

# Holmes of Kyoto

~The Mysterious  
Tea Party~



4

Mai Mochizuki

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### **Aoi Mashiro**

Age 17. She is a second-year high school student who moved to Kyoto from Omiya, Saitama. In an unexpected turn of events, she winds up working part-time at Kura. Now Kiyotaka is teaching her about art and antiques.



### **Kiyotaka Yagashira**

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



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## Prologue: A New Year

Red and white “flowers” adorned the willow trees. *These cute New Year’s decorations are actually rice cakes, and they’re called “drooping mochibana.” There are a lot of types of New Year’s decorations, but these are my favorite.* I, Aoi Mashiro, smiled as I gazed out the window, swaying from the movement of the packed bus.

It was January 3rd, and Kyoto was abuzz with joy and excitement for the new year. The city was decorated with shrine ropes, pine branches, drooping mochibana, and golden folding fans. The streets were crowded with men and women of all ages dressed in kimono. It was like a city-wide festival.

Tourists probably made up most of the crowd. A lot of people come here from other prefectures, wanting to spend New Year’s in a place brimming with traditional Japanese culture and visit the shrines and temples. *I might look like a tourist right now too.* I looked at myself and slumped my shoulders in embarrassment.

I hurried off the bus when I saw that we’d arrived at City Hall. Pushing through the crowd, I made my way from Oike Street to the Teramachi shopping district. The streets were even busier than usual. Most of the shopping streets opened for business on January 2nd, selling lucky grab bags and serving New Year’s spiced sake. I found myself engulfed in the festive air. It’d been just as crowded at the end of the year, but back then, there was a feeling of restlessness. *Then again, that was only a few days ago.* I’d been working here up until the 31st, but for some reason, it felt like a long time had passed since I’d come here, even though the only thing that happened was the turn of the year. The spring in my step was probably because the New Year’s atmosphere was making me excited. *I’m not here to play, though. Kura, the antique store where I work part-time, is reopening today.*

Seiji Yagashira, the store’s owner, had suggested that we all show up for the

first day back at work. So, I was invited too, even though I'm just a part-timer. I'm not particularly useful, and I'm only there to watch the store while they're gone. Still, I was delighted that they'd invite me to the New Year's meeting. It felt like they acknowledged me as a proper member of their staff. *I'll have to work harder.* I looked straight ahead and quickened my pace. Before long, I saw Kura's sign. As always, it looked more like an old-fashioned cafe than an antique shop. Our storefront had switched to New Year's mode too, sporting pine decorations, shrine ropes, and drooping mochibana.

"Good morning," I said as I opened the door and the usual chime rang out.

"Oh, Aoi!" called the owner in a firm voice as he turned around. The seventy-seven-year-old Seiji Yagashira is a renowned, nationally certified appraiser who's pretty famous in the Kansai region. He normally only wears a casual kimono, but since it was a special occasion, today he was also wearing a coat called a *haori* and pants called *hakama*. The formal attire gave him a more dignified appearance.

Next to him was his son, Takeshi, who we call Manager. Despite that nickname, his main profession is writing historical novels, so he generally writes while watching the store. Today he was wearing an indigo kimono.

On the other side of the owner was a tall, handsome young man with a gentle smile. He's the owner's grandson and apprentice, a grad student named Kiyotaka. He has an exceptional observing eye and a knack for appraisal, and since his surname has the character for "home" in it, he's nicknamed Holmes. He's very capable. Today he was wearing a kimono too, in an inky-black color.

Behind them was a beautiful woman named Yoshie Takiyama. She manages an event consulting company in the art industry. She's also the owner's girlfriend. Despite looking to be in her early thirties, she's actually a witch in her forties. Today she was looking stunning in her bright lime-green semi-formal kimono.

*As you can probably tell by now, everyone's wearing kimono today for the first workday of the new year.*

"Happy New Year, Aoi!" they all greeted me.

Awed, I bowed and said, “H-Happy New Year. It’s a bit overwhelming to see you all in kimono, even though I knew you would be.” Wearing a kimono for New Year’s was a very Kura thing to do.

“I’m the only one dressed casually, though,” Holmes remarked. In terms of men’s kimono, dressing casually means only wearing a long kimono and a sash, omitting the *haori* and the *hakama*.

“It looks good on you,” I said. *I think the informal look suits him more than the full ensemble would.* His pale skin shone against his black hair and inky black kimono.

“Thank you very much. Your patterned kimono looks good on you too,” Holmes said with a smile.

“Yes, it’s adorable,” Yoshie continued.

“I like it too,” said the manager.

“Th-Thanks...” I said sheepishly. I was wearing a kimono too, but it wasn’t a long-sleeved one. It was a casual kimono called a *komon*, meaning that it was covered in small patterns. It had a cream-colored base with light pink flowers all over it. The sash was light pink too, and looked like a big flower. I liked it because it was casual enough to walk around normally in.

“Is that the *komon* you bought at Kobo?” Holmes asked.

I nodded and said, “Yes.”

“Kobo” is the nickname for the fair held at To-ji Temple on the 21st of every month. It’s a large flea market and festival with stalls set up in the temple grounds. They sell a wide variety of things, including antiques, used clothing, kimono, food, and miscellaneous goods. It’s bigger than the handicraft market at Hyakumanben Chion-ji Temple that I went to with Holmes before.

By the way, Kyoto has three major monthly temple fairs. Hyakumanben Chion-ji’s handicraft market on the 15th, To-ji’s “Kobo” on the 21st, and Kitano Tenmangu’s “Tenjin” on the 25th.

I found this kimono when I went to my first Kobo with my friend, Kaori Miyashita. She looked at a cart and said the ones there were good bargains.

Since her family owns a kimono fabrics store, I trusted her judgment. I'd thought that kimono were expensive—unobtainable for someone like me—but the ones sold at temple fairs were surprisingly cheap. I could even afford them with my part-time earnings. *Now that I think about it, I never even considered buying a kimono with my own money until I moved to Kyoto.* The sash was from home, though, and I had to ask my grandmother to help me put it on. *I want to be able to put it on myself one day,* I thought, touching it.

"Now that we're all here, let's liven things up with a toast," said the owner.

"You can have *amazake*, Aoi," Holmes said. *Amazake* is a traditional drink made from fermented rice that contains only trace amounts of alcohol. He filled our sake cups and handed them to us in order from youngest to oldest: me, then Yoshie, then the manager, and finally the owner. I didn't know if it was because of the kimono, but each of his motions seemed more sensual than usual, and I couldn't look directly at him.

"Th-Thank you." I accepted the cup and quickly looked down.

As we were about to toast, the door chime rang. Akihito burst into the store, shouting, "Sorry I'm late! Happy New Year, guys!" He was wearing a blueish formal ensemble. His bright-colored hair seemed mismatched at first glance, but it actually did fit quite well. Akihito was an attractive, popular actor. He often wore a kimono for his TV show, *A Fine Day in Kyoto*, so perhaps I'd gotten used to it.

"What do you mean, 'sorry'? No one invited you," Holmes said, looking at him coldly.

"Hey now," Akihito shook his head, "at the New Year's Eve party, the owner told me, 'We're opening back up on the third, so come show up if you have time. It'll be more fun with you around.' How could I *not* show up after all he's done for me?" He laughed, smacking Holmes on the shoulder. Holmes seemed considerably less enthusiastic, rubbing his shoulder and glaring at Akihito. *It looks like this year will be the same for those two.*

"And that's why he's here!" the owner said, pouring another cup of sake and offering it to Akihito, who gratefully accepted it. "Once again, here's to another year, Takeshi, Kiyotaka, Yoshie, Aoi, and Akihito!"

“Cheers!” we all shouted, raising our cups and gulping down the contents. Perhaps because I was tired from coming all the way here in clothes I wasn’t used to wearing, the chilled *amazake* tasted extremely delicious.

“Huh? Are you drinking sake too, Aoi?” Akihito asked.

“No, mine is *amazake*.”

“Oh yeah, you’re still underage, after all. Second year, was it?”

“Yes. I’m going to be a third-year in the spring.”

“Oh right, Aoi,” Yoshie said. “My son will be returning from his exchange program this spring. Do be friends with him, okay?”

“O-Okay.” I nodded, surprised. I’d forgotten that Yoshie had a son. *If I recall correctly, he’s a high school first-year—one year younger than me. With Yoshie for a mother, he’s bound to be good-looking.*

While we were all chatting happily, the owner checked the time and slowly stood up. “All right, I gotta get going.”

“Me too,” said the manager.

“Wait,” Holmes called to them as they were about to leave. “Sorry, could you stay here a bit longer? Since it’s the first day back, I want to visit the Yata Jizo with Aoi.”

I tilted my head. “Yata Jizo?”

“It’s a temple very close to here. I think we should pay our respects for the new year.”

“Oh, the one next to the police box!” I clapped my hands. I occasionally saw it on my way to work, but I didn’t pay enough attention to it to know its name. *I feel kind of bad for not respecting it.*

“Fine, but make it quick,” the owner said. “I ain’t waiting long.” He turned away in a huff.

“This is your store to begin with,” Holmes replied. “How can you be so arrogant when you’re always skipping work to go play?”

“I’ve got important greetings to make, unless you wanna do ’em for me.”

Holmes paused before saying, “No, we’ll be right back. Let’s go, Aoi.” He put his scarf on and opened the door.

“Okay.” I nodded.

“I’m coming too!” Akihito said immediately, springing up from his seat.

The owner put his hand on Akihito’s shoulder to stop him. “Akihito, let ’em go. That kid just wants to walk around town a bit with Aoi in her kimono.”

Their conversation reached me just as I was about to go through the door. “Huh?” I blinked. *Holmes wanted to walk around town with me in a kimono? ...Yeah right, there’s no way. What is he talking about?* I inadvertently looked at Holmes. From his side profile, I could see a bit of a troubled expression. He wouldn’t look towards me at all. *He’s probably annoyed by the owner’s assumption.*

The Yata Jizo was only a stone’s throw away. *You can’t really call this “walking around town.”* The temple’s entrance was decorated with red lanterns spelling out its name. Many little Jizo statues encircled the small grounds.

“All of these little Jizos are so cute,” I said.

“The Jizo statues here are called ‘Hardship Surrogates.’ They’ll take on your suffering in your stead.”

*Jizos that take on your suffering...* “I kind of feel bad for them.”

“What?”

“I think it’d be better if we all split the suffering between us.”

“You’re very kind.”

“Oh, not at all. I guess it might be fine for the Jizos, since they feel things differently from us humans.” *What was I saying?* I shook my head furiously in embarrassment.

“I agree, though. Taking on all of the burden by yourself seems like a beautiful thing, but it’s a self-inflicted curse. I think that you can only sincerely be kind to others when you yourself are happy.”

“That’s pretty deep.”

“Really?”

“It is.” *Self-sacrifice is a self-inflicted curse. In order to sympathize with others, you need to cherish yourself—which is different from being self-centered.* I nodded slightly as we gave our offerings. I closed my eyes, put my hands together, and prayed, *Please take care of me this year.*

When I opened my eyes, Holmes was looking gently at me. We made eye contact, and I averted my gaze in embarrassment.

“That kimono really does look good on you, Aoi.”

“Th-Thank you.” I flushed at the repeated compliment.

“I look forward to working with you this year.”

“Same here. Please continue to teach me various things.”

“Various things...? Is there anything in particular that you want to be taught?” He gave me a sidelong glance, and I couldn’t help but sense something suggestive in it. My heart skipped a beat.

“Wh-What?” *The kimono is making his wickedness even more unfair. How am I supposed to answer that?* “U-Umm, I want to learn more about Raku tea bowls.”

“Raku tea bowls?” His eyes went wide in surprise.

“At the New Year’s Eve party, I had no idea whether Ensho’s Raku tea bowls were real or fake. It was frustrating...” I sighed. At the Yagashira family’s party, Ensho suddenly showed up and challenged Holmes to a match. The first items he presented were counterfeit Raku tea bowls. *Holmes instantly identified them as fake, but I couldn’t tell at all...* “Even though I’ve seen a Raku tea bowl before...” I mumbled.

Holmes nodded in understanding. “However, you wouldn’t have seen the Keinyu tea bowl that Ensho forged. You’re still inexperienced, so sniffing out a counterfeit of something you haven’t seen before is too difficult. I understand your frustration, though, so I’ll give you a thorough lesson on Raku tea bowls before winter break is over.”

“Th-Thank you!”

“You’re welcome. Oh yes, before we go back to the store, would you like to drink some coffee while we’re here?” He left the small temple and pointed at a cafe across the street that looked like something from the early Showa era. The manager often ran there when he had writer’s block or had to meet with his editor.

“Huh? Shouldn’t we go back right away?”

“A quick break won’t hurt,” he said with a grin. He started walking.

This Teramachi Street cafe was very traditional. Sometimes there was a line to get in, but since it was still morning, we were able to go right inside. The soft lighting added a warm tinge to the dark brown leather sofas and wooden chairs. I walked past this cafe all the time, but this was my first time coming inside. *Actually, I can probably count on my hands the number of times I’ve been to a traditional coffee shop like this.*

“Are you ready to order?” asked the waitress who came to take our orders.

“Coffee, please,” Holmes said without hesitation. He looked at me and asked, “What will you have, Aoi?”

“Oh, I’ll have coffee too,” I said shyly.

Holmes smiled. “Come to think of it, you said you were going to start drinking coffee black, right?”

“Yes.” I nodded firmly. On New Year’s Eve, after we visited Yasaka Shrine, we took embers of the traditional okera fire, made with special herbs, to Holmes’s apartment and he made coffee for us. Drinking his black coffee for the first time, it was definitely bitter, and I couldn’t honestly say that it tasted good. But it had a hint of sweetness, and I had a feeling that I’d be able to acquire the taste for it eventually.

As Holmes had said, the apartment where he and the manager lived was extremely normal on the inside. That said, the windows had an incredible sweeping view of Gion and Yasaka Tower. Holmes, Akihito, and I chatted until morning. *When I saw Yasaka Tower in the sunrise, I was almost moved to tears...*

While I was lost in thought, the waitress came back and placed our coffee on

the table. As I expected of the old-fashioned coffee shop, it looked really delicious. I narrowed my eyes, taking in its fragrant aroma.

“Do you need Fresh?” the waitress asked with a smile.

*Fresh?* I stared at her blankly.

“No, I’m fine,” Holmes said.

“And you?” the waitress asked me.

I shook my head, not knowing what she meant. *What’s “Fresh”? Is that some kind of fresh fruit special? Maybe I shouldn’t have declined, then.*

“Please relax and enjoy your coffee, then.” The waitress bowed. I stared vacantly at her back as she left.

Holmes peered into my face. “Shouldn’t you have asked for it, Aoi?”

“Huh? D-Did you think I needed ‘Fresh’?”

“Yes, since you’re not used to it yet.” Holmes picked up his cup.

*I’m not used to it yet?* “U-Um, do you not need it, Holmes?”

“I generally don’t, no,” he said smoothly.

*He generally doesn’t need it. “Fresh” is something that people who are used to it don’t need, but people who aren’t used to it do need? ...Used to what, exactly?* I looked down as I brooded over it.

Holmes tilted his head in confusion. “Is something wrong, Aoi? You don’t have to worry about the store. If they really need us to come back, they’ll call me.”

“No, um, it’s about ‘Fresh’...”

“Oh, you do need it after all?”

“No, um...” I made up my mind to ask. “What is ‘Fresh’?”

Holmes’s eyes widened. He looked genuinely surprised. “Huh? You don’t know what ‘Fresh’ is?”

I blushed hard. No matter what silly questions I asked before, Holmes never looked surprised or appalled. He always politely told me the answer. I couldn’t believe he was making this face now. *It must be so common sense that even a*

*child would know.* “I-I’m sorry for not knowing. People who aren’t used to it need ‘Fresh,’ and people who *are* used to it don’t, right? That means it’s not referring to fruit, right?” I asked quickly, feeling incredibly awkward.

Holmes chuckled as if he couldn’t hold in his laughter any longer. “Indeed. I’ve already been worn out, so there’s nothing fresh about me anymore. I don’t need Fresh. But, you’re still fresh.”

“Wh-What?”

“Actually, maybe I do need Fresh after all. I feel like it’ll make me remember something I’d forgotten.”

“U-Um, is it that important of a thing?”

“Yes...I suppose. If you drink that coffee, I think I’ll know whether or not you need it.”

Holmes’s prompt made me realize that I hadn’t taken a single sip yet. I picked up the cup and drank. As the aroma suggested, this coffee was more bitter than the coffee Holmes brewed. I grimaced on instinct.

“I-It’s a bit too bitter for me.”

“I see.” Holmes nodded and called to the waitress, “Sorry, could we get some Fresh after all?”

*Huh?* Before I could question it, creamer was placed on the table.

“Th-This is creamer, right?”

“Ah, is that what they call it in Kanto?”

“Y-Yes.” *Creamer or coffee milk.*

“In Kansai, it’s called ‘Fresh.’ Go ahead and use it, since you’re still ‘fresh,’ Aoi.” He grinned.

I blushed. *S-So it’s local lingo.* My cheeks felt so hot that I thought my head was going to give off steam. I poured the “Fresh” that they couldn’t have just called “cream” or “milk” into my coffee and took another sip.

“Did you have to phrase it like that? You really are a wicked Kyoto guy.”

“My apologies. You were just too cute.” He smiled, his eyes narrowing into

arcs. My cheeks grew even hotter.

This little incident in the traditional coffee house was a sign that I wasn't going to be able to avoid the rollercoaster of emotions this year either.

# Chapter 1: A Bisque Doll's Tears

## 1

Kyoto Teramachi-Sanjo's antique store Kura has many different items on display. A Shino tea bowl which is considered a national treasure from the Momoyama period, an old Kutani plate, a jar from China's Ming dynasty... I get to admire all sorts of antiques on a daily basis while I'm working here, which I really appreciate. All of them are beautiful, and I never get tired of looking at them. I was never this fascinated with antiques until I started working here.

That said, there's just one thing I can't bring myself to like: the bisque doll... It's an antique doll from the West. It wears a frilly white blouse with a red ribbon in front and a red skirt. It has long, flowing blonde hair, and there's a hint of loneliness in its glossy blue eyes. Despite thinking that it's very beautiful—or perhaps *because* of its beauty—I shiver when I look at it. The first time I came to Kura, I felt scared when I saw it. I'm not sure if it's because my first impression has stayed with me, but I still feel uncomfortable around it.

*I still have to take care of it, though.* I combed its hair, dusted it off, and carefully sat it in its chair, the way I always do. Then I immediately looked away, my eyes settling vaguely on the tabletop calendar. It was January 8th. Both New Year's and the Festival of Seven Herbs were over. The floods of kimono-clad tourists were gone, and the streets of Kyoto were now calm. What *hadn't* changed was the piercing cold that seeped in between the fibers of my clothes no matter how many layers I wore. Even though it was my second winter here, I still wasn't used to the cold. *It's always really warm inside Kura though, and I'm thankful for that...*

I looked outside the window. Since it was still winter break, there were a lot of tourists. *Tourists, huh?* I turned around and looked at Holmes who was sitting at the counter. "Holmes, when people from the Kanto region visit Kyoto, where do you think they should go sightseeing?"

“Sightseeing?” Holmes looked up at me.

“Yes.”

“Did one of your friends from Saitama ask you that?”

“Yes.” I nodded. *As usual, he immediately read my mind.* “My friend from Saitama is going to Osaka for a relative’s wedding. They said they could come to Kyoto for a day and asked me to take them somewhere nice.”

I was happy to be able to see my friend, but being asked to take them “somewhere nice” was a lot of pressure. I moved to Kyoto one and a half years ago, and thanks to working at Kura, I’ve been taken to a lot of places: Shimogamo Shrine, Ninna-ji Temple, Hyakumanben Chion-ji Temple, Kurama Temple, Kifune Shrine and the river terrace, the Philosopher’s Walk, Ginkaku-ji Temple, Tofuku-ji Temple, Suzumushi Temple, Arashiyama, Tenryu-ji Temple, Genko-an Temple... But deciding on a recommendation was hard. There were too many wonderful places to choose from. If it were the cherry blossom season, I could recommend Ninna-ji Temple or the Philosopher’s Walk. If it were May, I could take them to Shimogamo Shrine. Summer would be Kurama or Kifune, fall would be Tofuku-ji Temple, Genko-an Temple, or Nanzen-ji Temple. *But what would be good for winter? I could take them to the Eight Temples and Shrines of Shinkyogoku that we visited at the end of the year, but...*

“Can your friend only come to Kyoto for one day?”

“Yes.”

“And I’m assuming you’d be limited to daytime.”

“I think so.” They’d probably leave Osaka in the morning, meet up with me just before noon, and then go back in the evening.

“Does your friend often come to Kyoto?”

“No, they said it’s going to be their first time in Kansai at all.”

“They never came to Kyoto on a school trip?”

“Apparently their middle school went to Hokkaido instead.”

“In that case, I think you should go the orthodox route.” He nodded firmly.

I tilted my head. "Orthodox?"

"Yasaka Shrine, Kiyomizu-dera Temple, and then a walk around Gion. It's not original, but they'll be able to experience Kyoto's essence in its fullest."

"I see. You're right. I think Makoto will enjoy that." *Come to think of it, I've been wanting to go to Kiyomizu-dera Temple too.* I went there on a middle school trip before, but I hadn't visited again since moving here. *My friend's probably expecting a thorough tour since I've become a Kyoto resident now... Will I be able to do it? They're coming all the way to Kyoto to see me, so I want them to have fun.*

"Makoto...? Is your friend male by any chance?" Holmes asked quietly, looking down at the accounting book.

I shook my head. "No, she's a girl."

"I see." He looked up and smiled softly. "You're still friends with her, then?"

He was probably referring to the drama with my ex-boyfriend and best friend. I lost a lot of friends when that happened.

"Ah, yeah. She wasn't in that group. I knew her because we were in the same club."

"Oh, you were in a club?"

"Yes, although I didn't join another one after moving here." *I have my hands full with work now.*

"It was a sports club, right?" he asked confidently.

I nodded hesitantly. "Yes. You can tell?"

"Ever since you started working here, your responses to your seniors have been firm. I thought the habit might've been drilled into you from a sports club hierarchy. Was it tennis?"

"Y-Yes. Oh no, is it because my right arm is thicker than my left?" I unconsciously rubbed my right arm. *I played a lot of tennis for four years until my first year of high school, and my right arm is still thicker. It secretly bothers me.*

“Not at all. Everyone’s dominant arm tends to be thicker, so it’s not because of that. I just had the feeling that you’d prefer solo sports like tennis or track and field over team sports like basketball or volleyball. You didn’t have the aura of a former runner, though, so I guessed tennis.”

I did choose tennis because I preferred playing solo. *No wonder he’s Holmes.*

“Tennis is fun,” Holmes continued. “Would you like to play sometime?”

“Oh, you play tennis too?”

“Yes, I’d say it’s one of my better sports.”

“It does seem like it’d suit you.” *He’d be like a fairytale prince, playing tennis with that graceful aura.*

“Did you know that in tennis, the most blackhearted player wins?”

“Huh?”

“I’m confident in my ability to attack my opponent’s psyche. My wickedness isn’t just for show.” Holmes chuckled.

I silently nodded. *I take that back. He’s definitely not a fairytale prince.* As his appearance suggests, Holmes is indeed kind and chivalrous. He has a gentle, refined demeanor. But on the other hand, he’s quite an eccentric and he’s wicked at times. He’s stubborn and hates to lose. He also has a bit of a blackhearted side. It threw me off at first, but now I’m completely accustomed to it. I’m rarely surprised by his quirks or two-facedness anymore.

“Oh right, I have a recommended route from Yasaka Shrine to Kiyomizu-dera Temple. Would you like me to teach it to you in advance?” Holmes suggested.

“Y-You will?” I leaned in excitedly. I was really thankful since I wasn’t sure if I’d be a good guide.

“Of course. Come to think of it, I haven’t been to Kiyomizu-dera in several years now even though I live nearby. I’d like to visit too.”

“I really want my friend to have fun, so I appreciate it.”

“In that case, how about this Saturday? I’ll ask my father to watch the store. We can visit Yasaka Shrine and then go to Kiyomizu-dera.” He smiled gently, his

eyes narrowing into arcs.

“O-Okay!” I nodded eagerly.

*Yasaka Shrine and Kiyomizu-dera Temple. It really is an orthodox route, but then again, it’s orthodox for a reason.* Excited to get to do some sightseeing, my heart raced as I marked the date on the tabletop counter.

## 2

Then it was Saturday. After enthusiastically getting ready in the morning, I got on the bus to Yasaka Shrine. Since Kiyomizu-dera was going to be an uphill walk, I made sure to wear flats. Actually, either way, Kyoto sightseeing mostly consists of shrines and temples which all have stairs and gravel. *High heels are problematic—I’ll have to tell my friend that.* One time when I was visiting a nearby shrine, I happened to be wearing sandals and a piece of gravel got under my foot, which sucked. I considered wearing sneakers today because of that, but since it was a bit of a special outing, I went with a cute pair of mid-calf boots that were easy to walk in. *It might be rude to Holmes to think this, but even though he’s just going to teach me how to show my friend around, going to Yasaka Shrine and Kiyomizu-dera with him feels like...a date. Wait, what am I thinking? I already decided not to see him that way.* Despite cautioning myself, I suddenly felt anxious. I looked at my reflection in the window and adjusted my bangs.

I got off the bus at Gion, right by the entrance to Yasaka Shrine. The large vermilion two-storied gate at the end of Shijo Street is called the West Romon gate. Holmes and I were going to meet up at the bottom of the stone stairs there. *I’m a bit early, but knowing him, I’m sure he’s already there.* I jogged over, feeling bad for keeping him waiting. However, I didn’t see him there, which was a relief.

“Hey there cutie, are ya free?” came a voice from behind me. Shocked, I turned around—and saw Holmes with a mischievous grin on his face.

I stared at him wide-eyed. “H-Holmes?!”

“I’m sorry.”

“B-Being sorry isn’t the issue here. How long were you behind me?” I hadn’t seen him at all from the bus stop until the stairs.

“I arrived early, so I went for a walk in Maruyama Park. When I left, I spotted you running to the meeting place, so I couldn’t help it.” He chuckled.

I felt the strength leave my body. “You were like a completely different person, hitting on me from behind in a Kansai accent.”

“Your glare when you turned around was something else.”

“Oh, um, sorry.” *Was I glaring that hard?*

“It’s fine. The world is full of bad men, so when someone calls out to you like that, please don’t hesitate to kick them.”

“This is the first time a man ever called out to me on the streets like that.” I shrugged.

Holmes smiled cheerfully. “Shall we go?”

“Okay.”

We climbed the West Romon gate steps. The long stone stairway continued all the way to the main shrine building. Lots of stalls were set up on both sides of the stairs, making for a fun and exciting atmosphere.

“It’s still in New Year’s mode here, huh?” I remarked.

“No, there are always festival-style stalls here.”

“Really? I guess that’s Yasaka Shrine for you. It was really festive the other night too.” Holmes, Akihito, and I had come here for the first shrine visit of the new year. After that, we stayed up all night playing card games at Holmes’s apartment and watched the first sunrise... *I had a lot of fun that night.*

Holmes peered into my face while I was lost in thought and asked, “Is something the matter?”

My heart skipped a beat. “I was remembering New Year’s Eve. Now that I think about it, whenever I go somewhere with you, Akihito is there too, huh?”

Holmes’s eyebrow twitched. He looked around us and then put his hand to his

chest as if relieved.

“Wh-What’s wrong?” I asked.

“Nothing. I was just afraid he’d pop out from somewhere. Speak of the devil, as they say. That man always appears when you least expect it.”

“You don’t have to worry about that today. He said he was making a live appearance at a studio in Tokyo.”

“Oh? How do you know that?”

“He made me sign up for his email newsletter a while back, and it said, ‘You’ll watch my live appearance, right?’ Didn’t he ask you to sign up too?”

“Yes, I did register for it, but the content always fails to catch my interest, so I often don’t read it.”

*Poor Akihito.*

When we reached the top of the stairs, I saw the main building on the other side of the large shrine grounds. There was a row of three large bells spaced evenly apart. I walked in front of the middle bell, put my offering in the box, and placed my hands on the thick rope. Holmes and I rang the bells together, bowed twice, clapped twice, recited the traditional prayer that begins with, “O Gods, purify us from evil,” bowed once more, and then left the building. There were a lot of people in the shrine grounds.

“Yasaka Shrine is always crowded, huh?” I said.

“Indeed. Part of it is because Gion is a symbol of Kyoto, and part of it is because its main deity is Susanoo-no-Mikoto.”

“Is Susanoo-no-Mikoto a popular deity?”

“Personally, I associate him with festivals and liveliness. That might be why people are drawn to him.”

We left the shrine through the south gate, like we did on New Year’s. Unlike the main road, there weren’t many people here, so it was easy to get through. There were traditional shops and cafes here and there, and even someone pulling a rickshaw. We walked to the end of the path and turned left. Suddenly, the five-story pagoda was right in front of my eyes.

“Wh-Whoa, it’s like the pagoda appeared out of nowhere.”

“Yes. When you walk from the south gate and exit onto Yasaka Street, Yasaka Tower appears in front of your eyes. Doesn’t it feel like magic?”

“Y-Yes, it surprised me.” I hadn’t seen the tower at all while we were walking, but once we turned the corner, it was suddenly there. The scenery gripped my heart.

“This is my recommended path, Aoi. Feel free to use it when you’re showing your friend around.” He held up his index finger and grinned.

“Yes, I really want to.” I nodded firmly. “Anyway, Yasaka Tower is pretty far from Yasaka Shrine, huh?” I said, looking up at the magnificent five-story pagoda towering over us.

“This pagoda belongs to Hokan-ji Temple, not Yasaka Shrine. It’s nicknamed Yasaka Tower because it’s on Yasaka Street.”

“Yasaka Tower isn’t related to Yasaka Shrine? Oh right, only temples have this kind of tower. Sorry, I’m a hopeless high school girl.”

“No need to apologize.”

We continued walking up the slope. Various shops lined both sides of the narrow path, selling folding fans, ceramic tea bowls, spices... I also saw a sign for a famous boiled tofu restaurant. We continued onto Sannenzaka, a pedestrian road that was also lined with shops. I saw a sign that said Sanneizaka in unfamiliar characters.

“Sanneizaka?” I tilted my head.

“This is Sannenzaka’s original name. It’s said that the name means ‘praying for safe birth’ because Hideyoshi Toyotomi’s wife Nene prayed for childbirth at Kiyomizu-dera Temple.”

“What about Ninenzaka, then?” *Sannenzaka is written as “three-year slope,” and Ninenzaka is written as “two-year slope.”*

“Since Sanneizaka is commonly called Sannenzaka, the street in front of it was named Ninenzaka.”

“That’s not very imaginative.”

“Indeed.” Holmes nodded. “Oh, please wait here.” He stopped on one of the stairs and went inside a store.

*Does he know someone there or something?* I waited absentmindedly for a bit before Holmes came back holding two bags of Ajari mochi—the rice cakes we’d eaten at Kura before.

“This one’s for you,” he said. “Buying Ajari mochi here and stuffing your cheeks with them while walking to the temple is quite a trendy thing to do.”

“W-Wow, thanks!” It’d been a while since I last had Ajari mochi. I tore the package open and took a bite out of one of the round rice cakes. The slightly warm, springy snack was truly delicious. “Th-This Ajari mochi is so warm and delicious. It’s like it’s freshly made.”

“Right?” Holmes ate his rice cakes too.

We reached the top of the stairs. Since it was a Saturday, there was quite a crowd there. Regular sightseers, students on field trips, and foreign tourists were cheerfully walking up the slope. The rows of gift shops were also bustling with people. *It’s an exciting place no matter when you come.*

I looked up the slope and saw an enormous vermilion two-story gate. I also saw people taking pictures in front of the stone steps. *Holmes has taken me to a lot of places before, but I don’t think any of the other temples were this cheerful and fun. A lot of them were solemn or majestic, but they weren’t places that could excite everyone who came.*

“Kiyomizu-dera really is amazing,” I murmured.

“Indeed. No matter when you come, it’s always overflowing with energy. Simply being here on the path gives you a taste of the extraordinary,” Holmes said earnestly, nodding.

We climbed the stone stairs, passed through the two-story gate, and entered the temple grounds. Even though so many people were here, it wasn’t jam-packed. Holmes swiftly paid the entrance fee as usual and handed me a ticket that looked like a bookmark. “Here you go.”

“Thank you.” The entrance fee here seemed cheaper than the other temples. *Is it because so many people come here that they don’t need to charge more?*

We went inside. To our left, there was a large iron staff that had been used by the warrior monk Benkei. *I remember this—during our school trip, everyone surrounded it and talked about how cool it was.*

“This staff brings back memories,” I said.

“It belonged to Benkei. Apparently it weighs seventeen kilograms.”

“Seventeen?! Did Benkei really use this?”

“Who knows?” Holmes laughed as we went further inside.

We walked out onto the famous “Kiyomizu stage” which jutted out from the main building. Kyoto Tower was to our right. The stage looked out over the city of Kyoto, but right below us was a vast sea of greenery. Looking down was a bit scary for me, since I wasn’t comfortable with heights.

“It really is high up,” I said.

“Yes, it’s supposedly as tall as a four-story building.”

“It feels higher than that, though. I’m amazed that they were able to build it on this cliff.” The stage was held up by crisscrossed pillars. *Maybe it feels higher because it’s sticking out from the hill.*

“Indeed. This steep cliff is called Kinunkei. The wooden lattice is built using a construction style called *kakezukuri*. There isn’t a single nail used in this lattice of giant zelkova pillars, the longest of which are around twelve meters long. It’s an incredible work of art, right?” Holmes explained passionately.

I smiled. *It is artistic.*

“Come to think of it, Holmes, you said before that Kiyomizu-dera was your favorite temple, right? Is it because of the artistry of this wooden architecture?”

“That’s one part of it, but I feel like this place encompasses all of Kyoto. The temple’s beauty, its tremendous history, the modern landscape, and the unchanging view all draw people in, myself included,” he said softly.

I nodded quietly. *He’s right. I do feel like all of Kyoto is condensed in this place. That allure must be why no matter how many times you come here, you still want to come again. I’m sure that the lush green mountains in front of us are the same scenery that people saw here long ago.*

We continued along the designated route, exiting the temple building. I saw a sign saying “Jinushi Shrine.” I remembered going there on my school trip too.

“Now that I think about it, it’s kind of strange for there to be a Shinto shrine on a Buddhist temple’s grounds, right?” I asked.

“Are you talking about Jishu Shrine?” Holmes replied.

“Oh, those characters are read as ‘Jishu’? I thought they said ‘Jinushi.’”

“Yes, when a shrine or temple is built, a ‘jishu’—or ‘landowner’—shrine is also built to worship the local resident deity. Until the Meiji period, Shinto and Buddhism were considered the same religion. You could call Kiyomizu-dera Temple and its Jishu Shrine a remnant of that time.”

“What? Shinto and Buddhism used to be considered the same?”

“Yes. It was believed in the Meiji period that in order to make Shinto the national religion, they needed to prohibit the amalgamation of the two religions. It was called the ‘separation of Shinto and Buddhism,’ but... Well, setting that aside, I think that this is the most famous Jishu Shrine in the country. It’s known for enshrining Okuninushi, the god of marriage,” Holmes explained. “Shall we go?”

I nodded and started climbing the somewhat steep stone stairway with him. The shrine of love and marriage was packed with young girls. Next to the statue of Okuninushi-no-Mikoto was another one of a rabbit—the White Hare of Inaba that Okuninushi encountered in an ancient myth. One of the shrine’s famous “love divination stones” was at the entrance, while the other was farther inside. *If you can walk from one stone to the other with your eyes closed, then you’ll find love, or so the legend goes.* A lot of girls were in the process of attempting it.

“This is nostalgic too,” I said. “Everyone in my class did it.”

“Do you want your fortune told?”

“U-Um, I’m fine. I don’t care about love right now.”

“You don’t care?”

I looked down, feeling like I wanted to run away. Since Holmes and I had been getting along well, I once thought that I might've been special to him. But I soon realized that it was just my conceited assumption. Holmes is the same to all women: kind, gentlemanly, and at times, wicked. There was nothing special about me. I was glad that I realized before my misunderstanding got worse. And I'm drawing a line between us so that I won't have any more wild misunderstandings from now on. If I do fall in love with Holmes, he'll surely notice right away. Then it'll be too awkward for me to stay at Kura. I don't want to lose that beloved place, so I'm trying to prevent that. But regardless of my efforts, his actions are constantly making my heart race. *This isn't love, this isn't love*, I chant to myself. Holmes is an unfair Kyoto guy—it's not my fault.

"L-Let's move on to the next place, Holmes. I don't have anything to do here."

"All right." Holmes nodded.

We left Jishu Shrine. As we continued down the path, I saw Kiyomizu-dera's stage looking out over the area. It was the panoramic view of the temple that you often see in guidebooks or videos. The protruding stage was surrounded by greenery. Underneath, it was supported by a grid of long zelkova pillars.

"This feels like the Kiyomizu-dera I know," I said. The scenery was familiar, but seeing it up close made me realize just how beautiful it was.

"Isn't it great? It really is my favorite temple," Holmes said passionately, looking at it.

I nodded. "'Jumping from Kiyomizu's stage' is a common saying that means 'taking the plunge,' right?"

"There are a lot of people who really did jump off as a form of prayer. According to literature, more than two hundred people jumped off in the Edo period."

I coughed loudly. "A-As a form of prayer? Wouldn't they obviously die?"

"The survival rate was surprisingly high—over eighty percent. Apparently the trees were denser back then, and the ground below was soft earth."

"O-Oh. But why would they jump?"

“The belief was that if you entrusted your life to the almighty Kannon, your life would be saved and your prayer granted. However, the practice was banned in the early Meiji period.”

“I see. It makes sense that they’d ban it.”

We left Kiyomizu-dera Temple.

## 4

We had lunch at an Italian restaurant on Sanneizaka before continuing on to the bustling Gion shopping district of Ninenzaka. After that, we headed north on Kawabata Street.

Holmes stopped in front of a cafe and said, “Shall we have tea here?”

The building looked like it’d come straight out of an English picture book. A large clock was prominently featured in the center of the facade, and there was a light blue sign under it that said “CACAO MARKET.” It had a small patio with English-style street lamps and chairs. Right next to it was the Shirakawa River.

“I-It’s so cute! I didn’t know there was such a Western-style cafe in Gion!” I exclaimed in awe. *It’s so lovely.*

“It’s unexpected, but it fits in, right? Kyoto is a blend of Japanese and Western styles, after all.”

When we went inside, we were greeted by the sweet aroma of chocolate and the sight of a large dispenser that reached to the ceiling. As you could guess from the scent, the store was full of chocolate. Tables and shelves were packed with various jars and tins of it. It looked like a fancy chocolate shop, not a cafe. There was a tiny seating area, but it didn’t seem like you’d be able to relax with a cup of tea here.

“Are we having tea in here, Holmes?”

“The first floor is a chocolaterie, but there’s a cafe underground.”

“Oh, I see.” I nodded.

Holmes received a note from the store staff. “This way, Aoi,” he said, leaving

the store.

“We’re going outside?” I asked, following him.

Holmes nodded and pointed at a door on the side of the store building. “That’s the entrance to the underground cafe.” He opened the door. Inside was another door, this time made of wood. It said “ANGEL LIBRARY” on it.

“Angel Library?”

“Yes. The angels watching over Cacao Market opened up their beloved library as an eating area because they wanted the customers to have a place to relax. That’s what the store’s official blog says, at least.” Holmes grinned mischievously.

I smiled and looked at the door. There was an old-fashioned number pad above the doorknob. “What’s this number pad?” I asked.

“You need the secret password from the chocolaterie. Please enter it, Aoi,” he said, handing me the note he’d received from the staff.

“Ah, okay. This is kind of exciting.” I entered the number and opened the door, revealing a staircase leading underground and a large clock on the wall. At the bottom of the dim stairs was a softly lit room with shelves full of Western books covering the walls.

“Wow! This is so nice.” It felt like we’d slipped into a fantasy world. The “angels’ library” really did look like a foreign library. Shelves teeming with Western books, dim lights, extremely quiet background music... The space felt far removed from everyday life. The thoroughness of the aesthetic made me nervous and excited just standing there.

We ordered chocolate fondant, and I hummed at the sugary goodness. “I could eat this forever. This place really is exciting.”

“I’m glad you like it. I once came here by myself, when I was trying to visit every cafe in Kyoto. It made me think, ‘A guy would definitely impress his date if he brought her here.’” Holmes smiled and drank his coffee.

I nodded firmly. “Definitely. Any girl would be happy to come here. I should tell the guys in my class about this place.”

Holmes's eyes snapped wide open.

"Is something wrong?" I asked.

"No, um, are you friends with the guys in your class?"

"I guess?"

"How close are you to them?" he asked bluntly.

I frowned. "*How close?*" *A normal amount?* "We make small talk, and the guy who sits next to me forgets his eraser a lot, so I lend him mine."

"Are you sure he isn't doing that on purpose?"

"What?"

"Is he forgetting it on purpose because he wants to get closer to you?" he asked in a low voice.

I choked. *What is he saying?* "Th-There's no way. He borrows erasers from other people too. Besides, I think he has a girlfriend that he's all lovey-dovey with. I don't think he's trying to get closer to me like that."

"I see." Holmes sighed as if relieved and took another sip of his coffee.

"Have you ever forgotten your eraser on purpose because you wanted to get closer to someone?" I asked, leaning forward a bit.

This time, Holmes choked. "No. I may be sly, but I've never considered using such a cutesy method of getting closer to someone."

"You're sly?"

"Yes, I'm a blackhearted Kyoto guy, after all." He grinned, making my heart leap.

"What method *would* you use, then?" I prodded.

"Hmm." He furrowed his brow. "I'm not sure. I've never 'wanted' a girlfriend before."

"Huh? Why not?"

"It feels very bothersome."

"Bothersome?"

“Yes, because when you’re dating someone, it cuts into your own time. Everything you do gets restricted by a single woman. I’d say I’m the kind of person who wants to live freely, spending my time the way I want.”

I nodded—that did seem like him. *But that’s...* “You sound kind of like one of those ‘modern disillusioned youth’ people have been talking about lately.”

“Perhaps, yes. But I don’t think of it as a bad thing. Though the national birth rate is declining, the worldwide population is experiencing explosive growth. People losing interest in romance could be a form of nature’s guidance.”

“Nature’s guidance... But you went out with Izumi, right?”

“Yes. I was happy that she confessed her feelings to me, and I was curious about what it’d be like to date someone.”

“You’d never been confessed to before that?”

“Correct,” Holmes said readily, nodding.

I was a bit surprised. “R-Really? I thought you’d be popular with girls.”

“Not at all. Even Izumi told me, ‘You’re nice to everyone, but you also seem unapproachable, so I was really scared to ask you out.’ Apparently I’d unconsciously built a wall around myself because I wasn’t interested in dating. I was glad that she worked up the courage to ask anyway despite sensing that wall.”

“Oh, I think I get what you mean.” I nodded.

“That’s how I arrived at my first relationship, but as you know, the result was catastrophic and made me even more disillusioned.”

“I-I see.”

Holmes had gone through a rough heartbreak. He cherished his girlfriend too much, and she was stolen by another man. Since he wasn’t originally interested in dating, it might’ve been inevitable that he’d distance himself from it even more after that experience.

“But lately, I’ve started thinking it might not be so bad to have a girlfriend around.”

“Huh?”

He cast his eyes down and said, “Maybe it wouldn’t be so bad to be tied down to someone.”

My mind instantly went blank. After a moment of silence, I said, “O-Oh, is that so? Y-You’re finally interested in dating again, huh?” I didn’t know why I was so flustered, but it felt like my voice was on the verge of cracking.

Holmes silently gave a vague nod.

“Th-That’s good. I’m sorry for being presumptuous, but I was a bit worried about you. I truly think it’s a good thing if you’re interested in love again. Yes. I’m sure you can get a girlfriend right away if you put your mind to it. Th-That’s right, you should bring her to this cafe first. She’ll definitely love it,” I blurted out quickly. Even I wasn’t sure what I was saying anymore. My heart was beating uncomfortably fast.

“Are you sure? Even if I brought her here, I don’t think it’d have that effect.” He smiled weakly.

“Wh-What? That’s not true. If you bring a girl here, I’m sure she’ll fall for you immediately.” I smiled, but my chest ached. *I hate how strained my face must look right now.*

“Immediately, huh...?” What looked like a self-deprecating smile rose to his face. “Oh right.” He looked up. “Don’t you think your friend will like this cafe too? The one who’s going to visit.”

“Y-Yes, I’m sure she will. Thank you for telling me about this great place.” I bowed, relieved that he’d changed the subject.

“My pleasure.” Holmes smiled gently.

## 5

After enjoying our time at Angel Library, we went back up to the chocolaterie to pick out some chocolate to buy. Once we paid at the register, a surprised voice called out from behind, “My, is that you, Kiyotaka?”

I turned around and saw an elderly woman wearing a kimono looking at

Holmes with wide eyes. *Is this another of the owner's old friends?*

"Grandma..." Holmes murmured.

Now I was the wide-eyed one. *"Grandma." Is she his actual grandmother? As in, the owner's ex-wife and the manager's mother?*

"It really is you," she said. "You've grown so much." Her face wrinkled into a smile and she walked towards us. She was very pretty and elegant. *She must've been beautiful when she was younger.*

"We last met when I started university, so I haven't gotten any bigger."

"Yes, but you seem more mature now. It looks like you're doing well."

"Indeed. I'm glad that you seem to be doing well too." Holmes smiled back at her, looking sincere.

"Is this your girlfriend?" She looked at me warmly.

"N-No, I'm a part-time employee at Kura. My name is Aoi Mashiro." I hurriedly introduced myself and bowed deeply.

"Aoi has been a great help," Holmes continued immediately.

"That means she's helping Seiji and Takeshi too, then. Thank you very much, dear. I'm Kiyotaka's grandmother, Tsubaki." She bowed happily.

"Th-They've helped me a lot too," I said, bowing again.

"Kiyotaka, since we've run into each other, would you like to come over? You two are done shopping, right?"

"No, I don't have a single gift on me right now. I'll come over another time," Holmes declined politely.

"Why, we're family. You don't need to bring any gifts. Aoi, you're welcome to join us. Could you tell me how Kiyotaka and Takeshi are doing? My house is close by."

Feeling pressured, I hesitantly nodded.

"Wonderful. Shall we go?"

We left the store, half forced to by Tsubaki.

Tsubaki opened the gate and gestured for us to enter the yard. “Come right in.”

Her “close by” house was on a long, narrow, typical Kyoto alley that was accessed via one of Gion’s back streets. She had a well-maintained garden of beautiful camellia flowers—fitting because “Tsubaki” means “camellia.” It was an elegant Japanese-style residence that was large for the neighborhood. It had a big yard too.

“Th-This is a big house,” I murmured.

“After my grandmother divorced my grandfather, she married a wealthy realtor,” Holmes explained quietly so that Tsubaki wouldn’t hear.

*So that’s why her house is so nice.* I nodded, impressed.

Tsubaki stopped and turned around. “Oh right, Kiyotaka. Thank you so much for the birthday flowers last month. Forgive me for being away when you delivered them.”

“No worries.”

“Thank you for remembering every year. Also, Seiji sent me flowers this time too. It’s the first time he’s ever done this—I was so surprised.” Her eyes lit up happily.

Holmes looked startled. “He did?”

“You can’t believe it, right? They were splendid moth orchids. I was so astonished.”

“Perhaps it was to celebrate your seventy-seventh birthday,” Holmes said. Seventy-seven is a special age in Japanese culture. “He must’ve felt too guilty to send you flowers before.”

“What? It’s been more than fifty years since we separated. It’s reached the statute of limitations.” Tsubaki shrugged.

*Statute of limitations...? I was told that the owner divorced because he was “too free-spirited.” If the words “guilty” and “statute of limitations” are coming up now, does that mean he cheated on her?*

While I was mulling over it, Tsubaki waved at an elderly man who was watering the garden. “Yoshio, I met Kiyotaka at the chocolate store!”

This “Yoshio” seemed to be Tsubaki’s husband, which would make him Holmes’s step-grandfather. At a glance, he had the air of an untalkative old man. He looked at us with a grumpy frown.

Holmes bowed deeply upon making eye contact with him. “Long time no see. I’m sorry for the sudden intrusion. I trust that you’ve been well.”

“I-I’m Aoi Mashiro. It’s nice to meet you.” I bowed after him.

Yoshio bowed slightly without saying a word and quickly looked away. *EEK, that was blunt. Maybe he doesn’t want to welcome his step-grandson?*

“He’s shy.” Tsubaki gave a high-pitched giggle.

*H-He is?* I curiously looked at Yoshio.

“As my grandmother said, he’s shy. More accurately, he’s a socially awkward person who doesn’t know how to interact with someone in a complicated position like me,” Holmes whispered in my ear.

“Oh, I see.” I nodded, relieved.

“Meanwhile, my grandmother is even more whimsical and optimistic than my grandfather. She’s not two-faced at all.”

“I had a feeling.”

“I’m sorry things turned out this way.”

“No, don’t be.”

While we were whispering to each other, Tsubaki opened the sliding door to the house. “Come, come,” she said, beckoning to us. We hurried to the entrance.

Tsubaki led us to a Japanese-style room and said, “I just happened to receive some sweets from Kanshundo. Aren’t they pretty?”

On the table was a small plate of candies shaped like folding fans and apricot-colored New Year’s *yokan*—jellied desserts made of red bean paste, agar, and

sugar.

“They really are,” I said. “I’ve never seen such pretty *yokan* before.”

“Kanshundo makes the loveliest sweets,” Tsubaki boasted.

Holmes picked up his matcha-filled tea bowl with a cheerful look on his face. “This is a wonderful Hagi tea bowl.”

“I couldn’t possibly offer you anything less,” his grandmother replied. “It’s no Kyusetsu, but it’s quite nice, right?”

“Yes, it’s a quality piece from the late Edo period.”

“Kyusetsu” is short for “Kyusetsu Miwa,” a famous line of potters that’s been active from the Edo period until now. Kyusetsu Miwa X and XI are certified Living National Treasures—a term for people who preserve important cultural traditions. *It’s true that this tea bowl isn’t as good as a Kyusetsu one, but it’s still amazing. Makes sense, seeing as how she was once married to the owner.*

“You must be happy to have a cute part-timer around, Kiyotaka.” Tsubaki’s eyes gleamed.

I choked on my tea.

“Yes, Aoi is very sweet and works to her utmost ability,” Holmes said unabashedly. “It’s a joy to have her.”

I felt like I was going to choke again. He’d really mastered the art of flattery.

“Well, Yoshio still calls me cute too, you know.” Tsubaki pouted, as if no longer amused by the conversation she’d brought up herself.

“That’s what matters most.” Holmes smiled cheerfully.

*I’m surprised that that unsociable husband would call his wife “cute,”* I thought while sipping the tea.

“Exactly. Seiji wasn’t the type to say that kind of thing. Really, he tried so hard before we got married, but afterwards, I got nothing. You be careful now, Aoi. You mustn’t choose a man who won’t feed the fish he’s caught.”

“O-Okay.” I nodded hesitantly.

“Well, I think my grandfather was just shy too.”

“True, he did send me those moth orchids.” Tsubaki smiled mischievously. “Oh right, are you still playing detective these days, Kiyotaka?”

Holmes grimaced for a moment before regaining his composure. “It was never my intent to ‘play detective,’ but is something the matter?”

“The strangest thing happened. Wait here,” she said, hastily standing up and leaving. A little while later, she returned with a bisque doll. “It’s about him.”

It was a boy doll. The instant I saw it, I went, “Oh!” I realized that it formed a set with the girl doll at Kura.

Holmes looked at me and smiled gently. “Did you notice?”

“Y-Yes. This bisque doll goes with the girl doll at the shop, right?”

“Correct.”

“I knew it.” Their faces and the luster of their skin and hair were the same. Most of all, their clothes—the girl doll at Kura wore a frilly white blouse with a red ribbon in front and a red skirt. This boy doll wore the same frilly blouse but with a light blue ribbon, and a pair of dark blue shorts. I instantly recognized them as a pair.

The first time I visited Kura, I was simultaneously captivated by and scared of the beautiful bisque doll. Perhaps it was because it was so elaborately designed that it felt like it had real emotions.

“Seiji gave me this when we got married. When we divorced and my things were sent to me, the boy doll was with them by itself,” Tsubaki explained. She then mumbled, “I bet he liked the girl doll and didn’t want to lose it.” She picked up the doll and giggled.

“Did something happen with the doll?” Holmes asked.

“Oh right. I don’t think anything of it, but my granddaughter who lives in the neighborhood called it scary.” She held the doll facing us and sat down.

*I know how she feels.* I gave a strained smile.

“I assume the doll has always been in this house. Is this the first time she called it scary?”

“It’d been sitting on a shelf in my room, but I recently moved it to the living room. At first my granddaughter said it was cute, but later she said that it was scary and cursed.”

“Cursed?” Holmes and I asked in unison.

“Right. She said, ‘This doll was crying.’” Tsubaki shrugged.

*A crying doll...?* It suddenly sounded like a horror story.

“How old is she?” Holmes asked. Even though he was her grandson too, she had another family with her new husband, so he must’ve not been familiar with them. That was the impression I got from his question, at least.

“She’s in middle school.”

*Middle school...* If it were a younger child, it wouldn’t be so strange that they thought the doll was scary. A middle school student was a different story.

“Oh? Did she actually see the doll crying?”

“She said that she heard the sound of crying, and when she went to the living room, the doll had fallen to the floor, and its eyes were wet with tears.”

“I see.” Holmes crossed his arms.

“After that, it started moving around,” the grandmother said nonchalantly.

A chill ran down my spine. “M-Moving?”

“Mmhm. Even though I put it on the shelf, I’ll find it on the sofa or in front of the dresser. I asked my family and no one knew why. Then my granddaughter said, ‘Can you do something about it? It’s creeping me out.’ It hasn’t done anything wrong, though.” She lovingly caressed the doll’s head.

I shuddered. *I know how her granddaughter feels. Even if it isn’t doing anything wrong, it’s still creepy to have a doll that cries and moves from place to place.* I didn’t want to say it, but the corresponding girl doll at Kura sometimes felt like it had wet eyes too, as though it could start crying at any moment. *What if it’s crying when I’m not looking?* Another chill ran down my spine.

“What do you think, Kiyotaka?” Tsubaki asked, leaning forward a bit.

“Hmm...” Holmes put his hand to his chin. “Did you bring that doll out last

month?”

Tsubaki thought for a bit and then nodded. “Yes, at the end of the year.”

“How many times did your granddaughter hear it crying?”

“Once, apparently. She saw its wet eyes several times, though.”

“Does she visit you often?”

“Not as of late because school started again, but during winter vacation she came quite often.”

“Did the doll only move on days when she was here?”

“Come to think of it, yes. She often screamed, ‘It moved again! I hate this!’ I’m sure this boy hated being yelled at like that.” She gently caressed the doll’s head again.

Tsubaki seemed completely unfazed by the supernatural events—almost as if she was under the doll’s control. I shuddered again.

“Still, I can’t let my granddaughter be so spooked. I wonder if I should hire an exorcist.” She shrugged weakly.

“No,” Holmes said, shaking his head lightly. “It’s not possessed.”

“What’s the cause of this, then?”

“This is ultimately only my hypothesis, but...” He sat up straight. Tsubaki and I gulped and awaited his next words. “I suspect that this is the work of a human, not a supernatural phenomenon,” he said smoothly.

His grandmother blinked. “A human? Are you saying that someone in my family is doing it? Or that my granddaughter is lying?” she asked accusingly. Maybe she thought he was calling her granddaughter the culprit.

*I think the granddaughter is the most suspicious, though. Could she have been making it all up?*

“What was the reason why you brought the doll out, Grandma?”

“Hm? It suddenly felt nostalgic.”

“Is that because my grandfather sent you flowers?”

Tsubaki nodded immediately. “Yes. Seiji gave me flowers, and I thought, ‘How nostalgic,’ and brought out a few old things, including this doll.”

“Just to be sure, it wasn’t until recently that you told anyone that this bisque doll was a gift from my grandfather?” Holmes asked softly.

Tsubaki thought for a bit and then nodded. “I suppose.”

“My grandfather sent you flowers to celebrate your seventy-seventh birthday, and then you brought this doll out to the living room. Did your husband ask about it?” Holmes continued.

Tsubaki looked up at the ceiling as though searching her memories. “Yes. He asked why I suddenly brought it out, and I said, ‘I received flowers from Seiji, and I remembered that he gave me this as a gift.’”

I started at her words. *Could it be that...?*

“Can I see that?” Holmes asked, reaching for the doll. Tsubaki gave it to him and he held it in his arms. “I suspect that your husband was shocked to find out that this doll you loved so much was a gift from my grandfather.”

Tsubaki’s eyes widened. “He was?” Her face said that she’d never even considered this.

“First of all, I hear that the reason why my grandfather left you was because after you got married, he saw you ailing from an illness that wouldn’t go away, and he thought he’d become a god of pestilence.”

“A god of pestilence?” I blurted out.

“Apparently a shaman told him in the past, ‘Because you have defeated everything in your way and obtained all you could want, there is a potent karma swirling around you. However, you are under your ancestors’ powerful protection, so no harm will befall you. Instead, all of the karma will go to your spouse.’”

I was stunned speechless by the unexpected story.

“Don’t worry—the story itself is nonsense. However, it’s true that Grandma could not recover from her disease. After giving birth to my father, she fell deathly ill. When my grandfather saw her suffering, he was convinced that he’d

become a god of pestilence and resolved to leave her.”

“Oh no...” This was my first time hearing the real reason why the owner got divorced. I didn’t know what to say.

“Yes, but it was such a shock to receive his farewell letter and the divorce papers while I was being treated at my family’s home. I think the anger sent my illness flying.” Tsubaki laughed in amusement, as though it’d become a funny story now that half a century had passed. *Actually, if she can laugh about it like that, it must mean that she’s happy with her life now.*

“I think that my grandfather sent you the boy doll as a replacement for himself, since he couldn’t stay by your side. He kept the girl doll with him as a replacement for you. I imagine he felt, ‘We can’t be together as husband and wife anymore, but I wish I could have stayed by your side.’”

Tsubaki stopped laughing and her face turned serious.

“Your husband must’ve recognized my grandfather’s intent. Wouldn’t it have been shocking for him to find out that the doll that you always doted on and treasured represented such sorrowful feelings? It may have negated all of the long married life you shared.”

“B-But I was only married to Seiji for five years. I’ve been with Yoshio for fifty!”

“Yes, I’m sure your husband thought that way too. However, between your delight upon receiving flowers from my grandfather and the truth behind the doll, he may have temporarily lost confidence. ‘What if I was a replacement for Seiji this whole time? What if she was in love with him the whole time she was married to me?’ It’s possible that he felt that way.”

“It couldn’t be...”

“After succumbing to those thoughts, it wouldn’t be unreasonable for him to cry. Alone in the room, he held the doll and wept, keeping his voice down. When he heard your granddaughter’s footsteps, he would’ve put the doll down and fled. Could it not be that the doll, abandoned on the floor, was wet with your husband’s tears?” Holmes spoke, staring at the doll.

“Why did the doll move, then?” his grandmother asked.

Holmes smiled wryly. “Since your granddaughter called the doll scary, your husband may have had a malicious idea. Perhaps he hoped that by changing the doll’s location, you would find it creepy too and return it to the Yagashira family,” he said hesitantly.

*The truth behind the owner and Tsubaki’s divorce. The feelings that the owner put into this doll...* Ironically, the person who interpreted those feelings correctly wasn’t Tsubaki—it was her current husband. Tsubaki had probably accepted the doll without thinking too deeply about it. When she received flowers for her seventy-seventh birthday, she was happy and remembered the doll. She really didn’t mean anything by it. She was simply too pure-minded to think any other way. *Maybe that’s what the owner and her current husband loved about her.*

“I’m a fool,” she said. “I can’t believe I didn’t understand Seiji’s feelings until they were explained to me just now, half a century later. I even hurt the person who’s taken care of me for so long... I’d hate it too if he treasured something he received from a woman a long time ago,” she murmured with a faraway look. Tears welled up in her eyes. She fell quiet, and the room remained silent for quite some time. However, it wasn’t an oppressive silence. It was gentle and somewhat sad.

After a while, Tsubaki smiled and said, “Kiyotaka, would you take this boy to Kura for me?”

Holmes nodded. “Certainly. The girl at our store has always looked lonely. I’m sure she’ll be overjoyed to see her sweetheart again after half a century. We’ll take good care of this boy.” He hugged the doll and bowed.

*Maybe the owner sent her this doll thinking, “One day, we’ll be together again.” However, the chance for that is long gone. He and Tsubaki have both moved on with new partners. And now, the two bisque dolls that had been separated for half a century because of their owners’ circumstances can finally reunite.*

“Thanks. Apologize to the girl for me too.” Tsubaki looked at the boy doll and said, “Thank you too. Get along with your girlfriend at Kiyotaka’s place, okay?”

I smiled at the heartwarming scene.

“Kiyotaka, Aoi, make sure you don’t make the same mistake I did. Don’t make assumptions. Express your feelings clearly and out loud.” She reached out to squeeze our hands. Her hand was very soft and warm.

“O-Okay,” I said. *Feelings won’t get across unless you express them clearly.* The heavy regret in her words made my chest ache.

“Especially you, Kiyotaka. If you want something, say so. Even as a child, you never said what you truly thought. You have to do that,” she said, looking squarely at Holmes.

Holmes opened his mouth to speak, but closed it and smiled weakly. Then he said, “You’re right. Now that I think about it, I was always able to easily obtain the things I was mildly interested in, but I could never obtain what I truly wanted. Before I knew it, I’d lost the ability to say, ‘I want that.’ I felt that if I didn’t say it, I wouldn’t be hurt if I lost what I wanted.” He spoke as if talking to himself.

Hearing him say that made the pain grow worse. Like he said, someone as smart, skilled, and adaptable as him would surely be able to obtain most things he was interested in. However, he couldn’t obtain what he really wanted. *What if what he really wanted was his mother or his grandmother?* His mother passed away when he was young, and his doting grandmother was in a different world. Maybe he’d long since given up on what he truly wanted.

“You’re a fool too,” Tsubaki said flatly. “Losing it after *not* saying so is bound to hurt more.”

Holmes ran his hand through his bangs. “You’re right,” he said, reverting to his Kyoto accent for the first time since we’d run into his grandmother. “Despite being oblivious about yourself, you understand me well.” He was smiling, but he looked like he was on the verge of tears. The pain was overwhelming me.

“Of course. I’m your grandma, after all.”

“Indeed. Thanks, Grandma.”

They looked at each other and smiled. I sniffed, desperately trying to hold back my tears.

"Thank you for having us," I said, leaving the house just as Yoshio was coming in from the yard.

"Leaving already?" he asked awkwardly, not making eye contact.

"Yes," Holmes said, seeming unbothered by Yoshio's cold attitude. "Sorry for the sudden intrusion." He bowed.

"Oh..." Suddenly, Yoshio noticed the bisque doll in Holmes's arms, and his eyes widened. "That doll..."

"I'll be taking it into Kura's care," Holmes explained succinctly.

Yoshio looked at Tsubaki, astonished.

Tsubaki grinned. "I've always been thinking of returning it. Running into Kiyotaka today was just perfect."

"Really?" Yoshio asked, bewildered.

Tsubaki smiled. "You ought to buy me a new doll now."

Yoshio looked conflicted. He hesitated before replying curtly, "If you want one, I guess I can."

*The clumsy husband and his naïve wife. I think they make a wonderful couple.*

We bowed again and left through the gate. The sun was already setting. I looked up at the orange sky and saw the white moon floating over Gion. It was a beautiful scene, like something out of a painting.

"I'm sorry, Aoi. We were supposed to be sightseeing," Holmes said apologetically.

I shook my head. "Don't apologize. We did do a lot of sightseeing, and I'm really glad I got to talk to your grandma. She's very nice."

"Thank you for saying that." He smiled happily.

"Let's hurry back to Kura, Holmes."

"Huh?"

"The girl at the store is waiting." I took the bisque doll from Holmes and

grinned.

“You’re right. She is.”

“Yep. She’s been waiting for fifty years!”

We looked at each other and laughed.

“Shall we go, then?” he asked.

“Yes.”

We walked side by side. Up until now, I always felt something sad and lonely whenever I looked at the bisque doll sitting in a chair at the store. Since I could sense those emotions, I felt scared of her. *But now that this boy is here, I’m sure I won’t feel that way anymore. Kura will become a warmer, happier place.* I looked down at the bisque doll in my arms and smiled softly.

## Chapter 2: Valentine Soiree

### 1

*After a hectic January, it's now February.*

*Riiing, riiing.* Kura's landline phone was ringing more often lately. Each time it did, Holmes would groan, slump his shoulders, and pick up the receiver. Despite his reluctance, he'd say in a cheerful voice, "Hello, you've reached the antique store Kura. How may I help you?" Soon after, he'd switch to a low voice, saying, "Sorry, I'm not a detective."

Ueda was here this time, drinking coffee at the counter. He burst out laughing at Holmes's response. Once Holmes put down the receiver, Ueda teased, "What, another job request?"

I tilted my head. "A job request?"

"You haven't heard, Aoi? Word's gotten out that this guy's a great detective. People keep calling in asking him to solve their cases," Ueda said, pointing at Holmes and laughing as if it was hilariously amusing.

"I had no idea. Is that true?" I asked Holmes.

He sighed and slumped his shoulders. "It's my grandfather who's spreading the rumor. To make matters worse, he's exaggerating the stories."

"You're the talk of the town, kid. The ones I heard were, 'He can read your mind just by looking at you,' 'The moment he arrives on the scene, he knows who did it,' and 'He beats up criminals fast and mercilessly.'"

"Ugh, a person who matches that description wouldn't be human," Holmes said, exasperated.

I held my tongue and exchanged looks with Ueda. *The stories are exaggerated, but they're not entirely wrong.*

"There are people who believe those rumors and try to make real requests,"

Holmes said, sitting down in his chair. “It’s extremely bothersome.” He opened the inventory list.

“What kinda requests have you been getting?”

“I haven’t asked for details since I’m not taking any. Some people tell me regardless, though, and even if I were a real detective, I wouldn’t want to take any of those cases. For example, ‘I think one of my relatives is targeting my life because they’re after my riches—can you tell me who it is?’ or ‘I want to know if my boyfriend is thinking about marriage.’ Most of them are like that.”

“Yeah, that’s a pain.” Ueda nodded in understanding.

I nodded too. “They really believe that you can read minds, huh?”

“Yes, and judging from the calls I’ve received, it seems to be mostly women who fell for it.”

“Nah, it’s ’cause the rumors came with a huge bonus—‘He’s a beautiful young man with the grace of a weeping cherry tree.’”

“I’m flattered, but it’s still plum blossom season.” Holmes slumped his shoulders yet again.

Weeping cherry trees are similar to weeping willows. The branches full of cherry blossoms hang down towards the ground and have an elusive, magical aura. They’re very beautiful and at times they feel vaguely frightening. “I don’t know who spread that rumor, but that’s a good comparison,” I said earnestly, imagining a magnificent weeping cherry tree.

Holmes sighed lightly. “That was also my grandfather,” he said reluctantly.

“The owner?” Ueda and I asked in unison. *I guess he’s still doting on his grandson.*

“Well, it’s about time for me to get going to Kitayama,” Ueda said, putting his coffee cup back on its saucer with a *clink* and stretching.

Last December, Ueda opened a cafe on Kitayama Street. It’s one of those cafes where all of the staff are good-looking young men. Business was booming at first, and I went there several times too, but I haven’t gone recently.

“How is the cafe doing?” I asked.

“Great,” he answered. “That said, I wanna hand it over to someone else while business is still good.”

“Huh? How come?” I blinked, surprised.

Holmes gave a strained laugh. “Shops that rely on handsome men are dangerous. There’s no guarantee that you’ll always be able to secure quality personnel, and problems crop up with the female customers. It’s not so bad if there’s a dedicated owner that can always be there to manage the store, but Ueda runs several businesses, so he’s too busy.”

“That’s the gist of it. But hey, I won’t have to do this if I can hire Holmes to run the place all the time instead.”

“I politely decline.”

“Figured. Well, see ya.” Ueda stood up straight and left the store.

Once he was gone, I quickly got up and reached for his cup to put it on the tray. Holmes had the same idea, and our hands brushed against each other. I gasped and reflexively pulled back my hand.

“My apologies,” he said.

“N-No, it’s fine. I’ll clean up—”

“Can I ask you something?” He was looking at me.

“What is it?”

“Whenever our hands touch, no matter how slightly, you recoil like that. Are you scared of me?” he asked seriously.

I blinked. “N-No... I’m not scared.”

Holmes sighed, seeming slightly relieved. He cast his eyes down and asked quietly, “I-In that case, uh... Do you dislike me or something?” His voice was so quiet that I almost didn’t hear it over the jazz music playing in the background.

“Huh?”

“If the slightest touch makes you uncomfortable...then I’ll be more careful about it,” he said, not making eye contact with me.

I gaped in surprise. Whenever our hands or shoulders touched unexpectedly, I quickly distanced myself out of embarrassment. I didn't think he'd interpret it *that way. How could I possibly dislike him? Why would such a perceptive person come to that conclusion? Is it because I tried so hard to draw a line between us? Did that give off a bad impression?*

"N-No, of course I don't dislike you. It's the opposite, actually. I like you—and the manager and the owner—a lot. I love Kura, and I truly respect you," I said firmly.

Holmes looked conflicted. I couldn't tell from his expression whether he was relieved or sad. "That's...good to hear," he said weakly.

*Maybe he doesn't believe me.* "I-I'm telling the truth. Touching hands doesn't make me uncomfortable at all—I just pull back out of surprise. H-Here, let's shake hands." I held out my right hand.

Holmes's eyes widened. He gently took my hand. Even though it was about as loose as a handshake could get, my heart was racing.

"S-See? I don't mind touching your hand," I said. I was about to let go, when the corners of Holmes's mouth curved up ever so slightly and he squeezed my hand firmly. This time, my heart leapt.

"Yes, I'm glad. I was afraid that you might even hate me," he said, not letting go of my hand.

"What? I could never..." Even though it was just a handshake, the way he gazed at me while holding my hand made my cheeks flush. I inadvertently looked down.

"Yes, I finally understand that you don't hate me."

"F-Finally?"

"...Your hands are small, aren't they?"

"N-No, they're normal. It's your hands that are big."

"Really?"

"Yeah, your fingers are really long." I stared at his hand which was still holding mine. His large, pale, slightly bony hand with long fingers.

*Um... What now? What exactly is this situation we're in?*

Then the door chime rang. Surprised, I turned to the door and saw the manager there. His eyes widened when he saw us mid-handshake.

"Are you reconciling? Did something happen?" he asked, tilting his head.

"Yes, well, something like that," Holmes said curtly, slowly letting go of my hand. "Oh right, Ueda was here just now."

"I know," the manager said, nodding. "I passed by him on the street and we had a little chat. He seems to be doing well as usual."

"Indeed. Would you like coffee?"

"No, I'm fine. I was at a cafe before I came here." The manager hung up his coat and sat down in his usual seat at the end of the counter.

Feeling awkward, I quickly grabbed the feather duster and began cleaning.

"Oh right, Aoi," Holmes said, interrupting me. "The handshake reminded me..." He opened the drawer behind the counter.

"Huh?"

"These are for you." He took out a brand-new pair of white gloves, still in their plastic packaging. "They're appraisal gloves for women. The non-slip material makes them easy to use. Feel free to have them, if you'd like."

"W-Wow! Thank you very much." I did have gloves, but they weren't formal appraisal gloves. I'd secretly wanted these, so I was really happy. "I'm so happy. I'll make sure to use them with care." I accepted the gloves and held them tightly in my hands.

"Yes, please do."

"Good for you, Aoi," the manager said. But unlike us, he wasn't smiling. He seemed restless and fidgety. *I wonder what's wrong?*

"Is something the matter, Dad?" Holmes asked gently. He'd immediately noticed the manager's behavior too.

"Oh, er, well..." The manager averted his gaze.

Holmes sat down across from him and looked him in the eye. "Do you have

something to tell me?”

“Y-Yes... Kiyotaka, do you know the writer named Kurisu Aigasa?” the manager began reluctantly. Apparently his restlessness was because he had something to say to Holmes and was trying to find the right time.

“I know the name, yes.”

I sat down next to Holmes and nodded too. Kurisu Aigasa is a woman who writes occult mysteries. She’s one of the most popular writers in her light novel label, and her works have received anime adaptations too. She’s also popular as a personality because she’s very young and wears flashy makeup and is famous for wearing Gothic Lolita fashion while writing. There are a lot of fans of Kurisu Aigasa herself, not just her works.

“Well, her previous editor is the one currently assigned to me,” the manager continued.

“Oh?” we replied. *I guess in a large publishing company, it’s possible for an editor to be transferred from the light novel division to the historical novel division.*

“Apparently Aigasa is going to be holding a reading of her work, and I was asked to invite you, Kiyotaka.” The manager looked at Holmes with pleading eyes.

“Why me?”

“She’s originally from Kanto, but now she lives in Kyoto. It seems that she heard the rumors about you from somewhere. A beautiful young detective with the grace of a weeping cherry tree, nicknamed the ‘Holmes of Kyoto’...”

Holmes fell to the counter and said, “I’m begging you—can you *please* dispel these rumors?”

“Don’t worry—everyone’s well aware that the rumors are exaggerated. Anyway, could you attend the reading? You can bring Aoi too. Maybe you can solve the misunderstanding while you’re there,” the manager said impatiently. He must’ve told his editor that Holmes would go.

“When and where is it?”

“It’s on the night of Valentine’s Day, at the Yoshida-Sanso Inn. Sorry, I know it’s a special day for you.”

“Hm?” I furrowed my brow. *What does he mean by that? Is Valentine’s Day a special day for Holmes? Or does he mean that it’s special for all young men? Come to think of it...it’s almost Valentine’s Day. I do want to give Holmes chocolate for everything he’s done for me. But would he misunderstand if I gave him Valentine’s chocolate? I’ll have to prepare it in a way where he won’t think it’s romantic. What kind of chocolate would make my intent obvious?*

As I was racking my brain, Holmes abruptly sat back up and said, “Yoshida-Sanso Inn? That’s not a bad idea.” There was a glimmer in his eyes. He must’ve found the location appealing.

“Umm, is that a nice place?” I asked quietly.

Holmes nodded. “Yes. The Yoshida-Sanso Inn is located halfway up Mount Yoshida. It was originally built in the early Showa era as the second home of Emperor Showa’s brother-in-law, Higashi-Fushimi no Miya. After World War II, it became a traditional inn with a focus on cuisine, and sometimes events such as recitals are held there. It’s a magnificent mountain retreat,” he explained passionately. “Aigasa must have good taste.”

“I see... If it’s on Mount Yoshida, does that mean it’s near Kyoto U, by Yoshida Shrine?”

“Yes, it’s east of there. If you go east on Imadegawa Street then south for a while on Kaguraoka Street, you’ll see it on the right.”

“It’s near the Philosopher’s Walk too,” the manager continued.

I nodded in vague understanding. I’d been exploring Kyoto on my bike since moving here, but there were still a lot of streets and places that I didn’t know.

“Aoi, will you come to the reading with me? I’d love for you to experience Yoshida-Sanso’s brilliance too,” Holmes said, now fully eager to go.

I giggled. If the manager had mentioned Yoshida-Sanso from the start, Holmes wouldn’t have complained. It was kind of cute how moody and straightforward Holmes could be.

“Sure, I’d love to.” I nodded.

The manager put his hand on his chest, relieved.

## 2

Then it was Valentine’s Day. The reading was to begin at 6 p.m., with doors opening thirty minutes beforehand. Holmes and I left the store early and headed to Mount Yoshida by car.

“The invitations are in this envelope that the manager gave us as we were leaving, right? Can I check them?” I rummaged through my bag and took out the white, Western-style envelope.

“Yes, please do.”

“Okay.” I carefully opened the envelope and saw the title on the invitation: *Valentine’s Night Soiree at Yoshida-Sanso’s Shinkokan: Kurisu Aigasa’s Storytelling of the Soul.*

“What’s ‘Shinkokan’?” I asked.

“Ah, the reading isn’t being held at the inn itself, but at Shinkokan, which has its own charm. Shinkokan is the name of the cafe on Yoshida-Sanso Inn’s premises. It’s retained its original outer appearance from when it was built for Higashi-Fushimi no Miya. It’s like a small, Western-style hideaway. Personally, it’s one of my top five recommended cafes. That said, I haven’t been there in quite some time, so I’m thrilled to have this opportunity,” Holmes explained cheerfully as he drove.

“I-It’s one of your top five cafes?” I asked. Holmes was a cafe enthusiast who made it his mission to visit every cafe in Kyoto. *This must be a really amazing cafe if it made his top five.*

“Yes, but it’s ultimately a matter of personal taste,” he reminded me.

“I know. What are the other four cafes?” I asked, leaning in a bit.

“The...other four?” he murmured. He furrowed his brow and went silent for some time. “Sorry, I have too many favorites. I can’t decide right now. You’ll have to give me some time.”

I giggled at how much thought he put into it. “But Yoshida-Sanso’s Shinkokan is definitely in the top five, right?”

“Yes. The outer appearance, interior decoration, atmosphere, and view from the window are all to my preference.”

“Not the taste of the coffee?”

“Yoshida-Sanso’s coffee is delicious, of course. But what I look for in a cafe is the ambience. What matters is how comfortable it is to spend time in that space. If the coffee was all that mattered, I can make it at home however I want.”

“Oh, you have a point.” *That must be Holmes’s cafe philosophy.*

After exiting the underground parking garage onto Oike Street, we immediately turned north on Kawabata Street. “Kawabata” means “riverbank,” and as the name implies, it runs along the east side of the Kamo River. When you look out at the river, you can see cherry blossoms in the spring and colorful foliage in the fall. It’s great for walks and cycling too.

“Kawabata Street is nice, right?” I said, looking out the window. “I like riding my bike here, and sometimes when I’m going to Kura from my house, I’ll take a detour to go down this street.”

“Yes, it’s great because you can see the river and the trees. Oh right, Kawabata Street used to be a railroad. It only went as far as Sanjo, though.”

“Huh? It was?”

“Yes, but it was before I was born. Apparently the Keihan Line ran through here until the first year of the Heisei period. Due to construction work, the railroad was moved underground.”

“That’s too bad. A train running next to the river would’ve made for nice scenery.”

“It would, but at the same time, it’s much more convenient to have a road here.”

“I see.” I nodded.

When we reached Marutamachi Street, Holmes turned east onto it.

“You’re not turning on Imadegawa Street?” I asked.

“It’s faster to turn onto Marutamachi Street, then go north for a bit on Yoshida East Street, then turn east onto one of the small roads.”

“I see...” *That’s a local for you.*

Holmes impressively weaved his way through the narrow roads, not relying on a GPS. Before long, I saw Yoshida-Sanso Inn’s entrance. It had a temple-like gate with a black sign that said “Yoshida-Sanso” in white letters. We drove through the gate and headed up a gentle slope. The staff in the garden gave us parking instructions, which we followed. After getting out of the car, we found ourselves in front of the Yoshida-Sanso Inn, which stood in the middle of a delicately arranged garden.

“Wow,” I murmured. It wasn’t flashy, but it was an elegant Japanese-style manor with a calm air. It was exactly what you’d expect an imperial villa to look like. “This is amazing. I can feel the history behind it.”

“Indeed. This mountain retreat was built in the seventh year of the Showa period, and apparently it’s built entirely out of Japanese cypress. It has a warm elegance.”

“Yes, and it feels kind of nostalgic. It really has that early Showa feel, unlike buildings from the Meiji and Taisho eras. It feels like something you’d see in one of Seishi Yokomizo’s novels...” I murmured, staring at the inn. Seishi Yokomizo was a famous author who wrote historical detective novels.

“Indeed,” Holmes said with a chuckle. “It does seem like the kind of old home that Kosuke Kindaichi would get called to.” Kosuke Kindaichi was the private detective character that featured in many of Yokomizo’s works.

“Yes, I can just imagine him walking out, scratching his head. Oh, and a beautiful landlady, too.”

“And an old woman muttering creepy things to herself, right?”

“Yeah, a slightly scary old woman!”

“Sometimes she comes in a pair.”

We looked at each other and laughed.

“Anyway,” Holmes said, turning around. “This is Shinkokan.”

The cafe was located right next to the inn. It was a small Western-style house, but it wasn’t the showy kind of Western architecture—it was a simple, quiet wooden house that you might expect to find in the middle of a forest.

“This one kind of seems like it’d be in one of Kenji Miyazawa’s works,” I said. Kenji Miyazawa was a children’s author. “I imagined the Wildcat House to look something like this.”

“I see.” Holmes folded his arms. “*The Restaurant of Many Orders*, right?”

“Yes. It’s nostalgic, right? I read it in elementary school.” Two men got lost in a forest and came across a restaurant called the Wildcat House. When they went in, they were presented with a variety of orders, and in the end, it turned out that it wasn’t a restaurant where you can eat food—it was a restaurant where you get eaten *as* food. It was a bit of a scary fantasy story.

“I remember the line that said, ‘Please spread the cream in the jar all over your face, hands, and feet.’ It’s a scary story from the perspective of the prey, but when you read it from the predator’s point of view, it’s rather thrilling, right?” He looked at me.

My face stiffened. “N-Normally you wouldn’t read it from the predator’s point of view.”

“My bad,” he said with a laugh. He then looked at the building. In front of it was a standing signboard that said, “Valentine’s Night Soiree at Yoshida-Sanso’s Shinkokan: Kurisu Aigasa’s Storytelling of the Soul.” On the door was a sign that said “Opening Soon.”

“They’re not open yet. I suppose we arrived too early.”

“Yeah.” *There’s only fifteen minutes left though, so I’m sure they’ll open soon.* I looked at the signboard again and suddenly remembered: “O-Oh right, since it’s Valentine’s Day, I brought chocolate for you, if you’d like.” I took the wrapped package out of my bag before I could forget, and handed it to Holmes.

“Huh? For me?” His eyes widened in apparent surprise.

“Yes, as thanks for all you’ve done for me.”

The clear wrapping revealed the chocolate inside, which was in the shape of Sherlock Holmes’s side profile, pipe in mouth. There were also the words, “Thank you for everything.”

“Sherlock Holmes chocolate, huh?” Holmes said cheerfully.

“Yes, since you’re the ‘Holmes of Kyoto,’ after all.”

“Thank you very much. I love Sherlock Holmes, so this is great,” he continued.

“Huh?” I quickly looked up at him. “You...like Sherlock Holmes?”

“Yes, I’m a big fan.”

“B-But then, how come whenever someone calls you Holmes, you say it’s because your surname is Yagashira?”

“It’s because I’m a fan of Holmes. It’s an honor to be called that, but at the same time, I don’t feel worthy. You wouldn’t be happy for long if people kept calling you the ‘Irene of Shimogamo,’ right?” He was referring to Irene Adler, the character from *Sherlock Holmes*. She was a stunning and incredibly brilliant woman.

“No...but there’s no way anyone would call me that in the first place. That example makes no sense,” I said, frowning.

“Setting that aside, do you remember when we first met Akihito? He was clearly upset that I was called Holmes, right? I know that feeling very well.”

“I see, so that’s what it was.” It was because Holmes was a Sherlock fan himself that he used that surname excuse.

Holmes looked down at the chocolate again and smiled. “Really, thank you. It’s a wonderful birthday present too.”

“Birthday...?”

“Yes. Today, February 14th—Valentine’s Day—is my birthday.”

“Wh-Whaaat?!” I exclaimed in a high-pitched tone, shocked by the unexpected news.

“There’s no need to be that surprised.”

“O-Of course I’m surprised! I had no idea!” *So that’s why the manager said it was a special day for him. I never thought it’d be his birthday.*

“I never told you, so it’s only natural that you wouldn’t know.”

“I-If you told me, I would’ve gotten you a present!”

“You did give me a present. Thank you again.” He held up the wrapped chocolate with a childish grin.

“N-No, that’s *Valentine’s* chocolate. I would’ve wanted to get you a proper birthday present too.”

“It’s the thought that counts. Just knowing that makes me happy enough.”

“No, I’ll get you something at a later date. But honestly, I have no idea what would be good, so it might end up being something trivial again, like the homemade cookies I gave you for Christmas.”

“They weren’t trivial!” he exclaimed angrily.

My eyes widened in surprise.

“Er, I mean, I was very happy to receive those cookies. I ate them slowly day by day because I didn’t want to waste them... They were delicious.” He quickly averted his gaze.

“Th-Thanks.” My heart was pounding with joy. I didn’t know he was that happy about them. “S-So does that mean you’re twenty-three now?”

“Yes, I am.”

“Congratulations. You’re even more of an adult now, huh?”

“Thank you... Yes, I really am.” A sour expression rose to his face. I tilted my head, confused as to why he would make that face. Then, Holmes looked over at a minibus that had entered the inn’s premises. “The other guests are here, and the door is open now. Shall we go in?”

“Oh, sure.”

I glanced at the bus as I walked towards the door. Several men and women were getting off. The cold February wind led me to look up at the sky, which was gradually being taken over by the sunset—orange in the west and indigo in

the east. The pale moon which hung over the trees, mountain inn, and Western house was breathtakingly beautiful. It was a fantastical scene, like something from another world.

It was almost as if it was hinting at what was about to happen at the reading.

### 3

“Welcome! It’s good to see you.”

The reception desk for the event was right by the entrance. The staff member working there was a young woman in her late teens or early twenties—probably a student. Like Kurisu Aigasa, she wore a Gothic Lolita outfit... Well, it was a dark red retro-modern dress that reminded me more of the Taisho period. It would’ve seemed out of place anywhere else, but it actually fit quite well with this old-fashioned Western house.

“May I see your ticket or invitation?” she asked with a smile.

I hurriedly took out the white envelope the manager gave us and handed it directly to her.

“Thank you.” She checked the contents and said, “Mr. Yagashira, right? We’ve been waiting for you. Please go up to the second floor.” She pointed at a staircase near the entrance.

We bowed and went to the stairs. As we were going up, I noticed the next guest in line paying an entrance fee. Apparently invited guests didn’t have to pay, but everyone else did.

At the top of the stairs was the second-floor cafe area.

“It’s so nice...” I murmured in admiration. I could just imagine the way footsteps would echo from the dark brown wooden floor. There were five wooden tables in a brighter color, all of which were decorated with bright red roses. The wooden window frames were the same color as the floor and contrasted beautifully with the white walls. There was a small chandelier on the ceiling and antique lantern-like lights by the windows. A single blood-red velvet armchair stood by itself. *That’s probably where the storyteller will sit.* Quiet cello music was playing in the background. The scent of roses in this nostalgic

setting was making me dizzy—it was a mysterious feeling, as if I really had wandered into another world.

“Is something wrong?” Holmes asked, bringing me back to my senses.

I looked up at him and said, “Oh, it’s nothing,” choosing not to tell him about my fantasy thoughts. He didn’t look out of place at all here, which made me smile. *Come to think of it, the first time I visited Kura, I also thought it was like another world.*

“This is my first time at an event like this,” I continued. “Is the author herself going to be reading?”

Holmes shook his head. “No, I think it’ll be a professional. For an author, there’s probably no greater nightmare than reading their own story in front of other people.”

“Wait, really?”

“My father hates it if you so much as open one of his books in front of him.”

“H-Huh, I see.” *That’s pretty characteristic of him, though.*

“So, sometimes I say, ‘This line is very well written,’ and read it out loud to him. He turns bright red and immediately runs away somewhere,” Holmes said with a chuckle.

My face stiffened. *I guess his father is subject to his wickedness too. Hang in there, Manager.*

As we were talking, the other guests noisily made their way upstairs. There was a man in his early thirties, two women in their early twenties, and then two men who seemed to be the women’s companions. Lastly came a man in his forties wearing a wrinkled suit who seemed like he didn’t want to be there.

*That’s six people so far... Including us, eight. This place isn’t very big. Judging from the number of tables, this might be everyone?* It was a very small-scale event considering how famous the author was. *More importantly, I thought that Kurisu Aigasa’s fans would be younger than this...*

As if reading my mind, Holmes swiftly showed me his phone screen and said, “I checked Aigasa’s official website, and it doesn’t say anything about this

event.”

I looked at the screen which was open to her homepage. It had a black background with red roses, and the only major piece of news was an apology for the delay of her upcoming book.

“This might be a trial run for friends and family before the official readings begin.”

“Oh, I see.” That would explain the small scale and the age range of the guests.

“Since we were coming here, I read a few of Aigasa’s works beforehand,” Holmes continued.

“I did too,” I said, nodding. “But I only read one, because I’m not good with that kind of brutal, occult mystery,” I confessed, shrinking back.

“I thought they’d be lighter since they were written while wearing Gothic Lolita fashion, but it’s not good to have preconceptions. The stories instill terror and the ruthless plot developments don’t betray your expectations. Most of all, I was surprised by the well-crafted tricks and the elaborate composition. It reminded me of the English writer who was crowned the ‘Queen of Mystery.’ I can understand why she has such devout fans.”

“Yes. It’s not my thing, but I think there are a lot of people who like that kind of world.”

“Aigasa was in animation school when she won an honorable mention from a publisher’s monthly rookie contest. That was apparently what led to her debut. It was a very small-scale award—the prize was only one hundred thousand yen.”

“Wow, really?” It was an unbelievably modest debut considering her current success.

“Yes. No one had expected much from her at the time, but when her winning work was published in a magazine, it was quite well received. The publisher released a revised version in book form and it sold incredibly well. She became a popular author in the blink of an eye.”

“That’s an amazing success story,” I said, impressed.

A man in his early thirties perked up when he saw Holmes and walked over to us. “Are you Ijuin’s son, by any chance?” he asked.

We turned to face him.

“Sorry, I should introduce myself first,” he continued. “I’m his editor, Hashimoto. I was assigned to Aigasa before, but now I’m assigned to him.” He smiled and held out his business card. The man was tall and had innocent, unassuming features. He seemed like he’d be popular with women. He was also dressed more like a television producer than an editor at a publishing company.

“Thank you for working with my father. My name is Kiyotaka Yagashira. I’m a student, but I also help with my grandfather’s store.” Holmes took his Kura business card out of his breast pocket and exchanged it with Hashimoto’s.

“I’m sorry for making you come out here. Aigasa heard the rumors about you and insisted that you come today. You’re as handsome as the rumors say.” Hashimoto folded his arms and nodded. Then he looked at me and said, “Is this young lady your...?”

“N-No, I’m a part-timer at Kura. My name is Aoi Mashiro.” I hurriedly introduced myself and bowed.

“Are you in high school, Aoi?”

“Yes.”

“That’s nice... A real high school girl, huh?” He looked pleased.

Holmes quickly walked in front of me and said, “You seem to be married, Hashimoto. Are you here by yourself today?” He made it clear that he was looking down at the ring on Hashimoto’s left ring finger.

“Yes,” Hashimoto said, nodding. “My partner got pregnant. That’s also why I’m by myself today.” He slumped his shoulders. Judging by his face when he said his partner got pregnant, I could tell that he hadn’t wanted to marry her yet. Seeing him make that face, I felt bad for his wife. *His feelings might change after their child is born, though...*

As I was feeling conflicted, the staff came in with trays of black tea, coffee,

jasmine tea, juice, sandwiches, scones, and sweets. There was a lot of chocolate, perhaps because it was Valentine's Day.

"What would you like to drink?" the staff asked each of us one by one, pouring our drinks.

"Is there anything alcoholic?" someone asked.

"Please listen to the reading first. Alcohol will be available afterwards."

"Oh. I'll have black tea, then."

Holmes and I both ordered coffee.

"Have you gotten used to drinking it black?" Holmes asked, peering into my face.

"A little bit," I said, nodding bashfully. "It's finally started to taste good."

"Oh, you've recently gotten accustomed to black coffee, Aoi?" Hashimoto asked cheerfully, having overheard our conversation.

"Yes." I nodded.

The two women looked at us curiously.

"Who are they, Hashimoto?" one of them said.

"Do you know them?" said the other.

Hashimoto nodded. "This is Kiyotaka Yagashira and Aoi Mashiro. Kiyotaka is Takeshi Ijuin's son," he said. Then he introduced the two women, saying, "Kiyotaka, these are Aigasa's friends from when she was in high school, Suzuka Ijima and Kumi Oishi. Since they're her best friends, they've helped me out before too."

Suzuka Ijima had a cheerful aura, while Kumi Oishi seemed calmer and perhaps shy. *Since they're Aigasa's high school friends, maybe this event really is for friends and family.*

"Oh, Ijuin's son?" Suzuka said excitedly. "I'm a big fan of him, and so is Maa. Hey, Maa, Ijuin's son is here!" She waved over a man who was chatting by one of the walls.

"Really?" asked the man, who was in his mid-twenties. His eyes lit up at the

mention of Takeshi Ijuin. “I love Ijuin’s stories—they’re messy but deep and beautiful. His historical novels are good, but I can’t get enough of the romance novels he writes from time to time. Oh, where are my manners? My name is Tadashi Oda.” He held out his business card as he excitedly introduced himself.

“Nice to meet you. My name is Kiyotaka Yagashira. I’m sure my father would be delighted to hear that. Thank you very much.” Holmes looked at the business card and said, “I see you’re a photographer.”

“Yes.” Oda nodded. “I’m only an assistant, though. My mentor photographed Aigasa before, and that’s how I met Suzuka. Aside from being a photographer’s assistant, I also do web design. I helped with Aigasa’s official website too. Oh, but you have no idea how happy I am to be able to meet Ijuin’s son. I love the payoff at the end of his stories.” He began talking passionately again.

The other man who was standing by the wall—the one in his early thirties—walked up to us, grinning. “The payoff at the end, huh? I hope you get your reward too, Oda. How many times have you proposed to Suzuka, and how many times has she put you on hold?” He placed his hand on Oda’s shoulder.

“Don’t say that, Kikuchi. Suzuka’s really busy with work. It’s not her fault.”

It turned out that the man, Kikuchi, was Oda’s mentor, a professional photographer. So far, all of the guests were connected to Kurisu Aigasa. Hashimoto was her editor, Suzuka and Kumi were her friends, Kikuchi had photographed her before, and Oda was Kikuchi’s assistant. The last person was the crude-looking man in his forties. *I wonder how he knows her? Could he be her husband or boyfriend?*

Just as I turned to peek at him, he clicked his tongue impatiently and said, “Ugh, how long is she gonna keep us waiting?”

“Um, excuse me, who are you?” Hashimoto asked, bewildered.

The man ruffled his hair and said, “I’m Komatsu. Private detective. I did two jobs for Kurisu Aigasa, and even though the work was done, she wasn’t satisfied with one of the results and didn’t pay the investigation fee. Wouldn’t pick up the phone either. Then she calls me out here to this *reading*. What the hell?” He clicked his tongue again, seemingly annoyed.

“Wh-What kind of investigations were they?” Hashimoto asked timidly.

Komatsu surveyed the room. His face twisted into a grin and he said, “Can’t tell you. Still have to protect the client’s confidentiality.”

The rest of us exchanged looks, bewildered.

## 4

An awkward atmosphere had settled in. Then, we heard the sound of footsteps coming up the stairs. The chandelier turned off, leaving only the wall lights illuminating the room. The receptionist who was wearing the dark red dress came in. Everyone suddenly went quiet.

“Thank you again for coming to Kurisu Aigasa’s reading today,” she began. “I am her younger sister, Kana Inoue. I will be performing the reading today. I hope you will enjoy it.” She bowed deeply and walked briskly towards the armchair. Then she turned around. She was wearing a deep crimson necklace—ruby, perhaps—that sparkled in the light. She hadn’t been wearing it when she was at the reception desk.

“Now then, I’d like to begin Kurisu Aigasa’s Storytelling of the Soul. Please take your seats.” She lifted the hem of her skirt and bowed gracefully.

Bewildered, we bowed back and sat down as instructed.

“That’s Rika’s sister, huh?” Suzuka said quietly. “I’ve never met her before. Have you, Kumi?”

Kumi silently shook her head.

Apparently Kurisu Aigasa’s real name was Rika.

“Ah, so that’s why...” Holmes murmured extremely quietly from beside me. He gave a profound chuckle and sipped his coffee.

“Huh?” I turned to look at him.

“Shhh,” he said, holding his index finger in front of his mouth.

Kana opened her book. *Looks like the reading is beginning.* I regained my composure and shifted my gaze to her. The book she was holding was large and

had an elaborate cover, like a historical tome from a foreign country. *I doubt Kurisu Aigasa released a book like that, so it's probably specially made for this event.*

Kana took a deep breath and began slowly, "On that day, I was killed." Her words startled me. Even though I knew she was reading from the book, it felt incredibly real. The story was about a budding actress who became a superstar but attracted a lot of jealousy and was murdered by someone.

"Perhaps the shock of death is why I can't remember anything about the day I died. They say that I tied a red ribbon around my neck, jumped from the railing at my home, and hung myself. I was still wearing my red shoes, and a suicide note with my own signature was left on the balcony. However, I did not commit suicide. Someone murdered me. The culprit is surely among the people gathered here..." Kana looked up at everyone.

*Is this part of the act?* I nervously looked around. Everyone had gone pale. *Huh? What happened?*

"Kana, don't you think this is in poor taste?" Hashimoto said, standing up. *What?*

"Y-Yeah! Aren't we celebrating Rika's recovery today?" Suzuka continued.

"Has Rika's condition changed?" Kumi asked.

*What's going on?* It wasn't just me that was confused—Komatsu's eyes were wide open too.

Kana stood up straight, crossed her arms, and stared at everyone with a frigid expression. "Since there are guests present who do not know of the circumstances, allow me to explain. My older sister, Rika Inoue, achieved success as the author 'Kurisū Aigasa.' However, one day, she suddenly attempted suicide. She was wearing her usual black dress and red shoes. A bright red ribbon was tied around her neck, and she hung herself from her apartment balcony. A typed suicide note was left on the balcony, at the end of which was her handwritten signature.

"But the knot must have been loose, for the ribbon came undone and she fell to the ground. The trees formed a cushion that saved her life, but she hit her

head and fell unconscious. When she finally awoke, she could not remember anything from that day. However, she declared, 'I would never commit suicide. Someone tried to murder me.'

"That day, the people who had visited her workplace were Suzuka, Kumi, and Hashimoto—her editor who she had been arguing with in private. Right before she fell, she had been on the phone with Kikuchi, and his assistant Oda would have been with him. Then there was Komatsu, the detective who said 'I'll kill you' to her over a job. In other words, one of the people here tried to murder my sister," Kana declared firmly.

We were all lost for words.

Komatsu slammed the table. "Wh-What? I only said that because she requested my services and didn't pay up. It was the spur of the moment! I wasn't serious!"

Hashimoto leaned forward next and said, "Yeah, and I was her editor. Sometimes I criticized her work, and we argued about it. Even if she jumped because of that, that doesn't mean I killed her, right?"

"Y-Yeah," Suzuka continued. "Kumi and I were jealous of her success, but we'd never kill her! When we visited her at work that day, she was acting strange, so we were worried and went to buy her favorite pudding for her. When we came back, we found her like that. It was us who panicked and called an ambulance, remember?!" she shouted, distressed.

"Yes, and it wouldn't benefit us to kill her," said Kumi, angrily crossing her arms.

The photographer, Kikuchi, shrugged his shoulders in exasperation and tried to laugh it off.

Oda was the only one who said nothing. His face was deathly pale.

"I don't think I should be suspected of attempted murder just because we talked about work over the phone," Kikuchi said. "If you're going to make that claim, Kana, tell us who tried to fake Kurisu Aigasa's suicide and how."

Kana smirked and looked at Holmes. "I am not capable of doing that, which is why I invited a famous detective here just for this occasion. Though he is a

detective, he is not like Komatsu. He is the astounding gentleman known as the 'Holmes of Kyoto,' who can read a person's mind simply by looking at them and can identify the culprit the moment he steps foot on the crime scene. Mr. Kiyotaka Yagashira, will you please take it upon yourself to solve this mystery? You shall be compensated handsomely."

I had no doubt that if we were at Kura, Holmes would've collapsed on the table in front of us and said, "Give me a break." But this was Shinkokan.

Holmes looked like he'd resigned himself to his fate—and a faint smile rose to his face.

## 5

Everyone's gazes settled on Holmes at once, and he seemed to slump his shoulders ever so slightly before quickly putting on another smile. "I understand," he said, placing his hand on his chest. "To be honest, this doesn't sit well with me, but since you requested me specifically, I'll give it my best effort."

I was surprised that he'd agree so readily. I was sure he'd say, "That's just an exaggerated rumor," or, "They only call me that because of my surname." Something was off. There was no way he was willing to go along with that unreasonable request. He probably wanted to go straight home. *Holmes accepting this without a fuss must mean that...*

"Holmes, are you going to give a lazy answer on purpose to ruin your reputation?" I whispered so that only he could hear.

Holmes's shoulders twitched, and he gave me a strained smile. "You figured it out?" he murmured.

I nodded. *I knew it!* "I-I know how you feel, but I don't think that's a good idea," I said quietly.

Holmes ran his hand through his hair listlessly. "You're...right. Since I accepted the job, I have to do it properly."

"Yes."

“Well done, Aoi. I can’t hide anything from you.”

“Th-That’s not true.”

The others exchanged looks and frowned suspiciously at our whispering. Suzuka crossed her arms impatiently and asked, “What are you discussing?”

“My apologies,” Holmes said, recomposing himself. “Er, I do have one condition for accepting your request.” He looked at Kana.

“Yes, I do intend to compensate you to the best of my ability,” she answered.

“No, I don’t need compensation. However, regardless of whether my guess is right or wrong, I’d like you to tell everyone, ‘The rumor about him being a great detective is a complete lie. He can’t deduce anything to save his life. He’s just an antiques nut.’”

I couldn’t help but smile at the “antiques nut” part, knowing it was because he wanted to maintain his pride as an appraiser. Meanwhile, everyone else was stunned by the unexpected request.

“Er, in other words, you’re telling me to say that the rumor was false no matter what?” Kana asked as if needing confirmation.

Holmes nodded firmly. “Yes.”

“Wh-Why’s that?” Hashimoto questioned, seeming genuinely confused. The others nodded too.

“I’m simply an appraiser in training. I have no interest in playing detective, so it’d be quite bothersome if this strange rumor spread further, leading to more cases like this,” Holmes said flatly.

Kana bowed in shame. “I-I’m very sorry.”

“So I’ll be counting on you, okay?” Holmes smiled.

Kana nodded and said, “Y-Yes, I understand.”

Kikuchi snorted. “If you guess wrong, rumors that you were a birdbrain all along will spread either way,” he said mockingly.

I felt offended, but Holmes smiled calmly and said, “Yes, that was my original goal. Now then...” He got up and walked up to Kana, his leather shoes tapping

loudly against the old wooden floor. He stood beside her and turned to face us. “Despite the rumors, I am indeed a ‘birdbrain,’ so I can’t identify the culprit simply by entering the crime scene. Right now, I still lack understanding of the situation. Therefore, I can only ask you all questions and give my opinion as a third party. Is that all right with you?”

Kana and the rest of the guests looked at each other and gave their assent in their own ways.

“Thank you. I’d like to question you individually now, but first, Kana, could you explain what happened on that day again?” Holmes looked into her eyes as if searching them.

Even from off to the side, I could tell that Kana gulped before nodding and saying, “It happened three months ago, on the second Saturday of the month. My sister was at the apartment where she works, and she jumped from the fifth-floor balcony with a large crimson ribbon around her neck. However, the ribbon came loose and she fell to the ground. Fortunately, the trees cushioned her fall, and her life was spared. She did hit her head, though, and she said that she cannot remember much from that day.” She clasped her hands in front of her chest.

“According to my father, Aigasa is originally from Kanto and now she lives in Kyoto. Did she move to Kyoto after her debut?”

Kana looked surprised at the unexpected question. “Ah, no. After she graduated from high school, she enrolled in a vocational school in Kyoto for animation and screenwriting.”

“I see, so she was in Kanto until high school. By the way, where do you live now, Kana?”

“Some time after my sister debuted as an author, she invited me to move to Kyoto. Right now I work part-time and help her with the housework and accounting.”

“Ah, so that’s why she has a separate apartment for work. My father is the same—he loves his family, but as an author, there are times when he wants to be alone.” Holmes nodded in understanding.

“Yes,” Kana said, seeming more relaxed.

“When did you find out about what happened to her?”

“When she was taken to the hospital, her editor, Hashimoto, called me... After that, there was the police questioning and whatnot.” She furrowed her brow. *It must’ve been tedious.*

“Did you find out that Suzuka and Kumi visited the apartment beforehand from the police?”

“Yes, I did. That was also how I found out that the photographer, Kikuchi, called her twice.”

“Twice...” Holmes folded his arms in thought.

Kikuchi shrugged. “After I hung up, I realized I forgot to tell her something. That’s all.”

“I’ll ask you in detail about this later, Kikuchi. Now, Kana, why did you decide to hold this reading?”

“After my sister regained consciousness, she said, ‘Don’t let the public know about this,’ and nothing else. That made me believe that she really did attempt suicide. But one day, she suddenly declared, ‘I would never commit suicide. Someone tried to kill me,’ and told me about this plan to expose the culprit.”

“Suzuka said that this reading is intended to celebrate Kurisu Aigasa’s recovery. Did you tell the other guests that too?”

“Yes.”

“Did you also tell them that Aigasa didn’t remember anything from that day?”

“...Yes.”

Holmes seemed like he was expecting that answer. He looked around at everyone.

*Oh, so that’s why no one seemed nervous. Assuming the culprit is one of these people, they can relax knowing that she doesn’t remember anything. Or maybe they weren’t sure whether she’d truly lost her memory and came here to find out. They’d have to find it strange that she’d hold this reading instead of telling*

*the police that someone tried to kill her.*

“Now then, I’d like to question each of you. I’ll start with Suzuka. Sorry, but could everyone besides Suzuka, Kana, and Aoi please wait on the first floor?”

The others all nodded and went downstairs. Only Holmes, Kana, Suzuka, and I were left on the second floor. Cello music was still playing in the background.

“Please sit here, Suzuka Ijima,” Holmes said, gesturing towards the armchair. He set down another chair facing it and sat down. “Oh, Aoi and Kana, feel free to sit wherever you like.”

I’d only just realized that we’d been standing the entire time. Kana and I quickly sat down in the closest chairs.

Suzuka looked a bit nervous, but she grinned at Holmes in amusement. “This is an interrogation, right? That’s kind of exciting.”

“It’s nothing that drastic. I’m just going to ask you a few questions,” Holmes said, smiling gently. “Suzuka, you were Aigasa’s... Perhaps I’ll call her ‘Rika’ for now. You were Rika’s friend since high school. Could you tell me what led to you becoming friends?” he asked in a calm tone.

“Hmm.” Suzuka looked up at the ceiling. “Kumi, Rika, and I are completely different. I’m the chatty type, and Kumi’s a genius. Rika was...a boring girl who didn’t stand out. We were in different classes too, so normally there’s no way we would’ve become friends. But well, we were on the library committee together for three years. When we became third-years, we suddenly felt way closer when we saw we were all on the committee again. We started talking a lot while doing our committee work, and all three of us liked reading.” She had a soft expression, as if reminiscing.

“Did your friendship continue after graduation?”

“No, we kind of fell apart for a while. Kumi went to a top university, and I went to a party school. Rika went to a vocational school in Kyoto.”

“Do you still live in Kanto?”

Suzuka shook her head. “I’m in Osaka now, since I got a job at a Kansai-based company after graduating from university. Kumi’s in Osaka too. Well, Kumi

originally worked at a bank in Tokyo, but she wasn't feeling it, so she quit right away and came to Kansai for a change of pace. Now she's just a normal office lady, and I work in the planning department at a travel agency," she prattled, going beyond the scope of the question. *I guess talking is in her nature.*

"I see. When did you start associating with Rika again?"

"Hmm, I think it was in my second year of university. Rika suddenly asked us if we could meet up sometime. Oh right, that was also when she said she was thinking of writing a story for a contest. We wished her luck. Then she actually won a prize, so we decided to celebrate and ended up being pretty close ever since."

"What did you think when Rika won the prize?"

"Hmm, I think I was just like, 'Oh, good for her.' I mean, honestly speaking, it was just a small honorable mention, right? The prize was only a hundred thousand yen. At the celebration party, Rika was like, 'I got the prize money, so I'll treat you,' but we were like, 'It's only a hundred thousand yen, so you should use it carefully' and split the bill instead," Suzuka said, giggling. Apparently she was happy for her friend's success at the time, and she wasn't particularly jealous.

"You seem to be in a relationship with Oda, the photographer's assistant. How did you meet him?"

"Oh, Maa? Since I work in planning at a travel agency, I needed some pictures taken. Rika said she knew a good photographer and introduced me to Kikuchi and Maa. Kikuchi's good at taking pictures, but he's kind of mean, so I didn't like him. And Maa's job title is 'photographer's assistant,' but he's really good at web design. He handles Rika's official site too—the design changes every month, and that's all him. Not just that, but he also comes up with original ideas. He gave me detailed advice when I asked for his opinion on my work project. I thought he was really nice and comfortable to be around."

"I see. What about Hashimoto, the editor?"

"I met him when I was hanging out at Rika's workplace. Rika's always had a crush on him, so I did want to see what kind of guy he was," Suzuka said with a suggestive look in her eyes.

*Rika had a crush on Hashimoto?* I was taken aback.

Meanwhile, Holmes simply said, “Ah, I thought so.”

“Oh, you noticed?” Suzuka pouted, seemingly disappointed at his lack of surprise.

“Yes. When Kana said that they’d been arguing in private, I thought it might’ve been because of Hashimoto’s marriage. I imagine that’s why he’s no longer her editor too.”

“Yep. It’s not his fault, though. They weren’t dating or anything—Rika had a one-sided crush and flipped out when he got married. She wasn’t accustomed to the ways of men at all,” Suzuka said with a sigh, placing her hand on her cheek.

Holmes didn’t respond to that and continued his questioning instead. “Why did you go to Rika’s workplace on the day of the incident?”

“It was because of the thing with Hashimoto. Rika was really upset, so Kumi and I were worried and went over to cheer her up. She was acting super weird, though. We were still worried after we left, so we went to the hotel that sold her favorite pudding and bought some for her. When we got back to her workplace, there was this big crowd outside, and we ran over to see what was going on and that’s when we saw Rika like that...” Suzuka said sorrowfully, looking down. “After we called for an ambulance, we called Hashimoto too.” She sighed.

“Why didn’t you contact Kana at that time?”

“We knew that Rika lived with her sister, but we didn’t know her phone number. We’d never met her either.”

“Understood. Thank you for your time. Could you wait on the first floor and ask Kumi to come up next?”

“Sure. I thought being interrogated would be scarier, but since I got to talk face-to-face with a cute guy, it was pretty fun.” She stood up, giggled, and went downstairs.

Once Suzuka was gone, Holmes took out his smartphone and opened Kurisu Aigasa's official website. He turned around and asked Kana, "In past images, there are glimpses of a brick house. Could it be that this is actually Aigasa's work apartment?"

"Yes, the photos were framed so that it would look like a mansion, but it's actually an apartment with a retro-modern brick design. It's also edited so that you wouldn't be able to tell if you saw the real building."

"This was the work of the photographer, Kikuchi, and the web designer, Oda, then." Holmes nodded, impressed.

We stopped our conversation at the sound of footsteps coming up the stairs.

"Can we make this quick?" Kumi said upon entering the room. She frowned at Holmes and ran her hand through her hair.

"Yes, I'd like to finish this as soon as possible too," Holmes said, standing up. "Please have a seat, Kumi Oishi." He put his hands on the back of the armchair.

Kumi grimaced and sat down without saying a word.

"I heard you were a genius," Holmes said.

Kumi looked up in surprise.

"That's what Suzuka said," he continued.

"Wait, she told you that? I'm really not. I was just above average in an average high school, that's all. Thanks to that, I had a hard time in university," she said bluntly, shrugging.

"You, Suzuka, and Rika seem to be quite different. How did you become friends?" He repeated what he'd already asked Suzuka. *It must be on purpose.*

"We were on the library committee. The three of us all liked mystery novels, and we talked about books and stuff. We'd criticize authors for being young and inexperienced." She smiled slightly, probably from recalling fond memories.

"That's when the three of you took up writing too, right?" Holmes asked matter-of-factly, throwing me off. Suzuka hadn't said anything about them writing too.

Kumi flinched and sighed lightly. “Suzuka told you about that?” She was probably mentally scolding her for blabbing too much. *But Suzuka didn’t actually say it—this is Holmes’s trap.*

“It was Rika who wrote,” she continued. “On days when she was off duty, she’d be sneakily writing something in the corner of the library. Suzuka and I wondered if it was a love letter, and when we peeked, it turned out to be a story. We nagged her to show us, and she was really embarrassed, but in the end, she couldn’t win against Suzuka’s pushiness. The story she showed us was seriously bad. It didn’t have a climax or a decent ending. I remember bashing it without mercy.”

“What about you and Suzuka? What did you write?”

“It wasn’t really writing... Since Rika was doing it, Suzuka said we should all give it a try, but it was hopeless. I was motivated at first since I liked coming up with tricks and stuff, but I got bored fast and didn’t make it to the end. Suzuka’s writing was terrible aside from the characters, and in the end, she couldn’t finish either... I guess I learned that finishing a story is hard, even if you suck and don’t have a climax or conclusion. In that sense, I really respect Rika,” she murmured with a faraway look, resting her chin in her hands.

From her words, I could tell that she really did learn how difficult it was to write a story and how amazing Rika was for accomplishing it.

After a moment of silence, Holmes asked quietly, “By the way, I know that you live in Osaka right now. Why did you move to Kansai? Was it because your best friends, Rika and Suzuka, were here?”

Kumi smiled self-deprecatingly. “Yeah. Some bad stuff happened in Tokyo, and it made me want to run away from my hometown like Rika did. It’s just that I was too scared to go somewhere where I didn’t know anyone at all.”

“‘Like Rika did,’ you say?”

“Yeah. You didn’t hear? Rika’s parents got divorced when she was in high school, and both of them remarried. Because of that, she didn’t belong anywhere anymore, and she also got bullied by her classmates. That’s why she went to a vocational school in Kyoto—she wanted to start over in a place where no one knew her.”

“I see...” Holmes murmured. He looked at Kana as if to ask, “Is that true?”

Kana quietly nodded with a pained look. “Yes, she’s right. I didn’t belong anywhere either, so right after my sister became successful, she invited me to live with her in Kyoto. She didn’t tell our parents that she became an author, and they still don’t know.”

“They don’t?” Holmes asked, taken aback. “But Kurisu Aigasa is quite famous now, right?”

I nodded. Even I knew what she looked like, and I wasn’t even a fan. Her relatives would’ve recognized her right away.

“My sister’s Gothic Lolita fashion isn’t just a hobby—it’s a disguise to hide that she’s Rika Inoue. The flashy makeup, colored contacts, eyepatches, and cosplay make her look completely different from before. No one who knew her past self would think that was her.” Kana smiled wryly and took her phone out of her pocket. She showed us a photo of Rika with natural makeup—an ordinary smiling woman with black hair and a bit of a babyface. She didn’t leave much of an impression. *Kana’s right. Her aura is completely different.*

“Really?” Holmes asked. “They’re clearly the same person to me...” Apparently his expert eyes could still perceive her characteristics. He didn’t seem to understand how her friends and family would be deceived by mere Gothic Lolita fashion and flashy makeup, but he brushed it off and looked back at Kumi. “Now then, could you tell me about the day of the incident?”

“Rika was in love with her editor, Hashimoto, but he had a shotgun wedding and that made her go crazy. Suzuka and I were worried and went to go see her. We cheered her up and left, but we couldn’t shake the feeling that something was wrong, so we decided to buy her favorite pudding from a hotel restaurant. When we went back to give it to her, there was a crowd of people outside. We ran over to see what was going on, and Rika was collapsed there with a ribbon attached to her,” Kumi explained quickly. Her testimony was the same as Suzuka’s.

Holmes had seemed intrigued while listening to Kumi’s story, placing his hand on his chin and smiling.

“What’s with that suggestive smile? Did Suzuka say something different?”

Kumi sneered, crossing her arms.

“No, her testimony was the same.” Holmes grinned. “Those are all of my questions for you. Would you please ask Kikuchi to come up next?” He stood up and offered Kumi his hand.

“I can stand up by myself. I’ve had enough of friendly good-looking guys.” She got up without taking his hand and walked away with a brisk stride.

Some time after she left, Kikuchi the photographer came. He seemed bored and tired, stretching his neck and shoulders as he wordlessly sat down in the chair. The faint smell of tobacco suggested that he’d been smoking outside. He got settled in and looked cynically at Holmes. “So?” he asked, clearly displeased.

Holmes smiled gently and said sympathetically, “It’s become quite a mess, huh?”

Kikuchi scratched his head, looking a bit thrown off. “Yeah.”

“I’d like to finish this as soon as possible. How did you meet Aigasa, Kikuchi?”

“How?” Kikuchi looked up. “Aigasa did a magazine interview when she released a book, and I was the assigned photographer. She really liked my work and started asking me to take photos for her website and for herself.”

“Back when that interview was done, was she wearing her current Gothic Lolita fashion style?”

“Yeah, at first it was gonna be a normal shoot, but she cried about how she didn’t want to be published in a magazine the way she was. My assistant, Oda, calmed her down and talked to her for a long time in another room. When they came out, she said, ‘I want to make the author ‘Kurisu Aigasa’ into a completely different character from my real self,’ and well, that’s how she got her current look. It ended up making a big impact too, and she gained a lot of fans. It must’ve helped that it matched the content of her books.”

“I see. Since you knew her real self, she felt comfortable requesting you for more work.”

“Yeah.”

“Did you also associate with her in a personal, non-business manner? For

example, going to restaurants together?”

“Nah, I’ve eaten and drank with her, but it was always for work, like after a photo shoot. Aigasa liked Oda, so she wanted to eat with us. Seems like she was pretty shocked when he started going out with her friend, Suzuka,” he scoffed.

“Huh?” I furrowed my brow. *She liked Oda, the assistant? But Suzuka and Kumi said that she liked her editor, Hashimoto...*

“Her picture on her official site seems to change every month,” Holmes continued. “Do you take all of those photos?”

“Yeah, her fans seem to look forward to the new pictures, so she puts a lot of effort into them.”

“I was looking at her past photos earlier, and they’re rather extreme, right? There was one where she was in a bloody bathtub, and others that implied she was cutting her wrists.”

“Yeah, she’s putting on that ‘yandere’ character. Causing a ruckus is part of the plan, apparently. She knows what she’s doing. Well, she’s pretty yandere herself. She’s happy as long as she gets a reaction, even if it’s an angry mob.”

“Was it her idea?”

“Uh huh. She worked with Oda every time to make the pictures relate to her new books.”

“Is that what you were talking to her on the phone about before the incident? A photo shoot?”

“Yeah, that’s the only reason I ever call her.”

“What was the second call about?”

“Like I said, after I hung up, I realized I forgot to ask her for the specific time, so I called back to ask.” Kikuchi clicked his tongue, annoyed.

“I understand. Thank you very much. Could you call Oda next?”

“Yeah.” Disgruntled, he stood up and yelled, “Oda, you’re next!” as he went downstairs.

I tilted my head as I mulled over what Kikuchi said. *What does this mean?*

*Who did Rika have a crush on? If Kikuchi was right and it was Oda, then it would've been a shock to see him start dating her best friend. But since it was only a crush, she wouldn't be able to say anything, and she wouldn't want her best friend to know that she liked him. Did she lie to her best friends because of that? She said she liked her editor, even though she really liked Oda? And then Suzuka and Kumi believed her. That seems really likely. If Rika didn't have a crush on her editor, then that raises questions about Suzuka and Kumi's testimony...*

As I was thinking, Oda timidly entered the room and said, "H-Hello." He seemed to be nervous, sweating even though it wasn't hot.

"Sorry for taking up your time," Holmes said, quickly standing up. "Please take a seat." He smiled warmly and pointed at the chair.

"O-Okay." Oda awkwardly sat down, his eyes darting around restlessly.

"I'd like to ask about Aigasa's photo shoots," Holmes said.

Oda immediately looked up at him. "H-Her shoots?"

"Yes." Holmes stared at Oda.

Oda gulped and asked in a strained voice, "What about them?"

Holmes placed his hand on his chin and smiled ever so slightly. "Tell me about the day you first worked with her."

"O-Oh, that day?" Oda took out a handkerchief from his pocket and wiped away the sweat on his forehead.

"I heard that Aigasa cried and said that she didn't want to be published in a magazine the way she was. Then you calmed her down and had a long talk with her in another room..."

"Yes. That brings back memories." Oda seemed to relax after hearing that.

"What did you talk about in the other room?"

"Uhh, Aigasa was panicking, so I talked about anime to calm her down. Oh yeah, since she had an anime character keychain, I said, 'I like that anime too.'"

Holmes nodded silently, prompting Oda to continue.

“She gradually opened up more from there. Then I suggested, ‘What if you make up a fictional character too? Something so crazy that no one will know it’s you.’ We discussed what kind of character it should be, and since I can draw, I drew suggestions in my notebook, and we came up with her current style by combining her tastes with her writing style.”

“From what I can tell, the photos published in that interview astonished the world.”

“Yes, I was glad too.” Oda gave a childlike, carefree smile.

“Right now, you’re dating Aigasa’s friend, Suzuka, if I’m not mistaken.”

Oda blushed at the change of subject. “Yes, I am. I fell in love with her at first sight. She’s brilliant.”

“I see. Did you enthusiastically pursue her?”

“No, I couldn’t, because I didn’t think she’d go out with someone like me. But then she said, ‘Oda, you like me, right?’ At first I thought she was teasing me, but then she went to a restaurant with me...and...” He started sweating again out of embarrassment.

Like he said, Suzuka wasn’t especially beautiful, but she had a bright aura. She was the type of person who’d stand out the most in class. Rika seemed to be more of the quiet type, and Oda was probably the same. *Maybe he admired people like Suzuka who stood out.*

“On the day of the incident, Kikuchi was on the phone with Aigasa. Were you with him?”

“O-Oh, yes, I think I was. I don’t really remember, but I’m with him all the time, so...” Oda answered, not making eye contact.

“Kikuchi called her twice. Do you know why?”

“I think he forgot to ask her what time the photo shoot was. He was confirming it with her.”

“I see.” Holmes smiled cheerfully. “That’s all for now. Thank you very much. Could you call up the editor, Hashimoto, next?”

Relieved, Oda put his hand on his chest and said, “Okay.” He stood up and

turned to leave.

“Oh, one more thing,” Holmes said, stopping him.

Oda turned around with a stiff expression. “Wh-What is it?”

“Kikuchi said that Aigasa had a crush on you. What do you think?” Holmes asked boldly.

Oda gaped. “What? Aigasa? Me? No way. I heard that she liked Hashimoto,” he said sincerely.

Holmes nodded firmly. “Understood. Thank you.”

Oda bowed, looking bewildered, and left the second floor. Once he was gone, Holmes murmured, “Did Aigasa love Oda or Hashimoto? What do you think about these conflicting opinions, Kana?”

Kana flinched at the sudden question and looked up. She said hesitantly, “I think she trusted Oda as a good partner, but the one she loved was Hashimoto.”

“Did she ever talk to you about it?”

“My sister is very shy, so she doesn’t like talking about love. Even when I ask, ‘Doesn’t anyone catch your eye?’ she blushes and tells me to stop.”

“I see.”

Then Hashimoto, the editor, came in. “Hello,” he greeted us. He sat down across from Holmes and immediately put his hands together and bowed. “I’m sorry it ended up like this, Kiyotaka.”

“No, don’t be.”

“I don’t know what to say,” Hashimoto murmured with a sigh.

“Hashimoto, were you assigned to Aigasa ever since her debut?” Holmes asked, immediately getting to the topic at hand.

Hashimoto pulled himself together and adjusted his sitting position. “Yes.”

“Was it the editorial department’s decision?”

“No, in our light novel department’s contests, the editors have a large say in

the judging process. We cast votes on the authors we want to work with, and if you really want to be their editor, then you can. It's because of the belief that a story needs an editor who truly sees merit in it in order to produce a good product."

"I see. So it directly affects your standing if the author becomes popular, right?" Holmes asked, immediately guessing the true state of affairs.

Hashimoto nodded hesitantly.

"Why were you removed as Aigasa's editor?"

"Well," Hashimoto began. "Wait, no." He scratched his head. "You're Ijuin's son, so I can't lie—you'd find out right away by asking him. Apparently she didn't like my sudden marriage. She got pretty hysterical, and it became a company-wide problem. There wasn't any way to fix our relationship."

"She was in love with you?"

"Seems so. Personally, I thought she liked Oda. She went into a similar frenzy when Oda started dating her friend, Suzuka. She said she couldn't write, and it was hard to calm her down."

"As I thought." Holmes nodded. "Aigasa was originally in love with Oda, and her heart was broken when he started dating Suzuka. However, since you tried so hard to console her in her time of despair, her feelings of love shifted to you." He looked straight into Hashimoto's eyes.

Hashimoto shrugged weakly.

"You realized how she felt, right?"

"Vaguely, I guess. I pretended not to notice, though."

"I would've done the same in your situation," Holmes said quietly.

Hashimoto looked relieved.

"So, since your relationship with the light novel department's biggest earner was destroyed, you transferred to the historical novel department and became my father's editor."

"Yeah. I'm only a secondary editor, though. Ijuin's main editor is the editor-in-

chief of the historical novel department. Since the chief's busy, I run errands for him."

"Oh, I see. In that case, was the previous editor who often visited my father also a secondary editor?"

"Yeah, he switched with me, and now he's in the light novel department." Hashimoto grinned, but I could tell that it wasn't genuine.

"You were a candidate for the next editor-in-chief of the light novel department, right? What a shame," Holmes said sympathetically.

Hashimoto nodded and then looked up in surprise. "Wait, but that doesn't mean I'm the culprit. I was at work when it happened in the first place. Even if she jumped because I got married, that doesn't make me a *suspect*, right?" he said, flustered.

"Of course it doesn't." Holmes nodded firmly. "It must've been problematic though, I'm sure."

"Yes, she went out of control. I had no idea what to do."

"You asked Suzuka and Kumi for help, right?" Holmes asked smoothly.

Hashimoto's eyes widened as if he'd been caught off guard. "H-How did you...?"

"You yourself said, 'Since they're her best friends, they've helped me out before too.' This is the only situation I can imagine where you'd ask an author's friends for help."

"O-Oh, I did say that. Yeah, I did exchange business cards with them before at the office, so I asked them for advice. I thought they'd help me make amends with Aigasa, but it wasn't possible."

"I see. That's all I had to ask you. Could you call Komatsu up next? He's the last person."

Right after Holmes said that, Suzuka came running up the stairs. "We've got a problem! Komatsu said, 'I'm not sticking around any longer' and left!" She pointed at the window.

I looked outside and saw Komatsu quickly walking away from the cafe. "H-He

really is leaving!”

Holmes swiftly ran downstairs to chase him.

“Wh-Whoa, he’s fast!” I exclaimed, hurriedly running after Holmes. When I arrived outside, Komatsu was straddling his motorcycle and Holmes was grabbing Komatsu by the wrist.

“Let go or you’ll get hurt.” Komatsu tried to shake off Holmes’s hand while sandwiching his helmet under his right arm.

“I only have one question for you,” Holmes said. “You can leave if you answer this one question.”

“What? Look, I’m not gonna tell you what Kurisu Aigasa asked me to do.”

“You don’t have to tell me anything, either. But please look at me.” Holmes stared intently at Komatsu.

Komatsu clicked his tongue in annoyance and looked Holmes in the eye.

“You did two jobs for Aigasa, and both of them involved the people here today, right?” Holmes asked in a confident tone.

Komatsu said nothing. His expression didn’t change either.

“And the jobs were all background checks, right?” Holmes continued.

Komatsu flinched.

“Three targets in total. The first job had two, and the second job had one.” Holmes smirked.

Komatsu’s eyes widened. “Y-You really can read minds,” he squeaked, shoving Holmes’s arm away with all his might, starting the engine, and zooming away from the Yoshida-Sanso Inn.

I smiled wryly as I watched him speed off, thinking, *Komatsu, that’s the same as admitting the truth.*

Kana gasped and ran up to us. “Y-Yagashira, did you let him get away?”

“R-Right, was it okay to let him go?” I asked, coming back to my senses and tugging on Holmes’s sleeve.

“It’s fine. I asked what I wanted to. Now then...” Holmes turned around and surveyed everyone who’d followed us outside with a stern gaze. “I’ve completed my questioning. Could I have everyone gather on the second floor again, please?”

## 6

We returned to Shinkokan’s second floor. Holmes stood in front of the window on the opposite wall, looking at everyone. Kana, Suzuka, Kumi, Hashimoto, Oda, Kikuchi, and I all stood as well, staring at him wordlessly. Tension ran in the air. The silence probably didn’t last long, but it felt like an eternity regardless.

Kikuchi, who couldn’t take the suspense anymore, opened his mouth to speak, but was interrupted by Holmes. “Now then, I’d like to present my opinion,” he said quietly, leaning slightly on the window frame.

Everyone gulped. Kana stepped forward and asked, “D-Did you figure out the truth?”

Holmes smiled wryly and shrugged. “Did I? What I have is ultimately only a theory based on my own conjecture, and unfortunately, even if the theory is true, I have no proof. If the police were to formally investigate this as an attempted murder, they might acquire more evidence and testimony than I did.”

“That’s fine. Can you tell me your answer?” Kana had a firm look in her eyes.

“Very well. Now then, first I’d like to confirm with you, Kana—what was written in Aigasa’s suicide note?” He looked her in the eye.

Kana flinched.

“Did Aigasa avoid telling the police it was an attempted murder because she didn’t want the content of that note to be made public?” Holmes continued.

Kana looked away for a bit before giving in and smiling weakly.

“It was a confession, right?” Holmes pressed. “That’s why you believed for some time that your sister truly tried to commit suicide.”

*A confession?* Bewildered, I looked at Kana. She sighed loudly and nodded. “Yes, it was.”

“Please tell me what it said,” Holmes urged.

Kana hesitated before saying ruefully, “It said, ‘I, Kurisu Aigasa, have been deceiving my readers this entire time. None of the stories I composed were written by myself.’” She gritted her teeth.

*What does that mean? Did Kurisu Aigasa have a ghostwriter?*

“What do you think about this note, Kana?” Holmes asked.

“I-It’s a lie! I’ve been watching my sister work hard on her writing this whole time!”

“In that case, why didn’t she want this note to be made public? Wouldn’t it be because it includes some essence of truth?” Holmes continued relentlessly.

Kana clammed up, teary-eyed.

“However, it’s not the complete truth, right? It was probably half-true—or perhaps it’d be more accurate to say *two thirds*.”

“Two thirds?” I asked, tilting my head.

“Yes. Kurisu Aigasa was the combined pen name of three high school girls who admired the esteemed mystery authoress Agatha Christie—Rika Inoue, Suzuka Ijima, and Kumi Oishi, right?” he declared sharply.

Everyone’s eyes widened.

“When I read Kurisu Aigasa’s writing, though the style was completely different, I could sense that it was a homage to Agatha Christie, the English literary master. That made me think that the alias ‘Kurisu Aigasa’ was also derived from her.

“Then it turned out that Aigasa’s real name was Rika Inoue, and her high school friends were Suzuka Ijima and Kumi Oishi. ‘Agatha’ in Japanese phonetics is ‘Agasa,’ and the extra ‘i’ happens to be the common letter in all of their surnames—Inoue, Ijima, and Oishi. ‘Kurisu,’ which corresponds to ‘Chris,’ contains the first syllable of each of their first names. Thus, I suspected that ‘Kurisu Aigasa’ was a pen name that the three of them came up with together.”

“D-Does that mean that Kurisu Aigasa was three people?” I asked.

“Originally, yes.”

Holmes looked at Suzuka and Kumi. The two of them were pale, as if they’d been struck by ice magic. Judging from their faces, Holmes was probably right.

“Please listen to my hypothesis based on this information,” Holmes began in a calm tone, as if he was about to start a reading of his own. “Back in high school, the three of them were on the library committee together. Suzuka and Kumi accidentally discovered that Rika was writing a story, and they decided to take up writing too. However, all three of them were lacking things in their stories. Rika could write prose, but her story was boring, with no climax or conclusion. Suzuka wasn’t a good writer, but her characters were charming. Kumi didn’t like writing prose, but she was good at coming up with tricks. I imagine they would’ve tried joining forces upon realizing that.” Holmes glanced at Suzuka and Kumi for confirmation.

The two stiffened but didn’t object. He must’ve been right.

With newly gained confidence, Holmes continued, “Rika likely did the bulk of the writing, while Suzuka designed the characters and Kumi created the tricks. They combined their strengths and produced an excellent story. In their excitement, they came up with the pen name ‘Kurisu Aigasa’ and possibly continued to write several more works. Those were the happy days of their youth.”

His description had me imagining the three in the library after school during the sunset, getting excited over what Rika wrote—it definitely would’ve been a priceless time of their life.

“Their writing activities ended upon graduation. Suzuka and Kumi were never particularly fond of writing to begin with, so they turned to unrelated fields. Rika alone continued to write.”

Suzuka and Kumi were nodding slightly, probably unconsciously.

“In their second year of university, when Suzuka and Kumi had all but forgotten about their high school literature activities, Rika came back to Tokyo and invited them out. It must’ve been a fun reunion for them, right?

“But then, Rika probably asked them something along the lines of, ‘Do you mind if I tweak what we wrote in high school and submit it to this contest?’ She’d come all the way from Kansai just to ask permission, because she wanted to pursue her dream. On the other hand, Suzuka and Kumi were satisfied with their university life and had no interest whatsoever in becoming authors. They easily assented, assuming there was no way their story would win in the first place. Relieved, Rika submitted it under the name Kurisu Aigasa, out of respect for the other two.

“Then that story was selected as an honorable mention, earning her a hundred thousand yen. She tried to return it to her partners, who celebrated the victory with open minds. I’m sure it was a beautiful scene. However, none of them thought that it would lead to such amazing success.” Holmes smirked.

Suzuka and Kumi had pained expressions on their faces.

“Kurisu Aigasa grew in popularity until she became a bestselling author, known far and wide. I imagine that’s when their friendship became strained. That said, Suzuka and Kumi were simply happy that everyone liked the characters and tricks they’d created. I believe Rika would’ve been thankful at first too. However, as Rika became more financially well off, the others may have innocently said, ‘Treat us from time to time,’ or ‘Buy that for me.’ Suzuka found a job in Kansai because she thought Rika was handy to have around. Before long, Kumi moved to Kansai too. Now they could ask Rika for things more easily.

“From Rika’s perspective, it may have felt like she was being threatened. She gave them everything they wanted, while wondering, ‘Will I have to be their slave for the rest of my life?’ It must’ve been painful because she did feel guilty for her success. I suspect that her pent-up stress exploded when the target of her affections, Oda, began dating Suzuka.”

Oda blinked in surprise, and Suzuka looked down awkwardly.

“Rika couldn’t take it anymore. She thought, ‘I don’t want to be their servant anymore. I’ll find their weaknesses too,’ and hired a detective—Komatsu. Rika had him find Suzuka and Kumi’s weaknesses, and learned of their dark pasts. I don’t know what they entailed, but perhaps Suzuka’s youthful indiscretion led

to making a mistake in university, and Kumi did something that resulted in having to quit her bank job and even leave her hometown.”

Suzuka and Kumi trembled.

“Yeah, it was youthful indiscretion,” Kumi murmured, looking down.

Suzuka turned to her, surprised, with an expression that implied, “Wait, you’re going to tell them?”

“There’s no point trying to hide it now,” Kumi continued. “She already found out from Komatsu anyway, right? A guy from a host club kind of place tricked me into embezzling money from work, and I got fired. It didn’t escalate into a criminal case, but everyone was talking about it. I couldn’t stay there anymore.

“Rika investigated my past and suddenly said to me, ‘Don’t demand anything from me ever again.’ I was like, what? I never demanded anything. What was that attitude for? Who does she think she has to thank for her success?” Kumi said, flaring up.

Suzuka nodded firmly. “Y-Yeah. She dug up a bunch of dumb things I did, like paid dating and having an affair with my boss! She said it like she was blackmailing us, and we couldn’t forgive her. B-But we never tried to kill her!” she added. It seemed like they were revealing the truth themselves for the sake of being able to deny trying to kill her.

“Your anger is understandable,” Holmes said. “Since you were innocently asking Rika for favors without ill will, it must’ve been shocking for you. However, since Rika had so much bottled-up stress, an irreparable rift formed between you.

“Now then, the brokenhearted Rika fell into despair. Because of her success, she lost her friends and the man she loved was taken from her. She felt that nothing good had come out of it. ‘I can’t write anymore; I don’t want to write; I quit,’ she whined. Hashimoto desperately consoled her, of course. She was his golden egg. It’s not easy to produce a bestselling author. Hashimoto was good at handling women by nature, so I suspect he set her up to fall in love with him. He used suggestive words and mannerisms to manipulate and win over her heart, and thus Rika made her comeback. However, he desperately covered up that he was already in a relationship with a woman. He must’ve wanted to keep

up the charade at least until he became editor-in-chief.” Holmes gave Hashimoto a sidelong glance.

Hashimoto smiled stiffly.

“However, you can’t underestimate a woman’s intuition. Rika felt that something was wrong and hired Komatsu again to investigate Hashimoto. She discovered that he was dating a woman with marriage in mind and went into a frenzy again. She lashed out at Komatsu, saying, ‘I refuse to believe that!’ You can imagine how upset she was by the fact that she didn’t pay him.

“At around the same time, Hashimoto’s girlfriend got pregnant, so he married her. Rika finally exploded. She made a huge fuss over how she had been deceived, getting the editorial department involved too. Exhausted, Hashimoto asked Suzuka and Kumi for help, assuming that they were her best friends. The three of them met up, and I believe that Suzuka and Kumi told him, ‘Kurusu Aigasa isn’t one person.’”

I inadvertently looked at Hashimoto, Suzuka, and Kumi. They all stood stock-still, dumbfounded, faces ghastly pale, mouths slightly agape. *Oddly enough, people always have the same reaction when everything about them is revealed.*

“Hashimoto was shocked to learn that Kurisu Aigasa’s elaborately crafted tricks and charming characters weren’t Rika’s creation,” Holmes continued. “That may be when he came up with his evil idea.”

“Evil idea?” I looked at Holmes, bewildered.

“Yes, a terrifying idea that went, ‘If Kurisu Aigasa commits suicide and confesses the truth, and her ghostwriters reveal themselves to the world afterwards, they’re bound to draw a ridiculous amount of attention.’ Now, no matter how cruel the thought, it’s not an issue as long as you don’t say it out loud. However, since he *did* say it out loud, the evil idea became an actual scheme. Their horrifying plot was to kill Kurisu Aigasa and make it look like a suicide, then bring out her ghostwriters—in other words, create a new Kurisu Aigasa after generating a huge buzz.” Holmes glared coldly at them, and I felt the room temperature suddenly drop.

Oda was the only one looking down and shaking while everyone else stood still.

“Oda is an honest man who cannot lie, I see. As for how they were going to frame Rika’s murder as a suicide... It would appear that Oda, the man of ideas, contributed greatly. Suzuka likely tricked him into coming up with the plan, which was to use the photos taken monthly for Aigasa’s official website. He must’ve suggested, ‘This month, let’s make it look like a hanging.’ The day of the incident was a full moon—so that they could have the moon in the background of the photo.

“That day, Suzuka and Kumi visited Rika’s work apartment, perhaps under the guise of reconciliation. They brazenly helped prepare the set, secretly placing the suicide note while they were at it. After the preparations were finished, they pretended to leave, but one of them stayed at the apartment, perhaps hiding somewhere so that Rika wouldn’t notice.

“Meanwhile, Kikuchi and Oda were on standby outside with the camera. Kikuchi most likely knew nothing. He called Rika to say, ‘The camera’s ready, so come out to the balcony,’ and hung up, not having any reason to think that something was amiss. When he saw her standing on the balcony with the ribbon around her neck, he called her again and said, ‘Stand on the railing.’ Rika obeyed his instructions and stood on top of the railing in her black dress and red shoes, with the red ribbon around her neck... That’s when the person who was hiding—I suspect it’d be Suzuka, but it doesn’t matter who—sprang out and pushed Rika, sending her falling to the ground. That’s when Kikuchi finally sensed that something was wrong. He covered up the photo shoot entirely because he didn’t want to get involved, and he wanted to protect Oda too.”

No one said anything in response. The room fell silent.

“In other words, Suzuka, Kumi, Hashimoto, Oda, and Kikuchi—everyone was an accomplice, whether directly or indirectly. A very ‘Agatha Christie’ plot indeed. However, as I said at the beginning, I have no proof. It’s ultimately only my conjecture. If Rika remembers anything from that day, then I’m sure the story will change yet again.” Holmes smiled cynically, turned to Kana, and asked, “Is that enough for you, Rika?”

“Huh?” Everyone’s eyes widened when he called Kana “Rika.”

“There’s a camera inside that large red gem necklace of yours, right? Has Rika

been watching us from somewhere nearby?”

Everyone looked around at each other, confused. Suddenly, we heard the sound of slow footsteps coming up the stairs. The steady steps stopped when *she* appeared on the second floor. Everyone froze at the same time.

She was wearing a jet-black frilly dress and a black hat with a lace veil—the kind that a woman would wear to a funeral. Her feet were clad in bright red shoes, and there was a bright red ribbon around her neck. In addition to her eccentric outfit, she also wore matching crimson contacts that, at first glance, made it look like there was blood coming from her eyes. I felt chills run down my spine.

Rika—dressed in the style of Kurisu Aigasa—scanned her audience, smiled like an innocent little girl, and said, “How do you do, everyone?”

## 7

This time, I could tell that everyone else felt the chills too. No one uttered a word.

Rika looked at Holmes and smiled gently. “Good evening, Holmes of Kyoto. You lived up to your reputation with that wonderful deductive reasoning. I hadn’t expected you to discover so much.”

“I’m glad I met your expectations. While you’re here, I have one more question,” Holmes said, holding up his index finger.

Everyone held their breath, wondering what he was going to say next.

“Your memory loss was a lie, right?” he asked, looking her straight in the eye.

Rika gave a very light shrug and said, “Yes, it was. I remember that the moment I climbed onto the railing, Suzuka suddenly appeared and pushed me off.”

“Huh?” Kana’s eyes widened. “Wh-Why did you set all of this up, then?”

“I knew that Suzuka was angry with me, but I didn’t think it was to the point of murder. Also, Suzuka acts based on advantage and disadvantage. What benefit would there be in killing me? I wondered this for a long time, until the

day that Ijuin came to visit me. We weren't acquainted, so I was very surprised, but apparently it was because Hashimoto is now assigned to him."

Holmes's eyebrow twitched.

"He was very kind and accepting, and as I was speaking with him, before I knew it, I was crying and pouring out my deepest thoughts. Then he said, 'My son may be able to solve that bizarre case of yours.'"

*Now that was unexpected.* Apparently Holmes's grandfather wasn't the only one spreading rumors.

Holmes placed his hand on his forehead, not saying anything. *If this was Kura, I'm sure he'd have his head on the counter right now.*

Rika continued, "I wanted to know the full truth, so I enlisted Ijuin's help in requesting your services in this way. It was his idea to hold the gathering here, at Yoshida-Sanso. I sincerely apologize for the displeasure it caused you. And thank you very much." She bowed deeply.

"No, it's fine. It was my father's fault—er, I mean, it was my father's suggestion," Holmes said, holding up his hand. His mouth was in the shape of a smile, but his eyes weren't smiling. *Run, Manager!*

"Now then, Rika, what do you plan to do now that you know the truth?" Holmes asked, having regained his composure.

Everyone tensed up.

"Let's see," Rika said with a laugh. She took a handgun out of her pocket and pointed it at us.

"Aoi!"

Before I could even react, my vision went dark. Holmes had moved in front of me to protect me. His broad back shielded me completely, and I gasped, touched by how he'd immediately sprang forward. I peeked at Rika from behind him. Her gun was pointed at Hashimoto.

"C-Calm down, Rika," said Hashimoto. "That's not a real gun anyway, right?"

"Shall we find out? Your manipulation cost me two friendships. In my despair, I considered suicide and thought that a gun would be the right tool for the job.

It'd be a quick death, and bright red blood on a black gun would make for a beautiful sight, no? I'd never want an ugly death like hanging. I'll paint all of you in a beautiful color, and then I shall go too," Rika said, smiling eerily.

Suzuka screamed.

"Now then, Hashimoto," Rika continued. "If you lie, I'll shoot. Tell me—you were the mastermind behind this plot, yes?" she asked coldly, still pointing the gun at Hashimoto.

"Y-Yeah, it was me! I thought I could make big news and produce the bestselling author of the century at the same time. I thought I'd be able to make a news story that the world would still remember after my death! I-I was possessed! But it wasn't actually me who did it—the one who pushed you was that woman!" Hashimoto pointed at Suzuka, his eyes wide in desperation.

"Y-You can't just push the blame on me!" Suzuka retorted. "I just did what you told me to! Rika, I'm sorry. It was a sudden impulse—actually, Hashimoto tricked me too. Please forgive me. I'm really glad that you're still alive."

"What do you mean, I tricked you?!" Hashimoto whined.

Rika snorted. "I really could not care less either way. You would kill someone over that? Hey, Suzuka. You won't be satisfied until you've taken everything from me, right? You didn't care about Oda at first, but when you found out that I liked him, you suddenly took interest in him. You love what belongs to others, and you even slept with Hashimoto, right? Answer me honestly, or I'll shoot you first." She pointed the gun at Suzuka.

"Eeek!" Suzuka crouched on the ground. "Y-Yeah, you're right. I was interested in Maa because you liked him. And I slept with Hashimoto too. But why do you care? You already have everything! My looks, smarts, personality, and talents are all average, so I know I'm never gonna make it big. That's why I was jealous of your success! You had everything, and taking what you wanted made me feel like the winner. I'm really sorry!" She placed her hands on the ground and wailed.

Next to her, Kumi stepped forward and said, "I-I'm not going to apologize. Sure, I asked you for things too, but if you didn't like that, you should've said something. Instead, you hired a detective and dug up my dirty past to blackmail

me? *I'm* not going to forgive *you*. I wanted to kill you. So if you're going to kill me, then do it. It's not like I've never considered death either." Unlike Suzuka, she spoke defiantly—*but she probably doesn't really feel that way. If she truly wanted to kill Rika, then it would've been her that did it, not Suzuka. Despite that, her pride won't let her admit the truth.*

Rika simply shrugged and smiled. She probably had a good understanding of Kumi's personality.

Then Oda jumped forward and prostrated himself in front of Rika, his forehead nearly touching the ground. "I-I'm sorry, Aigasa," he began.

Rika grimaced.

"I-I really didn't realize how you felt. Since we worked together, I assumed that even thinking about you as a romantic interest would be taboo. Th-Then I met Suzuka through you, and I was so captivated by her that I couldn't make calm decisions anymore. Even though it was all a lie... I was an idiot. The whole plan came about from my idea, so i-it's my fault. I'll take responsibility for everything, so please, forgive the others. Most of all, you've already suffered enough. You don't need to dirty your own hands," Oda pleaded in tears. *Since he's so good-natured, the guilt must've been tormenting him this whole time.* Then he sprung to his feet, grabbed the gun out of Rika's hand, and pointed it at the side of his head.

Everyone gasped, and before we could remember to breathe again, Oda pulled the trigger without hesitation. However, it made no sound. A thin stream of blood ran down his head.

"Eeek!"

Amidst our screams, Oda simply stood there dumbfounded. He lowered the gun and tilted his head. "H-Huh? My head feels cold, but it doesn't hurt at all..." he murmured. The side of his head was a shocking deep red.

Holmes slumped his shoulders with a feeble smile. "Oda, that's a realistic-looking toy. It had red liquid inside. I could tell at first glance that it wasn't real, but modern toys can still be quite powerful, so I was carefully monitoring the situation."

I nodded firmly in understanding after hearing that. *That's why he only stood in front of me—he knew it was a toy. If it were real, he would've instinctively run to take it away from her.*

Rika stood still for a while, stunned by Oda's unexpected actions. Then her face twisted into a smile. "Correct, it's a toy. I simply wanted to hear everyone's true feelings. Everything said here is being recorded. I'll take my time deciding whether to report you lot to the police, so please remain on edge while you live your merry lives. You may leave now." She plucked the toy gun from Oda's hand, grinned, and pointed at the exit.

All of the conspirators hurriedly escaped down the stairs, faces still pale. Before long, the only ones remaining on the second floor were me and Holmes, Kana, and Rika.

## 8

It was quiet again in the cafe. The sweet scent of the chocolate on the tables wafted through the air.

Rika was gazing vacantly out the window with a sad expression. Forcing them to live in fear, not knowing when they'd be arrested, was a fitting form of revenge for her, but she still couldn't be happy.

"Why was I spared?" she murmured. "If I died that day, I wouldn't have to suffer these feelings." She touched the window frame. Her sorrowful face made my chest ache. Her former best friends and the two men she fell in love with conspired to kill her. I couldn't imagine how deep her emotional wounds must be.

*"I lived when I should've died; something prevented me from dying; there is work I must do,"* Holmes murmured.

Rika, Kana, and I turned to him, confused.

"It's a quote from Naoya Shiga's *At Kinosaki*," he explained. "Aigasa, 'something' prevented you from dying. There is work you must do."

Rika's eyes widened.

“You’ve been through a horrible experience, and it’s up to you whether to let it remain horrible or transform it into gold. As a fan, I hope you’ll show us your alchemy,” Holmes said with a smile.

Rika cast her eyes down with a bitter look on her face. “A fan...? But the characters and the tricks aren’t mine.”

“No matter how charming the characters are or how brilliant the elaborate tricks are, they cannot exist without the prose and composition that make them readable. I felt that your prose was beautiful, and I was impressed by your compositional skill.”

“Kiyotaka...”

“My father often says, ‘For a creator, every experience becomes inspiration.’ You must’ve become a new person after this unique experience, right?” He spoke as if challenging her, but with a smile on his face.

Rika fell silent for some time. Then her expression relaxed and she said, “Yes, those words have resonated with me. I shall take this vile experience I’ve gained and transform it into gold for you to see. I shall become a true witch and show you my alchemy.” Rika—no, the author Kurisu Aigasa smiled confidently and placed her hand on her chest. *A creator will take every experience, even horrifying incidents, and use them as ingredients for their alchemy.*

“Aigasa, although it was my father’s suggestion, I’m glad you chose Shinkokan for tonight’s stage.”

“Huh?”

“It’s a beautiful, fitting location for saying farewell to the past, absorbing it, and being born anew.”

Aigasa teared up, gripped the hem of her skirt, and bowed gracefully. Moved, we bowed back.

Afterwards, Kurisu Aigasa presented to the world a book that told this tale in great detail, to the point where you couldn’t tell if it was fiction or nonfiction. It became a big hit, and from there, she continued to release incredible works as if something had bloomed within her—but that’s a story for a little later.

As for Holmes's reputation...apparently you can't control what people say. Contrary to his hopes, his credibility only grew, and the rumors became even more exaggerated—but again, that's a story for later.

## Chapter 3: A Condition for Inheritance

### 1

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

After school, as I was heading down Teramachi Street to the antique store Kura where I work part-time, I found myself looking at the sign in front. *Since it’s always there, I haven’t been paying attention to it anymore. But now that I think about it, everything began with this.* I smiled and touched the standing sign. A warm breeze brushed past my cheeks. The short month of February had gone by in a flash, and now it was March. *It’s been a year since I first stepped foot into Kura... That brings back memories.* Thinking back to when I tried to secretly sell my grandfather’s antiques so that I could go to Saitama, I felt bitter at how shallow and foolish I’d been. Then again, I was at the lowest point of my life back then, so desperate that I couldn’t see anything around me. It was Holmes who saved me.

*“Aoi, would you like to work here?”*

Just how much had coming here done for me? I did regret the silly thing I’d done, but at the same time, I couldn’t help but be thankful for it, because it let me form a connection with this store. This sign was what brought me to Kura. I gently caressed it with love and gratitude, took a deep breath, and energetically opened the door.

“Good morning,” I greeted as the door chime rang out softly. I’d grown accustomed to saying “Good morning” even in the evening. At first I was reluctant to because it seemed like an industry insider thing, but then I learned that it’s seen as more respectful to say that to people who came to work earlier than you. Once I found that out, it didn’t bother me anymore to say it late in the day.

“Hello, Aoi.” Holmes smiled at me from behind the counter where he was working. An unfamiliar boy was standing across from him.

“Hm?” I squinted. The boy looked around fourteen or fifteen. He wore a thin duffel coat and a simple shoulder bag. He had light brown hair, large eyes of the same color, pale skin, and slightly rosy lips—a beautiful, androgynous boy. *Who is that? A customer?* I tilted my head.

The boy turned around, and his eyes lit up when he saw me. “Hey, Kiyo, is this the new part-timer?” He looked at Holmes.

“Yes, she is.”

The boy turned to me again and said, “Nice to meet you. I’m Rikyu Takiyama.” He bowed.

“N-Nice to meet you too. I’m Aoi Mashiro.” I didn’t know what was going on, but I bowed anyway. *Rikyu Takiyama... Where have I heard that last name before?*

“Thanks for helping with the store while I was gone, Aoi,” Rikyu said with the smile of an angel.

*What a sweet boy. “Oh, it’s nothing.” But what does he mean by “while I was gone”?*

Noticing my confusion, Rikyu grinned and said, “I used to work here at Kura, but I went to study abroad in France. You came here right after I left. I guess that makes me your senior.”

*“S-Senior...” In other words, he’s my predecessor. I never even considered that there might’ve been a part-timer before me. This store isn’t busy, but they need someone to watch it. The owner’s always traveling around the world, which makes things hard for Holmes and the manager, who both have their own occupations aside from this. This boy was here before me, but he left to study abroad. So that’s why when I first came to Kura, Holmes said, “Great. I was actually in search of an assistant.” Thinking about it that way, I might’ve shown up at the perfect time.*

“I’ve heard about you from my mother, Aoi. She said you’ve been working hard.”

“Your mother...?” *Who would that be?* I stared at Rikyu’s face again. His pretty features and expression suddenly brought someone to mind: a woman I

knew well, who said, *“Oh right, Aoi. My son will be returning from his exchange program this spring. Do be friends with him, okay?”*

“A-Are you Yoshie’s son, by any chance?” *I think her last name was Takiyama.*

“Yep.”

Holmes smiled cheerfully and said, “Yes, Rikyu is Yoshie’s son. They have the same eyes and mouth, right?”

“Yes.” I nodded. I knew Yoshie’s son would be handsome, but he exceeded my expectations. His coloring was light, and he could even be mistaken for a boyish girl. *If I recall correctly, she said he was a high school first-year, making him one year younger than me.*

It seemed like Rikyu had just arrived. He slowly took off his scarf, sat down in one of the chairs, and gave a relieved sigh. “This place is as relaxing as ever, huh?”

“I’ll make coffee,” Holmes said.

“Thanks, Kiyo.” Rikyu watched Holmes go into the kitchenette with a pure, childlike smile on his face. Then he slowly turned to me and said, “Hey, Aoi.”

“Yes?” I looked up, having just put on my apron.

Rikyu clasped his hands in front of his face, frowning ruefully with tears in his large, round eyes. “Um, I think it’ll be hard for Kiyo to say it, so let me make this clear.”

“Wh-What is it?”

“Now that I’m back, you can go.”

“Huh?”

“I’m the regular part-timer here, so now that I’m back, we don’t need you anymore. Thank you for your service, Aoi. Feel free to come back as a customer.” He bowed.

“Wh-What?” His sudden restructuring announcement had me reeling. It wasn’t so long ago that I was studying like crazy for my exams with Holmes as my tutor because I didn’t want to quit this job. *But now I’m suddenly being laid*

*off? Am I unneeded as long as someone else is here?* I stood there stock-still, unable to process what was happening.

“What are you talking about, Rikyu?” Holmes emerged from the back room, heaving an exasperated sigh. He wasn’t holding the tray. Apparently he came back after hearing our conversation.

Rikyu quickly smiled and said, “Just kidding, Aoi!”

“I-It was a joke?” I couldn’t believe it.

“Sorry, sorry! Don’t look at me like that! Anyway, I look forward to working with you.” He smiled sweetly and bowed again.

“Sorry, Aoi. Rikyu is something like a younger brother to me, so unfortunately, he’s blackhearted too,” Holmes said apologetically.

“O-Oh. I see.” That was all I could say.

Holmes went back to preparing the coffee.

“Well, I’m half serious,” Rikyu continued. “You have to start studying for entrance exams soon, right?”

“Y-Yeah.”

“You won’t have time to work anymore, right? You can leave Kura to me, so go focus on your studies. I can do a way better job than you.” He looked at me mischievously.

Not knowing what to say, I cast my eyes down. *He’s not wrong about my entrance exams...but I don’t want to quit yet.*

Holmes came out again, this time with the tray. “Rikyu, that’s for Aoi to decide, not you. Besides, Aoi does her job very well.”

“Are you saying she’s more useful than me?” Rikyu pouted.

“I don’t like to compare people. You’re you, Aoi is Aoi. More importantly, Aoi is the current part-timer and you already quit. Regardless of the reason, you don’t get to complain,” he admonished, placing the cups on the counter. He then turned to me and said, “Sorry about that again,” frowning.

“I-It’s fine.”

“Would you like to take a break with us first, Aoi?”

“O-Okay, I will.” I hurriedly sat down next to Rikyu, who sighed, making me shrink in my seat. *Ack, this is awkward.*

“What’s wrong, Rikyu?” Holmes asked.

“Huh?”

“You seem to be in an awfully bad mood today. I don’t know what happened, but I won’t let you continue to be rude to Aoi.” His gentle smile had an intensity behind it that made chills run down my spine.

Rikyu, however, pouted defiantly against the pressure and said, “You really do see through everything, Kiyo. I’m trying not to be depressed.”

“Depressed?”

“Yeah. I’m meeting with Dad here today.”

“Your father is coming here?”

Rikyu nodded.

*That would be Yoshie’s ex-husband, then.* Yoshie once told me that she was a “grave robber” and that the owner’s looks were exactly her type. *Which means...* “Is Rikyu’s father similar to the owner?” I asked nonchalantly to no one in particular.

Rikyu shook his head. “Nope, not at all. He’s younger than Mom.”

“Y-Younger?”

“He quit his job early and lazes around all day, and he’s even a two-timer—the very picture of a good-for-nothing guy,” Rikyu continued.

I was dumbfounded. “D-Did Yoshie get fed up with younger men because of that?”

“It doesn’t seem like it. Mom lost her dad early, so she has a huge father complex and was always into old men. But apparently when she was young, she didn’t want to admit that side of herself, so she tried to pretend that she wasn’t. Oh yeah, and even though people call her a ‘witch’ or whatever because of her beauty, she was a genius art geek when she was young—really

unfashionable and boring. She had no men in her life until Dad happened to come along and flirt with her. They got married, but Dad just figured she was a working woman and would make money for him.”

I was stunned speechless. *That young, beautiful Yoshie used to be unfashionable and boring...?*

“Anyway, Mom was disgusted by Dad’s lack of self-sufficiency and divorced him. After a while she met the owner through work. The moment he saw her, he said, ‘You’re like an unpolished gemstone, young lady. With refining, you can shine like a diamond.’ He was already her type to begin with, and with that line, he apparently defeated her on the spot. After that, she took his advice and turned into what you see now in the blink of an eye. Even as a kid, I couldn’t believe how much she changed.”

“I see...” I murmured, dazed. “S-So, Yoshie only became that beautiful and lighthearted after meeting the owner?”

“Yep, she said that until then, she lived a restricted life. Then she saw the owner living freely, supported and loved by everyone, and thought, ‘So it’s okay to live like that too.’ It was enlightening, apparently.”

“E-Enlightening...” *I see—he did say she was a genius.* Maybe she studied hard to meet her parents’ expectations, but then got deceived by a good-for-nothing man and had a failed marriage. That would’ve caused trouble for her parents...and she probably blamed herself for it. That was when she met the overly free owner and realized that she could be like that too.

“But Rikyu, were you upset when your mother got a new partner?” I asked.

“Nope. I was still really young, so it didn’t bother me at all. The owner’s nice, Mom got prettier, and most importantly, I was really happy to get Kiyo as a big brother. Everything about it was great.”

“I see...” I nodded. *That makes sense.* The doubts I had while listening to his story disappeared.

“Rikyu, your father lives in Tokyo, right?” Holmes asked. He said it like he didn’t know Rikyu’s father well.

“Yeah.”

“Have you met him before, Holmes?” I asked.

“No, I haven’t. I’ve only heard about him.”

“It’s been three years since I last saw him too,” Rikyu pointed out. “We talk on the phone occasionally, though. But Dad’s dad, in other words, my grandpa, lives in Kyoto.”

“Oh right, now that you mention it, you said before that he lives in Kita-ku.”

“Yeah, my rich grandpa that lives in a mansion in Takagamine. I haven’t seen him in three years either.”

“Does that mean your father is coming back to his family in Kyoto?” I asked.

Rikyu shook his head. “No, Dad was born out of wedlock, so that’s not his family.”

“Oh, I’m sorry.” I shrank in my seat.

“It’s not a big deal. Grandpa’s a weirdo too. After his wife died, he had kids with a bunch of different women without remarrying. He did acknowledge them and pay for child support and education, so Dad seemed to be raised well enough. He grew up into a lousy man who hates working, though.”

“Oh? I didn’t know that,” Holmes said quietly.

“Well yeah, I never told you much about Dad. He’s a cheater and he hates working, so I can’t be proud of him.”

Not knowing how to respond, Holmes and I simply said, “I see.”

“But you know,” Rikyu continued, grinning, “the reason for the divorce wasn’t his freeloading or his constant cheating.”

“Huh?”

“Mom figured, ‘I’ll just support us until he finds a job that suits him,’ and ‘A man can’t help but fool around a bit.’”

“What was the last straw, then?”

“Apparently he was extorting the girl he was cheating on her with for money. Mom was like, ‘I don’t need a pathetic guy like this.’ She likes chivalrous men, after all.”

“Ah, I see. That’s very like her,” Holmes said.

“No wonder she fell head over heels for the owner,” I said, amazed but sympathetic.

Holmes placed his hand on his chin and asked, “What did your father do after separating from Yoshie?”

“No idea.”

Confused, I asked, “Huh? But you talk on the phone, right? Does he not tell you what’s going on in his life?”

“Dad just wants to hear about me, so it’s always me doing the talking. He doesn’t talk about himself. I don’t want to hear about how he’s mooching off of women anyway, so I don’t ask,” Rikyu said coldly, sipping his coffee.

*Well, I can’t blame him for that.*

“Did you tell your father about me?” Holmes asked in a low voice. His mouth was smiling, but his eyes weren’t.

“Of course. Actually, I spend like eighty percent of the time talking about you. You’re the best brother ever! I can’t help but go on and on about you.” Rikyu beamed.

In contrast, Holmes’s expression went blank. “Why are you meeting him in this store?”

“Huh? Because he wants to meet the brother I’m always bragging about.” Rikyu smiled cheerfully.

Holmes facepalmed. “Rikyu—”

Suddenly, Kura’s door swung open and the chime echoed through the store. I turned around and saw a man wearing a suit. He looked to be in his forties, with thick light brown hair and a stylish beard. He had chiseled features and slightly drooping eyes. He radiated an Italian-like aura and was handsome enough to be a movie star. Upon seeing Rikyu sitting at the counter, he raised both hands and shouted, “Rikyu, Papa’s here!”

“Oh. Yeah. Long time no see, Dad,” Rikyu replied curtly.

Holmes seemed amused by the difference in their enthusiasm. He stood up straight and said, "Hello, my name is Kiyotaka Yagashira. Rikyu is a good friend of mine." He bowed.

"Oh!" Rikyu's father's eyes lit up. "So you're that 'Kiyo.' Rikyu was right about your good looks. Thanks for taking care of him. I'm his father, Sakyo Kirishima." He walked up to us and shook hands with Holmes.

"Your name is Sakyo? That's a lovely name," I murmured.

Sakyo looked at me happily. "Thanks. My father named both me and Rikyu. Oh, you're the new part-timer, Aoi, right? Nice to meet you. Thanks for looking after my son." He extended his hand to me this time. Apparently Rikyu had even told him about me. *What exactly did he tell him?* I was afraid to find out.

"N-Nice to meet you. I'm Aoi Mashiro." I timidly shook hands with him.

"I don't recall Aoi ever looking after me," Rikyu mumbled.

After that, Holmes made another cup of coffee for Sakyo, who smiled in delight upon tasting it. "I heard your coffee was good, but man, it really is," Sakyo said cheerfully. Then he looked at me with a carefree grin and said, "Your eyes are sparkling, Aoi. You must be a sincere girl."

I was expecting him to be more of a slob since he was described as "a good-for-nothing man who doesn't want to work," so I was taken aback by his cheerfulness. He had a friendly smile and a gentle, welcoming aura. He was also constantly complimenting us. He was totally unlike Rikyu, who seemed to have a wall built around him.

"I see," Holmes murmured to himself as he drank his coffee. He smiled slightly.

"Hm? Did I say something wrong?" Sakyo tilted his head.

"No, I was just thinking that you were a charming person who can quickly slide into people's hearts."

*I think I know what he means.* Yoshie, who was once dull and plain, must've been warier than the average person. Plus, she wasn't into younger men. It

didn't make sense that she would marry a young man who didn't work. But after meeting Sakyo in person, I could completely understand how he won her over. He worked his way into her heart, praised her nonstop, and expressed his gratitude for her. Considering her strong maternal instinct, she may have treated her husband as a son... *Is this what they call a "gigolo"? Maybe Sakyo has the natural ability to draw people to him.*

After listening to his father's chatter this whole time without saying anything, Rikyu rested his chin in his hand and asked impatiently, "Okay, so why did you come to Kyoto, Dad? It wasn't *really* just to see me and Kiyo, right?" His tone of voice was cheerful, but I could tell that he was annoyed at how long it was taking to get to the point.

"Hey now, I did want to see you and Kiyotaka. But I'm here in Kyoto because Dad called me here."

"Grandpa called you?"

"Yeah. He's calling for you too, Rikyu."

Rikyu pointed at himself. "Me? Why?" He stared blankly at his father.

"Not just us, but all his other sons too. The formal invitation will probably arrive at your house sometime today."

"Uh, what? This is scary." Rikyu blatantly frowned.

Sakyo nodded sympathetically. "I'm scared too. My day trading hasn't been going well, so I don't wanna see him." Apparently Sakyo was a retail investor. "Also, he had this weird requirement."

"Huh?"

"He said, 'If you're not confident in your own eyes, you can bring an appraiser.'"

"What's that supposed to mean?" Rikyu's eyes widened.

"I don't know either, but I'm guessing he has a lot of art in that Takagamine mansion, and he wants someone to tell him how much it's worth."

"So if you don't think you can, then you should bring an appraiser? I really don't get it." Rikyu sighed with a confused look on his face. "Hey, do I *have* to

go?”

“Well, all of the school expenses I’ve been sending you came from him...”

“Yeah, guess so. I do owe him...” Rikyu placed his hand across his forehead, accepting defeat. “What’s the whole ‘you can bring an appraiser’ thing about anyway?”

“I have no clue either, but there’s no way I’m confident in my eyes, so I wanted to bring an appraiser. Kiyotaka, I was hoping I could ask you to come with us. I know you’re a top-notch appraiser, though, so this is a formal request, and I’ll compensate you the best I can. Kiyotaka...no, Mr. Yagashira, would you please lend me your services?” Sakyo bowed deeply towards Holmes.

Holmes fell silent for a moment before sighing lightly and smiling. “All right, I will.”

Rikyu and I exchanged glances, surprised by how easily he accepted.

“Huh? You really will, Kiyo?”

“Yes. I’m curious about that requirement too, and more importantly, I want to meet your grandfather.” Holmes smiled gently.

Rikyu beamed and said, “Thanks, Kiyo!”

“Anytime.”

They really were just like brothers.

“Good for you, Rikyu,” I said, smiling.

“Yeah.” Rikyu nodded. “Hey, why don’t you come with us too, Aoi? There’s a lot of art in the mansion, so it’ll be educational for you.”

“Huh? Me?”

“She can, right, Dad?”

Sakyo nodded enthusiastically. “Yeah, of course. I think it’ll be like a house party, so the more the merrier. Right, Kiyotaka?”

“Yes.” Holmes nodded. “Sakyo says it’s fine, and Rikyu is correct in that there’s bound to be lots of amazing art there. It’ll be very educational. Please come with us, Aoi,” he continued, grinning.

*Ah, maybe Holmes accepted the request that easily because of the art.*  
“Okay.” I nodded.

After father and son left the store, Holmes picked up the cups and placed them on the tray. He seemed to be in a good mood.

“I was surprised that you accepted so easily, but I’m guessing it’s because Rikyu’s grandfather’s house probably has a lot of treasures, right?” I asked, wiping down the counter.

Holmes chuckled. “Yes, but that’s not all.”

“You wanted to meet Rikyu’s grandfather?”

“That’s part of it too, but the main reason was that this time, I was requested as an appraiser.” He looked at me with a dazzling smile.

“Oh, I get it.” I nodded firmly. *It all makes sense now—Holmes complains whenever he’s requested as a detective, but being requested as an appraiser makes him happy.*

“I’m still an apprentice though, so I’m not sure how much I can help.” He cheerfully took the tray to the kitchenette.

*I thought I understood him well, but there’s still things I don’t know.* After I finished wiping down the counter, I stretched, smiling to myself.

## 2

The next Sunday at 11 a.m., we all met up at Kura and went to Oike’s underground parking lot where the company car was parked. From there, we headed to Kita-ku with Holmes at the wheel. I was in the passenger seat, and Rikyu and Sakyo were sitting in the back.

“Jeez, a Jaguar? You sure drive a tasteful car for your age, Kiyotaka,” Sakyo said, looking around the interior of the car with interest.

Holmes chuckled wryly. “No, this is my grandfather’s car. He rarely uses it, so it became Kura’s company car. Personally, I like Minis.”

“Huh, the company car’s a Jaguar? That’s an amazing antique store you’ve got there.”

I giggled because I’d thought the same thing.

“Well, the people at Kura are like the epitome of aesthetic sense,” Rikyu responded languidly, staring out the window. Unlike his father, he seemed unenthusiastic. *He must not want to be here. What kind of person is his grandfather for him to be so gloomy about meeting him?*

“Hey, Rikyu, what’s with that lack of energy? Chin up!” Sakyo clapped Rikyu on the back.

“Ugh, could you calm down?” Rikyu groaned, sighing.

“Oh right, Kiyotaka, there’s somewhere we have to stop by before going to the estate,” Sakyo said, ignoring his son’s lack of enthusiasm and leaning forward. He moved so forcefully that his seatbelt was digging into his body.

“We *have* to? Will we have time?” Holmes asked hesitantly.

“Yeah, we don’t have to be there until 2 p.m., so there’s plenty of time. I haven’t been to Kyoto in a while, so I want to do some sightseeing.” Sakyo took a guidebook out of a paper bag. “There’s a lot of places I want to go, but I *really* need to go to this one place. I’d even go in a typhoon.” He nodded as he flipped the pages.

“Where is this place?” Rikyu asked dubiously. “It’d better not be in the opposite direction from Takagamine or you’ll cause trouble for Kiyo.”

“Don’t worry. It’s on the way.” Sakyo opened the book wide and pointed at a picture of a shrine. “I want to go here.” He gave a toothy grin.

Holmes glanced at the guidebook while the car was stopped and nodded. “Ah, that won’t be difficult.” When the traffic signal turned green, he stepped on the gas pedal again, taking us north on Horikawa Street. He turned west at the intersection with North Oji Street and then north again soon after. That took us to the parking lot of the shrine that Sakyo “really needed” to go to. There was a sign saying “Imamiya Shrine.”

“Is this the shrine that you really wanted to go to, Sakyo?” I asked. *It might be*

*a famous shrine, but I've never heard of it before.*

"Yep, at all costs. C'mon, let's go." Sakyo got out of the car and started walking with a spring in his step. We followed behind him.

"Is Imamiya Shrine that famous?" I asked, glancing at Holmes.

"Yes." He nodded. "It's very famous, in a sense."

"In a sense?"

As we walked leisurely towards the shrine, a fragrant scent wafted through the air.

"Oh, something smells nice," I said.

"I believe that's the light brown miso sauce from the roasted mochi," Holmes replied.

"Roasted mochi?"

I saw a row of stalls on the shrine road with banners that said "Imamiya's Specialty — Roasted Mochi." The people running the stalls were roasting skewered pieces of mochi over charcoal fires and garnishing them with light brown miso sauce. I smiled at the sweet aroma and said, "It smells delicious."

"Yes, it is. It's Imamiya Shrine's specialty. We'll have time, so let's eat some after visiting the shrine."

"Okay! I love mochi. Oh, is this why Sakyo wanted to go to Imamiya Shrine? To eat roasted mochi?" I asked, watching the rice cakes being cooked.

"No, I don't think so," Holmes answered smoothly, shaking his head.

"Oh, it's not?"

We continued into the shrine grounds. My eyes widened. "Wow!" There was a bright vermilion gate and bridge. The main shrine building was large and stately, and there were several smaller shrines surrounding it.

"The grounds aren't that big, but it's a brilliant shrine, huh?" I remarked.

"Indeed. This is another shrine with a long history dating back to the Heian period. It was originally known for providing blessings for sound health and healthy aging, but..."

Sakyo, who was walking ahead of us, excitedly turned around and continued, “It’s known as the ‘marry rich’ shrine now,” his eyes sparkling.

“The ‘marry rich’ shrine?” I squeaked in surprise. I immediately turned to Holmes and asked, “Is that true?”

Holmes nodded. “Yes. There was once a worshipper at this shrine named Otama, who was the daughter of a grocer. She later caught the eye of the third Tokugawa shogun, Iemitsu, became his concubine, and bore a son for him. That child, Tsunayoshi, went on to become the fifth shogun. Since Otama was now the mother of a shogun, her name was changed to Keishoin. It’s said that this is where the term ‘Tama’s palanquin’—meaning ‘to marry into wealth and power’—originates from. This shrine also sells ‘Tama’s palanquin charms’ so that you can become like Otama.”

“I’ve always been meaning to pray here if I ever got a chance to go to Kyoto,” Sakyo said, beaming. “I want to marry a rich lady no matter what it takes.”

My face stiffened.

“You should pray too, Aoi,” he continued. “You’re still young, so the possibilities are endless. In fact, I know quite a few rich young men. Want me to introduce you? Despite how I might seem, I’ve got connections. Throw me a bone when you marry rich, all right?” He put his hand on my shoulder.

“She’s still in high school, Sakyo,” Holmes said, putting his hand on Sakyo’s shoulder in turn.

“O-Ouch, that hurts! Your fingers are digging into my shoulder! I was just kidding, okay?”

“Right, my apologies.” Holmes let go and Sakyo immediately made his escape, walking towards the shrine building at a quick pace.

“Why’re you so mad if it was just a joke, Kiyo?” Rikyu asked coldly. My heart skipped a beat.

“I’m not mad.” Holmes smiled.

“Uh huh...” Rikyu folded his hands behind his head. “Well, whatever,” he murmured, following after Sakyo.

“This shrine protects against misfortune, Aoi. Shall we pay it a visit?” Holmes asked.

“Yes,” I replied.

We all prayed at the shrine and then headed towards a stone called “Ahokashi” which was located near the center of the grounds. Apparently this stone can be either heavy or light. You pray that your illness will be healed when you pick it up, and if it feels light, then your wish is granted.

After we rubbed and lifted the stone and Sakyo bought his “Tama’s palanquin” charm, we left through the east exit and went into a shop selling roasted mochi.

“Thanks for waiting,” the store employee said, placing a tray in front of us with roasted mochi, a small teapot, and teacups on it. “Enjoy!”

The roasted mochi came in bite-size pieces on bamboo skewers thin enough that you could bend them. The soft mochi was fragrant from being roasted over a charcoal fire, and it was glazed in light brown miso sauce. I picked up a skewer and popped the mochi into my mouth. “Mm!” I couldn’t help but smile from the deliciousness.

“Hey, this is pretty good,” Sakyo said cheerfully.

The bite-size mochi was slightly crispy on the outside and extremely soft on the inside. I couldn’t get enough of the slightly sweet sauce. I felt like I could eat it forever.

“This is kind of nostalgic, Kiyo,” Rikyu commented, smiling.

“Yes,” Holmes responded, smiling back. “The last time we had this was at the Yasurai Festival some years ago, right?”

“What’s that?” I tilted my head.

“It’s a local festival held on the second Sunday of April. There are large umbrellas decorated with ikebana flower arrangements, and *oni* demons dance along to the music of flutes and drums. The purpose of the festival is to ward off epidemics. It’s one of Kyoto’s ‘Three Bizarre Festivals’—the other two being the Uzumasa Ox Festival and the Kurama Fire Festival,” Holmes explained as usual.

“I see.”

Sakyo goggled at him. “Rikyu told me you knew everything, but you really are a walking encyclopedia, huh?”

“Not at all,” Holmes replied. “My knowledge is extremely biased.”

“Huh. Well, knowledgeable people are all like that, right? They don’t know anything outside their field.” Sakyo grinned.

“Indeed,” Holmes said, grinning back.

*Biased? Really?* Rikyu and I looked at each other and tilted our heads.

After eating the roasted mochi in front of Imamiya Shrine, we had lunch at a nearby restaurant. Then it was time to go to Takagamine.

“Is Takagamine where Genko-an Temple is?” I asked in the car, remembering the time we went there.

Holmes shook his head lightly. “It is, but Rikyu’s grandfather’s estate seems to be in Kinugasa, a bit north of Kinkaku-ji Temple.”

*“Kinugasa...” If I recall correctly, Akihito said he used to live there with his family. It’s one of the rich neighborhoods in the city.*

Holmes turned north before the point where North Oji Street turns into West Oji Street. A quiet residential district came into view. All of the houses were large with wide yards. It didn’t look like Kyoto.

“Ah, over there, right?” Holmes asked. I followed his gaze to an unusual house where the first floor was Japanese style and the second floor was Western style.

“It looks nice, but strange, right?” I remarked.

Holmes nodded. “It resembles the building in Aomori’s Seibien Garden.”

“Oh!” Sakyo leaned forward, a sparkle in his eyes. “Not surprised you knew. Apparently my old man was fascinated by the bold fusion of styles there and copied it.”

“Grandpa’s greedy,” Rikyu continued. “He couldn’t give up one of the styles.”

“I see,” Holmes said. “Can I park in front of the house?”

“Yep, that’s fine,” Sakyo said. “Seems like my brothers’ cars are there already.” He looked at the two cars that were already parked. One of them was a black Benz and the other was a white, Japan-made hybrid car. Based on their cars, I assumed the brothers were quite different from each other.

The garden surrounding the half-Japanese, half-Western house was a traditional Japanese garden in every way. I looked around at the plum trees, cherry trees, and rock-encircled pond as I walked on the stepping stones. I could see a beautiful rock garden on the other side of the pond.

“This is a magnificent garden that makes the best use of the cold season,” Holmes said passionately.

“Yeah, it seems like Grandpa’s aesthetics are a match for the Yagashira family’s,” Rikyu murmured.

“He named you Rikyu, after all.” Sen no Rikyu was a master of the tea ceremony. He was devoted to the study of beauty and played a large part in elevating tea ceremony to an art form.

The person we were visiting had a refined aesthetic sense. After his wife passed away, he had children with three other women while remaining single.  
*Is Rikyu’s grandfather a twisted womanizer?*

There was a fancy nameplate in front of the house that said “Saito.” *So his surname is Saito...*

While I was staring at the nameplate, a middle-aged man wearing a suit appeared and bowed to us. “We’ve been expecting you. Please come this way,” he said, leading us inside.

“He’s the butler here,” Rikyu said, taking off his shoes, placing them on the rack by the wall, and putting on a pair of slippers.

*Wow, there’s even a butler!* Impressed, I put on slippers too and stepped into the hallway, which was polished to a shine. The open corridor allowed you to look out at the rock garden, like at a high-class shrine or temple. The tension in the air made me instinctively stand up straighter.

“Long time no see, Suzuki,” Sakyo said cheerfully. “How’s Dad been?”

“He’s been well,” the butler, Suzuki, replied.

We walked down the long hallway at a comfortable pace. *I thought Sakyo was a deadbeat, but he might be surprisingly influential.*

“Please wait in here,” Suzuki said, leading us into the drawing room at the end of the first floor. Even though the first floor of the house was Japanese style, this drawing room was Western style. There was a dark brown leather sofa and an olive-brown table and chest. One of the walls had a fireplace built into it. The windows were tall with elegant, shimmery curtains. Even though it was a lovely, tidy room, there wasn’t a single piece of art in it, which felt strange.

The two middle-aged men sitting on the sofa stood up when they saw us.

“Hey, big bro,” said one of them, a heavily built man in his forties. He gave off a very robust impression with his height, broad shoulders, and square face.

“Been a while, Tsukasa,” Sakyo replied.

“Long time no see, Sakyo,” continued the other man, bowing. He was slim, wore glasses, and seemed very intelligent—a stark difference from Tsukasa. He looked to be in his thirties.

“You haven’t changed at all, Kazuhiko.”

*Tsukasa and Kazuhiko must be Sakyo’s younger brothers. They all look nothing alike—is it because they have different mothers?*

I looked at the woman next to Kazuhiko, who was probably the appraiser he’d brought with him. She was maybe in her early thirties. She had long, wavy, chestnut hair tied in a ponytail, and she wore a simple black dress with a stylish necklace. She was very pretty and gave off the impression of a city woman.

“Oh!” The woman’s eyes widened upon seeing Holmes. “If it isn’t Kiyotaka. Long time no see.” She stood up straight and walked up to him.

“Hello, Keiko. You’ve returned to Japan, I see.” Holmes placed his hand on his chest and bowed.

“Yes, for the time being. I’ll be going back to New York soon. Kazuhiko happened to contact me while I was in the country, so that’s why I’m here today. But more importantly, I’m so glad to see you, Kiyotaka!” She placed her

hand on Holmes's shoulder and kissed him on the cheek as if it were completely natural. Holmes lightly returned the favor. It was like a greeting from a foreign movie, and I was stunned.

"Aoi, this is Keiko Fujiwara," Holmes said. "She's a curator at an art museum in New York."

I quickly bowed, still flustered. "N-Nice to meet you. I'm Aoi Mashiro, a part-timer at Kura."

So this woman was indeed the appraiser Kazuhiko brought. *What about Tsukasa...?* He didn't have anyone with him, which I found strange.

Rikyu must've been thinking the same thing, because he said, "Long time no see, Uncle Tsukasa. Hey, where's your appraiser?"

Tsukasa smiled and crossed his arms. "I don't know any appraisers that I trust enough for this, so instead, I asked a friend of mine. He's not a certified appraiser, but his eyes are as keen as one. He's on his way now."

"His eyes are as good as an appraiser's, huh? What's his name?"

"Hiroshi Tanaka."

"Hiroshi Tanaka... That's such a generic name that I don't know if I've heard of him or not." Rikyu shrugged.

Tsukasa laughed merrily.

As I was watching the two of them, Kazuhiko approached me and asked, "You're Aoi, right? We've met before. Do you remember me?" He smiled, eyes narrowing behind his glasses.

*We've met? Oh no, I don't remember him at all.*

Holmes chuckled as I was struggling for an answer. "It was at Yanagihara's birthday party last fall. Kazuhiko is quite the art enthusiast, and he's friends with Yanagihara."

"Oh!" I nodded, remembering the birthday party at the Yanagihara residence near Arashiyama. *Now that I think about it, there were a lot of people there. Kazuhiko must've been one of them.*

“Since the party was mostly elderly people and people from the art industry, your group stood out a lot,” Kazuhiko said. “I thought you were just a cute little high school girl, but then at the authenticity game, you displayed splendid appraisal skill. Oh, it was brilliant. I was moved that such a high school girl could exist. I’m looking forward to what you’ll accomplish in the future,” he said confidently, holding his hand out for a handshake.

I blushed, embarrassed, and shook his hand. “Th-Thank you.”

“I work as an accountant, but my office has a lot of works of art on display,” he continued, not letting go of my hand. “Please come by sometime for a chat. I’d love to show them to a young up-and-coming connoisseur.”

Holmes stepped forward and said, “I’d love to join in on that chat too.”

“There isn’t anything I can teach you, Kiyotaka.”

“Not at all. I’m still an appraiser-in-training. Please let me come along and admire your collection.”

“Oh, well, all right. I’ll be waiting.” Kazuhiko smiled and walked away.

Holmes turned to me and said, “Aoi, I’ve been thinking this for a long time...”

“Y-Yes?” I was intimidated by his strict eyes.

“You lack self-awareness. Please be careful.”

“Um, about what?”

“This is the problem right here,” he said flatly before turning away. He seemed to be in a bad mood, and I had no idea why.

Rikyu raised an eyebrow and said, “Hey, Aoi. I hope you’re not getting the wrong idea.”

“Wh-What?”

“He’s just saying to be careful because old guys love high school girls.”

“O-Oh.” *So that’s what it was.*

“Kiyo’s a gentleman, so all of the girls he knows misunderstand and think they’re special. It’s really annoying and I’m always thinking, ‘You wouldn’t be a good match for him, so don’t misunderstand.’ Oh, but I’m not saying this about

you or anything, Aoi.” He grinned.

*Uh, he’s definitely saying that to me. Well, there’s no need to worry. I’m not misunderstanding. It’s true that I did get the wrong idea in the past, though. As embarrassing as it is to admit, I can’t deny that. But now I know that I’m not special. The only thing different about me is that I work at Kura with him and we have a master-and-apprentice relationship. At any rate...*

“Rikyu, are you against Holmes dating someone?”

“Not at all. It’s just that Kiyo’s my idol, so I want him to be with someone suitable for him. Wouldn’t you be disappointed if an actor you admired got married to someone pathetic?”

“I-I guess.” *Yeah, that would be disappointing. So in other words, if Holmes went out with someone smart and beautiful, Rikyu wouldn’t have any complaints.*

“Oh my!” Keiko exclaimed. She was staring fervently at the trim on the fireplace.

“What happened?” Holmes asked, walking towards her. The rest of us followed him.

“Oh, nothing, but look at this.” She pointed at the design in the middle. To be specific, it was a family crest. It depicted leaves inside a circle.

“Ah, this is the ‘wisteria hanging in a circle’ crest,” Holmes remarked. *The design looked like leaves at first, not wisteria.*

“My family uses the same crest,” Keiko said.

Holmes nodded. “It’s common in Fujiwara and Saito families.” Both of those surnames have the character for “wisteria” in them.

“Oh right, this is a Saito family. Good on you for noticing, Kiyotaka!” Keiko stood up and asked, “What’s the Yagashira family’s crest?”

“Ours is the *mitsudomoe*.” The *mitsudomoe* is a set of three comma-like symbols arranged in a circle.

“Is that common in Yagashira families?” Keiko asked playfully.

Holmes smiled and said, “I’m not sure, but it’s common in shrines.”

“Hmm, does that mean your perception has something to do with yin and yang?”

“Of course not.” Holmes laughed cheerfully.

They seemed to get along really well. It felt like I couldn’t intrude.

“Are you jealous, Aoi?” Rikyu grinned mischievously.

“N-No. Would you approve of a smart and beautiful woman like Keiko, Rikyu?”

“Nah, too old.” Rikyu crossed his arms.

I stiffened. “Wh-What about his previous girlfriend, Izumi, then?” Izumi was both lovely and smart.

“She was pretty, but she seemed stupid, so I didn’t like her.”

I gaped at him. *H-He really doesn’t show any mercy.*

Rikyu glanced at me, arms still crossed, and said, “And you’re too normal. You’re not ugly and maybe you’ve got a decent head on your shoulders, but there are high school girls like you everywhere.”

“Oh.” It was actually refreshing to hear it said so bluntly.

Rikyu clicked his tongue. “Aren’t you going to get mad? I was pretty mean.”

“Well, you were right.” If anything, it was strange that he thought I was getting the wrong idea about Holmes.

Rikyu’s eyes widened in surprise.

“Don’t worry, I’m not getting the wrong idea. Holmes loves beautiful things more than anything, so there’s no way he’d ever choose me.” I looked at Holmes, the epitome of aesthetic sense. Whoever he chose was bound to be beautiful, just like his ex-girlfriend Izumi was. Besides, it seemed like he’d found a romantic interest recently—as much as it pained me to think about it.

“What? I thought you’d be more depressed. You’re kind of weird.”

“Huh? Am I?” To be honest, even though I insisted I wasn’t in love with him, I

felt uneasy whenever I saw him getting along with other women. *But I can't let myself cross that line.* Anguished, I cast my eyes down.

Then I heard the sound of footsteps coming from the hallway, and the door opened with a *click*. It was the butler we'd met earlier, Suzuki. He opened the door wider and bowed. A moment later, an elderly man with a cane slowly entered the room. He was wearing semiformal Japanese clothes and had grizzled hair. His face seemed gentle at first glance, but he had a sharp look in his eyes.

"Dad," the three sons greeted him.

"Sakyo, Tsukasa, Kazuhiko, and Rikyu, thanks for coming." The man grinned, placing both hands on the cane. "A warm welcome to the appraisers, too..." He looked at us and frowned when he saw me. "I allowed you to bring *appraisers*. I don't recall allowing you to bring outsiders. Why are you here, little lady?" he said coldly.

"Huh?" I stood there dumbfounded, not knowing what to say.

"Dad, I was the one who brought her," Sakyo said, covering for me.

"In that case, have her leave. Only my sons and the appraisers are needed here. Sorry, little lady, but you don't belong here," the man spat out, shooing me with one hand.

I looked down awkwardly.

Holmes took a step forward and said, "Hello, my name is Kiyotaka Yagashira."

"Oh, you're from Seiji's place, right?" the man replied. "I've been hearing about you here and there. I'm Ukon Saito. Nice to meet you." Ukon smiled happily at Holmes.

"This girl is one of our staff members, and just like me, she's an appraiser-in-training," Holmes continued. "With all due respect, I think her eyes are good enough to be here." He spoke firmly with a sharp gaze behind his smile.

Ukon smirked. "She's clearly just a high school girl. You're saying she has good eyes?"

"Grandpa actually hates women," Rikyu murmured from behind me. "And he

*really* hates high school girls.”

*I was deceived! Rikyu invited me knowing that his grandfather hated women—especially high school girls. Am I that annoying to him?* I was more weary than upset.

“Ukon, she is most certainly not unsuitable to be here. I would appreciate it if you could retract that statement.” Holmes spoke calmly with a smile, but I could tell that he was angry. Rather than being happy, I felt nervous.

“Um, it’s okay, Holmes. I felt out of place here too. I can take a bus home from here without having to transfer.” I bowed deeply to Ukon. “Sir, I’m very sorry for brazenly entering your house without a direct invitation.”

Ukon narrowed one eye, staring at me coldly. After a while, he mumbled, “Well, at least she knows her manners.” Then he asked, “What’s your name, little lady?”

“Aoi Mashiro.”

“All right then, Aoi. I’m going to test you.”

“Wh-What?”

“I’m going to see if you really do have good eyes like Kiyotaka claims.” He turned to Suzuki and whispered, “Bring *those* out.”

*Oh no, what have I gotten myself into?*

### 3

Suzuki immediately left the drawing room, and in his place, several attendants came in, pushing a cart.

“Please allow us to prepare the tea,” one of them said.

The attendants swiftly placed teacups and saucers on the long table and poured piping hot black tea into them. The large plate in the middle of the table had an assortment of baked sweets arranged nicely on it.

“The rest of you can feel free to sit down and make yourself at home,” Ukon said, beckoning everyone towards the chairs. They nodded and sat down, but

Holmes stayed standing beside me. “You sit down too, Kiyotaka,” Ukon insisted.

“No, I’m staying with her.”

Ukon’s eyes widened. “Fine, but don’t give her any hints.”

Holmes smirked. “Don’t worry, I won’t.”

“If you say so.”

Suzuki returned to the room, pushing a slightly larger cart. “Sorry for the wait.”

“Oh, here he is,” Ukon said.

There was something on the cart, covered in a white cloth. I couldn’t see what it was, but height-wise, it was about the size of a cup.

Ukon nodded, satisfied, and gently removed the cloth, revealing a row of tea bowls. Their shapes were different, but they were all cylindrical. Their colors ranged from pink, to black, to white, but the one thing they had in common was...

“These are Raku ware,” I murmured.

Ukon smiled and nodded. “Right, this is my family’s prized collection. These tea bowls were created by those who inherited Sen no Rikyu’s beliefs.” He looked down at them proudly.

There were eight tea bowls in all. Having *one* Raku tea bowl was already a feat in itself. I couldn’t believe that a normal household could own this many. I gulped, overwhelmed.

“There are many potters who create Raku tea bowls, but you’re aware of this, right?” Ukon looked at me with challenging eyes.

I nodded. “Yes, they’ve been inheriting the trade from the first generation to the fifteenth.”

“Right, from the first generation, Chojiro, down to the fifteenth generation, Kichizaemon. The collection here is a selection of tea bowls from those potters. You’re going to guess who made each one, Aoi. By the way, there could even be some from potters outside of the Raku family.” He grinned maliciously at me.

The others, who were watching from their seats, widened their eyes in surprise.

“Isn’t that too difficult?” Keiko asked.

“Yeah, that might be even harder than determining authenticity...” Kazuhiko murmured.

“Oh? The first-rate appraiser and the art fanatic don’t think they can do it?” Ukon looked at them coldly.

Keiko and Kazuhiko smiled wryly.

“No, of course *I* could do it,” Kazuhiko said.

*I was wondering what kind of test it was going to be, but I never expected I’d have to guess the potters of eight tea bowls...*

“A-Aoi...” Sakyo was flustered. *He must regret inviting me.*

I turned around and smiled. “I’ll be fine.”

Holmes smiled too and nodded.

“Y-You will?” Sakyo tilted his head.

I smiled again and said, “If it’s Raku ware, I can manage.”

“Huh?” everyone remarked. Sakyo furrowed his brow.

“B-But, um...”

“But what?” Sakyo asked.

“I know their names, but I don’t remember who belongs to which generation.” I shrank back, embarrassed.

Ukon and Suzuki looked at each other and snorted. “If you know the names, that’ll be fine,” Ukon said. “Here, I’ll even let you look at a book that has the generations written out—Suzuki, go get it.” He glanced at the butler.

“Yes, sir.” Suzuki opened one of the chest drawers and handed me a booklet that said “Raku Family Tree” on it.

*Founder: Ameya (Chinese, year of birth and death unknown)*

*First Generation: Chojiro (died 1589)*

*Second Generation: Jokei (died 1635)*

*Third Generation: Donyu (1599—1656)*

...

The booklet listed each potter's name in order.

"W-Wow, thank you! Now I really will be fine," I said.

"You think so?" Ukon smiled in amusement.

I took my white gloves out of my bag—the non-slip appraiser ones that Holmes gave me. I took a deep breath and bowed to the tea bowls. "I'll begin now." I stared closely at the tea bowls, picking them up and checking their bases. I examined their weights, coloring, and contours.

First, I pointed at the red tea bowl and the speckled black and white one. I checked the booklet and said, "I think these two are by the ninth generation of the Raku family, Ryonyu."

Ukon's eyebrow twitched. "What makes you think that?"

"Ryonyu is called the rejuvenator of the Raku family. The unique characteristic of his works is his unrestrained spatula use. The Raku family didn't use potter's wheels—they sculpted their works by hand. Ryonyu's way of using the spatula wasn't present in the other generations, so his lines are unique. Also, his tea bowls had low, thin bases.

"This light red tea bowl is also one of his characteristic colors. I'd guess that he created it in his later years of life. When he was younger, he made glossy, reddish-brown tea bowls instead," I explained, staring at the tea bowls.

No one said anything. It didn't seem like anything was wrong, so I immediately moved on to the next tea bowls.

"The two on the far sides are by the fourth generation, Ichinyu." I picked up one of them and recalled a conversation I had with Holmes while we were watching the store. Holmes had been teaching me about Raku ware and relevant potters ever since the beginning of the year. What I'd realized then was that all of the Raku potters were incredibly talented, which led to strong individuality. Everyone produced their own "color."

*“Ichinyu’s later works kind of remind me of Chojiro, the first generation,” I said.*

*“Indeed. When the Raku family reached the fourth generation, they cycled back. Ichinyu’s early works were influenced by his father, Donyu, but in his later years, coupled with the one hundredth anniversary of Sen no Rikyu’s death, he changed to a style resembling the first generation’s. This one is from that time period. Each and every tea bowl contains its potter’s sentiments,” Holmes explained, holding the tea bowl tenderly.*

“This one isn’t from the Raku family,” I continued. “It’s by Kakukakusai from the Omotesen family.” The tea bowl had a very unfettered style. The large, bold lines reminded me of that potter.

“This one is by the fourteenth generation of the Raku family, Kakunyu.” It had a clean, modern look, perhaps because the potter was born in the Taisho period. The other generations didn’t have that.

“Next, this one is by the fifteenth generation, Kichizaemon.” He was the current Raku heir, working since the Showa period. I could sense his pride and his strong desire to create beautiful art.

I examined the tea bowls lovingly as I picked them up one by one. At the Yagashira family’s New Year’s Eve party, I failed to appraise Ensho’s tea bowls. It was really frustrating. As a result, I studied Raku tea bowls so that I’d never get them wrong again.

It was time for the last one. “This one is by the third generation, Donyu, who’s still known as one of the greatest artisans to this day—wait, no.” Something felt off about what I said. I shook my head and looked closely at the tea bowl again. Its glossy black surface seemed almost as if it were emitting light. It was beautiful, but felt warped. It reminded me of the universe—of all of creation...

“Sorry, I take that back. Is this Koetsu Hon’ami?” I looked up, having finished my appraisal. I glanced at Ukon, who had an incredibly blank expression on his face. The room was completely silent. I suddenly felt nervous. “U-Um, was I wrong? Sorry, I’ll get ready to leave...” I wanted to run away.

“Brilliant!” Ukon exclaimed, loud enough that the whole house must’ve heard.

I flinched.

Ukon took my hand in both of his and vigorously shook it. “I apologize for my rudeness earlier, Aoi. I really am sorry. You’re amazing.”

“N-No, not at all...”

“In the past, I had to deal with a fraud who called himself an appraiser. I prepared this test to peel the mask off of his face. Naturally, he couldn’t identify the potters and slunk away.

“This time, I prepared the test to chase you out. However, you identified all of them—What a surprise, that such a high school girl could exist!” he said passionately, squeezing my hand.

“N-No, I still have a ways to go. It was Holmes—I mean, Kiyotaka, who taught me all of this. Besides, I almost got the last one wrong.” *Right, how could I almost mistake Koetsu Hon’ami for Donyu? Ukon should’ve failed me.* Despite that, he was showering me with praise. I looked down, ashamed.

“That’s not true,” Holmes said, walking up to me. “Aoi, it’s said that Donyu worked closely with Koetsu and was quite influenced by him. You really can sense Koetsu in some of his works. I think it’s amazing that, faced with all of those Raku tea bowls, you mistook it for Donyu for a moment before immediately realizing it was Koetsu.”

“I agree,” Ukon said. “Again, please forgive me for my rudeness.” He bowed.

“I-It’s nothing, really.” I bowed back.

“I’d like to officially welcome you here as an appraiser. Since Sakyo brought Kiyotaka, I assume they will form a pair.”

*Pair?* I tilted my head.

“In which case, I’d like you to partner up with Rikyu,” he continued.

I nodded, unsure of what he was talking about. Rikyu, who was sitting at the table, had an upset, “Whaaat?” look on his face.

“Now then, please have a seat, Aoi and Kiyotaka,” Ukon said, gesturing towards the table. “Tsukasa’s partner seems to be running late, so let’s have tea first.”

We nodded and sat down next to each other.

“Excuse me,” Suzuki said, pouring tea for us. The cup and saucer in front of me were white and dark blue with gold lines. It was a high-class color scheme and the lines were beautifully delicate.

“What a lovely cup,” I murmured, looking down at it.

“This is Meissen,” Holmes explained quietly. “I believe it’s a first-rate work from over a century ago, but its lasting beauty has prevented it from seeming aged. It’s an excellent piece.”

I choked. *I-I don’t think I can enjoy this tea while knowing that I’m drinking from a century-old Meissen cup. Ukon really does love beautiful things.* I looked at the cup again, impressed.

Holmes was staring at me with an intensity that made my heart pound. “Good work earlier, Aoi. You did an amazing job.”

“N-No, um, it’s only because of what you taught me, Holmes.”

“Not at all. It was a matter of aptitude.”

Kazuhiko, who was sitting across from us, nodded firmly and, leaning his upper body forward, said, “Yes, I agree. Watching you guess the potters correctly without difficulty was a stimulating experience.”

“I-It’s not that big of a deal.” I slumped my shoulders.

Holmes smirked. “Stimulating, you say?”

“Yes, very much so. It was stimulating to see such a sweet high school girl performing appraisals.”

“Thank you very much,” Holmes said. “Hearing our Aoi being praised makes me as happy as if it were myself.”

“You’re totally her teacher, huh?”

“Yes, indeed...”

I'd never been so openly complimented before, so I felt like running away.

After a bit of small talk, there was a knock on the door.

"Sir, Tsukasa's guest—Hiroshi Tanaka—has arrived," said one of the attendants.

"Let him in." Ukon nodded.

The door opened, revealing the keen-eyed man who Tsukasa invited to be his partner. I gaped when I saw him. He wore an ink-black kimono and cap, and his head was shaved bald, like a monk's. His calm smile and appearance were the picture of Sen no Rikyu—but there was no hiding the sharp glint in his narrow, almond-shaped eyes. I recognized this man, but not by the name Hiroshi Tanaka. I knew him as Ensho—the evil counterfeiter that Holmes was forced to admit was a genius.

"Sorry I'm late," Ensho said with a smile. "I'm Hiroshi Tanaka—Tsukasa invited me here."

*Is that his real name?* I looked at Holmes, only to see an incredibly cold look in his eyes. His icy aura made me hesitate to speak.

"Hey, Tanaka." Tsukasa walked up to Ensho with a wide grin. "Thought you weren't going to show up, since you refused at first. You really are a fickle guy."

"Forgive me, I got stuck in traffic."

"I know it's been a while, but what's with that look? You shaved your head? Did you become a monk or something? Or are you seriously trying to become an appraiser?"

"It suits me, eh?" Ensho chuckled.

"Yeah, it's not bad. Makes you look more trustworthy." Tsukasa laughed, then turned to Ukon. "Dad, I met Tanaka through work. He has really good eyes. You can even put him through that test if you want."

*What kind of job does Tsukasa have? I can't imagine it's something honest if they hired a counterfeiter.* My face stiffened.

"We're running low on time, so as long as you trust him, that's fine," Ukon replied. "Please take a seat."

Tsukasa and Ensho sat down.

Ukon, who was sitting at the head of the table with his arms crossed, cleared his throat and looked around at everyone. “Now then,” he began. The atmosphere in the room was tense. “Allow me to explain why I called my sons and grandson here today, and said, ‘If you’re not confident in your own eyes, you can bring an appraiser.’”

Everyone nodded silently.

“My wife passed away when I was still young. She had a weak heart, but she still wanted children, and we both hoped we would be blessed with them one day. She was very benevolent and often volunteered at the nearby kindergarten and elementary school so that she could interact with children.

“One time, my wife noticed some high school girls sitting on the ground in front of a store. She advised them, ‘It’s not good for girls to sit on the bare floor like that—your bodies will get cold.’ She was just trying to help, but the girls told her to shut up and stole her purse. That purse was important to her because it was a gift from me. She ran up to them, shouting, ‘Give it back!’ and the girls stood in a circle, throwing it among themselves and laughing at her. They made my wife run around until she had an attack and collapsed... That was what led to her passing.” He clenched his fists tightly as he spoke.

*Now I know why he hates high school girls. My heart ached for him. I’m sure he knows better than to lump them all in the same category, but he still can’t bring himself to accept them.*

“When my wife was on her deathbed, she said she wanted me to remarry and have children. But I had no intention of doing either of those things with anyone else. However, I realized that I would need offspring in order to keep the Saito family alive. I decided to take a clinical approach to having children and chose three women with different characteristics.

“Sakyo, your mother was very beautiful. Tsukasa, your mother was very athletic. And Kazuhiko, your mother was very smart. I told the three women that I wanted them to have children with my genes through artificial insemination, and I promised that they would be compensated and have their needs taken care of. I also asked them not to tell the children that they were

conceived this way.”

The three sons were lost for words at this point—it must’ve been shocking, of course. *But...I guess that’s why they all have different mothers. And since the mothers were different types of people, the sons are very different from each other too.*

“Technically, Sakyo is the eldest son, but I don’t see it that way. All three of you are equal in my eyes. I watched your growth to determine who would be the most fitting heir to the Saito family, but all of you have both strengths and weaknesses.

“Sakyo is good-looking, charming, and has a good eye for people, but it’s in his nature to avoid productive work, and he’s as spineless as a sea cucumber. Tsukasa is strong, decisive, and a good leader, but he’s reckless and sometimes loses sight of his surroundings. Kazuhiko is smart and accomplished, but he’s timid—another sea cucumber.” Ukon sighed.

Sakyo smiled cheerfully at the merciless assessment, while Tsukasa and Kazuhiko looked a bit hurt.

“So instead of choosing a ‘fitting’ heir, I decided to choose the one who understands the Saito family the most.” Ukon got up and stood in front of the fireplace.

“What?” Everyone tilted their heads in confusion.

“My estate contains many different treasures. Whoever can identify the Saito family’s *greatest* treasure will be named my successor,” he declared with a firm look.

Everyone’s eyes widened. They didn’t seem to know what to say in response to the unexpected turn of events.

“However, this would be difficult for you to determine by yourselves, which is why I allowed you to bring appraisers. They will be your eyes.” Ukon looked at Holmes and the rest of the appraisers. “But I would like the appraisers to follow this one rule: don’t tell my sons anything beyond what they ask about. You are simply to be their ‘eyes.’ When you’re asked for an appraisal, tell them why the item is valuable and answer only the questions that are asked. It’s up to my

sons to come up with their verdicts. If one of them answers directly with their appraiser's opinion, they will lose their right to their inheritance."

As they listened, everyone's expressions changed. Whoever could identify this family's "greatest treasure" among the countless valuables in this mansion would become the next heir—in other words, it was a test.

"So that's why you said we had to pair up," Rikyu said. "And my appraiser is Aoi, right?" He didn't seem too interested.

"U-Um, so we're not allowed to say, 'This item is better than the previous one,' then?" Keiko asked.

"Right," Ukon answered, nodding slightly. "Without making any comparisons, explain only what the item itself is. Refrain from giving any monetary values, too."

Keiko giggled. "That's difficult for us too, then."

"It sounds fun, though," Holmes said cheerfully. He took his white gloves out of his inner pocket and slipped them on.

Everyone slowly got up, and I headed straight to Rikyu.

"I don't really need any advice," he said. "I'm not interested in being the heir anyway. So even if I'm stuck teaming up with you, it doesn't matter." He nonchalantly bit down on a cookie.

*Rikyu's mean and does things his own way, but at least he doesn't seem to mind being paired up with me, so that's a relief.*

"We'll reconvene at 7 p.m. for dinner, and I'll hear your answers then," said Ukon. "All of the rooms are open except for my bedroom, my study, and Suzuki's office. Investigate the house to your heart's content."

I'd been wondering if it was okay to explore the house. Apparently we weren't allowed to enter those three rooms.

"Oh, and you can exclude the kitchen and restrooms," he continued. "I wouldn't put family treasures there."

Everyone nodded in understanding.

Suzuki opened the door wide and Ukon declared, “Begin!”

Everyone seemed to be holding back their excitement as they quickly walked out of the drawing room. *I’m sure they’re refraining from breaking into a run.* Before long, the only ones left in the room were me, Holmes, Rikyu, and Ensho.

Ensho dropped the calm mask he’d been wearing and looked at us with a confident grin. “Hello, Mr. Holmes. We meet again, eh?”

“Long time no see, ‘Hiroshi Tanaka.’”

“Aw, don’t call me that when you know it’s a fake name.”

“How many names do you have?”

“Who knows? ‘Hiroshi Tanaka’ is the one I use with Tsukasa. He said that none of the honest appraisers like him because his work is heartless, so no one would take this job. I turned him down at first too, ‘cause it sounded like a pain. But then he called me again and said, ‘My brother got Seiji Yagashira’s grandson—the guy from the rumors. I seriously need your help!’ Sounded like fun. I’m glad I get to face off against you.”

“What? I’m simply doing my job as Sakyo’s hired appraiser. I’m not going to get in a silly fight with a sham who calls himself a connoisseur.” Holmes chuckled. *Ensho really brings out Holmes’s immature side.*

Ensho’s eyebrow twitched. “Well, it’ll be funny to see a sham outwit a thoroughbred, that’s for sure.”

“Indeed, it would be. Do try your best.”

The terrifying aura they gave off as they smiled at each other gave me the chills. Meanwhile, Rikyu was watching them with starry eyes.

## 5

“I really wasn’t looking forward to today, but now I’m glad I came,” Rikyu said gleefully as we left the drawing room. “Things are getting interesting.”

I wondered how he could find that fearsome scene entertaining.

“Don’t make that face, Aoi,” he continued. “Have some fun!”

“I-I can’t enjoy this.”

“It’s like a battle between a tiger and a dragon! How often do you get to see an awesome showdown like this?”

“I guess, but... In that case, who’s the tiger and who’s the dragon?”

“Kiyo’s the dragon, of course. Hiroshi Tanaka a.k.a. Ensho is the tiger,” Rikyu said as if it were obvious.

“I see.” I gave a strained smile.

We soon came upon a closed door.

“This is Grandpa’s study. Gimme a sec, Aoi.” Rikyu knocked on the door.

“Oh, okay.” *Does he need to talk to Ukon?*

After receiving permission to enter, Rikyu went inside.

“You’ve sure grown, Rikyu,” came Ukon’s voice from the other side of the door. Startled, I peeped inside through the gap without thinking. Ukon’s attitude had changed completely. He beamed at Rikyu, hugging him and nuzzling his cheek. *U-Ukon?*

“I missed you, Grandfather!” Rikyu cheerfully hugged him back. He seemed like a different person from the one who previously called him “Grandpa” with a cold expression.

I watched their affectionate hug continue for a while before Rikyu gently moved away.

“I’m going to give it my best shot now,” Rikyu said sweetly.

“Good, good.” Ukon nodded. “Do your best, Rikyu.”

“Here I go!” Rikyu waved and exited the study. When he saw me standing outside the door with a blank stare on my face, he sighed loudly and said, “Ugh, catering to Grandpa is so much work.” He slumped his shoulders dramatically.

*Oh, so this was why he seemed depressed about coming here. His extreme two-facedness is an equal match for Holmes’s. But...*

“You’re nice, huh?” I said.

“Nice?”

“You didn’t have to do that if you didn’t want to. You went out of your way to visit him at his study and talk one-on-one with him. That was for his sake, right?” *No matter how halfhearted it was, he still did it because it would make Ukon happy. I think that’s kindness.*

Rikyu blinked in surprise, blushed slightly, and looked away. “What’re you talking about? I only did it because it benefits me when he’s in a good mood.” He started walking at a brisk pace, seeming a little angry.

I couldn’t help but smile as I watched him walk away. *I don’t think that was a lie, but he still is nice.*

“A-Anyway, setting aside the showdown for now, let’s start looking for the Saito family’s treasure.”

“Okay.”

All of the rooms on the first floor besides the drawing room were Japanese style. The long corridor had polished cypress flooring, and the open doors led to rooms with tatami floors. I peeked into one of the rooms and saw a large hall that resembled a Japanese inn’s banquet hall.

The sliding screen at the end of the hall was covered in an ink wash painting of a pine tree. The painted sliding screens I’d seen in the past depicted beautiful landscapes framed by the screens, but this one was different. It showed a slice from a larger scene, and it felt like the painting was bursting out from the screen. Placed in front of it was a gold leaf folding screen that contrasted with the ink wash painting. This one depicted a woman and beautiful flowers with soft lines. It was gentle yet showy.

The room was also decorated with hanging scrolls, jars, and vases. Ukon’s sons were asking their appraisers questions and getting their opinions. However, they were all whispering so that the others wouldn’t hear.

“Do you know what this bottle is, Aoi?” Rikyu asked, pointing at a white bottle with a floral design.

“Oh, that’s an old Imari bottle.”

“Is it real?”

“Yes, I think so. The flowers are very detailed and beautiful, and I think the blue lines are lapis lazuli.”

“When was it made?”

“U-Um, I’ve seen something with similar characteristics before, and that was from the late eighteenth century. It’s probably from around the same time.”

“You’re answering the questions, but you don’t seem very reliable...”

“I-I’m sorry.”

“Well, whatever.”

As we were talking, Tsukasa turned around and looked up at the painted sliding screen. “Hey Tanaka, what’s that gold folding screen and who made it?”

“Ah,” Ensho said. He smiled and whispered something in Tsukasa’s ear.

Rikyu saw their exchange and turned to look at me. “Hey, Aoi, do you know who painted that gold folding screen?”

“U-Um, I think it was Sekka Kamisaka.” I’d seen his work at an art museum with Holmes before. He drew women and animals such as birds, dogs, and cats with a gentle, round touch. What stood out to me was the clear affection in their eyes.

“Oh.” Rikyu didn’t seem too enthused by my answer.

Behind us, Tsukasa continued his questions. “What about the sliding screen behind it, Tanaka?”

“Well, it’s in good condition, but it’s pretty old. Around the sixteenth century, I’d say. This mansion has a lot of Rinpa stuff, and this sliding screen is done in that style, but there’s no signature or seal from the artist... It’s nice, but it’s anonymous.”

“Hmm.”

Ensho probably thought it didn’t matter if we heard that. He spoke quietly but not in a whisper, so everyone else was able to hear.

“He’s right,” Rikyu said. “The Saito family really seems to love Rinpa.” He

looked at the hanging scrolls now, having lost interest in the sliding screen.

Rinpa was a school of painting that was founded by Koetsu Hon'ami and developed by the Ogata brothers, Korin and Kanza. It was revived in Edo by Hoitsu Sakai. The name Rinpa refers to the school as well as the artists and works that use that style. In recent years, Kyoto has been celebrating the school's four hundredth anniversary.

"Hey, Aoi, what's this?" Rikyu pointed at an ink painting of cliffs and a waterfall. I'd never seen that style of painting before, so I didn't know who the artist was.

"S-Sorry, I don't know."

"Do you know if it's real or fake, then?"

"I think it's real..." I trailed off, ashamed and sorry that I wasn't confident in my answer. Paintings were extremely difficult for me because of my lack of experience. Holmes said that identifying counterfeit tea bowls and jars was easy because in three-dimensional works of art, the creator's individuality appears in the contours, and the works emit distinctive auras. Two-dimensional works are much more difficult.

*But that's just an excuse.* I cast my eyes down, embarrassed.

Rikyu smirked and said, "This is by Koson Ikeda, an artist from the late Edo period. He was the apprentice of Hoitsu Sakai from the Edo Rinpa school. The painting's definitely real. The Saito family *really* loves Rinpa, huh?" He looked at the hanging scroll with his hands on his hips.

"Wait, you knew the answer already?" I suddenly felt weak. He probably knew what the bottle and the folding screen were too.

He turned around with a mischievous grin. "Don't you remember? I'm your senior." His smile was sweet like an angel's, but I could only see him as a little devil.

"All right, let's go to the next room," he continued. "Everyone else already left." He started walking at a brisk pace, and I hurriedly followed.

The other rooms were also packed with treasures. *I think I can understand*

*why Ukon didn't want any non-appraisers here.*

However, there was a forgery hidden among them.

"I think this Kozeto-style jar is probably fake," I said.

"Yeah, I thought so too," Rikyu replied. "It's gotta be a trap."

We nodded at each other.

"Wh-What's with those kids?" Kazuhiko asked.

"Indeed..." Keiko replied.

I didn't notice their surprised stares at the time.

We climbed the U-shaped wooden staircase to reach the second floor, which was Western style. There was a large full-length mirror at the wide landing. Sakyo and Holmes were standing there, looking at the mirror with great interest.

"What's this, Kiyotaka?" Sakyo asked. "It wasn't here before."

"It's a mirror with an oak frame. The simple design is stylish but not overly gaudy. It's likely from England. It doesn't seem too old—I'd say it's from around the Meiji period."

"Things from the Meiji period aren't 'old,' huh? That's the world of antiques for you." Sakyo chuckled.

"When you climb up these stairs from the Japanese-style first floor, you're greeted at this landing by an English full-length mirror. Even though the frame is from England, it doesn't feel out of place in a Japanese room. I think this mirror acts as a hint that the second floor is going to be completely different in culture. After seeing this mirror, guests can accept the Western-style second floor without being confused," Holmes explained, staring at the mirror.

Rikyu and I looked at the mirror from behind him and nodded in understanding. *Maybe that's also why the stairs are U-shaped and made of dark wood—to properly unite this house's fusion of aesthetics.*

"Oh, perhaps I said too much." Holmes raised his index finger in front of his

mouth.

“Nah, I asked about the mirror, and you told me about it. Thanks.” Sakyo smiled at him.

Holmes and Sakyo continued up the stairs. I walked behind them, looking at them nonchalantly until I sensed a piercing stare from above me. I looked up and saw Tsukasa with his elbow on the second-floor railing, glaring down at us. He disappeared the moment I made eye contact with him. *What was that sharp glare about? His eyes were on Sakyo and Holmes. Is he worried that they'll be able to find this house's treasure? Right, even though it feels like a game, it's definitely a test to choose the next heir. I just realized how much responsibility we took on by getting involved.*

I still felt uneasy from Tsukasa's glare when we reached the second floor. The corridor here was covered in dark red carpet. The walls were white, and the ceiling was dark brown. I could see pillars and doors. There were three doors along the wall and one large door at the end of the hallway, all of which were open. In other words, the second floor had four rooms—three guest rooms and one drawing room. The guest rooms had treasures like chandeliers, paintings, and water jugs, but...

“It looks like all of the paintings in the guest rooms are lithographs,” I remarked.

“Yeah, these are prints,” Rikyu replied.

There wasn't anything awe-inspiring in the guest rooms. *Then again, I can't imagine he'd put the family treasure in a guest room. If it's anywhere, it'd be in the drawing room, right?*

We left the room as Kazuhiko and Keiko were entering. They immediately went to the ceramic doll in front of the chest of drawers and began whispering to each other.

“This is Meissen,” Keiko said.

“Hm, she's holding a folding fan. Is she a noblewoman?”

“Yes.”

Rikyu and I watched them indifferently as we left the room. We then headed for the drawing room at the end of the hallway.

“Man, Kiyo really is amazing, huh?” Rikyu said out of nowhere.

“Huh?” I looked at him.

“Maybe other appraisers can do it too, but Kiyo’s appraisals explain the creator’s thoughts and the owner’s feelings, right? And he says them in a way that goes straight to your heart. I watched Keiko’s appraisals, but they were too businesslike and didn’t strike a chord at all.”

I nodded in agreement. “You’re right.” *Holmes’s words contain a vast world. Come to think of it, Akihito said something similar before: “I’m hopeless when it comes to complicated stuff, but Holmes’s words go straight to my heart.”*

“He’s young, good-looking, *and* he’s a genius. People get jealous of him, you know? Uncle Tsukasa was glaring at him like crazy.” He chuckled. *So he noticed too.* “Well, that’s why I have to protect him.” He clenched his fist.

I held back the urge to laugh. Rikyu was as delicate and fair as a girl, but he thought it was up to him to protect Holmes. *He has a cute side, huh?* I smiled to myself as we entered the drawing room.

The room was as big as the one on the first floor. Sakyo, Holmes, Tsukasa, and Ensho were already there, standing wordlessly in front of something in the center of the room. I craned my neck to see what was causing this tense atmosphere and gasped when I saw it. The thin vase was fifty centimeters tall. Its outline curved gently out at the shoulders and then narrowed in a sharp diagonal from the body downwards. It was indigo with flowers and two cranes. The vivid coloring and elaborately painted beauties of nature overwhelmed me with their exquisiteness.

“K-Kiyotaka, this is something incredible, right?” Sakyo asked, before quickly correcting his question to, “Uh, I mean, what is this?”

Holmes opened his mouth to speak without looking away from the vase. “This is a cloisonné vase. It’s a type of art that originated from the Yuan dynasty. In the past, it was used to pay tribute to the imperial court, and it was favored by

empresses and consorts. This vase is likely from the Qing dynasty.” He continued to stare at the vase as if he were trying to engrave its beauty into his eyes. I didn’t blame him—we’d encountered a priceless treasure.

Since the appraisers were prohibited from saying anything unnecessary, Holmes’s reaction was rather lackluster. However, it was still clear that he was excited to be in the presence of such a wonderful work of art. We weren’t allowed to talk about prices, but it was undoubtedly worth hundreds of millions of yen. The other items were wonderful too, but this one was clearly the most valuable of them all. *Is this the family treasure, then?*

Tsukasa furrowed his brow and whispered, “It’d be too easy if this was it.”

“Tribute to the imperial court, huh? Yeah, I can see that.” Sakyo nodded and looked around the room. “Oh, there’s a sword here!” His eyes lit up and he walked over to the sword next to the wall. Rikyu and I followed him.

The Japanese blade was displayed proudly on a sword stand, in a way that suggested it could also be the family treasure. *I don’t know much about swords, but this must be a longsword.* It felt strange seeing it on the Western-style second floor. *It’d fit in more on the first floor...*

“Kiyotaka, do you know what this sword is?” Sakyo asked.

“It’s not my specialty, so I may be lacking in knowledge, but...” Holmes picked up the sword with his gloved hands and slid it out of its sheath. The polished blade was as reflective as a mirror and as beautiful as the moon on a clear night. We gulped upon seeing it.

“The crest on the sheath is a Chinese bellflower... This is likely the work of the swordsmith Chikakage from Osafune, Bizen.”

“Is he famous?” Sakyo asked.

“Yes, his swords are considered National Treasures and Important Cultural Properties.”

“Huh. Well, apparently the Saitos were once a samurai family. I’m a pacifist, so I’m not into weapons!” Sakyo laughed.

“Hmm, a sword...” Tsukasa grinned boldly. He then noticed the wooden box

next to it. “Huh, what’s this?”

Ensho picked up the box, opened the lid, and froze. His eyes widened at the small, lustrous white porcelain pot inside.

Tsukasa took the box from him and took out the pot, saying, “What? This is a pretty plain pot. What do you think, Tanaka?” He turned around, but Ensho didn’t say anything. “Huh?” He furrowed his brow.

Sakyo brought his face up to the pot, his eyes glittering. “It’s simple, but it’s really pretty. Kiyotaka, what is this?”

“This is white porcelain from the Joseon dynasty. Confucianism was brought to Korea in the fourteenth century, and in accordance, the color white became highly valued. Eventually this white porcelain was designated for the king’s use, and ordinary civilians were prohibited from using it.”

I looked at the pot while listening to Holmes’s explanation. It was round, pure white, and small enough to fit snugly in one’s hand. Its elegant appearance reminded me of the Chinese celadon I saw at the Yagashira estate, which was also considered an extremely valuable treasure. This pot was probably worth quite a sum as well.

“Another favorite of the royals, huh?” Sakyo said in a carefree tone. “It feels like the complete opposite of the cloisonné ware, which was obviously flashy.”

Ensho said nothing. Keiko, who’d just entered the drawing room with Kazuhiko, exclaimed, “Wow, a cloisonné jar!”

## 6

After that, we went back to the first floor, then revisited the second floor, looking around the mansion again. We decided to take a short break, and I sat down on a bench in the corner of a hallway.

There were many treasures in this house: the old Imari bottle, the Sekka Kamisaka folding screen, the Koson Ikeda hanging scroll, the Qing dynasty cloisonné vase, and the Joseon dynasty white porcelain. *If it’s simply a matter of price, then the cloisonné vase would win. But I doubt that’s what Ukon means.* I placed my hand on my forehead as I mulled over it.

“Your name’s Aoi, right? Are you tired?” came a female voice from above me.

Surprised, I looked up and saw Keiko smiling at me.

“May I sit here?” she asked.

“S-Sure.”

“Thanks.” She grinned and sat down next to me. “I was really surprised by your appraisal skills. You’re amazing for your age!”

“Oh, it’s nothing. I only knew because Holmes—I mean, Kiyotaka—taught me.”

“Kiyotaka, huh? Seiji was always saying he had a long way to go, but at some point, he became good enough to teach people, I see.” She smiled gently. Her calm expression made me feel uneasy.

“Do you know Kiyotaka well?” I asked.

“Not that well. We’ve known each other for...a few years? I met him when he came to New York with Seiji, and he was eighteen at the time. Oh, but I’ve known Seiji for a long time. He was close with my father, who was also in the art industry.”

I nodded absentmindedly.

“Kiyotaka and I hit it off right away. He even stayed over at my place.” She glanced at me and smiled.

“H-He did?”

“Yes. He, Seiji, and I were having dinner together, and while we were enthusiastically talking away, Seiji said he was going back to the hotel first. Kiyotaka and I kept talking until the restaurant closed, and then continued at my place... He basically didn’t get any sleep at all—”

I stood up without thinking, not wanting to listen anymore. “S-Sorry, I have to go back to Rikyu now.” I bowed and left in a hurry. In the corner of my eye, I could see Keiko smiling suggestively. *Ahh, I didn’t want to feel uneasy about this kind of thing anymore!*

I went to one of the windows in the second-floor drawing room, looked down

at the garden, and sighed.

*“He basically didn’t get any sleep at all...”*

Keiko’s words swirled around in my head. I leaned my forehead against the wall and wondered, *why did she say that to me so openly? Is she telling me not to get closer to him? If that’s the case, why is everyone trying to drive nails into my heart? I already know! I’m already drawing a line between us. I’m already stopping myself...from liking Holmes more.* I felt my eyes well up as I continued to stand there, forehead against the wall.

“Are you all right, Aoi?” came Holmes’s voice from behind me.

I turned around, but Holmes wasn’t there. It was Ensho with an amused smile on his face.

“Tried to mimic him. Did it work?” He grinned.

I stared at him. Thinking about it, even though his voice was different, he spoke in the exact same tone as Holmes, so I didn’t doubt it at all.

“Are you feeling unwell, Aoi?” he asked worriedly, continuing to imitate Holmes.

I felt chills run down my spine. “P-Please stop that.” I stepped backwards and my back pressed against the wall. *He really is scary.* “I-I was just thinking too much about the treasure and got stuck.”

“Hmm.” He didn’t seem interested in my answer. I could tell that he was thinking, “You’re just a high school girl. What would you know about treasure?”

My annoyance turned into fear as he slowly walked towards me. I froze—*Rikyu called him a tiger, and he might’ve been right.*

“U-Um...”

“Yes?”

“You were really surprised when you picked up the white porcelain, right?”

Ensho stopped and put his hands on his hips. “Yeah. Never saw anything like it before.”

“Really?”

“Hey, you’re Mr. Holmes’s woman, right?” He changed the topic with a smile.

I immediately looked up and said, “N-No, I’m not. I-I’m just a part-timer.”

“He told you to say that, right? Oh right, I liked what you did at that party. When you jumped out at us, I thought for sure you were gonna defend Mr. Holmes, but instead you went, ‘Cut it out, both of you!’” He snickered.

Embarrassed, I silently cast my eyes down. Akihito had said something similar.

“Didn’t know why he’d be with an average girl like you, but you’re a good kid, huh?”

“L-Like I said, we’re not—”

Ensho stared into my eyes and twisted his face into a grin as if he couldn’t hold back his amusement. “Oh, I get it! You’re a virgin, eh?”

“Wh-What?” I goggled at his blatantly inappropriate remark. *What about me gave him that impression?*

“That greedy, egotistical guy must treasure you a lot to keep you around without laying a hand on you. Or maybe you’re too wary of his tricks, so you’re acting all high and mighty? Your body isn’t anything special, so if you’re too protective of it, he’s not gonna like you.” He spoke mockingly, but now he quickly wiped his sneer off his face and turned around—the *real* Holmes was at the door.

Before I could even react, Holmes swung his leg at Ensho. I heard the dull sound of it making contact, but Ensho had blocked the kick with his arm.

“A high kick out of nowhere? What a violent child. My arm’s throbbing!” Ensho winced in pain, his right arm still held up.

“You were so rude that my leg slipped.” Holmes lowered his leg. His lips curved up, but his eyes weren’t smiling.

“You call that *slipping*? You really act faster when it comes to *her*, eh?”

Holmes raised an eyebrow. “You seem to be misunderstanding. Aoi and I are not in a relationship.”

“So you say.” Ensho snorted.

“No, as you said, I’m a ‘greedy and egotistical’ man,” Holmes said, smiling as if to imply, “If we were dating, I would’ve laid hands on her a long time ago.” Apparently that smile was more convincing than any words could’ve been, because Ensho seemed to accept it. On the other hand, I was looking down at the floor, too embarrassed to lift my face.

“Tanaka?” came Tsukasa’s voice from the hallway.

“Well, I’m being called, so bye.” Ensho gave his usual grin and started to leave. “Oh right,” he said, turning around. “I know what the Saito family’s treasure is.” He smirked confidently at Holmes.

“Oh? I know too, of course.”

“Really?”

“Yes. I don’t know if Sakyo has figured it out or not, though.”

“Sure seems like Tsukasa did.”

“Did you give him a hint even though we’re not allowed to?”

“I would never. We just make good partners, that’s all. See ya.” Ensho left the room.

Once he was out of sight, Holmes turned around and put his hands on my shoulders. “Are you all right, Aoi? Did he do anything bad to you?”

“I-I’m fine. He said rude things, but that’s all.”

“I truly can’t believe how offensive that man is.” Holmes sighed loudly.

Another wave of embarrassment washed over me when I remembered that Holmes heard what happened. “I-I thought I was used to inappropriate comments because of Akihito, but Ensho’s were so direct that I was shocked speechless.” My cheeks were burning up, but at the same time, Ensho’s “So you’re acting all high and mighty?” replayed in my head and I bit my lip.

“E-Ensho wasn’t completely wrong though,” I murmured.

“What?” Holmes frowned.

“Acting too high and mighty... That might be why I got dumped.”

“Huh?”

“B-Before I moved to Kyoto, there was a time when my ex tried to force himself on me. I guess he was impatient. It was so sudden, and I was scared, so I pushed him away and said, ‘No! Stop!’ Naturally, he seemed really hurt and things got awkward between us. Right after that, I had to move to Kyoto and we broke up.

“When I found out he was going out with my best friend, what I really thought was, ‘It’s only natural that I got dumped after hurting him with that harsh reaction.’ I couldn’t stop wondering why I refused him even though I loved him, and why I couldn’t have at least done it more gently. Maybe Ensho’s right.” As I spoke, my eyes welled up and I sniffled.

*“Your body isn’t anything special, so if you’re too protective of it, he’s not gonna like you.”*

It felt like the scab over my scar had been ripped off. Even though it was so long ago, it still stung. *This whole time, I’ve been blaming myself in the back of my head: “It has to be because of how I reacted that day.”* I looked down, trying to hold back my tears.

Holmes drew me into a tight hug. Not knowing what just happened, I widened my eyes against his chest. I could feel the pounding of my heart throughout my whole body.

“That’s not true, Aoi. You did nothing wrong,” he said gently, caressing my head with one of his large hands. “It’s not your fault you refused him out of surprise, and I don’t think it’s his fault either for being nervous that you were moving away. I believe that human relationships all come down to fate, and there’s nothing you can do about that. Even if you hadn’t hurt him that day, I don’t think the end result would’ve changed. It’s the same for me. I thought a lot about what happened with Izumi, but even if she hadn’t betrayed me, the result would’ve been the same.”

Holmes gently let go of me and peered into my face. “And most of all, if he really was the kind of man who’d choose to break up with you over that, then you were better off without him. So please don’t blame yourself.” He took his handkerchief out of his inner pocket and gently wiped my tears. My heart raced at how close his face was to mine, and I felt dizzy.

“Holmes...” I murmured.

“Oh!” His eyes widened. “S-Sorry for hugging you out of nowhere. I criticized Ensho, but my conduct is just as inappropriate.” He hurriedly took his hand off my shoulder and looked away, flustered. I was surprised to see his pale skin so flushed.

“N-No, it’s fine.” I shook my head. Apparently he’d done it unconsciously. *He really is...seductive.*

“I’m truly sorry. When people are desperate, they do absurd things.”

“Desperate...?”

“Er, well... I didn’t want to let you cry,” he murmured, looking down. My heart skipped a beat. “It’s embarrassing considering the cameras. So was kicking Ensho.”

“Wait, cameras?”

“Yes.” Holmes looked around the room. “So you didn’t notice. There are cameras set up around this house. Our voices are probably being monitored too.”

“S-So that the treasures won’t get stolen?”

“That too, but I’m guessing that they’re making sure the appraisers aren’t giving any forbidden hints. Suzuki’s office would have monitors in it.”

“Th-That’s really thorough.”

“It’s a test to choose who will inherit this mansion. Of course they’d be thorough.”

“That makes sense.” I nodded, looking at the cloisonné vase in the middle of the room.

“So, please be aware of the cameras. Even if no one else is in the room, try not to show yourself in an embarrassing state. Although it’s not my place to say that.”

“Um... I know I’m hardly refined, but even I’m not going to act like a slob in someone else’s house just because no one’s around,” I mumbled, glaring at

him.

Holmes's eyes widened. "A slob..." He covered his mouth and turned around. "N-No, I didn't think you would."

"Really...?"

"Really. I'm just saying...to be careful," he said hesitantly.

*What he meant was that, even if no one's in the room, I shouldn't yawn loudly, pick my nose, or sit, jump, and roll on one of the fluffy beds in the guest rooms, right?* "Okay, I'll be careful." I nodded firmly.

Holmes relaxed his expression, relieved. He straightened his back and said, "Shall we go, then?"

"Um..." I looked up at him.

"Yes?"

"H-Have you gone out with Keiko?" I asked on the spur of the moment.

Holmes gaped. "With Keiko? No, not at all."

"B-But you stayed at her house, right? That's what she told me."

"Oh." Holmes nodded in understanding. "Yes, that's true. She said she had a rare collection of art references so I visited her house to see them. Those books were truly fascinating. She said she couldn't lend them out, so I stayed there reading them for as long as time allowed." His eyes sparkled as he spoke. "I basically didn't get any sleep at all because I was so absorbed in them. I was sitting on her couch for two days straight. It was exhausting but fulfilling. I feel bad for causing her trouble though." He shrugged his shoulders sheepishly.

*He spent two days reading a rare collection of art references without sleeping...?* Normally it'd be unbelievable, but since it was Holmes, it could've been true.

"Th-That's what it was?"

"To be honest, during that time, she indirectly tried to tempt me, but I pretended I didn't notice."

"What?" I squeaked. "Wh-Why? Did you want to read the books so badly that

you couldn't waste any time?"

"There was that, but also, I won't have intimate relationships with people in the same industry if I'm not going to date them. It'd become troublesome in the future," he said nonchalantly.

*He really is blackhearted.* I was shocked, but at the same time, I understood. *Keiko might've mistaken me for Holmes's girlfriend like Ensho did. It's possible that she remembered when Holmes gave her the slip and said those suggestive things to me out of frustration.*

"E-Er, Aoi... Did it bother you that I might've had a relationship with Keiko?"

"N-No, it's just that she told me that and it felt like she was trying to discourage me. Plus, you two casually kissed each other on the cheek when you met today."

"That was just a greeting. She's lived overseas."

"I-I know it was, but you seemed really accustomed to it despite being a Kyoto guy. You're so seductive, huh?" I said without thinking, flustered. I lightly hit him on his arm.

Holmes looked away and mumbled, "You're the seductive one, Aoi."

I froze. "Huh?"

## 7

At 7 p.m., all of the pairs returned to the first-floor drawing room, where the table was set for dinner. It was an orthodox French menu: pumpkin soup, steamed sea bream seasoned with salt and sake, cooked vegetables, sauteed lamb, and salad. Since the post-meal ceremony would determine the heir, no one drank alcohol, to keep their heads clear.

After dinner, we were given some time to settle down. Then Ukon stood up, saying, "Now then." Everyone stopped talking and sat up straight. Ukon walked over to the armchair and slowly sat down. As if on cue, Suzuki distributed pens and white cards to the three sons, Sakyo, Tsukasa, and Kazuhiko.

Ukon rested his chin in his hands and said, "Write on that card what you think

is the Saito family's treasure and give it to Suzuki. Make sure you don't let anyone see your answer." Despite his smile, the room was tense.

*Oh, I see. This way, no one can change their mind after hearing the others' opinions.*

The three brothers wrote their answers on the white cards, hiding them from the others, and handed them to Suzuki. I noticed Tsukasa and Ensho exchange looks for a second. Ensho stated that he knew what the treasure was. *The appraisers aren't allowed to say the answer. Did Ensho follow the rules? I really can't believe that he would.*

*What is the Saito family's treasure, anyway? It surely isn't just a matter of monetary value... I feel bad for not being more useful as Rikyu's partner.* I glanced at Rikyu, who was sitting next to me. *Wait, come to think of it, why didn't Rikyu get a card?*

"You need to get a card too, Rikyu," I said.

He shook his head, saying, "I withdrew. I told him, 'I'm only sixteen, so I don't even know if I want to inherit the Saito family yet.'"

"O-Oh, I see." *It would be so incredible to inherit the treasures in this house, but he just withdrew?*

"Besides, I think I could become the heir if I wanted to," he mumbled.

"Huh?"

"I know what the Saito family's treasure is, and I have the right 'heart.' But the last thing I want is to become the heir right now and lose my freedom." He sipped his tea with a relaxed smile.

*He really thinks differently, as you'd expect from Holmes's younger brother figure.*

"First, Kazuhiko," Ukon said in a quiet but clear voice. Kazuhiko stiffly stood up and walked up to him. At the same time, Suzuki handed the card to Ukon.

"The cloisonné vase? Why did you choose this?" Ukon asked with a sharp glint in his eye.

Kazuhiko timidly shrank back and looked down. "I-I just thought so because

it's definitely the most valuable thing in this house." He looked back up and declared firmly, "I was extremely impressed when I saw it."

"I see." Ukon smiled happily. "I understand your thought process. You may be seated." He looked at the table and said, "Next, Tsukasa."

Tsukasa eagerly stood up, approached Ukon with a confident stride, and bowed.

Ukon received the card from Suzuki and murmured, "Sword." He looked at Tsukasa.

"Yes. The sword on display in the second-floor drawing room is our family's treasure," Tsukasa declared.

"What's your reasoning?"

"The Saito family's ancestors were samurai. We were told not to forget the 'heart of the warrior.' In other words, that sword is proof of the family's pride as warriors. Plus, normally a Japanese sword would be on the Japanese-style first floor. Instead, it was in the second-floor drawing room, displayed in a way that felt like you didn't want to get a single speck of dust on it. It seemed like it was being treated as a National Treasure," Tsukasa explained confidently.

*That means Ensho decided on that longsword as the Saito family's treasure. A symbol of inheriting the heart of the warrior—it's very convincing.*

Ukon smirked. "I see. The 'heart of the warrior' part is very like you. The rest was a hint from your partner, I guess."

Tsukasa's face went bright red and Ensho grinned.

"N-No, he didn't give me any hints."

"Well, all right," Ukon said. "I'll accept that it was your opinion."

Rikyu chuckled at them. "So close," he murmured.

*So close? What does he mean by that? It's the right answer, but it doesn't count because Ensho helped too much?*

"Next, Sakyo," Ukon continued.

"Okay." Sakyo nodded and walked up to him.

Ukon looked at the card and furrowed his brow. “Explain yourself, Sakyo,” he said, holding it out. The card was blank—Sakyo hadn’t written anything.

“I think that the Saito family’s treasure isn’t an object, so I didn’t write anything.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“Dad needed to have descendants—to the point where he used medical procedures to get it done. That means that the Saito family’s lineage is the treasure. Everyone with the Saito blood running through their veins is the treasure—me, Tsukasa, Kazuhiko, and Rikyu,” Sakyo explained calmly.

“Oh?” Ukon rested his chin in his hands, seeming intrigued. “How did you arrive at that conclusion?”

“There was that big mirror at the landing on the stairs leading to the second floor. That wasn’t there last time I came. When I looked at it...I saw myself with Rikyu and Kazuhiko behind me. It made me wonder if Dad’s treasure was us, the people reflected in the mirror.”

Everyone’s eyes widened. *Come to think of it, Sakyo seemed really interested in the mirror.* Apparently he was looking at the people reflected in it and thinking, “The treasure could be us.” Despite his carefree attitude, he could’ve been the one to discover the truth. I looked at him, impressed.

“It was you, right? Bastard!” came a voice from behind me. Startled, I turned around to see Tsukasa grabbing Holmes by the collar.

“What are you talking about?” Holmes asked, confused.

“Don’t play dumb! There’s no way our idiot brother would come up with something like that. You told him!” Tsukasa tightened his grip.

“Ts-Tsukasa!” Everyone was in a panic. Meanwhile, Ensho alone was grinning in amusement, resting his chin in his hands.

“No, I simply answered his questions in my own way,” Holmes said, smiling nonchalantly.

“Yeah right!” Tsukasa retorted. “I heard you say, ‘I said too much’ at the mirror. How would a youngster like you know so much anyway? You must’ve

coaxed the info out of our old man beforehand. Despite what he says, Sakyo's his favorite. Isn't this a rigged game?"

"Absolutely not. First of all, even if he did want to make Sakyo the heir, he wouldn't need to rig anything. Sakyo is the eldest son to begin with, so he could've just said, 'My heir will be my eldest son, Sakyo.'"

The rest of us smiled wryly, knowing that Tsukasa wouldn't be able to argue against that.

"E-Either way, you're fishy. You clearly whispered more to him than you were supposed to. Get out of this house!" Tsukasa raised his right fist.

"Eek!" Keiko screamed, covering her eyes.

"Stop that, Tsukasa! Kiyotaka really didn't say anything he wasn't supposed to!" Sakyo ran up to Tsukasa and grabbed his arm.

"Shut up!" Tsukasa shouted. Due to the difference in their builds, he easily flung Sakyo away.

I panicked, not knowing what to do. Beside me, Rikyu heaved a heavy sigh. "This kind of thing attracts jealousy and spite, huh?"

"What?"

It happened in the blink of an eye—Rikyu got out of his chair, swiftly ran up to them, grabbed Tsukasa's right arm, and slammed him to the ground with a one-armed shoulder throw. It was so fast that Tsukasa looked dumbfounded as he lay sprawled out on the floor.

"Sorry about my uncle, Kiyo," Rikyu said.

"No worries. I couldn't exactly throw him myself, so you did me a real favor. Thanks, Rikyu." Holmes straightened his wrinkled shirt.

Everyone else was standing stock-still, amazed that Rikyu, with his small stature, could throw a large man like Tsukasa so easily.

"R-Rikyu, when did you become that strong?" Sakyo asked hesitantly.

Rikyu pouted. "What? Didn't I tell you that I started doing martial arts because Kura's owner kept nagging me to? Right after I met him, he was like,

‘You’re all frail like a girl, so you need to toughen up.’”

“Y-Yeah, you did, so I knew that you’d gotten sturdier. I didn’t think you’d become *that* strong.”

“What? But I was studying judo in France.”

“H-Huh? Weren’t you studying art?”

“That too, of course.” Rikyu straightened his back. “The owner once said to me, ‘Martial arts aren’t for attacking people—they’re for training your body and protecting the people you love. Since you’re an only child, you have to get stronger so that you can protect your mother.’ So that’s what I did, not just for Mom, but for Kiyo too. But Kiyo does martial arts too, so becoming strong enough to protect him meant becoming stronger than him, and it was really hard.”

*Rikyu wasn’t kidding when he said he was going to protect him.*

Holmes chuckled. “Indeed. I doubt I’d be a match for you now.”

“Wait, but why is Kiyotaka so important to you?” Keiko asked. “C-Could it be...?” she blushed, perhaps imagining something she shouldn’t have.

Rikyu grimaced. “Can you not? I’ll have you know that my feelings towards Kiyo are noble. He’s like my lord. I want to serve him for the rest of my life,” he declared passionately, placing his hand on his chest.

The rest of us exchanged glances, not knowing how we were supposed to feel about that.

“Hahaha!” Sakyo laughed. “Even though you’re in high school now, you still have that eighth-grader syndrome.”

“D-Don’t call it that!”

“Yes, Rikyu will likely have it forever.”

“Not you too, Kiyo!” Rikyu turned bright red.

Everyone laughed. Meanwhile, Tsukasa was still awkwardly lying on the floor.

Ukon, who had been watching in silence, clapped his hands and said, “Brilliant! Kiyotaka, I humbly apologize for my idiotic, greedy son. I’ll be sure to

scold him later.” He bowed.

“It’s fine,” Holmes said, holding up a hand. “Tsukasa must’ve been desperate. He thought that Sakyo had the right answer, even though that wasn’t the case...”

“Huh?” Everyone’s eyes widened.

“Sakyo’s answer was wrong?” Tsukasa asked in surprise as he got up.

“Yes, you disgrace to the Saito family.” Ukon glared coldly at Tsukasa before shifting his gaze to Sakyo. “Sakyo, what you said was very true. The Saito family treasures its descendants. However, I did mean for you to find an object—not people. It wasn’t a trick question.”

“O-Oh, I see. Now I feel embarrassed for saying that so confidently.” Sakyo blushed and scratched his head.

“What’s the treasure, then?” Keiko asked, frowning and tilting her head. Everyone seemed to share her sentiment.

Ukon chuckled and said, “Everyone failed the test this time. I’ll continue to watch your growth and think about what to do. Now, as for the family treasure...I believe Kiyotaka knows what it is. Could you tell them?”

“I’ll begin with a hint, then,” Holmes said. “The Saito family’s treasure originally didn’t belong to them. Do you know what it is now?” He looked around at us.

*It originally didn’t belong to them. Does that mean they received it from someone else or that it was left in their care?*

While we were pondering his hint, Rikyu had a smug look on his face, as if he already knew everything.

*If it came from someone else, it probably wasn’t something large like the folding screen. That narrows it down to things like pottery and paintings. Actually, there doesn’t need to be a size restriction—anything could’ve been left in their care. How did Holmes know that it wasn’t the Saito family’s? Was there definitive proof?*

Suddenly, I remembered something—and Kazuhiko seemed to as well. He

looked up and said, “I-I’ve got it! The Saito family’s treasure is the longsword in the second-floor drawing room after all, right? The one by Chikakage from Osafune, Bizen.”

“Huh?” Everyone blinked.

“So it was,” Ensho mumbled.

“Th-The sword? I was right, then?” Tsukasa asked.

“Yes, the item was correct, but the reason wasn’t quite accurate,” Holmes said in an admonishing tone. “Apparently the reason was the important part of this trial.”

“Wh-What do you mean, Kiyotaka?” Sakyo pressed.

“I want to know too,” Kazuhiko added.

“Now, now.” Holmes held his hands up. “That longsword has a Chinese bellflower crest on it, but this family’s crest is the hanging wisteria. That means the sword didn’t originate from this family—it was bestowed to them by someone who had that family crest. Since it was a longsword forged by Chikakage with a Chinese bellflower crest, the original owner would’ve been the samurai general Mitsuhide Akechi.”

*This family’s treasure is a sword gifted from Mitsuhide Akechi?*

The brothers exchanged glances.

“Mitsuhide Akechi is seen as a traitor because of the Honno-ji Temple incident where he betrayed Lord Nobunaga Oda, leading to Oda’s death. However, he was a completely different person outside of that incident. It’s said that he was compassionate, kind towards his vassals, intellectual, graceful, and had a refined sense of beauty. There may have been a considerable amount of conspiracy behind that coup d’état that we don’t know, for which he was willing to become a traitor. That’s who the sword came from.

“Mitsuhide was branded a traitor after the coup, but the Saito family who received his sword treasured it enough to pass it down for all of these generations. The Saito ancestor would’ve been a dedicated subordinate of Mitsuhide—my guess is Mitsuhide’s chief vassal, Toshimitsu Saito.”

Everyone looked like they were thinking, *So that's what it was*. I didn't know enough about history to recognize the name Toshimitsu Saito, but he must've been famous if he was Mitsuhide Akechi's chief vassal.

"It's possible that the Saito family's high aesthetic sense was passed down from Mitsuhide's influence. Anyway, I assume that the Saito family teaches its heirs that among all of the treasures they possess, the sword they received from Lord Mitsuhide is the most important. Even though history paints him as a traitor, to this family, he's the reason why they can exist. Their gratitude towards him is the reason why their family treasure is something that no one else would value so much."

The room fell silent after Holmes finished his explanation. *The heart of a vassal who served his lord, and the family's gratitude to that lord for their prosperity... That sword embodied all of those feelings.*

*And when Rikyu said he had the right "heart," it was because he revered Holmes as his "lord."*

"Yes, our family is descended from Toshimitsu Saito," Ukon confirmed. "Unfortunately we aren't his direct descendants, but we take pride in inheriting our ancestors' will. You really are amazing, Kiyotaka. If you were my grandson, I'd choose you without a doubt." He gave Holmes an enthusiastic look.

"Not at all," Holmes said, shaking his head. "I'm merely a trader. I stock fine goods and sell them to people with good taste. Succeeding a samurai family would be unjustifiable." He smiled, captivating us. We were at a loss for words.

"He's completely right, you know?" Rikyu gave an exaggerated shrug.

Ensho had a cold look in his eyes.

After that, the family wanted to speak in private, so the appraisers and I prepared to leave the house.

"I greatly enjoyed the wonderful heirlooms and the delicious meal," Holmes said to Ukon. "Thank you very much." He and I bowed.

We were about to exit the drawing room when Ukon stopped us, asking, "Kiyotaka, before you go—actually, I'd like to ask all of the appraisers. Setting

aside the Saito family's treasure, what do you think the most valuable object in this house is?" He looked around at us.

*If it's only a matter of value, not sentiment...*

Keiko answered first: "I think it's the cloisonné vase." I agreed. The other items were valuable too, but that vase was on a completely different level.

"What about you, Tanaka?" Ukon asked.

Ensho averted his gaze. "Let's see... The white porcelain, I guess," he mumbled, as if talking to himself. It felt like his real opinion. Perhaps the Joseon white porcelain had rendered him speechless back then.

"And Kiyotaka?"

"Well..." Holmes looked towards the Japanese-style hall on the first floor. "Is it the sliding screen at the back of the hall?"

Ukon looked down. "I figured as much. The instruction to 'take good care of it' has been passed down through the generations, but it has no signature or seal, and no appraiser has ever given me a proper answer. I've always found it mysterious. What exactly is it?"

*Come to think of it, Ensho said it was by an anonymous artist. Is it difficult to appraise?*

"The appraisers you spoke to may have been afraid to make an irresponsible statement," Holmes said. "In my opinion, it's not something you can assign a price to."

"Huh?"

"It's by Sotatsu Tawaraya, the artist who painted one of Japan's National Treasures, *Wind God and Thunder God*."

Everyone in the room looked like they'd been caught off guard.

*Wind God and Thunder God* is a National Treasure held at Kennin-ji Temple. It's considered a novel piece, known for its unique composition. The wind god is on one end, holding a wrapping cloth in both hands, and the thunder god is on the opposite end, surrounded by several drums. *Come to think of it, I heard that that painting doesn't have a signature or seal either.*

“Despite being such a renowned painter, Sotatsu Tawaraya is shrouded in mystery,” Holmes continued. “Many of his works are unsigned. As for that sliding screen, the gentle touch on the pine tree, the framing as though it were a photo taken of a landscape, and the infinite expanse felt from the partly cut off areas are a perfect example of Sotatsu Tawaraya’s expression of the vastness of nature. To be honest, it was difficult for me to hold back my tears in front of that sliding screen. I never would’ve dreamed of encountering one of his works in this house,” Holmes said passionately, placing his hand on his chest.

“I-I see,” Ukon said. “I can’t believe that that was Sotatsu Tawaraya’s work—that it was such an incredible treasure. Thank you, Kiyotaka.” He held Holmes’s hand tightly. “And please take good care of Rikyu.” He bowed deeply. It was as if he was saying, “Raise Rikyu into someone worthy of succeeding the Saito family.” I felt nervous watching them and held my breath.

“I met Rikyu when I was twelve and he was only six,” Holmes said. “Ever since then, I’ve thought of him as my younger brother. So, I plan on continuing our relationship the way it’s been.” His last sentence indicated that he understood Ukon’s intent.

“Yes, that’ll be fine.” Ukon nodded and smiled. *He must be thinking that even if Holmes doesn’t do anything special, simply being with him is enough.*

We said our farewells again and left the drawing room, but Sakyo and Rikyu came running after us.

“Thanks so much for today, Kiyotaka.”

“Kiyo, you’re going home now, right? I wanted to say thanks too.”

“No need for thanks—I had fun,” Holmes replied. “Please enjoy your family time.”

“You say that, but I’m pretty sure we’re just going to watch Uncle Tsukasa get yelled at.”

“You might be right,” Holmes said. “My condolences to Tsukasa.”

“Condolences?” We chuckled together.

Rikyu looked at me and said, “Thanks to you too, Aoi. Sorry for being mean. I felt sad and frustrated because I lost my place at Kura. It felt like you’d taken away everything I cared about.”

“Rikyu...” I empathized with his feelings. *If I were in his shoes, I’d definitely feel really lonely.*

“But I can tell that you’re trying really hard to be suitable for Kura, and your Raku tea bowl appraisals were pretty good, so I guess I can accept you.”

“Huh?”

“As my successor.” He grinned mischievously.

I felt like I was going to cry from happiness. “Th-Thank you, Rikyu.”

“Ugh, don’t get moved to tears over something like that.” Exasperated, he took his handkerchief out of his pocket and handed it to me. *As you’d expect from Holmes’s younger brother figure.* Impressed, I gratefully accepted the handkerchief and pressed it against my teary eyes.

## 8

“Aoi, before we leave, I’d like to look at that sliding screen one more time. Do you mind?”

“Oh, okay. I wanted to look at it again too.”

We went back to the Japanese-style room. The sliding screen was an ink wash painting of a pine tree. As Holmes said, the pine tree was painted with a very gentle touch. *I often see pine trees depicted majestically, in what’s called the “manly hero” style. But this pine tree is completely different. It reminds me of a graceful young woman.* The painting used blotted ink to make it look like the tree was bursting out from the screen. It evoked an endless expanse that couldn’t be contained in a framed picture.

“I’ve never seen *Wind God and Thunder God* in person,” I murmured, staring at the screen. Since it was a famous National Treasure, I’d seen pictures of it. The wind god and thunder god were painted from end to end of the gold leaf screen. The green wind god held a sack, while the white thunder god was

surrounded by a circle of drums.

“Is that so? I hope you do get to see it,” Holmes said quietly, not looking away from the screen either.

“You’ve seen it before, right? What did you think?”

“Hmm...” He smiled gently. “The wind god and thunder god were there.”

It seemed like an obvious statement, but I waited for his next words.

“I was struck with the feeling of looking up at the sky and being surprised to see the wind god suddenly emerge from the clouds, only to spot the thunder god hiding in the clouds in the corner of my eye. The wind god and thunder god looked like they were having a good time—there wasn’t any kind of imposing grandeur. Despite that, I was still overwhelmed by their divinity.

“There’s a theory that *Wind God and Thunder God* was modeled after Sanjusangen-do Temple, and when I saw that folding screen in front of my eyes, I felt like all of my knowledge and preconceptions had been blown away. I wondered if Sotatsu Tawaraya had truly looked up at the sky and seen gods there, and if the painting was a transcription of what he saw. It was as if the gods were living inside the screen—they were truly there.”

The corners of his eyes were glistening, as if he was recalling the emotions he felt when he saw the painting.

*“The gods were there.”*

Sotatsu Tawaraya’s masterpiece has remained a National Treasure to this day. *I have to see it one day too*, I vowed, clenching my fists as I gazed at the pine tree on the sliding screen.

Once we were done, it was time to head home for real. It took me some time to put on my boots, and when I finally left the mansion, I saw Holmes and Ensho facing each other and hid myself without thinking.

“I came today to mess with you, but you beat me fair and square,” Ensho said with a self-deprecating smile.

“Are you sure? You identified the treasure too.”

“Yeah, but it wasn’t enough. Plus, I didn’t notice that sliding screen’s

value...although I did think it was a good painting.”

Ensho seemed to be more frustrated about that than the true meaning behind the sword.

“You can’t understand Sotatsu Tawaraya, right?” Holmes said coldly.

“What?” Ensho glared at him.

I anxiously peeped at them, not knowing why Holmes chose that phrasing.

“As I said earlier, Sotatsu Tawaraya is an artist shrouded in mystery. Try as you might to research him, there’s an unusual lack of material—as if he erased all traces of himself. There must have been some reason. Sotatsu Tawaraya was a brilliant artist who tried to hide his existence, but you’re the complete opposite. There’s no way you could understand him.” Holmes stared at Ensho.

Compared to Sotatsu Tawaraya, who tried not to leave traces of himself despite being talented and acknowledged by his peers, Ensho created forgeries in the shadows, living in obscurity while secretly wanting to be recognized as himself. They *could* be considered complete opposites.

Ensho trembled and put on a twisted grin. “You never change, eh? I *really* hate that about you.”

“I feel the same way.”

They looked at each other in silence. The atmosphere was tense, as though a swordfight could break out at any moment.

They faced each other for a while before Ensho turned and walked away. Holmes stood still, watching him leave. Then he noticed my silent gaze and turned around.

“Aoi... You saw that?”

I nodded.

“His eyes were incredibly hateful. I thought he was going to stab me,” he said quietly.

I leaned in and said, “Y-You were mean too, Holmes. Why did you have to rub him the wrong way like that?” It was obvious that his phrasing was going to

upset Ensho.

“I...wanted to set him off.”

“Huh?”

“I thought it would clear up some of his gloominess,” he murmured.

I had nothing to say to that. *Thinking about it, Holmes definitely didn't get emotional just now. I guess there was a deep meaning behind provoking Ensho like that.*

“S-Sorry. I called you mean even though you had a reason for it...”

“It's true that it was mean in his eyes. Besides, in the end, I made him even gloomier... That was my mistake.” He sighed. His sorrowful face suggested that he regretted what he'd done. “No...this is all sophistry on my part. I simply can't stand him. I can't help but get irritated. If I had that much talent, I'd...” He clenched his fist, looking both frustrated and furious.

“Holmes...”

I was surprised. Up until now, I'd thought that Ensho's jealousy was one-sided, but that wasn't the case. Holmes harbored similar feelings. They seemed completely different but really were like mirror images of each other.

Ensho had casually shown up to play today, but he didn't expect to get caught in Holmes's sharp claws. *Did his “disagreeable” attitude transform into genuine hatred after today? I have a bad feeling about this.* I felt chills run down my spine.

“Shall we go, then?”

I looked up and saw Holmes smiling at me as usual. “Okay.” I nodded.

“It's gotten quite late.”

“Yeah.”

I looked up at the silver crescent moon hanging in the dark blue sky.

“The moon is so pretty. It reminds me of that sword,” I said.

“Indeed. That longsword's beauty was like a reflection of the noble heart of the vassal who trusted his lord.”

“Yes. I’m really glad I could come here today.”

The mansion was filled with amazing treasures, but the family’s greatest treasure was their gratitude towards their lord, Mitsuhide Akechi. The same Mitsuhide Akechi who was branded the traitor of the century. Despite that, his vassal and his vassal’s descendants remained loyal to him. It must’ve been because they trusted their lord and didn’t let others sway their beliefs.

*It really is commendable. I also want to trust my loved ones and protect them no matter what happens. And before that, I want to be honest with myself. My chest ached as I thought that. I’ve been lying to myself this whole time. I’m scared of getting hurt, so I trick myself, avert my eyes, and lie to my heart...*

It felt like a dam burst within me when I realized that. All of my bottled-up feelings suddenly poured out. My chest was hot and I felt like I was going to cry. *How much have I been holding myself back? In reality, I was suffering.*

*I’ll set myself free...even if it results in pain.*

As we slowly started walking, I stopped, looked at him, clenched my fists, and said in my heart:

*I love you, Kiyotaka.*

Holmes stopped too and said, “It smells like spring.” He looked at the buds of the cherry blossoms and smiled warmly.

The gentle breeze carried a hint of warmth in its chill. It also brought with it the scent of earth and flowers. I smiled fondly at the pleasant feeling and said, “Yes.”

“Oh right, Aoi... The moon is very beautiful tonight,” he said, looking up at the night sky.

I silently looked up at the sky as well.

Holmes glanced at me without turning and said, “I’m truly looking forward to seeing who you’ll become.”

“O-Okay, I’ll try my best.”

“Ah, you don’t have to try that hard.” He laughed cheerfully.

Knowing how red my cheeks were, I looked down, unable to keep my head up.

It was early spring, the season of budding blossoms...

## Afterword

First, I'd like to express my heartfelt thanks to the following locations for allowing me to use them in this book: CACAO MARKET (MarieBelle Japan K.K.) Yoshida-Sanso Inn (traditional Japanese restaurant and inn, former second home of Higashi-Fushimi no Miya) When I visited Angel Library, the lovely, dreamlike cafe under Cacao Market in Gion, I thought, "I have to bring Kiyotaka and Aoi here!"

Yoshida-Sanso Inn on Mount Yoshida is brimming with romanticism, and when I visited Shinkokan, I was fascinated by its magnificence. I trembled with awe as I thought, "I want to write a story that takes place here!"

Kyoto has so many of these wonderful places, and this series has reached the fourth book full of the emotions they contain.

Once again, allow me to express my heartfelt gratitude to the city of Kyoto, the shrines and temples I visited, all of my readers, and everyone and everything surrounding me and this book.

Thank you so much.

Mai Mochizuki



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by Mai Mochizuki

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