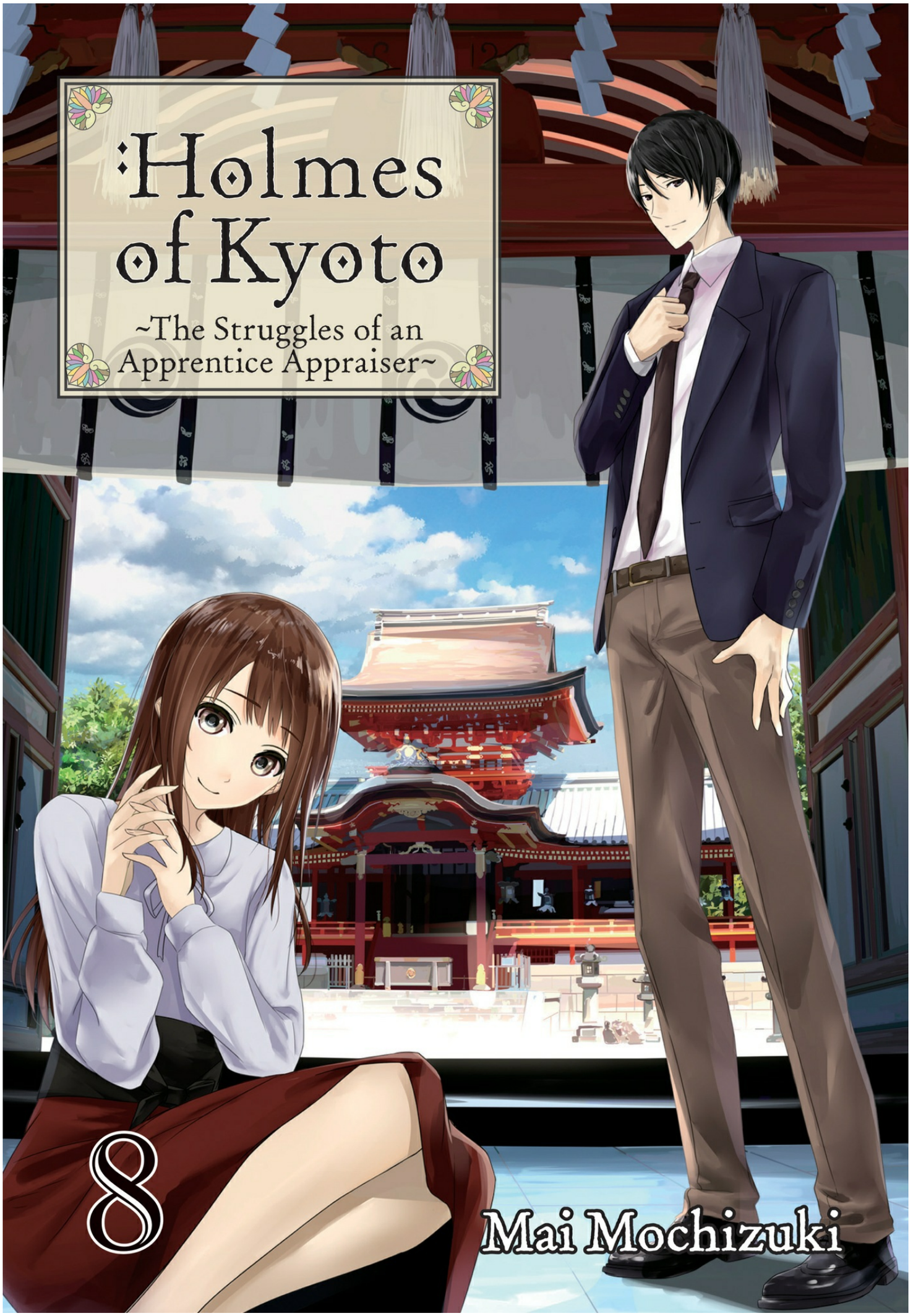

Holmes of Kyoto
~The Struggles of an Apprentice Appraiser~
8
Mai Mochizuki


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Kiyotaka Yagashira
He is the grandson of the owner of Kura, an antique store in Kyoto's Teramachi-Sanjo district. Nicknamed "Holmes," he has an incredibly sharp mind despite his gentle demeanor. Sometimes he acts like your typical mischievous, "wicked" Kyoto boy.



Aoi Mashiro
She is a first-year university student who moved to Kyoto from Omiya, Saitama in high school. In an unexpected turn of events, she winds up working part-time at Kura and learning about art and antiques from Kiyotaka.

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Prologue

“The cherry blossoms are in bloom.”

This phrase contains several meanings beyond the literal one. It represents the end of the cold winter and the welcoming of spring. It represents the beauty of cherry blossoms and the state of mind where one rejoices in their blooming. In other words, blooming cherry blossoms evoke feelings of happiness and celebration—and that’s exactly the state I’m in right now. This spring, I became a student at my top pick, Kyoto Prefectural University.

“Aoi!”

A familiar voice called out from behind me as I passed through the university gate. I turned around and saw my best friend, Kaori Miyashita, waving at me with a big grin on her face.

“Hey, Kaori.”

Kaori had gotten into the same school as me. Well, she’d actually been aiming for KPU earlier than I had. Considering she had gone from a private middle school to a public high school out of concern for her family’s financial situation, it made sense that she would choose a public university as well.

She was wearing a cute, simple dress that gave off a very “female university student” vibe. It was refreshing to see her wearing something other than a school uniform on a school campus.

“Morning,” I said. “That’s a nice dress.”

“Thanks. I really had no idea what to wear, though. I’m already starting to think it was easier when we had uniforms.”

“I know. Don’t give up on the first day, though.”

“Yeah, you’re right. We’re finally university students now, huh?” she said enthusiastically, looking up at the school building.

I nodded. The entrance ceremony had been last Friday, and today was the first day of school.

I'm a university student now. The thought made my heart leap, but I couldn't afford to be complacent. I was majoring in history in the Faculty of Letters, with the goal of obtaining a curator certification.

"We're in different departments, but let's both do our best," said Kaori.

"Yeah."

Kaori was majoring in European and American linguistic cultures. Since her family owned a kimono fabric store, she'd spent most of her life surrounded by Japanese culture. Because of that, she admired foreign cultures a lot. "Learning about foreign countries gives you a better understanding of your own country, and I'm thinking of studying overseas one day," she'd said with a radiant smile. It had motivated me to work harder as well.

"Oh, are you joining any clubs?" she asked as we walked.

"I'm not sure. What about you?"

"I'm thinking of joining the club for Western-style flower arrangement."

"Not ikebana?"

"Yeah. I've been learning ikebana for a long time, so I want to try arranging flowers with more freedom now."

"That sounds perfect for you."

Kaori liked arranging flowers, and she used to attend ikebana class with Saori. However, after her family's expansion into Roppongi failed and money had become tight, she'd quit the lessons for their sake. Later, when Saori was selected as Saio-dai, their store gained a lot of publicity and was able to turn its financial situation around.

"Do you want to join it with me?" she asked.

"It sounds interesting, but I still have work."

"Oh, I see. Kura can't manage without you."

She smiled teasingly and I blushed. I'd been working at the antique store in

Teramachi-Sanjo for two years. *But still...*

"That's not true. They don't *need* me." I shook my head, embarrassed. But then I remembered something. "Wait, I take that back."

"Huh?"

"Apparently, they do need me right now. It's only temporary, though. Kura's dangerously understaffed."

"Why? Didn't Holmes finish grad school and take over the shop?" Kaori tilted her head.

Kiyotaka "Holmes" Yagashira had been working at Kura while completing his studies. This spring, he had finished grad school and was ready to formally inherit Kura and take over the store's operations. I had been planning to study hard so that I could help him in the future, but...

"Holmes's succession was postponed," I murmured.

Kaori blinked in surprise. "What do you mean? Oh, was he missing credits?" She seemed to find it believable.

I chuckled and said, "No, Holmes did finish grad school."

"Oh yeah?"

"Yeah. To be honest, I was concerned about his credits too, but you know how careful he is."

Kaori nodded. "So what's the issue?"

"Well..." I sighed.

Holmes had said that after finishing grad school, he wanted to turn Kura into an antique cafe. I had assumed he'd be carrying out that plan now and had intended on helping out in any way I could. *I was so looking forward to building the new store with him...but life isn't that easy.*

***

It was the beginning of April, before university began. I was working at Kura that day, diligently cleaning the store. As usual, Holmes was doing the accounting at the counter. It was quiet aside from the sound of pen on paper

and the soft background music. Most of the time, there was jazz music playing, but today it was classical. The playlist included Vivaldi's "Spring" and Mendelssohn's "Spring Song." The small display window was decorated with cherry blossom-themed hanging scrolls and tea bowls, giving the store a very spring-like atmosphere.

Time passed uneventfully until the door chime suddenly rang. I immediately looked up and saw an elderly man wearing a stylish kimono and hat.

"Hey, Aoi, good work today." He smiled at me.

"Hello, Owner."

It was Seiji Yagashira, the owner of the store. He came inside, took a heap of papers out of his bag, and dropped it on the counter. "Ahh, that was too heavy for my old bones." He rolled his neck.

Holmes looked down at the pile of papers and frowned. "What is this?"

"The places you're going to," the owner said nonchalantly, plopping himself down on the armchair.

"What?"

Holmes picked up the documents with a dubious look on his face. I craned my neck to peek at them. The topmost page said "UED Consulting" on it.

"UED Consulting?" I asked. *I've never heard of them before.*

"It's a company that Ueda manages," Holmes explained, not looking up from the documents. "He said it's an abbreviation of United Export Dynamics, but it's clearly just the 'UED' in 'Ueda.'"

"That does sound like something he'd do." From what I'd heard, Ueda ran many businesses, including a management consulting company in Osaka.

The rest of the page detailed the company's location, a job description, and a term length of three months. The other pages were for other places, like museums, hotels, and Komatsu's detective agency. One of them even said "Akihito Kajiwara." The term lengths ranged from two weeks to three months.

"What exactly is this?" Holmes asked, shifting his gaze to the owner. His cold eyes made me shudder.

“As you can see, it’s training,” the owner said, taking a folding fan out of his pocket, opening it, and fanning himself.

“Training?”

“Yep. You were born and raised in Kyoto, and you followed me into this world at an early age. That’s why you know so much about antiques at your age, and I’ll give you credit for that.” He nodded and gave Holmes a sharp look. “But that’s all you have. You don’t know enough about the outside world. You’re a naive kid who’s never lived outside of Kyoto. I can’t let you take over the shop like that. You gotta get out there and learn. So, I asked everyone I knew if they could hire you for a short time, and this is what I ended up with. Good thing there were a lot of takers.” He rubbed his hands together and smiled proudly.

“If that was your plan, why didn’t you tell me in advance?” Holmes frowned at the suddenness of it all.

The owner stuck out his chest and said, “Couldn’t. I just came up with the idea the other day.”

Holmes stared at him, dumbfounded.

“When I realized you weren’t gonna be a student no more, I suddenly thought, ‘This is bad.’ Must’ve been my instinct kicking in.”

“Instinct?” Holmes muttered quietly. He stroked his chin and said, “I’m fine without your concern. I’ve been all around the world with you, after all.”

“That ain’t the same. Right now, you’re a sheltered son. As they say, ‘the frog in the well knows nothing of the ocean.’”

“After ‘the frog in the well knows nothing of the ocean’ comes, ‘but it knows of the blue sky.’ In this industry, don’t you think it makes sense to delve deep while still knowing that the sky is blue?” Holmes smiled.

The owner’s eyebrow twitched. “Don’t you have any ambition?”

“Of course I do. It might be inside that ‘well’ you speak of. If I have to learn something else, it’s going to be what *I* want to learn.”

The owner stood up without saying anything and glared at him. He didn’t shout or raise his fist, but he gave off a terrifying aura that made me shiver.

“Enough with your antics,” he said in a low voice. “You’re going, Kiyotaka.”

Holmes sighed in resignation, perhaps realizing how serious the owner was. “Fine. Do I have to go to all of these companies?”

“That’d be for the best, but it ain’t possible. I marked the mandatory ones, and you can pick the rest yourself. You gotta go to at least ten.”

“Ten?”

“You don’t seem happy.”

“Of course I’m not.”

The owner grinned. “You’re ridiculously good at absorbing things, so going to ten companies will expand your horizons. Come back when you’ve grown up some more. Then I’ll feel comfortable handing over the shop.”

“But who’s going to take care of the store while I’m gone?”

“I guess I have no choice but to do it myself. It’s for your sake.”

Those words seemed to convince Holmes. He nodded with a serious look in his eyes.

“You’re starting on April 10th. Work hard.”

The owner turned on his heel and left the store. The chime rang. As soon as he was out of sight, Holmes flopped down onto the counter.

“Are you okay?!” I cried.

“No, I’m not. Working at ten companies means I’ll be running around for at least a year and a half.”

I gulped.

“Most of these places are outside of the city. Many of them are in the Kansai region, so I think I’ll be able to come back every now and then, but I won’t be able to see you as often as I do now. It’s going to be a long-distance relationship.”

A long-distance relationship... That’s such a shame. I was really looking forward to building the new Kura with Holmes now that I’m finally going to be a university student.

I could see where the owner was coming from, though. Holmes was incredibly knowledgeable and a man of action. He seemed perfect at first, but he was also surprisingly ignorant at times. He was born and raised in the unique city of Kyoto, and though he'd visited other places, he'd never lived in them. Now that he was no longer a student, the owner must have wanted him to experience more things in a broader society.

"It's not your fault," I said.

"Will you wait for me, Aoi?" he murmured without looking up.

"Of course. Why wouldn't I?"

Holmes lifted his head, but his eyes were still downcast. "I'm worried, though."

"About what?"

"You're very attractive, you know? I was already worried about you going to university, and now I can't even be near you."

Here we go again. I forced a smile. "Holmes, can you please do something about that obsession of yours? It's honestly laughable at this point."

"That's not a very nice way to put it. Can you at least call it an infatuation?"

"Wh-What?!" I squeaked, blushing. "Besides, I've never been popular before. I'm not the kind of girl you have to worry about."

"That's exactly why I'm worried."

"Huh?"

"I may have said this before, but being oblivious is both a weapon and a sin."

Have I heard something like this before? Anyway... "You say that, but I'm the one who's worried about *your* popularity."

"No, I'm not popular."

"Really?" I looked at him doubtfully. Over the past two years, I'd run into several women who had admired or crushed on him. Then again, he had a strong wall around himself, so perhaps he wasn't the typical definition of "popular."

“Even if I were popular, I wouldn’t cheat on you, so there’s no need to worry.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes. I would never risk losing you for a bout of pleasure. I’m not stupid enough to make such a silly mistake,” he said with a serious face, making my heart race. I was speechless. He reached out and gently held my hand. “So you can’t go cheating on me either.” The touch of his long fingers made my heart pound even faster.

“I-I won’t.”

“Really?”

“Yes. To be honest, I’m going to be lonely. But I understand that the owner wants you to grow more, so please do your best.”

“Thank you.”

His sad smile made my chest feel tight. After a brief moment, I smiled, clapped my hands, and said, “Oh, I know! Let’s celebrate together when your training is over.”

“Celebrate?” His eyes widened.

“Yes, let’s.”

“Celebrate... That’s a good idea. Looking forward to celebrating with you will encourage me while I’m gone.”

“Yes, I think it’ll motivate me too.”

It was going to become a bit of a long-distance relationship. Since my previous one had failed, I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t worried at all. *But if we’re not going to be able to see each other much, I should at least work hard at school. This can be considered training for me as well. When Holmes comes back to Kura, I want to surprise him with how much I’ve grown.* I clenched my fist with secret determination.

*

“So that’s how it is,” I said.

“Wow. It’s just like the owner to send him out for training instead of letting

him take over right away. Come to think of it, my sis was also sent to a Kinosaki hot spring inn for training," Kaori remarked.

"Oh right, she was." I smiled, recalling the trip to Kinosaki with Holmes, Kaori, Akihito, and the manager.

"Wait, if the owner's taking care of Kura, why is it dangerously understaffed?"

"In the end, he doesn't come to the store much. The manager can't handle it by himself, and Rikyu's got entrance exams coming up. I have to help as much as I can."

"So Kura really *can't* manage without you!" she laughed.

"I'm not sure about that," I said, tilting my head and laughing with her. "Anyway, we should go to class."

"Yeah."

As cherry blossom petals fluttered in the air, we cheerfully made our way to the entrance. It was a new spring day.

Chapter 1: Once in a Lifetime

1

At 8 a.m., I walk out into the beautiful garden and check to make sure that nothing is out of the ordinary. The area is the size of 1.5 Koshien Stadiums. The reason I don't describe it in terms of the Tokyo Dome is because it'd become "approximately half a Tokyo Dome," which sounds rather sad. Calling it 1.5 Koshien Stadiums gives it more prestige.

In the outer garden, which has around forty species of bamboo, there are three tearooms called Sho-in, Bai-in, and Chiku-in. There's also a stone washbasin and the historic Ominaeshi Tomb. The flowers, bamboo, trees, and ponds are all beautifully arranged. To think that my job would be to check for issues while admiring all of this...

"Is this what it means to live in luxury?" Kiyotaka murmured as he strolled through the large garden.

"Kiyotaka!" came a man's voice from behind him. He turned around and saw a bespectacled man in his late thirties running up to him with a good-natured smile on his face.

"Good morning, Igawa."

"Morning, Kiyotaka. Oh, wait, I guess I should be calling you Yagashira. But saying that makes me think of your grandfather." The man scratched his head. His name was Kyosuke Igawa, and he was one of the owner's connections.

Kiyotaka smiled and said, "There aren't any guests here right now, so I don't mind being called Kiyotaka."

"It's hard to believe you've already graduated. The years go by so fast. When Mr. Yagashira said he was looking for a place to hire his grandson as a temp, I volunteered even without getting approval from the higher-ups."

"Did they not scold you?"

“I got in a bit of trouble, but, well, Mr. Yagashira does help us out. The director seemed to want to make him owe us a favor, but I don’t think of it that way. I firmly believe that you’ll bring a breath of fresh air to Shokado Garden Art Museum. I have high hopes for you!” Igawa clenched his fist and put on a toothy grin.

“I’m glad you believe in me, but I’m not sure if I’ll be that much help.” Kiyotaka shrugged.

“No need to be humble.” Igawa patted him on the back. “People call you the Holmes of Kyoto, don’t they?”

“I don’t think that nickname has anything to do with Shokado Garden Art Museum.”

“You’re an art specialist who went to Kyoto University, and you have great looks. That’s more than enough to be helpful. By the way, Kiyotaka, you know what this is, right?”

He pointed at the stone washbasin. This type of basin was originally used to rinse one’s mouth and cleanse one’s hands before the gods, but it was later introduced into tea ceremonies as well. They were placed in teahouse gardens and built in a unique style called “tsukubai.”

“This is the Kinuta washbasin, which came from the residence of Tatsugoro Yodoya, a wealthy merchant in the Edo period,” Kiyotaka explained. “It’s said that his home was at the foot of Mount Otoko, and he used the elevation to draw water from up the mountain with a flume. He enjoyed the sound of stones dancing in the washbasin as he did, and since the sound resembled *kinuta*, a traditional ironing method where clothing was beaten on a smoothing stone, the washbasin was named after that.”

Igawa gaped. “I’m impressed. Did you study before coming here?”

“No, I just happened to know that.”

“I thought so. All right, you’re fine the way you are. All you have to do is answer the visitors’ questions like that. I’m counting on you!” He shook his hand firmly.

Kiyotaka’s eyebrow twitched ever so slightly, but he quickly bowed deeply

and said, “Thank you. I’ll only be here for three months, but I look forward to working with you, Assistant Director Igawa.”

“Oh no, no need to be so formal. Anyway, have you found your way around the museum yet?”

“Yes, more or less.”

They began walking towards the building. Three days had passed since Kiyotaka had arrived at Shokado Garden Art Museum in Yawata, Kyoto Prefecture, as a temporary employee. There were many visitors these days because of the spring exhibition.

The museum was originally associated with Shojo Shokado, an early-Edo monk of Iwashimizu Hachimangu Shrine. The famous “Shokado bento box” was also named after Shojo Shokado.

“But you know, a lot of people ask who Shojo Shokado is,” Igawa said, slumping his shoulders.

“Ah. As a literary monk, he was one of the ‘Three Brushes of the Kan’ei Era,’ but he wasn’t as significant as the other two, Nobutada Konoe and Koetsu Hon’ami.”

“Right. Why do you think that is?”

“He may have been driven away by the Rinpa school’s momentum.”

“Oh, Rinpa...” Igawa gazed into the distance, squinting as if he were looking at something very bright.

“Isn’t it this museum’s job to make his name known to the world?”

“Yes, you’re right. Let’s do our best together for these next three months, Kiyotaka.” He shook Kiyotaka’s hand again.

“Of course.” Kiyotaka nodded.

2

“Oh, Holmes went to Shokado Museum?”

It was lunchtime, and as usual, Kaori and I had met up at the university

cafeteria. I'd been telling her about how Holmes had gone to his first training place, Shokado Garden Art Museum in Yawata.

Her eyes widened in surprise and she said without inflection, "You called it a long-distance relationship, but Yawata is totally close. Just get on the Keihan Line and go."

"Distance-wise it's not far since it's still in Kyoto Prefecture, but it doesn't seem like we'll be able to meet up much." I sighed and bit into my sandwich.

"How come?"

"The museum is open on the weekends—it's only closed on Mondays. Plus, Holmes got kicked out of the house. He's living in a weekly rental apartment in Yawata."

"Whaaat?! He even got kicked out from home? Seiji's serious about this, huh? Was Holmes depressed?"

"He was actually the complete opposite. He was happy and said, 'I've always wanted to live by myself. I'm finally free from the ghosts.'"

"Ghosts?" Kaori's hand rose to her mouth. "So, why'd he go to that museum first?"

"Apparently, a lot of places wanted him, but that was one of the first to respond. He also said, 'It's neither hot nor cold right now—the perfect weather for working in that garden. I couldn't be happier,'" I said, imitating his tone of voice and gestures.

Kaori laughed and said, "You sound like him."

"If Holmes is that happy to work there, it must be a really nice garden," I murmured.

Kaori looked at me, surprised. "You've never been there?"

"I've never even heard of it until now."

"Oh, I went there when I was in middle school. My parents took us for Shokado's tenth-anniversary exhibit. The garden really is great. Oh right, that's where I became enlightened."

“Enlightened?” *Did I mishear her?*

“Yep. At the time, I couldn’t decide what to do. The family business was doing badly, so I was agonizing over whether to continue on to a private high school or switch to a public one. I kept asking myself stuff like, ‘If I go from a private school to a public school, will people find out that our shop is in the red?’ ‘Will it be embarrassing?’ ‘Do I really have to consider all of this for my parents’ sake?’”

I completely understood the inner conflict she had faced at the time.

“But like, as I was walking around Shokado’s garden and thinking, the flowers and bamboo were so beautiful that they cleansed my heart. It made me realize, ‘I keep thinking it’s for my parents’ sake, but in reality, I want to switch to a public school because private schools don’t feel right for me.’ Once I realized I was only using my parents as an excuse, I decided to go to Oki High.”

“That really is enlightenment.” I nodded, impressed.

“Now I feel like going there again. You’re going to visit Shokado while Holmes is there, right?”

I smiled awkwardly, not knowing how to answer that.

“What, you aren’t?”

“I don’t know if it’s okay for me to go for fun when Holmes is there for training.”

No matter how excited he was, he had still been kicked out of his home. He was working and living in an unfamiliar city. He wasn’t there to play.

Kaori nodded. “Oh, I know!” She clapped her hands. “Why don’t we go in secret, then?”

“Secret?”

“We’ll check out the garden, sneak a peek inside the museum, and leave without saying hi to him. That would be fine, right?”

“That might work.”

“Let’s go on a weekend when you don’t have to be at the shop.”

“Okay. I might be able to take Saturday off, since the manager will be there.”

“We’ll make it Saturday, then.”

“Sounds good.”

We excitedly took out our phones and started looking up directions to the museum.

*

Though it was a museum, the office for desk work was no different from any other business. There were rows of desks with piles of papers and books on them.

“May I have everyone’s attention?” Igawa said upon entering the room. “We’re going to have a short meeting.”

“Sure,” responded the staff members.

“A meeting?” Kiyotaka, who had been perusing a list of past exhibitions, looked up and gave a small nod. As a temporary employee, he was always going to feel excluded. *Still, if I do what I can to be of use...*

Igawa came up behind him and put his hands on the young man’s shoulders. “The subject of the meeting is Kiyo—er, Yagashira here. As you’re all aware, he’s the grandson and apprentice of the famous nationally certified appraiser Seiji Yagashira. He’s also an elite, thoroughbred art specialist from Kyoto University’s graduate school. As you can see, he’s been blessed with handsome looks as well. However, he’ll only be with us for three months. What tasks do you think we should give him?”

Kiyotaka blinked. One of the female curators quickly raised her hand.

“Oh, that was fast,” Igawa said. “Go ahead, Suginami.”

The woman, who was in her mid-twenties, stood up and cleared her throat. She had medium-long black hair and a slender face. She introduced herself as Harumi Suginami and said, “Currently, we are working on an initiative to have curators give lectures at our museum. I’d love to ask Yagashira to give a lecture.”

Everyone nodded in agreement.

“Yagashira has a lot of contacts in the art industry too, so I’m hoping he can

help us pick out people who might be willing to lend us display pieces and negotiate with them," added a male curator.

Igawa sighed. "He's right. We're a municipal museum with a limited budget. Whenever there's an exhibition, we go to various museums and borrow pieces to display, but most of the time they only lend them to us out of goodwill. When we borrow from individuals, we really can't repay them with anything other than gratitude. Mr. Yagashira lends us pieces and even says, 'You can thank me with a Shokado bento,' which we really appreciate."

Other staff members added their input:

"Yeah, we have seasonal exhibitions, so if you could borrow display pieces that would make people want to come..."

"Our director's running around every day trying to find things."

"I see," said Kiyotaka. "All right. I don't know how much help I can be, but I'll ask around. In the worst case, you can borrow some of our things."

"Huh? Like what?"

"As far as centerpieces go, we have Chinese celadon ware and a Shino tea bowl. However, I would have to get my grandfather's permission, so please don't get your hopes up. He's never lent out those two pieces before. If he says no, we have several Raku and Ninsei tea bowls as well as a cloisonne vase and a Taikan hanging scroll, among others."

"Um, aren't those all centerpiece-worthy?" Suginami murmured.

Everyone burst out laughing.

After the meeting, Kiyotaka left the office and noticed a crowd in the hall in front of the museum entrance. He frowned at the squealing girls. *Is a celebrity here or something?*

"Holmes! Hey, I finally found you!" came a familiar voice. Kiyotaka looked and saw Akihito Kajiwara blatantly pointing at him.

"Could you refrain from pointing at people?"

"I'm upset. I came all this way, looked all around the museum, and ran around

the whole garden, but I couldn't find you."

"I was in the office like I was supposed to be."

"I'm not upset because I couldn't find you!"

"I have no idea what you're trying to say. Could you organize your thoughts *before* speaking?"

"Yeah. Okay, I'm done. My question is, *why are you here?*"

"I see that your organization skills are messy," Kiyotaka said, facepalming. "You should already know that my grandfather sent me away for training."

"Yeah, of course. I stepped forward right away and said you could be my manager. I even got permission from my agency, but you turned down my offer."

"Yes." Kiyotaka nodded, expression unchanging.

"Why did you reject my job for *this*?!" Akihito exclaimed, holding his hands out.

Finally realizing what the young actor was getting at, Kiyotaka gave him an exasperated look. "Because working at this museum was several times—no, several *hundreds* of times—more appealing than being your manager."

"Are you an idiot?"

"You're the last person I want to hear calling me an idiot."

"But I mean, you go to museums *all* the time. You should take this rare opportunity to experience different worlds. I doubt you'll ever get the chance to be a celebrity's manager again."

"You're actually making a bit of sense for once, but the issue here is a difference in values. I'm perfectly fine with never being your manager for the rest of my life."

"What was that, you little punk?!"

"We're in a museum. Please keep your voice down," Kiyotaka said, raising his index finger. He looked around and apologized to the onlookers, who blushed, fascinated by the exchange.

Once their little dispute was over, the spectators timidly approached Akihito. The women in front asked: “U-Um, you’re Akihito Kajiwara, right?”

“Can we take a picture?”

Akihito grinned and said, “Sure, as many as you want!” He quickly made a social media-style pose.

As the women squealed, Kiyotaka sighed and slumped his shoulders.

“K-Kiyotaka!” shouted Igawa and Suginami, running up to him with shocked looks on their faces.

“I’m very sorry. A loud person found his way in here, but I’ll have him leave right away.” He grabbed Akihito’s head and forced him to bow.

“That hurts, Holmes!”

Igawa and Suginami shook their heads and exclaimed, starry-eyed:

“You’re Akihito Kajiwara, the popular, handsome actor, right?!”

“Yes, the one on *A Fine Day in Kyoto*!”

“Yep, that’s me, Akihito Kajiwara. Thanks for looking after my best friend.” This time it was Akihito’s turn to grab Kiyotaka’s head and make him bow.

“B-Best friend?” Suginami put her hand over her mouth and blushed.

Akihito nodded firmly. “Yeah. This guy seems like he’s got his stuff together, but sometimes he’s pretty worrying.” He put his hand around Kiyotaka’s shoulder and pulled him close, eliciting high-pitched cheers from their audience.

Meanwhile, Kiyotaka’s expression was colder than it had ever been.

“This is the pride of Shokado Garden Art Museum, the garden associated with Shojo Shokado,” Kiyotaka explained in a cold, robotic manner.

“Ooh,” Akihito said, walking with his hands behind his head as usual.

A few minutes prior, Igawa had issued an executive order—“Kiyotaka! By all means, please give Kajiwara a tour of our museum!”—which Kiyotaka had begrudgingly obeyed.

“Who is Shojo Shokado, anyway?” Akihito asked, turning to look at him.

Kiyotaka sighed as if he’d seen this coming. “Do you know of Koetsu Hon’ami?”

“Yeah, I’ve heard the name. He’s the Rinpa guy, right?”

“Yes. Shokado was a literary monk on the same level as Koetsu Hon’ami.”

“A monk? Like, a Buddhist one?”

“Yes, he was a monk of Iwashimizu Hachimangu Shrine and the head of Takimotobo Temple.”

“Why did a shrine have a Buddhist monk?”

“Iwashimizu Hachimangu used to be a mixed shrine and temple, and before the Meiji period, it had a stronger Buddhist influence. It is now a shrine, though.”

“Oh.”

“Shokado was a calligrapher and showed excellent talent in a wide range of other fields, including painting, poetry, and the art of tea ceremony. During his final years of life, he built a tearoom hut and retired there, but...”

“Oh, and that’s where we are right now?”

“No, after centuries passed, the time came when it had to be taken down. Yawata’s culturists spent Meiji 24 to 31 moving the Shokado hut and the Izumibo study here in order to preserve them.”

“Ooh, good on them.”

“Indeed, I think they did a wonderful thing. And so this place was named Shokado Garden.”

Despite his initial reluctance, Kiyotaka soon returned to his usual state thanks to Akihito’s enthusiastic questions. They continued walking towards the three tearooms in the garden.

“Yagashira,” called out Suginami, who was jogging up to them.

The two young men stopped and turned around. Behind the out-of-breath curator were five men and women of varying ages. None of them looked

familiar.

Kiyotaka gave them a slight bow and looked at Suginami. “Who are they?”

“Temporary volunteers,” she said with a smile before proceeding to introduce them.

First was Ryo Ishida, a second-year middle school student who was taking part in his school’s work experience program.

Next were Koichi Takeda and Rie Maeda, first-year university students who had come as part of their studies.

Then there was Yoriko Hosokawa, a housewife in her early thirties who lived in the neighborhood.

Last was Akio Hashimoto, who had just retired.

“They’ll be here for the next five days,” Suginami continued. “I was hoping you could accompany them as part of your training.”

The five people bowed.

“Sure, if you’re fine with me,” Kiyotaka said, smiling and placing his hand on his chest.

The women blushed. Akihito, wanting to be the center of attention, pushed him aside and stepped forward.

“All right, let’s all listen to Holmes’s lecture!”

“Um, you’re Akihito Kajiwara, aren’t you?”

“What do you mean by ‘Holmes’?”

Everyone looked bewildered and started asking questions like “Why is the famous actor Akihito Kajiwara here?” and “Why is Akihito Kajiwara calling this person Holmes?”

Kiyotaka immediately answered, “I was given the nickname ‘Holmes’ because my surname is Yagashira, written with the characters for ‘home’ and ‘head.’”

“And he really is amazing like Holmes,” Akihito added. “I’m here today because I’m his best friend.” He put his hand on Kiyotaka’s shoulder again.

The volunteers looked at each other with smiles on their faces, saying things like, “I think we got lucky today.”

“You don’t have to put your hand on my shoulder for every little thing,” Kiyotaka said, brushing Akihito’s hand away. “Anyway, let me show you all around. Please come this way.” He started walking towards the tearooms.

They toured the Bai-in, Sho-in, and Chiku-in tearooms. The one that received the biggest reaction was Sho-in, which was a recreation of Kan’unken, the tearoom that Enshu Kobori had built for Shojo Shokado. It consisted of an entranceway, an eight-tatami-mat reception hall, a four-tatami-mat tea ceremony room, and a kitchen. The view of the garden from the windows was especially beautiful. Everyone stood there in awe.

“Ahh, my heart is being soothed,” Akihito said, gazing at the garden and spreading out his arms. Everyone giggled at him. “But you know, if this was in the middle of Kyoto, I bet it’d be so crowded that you couldn’t get in.”

“You’re right,” Kiyotaka said. “It’s a little-known treasure. Even better, these three tearooms can be rented. The cost varies depending on the room, but I believe it ranges from fifteen to twenty-five thousand yen per day.”

“Huh?” Everyone blinked.

“Th-This place can be rented out?”

“It’s cheaper than I would’ve expected...”

“Yes,” Kiyotaka answered. “And if you’re only using it for three hours, the price is halved. You can rent it as a large group and have a tea ceremony, bring your ikebana club here, or even hold an engagement party.”

Murmurs of fascination came from the group as he continued to promote the tearooms.

After leaving the tearoom, they went to Shokado’s hut, followed by Izumibo’s reception hall, which was said to have been a donation from the great Hideaki Kobayakawa. Kiyotaka explained the story of the Kinuta washbasin to them, and after a walk around the outer garden, the tour was finished. Then, Igawa took the five volunteers to Iwashimizu Hachimangu Shrine for training. Kiyotaka was tasked with entertaining their guest, so he brought Akihito to the traditional

Japanese restaurant adjacent to the museum, Kyoto Kitcho, where they could eat Shokado bento.

Akihito grinned once they were seated. “Thanks to me, you get to eat Shokado bento. Aren’t you glad?”

Kiyotaka sighed. “You’re being entertained as a guest, but I’m paying for my own share.”

“Wait, really?”

“This is a small municipal museum. Be grateful that they’re showing you this much hospitality at all. Well, even though I have to pay for myself, I *am* happy to be able to eat Shokado bento at Kitcho.” He smiled cheerfully as he looked out the window at the beautiful garden.

“Thinking about it that way, I’m surprised they’d hire you, even as a temp.”

“Indeed. I’ll have to make myself as useful as possible.”

“Like that tour just now?”

“That’s part of it, but I want to help improve their profits in a more definite way.”

“How’re you gonna do that?”

“The best way would be to borrow my grandfather’s prized celadon and Shino tea bowl.”

“That’s a piece of cake.”

“Not necessarily. My grandfather has never lent those pieces out before. If someone wants to see them, they have to come to Kura or the Yagashira estate. It became an even touchier subject after Ensho stole the tea bowl. He doesn’t even let my father borrow them anymore.”

“Huh, didn’t know that.”

As they were talking, their Shokado bento boxes were brought to them with a “Thank you for waiting.”

“Nice, they’re here. Come to think of it, I didn’t know until today that the

Shokado bento was named after a monk called Shojo Shokado," remarked Akihito.

"Apparently, Shojo Shokado originally used a farmer's seed box as a tobacco tray and an accessory case for tea ceremonies. In the early Showa period, the founder of Kitcho, Teiichi Yuki, went to a tea ceremony at one of Shokado's historic places. He saw the box in the corner of the room and thought, 'What if I used this as a food container?' After some design work, he came up with the Shokado bento."

"Oh, so that's why Kitcho is right next door."

"Yes. Being able to eat a Shokado bento while admiring this view is true happiness." Kiyotaka chuckled and opened the lid of his bento. The square, black-lacquered box was divided into four sections containing simmered vegetables, sashimi, grilled meat, and sesame tofu, respectively. On the side, there was rice, soup, and pickled vegetables.

"This is so fancy. I would've been totally fine with pork cutlet."

"I suppose you're too young to appreciate this."

"What? I'm older than you."

"I guess. At any rate, someone who wants to stuff his mouth with calorie-rich food won't understand the appeal of Shokado bento. The delicate cut of the decorative knife, the careful arrangement, the presentation of the food, the way the ingredients' natural flavors are leveraged, and the elegant, healthy seasoning—it's all so moving. You're meant to savor each and every piece while gazing at the beautiful garden." Kiyotaka put his hands together, gave thanks for the meal, and took a bite of the sesame tofu.

"Huh. Well, guess I'll get started too," Akihito said, copying his best friend and starting with the sesame tofu. His eyes widened. "Oh, this really is good."

"Right?" Kiyotaka nodded.

When they finished eating, Akihito murmured, "Shokado Museum and Shokado bento, huh? Not bad. I might suggest them."

Kiyotaka looked up at him. "For *A Fine Day in Kyoto*?" That was the name of

Akihito's five-minute travel program, which was still airing after all this time. At first, Akihito had imitated Kiyotaka's mannerisms for the show, but ever since his true nature had been exposed, he appeared on the program in his natural state. That had actually resulted in a bigger response from the viewers, and it had become quite a popular show. People joked about how the Akihito in episode one was a completely different person from the current Akihito.

"Yeah, they ask for my input a lot. Even though the show's supposed to be based in the city, if I say I wanna present Kinosaki and Amanohashidate, they'll go, 'That sounds great!' and set things up right away."

"Yes, I do recall viewers being surprised that you suddenly went outside the prefecture—to northern Kansai, no less. I think introducing this place is a good idea. It'd be nice if more people knew the name of Shojo Shokado."

"Right? People only know it as the name of a bento box."

"When we're finished here, I'll show you around the museum. You can discuss the program with Igawa when he returns."

"Sure." Akihito leaned forward slightly. "So, how're things with Aoi lately?"

"What do you mean?"

"She's finally in university, which means you don't have to hold back anymore, right? She just started school, so make sure not to get her pregnant." He grinned mischievously.

Kiyotaka sighed. "I can't believe you're concerned about that."

"You've got a good head on your shoulders, but you're a total mess when it comes to Aoi."

"I won't deny that, but there isn't anything happening to warrant such a concern in the first place," he said casually as he continued to eat.

Akihito froze. "Huh? You still haven't done it?"

Kiyotaka remained silent.

"If you're having physical problems at your age, you should see a doctor," Akihito whispered in a sympathetic voice.

Kiyotaka choked. “No, that’s not it. If anything, it’s a mental problem.”

“It doesn’t work because you’re too nervous?”

“That’s not it either... Aoi is truly a wonderful woman, isn’t she?”

“S-Sure? I dunno. She’s okay in my eyes. A little above average.”

“She’s constantly improving herself, and she’s very accepting. It makes me wonder if it’s okay for me to touch such an amazing woman.” He sighed.

Akihito’s eyes widened. He *wanted* to say, “No, in my eyes, you’re way above her level,” but he kept his mouth shut. *Everyone has different tastes.* He nodded and instead said, “I get that you think she’s amazing, but why do you think so little of yourself?”

“Do you remember what I accidentally told you at Nanzen-ji Temple when we were looking at the aqueduct?”

“Oh, when you said you’d had your heart broken and started preferring ‘short-term relationships with people who wouldn’t try to get deeply involved’?”

“You remember it more precisely than I expected.”

“What can I say, it made a strong impact. Anyway, what about it?”

“I’m definitely a much worse man than Aoi thinks I am. I don’t know if I should advance our relationship while hiding that.”

“Then don’t hide it?”

“I’m sure she’ll hate me.” Kiyotaka lowered his eyes.

“You’re a real pain, you know that? First of all, men are made to prioritize their instincts. Even if girls think that’s disgusting, that’s just how we are. I don’t know what you got up to in the past, but it’s not like you’re betraying Aoi right now, so why do you care? Are you stupid?”

Akihito bit into his dessert, seeming genuinely exasperated. Kiyotaka blinked in surprise.

“What’s with that look?” Akihito asked.

“I was just thinking that you actually made a good point.”

“Well, we’re best friends, after all.”

Kiyotaka shrugged and said nothing.

“You know, you’ve stopped denying it when I call us best friends,” Akihito said with a grin.

Kiyotaka choked again.

3

“Huh?” Suginami blinked in surprise. “Kajiwara will be coming back?”

A few hours after Akihito left, Kiyotaka went to Suginami’s desk to inform her of the plan.

“Yes, he’s looking into having this place featured on *A Fine Day in Kyoto*. When we told Igawa, he asked if Iwashimizu Hachimangu could be included as well.”

Suginami nodded in agreement. “Yes, of course. We’re under their jurisdiction, and they provide us with a lot of help.”

“So then Igawa offered to give Akihito a tour of Iwashimizu Hachimangu, but Akihito had to take the evening shinkansen to Tokyo for work.”

“That’s the life of a celeb, huh?”

“However, he has a late-night radio show to attend in Osaka this Saturday, so he’ll be back in Kansai during the day. He’ll come by for the shrine tour then and then suggest it to the program staff.”

“Wow!” Suginami’s eyes lit up, and she clapped her hands together. “So if all goes well, Shokado and Hachimangu will be on *A Fine Day in Kyoto*? That show is popular with young people, so that’s great.”

“Yes, indeed.” Kiyotaka smiled. *But I’ll have to work as that man’s manager for the whole day, and that makes me depressed.*

“Kajiwara seems like a modern-day playboy, but he’s passionate about his work too, huh?”

“He is most certainly a modern-day playboy, but yes, he puts all of his effort

into everything.”

Suginami laughed. “Oh, so you do acknowledge that side of him?”

“I wouldn’t say that,” Kiyotaka replied with a forced smile.

She laughed again. “You’re such a tsundere.”

Kiyotaka tilted his head. “I wouldn’t say that either.”

Suginami smiled softly and rested her chin on her hand. “Igawa must be so excited.”

“Yes, he immediately ran to Hachimangu to let them know.”

“But he just got back from taking the volunteers there.” She giggled and remembered the five volunteers who were still sitting at a nearby table, making notes. “What did you think of Iwashimizu Hachimangu, everyone?”

The group hadn’t expected to be addressed, but their looks of surprise quickly turned to smiles.

“Oh, it was wonderful,” said Yoriko Hosokawa, the housewife.

The university students, Rie Maeda and Koichi Takeda, nodded, saying:

“Even though I’d read about it before, I was surprised by how much I could feel the history there after going in person.”

“Yeah, like the hallway Taira no Kiyomori used as a waiting room, and the gold rain gutter donated by Nobunaga.”

“Yes!”

Suginami smiled at the two and asked, “Hey, are you a couple?”

They looked at each other and shook their heads.

“Oh, no,” said Maeda.

“We’re in the same group at university,” Takeda explained.

“Yes, that’s all.”

“Which group?” asked Suginami.

“It’s a group that researches Japanese history and spiritual places.”

“We did choose to volunteer here to learn about Shojo Shokado, but another reason was that we’d receive training at Iwashimizu Hachimangu.”

“I see,” said Suginami. “May I ask why the rest of you chose us? What about you, Ishida? Why did you pick this place for your school’s work experience program?”

The youngest of the group, Ryo Ishida, was a shy second-year middle schooler. He immediately looked down and mumbled, “I’m in the art club and I like museums. Also, I was interested in training at Iwashimizu Hachimangu.” His voice was extremely soft but just barely audible.

“Ooh, I see.”

“I used to want to be a curator, but that dream never came true. Soon after getting married and moving to Yawata City, I found out this place was looking for volunteers and instinctively jumped at the chance,” said the housewife, Yoriko Hosokawa, with an energetic smile.

“My case is a little similar,” said Akio Hashimoto, the last person in the group. “I’ve always lived in Yawata, but after mandatory retirement, I had too much free time on my hands. I saw the recruitment and thought it’d be nice to work at a museum. I was also fond of Shokado Garden to begin with.”

Suginami bowed and said, “Thank you, everyone. I look forward to working with you this week.”

After that, Suginami left to look around the museum. Kiyotaka stood up and went to make coffee before getting started on the document filing he’d been tasked with. He also made coffee for the five volunteers while he was at it.

“Here you are,” he said, placing the cups in front of them.

Ishida, who was in the middle of drawing something, jolted up.

“Oh, sorry for startling you. You were concentrating, weren’t you?”

“Um, it’s okay.” The middle school student hid his work.

“What were you drawing?”

Ishida timidly showed Kiyotaka his sketchbook, which had a drawing of the

Bai-in tearoom.

“You drew this based on memory? That’s impressive.”

“I-It’s not impressive.” The boy blushed and looked down.

“Yes, it is.”

“M-Mom tells me to stop drawing all the time, and dad says I’m weak because boys are supposed to play sports,” he muttered.

The other volunteers looked at him sympathetically, but Kiyotaka smiled and said, “Oh, that’s good.” Everyone widened their eyes.

“H-How come?”

“Perhaps it’d be ideal if they understood you and let you draw all you wanted, but being opposed and restrained isn’t as bad as you think it is. It enhances your desire to draw and further develops your talent. Try to draw with the limited time you have, and don’t waste any opportunities like this work experience. You really are impressive. One day, you might look back and be grateful that your parents held you back,” Kiyotaka explained with a smile.

Ishida was at a loss for words.

“Listen, Ishida,” Kiyotaka continued, peering into the boy’s face, “the trick is to use everything in your environment to your advantage. If you do that, your life will change in interesting ways.”

Ishida gaped at him.

“Uh, is it just me or did it get colder in here?” remarked Takeda.

“Y-Yeah, I feel like I just had a divine revelation,” replied Maeda, rubbing her arms. *And it wasn’t from an angel.*

“What have you two been so absorbed in?” Kiyotaka asked, turning to face the two university students.

“They’re just normal reports,” said Takeda, smiling.

“Yes, one about Shokado Garden and the art museum and one about Iwashimizu Hachimangu. The one about the shrine is separate because it’ll be published by our group,” said Maeda, showing Kiyotaka the notebook for the

latter. It said “No. 8” on the cover and had tabs sticking out with the names of previously visited shrines on them: Tokiwa Shrine (Ibaraki), Biyo Shrine (Aichi), Nanryu Shrine (Mie), and Susa Shrine (Wakayama).

“Could you look over my notes too, Yagashira?” Hashimoto asked eagerly, opening his notebook.

What can we do to bring more tourism to Shokado Garden Art Museum, Iwashimizu Hachimangu, and Yawata City as a whole?

Have a citywide stamp rally

Allow more unrestricted photography in the museum to improve word-of-mouth on social media

Kiyotaka was impressed. The suggestions were quite novel for someone who was past retirement age. “These are interesting ideas,” he said.

“Yawata’s my hometown, but I worked in another prefecture in the tourism industry,” Hashimoto explained with a laugh. “Also, I was impressed when I saw that actor letting people take his photo. He didn’t seem annoyed at all. I looked on social media and saw that people posted the pictures, saying, ‘Akihito Kajiwara’s really good-looking, and he’s friendly and nice too.’ It’s amazing how fast news can travel. I wonder if that was his goal all along,” he murmured, looking down at his phone.

Kiyotaka shrugged. “He probably does it unconsciously.”

Hosokawa, the housewife, looked at her own notes dejectedly. “I’ve only written a summary of the training we received today.”

“Don’t worry, Hosokawa, that’s normal,” Hashimoto said, laughing.

After that, everyone went back to their work.

4

Kyoto Prefectural University was closer to my house than Oki High, so I continued to commute by bicycle. I didn’t go straight home after school, though. Instead, I biked south down Shimogamo Center Street, turned west onto Imadegawa Street, and then immediately turned south again onto

Teramachi Street. I continued down, passing by the Kyoto Gyoen National Garden on my right and the Kyoto City Historical Museum on my left. Eventually I reached city hall, which was right by the entrance of the Teramachi Specialist Shops street. As usual, I parked my bike in the designated area on Oike Street and entered the shopping arcade on foot. Walking here and looking at the stationery shops, art galleries, and coffee shops soothed my heart. For some reason, it felt like I'd returned to my hometown.

Before long, I reached Kura. The "We buy and appraise" sign had been taken down for the time being. I understood why Holmes couldn't be there, but it still felt a bit lonely. I sighed, pulled myself together, and opened the door. As usual, the chime rang.

Oddly enough, the owner was sitting at the counter. He was supposed to be taking care of the store in Holmes's absence, but this was only the second time I had seen him here since Holmes had left.

I was about to greet him but stopped upon realizing that Holmes was sitting across from the owner. My heart leaped with joy, but before I could say anything, I noticed the serious looks on their faces.

"Is there no way to change your mind?" Holmes asked.

"I'm grateful that they were willing to hire you, but this is a separate issue. I ain't lending them the celadon and Shino tea bowl. You know better than anyone that I've never lent them out anywhere."

"Yes, because they're the Yagashira family treasures. But it only needs to be for a day. I'll guard them carefully."

The owner shrugged. "That doesn't mean anything coming from someone who let a corrupt monk steal the tea bowl."

Apparently, Holmes had come to negotiate with Kura as a museum employee. The unexpected tension had my heart beating fast.

"There're other places with Shino tea bowls anyway," continued the owner. "What're you gonna get out of displaying it for a day?"

Holmes placed a brown envelope on the counter and stood up. "This is the plan I came up with. I'll leave it here, so please consider it."

“I don’t know what kind of plan this is, but you ain’t getting them. Anything else is fine.”

Holmes didn’t respond to that. He bowed, saying, “I’ll be taking my leave,” and turned around. At last, our eyes met. Knowing him, he’d probably realized that I’d entered the store even though his back was turned.

He smiled, and I could almost see flowers blooming around him. “Hello, Aoi. Sorry for burdening you with the store while I’m away.”

“It’s okay. You’re working hard, right?” *He really looks like a working adult in that suit and tie.*

“Aoi,” he said, extending a hand towards me.

“Did Shokado’s representative come here to play around?” snapped the owner.

Holmes quietly clicked his tongue and said to me, “We’ll talk next time. I’ll call you in the meantime.” He smiled, his eyes narrowing into arcs.

“Okay, I’ll wait.” I smiled back.

He clenched his fist. “You really are cute today, Aoi. Your smile heals my soul. Um, do you mind if I pet your head?”

“Get out already!” the owner shouted.

Holmes frowned and left the store. Once he was out of sight, the owner held up his hand and said, “Sorry about that, Aoi.”

“It’s okay.”

“I’m glad that maniac has someone like you in his life, but when I see him acting like some perv, it really grinds my gears. When a man’s crazy for a girl, he ain’t supposed to let it show like that. Ugh, it’s embarrassing to watch. Makes me wanna perform a purifying ritual.”

As usual, the owner was brutally honest. He also had an old-fashioned mindset. He picked up the envelope and took out Holmes’s proposal.

“Like I told him, there’re other places with Shino tea bowls. He just wants to take the easy way out by asking family,” he grumbled. But upon looking through

the proposal, he closed his mouth and squinted. “Oh?”

What kind of plan is it? I wondered as I put on my apron.

The owner suddenly broke into a smile, seeming to have read my mind. “What a crafty man. Who does he take after?” Despite his words, he seemed happy, which put a smile on my face too.

“Who *does* he take after?”

“The craftiness comes from me. His looks are from Kiyomi. He’s the spitting image of her.”

“Kiyomi?”

“That’s his mother’s name. She was a really pretty lady.” He cast his eyes down with a glum look on his face.

Holmes’s mother had passed away when he was two years old. Knowing the owner, he had probably doted on his daughter-in-law very much. My heart ached seeing him like that.

Holmes is the spitting image of his mother... I wish I could’ve met her.

“Sorry, didn’t mean to make you sad,” he said.

I shook my head. “Um, so what’s his plan?” I asked hesitantly, not knowing if I was allowed to.

“Take a look.” He showed me the proposal.

“Oh, I see what you mean.” The first headline that jumped out at me told me everything I needed to know.

“Seriously, what a crafty man.”

I couldn’t help but laugh at his dramatic shrug.

5

At last, it was Saturday. Kaori and I met up at Demachiyanagi Station so that we could take the Keihan Line to Kuzuha Station. The plan was to arrive at the museum at 10 a.m. Since Kaori lived in Nishijin, Demachiyanagi Station wasn’t

close to her, but there was a reason she had chosen this station.

“I’ve always wanted to try riding in the premium car. Will you join me, Aoi?” she asked, blushing with her fists clenched.

“The premium car?” I tilted my head.

Kaori’s eyes widened. “You haven’t heard of it? It’s like the Keihan Line’s version of the shinkansen’s green car. From Demachiyanagi to Kuzuha, it’s only an extra four hundred yen. I really want to sit in that kind of special seat just once.” She clasped her hands together with a dreamy look on her face, then snapped back to reality and looked at me. “Oh, but if you don’t think it’s worth it, that’s fine.”

“No, I think an extra four hundred yen to experience a special-class seat is a good deal. Let’s do it.”

Holmes often says, “I’m willing to spend money for experiences that will benefit me,” and I guess that rubbed off on me.

“Thanks! Let’s buy the tickets now.” She smiled happily and set off for the ticketing area.

We boarded the premium car and sat down next to each other.

“Ooh, the seats really are comfy,” Kaori said, putting a hand over her mouth and giggling. “I could get used to this.”

“Wow, there are even power outlets and Wi-Fi here,” I remarked.

She nodded proudly. “Yep, and the seats recline. We’ll be living in luxury until Kuzuha Station.”

Seeing her this way made me smile. “You’re sort of reminding me of Holmes.”

“Uh, I don’t know how I feel about that,” she said with a genuinely conflicted expression. I couldn’t help but giggle.

We departed from Demachiyanagi Station at 9:08 a.m. and arrived at Kuzuha Station in under thirty minutes. Our “life of luxury” was short-lived but great nonetheless. We got off the train with smiles on our faces.

The closest stations to Shokado Garden Art Museum were Yawatashi Station and Kuzuha Station. We had chosen the latter because it was more accessible and had more buses.

“Oh, the bus is here,” I said. It had arrived just as we reached the stop.

“You’re right.”

We boarded the bus and reached Oshiba Shokadomae in about ten minutes. That was the closest stop to the museum.

“I’m glad the weather’s nice,” Kaori commented.

It was just past opening time, and the museum still seemed empty. Since Holmes wasn’t supposed to know we were there, I was wearing a hat pulled over my eyes and a wavy wig. Kaori had gone for a boyish look with fake glasses and all of her hair pulled up in a newsboy cap.

We decided to look at the garden first. On the way to the information desk, I glanced at a notice board and my eyes widened.

Learn From a Curator!

A lecture about Shojo Shokado will be presented by Kiyotaka Yagashira, Kyoto University graduate and grandson-apprentice of the nationally certified appraiser, Seiji Yagashira.

Time: 11:20 a.m. — 12:00 p.m.

Location: First floor training room

The poster even had a photo of Holmes on it.

“Holmes really is good-looking in this picture, huh? Did you know this was happening, Aoi?”

“No, I didn’t.”

“You guys talk on the phone, don’t you?”

“We mostly talk about silly things, not his work.”

“Silly as in flirting?”

“Oh, no... It’s normal small talk.” I looked down to hide my flushed cheeks.

“Anyway, this is good timing, isn’t it? After we look around the garden, we can sneak into the lecture.”

“Yeah, let’s sit in the back and listen.”

We excitedly bought our tickets and went to the garden where Kaori had become enlightened in middle school. It was an elegant Japanese garden that was both beautiful and soothing. We visited the tearooms and talked about how nice it would be to drink tea or arrange flowers there. When we reached Ominaeshi Tomb, the setting of the tragic Noh play, *Ominaeshi*, we both put our hands together in prayer.

“Hey, do you know the story of *Ominaeshi*, Kaori?”

“If I remember correctly, it’s about a woman who comes here because she misses her lover, who she met in the city. She finds out that he’s already in a relationship with another woman, and she’s so shocked that she throws herself into the Namida River.”

“Oh, that’s terrible.”

“Then the man’s guilty conscience pushes him to kill himself too. It’s a tragic love story.”

“I’m...not sure how to feel about that.”

“Yeah.”

We left the tomb and went to the camellia garden on the west side. The camellias weren’t actually in bloom, but the bamboo thicket was breathtakingly beautiful.

“It feels so refreshing,” I said.

“Yeah, I think I feel enlightenment coming again.”

“What’s it about this time?”

“I was thinking it’d be nice to have a boyfriend and wondered if I should be more proactive in finding one.”

“Ooh.”

“But it’s telling me to stop pushing myself to be someone I’m not. I should

enjoy my life as it is now.”

“Yeah, it’s not good to force it.”

“Right?”

We continued to chat as we walked, and before we knew it, it was almost time for Holmes’s lecture to begin. We hadn’t realized how much time had passed, so we hurriedly lowered our hats and sped to the first-floor training room.

*

Kiyotaka was sipping coffee while looking over his lecture notes in the office.

“It’s finally time,” said Igawa, anxiously pacing around the area. “A lot of people came for the lecture. Are you nervous?”

“Yes, I’m very nervous, but I’ll try my best.” Kiyotaka put his cup down and smiled.

He has to be lying, thought everyone else in the office, with the exception of Igawa, who said, “Right, of course you get nervous too. You also have to be Kajiwara’s manager in the afternoon, so you can take a break right after the lecture. Oh, here, take this water.” He handed over a bottle of mineral water.

“Thank you. I should get going now.” Kiyotaka stood up, notes and bottled water in hand.

“Oh, wait!” Suginami ran up to him. “I’m going to do an introductory speech first. Come out when I call for you, okay?”

Kiyotaka nodded. “All right.”

*

By the time Kaori and I got there, the room was already full. The white walls were decorated with calligraphy, folding screens, and hanging scrolls, perhaps specially for the lecture. There was a teacher’s desk at the front of the room, and behind it was a projector screen. A woman was checking that the mic was working. There wasn’t any sign of Holmes yet. Relieved, we stealthily sat down in the back row. Surely he wouldn’t notice us behind all of these people, especially when we were wearing disguises.

The attendees around us were whispering:

“The museum’s new employee is named Yagashira, huh?”

“Yeah, I heard he’s the grandson of that famous appraiser who was on TV before.”

“I had my eyes on him since he’s really good-looking, but I didn’t know he went to Kyoto University.”

Kaori and I exchanged looks and smiled.

“Holmes is already the center of attention, huh?” she murmured.

“Yeah,” I said quietly.

The man sitting next to Kaori looked at us, wide-eyed, and asked, “Do you two know Yagashira?” He looked like he was in his mid-twenties, and he had short black hair and glasses.

“Um, yes,” answered Kaori.

“My name’s Kohinata. I went to university with him.”

Since Holmes was known by his nickname at school too, Kohinata must’ve instantly figured out that we were acquainted with him.

“Nice to meet you,” he said with a smile. Kaori and I introduced ourselves as Miyashita and Mashiro.

“Are you friends with Holmes?” asked Kaori.

“I’m not sure. Yagashira gets along with everyone on a superficial level, but he doesn’t really get close to anyone. I get the feeling that even if I think of him as a friend, he doesn’t think of me that way.”

I nodded. *Holmes does have that side to him.*

“We’re not in the same department either. I only met him because of a group date our mutual friend set up.”

“Really?” We blinked.

“He was asked to join so that more people would show up. He’s really good-looking, after all. He was popular at school, but he was always dodging girls’

advances. At first I thought he wasn't into women, but when I asked him about it indirectly, he said, 'I'm not going to get involved with a girl from the same university if I'm not interested in a serious relationship. It's only going to cause trouble later.' It made me think, 'He looks graceful on the outside, but he's actually a pretty terrible guy.' I started liking him a bit and we hung out every now and then," he said with a laugh.

Kaori gaped while I facepalmed. *Yeah, that's definitely Holmes.*

"You're his fans too, aren't you? He's that kind of guy, so you should be careful around him," he continued with an amused look in his eyes.

Kaori frowned. "We're not fans. I don't even like being around him."

"Huh, really?"

"But more importantly, shouldn't you figure out who you're talking to before saying things like that? This girl is Holmes's girlfriend. I'm sure you hurt her feelings with those thoughtless words." She glared at him.

He looked at me with wide eyes. "Wait, you are? Come to think of it, I did hear a rumor that he got a girlfriend. That's you? Really?"

Kaori's frown grew. "What's with that reaction? You're so rude."

Worried, I reached out to her and said, "Thanks, Kaori. Don't worry, I'm completely fine."

"Oh, uh, I guess that really was rude," the man said. "I was just surprised that Yagashira would choose a cute, young girl like you, Mashiro. He seemed like the type to pick an older woman."

Kaori and I nodded, now understanding why he was surprised.

"I'm so sorry, Mashiro. I haven't talked to Yagashira much this past year, since we were both busy. I thought the rumor was fake."

I shook my head. "It's okay. I'm fine, really."

The man looked relieved and turned to Kaori. "My name's Keigo Kohinata. What's your first name, Miyashita?"

"Uh, Kaori..."

“I’m continuing my research at Kyoto University, and I’m pretty serious about it.”

“Okay?”

“Do you want to get dinner sometime?”

“Why are you asking me that?” Kaori narrowed her eyes in suspicion.

“Because I’m interested in you.”

“Well, *I* don’t have a good impression of you. Sorry, but I’ll pass.” She bowed and turned to face the front of the room.

“Whoa,” the man murmured, sounding impressed. “You’re really cool, Kaori.”

She blushed. “Seriously, what’s with you?” She turned her face away from him to hide her reddened cheeks.

Kaori was worried about me and scolded him for being rude, so I can understand why she doesn’t have a good impression of him...but he isn’t necessarily a bad person. I’m sure he thought we were just Holmes’s admirers, so he was warning us that Holmes isn’t as nice as he looks. And like he said, Holmes is *quite a troublesome man, so...*

As I was musing over all that, the lecture began. A woman stepped forward and gave an introductory speech.

“Thank you all for coming. I’m Suginami, a curator at this museum. Currently, we have Kiyotaka Yagashira—grandson and apprentice of Seiji Yagashira, the nationally certified appraiser—working here for a limited time as part of his training. We felt that we could not miss this opportunity, so we asked him to give a lecture. Please enjoy this presentation by a knowledgeable, stylish, and good-looking art specialist.”

The audience chuckled at the humorous speech.

“Now then, Yagashira, if you will.”

When prompted, Holmes came in. Everyone clapped, seeming to have high expectations. The young women squealed—well, maybe not only the young ones.

“As you’ve heard, my name is Kiyotaka Yagashira, and I’m an appraiser-in-training. It feels impudent of me to give a lecture in such a grand place while still being an apprentice, but I do have my curator certification, so you don’t have to worry about that. Thank you for having me today.” He placed a hand on his chest and smiled. “Now then, do you all know about Shojo Shokado?”

Everyone shrank back a little with sheepish looks on their faces. It appeared that most people didn’t know.

“What about Shokado bento boxes, then?” he continued.

This time, everyone’s faces brightened up and they nodded.

“Shojo Shokado is the person the Shokado bento got its name from. He was a Buddhist monk at this city’s Iwashimizu Hachimangu shrine.”

“A Buddhist monk at a shrine?” audience members murmured, tilting their heads.

“Both Shintoism and Buddhism were practiced on Mount Otoko until the late Edo period,” Holmes went on. Iwashimizu Hachimangu was located on the peak of Mount Otoko. “Shojo Shokado was so brilliant that he made it to the high rank of *ajari*. When you hear ‘ajari,’ you probably think of the famous dessert, but in Shingon Esoteric Buddhism, it’s a rank given to monks who act as role models for disciples.”

“Oh,” murmured the younger people in the audience, who had probably thought of Ajari mochi.

I’m sure the past me would’ve reacted the same way.

“Shojo Shokado was the type to hone multiple talents rather than focusing on only one. First, please look at the calligraphy on the wall to your left.” He gestured with his right hand. Then with his left, he pressed a button on the remote, displaying pieces of calligraphy written on red and blue paper on the projector. “They’re very lively and beautiful, aren’t they? Now, does anyone know what’s written on them?”

The audience squinted at the screen.

“It’s something you’re all familiar with,” he added. “Especially around New

Year's, and recently it has become a competition as well."

A boy sitting in the front row said in a soft voice, "*Hyakunin Isshu*?"

"Correct, Ishida. Shojo Shokado wrote the poems from Fujiwara no Teika's *Ogura Hyakunin Isshu* anthology on beautiful paper that was decorated according to the theme of each poem. The cover made use of gold and silver leaf, with paintings of plants added for color. The one hundred sheets of paper were designed so as not to be monotonous, and the writing itself was arranged in an easy-to-read way. From this, we can see that Shojo Shokado didn't simply have an excellent sense of beauty—he was also a cultured man who remembered to entertain the viewer."

After that, he showed us a subdued painting, explained that Shojo Shokado was one of the Three Brushes of the Kan'ei Era along with Nobutada Konoe and Koetsu Hon'ami, and told us some stories from the time when they were active. His simple explanations made for a fun, intriguing talk.

"I'm afraid we're out of time now, so I'll stop here. Thank you for listening to my humble presentation."

Before I knew it, the lecture was over. Everyone reluctantly began to leave their seats, seeming like they were hoping to hear more. Kaori and I stood up too, wanting to leave the room before Holmes saw us. We'd made a lunch reservation at the adjacent restaurant, Kitcho, so that we could try the Shokado bento before going home.

I subtly glanced at Holmes.

"Well done, Yagashira," said Suginami, running up to him. She was the curator who had given the introductory speech. "That was a great presentation."

"Thank you. I can take my break now, right?"

"Yes, you deserve it."

"In that case, I'll be taking my break right now," he repeated as if to emphasize the point.

The woman seemed confused but nodded and said, "Sure, take your time."

Oh, Holmes is on break now... I turned to leave.

“Aoi!” came his voice from behind me.

I flinched and turned around to see that he was right in front of my face. Before I could even react, he took my hand and squeezed it in his.

“You came, Aoi! I’m so happy. Did you see the notice on Kura’s website?” he asked gleefully. Apparently, he had announced on Kura’s website that he was going to be giving a lecture here today. Kohinata must have come because he’d seen that.

“Oh, no, I didn’t—”

“I’m touched that you came. Ever since I started working here, you never once said that you’d visit, so I thought you didn’t want to.”

“No, it’s not that. You’re doing your training, so...” *I wasn’t sure if I was allowed to visit.*

“Yes, you’re right. That’s also why I couldn’t just ask you to come over. I was hoping you’d suggest it yourself, but it didn’t seem like you would, so I thought you weren’t interested in seeing me at my job.” His eyes teared up, and I panicked.

“That’s not true! I really did want to visit, and I’m glad that I got to hear your lecture today, even if it was only by coincidence. It was really interesting and easy to follow.”

“Aoi!” he squeezed my hand tighter.

“Holmes...”

I suddenly realized that everyone was staring at us, dumbfounded. They must have been surprised to see the elegant lecturer go through such a drastic change in personality.

“Huh, so Yagashira isn’t tsundere; he’s the infatuated type,” murmured Suginami.

The boy named Ishida, who had answered the question earlier, looked like he was in a state of shock. But the person with the most incredulous face of all was Kohinata. He was staring at us with his eyes and mouth as wide as they could be.

Holmes noticed the man's gaze and smiled. "Oh, Kohinata. It's been a while, hasn't it? Thanks for coming."

"Y-Yeah. Yeah, yeah, that's right."

There was something strange about how many times he said "yeah."

"Since you finished grad school, I was wondering if you'd taken over Kura yet, so I checked the site and found out about this. But, well, uh...sorry, Mashiro." He suddenly looked at me and bowed.

"Huh?" I blinked, not understanding why he was apologizing.

"I didn't really believe you were Yagashira's girlfriend. Like, I didn't think you were *lying*, but I thought you might've had the wrong idea." Holmes must simply have struck Kohinata as someone who would never be in a relationship.

"Oh, it's okay," I replied.

Holmes sighed. "Kohinata." He put his hand on the man's shoulder and whispered something in his ear. Based on how Kohinata's face immediately twitched, it was probably something along the lines of, "Don't talk about my past."

Holmes regained his composure and turned back to Kaori and me. "Hello, Kaori. Thank you for coming today."

"No problem. I enjoyed your lecture too."

"We're going to have a Shokado bento now," I mentioned.

"I see," Holmes said with a gentle smile. "Please enjoy yourselves. If you're free afterwards, stop by the office and I'll give you some pamphlets."

"Do you want to join us, Holmes?" Kaori asked considerately.

Holmes shook his head. "I made my own lunch, and I have to go to the office and check documents while I eat. Have fun on your girls' day out." He smiled, surely being considerate of Kaori and me as well.

We said goodbye and headed to Kyoto Kitcho, the Japanese restaurant next to the museum.

"I'm excited for this," I said.

“Me too,” agreed Kaori. “I’m curious about the lunch Holmes made for himself, though.”

“Yeah, same.”

“I bet it has a good color scheme.”

As we giggled, we heard the sound of running footsteps behind us.

“Mashiro, Kaori!”

We turned around and saw Kohinata trying to catch his breath. *Does he need something?*

“I’m leaving now, but please take this,” he said, pulling a business card out of his pocket. Kaori accepted it, albeit confusedly. The man smiled happily and said, “Thanks. See you again.” Then he turned and left.

“He seriously only gave it to you, huh?” I laughed.

Kaori shrugged. “Holmes would’ve gotten angry if he gave one to you. I guarantee you that whisper earlier was something like, ‘Don’t you dare hit on my girlfriend.’”

“Wait, really? I thought Holmes was preventing him from talking about his past.”

“He doesn’t need to hide what you already know.”

We looked down at the business card.

Keigo Kohinata

Researcher

Hematology and Oncology

Kyoto University Graduate School of Medicine

“Medicine? You’ve caught the attention of someone incredible, Kaori.”

“I’m sure he’s just teasing me.” Kaori sighed and put the business card in her bag.

*

When Kiyotaka entered the office, everyone looked at him in surprise.

“Yagashira, your break isn’t over yet,” said Suginami.

“Yes, I’m going to have lunch now,” Kiyotaka replied, sitting down at his desk and taking a bento box out of his bag.

“Oh, you brought lunch again.” Suginami wasn’t particularly surprised. Kiyotaka had been bringing his own homemade lunch every day. “Did those girls go to Kitcho?”

“Yes.”

“I thought you would’ve gone with them.”

“If we’d planned for it, I would’ve. But it’d be lacking in tact for a boyfriend to intrude on their girl time, wouldn’t it?”

Suginami chuckled and nodded. “You really understand. Yes, it’s fine if you were part of the original plan but joining in now would change the mood.”

“Exactly.”

“Still, I thought you’d be a tsundere to your girlfriend too, so that was surprising. I never would’ve dreamed you were the type to go running after her!” She laughed, and so did the volunteers who were sitting nearby.

Ishida, however, looked away and mumbled, “I thought you were a cooler person than that.” He was clearly disappointed.

Takeda, the university student, shook his head and said, “Nah, I’m relieved. Yagashira was always too perfect.”

“Yes,” agreed Hosokawa, the housewife. “It’s great to have that gap in personality. Just like Nobunaga Oda, right?”

The sudden mention of the Sengoku-era warrior threw everyone off.

“Nobunaga Oda?” someone asked.

Hosokawa panicked and held her hands out. “Oh, sorry. I’m a history fan, so I said that without thinking.”

Maeda’s eyes lit up. “Hosokawa, are you a history otaku? I am too!”

“I don’t think I know enough to be considered an otaku, but I did major in history.”

“Oh, same. I was showing Ishida my school’s history program just now.” She held up a brochure for a university in Kyoto Prefecture.

Hosokawa’s eyes widened. “That’s my alma mater.”

Maeda and Takeda’s eyes lit up.

“Really? That means you’re our senior,” said Takeda.

“It sure is a small world,” remarked Maeda.

“It might be smaller than you think,” Hosokawa said hesitantly. “I had a feeling when I saw your notes. I think I used to be part of the same group.”

“Huh?” The two university students froze.

“Assuming the name hasn’t changed, it’s ‘Birdie x2,’ isn’t it?”

“Y-Yes, it’s still called that,” said Maeda, gaping.

“Whoa, I’m getting goosebumps!” exclaimed Takeda, hugging himself.

“You said it was a group for researching Japanese history and spiritual places, right?” asked Hashimoto. “Why is it called ‘Birdie x2’?” He tilted his head.

Just then, assistant director Igawa walked in, talking on the phone. “Huh? Really? Oh, so it’s fine now. In that case, we’ll proceed as planned. I’ll bring Yagashira over when Kajiwara arrives. What? Oh, okay. We’ll see you later, then.” He hung up the call and put the phone on his desk.

“Did something happen, Igawa?” asked Suginami.

“Yes,” he said, putting his hand on the back of his head. “I got a call from Kojima.”

Kojima was a priest at Iwashimizu Hachimangu. Kiyotaka stopped eating and looked at Igawa.

“He said that a monkey appeared on the shrine grounds,” Igawa continued.

“Huh, I didn’t know there were monkeys on that mountain.”

“I’ve never seen one before either.”

“Did it cause any trouble?”

“Apparently it was docile. It didn’t cause any trouble, and it went away

quickly, so it should be fine to go there with Kajiwara.”

“That’s good.” Suginami placed a hand on her chest, relieved.

“Kojima asked to send the volunteers over again, though. Could I get you guys to go to Hachimangu one more time? I’ll drive you there, of course.”

Ishida, Maeda, Takeda, Hosokawa, and Hashimoto looked at him as if to say, “Us?” and Igawa nodded.

6

After finishing our Shokado bento boxes at Kitcho, Kaori and I cheerfully left the restaurant to go back to the museum.

“Holmes really did pay for our lunch, huh?” remarked Kaori. “Not that I wasn’t expecting it.”

“Yeah...”

When we’d asked for the bill after eating, the waitress had said, “Yagashira has taken care of it.”

Kaori shrugged. “Is that okay? I feel kind of bad.”

“Yeah, I do too. But I think Holmes would be happier if we let him treat us.”

“Pretty much. It’s amazing, really. He’s like a guy from the economic bubble.”

“I think it’s because of the owner’s teachings: ‘Save when it’s time to save, spend when it’s time to spend. The wealthier you act, the wealthier you’ll become.’”

“Oh, my grandpa’s like that too. Now that I think about it, Miyashita Kimono Fabrics has had a harder time staying afloat ever since my dad took over, and he’s the shy type.”

“Isn’t part of that because the times are changing?”

“Yeah, but even when my sister was chosen as Saio-dai, dad was like, ‘But it’s going to be expensive.’ He changed his mind after grandpa yelled at him, ‘You’re going to let such a good chance go by?! Are you stupid?!’ I didn’t hear about it until after the whole ordeal, though.”

“Your grandpa really is similar to the owner.”

“Yep. But even though Holmes was taught by the owner, he doesn’t seem the same.”

“Yeah, he has the owner’s teachings wrapped in the manager’s stylishness.”

“He picked the best of both worlds, huh?”

“Exactly.”

We giggled as we entered the museum. Immediately, we heard girls squealing.

Is Holmes doing something again?

I followed their gazes to see Holmes—and the real target of their attention, Akihito.

“Akihito?” I blinked.

The actor looked at us and waved. “Hey there, Aoi and Kaori.”

His dazzling smile made Kaori blush and look down. Even though she was a self-proclaimed fan of good-looking guys, she always stiffened up when she was actually in their presence. I thought she would’ve been used to Akihito by now, but apparently she was nervous again since it had been a long time since she’d last seen him.

“Did you come to see Holmes too, Akihito?” I asked.

“Nah, I’m here for work today.”

“Work?”

Holmes was the one to answer my question. “He’s going to Iwashimizu Hachimangu to perform preliminary checks for *A Fine Day in Kyoto*. I’ll be going with him.”

Akihito put his arm around Holmes’s shoulder and said, “Holmes is gonna be my manager for the rest of the day.” He pulled his disgruntled friend closer and grinned, eliciting more squeals from the women around them.

“Please remove your arm,” Holmes said, brushing the other’s hand away as usual. “Anyway, we’ll be leaving now. Feel free to take your time looking

around. I left the pamphlets on my desk in the office, so just ask someone for them before you leave and they'll—"

"Hey, why don't you two come with us?" Akihito interrupted, looking at Kaori and me.

"Huh?" murmured Holmes, eyes wide in surprise. "Can they?"

Unexpectedly, he was the one asking, not us. It sounded like he was trying to hold back his excitement.

"Yeah, it'll be more fun with girls there, and besides, you're in a better mood when Aoi's around."

"You're a good person, Akihito. I'll treat you to something sometime." Holmes smiled broadly and placed his hand on Akihito's shoulder.

"It's kind of creepy how simpleminded you are when it comes to Aoi," the actor said with a genuine frown.

Kaori and I laughed.

"Aoi, Kaori, would you like to come to Iwashimizu Hachimangu?" Holmes asked, beaming at us.

Kaori put her hand on her mouth, trying to hold back the urge to laugh more.

I've heard that Iwashimizu Hachimangu is famous for warding off evil, but I've never been there myself. I'd love nothing more than to go with them.

"Yes, we'd love to. Also, thank you for paying for our lunch today."

Kaori bowed. "Yes, thank you. You even paid for mine."

"Don't worry about it." Holmes shook his head. "Now then, shall we go?"

We exited the museum and went to the parking lot, where a group of people were getting into a van. There was a man with a nametag and five people of varying ages.

"Are we ready to leave, Igawa?" asked Holmes.

"Yeah." The man nodded. "I'll head over first with the volunteers. You take Kajiwara. Remember to be hospitable." He got into the driver's seat and drove out of the lot.

“Who were those five?” I asked. I’d noticed that one of them was Ishida, the middle schooler who was at Holmes’s lecture.

“Four of them are volunteers, and one of them is on a work experience program. They’re heading to Iwashimizu Hachimangu too,” Holmes answered, opening the sliding door of what seemed like a company van.

“Oh, I call shotgun,” Akihito said, quickly getting into the passenger seat.

“Aoi, Kaori, go ahead.” Holmes gestured at the back seats.

We nodded and got into the car.

“Those volunteers were all different ages, huh?” Akihito remarked while we were driving to the shrine.

“Yes, the only ones who are the same age are the two university students. There’s also a retired man, a housewife in her thirties, and a boy in middle school.”

“So the only thing they have in common is a love of art?”

“Yes. They also have different interests and beliefs, which I found quite interesting.”

Holmes told us what he knew about the five people.

7

After what felt like about fifteen minutes of driving, we arrived at the parking lot in front of Yawatashi Station and got out of the car. The entrance to the path leading to the shrine was right next to it.

“Is this Iwashimizu Hachimangu?” Akihito asked, turning around.

Holmes cleared his throat and said, “I must apologize, Akihito.”

“What?”

“It’s possible to drive higher and park near the shrine building, but most people would take the cable car from here.”

“Oh, so we’re gonna take the cable car. Works for me!”

“No, only Aoi and Kaori will be doing that. In your case, I’d like you to climb from the foot of the mountain to the top, so that you can learn everything about it.”

“How long does that take?”

“Around thirty minutes. If it’s just you and me, we might reach the top in twenty.”

“Whaaat?!” Akihito exclaimed, clearly unhappy. “Why do we have to walk?”

“There are many sights that can only be seen on foot. Since you’ll be presenting this place on TV, your words will carry more weight if you know everything about it.”

“Don’t worry, I’m confident in my persuasiveness.”

“By the way, this shrine excels at warding off evil and bringing guaranteed success. I’m sure it’ll grant you even better luck if you climb up on foot,” Holmes said, looking up at the faraway peak.

Akihito froze. “Well, guess I have no choice but to go. See you later, girls.” He waved at us.

Kaori and I looked at each other and said, “No.”

“We’ll climb with you,” I announced. “We’re wearing sneakers anyway.”

“It’ll be exercise that comes with good luck,” Kaori said.

Akihito brightened up at that. “Oh, going with everyone sounds like it could be fun. Let’s go, then!”

As Holmes had said, there were many sights that could only be seen on foot, including the sacred spring that had existed since before Hachiman had been enshrined there. While we walked, Holmes explained that to the northeast of Kyoto was the “demon gate” Mount Hiei, said to protect against evil influences because northeast was considered an unlucky direction. Mount Otoko, where we were now, was in the opposite direction—southwest—making it the “rear demon gate.” He also told us that Iwashimizu Hachimangu was considered one of the three most important shrines in Japan along with Ise Grand Shrine and

Kamo Shrine.

“It’s up there with Ise and Kamo? I didn’t know that,” I said.

“Me neither,” Kaori concurred. “I only knew that this place warded off evil.”

Holmes shrugged and said, “Just like with Shojo Shokado, it’s a shame that this place’s magnificence isn’t well known. In the past, there was a monk at Ninna-ji Temple who longed to visit Iwashimizu Hachimangu once in his life.”

“Really?”

“Yes, it comes up in the essay collection *Tsurezuregusa*. The story goes that a monk from Ninna-ji Temple longed to visit this shrine. When he did, he saw Kora Shrine at the foot of the mountain, assumed it was Iwashimizu Hachimangu, and returned without ever going to the main shrine at the top of the mountain.”

We smiled at the story. *In a time without cars or trains, it must’ve been difficult to come all the way here from Ninna-ji Temple, yet he mistook the shrine at the bottom for Hachimangu and left without seeing the main building.*

“Poor guy,” Akihito said. “Kind of reminds me of your dad, the manager.”

“My father? Yes, I could see him doing that. The other day, he was brewing instant coffee in the coffee maker and said, ‘Kiyotaka, these beans completely disappeared. How strange.’”

It was an easy sight to imagine, and we all laughed.

Before long, the view of the town below faded and the third *torii* gate came into view. Once we passed through the south entrance, the road ahead of us became a flat, straight line leading to the main shrine building. Its vivid vermilion color made for a beautiful sight this high up the mountain.

“We’re finally here,” said Akihito.

We cleansed our hands and mouths with the purifying water.

“Kiyotaka, Kajiwara!” shouted Igawa, running up to us and waving.

“You made it, Igawa,” said Holmes.

“I should be the one saying that. You climbed up from the bottom, didn’t

you?”

“Yes, I wanted him to get a good look at the shrine. Where are the volunteers?” Holmes craned his neck, looking for the five people.

“They’re in the break room, but first, let me introduce you to someone.” Igawa turned around to look at a man wearing a light blue priest’s outfit. “This is Kojima, the head priest here. He also handles publicity. I’m sure you’ve heard about him, but it’s your first time meeting him in person, right?”

The head priest, a man in his late thirties, said, “I’m Kojima. It’s nice to meet you. I’ve heard a lot about Yagashira, and I’ve seen Kajiwara’s program on TV.” He smiled gently and bowed.

“Nice to meet you. My name is Kiyotaka Yagashira,” Holmes said, returning the bow.

“Oh, this priest is kind of cool,” Kaori said, blushing and covering her mouth.

At roughly the same time, Akihito blurted out, “Huh, I assumed head priests were all old men, but you’re young and good-looking. What kind of stuff do you sing at karaoke?”

Holmes pinched Akihito’s cheek, looking exasperated. “What on earth are you asking him? That came out of nowhere.”

“O-Ow! Okay, but I mean, aren’t you interested in what a priest would sing if he went to karaoke?”

“No, I’m not. Don’t you have anything else to ask?”

“Stop pulling on my cheek! It hurts! You’re destroying my beautiful face!”

The head priest chuckled and said, “I’m not very good at singing, but in social settings, I go with Masaharu Fukuyama’s ‘Sakurazaka.’”

“Oh, for real? You even sing cool songs!” Akihito’s eyes lit up.

Holmes facepalmed. “I’m sorry that you had to answer that question, Kojima.”

“No worries. You two are very good friends, I see.” The head priest smiled in amusement. “Let me show you around.”

We followed him towards the shrine.

Akihito looked up at the vermilion building and squinted as if it were blinding him. “Man, it’s like a heavenly palace.”

“Indeed,” said the head priest. “This shrine was built at the beginning of the Heian period to protect Kyoto’s rear demon gate, and the great Hachiman came here from Buzen Province, which is now Oita Prefecture. As I’m sure you’re aware, Oita is near the sea, but this shrine is on top of a mountain. According to one theory, this shrine was built in the image of the Ryugu-jo undersea palace so that the god wouldn’t miss the ocean.”

“Ohhh,” we murmured, impressed.

Now that he’s mentioned it, it does remind me of Ryugu-jo but on top of a mountain instead of at the bottom of the sea. Maybe Akihito was right to call it a heavenly palace.

The head priest continued walking, leading us up the side stairs to the sanctum. “Here we are.”

We took off our shoes, put on slippers, and went inside.

“Iwashimizu Hachimangu was designated a national treasure in 2016,” explained the priest. “Throughout its long history, which dates back to the early Heian period, it has burned down and been repaired several times. It became what you see today around 370 years ago when it was rebuilt by Iemitsu Tokugawa. The main building is surrounded by a 180-meter-long corridor that’s integrated with the two-story gate, and it’s also connected to the outer building in front and the inner building in the back. This layout is called ‘Hachiman construction,’ and there are four shrines in the country that use it. Iwashimizu Hachimangu is the biggest and oldest.”

Holmes nodded along with his explanation. “I can understand why it was designated a national treasure.”

“Thank you, although it was only a recent endorsement. Over there, you can see the main shrine.”

The shrine was surrounded by a fence made up of vermilion frames and green lattice walls. I turned around and saw the two-story gate behind us. Below,

people were facing in our direction and praying.

“This fence is called *mizugaki*. On the other side is the divine realm of the gods, and the side we’re standing on is the earthly realm. The main deity on the other side is Emperor Ojin. He is accompanied by his mother, Empress Jingu, and Himeo, which some speculate may be the true identity of Queen Himiko. These three gods are collectively called the ‘Hachiman deities.’”

We faced the gods and gently clapped our hands as we listened to the priest’s explanation.

“The carvings above the horizontal beams of the *mizugaki* are another highlight of this shrine.”

As he said, there were several richly colored carvings. The maiden, sun, and moon reminded me of Ryugu-jo, and there was also a crane, tortoise, and hare.

While I was admiring the amazing carvings, Holmes placed a hand on his chest and smiled. “Many of these are the work of Jingoro Hidari, a carver who was active in the Edo period. Their magnificence fills my heart with passion. I’ve heard that there are 150 of them, so you could even call this place his museum,” he said enthusiastically.

“You’re very knowledgeable,” the head priest said with a smile.

Akihito shrugged. “He’s always like this.”

“There are many emblems carved here,” continued the priest. “If you look up at the ceiling, you’ll see the Imperial chrysanthemum emblem, the prime minister’s paulownia emblem, and the similarly historic tachibana citrus emblem.”

We looked up at the emblems. Just as eye-catching as the chrysanthemum emblem was the mitsudomoe emblem that looked like three commas arranged in a circle.

“Mitsudomoe...” I murmured.

“Yes,” said the priest. “That is our shrine’s emblem, the left-flowing mitsudomoe.”

I suddenly remembered something. “Holmes, your family crest is a

mitsudomoe too, right?”

“Yes, but ours is a right-flowing mitsudomoe. The symbols face the opposite direction to this one.”

I looked at the ceiling again. Sure enough, there were many left-flowing mitsudomoe. However, there was also one that was right-flowing.

“Oh, but that one’s right-flowing, isn’t it?” I pointed out.

“You’re right,” said Kaori.

“Huh, so there are both types,” said Akihito.

“It’s written in *Tsurezuregusa* that ‘a building begins to decay after it’s completed,’ so this building was supposedly given an incorrect emblem on purpose to make it seem unfinished,” explained the head priest.

“Oh!” Akihito clapped his hands. “I know about that. I was in a historical drama a while back and found out the Nikko Toshogu Shrine did the same thing. They flipped around one of the patterns on a pillar so that it wouldn’t be perfect.”

“Yes, Nikko Toshogu was also built by Iemitsu Tokugawa, so perhaps he was conscious of that belief.”

“Oh, so it was the same guy. But even though this place was built by Tokugawa, I don’t see the aoi emblem here,” Akihito said, searching the ceiling for the symbol of the Tokugawa clan.

The head priest chuckled and said, “You have a good eye. There is an aoi emblem, but it’s over here.” He turned around and gestured at the two-story gate.

“Huh? Where?” I squinted.

“There’s a single aoi emblem on the gold plate in the middle of the horizontal beam. When people pray at the shrine, the emblem is behind them, so they don’t see it.”

Squinting even harder, I was finally able to spot it.

“It’s said this was done to make Tokugawa’s presence less conspicuous, since

this shrine has been a place of prayer for the Imperial Court since ancient times."

"Huh, so the Tokugawa clan was being considerate," remarked Akihito.

"Yeah," said Kaori.

"Well, it's certainly clever," said Holmes with a faint laugh.

I wonder why he says that?

Next, we walked around the corridors that surrounded the main shrine in the shape of a square. These had been donated by Hideyoshi Toyotomi, who had prayed for his mother's illness to be cured.

"Next, this golden drain spout was donated by Nobunaga Oda," the head priest said, looking up at the drain spout installed between two sections of the roof.

"Whoa, it really is gold," Akihito remarked.

"It's actually a bronze surface coated in gold leaf, but it's said that Nobunaga's instructions were for it to be sold and replaced in the event of wood rot, natural disaster, or any other emergency."

"Huh, I thought Nobunaga Oda was a heartless ruler, but I guess he did have a considerate side," Akihito said, sounding sincerely impressed.

"Well, he wouldn't have gotten so far just by being heartless," Holmes replied. "I think he was extremely proficient at using the carrot and stick approach."

Kaori giggled. "The gap appeal, huh? Just like you."

"I'm not heartless."

"There's a huge gap between your cold and soft sides, man," said Akihito. "You're seriously Aoi-obsessed."

"That's not a nice way to put it, so please say I'm 'Aoi-infatuated.'"

"Hey, stop that!" I looked away, embarrassed, and started walking faster.

There was another row of carvings by Jingoro Hidari along the wall. All of

them were colorful and elaborate.

“There are a lot of birds,” I murmured, looking at the carvings.

“Yes, Fushimi Grand Shrine has foxes as messengers, but here at Iwashimizu Hachimangu, pigeons are the messengers of the gods. That’s why there are so many birds, pigeons included.”

“That’s kind of cute.” I smiled, imagining a bird wearing messenger clothes like Sanjo Street’s mascot character.

“So do you use carrier pigeons here?” Akihito asked.

“No, we don’t.”

We continued down the corridor, and the head priest stopped to look up at the wall outside.

“Please look at the monkey carving over there, which is called the ‘pierced-eye monkey.’ This was the work of Jingoro Hidari too. Legend says that the carving was so elaborate that it came to life, went down the mountain, and started causing mischief in town. The people stuck a bamboo nail through its right eye to keep it in place, and it stopped appearing in town.”

As we listened to the story with smiles on our faces, we looked at the monkey carving.

“It sounds like a common folk tale so far, but there’s more,” he continued.

“Hm?” We turned around.

“When this shrine underwent major repairs in 2011, the pierced-eye monkey was removed from its spot for a period of time. Perhaps because the nail was taken out too, a monkey really did appear on the shrine grounds, which caused quite a stir. After the carving was put back in its place, the monkey stopped appearing.”

“Dang, the pierced-eye monkey’s pretty crazy. Right, Holmes?” Akihito looked at Holmes and frowned. “Huh?”

Holmes was standing perfectly still as if imitating the monkey carving.

“What’s wrong?” Akihito asked.

“Nothing. It’s just...Kojima, is the nail missing?” Holmes asked hesitantly.

The head priest put on a weak smile and said, “You have very good eyesight. Most people can’t tell with the naked eye. Please don’t tell anyone, but the truth is that someone took the bamboo nail out of the pierced-eye monkey.”

“Huh?” We blinked in surprise.

8

We were led to the guest room in the shrine office so that others wouldn’t overhear our conversation. Igawa and the five volunteers were in another room in the office.

“I’m ashamed to admit this, but we don’t know exactly when the nail was taken,” the head priest said with a bitter expression. “Since it’s so high up, it takes very good eyesight to be able to notice with the naked eye. However...” He opened the laptop on the table. “Four days ago, I was giving a tour to a group from Wakayama. One of them had a DSLR camera, and they posted a photo of the pierced-eye monkey to their social media. I know this because they specifically asked for permission to post it.”

He clicked the mouse, bringing up the person’s social media account, which was under their real name. There were several photos of Iwashimizu Hachimangu there, and one of them was of the pierced-eye monkey. Since it had been taken with a DSLR, it had come out beautifully, and we could clearly see the black bamboo nail stuck in the monkey’s eye. The photo seemed to have been taken at around 3 p.m. four days ago.

“The next tour I gave was the following day to a group of five volunteers who came from Shokado Garden Art Museum. There were no other tours between then and now,” he said, closing the laptop.

“So that’s why you called the volunteers back?” Holmes asked.

“Please don’t misunderstand—I’m not accusing the volunteers. I just wanted to see if any of them had taken a picture.”

“I see.” Holmes nodded.

The head priest sighed with a conflicted look on his face. “Then something even more bizarre happened.”

“A monkey appeared on the shrine grounds, right?”

“Yes, it’s as I told Igawa. I didn’t think that there were monkeys on Mount Otoko, and even if there were, they haven’t appeared in the past several years. In fact, this would be the first time since the 2011 incident I mentioned.”

Since the monkey carving was so elaborate, it escaped and caused mischief. The people sealed it in place by sticking a nail in its eye—but when that nail was removed, the monkey appeared again. Is that really possible?

Everyone fell silent. Then there was a knock on the door accompanied by a man’s voice.

“Kojima, do you have a minute?”

“Sorry, let me take care of this.” The head priest stood up and left the room.

“What a weird story,” Kaori murmured. “Why would someone do that?”

“Yeah, I dunno,” said Akihito. “What do you think, Holmes?”

Holmes gave a small shrug. “I don’t know.”

True, there isn’t enough information to go off on.

A while later, the head priest returned to the room and placed a brown envelope on the table. “This was found in the office mailbox,” he said, looking bemused.

“What’s inside?” Holmes asked.

The priest took out the contents: a black bamboo rod and a piece of printer paper folded into thirds. The paper said: *Here is the pierced-eye monkey’s nail. I borrowed it out of curiosity. I’m very sorry for the trouble and I’m returning it now.*

We looked down at it, confused.

“Wait, what?” Kaori asked. “So is the problem resolved?” She looked at Holmes and the head priest.

“I...suppose,” said the priest. “We don’t want to make it into a serious matter

if the nail has been returned."

"But this is kinda unsettling, isn't it?" Akihito said what everyone was thinking. We nodded in agreement.

"May I have a look?" Holmes asked, taking his white gloves out of his inner pocket and putting them on.

"Yes, please do."

Holmes looked closely at the envelope and the paper. There was no stamp or postmark on the envelope. The paper folded into thirds was creased in one place.

"The culprit most likely typed this message in a hurry," Holmes murmured, staring at the paper.

"How can you tell?" asked Akihito.

"Normally when one wants to write an anonymous apology, they'll try to use brand-new paper if possible, because a sheet that's just lying around could have their fingerprints or traces of pen pressure. Printer paper is sold in sets of five hundred, so they would've taken one sheet out, and perhaps because they were hurrying, they caused this crease by grabbing too quickly. However, they weren't thinking calmly enough to take a new piece of paper." He placed the message back on the table.

"But what does that mean?" Akihito pressed. "Why were they in a hurry? Was someone about to catch them in the act?"

"That's a good question," Holmes said, steepling his hands in front of his chin. "Let's assume that one of the volunteers is the culprit. Setting aside the means for now, if we believe what the letter says, they took the nail out of curiosity and put it in their pocket. The carving is very high up, so they may have believed that no one would notice for a while. However, they then heard about a certain event."

"The monkey appearing on the shrine grounds?" I asked quietly.

"Yes, and then the shrine called for the five volunteers to come back."

We nodded in understanding. After the thief had stolen the nail, a monkey

had appeared and the shrine had called them back. It must've been terrifying. That was why the culprit had decided to return the nail before the situation blew up.

"So you suspect those five people, Yagashira?" asked the head priest.

"I think it's quite telling that this apology was placed directly in the mailbox. However—"

"W-Wait!"

Suddenly, the door opened and Igawa came in with the five volunteers. They must have been listening from the hallway.

"Kojima, Kiyotaka, you think one of them took the nail?!" exclaimed Igawa, his eyes wide in surprise.

The five behind him all reacted differently. Ishida, the middle schooler, had an unhappy look on his face as if he were thinking, "I've encountered an annoying situation." Maeda and Takeda, the university students, looked at each other, completely bewildered. Hosokawa, the housewife, frowned as if thinking, "I can't believe this."

Hashimoto, the old man, gave an exasperated shrug and said, "The pierced-eye monkey is so high up. How could anyone take out the nail? If we pulled out a ladder or something, someone would definitely notice."

I nodded. "That's true."

The carving was so high up that you couldn't even see its face clearly with the naked eye. It would be difficult to take out the nail without a ladder.

The others nodded in agreement.

"No," said Holmes. "There are two pillars supporting the roof of the wall, though they are a bit far from the monkey. The front one seemed unstable, but the one in the back is sturdy enough to climb. You could then walk along the roof to get to the carving, although you'd have to be quite nimble."

Akihito gaped. "You really are 'Holmes,' man."

"Well, that means I'm innocent," said Hashimoto, placing a hand on his chest in relief. "An elderly man can't possibly do that."

Akihito furrowed his brow. “Sorry, Holmes, I think I figured out the culprit,” he said with his hands behind his head and his legs crossed.

“Uh...”

“What’s with that reaction? You told us all about the volunteers on the car ride. I already found the answer.”

“Let’s hear your opinion, then,” Holmes said, glancing skeptically at the actor.

“You got it.” Akihito stood up and looked at the group. “First off, these five people all have different motives,” he began, trying to sound like a detective.

“Huh?” The volunteers blinked.

“Let’s start with the middle school boy. I heard that you want to become an artist so much that you practice drawing every chance you get. Four days ago, you encountered a monkey carving that was elaborate enough to come to life. There’s no way you didn’t want to see it up close. So you climbed up the pillar, walked along the top of the wall to the monkey, took the nail while you were at it—”

“What?” Ishida raised an eyebrow. “Are you stupid? Even if I wanted to see it, I wouldn’t climb up there, and besides, I’m not interested in the nail.”

“You’re the stupid one, interrupting me in the middle of my explanation. I considered the possibility, but figured it was too daring for a gloomy kid who cares about what adults think. So that option’s out.”

“Wait, you were just bad-mouthing me for no reason?!” Ishida’s face was bright red. I felt so bad for him.

“Next, the two university students who are interested in history and stuff. Obviously, the pierced-eye monkey piqued their curiosity. It’s conceivable that the girl said, ‘Hey, I want to see the nail in the monkey’s eye,’ and the guy said, ‘All right, I’ll go get it and *nail* your heart,’” Akihito said proudly, pacing around the room.

Holmes stroked his chin.

“Uh, we like history, but not so much that we’d take the nail,” said Takeda.

“Yeah,” agreed Maeda, exchanging looks with her fellow student.

“Well, yeah, I don’t think so either.” Akihito nodded and then looked at Hosokawa. “I heard that online auctions are popular with housewives right now. Have you used them, Hosokawa?”

“Y-Yes...”

“You might’ve stolen it, thinking that the nail from the pierced-eye monkey would fetch a high price. But selling it would expose yourself as the thief, so you held on to it, unable to do anything with it.”

Hosokawa’s eyes widened, then she burst out laughing. “I don’t think that reasoning is very believable.”

“Yeah, pretty much, so it’s not you either. That only leaves one person. It’s you, Hashimoto!” Akihito turned around and pointed at the old man in true detective fashion.

“Me?” Hashimoto pointed at himself, eyes wide in confusion.

“Yes.” Akihito nodded and ran his hand down the old man’s upper arm. “I knew it. You’ve got plenty of muscle. Don’t bother pretending to be an elderly man—you have the strength to climb the pillar.”

“No, I don’t think I can,” said Hashimoto. “Why would it be me anyway?”

“I heard that you were the one trying the hardest to come up with ideas for attracting more tourists to Iwashimizu Hachimangu, the museum, and Yawata City as a whole.”

“I guess.”

“If it became national news that a real monkey appeared in the shrine after the nail was removed from the pierced-eye monkey, wouldn’t that be awesome publicity even if it resulted from a crime?” Akihito’s eyes lit up.

Kaori and I looked at each other. It was certainly the most convincing of the motives so far.

Hashimoto had a troubled look on his face.

“Wow, Akihito’s amazing,” Kaori murmured in a very quiet voice.

“No, that’s not right,” declared Igawa. “After listening to Kajiwara’s

deduction, I figured it out."

"Huh? Figured out what?" asked Akihito.

"The true culprit, of course." Igawa's voice was trembling.

The true culprit?

Everyone gulped in anticipation.

"Who do you think it was?" Akihito asked.

"As you said, it would become quite the news story. The media might even cover the shrine in detail since it's related to the legend of the pierced-eye monkey. I believe that this was the work of someone like Hashimoto, who wants more publicity for Yawata City."

"So it *was* Hashimoto, then?"

"No. Hashimoto *is* spry enough that you wouldn't think he's past retirement age, but I really doubt he could climb the pillar. There's one more person here —someone who knows the most about Iwashimizu Hachimangu and has a strong desire for more people to learn about it..." Igawa gulped and looked at the head priest. "It was you who took the nail...Kojima," he declared.

The head priest's eyes widened.

Kojima, the head priest of this shrine, took the nail. His motive was to create a news story to generate publicity. Was that really true?

The room fell silent. Perplexed, I glanced at the head priest, who looked dumbfounded. He then smiled and said smoothly, "Igawa."

"Y-Yes?"

"You're wrong. It wasn't me."

"What?!"

"Indeed," agreed Holmes. "It wasn't Kojima. If he were the culprit, he wouldn't call the volunteers here."

"Oh, right," I said.

"You're right that I always want more people to know about the shrine," the

head priest said. “But I wouldn’t go against the will of the gods.”

“Wait, I’m wrong? Really? Oh, that’s great. I don’t know what I would’ve done if you were the culprit. I’m so sorry.” Igawa hurriedly bowed.

“It’s all right. From now on, please do call me ‘Suspect Kojima,’” the head priest said with a smile.

Kaori and I held our hands in front of our mouths, trying not to laugh. Apparently, the man we’d thought was a charming priest had the same sense of humor as Holmes.

“Well, he’s a Kyoto man too,” Holmes murmured. I coughed, realizing that he’d read my mind again.

“Wait, so who did it?” asked Akihito. “Was it an outsider, then?” He pressed his temples.

“Well,” Holmes said, crossing his legs and resting his chin in his hand, “as you can see, the nail was returned, and Kojima said that he doesn’t wish to turn this into a serious matter. It may be better to close the case here, but would you mind if I offered my own opinion like Akihito did with his little skit?”

Everyone exchanged looks and nodded.

“Thank you. Please consider this nothing more than my imagination at work.” He slowly stood up. “Let’s say that the culprit is one of these five people. I believe this incident was impulsive rather than planned. They heard Kojima’s story about the pierced-eye monkey and wanted to test if it was true.”

Why did he say “test if it was true” instead of “see if it was true”?

Holmes noticed my frown but continued without addressing it. “I imagine that after the tour of the shrine, the volunteers walked around on their own.” He looked at the five as if asking for confirmation. They nodded. “The culprit found themselves in a situation where no one else was near the carving and thought, ‘I can do this.’ In that case, they must be a very agile person. Akihito was correct in saying that Hashimoto is spry for his age, but I doubt he’d be able to act so quickly. Besides, he’d already known about the monkey, so he wouldn’t be driven by impulse. That removes him from the list of suspects.”

He patted Hashimoto on the shoulder. The old man looked genuinely relieved.

“That leaves Ishida, Maeda, Takeda, and Hosokawa. Ishida may have wanted to see the monkey from up close so that he could use it as a drawing subject. However, even if he did climb up, he wouldn’t need to take the nail with him. He’s the type of person who can remember what he sees, so he wouldn’t be fixated on the nail enough to do such a daring thing. So Ishida is out too.”

He patted Ishida on the shoulder this time, then whirled around to face Maeda, Takeda, and Hosokawa.

“That leaves three people who have something in common. They’re all part of, or were part of, the same university group. It’s called Birdie x2, which is a sort of secret code.” Holmes smiled in amusement and held his index finger up to his mouth.

“A code?” I asked.

“Yes.” He nodded. “Birdie x2 is a reference to ‘Kagome Kagome,’ which begins with the line, ‘Kagome kagome, the bird in the basket.’”

“Kagome Kagome” is a famous children’s game and nursery rhyme song that most Japanese people know.

“Some believe that ‘Kagome Kagome’ contains a great meaning,” he continued. “It’s essentially an urban legend, but it’s said that the location of a treasure is hidden in the song. I suspect that finding this treasure is the goal of Birdie x2.”

“What kind of treasure is it?” Akihito asked, leaning forward.

“Like I said, it’s only an urban legend, but it’s said to be Tokugawa’s buried treasure.”

“T-Tokugawa’s buried treasure?!”

The uninvolved people all blinked in surprise. Meanwhile, Hosokawa, Takeda, and Maeda had sheepish looks on their faces. Since their group name was a code, their treasure-hunting activities probably weren’t public. Instead, they called themselves a group that researched history and spiritual places. In other

words, they were that serious about the treasure.

“Maeda and Takeda’s notebook for their group was labeled with Tokiwa Shrine, Biyo Shrine, Nanryu Shrine, and Susa Shrine. All of those are related to the Tokugawa clan. Also, the notebook was labeled ‘No. 8.’ Perhaps the number one notebook would’ve covered famous places like Nikko Toshogu Shrine and Mount Akagi. When I saw that notebook and heard the name Birdie x2, I assumed the group was trying to find Tokugawa’s buried treasure.” Holmes smiled.

The three group members’ faces went pale.

“Despite existing since Hosokawa’s time in school, the group still hasn’t solved the mystery of the buried treasure. So they turned their attention to Iwashimizu Hachimangu, which the group must not have checked before, and found out that Shokado Garden Art Museum was recruiting volunteers. Takeda and Maeda signed up after hearing that they’d be able to receive training at Iwashimizu Hachimangu. As such, they would’ve been listening intently to Kojima’s explanations.”

“So those two are the culprits?” Akihito asked impatiently.

“Are they?” Holmes tilted his head. “As I said earlier, I feel that the theft was impulsive. Let’s say that a student who was passionate about their university group graduated and eventually got married and settled down. Then, by chance, they met their juniors from that very group and felt their youth come back. They were both surprised and thrilled by the memories of their past self. They also saw that their juniors were investigating Iwashimizu Hachimangu and thought, ‘Could it be?’”

He didn’t name any names, but it was clear that he was talking about Hosokawa.

The woman smiled dryly and said, “In that case, why would that person have to take the nail in the eye?”

“I’ve read about the ‘Kagome Kagome’ Tokugawa theory in a book before, though my memory of it is vague. First, please recall the lyrics.”

Kagome kagome, the bird in the basket

When, oh when will it come out

In the darkness of dawn, the crane and tortoise slipped

Who's behind you?

"The word kagome refers to a basket woven from bamboo. In the book, it said something along the lines of 'Since the bamboo-weaving pattern is a hexagram, you can connect the Tokugawa-related shrines to form a hexagram and Nikko Toshogu is at the center of it'...but I find that rather dubious. There are countless Tokugawa-related shrines, so I couldn't imagine trying to connect them all."

We quietly listened to Holmes's explanation.

"Naturally, the members of Birdie x2 would've also been investigating the Tokugawa-related shrines as a hexagram, and that led them here. Upon arriving, they found that the lattice fence separating the divine realm from the earthly realm was just like woven bamboo. The song goes, 'the bird in the basket,' and here, birds are divine messengers. There are also carvings of a crane and a tortoise, and when you turn around, you see Tokugawa's aoi emblem, which matches the final line, 'Who's behind you?'"

I felt chills run down my spine.

"Unlike the current group members, who had done some research before coming, the former member would've been shocked by the realization. 'This must be the clue to Tokugawa's buried treasure,' they thought."

Holmes paused for a moment. Hosokawa looked down and bit her lower lip.

"The song mentions the 'darkness of dawn,' which would appear to refer to the shadows cast by the morning sun. In that book, it said that it indicated the shadows cast by the crane and tortoise statues at Nikko Toshogu, but perhaps this person interpreted the black nail in the pierced-eye monkey as the darkness of dawn."

Takeda and Maeda nodded in understanding.

"Perhaps they thought that that nail—or the eye itself—contained a major clue to the ultimate treasure. Naturally, they couldn't help themself, could

they?”

“Yeah,” Takeda and Maeda said sadly, seeming to sympathize.

“After that, as I said earlier, they panicked upon being called back to the shrine and returned the nail. That letter may have been simple, but I could tell that it was written by an adult, not a student.” Holmes sighed and looked up. “Well, this is all assuming that the culprit is one of the people here. Thank you for your time.” He finished with that and smiled cheerfully as if he’d been telling a make-believe story all along.

Meanwhile, the woman in question was trembling and looking down.

“Hosokawa, if he’s wrong, you can just say, ‘No, you little twerp!’” said Akihito. “He didn’t name names, but he was obviously talking about you.” He grabbed Holmes’s head, preparing to make him bow.

Hosokawa opened her mouth to say something but immediately closed it and looked back down. “I-I’m...very sorry...” she said, trembling and bowing deeply.

Holmes quickly stood up and opened the door. “The rest of us should leave.”

We nodded and exited the room, leaving only Hosokawa and the head priest inside.

9

“Man, I still can’t believe this was about Tokugawa’s buried treasure,” Akihito said after we left the office. He, Kaori, Holmes, and I were walking around the shrine grounds. “Yeah, I can see why that’d make someone want to take out the nail.”

Holmes chuckled and said, “Even if someone found the treasure, I doubt they’d be able to keep it.”

“It’s all about the thrill of treasure hunting, you know?”

“Yes, I can agree with that. I’m curious about what the treasure is too.” Holmes stroked his chin and smiled.

“Do you think Tokugawa’s buried treasure is here?” Kaori asked quietly.

Holmes tilted his head. “I’m not sure. I can imagine it being at Nikko Toshogu, but it wouldn’t be strange if it were here either.”

“Why wouldn’t it be strange?”

“Because ‘Kagome Kagome’ really did seem to be referring to this shrine. When it asks ‘When, oh when will the bird in the basket come out,’ that can be interpreted as asking when the gods inside the *mizugaki* fence will come out. ‘The darkness of dawn’ refers to ‘the night before dawn’—in other words, before the world changes. Since cranes and tortoises represent longevity and good fortune, the song becomes, ‘When fortune is lost, a new world will come, and the gods’ hidden treasure will come to light.’ If you’ll remember, Nobunaga Oda donated a golden drain spout to sell in case of emergency or disaster. Iemitsu may have been following in his footsteps by suggesting they use the treasure hidden here when the country is in crisis. It’s a little exciting when you think about it that way,” he explained with a chuckle.

The rest of us shivered.

“Whoa, I think I have goosebumps,” said Akihito.

“Me too,” said Kaori, hugging herself.

“Well, it’s all just speculation,” Holmes replied. “However, there certainly is a treasure here, though it’s not buried.” He looked up at the vermilion shrine building. “A palace atop a mountain that a monk longed to visit once in his lifetime. Is Iwashimizu Hachimangu itself not the treasure that Tokugawa built?”

We looked up and gazed at the building.

“Come to think of it, you said that Tokugawa’s hidden aoi emblem was clever,” I remarked. “What did you mean by that?”

“Ah, yes. Tokugawa *was* clever. He acted like it was out of consideration for the Imperial Court, but the fact is that he put his gold family crest right in front of the gods. He didn’t care about other people seeing it—he wanted the gods to. Despite that, to the public it seemed like he was being thoughtful. It was very well done.” Holmes sounded genuinely impressed.

The rest of us exchanged glances and burst out laughing.

“Is something the matter?” he asked.

“No, I was thinking that it’s just like you to say that,” I answered, giggling.

“Yeah,” agreed Kaori.

Holmes smiled and said, “Well then, shall we pray at the shrine and draw their famous pigeon fortunes?”

“Okay,” we said, following him to the shrine.

Apparently, Hosokawa apologized to Kojima, and in exchange for forgiving her crime, he told her to purify herself by spending a month cleaning the shrine grounds. The nail was returned to its place in the monkey’s eye, and mysteriously, the wild monkey stopped appearing in the shrine.

“All right, I’ll propose a plan to the program staff when I get back,” Akihito said enthusiastically, pumping his fist. We were in the car on the way back to the museum.

“I wouldn’t recommend talking about Tokugawa’s buried treasure,” Holmes warned him.

“Yeah, I know. First, I’ll have to sort out the pictures I took.”

I saw Holmes’s gentle smile in the mirror. “I’ll have to work on my project too,” he said.

“What project?” asked Akihito.

“It’s for the museum. I’ll be handling a one-day event.”

I remembered the proposal he’d given the owner and chuckled. “Did the owner approve?”

“Yes.”

“I knew you could pull it off.”

“Thank you.” He smiled happily.

After that, Akihito attracted public attention for Iwashimizu Hachimangu

through his program, and Holmes held his event at Shokado Garden Art Museum. The event was called The Treasures of Legendary Appraiser Seiji Yagashira. It included an exhibition of the owner's treasures and a lecture from the man himself. Surprisingly, the owner had never received such an offer before, so he had gladly agreed to do it.

Many important figures in the art industry were invited, and since they were going all the way to Yawata City, they visited Iwashimizu Hachimangu and Shokado Garden Art Museum while they were there. It was Holmes's idea to hold the lecture in a tearoom so that the guests could eat Shokado bento while listening, which was very well received. All in all, the event was a huge success.

"Thank you for having me."

During his three months of training at Shokado Garden Art Museum, Holmes had held several successful lectures and borrowed display pieces from various art collectors, including the owner's rival, Yanagihara, and Rikyu's grandfather, Ukon Saito. The museum staff were sad to see him go, and they held a grand farewell party for him.

"Thanks for all your help, Kiyotaka," said Igawa.

"Please come back to visit us anytime," Suginami added.

"Yes, of course."

And with that, Holmes was off to his next placement...but that's a story for next time.

Chapter 2: Little Holmes

1

“Today, you have a conference at 10 a.m., lunch with a client company’s director at 11:30 a.m., a meeting at Company A at 2 p.m., an appointment at Kyoto Okura Hotel at 3 p.m., and—”

“Kiyotaka, it kills my motivation if you tell me everything at once,” Kunimitsu Ueda said with a sigh, slumping his shoulders at his secretary’s words. “Just tell me what’s next in my schedule after each thing’s over.”

“Understood.” Kiyotaka Yagashira closed his notebook. The dark suit, blindingly white shirt, and modest necktie looked great on him.

Kiyotaka was currently working at UED Consulting as secretary to the company director, Kunimitsu Ueda.

“You’re using a paper notebook in this day and age?” his boss asked as they walked down the office hallway.

“Yes. I could use a tablet, but since I’m old-fashioned, I feel more comfortable with this.” He slipped the small, black, leather notebook into his inner pocket and opened the door to the director’s office. “You have a packed schedule today, but you can relax until the conference begins at 10 a.m. Please have a nice cup of coffee.” He immediately began preparing the drink.

Ueda sat down at his desk and watched Kiyotaka elegantly handle the coffee maker. *He’s really grown up*, he thought with a smile. At the same time, he recalled a conversation from long ago:

“How many stairs does my house have?” he had once asked Kiyotaka. The young boy had wanted to be quizzed more, so Ueda had casually asked the question, expecting him to run to the stairs to count—but this boy was different from other children.

“Fifteen!” he had answered immediately, his eyes shining.

The hint of pride in his face was startlingly similar to her*...Kiyomi. Ueda hurriedly closed his mouth before he could say her name by accident. It was only natural that they were similar. She was his mother, after all.*

He smiled at the memory of the past.

"Here you are," said Kiyotaka, placing the coffee in front of him.

"Thanks," Ueda answered, picking up the cup. *When was that again?* he wondered as he spun his chair around, staring at the ceiling.

"If you spin that much, you'll get dizzy and fall down."

"No, I won't. Don't treat me like an old man. You're just as bratty as you were as a kid." *Oh, that's right.* He stopped spinning. *It was when he was in elementary school.*

Takeshi had brought Kiyotaka to his house to play. It wasn't his first time meeting the boy—that had been at Kiyomi's funeral when Kiyotaka was two years old. He remembered being surprised by how much the boy had grown in just a few years.

Why did Takeshi bring him to my house in the first place? Ueda stood up and looked out the window, trying to sift through his vague memories. Below him was a view of Umeda, one of Osaka's major commercial districts.

When Ueda had heard that the owner was looking for people to hire Kiyotaka on a temporary basis, he'd thrown his hat in the ring right away. He had already been wishing he could hire Kiyotaka as a secretary, and his current one was on maternity leave, so the timing had worked out well.

Kiyotaka's only going to be here for three months. No matter how smart he is, it's still his first year out of school. By the time he's learned the job, he'll be going to the next place...

Or so he'd thought, but they were a month and a half into the term and Kiyotaka had performed his secretarial duties flawlessly from the very beginning.

He's always been perfect at everything, Ueda thought, sitting down in his chair again. "Oh, right." He clapped his hands. *When I met Kiyotaka, I was*

married to my ex-wife. Takeshi came to see the house we built in Tezukayama, bringing his son with him. "I was really surprised when I saw you as an elementary schooler," he sighed, sipping his coffee.

"What was so surprising?" Kiyotaka asked calmly, looking at the laptop in front of him.

"Oh, nothing."

Ueda took a notebook out of the drawer and opened it to a photo that was tucked inside. It was a picture of him and an intelligent-looking woman with short hair and fair skin. They were standing a bit apart with reserved smiles on their faces. This was Kiyotaka's mother, Kiyomi.

For Ueda, it'd been love at first sight. When he first saw her on the university campus, his breath had been taken away. She had snow-white skin, sharp jet-black eyes, and a slender, tall frame. She'd seemed like a smart, beautiful woman, but what had struck him the most was her short shiny black hair. She had grown it out later on, but...

Kiyotaka really is the spitting image of her.

"We should head to the conference room," the young man said, standing up.

"Gotcha." Ueda nodded, tucked the photo back into the notebook, and returned it to the drawer.

2

It was about seventeen years ago when my close friend, Takeshi Yagashira, visited my new house.

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Ijuin. I've heard about you from my husband, and I'm a fan of your work," my wife greeted him with a smile. She then looked at Kiyotaka, who was standing next to the author. "And hello, little Kiyotaka. What a sweet boy you are."

As she'd said, Takeshi's son was an adorable little boy who had pretty, almost feminine features.

"Right, dear?" she prompted me.

“Yeah,” I answered. I was staying calm, but it took everything I had to hide my unease. *How can he look so similar to Kiyomi?*

“It’s been a while, huh?” Takeshi said in his usual gentle tone of voice. “Congratulations on the new house.”

Next to him, Kiyotaka quickly bowed and said, “Hello. Thank you for inviting us today.” He didn’t raise his voice, but it was clear and strong without being annoying.

“Come inside,” my wife insisted.

Kiyotaka took off his shoes and placed them neatly at the edge of the entryway. From his greeting and manners, I could tell how well-disciplined the child was. I passed by Takeshi and whispered, “He looks just like Kiyomi.”

Takeshi nodded slightly and said, “Yeah,” with a sad smile on his face. Perhaps it was both a happy and sad thing for his son to resemble the woman he’d loved and lost.

Kiyotaka walked quietly behind the adults, looking around the house curiously but subtly.

“Pretty nice place, eh?” I tapped him on his little back.

He smiled and said, “Yes, it’s a very nice house.”

I wasn’t sure if I was surprised or not by the inoffensive response that seemed to have been prepared in advance. He was exactly the kind of “good kid” that adults hoped for.

I don’t really like “good kids.”

I rolled my eyes and shrugged.

“Ueda, do you like Vories?” he asked me.

“Huh?” I squeaked.

“I’m sorry if I’m mistaken, but this house reminds me of Vories.”

I was flabbergasted. Vories—full name William Merrell Vories—was an American missionary and architect who had worked on a number of Western-style buildings during the Meiji period. His creations were all over the Kansai

area, and they were all brilliant. As Kiyotaka had said, I admired the man's work very much.

Despite my surprise, I felt the urge to tease this smug little brat. "Which part reminds you of Vories?"

There were many other architects active in the Meiji, Taisho, and Showa periods. For example, Goichi Takeda, who had worked on Kyoto City Hall, Alexander Nelson Hansell, and James Gardiner. Their works gave off a similar impression at first glance.

He probably doesn't know anything about Vories besides the name, I thought, but I soon regretted asking such an immature question. *What am I doing? He's just a little kid.*

"Vories originally came to Japan as an evangelist. Not only are his works beautiful in appearance, they seem to pursue quality and efficiency as well. Your house's old-fashioned design reminds me of missionary architecture, and it's very efficient, which made me think of Vories," the young Kiyotaka answered without hesitation.

Before I knew it, my eyes and mouth were wide open. Next to me, my wife also stopped in her tracks, seemingly amazed.

Takeshi scratched his head weakly and said, "Sorry, we're always surrounded by experts, so I ended up raising a precocious child."

"O-Oh..." *I did hear that the owner was taking the kid around with him. But I think this goes beyond "precocious." I get that he's smart, but I don't like this kid.* I couldn't help but frown.

Kiyotaka quickly shut his mouth and looked down with a slight grimace, seeming to regret being too cocky. It was as if he'd immediately guessed what I was thinking, which made me grimace too. I thought of Kiyomi again.

"What kind of man is your type?" I asked.

"A gentle and dense person," she answered.

"Dense?"

She chuckled. "I'm more sensitive to things than the average person, so I don't

like people who are as perceptive as I am. I feel more comfortable with people who are kind and oblivious."

True to her word, she had married Takeshi, a gentle and oblivious man. Even now, the memory gave me a burning sensation, and I let out a small gasp at the realization of how dense *I* had been. *That was her roundabout way of saying she wasn't comfortable with me...*

My feelings for Kiyomi remained unfulfilled. I guess I still regretted never being able to touch her skin or lips before she got married to my close friend. After she passed away, I thought I'd completely forgotten about her, but seeing her lookalike son fully brought back my feelings, as if I'd traveled back in time.

Genetics are amazing, but sometimes they can be terrifying. Even though he wouldn't remember being raised by her, he was the spitting image of her in both appearance and mannerisms. And now he was sitting on the sofa, completely quiet. He'd probably been hurt in the past by disapproving looks from adults because of his unchildlike behavior. He was behaving himself now, not trying to join our conversation, yet not looking bored.

How many times has he been brought to adult gatherings like this? He was so well behaved that I actually felt sad looking at him.

While my wife and Takeshi were chatting, I got up and crouched down in front of him. "Hey, kiddo, have you ever laughed out loud?"

He blinked at my sudden question and then smiled, his eyes narrowing into arcs. "I have."

"Really? Can't imagine it. Mind if I try to make you laugh?"

"Go ahead." He nodded awkwardly.

"Here's uncle's best weird face." I pulled my cheeks outwards with both hands and put on the best flounder impression I could.

My wife and Takeshi burst out laughing, but Kiyotaka only offered a reserved smile and said, "That's an interesting face."

"Ugh, what a calm kid. Just you watch, I'll make you laugh."

This time I took a forceful approach, tickling him.

“Wait, stop that. Stop—ha ha! Aha ha ha! Please have mercy!”

As I tickled his armpits and stomach, he finally laughed out loud, his face bright red as he wriggled around.

“Oh, so you *do* know how to laugh.”

“That wasn’t fair!” He pouted and glared at me, probably embarrassed. Thanks to his flushed cheeks, he finally seemed like a kid, which made me happy.

“Hey, Kiyotaka, do you like airplanes?” I asked, peering into his young face.

“Airplanes? Yes, I suppose.”

It was an answer that implied, “I don’t especially like them, but I don’t hate them. If I have to choose one or the other, I like them.”

I grinned and lifted him up. “Well, now you *are* one!” His body was lighter than I had expected, so it was easy to swing him around.

“Hey, Ueda!” the boy exclaimed. He was horrified at first, but he soon gave up and started to enjoy it. His eyes sparkled.

“Whoa, crash landing! Oh, nice recovery!”

Kiyotaka laughed innocently as we played. Relieved by his smile, I put him down and said, “Time to land.”

“Again, Ueda! I want to be an airplane again!” He clung to my leg and begged like any ordinary kid would.

Maybe no one’s ever played with him like this before. What a cute kid.

“All right, but just one more time.” I picked him up again.

After that, Kiyotaka finally felt like a normal kid his age. When we were done playing airplane, I gave him some riddles and quiz questions, but being the genius he was, he solved them right away.

“Do you have any other questions?” he pressed me, his eyes gleaming. “I like the ones you ask!”

That face of his made me want to listen to his every request, but I really was getting tired at this point, so I smiled wryly and said, “I don’t have any more.”

“Aww...” He sounded disappointed.

“Fine, but this is the last one, and you gotta answer within ten seconds. How many stairs does my house have?”

“Fifteen!” he answered instantly.

I didn’t know what to say. I was sure that he’d run off to count them. It was the right answer—my house did have fifteen stairs.

“You can’t just take a shot in the dark!”

“I didn’t! I saw them before.”

“You can tell how many stairs there are just by looking at them?”

“Um, of course?” He frowned like it was completely normal.

“You’re just like Holmes, kiddo.”

“Holmes?”

“Sherlock Holmes. You know him, right?”

“I know of him, but I haven’t read the books.”

“Huh, that’s surprising. The main character is a detective with a unique observing eye, just like you. All right, from now on, I’m calling you Holmes.”

I patted the boy on the back. In all honesty, the nickname was an out for me. It was a way to prevent myself from accidentally calling him “Kiyomi.”

When the sun began to set, I opened the sliding door to the yard and said, “Let’s have a barbecue.”

That had been the plan from the start, so the preliminary work was already done. My wife took the tray of prepared ingredients out of the fridge. I lit the fire and looked at Kiyotaka, expecting a happy face, but I got the opposite.

“What, you don’t like barbecues?”

“I’ve never done it before.”

“Oh, so it’s your first time. Today’s your lucky day, then.”

“Is it sanitary to cook and eat food outside?” he murmured hesitantly.

“Heat kills germs, so it’s fine.”

He frowned, seeming unconvinced. At first I was annoyed, thinking this kid was a clean freak, but I quickly remembered Takeshi telling me that the owner had been overprotective of him since Kiyomi had passed away from a cold that had gotten progressively worse. He hadn’t been allowed to go to bacteria-ridden places like nursery school or kindergarten; instead, he had accompanied the owner everywhere. Because of that, he was constantly catching colds now that he was in elementary school without any resistance to germs.

The owner was a daring man, so I couldn’t believe he had such a sensitive side to him. His daughter-in-law’s death must have been so shocking that he’d become afraid of losing his grandchild too.

I guess it’s not the kid’s fault he ended up a clean freak, considering how he was raised.

“Come here, Kiyotaka,” I beckoned.

The boy nervously approached me.

“Will you help me start the fire?” I asked, picking up the tongs.

His eyes widened in surprise. “Can I?” He’d probably never been allowed to go near fire before because of the danger.

“Yep, put on these gloves and use the tongs to put charcoal on the—oh, crap.” I facepalmed.

“What’s wrong?” Kiyotaka tilted his head.

“I forgot to buy a firelighter. This’ll be tough without one.”

“Is it hard to start a fire without one?”

“Yeah, we can burn newspaper and use that, but it’ll take a ton of effort. We’ll have to give up on the barbecue and cook with the hot plate inside,” I said, patting the boy on the head.

He frowned for a bit before saying, “Oh, we might be able to start the fire quickly with newspaper if we do this.” Using the tongs, he laid out the relatively flat pieces of charcoal, then arranged the rest in the shape of a well surrounding them. “Try putting the burned newspaper in the middle.”

“Gotcha.”

I lit a piece of newspaper on fire and put it inside the well. The flame continued to burn vigorously, igniting the charcoal with a crackle in a matter of minutes.

“That really was fast,” I remarked.

“Yay!” The boy pumped his fist, eyes sparkling.

“Kiyotaka, help me fan the flames.”

“Okay!”

My wife and Takeshi laughed as they watched us.

“They look like father and son,” said my wife.

That seemingly innocuous remark made my heart ache, but at the same time, it filled me with an inexplicable sense of joy.

Once the fire was stable, I put down the wire mesh and let Kiyotaka grill the meat and vegetables. He was having fun, but he also seemed to be worrying about sanitation again.

“Kiyotaka, it’s good to be clean, but that doesn’t mean cleanness is everything. The world’s full of germs, and in order to fight ’em off, you gotta take some in and overcome them. The reason you’re weak is ’cause you weren’t exposed to enough germs growing up.”

He nodded.

“I dunno if the owner’s worried about you, but when he was your age, he was playing in the mud, and look how healthy he is now. Listen up, Kiyotaka,” I said in a strong tone of voice. “It’s all about balance. Stay clean, but don’t be scared of germs.”

Kiyotaka looked straight up at me. He was a smart kid, so I was sure he understood what I meant. After some time, he nodded firmly and said, “I understand.”

As I thought.

While stuffing his face with the meat and vegetables he had grilled, he

grinned and said, “It’s delicious. I can’t get enough of it.”

I knew it was shameless of me, but I found myself wishing that I could be another father figure to him.

3

After that, whenever I had time, I went to Kyoto and visited the antique store Kura in Teramachi-Sanjo. Kiyotaka always went there after school instead of going home. He’d sit at the end of the counter and do his homework or read a book.

“Hey there, Holmes,” I said as I came in.

“Ueda, would you please stop calling me that already?”

Whenever he said that, it meant there was a new customer in the store. Anyone who didn’t know me would be startled by a grown man calling out to “Holmes” upon coming in. So Kiyotaka would always tell them, “He only calls me that as a nickname.”

Knowing all of this, I said, “What’s the big deal?” and sat down beside him.

In front of me, Takeshi was writing his manuscript as usual. It had been three years since his debut as an author, and he was already a popular history novelist.

Kiyotaka noticed that his father was focused on his work and stood up, asking, “Are you fine with coffee, Ueda?”

“Sure, thanks.”

Recently, Kiyotaka had begun brewing coffee. I smiled as I watched him go into the kitchenette, thinking about how he’d grown in the short time I hadn’t seen him. *Before long, he’ll become a man and look less like Kiyomi.* It was a sad thought, yet I wanted it to happen soon.

The customer, a woman in her forties, nervously approached the counter and said, “Excuse me...”

However, Takeshi was absorbed in his writing and didn’t notice her.

Is this guy even capable of watching the shop? I groaned inwardly as I tapped him on the upper arm. “Manager, you’ve got a customer.”

“Oh, I’m sorry.” He put his hand on his head apologetically, seeming like he really hadn’t noticed. “Please have a seat,” he offered, gesturing to a chair.

Kiyotaka came out from the kitchenette holding a tray. He’d prepared coffee for the customer as well. After placing the cups in front of everyone, he silently sat back down at the end of the counter so that he wouldn’t be in the way.

I couldn’t help but put on a strained smile. *This kid is the complete opposite of the dense Takeshi.*

“I’d like to request an appraisal,” the woman said stiffly. It was probably the first time she had brought something to an antique store.

“Our appraiser is currently away, so we’ll hold on to the item for now. May I have a look at it first?”

“Y-Yes, here it is.” She nervously took a bundled-up towel out of her bag. “It belonged to my father before he passed away, and I’m wondering if it could be a real Raku tea bowl.” She gently unwrapped the towel, revealing a short, cylindrical, jet-black tea bowl with an unpolished texture. It was reasonable to think it could be Raku ware.

Is it real? I leaned forward a bit, observing the item from afar.

“Ah, even I can identify this. It has a similar aura to Raku ware, but it’s not,” Takeshi answered smoothly.

Holy crap! Takeshi was always depressed about not being able to appraise. When did he learn how?

“Does that mean it’s fake?” the woman asked, disappointed.

“Not exactly... Err...right, it’s an imitation.”

It was weird how stilted Takeshi’s speech was.

“Um, how much would I get if I sold it?”

“Err, let’s see...” He glanced at the end of the counter, where his son was sitting.

Kiyotaka quickly held up an open hand in a way that the customer wouldn't see it.

"Fifty thousand—" Takeshi started, but his son immediately shook his head. "Oh, sorry. It would be about five thousand yen." He cleared his throat to distract from his mistake.

"I see..."

A quality Raku tea bowl could easily go for seven digits. The woman slumped her shoulders in disappointment and left the store.

I looked at Takeshi, dumbfounded. "Did you just...ask Kiyotaka?" *For an appraisal?* I was so shocked that I couldn't even finish my question.

Takeshi laughed weakly and said, "He's always had a good eye, and thanks to dad's special education, he's a great connoisseur despite his age. Even dad's friends are singing his praises."

You would normally expect a parent to sound proud of that, but Takeshi's tone of voice was nothing of the sort. At first, it seemed like he was simply lamenting the precociousness of his child, but there was something lurking behind that—jealousy, probably.

I suddenly remembered Takeshi's debut work: a story about a teacher who was hopelessly jealous of his genius apprentice.

"Oh..." *So that was a story about you.*

Takeshi must have loved Kiyotaka, who resembled his beloved late wife, more than anyone could imagine. But even though he loved his son, he was jealous of the boy's natural talent. There must have been nowhere for his inner struggle to go, so he'd taken up the pen to vent it all out.

I nodded subtly to myself, finally understanding why Takeshi had started writing novels. I remember being surprised when he'd won an award, but at the same time, it hadn't seemed strange. He had always been the artsy type. At first glance, he seemed like a nice, mild-mannered man with no special features, but he was pretty good at the cello, which his foster parents had taught him. Everyone had been amazed when he'd played it at a university event because he was so different from his usual self.

“I didn’t know Yagashira had such a skill... How wonderful,” Kiyomi had murmured enthusiastically, holding her hands in front of her face as if praying. That was probably what had attracted her to him in the first place.

Disgusted by the stinging pain in my chest, I looked at Kiyotaka, who was quietly reading a book. The title on the cover was *Sherlock Holmes*. Suddenly, my heart was filled with affection. He really did resemble Kiyomi with those downcast eyes of his.

I sighed. *This kid is gonna be the end of me.*

4

Some time after that, I divorced my wife. Our marriage hadn’t even lasted three years. There were several contributing factors, but the final nail in the coffin was the fact that I cheated. I had to sell the house in Tezukayama to pay the huge settlement.

Before the sale, I invited a bunch of friends to the house for what I called a scold-and-console-this-stupid-man party. Takeshi and Kiyotaka came too. The only things left in the bare-walled living room were a table and a sofa. My friends chowed down on the food I’d ordered, drank champagne and wine, laughed about how stupid I was, and patted me on the shoulders and back. If any women were around, they would probably have glared at me and aired their criticisms, but only men were there. They showed sympathy, I guess because they could understand how I felt even though they wouldn’t have done something so dumb themselves.

“Were you putting up with it for too long?”

“Nah, it really is my fault. My wife was good to me.”

As I talked to my friends, Kiyotaka stared at me from a short distance away. I noticed his gaze, walked up to him, and said, “Thanks for coming to such a heavy gathering. It’s not good for your upbringing, though. Actually, I guess it’s a good example of what *not* to do.” I laughed and patted his head.

Kiyotaka looked up at me and asked, “Why did you cheat on your wife?”

“What do you mean, ‘why’?” His clear eyes made me feel so dirty. I looked

away in shame.

“Did you do it on purpose?” he continued.

I flinched and squeaked, “What?”

“If you were serious about doing something wrong, you’d make sure you didn’t get caught, right? And even if you did get caught, I think you’d be able to apologize to your wife and convince her to stay.”

My heart pounded furiously as I listened to him.

“Did you cheat on purpose to make yourself the villain so that you could get divorced?”

I placed a hand on my forehead, lost for words. Kiyotaka had seen through me perfectly.

“That’s my little Holmes of Kyoto,” I said with a self-deprecating laugh.

Indeed, I had deliberately gotten caught cheating because it was getting painful to stay with my wife. The final blow had been when she went into my study and looked at the notebook I’d kept ever since my school days. There was a photo of Kiyomi tucked into it. To be precise, it had *stayed* tucked into it. I could never bring myself to take it out.

The photo had been taken at a university gathering before she had started dating Takeshi. It was the only time I’d managed to get a picture of just the two of us. At the time, I’d been hoping to go out with her eventually. She really was cute, smiling and standing next to me with her short hair tucked behind her ears. She’d later grown out her hair, though...because she’d heard that Takeshi liked girls with long hair.

“What’s this picture?” my wife asked with a stern expression. “This girl...looks just like Kiyotaka. Don’t tell me that boy is the child of you and this woman.”

I almost laughed. I couldn’t believe she’d come to that conclusion. If only it were true.

I quickly tried to correct the misunderstanding. I explained that the woman was my first love, which had never bore fruit. That she’d gotten married to my best friend before I’d even had a chance to kiss her. That since I could never

have her, she remained a dazzling existence in my life, and I couldn't throw away the photo.

"In that case, she's a terrible person, having your child while being married to Ijuin. There were girls like that at my school too; they acted pure on the outside but secretly slept around. She must be one of them."

I knew she was only saying that on the spur of the moment, fueled by jealousy. But I couldn't just excuse the accusation. That said, I didn't get angry right then and there. It was my own fault that she'd felt the need to search my desk and say those things. I'd probably made her anxious.

I calmed her down and told her that the woman really was only my first love, we'd never kissed, and I'd simply forgotten to take the picture out after all this time. I also said that it was awfully sad to hear such things said about a woman who was no longer in this world.

My wife broke down in tears and apologized.

"No, it was my fault for making you worried," I said, but it was too late. After that confrontation, my heart distanced itself from her. There was no saving our marriage, which now felt painful to me.

I sighed and looked down at Kiyotaka, who was still staring up at me. "Are you worried about me?" But before I could continue with, "You're a nice kid," he shook his head.

"I'm not worried."

"Huh?"

"Because...you look like you've had a weight lifted from your shoulders."

I put my hand on my forehead again. *He got me.*

One of my friends barged into the conversation. "Man, you got caught cheating and had to pay a ton for the divorce settlement? Ouch." It was a rude remark, but I preferred that over people treating me with caution.

"Yeah, pretty much."

"Where're you gonna live?"

“I’m gonna camp in my office in Umeda for now.”

“That sucks.”

“Yep.”

Alimony in the case of cheating was typically one to three million yen if there were no kids, but since I’d agreed to my wife’s demands without a fuss, I’d had to sell the house. It really was the worst possible situation from an outsider’s point of view, but I didn’t feel all that depressed.

“Wanna buy a painting while you’re spending all that money? Think of it as making a fresh start.”

My friend was an art dealer, and every now and then he offered me a good piece that came in.

“A painting?”

“Yeah, it’s by one of the artists you like. It’s in the car—mind if I bring it in?”

“Sure, go ahead.”

I loved art, though I had no eye for it. *Maybe he’s right; it could be a good idea to buy a painting with the little money I have left and make a fresh start.*

My friend went to his car and brought the painting into the living room. He cleared some space on the table and put down the cloth-wrapped canvas.

Others gathered around, laughing and saying things like, “Oh, you brought a painting?” and “You’re selling Ueda art at a time like this?”

“It’s a good one,” he said. “You’ll definitely want it.” He grinned and unwrapped the cloth, revealing a painting of a Japanese woman sitting at a table and facing the viewer in a pose that reminded me of Audrey Hepburn in *Breakfast at Tiffany’s*. The art style was so distinctive that even a layman like me could instantly tell who had painted it.

“Léonard Foujita, right?” I asked.

“Yep.”

The artist’s original name was Tsuguharu Fujita. He was a Japanese painter who was active in Paris during the first world war and caught the attention of

Picasso at his first solo exhibition. His most famous works were *Reclining Nude* and the New York-inspired *At the Cafe*. This painting had the exact same composition as the latter, but the model was different.

"This is said to be Foujita's wife, Kimiyo," he explained.

My heart thumped. Léonard Foujita was known for being a man of many relationships. None of his marriages had lasted long until his fifth and final one, when he met his soul mate, Kimiyo. Many people had probably considered him frivolous, but I felt like I understood him and what it was like to think, "This might be the one," only for it to not work out. Even if he swore eternal love, in the end, he couldn't stay with them. But Kimiyo was different. *Will I be able to meet my own Kimiyo one day?*

"How much?" I asked, looking down at the painting.

My friend held up three fingers.

Three million. I think I can manage that somehow.

"This painting is a homage to Léonard Foujita, I see," said Kiyotaka. "Does three fingers mean that you're charging thirty thousand?"

Everyone looked at the boy, surprised.

"No, little guy. This isn't a homage; it's an actual Foujita painting," my friend replied with a smile.

"But this isn't Foujita's work." Kiyotaka pointed at the woman's skin. "The most important characteristic of Léonard Foujita's paintings is the milky-white skin. He never revealed the secret behind it, but it's said that he blended calcium carbonate and white lead into the paint. This painting tries to come close to his style and skin color, but it's definitely not the same."

Everyone was stunned.

"This painting conveys that it was made out of pure aspiration, not malice," Kiyotaka continued. "It's probably the work of someone who admired Foujita. Since they painted Kimiyo in the composition of *At the Cafe*, they must've admired Foujita's way of life as well. It's not a counterfeit, and I think it's a good painting. It'd be worth thirty thousand, Ueda." He grinned.

My friend was clearly flustered. “Wh-Who is this kid?”

“This is Takeshi’s son, Kiyotaka Yagashira,” I said, putting my hand on the boy’s shoulder. “In other words, he’s the grandson of *that* owner.”

My friend’s eyes widened. “The grandson of nationally certified appraiser Seiji Yagashira...”

Everyone in the art industry knew the owner’s name. People had also been talking about how he brought his grandson with him everywhere.

“O-Oh, well, he’s pretty smart. I was joking when I said it was a Léonard Foujita painting. Like he said, it’s a homage. So how about thirty thousand?”

Based on his response, he’d known all along that it wasn’t a Foujita painting. His lie was so painfully obvious that it was embarrassing to see, but I nodded and said, “Yeah, it’s a good painting even if it’s not Foujita. I’ll buy it.”

I’ll buy this painting, but our friendship is over, I thought as I picked it up.

5

After that, all of my friends, other than Takeshi and Kiyotaka, left. Takeshi didn’t have much alcohol resistance, so he was sleeping like a log on the lone sofa. The painting I’d bought for thirty thousand yen was leaning against the wall. Kiyotaka looked at it, frowning.

“You’re a nice person, Ueda,” the boy said.

“Because I bought the painting?”

He nodded.

“It’s not by Foujita, but it still took me in,” I explained. “I bet I’d be furious if I’d paid three million only to find out the truth later, but for thirty thousand, I think it’s a really good deal. Thanks, Kiyotaka.” I patted his head and turned to the painting. “I’m gonna hang it in my office in Umeda. It’ll represent a fresh start.”

“Do you want to get married again, Ueda?” he murmured, still looking at the artwork.

I smiled wistfully and said, “Not now, but it’ll be great if I feel up to it one day.”

The boy looked at me without saying anything. Though he was mature for his age, his eyes were full of innocence.

“Remember this, Kiyotaka: there’s a saying that being loved in a marriage makes you happy, but I think that generally applies more to women.”

He nodded.

“Even if a woman marries the man she loves the most, she still won’t be happy if he doesn’t show her any love. In that case, it’s better to marry the person who’ll love her the most, even if she only loves him second or third best, and receive all of his love. Now, I’m sure there are exceptions, but I think most women are like that. But for men, it’s the opposite.”

“The opposite?”

“Yep. If we don’t marry the woman we truly, *truly* love, we can’t be happy. Heck, most of us can only put in effort or put up with things if it’s for the sake of the girl we love. Just look at Takeshi. He married the woman he loved the most, so even though she’s gone now, he still seems happy.”

I looked at the man sleeping on the sofa. *I’m so damn jealous.*

“So, Kiyotaka, make sure you marry the girl you love the most,” I declared, looking back at him. “If it’s just dating, you can go with the second or third best. And sometimes you’ll truly fall in love with a girl after dating her. Men are simple, so we tend to grow fonder of people who love us. But you can’t compromise when it comes to marriage.”

“Okay.” He nodded and looked at Takeshi. “But do you really think dad is happy?”

“Yeah. He’s got you, after all.”

Kiyotaka smiled shyly. His face looked so similar to Kiyomi’s that I choked up.

“Do you remember Kiyomi...your mother?”

I hadn’t intended to ask such a heavy question, but it came out of my mouth before I realized it.

The boy lowered his eyes and frowned sadly. “Only a little. She caught a cold, and when she found out it was the flu, she shut herself in a room in the back of the house. She wouldn’t open the door when I knocked, coughing and saying that she was contagious. I wanted to see her, so I kept knocking, but she never opened the door for me, all the way until she died...” He turned his back to me. “All I remember after that is her lying in the coffin. Her skin was as pale and stiff as a doll.”

I remembered Kiyomi’s funeral and grimaced.

“I know she was worried about my health...but I wanted her to open the door. I wanted to see her even if it meant catching the disease.” His small shoulders were trembling. He must’ve been holding back the urge to cry.

“You can cry if you want to.”

“No. Grandpa always tells me that men aren’t allowed to cry.” He shook his head, still facing away from me.

“He’s right, but it works a little differently. Men are allowed to cry—they just can’t let others see it. I bet even the owner has cried when he was by himself. I have too.” I placed my hands on his shoulders from behind. “Takeshi’s sleeping right now, so I’m the only one here. It’s the same as no one being around. When it’s time to cry, you gotta let it out.” I patted his head and said gently, “You must’ve been lonely, Kiyotaka. You wanted to hug your mom even if it meant catching the flu, right?”

The boy turned around and wailed. I hugged his small frame and stroked his back. As he clung to me and cried, tears welled up in my eyes too. At the same time, for some reason, I felt as though my lingering feelings for Kiyomi had been purified a little. *Is this her guidance?* I wondered. It wasn’t like me to be so sentimental.

After a while, Kiyotaka stopped crying, wiped his tears, and looked away bashfully. “Please don’t tell anyone that I cried,” he murmured, blushing slightly.

“Hmm, I can’t promise that.”

“What?!”

“Fine, I won’t tell the owner and Takeshi. Man’s word.”

His expression relaxed. He looked at the painting again and said, “I hope you find your Kimiyo one day, Ueda.”

He reverted to his grown-up mode so fast. I shrugged and said, “Yeah, you too.”

We glanced sideways at each other and laughed.

It was truly a nostalgic memory.

*

“And that’s how Kiyotaka ended up clinging to me and crying his eyes out, Aoi. He was so darn cute.”

It was 4:30 p.m. and Holmes and Ueda had paid Kura a visit out of nowhere. According to Ueda, they had met with a client at Kyoto Hotel Okura and then dropped by here “as a bit of a treat for Kiyotaka.” He’d then proceeded to reminisce about the past.

“I had no idea that happened,” I said, excited to learn about their past. I *had* found it surprising that Holmes, a clean freak, enjoyed things like barbecues. *So it was all because of Ueda.* I nodded in understanding.

Holmes frowned as he sipped his coffee. “Didn’t you promise not to tell anyone that I cried? What happened to ‘man’s word’?”

“Wrong, I said I wouldn’t tell the owner or Takeshi,” Ueda replied confidently.

“Did you?”

“Uh-huh. From the very beginning, I planned on telling the story to your ‘Kimiyo’ if she ever appeared.” Ueda grinned.

Holmes blinked and then his expression softened.

“Kimiyo?” I tilted my head.

“Léonard Foujita’s Kimiyo,” Holmes explained. “A long time ago, Ueda thought a no-name artist’s painting was by Foujita and almost paid three million yen for it.”

“Wh-What?”

“Hey, don’t tell her about that!”

“I’m telling her because you’re always telling my embarrassing stories and none of your own.”

“They aren’t embarrassing; they’re cute,” Ueda insisted.

Their conversation was so funny that I couldn’t help but giggle. “You really are like father and son.”

“We get that a lot,” Ueda said, seeming somewhat happy.

Holmes smiled and nodded. “Yes, I’ve always thought of Ueda as a second father. Despite how it may seem, I’m very grateful for him. He’s had as much influence on who I am today as my father and grandfather.”

Ueda froze in surprise and looked away, clearly flustered. “H-Huh, that’s the first time you’ve said that,” he murmured, his cheeks turning red. “Oh, uh, we should get going.” He hurriedly stood up.

“Yes,” Holmes said, nodding and picking up his bag.

“I’ll drive. I gotta go get the car, so you can take your time leaving.”

Ueda left the store, practically running away. Holmes and I looked at each other and laughed.

“Ueda’s a really good person, huh?” I remarked.

“Yes,” Holmes said quietly, looking down at me. “Aoi, I’m going to break the rule just this once.”

“What rule?”

The moment I asked that, his lips touched my forehead. My heart skipped a beat.

“I’ll be going now,” he said.

“Okay, see you.” I smiled and waved, my heart beating fast.

The door chime rang as he left. I watched him walk north along Teramachi Street. I didn’t know if it was because of the childhood story I’d heard, but his

back looked bigger and more mature than before. I felt happy and proud, but at the same time, anxious.

I need to work hard too so that I don't get left behind. I clenched my fist.

Chapter 3: Tears of the Holy Mother

1

Founded in 1870, the Metropolitan Museum of Art is one of the world's largest art museums. It's located in New York City on Fifth Avenue and rivals the likes of the Louvre and the Hermitage.

Although I'd been reluctant to take on my grandfather's training regimen, I feel incredibly fortunate to be able to work as a certain person's assistant here, even if it's only for a short time. Such experience is hard to come by.

Kiyotaka nodded in satisfaction as he stood by the wall in the Met's first-floor hall, looking at the older man who was giving a lecture.

"I trust that most of the young curators gathered here today know of Bernard Berenson. He was an art historian active in the early twentieth century as well as an incredibly skilled appraiser. This genius liked extravagance and wasn't bound by common sense or morals. Supposedly, he told his colleagues, 'I cannot explain how I can tell that something is a counterfeit. I can only describe it as a gut feeling.' An appraiser who has this innate ability to spot forgeries is rare. Being able to instantly identify a fake can be considered something of a sixth sense. You can't learn it through studying. You who are gathered here today are valuable people who possess that sixth sense. However, you must be careful, because sometimes, knowledge and common sense will impede your judgment. The world is uncertain—there are always new discoveries that defy common knowledge, and there are times we can only rely on the senses of the chosen ones. Please don't forget to refine your senses of sight, touch, and smell just as much as, if not more than, your knowledge. That is all I have to say." The man cleared his throat. "Ah, one more thing: I wish you a merry Christmas." He smiled, remembering that the holiday was approaching.

The people in the hall gave him a round of applause. Though he'd addressed the audience as "young curators," many of them were not young at all. But as

the speaker would be celebrating his sixtieth birthday soon, perhaps they were young in his eyes.

Kiyotaka clapped too as he made his way to the front with a bottle of water for Thomas Hopkins, former curator at the Met and an influential figure in the art industry. The man was well versed in art museums all around the world.

“Thank you for your hard work,” Kiyotaka said, offering him the Evian water.

“Hmm...” Hopkins frowned and waved his hand. “I was drinking Evian before, but I’m not in the mood for soft water right now.”

Kiyotaka took another plastic bottle out of his bag. “I thought you might say that, so I also brought Contrex.”

“Oh!” Hopkins’s eyes lit up and he accepted the drink. “You really are prepared for everything. Japanese people are all meticulous, but you go above and beyond. Outstanding.” He drank the water.

“Thank you. My teacher has strong whims too, so I’m used to this. By the way, I also have Perrier, so let me know if you feel like drinking carbonated water.” He showed him the inside of his shoulder bag.

Hopkins laughed and said, “When Seiji was asking for places to accept you for training, I came forward out of curiosity. I wanted to see how much that precocious boy had grown up, but I didn’t expect you to be this good.”

“As an assistant?” Kiyotaka shrugged, putting the materials from the podium into his bag.

“That too. Thanks to you, my secretary can take a vacation in peace. But you really are blessed with talent as an appraiser despite your young age. Well, I knew that all along.”

They left the hall and walked down the corridor. The curators who’d been listening to Hopkins’s lecture greeted him as soon as they saw him, to which he responded with a wave of his hand. Since it was a Saturday in December, the museum was very crowded.

Hopkins chuckled at Kiyotaka, who was looking around enthusiastically. “Has it been a long time since you were last here?”

“Yes. The entrance is much nicer now.”

“Yeah, it’s been remodeled. Continuing from where I left off, you’re more mysterious than I thought.”

“Mysterious?”

“Yes. You have a very strong presence, but you’re capable of making it disappear. It seems like you’d have a hard time fitting in, but before I know it, you’ve assimilated. You’re a unique type of person; very elusive. The way you blend in despite standing out reminds me of a chameleon.”

“Another reptile...”

“What do you mean?”

“In Japan, someone often jokes that I’m a snake.”

There was a snicker behind them, and they stopped and turned around to see an Asian man with glasses and an amused look in his eyes. He was wearing a cream-colored jacket, a beige shirt, and beige chino pants. The natural outfit complemented his soft facial features.

“‘Snake’ describes Kiyotaka perfectly,” the man remarked.

“It’s been a while, Shiro Amamiya,” said Kiyotaka, smiling and taking a step forward.

“I cut ties with my dad after he got arrested, so I’m not Amamiya anymore. I’m using my mom’s surname now, so it’s Shiro Kikukawa. Good to see you.”

Shiro extended his hand without shame, and Kiyotaka accepted the handshake.

“I don’t blame you,” said Kiyotaka. “Manipulating people with drugs and brainwashing them into raising money is simply inhumane.”

“You don’t mince words. ‘Simply inhumane’? What about you, then, snake man?”

“Me?”

“Yeah, you seem like you have it in you. You wouldn’t need drugs to brainwash and manipulate people.”

“I’ve done nothing of the sort. Isn’t brainwashing and controlling people what *you* do?” Kiyotaka tilted his head, still smiling.

A twisted grin appeared on Shiro’s face for a second before being replaced by his normal expression. “You really are funny. I’m thinking of going back to Japan soon, so I look forward to seeing you again.” He patted Kiyotaka’s shoulder and left.

Kiyotaka frowned as he watched the man walk away.

“Is he your business rival?” Hopkins asked.

The younger man forced a smile. “Is that what it looked like?”

“At first I thought you were rivals in love, but it seemed unlikely, so I went with business rivals.”

“Not quite.”

“Rivals in the same industry, then?”

“No...that’s someone else.” He thought of Ensho and shrugged slightly.

“He looks friendly at first glance, but he seems dangerous. You may have made a troublesome enemy.”

“Yes, I think so too,” Kiyotaka muttered.

“Well, now that work’s done, shall we go for a drink?”

“I have an interview with an art magazine, so it’ll have to be after that.”

“Oh, you still have work?” Hopkins slumped his shoulders.

“If we’re going to drink later, how about the Top of the Tower bar on the twenty-sixth floor of Beekman Tower Hotel?”

“Why there?”

“It has a great view, and there aren’t many tourists, so we can enjoy it in peace. And the gentleman you wanted to meet always goes there on Saturday nights.”

“You mean...the owner of that Chagall painting?”

“Yes, the owner of the painting you said you wanted to hang in the Met one

day. He said he'd never let go of it, but now that he's getting older, he's thinking it might be better for his precious collection to be displayed in a museum rather than inherited by someone who doesn't care about it. He also let it slip to his friends that he was willing to hear you out just once. If he meets you now, he might feel that it's fate."

"Do you think I can convince him?"

"I'm not sure, but it's worth a shot. I think it's good that another one of the world's treasures has a chance of being seen by many people in a museum."

"While we're at it, do you think we can have your family's celadon one day?"

"I'll think about it."

"Seiji told me that 'I'll think about it' is how Kyoto people say 'Not a chance,'" Hopkins said with a sideways glance.

Kiyotaka laughed without thinking. "Yes. It's not that I don't want it to go to a museum someday, but I have something in mind before that."

"What is it?"

"It's not at the stage where I can tell you yet."

"I see." Hopkins nodded. "Anyway, it's almost the end of your term. You'll be going back to Japan soon."

Kiyotaka had been working as Hopkins's assistant for almost two months.

"I should've gone with the maximum length of three months instead," the older man continued. "How about an extension? New York's a great place to spend Christmas. My wife would love to have you over."

"I'm honored, but there's someone I want to spend Christmas with."

"Oh, that's right. You really have grown up."

"I hope you have a wonderful Christmas with your wife." Kiyotaka chuckled and looked at the corridor. Shiro was no longer anywhere to be seen.

2

“Oh, Holmes is coming back soon?” Kaori asked, sitting across from me and drinking her milk tea.

“Yeah.” I nodded and looked at the garden behind her. We were at the cafe-restaurant next to Kyoto Botanical Gardens, having come here for tea after finishing our classes at university.

Since it was December, the autumn leaves were all gone, and it looked a little sad. It didn’t seem like this place would get many visitors in winter, but the greenhouses were warm all year round, so the plants there were still lovely. The decorative lights were pretty impressive too.

“He’s in New York, right?”

“Yeah.” I drank my warm café au lait.

Last month, Holmes had left for New York. Even though he hadn’t been enthusiastic about the forced training, he *had* seemed really happy to be able to work under Thomas Hopkins, an influential figure in the art world who he respected.

“He said he’ll arrive in Japan on the fifteenth, and he’ll be back at Kura until the new year.”

“That’s great.”

“Yeah. And when I told my family that he’d be coming back, my mom and brother said they wanted to throw a welcome home party for him.” I gave an exasperated shrug.

Kaori burst out laughing. “They want to see him too, huh? Well, he’s a great guy, after all.”

“You say that, but you don’t even like talking to him.”

“Well, in my case, I haven’t gotten over the time he exposed my wrongdoing. If it weren’t for that incident, I might’ve thought he was a nice guy. Then again, he’s still not the type of person I like dealing with.”

I couldn’t help but laugh at her honesty.

“So what’d he say about the party?” she continued.

“I mentioned my mom’s idea and he seemed pretty appreciative, so we really are going to have a welcome home party at my house. It’s on the sixteenth, the day after he comes back to Japan.”

“Oh...but you’re not going to be alone together for your reunion. Are you disappointed?”

“Oh, no. I’m happy just to be able to see him, and I’m really glad he accepted my family’s invitation.”

“Yeah, that’s true.”

“But after that, he said, ‘Oh, but I’m nervous. I have to make sure they don’t find out that I’m black-hearted. I’ll need your help, Aoi.’”

Kaori blinked, looking genuinely surprised. “He tells you those kinds of things?”

“Um, yeah.”

He’s always said that he’s prone to revealing his true thoughts to me, but it feels like it’s been happening more often lately.

“That’s nice,” she said with a smile. “So you guys can spend Christmas together too, huh? Good for you.”

“Yeah.”

“Oh yeah, what’re you getting him?”

“Huh?”

“As a Christmas gift.”

“O-Oh!” *I completely forgot about that!*

“It must be hard to come up with presents for a guy like that.”

“Yeah, he’s too much of a connoisseur.”

“And the presents he gives you are amazing, right? He got you a Mucha lithograph and a Swiss bracelet watch as souvenirs from his travels, didn’t he?”

“Yeah...”

He’s also taken me to a lot of places and treated me to meals. There was the

lunch at the Kibune river terrace (although the manager paid for that one), the dinner in Ponto-cho after seeing the Kaomise, and the dress, shoes, and necklace he gave me for my birthday. Just how much has he given me? I can't keep being on the receiving end, I thought, letting out a small sigh as we continued to chat.

3

December 16th, 4 p.m.

At last, it was time for Holmes to come to my house. This was going to be his third visit. The first time was when he'd dropped by to look at my grandfather's collection before going to Ueda's cafe. The second was when he'd greeted my parents after we first started going out.

"I'm heading out now," I said.

Since our house didn't have room to park two cars, Holmes was coming by bus. I put on my shoes, intending to pick him up from the Shimogamo Shrine stop.

My mother came running from the kitchen. "Aoi, are you sure we should be having seasoned rice and croquettes for dinner? Are those really right for a welcome back party?"

"Yeah, that's why I already made the croquettes." All that was left was to fry them. Why was she questioning it now?

Even though the party was her idea in the first place, mom couldn't decide what to make and told me to ask Holmes what he wanted. I tried asking him directly, but he predictably answered, "I'll be happy with anything."

Then I asked, "In that case, let's make your favorite foods. Can you tell me three of them?"

He listed potato croquettes and seasoned rice with mixed ingredients. "My third favorite food depends on my mood, but I always like those two."

His answer was surprising and at the same time suspicious.

"Are you choosing commoner dishes to be considerate?" I asked. My family wasn't as rich as Holmes's, but we could certainly afford nice sushi. Then again,

it'd probably be hard for him to request that. Maybe my initial question had been a mistake. It would've been easy to buy sushi without asking him, and then he'd be happy too.

"Not at all," he said. "I think you'd get those answers even if you asked my father or Mieko. They're things people usually don't make for themselves even if they like them. Meanwhile, things like hamburger steak can be eaten whenever you go to a Western restaurant. Everyone likes it when someone shares their seasoned or red rice with them."

After his explanation, I finally understood. He'd told me before that he always ended up eating out or making simple dishes like stir fry or grilled fish. The Yagashira family usually didn't eat together, so there was no reason to bother making seasoned rice or croquettes.

"Holmes said he likes them, so it's fine."

Realizing that the conversation with my mother had taken longer than expected, I decided to bike to the bus stop. The walk was a little more than ten minutes, but by bike, it took no time at all.

The winter wind was cold, but the sky was clear today and the sun's rays were warm. I rode my bike leisurely...or so I'd like to say, but unfortunately, it was an old bike, and the squeaking was annoying. It was a gray school-designated model that my parents had bought for me when I'd started middle school.

Maybe it's reaching the end of its life. I would've liked to get a new one with a cute design, but it would feel like a waste when this one still ran well enough. Besides, bicycles probably didn't have life spans. *It might just need maintenance.*

I spaced out as I pedaled and suddenly realized that I'd passed a bus. I looked up and saw Holmes at the bus stop. He must have been on the one that had just gone by. He was wearing a jacket and jeans, and he waved when he saw me.

"Holmes!" I got off my bike and jogged over to him.

"Thank you for coming out here."

"L-Long time no see...and welcome back."

“I’m home, Aoi.”

I choked up at the sight of his smile. He was as stylish as ever, and he seemed more mature than he had been two months ago.

“Shall we go?” He reached for my bicycle’s handlebars as usual.

“Oh, sorry.”

“It’s fine; let me put my things in the basket,” he said, setting down a paper bag. It had a cute picture on it and an English logo.

I inadvertently stared at the bag, wondering if it was a souvenir from New York.

“Oh, these are brownies from Fat Witch Bakery. I know you can buy them here too, but they tasted good, so I brought some.”

“I’ve never had them before, so I’m looking forward to it. How was New York?”

“It was a great experience. No matter how many times I visit the Met, it continues to be a brilliant inspiration.”

“It’s one of the biggest museums in the world, right?”

“Yes. It’s so big that you can’t see everything in a day, so it’s better to narrow down what you want to see. And even though it’s full of amazing first-class pieces, you’re allowed to take pictures freely and even touch the sculptures.”

“Wow, really?”

“They might get upset if you go too far, but everyone touches Rodin’s sculptures. I did too. I’d like to go there with you one day.”

“Yes, let’s!” As I listened to him talk, I started getting excited about this museum I’d never been to before.

“I feel like working with Mr. Hopkins broadened my horizons even though I was only there for two months.”

Holmes had a broad perspective to begin with. If it’s expanded even more, that’s amazing. The owner’s goal was a success.

I thought Holmes was brilliant, but at the same time, the anxiety welled up

within me again. I felt like I was being left behind since all I could do was my regular studying at university.

“How is school going?” he asked.

“I haven’t been progressing as much in specialized studies as I’d like...but I think it’s because I’m still starting out.”

“Yes, I think so too. You’re only nineteen, so I’m sure your world will keep expanding from here.”

“Really?”

“Yes. Thinking about it now, when I was nineteen, I really was a child even though I thought I was as grown-up as any adult.”

“I think I know what you mean.” I giggled.

The casual conversation made my anxiety fade away. It must’ve been because he understood how I was feeling and encouraged me.

“But what I really wanted to know about was your personal life at university,” he said.

“Huh?”

“Have any of the guys at school said to you, ‘Mashiro, do you want to get something to eat after class?’ or ‘I can call you by your first name, right? Wanna go for drinks, Aoi?’ or ‘I’m so interested in you, Aoi. Come to my place’?”

The extremely specific examples made me choke on my breath. “What is all of that? Why are your delusions about my relationships with men becoming more and more detailed?”

“Because a man who can win over his target is a man who’s good at closing the distance. Women don’t like to be approached out of the blue. I’m constantly worried whenever we’re apart.”

“You sure know a lot about approaching women.” I shot him a cold look.

This time, he was the one who choked. “It’s a common belief.”

“Come to think of it, there’s something I’ve always been curious about. You said before that you were so shocked by Izumi’s betrayal that you considered

taking up priesthood but ended up going off the rails and ‘doing the complete opposite of what a priest would.’”

“Did I say that?”

“What exactly did you mean?”

“Well, it was the complete opposite of priesthood. I dyed my hair blond.”

“What? Really?”

Holmes had blond hair?!

“I’m just kidding,” he said, smiling. “At any rate, this is my third time going to your house. I still have butterflies in my stomach.”

He was clearly trying to change the subject, but since it seemed like he didn’t want to talk about it, I didn’t press him.

“You’re nervous? Really?”

“Yes. Do you want to touch my chest and see for yourself?” He grinned mischievously, making my heart skip a beat.

“N-No, I’m fine.”

“That’s too bad.”

“What?!”

We laughed as we walked, and when we came to a small church, I stopped and said, “My mom has been coming to this church a lot for her work as a district board member.”

The church had a white statue of Mary in its courtyard, and it was adjacent to a kindergarten called Holy Mother Kindergarten. The trees here still had their leaves even though it was December, so the greenery stood out quite a bit.

“Is she helping with a bazaar?”

“Yeah, and it looks like she’s going to sing gospels at the Christmas party.”

“Gospels...” He sounded intrigued.

“Yeah. Apparently, the parents of the kindergarten students formed a gospel group, and since they didn’t have enough members, they asked the district

board members to join them. Mom was more interested in singing than doing the other board-related tasks, so she took the request."

"That does sound fun."

"Right? She acted like she was reluctant, but she's been excited about going to rehearsals. She used to be in a choir club."

We passed by the church as we talked.

"We're here!" I said, opening the front door to my house.

"What? Again?" came my mother's voice.

Surprised, we stopped in our tracks.

"Okay, I understand," she continued. "I'll go right now."

It sounded like she was talking to someone on the phone in the living room. She had a habit of raising her voice when she was on the phone.

The living room door opened and she came out into the hallway. "Oh!" she exclaimed upon seeing us. She put on a smile and said, "Why, welcome, Kiyotaka."

"Sorry to intrude. Thank you for having me here today."

"I hear that you're in training right now and you went to New York. That's amazing. You're working hard, aren't you?" she said unnaturally quickly before turning to me. "Aoi, I'm going to the church for a bit. I'll be back in time to make dinner." She hurriedly put on her shoes.

Holmes and I exchanged glances.

"Did something happen, mom?"

"Is everything all right?"

She stopped and looked at us weakly. "Y-Yes, there's a bit of an issue..."

"If there's anything I can do to help, please don't hesitate to ask," Holmes said.

"To be honest, I was hoping I could ask you about it today. Oh, but that's not

the reason I invited you!”

Holmes nodded in understanding.

“You wanted to ask Holmes for help?” My eyes widened. “Did you get involved in some kind of trouble?”

My younger brother, Mutsuki, had apparently been eavesdropping. He poked his head out of the living room and said, “What? Really?”

“It’s not me who’s in trouble. Something strange has been happening at the church I’ve been going to...” My mother placed a hand on her cheek.

“Something strange?” my brother and I asked in unison.

“Yes, although I think it’s just a malicious prank. You see, the statue of Mary in the courtyard...has been shedding tears of blood,” she said with a strained smile. We all stiffened.

4

“But what do you mean, tears of blood?” I asked as we headed to the church in question.

My mother grimaced and said, “It’s exactly that. The statue of Mary at the church started shedding tears of blood. We weren’t going to tell anyone, but that’s what the phone call earlier was about. The statue was crying again.”

“Mom, that’s one of those occult phenomena,” my brother said excitedly, his eyes lighting up. He was at that age where he was interested in all things paranormal. “I saw it on *Shocking News from Around the World*. A statue of Mary in Italy was crying tears of blood.”

Holmes walked behind us, not saying anything as he listened to our conversation.

“Tears of blood?” I asked. “But why would someone play such a prank in the middle of the day?” Suddenly I realized something and turned back to look at Holmes. “I don’t think the statue was shedding tears of blood when Holmes and I passed by earlier. That means it had to have happened between then and now, right?”

“Aoi, from our vantage point, the statue’s face was blocked by the trees,” Holmes said smoothly. “We could only see from the neck downwards, so we wouldn’t have known if there were any tears of blood.”

I was at a loss for words. As always, he saw and remembered everything. Thinking about it now, I’d only seen the white silhouette of the statue. It felt like I’d seen the whole thing, but it was actually only from the neck down.

A few minutes later, we arrived at the Church of the Holy Mother. The main entrance was locked, so we entered through the back door. There were six women and a middle-aged Caucasian pastor in the courtyard.

“Oh, Mashiro!” A woman named Suzuki waved at us. She was around the same age as my mother and also served on the district board.

The other five women had that “young mom” vibe. They were probably the mothers of the kindergarten students.

“It happened again, Suzuki?” my mother asked, running up to the group.

Suzuki nodded with a grim expression and said, “Look.”

The statue of Mary had her palms together in front of her chest. There were brownish-red tears falling from her downcast eyes.

I gasped—this wasn’t just an occult prank. The sight was downright *chilling*. Even my brother, who had been excited this whole time, went pale. The pastor and the young mothers had grim looks on their faces too.

Holmes put on his white gloves and quickly made his way to the statue, taking a magnifying glass out of his inner pocket. He stared intently at it and said, “This appears to be real blood, though I don’t know what kind.”

“Um, Mashiro, who is this?” whispered Suzuki.

“O-Oh, right, he’s a detective named Holmes,” my mother said, still in shock.

“No, I’m not a detective,” Holmes calmly interjected. “I’m an appraiser-in-training.”

“This is my sister’s boyfriend who went to grad school at Kyoto U!” added my brother.

“Wow, Kyoto U!” exclaimed the others. Their looks of suspicion instantly became trusting. I was impressed by how much of an effect the school’s name had.

“First, we’ll have to determine whether this is human blood or animal blood,” Holmes said, taking out his phone and calling someone. “Yes, it’s me, Kiyotaka Yagashira. How are you, Komatsu?” Komatsu was a private detective we had met during a past incident. “Sorry to bother you, but I have a request. Yes, a work of art got blood on it because of a malicious prank, and I’d like to examine it. Could you send me a bloodstain sampling kit? By motorbike courier is fine. I’ll send you the address right now. Yes. Oh, I’ll have the blood analysis done by a friend of mine. Yes, thank you.”

He hung up, emailed Komatsu the church’s address, and put the phone to his ear again. This time, he spoke casually in a Kyoto accent.

“Yeah, it’s me, Yagashira. So, someone put blood on a work of art as a malicious prank, and I want to investigate it. Yeah, that’s right. I can get a bloodstain sampling kit, so can I send it to you to examine? Thanks, I’ll treat you next time. Huh? Sure, I suppose I could ask. I’m counting on you. See you.” He hung up again.

“Were you talking to Kohinata?” I asked.

“I’m surprised you knew.”

“He gave Kaori his business card.”

“Oh, is that what it was? He actually said, ‘I don’t need anything in return, but I want to go for a meal with you, me, Kaori, and Aoi.’ He seems busy this month, so it can wait until after the new year. Could you ask Kaori if she’s willing to come?”

“Oh, sure. No problem.”

The others looked at us, amazed.

Holmes noticed their stares and said, “I think the kit will be here within an hour,” putting his phone in his pocket.

Everyone seemed stunned by the turn of events.

“Allow me to introduce myself properly,” he continued. “My name is Kiyotaka Yagashira. Could you tell me when the statue first shed tears of blood?”

With that, his investigation began. The tears of blood were obviously man-made rather than supernatural, so it was possible there was a witness among the people there. Everyone exchanged looks, not knowing how to respond.

A very pretty woman with a trim appearance stepped forward and said, “My name is Risa Brown. I’m the wife of the pastor of this church. The first time the statue shed tears of blood was two weeks ago on Friday.” She was wearing simple clothes and had sleek black hair and a gentle smile. She looked very much like a devout Christian.

“Can you tell me about the circumstances at the time?” Holmes asked.

“Yes. On Friday morning at 8:30, I brought my daughter to Holy Mother Kindergarten next door and then came here. That was when I discovered the traces of a red liquid flowing from the statue’s eyes.”

The kindergarten was right next to the church, but there was a fence between them. Paired with the trees, they prevented people on the church side from seeing the kindergarten—which meant the reverse was probably true too.

“Where was the pastor at the time?”

“My husband had come to the chapel at 6 a.m., but he said there was nothing out of the ordinary when he arrived.”

“I see. That means the prank occurred in the early morning between 6 a.m. and 8:30 a.m. Did you see anyone suspicious?” Holmes looked at the pastor.

“The church has stained glass windows, so I could not see out*side*. I was cleaning the chapel the whole *time*, so I don’t *know*,” said the pastor. He was fluent in Japanese, although his intonation was slightly off.

“Risa, what did you do when you saw the statue?”

“I went straight to the chapel to call for my husband. We both thought it was a prank, and he wiped the tears off.”

“Some may have thought that it could’ve been a miracle of God. Why did you immediately assume that it was a prank?” Holmes asked in a gentle tone.

Oh, I see. I folded my arms. *I'm not Christian, so I'd assumed it was a prank right away, but it wouldn't be strange for a believer to interpret it as a miracle. There might've been a reason they immediately thought it was a prank.*

"Well...not long before, there was a TV special called *Shocking News from Around the World* that showed a statue of Mary shedding tears of blood. My husband and I were watching it and saying, 'I hope people don't vandalize the church's statue with red marker after watching this,' and then something really did happen," Risa said hesitantly.

Holmes nodded in understanding. It was the same program that Mutsuki had mentioned watching. "Did you tell anyone about it?"

"I brought it up with Ito and Uchiyama from the gospel group since they were nearby in the kindergarten, but I asked them not to tell anyone else."

"Do you belong to the gospel group too, Risa?"

"Yes, I'm the leader. The other members are Abe, Egawa, Ito, and Uchiyama. There are five of us in total."

Abe, Egawa, Ito, Uchiyama. Coincidentally, those all start with vowels. The only one missing is "O."

"Could you tell me about the second occurrence, then?"

One of the gospel group members, a quiet-looking woman, looked up and said, "The second time, it was spotted by me, Abe. A week ago, on Saturday, we were having a rehearsal at church, and I came late because I had something to do first. I arrived around 4 p.m., and when I looked at Mary, she was crying tears of blood..."

"What did you do?"

"I-I didn't know it was the second time, and I couldn't imagine it being a prank, so I thought it was a miracle from God. I fell to my knees and cried," Abe said, lowering her gaze.

"You're a devout Christian, I presume?"

"Yes, of course."

"Are all of the members of the group Christians?" Holmes asked, looking

around at the others.

“Not all of us, but I am too,” said a woman with medium-long hair, raising her hand. “Oh, I’m Ito.”

“I’m Uchiyama,” said an energetic-looking woman with short hair. “My two daughters go to Holy Mother Kindergarten, but we aren’t Christian.”

“Same,” added a brown-haired woman with a bright smile. “I send my kid to Holy Mother Kindergarten because it’s close, but I’m Buddhist. Oh, my name’s Egawa.”

So, Risa, Abe, and Ito were the Christian members of the gospel group. Uchiyama and Egawa weren’t, and neither were my mother or Suzuki, who had come from the district board.

“In other words, the incidents became public after Abe’s discovery, correct?” Holmes asked for confirmation.

The group nodded.

“But the only ones present at the time were the group members, Mashiro, and Suzuki, since we were rehearsing,” added Risa. “I asked them not to tell anyone.”

“Did you inform them that it was the second time it’d happened?”

“Yes.”

“So, who made the discovery today, the third time?”

“Me,” said Egawa, raising her hand. “We were practicing in the early afternoon today, and, like, we had a break at 3 p.m. I went outside and was totally shocked when I saw the statue.” She had a young way of talking.

“Did anyone see any suspicious persons? It doesn’t have to be from today,” Holmes asked.

They all exchanged looks again.

“No one stood out to me,” said one of the members.

“Yes, this is a quiet residential area, and since there’s a kindergarten, we’re rather sensitive to unfamiliar people but I can’t think of anyone...”

So no information on that front.

"In that case, have you heard of a similar prank happening to Mary statues at other churches?" Holmes continued.

"No, I *have* not." The pastor shook his head.

"It's not normal for someone to do such a thing three times. Why don't you contact the police? Also, is it possible that someone has a grudge against the church?" Holmes asked quietly.

The pastor and Risa widened their eyes.

"A grudge against the *church*?! Perish the *thought*!"

"Oh, but there may be someone who's irrationally angry at God because their life is unfair. I'd like to save them if possible, which is why I haven't called the police," said Risa, clasping her hands in front of her chest. Her form was beautiful and divine.

Abe and Ito, the other Christians, clasped their hands as well.

"It'll be okay, Risa," said Uchiyama, trying to cheer her up. "It won't happen again."

"Yeah, they'll get bored eventually!" added Egawa.

Suddenly, a motorcycle stopped in front of the church and someone shouted, "Delivery! Is there a Yagashira here?"

"Thank you," said Holmes, accepting the package. "I'd like to send something too. Could you give me a minute?"

He opened the box, which contained the bloodstain sampling kit he'd requested from Komatsu. It included a pair of rubber gloves, which he put on before opening an antibacterial bag—the kind you'd see at a hospital. He took out what looked like a special cotton swab and a sheet-like object, walked up to the statue, and skillfully collected a blood sample. He quickly put it into an airtight container, wrote the university's address and his friend's name on it, and went back to the deliveryman.

"Thank you very much."

The man departed on his motorcycle with the package. The whole process had been smooth and efficient. Holmes always went directly for the solution rather than engaging in inconclusive debates.

“In a week, we’ll know if the blood came from a human or not as well as the blood type and whatnot. That should narrow down the possibilities quite a bit. Oh, and it may be a good idea to install a security camera on the outside wall of the church,” Holmes said, turning around to face us.

Once again, everyone looked stunned.

5

After collecting the sample and wiping off the remaining blood, we determined that there wasn’t anything else we could do that day and decided to head out.

On the way home, Holmes looked back at the church and tilted his head. “It’s certainly a strange church.”

I nodded. “Yeah, I can’t believe someone would do that to the statue.”

Holmes shook his head. “Oh, I don’t mean that. I’m referring to Risa and the fact that there’s a statue of Mary in the courtyard. Don’t you think it’s strange?”

This time, it was me tilting my head. “Um, how so?”

Holmes looked at my mother and brother, who had similarly confused looks on their faces, and his eyes widened. “Oh, I see. There must be many ordinary people who wouldn’t find it strange,” he murmured to himself, nodding.

I was still baffled and had no idea what he was talking about, but before I knew it, we had arrived at my house.

“Your boyfriend was amazing, Aoi!” exclaimed Suzuki the moment we entered the house. She had tagged along with us. “I’d expect no less from a Kyoto U graduate!”

“Really, I was surprised too,” said my mother, nodding fervently as she prepared tea.

My brother agreed. “Yeah, I was kind of overwhelmed too! You’re amazing, Holmes!”

The bizarre incident at the church seemed to have improved Holmes’s reputation even more.

“No, not at all,” he said, sitting at the dining table and shaking his head with a smile. His manners were as perfect as ever.

“Thanks to you, we’ll know what kind of blood it is, which should help us figure out more,” said Suzuki. “I wish such creepy things wouldn’t happen anymore, though.” She placed her hand on her chin and sighed.

“I don’t think it’ll happen again,” Holmes said quietly.

“Huh?” Everyone froze.

“Why do you think that?” asked my mother, placing the tea on the table.

Holmes shook his head lightly and said, “Oh, um, it’s just a hunch. Don’t mind me.”

“True, they say that what happens twice will happen thrice, but there are a lot of things that stop at three.” My mother exchanged looks with Suzuki. They seemed to accept his excuse.

“Could I ask you for more information on the church and the gospel group members?” Holmes asked.

“Huh?” Suzuki looked up. “What do you mean?”

“For example, the state of the church’s activities and how old the children are.”

“Oh, yes. The church has Sunday service. They also do volunteer work and hold bazaars sometimes. As you saw, it’s really small, so I’ve never seen a wedding held there.”

Holmes nodded.

“The moms in the gospel group are all young. Uchiyama has two children in the kindergarten, and I think the big sister is the oldest one there. I heard the gospel group was formed when Risa’s only daughter enrolled. You saw how

pretty and elegant Risa was, right? A lot of people admire her because she's like the Virgin Mary herself. I even heard that Abe and Ito became Christians because of her. She also seems to have a lot of other admirers who can't join the group for various reasons."

I nodded. *I think I can understand that.*

"Do you know what their husbands do for a living?"

"Abe's husband works for a recycling company, Egawa's family owns a beauty salon, Ito's husband works for a printing company, and Uchiyama's husband is a teacher."

Leave it to a district board member to know all of that.

"A teacher?"

"Yes, at a middle school. Uchiyama has a teaching license too."

"I see." Holmes nodded and folded his arms.

"I should get going now," Suzuki said, standing up. My mother left the room with her to see her off.

Once they were gone, I glanced at Holmes and said, "You think one of the gospel group members is the culprit, right?" *Otherwise he wouldn't have asked about their jobs.*

"Not once, but three times, and in a place where outsiders can't enter without drawing suspicion. It's possible. Also, it could be anyone with a kid at the school, not just them."

So he does suspect them. It's true that outsiders would be really conspicuous there, and the church grounds have an atmosphere that makes you feel like you can't go in unless there's an event going on. Plus, the incidents happened in broad daylight—early morning and in the afternoon. If a stranger was harassing them, they'd probably do it in the middle of the night. It could be someone who's confident that the statue's face can't be seen from outside.

As I folded my arms, deep in thought, my mother came back to the living room and said, "Let's get ready for dinner now. You can just relax and eat, Kiyotaka."

“Thank you.”

“Aoi, come help me,” she continued.

“Okay,” I said, standing up.

“Kiyotaka, why don’t you play games with Mutsuki while you wait?”

My brother, who had been playing video games on the TV, turned around excitedly and exclaimed, “Holmes, let’s have a match!”

“I haven’t played games in a long time, so please go easy on me.” Holmes cheerfully went over to the TV.

A little later, while in the kitchen, my mother and I heard Mutsuki shout, “Ahhh! You said to go easy on you, but you’re really good at this!” which made us laugh.

As we fried the croquettes, my mother said, “Don’t tell dad about what happened at the church. I don’t want him to worry.”

“Okay.” I nodded.

“Also, there’s something I want you to tell me. You and Kiyotaka started going out again last spring, right?”

“Y-Yes.”

“How far have you two gone? I won’t tell dad,” she asked quietly, looking at the oil.

My heart leaped. After a moment of silence, I whispered, “We...kissed.” My cheeks were burning.

“Is that all?” She looked at me, seeming slightly disappointed.

My cheeks got even hotter. “Th-That’s all. He was originally concerned because I was under eighteen anyway. Even though I’m nineteen now, he’s been so busy. I don’t think he plans on taking things further while he’s still in training...” I murmured.

My mother giggled. “What a good kid. There seems to be something out of the ordinary about him, though.”

“Yeah, you’re exactly right.”

He's not ordinary. While this case had improved his reputation, it had also distanced him a bit from the "just a nice young man" impression my mother had had of him.

Before long, my grandmother returned from her outing and we finished cooking.

"Dinner's ready!" my mother shouted.

"Ahh, I'm starving!" Mutsuki exclaimed, running to the dining table right away.

My father was busy at this time of year and came home late every day, so today it was just me, Mutsuki, my mother, my grandmother, and our guest.

"Even if dad wasn't busy, he'd probably force himself to work overtime anyway. He feels too awkward about having his daughter's boyfriend over," my mother had said.

On the table, we had seasoned rice with mixed vegetables, potato croquettes, salad, braised chicken, rolled omelets, and steamed egg custard. It was a delicious-looking, homely meal.

Holmes, who had been washing his hands in the bathroom, looked surprised when he returned and saw the dining table. "This is an amazing feast. Seasoned rice, croquettes, braised chicken, rolled omelets, and even egg custard? They're all my favorite foods."

"When I heard that your favorites were seasoned rice and croquettes, I was sure that you'd like the others as well," said my mother.

"Yes, I love them!" Holmes grinned, his eyes sparkling. He looked as happy as he did when encountering a beautiful antique, and it made me happy as well.

My mother laughed shyly.

"Holmes likes plain food, huh?" remarked Mutsuki.

"Yes, I'm touched because I've never seen so many of my favorite foods in one place before."

"Okay, now you're exaggerating," I said. I appreciated the compliments, but they were embarrassing.

“Shall we eat?”

“Yeah!”

We gave thanks for the food and began eating.

“Mm, it really is good,” Holmes said, smiling fondly throughout the entire meal.

Seeing him like that made my mother and grandmother grin happily too. After dinner, we enjoyed the brownies that he’d brought from New York, which were rich and went perfectly with coffee.

Then, while we were putting away the dishes, my mother said to me in a quiet voice, “I think Kiyotaka is a good boy after all.”

“Huh?”

“Any boy who looks so happy when he eats is a good boy.” She chuckled and I felt my expression relax. “I might be jumping the gun here, but it’d be great if he became your husband. He’s very reliable.”

My eyes widened. “I-It really is too soon,” I squeaked.

My mother laughed and said, “Anyway, I don’t need help here, so go bring Kiyotaka some tea or coffee.” She patted me on the back.

“Okay, I will.”

I made coffee and headed to my room upstairs, where Holmes was waiting. Since the door was open, I peeked in and saw him sitting on the floor, leaning against my bed.

“Sorry for the wait. I made coffee, although it’s not as good as yours.” I placed the cups on the table.

“Thank you,” he said, taking one. “It’s delicious.”

“Thanks.” Relieved, I placed the tray on my desk.

“I see that you put the lithograph up,” he said, smiling and looking at the Mucha work.

I nodded. “It’s my treasure.”

“Oh, right,” he said, picking up the bag next to him. “I have your souvenir from New York. It’s only what you requested, though.” He took out a paper bag and handed it to me.

“Wow, thanks!”

The souvenir was stationery from the Metropolitan Museum of Art’s gift shop. The New York-style notebooks and pens filled me with joy. This was what I had mentioned when Holmes had asked me what I wanted as a souvenir.

“Are you really satisfied with just this?” he asked.

“Yes, I love stationery, and—” I was about to explain that I’d feel uncomfortable receiving an expensive gift, but suddenly I remembered something. “Oh right, about Christmas...”

“Yes?”

“Can we spend it together?” I asked, fidgeting.

He nodded firmly. “Yes, of course.”

“And, um, about presents... You’ve already given me so much, so I don’t need one for Christmas.”

It was something I’d wanted to say for a while now. I had already received more gifts than I’d ever need, and I was sure that if I didn’t say it now, he’d get me another extravagant present.

Holmes froze. “You don’t want anything for Christmas?” He looked like he was in complete disbelief.

“Nope. I can’t accept anything else.”

“But what about my plan to get you something nice for Christmas in hopes that it’ll lead somewhere?” he mused with a straight face.

I coughed. “Wh-Wh-Wh-Wh-Wh-What are you talking about?”

“Well, I was just kidding. Won’t you feel sad without a gift, though? It’s the first Christmas we’re spending as a couple, you know?”

Put that way, he was right. It would be sad not to have something to remember our first Christmas by.

“How about we give each other something handmade, then?” I suggested, clapping my hands together at my good idea. *That way, it won’t end up being too costly.*

Holmes folded his arms and said, “Handmade? All right, I’ll think of something. But you know, I’d always assumed that women had a lot of materialistic desires. You’re different, aren’t you?”

I shrugged. “I-I mean, there are things I want, of course.”

I always want things like cute clothes, purses, and accessories. But since I’ve been working a lot, I can afford some new clothes myself now, and Holmes has given me so many things that were beyond my budget.

“Maybe it’s the same as having an appetite,” I murmured. “When you’re full, you’re satisfied.”

He laughed. “How philosophical.”

“No, it’s not *that* deep.”

We looked at each other and chuckled.

“Thank you for having me today. I’m sorry for staying so late.”

It was 8 p.m. when Holmes left my house. I stepped out to send him off.

“No, I should be the one apologizing. Everyone prevented you from leaving.”

The winter air was chilly. Our white breaths faded into the darkness of the night.

“I had a lot of fun, and the dinner was touching. Thank you.”

“I’m glad that you ate what I made.”

“Aoi...” He gently kissed me, making my chest tighten. “Thank you so much.”

Seeing his face up close made me dizzy. “Thank you too. You had to deal with that weird request,” I said, still flustered.

“Oh, right.” He clapped his hands. “If possible, could I get you to infiltrate the kindergarten and investigate what it’s like inside? Ideally, you would talk with the gospel group members about anything you can.”

“How am I supposed to do that?”

“For example, you could go under the pretense of helping out.”

“Oh, that might be possible. I’ll get mom to help me come up with a plan.”

“I’m counting on you.” He was about to start walking when he paused and said, “Oh, another thing. May I borrow your bicycle?” He looked at my bike, which I had left in its usual place outside.

“Huh?”

“It’s rather worn out, isn’t it?”

“Oh, yes. It makes creaking sounds.”

“The tires are worn down too. It’ll be dangerous to keep using it like that, so I’ll fix it for you.”

“You know how to fix bicycles?”

“Yes, I can handle that much. I grew up with my grandfather telling me to fix everything myself so that I could learn how things worked. I was only allowed to ask a repairman after I’d determined that it was beyond my abilities.”

“Wow, that’s the owner for you.”

“It might take ten or so days, though.”

“It’s okay. I can borrow my mom’s bike in the meantime, or my brother’s.”

“Good. In that case, I think I’ll go home on your bike today.”

“Go ahead. The key’s in the lock.”

“That’s careless, even if it’s on your own property,” he said, raising the seat.

“I don’t think anyone’s going to steal such a run-down bike.”

Having adjusted the seat to his liking, he turned to face me and said, “Well, have a good night, Aoi.”

“Yes, you too.”

He kissed me on the forehead, got on the bicycle, and pedaled away. The creaking echoed in the darkness. I stood in front of my house until the creaks could no longer be heard. The air was cold, but I was so happy that I didn’t feel

it.

6

Several days later, once school was out for winter break, I found myself in a classroom at Holy Mother Kindergarten.

“The Glasritzen class will now begin,” said Risa, smiling as she stood in front of everyone at the table.

The young mothers were there as well as housewives and elderly people who lived in the neighborhood. I’d slipped in with them. After Holmes had assigned me my mission, I had decided to ask my mother for advice first.

“I want to investigate the kindergarten,” I’d said honestly.

“In that case, why don’t you attend one of their classes?”

My mother gave me a flyer from the school that presented various cultural and craft classes like beadwork, embroidery, knitting, and Glasritzen.

“Oh, they have events like this?”

The classes were taught by mothers at the kindergarten, and since they were teaching the other mothers and people from the neighborhood, the fee was very low. I had chosen the Glasritzen class because it was taught by Risa, and it appeared that I had made the right choice. The gospel group members—Abe, Egawa, Ito, and Uchiyama—were all in attendance.

However, I was missing a crucial piece of information: what *was* Glasritzen?

As if to answer my question, Risa placed a wine glass on the table. It was engraved with a decorative letter “R” and rose flowers.

“Wow!” everyone exclaimed, eyes lighting up at its beauty.

“This is Glasritzen, a European glass art,” Risa explained. “A tool with a diamond nib is used to draw designs like flowers, ribbons, and fruit on glass materials such as wine glasses, plates, and jewelry boxes. Since the patterns are all made by hand, they’re beautifully delicate. It’s said that the craft was once popular among upper-class women in England, but nuns have been known to

make them diligently as well."

"Ooh." We all nodded.

I had seen engraved glass before, but it hadn't seemed like something a layman could do. *Glasritzen...how nice.* I gazed fondly at it.

"Today, I'll be teaching you how to make it. Please choose what you'd like to work with," Risa said, laying out various wine glasses, cocktail glasses, and beer glasses.

Everyone excitedly chose their glass of choice, saying things like "I drink beer, so I'm going with that one" and "The cocktail glasses are lovely too."

I think it has to be a wine glass for something like this, but I'm still underage, so I don't drink alcohol. I recall Holmes liking wine, though. Suddenly, I realized something. *Right, the handmade Christmas present... I had a few ideas in mind, but I should give him a wine glass with his initials on it! That sounds like it'd be really nice.*

Even though I had originally come here for recon, I had found something that would make a good gift. I smiled as I picked up the glass. *Killing two birds with one stone.*

There were three steps to the process: deciding on a design, transferring it to the glass with chalk paper, and then carving it by gently stroking the glass using a special pen with a diamond nib. It was more fun than I had expected, and I found myself enraptured by Risa's kind guidance.

"I have to step away for a bit, but please keep at it," she said, leaving the hall.

Once she was gone, I inconspicuously looked around. Most of the people here were mothers of the kindergarten students. Everyone had been looking at Risa with sparkling eyes during the lesson. It was obvious that they all admired her.

"Risa is a wonderful person, huh?" I murmured as I worked on my glass.

The people near me nodded firmly.

"She really is," said Ito.

"Yeah," added Egawa. "It was her idea to hold these classes. I teach nail art on another day, and it's like, she gives me a place where I can shine."

“The kindergarten really feels like it’s been shining ever since Risa came,” said Uchiyama, nodding.

Abe, who was sitting nearby, murmured, “I came to Kyoto from Hokkaido after getting married. I didn’t have any friends here, my parents lived far away, and I wasn’t good at socializing, so I was raising my child all alone. But after coming here, Risa saved me. I don’t know what I would’ve done if it hadn’t been for her.” Tears welled up in her eyes.

This...feels like it goes beyond admiration. It’s as if she worships Risa.

Egawa laughed and said, “You’re normally so quiet, but, like, you get so fanatic about Risa.”

“I don’t think you should use that word here, Egawa,” interjected Uchiyama.

“Oops, you’re right. I just meant she was enthusiastic.”

Ito giggled and said, “Oh, Egawa. I know how Abe feels, though. Risa is like that person who everyone admires at an all-girls school. Even people of the same gender swoon over her.”

Now that I thought about it, Ito’s hair and clothes had a similar vibe to Risa’s. You could tell that she was copying her out of admiration.

Uchiyama gave Ito an exasperated look.

“Why did you join the gospel group, Uchiyama?” I asked, although it felt kind of awkward. I wanted to know why she’d joined despite not being Christian.

“I’m not Christian, but I like singing and I admire gospel music,” she answered shyly.

“Yeah, Uchiyama’s really good at singing, and since she studied overseas, her English pronunciation is seriously amazing,” said Egawa.

“You studied overseas?” I asked.

“I wouldn’t call it that. I was in Italy for a year, and since it was Italy, my English is nothing special.” Uchiyama smiled. “Risa’s English is the best. She even married internationally, after all.”

Listening to them made me even more impressed by Risa.

“Oh yeah, is it true that there was a weird poster in the church?” Egawa asked, leaning forward.

A poster? I blinked. Ito tilted her head in confusion too.

Meanwhile, the others continued the conversation:

“Yes, I heard that it didn’t really make sense.”

“What did it say?”

“‘Pay attention to the poetry of Thomas something,’ or something like that.”

“That’s kind of creepy, considering the tears of blood too,” Uchiyama muttered with a sigh, quietly enough that the others couldn’t hear.

After the Glasritzen class ended, I thanked Risa, picked up my belongings, and went to use the bathroom before leaving. When I entered the stall, I heard some noisy voices coming from the hallway.

“Hey, was Risa’s class today?”

“Sounds like it. All of her worshipers had sparkles in their eyes. It’s seriously gross.”

Huh? I stiffened at the shocking words.

“But like, hasn’t the atmosphere at the kindergarten gotten even worse lately? I don’t like how they make you feel like you’re inferior if you aren’t Christian.”

“Oh, I get what you mean. And Risa’s grandfather owns the kindergarten, right? She’s basically making herself queen.”

“Even Uchiyama from the gospel group was wondering if she had to convert. The others in the group are two Risa followers and Egawa, who’s young and carefree. Uchiyama’s the serious type, so it must be hard for her.”

“Sometimes it feels like pressure or unintentional bullying. It’s like if you’re not Christian, you’re not human.”

“Yeah. Well, aren’t they only pretending it’s unintentional? I felt like I saw *that* woman’s true nature the other day.”

“Oh? Tell me more.”

“There was a piece of paper on the church wall, and as soon as she saw it, she ran over with this really menacing look on her face, ripped it off the wall, and crumpled it into a ball. It was off-putting, like she was a different person.”

“What did the paper say?”

“I had no idea what any of it meant. All I remember is ‘something something, Thomas something.’”

“Huh? What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Heck if I know.”

The mothers laughed and walked away.

I was so stunned by the fact that overhearing this kind of gossip from a bathroom stall could actually happen in real life that I continued to sit on the toilet seat for a while, unable to move from my spot.

7

The next day, I went to work at Kura and told Holmes everything I had witnessed at the kindergarten.

“I’m just...so shocked about it all,” I admitted.

Some people admired Risa very much while others were saying bad things about her behind her back. I couldn’t help but let out a deep sigh as I went about dusting the shelves.

Holmes chuckled as he performed the inventory check, clipboard in hand. It had been a long time since we’d last worked together at Kura, but we were so accustomed to it that we easily fell into our usual routine.

“It’s only natural,” he said.

“Natural?”

“Yes. When someone is blindly supported, there will always be people who don’t think well of them.”

“Huh?”

“Just look at the Catholic Church. They have ardent followers all over the world, but there are countless people who criticize them as well. It’s the same with celebrities too. When someone has fans, they also have haters. It’s just the way the world works. If there are many people who openly adore and support Risa, there are bound to be people who don’t like what’s going on. It’s essentially the universe balancing itself,” he said matter-of-factly as he did his work.

I gaped at him. “That’s so harsh. Don’t you think it’s cruel that they’re gossiping about her?”

“Is it? I’d find it scarier if everyone supported her.”

I pouted, not knowing what to say. Holmes always seemed like he was looking at things from a holistic view, although he was right that it would be kind of scary if everyone at the kindergarten was as obsessed with Risa as those young mothers.

The world balancing itself, huh?

“Is it considered balanced if half of the people say good things about her and half of them say bad things?” I asked.

“No, it’s not actually half and half. For example, if forty percent of people support her, forty percent are neutral, and the remaining twenty percent say terrible things about her, I’d say that’s balanced. But since those twenty percent are so harsh, they tend to have more of an effect. And the neutral people tend to shift to one side or the other.”

“I see...” His words were as eye-opening as ever.

“Still, that was some good information you got. So, Abe and Ito are Risa’s blind followers, Uchiyama is being made to feel inferior, and Egawa is the carefree type.”

“Oh, yes.”

“I did some investigating on my end too—or rather, I had Komatsu do it. Risa’s maiden name is Takamiya, and her family is quite rich. She also went to

Notre Dame from kindergarten until university."

"Oh, Notre Dame." It was a girls-only Christian school on Kitayama Street as well as Izumi's alma mater. The university's students were all so stylish and pretty that I wouldn't feel comfortable setting foot on campus.

"As you said, Holy Mother Kindergarten appears to be owned by the Takamiya Group. Risa is likely involved in its management but not publicly. Perhaps that's why she's so enthusiastic about holding cultural classes," he continued as he jotted down the inventory on his clipboard.

Oh, so those classes are for business purposes. In that case, Risa is more than just beautiful, enthusiastic, and kind.

"The church has a good reputation for its volunteer work, bazaars, and other services. Their stance seems to be 'do good things even if they're small.'"

I nodded in agreement. "Do you think the kindergarten is somehow connected to the tears of blood?"

"Let's see... After the incident two weeks ago, it happened again within short periods of time. If the prank suddenly stopped, it's highly likely the culprit was one of the group members we met, since they know a security camera has been installed and a blood sample was collected. However, if the statue of Mary were to shed tears of blood again, it would become likelier that the prank is being done by an outsider."

"Good point."

If the culprit is one of the group members, she would know she wouldn't be able to get away with it anymore.

"I think we'll be able to narrow it down when we receive the blood test results," he said, tapping the clipboard with his pen.

If it turns out to be human blood, will the culprit have used their own blood for this? It was a decent amount, though—enough that you could tell they were tears of blood at a glance. It wasn't an amount one could get by cutting their fingertip. Was it from self-harm? If not, we can narrow it down based on who would be able to procure that much human blood. But if it's animal blood...did they kill an animal and harvest its blood to use for pranks? That would be

horrible. Both possibilities are terrifying.

"Now, what I'm really curious about is the poster that sent Risa into a fit of rage. 'Pay attention to the poetry of Thomas something,' was it?" Holmes folded his arms and looked up at the ceiling.

"Is that the name of a poet?"

"Thomas Wyatt, Thomas More, Dylan Thomas, Thomas Moore..." he mumbled as he paced around the store. They were probably the names of poets. "Thomas...Murner." He stopped. "I see. So that's what it is." He smiled, seeming to have figured something out.

Meanwhile, I didn't have the slightest clue.

8

When Holmes notified us that the blood test results had come back, we gathered at the church again. The pastor was there as well as the gospel group members: Risa, Abe, Ito, Uchiyama, and Egawa. My mother and Suzuki, the district board members, were also standing in the chapel, looking nervous. Naturally, I was present too, and for some reason, even my little brother had shown up. Holmes was stopping by the university first, so he hadn't arrived yet.

In the heavy atmosphere, Risa smiled cheerfully and said, "Since we're all here, why don't we practice singing until Kiyotaka comes?"

The group members all excitedly lined up in front of the cross for an impromptu rehearsal. Mutsuki and I awkwardly sat in the pews like spectators, not knowing where else to go. For once, I couldn't help but feel glad that my brother was with me.

On Risa's cue, the seven gospelers began to sing *Oh Happy Day* a cappella with claps and steps. Mutsuki and I exchanged looks of surprise. Their singing far exceeded our expectations. I felt bad for wondering what I was going to do if I couldn't bear to listen to their amateur singing. The official group members were amazing, of course, but even my mother and Suzuki were singing quite well. They must have practiced a lot in this short period of time. I found myself a little moved by their vibrant performance.

When they finished, Mutsuki and I were about to applaud when we heard clapping from behind us. I turned around and saw Holmes, clapping with a smile on his face. The gospelers had been so absorbed in their singing that they hadn't noticed his entry. Their eyes widened in surprise.

"Being able to hear such splendid music was an unexpected pleasant surprise," he said. "When is the Christmas party where you'll be performing for real?"

The group members didn't hesitate to answer.

"It's on Christmas Eve, of course."

"Come and listen if you'd like."

"Yes, please do. After the concert, we're going to have a big party in the kindergarten hall."

What? There's no way Holmes would want to spend his Christmas Eve listening to gospel music and going to a party at the kindergarten hall.

"Yes, I think I will," he said. "I'm sure Aoi would like to come with me too."

What?!

"You don't have to force yourself to go, Kiyotaka," my mother said hurriedly.

"No, I want to see you in your moment of glory. Your singing voice was wonderful, after all." He placed his hand on his chest and smiled at my mother.

Everyone gasped and blushed as if they'd been struck in the heart. Apparently, a Kyoto guy's smile was effective against older women too.

But our Christmas... I looked at how happy my mother and brother were and changed my mind. *Maybe this is for the best?*

"A-Anyway, the test results came back, right?" asked Suzuki.

The cozy mood suddenly turned cold.

Right, we're going to find out what that blood was.

"Yes," replied Holmes, holding the papers. "It was determined that the tears were not human blood."

It's not human blood. I was a bit relieved, but animal blood wasn't a good thing either.

"It may have been ceremonial in nature," he continued. "The results say that it was sheep blood."

The rest of us exchanged looks, not knowing how to feel.

"Let's set aside the matter of the blood for now," he added. "First, I'd like to ask Risa and the pastor something."

The two of them looked at Holmes, confused.

"Um, yes, what is it?"

"Is this church Catholic or Protestant?"

Risa's expression stiffened for a moment.

"I found it very strange," he continued. "Generally, it's Catholic churches that have statues of Mary. I'm not too knowledgeable about the subject, but I've heard they greatly respect Mary the Holy Mother, who conceived Jesus as a virgin. Protestant churches, however, do not have this so-called 'Mary faith.'"

Most of us tilted our heads.

Why does that matter? Catholic or Protestant, it's Christian either way, isn't it?

"Catholic churches have priests, who I hear are not allowed to marry except in special cases. On the other hand, Protestant churches have pastors who are allowed to marry. This church looks Catholic but it has Protestant elements, which is rather curious."

Everyone looked surprised. Risa put on a strained smile and said, "O-Our church is called the Church of the Holy Mother. We're neither Catholic nor Protestant."

"In other words, it's a Christian 'new religion,' isn't it?" Holmes asked pointedly.

"Wh-What's wrong with that?!" exclaimed Abe.

Everyone turned around in shock to look at Abe, who was being

uncharacteristically loud.

"You make it sound like it's evil! The church—Pastor Brown and Risa are wonderful people who have saved the lives of many. Sometimes they even work themselves to the bone for us. I won't let you ignore their good deeds and talk about them that way!" she continued, teary-eyed.

Risa smiled gently and said, "Thank you, Abe. I will explain."

"No, I'll do *it*," said the pastor, stepping forward. "I used to be a priest of the Catholic *church*. I offered everything I had to *God*. But one day, I met Risa at church, and I'll never forget the shock I *felt*. I thought I'd met Mary her*self*. She was shocked too, and we fell in love at first *sight*. I was uncontrollably drawn to *her*. I knew it was forbidden, but I wanted so badly to make her my *wife*. As a rule, Catholic priests can't get mar*ried*. But just as I believed in and loved God, I also loved Risa—and I made the decision to leave the Catholic *church*. I am a trai*tor*." He placed a hand on his chest. "After that, I started an English conversation class for mothers and chil*dren*. During these classes, I could not help but preach the teachings of *God*. I talked to Risa, and we decided to start our own church without regard for denomina*tions*. That was our Church of the Holy Mo*ther*." He looked up at the altar.

Risa, who was standing next to him, nodded. "Yes, we wanted to contribute to our community in any way we could, no matter how insignificant, as long as we could make people happy."

I didn't know how others would feel about that, but at the very least, I found the couple admirable.

Holmes nodded and said, "Yes, I'm aware. Sorry, I went ahead and researched this church. It was originally abandoned and about to be demolished alongside the adjacent kindergarten, but Risa asked her grandfather to have it repaired, didn't she? She also put a lot of effort into revitalizing the school. She didn't charge a high monthly fee, she interacted with the local community through cultural classes, and she was passionate about volunteer work. I agree with Abe that she's a wonderful person."

Everyone's tense expressions relaxed.

"However, there's a reason Abe reacted so strongly," he continued. "Some of

the people who knew about the church's circumstances started gossiping about 'the shady new religion,' didn't they?" he asked gently.

Abe flinched.

Huh?

"It was very frustrating for her, because she had seen how wonderful the church was. And then someone played a prank on the statue of Mary. Risa had only told Uchiyama and Ito about it, but since you can't stop people from talking, Abe found out too."

Bewildered, I asked, "What does this mean? Were the tears of blood a prank by an outsider?"

"I believe that only the first incident was. Risa said that the first time, it was a red liquid, but real blood isn't red when it's applied to a stone surface. Also, the first time was in the early morning while the second and third were in the afternoon. The first was probably done by someone who saw *Shocking News from Around the World*. Perhaps they were jealous of Risa. However, because of that incident, Abe watched the TV special as well, either from a recording or online. I took a look at the program too, and in response to Mary shedding tears of blood, the Italian priest had cried in joy and said, 'It's a miracle of God. Our church was chosen.' That was when Abe thought the tears of blood could be a miracle—that the Church of the Holy Mother was chosen by God."

Abe trembled, her eyes wide.

"When I asked you about the tears of blood, you said, 'I thought it was a miracle of God, fell to my knees, and cried.' You wanted to take revenge on the people who'd mocked the church for being illegitimate, didn't you?" he asked in a calm tone.

Everyone stood still. Abe's lips trembled but she didn't say anything.

"Did Risa perhaps realize that you'd done it?" he continued.

"Huh?"

"That would be why she got so worked up about removing the poster. I believe it said, 'Pay attention to the poetry of Thomas Murner.' Am I wrong?"

Risa bit her lip and lowered her gaze.

"Who's Thomas Murner?" asked Egawa.

"A satirical poet from the start of the sixteenth century."

He proceeded to recite one of Murner's poems:

The plan was deceitful and wicked.

To make the Holy Mother weep with varnish under her eyes,

And so deceive the pious.

Dr. Stefan is behind her, cunningly preaching melodiously through a tube.

Later, many people will assert

That everything they heard was the voice of Mary,

Even though it was Dr. Stefan all along.

"In other words, the poster was a roundabout accusation that the tears of blood were a trick to gain followers. When Risa saw it, she panicked and disposed of it. I suspect that the person who put it up was...you, Uchiyama." Holmes looked at the woman.

Uchiyama looked down in resignation. "Yes. I thought that the tears were Risa's doing because she wanted to make this into a miracle church chosen by God. I still didn't think she'd go *that* far, though, so I put the paper up to test her, knowing she was the only one knowledgeable enough to understand what it meant. When she got mad and took it down, I thought, 'So it really was her.' But I guess I was wrong. She was covering for Abe." She sighed deeply.

Abe clenched her eyes shut and then broke down into tears. "Waaaaaah! I'm so sorry, Pastor Brown and Risa! I'm so stupid and shallow. Even God must've run out of patience for me," she wailed, hands on the floor.

Risa hugged her and said, tears streaming down her face, "Abe! Thank you for caring so much about our church. God will always love us, no matter what."

The pastor knelt down in front of Abe and said, "She's right, Abe. Everyone makes foolish mistakes. God and Mary will save all of the lost lambs. They will always love us."

“Pastor Brown...” Abe cried again, her body trembling.

Holmes nodded and said, “Yes, I think so too. People are foolish, shallow, selfish, and quick to lose their way. God knows his lambs very well, so no matter what mistakes they make, He will never abandon them. That includes Abe...as well as Pastor Brown and Risa, who still feel guilty for ‘betraying’ the Catholic church.” He gave them a gentle look.

Risa and the pastor widened their eyes, seemingly lost for words.

“Strangely, even though human beings are selfish, they can forgive the sins of others while never forgiving their own,” he continued. “Pastor Brown and Risa, please, forgive yourselves.” He placed a hand on his chest, speaking as if he were a high-ranking monk.

The two of them burst into tears.

He’s right. By sticking to their love, they went against their teachings, literally bearing a huge cross on their shoulders. They could never forgive themselves, so instead, they tried to forgive the sins of others. People really are contradictory—they can be selfish yet selfless at the same time.

“You’re...right,” said Risa, smiling through her tears. “God will forgive us.”

Holmes nodded. “Yes, He forgives everyone.”

The other members of the group started crying too.

“Abe, where did you get the sheep’s blood from?”

“My family often eats jingisukan,” Abe replied. It was a grilled mutton dish popular in Hokkaido. “So we buy a lot of lamb meat, and...like Yagashira said, I thought sheep’s blood would have a ceremonial feel to it,” she muttered, looking down.

“Jingisukan...”

Everyone blinked, then struggled not to laugh.

“Oh right, you’re from Hokkaido.”

“I can’t believe the blood came from jingisukan.”

I was sincerely relieved, but at the same time, I didn’t know if it was

appropriate to laugh in this situation. Either way, the case was settled for now.

Risa stared reverently at Holmes and asked, “Yagashira, you’re Christian, right?”

“No.” He shook his head.

“Huh?” Everyone froze in confusion. “You’re not?”

Apparently, the way he had spoken made them think he was a devout Christian. They all widened their eyes at the unexpected answer.

“I’m not. I go to funerals and memorial services at Buddhist temples, I go to weddings and festivals at Shinto shrines, and on Christmas, I sometimes go to churches for the lights and hymns. I’m a very secular, completely ordinary Japanese person,” he admitted without shame.

Everyone exchanged looks, and this time, they went ahead and burst out laughing.

“Do you mind that I’m like this?” he asked.

“No, of course not.”

“The church welcomes everyone whether they be Buddhist, Shinto, or neutral like you. Everyone is free to visit.”

“I see, so I’m considered neutral.”

The chapel was engulfed in laughter.

Uchiyama smiled gently and said, “Risa, I’m...not going to become Christian, but I admire this church’s activities and I’ll help you with what I can.”

“Yeah, me too!” added Egawa.

“Thank you,” said Risa. “Well, I guess this case is closed. Now, let’s focus on making the Christmas concert a success.”

“Yeah!” everyone shouted.

They went back to rehearsing. Holmes and I quietly left the chapel to avoid being a nuisance.

Mary’s tears of blood were neither a work of the occult nor a miracle from

God—they were the work of a human. Just as the culprit had admitted, I thought it was a very foolish and shallow act. It definitely wasn't good. But now that the truth had come to light, it felt like things were moving in a better direction.

"'Adversity strengthens the foundations,' huh?" I murmured.

"Perhaps. I think it's always for the best when dirty secrets are brought into the open. At any rate, I'm looking forward to the Christmas concert," Holmes said, holding my hand.

"Yeah... Are you sure you want to come here on Christmas Eve, though?"

"Do you not want to?"

"It's not that. Mom seemed happy, and the gospels were nice..."

"Yes, I'm looking forward to the gospels, and since your mom is performing, I'll be able to meet your dad too, right? I don't want to miss such a valuable chance to interact with your family."

My chest was filled with warmth. "Thank you."

"No, thank *you*."

We held each other's hands tightly, and I looked up at the night sky where the stars were twinkling brightly.

9

It was now December 24th. The Church of the Holy Mother's Christmas concert was scheduled to begin at 5 p.m. We arrived at the chapel at 4:30 p.m., and the sky was already dark. The church was beautifully decorated with sparkling lights.

"It's been a while, dad," Holmes said, bowing cheerfully to my father.

My very "normal" father, a rather quiet man of medium build, shrugged weakly and said, "Thanks for taking care of Aoi, I guess. It looks like you helped my wife this time too."

"No, I didn't do anything in particular." Holmes shook his head.

“That’s not true, dad! Holmes is amazing!” Mutsuki shouted, eyes gleaming.

It looks like Holmes has gained another blind follower like Rikyu.

Before long, the pastor came and gave his introductory greetings. We applauded and the gospel group members came out. They stood in a row in front of the cross, all wearing black dresses. With her beautifully done makeup, arranged hair, and stylish dress, even my usually plain mother looked like a star, which made me feel kind of happy to see. My father and brother, who had secured front-row seats in their eagerness, looked even more nervous than she did.

The concert began with famous gospels like *I Will Follow Him*, *Joyful, Joyful*, and *Oh Happy Day*. Everyone was overwhelmed by the group’s performance, which exceeded all expectations. A generous round of applause followed every song.

I overheard some people in the audience saying things like:

“Hey, was our gospel group always this good?”

“They’re amazing.”

The concert was a huge success, and afterwards, everyone went to the large hall in the kindergarten. There was going to be a big party with a lot of games and a potluck dinner provided by the mothers. Everyone left the chapel excitedly, adults and children alike.

“There’s going to be a gift exchange too,” said one of the party staff. “Those who brought handmade gifts, please put them in the big box at the entrance.”

“Oh,” Holmes said, looking at me. “That’s right. I brought your fixed bike with me, Aoi.”

“Wow, really?”

“It’s over here.” He walked to the parking area and pushed the bicycle forward.

“Huh?”

The bicycle was cute and shiny, with a deep red frame and a stylish wicker basket.

“Holmes! Did you buy me a new bike?” I squeaked.

Oh no. I did think my old gray bike was tacky and worn out, but I didn’t expect him to buy me a new one.

I was happy, but bicycles were pretty expensive. Even though I didn’t like my old one, it was still usable, so this felt like a waste. My hesitation took precedence over my joy.

Holmes shook his head. “No, I didn’t.”

“Huh?”

“I gave your bike a makeover. I replaced the basket, changed the rubber grips with brown ones, filed down the whole frame, and repainted it red. Oh, I also fixed the brakes and chain, of course, and cleaned them. I thought that if I did a good job, I could make it my handmade Christmas present,” he said with a grin.

I was too shocked to say anything.

“I couldn’t do it as well as a professional, though. Someone like Ensho would’ve been able to do a perfect job.” He frowned, as if offended by the name he had just uttered.

Oh, Holmes. I couldn’t help but laugh. “Don’t say that. You really are amazing. I never expected you to turn that old bike into something so cute.” My nose twitched and tears spilled from my eyes. I felt so happy and warm. “I-I’m really happy, Holmes. Thank you.” I bowed, unable to stop crying.

He grabbed my wrist and pulled me into a close hug. “This really is dangerous, Aoi. You’re always so unfair,” he said as he held me so tightly that I thought he’d be able to hear the sound of my madly beating heart.

You’re the one who’s unfair in everything you do, Holmes.

Suddenly, I heard children’s voices coming from behind us.

“Wow, they’re hugging!”

“Mama! There’s a lovey-dovey couple!”

We froze, looked at each other, and giggled before fleeing back into the church. There was no one left in the chapel. The stained glass windows were

illuminated by the many candles, making for a beautiful, fantastical scene. The silence made it hard to believe how lively it had been here earlier.

“The mothers from the kindergarten all loved it,” I murmured as we sat down on the pew.

Even the bad-mouthers must’ve been applauding.

Holmes nodded. “Yes, when people are moved, they can’t hide it.”

I looked at him and said, “Thank you for everything, Holmes. My mom and the others were really happy that you solved the mystery and came to the concert today.”

“I’m glad. Has my worth gone up?”

“It’s skyrocketing.”

“Your dad wouldn’t make eye contact with me, though.” He slumped his shoulders, disappointed.

I giggled. “Don’t worry about it. I’m sorry you had to spend Christmas at my family’s event.”

“What are you talking about? I’m the one who’s always getting you caught up in my family’s affairs.”

“Those are fun, though.”

“Yes, I feel the same way.” He smiled gently, making my heart skip a beat.

“Oh right, I made you a Christmas present. I’ll give it to you now since we’re in the church.” I rummaged through my tote bag, took out the gift-wrapped box, and gave it to him.

“Thank you. May I open it?”

“G-Go ahead.”

He carefully untied the ribbon and opened the box, revealing a wine glass with a decorative letter “K” and roses engraved on it.

“Huh? This is Glasritzen, isn’t it? Did you make this?”

“Yes. But I’m only an amateur, so it’s embarrassingly clumsy.”

“No, it’s wonderful! I’m really happy. Thank you.” He grinned, looking genuinely pleased.

“Th-That’s good. I actually considered making it ‘H’ for Holmes or ‘KY’ for Kiyotaka Yagashira, but neither of those would’ve been good ideas.” The letter H was typically associated with perverted things, while KY was a common abbreviation for “kuuki yomenai”—someone who can’t take a hint.

“Having those initials sure complicates things.”

I couldn’t help but laugh.

“I actually have a present for you too,” he continued.

“You mean the bicycle, right?”

“No, something else. I’m sorry for breaking our ‘handmade present’ promise, but please take this.” He handed me a small box.

“Huh?” My heart raced. “Thank you. Can I open it?”

“Yes, of course.”

I anxiously opened the box, revealing a ring with a small flower on it. I recognized the flower as an aoi flower—in other words, it matched the necklace he’d given me for my birthday one year.

“Oh, why are you always so unfair? Stop making me cry!” I said, rubbing my eyes.

“I should be the one asking you to stop getting me worked up.” He placed a hand on his forehead.

“Huh?”

“Never mind. Anyway, this is my way of being sneaky, so you don’t have to worry about it. It’s bug repellent.”

“Bug repellent?”

“It’s to keep other men from approaching you,” he said, touching my hair.

My heart throbbed. “You really are unfair.” My face felt so hot that I couldn’t help but look down.

The chapel fell silent. Holmes gazed at the cross with a fond smile and said quietly, “Your mom and the gospel group members praised me a lot. I was happy, but at the same time, it pained my heart. I’m not such a great person, so it felt like I was being overvalued.”

I slowly looked up at him. Everyone had been whispering that he was like a messenger of God.

“Since we’re at church on a holy night, I should take this opportunity to repent,” he added.

“Huh? Repent?”

“For my sins and acts of folly.”

“Oh. In that case, I want to repent too,” I said with a sigh.

“You do?” He blinked, surprised.

“Yes.” I nodded, clasped my hands together, and closed my eyes. “I was once a selfish sinner who tried to sell my late grandfather’s treasure without permission. Holmes stopped me—and maybe I would’ve given up and gone home even if he hadn’t—but I still can’t forgive myself for trying to do that, and my heart still aches. Tonight, I repent for my sin.”

Saying it out loud made me feel considerably better, but I still ended up crying. As I held my fingers to the corners of my eyes, Holmes wiped my tears with a handkerchief.

“I’m so jealous of your ex,” he said.

“Huh?”

“I wish you would care about me enough to commit a crime for me.”

“I-It’s not like that. When I think about it now, it feels like I was just doing it for my own ego.” I shrugged. *I care about Holmes so much more—so much that he can’t even be compared to my ex.*

“I’m going to make an honest confession too. All this time, I’ve been avoiding talking to you about my past, but I feel that I have to tell you, even if you end up hating me.”

His words made my heart beat faster, but for a different reason this time. Holmes had said that after Izumi betrayed him, he could no longer trust women and lived a life that was “the complete opposite” of a priest’s. *Just what did he mean by that?*

Holmes sighed. “After that...falling apart with Izumi, I became sort of twisted. I chose a woman who had a boyfriend and got closer to her,” he said, not looking in my direction.

When he says he “got closer to her,” he probably means in the adult way.

I silently awaited his next words.

“I was really shocked that I’d lost my girlfriend, who I’d treasured in my own way, to a man she’d met on a group date of all things. I was blind to my own shortcomings, and perhaps I wanted some sort of revenge. That said, I never actually dated the woman I got close to. I imitated seduction techniques, and when I saw how easily she fell for me despite having a boyfriend, I became even more distrustful and disillusioned. It’s terrible, isn’t it?”

It *was* terrible, in many ways.

“In reality, I’m a black-hearted, dirty man—a far cry from a Christian.” He sighed.

I couldn’t say anything in response to his past, which he was revealing to me for the first time.

“Sorry, I really am the lowest of the low,” he continued. “I sometimes wonder if I’m worthy of you.”

After a moment of silence, I said, “But that means you aren’t committing anything like adultery, right?”

“Adultery?! N-No, of course I’m not. I reformed myself after I started going out with you. But you’re disillusioned after hearing my story, aren’t you?”

“No, um, how do I put this... It was within the scope of my imagination,” I mumbled.

“What?!” He looked up at me.

“I was worried that you might’ve been having an affair or something. Older

women tend to like you, you're black-hearted, and you have a lot of opportunities to meet rich people, so I thought you might've been manipulating rich married women. I didn't know what I'd do if you said you had a lot of affairs..."

He dropped his forehead onto the pew in front of us with a *thud*.

"Holmes?"

"You're as harsh as ever, Aoi. Since I'm black-hearted, you thought I was having affairs with several rich married women?" He chuckled as he remained slumped over, seeming genuinely amused.

"S-Sorry. But I wasn't *that* far off, was I?"

"You're right. I didn't have an actual affair, but your guess wasn't too far off the mark." He looked up. "What would you have done if I *had* had several affairs like you thought?"

I didn't know what to say. *What* would *I have done?*

"I'd be shocked, but like I confessed just now, I'm a sinner too, so..." I smiled feebly.

Holmes pulled me towards him by the shoulder, and before I knew it, he was hugging me tightly.

"I'm realizing again that I'll never be able to win against you, Aoi."

"That's not true."

"No, it is," he said, reverting to his Kyoto accent. "You look straight at me for everything I am, not averting your eyes from any side of me. I really can't get enough of it. So, thank you. I was a terrible person, but I want to take good care of you." He tightened his hold on me.

Amid the flickering candlelight, we heard a beautiful hymn coming from the direction of the kindergarten. We gently pressed our foreheads together and whispered words of love to each other as if they were prayers. It was a sweet, precious Holy Night.

Short Story: Kaori Miyashita's Dilemma

I don't mind doing things alone. I'm fine going to the movies, eating at restaurants, and wandering around town by myself. Being with a friend might double the fun, but that doesn't mean I feel lonely on my own. Friends have their appeal, as does being alone.

It was January 5th. I, Kaori Miyashita, had gone to the Sanjo movie theater by myself. After the movie, I wandered over to the antique shop, Kura. That was where my best friend, Aoi Mashiro, worked part-time, so I figured I might find her there.

The storefront was kind of intimidating, so I felt nervous when I opened the door. The chime rang softly, and at the same time, the scent of coffee tickled my nose. This place always smelled like coffee, as if it were a coffee shop.

"Oh, welcome, Kaori," said a familiar male voice, surprising me a bit. It was the voice of Kiyotaka "Holmes" Yagashira, who I had thought was away for training.

I stiffened up, but unexpectedly, what my eyes landed on was the manager's gentle smile.

"It's been quite a while since we last met," he continued.

The voice actually belonged to Holmes's father, the manager. In the past, Aoi had mentioned that Holmes and the manager resembled each other, but it hadn't made sense to me at the time. Now, I finally understood. Their voices, way of speaking, and auras really were similar.

I wouldn't be able to tell them apart over the phone, I thought with a faint smile.

"Kaori?" The manager tilted his head, curious as to why I wasn't saying anything.

"Oh, sorry. Um, is Aoi here today?"

“She’s attending a New Year’s party in Gion with Kiyotaka for people in the antiques industry. I’m watching the store today.”

“Oh,” I murmured.

In that case, there’s no reason for me to stay.

I bowed and was about to leave.

“I brewed coffee for myself just now, but it ended up being too much for one person to drink. Would you like a cup?” the manager asked with a smile.

My expression relaxed. “Thanks. Don’t mind if I do.”

“Go ahead and have a seat.”

“Okay.” I sat on a chair in front of the counter. As the manager had said, the glass pot was filled to the brim with coffee. I couldn’t help but laugh. “You really did make a lot.”

“Yes, I accidentally used too many beans.” He gave an embarrassed shrug and poured a cup for me.

“Thank you.” I sipped the coffee and let out a sigh.

“I can’t brew it as well as Kiyotaka does, but...”

“It’s good.”

“I’m glad to hear that. I often make mistakes.”

“Now that you mention it, Holmes said you tried to brew instant coffee in the coffee maker,” I said, holding a hand up to my mouth.

The manager held his head in his hands. “How embarrassing. What happened was, we’d never had instant coffee in our store before, so I assumed there couldn’t be any. I believed they were beans and put them in the coffee maker only to be astonished when they melted and disappeared. When I told Kiyotaka about it, he simply said, ‘Yes, because it’s instant coffee.’”

It was so easy to imagine that conversation that I couldn’t hold back my laughter. “Okay, but why was there instant coffee?”

“Kiyotaka had bought it for me since he was going to be away for training. He thought I wouldn’t have to worry about messing up if it was instant coffee.”

“How kind of him.”

“Yes, despite how he seems, he’s a nice boy.” He chuckled.

What a nice father and son, I thought as I looked down at the counter. There was a sheet of paper in front of him.

“You were working, weren’t you?” I asked.

“Yes, this is why I’m watching the store instead of attending the New Year’s party. I have a deadline coming up.”

“You write historical novels, don’t you?”

“Yes.”

“It’s amazing that you can do that,” I said earnestly.

He put on a small smile and replied, “Just because they’re historical novels doesn’t mean they’re amazing.”

“Yeah, but you have to do a lot of background research, right? And I think people would’ve felt differently back then than they do now.”

“Well, you’re not wrong about that. But in general, the interpersonal drama isn’t any different. It’s just set in the past.”

“Really?”

“Yes.” He nodded. “For example, if you read *The Tale of Genji*, you’ll find that although polygamy was practiced in the Heian period, the pain and conflict that arose from jealousy were the same as today. People were angry or moved for more or less the same reasons they are now. Past or present, people’s emotions work the same way. If you have a romantic drama set in the present, you can change it to the Edo period with the exact same developments and it becomes a historical novel.”

“Now that you put it that way, you’re right. It’s true,” I said, impressed. “You really are an experienced writer.”

“No, not at all. I’m sorry to bother you with this boring talk. Did you need Aoi for something?”

“Nah, I was just stopping by on the way back from the movie theater.”

“Did you watch a movie by yourself?”

“Oh...yes.” I nodded awkwardly.

The manager smiled gently and said, “I see. That’s nice. I admire a woman who can go anywhere by herself.”

“Thank you, but because of that, I can’t really get a boyfriend.”

“I overheard Aoi and Kiyotaka saying that Kiyotaka’s friend has taken an interest in you.”

“He...got Holmes to invite me to a group dinner with the four of us.”

“By four, you mean Kiyotaka, Aoi, him, and you?”

I nodded.

“Not enthusiastic about the idea?”

“Well...to be honest, Kohinata’s decently good-looking and incredibly accomplished, so I’m flattered that he seems to be interested in me, but...”

“You two don’t click?”

“Yeah.” Before I knew it, I was nodding firmly.

“In that case, a group of four sounds like a good idea. You won’t have to worry about making conversation.”

“Well...yeah, I guess.”

“I think it’s fine to turn him down after you’ve gotten to know him. It’s possible that your second impression of him will be different than your first. That’s how it was for me.”

“It was?”

“Yes, when I first met my wife, I didn’t have a very good first impression of her. She was very blunt and avoided strangers. I thought, ‘She’s pretty, but she’s not very nice.’ But after having a proper conversation with her, I realized that she was just clumsy. In reality, she was an honest and kind person.”

“Oh...”

“You’re a kind and smart lady, Kaori, so please don’t discourage yourself from

reaching your potential," he said with a smile.

My heart skipped a beat. "Th-Thanks." I blushed and looked down, confused by my quickening pulse.

"Is something the matter?" He peered into my face, making my heart pound faster.

"Oh, no, it's nothing."

Oh gosh. This is bad. Aoi, what should I do? I feel like...I have a crush on the manager.

Fearing that he could hear my still-racing heartbeat, I was torn between wanting to run away and wanting to stay longer. I meekly sipped the coffee that he had brewed.

It was a sweet yet painful afternoon. The quiet jazz music playing in the store sounded far away.

Epilogue

It was January 5th and we were attending a New Year's party. My face stiffened. *Who would've thought that this day would come?*

In the banquet hall of a traditional Japanese restaurant in Gion, a feast was laid out on four-legged trays, including grilled sea bream and other delicacies.

"Today's party is to introduce my new apprentice," said Yanagihara, grinning from ear to ear.

"My name is Ensho. I look forward to working with you all." The former counterfeiter bowed deeply.

The others present were familiar faces from the art industry, the flower arrangement teacher, and the Yagashira family members, including Yoshie and me.

"Man, this is kind of crazy."

For some reason, Akihito was there too.

Ensho had a shaved head as usual. He wore a formal traditional getup consisting of a long kimono and haori jacket made of white habutae silk dyed black and hakama pants with a striped pattern called sendaidaira. The way he bowed with his hands on the tatami and slowly raised his head was so dignified that impressed voices could be heard from around the hall.

"Huh, he's pretty handsome when you look at him like that," said Akihito, gazing at Ensho from afar. The two of us were sitting in the lowest-ranking seats, which were the farthest from the seat of honor.

He was right; Ensho was so manly and majestic that it made me think, *Was he always this handsome?*

Apparently, Ensho had admitted his crimes and turned himself in. His actions had been classified as fraud, but since he had already become Yanagihara's apprentice and had a strong desire to reform himself, he'd been given a

suspended sentence due to the extenuating circumstances.

“But oh man, just look at Holmes’s face!” Akihito lightly elbowed my arm.

Holmes was sitting with the Yagashira family. He wore a black suit that looked really good on him, making him look stylish and dignified. However, his expression was startlingly cold. His emotions were so evident on his face that I almost burst out laughing.

“It’s hilarious, right?”

“Don’t say that, Akihito.” It did make me want to laugh, but that would be *really* inappropriate.

The two of us struggled to hold back our laughter.

“Be quiet, you two,” said Rikyu, who was sitting across the table. He pointed at us with an exasperated look on his face.

We shrugged awkwardly, embarrassed about being scolded by someone younger than us.

After Ensho introduced himself, Yanagihara continued with his opening speech.

“My children and grandchildren have moved on to careers that are unrelated to antiques, and I couldn’t find any young people with good eyes. Just when I was lamenting the future of the art industry, I met Ensho...”

He looked happy as he spoke. When Ensho had declared, “My eyes are just as good as that Holmes of Kyoto’s,” Yanagihara must have doubted him at first. But after getting to know him, he’d sensed the man’s unique intelligence, and now he was proud to call him his apprentice.

It’s to be expected, seeing as Ensho was able to compete with Holmes. As much as I hate to admit it, he’s even surpassed Holmes at times. I can understand why Yanagihara is so happy.

As I watched Yanagihara and Ensho from afar, I heard voices around me saying:

“Now that’s another good-looking man.”

“Indeed. He looks like he’ll join Kiyotaka as another prince of the antique world.”

In the past, I had always been afraid of Ensho, so I hadn’t been able to examine his appearance calmly. But now, his mannerisms were so graceful that it was hard to believe he had lived in the underworld. I could understand why people would say such things about him. Ensho had always been skilled at perfectly copying people’s movements, facial expressions, and even the way they spoke. He must have been imitating the mannerisms of someone high-class.

“I humbly ask for your guidance and encouragement,” he said, looking around at everyone in the hall.

Upon making eye contact with me, he smiled gently. I felt like I couldn’t breathe. That smile was the spitting image of Holmes’s.

Oh, so that’s whose mannerisms he was copying. Deliberately looking at me and smiling like Holmes... I see that he still has a terrible personality.

I looked at where the Yagashira family was sitting, wondering how Holmes felt about this. Naturally, his eyes were still cold—actually, they seemed even colder than before.

“Hey, don’t you think Holmes is really mad?” whispered Akihito. “He’s radiating a scary aura.”

I nodded and said quietly, “Yes, he is.”

He probably realized that Ensho was imitating him, making him extremely uncomfortable. And Ensho knew that Holmes would be offended, but he’s doing it anyway. I thought things would calm down after he turned over a new leaf in the art industry, but this isn’t looking good.

I slumped my shoulders as I looked at the amused Ensho and the cold, fiery-aura-emitting Holmes.

After the formal speech was over, it was time for the toast. At last, we could get on with the meal. The atmosphere in the hall suddenly became much more relaxed.

“Ahhh, we can finally eat,” Akihito said with a relieved smile, picking up his chopsticks.

Rikyu laughed and said, “You’re the same as ever.”

“Yep.”

As the three of us laughed together, I overheard Yanagihara saying to the owner, “He and Kiyotaka are going to be the two great princes of the antique world.”

The owner crossed his arms doubtfully and snorted. “That greenhorn can’t compare to Kiyotaka. How good can he possibly be?”

Owner... I forced a smile. *I guess Holmes isn’t the only one who’s unimpressed.*

Everyone flinched at the owner’s rude remark.

“I thought you’d say that,” Yanagihara replied, unconcerned. “He really does have good eyes, though.”

“Does he know what that calligraphy is, then?” the owner asked, pointing at a large scroll hanging on the wall. It had the word “grace” written on it.

Ensho stared at it and tilted his head. “I can tell that it’s authentic, but I’m still lacking in knowledge, so I don’t know who wrote it,” he answered calmly.

The owner smirked. “Tell him, Kiyotaka.”

Holmes nodded and put down his chopsticks. “That calligraphy is by Shiyu Tsujimoto, a calligrapher from Nara Prefecture who was active from the Meiji period until the early Showa period. His character shows in the work’s carefree and fluttery appearance. I believe it may have been written specially for this restaurant,” he explained smoothly.

“Ohhh!” exclaimed the people in the hall.

“Kiyo never disappoints,” said Rikyu.

“Yeah, that’s our Holmes,” replied Akihito, both he and the younger boy clenching their fists.

I heard others saying:

“Kiyotaka really knows everything, huh?”

“Yeah, Ensho said it was authentic, but even I can tell that much. It’s hard to identify the calligrapher like Kiyotaka does.”

Ensho narrowed his eyes and said to Taguchi, the secretary, “I’m sorry to bother you, but could you give me the bag over there?”

“Of course.” Taguchi handed him the black bag right away.

What’s happening now?

Before anyone could question him, Ensho took out a brush, ink, an inkstone, and calligraphy paper. He stared at Shiyu Tsujimoto’s calligraphy for a few moments before picking up the brush and gazing at the paper with intense focus. He held his breath and began moving his hand as if possessed, his eyes wide open. Before long, he had written the word “grace.”

Everyone gasped—the writing looked identical to Shiyu Tsujimoto’s.

Ensho took a deep breath, picked up his calligraphy, and stood up. Everyone was rendered speechless by the perfect reproduction.

“I once created forgeries like this,” he explained. “It’s something I’m truly ashamed of, and I’ve resolved to never commit such crimes again. I lack knowledge right now, but there are a lot of things I know about counterfeits because of my past. I’m sensitive to fakes, and I’m confident that I have keener eyes than anyone else. For the sake of atoning for my sins, I hereby pledge to use these eyes to not let a single counterfeit go overlooked,” he declared in a strong tone of voice.

Everyone cheered and clapped for him, although they were taken aback.

They would’ve found out that he was a former counterfeiter sooner or later. He picked the best time to confess and turned his shameful past into an advantage. He really isn’t an ordinary person.

Now people were saying things like “Wow, that was amazing” and “It’s reassuring to have someone like him come over to our side.” He had successfully won their hearts.

Is Holmes okay? Now that everyone’s in party mode, I should be able to switch seats.

Worried, I was about to quietly move to the Yagashira family's section when Ensho walked up to Holmes, beer bottle in hand, and said, "I look forward to working with you, Holmes."

"Yes, likewise," Holmes replied, his eyes narrowing as he smiled.

He held out his cup and Ensho filled it with beer. It should have been a very charming scene, but I couldn't help but feel chills run down my spine. Likewise, Akihito's face went pale.

Rikyu, however, said with a twinkle in his eyes, "It's like a cold war! Awesome!"

"By the way, Ensho, do you mind if I borrow that calligraphy of yours?"

"Sure, go ahead."

Ensho handed the paper to Holmes, who took a fountain pen out of his inner pocket and pointed it at the calligraphy without removing the cap.

"Here, here, and here," Holmes said quietly so that the others couldn't hear. "These places are where your character shows through. The work may look identical at first glance, but it's not a very good forgery. Well, that might be for the better since you're retired now." He chuckled.

Ensho froze for a second. "I *really* can't stand you."

"Likewise."

As they continued to smile at each other, I heard other people saying things like "They sure get along well" and "What a lovely pair."

I couldn't help but grimace. *Why does this scene come across as delightful to everyone else?*

The owner was grinning in amusement, seeming to have been won over. "The dragon and the tiger, eh? Now this is interesting."

"I told you," said Yanagihara.

"Fine, I'll allow it."

"Cheers!"

They drank. Apparently, the owner had acknowledged Ensho as Holmes's

rival.

It's probably only because he thinks it's "interesting."

***

While the party was going on, I slipped out to use the restroom and let out a loud sigh as I washed my hands.

What's with this nerve-racking New Year's introduction party?

It was unsettling how happy everyone else was in contrast to me. I thought Akihito would've felt the same way, but now he was enjoying himself quite a bit with Rikyu.

It's not every day I get to go to a party like this, so maybe I should relax and have fun too.

I sighed again and dried my hands with my handkerchief. Trying to regain my composure, I straightened my back and looked at my reflection in the mirror. I was wearing a cute black dress that could pass as formal wear. Since I had wanted to go all out, I had applied a treatment to my hair that made it all shiny, and I had a light touch of makeup on.

I think I look more mature than usual, if I do say so myself. My expression relaxed. *I'm a university student now.*

I reapplied my lipstick, nodded in satisfaction, and left the powder room.

I walked down the polished tatami hallway. There were Japanese paintings on the walls and flower arrangements in the corners, and outside, there was a traditional Japanese garden that had quite a nice atmosphere at night.

Restaurants in Gion really spare no effort when it comes to beauty.

When I reached the large hall, I saw a man smoking a cigarette in the garden's faintly lit smoking area.

I can't see his face from behind, but is that Ensho? The star of the party went out to smoke?

I shrugged, mildly astonished.

Ensho snuffed his cigarette out in the ashtray and came inside, seeming to

have noticed my gaze. “Good evening, Aoi. Thanks for coming to the party to see me.” He brought his face close to mine and grinned.

“I didn’t come here for *you*.”

“Whose introduction party is this, then?”

“It’s...yours.”

“Yep, thanks.” He put on a carefree smile.

My face twitched.

“Well, I really do wanna thank you, though. Because of you guys, I got out of the shadows. Never would’ve thought I’d have my own introduction party,” he said quietly, gazing out at the garden.

Seeing him like this filled my heart with emotion. He had a gentle aura that I hadn’t felt from him before. It must have been because he was with the person he loved.

“Are you living with Yuki now?” I asked.

He looked at me with wide eyes. “No. I’m training at Yanagihara’s place.”

“Oh, you’re a live-in apprentice? Do you get to see Yuki at all?”

“Yeah, but not that much. Going all the way to Hyogo is a pain.”

“Huh?” I squeaked.

“What, did you get the wrong idea? Yuki and I ain’t lovers.”

“R-Really?”

“Well, I *have* slept with both men and women in my thirty years of life.”

My face stiffened. “I don’t care about that.”

“Yeah, I know.” He laughed.

Seriously, what an abnormal man.

“But Yuki is really special to you, isn’t he?”

Ensho had been sending him financial aid all this time.

“Yeah, he’s special, but I think of him as a brother. He’s the only family I can

trust. Since I couldn't go on the right path, I wanted to at least give him a respectable future in my place... No, that's not it. I was trying to justify what I was doing by supporting him," he said with a self-deprecating smile.

I didn't know what to say, so I just stared at him.

"Yuki always admired me," he continued. "He'd go, 'Shinya, you're cooler than the heroes on TV.'" Shinya was Ensho's real name. "I didn't want to destroy the hero image in his mind, and the fact that he looked up to me was what kept me going."

It must have been similar to the envious looks that Rikyu gives Holmes.

"That might've been why I took up the priesthood to cleanse my sins. It didn't work, though. Life as a monk was too dull. Then I met Holmes and I just exploded."

So he really had been pushed to the edge.

"But really, you thought I had something going on with Yuki?" He laughed.

I blushed, too embarrassed to look him in the eye.

"I'm pretty interested in you, though."

"Huh?" I looked up, surprised.

"At first, I didn't know why Holmes would keep you around, but I think I get it now. You're a fine woman."

I glared at him. *He must be teasing me.*

His mouth was curved in a smile, but his eyes were serious. "Well, believe it or not, I do feel indebted to Holmes, so I ain't gonna make a move on you. But if you weren't his, I'd definitely make you mine."

"Wh-What?!" I wanted to say, "Well, *I* have no intention of being yours!" but his overwhelming aura prevented me from speaking. It was intense, like a wild beast. The owner had compared Holmes and Ensho to a dragon and a tiger, and Ensho was definitely the tiger.

"Oh?" he said when I didn't fight back. "What, does this mean I have a chance? Let's have a fling. You'll see that I'm better than him."

“Wh-What are you saying?!” *I really can’t believe this man!*

He laughed at my incredulous reaction. Suddenly, he looked up and caught something that was flying at him. It was a closed folding fan.

“Oh, what a scary face,” he said.

I followed his gaze and saw Holmes standing there with a terrifyingly cold look in his eyes.

“What are you doing to Aoi?” he asked in a low voice.

Ensho shrugged dramatically and replied, “I’m not gonna steal your girl, so don’t look like you’re gonna kill me. I’m grateful to you, after all. So, what’s this? That was dangerous, y’know?”

He opened the fan, revealing autumn leaves and the words “I win.” It was the fan that he had thrust at Holmes back at Genko-an Temple. Holmes had snapped it in half at the time, but it was now fully repaired—and he had secretly been displaying it in his room.

“I was going to return it to you today. I meant to hand it to you, but my grip slipped, sorry,” Holmes said with a smile.

“Just how much did it slip?!” Ensho looked down at the fan, exasperated, and sighed. “I don’t want this. If you don’t want it either, go ahead and throw it out.” He closed the fan with a quick motion and held it out to Holmes.

“If that’s the case, please dispose of it yourself,” Holmes said, frowning as if to say, “Why do I have to do it?”

Ensho grinned and said, “Well, I originally painted this for you.”

“Huh?” Holmes’s eyes widened.

Ensho opened the fan. “You saw through my forgery, so you won. I wrote this on the fan so I could give it to you if you showed up at Genko-an. So it’s yours. If you don’t want it, throw it out or burn it or whatever you like.”

“It was for me?” Even Holmes looked surprised by this revelation. “In that case, I really can’t accept it,” he said with a sigh.

Ensho narrowed his eyes as if wondering, *Why not?*

Holmes awkwardly looked away and said, “I only won by chance. I don’t want proof of that ‘victory.’ From now on, we’ll be competing as fellow appraisers. I’ll receive that fan when I have a decisive victory over you.”

“You’re stubborn too, eh? You might not be able to beat me anymore.” Ensho held up the fan and grinned.

“Don’t worry about that.”

Sparks flew between them, but unlike before, it was sort of touching to see them like this.

“Those autumn leaves and the landscape painting of Suzhou were undoubtedly your own work,” Holmes said. “Since you have such talent, I hope you’ll paint more of your own pictures in the future.”

“Thanks. Never thought I’d see the day when you complimented me.”

“I’d rather not, if I had the choice. Anyway, there’s something I’ve been meaning to say to you.”

“What?”

“You’ve been leering at Aoi ever since we were in the hall. From now on, if you try to flirt with my girlfriend, I’m going to crack your head open for real,” Holmes said condescendingly, crossing his arms.

“Oh, that’s what had you on edge? I wasn’t leering; I was just looking. Don’t tell me I can’t even look at her,” Ensho said with a laugh.

“No, that was leering. It’s unpleasant, so I won’t tolerate it. Also, Yanagihara was calling for you.”

“Man, tell me that sooner. Well, I’m going, then.” He ran towards the banquet hall.

“Please don’t run in a place like this,” Holmes reprimanded him. “Are you a child?” He narrowed his eyes before turning around and offering me his hand. “Shall we go?”

“Okay.”

We looked at each other and held hands tightly. It felt like a fresh breeze was

blowing through my heart as I watched Ensho walking slightly ahead of us.

Afterword

Thank you for reading. At last, the eighth volume of this series marks the start of Aoi's university arc. However, the story mainly revolved around Kiyotaka, who's getting his feet wet in the working world. Sorry, I hope you'll be understanding. (laughs)

Before writing this book, I had already decided that Kiyotaka would be undergoing training after finishing grad school, but I had to think about where I was going to send him. At my autograph event in late April 2017, I was visited by the assistant director of Shokado Garden Art Museum, who said, "It would be a dream come true if Shokado Garden Art Museum could appear in the *Holmes of Kyoto* series one day." I thought it would make a great training place for Kiyotaka, so I suggested it and they readily agreed, saying, "It would be our pleasure. Feel free to use Iwashimizu Hachimangu as well, which is also in Yawata City." That was how this collaboration came to be.

Since the incident was going to take place inside the shrine, I asked the priest at Iwashimizu Hachimangu if it would be acceptable, and he said, "As long as it's not something like a murder mystery, it's fine. Go ahead and write anything you like." I was very happy that they agreed to the collaboration as well.

By the way, Igawa the assistant director, Suginami, and Kojima the head priest are all real people, although their names were slightly changed. I'm really grateful to them for letting me include them.

I'd be delighted if those who read this book became even a little interested in Shokado Garden Art Museum, Iwashimizu Hachimangu, and Yawata City.

Once again, thank you to Shokado Garden Art Museum and Iwashimizu Hachimangu Shrine.

As usual, please allow me to use this space to express my thanks:

To Futabasha, EVERYSTAR, the proofreaders, the distributors, the bookstores,

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I’m truly thankful to all of the connections surrounding myself and this series.

Thank you all so much.

Mai Mochizuki



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by Mai Mochizuki

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