing volunteer work right from the start of the year. And Haruhiko's a great person for organizing it."

Kaori blushed slightly. "Um, yeah, I guess." Her eyes darted around for a second. "Oh, but more importantly, what did Holmes give you for Christmas?"

"What?" I asked, startled by the sudden change of topic.

"I mean, this is Holmes we're talking about, so it must've been something crazy, right?"

It felt like she was being evasive, but I answered the question anyway. "We gave each other matching fountain pens."

"Huh? Fountain pens?"

"Yeah. He's always trying to give me expensive things, so I preempted him by suggesting that we get each other matching things."

"Preempted?" Kaori repeated with a smile.

"He still seemed like he was going to give me something else, though, so I ended up saying, 'Please don't try to spoil me so much. I wish you'd be more understanding of the average person.'"

"What did he say to that?" Kaori peered into my face.

"He looked kind of shocked..."

"Ahh," she murmured, crossing her arms. "I can understand why you'd say that. He always has that 'rich socialite' feel."

"Yeah. I really appreciate the sentiment, but..." Since I was just an ordinary person, his gifts made me feel uneasy at times. "I do treasure all the things he's given me, though, and I was happy when I received them."

Kaori hummed and murmured, "Is it a fundamental difference in values?" Realizing something, she hurriedly waved her hands. "Oh, I don't mean it in a bad way."

“I know.” I nodded and gazed out the window. “I’ve actually wondered the same thing, but I think it’s inevitable because Holmes and I grew up in very different ways.” I looked at Kaori. “Speaking of which, you and Haruhiko probably have similar values, huh?”

The two of them were both born and raised in Kyoto. Kaori’s family ran a kimono fabric shop, while Haruhiko’s father was a leading figure in the literary world. Those were completely different occupations, but both were connected to prominent people in Kyoto, such as Holmes’s grandfather, the nationally certified appraiser Seiji Yagashira. I wasn’t sure if this was an acceptable way of saying it, but it felt like they were from the same “class” of families in Kyoto.

“Yeah, I guess...” Kaori weakly put her hand on her head. She had been acting strangely every time I brought up Haruhiko. At first I thought she had been embarrassed, but it seemed like there was more to it than that.

“Did something happen between you and Haruhiko?” I asked more forwardly than intended.

Kaori averted her gaze and blushed. “Yeah...”

I knew it. I gulped.

“To be honest, I want to tell you, but I also feel like you’ll look down on me if I do. *I can’t even believe what I did.*” She placed her hand on her forehead.

“I’d never look down on you. What happened?”

“You know how...we had that party at the Yagashira residence on Christmas Eve?”

“Yeah.”

“Afterwards, Haruhiko offered to walk me home. But we were both still giddy from the party, and we didn’t want to go home yet. So we went for drinks, just the two of us.”

I silently awaited her next words.

“Never mind, I can’t do this.” Kaori shook her head.

“Huh?”

“I haven’t sorted out my feelings yet, so I can’t talk about it. Can you give me some more time?”

“Of course.”

“Thanks.” She sighed.

Worried, I leaned closer and said, “But, um, there’s one thing I want to ask. Did he hurt you or make you feel uncomfortable?”

Kaori hurriedly shook her head and waved her hands. “Not at all. Haruhiko’s a perfect gentleman.”

“That’s good.” I placed my hand on my chest, relieved.

“It’s just that... Ugh,” she murmured, burying her face in her hands. “When I remember that night, I want to crawl into a hole and die. We’re done talking about this.”

Judging from how she’s acting, she might’ve made some kind of mistake while drunk. I had no idea something like that happened between them on Christmas Eve. Come to think of it, Ensho spent that night with his childhood friend Yoshitaka “Yuki” Sakaguchi, and Atsuko Tadokoro—a flower arrangement teacher—held a Christmas party, which led to a shocking incident. It seems like a lot of things happened last Christmas, big and small, in various places with various people.

“Oh, so where is Holmes training right now?” Kaori asked, changing the subject.

“The Komatsu Detective Agency.”

“He’s still at Komatsu’s place? Hasn’t it been more than three months?”

“Yeah.” I sipped my wine. “I think December was the three-month mark, but the office was often closed while Komatsu focused on his side job. Holmes came back to Kura during those times, so he’s going to be helping them for a little while longer.”

“Wow, how dutiful of him.”

“I think it’s a bit different from that.”

Holmes was very clear about his likes and dislikes. If he didn't want to go somewhere, he wouldn't do it, no matter how much someone begged him to. So he had probably decided to keep helping the Komatsu Detective Agency because he liked it there.

"Oh, right," I said. "The Komatsu Detective Agency reopened today after the holidays. The three of them are going to meet up."

"That's nice." Kaori nodded. "Ensho's an amazing guy, eh?"

"Huh?" I looked at her.

"I didn't really know him, so I only had the impression that he was scary. But when I saw his exhibition, I was astonished."

"Yeah, he's amazing."

"Do you think he'll have another exhibition for his next painting?"

"That's a good question..." I tilted my head. "I hope so."

"Did Holmes and Ensho stop fighting, by the way?"

Ensho was no longer a counterfeiter. He and Holmes were now colleagues at the Komatsu Detective Agency. However, their rivalry was still going strong, and Holmes always overreacted when it came to Ensho.

"They...fight a lot," I said.

"Really?!" Kaori's eyes widened.

"Yeah, but it doesn't feel dangerous like it used to. I think they also warmed up to each other a bit after the exhibition...but I'm sure they'll stay rivals forever," I said with a chuckle, looking out the window.

Chapter 1: Too Good to Be True

1

Recently, the Komatsu Detective Agency had come to be known as the Gion Detectives by a select group of people. However, although the office was located in Gion, it didn't do much to match the theme. There wasn't a maiko solving cases, nor was there a geiko manipulating her enemies with a shamisen. Not that Gion was *supposed* to be like that...but anyway, the sole Gion-like aspect of the office was that it was a renovated wooden townhouse. That said, only the exterior was traditional. Inside, it was utterly normal, with wooden flooring instead of tatami mats, three metal office desks, and a reception area with a black leather sofa set. Actually, it was synthetic leather.

This completely ordinary office was occupied by three men: Katsuya Komatsu, the chief; Kiyotaka Yagashira, a sharp-minded and handsome young man known as the "Holmes of Kyoto"; and Ensho (real name Shinya Sugawara), a bald man who was now a renowned painter. Each sat at his own desk.

I'm the only normal one here, Komatsu thought for the nth time. *Why are these incredibly talented people working for me?*

It was their first day back at work. After gathering here and exchanging New Year's greetings, the three men had moved on to doing their own things. Komatsu was working on his programming side job. Ensho was staring at his computer screen, languidly playing a card game that looked like Solitaire. Kiyotaka was resting his chin on one hand while staring absentmindedly at the fountain pen in his other.

Is something wrong with the kiddo? Komatsu wondered. He immediately remembered the Christmas Eve party at the Yagashira residence and decided not to ask. A curator from America named Sally Barrymore had invited Kiyotaka's fiancée, Aoi Mashiro, to work for her in New York. Aoi hadn't known what to say, but Kiyotaka had stood next to her, bowed, and said, "Please look

after her.” Komatsu, who had been watching from nearby, hadn’t been able to hide his surprise. Kiyotaka seemed to love Aoi to the point of obsession. Sending her on a journey would have been akin to slicing off a part of himself. Yet he still made his decision out of consideration for Aoi’s future.

As Komatsu sat in silence, moved by Kiyotaka’s wonderful actions, Ensho glared at the man sitting beside him, annoyed.

“Why do you keep staring at that fountain pen?” Ensho sighed. “You’re giving me the creeps.”

“Hey, leave him alone.” Komatsu’s face stiffened.

Ensho hadn’t attended the party, but he knew what had happened with Kiyotaka and Aoi. Komatsu was sure of this, because he was the one who had told him. Ensho lived on the office’s second floor, so there were often opportunities to talk to him, and Komatsu had found himself blabbing about all kinds of things. The point was, Ensho knew about Kiyotaka’s situation, and yet he still didn’t show any restraint.

“Actually,” Kiyotaka said, turning around with a relaxed smile, “this fountain pen was a Christmas present from Aoi.”

“So you just wanted to show off. Can you be any more annoying?”

“That wasn’t my intention. I was just looking at it and thinking.” Kiyotaka carefully returned the pen to his chest pocket.

“So what’d you give the little miss, kiddo?” Komatsu asked, curious.

“Since it’s Holmes, I bet he went, ‘I prepared the perfect gift for you: a painting by Chagall.’”

Ensho’s imitation was so spot-on that Komatsu burst out laughing. “You sound just like him. Surely even the kiddo wouldn’t get her Chagall, right?”

“It ain’t out of the question.”

“True.”

“Am I *that* far removed from reality?” Kiyotaka asked with a displeased sigh.

“You’re only questioning it now?” Ensho spat.

“Well, yeah, you are,” Komatsu said.

“Aoi said the same thing to me,” Kiyotaka replied.

“Huh?” Komatsu and Ensho looked at him.

As it happened, before Christmas, Aoi had told Kiyotaka, “Holmes, why don’t we give each other matching presents? Wouldn’t that be great?”

Kiyotaka had realized that she was worried about receiving something expensive, so by giving each other the same thing, she could ensure that it would be reasonably priced. Her eyes had shone as she made her suggestion, and it had been adorable.

“That’s a good idea,” Kiyotaka had said. “What shall we get?”

After discussing it, they had decided on fountain pens. A deep indigo one for Aoi, in Kiyotaka’s image, and a scarlet one for Kiyotaka, in Aoi’s image. They had engraved each other’s names on them, so that even when they were apart, they could look at the pens and remember that their hearts were together. It was romantic, and Aoi’s blushing face at the time had been the sweetest thing in the world.

“Get to the damn point,” Ensho said, interrupting Kiyotaka’s passionate spiel. “We don’t need your personal opinion on every little thing.” He clicked his tongue, annoyed.

“Seriously,” Komatsu agreed with him. His brow had furrowed as well.

“My apologies.” Kiyotaka placed his hand on his chest. “I felt that a fountain pen alone wasn’t enough, so I tried to give her something else, but she refused, saying...”

“Please don’t try to spoil me so much. I wish you’d be more understanding of the average person.”

“Ah, yeah,” said Komatsu and Ensho.

“I get where the little miss is coming from.”

“Uh-huh.”

“Is that so?” Kiyotaka frowned.

“You’re basically a Marie,” said Ensho.

“Marie?”

“Antoinette.”

Komatsu burst out laughing again, while Kiyotaka’s frown deepened.

“Marie Antoinette? I come from a normal merchant family. I *do* think like an average person.”

“No way,” said Ensho. “You stopped being an average person the moment you took your girlfriend on a luxury overnight train in Kyushu.”

“What’s wrong with that? It was our very first trip. I splurge when the occasion calls for it. Besides, I don’t live my daily life like that. In fact, I even read supermarket flyers, and when I find a good deal, I happily go to buy it.”

“Huh, I had no idea you did that stuff,” said Komatsu.

“I do it regularly. See? I’m a normal person,” Kiyotaka said proudly.

“No, I know you ain’t,” said Ensho. “Why’re you only a cheapskate some of the time?”

“I take offense to being called a cheapskate. I pay when it’s time to pay and save when it’s time to save. More specifically, when it’s something I want to pay for, I pay without reserve, and when it’s not, I try to save as much as possible.”

“I see,” Komatsu said, crossing his arms. “That does sound like what a merchant would do.”

“So basically, you’ll squander all your money if it’s for Aoi,” said Ensho.

“Would you stop phrasing things like that?” Kiyotaka frowned.

“But doesn’t that just mean your sense of values *is* different from the little miss’s?” Komatsu asked.

“Huh?”

“Yeah, people say the number one reason for divorce is a difference in values,” said Ensho. “It doesn’t matter as much when you’re just a boyfriend

and girlfriend flirting all the time, but when you become life partners for real, she's gonna go, 'I think this might not work out between us,'" he continued, mimicking Aoi's way of speaking.

Wow, Komatsu thought, impressed. Even though Ensho looked and sounded completely different from Aoi, Komatsu could see her in him.

"But..." Kiyotaka placed his hand over his mouth, his face pale. "Christmas is a special day. I just wanted to get her something nice, maybe something she could wear. If I didn't have any savings at all, it would be a different matter. But as you can see, I've been working at a lot of places. As an adult with spending power, wouldn't *not* giving her anything make me a lousy cheapskate? Wouldn't that be disrespectful to her?"

The sight of Kiyotaka panicking was so amusing that Komatsu had to struggle to hold back his laughter. Taking on the role of the wise adult, he cleared his throat and said, "Well, I get how you feel, kiddo. But if the little miss doesn't want anything, that's that."

"Yep, that's where your values differ," Ensho added.

Kiyotaka placed his hand over his mouth in silence.

Ensho, too, seemed to be trying not to laugh—the corners of his mouth were twitching. Still, he managed to maintain a calm expression as he mimicked Aoi again. "'I'm just a normal person, so I don't think this is going to work out. I'd rather marry someone with the same values as me.' I bet it won't be long before she says that."

"Man, you really are good at that," said Komatsu. "I can't believe you can even imitate the little miss."

"What can I say? It's my specialty."

Komatsu glanced at Kiyotaka, whose face had become even more pallid. Feeling sorry for him, he threw him a lifeline. "Well, that just means you gotta develop the common person's sense of values."

"A common person's values..." Kiyotaka repeated softly. "What are a common person's values?" he muttered.

“Damn, he’s serious about this.”

“It feels like watching a nobleman fret over dating a commoner,” said Ensho.

“Yeah,” Komatsu said with a chuckle.

Hearing their laughter made Kiyotaka regain his composure. He sighed and gave Ensho a displeased look. “My issues aside, what about you, Ensho?”

The painter flinched. “Huh? What’re you talking about?”

“I’m talking about Mr. Jing. He still wants your painting, but you have yet to give him a clear answer. What are you going to do?”

Zhifei Jing, father of Yilin Jing, was a businessman from Shanghai and one of the wealthiest men in the world. He was fascinated by Ensho’s paintings.

Ensho seemed to relax at that. “Oh, that’s what you meant?”

“Is there something else I should be concerned about?”

“Nah, not at all.” He put his hand on his head, trying to brush off the matter.

He must be thinking about Aoi, Komatsu thought. The basis for his assumption was the conversation they’d had after Christmas, when the town was getting ready to ring in the new year. Komatsu had met with Ensho in this very room. After telling him about the Christmas Eve party, he had asked, “How were things on your end? You hadn’t spent time with your childhood friend in a while, right? Did you have fun?” to which Ensho had shrugged and murmured, “Yeah, Yuki kind of lit a fire under my ass.” His childhood friend must’ve told him to try harder to win over the girl he liked—and if Komatsu had sensed it, there was no way Kiyotaka hadn’t.

However, Kiyotaka pretended not to notice and continued his ambiguous questioning. “Are you hesitating?”

To Komatsu’s ears, it sounded like he was asking, “Are you hesitant to confess to her?”

Judging from the strained look on Ensho’s face, he had interpreted it the same way. “‘Bout what?” he asked.

“About selling your painting,” Kiyotaka said with a smile.

Ensho clicked his tongue in annoyance and sighed. “I’m glad he wants it, but...”

“He offered you a price this time, didn’t he?”

“Bingo.”

“How much does he want to buy it for?”

“Sixty million yen.”

Komatsu choked. “Sixty million?” His eyes widened.

Kiyotaka gave a calm nod. “What did you think about that?”

“It’s a crazy amount,” Ensho grumbled. “But rich people trade popular paintings for even more than that, right? Part of me feels like, if he’s that obsessed with it, sixty million ain’t much.” He crossed his arms, unsatisfied.

Indeed, paintings popular among the wealthy could be priced in the hundreds of millions. Sixty million was a large sum, but Ensho was frustrated that his work wasn’t valued at a hundred million like the others.

Kiyotaka hummed.

“What do you think?” Ensho asked hesitantly.

“It’s not a bad offer.”

Ensho fell silent.

“Unfortunately, art is sometimes used for money laundering. This is where you’re likely to see those unbelievable sums get tossed around—but of course, not all cases are illegitimate. If your painting were priced at a hundred million, then for better or worse, it would be labeled as ‘a painting worth a hundred million,’ and wrongdoers might try to exploit it in the future. Sixty million feels like a sincere offer from someone who doesn’t want your work to be misused.”

“Money laundering...” Ensho murmured, crossing his arms.

“Makes sense,” Komatsu whispered. Art didn’t have a concrete value, which perhaps made it perfect for money laundering. But as Kiyotaka said, it was unfortunate.

“More importantly, there’s a chance that you would stop painting if you

received hundreds of millions from the very beginning,” Kiyotaka continued. “I’m sure Mr. Jing would want you to continue.”

“If I were a painter, I’d happily retire with that sixty million,” Komatsu muttered softly.

Kiyotaka ignored the detective and asked, “Did your inspiration come back after the exhibition?”

Ensho hummed and folded his hands behind his head. He had fallen into several ruts thus far, but the exhibition seemed to have cleared his doubts. “I feel better, but I still ain’t got the will to paint. Maybe I can’t unless I have a reason to.”

“I heard you painted when you were at Yanagihara’s place.”

“Those were more like scribbles. They weren’t works of art.”

“That’s fine too. Are you painting anything like that right now?”

“Nope.”

Throughout his life, Ensho had painted commissions in his father’s stead, forgeries to provide financial support for Yuki, and a painting that had been used to save Aoi.

Without reasons like those, he can’t be motivated to paint? Being a creator is hard, Komatsu thought. *Then again, if he can get sixty million yen right now, does it even matter if his motivation comes back? That’s so much money. Wait, speaking of money...* He looked up. “Come to think of it, I saw Atsuko the other day.”

Atsuko Tadokoro taught flower arranging. The mention of her name immediately put a sad look on Kiyotaka’s face.

“How was she?” Kiyotaka asked.

“Definitely glum. I still can’t believe that happened.” Komatsu sighed.

Ensho frowned. “What happened? Another incident?”

Before Christmas, they had investigated a minor case involving Atsuko Tadokoro. Her student, Tomoka Asai, whom she loved like a daughter, had

gotten engaged. Atsuko had initially been happy for her, but not long after, she had begun plotting to break them up. This was because Tomoka's fiancé, Yutaka Sada, was the half-brother of her son, Hiroki, and she had feared that he had inherited her ex-husband's bad karma. In the end, everything had been resolved cleanly. Tomoka and Yutaka stayed together, and the half-brothers kept in touch now that they knew each other.

Kiyotaka looked at Ensho, surprised. "You don't know? It was in the newspaper and on TV."

"Did her idiot son finally get arrested?"

"No, it was nothing of the sort."

"You really don't mince words, Ensho," Komatsu said with a strained smile. *I don't blame him for assuming her son was involved, though.* "Remember how Atsuko had that insanely valuable diamond?"

"Oh, yeah," said Ensho. "A twenty-carat blue diamond, right?"

"Right, that one." Komatsu nodded. Atsuko had inherited it from her father, who had been a jeweler.

"She said she was too scared to keep it at home, so she entrusted it to a museum." In doing so, she had maintained ownership of it.

"Yeah, but apparently, she wanted to wear it for a Christmas Eve party at her place, so she took it back from the museum. The party itself went fine, but later that night, a thief broke in and stole a bunch of her jewelry, including that blue diamond."

"What?" Ensho's eyes widened.

Kiyotaka took over the explanation. "It seemed to have been the work of a pro. After the diamond was put on display at the museum, wealthy people from around the world offered to buy it, but Atsuko refused to let go of it, saying that it was a memento of her father. Thieves must have had their eye on it because it had so many interested buyers."

Ensho hummed. "So how was she when you saw her?"

"She was like a zombie," said Komatsu. "She slumped her shoulders and said,

‘I knew it was too much for me. I’m sad it’s gone, but I’m even sadder that I can’t look at it anymore.’”

“There’s more to it than being sad,” said Kiyotaka. “She had to pay a lot of inheritance tax on that diamond.”

Ensho hummed again. “But someone set a house on fire over the diamond before. Isn’t she better off without that bad luck charm?”

“Yeah, a lot happened ’cause of it,” Komatsu murmured, looking up at the ceiling.

Kiyotaka nodded. “It’s like the Hope Diamond.”

The Hope Diamond was a large blue diamond that had been owned by the likes of King Louis XIV and Marie Antoinette. Its owners had suffered misfortunes one after the other, and the ominous gemstone was now held at the Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History.

“Oh yeah, Atsuko was calling it the Oriental Hope Diamond too,” Komatsu added. As they were talking, the intercom rang, and he reached for the mouse to see who their visitor was. “Komatsu Detective Agency,” he said.

The person displayed on the screen was Yilin Jing, the daughter of the wealthy Chinese man they had just been discussing.

2

“Happy New Year,” said Yilin. “I’m sorry for visiting without advance notice.”

She sat on the sofa, pressing her hands together in apology the way a Japanese person would, gorgeous as ever with her large, bold eyes, straight nose, and glossy black hair. Today, that long, straight hair was done half-up, giving her a clean and professional impression.

“Don’t worry about it,” said Komatsu, shaking his head and hands. “Thanks for coming.”

Kiyotaka placed cups of coffee for each of them on the table and sat next to Komatsu, facing Yilin. Ensho stayed at his desk, continuing to play his card game. Yilin avoided looking at him. *Did something happen between those two?*

Komatsu wondered.

“Um, I have a request for you...” Yilin began.

“Yes?” Komatsu and Kiyotaka awaited her next words.

“An acquaintance of my father is currently visiting Japan. She’s coming to Kyoto soon, and I’m hoping you can act as her tour guides and bodyguards while she’s here.”

“Who is she?” Kiyotaka asked.

“The only daughter of a rich man in Hong Kong. Her mother is Japanese, so she’s fluent in the language. She says that in Hong Kong, she doesn’t get much freedom because of the risk of kidnapping, so she wants to relax and have fun in the safety of Japan.”

Komatsu’s face stiffened. “Uh, wouldn’t Japan be just as risky?”

“Her visit is classified information. Back at home, she has a standin pretending to be her and not leaving the house.”

“A standin?” Ensho scoffed with an exaggerated shrug. “How rich are these people?”

Kiyotaka gave a strained smile and looked at Yilin. “I’m honored that you’d ask, but I think it’d be too much pressure for us to act as bodyguards for a lady of her caliber. We’re not professionals in that field.”

“Yeah, it’s not like they can’t afford a real security detail,” said Ensho.

“I’m aware.” Yilin nodded. “Her father has professionals guarding her at all times. What she needs is someone to be her guide in this city, who can protect her when she’s in a pinch, and...”

“And?” the three agency members asked in unison.

“Apparently, he has to be handsome...”

“So that’s what this is about,” said Komatsu.

“Several skilled and knowledgeable male guides have been appointed so far, but she fired all of them immediately. I think you’re the only person in Kyoto qualified for the job, Holmes. And I was thinking Komatsu could back you up.”

There was no role for Ensho. Yilin seemed to think he no longer worked for the Komatsu Detective Agency.

Komatsu gave Kiyotaka a sideways glance. The cold look on the young man's face made it clear that he wasn't interested. Of course he wasn't. They were essentially being asked to babysit a rich girl.

"I'm sorry, but I still don't think we're—"

"Please," Yilin said, interrupting Kiyotaka. "You'll have professional bodyguards supporting you, so all you have to do is be a good tour guide. I think the compensation is quite good. Let's see..." She hurriedly opened the calculator app on her phone. "It's about this much per day. Would you be able to do it?"

She showed them the day rate. To put it bluntly, it was an unbelievable sum.

"Gladly!" Komatsu exclaimed without thinking. His agency had managed to stay in business with Kiyotaka and Ensho's help. However, its finances were always skirting the line, and anything could happen in the future. A well-paying job was extremely welcome.

"Oh, thank you, Komatsu!"

"No sweat. We'll do our best."

Komatsu shook Yilin's hand but was too scared to look at the man next to him. *Sorry, kiddo! Forgive me!* He slowly turned his head, praying for his life. Kiyotaka appeared to be smiling gently, but Komatsu could sense his silent rage. A chill ran down his spine, and he gave a small shriek.

"Of course, there is a possibility that she'll fire me right away too," Kiyotaka said in a calm voice. Komatsu tilted his head.

"I'm sure it'll be fine," said Yilin. "But if she does, it's not your fault, so you'll still be paid for the day. There's no need to worry." She sounded desperate.

Kiyotaka sighed. "By the way, when is her 'joraku'?"

"Joraku?" Yilin was fluent in Japanese, but she didn't seem to recognize that word. Understandable, considering how many Japanese people probably weren't familiar with it either.

“My apologies. ‘Joraku’ is a way of saying ‘entering Kyoto.’”

“Oh, like how people say ‘jokyo’ for ‘going to Tokyo.’”

“Yes, but ‘joraku’ is the older word. It came first,” Kiyotaka said emphatically with a smile.

“This guy never changes,” Ensho remarked with a frown.

“She’ll be arriving in Kyoto next Thursday,” said Yilin. “She’ll be here for three days. Will that be all right?”

Kiyotaka took a black leather notebook out of his chest pocket and checked his schedule.

Even in this digital age, he’s still using an old-fashioned notebook, Komatsu thought. I guess he’s more of an analog guy since his family owns an antique store. Wait, more importantly...

Komatsu grabbed Kiyotaka’s arm. “Kiddo, didn’t you say earlier that you were available to work anytime this month?”

“Did I?”

“So the Komatsu Detective Agency is fine with that schedule,” Komatsu said, ignoring him. Ensho chuckled, amused.

“Great,” said Yilin, clasping her hands together in relief. “Thank you very much. I’ll contact you later.” She bowed and left the office.

“Care to explain, Komatsu?” Kiyotaka asked him the moment Yilin was gone. His mouth was still curved in a smile, but the look in his eyes was terrifyingly cold.

“Sorry, kiddo. We never get jobs that pay that much!” Komatsu pressed his hands together pleadingly. “I’m really, really sorry.”

Ensho smirked. “Old man, if something sounds too good to be true, there’s gotta be a catch.”

“Ack...”

Kiyotaka looked exasperated. “Well, it seems like Yilin was able to save face since you accepted the request, so I’ll let it slide for now.”

“Yeah...she seemed kind of desperate.”

“I’m sure it was a direct order from her father.” Kiyotaka turned to the other man in the room. “Ensho, did something happen between you and Yilin?”

“I was wondering the same thing,” said Komatsu.

“Nah, not really.” Ensho gave a slight shrug. “I had dinner with her after the exhibition, but that’s about it.”

The day before his exhibition, Ensho had personally checked the display in order to decide whether Aoi could open it to the public or not. He had been very satisfied with what he’d seen. After giving his approval, he had gone to dinner with Yilin.

“Where did you end up going?” Kiyotaka asked.

“The motsunabe place you recommended. I didn’t feel like thinking,” Ensho said bluntly.

“Oh!” Komatsu’s eyes lit up. “Was that Yilin’s first time having motsunabe?”

“Seemed like it. She kept going on about how delicious it was.”

“Sounds like it went well.” Kiyotaka chuckled.

“Yeah, but then she said she wanted to see my original atelier.” Ensho shrugged.

Komatsu hummed. The atelier in question was probably the old apartment near Adashi Moor’s Nenbutsu-ji Temple.

“It was already late, so we decided to leave it for another day. Then, like a few days later, she asked if she could go, and I happened to be there at the time, so I said, ‘Sure’ and gave her the address.”

Komatsu and Kiyotaka silently waited for him to continue.

“She got there pretty fast, but she was probably turned off by how run-down the place was. She even hesitated to take her shoes off and go inside. So I said, ‘You don’t gotta force yourself to come in, missy. Why don’t you just go home?’ Then she kept saying, ‘I’m sorry’ over and over again ‘til she burst into tears. So I said, ‘If you keep apologizing, I’m never talking to you again,’ and that shut her

up. We haven't talked since."

Yilin had clearly been interested in Ensho. She must've wanted to see his atelier because she wanted to be part of his inner circle. However, she hadn't been able to bring herself to go inside.

"Was that before you hung out with your childhood friend?" Komatsu asked.

"Nah, right after."

"Ohhh. Weren't you the one who wanted to cry, then?" *He spent Christmas Eve with his childhood friend, Yuki, in a room that Yilin didn't even wanna step foot into.*

"As if," Ensho spat. "The place was seriously falling apart. Couldn't really blame her."

Kiyotaka hummed and looked up at the ceiling. "It was an old apartment, but it was only the paint that was musty, not the tatami mats. And since you were previously there with Yuki, I imagine it would've been aired out a bit."

"Have you been there before, kiddo?" Komatsu asked.

"Yes, around three years ago. It was a terrible experience."

"Huh? What happened?"

"Nothing happened," Ensho said dismissively. "Anyway, in the end, Yilin's a rich girl. She has completely different values."

"Are you sure? I don't think you should make assumptions," Kiyotaka said, standing up and putting the cups back on the tray.

"Thanks, kiddo," said Komatsu. "Not just for cleaning up, but, you know, for the whole Yilin thing..."

Kiyotaka shrugged. "I agree with what Ensho said earlier."

"Huh?"

"If it sounds too good to be true, there must be a catch." Kiyotaka smiled and took the tray to the kitchen.

Komatsu shrank back, ashamed that he'd been chastised by two younger men. But soon after, he pouted and said, "You never know. Something could be

good *and* true.”

But life wasn't that easy. Komatsu had no idea at the time that accepting this job was going to get them involved in a huge incident.

Chapter 2: A Local Celebrity

“It’s another busy day outside, huh?” I murmured to myself, looking out the window of the antique shop Kura.

New Year’s had passed, but students were still on break, so the Teramachi-Sanjo shopping streets were bustling with tourists. Some of them were even wearing kimono, perhaps because they were making late shrine visits. It used to be that everyone would pass by Kura without so much as glancing at it, but nowadays, that wasn’t the case. Some people stopped to look at our small display window.

This month’s theme was a camellia garden. I had hung a scroll with a painting of camellias on the wall and placed a vermilion oil-paper umbrella next to it, along with a camellia-patterned tea bowl and tea utensil set on a vermilion cloth spread. There were also red and white camellias arranged in a bamboo cylinder.

I had also included a poem about camellias. The flower had a long history—there were nine poems about it in the *Manyoshu*, one of Japan’s most well-known poetry compilations. It was difficult to choose between them, but I’d picked the one that resonated with me the most and asked the owner—who was also a calligrapher—to write it for me. He had noticed the effort I’d been putting into the display and had told me to let him know whenever I needed calligraphy.

The poem I ultimately chose was by Prince Naga:

“I wish to see my beloved. O swift sea breeze, I beseech thee, carry my thoughts to my pine and camellia in Yamato.”

“Pine” was associated with waiting, while “camellia” referred to a beautiful person. In other words, the poem meant...

“Ah, I cannot wait to see my beloved wife again. Oh swift sea breeze, I implore you, do not forget to blow these feelings of mine to her as she awaits

my return to Yamato.’ Right?” came Holmes’s voice from behind me.

I flinched and turned around to see him grinning at me. My face stiffened as I looked up at him. “It’s been a while since you read my mind like that.”

“No, I was reading your lips, not your mind.”

“My lips?”

“Your mouth was making slight movements.”

I covered my mouth, embarrassed.

Holmes chuckled and looked at the display. “It’s said that Prince Naga composed that poem during his travels. It’s full of his desire to see his beloved again.”

“Yes. Everyone looks moved when they read the explanation.” No matter the era, these dedicated feelings would always touch one’s heart.

“However, it takes more than calligraphy and a description to attract people’s attention. They stop to read it because your display is wonderful. The contrast between the red and white camellias matches the New Year’s season, and most of all, the way you used the hanging scroll and tea ceremony set to evoke the image of a camellia garden is splendid.”

“Thank you,” I said shyly.

“I should be the one saying that. We’ve had people see the display and come inside wanting to buy the tea utensils.”

The set on display was meant for outdoor tea ceremonies. In addition to the usual tea bowls and confectionery holders, it included other utensils, like a tea whisk (a bamboo instrument used for preparing green tea), a tea cloth (for wiping tea bowls), a tea scoop, and a tea caddy, all packed in a cute, portable, dark-brown bamboo basket. Wooden boxes were also a popular choice of container.

In the past, Kura had only carried expensive tea ceremony sets. But when I’d told Holmes that I wanted to put an outdoor set in the display window, he had immediately procured a few affordable varieties.

“I’m impressed, Aoi,” he continued.

“No, it was all you,” I said with a strained expression. “I was surprised that you stocked tea ceremony sets that the average person can actually afford.”

“Well, I *am* a normal person,” he stressed. “Oh, right. I had dried sardines for dinner last night. And eggs were on discount at the supermarket, so I made a rolled omelet too.”

Recently, Holmes had begun emphasizing his “normalcy.” He must’ve not been able to get over my telling him, “I wish you’d be more understanding of the average person” when we were discussing Christmas presents.

“Was that all you had for dinner?” I asked. “Dried sardines and a rolled omelet?”

“I also had brown rice, natto, and clam miso soup.” He looked at me proudly.

I fell silent. He sounded less like a commoner and more like a health-conscious socialite...but I decided not to say it out loud. Instead, I changed the subject. “Oh, by the way, is it true that you’re going to be a tour guide and bodyguard for a rich lady from Hong Kong?”

“Yes, starting next Thursday. To be honest, I’m not looking forward to it.” He sighed and glumly put his hands on his hips.

Holmes had acted as the owner’s assistant for a long time, so he was good at accompanying people and taking care of their needs like a manager would. However, he was also the type of person who got annoyed if it wasn’t someone he willingly chose to assist. So he was probably telling the truth when he said he wasn’t looking forward to it.

Wanting to cheer him up, I looked around the store for a distraction. “Oh, I know.” I clapped my hands together. “Holmes, do you want to go see the Jakuchu exhibition sometime?”

Next month, the Kyoto National Museum was going to exhibit the works of Jakuchu Ito, a painter from the Edo period. Our store had received a promotional poster for it, which was currently displayed behind the counter.

“Yes, gladly!” he replied, beaming. “I was going to ask you too, Aoi. I have an invitation, and more importantly, Jakuchu is very special to me.”

“He is?”

“Yes, he grew up right over there, in Nishiki Market.”

“Oh, right.” I nodded. “His family owned a vegetable wholesale store called Masuya, didn’t they?”

“Correct. Basically, Jakuchu Ito is like a local celebrity to me.”

“A local celebrity?” I laughed. “I’ve actually never been to an exhibition of his work before.” I’d only seen his paintings at temples and the like.

“Really? That’s surprising.”

“I’ve been meaning to, but they’re always held when I happen to be busy.”

“It looks like they’ll have most of his famous works this time, so I’m looking forward to it.”

“Yeah.” I nodded firmly.

“I think this museum date will motivate me to work harder.”

“I hope your work goes well. I’m rooting for you,” I said, clenching my fists.

“Oh no,” he said, reverting to his Kyoto accent and covering his mouth.

“You’re being so adorable again. I want to hug you, but it’s business hours. The store won’t close for another three hours, which means a hundred and eighty minutes, or ten thousand and eight hundred seconds... Three hours is such a long time.”

“Holmes?”

“Please, Aoi, don’t tempt me during work hours!”

“Huh?!” My eyes widened.

Suddenly, the chime rang. Holmes quickly reverted to his usual expression and turned to face the door. I turned too, and was about to welcome our visitor until I saw that it wasn’t a customer, but the manager.

“It sure is warm today,” he said, sitting on a chair at the counter and taking a stack of papers out of his bag. The words on them were printed rather than handwritten, and the additional pages, such as the frontispiece, had already been designed. It was what was called a “galley proof.”

The manager hummed a few notes as he took out a red pen and began checking the proof. He often looked like he was in pain while writing his manuscript, but he always enjoyed proofreading the completed story.

Come to think of it, he used to be an editor for a publishing company. Polishing up a book might be his area of expertise.

Holmes brought the manager a cup of coffee. “Oh, right.” He clapped his hands together. “Dad, would you be able to watch the store for about an hour? I want to show Aoi something.”

“Sure, go ahead. I don’t mind.” The manager smiled.

“Shall we go, then, Aoi?” Holmes immediately put on his jacket.

“Um, sure,” I said, uncertain of what was happening as I took off my apron and slipped on my mid-length coat. I braced myself for the cold winter wind when the door was opened, but as the manager said, the sun was warm. I relaxed my shoulders. “The weather is so nice.”

“Indeed.” Holmes nodded. “This way.” He began to walk.

Where are we going? Just now, he said he wanted to hug me. Is he trying to take me to a place where we can have privacy for almost an hour? It’s not that I don’t want to. But we’re supposed to be working right now, and most of all, if that’s what he’s planning, I’m not ready right now... What should I do?! Come to think of it, there is a hotel for that kind of stuff nearby... I suddenly imagined Holmes approaching me, loosening his necktie, and blushed.

Holmes twitched. “Oh, please. I’m not trying to take you somewhere inappropriate.”

I looked at him, stunned. “Was my mouth moving again?”

“No, it was your eyes. They were flitting around.”

“I’m sorry.”

“It’s fine. I know I have a past offense.”

“A past offense...”

There was a time when Holmes had led me by the hand into a narrow alley

that had only been wide enough for one person to pass through at a time. After walking for a bit, we had reached a wide, open space surrounded by buildings on all four sides. There, he had held out his arms and said, “Come here, Aoi.” Remembering it made me blush again.

“I’d like to say we should go there again sometime, but that place doesn’t exist anymore,” said Holmes.

“Huh? Really?”

“Yes, because the store next to it was remodeled. I found that place when I was a child and always thought of it as my secret base, so it was a bit disheartening.”

“I remember making a secret base with my friends in elementary school too. You did cute things like that, huh?”

“Yes, as a child, I was innocent. But after growing up, I brought the girl I loved to my private hideout to flirt with her, so as you can see, I’ve become a sinful adult. It’s truly regrettable.” He sighed.

I choked.

“But back then, I also wanted to show you that place because it was special to me.”

My expression relaxed as I remembered the childish smile he’d given me at the time. I was glad that I’d gotten to see it. “So where are we going now?” I asked.

Holmes held up his index finger in front of his mouth. “Aoi, when you think of temples related to Jakuchu Ito, what comes to mind?”

“Umm...” I looked up as I pondered the unexpected question. “The one in Imadegawa, near Doshisha University... Shokoku-ji?”

“Correct.” He nodded. “It’s believed that the head priest at the time, Daiten—also known as Kenjo Baiso—was the one who discovered Jakuchu’s talent. Jakuchu looked up to Daiten as his teacher and donated many of his paintings to Shokoku-ji Temple.”

I nodded in silence.

“But there’s actually another temple related to Jakuchu near here.”

“Really? I had no idea. Where is it?”

“It’s Hozo-ji Temple on Uraderamachi Street. It houses his family grave.”

The name “Uraderamachi” sounded like it could mean “behind Teramachi,” but it was actually a north-south street between Kawaramachi Street and Shinkyogoku Street. It wasn’t long, but there were many small temples along it, most of which were usually closed to the public. Hozo-ji Temple was an exception—it was open.

When we entered the temple grounds, I was surprised to see that there were many people inside. The main building was at the end of the path. We prayed there before looking around the rest of the grounds.

Next to the main building, there was a group of dignified gravestones for Jakuchu Ito’s family. People were praying there and waiting to receive their collectible seal stamps. It was as if they were on a pilgrimage.

“The seals and seal books here are popular,” Holmes said. True to his word, there was a line of visitors waiting at the booth where they were being given out.

When we entered the temple’s office, we found various talismans featuring Jakuchu’s art. Even the seal books had his paintings on the cover—*Bamboo and Rooster*, *Skulls*, and *Koi Carp*.

“You can see how popular Jakuchu is, can’t you?” Holmes asked.

“Yeah.” I nodded. “These would make great souvenirs. Don’t you think Ensho would like these seal books with *Bamboo and Rooster* and *Skulls* on the cover?”

He froze, an icy look on his face.

“Holmes, your eyebrows are furrowing.”

“Sorry.” He relaxed his expression. “Yes, a Jakuchu seal book would suit Ensho. Let’s get him one while we’re here.” He picked up a seal book.

I grinned. “I’m sure he’ll love it.”

“I wouldn’t be so sure, considering it’s coming from me. I feel like he’d just be

annoyed.”

“That’s not true. It’s perfect timing, isn’t it?”

“For what?” Holmes looked confused. Apparently, he didn’t know.

“I just happened to hear about it, but...” I explained the situation.

Holmes hummed. “In that case, a seal book alone seems lacking.”

“I feel like he’d say it’s more than enough.”

As we talked, we left Hozo-ji Temple. I looked back at the gate and saw that there was a steady stream of visitors going in.

“It really is popular,” I remarked. “But that grave wasn’t for Jakuchu himself, was it?”

“Correct.” Holmes nodded. “Hozo-ji Temple houses the Ito family grave, but Jakuchu’s remains aren’t there. They do say his hair is buried there, though. His personal grave is at Sekiho-ji Temple.”

“Sekiho-ji...” I’d never heard of it before.

“Sekiho-ji Temple belongs to the Obaku school of Zen Buddhism. It’s located in Fukakusa, on the hill near Fushimi Inari Taisha. In Jakuchu’s later years, he entered the Obaku school in search of the original nature of religion, and there he met the head priest of Sekiho-ji Temple. That was when he created the five hundred arhats.”

The phrase “five hundred arhats” didn’t ring a bell either. Holmes sensed my confusion and quickly explained to me that in Buddhism, those who had attained the highest level of enlightenment were called arhats. So “five hundred arhats” meant “five hundred amazing people who have attained enlightenment.” It referred to statues of high-ranking monks. Even if there weren’t exactly five hundred of them, they were still called “five hundred arhats.”

“The three major five-hundred-arhats collections in Japan are Tokuzo-ji Temple in Tochigi Prefecture, Kencho-ji Temple in Kanagawa Prefecture, and Rakan-ji Temple in Oita Prefecture.”

I listened to his lecture in silence.

“Jakuchu’s five hundred arhats still remain in Sekiho-ji Temple, on the hill behind the main building. There used to be over a thousand statues, but now there are fewer than five hundred. The sight of the stone buddhas in the middle of a thick bamboo forest is very mystical.”

I imagined the scene and a smile came to my face. *It must be majestic and fantastical.*

“I’d like to see them one day,” I said.

“Yes, let’s go there sometime. Shall we head back now?”

And with that, we walked back to Kura, hand in hand.

Chapter 3: Mission Start

1

Thursday came quickly. It was 10:30 a.m., the scheduled meeting time.

“Ugh, I’m so tired.” Komatsu stifled a yawn as he stepped onto the premises of the Hyant Jency hotel near Sanjusangen-do Temple. “This Hyant feels pretty different from the one in Tokyo, huh?”

Komatsu was originally from the Kanto region. He had been a frequent guest at Tokyo’s Hyant Jency...if walking past it all the time counted. Whenever he’d passed the luxury hotel in Nishi-Shinjuku, he would gape in awe at the socialites lounging in the lobby and the extravagant chandeliers hanging from the high ceiling.

On the other hand, Kyoto’s Hyant Jency wasn’t tall. It seemed to only have two stories—five if you included the building in the back.

“Since it’s short, it doesn’t feel intimidating,” Komatsu murmured. “Makes it easy to just walk in.”

“Hey, old man,” came a voice from behind him.

There was only one person out there who called him “old man.” He turned around, and sure enough, it was Ensho. The bald man was wearing a hat, jacket, and jeans. His arms were crossed.

“Huh, you showed up too?” Komatsu asked.

“Just outta curiosity. If I get bored, I’ll leave. Where’s Holmes?”

“He’s probably already inside.”

As they talked, they entered the lobby. Unlike the hotel in Tokyo, this one had a quiet and relaxed atmosphere with modern Japanese-style lighting. But it still had rich-looking people chatting on the sofas. Needless to say, Komatsu and Ensho felt out of place.

A man who was reading a newspaper stood up from his sofa. “There you are, Komatsu.” It was Kiyotaka. He smiled and walked up to them with his usual impeccable mannerisms, looking dazzling in his dark gray suit.

“Oh, it’s you, kiddo,” said Komatsu. “You look just like a young and handsome businessman when you’re in a place like this.”

Ensho humphed and crossed his arms. “I bet you were being pretentious by reading an English newspaper.”

“No, it was Kyoto Shimbun’s local topics section,” said Kiyotaka.

“Local topics?” Ensho scoffed.

“That’s the kiddo for you,” said Komatsu. *His consistency puts me at ease.*

Kiyotaka looked at Ensho and chuckled. “I see you decided to come after all.”

“What, am I not allowed to?”

“No, I’m glad you did, because now I can give you this.” Kiyotaka took a seal book out of his pocket. The cover was black and depicted skulls and a rooster.

“What’s this? Jakuchu?”

“Yes. It’s a bit early, but this is for you.”

“Huh?” Ensho’s eyes widened.

“It suits you, doesn’t it? Especially *Skulls*.”

“*Skulls*? Am I *that* edgy? And whaddya mean, it’s a bit early? Is this a new kind of harassment?” The sudden gift had Ensho—and Komatsu—confused.

“Actually, Aoi saw this seal book and thought you would like it. She seemed like she was going to buy it for you, so I picked it up instead.”

In other words, Kiyotaka had bought the book first in order to prevent Aoi from giving Ensho a present directly. That was just like him.

“So if you don’t like it...” Kiyotaka began to put it back into his pocket.

Ensho grabbed the seal book. Even if it was coming from Kiyotaka, Aoi was the one who had chosen it, so there was no way he wasn’t happy about it.

“I didn’t say I didn’t want it,” said Ensho.

“Ah, I see. It’s yours, then.” Kiyotaka handed the book over. His smile didn’t reach his eyes.

“Thanks.”

Komatsu’s face stiffened. *It should be a friendly scene, so why do I see sparks flying?*

Noticing something, Kiyotaka looked towards the elevator. “I believe our client has arrived.”

A man in his thirties bowed and walked up to them. He wore glasses and a tailored suit and gave off a clean vibe. He looked like he could be an elite businessman or a department store salesman.

“You must be from the Komatsu Detective Agency,” the man said. “It’s a pleasure to meet you. My name is Kimishima.”

He took out his business card, and Komatsu and Kiyotaka quickly followed suit. Ensho watched the exchange with an uninterested look on his face. Kimishima’s business card was in Japanese on the front and English on the back. The Japanese side said, “Hua Ya Corporation—Eiji Kimishima.” Hua Ya was a large company based in Hong Kong that dealt in IT, shipping, international trade, real estate, and apparel.

“Miss Yilin told me about you, Mr. Kiyotaka Yagashira,” said Kimishima. “Thank you very much for agreeing to be a guide.” He bowed and began explaining what they needed to know about their charge, although it was nothing they hadn’t already heard from Yilin.

The Komatsu Detective Agency was tasked with guiding the only daughter of Hua Ya Corporation representative Haoyu Zhou. Her name was Zixuan Zhou, and she was twenty years old.

“Is it true that she’s fluent in Japanese?” Komatsu asked.

“Yes.” Kimishima nodded. “She used to speak Japanese with her mother at home. While she’s not fluent in all aspects of the language, she can speak it very well.” He paused before continuing, “I am one of Representative Zhou’s secretaries, and until now, I have been acting as his daughter’s guide and attendant when she goes out. However, I committed a blunder while we were

in Tokyo and she relieved me of my role. Now I am part of the security team that watches over her from a distance.”

“A blunder?” Kiyotaka asked.

“In Tokyo, she asked me to do some shopping for her, but I bought something different from what she had specified. So...”

“What?” Ensho frowned. “You got fired just ’cause of that?”

“Oh, no. She usually wouldn’t dismiss someone over such a small thing. She had her reasons. Anyway, after that, we appointed new guides, but they all got fired. I didn’t know what to do, so I asked Representative Zhou for help.”

And the representative had gone to Mr. Jing, who had assigned the task to Yilin.

Kiyotaka hummed and stroked his chin. “What were the previous guides like?”

“Naturally, everyone we enlisted was both knowledgeable and capable of protecting her on the spur of the moment. The latter requirement meant that they all ended up being muscular men. Presumably, that was not to the lady’s liking, so...” Kimishima appraised Kiyotaka’s graceful appearance and slender frame. “I’m very glad to have someone like you here,” he said enthusiastically.

“She might dismiss me immediately too, you know?”

“No, no, I’m sure you’ll be fine.”

Komatsu and Ensho both nodded in agreement.

Kiyotaka placed his hand on his chest and smiled. “Thank you. I’ll try my best, in the way I see fit.”

Thank God, Komatsu thought, relieved. He’d been worried about Kiyotaka’s reluctance to take the job.

“Please come with me,” Kimishima said, walking towards the elevator.

Kiyotaka, Komatsu, and Ensho followed him.

They were taken to a room on the fifth floor—the hotel’s highest floor. Upon

entering, the first thing they saw was a chic living room.

“Whoa,” said Komatsu. He’d only ever stayed at cheap business hotels where the rooms were tiny and had the desk and bed crammed together. However, there was no bed to be seen here. The room next door must have been the bedroom. “A suite, huh?” he muttered. The living room had a table with sofas around it, and the windows provided a view of the city.

Their charge was sitting on an armchair. Komatsu’s first impression of her was “an Eastern beauty you’d see in a Hollywood film.” She had straight hair trimmed neatly at the jawline with long bangs swept to the side. Her face was small and egg-shaped with a straight nose, small nostrils, full lips, and almond-shaped eyes. What stood out the most were her long eyelashes. He didn’t know if it was mascara or extensions, but they looked as if they could flutter away at any moment.

She wore a simple outfit consisting of a low-cut knit top and long leather skirt. However, her large diamond necklace and gold bracelets sparkled with an overwhelming presence.

“My lady, this is Kiyotaka Yagashira, who will be your guide in Kyoto,” Kimishima said in English.

The woman glanced at Kiyotaka, picked up the high-heeled shoe hanging from the end of her foot, and flung it at him. Kiyotaka made no effort to dodge or catch it, so it hit his body and fell to the floor.

“Aha ha ha! You didn’t react at all! You’re stupider than all of the other guides! Kimishima, did you choose purely based on looks this time? You really are old.” She clapped her hands and laughed.

Old? Komatsu glanced at Kimishima. The man wasn’t the bright and energetic type, but he certainly wasn’t old; not by Komatsu’s standards, at least. He seemed like a nice young man...but judging from his flustered look, he had taken the insult to heart.

“Hmph.” The lady looked at Kiyotaka. “Well, it’s fine. I don’t need a real bodyguard in this safe country, and I’d much rather walk around town with a pretty boy. You’re hired for now.”

Kimishima placed his hand on his chest in relief, while Komatsu anxiously clasped his hands together. Ensho had his hand over his mouth as if he was trying not to laugh.

“Your name is Kiyotaka? Put my shoe on for me. Any idiot is capable of that, right?” The lady rested her chin on her hand and pointed her toes at Kiyotaka.

Kiyotaka smiled and narrowed his eyes. “I refuse.”

“Excuse me?”

Kiyotaka extended his arms and gave a dramatic shrug. “Perhaps you aren’t aware, but that does not fall under a guide’s duties.”

Kiddo, no! Komatsu covered his face with his hands. *I know how you feel, but can’t you phrase it a little more nicely?*

“Saw that one coming,” Ensho said with an amused chuckle.

The lady looked at Kimishima and said, “Desserts” in a complaining tone. Was she asking him to bring her something sweet to put her in a better mood?

Kimishima weakly whispered in her ear, “Um, my lady, he was introduced to us by Mr. Jing...”

The lady gave a small sigh and looked at Kiyotaka. “I suppose you’re right. It’s not the job of a guide.” Her attitude had changed. Even this rich lady couldn’t afford to disrespect Mr. Jing. “Well then, Kiyotaka, could you return my shoe?”

Kiyotaka picked up the high heel at his feet and tossed it to her.

She caught it, startled. “What? Why did you throw it at me?!”

“Ah, my apologies. I thought that might be your way of doing things. I follow the principle of, ‘When in Rome, do as the Romans do.’ I’m impressed, though. Unlike me, you aren’t stupid.” Kiyotaka gave a radiant smile. “Nice catch,” he said, giving her a thumbs-up.

Kiddo, nooooo! Komatsu held his head in his hands, while Ensho burst out laughing, unable to hold it in anymore.

“What’s with this man?” The lady clicked her tongue. “Isn’t he far too rude, even if Mr. Jing sent him?”

“Ahhh, I hear he’s an expert on Kyoto, my lady,” Kimishima said hurriedly. “It’s going to be a great tour.”

The woman narrowed one eye and hummed. “Well then, Mr. Kyoto Expert, take me somewhere with a lot of impact. Oh, I’ve already been to Kiyomizudera, Kinkaku-ji, Yasaka Shrine, Fushimi Inari, and all that, so not any of the extremely famous places.” She stood up.

“Understood.” Kiyotaka bowed. “But first, please change into something more comfortable. Preferably sneakers as well, since a lot of shrines and temples involve walking on gravel.”

Before the lady could object, Kimishima exclaimed, “Good point! We wouldn’t want you to twist your ankle.”

Mission 1: An Impactful Kyoto

Kiyotaka brought the lady to Yasui Konpiragu in Gion. It was known as the “Shrine of Cutting Ties” and had a large stone monument with paper charms all over it. The monument had a hole in the middle, like a tunnel.

“Wh-What is this?” the lady muttered with a frown. She had changed into a more dynamic outfit consisting of a leather jacket, jeans, and sneakers.

Komatsu and Ensho were watching from a short distance away, while Kimishima—who had been banned from accompanying the lady after committing his blunder—was waiting in the van.

Kiyotaka’s lapel pin had a built-in camera and microphone. The camera footage was transmitted to the security team on standby in a nearby car. Komatsu could also hear the audio through his earphones, and he too wore a camera pin on his chest just in case.

“You’re not going with the camera glasses you used last time?” Komatsu had asked.

“I’m technically supposed to be her bodyguard too, so glasses would get in the way,” Kiyotaka had replied. “Not only would they hinder my movement, the rims would obstruct a small part of my vision, which bothers me.”

“Huh.” Komatsu sometimes wore glasses as well, but he’d never felt that the rims obstructed his vision, so that was all he could say.

Kiyotaka began explaining as usual. “This shrine is called Yasui Konpiragu. It has a long history dating back to the Asuka period, during the reign of Emperor Tenji. It was established by Kamatari Fujiwara, a powerful noble at the time, who planted purple wisteria flowers here and called it ‘Fuji-dera,’ meaning ‘Wisteria Temple.’ He prayed for his clan’s prosperity and that his descendants would continue for eternity.”

The lady hummed.

“Over four hundred years later, Emperor Sutoku took a liking to the wisterias and had his favorite concubine, Awa no Naishi, live here.”

The lady remained silent as she listened to the explanation. Komatsu squinted and saw that she was frowning. Perhaps this kind of lecture annoyed her.

“After Emperor Sutoku retired from his post, he was defeated in the Hogen Rebellion and eventually died in Sanuki, which is now Kagawa Prefecture. Awa no Naishi, in her grief, enshrined in the temple’s Kannon hall a hand-drawn portrait that she had received from the emperor himself. That is how Emperor Sutoku became the main deity of the temple.”

Kiyotaka paused before continuing.

“However, before his passing, Emperor Sutoku abandoned all of his worldly desires and devoted himself to prayer in Sanuki’s Kotohiragu Shrine. That is why this place is considered a place to pray for abstinence.”

“Abstinence?”

“It means ‘cutting ties.’ The stone covered in charms is called the ‘monument for breaking off bad relations and initiating good ones.’ You do so by passing through the hole in the center. How’s that for impact?” Kiyotaka smiled.

“It does have an impact...but don’t you think that stone is disconcerting? It feels like it’s going to start slithering away.” The lady grimaced as she looked at the monument.

Komatsu chuckled at her use of the word “disconcerting.” She really was good

at Japanese. And now that she mentioned it, the monument *did* look creepy.

“It’s rude to call it disconcerting,” said Kiyotaka. “That said, it’s true it has broken the kind of evil ties that people couldn’t do anything about themselves. Think of how many desperate people must have passed through it over the years. I’m sure that it has absorbed countless painful thoughts and regrets.”

A chill ran down Komatsu’s spine as he listened. He turned and looked at the wooden prayer plaques hung up around the shrine.

“I pray that I can cut ties with my abusive husband.”

“I pray that my power-harassing boss goes away.”

“I pray that my stalker forgets about me.”

They were the kind of serious wishes that made one shudder.

The lady was clearly scared. “Kiyotaka, have you passed through it before?”

“No.” Kiyotaka shook his head. “It feels frightening, so I have yet to do so. Because of that, I haven’t been able to break my bad relationship, and it’s still here with me.”

He was probably referring to Ensho. Komatsu glanced at the bald man and saw that he was scowling.

“What?!” the lady shrieked. “Why would you recommend something you haven’t even done yourself?”

“This shrine is said to be very effective,” said Kiyotaka. “I recommend it to anyone who wants to change their life, and most importantly, I think it’ll help you break the evil connections surrounding you. It’s a great opportunity.” He clenched his fists enthusiastically.

“I don’t have any evil connections!” the lady shouted angrily.

“Huh? Really?”

“Don’t act so surprised!”

Komatsu burst out laughing without thinking.

“Besides,” the lady continued, her arms outstretched, “this place does have an impact, but it’s not what I’m looking for. I want something different, like...

Oh, I know. Isn't there a place that will move my heart?!"

"Is that what you want? Fine, very well." Kiyotaka sighed.

"Aren't you supposed to be a guide? Why are you being so condescending?"

"I'm doing no such thing." Kiyotaka chuckled.

Komatsu and Ensho, who had been watching from a distance, exchanged a look.

"Holmes has gotta be trying to get fired as soon as he can," said Ensho.

"Yeah, I had a feeling that was the case..." Komatsu sighed and facepalmed. He fully understood how Kiyotaka felt. He had selfishly accepted the job while Kiyotaka was trying to decline it, and it turned out the lady was as arrogant as it got. It was no wonder that he was trying to get fired as soon as possible so that he could leave. Komatsu understood, but he wished the young man would at least *try* to do his job.

Mission 2: An Emotional Kyoto

The next place Kiyotaka brought them was a short walk from Yasui Konpiragu. It was a small store just down the road from Rokuharamitsu-ji Temple. The sign said "Child-Raising Ghost Candy."

"Am I reading this correctly?" the lady murmured skeptically, looking at Kiyotaka. "Child-raising ghost candy? What is this place?"

"There's a story behind it." Kiyotaka placed his hand on his chest and began to explain. "In the year 1599, there was a woman who would come here every night to buy candy. One day, the store owner grew curious and decided to follow her...only to witness her vanish into a grave," he said, lowering his tone of voice. The lady flinched. "Surprised, the store owner went to search for her and heard crying coming from the grave she'd disappeared at."

"C-Crying?" the lady squeaked. Perhaps she didn't like scary stories.

"Yes. He then dug into the grave and found a baby holding a piece of candy."

"What?"

“The mother and baby must have been buried together for some reason. However, the baby was still alive, so after the mother died and became a ghost, she continued to buy candy every night to feed her child. It’s a story about a mother’s love,” Kiyotaka said passionately, raising his hand to his mouth.

The lady pressed her finger to the corner of her eye, seemingly trying to hold back tears.

“It moves your heart, doesn’t it?” Kiyotaka said proudly.

The lady looked away with a start. “Not really. There’s no proof that it happened.”

“By the way, the baby who was rescued went on to become a high-ranked priest. A child saved by his mother’s spirit became a priest who guided other spirits. Doesn’t that warm your heart?”

“Yes...” The woman began to nod, but then came to a realization and looked up. “It may be touching, but I’m not looking for disconcerting places like this. I want to see something *appealing*. Don’t you know any places like that?”

“I’m sorry. I’m afraid I’m too stupid.”

“Are you *still* holding a grudge about what I said?”

“No, no. It’s the truth.”

“You *are* holding a grudge. Well, whatever. I want to do something that other people don’t. Give me a unique experience!”

“Understood. I will bring you to a place where you can have a special experience.” Kiyotaka placed his hand on his chest and bowed.

“Please do,” the lady scoffed.

“Seriously, kiddo, please do,” Komatsu muttered in prayer. “Oh, right!” He took out his phone and sent a message. The reply came immediately, and he hugged his phone to his chest, relieved, then turned to his companion. “Sorry, Ensho, can I get you to do a favor for me?”

“Huh?” Ensho’s eyes widened.

Mission 3: A Unique Experience in Kyoto

“What’s with these stairs?! They’re so old and shaky!” the lady screamed as she climbed the staircase that was as narrow and steep as a ladder.

Kiyotaka had taken her to Yasaka Tower, located between Yasaka Shrine and Kiyomizu-dera Temple as part of Hoka-ji Temple. It was a famous five-story pagoda that any sightseer in Higashiyama would have seen before. Komatsu had also seen this historic structure countless times, but he hadn’t known it was possible to go inside.

The tower did not have a spacious interior. It was supported by a thick central pillar that was surrounded by statues of Gochi Nyorai, the five wisdom buddhas. After praying to them, it was time to head to the upper level, but the narrow and steep stairs were enough to intimidate anyone who wasn’t accustomed to them. The lady was currently cowering as she ascended them, with Kiyotaka right behind her.

Kiyotaka beamed. “Isn’t it incredible? Yasaka Tower is an official Important Cultural Property of Japan that was rebuilt in the Muromachi period. To think we can enter this historic building and even climb up to the second level! Isn’t it a dream come true?”

“I did say I wanted a unique experience, but why are these stairs so unstable?! What are you going to do if I slip and fall?!”

“Don’t worry. I’ll catch you if that happens.”

“What, a stupid beanpole like you?”

“Yes, even a stupid beanpole is capable of such a thing.”

“Oh, I get it now. You think if you’re lucky, you’ll get to touch my body.”

“Would you please refrain from insulting me?” Kiyotaka immediately said in a low voice.

“*That’s* what offends you? Not being called a stupid beanpole?”

“Yes, because the only person I want to touch is my fiancée.”

Komatsu choked.

“No one asked!” the lady shouted.

“The only person I want to touch is my fiancée,” Kiyotaka repeated.

“Why did you say it again?”

“Because it’s important.”

“Ugh, I don’t care.”

“My apologies.”

“Well, she must be a very tolerant person if she’s engaged to a horrid man like you.”

“Now that’s rude. I’m often told that I have a stellar personality.”

“It must be sarcasm, right?”

“You’re right that she’s tolerant, though. She’s a wonderful woman and I don’t deserve her.”

“Like I said, no one asked and I don’t care.” The lady clicked her tongue as she climbed the stairs. “Seriously, why are you— Wow!” she exclaimed upon reaching the second level.

Komatsu would also learn this later when he went up, but the windows on the second level provided a view of the Higashiyama townscape. Seeing the present-day city from inside the ancient tower really emphasized the difference in time periods. It made one appreciate the technology of the time and the central pillar supporting the tower, and most of all, it was moving to think that such a historic structure was still standing today, and even open to the public.

The lady realized it too. “You were right,” she said in a slightly frustrated tone after leaving the tower. “It was a unique experience.”

“I’m glad to hear that,” said Kiyotaka. He looked around the temple grounds and asked Komatsu, “Did Ensho go home? I don’t see him anywhere.”

“Oh, nah.” Komatsu scratched his head. “He’ll be back. I’m gonna go up and take a look too. Wait for me, all right?”

“Of course. We’ll pray at the shrine in the meantime.” Kiyotaka started walking towards the torii gate and began his explanation. “This was where the head of Yoshinaka Kiso was buried...”

When Komatsu came back down from the tower, the lady had her arms crossed.

“Hey, I’m hungry,” she said. “I want to have lunch at a very Kyoto-esque place.”

Komatsu looked at the time. It was already noon. He realized that he was hungry too.

“I had a nearby place in mind,” said Kiyotaka. “It’s almost time for our reservation, so let’s head over.”

“You made a reservation?” Komatsu blurted out, surprised.

“Yes.” Kiyotaka nodded.

For all his reluctance and reckless remarks, Kiyotaka was still doing his job as a guide properly. Komatsu was impressed.

Mission 4: A Kyoto-esque Lunch

The restaurant that Kiyotaka had chosen for lunch was less than a five-minute walk from Hokan-ji Temple. It was an old establishment known for its boiled tofu, and it had another location near Nanzen-ji Temple. They were brought to a Japanese-style room with a view of the garden, and by the time the boiled-tofu lunch sets arrived, the lady was in a much better mood.

“Tofu is very popular among our crowd,” she said. “It’s all about macrobiotics these days.”

“Do you eat a macrobiotic diet?” Kiyotaka asked.

A macrobiotic diet mainly consisted of brown rice, whole grains, bean products, vegetables, edible seaweeds, and salt. No meat was to be consumed. Many foreign socialites had adopted this health regimen.

“Not consistently, but sometimes,” the lady said. “I model for our clothing brand, so this kind of Japanese food is very welcome. I give this place a passing grade.” She took a bite of the boiled tofu.

The lady's security detail was standing guard outside the room. *She really is important*, Komatsu thought, impressed.

"You're eating without hesitation," Kiyotaka remarked. "Are you sure you don't need the food to be tested for poison?"

"Aha ha ha! My father is only worried about kidnappers."

"Kidnappers?"

"Yes, because he has what everyone wants. He isn't concerned about me being poisoned to death, so I can eat anything without worry."

"That's good. I'll begin too, then." Kiyotaka gave thanks for the meal before picking up his chopsticks. His handsome appearance combined with his elegant mannerisms attracted the attention of the young waitress, who blushed and glanced at him as she passed by.

The lady noticed and giggled. "Your looks are the one thing I can't complain about."

"It's a shame that I'm stupid on the inside," Kiyotaka retorted immediately.

Komatsu choked.

The lady gave a strained smile. "You really do have a horrible personality. You must be popular with the ladies because of your looks, though."

"No, I'm not."

"Do girls aside from your fiancée ever come on to you?"

"No."

"You're lying."

"No, it's true. Unfortunately, I have a horrible personality."

"Again with the snide remarks... Hey, you said your name was Komatsu, right? This guy is popular, isn't he?"

Komatsu hadn't been expecting to be addressed, but he did his best to respond. "Uh, he *is* popular, I guess, but only to the point of getting glances like just now. Thinking about it, I don't think I've ever seen a girl make moves on him." Kiyotaka was very popular with the older women in Gion, but you

couldn't say they were seriously pursuing him. "The kiddo—I mean, this guy—puts up a wall around him, and everyone knows he's obsessed with his fiancée, so it's not easy to approach him."

The lady hummed. "In that case, Kiyotaka, what would you do if a lovely girl other than your fiancée, who was completely your type in both looks and personality, made a move on you?"

"I wouldn't do anything," Kiyotaka said.

"What if she said, 'It's okay if you already have a girlfriend. I'm fine with being number two,' and really meant it?"

"I would say, 'I don't need a number two, so no thank you.'"

Komatsu laughed at how Kiyotaka had answered with no hesitation whatsoever.

The lady's eyes widened. "You really love your fiancée, don't you?"

"Yes." Kiyotaka nodded.

"Well then, what if your beloved fiancée died before you did? What would you do?"

"Huh?" He froze, his eyes wide with shock. "What *would* I do?" he murmured softly. "I don't think I'd commit suicide, but I don't know how I'd live in a world without her."

"You say that, and you'd be sad at first, but after a while, you'd fall in love with someone else."

"I doubt it. I'm sure I'd live a lifestyle akin to a monk. I don't think I'd be able to fall in love with another," he whispered, a distant look in his eyes.

"Hmph. It's amazing how enamored you are."

"Thank you."

"It wasn't a compliment." The lady frowned. "But people's hearts change. At the wedding, the priest asks, 'Do you vow to love and to cherish till death do you part?' and they might even say, 'We'll love each other even after death separates us,' but some of them eventually forget that promise."

That's an oddly specific example, Komatsu thought. He started looking up the lady's family, pretending to be checking his email. Just then, his phone buzzed with a message from Ensho.

"We're out front."

His expression relaxed at the simple text. *"Sorry, we'll be there soon,"* he replied before looking up. Kiyotaka and the lady had finished eating and were sipping tea while discussing the next destination.

"I do think it was a unique experience," the lady said. "But I'm looking for something different. I want a place that I can post on social media and get a lot of engagement with."

"How about Seimei Shrine, then? The pentagram there is quite photo-worthy."

"A pentagram!" The lady's face lit up.

"It also has a reproduction of Ichijo Modoribashi, a bridge with quite a few morbid tales surrounding it," Kiyotaka said ominously.

"Again, that's *not* what I'm looking for!" the lady screamed.

"Hey, uh..." Komatsu raised his hand. "Miss, we have someone else who rushed over to help and will understand what a girl wants. Are you okay with a second guide?"

The lady hummed. "Well, I'll decide after I see them. But if they understand what I want, they're more than welcome to join. Kiyotaka is a good guide, but he keeps taking me to places that just aren't right. He *is* a bit stupid, after all."

She's saying that on purpose, Komatsu thought to himself.

Kiyotaka frowned, seeming to have picked up on something. "Who is this guide?"

"I'd like to know too," said the lady. "What kind of person are they?" Her eyes were full of curiosity.

"Oh, uh...it's the person you were talking about earlier! His fiancée, Aoi Mashiro!"

Kiyotaka furrowed his brow. “What is the meaning of this?” He brought his face close to Komatsu’s. “Aoi has class today. I am extremely against causing her trouble.”

“No, you see, since you were...having a hard time, I asked the little miss if she could back you up, and she said, ‘I only have morning lectures today, so I can help in the afternoon if that works.’ So I got Ensho to bring her over. Sorry for acting on my own!” Komatsu clapped his hands together.

“Good grief. I don’t know what to do with you.” Kiyotaka sighed, but his expression had relaxed. He must’ve been delighted to be able to spend time with Aoi when he wasn’t expecting it. “Well, where is she?”

“She should be right outside the restaurant.”

“Let’s go, then.” Kiyotaka immediately stood up and left the room.

The lady frowned as she watched him go. “Hey, Komatsu. Is it just me or is that guy extremely self-centered?”

“Ah, well, yeah.” The detective’s face stiffened.

2

Ensho and Aoi were waiting outside the restaurant.

“I’m sorry about this, Aoi,” Kiyotaka said, making a beeline for her and taking her hand.

“It’s fine. My classes just ended anyway.” Aoi smiled, turned to the lady, and bowed deeply. “It’s a pleasure to meet you. My name is Aoi Mashiro.”

“I’m Zixuan Zhou. My Japanese name is Azusa. You can just call me that,” the lady said smoothly.

So she goes by Azusa, thought Komatsu.

“Anyway,” Azusa continued, “Aoi, I want to go somewhere *wonderful* in Kyoto. It can be famous, but preferably not *too* famous. A place that will look good on social media. Would you be able to take me somewhere like that?”

“So basically, somewhere that’s pretty, right?” Aoi thought for a bit before

clapping her hands together. “Oh! I know the perfect place. It’s not far from here.”

Mission 5: A Photogenic Kyoto

“It’s right this way,” Aoi said.

After a very brief walk down the slope, they came to a small gate on the left-hand side that said “Yasaka Koshin-do Temple.” In the center of the temple grounds was a small vermilion shrine with rainbow beanbag-like balls hanging down from it in bunched-up columns. There were many young women in their teens and twenties at the temple, perhaps attracted by its colorful look.

Azusa seemed fascinated too. “Wow!” she exclaimed, her eyes lighting up. “It’s so cute! Yes, this is what I wanted!”

“I’m glad you like it.” Aoi smiled happily.

Kiyotaka nodded. “Yes, I’d expect no less from Aoi.”

“Uh, I’m pretty sure you could’ve taken her here too, kiddo,” said Komatsu.

“Seriously,” said Ensho.

Kiyotaka ignored them and began his explanation. “Yasaka Koshin-do is one of Japan’s three Koshin temples, the others being Tokyo Iriya Koshin-do and Osaka Shitenno-ji Koshin-do. By the way, ‘koshin’—also known as ‘kanoe-saru’ or ‘kokin no saru’—is one of the years of the monkey in the Chinese zodiac.”

Most people were familiar with the twelve Earthly Branches: rat, ox, tiger, rabbit, dragon, snake, horse, goat, monkey, rooster, dog, and pig. However, when factoring in elements, there were actually sixty types of years in total—five for each Earthly Branch. For example, the year 2021 was the year of the metal ox, and the year 2022 was the year of the water tiger. The five years of the monkey were mizunoe-saru (water monkey), kinoe-saru (wood monkey), hinoe-saru (fire monkey), tsuchinoe-saru (earth monkey), and kanoe-saru (metal monkey). The sixty types were also applied to the calendar year, meaning that the day of kanoe-saru came once every sixty days.

“According to the Koshin faith, the human body contains parasites. On the

night of the day of kanoe-saru, the parasites leave their host's body while they sleep and ascend to heaven, where they report the human's transgressions to God. Then, God judges the human and takes away part of their life span accordingly. In order to avoid this, people stay awake for that entire night in prayer. That is the Koshin faith that comes from Chinese Taoism."

"Today I learned..." said Komatsu. He looked to his side and saw Aoi, Azusa, and Ensho listening attentively as well.

"To this day, Yasaka Koshin-do still holds an all-night vigil on the day of kanoe-saru, and the general public is allowed to participate. On that day, they have a 'konnyaku bonfire,' where people eat three monkey-shaped pieces of konnyaku while facing north to pray for good health." Kiyotaka turned his gaze to the colorful beanbags. "Also, these things hanging here are called 'kukurizaru,' as in 'tied monkeys.'"

"Those are monkeys? I thought they were beanbags," Komatsu said without thinking.

"Yes, they're monkeys with their hands and feet bound so that they can't move."

"I thought they were beanbags too," said Azusa, looking at the kukurizaru. "Why are they so round?"

"Since monkeys act out of greed, these kukurizaru represent human desire being tied up and unable to move. It's said that they have the power to grant wishes."

Everyone's eyes lit up. "Wishes?"

"Yes, but in order to have your wish granted, you must restrain one desire in exchange."

It was essentially rejecting something in order to make a wish. There were various wishes written on the backs of the kukurizaru, many of which sounded like they belonged to young people: "I want to go out with him," "I want to pass my exams," "I want our team to go to Koshien," and so on. Unlike the creepy thing they'd seen earlier, the strings of colorful beanbags made one feel at ease.

Azusa hummed and looked at the kukurizaru, intrigued. "Hey, Aoi, I want to take a photo in front of this."

"Sure." Aoi nodded and held up her index finger. "But first, let's pray."

"Pray? Can't we do that later?"

Aoi shook her head. "I think it's better to pray at the temple and pay our respects to the object of worship first. We can take some cute pictures afterwards, okay?" She smiled.

Azusa looked hesitant for a moment before nodding. "You're right."

The two girls eagerly went up to the main building and put their hands together in prayer.

"Now we'll definitely be able to take a really cute photo," Aoi said with a smile.

"Yes!" Azusa replied happily. "Take it for me, okay?"

"Of course." Aoi took Azusa's phone and got ready to take the photo. "Please stand over there. Maybe a little more to the right."

"Like this?" Azusa posed in front of the colorful kukurizaru. She was finally going to get the social media-worthy picture she had wanted so badly.

"That rich lady acts a lot more normal when she's hanging out with a girl her age, huh?" Komatsu murmured.

Kiyotaka smiled gently. "It's because she's with Aoi."

"There you go again, kiddo..."

"No, I'm not being biased. Aoi has a mysteriously calming presence," Kiyotaka said with a fond expression.

Komatsu craned his neck to look at Aoi. "Guess it's 'cause of how unintimidating she is." *She's like an ermine peeking out from behind a rock.* "Oh, I get it now." He clapped his hands together. "The little miss has the power to neutralize people's toxicity."

"Exactly." Kiyotaka nodded. "I never quite knew how to describe her healing aura, but that's a good expression."

“I know, right?”

“She’s neutralized my toxic feelings on several occasions.” Kiyotaka smiled in amusement as he recalled the many times she had cured his malicious thoughts.

“It’s a great ability to have, but it’s not something that people are gonna notice easily, huh?”

“That may be true. I only noticed by spending a lot of time with her.”

“Man, it must be a lowkey ability if *you* didn’t notice it right away,” Komatsu muttered.

“I think that’s part of her charm, though.”

As the two men were talking, Ensho, who was standing to the side, widened his eyes as if he’d been caught off guard. He must’ve remembered having his toxic feelings neutralized too.

Thinking about it, Akihito Kajiwara was always saying, “Aoi’s pretty cute, but I don’t get why she’s popular with amazing guys like Holmes and Ensho,” thought Komatsu. I never understood either.

“Oh!” Komatsu placed his hand over his mouth. “She neutralizes toxic feelings. That’s why toxic guys...” *Like her.* He crossed his arms, not finishing the sentence out loud. “That’s why the rest of us weren’t drawn to her as much, huh?” He nodded firmly.

That was one mystery solved. The girl in question was oblivious to her ability, though.

“It sounds sinful in a way,” he whispered, looking at Kiyotaka and Ensho, who were also watching Aoi and Azusa.

The girls were still frolicking around the kukurizaru. Perhaps Azusa had toxic feelings too.

“Oh, right, kiddo. I was looking into the lady just now, and it seems like she has a bunch of stuff going on.”

Azusa’s mother had died three years ago, when she had been caught up in a terrorist attack during a business trip abroad. Azusa’s father had fallen into

depression for a while after the loss of his beloved wife, but he had recently found a new girlfriend, a Hong Kong singer who was also popular in the UK. She was beautiful and young—only ten years older than Azusa. Their relationship had been discovered at the end of last year. Azusa had probably come to Japan because she was frustrated with her father.

Kiyotaka's expression remained unchanged as he took in the information. "I had a feeling that her mother had already passed away, so I suspected as much."

"Huh? How'd you know?"

"Kimishima's words were the first clue. He said, 'She used to speak Japanese with her mother at home' in the past tense, and it seemed like he was defending her when he said, 'She had her reasons.' I assumed that something had happened. Later, Azusa had tears in her eyes when I was telling her the story behind the child-raising ghost candy. That convinced me that her mother had passed away. She may be an adult, but she grew up sheltered, so her father's remarriage could easily have angered her to the point of desperation."

Kiyotaka paused before continuing.

"Also, during lunch, she asked me, 'What if your beloved fiancée died before you did?' When I answered her, she said, 'People's hearts change.' The way she looked confirmed that her father had found a new partner. What she said about wedding vows was probably referring to her parents."

"Your observation skills never change." Komatsu's face stiffened. "So you knew, but you still treated her like *that*?"

"Regardless of what happened, it's no excuse to take out your frustration on others."

"I guess so, yeah."

"But you do it to me all the time," said Ensho.

"Yes, and you're also free to treat me poorly for it." Kiyotaka smiled.

Komatsu and Ensho tightened their lips and looked at each other.

"By the way, what was Azusa's mother like?" Kiyotaka asked.

“Oh, right.” Komatsu took out his phone. “This is a photo of her from when she was young. Her name was Naomi.” Despite being Japanese, the beautiful woman in the picture had blue eyes alongside her jet-black hair.

“She has blue eyes. Was one of her parents a foreigner?”

“Yeah, seems so. Naomi had a Japanese mother and a British father. Her parents were divorced and her father went back to the UK. When Naomi was in university, she studied abroad in the UK, and that’s where she met her future husband, Haoyu Zhou.”

“I see. What about Haoyu Zhou’s current girlfriend, then?”

“This is her.” Komatsu showed Kiyotaka his phone screen. The woman in question was a beauty who slightly resembled Azusa’s mother.

Ensho craned his neck to peer at the phone and chuckled. “What the heck? She looks like a glamorous version of the girl’s mom. Guess that’s what Zhou’s into. But this has to be plastic surgery, right? Is she looking like the girl’s mom on purpose?”

Komatsu had actually been thinking the same thing but had chosen not to say it. As usual, Ensho showed no such restraint.

As they were talking, Azusa and Aoi walked up to them.

“Holmes, Komatsu, we’re done here,” said Aoi.

“Aoi says there’s a place she wants to show me,” said Azusa, grinning. “Let’s go.”

“Dang, it really is like her toxins got neutralized,” Komatsu said, his face stiffening.

“See?” Kiyotaka smiled.

Aoi’s suggestion for their next destination was Arashiyama. They headed there in the van. The driver seat and passenger seat were occupied by two of the bodyguards, while Aoi and Azusa sat in the second row and Kiyotaka and Komatsu sat in the back. Ensho had separated from the group at Yasaka Koshindo.

The cars in front of and behind the van were also part of the security detail. Kimishima was among them. All three vehicles were domestic to avoid drawing attention. It was like they were escorting a member of the royal family on an incognito trip.

“Isn’t Arashiyama extremely famous?” Azusa frowned as she exited the car.

“Yes, it is.” Aoi laughed. “There’s a place that’s been really popular with girls lately. I’m sure you’ll like it.”

“Where is it?”

“This way.” Aoi took Azusa’s hand and began to walk. Komatsu thought the sight was heartwarming, but Kiyotaka seemed unamused.

Aoi led them into Arashiyama Station’s main entrance and out the other side. There, they found a path lined with six hundred cylindrical pillars of kimono fabrics, two meters in height and wrapped in clear acrylic. There were bright colors like pink, light blue, yellow, and orange, as well as modern styles like black and brown.

“Wow!” Azusa’s eyes widened. “It’s beautiful!”

“I’m glad you like it,” said Aoi. “This place is called Kimono Forest. The fabrics in the poles are all Kyoto dyed silks. Isn’t it wonderful?”

“It really is a forest of kimono. It’s so pretty!” Azusa clapped her hands together and squealed with joy as she walked.

“Azusa, I think this type would look good on you,” Aoi said, pointing at a modern style in black, white, and red.

“I love it. I think this light pink kimono would suit you, Aoi.”

“Yes, I like that kind of aesthetic.”

“I knew it!” Azusa clung to Aoi’s arm.

“Komatsu, don’t you think she’s sticking too closely to Aoi?” Kiyotaka asked.

“Don’t girls do that with each other all the time?”

“Kaori doesn’t cling to Aoi like *that*.”

“Well, she’s more of the stoic type. Wait, it even bothers you when a girl does

it?”

“Yes, everyone who isn’t me gets judged the same way.”

“Figures.” Komatsu shrugged.

“Hey!” Azusa shouted at them. “Can you take a picture of me and Aoi?”

“Of course,” said Kiyotaka, taking the camera from her.

“Kiddo, you’d better not blur out just the lady’s face,” Komatsu whispered.

Kiyotaka slumped his shoulders. “I would never.” He took the picture properly and returned Azusa’s phone.

“Thanks,” Azusa said, checking her photo gallery. “Good, it’s normal. I was worried because of your horrible personality.” Apparently it wasn’t only Komatsu who had been concerned.

“What do you take me for?” Kiyotaka muttered, annoyed.

Azusa brushed him off and gazed at the poles. “You said these were Kyoto dyed silks, right? I’m going to have a kimono made with this pattern right away.” She immediately sent an email with a photo attachment to an unknown recipient.

“Huh? You’re commissioning a kimono right now?!” Komatsu blurted out, shocked. Aoi looked mildly surprised as well.

“I’ve been wanting to wear a kimono to our events in Japan,” Azusa said. Her reasoning made sense. “Hey, Aoi, where are we going next? You have a plan, right?” She wrapped her arm around Aoi’s again.

“Yes.” Aoi nodded and held up her index finger. “Arashiyama has another photogenic spot.”

Next, Aoi took them to the sprawling bamboo forest in northeast Arashiyama. There was a refreshing beauty in the path through the lush, green stalks.

“Sagano has been cherished by the nobility since the Heian period,” Kiyotaka explained.

“It’s wonderful,” Azusa murmured as if compelled by his words. She looked left and right at the vast grove, captivated.

After taking photos there too, they ended their first day of sightseeing with some cute and delicious Japanese sweets.

“I’m excited for tomorrow,” Azusa said as they returned to the hotel.

3

“You really saved us, little miss,” Komatsu said as they left the hotel, pressing his hands together as if he was worshipping Aoi. “The kiddo was so outrageous.”

Aoi shook her head. “It was nothing.”

Kiyotaka frowned. “You’re being outrageous too, Komatsu. I was taking the job seriously.”

“As if,” said Komatsu. “Who knows what would’ve happened if the little miss hadn’t come to save the day?”

“No, I didn’t do anything important,” said Aoi, embarrassed. “In the end, it was Holmes who did all of the explaining.”

“No way.” Komatsu shook his head and hands vehemently. “The kiddo’s explanations were good, but it was touch and go the whole time. Your detoxifying power gave us peace.”

“Detoxifying?” Aoi tilted her head.

“Little miss, could you come tomorrow too? Just the afternoon’s fine, and I’ll pay you, of course.” Komatsu pressed his hands together.

Kiyotaka stepped in front of Aoi. “Komatsu, Aoi has classes to attend. If it’ll stop you from inconveniencing her, I’ll do my job properly tomorrow.”

“You admit you weren’t doing it properly!”

“Um...” Aoi raised her hand gingerly. “I can join in the afternoon tomorrow. I’m happy to be of help.”

“Oh, little miss!” Komatsu exclaimed, touched.

Kiyotaka placed his hands on his hips, exasperated. “Well then, Aoi, make sure Komatsu pays you *very* handsomely.”

“Oi! Well, it’ll be a lot, don’t worry.”

“Thank you.” Aoi laughed.

“Shall we head back, Aoi?” Kiyotaka held out his hand. When Aoi tried to take it, he ran his hand down her arm and around her waist. “Well then, see you tomorrow, Komatsu.”

Kiyotaka and Aoi waved and walked off together.

“Yeah, thanks for today. See ya,” said Komatsu, waving back as he watched the couple leave.

The moment they were off the hotel’s property, Kiyotaka rubbed his head against Aoi’s. It was as if he was asking her to praise him. Aoi laughed in amusement and patted him on the head.

Komatsu narrowed his eyes coldly at the sight. “What the heck is with that drastic change in personality?” Still, when he caught a glimpse of Kiyotaka’s happy face, his expression relaxed. “Well, I’m really glad he met the little miss.”

As he was thinking that, Ensho came to mind. He felt a small pang in his heart at the thought of Ensho’s feelings. “I was hoping he’d straighten things out with Yilin, but... Well, I should be heading back too.” He stretched. “We’ve got more guiding to do tomorrow. Gotta love a high-paying job.” He grinned as he began to walk.

Never in his wildest dreams did he imagine that a tremendous incident would occur the next day.

Chapter 4: An Accident

1

After finishing our guide duties, Holmes and I headed over to Kura. The store was about to close, but we were going there anyway because we were devoted to our work and couldn't help but worry— Well, no. We were going because the manager had told us a visitor had come to see us.

When we entered the store, we saw the manager—who was already getting ready to leave—and Atsuko Tadokoro, who was sitting at the counter.

“Good evening,” she said, smiling when she saw us. It was a graceful and refined smile, as you'd expect from the teacher of a flower arranging school in Gion. She also ran a secret—but legal—club in its basement. Hearing that, you might have thought she was two-faced, but she was actually a kind and considerate woman. And despite being in her fifties, she looked very young and beautiful. Her kimono suited her well and gave her an air of elegance. I secretly looked up to her.

Speaking of Atsuko, there was no forgetting her recent interference in Tomoka and Sada's engagement, although we later learned that it had been out of genuine concern for Tomoka's safety. And then there was the *other* incident that had completely overshadowed it.

“Good evening, Atsuko,” said Holmes.

“Yes, good evening,” I echoed.

“I'll be taking my leave, then,” said the manager, standing up to give us some privacy.

“Thank you for watching the store,” Holmes and I said, bowing. We saw him off and then moved behind the counter.

“Forgive me for calling you here,” Atsuko said with a smile. “You weren't at Komatsu's office, so I thought I might find you here.”

When I'd met her before, I had been awed by her powerful beauty and presence. But now, she seemed weaker. It was understandable, considering what had happened. I nodded to her, a somber look on my face.

"Thank you for going to the trouble of coming all this way," said Holmes. "I'm sorry to hear what happened."

"Yes..." Atsuko sighed. Her precious twenty-carat blue diamond had been stolen on Christmas Eve. It was normally kept at a museum, but she had temporarily withdrawn it to wear it for a party she was hosting, only for it to be stolen afterwards.

"How was the diamond stolen?" Holmes asked.

"I had it in the wall safe, but it was opened. No matter how sturdy the safe is, once it's been opened, it's all over."

She was right. Even a solid safe built into the wall was useless if the thieves managed to open the door.

"On the bright side, the building wasn't set on fire this time, and they only stole the jewelry. The deeds and whatnot were left in place."

"I see," Holmes said with a serious expression.

"Right after it was stolen, I was so frustrated and angry; I didn't think I would ever calm down. But as time passed, I started to realize the terror of owning that gem."

"It was even being called the Oriental Hope Diamond, after all."

"Indeed." Atsuko sighed. "Wealthy people from all over the world wanted it for themselves."

"It must've been because it was displayed at a museum."

"Not just that, but I also received a request from a foreign museum, so it was on display abroad for a while. I allowed it because I wanted more people to see it and also because I wanted the remuneration since I had to pay a lot in inheritance tax. I suppose it was a bad idea. Well, it just means it was too much for me to handle."

Holmes and I listened in silence.

“That said...” Atsuko looked up. “Today, near Yasaka Shrine, I spotted from a distance a man who had been very persistent in asking me to sell him the diamond. I took a picture without thinking.” She took out her phone. “He’s small in it, though, since I took it from afar.”

Holmes and I leaned forward to look at the photo. It showed a car parked on East Oji Street in front of Yasaka Shrine. A man in a coat stood next to it. I knew who that man was. I unconsciously glanced at Holmes, who was folding his arms and stroking his chin, an intrigued look in eyes.

“I see,” he said. “There may be something going on here...”

2

The next day, Kiyotaka and Komatsu arrived at the hotel lobby in the afternoon. As with the previous day, they got into the van with Azusa and the bodyguards. Again, the cars in front of and behind them were part of the escort, and Kimishima was among them.

“We need to pick up Aoi first,” Azusa said when she got into the car.

The original plan had been to begin the tour in the morning again, but when Azusa had been informed that Aoi would only be joining in the afternoon, she had decided to start later instead. Apparently she couldn’t stand having Kiyotaka as the only guide, even though he’d said he would take it seriously this time.

When they arrived in front of Kyoto Prefectural University, they saw Aoi waiting at the gate.

“Aoi!” Kiyotaka immediately got out of the car and walked briskly towards the gate, making many female students turn their heads.

“It’s like being picked up by a prince,” Azusa murmured as she watched.

“Yeah, definitely,” said Komatsu. *Just think about it. All eyes are on him as he gallantly makes his appearance and takes Aoi’s hand.*

Aoi looked embarrassed as she walked with him.

It’s gotta be awkward to have so many people watching. Komatsu nodded in

understanding from his third-row seat.

Azusa suddenly turned around and said, “It’s frustrating that you can’t tell how horrible his personality is from the outside. Is Aoi being deceived?”

“Nah, I don’t think you have to worry about that.”

The couple arrived at the car.

“Thank you for going to the trouble of picking me up,” Aoi said as she took her seat next to Azusa.

“Don’t worry about it,” said Azusa.

“Where would you like to go today?”

Azusa hummed and folded her arms. “A place that girls love.”

“Understood.” Aoi nodded and told the driver where to go.

Mission 6: A Kyoto That Girls Love

The car arrived at the destination in less than ten minutes. Aoi had taken them to Shimogamo Shrine.

“I’ve heard the name before,” Azusa said as soon as she exited the car. “This is a famous shrine too, right?”

“Yes.” Kiyotaka nodded. “Its formal name is Kamo-mioya Shrine, and together with Kamo-wake-ikazuchi Shrine—colloquially known as Kamigamo Shrine—it enshrines the Kamo clan’s guardian deities. It has a very long history. Its exact date of construction is unknown, but there are repair records from 90 B.C., so it must have been built earlier than that. The shrine has been revered since ancient times, and it is popular for having one of the strongest energy vortexes in Kyoto.”

Azusa hummed as she listened and walked through the shrine grounds. When the vermilion gate came into view, her eyes widened. “Wow! It’s beautiful.”

Just past the gate was the performance stage, which they passed on the way to the main building. The main shrine was surrounded by other shrines dedicated to the twelve Earthly Branches, with this year’s being the focus.

“Let’s pray, Azusa,” said Aoi.

“Yes, let’s.”

The two women prayed at the main shrine, followed by the shrines for their respective zodiac signs. Next, they went to the east area, where there was a small stream and shrine.

“That shrine is dedicated to Lady Seoritsu-hime, who washes away sins and impurities,” said Kiyotaka.

Azusa ignored his explanation, her eyes glued to the stream, where other visitors were dipping slips of paper into the water. “What are they doing?”

Aoi giggled. “Those are water fortunes. When you dip them in water, words appear.”

“That sounds interesting. Let’s do it!” Azusa rushed to the booth where they were being sold.

Komatsu glanced up at Kiyotaka. “Isn’t it Kifune Shrine that’s famous for water fortunes? I didn’t know Shimogamo had ’em too.”

“Yes, it does.” Kiyotaka smiled. “They started offering them in recent years. I think it’s a great idea, since there’s a small river—the Mitarashi River—running through the shrine grounds.”

The water fortunes at Shimogamo Shrine had a cute design that girls would definitely love. At the top were the words “Water Fortune” with a big circle in between them, and below was a row of heart-shaped aoi flower leaves. When dipped in water, words would appear inside the circle and leaves.

Azusa’s fortune said “Small Luck” in the big circle. The leaves had various phrases like “Improvement does not come without effort” and “Avoid acting rashly.”

“‘Small Luck’ isn’t very good, right?” Azusa frowned. “What did you get, Aoi?” She peered at the girl’s hands.

Aoi’s slip said “Medium Luck.” Its suggestions were things like “Persist and your skill will grow” and “Trust in your current affinities.”

Azusa hummed. Next to them, Kiyotaka held up his “Great Luck” fortune.

“I apologize,” he said. “I’m afraid I received a ‘Great Luck’ fortune even though you didn’t.” His tone was humble, but it didn’t hide his conceit at all. “What’s more, Aoi’s fortune says ‘Believe in your current affinities.’ I feel as though Lady Seoritsu-hime herself has blessed our relationship.”

Azusa shot him an annoyed look. “For all you know, it could be referring to her affinity with *me*, not you.”

“Please. That cannot possibly be true.”

“Excuse me?” Azusa furrowed her brow at the man who was having a heated argument with a smile. “Aoi, as you can see, this man has a terrible personality. Are you aware of that? He isn’t deceiving you, is he?”

“Oh, yes, I know,” Aoi said nonchalantly.

Azusa gaped. “Huh? You do?”

“Yes. He looks perfect on the outside, but he’s actually black-hearted, extremely two-faced, and mildly suspicious. I’m fully aware of that.”

Azusa stiffened.

“Aoi, you’re as harsh as ever,” Kiyotaka said, placing his hand over his mouth. It was trembling as if he was trying to hold back his laughter. Despite what he had said, he seemed quite happy.

“Anyway,” Aoi said, clapping her hands together. “Azusa, the Shimogamo Shrine grounds also have the Aioi Shrine for good luck in marriage and the Kawai Shrine where people pray for beauty. Would you like to see them?”

Azusa nodded, regaining her composure. “Oh, yes. I’m interested in praying for beauty.”

“Let’s go, then.”

The girls happily left through the gate. After praying at Aioi Shrine, they walked through Tadasu no Mori—the forest covering much of Shimogamo Shrine’s grounds—and reached Kawai Shrine. It was small, but since there were so many young women there, it felt oddly glamorous.

Aoi and Azusa wrote their wishes on the hand-mirror-shaped prayer plaques and drank the “beauty water” that was said to be made from the fruit of the

shrine's karin trees. They seemed to be enjoying themselves.

"Oh, that was so much fun," said Azusa.

"What kind of place would you like to see next?" asked Aoi.

"I think that's enough sightseeing for today. I want to go shopping next. Where's the nearest Harry Winston?"

"Harry Winston?" Aoi tilted her head. She had no idea what that was.

Also clueless, Komatsu took out his phone to look it up, but Kiyotaka provided the answer immediately: "It's in Osaka."

"Oh no." Azusa grimaced. "We'd have to go all the way to Osaka? That would be *such* a pain. What about Van Leaf & Anabel?"

"There's one in Daimaru Kyoto," Kiyotaka said with a smile. "We can take you there."

"By the way, Kimishima is listening in on our conversation, right?"

"Yes." Kiyotaka nodded.

"Hey, Kimishima, you can hear me, right? Go to Osaka right now and buy me a few pieces of jewelry from Harry Winston. I'll message you the list. If you get everything, I'll forgive you for what you did last time and take back what I said about you being old. Good luck."

It was easy to imagine Kimishima panicking from where he was on standby.

Still, why is she calling him old? Komatsu's face stiffened. He then received a message from Kimishima.

"I'll accompany you to Daimaru and then head for Osaka. The audio won't reach me there, so please take care of her."

"He's telling the truth," Komatsu muttered to himself. The pin could only transmit audio a few hundred meters away at most.

"Well then, let's return to the car," Azusa said cheerfully.

Aoi hesitantly whispered in Kiyotaka's ear, "Um, Holmes, what are Harry Winston and Van Leaf & Anabel? Are those fashion brands?"

Komatsu's expression relaxed into a smile. *The little miss really knows how to make you feel better.*

"Harry Winston is a luxury jewelry brand from New York," Kiyotaka said. "Oh, yes." He held up his index finger. "It was the founder—Harry Winston himself—who acquired the world's largest blue diamond, the Hope Diamond, and donated it to the Smithsonian."

"What?!" Komatsu exclaimed.

"I had no idea," Aoi murmured.

Azusa seemed to already know the story.

"On the other hand," Holmes continued, "Van Leaf & Anabel is a European brand. It's popular for not only its jewelry, but its watches and perfumes as well. It's also known for having European royalty among its clientele."

"They're both amazing brands, huh?" Aoi sounded impressed.

Azusa, however, seemed more impressed by Kiyotaka. "You really would be amazing if explanations were the only thing that came out of your mouth."

"Thank you."

"It wasn't a compliment." Azusa frowned.

3

When we arrived at Daimaru Kyoto, we were welcomed by several salespeople.

"Did you contact them, kiddo?" Komatsu asked.

"Of course." Kiyotaka nodded. He had worked there for a while, so he probably knew everyone.

"Welcome, Miss Zhou," said a dignified salesman. "Van Leaf & Anabel is located in the special selection corner on the second floor." He smoothly guided Azusa into the department store.

"Why, thank you." Azusa put on a large pair of sunglasses and walked in a noble manner. Aoi and Kiyotaka were right behind her, while her bodyguards

were ensuring her safety from a distance.

Among the salespeople was a lone woman wearing a suit. She was in her early thirties, with a slender frame and large, bright eyes.

“It’s been a while, Kiyotaka and Aoi,” she said.

“I’m sorry for not keeping in touch, Taniguchi,” Kiyotaka said. He and Aoi smiled at her. Clearly, the pair knew her.

Taniguchi quickly moved to stand next to Kiyotaka and whispered, “The whole company’s abuzz because the young lady from Hua Ya Corporation is here.”

Komatsu hummed. “Everyone recognizes that name, huh?”

“Yes.” Taniguchi nodded. “Hua Ya is said to be one of the top ten companies in the world.”

“Top ten...” Komatsu gaped.

“Not only do they deal in IT business and trading, but in recent years they launched an apparel brand called Hua, which is also doing very well. I hear the young lady is involved in their projects. Please introduce me to her later, Kiyotaka!” She nudged him with her elbow and clapped her hands together. “*Please.*”

“Of course,” said Kiyotaka.

“Thank you. Ahh, I’m not even surprised that you’re accompanying such a high-profile VIP. The lady must adore you, doesn’t she?”

“No, she absolutely loathes me.”

“Oh, we all know that’s not true.” Taniguchi laughed and patted him on the back.

“Nah, it’s the truth,” Komatsu muttered softly.

Even though they were only going up one floor, they took the elevator. When they reached the second floor, they saw a logo with a hydrangea motif. Apparently this kind of hydrangea was called “Annabelle.”

Azusa happily made her way to the Van Leaf & Anabel section and peered into the display case. “It’s so fun to look at them in-store. I normally have to have

the vendors bring them to me directly.”

“Figures,” Komatsu said with a strained smile.

“Do you not get to go shopping often, Azusa?” Aoi asked.

Azusa nodded. “My mom died in a terrorist attack when she went abroad on a business trip. Because of that, my dad never wanted to let me go outside. He wouldn’t even let me travel by myself until I was twenty. So when I finally turned twenty last month, I wanted to go to Italy, but he said, ‘Absolutely not. If you want to travel, go to Japan where it’s safe.’ So I had no choice but to come here. My dad will be joining me later, though, so I can’t even call it a solo trip anymore.”

I think it stopped being a solo trip when the bodyguards tagged along, Komatsu thought with a stiff expression.

“I was able to do a lot of shopping in Tokyo and Yokohama, though, so it was a lot of fun.”

“I see,” said Aoi. “I hope you can make fun memories in Kyoto too.”

Azusa giggled. “Thanks.”

The lady had a snobby side, but she was also curious about what she saw and heard, and she genuinely delighted in things. As a sheltered girl, she probably didn’t know much about the outside world.

“Oh, they’re all so cute. The Annabelle brooch is lovely, and I especially love the Marguerite collection.”

Komatsu found himself looking down at the display case, where marguerite-shaped accessories were laid out in a row. The center part of the flower was a jewel, while the petals seemed to be made of shells. The necklaces, rings, and earrings sparkled in the light. As Azusa said, they were cute.

“I can see young girls getting excited over these,” he murmured. “My daughter would probably like them too.” He looked at the price tags and squinted. “Huh? Two million, three hundred and eighty thousand yen? For one necklace?” His eyes widened.

Kiyotaka nodded as if it was the most normal thing in the world. “Of course.

It's jewelry worn by royalty."

"Okay, but still, you could buy a car for that much..."

Aoi was flustered too. "It's okay, Komatsu. I was also thinking, 'Wow, it costs two hundred and thirty thousand,' and then I realized I was off by a digit and freaked out..."

"Phew, I'm not alone!" Komatsu held out his hand without thinking, but Kiyotaka interrupted their handshake, displeased.

"Komatsu, would you please refrain from taking advantage of the situation to touch Aoi's lovely hand?"

"Ugh, why are you like this over every little thing? Unlike you guys, the little miss and I are commoners. It was a handshake between comrades."

"I'm a commoner too."

"You don't flinch at these price tags, so no, you're not, kiddo."

"I wasn't surprised because I already knew how much they cost; that's all."

As they were talking, Azusa enthusiastically pored over the display case. After a while, she nodded and said to the employee, "I'd like everything from the Marguerite collection that's on display."

Komatsu choked. How much would that come to? How was she going to pay? Was she going to bring in an attaché case?

Azusa took a card case out of her pocket and placed a shiny black credit card on the counter. "Bill it to this, please. Have everything delivered to my hotel."

Aoi looked just as awestruck as Komatsu. She stood near the exit, watching Azusa and sighing. "It really feels like we're in different worlds."

"Yeah." Komatsu nodded. "Kinda depressing, huh?"

A troubled look came to Aoi's face. "I wonder why," she whispered.

She probably didn't understand exactly *why* seeing this made her feel depressed. Komatsu could relate. He knew it was good for the economy when rich people spent money like it grew on trees, but he still couldn't help but feel gloomy when he saw it taking place.

“Does it make you jealous, little miss?” Komatsu asked.

Aoi hummed and tilted her head. “I...don’t think it’s jealousy.”

“Yeah, same.”

It wasn’t necessarily envy either. If you asked him if he would buy everything that caught his eye if he was filthy rich, he wouldn’t know what to say. But the fact was that people’s hearts didn’t react to things they weren’t jealous of. As proof, when Kiyotaka had bragged about receiving a fountain pen from Aoi, Ensho had been annoyed, but Komatsu hadn’t felt anything at all. But now, watching Azusa gave him such a strong reaction. Deep in his heart, was he actually jealous? He glanced at Aoi, who had the same conflicted look on her face.

Meanwhile, Kiyotaka was carefully observing his fiancée.

Azusa seemed to be satisfied with the shopping trip. She was in a good mood as she accepted business cards from Taniguchi and the other salespeople. “Let’s go,” she said, leaving the sales floor. She held a hand up to stop the employees, who were probably willing to escort her all the way back to her hotel if they had to. “I don’t like to draw attention when I’m leaving, so you don’t need to see me off.”

They obediently stopped at the elevator and said, “Thank you very much,” bowing deeply.

The group took the elevator down to the first floor and headed for the Higashinotoin Street exit, which had a wide, open space where the car could wait for them. When they went outside, only the van was there. The bodyguard in the passenger seat immediately got out of the car.

“Welcome back, Miss Zixuan,” he said hurriedly, bowing to Azusa. “I just received a call from the representative saying that he will be arriving in Kyoto shortly. He requests that you return to the hotel right now.”

Azusa blinked. “Huh? My dad was supposed to come tomorrow afternoon. Well, all right.”

The bodyguard looked at Komatsu and the others. “With that being the case,

today's tour is over. Thank you all for your help as guides."

"Oh, it's nothing." Komatsu shook his head and waved off the other man's thanks.

Kiyotaka smiled and walked up to the bodyguard. "Where are the other escort vehicles?"

"There isn't enough space to fit three cars here without blocking the road, so they're waiting a bit farther away."

"Makes sense," said Komatsu.

The look in Kiyotaka's eyes grew serious. "I imagine Kimishima would have also received word of her father's sudden early arrival. Komatsu, did he contact you at all?"

Komatsu checked his phone, but there weren't any messages from Kimishima. "No, I didn't get anything."

"In that case, please check with him."

The moment Kiyotaka turned to face Komatsu, the bodyguard clicked his tongue and shoved him away. He then grabbed Azusa by the wrist and forced her into the car.

Azusa screamed. Kiyotaka quickly recovered from the surprise attack and grabbed the bodyguard by the collar as he was trying to get into the van. The bodyguard was taken aback, but turned around and swung his fist at Kiyotaka, who parried it with his arm and delivered a sweeping kick to the man's legs, knocking him down. The man put his hands on the ground and instantly did the same thing to Kiyotaka, who dodged the attack with a backflip.

The rapid back-and-forth was too much for Komatsu and Aoi to process. They stood still, unable to react. The pedestrians on the street were also watching in blank amazement.

"Kiddo, what should I..." Komatsu looked around frantically. The bodyguards who had been protecting Azusa were suddenly trying to take her away. He couldn't make sense of the situation, but he figured he should at least join the fray.

“Komatsu, protect Aoi!” Kiyotaka shouted immediately.

The bodyguard’s fist flew towards Kiyotaka’s face. He quickly crouched down to evade it, then grabbed the man by the waist and pushed him down such that he was sitting on top of him.

“He did it!” Komatsu clenched his fists.

However, stopping his opponent’s movements meant that his movements stopped at the same time. The man punched Kiyotaka in the gut while lying down. Kiyotaka groaned and bent over.

“Holmes!” Aoi put her hands over her mouth, her face pale.

Kiyotaka remained on top of the man. His face grimaced in pain, but he continued to twist and tighten his grip on the man’s arms. “Azusa, please hurry and get out of the car!”

His pleas went unanswered because one of the men in the car had Azusa in a nelson hold. Her eyes were wide open in shock. The others started the car and sped off, seeming to have given up on the bodyguard that Kiyotaka was restraining.

The man took advantage of the slight shift in Kiyotaka’s focus to shove him away and run off in a different direction from the car. Kiyotaka got up and seemed to consider chasing either the car or the man but ultimately determined that both paths would end in vain.

“They got us,” he said, placing a hand on his forehead and sighing, his teeth gritted in frustration.

Chapter 5: Putting Past Skills to Use

1

It turned out that the men had indeed lied about Azusa's father—Haoyu Zhou, representative of Hua Ya Corporation—arriving in Kyoto that day. He *was* already in Japan but in Tokyo instead. When he heard that Azusa had been kidnapped, he immediately boarded the next Shinkansen and was now on his way to Kyoto.

Komatsu, Kiyotaka, Kimishima, and Ensho—who had heard about the incident—had moved to the suite at Hyant Jency Kyoto. Aoi wasn't there. Given the dangerous nature of the case, Kiyotaka had called Rikyu to take her home.

Ensho leaned against the wall, his arms crossed. Kiyotaka was gazing out the window. Komatsu and Kimishima were sitting on separate sofas, waiting for Zhou's arrival. The silence was stifling.

The criminal group had used Azusa's phone to message Kimishima with their demand.

"Your daughter in exchange for the treasure you acquired. Dzgzhserdzwzrqlyf."

The entire message was in English, but the second line was an inscrutable string of letters.

"Duzguz'?" No matter how many times Komatsu looked at it, he couldn't figure out what it meant. Trying to read it out loud only resulted in gibberish. He thought it might convert to something when typed on another language's keyboard, but no luck. Unable to bear the silence anymore, he looked up and said, "Um, Kimishima, I really think we should contact the police. Maybe even right now."

Kimishima shook his head without raising it. "No, Representative Zhou said we can't." He had immediately contacted Zhou to relay the series of events, but Zhou had told him to wait for his arrival and not call the police.

In TV shows, you would see scenes where a kidnapper would demand a ransom and threaten the victims by saying, “If you tell the police, your daughter is dead.” But even then, it was still better to call the police in most cases.

“Yeah,” said Ensho, nodding as if he was thinking the same thing. “Kidnappers usually warn you not to call the cops, right? But in reality, they’ve already accounted for you doing it anyway. No matter what you say, there’s nothing a normal person can do on their own.”

Kiyotaka, who had been staring out the window in silence, turned around. “But Mr. Zhou is hardly a normal person.”

“Well, yeah.”

“If anything, he may be avoiding telling the police because doing so would cause some sort of problem for himself.”

“I get it.” Ensho smirked. “Like if the kidnappers demanded a sum that can’t be made public?”

Kimishima said nothing and lowered his gaze. Just then, he received a message. He looked at his phone and sprang to his feet. “Representative Zhou has arrived.” He cut across the room and opened the door, presumably intending to meet Zhou in the lobby, only to widen his eyes in shock at the man blocking his way.

“Kimishima, what the hell were you doing while accompanying her?!” the man shouted angrily in English. It was Haoyu Zhou. He was wearing a dark-brown suit, and he was stockier than he appeared in photographs. He had a very intimidating presence.

“I’m very sorry,” Kimishima said, bowing deeply.

Unsatisfied, Zhou grabbed him by the collar and tightly clenched his fist. One of the subordinates standing behind him hurriedly explained, “Representative Zhou, Kimishima was in Osaka on Azusa’s orders. Also, it was she who removed him from his bodyguard role, and yet he joined the security detail anyway.”

“In the end, he still let her get kidnapped. Kimishima, you’re fired. Starting tomorrow, I never want to see your face again.”

Kimishima didn't object. He bowed deeply, seeming to have been prepared for this outcome.

Zhou looked at the detectives. Komatsu had already stood up and was bowing along with Kiyotaka.

"You must be from the Komatsu Detective Agency," Zhou said in fluent Japanese. "I thought she would be safe because you came recommended by Yilin Jing, but apparently not." He sighed, disappointed.

"I'm truly sorry for what happened," said Kiyotaka. "We were able to capture the men who kidnapped your daughter on camera. Would you like to have a look?" He showed Zhou the lapel pin with the hidden camera.

"Of course." Zhou plopped himself down in the armchair.

Kiyotaka signaled to Komatsu with his eyes.

"Got it," said Komatsu, placing his laptop on the table. The images had already been transferred, so he could display them right away.

"Um," Kimishima interjected, "Komatsu, we have a projector. Please use that." He swiftly prepared the device and projected the screen onto the wall. The footage was divided into two views.

"The one on the left is my camera, and the one on the right is Komatsu's," Kiyotaka explained. "It's hard to see anything on mine because I was grappling with one of the perpetrators, but Komatsu's should show the entire event."

As he said, the feed from his pin camera was moving so fiercely that it was difficult to tell what was going on. However, Komatsu's camera clearly showed Kiyotaka's scuffle with the man.

Zhou's expression was stern as he watched the screen, while Ensho's was surprisingly cold. After viewing the footage, Zhou heaved a sigh.

"Unfortunately, the men in the car were the bodyguards I hired. They were former mercenaries with solid backgrounds, so I thought I could trust them, but alas." He sighed again, then looked at Kiyotaka. "Are you a professional too?"

"No." Kiyotaka shook his head. "I was only hired as a Kyoto guide."

"Could a mere guide really last so long against a former mercenary?"

“I was frail as a child, so my grandfather had me learn martial arts.”

Zhou hummed, rested his chin on his hands, and snorted. “I hear your grandfather is the nationally certified appraiser Seiji Yagashira. I also had the rest of your agency investigated, and they seem to be quite the unconventional group.”

He signaled to the man standing beside him with his eyes. The man nodded and extended his hand towards the door. The guard standing in front of the entrance opened it, and several men in suits came inside and began setting up laptops and other devices.

Komatsu recognized this sight. It was exactly the same as when police officers stationed themselves at a hotel. It was overwhelming for him, but on the other hand, Ensho seemed impressed.

“Huh, no wonder they didn’t think they needed to call the cops.”

Their private investigation headquarters was ready in no time at all. The men all turned to their laptops at once, and the sound of fingers tapping keyboards echoed back and forth across the room.

Zhou cleared his throat. “Komatsu, I hear that you worked for a certain organization and were very capable in your field.” Komatsu flinched. “I will take full responsibility, so you can do whatever it takes. Can you track Azusa down?”

Komatsu was keenly aware of the inner workings of the “certain organization” Zhou spoke of. Though it presented itself as an ally of justice, in reality, it was easily swayed by money and power. If a foreign billionaire came to Japan and had his subordinates do illegal things to save his kidnapped daughter, that organization wouldn’t be able to challenge them even if their actions came to light. Zhou’s claim that he would be accountable held water.

“Responsibility, huh?” Komatsu gave a strained smile. As chief, *he* was the one who had to take responsibility for letting Azusa get kidnapped. “I’ll do it.” He clenched his fists and placed his laptop on the desk that had been prepared for him. With a deep breath, he reached for the keyboard.

First, he checked the camera near Daimaru Kyoto’s Higashinotoin Street exit. He did so by identifying which jurisdiction it belonged to, hacking into their

program, setting the time to that of the incident, and checking that the car in question was there.

The car was displayed on the projector. Upon zooming in, they were able to see Azusa inside.

“Ohhh!” The room was filled with surprised voices.

“There it is!”

“Miss Zixuan is inside!”

Komatsu ignored the excitement and continued to relentlessly tap at his keyboard. The car was heading west. He quickly checked the next camera. These days, there were security cameras everywhere, so tracking movements was a piece of cake.

The car crossed Karasuma Street and continued west all the way to Horikawa Street, where it turned south. Komatsu kept typing away, verifying the footage of the getaway car. The other investigators stopped working, their eyes fixed on the projector. Some even remarked on his incredible speed, but Komatsu wasn't in the mood to feel proud.

Kiyotaka whispered in Zhou's ear, “Do you have any idea what the mysterious phrase at the end of the kidnappers' message means?”

“No.” Zhou shook his head. “They used Azusa's phone to send it. She probably started struggling or something, making them type those meaningless letters by accident.”

“I see.” Was it *truly* meaningless, though? Kiyotaka continued his questioning. “What is the treasure of yours that the kidnappers are demanding?” He spoke quietly, but his lapel pin transmitted his voice to Komatsu's earphones, which the detective hadn't taken off.

“I'm an upstart, so the treasure I've obtained is my wealth. They must be after my money.”

“No, it isn't money.”

“What makes you think that?”

“The perpetrators were your hired men, which means that this was a carefully

planned scheme targeting your daughter's trip to Japan. They must have a fair amount of funding. If all they wanted was money, there are countless easier ways to get it without going to such great lengths. In fact, they could target other wealthy people. It doesn't seem like a simple demand for money. For example, perhaps you own something special that no one else does, and they think the only thing you would be willing to exchange it for is your daughter."

At the restaurant where they had lunch, Azusa had said regarding her father, "He has what everyone wants." The initial assumption had been that she was referring to his current position, that he had obtained through his successful business, but perhaps he had actually obtained something *specific* that everyone wanted. Kiyotaka was trying to throw Zhou off guard in order to confirm this.

Komatsu glanced at Zhou, but there was no change in his expression. However, after a little while, he narrowed his eyes in amusement.

"People call you the 'Holmes of Kyoto,' if I'm not mistaken. But I think you may be more suited to being an author than a detective. I don't normally say such clichéd lines, but your theory is so off the mark that I can't help it."

"I'm actually an apprentice appraiser, not a detective," said Kiyotaka. "Also, it's my father who's the author. I don't mind clichéd lines, though, so I'm rather happy to hear that." He smiled.

Shivering at the battle of smiles, Komatsu returned his gaze to his laptop screen and sped up his typing.

The trail was lost when the car crossed Uji Bridge into Fushimi-ku. He checked the surrounding cameras, but couldn't find it. Upon looking at the map, he found that the area was filled with warehouses used for various industries.

"They might be hiding here somewhere," Komatsu said, wiping the sweat from his forehead.

The other investigators began to move at once.

"It's Fushimi-ku!"

"Scour every warehouse one by one!"

“So this is the work of a former member of an elite unit,” Zhou said, his expression still stern. “Even my staff couldn’t match your speed. I’m impressed.” The man was strict, but he seemed to acknowledge people’s abilities.

Komatsu didn’t feel happy, though. He had done this work to death back when he was in the organization. His body had simply gone through the motions that had been drilled into it. It wasn’t worthy of praise.

“That said, now that we’ve tracked them this far, I don’t need you anymore. Why don’t you leave with Kimishima?” Zhou spat.

Kimishima flinched.

Kiyotaka gently placed his hand on the unfortunate man’s shoulder. “If we can locate Azusa faster than your staff, will you withdraw Kimishima’s dismissal?”

Komatsu gaped at him.

Zhou frowned. “My staff who were on standby outside are already heading to Fushimi.”

“Yes, I would prefer having that handicap anyway,” said Kiyotaka.

Zhou blinked, then burst out laughing. “Well, if you insist. Go find my daughter faster than we do.”

“Understood.” Kiyotaka placed his hand on his chest, bowed, and looked at Komatsu, Ensho, and Kimishima. “Let’s go, then.”

“Uh...yeah.” Komatsu gulped and clenched his fist.

“Show us what you’ve got.” Ensho crossed his arms, amused.

Kimishima merely nodded in silence, his face still pale.

The four men left the suite-turned-investigation headquarters together.

2

“Well then, let’s go,” said Kiyotaka, getting in the driver’s seat and putting on his seat belt. The car had been prepared by Kimishima, who was in the passenger seat. Komatsu and Ensho sat in the back.

Kiyotaka started the car and went out onto East Oji Street. Not a second later, everyone was shocked to see him turn left. If they were going to Fushimi-ku, they would have to turn right here and go south. But Kiyotaka was heading north.

“Kiddo, why are we going this way?” asked Komatsu.

“I would like to know too, Yagashira,” said Kimishima.

Ensho laughed in amusement. “If Holmes says we’re going this way, it has to be right.”

“What’s with that unwavering trust?” asked Komatsu.

“Who said anything about trust? He’s the sketchiest guy in the world.”

“‘In the world’ is a bit much,” Kiyotaka said with a shrug. He glanced at the man beside him. “Kimishima, you know something, don’t you?”

Kimishima tightened his lips.

“Only tell us what you’re allowed to, then. The kidnappers’ demand isn’t money, is it?”

Kimishima nodded.

“The bodyguards hired by Representative Zhou were part of the scheme. I think there’s someone on the inside who’s colluding with them,” Kiyotaka continued.

Kimishima tilted his head.

“In fact, I think *you* might be one of the perpetrators.”

“Huh?” Kimishima looked up.

“You’ve been rather calm for someone whose charge has been kidnapped.”

“I’m not calm at all. I’ve been shaken this whole time.”

“Shaken, yes. But I don’t sense any fear in you that Azusa might be killed. It feels as though you know she is safe.”

“Is that why you brought him with us, kiddo?” asked Komatsu. “Because you suspect him of being one of the culprits?”

“Yes.” Kiyotaka nodded. Even when he had placed his hand on the man’s shoulder, he had been doubting him. “However, when I steered the car north on East Oji Street, he was genuinely surprised. There was no falsehood in his reaction. Kimishima, I’d say you know Azusa is safe, but you don’t know where she is. But you *do* have an idea of who the culprit is, don’t you?”

Kimishima didn’t know what to say.

“You don’t have to force yourself to reply. Not yet, at least.” Kiyotaka laughed and turned west onto North Oji Street. The car was filled with a chilly air. “It’s easier to drive on the big streets in Kyoto. The others are awfully narrow and have more traffic than you would expect. Kyoto is often called a ‘walking town.’ It’s not suited for cars. It’s convenient for motorcycles and bikes, though,” he said nonchalantly as he continued to drive.

They passed through Shimogamo and crossed Kitaoji Bridge, which spanned the Kamo River. There were shopping streets on either side, and farther ahead, Ritsumeikan Primary School could be seen to the right. After passing Horikawa Street and reaching Senbon Street, Kiyotaka turned the wheel, taking them north.

“This is the road to Genko-an Temple, ain’t it?” asked Ensho. “Is that where the girl’s waiting for us? Didn’t realize she was copying me.”

Kiyotaka laughed. “Unfortunately, we’re not going all the way to Genko-an.” He turned the wheel again and parked the car in a corner of a certain hotel’s lot. “Komatsu, check the footage around this hotel and in the lobby. I suspect the perpetrators took a taxi.”

“Got it.” Komatsu opened the laptop in his lap and began typing. It was a relatively new hotel called Amano Kyoto. Among the many taxis coming and going, one of them had been a van, and Azusa and the bodyguards had exited it. “Bingo, kiddo! How’d you know?”

“How *did* you know?” asked Kimishima. “Their car was heading towards Fushimi-ku.”

Kiyotaka chuckled. “There’s a heliport in the area they went to.”

“A heliport?!” Kimishima and Ensho’s eyes widened.

Komatsu clapped his hands together. “Oh! The JPD Kyoto Heliport!”

“That’s right.” Kiyotaka nodded. “And there’s another heliport here, in Takagamine.”

The perpetrators had driven to Fushimi, hidden their car in a blind spot, and headed to JPD Kyoto Heliport, where they had boarded a chartered helicopter to Takagamine in northern Kyoto. From there, they’d taken a taxi to this hotel.

“I’m amazed that you figured it out,” Komatsu murmured.

“It was still a gamble, though. There was always the possibility that they really were hiding in Fushimi. I decided to let Representative Zhou’s staff handle that side of the search while we came here.”

“Man, what a high-class kidnapping plot,” Ensho said, exasperated.

“Indeed.” Kiyotaka nodded. “Amano Kyoto is known for being a luxury hotel too. You may be speaking the truth.”

“The truth?”

“It’s a high-class kidnapping plot—or rather, a kidnapping plotted by the high-class.” Kiyotaka smirked and spoke into his phone, “As you just heard, Representative Zhou, we have located Azusa.”

“Whoa!” Komatsu exclaimed. “You were letting him listen in on our conversation?”

“Yes. He’s still taking responsibility for our actions, after all.”

Before receiving a reply from Zhou, they saw a series of luxury cars enter the hotel grounds.

“What the heck?” Ensho narrowed one eye. “We were totally being tailed.”

“He wouldn’t just leave us to our own devices, would he? I knew we were being followed. Now, it’s checkmate—the end to this grandiose father-daughter dispute.”

“Father-daughter dispute?” Komatsu and Ensho blinked.

“That’s right. The young lady planned this kidnapping drama herself. Kimishima should have realized it too. Right?” Kiyotaka looked at Kimishima.

The man weakly lowered his gaze.

3

Amano Kyoto's suite was magnificent as well, with a wall of floor-to-ceiling windows that provided a view of the illuminated trees outside.

Azusa was lounging on the large sofa, looking disgruntled. "How did you know I planned it myself?" She glared at Kiyotaka, who was standing in front of her.

Komatsu, Ensho, Kimishima, and Zhou's subordinates formed a row behind Kiyotaka. At this point, they were simply waiting for Zhou's arrival.

"There were several unnatural aspects of your behavior," said Kiyotaka.

"Really, now?" Azusa asked, displeased.

"Yes." Kiyotaka nodded. "First, you kept firing your guides because you didn't want to have a competent person around who wasn't supporting your plan. Since you couldn't avoid having an outsider present, you wanted it to be someone who wouldn't be able to do anything to stop the kidnapping. Thus, you hired me because you thought I was 'stupid.' As soon as you were introduced to me, you threw your shoe at me. That was a test to see what I would do, wasn't it?"

"That's what that was?" Komatsu gaped.

"I purposely didn't react because, in truth, I wanted to be fired as soon as possible. Ironically, it had the opposite effect." Kiyotaka shrugged. "You dismissed Kimishima from his bodyguard role out of consideration—you didn't want to get him involved in this incident. That's why, despite firing him, you never stopped asking him for things."

Azusa pursed her lips.

"You even sent him to buy Harry Winston jewelry because you didn't want him to be at the scene. You knew there were no Harry Winston stores in Kyoto, didn't you? It was an excuse to send him away on an errand."

Kiyotaka paused for a moment before continuing.

“After shopping at Daimaru, you stopped the employees from escorting you to the exit. That was because you knew the kidnapping was about to take place and you wanted to have as few witnesses as possible. And so, the plan was executed. You played the part of a victim and screamed as you were shoved into the car, but you didn’t put up much resistance. If it were a real kidnapping, you would have fought back more desperately. You weren’t behaving like yourself. You may be a talented model, but it appears you aren’t cut out to be an actress.”

Azusa looked away, frustrated.

“However, you hadn’t accounted for my fighting ability. You looked very surprised when you were in the car. That was because I was more capable than you expected, wasn’t it?”

“Yes.” Azusa crossed her arms. “I didn’t think you were that strong. It really made me panic.”

“But how’d you know about the helicopter?” Komatsu asked.

“I hypothesized that Azusa had planned the kidnapping herself, and thought about where she would go,” said Kiyotaka. “She isn’t the kind of person who would hide in a car forever, nor would she want to spend time in a dirty warehouse.”

“Definitely,” Komatsu agreed wholeheartedly.

“In that case, it was highly likely that she would go to a hotel, but the area where the car disappeared from view didn’t have any that would suit her tastes. Why did they go that way, then? I remembered there was a heliport there. The moment I realized that, the option of taking a helicopter to Takagamine stood out as the clearest option in my mind. Especially because she would be able to lead her father’s investigators on a wild-goose chase that way.”

“Makes sense.”

“Still, as I said earlier, it was partially a gamble. I didn’t have any definitive proof.”

“What about that weird code, then?”

“Oh, that.” Kiyotaka smiled. “That was an Atbash cipher.”

“Huh?” Komatsu tilted his head.

“You decode it using the reverse of a given sequence of letters. In the case of the alphabet...”

Normal: ABCDEFGHIJKLMNOPQRSTUVWXYZ

Reversed: ZYXWVUTSRQPONMLKJIHGFEDCBA

“So ‘A’ becomes ‘Z,’ ‘B’ becomes ‘Y,’ and so on. The letters in the message were ‘dzgzhsrcdzwzrqlyf.’ What does that convert to?”

“Uhh...” Komatsu deciphered the encoded message. *Watashiwadaijobu...* “‘I’m fine’? What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It was Azusa’s message for Kimishima. Remember when she called him ‘old’? She referenced it at Shimogamo Shrine too, when she sent him to Osaka. Didn’t you find it a little strange?”

“Yeah.” Komatsu nodded firmly. Kimishima definitely wasn’t that old.

“Try using the Atbash cipher on it.”

Confused, Komatsu converted the word “old” using the same method as before. “L-o-w... Oh, she was calling him ‘low’?”

“That’s right. Also, when she met me, she said ‘desserts’ to Kimishima. However, Kimishima did not bring her any desserts.”

“Was that encoded too? But ‘desserts’ comes out to gibberish.”

“The word itself is reversed. ‘Desserts’ backwards is ‘stressed.’ She was telling him that she felt stressed.”

“Oh, so that’s what it was.” Komatsu clapped his hands together. Ensho looked impressed too.

“We can see that Azusa and Kimishima regularly sent each other messages that others wouldn’t be able to understand, using reversed words or ciphers. However, this kidnapping was Azusa’s plan alone—she didn’t inform Kimishima beforehand, most likely because he would have been opposed to it. After it was executed, she sent that message because she didn’t want him to worry.

Thinking about it that way, we can draw a certain conclusion.” Kiyotaka held his index finger up to his mouth and chuckled. He was surmising that Azusa and Kimishima were *very* close—close enough to be lovers.

Azusa and Kimishima weakly lowered their gazes, a faint blush on their cheeks.

Ensho clicked his tongue. “What the hell? So the girl plots this huge incident ‘cause she doesn’t like her dad’s girlfriend, all while she’s getting it on with his employee? How much unnecessary trouble can one person cause?”

“No!” Azusa snapped. “It’s true that I wasn’t happy about my dad getting a new girlfriend, but I wouldn’t go this far just because of that.”

“Well, why did you, then?”

“It’s none of your business.” She crossed her arms and looked to the side.

“Hey now,” Komatsu said, holding up his hand in an attempt to de-escalate.

Kiyotaka took a step forward. “It’s the Oriental Hope Diamond, isn’t it?”

Azusa’s eyes widened in shock.

“You asked your father for the famed twenty-carat blue diamond, didn’t you?”

“Huh?” Komatsu and Ensho both looked surprised.

“You mean...Atsuko’s?” Komatsu asked.

“Yes.” Kiyotaka nodded. He looked at Azusa’s bewildered expression and said, “Azusa, the diamond’s owner is actually an acquaintance of ours. Yesterday, she visited me and said, ‘Today, near Yasaka Shrine, I spotted from a distance a man who had been very persistent in asking me to sell him the diamond. I took a picture without thinking.’”

Kiyotaka took his phone out of his inner pocket and held it up. “I had her send me the picture. It showed someone we all know.”

Komatsu and Ensho craned their necks to see the screen, but Azusa didn’t bother to look. She already knew who it was.

“That’s Kimishima, right?” said Komatsu.

“You’ve wanted the Oriental Hope Diamond for a long time, and you used Kimishima as a middleman,” said Kiyotaka. “Atsuko said that he was very passionate and sincere, and that if she’d known it would come to this, she would’ve sold it to him.”

Azusa gritted her teeth. “You’re right.” She raised her head in a relaxed manner. “The apparel brand I’m in charge of, Hua, was originally started by my mom. She staked her life on it because she didn’t want to lose to my dad. When I turned sixteen, she let me help, and the two of us worked hard on it together. But then she died. I inherited Hua, and to me, Hua is my mom’s will. It’s proof that she existed. Working on Hua let me distract myself from the sadness and loneliness of losing her.”

She paused before continuing.

“Last fall, the Oriental Hope Diamond was exhibited at a museum in Hong Kong. It was owned by Atsuko Tadokoro and loaned out through a Japanese museum. When I saw it, I cried because it reminded me of my mom’s blue eyes. I wanted to make that diamond our company treasure...the symbol of Hua. That’s why I sent Kimishima over so many times. But then...” She clenched her fists.

“That was when your father got a new girlfriend, wasn’t it?” Kiyotaka asked.

“Exactly! Even though when mom died, he said he’d always love her forever. And at the wedding, he said he’d love her even after death separated them. I was so angry. But worse than that...” Her eyes quickly became bloodshot. “His new woman said to me, ‘I begged him for the diamond. I told him I wanted a necklace made with the Oriental Hope Diamond more than any ring, and he said he’d do anything to get it for me. I heard you wanted it too, but it doesn’t look like you’re going to get it. Sorry.’ And then the theft happened! Dad used inhumane means to get the diamond. He didn’t just betray mom—he betrayed everyone who trusts him!” she shouted, breaking down in tears.

Kiyotaka hummed and folded his arms. “So you tried to take the diamond from him.”

“Sure, but stealing it from him just puts you on the same level,” said Ensho.

Azusa glared at him, her face streaked with tears. “I was going to return it to

Tadokoro, obviously. I was hoping to continue negotiating with her afterwards.”

Kiyotaka said into his phone, “Representative Zhou, you heard all of that, right? This is the truth behind the incident caused by your daughter.”

Azusa flinched. The door opened, and Zhou stepped into the room. He heaved a sigh upon seeing her.

“I realized it was all your doing,” he said in English. “I assumed you did it because you didn’t approve of our relationship.”

Komatsu had his phone open to a translation app, so he was able to understand their conversation.

“I wouldn’t have done it over something like that,” Azusa said.

“I didn’t know you wanted that diamond.”

“You’ve never cared about anything besides my school grades,” Azusa spat, glaring at her father. “I’m not angry because you’re trying to give the diamond I wanted to your girlfriend. It’s because you got it through criminal means! That’s why I was trying to take it from you in the same way. Do you understand now how it feels to have a precious family member do that to you?”

Zhou shook his head weakly. “You’ve got it wrong, Azusa.”

“Really? How so?” she asked defiantly.

Her father fell silent for a second.

Kiyotaka answered in his place. “If I’m not mistaken, Representative Zhou hasn’t obtained the diamond yet.”

“Huh?” Azusa’s eyes widened.

“What do you mean by ‘yet’?” Komatsu asked.

“It’s exactly as it sounds,” said Kiyotaka. “He plans to obtain it soon. That’s why he came to Japan.” He glanced at Zhou, who gave him a resigned nod.

“There’s going to be a secret auction in Osaka tomorrow night,” Zhou explained, switching to Japanese. “The diamond is going to be there. I was planning on winning the bid.”

The “secret auction” was probably a black-market auction. Komatsu nodded

in understanding. “A professional burglary ring caught wind that Hua Ya’s representative wanted the diamond, so they stole it. But getting it out of the country would be ridiculously hard.”

Ensho nodded as well. “So they decided to hold the auction here and leave the transport to whichever rich guy won.”

“That’s right.” Kiyotaka nodded.

Zhou heaved a sigh. “I didn’t have the diamond stolen, but in a sense, it was stolen because of me. I shouldn’t be bidding on it.”

“What, are you going to let me do it, then?” Azusa sneered.

Zhou shook his head. “The secret auction is full of stolen goods, even if it doesn’t explicitly say so. If the police were to raid that underground venue...I imagine all the items would be returned to the owners who reported them stolen.”

Azusa’s eyes widened in shock.

“I can’t say this too openly, but I was invited to the auction. In other words, I have a connection to it, so I’d be reluctant to report it myself. But fortunately, it appears we have some very respectable detectives here.” Zhou turned to look at Komatsu, Kiyotaka, and Ensho. He didn’t say it out loud, but it was clear that he wanted them to be the ones to report it.

Kiyotaka placed a hand on his chest and bowed. “Leave it to us.”

Komatsu hurriedly bowed as well, while Ensho merely shrugged.

*

The next day, police raided a black-market auction in a certain business district in Osaka and made several arrests. It would take some time for the stolen items to be returned to their owners.

After receiving the news from the police, Atsuko—who had assumed her treasure would never return to her—was shocked but happy.

“I’ve never felt so overwhelmed before,” she said.

And so, the lady's whirlwind of a Kyoto trip reached its final day. She had invited Komatsu, Kiyotaka, Ensho, and Aoi to her hotel suite, where they now sat on the comfortable sofas, drinking tea prepared by Kimishima.

"My trip couldn't have been this wonderful without you," Azusa said. "Thank you all so much." She smiled brightly, as if she'd been freed from the evil spirit possessing her.

"It was nothing," the group said, shaking their heads.

"I was simply doing things my own way," Kiyotaka said with a grin.

"Yeah, you were." Komatsu's face stiffened.

"I didn't do anything," said Ensho.

"No, you really didn't." Komatsu agreed completely.

"It sounds like a lot happened, but I hope you enjoyed Kyoto," Aoi said, smiling.

Azusa happily smiled back at her. "Thank you. I've never gone sightseeing with someone my age, so it was really fun walking around Kyoto with you. Also..."

"What is it?" Aoi tilted her head.

"Never mind. It's nothing." Azusa laughed it off. "Oh, right." She gestured towards the boxes of Van Leaf & Anabel accessories laid out on the table. "You can have one as a gift if you'd like."

Aoi's eyes widened. She shook her head. "I can't accept something so expensive."

"Oh?" Azusa rested her chin on her hand. "So if it wasn't expensive, you'd accept it?"

Aoi's expression was conflicted. "Maybe..."

"Don't you think that's a little strange? I'm doing this out of gratitude, but you're deciding whether or not to accept it based on its price tag."

Komatsu found himself admitting that Azusa might be right. However, Aoi shook her head without hesitation.

“I think everything has an appropriate value associated with it,” said Aoi. “I don’t know what you thought of it, but to me, the work I did wasn’t valuable enough to be worth such an expensive gift.”

Azusa hummed and crossed her arms. “So if you did something you were proud of—something you thought was worth that much—you would be able to accept it?”

“Yes, I would happily take it. But if that condition wasn’t met, I feel like I’d be creating a distortion by doing so.”

“A distortion? How so?”

“The core of my being would become distorted.”

Azusa’s eyes widened at how easily Aoi had answered her question. “I see.” She chuckled and looked at the jewelry boxes. “When I was shopping at the department store, I noticed you and Komatsu whispering to each other. What were you thinking? That I was wasting money?”

Komatsu shook his head vehemently.

“No,” said Aoi. “You had a very serious look in your eyes when you were examining the jewelry, so I didn’t think you were wasting money. I was just overwhelmed because our worlds are too different. To be honest, it made me feel gloomy. But it wasn’t because I was jealous.”

It was clear that Aoi was telling the truth. Azusa noticed it too.

“As you may have heard, I’m in charge of our apparel brand, Hua,” Azusa said, facing Aoi completely. “At Hua, we’re planning to design fashion for Asian celebrities.”

Aoi listened in silence.

“With the growth of online streaming, Asian TV dramas are now being watched all over the world. They’re popular in Japan too, aren’t they?”

“Yes,” said Aoi.

“My wife loves them,” muttered Komatsu.

“Do you know how much the actors are paid for a single episode?” asked Azusa.

Everyone tilted their heads. Even Kiyotaka didn’t know the answer.

“Kimishima, you can answer that, can’t you?” Azusa looked up at him.

“Yes.” He nodded. “In yen, I believe it ranges from twenty to thirty million.”

“What?!” Aoi and Komatsu gaped.

“For a single episode?” Aoi asked.

“So they’d make hundreds of millions for the whole season?!” Komatsu exclaimed.

“That’s right.” Azusa crossed her arms and nodded. “Van Leaf & Anabel’s Marguerite collection is increasing in popularity among Asian stars, and we want to design fashion that matches it. By combining our apparel with the Marguerite collection, we can create the image that Hua is a high-class brand. Once celebs start wearing it, people all over the world who admire them will seek out our products.”

Komatsu was stunned by her logic. Phrased that way, her shopping spree had been an upfront investment for her business.

It made sense to Aoi too, but there was still one thing she didn’t understand. “But why did you buy them during your Kyoto trip? Aren’t they sold in Hong Kong too?”

“Why, that’s a strange question. Kyoto is a hub for spiritual energy, isn’t it? Why wouldn’t I want to buy them from a place that brings good luck?”

Aoi’s expression relaxed. “Yes, Kyoto is magical. I can promise you that.”

“You can?”

Aoi nodded. “This city changed my life.”

“That’s a great phrase. I think it may have changed my life too. Hey, can I use that line?”

“Um, sure?” Aoi didn’t know what to make of the sudden request. Later, she

would learn that Hua's next marketing slogan was "Fashion that changes my life."

"I came to Kyoto because I wanted to create a design for Hua with a Japanese aesthetic. When it's finished, I'd like you to model it for me. I want to see how you look with the Kimono Forest in the background, showing off a bewitching beauty like never before."

"I couldn't possibly," said Aoi, flustered.

Kiyotaka swiftly changed the subject. "Azusa, will you be returning to Hong Kong right away?"

"Yes, but before that, I plan to speak with Atsuko Tadokoro. I really do want that diamond. I won't give up on the negotiations."

"I see." Kiyotaka smiled.

If Azusa loves it that dearly, I bet she'll be able to convince Atsuko to part with it eventually, Komatsu thought, his expression relaxing.

Chapter 6: Supporter

1

Several days had passed since the lady's kidnapping scheme. Ensho was lying idly on the tatami mats in his room on the Komatsu Detective Agency's second floor.

"There's nothing to do," he muttered as he stared at the wood ceiling.

As a kid, he had always looked for people's faces in the wood grain. It was a habit that had stuck with him—even now, he saw faces in the pattern. The dark parts started to look like Aoi's eyes. He averted his gaze, and it landed on the pile of sketchbooks on his low desk. He grabbed one and flipped through it.

The first page had sketches of peonies and camellias, but the bottom half was blank. He had drawn them when he was living with Yanagihara. After leaving his teacher's home, he had stopped drawing and painting casually. He felt that if he was going to draw something, it had to be a masterpiece. He wanted to surpass *Yu Garden by Night*, the piece he had obsessively painted in a Shanghai hotel. He really, really wanted to do it. His heart was anxious to make it happen, but his hands wouldn't move.

Suddenly, he remembered his conversation with Kiyotaka.

"I heard you painted when you were at Yanagihara's place."

"Those were more like scribbles. They weren't works of art."

"That's fine too."

Kiyotaka had said that so nonchalantly.

"But scribbling won't get me anywhere." Ensho sighed and laid on his side, resting his head on his bent arm.

Next to the sketchbooks, there was a seal book with Jakuchu artwork on the cover. Kiyotaka had given it to him.

“Might as well collect some temple seals since I’ve got nothing else to do.” He picked up the seal book and a single scrap of paper fluttered to the ground. “What’s that?” He grabbed the piece of paper and saw that it was a note. It said, “Would you like to see the Jakuchu exhibit?” and had a date written on it.

Ensho pulled up the Kyoto National Museum’s official website on his phone and checked the specified date. The museum was closed on that day.

“What the heck?”

He suddenly envisioned Kiyotaka’s cheeky smile and grimaced.

“Woo-hoo!” came Komatsu’s voice from the first floor.

Ensho shuddered at the bizarre sound. “What the heck?” he said again. He got up and went downstairs, still holding the seal book and note. “What’re you making weird sounds for, old man?” He stepped into the office, where Komatsu was sitting at his desk, arms raised in front of the computer screen. “Did you finally lose your mind from spending too much time staring at code?”

“Nope.” Komatsu whirled around to face him. “Zhou sent the payment, and it’s just...so much. We’ll be able to stay in Gion for a while, that’s for sure.” He sniffled, seeming genuinely elated.

“Man, how happy are you?” Ensho put his free hand on his hip. “I dunno how much you got, but it’s funny seeing this after Aoi said she couldn’t accept a reward that didn’t match the work she did. You don’t care about that, eh?”

“It’s not that. Even if I didn’t do much, the kiddo did great. The Komatsu Detective Agency deserves to accept the payment. Seriously, it’s all thanks to him. I gotta give him his fair share. Gotta pay the little miss a handsome part-time wage too...”

Ensho shrugged. “You did great too, didn’t you?”

“Nah.” Komatsu gave a strained smile. “I didn’t do anything special.” His hacking skills were probably world-class, yet he didn’t think of himself as amazing. It wasn’t an issue of low self-esteem, but that the work was so easy for him that he didn’t think it meant much.

“You’re creepy in your own way,” said Ensho.

“What was that for?” Komatsu frowned but quickly brightened up. “Anyway, let’s celebrate.”

“I’m always down for free food.”

“We should make it a New Year’s party while we’re at it. Gotta invite the little miss too. If it weren’t for her, the kiddo would’ve been fired on day one.”

“Yeah.” Ensho chuckled.

“Speaking of the little miss, you know how Azusa was about to say something to her that last time in the hotel suite?”

“Was she?” Ensho furrowed his brow.

“Yeah. She said, ‘I’ve never gone sightseeing with someone my age, so it was really fun walking around Kyoto with you. Also...’ Never finished her sentence.”

“Oh yeah, she was fidgeting too.”

“Uh-huh. The kiddo was curious too, so he secretly asked her about it when we were leaving. He was all, ‘Azusa, what did you stop yourself from saying to Aoi earlier?’”

Ensho hummed and crossed his arms.

“And Azusa said this...” Komatsu relayed her answer, chuckling all the while.

Ensho stood still. Unlike the detective, he was in no mood to laugh.

“What’re you zoning out for?” asked Komatsu.

“Oh, it’s nothing.”

“Hey, is that the seal book you got from the kiddo?” Komatsu had just noticed the object in Ensho’s hand.

“Yeah.” Ensho shrugged. “Came with a note too.”

“What’s it say?” Komatsu looked at the note and whistled. “A Jakuchu exhibit, huh? He’s popular right now, so I bet it’ll be packed.”

“But the museum’s closed that day.”

“Maybe there’s an advance showing for insiders?”

“An advance showing?” Ensho looked it up on his phone. The official website

made no mention of it. The specified date *was* before the exhibition's opening date, though. There was a high chance that Komatsu was right.

"Wait, it's only a few days from now. Good thing you realized before it was too late. The kiddo's always planning something, huh?"

Even though Ensho was glad, being told that by someone else made him uncontrollably annoyed. "He's so irritating," he said bluntly, turning to leave. He knew Komatsu was grinning, so he didn't look back as he returned to the second floor.

2

It was the day of the private showing, and Ensho was on his way to the Kyoto National Museum. It was located on Shichijo Street, right across from the hotel Azusa had been staying at. Next to the hotel was another famous destination, Sanjusangen-do Temple.

Popular exhibitions usually resulted in long lines outside, but since the museum was closed today, the area was rather empty. Every now and then, he'd see people who were there for the insider event. Kiyotaka and Aoi were waiting for him in front of the entrance.

"Ensho!" Aoi waved at him, a cheerful expression on her face. Meanwhile, Kiyotaka was smiling ominously.

"What's with that look?" Ensho asked.

"Nothing," said Kiyotaka. "I'm just glad you found the hidden note."

"What were you gonna do if I didn't?"

"I'd simply think it wasn't meant to be." Kiyotaka chuckled.

Ensho couldn't help but furrow his brow. The guy never failed to annoy him.

"Now, now," Aoi said, intervening before their conversation escalated into a fight. "Holmes says that, but he was relieved when Komatsu told him you found the note," she whispered.

Ensho felt a smile coming on and held it back—so strongly that his expression

became sterner than necessary, causing the people around them to flinch. He began to worry that he'd scared them, but Aoi was smiling as usual.

"Let's go inside," said Kiyotaka. "I'll have to ask my grandfather to come back."

It turned out that each invitation to the private showing allowed two people to enter. The Yagashira family had received two, one for Seiji and one for Kiyotaka.

Ensho craned his neck to peer into the museum grounds. The owner was already inside, chatting it up with people from the industry. Kiyotaka called for him and he came back, allowing the group of four to pass through the gate.

Normally, getting into a Jakuchu exhibition would have been a difficult feat. It felt nice to be given special treatment, but at the same time, Ensho hated it. He sneered at his own bitterness.

The owner grinned. "Think of it as an opportunity. Aoi, Ensho, enjoy yourselves today," he said, leaving them to go back to his acquaintances. The elderly man had a sharp intuition of his own, although not as overwhelming as Kiyotaka's.

Kiyotaka checked his watch and looked up. "There's still some time before it starts. Shall I tell you about Kyoto National Museum while we wait?"

"Yes, please." Aoi clenched her fists excitedly.

"The Kyoto National Museum, also known as KNM, is located on what used to be the vast grounds of Hoko-ji Temple."

Ensho hummed and crossed his arms. "The Great Buddha of Kyoto, eh?"

"What's that?" Aoi tilted her head in confusion.

"In the past, Hoko-ji Temple was so large that KNM's site, Myoho-in Temple, Toyokuni Shrine, Sanjusangen-do Temple, and others were all part of its grounds. Hideyoshi had a giant Buddha statue enshrined there, even larger than the one at Todai-ji Temple. It was known as the Great Buddha of Kyoto, but it was destroyed several times by fires. It hasn't been rebuilt since the last time in the Showa period."

“I see,” Aoi said in a disappointed tone.

“Going back to KNM, the symbol of the museum is this building, which is a designated Important Cultural Property of Japan. It used to simply be known as the Main Exhibition Hall, but now it’s called the Meiji Kotokan Hall.” Kiyotaka looked up at the brick building. It looked like it could be a palace. “It was designed by Tokuma Katayama, an architect from the Meiji period. He studied at the Imperial College of Engineering—now the University of Tokyo’s Faculty of Engineering—under a British architect named Josiah Conder.”

Aoi tilted her head, while Ensho furrowed his brow. Neither of them recognized the name.

“The college invited Josiah Conder from England to promote authentic Western-style architecture in Japan. He was a key figure in training Japanese architects in those early days. Tokuma Katayama was one of his first students.” Kiyotaka placed his hands together. “Back to the story. Tokuma Katayama studied under Conder and went to Europe to make his own observations before eventually taking part in designing KNM. Look at this palatial building. Everything from the front gate to the ticketing area and even the surrounding fence is so breathtakingly intricate and beautiful. It is, without doubt, a Kyoto treasure. It’s a wonderful building, and I hope it has a hundred—no, three hundred—years ahead of it.” He spread his arms as he spoke passionately about the museum.

Ensho noted that Kiyotaka had specified it was a *Kyoto* treasure, not just a national one. *This guy never changes*, he thought, his face stiffening. He looked up at the Meiji Kotokan Hall again. It *was* impressive. Its beauty and grandeur were comparable to those of foreign castles. In fact, when looking at a royal court in a foreign country, it was hard to immerse yourself in its beauty alone, because you could sense the history of bloodshed and strife. However, this building had no such horrific background. Perhaps that was why the atmosphere around it felt clean and upright.

Kiyotaka explained that the building consisted of seventeen rooms arranged symmetrically around the front entrance. The decorative gable above the entrance had an imperial crest in the center. There were Buddhist deities on either side of it—Vishvakarma holding a chisel and hammer on the left, and

Gigeiten holding a brush and scroll on the right. Although they seemed to clash with the Western-style architecture, both of them were deities associated with arts and crafts, making them appropriate motifs for a museum displaying a variety of pieces of both Japanese and Western origin.

“The new building next to it is called the Heisei Chishinkan Wing,” he added. “‘Kotokan’ means ‘old hall’ and ‘Chishinkan’ means ‘new knowledge hall.’ The Meiji Kotokan Hall is currently undergoing renovations, so there aren’t any exhibits there.”

Aoi seemed disappointed to hear that.

“However, it has a few special openings each year, and the main hall can be rented for a fee. It’s a beautiful space with white plaster walls and pillars, filled with Western decorative architecture techniques. You can see them in the bases and tops of the pillars, the eaves—everywhere. It feels like a sacred place.”

Aoi looked entranced as she imagined the hall. “I’d like to see it next time there’s a public opening.”

“Yes, let’s be sure to go.”

“Was this all just a ruse for planning a date?” Ensho slumped his shoulders, annoyed.

After talking for a while, it was time for the private showing to begin. The trio headed for the Heisei Chishinkan Wing.

Unlike Meiji Kotokan Hall, Heisei Chishinkan Wing had a modern and clean look. The grand lobby was flooded with light, and the windows provided a view of Meiji Kotokan and the vast garden. On the other hand, the exhibit halls were completely isolated from natural light and air-conditioned to preserve the cultural assets they contained. It was truly a state-of-the-art museum.

“Oh, there’s someone else we can’t forget when it comes to KNM,” Kiyotaka said, his expression suddenly turning serious.

Ensho and Aoi stopped in their tracks, ready to hear the important story that was surely about to begin.

“It’s KNM’s official mascot and PR ambassador, Torarin.” Kiyotaka looked at the person in the tiger mascot costume welcoming the visitors. Unlike the usual orange and black tigers, this one was white and gray with black stripes. “It’s based on *Tiger and Bamboo*, a charming painting of a tiger by Korin Ogata. The mascot’s official name is Rinnojo Kogata, but it’s nicknamed Torarin. Isn’t it adorable?” he said happily as he gazed at the short mascot with the big head.

“I was wondering what you were gonna say that was so serious,” Ensho said, mildly annoyed.

Aoi giggled. “Holmes really loves mascots.”

“Huh? Really? Didn’t expect that,” Ensho murmured.

“He likes cute things,” Aoi said teasingly.

“So that’s why his girlfriend’s like a mascot too, eh?”

“Huh?” Aoi blinked.

Kiyotaka shook his head, exasperated. “What are you talking about? Then again, if there was Aoi merchandise, I’d buy it.”

“It’d be ‘Aorin,’ eh?”

“What?” Aoi blushed.

“Well then, shall we take a picture with Torarin, Aorin?” Kiyotaka asked.

“Why are you calling me that too?”

While they were taking commemorative photos with Torarin, the staff came to give an explanation of the exhibition. They thanked everyone for their patronage and told funny anecdotes about the challenges involved in holding the Jakuchu exhibition. After that, everyone was free to explore.

Since there were only a small number of visitors, the trio was able to take their time looking around the exhibition and ask the staff questions directly. It was truly a luxury.

Ensho purposely kept his distance from the couple as he went through the hall. The first piece he came across was one of Jakuchu’s largest-scale works, a three-painting series called *Shaka Sanzon Portrait*. The painting in the center

depicted Shaka Nyorai, while the ones on the left and right depicted Fugen Bosatsu and Monju Bosatsu. Ensho gulped as he stared at them. The paintings were brilliant and majestic, but despite being so overwhelming, they didn't convey the artist's emotions, and especially not his ego. Had he painted these while in a state of nothingness? And after creating these magnificent works of art, had he been able to continue to paint? Ensho couldn't help but wonder.

Next was another of Jakuchu's greatest masterpieces, *Colorful Realm of Living Beings*. It was said that he had painted this collection to decorate the space around *Shaka Sanzon Portrait* at Shokoku-ji Temple. Ensho knew about these paintings and had come across them in reference books and the like, but this was his first time seeing them in person.

The first painting in the series was *Peony and Butterflies*, and it took his breath away. It depicted butterflies fluttering around beautiful peonies, and he could practically smell the flowers' fragrance. The butterflies seemed like they could move on to the next flower at any moment. The brushstrokes were careful and realistic, delicate yet powerful.

Whenever Ensho painted, he always thought, "A painter must be able to surpass photographs." At some point in time, most people who used cameras had probably felt that they couldn't do justice to the scenery they saw with their own eyes. For example, when looking up at the shining moon or gazing at a canyon from atop a mountain, someone might take a picture because they want to depict that beautiful scenery. However, it was rare to be able to capture the beauty in its entirety, as seen by the naked eye. People who could take such photographs were professionals.

Ensho felt that a painter had to portray the magnificence of a scene better than a professional photographer could. That was probably due to his father's influence. He suddenly thought back to what his father had told him.

"Shinya, practical techniques are only a means to an end. A painter doesn't just copy what he sees onto the canvas. What's important is how you express what's in your heart. In other words, a painting is a reflection of the scene in your heart."

Jakuchu's paintings matched Ensho's personal ideals. They had the realism of

photographs while surpassing them in beauty. It was as if Jakuchu had taken what he saw and reflected it through his heart onto the canvas, and yet you couldn't sense his ego.

Overwhelmed, Ensho continued through the exhibition and arrived at a group of paintings dedicated to chickens, a common subject for Jakuchu. *Sunflowers and Rooster*, *Rooster and Hen with Hydrangeas*, and *Rooster and Hen* were all painted with delicate precision and a dynamism that let the viewer imagine how the birds would move next. The subjects were ordinary chickens, not something Ensho would ever think to use as a motif. They must have been an everyday sight for Jakuchu too, since his family had dealt in groceries.

As he stared at the paintings, someone called his name. Startled, he jumped a bit and turned to the side to see Aoi looking apologetic. "Aoi?"

"Sorry for interrupting you when you were focusing..."

"It's fine." Ensho shook his head and noticed that she was alone. "Huh? Where's Holmes?"

"He stepped away to take a phone call."

Ensho hummed and straightened his back.

Aoi looked at the paintings and murmured, "They're wonderful, aren't they?"

"Yeah." Ensho put his hands on his hips. "A kid from a vegetable wholesaler family turned out to be an amazing painter like this, eh?"

"Holmes called him a local celebrity."

Ensho chuckled. "Well, Jakuchu was in a similar position to Holmes. He was the son of a wealthy merchant and had a comfortable life."

"Yeah." Aoi nodded. "But I heard that Jakuchu wasn't interested in anything except painting. He didn't drink or gamble, and he stayed single his whole life. The only luxuries he afforded himself were his painting materials. Holmes told me that just now."

Paint was quite expensive in those days. Part of the reason Jakuchu had been able to develop his talent was because he had been born into a wealthy family.

"You were really focused on the paintings, huh?" Aoi asked.

Having it pointed out again made Ensho feel embarrassed. “I was wondering why he painted chickens.”

Aoi giggled. “I wondered the same thing before, when I was reading an art textbook. But now that I’m seeing the paintings in person, I kind of get it.”

Ensho quietly waited for her explanation.

Still looking up at the painting, Aoi said, “I think he painted them because they caught his eye.”

“They caught his eye?”

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

Jakuchu’s *Realm of Living Beings* included paintings of other creatures, such as fish, frogs, spiders, and caterpillars, and every single one felt precious.

God’s point of view, eh? Ensho smirked. Perhaps Jakuchu had also been determined to paint a masterpiece, but he didn’t feel the need for a special subject, because to him, everything around him was special. *I get it now.*

Ensho’s shoulders relaxed. He didn’t have to paint something special. He could just paint whatever caught his eye, like when he was sketching flowers at Yanagihara’s place. That must have been what Kiyotaka was trying to tell him. The invitation to this private showing had been a means of making him realize this.

Normally, Ensho would feel frustrated, but not this time. He glanced at Aoi, who was still looking up at the painting in front of them. He chuckled as he realized the smoldering darkness within him had cleared up at some point.

“You really are a detoxifier, eh?” he said.

“Huh?”

“Did Holmes tell you what the Hong Kong girl said about you?”

Aoi shook her head, confused.

“She said, ‘Aoi’s different from my mom, but she feels like one to me.’”

“Huh?” Aoi blinked. “Me? A mom? But I’m not that much older than Azusa...”

What was interesting was the “different from my mom” part. Indeed, Aoi was probably nothing like Azusa’s mom. Despite that, Azusa had felt that she was like a mom because of her motherly nature.

“Did Holmes’s old-timeyness rub off on you?” Ensho asked teasingly.

Aoi giggled. “Maybe.”

“Aoi,” came Kiyotaka’s clear voice. He walked up to her, made a show of wrapping his arm around her shoulder, and smiled. “Are you enjoying Jakuchu?”

“Yeah, since you went to the trouble of inviting me,” said Ensho. “You really are a nice guy, eh?”

Aoi giggled at his sarcastic smile. “He is. When I told him your birthday was coming up, he slipped the note into the seal book. It made me realize how much he cares about you.”

“What?” Kiyotaka and Ensho’s voices overlapped.

“What are you talking about, Aoi?” asked Kiyotaka. “I invited Ensho because we happened to have an extra spot.”

“Yeah, there’s no way in hell he cares,” said Ensho. “Just thinking about it creeps me out.”

“Exactly. I don’t want to involve myself with him if I don’t have to.”

“That’s my line. You say you don’t wanna deal with me, but you’re always poking your nose into my business.”

“That’s what I want to say. *You’re* the one always coming to me for one thing or another.”

“No, I don’t.”

Aoi stepped in between them and held up a hand. “I guess I wasn’t clear enough. He cares about your *paintings*, Ensho.”

Kiyotaka weakly averted his gaze. “Well, the paintings have done nothing

wrong.”

“What, you admit you like my paintings?” Ensho said jokingly.

“I wouldn’t hold an exhibition at my house for paintings I didn’t like,” Kiyotaka snapped.

Ensho rubbed the back of his head, unable to argue back. His first-ever exhibition had been at the Yagashira residence. It was also the first exhibition in general that had ever been held there.

Kiyotaka looked at Jakuchu’s painting. “I think Jakuchu’s work depicts God’s point of view.” It was the same thing Aoi had said. Was Aoi influenced by him, or did they have similar sensibilities? Probably the latter. “Oh, right, take this.” He held out an illustrated book of Jakuchu art.

Ensho looked down at it hesitantly. “What, a picture book this time? It’s scary when you give me so many things.”

“No, this is given to all of the private showing attendees.”

“Oh, I see.”

“We’ll be going now.”

“See you, Ensho,” said Aoi.

The couple bowed and walked away.

After watching them leave, Ensho looked back at the painting.

“God’s point of view, eh?” he whispered.

As he gazed at the vivid colors, he was suddenly reminded of the kukurizaru at Yasaka Koshin-do Temple. By casting away one desire, you could have one wish granted. If he were to pray there, what would he offer and what would he ask for? The important question there was, “What do I want the most?”

At the same time, he remembered what Yuki had said.

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

He admitted that he harbored special feelings for Aoi. But he didn’t know if

they were romantic in nature. He didn't like seeing her all lovey-dovey with Kiyotaka, but it didn't make his heart burn with jealousy, probably because he had already given up on her. Kiyotaka and Aoi were an item, and it had been that way ever since he'd first met them.

He sighed and looked at the painting. It was said that the Zen priest Daiten was the one who had discovered Jakuchu's talent. Daiten was known for his Chinese poetry. In fact, he was considered the best poet out of all the temple priests in Kyoto. That man had praised Jakuchu's talent and provided him with endless support.

Come to think of it, Yilin had said something related to that.

"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 away."

No matter how much talent you had, it was meaningless if you went unseen. For Jakuchu, his good fortune had been meeting Daiten.

"As for me..."

Kiyotaka's image flashed through his mind. Ensho slumped his shoulders and walked away.

Chapter 7: Their Values

After leaving Kyoto National Museum, Holmes and I walked west, hand in hand, until we reached the Kamo River. There, we turned north at Kawabata Street. The other side of the river was lined with quaint inns and restaurants. Egrets rested their wings on the surface of the water, remaining perfectly still as if they were ornaments.

As we leisurely walked along, I brought up something I had been curious about. “Despite what you said earlier, you invited Ensho to the Jakuchu exhibition because you were worried that he wasn’t painting, right?”

“I suppose,” Holmes said reluctantly. “*Yu Garden by Night*, which he painted in Shanghai, was a masterpiece, and that fact seemed to be affecting him quite a bit.”

I nodded in silence.

“Almost everything he’s ever painted has either been under his father’s name or forgeries of famous works. As far as I’m aware, the only paintings he’s completed as himself are *Yu Garden by Night* and the one he gave me, *Suzhou*.”

“But he technically painted *Yu Garden by Night* as a forgery of Taisei Ashiya, didn’t he?”

“Yes, but at the time, he didn’t know what Taisei Ashiya’s paintings looked like. What I told him was, ‘In my opinion, your style is similar to Taisei Ashiya’s, so it doesn’t need to be a forgery. Could you please just paint a piece for me? I’d like it to make one think of ancient China. Aoi’s life is at stake. I’m seriously relying on you.’”

Holmes paused before continuing.

“When I first saw *Suzhou*, I assumed he had painted it with a carefree attitude since it was going to be given to me. That showed in the painting, which gave a very relaxed impression. On the other hand, he had taken *Yu Garden by Night* seriously because he was painting it to save someone. It’s a masterpiece with

the power to overwhelm the viewer—so much so that even Ensho burned out. As a result, he couldn't paint his next piece. His mind was hung up on having to surpass his previous work." Holmes slumped his shoulders. "It's something all creators go through."

"Yeah. I often hear the manager go, 'I can't write anything better than this!'"

"When you're stuck in such a situation, staring at the paper won't help. If you can't put anything out, you'll just have to take as much input as you can."

"But," I said hesitantly, "if I were a creator and saw Jakuchu's amazing paintings at a time when I couldn't paint, it'd probably break my heart."

Holmes chuckled. "I think a lot of creators would feel the same. But Ensho will be fine," he said with confidence.

"Are you sure? He can be surprisingly sensitive..."

"That's true." Holmes smiled. "Despite his big attitude, he's actually oddly sensitive, has low self-esteem, and hesitates for the strangest reasons. Really, what a pain. But on the other hand, he absolutely hates to lose. When he sees a painter who has God's point of view, he'll get worked up, thinking, 'I can do that too.'"

"You really understand him, huh?"

"Well, we're similar," Holmes said in a resigned tone of voice. In the past, he never would've admitted their similarities out loud, even if he was aware of them.

"Speaking of similarities, when I saw Jakuchu's paintings, I also thought they showed God's point of view. So I was surprised when you said the same thing, then happy that we had the same interpretation."

"Is that so?" Holmes smiled cheerfully. "I'm happy too." He suddenly leaned closer to hug me, only to clutch his stomach in pain. "Ouch!"

My eyes widened. "Holmes?!"

"Sorry," he said, quickly regaining his composure.

"It still hurts where you were hit, doesn't it?"

“I normally don’t feel it.”

“Are you okay?” Regardless of how he tried to brush it off, his opponent had been a former mercenary.

Holmes smiled and held my hand. “I’ve been working out.”

“I know, but...” The sight of Holmes being punched flashed through my mind, and I cast my eyes down in shame. “I couldn’t do anything when it happened...”

“What are you talking about? It’s a *good* thing you didn’t get involved. When the fight broke out, I truly regretted asking you to be a guide.”

“Thank you, but I’m glad I was able to help with that request. Spending time with Azusa and seeing everything that happened cleared up some of my uncertainties. My thoughts on money changed as well.”

“How so?”

“I used to feel guilty about wanting a lot of money. It just felt dirty to me. So I didn’t like seeing rich people splurge on things either. I actually felt depressed seeing Azusa buy all of that expensive jewelry at Daimaru. But when I heard that she was doing it for her business, I was moved. That was when I realized, spending a lot of money on your interests isn’t a bad thing. If anything, it’s good because it keeps the economy moving. But more than that, I admired Azusa for combining her interests with her work.”

Come to think of it, there were a few things Holmes often said:

“I always endeavor to look at genuine articles.”

“If I’m going to be wearing something, it should be good quality.”

“When in doubt, I think it’s better to choose the more expensive option.”

I knew there were such things as good luxuries and bad luxuries, and I knew that good luxuries enriched one’s mind, lifestyle, and the economy. Holmes had taught me that, but I’d always been in a state of, “I understand what he’s saying, but it’s hard to accept it.” However, now it was different.

“It was the same for Jakuchu, right?” I continued. “Paint was expensive back then, but he continued to use it without restraint. It might’ve seemed indulgent from the perspective of others, but it wasn’t a bad luxury. That made me realize

that I don't feel conflicted when I think of luxury as a stepping stone."

"A stepping stone?" Holmes murmured.

I nodded. "I always felt uneasy whenever you tried to give me an expensive gift. But when you took me to places beyond my means to broaden my views, like Minamiza Theater and the luxury sleeper train, I felt humbled but also happy. I was able to accept those gratefully because I knew they were important experiences that would benefit my future."

I paused before continuing.

"The other thing I learned was that having money means having freedom of choice. I used to think I envied rich people because they could buy anything they wanted and go anywhere in the world. But what I really envied was that they had a lot of options available to them."

"Indeed." Holmes looked up at the sky. "Having money means you can make choices, such as, 'I can buy anything, but I won't,' and 'I can go anywhere in the world, but I'll stay home.' There are people who say things like, 'You don't need money to be happy' or 'Money isn't the only thing that matters in the world.' These statements are not false. However, I believe that being able to make any choice you want in a variety of situations is what gives you freedom."

I nodded with a strained smile. "That's exactly what I thought—I didn't need money to be happy. But after these events, I realized that having money gives you freedom. I think the resistance and guilty feelings towards money I had deep inside my heart have diminished."

"That's good." Holmes's expression softened. "Money is very sensitive to people's emotions. If your heart is rejecting it, no matter how much you wish for it, it won't come to you."

I laughed and looked at him. "Is that how it works?"

"Yes." He smiled in amusement. "It doesn't matter if you're a good or bad person. Money comes to those who truly like it. People who say, 'I don't need it,' 'Having a lot will bring misfortune,' or 'I'm fine with a modest amount' will really end up with less of it."

"Now that you mention it, my grandmother and parents often say that last

one, and they pretty much did end up that way.”

“My father is the same. My grandfather and I aren’t, though.”

“You don’t feel that way at all, huh?”

“No, I welcome any amount I can get. I’d like to be able to go anywhere in the world to look at art when the fancy strikes me.”

“That’s just like you.” I smiled. “I’ll have to change my mindset, then.” But would I really be able to start thinking “I love money” all of a sudden?

Holmes chuckled, seeming to have read my mind. “If you don’t like the crude sound of ‘I want money,’ you can think of it as ‘I want to have a lot of freedom.’”

“Oh, right.” I nodded firmly. Then it occurred to me—when Azusa had offered to give me an accessory, why hadn’t I been able to accept it? And why was I so resistant to the idea of Holmes giving me expensive presents? “I think I finally understand.”

“Understand what?”

“Why I didn’t like the idea of you giving me expensive things. I always assumed it was a difference in values—you thought I was worth the price of those gifts, but I didn’t.”

“Was that not the case?”

“It’s definitely part of it, but the main reason was the same as why I turned down Azusa’s offer.”

Holmes silently awaited my next words.

“It’s hard to explain, but it felt like I was going to lose my freedom. Even though you and Azusa were trying to give me those things because you genuinely cared about me, for me, if I accept something beyond my means, I’ll feel too indebted and the relationship won’t feel equal anymore. And then...my heart will be trapped by that thought. That’s why I didn’t want to accept the gifts. It would’ve been the same no matter who was offering them.”

I looked up at Holmes’s face.

“So if I ever find something that I truly want, I’d rather work hard to get it myself than have you give it to me. And I’d want you to be by my side, watching me do it.”

“I understand,” he said with a refreshed expression. “From now on, even if I notice that you want something, I won’t buy it ahead of you. I’ll stay by your side and watch you work hard to obtain it.”

“Thank you.”

“I should be thanking you. You’re giving me permission to watch over you from your side. Nothing could make me happier. In fact, that’s something money can’t buy,” he said, pressing his forehead to mine.

My heart skipped a beat. Without moving my head, I glanced around to make sure no one was around, then gave him a light kiss on the lips.

Startled, Holmes placed a hand on his mouth, blushed, and looked down. “Oh no,” he said, reverting to his Kyoto accent. “What a priceless surprise. Ah, I’m so happy, I could die. I could jump into the Kamo River right now and get washed all the way to the Yodo River in Osaka.”

“Hey, don’t say ominous things like that.”

He laughed, then fell silent, covering his face with his hand.

“Holmes?”

“It’s embarrassing to admit, but I was feeling insecure again.”

“Huh?” I asked in a quiet voice. “Because I might be going abroad after I graduate?”

“No.” He shook his head. “It was something else. At the end of the year, you said to me, ‘I wish you’d be more understanding of the average person,’ didn’t you?”

“I did.”

“I didn’t want to admit it, but our values do differ a bit. And differing values are a sure cause of breakups. If you were to leave me because of that...”

I gaped. “Is that why you were showing off how normal you could be?”

“I *am* normal. I wanted you to understand that,” he said sulkily.

I feel like a true commoner wouldn't have to prove it...

Holmes heaved a sigh. “I was afraid you would realize we had different values.”

“But isn't it natural for that to be the case?”

“Huh?” He looked up.

“We're different people, so it's impossible for our values to be exactly the same. It's *because* we're different that we can make efforts to understand each other and make mutual concessions.”

Holmes's eyes widened in surprise.

“Sure, it's probably best to have similar values, but differences aren't something to break up over. The more different we are, the more we can know about other perspectives. Don't you think that's a great learning experience?”

Holmes scrunched up his face and put his hand on his forehead. “You're such an angel.”

I giggled and cupped his cheeks in my hands.

“I'm so ashamed of myself,” he murmured. “But strangely enough, I don't hate myself for it.”

I looked at him, confused.

“Before I met you, I wasn't particularly afraid of or anxious about anything. The people in my life were all considerably older than me, so I was prepared for them to die before me. I had a painful heartbreak, but all it did was hurt my self-esteem. It didn't lead to fear or insecurity.”

I quietly listened to his words.

“I didn't experience the jealousy, fear, or possessiveness that a normal person would. Instead, I was always calm and composed. Sometimes I wondered if I was defective as a human being, but even then, it didn't cause any distress. I simply thought, ‘If that's the case, that just makes my life easier.’ But...” He touched my cheek. “After meeting you, every little thing has me alternating

between joy and anxiety. My heart struggles to keep up, but I feel alive. I used to prioritize myself above all else, but now I care more about you than myself, and I feel proud of wanting to protect you.”

He looked straight into my eyes as he spoke, and my heart welled up with emotion. “Kiyotaka...”

“Aoi...” He gently wrapped his arms around my back.

“Wait, is your stomach okay?”

“It’s fine.” He laughed and brought his face close to mine.

“Come to think of it, we may have different values, but we have similar sensibilities.”

“Indeed. I’m very happy about that.”

Our noses touched, and then our lips met once more. Just then, an egret in the river flapped its wings, and we separated, startled.

“Oh, right,” said Holmes. “It was Komatsu who called me earlier. He said he wanted to give you your payment for the guide work. And since the agency was paid a lot, he also wanted to order catering and have a celebration party at the office.”

“Ooh, that’s exciting.”

“He also said...” Holmes whispered something in my ear.

I grinned. “Count me in.”

We looked at each other, chuckled, and continued walking hand in hand. The surface of the Kamo River sparkled brightly beside us.

Epilogue

“So you see, we’ve always declined new customers without a referral, but it’s gotten to the point where we won’t be able to get by without them. And yet it wouldn’t be fair to our existing customers if we changed our stance,” the kimono-clad proprietress of a small restaurant explained fervently. “What do you think, Kiyotaka?”

Whenever Komatsu walked around Gion with Kiyotaka, people would ask them for advice. Figuring he might as well make a service out of it, he had put up a poster in front of the Komatsu Detective Agency that said, “We offer thirty-minute consultations on anything. Pay what you want.” As a result, there was now a steady stream of visitors whenever Kiyotaka was in the office.

Komatsu had assumed that Kiyotaka wouldn’t want to do such work, but the young man had actually accepted the job quite willingly.

“I think the exclusivity is part of the restaurant’s brand,” said Kiyotaka. “Instead of cheapening its reputation, how about launching a campaign aimed at the general public, advertised as experiencing a meal at a restaurant they normally wouldn’t be able to enter? You could also have it incorporated into tours and whatnot.”

“Yes, we do need to expand the scope of our business, and that’s one way to do it.” The woman nodded.

There was a timer set for thirty minutes, but most visitors hurriedly stood up before the alarm rang.

“It seems that time is almost up,” she said. “Thank you kindly. It’s not much, but here’s the payment.” She put down a white envelope before leaving the office.

The consultations had no set price, so people paid whatever they felt was right. Some paid as little as a thousand yen, while some paid as much as ten thousand. Kiyotaka received eighty percent as the actual adviser, while

Komatsu took twenty percent for providing the office space.

“That poster brings in a lot of people, eh?” said Ensho, amused. “Well, it feels less like they want advice and more like they wanna talk to Holmes.”

“True.” Komatsu nodded. “He gives pretty good advice every time, though, so it’s not a bad idea. Honestly, I was sure he’d refuse to do it.”

“My past self wouldn’t have been enthusiastic about it, but the situation is different now,” said Kiyotaka.

“Oh yeah? Did you have some kind of change of heart?” Komatsu asked.

“Yes. I thought of something I’d like to do, and it would benefit from having more connections.”

“What is it?”

“Well...”

Suddenly, the intercom rang. The screen showed a young man.

“Oh?” Kiyotaka’s eyes widened. “If it isn’t Haruhiko. Please come in.”

They heard the sliding door open, followed by a hello. Akihito Kajiwara’s younger brother, Haruhiko, came in.

“I heard that Holmes is providing consultations here.” He eagerly took out an envelope.

Kiyotaka held up his hand. “I can’t accept payment from a student who does so much volunteer work.”

“Thank you.” Haruhiko bowed humbly and sat down on the sofa.

While preparing coffee, Kiyotaka smiled and said, “Oh, right. We’re having a dinner party here at the office this evening. Would you like to join us?”

“That sounds like fun, but I have a student meeting after this. I was invited by the Consortium of Universities in Kyoto.”

“You’re working as diligently as always, I see.”

“It’s not that big of a deal... By the way, is Kaori going to be at the party tonight?”

“No.” Kiyotaka shook his head. “We invited her, but she said she has family matters to attend to.”

“Oh.” Haruhiko looked away, his conflicted expression hinting that the question was related to his reason for coming.

“Here you are.” Kiyotaka placed a cup of coffee in front of Haruhiko and sat down across from him. “Did something happen between you and Kaori?”

“No, um...” Haruhiko weakly put his hand on his head. With great reluctance, he continued, “The other day, Kaori said to me...”

“Can you pretend my confession never happened? I’d like to keep being normal friends and colleagues, just like before.”

After relaying her words, he let out a long sigh. “Was it wrong of me to hold off on giving her my answer?”

Kiyotaka tilted his head. “That depends. But first, have you realized that you love Kaori?”

Haruhiko blushed slightly and nodded. “After she confessed to me, I became more conscious of her. It’s like we’re on the same wavelength. I really enjoy being with her. And most of all, she’s really honest and nice.”

“Indeed,” Kiyotaka said with a knowing nod.

“I didn’t manage to take the next step before the year ended, so I was going to do better this year.”

“Yes, I know that feeling well.” Kiyotaka nodded nostalgically.

Haruhiko slumped his shoulders. “But after she said that, my mind went blank. I keep trying to figure out what I did wrong.”

“Do you know what it might’ve been?”

“No idea. I don’t remember doing anything that would make her hate me, but...” He leaned forward and whispered, “Things changed a bit after Ensho’s exhibition.”

“Hm?”

“When we’re together, she’s always talking about Ensho’s paintings. It makes

me wonder if he stole her heart...”

Haruhiko was keeping his voice down so that Ensho wouldn't hear, but since his words were reaching Komatsu's ears, the man in question could surely hear as well.

Kiyotaka hummed and folded his arms. “I wouldn't be sure about that.”

“Do you know something, Holmes?”

“I don't have nearly enough information to say anything.”

“I see...” Haruhiko sighed.

“Rather than making assumptions about Kaori, why don't you ask her how she feels?”

“It's...hard to ask. I feel like we wouldn't be able to go back to being friends.”

“Would you even want to be friends with the girl you love?”

“Huh?”

“I certainly wouldn't want to prolong my suffering like that.”

“Suffering...”

“If you wanted to stay friends with her to aim for another chance or prevent other men from getting close to her, I would understand. In fact, if you want to come up with a plan for that, that's another discussion entirely.”

Haruhiko groaned and clutched his chest.

The kiddo's giving him a push, but it might be too strong for a naive guy like him. Komatsu's face stiffened.

“Sorry,” Haruhiko said, shakily rising to his feet. “I'll sort out my feelings and talk to her.”

Yep, you go do that. Komatsu nodded at his desk. After Haruhiko was gone, he gave a strained laugh. “Wasn't that a bit too cold?”

“That wasn't my intention,” said Kiyotaka. “I know all too well how it feels to fall in love and turn into a spineless coward.” He looked at the door that Haruhiko had left through. “That's why I wanted him to think it over carefully

and have a proper talk with Kaori. It may have seeped into my words.”

Ensho, who was leaning on his elbow at his desk, asked, “What was that about Kaori’s feelings changing, though? Did she really fall for me?”

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

“You think it’s impossible, don’t you?”

“No. You never know. If Kaori took back her confession, it means that her feelings changed. It’s reasonable to suspect that she fell in love with someone else. If her attitude changed after the exhibition, it’s possible that she’s interested in you.”

“Do you really think that, kiddo?” Komatsu asked. “Is Ensho suddenly in his popular phase?”

“I only acknowledged it as a possibility. I don’t understand how women think.”

“You say that a lot,” Ensho muttered.

“That’s for sure,” said Komatsu. “What’re the other possibilities?”

“Well, it could be that Haruhiko did something while they were together that disappointed her,” said Kiyotaka. “Or perhaps she assumed he would never be interested in her because he went so long without responding to her confession. The possibilities are endless.”

“What a pain,” Ensho spat. “Women and their assumptions.”

“Don’t say that,” Komatsu said with a strained smile. “Kiddo, does the little miss ever make annoying assumptions?”

“No, not at all,” said Kiyotaka. “A while back, a small misunderstanding led to her thinking I was interested in another woman, and she lost confidence in herself, but...” His expression gradually relaxed into a smile.

“Why do you look so happy?” Komatsu asked.

“Because I am. I’m truly blessed.”

“Good for you,” Komatsu and Ensho said in unison, glaring at him.

“Besides, being annoying out of love isn’t exclusive to one gender.”

“Yeah, guys can get pretty bad too,” said Komatsu. “I wonder why we think it’s annoying when women do it?”

“It’s a different type of annoyance. I’m sure women think the same thing about men. In their case, they seem more likely to brood over things in their heads.”

“Oh, yeah.” Komatsu facepalmed. “Some days, my wife just snaps out of nowhere. When I ask what’s wrong, she gets mad and tells me she was putting up with something for a long time. I wish she’d just tell me instead of bottling it up, then.”

“It may be that when she’s bottling it up, she’s in a state of uncertainty where she can’t describe the issue in words.”

“Huh. So when she *can* put it into words, that’s when she lashes out?”

Ensho seemed to remember something as he listened to their conversation.

“Were you thinking about Yilin?” Kiyotaka asked him.

Ensho flinched and awkwardly placed his hand on his head. “Kinda, yeah. She seemed to be brooding over something when she was standing outside my apartment. Made no sense,” he murmured.

“I’m sure she was,” said Kiyotaka.

“What do you mean?” asked Komatsu.

“She must’ve been brooding,” Kiyotaka clarified.

“About what?” asked Ensho.

“You said that Yilin went to your atelier but couldn’t bring herself to go inside because it was so old. While she was hesitating, you said, ‘You don’t gotta force yourself to come in, missy. Why don’t you just go home?’ Then she apologized several times and burst into tears. Is that correct?”

“Yeah.”

“With only that information to go on, perhaps it did make ‘no sense.’ However, there may have been various sentiments behind her actions.”

“Sentiments? Like what?”

“That’s not for me to say. Figure it out yourself.”

“What a pain.” Ensho turned his back to Kiyotaka and buried his head in his hands.

Just as Kiyotaka gave an exasperated shrug, the intercom rang again.

*

This time, the visitor was from the catering company.

“Oh, is it already time?” Komatsu sprang out of his chair and headed to the front door.

Ensho yawned and looked at the clock. It was just past five in the evening. As Kiyotaka had told Haruhiko, there was going to be a dinner party at the office, celebrating both the New Year and a job well done.

“Now then,” Kiyotaka said, standing up. “Ensho, help me bring out the long table and move the sofas.”

“Fine.” Ensho stood up as well. “But why’re we doing this here when we could just go to a pub or something?”

“Well, this is fun in its own way.”

They shifted the desks to the far wall, brought out a long table, and moved the sofas. Ensho had been expecting Japanese-style catering in the form of multitiered bento boxes, but instead, a variety of appetizers had arrived. It was a mix of Japanese, Western, and Chinese dishes, including deep-fried foods, roast beef, chili stir-fried shrimp, spring rolls, and a sashimi platter.

“Let’s prepare the cups and plates too,” said Kiyotaka.

“Who’s coming, anyway?”

“Aoi, Rikyu, Yuki...”

“Huh? You even invited Yuki?”

“Yes. It’s a special occasion, after all. He was ecstatic. Is there a problem?”

“Nah, it’s fine.”

“We invited Yilin too, but she’s already back in Shanghai.”

Ensho hummed.

“Also, Akihito will be able to make it.”

“He’s coming all this way?”

“He’s in Kansai right now.”

“I’m still surprised he’d show up. Isn’t he literally a famous actor?”

“I always wonder the same thing.”

As they were setting the table, Aoi, Rikyu, and Yuki arrived, carrying reusable bags crammed full of snacks and drinks.

“Aoi, are you all right?” Kiyotaka ignored Rikyu and Yuki, who were clearly struggling with the weight of their bags, and helped Aoi with hers instead.

“Really, Kiyo?” Rikyu said, annoyed. “Yuki and I have super heavy bags full of drinks, but Aoi’s are light because they only have snacks and desserts!”

“Ah, my apologies. Thank you for carrying the heavy items, Rikyu and Yuki. I’ll put them in the fridge.” Kiyotaka took the bags from them and headed for the kitchen. As Rikyu said, they were filled with soft drinks, beer, champagne, wine, and sake.

“They let kids buy booze?” Ensho asked.

“We’re adults,” Aoi and Yuki said in unison.

“But we were asked to show ID,” said Aoi.

“Do we seem that childish?” Yuki mused.

The two looked at each other in shared discontent. Ensho couldn’t help but laugh.

“Hey, is this everyone?” Rikyu asked, looking around the room.

“Akihito is planning to come too,” said Kiyotaka. “He said he’d rush over as soon as he could, but he doesn’t know what time that will be, so we don’t have to wait for him.”

“That means we can get the party started, right?”

“Yes, let’s do that.”

“Oh, I’ll put up the ‘CLOSED’ sign,” Aoi announced, hurrying out of the room.

We have a sign like that? Ensho wondered. Suddenly, the lights went out. “Huh? A power outage?” He looked up at the ceiling.

Candlelight appeared in the darkness.

What’s that? He squinted and saw Aoi holding a decorated cake. On closer inspection, it was actually a homemade cake composed from a big crème caramel.

“Happy birthday, Ensho,” she said.

“Congrats, Shinya,” said Yuki.

“Using the real number of candles would have been too much, so we kept it to three,” said Kiyotaka.

“Three ‘cause you’re in your thirties,” Komatsu added.

Rikyu grinned. “Wanna sing with us, Ensho?”

Ensho looked at the cake, confused and lost for words. *Oh, today’s January 31st. My birthday. Thinking about it, have I ever had a surprise birthday party like this before?* he wondered as he stared at the candlelight.

Aoi placed the cake on the table. “Okay, now blow out the candles.”

She, Kiyotaka, Komatsu, Rikyu, and Yuki were all watching him expectantly. He felt something rise up in his chest. The corners of his eyes burned. *This ain’t good.* He clenched his fists, holding his emotions back.

“What the hell? This is basically harassment,” he spat.

Yuki looked around in panic. The boy was probably aghast that he would say such a thing when everyone had gone out of their way to celebrate his birthday. However, no one was bothered by it.

“I thought you’d say that,” said Aoi.

“That’s the Ensho we know,” Komatsu added.

“Yep, that’s him,” Rikyu agreed.

“Yes, and of course, it *is* harassment,” said Kiyotaka.

Everyone was laughing because they knew him well. Ensho was happy, but it made him want to run away. Even knowing it would make everyone feel bad, he wanted to spit out “This is annoying” and leave the room.

Suddenly, the door opened and Akihito rushed in. “Big news, guys! Get a hold of this!”

His forceful entry made the candles go out. “Aww,” everyone said, disappointed.

“Why’s it so dark in here? Is this the main light switch?”

Much to everyone’s dismay, Akihito turned on the lights. Ensho, however, was relieved.

“Oh crap!” The actor saw the cake and put his hand over his mouth. “My bad, were you guys in the middle of something?”

“Yes, we were celebrating Ensho’s birthday,” said Kiyotaka.

“I’m *so* sorry, Ensho.” Akihito clapped his hands together.

“It’s fine,” Ensho replied with a shrug.

Kiyotaka placed his hands on his hips. “You always have the most miraculous timing,” he said, exasperated. “In both good and bad ways.”

“I’ll turn off the lights again and we can start over,” said Akihito.

“Well, there’s no need for that. Ensho doesn’t seem to be comfortable with these things.” Kiyotaka had noticed how unbearable it had been for him.

I seriously hate how he sees everything, Ensho thought, averting his gaze.

“Anyway, what’s the big news, Akihito?” Aoi asked.

“Oh, right,” the actor said. “You know the book Kurisu Aigasa wrote with the characters modeled after me and Holmes?”

Everyone nodded. The mystery novel was a pastiche of Ellery Queen, set in Kyoto during the early Showa period. Kiyotaka, the son of a wealthy merchant, was the detective, and Akihito, the student, was his partner.

“It’s getting a stage adaptation!”

“Ohhh!” everyone exclaimed.

“And naturally, I’m starring in it!” Akihito pointed at himself with his thumb.

“Of course,” everyone said.

Kiyotaka folded his arms. “Who’s playing me? I mean, Kiyosato Kamizu?”

Their names had been kept as Kiyotaka Yagashira and Akihito Kajiwara during the manuscript stage, but when the book was published, they had been changed to Kiyosato Kamizu and Akito Kajima, respectively.

“Oh man, don’t be too shocked when you hear this, all right? Holmes is being played by Kisuke Ichikata!”

“Huh?” Aoi’s eyes sparkled. “Kisuke?!”

Kisuke Ichikata was a kabuki actor who also starred in TV dramas and the like. He had gentle features, black hair, and fair skin. He was very popular for his good looks, and now that the comparison was brought up, perhaps he did resemble Kiyotaka a bit.

“It’s a new thing they’re trying,” said Akihito. “The play is gonna be performed at Minamiza Theater. Isn’t that incredible?”

“Oh, so that’s why it’s Kisuke Ichikata.” Everyone nodded in understanding.

“It really is amazing,” said Aoi. “I can’t wait.”

In contrast to her excitement, Kiyotaka had a grim look on his face.

“What’s wrong, Holmes?” she asked.

“I’m happy for you, but I can’t help but have a bad feeling about this,” said Kiyotaka.

“A bad feeling?”

“I have a hunch that we’re going to get dragged into something unpleasant again.”

“No doubt about it,” everyone said, bursting into laughter.

“It really is great, though,” said Aoi, clapping happily.

“Indeed,” said Kiyotaka, regaining his composure. “Well then, let’s have a

toast. Komatsu, please do the honors.”

“A-All right,” Komatsu said stiffly, unprepared for the sudden attention. He cleared his throat while everyone prepared their drink of choice. “Uhh, here’s to a job well done, a happy new year, Ensho’s birthday, and the stage adaptation! Cheers!”

“Cheers!” everyone said in unison, raising their glasses.

Naturally, Kiyotaka’s hunch would turn out to be absolutely correct, but that’s a story for another time.

Afterword

Thank you for reading. I'm Mai Mochizuki.

Holmes of Kyoto has reached its eighteenth volume. Following in volume 6.5's footsteps, volume 0 was also released as a guidebook and short story collection, making for twenty books released in total (in Japan). Thank you all so much for your support.

The guide portions of volume 0 showcase recommended places to visit in Kyoto in spring, summer, fall, and winter. They also include trivia from Kiyotaka and beautiful photos. They're very well organized and easy to digest. The short stories are filled with vignettes of Aoi and Kiyotaka in their early days together. I hope you'll enjoy all of the bittersweet feelings and nostalgia.

When I was planning out volume 18, the idea of Kiyotaka being a bodyguard for a young lady came to me. That thought later developed into "an arrogant young rich lady and an even more malicious Kiyotaka," leading to the completion of this book. It'd been a while since I was able to write Kiyotaka in all his black-hearted glory, and I was able to fit in a lot of Kyoto tourism too, so it was very fun. Also, even though the story was mostly told from Komatsu's point of view instead of that of the main protagonist, Aoi, it was very easy to write because his view allowed me to tell the story from a broader and more objective perspective. I think he'll continue to play an active role in narration in the future.

By the way, the Portuguese sweets shop, Hyant Jency, Amano Kyoto, and Van Leaf & Anabel were all modeled after existing businesses and brands, with their names slightly modified.

Now then, my other long-running series, *Wagaya wa Machi no Ogamiya-san*, has come to an end, although a bonus volume is in the works. Kiyotaka also appears in a short story in *Ogamiya-san*, and it was so well received that some readers told me, "After that side story, I started reading *Holmes of Kyoto*," while *Holmes* readers said, "I loved being able to see Kiyotaka's inner thoughts during

the *Ogamiya-san* side story.” I felt that the story should be published in *Holmes of Kyoto* too, so I decided to include it at the end of this book.

The following story was originally published in volume 13 of *Wagaya wa Machi no Ogamiya-san* and has been touched up for this rerelease. I hope you enjoy it.

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

Extra: The Exorcist and the Appraiser (Inside His Mind)

The door chime at the antique store Kura rang.

“Good day,” said the visitor.

“Welcome,” I said, turning around, only to be stunned by the sight before me. The man at the door was beautiful beyond belief, graceful, and gentlemanly. The traditional Japanese clothing he wore suited him well. “Oh, hello, Reito.” I bowed to him.

“Long time no see, Aoi,” he said in his strong Kyoto accent.

The man’s name was Reito Kamo, and he was the heir to a unique family trade. There were many words that described his occupation: exorcist, shaman, even diviner.

Holmes, who had been working at the counter, looked up with a smile.

“Welcome, Reito. Thank you for the other day.”

Holmes had turned to him for help when he wanted to know which shrine Yutaka Sada’s bracelet charm had come from. The exorcist’s knowledge had greatly contributed to solving the mystery.

Clinging to Reito was a young, petite girl who looked like a student. She was as cute as a little rabbit.

“Hello, um, Koharu, isn’t it?” I asked.

The girl smiled, reminiscent of a blooming flower. “Yes, I’m Koharu Sakurai. It’s been a while, Aoi.”

She bowed slowly, and I couldn’t help but be captivated by her beautiful mannerisms.

Koharu was Reito’s second cousin. She had visited Kura with him once before, but I hadn’t been able to speak with her much before they had left.

“We happened to be in the area today, so we stopped by,” said Reito.

“I saw Aoi from outside and wanted to come in,” Koharu explained.

“I see,” I said with a smile.

“Reito, Koharu, please have a seat,” Holmes said, gesturing towards the sofa before heading into the kitchenette to make coffee.

The two visitors thanked us and sat down cheerfully. They seemed closer than before, and I couldn’t help but wonder if they were dating.

Koharu looked around the store curiously and murmured, “There are so many antiques here. It’s amazing that it doesn’t feel stagnant.”

“It shows that they’re well taken care of,” Reito observed.

“It really does. I remember the first time I came here, it was one surprise after the other.”

I tilted my head. “What happened?”

“You don’t want to know. It had such a strong impact on me...” Koharu thought back to the events of that day with a distant look in her eyes.

*

It was the year Koharu Sakurai had moved to Kyoto, and Reito Kamo was bringing her to an antique store named Kura in a place called Teramachi-Sanjo.

“Kura?” she asked. She tried to recall the shopping district, and what came to mind was a large model crab. “Oh, over by that crab restaurant,” she murmured.

Reito chuckled and nodded. “Yes, it’s in that area. Personally, I think of it as ‘near Mishima-tei.’”

“The sukiyaki place, right?”

“You know of it?”

“Yes. I’ve never been inside, but before New Year’s, grandma bought high-quality meat there for us.”

“Indeed, many people in Kyoto buy meat there and make New Year’s sukiyaki

with it. The lines get rather absurd.”

“I see.”

Teramachi-Sanjo wasn't close to Gion, but the distance was walkable. It took the pair about twenty minutes to get there, walking west on Shijo Street, then turning north into the roofed Shinkyogoku shopping street. It felt like this area was always busy, especially since Nishiki Market was nearby.

“You're delivering something to Kura today, right?” Koharu asked.

“Yes,” said Reito. “Thank you kindly for accompanying me.”

“It's nothing.” Koharu shook her head. She was really happy to be able to walk with Reito, but she didn't know why he had brought her along. Was he trying to give her a distraction? She tilted her head.

Perhaps sensing her inner confusion, Reito added, “The store owner's grandson, Kiyotaka Yagashira, will be there. He's a bit older than me.”

“Kiyotaka Yagashira...”

“I feared he wouldn't be very welcoming if I were to go alone, so I thought to bring you with me.”

Why wouldn't he be welcoming? Are they on bad terms? Koharu glanced up at Reito, worried. The man was smiling as usual.

“That's the place.” His gaze was directed at a small antique store that almost seemed like it could be an old-fashioned coffeehouse. Without slowing his pace, he opened the door, and the chime rang. “Good day,” he said.

“H-Hello,” Koharu added awkwardly.

The store was filled with antiques. Old items sometimes had sinister thoughts clinging to them. A single one might not be a concern, but large quantities of them tended to be suffocating. Koharu was wary for a second, but then her expression relaxed. Even with so many antiques crammed together, there were no traces of dust or rotten thoughts. In fact, the store actually felt clean and refreshing. All of the items here were probably very well cared for, to the point where she and her companion both felt gratitude towards the store. She could sense pride in the antiques here and breathed a sigh of relief.

“Ah, Reito. Welcome.”

The store had appeared small from the outside, but the interior extended quite far back. A young man emerged from the back shelves. He was tall and slim with glossy black hair and pale skin, and he wore a black vest over a white shirt and black pants. This was probably the owner’s grandson, Kiyotaka Yagashira.

He and Reito were both black-haired, pale-skinned, and attractive, but their auras were completely different. Reito was very gentle and relaxed, but this man seemed clever and quick-witted.

Koharu watched the two of them with bated breath, only to gasp when Kiyotaka’s gaze turned to her. *Oh no.* Her body tensed. Their eyes had met.

Like Reito, Koharu was a descendant of an exorcist family. She had a special power that activated when she made eye contact with people. She hurriedly averted her gaze, but it was too late. In that brief moment, she had captured a vast number of the man’s thoughts.

Likely fifteen or sixteen, a first-year high school student. 155 centimeters tall, weighing about 48 kilograms. Three sizes 80/62/82. Right shoulder slightly slumped and right arm slightly thicker → right-handed. No sense of muscle overall → not in a sports club. Distance kept from Reito → they aren’t in a relationship. He isn’t the type of person who would bring his girlfriend here in the first place. Which means she’s from the Kamo family. Young female relative → Kanto accent → Yoshino in Gion had a grandchild come over from Tokyo → must be her. Looked me straight in the eye but immediately averted her gaze → outgoing type but something (puberty?) caused her to become shy. Very wary → be careful not to frighten her. Still young → offer hot chocolate or milk. Then again, she’s the age where she would hate being treated like a child → milk tea or café au lait...

So many thoughts had run through his mind in that tiny span of time.

“It’s nice to meet you,” he said. “I’m Kiyotaka Yagashira.” He placed his hand on his chest and smiled.

“N-Nice to meet you. I’m Koharu Sakurai.”

“She’s Yoshino’s granddaughter and my second cousin,” Reito said.

“Oh, is that so?” Kiyotaka reacted as if the thought had never crossed his mind, even though he had already predicted that very thing.

Wow. Koharu gulped. He guessed almost everything about me in just a few seconds. She broke out in a cold sweat.

Koharu’s special power allowed her to read the thoughts of those she made eye contact with. She had read many people’s minds throughout her life, but this man was completely different. He was like a machine in human form. Electric currents flew through his brain at a dizzying speed, judging the situation and immediately drawing conclusions. Koharu was overwhelmed.

“Kiyotaka, I was finally able to bring what you asked for,” said Reito. “I planned on finishing it earlier, but it was more troublesome than I expected, so it took some time.” He placed a cloth-wrapped package on the counter, untied the knot, and took out the wooden box within.

“Don’t worry about it,” said Kiyotaka. “Thank you very much.” He took a pair of white gloves out of his inner pocket and slipped them on before opening the box. Inside was a wooden comb hair ornament, bright vermilion and gold, with beautifully carved flowers and butterflies.

“It’s so pretty,” Koharu murmured, captivated.

Reito gave a strained smile. “It certainly is, but it was possessed by something awfully strong. It took a while to purify it.”

“Something awfully strong?”

“Imagine countless negative thoughts clinging together to form a monster.” Reito sighed.

“Indeed.” Kiyotaka nodded. “This was a cursed comb that was passed from one person to the next, bringing misfortune to all of its owners.”

“Huh?” Koharu looked at the item again, startled. She didn’t sense anything from it—it was an ordinary comb now that Reito had taken the time to exercise it.

“Despite subjecting so many to misfortune, it continued to entice people.

However, while it is still beautiful, it has lost its bewitching nature now that it is no longer possessed,” Kiyotaka murmured, holding the comb.

“Yes, that is how these things go,” said Reito.

As Koharu watched Kiyotaka smile in amusement at the comb, curiosity gnawed at her. Never before had she wanted to peer into someone’s heart of her own volition, but now, for the first time, she wondered what this man was thinking. He surely had a special power of his own, different from hers and Reito’s.

“Thank you for going to the trouble of bringing it here,” said Kiyotaka. “Would you like something to drink? Perhaps coffee? I can also make tea or café au lait.”

“Thank you kindly, but I’m afraid we must leave you now,” said Reito.

“Do you have work to do?”

“Not quite, but...”

As Koharu listened to their conversation, she furrowed her brow, wondering why Reito had said that Kiyotaka wouldn’t have been welcoming if he had come alone. They seemed to get along very well, and they were also similar in that they were far from ordinary people.

Then again... Koharu gave Kiyotaka a sideways glance. He’s a different type of “abnormal” than Reito. I can’t believe someone like him exists. Does he even have human feelings?

The door chime rang.

“Hello, I’m here for my shift,” a young girl said cheerfully as she entered the store. She looked like she was in high school, and her greeting made it clear that she was a part-timer. She was cute, with longish hair.

Koharu bowed to the girl and her gaze absentmindedly drifted to Kiyotaka. Their eyes met briefly, and—

Oh, Aoi! You’re as lovely as always!

Koharu’s eyes widened in shock at Kiyotaka’s extremely loud inner voice.

My goodness, how can you be so cute, Aoi? Oh, but isn't your skirt too short? I mean, I certainly appreciate it, but judging from your shortness of breath, you half-ran here. What if your skirt flipped and some ne'er-do-wells were to see underneath? Oh, you're too unaware for your own good, yet when I look into your eyes, I cannot say anything. What is this feeling? It's as though the moment you enter the store, the lights become brighter. What an angel you are.

Koharu was floored. Reito quickly came up behind her and covered her eyes with his hand. She gasped and turned around in surprise.

Reito chuckled. "You mustn't peer into a man's head when he's in front of the one he loves," he whispered.

"Understood." Koharu blushed and nodded. The events at Kura had been shocking for her in many ways.

*

"Here's your coffee," Holmes said, placing the cups on the table.

Koharu, who had been staring into space, snapped back to attention.

"Um, what do you mean by 'a strong impact'?" I asked hesitantly.

Koharu smiled weakly. "Oh...um, I thought you two made a great couple."

"Indeed," Reito said with a nod.

"I'm happy to hear that," Holmes said as he sat down across from them.

"Thank you," I said, feeling my cheeks grow hot as I took my place next to him.

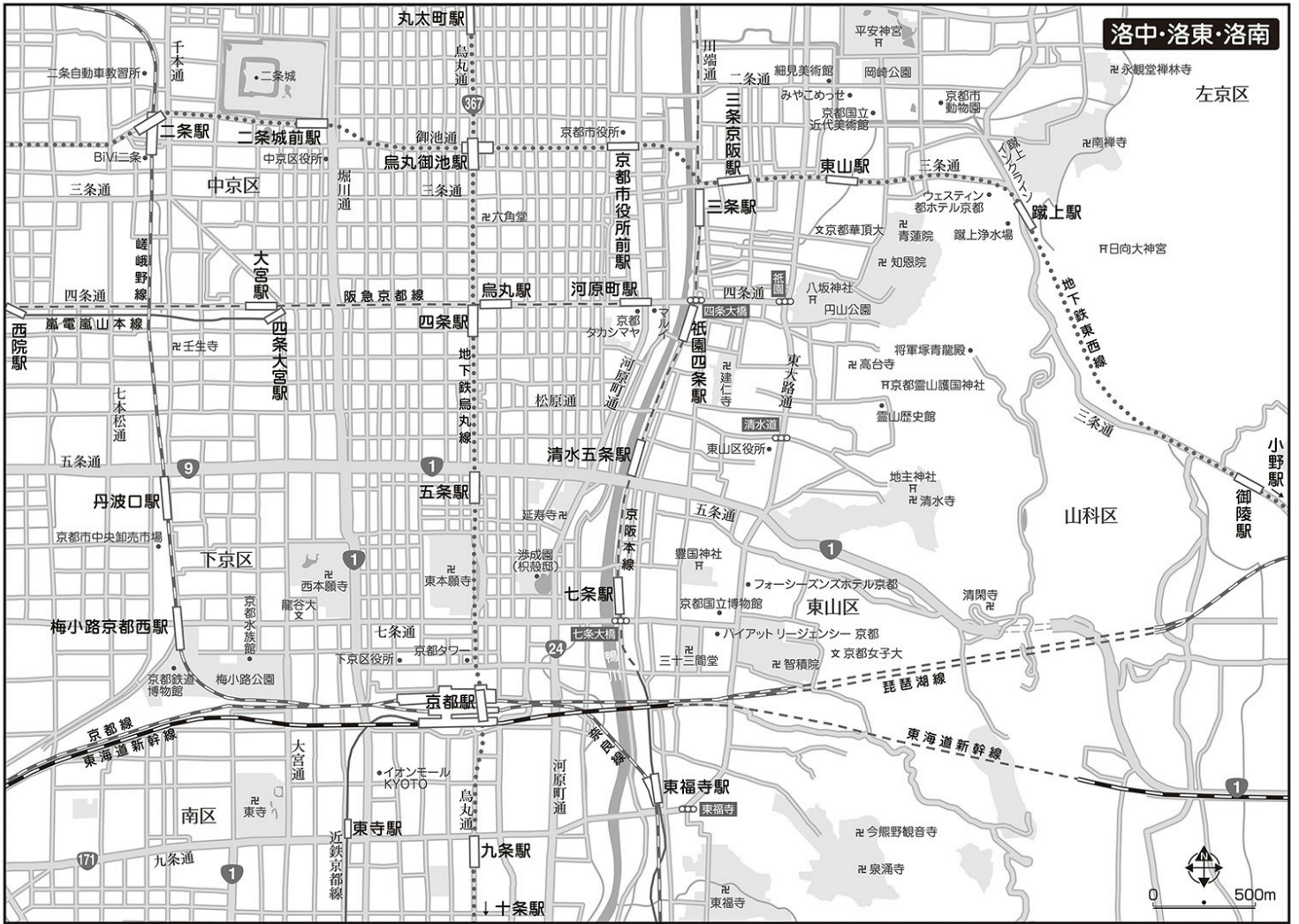


Kiyotaka in Aoi's Fantasy

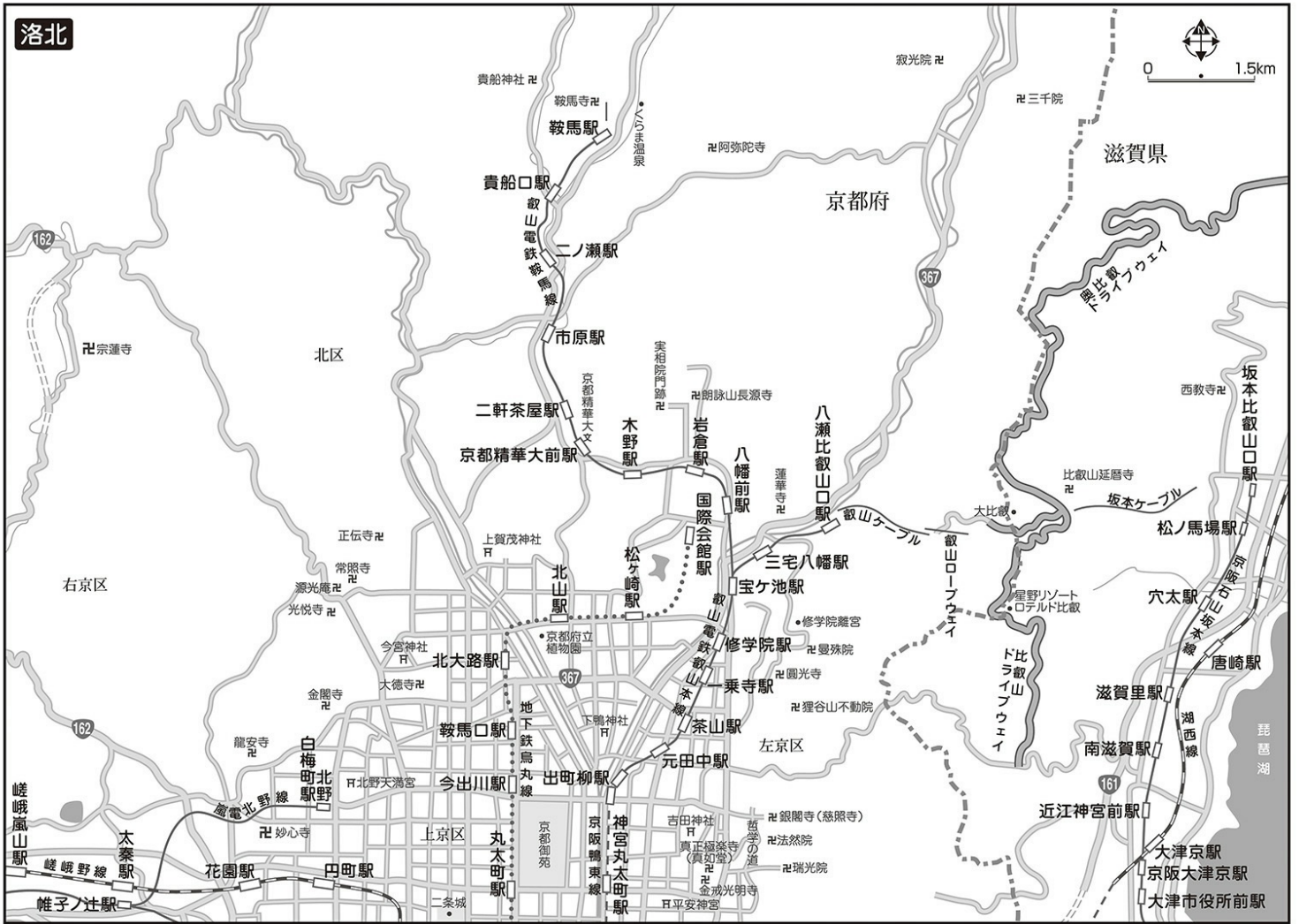


Aoi at Kimono Forest (Imagined)

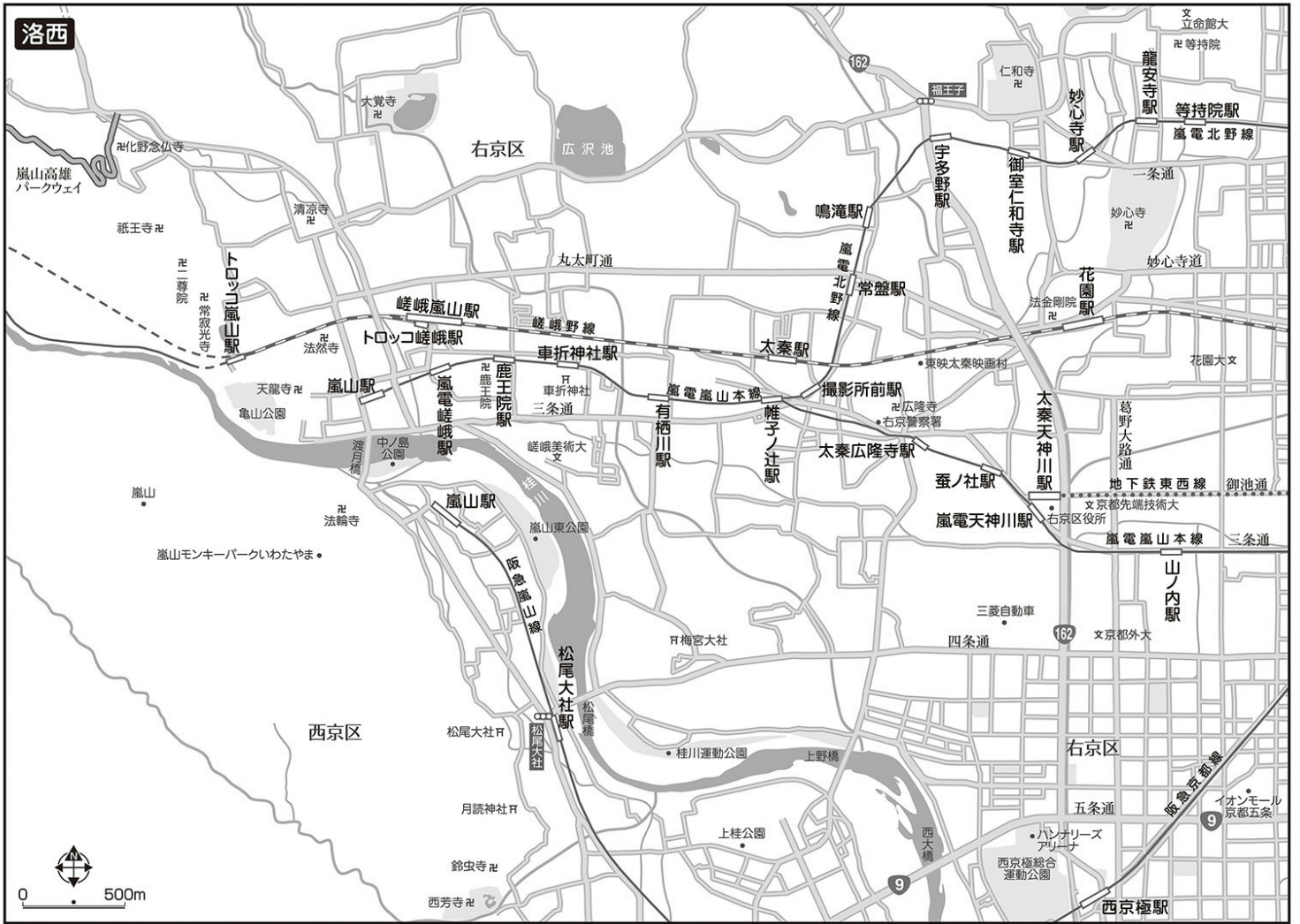
Map of Central, Eastern, and Southern Kyoto



Map of Northern Kyoto



Map of Western Kyoto



Translator's Corner

Thank you for reading volume 18 of *Holmes of Kyoto*! It's time for another round of translation notes.

First off, in Chapter 1, we have the words “joraku” and “jokyo” come up when Holmes is asking Yilin when their client will be arriving in Kyoto. Using the latter as an example, the word “jokyo” is made up of two parts, with “jo” meaning “up” and “kyo” meaning “capital” (the “kyo” in “Tokyo”). Put together, it means “going up to the capital (Tokyo).” The reason Yilin doesn't make the connection when Holmes says “joraku” is because—as you can see—“raku” isn't anywhere in the name “Kyoto.” The reason it's used is because “raku” is an old name for Kyoto from ancient times.

Since this was a mystery-centric volume, as usual, some considerations had to be made when translating the clues—namely, the fact that Azusa and Kimishima communicated using code words. “Desserts” being “stressed” backwards was easy—it was already in English. But in the original text, instead of calling Kimishima “old,” Azusa said he had dead eyes (“shinda me da”). Reversing the syllables gives “dame danshi”—“loser boy.” Since it would've been incredibly weird to keep perfectly translatable Japanese words, I had to come up with an alternative.

Poring over lists of words that became other words when read backwards (called “semordnilaps” because “semordnilap” is “palindromes” backwards) didn't help much. I needed something that was an insult in both directions, with one of them seeming odd. “Drab” was okay, but the idea of Azusa calling Kimishima a “bard” was worse than odd; it was *bizarre*. Longer examples like “deliver/reviled” were impressive, but there was no way to work them into the dialogue naturally. So I decided to give up and try the Atbash cipher for this one instead, since it was used for one of the other codes. I was able to discover that there were a few words that could be converted into other real words, and luckily, “low/old” worked for what Azusa was saying!



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Holmes of Kyoto: Volume 18

by Mai Mochizuki

Translated by Minna Lin Edited by Tess Nanavati

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