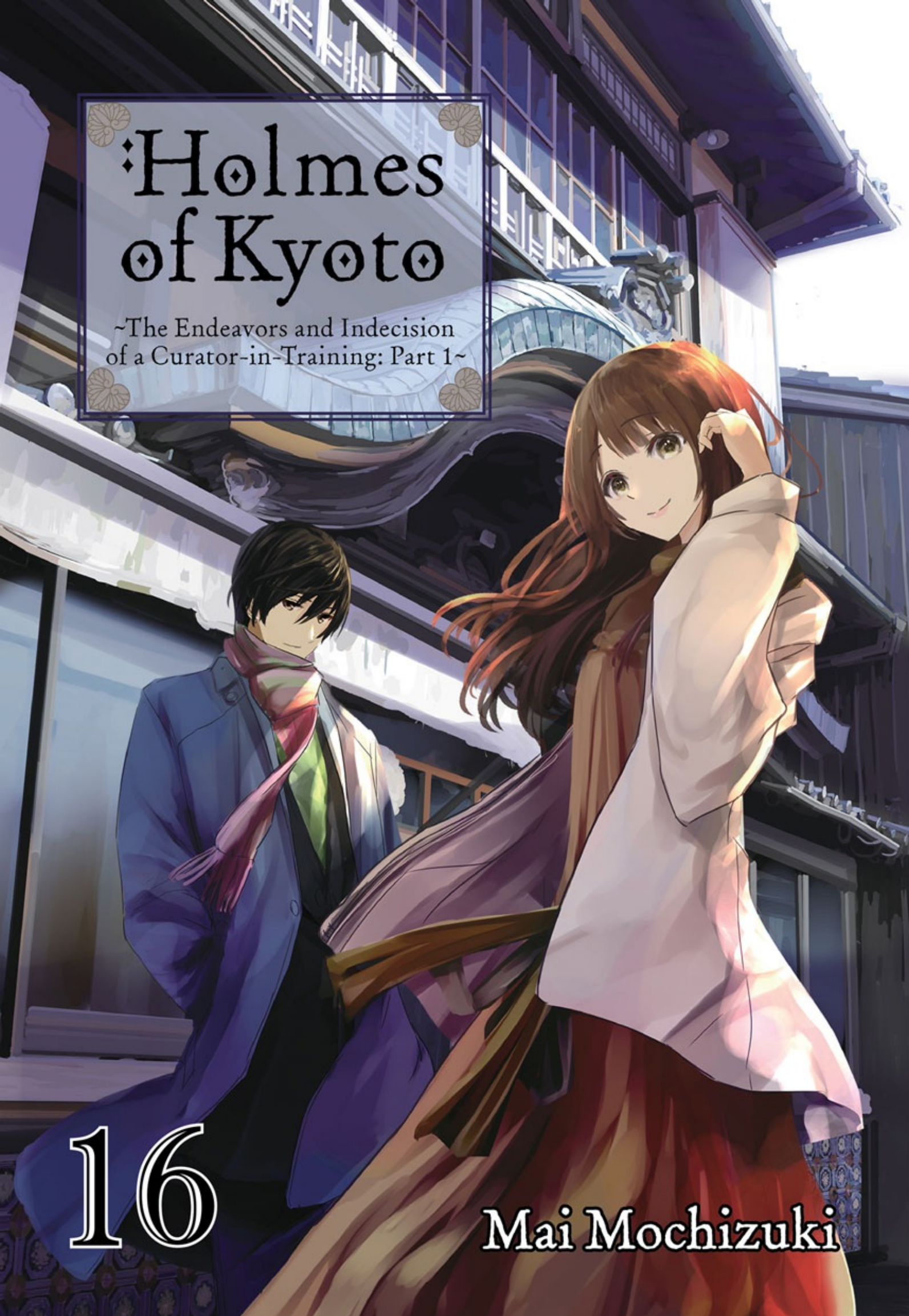
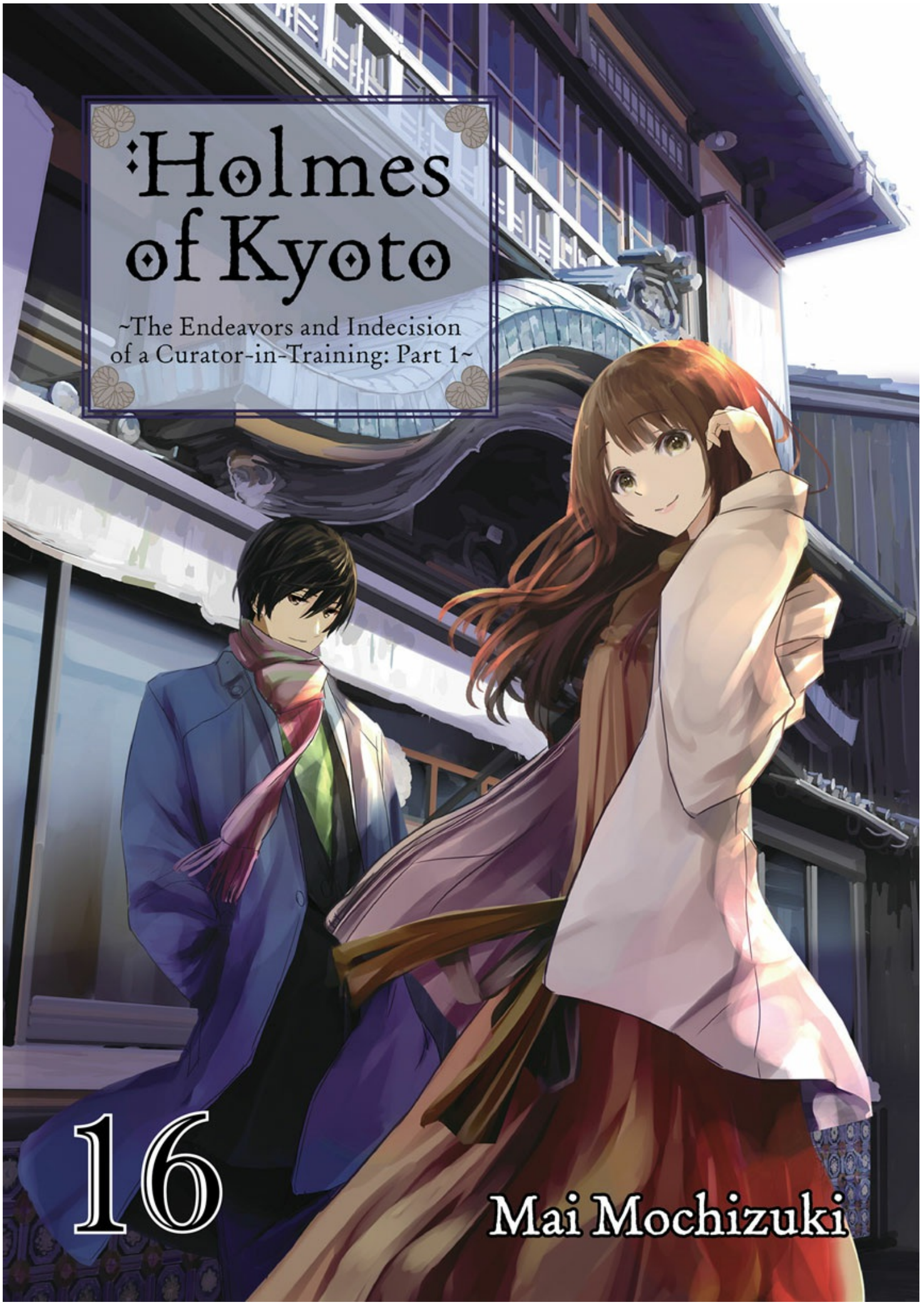
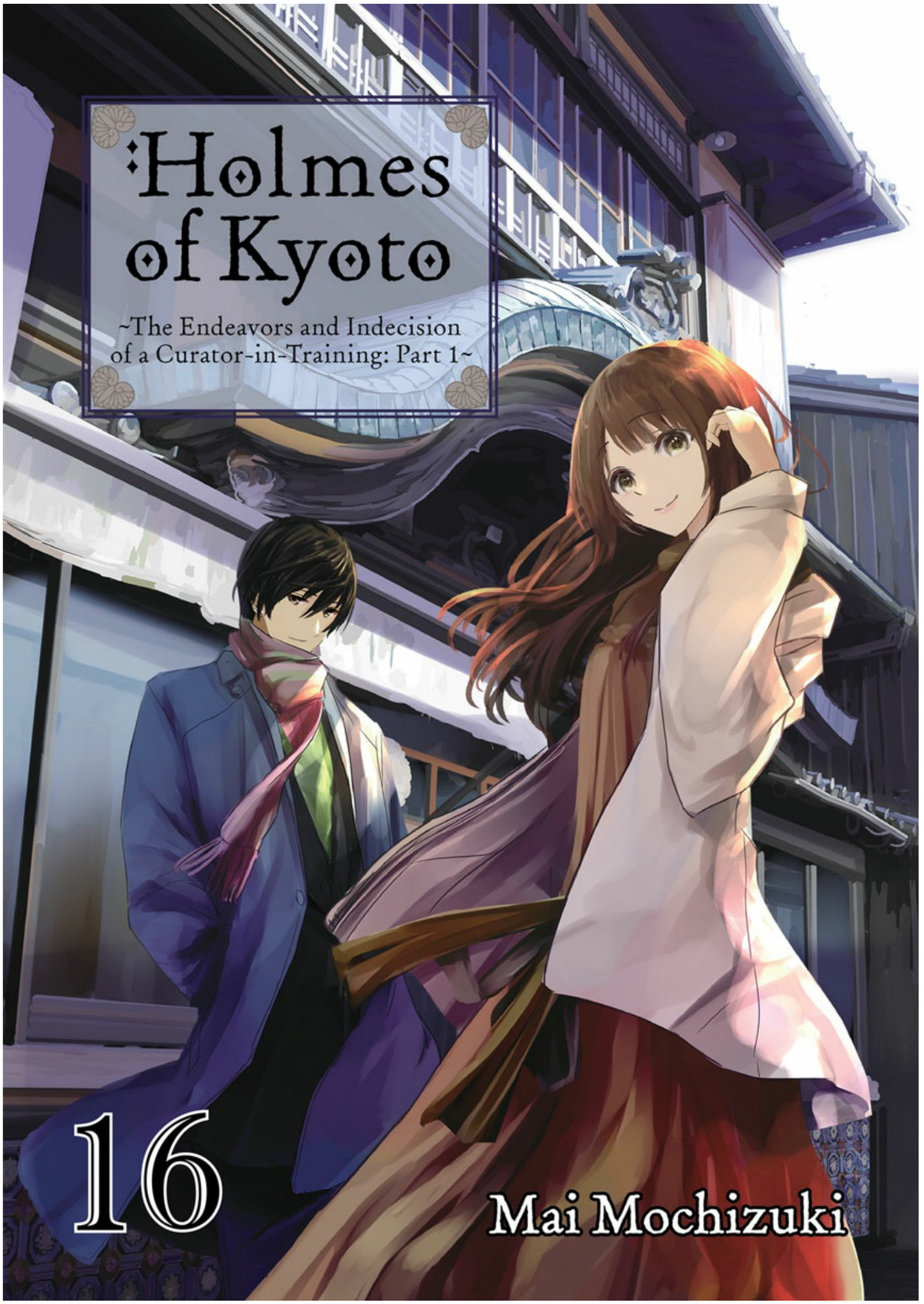

Holmes of Kyoto
~The Endeavors and Indecision of a Curator-in-Training: Part 1~
16
Mai Mochizuki


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Mai Mochizuki

The German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche once said, “Life is a journey, so everyone is a tourist.”

Life is sometimes compared to a journey. We grow through various encounters and experiences, and the scenery before our eyes is constantly changing. Some paths are smooth and easy to take, some are dead ends, and sometimes one can’t even tell where they’re walking. What should one do when they get lost in the forest?

This is a story of how we come to a standstill over trivial matters, struggle with indecision, and learn from the experience.

Prologue

The trees lining the street outside the window were vividly colored. It was already November, the time of year when fall had settled in and one could sense winter's approach.

Time flies. The four seasons had passed in the blink of an eye, and before I knew it, I—Aoi Mashiro—was about to enter the winter of my second year of university. My schoolmates were starting to prepare for the upcoming job-hunting season. I knew I had to think about it too, but now just wasn't the time. I couldn't focus on studying or job hunting when my thoughts were fully occupied by the exhibition. I'd been tasked with planning one for counterfeiter-turned-painter Ensho (real name Shinya Sugawara), and it was on my mind twenty-four seven—even right now, as I was having lunch with my best friend, Kaori Miyashita, in our university's cafeteria.

I sighed.

Kaori, who was sitting across the table from me, frowned apologetically. "Oh, you don't want to?"

"Huh?" I looked up at her. "Sorry, I was spacing out."

Instead of being angry, she laughed and said, "I figured you weren't listening."

The toasted sandwich in front of me had already grown cold, while Kaori was almost finished with her pasta.

"You know how the flower arranging club's on hiatus?" she asked.

"Yeah," I said, ready to pay attention.

The flower arranging club had originally been founded by students two years our senior, with Kaori being the youngest member. It had become mostly inactive because the older students had been busy with a lot of things, and they had decided to make the school festival the other day—the Nakaragi Festival—their last club activity before quitting. Since no younger members had joined, Kaori was now the only member.

I was more like a temporary member who attended occasionally, and Kaori wasn't so attached to the club that she'd try to recruit new members in earnest. After all, flower arranging was something one could do on their own. It made more sense to try new activities while we were still students, so we were visiting various clubs and experiencing different things.

That was how I ended up joining the pottery club. I got really into it—after making the mug and the teacup, I was also making small plates, flowerpots, and whatnot. The shapes had room for improvement, but I was told that the colors were coming out nicely—still within the realm of an amateur, of course, but the compliment made me feel good about myself, so I diligently continued to make new items.

"A group was recently formed at our university called the Make Kyoto More Beautiful Project, or KyoMore for short," said Kaori. "Why don't you join too, Aoi?"

I couldn't give her a response right away. I had my hands full with the exhibition. Even if I had time, I didn't have the mental capacity.

"Did you already join?" I asked.

"Yeah, sort of. Haruhiko's the project leader, so it's more like I'm helping him out."

"Oh, I see." *So Haruhiko's involved.*

Haruhiko Kajiwara was the younger brother of a popular actor that Holmes and I were friends with, Akihito Kajiwara. He and Kaori had grown close while I was in New York. Apparently they'd hit it off; they often did things together as of late.

"You and Haruhiko really are close, huh?" I said.

"We're both *Kamen Rider* fans, so yeah," Kaori said nonchalantly.

"Right." I laughed.

"Do you watch it, Aoi?"

"My younger brother liked it, but I preferred shows with girl fighters, like *PreCure* and *Sailor Moon*. I even used to see the stage plays. I really looked up

to those characters because they were so cute and powerful." I remembered being obsessed with watching *Sailor Moon* reruns.

"Oh, I liked those too. I guess I just like everything," Kaori murmured to herself.

I smiled. "Well, anyway, since it's your *Kamen Rider* buddy leading the KyoMore project, I'm sure he'll be accommodating." *He does seem like he'd take my situation into consideration.*

Still, Haruhiko sure was active these days. He was part of the pottery club too, and the other day, he and Kaori had acted as extras in Akihito's TV drama.

"Now that I think about it, Haruhiko's involved in a lot of things, isn't he?" I asked.

"Yeah." Kaori nodded and folded her arms. "He suddenly started doing a bunch of things. I wondered why too, so I asked him, and he said he wants to try different things while he's still a student. I think there's more to it than that, though."

"Like what?"

"I feel like it has to have something to do with his breakup," she said quietly.

I gave a silent nod. Until recently, Haruhiko had been going out with Akari Meguro, a member of the flower arranging club. However, their relationship had ended with him getting dumped.

"Before it happened, he sensed that Meguro was avoiding him and picked up some new hobbies to distract himself from his fears. And in the end, they broke up, right? So I think he's drowning his sorrows by being even more active. Poor guy."

"Kaori, are you, um, interested in him?" I asked softly, curious.

She burst out laughing. "No way. It's not like that. Why would you think that?"

"Well...because you seem to get along really well."

"We're just on the same wavelength, that's all. It's not love, though. I've never met someone like him, where I'm not conscious of him being a guy."

“Really?”

“Yep.” She nodded. “Haruhiko’s older than us, but he feels like a younger brother. He doesn’t make my heart race at all, which is why it’s easy to hang out with him. That’s not love, right?”

“I guess.”

Haruhiko did have a younger brother vibe. He was like a puppy; you could feel at ease around him.

I dropped the subject and returned to the original topic. “What kinds of things does the KyoMore project do?”

“We just started up, so we haven’t done much yet, but we cleaned up litter in the streets a few times. The other day, we picked up garbage at the Kamo River and had a picnic—without leaving our own trash, of course. Not very exciting, huh?” Kaori laughed.

I shook my head. “Actually, I think that’s really nice.”

I sometimes noticed litter while walking along the Kamo River. I would’ve liked to pick it up, but it’s difficult when you aren’t prepared for it. Students taking the initiative to clean up garbage would surely have a positive impact on the neighborhood, and it seemed like an activity I could participate in on a casual basis.

“I think I’d be able to help with that,” I said. “I do have work, though...”

“You don’t have to push yourself. He said you can just join in when you’re free.”

“I can do that.” I nodded. “I might end up being a ghost member, though.”

“That’s totally fine. Great, if you’re around, it’ll be more fun for me too.”

“Same.” I smiled.

Kaori looked relieved. “Good. You seem happier now.”

“Huh? Was I not happy?”

“You’ve been sighing a lot lately.”

“Oh.” I shrugged. *Have I really been sighing that much?*

“Did something happen with Holmes?”

“No, not at all.” I laughed. “It’s not because of him.”

“Oh, okay.” Her expression relaxed.

Thinking about it, Kaori always tended to worry about my relationship with Holmes. When a couple is together for a long time, issues are bound to come up. The same went for us, but we overcame them, and as a result, our relationship was stable. Also, it wasn’t as if I had told Kaori the details of what had happened, so I was curious as to why she was always concerned about us.

“Does our relationship seem that rocky?” I asked.

Kaori hummed and tilted her head. “I’m not really sure. Sometimes you look stable like a married couple, but sometimes you surprise me with something suddenly happening. I don’t know how to explain it. I mean, I don’t understand Holmes that well in the first place.”

Her words were vague, but I got the gist of what she was saying.

Kaori then lowered the tone of her voice and said, “He’s really attractive and he probably meets a lot of people. I thought you might be worried.”

“Worried?”

Holmes did have an eye-catching appearance. He had handsome features, and he was tall and stylish. Sometimes, when we were walking around, women would clearly turn to look at him. In the past, I thought he was completely out of my reach. It wouldn’t be surprising if I felt insecure, but...

“I don’t think I’m that worried... Well, it does happen, but rarely.”

Kaori laughed at my reply. “I guess you don’t have to worry since he’s obsessed with you.”

“That’s not true.” I shrank back, embarrassed.

“I used to feel uncomfortable around him, but I see him in a better light now.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. Before, I was concerned about you because I thought a guy like him couldn’t be trusted.”

“I see...”

“But he chose a good girl like you, and he takes good care of you. It improved my opinion of him.” Kaori grinned.

I felt my cheeks grow hot. “Sometimes, I wonder if it really is okay for him to be with me. I probably wasn’t his type before.”

“Huh?” Kaori froze. “Really? What was his type?”

“Holmes’s type...?” I furrowed my brow. Even though I was the one who said it, I wasn’t sure. The girl he had dated before, Izumi, was beautiful and had a delicate air—different from me. “I don’t really know, but I’m sure it wouldn’t have been someone like me. Holmes likes beautiful things, so he probably preferred people who were really pretty.” I chuckled.

“It’s amazing that you can say that with a laugh.”

“Huh? Why?”

“It means you have high self-esteem. If it were me, I’d get depressed right away.”

“That’s not true.” I shook my head. “I don’t have high self-esteem. Like I said, I often wonder if I’m good enough for him.” I gave a strained smile. In the past, I *had* gotten depressed right away when comparing myself to someone else.

“Really?” Kaori tilted her head. “Well, back to what we were talking about, why *have* you been sighing, then?”

“I’ve been thinking about the exhibition I mentioned before.”

“Oh, for that ossan?”

I choked. “That’s pretty mean.” I didn’t know how old Ensho was, but he was probably still in his early thirties. Not young, but not old enough to be called an ossan—a middle-aged man.

“No, not ossan, *os*san.” She emphasized the first syllable.

“What’s the difference?”

“‘*Ossan*’ is short for ‘oji-san,’ but ‘*os*san’ is short for ‘obo-san,’ as in a monk.”

“Huh?” I leaned forward. “Do people in Kyoto call monks ‘*os*san’?”

Kaori tilted her head. “I don’t know if it’s all Kyoto people or just some, but ‘*os*san’ and ‘*os*sama’ are both used here. Anyway, that *os*san-looking guy’s name was Ensho, right? He was Holmes’s rival, wasn’t he?”

“Oh, yeah.” I was still processing this shocking new information, but Kaori had casually moved on as if it wasn’t important.

“Are you reluctant to work on an exhibition for Holmes’s former enemy?”

“No, it’s the opposite.”

“The opposite?”

“I really want to do it. I’m a fan of his work, so I end up putting more pressure on myself out of excitement.”

“Do you have any ideas for how you want to do it?”

“I’ve thought of a lot, but none of them make me think, ‘This is it!’”

I had struggled with the exhibit in New York as well. Back then, I had happened to see the Japanese umbrella store from the car window, its lights looking fantastical amidst the nighttime streets of SoHo. The sight had inspired me to use Japanese umbrellas, and the resulting exhibit had been highly praised. I, too, thought I had done a good job.

I hadn’t gotten a flash of inspiration for Ensho’s exhibition yet, and that was making me panic.

“When is it going to be?” Kaori asked.

“They said any time is fine.”

“Huh?” Her eyes widened. “What does that mean?”

“It’s going to be at the Yagashira residence, remember? So unlike a normal art exhibition, there aren’t any booking requirements. Ensho also said he’d leave it up to me, so it really can be at any time. Personally, I want it to line up with Christmas.”

“I see.” Kaori nodded. “It’s hard to get a clear idea of what to do when you don’t have a deadline.”

“Yeah, exactly.” I felt that I had been able to put the previous exhibit together

quickly because there had been a deadline I had to meet no matter what.

“But on the other hand, doesn’t that mean you don’t have to think about it all the time?”

“Huh?” I looked up.

“Whenever I got stuck on a flower arrangement for an exhibition, I’d give up and watch my favorite TV shows, read books, and go to concerts. Then I’d suddenly get hit with an idea.”

Her words rang true. I nodded and said, “You’re right. I’ll try taking my mind off of it for a while.”

“Yep, that’s a good idea. You can do more pottery or join KyoMore’s activities.”

“Yeah. There’s also something I want to read up on.”

“What is it?”

“Um, before that, I have a question...”

“Yeah?”

“You weren’t joking when you said monks are called ‘*os*san,’ right?” I asked with a serious expression.

Kaori’s eyes widened.

*

The antique store Kura on Kyoto’s Teramachi-Sanjo shopping street was usually quiet, as if time were frozen within its walls. However, right now was an exception—the store was filled with laughter.

“You were shocked about ‘*os*san’? That’s so funny, Aoi.”

Akihito had come over to chat for the first time in a while, and I had just told him about my conversation with Kaori. He had his hand on his stomach as he burst out laughing, and behind the counter, Kiyotaka “Holmes” Yagashira was chuckling as well.

“How could I not be, when I thought Kaori was calling Ensho an old man?” I shrugged as I dusted the shelves.

“Ensho’s an *os*san *and* an *ossan*. That’s great.” Akihito slouched on the counter, still stuck in a fit of laughter.

Holmes’s expression quickly turned serious. “What were you and Kaori talking about that would involve Ensho?” His lips were curved in a smile that didn’t reach his eyes.

Akihito noticed his expression and flinched. Holmes sometimes made his jealousy obvious like a young child would.

I giggled and said, “We were talking about his exhibition.”

“Oh, I see.” Holmes smiled gently.

“Do people in Kyoto really call monks ‘*os*san’?”

“Yes. I don’t know if it’s only in Kyoto, but as Kaori said, there are people who call them ‘*os*san’ or ‘*os*sama.’ For example, when my grandfather is talking among family members, he might refer to someone as ‘that *os*san over there.’”

“The owner does it too?!”

Akihito crossed his arms. “Y’know, I never paid attention to it before, but some people do say ‘*os*san’ on the regular. It’s pretty interesting, now that I think about it. Holmes, why are monks called ‘*os*san’?” Resting his chin on his hand, he looked at Holmes.

“I’ve been thinking this for a while now, but Akihito, could you stop treating me like an AI assistant?”

“Tell me the answer, Holmexa!”

Holmes frowned and grabbed Akihito’s forehead with one hand.

“Ow! Ow! Holmexa, stop! Seriously, spare me the iron claw!”

“Good grief.” Holmes let go of Akihito and wiped his hand with a wet towel.

“That’s so mean! You were the one who gave me the iron claw, and now you’re acting like you touched something filthy? Don’t do me dirty like that, Holmexa.”

“You’re still going to call me that?”

“Eek!” Akihito recoiled at Holmes’s glare.

I smiled as I watched them. “You two really do get along well.”

“Yep!” Akihito gave a thumbs-up.

“What an upsetting thought.” Holmes sighed. “Anyway, as for why monks are called ‘*os*san’...”

“I think it might be ’cause ‘otera-san’ got shortened to ‘*os*san,’” said Akihito. “Otera-san” was a respectful way of addressing a monk.

“Oh, I see.” I clapped my hands together. “That would make sense.”

“Right?”

Holmes held up his index finger. “Yes, there are several theories, but the most plausible one is perhaps ‘hossu-san.’”

“Hossu-san?” The word meant “high priest.”

“Yes. It’s possible that ‘hossu-san’ became ‘ossu-san’ and then ‘*os*san.’ By the way, some people will also call monks ‘oshu-san’ or ‘osu-san.’ However, these are only used in private conversations. It’s best not to use them towards actual monks.”

“Oh, really?” Akihito asked, surprised.

“Yes. It would be considered disrespectful, like addressing a head priest without his title.”

I tilted my head. It made sense, but there was still something I didn’t understand. “Head priests are called different things depending on the location, aren’t they? At Ninna-ji Temple, he was called ‘monzeki,’ and some sects call them ‘washo-san.’ Sometimes, I don’t know how I should address them.”

“Yeah,” said Akihito. “I got confused a lot while filming *A Fine Day in Kyoto*.”

Holmes chuckled and held up his index finger. “It’s generally fine to simply call them ‘Head Priest.’ It’s also safe to call them by the temple’s name, such as ‘Ninna-ji’ or ‘Daitoku-ji.’”

“I see.” I nodded firmly.

“Oh, almost forgot—I brought something for you guys,” Akihito said, taking a package out of the paper bag on the chair next to him and placing it on the

counter. It said “Gozasoro” on it.

“Gozasoro? Now that’s a treat,” Holmes said. “Shall I make tea?”

“No, make it coffee. Part of the reason I come here is because I wanna drink your coffee.”

“I’m flattered.” Holmes went into the kitchenette.

“What’s Gozasoro?” I asked.

“Huh? You don’t know?”

“This is my first time seeing it.”

“It’s well-known in Kansai, though.” Akihito opened the package, revealing baked treats called imagawa-yaki.

“Ooh, imagawa-yaki!”

“Man, you’ve still got the Kanto mindset, huh? Imagine calling this ‘imagawa-yaki,’” he teased.

I pouted. “Yeah, I know. In Kansai, you call it ‘oban-yaki,’ right?”

“Nope.” He shook his head. “I call this kind ‘kaiten-yaki.’”

“Kaiten-yaki?” I blinked at the unfamiliar word.

“Well, I do call it ‘oban-yaki’ too.”

“I wonder what the correct term is?”

Holmes emerged from the kitchenette carrying a tray. “Different regions have different terms, so I don’t think there’s a correct answer. However, Gozasoro’s products are simply called ‘Gozasoro.’” He placed the coffee cups on the counter and looked at me. “You should take a break too, Aoi.”

“Okay.” I put the feather duster away, washed my hands in the kitchenette, and sat down next to Akihito.

The box contained six Gozasoro—three with red bean filling and three with white bean filling, so we could all have one of each. Both types had a simple, mild flavor. They were very delicious, and I liked how there was a lot of filling.

“I haven’t had imagawa-yaki—well, this is Gozasoro, but I haven’t had this

kind of dessert in a long time," I said.

"Same," said Holmes.

"It's good, isn't it?"

Holmes and I smiled happily as we ate the Gozasoro.

"Yep." Akihito stuck his chest out proudly. "I covered them on my show the other day and got a craving for them."

"By the way, Holmes, what do *you* call this kind of dessert?" I asked.

Holmes gave an apologetic smile. "Right now, I call them 'oban-yaki.' But in the past, I used the wrong term."

"The wrong term?" Akihito and I asked in unison.

"What did you call them?" I asked.

"What do you mean, 'the wrong term'?" Akihito asked. "Didn't you say that there's no right answer?"

Holmes laughed, embarrassed. "No, it really was wrong. When I was a child, I called this kind of baked dessert 'London-yaki.' Even now, I catch myself nearly calling it that out of habit."

"Why 'London-yaki'?" I tilted my head.

"Oh!" Akihito clapped his hands. "Because of London-ya, right?"

"Yes," said Holmes.

"Are you talking about the store in Shinkyogoku?" I asked. I knew of it, but I'd never been inside.

"Yes, London-ya in Shinkyogoku. They sell sweets that are like miniature imagawa-yaki." Holmes looked down at the Gozasoro. "London-yaki has a sponge cake exterior and white bean filling. It's like a small version of this. When I was little, I was more familiar with London-yaki than oban-yaki, so I thought all of these types of sweets were London-yaki."

"I see." I nodded. "That's something only a local would experience."

"Interesting, huh?" Akihito asked.

“Yeah.” I giggled as I ate the Gozasoro.

I thought I’d become very familiar with Kyoto after living here for several years, but there’s still so much I don’t know.

As I was reflecting, my phone buzzed in my pocket, startling me.

“Go ahead,” Holmes said, gesturing with his hand.

“Oh, sorry.” I hurriedly took out my phone and looked at the screen.

It was an email from Keiko Fujiwara, an assistant to the world-famous curator Sally Barrymore. She was the one who had invited me to New York, and I owed her a great deal. However, after my return to Japan and a few thank-you emails, we hadn’t kept in touch.

Did something happen? I wondered as I opened the email.

“Is something wrong?” Holmes asked, sensing my bewilderment.

“I received an email from Keiko...”

“It’s been a while, Aoi. Well, first of all, I’d like you to read this.”

There was a PDF attached. I tapped it and was faced with a wall of English text. I could barely make out that it was an article about Sally Barrymore, but it wasn’t something I could read with ease. I gulped.

“Would you like me to read it for you?” Holmes asked.

“Yes, please.” I held out my phone, shamefully accepting his help.

He took it and looked down at the screen. “Ah, this is an American financial magazine. They had an interview with Sally Barrymore.”

“I was able to figure out that much.”

“The art exhibition she worked on in October was a huge success. Apparently, she recklessly had the title changed at the last minute.”

“Huh?” My eyes widened. Changing the title at the last minute meant having to change all of the advertisements and materials that had been made. I could imagine how much work it must’ve been, and I was surprised that the calm and composed Sally would do such a thing.

“As a continuation from the Vermeer and Meegeren exhibit, this second part was originally titled ‘Light and Shadow.’”

When I was in New York, Sally had been working on an exhibit showcasing Vermeer, the artist known for paintings such as *Girl with a Pearl Earring* (or *Girl with a Blue Turban*), and the man who made forgeries of his work, Meegeren. It had been called “Light and Shadow.”

“What did she change the name to?” I asked.

“Envy.”

“Wow!” My eyes widened again.

Akihito hummed. “It’s got impact, that’s for sure.”

“Indeed,” said Holmes. “The artworks displayed included Rubens’ *Cain Slaying Abel*, Munch’s *Jealousy*, and John William Waterhouse’s *Circe Invidiosa*. They all highlight people’s envy, so she decided to change the title accordingly.”

Now that I knew the lineup, “Envy” did fit better than “Light and Shadow.”

“It seems that the straightforward title made an impression on people. The exhibition became a major topic and attracted more visitors than the Vermeer exhibition, which was already a success to begin with.”

I hummed.

“Here’s a rough translation of what Sally said about it. ‘When I first saw this lineup of paintings during the planning stage, “Envy” was actually the first title that came to mind, but I couldn’t bring myself to use it because I despised that word. I think it was because I always had envy in my own heart. All my life, I had envied the talent of Yohei Shinohara, a fellow curator. I just didn’t want to admit it. However, although we had been at odds for many years, something recently happened that allowed me to reconcile with him, and at the same time, I was able to accept that I had been jealous of him. It was a weight off my shoulders, and I suddenly felt compelled to change the name of the exhibition to “Envy.” It was a reckless decision that inconvenienced many people, but I’m glad I did it. To tell the truth, I was relieved that it ended up being a huge success. However, even if it had failed, I wouldn’t have regretted it. I learned from this experience that recognizing your jealousy makes you feel better, and I

think I was able to ascend to a higher stage in life. I also believe I was able to change thanks to Aoi Mashiro, a young Japanese curator. She's still in training, but she inspired me with her honest, fresh views. I'm grateful to her.'"

"Whoa, that's amazing, Aoi!" Akihito leaned towards me excitedly.

I couldn't believe it. "Huh? I don't remember doing anything that grand..." It was true that I had tried to be a mediator between Sally and Shinohara, but in the end, they had reconciled by themselves.

"Well, it's good, isn't it?" Holmes asked. "Sally says she's grateful to you. It's rather clever of her to say so through an interview instead of telling you directly."

"Yeah, she must've let you have the credit because she cares about your future," Akihito said.

Holmes gave me my phone back. I looked at the article and saw that the words "Aoi Mashiro" really were there. My heart was pounding.

"Oh, but..." Akihito looked at Holmes. "Appraisers and curators are different things, right?"

"Yes." Holmes nodded. "They both only exist in the art world, but appraisers are—as the name suggests—people who appraise. Curators have a much broader scope of work. They use their appraisal skills and specialized knowledge to plan projects and produce exhibitions."

"I see..." Akihito nodded and turned to me. "I assumed you were aiming to become an appraiser like Holmes, but you're a curator-in-training?"

For a second, I didn't know what to say. I had spent a long time by Holmes's side, dreaming of becoming an appraiser like him. But on the other hand, I had also been fascinated by my short experience doing curator work in New York.

Holmes chuckled. "You're still a student. I don't think you need to rush to decide."

I breathed a sigh of relief. "You're right. I'll think it over carefully."

"Good." Holmes smiled.

"Fair enough," said Akihito. "But you're in charge of Ensho's exhibition, aren't

you? Isn't that kind of like curator work?"

"Oh, yes," I said.

"I bet you'll get some industry people coming because they read this article. Better work hard so that you don't disappoint them, curator-in-training." Akihito grinned mischievously.

"What?!"

Holmes glanced at him. "Please don't put pressure on her like that."

"Oh, my bad," said Akihito. "But hey, pressure makes for good motivation!" He gave me a thumbs-up.

I shrank back and muttered, "That's not true."

That afternoon was the beginning of my days of anguish.

Chapter 1: The Mount Funaoka Project and the Black Tortoise's Prayer

1

It was November now, and Holmes had returned to work at the antique store Kura. His training period at the Komatsu Detective Agency wasn't over, but business there was essentially on hold because the boss, Katsuya Komatsu, was overwhelmed with programming work. So Holmes had come back to Kura, promising that he'd rush to the office if an important case came in. Personally, I was happy to be able to take care of the store with him like we used to.

This is a story of a small incident that happened during these peaceful days.

*

"I want you to find out if he's cheating."

They were words you wouldn't expect to hear in an antique store. Behind the counter, Holmes and I looked at each other and then at the two people sitting in front of us.

One of them was a beautiful woman in her early fifties wearing a kimono. Her name was Atsuko Tadokoro, and she ran a flower arranging school that had a secret club in the basement. Holmes had met her during his work at the Komatsu Detective Agency.

Next to her was a woman in her mid-twenties, wearing a dress. She had tears in her eyes—she was the one who had made the request just now. She was pretty too, and at first glance, the two looked like mother and daughter, but that wasn't the case. Her name was Tomoka Asai, and she was a student at Atsuko's school.

Holmes and I had already introduced ourselves.

"Kiyotaka, could you take on Tomoka's request?" asked Atsuko, looking up at him as she wrapped her arm around her student's shoulders.

Holmes silently pressed his hand to his forehead. He was wearing his usual Kura attire: a black vest over a white shirt with sleeve garters around his upper arms. In other words, although he was a trainee at the Komatsu Detective Agency, he was currently an appraiser in an antique store. He certainly wouldn't be in the mood to investigate someone's life.

My face stiffened slightly as I realized what he was thinking.

Holmes paused for a second before smiling and saying, "Atsuko, if you're in need of a detective, why not pay Komatsu a visit?"

"I don't want to," the older woman said. "We did go to his office, but I asked about you and he said you were here. Besides, isn't he busy with his computer work right now? Even if we asked him for help, the request would end up going to you. And we'd rather have you do it anyway." She raised her hand to her mouth and laughed.

There's no winning against a Kyoto woman, huh?

"You have a point," Holmes said with a small sigh. "The Komatsu Detective Agency does do infidelity investigations. We charge market rate. The cost varies depending on the situation, but it'll be about this much per hour." He tapped a few buttons on the calculator and showed them the number.

"Huh?" Tomoka looked up, startled. "It costs that much?"

"Yes, which is why the client needs to give the investigator the exact date and time they suspect the cheating will occur. However, there's no guarantee that evidence will be obtained."

Tomoka looked troubled. It was as if she'd come here on impulse without considering what the investigation might cost.

"Am I correct in assuming that the target isn't your husband, but your boyfriend?"

She nodded. "We aren't married yet, but we're engaged."

"I see." Holmes folded his arms. "Why do you think he's cheating on you?"

Tomoka looked down, clenching her fists in her lap. "He's a wonderful person. I'm not a good match for him, and several people have even told me that."

Her words surprised me. She was very beautiful, yet she thought she didn't match up to her partner and other people were even saying that to her directly. Just how impressive *was* this man?

"I wasn't even on his radar at first," she continued. "But I liked him, so I did my best to get his attention. He eventually took an interest in me and we started dating."

As I listened to her story, I wondered if her fiancé was in the entertainment industry. That would explain why she—and others—didn't think she was a suitable partner for him. She wasn't a celebrity, after all.

"He treated me with such kindness and care that it was hard to believe he hadn't been interested in me before. And now we're engaged," Tomoka said happily. Then her face clouded over. "A few days after our engagement, it was my birthday. I was looking forward to spending it with him, but that morning, he said he couldn't see me that day because he was busy with work. Thinking about it now, that was when he started acting differently. His mind would be elsewhere when we were together, or he'd give excuses for not being able to see me as often as he used to. And the other day, I found out that he hadn't been working on my birthday."

Holmes hummed. "And that's why you think he's cheating on you?"

"I feel like he must be."

"Have you tried asking him about it?"

"No."

"You decided to have him investigated because you want to be sure, right?"

She flinched. "Yes."

"If it turns out that he *is* cheating on you, will you break off the engagement?"

She bit her lip. It seemed like she didn't want to call it off.

"In my opinion, hiring a detective to investigate is hard on both parties. If you were married, then it might be necessary, but since you're only engaged, I think it would be better for you to try talking to him on your own rather than having someone else provide the answer for you."

Holmes was right. If she wanted to leave her fiancé but couldn't because he wouldn't admit his wrongdoing, then an investigation might be needed. But in this case, she loved him and wanted to stay engaged if possible.

Tomoka trembled and said, "I'm too scared to get the answer myself, so I want someone else to do it for me."

Holmes looked at her in silence.

"I'm afraid of asking. I've had questions like, 'Do you love someone else?' and 'Do you want to break off the engagement?' on the tip of my tongue, but I was always too scared to ask," she said, tears in her eyes.

I knew the feeling well. I was aware that I was an outsider, but I couldn't help but ask, "You wanted someone else to give you the verdict, didn't you?"

Tomoka nodded. "I decided that I would leave him if the investigation revealed that he was cheating."

My heart ached as I sympathized with her again. "I completely understand how you feel," I murmured to myself, looking down. If I were in her shoes, I'd also get cold feet and want someone else to find out the truth for me. I could understand why she would want to run away after seeing the results.

Tomoka looked up at me, her eyes wet with tears. "Would you do the same thing if you were in my situation?"

"Huh?" I furrowed my brow as I thought about it. "I can relate to how you feel, but if it were me, I'd probably ask him right away."

"You're strong, Aoi."

"No, that's not it." I shook my head. "I want to trust the person I love. I want to believe until the last minute that it was just a misunderstanding. If it turned out that he betrayed me, I think I really would give up."

Tomoka's eyes widened. She laughed and said, "That's called being strong."

Really?

She fell silent for a while before letting out a small sigh. "You're right, though. I think I'll try believing in him too. I'm scared, but I'll ask. I mean, I'm already prepared to leave him anyway." Her face seemed to have brightened up a bit.

“Yeah.”

Next to me, Holmes nodded and said, “Yes, I think that’s for the best.”

Atsuko’s eyes widened in disappointment. “Are you sure about this, Tomoka? I’d say a proper investigation is still a valid option.”

“Thank you, but I want to see what I can do on my own first,” said Tomoka.

“If you’re fine with that, then so be it.” Atsuko shrugged and looked at Holmes. “Sorry for barging in only for nothing to come of it.”

“Don’t worry about it.” Holmes shook his head. “It’s best if they can solve the problem themselves.”

“Yes, you’re right.” Atsuko gave a crescent-eyed smile.

The two women thanked us and left Kura.

2

After making sure they were gone, I bowed to Holmes. “I’m sorry for butting in as an outsider. Even worse, I ended up costing you the job...”

“Not at all.” Holmes placed a hand on his chest. “I don’t like doing infidelity investigations in the first place, so I’m glad I was able to avoid it. Thank you.”

“You shouldn’t say that. Komatsu will get mad at you.”

“It’s fine. We’re essentially closed right now. Even if we weren’t, I think I would’ve encouraged her to face the issue herself.”

“I see.” I felt a bit relieved. “Do you think Tomoka’s fiancé is cheating on her?”

“It’s probably something else, or a misunderstanding caused by jealousy. After all, when someone is jealous, it distorts their perception of the truth.”

“Why do you think that?”

“If he really was cheating on her, he would’ve celebrated her birthday with her. Men act more sincere when they have something to hide,” Holmes said nonchalantly.

My face stiffened.

Suddenly, Holmes's phone buzzed. He took it out of his pocket and looked at the screen. "It's my father," he murmured, holding the phone up to his ear. "Hello?"

"Oh, Kiyotaka. It's me."

I could hear the manager's voice as well.

"I forgot to pass on the bulletins. Could you check them and pass them forward? They're still in the drawer."

"Again?" Holmes asked.

"I'm really sorry," the manager quickly said. *"Oh, and you wanted to meet with Mitsuoka, didn't you? They'll be at Kura with the documents soon."*

"Oh, really?" Holmes smiled. "All right."

"Anyway, thanks."

As soon as the call ended, Holmes opened the drawer and took out the neighborhood bulletins inside. "It's been quite a while since they arrived." He sighed, exasperated.

"Sometimes the manager puts them somewhere and then forgets about them, huh?" I said.

"Yes." Holmes frowned. "If he would just leave them on the counter instead of putting them away, he would remember to read them and pass them on. Look, this event is already over," he grumbled as he looked over the association news and added his signature.

"I'll go. Mieko's store is next, right?"

Bulletins were usually passed to one's immediate neighbor, but due to changes in the stores on this shopping street, they were no longer passed around in order. After Kura was a clothing store a short walk away.

"Sorry about this," Holmes said with a small bow, handing me the bulletins.

"No, it's no trouble at all."

"Since it's late, she might yell at you..."

I winced and hugged the bulletins to my chest. "It's okay. Mieko's our friend,

so it'll probably be fine."

"Yes, I'm sure she'll offer you tea. Feel free to take your time."

"Okay."

As I turned to leave, the door opened, ringing the chime.

The visitor—a woman—came inside hesitantly. "Excuse me." She was dressed in a formal suit and her medium-long hair was tied in a half-up style. Her eyes were large and bright, and she was more of the cute type rather than beautiful. She was attractive enough that it wouldn't be surprising to see her on TV. In fact, I felt as if I'd seen her somewhere before, so perhaps she really was a TV personality of some sort.

"Welcome," I said, captivated.

She bowed stiffly.

Holmes looked at her and gave his usual smile. "Mitsuoka, right? Hello."

The name reminded me of what the manager had said. *This woman is Mitsuoka, the person Holmes wanted to see.*

"H-Hello, Kiyotaka," she said nervously. "It's a pleasure to meet you." She walked up to the counter and blushed slightly. Apparently, although they hadn't met before, they knew of each other.

Seeing the attractive woman and the handsome Holmes smiling and chatting at the counter made me feel like I was watching a TV drama. I couldn't help but think that they looked good together. At the same time, I remembered what Tomoka had said about not matching up to her fiancé.

"I'll be going now," I said cheerfully, trying to shake off those thoughts.

I left the store and hurried to the clothing store in the shopping street, bulletins in hand.

"Hello," I said lightheartedly as I entered.

Mieko, a middle-aged woman, was at the checkout counter. She gave me a wrinkly smile and walked up to me. "Why, if it isn't Aoi. Long time no see."

“It really has been a long time. You haven’t been coming to Kura lately.”

“Oh, forgive me. I neglected to visit because there wouldn’t be delicious coffee without Kiyotaka around. You must have been lonely by yourself.”

I laughed and nodded. “Yes, I was. But Holmes is back at the store now.”

“Is his training over?”

“No, it just so happens that— Oh, right, here are the bulletins.” I handed them to her. “Apparently there was quite a delay in getting them to you. Sorry.”

“I assume it’s the manager’s fault,” Mieko said immediately.

I shrugged.

“That kid will really put off everything when he’s absorbed in his manuscripts.”

It was amusing to hear her call the manager “that kid.”

“Oh, yes, Aoi. Why don’t you have a cup of tea while you’re here?”

Normally, I would’ve smiled and said, “I’d love to.” But right now, I felt restless knowing that Holmes was with the pretty Mitsuoka. I wanted to go back to the store as soon as possible.

“Do you have to be back soon?” Mieko asked.

“Oh, no, I don’t.”

“Good. Have a seat. I received some sweets from Kyoto Gion Anon.”

“I haven’t heard of that place,” I said, sitting down in a chair.

“It’s a modern-looking shop that specializes in red bean paste. I was given this ‘An-pone’ set.”

She took out a gift box containing two small jars and several monaka wafers without filling. The jars were filled with what looked like jam, one red-bean-colored and the other cream-colored. According to the description, they were coarse red bean paste and mascarpone.

“You fill the monaka yourself and eat them,” Mieko explained.

“That sounds like fun.”

“Here, eat up.” She gave me a hand towel and began preparing the tea.

“Thank you.”

I wiped my hands and picked up one of the monaka halves. I filled it with the red bean paste and mascarpone, then put the other half on top like a lid. I took a bite and was surprised by the crispness of the monaka. The red bean paste wasn’t too sweet, while the other filling, which was like cream cheese, had an exquisite flavor.

“It’s delicious,” I said. “And it feels kind of innovative.”

“Indeed. It’s a new Japanese sweet,” Mieko said proudly.

The delightful sweets cheered me up. *But still...* I tilted my head. *Holmes knew other pretty women too, like Izumi and Keiko. I was nervous whenever I saw him with them, but I stopped feeling that way as of late. So why am I reacting so much to Mitsuoka?*

I spent almost an hour at Mieko’s store before returning to Kura.

“I’m back,” I said, stepping inside. Mitsuoka was gone. “Huh? Where’s the visitor?”

“She left,” said Holmes.

Apparently, we’d just missed each other. Holmes was putting the cup she’d used on the tray.

I walked behind the counter, feeling slightly relieved. “I’ll wash those. You can continue with the accounting.”

“Sorry. Thank you.”

“It’s nothing.” I picked up the tray and went to the kitchenette.

What is Mitsuoka like? What did she come here for? I wanted to ask those questions, but I felt ashamed of the jealousy in my heart.

As I was washing the cups, Holmes asked, “Was Mieko angry?”

“Yes, but only with the manager. She also gave me delicious sweets.” I described what she had served me.

“I see,” Holmes said in a gentle tone of voice.

After finishing up in the kitchenette, I began my usual cleaning. As I carefully removed the specks of dust from the merchandise, I felt myself calm down. *Holmes said that jealousy distorts the truth. I can’t believe I’d be so upset just because a cute girl came to the store. In the end, I guess I was just jealous.* I slumped my shoulders.

“Oh, right, Aoi.”

“Yes?” I turned around.

“About Ensho’s exhibition...”

I flinched.

“Are you sure it’s all right to schedule it for December—that is, Christmastime—as we discussed before?”

I looked down, troubled. Something about this conversation felt familiar. Right—it reminded me of the manager and his editor. When he wasn’t making any progress on his manuscript whatsoever and his editor called to ask, “How far have you gotten?” he would tremble and shrink back. I used to find it amusing, but now I knew how he felt. When you can’t think of any ideas and someone asks about your progress, it makes you want to run away.

What should I do in this situation? Force myself to say, “Yes, it’s fine”? What would the manager do?

If the manager’s editor asked him, “Will you make it in time for a December release?” and he wasn’t ready, he wouldn’t hide his progress. He said that lying to keep up appearances would only end up causing a lot of trouble later on.

It’s true.

I clenched the feather duster in my hand and looked straight at Holmes. “Um, I wanted to hold it around Christmastime, but I still don’t have a good idea of what I want to do with it. Would it be okay to hold off on deciding a date just a little longer?”

“Sure.” Holmes smiled. “Ensho said anytime was fine, and I don’t have a problem with it either.”

“Sorry about that.”

I was a fan of Ensho’s work, so I didn’t want to go ahead without a solid plan. Plus, because of Sally’s interview, people in Japan were asking the question, “Who is Aoi Mashiro?” I was just a student at a university that didn’t even specialize in art. But since Sally had chosen me as her honor student, I was attracting the attention of some curious people. And now I was planning an exhibition for a painter favored by one of the wealthiest men in the world, Zhifei Jing: Taisei Ashiya a.k.a. Ensho. All of the pressure was making me overthink and freeze up. That said...

“If this were a normal exhibition at a museum, I wouldn’t be able to make such a selfish request. I know that, but...” I sighed, depressed by my lack of professionalism.

Holmes gently raised his index finger. “I have an idea.”

“Huh?”

“I’ll give you until the end of this month—November—to decide whether to go ahead with the Christmas plan or postpone it. Even though the exhibition is being held at home, the preparations will still take some time.” He gave his usual smile, but I sensed no leniency in his eyes.

The tense atmosphere made me straighten my back. “Okay. I’ll come up with an answer by then.” I bowed.

Holmes chuckled. “Please don’t be so stiff. Oh, right. You’re going to start beautifying the city with Kaori and Haruhiko, right?”

“Oh, yes. I know I should be focusing on other things, but...”

“No.” Holmes shook his head. “Please try out the activities that interest you. Even if it’s completely unrelated, working hard at something can sometimes give you the hint you need. I’ll be able to stay at Kura for a while, so don’t worry about the store.”

“Okay.” I nodded with renewed resolve.

3

Soon enough, it was time for my first meeting with the Make Kyoto More Beautiful Project—KyoMore for short. It was held in a university classroom, and around ten members were in attendance. The desks were arranged in a square, with everyone seated on the sides away from the whiteboard.

The leader, Haruhiko, hadn't arrived yet. Everyone else was chatting and wondering what the sudden meeting was for.

Kaori looked around and murmured, "A lot of people showed up today."

"Is this everyone?" I asked.

"Probably."

"Maybe it's because it's lunch break, so it's easy for people to make it." Even those with commitments after school could attend a lunch meeting, myself included.

The sliding door opened with a rattle and Haruhiko came in.

"Sorry for calling you here on such short notice, everyone," he said, putting his hands together in apology. "Thanks for coming."

His friendly smile always seemed to put people at ease. He was baby-faced and looked more like a boy than a man. I remembered Kaori saying that he felt like a younger brother even though he was older than us, and I had to agree.

Following Haruhiko into the classroom were a large, middle-aged man in a suit and a woman in her mid-twenties. I didn't recognize them. Did they work for the university?

Everyone else seemed to be wondering the same thing. I heard whispers of, "Who are they?"

"These people are asking the KyoMore project for help," said Haruhiko. "This is Sada, who runs an Italian restaurant in Kita-ku. He also does volunteer work. And this is Takei from the Kita-ku ward office."

Sada gave a wrinkly smile and bowed. "Nice to meet you all. Kajiwara already introduced me, but I'm Yutaka Sada and I own an Italian restaurant. I was born in Kobe, but I did my training at a hotel in Osaka, and now I run my own place in Kita-ku. I chose that ward because I liked the area around Mount Funaoka,

which is a residential neighborhood but still has a historic atmosphere. We've been in business for ten years, and fortunately, we're doing well. Now I'm doing my best to give back to the local community."

The woman bowed next. "I'm Takei from the Kita-ku ward office. It's a pleasure to meet you."

We bowed as well, confused by the suddenness of it all.

"Sada, Takei, please have a seat."

The two nodded and sat in the chairs in front of the whiteboard. Haruhiko sat at the end of that row of desks.

Takei looked around at everyone and lowered her head. "I learned about KyoMore through the litter cleanup at Mount Hidari Daimonji last month. Thank you again for your efforts."

Mount Hidari Daimonji was one of the mountains where bonfires were lit in various shapes as part of the Gozan no Okuribi festival. Most of the country associated the festival with the character for "Dai," meaning "large." What other prefectures usually saw on TV was the Dai-shaped bonfire on Mount Daimonji in Sakyo-ku, but there was actually another Dai bonfire in Kita-ku, on Mount Hidari Daimonji.

Sada lowered his head too. "Thank you," he said, scratching his head in embarrassment. "It sounds weird coming from me since I'm not a government worker, but as someone who loves the area, I'm really glad to see students doing that kind of thing."

His smile seemed to reflect his warm personality, and our expressions naturally softened as well.

"By the way," Sada said, looking around. "Are any of you also not from Kyoto Prefecture?"

I raised my hand, expecting to be the only one, but it turned out that most of the members were outsiders. I was surprised for a second, but then I realized it was probably *because* we weren't from Kyoto that we were interested in this kind of thing.

“Huh, there are quite a lot of you,” Sada remarked, intrigued.

“I have a question for those from other prefectures,” Takei said. “Please raise your hand if you knew about Mount Hidari Daimonji in Kita-ku before coming to Kyoto.”

I lowered my hand. I hadn’t even known the name Gozan no Okuribi before moving to Kyoto, let alone Mount Hidari Daimonji. It was embarrassing, but I felt better when I saw that most of the others had put down their hands as well.

Takei and Sada slumped their shoulders and said, “That’s the problem.”

“You’d think everyone would know about Mount Hidari Daimonji, since it’s part of Gozan no Okuribi, but as you can see, that isn’t the case,” said Takei. “We want people across the country to know more about the Kita-ku area.”

“Yes,” said Sada. “Kita-ku has a lot of places of interest, like Mount Funaoka, historic shrines and temples, and quaint shopping streets.”

“That’s right.” Takei nodded. “We call it the Mount Funaoka area, but we don’t know how to promote it to the rest of the country. We’d like to enlist the ideas and help of the young members of the KyoMore project.”

With that explanation, we finally understood the situation.

“By the way...” Haruhiko looked at Takei. “Does the ward office have a vision for what they want to do with the Mount Funaoka area?”

That’s a good question. I quickly opened my notebook and picked up my pen.

“The ward mayor said he wants to make it a pilgrimage for couples,” Takei replied.

“Ooh,” everyone said.

I jotted down “Funaoka area → pilgrimage for couples.” When I looked up, I saw that Haruhiko was taking notes as well.

We’re going to help revitalize a neighborhood. That’s so wonderful, I thought excitedly.

4

“Huh?” Holmes turned around in surprise, his eyes wide open. “They want to turn the Mount Funaoka area into a pilgrimage for couples?”

After school, I had gone to Kura for my evening shift and told Holmes about the request from the Kita-ku ward office. His reaction was unexpected—I thought for sure he would’ve said, “That sounds wonderful.”

Bewildered, I clenched my apron. “Um, is that weird?”

The KyoMore members had spent the remainder of our lunchtime meeting looking at the map and thinking of a date plan. The Mount Funaoka area had hiking trails, shrines, and temples. All of us had excitedly agreed that it could be a good destination for couples.

“Sorry,” Holmes said with an apologetic frown. “I can’t help but associate it with the war.”

“The war?”

“The Onin War,” he said flatly. It was a historical civil war that had affected the entire city of Kyoto.

“Oh, right.”

When Kyoto people say “the war,” they’re generally referring to the Onin War. It’s a familiar story at this point, and nowadays, a lot of people say it jokingly. Holmes seems like he would take it seriously, though...

I looked at him and asked, “Why does it make you think of the Onin War?”

“It was a particularly fierce battleground.”

“Oh...” I panicked. “I didn’t know that...”

Of course he’d be surprised if you called a land where violent battles were fought a “pilgrimage for couples.”

“Is it a bad idea, then?” I asked.

“Hmm, well...” Holmes folded his arms.

“Oh,” I said, clapping my hands together. “Are there any shrines or temples in the Mount Funaoka area that give you good luck in love? What about”—I opened the map of Kita-ku that I’d received from the ward office staff—“this one, Genbu Shrine?” I pointed at its location.

Holmes tilted his head, his arms still folded. “As you can tell from the name, Genbu Shrine represents Genbu, the Black Tortoise, which protects Kyoto from the north. It’s one of the four guardian deities, along with Seiryu the Azure Dragon, Suzaku the Vermilion Bird, and Byakko the White Tiger. Genbu Shrine is a place to pray for disaster abatement and good health, so it doesn’t have a strong romantic image.”

Judging by his face, what he really meant was, “It doesn’t have a romantic image at all.”

“Well then, um, what about Kenkun Shrine? Is it good for love?”

“Er, the primary patron deity there is Nobunaga Oda.”

I froze. *The great warlord Nobunaga Oda, nicknamed the “Demon King of the Sixth Heaven” to this day.* I pictured the fierce general I’d seen in historical dramas.

“Okay, yeah. No romance there.” *You’d be better off praying to win a competition.* I slumped my shoulders, disappointed.

Holmes chuckled.

“Please don’t laugh at me...”

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to. It’s just that you’re trying so hard. Those two shrines have nothing to do with love, but there are others in the area. For example, Imamiya Shrine is famous for helping people marry rich, and Koto-in Temple on the Daitoku-ji Temple grounds is the home of the grave of Tadaoki and Gracia Hosokawa, a loving couple.”

“Oh, right.” I took my pen and notebook out of my pocket and jotted down notes. I smiled nostalgically as I wrote down the names of Imamiya Shrine and Koto-in Temple. “We went to both of those, huh?”

We had gone to Imamiya Shrine with Rikyu and his dad, Sakyo. The delicious

roasted mochi we'd eaten there was unforgettable. At Daitoku-ji Temple, I was awed by Koto-in Temple's beautiful greenery, and the powerful love between the Hosokawas had moved me to tears.

"It brings back memories, doesn't it?" Holmes said.

"Yes. Like you said, these could be pilgrimage stops for couples." I looked down at my notes and smiled.

"Unfortunately, I don't think getting people to visit shrines and temples would count as 'revitalizing the Mount Funaoka area.' Those two were already famous to begin with."

"Oh, you're right."

Even if Imamiya Shrine and Koto-in Temple did get labeled as pilgrimage spots for couples, simply having people go there and leave wouldn't make much of a difference. We needed them to visit other places as well. But how?

What if it were me? If someone said to me, "You should go to the Mount Funaoka area because it's a nice place," I would definitely ask, "What do you recommend there?"

"Oh!" I looked up. *We need to compile all of the information before presenting it.* "It might be a good idea to make a map of a fun route to take around recommended spots," I murmured.

"Yes." Holmes nodded. "I agree."

From the sound of it, he had thought of the idea already but refrained from saying it. It was like he was encouraging me to think and come up with a solution by myself. I appreciated his kindness, but it was a bit frustrating.

"I bet *you'd* be able to come with a great map," I said, pouting.

"Not at all." Holmes shook his head. "I'm too caught up in ancient history. The elderly might enjoy my route, but I doubt it would resonate with young people."

I couldn't help but laugh. "Mount Funaoka did make you think of 'the war,' after all."

"Exactly." He nodded. "You and the others should use your fresh mindsets to

make a map that people will enjoy exploring.”

“Yes, I’m sure we’ll be able to come up with something great if we work together.”

“I’m looking forward to it.”

“I’ll do my best.” I put my notebook back in my pocket. “Oh, right, speaking of coming up with things, I wanted to change the display window since it’s already November.”

“Now that you mention it, it’s still set up for October.”

“Right. Um, do you mind if I look around the second floor to see what we have?” The second floor was Kura’s storeroom. I had a general grasp of the first floor’s inventory, but the second floor was full of unknown buried treasures.

“Of course you may.” Holmes nodded.

“Sorry, I’ll be upstairs for a while, then. I’ll clean it up while I’m there.”

I gave a small bow and headed up, duster and wash rag in hand. At the same time, I heard Holmes say, “Hello?” It seemed that his phone had rung.

“Hey, it’s me.” Akihito’s voice was so loud, it even reached me on the stairs.

Holmes distanced his phone from his ear and grumbled, “Could you talk more quietly? And who’s ‘me’? Is this a bank transfer scam?”

“Your best friend.”

“I don’t have one. Can I hang up now?”

“Rude!”

Despite his cold words, Holmes seemed very amused. “So, what’s the matter?”

“What happened with that thing?”

“Oh, nothing as of yet...” Holmes moved behind the counter, so I couldn’t hear Akihito’s voice anymore.

I was curious as to what “that thing” was, but I brushed it off as I went upstairs. Right before I reached the second floor...

“Me? Personally, I think Mitsuoka is good.”

I froze.

“Yes, Mitsuoka really is to my taste. I can’t help but care about looks...”

My heart pounded with unease. I went down a few stairs and peeked into the first floor, but I couldn’t see Holmes. He probably thought I was already on the second floor.

“Yes, I’m only talking about preferences. I haven’t decided anything yet.”

Oh. I went upstairs, feeling bitter. Mitsuoka *was* really cute. I had been thinking a little bit about Holmes’s type ever since the conversation with Kaori, but I hadn’t known what it was until now.

“So he likes women like Mitsuoka,” I whispered softly. Perhaps my overreaction to her had been a woman’s intuition.

It’s not anyone’s fault. Everyone has preferences when it comes to looks. Holmes ignored his and chose me, so there’s nothing to worry about.

I tried to reassure myself, but I still felt lonely. I heaved a sigh. “This won’t work.” I wasn’t going to be able to design a good display in this state of mind. I decided to give up and go back downstairs.

When I returned to the first floor, Holmes had already finished his phone call. His eyes widened when he saw me. “Aoi, are you all right?” He walked up to me, concerned.

I looked up at him, bewildered.

“Your feet are dragging and you look very pale. You came down so quickly because you aren’t feeling well, right?”

He was as sharp as always. However, I wasn’t sick.

“Oh, no,” I replied.

“I overheard your conversation just now. People like Mitsuoka are your type, huh?” The thought of saying that was so obnoxious that I bit my lip.

“How do you feel? Are you perhaps anemic?” Holmes peered into my face as I panicked.

I choked up. Regardless of what his original preferences were, he cared about me so much. “Sorry, it’s fine.”

“It’s not fine. I’ll escort you home when my father is back, so please rest on the sofa until then.” He lifted me up in a so-called “bridal carry.”

My eyes widened. “I-I really am fine.”

“No. You’re quick to push yourself too hard, so I don’t believe you. You’re very important to me, so please take care of yourself,” he said in a slightly scolding tone as he carried me to the sofa.

“I was just feeling a little lonely,” I murmured. “Sorry.”

“Huh?”

“It’s nothing.” I shook my head and lowered my eyes in guilt.

5

The KyoMore project met again the next day during lunch.

The leader, Haruhiko, stood in front of the whiteboard, writing, “Plan: Turn the Mount Funaoka Area into a Pilgrimage for Couples” in red marker. I remembered what Holmes had said about it and gave a stiff smile.

“All right, can I get everyone’s ideas?” Haruhiko asked. The moment he finished writing and turned around, Kaori raised her hand. “Yes, Kaori?”

“Aoi and I were talking about it earlier, and wasn’t the Mount Funaoka area a fierce battlefield during the Onin War? Turning it into a pilgrimage for couples might be an unrealistic plan.”

Before the meeting, I had told Kaori about my conversation with Holmes. I hadn’t expected her to bring it up here, so I was both startled and glad. I knew I would’ve felt conflicted if the discussions had proceeded without acknowledging the Onin War.

Most of the members looked surprised, since they weren’t originally from Kyoto. On the other hand, Haruhiko simply said, “That’s right. There was even a fort built in the Nishijin district.”

“You knew?” Kaori and I asked.

“Yes. But I don’t think it has to stay a bloodstained land forever.”

“What do you mean by that?” Kaori asked. The other members and I listened attentively, wondering the same thing.

“Take the Kamo River for example. The riverbank is a relaxing place for couples now, but it was once an execution site laid out with dead bodies. There isn’t even a trace of that atmosphere anymore, is there? I think that’s thanks to the couples and the people who love the Kamo River—their happiness and excitement swept away its dark past. So I think it’d be wonderful if the Mount Funaoka area could also transform from a gruesome land into a place where couples can be happy together,” Haruhiko said shyly.

I was truly impressed. The others seemed to feel the same way; before I knew it, everyone was clapping.

“S-Stop that, guys. It’s embarrassing.” He blushed and scratched his head.

I glanced at Kaori and whispered into her ear, “Haruhiko’s a great guy, huh?” I wanted to know how she felt. She had told me that she thought of him as a younger brother, but I didn’t think she was being honest.

“Yep.” She smiled and nodded. “He’s a good guy and not complicated at all.”

“Yeah. A lot of people seem to think he’s still going out with Meguro. If they find out he’s available, they might go for him.”

“Absolutely. I’m sure he’ll be able to get a girlfriend soon.”

“Yeah...”

It seems like Kaori really doesn’t have special feelings for Haruhiko.

I looked at her and saw her smile as she followed him with her gaze. Seeing her like this made me think she had feelings for him, but at the same time, her words hadn’t felt forced at all.

How does she really *feel*?

After that, we immediately began discussing ways to revitalize the Mount

Funaoka area. Written on the whiteboard were ideas such as “teach people the good aspects of the region → hold a fair” and “pilgrimage for couples → make a map.” We considered whether the map would be a single page or a booklet if we were to make it.

“Oh, right.” Haruhiko raised his hand. “I heard that Kenkun Shrine is also known for fulfilling great ambitions. Love is an ambition, so we could probably add it to the route. What do you guys think?”

“Love *does* count as an ambition,” everyone agreed.

I looked at the bullet list of ideas on the whiteboard. They all sounded great, but there was one thing I was still a bit hung up on. I quietly raised my hand.

“Yes, Aoi?” said Haruhiko.

“I think turning the Mount Funaoka area into a pilgrimage for couples is a great idea, but on the other hand, we shouldn’t forget its history. Everyone recognizes the Onin War’s name, but there are a lot of people who don’t know much about it. I think it’d be nice if we could also make this a place where people can learn about that history,” I said hesitantly.

“True,” everyone murmured.

“Yes,” said Haruhiko. “What was formerly a fierce battlefield will transform into a pilgrimage for couples, but we mustn’t forget the tragic history of the Onin War. I do hope it’ll be a place that teaches that.”

Everyone nodded in agreement.

“That’s a really good idea, Aoi,” said Kaori.

“Thanks,” I said shyly.

“Oh, right. Do you have work today?”

“No, I don’t.”

“Why don’t we take a look around the Mount Funaoka area today? We can explore the shops to find places for the map.”

“Sure, let’s go.”

I had originally had a shift today, but it was canceled because I’d looked sick

yesterday. Despite my refusing, Holmes had stubbornly insisted on driving me home as soon as the manager came back to the store. Thinking about it made me feel an uncomfortable mix of apologetic and gloomy. But I had decided to put it out of my mind. At times like this, it was good to have something to focus all of my attention on.

6

After school, Kaori and I went to the Mount Funaoka area. First, we put together two simple routes: an “exploring history” course that visited shrines and temples, and a “stroll around town” course where one could enjoy cafes and stores. Since we didn’t have much time today, we decided to try out the latter.

We went down the Shin-Omiya shopping street towards Kuramaguchi Street. The neighborhood had more cafes, fashionable shops, and hands-on classes than I expected. It was really interesting. On Kuramaguchi Street, there was a bathhouse called Funaoka Onsen, and near it was a charming cafe that had been renovated from another public bath. Tired from all the walking, we decided to take a break at that cafe, which was called Sarasa Nishijin.

“Wow, it really is like a bathhouse,” I said, looking up at the building. It had a dignified exterior with a curved karahafu gable. “How do I put this? It’s just...amazing.”

“In a way, it’s new.”

“Yeah.”

As we were about to enter the bathhouse cafe, we noticed a lovely place next to it called Fujinomori-ryo. It was renovated from an old townhouse.

“The building next door is nice too,” I said.

“I never paid attention to it when passing by, but you’re right.”

Kaori and I decided to check it out. We entered the building and found that it housed shops selling trinkets and ceramics made by up-and-coming artists. The glasswork shop was the one that caught my eye. In New York, I had been tested

by two curators, Sally Barrymore and Yohei Shinohara. I had passed the ceramics parts, but the glasswork had been a complete mystery to me. The main reasons were that Kura had very little in the way of glass art and Holmes had never taught me about it before. Looking at the glasswork here, I felt that it had a different charm than ceramics.

“They’re so pretty,” I murmured. “I’ve been wanting to study glass...”

I was absorbed in the glasswork for so long that Kaori gave me a light pat on the back and said, “Aoi, we should go to the cafe now.”

“Oh, okay.”

We left Fujinomori-ryo and went to the cafe, Sarasa Nishijin.

“Welcome. Sit anywhere you like.”

We bowed, sat at an empty table, and looked around the store curiously. The retro majolica-tiled walls were very vivid. Since the cafe had kept the original structure of the bathhouse it was renovated from, there was a mix of nostalgia and newness. It was a strange feeling, as if we’d wandered into another world.

“The decor sure is psychedelic,” said Kaori. “This place is always fairly crowded. There’s often a line.”

“Have you been here before?” I asked.

“Yes, I come here quite a lot. I live in Nishijin, so it’s not far from home.”

“Oh, I see.”

We ordered cake and coffee and opened our map and notebook. We circled the shops we’d visited so far.

“There were a lot more nice stores than I expected,” I said. “The picture book cafe in Shin-Omiya was cute.”

“Yeah. The lacquer store and the fox-themed teahouse were good too.”

“Yep.”

As we were nodding to each other, a woman in a dress entered the cafe. Her silhouette looked familiar.

“Huh?” I squinted. “Aigasa?”

It was the author, Kurisu Aigasa. She usually wore Gothic Lolita fashion, so I was accustomed to seeing her in it—but I was surprised to see her in this cafe. Kaori, however, didn’t have much of a reaction.

“Oh, I heard she comes here sometimes,” Kaori said.

“I had no idea.”

Come to think of it, Aigasa lives in Kyoto. She also seems like she’d be fond of unusual cafes like this.

As I was wondering whether to say hello, something happened that made both my and Kaori’s eyes widen: Haruhiko followed Aigasa into the cafe. They sat facing each other, opened their notebooks, and pointed at the pages while chatting cheerfully. They didn’t seem to notice our presence.

Haruhiko was a completely normal young man, while Aigasa was the type of person who looked perfectly natural in Gothic Lolita fashion. It was as if they were from different planets. It made me imagine a story where a man from the real world wanders into a mysterious cafe and meets a witch from another world. Stranger still was the fact that, despite being so different, they looked like they would make a good couple.

“What an unusual combination,” I murmured softly, looking at Kaori.

She bit her lip and lowered her eyes in silence. Her face was pale, and she seemed to be feeling unwell.

“Kaori...”

My past self wouldn’t have understood right away, but I now knew exactly what she was feeling: jealousy. Perhaps I had been making the same face yesterday.

When the person you like is with another woman and they seem to really suit each other...you can stay calm when it’s just a what-if scenario, but encountering it in person is something else entirely.

Aigasa eventually stood up, waved goodbye, and left the cafe. Haruhiko walked outside with her to see her off, then returned to his seat and began

writing something in his notebook.

Kaori heaved a sigh, seeming to be calmer now that Haruhiko was alone. It was as if she'd been holding her breath the whole time. "Sorry, I was a bit surprised."

"Yeah." I nodded.

After a pause, she continued, "Haruhiko always carries a small notebook with him."

"I noticed." Whenever something happened, he would immediately write it down. I was similar in that respect, so I hadn't thought much of it, but...

"He dropped it once while he was walking. I told him and tried to pick it up, but he yelled, 'Don't touch it!' He's normally gentle, so I was surprised to see him angry."

That *was* surprising.

"He might've written some private things in it, though, so I didn't let it bother me. But..." Kaori took a deep breath. "He was showing it to Aigasa just now." She grimaced.

"You *do* like him after all, right?" I asked quietly.

Kaori made a bitter expression. "To be honest, I didn't know." She took another breath. "There's actually a reason I felt uncomfortable around Holmes."

"Huh?" I hadn't been expecting those words at all.

"He's kind of similar to my dad when he was young. Oh, his face is completely different, though. My dad isn't *that* handsome."

I nodded in silence.

"My dad has an average face, but he's tall and slim. Apparently he was pretty popular in his younger days. People called him the 'young master of the kimono fabrics store' and a 'graceful Kyoto man.'"

A tall young owner of a kimono fabrics store *would* be popular with women, and I could see how he resembled Holmes if he was being called a graceful

Kyoto man.

“Back when business was good, he would be surrounded by women outside our house.”

“Huh?” I looked up.

Kaori scratched her head, grimacing. “When my mom found out, she went half-crazy. It was chaos at home. As for me, that was around the time when the guy I had a crush on rejected me really harshly. Because of those two things, I lost trust in men.”

“That’s understandable.”

“Looking back, I think I was attracted to the manager because I was touched by how he continued to love his wife after she passed away. I liked him, but I didn’t want him to reciprocate.”

Her emotions were complicated, but I vaguely understood.

“And with Holmes, I was always thinking, ‘He’s just like dad. Who knows what he’s doing in secret?’ Like I said before, I was worried about you. But he does seem devoted to you, so I’ve changed my opinion of him.”

Now I felt conflicted. Kaori would surely be angry if she knew that Holmes had told Akihito that cute women unlike me were his type.

“Kohinata was a wonderful person, but he seemed really popular. I couldn’t take the next step with him because I was afraid of getting hurt.”

“I see...” I finally knew why Kaori hadn’t gone for Kohinata. She might’ve been able to if it weren’t for her past trauma.

After a pause, Kaori glanced at Haruhiko. “Haruhiko isn’t the same type as Kohinata, but he still seems popular. I really did think I wanted us to be good friends. But...” She clutched her bangs, crumpling them, and smiled weakly. “I don’t know. When I see him enjoying himself with another woman, my heart can’t take it.”

“Kaori...” I understood her feelings painfully well. I felt like I was going to cry. “We don’t know if those two are going out, though.”

“Yeah.” She nodded. “And even though I’m saying all this, I still don’t know

exactly how I feel, so...” She looked down at her cup.

A moment of silence passed.

“Oh? Is that you, Kaori and Aoi?” Haruhiko stood up and came over to us.

We looked at him, startled.

“You’re here too, huh?”

“Yeah,” Kaori and I said with awkward smiles.

“We were walking around the area and making a map,” I said.

“That’s great. Would you mind showing me?”

“Here.” I nodded.

“Thanks. Let’s see...” He sat down next to Kaori, who immediately blushed.

“We thought of two routes,” I explained. “The first is what we just did, a ‘stroll around town’ course that goes down the Shin-Omiya shopping street, exiting onto Kuramaguchi Street. The second is an ‘exploring history’ course that we’re going to try next time.”

Haruhiko nodded as he looked at the routes. “They both sound great.”

Kaori and I thanked him.

“I’d like to try this ‘exploring history’ course in a group of four.”

“Four?” Kaori and I asked in unison.

“Me, Kaori, Aoi, and ideally Holmes, since I feel like he would provide hints for us. I’ll ask him, but it would be nice if Aoi could let him know about it too.”

Kaori and I exchanged glances.

“Oh, you’re not interested?” Haruhiko slumped his shoulders, disappointed by our lack of reaction.

We hurriedly shook our heads.

“No, I think it’s a good idea,” I said. “Let’s do that.”

“I-I’m fine with it too.” Kaori nodded awkwardly.

“It’s decided, then,” Haruhiko said with a carefree smile. “I’m looking forward

to it.”

“Yeah.” We smiled back.

“Oh, I might as well call Holmes right now,” I said. “I’ll just be a minute.” I took out my phone and went outside.

7

Meanwhile...

“Sorry, kiddo. I’m really sorry.” Katsuya Komatsu was sitting at Kura’s counter, facing Kiyotaka with his hands pressed together.

Kiyotaka placed a cup of coffee in front of the detective, seeming exasperated. “I understand that you’re busy, but I can’t have you sending your clients to Kura. This is an antique store.”

“No, you’re completely right. I just can’t help but rely on you.” Komatsu scratched his head and sipped his coffee.

“Has the programming work been going well?”

“Yeah. *Too* well. They keep asking for more and more. I’m making a lot more money than I do with my main job.”

“Why don’t you make it your main profession, then?”

Komatsu choked. “You’re as harsh as ever, kiddo.”

“Am I? I think anyone would agree. That job leverages your skills *and* earns more, does it not?”

“Maybe, but I’m good with being a detective.”

“Why is that?”

Komatsu’s cheeks reddened slightly. “It was my dream job ever since I was a kid.”

“I see, so that’s how it is.” Kiyotaka chuckled.

Embarrassed, Komatsu changed the subject. “Oh, right. What did Atsuko want? Was it about the new shop?”

“No.” Kiyotaka shook his head. “She brought one of her flower arranging students, whose fiancé is suspected of cheating. In the end, the student decided to resolve the issue herself.”

Komatsu hummed and rested his chin on his hand.

“By the way, what was that about a new shop?”

“Oh, you know how Atsuko runs a secret club in Gion for married women?”

“Yes.” Kiyotaka nodded.

“I heard that she’s opening a second one, this time a high-end club for men.”

Kiyotaka fell silent.

“Something wrong?”

“It’s gone past the point of no return,” Kiyotaka muttered. “Komatsu, there’s something I’d like you to investigate for me.”

“S-Sure. What is it?” The detective nodded, confused.

Suddenly, Kiyotaka’s phone buzzed. He looked at the screen and smiled the moment he saw it was a call from Aoi.

“Oh, Holmes,” she said. “Can you talk right now?”

“Yes, it’s fine. What’s the matter?”

“Um, I’m with Kaori and Haruhiko right now. We were talking about visiting the shrines and temples in the Mount Funaoka area sometime. If it’s all right with you, would you like to—”

“I’d love to.”

“Great. I’ll let you know when we’ve decided on a date, then.”

“Yes, I can come anytime. I’ll ask my father to watch over the shop.”

“Okay. Thank you, and see you later.” Aoi ended the call. Apparently, that was the only thing she had wanted to ask.

Kiyotaka put his phone back in his pocket, still smiling.

“You look happy, kiddo.”

“Yes, it’s a lucky day when I get to hear Aoi’s voice when I’m not expecting it.”

“You never change, huh?” Komatsu murmured, exasperated. “So, what do you want me to investigate?”

“Oh, yes, sorry. I want you to look into Atsuko’s student, Tomoka Asai, and her fiancé.”

“Uh, all right.” Komatsu nodded.

8

Our practice run of the “exploring history” course was scheduled for a sunny Saturday. We were going to visit the locations in the following order: Genbu Shrine, Kenkun Shrine, Daitokuji Temple, Koto-in Temple (part of the Daitokuji Temple grounds), and Imamiya Shrine.

Holmes and I went by bus to the Daitokuji-mae stop, intentionally traveling the way tourists would. From there, we headed to Genbu Shrine on foot. Kaori and Haruhiko were going to meet up with us there.

“Genbu Shrine holds the Genbu Yasurai Festival every year in April,” Holmes explained as we walked.

I nodded without really thinking. “Wait, huh?” I tilted my head. “Imamiya Shrine has a Yasurai Festival too, right?”

“Yes, but it originated here.”

“I see.”

We quickly reached Genbu Shrine. For a shrine dedicated to the divine beast that protected Kyoto from the north, it was much smaller than I’d expected. After bowing and passing through the stone torii gate, we were already at the main building. I could see residential houses on the other side of the shrine. It felt anticlimactic at first, but upon entering the shrine grounds, I felt the sense of solemnity you would expect from a sacred land—especially one devoted to one of the four divine beasts.

As I was admiring the atmosphere, I spotted Kaori and Haruhiko.

“Aoi!” Kaori called.

“Holmes,” Haruhiko said.

They waved and ran up to us, making sure to stop before the torii gate and bow once before coming inside.

“Good morning, Kaori and Haruhiko,” I said.

“Yes, good morning,” Holmes added.

We bowed to them.

Haruhiko blushed happily and said, “Holmes, thank you for agreeing to come with us today.”

“It’s nothing.” Holmes shook his head. “When I heard about the KyoMore project from Aoi, I thought it sounded like a lot of fun. I’m glad you invited me.”

“I really appreciate it. There are actually a lot of things I was hoping to ask you.”

Holmes smiled, amused. “You certainly resemble your brother in that sense. Let’s pray at the shrine first, though.”

“Oh, right.”

We stood in a row in front of the shrine building. Since there wasn’t a bell to ring, we skipped to clapping twice, reciting the rite in our minds, and lowering our heads.

“Come to think of it...” I took my phone out.

“Is something wrong?” Holmes asked.

“Oh, no. This is Genbu’s shrine, right? I want to see where the other three beasts’ shrines are.”

There were four divine beasts in total: Genbu of the north, Seiryu of the east, Byakko of the west, and Suzaku of the south.

“Ah,” Holmes murmured. “According to one theory, Seiryu’s is Kawai Shrine, which is located within Shimogamo Shrine’s grounds. Byakko’s is Konoshimanimasu Amateru Mitama Shrine in Uzumasa, colloquially known as Kaiko no Yashiro. Suzaku’s is Kitamukimushi Hachimangu, located within Tanaka Shrine.”

As usual, he answered my nonchalant question with ease. Kaori and I were used to it, but Haruhiko seemed excited.

“Wow, now I know what my brother meant when he said you were like a walking encyclopedia. I need to write that down before I forget.” Haruhiko quickly opened his notebook and jotted the information down.

Holmes smiled fondly and said, “You resemble Aoi in that regard.”

Most people used digital memo apps these days, but I was one of the few who still diligently kept a physical notebook.

Haruhiko didn’t seem to know what Holmes was referring to. “Huh? I resemble Aoi?” He blinked.

I couldn’t help but laugh. On the other hand, Kaori made a bitter expression for a second. She must’ve remembered how Haruhiko had shown Aigasa his notebook. However, she quickly shrugged it off and smiled cheerfully.

“Next up is Kenkun Shrine, right?” she asked, leaving the shrine grounds with a light gait.

It was the same as last time. Kaori was shocked to see Haruhiko with Aigasa, but the next day, she was back to normal. She said she’d think her feelings over, but I don’t know if she changed her mind about anything yet.

We headed for Kenkun Shrine. Holmes and Haruhiko walked in front, while Kaori and I followed them, looking at their backs.

“Do you have anything else planned for revitalizing the Mount Funayama area?” asked Holmes.

“We’re going to work with the Kita-ku ward office staff and the local residents’ association to hold a fair,” said Haruhiko.

“Whereabouts?”

“Umm, near Kenkun Shrine, at Mount Funayama Park.”

“It has a good view.”

“Yeah. I was concerned because it has a bit of a slope, but it does have a pretty big open space, and we can have people think of it as a hiking trip. There’s also an outdoor stage, so we could turn it into a small festival.”

“That sounds fun.”

“I’m sure it’ll be a success. I’m also thinking that we can distribute flyers there, with walking maps of the Mount Funayama area. We eventually want to

make a booklet of those maps. Also, we discussed wanting people to learn about the Onin War, so we're thinking of making another flyer with an easy-to-understand summary."

Holmes smiled happily. "I think that's a wonderful idea."

"Yes, but isn't the Onin War complicated?"

"Indeed." Holmes gave a strained smile.

"I was hoping you could provide a one-liner for us." Haruhiko chuckled shyly. Apparently, this request was part of the reason he'd invited Holmes.

Holmes stroked his chin. "I don't think it's possible to summarize that chaotic war in one line..."

"It doesn't have to be right now. Please, we need your help." Haruhiko lowered his head.

"You really are like your brother."

"Huh? How? Akihito and I are completely different."

"No, you both make unreasonable requests."

Kaori and I giggled.

"We're also considering a mascot drawing contest," I said.

Holmes slowed down and turned around with an intrigued expression. "Are you going to solicit mascots?"

"It's just an idea, so I don't know if we'll go ahead with it. But I think it'd be fun." I giggled. The contest had been my suggestion.

"Yes, I think it's good to have a mascot. It gives people a sense of affection. Our Sanjo has one too. The Sanjo Birdie is unparalleled in cuteness," Holmes said, placing a hand on his chest.

"Unparalleled in cuteness..." Haruhiko and Kaori looked at each other, eyes wide open.

I put my hand over my mouth and smiled. "Holmes really loves his hometown."

“Yes,” Holmes said confidently. “A town cannot thrive without the love of its people.”

“Yeah,” we agreed.

“So, about the Mount Funayama mascot...” I reached into my bag.

“By the way, what does the Sanjo Birdie look like again?” Haruhiko asked.

“It’s this,” Holmes said, taking a key out of his pocket. It was a spare key to Kura, and it was attached to an acrylic Sanjo Birdie key chain.

Haruhiko burst out laughing the moment he saw it. “It really is cute.”

“Yes, isn’t it?”

“But I wouldn’t have expected you to be carrying around such a cute key chain.”

“Really? I’m rather fond of cute things.”

“I see.”

Haruhiko and Kaori nodded, but I froze up. *He likes cute things.* The image of the cute Mitsuoka appeared in the back of my mind, and I couldn’t help but feel bitter.

“What’s wrong, Aoi?” Holmes asked. He must’ve noticed the change in my mood.

He’s scarily sharp at times like this. “It’s nothing,” I said, hurriedly putting on a smile. I regained my composure and changed the subject. “Oh, right, Kenkun Shrine’s official name is Takeisao Shrine, isn’t it?”

“Yeah,” Haruhiko replied. “When you’re riding the bus, the announcement says, ‘Next stop, Kenkun Shrine,’ but it’s actually called Takeisao Shrine.”

“Yep, I’m a local, and even I thought it was Kenkun for a while,” said Kaori.

Holmes chuckled. “Well, Kyoto has quite a few shrines and temples like that. For example, Kinkaku-ji Temple and Suzumushi-dera Temple.”

“Oh!” Our eyes widened.

“Come to think of it, you’re right,” I said.

“Kinkaku-ji Temple’s official name is Rokuon-ji Temple,” said Kaori.

“And Suzumushi-dera Temple is Gekon-ji Temple,” said Haruhiko.

“Yes.” Holmes smiled gently. “So perhaps it’s a good thing.”

As we talked, we headed to Kenkun Shrine. It was located partway up Mount Funayama, so we had to climb a lot of stairs. Since I hadn’t been getting enough exercise lately, I was a bit out of breath. Still, when I turned around, I was blown away by the vast view the high elevation provided.

At last, we reached the top of the stairs. There was a large stone slab engraved with a verse from the Noh play *Atsumori*, making it really feel like a shrine dedicated to Nobunaga Oda. The shrine also had a clear view of Mount Hiei. It was impressive, but thinking about how Nobunaga had razed the temples there made me feel conflicted. That said, this shrine hadn’t been built until the Meiji period, and it was meant to laud his achievements.

There were quite a few young women inside.

“There are a lot of women here,” I said, surprised.

Kaori held up her index finger and said, “This is a pilgrimage for *Touken* fans.”

She was referring to a game that involved anthropomorphized swords, which had caused a sword fad when it was released. It was still popular now, and I’d heard there was a never-ending stream of people awakening to the allure of swords and visiting Kyoto, which had ties to them.

“I see,” I said. “This is one of those places too, huh?”

We found out that Nobunaga Oda’s trusty blades, Sozasamonji (Yoshimoto Samonji) and (a reproduction of) Yagen Toshiro were held here. The shrine also had seal stamps based on the swords.

“Shall we go pray, then?” asked Haruhiko.

“Yes, so we can fulfill our great ambitions,” said Kaori.

The two of them quickly headed towards the shrine building. Meanwhile, Holmes and I walked slowly, looking up at it. The shrine had a majestic appearance. It reminded me of Kurama-dera Temple in how it felt like it was absorbing the mountain air. What I found unusual was the wand with paper

strips, used for purification rituals, next to the offering box. It was labeled “haraigushi,” and apparently you were supposed to wave it before praying.

Kaori and Haruhiko, who had arrived ahead of us, cheerfully waved the wand and clapped their hands in front of the shrine. I followed suit, waving it left, right, then left again before clapping.

This shrine is for fulfilling great ambitions. Now that I think about it, do I have a great ambition right now? My current objective is to produce a good exhibition for Ensho. But what comes next?

I heard clapping next to me and opened my eyes a sliver. Holmes had his eyes closed and his hands pressed together. His side profile was elegant and composed. I couldn’t help but wonder what he was praying for.

Perhaps noticing my gaze, he opened his eyes and looked at me. “Is something the matter?”

“Oh, no, I was just wondering what you were praying for.”

“I prayed to be able to stay with you forever, of course.”

I fell silent. The past me would’ve laughed shyly and said, “Oh, come on,” relishing in joy. But it was different now. The doubt in my heart was rearing its ugly head.

“Aoi?”

“I-I should pray too.” I closed my eyes again.

Holmes expressed his love in a very blatant, overbearing way. Perhaps I’d been spoiled by him and now I was numb to it. I hadn’t realized it, but I’d become vain. So when I heard Holmes say that Mitsuoka was his type, it was like being hit in the head with a blunt object. Whenever he was with me, he’d always act like he wasn’t even remotely interested in other women. But thinking about it, Holmes had said in the past, “My principles dictate that when I’m with a lady, I shouldn’t praise another.” He was just putting that into practice by not complimenting other women in my presence. Clearly, he was doing it when I wasn’t around, or at least in his mind.

There was a stinging, burning feeling in my heart. It was jealousy and I hated

it. I shook my head gently. *Regardless of what his tastes are, Holmes loves me. I want to trust him.*

I prayed, *May I be with Holmes forever.* Not long ago, it might've felt like a modest wish. *I was so stupid.* I bit my lip. *Being able to stay with the person you love is practically a miracle, but I took it for granted.*

I bowed deeply, repeating my prayer.

9

After praying at the shrine, we decided to get the seal stamps while we were there.

"Next is Daitokuji Temple, right? It's been a while for me," I murmured.

As I was about to leave, Holmes stopped me. "Before that, shall we go to the summit of Mount Funaoka?"

"The summit?" I asked, surprised.

"Yes." He nodded. "Since we've already come this far, I recommend seeing Kunimi Hill."

I looked down at myself, concerned. I wasn't wearing heels, but I certainly wasn't dressed for mountain climbing.

Everyone laughed, perhaps realizing what was going through my mind.

"You don't have to worry, Aoi," said Kaori.

"Yeah, Mount Funaoka is more of a low hill than a mountain," Haruhiko added.

"Yes, it's only a short walk from here," Holmes assured me.

"Okay then," I said, relieved.

We left the Kenkun Shrine grounds and headed to the top of Mount Funaoka. There was a trail through the dense forest. Like everyone said, it felt more like walking a course than climbing a mountain. Before I knew it, we were at the summit, where Kunimi Hill was.

“Wow!” I exclaimed. I could see all of Kyoto. I stretched my arms out towards the refreshing scenery. The character for “Dai” was clearly visible in the middle part of Mount Hidari Daimonji to the northwest. “This is amazing! The ‘Dai’ is so close.”

Since the stands for the bonfires had been set up there, it was as if the character had been cut out from the lush mountain.

“It really is easy to get here, isn’t it?” asked Kaori. “Even coming from the bottom of the mountain, it feels more like a hike than a climb. I came here quite often on elementary school trips.”

“This scenery is a must-see, huh?”

As we were talking, Holmes walked up to us. “Also, Mount Funaoka was Kyoto’s starting point, so I wanted you to include this place no matter what.”

I had a blank look on my face, but Kaori and Haruhiko nodded as if they remembered something.

“Kyoto began at Mount Funaoka?” I asked.

“Yes.” Holmes looked down at the sprawling townscape. “Long ago, Emperor Kanmu saw the Yamashiro basin from this vantage point and decided to relocate the capital here. ‘Sing, bush warbler of Heian-kyo’ began here at Mount Funaoka.”

He was referring to the mnemonic used to remember the year of the Heian-kyo capital relocation, 794.

“I had no idea!”

I couldn’t hide my surprise as I looked at the vast scenery. It was a different view of Kyoto than the ones from Ginkaku-ji Temple and Kiyomizu-dera Temple to the east or Yoshimine-dera Temple to the west. It was no wonder this place was called Kunimi Hill—the hill overlooking the country.

“So Kyoto began with this mountain...”

Learning the history made me feel that this was truly a special place. It may have been common knowledge for those who grew up here, but there were surely a lot of outsiders like me who didn’t know.

“I want more people to know about this.” *Especially those who like Kyoto. This is the view where it all began.* I felt a surge of emotion in my heart.

“Um, Haruhiko,” said Kaori, who was a short distance away. She looked nervous. “You were with Kurisu Aigasa at the cafe the other day, right?”

“Oh, yeah, we met up there,” said Haruhiko.

“So it *was* her. I was kind of surprised. You know each other?”

“I’ve always been a fan of hers, so I asked my brother about her latest work.”

“Oh, the one that takes place in early Showa-era Kyoto, with characters modeled after Holmes and Akihito.”

“Yeah. I’m in it too.”

“Huh?” I furrowed my brow. The book wasn’t published yet, but I had read it. There was a character named Masaki Eda—a home tutor, university student, and writer—who had a similar personality to Akihito’s younger brother, but not to the point where you would say it was a direct inspiration.

“I don’t stand out as much as Holmes and Akihito, so I was really happy to appear in a famous author’s novel. I asked Akihito to let me thank Kurisu, and she said she wanted to meet me in person to thank me as well. So we did.”

“So that was your first time meeting each other?” Kaori asked.

“Yep.”

“I see.” She looked relieved. “You were writing in your notebook, so I thought you might’ve been collecting some kind of information.”

“I use that notebook for miscellaneous memos and journal entries, so it basically contains whatever I’m thinking. That’s why I don’t want people to see it. I’m sorry for lashing out at you the other day.”

“No, it’s fine.” Kaori nodded in understanding.

I felt relieved too. Wanting to give them some time alone, I casually stepped away.

“Aoi,” said Holmes, standing next to me.

“Yes?”

“Are you being considerate of them?”

“Yes, well, maybe it’s none of my business.”

“They have a good mood going on, so I think you did the right thing. It’s unfortunate for me, though.”

“How so?”

“It would’ve been nice if you’d moved away because you wanted to be alone with me.” He leaned in close to me and chuckled mischievously.

I blushed and looked away. “If you really do feel that way, then I’m flattered.”

“Huh?” He blinked. “Of course. I’m always serious.”

“Yeah.” I gave a strained smile.

“You’ve been acting strangely these days, Aoi.”

So he did see through me.

“Did something happen?” he continued.

I remembered what I had said to Tomoka the other day.

“I can relate to how you feel, but if it were me, I’d probably ask him right away.”

“No, that’s not it. I want to trust the person I love. I want to believe until the last minute that it was just a misunderstanding. If it turned out that he betrayed me, I think I really would give up.”

To think those words would come back to bite me.

“I’m just being pessimistic is all,” I said.

“Pessimistic?”

“Um, Holmes...”

“Yes?”

“Do you have...a type when it comes to women?” I asked timidly.

He grinned. “My type is you, Aoi. I’m obsessed with you,” he said proudly, placing a hand on his chest.

I found myself grimacing. “Please tell me the truth.”

“Huh?”

“I thought you liked the beautiful type, but could it be that you actually like cute women? Izumi was beautiful, but she *did* look sweet too.” I didn’t know what expression I was making, but I was sure that it wasn’t pretty.

Holmes realized that I was serious and quickly put on a straight face. “You’re asking about my preference when it comes to appearances, yes?”

“Yes.” I nodded.

“To be honest, I’ve never had a particular type.”

I frowned. “What do you mean?”

“Either I don’t have one or I don’t know what it is. Now, I’d like to think that I have a general eye for aesthetics, so when I see a beautiful person, I’ll think they’re beautiful. But when I hear what others say, I realize that I don’t think the same way as them.”

“Huh?”

“As I’m sure you’re aware, I have a sharper eye than the average person. When I see someone’s appearance, I also notice various other things about them, so I don’t know what I should be judging based on,” Holmes said weakly.

I remained silent.

“For example,” he continued, taking his Sanjo Birdie key chain out of his pocket, “I can take this mascot at face value and think it’s cute. The same goes for paintings and photographs. But when I see real, moving people, I gain additional information from their mannerisms and expressions.”

Holmes had received his nickname from his ability to look at a staircase and immediately know how many steps it had. Perhaps this was just the way he was.

“A few years ago, when we were invited to the Kaomise at Minamiza and saw Kisuke’s then-fiancée, you said, ‘I thought she was frail and pure,’ didn’t you?”

“Yes.” I nodded. He was referring to the incident where the kabuki actor

Kisuke Ichikata had fallen from midair onto the stage.

“However, to me, she looked like the type to stir up conflict. Since this is the way I am, when I hear other men talk, I realize just how different I am. Izumi wasn’t two-faced, so it was easy for me to accept her.” He gave a strained smile.

His reasoning made sense. He could instantly notice all sorts of things about a person and process that information, so he couldn’t judge someone on their outward cuteness or beauty.

“I was stirring up conflict just now too, huh?” I said. “I’m sorry.” I was overcome with jealousy. I must’ve been making an ugly expression.

“No, you were very cute.”

“You’re lying.”

“I’m not. I’m not quite sure what happened, but you were jealous over me, were you not?” He chuckled and smiled fondly.

I blushed. *He really does see through everything.* I looked at him weakly. He’d said that Mitsuoka was to his taste and that he couldn’t help but care about looks, but perhaps that really was purely about appearances. *In that case, I want to know exactly what he liked about her.*

“Um, Holmes, Mitsuoka suits your tastes, right?” I asked awkwardly.

He nodded, confused. “Yes. I like Mitsuoka,” he said flatly.

I choked on my words for a second. “Really?”

“Yes, fundamentally.”

“Fundamentally?”

“I haven’t decided yet, but personally, I think Mitsuoka is nice too.”

How can he say something like that after the conversation we just had? Maybe this is a misunderstanding.

“Um, does that mean you plan on switching?”

“Yes, that would be the case.” He nodded, casting his eyes down sadly.

I stood there in silence, not knowing what to say.

“Sorry, I didn’t know you were so fond of it. I think we only need one, though.”

“It?” I was utterly confused.

Holmes frowned and folded his arms. “We don’t seem to be on the same page here.”

“Probably not.”

“What were you talking about, Aoi?”

“Mitsuoka.”

“Yes, so was I—” He covered his mouth as if he’d suddenly realized something. After a while, he shook with laughter.

“Huh? Why are you laughing?”

“I’m sorry. Could it be that you don’t know what Mitsuoka is?”

“Sh-She came the other day, didn’t she?”

“I knew it.” He laughed. “Mitsuoka is an automobile company. That person was a Mitsuoka Motor sales representative.”

“Mitsuoka Motor?” My eyes widened at the unfamiliar name.

“They’re headquartered in Toyama Prefecture. Our Jaguar is reaching the end of its lifespan, so we’ve been thinking about buying a replacement. This time, we’re taking my preferences into account too, so I’ve been looking into MINI and Mitsuoka Motor. I really like classic designs.” He took his phone out of his pocket and showed me an image of Mitsuoka Motor’s cars. As he said, they had a classic, retro-modern design.

“I had no idea about them.”

“I suppose women aren’t as knowledgeable about cars.”

I sighed and looked at him. “So was that woman your type?”

“I didn’t think anything of her.”

“Really?”

Holmes gave a strained smile. “Strictly speaking, I did have some thoughts. ‘She’s learned how to present herself in a way that people will react favorably to.’ ‘It seems that she was confident in the left side of her face and made a conscious effort to face it towards her clients, but now it’s become an unconscious habit.’ ‘Based on these points, she may be a former entertainer of some sort.’”

My face stiffened. *Okay, he really* is *scary.* “So, um, *was* she a former entertainer?”

“I asked out of curiosity, and it turned out that she was. She was originally a child actress and gained popularity from a role in a show about girl fighters. But she had a hard time finding work after that, so she retired upon starting high school.”

“Oh! I might’ve watched that show!”

I instantly understood the unknown feeling that had been swirling within me. A long time ago, I’d seen her on stage. She was really cute and I’d looked up to her. So when she had appeared in front of Holmes, I felt more anxious than ever before. It all made sense now.

“Have we resolved the misunderstanding?” Holmes grinned.

“Yes. You seem kind of happy...”

“I am. In fact, I want to shout from this hill and let all of Kyoto know, ‘Aoi was jealous over me!’”

I choked. “Don’t be a public nuisance.”

“But wouldn’t it befit a pilgrimage for couples?”

“What? How?”

“This could become a place where people shout out their love.”

“That would bother the locals!”

“Yes, you’re right. I realized that as I was making the suggestion.”

“Jeez, what the heck?” I couldn’t help but laugh.

“Still, I never would’ve expected you to have such a misunderstanding.”

Holmes laughed again.

I shrugged, ashamed. “I said that stuff to Tomoka, but I didn’t put it into practice myself.” I sympathized with her again. When you think you might lose the person you love, it’s hard to stay strong. “I wonder how it went for her.”

“I looked into it out of curiosity, and I have an idea of who the culprit is.”

“The culprit?” I looked up at him, shocked. Tomoka had requested an infidelity investigation. There hadn’t been any talk of a culprit.

“Please have a look at this first.”

Holmes tapped his phone screen a few times and showed me someone’s social media account under their real name. It had a photo of Tomoka with a short and stout man who looked like a cook. He was wearing a white chef’s uniform and hat.

I recognized him. “Is the person next to her Sada?”

“Do you know him?”

“Oh, yes. He runs an Italian restaurant in Kita-ku and he’s the leader of the Mount Funayama Area Revitalization Project’s civilian team.”

“I see. He’s Tomoka’s fiancé.”

“What?!” I peered closely at the screen.

“As you know, he’s the owner and chef of a restaurant. He’s a good man who volunteers in his free time.”

Since the beautiful Tomoka had described her fiancé as a wonderful person whom she wasn’t a good match for, I was expecting quite a handsome man. But that wasn’t the case. She had been referring to his personality.

“Oh, so that’s why people were saying that they weren’t a good match...” They thought *Tomoka* could find someone better for *her*, but she had interpreted it backwards. “So who is this culprit?”

“Most likely Atsuko.”

“Huh?” My eyes widened. “Why her?”

“Atsuko is planning on opening a high-end club in Gion. She probably wants to

hire women she already knows would make perfect staff.”

“So, Tomoka?”

“Yes. Tomoka is beautiful and doesn’t judge men by their appearances. Atsuko wouldn’t have wanted to let go of her.”

I nodded firmly. “Atsuko wanted her to break off the engagement and work for the club, right?”

“It’s only a hypothesis. She was the one who pushed Tomoka to hire a detective, after all.”

“But Sada isn’t cheating, so the investigation wouldn’t turn up anything, would it?”

“There are two possibilities. First”—Holmes held up his index finger—“Tomoka went to Atsuko for advice, causing Atsuko to genuinely be suspicious of Tomoka’s fiancé. Outraged, Atsuko thought, ‘What a despicable man, cheating when he has such a wonderful fiancée,’ and wanted to break them up. Second”—he held up another finger—“Atsuko wanted to hire Tomoka no matter what, so she was planning to send one of her people to the fiancé and have a misleading photo taken.”

A chill ran down my spine at the terrifying thought.

“However...” Holmes gave a strained smile and folded his arms. “I know what kind of a person Atsuko is. She’s the type to get what she wants, but I don’t think she’s *that* cruel. I want to make sure, so I’m having Komatsu investigate what Sada was doing on Tomoka’s birthday.”

“I see.” I sighed. “I hope it’s the first possibility.”

“As do I.” He lowered his gaze. “Oh, right.” He looked up. “When we were talking about mascots, didn’t you try to take something out of your bag?”

“Oh...” I had already forgotten that I’d stopped in the middle of taking out my notebook. “You really are sharp...”

“What was it?”

“Um, one second. It’s a bit embarrassing, but...”

“Did you perhaps write a poem?”

“N-No, but you’re not that far off the mark.”

“Oh? Did you write me a letter?” His face brightened, eyes filled with anticipation.

I shook my head. “Sorry, it’s not anything related to writing. The mascot drawing contest was my idea, so I wanted to enter too. I drew one myself.”

“Huh? You drew a mascot?”

“Yes. It’s just a sketch of a Genbu mascot.”

“Please show me.”

“Umm...I’m pretty sure you’ll laugh at it, though.”

“It’s a drawing of a mascot, isn’t it? I promise I won’t laugh.”

“Well then...” I timidly took out my notebook and opened it. Genbu was a divine beast with the body of a tortoise and the tail of a snake. The snake tail was often depicted as wrapping around the tortoise body. I had attempted to design a cute Genbu. Drawing wasn’t my strong suit, but I thought I’d done a pretty good job.

The moment Holmes saw my drawing, he burst out laughing.

“Y-You *did* laugh! What happened to your promise?”

“I’m sorry. It was just too cute. It’s very well done.”

“Really?”

“Indeed. The snake is purple, is it?”

“Oh, yes, to coincide with Kita-ku’s Murasakino district.” The name “Murasakino” meant “purple field.”

“You seem accustomed to drawing turtles.”

“You can tell?” I laughed, embarrassed. “I used to be slow, so in elementary school, I made a turtle drawing my personal symbol. It was my way of making fun of myself. I’d draw a turtle at the end of my notes and stuff.”

“You aren’t slow in the slightest.”

“In middle school, I joined the tennis club, which made me a lot more competent.”

“I see. By the way, this snake is in the shape of a heart, isn’t it?”

As he said, the snake wrapped around the turtle was forming a heart with its body. The two animals were facing each other and smiling happily.

“Yes, since it’s going to be a pilgrimage for couples.”

“This mascot has the power to truly turn this land of Genbu into a pilgrimage for couples.”

“You’re exaggerating again...”

I had a skeptical look on my face, but Holmes’s expression was serious. “It’s said that Genbu’s tortoise and snake also represent yin and yang respectively. In other words, the tortoise represents woman and the snake represents man. Eternity is formed through the harmony of the two opposing forces.”

“I see,” I said, impressed. I’d never heard that before.

“I originally said that Genbu Shrine wouldn’t fit a pilgrimage for couples because Genbu is the northern guardian. However, as a symbol of yin and yang harmony, it may work. Seeing your drawing made me think that this could very well be Genbu’s true wish,” he said passionately.

“You’re exaggerating again.” I shrank back.

“Most of all, this drawing is just like us.”

“Huh? Is it?”

“Yes. The turtle is your personal symbol, isn’t it? And I’m often called a snake-like man. How better to describe us than ‘a snake wrapped around a turtle that refuses to let go’?”

“J-Jeez.”

“Looking at it like this, you’ve been caught by quite the troublesome man,” Holmes said apologetically.

I quietly stepped closer to him. He looked down at me, surprised.

“The other day, Kaori said I had high self-esteem, and I didn’t believe it. I felt

like I was always putting myself down.” I was always thinking I was undeserving. “But after I started going out with you, I was constantly subjected to your positive feedback, and before I knew it, I was able to think better of myself. I was unknowingly gaining self-confidence. And strangely enough, that led to a lot of good things happening. Thinking about it, putting yourself down closes the doors to a lot of possibilities.”

“Indeed. I think so too.”

“This experience made me realize that I can be strong when I’m with you. So, um...I’m a turtle that’s happy to have a snake wrapped around it.” I clung to Holmes’s arm.

“Aoi...” He touched my cheek. Just as he was bringing his face closer—

“Aoi, Holmes, we should get going!” Haruhiko shouted, waving at us.

“Okay!” I replied.

Holmes facepalmed. “He really is Akihito’s brother, interrupting at the absolute worst of times.”

“Oh, come on, Holmes.”

“I’m kidding. Shall we go?”

“Yeah.”

I took his hand and we went back to Haruhiko and Kaori.

We departed from Kunimi Hill in the same formation as when we’d arrived, with Holmes and Haruhiko walking in front of me and Kaori. It was a gentle downward slope.

“Aoi, can we talk?” Kaori whispered, slowing her steps.

I nodded and looked at her.

“You know how I said I didn’t know how I felt?”

“Yeah.”

“Coming here made it crystal clear.” She gave a small sigh and looked back at Kunimi Hill. “I tried imagining what would happen if that place really did

become a pilgrimage for couples and Haruhiko was there with another girl, like Aigasa.”

I silently awaited her next words. When we had seen Aigasa and Haruhiko at the cafe, they had seemed oddly cohesive despite being completely different. It made you think that a couple like that could certainly exist.

“And I really didn’t like it,” Kaori muttered with a bitter expression, looking ahead of us at Haruhiko’s back. “I realized that I *am* interested in Haruhiko after all.”

“Kaori...”

“Oh, but it’s not like I’m going to confess to him. It’s just that I finally faced my feelings.”

“Yeah.” I smiled.

Kaori looked really refreshed. Both of us had come to terms with our feelings today. Perhaps this land of beginnings had a special energy. Had Genbu’s power given us a push on the back? If so...

“This really is a holy ground for couples, huh?” I murmured.

“Huh?”

“It’s nothing.” I smiled.

We sped up and caught up to the other two.

“Next up are Daitokuji Temple, Koto-in Temple, and Imamiya Shrine, right?” asked Kaori.

“Yep,” said Haruhiko. “I haven’t had roasted mochi in a while. I’m craving it.”

“Sounds good,” said Holmes. “It’s been a while for me as well.”

“After Imamiya Shrine, let’s stop by the Shin-Omiya shopping street. It’s fun too.”

We nodded in approval and left Mount Funaoka with a spring in our steps.

Chapter 2: Intertwining Fates and Pasts

1

The day after trying out the “exploring history” course—Sunday—I headed to a museum on the outskirts of town by myself. I thought it would be quite far, but after getting on the Hankyu Kyoto Line at Kawaramachi Station, it was less than thirty minutes to the closest stop to the museum, Oyamazaki Station. From there, it would be another ten minutes of walking, but there was a free shuttle bus. Priority was given to the elderly, but since it was mostly empty and I didn’t want to be late, I chose to take it.

The bus headed up the mountain. It was quite a steep slope. I placed a hand on my chest, glad I’d decided against walking. The dense trees were colored red, and I could see a lot of large houses. It felt like a place where people kept vacation homes.

We stopped in front of a small tunnel. The rest of the route was on foot. I thanked the driver, got off the bus, and passed through the gate-like tunnel into a large garden that made use of the sloped land. The bright-red maple trees and yellow ginkgos were a vivid representation of autumn.

“It’s like I’m in another world,” I murmured.

I walked a bit and a large house came into view. It was an English-style mountain villa, partially made of brick. This elegant building was called the Asahi Beer Oyamazaki Villa Museum of Art. Although it looked like a vacation home built by an English noble, it had actually been built by a Japanese man named Shotaro Kaga, who was a well-known businessman in the Taisho period. He had studied abroad in England, and this building had been constructed according to his vision. The beautiful mountain villa—a culmination of Kaga’s thoughts and feelings—had been at risk of being demolished, but currently, it was being used as a museum.

“Wow...” *I can’t believe I didn’t know about such an incredible place until now.*

I stood staring in awe at the Western-style building, which was wonderful in a

different way from the stone Yagashira residence or the Vories-designed architecture that one could see in Kyoto City.

“Aoi.” A woman came out of the building. She was in her early thirties, and her shiny medium-long hair was neatly curled. Her outfit was simple, consisting of a sweater with a wide neckline and a skirt. However, her beautiful necklace and bracelets gave her a very sophisticated look.

“Keiko,” I greeted her. I walked over and gave a deep bow.

This was Keiko Fujiwara, assistant to the famous art curator Sally Barrymore. She was the one who had invited me to New York.

“Thank you for everything you did for me in New York,” I said. “And for Sally’s interview...”

The other day, she had sent me an article where Sally had spoken about me. In the conversation that followed, she had asked me to come to this museum today.

“You’ve sent me more than enough thanks in your messages,” Keiko said. “Besides, I should be thanking you too.”

“Huh?”

She grinned. “I’m sure you noticed when you read the article, but ever since you played mediator for Sally and Shinohara, Sally’s completely mellowed out. The demon boss is gone.”

She was referring to Yohei Shinohara, another art curator who worked all around the world. He and Sally had been in a relationship twenty-five years ago, but a certain event had caused a rift between them. Their teacher, Thomas Hopkins—a top-class authority in the art world—had asked me to look into why the two of them had fallen out. In the end, we’d discovered that various circumstances had come together to result in a huge misunderstanding. Upon learning the truth, Sally and Shinohara had finally reconciled after twenty-five long years.

Sally had always exuded a snappish aura, so the thought of her mellowing out made my face naturally relax into a smile. “Did Sally and Shinohara start dating again?” I asked.

“No, it’s not like that yet. They’re good business partners now, and sometimes we assistants help with Shinohara’s work too. He’s good at coaching people, so we’re all elated to be able to learn and experience new things.”

“That’s great.”

“It’s actually why I’m here right now. I’m helping Shinohara with the exhibition he’s working on at this museum.”

“Oh, I see.”

“And he said he wanted you to see it.”

“Me?”

I wondered why, but my question was immediately answered by the flyer Keiko showed me. It said “Gorgeous Glass: Art Nouveau and Contemporary Artists.”

“Ohhh.” I gave an awkward laugh. “Right. I...don’t know much about glasswork. Shinohara recommended that I look at more of it.”

“So I heard. The exhibition is still being set up, but the display pieces are all here, so I figured I’d let you see them.”

“Wait, can I really?” I leaned forward.

“Yes, that’s why I called you here.”

“Yay!” I clapped my hands together, overcome with gratitude. “I’m so happy. Thank you so much.”

“How cute,” Keiko murmured.

“Pardon?”

“It’s nothing. I think I understand how Kiyotaka feels now, that’s all. Come this way.”

She turned on her heel and headed towards the mountain villa. I hurried behind her. Upon entering, we were greeted by beautiful stained glass and an atrium that extended to the second floor. An old-fashioned chandelier hung from the ceiling, and there was a staircase with an ornate railing. Next to the staircase was an antique that, at first glance, looked like a large grandfather

clock.

“Do you know what this is?” Keiko asked.

“It’s a music box, right?”

“Oh, so you do know.”

“The Yagashira residence has one too.”

“Ah, Seiji’s house. I haven’t been there before, but I hear it’s quite grand.”

“Yes.” I nodded. “It’s different from this building because it has a stone exterior, but the interior design is very similar.”

“Impressive.” Keiko laughed. “That means you can get a simulated experience of the Yagashira residence here. What’s amazing about this building is that it’s a museum in its entirety.”

“That really is amazing.”

As with Chourakukan in Maruyama Park, a grand Western-style building was worth seeing by itself. With artwork on display, it could be considered the ideal museum. It was home to the collection of Asahi Beer’s first president and included ceramics, lacquerware, textiles, and pieces from Claude Monet’s *Water Lilies* series.

“The ceramics were wonderful, but I was surprised to see Monet,” I said with a passionate sigh after going around the exhibits.

“Indeed. Shinohara recommends this museum,” Keiko said, stopping in front of a room with an “In Preparations” sign. “Put this around your neck.” She handed me a staff pass.

I did as I was told. When the door opened, the staff working inside saw us and bowed. I bowed back, stepped into the exhibit room, and looked around. A world of glass art unfolded before my eyes. There were pieces by Émile Gallé and the Daum brothers, Auguste and Antonin. Vases decorated with flowers and plants, goblets, lamps—many of them had innovative designs. Glass art had a different appeal from ceramics with its gorgeous yet delicate beauty.

Some pieces felt unapproachable, while others were charming. I giggled at the sight of a lamp called *Ink Cap Mushrooms*. It was a famous work by Gallé.

The exhibit also had an explanation of the history of glasswork, which was said to be very old—dating back to around 2000 B.C. in Western Asia and around 1550 B.C. in Egypt. Glass containers believed to have been made around those times had been discovered. They could be considered the beginning of glass art.

Glassmaking, in a nutshell, was done by mixing silica sand, sodium carbonate, quicklime, and colorants together and heating them at high temperatures. It sounded simple, but who would've thought up such a thing without any prior knowledge? And from there, these beautiful works of art came to be...

"Humans are amazing," I said aloud without thinking.

"Indeed." Keiko nodded.

The next room had modern glass art on display.

"Shinohara's true goal is to show people Art Nouveau and then introduce them to the works of currently active creators," Keiko explained.

The glass artwork created by modern-day artists was simpler than the Art Nouveau style, but they felt elegant and sharp. Some were inspired by flowing water or outer space, while others were accessories or kiriko—a traditional Japanese style of cut glass that had been passed down to the new generation.

"Oh, it's Edo kiriko!" I recognized the beautifully crafted glass from my grandmother's collection.

"There's more than just Edo."

"Huh?" I looked at the display again. The pieces were labeled Edo kiriko, Satsuma kiriko, and Tenma kiriko. "Oh, there are other types of kiriko besides Edo," I murmured.

Keiko laughed. "Your knowledge really is biased towards ceramics, huh?"

It's probably common knowledge. "Sorry," I said, slumping my shoulders in shame.

"It's fine. I just think it's funny. It's said that Edo kiriko began at the end of the Edo period, when glass toymakers carved patterns into the surface of glass."

Maybe that's why there are glass toys on display as well.

“Satsuma kiriko came about at the same time. A feudal lord had it produced as part of his business. You could say that if Edo kiriko was private sector work, Satsuma kiriko was public sector work.”

Feudal lords produced things to finance their domains. The ceramic equivalent would probably be something like Nabeshima ware.

“Tenma kiriko is also from the Edo period. It’s said that a glass merchant learned the glassmaking technique introduced by the Dutch in Nagasaki and brought it to Kansai—specifically Osaka.”

I took notes as I listened.

“Oh no.” Keiko blushed. “You don’t have to write down these rough explanations. There are proper descriptions right here.” She handed me a piece of paper.

“Thank you.” I put it in my notebook and peered closely at the kiriko glass. “It’s really pretty. When you think about it, it’s unbelievable that we use such beautiful crafts in daily life.”

“Oh, but Kura also uses expensive cups and saucers on a daily basis, doesn’t it?”

“Sometimes people tell us they don’t feel comfortable using such expensive things.”

“Really? I’d think they’d be happy to use cups they normally wouldn’t be able to.”

“That’s how I feel, but some people feel nervous about breaking them.”

“Well, I can understand that. But I doubt Kura would ask for compensation if someone accidentally broke a cup for guests.”

“That’s true.” I laughed.

“Anyway, come have a look at this.”

Keiko guided me to one of the sections in the back, a space decorated with cut glass. The brightly colored lamps, glasses, and goblets had an exotic feel that made me think of Turkish glass. At a glance, they didn’t seem like Edo, Satsuma, or Tenma kiriko.

“What are these?” I wondered. Next to the works of art, it said “Kobe Kiriko.” This was yet another new name to me. “There’s Kobe kiriko too?”

“Well, you see...” Keiko smiled in amusement. “Oh, the members happen to be here right now.” She waved to a group of staff who were discussing something in a corner of the exhibit room. “Kobe Kiriko, could you come here for a minute?”

Three people came in response to her summons, a woman and two men. They looked to be in their twenties.

“These fellows are creators from Hyogo Prefecture,” said Keiko. “They wanted to make a new type of kiriko and came up with these.”

“Huh?” I looked at them in surprise. “So you three made these Kobe kiriko pieces?”

“Yes,” they said shyly.

I bowed, realizing I still had to introduce myself. “Oh, my name is Aoi Mashiro. It’s nice to meet you.”

“Aoi is a promising curator-in-training,” Keiko quickly added.

“That’s not true.” I shook my head.

“Nice to meet you. I’m Akamatsu, and these are Igawa and Sakaguchi. Igawa and I came from the same glass workshop,” said the young man, who seemed to be the leader of the group. He put his hand on the shoulder of the other man, Igawa.

“Yeah.” Igawa nodded. “Akamatsu and I went to Turkey to broaden our views and were fascinated by the beauty of Turkish glass. We wanted to make something similar ourselves.”

“But,” Akamatsu continued, “we came across Japanese kiriko later on. Oh, we knew what it was, of course. But after becoming craftsmen and traveling abroad, seeing Japanese kiriko again made us think, ‘Our country has an amazing technique too!’ So we wanted to try making our own kiriko.”

“Yeah,” said Igawa. “And then we met a designer with great sense.”

The men looked at the woman standing between them, Sakaguchi. She was

very short and fair-skinned—a beautiful woman with an air of delicacy and purity.

“Aha ha ha,” Sakaguchi laughed shyly. “I’m no art designer. My main job is in architectural design, but I draw in my free time. When I posted my drawings online, these guys reached out to me. Now I’m designing Kobe kiriko alongside my day job.”

I was surprised when I heard Sakaguchi’s voice. “You’re...a man, right?” I asked inadvertently.

Akamatsu and Igawa laughed, while Sakaguchi made a stiff face and said, “Yes, I am.”

“Right, sorry. That was rude of me.” I lowered my head.

“It’s fine.” Sakaguchi shook his head and smiled.

He reminded me of Rikyu in the sense that he was the “androgynous beautiful boy” type, but their auras were different. Rikyu was cheeky and a bit touchy, while Sakaguchi seemed frail—as delicate as the glass he worked on.

“You got mistaken for a girl again, Yuki-chan,” said Akamatsu.

“Don’t call me Yuki-chan.” Sakaguchi shrugged, displeased.

Something about that exchange caught my attention. “Yuki-chan?” I asked without thinking.

“My first name is Yoshitaka, but it’s written with characters that are usually read as ‘yu’ and ‘ki,’ so ever since I was a kid, people called me Yuki,” Sakaguchi explained.

“If other people have been calling you that, why can’t we?” Akamatsu asked.

“I don’t mind being called Yuki, but you’re not allowed to add the ‘chan.’ It makes everyone think I’m a girl.”

“Oh, so that was the problem,” said Igawa.

Apparently, they were only learning this now.

Akamatsu turned to me and Keiko. “Anyway, Kobe Kiriko is a team of three.”

“We want as many people to know about us as possible, so we’re glad that

Shinohara found out about our work," said Igawa.

"Eventually, we want to get other regions making their own kiriko too, like Otaru kiriko or Kyoto kiriko."

Their passion filled me with excitement. "That would be wonderful."

"Right?" Keiko nodded.

"We're pleased to make your acquaintance," said Akamatsu. "And if there's ever an opportunity to exhibit our work, please reach out to us. We're open to anything."

I nodded, hoping I'd be able to help them one day.

After that, Keiko and I looked at the glass art for a while before deciding to go to the second-floor terrace for tea.

"Wow!" The terrace had a view of the forested mountains and three rivers. The trees were dyed red, making for breathtaking scenery. With so much foliage, one could enjoy vastly different sights over the seasons.

"This museum is surrounded by Mount Tenno and Mount Otoko. The Kizu River, Uji River, and Katsura River flow in from the east and merge into the Yodo River here at Oyamazaki, which continues into Osaka. It's said that Shotaro Kaga built his mountain villa here based on his memories of seeing the River Thames from Windsor Castle in England."

"This view was the deciding factor, huh?"

It sort of reminded me of the story behind Kunimi Hill. No matter the era, people will be awed by beautiful sights and make their decisions based on them.

We sat at a table in the open-air cafe and looked over the menu.

"It's my treat," Keiko said. "Order anything you want. They have a cake set and beer too."

"Thank you. I'll have the cake set, then."

"Since we're here, I'll have an Asahi—or so I thought, but I still have work

after this. You can't drink alcohol when you're going to be handling glass. Too bad." She frowned.

We both ended up ordering the cake set and updated each other on recent events. Keiko spoke mainly about Sally and Shinohara. She grumbled about how the assistants were the ones who had suffered the most when Sally had changed the title of an exhibition at the last minute, but also added that everyone had been relieved when it had been a huge success.

"What are you up to these days, Aoi?" she asked.

I told her about Ensho—how he was formerly a skilled counterfeiter and, at one point, had aspired to become an appraiser. After he gave up, various things happened that led to him becoming a painter whose talent was acknowledged by the upper class.

When I explained that I was in charge of his upcoming exhibition at the Yagashira residence, Keiko's eyes widened. "I know the name Taisei Ashiya too," she said.

"You do?!"

"Yes, because of the rumor that Mr. Jing was enthusiastic about his work. It's amazing that you get to work on that painter's exhibition."

"Yes." I nodded and lowered my eyes. "But because of the pressure, I can't think of any good ideas at all. I'm totally stuck."

"That's silly. Even if you don't have any ideas, you can't sit and do nothing."

I looked up in surprise.

"You aren't trying to do everything by yourself, are you?"

I flinched.

"Of course you'll get stuck if you do that. Remember what I told you before? Curators don't do everything on their own. They're like film directors. They tell the cameramen how they want the film to be shot, the screenwriters how they want the script to be written, and the art staff what they want the sets to look like. They assign the work to people who can get it done."

This was what Keiko had taught me when I met her in New York. I understood

the concept but hadn't put it into practice.

"What about the budget?" she asked. "How are you raising funds?"

"Holmes said, 'You don't have to worry about anything. Just plan it however you like.'"

"What? Kiyotaka is going to fund it?"

"No, I don't think so. There are a lot of rich people backing Ensho—that is, Taisei Ashiya—so he's probably going to call on them."

"I see." Keiko nodded. "So money isn't a factor. What an ideal event. I envy you." She sounded sincere.

"Yeah..." I slumped my shoulders.

"The paintings by the Taisei Ashiya father and son are in the hands of several different people now, right?"

"Oh, yes."

"First, you need to check how many you'll be able to gather. Once you know which pieces you have, you'll be able to think about the theme and presentation."

"You're completely right."

"It's also important to understand the artist well. Luckily, he's someone you know, so you can easily interview him. You need to have your own interpretation of him as a person."

I took out my notebook and jotted down what Keiko said. "Got it." I nodded. I felt like I'd seen the light. *How could I have forgotten such basic things? I'll ask Holmes to gather the paintings instead of doing it myself. And then I'll interview Ensho.*

"While you're doing these things, you'll find your ideas," Keiko said.

"Right." I bowed, feeling as though I'd been saved.

"I'm looking forward to it."

"Hearing you say that doesn't help with the pressure, but I'm glad."

“Can I say something that will put even more pressure on you? It’s a bit frustrating for me, though.”

“What is it?” I looked at her, bewildered.

“It seems like Sally hasn’t given up on you yet. She still wants you as an assistant.”

My heart pounded. “That’s, um...I’m honored.”

“You declined her offer because you wanted to stay with Kiyotaka, didn’t you?”

She wasn’t wrong, but it was more nuanced than that. Naturally, I didn’t want to be apart from him. But the reason went beyond us being a couple—it was that I admired him as a teacher.

When I told Keiko that in a roundabout way, she rested her chin on her hand and murmured, “Oh. Kiyotaka seemed prepared for you to go to New York, though.”

“Huh?”

“At the party that night, I met him before you did. I told him what Sally thought, and he nodded as if he’d expected it.”

I could imagine the sight. After all, he really *had* been prepared for me to say I’d study abroad in New York.

“And then he asked me a million questions about where it would be best for you to live, whether Sally was a trustworthy person, if there was any danger of drugs in the area, and so on.”

“Drugs?”

“It comes up a lot in industries like this. He was probably worried that you’d be exposed to bad things like that. Come to think of it, he’s always been overly wary of drugs.” She seemed to murmur the last sentence to herself.

In the past, when Holmes had worked on a case involving cannabis, he had told me in very strong terms to stay away from drug users.

“If someone you know becomes a drug addict, no matter how close you are

with them—even if it's me—please do your utmost to stay away from them. Don't think you can cure them, because it's not possible."

It had surprised me because it had sounded like he was speaking from experience.

"That aside, I personally think it's a waste for you to pass up the opportunity," Keiko said, bringing me back to the present. "It's not that I don't understand why you chose to stay with Kiyotaka. Not only do you love him, but you have him to thank for your current progress, and like you said, he's a great teacher."

I had no objections, so I gave a silent nod.

"I always thought Kiyotaka wasn't the type to get married, but he chose you, and I don't think it was a half-hearted decision. He's never going to let go of you."

I gave a vague smile, unsure how to reply.

"That's exactly why it should be fine to leave him for a short period of time. You can spend the rest of your life with him, but right now is your only chance to work for Sally."

My heart beat faster and faster as I listened to her words.

"You should think it over again...at some point, at least. For now, you have your own work to deal with."

"Yeah..."

I felt a surge of emotion. The other day, Akihito had said that pressure made for good motivation. I hadn't been able to agree at the time, but now I felt like I understood. Sally saw potential in me, which was the greatest honor I could ask for. It compelled me to do my best to create something spectacular.

"Oh, I forgot to give you this," Keiko said. "Here, if you're interested." She took a Kobe Kiriko flyer out of her bag and placed it on the table. It had photos of the glassware and the three staff members.

I thanked her and took the flyer. "Kobe Kiriko's glass art was wonderful."

Entering that space, with its many exotic lamps hanging from the ceiling, had felt like stumbling into a mysterious alternate dimension. The cafe on

Kuramaguchi Street, Sarasa Nishijin, had been the same way. Perhaps there was something wondrous about places that felt nostalgic yet otherworldly. Taking a step inside and being surprised—it was a bit like magic.

My eyes widened in realization. “Oh! Um, Keiko...”

“Yes?”

“I’d like to meet the Kobe Kiriko members again. I have a request for them.”

An idea suddenly formed in my mind. I didn’t know how it would turn out, but I had a feeling that it could be wonderful.

2

“Aw, man...”

Akihito sat at Kura’s counter, holding his head. Holmes and I were standing behind it, looking similarly troubled.

“Haruhiko said all that stuff?” Akihito asked.

When Haruhiko said that he wasn’t a Kajiwara, Holmes had relayed those words to Akihito right away. The older brother had rushed to Kura that very night.

“You haven’t told him yet, then,” Holmes murmured, looking down at Akihito.

“Fuyuki and I both tried a bunch of times, but we just couldn’t do it.”

I could absolutely sympathize. I thought back to when we had first met the Kajiwara brothers—and what had transpired at the Mount Kurama lodge that day.

The brothers’ late father, Naotaka Kajiwara, was a famous author. His book revolving around organized crime had been adapted into films and TV series. However, his success had led to misfortune as well. There was once an attempt on his life because he angered the yakuza group that the story was based on. The person who saved him was his driver at the time, Kurashina, who stood in the way of the gang member charging at him with a knife. In the end, Kurashina was stabbed in his place and seriously injured. However, as a result, Kajiwara was able to reconcile with the yakuza. He received permission to continue writing his books, for which he was very grateful to Kurashina.

Twenty years later, Kajiwara passed away, leaving each of his three sons a hanging scroll representing his heartfelt messages for them. Fuyuki received a painting of Taira no Kiyomori, and Akihito received a painting by Hokusai Katsushika.

Holmes told them that the painting of Taira no Kiyomori was a message to Fuyuki to run his business with the power and authority of Kiyomori, but

without letting it get to his head the way the historical figure had. The Hokusai Katsushika painting was a message to Akihito to keep striving to master the performing arts, the way Hokusai had never ceased his artistic pursuits.

Lastly, Haruhiko received a painting of *Tadamori and the Lantern*, a tale about Taira no Tadamori and a priest. What was the meaning behind it? I thought back to Holmes's theory at the time.

"The painting for Haruhiko was the tale of Tadamori and the Lantern*. One night, when Emperor Shirakawa was passing through Gion to meet with his favorite concubine, Nyogo Gion, he saw a demonlike being on the path ahead and ordered his bodyguard, Taira no Tadamori, to kill it. However, Tadamori captured it alive to ascertain its identity and found that it was an old priest. The emperor was very grateful for Tadamori's prudence because it meant that his misconception hadn't resulted in an innocent priest being killed. Now, one theory states that as a reward, the emperor gave his beloved Nyogo Gion to Tadamori, and thus was Kiyomori born."*

Kurashina had risked his life to protect Kajiwara. If Kurashina secretly desired Kajiwara's wife, Ayako, and Kajiwara knew, then Kajiwara might've given him the ultimate proof of his gratitude.

Kurashina...and Ayako...and then Haruhiko was born. Despite knowing this, Kajiwara had raised Haruhiko as his own son.

I remembered feeling chills run down my spine upon learning about the possibility. Haruhiko was the only one who had been kept in the dark. I knew that Akihito and Fuyuki had said they would find an opportunity to tell him, so I was curious as to whether they had, but it hadn't been my place to ask.

I had a vague feeling that they didn't, and apparently, I was right. And now Haruhiko has discovered the secret on his own by donating blood... My face went pale.

Akihito gave an awkward chuckle. "We didn't think we'd need to tell him, you know? If his blood type was O anyway, there wouldn't be a problem."

"So you and Fuyuki decided to stay silent, then?" said Holmes.

“Yep.”

“But your father was trying to tell him the truth, wasn’t he?”

“I mean, he left him a hanging scroll and expected him to figure out the meaning himself. Isn’t that too roundabout?”

“I’m sure it was because he didn’t want Ayako to notice. But ironically, she was the first to realize it.”

Akihito scratched his head. “Well, that’s just both of them being selfish. I don’t think Haruhiko would’ve been hurt.”

“I understand why you would say that, but as I told you back then, there’s a saying that goes, ‘Ignoring your ancestors will always lead to familial strife.’”

Come to think of it, he did say that to Akihito and Fuyuki. He told them that Haruhiko needs to be aware that despite being part of the Kajiwara household, he has Kurashina blood in his veins.

“Oh...” Akihito seemed to have completely forgotten. “What happens to kids who don’t know who their parents are, then?” He was dodging the issue, but he did have a valid question.

“Naturally, there are people in the world who will never know the circumstances of their birth,” said Holmes. “There’s nothing they can do about it, so I wouldn’t consider that to be ignoring their ancestors. However, Haruhiko *is* being disrespectful by mistaking his ancestors while being in an environment where he *could* know the truth. From that perspective, the current situation is somewhat better than before, when he believed that Kajiwara was his real father.”

“Wh-What if we leave it like this, then?”

“But now, Haruhiko doesn’t think Ayako is his real mother either. That’s too cruel, isn’t it?”

Akihito swallowed his words. “But...he loves mom and has a lot of respect for dad. Wouldn’t it be crueler for him to find out that mom slept with dad’s trusted friend, and that was how he was born?”

“Perhaps, but it’s important to know the truth.” Holmes’s tone of voice was

calm, but his words were harsh. “Akihito, you don’t have to bear the entire burden by yourself. I think you should discuss it with Ayako and Kurashina.”

Akihito grimaced and stood up forcefully. “Ugh, I’m so done with you! Have a heart, will you?! I don’t need your advice anymore!” he spat, leaving.

The door chime rang noisily. Then the store fell silent.

“Holmes, I...know how he feels,” I murmured.

Holmes sighed. “Yes, as do I.”

“Is it wrong to keep quiet about it? I mean, if the truth came to light, wouldn’t there be familial strife anyway?”

“Personally, I think that keeping quiet and lying are two different things. So I don’t think it’s bad to keep quiet. However, in this case, they would have to lie at some point, wouldn’t they?”

“That...might be true.”

“What I can say for sure is that nothing good will come from building up lies. It will only cause more strain.”

His words pierced my heart.

“That said, this is the Kajiwara family’s problem, so all we can do is watch over them.”

“Right.” I nodded, feeling bitter.

3

The Mount Funaoka Fair was a success, and KyoMore's activities had quieted down for the time being. We still had to make a proper booklet out of the flyers we'd handed out at our booth and promote the mascot contest on a larger scale, but those were scheduled for spring, so there was no rush.

I decided to take a break from KyoMore to focus on my proposal for Ensho's exhibition, which I needed to have ready for my upcoming meeting with the Kobe Kiriko team. Holmes had said I could work at Kura, so I had taken him up on that, sitting at the counter and doing my work the way the manager did. But rather than manuscript paper, I had my laptop in front of me.

I wasn't accustomed to writing proposals, so I was referencing an example I had received from Keiko. It was difficult to convey my mental image in writing. I would start typing and then immediately stop. And sometimes, I would suddenly remember Haruhiko.

As I sighed, I smelled the aroma of coffee. I looked up and saw Holmes placing a freshly brewed mug in front of me.

"You've been hard at work," he said with a smile.

I felt relief wash over me. "It's amazing how you bring coffee at the best time possible. Thank you."

"You give me too much credit."

"That's not true. I'm sure the manager has also been saved by your coffee." I giggled and picked up the mug. It was the original design we had made for Kura the other day. As expected, the beautiful turquoise blue stood out nicely in the store. These "Kura mugs" were mainly used by us staff and guests who were hesitant to use the expensive cups.

"How is progress on the proposal?"

"It's coming along, but slowly." I shrank back.

"You're not used to this kind of work, so it's understandable."

“Yeah. And when I stop for a break, I end up thinking about Haruhiko,” I murmured hesitantly.

“Ah.” Holmes’s expression was serious. “Have you seen him since then?”

“Yes, several times on campus.”

“How was he?”

“No different from usual. But it seems like his confession that he ‘wasn’t a Kajiwara’ really affected Kaori’s emotional state. It feels like she’s been spending more time with him.”

“I see.” Holmes folded one arm and stroked his chin with the other. “Have they grown closer, then?”

“Well...” I gave an awkward smile. “Kaori started saying that she’s not sure whether her feelings are love or sympathy now.”

“That does sound like something she’d say.”

“What do you think, Holmes?”

“I’m sure that sympathy plays a part in it, but it could be that her motherly instincts are kicking in, aided by her original feelings for him.”

“Hmm...” I looked down at the Kura mug. “Do you think Akihito and Fuyuki are going to continue to withhold the truth from Haruhiko?”

“I don’t know,” he said softly.

Not telling him might be happier for everyone, but right now, Haruhiko doesn’t know who his parents are.

“I gave my advice, but it’s up to the Kajiwara family to decide,” he continued.

“Yeah...” I recalled the image of Akihito leaving in anger. “Akihito probably won’t be coming by again for a while, huh?”

As we were talking, the grandfather clock gonged once, indicating that it was 1 p.m. At the same time, the door opened, ringing the chime.

I sprang out of my chair and said, “Welcome!”

“Aoi, there’s no need to panic,” Holmes said with a chuckle. “You can keep

working.” He turned to the door, where Haruhiko was standing.

“Sorry for visiting out of the blue,” our guest said softly. It was obvious that something had happened. He bowed to us with an uncharacteristically serious expression.

Holmes gave his usual smile, probably on purpose. “Welcome. It’s cold outside, isn’t it? Please have a seat.”

“Thanks.” Haruhiko came up to the counter and sat down in one of the chairs.

“Is coffee fine? I can also make café au lait.”

“Oh, could I ask for café au lait, then?”

“Understood.” Holmes went to the kitchenette.

Haruhiko looked at me sitting at the end of the counter and smiled. “Are you studying here today, Aoi?”

“Oh, yes,” I said. “Something like that.”

As we were chatting, Holmes came out of the kitchenette with a tray. “Enjoy,” he said, placing a Kura mug in front of Haruhiko.

“Thank you,” Haruhiko said, taking a slow sip of the café au lait and sighing.

After a pause, Holmes asked in a gentle tone, “Did something happen?”

Haruhiko nodded. “My brother—Akihito—told me that there’s a secret behind my birth.”

Holmes and I silently awaited his next words.

“He said that it was hard to explain and that I should ask you for the details...”

My eyes widened. I immediately looked at Holmes and saw that his eyes were also wide open in shock.

“Um, Holmes, you know about my birth, right? Could you please tell me?”

Holmes facepalmed.

Akihito...you yelled at Holmes and ran out of here, only to pass the buck to him? I held my head in my hands.

Holmes fell silent for some time before regaining his composure and looking

up. “Haruhiko.”

“Yes.” The other boy met his gaze.

“Do you remember the day we first met?”

Haruhiko blinked in confusion. “Um, yes. It was at the Mount Kurama lodge, right? Someone had burned the hanging scrolls dad left us, and you came to investigate the truth.”

“That’s right.” Holmes nodded. “And it is my opinion that the truth was linked to the secret behind your birth.”

“The truth that mom burned them?” Haruhiko tilted his head.

“Yes. Why did your mother burn the scrolls? At the time, she said it was because she was upset that her name wasn’t in the will. Did you believe her, though?”

Haruhiko averted his eyes before shaking his head. “No, that’s not the kind of person she is.”

“I’m sure you remember the painting that was left for you.”

“Yes,” Haruhiko said quietly. “It was Taira no Tadamori.”

“You were confused as to why it was that painting, weren’t you?”

“Yes, because my brothers received Taira no Kiyomori and Hokusai, which are...well, famous.”

“Your painting was based on the tale of *Tadamori and the Lantern*. Perhaps your father wanted you to know that story?”

I quietly watched the two of them.

“So the secret behind my birth can be found there?”

Holmes lowered his eyes. “Please research the story yourself and find the answer.”

The store fell silent.

Haruhiko gulped. “Understood.” After a pause, he nodded and said, “I happen to be going to the university for something after this, so I’ll check the library.”

He finished the rest of his café au lait and stood up. “Thank you, Holmes.” He gave a deep bow. The door chime rang again as he left.

I looked out the window, feeling bitter. Haruhiko was walking quickly, so he was gone in the blink of an eye.

4

About four hours passed without much conversation between me and Holmes, although I was curious about what Haruhiko had ended up doing. Holmes was checking the inventory, clipboard in hand, while I continued to work on my proposal.

I was afraid that I might not be able to get my work done in this state of mind, but it was surprisingly fine. Since I had made up my mind to ignore any unrelated thoughts, my concentration was better than usual. Thinking about it, the same thing had happened with my university entrance exams. Holmes breaking up with me had been a great shock, and I had focused all of my attention on my studies as a way of escaping from the pain. Perhaps it was because of that incident that I had gotten into my first-choice university.

As I fervently tapped away at the keyboard, my phone, which was next to my laptop, buzzed. I looked away from the computer screen with a start and saw the name “Kaori Miyashita” on my phone.

“It’s from Kaori...” *It’s rare for her to call me.* I turned around and told Holmes, “Sorry, I’m going to take this.” I answered the call. “Hello?”

“A-Aoi...I’m scared.” Her voice was trembling.

“What happened?”

“I was at school for the KyoMore booklet meeting, but, like, Haruhiko was acting weird today.”

My heart pounded restlessly. I awaited her next words, unable to say anything.

“And then, I accidentally saw his notebook.”

“Huh?”

“It was a coincidence, I swear. After the meeting, I left with everyone, but Haruhiko stayed behind. I couldn’t help but worry, so I went back.”

“And?”

“When I got to the classroom, he was hunched over the table with his notebook open in front of him. I just wanted to know if he was asleep...” she trailed off. She must’ve felt guilty about peeking at Haruhiko’s notebook.

I sympathized with her, but I was more concerned about what had “scared” her. At this point, Haruhiko would’ve researched *Tadamori and the Lantern* at the school library and inferred the secret behind his birth.

“S-So what did you see?”

“There was some crazy stuff written in it.”

“What?” I gulped.

“Things like, ‘I’m so jealous of my brothers,’ ‘I just want to die,’ ‘No, I’m gonna kill them,’” she said shakily.

“No way...” My eyes widened and I covered my mouth.

“I was shocked, and I guess he noticed my presence because he suddenly looked up. He wasn’t sleeping; he was just resting his head. And then he closed the notebook and ran out of the room.” After recounting the event, Kaori exclaimed, “Why would he be so upset?! Who does he want to kill?! Aoi, can you tell Holmes and get him to stop Haruhiko?”

“Y-Yeah.” I nodded firmly. “I’ll tell Holmes. I’m going to hang up for now, okay? Tell me if anything else happens. I’ll contact you right away if I find out something new.”

“Okay,” she replied tearfully.

“Talk to you later, then.”

I ended the call and told Holmes what Kaori had said. After hearing everything, he nodded and said, “Understood.” He tapped his phone, which he had already taken out of his pocket, and a moment later, a ringtone echoed through the store. He had put the call on speakerphone.

“H-Hey,” came Akihito’s stilted voice.

“Akihito—”

“Ahhh, I know. Haruhiko went over to you, right? Look, I’m really sorry. We came to the conclusion that we wouldn’t be able to explain it well, so we ended up pushing it onto you.”

“Good grief.” Holmes sighed. “If you were going to do that, it would have been nice if you’d told me beforehand.”

“After running out of the store like that, it was kinda hard to do that...”

I could imagine Akihito’s ashamed face.

“As you suspected, Haruhiko paid me a visit,” Holmes said. He proceeded to give Akihito a summary of the conversation: Holmes didn’t know the actual truth himself, so he had only been able to tell Haruhiko to research the story depicted in the hanging scroll. “And just now, Aoi received a call from Kaori saying that Haruhiko was acting strangely. He wrote in his notebook, ‘I’m so jealous of my brothers,’ ‘I just want to die,’ and ‘No, I’m gonna kill them,’” Holmes said in a low voice.

“Huh?” Akihito’s tone of voice changed. “Are you serious?” he squeaked. “Who is he trying to kill? Mom and Kurashina? Or me and Fuyuki?”

“If those were his true thoughts written in the notebook, then he is very distressed. You and Fuyuki should stay by his side, if possible. Also, please tell Ayako and Kurashina about this. I would recommend that you seek professional counseling for him.”

“A-All right. I happen to be in Osaka right now, so I can be home soon. I’ll tell Fuyuki, mom, and Kurashina everything.”

“Let me know if you need anything.”

“Got it.” Akihito hurriedly ended the call.

The store suddenly fell silent.

“Ayako and Kurashina are going to find out, huh?” I murmured, casting my eyes down. They didn’t know that the sons knew the secret behind Haruhiko’s birth, so it was going to be quite the rude awakening.

“Yes.” Holmes had a solemn expression. “Perhaps this flow of events means that the time has come for the truth to come to light.”

Despite everyone’s efforts to hide it, Haruhiko had discovered his true blood type through his own actions, leading him to believe that he wasn’t his parents’ child. Maybe this was the lingering wish of his late adoptive father, who had wanted him to know the truth.

I looked out the window. Evening was short in winter, and the sky was already dimming.

Holmes wordlessly turned on the lights. The store was illuminated in soft light, but my heart remained dark and gloomy.

In the few hours leading to closing time, Akihito had sent me three messages: *“I think Haruhiko turned off his phone. I can’t reach him.”*

“I just got home. I’m gonna tell mom and Kurashina.”

“Holmes seems worried too, so I’ll report to him when Haruhiko comes home.”

There was nothing after that. Haruhiko must not have returned yet.

The grandfather clock gonged. I looked up and saw that it was 7 p.m.—time for the store to close.

“Aoi, you can leave first,” said Holmes. “I’m going to stay here a little longer.”

I shook my head. “I’ll stay too.”

A message came from Kaori: *“Any updates on Haruhiko?”*

She didn’t know the details of Haruhiko’s situation. All she knew was what he had told us: he had discovered his true blood type and determined that he wasn’t a Kajiwara.

Should I tell her what I know? It’s definitely not a pleasant story, and Haruhiko probably wouldn’t want people to know.

Thinking about it that way made me hesitate. Plus, Kaori hadn’t specifically asked for information on his birth.

I replied: *“It seems like he hasn’t come home yet. Akihito said he’d contact Holmes when he does, so I’ll let you know then.”*

“Thanks. That’d put me at ease too.”

I clutched my head in my hands, feeling bad about not being able to tell her everything.

5

Kaori Miyashita was pedaling her bike in the cold with all her might. Thanks to KyoMore, she had been spending a lot of time with Haruhiko, so she had an idea of the places he liked and frequented. On campus, there was the classroom in which the group was stationed, the cafeteria, and the library. Nearby, there was the cafe next to the botanical gardens, Sarasa Nishijin on Kuramaguchi Street, and—since he liked picture books—Mébaé on Shin-Omiya Street, a cafe with an extensive library of them. He had said that he got a craving for ramen whenever he was upset, and that his favorite ramen joint was Tenka Ippin. He would bike all the way to their main store in Kitashirakawa just to have it.

“Not here either.” Kaori sighed, disappointed.

She had biked around to all of Haruhiko’s favorite cafes before arriving at the ramen shop in Kitashirakawa. She checked her phone, but there were no new messages from Aoi. Haruhiko wasn’t home yet, apparently.

“Well, I guess he wouldn’t stay at a ramen place for long.”

She resumed pedaling. Where would Haruhiko go if he wanted to sit and kill time? A diner or a fast food place? There was a fast food place at the intersection of Kitaoji Street and Shimogamo Street that was famous for its chicken. Haruhiko had mentioned that he liked eating there while looking out at the street.

From Shirakawa Street, Kaori headed towards Kitaoji Street. When Shimogamo Street came into view, she stopped and peeked into the shop. Haruhiko wasn’t there.

“This is reckless now that I think about it. There’s no way I can find him.”

She gave a self-deprecating laugh and set out on her bike again. It was strange how she had run into him by chance that one time, despite all of her current

attempts to find him coming up empty. She smiled ruefully as she remembered the sight of him crying, alone and heartbroken. Then she blinked.

“Oh. He might be there...”

She had originally ruled it out on the assumption that he wouldn’t be outside in the cold. But, although that place reminded him of his ex-girlfriend, it was possible that he had liked it to begin with. After all, he had instinctively gone there when he was in pain.

Kaori turned east again and biked until she reached the Kamo River, then turned south. The freezing wind blew relentlessly against her face, but perhaps because she’d been pedaling for so long, she didn’t feel cold. She came to the riverbank from before and got off her bike.

Haruhiko was sitting on the bench, staring at the pitch-black water. Kaori didn’t know if her legs were trembling out of fatigue or relief. Lacking the energy to park her bicycle properly, she let it fall to the ground.

Haruhiko turned around at the sound. “Kaori...”

Kaori left her bicycle as it was and walked up to Haruhiko. Not knowing what to say, the first words to leave her mouth were, “S-Sorry, I saw your notebook.”

Haruhiko gave her a weak look.

“Um, I don’t know your situation, but I’ve always been jealous of my older sister, so I can really relate to how you feel about your brothers. But, like, I’m just as proud of her as I am jealous, and I’m sure it’s the same for you because your eyes always light up when you talk about Akihito and your other brother. And each time, I think, ‘Wow, Haruhiko’s amazing’ because it’s impressive that you can praise people so openly, even if they’re your brothers. But at the same time, I always wondered what you were *really* thinking.”

Kaori grabbed at her hair.

“Um, so when I saw your notebook, I understood. You’re only human, so of course you’ll think that way sometimes. No one can stay a saint forever. Everyone will get thoughts like that at some point in life. But...” She clenched her fists. “I like you because you’re bright, kind, and pure. Being with you heals my heart and makes me feel warm, and that’s what I love about you. I don’t

know what happened, and it's fine to think about dying or killing, but don't ever consider doing it for real. No matter what, you have me on your side!" she shouted with all her might.

Haruhiko's eyes widened. The silence was overbearing. All that could be heard was Kaori's breathless pants and the swift river current.

After a moment, Haruhiko said, "Thank you, Kaori." He paused before lowering his head. "But sorry."

"Huh?" Kaori stiffened. "Did you...already kill someone?"

"N-No, that's not it."

"Are you replying to what I said, then? It wasn't really a confession. Oh, but I did mean what I said, so maybe it was..."

"No." Haruhiko gave a strained laugh. "It's a misunderstanding."

Kaori said nothing and waited for him to continue.

"Today, I more or less figured out the secret behind my birth. It was a huge shock, and I did come here to sort out my feelings, but when I wrote 'die' and 'kill' in my notebook, those weren't my real feelings."

"Were you just venting?"

Haruhiko shook his head. "Kind of, but not exactly..."

Kaori frowned at the vague answer.

"Um, to tell you the truth, I want to become an author..."

Kaori's mind went blank for a second. She hadn't seen that coming. "You mean like the manager or your father?"

"More like Kurisu, if anything..."

"Oh, lighter stuff like that." Kaori's eyes widened. "Wait, is that why you met up with her?"

"Yeah." Haruhiko scratched his head. "The real reason I wanted to meet her was that I found out one of her books had an author character who resembled me. I was really surprised because I'd never told anyone that I was aiming to become one. I wanted to meet her and ask her how she knew."

“What did she say?”

“Well, her answer was really vague. She said, ‘I just had a feeling. I didn’t think it’d be true.’”

“Oh. So, the notebook you’re always carrying...”

“Yeah, it’s where I jot down my ideas. I don’t want anyone to see it because it’s embarrassing.”

Kaori nodded in understanding.

“As for the scribbles you saw...when I met Kurisu, she gave me some advice. ‘Everyone goes through various things in life. You, too, will eventually have experiences that make you want to throw up. But for an author, everything is fuel.’” A cynical smile came to his face. “Then, as if her prophecy had come true, something shocking happened. I remembered her words and decided to turn it into fuel. I thought about how a protagonist would feel if they were faced with my situation and what kind of story would unfold from there. I figured it’d have to be a mystery, so I wrote that stuff about dying and killing, and, well...sorry for making you worry.” Haruhiko lowered his head apologetically.

Kaori shook his head. “No, I should apologize for looking at your notebook without permission and getting the wrong idea. I’m sorry.” She gave a deep bow.

“No, *I’m* sorry.” Haruhiko bowed again. “You were looking for me because you were worried, right? Even though it’s freezing.”

“No, it’s not that bad.” Kaori shook her head.

“Let’s go somewhere warm and get something hot to eat—my treat. What do you want?” Haruhiko asked, standing up and picking up Kaori’s fallen bicycle.

“Um, let’s go with ramen at Tenka Ippin.”

“Huh? That’s okay with you?”

“Yeah. But if you don’t have the energy to go to the main store, we can go to a nearby one. I’m in the mood for something rich and thick,” Kaori said with a smile.

“Got it.” Haruhiko smiled back. “Let’s go, then.”

“Oh, just a second. I need to send a message.” Kaori took out her phone and shot Aoi a quick text.

“I found Haruhiko. He’s fine.”

“Thank goodness!”

Kaori’s expression softened at the quick response. She could imagine Aoi’s teary eyes.

6

“When I was a young man, I was selfish and didn’t know my place,” began Kajiwara’s secretary, Kurashina. “Despite being indebted to Kajiwara, I had illicit feelings for Ayako.”

This was the story I later heard from Akihito. We had learned that the ominous sentences in Haruhiko’s notebook had been part of a creative writing exercise, but the fact that he had discovered the secret behind his birth hadn’t changed. Kurashina and Ayako had offered to explain everything to him and his brothers.

Ayako Kajiwara and Kurashina sat side by side on the living room sofa at the Mount Kurama lodge. Haruhiko and Fuyuki sat across from them, while Akihito listened from a chair by the counter.

“Was that before you took a knife for dad?” Akihito asked, resting his chin on his hand.

“Yes.” Kurashina nodded. “It was before that incident. It’s very hard for me to say this, but I will tell you because the story cannot be told otherwise: Kajiwara had several mistresses at the time, and Ayako was often crying because of it. At first, I purely felt sorry for her. And while I was grateful to Kajiwara, I began to resent him for making her cry.”

The brothers were unfazed by this information. It was a well-known fact that their father had had many lovers in his younger days.

“One day, a mistress came while Kajiwara was away and told Ayako, ‘He loves

me the most, so you should get out.' As his legal wife, Ayako could have simply insulted her and sent her away, but she was too sensitive of a woman for that. She cried and packed her bags, preparing to leave. I was going to stop her, but instead, I found myself taking her hand and saying, 'I've always loved you. Let's take the children and leave this place together.' Ayako was in a weak state of mind. She tearfully accepted my offer, and we left the house, bringing Fuyuki and Akihito with us."

Ayako kept her eyes lowered.

"I remember that," said Fuyuki. "We went to your parents' house, which had a view of Mount Fuji, right? I thought you'd taken us there on a trip."

"Yes." Kurashina nodded. "I didn't want to scare you two, so I disguised it as a trip to Shizuoka and told my mother I was taking my employer's wife and children on vacation. We spent some time at my parents' house, but three days later, Kajiwara tracked us down. I thought he was surely going to arrogantly take his family back, but I was wrong. He got on his knees before Ayako and begged for forgiveness."

"Huh?" The brothers exchanged looks, unable to believe that their father would do such a thing.

"He said, 'It's all my fault. I cut ties with all of my mistresses. Please come back with our children. I'll pretend that these three days never happened.' Ayako had originally loved him, so there was no way she wouldn't be moved. She chose to go back to him. Later, when things had cooled off, I decided to meet with Kajiwara to take responsibility. I was going to thank him for everything he'd done for me, apologize for my transgression, and say my final farewell. He came outside to meet me, and that was when that gang member charged at him with a knife."

Kurashina paused before continuing.

"I protected him not just to make up for what I had done, but also because I wanted to die. When I woke up, I was in the hospital. Kajiwara, Ayako, Fuyuki, and Akihito were all crying around me. Kajiwara took my hand and said, 'Thank you so much. Please continue to be here for me and my children.' And so I buried the past and pledged servitude to the Kajiwara family."

He heaved a sigh.

“After that, Ayako became pregnant with her third child. I wondered if it could be mine, but Kajiwara said that it was his—the third child of the Kajiwara family—without a doubt. I trusted his words. However, he knew that it was mine, not his. Still, he allowed Ayako to give birth and loved the baby as his own child, perhaps out of gratitude to me for risking my life to save him.”

And then he left Haruhiko that hanging scroll...

Everyone remained silent. Ayako, who was sitting next to Kurashina, had a pained look on her face. She wouldn’t have known whether the child she was carrying belonged to her husband or the man she had spent a mere three days with either. Haruhiko had been born under circumstances that were complicated but full of determination and compassion, and he had lived to see this fateful day.

It was Haruhiko himself who broke the silence. “Thank you. Knowing is a weight off my shoulders. I might not be able to call you ‘dad’ right away, though.” He gave a strained smile.

“I understand, of course.” Kurashina nodded firmly.

*

“That’s pretty much how it went,” said Akihito, who was relaying the discussion to us at Kura.

Holmes and I were present, naturally, but Haruhiko wasn’t. And sitting next to Akihito was Kaori. Akihito had guessed that Haruhiko would want the people for whom he had caused concern to know the truth, so he had taken it upon himself to play the role of messenger.

“So that’s what happened...” I nodded. Now that I finally knew the details, it all made sense.

Holmes nodded as well, seemingly thinking the same thing.

“Man...” Akihito stretched his arms and clasped his hands behind his head. “I feel better now that I know the truth too.” He looked at Kaori beside him. “I heard you helped him a lot. Thanks.”

“Oh, no.” Kaori blushed and shook her head. “I’ve just been meddling when no one asked me to.”

“No, seriously, thanks. Also, I heard there’s something going on between you two. Are you going out with our Haruhiko?” Akihito grinned and peered into Kaori’s face.

“No, nothing like that has been decided yet... It’s more like, I finally figured out my own feelings...” Kaori looked down, her ears bright red.

“Finally?” Akihito tilted his head.

“Kaori felt so relaxed with Haruhiko that she didn’t know if her feelings were love or something else,” I said.

This incident had made her realize that he was very important to her, but like she said, they hadn’t started dating or anything.

Holmes chuckled. “I think I know why Kaori was blind to the nature of her feelings.”

Kaori looked up with a start. “Huh? Why?” She must’ve been astonished because she didn’t even know the reason herself.

“It could be because Haruhiko and Aoi have somewhat similar auras. Perhaps you couldn’t tell because he felt like a friend?”

Kaori and I blinked.

“We do?” I asked blankly.

Kaori gaped, her eyes wide open. “I-It’s true!”

“Huh? Kaori?”

“Haruhiko and Aoi are sort of similar. *That’s* why I felt so comfortable and relaxed around him that I couldn’t tell how I felt!”

“Aoi is a thousand times cuter, though,” Holmes added.

I choked.

“Man, you really never change.” Akihito propped his chin on his hand, exasperated.

Kaori burst out laughing.

And that’s how one bright afternoon went, when a secret of the past was made clear, opening the door to a new future.

Chapter 4: A New Mystery

1

The Komatsu Detective Agency was situated in a traditional wooden townhouse, but the first floor had been remodeled into Western-style rooms. The second floor, however, had remained unchanged. It had two Japanese-style rooms side by side, modestly sized at eight tatami mats each. At first, the plan had been to rent one of them, but the boss had said, “I’m not using either of them anyway, so you can take both. You want a studio, don’t you?”

Ensho gave a small sigh and lay on the floor, arms and legs outstretched. Perhaps because he used to live at a temple, he felt at home in the Japanese-style room. He would lie out his futon before going to sleep, and after waking up, he would fold it and put it away in the closet. Even his few personal belongings and clothes were all stored away. The only furnishing in the room was a low desk that he sat on the floor to use.

The other room had his bag of painting materials and a wooden easel. Whenever he looked at the blank canvas, he would automatically avert his gaze, feeling as if he was being blamed for something.

He noticed the wood grain on the ceiling. As a child, he had hated this kind of wood grain because it looked like human faces. It had made him think of sinners trapped in the walls, groaning. When he had mentioned it, his father had replied with a serious expression, “Then paint a picture of it. It’s a world that only you can sense.”

His father had only ever had art on the mind. He had become obsessed with the world of painting, then terrified. Eventually, he had turned to alcohol as an escape. He could no longer hold a brush with his trembling hands. And Ensho had painted in his stead, recreating his style perfectly.

Ensho would never forget the emotions that had run across his father’s face: shock, discouragement, despair, envy, jealousy, and finally, relief. It was a look that said, “I don’t have to paint anymore,” as if he had escaped from something.

“It really is scary,” Ensho muttered.

He didn’t like this. He had painted to make a living, not to live in the world of art. After his father died, he had naturally turned to forgeries, scheming with the bad friends he met. People began to praise him as a genius. He made money, ate good food, and slept with women whenever he wanted to. He became prideful and continued to make forgeries.

“I guess that’s what they call approval-seeking.”

It was a human instinct—something like a motivator to study or work hard. Everyone desires a certain amount of validation. If you were to compare that amount to a vessel, some people have an entire dam to fill and will continue to seek approval endlessly, while others are satisfied with a wine glass’s worth.

Ensho’s desire wasn’t as great as he had thought. It was about the size of a bathtub; as long as he could immerse his body in it, he was satisfied. So he didn’t care anymore. He was done with counterfeiting, alcohol, women—everything. Even Yuki, the only person he treasured as family, had graduated from university and found a job. If he recalled correctly, Yuki was now working for an architectural design firm. He remembered the days when the boy would accompany him as he painted, drawing in his sketchbook.

I wonder how he’s doing?

Feeling uneasy all of a sudden, Ensho sat up in an attempt to brush it off. He realized that the sun had already set. Komatsu was probably still at his desk on the first floor. Imagining the detective tapping away at his keyboard gave him a strange sense of relief. Was it because it meant he wasn’t alone?

Ensho quietly left his room and went downstairs, smiling cynically to himself.

2

The streets of Gion bustled with activity after sunset, but the Komatsu Detective Agency remained quiet. The only sounds were that of Komatsu’s keyboard.

After finishing his side job’s work for the day and getting ready to go home,

the detective remembered something and opened a file on his computer. The picture of Sada—Tomoka's fiancé and owner of an Italian restaurant—with Atsuko popped up on the screen. It had been taken at a restaurant in Gion the day before Tomoka's birthday. Komatsu had found it while investigating for Kiyotaka, and he had already reported his findings to the young man.

Social networking was widespread these days. Thanks to that, it had become easy to obtain such information without having to tread the fine line of the law.

"What's the point of going out for dinner if the people next to us are going to be hostile and ruin the mood? It's probably a mother meeting her daughter's boyfriend. She's basically telling him to break up because he's not good enough for her daughter. Kinda scary."

That was the post made by the person who was in the same restaurant.

"But I don't think she's the kind of person who'd get a girl to break up with her fiancé just because she wants to hire her either." Komatsu thought he knew Atsuko's personality. If she really wanted to hire Tomoka for her club, she wouldn't do sneaky things behind her back. The detective sighed.

"What's going on?" Ensho asked from right next to him.

Komatsu flinched. "Whoa, you scared me. How long have you been standing there?"

"A little while now, old man. You really don't pay attention, eh?" Ensho laughed in slight disbelief.

Komatsu sullenly rested his cheek on his hand. "It's your fault for having too little presence. Besides, I don't wanna hear you call *me* an old man when *you* look like an *os*san yourself," he retorted. He had heard from Kiyotaka the other day that people in Kyoto called monks "*os*san."

"What?" Ensho turned around.

"The little miss's friend said you look like an *os*san."

"Aoi's friend?"

"Kaori." Komatsu had met the girl before at Aoi's birthday party.

Ensho racked his brain. "Oh, yeah, I've seen her. The one with the bob cut,

right?” He peeked at the computer screen. “You’re looking into that obasan?”

“Hey, she’s not *that* old. Call her by her name: Atsuko.”

“What? ‘Obasan’ ain’t rude in Kansai. It’s like calling her ‘auntie.’”

“Huh? Really?”

“Yeah. A lot of people here like the middle-aged ladies.”

“Well, I guess it’s true that young people in Kansai are friendly with the older folk.”

“I’m calling her ‘obasan’ affectionately.”

“All right, that can’t be true.”

“Anyway, what’s that photo?”

“Well...” Komatsu explained the situation. Atsuko had brought one of her flower arranging students—a woman named Tomoka Asai—to Kura to have Kiyotaka investigate her fiancé on suspicion of cheating. “But the kiddo said he advised Tomoka to talk it out with the guy.”

Ensho snorted and pointed at the screen. “Oh, so that’s her fiancé in the photo. He’s been meeting with the obasan in secret. Eh, he didn’t do anything wrong. The obasan just wants them to break up so she can hire the girl at her club.”

“You’re fast on the uptake,” Komatsu said with a dry laugh. “But that’s not necessarily true,” he quickly added.

“But you think it is, yeah? Did you show Holmes this?”

“Yeah, I gave him my findings already.”

“What’d he say?”

“Something like...” Komatsu held out his hands and put on his best Kiyotaka impression: “It isn’t out of the question, but I feel that she wouldn’t go so far to recruit Tomoka for her club.”

Ensho burst out laughing. “That wasn’t even close.”

“Don’t say that. Anyway, what’s your take?”

“Dunno. That obasan’s the type to do anything to get what she wants.”

“Hey, that’s going too far.”

“So defensive. She your type?”

Komatsu choked. A mature woman like Atsuko with a graceful allure... “Yeah, she is.”

“Are you aiming for her?”

“No way. I’m married.”

As they were talking, the intercom rang. Komatsu looked at the screen and did a double-take when he saw none other than Atsuko Tadokoro.

“Holy crap, it’s Atsuko,” said Komatsu.

“Huh, yeah. Speak of the devil, eh?”

“Seriously.” The detective hesitantly answered the call. “Just a second,” he said into the intercom.

Upon opening the front sliding door, he was greeted by a smiling Atsuko in a light purple-lined kimono.

“Good evening to you,” she said.

“Likewise.” Komatsu bowed and ushered her into the office. “Please have a seat.” He gestured at the sofa.

“Thank you kindly.” Atsuko sat down.

“Hey, Ensho, get the tea.”

The painter scowled. The words “I don’t work here anymore” were written all over his face.

“Oh, okay, I’ll do it.” Komatsu started towards the kitchen.

Atsuko held out her hand. “It’s late, so I won’t be staying long.”

“Oh, okay.” Komatsu sat down across from her, a strained smile on his face.

He was about to begin some small talk, but Ensho—who was now standing behind him—spoke up first. “I heard you’re opening up a new place in Gion?”

Komatsu choked. Atsuko, however, continued to smile softly.

“Yes, I am. Do you remember the pathetic shop my son Hiroki was running?”

“Yeah, the rip-off joint, right?” Ensho replied immediately.

Komatsu facepalmed.

“Yes.” Atsuko sighed. “He turned over a new leaf and wanted to do honest work, but he still wants a club. So this time, I’m going to be the owner and make sure everything is run properly. He’s only going to be the manager.”

Ensho snorted. “Must be tough, having a grown man clinging to his mommy’s kimono sleeve forever.”

“Hey, Ensho!” Komatsu snapped.

Atsuko held up a hand. “It’s fine. He’s right. That boy is my bad karma.”

“Bad karma?”

Atsuko regained her composure and looked up. “I’m here today with a request for you, Komatsu.”

“Oh, ask away.” The detective couldn’t help but straighten his back at the dignified gaze pointed his way.

“I trust that you’ve heard about Tomoka from Kiyotaka?”

“Yeah. You wanted him to perform an infidelity investigation, right?”

“Yes.” Atsuko folded her hands in her lap. “I’m not going to be so roundabout anymore.”

“Huh?”

“I don’t want Tomoka to marry that man named Sada. I want you to break them up.”

The blunt declaration left Komatsu speechless. Ensho furrowed his brow.

The Endeavors and Indecision of a Curator-in-Training: Part 1 — Fin

Extra: The Melancholy of Kurisu Aigasa

After a meeting in Umeda, Osaka, author Kurisu Aigasa was on the Hankyu train back to Kyoto. She got off at Kawaramachi Station, climbed the stairs to the surface, and walked west on Shijo Street. When she was almost at Teramachi Street, she turned north, entering a bustling shopping street. The fun atmosphere usually made her feel excited as she passed through here, but today was different. Her feet felt heavy.

Kurisu was wearing her usual Gothic Lolita fashion. Her dress was a modern deep red. A large, plain leather tote bag hung from her shoulder, not matching her intricate outfit at all. It contained her new book, a manila envelope, and her laptop.

The Tragedy of the Grand Family was going to be published soon, on December 1st. Sample copies arrived at the author's office about a week before the release date. The quantity varied by publisher, but it was usually ten. Kurisu would send her sample copies to those who had helped her with research—in this case, Kiyotaka Yagashira and Akihito Kajiwara, who she had modeled the main characters after.

Kiyotaka had emailed her at once with a polite thank-you and two sentences that had sent a chill down her spine: *"I read it right away. When you have time, could you please come to the store?"* Despite the softness of the words, she trembled with fear. Was it because of the anger contained within, or was it because of her own guilty conscience?

Kurisu stopped in front of the antique store Kura and took a deep breath before willing herself to open the door. The chime rang. As usual, the black-haired, fair-skinned Kiyotaka Yagashira was at the counter. He was wearing his typical outfit, a white shirt and black vest with arm garters. There didn't seem to be anyone else in the store.

Kiyotaka turned to Kurisu and smiled. "I've been waiting for you."

"Hello," the author said with an awkward bow. She started walking towards

the counter only to be interrupted by Kiyotaka motioning her towards the guest sofas in the middle of the store.

"Please have a seat there."

"Thank you," Kurisu said, sitting down as instructed.

"Will coffee be fine?"

"Yes. Oh, I have a souvenir for you. Please share it with Aoi." She took a rectangular metallic box out of her large tote bag. It was white with light blue text on it.

"Ah, these are Échiré's baked treats. Thank you. I'll be sure to have them with Aoi."

Échiré was a French fermented butter brand, and this was an assortment of sweets from its specialty store, Échiré Marché au Beurre. The choice of gift and the phrase "share it with Aoi" seemed to have their intended effect—Kiyotaka happily accepted it before heading into the kitchenette.

Phew. At least he isn't in a bad mood. Kurisu sighed in relief as she sat back down.

It wasn't long before the rich aroma of coffee wafted out from the kitchenette. Looking around, the store was packed with rows of beautiful antiques. They were surely all old, but the place didn't feel musty. Despite the sheer quantity of *things*, everything seemed free of dust, as if time had stopped.

Kurisu noticed the ticking of the grandfather clock. Time was moving after all. Her expression relaxed, and when she glanced down, she saw a book lying at one end of the table. She couldn't see the title because it was wrapped in a black leather book cover, but it was probably *The Tragedy of the Grand Family*.

She shivered, placed a hand on her chest, and took deep breaths. She felt tense, as if she was about to engage in battle.

After a while, Kiyotaka emerged from the kitchenette with a tray. "Thank you for your patience. Here, have some stollen." He placed the coffee and bread on the table.

“Oh, thank you. It’s already Christmas season, huh?” Kurisu took a bite and her eyes widened. “Oh my, it’s delicious.”

“Indeed.” Kiyotaka smiled happily. “This stollen is from a cafe in Okazaki, near the Kyoto Zoo. It’s sold in limited quantities and advance orders are required, but it’s very good, so I buy it every year.”

Stollen was a German cake-like bread eaten during the Christmas season. In Japanese, the name was pronounced with an elongated “o,” but apparently, the original German pronunciation was much faster.

“Sometimes it’s too sweet for my liking, but this really is good,” Kurisu said. “I might order some myself.”

“Please do.” Kiyotaka nodded.

Kurisu sipped her coffee. The plate, cup, and saucer were all from a brand called Noritake. The cup had a rose design. It was taller than a normal teacup and had a jug-like shape. “Oh, it’s not one of the custom cups you had made?” She had seen the announcement on Kura’s website. The picture there had been of a simple turquoise mug.

“Ah, you checked our homepage. Thank you. Those are mainly for staff use. Also, I had a feeling you would prefer this cup today.”

“Yes, you’re right. I love Noritake’s tableware. I’ve never seen a cup in this shape before.”

“It’s called ‘color enamel and gold leaf, rose pattern,’” Kiyotaka said, sitting down across from Kurisu. He took the cover off of the book on the table and showed her the cover. As expected, it was his complimentary copy of *The Tragedy of the Grand Family*. “Thank you again for the book.”

“Thank you too. I wouldn’t have been able to write it without you as a reference.”

Kiyotaka shook his head. “No, I didn’t do anything. As I said in my email, I read it right away. The improvements from the manuscript I read before made it much more interesting and enjoyable.”

“Thank you.” Kurisu bowed and sipped her coffee.

“However,” Kiyotaka said, flipping the pages, “I found it rather strange.” He continued to leaf through the book.

“Um, how so?” Kurisu asked, playing dumb despite knowing what he was getting at.

“I requested that Aoi appear in the story, but she’s nowhere to be found.” He stopped flipping the pages and stared at Kurisu.

The author held back a shriek. Feeling a cold sweat forming on her forehead, she gently put down her cup. She had considered including the girl, but personally, she had been against the idea. Aoi Mashiro was the love of Kiyotaka’s life. This handsome, gentle, and knowledgeable man would instantly lose his composure in her presence. But the Kiyotaka Yagashira in the story was a detective. Kurisu had wanted him to stay solitary, elegant, and cool. That was why she had decided to leave Aoi out.

“Um, well, I discussed it with my editor, but it was decided that the story would be better off without romantic elements,” Kurisu said.

“You could have included her without romance, though,” Kiyotaka replied immediately.

He was right. She could have. In fact, she *had* tried writing it, but for some reason, it would always veer towards romance. As such, she had concluded that it wouldn’t work.

“I did try, but it affected the overall balance,” Kurisu said honestly. “I’m sorry I couldn’t fulfill your request.” She bowed deeply.

“I see.” Kiyotaka sighed.

Kurisu braced herself for a stinging complaint, but the man said nothing else. She looked up at him, confused. “Are you upset?”

“No, I’m not upset. I’m just disappointed.”

“I know you love Aoi, but is it really that disappointing that she didn’t appear in the story?” Kurisu asked without thinking.

Kiyotaka gave a strained smile. “I may be Aoi’s fiancé, but I’m also her fan.”

“So basically, she’s your so-called ‘best girl’?”

“Yes.”

“Oh, I see. It *would* be disappointing if your best girl didn’t show up.” Kurisu nodded, finally understanding his mindset.

“Exactly. I read the book excitedly, wondering when Aoi would appear. When I reached the last sentence to no avail, I considered the possibility that the author was challenging me to ‘read between the lines.’”

“You don’t need to be sarcastic about it. You really are a Kyoto boy, huh?”

“My apologies.”

There was no energy behind Kiyotaka’s smile. He must have been genuinely disappointed.

Kurisu couldn’t help but feel sorry to see him so depressed. “Um, if it interests you...” She nervously reached into her bag. This was the ace up her sleeve—and her last resort. She didn’t want to have to use it, but alas.

“Yes?”

“I brought the rejected manuscript that has Aoi in it. You said to write her as your betrothed, didn’t you? So I did.” She held out the manila envelope.

Kiyotaka’s eyes widened. When he said nothing, Kurisu hurriedly tried to put it back in her bag.

“Oh, I guess you wouldn’t want to read a scrapped manuscript. Sorry.”

“No!” Kiyotaka shouted. “Please let me read it.” His expression was more serious than ever.

Kurisu’s face stiffened. “You can just have it, then. If you don’t like it, you can rip it up.” She offered him the envelope with both hands.

“I would never do such a thing. It’s a story where Aoi is my fiancée, isn’t it? I’ll make it my family heirloom.”

“No, seriously, please don’t.” Kurisu immediately stood up.

“Are you leaving already?”

“I’m scared that you’ll be angry...”

“I couldn’t possibly be angry about a story where I’m engaged to Aoi. Please stay if you have time. I’d like to give you my thoughts.”

For a writer, impressions were as gratifying as royalties. Even if the manuscript had already been rejected, Kurisu wanted to hear his opinion. She sat back down and sipped her coffee.

Kiyotaka took the papers out of the envelope and tapped them on the desk, lining them up. Feeling restless, Kurisu began to explain the setting.

“The Kiyotaka Yagashira in the story was the son of a wealthy merchant, right? So I made his fiancée, Aoi Mashiro, the daughter of former nobles who lost their riches. Her family needs the Yagashira fortune in order to rebuild their family, while the Yagashira family wants the honor of the Mashiro family name. I wrote their first encounter—a marriage interview—but scrapped it.”

“How intriguing.” Kiyotaka looked down at the manuscript.

*

The day of the marriage talks, Aoi Mashiro visited the Yagashira residence in a stylish modern girl outfit consisting of a hat, blouse, and long flared skirt. Kiyotaka had expected her to appear in an elegant formal kimono, which would have been the safe choice, so he was surprised to see her avant-garde fashion. He appreciated that she was clearly not the conservative young lady he had assumed she was.

His parents left them alone quickly, saying, “We’ll leave you two to yourselves now” and “Yes, Kiyotaka, show Aoi around the garden.”

“Well then, come this way, Aoi.”

Kiyotaka led her into the Yagashira family’s prized garden, which had seasonal flowers in bloom no matter the time of year. But instead of enjoying the scenery, she kept her head down. Her body radiated a nervous aura.

She seems to want to say something. Kiyotaka stopped and turned around. “You’ve just arrived from Kanto, so you must be tired. Would you like to sit down somewhere?” he asked gently.

Aoi's face remained tense. Eyes lowered, she quietly said, "Um, I have a favor to ask."

As Kiyotaka had thought, she had something to say. He was sure that she was going to declare her conditions for marriage.

She looked up and met his gaze. "Kiyotaka, I want you to turn down this marriage."

That was unexpected. Kiyotaka blinked in surprise for a moment before putting on a confident smile. "And why is that? Do you dislike me now that you've met me?"

Aoi shook her head.

"As a Mashiro, are you reluctant to marry into a merchant family?"

Aoi shook her head even harder. "No, of course not." She took a breath and closed her eyes. "The Yagashira family must not have realized that the Mashiro family's debt is much larger than you think."

Kiyotaka said nothing.

"My parents are hiding it at all costs. They're desperate to form a tie with the Yagashira family. They say that even if you find out after the marriage and divorce me, it's fine as long as they received the betrothal money. This is *fraud*. Please pretend you knew all along and refuse to marry me," Aoi said, quietly but firmly.

Kiyotaka furrowed his brow. While the girl referred to the Mashiros as her "parents," her biological parents had died in an accident. She had been adopted by her uncle and aunt.

"Are you sure that's what you want? If I refuse, the public will find out that the Mashiro family is heavily in debt. Then it really will be over for your family."

"Yes, I imagine so."

"You may even be sold to a brothel as collateral for the debt," Kiyotaka said. Part of it was because he wanted the naive young lady to realize the reality of the situation. However, girls from bankrupted respected families fetched extraordinary prices in the red-light district, so it wasn't actually an uncommon

tale. Her adoptive father was a miser, so it was well within the realm of possibility.

Aoi bit her lip. “I’m prepared to accept my fate.” She looked straight into Kiyotaka’s eyes. “No matter what happens, the Mashiro family is responsible for the seeds we have sown. As the eldest daughter, I do not wish to cause anyone any more trouble, certainly not by deceiving them into marriage. Even if my body becomes dirtied, my soul will remain clean.” Her eyes were reserved but resolute. They showed her unwavering determination.

Kiyotaka gulped, then chuckled. Aoi looked bewildered by his reaction. She didn’t know why he had suddenly laughed.

“Excuse my rudeness,” he said. “I already knew everything. Your parents may have been trying hard to conceal it, but we fully investigated the Mashiro family’s debt. Naturally, that includes the high sum.”

“Huh?”

“My grandfather is desperate to form ties with former nobility. He thinks that the Mashiro family name is worth shouldering that debt,” Kiyotaka said with a grin.

Aoi frowned. “I hear that you are a talented man. Are you truly all right with that outcome?”

“I don’t mind. I’m indebted to my grandfather.”

Kiyotaka had assumed that he was incapable of love, so he was content to marry whomever his grandfather would be pleased with. *However...* He looked at Aoi and felt dazzled by her gaze. For the very first time, he found himself wanting to learn more about someone.

How can she be so strong? Perhaps she is in love with another. That would explain why she is so intent on canceling the marriage talks. Her heart belongs to another man.

The thought made him reluctant to let her go. He looked her in the eye and said, “Aoi, rather than selling yourself to a brothel, would you be willing to sell yourself to me?”

Aoi’s eyes widened in disbelief.

“I know all of your circumstances, so you would not be deceiving me. Just now, you asked if I was okay with this outcome. Frankly, I didn’t think forming ties with the Mashiro family was worth taking on such a large debt. However, after meeting you, I’ve changed my mind. You are worth more than the Mashiro name.”

Aoi’s eyes wavered at the unexpected offer. “Are you telling me...to become your personal prostitute?”

“Yes, that’s what it would entail.”

Why did he phrase it that way? Thinking that her strength was out of love for another made him angry, and at the same time, he didn’t want to let anyone else have her.

“If the Mashiro family were to go bankrupt, the damage would not be limited to your family. Many people associated with the Mashiros would lose the roof over their heads. All you have to do is proceed with this marriage and everything will be fine. It’s not a bad deal, is it? Would you rather subject more people to misfortune?” He knew that by saying this, she wouldn’t be able to refuse. He really was a demon. “Come,” he said, holding out his hand with a cynical smile.

Aoi nodded silently and took his hand with determination.

Kiyotaka pulled her into an embrace. “Let us make a provisional contract. Tonight, I will have you,” he whispered into her ear. The girl in his arms trembled.

It was the beginning of a twisted love.

*

“That’s basically it,” Kurisu said when Kiyotaka finished reading.

The young man hung his head and muttered, “This is bad for my heart.”

“Huh?”

“If I were to obtain Aoi that way, wouldn’t she hate me?!”

“Yep.” Kurisu nodded. “Kiyotaka is convinced that Aoi is in love with someone else, but actually, Aoi fell in love with Kiyotaka while investigating her fiancée-to-be. That’s why she didn’t want to deceive him and asked him to call off the marriage talks. So neither of them know that their feelings are mutual.”

“Ahhh, that’s even worse.” Kiyotaka held his head. “So do I share a bed with her that night?”

“Share a bed... Well, what would *you* do in that situation?”

Kiyotaka folded his arms and frowned, deep in thought. “If it were me...I don’t think I’d be able to do it.”

“I thought so,” Kurisu said, satisfied. “That’s right. Aoi goes to the bedroom, resigned to her fate. Kiyotaka is about to do the deed.”

“And then?”

“But when he sees Aoi frightened, he can’t do anything to her. He tells her to go back to her room. Aoi thinks she doesn’t even have worth as a personal prostitute. While she’s vulnerable, her childhood friend makes his move!”

“A second man?!” Kiyotaka put his hand over his mouth. “What an evil plot development. I simply must know what happens next!”

Kurisu gave a strained smile. “But this kind of development overshadows the mystery, doesn’t it? I want to write a *mystery*. That’s why I scrapped it.”

“No.” Kiyotaka gave her a firm look. “I personally think that this story is much better. Could you postpone the next mystery and write this instead?”

“H-How can you say that?!” Kurisu’s eyes widened.

“I’m sorry.” Kiyotaka held up his hand. “That was too pushy of me.”

“It really was.” Kurisu humphed and crossed her arms and legs.

“I know I shouldn’t have said that, but also, how about this for thought?”

“What is it this time?”

“That aggravating second man, Aoi’s childhood friend, is murdered by someone.”

“Excuse me?” Kurisu squeaked.

“‘Who killed that man?!’ See? It’s a mystery now. A perfect cross between romance and mystery.” Kiyotaka’s eyes lit up as he held the manuscript.

“What’s with that smug look on your face? Besides, it’s obviously Kiyotaka Yagashira who killed the childhood friend. ‘The detective was the culprit’ is such a forbidden move.”

“No, no.” Kiyotaka shook his head. “Please don’t think so poorly of me. Even in fiction, I would never take direct action like that.”

“Then you’re the mastermind—the one who grins at the last line of the book after the culprit is caught, spooking the reader.”

“I don’t want to be that black-hearted.”

“That’s rich, coming from you.”

“I want the book to end with Aoi and I holding hands in a beautiful garden, having fallen completely in love with each other. Well, to be completely honest, I want it to be a scene where they wake up in the morning in bed together.”

“Stop it.” Kurisu slumped her shoulders. “I don’t want to write a mushy romance. I want to write partners solving a mystery.”

“By ‘partners,’ you mean me and Akihito, right?”

“Yes. What could be better than two handsome men?”

Kiyotaka rested his chin on his hand and sighed. “That has no appeal to me at all. I’m not interested in young men.”

“Even if it doesn’t appeal to you, it will to the women of the world.”

“Are you sure? A mystery set in the early Showa period with a romantic drama between fiancés would definitely be more interesting.”

“Wouldn’t that be too much?”

“I think it’s more fun to have various elements. Combining genres like ‘fantasy suspense’ or ‘horror mystery’ multiplies the enjoyment, doesn’t it?” Kiyotaka said with his arms spread out.

Kurisu clicked her tongue and whispered, “Ugh, he always has more to say. And it’s frustrating that he’s basically right...”

Kiyotaka flipped through the manuscript, pretending not to hear her. “But still,” he murmured, “I don’t like how the me in the story is so cruel to Aoi. Could you do something about that?”

“Like what?”

“For example, I could slip in the bathroom and hit my head. Suddenly, I realize that I’m in love with Aoi and become kinder to her.”

“Just when I thought your suggestions were reasonable, you hit me with this nonsense. You slip in the bathroom and hit your head? Really?”

“I may be able to suggest ideas for projects, but I have no creative writing talent.”

“Oh my, what an unexpected weakness for Kiyotaka Yagashira.” Kurisu quickly opened her notebook to take notes.

“Are you going to use that for your next book?”

“Perhaps.”

“Is my fiancée Aoi going to comfort me because I can’t write a story?”

“Look, I scrapped the engagement stuff. Aoi isn’t going to appear in the book. You know what, I’m taking that manuscript back.”

Kurisu reached out, but Kiyotaka hugged the papers to his chest. “No. You already gave it to me. It’s mine now.”

“You’re behaving like a child.”

Suddenly, the door chime rang, and Aoi entered the store. “Hello. Oh, Aigasa! Good afternoon!”

At that very moment, Kiyotaka was standing up, holding the manuscript high in the air, while Kurisu was standing on tiptoe, trying to grab it.

“Um, what are you doing?” Aoi asked, stunned.

“Perfect timing, Aoi,” said Kurisu. “Could you tickle Kiyotaka for me?!”

“Huh?” Aoi replied, confused.

Kiyotaka’s eyes widened. “You would have Aoi tickle me so that you could

take it? Have you no shame?!”

“I could ask you the same thing,” Kurisu quipped.

The antique store Kura was filled with lively voices. It was a melancholic afternoon for the author Kurisu Aigasa, who couldn’t help but feel that many difficulties lay ahead.

Fin

Afterword

Thank you for reading. I'm Mai Mochizuki.

First, I must apologize that this story ended up being split into two parts. Ensho's exhibition is the central event this time. I wanted to depict Aoi's struggles as a student and curator-in-training, as well as the other characters' growth, but it became unexpectedly long. When I tried to fit it within the set page count, the latter half of the story became rushed, and I didn't want that. After much hesitation, I decided to release it in two volumes. I will try to have the second part published as soon as possible.

Although I had decided on the theme of the story, as was written at the start of this book, I couldn't figure out how it should begin. As I was struggling, I received a request from the Kyoto City Kita-ku ward office:

"We, the Kita-ku ward office, are trying to promote the Mount Funaoka area throughout Japan. We would love to hear any ideas you might have."

Startled, I thought, *I can write this as-is*. Aoi and the other students receive a request from the Kita-ku ward office to promote the Mount Funaoka area. Once I had that idea in my head, the door to the story opened.

I accepted the request while making one of my own: "Please let me use this in *Holmes of Kyoto*." As a result, this volume highlighted Aoi and her schoolmates' struggle to liven up their neighborhood, differences between Kyoto and other regions, and various Kyoto cliches. There weren't any major incidents, but I had a lot of fun writing it, all the way up to the extra chapter at the end. It felt like going back to the basics. (By the way, the "Little Genbu" illustration was drawn by me.)

I hope you'll look forward to part two.

Now then, as usual, please let me use this space to express my thanks. I'm grateful for all of the connections surrounding me and this series. Thank you all so much.

Mai Mochizuki

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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 March 2021)