



Holmes of Kyoto

~Springtime Suspense~

6

Mai Mochizuki



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Aoi Mashiro

She is a third-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 second-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

If you walk through the shopping district at the intersection of Teramachi Street and Sanjo Street, you will find a small antique store nestled in the rows of shops. Its name is simply Kura, meaning “storehouse.” The place feels more like an old-fashioned cafe than an antique store: a blend of Japanese and Western aesthetics reminiscent of the Meiji and Taisho eras. Jars, tea bowls, and other antiques are neatly arranged on the lines of shelves. There are also Western antiques such as tea sets, candlesticks, and bisque dolls.

I, Aoi Mashiro, first wandered into this store last March. An unexpected turn of events led to me working here, and it’s been a full year since I started. I was in my second year of high school back then, but now I’ve become a third-year.

Kiyotaka Yagashira—nicknamed Holmes—works there too. He’s a handsome young man with a slim build, pale skin, slightly long front bangs, and refined features. His nickname comes from his exceptional eye for observation and appraisal, his knack for appraisal, and the fact that his surname has the character for “home” in it. Right now he’s a grad student at Kyoto University. He’s also the grandson and apprentice of this store’s owner, the nationally certified appraiser Seiji Yagashira. He calls himself an appraiser-in-training, but even leading figures in the antiques industry recognize his skill. He’s also my mentor who teaches me all sorts of things about fine art. True to his appearance, he’s gentlemanly, kind, graceful, and well-mannered—but at the same time, he’s quite eccentric. He’s wicked at times, stubborn, and hates to lose. What’s more, he even has a bit of a black-hearted side. As you can see, he’s not very straightforward. I fell in love with this not-straightforward man, and after many twists and turns, we started dating just a week ago. Holmes is my boyfriend now...although I still find it hard to believe.

I glanced at Holmes, who was sitting at the counter. Feeling a smile coming on, I quickly looked away.

Suddenly, I heard the sound of a retro phone ringing. It was Kura's landline.

Holmes picked up the receiver and said with a smile, "Hello, you've reached the antique store Kura. Oh, hello, dad." His voice relaxed upon realizing that the caller was his father, Takeshi Yagashira, who we call "Manager." *Holmes's relatives know that he always keeps his cell phone on silent at work, so when they need to talk to him, they call the store's phone.*

"The wooden boxes behind the counter?" Holmes turned around and opened the cupboard behind him. There were two boxes inside. "Yes, I see them. Both of them? All right. Bye, then." He nodded and hung up.

What did the manager ask him to do?

Sensing my unspoken question, Holmes immediately said, "Ueda left things with my father again. He wanted me to appraise them." He placed the boxes on the counter.

"Are these Ueda's own things?" I asked.

"No, apparently they belong to the director of a client company, so there might actually be something worthwhile in here." He smiled.

Ueda was an old friend of the manager. He ran several businesses, with his management consulting company being the main one. This meant that he had a lot of connections and was on friendly terms with managers of large corporations. He was smart and good at business, but unfortunately he had terrible judgment when it came to antiques. Most of the things he brought in for Holmes to appraise were forgeries. He was a poor connoisseur—but this time, the items belonged to a director he knew. This meant there was a chance that they were genuine.

"It's been a while since our last study session," Holmes said. "Shall we borrow what Ueda brought in to have one?" He placed his index finger in front of his mouth and smiled, his eyes narrowing into arcs.

"O-Okay." I blushed slightly. That gesture of his was my weakness.

"I'll make coffee. Please have a seat and wait." He stood up, pulled a chair out for me, and went into the kitchenette to prepare the coffee.

I bowed and excitedly sat down at the counter. Holmes's lectures about antique art began last summer break. At first they were fun, casual lessons, but since I showed so much interest, he became more enthusiastic in his teaching too. Our study sessions continued after summer break ended, and thanks to them, I had the opportunity to see many genuine works of art in a short period of time. *I think my eyes are getting better too, bit by bit—but that's only compared to other people my age. I'm still a fledgling. Then again...I'm sure I haven't even caught up to Rikyu yet, and he's younger than me.*

Just when I was starting to feel a bit depressed, the scent of coffee tickled my nose.

"Why the long face?" Holmes asked, placing a cup in front of me.

"Oh, no, it's nothing," I said, shaking my head.

He sat down across from me and slipped on his white gloves, not pressing the matter. I took my non-slip appraisal gloves out of my apron pocket too and put them on.

Holmes carefully picked up one of the wooden boxes and opened the lid. Inside was a pale-colored tea bowl.

"Is that Kizeto ware?" I asked.

"Yes, it's a Hakuan tea bowl." He looked down at it, smiling happily.

"Hakuan...? What's that?"

"Is this your first time seeing one, Aoi?"

"Yes, I just thought it was a Kizeto tea bowl."

"That's correct too—Hakuan is also called the Kizeto of Rikyu's era. There are various theories as to how it came about, one of which is that it was an imitation of the pottery from Hoeryong, North Korea. The pieces were created in Mino Province, during the short time span from the Momoyama period until the early Edo period. Also, it's said that the name 'Hakuan' came from Hakuan Soya, a medical officer of the Edo shogunate who was very fond of the tea bowls."

"I see. This is authentic, right?"

“Yes, it is.” He looked back down at the tea bowl, which he was holding with both hands. “Hakuan tea bowls follow an old convention called the ‘Hakuan Ten Vows.’”

“What’s that?”

“It refers to a set of conditions that tea bowls, tea containers, and whatnot must meet. Hakuan’s ten vows are: one, loquat-colored; two, sea cucumber glaze on the body; three, a ‘crescent moon’ foot; four, fine wrinkles; five, pulpy clay; six, ripples; seven, a tea well; eight, minute cracks all over the surface; nine, an outward-curving lip; and ten, spots in the glaze. There are actually two other conditions—a ‘bamboo node’ foot and a glaze stain inside the foot—making for twelve vows in all.”

“Wow...” was all I could say in response. I looked down at the tea bowl. “This meets all of the conditions, right?”

“Yes, this is very clearly an authentic piece.” Holmes nodded, seeming satisfied. He gently put down the tea bowl and picked up the other box, which was tied with string. He held the box in one hand and carefully untied the string with the other. *Since string deteriorates over time, Holmes taught me before that it’s dangerous to hold wrapped items by the string.*

He opened the lid and his eyes widened. “This is...” he murmured, taking off his gloves to pick up the tea bowl with his bare hands.

I blinked in surprise. “Wh-Why did you take off your gloves?”

“Huh?” He looked at me. “Did I never tell you...?”

“A-About what?”

“Gloves are typically worn for appraising hanging scrolls and other works of art, but ceramics such as tea bowls are appraised without gloves.”

“Huh? But you always wore gloves before, right?”

“Yes, I kept my gloves on for things that didn’t require the sense of touch to appraise. This is because many customers dislike it when you touch their items directly. Since it’s not common knowledge that appraising ceramics requires taking off gloves, people often get upset and yell, ‘Why aren’t you wearing

gloves?!’ Even when people leave their antiques here to be appraised, they sometimes specify to wear gloves. So as a general rule, I keep my gloves on to not hurt their feelings.”

Makes sense. I can see why someone would question it if he touched their precious tea bowl with his bare hands.

“One of the reasons why gloves aren’t worn when appraising ceramics is the risk of them slipping out of your hands, which is why I wear non-slip gloves,” he continued. “I can appraise most things that are brought in by their appearance alone—I don’t need to feel them. So it’s possible that you’ve never seen this happen before.”

I had heard that before—that Holmes and the owner could often determine something’s authenticity without touching it.

“But I make an exception when a ‘serious’ appraisal is needed,” Holmes said with a sharp look in his eyes.

What kind of piece is this? I wondered, looking at the tea bowl in his hands. It was whitish, and at first glance it seemed like Shino ware. Its foot was taller than any Shino tea bowl I’d seen, though, and its shape narrowed towards the bottom at an extreme angle.

“The shape is unusual, but it’s real,” Holmes said enthusiastically, gently cupping it in his hands.

“It’s a Shino tea bowl, right?”

“Yes, I believe it’s one of the pieces from the old kiln sites in the Ogaya district of Kani City in Gifu Prefecture. It’s a delight to be able to encounter a genuine one.” He smiled fondly. *Authentic Shino tea bowls are rare. He must be truly happy.* “You should take your gloves off and touch it too, Aoi. Learn this sensation with your fingers and palms.”

“Okay.” I quickly took off my gloves. Holmes gently placed the tea bowl on the counter in front of me. I gulped and wrapped my hands around it. *It does feel similar to the Shino tea bowl we have in the store. This is what a real one feels like... Come to think of it, even in Holmes’s previous lectures, he told me to learn how tea bowls feel when touched directly. Now I finally know what he meant.* I

let the feeling sink into me and then repeated the process with the Hakuan tea bowl.

“Thanks to Ueda, we had a good lesson today, right?” Holmes said with a grin as he carefully placed the tea bowls back in their boxes and put them away behind the counter.

“Yes.” I nodded earnestly.

Holmes gently reached out and wrapped his hand around mine, startling me. The feeling of his long fingers and large palm on the back of my hand set my heart racing. I almost thought I was going to forget what the tea bowls felt like.

“It’s as if it’s human nature,” he murmured.

“Huh?” I looked up at him.

“When something is real and special, we want to touch it directly.” He looked at me passionately, and my head spun. “Aoi...”

“Y-Yes?”

“It’s your birthday next month, finally.”

I felt like I was suffocating—as if my heart had leapt into my throat. “Yes,” I said, nodding.

“I have an idea in mind for that day...”

“Y-Yes?”

Suddenly the door chime rang, and we quickly let go of each other’s hands.

“Welcome,” I said as I stood up and turned around. At the door was Seiji Yagashira, the store’s owner. He was dressed as stylishly as always, wearing a casual gray kimono, a navy blue *haori* jacket, and a white hat.

“If it isn’t the owner,” Holmes said, looking at him curiously.

“Hey, I came to put up a new scroll.” He took a paper tube out of the bag he was holding and pulled out the scroll inside. He unrolled it, revealing calligraphy that said “No PDA inside the store,” and taped it to the kitchenette wall.

Unbelievably embarrassed, I averted my eyes. In contrast, Holmes glared at him coldly. “What’s the meaning of this...?” he asked.

“It’s exactly as it says,” the owner said matter-of-factly, turning around to face us. “You and Aoi are finally dating, right?”

My face turned even redder.

“Yes, and?” Holmes said.

“If you were dating someone who was a complete stranger to me, I wouldn’t say nothing. But I run this place, and I’m the one who hired Aoi. That means I’m responsible for her when she’s here, in her parents’ place.”

“Right.”

“So as long as I live, I ain’t letting you use this store as your secret love nest.”

D-Did he have to phrase it like that? I couldn’t bring myself to look up at him.

“You didn’t have to come here just to warn us about that. We wouldn’t use a place like this as a secret love nest,” Holmes replied calmly, not changing his expression.

I facepalmed. *Please stop calling it that!*

“Your real thoughts are showing,” chastised the owner. “That means you’d do it somewhere that ain’t ‘a place like this.’ Listen here, kid—Aoi’s like a daughter to everyone right now. I ain’t letting a snake like you sink his poisonous fangs in her.” He stuck an index finger at Holmes’s forehead and peered into his face.

“*Your* real thoughts are showing too,” Holmes retorted. “You brought up her parents, but the truth is that you just don’t like it, right? Besides, I’m your *grandson*,” he said, his Kyoto accent leaking out. The owner’s ruthless words brought him back to his natural self. “You’re calling your own grandson a snake? Isn’t that awfully harsh?”

“I just don’t want to see a pure, sweet high school girl fall victim to the wicked wiles of a black-hearted man like you. Least not ’til she graduates. It’s my duty as your grandfather.”

“What kind of duty is that?! What do you think I am? Can’t you have more faith in me?”

“I wish I could, but you *are* dating a high school girl! You’re a lolicon! A danger to society!”

“No... Aoi’s a special case. I’m not a lolicon... She just happened to be five years younger. Even if she were five years older than me, my feelings would’ve been the same,” Holmes said weakly, putting his hands on his hanging head. Suddenly, he sprung up and said, “Wait, I don’t want to hear this from *you*. Aren’t you dating Yoshie, who’s over *thirty* years younger than you?”

“We’re both adults!”

“In that case, Aoi will be eighteen next month!”

I stood frozen in place, stunned by this absurd argument between grandfather and grandson.

The door chime rang again, and this time Rikyu burst in, shouting, “Owner!”

Rikyu Takiyama was the only son of the owner’s girlfriend, Yoshie Takiyama. He was one year younger than me, in his second year of high school, and a younger brother figure to Holmes. He was a beautiful androgynous boy who closely resembled his gorgeous mother. He fiercely admired Holmes, and I always felt awkward around him. Since he idolized Holmes so much, he couldn’t stand the thought of him going out with an ordinary girl like me.

Rikyu glanced at me and sighed loudly. “I heard the news, Aoi. You’re finally going out?”

“I-I’m sorry.” Even though it wasn’t something I had to apologize for, I couldn’t help but feel guilty.

“Eh, whatever. It was only a matter of time.”

Huh?

Rikyu handed the owner a rolled-up scroll. “Here, it’s the hanging scroll you asked Yanagihara for.”

“Oh, thanks for going to the trouble,” said the owner.

“No problem. His house is close by.”

The owner gleefully opened the scroll, which said: “Happiness is something that should be received, not sought. If you ask for something and receive it, that is pleasure, not happiness — Naoya Shiga.” I’d seen this writing before, in a room at the Tsukimiya inn when we went to the Kinosaki hot spring. It was a

famous quote from Naoya Shiga.

“If you ask for something and receive it, that’s pleasure, not happiness,” the owner recited. “Fine words, eh? I asked Yanagihara for it so I could put it up in the store.” He hung the scroll up in a place that could easily be seen from the counter.

Holmes quietly clicked his tongue, looking annoyed.

“Oh yeah, Aoi,” the owner said, turning around.

“Y-Yes?” I instinctively braced myself.

“Despite what I said, I’m happy that you’ve gotten close with Kiyotaka. He’s a real handful, but take care of him for me, all right?” He bowed.

I hurriedly bowed back. “I-I’ll be relying on you too. Please forgive my inexperience.” The owner’s words slowly seeped into my heart, making me feel hot inside. I was really happy that he accepted our relationship.

“Anyway, your birthday’s next month, on May 3rd, right?” he asked.

“Yes.”

“Constitution Memorial Day, eh? Very nice. So I’m thinking it’ll be fun to have a birthday party for you at our place on that day. We can celebrate you and Kiyotaka getting together while we’re at it.”

“What?!” I squeaked.

“Yeah,” Rikyu added immediately. “Let’s all celebrate your eighteenth birthday.” *I never would’ve expected Rikyu of all people to say that.*

“A-Are you sure?” I asked.

“Of course,” the owner said. “So don’t make any other plans for that night. We’re all gonna celebrate together. You can invite Kaori too.”

“Th-Thank you,” I said, voice trembling with joy. Suddenly, I remembered that Holmes was trying to say something about my birthday earlier. *Maybe this is what he was going to tell me.* “Ahh, I’m so excited... What should I wear?” Tears of joy welled in my eyes.

Meanwhile, Holmes wordlessly placed his hand on his forehead. “So much for

that," he murmured.

"Huh?" Not catching what he said, I turned around.

He smiled and shook his head. "It's nothing. I'm glad you seem to be happy."

"Yes, I am." I didn't feel like I deserved to have a birthday party at the Yagashira estate, but I truly was happy. *Seriously, what am I going to wear?* Heart pounding, I looked at the tabletop calendar. It was just under a month until my birthday.

I didn't know yet that I was going to get caught up in a huge incident in that short time.

Chapter 1: An Unexpected Client

1

With the cherry blossom season over, there seemed to be a slight lull in tourism in Kyoto. It was a Saturday afternoon, and most of the people on the street outside Kura were students and other locals. I watched them absentmindedly as I wiped the windows. Upon seeing a cheerful group of girls my age walking by, I couldn't help but examine their clothes, for the sake of deciding what to wear for my birthday party. *Ahh, that outfit is cute. The other girl's clothes are cute too, but they're too revealing. I couldn't wear that.*

As I observed them, a close-looking couple passed by as well. The girl had her arms wrapped around the guy's like a vine around a tree, and she pressed her cheek against his shoulder as they walked. It irked me how they stuck together like magnets, but at the same time, their happy expressions were heartwarming. *Come to think of it, it's been a week since Holmes and I started dating. We've held hands, but we've never been all clingy like that... Wait, I'm not saying that I want to be like that, though.* I cast my eyes down, embarrassed at myself.

"Aoi," came a voice from behind me.

I snapped to my senses and turned around. "Y-Y-Y-Y-Y-Yes?"

It was Holmes. He looked down at me with a startled face. "Did I surprise you that much?" He tilted his head slightly.

I gave a vague smile and stood up. "Sorry, I was spacing out while wiping the windows."

Holmes looked outside. "Now that's a passionate couple."

"Yeah." I looked back outside, where the couple was now locked in a kiss. I blushed and turned away, surprised. Looking at them made *me* embarrassed. "H-How can they make out like that in public?"

“Possessiveness, attention-seeking, and early-relationship tunnel vision,” Holmes answered smoothly.

“What?” I squeaked.

“Their possessiveness says ‘This person belongs to me,’ their desire for attention says ‘Look how much we love each other,’ and since they’re early in their relationship, they’re experiencing a surge in feelings of love. Their thoughts are consumed by it, narrowing their physical field of vision to the point where they can’t see their surroundings. This is called ‘tunnel vision.’”

“I see...”

“From what I can tell, they haven’t been dating for long, and the woman is more obsessed with the man. That’s why she isn’t paying attention to her surroundings. It could be that she isn’t receiving enough love from her family. Judging from her clothes and accessories, she isn’t poor. She may be from an affluent single-parent household, or perhaps both of her parents are busy with work and neglect her. As a result, she’s ecstatic about getting a boyfriend,” Holmes said as he looked out the window. His voice carried a hint of pity, but it was cheerful nonetheless.

Chills ran down my spine. *He’s as perceptive as ever. What a terrifying person.*

“Aoi... Um, I don’t mind if you get tunnel vision too,” he mumbled, taking his eyes off the window.

“Huh?”

“Although we started dating, you’ve still been composed...or rather, you’ve been acting the same as before,” he continued, averting his gaze.

I blinked. “N-No, it’s just that it still doesn’t feel real, and I’m embarrassed. I’ve...had tunnel vision for a long time now,” I muttered, shyly looking down at the floor.

Holmes’s shoulders twitched. The next instant, he exclaimed, “Aoi!” and took a big step towards me, only to stop in his tracks. “Ugh, we’re in the store... Aoi, I’m in a state of complete tunnel vision right now. Please keep that in mind. Come to think of it, I, too, am a fiercely possessive attention seeker from a single-parent household,” he lamented, placing his hand on his forehead.

I inadvertently laughed. “Yes, I’m well aware,” I said, nodding. “By the way, what were you calling me for? Was there something you wanted me to do?”

“Oh right,” Holmes said, straightening his posture. “I was going to say, ‘I’m going to do an inventory check on the second floor, so please watch the store for me.’”

“Oh, okay.”

“Call me if there’s a customer.” He went upstairs.

Left by myself on the first floor, I went closer to the counter, where there was a better view of the store interior, and began dusting. Then I swept up the fallen bits of dust and debris and disposed of them. Before working at Kura, I had no idea how much cleaner you could make a room with just a feather duster and a broom. *The broom in particular is no slouch. It can clean every nook and cranny. It’s easier to use than a vacuum cleaner, and the sweeping sounds are quite soothing. They really clear my mind.*

The door chime rang. I stopped sweeping and turned around.

“I see you’re working hard there, Aoi.” The owner came in, dressed stylishly as usual. He took off his hat and grinned.

“Hello, sir.” I bowed, still holding the broom and duster.

The owner smiled gently. “You always take this job so seriously, even though there’s no customers. I really appreciate it.”

I shook my head. “I-It’s nothing. I’m an employee, after all.”

“Diligent as ever,” he said with a cheerful expression.

Did he come to make sure we weren’t breaking the “No PDA” rule?

The owner surveyed the store and then looked up at the stairs to the second floor. “So, is Kiyotaka upstairs?”

“Yes, I’ll go get him.” I immediately went for the stairs, but the owner held out his hand to stop me.

“S’all right. He’s making sure nothing got stolen. You can leave him be.”

“Stolen?” I widened my eyes. *I wasn’t expecting that word.*

The owner nodded with a serious look on his face. “Yeah. There was a bit of trouble at Yanagihara’s.” He was referring to Shigetoshi Yanagihara, an old friend of his who was also an appraiser. The two of them were rivals and called each other names like “old geezer” and “old fart.” That said, they did acknowledge each other’s competency.

“At his house?”

“Yeah, he was checking his storeroom and found out that a single work of art was stolen...” He sighed and sat down on an armchair.

“Huh?”

“It happened a while back, but I only heard about it the other day.”

“But if only one piece was gone, it feels like he could’ve just missed it.” I furrowed my brow. *Yanagihara’s storeroom surely contains countless works of art.*

“Yeah, he didn’t report it to the police because it coulda been some kinda mistake. But the other day we were having tea, and when he said, ‘A work of art went missing from my storeroom,’ the tea master said the same thing happened to them. So I had to get Kiyotaka to check the second floor.”

I nodded in understanding. “What was stolen from Yanagihara?”

“A *butsuga* by a modern artist.”

“A *butsuga*...” *I’ve heard that butsuga is a broad term referring to all Buddhism-related paintings.* “Was it valuable?”

“Not really. Yanagihara’s storeroom had much bigger treasures, but apparently the thief didn’t touch ’em. They only took the *butsuga*.”

“Yanagihara just happened to be checking the storeroom, right? And he noticed that the *butsuga* was missing?”

“Yep. He said he was gonna lend it to a temple exhibit, but it was gone. So he doesn’t know *when* it was stolen.”

“I see...” I said, still holding the broom.

“Well, I’m sure we’re fine. Made me realize that we gotta do periodic checks,

though.”

“There are a lot of things, so it must be hard for Holmes to do it by himself.” I looked up at the ceiling.

“It’s not as bad as you’re thinking. He’s got everything up there stored in his brain.”

“Really?”

As we were talking, Holmes peered down at us from the top of the stairs. “I thought I heard voices. You came, Owner?”

“Yeah. How’s the second-floor check going?”

“A quick inspection didn’t turn up any issues. I plan to do another check later, though.” He came downstairs holding a binder.

“So we’re safe?”

“Yes, we’re fine...at the moment.”

“I see...” the owner murmured, crossing his arms. I thought he’d be relieved, but his expression was grim.

Holmes tilted his head ever so slightly. “Is there something on your mind?”

“Well, I heard over the phone just now that there were other victims besides Yanagihara and the tea master.”

“What?” Holmes blinked.

“Just like us, everyone else checked their storerooms after hearing what happened to Yanagihara, and apparently the same thing happened to four or five other houses. A single thing was missing, nothing particularly valuable. None of the expensive stuff was stolen, so everyone’s confused that maybe they just made a mistake. Creepy, eh?”

“Indeed...” Holmes furrowed his brow and nodded. “What kinds of things were stolen?”

“A crystal, a wood carving, a sculpture, and a hanging scroll. All of ’em were related to Buddhism.”

“Come to think of it, it was a *butsuga* that was stolen from Yanagihara’s

house, right?”

“That’s right. We’ve got one too—a hanging scroll of the Holy Kannon. Is that safe?”

“We sold that a long time ago. One of dad’s fans bought it.”

“Oh.” The owner rested his elbows on the armrests and frowned, a distant look in his eyes. “All of the victims were well-known appraisers and art collectors in Kyoto,” he murmured. “Oh right,” he said, looking up. “There was also the third son of the Saito family—the accountant. Something was stolen from his office.”

Holmes’s eyes widened. “Are you talking about Kazuhiko, the third son of Rikyu’s grandfather, Ukon?”

“That’s the guy.”

Rikyu’s grandfather, Ukon Saito, was very wealthy and owned a mansion full of wondrous treasures in Kita-ku’s Takagamine district. He had three sons, one of which was Rikyu’s father. All of his sons were born from different mothers, and they had different surnames too.

The eldest son was Rikyu’s father, Sakyo, a retail investor. The second son was Tsukasa, a business owner. The third son, Kazuhiko, was an accountant and a well-known art collector. He had lots of works of art on display in his office, and now one of them had been stolen...

“What about the Saito estate in Takagamine, then?” Holmes asked.

“Nothing there. Don’t you think that’s weird? Something was stolen from the third son’s office, but not the Takagamine estate?”

I agree. I’ve never seen Kazuhiko’s office, so I don’t know what it’s like, but Ukon’s estate would clearly be the better target. Then again, the thief wasn’t aiming for valuable things, so maybe that makes sense...

“Isn’t it a matter of security?” Holmes asked, putting his hands on his hips.

“Security?”

“Yes. You and Yanagihara are the most famous appraisers in Kyoto, but although Yanagihara was a victim, we were untouched. In the case of the Saito

family, Ukon's estate was fine, but his son's office was not. The Saito family's security system is top-notch, and of course, ours is too. The culprit may have known that and wanted to play it safe. If they were only stealing one inexpensive item at a time, their goal might have been to further their own collection, rather than sell them for money."

The owner placed his hand on his chin and frowned. "I've got a bad feeling about this."

"Yes, if they know about our security, then it may be someone we know."

Their stern faces had me feeling disturbed too. A chill ran down my spine.

"Anyway, I'll make coffee," Holmes said to change the mood.

"Nah, it's fine." The owner shook his head and stood up. "I'm gonna look into this some more. Keep doing your checks." He took his hat from the coat rack and put it on. "See ya, Aoi," he said before leaving the store. I absentmindedly watched his receding figure through the window while the door chime echoed.

"Aoi, I'm going back to the second floor," Holmes said, bringing me back to my senses.

I turned around to face him. "Oh, okay. Let me know if there's anything I can help with."

"I will. Please continue watching the shop." He smiled and went back upstairs.

2

Stealing a single, inexpensive Buddhism-related work of art from the storerooms of appraisers and art collectors... That really is strange. They were all connected to Buddhism...but would a devout Buddhist do such a thing? I tilted my head, thinking, as I cleaned.

Kura's door opened again, ringing the chime. *Did the owner come back?*

Despite my initial thought, I reflexively smiled and said, "Welcome," turning towards the door. My customer-facing smile stiffened when I saw who was standing there. It was a man in his mid-forties with tousled hair, an unshaven face, and bags under his eyes. His jacket was slightly wrinkled. His messy

appearance was enough reason to be wary, but I also knew him. Well, perhaps I didn't *know* him, but I definitely remembered his name and face. He was...
"Komatsu, right?" I asked in a quiet voice.

"Oh, you're that girl from back then," he said with a listless smile.

"It's been a while." I bowed.

"Yeah, thanks for your help at Yoshida-Sanso." He bowed back awkwardly.

Komatsu was one of the people that Kurisu Aigasa, the author, invited to her reading at Yoshida-Sanso's Shinkokan. He was the detective she hired.

"I heard I could find that fearsome kid here," he said hesitantly, looking around the store. It went without saying that he was referring to Holmes. At the Shinkokan soiree, Holmes had guessed what Aigasa asked Komatsu to investigate. Komatsu's reaction back then was a terrified "You really can read minds."

"Oh, Holmes is..." I turned around to look at the stairs, and Holmes was standing at the very top, looking down at us. He must've heard our voices.

"Now this is an unusual customer," Holmes said, curving his lips and narrowing his eyes into arcs. *It looks like he's smiling, but there's no way it's genuine. I know exactly what he's thinking: it's hard to imagine Komatsu coming to this store as an actual customer.* The aura he radiated said, "If you come bringing trouble, kindly remove yourself from our store." But instead of that, what he actually said as he descended the stairs was, "Long time no see, Komatsu."

Komatsu was visibly trembling with fear, as if he was facing a demon.

Why would he come here if he was so scared of Holmes? I slumped my shoulders and put away the broom.

Upon reaching the first floor, Holmes smiled again and placed his hand on his chest. "Welcome to the antique shop Kura."

It was an indirect way of saying, "If you came as a *customer*, I'll welcome you." Hearing him say that with his perfect smile made chills run down *my* spine too.

“Oh, uh, lemme thank you first.” Komatsu scratched his head sheepishly.

Holmes’s eyes widened. “For what?” He tilted his head.

“Kurusu Aigasa paid up.”

When Aigasa hired Komatsu to do background checks, she was shocked at the results and said, “You’re lying! I’m not paying you!” After that, someone tried to kill her and disguise it as a suicide. She survived, and Holmes solved the case, but...

“I see,” Holmes said. “That’s good. It’s not something to thank me for, though.”

“No, it’s all thanks to you. She’s like a different person now.” Komatsu’s expression suddenly relaxed.

“Did you meet with her?”

“Yeah, she called me to her house.”

“I see. Please have a seat, if you’d like. I’ll make coffee.” Holmes smiled and pulled a chair out for him. *He probably wants to ask how Aigasa’s doing.*

“Sorry about this.” Komatsu sighed as if he’d gotten past the first hurdle and sat down.

“You can sit down too, Aoi.” Holmes pulled out the chair two seats away from Komatsu’s and went to the kitchenette.

I sat down and wiped my hands with a wet napkin. Suddenly, I heard a loud, drawn-out sigh from beside me. I turned and saw Komatsu hunched over the counter, holding his head in his hands.

“Wh-What’s wrong?” I asked.

“What’s with that threatening aura? Is ‘have some coffee’ his way of saying ‘have some ochazuke’? That’s Kyoto slang for ‘get out,’ right? Is it safe for me to drink the coffee, miss?” he asked with a serious face.

Startled, I nodded. “I-It’s fine.”

“I’m surprised you don’t mind being with a guy who can read minds. Aren’t you scared?”

“No, Holmes doesn’t read minds. That was just an overblown rumor.”

“Then it was a coincidence that he guessed everything right?”

“No, it wasn’t a coincidence. How do I put this... He can’t read minds, but he can sense cues.”

“Isn’t that the same thing?”

I thought about it for a second. “I guess it is.”

“Yeah...”

It *was* similar to mind reading.

“...”

The only sounds in the store were the jazz music playing in the background and the faint dripping of coffee.

A little while later, Holmes came out from the kitchenette holding a tray. He looked at us with a puzzled expression. “What’s wrong? You look like you’re at a funeral.”

“Oh, uh, don’t worry about it,” Komatsu said awkwardly.

“Y-Yeah,” I added.

“All right,” Holmes said, not dwelling on it. He placed the cups on the counter and sat down across from us. “How was Aigasa?”

“She turned normal,” Komatsu said readily.

“Normal?” I asked.

“She used to wear those flashy dresses and stuff, right?”

“Gothic Lolita fashion,” Holmes clarified.

“Yeah, she stopped doing that. When I saw her, she was wearing a pretty tasteful suit, like a normal author would.”

“Oh...” Holmes and I nodded, impressed. The Kurisu Aigasa I knew wore a jet-black frilly dress, bright red shoes, a bright red ribbon around her neck, a black hat with a lace veil—the kind a woman would wear to a funeral—and matching crimson contacts. *It left such an impression that I can’t imagine what she must*

look like now, having become normal.

“She truly was born anew, then,” Holmes said, referencing his parting words back then.

Komatsu relaxed his expression and said, “Like I said, it’s all thanks to you.”

“No, I didn’t do anything...”

“That’s not true, and you know it. Kurisu Aigasa told me everything that happened after I left... You figured out the whole truth with your crazy powers of perception.”

“It was just a coincidence.” Holmes sipped his coffee.

Come to think of it, I feel like that’s what he usually says in these situations. Seriously, how could it be a coincidence?

The conversation stopped there. The grandfather clock ticked in the background as tension lingered in the air—the source of which was probably Komatsu. *He must be waiting for the right time to tell Holmes something.*

Komatsu gulped down his coffee as if to shake off the tension and put the cup down on the counter. “I actually came to make a request.”

“I decline,” Holmes said immediately with a calm look on his face.

Komatsu and I both gaped.

“Uh, but...I haven’t even told you what it is yet.”

“Yes, and I’m declining it before you do.”

“Without knowing what it is?”

“It’s something better suited for a detective than an appraiser-in-training like me, right?”

“Y-Yeah.” Komatsu nodded hesitantly.

“Despite the unwanted embellished rumors that have been going around lately, I’m only a student and appraiser-in-training. I have no interest in playing detective. Even if I’m offered compensation, I have no intention of taking it. So long as that is the case, I don’t think you have the right to ask me,” Holmes said calmly and bluntly.

Komatsu's face went pale.

Holmes must've realized from the very beginning that Komatsu came to ask him to investigate something. That's why he was wary from the start. Komatsu sensed that, but he was still desperately looking for an opportunity.

I understand Holmes's perspective—he's always hated dealing with troublesome things. He thinks it would be ruder to listen to the story when he has no intention of accepting the request. But when I look at how dejected Komatsu is, I can't help but feel bad for him.

"I apologize for not meeting your expectations." Holmes frowned and bowed.

Komatsu didn't say anything and continued to look down.

"If it helps, I can find a skilled detective for you," Holmes continued. "I know a lot of people with connections—"

"It's my daughter," Komatsu murmured, not looking up.

Huh? Holmes and I blinked.

Komatsu sprung up and exclaimed, "It's about my daughter. Please! I want to help her!" He knelt down on the floor and prostrated.

"Please don't do that," Holmes said, standing up. He grabbed Komatsu's arm, but the man shook his head.

"I'm begging you! At least listen to my story," he pleaded, pressing his forehead to the floor again.

Holmes frowned at his stubbornness but slumped his shoulders and said, "Fine, I'll listen. I don't know if I'll be able to help you, though." He pulled on Komatsu's arm, getting the man to slowly stand back up.

Komatsu bowed apologetically and sat down in his seat. Holmes immediately sat across from him and prompted him to begin.

Komatsu took a deep breath and said, "I have a daughter, but she doesn't live with me. I got divorced and her mother took custody. She's...oh, around the same age as the young lady here. Sixteen, a high school first-year—"

"Aoi is about to turn eighteen. It may seem similar but it's very different,"

Holmes declared, a gleam in his eyes, as if it had to be said.

Komatsu flinched.

“I apologize for interrupting your story. Please continue.”

“R-Right. My ex-wife and I were originally from Tokyo. We moved to Kyoto because of work, but, well, after I quit my job, we divorced. I went back to Tokyo by myself and started working as a detective. It’s already been ten years since then...”

“Your wife and child stayed in Kyoto?” Holmes asked.

“Yeah.” Komatsu nodded. “My wife got a job at a Kyoto tourism magazine and seemed to like working there.” He took a sip of coffee. “Our daughter got into a pretty good private school that covered both middle school and high school. After the divorce, my only connection with her was the child-support payments. But my wife started talking to me more after our daughter started middle school, mainly to talk about the kid. She often said, ‘It’s difficult when they start puberty.’ It seemed like she was struggling with our daughter’s rebellious phase.”

“Did you never see your daughter after the divorce?”

“No, it’s not that I *never* saw her. It was basically only at entrance ceremonies and her elementary school graduation, though...because it’d be sad for her if only one parent was there.”

Holmes nodded. “So in middle school, she rebelled against her mother...”

“Yeah, apparently it started with a fight over something trivial. Maybe since she put so much effort into her middle school entrance exams, she slacked off hard after getting in. My wife warned her, but my daughter responded angrily, ‘I got into the school you wanted for your sake, so don’t nag me anymore!’ Then my wife said, ‘What do you mean, for my sake? It’s for your sake,’ and it blew up into a huge fight. They couldn’t make amends after that.” Komatsu sighed deeply.

“I see.”

“Apparently my daughter started going to Osaka until late at night, and she

even got taken in by the police once. But one day, someone in Umeda asked her if she wanted to be an amateur fashion model, and she accepted. It was a Kansai teen magazine. Working there calmed her down a bit, and her relationship with her mother improved.”

“It’s a good thing that the person who approached her didn’t have bad intentions...” Holmes frowned, as if thinking, “That was close.”

“Yeah, you’re completely right. We’re lucky that it was a respectable place. My wife was happy to see her daughter in magazines too, and their relationship apparently recovered...but only temporarily. In her third year of middle school, she met a university student who became her fan after seeing her in the magazine. He was pretty good-looking, so she fell head over heels for him...”

Out of the frying pan and into the fire... My face stiffened as I listened to Komatsu’s story.

“There was a brief moment of peace after she started high school, but one day, she suddenly disappeared. She’s been missing for two weeks now.”

Holmes gave him a stern look. “Did you report it to the police?”

“Of course. But she purposely left her phone at home, with a letter that said, ‘I want to live with him.’ Since it seems like an ordinary runaway case, they aren’t putting effort into the search. So I took on the investigation myself. I waited outside her school and tried to get information from people, but you can tell how that turned out, right? Just look at me.”

“They thought you were suspicious.” Holmes looked at Komatsu with pity.

“Please, help me. They won’t suspect me if you’re with me, and since you can read minds, you’ll know right away if her friends are lying, right?” he pleaded, leaning forward over the counter.

“No, I can’t read minds. It’s understandable that the students would be suspicious of you, though. How about an exchange, then?”

Komatsu instantly put on a guarded expression. “An exchange?”

“Yes. Recently there have been strange thefts happening around us, where only a single inexpensive work of art is stolen. I’d like you to help us with that

investigation.”

Komatsu’s face brightened up. “Oh, I can do that.”

“Thank you.” Holmes nodded and shifted his gaze to me. “Aoi, I think they’ll relax their guard more if you come too. Could you help us?”

I was surprised at the sudden attention, but I nodded. “Y-Yes, I’ll do anything I can.”

Komatsu instantly scrunched his face, tears welling up in his eyes. “Thank you,” he said, bowing deeply.

“If you have any pictures of your daughter, I’d like to see them,” Holmes said, immediately getting down to business.

Komatsu nodded and said, “Of course.” He took a clear folder out of his black briefcase. There were several photographs and magazine clippings inside. “Here.” He put the folder on the counter.

Holmes took his white gloves out of his inside pocket in an extremely natural manner and put them on. “Allow me to take a look, then.” As if handling an antique, he carefully took the photos and clippings out of the folder and spread them out on the counter.

“Wow, your daughter’s so pretty!” I remarked without thinking.

“Thanks,” Komatsu said with an awkward shrug. “She resembles my ex-wife.”

Since she was an amateur model, I thought she’d have more distinct features, but that wasn’t the case. If anything, she was a Japanese-style beauty, with an oval face, hidden double eyelids, a straight nose, and elegant lips. Her facial features weren’t flashy, but they were balanced. She’d surely look good in a kimono.

The magazine photographs, however, gave a completely different impression. There, she wore fake eyelashes and used eyelid glue to enhance her double eyelids.

“In the magazines, her makeup makes her seem mixed-race,” Holmes remarked as he compared the pictures. “I think it would’ve been better to make use of her existing characteristics,” he added, as if talking to himself.

“Apparently the magazine staff also wanted to stick with Yuko’s natural looks—oh, Yuko is my daughter’s name. Her last name’s Hasegawa—different from mine. According to my wife, the other models were all mixed-race and Yuko wanted to be like them. They did keep her natural look for this kimono picture though...” Komatsu picked out one of the many clippings. It was an article with a picture of Yuko in traditional Japanese clothes.

“So pretty! It really suits her,” I said. She was wearing a pink semi-formal kimono and looking down with a smile. She had a very refined, gentle aura.

Holmes picked up the picture. “Hm?” He squinted at it.

I thought for sure he’d smile and say, “Traditional clothes suit her well,” so his stern face caught me off guard.

“What’s wrong, Holmes?” I asked.

“Did you figure something out, lad?” Komatsu leaned forward.

Holmes gave a strained smile. “No, I don’t know anything. I feel like I’ve seen this somewhere, though...” he said, staring at the photo.

“It was in a magazine, so maybe you saw it there?”

“Yes, that’s possible...but I feel like her aura reminds me of someone I know, not her face.” He handed the magazine clipping back to Komatsu, saying, “Thank you.”

“Sure you didn’t figure anything out, kid? If you noticed something from looking at the pictures, I’m all ears.” Komatsu gathered the photos strewn across the counter and looked at Holmes.

“I didn’t, but I did sense something. If you don’t mind my impudent assumptions, I can tell you,” Holmes said, putting his hand on his chin.

“That’s fine. Just tell me.”

“The intensity in her eyes shows that she’s not camera-shy. That and the way she curves her lips gave me the impression that she’s strong-willed. She’s brave and determined. Confident in herself, but since she also has an inferiority complex, she used eyelid glue and fake eyelashes to assert herself. Considering that she had what it took to make the magazine company follow her will, I

imagine her mother must've had a hard time with her rebellious phase."

Komatsu's eyes went wide open.

"From what you said, Komatsu, I sensed that Yuko is extremely dedicated to what she does. I'm sure she studied very hard for her entrance exams too, which is why she experienced burnout syndrome after passing. Despite how hard she worked, her mother scolded her, making her think, 'Even though I worked so hard, my mom won't acknowledge my efforts one bit.' From there, her mindset would've become, 'If my work isn't acknowledged, then working hard is pointless.' That would've set her on the path of rebellion." As Holmes spoke, he stood up, retrieved the glass coffee pot from the kitchenette, and returned to the counter. "Being a model may have been gratifying for her because the staff would openly praise her for working hard to fulfill their requests. It could be one of the reasons why her strained relationship with her mother improved." He stooped down a bit to pour coffee into Komatsu's empty cup.

Komatsu gave a humble-looking bow of thanks.

Holmes smiled and asked gently, "Could it be that Yuko's mother isn't good at giving praise?"

"Y-Yeah, you're right. She was never the type to give straightforward compliments or thanks. Her awkwardness results in misunderstandings, since she's strong-willed and prideful too. When we divorced, she even told me, 'I don't need any of your settlement money or child support.' I argued back, though, saying 'I'm not paying you; I'm paying Yuko.'"

"As I suspected. Yuko always wanted to be praised. Her mother may have been praising her in her own way, but it didn't get across to her. However, through her work as a model, Yuko learned what it was like to be acknowledged by someone besides her parents."

"Well...that isn't a bad thing to learn, right?" Komatsu looked up at Holmes, seeming confused.

"No, it's not a bad thing—it's a way of becoming independent from one's parents. When people are young, they work hard because they want to be praised by their parents. When they grow up and enter society, they then work

hard to be acknowledged at their job. However, Yuko's situation changed when she met a man who would acknowledge everything about her. Since she was already distancing herself from her mother, her dependence transferred over to that man. That's why she even left her phone behind when she ran away." Holmes returned to his seat behind the counter and looked at Komatsu. "Well, that's my assumption."

Komatsu visibly gulped.

This whole time he could only wonder why his daughter would run away, but now that Holmes spelled it out for him, he finally understands Yuko's point of view. At the same time, he must be scared of how Holmes inferred so much from the pictures and what he said. Even though I'm used to it, it was still intimidating for me.

Holmes chuckled and waved his hand. "As I said, it's only my conjecture."

"No, the rumors were true after all," Komatsu murmured, face pale.

"Like I said, those rumors weren't..." Holmes trailed off, shrugging as if it was getting bothersome to give the same explanation every time. "Setting that aside, we'll have to question her friends and the magazine company that acted as her modeling agency. I assume the police are already doing that, though," he said, picking up a magazine clipping.

"Probably, but they won't put any real effort into it unless they get a whiff of blood. She's also got a juvenile record, so they just see it as a delinquent girl running away with her boyfriend," Komatsu muttered with disdain.

"We're talking about a university-aged man who didn't hesitate to make a sixteen-year-old girl run away from home. I'd say that's more than criminal enough," Holmes said coldly.

Komatsu's eyes widened. "You're...right. This is a crime."

"Indeed."

We decided to go to Yuko's high school on Monday afternoon. Komatsu thanked us several more times before getting up from his seat and leaving the store.

I immediately ran outside to see him off. “Komatsu, I’m sure we’ll find your daughter quickly, so please eat and sleep properly. I’m worried because you look more worn out than before,” I said, despite feeling awkward about it.

Komatsu gave me a dejected look and said, “You’re a nice girl, miss.”

“N-No, not at all.” I shook my head, embarrassed.

He smiled slightly and said, “No offense, but at first I was surprised that that scary kid chose you. I mean, you’re cute, but you’re still a normal girl, and you’re only in high school. He’s a weirdo, so I wondered if he was a lolicon.”

“A-A lolicon...” *Apparently it really does look that way when a grad student is dating a high school girl.*

“But maybe that’s not it,” he murmured. “Hey, don’t you get scared being with a guy like that? Surely you can’t put up with it just because he’s good-looking.”

I gave him a strained look. *I feel like a lot of people have asked me that question, even before we started dating.* “I was scared at first, but I’m used to it now,” I said with a smile.

Komatsu’s eyes widened, then he grinned. “I see. You’ve got guts, miss.”

“Guts?” I gaped. *No one’s ever said that to me before.*

“Yeah, otherwise you wouldn’t be able to go out with a freak like that, knowing what he’s really like.” He nodded over and over, as if he’d figured us out. “Anyway, see you on Monday.” He waved and turned away.

“Okay,” I said, bowing. *Do I really have guts?* I wondered as I went back into the store.

Inside, Holmes had already cleared off the counter and was wiping it with a cloth.

“Oh, sorry,” I said. “I should be doing that.”

“It’s fine.” Holmes put down the cloth and stretched. “Everything about Yuko’s story was terrifying, don’t you think?”

“Huh?”

“First, the recruiter. It’s a miracle that they were legitimate. There are more than a few scoundrels who will lure innocent girls in with nice words and then sell them as commodities.”

“Yeah...”

“Then there’s the university student who ‘became her fan’ and went to her school to see her—when she was still in middle school. That’s nearly a crime in itself, and he seems to me like a frivolous man with no morals. Well, no one with morals would approve of her running away from home, anyway. That said...even if he lacks common sense, it’s still salvageable if he’s treating her well. We can only pray that he isn’t using her.” He sighed.

“Yeah,” I agreed, looking at the serious expression on his face. I was glad to see him like this since he wasn’t interested in the case at first. *Maybe that’s why he always refuses at first—he knows that if he listens to the story, he’ll be sympathetic.* “You’re more sympathetic than I expected, though.” I giggled.

Holmes nodded firmly. “I thought of you in Yuko’s place.”

“Huh?”

“I thought, what if you were recruited as an amateur model and a frivolous university student saw that and approached you? Even though we’re dating now, if an easygoing, exciting university student showed up while you were fed up with the serious and boring me, I’d lose you.”

“‘Serious and boring’? Holmes, you’re pretty interesting, you know...?” *In many ways.*

“Either way, if someone tries to recruit you out on the street, you must refuse immediately! Don’t follow them!” he shouted, grabbing my shoulders.

“O-Okay... Well, no one would recruit me in the first place. The moment they try, I’ll know it’s a scam.” I laughed.

Holmes blatantly frowned. “What are you talking about? You’re very attractive,” he said with a serious face.

I blushed. “Th-Thanks. It makes me happy even if you’re just saying that to be

nice.”

“What? Aoi, you’re truly wonderful. You’re brilliant,” he declared with an even more serious expression.

I felt like I was going to cry. “Y-You’re exaggerating.”

“Not in the slightest.”

“Thank you, but, um, could you calm down a bit?”

“Of course, this is in my own opinion. See, the way you look up at me with that troubled face, the way you look down weakly—all adorable. And the way you’re avoiding looking me in the eye right now—”

“P-Please, stop it!” I squeaked, my voice echoing through the store.

Komatsu, Holmes may have a scary side...but he also has a stupid side like this, I whispered in my heart as dusk fell.

Chapter 2: The Investigation Begins

1

A gust of wind came in through the open classroom window, ruffling my hair. It was lunch break, and the male students were outside playing dodgeball like elementary schoolers. The girls were watching them and laughing. Having finished my lunch, I stared out the window and sighed.

“What’s with the sigh?” came a voice from above my head.

I startled, turned, and saw Kaori Miyashita grinning mischievously. She giggled and sat down in the seat in front of my desk. Luckily for us, we were put in the same class this year.

“What, did I scare you?” she asked.

“I was just spacing out,” I said, straightening up in my seat.

“You seemed kind of sad. Did you get in a fight with Holmes?” she asked, leaning in slightly. She had an expectant look in her eyes, as if hoping for gossip.

I slumped my shoulders. “No, that’s not—” I froze. “Actually, I guess it was something like that.”

“Really? That’s weird. What caused it?” She instantly looked worried, as though she hadn’t expected it to actually be a fight. I couldn’t help but smile. *She really is a good friend. That’s why I feel bad for not being able to tell her...*

“It really isn’t anything serious,” I said with a strained smile, waving my hand.

I couldn’t tell her that it started because Holmes was singing my praises. I’d said, “Please stop saying those things. It’s too much,” and it turned into an argument. He even said, “I’m not saying anything excessive at all. Regardless of my tunnel vision, this is what I think, so please don’t deny my feelings. It’s not good to do that to anyone, even if you disagree.” Then he made me listen to a lecture on “the terrors of trampling on people’s feelings,” and at some point, it turned into a philosophical talk. All I could respond with were dumbfounded

“yeahs.” In the end, we settled on a compromise where he won’t say those embarrassing things when other people are around. *I’m surprised Holmes has that side to him, though. I thought he was calmer and more collected than that. He really is weird...* I facepalmed. *Being complimented by the person I like does make me happy, but as they say, everything in moderation...*

“You went through like five faces just now,” Kaori said, bringing me back to my senses. “Either way it’s a lovers’ quarrel, right? I’m staying out of this.” She had a cold look in her eye.

“Yeah, pretty much.” *I bet you’ll never find a better example of a lovers’ quarrel than this,* I thought, laughing even though I shouldn’t have.

“Is that what you were sighing over, though?”

“Oh, no. I was thinking about some strange things that’ve been happening lately,” I answered vaguely. I figured I wasn’t supposed to tell others about the owner’s story and Komatsu’s daughter.

“Are you talking about those art thefts?” Kaori asked in a hushed voice.

“Y-Yeah. You heard about them?”

“My family heard about them from a tea master and spent a whole day checking the storeroom and closets and stuff. They made me help too. It was so much work.” She slumped her shoulders. Kaori’s family owned a long-established kimono fabric store.

“Was it okay?”

“Probably? Besides the kimono fabrics, we didn’t keep track of what was in the house to begin with.”

“Pretty much. We have a lot of things from my late grandpa’s art collection too, but we’ve never checked what exactly was there.” I nodded, resting my chin in my hands.

“And like, Seiji came over yesterday too.”

“Really?” *Yesterday was Sunday. The owner came to Kura on Saturday, which means that he went to Miyashita Fabrics the very next day.*

“Yep. I was listening to his conversation with dad, and it turns out that the

stolen things and their owners have something in common.”

“They do?”

“Yeah, all of the art was Buddhism-related, and all of them were displayed at a private museum’s exhibit last year. It was called ‘The Beautiful World of Buddhism.’”

“I see.” *Does that mean the culprit targeted them after seeing that exhibit?*

“Dad was like, ‘What if they pretended to be from a delivery company and stole the items after the exhibit ended?’ but Seiji said, ‘People get nervous when they’re expecting their things to be returned, so that probably ain’t it. The exhibit’s just how they determined their targets.’”

I silently nodded.

“He also said there was someone who was confused ‘cause the thief passed over a Raku tea bowl to steal a cheap hanging scroll.”

That’s what the owner said the other day too: nothing was “particularly valuable.” But I feel like the monetary value of the losses isn’t the issue here—these are things that people kept safe and secure in their homes. When Ensho stole the Shino tea bowl from the store, I was shocked because it was something important to Kura, not because it was expensive.

“No matter what’s stolen, theft is theft. We can’t let them get away with this,” I declared, louder than I’d intended.

Kaori looked up, startled.

“Oh, sorry, I didn’t mean to scare you,” I hurriedly added.

She shook her head. “No, you’re right. I hope they find the culprit soon.”

“Yeah.” *This might look like a minor case of theft, but the owner did call it “creepy.” I can’t shake the sinking feeling growing in my chest either.*

2

After school, I went straight to my bicycle and hurried to the meeting place: a cafe on Karasuma Street, near the prestigious private school that Yuko went to.

It wasn't far from my school; in fact, it was much closer than Teramachi-Sanjo. The cafe felt more like a vintage Showa-era coffeehouse, with its small chandeliers and lamps, reddish-brown sofas, and wall clock. *It has a similar atmosphere to Kura*, I thought as I peeked in from outside.

I parked my bicycle and nervously opened the door. The man behind the counter—presumably the owner—greeted me with a quiet “Welcome.” I bowed and looked around until I saw Komatsu and Holmes sitting next to each other in a booth. Across from them were two high school girls. *They must've succeeded in finding people who were willing to talk.*

I could only see the girls from behind, but their shiny, neatly arranged hair and crisp white collars gave me the impression that they were well bred. I walked up to the group and saw the girls' faces. Their eyes were lit up.

“So like, we're not Yuko's friends or anything.”

“Yeah, we wouldn't be friends with *her*.”

There was a flirty tone to their voices, probably because they were interested in Holmes. As I was thinking about what they just said, Holmes, who was sitting in the aisle seat, greeted me. “Aoi,” he said, standing and walking up to me.

“Sorry, I ran a bit late,” I said.

“Don't worry about it.” He shook his head. “In order to get the truth from them, Komatsu is pretending to be a detective hired by Yuko's parents. Please play along,” he whispered.

I nodded. *That makes sense...but based on what I'm seeing, Holmes's “hot guy effect” is working on them anyway. They don't seem wary in the slightest.*

I looked at the booth. With the four of them there, there wasn't space for me. “Should I sit in the next seat over?”

“No, it's okay,” Holmes said. “Komatsu, could you sit at the counter for a while?”

“S-Sure,” Komatsu said, standing up and taking his coffee with him to the counter. He'd been seething because of the girls' ruthless words.

“Sorry, I thought you might feel uncomfortable speaking with two men, so I

asked my partner to join us,” Holmes said, sitting down.

“Hello,” I said, sitting next to him.

The two high school girls across from us looked at me blankly. One of them murmured, “Even a high school student can work as a detective’s partner, huh?” They must’ve assumed that since Komatsu was a detective, Holmes was too—making me a detective’s partner. It seemed like it’d be easier to let them keep believing that.

Holmes smiled and tried to correct them, “No, by ‘partner,’ I mean—”

I gently tugged on his sleeve. He looked down at me, surprised. I signaled with my eyes, “Let’s keep it this way,” and after a moment, he nodded.

By the time my coffee arrived, the conversation at the table had more or less opened up. The two girls were first-years, making me two years their senior. They seemed to be quite respectful of that fact, refraining from the flirty tone they’d been using earlier and speaking formally.

“I didn’t always hate Yuko,” said the one sitting in the wall seat, Fuyumi. “We were classmates in middle school too.”

“Yeah,” said the other girl, Akiko.

“She was stubborn but she always did the right thing. She was dignified and *really* pretty, so the younger students looked up to her.”

“It made sense that she started modeling too.”

“When did your friendship change, then?” I asked.

They looked at each other.

“Well...it’d have to be when she got a boyfriend. Yuko’s boyfriend is in university, and he’s super rich and good-looking,” one of them said.

“She started bragging about him nonstop. At first we thought it was cute, but it just got more and more annoying over time.”

“And she’d put him before everything else. When we made plans to hang out, she’d cancel on the day-of because he invited her out.”

I looked at them with a strained smile as they raced to voice their complaints. I could understand Yuko's emotional state of being infatuated with her first boyfriend, but I sympathized with her friends more.

Holmes had been quietly listening to their story with his hand on his chin. "Regarding that boyfriend..." He clasped his hands on the table and looked intently at them.

The girls immediately snapped back to attention and looked at him.

"Are you aware of how he and Yuko came to be in a relationship?" he asked. We'd already heard the story from Komatsu, but he must've wanted to hear it directly from them.

The girls nodded enthusiastically.

"We know," one of them said. "I mean, we were there when it happened."

"How so?" Holmes asked.

"In our third year of middle school, we were going home and there was this white Porsche parked in front of the school. Everyone was like, 'What's going on?' and her boyfriend got out of the car."

"Yeah, he had flowers and an autograph board and he was like, 'I'm a fan of your magazine shoots. Can I get your autograph?' He was really cool, Yuko was super embarrassed, and everyone was excited because it felt like we were watching a TV drama. They got each other's numbers and started going out right away."

"When you got out of that Jaguar today, Yagashira, it reminded me of him."

"Yeah, I thought there was gonna be a second Yuko!"

Holmes smiled weakly. "I'm sorry about that. That car doesn't belong to me, and unlike Yuko's boyfriend, I'm not rich. Was it his Porsche that made you think he was?"

The girls looked up at the ceiling as if trying to recall.

"Umm... Yuko herself said he was rich too."

"Yeah, he bought her a Kelly bag and she brought it to school before."

I was stunned. *A university student wearing a suit, driving an imported car, dating a middle schooler who works as an amateur model, and buying her a luxury handbag... It might seem like a glamorous dream come true to Yuko and these girls, but anyone else would find it alarming. Even Holmes is getting called a lolicon because he's in grad school and dating me, a high school third-year. Was that university student not hesitant about dating a middle schooler? Is he a selfish rich boy who tries to get his hands on everything he wants?*

"Did Yuko say anything before she ran away from home?" Holmes asked.

The girls shook their heads, seeming ashamed. "To be honest, we've all been avoiding her," one of them said. "We don't talk to her anymore."

"By 'all,' do you mean everyone in your class, not just you two?" Holmes pressed.

They nodded hesitantly. *In other words, Yuko was alienated from her class.*

"How did you feel when you found out that Yuko wasn't coming to school because she ran away?" Holmes asked.

"How...?" They tilted their heads.

"Were you surprised?" he continued.

"Yes, but not *that* surprised."

"She said she didn't get along with her mom, and being at school was awkward for her, so I didn't think it was strange."

"I see," Holmes said. "Thank you for answering my questions today. Feel free to buy yourselves some books with this." He offered them an envelope containing a bookstore gift card.

"Ooh!" they exclaimed happily. "Thank you for treating us to cake too." They bowed and left the cafe.

I watched them leave, unsure if we'd gained any new information from that conversation.

Once they were out of sight, Holmes rested his chin in his hands and said, "They seemed to know a lot about Yuko's boyfriend, but they didn't even know his name." He sighed.

“Not even his last name?” I tilted my head. *That’s strange, considering how much Yuko bragged about him.*

“Apparently Yuko called him Piro, so her friends don’t know his real name.”

“Based on that nickname, his name would have ‘hiro’ in it, right?”

“Yes, like you, her friends assumed that his name must have ‘hiro’ in it, so they didn’t question it.”

“Come to think of it, when I’m talking to Kaori about you, I call you Holmes too.” *Kaori knows his real name because they’ve met, but if that weren’t the case, she’d only know him as “Holmes.”*

“You talk to Kaori about me when I’m not around?” he murmured.

I nodded hesitantly. “O-Of course I do. We already talked about you before, but now...you’re my boyfriend, so...” I mumbled, unable to look him in the eye. My face felt like it was going to give off steam.

“I’m sort of happy to hear that,” Holmes said, placing his hand in front of his mouth. His cheeks seemed to be slightly flushed.

“W-We don’t talk about anything special.”

“Hey, can I sit here?” Komatsu asked, interrupting our fidgeting with a very cold stare.

“My apologies, please have a seat,” Holmes said with a smile, switching gears in the blink of an eye.

Komatsu sat down across from us, looking unenthused. He gulped down the small remainder of his coffee and heaved a sigh. “I didn’t think I’d have to put up with this much bad-mouthing of my daughter.”

“Indeed, I’m sure you would’ve rather they spoke badly of you. It must’ve been painful.” Holmes gave him an appreciative look.

“Thanks... Can’t say I ever expected to be comforted by you, kid.”

“Hearing someone speak ill of the people you hold dear is a test of endurance. Moving on, what did you think about what they said?”

Komatsu sat back in his seat and looked at the ceiling. “Well, I can’t argue

with it. Even though I didn't live with my daughter, I can imagine that stuff happening. She's like my wife—determined and stubborn. She also tends to be a status seeker.”

“How so?”

“She's easily swayed by popularity and stuff.” Komatsu laughed self-deprecatingly, ran his hand through his messy hair, and then looked at Holmes with renewed urgency. “So, what're your thoughts?”

“I felt that it was peculiar.”

“Peculiar?”

“When a university-aged man sets his sights on a young lady, does he brazenly wait for her at the school gate? Arriving in a Porsche with flowers and an autograph board is like a scene from a shojo manga.”

“Yeah,” I agreed.

“And even though he showed up so brazenly, it would appear that her friends never saw him again after that. In other words, they only saw him on that first day. Additionally, out of all of the possible handbag brands, would you really give a middle school student a Kelly bag? It feels like it's intended to be obviously expensive rather than a thoughtful gift. The whole scenario of a rich, good-looking man getting out of a luxury car is so naive and cliched that I'd almost think that Yuko set it up herself,” Holmes said with his hand on his chin.

Komatsu frowned. “What the hell? Are you implying that Yuko asked a model she knew to pretend to be her boyfriend?”

“I'm not. I'm saying that that's how unnatural it feels. However, if, as you say, Yuko was simply having a model act for her, then it would actually be far less problematic...”

Right, if this is all a charade that Yuko set up, then she must be safe, barring any major trouble.

“Although,” Holmes continued, “even if that were the case, I'd still be worried. There are many scoundrels who would see a cheeky young girl who enjoys manipulating men and want to bring her down a peg or two, so to

peak.”

“Do you think Yuko set this up?” Komatsu asked in a low voice.

Holmes frowned and folded his arms. “It’s not impossible.”

In short, she asked someone she knew to help her show off to her friends, but ended up getting closer to the man for real and alienating herself from her classmates. Feeling terrible about it all, she ran away from home... Is that really it? I tilted my head.

“However,” Holmes continued, “I cannot say for sure. I’d like more information. Perhaps I’ll have a better understanding after talking to her modeling agency.” He had a serious look in his eyes.

“A-All right.” Komatsu nodded.

Seeing the absentminded look on Komatsu’s face, Holmes seemed reluctant to bring up the next topic, but he did nonetheless: “By the way, Komatsu, about my request...”

“Oh right.” Komatsu took a brown envelope out of his bag. “I’m not done yet, but here’s what I found so far.” He handed the documents to Holmes.

Exhibit Information:

Name: The Beautiful World of Buddhism

Venue: Kitashiro Museum

Kitashiro Museum was a somewhat large private museum known for its themed exhibits.

Concept: Buddhist art has flourished in India ever since the 1st century, in the Kushan Empire, Gandhara, and Mathura. Even today, we still find beauty in the world of Buddhism. This exhibit will focus on Buddhist works by present-day artists.

The sponsors were written below the concept, followed by a list of display items with their creators and owners.

Artists, Works, and Owners

Shuei Akutagawa: A hanging scroll depicting Vayu (owned by Shigetoshi

Yanagihara)

Takashi Katahira: A sculpture of Deva (owned by Kazuhiko Shinohara)

Yutaka Kunishiro: A tapestry depicting General Kubira (owned by Atsuro Shigemori)

Yasushi Murakami: A copper ornament depicting Sakra (owned by Kuro Amamiya)

“These are the four that’re missing,” Komatsu said, pointing at the document. “I’m in the process of confirming if there’re other victims. Everyone cooperates once I tell them I’m doing it for Seiji Yagashira.”

Of the four, I knew Yanagihara and Kazuhiko, Rikyu’s uncle.

“Shigemori is the tea master that my grandfather knows,” Holmes said. “Hm?” His eyes widened. “Is this fourth name Amamiya, as in the politician? And it says he was one of the sponsors for this project too?”

“Yeah, he’s in the Diet. He lent a lot of artworks to this exhibit.”

I leaned forward to read the list. Many of the works were indeed owned by Kuro Amamiya.

“Amamiya also has a gold Buddha statue, but the thief didn’t take it,” Komatsu continued. “He said he was confused about why they’d leave that behind.”

“Were you able to speak with him directly?” Holmes asked.

“He’s in Tokyo right now, so I could only talk to his secretary, who said he’d be at a party at Okura if I wanna talk to him. One of those fundraising parties that politicians love having,” Komatsu spat.

Holmes narrowed his eyes. “I see. In that case, I would like to speak with him directly.”

“Wait, you’re gonna go to the party?”

“Yes, of course. If it’s just a fundraising party, it should be rather easy to attend as long as you sign up. You should come too, Komatsu.”

Komatsu shook his head vigorously. “Me? I’ll pass. You can go with the young

lady.”

“I do intend on bringing Aoi, but don’t forget that we agreed to help each other. I’ll cover the attendance fee.”

Komatsu caved to Holmes’s gentle persuasion, slumping his shoulders and saying, “Fine.”

“Wait, I’m going to that politician’s party too?” I pointed to myself and gaped. I’d assumed that that conversation had nothing to do with me. *A politician’s party seems like it’d be stiff, and I’d feel way out of place there. I don’t really want to go.*

“The atmosphere would be much better than if we went as a pair of men, so I’d appreciate it if you could attend. More importantly, I’d be happier if you were with me,” Holmes said unabashedly.

Seeing his smiling face from up close, I couldn’t argue back. “O-Okay, I’ll go.” I gave in, blushing furiously.

3

Holmes and Komatsu went to talk to the agency where Yuko was registered as an amateur model, while I went home on my bike. I headed east on Marutamachi Street, along the wall surrounding the Kyoto Imperial Palace, until I reached Kawaramachi Street, where I turned north. There were a lot of old Western-style restaurants and candy stores on Kawaramachi Street. The scattered small lights from the stores glowed gently under the sunset sky. I smiled as I pedaled past them.

When I reached Demachiyanagi, there was still a line in front of Futaba, a shop famous for its *mame mochi*—sweet rice cakes studded with beans. I got off my bike outside the entrance to the Demachi Masugata shopping street, took my phone out of my bag, and called my mother, who picked up after a moment.

“Aoi?”

“I’m at the entrance to the shopping street right now. Do you want me to buy anything on my way back?”

“Oh, you’re early today. You didn’t have work?”

“No...” *Holmes asked me to join them in talking to those girls, but it wasn’t work.*

“Perfect timing, then. Can you get cabbage, eggs, ham, and milk?”

“Huh, that’s more than I expected. Okay.”

I put my phone back in my bag and pushed my bike into the shopping street. Past the large “Masugata” sign over the entrance was an arcade decorated with colorful banners and triangular flags. Hanging over the street was a big sign that said “We’re doing well today.” Looking at it always put a smile on my face. Since the street was much narrower and smaller in scale than the ones in the Teramachi-Sanjo area, it felt very local.

Among the stores selling Western apparel, traditional Japanese sweets, donuts, and fruit was a supermarket I often went to. I left my bike in a permitted parking area and went inside. Even though I wasn’t a housewife, I was always surprised by how cheap the vegetables in the front of the store were. *These tomatoes are bright red and look delicious, and on top of that, they’re unbelievably cheap.* I added some tomatoes to my shopping basket even though my mother hadn’t asked for them, then picked up the cabbage, ham, eggs, and milk she wanted. Lastly, I bought some snacks to eat while studying.

“I’m home!” I shouted as I opened the living room door.

My mother, who was in the kitchen, turned around and smiled. “Welcome back.”

“I bought these, as well as tomatoes since they were cheap,” I said, placing my reusable shopping bag on the dining table. “Let me get changed and I’ll help you.”

“Why thanks. I see that ever since you started going out with Kiyotaka, you’ve suddenly been very enthusiastic about helping with dinner.” She giggled.

My cheeks flushed. Mutsuki, who was on the sofa playing a video game, said, “Are you gonna learn how to cook for Holmes?”

"J-Jeez, leave me alone." I looked away, embarrassed.

My parents knew that I had started going out with Holmes. In fact, they were among the first to know—right after we confessed our feelings for each other, Holmes came to my house to meet them.

"I have been given the privilege of dating Aoi. I am fully aware that she is still under eighteen and has entrance exams coming up, so I intend on handling our relationship with moderation. I ask that you please support us," he said, bowing deeply.

"O-Oh, um, yes, please take care of our inexperienced daughter." My mother bowed back, not looking either of us in the eye.

My father, who was sitting next to her, put on a strained smile and shrugged. "Hey, it's not like you're asking for permission to marry her. Well, I'm glad you came to tell us anyway. Keep it in moderation like you said, all right?" he said gently.

Next, my grandmother said, "You sure got yourself a looker." The mood lightened up after that.

So, we were going out with my parents' approval.

"Being able to cook is good, but right now you need to focus on your tests, Aoi," my mother said.

I slumped my shoulders. "You're right." *I have to take entrance exams this year. But since Holmes has been tutoring me recently, I haven't had to go to cram school.*

"So which school are you aiming for? You've discussed it with your teacher, right?" my mother asked, turning around.

"Yeah." I took a bottle of mineral water out of the fridge, took a gulp, and wiped my mouth. "Today, actually. My teacher suggested Kyoto Prefectural University."

"What do you think?"

"Apparently I can get a curator certification there."

"That's for working at museums or art galleries, right?"

“Yeah. Working at Kura has made me want to get a job related to art. I want to get a curator certification if I can. I think Holmes got his when he was at KPU, so I’m thinking of going there too.”

“If that’s what you want, then I’ll support your decision. But don’t let your stress build up too much, okay? I’m scared you’ll end up like that boy in the news.” My mother placed her hand on her cheek and sighed.

I tilted my head. “What boy in the news?”

“It was on just now,” Mutsuki said. “A guy at a really prestigious private high school in Kyoto got arrested for possession of cannabis. He said he had it ’cause of exam stress.”

“Oh.” This seemed to have nothing to do with me whatsoever. “I wouldn’t do something so dangerous, so don’t worry.” I gave an awkward smile. I assumed my mother was warning me not to turn to bad things to relieve exam stress.

“But they thought the same thing about the boy in the news—that he’d never do something like that,” my mother said. “Be careful, okay?”

“O-Okay. But don’t worry—when I’m stressed, I go for cake instead,” I said with a stiff face.

“Holmes isn’t gonna like you anymore if you get fat!” Mutsuki shouted from behind me.

My face stiffened even more.

“Now then...”

After dinner and a bath, I went straight to my room and took my studying materials out of my desk. I glanced at the clock—it was 8:30. *If I start now, I’ll be able to study for two hours.*

I spent the first hour finishing my homework, then moved on to prep work. At just past 10:30, my phone started vibrating. Startled, I looked up, picked up my phone, and pressed it to my ear.

“H-Hello?”

“Good evening, Aoi.”

Upon hearing Holmes's voice, my face relaxed into a smile. "G-Good evening."

"Was there anything today that you didn't understand or got stuck on?"

"Oh, yes. First, for math..." I opened my notebook and found the part that I'd marked to ask him about. Every night at 10:30, unless either of us had something else to take care of, Holmes would call me and help me with my schoolwork. Since he told me to have my questions ready by then, I got into the habit of studying until 10:30.

"Oh, I see. So this is how you do it."

"Yes. Make sure to keep solving more problems of this type to drill what you've learned into your head. Math is learned through repetition."

"Okay."

After going over my questions, we'd usually have a short chat before hanging up.

"Come to think of it, Holmes, how did it go at the modeling agency?" I asked.

"Well..." His tone of voice made me imagine him with a strained smile. *I wonder if he didn't learn as much as he was hoping for.* "The people at the modeling agency didn't even know that Yuko had a boyfriend."

"Huh? Really?"

"Even though she was only an amateur model, she had the professionalism of someone in the entertainment industry, so she seemed to think it would be bad if people knew she had a boyfriend. That gave me the impression that she wanted to go beyond amateur modeling and become even more famous."

"I see."

"Apparently she often complained about her mother. A common complaint was, 'She never praises me no matter how hard I study, but she gets happy when I'm in magazines.' And apparently she also said, 'I want to move out already.'"

"Oh..."

"However, I did hear something interesting."

“What was it?”

“That modeling agency is partnered with the magazine that Yuko was in—the Kansai teen magazine. They recruit students in Kansai to be amateur models for the magazine, and Yuko was one of them.”

“Right.”

“It seems that the magazine will also publish the models’ school names if they have permission. For example, if it was you, it’d say ‘Aoi Mashiro from Oki Prefectural High School.’ Beautiful girls from high-ranking schools are more popular.”

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

“It would appear that something bad was circulating among the students from high-ranking schools. The agency staff were nervous and hoped that Yuko’s running away wasn’t related to that,” he said in a low voice.

I gulped. “Was it...cannabis?”

“Is it at your school too?” His tone of voice changed.

“N-No. It was on the evening news today...” I told him what I heard from my mother.

“I see... From what I heard, the students didn’t feel particularly guilty about it. They didn’t realize the gravity of the situation until they were finally caught with it.”

“H-How come?” *I only have average grades, and even I know how dangerous it is.*

“They all said things like, ‘It’s legal in other countries,’ and ‘It’s not as bad for you as they say.’”

Chills ran down my spine.

“Cannabis is being called nicer-sounding names like ‘leaves’ and ‘herbs.’ If you hear those words at school, be careful.”

“Okay.” I unconsciously straightened my back. “I’ll be careful. And if I find out anything, I’ll—”

“No,” Holmes interrupted. “Don’t get involved in the cannabis case, Aoi. Please don’t stick your nose into danger under any circumstances. All right?” he said in a firm tone.

“All right.”

I heard a relieved sigh. Then he said, “There are cases where cannabis acts as a gateway to even more terrifying drugs. If someone you know becomes a drug addict, no matter how close you are with them—even if it’s me—please do your utmost to stay away from them. Don’t think you can cure them, because it’s not possible.”

“It’s not?” I asked, confused.

“It’s not. You often see cases where a man is arrested on drug charges, his wife is found to be using them too, and the wife says she started because her husband suggested it, right? Have you ever questioned why someone would get their family involved too?”

“Y-Yes, I have.” *Getting addicted to drugs yourself is one thing, but why would you encourage the woman you love to use them too?*

“Being addicted to drugs means that your brain is being controlled. Your brain craves them and prioritizes them over everything else. People have an order of priorities, like family, work, and money, but drugs push everything aside to stand at the top. An addict’s top priority is drugs, followed by friends who give them drugs, a significant other who tolerates their drug usage or a sexual partner who joins them in it, places where they can do drugs, money to buy drugs with, and so on. Someone in this state will not understand love and sincerity. They are no longer normal. It’s an illness, and they will lie about anything in order to have their fix. So you absolutely must not get involved.”

Hearing Holmes’s explanation, I was overcome with fear. “Okay,” I said. “I’m surprised you know so much about them, though. It feels like you’re speaking from experience.”

“When you’re in the art industry...you meet a lot of artists, many of whom are sensitive. Sometimes someone will use drugs as an escape, so I’ve witnessed it firsthand.”

“I see...”

“I apologize for the grim talk. You’re going to keep studying, right?” Holmes asked in a cheerful tone to lighten the mood.

“Oh, yes.”

“Keep at it, but don’t push yourself too much.”

“Okay, thank you.”

“Sweet dreams, Aoi,” he whispered in a Kyoto accent.

“Good night,” I said, blushing, before hanging up the phone.

4

Because of Holmes’s warning, I didn’t intend on investigating the cannabis case myself, but I couldn’t help but become sensitive to the words “leaves” and “herbs.” It was even harder to ignore it when all of the high schools in the city seemed to be shaken up from the news that a student from a high-ranking school got arrested on a possession charge. My school even had an emergency assembly.

“There was another case like this before in Kyoto, with a delinquent, but it didn’t blow up so much that time,” Kaori said with a sigh. We were on lunch break.

“It must get treated differently when it’s a prep school,” I said.

“They said he had the highest grades in his year too.”

“Really?” I squeaked.

“I guess that’s why ‘stress’ was the reason.”

I hadn’t been expecting that, but on the other hand, it weirdly made sense. “But how does a high schooler even get something like that?”

“Kyoto has a great police force, so they’ll find out quick.”

“Yeah...” I frowned, wondering why so many strange things were happening lately. *There’s still the art theft case, and on Saturday we have to go to that*

party hosted by Kuro Amamiya, one of the victims. Come to think of it... I looked up. “Kaori, have you been to a politician’s party before?”

“Hmm, my parents took me to a city council member’s party once. What was it like again...?” Kaori tilted her head.

“I have to accompany Holmes to one. What do you think I should wear?”

Kaori’s eyes widened. “Holmes goes to politician’s parties?”

“It just turned out this way. The politician is one of the victims in that art theft case, so we’re going there to talk to him.”

Kaori nodded in understanding. “I think an elegant dress would be good. Oh, like the one you were wearing at the owner’s birthday party.”

“Oh, that one...” At that party, I wore a dress that the owner’s girlfriend, Yoshie, gave me. *She let me keep it as a gift, but I’d feel awkward wearing it to the party. I just need to wear a dress like that, right? Since I started working at Kura, I found myself going to fancy places more often, so some of my pay went towards a few nice dresses so as to not humiliate myself in those situations. I’ll wear one of those. Yeah, let’s go with that.*

5

It was now Saturday, and I was waiting at Kura until it was time to go to Amamiya’s party, which started at 6 p.m. at Kyoto Hotel Okura. Instead of working, I was silently studying at the end of the counter—which turned out to be quite productive. The jazz music wasn’t an annoyance, and the sound of the distant hustle and bustle was surprisingly pleasant. Whenever I stopped writing, Holmes would advise, “You overlooked this part.”

At 4 p.m., when the grandfather clock chimed four times, I straightened up and stretched my arms.

“Here you are,” Holmes said, smiling and placing a cup of coffee in front of me. “You were quite focused today.”

I nodded, embarrassed. “Thanks for the coffee. This is a surprisingly effective place to study.”

“When I was in high school, I often studied here while watching the store.”

“I see.” *I wonder what Holmes was like in high school. Was he already this tall?* I looked up at him while drinking the coffee.

“Please don’t look at me with those upturned eyes. It’s making my heart race.” He grinned.

Wh-What?! I hurriedly looked away.

“That aside, is there something in my hair?” He brushed through his hair with his hand.

“No, that’s not it. I was wondering what you were like in high school.”

Holmes chuckled. “Not much different from now. I was a bit shorter, and my hair wasn’t quite this long.”

“What was it like?”

“Since I went to a prep school, the slightly long bangs I have now would’ve gotten me pestered by teachers.”

“Ohhh.”

“Oh right, I have pictures from back then.”

“Ooh, I want to see!”

“I keep an album here at the store to show people.” He opened a drawer and took out a photo album. “Here you go.”

I excitedly took the album from him. “Where did you go for your school trip?”

“You’ll find out when you open it,” he said, chuckling.

I flipped the album open and saw a picture of a more innocent-looking Holmes with shorter hair. He had a carefree smile on his face as he cradled a fluffy white sheep in his arms. The sight was like an arrow through my heart—I could’ve fainted right there and then. “S-So cute.”

“Right? Our school trip was to Hokkaido. We went to a farm in Tokachi and they let us hold the sheep,” he said in a reminiscing tone.

I smiled awkwardly. *No, Holmes, it’s you that’s cute, not the sheep...although*

the sheep is cute too. Anyway, this cuteness is unfair! It doesn't even look like he's putting on an act the way Rikyu does.

The picture of him smiling and sitting in front of hay bales with his friends was also really cute. He looked like an honest boy, with none of his current two-sidedness.

"Were you black-hearted back then too?" I asked.

"Somewhat, but not to the point that I'm at now. I think I was fairly pure. Wait, you really never miss a chance to call me that." He laughed.

I hurriedly looked up and said, "Oh, sorry. I was just surprised by how radiant your smile was."

"It was my second year of high school, so I hadn't experienced heartbreak yet."

"Oh, I see." After this trip, this boy would go on to have his first girlfriend stolen by another man. Being so innocent might've made the impact even worse when that innocence was lost. *He really must've suffered... Of course he did; it was a huge shock for me too when my ex started going out with my best friend.*

"Please don't make that face," Holmes said apologetically, presumably having guessed what was going through my mind. "Looking back, I think that heartbreak was a good thing."

I hesitantly looked him in the eye. "You do?"

"Yes. As you might be able to tell from these pictures, I was just a know-it-all back then. I did go through a few hardships, but I was spoiled and sheltered by my father, my grandfather, and their friends. I could sense people's two-facedness with my natural perceptiveness, but I always treated it like someone else's problem. I believed that I was smart enough that I'd never be betrayed. Then my girlfriend was stolen from me in the most humiliating experience of my life, and that's how I was able to break out of that way of thinking."

He spoke cheerfully, as if he was talking about someone else. *He really has gotten over the past. I'm so happy for him.* I nodded, relieved.

“However, I don’t intend to have the same thing happen again.” He quickly reached out and squeezed my hand. “Aoi...”

My heart skipped a beat. “Y-Yes?” I stared back at him.

“Don’t you cheat on me,” he said in his Kyoto accent, looking straight into my eyes.

“I-I won’t.” I felt like I was going to stop breathing.

“Really?”

“Yes.”

“Even if an extremely handsome man has you up against a wall?”

I inadvertently burst out laughing. “I’ll push him away.”

“I can actually imagine that,” he said, chuckling.

Suddenly the door chime rang and Komatsu came in.

“Ah, Komatsu,” Holmes said. “I’ve been expecting you.”

“Hey,” Komatsu said, raising his hand.

I guess they made plans for him to come here before the party.

Holmes looked Komatsu up and down and narrowed his eyes. His dress shirt and suit were wrinkly. They clearly hadn’t even been ironed, let alone sent for dry cleaning.

“My hunch was correct,” Holmes murmured.

“What hunch? Oh, these clothes? S’only a fundraising party, so I’ll just put on a tie and it’ll be fine,” Komatsu said without a hint of shame. He sat down at the counter.

“I see your previous job didn’t involve wearing a suit either,” Holmes said, clasping his hands under his chin and looking Komatsu in the eye.

“Y-Yeah, pretty much.”

“Furthermore, it was a respected job nonetheless. As a result, you don’t place importance on suits. However, based on your build and mannerisms, I doubt it was a blue-collar job. Considering that you became a detective after you left,

you must've been skilled at investigating. Which means that..."

Komatsu's face went pale. "S-Stop probing people's pasts like that. Ugh, you really are a scary kid."

Looks like Holmes was right.

"Your previous job must've been so esteemed that no one would look down on you for wearing such a wrinkled suit. You had the accomplishments and the title for it."

"Stop it already!"

"However, that is no longer the case," Holmes declared flatly.

Komatsu furrowed his brow.

"I do not wish for us to be looked down on at this party."

"What am I supposed to do, then? I don't have a nice suit," Komatsu spat, crossing his arms.

"As I said, I had a hunch. Thus, I prepared one for you in advance."

"How?" Komatsu frowned.

"Your physique is very similar to Ueda's. Oh, Ueda is sort of like a relative to me. He has good taste in suits, so I borrowed one from him." Holmes brought out a black garment bag from the kitchenette and gently placed it on the counter. "Please change into this."

Komatsu clicked his tongue in annoyance, as if he didn't want to.

"My grandfather told me that many people from around the city will be attending tonight's party," Holmes continued. "We may find a clue about your daughter. Please cooperate with me here."

Komatsu looked away with a scowl but said, "Fine."

"Good." Holmes smiled and turned to me. "Aoi, it's almost time to get ready. Please close up the shop and get changed."

"Oh, okay." I closed my textbook and stood up right away.

"Komatsu, I didn't borrow a dress shirt, so I'm going to iron yours. Please take

it off.”

“Huh?”

Holmes reached behind himself and took out an iron and ironing board.

“Wh-Why do you have an iron in the store?!”

“My grandfather takes good care of his appearance, but my father is rather unkempt. Whenever he suddenly has to do an interview, I iron his clothes for him here.”

I’d seen it happen. Holmes ironing the manager’s clothes and the manager shrugging awkwardly and saying, “Sorry about this, Kiyotaka,” was no longer a strange sight to me. Sometimes Holmes would polish the manager’s shoes too, even going so far as to iron the shoelaces.

“Your suit is worn out, but I’m relieved that your shoes are in good shape. I was prepared to have to polish them,” Holmes said, chuckling as he ironed Komatsu’s shirt.

“It’s because I hardly ever wear ’em. I feel bad for your future wife, though. She’s gonna have a hard time.”

“Why is that?”

“She’d have to be more of a neat freak than you.”

“Of course not.” Holmes laughed.

“What?”

“I don’t expect anyone to be like me. Not in the slightest.”

Having just brought the signboard inside, I patted my chest in relief. *Phew, he doesn’t expect me to be able to do what he does.*

Before long, the shirt looked like it’d just come back from the cleaners. Holmes nodded in satisfaction and returned it to Komatsu. “Here you go. Shall we get changed, then? Aoi, you can use the second floor. I’ll change here, and Komatsu can use the kitchenette.”

“O-Okay.” Komatsu seemed bewildered at being dragged along at Holmes’s pace.

I hurried up to the second floor, went into the back, and closed the curtains. I picked up my dress, which I'd hung up there earlier. I didn't know what the atmosphere at the party would be like, but I'd heard that Amamiya's parties were quite fancy, so I went with a dress the color of pink dogwood flowers. It was a bright color but had a simple design and a clean silhouette. As an accessory, I wore a necklace with a single large pearl. I tied my hair into an updo, put on some light makeup—which I normally never do—and applied a touch of lipstick. *It's embarrassing because it feels like I'm trying to act more mature than I really am, but I'm about to turn eighteen, so I should get used to wearing makeup. Maybe I can pass for a university student the way I look now,* I thought as I looked myself over in the full-length mirror. Suddenly I felt even more embarrassed. I took a black pair of pumps out of a paper bag and slipped my feet into them. The heels weren't too high, since I wasn't used to wearing high heels.

Once I finished changing, I went downstairs. "I-I'm ready," I said nervously.

The first thing I saw when I reached the first floor was Holmes in a dark gray suit with a vest underneath and an indigo necktie. His shoes were so polished that I wondered if I could see my reflection in them, and he wore an expensive-looking wristwatch the same color as his tie. He looked very stylish.

Holmes looked at me and his face bloomed into a gentle smile. "You look lovely, Aoi."

"Th-That's what I should be saying. You look amazing."

"I went for the 'rich young master' look. What do you think?" he asked, spreading his arms out.

"Yes, that's exactly what you look like."

"Can you guys just go by yourselves?" came Komatsu's voice from the kitchenette.

Startled, I turned around and saw him wearing a charcoal gray suit with a brick-red tie. In other words, Ueda's suit. No longer did he look like a miserly old man—he now seemed cultured, playful, and mature.

I gaped at his transformation. "K-Komatsu, you look great."

“Really?” He scratched his head, confused.

“Y-Yes. I didn’t know someone could change so much depending on what they wear,” I blurted without thinking.

Komatsu looked somewhat satisfied.

“That’s right,” Holmes said. “People can change infinitely based on what they wear. In this world where people are judged by their appearances, you must use every means possible when you’re in a situation that requires bluffing.”

Komatsu straightened his tie. “R-Right, sorry about that.”

“It’s fine. Shall we go, then?” Holmes looked at us and smiled.

We left Kura and went north on Teramachi Street, heading for Kyoto Hotel Okura. Apparently we stood out in our formal wear, because all of the familiar faces on the shopping street called out to us as we passed by.

“Kiyotaka dearie, Aoi, where are you going all dressed up like that?” asked Mieko, the owner of a Western-style clothing store.

Komatsu burst out laughing. “Never thought I’d hear you called ‘dearie.’”

“All of the adults in this neighborhood address me affectionately because they watched me grow up. I imagine they still think of me as an elementary schooler with a *randoseru* backpack.”

“Huh. I kinda got the impression that Kyoto was an unfriendly place, but I guess it can be cozy too,” Komatsu mumbled with a distant look in his eyes. *Maybe he had an uncomfortable experience when he lived in Kyoto.*

“The people of Kyoto aren’t unfriendly. They’re simply wary, or rather, they have a strong self-defense mentality. If you keep associating with them despite their hard outer shell, they’ll warm up to you over time. Sometimes you get the type of person who’ll try to break right through the shell without hesitation. At first they’ll be rejected, but if they keep doing that regardless, people will eventually give up and accept them.”

He must be talking about Akihito, I thought with a smile. Then again, Akihito grew up in Kyoto too. He just doesn’t seem like a Kyoto person at all because his father is from Kyushu and his mother is from Kanto.

Like Holmes said, I get the feeling that Kyoto people maintain a certain distance from others at first and close the gap over time. Someone who ignores that distance will get rejected, but if they keep it up, eventually people will give up and say, "Forget it; this is just how this person is," and become close friends with them.

Kyoto Hotel Okura was within walking distance of Kura. Upon exiting the shopping arcade, we could already see Oike Street. Across from us was the stone-built Kyoto City Hall, and to the east of it, across Kawaramachi Street, was the hotel.

We entered the hotel lobby and headed for the elevator. I was reminded of about a year ago, when we came here for Saori's flower arrangement exhibit.

"Come to think of it, Aoi, did you get a chance to eat cream-filled red bean buns with Kaori?" Holmes asked out of nowhere.

He must've remembered that time too. I smiled and nodded. "Yes, we went. They were really delicious."

The cream-filled red bean buns were in the building to the north, not this one. They were jam-packed with delicious filling, and Kaori and I had happily stuffed our cheeks with them. There was a bit of hesitation and nervousness between us since we'd just become friends, but it was fun nonetheless.

"Huh," Komatsu said, listening to our conversation. "Never heard of those before... I should tell my daughter about them."

I sensed sadness in his words. *Please let Yuko be found safe and sound,* I prayed in my heart.

The elevator doors opened at the fourth floor with a *ding*. There was a large banquet hall on this floor called "Gyoun," meaning "clouds at dawn." This was where Kuro Amamiya's party was being held. There were already lots of people chatting with each other inside.

"Ugh, it's as formal as I thought it'd be." Komatsu grimaced, looking like he really didn't want to be there.

"Um, is it really possible to raise money with a party like this?" I asked quietly.

“Well,” Holmes said, straightening his back and looking around, “the participation fee for these so-called ‘political fundraising parties’ is currently around twenty thousand yen, but in reality you can get in for five to seven thousand. The more people that attend, the more money they make.”

“Oh, I see...”

Komatsu clicked his tongue. “A lot of them aren’t even worth five thousand. These scum don’t think twice about ripping you off.”

“Well, it’s an accepted fact that these parties are for raising money,” Holmes said. “Politics requires money, no matter how nicely anyone tries to put it. Having no money is equivalent to having no power. In order to change the world, you need both the clean side and the dirty side. I think it’s best for this to be acknowledged, and for politicians to use the funds they raise to do a good job.”

We walked to the reception desk, wrote our names down, and entered the hall. This venue was also used for wedding receptions. It had luxurious chandeliers and there was a gold leaf folding screen on the stage. Above the screen hung a sign that said “Talking About the Future with Kuro Amamiya.” There were also panels on the wall that explained Kuro Amamiya’s career history.

Kuro Amamiya was fifty-seven years old. He was born in Kyoto and worked as a politician’s secretary before being elected to the Kyoto Prefectural Assembly at the age of thirty-eight. He continued working as an assembly member until two years ago when he was elected to the House of Representatives—his current position.

“Kuro Amamiya was always some local politician I’d never heard of, but then he suddenly advanced to the capital,” Komatsu murmured as he looked at the panels. “He’s had a lot more presence lately.”

“Indeed,” said Holmes. “His eldest son studied abroad and continued to work there for a while before returning to Japan. Now he’s Kuro’s secretary. It might be his skill that allowed Kuro to show such rapid progress.”

I nodded along as I watched them talk, not really understanding their conversation. Before long the party began—with an endless spiel of greetings

from the politicians. As the host, Kuro Amamiya went first, followed by his supporting members and the young assembly members that they were partial to.

Representative Kuro Amamiya had graying hair parted on one side. His smiling eyes stood out to me. I didn't know if it was natural or on purpose, but he always looked like he was smiling, making me think he was probably a well-received politician.

I did my best to hold in my yawns at the boring speeches and greetings, but Komatsu showed no such restraint. Holmes seemed to have run into someone he knew. He and a middle-aged man were talking about something in quiet voices.

"My name is Kuro because I'm the youngest of nine children," Kuro Amamiya said. The "Ku" in his name meant "nine." "I went through a lot of *kurou* (hardship)." After that pun, the barrage of speeches was finally over and we could chat freely again.

It was a buffet-style party, so everyone picked up a plate and started taking food. However, Komatsu left the hall saying he was going for a smoke, and Holmes was still talking to that man.

I'm thirsty, so I guess I'll get a drink first... I started walking towards the drink area, but was interrupted by a voice from behind me: "A young lady like you must be bored here."

I turned around, bewildered, and saw a man with glasses and bright hair smiling at me. He looked around thirty and was tall with gentle facial features. He spoke in standard Japanese with Kansai intonation—a common occurrence when people from Kansai speak in the standard dialect.

"Oh, no, it's my first time attending a party like this, so it's very interesting," I said. *Since he approached me out of the blue, he could very well be involved with the party organization. I'll try to be careful with my responses.*

"I'm bored out of my mind," he said. "I'm only here because my dad told me to come. Don't you think those speeches were too long? The only thing I remember is that joke at the end." He slumped his shoulders and laughed.

I couldn't help but laugh too, since I'd been thinking the exact same thing.

"Are you a student? Which university do you go to? Oh wait, it's rude to ask that these days, right?"

I shook my head. *He seems to be mistaking me for a university student. Is it because of the makeup?* I was a bit happy to be seen as an adult. "I'm—"

"Sorry to keep you waiting, Aoi." Holmes walked up to me and put his hand on my shoulder.

"Oh, Holmes," I said, turning around and looking up at him.

"Huh, are you Kiyotaka from Yagashira's place?" the man asked curiously.

"Yes...but this is my first time making your acquaintance, right?" Holmes asked in a slightly apologetic tone while maintaining his smile. If it were me, I would've been panicking, thinking, "Wait, have we met before?" but Holmes's words held no doubt. *He must have absolute confidence in his memory.*

"Oh right, I saw you, but you didn't see me. When I was living in New York, Yagashira came over for work and brought you with him. Keiko Fujiwara was also talking about how 'Yagashira's grandson is really good-looking.'" Keiko Fujiwara was a curator in New York that Holmes and the owner knew.

"Ah," Holmes said. "You previously lived in New York, you came here today because your father told you to, and you can make rather loud jokes at Amamiya's expense. You know my grandfather and Keiko too, in which case, might you be Amamiya's rumored..."

"Hey now," the man said with a carefree grin. "You've got rumors too, and they seem to be right, *Holmes of Kyoto*. Yeah, I'm Kuro Amamiya's oldest son, Shiro Amamiya. I'm his chief secretary right now."

The casual tone of his voice surprised me. *I thought he might be involved with the event, but he was Amamiya's son...*

"So is this your girlfriend? That's too bad—I chatted her up because I thought she was cute." He didn't actually sound disappointed at all. "Well, I had fun watching you storm over here when you saw us, so I guess I can call it even. Hahaha!"

It was clearly a light taunt. *It seems like he's the opposite of his gentle, mild-mannered aura.*

"Yes, I always get emotional when it comes to her," Holmes said with a smile, swiftly dodging Shiro's indirect taunt.

Oh right...Holmes isn't a straightforward person either.

"By the way," Holmes continued, "I'd like to speak with Representative Amamiya, but he appears to be busy." He looked towards the politician, who was surrounded by people.

"Oh, I'll get him for you. He'll definitely be excited when he finds out that Yagashira's grandson came to his boring party." Shiro started walking towards Representative Amamiya.

As we followed him, Holmes smiled in amusement and said, "'Boring party,' you say? Should the chief secretary really be saying that?"

"Nah, I'm basically a slacker with a fancy title. It's the second secretary who does all the work."

"Really? People say it was your skill that made your father stand out."

"I think he just spreads those rumors for the sake of appearances." Shiro chuckled. His words made him seem like an idiot son, but his tone of voice was brimming with confidence. I could tell that he was just being humble about everything.

"So is your younger brother here today?" Holmes asked.

Shiro stopped and turned around. "What makes you think I have a brother?"

"You called yourself the 'oldest son,' so I assumed you had at least one younger brother. I'm an only child, so I don't call myself the 'oldest son.' Was I wrong to make that assumption?"

"Oh, I get it. You're the type of guy who latches on to people's unconscious slips of the tongue, huh?" Shiro said. He was smiling gently, but I could sense distaste in his voice.

"Yes, it's a bad habit of mine. I apologize for overstepping my bounds." Holmes wasn't about to lose to him.

“You’re an interesting guy,” Shiro said with a laugh. “Oh right, I thought for sure that it was going to be Seiji Yagashira coming today, so I brought a painting for him to appraise. Could you look at it for me instead?”

Holmes looked surprised, but smiled and placed his hand on his chest nonetheless. “If you’re all right with an inexperienced apprentice like me, then gladly.” He seemed genuinely happy. *Holmes complains when people ask him to be a detective, but he gladly accepts appraisal requests. It must be because he’s proud of his appraisal ability.*

“Good. It’s over here.” Shiro walked towards the gold leaf folding screen by the wall. Apparently the painting was behind it. “It was my grandpa’s treasure. He passed away three months ago.”

“Taro Amamiya, right? I met him on several occasions.”

“Oh yeah, I guess he did know Seiji. Seiji came to the funeral too.”

“Yes, he was very fond of art and even came to our store sometimes.”

As they spoke, Holmes and I followed Shiro behind the folding screen, where there was an easel covered by a white cloth. Shiro pulled the cloth off, revealing a landscape painting of a European cityscape with a white church. It was beautiful, but had a lonely atmosphere to it.

“It’s a Paris landscape by Maurice Utrillo,” Shiro said.

“Utrillo... A French painter from the beginning of the twentieth century. He’s known for being mesmerized by Paris, painting his home district of Montmartre over and over.” Holmes brought his face closer to the painting, looking intrigued.

“Yeah, my grandpa loved Paris, so Utrillo was his favorite. My dad and I don’t know anything about art, though. I heard this could be worth over ten million yen if it were real, so I wanted to get it appraised. What do you think, Kiyotaka?” Shiro looked at Holmes expectantly.

It was my first time seeing a Maurice Utrillo painting in person, so I didn’t know if it was real or fake. *If Shiro’s grandfather was friends with the owner, then he probably would’ve already gotten this painting appraised, right? In that case, there’s a high chance that it’s real. But...why does something feel off to*

me?

Holmes stepped back from the painting and smiled. "This is a fake," he declared.

Shiro's eyebrow twitched. "What makes you think that?"

"Utrillo was picky about the color white. He mixed plaster into it to create his own unique shades. In fact, when asked, 'If you could only keep one thing as a memory of Paris, what would it be?' he answered 'plaster.' However, this painting does not show Utrillo's white. It is a counterfeit, without a doubt."

Shiro slumped his shoulders. "Oh, so it's a fake..." He ran his hand through his hair and heaved a disappointed-sounding sigh.

The ten-million-yen painting his grandfather left behind was a counterfeit... Of course he'd be disappointed.

"Shiro, would you mind stopping this obvious act?" Holmes said with a smile.

"What act?" Shiro asked.

I didn't know what Holmes was talking about either.

"What do you mean by that?" Shiro asked again.

"You had this counterfeit made, right?"

I blinked in surprise.

Shiro's face went serious. "Why would I do something like that?" He tilted his head in confusion.

I felt the same way. *Why would he need to have a counterfeit made?*

"A fair number of people know that your grandfather had this Utrillo painting. I've seen it in person before too. However, unlike this one, the one he had was authentic."

Shiro startled. He was clearly at a loss for words.

"When your grandfather passed away, you purposely had this counterfeit prepared, right?" Holmes said, glaring at Shiro.

"Wh-Why would he do such a thing?" I asked, utterly confused.

Holmes, still looking at Shiro, crossed his arms and said, “I suspect it was to evade inheritance tax.”

“Inheritance tax?”

“Yes. Works of art are, of course, taxed. However, if he were to say, ‘My grandfather bought this painting for tens of millions of yen thinking it was real, but it turned out to be a counterfeit,’ then it would instantly become a worthless item. By hiding the original and having an appraiser judge a counterfeit, he could avoid paying tax on it. Isn’t that right, Shiro? I can’t say I’m impressed to see a politician’s son and secretary attempting tax evasion.” Holmes grinned, sending chills down my spine.

However, Shiro smiled right back and said, “Now that’s just rude. I’m surprised—I didn’t know he had a real one. Maybe I can find it if I search the house. Why did grandpa prepare a counterfeit, anyway? Was it to prevent theft? Well, thanks, Kiyotaka.”

“Oh, is that how it was? I apologize for my rudeness. I’d love to see a genuine Utrillo painting again, so if you find it, please let me see it.”

“Yeah, I sure will. Oh yeah, you wanted to talk to my father, right?” Shiro walked off as if nothing had happened. I watched him from behind and put on a strained smile, thinking, *the truth must’ve been what Holmes said. That’s why he brought this painting here—if the guests saw an appraiser deem it counterfeit, they’d spread the word.*

“Dad,” Shiro said to Representative Amamiya with a grin. “Yagashira’s grandson is here.”

Amamiya immediately turned our way. “Oh!” he said with a big wrinkly smile.

“Well, that’s it for me,” Shiro said, raising a hand and leaving.

“What a tricky man,” Holmes muttered as he watched Shiro go. Then he faced Amamiya with a smile and said, “It’s nice to meet you, Amamiya. My name is Kiyotaka Yagashira.”

“You’re Seiji’s grandson, huh? I’ve heard great rumors about you.” Amamiya beamed as he shook Holmes’s hand.

“I’m sorry, but those are all exaggerations.”

“It doesn’t seem like your extreme good looks were an exaggeration, though.” Amamiya gave Holmes a mischievous look.

Holmes placed his hand on his chest in thanks and gave an awkward smile. “I noticed that you’ve been very active these days, sir.”

“I’m just following my son’s advice—he studied economics in America. It’s actually kind of unsettling how everything’s going better than expected.” Amamiya shrugged.

“I wanted to ask you about the art theft,” Holmes said, quickly getting to the point.

“Ah. I haven’t gotten involved in that case at all, but it would appear that my missing artwork was a misunderstanding.”

Holmes’s eyes widened. “What?”

“My wife heard about the string of thefts and searched the storeroom. Something was missing, so she said we’d been targeted too, but it turned up in a thorough search.”

“I see. Was it in the storeroom after all?”

“No, she found out that my son took it.”

“Shiro?”

“Yes, Shiro. So in the end, we weren’t affected. The other houses may have jumped to the wrong conclusion as well. Anyway, please enjoy the party. Send my regards to Seiji.” Amamiya patted Holmes on the shoulder before leaving to talk to other voters.

“Holmes, he said it was a misunderstanding, right?” I asked.

Holmes raised the corners of his mouth slightly and said, “Yes, but Shiro taking it was a lie.”

“What makes you think that?” From what I could tell, Amamiya’s tone of voice had been normal.

“When he talks about Shiro, he looks to the upper right for a moment and

blinks more afterwards. People tend to look to the upper left when recalling the past, and to the upper right when being reminded of something false. And when they can't hide their discomposure, they blink more often. He probably has a problematic son." Holmes crossed his arms.

A problematic son? I tilted my head.

Then, at long last, Komatsu reappeared in the banquet hall. "Okura's food sure is good," he said contently.

"Komatsu, please do your best to talk to the people here from your generation and steer the conversation towards, 'I've been nervous lately because of a string of runaways at my daughter's school. Has anything like that happened at your kid's school?' Get as much information as you can, please."

Komatsu's face turned serious. "O-Okay, will do."

"I was speaking with a teacher from a famous cram school earlier, and he said there were multiple students who ran away from home like Yuko did."

Apparently the middle-aged man he was talking to before was a cram school teacher.

"Huh?" Komatsu blinked.

"However, those students came back in two or three days, saying that the stress from exams made them want to run away. They refused to say where they went, though."

Komatsu gulped.

"Also, even the cram schools are keeping an eye on the cannabis issue now. Perhaps all of these cases are connected," Holmes said with an intense look in his eyes.

Komatsu's face went pale. "Yeah." He nodded firmly.

After that, we split into two groups to ask around. I went with Holmes and Komatsu went by himself. However, time passed fruitlessly, with no new information gained.

"I suppose we should call it a day." Holmes placed his hands on his hips and

sighed. He must've been disappointed by the lack of leads.

Suddenly, a middle-aged man walked up to us. He seemed to have just arrived at the party. Facial hair covered half of his face. "Hey, you're Kiyotaka, right? From Seiji's place? Boy, you've sure grown up," he said with a wrinkly grin.

"Oh!" Holmes smiled upon seeing the man. "Long time no see, Kunishiro. I knew I'd be able to see you here today."

"Huh, were you looking for me?" Kunishiro tilted his head.

"Yes, the tapestry of General Kubira that you painted was stolen..."

Oh, I see. I thought that name sounded familiar—this is Yutaka Kunishiro, the painter. Since his work was displayed in that art exhibit, Holmes must've predicted that he'd attend Kuro Amamiya's party.

"Yeah, seems so. The owner, Shigemori, always kept my work in a storeroom, so I can't help but think the thief might actually hang it up if they stole it because they wanted it. Not sure if I should be sad or happy. But a theft's a theft, of course. I really liked that piece, so we can't let them get away with this." Kunishiro slumped his shoulders.

"Have you heard of any thefts in your area?" Holmes asked.

"Heck, it happened at my own house. A hanging scroll was stolen."

"What?" Holmes's eyes widened. "When did this happen?"

"About a year ago, maybe. I really liked that piece too, so it's a real shame."

"Was it Buddhism-related?"

"Yeah, I mostly deal with Buddhist art, after all. It was a hanging scroll of Yakushi Nyorai, the Medicine Buddha."

"Yakushi Nyorai..." Holmes murmured in a low voice. He frowned and folded his arms.

"I think you've seen it before, Kiyotaka. We hung it in our alcove. Then again, it's been a long time since you came over, huh? You were still small," Kunishiro said in a reminiscing tone.

"Yes, I was still in elementary school when I accompanied my grandfather to

your house for an appraisal. The stolen scroll was hung in the alcove? I consider myself to have a good memory...but I can only vaguely remember it. If I recall correctly, the coloring was bright as though the buddha was enveloped in light. He was looking slightly downwards with what seemed like a gentle smile. It was a beautiful painting of Yakushi Nyorai.”

“Yep, that’s the one. You *do* remember!” Kunishiro’s eyes gleamed.

“Was that hanging scroll the only item stolen, like the rest of the recent thefts?”

“No, it was a full-blown burglary. Almost all of our valuables were stolen. The culprit was caught later on, but the hanging scroll had already been resold. The thief was complaining about how they didn’t get much money for it.” Kunishiro sighed out of exasperation.

“I hope you find it one day.”

“Yeah, same. Hey, did Seiji tell you to look into this stuff?”

“Essentially, yes.”

“No one wants to deal with the police, huh?” Kunishiro shrugged.

“Indeed.” Holmes smiled wryly.

“I’ll let you know if I find out anything. You’re still helping out at Kura, right?”

“Yes, please do.” Holmes bowed.

“See you,” Kunishiro said, waving before heading towards Amamiya.

I quietly approached Holmes and asked, “Why isn’t anyone going to the police?”

“I suppose it’s bothersome. No one wants their house to be turned inside out. They might not mind if it was something expensive, but sentimental value aside, none of the items stolen in this case were worth much money.”

“I see...”

“As the saying goes, police and hospitals are essential, but you want to avoid getting involved with them if possible,” he added with a wry smile.

That’s true. Both of those are extremely necessary, but you don’t want to get

in trouble if you can help it.

“Hey,” said Komatsu, raising his hand. He’d returned from his end of the investigation.

“Did you find any clues?” Holmes asked.

“I dunno if they’ll help, but either way, I’ve had enough.” Komatsu slumped his shoulders.

“All right. Let’s head back, then.”

“Okay,” I said.

I wondered if we should say a proper goodbye to Amamiya before leaving, but he seemed to have his hands full dealing with the crowd of people surrounding him. So instead, we exchanged bows from a distance before leaving the hall.

6

When we left Hotel Okura, it was past 8 p.m. The sky was completely dark.

“Huh, so Yutaka Kunishiro, one of the artists, came to the party? Wish I could’ve seen what his ugly mug looked like,” Komatsu spat.

Holmes tilted his head. “Why do you speak ill of him when you’ve never even seen his face?”

“I heard he’s a womanizer.” Komatsu clicked his tongue.

“Really? I’ve never heard that. From what I know, he’s like my father—his beloved wife passed away at an early age and he hasn’t remarried since.”

“It’s in the past now, so whatever.”

“The past?”

“Don’t worry about it. Anyway, I dunno if this party ended up being useful or not, but at least I exchanged a lot of business cards. That’s good enough for today.” Komatsu stretched.

“Indeed. Connections are king.”

“Yeah... Well, I’m going back to the office.” He waved goodbye.

I bowed and said, “Good night, Komatsu.”

“Thanks,” he replied, not turning back. His sad-looking figure touched my heart. *He must be losing sleep over his missing daughter.*

“Aoi, I’ll drive you home,” Holmes said, cutting short my musings.

“Huh? Didn’t you drink at the party?”

“No, I only drank non-alcoholic drinks. I don’t get drunk easily, but I wanted to be sober when getting information.”

“Oh, I see.”

The car was always parked in the underground lot below Oike Street. I headed towards the stairs leading down there, but Holmes took my hand, stopping me. “While we’re here, would you like to take a walk?”

“A walk?”

“Yes, I think it’d be nice to go see the inlet at Takase River. It’s right behind here.”

The inlet at Takase River was once a canal that boats would pass through to unload their goods. It’s a fairly atmospheric place, and it’s a designated natural monument. I’d been there with Kaori before, but that was during the day. I was a bit excited at the thought of a nighttime stroll there.

“Yes, of course,” I said.

Holmes smiled happily. “This way,” he said, walking around to the east side of the hotel.

The moment I stepped onto Kiyamachi Street, I exclaimed, “Wow!” Paper lanterns lined the stone-paved path, gently illuminating the stream known as Takase River. The trees swayed in the wind. What looked like traditional wooden townhouses were all restaurants—not just Japanese cuisine, but French and Italian as well. They all looked stylish. The rich atmosphere reminded me of when I visited Ponto-cho and I was similarly surprised. *At times like this, I’m always amazed by how incredible Kyoto is.* “It’s lovely,” I said enthusiastically.

Holmes nodded. "The atmosphere is nice here."

"Yes."

We held hands as we walked alongside the river, watching the water flow. No one else was around. A little to the north was the inlet itself, where there was a model boat to show its original purpose. The boat had wine barrels and bags of rice on it. All of the trees around it were cherry trees. The Japanese-style outdoor lamps, the lanterns, and the lights from the traditional restaurants on the other side of the river made for a magical scene. *This place must be even more picturesque during cherry blossom season.*

"It's amazing how the atmosphere here is so different at night," I said. "Thank you for bringing me here." I looked up at Holmes, excited.

Holmes chuckled and shook his head. "There's no need to thank me. I brought you here for my own sake."

"Huh?"

"I like seeing your happy face. Therefore, everything is for my own sake."

I looked him in the eye without saying anything.

"Sorry, was that too much?" he asked.

I giggled and shook my head. "I was thinking that it's just like you to say that."

"Is it?"

"Yes, it is." *What he said was almost certainly what he really thinks, but at the same time, he said it because he didn't want me to worry about him going to the effort of bringing me here. They were the words of someone who's selfish yet considerate.*

Holmes sighed. "You don't get it."

"I don't?"

"I'm serious when I say it's 'for my own sake.' It means, 'I have plenty of ulterior motives, so don't worry about thanking me.'"

My brain short-circuited.

"Even right now, if no one was around, the moment I had a chance, I'd do this

—” He put his arm around my shoulder and slowly moved closer.

Right as my heart started racing, a group of people left one of the restaurants on Kiyamachi Street, and we quickly sprang away from each other. They were probably tourists. I watched them from a distance as they cheerfully said things like, “Ahhh, that was good,” and, “Kyoto’s great. Where should we go next?” while my heart was beating a mile a minute and my cheeks were completely flushed.

“Am I fated to always be interrupted?” Holmes muttered in his Kyoto accent, slumping his shoulders with his hands on his hips.

I couldn’t help but laugh. “You might be.”

“Well, this just means that I can’t do these things in busy places. I’ll save it for when we’re alone and there’s no one that can get in the way,” he said with a smile.

I looked down at the ground, too embarrassed to say anything.

Chapter 3: Human Emotions and the Sanjusangen-do Temple

1

After an unusual weekend of questioning people at a politician's party, it was back to school, where reality awaited. The classroom was tense because of the upcoming tests. *We're preparing for entrance exams, after all. Now that people have decided on their target universities, it's only natural that they might panic or be annoyed after comparing the requirements with their current grades. Even the top scorers seem to be on edge.*

I'd always had average grades, but thanks to Holmes's tutoring, I was able to rank up to "above average." In some subjects, I was even encroaching on the top level. My teacher said that if I kept this up, I'd be able to aim for Kyoto Prefectural University. But the top scorers who were aiming for national schools or famous private universities were on a different level. *I can't imagine how great it'd be if I were as smart as them, but at the same time, they must have their own struggles. No matter where you stand in the hierarchy, every world has its own problems and hardships. I'm sure the student from the famous prep school who was arrested for possession of cannabis also had problems that only people with the highest grades would understand.*

"Yeah, if your grades are too good, people probably put tons of expectations on you," Kaori said. I'd been telling her my thoughts during lunch break.

"What about you?" I asked. *Kaori's grades are in the upper tier. She's really smart.*

"My family's old-fashioned, so they think girls should just marry into a nice family. Heck, they even think that being too successful will delay marriage, so they don't expect anything from me at all. Even when I get good grades, they don't celebrate or anything. I'm only going to cram school because I begged them to let me go."

“Th-That’s a bit depressing.”

“Right? But I guess it’s better than unrealistic expectations. You know how a lot of people in our generation don’t have many siblings? It means you get spoiled by your parents, but at the same time, they have higher expectations of you.”

“Yeah, it does seem that way.”

“It seems like there are a lot of people where it’s like, they got spoiled by their parents growing up, studied to get into a private middle school like their parents wanted, didn’t have to take high school entrance exams and thought they’d slide into university the same way, but now their parents expect them to get into a better school, so they hit a wall with the entrance exams and it really stresses them out.”

I nodded as I listened to her, feeling my facial expression become solemn.
“You sure know a lot, Kaori.”

“A lot of people at cram school have that aura. Some of them are going to a weird seminar too.”

“A weird seminar?” I blinked.

Kaori frowned and tilted her head. “I think it was called a mental health support seminar?”

“What do they do there?”

“Oh right,” Kaori said, rummaging through her bag. “I got a flyer too and it’s still in my bag.” She placed the flyer on the desk.

Mental Health Support Seminar

“Is your heart screaming for relief?”

Do entrance exams, your career path, your parents’ expectations, and your personal relationships have your heart screaming for relief?

Something isn’t right with today’s society, but it’s not something that can be changed right away. Instead, in order to survive in this stressful world, we must soothe our overworked hearts. Reset everything to a blank slate and enter the

battlefield refreshed.

Being able to perform this reset will have a great impact on your future life. At this seminar, we'll teach you this form of mental control and how to be optimistic.

Adults: 3,000 yen

Students: First class free, second onwards is 2,000 yen

We urge you to try our seminar before your heart breaks down.

I skimmed the flyer and frowned. There was a picture of a waterfall and trees with fresh spring leaves on it.

I guess you could call this a "mental health support seminar," but... "Th-This is sketchy." My face stiffened.

"Yeah. It's pretty cheap, though."

I looked at the cost. "You're right... Kaori, do you mind if I borrow this flyer?"

"Sure. Wait, are you going to go?" She looked worried.

Shocked, I shook my head. "No, that's not it." *Something about it bothers me.* I carefully put the flyer in my notebook and then put my notebook in my schoolbag. *Three thousand yen for adults, two thousand yen for students with the first time being free. Like Kaori said, that's cheap. It's not a price you'd raise an eyebrow at. But am I the only one who feels something sneaky about this, like it's not in good conscience?*

2

"There's something sneaky about this," Holmes said immediately upon looking at the flyer.

Since I had work after school, when I arrived at Kura, I showed Holmes the flyer right away. He dismissed it without a moment's hesitation. *Maybe it's because of his influence that I felt the same way about the flyer.* I smiled awkwardly.

“It’s suspicious, right?” I asked.

“Yes, although it doesn’t say anything strange either. People with healthy hearts won’t resonate with this kind of seminar at all. Like you and me, they may think it’s suspicious and throw out the flyer. But people who truly need help will be moved by these words,” he said, placing the flyer on the counter and pointing at the phrase, “Is your heart screaming for relief?” “Then there’s the pricing. I suspect that the three-thousand-yen fee for adults is just for show. Their target is students, and an adult coming would be considered lucky. If they only wrote ‘free for students,’ then it really would be suspicious, because something like this shouldn’t be free. That’s why it says three thousand yen for adults, and two thousand yen for students from the second class onwards. This makes it seem like a good deal, and it gives the targets a sense of security knowing that even if they try it and end up going for more classes, it’ll only be two thousand yen.”

“You’re right,” I said, picking up the flyer.

“That said, there’s a higher likelihood that the low price is simply out of goodwill. But perhaps because of the recent bad news revolving around students, I can’t help but scrutinize it.” He picked up the flyer again and looked at it coldly. After a while, he put it on the scanner and opened his laptop.

“Who are you sending it to?”

“Komatsu.”

“I see.”

After sending the scan, Holmes smiled and said, “It’s in Shijo. I think I’ll go take a peek.”

“You mean the seminar?”

“Yes, I’m thinking of attending.”

“Can I come too?” I asked without thinking.

Holmes frowned slightly.

“I-I guess I can’t, huh?” I said.

“I’m not saying that you can’t. I don’t think it’d be dangerous, and I’d also like

to get the opinion of a current high school girl.”

“Then why didn’t you answer right away?”

“That’s because in a situation like this, I get the feeling it’d be better not to attend as a couple.”

“Oh, you’re right.” It’d be strange for a couple to attend a seminar for people who need mental health support.

“So we’d be sitting apart from each other, and we might not be able to talk much. Would you still be all right with that?” Holmes asked with an apologetic tone.

I nodded. “I don’t mind.”

Suddenly, I heard footsteps outside followed by Kura’s door opening with the usual chime. I turned around.

“Hey,” Komatsu said, holding up one hand.

“Ah, I just sent you an email,” Holmes said.

“You did?”

“Yes, there was a flyer for a seminar that caught our eye.”

“Oh,” Komatsu said, sounding rather uninterested. He walked up to the counter and sat down. “I looked into Kuro Amamiya’s other son—in other words, Shiro’s younger brother.” He took a brown envelope out of his bag and gave it to Holmes.

“Thank you. So he did have a younger brother, then?” Holmes took out the investigation report and smiled, narrowing his eyes into arcs.

“Yeah, one of those so-called bastard children... He’s not publicly acknowledged and they pretend he doesn’t exist, but he seems to be getting financial support.”

“I see. His name is Hiro Haraguchi, his mother is a hostess at a high-class club in Namba, and he was raised in Osaka. He’s currently twenty-one and unemployed...” Holmes looked at the man’s picture. “Ah. He’s even more handsome than Shiro.”

“Yeah, apparently his mom’s a famously beautiful hostess, so he probably gets his looks from her.”

Listening to their conversation, I frowned. At a glance, Kuro Amamiya had only looked like a nice middle-aged man to me. *I can’t believe he had an illegitimate child.* I peeked at the report and saw that Hiro really was handsome like Holmes said.

“For Representative Amamiya, Hiro was a thorn in his side. He was a wild kid in middle and high school, and he joined a biker gang. He was on the verge of being sent to juvie. The older brother, Shiro, was the one who cleaned up that situation.”

“I see. That may have been why Shiro returned from America. So, is Hiro truly unemployed right now?”

“Yeah, but he’s doing better than you’d ever believe. Shiro’s probably taking care of him.”

“Do many people know that Amamiya has an illegitimate child?”

“Doubt it.”

“I see. Still, considering that he’s moving into the heart of politics despite having a scandalous secret, Shiro most likely has his problematic younger brother completely fenced in,” Holmes murmured, folding his arms.

“I also have one more piece of news.”

“What is it?”

“I found eight more victims in the thieving case.”

Holmes raised his eyebrows. “Which means that there are twelve in total?”

“Amamiya withdrew his case, so it’s eleven.”

“No, I’m not counting that one out,” Holmes said immediately.

“Oh yeah?” Komatsu gave an exaggerated shrug. “Here’s the new list of victims and what was stolen.” He took a clear folder out of his bag and gave it to Holmes.

List of Stolen Items (owner in brackets)

Shuei Akutagawa:

Hanging scroll depicting General Mekira (Kazuo Miyamura)

Hanging scroll depicting General Anchira (Hajime Tanaka)

Seppu Nakamura:

Tapestry depicting General Sanchira (Tadashi Mino)

Tapestry depicting General Haira (Hiroshi Kawaguchi)

Takashi Katahira:

Wood carving of General Makora (Shinichi Yamaguchi)

Crystal ornament depicting General Shindara (Mokichi Segawa)

Copper ornament depicting General Shotoro (Ryo Tachibana)

Ryo Tokimune:

Hanging scroll depicting General Bikara (Shogo Imagawa)

Holmes looked at the list and murmured, "I see."

"There could still be more, though, so I'll keep looking."

"Thank you. However, from looking at this list, I think the thefts will stop at these twelve." Holmes placed the list on the counter.

"What makes you think that?" Komatsu looked completely confused. I had no idea what he meant either.

"Do the stolen items have anything in common besides being Buddhism-related?" I asked, peering at the list.

"Yes, but it's not enough to draw a conclusion yet," Holmes said, furrowing his brow.

"Oh right," Komatsu said, clapping his hands. "Apparently all of them were made at the same time, after the artists were inspired by the Buddhist statues at Sanjusangen-do Temple."

"Sanjusangen-do, huh...?" Holmes folded his arms.

"There was some kind of get-together for modern artists. They all went to

Sanjusangen-do together, then made their own pieces and held an exhibit. That was five years ago, and those were the pieces that were stolen in this case. Apparently that ‘Beautiful World of Buddhism’ exhibit happened because they wanted to bring those works of art together again after five years.”

“And so Amamiya, who owned many of them, became a sponsor?”

“Yeah. Yutaka Kunishiro and Shuei Akutagawa are close with him, so they brought up the idea.”

“Ah, Akutagawa...”

“You know him?”

“We aren’t close, but I’ve met him before. Since Amamiya, Kunishiro, and Akutagawa seem to have been heavily involved with this exhibit, I’d like to meet with Akutagawa again and ask him some questions,” Holmes murmured, looking at the list. “Oh right.” He looked up. “Komatsu, I’d like to speak with Yuko’s mother—your ex-wife—as well. Would that be all right?”

I saw Komatsu gulp.

“Is there some kind of problem?” Holmes asked. “Is she feeling unwell from the anxiety?”

“N-No, that ain’t it. The problem is that you’re a monster, kid.” Komatsu averted his eyes.

Holmes gave a strained laugh. “What?”

Komatsu was probably afraid that if he let Holmes meet his ex-wife, Holmes would find out things about him. *Even though it’s the logical choice, he might feel reluctant.*

“But...there’s a chance that she’s lying, so I do want you to talk with her. I’ll ask her if she can meet you.” Komatsu bowed, as if having made up his mind.

Holmes waved his hand. “Please don’t take it too seriously. It’ll just be a chat.” He smiled gently.

The next day, after school, I headed towards Higashiyama-ku on my bike. I turned south at the Higashiyama-Gojo intersection. Since there was an uphill slope, I suddenly felt short of breath and slowed down. As I pedaled, a lovely brick building came into view. It was the Kyoto National Museum, a magnificent building in the style of the French Renaissance that looked like a palace. I looked at it as I passed by, still out of breath.

I smiled upon arriving at a sign that said “Sanjusangen-do Temple.” This was my destination. *Holmes should already be here.*

Holmes had contacted Akutagawa, and apparently they arranged to meet at Sanjusangen-do at 4:30 p.m. Sanjusangen-do was a fairly well-known Buddhist temple, but I’d never been there before, so I ended up tagging along. The name means “thirty-three ken,” with “ken” being a traditional unit of measurement for buildings.

It’s exactly 4:30 p.m. now. I walked my bike into the parking area, still trying to catch my breath.

“You made it, Aoi.” Holmes appeared and handed me a sports drink.

“Th-Thank you.” *He’s always so well prepared, or should I say, attentive.* The cold drink felt like it was spreading through my body as I drank.

“It was quite steep from your school to here, right?”

“Yes, but it was good exercise and I’m not that tired. It’s my first time coming to Sanjusangen-do Temple, so I’m excited for that.”

“I’m surprised you’ve never been here before. I thought you would’ve come here during your school trip.”

“It’s one of the typical sightseeing spots, right? One of the other groups came here, but not mine.”

We entered the temple grounds and Holmes stopped in front of the long main building. “This is Rengeo-in Temple, commonly known as Sanjusangen-do Temple. This splendid main building with the gabled roof is a hundred and twenty meters north to south, making it the longest wooden building in the world.”

“In the world?” I blinked. *I did think it was long, but I didn’t think it’d be the longest in the world.*

“By the way, the ‘thirty-three ken’ doesn’t refer to the building’s length—it represents the number of intervals between its support columns. If it referred to the building’s length, then it’d be ‘Rokujurokugen-do’ instead—sixty-six ken.” He chuckled.

“Right...”

“Sanjusangen-do was founded in the second year of the Chokan era—in other words, 1164—by Taira no Kiyomori for the cloistered Emperor Go-Shirakawa. Since Taira no Kiyomori shouldered the construction costs and enshrined a thousand Kannon statues in the main building, the temple was also called ‘One Thousand Kannon Hall at Hojuji-dono Temple,’” Holmes explained with ease as usual. Hojuji-dono was the temple where the cloistered Emperor Go-Shirakawa lived. “At the time, the temple was an impressive complex with a five-story pagoda and a hall dedicated to Fudo of the Five Wisdom Kings. However, everything was lost to a fire in the first year of the Kencho era. The current main building was rebuilt in the third year of the Bun’ei era, or 1266 in the Gregorian calendar.”

“It’s existed for that long, huh?” I said, impressed.

We entered the main building and I stopped in my tracks, awed by the one-thousand-and-one Kannon statues lining the one-hundred-and-twenty-meter-long hall. I was at a loss for words.

Holmes chuckled and said, “It’s intense, right? Even excited students on field trips fall silent when they enter this building.”

“I-I totally understand. It feels like a different world.” I walked slowly, feeling intimidated by the divine atmosphere. “It really is incredible.”

“Indeed, and look, there are statues of Fujin and Raijin, the gods of wind and thunder, on opposite ends of the hall. It’s speculated that Sotatsu Tawaraya modeled his famous painting of Fujin and Raijin after these.”

The Fujin and Raijin statues sat atop very detailed clouds. Raijin stood on a cirrus cloud beating his thundering drums, while Fujin glared into the hall with

his bag of wind around his shoulders. The glint in their eyes was so sharp that it felt like they could spring to life at any moment.

As you'd expect from a famous temple, there were other impressive sights too, like the twenty-eight statues of Kannon's followers.

"These Kannon statues are placed precisely so that you can see each and every one of their faces. There's a mysterious saying, 'Whoever you wish to see, their face will always be among the Kannon statues.' When I heard that as a child, I came here by myself," he said as if to himself, looking up at the statues.

"Was there someone you wanted to see?"

"I thought I'd be able to see...my late mother's face. I didn't know which face was hers, but I remember being healed by the sight of the compassionate Kannon." He smiled gently.

I felt a pang in my chest. *He must've been lonely.* Feeling tears begin to well up, I looked down.

"Hello, Akutagawa," Holmes called out to a man who was staring solemnly at the statues. The man was nearing old age and wore a white linen shirt with a stand-up collar and indigo pants. His Asian fashion style gave him a unique aura.

The man turned around and smiled warmly. "Hey, Kiyotaka."

We left the main building with Akutagawa and sat down on a bench.

"I'm fond of Sanjusangen-do," he said. "I often come here to gaze at the statues." He lifted the cap of his water bottle and drank.

"I heard that you got the inspiration for your Vayu hanging scroll from Sanjusangen-do," Holmes said.

"Yes, and it wasn't just me. I came here with Kunishiro, Katahira, Murakami, Tokimune, and Nakamura. We aspired to create something that would last for generations... In my case, my specialty is painting, and I like Vayu—the deification of wind—very much, so I wanted to use him as my subject."

"It seems to be a very important painting to you. How did you end up selling it to Yanagihara?"

“Oh, well, Yanagihara came to my house, and when he saw the painting, he said he wanted it at any cost. I thought that handing it over to a famous appraiser would get it seen by more eyes than if it’d stayed with the creator. Besides, artists are typically strapped for cash.” Akutagawa scratched his head, embarrassed. *I bet that was the main reason, I thought.*

After that, Holmes asked Akutagawa a few more questions. We thanked him for his time and left the temple.

4

That night, Yuko’s mother, Masami, came to Kura. It was at 7 p.m., right before closing. She opened the door and called out a greeting, probably feeling too out of place to come inside.

“Welcome,” Holmes said, standing up and walking up to her. “Are you Yuko’s mother? We’ve been waiting for you.”

“Yes, my name is Masami Hasegawa.” She straightened her back as if pulling herself together. At first glance, she looked like a career woman. She wore a white shirt and black suit pants. She seemed to have good fashion taste, perhaps because of the stylishness of the simple outfit. I also sensed a strong will from her dignified aura and firm gaze.

“Hello, my name is Kiyotaka Yagashira. Your daughter resembles you a lot, I see.”

I nodded. Though I’d only seen Yuko in photographs, she looked startlingly similar to her mother. You could even call them carbon copies.

“Yes, I hear that a lot,” she said with a gentle smile. *Holmes’s calm aura probably relaxed her nerves.*

“Please have a seat,” Holmes said, pulling a chair out. “I’ll make coffee.” He then looked at me and said, “Aoi, it’s a bit early, but please put up the ‘CLOSED’ sign.”

“Okay.” I quickly went outside, brought in the standing sign, and put up the one that said “CLOSED.” I put away the standing sign and closed the curtains.

The scent of coffee drifted through the now-closed store. Yuko's mother, Masami Hasegawa, sat in front of the counter and took a sip of the coffee Holmes brewed. "It's delicious," she said, exhaling. She seemed to truly think so.

I was drinking coffee too, at the end of the counter. Hearing someone praise Holmes's coffee made me feel happy for some reason.

"I'm glad to hear that," Holmes said. "Did you just finish work?"

"Yes."

"Thank you for coming here after a long day, then." He smiled gently.

She smirked self-deprecatingly and looked down. "I'm a demon of a mother, right? My daughter ran away from home and I'm continuing to work as if nothing happened."

"No, not at all. However, that means you believe that Yuko's disappearance is only 'running away from home.'"

She looked back at Holmes, bewildered. "What do you mean by that? She left her phone and a letter behind, and she packed her things before leaving, you know? That has to mean she ran away from home, right?"

"Perhaps, but did you not think about the criminal nature of the event?"

"Criminal nature...?"

"What did you think about your sixteen-year-old daughter entering a relationship with an adult man?"

Masami shrugged weakly. "It's embarrassing to admit, but when I was in high school, I dated a man in his thirties. So I didn't really see it as a problem."

"A man in his thirties when you were in high school...?"

"Y-Yes, he was a teacher at my cram school. I've always been into older men...although my previous husband, Komatsu, was the same age as me." She said it in a tone that implied that was the reason their marriage didn't work out, and I couldn't help but give a strained smile.

Still, there's also Yoshie, the owner's girlfriend and Rikyu's mother. There

might be a lot of women in this world who like much older men. Come to think of it, Holmes and I are five years apart too.

After a moment of silence, Holmes looked firmly into her eyes and said, "Seeing you like this, I sense even less resolve from you than her father, Komatsu. You seem as if you've given up."

"What?"

"You don't seem hopelessly anxious or worried."

"Are you criticizing me?"

"No. It means that you argued with your daughter enough to feel this way, right?" He looked at her sympathetically.

Masami froze.

"Yuko was smarter and more levelheaded than the average sixteen-year-old, and most importantly, she didn't stray from her beliefs," Holmes continued. "Did you think, 'If she made up her mind to leave, then there's nothing I can do'?"

Masami's eyes widened. She stared at him for a while, clearly baffled as to how Holmes could've known that.

"But what was the last straw that made Yuko run away?" he asked.

Masami flinched.

"Considering how much you fought before, I'd think that there was something that cemented her decision to leave. Did you perhaps bring up the topic of remarrying...?"

Masami shook her head with a bitter expression on her face. "It didn't have anything to do with remarrying. I made a big mistake."

A mistake? I frowned.

"After divorcing Komatsu, I decided I wasn't cut out for marriage and had no intention of remarrying. I still feel the same way..." she murmured softly.

Holmes silently nodded.

"But despite having no desire for marriage, I did want love. That was when I

met my current boyfriend.” Her next words came very quietly: “He’s married.” *That must’ve been hard to say.*

Holmes nodded, as if he’d suspected as much. “Yuko didn’t know that you were having an affair, then.”

“Yes.”

“Was he someone she knew?”

“Yes...her cram school teacher.”

I goggled at her in surprise.

“And Yuko found out, right?” Holmes asked.

“Yes... She was staying over at a friend’s house, so I called him to my house. We always have to meet in secret, so having the house to ourselves put us in a very liberated mood, and we spent the day like a young couple would. Then, Yuko suddenly came home...” She clammed up.

Holmes silently nodded, while I gaped in shock. *If I came home and saw my mother doing the deed with my married cram school teacher, I’d want to run away too.*

“Did you tell Komatsu this?” Holmes asked quietly.

Masami shook her head. “I didn’t. I *couldn’t*. Yuko kept spouting things like, ‘You’re filthy, this is immoral, get out,’ and I wasn’t in a position to complain, but she even said terrible things that had nothing to do with the situation. I said, ‘Why should I have to leave? This is my house,’ and she screamed, ‘Then I’ll leave!’”

Then Yuko packed her bags and left. *I guess it’s understandable that Masami gave up on her coming back.*

After a while, Holmes said quietly, “Masami, have you met your daughter’s boyfriend?”

Masami silently shook her head.

“Have you seen his face in pictures on her phone or from photo booths?”

She smiled wryly and shook her head again. “She said he was avoiding taking

pictures with her because she was working as a model. She was always talking about how considerate he was of her career...”

“And you thought the same way?”

Masami nodded, embarrassed.

“You didn’t think it was strange?” Holmes asked, maintaining his calmness but slightly lowering the tone of his voice.

Masami must’ve felt the pressure in his tone, because her face went pale. “At this point, I do find it strange. But back then, she had me convinced that he was a good person...”

“He was the kind of man who’d go to a middle school girl, lead her into a relationship, and give her a Hermès bag. Wouldn’t it have been better to be suspicious and meet him in person? If she was constantly telling you that he was a good person who cared about her, that might’ve been because she was trying to reassure herself.”

I nodded without thinking. *I don’t tell my parents about how good Holmes is, because I don’t have any doubts about him.*

“That night, Yuko said she was staying at a friend’s place, right? Did she say who it was?” Holmes asked in a slightly softer tone, seeing Masami hang her head.

“She said it was a classmate.”

“Why did she suddenly come home?”

Masami shook her head. “I don’t know. She suddenly came back, saw us, and went ‘What’s the meaning of this?’ The fight went on from there...” She looked down, grimacing.

“I heard that Yuko was a loner at school. She probably didn’t go to stay at a friend’s place.”

“Huh?”

“She planned to stay at her boyfriend’s place, but that got canceled for some reason. To think that it’d happen to be the same day that you brought your secret boyfriend to your house... Don’t you think that’s an incredible

coincidence?” Holmes said coldly.

Masami’s eyes widened and she nodded. I felt chills run down my spine.

Holmes furrowed his brow and put his hand on his chin. “Hopefully it’s only a coincidence.” He sighed and looked at her. “Masami, Komatsu is more worried about Yuko than you are. Do you know why?”

“A-Are you saying that I didn’t love her? I know I made a mistake, but I did love her! Komatsu didn’t even spend time with her!” Masami shrieked hysterically.

Holmes’s expression remained calm. “It’s not a matter of love. Komatsu is a man, so he knows how nasty a man’s desires can be. He can’t help but be terrified of what Yuko could be going through.”

Masami gaped. The store fell silent, aside from the ticking of the clock. She looked down and tears trickled down her face. “I’m such a stupid mother,” she murmured softly.

Holmes reached for his inner pocket to take out his handkerchief, but froze. He stared at Masami’s face.

“H-Huh?” Masami said, confused.

Holmes leaned in closer and peered into her face. “Sorry, but have we met before, Masami?”

“Huh?”

“When I saw Yuko’s picture, I felt as if I’d seen her before. But now I realize that it may have been you, not Yuko.” Holmes finally took out his handkerchief and offered it to Masami.

“N-No, I think this is the first time we’ve met.”

“Have you ever attended an art-related event or party?”

“Yes, several times. For networking, because I work for a publishing company.”

“I see. Perhaps I saw you at one of those, then. Sorry about that,” Holmes said with a gentle smile. He seemed unconvinced, however.

“Um, what should I do now?”

“Let’s see... Please tell everything that happened to the police officer in charge of the case. Your desperation may change their impression from ‘a rebellious girl running away from her mother’ to ‘a grave incident.’”

“Okay... I will.” Masami nodded firmly with a serious look on her face.



Right outside Karasuma Station is the Shijo-Karasuma intersection. It’s a fairly metropolitan area, surrounded by a shopping mall and the stone-built city bank, but when you look out at Shijo Street, which leads to Yasaka Shrine, it definitely feels like Kyoto.

Katsuya Komatsu headed west on Shijo Street and entered a certain cafe. It was dinnertime, and since the cafe didn’t have much in the way of food on its menu, there were fewer customers than usual. He saw a young man, around university age, sitting by the window, and walked up to him. “Are you Kikuchi?” he asked quietly.

The man looked up and said, “Yes.” He was tall and thin—almost *too* thin—with short black hair, glasses, a white shirt, and jeans. He seemed like a very diligent university student.

“Sorry for calling you out here,” Komatsu said, sitting down across from him.

Kikuchi shook his head. “It’s all right.”

“Let me reintroduce myself. I’m Komatsu, a detective. As I said on the phone, I’m investigating the Shirasaki case. You were Shirasaki’s private tutor, right?”

Kikuchi nodded. Shirasaki was the prep school student who’d been arrested on cannabis charges the other day.

Once Komatsu’s coffee arrived at the table, he leaned in, getting right into the questioning. “When did you become Shirasaki’s tutor?”

“A year and a month ago.”

“What led to it?”

“I was registered in Kyoto University’s private tutoring program.”

"I see. So if it was a year and a month ago, you started at the beginning of last spring."

"Yes."

"Was Shirasaki a good student?"

"Yes, very good."

"Did he ever reveal his concerns to you?"

"No."

"Oh, so you didn't make idle talk?"

"Almost never. I focus on teaching, and I try not to get involved on a personal level."

Komatsu relaxed slightly, realizing that Kikuchi was saying the bare minimum without hesitating. The man was smart and wary. "What did you think when Shirasaki was arrested?"

Kikuchi clammed up for the first time. "It was...shocking."

"Was it unexpected?"

"Yes. But ever since about half a year ago, I did think something was strange."

"How so?"

"He used to have a plain room, but he suddenly started decorating it."

"With what?"

"Oriental things, like a mandala tapestry and an ornament of Sakra. He was burning incense too. It was a surprising change of interests."

"Oriental, huh?" Komatsu jotted down what Kikuchi said. Suddenly, he looked up and asked, "Do you remember what the Sakra ornament was like?"

"It was made of copper, and he was on an elephant with his legs crossed."

What if...? Komatsu gulped as he continued to take notes. "How big was it? Can you tell me everything you remember about it?" he asked, leaning forward.

"Uh, okay?" Kikuchi said, confused.

"There was a Sakra ornament in that student's room..." Holmes remarked, holding his phone to his ear.

We'd been walking on Teramachi Street towards Shijo when his phone rang, so we stopped and moved aside to avoid blocking the way for pedestrians. Though it was nighttime, the shopping street was still crowded, perhaps because we were close to Nishiki Market. It was a different type of crowd, though.

I looked up at Holmes as he talked on the phone. *It's probably Komatsu on the other end. He was saying that he met a cram school teacher at the party and used that connection to arrange a meeting with the arrested high school student's private tutor. That meeting was today, so he must've just finished.*

"I understand. When it arrives, I'd like to have Murakami check it. Yes. Thank you, bye." Holmes hung up the call and looked at me.

"Was that Komatsu?" I asked.

"Yes. Apparently there was a Sakra ornament in that high school student's room. According to Komatsu, it could be one of the stolen items."

"R-Really?"

"It's a bit of a forced connection, but the possibility exists. It's been in his room for half a year, so the time frame matches up too."

"Wh-What are you going to do?"

"Komatsu explained the situation to the tutor and asked if he could take a picture of the ornament. The tutor agreed."

"So when you get the picture, you'll show it to the original creator?"

"Yes, which would be Murakami."

We exited the shopping arcade onto Shijo Street.

"But if it really is the stolen piece, does that mean the high schooler stole it?" I asked.

"I'm not sure. Apparently that was the only one he had in his room. I don't

know who originally stole it, but I suspect that the other pieces are in the hands of other people.”

“So in other words, the twelve pieces are with twelve different people?”

“Yes, that’s what I think. They’re likely playing pretend.”

“As what?”

“The Twelve Divine Generals,” Holmes said, smirking.

“What’s that?” I looked up at him, tilting my head.

“The Twelve Divine Generals are devas—which is a general term for beings that dwell in heavenly realms. These deities...” Holmes began explaining.

The Twelve Divine Generals are: General Indara (Sakra), General Kubira, General Basara (Kongo Rikishi), General Anira (Vayu), General Mekira, General Anchira, General Sanchira, General Haira, General Makora, General Shindara, General Shotoru, and General Bikara. They are the guardian deities of Yakushi Nyorai, the Medicine Buddha, protecting the twelve hours, months, and directions in correspondence with his twelve vows. They are also gods of military arts.

“Each divine general commands seven thousand followers,” Holmes said.

“Wow... But then, what do you mean by pretending to be them?”

“I can’t say for certain yet, but I have a terrible feeling about this.”

He’s probably still in the process of putting together his hypothesis.

We walked in silence for a while until we saw the building where the seminar was. Komatsu was standing near the entrance and raised a hand when he saw us. “Hey.”

“What are you doing here, Komatsu?” I asked, surprised. *He was just on the phone with Holmes.*

Komatsu slumped his shoulders and said, “After we hung up, I saw this and came rushing over on the subway.” He took out a small tablet and showed it to Holmes. There was a list of seminars on it.

“This is a list of self-development seminars, right?” Holmes asked.

“Yeah, I looked into seminars in Kyoto and this was the only one that started about a year ago. It’s also mainly targeted at students... It sounds shady, so I’ll join in too,” Komatsu said with a serious look.

Holmes nodded happily. “That would be reassuring. However, I’d ask that the three of us act like strangers from this point onwards. When the seminar is over, we’ll meet at that cafe right there.” He motioned with his eyes towards the building across the street. Komatsu and I nodded.

6

Holmes, Komatsu, and I entered the building at different times. When I got out of the elevator, I saw what looked like an office’s conference room with a sign that said “Mental Health Support Seminar” in front. There was also a gentle-looking woman in her twenties standing at the check-in desk.

“Welcome, and thank you for coming,” she said. “May I have your name?”

“Um, Aoi Mashiro.” I’d registered for the seminar online in advance.

The woman checked off my name on her list, smiled, and said, “For students, the fee is waived for the first session.”

“Thank you,” I said, bowing automatically.

“Please go inside. While you’re waiting, we’d like you to fill out this form.” She smiled and handed me a form as well as a booklet for the seminar.

“Thank you.”

As I entered the room, Komatsu arrived. With an exaggerated air of timidity he said, “Sorry, I’m not registered, but I saw this flyer and suddenly felt like coming. Is that okay?”

From the hallway the room looked like a conference room, but when I went inside, it turned out to be more like a cram school classroom. There were eight rows of long white tables on the left and right sides of the room. Each table could easily seat three people, but had only two chairs set up, making for sixteen in total. The front rows were already occupied.

“Please sit as close to the front as you can,” said one of the staff members.

Following instructions, I sat in the center aisle seat of the fifth row from the front on the window side. Holmes was in the center aisle seat of the fourth row, on the side closer to the hallway—in other words, he was diagonally in front of me. Komatsu sat in the seventh row, having apparently obtained permission to join the seminar.

After seeing that Komatsu had entered, I looked at Holmes again. He noticed my presence but didn't try to look at me. His expression was indifferent, as if we really were complete strangers. It made me a bit sad, but at the same time, I was impressed.

Holmes was already filling out the form, so I hurriedly took out a pen.

Do you feel sluggish or tire easily?

No Sometimes Often / Always

Are you more sensitive to noise than you used to be?

No Sometimes Often / Always

Have you felt depressed recently?

No Sometimes Often / Always

Do you enjoy listening to music?

No Sometimes Often / Always

Do you feel the most lethargic in the morning?

No Sometimes Often / Always

Are you able to engross yourself in discussions?

No Sometimes Often / Always

The form continued like that, with around twenty questions in all. The other questions involved things like having trouble sleeping, getting headaches, and

strained personal relationships.

After I answered all of the questions, the staff came to collect the form. I looked around and saw that the classroom was now mostly full. Two-thirds of the people were high school students, and there were also a lot of middle-aged men that looked like office workers, so Komatsu didn't stand out.

At 7 p.m. sharp, the door opened with a *clack*, and a bespectacled man with a gentle aura came in. He looked to be in his early thirties. "Good afternoon... I mean, good evening," he said with an embarrassed laugh. Rather than raising his voice energetically, he spoke in a soothing yet cheerful tone. He looked around the classroom and said, "Welcome to our mental health support seminar, everyone." He smiled, his eyes narrowing into gentle arcs.

After that lighthearted start, he spoke ardently about how restrictive modern society was. He showed appreciation for how everyone was hanging in there, saying things like, "How much are you holding back how you really feel?" "Please don't suppress yourself so much. You don't have to be so considerate." "Please take better care of yourself. Praise yourself." It was all quite standard. Nothing he said stood out as special, but the way he appealed to the audience with those simple words in between unique stories relieved the stress in their hearts. It certainly felt like it was worth more than two thousand yen.

Before I knew it, I was tearing up just like the other participants. I glanced behind me and saw Komatsu crying his eyes out. Meanwhile, Holmes was looking down with his hand on his mouth.

7

"I thought the seminar was going to be suspicious, but it was actually really nice," I said upon reaching the table at the cafe.

Komatsu, who was already seated, nodded fervently. "I feel bad for thinking it'd be suspicious too. My heart feels so light now."

"Right? I feel like the burden on my heart has been lifted."

Holmes smiled in amusement at our conversation.

"Is there something strange, Holmes?" I asked.

“No, I was just thinking that it was good that you two went as well. It shows just how easy it is to win people over.”

“Easy? But you were moved too, right? You had your hand on your mouth.”

Holmes chuckled. “Ah, that was an act.”

“What?” Komatsu and I asked in unison.

“If one person was completely nonchalant while everyone else was moved to tears, it’d spoil the mood, right? So I pretended to be restraining my emotions,” Holmes said without a hint of guilt.

Komatsu and I gaped at him.

“S-So you weren’t moved at all?” I asked.

“Those kinds of seminars all say the same thing, so the content was within my expectations. What’s important is expressing that content with conversational skill, and I was indeed impressed by the lecturer’s use of timing. But the gist of it was, ‘Prioritize yourself and take better care of yourself.’ Those words won’t sway my heart, because I always prioritize myself and take good care of myself,” Holmes said proudly, placing his hand on his chest.

My face stiffened. *This is as “Holmes” as it gets.* Beside me, Komatsu was gaping in awe.

“More importantly, did you two receive this as well?” Holmes asked, taking out a loose paper from his pamphlet and showing it to us. The paper said: “According to your answers, your heart is screaming for relief. We will offer you the next seminar at a special discount, so please attend.”

“Oh, no, I didn’t get that,” I said.

“I got it,” Komatsu said, showing us the same piece of paper.

“Did they only give it to men?” I asked, tilting my head.

“No.” Holmes shook his head. “They gave it to women too. I deliberately filled out the form as a suffering person would, so that’s why I got one.”

“Oh, I see.” I was foolishly honest and answered the questions truthfully, saying that I slept well, found food delicious, and enjoyed listening to music.

“I answered honestly though,” Komatsu said. “I’m really not getting any sleep, and when it’s too quiet I get all kinds of negative thoughts.”

I cast my eyes down, not knowing how to respond to that.

Holmes held up the paper and chuckled. “Fortunately, it looks like Komatsu and I will be able to attend this special seminar.” It was clear that he’d fallen for the trap on purpose.

Surprised, I looked up and said, “B-But was this seminar really a bad thing?”

“Huh?”

“It may be true that it said the same thing as any other seminar, but I think most of the people there really did feel less stressed afterwards.”

Holmes nodded with a gentle expression. “Yes, this kind of seminar is similar to a massage on hearts that have become stiff due to the ways of modern society. It relieves the tension gently—and sometimes strongly. That is not a bad thing. In fact, many people will be refreshed and gain the motivation to keep toughing out their situation. What’s scary is if they rely too much on that comfort, and if that reliance is used to manipulate them.”

“Manipulate...”

“Yes. If your heart was soothed by this seminar, then that’s a very good thing. However, if you soon find yourself thinking, ‘I can’t feel at peace unless I come to this seminar,’ and someone plans on controlling you that way, then they must be stopped,” Holmes said with a sharp look in his eye.

Komatsu and I fell silent.

“Besides...even I could give a seminar like that if I wanted to.” Holmes rested his chin in his hands and sighed.

He’s right about that. Holmes seemed like he would be a fearsome teacher that could win over the hearts of many and manipulate them at will.

“Hey,” Komatsu whispered to me. “I know I asked this before, but are you really not scared of going out with a guy like this?”

“L-Like I said, I’m used to it,” I whispered back.

Holmes frowned. “You make it sound like I’m a terrible person.”

“Uh, anyway, you definitely don’t need this seminar,” Komatsu said.

“Yes, I agree.” Holmes chuckled.

Suddenly, we heard a cellphone beep. “Oh,” Komatsu said, taking his out. The moment he looked at the screen, he gulped. “Smart guys work fast, huh?”

“That’s not necessarily true,” Holmes said. “Did you get a message from the private tutor, Kikuchi?”

“Yeah, he went to the kid’s house saying that he might’ve forgotten something in his room. He sent the picture just now.” He showed Holmes the picture on his phone.

“Now this is interesting,” Holmes said immediately, smiling. It was a copper ornament of a Buddha in a suit of armor—most likely Sakra. He was sitting on an elephant. His right hand held a lance and his left hand was on his hip. His right leg was bent and rested on the elephant’s back, while his left leg hung to the side. He was looking down and seemed to be in a void state of mind. On the other hand, the elephant had intense eyes and large, majestic tusks.

“I’ll forward it to you,” Komatsu said. “Can you get Murakami to check if it’s the same one?”

“Yes, of course. I suspect that it is, though. I’ve seen Murakami’s other works, and this one has his defining lines.”

“So the stolen ornament really did end up in that high schooler’s room?” I asked. I couldn’t believe it.

Holmes smiled wryly and said, “Yes, I wasn’t expecting it either. We’ll have to do a serious investigation on that high school student.”

“Yeah...but ever since the arrest, his school’s been wary of outsiders, so I don’t think we’re gonna have any luck interviewing witnesses.” Komatsu sighed and raked his hand through his hair.

Makes sense. If we suddenly showed up and started asking questions, how honest would they be...? Even if Holmes can detect lies, I don’t think we’ll get the information we need.

“That’s fine,” Holmes said with a smile. “I’ll have an insider do the investigation for us.”

“An insider?” Komatsu and I tilted our heads together.

“Huh, you know someone there?” Komatsu asked.

“Wh-Who is it? Was that the school you went to?” I asked.

Holmes grinned. “It’s Rikyu. Oh, Rikyu is sort of a younger brother to me, Komatsu. He goes to that school, so I’ll have him investigate.” He spoke as if it was a done deal.

I frowned. “Um, would Rikyu agree to do that?”

“Yes, he’ll do anything I ask him to,” Holmes said without hesitation.

I gaped. *I thought Rikyu was selfish when it came to Holmes, but apparently that isn’t the case. Come to think of it, when Holmes came to watch the soccer game at Nishikyogoku Stadium, he said, “I just remembered that I have someone named Rikyu who’s like a younger brother to me. I’ll ask him to watch the store.” He hadn’t even checked with Rikyu before saying that he’d definitely go.*

“I’m certain that Rikyu will bring the student’s connections to light. That boy is very capable.” Holmes smiled, his eyes narrowing into crescents.

“He already has followers...” Komatsu murmured.

I nodded at him. *Yes, Rikyu’s definitely a follower.*



I, Rikyu Takiyama, attend one of the top five private prep schools in Kyoto for one reason alone: it’s the closest school to my house. I did consider going to the same school that my beloved and respected Kiyo went to, but it was a bit too far. So instead, I attend this combined middle and high school in Sagano. I can’t give up being able to relax in the mornings. It’s unfortunate that I don’t get to call myself Kiyo’s junior, but I made the choice to reduce my commute time—for six whole years at that. Since it’s a private school, it also puts effort into sports. Thanks to that, I was able to continue practicing my childhood sport, judo, there. The school also gave me the opportunity to study in France for a year. Even

though I chose it for a simple reason, I like it here, and I can tell that the other students are proud of it too. That's why it was such a shock when we heard that third-year Suguru Shirasaki, known for his excellent grades, was arrested on cannabis charges...

The day after the arrest, there was a school assembly. The principal went on stage and told us that Shirasaki was expelled. They then went on and on about how regrettable it was, how he threw his future away, et cetera, et cetera. The school was abuzz for a while, but since Shirasaki was expelled, it now felt like a storm had passed.

Just when my interest was fading too, Kiyo came to me with that request. I couldn't help but grin as I looked out the window at the huge schoolyard, wishing that lunch break would come sooner. As usual, there were people running on the track and kicking a soccer ball at the nets. For a school like this, where everyone aims to excel at both academics and sports, training their mind and body in the lush greenery of Sagano—in other words, the picture-perfect school setting—that scandal had to have been really painful.

“What're you grinning for, Rikyu?” came a voice from beside me. I turned and saw a girl with short hair peering into my face. Her name was Haruka Ichinose. She lived close to me, and we went to kindergarten and elementary school together. We didn't go to the same middle school, but she came here starting in high school. *Well, basically, she's a childhood friend.* Her black hair stuck out every which way, and since she did track-and-field, she had a toned body with suntanned skin. She definitely seemed like a tomboy.

“Something good happened, so I can't help but smile,” I answered honestly.

Haruka widened her eyes—which were already fairly big to begin with. “S-Something good? What was it? Oh, oh, did you get a girlfriend?” She leaned in eagerly, like a gossip journalist looking for her next scoop.

I looked at her and sighed. “No. Kiyo asked me for a favor, that's all.”

“Kiyo did?” She looked at me in wonder.

Haruka also knew Kiyo well, and she was a fan of him just like me. *Well, it's only natural—Kiyo is good-looking, upstanding, kind, and knows everything. Once you've met him, you can't not admire him. That's perfectly*

understandable. People are free to admire him and fall in love with him, but I get annoyed when they get the wrong idea and I have to tell them, “No, you’re not good enough for him. Know your place.” Fortunately, Haruka said that she doesn’t have a crush on him; she just admires him as a person. Besides, even if she did have a crush on him, she has low self-esteem, so she wouldn’t get the wrong idea anyway.

Oh, that reminds me of the day I first met Aoi. The shock when I realized that such an ordinary person stole Kiyo’s heart... The truth was that I knew from the very beginning that Kiyo liked her. I realized from the look on his face the moment she came into the store. He smiled at that average girl with a lovey-dovey aura—there might as well have been flowers blooming in the background. His sudden mood swing had me wondering what on earth just happened. Luckily, it didn’t seem like she’d realized how he felt. I wanted to ruin her chances before they got together...but that didn’t go so well.

Well, Kiyo seems happy, so I’m not going to complain. Even though I still don’t like it. To be completely honest, I wish they’d break up already. I don’t hate Aoi herself, but I don’t want her to be with Kiyo. Saori, last year’s Saio-dai, would’ve been better. They really did look good together, and I’m sure I would’ve been able to congratulate them sincerely. I can’t tell Kiyo that, though, because I’m sure he’d stop talking to me. In fact, when he told me he started going out with Aoi, before I could even say anything, he said, “Rikyu, don’t be mean to my girlfriend.” But what was with that bragging tone? He clearly just wanted to say “my girlfriend.” Even though it’s Kiyo, I don’t like it when he’s giddy like that. But alas, I have no choice but to pray for my master’s happiness.

“Kiyo hardly ever asks you for anything, right?” Haruka said quietly, bringing me back to my senses.

“Yeah, it’s rare. That’s why I’m happy.” I always want to help Kiyo. I’m like a retainer on standby—always waiting under the eaves for instructions.

“What did he ask you to do? Can I help?” she asked seriously.

“Hmm.” I crossed my arms. Haruka has a lot of connections that are different from mine. I can’t underestimate girls’ information networks. Plus, I know I can trust her to keep a secret. I’ll be able to get more information if I accept her

help. “All right, Haruka, you can help. But keep this a secret between us.”

“O-Okay.” She nodded, her eyes lighting up as if she were a child.

Chapter 4: Investigation Results

1

Rikyu came to Kura the next Saturday. The door opened right as the grandfather clock chimed three o'clock.

"I'm here, Kiyo." He raised one hand and cheerfully entered the store. Today he was wearing a newsboy cap, a white shirt with a fashionable necktie, and fairly tight shorts. A messenger bag hung diagonally from his shoulder. *The outfit looks good on him, but...is he cosplaying as something?*

Holmes, who'd been checking the inventory, turned around and smiled, binder in hand. "Oh, welcome, Rikyu. Are you dressed as a young detective?"

"Yep. Of course you'd know."

"You've always been one to prioritize appearances."

Not that Holmes is any different...

"Thanks." Rikyu giggled shyly.

Um, I don't think that was a compliment.

"Here's the results of my investigation." Rikyu placed a brown envelope on the counter and sat down. The envelope was tied with string and had the word "CONFIDENTIAL" stamped on it. It was extremely over the top.

"This looks promising," Holmes said, going around to the other side of the counter and picking up the envelope. "Oh, let me make coffee first." He put the envelope back down.

"No, I'll make tea today," Rikyu said. "I brought some nice black tea, so you can relax and read my report."

"Thank you. The tea you make is wonderful, so I'm looking forward to it." Holmes sat down, looking happy, and took the report out of the envelope.

I put down the feather duster and hurried to the kitchenette. “Rikyu, do you want me to help you?” I asked hesitantly.

As expected, Rikyu shook his head. “I’m fine. I’ll make it for you too since I have no choice, so sit down.” He took three sets of cups and saucers out of the cupboard.

“Rikyu is very skilled at brewing tea, befitting his namesake,” came Holmes’s voice from the counter. Rikyu was named after Sen no Rikyu, a famous tea master. “Come have a seat, Aoi. There aren’t any customers, so you can take a break.”

“Okay.” I hesitantly sat down next to Holmes. Normally I sat across from him, but if a customer arrived, I’d notice faster if I was next to him. This also gave me a good view of Rikyu brewing tea.

First, he poured hot water from the kettle into a glass teapot and the cups to warm them up. Then he emptied the teapot and added three servings’ worth of tea leaves. After that, when the water in the kettle boiled, he poured it into the teapot and quickly put on the lid. He looked down at his watch, and about three minutes later, he stirred the contents of the teapot with a spoon. Once the color of the tea was consistent, he skillfully poured it into the cups. Usually it was the scent of coffee that wafted through the store, but today it was the nice smell of black tea.

“Thanks for waiting, Kiyo.” Rikyu placed a cup and saucer in front of Holmes, then me, and lastly in front of his own seat, before sitting down.

“Thank you, Rikyu,” I said, quickly bringing the cup to my mouth. I couldn’t help but smile at its rich aroma and flavor. Even though there wasn’t any sugar in it, it tasted faintly sweet. I’d always found the taste of black tea somewhat harsh, but this was a new flavor to me. “It really is delicious...” *I can understand why Holmes openly praised it.*

“Well thanks,” Rikyu said bluntly. He did smile, though, seeming genuinely happy. *He has an angelic smile, but it’s too bad about his personality...*

Holmes, however, was engrossed in reading the report and didn’t even touch his teacup. *He gets into this focused mode sometimes, like when he’s standing in front of the bookshelf, absorbed in an art textbook. When he’s like that, he*

doesn't even notice when you call his name. It makes me worry about whether he can watch the store by himself, but apparently he reacts to the sound of the door chime, so customers don't go unnoticed.

Rikyu seemed well aware that Holmes was in that state, so he didn't try to talk to him. He simply sipped his tea and nodded, satisfied.

When Holmes finished reading the report, he said, "I'm impressed with how much you found."

"Yeah, our student council president's a girl, so I hugged her from behind and asked," Rikyu said smoothly. I imagined him sweetly embracing a glasses-wearing, smart-looking student council president. But...

"Sh-She didn't get mad at you for that?" I blurted out.

Rikyu shrugged. "Of course she got mad at first. She was like, 'Takiyama, that's sexual harassment!' So I went, 'Wow, so you *do* think of me as a guy! You always treat me like a girl, which I don't like,' and put on a sad face. That got her feeling sympathetic, so I pretended to be teary-eyed and said, 'I was close with Shirasaki, so I can't believe what happened. Do you know anything? Even the slightest information would help.' I was able to pry the information out of her that way."

I was lost for words.

Holmes, on the other hand, smiled in amusement and said, "That's a technique that only you can pull off."

"Really? I think you could too, Kiyo. Especially if it's an older woman—you'd win her over in a heartbeat. You should try it." Rikyu flashed me a mischievous grin. Startled, I slumped my shoulders.

"Could I? In that case, I think I'll try it on Aoi," Holmes said. This time I was startled for a different reason. I blushed and Rikyu grimaced.

"Anyway, Haruka helped with the investigation too," Rikyu said, quickly changing the topic.

"She did?" Holmes blinked. "Oh, Haruka is Rikyu's childhood friend. They're the same age and go to the same school," he explained for me.

“Yeah. She knows a lot of people and she doesn’t tell secrets. She did well.”

“I’ll have to thank her, then.”

“It’s fine, I’ll do it. I’m the one who asked her to help. Anyway, you’ll do me a favor now, right?”

“Of course. I did promise you I would. What do you want?”

What would Rikyu ask Holmes for? I felt kind of nervous.

“I want you to go to Tokyo with me sometime. Dad called me over, and I don’t want it to be just the two of us.” Rikyu slumped his shoulders.

“Tokyo...? All right, then. It’ll have to be after these cases are resolved, but I can squeeze in a two-day trip.”

“Yes!” Rikyu raised his hands in the air.

“However, from this report, it seems that there was more to Suguru Shirasaki than met the eye,” Holmes said, looking back down at the documents. There was a picture of the boy in question on the first page. He was wearing his school uniform blazer and looked like any other third-year high school student. His smile made him look completely harmless. “Suguru Shirasaki, seventeen years old. His father works at a bank, and his mother is a piano teacher. His grades were among the highest in his school, he was the head of the disciplinary committee, the teachers trusted him—in other words, he was a model student. But that was only a front.”

“A front?” I looked up at Holmes.

“Yes. It would appear that he was quite two-faced.”

Like you? I secretly thought to myself.

“Not like me,” Holmes answered smoothly, reading my mind. I choked on my tea.

“His family was well-off, his grades were top-notch, and all of the teachers trusted him,” Holmes continued. “He was at the top of the school caste.”

I imagined a pyramid diagram in my head. *School castes are often talked about. There’s a depressingly clear hierarchy in place from the bottom tier to the*

top.

“And apparently he was the leader of a vicious group of bullies.”

“Bullies...?”

“Yes. Behind the scenes, he was making it so that everyone would ignore the people who he didn’t like or who went against him. But since it never became public, he was never seen as a concern. Instead, everyone had the impression that ‘Shirasaki is a nice person, but you don’t want to make him angry.’ However, it would seem that the student council president had seen through him. Also, the other disciplinary committee members were in on it. One of them, a student named Yohei Sato, worked particularly closely with him. You could say that he was Shirasaki’s right-hand man.” Holmes laid out the information about the disciplinary committee members on the counter and pointed at Yohei Sato. “He lives alone in an apartment in Nishioji while his parents live overseas. Shirasaki visited it quite often... If only we knew what this apartment was like,” Holmes said, crossing his arms.

“The apartment?” Rikyu tilted his head. “I’ve been there before. Since he lives alone, he uses it for small gatherings and discussions.”

“Was there a hanging scroll there?”

“Yeah. It was in the only bedroom and it made a pretty strong impression.”

“It was a hanging scroll of General Mekira, right?” Holmes asked confidently.

“Yep, Shuei Akutagawa’s.”

“Bingo.” Holmes put on a satisfied smile.

“Um, how did you know that this...Yohei Sato had a hanging scroll of General Mekira in his room?” I asked.

“Because he’s to the west, right?” Rikyu answered easily.

“Oh...”

“Rikyu is correct,” Holmes said. “The answer is simple. The Twelve Divine Generals represent twelve directions. Sato lives to the west of central Kyoto, while Shirasaki lives to the southeast. The possibility that they were connected crossed my mind.”

“S-So is Shirasaki really behind the art thefts, then?”

“No. Try to remember—which artwork was in Shirasaki’s room?”

“U-Umm, it was a copper ornament of Sakra.”

“Do you remember who originally owned it?”

“Huh...?” *Who was it again? The creator was Murakami, but the owner was someone else. Did we even talk about the owner to begin with?* Suddenly, someone came to mind. “Oh... Was it Representative Amamiya?”

“Correct. Sakra’s owner was Representative Amamiya. However, he withdrew his claim, saying that it ‘wasn’t stolen.’”

“R-Right. He said his son took it.” Everything was coming back to me.

“And that son didn’t seem to be Shiro.”

“Yes, you said that it was probably his hidden son, Hiro.”

“Let’s assume that Hiro took the painting, and now it’s in Shirasaki’s room. Do you know what this means?”

“It means...there’s a connection between Hiro and Shirasaki?”

“Yes. I’ll investigate what this connection is...but it’s all coming together now.” Holmes tapped the files on Suguru Shirasaki with his finger.

“Yeah,” Rikyu said, nodding. “Oh right.” He looked up. “Kiyo, you said you were going to a mental health seminar as part of the investigation. What happened with that?”

“Oh, I wanted to ask that too,” I said. Holmes and Komatsu had already attended the seminar several times by now.

“The second time was the price listed on the flyer, but from the third time onwards, the price skyrocketed to thirty thousand yen.” Holmes smiled in amusement, placing his hand on his chest.

“Th-Thirty thousand yen?” I squeaked.

“Yes. They didn’t force us to pay, but they said, ‘The price up until now has been for people who wanted a little bit of relief. From now on, only the people who truly want to be saved should come. Thirty thousand isn’t a low sum, but

when you consider that this will change your life, I think it's quite cheap.' Half of the people quit the seminar after that. Phrased differently, half of them *stayed.*"

"You and Komatsu stayed, right?" I asked.

"Of course. Then, after the third seminar, we were invited to a three-day camp. Perhaps we were accepted as official members."

"A camp?" Rikyu and I asked in unison.

"They rent a martial arts dojo in Ohara and train their minds and bodies. Apparently you can go whenever you like as long as it's from Friday to Sunday. The cost is sixty thousand yen, or thirty thousand for students."

My eyes widened. "W-Wow, that's expensive."

Rikyu smirked and rested his chin in his hands. "It's a clever price, though. It's high, but it's not out of reach. Adults and students could both pay it if they tried."

"Yes, I thought so too," Holmes said. "As I expected, the seminar became more and more suspicious."

"You're going to the camp, right?" Rikyu asked, eyes sparkling with curiosity.

"Yes, of course. Once I infiltrate that dojo, I'll know the true state of affairs."

Rikyu immediately put on a serious face. "Are you going to be okay? Won't it be dangerous? Underground organizations can be involved with that kind of stuff, right?" *He seemed amused up until now, but his attitude changed when Holmes was going to enter the storm. Looks like he's still serious about protecting him.*

"I'll be fine. I might need your help again, though, Rikyu."

"You can count on me," Rikyu said proudly, sticking out his chest.

"Rikyu is one of Holmes's Twelve Divine Generals, huh?" I giggled.

Rikyu gave me an upset look. "I can protect Kiyo by myself. He doesn't need twelve guardians."

"Oh, right." I nodded in vague understanding.

Holmes chuckled. “Besides, if Rikyu was a Divine General, that’d make me... Oh.” His eyes widened and he put his hand over his mouth.

“Holmes?”

“What’s wrong, Kiyo?”

Holmes said nothing and opened the cabinet behind the counter. He rummaged around for a bit before taking out a booklet and flipping through its pages. “Not here.” He put the booklet down. Before I knew it, there was a stack of booklets and pamphlets on the counter.

“What are you looking for, Holmes?”

“A picture of the hanging scroll that was stolen from Kunishiro.” He took out a booklet about Buddhist art, flipped through it, and added it to the pile.

“Kunishiro’s hanging scroll?”

“Yes, I just remembered the painting I saw as a child. Vividly, at that.” He took out another booklet and frowned. “Not here either. Oh right.” He brought over something that looked like a photo album.

“Is that an album?”

“Yes, this is from when I was in elementary school. I don’t remember the contents too well, but I think we took a picture when we visited his house.” He placed the album on the counter and flipped through it. My eyes were treated to page after page of adorable pictures of Holmes as a child, but now wasn’t the time to appreciate them.

“It’s here,” Holmes said, stopping at one of the pages. In the photo, Kunishiro, the owner, and Holmes were sitting in a row in a Japanese-style room. There was a hanging scroll on the wall behind them—the Yakushi Nyorai one that Kunishiro was devastated about losing. In it, the Buddha was looking down and looked absolutely beautiful, like a goddess.

I gasped, immediately understanding what Holmes was getting at. *The Yakushi Nyorai in the painting looks just like Yuko.*

Meanwhile, Komatsu was north of Kyoto, paying a visit to Ohara at Holmes's request. Though he'd lived in Kyoto before, it was his first time going to Ohara. "Whoa..." he murmured at the endless expanse of greenery. He walked along in the tranquil atmosphere, impressed that there was a mountain village a mere hour's bus ride from central Kyoto. The mountain, trees, and moss were beautifully, dazzlingly green. He closed his eyes and smiled at the soothing sounds of flowing water and wind rustling through fresh green leaves. *This must be what true luxury is...but thinking that way must mean that I've grown old*, he thought self-deprecatingly.

"Kyoto... Ohara... Sanzen-in, huh?" Just when it seemed like the quiet, natural scenery would go on forever, he arrived at the road connecting Sanzen-in Temple and Jakko-in Temple, which was lined with busy gift shops and teahouses.

Komatsu recalled Kiyotaka's suggestion: *"While you're there, why don't you visit Sanzen-in Temple? You're tired, right? It'll make you feel refreshed."* Back then he'd replied with a noncommittal, "Sure, if I feel like it." But now, he felt himself drawn to the temple road.

Sanzen-in Temple was a *monzeki* temple, meaning that its head priest was a member of the imperial family or an aristocrat. Like a castle, it was surrounded by a stone wall, giving it a grand, dignified appearance.

Komatsu passed through the gate, paid the admission fee, and then started on the designated route through the temple. From the austere reception hall, which was thought to be built by Hideyoshi Toyotomi, he saw Shuheki Garden and stopped to admire its clean, natural beauty. He felt like he was looking at a painting on a scroll. He stood there fascinated for a while before slowly proceeding into the hallway towards the main building, which was called Shinden. The Yakushi Nyorai statue in Shinden had a very benevolent face. Awed by its divinity, Komatsu pressed his hands together in prayer. Next was the outside corridor leading to Yusei Garden, a moss garden that was called "The Treasure of the East." Komatsu breathed in and said, "Sure feels like the Buddhist 'pure land' here." Sparkling sun rays shone through the trees as he walked.

Next was the Ojo Gokuraku-in hall, where there were beautiful golden statues

of the Amida Triad. These were all National Treasures. In the garden past it, there were cute little statues called “laughing Jizo.” They reminded Komatsu of when his daughter was young, and his heart ached. He came to a stop and looked down to see two young girls passing by him.

“There’s gold water over there that’ll give you a longer life,” one of them said. “The guide says to wash your hands in it for good luck.”

“Let’s go!”

Komatsu looked back up and smiled. He left Sanzen-in Temple, thinking, *I’m glad I came here.* Outside the gate, he turned around and looked up at the sky, overcome with feelings of gratitude. *I didn’t think it’d heal me this much. I’ll have to thank the kid.*

“Now then, time to find that dojo and do some questioning.” He walked along the trail with light steps. The dojo was deeper in the mountain. The cypress fence was brand new, but the dojo itself had a very traditional appearance, with a tiled roof reminiscent of an old mountain temple. There was a wooden sign that said “Akashi Takezo Aikido Dojo” hanging from the tightly shut gate. There was also a paper notice that said “We are currently not accepting new disciples. Sorry for the inconvenience.”

I can’t see much past the fence, but there’s probably people here. I’ll walk around the perimeter and see if I can find anyone.

The property was quite large, about the size of a school campus. The building seemed to be one story, with the dojo hall itself and other Japanese-style rooms. The trees in the yard were a majestic sight too.

Well, I’ll be going inside later anyway, so I’ll leave that for now. Komatsu left the dojo and went to a nearby soba restaurant.

“Welcome,” greeted a plump lady with a gentle smile. She looked past middle age, but not quite elderly yet. “Are you sightseeing at Sanzen-in?” she asked, pouring water into a cup and placing it on the table.

“Yeah, something like that.” *Looks like she’s a talkative one. That’s good.*

Komatsu ordered the tempura and soba set, looked up, and said, “I’m actually a journalist. I’m writing an article about Kyoto and martial arts.”

“Ooh, martial arts?”

“There’s an aikido dojo over there, right?” He turned to face the direction of the dojo.

“Oh... They’re not active anymore. The instructor retired and there was some fuss over whether to sell the dojo or not. It looks like it’s being rented out now.”

“Rented?”

“Mmhm. The renters came by once and said they’re using it for their cram school’s training camps. They leave their smartphones and stuff at home, meditate and chant sutras, and then focus on their studies. I see a lot of kids come on the weekend on a minibus.”

“I see...” Komatsu put his hand on his mouth. “Um, have you seen this child before?” He took his phone out of his pocket and showed her a picture of Yuko.

“What a pretty girl. I haven’t seen her before, though. Is she missing or something?”

“She’s my daughter...and she ran away from home.”

“Oh dear, you must be so worried.”

“I thought she might’ve gone to the training camp.”

“I know kids go there, but I don’t know their faces because they go straight inside from the minibus. At first I was hoping they’d come to my restaurant, but apparently they cook for themselves.” She shrugged.

“That’s too bad.”

“Yes, but sometimes one of the staff members comes here to eat. He’s a real looker.” She giggled and hit Komatsu on the shoulder.

“A looker...” Komatsu recalled the good-looking men he’d encountered. One of them was Kiyotaka Yagashira, but there was another one he’d seen recently. He remembered thinking, *there’s a surprising number of good-looking guys out there*. Suddenly, he gasped, picked up his bag, and took out a photograph. “Did he look like this?” He showed the woman a picture of Representative Amamiya’s illegitimate son, Hiro Haraguchi.

“Let’s see... Oh!” Her eyes widened. “That’s him.”

“So it was him...” *There’s the connection.* Komatsu clenched his fist under the table.

When his food arrived, he slurped some of his noodles and took his laptop out of his bag.

“Journalists always bring their laptops around so they can write anywhere, huh?” The woman placed a cup of coffee on the table. “On the house,” she said.

Komatsu thanked her and looked at the laptop screen with a serious face. “I didn’t want to do this, but...” He entered “Hiro Haraguchi,” took a deep breath, and began typing away with fervor.

3

Komatsu came to Kura at around 7 p.m., when we were already closing up shop. Rikyu was still here, reading an art textbook at the counter. Holmes was draping cloth over the shelves. I’d just opened the door after closing the curtains when the detective appeared.

“Hey,” he said, raising a hand as he entered the store.

“Good evening, Komatsu,” Holmes said, turning around and smiling.

“Sorry I’m late. I was putting together the files.” He scratched his head, ruffling his messy hair.

“Thank you,” Holmes said. He gestured towards a chair. “Please have a seat. This is Rikyu, who I said was like a younger brother to me.” He put his hand on Rikyu’s shoulder. “He’s helping us with this case.”

Rikyu immediately put on his usual adorable smile and said, “Nice to meet you, sir. My name is Rikyu Takiyama.”

“Yeah, nice to meet you too,” Komatsu said. “You’re a boy, right?” He peered into Rikyu’s face.

“Yes.”

“I got witness testimony saying that Hiro Haraguchi was involved with that

dojo.” Komatsu sat down, opened his bag, and took out his documents. Though he’d investigated Hiro Haraguchi before, there were many more pages this time.

“This is incredible,” Holmes said, holding the report. “You even found the hospital he was born in and his juvenile record.” He seemed impressed. “So Hiro Haraguchi was the leader of a youth biker gang when he was a student. The team’s name was ‘Idatetime,’ as in the Buddhist figure. A common name among such groups.” He put his hand on his hip and smiled.

I tilted my head. “Why is Idatetime a common name for biker gangs?”

“According to folklore, when the Buddha achieved nirvana, a fast-running demon stole his ashes. Idatetime chased after him and retrieved them. Because of that, ‘Idatetime’ is used as a synonym for a great runner.”

“Oh, so that’s why biker gangs like it.”

“That said,” Komatsu cut in, “it looks like he stopped racing on the streets after his first run-in with the cops. After that, they were just a group of rowdy delinquents. Apparently they’re still together.”

“I see he often attends Kyoto’s underground auctions,” Holmes said, slowly pacing around the store as he looked at the documents. He stopped and turned to Komatsu. “How did you obtain this much information?”

Komatsu looked away. “Uh, well, I didn’t think Amamiya’s illegitimate child was that important before. All I did this time was take it more seriously.”

Even though I wasn’t particularly perceptive, I could tell from his awkward smile that he was hiding something. Holmes definitely would’ve noticed too, but he didn’t press him. Instead, he showed him a picture. “Komatsu, please take a look at this.”

“That’s a pretty old photo, huh? Dang, the owner looks younger. And is this kiddo kneeling with perfect posture you?” He sounded amused.

“Yes.” Holmes nodded and pointed at Kunishiro. “Do you know him?”

“Nope. He looks like a bearded potter.”

“This is Kunishiro. Could you take a close look at the hanging scroll in the

back?”

Komatsu squinted, then widened his eyes. “This is...”

“It looks exactly like Yuko, right?”

The painting of Yakushi Nyorai, with her downwards gaze and compassionate smile, was very realistic.

“This much of a resemblance cannot be a coincidence,” Holmes said. “Did Kunishiro have any contact with your ex-wife, Masami?”

“Yeah... They met at a party and I heard there was a lot of flirting.”

“Who said that?”

“Masami herself. She was always telling me how popular she was, and stuff like, ‘You tried so hard to win me over before we got married, but you don’t feed the fish you caught,’ and ‘It’s not like I minded it, you know.’ The artist Kunishiro was one of them, and—oh right, she said the Yagashira owner hit on her too.”

Owner... My face stiffened.

“My grandfather simply thinks that it would be rude not to ask a beautiful woman on a date. He wasn’t seriously making a move on her. But the fact that she brazenly told you so means that she may not have felt guilty about it.”

“Who knows?” Komatsu shrugged.

“There’s no doubt that Kunishiro painted this Yakushi Nyorai out of his attraction to Masami. The problems are twofold: that Yuko was the spitting image of her mother, and that this hanging scroll was stolen.”

Komatsu and I silently waited for Holmes’s next words.

“Here is my hypothesis. A group of thieves tried to sell the painting, but since it didn’t go for as much as they expected, they put it up for auction instead. There, Hiro Hiroguchi saw it. Considering that he named his gang Idaten, he may have been fascinated by Buddhism. Attracted to the realistic depiction of Yakushi Nyorai, he won the bid and was later shocked when he saw Yuko in a magazine.”

“Since there was a girl who looked exactly like Yakushi Nyorai...” I murmured.

“Yes. I wouldn’t know if it was out of romantic love or some other emotion, but the point is that he wanted to ‘obtain’ Yuko.”

Komatsu leaned forward. “I-If it wasn’t love, then what was it?”

“A symbolic reason?” Rikyu said, resting his chin in his hands.

“What?” Komatsu looked back and forth between Holmes and Rikyu.

“I agree,” Holmes said.

“What symbol?” Komatsu asked.

Suddenly, the door chime rang, and a young man in a suit and tie entered. He wore glasses and looked like a nervous office worker. It was someone we knew.

“Uncle Kazuhiko...” Rikyu said, eyes wide open. The man was Kazuhiko Shinohara, Rikyu’s uncle and the third son of Ukon Saito. He worked as an accountant.

“What brings you here, Kazuhiko?” Holmes sounded surprised.

“Sorry for coming by after closing. I heard you were looking into the stolen art pieces.” Kazuhiko bowed apologetically.

“Oh yeah,” Rikyu said. “You were a victim too, right?”

“Yeah. My Kongo Rikishi sculpture was stolen.” Kazuhiko sighed.

“I’ll make coffee, so please have a seat,” Holmes said, pulling out a chair.

“Thanks.” Kazuhiko sat down, Komatsu and Rikyu moving slightly aside to give him more room.

“Long time no see, Kazuhiko,” I said, bowing.

“Oh, Aoi. You look like you’ve grown up since we last met. You’re prettier now.”

“Th-Thank you.” I looked down, embarrassed.

Rikyu sighed loudly. “Stop that, Uncle Kazuhiko. Kiyo’s glaring at you from the kitchen.”

Kazuhiko looked towards the kitchenette and stiffened up.

“Huh?” I turned to look too and saw Holmes with a cheerful smile on his face.

Before long, Holmes came out and placed a cup of coffee in front of Kazuhiko.
“Thank you for waiting.”

“Th-Thanks.” Kazuhiko bowed awkwardly and drank.

“Kazuhiko, I wanted to ask how your Kongo Rikishi sculpture was stored.”

“It was in my office, but always at the back of the shelf.”

“Why is that?”

“It was a great sculpture, but the rest of my decorations are Western-style, so it didn’t fit the theme. Before I knew it, it was gone. I came today because I wanted to ask what other things were stolen.”

“Ah, I see.” Holmes nodded. He took out the list of stolen items from the drawer and placed it on the counter.

Kazuhiko immediately picked it up and his eyes widened. “Now that’s a surprise. All of these are people from Unbound,” he murmured.

“Unbound?” Holmes looked up.

Kazuhiko flinched. His face clearly revealed that he’d screwed up.

“What’s ‘Unbound’?” Holmes asked again.

“Oh, uh, it’s the name of a group for modern artists.”

“Do you know much about it?”

“No, well, I only ate with them once or twice.”

“Do the members meet regularly?”

“Uh, I’m not sure. Sorry.” Kazuhiko put down the list, gulped down the rest of his coffee, and stood up, flustered. “Mom will yell at me if I’m out too late, so I have to go now. She likes the octopus and egg from Nishiki Market. You know, that salty-sweet stewed dish where they put quail eggs on top of little octopuses. I like it a lot too,” he rambled as he hurriedly left the store.

A fully-grown man saying that his mom will yell at him... I gave a strained smile.

“Man, Uncle Kazuhiko really sucks at lying,” Rikyu said, resting his chin in his hands and slumping his shoulders slightly. “That ‘Unbound’ is related to this somehow, right?”

“Yeah, I thought so too,” said Komatsu.

“Indeed. They could even be holding auctions for stolen works that can’t be sold publicly, while being artists,” said Holmes.

“No way...” Komatsu said, surprised.

I cast my eyes down. *Before I worked at Kura, the idea of art theft felt like something that only happened in movies. But now I know that art thieves really do exist and are a problem. There are people in this world who want things even if they know they’re stolen. The illegal business only exists because buyers exist.*

Each incident in this string of thefts occurred in a different place, but there’s a whole mess of connections between them. Maybe there’s a single thread that links everything. I hugged myself, feeling chilly all of a sudden.

Chapter 5: The Infiltration Begins

1

On Friday afternoon, Komatsu boarded a minibus with Kiyotaka at Shijo-Karasuma. He gazed absentmindedly out the window as they headed north on Karasuma Street towards Ohara. The bus was sparsely filled; including the two of them, there were only twelve people in all. The others all looked like students. *Only this many people? Then again, I guess I should be surprised there are this many at all. It's a weekday. Don't these kids have school? ...Come to think of it, maybe this is what all of those short runaway cases were about. I heard that kids have been running away from home, leaving letters behind, and then returning the next Sunday. They wouldn't tell their parents where they went.*

Komatsu glanced in front of him and saw the top of Kiyotaka's head. They were sitting two rows apart. He rested his chin in his hand as he looked at the man's sleek black hair and recalled the conversation they'd had at Kura...

"What do you mean, Yuko's a symbol?" Komatsu asked, face pale.

"Have a look at this," Kiyotaka said, taking a book from the shelf and opening it to a page showing standing statues of Sakra, General Kubira, Kongo Rikishi, General Anira, General Mekira, General Anchira, General Sanchira, General Haira, General Makora, General Shindara, General Shotora, and General Bikara.

"These are the Twelve Divine Generals, right?"

"Right. They're gods of military arts and guardian deities. They represent the twelve hours, months, and directions in correspondence with Yakushi Nyorai's twelve vows."

"So basically, they're Yakushi Nyorai's followers?"

"Yes. Do you see the connection between these incidents now?" Kiyotaka

crossed his arms, a cold look in his eyes.

Komatsu shivered.

“We’re here,” said the student sitting next to Komatsu.

“O-Oh, already?” Komatsu said. He’d been staring idly out the window for the majority of the trip. The bus was now inside the cypress fence around the dojo. All of the other passengers were getting off, so Komatsu hurriedly stood up and followed them. Perhaps because he was rushing, he tripped as he was getting off—but Kiyotaka caught him by the arm.

“Are you all right?” Kiyotaka asked, with a kind smile he’d never directed towards Komatsu before. He was wearing black-rimmed glasses. Komatsu didn’t know if it was because he was taking the camp seriously, or if it was supposed to be a disguise.

Oh right, we’re supposed to be strangers. “Y-Yeah, sorry about that.”

“My name is Kiyotaka Ijuin. I remember you from the seminars.” Kiyotaka used a fake name for the seminar, because not only was Yagashira an uncommon name, it was famous in certain industries as well.

“Why Ijuin?” Komatsu balked. “That’s pretentious for a fake name.”

“It’s my father’s pen name,” Kiyotaka answered plainly.

“I’m...Komatsu.”

“The others are all young, so it’s a relief to not be the oldest one here.”

“Well, sorry for being an old man.”

“No, I didn’t mean it like that.” Kiyotaka shook his head, flustered.

When he’s like this, he just looks like a well-mannered kid. Actually kind of cute... Is it because of the glasses? Komatsu began to smile.

“It’s good that we became friends quite naturally,” Kiyotaka whispered, smiling. “Well done, Komatsu.”

Komatsu facepalmed. *I take back my last thought.*

“Please come this way, everyone.” The staff member walked ahead of the

group, leading them to the dojo. Inside, there were large shoe racks on both sides of the entrance. Everyone put their shoes away and switched into slippers.

Right in front of the entrance was a reception desk. A young woman wearing glasses explained the process in a robot-like manner: “Please write your name here and place your valuables, mobile phones, watches, cameras, and all other electronic devices in this box. They will be returned to you after the camp is over.”

Komatsu’s eyes widened. “Even my watch?”

“Yes. As was written in the guide, we will be providing *samue* for you—traditional work clothing worn by monks. The only items you may bring in are underwear. Now, please leave all of your belongings here and get changed in those rooms over there. Girls on the right, boys on the left.”

The other participants looked bewildered, but Kiyotaka took off his watch without hesitation, putting it, his wallet, and his phone in the box.

The woman smiled and handed him a white set of *samue*. “Please get changed over there.”

“Thank you.” Kiyotaka accepted the clothes and went to the changing room. Komatsu hurriedly put his valuables in the box and followed him.

The changing room was a nondescript room with tatami flooring. A man was stationed there to take all of their belongings when they finished changing.

“Please put your underwear in here,” he said, handing them black tote bags. “I’ll take you to your room now.”

“Does everyone get their own room?” Kiyotaka asked.

“No, the men will be sharing one large room. Same for the women.”

“I see.”

There were four women and eight men in the group. *An eight-person room, then. I was hoping to sneak around and look for Yuko, but that seems like it’d be hard.* Komatsu quietly clicked his tongue. He recalled the conversation at Kura again...

“So basically, they made Yuko a symbol of Yakushi Nyorai since they look the same, and now they’re worshipping her like it’s their religion?” Komatsu asked, leaning forward.

“Yes.” Kiyotaka nodded.

A young man was fascinated with Yutaka Kunishiro’s Yakushi Nyorai, and when he found Yuko, who looked exactly like the painting, he came up with a plan to start a religious organization. The leaders would become the Twelve Divine Generals, and Yuko would be their living goddess.

“Th-That means Yuko’s safe at least, right?” Komatsu placed his hand on his chest, relieved.

Kiyotaka looked away. “I think she’s safe. However, there’s also a good chance that she’s been placed in a situation she can’t escape from.”

“Like she’s locked up somewhere?”

“If it were just that, it’d still be salvageable... But their ‘Sakra’ is currently under arrest for possession of cannabis.”

Komatsu knew what Kiyotaka was implying: there was a chance that Yuko had been turned into a drug addict. He stood still, unable to say anything.

Kiyotaka lightly covered his mouth with his hand. “It’s inexcusable...”

“Wh-What is?”

“Thinking about that possibility being real is making me shake with anger.” His hand really was trembling. Though his expression was the same as always, it was clear that he was furious. “Komatsu, Yuko is likely being held captive at the dojo in Ohara. We will save her, no matter what it takes.”

Feeling Kiyotaka’s intense aura, Komatsu nodded firmly.

2

The participants were taken to the large room where they’d be staying. It was the size of twenty tatami mats—plenty of room, even shared between eight men. As instructed, everyone stored their tote bags containing their underwear

on the shelf along the wall. Then it was time to go to the dojo.

What're they gonna make us do? Komatsu wondered, anxious. But to his surprise, the activities were entirely focused on relaxing. First was calisthenics, followed by yoga. Then they meditated in a relaxing pose while the sound of a flowing river played in the background. The meditation was for them to “reexamine their heart.”

After that, they went to a small room where everyone introduced themselves. The idea was that since they were complete strangers, it would be easier to open up about their hidden troubles.

“My parents say it’s for my sake, but it’s really for themselves. They’re just making me do what they couldn’t. They don’t listen to me when I say what I want to do. Even if it looks like they are, they’re just pretending...”

“I’m being ignored at school, but not blatantly. I told my mom and she said, ‘Being bullied is your own fault. I don’t want to have a bullied child’...”

“The person I loved broke my heart, and I feel like I’ve lost everything...”

As people revealed their worries and complaints, everyone nodded along and agreed. They were told beforehand not to argue about anyone’s problems.

Komatsu grew nervous as his turn approached. *I can’t tell them I’m worried about my missing daughter. I have to say something else...*

Soon it was Kiyotaka’s turn. Komatsu moved slightly closer, wondering what he would say.

“I lost my mother at a young age and was raised by my father and my grandfather. My grandfather is egotism incarnate, and whenever I make a mistake, he yells at me loud enough that I swear it can be heard outside the house. My father is kind, but he’s incredibly self-centered. He shows concern for me, but he also makes me do all of the annoying tasks that he doesn’t want to. Before I knew it, I’d become their housekeeper, handyman, and errand boy. I’m very grateful to them for raising me, but I constantly feel depressed when I ask myself what my purpose is.”

Kiyotaka had been smiling when he started speaking, but his face slowly turned into a grimace, and at the end he looked like he was in real pain.

Everyone was moved by his story.

Komatsu teared up. *I thought he was so far removed from humanity that he wouldn't have any worries, but I was wrong. He's been through so much. Poor thing...*

"Thank you for listening," Kiyotaka said. "Next is Komatsu, right?" He looked at Komatsu and whispered in his ear, "Just do what I did. Take something trivial and exaggerate it into a sad story."

I take back my last thought. Komatsu facepalmed again. Then he thought, *That also sounded like a reminder to not talk about Yuko.* He awkwardly scratched his head, sensing everyone's eyes on him. "A long time ago...I worked at a job that made use of my special skill," he began.

Everyone nodded, except for Kiyotaka, who gave a curious, "Oh?"

"That job came with a lot of responsibility, but I didn't think much about it. But one day, my job heavily impacted someone's life, and I got scared and quit. When I lost my job, I got divorced too. I tried to find a new job doing something different, but there wasn't anything else I was capable of. My skill would be useful for my current job, but I don't use it... Seriously, what *am* I doing with myself?"

Everyone was so overcome by the severity of his problem—a problem that only a grown adult could have—that they forgot to nod and give encouragement.

"You've all been struggling with so much," said the female staff member, looking sincerely moved. "It must've been so hard." She said kind words to each and every person, bringing tears to their eyes.

After that, everyone was given paper and a pen. They were instructed to write "what you want to become," then an arrow, then "why you want to become this."

Komatsu wrote "I want to be rich" followed by an arrow. *I want to be rich → because I'll be able to buy anything I want → because I want to feel fulfilled → because I'm lonely.* He stopped when he realized he'd reached his true feelings.

Kiyotaka looked at Komatsu's paper and said gently, "I think in your case, it

might be ‘I want friends and family’ rather than ‘I want to be rich.’ Perhaps you feel that if you have money, your family will come back to you?”

“Sh-Shut up.” Komatsu hid his paper. “What’d *you* write, then?” He peeked at what Kiyotaka wrote.

I want to be more irresponsible → I want to go on a trip with my girlfriend → I want to...[redacted] with my girlfriend.

“You...took this pretty seriously, huh?”

“Yes, it just happened on its own. Well, no matter how composed I seem, if you probe into a young man’s desires, it’ll always end up like this.” Kiyotaka smiled self-deprecatingly and gently folded the paper.

“Well, good luck. I hope you get to go on that trip.”

“Unfortunately, that would be skipping ahead.”

“Skipping ahead?”

“We’re still at the hand-holding stage.”

“What?”

“So my next goal is to at least interlock our fingers when we hold hands.”

“Oh. Good luck with that,” Komatsu said halfheartedly.

The day continued with everyone eating teacakes together and discussing what they wanted for themselves. When they understood the inside of their hearts, it was time to burn incense and meditate.

Sharing his troubles with strangers and laying his heart bare had Komatsu feeling utterly healed. *Is this camp really a bad thing? If Yuko gave up on getting along with her mother and came here to relax, that might not even be a problem,* he thought as he sat cross-legged with his eyes closed.

Before long, the incense’s scent transformed into something unique. It smelled like smoking leaves. Komatsu frowned. He remembered this smell from a certain shop in a foreign country. *Isn’t this cannabis?* He opened his eyes and was about to stand up, when—

“This is the smell of sage, right?” Kiyotaka said, as if to stop him.

“Yes, it’s sage,” answered the staff. “It’s said that sage’s unique aroma is the best for soothing the heart. It’s also said to have been an essential medicinal herb for Native Americans since ancient times. It dispels evil influences and reverses negative thoughts and feelings. It’s also said that the smell of sage is extremely similar to that of hemp and cannabis.”

“Huh?” The other participants, including Komatsu, looked surprised.

“Oh, there’s no need to be scared. Today’s Japan is overly sensitive. Cannabis is different from narcotics. It’s much less harmful to the body than tobacco and it doesn’t cause addiction. In fact, when you become accustomed to it, it becomes a powerful support for your nervous system and it has the power to regulate your mind and body. According to Shintoism, it also purifies sins. Due to differences in how civilizations developed, there are some places where it’s seen as a terrible evil. However, I believe that even this country will one day correct its judgment and legalize it.” The staff spoke enthusiastically.

The other participants seemed interested, but Komatsu’s newly healed heart quickly went cold.

“This is how they brainwash them,” Kiyotaka murmured quietly. His smile may have looked gentle to the others, but Komatsu knew that the young man was seething with anger.



“I wonder if Holmes and Komatsu are okay.” I looked at the time—it was 7 p.m. I was in an RV with the manager, Rikyu, and Yuko’s mother, Masami. We were on standby on high ground overlooking the dojo.

“He’d be fine right now,” said Rikyu from up on the loft. “Since it’s Kiyo, he’d investigate the building during the day and take action at night. Hopefully Komatsu doesn’t weigh him down.” Despite his lighthearted tone, he was constantly watching the dojo through binoculars. He seemed more worried than his words let on. *Masami’s the most worried of us all, though—when we told her what was happening, she asked to come with us. She’s been shaky and pale ever since.*

“I never thought it’d end up like this,” Masami mumbled, biting her thumbnail. “Even though she ran away from home, I thought we’d just have another argument and then she’d come back...” Her eyes were wide open, but I couldn’t tell where she was looking.

“Are you all right, Masami?” I asked, sitting beside her and patting her shoulder.

“I don’t blame you,” said the manager, who’d been observing the situation. He walked up to us and said, “You won’t be able to calm down here, right? Shall I book a room at a nearby inn?”

Masami shook her head and relaxed her expression ever so slightly. “No, I want to stay here. Besides, this RV of yours is amazing. I’ve never been in one before.”

“I borrowed it from a friend who’s quite the outdoorsman.”

This RV belonged to Ueda, the manager’s friend and a familiar face at Kura.

“I’d gladly lend it if Kiyotaka was driving it, but you?”

He did let us borrow it, but he seemed extremely reluctant. The manager was very kind and mild-mannered, and he was an amazing author...but he was hopelessly careless at times, so none of his friends trusted him with such things.

On the other hand, he had my parents’ utmost faith. When I said, “I’m going with the people from work on an outdoor RV trip, and the manager will be with us,” they let me go without question. I obviously couldn’t tell them the truth.

“Hm?” Rikyu leaned forward with his binoculars.

“What happened?” Everyone quickly gave him their attention.

“A motorcycle stopped in front of the dojo.”

“Huh?” We all leaned out the window. It was hard to see from this far away, but there was certainly a motorcycle parked in front of the gate. Someone—probably a man—got off the bike, took off his helmet, and pressed the button on the intercom. He gestured with his hands as he spoke to whoever was on the other end, and after a while, he slumped his shoulders and turned to go back to his bike.

“I’m going,” said Rikyu.

“Wait, Rikyu!” I called, but it was too late. Rikyu jumped out of the car without a moment to spare and ran down the mountain road at lightning speed. I quickly picked up the binoculars and looked at the person on the bike—it was Hiro Haraguchi.

By the time we caught up to Rikyu, he already had the man pinned down. Hiro Haraguchi laid on the ground, looking baffled as to who the boy sitting on top of him was.

“Oh, there you guys are,” Rikyu said. “I caught this guy. Can you bring over the rope that’s in the car? We brought a lot of it.” He waved at us cheerfully with that carefree smile of his.

“I can’t believe what I’m seeing,” Masami murmured, stunned.



For dinner, all of the participants gathered in the kitchen and cooked together. The menu was set for them: pork miso soup, stewed squash, chicken teriyaki, and potato salad. Everything was prepared in large quantities because the staff would be eating their cooking as well.

They placed their bowls of rice and side dishes on trays and went to the dining hall. It was a bit of a dreary room, with long white tables under fluorescent tube lamps. *Then again, maybe this is what cafeterias are supposed to be like. But hey, this food looks pretty good.* Komatsu looked down at his dinner and grinned.

“Since it’s a camp, I was expecting curry or a barbecue,” Kiyotaka said in a slightly unhappy tone as he sat down.

“Are you disappointed?”

“I was hoping to cook with a mess kit. Instead, the menu was fairly normal.”

“Yeah, I guess so. Are you into outdoorsy stuff?” Komatsu looked at Kiyotaka, surprised. Seiji Yagashira and Takeshi Ijuin didn’t strike him as the outdoorsy type.

“Yes, Ueda—my father’s friend—often took me out with him. I’ll never forget

the excitement of those special outings that I didn't usually get to experience."

"Food cooked with a mess kit sure tastes good, huh?"

"It does. It's a shame, because that was the only thing I was looking forward to. But thanks to this, I've ascertained the number of people lurking in this building besides the staff," Kiyotaka whispered.

Komatsu looked at him, surprised. "Really?"

"Yes. Aside from the man who drove the bus, the receptionist, and the woman at the dojo, there are five or six other people. They went left from the kitchen with their food, so they should be on that side of the building."

"That includes my daughter, right...?"

"I believe so. Since they eat the food that the students make, they can't have it be curry or barbeque every time." Kiyotaka put down his chopsticks. "I'll be back in a bit," he said, quietly standing up.

"Uh, you're leaving in the middle of dinner?"

"It has to be now. The staff are eating too, so it'll be easier to explore the premises. Please wait here, Komatsu." He placed his hand on his abdomen and left the cafeteria. To the others, it would've looked like he had a sudden need to use the bathroom.

3

Kiyotaka moved quickly around the building. An earlier peek at the office from afar had shown the bus driver staring at a computer with a bored look on his face. The monitor displayed footage from six security cameras. The main focus seemed to be watching for intruders from outside, so there was one camera at the entrance and four on the outer fence in each cardinal direction. The last camera showed a door somewhere.

The layout of this building has the dojo in the center. To the south are the entrance and the office, to the east are the lodging rooms, and to the west are the kitchen and dining hall. That leaves north.

Kiyotaka went left from the dining hall, heading north of the dojo. There was

a separate building there, surrounded by a porch. He walked carefully so as to not make any sound on the wood floor. “Hm?” He stopped, looked down at his feet for a moment, then looked back up and resumed walking.

The north building was octagonal, reminding him of the Yumedono Hall at Horyu-ji Temple. It was exactly what the monitor had shown.

The door had a combined fingerprint and password lock. “Of course.” Kiyotaka slumped his shoulders. *I won’t be able to guess the password if I don’t know how long it is. But since the keyboard mounted on the wall has a liquid-crystal display, I might be able to use the fingerprints on it as a hint.*

Out of curiosity, he touched it. The screen displayed: “No matching fingerprint found. Please enter the password.” It also showed the number one in kanji.

One...? And why is it in kanji? He furrowed his brow.

Gulping, he entered “komyofusho.” The number three appeared next. This time, he entered “semujinbutsu.” Next was the number ten, for which he quickly entered “kunogedatsu.”

The words referred to Yakushi Nyorai’s twelve vows:

Komyo fusho: I vow to illuminate the world with my light.

Zuii joben: I vow to awaken all humans to the path of enlightenment.

Semu jinbutsu: I vow to provide the necessary environment for all humans to attain enlightenment.

Anshin daijo: I vow to correct those who have gone astray, guiding all humans to the Buddhist way.

Gukai shojo: Those who break the precepts, I vow to guide them back to the correct path.

Shokon gusoku: Those who are disabled or ailing, I vow to save them from their suffering.

Jobyo anraku: I vow to heal all humans of their sickness and pain.

Tennyō tokubutsu: I vow to remove the disadvantages suffered by women.

Anshin shoken: I vow to guide humans such that their mental anguish and

worldly desires may be purified.

Kuno gedatsu: I vow to liberate humans from the pressure that bears down on them.

Onjiki anraku: I vow to guide all humans such that they shall never suffer from hunger or thirst.

Mie manzoku: I vow to grant all humans clothing and spiritual comfort, guiding them such that they may attain a satisfied mind and body.

These were Yakushi Nyorai's twelve great vows, and the Twelve Divine Generals existed in accordance with them.

So if the fingerprint doesn't match, it displays random numbers and I have to enter the corresponding vow. A bit of a hassle, but easily dealt with, Kiyotaka thought, only for the next number to be thirteen. He stared at it. Yakushi Nyorai only has twelve vows, but it's asking for number thirteen. This is likely their secret password. Could it be "Unbound," then? It seems too simple, but since the twelve vows were kept as-is, a straightforward approach might be best.

He entered "unbound" and the lock made an unsuccessful beeping sound. He clicked his tongue.

"What are you doing over there?" came a voice from behind him.

Kiyotaka immediately hit the reset button and slowly turned around. The man who'd been driving the bus was glaring at him. "I felt like exploring," Kiyotaka said sheepishly, scratching his head.

The man sighed and slumped his shoulders. "Didn't they tell you that the North Hall is off-limits?"

"I'm afraid I didn't hear that. So this is called the North Hall? Do the staff live here?"

After a pause, the man said, "We have a special guest over. It's dinnertime now, so please go back."

"All right."

Kiyotaka returned to the dining hall with the man.

After dinner, Komatsu took a cigarette out of his pocket and headed for the courtyard.

“Oh? They didn’t confiscate your cigarettes?” Kiyotaka asked, eyes wide in surprise.

“Yeah, apparently they don’t because this camp is supposed to be a place for relaxation. It’s just that you can only smoke in the designated area in the courtyard, and not after lights-out at 10 p.m. They also said to try to smoke less than usual.” Komatsu opened the sliding door to the courtyard, cigarette in mouth.

“I see. May I have one too?”

“Wait, you smoke?”

“Not usually.” Kiyotaka smiled suggestively.

Komatsu immediately got the message and gave him a cigarette.

They went outside. The wind was slightly chilly. Komatsu looked up to see a dim white moon hanging in the cloudy sky. He lit his cigarette with a flick of his lighter.

“Excuse me,” Kiyotaka said, putting his cigarette in his mouth and lighting it with the end of Komatsu’s.

“What is this, a movie?”

“A famous example would be Alain Delon in *Farewell, Friend*.”

“You know old movies too, huh?” Komatsu snorted.

Kiyotaka took a deep puff of his cigarette.

“The way you handle that, you sure don’t look like a nonsmoker,” Komatsu remarked.

“I’ve smoked before.” Kiyotaka laughed.

“That’s kind of surprising.”

“I did it occasionally at parties.”

“Huh. You don’t normally get the urge?”

“No, because I don’t want to be controlled by anything.”

“Controlled?”

“Most smokers let it dictate their lives, right? They go around looking for places where they can smoke, they always set aside time for smoking, and they need to have money to buy smokes. It’s also bad for their health. I would never let myself be controlled by such a thing.” Kiyotaka looked down at his cigarette and sneered.

“This hurts to listen to...”

“I don’t mean to criticize smokers. Everyone is free to do as they like, as long as they follow proper etiquette.”

“Anyway, did you find anything earlier? That’s what you wanted to talk about, right?”

“Yes. There’s an octagonal building north of the dojo called the North Hall. She’s most likely in there.”

Komatsu closed his mouth and gulped.

“However, it’s locked by a fingerprint reader and a password.”

“D-Do you know the password?”

“I made it partway through, but it’s unlikely that I’ll succeed in cracking it.” Kiyotaka smiled, unashamed.

“What?”

“I tried thinking of words related to Yakushi Nyorai, the Twelve Divine Generals, and Unbound, but so long as I don’t know how long the password is, I can’t risk getting it wrong. Most password security systems lock you out after three attempts.”

“Yeah, you’re right.”

“There’s also the option of capturing a staff member and forcing the answer out of them, but it’s too dangerous. It can only be our last resort. Since they’re holding Yuko hostage, I don’t want to use any reckless methods.”

“Okay, so how about you go and seduce one of the female staff into telling

you the password?” Komatsu said with a serious face.

Kiyotaka shrugged. “More importantly, you know the management office near the south entrance?”

“Y-Yeah?” *Was there one?* Komatsu tilted his head.

“This building has security cameras set up, but there wasn’t one in the office that oversees them. There were also several computers in that office.”

“Yeah, there would be.”

“Komatsu, how many minutes would it take you to disable the security at the North Hall?” Kiyotaka asked with a sideways glance at Komatsu.

“Huh?” Komatsu blinked.

“I know you’re capable of disabling it. Now how many minutes would it take?”

Komatsu looked away. “Wh-What’re you talking about?”

“You’re a skilled hacker, right? Your previous job must’ve made use of that ability. After you left, you started working as a detective because you could use your hacking skill to your advantage, but you ended up sealing it away and never using it. But the other day, you lifted the seal and used your power to get information on Hiro Haraguchi. Am I mistaken?”

Komatsu gasped.

“Your skill was recognized and you came from Kanto to Kyoto. Could it be that your previous job was at one of the greatest cyber teams in the world, the Kyoto—”

“I...!” Komatsu interrupted. “I... You’re right. I used to belong to the cyber team at *a certain organization*. I won’t say which. At the time, I stole information and sometimes manipulated it, believing that I was doing the right thing. But the information I gathered drove an honest person to their death. They were only a sacrificial pawn, not a ringleader...” He grimaced and clenched his fists.

“And then you no longer knew what was right, so you left your job.”

Even though Komatsu only gave bits and pieces of information, Kiyotaka

seemed to see the whole picture. *Just how much of a mind reader is this kid?* Komatsu laughed self-deprecatingly and scratched his head. “Yeah.”

“But you lifted the seal on your power for your daughter’s sake. That power hasn’t waned, right? How long will it take to crack the security?”

“For an amateur organization like this, ten minutes is enough.” Komatsu smiled, albeit stiffly.

“In that case, shortly after lights-out, I will call the man in the office to the courtyard and buy as much time as I can. The rest is on you.”

“All right... I think it’ll be hard to keep his attention, though.”

“Indeed. So please finish the job in ten minutes.” Kiyotaka gave him a light smack on the shoulder.

Komatsu placed his hand on his forehead and said, “Will do.”

After dinner, everyone took turns bathing. When they returned to their room, they each laid out their own bedding. The rooms had books, playing cards, shogi, and Othello for people to occupy themselves with.

Some time later, a female staff member came by and said, “Let’s do some yoga to help you sleep.” They did simple exercises that resembled calisthenics. All of the participants had refreshed looks on their faces. Maybe it was because they’d spent the whole day without smartphones or internet access, instead meditating, reexamining their hearts, and at times, crying.

This would be a praiseworthy camp, if only it weren’t backed by such a sketchy organization, Komatsu thought, looking at the others with a strained smile.

“Now then, it’s ten o’clock, so it’s time to turn off the lights,” the woman said with a smile. “Tomorrow we’ll be waking up at five—it’s early, so go to sleep. If you need anything, the other female staff and I will be in the next room over, and a male staff member will be in the office.”

“Okay,” everyone said as they got into their futons. The lights were turned off, and the staff’s footsteps faded into the distance.

Komatsu laid in his futon and stared at the ceiling. He recalled what Kiyotaka

had said: *“After I leave the room, get up right away and go towards the restroom.”*

The room wasn't pitch black. It had Japanese-style footlights that gave off faint light. Though it felt like a high school field trip, many people had already fallen fast asleep. *Maybe it's because we're all strangers, or because of that yoga we did.* Komatsu nervously honed his senses on Kiyotaka, who was lying next to him.

Around twenty minutes after lights-out, Kiyotaka quietly rose and left the room. Komatsu did what he was told and left for the restroom.

“Excuse me, there's something I really need to ask you,” Kiyotaka called out to the man in the office. “Oh, no, not here...”

Komatsu watched him as he entered the restroom. *Is this really gonna be okay?* He squatted down and sighed deeply. He had no urge to relieve himself, so he opened the door slightly and listened until he heard footsteps moving farther and farther away. *Looks like he pulled it off somehow.*

Komatsu's heart pounded as he quietly snuck into the office. On top of a long steel desk, there was a desktop computer with a large monitor, a monitor showing the security camera footage, and two laptops.

With two computers, this'll be a piece of cake. Komatsu looked around and then sat down.



“All right, what'd you want to ask?” The man glared at Kiyotaka with a suspicious frown. He'd been taken out to the courtyard.

“There is something I must do every night or else I cannot sleep. It's very annoying to others, though, so I've been refraining. But...” Kiyotaka murmured, looking down timidly.

The man crossed his arms. “What is it?”

“First, let me explain so that you don't get the wrong idea. Have you heard of the saying, ‘It's bad luck to whistle at night’?”

“Yeah, because snakes will come out...”

“Yes, the saying varies depending on the region. It could be snakes, demons, thieves, or evil spirits that come out when you whistle at night. As for how this saying came to exist, there is an old word for ‘whistle,’ ‘uso.’ Also, in certain regional dialects, whistles are apparently called ‘uso’ or ‘oso.’ It’s said that the whistle ‘uso’ and the whistle ‘oso’ share the same origin as the ‘uso’ and ‘osogoto’ that mean ‘lies,’ which means we can consider that lying was also called ‘oso’ in ancient times. Now, this is just my hypothesis, but what if ‘oso’ was also the oldest word for ‘whistle’? This makes sense because ‘oso’ has another meaning—a sign that calls forth deities or spirits of the dead. From this, we can surmise that the folk belief of ‘whistling calling forth something or other’ came from these meanings. Additionally, in the Tohoku region, slave dealers whistled in the middle of the night as a signal that they’d come to buy children. So the saying also could’ve been meant as a warning for children...”

The man stood there, dumbfounded. His face stiffened slightly as he stared at Kiyotaka rambling on and on about “uso,” “oso,” and whistles.



Komatsu got right to work. Though he was used to handling computers, his hands were shaking.

First I’ll download two programs onto this computer. This is free software that anyone can get. It’ll be more than enough for now. Next I’ll unzip the first program. Then move the second program and hit “Run.” As expected, the antivirus software popped up a warning. Close it and move on to the settings. Then write the code.

His mind became clearer as he furiously typed away. *Right, I’ve broken through way stronger security than this. This is nothing.*

...But buy me as much time as you can.

Listening to the high-speed clacking of the keys under his fingers, he focused on the screen, forgetting to even blink.



“Also, when you say that whistling brings snakes out, the word for ‘snakes’ is ‘ja,’ which we can also hear in ‘jaaku,’ the word for ‘evil.’ If whistling brings out

‘evil,’ then...”

“Okay, wait... Hey!” Tired of waiting, the man waved his hands in Kiyotaka’s face.

Kiyotaka looked at him with a serious expression. “Sorry, mister.”

“The name’s Yamashita.”

“Okay, Yamashita. I understand that you want me to stop. But please, listen to the rest of my story. I’m almost done. This is very important to me.”

“The whistle story is that important?”

“Yes... Even if you believe in these kinds of superstitions, there is not much evidence to back them up. You know how some people say ‘kuwabara kuwabara’ when they hear thunder?”

“Yeah...”

“There are various theories behind that one. Apparently it originates from Sugawara no Michizane, though he did not say it himself. In the Heian period, Sugawara no Michizane was framed by a rival and demoted to *dazaifu*, a regional government in Kyushu. It’s said that he died full of resentment and became a vengeful ghost that rained thunderbolts on the imperial palace. When the people of Kyoto heard thunder, they thought it was the work of Michizane’s ghost, so they said, ‘It must be safe in Kuwabara, where Sugawara no Michizane lived.’ That is supposedly how the ‘kuwabara kuwabara’ chant came to be.”

“So...Kuwabara was the name of the place where Sugawara no Michizane lived.” Yamashita folded his arms. He was starting to seem somewhat interested.

“Yes, and on Marutamachi Street in Nakagyo-ku, on the south side of the imperial palace, there is a curious neighborhood named Kuwabara.”

“Curious?”

“Currently, it only consists of the small section of road between the palace and the courthouse.”

“Oh, so they kept the name there because of Sugawara no Michizane.” Yamashita nodded. He’d gotten absorbed in Kiyotaka’s story.

“I think so too.”

Yamashita suddenly looked up. “So are you done now? I’m leaving.”

“No, this is where the important part begins. Back to what I was saying about whistling...”

“That again?!”

“Yes, that was the main issue. It’s said that whistling at night calls forth evil, but when I was a child, I remembered it as the opposite. I mistakenly thought the saying was ‘whistling at night cleanses evil,’ and was not corrected until I was older.”

“Uh...”

“I’m quite paranoid. Ever since I was a child, I whistled at night before going to sleep to exorcise evil beings. Even after finding out that I was mistaken, I couldn’t shake the habit. If I don’t whistle at night, I simply cannot sleep. The reason why I told you all of this was to convey that right now, though I know I’m wrong, I *must* whistle. I am hoping that you will not judge me for whistling out of the blue,” Kiyotaka rambled.

“Oh, for crying out loud...” Yamashita scratched his head. “So basically, you want to whistle before you go to sleep? Hurry up and do it, then!”

“Thank you. I apologize for the disturbance.” Kiyotaka bowed, placed his index finger and thumb on his lips, and whistled. The clear sound echoed through the night sky like a bird’s chirp. He sighed, placed his hand on his chest, and said with a smile, “Thank you. Now I can sleep in peace.”

“Good for you. Now go.” Yamashita clicked his tongue as he took off his shoes, opened the door, and went back inside the building.

“The female staff here are very nice, but I can’t quite say the same for you.”

“They’re counseling specialists. I’m just a manager.”

“I see.” Kiyotaka went inside with Yamashita and gulped as he watched the man head towards the office. *That should’ve been more than ten minutes. Did Komatsu succeed?* “I’d like to use the restroom before I go to sleep, if I may.”

“Just go then,” Yamashita spat, continuing towards the office.

Kiyotaka frowned. *If he's still in the office, this is going to be messy.*

Suddenly, Yamashita stopped and shouted, "Hey, what're you doing?"



Later in the night, we moved the RV closer to the dojo. Hiro Haraguchi's motorcycle was parked next to it. Rikyu had tied up the man and interrogated him, threatening him in nasty ways with a smile that rivaled Holmes's in its evilness.

"There's still a lot he hasn't told me, but I get the gist of it now. I wish I could tell Kiyo this new info," Rikyu said, sighing. The two of us were sitting in camping chairs outside the car. The manager, Masami, and Hiro Haraguchi were still inside, talking.

"But his phone got confiscated, so we can't contact him," I said, looking up at the sky. It was cloudy when we arrived, but the clouds eventually drifted away. Now there was a clear view of the moon hanging in the sky. *Kyoto is one of the biggest cities in Japan, but it doesn't have skyscrapers or neon lights, so you can see stars at night. Since Ohara is a rural village, the twinkling stars here are even more beautiful.*

I wonder how Holmes and Komatsu are doing in there. I was so worried.

Suddenly, I heard something that sounded like a birdcall.

"That's the signal!" Rikyu shouted, standing up and opening the car door. "Manager, we got the signal. Help me out."

"S-Signal?" I stood up too, looking around frantically. *What's going on?*

"Yeah, it's Kiyo's signal. Since there was only one whistle, it means 'sneak inside.' If there were two, it'd mean 'call the police and then barge inside.' So it's not an emergency right now." Rikyu put on a backpack. Apparently he and Holmes had discussed this at some point.

The manager immediately came out from the car. He seemed to be aware of the plan too. The two of them hurried to the fence surrounding the dojo. It was about three meters high, and there was a security camera slowly panning back and forth.

“It’s a simple camera that just turns left and right,” Rikyu said. “There’s no sensor, so I can just jump the fence when it’s turned away.” Making sure not to look at the camera, he took off his sneakers and tied them together with the laces.

What’s he doing?

As soon as the camera wasn’t looking, he threw the shoes over the fence and listened carefully. “All right, doesn’t seem like there’s any sensors inside either. Come here, Manager.”

The manager nodded and walked up to the fence. “I’m not sure if I can do it, but...” He stooped down and put his hands together, like a receive position in volleyball. But unlike in volleyball, his palms were face up.

Rikyu stepped back from the fence and glanced at the camera. The moment it changed direction, he shouted, “Here goes!” and ran forward, stepping on the manager’s palms with one foot. The manager winced as he lifted his hands. The momentum was enough for Rikyu to grab the top edge of the fence, after which he flipped in the air and cleanly made it over. The whole process took about ten seconds.

I gaped, feeling as if I’d just watched a circus act. “Rikyu’s incredible...” *It wasn’t just Rikyu; the manager also did a fine job.* Impressed, I turned to look at the manager—who had his hand on his lower back.

“My back...”

“A-Are you okay?” I panicked and rubbed his back. I could hear Rikyu running through the grass on the other side of the fence.



“Your name was Komatsu, right? What’re you doing there?” asked Yamashita in a low voice. He happened to see Komatsu when he turned the corner. He looked at the box of cigarettes in the man’s hand and frowned. “Where are you going with those cigarettes? Didn’t they tell you that you can’t smoke inside?”

“Well...” Komatsu placed his hand on the back of his head. “They said we can’t smoke after ten, so I was going to hide in the bathroom and do it.” He gave an awkward shrug and bowed.

“No smoking after lights-out is a recommendation, not a rule. It’d be worse for us if you did it in the bathroom, so go to the smoking area in the courtyard.”

“Okay. Sorry about this.” Komatsu hurried towards the courtyard, seeming relieved.

“Ah, Komatsu, could I have one as well?” Kiyotaka asked with a smile, following him. “I’d like to have a puff before going to the restroom.”

After confirming that Yamashita had grumpily returned to the office, they turned the corner and pumped their fists.

“You succeeded, right?”

“Yeah, somehow.”

The two of them ignored the courtyard and hurried to the North Hall.

“How’d you keep that cranky guy occupied?” Komatsu asked. “Must’ve been hard.”

“I was as annoying as humanly possible.” Kiyotaka ran silently, his footsteps inaudible.

“What?” Komatsu tilted his head.

“What is the state of the security now?” Kiyotaka asked, dashing through the passage.

“The cameras are looping the past thirty minutes, making it look like nothing’s happening. The North Hall door’s unlocked.”

“Thank you. However, it’s going to be a race against time.”

“Yeah...” *If someone goes to the North Hall, they’ll notice the security’s down. We have to secure Yuko before that.* Komatsu clenched his fists pleadingly.

The North Hall building soon came into view. When they reached the path leading to it, they stopped for a moment, exchanged looks, and nervously proceeded, careful to not make any noise.

Kiyotaka looked down at the floor and stopped.

“What’s wrong, kid?”

“There’s something strange about this floor. I noticed it earlier too.”

“Strange?”

“Yes. It’s as if there’s a hollow space under here. The floor feels like duckboards on top of a wooden foundation. And something smells sweet.”

The path was about a meter and a half wide. Despite what Kiyotaka said, the floor was made of polished wooden boards. It didn’t look like slatted duckboards at all.

Kiyotaka knelt down on one knee.

“Wh-What’re you doing?” Komatsu asked.

“There must be something under here.” Kiyotaka pressed firmly on a floorboard and the other end rose up like it really was a slat, allowing him to remove it. He quickly touched the temple of his glasses and the bridge lit up.

“Those glasses were a flashlight?”

“They’re actually a camera.”

“What else can they do?”

“You don’t know? I thought you were a detective. These are sold as spy glasses, and unfortunately, mine only function as a camera.” Kiyotaka peeked under the floor. As he’d suspected, there was a hollow space underneath that was full of bright green plants. The leaves looked similar to maple leaves, but with a slightly different shape. Someone who didn’t know better might’ve thought it was a relative of Japanese mugwort.

“This is...decisive evidence, right?” Kiyotaka asked.

“Uh-huh.”

It’s cannabis. Kiyotaka smiled, took a picture, returned the floorboard to its place, and stood back up. “Now then, let’s go inside.”

“Yeah.”

Kiyotaka stood in front of the entrance to the North Hall and put his hand on the dark double doors. They were quite imposing. “Komatsu, were you able to see inside with the security cameras?”

“No, the monitor didn’t show what was inside, so it doesn’t seem like there are any cameras in there.”

“I see. It could be that recording the contents of this building would later come back to bite them.” He pushed the door open, making a loud creaking noise. As the building’s outer shape suggested, the room inside was an octagonal hall. There was a golden altar directly ahead of the entrance, lit up by softly glowing lanterns on both sides. A similarly golden canopy hung from the ceiling. The most eye-catching feature, however, was the Yakushi Nyorai hanging scroll in the center of the altar...

“Masami...” Komatsu murmured.

Kiyotaka nodded slightly. *The others thought that this Yakushi Nyorai was the spitting image of Yuko, but Komatsu sees his ex-wife, Masami.* “It’s beautiful. Truly, a beautiful Yakushi Nyorai.” He’d seen the hanging scroll once before, but it gave off a different aura now that it was adorning an altar. *They really are worshipping her.* It pained him to think that, but he, too, was fascinated by the painting’s beauty.

“But out of all the gods and buddha out there, why’d it have to be Yakushi Nyorai?” Komatsu sighed and looked down.

“They were charmed by this hanging scroll. Also, as I said before, Yakushi Nyorai is a buddha of healing that cures physical and emotional pain—perhaps the perfect fit for people who are worn out from today’s stressful society. The people here use their mental health seminar to find those who are mentally fatigued and easy to manipulate, and then they convert them into believers.”

“That’s terrible...” Komatsu said sincerely, knowing how much the seminar had healed him.

“Indeed, I’m seething with rage. They’re using the Medicine Buddha for their own selfish desires, trampling on the faith.”

“Yeah.”

“I suppose this is the ‘main temple’ where only the chosen followers may enter. There should be an entrance to the living quarters. I’ll search the left side; you search the right side and behind the altar.” The walls were covered in

bright curtains in the colors of the Japanese Buddhist flag: red, blue, yellow, white, and green. The door was somewhere behind them.

“Gotcha.” Komatsu quickly went to investigate the right side of the hall and was caught off guard when he found a door almost immediately. “There’s a door over here!” he shouted.

It was a simple metal door with a round, silver doorknob. There was a keyhole in the middle of the doorknob.

“It’s locked,” Komatsu said.

“Didn’t you disable the security?” Kiyotaka said as he ran over.

“I can’t open analog locks like this,” Komatsu said with a sarcastic laugh.

“An analog lock... This calls for an analog solution, then.” Kiyotaka took a deep breath.

Komatsu’s eyes lit up. “Are you gonna pick the lock with a couple of wires?”

“No, I’m going to break the doorknob.”

“That’s what you meant?!”

“We’ve come this far. It’s time to force our way through. Please stand back, Komatsu.” Kiyotaka took a step back from the door, clenched his fists, and was about to swing his leg, when—

“I knew there was something fishy about you guys.” The door to the North Hall opened and Yamashita came in.

Kiyotaka stopped in his tracks. He and Komatsu both turned around.

Yamashita stood imposingly at the entrance, a fiendish look on his face. He must’ve been showing quite a bit of restraint earlier—he seemed like a completely different person now.

Komatsu shrunk back, but Kiyotaka merely grinned and said, “Fishy? I disagree, Yamashita. What was so fishy about me?”

I’m surprised he can smile in a situation like this, Komatsu thought, glancing at Kiyotaka before looking at Yamashita. *So that guy’s name is Yamashita. It’s a common last name so I can’t be sure, but Hiro Haraguchi did have a friend*

named Yamashita. He furrowed his brow as he searched his memory.

“Everything,” Yamashita said. “You’re not the kind of person that participates in this camp.”

“Is that so? Well, even if that’s the case, why did you leave the office and come here?”

Yeah, even if he thought the kid was suspicious, the camera wouldn’t have shown anything.

“One of the participants said that you and Komatsu never came back to the room.”

“Ah, so that’s what it was.” Kiyotaka nodded in understanding.

“How much do you know about us?” Yamashita asked, slowly walking closer.

“First of all, we found the cannabis under the passage.”

“Oh, so you know too much.” Yamashita snorted and grabbed Kiyotaka by the collar. He raised his fist for a punch, but Kiyotaka immediately kicked him in the pivot foot, throwing him off balance. Kiyotaka used that opportunity to knee him in the stomach. Yamashita coughed and crouched down, clutching his abdomen.

Kiyotaka stood in front of him and grinned. “Sorry, I don’t like to touch things that disgust me, so I only trained in foot techniques. As a result, I just can’t keep my feet still.”

A chill ran down Komatsu’s spine.

Yamashita gritted his teeth and, from his crouched position, headbutted Kiyotaka in the solar plexus. It was a clean hit. Kiyotaka coughed and stumbled back, and Yamashita immediately raised his fist. A loud *smack* echoed through the hall.

Komatsu, who’d closed his eyes without thinking, opened them and saw that Kiyotaka had blocked Yamashita’s fist with his palm.

“Sorry for making you touch something disgusting,” Yamashita said with a sneer.

Kiyotaka smiled stiffly and said, “Indeed. I wasn’t expecting your head to come flying at me. You were like a human torpedo.”

“Don’t call me that.”

“It’s fitting for an organization’s sacrificial pawn, isn’t it?”

“I ain’t a pawn.”

“My apologies. Were you part of this drug cult’s management?”

“Cannabis is different from dangerous drugs like cocaine and heroin. It’s not addictive, and it’s legal in a lot of countries. Even in Japan, it used to be used in rituals. It’s used in medical treatment to relax the mind. Japan’s behind the times. We should legalize it like other countries have.” Yamashita’s arm shook as he pressed his fist into Kiyotaka’s hand.

“Ah, so Unbound’s goal is legalizing cannabis. ‘Unbound,’ another word for ‘loose-leaf.’ In other words, setting loose the restrictions on cannabis.”

“You knew that much...?”

“That aside, you said ‘we should legalize it like other countries have.’ Didn’t anyone ever tell you when you were a child, ‘We have our rules; they have theirs’?”

Yamashita laughed. “That’s a ridiculous saying.”

“I used to think it was ridiculous too, but now, I fully agree with it. Why do you think our country is able to maintain such peace? Is it not because things like guns and cannabis, which are legal in other countries, are prohibited here? The idea that cannabis isn’t addictive makes me laugh. I don’t know what it’s composed of, but humans even get addicted to their smartphones, so they would surely get addicted to cannabis too. Also, humans don’t know how to stop their desires. Once they’ve experienced the pleasure of doping, they’ll surely try to escalate it. In other countries, most of the people who’ve tried cocaine apparently started with marijuana. And above all, we can see right here that cannabis is being used as a tool to manipulate people. This is proof of its danger.” Kiyotaka glared at Yamashita.

Yamashita clicked his tongue. “You really never run out of things to say, huh?”

“Thank you. But Yamashita, do you seriously want Japan to legalize cannabis?”

“What?”

“If that plant becomes legal and anyone can buy it easily, you won’t be able to make a fortune on it anymore. Your group should be against legalization. That campaign is just an excuse, right?”

Yamashita sneered. “I’ve never met a man as annoying as you before. I was gonna tie you up, strip you, and take an embarrassing video to blackmail you with, but it doesn’t look like that’s gonna cut it.”

“You were thinking such vulgar things?”

“Yeah, but change of plans.” Yamashita sprung away from Kiyotaka and hit the alarm on the wall. There was a loud ringing sound.

Komatsu heard the rumbling noise of footsteps coming from the other side of the door and hurriedly moved away. Moments later, the door was thrust open, and three men brandishing wooden swords and survival knives rushed in. They clearly looked like outlaws—likely Hiro Haraguchi’s friends from his biker gang.

The men’s eyes widened in surprise when they saw Kiyotaka and Komatsu in the main temple.

“I thought the emergency alarm was for a drill, but there really are intruders?!”

“Who are these guys? Dad and son?”

“No,” Yamashita said cheerfully, shaking his head. “I don’t know who they are, but they sniffed us out and came to find evidence. Capture them and find out who they’re working for.”

“What?” one of the men said. “You couldn’t capture them by yourself? It’s just an old man and a skinny pretty boy.”

“The pretty boy’s more skilled than he looks.”

While they were talking, Kiyotaka swiftly took off his glasses and shoved them at Komatsu. “Take this and run away,” he whispered.

“Wait, there’s no way you’re strong enough to take on four of them,” Komatsu said, panicking as he put the glasses in his pocket with shaky hands.

“That’s why you need to run,” Kiyotaka whispered.

Komatsu clammed up, sensing that the fight was unavoidable.

“But first, stay behind me,” Kiyotaka continued. “After the fight breaks out, look for an opportunity and run. If you whistle twice, my father will call the police.”

Komatsu nodded silently.

“What’re you whispering about?” Yamashita sneered. “Having a strategy meeting?”

“Precisely.” Kiyotaka smiled.

The men stopped laughing and gave Kiyotaka sharp looks.

“While we’re here, there’s something I wanted to ask, if I may,” Kiyotaka said.

“If you may? Well aren’t you polite,” one of the men said with a laugh.

“What is it?” Yamashita asked with a mocking look.

“Are the female staff and the seminar teacher part of your group?” Kiyotaka asked.

“No, those are professional counselors we hired. If they get in our way, we’ll just fire those well-meaning people.” Yamashita gave an exaggerated shrug. The men behind him burst out laughing.

Komatsu was a bit relieved to hear that. He was even happy now that he knew the people who’d given him such earnest emotional support were sincerely doing their jobs.

“That’s a relief,” Kiyotaka said. “I actually thought it would’ve been a good seminar, if only it weren’t backed by such a suspicious organization. It provides emotional care and teaches you how to reexamine yourself. Don’t worry, they’ll still be able to do it even if they aren’t employed by you.”

“I’m surprised you’re still smiling in this situation.”

“Those are my words.” The moment Kiyotaka finished saying that, he ran

forward, put his hands on the floor, and aimed a roundhouse kick at Yamashita's jaw, sending the man flying. While everyone was gaping, Kiyotaka regained his footing and elbowed the man with the wooden sword in the face. He then took the sword and hit him in the waist before he could recover. Now there were two men lying on the floor. Komatsu and the remaining two henchmen's jaws dropped.

"What're you standing there for?!" Kiyotaka shouted at Komatsu in a Kyoto accent. "Hurry up!" He tossed the wooden sword at him.

"R-Right." Komatsu frantically picked up the wooden sword and ran towards the exit.

"Don't let them get away!" Yamashita shouted from the floor, his arm trembling as he propped himself up.

One of the men chased after Komatsu, while the other two immediately turned to Kiyotaka with serious looks on their faces. They weren't going to let down their guard against him anymore. One of the men attacked Kiyotaka with punches and kicks, while the other one wielded a knife. Even though Kiyotaka could parry the punches and kicks, he had to deal with a knife coming at him from the side at the same time. The surprise attack at the start had gone well, but now that the henchmen were in their combat stances, they were formidable opponents. Kiyotaka clicked his tongue in annoyance as he dodged their attacks.

On Komatsu's end, the man chasing him had caught up to him immediately.

"You're looking pretty weak there, old man," the man taunted.

"I-I'll have you know that I used to have a black belt in judo and kendo! Graaah!" Komatsu raised the wooden sword, but was kicked in his side.

"That wasn't even believable enough to be a bluff," the man sneered, taking the wooden sword as he watched Komatsu crouch in pain.

But it wasn't a bluff, Komatsu thought, frowning in frustration.

The man grabbed Komatsu by the hair. "Hey, the old man really is a weakling! You'd better listen to what we say, pretty boy, or the old man gets it!"

Kiyotaka furrowed his brow and stopped moving. Komatsu looked at him with apologetic eyes as he winced in pain. Kiyotaka sighed and held up his hands. *I have no choice.*



After Rikyu jumped over the fence, the manager, Masami, and I set up the camping chairs outside of the security camera's view and watched the entry gate.

What's happening in there? I wondered. None of us said anything—everyone was worried for their own reasons. The night wind blew through under the bright moonlight, bringing with it the pleasant scent of fresh green leaves. But the more I tried to endure the anxiety, the colder the wind felt.

Masami shivered, still biting her thumbnail.

"You can go inside the car if you want, Masami," I said, placing my hand on her back. "The manager and I will keep watch."

Masami shook her head and said, "Thank you, Aoi, but I'm okay." She smiled weakly.

Not knowing what to say in response, I vaguely smiled back. Now it was silent again.

"Aoi, you're going out with Kiyotaka, right?" Masami asked, perhaps wanting a distraction.

"Oh...yes." I blushed, embarrassed.

"Are you having fun?"

I silently nodded.

The woman smiled fondly. "That's so nice, having a great relationship. I was dumped." Her smile changed to one of self-derision.

"Huh...?"

"The man I was seeing lost his mind. He probably thought his own family was going to fall apart since my daughter saw us. Even though he said all those nice things, when it came down to it, he valued his family the most. The moment he

thought my existence was going to threaten that, he cut me out of his life without hesitation... It's only natural, since it was just a fling, right? And I was supposed to value my family the most too...as in Yuko." Masami looked up at the sky, trying not to cry.

I sat there in silence and heard an owl hooting in the distance. The manager said nothing and looked at the trees. I absentmindedly followed his gaze to where the sound had come from. *I didn't know there were owls in Kyoto. In any other situation, I might've been excited about it.*

Suddenly, we heard a ringing sound coming from the other side of the fence. It sounded like an alarm. We all stood up at once.

"What happened?" the manager asked. I frantically looked around.

Masami, unable to take it any longer, ran to the gate and shouted, "Open up! Open this right this instant!" She pounded on the gate with all her might, even though it hadn't budged when we saw Haraguchi hit it earlier. But this time, it opened startlingly easily with a *creak*. I blinked in surprise. (We later found out it was because Komatsu disabled the security.)

"Yuko!" Masami blindly ran inside.

"W-Wait, Masami!" Shocked, the manager and I ran after her to stop her.



The men suddenly grinned and burst out laughing, knowing that capturing Komatsu had put them at an advantage at once. One of them grabbed Kiyotaka by his long front bangs and said, "I've always wanted to beat the shit out of a pretty boy."

"Go ahead," Yamashita said, laughing.

"Wait, but it'll be easier to sell him to a pervert if we keep his face intact," said another man with a serious face. "Only hit him below the neck."

"If you're going to sell me to a pervert, please make it a woman." Kiyotaka smiled.

Yamashita immediately punched him in the gut. "You really never shut up!" He gave Kiyotaka, who was coughing and clutching his stomach, a hard—and

painful-sounding—slap to the face. Kiyotaka's cheek swelled and turned red. "Face injuries will heal soon enough," said Yamashita. "I'm gonna break all your teeth and replace them with dentures." He raised his fist again, when suddenly, the door swung open—

"Kiyo!" shouted Rikyu.

Komatsu looked towards the source of the voice with his eyes, unable to turn his head because his hair was still in the man's grasp. He saw a boy—who could easily be mistaken for a tomboyish girl—brandishing his fists. *That's Rikyu, who the kid said was like a younger brother to him. Now he's gonna get captured too.* Komatsu looked down in despair.

The men gaped at Rikyu.

"Is that one of the students?"

"No, there wasn't anyone who looked like that."

"How'd she get in, then? She said, 'Kiyo'—is she your sister?"

"No man, that's a dude."

The men chuckled as they spoke.

Rikyu looked at Kiyotaka's reddened cheek and his eyes widened. "These lowlifes hit Kiyo?" he muttered, his fists trembling. "Graaah!" he shouted, swinging his elbow into the solar plexus of the man grabbing Komatsu's hair.

"Guh!" the man groaned, buckling over.

Rikyu immediately grabbed his arm and threw him over his shoulder. The man hit the ground quite a distance away with a painful *slam*. Rikyu quickly placed his foot on the man's back. "Okay, Kiyo. There's nothing holding you back now. To be honest, I want to beat the crap out of whoever hit you, but I'll let you do the honors."

"Thank you, Rikyu." Kiyotaka smiled for an instant before swinging his foot at Yamashita. From that point on, it was an all-out fight. Kiyotaka and Rikyu moved unbelievably fast, dodging the men's attacks and throwing them with force. The tougher ones got back up, so they aimed for their dominant arms and legs to kill their fighting spirit. It only took a short amount of time for the four men to give

up and grovel on the floor.

Kiyotaka crouched down in front of Yamashita, grabbed his head, and peered at his face. “Where is Yuko Hasegawa?”

Yamashita smiled bitterly, finally realizing what Kiyotaka and Komatsu were after.

One of the other men shakily lifted his head and said, “She...should be on the other side of the door. She came with us when the alarm rang, and we had her wait there.”

Suddenly they heard the sound of running footsteps. The two female staff members came rushing into the main temple.

“W-We have a problem!” one of them shouted. “A woman came in and said her daughter was being locked up here!”

“And for some reason, the front gate was unlocked!” shouted the other.

Masami came inside next.

Kiyotaka stood up. “It looks like everyone’s here now.”

Chapter 6: The Truth

1

I caught up with Masami in an octagonal hall where the Yakushi Nyorai painting was hanging in the center of a golden altar. Paper lanterns on both sides were lit with what I assumed were LED lights. Their flickering gave the display a mystical atmosphere.

In the middle of the hall, several men were collapsed on the floor like sea lions lying on the shore. I doubted my own eyes for a moment, but when I saw Komatsu leaning against the wall, clearly injured, Holmes standing in the middle of the men, and Rikyu, I immediately realized what had happened.

Masami stood completely still, staring at something in shock. *What is she looking at?* I followed her gaze and saw Yuko, who was wearing a T-shirt and shorts—normal loungewear. She was looking back at us with a pleading look in her eyes. Based on her appearance, it didn't seem like she was being abused.

"Mama..." Yuko said, breaking the silence.

"Yuko," Masami murmured, barely audible. She immediately began sobbing. "I'm so sorry, Yuko!"

Yuko looked genuinely surprised. Her mother had probably never apologized to her before. She shook her head and said, "I'm sorry too! I honestly couldn't believe you'd do such a thing, but I said a lot of terrible things too. I...I was a terrible person too." She cried with all her might and clung to her mother. I didn't know what had happened to her while she was here, but it seemed clear that she hadn't been free to leave.

"Yuko, are you all right?" Komatsu asked, walking up to them on shaky feet. "Did they do anything bad to you?"

"Papa..." Yuko's eyes were wet with tears. "I'm okay. Everything's okay, so let's go home." She tugged on Masami and Komatsu's hands.

“What? It doesn’t look like anything’s okay here, Yuko,” Komatsu said with a hesitant look.

“Sorry I’m late,” said the manager, entering the hall.

“Manager!” I shouted.

Next to the manager was Hiro Haraguchi. He wasn’t tied up anymore, so he must’ve come here of his own volition.

“Piro...” Yuko murmured, taken aback.

Hiro Haraguchi looked down with what looked like a slight bow.

“You were tricked by this man, right?” Komatsu asked.

Holmes sighed lightly and stepped forward. “I wouldn’t say ‘tricked.’”

Komatsu turned to look at him.

“This incident wasn’t necessarily elaborate, but it was indeed the result of several motives mixing together,” Holmes continued.

“Motives?” Komatsu frowned.

“Yes. Komatsu, your investigation showed that Hiro Haraguchi was once the leader of a delinquent group called Idaten. Hiro, am I correct in assuming that these four men on the ground were in that group?”

Hiro nodded with a bitter expression.

“Suguru Shirasaki, the prep school student who was arrested, is your friend too. As was his companion, Yohei Sato.”

Hiro looked surprised, but nodded again.

“It doesn’t seem like there’d be any connection between you. How did you meet them?”

“At Amamiya’s house.”

“It felt like Representative Amamiya was trying to hide your existence. Did you go to his house often?”

Hiro heaved a sigh and scratched his head. “Only in the last few years. When he was moving up in politics, he must’ve figured it’d be better to butter me up.

He'd suddenly invite me to his house and let me join his parties. Although he treated me like a relative's kid."

"I see. So that's when you met Suguru Shirasaki and hit it off with him."

"Yeah."

"Why did you decide to start an organization like this?" Holmes asked, looking at the altar.

Hiro looked down, seeming uneasy. "Suguru told me, 'We can make money off of religion. With your charisma and my intellect, I know we can do it.'"

"I see. However, you currently are not in the organization. Put another way, you were kicked out, right?"

"Yeah." Hiro nodded, surprisingly unfazed.

"As revenge, you reported Suguru Shirasaki to the police for possession of cannabis."

Hiro had a sheepish look on his face. "I did, but it wasn't revenge."

"Then why?"

"I was...scared," he murmured, looking down. "It was cool at first. I was excited about the money, and when I saw a Yakushi Nyorai hanging scroll at an auction, I thought, 'This will work.' I bought it, but then..."

"Because of that hanging scroll, a third party—the cannabis association, Unbound—got involved," Holmes continued calmly.

Hiro's face sprung up.

"Your primitive plan with Suguru Shirasaki became what it is now because of Unbound. It was also their idea to make Yuko into a living goddess. Your role was to carry out their orders..."

Hiro nodded silently.

"The people involved in this case are five members of Idaten, the two disciplinary committee members—Shirasaki and Sato, and five members of Unbound, which was formerly a group for modern artists. These twelve people made Yuko into Yakushi Nyorai, called themselves her Twelve Divine Generals,

and started a religious organization centered around seminars and cannabis. The ringleader is Unbound's leader—the artist who painted this Yakushi Nyorai.”

The hall fell silent. I immediately looked at the hanging scroll. The person who painted it was...

“You're here, right?” Holmes called in the direction of the door. “Please come out, Kunishiro.”

Everyone's eyes widened in shock, mine included.

After some time of silence, Yutaka Kunishiro came out. “You really are a fearsome one,” he said quietly, looking at Holmes, who said nothing in response. He then smiled self-deprecatingly and said, “When you first came to my house, you stared at this hanging scroll. I asked, ‘What do you think?’ and you said, ‘It's beautiful. I can sense the artist's fixation.’ I was so surprised.”

“Did I say that?”

“Yeah, you did.”

“I see. Well, it appears that my impression hasn't changed since then. I can still sense the artist's fixation from this painting. Your fixation led you to find the hanging scroll after it was stolen, and that's how you met Hiro. He was doing something interesting with it, and you thought it was a good idea, right?”

“Well...pretty much. Coincidentally, I was originally a believer of Yakushi Nyorai too.”

“I'd expect as much, seeing as how you painted the deity.” Holmes chuckled. “Then you happened to see Yuko in a magazine, and you were surprised that Masami had a daughter who was the spitting image of her. You wanted to get your hands on Yuko, and you used Hiro to do it.”

“I wouldn't say I *used* him. He was pretty interested in the idea of making her a living goddess too.”

Hiro looked away, ashamed.

Holmes shifted his gaze to Masami. “Masami, when Yuko ran away from home, you knew that she went to Kunishiro, right? But of course, it doesn't

seem like you knew how suspicious this organization was...”

Masami flinched.

“What do you mean?” Komatsu asked in a wary tone.

Yutaka Kunishiro sighed loudly. “I’ll explain. I’m sorry, Komatsu. Yuko is my daughter.”

Komatsu’s eyes widened.

“No!” Masami shouted. “That’s not it! The truth is, I don’t know who her father is!”

“You don’t know?” Komatsu asked.

“Before I was pregnant with Yuko, Kunishiro tried to make advances on me, but I didn’t budge. But then one day, he said, ‘I’ve given up on you, but at least let me channel these feelings into a painting of you.’ I was honored, so I went to his studio to model for him. He offered me alcohol and burned a strange incense for relaxation purposes, and my consciousness gradually became hazy. When I came to, it was morning, and I was in bed with him. I don’t remember what happened. But just when I decided to accept it as a one-night blunder, I got pregnant with Yuko afterwards... I’ve never known who the real father was. I wanted to believe it was Komatsu, of course. But I was so scared that I couldn’t bring myself to get a DNA test done. When Yuko was growing up, she didn’t resemble Komatsu at all, and the guilt ate away at me until I couldn’t stay with him anymore... That’s the real reason why I got divorced.”

“So that’s why you said, ‘I don’t need any settlement money or child support—you’re not going to make any money now that you’ve quit your job anyway,’” Komatsu murmured, finally understanding what happened all those years ago.

“Yes. But no matter how many times I said I didn’t need it, you still sent child support payments. I knew I couldn’t accept them, but at the same time, it was possible that you were the father, so I set the money aside. One day I’d get a DNA test done, and if it was found that you were the father, I’d put the money towards Yuko’s marriage expenses. If Kunishiro was the father, then I’d give you the money back,” Masami said with teary eyes.

“Most likely, Kunishiro drugged Masami, had his way with her, completed his

Yakushi Nyorai painting, and moved on from his feelings. This is a crime in every way, but let me set that issue aside for now. When Kunishiro saw Yuko in that magazine, he also found out that Masami was divorced, and believed that Yuko must be his child. Wanting to have her in his custody at any cost, he used Hiro to bring her to him. He showed her the Yakushi Nyorai painting and told her something along the lines of, ‘Masami and I were in a relationship, and you’re my daughter.’ Am I correct?”

“So Hiro Haraguchi and Yuko weren’t dating?” Komatsu asked.

“I imagine Yuko did fall in love with Hiro, but they weren’t in a relationship. She simply told her classmates her fantasies. Also, it was Kunishiro who gave her the Kelly bag, not Hiro, right?”

Yuko nodded with a sour look on her face. Holmes really wasn’t holding back.

“Kunishiro was the reason why Yuko and Masami got into such a big fight, of course. Yuko may have called Masami a loose woman, the proof of which was the man she had over right that moment. During the fight, did Yuko announce that she was going to live with Kunishiro? Something along the lines of, ‘I’m going to live with my real father.’ That’s why Masami wasn’t particularly worried about Yuko’s well-being, despite being too shocked to tell her the truth. Yuko had simply left to live with her father.”

I gasped. When we were outside the dojo, Masami was trembling. She said, “I never thought it’d end up like this.” Regardless of the truth, Yuko had accepted her possible father as her real father, and she went to him of her own free will. Masami may have felt that there was nothing she could do about that. That’s why she was suddenly so scared when she found out that her daughter had actually gotten involved with cannabis and a suspicious organization.

“Hiro, you’re the one who went around stealing paintings and ornaments of the Twelve Divine Generals, right?” Holmes asked.

Hiro flinched and nodded. “Yes.”

“It was with the help of Unbound, right?”

“Yeah. The artists in Unbound were angry because the works they’d poured their souls into were being kept in the backs of shelves. I said I’d steal them

back, and they happily helped me out.”

“But that’s not the truth, right?” Holmes continued.

Hiro blinked.

“You were afraid, were you not?”

“You really are incredible,” Hiro said, laughing self-deprecatingly. “Yeah... I was scared. The organization was making a lot of cash from cannabis, and Kunishiro was manipulating Yuko with his words.” He started to tremble and tear up. “He was obviously brainwashing her into house arrest. It’s been snowballing ever since the thefts, and I just wanted someone, somewhere, to bring it to a stop.”

The hall fell silent again. Then we heard a siren.

“Finally,” Holmes said, sighing. “Thank you, dad.”

“All I did was make the phone call,” said the manager. “There’s nothing to thank me for... But now, everything will be made public. Just as you wished, Hiro.” The words he murmured left a deep impression on me.

2

After that, the police took our group in for questioning too, which took quite a while. In the end, all of the twelve were arrested: the Unbound members led by Yutaka Kunishiro and Kuro Amamiya, the five Idaten members led by Hiro Haraguchi, and the disciplinary committee members, Suguru Shirasaki and Yohei Sato. Kuro Amamiya made major news, seeing as how he was a rising politician caught using cannabis to start a religious organization. Even though it was Holmes that solved the case, he insisted that he was only Komatsu’s assistant. As a result, Komatsu received the credit.

“We really got caught up in something troublesome this time,” Holmes said, placing a cup of coffee on the counter in front of me. “Enjoy.”

It was quiet and peaceful at Teramachi-Sanjo’s antique store, Kura. As usual, people were passing by outside without coming in. I didn’t have work today,

but I was studying at the counter.

“Thank you,” I said, and Holmes smiled. “It really did turn out to be a huge incident.”

“Indeed. I had a bad premonition when Komatsu first came here,” Holmes said, now placing a cup of coffee in front of Rikyu, who was sitting beside me.

“Thanks.” Rikyu smiled and rested his chin in his hands. “But you know, my school has it the worst. We were famous for being an elite private school, but now another one of the disciplinary committee members has been arrested. It’s pure chaos. Apparently there are staff meetings and PTA conferences every single day.”

“Yeah, it must be hard for your school,” I said.

“Well, it’s only hard for the adults. The students are surprisingly calm about it all. We’re already joking about it, like, ‘It makes sense coming from those power-tripping disciplinary committee members’ and ‘We’d better not study too hard either.’”

“That’s impressive...” I sipped my coffee.

“Children are smarter and more resilient than adults think,” Holmes said. “I hope you’ve learned a lesson from this incident.”

“A lesson, huh? Don’t do drugs, right?” Rikyu grinned mischievously.

“That too, but there’s something that’s just as terrifying.”

“There is?” Rikyu and I both tilted our heads.

“Yes, and that is ‘trying to control people.’ I don’t think there’s anything more terrifying than that.”

Rikyu crossed his arms. “Hmm. I know what you mean, but no one likes it when people don’t do what they want, right?”

“Huh?” I frowned and looked at Rikyu.

“Like if someone asks me for advice, I’ll give them the best solution to their problem, right? But if they don’t follow my advice, I’ll get really annoyed, and ask, ‘Why didn’t they listen to me?’ Is this what it means to want to control

someone?”

“Oh, I see.” It made a bit more sense to me now. *It’s not on the same scale as what Holmes was talking about, but human nature does have that aspect to it. Maybe people inherently want to control others, to some extent.*

“Helping people and giving them advice is a commendable act,” Holmes said, “but after you’ve given your advice, you should forget about it. In the end, they have to choose their path for themselves. Even if your suggestion was objectively the best solution, if they don’t choose it, then that’s their decision, and you must respect it.”

“Guiding is different from controlling, huh?” I nodded firmly.

“Right,” Holmes said. He stopped what he was doing. “In this world, there are people who control under the pretense of guiding. That may very well be the scariest situation of them all.”

“Are you talking about yourself, Kiyo?” Rikyu said immediately. I rushed to cover my mouth before I could burst out laughing.

Holmes shrugged. “I don’t do that, and I’d like to believe that I’m not like that. However, it’s true that it may be in my nature, so I will be careful. Unlike that man in this incident...”

“Which man?”

“Representative Amamiya... As soon as this case was brought to light, his wife shoved a letter of divorce at him, and so they got divorced. She then changed her surname back to her maiden name, and she and Shiro both left for the US.”

“Huh...?” I didn’t know what to say. A divorce was to be expected, but it felt like it happened far too quickly.

“I don’t have proof, but I cannot help but feel that Shiro was pulling the strings behind the scenes, even though he was not directly involved. I suspect he used his father, his younger brother, and Unbound as his pawns so that he wouldn’t have to dirty his own hands.” Holmes spoke in a low voice that sent chills down my spine. “Well, it’s nothing more than my own conjecture.” He relaxed his expression and sat down across from us.

“Come to think of it, I heard that Komatsu decided to live in Kyoto again,” I said, wanting to change the topic to something happier.

“Huh, did he get back together with Masami?” Rikyu asked.

“It hasn’t reached that point yet, but he’s living close enough that they can visit each other,” Holmes said. “The three of them, including Yuko, have been eating together.”

“Are they gonna do the DNA test?”

“I wouldn’t know. Either way, Yuko is still the child of his beloved. As long as Masami’s heart didn’t betray him, I think they’re fine as they are. Besides, if I were Komatsu, I absolutely would not do the DNA test.” Holmes sipped his coffee.

Rikyu looked at him with deep respect. “You really are an adult, Kiyo.”

“No, that’s not it,” Holmes said smoothly, holding up his hand.

“Huh?”

“For Komatsu, what he wants the most is Masami and Yuko. If he accepts them without doing the test, then he can capture the hearts of the people he truly wants. It doesn’t get any better than that, right? If it were me, I’d never do the test. However, the other man definitely will not back down. He’ll surely come back for revenge,” Holmes said with a bold smile.

Rikyu’s eyes lit up. “That’s my big bro, calculating and blackhearted! In the end, that means manipulating them, right? Is it okay to say that in front of Aoi?”

Holmes looked at me, visibly startled. He collapsed onto the counter.

“K-Kiyo?”

“I’ve done it again. Why can’t I hide myself when I’m in front of Aoi? It’s not like I *want* to be this blatantly calculating...” Holmes muttered.

I hurriedly leaned forward and said, “U-Um, I’ve known that you’re calculating and blackhearted for a long time, so there’s no need to get worked up over it now. I think what you said was very characteristic of you. It’s the ‘usual’ Holmes.”

“Thank you, Aoi, but as usual, you’re so harsh. I suppose this is the ‘usual’ Aoi.”

“Th-That’s not...” I stuttered. Holmes sat back up and smiled cheerfully.

Rikyu looked between the two of us and mumbled something under his breath. “So that’s how it is...”

“Is something wrong, Rikyu?” I asked.

“Not really. Don’t get the wrong idea, though. I haven’t approved of you.” He looked away.

“What?”

“Rikyu, could you refrain from bullying my girlfriend?”

“Huh?” I blushed.

Rikyu grimaced. “Again with the ‘my girlfriend’ thing... You just want to say that, don’t you?!”

Rikyu’s grouchy voice and our laughter echoed through the store. It was a peaceful afternoon after an unsettling incident.

Epilogue

It was May 3rd. My girlfriend Sanae and I walked west on Shijo Street, and, swept up in the crowd, turned north onto Teramachi Street.

“Hey, Katsumi, isn’t it exciting walking around in Kyoto? Like, what if we run into Aoi?” Sanae whispered, clinging to my arm.

We had come for our Golden Week trip to see the universities in Kansai and sightsee in Kyoto while we were at it. We went to Kiyomizu-dera Temple, wandered around Shijo Street, and wound up in Teramachi Street’s shopping district.

“Coincidences like that don’t just happen. Besides, it doesn’t matter anymore. She has a boyfriend now.” As soon as the words left my mouth, an uneasy feeling rose in my chest. Last summer, her good-looking boyfriend from Kyoto University had shown up in our hotel lobby.

“That was probably a lie,” Sanae said in a low voice.

“What?”

“My friend said that right before our school trip, she asked Aoi if she got a boyfriend, and Aoi said ‘Of course not.’ Then she asked, ‘Are there any hot guys in Kyoto?’ and Aoi said, ‘My coworker is, but we aren’t like that at all.’ I bet the guy who showed up was her coworker, not her boyfriend. She just asked him to pretend. That makes me feel bad...” Sanae looked down with a bitter expression.

“So basically, she asked her coworker to pretend to be her boyfriend, because it would’ve been sad to be alone when she met us?”

“I’m pretty sure.” She frowned, looking downcast.

Huh. Aoi pretended to have a boyfriend when she really didn’t. I felt bad for her, but at the same time, I was relieved. I was considering going to a university in Kansai. *Sanae’s going to stay in our hometown, so if I do end up coming here, it might be a good idea to find Aoi and apologize to her.* I tried to hold back my

smile as we looked around Nishiki Market, visited the Nishiki Tenmangu Shrine in the shopping arcade, and continued north, holding hands all the while.

I glanced at my watch and saw that it was just past five. “What do you want for dinner?”

“I’m okay with anything. What about you?”

“I don’t care either.”

“How about that Italian place over there, then?”

“Nah, we came all the way to Kyoto. We shouldn’t get Italian.”

“Traditional cuisine, then?”

“Hmm, that sounds expensive.”

We walked around the shopping arcade, looking at the restaurants.

“Hey, there’s a nice, classic-looking place over there,” Sanae said, pointing at a small store. “Is it a cafe?” The store’s sign said “Kura.”

“Hmm, it doesn’t look like one.”

“Is it an antique shop?”

“Seems like it.”

“Hey, wanna go inside?” Sanae tugged on my sleeve.

I looked at the storefront again and gave a strained smile. It didn’t feel like a place we could just walk into. Upon closer inspection, there was a “CLOSED” sign hanging from the doorknob. The inside of the store was dimly lit. *It’s already closed, even though it’s only 5 p.m.* Slightly relieved, I said, “No, it looks like they’re already closed. See? Someone’s closing the curtain.” I peeked inside the store again and saw a slim, attractive man standing by the window, closing the curtain. There was a girl behind him, walking upstairs to the second floor.

We froze, lost for words. There was no doubt about it—inside the store were Aoi and that university student.

“S-So that’s where Aoi works,” said Sanae. “We should get away from here, Katsumi. They’re already closed, and it’d be really bad if we ran into her.” She frantically pulled on my sleeve.

I didn't hear most of what she said. My heart was thumping like crazy. *She's working in such a small store, alone together with that man?* My panic grew stronger, though I didn't really know why.

"Sorry, Sanae. Wait here. I'll be right back." Before I knew it, I'd shaken her hand away and reached for the doorknob.

When I opened the door, the chime rang with a *clang*. The attractive young man who was closing the curtain said, "Sorry, we're closed." He turned to look at me and his eyes widened. "You're..."

He must remember my face. I bowed, feeling awkward.

He quickly smiled, his nicely-shaped eyes narrowing into crescents. "Are you using your Golden Week holiday to visit universities in Kansai?"

I flinched, but then realized that I was holding the cloth tote bag I'd received from a university. It was full of brochures and whatnot. *He must've seen it.*

"It doesn't seem like you're here as a customer," he continued, still smiling. Or it should've been a smile, but there was a strange feeling of oppression behind it. I took a small step backward when I realized.

"No, uh, I saw you from outside...and felt bad for causing you trouble."

"Me?" He tilted his head slightly. Apparently he wasn't expecting that.

"You showed up that time because Aoi asked you to, right? Sorry you had to get involved."

"Ah, so that's what you meant..." He looked amused.

"Thank you for taking care of Aoi," I continued.

He froze. "Why would you say that? You don't even talk to each other anymore, right?"

"Uh, yeah, but...I've known her for a long time, so..." I looked away, feeling uncomfortable despite the man's gentle tone. The store was crammed full of various antiques, but didn't feel disorganized. Although there were a lot of old things, the place felt fresh. I looked at a big jar painted with vivid colors and murmured, "Wow..." out loud without thinking. Behind it, there was a whitish tea bowl in a glass case. I stared at it.

“Are you interested in that tea bowl? Feel free to get a closer look,” the man said.

I nodded and walked up to the glass case. “It’s not that I’m interested... I was just wondering why this ordinary tea bowl is in the case, when the jar in front of it and the flower vase over there look more valuable.” I almost followed up with, “What a boring tea bowl,” but I stopped myself.

The man’s eyes widened, and then he chuckled.

“Huh? What’re you laughing about?”

“Oh, it’s nothing.” He held up his hand. Suddenly we heard footsteps coming from the stairs. “Go behind the shelf and hide there. Don’t make any noise.”

Confused, I followed his instructions and hid behind the shelf.

“C-Can I really have this dress?” came Aoi’s voice.

I peeked out. It didn’t look like she noticed my presence at all. I, on the other hand, was startled when I saw her—she was much prettier now, almost as if she were a different person. She was wearing a chic dress that even I could tell was high quality. She had a shy but happy smile on her face.

“As I thought, it looks great on you. When I saw this dress, I knew it’d be perfect for you.”

“Yes, I was surprised by how well it fit. I like it a lot, but is it really okay for me to have it?”

“Of course. It’s one of your birthday presents. You seemed like you were having difficulty deciding what to wear to parties.”

“Th-Thank you. I have a lot of casual clothes, but I don’t really have any fancy party dresses. But what do you mean, ‘one’ of my presents?”

“The other present is this,” the man said, suavely placing a necklace around Aoi’s neck.

“Wow, it’s so cute! Is this a flower?”

“Yes, it’s an ‘aoi’ flower.”

“Oh right, aoi plants have flowers too. I always associated the name with

leaves. It's really cute—thank you so much.” Aoi blushed bright red, looking like she couldn't contain her happiness.

“I'm glad you like it. Ah, sorry, but could you bring me my pocket watch? It should be upstairs, on the back shelf.”

“Oh, sure.” Aoi nodded and went back upstairs.

I waited behind the shelf. Once she was out of sight, the man looked at me and smiled. I flinched when we made eye contact.

“The tea bowl in that glass case is called a Shino tea bowl,” he said, walking towards me. “It's a masterpiece from the Momoyama period, and it's worth about sixty million yen.”

“Seriously?” I stared at it in disbelief. “Antiques make no sense.”

“Yes, that's what most people your age say. Most of them pass by this shop without a second thought. There aren't really any young people who would understand the value of this piece without knowing beforehand. However, *she* was different.” He looked up at the ceiling.

“You mean Aoi?”

“Yes, Aoi.” He smiled and nodded. “I must thank you.”

“What?” I had no idea what he was saying.

“Thank you for letting go of her. Because of that, I was able to take the hand of this wonderful woman. Aoi is devoted and open-minded, and she cherishes her relationships. If you hadn't broken up with her, I'm sure she wouldn't have paid me any mind. Actually, we wouldn't have met in the first place. I'm glad you don't have an eye for quality.”

“Huh?”

“However, that doesn't mean I can forgive you for hurting her. If you feel any remorse for hurting her, could you leave? Your girlfriend is waiting outside, right? Today is Aoi's birthday. It's a special day for her. If she runs into you two, it'll only bring back painful memories. If you really need to talk to her, please make it another day, and let us know in advance. Here's our business card.” He handed me the store's business card and pointed at the door, as if to say, “The

exit's that way."

"Oh...okay." I accepted the business card, too overwhelmed to say anything else. "Um, well, sorry for the sudden intrusion." I wanted to say, "Please give Aoi my regards," but I held my tongue and reached for the doorknob.

"Oh right," I heard the man say. I turned around. "Thank you for taking care of Aoi," he said, placing his hand on his chest and grinning.

I felt chills run down my spine. Unable to say anything, I bowed and fled the store. Sanae was waiting outside, and I took her hand.

"What did you talk about?" she asked.

"Uh, nothing important. Let's go." I walked quickly out of the shopping arcade, wanting to get away from that place as soon as possible. *Let's not go to university in Kansai. Not when there's such a scary guy around.*



"I can't find his watch..."

As I was searching all of the shelves, tables, and drawers on the second floor, I heard footsteps coming from the stairs. It was Holmes.

"Sorry, Aoi. My pocket watch was on the first floor." He held it up for me to see.

"Oh, okay." *Holmes has a good memory, so it's strange for him to make a mistake like that.* I closed the drawer I was looking in.

Holmes sighed.

"Hm?" *Why did he sigh?* I turned around, and as soon as our eyes met, he smiled.

Hmm... That face is the same as usual, but something about it feels off. He has a different aura. When I was changing into this dress, I heard voices downstairs. Did someone come to the store?

"Holmes, did something happen?" I asked in a quiet voice.

"Why do you ask?"

"I don't know, but it feels like something did..."

Holmes fell silent for a moment, then sighed. “It wasn’t anything pressing. I’ll tell you about it tomorrow.”

“Huh? So something did happen?” I frowned.

“No, it really isn’t anything important.” He shook his head.

“But if you’re going to tell me tomorrow anyway, I want to know now. Did someone come to the store earlier?” I stared up at him. I only knew one person who could change his mood in an instant. “Was it...Ensho?” I asked cautiously.

Holmes blinked and then facepalmed. “I give up. I really can’t hide anything from you.”

“I-It really was Ensho?”

“No, it wasn’t Ensho.”

“Then who?”

“Your...ex-boyfriend came here,” he said quietly.

For a second, I didn’t understand what he said. My jaw dropped. *My ex-boyfriend? Here? My ex-boyfriend...* “K-Katsumi?” I squeaked.

“Yes.”

“Why did he come here?”

“He took the holidays to visit universities in Kansai, and he happened to see us. He also thought you asked me to pretend to be your boyfriend. He was probably considering going to university in Kansai, and wanted to keep you available for him until then... Sorry, I made the decision to send him away without letting him see you,” he mumbled, looking at the floor. He probably felt awkward. “Sorry for deciding on my own,” he continued, still looking down.

I smiled and shook my head. “Was he by himself?”

“Sanae was outside the store.”

I didn’t feel anything when I heard Katsumi’s name, but hearing my former best friend’s name stung a bit. That was when I realized for the first time: I didn’t feel anything for Katsumi anymore, but I still felt something for Sanae. Her betrayal still lingered painfully inside me...

But now I know that Sanae was hurting too. She fell in love with the person her friend liked, and couldn't do anything about it. It must've been so painful. Even if he returned her feelings, she wouldn't be able to be sincerely happy about it... I can't tell her right now, but I'd like to someday. I'll tell her, "I'm okay now. I'm really happy where I am. I think it was all part of fate, so you don't have to worry about anything anymore. It's your turn to achieve happiness, Sanae." And...I can only think this way because I really am happy right now. When people aren't satisfied with themselves, it's hard for them to sincerely wish for others' happiness. They don't have the room in their hearts for it. People are selfish. I smiled bitterly. *But that means I can't let myself be caught up in the past forever. I want to focus on my own happiness, so that I'll be able to wish for others' happiness as well.*

"Thank you, Holmes." I think I'd be fine if I met them as I am now. But I'm still happy that Holmes was considerate of me.

Holmes looked down at me, not saying anything. I took his hand and squeezed it lightly. "You're always protecting me..." I murmured quietly.

He firmly squeezed my hand back and said, "That's not true, Aoi. I didn't send him away for your sake. It was my selfish ego that didn't want to let you see each other."

Feeling the warmth radiating from his palm made my chest grow hot. I shook my head and said, "Even if that's the case, thank you." *Even if he's not lying, it was still for my sake. He's always protecting me like this.*

"Aoi..." Holmes reached out to me, touching my cheek with his large hand. He slowly brought his face closer. Just when his silky bangs brushed against my forehead...our lips touched. Afterwards, we both looked down. My heart was pounding furiously, and my face and ears felt hot.

"W-Well then, we should get going," Holmes said, covering his mouth with his hand and averting his gaze. His face was bright red. "The party preparations should be finished."

I nodded. "R-R-R-R-Right, let's go."

"A lot of people are coming to celebrate your birthday tonight."

“R-Really?” Our conversation was painfully stilted, to the point where it was kind of funny. We looked at each other and giggled. “Who’s coming?” I asked, regaining my composure.

“Let’s see...” He began counting with his fingers. “First there’s my father, my grandfather, Yoshie, and Rikyu. Then there’s Ueda, Mieko, Kaori, Saori, Yoneyama, Yanagihara, and—much to my dismay—Akihito, who said he would be arriving later.”

“That many people? And even Akihito’s coming?!” I placed my hand on my chest. *He must be busy.*

“Oh right, Komatsu, Masami, and Yuko are coming too.”

“They’re coming together, huh? That’s so nice.”

“I’m sure there will be many others too. There are also several games planned.”

“Wow, I’m excited.” Being able to gather so many people was a result of the Yagashira family’s natural qualities, not the fact that it was my birthday. But I was still grateful and happy nonetheless. “I’m so happy to have that many people celebrating my birthday.”

Holmes slumped his shoulders. “Personally, I wanted to celebrate it with just the two of us.”

“Huh?”

“But we’ll do that another time.” He held his index finger in front of his mouth and smiled mischievously, making my heart skip a beat. “Happy birthday, Aoi. Let’s go.” He offered me his hand.

“Thank you...” I took his hand and left Kura with a spring in my step.

Afterword

Thank you for reading this series, which has now reached its sixth volume. This is the first full-length story. If the usual short stories are like a drama serial, then this volume is like a special two-hour suspense drama. Since I kept that in mind while writing, I included the word “Suspense” in the volume’s subtitle.

For the previous volumes that were series of short stories, each story would be “exploring Kyoto + detective work” or “exploring Kyoto + appraising,” with the romance between the two protagonists at the base. But since it was a full-length story this time, I tried packing everything in: romance, appraising, detective work, exploring Kyoto, and also action.

The famous locations the characters visited this time were the inlet at Takase River on Kiyamachi Street, Sanjusangen-do Temple, and Sanzen-in Temple. Also, when Aoi was biking home, she stopped by the Demachi Masugata shopping street to buy groceries—part of her daily life in Kyoto. She talked with her family, studied at night, and talked to Kiyotaka on the phone. I was glad that I could show her everyday life.

Also, I personally like writing action scenes, so I really enjoyed being able to write one to my heart’s content in this volume. It’s one of the benefits of a full-length story.

The next volume will return to the usual short story format, but I’d like to write the occasional full-length story again. I hope you’ll look forward to them.

Allow me to use this space to express my gratitude once again: To Shin Miyazawa from Futabasha, who always guides me with useful advice; To Hajime Tanifuji from sales and Ryuichiro Kawasaki from EVERYSTAR, who provide me with their support; To the illustrator, Shizu Yamauchi, who drew yet another wonderful cover for me; To the cover designer, the proofreaders, the distributors, and the bookstores; And to you, who picked up this book.

I’m truly thankful to all of the connections surrounding myself and this book.

Thank you all so much.

Mai Mochizuki

Translator's Corner

Thank you for reading volume 6 of *Holmes of Kyoto*! It's time for another round of translation notes. Linda has covered this book's most prominent cultural difference in her part below, so I'll be going over some other miscellaneous things instead.

First off, at the heart of this volume's mystery are Yakushi Nyorai and the Twelve Divine Generals. Holmes explained that the Twelve Divine Generals represent the twelve hours, months, and directions, but the only clue that this factored into was the locations of two people's houses. At first I found it surprising that the other elements weren't used, but as it turns out, the arrangement of the twelve can vary depending on the sutra. Even the names of the generals vary across languages, but I chose to stick with the Japanese representations when listing them out because the characters are looking at them from a Japanese perspective.

"Unbound" was probably the first time that a significant rename had to happen in this series, since the original wordplay simply doesn't work in English. The cult's name in Japanese was "Akatsuki" which means "dawn," or in other words, "morning opens up." "Morning" and "hemp" are both *asa* in Japanese, but this isn't a connection you'd make from "Akatsuki" alone unless you're a genius like Holmes (or maybe I'm just oblivious, which is definitely possible). I pondered it for a while before deciding to go with "Unbound" for the "loose-leaf" connection, since it was already established earlier that people had been using "leaves" as a euphemism for cannabis.

Lastly, in chapter 5, when Holmes and Komatsu sneak into the octagonal hall, the walls are covered in curtains the colors of the Japanese Buddhist flag. It was necessary to specify "Japanese" here because there are quite a lot of regional variants. The general Buddhist flag is blue, yellow, red, white, and orange—the colors represent the spectrum of the Buddha's aura when he attained enlightenment. In Japan's case, orange is replaced with green and the blue is ultramarine rather than bright blue. This color scheme also matches the

traditional elements: earth, water, fire, wind, and void.

Editor's Corner

We often have to grapple with cultural differences in translating this series, but this time a different aspect of culture is a problem: the legal system. Where Holmes has investigated crimes in the past, they've been activities that everyone agrees are illegal, like art theft and forgery. But in this volume, a good part of the plot and drama inevitably comes off as almost hard to believe for a North American reader because it involves Japan's marijuana laws.

As I write this, I'm within walking distance of more than one medical marijuana shop. I could get in my car and within five minutes drive across my state border to a jurisdiction where recreational pot is legal. This can make it hard to take seriously the role that cannabis plays in this volume. It might feel a little like we've suddenly been time-slipped into the 1950s—or even the 1930s—and Holmes is about to pull out an old film projector and make everyone watch *Reefer Madness* (if you've never heard of it, Google it, and you can thank me later).

It also reminded me that I once wrote some fiction set in Japan with a plot element involving the risk of deportation for marijuana possession. I gave it to one of my 100% non-otaku friends to read and she literally refused to believe this was possible, and told me confidently that no other American reader would be able to take this story at face value.

In case you reacted to this story like my friend did to mine: be reassured that in fact, using marijuana is a serious crime in Japan. In one famous example, in 1980, former Beatle Paul McCartney was jailed for a number of days, deported, and banned from entering the country for several years—and he was lucky to have avoided a potential seven year jail sentence. The law has not changed since then, nor are Japanese celebrities immune—to take just one of many examples, in 2020, Shion Okamoto, a cast member of the popular *Terrace House* TV series, was arrested for possession.

It goes so far that, when Canada legalized pot in 2018, the Japanese

government warned that it was illegal for Japanese citizens to use it even *outside Japan*, although it's hard to imagine how they would enforce this.

Unlike the details we normally have to wrangle in this series, this isn't one we can finesse by how we render the language or by adding a few words of explanation. All we could do was hope that if you found this hard to believe, you read as far as this editor's note.



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Holmes of Kyoto: Volume 6

by Mai Mochizuki

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