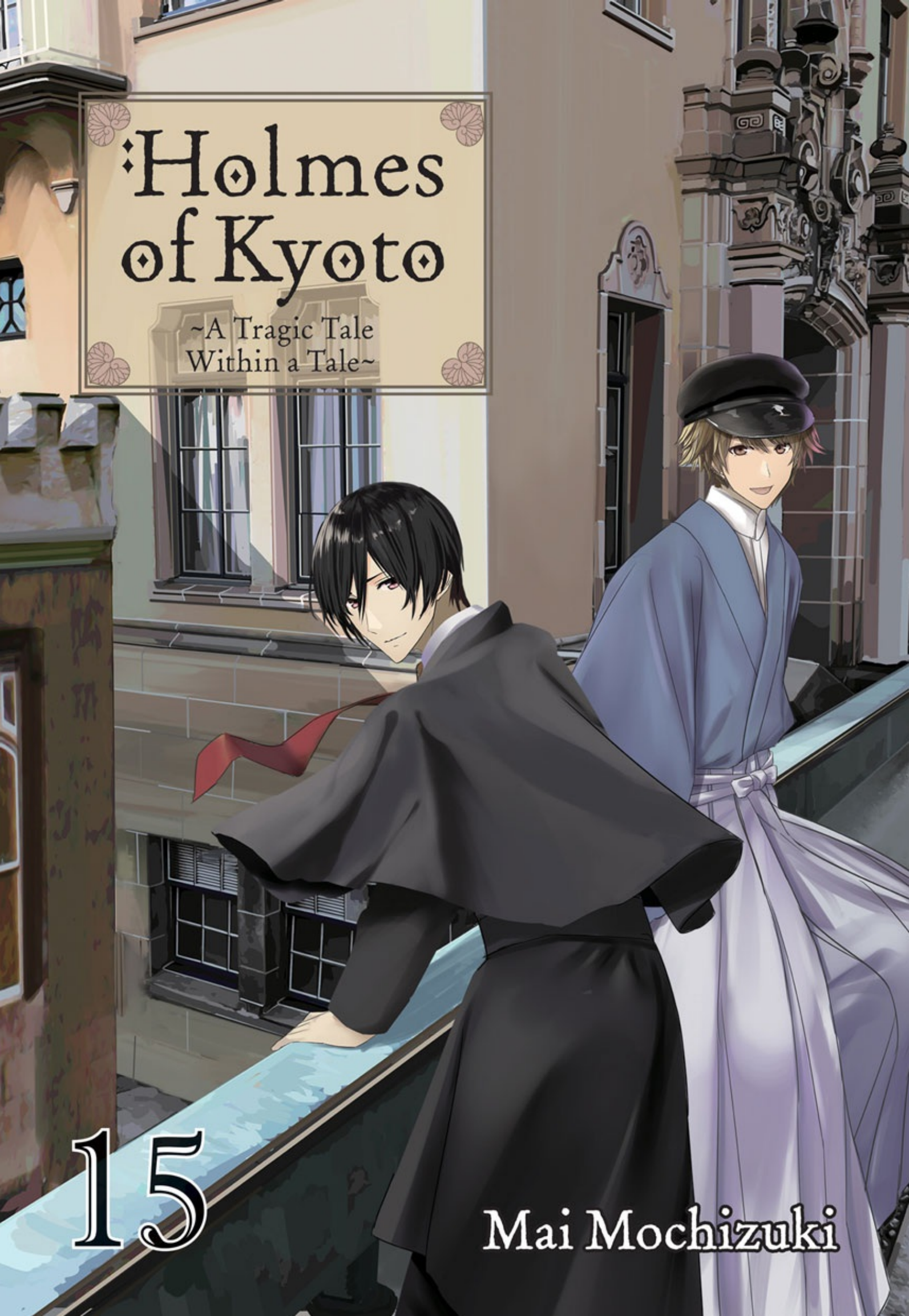
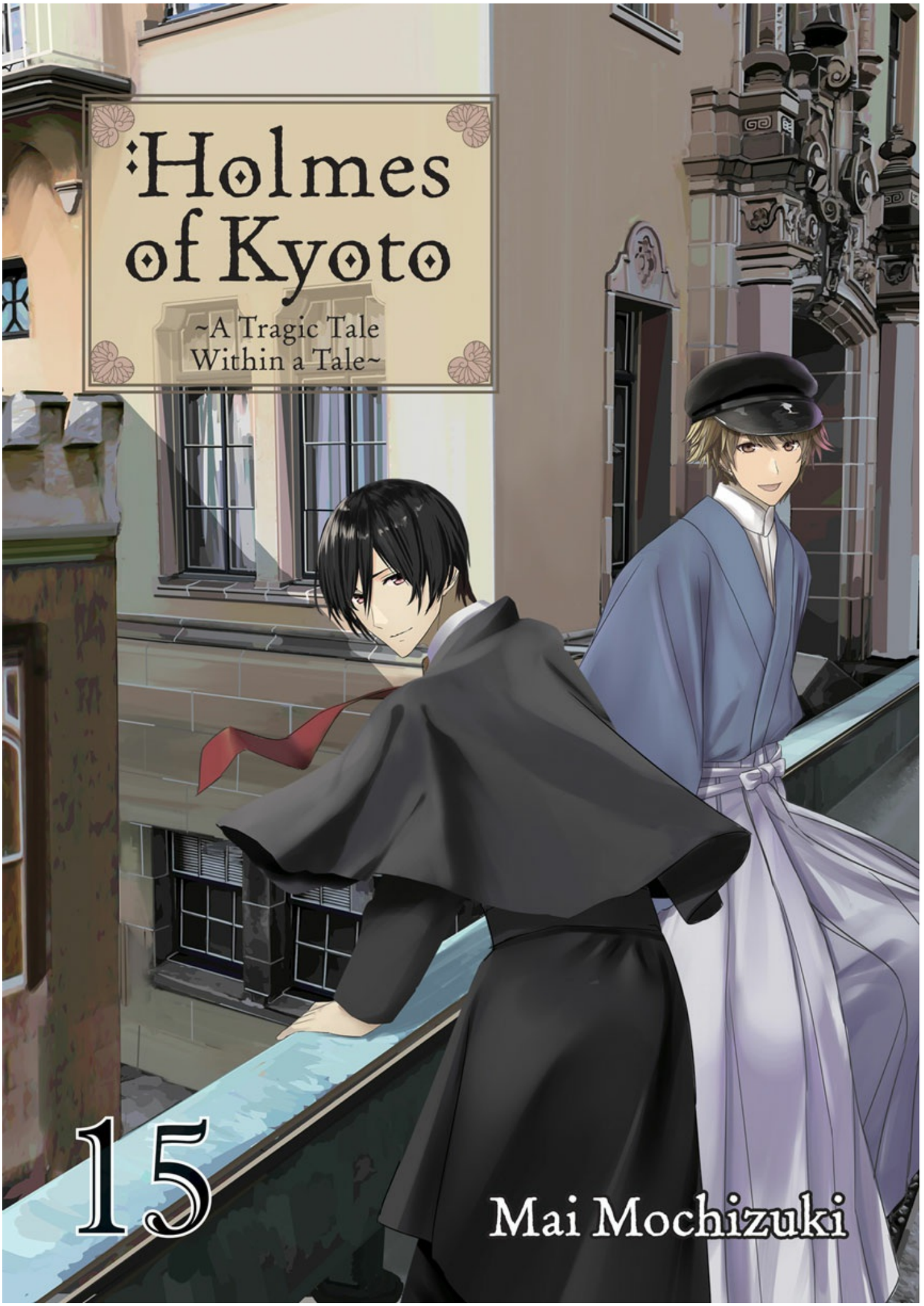
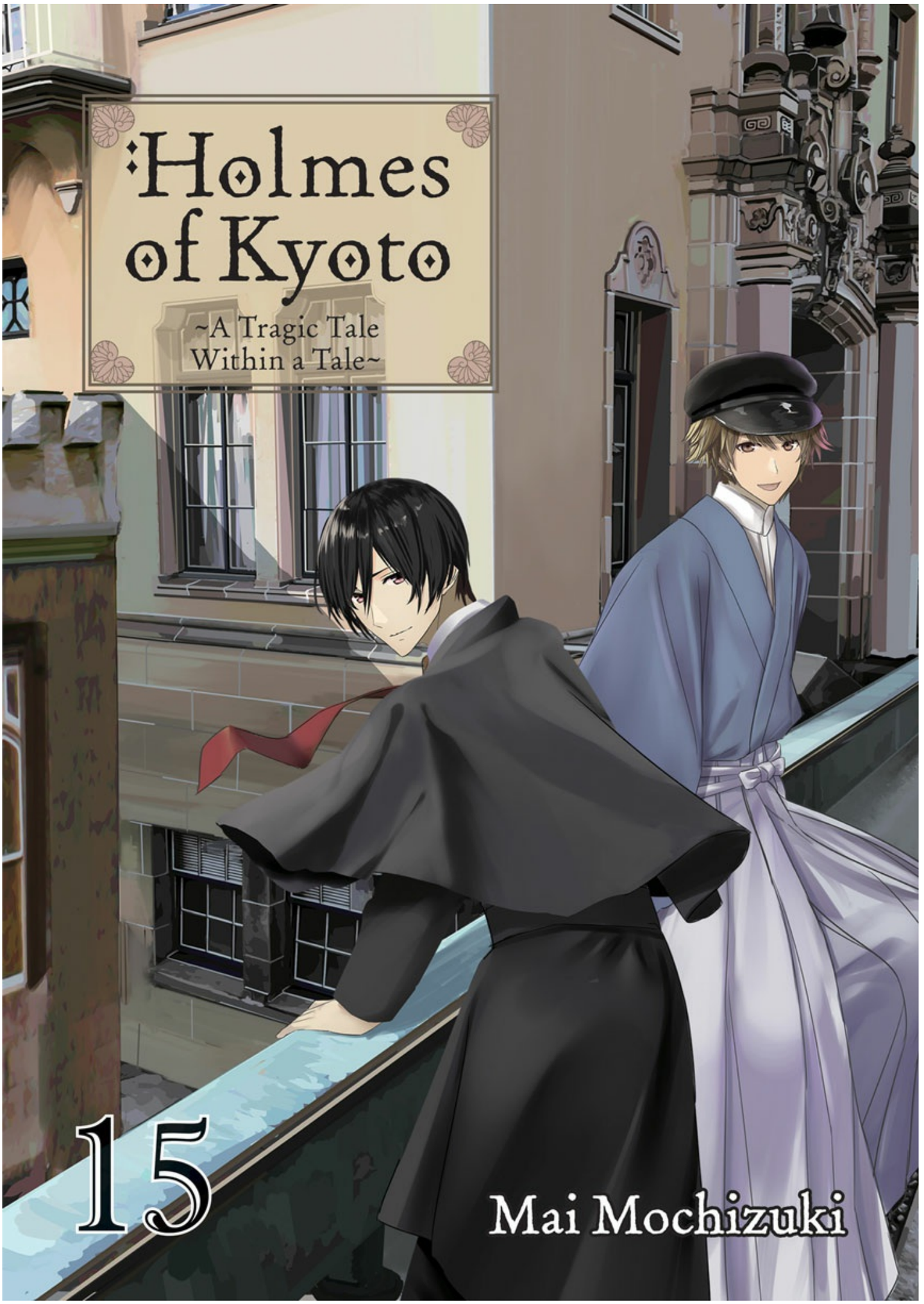

Holmes of Kyoto
~A Tragic Tale Within a Tale~
15
Mai Mochizuki


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Holmes of Kyoto: Volume 15 [Complete]

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Holmes of Kyoto
~A Tragic Tale Within a Tale~
15
Mai Mochizuki

Prologue

Under the guidance of Kiyotaka Yagashira, skilled counterfeiter-turned-painter Ensho (real name Shinya Sugawara) had quickly gained recognition from one of the wealthiest men in the world. Ensho's brilliance was awe-inspiring, but it went without saying that Kiyotaka was also incredible. Despite calling himself an apprentice, he was an excellent appraiser with an exceptional eye for observation and discernment. His accomplishments were already well known around the world.

"Ensho and the kiddo really are amazing." Katsuya Komatsu, head of the Komatsu Detective Agency, chuckled and looked up. He couldn't believe that such great people had been working at his tiny office, even if it had only been a temporary arrangement.

"Didn't I tell you not to use my mug?"

"Pfft, it's just a mug. Who cares? You're such a stingy guy."

"Is that really how you should be talking after using someone's property without permission?"

"Whaddya mean, 'someone's property'? There's no ownership in a shared kitchen."

"Oh, so that's how you see it. In that case, let's say you bought your favorite sweets and put them in the fridge so you could eat them during your break. If I were to eat them without checking with you first, you wouldn't complain, would you?"

"Nah. I ain't interested in sweets."

"What if it was crème caramel?"

Silence.

"No snarky response, I see. I'm sure it's true that you aren't interested in sweets in general, but crème caramel is different. Could it be that you have a

special attachment to it?”

“Seriously, shut up. Why do I have to put up with this just ’cause I used a damn mug?”

“When I brought it in this morning, I said, ‘This mug is special to me, so please don’t use it.’ If I’m not mistaken, you nodded and said, ‘Yeah, yeah.’”

“I don’t recall that. What’s so good about this ceramic cup, anyway? It looks like an amateur made it. I like this deep indigo color, though. It must’ve been really expensive if you’re using it, eh?”

“Aoi made that mug for me.”

“Oh...so that’s why. All right, my bad. You can have it back right now if you want. I already put my mouth on it, though.”

“Thank you.”

“Wait, you didn’t even hesitate to take it. I said I put my mouth on it.”

“I’ll wash it thoroughly.”

“You’re seriously ridiculous.”

“Say whatever you like.”

“This is stupid.”

It really is *stupid.* Komatsu grimaced as he listened to the pointless bickering taking place within the walls of his modestly sized office. Then he stood up with a start. “Wait, why are you guys still here?!”

“Why do you ask?” Kiyotaka asked, tilting his head. Ensho silently rested his chin on his hand.

After returning from Shanghai, all of the stress, excitement, and fatigue had caught up to Komatsu at once. He had fallen ill for about two weeks, and today was his first day back at work. He had assumed that Kiyotaka and Ensho hadn’t been coming to the office either, but here they were, chatting away as usual.

Kiyotaka shrugged. “I haven’t finished my training here yet.”

Their time in Shanghai had been so action-packed that Komatsu had felt like a long time had passed. “Oh, I see. You only just started working here, huh?”

“Am I bothering you?”

“No, I’m glad. I was just surprised. I mean, after the party in Shanghai, you went to New York. With all your other work, I figured you wouldn’t be back for about a month. That’s why I...” Komatsu recalled the scene at the Shanghai Tower, when Kiyotaka had declared he was taking the last flight to New York and left the hall.

“Yeah.” Ensho nodded. “Don’t you normally stay abroad for a long time?”

“No, I only went to see Aoi, so I was there for a total of around twenty-four hours,” Kiyotaka said nonchalantly.

“Huh?” Komatsu and Ensho’s eyes widened.

“You came back after just a day?” asked Komatsu.

“Yes,” said Kiyotaka.

“You went to New York and back just for that...” said Komatsu.

“Sheesh, how rich are you? I can’t believe anyone’d do that,” said Ensho.

“Well, it gave me a chance to use up my miles. Most importantly, I had a wonderful time, so I’m truly glad I went,” said Kiyotaka, placing his hand on his chest.

The other two men groaned.

Komatsu turned to Ensho and said, “Okay, but what about you? I definitely didn’t expect *you* to show up here anymore.”

In Shanghai, Ensho had realized it was impossible for him to become an appraiser. He had disappeared for a while, but later, his skill as a painter had been recognized and he had decided to pursue a career in art.

“You aren’t Yanagihara’s apprentice anymore, right?” Komatsu continued. “Which means you don’t have to be stuck to the kiddo.”

“Uh-huh.” Ensho nodded and stood up. His serious eyes made Komatsu flinch. Perhaps he had come to say goodbye. What a conscientious guy. “I’m here ’cause I have a request for you.”

A request? Komatsu blinked at the unexpected word. What could Ensho

possibly want to ask him for?

“Like you said, I ain’t Yanagihara’s apprentice no more. I’ve been living at his place, but now I gotta leave. He said I could stay as long as I wanted, but I can’t just do that.”

Ensho had been living at the Yanagihara residence, taking care of his teacher’s daily needs while undergoing his training. It sounded like a good trade, but in reality, he had probably been more of a freeloader.

“Yeah,” said Komatsu. “It’s not right to take advantage of his kindness. So you want me to help you find a place, then?”

“Maybe later on. You don’t use the second floor here much, yeah? Do you mind letting me stay there for now? Doesn’t have to be permanent, and I’ll pay rent.”

“Here?” The detective’s eyes widened.

“That’s a good idea,” Kiyotaka said with a smile. “Believe it or not, Ensho’s a tidy person, so you don’t have to worry about him making a mess. Him living here would also prevent theft. Besides, you always complain about how expensive the rent is here.”

“Yeah, I do,” said Komatsu.

His office was located right in the middle of Gion, south of Kiyamachi-Shijo on a small, quaint path along the Takase River. It was a traditional wooden townhouse that matched the others—mostly restaurants—in its row.

The landlords were an elderly couple that he had solved a case for in the past. With their permission, he had renovated the interior in a Western style. The first floor served as the office and consultation room, with wooden flooring and a black sofa set. The second floor was his research room equipped with the latest in computer technology. However, he rarely used it. Going upstairs was a hassle, so he ended up doing all of his work at his desk on the first floor.

The second floor also had another room that was completely empty. And as it turned out, Komatsu’s current pressing concern was the fact that rent was high due to the location. The Komatsu Detective Agency had been thriving for a while, so he’d thought he’d be able to get by, but as business dwindled, Gion’s

high rent had become a serious issue. He was even considering moving the office, but it wasn't something that could be done quickly. Having Ensho rent a room, even temporarily, could be a dream come true.

"Well, okay, that works for me," said Komatsu. "But didn't you get filthy rich by selling that painting?"

In Shanghai, Ensho had painted *Yu Garden by Night*, and Zhifei Jing—one of the wealthiest men in the world—had offered to buy it, likely for over a hundred million yen. Komatsu was extremely jealous.

"Nah, I didn't sell it," said Ensho.

"Whaaa?" The detective's eyes widened. "Why not?"

The painter looked away and said nothing.

Kiyotaka replied in his stead, "Ensho painted *Yu Garden by Night* in order to save Aoi, so I think he might want her to have it."

Indeed, Aoi Mashiro's life had been in danger because of Shiro Kikukawa, and Kiyotaka had begged Ensho to paint a painting for her sake. Aoi was Kiyotaka's fiancée, but Ensho was also in love with her. In order to protect her, Ensho had created *Yu Garden by Night*. It was truly a work he'd put his heart and soul into.

"I understand how you feel, but..." Komatsu didn't actually understand. If it had been him, he would have sold it without a moment's hesitation.

"No, that ain't it!" Ensho snapped.

"Oh, really?" asked Kiyotaka. "I was so sure you'd want to give it to Aoi."

"Well...I wanna leave it at Kura for now," Ensho muttered, perhaps embarrassed that his feelings had been revealed. His painting was still on display in the Shanghai hotel. It would probably be shipped back to him after the exhibition.

"All right." Kiyotaka nodded. "You want Aoi to see it first, right?"

"Will you ever shut up about that? I said that ain't it. Anyway, I'm gonna go get my stuff."

He left the office as if running away. Once he was out of sight, Kiyotaka and

Komatsu looked at each other and chuckled.

“Kiddo, don’t you ever feel uneasy knowing that Ensho loves the little miss?” Komatsu asked. If it had been him, he wouldn’t have been able to act so calm. Was Kiyotaka *that* confident?

“I do.”

“Huh?” Komatsu turned to the young man and saw that he had an amused smile on his face.

“When it comes to Aoi, I’m uneasy about everything, not just Ensho. I worry that she might come to hate me, get tired of me, or have a change of heart. I have so many fears that anxiety has become my default state of being.”

“Uh, sure.”

Every time Komatsu heard Kiyotaka talk about Aoi, he couldn’t help but wonder, *Is she really that desirable?* Kiyotaka and Ensho were both unique people, though. Perhaps Aoi had something that attracted people like them. Ensho had even subtly included Aoi in his painting.

Komatsu thought back on *Yu Garden by Night*. It was a truly wonderful work of art. “Man, I still can’t believe he didn’t sell the painting to Mr. Jing. What a wasted opportunity,” he muttered.

“Is that so?” Kiyotaka tilted his head. “I think he made the right decision.”

“Huh?” Komatsu’s eyes widened. “Really? How much do you think Mr. Jing would’ve paid for it?”

“Let’s see. In the past, Mr. Jing once bought a painting he liked for six hundred million, so it might’ve been along those lines or more.”

“That’s what I thought.” Komatsu shook his head. “How could he pass up that much money?”

Kiyotaka folded his arms and lowered his eyes. “It’s precisely because it was a lot of money.”

“What do you mean?”

“In a way, that painting was his first work as ‘Ensho.’ His debut, so to speak. If

he were to make that much money from it, there's a chance that he would be satisfied and stop painting. In my opinion, that would be an even bigger waste," Kiyotaka said with conviction.

"Hmm, I dunno..." It made sense, but Komatsu just couldn't come to terms with it. In the end, he was just an ordinary guy.

Kiyotaka chuckled and changed the subject, perhaps guessing what the detective was thinking. "Come to think of it, weren't you saying something earlier?"

"Huh?" Komatsu looked at him.

"When you said you didn't expect me to be here, you also said, 'That's why I...'"

"Oh, right." Komatsu clapped his hands together. "Since I thought you guys wouldn't be coming here anymore, I had to start thinking about what I was gonna do."

"Are you really considering moving the office?"

"No, not that." The detective shook his head. "Seeing you made me realize that I have to make full use of my skills. Honestly, it'll probably be hard for me to make a living off detective work alone when you guys are gone, so I decided to pick up a side job."

"A side job?"

"Well, it's only a part-time programming job at a game company," Komatsu said, slightly embarrassed.

Kiyotaka nodded firmly. "I see. You're a specialist in that field, so that would make a perfect side job."

"Thanks." The detective shrugged. "Oh, and..." He scratched his head. "I have to focus on that for half a month, so I was gonna take a break from detective work. I didn't think you and Ensho would be coming anymore, after all."

"Ah. May I take that time off, then? I'd like to work at Kura. If an urgent request comes in, I'll run over."

"I'd appreciate that. I didn't know you thought I was gonna move the office,

though.” Komatsu folded his arms and chuckled.

“As I said earlier, you often mutter that the rent is too high.”

“Yeah.” Komatsu sighed. “Well, it’s true that I’m always looking into moving. But I wanna try a bit harder first, and if Ensho’s willing to lodge here, that’d be a great help.”

“That’s good.” Kiyotaka smiled. “The second floor will become his atelier, then.”

“Yeah, probably.”

“As much as I hate to say it, I’m a fan of his work. So I can’t wait to see what he’ll produce upstairs.” He happily looked up at the ceiling.

Komatsu followed suit. Indeed, it would be a joy to have a famous painter producing masterpieces on the second floor of his office. He nodded and looked at Kiyotaka.

However, contrary to their hopes, Ensho would make no attempt to pick up his brush.

Chapter 1: Different Steps Forward and Hidden Feelings

1

It was now late September, and Kyoto had fully transitioned into autumn. It could even be seen in the pedestrians, their fashion trends taking on more subdued colors. The Teramachi-Sanjo shopping street was bustling, but the antique store Kura was as quiet as always—or it normally would be, but that wasn't the case as of late. Ever since I had started leaving the door open and rearranging the front display, more and more people had been coming in on a whim. There was also a sharp increase in female customers lately, probably because of the man at the counter. He was tall and slim with handsome features, shiny black hair, and pale skin.

I glanced at the counter where Kiyotaka "Holmes" Yagashira was writing in the account book just like he used to. The Komatsu Detective Agency was currently on break while Komatsu focused on his side job, so Holmes had returned for the time being. I felt like I'd gone back to the time when I had first started working here.

My thoughts were interrupted by the landline ringing. Holmes picked up the phone and said, "Hello, this is the antique store Kura. How may we help you?"

Most phone calls these days were made between smartphones, but at Kura, it wasn't unusual for the landline to ring. The store's phone also had a fitting antique design that made me think of the peerage in Taisho-era Japan.

"It's good to hear from you again," Holmes said with a smile. "Yes, you're always welcome here. I'll be here every day this month. Yes, I look forward to seeing you."

Who is he talking to? I wondered as I stared at him.

After hanging up, Holmes noticed my gaze and looked up with a grin. "It was Kisuke."

“Huh?” I blinked. “You mean *that* Kisuke?”

“Yes, Kisuke Ichikata.” That was the name of a kabuki performer we had met through a close friend of ours, the actor Akihito Kajiwara. “He’s performing at Minamiza Theater, and he said he’d find time to come visit us, although he couldn’t say for sure when it would be.”

“I see. That’s great timing since you’re here all the time now.”

“Yes, and even if I step out, you can call me and I’ll come back.”

That’s how it used to be. “It’s like we’ve gone back in time.”

“Indeed.” He smiled.

“Now that you’re back, we’re getting more young female customers, huh?” *Who needs a poster girl when you have an attractive poster boy?*

Holmes’s eyes widened for a second. He shook his head and said, “No, that’s not the reason.”

“Really?”

“My presence didn’t bring young women to the store in the past, did it?”

Now that he mentions it... I thought back to when Holmes used to work here regularly. Customers in general had been rare, let alone young women. It had made me worry about the store’s finances. Later on, I had learned that Kura’s income came mainly from appraisals and selling purchased antiques to connoisseurs rather than the store’s sales. In other words, this antique shop was more like a display room and warehouse. No one was expecting first-time customers to buy anything.

“Were you not interested in attracting customers?”

Holmes stopped writing and folded his arms. “Well, I was also busy with school and helping my grandfather, so I wasn’t exactly enthusiastic about it.”

“So that’s why you created an atmosphere that would keep fangirls out.” I nodded in understanding.

Normally, a handsome young man like Holmes would have a poster boy effect. In fact, when he had worked here, young women would sometimes say,

“There’s a hot guy in that store” as they passed by. However, none of them ever came inside. I once heard someone say, “If only it was a cafe.” It must’ve been because the store intentionally exuded an unapproachable aura.

“No, I just wasn’t proactive about attracting customers. It was never my intention to keep people out. This is a store, so I’m happy to have customers come in.”

“Is that so?”

“Yes. I’m always wishing for more people to experience antiques. I’d say the recent boom in young female customers is the sum of your small efforts, Aoi.”

“Huh?” I pointed at myself in surprise. “My small efforts?”

“That’s right.” He nodded and looked at the front window. “We used to only change the display seasonally, but now you change it every month and include explanations that anyone can understand. And when the weather is nice, you leave the door open and put inexpensive, cute items near the entrance, right? That makes it easier for passersby to drop by. It’s great to have new faces coming in. I appreciate your efforts very much.”

As he said, I had made those changes. I shrugged shyly and said, “I used to be one of those passersby who was curious about this store but too intimidated to come in. All I did was try things that would’ve made it more inviting to me.”

This place had a small entrance, but the interior extended quite far back. Its old-fashioned aesthetic was reminiscent of the Meiji and Taisho eras, and it was crammed full of both Japanese and Western antiques. The sight felt familiar at this point, but at first, I had only been able to look at it from the outside.

“It’s important to have an outsider’s perspective,” said Holmes, glancing around the store. “Once you become an insider, everything begins to feel normal. The manager of a first-rate hotel once said, ‘When you get too used to what you see, even stains on the carpet will start to look like part of the pattern. Always remember to look at things from a fresh perspective.’ I completely agree. Since I’m so used to this store, I don’t understand what makes it unapproachable.”

“Yeah.” I giggled and resumed cleaning.

“Aoi, why don’t we take a break? I’ll make coffee.” He carefully took a ceramic mug from the shelf. It was a beautiful deep indigo, but the shape was warped and it was clearly made by an amateur—me, that is. Holmes went to the trouble of bringing it around with him wherever he went.

“You really like using that mug,” I said, placing a hand on my forehead.

“Of course,” he replied in a firm tone. “It’s the first piece of pottery you ever made.”

Soon after I had returned from New York, my best friend, Kaori Miyashita, had invited me to a workshop run by our university’s pottery club. She had heard that the club leader was the son of a potter.

*

It was around two weeks ago, after class. A pleasant autumn breeze was blowing in through the half-open school windows. Ten or so students were making pottery.

“Ugh...” I frowned as I looked at the potter’s wheel. How many times had I said that so far?

Kaori, who was sitting next to me, gave me a sideways look. “What’s the matter, Aoi? You keep groaning.”

“It’s just not going the way I want it to at all. Pottery is hard, huh?” I sighed and stopped the wheel.

“Well, yes.” She laughed.

We were at our university’s pottery club. Holmes had mentioned that he wanted a mug he could use at Komatsu’s office, so I was hoping to make one and give it to him if it turned out well. Unfortunately, it wasn’t easy.

“I’m going to start over.” I broke the clay apart and went back to square one.

The first step was making the base of the mug. I placed a round, flattened piece of clay on the stand and a piece of pattern paper on top of it. Then I stuck the tip of an awl into the clay along the paper and turned the wheel slowly to make a perfect circle. With the base done, I added a snakelike string of clay, wetting the adjoining surfaces with water. I repeated this with a second and

third layer. Next, I used a spatula to neaten the inside of the cup and smooth the outside from bottom to top.

Now to fix up the rim..."Argh, I still can't get it right." I hung my head in front of the clay.

"It looks good enough to me. Aren't you setting the bar too high?" Kaori asked, glancing at me. Her teacup was already being left to dry.

She was right. Despite this being my first attempt at pottery, my expectations were too high and my shoulders were probably too tense.

"The club leader's demonstration made it seem so easy," I lamented.

"Well, that's because his family does pottery professionally."

As we were talking, a male student who had been looking around the classroom walked up to us with a smile. "What's wrong, you two?"

It was Haruhiko Kajiwara, the younger brother of our friend Akihito. He was a member of the pottery club and seemed to be friends with the president, who had also been the one to found the club.

"Aoi was groaning about how hard pottery is," said Kaori.

Haruhiko looked at me with an understanding nod. "Yeah, it must be even more frustrating for you since you're always seeing masterpieces at Kura."

"That might be it." I shrugged. Having seen national treasures on a regular basis, my eyes had become overly discerning. I knew I was an amateur and couldn't expect to do well. When I had seen Kaori's teacup, I'd thought it had a unique charm. So why was I unable to accept my own unskillful work?

"Seriously," said Kaori. "If you could make a tea bowl like the ones at Kura on your first try, you'd be a living national treasure."

"She's right," said Haruhiko.

They both laughed, and my expression relaxed into a smile as well. In the short time that I had been in New York, the two of them had suddenly become close friends. I'd heard that it was because Kaori had happened across Haruhiko when he was depressed from a broken heart. At the time, she had given him some pocket tissues, and he had dutifully brought her a new pack later. That

was how they had started talking to each other. The reason I was here in the first place was because Kaori had invited me, saying, “Haruhiko’s friend is the leader of the pottery club. He asked me to go to their workshop. Wanna come with me?”

“You should make something you can be satisfied with,” said Haruhiko. “There should still be time.” He took his phone out of his pocket to check the time, even though there was a clock on the classroom wall. It must have been a habit of his.

I happened to notice his phone wallpaper and blinked in surprise. It was Akihito in his *Local Rangers* costume. “Your wallpaper is Akihito, isn’t it?”

Haruhiko blushed slightly. “Oh, yeah. I’m rooting for him, and, well, I’m his fan.”

“He must be happy that his younger brother calls himself his fan.” I giggled, imagining a proud-looking Akihito.

“I’ve also loved shows like *Super Sentai* and *Kamen Rider* ever since I was a kid. Even at this age, I still like them enough to go see stage plays. I’m really glad my brother’s a ranger.” He laughed, trying to hide his embarrassment.

“I see.”

Next to me, Kaori flinched. Without looking up, she murmured, “*Kamen Rider*... Which one’s your favorite?”

Haruhiko hummed and folded his arms. “I like *555* and *W*, but I think it’d have to be *Den-O*.”

Kaori perked up. “*Den-O’s* my favorite too! And *Kabuto*!”

“Oh!” Haruhiko clapped his hands. “The Riders in *Den-O* and *Kabuto* are really cool, aren’t they? Same with *Fourze*.”

“*Fourze*!”

Overwhelmed by their enthusiasm about a superhero franchise I knew nothing about, I resumed my work on the mug. Their passion was enjoyable to hear, and just watching them warmed my heart. I reached for the clay, feeling better. Listening to their conversation let me focus surprisingly well on my

work, without any unnecessary thoughts. I had to admit that the end result wasn't bad.

"Bring your completed work to the front," said the club instructor. "Don't forget the label with your name on it."

The pottery was left here to dry for around a week. Then the club leader brought them home and fired them for us. After that, the ceramics were painted, glazed, and fired once more. My finished mug was the work of an amateur, but it had a beautiful color and it was good for a first attempt. Still, it wasn't something I could give to Holmes.

Instead, I sent him a picture of the mug with a message saying, "This is my first piece. I was going to give you it if it turned out well, but as you can see, it didn't. I'll just use it myself."

"I really want that mug," he pleaded.

"No, it's not good enough to give to anyone..."

Despite my refusal, he didn't back down. In the end, I relented and gave him the mug.

*

I went to the kitchenette to wash my hands and looked at Holmes, who was using the drip coffee maker. "Every time you use that mug, I feel bad."

"Why would you say that?" He smiled and poured coffee into it. "To me, it's worth more than a cup made by a living national treasure."

The reason he had said that was probably because of the other mug in front of him. Next to my creation was a mug made by Manji Inoue, a currently active potter who was a certified living national treasure. It was white porcelain with a jade-colored pattern, and it had a smooth, beautiful form.

"The living national treasure will yell at you for saying that." I gave him a strained smile.

Holmes cheerfully brought the mugs to the counter. I followed him out of the kitchenette and stood beside him.

"This cup is your first work of art," he said. "On top of that, you made it with

the intention of giving it to me if it turned out well. Regardless of what it's worth to others, to me, it's priceless."

I shrank back, embarrassed. "I guess everyone has different values."

"That's right." He nodded and picked it up.

"Creative work is like that sometimes, huh?" I sighed and sipped my coffee.

I found myself thinking about the artwork I'd seen at the museums in New York. Many of them had taken my breath away, but there were just as many that had left me tilting my head in confusion. Meanwhile, another one of Sally Barrymore's students, Chloe, had been fascinated by those same works. It just went to show that everyone did have different values.

"Is something the matter?" Holmes asked.

"I saw a lot of abstract paintings when I went to America, but I couldn't understand the appeal of most of them. Maybe I just don't have a good eye for them." I shrugged.

He hummed and reached for an art reference book on the shelf, which he opened and placed on the counter. "Aoi, do you know this artwork?" It looked like a piece of paper with six slits in it.

"I don't."

"It's by an Italian painter named Lucio Fontana. How much do you think it's worth?"

"How much?" I squinted at the image. I couldn't imagine pricing a work that was simply a piece of paper with knife cuts in it, but if he was asking, it must've been valuable. "Around ten million yen?"

"A hundred and forty million."

I choked. "A hundred and forty million?" I took a closer look at the book.

"This is a work from his *Concetto spaziale*—Spatial Concept—series, *Attese*, or Expectations. By cutting the canvas, he created a new space beyond the plane of the painting. Fontana is said to be the first to cut a painting in this way, which is one of the reasons it's worth so much. Even if other artists were to use the same technique later, they wouldn't fetch the same price."

“It must’ve been innovative...”

“Yes. People often say that they can’t understand the value of abstract paintings or that they look like children’s doodles. Some of them honestly don’t appear any different from children’s doodles.”

“Yeah.” I nodded.

“What separates them is that a child simply draws however they like, but an abstract artist truly paints an abstracted work.”

I had a vague idea of what he was saying, but it still didn’t click. Before I knew it, I was tilting my head.

“For example, say I wanted to paint the universe,” Holmes continued. “Everyone has their own interpretation of what the word ‘universe’ means, right? The universe in my heart is unique to me.”

“Right.” I nodded.

“Let’s say my concept of the universe is ‘the thoughts that make up my mind.’ When I have you by my side, I feel very blessed. Wanting to express the rosy universe in my heart, I paint the entire canvas pink. At first glance, it’s nothing but a pink canvas. Some may laugh and say that anyone could make such a thing. On the other hand, the painting is a depiction of the universe by a young man in love. It’s up to the individual viewer to decide what it’s worth.”

I let out a deep breath. *If Holmes really were to paint that, people like Ueda would probably find the concept of “a representation of the universe by Kiyotaka when he’s head over heels in love” amusing and buy it. I’d want it too, since the pink canvas would be full of his love for me. But people who didn’t know him wouldn’t see any value in it. At first glance, it might look like anyone could’ve painted it, even a carefree child, but what matters is the meaning behind it, what feelings and philosophies were put into it, and how much value people find in those.*

“I think I kind of get it now,” I said. “Abstract art is profound, huh?”

“That said, there are times when it’s unclear whether the profoundness is on the painter’s side or the viewer’s.”

I couldn’t help but laugh. “I can see there being times when the viewers read too much into it.”

“Well, those cases are part of what makes art so interesting and appealing.” Holmes wrapped his hands around my handmade mug and looked down at it. “So it’s normal for people to have different values. To me, the mug you made for me is a one-of-a-kind work of art.”

I lowered my eyes, feeling restless. “I’m glad you feel that way.”

“Did you enjoy the workshop?”

“Yeah. It was fun, but...”

“But?”

“I don’t think I’d do it again unless I was invited to.”

“I see.” He looked fondly at me.

I expected him to ask why, but the question never came. He must have sensed how I felt. For better or worse, I had seen too many masterpieces. If my first attempt at pottery had been before I’d come to Kura or met Holmes, I would have been truly happy with the quality of the mug. I’m sure I would have said, “I can’t believe I was able to make something so good on my first try. I might be talented.” But the current me had encountered too many beautiful things, making the unskillful craftsmanship unbearable.

After trying out pottery, I understood why Holmes didn’t create his own art despite admiring artists so much. Even I felt disappointed with myself, so a prideful perfectionist like Holmes would never be able to accept his own creations. On the other hand, he could appreciate the creations of others, no matter how amateur they were.

“Speaking of which, Ueda came by the other day,” said Holmes. “I told him, ‘This mug is a treasure,’ and he said, ‘It must be valuable if that’s what you’re saying. It’s pretty nice. Looks really expensive.’”

I choked. “Oh, Ueda... Well, it’s true that if a trustworthy connoisseur says they like something, you’ll probably think it has artistic value.” *It’s so subjective.*

“Yes. In this world, sometimes an appraiser’s words become the truth, and

that's scary."

I tightened my lips, feeling tense.

"Also, for better or worse, wealthy people have a lot of sway in the art market. Even a painting that has long been mocked as a child's doodle can strike a chord with a rich person and be sold for a high price. Even if that person simply had strange tastes, the painter would quickly become world-renowned."

"Yeah." I gave a strained smile.

"It happens often. When the rich recognize something, society follows suit. Come to think of it, it was the same with the Taisei Ashiya works that Ensho painted." One of the richest men in the world, Zhifei Jing, noticed Ensho's work and showed it to the world. "Still, as I was saying earlier, everyone has their own values. It's good for creators to be noticed, regardless of how it's done. In Ensho's case, anyone would agree that he has amazing talent, so I'm truly glad he was able to make a connection with Mr. Jing."

I nodded firmly. The painting of Suzhou that Ensho had sent us was still hanging on the wall in Kura's section for Chinese antiques. I could still remember how moved I had been when I first saw it, and I never stopped being impressed by it.

"Speaking of Ensho, has he already moved into Komatsu's office?" I asked. I had heard that he was going to move out of Yanagihara's place and rent the second floor of the Komatsu Detective Agency.

"Yes, quite a while ago. He didn't have many possessions, so it was an easy move."

I could imagine that. "When is he getting *Yu Garden by Night* back?"

"The exhibition is until the end of October. I heard that the painting will be shipped right after."

"He's letting us display it at Kura for now, right?" According to him, he had nowhere else to put it up.

"Yes, and I actually have an idea regarding that." Holmes grinned mischievously, holding up his index finger. He only made that face when he

came up with a great idea.

“What is it?”

“When the painting comes back, I want to hold an exhibition of his works at the Yagashira residence. It’ll include *Yu Garden by Night* and the Taisei Ashiya painting of his that Takamiya has.”

“Oh!” I clasped my hands in front of my chest. “That sounds like a really good idea.”

Seiji Yagashira’s house was a Western-style stone mansion near the Philosopher’s Walk. The first floor was used for displaying the Yagashira family’s art collection, and Holmes wanted to turn the house into an art museum one day. Exhibiting Ensho’s paintings would be the first step towards that goal.

“If it works out, may I ask for your help?”

“Of course. I’d love to.”

“Unfortunately, I haven’t suggested it to Ensho himself yet.”

“Huh? Really?”

“I feel like he’ll refuse if I ask him in the wrong way...”

“Yeah, maybe.” My face stiffened.

“Oh, I know. May I also ask you to help me suggest it to Ensho and persuade him?”

“Me?”

“Yes. I think he’ll be more likely to agree if you’re with me. He and I are like oil and water, after all.”

“Definitely.” I nodded with a bitter expression. The two of them got along like cats and dogs. One wrong move and they’d be at each other’s throats. “All right. Please let me help.”

“Thank you.”

“This is a lot of pressure.” I placed a hand on my chest.

“No, don’t worry.” Holmes shook his head. “If you can’t convince him, I

wouldn’t have a chance. The project would be hopeless anyway.”

That made me feel a little better. “Come to think of it, has Ensho been painting since he moved?”

“It seems like he hasn’t started yet. When he was at Yanagihara’s place, he would paint when he had time, but now...”

Maybe he just hasn’t settled into his new place yet.

As we talked, I imagined holding an exhibition at the Yagashira residence. I hoped we would be able to make the project a reality.

2

A few days later, on a sunny Sunday afternoon, Holmes and I were headed east on Sanjo Street to a store called Funahashiya. We had asked the manager to watch over Kura while we went to buy refreshments for our guest.

The store was located near the Kamo River and had an old-fashioned exterior. One of its specialties was okaki, a rice cracker snack. We were going there because Kisuke Ichikata had let us know the other day that he wanted to visit Kura sometime soon. Since we didn't know when he would be coming, we decided to buy snacks in advance so that we would have them ready.

"Kisuke mentioned liking namagashi and okaki," said Holmes. "If we get okaki, it'll keep for a long time."

"Namagashi does have a short shelf life," I replied. It was a type of traditional sweet known for having beautiful designs, and it had high water content, so it needed to be consumed while fresh.

We entered the store. The bags filled with small crackers were a delight to the eye, and I couldn't help but buy a bunch of them.

"Aoi, why don't we drop by the Komatsu Detective Agency while we're at it?" Holmes asked.

"Oh, that's a good idea. If Ensho's there, we can talk to him about the exhibition."

After buying some treats for the office as well, we walked along the Kamo River.

"This place never changes, huh?" I remarked.

The sight of couples sitting along the riverside was well known throughout Japan by this point. It was also common to see birds hoping to get a bite of their leftovers.

One couple shrieked as a black kite stole one of their sandwiches. Unlike other birds, black kites weren't interested in mere leftovers. They feigned innocence as they looked for an opportunity, and the moment you let down

your guard for even a second, they would swoop in and seize their prey.

“That couple seems to have lost their lunch to a black kite,” said Holmes.

“Yeah.” I gave a strained smile. “It happened to me and Kaori once when we were eating pastries.”

It was back in high school, I think? Kaori and I bought cream-filled buns from Shizuya and sat down by the river. The moment we took a bun out of the paper bag, something zoomed past us, too quick to catch sight of. The next thing we knew, the bun was gone and our faces were covered in cream. When we looked up, we saw a black kite far off in the sky, carrying the bun in its beak. We were both shocked, but we burst out laughing, and it was a nice memory.

“I can picture that happening,” Holmes said with an amused smile after listening to my story. “By the way, isn’t that Kaori who just had her sandwich stolen?”

“Huh?” I squinted in the direction of the riverbank and realized it definitely was her. The man with her...

“That’s Akihito’s younger brother, Haruhiko, isn’t it?”

“Kaori and Haruhiko?”

“Are those two close?”

“Oh, yes, they have been lately...”

I’d known they had become friends, but I hadn’t thought they were close enough to come to the Kamo River by themselves. *Are they dating?*

I absentmindedly took a step towards them.

“Whoa, that came out of nowhere,” said Haruhiko. “Black kites are scary, huh?”

“Yeah. I had a bun stolen from me before when I was with Aoi.”

I stopped upon noticing how much they seemed to be enjoying themselves. If they really were dating and hadn’t told me, the reason was probably a matter of feelings. I decided to wait for them to tell me instead of ruining the good mood.

“Holmes, I don’t want to interrupt them, so let’s go,” I said.

“All right.” He nodded.

We pretended we hadn’t seen them and started to leave.

“Huh? Is that Aoi and Holmes?” asked Kaori.

“You’re right. Aoi! Holmes!” Haruhiko called out to us without hesitation.

We turned around as if we’d only just noticed them. “Oh, hey, Kaori and Haruhiko,” we said, walking up to them.

“You don’t have work today, Aoi?” Kaori asked.

“Um, yeah,” I said with a vague nod. I didn’t have to be at the store, but I was still doing work-related things.

“Are you two on a date?” Holmes asked casually, startling me.

Kaori and Haruhiko looked at each other and laughed.

“No way,” said Kaori. “Akihito’s shooting a TV drama here in a bit.”

“We’re going to be extras,” Haruhiko said proudly.

“Extras in Akihito’s drama?” I asked.

Holmes and I looked around and saw what looked like a film crew setting up.

“Ah, would that drama be *A Fine Day in Kyoto: Case Files*, by any chance?” Holmes asked.

“Oh, he did mention that.”

A Fine Day in Kyoto was a TV show where Akihito presented various locations in Kyoto. He had told us it was getting a two-hour suspense drama.

“Yep,” Kaori and Haruhiko said, smiling and nodding.

“They’re filming a scene where an actress’s body is found on the Kamo riverbank,” said Kaori.

“Exciting, right?” said Haruhiko.

We had heard a brief summary of the drama’s opening. If I recalled correctly, the actress had said to three idols, “Beware of Maru-Take-Ebisu.” The next day,

she was found dead near the Kamo River.

“Oh, why don’t you two join in?” asked Haruhiko.

“Yeah, do you want to be extras with us?” asked Kaori.

Holmes held up a hand and said, “I’ll pass, but Aoi can if she wants to.”

I shook my head. “We’re in the middle of an errand right now.”

“Oh.” Kaori sounded disappointed.

“Good luck with the shoot!” I said.

“I’m looking forward to the broadcast,” said Holmes.

We took our leave and walked up the stone steps to Shijo Street. We looked down from the bridge and saw Kaori and Haruhiko waving at us.

“They look like they’re having fun,” said Holmes.

“Yeah.” I giggled and waved back.

We continued south down Kiyamachi Street.

3

Kiyamachi Street was lined with cherry blossom trees, so in the spring, it was colored light pink, and in the fall—which it currently was—the leaves turned red. As we walked down the quaint road, listening to the gurgling of the Takase River, I spotted the “Komatsu Detective Agency” sign hanging over a renovated townhouse.

“Hello,” Holmes said, opening the sliding door. Since he was currently training here, he didn’t feel the need to ring the intercom.

“Oh, hey, kiddo,” Komatsu said from his desk.

“What’d you bring your girlfriend here for, Holmes?” Ensho asked languidly, sticking his pinky in his ear. He was sitting at his own desk.

“Before that, what are *you* doing at that desk?” Holmes asked back. “You aren’t working for the Komatsu Detective Agency anymore.”

Ensho gave Komatsu a sideways glance. “I was upstairs, but this old man

doesn't notice any sounds when he's concentrating on his programming. He didn't answer the intercom for a delivery, so I came down."

"Sorry." The detective slumped his shoulders. "I did hear it, but I was too focused to get up from my chair."

"Well, it happens with painting too sometimes, so I get it," Ensho said before looking back at Holmes. "So whaddya want?"

Before Holmes could reply, I said, "Um, we want to hold an exhibition when your painting comes back from Shanghai."

"What?" Ensho's eyes widened. "An exhibition? For who?"

"For you, obviously," said Holmes. "I was hoping to hold an exhibition on the first floor of the Yagashira residence with that painting, the Suzhou one at Kura, and the Taisei Ashiya one in Takamiya's possession. Naturally, you will be paid, and—"

"Nah, I'll pass."

I grabbed Ensho's hand. "Um, wait—"

He quickly pulled away. He seemed to feel bad for startling me, but he averted his gaze.

"Are you uncomfortable with the idea of an exhibition?" I asked.

He put his hand on the back of his head. "Yeah. I'm not into that kind of grand stuff."

"Huh?" Komatsu said. "The whole point of art is for a lot of people to look at it, isn't it? If you're gonna be a painter, this should be a good thing."

"He's right," I said. The Yagashira family had a wide—and glamorous—circle of friends. Ensho would surely be able to meet someone who liked his work.

"Nah, I thought about it, and I'm gonna quit painting after all. So I don't need no exhibition."

Holmes, Komatsu, and I widened our eyes.

"What? You're quitting? But why?" I asked.

"Yeah, man, why? You're so good at it," said Komatsu.

“Indeed,” said Holmes. “Didn’t you finally find a real goal to pursue?”

“You’re all so damn annoying!”

The office fell silent. Ensho winced and left. The rest of us looked at each other in confusion.

As if to break the silence, Komatsu laughed and said, “He must’ve been in a bad mood. Well, don’t just stand there. You came all this way, so have a seat.”

We thanked him and sat down on a sofa.

“Has Ensho been painting since moving in?” Holmes asked.

Komatsu hummed. “Can’t say, since I don’t know what he’s up to in his room. He goes out a lot, though. Maybe he doesn’t have time to focus on painting.”

“Does he go out during the day? Or at night?”

“He leaves during the day and probably comes back late at night. I’m doing my programming work here until around 9 p.m., so I know he doesn’t come back before then.”

“In that case, he must not be painting.” Holmes sounded a little sad.

I thought about the pained look on Ensho’s face before he left. I felt as if I had seen it somewhere before.

4

Kisuke Ichikata came to Kura the next day. It was a little past 7 p.m., and we were getting ready to close the store when the door chime rang.

“Oh, are you closed?” a man asked apologetically. He took off his hat, which had been pulled low over his eyes.

“Good evening, Kisuke,” I said. “It’s been a while.” It really had been. His aura was just as glamorous as I remembered it.

“Oh? Is that you, Aoi?”

“Yes.”

“Now that’s a surprise. You’ve really grown up. Are you in university now?”

Now that I thought about it, he probably hadn't seen me since the New Year's party at the Yagashira residence. I had only been in my second year of high school at the time.

"Yes, I'm in my second year."

"I see. No wonder you look more mature. You're very pretty now. I—"

"Welcome, Kisuke," Holmes said, interrupting him. "Please have a seat."

"Long time no see, Holmes. I'm sorry for dropping by so late."

"It's fine." Holmes smiled. "Aoi, could you..." He signaled to me with his eyes.

Sensing that he wanted me to continue closing up, I nodded and said, "Okay," then brought the standing sign inside, hung the "CLOSED" sign on the door, and closed the curtains.

"Sorry, it feels like I'm making you accommodate me," Kisuke said, sitting down on a chair in front of the counter.

"Don't worry about it," said Holmes. "Were you performing today?"

"Yesterday was the final show."

"I see." Holmes carefully prepared tea and placed it in front of Kisuke, alongside a variety of small rice crackers.

"Are these from Funahashiya, by any chance?"

"Yes, you mentioned that you like okaki."

"Thanks, I appreciate it."

After closing up shop, I went behind the counter and stood next to Holmes. Kisuke seemed pleased as he ate the okaki. At first glance, he had seemed the same as before, but up close, he seemed a little worn out. Perhaps he was tired from the series of performances he had just finished.

"The play this time was *The Tale of Genji*, right?" asked Holmes. "I wanted to see it, but the tickets sold out immediately."

Kisuke laughed. "That one was especially popular. But if you had said something, I would've arranged tickets for you."

“No, I couldn’t be so brazen with a star like you.”

“What do you mean? You’ve seen me at my worst. It really has been a long time, huh? I can’t believe Aoi is a university student now.” He looked at me and smiled.

“By the way, didn’t you need something from me?” Holmes asked suddenly.

Kisuke smiled awkwardly. “You could tell?”

“Yes, because you went to the trouble of contacting me in advance.”

“I did. Of course you’d know, then.” The actor sighed. After a moment of silence, he steeled his resolve and began, “I can tell you two about this because you know my shame.”

His words brought back memories of a past incident, and my face stiffened. At the time, Kisuke had been in multiple relationships. He had been dating Rei Asamiya (a former Takurazuka actress) and Airi Kano (a model) at the same time, all while being engaged to a woman from a rich family. As if that wasn’t shocking enough, he had even been having an affair with his uncle’s wife. The jealousy-fueled drama had developed to the point where he began receiving threats. There had even been an attempt on his life, but Holmes had identified the culprit.

“After that incident, I stopped having multiple relationships,” he said proudly, as if wanting to be praised for being normal. “I’m still with Rei, but rather than being lovers, it’s more like we’re just comrades-in-arms doing our best in the harsh world of showbiz.”

So instead of being clingy like lovers, they supported each other as friends and sometimes slept together. Perhaps it worked because of their natures.

Holmes and I nodded silently.

As it happened, Rei Asamiya now had a lot of TV work. She was constantly appearing in dramas and had quite a few leading roles. Since she had formerly played male roles in the Takarazuka Revue, many of her current roles were strong-willed lawyers or doctors.

“We started to get confused about what our relationship was,” Kisuke

continued. “We never interfere in each other’s affairs or act possessive, but it’s not like those adult relationships without any emotion involved. We both care about each other, and I began to think we might be close friends.”

Close friends don’t sleep with each other, was what I wanted to say, but I swallowed my words. Everyone had their own mindsets and values.

“And now, I’m finally in my thirties,” he said. That was a bit of a surprise because he looked very young. “My family’s saying it’s time to get married...”

“Ah.” Holmes folded his arms. “The kabuki world does seem like it would pressure you to settle down quickly.”

“Yeah...there’s also the issue of succession.”

I didn’t know much about the world of kabuki, but from what I was hearing, it sounded tough.

“So I met with an arranged marriage partner,” Kisuke continued.

“Huh?” I reacted without thinking.

He lowered his gaze, seeming embarrassed. “It may be hard to understand for a young girl living in the modern age like you, but in the world of kabuki, it’s considered a virtue for a wife to be passive and support her actor husband from behind the scenes. The public may criticize this, but it’s a culture that was developed over hundreds of years and it won’t be changing. There are unsurmountable walls that regular people don’t understand. I think the world of kabuki would be too harsh for Rei, and I want her to keep acting. I’m sure she would survive here even without quitting, but my family would pressure her to retire, and if she stands out too much, she’ll be criticized at every opportunity.”

It was a unique world I knew nothing about. I looked down, unable to say anything.

“Have you discussed this with Rei before?” asked Holmes.

“I asked her, ‘What do you think of the wives of kabuki actors?’” Kisuke replied softly.

“And what did she say?” I asked quickly.

“She laughed and said, ‘They sure have it tough. They have to deal with a lot

of sisters-in-law, and if it were me, I bet I'd be forced to quit acting.' Then I asked, 'Do you want to continue acting?' and she replied, 'Of course.'"

"I see." I bit my lip.

"So then I asked, 'What would you think if I said I was going to meet potential marriage partners?' and she said, 'That's your own business, isn't it?' with a nonchalant laugh."

I could picture Rei saying that.

"That confirmed to me that we were more like best friends, so I decided to go ahead with the matchmaking. The woman I was introduced to was kind and modest—suitable for a kabuki actor's wife. I was planning to go ahead with the marriage."

I looked halfheartedly at Kisuke. "Are you fine with a woman 'suitable for a kabuki actor's wife'?"

"It was the case for my predecessors. My mother and grandmother were women like that," he replied with a grimace.

I couldn't say anything.

"I was honest and told Rei I was going to proceed with the arranged marriage. Then she sent me this, along with a message saying, 'Congratulations.'" He reached into his inner pocket and placed something on the counter. It was a pocket watch. "After that, she stopped answering my calls. My messages would be marked 'read,' but she wouldn't reply." Tears welled up in his eyes as he continued. "I keep thinking she's angry with me, and I can't get any sleep. I wonder if this pocket watch has a special meaning."

It seemed that Kisuke looked worn out because he had been worrying about Rei, rather than being tired from work. He may have assumed that Rei would continue to be with him even if he got married.

"I couldn't ask anyone for advice," he continued. "Then I remembered Holmes."

"I understand," Holmes said, looking down at the pocket watch. "May I examine it?"

“Of course.” Kisuke nodded.

Holmes put on a pair of white gloves and picked up the watch. It was gold with a five-petaled flower—probably cosmos—engraved on the cover. There was a round fruit next to the flower. The watch face was simple, and the frame and crown were gold as well.

He hummed. “This is by Patek Philippe, a Swiss luxury watch maker. It’s from the Ricochet collection, which was a collaboration with a Swiss jeweler named Gilbert Albert. It was only produced for a very short time, making it very valuable. I’d say it’s worth about two million yen.”

“Two million?” Kisuke gulped. “I didn’t know it was that expensive.”

“Rei comes from quite a distinguished family, so it may have been passed down from generation to generation.”

“Yes, she does. From a young age, she learned piano, ballet, and traditional Japanese dance. She begged her parents to let her join the Takarazuka Revue, but they were against it. She joined anyway and was essentially disowned. She hasn’t been home in a long time.”

“Wow,” I murmured. That was news to me.

“Perhaps this was Rei’s treasure that she brought from home,” said Holmes. “However, the flower on the cover was engraved very recently. Doing so would certainly reduce its monetary value, implying that she wanted to engrave it regardless of that fact. Is this flower special to the two of you?”

Kisuke looked down at the pocket watch in Holmes’s hands. “No.” He shook his head, puzzled. “We don’t have any particular memories relating to cosmos. I looked up its meaning in the language of flowers and found that it represented modesty, a maiden’s sincerity, and harmony. So I thought the pocket watch might mean, ‘I hope you’ll find happiness with a person like a cosmos flower and mark the passage of time together,’ but it just didn’t feel right.” He put his hands on his head and grabbed at his hair.

“Huh?” Holmes froze.

“What do you mean, ‘huh?’”

Kisuke and I looked at Holmes, confused.

“Did you think this was a cosmos flower?” Holmes asked, gaping.

“It’s not?” Kisuke gaped back.

I was bewildered too, since I had also thought it was cosmos.

“What is it, then?” Kisuke asked.

Holmes took a flower reference book from the bookshelf, flipped it open to a page, and placed it on the counter in front of us. “It’s this.”

The page had a picture of a lovely white flower with five petals. The center stigma and anthers were yellow, and there was a yellow-orange citrus fruit next to it.

“Oh, it has a round fruit,” I remarked. “This must be it.”

“You’re right,” said Kisuke. “It’s called...”

We looked at the top of the page, where it said “Tachibana.”

“This is the flower of the tachibana orange,” said Holmes.

“So it was tachibana...” Kisuke looked closely at the book. The page included the flower’s meaning, which was “reminiscence.” A flower representing reminiscence, engraved into a pocket watch’s cover. He groaned and lifted his fist to his forehead, seeming even more confused than before.

“Reminiscence means thinking nostalgically on the past,” said Holmes. “There may also be feelings associated with the tachibana flower aside from its meaning in the language of flowers.” It sounded like he already knew what Rei was thinking and was giving Kisuke hints.

“Feelings associated with the tachibana flower...thinking nostalgically about the past...” Kisuke pondered for some time before looking up and saying, “Oh, could it be poetry? Is there a classical poem about tachibana flowers?”

He quickly reached into his pocket for his phone, but before he could take it out, Holmes placed a book of classical poetry in front of him. “You can find anything on the internet these days, but it’s also good to turn the pages by yourself.”

“O-Oh. You sound like my father, Holmes. Thanks.” Kisuke opened the book, which happened to have a useful index page grouped by type of flower.

“Waiting for May, I smell the tachibana flowers, and they smell like my past lover’s sleeves.” (When May comes and I smell the scent of tachibana flowers, I remember the scent of the incense my past lover burned.)

It was a poem reminiscing about a past love.

“Maybe it’s this one? I feel like it isn’t, though,” Kisuke murmured, moving on to the next poem.

“When I become a person of the past, will tachibana flowers remind anyone of me?” (Just as I remember the people of the past when I smell tachibana flowers, will anyone remember me after I die?)

“If it’s this one, and she’s asking me to remember her after she dies... She isn’t going to end her life, is she?!” Kisuke’s face turned pale. He whipped out his phone and called Rei, but she didn’t pick up. He quickly sent her a message saying, “Rei, are you okay?” and let out a sigh of relief when he saw it marked as “read.”

During this time, Holmes said nothing as he watched Kisuke.

“It looks like there are still more poems,” said the kabuki actor. “Let me see...”

There were many other classical poems involving tachibana flowers, but none of them seemed to fit. Kisuke frowned. He traced his finger along the page and stopped at a certain poem.

“The tachibana flowers at your home have ripened. If only I had met you when they were blooming.”

The author was listed as Wandering Harlot. Perhaps that was something similar to a geisha. The meaning was, “The tachibana flowers at your home have borne fruit. I wish I could have met you earlier, while they were still in bloom.”

Kisuke gasped, placing his hand over his mouth.

“Kisuke, you’re settling down, huh? I wish I could’ve met with you more while you were still free.”

I felt like I could hear Rei's voice.

"Rei..." Kisuke clenched his fists and closed his eyes.

"Um, Kisuke..." I said.

He looked at me, not saying anything.

"Have you had a proper discussion with Rei?"

"Huh?"

"You asked her what she thought of kabuki actors' wives, but you didn't bring up marrying each other, did you?"

"Oh, no."

"You assumed she'd never quit acting, right? So you never properly discussed it."

His eyes widened. "But she said she didn't want to quit. She isn't the kind of person who would quit being an actress to become a kabuki actor's wife to begin with."

"That's not for *you* to decide. More importantly, if you left it at that, she wouldn't even be able to contemplate it! At this point in time, there's no way Rei would think, 'I want to quit acting.' But if you were serious about her and proposed, *then* she'd be able to think about it, and the two of you would be able to talk to each other and figure out what would be best. The tachibana flower on the pocket watch means, 'I wish I could've seen you more while I still could.' In other words, 'I wanted to talk with you more. I wanted to mark the passage of time with you.' Right?"

Kisuke's eyes widened further. Then he burst into tears, startling me. "I understand what you're saying, Aoi. But I was scared!"

"Scared?"

"Yes. Rei continued to support me after that incident, and she became very important to me. I was afraid that she would decide we were nothing more than friends with benefits, or that I would propose only for her to laugh and say, 'No, I could never marry you. I don't want to be a kabuki actor's wife.' So I tried to probe her feelings, but it didn't seem like she wanted to marry me. I thought

if I couldn't marry the person I loved, I might as well go with a 'suitable' wife."

He bawled like a child as he spoke. For all he had said, it seemed like he truly loved Rei, and that had made him nervous.

"Kisuke..." *His fans would be mortified if they saw this. But when I see him like this, I feel like I can understand why Rei stayed by his side. She must've found him really endearing. She wanted to stay with him and support him.*

Holmes took his handkerchief out of his inner pocket and handed it to the crying actor. "Kisuke, I understand how it feels to be cowardly in front of the person you truly love. But if you marry someone you have no feelings for, you, your spouse, and Rei will all be unhappy. Also, the tachibana flowers haven't borne fruit yet. It's not too late. Rei hasn't blocked you; she simply isn't responding. Doesn't that mean she's waiting for the words she wants to hear?"

Kisuke accepted the handkerchief and sniffled as he picked up his phone.

"Rei. I've received the message you left in the pocket watch. The tachibana flowers haven't borne fruit yet. I don't think I'm going to proceed with the arranged marriage. There's something important I want to talk to you about. Can we meet?"

Shortly after sending that message, he received an "OK" sticker in response. He let out a long sigh of relief.

"Isn't that great, Kisuke?" I asked with a smile.

"Yeah." He grinned. "I'm sure everyone involved is going to scold me, though."

"At least you figured it out before it was too late to do anything," said Holmes.

"Yes." Kisuke nodded. "Thank you. I'm sorry for constantly putting on these shameful displays in front of you."

"Don't worry about it." Holmes and I shook our heads.

Despite our reassurances, Kisuke hurriedly started preparing to leave, seeming embarrassed. "Well then, it's already late, so I should take my leave. Thank you so much." He stood up, bowed, and pulled his hat down over his

eyes.

As he was walking away, Holmes called out, “Oh, Kisuke.”

“Hm?” He stopped.

“When did she send you that pocket watch?”

“Umm...” He looked up at the ceiling, trying to remember.

“Was it shortly before you came to Kyoto, by any chance?”

“Oh, yes.” Kisuke nodded. “It was right before my shows at Minamiza. Why do you ask?”

“No reason.” Holmes smiled. “Please come again sometime.”

“Yes, I’d love to. It might end up being in spring, though, since I’m so busy.”

“Oh, in that case, I’ll have some special sweets waiting for you.”

“I wonder what they could be? I’ll be looking forward to it.”

Kisuke bowed again and left the store. When he was out of sight, I turned to Holmes and asked, “Why did you ask him when he received the pocket watch?”

“Why indeed?” He smirked.

I giggled. Rei must have been hoping that Kisuke would go to Holmes for help. She had wanted Kisuke to realize and make a move, and that watch was what she had come up with. However, there was the possibility that Kisuke wouldn’t have been able to figure it out.

“Maybe Rei wanted you to help him solve the mystery,” I said.

“I’m not sure.” Holmes tilted his head. “If that’s the case, it’s a good thing he came to me. He didn’t even identify the type of flower correctly.”

“Yeah, Kisuke and I both thought it was cosmos.”

“I feel sorry for Rei.”

“Yeah.” I laughed. “I don’t know why she used such a roundabout method, though.”

“It was probably because she’s the same as Kisuke.”

“The same?”

“She loved him, so she was scared.”

“Oh, I see.” I nodded. *Sometimes love turns people into cowards. The two of them felt the same way.*

I suddenly remembered Kisuke’s grimace when he was talking about his arranged marriage partner. He must have been in pain because of his feelings for Rei.

I thought back to when Holmes had broken up with me. The next time we had met, he’d tried to distance himself from me again, saying, “Regardless of the reason, the fact is that I hurt you more Ensho did.” He’d had the same pained expression as Kisuke. I had also seen that expression on Ensho’s face when he said he was quitting painting.

Oh, I get it. I turned around and looked at the Suzhou painting on the wall. *Maybe Ensho’s getting cold feet because he loves painting. He’s scared. If that’s the case, there’s nothing to worry about. If he loves it enough to be cowardly about it, there’s no way he’ll quit.*

In a way, I was the same, although not anywhere near to the same extent. I didn’t want to do pottery anymore because I didn’t like how amateurish my creation was. In other words, I was scared, even though the truth was that I really enjoyed it.

“Holmes, I think I’m going to try pottery again,” I murmured.

“That’s good,” he said with a smile. “Would you like to do it together?”

“I’d love to.” I smiled back. “By the way, what were the special sweets you mentioned?”

He looked up from the teacups he was gathering and said, “Oh, Kyoto Tsuruya Kakujuan has freshly made sweets called Tachibana Flowers. They’re filled with bean paste, have a refined sweetness, and are modeled after tachibana oranges.

“That sounds delicious.”

“Yes. I hope we can serve them when Kisuke and Rei visit together.”

We smiled as we resumed closing the store. It was a bittersweet night, having discovered the hidden truth behind two adults who couldn’t be honest about their feelings.

Chapter 2: A Tragic Tale Within a Tale

1

It was now late October. Immune to autumn blues, Kyoto was becoming livelier by the day. Autumn was often referred to as a season for art, so Kura was getting more visitors as well.

The display window's current theme was Taisho romanticism. There was a mannequin dressed in a checkered kimono and hakama pants, accompanied by furniture reminiscent of that era: a ceramic clock atop a chest of drawers, a table with a colorful old-fashioned cup and saucer, and a stained-glass lamp resembling a flower. The display was quite popular. Young people passing by often stopped to look at it.

Holmes, who was carefully wiping products behind the counter, paused and said, "Oh, people are looking at your display again, Aoi."

I turned around from where I was cleaning and looked at the window. Two young girls were complimenting the combination of Japanese and Western styles.

"You're right," I said. "I'm glad it's more popular with young people than I expected."

"I never would've thought of expressing Taisho romanticism in that small space. You did a wonderful job." His enthusiastic praise made me blush.

"It's not that amazing." I shrank back. "I just like following trends."

"Thanks to you, our Koransha products are selling well."

"Oh, really?"

Koransha is a long-standing manufacturer of Arita ware. They've been in business since the Edo period, although their name has changed since then. When I think of them, I think of Taisho romanticism.

The cup and saucer on the table had gold edges and a traditional motif of

pine, bamboo, and plum. There was no greater joy than knowing people were buying our wares because of my display.

“Part of it might be that they’re affordable because they cost less than fifty thousand yen,” he continued.

My face stiffened. It was easy to become desensitized to high prices when dealing with antiques worth hundreds of thousands, millions, or even tens of millions, but a fifty-thousand-yen cup and saucer definitely wasn’t reasonable for most people.

“For the average person, I think an affordable price would be more like five hundred yen,” I muttered with a shrug.

“Yes, I know. I’m speaking in terms of the antique industry.”

“Yeah, I figured.”

“Aoi, you seem to doubt my financial sense. I’m actually quite frugal, you know?”

“Huh? Really?”

“Yes. When I see a discount sticker on something at the supermarket, I’ll pick it up, and if I know something I want to buy will be cheaper in a few days, I’ll wait.”

“That’s a bit surprising, but I guess you do have that side.”

“If something can be bought cheap, I’d rather get it cheap. It’s just that I spare no expense for things I truly want or sense value in.”

That does sound like him.

“Since that’s how I am, I’m lucky that I rarely feel the urge to acquire something,” he said.

“Yeah.” I laughed.

“It’s also why I’m terrified, though.”

“Of what?”

“If someone were to steal the mug you made for me and put it up for auction, I’d do anything to get it back. What if I ended up spending all my savings?” he

asked with a serious expression.

I was taken aback.

“I’m just kidding,” he added.

“Good,” I said, relieved. “But even if it gets stolen or broken, I’ll just do my best to make another one. I decided to participate in the pottery club’s workshop again.”

“That’s great. Are you joining the club?”

“No, they said it was fine to come occasionally as a guest. When you gave me that lecture on abstract art, it made me realize that everyone has different values. I want to try to make something I can appreciate even if the workmanship is bad.”

“That’s good to hear.” Holmes smiled happily.

Suddenly, the door was thrust open rather harshly, ringing the chime. I looked over, confused, and saw a woman standing imposingly with her hands on her hips and her legs slightly apart. She had a blonde bob cut and red contacts, and she was wearing a pitch-black dress. She was also out of breath.

“Aigasa...” Holmes’s eyes widened.

The visitor was Kurisu Aigasa. In the past, we had attended a reading of her work at Yoshida-Sanso Inn’s Shinkokan cafe. She was an author famous for writing dark stories, which you wouldn’t have expected given her Gothic Lolita fashion. A few years ago, she had nearly been murdered by her close friends, and Holmes had uncovered the truth. After that, she had quit her Gothic Lolita style and begun to dress in very normal clothes. However...

“Welcome,” Holmes said with a smile. “I see you’ve taken to wearing dresses again.”

“Yes.” Aigasa nodded and walked up to the counter in long strides. “I still like this look, so I decided to go back. It’s popular with the public too. More importantly, that display is wonderful! I love the romantic air of the Meiji, Taisho, and early Showa eras!” she said excitedly, pointing at the display window.

“Thank you.” We bowed.

It does seem like something she’d like.

“This must be fate,” she said passionately, placing a hand on her chest.

“Fate?” Holmes and I exchanged confused looks.

“Kiyotaka...” Aigasa put her hands on the counter and leaned forward. “I have a request.”

Holmes frowned slightly as if he had a bad premonition. “I’m not doing another photo shoot.”

I burst out laughing. Aigasa had once visited Kura with an unusual request for Holmes.

“This is no laughing matter,” Holmes said, his frown deepening. “Come to think of it, that was also at the end of October...” He placed a hand on his forehead and sighed as he remembered the events of that day.

*

The tragedy had occurred a few years ago in fall. I—Kiyotaka Yagashira—was watching the store by myself when the author Kurisu Aigasa dropped by.

“Long time no see, Yagashira,” she said. She had once dressed in Gothic Lolita fashion, but now she was wearing a normal suit, which gave a completely different impression from when I had seen her last.

I smiled back, thinking that her previous look had probably been better for her career as a public-facing author. “It’s been a while, Aigasa.”

She offered me a box of sweets. “I’m here to ask a favor,” she said nervously.

“I thought so.” I gave a strained smile. I had suspected as much from the way she had entered the store. If it had been anyone else, I would’ve declined on the spot. However, I was curious about what the author’s request would be. Hopefully, it wouldn’t be annoying. “What is it?”

“Well...” She took something out of a paper bag. A black cape, fangs... It was a vampire costume. “I’m writing a story about vampires, and I need to convey my idea for the cover to the artist. I was hoping you would model for me. You just

have to wear this vampire costume and let me take a picture.” She held out the black cape and lowered her head.

It was a much easier request than expected. Simply wearing the cape over my current clothes and putting on the fangs would be enough to look like a vampire.

“Today’s Halloween, so I thought it’d be fine even if a customer were to suddenly come in,” she added.

I looked at the calendar and nodded. “You’re right. It *is* Halloween.” The day had nothing to do with me, so I didn’t pay much attention to it.

“Will you accept?” she asked.

I glanced at the clock. It was two in the afternoon. Aoi would be coming in an hour. *It’s Halloween, so it might be fun to surprise her in a vampire costume. She’ll surely be startled when she comes in. And if I say, “Aoi, trick or treat. If you don’t give me candy, I’ll play a trick on you,” she’ll definitely turn bright red. Then I’ll tell her, “Just kidding.” Well...to be honest, I’d rather play a trick on her if I could.*

“Yes, that’s fine,” I said with a smile. “A picture is an easy request to fulfill.”

However, it wound up being a mistake. I donned the cape, put the fangs in my mouth, and stood in front of Aigasa.

“Ohhh, this is even better than I expected.” She blushed and placed a hand over her mouth. “Yagashira—no, let me call you Kiyotaka...could you stand next to the grandfather clock?” She took out a DSLR camera and looked at me with serious eyes.

What followed was a disaster.

“Reach out your hand as if you’re about to carry a woman away!”

“Now give me a bold smile!”

“Look up to show off your pale neck!”

“If you could stick your tongue out just a little bit... Ohhh!”

Not only was the photo shoot more demanding than I'd expected, it was incredibly bothersome. I realized I absolutely was not cut out to be a model.

"Thank you. I'm sorry for getting carried away with my personal tastes towards the end." Aigasa cradled her camera, looking pleased.

"It was much more tiring than I expected." I placed a hand on my forehead and sighed.

"Yes, I really am sorry, Kiyotaka."

"Please don't ask for anything like this again."

The door chime rang.

"I'm here," Aoi said as she entered the store. "Oh, hello, Aigasa. Wow, Holmes is dressed up too! So much for trying to surprise him."

I reflexively looked at the door and saw her wearing a black cat-ear headband.

"They were handing these out on the shopping street," she explained. "Trick or treat, Holmes! If you don't give me candy, I'll play a trick on you! Just kidding." She curled her hands like cat paws and smiled shyly.

I gasped and fell onto the counter. My forehead hit the surface with a thud, but I felt no pain.

"Holmes?"

"No. I won't give you any candy."

"Huh?"

"So you can play as many tricks on me as you want," I muttered, still face-down on the counter.

Aoi didn't seem to hear me. She tilted her head. "What?"

However, Aigasa, who was right in front of me, *did* hear. "W-Well then, don't mind if I do." She gulped and reached towards me.

"I'm not talking to you!" I yelled, getting up.

"Huh?" she and Aoi said at the same time, confused.

*

“It was bad in so many ways,” Holmes murmured, placing his hand on his forehead. He must’ve vividly recalled the day Aigasa had asked him to model for her.

The author shook her head. “Don’t worry. I’m not going to ask you to model anymore.”

“Really? Truly?”

“Really.”

Holmes’s expression relaxed. “I’ll make coffee. Please have a seat.” He went to the kitchenette.

Aigasa sat on a chair and looked at me. “It’s been a while, Aoi.”

“Yes, it has,” I said. “I’ve been reading your works.”

“Thank you.”

The story she had written based on her painful experience at Yoshida-Sanso had been a huge hit, and her following books had been brilliant as well.

“I love historical fantasy, so I was sad when that one came to an end,” I said.

“The disadvantage of historical fantasy is that you can’t turn it into a series.”

“Oh, that makes sense. Even though it’s fantasy, it’s still based on historical facts, so once the protagonist achieves his goal, the story ends.”

“That’s right.”

“Are you going to write a series next, then?”

“I’m considering it, but...”

“Sorry to keep you waiting,” said Holmes, emerging from the kitchenette. He placed three cups of coffee on the counter.

Perhaps due to the occasion, the cups and saucers were all from Koransha. The set in front of Aigasa was the flashiest of the three, a masterpiece with dazzling gold trim.

“What a gorgeous blend of Japanese and Western aesthetic,” she remarked.

“It’s Koransha’s ‘some-nishiki madori-style’ pine, bamboo, and plum with gold

trim," Holmes explained.

The sweets served alongside the coffee were Baumkuchen. Holmes had once told me that this German dessert was first introduced to Japan during the Taisho period. He had prepared it because it was perfect for the Taisho-themed display. Also, chocolate and caramel had apparently come to Japan at around the same time.

"Why don't you sit down and take a break too, Aoi?" Holmes suggested.

"Okay," I said hesitantly, sitting next to Aigasa.

The author nodded, took a sip of the coffee, and smiled. "The coffee here is always delicious. The lovely cup makes it taste even better."

"Thank you." Holmes smiled back.

I sipped my coffee as well and looked at Aigasa. "So, you have a request for Holmes?"

"Yes." She clasped her hands atop the counter. "After that incident, I decided I was better suited to writing stories based on reality."

Holmes and I nodded. Aigasa's recent books had been based on real-life events, including the historical fantasy I mentioned earlier. Part of their appeal was that they were heavily altered, giving them a different impression from the historical facts.

"Moreover, I discovered that it's easier to write when the characters are based on real people," she continued. "So I'm writing my new piece now, and"—she looked straight at Holmes—"I'd like to use you as a model, Kiyotaka."

"Huh?" Holmes blinked.

"I've heard about you in great detail from Ijuin, so I'm confident that I can write you. However, I would like your permission to do so." She was referring to Holmes's father, Takeshi Yagashira. He was an author, and his pen name was Takeshi Ijuin.

"My permission..." Holmes seemed bewildered.

"Aigasa, what genre will it be?" I asked excitedly.

“Mystery, of course,” she said proudly.

“Mystery...” Holmes murmured, intrigued.

From his expression, I could guess that he was thinking, “As long as it’s not romance or fantasy, I suppose it could be fine.” After the photo shoot incident, he might’ve been concerned that he would turn into a vampire partway through the book.

“You’d be changing my name, I hope?” he asked.

“O-Of course.”

“In that case, I have no reason to object.”

Aigasa took a brown envelope out of the tote bag she’d left on the seat next to hers. She placed it on the counter and said, “Well, I actually already wrote it...”

“What?!” My eyes widened, as did Holmes’s.

“You already wrote it?” he asked.

“Yes,” Aigasa said apologetically. She took the manuscript out of the envelope and gently placed it in front of Holmes. It was printed on A4-size paper. I craned my neck to see and noticed the words “Kiyotaka Yagashira.”

“What happened to changing my name?” Holmes asked.

“Oh, sorry. It’ll be changed when it’s published. I just wrote it with your real name because it was easier to visualize the character.”

“Right...” Holmes looked down at the manuscript. “Do you mind if I read it?”

“Go ahead. That’s why I brought it in the first place.”

“I see it doesn’t have a title.”

“It hasn’t been officially decided yet, but the series title is *Case Files of a Kyoto Detective*, and I’m thinking of naming this story *The Tragedy of the Grand Family*.”

Holmes and I forced a smile. *Where have I heard that name before?*

Aigasa shrugged. “It’s an homage to a famous work, or maybe a pastiche?

Something like that.”

“I see,” said Holmes. “That could be exciting.”

“Right? Go on and read it. Aoi too, if you’d like.”

“All right.” Holmes picked up the first page. His lips curved ever so slightly in a smile as he read it. “I see. Aoi, I think we should close the store for today so we can read this story. Could you take care of that?”

“Okay.” I went outside, brought the standing sign in, and hung the “CLOSED” tag on the door. I then joined Holmes and Aigasa, who had moved from the counter to the sofa for visitors.

“Oh, right,” said Aigasa. “Please note that the story has a detective cooperating with the police in investigations, which would be unthinkable today. Also, it takes place in the early Showa period, but the characters speak in modern language. It’s for the sake of readability and entertainment value, so please turn a blind eye to those inconsistencies. Think of it as a request from the author to the readers.”

“All right.” Holmes and I chuckled and looked down at the manuscript.

The following story is written by Kurisu Aigasa, with Holmes as the main character.

Introduction

The year was Showa 12 (1937).

Akihito Kajiwara was running eastward towards the Philosopher’s Walk, gasping for breath. He was dressed in a kimono, hakama pants, and a school cap. Anyone looking at him would think he was a student, but he had actually been branded a dropout—and a scatterbrain, at that. However, he was very handsome. His bright hair and gorgeous face compensated for his many shortcomings.

Upon reaching the Philosopher’s Walk, he turned north, and a Western-style stone house came into view. The front door was open, and workers could be seen sweeping the entrance, wiping the windows, and attending to the garden.

Polishing the residence was a daily task.

Akihito ran right through the gate and front door, waving to the servants with a “Hey, everyone!”

The first floor was Western style, so he kept his shoes on. There was classical music coming from the study in the back. One of the inhabitants must have been listening to it.

“Holmes, have you seen the news?” Akihito asked, barging into the study.

“Yes,” said the young man relaxing in the armchair. He was handsome too, with shiny black hair and pale skin. He was holding *A Complete Collection of Detective Stories from Around the World*, published by Heibonsha. “At long last, I got my hands on a copy—the first edition of Ranpo Edogawa’s translation of *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes*... It’s simply wonderful.”

“I’m not talking about the book.”

“I know. Today is my first day off in a while, and the weather is lovely. I was going to relax with a book in my study while listening to classical music”—he gave Akihito a sideways glare—“but just as I was about to begin, someone interrupted me.”

“S-Sorry. Haven’t you already read *Adventures,* though?”

“The version I read before was the second edition.”

“The words inside are the same, Holmes.”

“Would you please stop calling me ‘Holmes’?”

“You got it, Kiyotaka Yagashira,” Akihito replied in a monotone, folding his hands behind his head.

The other man’s name was Kiyotaka Yagashira. He had been nicknamed “Holmes” because his surname had the character for “home” in it and he had a keen eye for observation like Sherlock. He was an avid reader of the novels, and while he always told people to stop calling him by the nickname, he didn’t seem completely against it.

“Wait, what do you mean it’s your first day off in a while?” Akihito asked. “Aren’t you *always* taking it easy?”

Kiyotaka lived in a large mansion. He appeared to be an aristocrat, but he wasn't of noble lineage. He *was* wealthy, however. His family had been successful merchants since the Edo period.

"Believe it or not, I have quite a lot of work. Your older brother calls on me at times as well."

"I heard you helped with the investigation the other day. My brother was happy about that. Thanks, man."

Akihito's older brother, Fuyuki, was a police officer. Sometimes, when an investigation hit a dead end, he would ask for Kiyotaka's keen insight.

"So what is it today?" Kiyotaka asked. "Considering you're out of breath from running here, is there another incident everyone is gossiping about?" He placed the book on his desk, seeming to have given up on reading it.

"Yeah, a big one. You didn't hear about it?"

"Perhaps not." Kiyotaka shrugged.

"Remember the news the other day? About the drowned body that washed up at the Port of Osaka?"

It was recent news. When the body had been found, it had already decomposed too much to be identifiable, but it had been dressed in fine clothes.

"It was the head of the Hanayashiki family," Akihito continued, holding up the newspaper in his hand.

Kiyotaka froze. "Are you referring to *that* Hanayashiki family?"

"Yeah, the 'Grand Hanayashiki Family.'"

The Hanayashikis were a wealthy upstart family with an estate in the northern part of Kyoto City, near Kinkaku-ji Temple. They had moved there after establishing a hugely successful business in the Taisho period.

"Their head ditched them, right?" Akihito asked.

"That's how the story goes."

A few months ago, the head of the Hanayashiki family, Yoshiharu, had

informed them he was going to attend a party with his former schoolmates to celebrate their sixtieth birthdays. However, he had never returned home. His wife, Hanako, had initially cried that her husband had been kidnapped, but no one demanded a ransom from her, and the police believed it wasn't a criminal case. The reason was that Yoshiharu was known as the "unfortunate head."

Hanako was an only child and had inherited the entirety of the Hanayashiki family's wealth. Yoshiharu had met her by chance and married into the family. They had three children, all of whom were now adults. Their son had inherited the family business and brought it to greater heights. Their eldest daughter was a violinist, and their second daughter was an opera singer. The family was so glamorous that people called them the Grand Hanayashiki Family.

However, they were also subjected to ridicule. Society didn't overlook the shadow behind the light. Hanako was arrogant and oppressive, perhaps due to a spoiled upbringing. Her overbearing nature had ruined her previous marriage. Her daughter from that marriage had also grown up, but as a child, she had suffered from a serious illness that rendered her blind, deaf, and mute.

Meanwhile, Yoshiharu had been a chemist at Tokyo Imperial University. He was incredibly smart and as beautiful as an onnagata—a kabuki actor playing female roles—but because he was poor, he couldn't get married. He sank what little money he had into his research, and just when he was about to be crushed by his rising debts, Hanako appeared before him and said, "Marry me and I will shoulder all of your debts so you can continue your research as much as you like." The weak-willed Yoshiharu could not refuse.

Society had mocked their marriage, calling it unenviable and "marrying poor." There had also been rumors that the meek, good-natured husband would eventually run away.

Time passed, and Yoshiharu and Hanako grew old. People gossiped that Yoshiharu had run away because he wanted to spend the remainder of his life doing something meaningful. No one expected him to be dead. So when the body was found at the Port of Osaka and it was determined from his clothes that he was wealthy, not many would've made the connection.

"My brother and the other officers were arguing about whether it was a

suicide or murder," said Akihito. "If it was suicide, then he was fed up with that grand family. If it was murder, then Hanako might've resented him for running away and hired a hitman to kill him." He gestured with his hand in the shape of a gun and cheerfully turned to Kiyotaka. "What do you think, Holmes?"

"I don't care."

"What?" Akihito pouted. "You're not this uncooperative when my brother asks you."

"I'm a merchant, so it can only benefit me to have the police on my side. I'm generally uninterested in people's gossip. If I had the time to poke my nose into such things, I'd rather spend it reading."

"Oh, so that's how it is. How refined of you. Well, even if you say that, my brother's just gonna call you for help again."

"When that happens, I will gladly cooperate."

"What the hell?" Akihito clicked his tongue.

A few days later, Yoshiharu's cigarette case was found on the docks. There was a note inside it.

"I've grown weary of life and have chosen to die in the vast sea. — Yoshiharu Hanayashiki"

And so, his death was determined to be a suicide. The head of the grand family taking his own life attracted attention from the public. Day after day, it was all anyone would talk about. That said, it wasn't considered a criminal case. At the time, no one realized that a terrifying incident was about to unfold.

Act 1: The First Case

1

About two months passed. The rumors about the Hanayashiki family had somewhat died down.

Akihito was in Kiyotaka's study again. "I actually wanna become an actor. I'm

not good at studying, but I think I have a talent for acting," he insisted.

"What's your point?" Kiyotaka asked, not looking up from his deskwork.

"My dad and older brother are really opposed to it. They think I'm only saying this because I don't wanna study."

"Yes, I think so too."

"Hey, don't say that! Help me convince them."

"The world of performing arts is harsher than you think. If you really want to become an actor, push past your family's objections and leave home. Become the apprentice of an actor you respect. If you can't do that, it means you aren't serious enough," Kiyotaka said nonchalantly.

Akihito clamped his mouth shut.

Suddenly, the phone rang. Kiyotaka picked up the handset and said, "Yes, this is Yagashira." The moment the operator connected him to the caller, he made a surprised face. "Oh, Fuyuki. Thank you for all your help. Very well; I understand. I'll head over now. Oh, yes, Akihito happens to be here right now. Huh? I don't need to bring him with me? All right. See you soon, then." He put the phone down.

"Was that my brother?" Akihito asked.

"Yes, it was. He's calling me for something, so I'm going to head over."

"I'll go too!"

"No, he said I didn't need to bring you." Kiyotaka stood up and put on his lightweight black Inverness coat.

"No, I'm definitely going." Akihito grabbed Kiyotaka's coat and stared at him as if to say he refused to let go.

"Good grief." Kiyotaka shrugged. "Well, I can't stop you from tagging along on your own."

"Whoo!" Akihito clenched his fist.

Kiyotaka walked briskly out of the study. Akihito followed him, but upon looking at him again, he burst out laughing.

“Man, what’s with that getup?” the failing student asked. “It’s just a black version of Sherlock Holmes’s coat.”

“I’m helping with an investigation, and it’ll go faster if people recognize me as a detective at a glance.”

“You say that, but you’re totally into it. If you’re Sherlock, does that make me Kobayashi?”

“Kobayashi is Kogoro Akechi’s sidekick.”

“I know that. Sherlock Holmes’s sidekick is Watson, right? But I’m good looking, so I think I’m closer to ‘Kobayashi the boy detective’ than Dr. Watson.”

“I don’t need a doctor *or* a pretty boy as a sidekick, so you don’t have to follow me around at all.”

“Ugh, this is why people call you wicked!”

Akihito jogged to keep up with Kiyotaka. Without waiting for permission, he got into the car waiting in front of the house. This was one of the reasons he had insisted on coming along. He was interested in the case, of course, but more than that, he wanted to ride in the Kiyotaka family car, the Toyota AA passenger car. Naturally, they had an exclusive chauffeur to drive it.

Akihito sat in the back seat with Kiyotaka and gleefully looked out at the town. “Hey, do me a favor and drive down Shijo Street.”

“Don’t make him take that much of a detour.”

“What’s the problem? We’re driving.”

At Akihito’s request, they drove south on East Oji Street until they reached Yasaka Shrine, where they turned west onto Shijo Street. There was a large stone bridge spanning the Kamo River. Right before it, Kikusui was to the north and Minamiza was to the south. Yaomasa was on the far side of the bridge. A little farther west was Daimaru Kyoto.

“It’s Daimaru!” Akihito exclaimed. “I wanna go to their restaurant again.”

Daimaru Kyoto was the prime example of a high-end department store. There was nothing stopping common folk from entering, but it was still a place admired by all. The interior and exterior were both designed in an elaborate

Western style, and the restaurant with its fancy chandeliers allowed wealthy commoners to relax and enjoy a brief moment of luxury.

"If I recall correctly, you ate at Daimaru to celebrate Fuyuki becoming a police officer," said Kiyotaka.

"Yeah. I had omurice, my younger brother had croquettes, and my older brother had curry rice."

"You can't go wrong with any of those."

The car reached Horikawa Street and turned north. Not everyone could own a personal car, so there were very few on the road. As a result, all of the ones driving by were luxury cars.

There was a tram running alongside the car Kiyotaka and Akihito were in. The passengers were looking at them, their faces pressed against the windows.

"Whoa, everyone's looking at us, Holmes. Luxury cars are so cool."

The Toyota AA had just gone on sale last year, Showa 11. The Yagashira family had been one of the first to obtain one. It had a captivatingly shiny black body and a classic, solid design. The inline six-cylinder engine on top of the front axle drove the rear wheels via a torque tube and drive shaft.

"I was amazed when I heard your family bought the car everyone was talking about," said Akihito. "That's the Yagashira family for you."

"My grandfather is weak to this kind of thing."

"Not the Grand Hanayashiki Family but the Grand Yagashira Family, huh?"

Kiyotaka chuckled.

"What's so funny?" Akihito asked.

"Nothing. Have you ever seen the Hanayashiki estate?"

"I've caught a glimpse of it from afar, but not really, no. Is it better than your place?"

"Our house doesn't hold a candle to it."

"Oh, come on. They're about the same, aren't they? This is what they call a 'pointless competition,' right?"

“I don’t think that’s quite the right term...”

“Oh, what about ‘the pot calling the kettle black’?”

“You don’t have to force yourself to use idioms.”

“Huh? Why?”

Kiyotaka gave Akihito a cold look. The driver looked at them in the rearview mirror and silently chuckled.

As they were talking, the car reached the Hanayashiki estate’s front gate. It was open, so their chauffeur drove inside, following the staff’s instructions to find the parking area. He then stepped out of the car and opened the back door for the two passengers.

Akihito got out, looked up at the mansion, and gaped. The large house was made of brick and stone. It resembled a Western castle. The yard was like a botanical garden, the colorful flowers in full bloom. It was fitting for a family whose surname meant “flower house.”

“Wh-Whoa,” said Akihito. “You know, I feel like I’ve seen this somewhere before.”

“This house was built to match up to Chourakukan in Maruyama Park, so they look a little similar,” said Kiyotaka.

“You mean the Tobacco King’s vacation home?”

“Yes, Kichibee Murai’s. He was originally from a poor family, but he eventually became extremely rich. It was the same for the late Ichiro Hanayashiki. Perhaps he saw Murai as a rival.”

“Ichiro Hanayashiki... That infamous upstart, huh?” Akihito laughed and put his hands on his hips.

Japan’s economy had boomed in the Taisho period because of World War I, resulting in a surge of new wealth. Hanako Hanayashiki’s father, Ichiro, was one of the people who had risen to riches. The unprecedented boom had been followed by the postwar depression in Taisho 9. Many people had gone bankrupt, but Ichiro Hanayashiki was different. He was a so-called arms dealer,

and there were rumors that he was trading wares that couldn't be sold in public. His mansion had been built with the fortune he'd accumulated through the blood and tears of others, yet it was the most beautiful of all. One couldn't help but find it ironic.

As Kiyotaka and Akihito walked towards the house, they saw a car that looked like it belonged to the police.

"Kiyotaka!" Fuyuki Kajiwara—Akihito's older brother and an officer in the Kyoto Prefectural Police—came running through the front door. He must've seen them from inside.

Fuyuki had become an elite police officer after graduating from Tokyo Imperial University, and there were rumors that he would be promoted to detective soon. Appearance-wise, he was completely different from Akihito. He had sharp, masculine features and gave a tough impression.

"It's been a while, Fuyuki," said Kiyotaka.

"Yo, Fuyuki." Akihito held up a hand.

The officer grimaced and looked at his brother. "So you came anyway."

"I figured Holmes needed an assistant."

Fuyuki heaved a resigned sigh.

"So why did you call me here?" Kiyotaka asked, not wanting to waste time on a pointless argument.

"Right." Fuyuki regained his composure. "Kiyotaka, you seem to be acquainted with the Hanayashiki family's eldest daughter, Shoko. Are you close?"

"I know her, but I wouldn't say we're close. About a year ago, I attended a party at this house with my grandfather and introduced myself to her. That's about it."

"Oh." Fuyuki put his hands on his hips.

"What's wrong?" Akihito asked.

“There’s been some trouble here. Shoko knew you were a sharp man nicknamed Holmes, and she asked me to call you. Maybe she thinks the police are unreliable.”

“I don’t recall her placing that much faith in me.” Kiyotaka tilted his head. “But as a citizen, I’d be happy to cooperate with the police.” He placed his hand on his chest and flashed an extremely good-natured smile.

Fuyuki seemed to be moved by his smile. Meanwhile, Akihito felt a chill and hugged himself.

“Well then, come with me to the drawing room first,” said Fuyuki. “Oh, right. Akihito, if the Hanayashiki family tells you to leave, get out *immediately.*”

“Yeah, yeah,” Akihito replied indifferently.

2

Fuyuki led Kiyotaka and Akihito into the Hanayashiki estate. The drawing room they were brought to had dark-red curtains, a matching carpet, and reddish-brown leather sofas. A crystal chandelier sparkled on the ceiling, and the walls were adorned with paintings and a stuffed deer head hunting trophy. No one was there.

Akihito whistled rudely and looked at Kiyotaka. “It’s a fancy room, but the one at Holmes’s place is similar.”

“Drawing rooms are mostly the same everywhere,” said Kiyotaka. “Where is the family, by the way?” He glanced around curiously and looked out the window. They hadn’t seen anyone on their way there from the front door.

“They’re talking to the police right now,” said Fuyuki. “It’ll take a while, so I figured I’d give you an overview of the case while we wait.” He gestured for Kiyotaka and Akihito to sit, and they did so. “First, I need to explain the Hanayashiki family’s complicated structure,” he said, sitting down as well.

“It’s a big family, right?” asked Akihito.

“Yes.” Fuyuki nodded. “Let me begin by saying that nine members of the Hanayashiki family live here.”

“That’s all?” Akihito asked, disappointed. A nine-member household wasn’t the most surprising thing in the world.

“There’s the head of the family, Yoshiharu, and his wife, Hanako. They have three children: two daughters and a son, who’s the youngest. All three are adults. Also, Hanako has been divorced before. Her ex-husband’s name is Masataka Saeki. The daughter she had with him lives here too.”

“So there are three siblings plus a half-sister, for a total of four siblings,” said Akihito.

“Yes,” Fuyuki replied. “Of the siblings, only the youngest—the son—is married. His wife and their two sons live here as well.”

Akihito counted on his fingers, “The head and his wife, four siblings, the son’s

wife and two kids... Yeah, that makes nine.” He nodded.

Kiyotaka held his index finger in front of his mouth. “Well, Yoshiharu has died, so it’s an eight-member family now.”

“Oh, right. His body was found in the sea.”

Yoshiharu, the Hanayashiki family’s head in name only, had been found dead two months ago at the Port of Osaka. A suicide note had been discovered in his cigarette case, leading the police to believe that his death was indeed a suicide.

“By the way, Fuyuki,” said Kiyotaka, “how did the head make his way to the sea?”

“Uh...” Fuyuki took his notebook out of his pocket. “Right before he went missing, he attended a party with his former schoolmates. They were celebrating their sixtieth birthdays. In other words, it was a class reunion. But afterwards, instead of going home, he went to Kobe and stayed overnight at an inn. There, he asked for a pen and a single sheet of paper, most likely to write his suicide note. He then boarded a merchant ship owned by the Hanayashiki family, but he used a fake name, hiding his identity. He said he was an acquaintance of Yoshiharu Hanayashiki and paid money to get onto the ship. The crew believed him. No one had any idea he was the head of the family.”

“It goes to show how low-profile he was,” Kiyotaka muttered.

“The ship was heading from Kobe to Osaka, and during the journey, he threw himself overboard. The crew paid no mind to the fact that Yoshiharu Hanayashiki’s acquaintance had disappeared at some point.”

“And then he was found at the Port of Osaka?”

“Yeah. He died at the age of sixty. After marrying, he holed himself up in his personal lab and had no sense of presence. But originally, he was a brilliant chemist and supposedly pretty good-looking. They say that’s why Hanako fell in love with him.”

Kiyotaka hummed and nodded.

“Well, it makes sense,” said Akihito. “Hanako’s always been the central figure of the Hanayashiki family. She’s a gaudy old woman in her sixties now, but

people say she was beautiful when she was young."

"Yes," said Fuyuki. "Hanako's mother was known to be a beautiful geiko in Gion. Ichiro Hanayashiki, who had built up a fortune in his lifetime, fell in love with her at first sight and used money to marry her. Unfortunately, she was frail and passed away from illness when Hanako was eight. Ichiro grieved for her and spoiled their daughter a lot. Hanako ended up inheriting her mother's beauty as she grew up. In her younger days, she was called an 'unattainable flower of society.'"

"Right." Akihito nodded. "She still dresses up in super flashy outfits, maybe 'cause she's basking in her former glory. Her dresses show a ton of chest."

"Akihito, keep your voice down," Fuyuki snapped. "We're in the Hanayashiki estate."

The student hurriedly put his hands over his mouth.

Kiyotaka chuckled. "Well, regardless of age and appearance, I think it's best for people to dress the way they like."

"Oh, is that the classic Kyoto man's sarcasm?" Akihito asked.

"Classic? How rude. No, I'm serious. I myself do the same thing." Kiyotaka shrugged.

"Back on topic," Fuyuki said, raising his hand. "Let me talk about the siblings."

"The eldest sister, the second sister, the brother, and their older half-sister," Kiyotaka said, holding up four fingers.

"Right." Fuyuki nodded. "As I mentioned earlier, the only married one is the son, who inherited the family business. His name is Kikuo, and he's thirty years old. His wife's name is Masako. They have two sons, the eleven-year-old Kikumasa and the four-year-old Kikujiro." He paused before continuing. "The sisters are all named after flowers. The eldest is Shoko, meaning 'rose girl.' She's a thirty-two-year-old single violinist. The second sister is Ranko, meaning 'orchid girl.' She's a thirty-one-year-old opera singer, also single. Their half-sister from their mother's previous marriage is Yuriko, meaning 'lily girl.' She's thirty-six, blind, deaf, and can't speak. An unfortunate woman." Incidentally, the 'kiku' in the brother and his son's names meant "chrysanthemum."

Kiyotaka frowned. “Being unable to see or hear may come with many inconveniences, but I don’t think it’s right to label her ‘unfortunate.’”

For a second, Fuyuki looked like he had no idea what Kiyotaka was saying. However, not wanting to waste time arguing, he apologized and continued, “So those are the nine—no, eight—members of the Hanayashiki family. They also have a live-in maid and their doctor visits often.”

“Hang on a sec,” said Akihito. “I knew there were a lot of people, but I’m starting to get confused.” He reached into the top of his kimono, took out a brush and notebook, and jotted down the names of the family members.

■ *Hanayashiki Household*

Head: Yoshiharu. Chemist who married into the family. Technically head of the family, but lacks presence. Committed suicide.

Wife: Hanako. Yoshiharu’s wife who has always held all the power in the family. History of divorce.

1st child: Daughter, Shoko. Violinist.

2nd child: Daughter, Ranko. Opera singer.

3rd child: Son, Kikuo. Businessman heir.

Half-sister: Yuriko. Born to Hanako and her previous husband (Masataka Saeki). Blind, deaf, can’t speak.

● *Kikuo’s Family*

Wife: Masako.

1st child: Son, Kikumasa (11 y/o).

2nd child: Son, Kikujiro (4 y/o).

“All right, that should do it. Oh, but Yoshiharu’s gone now.” Akihito put an X over Yoshiharu’s name.

“Now that you have the family structure in mind, let’s talk about what happened last week,” said Fuyuki.

Kiyotaka looked at him. “Last week?”

“Yeah.” Fuyuki nodded. “It was last Friday afternoon. The incident began with Yuriko.”

“Yuriko...the half-sister who can’t see or hear,” said Akihito, checking his list.

“She has milk tea and baked sweets every day at 3 p.m., apparently. It’s her daily habit she never misses.”

“Afternoon tea, right?” Kiyotaka smiled.

“Yeah. The milk tea is always brewed by the maid and placed at the end of the dining room table. Yuriko is blind and deaf, but she can move around freely in the house. She goes to the kitchen by herself, has her milk tea and baked sweets, rests, then goes back to her room.”

A vague image came to Kiyotaka’s and Akihito’s minds: Yuriko walking slowly through the house with a cane, reaching the dining table, and enjoying delicious tea and sweets. For her, it must have been nothing short of bliss.

“But that day was different. When Yuriko arrived at the dining room, Kikuo’s oldest son, the eleven-year-old Kikumasa, came in out of nowhere and said, ‘Mine!’ before drinking from the cup of milk tea. He was just a naughty boy playing a prank, like Akihito did when he was little.”

“I see,” said Kiyotaka.

Akihito scratched his head, embarrassed.

“But the next moment, Kikumasa’s eyes rolled back and he fainted. He was foaming at the mouth.”

Kiyotaka and Akihito turned pale at those words.

“Kikumasa was a *really* naughty boy. Believe it or not, he had a rat in his pocket. When he fainted, the rat jumped out and drank the spilled milk tea. A second later, it was dead.”

“The tea was poisoned,” Kiyotaka remarked.

“Yes. A later investigation revealed that it was strychnine.”

“That’s a deadly poison! How is Kikumasa now?”

“The family doctor was in the house, so he induced vomiting right away. The

boy had only drunk a very small amount, so it wasn't serious."

Kiyotaka and Akihito patted their chests in relief.

"After that, we policemen rushed to the scene, but it was already chaos when we got here." Fuyuki looked exasperated as he remembered what had happened.

"Please tell me more," said Kiyotaka.

"Of course." Fuyuki nodded.

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A week prior, when Fuyuki and the other officers visited the Hanayashiki estate, the elderly Hanako was crying and hugging her seated daughter, Yuriko, in the dining room.

"Oh, Yuriko, you poor thing," she lamented.

On the floor, there was spilled milk tea, scattered pieces of a broken cup, and a large rat lying face-up. It was quite a bizarre scene.

Yuriko had a vacant look in her eyes. She was a very beautiful woman and appeared much younger than her real age of thirty-six. Perhaps because she rarely went outside, her skin was very pale and her hair was very long. Her long locks were arranged in a neat braid behind her head.

Also present in the dining room were a stunned maid and an annoyed Kikuo.

Kikuo clicked his tongue. "Yuriko this, Yuriko that. Would it kill you to worry about Kikumasa too, mom?"

He had whispered it very softly, but the elderly woman seemed to hear him loud and clear. Hanako forcefully grabbed Yuriko's cane and swung it at Kikuo without mercy. "The nerve of you, Kikuo! Don't you feel sorry for Yuriko? I can't believe you!" she shouted, hitting him on the back and shoulder with the cane.

"Ow!" As a grown man, an old woman's attacks weren't going to cause any serious harm, but they must have been quite painful. "That hurts, mom. I'm sorry."

"No, you're not. You don't feel any remorse."

The police officers were taken aback. Fuyuki hurriedly said, “Mrs. Hanayashiki, please stop this.”

“Grandma...” said an eleven-year-old boy who had just entered the dining room. It was Kikumasa, who had unknowingly drunk the poison. The early medical treatment seemed to have worked—he was already able to walk again, albeit unsteadily. However, his face was pallid. Behind him was his mother, Masako. She was even paler.

“Kikumasa!” The moment Hanako saw her grandson enter the room, she tossed the cane aside and rushed up to him. Everyone thought she was going to hug him, cry, and say, “I’m so glad you’re all right.” Unfortunately, that was not the case. Hanako raised her hand high and slapped the boy’s cheek. A loud *smack* rang through the air. “You horrible child, Kikumasa! How many times have I told you not to take your aunt’s sweets and tea?! You’re such a despicable, stupid child!”

Kikumasa put his hand on his cheek and wailed, “Waaah!”

Masako quickly hugged her son. “Mother, please stop. Kikumasa wasn’t able to get out of bed until just now.”

“What does it matter?” Hanako asked. “He’s suffering the consequences of his actions. You spoil your son too much!”

“You say that, mother...” A young woman in a bright red dress entered the dining room. “But thanks to Kikumasa, your precious Yuriko’s life was saved. Isn’t that a good thing?”

“Ranko...”

It was the second daughter, Ranko. Her sharp features rivaled the showiness of her dress.

“Hmph,” said Hanako. She walked back to Yuriko and hugged her tightly. “That’s right. The problem is that someone poisoned my lovely Yuriko. Someone in this house tried to kill her. I know this because everyone else in this family hates her.” She glared at the other family members.

Yuriko, who was blind and deaf, simply sat still in her mother’s arms. Kikuo clammed up, perhaps because his mother’s words rang true.

Ranko flipped her hair back and sneered. “Well, yes. Yuriko is a burden on us all, yet mother dotes on her endlessly. Mother, you plan to have Yuriko inherit most of your fortune, don’t you? I already know.”

“What?” Kikuo’s eyes widened. “Is that true, mom? Yuriko doesn’t even know the value of money or how to use it! Besides, *I’m* the heir.”

“That’s exactly why!” said Hanako. “If I don’t give it to Yuriko, what will happen to her after I die? I need to leave money for her!”

“That attitude of yours is exactly why someone would want to poison her!” Ranko exclaimed.

“Are you saying you did it, then?”

“I only said I could see why someone *would* want to. I did no such thing myself. In fact, wouldn’t Kikuo be more desperate than me? He’s the heir, after all.” Ranko crossed her arms and looked at her younger brother.

“I didn’t poison her, and if I had, there’s no way I would’ve let my son go near the dining room!” Kikuo shouted.

“Then who did it?!” Hanako shrieked.

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“That’s what it was like,” Fuyuki said with a sigh.

“I’m sorry you had to go through that,” said Kiyotaka. “So who poisoned the tea?”

Fuyuki shook his head with a bitter expression. “We questioned everyone in the house, but no one had an alibi.”

“Yikes.” Akihito grimaced. “It’d be annoying if *everyone* had an alibi, but *no one* having one is a whole other problem.”

“Could you tell me the details surrounding the time when the milk tea was prepared?” Kiyotaka asked.

Fuyuki nodded, happy that the detective was interested in the case. “The maid brewed it the same way as always. Yuriko’s daily routine is to go to the dining room at a little past 3 p.m., so the maid begins her preparations at 2:50

p.m. She boiled water, took out a cup, and prepared a plate of baked sweets—that day, it was cookies. She set the table just before the clock struck 3 p.m."

"What time did Yuriko arrive at the dining room that day?"

"I think it was..." The officer took his notebook out of his pocket to double-check. "The maid said it was a little after 3:05 p.m."

"Who else was there?"

Fuyuki shook his head and frowned. "She didn't know. She left the dining room door open so Yuriko could come in easily, and she said she had no idea if anyone else came in because she was washing dishes in the kitchen. Oh, the kitchen is at the back of the dining room, and layout-wise it's more like a restaurant kitchen."

"Was the maid the only one there?"

"No, the chef was doing early dinner preparations beside her, and they were chatting."

Kiyotaka hummed and stroked his chin. "Then how did the maid know Yuriko arrived after 3:05 p.m.?"

Fuyuki tightened his grip on his notebook. "Well, the mischievous little Kikumasa was shouting and making loud footsteps as he came to the dining room. The maid and cook heard him and stepped away from the sinks to peek outside the kitchen. By then, Yuriko was at the door and Kikumasa was already holding the teacup."

"Ohhh." Akihito folded his hands behind his head. "So then the kid drank the poisoned milk tea, unintentionally saving Yuriko's life. Troublemakers can be useful too, huh?"

"He nearly died in her place, though," Fuyuki snapped.

Akihito shrugged. "So what excuses did the family members have?"

"The eldest daughter, Shoko, said she was playing the violin in her room. This was heard by other family members and the maid. The second daughter, Ranko, was supposedly in bed with a hangover. She had a recital the day before and drank too much at the afterparty. The son, Kikuo, was smoking outside on the

terrace, but there were no witnesses. Kikuo's wife, Masako, said she was on the second floor, supervising her sons' studies. Kikumasa had difficulties with concentrating that prevented him from being able to study, so he ran out of the room and Masako had Kikujiro practice writing instead. No one could corroborate her story either."

"What about Hanako?" asked Kiyotaka.

"She said she was taking a nap in her room. When the grandfather clock struck three, she woke up and decided to head to the dining room to have tea with Yuriko."

"I see." Kiyotaka folded his arms.

"Wait, you said no one had an alibi, but Shoko does, doesn't she?" asked Akihito. "She was playing violin in her room and other people heard her."

Kiyotaka looked at the phonograph in the drawing room. "If they only heard the sound, it could've been a recording."

"Oh, right."

"By the way, where was the strychnine obtained from?" Kiyotaka asked.

Fuyuki's face fell. "It might've been in the house to begin with."

Kiyotaka and Akihito exchanged looks.

"You aren't sure?" Kiyotaka asked.

"No. Remember how the head of the family, Yoshiharu, who drowned himself in the sea two months ago, was originally a chemist? After marrying, he built a lab in the house and holed himself up in there while conducting various experiments. There were bottles of poison on the shelf."

"Doesn't that settle it, then?" Akihito tilted his head. "Why can't you say for sure?"

"When Yoshiharu went missing, Hanako locked up the lab and ordered the family to stay out. She still has the key, and it hasn't been used since. The lab only has one door with one key, and the window is barred. I tried to see if I could break in without a key, but no matter what I did, it just wasn't possible," Fuyuki said lethargically. He really must have tried a lot of methods.

“Well,” Kiyotaka said, folding his arms. “I haven’t seen the room so I wouldn’t know, but assuming it truly is impossible to break in, Yoshiharu could have swiped poison from the lab before he went missing. Alternatively, he could have made a duplicate key with a wax mold. Or perhaps the poison was simply obtained elsewhere.”

“Tsk, tsk.” Akihito waved his index finger. “Holmes, you’re overlooking a huge possibility. The culprit was Hanako, who had the key. She pretended to dote on her disabled daughter when she actually hated her.”

“It’s not completely out of the question,” Kiyotaka said nonchalantly. From the sound of it, he had considered the possibility but chosen not to voice it.

Fuyuki shook his head with a serious expression. “It wasn’t her.”

“How do you know that?” asked Akihito.

“There was a second incident. Hanako was attacked today.”

“Huh?” Kiyotaka’s and Akihito’s eyes widened.

“It happened before we’ve even figured out the truth behind last week’s poisoning.”

“Hence Shoko thinking the police are unreliable,” said Kiyotaka.

“That’s why she asked for Holmes,” Akihito agreed.

Fuyuki scratched his head, ashamed. “It doesn’t seem like the Hanayashikis will be here anytime soon. Let’s go to the crime scene first,” he said, standing up.

Kiyotaka and Akihito nodded and followed him. Upon opening the drawing room door, they were faced with a wide hall. Kiyotaka paused and looked at the wall.

Akihito turned around and asked, “What’s wrong, Holmes?”

“It’s nothing.” Kiyotaka shifted his gaze from the wall and resumed walking.

Act 2: The Incomprehensible Case

1

“Well, the Hanayashiki family...has good taste, I’ll give ’em that,” Akihito muttered to himself as they walked down a long hallway. The Hanayashiki estate was so gorgeous that the words naturally came out of his mouth.

“What’re you going to do if someone hears you?” Fuyuki, who was at the front of the group, gave his brother a side-eyed glare.

“This mansion is very English in style,” said Kiyotaka.

“English, huh?” Akihito hummed. “There aren’t any Union Jacks or anything, though.”

“English-style architectural design is said to have begun with cathedrals. It’s the Gothic style that originated around the twelfth century.”

“Oh, it does kinda feel like a church. Is this house Gothic-style, then?”

“No, it seems to be the Tudor style that came about in the late fifteenth century.”

“Tudor?” Akihito asked, pursing his lips and tilting his head.

“It was named after the king at the time, Henry Tudor. The low-relief roses are one of its characteristic features. This design was created by Henry VII after the Wars of the Roses by combining the House of Lancaster’s red rose emblem and the House of York’s white rose emblem.”

“Huh? The Wars of the Roses? What’re those?”

Fuyuki facepalmed. “Aren’t you supposed to be a student? What have you even been studying?”

“Everything besides that, I guess.”

“Idiot.” Fuyuki sighed.

“The Wars of the Roses were a series of civil wars fought between the House of Lancaster and the House of York in the fifteenth century,” Kiyotaka explained. “They were called that because Lancaster’s emblem was a red rose and York’s was a white one. Quite a lot happened, but in the end, it was Henry Tudor who settled things once and for all. Afterwards, he combined the two

houses' rose emblems to make the Tudor family crest. The resulting design is called the Tudor rose."

"Ooooh." Akihito's eyes lit up. "H-Hey, what was the 'quite a lot' that happened?"

"There was a lot of drama. I'll lend you a book next time."

"Thanks!" Akihito nodded.

Fuyuki gaped as he looked at his brother.

"Is something the matter, Fuyuki?" Kiyotaka asked.

"No. It's just that I think you'd make a good tutor."

"Oh, not at all." Kiyotaka smiled.

"It was Ichiro Hanayashiki who built this house, so maybe he liked the Tudor style," Akihito said, looking around the building as he walked.

"Indeed. When I look at this mansion, I can sense an admiration for and fixation on beauty and nobility."

"Fixation, huh? I heard he did whatever it took to rise up in the world," Akihito murmured.

Fuyuki held his index finger in front of his mouth, taken aback. "There's no point talking about that now."

Everyone knew about Ichiro Hanayashiki's bad reputation. He had made his fortune by treating people of low status like slaves. Many complained that he had tricked them, betrayed them, or wrung them for all they were worth.

His violent side was particularly reprehensible. Perhaps he could have been called a sadist. He would buy poor people for money and beat and kick them. Not satisfied with just that, he allowed others to also beat them as much as they liked as long as they paid up, or so the rumors went.

As his only daughter, Hanako had inherited his violent tendencies. One day, when she was still young, a man had seen her at a party and mocked her for being a gaudy woman. Hanako had overheard him and flown into a rage. She'd told a servant to bring her a horse whip and hit the man with it, forcing him to

grovel on his knees.

This influence seemed to extend to Ichiro's grandson, Kikuo, as well. He had been violent on numerous occasions and resolved the incidents with money every time.

The saving grace was that Hanako's daughters did not have this disposition. However, the second daughter, Ranko, didn't have a good reputation either. When she had alcohol in her system, she became like an animal in heat. She would attend evening parties, grab a man she liked, and immediately do the deed with him. The problematic aspect of this was that she lost all sense of judgment—as long as she was interested in the man, she didn't care if he was already married. Ranko complained it was her family's fault she couldn't find a husband, but in reality, she didn't realize it was her own fault for being so promiscuous.

"Come to think of it, I haven't heard any bad rumors about Shoko," Akihito murmured.

"Yeah." Fuyuki nodded. The eldest daughter, Shoko, was said to be very sensible and kind. Everyone knew her as a talented violinist. "She's the only one who's gentle and thoughtful. She's a wonderful woman...and very beautiful," he murmured passionately, as if he was personally fond of her.

2

They went upstairs and saw rows of doors on both sides of the second-floor hallway.

"It happened in Hanako's room, which she shares with Yuriko," Fuyuki said, pointing at a door next to the stairs.

"What's the room behind it?" Kiyotaka asked.

"That's Yoshiharu's lab. The one across the hall from it belongs to the maid, whose main job is taking care of Yuriko. While I'm at it, the one on the far side is Shoko and Ranko's room. The one across from it is where Kikuo's family lives."

The last one didn't need an explanation—it was clear from the high-pitched voices of children coming from inside, which they could hear from the other

end of the hallway.

“Behave!” their mother shrieked.

“That’s Masako’s voice, I assume,” said Kiyotaka.

“Sounds like it,” said Fuyuki. “She seems to be on edge because her mother-in-law, Hanako, is always berating her for not disciplining her children properly. When I look at that mischievous rascal, I can see why she’d want to say that...”

“It’s important to *educate* your children on how to behave in certain situations, but sometimes they have innate traits that discipline won’t change. It’s not fair to only blame the parents.”

“I don’t know about that,” the officer muttered. He seemed to believe that children changed depending on how they were disciplined.

“We have an example right here. You and Akihito are blood-related brothers raised by the same parents, yet you’re completely different from each other.”

Fuyuki and Akihito looked at each other, gave dry chuckles, and said, “True.”

Suddenly, Shoko’s door opened and she came out of her room. “Oh, Kiyotaka.”

“Hello, Shoko. It’s been a while.” Kiyotaka placed a hand on his chest and bowed.

“I’m sorry for calling you here out of the blue,” the eldest sister said apologetically, tucking her silky long hair behind her ear. With comely features and an oval-shaped face, she was as lovely as an elegant white rose.

“What a beauty,” Akihito murmured.

Fuyuki’s face turned bright red. “Don’t be rude,” he chided him.

“I’m honored that you would rely on me,” said Kiyotaka. “But I must ask, why me?”

“In the past, your grandfather—Seiji—said to me, ‘If you’re ever in trouble, you can consult with my grandson for anything. I hear you’re called the Holmes of Kyoto. I love Sherlock Holmes too.” She gave the detective an excited look.

Kiyotaka’s temple twitched slightly, but he quickly put on his usual smile.

“Again, I’m honored. So what exactly happened?”

Shoko’s face clouded over and she lowered her gaze.

Fuyuki replied in her stead. “Kiyotaka, take a look at the crime scene first.”

The door to Hanako and Yuriko’s room was open, and police officers were inside, examining the scene. The room’s owners were nowhere to be seen.

“Excuse me,” Kiyotaka said, putting on a pair of white gloves and stepping inside.

The room shared by the mother and daughter was like a fancy hotel room, with two beds arranged in a row and its own bathroom. There was a chest of drawers between the beds with fruit placed on top of it. The room also had a fireplace, the mantle of which was adorned with a beautiful candlestand and flower vase.

It was gorgeous, but Akihito looked down and turned pale. Blood had spread across the floor, the color clearly visible on the moss-green carpet. Trying to imagine what kind of tragedy had occurred made one want to cover their eyes. In fact, Akihito screamed, grabbed Kiyotaka’s sleeve, and hid behind him.

“At long last, a murder case...” Akihito murmured, trembling.

“No.” Fuyuki shook his head. “Hanako didn’t die.”

“Huh?” the student looked up.

“That’s what I thought,” said Kiyotaka.

“H-How? There’s a sea of blood!”

“Fuyuki said Hanako was attacked, not murdered. Also, while it does look like the scene of a tragedy at first glance, this isn’t enough blood loss to result in death,” Kiyotaka said calmly as he examined the amount staining the carpet.

“How can you stay calm in this situation?” Akihito, who couldn’t handle blood, felt queasy and covered his mouth.

“Now then...” Kiyotaka looked around. What caught his interest was the white powder scattered all over the floor. If this had been the kitchen, one might have assumed someone had spilled flour. Because of the powder, there

were also visible footprints everywhere. “The footprints look to be from men’s shoes.”

“Yeah, they’re pretty big,” said Akihito, having regained his composure. He took a magnifying glass out of his pocket and gulped.

The Hanayashiki estate was built in a foreign style, but the family didn’t wear their outdoor shoes at home. They took them off at the entrance and changed into slippers. However, the culprit had entered the room with their shoes on.

“The shoes are about twenty-eight centimeters long, with both heels worn down,” said Kiyotaka. “The toes have a pointed shape, but from what I can tell, they don’t seem to be made of leather.”

“I’m having the officers search the house for shoes that match the description right now.”

While Kiyotaka and Fuyuki were calmly discussing the evidence, Shoko stood at the door, averting her gaze from the blood.

“Who discovered the crime scene?” asked Kiyotaka.

The maid standing behind Shoko bowed. “I-It was me. The madam and Miss Yuriko both wake up early in the morning, so I come to check on them at 6 a.m. every day. This morning, there was no response when I knocked, so I opened the door, thinking they might be feeling unwell. Then I found the madam lying on the floor, covered in blood. She was still breathing, so we took her to the hospital right away.”

Akihito placed a hand on his chest. “It’s great that you made it in time.”

Shoko shook her head with a bitter expression. “We can’t be optimistic. She still hasn’t regained consciousness.”

“Oh...”

Kiyotaka nodded, a grave look on his face. “Shoko, your room is across the hall. Did you hear any fighting?”

“No,” said Shoko. “I always sleep with earplugs in, so I didn’t notice anything was wrong until the maid screamed.”

“When you heard that, did you rush over right away?”

“Yes, and then I saw my mother covered in blood...”

“What was Hanako wearing at the time?”

“A bathrobe,” Shoko and the maid said at almost the same time.

“Does she normally sleep in a bathrobe?”

“No, the madam always sleeps in a negligee.”

“Does she usually take a bath in the morning?”

“Not always, but sometimes she does.”

“I see.” Kiyotaka nodded at the maid’s words. “This white powder is talcum powder, then. Hanako woke up early, had her morning bath, and picked up the container.”

“Oh!” Akihito’s eyes lit up. “So she came out of the bathroom applying it like this.” He pretended to apply talcum powder to his body.

“I see.” Fuyuki nodded. “And then she ran into the culprit, scattering the white powder everywhere.”

The container seemed to have fallen in between the beds after the scuffle. Kiyotaka crouched down to examine it. “Yes, I was right,” he said with a crescent-eyed smile.

There was a plate of fruit on top of the nearby chest of drawers. It had a bunch of bananas, which were far too expensive for the average person to eat. It also had two oranges, an apple, and a pear. All of the fruits were fresh except for the pear, which was darkened and spoiled.

“What I can’t figure out is the weapon,” said Kiyotaka, standing up. He frowned and looked at the floor. There was a violin lying by the window. Its strings were twisted and there was blood sticking to it. “Was it that violin?”

Shoko and Fuyuki nodded at the same time. “Probably.”

“Does it belong to Shoko?”

“No.” Shoko hurriedly shook her head. “I think that one was a decoration in the first-floor drawing room.”

“I see.” Kiyotaka folded his arms. “It really doesn’t make sense.”

“How come?” asked Akihito.

“There are many objects in this house that would be more lethal. For example, the candlestand and flower vase on top of that fireplace. Why would the culprit use a violin?”

“I dunno; a violin seems pretty sturdy to me.”

While they were talking, one of the officers examining the room exclaimed, “Hey, there’s a syringe under the bed!” He retrieved the fallen needle and brought it to Fuyuki.

Fuyuki, Kiyotaka, and Akihito looked down at it and saw that it was empty.

Kiyotaka glanced at Shoko and the maid. “Is the fruit on the chest of drawers always there?”

“Yes.” The maid nodded. “The madam and Miss Yuriko both love fruit, so I keep the plate filled.”

“Are there any fruits that Hanako doesn’t like?”

The two women exchanged looks.

“My mother can’t eat pears, but it’s not that she doesn’t like them,” said Shoko.

“Yes.” The maid nodded. “The madam likes pears, but she says that eating them makes her throat scratchy.”

“Did everyone in the house know that?” Kiyotaka asked.

“Probably,” said Shoko. “Whenever we talked about fruit, she’d say, ‘I like the taste of pears, but they make my throat scratchy so I can’t eat them. It’s too bad.’”

“I see.” Kiyotaka picked up the pear on the plate.

The maid frowned when she saw the blackened fruit. “Oh dear. That pear was perfectly fresh when I put it there last night. How did it spoil in a single night?”

“That’s easy to explain.” Kiyotaka found a needle-like hole in the pear and showed it to everyone. “It was poisoned with that syringe.”

Everyone’s eyes widened and they gasped.

“What does that mean for the case?” asked Akihito.

“The culprit snuck into this room early in the morning and poisoned the pear,” said Kiyotaka. “Then Hanako came out from the bathroom. Startled, the culprit hit Hanako on the head with the violin and fled.”

Akihito and Fuyuki’s eyes lit up.

“In other words, the culprit was targeting Yuriko, not Hanako,” said Akihito.

“Oh!” Fuyuki clenched his fist. “They happened to be spotted by Hanako and attacked her out of necessity. Anyway, we need to find the shoes! Make haste, everyone!”

“Yes, sir!” The other officers saluted and ran out of the room.

“So the culprit’s solely going after Yuriko,” said Akihito.

“Yeah, which makes it easier to narrow down the suspects,” said Fuyuki.

Kiyotaka watched the two brothers nod to each other. There was something he still couldn’t comprehend. He fixed his eyes on the violin lying on the floor.

3

The woman at the center of it all, Yuriko Hanayashiki, was sitting in the maid's room next door. The room had a bed, an armchair, a desk, and a chair. It was a splendid living space, but since the group had just come from Hanako's room, it felt much plainer in comparison.

Yuriko, who was sitting in the armchair, looked uneasy. She seemed to have sensed that something was different from usual. Her hands were fidgeting in her lap.

"Since Yuriko's blind and deaf, we can't explain the situation to her, huh?" Akihito murmured, feeling sorry for the woman.

"No." The maid shook her head. "I was told that Miss Yuriko was born healthy but became very ill at the age of six. That was when she lost her eyesight and hearing. However, she was very smart, so she could already read and write perfectly by then. We use these to communicate with her." She took out a board and wooden blocks engraved with hiragana characters. There were multiple sets provided so the same character could be used more than once.

"I see," said Kiyotaka. "You've thought this through." He lightly tapped Yuriko on the arm and spelled out a sentence on the board.

"Hello, my name is Yagashira."

Yuriko removed the last four words, leaving only "Hello." She bowed. Then she rearranged the blocks into a new phrase.

"Who are you?"

Kiyotaka thought for a moment before reluctantly writing his sentence.

"I am a detective."

"Oh, you finally admit it!" Akihito teased him.

Kiyotaka grimaced. "I considered saying I was the police, but I don't want to lie." Saying he was a detective was the fastest way to explain the situation in a short phrase without lying.

He spelled out another sentence on the board.

“Your mother was attacked by a burglar and injured.”

Yuriko covered her face with both hands in shock.

“Did you notice anything?”

The woman’s hands were still on her face. She wasn’t aware that Kiyotaka had asked her a question.

“Kiyotaka, do you have a minute?” asked Fuyuki.

“Yes.” The detective gently patted Yuriko on the shoulder and stood up.

“The violin really was from the drawing room. Come with me real quick.”

Kiyotaka and Akihito went back to the first floor with Fuyuki.

The drawing room had a large display case with glass doors. Antiques and dolls were displayed on them. Upon closer inspection, there was one shelf with nothing on it.

“This is where the violin was,” Fuyuki said, looking at the glass shelf.

“Do you know when it was taken out?” Kiyotaka asked.

“We’re asking around, but it doesn’t seem like anyone paid much attention to what was inside the display case. Everyone says they don’t know.”

“Were there fingerprints on the violin and syringe?”

“The syringe didn’t have any. The violin had fingerprints from several people who had used it before, but there weren’t any fresh ones that could belong to the culprit.”

“I see. It still doesn’t make sense. Why would they use a violin of all things?” Kiyotaka tilted his head.

Fuyuki was deep in thought. “Maybe the culprit thought it was valuable and picked it up with the intention of stealing it? He took it with him to Hanako’s room and used it as a weapon on the spur of the moment.”

“It’s unnatural to bring a violin with you when you’re sneaking into a room

with a poison-filled syringe. Besides, the violin wasn't particularly valuable. It was an ordinary one you could find anywhere."

Kiyotaka was the heir to the wealthy Yagashira merchant family. He was also known as a connoisseur. He would be able to discern the value of a violin.

"That said," he continued, "even if it didn't have monetary worth, it might've had sentimental value to the family."

"We found the shoes!" came an officer's voice from outside.

"Really? Where were they?" Fuyuki asked.

"The forest out back!"

The three men looked out the window and saw the excited officers holding a pair of shoes.

A little later, the shoes were brought to Fuyuki. They were white canvas shoes, twenty-eight centimeters long with a pointed toe shape.

"The heels aren't as worn down as I thought," Kiyotaka remarked, examining the shoes with his gloved hands. Suddenly, he frowned and pointed at a stain on the outside of the right shoe. "Could you figure out what substance this stain is?"

"Got it." Fuyuki nodded and gave the shoe to his subordinate.

Later, it was determined that the stain was the same poisonous fluid that had been injected into the pear. At the same time, they also determined the owner of the shoes: Kikuo Hanayashiki, heir to the family.

4

In Kikuo Hanayashiki's room, his two sons, Kikumasa and Kikujiro, were sword fighting with rolled-up newspapers.

"Quiet down, you two!" their mother screamed.

Fuyuki grimaced. Akihito, on the other hand, laughed and said, "It's lively in

here, huh?”

Meanwhile, Kiyotaka was showing Kikuo the white canvas shoes that had been found in the forest behind the house.

“Kikuo, do you recognize these shoes?”

“They’re mine, but I haven’t worn them in a long time. I thought canvas shoes would be comfortable because they were made of fabric, but those have pointed toes, so they didn’t fit my feet. I only wear custom-made shoes and suits now.”

“Show-off,” Akihito said with an annoyed expression.

However, Kiyotaka nodded and said, “I agree. So where did you keep these shoes?”

“No idea,” said Kikuo. “I thought I’d thrown them out. Is there something about them?” he asked warily. He knew there had been footprints left in his mother’s room but didn’t want to believe they could have been from his shoes.

“The footprints at the crime scene match these shoes,” said Fuyuki.

“What?” Kikuo’s eyes widened. “That doesn’t mean anything. Like I just said, those shoes weren’t custom-made or anything. They aren’t one-of-a-kind like Cinderella’s.”

“Well said.” Kiyotaka’s face relaxed into a smile. “You make a good point.”

“Yeah. The footprints could’ve matched because the culprit was wearing the same brand of shoes.”

“By the way, Kikuo...”

“What?”

“Do you know what mercury bichloride is?”

“Mercury...what? Chemistry isn’t my strong suit.” Kikuo laughed dryly.

“It’s the name of the poison that was in the pear. It was injected at a much higher than lethal dose. A single bite of that pear would instantly kill you.”

Kikuo’s face stiffened. Kiyotaka pointed at the stain on the right shoe.

“There’s a trace of the same poison here, and the soles have talcum powder on them. I understand your argument that the culprit could’ve been wearing the same brand of shoes, but we can say without a doubt that it was these shoes of yours that were worn at the crime scene. The culprit was wearing them when they attacked Hanako.”

Kikuo’s eyes widened.

“Now, let me ask again: where did you keep these shoes?”

“Uh...well, if they weren’t thrown out, they probably would’ve been at the back of the shoe rack at the front door.”

While the adults were talking, the children continued their mock sword fight.

“Be quiet!” Kikuo yelled, annoyed by their energetic shouts. “Masako, make them shut up!”

“O-Okay.” His wife flinched. “Kikumasa, Kikujiro, Mr. Eda will be here soon, so let’s wait for him outside in the gazebo.”

“It’s your fault in the first place for not throwing out these shoes I never wear!”

“But whenever I throw out something of yours, you always—”

“Don’t talk back to me!”

Masako clammed up.

Kikuo huffed, seeming to have calmed down after yelling. “So you guys are saying I’m responsible because the shoes belong to me? Do you really think the culprit would wear their own shoes?”

“He’s got a point,” Akihito murmured.

“Indeed,” said Kiyotaka. “We aren’t accusing you of being the culprit. We simply wanted to ask you some questions. Where were you between last night and this morning, and what were you doing?”

“This is one of those alibi investigations, huh?” said Kikuo. “Between last night and this morning, I was just sleeping here like normal. I came to my room at 11 p.m. and got into bed. Then I was woken up this morning by the commotion.”

“Did you notice anything while you were in bed? This question is for your wife too.”

Kikuo and Masako glanced at each other, trying to recall if anything had happened.

“No, not that I can think of,” said Kikuo.

“My husband and I are both deep sleepers,” said Masako. “Once we’ve fallen asleep, even a thunderstorm won’t wake us up.”

Kiyotaka looked around the room as he listened. The space occupied by the Kikuo family at the end of the second floor seemed to have three main rooms: one for the parents, one for the children, and a living room in between them. It also seemed to be equipped with a bathroom. It was quite far from Hanako’s room, so it wasn’t strange that they hadn’t noticed anything was amiss.

“I understand,” said Kiyotaka. “Thank you.” He bowed.

There was a knock on the door.

“Mr. Yagashira, Miss Yuriko is calling for you,” said the maid outside. Yuriko had probably noticed the message Kiyotaka had left on the board earlier.

Kiyotaka bowed to Kikuo again and hurried back to Yuriko.

5

Yuriko was still sitting in the armchair from earlier. She was tapping the board on her lap, where the word “detective” was spelled out.

Kiyotaka tapped her on the arm and replied on the board, *“I’m here.”*

“I will tell you what happened.”

“Thank you.”

“I woke up feeling strange.”

The strange feeling had probably been because her mother was fighting the intruder. Since Yuriko couldn’t see or hear, she seemed to be sensitive to vibrations in the air.

“Do you know what happened?” Kiyotaka asked.

Yuriko stood up, picked up the cane beside her, and steadily walked to her room. Kiyotaka, Akihito, Fuyuki, the other police officers, the maid, Shoko, and Ranko all watched her. When she got there, she lay down on her bed with practiced movements. She seemed to be recreating the situation.

Sensing vibrations and an unfamiliar presence, Yuriko rose and lowered her feet off the bed. She stood up, turned towards the footboard, and reached out to see if her mother was there. She then withdrew her hand in surprise. After a pause, she tapped her cheek.

“I see,” said Kiyotaka. “You touched the culprit’s face.”

“Huh?” Akihito tilted his head. “Why would the culprit’s face be there?”

Yuriko had stretched her arm forward and down.

“Maybe the culprit dropped the syringe and was bending down to pick it up?” suggested Fuyuki. “Then Yuriko touched him and he panicked and ran away.”

“Oh, that explains why the syringe was left under the bed.” Akihito clapped his hands together.

The others seemed to agree as well. Kiyotaka said nothing.

Yuriko sat down on the sofa and tapped her lap, indicating that she wanted the board. The maid quickly placed it there.

“The skin was very soft and smooth,” she spelled out.

“Soft and smooth?” Everyone naturally turned their gazes to Shoko and Ranko, who had youthful skin despite being in their thirties.

“You can’t use that as proof,” Ranko spat. “Yuriko doesn’t know anything.”

Shoko immediately scolded her sister. “Stop it, Ranko.”

“You don’t want to be suspected because of such unreliable information, do you? I know I sure don’t.”

Kiyotaka ignored the two sisters and spelled out another question on Yuriko’s board. *“Who do you think it was?”*

“I don’t know. They were gone right away.”

“Did you sense anything else?”

“The person had a sweet smell.”

Kiyotaka hummed and folded his arms. *“Was it this?”* He let Yuriko smell the talcum powder.

She shook her head. *“No.”*

“What kind of sweetness was it?”

Yuriko furrowed her brow as she tried to remember the scent. After a few moments, she replied, *“The smell of vanilla.”*

“Vanilla...” Kiyotaka pondered this information with a serious expression.

Ranko snickered. “Isn’t the most suspicious person the maid who bakes sweets in the kitchen, then? You’ve been suspecting the family, but it could also be that the maid is tired of taking care of Yuriko. She’s young so she has smooth skin, and she uses vanilla flavoring in her sweets.” She crossed her arms and turned her gaze to the maid, who was standing by the wall.

The maid looked up in surprise. “I-I would never do such a thing! Miss Yuriko is more self-sufficient than you think. She even braids her own hair. Taking care of her isn’t as hard as it seems. Most of all, she’s a very kind person.”

“She’s right, Ranko,” said Shoko. “I know you want to clear yourself of suspicion, but don’t do it by pinning the blame on someone else.”

Ranko stomped out of the room.

“Hey, wait!” Akihito followed her.

Kiyotaka continued to ask Yuriko questions. *“Vanilla as in the smell of sweets or ice cream?”*

Yuriko thought for a moment before replying. *“Not quite. It smelled artificial.”*

“Artificial...” Kiyotaka murmured. *“Thank you. Please let me know if you remember anything else.”* He gently patted her on the shoulder, stood up, and looked outside the door.

Akihito and Ranko were talking in the hallway.

“Yes,” said Ranko. “You’re the detective’s assistant, right?”

“Right, so please leave it to me, Akihito Kajiwara.”

“How dependable of you. I was so scared this would happen.”

Ranko was beautiful and radiated an allure that acted as an aphrodisiac to the opposite sex. Most men frowned in disapproval when they heard about her promiscuous nature, but when they actually saw her in person, they were easily charmed. Akihito was no exception.

Ranko snuggled into Akihito’s chest, pretending to be frightened. Kiyotaka and Fuyuki felt like they could hear his gulp from inside the room. They glared coldly at him, but he didn’t notice.

“Akihito, I’m so scared,” she cooed. “Could you please hold me?”

“Yes, as much as you want!” Akihito breathed heavily as he moved to hug her.

“Ranko, I’d like to help you too,” Kiyotaka cut in with a smile. “Would you please tell me your side of the story?”

“Oh my.” The woman blinked at the suave words coming from a more reliable-looking man. “I’d be happy to.” She slipped away from Akihito and tried to cling to Kiyotaka’s arm, but the detective turned around, evading her.

“Let’s go downstairs, then,” he said, heading for the first-floor drawing room.

6

“Ask me anything,” said Ranko, sitting on the armchair and crossing her legs seductively.

Fuyuki averted his gaze, unable to look directly at her, while Akihito’s eyes clearly lit up. Kiyotaka seemed unaffected.

“Well then, please tell me when the violin was first displayed on that glass shelf,” said Kiyotaka.

“I don’t know,” said Ranko. “It’s been there for ages. It was there when we were kids too.”

“Who did it belong to?”

“No one, so anyone was free to use it whenever they wanted. Well, Shoko’s

the only one who could actually play well.” Ranko laughed. “Come to think of it...” She clasped her hands. “Apparently, it originally belonged to our dad. He wanted to play the violin ever since he was a kid, but he was too poor to afford one. After getting married, he bought a violin and tried to learn, but he didn’t make any progress at all. Oh, right, when Shoko heard that story, she said, ‘I’ll play the violin in your place, then.’ That’s how she first got into it.”

Fuyuki, with his Shoko bias, placed a hand on his chest and said, “What a touching story.”

“I see.” Kiyotaka smiled and nodded. “Your late father was loved dearly, wasn’t he?”

“Shoko and Kikuo seemed to love him because he was kind and gentle,” said Ranko. “I didn’t really... It was hard to watch him being so pathetic. I did feel bad for him, though.”

“What was pathetic about your father?” Kiyotaka asked.

“He was always cowering. Our mom is violent when she’s angry, so he was always watching what he said and did.” The sight was easy to imagine. “He even had a separate bedroom because our mom was always glued to Yuriko. Not that it really mattered. He was always holed up in his lab with his experiments, as if he was trying to escape from reality. And he didn’t even make any big discoveries. He was like a mouse living in fear of our mom’s temper.”

“How did your mother react when he disappeared?”

“At first, she thought he might’ve been kidnapped. But when it turned out that he’d probably run away from home, she was surprisingly distraught. She must’ve been shocked that her submissive husband would escape. She locked up his lab and didn’t let anyone go inside.”

“Why would she do that?”

“I think she thought it’d be dangerous because there were strong poisons in there. With our dad gone, she was the new head of the family, so she was probably afraid someone would poison her. Well, she did end up getting attacked.” Ranko shrugged.

“No,” said Fuyuki. “Hanako wasn’t targeted. She was just in the wrong place

at the wrong time.”

“Huh?” Ranko blinked.

Kiyotaka handled the rest of the explanation. “The culprit snuck into their room, and when they were injecting poison into a pear with a syringe, Hanako came out from her bath and ran into them.”

“Huh? That’s still a poisoning, then, isn’t it? Oh, I get it. Mom doesn’t eat pears.” Ranko’s expression was cold. “So Yuriko was targeted again, just like last week. In that case, the only logical suspect is my brother. Mr. Kajiwara, you heard about the inheritance, didn’t you? Mom said she’s giving it to Yuriko.”

“Oh, yes, I remember.” Fuyuki nodded.

Kiyotaka hummed and folded his arms. “It appears that Hanako loves Yuriko a little *too* much. At first I thought it was an act she was putting on for the public, but she wouldn’t share a bedroom with her daughter if that was all it was. She really does seem to be devoted to Yuriko.”

“Yes.” Ranko looked away.

“Why would she devote herself to that extent?”

Before Ranko could say anything, Fuyuki asked, “Isn’t it because she feels bad for Yuriko?”

Ranko snickered and shook her head. “That’s not it. Well, it might be part of it, but the real reason is narcissism.”

“Narcissism?” the three men asked.

“Yuriko’s the spitting image of mom when she was younger. Also, mom feels guilty because Yuriko fell ill while she was out partying at an event hosted by her late grandpa. Yuriko was also the reason her previous husband left her, apparently. Anyway, all of those things put together are why she’s so attached to Yuriko. She’s even giving Yuriko the inheritance. You can’t blame Kikuo for being annoyed.”

“Wouldn’t you be annoyed by that as well?” Kiyotaka asked.

Akihito was startled by the blunt question.

Ranko seemed unoffended, though. She giggled and said, “Of course I don’t *like* it, but I wouldn’t kill anyone over it. I’m happy as long as I have enough money to live in luxury. I wouldn’t even mind being Yuriko’s legal guardian. The maid does all the work anyway.”

“How do you feel about it from an emotional perspective, then?” Kiyotaka asked.

“Emotional?” Ranko furrowed her brow.

“Taking wealth out of the equation, do you have any pent-up feelings regarding Yuriko?”

“Our family’s been this way ever since I was born, so I don’t see why it would bother me now.”

“Is that so?” Kiyotaka folded his hands on his lap. “You are known to be a woman of many relationships. Could it be that you seek out other people because you’re trying to make up for the love your mother never gave you?”

Ranko’s eyes widened. “Don’t be ridiculous!” She stood up forcefully. “What are you saying? That I actually want my mom’s love, but she won’t give me it, so I seek out men instead?”

“Am I wrong?” Kiyotaka asked calmly.

Ranko made a disgusted face. “Seriously, what? I just like playing the game of love. I like men! I don’t do it because I want my mom’s love. That... That’s just not...”

“Indeed.” Kiyotaka nodded. “That was never your intention. However, playing the game of love with men didn’t satisfy your needs, did it? It’s because it wasn’t what you were looking for in the first place,” he said expressionlessly, looking into Ranko’s eyes.

The woman stood there, pale as a ghost, as if a devil were staring at her.

“Ranko, you were very lonely, weren’t you?” Kiyotaka gave her a pained, sympathetic look.

Ranko’s whole body trembled. She sat down on the armchair, her face turned down. Her shoulders shook slightly as sobs escaped her lips. Kiyotaka stood up

and gently placed his hand on her shoulder.

“You never received what you’ve truly wanted ever since you were little. It must’ve been hard for you.”

Ranko nodded slightly, not looking up.

“However, your mother is still alive. Please be honest with yourself. If she won’t hug you, then hug her yourself.”

“Okay,” Ranko said, tears streaming down her face. She clenched her fists in her lap.

Kiyotaka took a handkerchief out of his inner pocket and gave it to her. The drawing room was filled with the woman’s sobs for a good while.

“You really are amazing, Kiyotaka,” Fuyuki murmured after Ranko had left the room.

Akihito’s face stiffened. “You’re wrong, Fuyuki.”

“How so? He thawed Ranko’s heart. Isn’t that amazing?”

“Ugh.” Akihito shrugged and gave Kiyotaka a sideways look. “That’s exactly what’s scary about this guy. This is how he worms his way into people’s hearts and manipulates them. Now Ranko’s one of his pawns. I’m telling you, Holmes is a demon!”

“That’s rude, Akihito,” said Fuyuki.

“Indeed,” said Kiyotaka. “I won’t stand for this slander.” He leaned back on the sofa. “Still, the more questions I ask, the more questions I have.”

“Are you still hung up on the violin?”

“There are other issues as well.” Kiyotaka sighed. “Between Yoshiharu’s suicide and Hanako, there are too many things about this house that don’t make sense. What concerns me at the moment is the wall over there in the entrance hall.” He pointed outside the drawing room.

“The wall?” Akihito looked at the hallway.

“Part of it is discolored. There was probably a large painting hanging there

before.”

“Huh? Really?” Akihito left the room and examined the wall. “Oh, you’re right. It does look like a big painting was hanging here.”

“What kind of painting do you think it was?”

“Beats me.” Akihito tilted his head as he came back to the drawing room.

“It’s probably this house’s dark secret.” Kiyotaka narrowed his eyes.

Act 3: The Late Husband’s Laboratory

1

A day had passed since the incident.

A summary of what was known so far:

The first poison used was strychnine, which had been mixed into Yuriko’s milk tea. The second was mercury bichloride, which had been injected into the pear.

The culprit had worn Kikuo’s unused white canvas shoes while committing the crime and spilled the poison onto one of them during the act. While poisoning the pear in an attempt to kill Yuriko, they had been witnessed by Hanako, who they had hit on the head with a violin. When that happened, the talcum powder Hanako was holding had scattered all over the place, getting on the shoes.

Yuriko had been woken up by the fight. She had touched the culprit’s face and described their skin as “soft and smooth.” She had also said the culprit smelled like vanilla.

Perhaps startled, the culprit fled the scene without retrieving the fallen syringe. It was still unclear where the syringe itself had come from. Initially, the police considered the possibility of it being stolen from the Hanayashiki family’s doctor, but that turned out to not be the case.

Hanako had not yet regained consciousness since being transported to the hospital. However, there *was* some good news. The hospital had reported that a key had been attached to Hanako’s waist belt. It was the one and only key to Yoshiharu’s lab. Under Kiytoaka, Fuyuki, and Akihito’s supervision, Shoko had

retrieved it from the doctor at the hospital.

The group returned to the Hanayashiki estate and headed upstairs. The lab was on one side of the second floor, next to Hanako and Yuriko's room. Kiyotaka, Shoko, Fuyuki, and Akihito stopped in front of the door.

"Let me try something before we unlock it," said Kiyotaka, crouching down on one knee. He inserted two wires into the keyhole.

"Are you picking the lock?" Akihito asked excitedly, squatting next to the detective.

"Yes, I wanted to give it a try...but it's not possible. This lock is quite sturdy and tough. A common thief's methods wouldn't be able to open it." Kiyotaka took the wires out of the keyhole and stared at them.

Fuyuki bent down and asked, "Is there something on the wires?"

"No, it's the opposite."

"The opposite?"

"There isn't anything on them besides rust. I was thinking a duplicate key may been made, but there are no traces of the keyhole having been filled with wax." Kiyotaka stood up and placed his hands on his hips with a sigh.

Fuyuki hummed, a serious look on his face. "Oh, I know. The culprit could've gone in and obtained the poison *before* Yoshiharu went missing, when the door would've been unlocked."

"Fuyuki..." Akihito narrowed his eyes at his brother. He was displeased because Kiyotaka had mentioned this possibility the previous day, but Fuyuki was stating it as if he'd thought of it himself just now. He must have been trying to impress Shoko.

However, this petty effort had no effect on her. She shook her head and said, "No, I think we can count that out. Our dad didn't let anyone enter this room."

"Oh, I see," Fuyuki murmured, disappointed.

"He said it was dangerous. He didn't even let our mom go in. Whenever he left, even if it was only to use the bathroom, he would lock the door."

“Even when he went to the bathroom?” Akihito’s eyes widened. “That’s overdoing it.”

“It’s a commendable habit for a chemist working with dangerous substances,” said Kiyotaka. “His young grandchildren lived in the same house, after all.” He inserted the key into the lock and turned it. A heavy *clack* rang out.

The lab was about thirty square meters in size. In the center of the room, there was a table with a water tap, covered in beakers, flasks, alcohol burners, and gas burners. The walls were lined with shelves of books and compounds. There was also a fireplace and a large sofa that would be good for taking naps.

There was so much dust on the floor that walking would probably leave footprints. And as if to hide those footprints, the dust had been trampled all over.

“The police also entered this room two months ago when it was determined that the dead body was Yoshiharu’s, right?” Kiyotaka asked.

“Yeah.” Fuyuki nodded. “I was with them. There wasn’t this much dust at the time. In fact, it was so clean that I thought he must’ve tidied up before heading to his death.”

“Yes,” said Shoko. “Our mom locked the door after the police investigation and it’s been closed ever since.”

“This much dust in just two months, huh?” Akihito remarked. “It looks like it’s been stomped on, though. Someone must’ve broken in after all.” He gulped as he looked around the room.

“It’s unusual,” Kiyotaka said, narrowing his eyes at the floor. Everyone turned to him in silence. “The dust is only disturbed in the middle of the room. The areas around the door, window, and walls appear untouched.”

“What does that mean?” Akihito asked. “Did the culprit open the door, jump to the middle of the room, take what he wanted, trample the dust to hide his footprints, then jump back outside?”

“Perhaps, but it would be quite unnecessary.” Kiyotaka tilted his head as he entered the room and examined the window. It was barred like a prison cell, making it impossible to pass through.

“Hey, Holmes, look at this,” Akihito said, looking at the shelves of compounds. “The guy was ridiculously organized.”

One shelf unit had five rows divided into three parts each, for a total of fifteen sections. Bottles of equal size and shape were arranged in perfect rows, each labeled in neat handwriting. The black ink spelled out the type of compound and its number. The compound labeled “#1” was on the left end of the top row, followed by “#2” and “#3” to its right. “#15” was on the right end of the bottom row, with “#16” starting the next shelf over. The grid-shaped shelves were filled to the point where nothing else could be placed on them, and there were around twenty of them in total. In other words, there were three hundred compounds in the room.

“Oh!” Fuyuki exclaimed, looking at the second row from the top. “Look at this, Kiyotaka.”

“#9 — C21 H22 N2 O2 strychnine [toxic]”

The word “toxic” was written in red. The bottle contained white crystalline pills and was only about half full.

“What do we have here?” Kiyotaka’s eyes lit up in interest. “Fuyuki, did you investigate these compounds two months ago?”

“Of course. We looked at everything on the shelves and paid extra attention to strong poisons. I’m sure that bottle had more pills in it at the time,” Fuyuki said excitedly.

“I see. Also, please look here.” Kiyotaka pointed at the bottom of the bottle.

As with the floor, the shelves were also caked in dust. Most of it was untouched, but the dust on the shelf with the strychnine had clearly been disturbed.

Fuyuki, Akihito, and Shoko gasped.

“There wasn’t this much dust two months ago, so it’s safe to say that this bottle was moved recently,” said Kiyotaka. “We can assume the culprit took strychnine from here and put it into Yuriko’s milk tea.”

He looked over the shelves again and stopped at the twelfth one. The second

row from the top had finger marks in the dust.

“#169 — HNO3 nitric acid [toxic]”

“Fuyuki, it seems like someone has touched this one. Does it ring any bells?”

“No.”

“Is that the poison that was in the pear?” Akihito asked excitedly.

“No, that was this one,” Kiyotaka said, shifting his attention to another bottle on the same shelf.

“#168 — mercury bichloride [toxic]”

“Oh, that...” Akihito murmured fearfully.

The bottle contained liquid, and just like the strychnine, there wasn’t much left. Further investigation revealed that there were several syringes inside the center table drawers.

Shoko covered her mouth in shock, her face pale.

“So the culprit got everything they needed here.” Fuyuki clicked his tongue. “That’s annoying.”

“But...” Akihito turned around. “How did they get in here in the first place? There’s only one key, and that oppressive old lady kept it on her at all times. There’s no sign of a duplicate being made, and you can’t get in through the window either!”

Everyone fell silent.

Kiyotaka looked around the room again. His eyes widened. “Ah. How could I have missed it? There’s a big entrance right here.”

“Huh?” Everyone turned to him.

He briskly walked up to the fireplace. “It’s this. Where there’s a fireplace, there must be a chimney. The culprit must’ve broken in through there.”

“Oh!” Fuyuki and Akihito’s faces lit up as they clenched their fists.

However, Shoko shook her head with an unhappy expression. “That isn’t possible.”

“Why?” asked Kiyotaka.

“The fireplaces in this house were used by my grandfather’s generation, but now, they’re all just for decoration. Each room uses a regular small stove instead. If the chimney was open, it’d get cold and drafty in the winter, so it’s been closed up for years. If someone wanted to open it back up, they’d have to call a professional, and the rest of us would definitely know if that happened.”

“I see.” Kiyotaka hung his head in disappointment. “That puts us back at square one.” It was rare for him to look so dejected.

“Cheer up,” said Akihito, patting the detective on the back. “We know now that the culprit somehow got in here and took the poison and syringe, so that’s progress.”

Seeing the student’s easygoing smile, Kiyotaka couldn’t help but smile too. “You’re right. Now, let’s get back on track. Shoko.”

“Y-Yes?” the woman replied.

“Would you please tell me about your late father, Yoshiharu?” Kiyotaka grinned.

Shoko stiffened and gave a nervous nod.

2

The group went to the drawing room to hear Shoko's story.

"My father—Yoshiharu Hanayashiki—was a kind man," she began. "He was gentle and caring, even to Yuriko, who he wasn't related to by blood. But mom always avoided looking at him. She made a point of ignoring him, yet if he said the slightest thing she didn't like, she'd yell at him and sometimes even hit him." Shoko trembled and hugged herself.

Kiyotaka listened in silence, the Hanayashiki family's photo album open on his lap. Yoshiharu had been a beautiful man in his younger days, with delicate features like a kabuki actor. There was also a photo of Hanako when she was young. As Ranko had said, she had born a close resemblance to Yuriko.

Akihito hummed in confusion. "Hanako wanted to marry Yoshiharu so badly that she even paid off his debts, right? Why would she treat him like that?"

"I don't really know," said Shoko. "But maybe she couldn't forget her previous husband."

"What makes you think that?" Kiyotaka asked, not missing a beat.

Shoko placed a hand on her cheek. "I think she might dote on Yuriko so much because she loved her previous husband."

Ranko had declared narcissism to be the reason for Hanako's unfettered love for Yuriko, but Shoko's theory made sense too.

"Do you know how your mother's previous marriage fell apart?" Kiyotaka asked.

Shoko nodded. "I know the gist of it. The rumors say her previous husband ran away because she was a tyrant, but that's not true. Yuriko fell ill when she was six and became the way she is now. My grandfather blamed it on her father's weak genes and kicked him out. My grandfather also didn't like how mom wasn't able to give birth to a son, and he blamed that on her previous husband as well."

"Whoa." Akihito grimaced. "I didn't know it was possible to be that selfish."

Kiyotaka coughed lightly, while Fuyuki glared at his brother for the rude remark.

“Indeed,” Shoko said with a strained chuckle. “People call mom a tyrant, but she couldn’t defy her father. He ordered her to find a new husband right away and give birth to a son, so she had no choice but to do it. However, with such a bad family reputation, she couldn’t find anyone willing to be her second husband. Her father had his secretary look for exemplary men who would have a reason to marry into the family, and out of the photos she was shown, she picked dad. It was probably because he was good-looking and meek enough to boss around.”

Kiyotaka nodded firmly. “So then Hanako gave birth to you, Ranko, and finally Kikuo, the son she’d been waiting for.”

“Yes. After giving birth to Kikuo, mom stopped sharing a bedroom with dad. As for my grandfather, I heard he cried with joy when Kikuo was born. He was looking forward to watching his grandson grow up more than anything else, but he passed away before Kikuo even started elementary school.”

Kiyotaka hummed and looked outside the door. “It seems that there used to be a large painting in the entrance hall, but it’s been removed, hasn’t it? Was it a portrait of your grandfather, Ichiro Hanayashiki?”

Shoko nodded. “When he passed away, mom immediately had it taken down and burned in the yard. Without hesitation.”

“That’s dark.” Akihito grimaced.

“Hanako despised her father, then.” said Kiyotaka.

“I assume so,” said Shoko. “He was the one who forced her to marry, divorce, and marry again.”

“When Ichiro passed away, Hanako became free. Did she not consider divorcing Yoshiharu? She married him unwillingly in the first place, didn’t she?”

“Well...” Shoko looked down. “Dad was very kind to Yuriko, so I don’t think she would’ve kicked out someone who was essentially harmless. If she divorced him, people would just gossip about her even more, so it was probably easier to stay in the loveless marriage.”

“Loveless marriage, you say...” Kiyotaka folded his arms. “Hanako made a loud fuss when her husband went missing, and when she learned he’d committed suicide, she locked his lab to prevent anyone from entering. Don’t you think there’s something strange about that?”

“Yes.” Shoko nodded again. “But mom’s actions have never really made sense.” She sounded like she was speaking from experience.

“Hey,” said Akihito, “what if Yoshiharu had a mistress?”

“Huh?” Kiyotaka looked at the student.

“Basically...” Akihito stood up. “He was planning on eloping with his mistress, but when the time came to actually do it, she was too scared of making an enemy of Hanako. She refused, saying, ‘I’m sorry, I can’t go with you. I’m afraid of that woman.’ So Yoshiharu, who’d bet everything on a new life with his mistress, fell into despair and decided to kill himself. Then Hanako, who learned about her husband’s betrayal by chance, flew into a rage. ‘I can’t believe you would betray me! I thought I had you wrapped around my finger!’ But at the same time, she had a change of heart. ‘I realized I loved you all along. Oh, Yoshiharu...’” Akihito gestured as he acted out the roles of Yoshiharu’s mistress and Hanako, even changing his tone of voice.

Kiyotaka looked at him, impressed. “Akihito, perhaps you really do have what it takes to become an actor.”

“Really?” The student’s eyes lit up.

“Yes, you were quite expressive.”

“Kiyotaka, could you stop saying such irresponsible things?” Fuyuki said, placing a hand on his forehead.

“It might actually be possible, though,” said Shoko. “Dad was a bit livelier right before he went missing.”

“How so?” asked Kiyotaka.

“Um...” Shoko desperately searched her memory. “Oh, right. He seemed cheerful, so I asked him if his research was going well. His reply was, ‘My research is going the same as usual, but I’ve found a new pleasure.’ I thought

he'd picked up a new hobby, but..."

"A new pleasure..." Kiyotaka muttered, furrowing his brow.

Suddenly, they heard the energetic cheers of children playing outside.

"All right, this way, Kikumasa!" shouted a young man holding a ball.

Kiyotaka looked out the window and squinted at the unfamiliar face. "Who is that man?" he asked.

"Oh," Shoko said with a smile. "That's Kikumasa's home tutor, Masaki Eda. It was hard to find someone who could teach that naughty boy, but dad found him for us, saying he knew someone good."

"Yoshiharu found him? How did they know each other?"

"Mr. Eda is a student at Kyoto University, but he's also an author. Dad said he was a fan of his books. Mr. Eda is good with children and really nice to Yuriko, so Kikuo, Masako, and mom all like him."

"Oh?" Kiyotaka's eyes lit up. "Could it be that your father became livelier after that tutor was brought in?"

Shoko thought for a moment before nodding. "Possibly."

"Whoa, how'd you know?" asked Akihito.

"A change of heart is often brought about by something different happening. That tutor may have triggered something for Yoshiharu. I'd love to know more about him."

"Shall I call him?" Shoko began to stand up.

"No." Kiyotaka held up a hand. "I want to know his background first. Akihito, please contact Komatsu and have him look into Masaki Eda."

"Gotcha. Shoko, I'm gonna borrow your phone, all right?" Akihito sped out of the drawing room.

Komatsu was a real detective. He was highly skilled in investigations, so when Kiyotaka needed something researched, he requested it from him.

"I'd like to get information on Eda before speaking with him," Kiyotaka said with a knowing smile.

3

Later, upon returning to the Yagashira residence, Kiyotaka sat down on the chair in the study and clasped his hands together, furrowing his brow.

Akihito sat on the sofa for guests, sipping tea. “This is good,” he said with a smile. “At the Hanayashiki estate, I was too scared to even drink water. I doubt they’d poison me, but like, what if it got in there by mistake, you know?”

Even in the face of that joke, Kiyotaka’s pose remained the same.

“Oh, you even look like Sherlock now, Holmes.” Akihito laughed in amusement.

Kiyotaka, who had been imitating Sherlock Holmes’s iconic pose, shrugged. “I thought I might figure something out if I followed the example of a legendary detective.” He sighed and leaned back in his chair.

“Hey, don’t say depressing stuff like that. Man, even *you’re* having a hard time with this case, huh?”

“Yes, everything is just so strange.”

“Strange?”

“It seems carefully planned, yet it also feels nothing short of careless. Is it consistent or inconsistent?” Kiyotaka turned his chair and looked up at the ceiling.

“What part of the case makes you think that?”

“All of it. The first incident with the poisoned milk tea, the second incident with the poison injected into the pear, and even what we saw in the lab. However, the most baffling part is the violin. Why did the culprit go to the trouble of using that as a weapon?” He placed a hand on his forehead.

Just as the study fell silent, there was a knock on the door. It was already open, and a middle-aged man with scruffy hair and a worn-out suit was standing there.

“It’s rare to see you so glum, kiddo,” the man said.

“Ah, Komatsu.” Kiyotaka took his hand off his forehead and smiled. The visitor

was the detective he had hired, Katsuya Komatsu.

“I got the intel you asked for,” Komatsu said, entering the study and placing a brown envelope on the desk.

“Thank you.” Kiyotaka quickly picked up the envelope and perused the contents.

“Oh, about that tutor?” Akihito stood up and walked over to the desk. He looked at the name on the file and frowned. “Huh? Masaki Saeki? You messed up, Komatsky. The home tutor’s name is Masaki *Eda*.”

“It’s fine,” Komatsu said, leaning against the desk and putting a cigarette in his mouth. He lit it with a match and blew a puff of smoke towards the ceiling.

“Smoking is prohibited in his room,” Kiyotaka said, displeased. He placed a small ceramic dish on the desk to serve as an ashtray.

“My bad.” Komatsu laughed and dropped the ashes in the dish. “The guy’s a novelist. Masaki Eda is a pen name. His real name’s Masaki Saeki.”

Kiyotaka hummed and nodded as he read the report. “It seems to be true that he’s a student at Kyoto University. He became an author because he admired Ryunosuke Akutagawa, and he won an honorable mention in a magazine’s novel awards. He has published short stories and whatnot...”

“Keep reading. There’s a shocking fact in there.” Komatsu looked sideways at Kiyotaka and grinned.

“Indeed. I thought the tutor Yoshiharu invited to his home would have something to do with the case, but I never would have suspected *this*.” Kiyotaka put the file down on the desk and took a white envelope out of the drawer. It contained the payment. “Thank you so much, Komatsu.”

“Anytime.” The detective put the envelope in his pocket and left, cigarette still in his mouth.

“Now then...” Kiyotaka stood up. “I’ll have to go back to the Hanayashiki estate and ask the tutor some questions.” He put on his Inverness coat and began to walk away.

“Oh, hey, wait up! I’ll go with you.” Akihito gulped down the rest of his tea

and hurriedly followed his friend.

Act 4: How the Husband Met the Young Man

1

When they returned to the Hanayashiki estate, Masaki Eda was playing tag with Kikumasa and Kikujiro in the large yard.

Eda tapped Kikumasa on the back and grinned mischievously. “All right, it’s over now. I win, so it’s time to do your homework.”

The boy clicked his tongue and pouted as he sat down on a chair in the gazebo. His mother, Masako, was watching from a distance with a smile.

Kiyotaka and Akihito approached the woman.

“Hello, Masako.” Kiyotaka bowed.

“Oh?” She turned around. “Hello there, Yagashira.”

Kiyotaka turned to the gazebo. “Mr. Eda seems to work well with Kikumasa.”

“Yes, he does.” Masako smiled happily. “He’s the first tutor that Kikumasa has ever opened up to.”

“He’s good with children, isn’t he?”

“Very. Kikumasa has an overabundance of energy, so instead of getting straight to work, Mr. Eda always plays with him first, to expend that energy through exercise. Today they played hide-and-seek and tag before starting the lesson. Oh, right.” Masako looked at Kiyotaka. “Shoko said you wanted to speak with Mr. Eda?”

“Yes.” Kiyotaka looked back at the woman. “I heard it was Yoshiharu who introduced him to you.”

“That’s right. My father-in-law was apparently a fan of his books, and he happened to meet him in front of the house one day.”

“In front of the house?”

“Well, it wasn’t completely by chance. Mr. Eda liked the design of the house and came to see it multiple times. My father-in-law saw him from his lab’s window and was afraid he might be a thief scoping out the place, so he went to check and it turned out to be an author he’d seen in a magazine.”

“I see. So how did he become Kikumasa’s tutor?”

“Mr. Eda is a student at Kyoto University and also does private tutoring. When my father-in-law found out, he brought it up. He knew I was struggling with Kikumasa,” Masako said with a shy smile.

“Were you and Yoshiharu close?”

“Yes, he and I were the outsiders of the family, so he showed concern for me.”

“I see. From what I heard, Yoshiharu didn’t belong in the family,” Kiyotaka said bluntly.

Masako gave a hesitant nod. “He slept in a different room than my mother-in-law, and she was constantly scolding him. He always bore with it, and when the stress became too much, he’d get rashes on his chest. I often saw him applying cream to his skin, complaining about the itch. I felt so sorry for him.” Her eyes were tinged with sorrow and pity.

“Come to think of it, Shoko said that before Yoshiharu went missing, he seemed cheerful and said he’d ‘found a new pleasure.’ Do you know anything about that?”

“Cheerful?” Masako furrowed her brow, trying to remember. After a while, she murmured, “Oh...he said he was going to ask Mr. Eda to teach him how to write a novel. Could it have been that?”

“A novel?” Kiyotaka’s eyes widened.

“Later on, I asked him how it was going, and he said it was ‘rather difficult.’”

“A novel...”

Seeing the detective’s mouth curve into a smile, Akihito’s eyes lit up. “Holmes, did you figure something out?”

“Not yet.” Kiyotaka brushed the student off and looked back at the woman.

“By the way, Masako, how did you meet Kikuo and decide to get married?”

Masako laughed self-deprecatingly. “It wasn’t a marriage of love, like what is becoming popular with young people these days. It was arranged. My family was once part of the nobility, though they’ve lost all their status now. My husband said he was attracted to my lineage, and at first, he was kind to me.” There was a faraway look in her eyes as she thought about her newlywed days.

“He seemed to be harsh on you. Has he ever hit you?”

Masako flinched. “When my husband hits me, it’s my own fault...” She lowered her gaze.

“Is that also the case when Hanako hits you?”

“No.” She looked up. “My mother-in-law is very strict, but she never raises her hand to me. She does it to my husband and children without mercy, though...”

Kiyotaka’s eyes widened for a second. “I see.” He folded his arms. “Even if she doesn’t hit you, it must be painful to watch her do it to your sweet children.”

Masako said nothing.

“And yet she’s so nice to Yuriko...” Kiyotaka mused.

Masako frowned. “Are you suspecting me?”

“No, not at all.” Kiyotaka smiled and waved his hand.

“Now that you mention it...” Akihito, who was standing behind Kiyotaka, frowned. Masako seemed tired and worn out from raising two mischievous sons and suffering from her husband’s and mother-in-law’s abuse, but she was still in her twenties—younger than Shoko and Ranko.

“I’ll go get Mr. Eda,” Masako said, heading for the gazebo as if running away.

“Masako has nice skin too, huh?” Akihito muttered to himself.

“Indeed.” Kiyotaka nodded.

“But you know,” Akihito said, folding his hands behind his head as usual, “I thought of something regarding the ‘soft and smooth skin’ problem.”

“Yes?” Kiyotaka turned to the student.

“Isn’t it possible that when Hanako spilled the talcum powder, it got on the culprit’s face?”

“Huh?” Kiyotaka furrowed his brow.

“A man can have soft and smooth skin too if he wears face powder, right?”

“Is that true?”

“Uh, have you never used it before?”

“No. Have you?”

“A lady-killer knows how to take care of his appearance,” Akihito said proudly.

Kiyotaka gave an exasperated shrug. “Well, I’m not a lady-killer. You do make a good point, though. Applying powder to skin would indeed make it smoother.”

“Oh no, now it sounds scandalous.” Akihito put his hands over his mouth.

Kiyotaka ignored him and lowered his gaze, deep in thought. “Then the culprit would have gotten talcum powder on his clothes too, not just his shoes...”

At that moment, he spotted the maid walking to the gazebo with a tray of tea and sweets.

“Excuse me,” Kiyotaka said, running up to her.

“Yes?” The maid stopped and bowed.

“Do you recall washing any clothes that were unnaturally dirty recently?”

If the culprit’s clothes had talcum powder on them, it was highly likely that they’d hidden the fact by dirtying them with something else.

The maid thought for a moment before shaking her head. “No, there hasn’t been anything unusual about the laundry.”

“Well, yeah, Holmes,” said Akihito. “The culprit dumped the shoes in the back forest. Wouldn’t they have also tossed their clothes somewhere instead of washing them?”

“That’s what I thought at first, but since the shoes have been found and the clothes haven’t, I had to consider the possibility.”

As they were talking, they saw Masaki Eda coming towards them from the gazebo.

“That tutor kind of looks like my younger brother, Haruhiko,” Akihito murmured.

“They do seem similar,” said Kiyotaka.

Masaki Eda gave off the soft, gentle impression of a nice young man. It matched everyone’s description of him.

“Hello,” he greeted them with a nervous bow. “I heard you wanted to speak with me. Is there some kind of problem?” His face was tense as if he was afraid he was under suspicion.

“Hello, Mr. Eda. I wanted to ask you about the late Yoshiharu.”

“Yoshiharu?” Eda asked, relieved.

“Yes.” Kiyotaka smiled and nodded.

2

Kiyotaka and Akihito decided to talk with Eda in the drawing room. Fuyuki was absent, investigating the yard with the other officers.

“It was a year ago,” Eda began. “I like elegant Western-style houses, so I came to look at the Hanayashiki estate several times. One day, Yoshiharu came outside and asked me, ‘Do you have business with us?’ He must’ve thought I was suspicious.” He smiled with nostalgia even though only a year had passed.

“Did Yoshiharu know you were an author?” Kiyotaka asked.

“Yes. We talked about my stories and became friends. When I told him I worked part-time as a tutor, he asked me to teach his grandson.”

“I see. By the way, was the purpose of your visits really to see the building itself?”

Eda frowned. “What do you mean by that?”

“There are many lovely women living here.”

His expression relaxed. “Oh. Well, I won’t say it *wasn’t* a factor...” He held his index finger in front of his mouth. “Please don’t tell anyone.”

“Oh?” Akihito’s eyes lit up. “Who are you after? Shoko? Ranko?”

“No...” Eda placed his hand on his head bashfully.

“Yuriko, right?” said Kiyotaka.

Eda froze.

“You weren’t looking at the building. You were watching Yuriko sunbathe in the garden, weren’t you?”

“Ohhh.” Akihito nodded firmly. “She does go outside, yeah. And she’s really pretty.”

“Oh, um, Yuriko is indeed beautiful, but I don’t feel *that* way about her...” Eda muttered.

“I know you don’t,” said Kiyotaka. “She’s your sister, after all.” He grinned.

“Huh? Where did that come from?” Eda asked, his face tense.

“I’m sorry, but I determined it was necessary to have your background investigated in order to get to the bottom of this case. Mr. Eda—no, Masaki Saeki. Your father was Masataka Saeki, Hanako’s previous husband. In other words, you’re Yuriko’s half-brother.”

Eda’s eyes widened in shock. After a moment of silence, he gulped. Seeing the all-knowing aura Kiyotaka was radiating, he sighed and said, “No wonder they call you a great detective.”

“Well, it was another detective who investigated you,” Akihito muttered.

Kiyotaka ignored the student and continued, “Mr. Eda, I wanted to ask you: did Yoshiharu know your real identity when he let you into this house?”

“Yes.” Eda nodded. “After my dad was kicked out of the Hanayashiki family, he left Kyoto and moved to Shikoku. There, he met my mom and had me. I was never told directly about my dad’s past, but I heard rumors. When I asked him about them, he told me the truth and that I had a half-sister.” He took a breath before continuing. “I was an only child, so I was really just curious about what

my sister was like. I'd heard that Yuriko was blind and deaf, and since she lived in a rich family's house, I was worried they might be treating her badly."

He really is a kind person, Kiyotaka and Akihito thought, impressed.

"Before I knew it, I found myself wanting to live in Kyoto, so I aimed for Kyoto University and was able to get in. I started going to the estate just to be able to see my sister from afar. Yuriko was as pure and beautiful as a lily, the flower in her name. She had a soft aura and was always smiling gently. I thought she was like an angel. Even though she was my sister, my feelings for her were similar to love. Unable to hold back those thoughts, I picked up the pen and wrote a novel."

"And you won an award with it?"

"Yes, but my feelings for Yuriko didn't go away. I kept coming back to their house..."

"And Yoshiharu spotted you while you were doing that."

"Right. When he questioned me, I told him the whole truth. I assumed he'd turn me away and then I'd be able to give up for real."

"However, he accepted you."

Eda nodded.

"So that's what happened," Kiyotaka said in a gentle tone. Then he looked up. "By the way, I heard you taught Yoshiharu how to write a novel."

Eda placed a hand on his chest, seeming relieved by the change of subject. "Yes, I did. I wasn't much help, though."

"Huh?" Akihito blinked. "Why?"

"The genre he wanted to write was different from my novels, so I couldn't give him good advice."

"The genre?" Akihito tilted his head.

"I look up to Ryunosuke Akutagawa, so the stories I write are what's called 'pure literature.' Yoshiharu wanted to write a mystery novel in the vein of Ranpo Edogawa."

“A mystery novel...” Kiyotaka stroked his chin.

“Yes. Yoshiharu said, ‘I thought of a really good idea, so please teach me how to write it well.’ But I didn’t write those kinds of stories, and I was a new author to begin with. I wasn’t confident that I could teach him, so I referred him to an editor I knew at a publishing company. The editor was happy to work with him because a book written by the head of the Hanayashiki family was bound to get attention.”

“But in the end, he didn’t finish writing it.”

Eda shook his head. “He said he finished.”

“Oh? Was it too difficult to get it published, then?”

“Well, it seems that he never actually submitted it to the editor.”

“Why not?”

“I don’t know.” Eda tilted his head. “Yoshiharu was a perfectionist, so I assumed he wasn’t satisfied with what he wrote. Also, since it was going to be his debut work, he would’ve been more attached to it. When that happens, it makes you worry about what you’ll do if it gets rejected.”

Kiyotaka hummed. “I see. I’ve never written a novel, so I wouldn’t understand.”

“That’s just how it is.” Eda chuckled.

“Did Yoshiharu commit suicide shortly after he finished writing the book?”

“Yes. Actually, my dad in Shikoku passed away right before that, so I went back home for a while. Yoshiharu even went to the trouble of calling me at my family’s house to express his condolences. I found out later that he’d called me from an inn in Kobe right before committing suicide.”

“I see...” Kiyotaka had a sympathetic look on his face. “How did you feel when you found out your dear Yuriko was being targeted in these incidents?”

“Angry, of course. But...” Eda’s expression clouded over.

“Do you have any thoughts on the matter?”

“I wonder if the culprit really intended to kill Yuriko.”

“Why?” Kiyotaka asked eagerly.

“I’m not that familiar with poisons, but I assume they aren’t tasteless and odorless. Since Yuriko can’t see or hear, her other senses are very keen to make up for it. If there was poison in her milk tea, I think she’d smell it and choose not to drink it. As for the pear, I’m sure she’d realize it was rotten upon touching it and choose not to eat it.”

Kiyotaka’s eyes widened. “You’re quite right,” he murmured in his Kyoto accent, which came out when his emotions were running high. His face turned pale and he placed a hand over his mouth in shock. “I understand now. It was all camouflage.”

“What do you mean, Holmes?”

“These incidents were made to look like the target was Yuriko when it was actually Hanako.”

The culprit’s true objective was to kill Hanako. The poisoned pear had been nothing more than a guise.

Kiyotaka clicked his tongue. “How could I have been so foolish?” he spat, holding his head.

“There, there,” Akihito said with a strained look on his face. “Don’t be so hard on yourself, Holmes. Only someone who knew Yuriko well would’ve realized that.”

“Yes,” said Eda.

Kiyotaka remained glum, their encouragement not reaching him. “The culprit definitely knows this house very well. What I still don’t understand is how it sometimes looks like a meticulous, well thought-out plan, but sometimes it doesn’t. Is it all part of the scheme? I just can’t tell.”

Everyone fell silent.

“Huh?” Akihito frowned. “Hey, do you guys smell something weird?” He sniffed the air.

“Hm? It does smell like something is burning.”

Suddenly, they heard Kikuo’s voice echo through the hallway. “It’s an

emergency! The lab's on fire!"

Kiyotaka stood up and opened the drawing room door. White smoke was coming from upstairs. Akihito and Eda also got up and ran out of the room. They saw Kikuo, Shoko, and Ranko screaming and running down from the second floor. Meanwhile, the cook, maid, and gardeners ran past them, heading upstairs with a fire extinguisher and hose.

"There are chemicals in the lab that could explode!" Kiyotaka shouted. "Please evacuate! And call the fire department!"

Unfortunately, everyone was so focused on putting out the fire that they didn't seem to hear him.

"The lab..." Eda's face went pale. "Oh no! Yuriko!" He ran up to her room without hesitation, but after a moment, he came back downstairs, likely realizing that the woman wasn't there. "Oh, right. She would be in the dining room at this time."

It was three in the afternoon, so Yuriko was having tea in the first-floor dining room. She seemed to be bewildered by the smell of smoke.

"Oh, thank goodness you're safe, Yuriko," Eda said. "Let's go outside." He lifted her in his arms and left the mansion.

Masako was panicking in the entrance hall. "What do we do?"

"Masako! Call the fire department!"

"O-Okay!"

The silver lining was that the police were already in the yard. Fuyuki had been the first to notice the suspicious smoke coming from a second-floor window. He had immediately contacted the fire department, so it didn't take long for a fire truck to arrive, blaring its sirens.

The firefighters worked efficiently, putting out the fire in about thirty minutes. The chemicals didn't explode, and no one was hurt.

3

Some time later, Kiyotaka and Akihito went with Fuyuki to the lab. The room was flooded with water. From the look of it, the fire had started from the curtains, which had burned to cinders.

It was a terrible sight. The window was broken, there was glass all over the floor, and the wall was charred black. But since the shelves were away from the window, the chemicals were untouched. Almost all of them were gone now, though. The firefighters had quickly removed them during their work because they were too dangerous.

Fuyuki sighed. “Now we won’t know if another poison was stolen or not.”

“This had to have been arson, right?” Akihito asked. “Did the culprit do it so they could steal more poison?” He looked at the nearly empty shelves, then turned to Kiyotaka.

“I’m not sure about that,” said Kiyotaka. “They’ve already stolen poison on multiple occasions, so they wouldn’t need to start a fire for that.” He frowned, puzzled.

“Was it to destroy evidence, then?” asked Fuyuki.

“Well, that’s the likely reason. What was in this room?” Kiyotaka muttered. “Hm?”

He squinted at the shelves. The topmost one had a tube of ointment still on it. It was right above the shelf where the finger marks had been, and upon closer inspection, it was a dermatitis treatment. He had seen it there the other day as well, but since it wasn’t poison, he hadn’t paid attention to it.

“Come to think of it, Masako said that Yoshiharu got rashes when he was stressed,” Kiyotaka said, picking up the tube with his gloved hands and opening it. It gave off a light, sweet fragrance. “So it was this...”

“Huh? What is it?” Akihito craned his neck and brought his nose to the ointment. “It smells like vanilla...right?”

“Yes. This is the rash medication Yoshiharu used.”

“What does this mean?” Akihito held his head in his hands.

Fuyuki laughed dryly. “If Yoshiharu were alive, he’d definitely be the prime suspect.”

“I agree.” Kiyotaka nodded.

A frightened woman’s voice came from the door. “It was father...” The three men turned and saw a pale-faced Shoko. “Father was the culprit...”

“But Shoko, your father is...” Fuyuki said, bewildered.

“Yes, he’s already dead. The crimes were committed by his ghost. He was kind to Yuriko, but he actually hated her—and mom. This is father’s revenge! Ahhh!” She crouched down.

“Shoko!” Fuyuki quickly ran to her and lent her his shoulder. “Let’s get some rest downstairs. You must be tired.” He took her to the first floor.

After watching them leave, Akihito turned to face Kiyotaka. “Holmes, should we go downstairs too?”

“No, I want to investigate this room some more.”

“I’ll join you, then. I still wonder how the culprit got in here.” The lab key had been given to Fuyuki for safekeeping. “Did they steal the key when Fuyuki wasn’t looking?”

“Didn’t you see him unlocking the door when we came here?”

“Oh, right.”

Kiyotaka pondered the situation as he surveyed the room. His eyes happened to land on the fireplace. “Oh!”

“Oh?” Akihito turned to him.

“How could I have missed this? As with earlier, I don’t deserve to call myself a detective anymore. Akihito, could you stop calling me ‘Holmes,’ even as a joke? It’s disrespectful to the man himself.”

“Huh? What’s gotten into you?”

“I finally figured out the entrance, but it’s too late.” Kiyotaka stooped in front of the hearth.

Akihito squinted. “The fireplace? But it’s impossible to get in through there, right? Shoko said the chimney was sealed. Oh! Holmes, I figured it out too.”

“Did you?”

“Shoko’s the culprit, right?”

“What makes you think that?”

“The chimney. She said it was sealed, but we didn’t actually check to see if it was. It must be possible to go through it.”

“Are you saying that Shoko, with her slim build, climbed onto the roof and snuck into the lab through the chimney? The police have been searching the yard. Wouldn’t she be too conspicuous if she did that?”

“Maybe she snuggled up to Fuyuki and stole the key without him noticing? And then she secretly put it back. You can’t trust a woman who’s smart, beautiful, *and* seems like a good person, can you?” Akihito’s eyes sparkled.

Kiyotaka smirked. “The possibility of Shoko lying was a good point, but the rest was weak. Also, I did ask the police to check whether the chimney was truly blocked or not.”

“Oh, I see.” Akihito slumped his shoulders, disappointed. “What was the entrance, then?”

“The fireplace, but not via the chimney. It’s common for multiple fireplaces in a house to share a chimney. This house only has one chimney, and there was a fireplace in the room right next door as well, wasn’t there? Which means...”

Kiyotaka entered the fireplace. There was a steel plate inside, which, when removed, revealed a small diagonal space with another steel plate on the other side. Removing *that* plate revealed...

“Whoa, you can see the other room!” Akihito exclaimed.

“Yes, the culprit passed through the fireplaces to enter this room.” He fell silent upon seeing something in the narrow space between the plates and reached for it.

“Is there something there?” Akihito asked.

“An envelope...” Kiyotaka exited the fireplace with a brown envelope in hand and brushed the soot and dust off of himself.

Akihito walked up to him. “Is that what the culprit was trying to burn?”

“I doubt it. They wouldn’t need to burn the whole room just to destroy these papers. Even if they wanted to do that, they would’ve put them near the curtains instead of hiding them between the steel plates.”

He opened the envelope. It contained manuscript paper. The first page read:

Detective Novel Outline

Title (tentative): The Tragedy of the Grand Family
Author: Yoshiharu Hanayashiki (tentative)
Time period: Present day
Setting: Kyoto is fine, but it doesn’t need to be specified.
Format: First-person

The two men gasped and looked at each other.

“Is this the novel Yoshiharu wrote?” Akihito asked.

“No, it’s not the complete story. As it says, it appears to be an outline of it.”

Kiyotaka turned to the second page. Yoshiharu Hanayashiki’s outline continued as follows.

*

■ Characters (names will be slightly modified later on)

Hanayashiki Family:

Yoshiharu (me): Culprit, the victim’s husband.
Hanako (wife): Tyrant, victim.
Yuriko (stepdaughter): Culprit’s stepdaughter, blind and deaf.
Kikuo (eldest son): The order the siblings were born in has been changed from reality.
Shoko (eldest daughter): Her excellence as a person psychologically makes her

seem like a suspect.
Ranko (second daughter): Makes the setting livelier.
Masako (Kikuo's wife): Kind woman, psychological suspect #2 (grandchildren will not be making an appearance).

Other Characters:

Masaki Eda (home tutor): Nice young man, in love with Yuriko.
Maid, cook, gardener, *etc.*

■ Overall Flow of Events

First Crime (details to follow)

Poison (strychnine) is mixed into Yuriko's tea.
*State beforehand that Yuriko's daily routine involves having tea and sweets at three in the afternoon.

However, the murder attempt fails. Yuriko does not die.

To make it clear that the tea was poisoned, depict a pet dog or some other animal licking it and dying.

Second Crime

A poisoned pear is placed in Hanako and Yuriko's room.

The poison was injected using a syringe containing mercury bichloride.
*However, this is to hide the true crime. Yuriko would not eat spoiled food.

■ The True Crime

Kill Hanako by sneaking into her room and hitting her with a blunt instrument.

The culprit wears Kikuo's canvas shoes during the act. Mercury bichloride is applied to the shoes, placing suspicion on Kikuo.

During this time, write about how oppressive and cruel the Hanayashiki family

is—especially Hanako.

■ **The Culprit**

Holds a deep grudge against Hanako Hanayashiki, who has abused him for many years. This is a revenge tragedy.

It would be unnatural if the attempts on Yuriko's life suddenly ceased after Hanako's murder, so he poisons her again. (Undecided whether it will succeed or not. I have no personal grudge against Yuriko, so a failed attempt is fine.)

■ **What the Culprit Needs to Watch Out For**

Always wear gloves, make sure not to leave fingerprints.

Be a good-natured person who doesn't lose composure when the topic of crimes comes up.

■ **Clues Left by the Culprit**

When killing Hanako, Yuriko smells his scent (the vanilla ointment used for dermatitis). This becomes a clue that pinpoints me as the culprit.

*Detective role needed. Perhaps Masaki Eda would be best?

■ **Details of the Crime...**

*

The second half of the outline listed the steps involved in carrying out the crime.

"Oh," said Akihito, crossing his arms. "The culprit used this outline as a reference."

"It seems so. And I see...*that's* what happened..." Kiyotaka's fingers trembled slightly as he held the manuscript.

"Holmes?" Akihito looked at his friend and was taken aback by the twisted smile on his face.

“I understand now.”

“You know who did it?”

“Yes.” Kiyotaka had a confident look in his eyes.

“Based on this outline?”

“Yes, all of the mysteries have been solved.”

“I don’t get it.” Akihito stared wide-eyed at the manuscript. “According to this story outline, Yoshiharu himself is the culprit, isn’t he?”

“I’ll explain in detail later. First, I want to know more about Yoshiharu. I’ll have to speak with the editor he was working with.” Kiyotaka left the lab with brisk steps.

“Hey, wait for me!” Akihito hurried after him.

It was time for the final act to unfold.

Act 5: It All Becomes Clear

1

It was the day after the fire, at 3 p.m. Kiyotaka had called the Hanayashiki family to the first-floor dining room, saying he had figured something out.

Despite the gathering, Yuriko’s milk tea had still been prepared at 2:50 p.m. as usual. The maid had brewed it before everyone’s arrival and placed it at Yuriko’s seat. Then she had immediately returned to the kitchen to prepare milk tea and sweets for everyone else.

Once the dining room was clear, a certain individual snuck in, added a liquid to Yuriko’s milk tea without hesitation, and left with a nonchalant look on their face.

This was what Kiyotaka had feared the most.

Five minutes later, the Hanayashiki family assembled in the dining room. Shoko, Ranko, Kikuo, Masako, Kikumasa, Yuriko, and Masaki Eda arrived to find

milk tea and baked sweets ready for them on the table. The young Kikujiro was absent, taking a nap.

Everyone sat down right away. They were in their usual seats. Kiyotaka stood at one of the short ends of the table, looking at them. Fuyuki, Akihito, and the household workers stood by the wall and watched.

Kikuo hesitantly looked up at Kiyotaka. “What did you find out?”

“Do you know who the culprit is?” Ranko asked excitedly.

Shoko said nothing, her face tense. Masako and Eda looked nervous as well.

Yuriko had been informed via the board and blocks that something important was to be discussed here. However, she had realized that she wouldn’t be able to learn anything at this point in time and was leisurely drinking her milk tea.

Kikumasa was also more interested in the food than the talk, which had nothing to do with him. He was drinking his milk tea and stuffing his face with cookies.

“Yes, I’ve determined the culprit,” Kiyotaka declared, looking over the table.

Everyone gulped.

“First, I’d like to go over the case. Two months ago, the head of this family, Yoshiharu Hanayashiki, was found dead at the Port of Osaka.”

Shoko’s eyes darted around in terror. “Could it be that the body was someone else and father was still alive?”

Kikuo’s and Ranko’s eyes widened.

“Dad was the culprit?!”

“Is he hiding somewhere in this house?”

Everyone looked around, wondering if Yoshiharu would appear from somewhere.

Kiyotaka cleared his throat, prompting them to quiet down and focus on him. “The drowned body was indeed Yoshiharu. He is dead.”

It was hard to tell whether the looks on their faces were of relief or disappointment.

“However, it is not entirely incorrect to say that Yoshiharu was the culprit.””

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Kikuo frowned.

“Before explaining that, let me go back to what I was saying. After Yoshiharu disappeared, Hanako locked up his lab to prevent anyone from going inside. There was only one key, and she kept it on her belt at all times. Therefore, no one could enter the lab. It was only opened after Yoshiharu’s body was found, when the police inspected the room. After that, it went back to being closed. Am I correct?”

Everyone nodded silently.

“Two months later, Yuriko’s milk tea was poisoned here in this dining room using strychnine pills. The act was discovered when Kikumasa took a sip of it.”

The boy nodded as he listened. He grimaced at the painful memory.

“The second incident was a week later. The culprit put on Kikuo’s canvas shoes and snuck into Hanako and Yuriko’s room with a syringe that he used to inject poison into a pear. Then, Hanako came out from her morning bath and ran into them. The culprit struck her on the head with a violin. The force made the talcum powder she was holding scatter all over the floor, and it got on the culprit’s shoes as well. Additionally, the violin used was taken from the first-floor drawing room.”

Kiyotaka took a deep breath before continuing.

“Yuriko was asleep at the time, but she woke up upon sensing movement in the room. She touched the culprit’s face, and according to her testimony, the skin of their cheek was ‘very soft and smooth.’ She also said they gave off the scent of vanilla.”

Shoko and Ranko nodded, remembering the conversation.

“The silver lining is that Hanako survived. She hasn’t regained consciousness yet, but the doctor says she’s on the road to recovery.”

Shoko and Ranko looked happy to hear that, but the others gave strained smiles. They probably thought the family was more peaceful without the bossy woman around.

“Since Hanako was taken to the hospital, we were able to obtain the key to the lab and investigate. We found that both the strychnine mixed into the milk tea and the mercury bichloride injected into the pear were stolen from there.”

Everyone frowned in silence. The culprit had worn men’s shoes, had soft skin, smelled like vanilla, *and* had somehow entered the lab?

As if to address their unspoken questions, Kiyotaka said, “The infiltration method was surprisingly easy. I even criticized myself for not figuring it out sooner.”

“What do you mean?” Kikuo asked impatiently. “How did they get in?”

Shoko and Ranko also looked confused.

“It really was simple,” Kiyotaka said. “The fireplace in Hanako’s room was connected to the one in the lab, with two steel plates separating them. The culprit passed through the tunnel between them.”

The revelation left everyone exchanging looks.

“Now then, everyone. Are you aware that Yoshiharu was penning a novel?”

Only Eda and Masako nodded.

“Yoshiharu was writing a mystery story modeled after this family. I found the outline of it between the two fireplaces. Shockingly, the culprit had been following exactly what was written in it.”

Kiyotaka took the manuscript out of the brown envelope on the table. Everyone’s eyes widened in disbelief.

“When I saw this, I knew who the culprit was. The outline says...”

“It would be unnatural if the attempts on Yuriko’s life suddenly ceased after Hanako’s murder, so he poisons her again. (Undecided whether it will succeed or not. I have no personal grudge against Yuriko, so a failed attempt is fine.)”

“I realized if the culprit were beyond saving, they would poison Yuriko’s milk tea. If they were to do it, it would most likely be today, because it would be most dramatic if Yuriko died while everyone was gathered here. Yuriko’s milk tea was prepared a little before 3 p.m. as usual, so right before you all arrived, I switched her tea with the culprit’s.”

“Huh?” Everyone’s eyes widened as they looked down at their teacups.

“Don’t worry. Everyone else has ordinary milk tea. The culprit should be noticing a change in themselves right about now. Their head will start to feel fuzzy. The poison they used doesn’t cause pain. It slowly goes around the body, and the person will simply faint and die. However, there is a way to save them. We have the antidote right here.” Kiyotaka turned to Fuyuki, who took a small bottle out of his inner pocket. “If they drink it right now, they will be saved.”

Everyone looked bewildered, except for one person who was pale and trembling. Kiyotaka pretended not to look at them, but he had been observing them from the start to see their expression suddenly lose all confidence. They had been convinced no one would ever suspect them, after all.

Eda noticed the change and turned to the person in question, confused. “Kikumasa, what’s wrong? You’re shaking.”

Those words prompted the boy to spring out of his chair and grab Fuyuki’s arm. “Hurry, give me the cure!”

Everyone was taken aback, except for Kiyotaka, who softly lowered his gaze, and Fuyuki, who scowled.

“What a terrifying kid!” Fuyuki yelled. “You tried to kill your own grandmother and even Yuriko, who didn’t need to die in the story!”

“The old hag and Aunt Yuriko are burdens to this family! That’s why I did it! It was the right thing to do!”

“You’re hopeless! You should die from your own poison!” Fuyuki opened the bottle and dumped the liquid onto the floor.

“Ahhhhh!” Kikumasa wailed, crawling on the floor to lick the spilled liquid.

His father, Kikuo, was dumbfounded, while his mother, Masako, was hugging him, crying and apologizing.

“It’s all my fault!” Masako cried out. “He did this because I’m always complaining to the kids about my mother-in-law!”

“I’m at fault too, then!” Kikuo insisted, joining his wife at Kikumasa’s side. “This happened because I said in front of him that I wished Yuriko didn’t exist.

Please, there must be more of the antidote, right? I'm begging you, save my son!"

"Mom, dad, my head feels fuzzy. Am I going to die?"

"Kikumasa! Kikumasa!"

"No, I don't wanna die..."

"Kikumasa, apologize for what you did!"

"I'm sorry! I'm sorry!"

"Your apologies don't mean anything when you're just begging for your life!" Fuyuki shouted.

Akihito couldn't bear to watch. "Hey, Fuyuki, hurry up and—"

Kiyotaka grabbed the student's hand, stopping him from intervening.

Tears and snot ran down Kikumasa's face. "I-I thought mom and dad would be happy if grandma and Aunt Yuriko died. I thought they'd stop fighting."

"Oh, Kikumasa!"

"We're sorry, Kikumasa."

"Mom, dad...sorry, I think...I'm about to die."

The boy collapsed to the floor, his eyes closed.

"Kikumasaaa!" Kikuo and Masako screamed.

"Th-That was too cruel, Fuyuki," said Eda.

"Isn't this murder?" asked Ranko.

"Yes," said Shoko. "How can you call yourself a police officer?!"

Fuyuki's face was as pale as a ghost.

Kiyotaka clapped his hands together, drawing everyone's attention. "Don't worry. Kikumasa's drink was only spiked with a sleeping pill. He'll wake up in a few hours."

"Huh?" Everyone looked at the boy lying on the floor. His cheeks were streaked with tears, and he was still breathing.

“A sleeping pill?” Fuyuki sounded confused as well.

“I confiscated Yuriko’s cup and put a sleeping pill in Kikumasa’s. The bottle Fuyuki was holding simply contained milk, not an antidote. Spilling it on the floor instead of giving it to Kikumasa was his way of punishing the child. Am I right?” Kiyotaka looked at the officer.

“Y-Yeah.” Fuyuki nodded awkwardly.

“Now then, I’d like to review the case again. Please have a seat, everyone.”

The family members nodded and sat in their chairs. Masako and Kikuo sat on the sofa at the end of the room, holding Kikumasa.

“Kikumasa likely happened across the fireplace entry to the lab by coincidence. Perhaps he discovered it while playing hide-and-seek. There, he found the outline written by Yoshiharu. His motive for carrying out the plan is probably what he admitted just now. He may not have felt much guilt because his grandmother was a tyrant everyone hated, his aunt was a burden, and the murder plan was written by his grandfather.” Kiyotaka paused before continuing. “The first crime was described in Yoshiharu’s outline like so.” He showed everyone the page.

First Crime (details to follow)

Poison (strychnine) is mixed into Yuriko’s tea.
**State beforehand that Yuriko’s daily routine involves having tea and sweets at three in the afternoon.*

However, the murder attempt fails. Yuriko does not die.

To make it clear that the tea was poisoned, depict a pet dog or some other animal licking it and dying.

“It says that although the milk tea is poisoned, Yuriko does not die, and a pet dog is supposed to lick it, but this house doesn’t have any. However, Kikumasa wanted to follow the outline as closely as possible, so he took the reckless action of sipping the tea himself. He did it because he’s a child who doesn’t understand how dangerous strychnine is. The rat in his pocket was probably supposed to be a standin for the dog. It died after drinking the spilt milk tea, just as he’d hoped.”

Everyone listened to Kiyotaka's explanation in silence.

"The second crime was where a child's carelessness came into play."

"Carelessness?" asked Akihito, who was standing by the wall. The others seemed confused as well.

"For example, Akihito, let's say you want to sneak a poisoned pear into someone's bedroom. You have poison and a syringe on hand. You can also easily obtain a pear. What do you do?"

"Huh? I don't get the question."

"Would you bring the syringe to the bedroom?"

"Oh, no." Akihito shook his head. "I wouldn't do something that risky. I'd inject the poison into a pear of my own somewhere safe, then sneak into the room and switch the pear there with the poisoned one."

"Exactly." Kiyotaka nodded. "Yoshiharu's outline didn't say where the poison was injected, so Kikumasa brought the syringe with him to the bedroom. The vanilla-scented ointment was a clue in identifying the culprit at the climax of the story, so he didn't have to use it. Still, he faithfully recreated the situation. His small stature made it difficult for him to reach the ointment on the top shelf, hence the finger marks on the shelf below it."

Akihito's eyes widened. "So that's what those marks were from."

"Also, Yuriko touched Kikumasa's face at that time. It wasn't part of the outline, so it must've been unplanned."

"Oh!" Ranko put her hand over her mouth. "Kikumasa has soft and smooth skin too."

"Yes, that's right. Furthermore, Yuriko had been standing with her arm stretched forward and down when she touched the intruder's cheek. When we learned that, Akihito asked, 'Why would the culprit's face be there?' That question is what convinced me. Kikumasa is about a hundred and forty centimeters tall, which is shorter than Yuriko. The culprit's face was that low because he was a child."

"Oh, so that's why," said Akihito. "I was on the right track, huh?" He clenched

his fist.

“His clothes likely got covered in powder as well. It’s possible that he soiled them with mud afterwards to cover it up. There’s nothing unusual about Kikumasa getting his clothes dirty, so the maid wouldn’t have questioned it. Also, since he was wearing his father’s large shoes, the footprints were deepest at the toes, giving the impression that the heels were worn out.”

Kiyotaka paused before continuing.

“What confused me the most about this case was why a violin was used as the weapon. I did quite a bit of research, trying to determine if it had some special meaning only the Hanayashiki family would know, but the answer was again surprisingly simple. Right here, it says...” He looked down at the outline.

■ ***The True Crime***

Kill Hanako by sneaking into her room and hitting her with a blunt instrument.

No one seemed to know what Kiyotaka was hinting at.

“Kill Hanako by hitting her with a blunt instrument. There’s quite a lot of emotion here. Now then, I’m sure none of you see anything wrong with this sentence. However, the young Kikumasa, who doesn’t like to study, wouldn’t know what a ‘blunt instrument’ was. He couldn’t ask anyone either, or else he’d be suspected. After thinking about it, he interpreted it in a way an adult never would and executed the murder plan.” Kiyotaka gave a strained smile.

“Oh!” Akihito clapped his hands together. “He thought a ‘blunt instrument’ was a ‘musical instrument.’”

“Correct. Kikumasa identified the violin in the drawing room as a musical instrument he could easily pick up that would also work as a weapon. That was why he did something as reckless and absurd as sneaking into the bedroom with a syringe and violin.”

Everyone placed their hands on their foreheads, unable to say anything.

“Since Yoshiharu’s outline was carried out by a child, the plan seemed meticulous and careless at the same time. It threw me for quite a loop. The dust in the lab was similarly confusing. It was clearly trampled with the intent of

hiding footprints, but the area around the door was untouched, as if the culprit was *telling* us they hadn't entered through the door. I couldn't tell if it was on purpose or not. However, if a child was following a plan written by an adult, that would explain everything."

"What about the fire, then?" asked Kikuo, who had been silent until now.

"That was also in the outline. In the story, the culprit sets fire to his own lab to avoid being suspected."

"But..." Akihito crossed his arms. "Little Kikumasa was studying in the gazebo when the fire started, wasn't he?"

Masako shook her head. "The moment Mr. Eda went to the drawing room, Kikumasa grew impatient and ran off somewhere." She picked up her sleeping son and left the dining room. The discussion must have been painful for her to listen to.

2

"Now then, I'd like to spend the rest of this time getting to the truth about Yoshiharu," Kiyotaka said.

The Hanayashikis slowly looked up. "About father?"

"Yes. Why did he write such a novel? He was introduced to an editor by Mr. Eda and was planning to have it published."

Everyone had been so caught up in figuring out who the culprit was that they had forgotten about that side of the case. Why had Yoshiharu wanted to write a story like this in the first place? And why had he ended his life instead of publishing it?

"Are you all aware of Mr. Eda's history?" Kiyotaka asked.

"I told everyone last night," Eda said nervously, "that I'm the son of Hanako's ex-husband."

The Hanayashikis nodded awkwardly.

"That speeds things up," Kiyotaka said, relieved. "The goal of the novel was

perhaps revenge."

"Revenge?" Everyone frowned.

"Yes. My hypothesis is that in his later years, Yoshiharu devised a revenge plan where he would publish a mystery novel that acted as an exposé on the Hanayashiki family. I don't know whether he would've come up with the idea before or after meeting Mr. Eda, but I'm sure Mr. Eda was a major source of inspiration."

Eda shrank back, feeling guilty. No one said anything. They simply awaited Kiyotaka's next words.

Kiyotaka showed them the story outline again. "And so, Yoshiharu put together this outline and wrote the novel. He also made preparations to run away from home. The plan would've been to publish the book and debut as an author after leaving home. A partially non-fiction exposé mystery novel written by the tragic head of the infamous Hanayashiki family was bound to become a hot topic. That was how he would get his revenge against his wife, who he must've developed a great hatred for."

Everyone lowered their gazes as if thinking it was only natural to hate Hanako.

"After Yoshiharu's class reunion, he headed straight to Kobe. The way I imagine it, he would've had the completed manuscript with him. He called Mr. Eda, who was visiting his family in Shikoku, from the inn. Is that correct, Mr. Eda?"

"Yes." The author nodded.

"What did you talk about?"

"My dad had passed away, so he said, 'I'm sorry for your loss. May his soul rest in peace.' Then we made some small talk..."

"Was that when you heard that he'd finished his manuscript?"

"Yes." Eda nodded.

"What did you say?"

"I said something along the lines of, 'I'm looking forward to reading it.' Then, after some thought, I decided to tell him my dad's dying words."

“What were they?”

Eda hesitated for a second. “My dad said to me, ‘Hanako Hanayashiki was already pregnant when she married me. Yuriko isn’t my child. Therefore, you and Yuriko aren’t blood-related.”

Everyone’s eyes widened.

“What’s the meaning of this, Mr. Eda?” Ranko asked.

“Who *is* Yuriko’s father, then?” Kikuo asked.

Kiyotaka turned to Eda and asked calmly, “Did your father know Yuriko’s father?”

“No, but he said that Hanako’s father—Ichiro Hanayashiki—threatened him, saying, ‘Don’t tell anyone that Hanako got pregnant before marriage. If you do, I’ll kill you.’ Then my dad got paid a lot of money to marry into the family. However, they never once consummated their marriage, so obviously, Hanako couldn’t have children with him. Apparently, that’s why he got kicked out.”

“Did you tell Yoshiharu that?”

Eda nodded. “He was shocked and at a loss for words. But after a little while, he said, ‘Thank you for telling me.’ Then he asked me when I’d be able to return to the Hanayashiki estate.”

“What did you say?”

“Knowing I wasn’t related to Yuriko by blood made it even harder to suppress my feelings for her. So I said, ‘I don’t plan on going there anymore.’ Then he said, ‘Don’t say that. Please go back. They need a kind person like you.’”

“And after that, he took his life...”

No one said anything.

“Do any of you know who Yuriko’s father could be?” Kiyotaka asked.

Most of the people present looked perplexed, except for Shoko, who had a dark expression. “It’s so disgusting that I don’t want to imagine it, but I think he was probably our grandfather.”

“Huh?” Everyone looked at her.

“I don’t believe it,” said Ranko, placing a hand on her chest. “Shoko, are you saying that grandfather violated his own daughter?”

“Yes.” Shoko nodded, her face pale. “Mom was the spitting image of our grandmother, who died young. I heard that our grandfather was really attached to our grandmother. I remember when he was drunk, he’d wrap an arm around mom’s shoulders, stroke her hair, and act like they were lovers. Most of all, I’ll never forget the stiff expression mom had at those times. Thinking about it now, I wonder if that’s why she doted on Yuriko obsessively. Yuriko closely resembles our grandmother too, so maybe mom was afraid our grandfather would do something to her. Mom hates men, probably because of her trauma. When she was choosing her next husband, she must’ve picked dad because he was a beautiful, androgynous young man at the time. I also think she only gave birth to us because she was scared of our grandfather, who was rushing her into producing an heir.”

Everyone’s eyes widened in shock, with one exception: Kiyotaka simply had a somber look on his face as if he had already come to the same conclusion.

“After hearing what Mr. Eda said, Yoshiharu likely realized the whole truth behind Hanako’s emotional instability, her violence towards men alone, and her neglect of him,” Kiyotaka said. “I’m sure he would have been horrified. He had been with his wife for so long, yet he hadn’t understood anything about her.”

Everyone nodded with bitter expressions.

“Yoshiharu had been determined to get revenge, but now that he knew Hanako’s deplorable past, he no longer wanted to. At the same time, revenge had been his reason to live, and now it was gone.”

“That’s why he...” Tears welled up in Shoko’s and Ranko’s eyes. Kikuo looked down, holding his head in his hands.

“This is nothing more than conjecture, but perhaps Yoshiharu called Hanako when he was on the brink of death. He may have said something along the lines of, ‘I discovered your secret. I’m sorry I never noticed.’ However, Hanako didn’t want anyone to know the cruel fact that she’d birthed her own father’s child. She may have locked up her husband’s lab out of fear that her secret had been recorded somewhere.”

The room fell silent.

“My job here is done. Please discuss the rest among yourselves.” Kiyotaka placed a hand on his chest and bowed.

Everyone was still looking down, unable to respond. Kiyotaka understood this, so he simply bowed once more before leaving the dining room. Akihito gave a quick bow too and followed Kiyotaka outside.

Final Act

Half a month passed.

The man who had solved the case, Kiyotaka Yagashira, the “Holmes of Kyoto,” was working in his study as usual. There was a stack of papers in front of him, consisting of proposals and reports he’d received from various departments. He was checking them and stamping his square seal on those that could be approved. It looked like a simple task at first, but it actually required concentration and brain power.

“Yo, Holmes!” Akihito barged in as usual, paying no mind to his friend’s current situation.

“I’m in the middle of work,” Kiyotaka said, not looking up from the papers he was stamping.

“Oh, I can stamp those for you if you want.”

“No, thank you.”

“Hey, I’ve always wondered, what’s the difference between round seals and square seals?”

“Square seals are used by companies,” Kiyotaka said bluntly, stamping another document.

“You’re always so cold, man. Well, I’m not here for myself today. My brother wants to see you, so I tagged along.”

“Fuyuki is here?” Kiyotaka looked up.

The officer peeked out from behind Akihito and bowed. “Thank you again for your help with the Hanayashiki case, Kiyotaka.”

“It was nothing.” Kiyotaka stood up and motioned with his right hand for his guests to sit on the sofa.

Fuyuki sat down hesitantly, while Akihito plopped himself down.

“It was both a tragic and difficult case,” Kiyotaka remarked, sitting down across from them.

“Yeah.” Fuyuki sighed.

“I heard Hanako regained consciousness afterwards. Is that true?”

Fuyuki nodded. “She’s already back home. Her grandson trying to kill her with a violin seems to have taken quite a toll on her. The family says the shock made her docile.”

“What happened to Kikumasa?”

“He poisoned his aunt and assaulted his grandmother, so he’s been sent to rehab. Well, a lot of precautions were taken to prevent the public from finding out. If word got out that the grandson of the Hanayashiki family had committed these heinous crimes, the scandal would spread through the whole country.”

“Indeed.” Kiyotaka’s expression was bitter.

“So Kikumasa was sent to a rehab facility in Kanto rather than Kansai. Kikuo and Masako also left home so they could stay close to their son.”

“I see. In other words, the Hanayashiki estate is now only occupied by women—Hanako, Shoko, Ranko, and Yuriko.”

“I heard Mr. Eda’s been going there as a caretaker,” said Akihito.

“That must be reassuring for them.”

“Mr. Eda might get married to Yuriko, y’know? Then the whole Hanayashiki fortune would be his. Dang, it’s him who gets the last laugh, huh?”

“Akihito, you’re being crass.”

“Can you be sure he doesn’t have ulterior motives, though?”

“I’m sure he genuinely loves Yuriko. When the fire happened, he ran upstairs without hesitation. Then, when he found Yuriko, he immediately picked her up and carried her outside. He would only do that if he truly cared for her.”

“That’s what they call true selflessness, huh?”

“Well, if he really does inherit the fortune, he might change...”

“I sure hope he doesn’t.”

“Like he said, Yuriko has the aura of an angel. He might be fine so long as he’s

by her side.”

While Kiyotaka and Akihito were chatting, Fuyuki remained silent, his lips drawn into a line.

“Fuyuki?” Kiyotaka looked at him.

The officer lowered his head deeply. “I’m sorry for what I did.”

“What are you referring to?”

“You know. When I didn’t give Kikumasa the antidote.”

“Oh, the punishment.”

“It wasn’t just punishment!” Fuyuki held his head. From the look of it, he had truly believed that Kikumasa had been poisoned and the bottle had contained the antidote. He had seriously thought it would be fine—even preferable—for Kikumasa to die. “I’m a failure as a police officer,” he muttered in a low voice, hanging his head. It was clear that he felt strong remorse.

“Fuyuki...” Akihito looked at his brother with a solemn expression.

Kiyotaka looked down apologetically. “Fuyuki, I must also apologize.”

“Huh?”

“I had you hold the antidote because I predicted you would act that way.”

Fuyuki and Akihito were taken aback. They silently mouthed the word “Why?”

“There were two reasons. First, I wanted Kikumasa to experience the fear of death and reflect on the crimes he’d committed. Second, I wanted you to reflect on yourself as well, Fuyuki.”

The officer’s eyes widened.

“When you talked about Yuriko, you decided for yourself that she was someone to be pitied, even though you didn’t know her well. Since you’re smart, you have a habit of making assumptions based on your own judgment. That in itself isn’t a problem, but it becomes one if you apply it to your work. You’re a police officer, not a judge. You’ll be rising in the ranks, and I wanted you to reflect on that beforehand. It was a selfish thought I had,” Kiyotaka said, placing his hand on his chest.

“Do you think I should be allowed to remain a police officer, then?”

“That goes without saying.” Kiyotaka gave a strained chuckle. “In the end, nothing happened, and it’s not *my* place to judge people either. However, if you feel pain in your heart, I hope you’ll use the experience to become a better police officer. That’s my sincere wish as a regular civilian.” He grinned.

Fuyuki’s shoulders trembled. “Thank you,” he murmured, barely audible.

Kiyotaka gave him a compassionate smile.

Meanwhile, Akihito shrugged as he watched the scene unfold before him. *Holmes really is a demon,* he thought. After all, with that, Kiyotaka had completely made Fuyuki his pawn.

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After Fuyuki left the study, Akihito leaned forward and said, “Hey, Fuyuki gave me money to treat you to a meal. Let’s go eat some good food!” He took his wallet out of his pocket and grinned, showing off his pearly whites.

“That sounds good. Where should we go?”

“Daimaru! I wanna go to Daimaru’s restaurant. I’ll get the curry rice this time.”

“Sure. I’ll have the croquettes, then.”

“You sure love croquettes, huh? Let’s get custard pudding too.”

“Sounds great.” Kiyotaka picked up his Inverness coat. It fluttered as he put it on.

“When you wear that, it feels like another incident’s gonna happen.”

“Please don’t say such ominous things.”

“I’m just kidding.”

Akihito laughed as they left the study together. However, his prediction was right on the mark. Before reaching the restaurant, they came across another case—but that’s a story for another time.

These are the case files of a handsome young detective nicknamed “Holmes,” taking place in Kyoto in the early Showa period.

Fin

*

That was the story Aigasa wrote about the tragedy of the Hanayashiki family.

After reading the manuscript, Holmes hummed and nodded. Sitting next to him, I placed my hand on my chest, feeling emotional, as if I'd just finished watching a movie.

Across from us, Aigasa fidgeted restlessly as she watched us. "What do you think? You can give it to me straight. I want to hear your honest opinion."

"It's wonderful!" I exclaimed. "What a brilliant mystery!"

The author shrugged, seeming uncomfortable. *Why did she react like that?*

"This is Ellery Queen," Holmes said.

"Ellery Queen?" I tilted my head.

"Are you unfamiliar with the name?"

"Oh, I do recognize it, of course." It was the name of an old mystery author who was just as well-known as Agatha Christie and Conan Doyle. "I just haven't read any of his books."

"That's surprising, seeing as you like reading and have read some of the greatest foreign mysteries."

I laughed awkwardly and shrugged. "I tried before, but since the detective in the book was the author himself, Ellery Queen, it felt like he was his own self-insert and I couldn't get into it. It's fun when the author appears in a supporting role, but I didn't like how he was the main character, and the hero at that." It was embarrassing to admit that, but I offered my honest thoughts.

Holmes and Aigasa looked at each other and burst out laughing.

"Was that funny?" I asked.

"No," said Holmes. "I understand how you feel. However, Ellery Queen isn't quite like that. The author is a duo. 'Ellery Queen' is their joint pseudonym."

"Huh?" I blinked. "You mean like the old mystery author, Futari Okajima?"

“Yes, Futari Okajima’s books were also masterpieces. It’s a shame they disbanded. I hope they can write another story someday...but I digress. Ellery Queen was a duo of men: Frederic Dannay and Manfred Bennington Lee. Those names were also pseudonyms, though.”

“That’s right.” Aigasa nodded. “Dannay had genius ideas but wasn’t good at writing, so he was in charge of the plot and tricks. Lee did the writing, since that was his forte.”

It was similar to the approach Aigasa had taken with her friends. She liked writing, but characters and tricks were her weaknesses. She seemed to have overcome the former by modeling them after real people. As for the tricks...

Come to think of it, Aigasa said at the start that it was something of an homage or pastiche.

“Is this book based on the work of Ellery Queen?” I asked.

“Yes,” said Aigasa. “*The Tragedy of the Grand Family* is based on Ellery’s *The Tragedy of Y*. The tricks you praised were taken directly from there.” She smiled and picked up her cup.

“What surprises me is the page count,” Holmes said.

“The page count?” I looked at him.

“*The Tragedy of Y* is a long book, over four hundred pages long. This story has been cut to about half the length, hasn’t it?” he asked, picking up the bundle of manuscript paper.

“Yes.” Aigasa nodded. “The original is written with detailed descriptions of scenes and the characters’ psyches. It’s brilliant, but I had to cut it down for the sake of pacing.”

Holmes hummed and stroked his chin as he looked over the manuscript. “The Hanayashiki family’s circumstances and the husband’s motive for suicide are different from the original.”

“Y-Yes.” Aigasa nodded, stiffening as if she were a new writer presenting her work to a publishing house.

“As a fan of the original, I feel a bit sad that it has less volume, but it’s

interesting that you set it in Kyoto in the early Showa period.”

“I agree,” I said. “The retro-modern atmosphere was wonderful. I can totally imagine Holmes in an Inverness coat and Akihito dressed up as a Showa-style student.”

“I’m glad you liked that.” Aigasa looked up, relieved.

“Why did you choose the early Showa period, though?” Holmes asked. “Couldn’t it have been the Meiji or Taisho period instead?”

“I did mull over it, but I wanted a time when Sherlock Holmes was known throughout Japan and Ranpo Edogawa was present, so I went with the early Showa period.”

“Ah, so that’s the reason.”

“Yes.” Aigasa sipped her coffee.

“However, it’s a shame that the whole story takes place inside a house. You might want to leverage the early Showa setting more by including period-appropriate decorations.”

“That’s a good point. Perhaps I’ll introduce the Koransha cups and saucers you set out for us.”

“Feel free. I did think the Daimaru restaurant was a nice Showa touch.”

“Thank you.”

My face relaxed into a smile as I listened to them. It was like seeing an exchange between an author and their editor.

“The custard pudding at the end reminded me of Ensho, though,” Holmes murmured. “I’d prefer if you changed it to Baumkuchen.”

“Why does custard pudding remind you of Ensho?” I asked.

“Contrary to what you might expect, custard pudding is one of his favorite foods.”

“Oh?”

Aigasa’s eyes lit up. “Ensho is your rival, isn’t he? If I get the chance to write a sequel, I’d love to have him make an appearance.”

“You don’t need to do that.” Holmes shrugged.

I giggled. “I’ll look forward to it,” I said with a smile. “What surprised me the most when I read this story was how Holmes and Akihito were depicted. Their dialogue and mannerisms were so true to the people themselves. You’re amazing, Aigasa.”

“Thank you, but don’t just compliment me,” the author said with a strained smile. “Tell me what you didn’t like.”

I furrowed my brow. “Um, I felt like Fuyuki went too far at the end.”

“I think the me in the book—Kiyotaka Yagashira—did as well,” Holmes added. “I’m not such a terrifying person that I’d manipulate Ranko and Fuyuki into becoming my pawns.”

“I thought that part was pretty accurate.”

“Aoi...”

Aigasa laughed. “Thank you, Aoi. I suppose Fuyuki’s part might’ve been a bit too extreme.”

“But like you said, it’s a work of fiction,” I told her. “I think it’s good that you made Holmes’s black-hearted side stand out.”

“You’re as cruel as ever, Aoi.” Holmes slumped his shoulders. “But honestly, I was surprised too. You said you heard about us from my father, but I’m impressed you were able to write our personalities so well.”

“I can’t create compelling characters on my own, but I feel like I can do a good job when I use existing people as models,” said Aigasa.

Holmes folded his arms in thought. “It’s like writing a movie script with the actors in mind.”

“Yes. I also gave up on tricks because I don’t have the talent to come up with them. That’s why I was writing historical fantasy instead. But I still love mystery novels, so I wanted to try writing a pastiche of one of the masterpieces I admire. I’m a fan of the original, though, so it was intimidating.”

“That’s understandable,” I said.

“But being scared wouldn’t get me anywhere, so I mustered up the courage to do it.”

“I think I know how you feel.” I nodded.

When you really want to try something, it can be scary. It was the same for me. I liked the ambience of this antique store, but even though I was curious about it, I couldn’t bring myself to come in. The same went for Holmes. I liked him, but I was afraid of getting hurt, so I couldn’t act on my feelings. And even the idea of going abroad was terrifying for me before I went to New York. The stronger your feelings are, the scarier it is. But like Aigasa said, being scared won’t get you anywhere. There are some things you can only see after taking the plunge.

“How do you feel now that you’ve written it?” I asked.

“I’m truly glad I did it. I was able to feel the mystery’s greatness more strongly than when I was merely reading it, and most of all, I learned a lot from the experience.”

“I see.” *That must be something you’ll never see or know before taking the step forward.*

“Do you have any other comments on the story?”

“Oh, it’s not a big deal, but I was wondering how the fictional Holmes and Akihito met.”

“Ah, that’s something I’d like to touch on if I get to write a sequel.”

“Is there a big plot behind it?”

“No, nothing that grand. Akihito’s parents are acquainted with Seiji Yagashira, that’s all.”

“That does feel natural.”

As we were talking, I glanced to the side and saw Holmes staring at the manuscript, looking vaguely displeased.

Worried, Aigasa craned her neck to peer at it. “Is there something you didn’t like?”

“Yes,” Holmes replied immediately.

“Wh-What?” I squeaked. “Really, Holmes?” I didn’t know what there was to dislike about the story, and I certainly wouldn’t have expected him to express his disapproval out loud.

Aigasa panicked. “Wh-Which part?” She hurriedly took out a pen and notebook.

“Why doesn’t Aoi appear in it?” Holmes asked, his expression deathly serious.

“Holmes...” I facepalmed.

Aigasa’s face stiffened. “O-Oh, yes, I knew you’d say that. The Kiyotaka Yagashira in the book hasn’t met Aoi. He doesn’t know love yet.”

Kiyotaka frowned slightly and folded his arms. “I see. Will she be appearing in the future, then?”

“Um, well...if I’m allowed to write a sequel, it’s possible that she might make an appearance, yes.”

Holmes’s face lit up.

“But personally, I don’t want her to,” Aigasa muttered. “I want the detective to stay solitary and cool...”

Holmes either didn’t hear her or was pretending not to. “Now that’s something to look forward to: Aoi in a haori coat and hakama pants. Or, since it’s the early Showa period, I suppose it would be ‘modern girl’ attire? She would look good in either of them... Oh, this is bad.” He covered his mouth.

Aigasa and I were taken aback.

“Wh-What’s wrong?” I asked.

“I just pictured you in modern girl attire and it was the cutest thing ever. This is bad for my heart.”

“Um, you only imagined it, right?” asked Aigasa.

“Yes, and it was unbelievably adorable. The moment the image appeared in my head, I mentally screamed, ‘Marry me!’”

“Wait, Holmes!” I shouted, embarrassed.

Aigasa averted her gaze and mumbled, “I think I really won’t have her appear. I want the detective to stay dashing and cool...”

Holmes ignored her utterance and grinned broadly. “I’ll do everything I can to ensure a sequel is greenlit.”

“Thanks...”

“Oh, but it’s unfortunate that her name won’t appear in the first book at all. Why don’t you add a cameo? Given the time period, she could be my betrothed.”

“I-I’ll think about it.”

“If you make the addition, please let me read it.”

Aigasa nodded silently, overpowered by Holmes’s smile.

And so ended this rare occasion where we got to enjoy reading a manuscript before it was published.

Epilogue

Kura's door chime rang. I looked up to see a tall man bow awkwardly, take off his hat, and hang it on the pole. I sometimes found myself impressed by the shapeliness of his bald head. Today, he was dressed casually in a shirt and jeans.

I smiled at him and said, "Welcome, Ensho. I'm glad you came."

"You said you wanted to talk to me," he said curtly, sitting down on a chair at the counter.

I had indeed asked Holmes to relay that message to him. "I really wanted to thank you in person." I had visited Komatsu's office several times, but Ensho had always been away.

"For what?" Resting his face on one hand, he weakly scratched his head with the other.

There was a new painting hanging on the store's wall, depicting Yu Garden in ancient times. The beautiful Jiangnan Garden and Yu Garden market looked fantastical under the light of the moon. In the lower left, soldiers were having a feast. In the upper right, there was a terrace with the silhouette of a court lady looking at the moon.

A Chinese poem was written at the edge of the painting:

Exquisite wine, luminescent cups
We try to drink and the lute on horseback encourages us
If we lie drunk in the desert, you must not laugh
For how many have been sent to war since ancient times?

It was *Liangzhou Ci* (Liangzhou Verse) by Han Wang.

Exquisite wine is poured into cups that shine in the moonlight. When we try to drink it on our horses, we hear a lute play. If you see us lying drunk in the desert, you must not laugh. Out of all the soldiers who have gone to war since ancient times, how many do you think have returned?

Ensho had painted this piece to protect me from harm.

“It really is incredible,” I said. “I tear up when I look at it.”

There were different types of paintings that attracted attention: those that were technically solid and those that lacked technique but had power. Ensho’s painting was a combination of both.

“Thank you,” I said, bowing.

He sighed. “If you’re gonna thank someone, thank Holmes.”

“Why Holmes?”

“He lowered his head to me and begged me to paint for him. You know how much that means, don’t you? I didn’t do it for you. I did it ’cause that prideful man was willing to go so far for it,” Ensho said bluntly, turning away.

I had heard this story from Komatsu. It *was* impossible to imagine Holmes lowering his head to Ensho. It was probably the last thing in the world he’d ever want to do.

Ensho agreed to paint out of respect for Holmes’s dedication... They have a good relationship. I couldn’t help but smile.

“What’s so funny?”

“Sorry,” I said, embarrassed. “But I still want to thank you, because you did save me with this painting. That’s all I wanted to say today. Please let me make it up to you properly another time.”

“Like I said, I don’t need any of that.” Ensho shrugged.

“I don’t know how I can repay you for such a wonderful painting, though,” I murmured, looking at the *Yu Garden by Night* hanging in the section for Chinese antiques.

Ensho looked restless.

“Does being praised make you uncomfortable?” I asked.

“No, that ain’t it.” He tilted his head. “I can’t explain it.”

“I thought that might’ve been why you declined the exhibition offer.”

He placed his hand on the back of his head. “That ain’t it either. Like I said before, I’m quitting painting,” he said with a slight grimace.

My expression softened. “Um, Ensho...”

“What?”

“It’s really not much, but I have something to give you, separate from the proper thanks I was talking about.”

“I don’t want anything.”

“Um, first, there’s this.” I served him the usual coffee, along with custard pudding from the fridge. “I made pudding, if you’d like.”

“What, did Holmes tell you about it?”

“Oh, yes. He said it was one of your favorite foods.”

As an aside, I’d gotten Holmes to taste the custard pudding beforehand, and he’d said, “It’s delicious. I’m sure Ensho will love it.”

“Ugh, how irritating,” Ensho muttered.

“Was he wrong? Do you actually dislike it?”

Ensho sighed. “It ain’t that I like it. It’s just...special.”

“Special?”

“I used to make it for Yuki when we were kids, since all it takes is milk, eggs, sugar, and a pot. I didn’t put in anything fancy like vanilla essence. I could make something delicious just with what I had at home. Whenever we were both depressed, I’d make custard pudding.”

“I see...”

“It feels like Holmes even figured out that much, and it’s creepy.” Ensho ate a spoonful of the pudding and nodded. “It’s good.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, I like the firm stuff more than the soft ones that’re popular these days.”

“That’s good.” I placed a hand on my chest in relief. “There’s one more thing I want to give you.”

“What? Just forget about it.”

“Um, when you see it, you’ll probably say you don’t want it, but...” I gave a strained smile.

My pessimism seemed to have the reverse effect. “Hm?” He furrowed his brow, intrigued. “What is it?”

Embarrassed, I placed a wooden box in front of him.

He quietly opened the lid. “A ceramic teacup, huh?”

It was a cylindrical, deep-green teacup.

“Yes, I started doing pottery recently, and that’s one of my better creations. I think the color came out nicely. When I saw that green, I thought of you,” I said quickly, trying to explain myself.

“Why am I associated with deep green?” he murmured, staring at the teacup.

The mug I had given Holmes was a deep indigo, because he reminded me of the night sky and the universe. As for Ensho...

“It’s just my own perception, but...”

“Yeah?”

“To me, it feels like you’re in a deep forest.”

His eyes widened.

“Sorry, something like this is more like bragging than thanks, isn’t it?” I tried to put the teacup away, feeling even more embarrassed.

“Nah, you went to the trouble, so I’ll take it.” Ensho carefully put the teacup in the box.

“Thank goodness.” I relaxed.

“You’re into pottery, eh? You gave Holmes a mug too.”

“Now I am, but it was rough at first.”

“Rough?”

“Since I’ve seen so many wonderful pieces at Kura, I couldn’t stand the shoddiness of my own work. I thought it’d be better not to do pottery.”

“That’s what happens, yeah.”

“I think that’s probably also why Holmes doesn’t create his own art. It’s hard for him to look at it when he has such a refined eye.”

“I see...” Ensho crossed his arms.

“But I think it’s not just the frustration of not being able to make something good, but also fear. And I only felt that way because I liked it. So I decided to keep at it, doing it in my own way.”

“Mm.”

“I know I’m nowhere near your level, but have you ever felt that way?”

“Huh?” He frowned.

“After painting something so brilliant, are you afraid that you’ll never be able to produce something better?”

Ensho said nothing. He continued to rest his chin on his hand and looked at the painting.

“Even if you really never pick up the brush again, I think it’s a good idea to hold an exhibition to mark the end of this part of your career.”

He laughed. “You sure are desperate, eh? Did Holmes put you up to this?”

“No.” I shook my head. “*I* want to hold the exhibition. I want to show *Yu Garden by Night* and *Suzhou* to as many people as possible.”

Ensho fell silent for a while before standing up. “Well, I guess I can consider it if you’re gonna be in charge.”

“Huh?” I blinked. “Y-You’re fine with me doing it?”

“You’re Sally Barrymore’s honor student, yeah? Let’s see what you can do,” he said mischievously, picking up the wooden box. “Thanks for the pudding and the teacup.” He held up a hand and left the store.

“I’m going to be in charge of Ensho’s exhibition...”

I felt the pressure, but at the same time, my heart was pounding with excitement at the prospect of a new challenge.

“I’ll do my best,” I murmured softly, clenching my fists.

Short Story: The Law of Mirrors

The reason I hated Ensho was extremely simple: I was afraid of him.

I knew the concept of disliking people who are similar to oneself, but never in my wildest dreams did I think that *I* would ever feel that way. I was aware that I was an extremely rare type of person, and I had assumed that I wouldn't have to worry about encountering a man with the same nature and characteristics as me.

However, as millennia of history and art has taught us, the world consists of yin and yang in balance. If someone like me exists, then so does my mirror image. A romantic way of saying it would be, "Whether we meet or not may simply be a quirk of fate."

In psychology, the dislike of those similar to oneself is explained through the Law of Mirrors. The aspects you like about a person are the parts of yourself that you recognize and like. The aspects you *don't* like about a person are the parts of yourself that you dislike and don't want to acknowledge.

Before, Ensho was a consolidation of the parts of myself that I disliked and didn't want to acknowledge. After all, if I had been raised in a household like his, I would have done anything to survive and pull myself out of there. Ensho wasn't a paragon of virtue, but I'd say he stayed true to himself despite his environment. If I were him, I definitely would have ended up more twisted.

My grandfather once said, "You guys are like light and shadow."

Light and shadow. Yin and yang.

Everyone sees me as the light and Ensho as the shadow. But every time I hear those words, I feel uneasy. If the two of us form a pair, then which of us is truly the light and which is the shadow?

Ensho once mimicked others, completely suppressing his individuality. However, once the mask was removed, he shone with a fierce light, the likes of which I do not possess.

It was fine when he was living in the shadows. Back then, I could dismiss his

existence by proclaiming my sense of justice. But if he were to come to my world and fight me in the same ring, he could very well steal or destroy everything I had built up in my life.

To be honest, I hadn't come to such a clear conclusion at the time, but this is how I would explain that unfamiliar fear now.

Soon enough, my premonition came true—Ensho entered my ring. Everyone on Earth could sense his unique presence and exceptional talent, and those around him immediately fell for his charm. Yanagihara was a prime example.

Meanwhile, I was perfectly calm—almost disappointingly so. I was able to watch him with warm eyes. I think this was because I had Aoi. I can still vividly recall how she would spread her arms wide and hug me. She knew how foolish, ugly, and shallow I was, and she accepted it all.

I'm sure you don't know how moved I was. Until I met you, I thought only the fake version of me would ever be loved.

Aoi accepted everything about me. I truly believed that as long as I had her, I didn't need anything else. Ensho could have it all.

However, fate played its tricks again. Ensho fell in love with Aoi.

When I realized this, I thought, "I knew this would happen." I understood, but at the same time, I felt discouraged. Of *course* my mirror image would love Aoi.

I became hopelessly impatient. I lost control of my emotions. I had never experienced such turbulence before, so I didn't know what to do. However, it seemed to be the same for Ensho, so we wound up clashing again.

As our unproductive feud repeated itself, it turned out that we were still linked by fate. I never thought the day would come when we would join hands to save Aoi. He seemed considerably surprised when I lowered my head to him. He said on several occasions, "I can't believe you'd do such a thing."

However, it wasn't as difficult as he thought it was. I yearned for Aoi, but in another sense, I also yearned for his talent. If lowering my head would both save Aoi and get Ensho to pick up the brush again, it was a small price to pay.

Someone as talented as Ensho wouldn't be able to understand such feelings.

He has many things that I don't. In the end, all I have is a keen eye. I can't create my own art. I can't make perfect replications. I don't have exceptional athletic ability either.

Meanwhile, there is very little I have that Ensho doesn't: the experience I've cultivated and a smidgen of knowledge. Eventually, I will become his shadow, supporting his future.

That day, Ensho visited Kura because I told him that Aoi wanted to thank him.

I waited for him to leave before returning to the store. Aoi cheerfully told me about her conversation with him. As I'd suspected, he had a strong emotional attachment to custard pudding. He also agreed to hold the exhibition as long as Aoi was in charge of it.

That's just like him, I thought with a strained smile. If I were him, I would've said the same thing.

I would be lying if I said I didn't feel at all uneasy, but I *was* happy to be able to hold the exhibition. I felt at peace as I listened to Aoi's summary.

Perhaps I've grown up too.

"Oh, and I gave him a ceramic teacup I made as thanks," Aoi said shyly.

"Huh?" I turned around, my face tense.

*She gave Ensho a handmade teacup? Hold on a second—*I *haven't received a teacup yet! Not only that, but I don't want her to give her creations to anyone else to begin with. That teacup was made by her lovely hands! No, no, this is simply unacceptable. To make matters worse, she gave it to Ensho. His heart must've skipped a beat when he received it. That feeling belongs to* me! *Ugh, he must've been so happy. This is wrong!*

No...I'm the one who's wrong. So much for growing up. You aren't mature in the slightest, Kiyotaka.

Aoi stared at me as I struggled to suppress the displeasure welling up inside me.

“I-Is something the matter?” I asked.

“Um, I was just thinking, you really are cute...”

“Huh?”

“Here.” Aoi placed a teacup on the counter. It was the same deep indigo as the mug she had given me before. “You wanted a teacup too, right? I made one for you as well. Yours came first, of course.” She smiled mischievously. “You’re usually so mature, but sometimes you’re really childish. It’s not fair.”

Seeing her slightly flushed cheeks made me dizzy. *No,* you’re *the unfair one.* “Thank you! I’m so happy! I love you, Aoi!” I hugged her tightly, forgetting we were in the store.

“Jeez, Holmes!” She laughed cheerfully in my arms.

I really am a hopeless, incomplete person. I was never able to love myself. But you accept me and tell me you love me. I want to become a better person who can protect you, and I want to try to love myself a little more.

It was a sweet moment in time that made me sincerely feel that way.

Afterword

Thank you for reading. I'm Mai Mochizuki.

Time flies, and the *Holmes of Kyoto* series has reached fifteen volumes. Volumes 13 and 14 took place abroad, and after those major developments, I was thinking of writing a sort of side story where the cast could relax and take a breather. I decided to take this opportunity to do something I've always wanted to try: a pastiche of a foreign mystery within the world of *Holmes of Kyoto*.

The chosen mystery was Ellery Queen's *The Tragedy of Y*, considered one of the greatest masterpieces of all time. You may be thinking, "You didn't choose something from Arthur Conan Doyle's *Sherlock Holmes* series?!" However, as I was rereading the case that unfolds in *The Tragedy of Y*, I couldn't help but imagine Kiyotaka in that house.

Actually writing the story took quite a lot of courage, but my editor said it was an interesting idea, and thanks to Kurisu Aigasa, I was able to incorporate it as a "tale within a tale."

The story takes place in the early Showa period. Kiyotaka Yagashira is from a well-to-do merchant family and is nicknamed the "Holmes of Kyoto." Together with Akihito Kajiwara, a dropout student, he takes on a complicated case involving the wealthy Hanayashiki family.

In the original mystery, murders do take place. But since this is the world of *Holmes of Kyoto*, incidents occur, but no one is killed.

When I read the original work, there were so many characters that I struggled to remember the names of everyone in the wealthy family. So here, I tried to make them as easy to read as possible.

As mentioned by Kiyotaka, the original work is much longer and more detailed. The husband's sentiments are unique to this story, as is the way the final scenes play out. If you haven't read *The Tragedy of Y*, I encourage you to pick up a copy of this highly acclaimed work, considered the pinnacle of mystery.

In the first chapter, before the “tale within a tale” begins, the kabuki actor Kisuke Ichikata makes a reappearance. This was actually because Ichiha Akizuki’s rendition of him in the manga (volume 5) was so wonderful that I wanted to have him appear in the novel again. Thank you, Akizuki, for always drawing the manga so beautifully.

And speaking of drawing, the cover illustration by Shizu Yamauchi is the Kiyotaka and Akihito duo this time. Some of you may have been sad that Aoi wasn’t there, but I was moved by the old-school romanticism. The building in the background is what is now the Tohka Saikan restaurant, located just southwest of the Shijo Bridge. It’s been there since 1926.

In order to write this tale within a tale, I decided to go to the Kyoto City Historical Museum to research texts and photographs from that time period, but the enormous number of materials had me at a loss. I consulted with the receptionist, who helped me pick out some references. Taniguchi from Daimaru Kyoto also sent me a lot of materials from that time. Thank you so much to the staff at the Kyoto City Historical Museum and Daimaru Kyoto.

It has been over eighty years since the early Showa period. Naturally, much of the city of Kyoto has changed overall, but I was stunned to see that there are many places that have remained the same.

This volume was a new challenge for me. Nothing would make me happier than if you enjoyed it and it piqued your interest in the original work.

As usual, please let me use this space to express my thanks. I’m grateful to all of the connections surrounding me and this series, as well as the great author Ellery Queen. Thank you all so much.

Mai Mochizuki

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Born in Hokkaido and currently resides in Kyoto. Debuted in 2013 upon winning the first prize in the second installment of EVERYSTAR's e-publication awards. Won the Kyoto Book Award in 2016. Other works include *Wagaya wa Machi no Ogamiya-san* (Kadokawa Bunko), *Alice in Kyoraku Forest* (Bunshun Bunko), and *Kyoto Karasuma Oike no Oharai Honpo* (Futabasha). (As of August 2020)