

The Secret of the Crimson Crane



When he stepped into Fushimi Inari that morning, Archie never imagined something folded deep in the shadows was waiting for him.

Ahead of him, a thousand vermillion gates rose like a river of fire.

Archie stopped walking, eyes wide as he tilted his head back. “This is insane,” he whispered. “It just keeps going.”

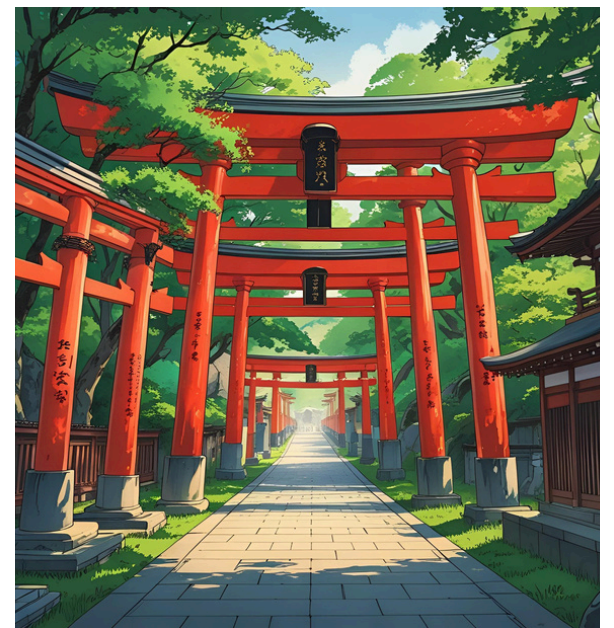
Archie and his friends, Violet and Alex, had arrived a week before from Australia and were still adjusting to this new country.

Their host family had dropped them at Fushimi Inari-taisha, then gone to wait at a nearby café.

“This is unreal,” Violet said, holding up her phone to film. “It looks fake. But in a good way.”

“Ten thousand gates,” Alex added, “All donated by people who wanted to say thank you. For luck, prosperity... stuff like that.”

“And they’re all hand-carved,” Archie murmured, flipping open the brochure he had picked up from the tourist information centre. “It’s like walking through a timeline.”





The gates stretched up the side of Mount Inari, tight together and curving into the forest above like some kind of glowing tunnel. Between them, fox statues peeked from stone pedestals, some moss-covered, others gleaming with fresh offerings.

“These are called Kitsune,” Archie said, crouching to look at one. Messengers of the god Inari. And apparently, protectors of secrets.”

“Kinda spooky,” Violet said, half-joking.

They wandered further off the main trail, away from the groups of tourists taking photos beneath the gates. Around a bend, they passed a side path where the trees closed in more tightly, and the noise faded.

That’s when Archie noticed her.

A girl, about their age, stood by a low stone slab partly buried in the earth. She wore a red kimono and was intently studying inscriptions while glancing back and forth between them and a leather-bound notebook spread open on the ground beside her. Her dark hair was neatly tied back, and her shoes were spotless despite the gravel path.

She didn’t see them at first. She was staring at the slab, frowning.

Archie stopped in his tracks. “What do you think she is doing?”



Alex followed his gaze. “Looks like she is trying to decipher something?”

“Let’s not be weird,” Violet said under her breath. “She might just be here to pray.”

But Archie had already stepped forward.

“Kon'nichiwa,” he said in broken Japanese. “Kore wa nan desu ka?” (What is this?)

After a week in Japan, he’d picked up a few phrases, especially this one, useful for pointing at menus when English wasn’t available.

The girl looked up. Her eyes flicked from one to the other, then narrowed slightly.

“It’s nothing,” she said in perfect English. “Just... family notes.”

“Oh. Okay.” Archie stepped back, trying not to seem too nosy.

“Sorry, I just thought you might be trying to figure out a puzzle or something,” he added, gesturing toward the strange inscriptions on the slab.

The girl studied him for a moment longer. Then her gaze shifted to Alex and Violet.

“Where are you from?”



“We’re from Australia,” Alex said, offering a small bow. “We’re here on a cultural exchange program.”

“We’re staying with the Yoshimuras, our host family”, Violet added.

There was a pause.

“I’m Emi,” the girl said at last.

Archie smiled. “Nice to meet you.”

Another silence.

“Why did you think I was trying to decipher a puzzle?” Emi finally said.

Archie shrugged, a little embarrassed. “I guess... we’re all kind of obsessed with puzzles. Can’t help it.”

Violet rolled her eyes with a grin. “These two are obsessed. I’m not but they always drag me on missions to decipher clues.”

“Missions?” Emi asked, raising an eyebrow.

Archie hesitated, glancing at Violet and Alex. “Well... we’ve had some unusual adventures recently. It’s not exactly something we talk about, though.”

Emi smiled slightly. “I understand. How about this: if you share your secret with me, I’ll share mine. Deal?”

Archie exchanged a quick look with his friends, then nodded.

“Deal.”

He took a deep breath, then began. “We’re part of a group called the Intrepid Explorers. It’s not a club or anything official. We’re more like a group of friends who solve mysteries and help recover artefacts.”

Alex nodded. “We’ve solved many riddles and helped recover ancient artefacts.”

“We started in Australia,” Archie continued, “then travelled to the United States, Egypt, and France. Each place had its own challenges and puzzles.”

“Wow, that’s so cool,” Emi said, eyes bright. “So, you can solve any puzzle?”

Archie scratched the back of his neck and shrugged.

“Depends... but so far, we’ve managed to crack quite a few.”

Emi hesitated, then slowly opened her notebook. “Before he died, my grandfather left me this. He was the head historian here at the shrine. He told me that some things were meant to be protected quietly. Folded up, not locked away.”

She turned the page. On it was a short, handwritten poem, in delicate brush strokes, and a faded map of the shrine grounds.





“I think he wanted me to find something,” Emi said quietly.
“Something hidden. I solved the first part. It was a poem tucked in the back of his journal. He wrote it in a strange way, like a riddle.”

She flipped open her leather-bound notebook and showed them a carefully copied verse:

Beneath vermilion,
The fox waits at the moon’s first rise.
Where crane and plum meet,
Listen where the stones will speak—
The truth sleeps in folded wings.

“This line, ‘beneath vermilion’, made me think of the torii gates,” Emi explained. “They’re everywhere in Fushimi Inari.”

Violet looked at the pictures she had taken minutes before with her phone. “Yes, we’ve noticed.”

“Right,” Emi said. “And the second line, ‘the fox waits’. In Japanese folklore, foxes or kitsune are said to be messengers of Inari. You see them all over this shrine. So that line in the poem made me think this was the place. And then, the part about ‘crane and plum’... well, my grandfather always said the crane is our family symbol.





He used to make origami cranes and draw plum blossoms beside them. For the last year, I have been coming here every day to inspect each gate and slab. Today, I saw the carvings near this slab, including a crane and a plum flower. That's when it all clicked."

She stepped aside to reveal a carving on the edge of the stone: a plum blossom on one side, and a crane with outstretched wings on the other.

"And that last line, 'stones will speak', is where I'm stuck."

She knelt down beside the slab.

"There's a 4x4 grid of *kanji* carved into the top. Do you know what kanji are?"

Alex shook his head.

"They're one of the three writing systems we use in Japanese," Emi explained. "Each *kanji* is like a symbol that represents a word or idea. For example," she pointed to one, "this one means *spring*. And that one is *autumn*."

Archie leaned closer. "And... that carving at the top, what does it say?"

“『四季のリズムをたどれ』,” she read. “It means, ‘Follow the rhythm of the seasons.’ But I didn’t know what to do with that. I thought it was just poetic.”

Archie’s eyes lit up. “Wait... the rhythm of the seasons! It’s a sequence. If we start with spring, then follow the year, it goes: spring, summer, autumn, winter. That has to be it. It’s a pattern!”

He looked at the stone grid, then back at Emi. “Can you show me the symbols for each season?”

Emi nodded and pointed to each one in turn, speaking softly.

“春 (haru) — Spring.
夏 (natsu) — Summer.
秋 (aki) — Autumn.
冬 (fuyu) — Winter.”

Without waiting for more confirmation, Archie pressed the kanji in order: 春, 夏, 秋, 冬.



For a moment, nothing happened.

Then, with a low rumble, the stone slab gave a soft click. A small square in the centre of the slab shifted, then rose, revealing a hidden compartment.

Emi blinked. “Wait... it was that simple?”

Alex chuckled. “Simple if your brain is wired like Archie’s.”

“I thought the kanji were just decorative,” Emi admitted. “I was trying to translate them, not use them.”

Inside the compartment sat a delicate red origami crane.

Beneath one of its wings, a tightly rolled scroll was tucked away.



What Happens Next? Your Turn to Imagine the Adventure!

When Archie pressed the final symbol — winter — the stone clicked open. A red origami crane, folded long ago, waited inside.

But what does it mean? And what will they find next?

Use these prompts to imagine and write the next part of the story. You're now the storyteller!

Prompt 1: What's Inside the Crane?

The crane wasn't just a decoration. There's a hidden scroll tucked under its wing.

What do you think the scroll says?

Is it a riddle? A warning? A map?

Who wrote it, and why did they hide it?

What secret does it reveal?

 Write what Archie sees when he unrolls the scroll.

Prompt 2: Where Does the Clue Lead Them?

Now that they've found the scroll, something is about to change.

Where do they go next?

Deeper into the forest?

Underneath the shrine into hidden tunnels?

To another part of Kyoto?

 Describe the setting and how the characters feel as they follow the clue.

Prompt 3: Your Ending... or a Cliffhanger?

Will they find the next artefact? Or are they about to step into even deeper danger?

How would YOU end the story?

With a success and a celebration?

Or a dramatic cliffhanger that leaves everyone gasping?

 Write the end of the story!