



神永  
学

心霊探偵

八

PSYCHIC DETECTIVE

YAKUMO

ΠΑΠΑΒΥ ΚΑΜΠΑΓΑ

雲



祈りの  
柩

角川文庫

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# 呪いの泉

## 第一章

FILE:  
01

## file 01: the cursed spring

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1

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Sachiko ran –

With only the moonlight as her aid, she made her way through the dark, thick trees and grass, pushing away branches and panting as she ran frantically.

Just earlier she had seen the back of the man running in front of her, but now, she could not find him anywhere.

It seemed like she had completely be left behind.

She didn't even know where she was running towards now.

Still, she couldn't stop. If her feet stopped, she would be caught at once.

– I shouldn't have come here.

Along with her strong regret, the spring she had seen earlier formed a vivid image in her mind. A spring on high ground, surrounded by the forest.

– Let's watch the meteor shower.

She couldn't remember exactly who had said it, but Sachiko herself had thought that a photo of the meteor shower reflected on the surface of the spring would have been beautiful.

And then they had gone to that spring.

At first it had been fun. Everyone had been excited when somebody had said, as they were waiting for the meteor shower –

'I hear something.'

When Sachiko strained her eyes, she did hear something.

She hadn't known what it was at first. It sounded like the branches rustling and the sound of insects.

'Do you know the legend about this spring?'

Sachiko started talking about the legend she had heard before about this spring. She had meant it as a joke.

She could still hear the sound as she talked. It got louder and louder, and then finally, somebody said –

'This is a song.'

Those words made everything turn cold.

Sachiko held her breath and looked around.

There was nobody here besides them, and yet she could hear it. Sachiko could no longer hear anything besides the song.

Sachiko suddenly felt something and looked towards the spring. Then, she saw something bubbling up from the spring, which reflected the moon on its surface.

As the water rushed up, a black shadow appeared.

A woman –

There was panic. Sachiko couldn't remember exactly what happened. She ran, screaming.

The singing voice came down from the sky.

The voice which echoed uncannily through Sachiko's head made her tremble.

'Stop it already! What is this!?' screamed Sachiko.

However, the song continued to echo in her ears regardless.

I need to get out of her right now – despite that urgent thought, Sachiko tripped on a tree root and fell forward.

She used the tree trunk as support to stand up, but then a shocking pain ran through her ankle. It seemed she had twisted it when she fell.

As if to mock Sachiko for that, the song followed her.

'Stop!'

Sachiko covered her ears with her hands and shut her eyes tightly as she screamed as loud as she could. Then, the wind rose up, as if her scream had caused it, and made the branches rustle loudly.

Sachiko was shaking, but she soon noticed something strange and opened her eyes.

The singing voice she had heard up until now had suddenly stopped. When she took her hands off her ears, she couldn't hear the song.

In the silence, Sachiko heaved a sigh of relief.

What on earth had that song been? Maybe it had been an auditory hallucination – no, that couldn't be it. She wasn't the only one who heard it.

Sachiko suddenly felt a presence behind her.

The man who had left her had come back – that was what she thought at first, but if that was the case, why wasn't he calling out to her?

Drip, drip, drip –

There was the sound of dripping water.

Gooseflesh came up over Sachiko's whole body in her anxiety and confusion.

– I'm scared. I don't want to look.

Even though she thought that, her neck slowly turned backwards, contrary to her will.

It was so shocking that Sachiko couldn't even scream.

Standing behind her was a woman, completely soaked –

She was so pale she didn't look alive. Water dripped from her sharp chin.

Drip, drip –

Her wet hand reached straight in front of her.

– I need to run.

Even though Sachiko thought that, she was caught by the woman's eyes, which were as dark as caves, and Sachiko couldn't even move a finger.

The wet hand completely snatched away Sachiko's consciousness –

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Gotou Kazutoshi leant back on the chair and lit a cigarette –

'I'm bored...' he grumbled, blowing out smoke.

The Unsolved Cases Special Investigations Room that Gotou was stationed at was under the jurisdiction of Criminal Affairs. Though it had a splendid name, the main work was to organise files for cases that had been left unsolved and to assist in cases when there weren't enough people. It was just a do-nothing job.

'Then please help.'

Through the smoke, Gotou saw Ishii Yuutarou lift his head up from the pile of documents.

He wore a slender suit and silver-framed glasses that made him look intelligent. At first glance, he looked like a capable man, but that was completely false.

Ishii was always hesitant and panicked when it came to the crunch, so he couldn't do anything. That was the type of guy he was.

'I can't do boring work like organising files.'

Gotou looked away.

'Organising documents is a splendid job. Why do you dislike it so much?'

Unusually, Ishii talked back.

Why – the answer was just that Gotou didn't like it.

It irritated him to think about difficult problems and do detailed work. There was no reason for it. That was just his personality.

But saying that aloud would get on Gotou's nerves.

'I don't dislike it. I just don't want to do it.'

'That's the same thing. In the first place...'

'Shut up.'

Gotou hit Ishii's head.

Ishii's lip curled in what looked like dissatisfaction, but he didn't say anything else.

When did Gotou turn into this –

When he joined the police, he had been burning with justice. He had felt like he'd become a hero.

However, he soon found out the truth.

Police weren't allies of justice. The bad guys did whatever they wanted, and the good citizens that the police were supposed to protect became victims.

Even while knowing that, there were laws, rules, and society – within these walls, Gotou couldn't do anything.

The recent stalker case was a good example.

Even though Gotou knew it was likely they'd commit a crime, he still couldn't do anything. All anyone could do was report it. If nothing happened, the police couldn't act.

These days kept piling up, rubbing away at Gotou's spirit.

If he couldn't save anyone, what were the police for anyway?

– Going on feeling won't solve anything.

A man who had been Gotou's coworker before had said that. The complete opposite of Gotou, he followed the rules and acted on his thoughts – an unpleasant guy.

Even though Gotou could remember his name, he just couldn't remember his face. Maybe because he hadn't ever looked at him properly because he just hadn't liked him.

The door opened, interrupting Gotou's thoughts.

Miyagawa Hideya, the chief of the detectives, came into the room.

Though he had a small frame, his bald head and sharp, glinting eyes made him seem more like a gangster than a detective.

He had been on the scene for a long time. When Gotou was a novice detective, Miyagawa had worked him hard.

Miyagawa was also a man who went more on feeling than on thought.

'Chief Miyagawa, good morning.'

Ishii stood up and bowed in his stupidly polite way.

'My, my. What's the revered chief of the detectives doing on this remote island?' said Gotou sarcastically.

'You look like you have a lot of free time, as always,' replied Miyagawa in the same manner.

'We're busy, even though we look like this,' said Gotou jokingly, which made Miyagawa snort.

'There's something I want to ask you guys to do,' said Miyagawa in a wry tone after walking up to Gotou's side.

If it was a request for Gotou and Ishii in their do-nothing jobs, it had to be troublesome.

'Please ask elsewhere.'

Gotou pressed his finished cigarette in the ashtray and looked away.

'I want to do that too. This isn't even police work in the first place.'

Miyagawa took one of Gotou's cigarettes without asking and lit it. Gotou had heard that he'd given up smoking, but he seemed really annoyed.

'Then you can just refuse, right?'

Gotou waved his hand, like he was chasing away a fly.

'No can do. There are circumstances on my side of things too.'

Miyagawa sighed, blowing out white smoke.

He looked tired.

'What do you mean by circumstances?'

'Request from an old police guy.'

'I don't know what idiot made the request, but you can just ignore somebody who's left the force already.'

'You know that I can't do that.'

It was just as Miyagawa said.

The police organization was built on a strict up-down relationship. The influence of that wasn't limited to those who were currently working. It stuck with you your whole life.

'What's the request?'

'The police vet has a grandkid who's gonna be in uni. The request's related to that kid...'

'A shoplifter?'

A police retiree might ask them to clear the record.

'There'd be no problem if that was it. We could just get pull them in.'

'Wouldn't there be pressure?'

'Like I care. If there's an arrest at this stage, there'd have to be pressure.'

Miyagawa wasn't acting tough. He probably meant it. Miyagawa was that sort of guy – that was why he could be trusted.

'Then what is it?'

'That grandkid got a murder notice.'

'A murder notice!?'

Ishii, who had been listening silently, stood up, eyes sparkling. Even though he was useless, he always got excited about cases.

'Is it all right to leave such an important request to us?'

That bothered Gotou.

If there was a murder notice, the police should respond to it diligently.

It wasn't something for a useless department with only two people to take care of.

'The problem is the obsessive person in question...' Miyagawa said wryly, pressing his finished cigarette into the ashtray.

Gotou waited for Miyagawa to continue. Ishii was holding his breath too. However, Miyagawa didn't speak no matter how long they waited.

'Who on earth is it?' asked Gotou, who had run out of patience.

Miyagawa's face twitched.

'An evil spirit, apparently.'

'Wha?'

It was so unexpected that all Gotou could do was cock his head.

'Of all things, an evil spirit...'

Gotou had had a hand in many cases that dealt with spirits. He had even been given the nonsensical nickname 'Psychic Detective'.

'To be honest, it sounds suspicious,' said Miyagawa.

'You don't believe it?'

'It's got to be someone's prank. Even though we could just leave it alone, it's been made into such a big thing... That said, I can't just refuse it, but there'd be a huge protest if I put Criminal Affairs on this.'

'So you're saying it's OK to push it over to us?'

'Because I can trust you. I don't have anyone else I can ask.'

To be honest, Gotou was going to immediately refuse, but now that Miyagawa said that, there was no way he could.

'I get it. We've got the time anyway. We'll at least go hear them out.'

'Sorry. Thanks for this.'

Miyagawa bowed from his waist.

'Please stop acting unlike yourself. So where should we go?'

When Gotou asked that, Miyagawa handed him a memo with an address and a name. After he took it, he grabbed his jacket and stood up.

'Ishii, we're going.'

Gotou started walking briskly, but when he turned around in the corridor, he didn't see Ishii following him.

– He's spacing out again.

'Ishii!' yelled Gotou, which made Ishii run out of the room.

He fell –

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3

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Ozawa Haruka went towards the prefabricated building behind Building B.

She was going to meet Saitou Yakumo.

She had met him last autumn – it had begun when Haruka had gone to consult him because her friend had been possessed by a ghost.

Her first impression of him was the worst. He was rude and hard to approach. Was it really OK for her to leave things to him? That had been what she felt at first.

However, Yakumo hadn't only saved Haruka's possessed friend. He had also revealed a murder that had been in the dark.

Since then, Haruka had experienced a number of cases, and her impression of Yakumo had changed greatly. It could even be said that it was the complete opposite of what it had been at first.

Though Yakumo normally hid it with a black contact lens, he had a red left eye.

That red eye could see the spirits of the dead – that is, ghosts.

Because of that unique ability, Yakumo had suffered a great deal more than other people.

He was afraid of being hurt and didn't like to hurt others, so he purposefully lived a solitary life.

Even though he was kinder than anyone –

Haruka soon reached the prefabricated building she was heading for. It had two floors, each with ten rooms.

The university lent it out to clubs and circles for activities.

Haruka stood in front of the Movie Research Circle room at the very end of the first floor.

The truth was, the Movie Research Circle didn't exist. Yakumo had filed some random documents with the university's student affairs office and used this room as his own – he literally lived here.

'Hey!' said Haruka, opening the door.

Yakumo, the owner of the room, looked at Haruka with incredibly sleepy eyes.

He had smooth, pale skin and a sharp nose. Though he had terrible bed head, it strangely went well together.

Haruka was going to sit in her usual seat, but unusually, there was a guest.

Since the guest was facing away from Haruka, she couldn't see his face. He was a tall man, wearing a lab coat.

'A guest? Let's continue this next time.'

The man slowly stood up and turned towards Haruka.

He was probably in his early thirties. He had a sensitive, androgynous face. There was a lolly stick in his mouth.

I feel like I've seen him before –

While Haruka thought about it, the man left the room.

'It looks like I got in the way,' said Haruka, regretting her bad timing.

Since it was Yakumo, Haruka was sure he'd say something like 'You did' or 'Read the atmosphere', but he gave an unexpected response.

'It's fine. The game is decided.'

Yakumo sighed, chin in his hands.

– What game?

Before Haruka asked, she spotted a chessboard on the table. It looked like Yakumo had been playing chess with the man from earlier.

'Who won?' asked Haruka.

Yakumo looked bitter.

'I was about to lose in twelve turns.'

It was unusual for Yakumo to acknowledge his defeat so readily.

Haruka took another look at the chessboard. Though she didn't know the rules well, from looking at the positions of the white and black pieces on the board, it didn't seem like a situation which would beckon a complete loss.

'Isn't it too early to give up?' asked Haruka.

Yakumo shook his head.

'Unfortunately, there's no way for me to win this way.'

'Is that how it is?'

'That's how it is,' murmured Yakumo. Then, he pushed one of the pieces on the board over with his finger.

Haruka didn't really understand, but if Yakumo was saying that, it was probably true.

'By the way, I feel like I've seen that person before, but who is he?'

'Professor Mikoshiiba.'

'Ah!'

Haruka remembered now that Yakumo said his name.

Haruka was in the arts and humanities faculty, so she hadn't directly met him, but she had heard the rumours.

A young maths associate professor. He was tall with a mysterious air, so people called him the 'Lab Coat Prince'. She'd heard that there were female students who fancied him.

'But why were you playing chess with Professor Mikoshiiba, Yakumo-kun?'

'I major in mathematics. Didn't you know?'

'I didn't.'

– I didn't know.

Even though Haruka had thought she knew Yakumo better than everyone, she had unexpected gaps in information about his personal life.

'Well anyway, that's how it is. We play chess sometimes.'

'I see... So what are the records?'

'Zero wins, zero losses, seventeen draws.'

'So you're an even match?'

'No. He's just playing with me. If Professor Mikoshiiba were serious, it'd be like taking candy from a baby for him.'

Yakumo put his hands up in surrender.

'Is he that great?'

'His specs here are different from mine.'

Yakumo tapped his head with his finger. If Yakumo was saying this much, Professor Mikoshiba had to be pretty amazing.

'So what trouble do you have today?'

After a pause, Yakumo stifled a yawn and spoke.

It made sense for Yakumo to think that way. It was true that Haruka had always visited Yakumo when she had trouble. However, it wasn't that common now.

'Nothing, really,' Haruka said casually.

Yakumo furrowed his brows.

'Do you have a lot of free time?'

'Even though I look like this, I'm busy too.'

'Then can't you just leave now?'

'It's fine for me to stick around, isn't it?'

Haruka opened the refrigerator in the corner of the room and took chocolate out.

'When did you put that in there?' asked Yakumo, sounding dissatisfied.

'When I came last time.'

'Why are you so...'

'Want some?'

Haruka interrupted Yakumo's grumbling and held out the box of chocolates.

It looked like Yakumo wanted to say something, but perhaps he lost to the temptation, as he reached for a chocolate and tossed it into his mouth.

Though it wasn't something Haruka should be saying herself, she felt like she had become better at dealing with Yakumo than before.

Just as she sat opposite Yakumo, there was a knock on the door.

'Come in!' replied Haruka.

'This isn't your room,' complained Yakumo.

Haruka thought about rebutting, but the door opened before she could.

A young man stood there. He was tall, but his round face made him seem friendly and cute.

'I apologise for coming so suddenly. Is Saitou Yakumo-san here?' said the young man in a slightly high-pitched and gentle voice.

'What is your request?'

Yakumo turned an evaluating gaze towards the young man.

'Are you him? My name is Utsugi Kento. I'm a second-year law student.'

'I asked about your request.'

Yakumo's eyes narrowed.

It was a pointed statement, but it wasn't that Yakumo had any special dislike for the young man named Kento. He was like this to everyone.

Haruka thought that the young man would be discouraged, but he just laughed quietly and said, 'Ah, that's right.'

'To put it directly, my friend, er... seems to have been possessed by a ghost... Aizawa, an upperclassman recommended me here.'

'Ah!'

Haruka spoke up without thinking.

To be frank, Aizawa had been the one who introduced Haruka to Yakumo too. That said, Aizawa hadn't met Yakumo before, and didn't know about his unique ability either.

He just exaggerated rumours and made them sound true – that was the sort of person he was.

'Do you know him?'

'Yes, we're in the same circle,' replied Haruka with a wry smile.

'Is that so? Er... Would you listen to my story?'

Kento looked at Yakumo.

– What will you do?

Haruka looked at Yakumo too. Yakumo crossed his arms and looked down, like he was thinking.

'The main fee is twenty five thousand yen. Actual expenses are separate.'

Yakumo put a smile on his face like a shady salesman.

It looked like he planned on taking it, but perhaps he was just planning on making up some appropriate lies and tricking Kento out of his money.

When Haruka thought that, her heart started beating strangely –

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'We've arrived,' said Ishii to Gotou in the passenger seat after parking the car on the side of the

road.

There was no response. When Ishii looked towards Gotou, he saw him lying back on the seat and sleeping with his mouth wide open.

'Detective Gotou, please wake up. We've arrived.'

When Ishii shook Gotou's shoulder, he finally opened his eyes.

'Shut up. I know.'

Gotou hit Ishii on the head.

It was an unreasonable scolding, but Ishii's sad personality made it impossible for him to complain.

'Man...' grumbled Gotou as he got off the car. Ishii followed him.

It had become much colder recently. Ishii had his shoulders hunched as he looked up at the large house that was their destination.

The house itself was probably at least two hundred tsubo in size. The grounds were large as well, surrounded by a tall fence.

It was quite a splendid home. Somebody who had a house like this in the city had to have a lot of money.

'It's impossible to be killed by a ghost anyway.'

Gotou spat in front of the gates.

It was an action inappropriate for a current police officer, but Ishii's sad character also did not have the courage to warn Gotou.

'You can't say it's completely impossible,' said Ishii.

Gotou glared at him. As usual, it had incredibly pressure.

'You know this too. Ghosts are clusters of the thoughts of the dead and don't have any physical effect. That's why they can't kill.'

Gotou's words just now was the theory of a young man named Saitou Yakumo, who had the unique ability to see the spirits of the dead.

Ishii wasn't saying that the theory was wrong. He himself had experienced how true it was through a number of incidents.

However –

'In the previous case, a person possessed by a ghost killed someone,' said Ishii, pain still in his chest.

'Ah, that,' murmured Gotou.

Ghosts that had no physical influence couldn't kill directly, but they could possess someone and

use their body to kill.

That case had proved it.

'You saying it's the same as that case?' said Gotou bitterly.

'No, since we don't know the details yet. I can't say anything. However, that is why I think it is premature to say that something is impossible at the current stage.'

'Pre – what?'

'Premature.'

'Matcher?'

'Ah, er... yes.'

– It's frustrating how I can't deny it.

'So we have to think of all the possibilities.'

'Yes.'

Though Gotou had got the word wrong, Ishii's meaning had got through, so it was fine.

'No helping it. First, let's just take a look.'

'That's right,' replied Ishii. Then, he pressed the intercom button.

After a while, a woman's hoarse voice replied <Yes>.

'I'm Ishii, from the Setamachi precinct.'

Ishii put his face close to the intercom and gave his name.

<E-er, sorry. Right now is... Aahh!>

The intercom cut off.

– What was that?

Ishii and Gotou looked at each other.

That had been a scream just now. Something serious had to be happening. Though Ishii thought that, they couldn't just break in.

Crack!

The sound of glass cracking from inside the house interrupted Ishii's thoughts.

'Let's go!'

Right after saying that, Gotou started running. Ishii hurriedly went after him.

Gotou opened the entrance door and rushed in, but Ishii stopped.

– Can we really go in like this?

Last year, society had been making a fuss about privacy. If they weren't careful, the press would beat them for this.

And yet, when anything big happened, people clamoured for quick responses.

Whatever they chose, there was a problem. It was a tough world – that was what Ishii was thinking when he heard fighting from inside.

Then, he heard Gotou yell out, 'You bastard!' –

Ishii couldn't stop any longer. However, after all those excuses, the truth was that he was just afraid.

'You can do it, Ishii Yuutarou.'

Ishii reprimanded himself. Then, he opened the door and rushed in.

'Takatoshi, calm down!'

A middle-aged woman cried out in fear from a room that was just by the entrance.

– What on earth is happening?

When Ishii peered in, he was shocked.

Gotou and a young man were fighting in the middle of the room.

'Calm down, you idiot.'

Though Gotou was trying to hold the young man down, the young man twisted his body about in a furious struggle.

It was like two beasts were fighting.

'Let go! At this rate, I'm going to be killed!' wailed the young man with a ghastly expression on his face.

'Ishii! What are you doing? Help out!' shouted Gotou.

Even if Gotou told him to help, Ishii wasn't used to this sort of thing. He wasn't sure what he should do.

'Er... Um...'

Perhaps Gotou had given up on help from Ishii when he saw him hesitating there, as he just made a clicking noise with his tongue and pushed the young man to the floor.

The young man finally became quiet.

'J-just as expected, Detective Gotou!'

When Ishii ran up in excitement, Gotou's fist came down on his head.

'If you're also a detective, act like one.'

'I-I apologise...'

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5

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Haruka, sitting next to Yakumo, looked once more at Kento, who sat opposite them.

Perhaps because of his round eyes, he looked very young. In contrast though, he seemed reserved and calm – somewhat sophisticated.

'Your friend was possessed – correct?' said Yakumo after letting out a bit of a sigh.

Kento nodded and then began to speak.

'Do you know about the little spring to the west of the city?'

'Yes, though I haven't been...' replied Yakumo.

Haruka had also heard that there was spring there, but she hadn't gone herself.

'It's called Kagami Spring<sup>1</sup>.'

'It's the first I've heard of it.'

'It's named that because the water's surface is reflective, like a mirror. There's a rumour about that place.'

Kento looked up at Yakumo.

'A rumour?'

'Yes. You can see ghosts at Kagami Spring – and that's not all. If you look into Kagami Spring at night, your true self will be reflected back to you.'

'Your true self?'

Haruka cocked her head.

She didn't really get it. Of course the person reflected in the water would be your true self. It would be creepy if something else appeared there.

'Yes. Your true self that you don't want anybody to know about, hidden away in your heart.'

– I see. So you can see to the bottom of your heart.

'If that's the case, I'd like to take a look.'

'It would be better not to.'

Kento shook his head.

'Why?'

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1 The spring's name is Kagami Yuusen (鏡湧泉) in Japanese. Kagami means mirror, while yuusen means gushing spring. It seems to have been made up by Kaminaga-sensei.

'The people who've seen their true selves are killed by a curse within a week – that's what people say.'

The words Kento said with a serious face made Haruka hold her breath.

'Is that true?'

When Haruka said that in shock, Yakumo shook his head with a sigh.

'When are you going to fix that airhead nature of yours?'

Fix? Haruka had never even thought of herself as an airhead.

'Did I say something strange?'

'Being unaware of it yourself is fatal.'

Yakumo let out an ostentatious sigh.

Haruka thought about objecting, but when she saw Kento with his brows furrowed in concern, she decided to keep quiet.

'And then?' Yakumo urged.

Kento started once more.

'Yesterday, I went with my friends to Kagami Spring.'

'Why did you go there?'

Yakumo's tone was harder now.

From Yakumo's perspective, it would be unbelievable to go for fun to a place where spiritual phenomena were said to occur.

If trouble occurred after going there, it was just deserts.

'Stargazing. We wanted to see the meteor shower. The location is perfect for viewing the night sky. We were thinking of taking photos of the meteor shower reflected on the water's surface too.'

Kento's explanation made Yakumo's expression soften slightly.

'Is that so?'

'I didn't believe in the rumours about Kagami Spring. But when we were waiting for the meteor shower, we heard singing from somewhere – '

Kento put his right hand to his ear.

It was like he could still hear it now.

'Singing – you say?'

'Yes. I couldn't hear what song it was. I don't know if it was a man or a woman singing. The sound was in a peculiar range.'

'It's possible it wasn't a song.'

'No, it was definitely a song,' Kento said confidently.

'And then?' Yakumo urged.

'Then, something started coming out of the spring.'

'Something – what was it?'

'A person. A drenched woman crawled out from the spring.'

Kento was probably remembering the fear from then. His expression was stiff, and his voice was shaking slightly.

'Did you see her face?'

'We were a bit away from the spring, so I didn't see it clearly... but she was definitely a woman.'

'I see.'

Yakumo put a hand on his chin as his gaze wandered, like he was thinking.

'We ran away in fear. We were in a panic. I could still hear the song then – but I managed to get to a main road,' said Kento, much more quickly than before.

That made his words seem incredibly urgent, conveying his fear to Haruka.

'But I didn't notice.'

Kento looked down at his feet and bit his lower lip.

'What didn't you notice?'

When Haruka asked that, Kento covered his face with both hands.

'The girl who was with me... I had been so focused on running that I didn't notice her...'

Kento probably blamed himself.

However, Haruka felt there was no helping it. Only Yakumo would be able to stay calm after encountering a ghost.

Furthermore, this wasn't the time to be hunched over with regret. The problem was –

'Excuse me... What happened to that girl?'

'I was afraid, but I went back. I saw her collapsed in the forest. Though she was breathing, she was unconscious... I called an ambulance...'

'Is that so?'

Though he might have run away once, Haruka didn't think that Kento's decision afterwards was wrong.

'But – she's been strange ever since then.'

'What exactly do you mean by strange?'

When Yakumo asked that, Kento slowly lifted his head.

Perhaps he was exhausted, because his face seemed to be shadowed.

'She's been singing thi whole time – '

Kento's words echoed through the small room.

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6

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'So what happened?' said Gotou, sitting on the sofa and looking at the middle-aged woman and young man sitting opposite him.

The woman was Tozuka Yukiko. She was the daughter of the retired police officer.

The young man was her son, Takatoshi. He was a sophomore at Meisei University.

Yukiko seemed exhausted, perhaps because of the fuss earlier. In contrast, though Takatoshi had become quiet after Gotou thrust him to the floor, he was fidgeting restlessly.

'Er...'

Yukiko looked away, like she found it hard to speak.

It felt like she didn't know where to start. Gotou felt the same way. There were a number of things he wanted to ask, but because of the fuss, he wasn't sure where to begin.

'Excuse me... I heard that an evil spirit was threatening you...'

Ishii, sitting beside Gotou, was the one who broke the silence.

It felt like it'd be better to ignore the incident for now and start asking from there.

'Talk about the spiritual phenomenon you experienced.'

Gotou looked at Takatoshi.

That instant, Takatoshi's expression changed. He looked weak, to the point that nobody would think he was the same man who had been thrashing about earlier.

'Please save me... At this rate, I'll be cursed to death...'

Takatoshi put his hands out, pleading.

Next to him Yukiko looked obviously displeased.

'Tell me in detail. If you don't, I can't do anything,' urged Gotou.

'I... The other day, I went to Kagami Spring with my friends. It's called the Spring of Truth...'

'Kagami Spring?'

'It's on a hill to the west of the city.'

Gotou didn't know about the spring, but he knew there was a hill to the west of the city. He had a general idea of where it was.

'There's a legend about that place... If you look in at night, your true self will be reflected there. The people who see that will be cursed to death within a week –'

'What did you say!?!'

Ishii stood up in shock, which was too much.

Only Ishii would so easily believe a story that was as shady as this one. Gotou hit Ishii's head to tell him to shut up.

'So did you see it?' asked Gotou.

Takatoshi nodded.

'I... was so afraid...'

Takatoshi covered his face with trembling hands.

Gotou didn't really get it. Of course you say yourself when you looked at water. The reflection had to be your true self.

When Gotou said that, Takatoshi vehemently denied it.

'That's not it! The reflection there... was a woman, covered in blood...'

Gotou and Ishii looked at each other unconsciously after hearing Takatoshi's explanation.

If that were true, Gotou understood where Takatoshi was afraid. But –

'Didn't you just see wrong?'

Or it was some sort of optical illusion.

'That was definitely what I say. Ever since then, I've been hearing a strange voice.'

'A strange voice?'

'Somebody whispering in my ear. I'll kill you – that's what the voice says. When I get in the bath, when I'm sleeping in my room – I hear it everywhere, like I'm being followed –'

After saying that all in one breath, Takatoshi took heaving breaths with his shoulders.

He looked incredibly agitated. From that response, Gotou didn't think he was lying.

'It's fine. You just misheard,' Yukiko said kindly, rubbing Takatoshi's back.

However, Takatoshi shook her away.

'No! I didn't mishear! I'm going to die, like the legend says!'

'If you didn't mishear, it's just somebody's prank,' said Yukiko.

It looked like Yukiko doubted that anything was actually happening to Takatoshi. At the same time, Gotou realised why her retired father had asked the police for help.

He probably thought this was someone's prank and wanted the culprit to be found.

'I don't care if you don't believe me! That person will save me!'

Takatoshi tried to leave the room in his anger.

'Wait.'

Yukiko grabbed Takatoshi's arms and tried to pull him back. Takatoshi fought back –

This was just what happened before.

'Calm down a bit!' yelled Gotou, standing up.

Takatoshi's and Yukiko's eyes went wide in shock and both sat down on the sofa, losing to Gotou's pressure.

'I'll properly look into whether what's happening to you is a proper spiritual phenomenon or somebody's prank.'

Gotou sat on the sofa again as well.

If he got Yakumo to help, he'd be able to determine whether what was happening to Takatoshi was the work of a ghost or a living person.

Yakumo would probably complain, but that was the fastest method. More importantly –

'Who do you mean by "that person"?' asked Gotou, leaning forward.

Just now, Takatoshi had said that that person would save him. That meant there was somebody else involved in this case.

'The priest at the church...' said Takatoshi in a voice that sounded like it could disappear at any moment.

'A priest?' said Ishii.

'There's a Protestant church near here. The priest there...'

'Ah, then he's a pastor,' interrupted Ishii.

'They're both the same right?'

When Gotou said that, Ishii pushed up his silver-framed glasses with his finger in a showy manner.

'It isn't the same. It'd be like calling a temple's monk a Shinto priest.'

Ishii's proud manner irritated Gotou, but they wouldn't get anywhere if he complained now.

'So what about that pastor?'

'He can exorcise evil spirits... so that person would be able to save me,' said Takatoshi, sounding desperate.

'So he's an exorcist,' said Ishii with sparkling eyes.

'Exercise – what?'

'An exorcist. In Christianity, there is a role that exists solely for cleansing evil spirits.'

'Sounds fake.'

'It isn't fake. It was in that film, right?'

Gotou knew what film Ishii was talking about. The one about a girl possessed by an evil spirit running around.

But that was just a movie. Ishii's reasoning made it sound like something in a movie was reality.

If that was the case, exorcists wouldn't be the only things that were real. They'd have to say aliens and monsters were real as well.

'Takatoshi, you can't believe in that. It has to be fraud. That person must be the one making the strange things happen...'

'I'm saying that's not it!'

Takatoshi drowned out Yukiko's reprimand with an angry yell.

Though Takatoshi denied it, Yukiko's words made sense.

Gotou had a strong dislike for people who said they could cleanse evil spirits. He'd dealt with people like that before, but not only had they all be fakes, they had been cunning and troublesome.

Well, thinking about things now wouldn't get anything started.

'I guess we'll go meet that pastor...' muttered Gotou.

If it went well, they'd get that pastor and solve all the problems at once.

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7

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'I've just returned.'

Hijikata Makoto went into the culture department room of Hokutou Newspaper.

The editor-in-chief in the back waved. It seemed that all the other reporters were out, so only the editor-in-chief was left.

Makoto put her bag down and sat in her own seat.

The exhaustion had piled up. She had been gathering information since last night on a potter since last night. Since the potter had been busy firing the ceramics, Makoto had had to go late at night and finally returned now.

She wanted to go home and lie on her bed, but she wanted to organise the photographs and recordings now.

She couldn't sleep if there was stuff left to do. That was her personality.

After logging in to the computer, the business phone on her desk rang. Makoto immediately picked up the receiver.

'Hello, this is the Hokutou Newspaper culture department.'

Though Makoto answered the phone, there was no response.

They hadn't hung up. It was probably from a mobile phone. Makoto could hear the sound of the street and faint breathing.

She thought that it might be bad reception, but it was strange.

– Is this a prank?

This wasn't limited to newspaper companies. If a phone number was public, calls like these were everyday occurrences.

However, civilian information was absolutely necessary for their work, so they couldn't ignore it.

'Hello, who might be calling?'

Makoto spoke up again.

Still, there was no answer. She was about to hang up and took the receiver away from her ear, when she heard a hoarse voice say <Excuse me...>.

'Yes?'

Makoto put her ear on the receiver again.

But there was silence again –

She thought about just hanging up, but she couldn't. Something like a sixth sense told her that this phone call was very important.

'I'm Hijikata from the culture department. Would you tell me your name?'

Makoto spoke in as gentle a voice as she could.

Silence –

However, there was a faint change in the breathing.

Makoto looked at the business phone monitor. It was an unknown caller. The number wasn't displayed.

'What is your request? If you'd be fine with me, please tell me,' said Makoto patiently.

After some rustling on the other side of the phone, a man's voice said <I...>.

Though the tone of the voice was dark, the voice itself seemed fairly young. Makoto wrote 'Man in

his twenties?' on a memo pad.

'What is it?'

<I... Er...>

It appeared he still wasn't sure whether to speak.

'Please calm yourself down and speak.'

<Would you believe... what I have to say...>

Perhaps he was nervous, as his voice was shaking.

It would be easy to say 'I will' here, but Makoto couldn't say something irresponsible in her situation.

She was a reporter. She was determined to make decisions without bias.

That said, she wanted to know what this man had to say.

'If you won't tell me, there's nothing for me to believe.'

After Makoto said that, there was a worrying pause for a moment.

<The police didn't believe me...>

'Were you involved in an incident?'

<I... saw...>

There was a small groan from the other side of the phone.

'What did you see?'

<That spring.>

'A spring?' repeated Makoto as she took a map out from the drawer and spread it out on the desk.

<A spring on the west side of town.>

'The west?' asked Makoto as she looked at the map.

<Yes. On top of a hill.>

Now that he said it, Makoto felt like there was a hill to the west of the city, but had there been a spring there?

She searched the map as she thought.

– There.

There was a very small spring on the map. Though there was no name there, this was probably it.

'What did you say at that spring?' asked Makoto as she put a checkmark in red at the spring.

<Will you really believe me?>

The man repeated himself.

Why was he so concerned about whether Makoto believed him or not? Perhaps it had something to do with what he had seen.

'Please tell me first. Otherwise, I can't make any decisions.'

Makoto was careful not to sound accusatory.

<At that spring...>

Either the man's voice had become quiet or there was some reception problem, as Makoto couldn't hear the rest of his words.

'I'm sorry. I couldn't hear you, so could you please repeat yourself?'

<A... cor... pse...>

'What did you say?'

<There's a corpse at that spring – >

The man sounded irritated as he said that.

'Eh?'

Makoto repeated herself without thinking.

Corpses weren't light things. Was it true?

<As I thought, you don't believe me.>

The man's tone changed completely.

It looked like he had determined that Makoto's surprise was doubt.

Makoto tried to explain that that wasn't the case, but he hung up before she could.

With a sigh, she put the receiver back down.

'What was that?' asked the editor-in-chief.

Makoto thought about explaining in detail about the strange call, but she decided not to. There was no way to determine anything with so little information.

'I think it was a prank,' replied Makoto, which made the editor-in-chief instantly lose interest.

However, Makoto still felt something was wrong as she stared vacantly at the map –

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Gotou put his mobile away in his jacket pocket with a click of his tongue.

He had been trying to call Yakumo since earlier, but it seemed like Yakumo's phone had run out of battery, since Gotou's call wouldn't connect.

He could never be contacted when it mattered. He really was an unpleasant guy.

'How was it?' asked Ishii from the driver's seat, as he handled the wheel.

'Can't you tell from looking?' replied Gotou curtly. He leant back into the passenger seat.

'Er... What should we do?' asked Ishii as he stopped the car.

'What?'

'We've arrived,' said Ishii, sounding like he thought it was very unfortunate.

Gotou saw a church outside the window.

It had white walls with a triangular roof. There were stained glass windows. It seemed very much like a church.

Maybe it had been erected recently or renovated, since it didn't seem old.

There was a tower in the centre with a bell. The cross on top of the roof glittered brightly in the sunlight.

'There's nothing to it. All we can do is go, right?'

Gotou tried to get off the car, but Ishii grabbed his arm. Ishii looked like he might cry at any moment.

'Er... I think that going with just the two of us is...'

Gotou could understand Ishii's misgivings.

They had met a number of people who called themselves exorcists in the past. Every time, Gotou and Ishii had been trifled with and fallen completely into their traps.

They weren't able to see through their fraud.

But Yakumo was different. His red left eye that could see the spirits of the dead – when that confronted the people who called themselves exorcists, it was an impressive advantage.

That wasn't all. Yakumo himself had an exceptional mind for insight and analysis. It was a strong weapon.

Confronting an exorcist without Yakumo was the same as going into enemy territory unarmed, but they couldn't just retreat because Yakumo wasn't here.

'Stop whining. Let's go.'

Gotou hit Ishii's head and then got off the car.

Ishii, though reluctant, also got off the car.

Gotou slowly walked forward to the church door.

It was mysterious how the building up close had a solemn, overpowering feeling to it.

Maybe the awe of the people looking at it was reflected back.

'Sorry to bother.'

Gotou pushed open the decorated door and went inside.

There was an arched ceiling with wooden beams supporting it. In the centre, there was a path covered in red carpet, with pews on both sides.

On the left side, there was a podium and an organ. There was an altar in the front and a tabernacle.

By the wall, there was a statue of Christ on the cross.

Why do they revere such a cruel statue – Gotou, who wasn't a Christian, could not understand at all.

Gotou turned around and saw Ishii still loitering at the door.

'Hurry up!' yelled Gotou, which made Ishii jolt and come in hesitantly.

Gotou looked around the church again.

Nobody was inside. It was so quiet it was frightening.

'It looks like no one's here. Let's head back,' suggested Ishii quickly.

There was a limit to how cowardly someone could be.

'Don't run away.'

Gotou grabbed Ishii's arm.

'No, but... er...'

Ishii looked around anxiously.

It was strange how Ishii couldn't do anything because he was too afraid when he had to face the bizarre, even though he was so interested in it.

'Get it together.'

Gotou slapped Ishii's back.

Ishii jumped up, but he still seemed afraid. 'Let's head back.'

'Stop that already...'

Just as Gotou lifted his fist, there was the sound of a door opening.

Gotou saw a man in black worship clothes come out from the door behind the altar.

He was probably in his late thirties. His face was so thin that his cheeks were hollow. His face was so pale it was practically blue. He had a tall nose with thick eyebrows. In contrast, his eyes were so

narrow they looked like they were closed.

– I've seen him before.

So Gotou thought, but he couldn't remember who he was. While Gotou went through his memories irritatedly, the man in worship clothes smiled gently.

'Is something the matter?'

His voice was ringing and unique.

– I know this voice too.

Gotou's memories were clamouring within his head. No, this wasn't the time to be thinking about that.

'I'm Gotou of the Setamachi precinct. A man named Tozuka Takatoshi comes here, right? I want to talk about that.'

Gotou showed his police ID, which made the man in worship clothes instantly change expression.

It wasn't the scorn or fear of a criminal. He had an open smile, like he had met again with an old friend.

'gotou – Gotou Kazuhiko-san, right?'

The man in worship clothes spoke in a friendly manner.

This response – and he even knew his name. Gotou really did know this man in worship clothes, but he still couldn't remember.

'It makes sense for you not to remember with me in these clothes.'

The man spread his arms and looked down at his own clothes.

From the way he talked, they probably weren't just acquaintances.

Gotou would have pretended to remember and tried to find out from the conversation, but with this situation, he couldn't do anything careless.

This could be a trick by the exorcist too.

'Detective Gotou, is he an acquaintance of yours?' Ishii asked quietly.

Gotou didn't reply. He looked straight at the man in worship clothes.

'Who are you?'

Finally, Gotou said that.

Maybe Gotou was nervous, as the inside of his mouth was dry.

'It's me. Kirino Kouichi – don't you remember?' said the man in worship clothes.

With that, the remains of the smouldering memories within Gotou welled up at once. At the same time, he felt a hot anger boil up.

Kirino Kouichi – his memories of this man always came with anger and irritation.

– I hated him.

Gotou tried to stop the emotions that had unwillingly welled up, but he clenched his fists anyway.

'Um...'

'Shut up.'

Gotou interrupted Ishii.

To be honest, he still couldn't believe it. The face did look similar. The voice matched the one of the man in his memories. But still, Gotou couldn't accept it.

The Kirino Gotou knew wasn't the sort of guy who would smile at others, and he hadn't been friendly with Gotou either.

Like water and oil, they just hadn't got along. They had hated each other.

And if this really was Kirino, what the hell was he doing here? Gotou didn't understand.

'Kirino. Is it really you?' said Gotou, who couldn't believe it. No, didn't want to believe it.

Kirino nodded.

'I understand why you didn't recognize me, since I'm a bit thinner now.'

Kirino shrugged.

That was right. His body type was completely different. The Kirino Gotou knew was about one size bigger than the man in front of him.

And the man had had cold eyes, like he was looking down on everyone.

'That's a lie. You're not Kirino.'

'You still don't believe me? You remember this, right?'

Kirino pointed above his left eyebrow.

There was a scar about three centimeters long. When Gotou saw that, he felt like he had been stabbed in the chest.

'Kirino...' said Gotou painfully.

There was no way he could forget. Gotou had been the one who gave him that injury.

He had a bad feeling in his chest.

'For certain reasons, I'm a pastor at this church now.'

Kirino smiled pleasantly.

'Don't screw around!' yelled Gotou angrily.

Pastor? What the hell. Kirino didn't have the qualifications.

The reason was that Kirino – had killed someone. Gotou couldn't accept that a man like that could be a carefree pastor.

'Why are you so angry?'

'What are you plotting by doing this, you bastard?'

Gotou grabbed Kirino by the collar.

'You don't change,' said Kirino gently, which didn't match the situation.

His eyes seemed somewhat sad.

'Detective Gotou, who on earth is this person?' asked Ishii, eyes darting about.

'He's an ex-cop!'

Gotou thrust Kirino away.

Kirino staged backwards, but he was still smiling gently. He wasn't angry or shocked.

'Is that true?' said Ishii in surprise.

'Yeah.'

Kirino Kouichi had been a cop. And, though it was just for a short time, Gotou had been his partner

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9

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'Hey, are you going to take that request?' asked Haruka to Yakumo, who was walking beside her.

Kento had requested that Yakumo save the woman named Sachiko, who had been possessed by a ghost, but Yakumo hadn't said clearly whether he would accept the request.

'I haven't decided,' Yakumo said curtly.

'Aren't you going to see her because you want to accept it?'

Right now, they were going to meet Sachiko, who was in the hospital according to Kento.

'I just said now that I haven't decided.'

Yakumo seemed to be in an unusually bad mood.

'Do you doubt what Kento-san said?'

'No, his story was consistent. I think it's probably true.'

'Then –'

You should save her – is what Haruka tried to say, but Yakumo stopped, interrupting her words.

'It's because what he said was true that I can't accept this easily.'

'Eh?'

'Unfortunately, all I can do is see. I can't cleanse a spirit by chanting.'

'Oh.'

Yakumo always said this.

Ghosts were like clusters of the emotions of the dead, and chanting wouldn't do anything. Even if it did, it would be like forcing them out with violence – that was what Yakumo thought.

That was why Yakumo searched for the reason why the spirits of the dead were wandering and solved that cause.

'In short, if it's true, I can't guarantee that I can solve it – that's how it is.'

Haruka felt like Yakumo's words had a sad echo to them.

Yakumo had said this before. That he was irritated with himself, because all he could do was see – He It was because Ykaumo was irritated with his bystander existence that he never said anything unless he was certain.

It was proof of how seriously he faced cases.

Haruka knew this, but she felt herself incredibly pathetic for not being able to sense Yakumo's feelings.

'Sorry...'

Haruka bowed her head.

Yakumo frowned, looking troubled for some reason.

'It's not like you need to apologise.'

'But...'

'It's creepy, so don't do any more.'

'Wai...'

Yakumo always ruined everything by talking.

Though Haruka was irritated, she went after Yakumo, who had started walking again.

Why was it? His back seemed somewhat lonely.

Soon, they reached the hospital at the station. They dealt with the procedures for meeting at the reception, took the elevator to the fourth floor and headed for the hospital room.

After knocking, they opened the sliding door to the hospital room.

It was a room for four, but three beds were empty. A woman slept in the bed at the very end.

Apparently, there had been people in the other beds until yesterday, but since Sachiko kept singing no matter how they told her to stop, the patients had asked to change rooms, thinking Sachiko creepy.

The nurse at reception had told Yakumo that. Even though he was so blunt normally, changing his attitude completely depending on the situation was one of Yakumo's skills.

Haruka and Yakumo walked up to Sachiko's bed.

It looked like she was sleeping now. Sachiko's eyes were closed as she breathed quietly. The IV drip attached to her arm looked like it hurt.

According to the doctor, it was autonomic ataxia. From the medical point of view, that was probably all they could see.

Yakumo put his index to his brow and looked down at Sachiko with a hard expression.

This response – Haruka could only see Sachiko on the bed, but Yakumo definitely saw something else.

'How is she?' asked Haruka.

Yakumo sighed.

'She has certainly been possessed by a spirit of the dead – '

After hearing Yakumo's words, she felt energy course through her.

Now that she knew there was a spirit possessing Sachiko, she looked strangely different.

'What sort of person?'

'A woman. She's probably around our age. But that's when she died...'

'I see...'

A woman who lost her life at about the same age as they were now –

What on earth had happened? Haruka thought about the life of a woman she didn't know. However, doing that wouldn't help her understand anything.

Sachiko's eyelids slowly opened, like she had sensed them.

Sachiko's lifeless eyes stared at them blankly.

It sounded like she was having trouble breathing.

This always happened, but Haruka didn't know what to do at times like this. Though she wasn't Yakumo, she felt irritated at how she couldn't do anything.

At the same time, she felt like she heard something.

– What are you saying?

Haruka tried to put her face closer, but Yakumo immediately grabbed her shoulder.

'Don't make me keep saying this. Don't just get closer without thinking.'

'Sorry.'

All Haruka could do was apologise honestly.

It was just as Yakumo said. She didn't know what personality the ghost possessing Sachiko had. If she got closer without thinking now, she might be the one getting possessed.

Similar cases had happened in the past.

'Who are you?'

After a long silence, Yakumo asked that in a whisper.

Sachiko's mouth moved more clearly than earlier.

Her voice slowly became louder.

'Ne... ah... ma...'

That wasn't an answer to the question. Just a sequence of words Haruka didn't understand.

'Why are you possessing this woman?'

Yakumo tried asking another question, but there was no response. Sachiko kept repeating the words, like a chant.

'... Go... to...'

When Haruka listened to the weak voice, she noticed something. Though it was faint, there was pitch and rhythm. In short –

'Is this a song?'

Haruka looked at Yakumo, who sighed.

'It seems so.'

'I wonder what song it is...'

'Who knows. You know more about music than me, right?'

That was true. Haruka had learnt piano since she was young, and she had been in the brass band since middle school. Even after entering university, she was in the orchestra circle.

She knew about music, but to be honest, with so little, she couldn't tell what song it was.

'Ne... ah... to...'

While Haruka thought, Sachiko continued to sing.

If they knew what song it was, they might be able to find out how to save Sachiko. But how –

'Ah!'

Haruka thought of something.

She took out her mobile and started recording a video. This way, even if she didn't know now, she could check afterwards.

After recording for about thirty seconds, Yakumo turned around. 'Let's go.'

'Eh? But we don't know anything yet, right?'

Yakumo ran a hand through his hair as he turned around.

'Staying here any longer won't solve anything.'

'Why not?'

'She isn't pleading anything. She's just singing –'

Haruka had met many possessed people up until now, but almost all of them had been filled with an intense hatred and had some sort of unfinished business.

The spirit possessing Sachiko probably wasn't like that.

'Why is she singing?'

'I can't do anything without understanding that reason.'

'How will you understand it?'

'It wouldn't be any trouble if I could understand it easily...'

After saying that, Yakumo briskly left the hospital room.

###'So... oh... gu...'

The song was still going.

Haruka hesitated for a moment, but then she went after Yakumo, putting Sachiko's singing behind her.

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10

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Gotou, sitting in the pews, glared at Kirino, who stood at the podium.

Kirino wasn't disturbed. He stood calmly. The Kirino in Gotou's memory definitely didn't match up with the man in front of him.

Gotou first met Kirino about eight years ago –

Miyagawa had been looking out for Gotou until then as his partner, but then Gotou was paired up with Kirino.

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'My name is Kirino Kouichi. It's nice to meet you.'

When Gotou saw Kirino bow politely from the waist, he had thought that Kirino was the picture of earnestness.

Kirino was younger than Gotou, and there was the difference between graduating from university and from high school, and Gotou had had more years of experience, but still, they were at the same level in their career.

Maybe Gotou had been biased, but he didn't like Kirino, who was an intelligent type, from the very beginning.

'Well, let's just get this done.'

When Gotou said that, Kirino looked dubious.

'What do you mean by just?'

'What?'

'You appear to often break the rules. Is that the result of just getting things done?'

Kirino had spoken in a flat tone.

It was true that Gotou had broken the rules often ever since then, but it wasn't like he tried to break them.

Sometimes, there were things that had to be done, even if it meant breaking the rules. The work of the police wasn't to protect the rules. It was to protect the safety of the citizens – that's what Gotou remembered saying.

In response, Kirino had said something incredibly cold.

'You think the same way the criminals do,' Kirino said coldly.

'Who are you calling a criminal? And criminals are people too!' yelled Gotou.

Kirino looked back at him coldly.

'Please don't put me together with trash who disturb order.'

Kirino said his practically discriminatory words with no expression and no feeling.

Gotou had had hated Kirino from the bottom of his heart ever since that moment. He didn't try to understand people's feelings – he was the one who was trash.

So why would Kirino –

'Why are you doing something like this?' said Gotou aggressively.

'What do you mean by something like this?'

'Why is a man who used to be a detective working as a pastor?'

Cops changed jobs too, but Gotou had never heard of one who'd become a pastor. It just didn't match.

'I've always been Protestant, and I graduated with a religion degree from university. Rather, it's more surprising that I ended up as a police officer.'

Kirino's smile seemed incredibly amused.

Come to think of it, Gotou had asked Kirino in the past why he'd become a police officer after graduating from university with a religion degree.

What did Kirino say then? Gotou thought about it, but for some reason, he couldn't remember.

'Excuse e... Can you really exorcise spirits?'

Ishii was the one who interrupted.

Maybe it was because Gotou had been confused, but he had completely forgotten that Ishii was sitting beside him. He had even forgotten his original goal after meeting Kirino again.

'Exorcise spirits?'

Kirino cocked his head.

It felt like he was showing that attitude on purpose.

'You call yourself an exorcist, right?'

Gotou glared at Kirino.

'Exorcist? What are you saying?'

Kirino spread his hands wide as he acted like he didn't know what they were talking about.

Maybe Kirino didn't mean it, but that felt like a challenge to Gotou.

'Don't play dumb!'

Gotou stood up in his anger.

'Exorcists and pastors are completely different.'

'You're tricking people out of their money by saying you're exorcising demons and evil spirits, right!?'

'Who is?'

'Stop screwing around!'

Gotou tried to grab Kirino, but Ishii stopped him in a panic.

'Please calm down. First, let's hear what he has to say.'

Gotou didn't like being told what to do by Ishii, but it was true that he might have let his emotions get ahead of him.

The pastor was Kirino – that fact had made that much of an impact on Gotou.

Anyway, doing this wouldn't get them anywhere. He might have to listen to Kirino calmly, like Ishii

said.

Gotou took a deep breath and sat back down. Then, he signaled at Ishii with his chin.

In response, Ishii hesitantly explained the reason they had come here to Kirino.

'I see – so that's what it was. Now I understand,' said Kirino with a gentle smile.

'What do you understand?'

When Gotou glared at Kirino, he sighed.

'You're really the same as always. When you lose your calm, you lose sight of things.'

'I don't need your concern!'

Gotou felt painfully how difficult it was to do his work when it was somebody he knew.

'First, I need to clear a misunderstanding.'

'Do it then.'

'It is true that I gave advice regarding an evil spirit to the young man named Tozuka Takatoshi. Furthermore, I also said I would exorcise the spirit possessing him.'

'Then it's not a misunderstanding!'

Gotou stood up again.

The explanation just now was just a repeat of what they'd said.

'Please listen properly until the end.'

Kirino smiled wryly, seeming exasperated.

It made Gotou irritated, since he felt like he was being treated like a child, but he gulped down his feelings.

'I gave advice to Tozuka-kun and said I would solve it, but I had another goal.'

'What was it?'

'In the first place, I don't believe in ghosts, evil spirits included.'

'You don't believe in them?'

All Gotou could do was cock his head.

'But the Devil exists, according to Christianity,' interrupted Ishii, who had been quiet up until now.

– He really bites down on strange things, as usual.

'The Devil and ghosts are completely different. Furthermore, I don't believe that the Devil exists either.'

'Eh? But then...'

Ishii's brow furrowed. He looked troubled.

Gotou felt the same way. Was it all right for a church's pastor to deny the Devil's existence so readily?

'What I believe in isn't the miracle of Christ. That doesn't mean I am denying the Bible's teachings. The things written in the Bible are very important for people to live by.'

'So you don't believe in God, but you agree with the teachings – is that how it is?' said Gotou, feeling confused.

'Well, something like that. It might be unexpected, but now that science has advanced so much, the number of pastors who think like me are not few in number. Though of course we don't say it aloud.'

Kirino spoke so readily that Gotou and Ishii shared a look.

However, maybe Kirino was right.

God made the world in seven days – there was something wrong with people who actually believed stories like that.

'Furthermore, there was the role of an exorcist in Catholic churches in the past –'

Ishii had said the same thing at Takatoshi's house.

'Like in that movie.'

'Though that movie caused many misunderstandings, it isn't an exaggeration,' Kirino said quietly.

'What do you want to say?'

'It's true that there used to be the role of an exorcist in the church, but the real goal was to urge people of other faiths to convert.'

'Not exorcising spirits?'

'Correct. Though this is not a good way to put it, they called the gods of other religions the Devil and convinced people to convert – that was the meaning of exorcist.'

'Is that so...'

For some reason, Ishii's shoulders slumped in disappointment.

In any case, the conversation was off topic. The first question was elsewhere.

'Why did you say you'd exorcise the spirit possessing Tozuka if you don't believe in ghosts? Did you really just want to trick him out of his money?'

'That's not it. Like I said earlier, I don't believe in ghosts. Accordingly, I think Tozuka-kun's case isn't a spiritual phenomenon either.'

'Then what is it?'

'Optical and auditory illusions from thinking too much,' Kirino declared firmly.

'So not the work of an evil spirit?' asked Ishii.

'Correct. However, that wouldn't convince Takatoshi-kun, so I decided to put on an act...'

Gotou understood what Kirino was trying to do now.

'So you were going to say you exorcised the evil spirit and make him calm down.'

Kirino nodded.

Yakumo had done the same thing a number of times in the past. Gotou didn't like it, since it was like he was tricking the person, but it was true that it was effective.

'Doing something so confusing...'

Gotou sank into the pews.

– Why am I relieved?

Gotou was confused by his own emotions.

Gotou hated Kirino. It wasn't just once or twice that he'd thought about hitting him.

That said, most of that was just Gotou's emotions exploding on their own, while Kirino had just let that slide.

That attitude had just made Gotou more irritated.

But still, Gotou wouldn't have liked to here that his old partner was a fake exorcist.

No, maybe I –

Gotou shook the thought away from his head.

'So you really didn't plan on tricking him?'

Gotou looked at Kirino again.

'Of course not. I don't lie. You know that well, right?'

Kirino's eyes were clear as they looked straight back at Gotou. When Gotou and Kirino had argued when they were both on the force, Kirino's eyes had often looked like this.

He'd been a disagreeable guy, and his perspective had been completely different from Gotou's, but Kirino never lied. That was true.

'I get it,' said Gotou, which made Kirino smile.

'You're the same as always.'

'You being sarcastic?'

'No, I just felt envious.'

Kirino smiled, seeming embarrassed.

'That's called sarcasm,' said Gotou with a click of his tongue.

'That part of you hasn't changed either.'

As Kirino said that, he narrowed his eyes, like he was looking back fondly on the past.

Kirino hadn't been the type to be nostalgic, and he would never say he was envious of Gotou, even as a lie.

Kirino had been a person of reason and thought.

– What the hell happened?

Gotou still had questions, but he decided to leave it here for the day.

'Anyway, we'll leave for today.'

Gotou stood up. He was about to leave the church when Kirino called out to him.

'What?'

'If you're concerned, how about coming here tomorrow?'

After hearing the unexpected invitation, Gotou and Ishii shared a look.

Maybe Kirino wanted to prove he had no ill intentions by getting Gotou to come again.

'I'll think about it –'

After saying that, Gotou put the church behind him.

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11

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Haruka followed Yakumo through the forest –

She weaved through the trees. It was terribly difficult to walk, as the ground was muddy and covered with fallen leaves.

The trees were thick, and the place felt a bit creepy.

After leaving the hospital, Yakumo hadn't said where he was going, but after coming so far, Haruka could guess where they were headed.

The spring where the incident occurred – they were going to Kagami Spring.

'Here...'

After walking for a while, Yakumo stopped.

Haruka looked past him and saw the spring, just as she had thought.

Its circumference was probably about one hundred metres. In the very middle, a large rock stood out, like a symbol.

To Haruka, it looked like a gravestone.

There was no wind, and the water was calm – it sparkled, just like a mirror.

'This is Kagami Spring...'

'Yeah.'

Haruka had thought that the spring would be frightening, but it was beautiful and made her think of nature. Haruka wouldn't have thought there was a curse.

Yakumo ran a hand through his hair. Then, he crouched to look at the spring.

'Wait, is that OK?'

There was a legend that people who saw their true reflections here would be cursed to death. If Yakumo wasn't careful –

'You're believing in a superstition like that again?' said Yakumo in exasperation as he put a hand into the spring.

'That's not it, but...'

Haruka knew in her head that it was just a rumour, but that didn't mean she wasn't afraid. Her thoughts and feelings were always separate.

And there was Sachiko. Putting aside whether the spring reflected the truth or not, something had definitely happened here.

'What's your true self supposed to be anyway?' said Yakumo as he stood up, wiping his wet hand on his jeans.

His eyes seemed to left off a sharp glint.

'That's...'

Haruka couldn't think of an answer right away.

'Whose truth is it supposed to be?'

'What do you mean?'

'Is an objective perspective that only links facts together the truth? If that's the case, the reflection here will be just like that of a mirror – a simple reflection.'

There seemed to be a shadow in Yakumo's eyes.

Haruka didn't understand exactly what he meant, but she could understand the gist of it.

'Maybe it's what's at the bottom of somebody's heart, which they haven't noticed themselves –'

Haruka said what came to mind.

'That's just the unconscious mind.'

'Isn't that the true self?'

'No.'

An immediate answer.

'Why not?'

'In the first place, people have many faces to them. All of them are true, but at the same time, they aren't –'

Yakumo spoke in a strong tone as he stared at the spring.

– What on earth can he see there?

Haruka walked up to Yakumo, but her view didn't change.

A gust of wind blew, making Haruka feel like her warmth had been snatched away from her.

'You don't understand anything.'

Yakumo shook his head and then slowly walked around the spring.

'What?' asked Haruka, chasing after Yakumo.

'If that woman named Sachiko we met at the hospital was possessed by a ghost here, there won't be a ghost here any longer.'

Come to think of it, he was right. The ghost that had been here was now in Sachiko's body.

When Haruka understood that, a question came to her.

'Then why did you come here?'

'Did you follow me without understanding anything?' said Yakumo in exasperation.

'Well, you didn't tell me.'

'Honestly... Let's change the way you're thinking.'

Yakumo stopped and ran a hand through his hair.

'What do you mean?'

'If a ghost was here, that meant somebody died here – or the person who died has special feelings for this place.'

'Ah, I see...'

Haruka finally understood.

In short, Yakumo was trying to find hints of that.

Yakumo started walking around the spring again.

After reaching about halfway, he stopped and turned away from the spring.

Since they were on elevated ground, they could see the town from here.

Though normally it felt busy and disorganized, looking down at it like this, it was strange how beautiful it looked.

Perhaps that was how life was.

If you would just stop stopp during your busy and rushed daily life to turn around, perhaps it would glitter beautifully –

'Why do you think she keeps singing...' said Yakumo suddenly in a murmur.

Sachiko's singing flashed back in Haruka's mind.

The singing, that continued in a whisper –

Though this was just Haruka's impression, it had been completely different from the possessions that she had witnessed before. It didn't come from strong emotions like anger or hatred.

That said, there didn't seem to be any unfinished business either.

That was why –

'I don't know.'

'If we don't understand that, we cannot stop her from wandering.'

Yakumo's theory was that ghosts were clusters of the emotions of the dead.

In order to get spirits to stop possessing somebody, sutras and chants wouldn't do anything – they had to find the reason the ghost was wandering and solve it. That was how Yakumo did it.

That meant he had no way to do anything without knowing why the ghost kept singing.

Haruka didn't know the reason. Just –

'To me, that song soundeds very kind.'

When Haruka said that, Yakumo smiled slightly.

'That's like you.'

'Eh?'

'You become emotionally involved right away and sympathise.'

'Yeah, yeah, I'm always...'

Unfortunately, she couldn't deny it.

'To me, that song sounded different.'

'What did it sound like?'

'Hm – if I had to compare it to something...'

'Hello.'

Another voice interrupted Yakumo's.

When Haruka turned to look, she saw somebody she knew standing there –

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12

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The strange call that came to the newspaper company wouldn't leave Makoto's head, so she decided to go to the spring that had been mentioned.

– Why would someone make a call like that?

– What did he mean by corpse?

She contemplated those questions as she walked through the forest to the spring.

Soon, she reached an open area and found the spring.

She hadn't heard of it before, so she had imagined that it would be terribly wild, but when she actually saw it, that impression left her immediately.

The light of the sun made the water sparkle and seem almost divine.

She could hear the faint sound of people talking. When she looked that way, she saw what looked like a couple walking around the spring.

She knew them. It was Yakumo and Haruka.

Makoto had met them because of a certain case. It made her shiver to remember it even now, because she had been possessed during it.

At the time, Yakumo, with his red left eye, had saved Makoto. They had met up again multiple times ever since then, each helping the other out.

If the two of them were here, that meant –

Makoto went up to the two of them and said, 'Hello.'

'Makoto-san!'

Haruka's eyes went wide in surprise.

It was strange how Haruka looked cute even with that expression on her face.

As usual, Makoto couldn't tell what Yakumo was thinking. He said 'Hi' with a shrug.

'Are you on a date today?'

Makoto could easily imagine that Haruka and Yakumo's relationship hadn't advanced, but she asked anyway, since she felt like teasing them.

'T-t-that's not it,' said Haruka with her face completely well.

Haruka wasn't pretending to be innocent – this was how she was. If only I had a pure heart like this too – Makoto was envious.

'I don't have so much free time that I would go on a date with her,' said Yakumo expressionlessly.

Either he was good at hiding his feelings or actually didn't feel anything at all. Makoto couldn't tell. It was probably because Haruka couldn't tell either that their relationship hadn't advanced.

'What's with the way you said that?'

'I'm just stating facts.'

'It's not like I...'

Though Yakumo and Haruka continued their amusing conversation, that wasn't what Makoto was here for. Makoto interrupted with an 'Excuse me'.

'Yakumo-kun, if you're here, does that mean there's some problem with spirits?' asked Makoto, sending Yakumo a searching look.

'Yes. Ah, but this time it wasn't from me.'

Haruka was the one who replied.

She emphasized that it wasn't trouble from her. She probably didn't like how Yakumo always called her a troublemaker.

'Why are you here, Makoto-san?'

Yakumo's eyes narrowed slightly.

Yakumo had terrifying sharp instincts. He must have figured out why Makoto was here.

'Actually – '

Makoto told Yakumo and Haruka about the strange call that had come this morning.

After she finished speaking, Yakumo said quietly, 'I see...'

'Hey, Yakumo-kun. Don't you think it's related?' said Haruka, sounding a bit agitated.

'A woman was possessed by a ghost at this spring,' Yakumo said disinterestedly after nodding.

– So I was right.

'If what the caller said this morning was true, that would match up,' said Makoto, which made Yakumo frown.

'It's too early to say.'

'Why?'

'The caller might not have been speaking the truth. Perhaps it just matches with the current spiritual phenomenon by coincidence.'

Yakumo spoke very seriously.

It was like Yakumo, who hated going ahead with preconceptions.

'But isn't it too much to be a coincidence?' interrupted Haruka.

'Coincidences like this a possible. To look at it differently, maybe the caller knew that this area is a ghost spot and made up the story about the corpse.'

After hearing Yakumo's logical explanation, Haruka seemed disappointed. 'I see...'

'Furthermore – '

Yakumo put the matter aside and continued.

'The corpse mentioned by the caller might not be the corpse of the ghost.'

'That's true,' agreed Makoto.

Yakumo always looked at all the possibilities.

'In any case, it would be unwise to completely take in the words of a man we don't know anything about.'

The words could have sounded harsh, but from Yakumo, Makoto could strangely accept them easily.

That said, she couldn't ignore the call. When Makoto told Yakumo that, he nodded. 'I agree.'

'So, Haruka-chan, Yakumo-kun, what trouble is it this time?'

They had said it might be related to the call. She wanted to know how it could be related.

'Actually...'

Haruka politely explained what had happened.

The spiritual phenomenon at the spring. The woman who had been possessed ever since, who had kept singing ever since.

Just as they said, it could be related to the call.

'Hey, what are you going to do next?'

Haruka pulled Yakumo's sleeve.

'I need to investigate this spring,' said Yakumo, raising an eyebrow.

That would probably be the fastest method, but there was a big problem.

'It would be rather difficult to search this spring with this number of people.'

There was also the season.

Though it wasn't the middle of winter, the water was considerably cold. It wouldn't be completely unbearable, but it would still be unbearable.

'It's simple.'

As Yakumo said that, he pulled out his mobile.

'Eh?'

'At times like this, we need the power of the country, right?' said Yakumo with a smirk. Then, he started to make a call. He probably intended on getting Gotou and Ishii.

Gotou and Ishii had it tough, being pulled around all the time. Makoto had a wry smile on her face when she suddenly sensed a gaze.

– Who is that?

She immediately glanced about and saw a shadow which seemed to be looking this way from the trees.

'Is something the matter?' asked Haruka anxiously.

'It looks like somebody's there,' Makoto murmured.

Haruka looked, but she didn't seem to see anything, as she started to walk forward, as if to check.

Makoto hurriedly stopped her by grabbing her arm.

'Wait. They might run if they notice. I'll walk over casually to check.'

After saying that quietly, Makoto started walking along the cliff, as if she was heading back.

She paused at a distance from the trees and could see the shadow more clearly.

It was a young man. In the dark, he had big, round eyes. There was an injury on the right side of his forehead.

– Maybe...

The man in the trees could be the person who called the newspaper this morning. Makoto had no proof. It was just her gut.

However, now that she thought that, she felt like it had to be it.

'There is definitely somebody there...' murmured Haruka, who seemed to have confirmed it as well.

The question was what to do next. Though they were closer, they were still over ten metres away. Should they approach normally – no, if they did, it was likely he would run away.

While Makoto was thinking, the man turned around and started walking back through the forest.

They was no more time to think.

'Wait!' yelled Makoto, who started to run.

The man froze for a moment.

'You're the one who called today, right?' said Makoto. Then, the man dashed off. Makoto went right after him.

She ran frantically after the man through the forest.

However, it was dark and hard to see, and the trees were in the way. She couldn't move the way she wanted.

The man was getting further and further away.

'Please wait!' yelled Makoto, just as she slipped and fell backwards.

She got up right afterwards and looked up, but the man had already disappeared into the darkness

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13

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'Sorry to bother.'

Gotou opened the door with vigour and walked in with Ishii.

It was the room at the very end of the ground floor of a prefabricated building behind Building B at Meisei University. It was the clubroom for the Movie Research Circle.

'If you know that you're a bother, please leave.'

Yakumo, the owner of the room, had his usual stony face on as he sat in his chair.

'You're the one who called me here!'

Though Gotou could just ignore it, he became seriously angry.

Ishii felt half-exasperated by this exchange, which happened every time, but he still intervened. As expected, Gotou hit his head and calmed down.

'Gotou-san, Ishii-san, would you like tea?'

Haruka was the one who spoke up. She was smiling from the corner of the room.

'H-Haruka-chan!' Ishii said, happy that he had unexpectedly been able to see Haruka.

She had an angel's smile, as usual. If that smile of Haruka's could be Ishii's, he felt like he could die.

'Don't smile like that.'

Gotou's fist fell.

Ishii just barely managed not to bite his tongue.

'Gotou-san, I had a bit of a request - '

Yakumo brought up the topic at hand in a serious tone once he saw Gotou and Ishii sit down.

'I've got a request too,' replied Gotou.

Haruka took bottles of tea out of the refrigerator and placed them in front of Gotou and Ishii. Then, she sat next to Yakumo.

Somehow, it was like Ishii and Gotou had come to visit the house of a pair of newlyweds.

– No, stop that.

Yakumo and Haruka getting together – that was completely impermissible.

'What is it?' asked Yakumo, putting his chin on his hands. He had no way of knowing what was inside Ishii's mind.

'We've got involved in a case that's related to spirits... Ishii.'

Gotou signalled at him with his chin.

It looked like Gotou had no intention of explaining himself. Ishii wasn't good at speaking either, but if he protested, the fist would come flying again.

He reluctantly started explaining in detail, starting from the spiritual phenomenon that had occurred to Tozuka Takatoshi to how a pastor from a church, after hearing his story, had said he would exorcise the spirit to pacify him.

When he started to say that the pastor, Kirino, was an ex-cop and had been partnered with Gotou, Gotou's fist had come down, with these words: 'Don't say anything unnecessary.'

'Could that spring be the one on the hill?' said Haruka immediately after Ishii finished explaining.

'Yes, it seems so.'

Haruka's eyes went wide in surprise.

'The case Yakumo-kun is working on right now concerns that spring too.'

'Yakumo! That true?'

Gotou leant forward.

'Please don't put your unpleasant face any closer to mine.'

Yakumo leant back, looking obviously displeased.

'You!'

Gotou let out his anger again, even though he could have just ignored it.

Ishii understood how he felt, but Gotou wouldn't be able to stand it if he responded to everything Yakumo said.

'Detective Gotou, more importantly, let's hear what Yakumo-shi has to say.'

Ishii tried to pacify Gotou and then turned his gaze towards Yakumo.

Ishii was sure that Yakumo would explain, but Yakumo looked towards Haruka and stayed silent.

'Honestly,' said Haruka with an unsatisfied sigh.

Ishii could painfully understand those feelings, since he had experienced the same thing just earlier.

'Actually, yesterday, a young man called Utsugi Kento consulted Yakumo about a spiritual phenomenon. According to him – '

Haruka explained how they went to see a female student who had been possessed by a spirit and kept singing. Furthermore, Makoto had gone to the spring because of a strange phone call.

'In short, what we are looking for is the same as the case Yakumo-shi is involved in,' said Ishii in surprise.

'It seems that way,' replied Yakumo as he stifled a yawn.

He seemed incredibly uninterested, but Ishii knew that was just an attitude he was putting on.

It was frustrating, but Yakumo could do more than see the spirits of the dead. He had an exceptional mind and had led many cases to the truth.

He must have already developed several theories in his head.

'Yakumo, what do you think?' asked Gotou with a sharp expression.

'Your question is so abstract that there is no way for me to answer,' Yakumo said bluntly.

'I'm talking about that. That...'

Gotou fumbled for words.

He probably couldn't organise his mind to find what to be asking about first.

'Er... is that pastor named Kirino-san trustworthy?' asked Ishii in Gotou's stead.

'I believe Gotou-san would be more apt to give an opinion on that than I.'

Yakumo glanced at Gotou.

It looked like Gotou couldn't think of an answer right away. He kept silent with a wry expression on his face.

'The Kirino I know was a disagreeable guy, but he wouldn't lie lightly,' said Gotou wryly after a short silence.

'Well, from what I hear, it doesn't seem like Kirino-san plans to trick anyone.'

Yakumo put his chin in his hand.

That might be the case – so Ishii thought as well.

If Kirino wanted to trick Takatoshi, he wouldn't have said he didn't believe in ghosts, and he wouldn't have tried to get the police to come watch the exorcism.

But then the problem was –

'Is Tozuka Takatoshi-san really possessed by a ghost?' said Ishii anxiously.

If Takatoshi really was possessed by a ghost, Kirino's actions would be completely useless, and if he wasn't careful, he might make the situation worse by angering the spirit.

'I can't say anything about what I haven't seen,' said Yakumo as he rubbed his eyes sleepily.

That was true. He had no way to determine that from the conversation they had just had.

'But... Sachiko-san's possessed by a ghost, right? Then wouldn't that mean nothing's possessing the person named Tozuka-san?' asked Haruka.

'There may be more than one wandering spirit,' said Yakumo as he ran a hand through his hair.

His casual words gave Ishii a chill.

'In short, it's possible that Tozuka-san's possessed too?' said Ishii.

Yakumo nodded.

'Then let's check,' said Gotou, crossing his arms.

Yakumo raised his left eyebrow. It seemed like he didn't like Gotou's commanding tone.

'What are you supposed to say when asking somebody for something?'

His tone was inflammatory.

'Don't screw with me! You said you had a request earlier too, right?'

'You remembered?' said Yakumo nonchalantly.

'Then this is give and take.'

'Well, I guess,' said Yakumo with a shrug.

He was cunning as usual. If Yakumo became a fraudster, he would probably be incredibly good at it.

'Then what is your request, Yakumo-shi?' asked Ishii.

Yakumo smirked meaningfully.

Ishii and Gotou exchanged gazes.

Ishii had a bad feeling for some reason –

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14

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Takatoshi sat on top of the bed –

The window curtains were closed so he couldn't see outside, but it was probably night already.

'Urgh.'

Takatoshi groaned, curled up in a ball.

He was afraid of the night.

He always heard that voice at night –

Though the lights were on, he knew very well from experience that it was useless.

He glanced at the clock.

It was just past nine. He thought about pulling up the blanket and going to sleep, but he was even more afraid of that.

Even if he slept, he would still hear that voice.

Yukiko, his mother, was sure that his experience was just a prank. His father didn't even seem interested.

The detectives who came today also seemed a bit dubious.

It made sense, now that Takatoshi thought about it. If he were in their position, he would probably not have believed such a stupid story either.

Only the pastor Kirino had listened to Takatoshi's story seriously.

Takatoshi had no way of knowing whether Kirino could really exorcise spirits. He'd heard that most of the exorcists on television were fakes.

But that wasn't a problem.

It was a problem of facing Takatoshi's problem seriously or otherwise.

That was the most important thing to Takatoshi in this situation. To be honest, anybody would have been fine if they would understand him.

Takatoshi hadn't just been suffering from fear, but also the loneliness of not being believed.

'Why only me...' said Takatoshi, half in tears.

He shouldn't have gone there, but it was too late to regret now.

What he saw at Kagami Spring flashed back in his mind.

A chill ran down his spine and Takatoshi let out a yell, shaking his head to clear the image away.

However, no matter how he tried, what he saw there wouldn't leave his mind.

It followed Takatoshi everywhere.

When he looked into the spring, half as a joke, what he saw there wasn't his own face, but something else. It was a woman's face.

Blood flowing down her head, she looked back at Takatoshi with hatred –

Takatoshi knew that woman's face. That was why he was so afraid.

There was a loud ringing noise in Takatoshi's ears.

He looked up, startled.

– The omen.

It was a sign that he would soon hear the voice. Takatoshi knew it was useless, but he put his hands over his ears.

<I won't forgive you – >

A voice full of sadness – no, hatred – reached Takatoshi's ears.

'Stop! Stop! Stop! I don't have anything to do with it!'

Takatoshi kept yelling, but the voice shook Takatoshi's eardrums regardless.

<I'll kill you. I'll kill you brutally.>

'Ahhh!' screamed Takatoshi.

– I'm at my limit.

He couldn't stand any more of this. Before Takatoshi noticed, he had run out of the room.

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15

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'Man, because of Yakumo, I'm getting told off left and right.'

Gotou leant back in his chair and lit his cigarette.

Gotou hadn't stopped complaining since he returned to the Unsolved Cases Special Investigations room. Ishii just kept giving unclear 'Ah's in response.

He understood how Gotou felt.

Yakumo had asked for a large-scale investigation of Kagami Spring on the hill to the west of the city in exchange for helping.

– A corpse may be sleeping there.

That was what Yakumo had said. Ishii himself thought it was likely.

In the cases he'd experienced, there were many that had corpses where ghosts appeared.

However, to investigate that spring, they would need many people, and they needed divers to search in the water too.

Gotou had gone to negotiate, but his reason had been vague. Saying that there were ghosts wouldn't work on the police.

'So how are things on your end?' asked Gotou as he glared at the documents.

Ishii had went back through old documents to check whether there had been deaths there in the past, perhaps from suicides or accidents. However –

'Currently, I don't have nay information...'

He had checked back fifteen years, but there were no records of murders, suicides or accidents that had caused deaths at Kagami Spring.

'Did you check properly?'

'Of course.'

Ishii had looked through everything. He could say confidently that he hadn't missed anything.

All they could do now was bet on the investigation of the spring. If a corpse was found there, that would be the true nature of the ghost.

However, what would they do if they didn't find a corpse?

Though they hadn't confirmed whether the spirit possessing Takatoshi was a real one, the woman named Sachiko had been possessed at the spring.

– Where did that ghost come from, and why was it there?

Ishii's head was a mess from all the questions.

'Are you listening!?'

Gotou's fist brought Ishii back to reality.

'Yes'

To be honest, Ishii had stopped listening halfway.

Gotou clicked his tongue in exasperation and then spoke again.

'What do you think?'

'What about?'

'About the case.'

'Even if you call it a case – to be honest, at this stage, nothing has occurred that requires the involvement of the police.'

Gotou's eyes went wide in surprise upon hearing Ishii's words.

Even if Gotou looked like that, it was the truth. There was no proof that Takatoshi's case was a prank, and Yakumo hadn't taken a look at him yet, so they had no proof that there was a ghost possessing him.

Kirino wasn't asking for money either, so it wasn't fraud.

For the call that came to Makoto, they didn't have the corpse.

They could do nothing with this. It was a bit vague. And there was another thing Ishii had his mind on.

'Detective Gotou.'

'What?'

'Kirino-san was your old partner, right?'

'Yeah.'

'What sort of person was he?' Ishii asked hesitantly.

Of course, Ishii wanted to know about Kirino to understand the situation, but he was also interested personally in Gotou's past.

He thought he knew Gotou's personality well now, but he knew practically nothing about his past.

He felt like Kirino would unravel that.

'He was a man with cold eyes...' said Gotou, looking at nothing.

'Cold eyes?'

'Yeah. Eyes that looked like he suspected everything in the world.'

'A bit like Yakumo-shi then.'

'Don't put them together. They're completely different,' said Gotou with a harsh look.

'I-I apologise...'

Though Ishii apologized, his thoughts hadn't changed.

Yakumo still had cold eyes sometimes, like he was rejecting everything in the world.

'Anyway, the guy was always high-handed in investigations and questionings. Said that all criminals were trash.'

'That is a bit of a twisted view.'

'Not just a bit. Physical evidence was everything to him. He had no interest in anything except what would incriminate the culprit. He didn't care about why cases occurred,' said Gotou with a click of his tongue.

'That's...'

'I investigated an assault case with him once. A guy who worked at a company was cut with a knife on the way home.'

'Was it a random attack?'

'No. The suspect that came up was the victim's subordinate. The guy's fingerprints were on the knife and there was a witness saying the subordinate was the culprit.'

As Gotou spoke, he took out another cigarette.

'Was the subordinate not actually the culprit?'

'Nah, that man did it. But that's not the problem. Why'd he stab his boss – that's the question. If we don't know that, you can't say we've solved the case.'

Gotou crushed the cigarette in his hand without lighting it.

'That's true.'

Perhaps it was just as Gotou said.

It was important to find out who the culprit was. However, at the same time, it was necessary to make clear why the incident had occurred.

'I couldn't accept Kirino's way of doing things, and we had a fight in front of the suspect. Kirino even said that criminals weren't people...'

Gotou smashed his fist into the table.

Perpetrators and victims were both people. Their emotions were reflected in cases. If police ignored that during investigations, they would lose sight of the truth, and even if the case was finished on paper, it wasn't solved in the real meaning of the word.

While Ishii understood Gotou's anger, he still felt something was off.

'I don't think Kirino-san is that sort of person.'

Though Ishii didn't know what sort of person Kirino was in the past, he didn't think he was a cold person now.

Furthermore, if Kirino had that sort of thinking in the past, like Gotou said, Ishii didn't understand why Kirino had quit the police to become a pastor.

'Neither do I,' said Gotou, looking faraway.

Ishii had thought that knowing the past would help him understand the present, but he was just more confused.

Just as Ishii let out a sigh, Gotou's mobile rang from atop the table.

'Who is it?'

As usual, Gotou answered the call without looking at the display.

A call with this timing – it was probably Yakumo, which meant that the usual fruitless exchange would start.

That was what Ishii thought, but Gotou's face became grimmer in a flash.

'What the hell do you mean by that? No, that's... I got it. Wait. I'll be right there.'

Gotou ended the call and stood up.

'What is it?' asked Ishii.

Gotou glared at him.

'Tozuka's mother called.'

'What did she call for?'

Since the call had come with this timing, it made Ishii strangely suspicious.

'Seems like the brat ran out of the house saying he couldn't bear it any more.'

'Again?'

'Can't ignore it, right?' said Gotou with a click of his tongue.

Well, that was true. Everything was confusing right now, but the original request was to find out what was happening to Takatoshi.

'But even if we're to look for him, where...'

Gotou hit Ishii's head.

'Ow.'

'You never learn. There's only one place to go, right?'

'Ah –'

Finally, Ishii understood as well.

If Tozuka had run out of his house because he was afraid of the spirit, he would definitely go to Kirino, the pastor.

'Anyway, let's go.'

Gotou left the room with wide strides.

Ishii hurriedly ran after him, but his feet tangled and he fell –

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16

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'Sorry to bother.'

Gotou opened the door to the church.

Though it was late at night, the lights were on. It had a different illusive air to it.

Ishii clung to Gotou, like he was afraid of something.

Gotou pushed Ishii away and continued to walk.

'So you really came.'

The man in front of the altar slowly turned around to face them.

It was Kirino, in his priest's robes.

'I want to ask you something.'

After Gotou said that, Kirino smiled at him gently.

There was definitely something off. The Kirino in Gotou's memories had always been

expressionless, as if he had been wearing a steel mask.

'I understand. You want to ask about Tozuka-kun, don't you? He's there.'

Kirino pointed at the centre of the pews.

There was a man there curled up while shivering. It was Takatoshi.

'I will exorcise the spirit possessing him now – ' declared Kirino.

'Ehh!' Ishii's shock was unnecessarily dramatic.

'You serious?' Gotou asked quietly after walking up to Kirino in front of the altar.

After Kirino looked at Takatoshi, he looked at Gotou once more.

'That is the only way. If he stays like this, he'll lose his mind.'

'But what if he's not just imagining things?'

Gotou looked at Takatoshi.

Kirino thought that Takatoshi was imagining the spiritual phenomena, but a ghost could really be possessing Takatoshi. And there was still the possibility that it was somebody's prank.

If that was the case, the situation wouldn't be fixed even if Kirino did something here.

'It's just an act – even if it doesn't work, there won't be any harm.'

'That's true, but...'

Though Kirino was calling what he was doing an exorcism, it was actually close to counselling.

Even if it failed, the situation would just continue. There wouldn't be any harm.

'Now, please don't be so stiff.'

Kirino patted Gotou's shoulder.

'But...'

'It's fine. I won't do anything to cause trouble.'

'That's not what I'm talking about.'

'Then what is it?'

Even though Kirino asked that, Gotou couldn't properly explain the feeling in his chest.

It was just a feeling.

Something terrible was going to happen after this – he had that anxiety.

'It's fine. Please believe me.'

Then, Kirino walked up to Takatoshi.

– Believe him? Ha.

Even when they were partnered, Gotou and Kirino hadn't had any trust between them.

Like similar magnetic poles, they never approached each other, each keeping their own views. Gotou had never thought that Kirino would say something like 'Please believe me'.

'What will we do?' asked Ishii after walking up to Gotou.

Gotou looked towards the pews and saw Takatoshi clinging to Kirino while saying something.

There was nothing to do. There was nothing the police could do in this situation.

'All we can do is wait.'

With determination, Gotou sat down at the front of the pews and crossed his arms.

After saying that, his anxiety flew away, and he felt like his heart had calmed down.

'The exorcism will be conducted in the waiting room in the back. Please wait here.'

After saying that, Kirino and Takatoshi went through the door behind the podium.

After the door closed, it opened once more and Kirino stuck his head out.

'Gotou-san, once this is over, do you want to go have a drink? There are a lot of things I want to talk to you about.'

Kirino gave him a friendly smile.

'Drinking with you will just make the beer taste bad,' Gotou said caustically, but he also wanted to ask what had changed Kirino these past few years.

'I see. Please don't worry about it then.'

With a wry smile, Kirino closed the door.

'Is it really OK?'

Ishii looked anxious as he adjusted his glasses with his finger.

'Who knows,' Gotou replied vaguely, looking up at the ceiling.

Kirino changed – he felt that, but maybe the current Kirino was the real one, and the Kirino Gotou knew had been the fake.

That thought suddenly came to his mind.

Kirino had been an excellent detective. Gotou had to admit that.

In good ways and bad, Kirino's perspective was completely the opposite of Gotou's.

Because of that, they always fought, but had Gotou ever asked what Kirino truly felt even once?

– I didn't.

Kirino must have had his own beliefs and justice, but Gotou had never tried to see that – he'd

always just rejected it.

Maybe drinking together wouldn't be a bad idea.

Just as Gotou was smiling self-derisively, there was the sound of something falling with a thump.

He stood up reflexively and shared a look with Ishii.

– Did something happen?

While thinking that, there was a loud crack – like something had snapped.

<Stop! W-what are you doing!?!>

Gotou heard Kirino's voice from the other side of the door. Something was definitely happening.

Gotou ran forward and tried to open the door.

However, it was locked and wouldn't open.

'Kirino! What happened? Oi! Open up!' Gotou yelled frantically as he knocked on the door.

He heard a beastly howl through the door –

<'ll kill youuuu!>

It was a low, hoarse voice.

Gotou slammed his body against the door, but the door was rather sturdy and Gotou bounced back.

<Stop it! Stop!>

Kirino was screaming.

'D-Detective Gotou...' Ishii said, seeming shaken.

<Gahhh!>

Gotou heard Kirino shriek from through the door. Then, like all the noise had been an illusion, it was silent.

'Kirino! Oi, Kirino! Respond!'

Gotou yelled at the door, but there was no response.

– You're kidding me, right?

Gotou shook away the anxiety spreading through his heart. He picked up the podium beside him and threw it at the door.

Crack – the door was crushed.

'You're in the way!'

Gotou kicked the door that had warped with all his strength.

When Gotou saw the room in front of him, he was lost for words.

Kirino was collapsed on the floor. A large amount of blood was flowing out from his neck, dyeing the floor red.

'Oi! Kirino! Get a hold of yourself!'

Gotou ran up to Kirino and spoke to him, but there was no response, as if Kirino was a doll.

– You've got to be kidding me!

'Oi! What are you doing!? Get a hold of yourself!'

As Gotou yelled, he checked Kirino's breath. He wasn't breathing. He checked his pulse too, but there was no response either.

Kirino just looked up into space with cloudy eyes.

Ishii took out his mobile and made a call. Probably for an ambulance.

'Don't die! Ishii, stop the blood!'

Gotou yelled at Ishii, who had finished his call. Though he hesitated for a moment, Ishii applied his handkerchief to Kirino's neck.

Gotou did CPR.

'Listen up! Don't die! Nobody's going to die on my watch!'

Gotou continued frantically while wiping the sweat from his forehead, but no matter what he did, Kirino's body didn't move at all.

Gotou was running out of energy.

– Kirino's dead.

That fact was spreading through Gotou's heart.

'Damn it... Why....'

As he said that, Gotou slammed the floor with his fists.

– You empathise too much.

He heard Kirino's voice in his ear. It was probably from his memories.

Kirino was always like that. Looking at Gotou with cold eyes as Gotou let his emotions boil over.

But now that Gotou thought about it, maybe it was because Kirino had been there that Gotou had been able to keep going without betraying his beliefs.

'Detective Gotou!'

Ishii's yell brought Gotou back to reality.

Then, he saw Takatoshi shaking in a corner of the room. Blood was splattered all over his face.

That wasn't all. His shaking hand gripped a knife covered in blood.

A hot anger welled up within Gotou, taking over his whole body.

'Was it you?' asked Gotou.

Takatoshi furrowed his brows, looking dazed.

'N-no... What is this...'

Takatoshi threw the knife to the ground and tried to run.

Something snapped within Gotou.

'Did you do it, you bastard!?' shouted Gotou. He thrust Takatoshi to the floor, straddled him and punched him in the face.

'D-Detective Gotou! P-please stop it!'

Ishii tried to get between them to stop Gotou, but still Gotou's anger wasn't settled. He just swung his fists recklessly and yelled.

泉に映るもの

第二章

02  
FILM

## file 02: that which the spring reflects

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1

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Makoto was surprised when she was contacted –

Though it was late at night, she dressed herself immediately and ran out of her flat.

When she reached the church which was the scene of the crime, it was filled with police and reporters.

She wanted to confirm the situation, but there was a yellow ‘No Trespassing’ tape and guards on the watch, so she couldn’t get closer.

Makoto was feeling bewildered when she saw a face she knew on the other side of the tape.

'Ishii-san!'

After she waved, Ishii noticed her as well and went up to her.

Perhaps it was because it was the middle of the night, but Ishii looked unusually gloomy.

'What happened?' Makoto asked quickly, which made Ishii's eyes dart about.

He probably didn’t want to let the other investigation members see him giving information to a newspaper reporter.

‘Let’s go elsewhere.’

Makoto and Ishii went a little away from the site.

The church looked eerie, illuminated by the outdoor lights. Perhaps the fact that somebody had died here made Makoto feel that way though.

'What on earth happened?' Makoto asked once more.

'Kirino-san, the pastor at that church, went into the waiting room in the back to exorcise the spirit from Tozuka-san. After waiting a while, there were noises that sounded like a fight.'

'Noises?'

'Yes. Detective Gotou tried to open the door to see what was happening, but it was locked.'

Ishii bit his lip and shook his head slightly.

'Then what happened?'

'We heard a scream that sounded like Kirino-san from inside –'

'A scream?'

'Yes. He yelled, “Stop!” Detective Gotou and I broke the door and went in, but he was already...'

Kriino had probably already stopped breathing.

'Why did that...'

'I don't know. However, from looking at the situation, the person who killed him is probably –'

Though Ishii didn't say it aloud, from thinking about the situation, Makoto could reach the conclusion herself as to who killed Kirino.

However, that didn't mean she didn't have questions.

'There is the possibility that somebody broke in from outside.'

'We thought about that too. However, the waiting room was a small room of six tatami inside, and there was only the one door from behind the podium. There were windows, but since it was stained glass, it wouldn't open.'

'It looked like a few were broken though...'

Earlier, when Makoto looked from outside, there had been some windows with broken stained glass. Though she didn't know if it was the room that Kirino had been performing the exorcism in, she couldn't abandon the possibility.'

'It is true that the room had a broken stained glass window.'

'Then...'

'However, all the pieces fell outside. I think that it wasn't broken from an outside trespasser but during the fight.'

'I see...'

So it was a locked room, even if that hadn't been the intention. That meant that Takatoshi, who had been in the room with Kirino, was the killer – thinking that would be natural.

'What did Tozuka-san say?'

When Makoto asked that, Ishii frowned.

'He said... that he doesn't remember anything?'

'Doesn't remember anything?'

'Yes.'

Ishii nodded.

Without a clear response, the police would probably be more suspicious. No, perhaps the investigation already thought that Takatoshi was the perpetrator.

But something was off – the reason Makoto thought that was probably motive. The situation pointed completely at Takatoshi as the culprit, but at this point, Makoto didn't know any reason for him to kill Kirino.

The investigation might find an unexpected connection and make that clear afterwards, but Makoto still felt it was unnatural.

'Ishii-san, what do you think?'

When Makoto asked that, Ishii let out a quiet groan.

'It... reminds me of that case.'

'That case?'

'Tozuka-san was concerned about a spiritual phenomenon. A ghost was whispering to him that he would be killed, and he was in a very unstable psychological state.'

'So it seems.'

Makoto hadn't met Takatoshi directly, but Ishii had explained to her that he had been very troubled psychologically.

'If what Tozuka-san experienced was real, there is another theory.'

'What is it?'

'The person that the spirit possessing Tozuka-san wanted to kill might have been Kirino-san.'

Ishii looked up at Makoto.

He had a sharp glint in his eyes, which was unusual for him.

'In short, Tozuka-san was used by the ghost to kill Kirino-san –'

When Makoto said that aloud, she realized what case Ishii had been talking about.

There had been a case like that in the past.

A number of misunderstandings had occurred – a sad case. Ishii had been involved in that case not as a police officer, but personally.

'That is a possibility.'

Ishii's theory would explain the lack of motive for murder and made sense.

But that brought up a new question.

– Who on earth is the spirit possessing Tozuka?

'I wish Yakumo-shi could have met with Tozuka-san before the incident occurred...' said Ishii with regret.

Makoto felt the same way.

If Yakumo had met Takatoshi, this case might not have happened.

However, it was too late to regret that now. The problem was what to do next.

While Makoto was thinking, she suddenly noticed something.

'Where is Gotou-san?'

She had heard that Gotou had been partnered with Kirino-san, the victim, in the past.

Gotou always empathised with cases more than he needed too. This case must have hit Gotou hard.

'It's terrible. He hit Tozuka-san... It might be a problem during the trial...'

Since Gotou was so quick to action, it wasn't unexpected.

'So where is he now?'

'That's... I haven't seen him since earlier... I don't know where he went...'

Ishii furrowed his brows in concern and shook his head.

Right now, Gotou was on a complete rampage. Hopefully he wouldn't let his emotions get ahead of him and do anything unwise –

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2

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Gotou found himself in front of the door –

He wasn't sure why he had come here.

While handcuffing Takatoshi and asking him about the situation, he was contacted with the information that Kirino, who had been carried to the hospital, was confirmed dead.

He had known that. Kirino hadn't been breathing and had had no pulse at the scene.

But somewhere in his heart, he had had the futile hope that Kirino was OK.

That hope had been cruelly crushed.

His mind had been blank. He left the scene to Ishii. At first, he had planned on going to the hospital, but he had stopped partway.

Seeing Kirino's corpse now wouldn't change anything.

Assaulted by a feeling of powerlessness and emptiness, his head felt dizzy.

As a police and as a person, he had been completely useless. He hadn't been able to do anything even though a murder was occurring just one door away.

– You lose yourself in emotion.

He felt like he heard Kirino's voice in his ear.

Kirino had always said that when he was partnered with Gotou.

Gotou didn't deny it. It was true that he had often lost his cool. But still, Gotou had things he

couldn't protect.

As a police officer – no, as a person – he had beliefs he wanted to persist with, but those feelings were always cruelly crushed.

It had been the same then –

An unpleasant memory flashed through his mind.

Gotou and Kirino had been on a case together. A robbery assault. There had been eyewitness testimony, and they had had a suspect for the perp.

They had gone to the suspect for an interrogation. All they needed was proof and a confession.

It should've been an easy case –

But that expectation was wrong. It left a deep scar on Gotou's heart. It had probably been the same for Kirino.

'I –'

While thinking that and wandering, he had ended up here.

Gotou turned the doorknob, and the door opened. It wasn't locked.

The room was dark.

There was a silhouette sitting in the seat.

Saitou Yakumo –

He wasn't wearing his black contact lens. In the dim lighting, his red left eye seemed to let off a suspicious glow.

'I thought you would come,' Yakumo said quietly as he looked at Gotou.

That challenging gaze made Gotou feel uncomfortable.

'Why'd you think I would come?' asked Gotou.

Yakumo's eyes narrowed.

'I heard from Makoto-san that Kirino-san was killed.'

'I see...'

Just that information was enough to make Yakumo expect that Gotou would come. That was his good intuition for you. Maybe it was because he knew Gotou's personality well.

'What do you plan to do next?'

'I'm... going to quit the force.'

That thought had kept flitting through his mind as he walked here.

He didn't have the qualifications. Even though he'd talked big, he hadn't been able to do anything.

He was a powerless, pathetic man.'

'Boring,' said Yakumo, his distaste clear.

'What?'

Gotou glared at Yakumo angrily, but Yakumo wasn't shaken. He returned the gaze scornfully.

'Hiding in your shell like a child will solve nothing.'

'You brat...'

'It seems you regret it.'

'You're the one to blame in the first place!' yelled Gotou.

Saying that wouldn't solve anything. He hadn't come here to say that in the first place.

Led by the unknown emotion welling up from deep within him, Gotou couldn't stop his mouth.

'Perhaps that's true,' Yakumo readily agreed.

Yakumo, who was normally so arrogant.

That attitude, which was so unlike him, made Gotou's emotions even rougher.

'What?'

'If I had met Takatoshi-san – if I had answered the call from Gotou-san – the case might not have happened,' said Yakumo clearly.

There was no trace of doubt in his eyes.

'What do you want to say?'

'You thought that too, Gotou-san – that's why you came here, correct? To blame me.'

'Stop screwing around!'

Gotou kicked the table forcefully.

There was a thunderous noise as the table flipped onto its side. Still, Yakumo was not shaken. He looked at Gotou.

'I'm not screwing around. I'm speaking seriously.'

'That's screwing around!'

Gotou grabbed Yakumo by the collar.

Still, Yakumo was not disturbed. He just looked straight at Gotou. It was like he was looking at a mirror.

'Why is that?'

'Saying that now won't bring Kirino back from the dead!'

Gotou's angry yell echoed through the small room.

'No, it won't.'

'Then...'

'Why are you stuck here even though you know that, Gotou-san?'

Yakumo's words shook Gotou violently.

That sharp and forceful gaze saw right through Gotou and made him lose his words for a moment.

'What do you mean?'

'I mean exactly what I said. I have regrets as well, but speaking them now will not bring back the time that has been lost.'

'I'm saying I know that!'

'But *you're stuck here blaming yourself, aren't you!*'<sup>1</sup>

Yakumo's voice, close to a scream, splintered something deep in Gotou's heart.

He lost all the power in his body. Before he noticed, he had let go of Yakumo and was sitting there on the floor.

'I...'

Gotou held his head in his hands.

He didn't know what to do any more. What was he angry at? What was he thinking? Why was he here?

'Muscle idiots should just run around, right?'

Yakumo stood in front of Yakumo.

He looked unusually large.

'What?'

'Gotou-san, you said this. That everyone should use their own abilities – '

Now that Yakumo mentioned it, Gotou felt like he had said something like that.

That was back when Yakumo was still in middle school. At the time, Yakumo had hated his red left eye, which could see the spirits of the dead, and saw the whole world with a twisted perspective.

Gotou had said that to Yakumo then, unable to contain himself.

What Gotou had wanted to say was that his red left eye was just an ability, like being smart or being good at sports.

He had wanted to tell him that there was nothing to worry about.

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<sup>1</sup> Normally, Yakumo speaks in polite language (desu/masu) to everyone except Haruka. Even when he's mocking Gotou, he speaks politely. However, he slips into casual language here. To replicate the effect, I've added italics.

– Like Yakumo-shi.

Suddenly, what Ishii had said flashed through Gotou's mind.

Now that Gotou thought about it again, the past Yakumo and Kirino had had similar eyes.

That was why Gotou hadn't been able to leave Yakumo alone when they met again –

'Gotou-san, you always empathise too much with each case,' said Yakumo coldly.

Kirino had always said the same thing to Gotou.

'I know that.'

'Even though you can't do anything, you arrogantly want to. It hurts me to watch.'

'You... Once I let you say what you want...'

'But there are people whom you've saved because of that, Gotou-san. Though it may only be a small number...'

Yakumo smiled cynically.

'Screwing around...'

'I'm not screwing around. Is your role to be stuck here and keep blaming yourself without doing anything, Gotou-san?'

Gotou had never thought that some brat in university would teach him about his true self.

'Don't be stupid. That's not like me at all!'

As Gotou said that, he stood up.

He had felt like he was walking on top of a cloud up until earlier, but it was different now. He was standing firmly on his own feet.

Just as Yakumo said, he couldn't hide in his own shell now.

He would run with these feet until the case was over. He would do what he could. That was all.

'This is sudden, but there is something I would like you to investigate.'

'Investigate? The perp is...'

'The identity of the perpetrator is not the problem. I wasn't investigating a murder case in the first place –'

After saying that, Yakumo smirked meaningfully.

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3

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Haruka was in the Movie Research circle room early in the morning –

She was sitting next to Yakumo instead of in her usual seat. Opposite them, Kento sat with a solemn expression.

Yakumo explained what had happened so far in a flat tone to Kento.

Haruka was shocked.

Of course, she had known about Sachiko and the call to Makoto, so there were no changes there.

However – it was the first she'd heard about the pastor Kirino being killed.

On top of that, the suspect arrested was Tozuka Takatoshi, one of the people who had experienced the spiritual phenomenon with Kento.

'Why did this...' lamented Kento after hearing Yakumo's explanation.

Haruka's impression of Kento was a guy with a bright smile, but even he was pale now, looking despondent.

'I won't know the details without looking into it further,' said Yakumo, chin in his hand.

'Did Takatoshi really kill someone?'

Kento furrowed his brows.

It felt like he still hadn't accepted the fact.

'The police believe so.'

'Maybe Takatoshi was possessed by an evil spirit... and then killed someone?'

Actually, Haruka was thinking the same thing as Kento.

The story didn't give a reason for Takatoshi to kill Kirino.

'I cannot deny the possibility.'

'Would Takatoshi be not guilty in that situation?'

Kento's voice echoed with urgency.

'It would probably be difficult. The police do not acknowledge the existence of the spirits of the dead,' Yakumo said clearly.

'But ghosts really exist,' persisted Kento.

'The problem isn't whether they actually exist or not. The police's rule is that they don't exist. They investigate following that.'

After being told that, Kento's shoulders slumped and he hung his head, like he had nothing to reply with.

Haruka couldn't stop her sympathy after seeing such an obvious loss of heart, but she didn't know what to say.

'Could I ask one thing?'

Yakumo spoke after a silence.

'Yes.'

Kento lifted his head.

'You didn't mention the spiritual phenomena occurring to Takatoshi-san the last time you came, correct?'

Yakumo's eyes narrowed slightly.

'I didn't...' replied Kento in a hoarse voice.

'Why didn't you talk about it then?'

'I was concerned about Takatoshi, but I was more concerned about Sachiko – '

Haruka could understand why Kento would put Takatoshi off for later after seeing Sachiko.

She had been so strange.

'If I had listened to Takatoshi properly...' said Kento hoarsely.

His face was a bit red. He was probably anguished with regret and anger towards himself.

'Blaming yourself now will change nothing. Furthermore – '

Yakumo stopped partway through.

'There's the possibility that Takatoshi killed him – you want to say that, right?' Kento said, reading into what Yakumo hadn't said. His tone was hard, filled with hostility.

'I'm just talking of possibilities. Furthermore, the investigation should be left to the police. The more important problem – the original one – is the spirit possessing Sachiko-san,' said Yakumo clearly.

Kento smiled wryly. He seemed to have accepted Yakumo's words. 'That's right...'

'Let us backstep a bit. How did Takatoshi-san talk about the spiritual phenomena?'

Yakumo's gaze became sharper.

Normally, Yakumo had sleepy eyes, but when he faced a case, his face changed completely.

'After what happened at the spring, Takatoshi said he could hear someone's voice.'

'Voice?'

'Yes. A woman's voice saying she'd kill him.'

'The spirit possessing Sachiko-san is also female, right?'

Haruka looked at Yakumo for agreement.

'What do you want to say?'

Yakumo's displeasure was clear in his reply.

'Maybe it's the same woman...'

The moment Haruka said that, she knew she had screwed up.

There was no way it could be the same woman, now that she thought about it. If they were, it would mean that the spirit possessing Sachiko had had to choose the time to whisper that she'd kill Takatoshi.

That would be too unnatural.

'That is also very possible.'

Yakumo said something completely different from what Haruka had imagined.

'It is?'

It made Haruka want to ask.

'I've said that ghosts are clusters of people's emotions.'

'Yes.'

'Human emotions are not always one way. Even if they have love, they can also have hatred.'

Haruka understood that.

There was the saying. Excessive tenderness switches to hundredfold hatred.

'So the spirit can split?'

'It's nothing so exaggerated. If a spirit has strong emotions, something like residual thoughts are born. As a result, there are living ghosts.'

Haruka had heard of living ghosts before.

The strong emotions of living human beings showed up as spiritual phenomena.

'In short, Takatoshi and Sachiko-chan could be possessed by the same woman?' said Kento, clearly shocked.

'Of course I can't deny the possibility that there were two spirits there.'

Somehow, things felt very complicated.

If Yakumo had met Takatoshi, perhaps the story wouldn't have become so convoluted. That was probably why he had asked why Kento didn't explain about Takatoshi from the beginning.

That said, nobody was to blame. Probably neither Yakumo nor Kento had imagined this would happen.

'Er... What will you do next...'

Kento looked at Yakumo searchingly after a silence.

'I will leave Takatoshi-san to the police and investigate Sachiko-san's case,' said Yakumo, running a hand through his hair.

'Thank you very much.'

After bowing his head deeply, Kento stood up.

'One last thing – ' said Yakumo, calling out to Kento who was about to leave the room.

'What is it?'

Kento turned around.

'Why did you come to consult me?'

They had received the answer to that question when Kento came yesterday. Why was Yakumo asking again?

Haruka thought about it, but she couldn't ask.

'What do you mean?'

Kento looked dubious.

'You didn't come here to have me exorcise the spirit possessing Sachiko-san – is what I want to say.'

Kento froze at Yakumo's words.

'Are you suspicious of me?'

Kento looked at Yakumo grimly.

'If you are talking about the murder of the pastor – then the answer is no. However, from another perspective, the answer is yes.'

'I don't know what you're saying.'

'Then let's change the question. You saw a ghost at Kagami Spring, correct?'

'Yes.'

'Didn't you recognise that ghost from somewhere? That's why you came. More than the spirit possessing Sachiko-san, you wanted to know the true identity of the ghost. Am I wrong?'

Yakumo looked straight at Kento.

Haruka held her breath in the sentence.

'You're mistaken. That's not how it is,' Kento replied with a smile.

'Then that's fine.'

Haruka had thought Yakumo would trick Kento into replying, but he backed off unexpectedly readily. Kento looked unsettled, but he left the room.

'Hey, was that true?' asked Haruka once the door closed.

'He said it wasn't, right?'

'But...'

Yakumo ignored Haruka and stood up, taking the coat on the hanger.

'Are you going somewhere?'

'Yeah. That's right. I have a little request.'

After saying that, Yakumo smirked.

Though Haruka was happy that Yakumo was relying on her, she had a terribly bad feeling.

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4

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Makoto stared at the computer monitor –

She had searched through all the rumours regarding Kagami Spring on the internet.

Kirino's murder last night wasn't a regular murder. It was related to what happened at Kagami Spring somehow – that was what Makoto thought.

She didn't have any concrete proof. Though it was just her gut instinct, she still couldn't clear that thought from her head.

She was able to find a number of rumours regarding Kagami Spring on a site that gathered information about spiritual phenomena.

There was something that seemed off to her though.

Normally, there were reasons for places to be spiritual spots, such as a large fire or battle in the past, or a place that was common for murders or suicides.

However, no sites had information of that sort about Kagami Spring.

Perhaps it had something to do with it, but Makoto thought there was something odd about how the rumours were only from the past few years.

Furthermore, she couldn't find any articles on the curse Takatoshi had talked about.

It was true that a spiritual phenomenon had occurred there. Something definitely happened. As Makoto continued to search, she came across a site.

The site claimed to have a video of a wandering ghost.

Makoto put in her earphones and clicked the video to play it.

It looked like the video was taken with a home video camera. It was in night mode, which made the whole screen green.

There were three men, probably university age, chatting as they went through the forest towards the spring.

Since an amateur was filming, the video shook terribly, and it made Makoto feel dizzy just from

watching.

She skipped ahead slightly and started playing against once they reached the spring.

<This is the spring famous for ghost sightings.>

The man standing by the spring had a smile that didn't match the location.

<Come out, ghost!>

Another man threw a branch that had been on the ground towards the spring, but then he lost his balance and fell.

The man with the camera stifled his laughter, which made the camera shake.

Maybe they had just uploaded a joke video. Makoto gave up and was just about to close the sight when suddenly, the tension changed in the video.

<Did you hear something just now?>

The man on the screen spoke.

<Yeah, I did.>

Another man answered.

<No way. I didn't hear anything.>

The man holding the camera replied while laughing.

<There, again – >

The first man stopped moving as he spoke.

The other man stopped moving too. The man holding the camera held his breath.

A long silence –

Makoto strained her ears too.

She suddenly heard a voice.

Though it was faint, it was a woman's voice. However, Makoto couldn't hear what she was saying.

The men screamed, drowning out the voice, and they started running. The video cut off suddenly.

Makoto played the part where she heard the voice once more.

Though there was background noise, she could definitely hear it –

She strained her ears to listen once more. Rather than a voice, it sounded like a song.

– Could it be?

Makoto had just thought that when she received a call on her mobile.

She was a bit surprised when she saw the screen. Though it was a call from somebody she didn't

usually get calls from, being contacted by him perhaps meant that something had happened.

'Hello, Hijikata speaking.'

<I apologise for calling so suddenly.>

Yakumo replied politely from the other end of the phone.

There was a bit of background noise. Perhaps he was outside.

'No, I was just thinking that I wanted your opinion on something too.'

<My opinion regarding what?>

Makoto explained what she had noticed while researching Kagami Spring and the video she had seen on the internet.

<Interesting. I will check it later.>

'How are things on your end, Yakumo-kun?'

<Actually, there's something I'd like you to look into.>

'Loko into?'

<Of course, it is to do with the case. If it goes well, we might find the person who called you, Makoto-san.>

Yakumo spoke in a calm tone.

If it goes well – is what Yakumo said, but since it was Yakumo, it probably wasn't just some gut feeling.

'Understood. What should I look into?'

<Takatoshi-san's relationships back in middle school. I want to know about the situation at the time in as much detail as possible.>

'The police are investigating that, aren't they?'

Takatoshi was a suspect in a murder. The police were definitely thoroughly investigating his relationships. Makoto felt like there was nothing for them to do.

<The police will be focusing on the present. I want to know about his past.>

'So you think that past has something to do with Kagami Spring.'

<Well, yes.>

'Understood. I'll contact you once I've looked into it.'

<Thank you. Though I don't think it'll be much help, I will be sending you an assistant, so please ask the details then.>

'Assistant?'

<My ride is here, so let's end the conversation here – >

The call ended without an answer to the question. That said, Makoto had a pretty good idea who the assistant was. It was probably her.

Just as Makoto had a bit of a break, the phone on her desk rang. She had a strange feeling. Makoto immediately picked up the phone.

'Hello, this is the culture department of Hokutou Newspaper.'

<Did you find the corpse?>

This voice – no doubt about it, it was the man from last night.

'We haven't found it yet, but we are working on it,' Makoto said politely. She wanted to get as much information from him as she could.

<I'm not lying...>

The man's voice was shaking.

What on earth was he thinking –

'I know. But in order to prove that, first I'd like your name.'

<I can't say.>

'Why not?'

<I'm hanging up.>

'Wait a second. You're the person who was at Kagami Spring yesterday, right?'

After Makoto asked that, there was a long silence, and then the call ended.

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5

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Ishii had just stopped the car when he saw Yakumo leaning against the school gate.

It looked like he was talking on the phone. After a while, Yakumo noticed Ishii was there, hung up and slowly walked over to him.

He let out a yawn while running his hand through his messy hair.

Even though such a serious incident had occurred, Yakumo didn't seem disturbed, nervous or anxious.

Was he hiding it well in his heart or did he really not feel anything – Ishii still didn't know.

'You're late,' Yakumo complained to Gotou in the passenger seat as he got into the back.

'Shut up. We're busy too,' rebutted Gotou without a pause.

'I apologise for bothering you when you are so busy. Please continue the hard work – I'll leave the rest to you.'

After saying that calmly, Yakumo put his hand on the car door and made a move to leave.

'Where are you going?' Gotou said hurriedly.

'I'm obviously returning.'

'Why?'

'You're busy, aren't you?'

'You little – !'

Gotou looked like he would hit Yakumo in his anger.

'P-please calm down!' interrupted Ishii frankly. If he left the situation like this, Gotou would probably actually hit Yakumo, and Yakumo would probably leave without any mercy.

'Let's keep things peaceful, please.'

Ishii put his hands together, as if in prayer. If Yakumo left now, the investigation wouldn't go anywhere.

Maybe Ishii's prayer went through, as Yakumo let out a sigh and sat in the backseat again. Gotou also calmed down, though he still looked angry.

– Thank goodness.

With a sigh of relief, Ishii started the car.

'So – how is the questioning going with Takatoshi-san?' asked Yakumo after the car had been going for a while.

'Tozuka-san keeps saying he doesn't know what happened, so the conversation isn't going anywhere,' replied Ishii with a sigh.

'He was at the scene though.'

'Yes,' replied Ishii, looking at Yakumo's face through the rear-view mirror.

As usual, he had a lazy-looking expression on his face and Ishii had no idea what he was thinking. This was how Yakumo always was.

'It is clear that he met Kirino-san, the victim, immediately before the incident. And yet he's denying it?'

'That guy keeps saying he can't remember,' said Gotou, looking like he had eaten something bitter.

'Can't remember?'

'He remembers up 'til he got inside and the exorcism started, but he says that Kirino was on the floor before he realised it.'

'That's strange.'

Yakumo put his index finger to his brow.

'What is?' asked Gotou.

'The two of you heard the sound of fighting, didn't you?' said Yakumo as a reminder.

Gotou nodded. Ishii remembered too. At the time, there had been loud noises and yelling. That was why they had forced their way in.

'And yet Takatoshi-san denies it by saying he can't remember.'

'The guy's lying,' replied Gotou, kicking the glove compartment.

Though Ishii did understand how Gotou felt, he felt like Gotou was letting his emotions overrule his mind because of what happened to Kirino.

'It didn't look like he was lying to me.'

That was what Ishii felt immediately.

'Don't just talk on feeling.'

Gotou immediately hit Ishii's head.

Ishii swerved and almost ran into a telephone pole.

He hadn't been just talking on feeling. Though Takatoshi's testimony had been vague in many parts, they had been consistent.

It made Ishii think that Takatoshi really couldn't remember.

It felt like Gotou was the one talking on feeling, but naturally, Ishii couldn't say that.

'Gotou-san, what is your evidence for thinking that Takatoshi-san is lying?' said Yakumo in his usual calm tone.

'That room was a locked room. If he didn't kill Kirino, who did?' said Gotou, turning around from the passenger seat.

Ishii couldn't deny that it had been a locked room. There was only one door to the waiting room, and it was behind the podium.

The broken stained glass shards had all been outside the building.

That meant that there hadn't been intruders who came in from there. However, Ishii was caught on another point.

'Tozuka-san may be the one who killed him. However...'

'What?'

Gotou glared at Ishii.

Ishii felt like he'd be hit if he spoke more, but keeping quiet wouldn't start anything. Ishii opened

his mouth, determined.

'What if the ghost possessing Tozuka-san committed the murder?'

Ishii revealed his theory.

If that was the case, it would explain why Takatoshi couldn't remember what had happened right before the murder.

'What?' Gotou looked openly displeased. 'Don't be stupid. The ghost possessing Tozuka was trying to kill Tozuka.'

'Please recall the words carefully. The ghost only said, "I'll kill you." It didn't specify who "you" was.'

It was like a light bulb had come on in Gotou's head.

He had probably accepted it as a possibility.

'Yakumo. What do you think?' asked Gotou, leaning towards the backseat.

'I can't deny the possibility, but that would mean that the spirit possessing Takatoshi-san had wanted to kill Kirino-san.'

When Gotou heard Yakumo's explanation, his expression clouded over.

Though Yakumo hadn't said anything aloud, Gotou had probably heard the hidden meaning in those words.

'You saying that the ghost hated Kirino? To the point that it'd want to kill him – '

'What do you think, Gotou-san?' said Yakumo casually, even though he had to know Gotou felt.

Ishii was worried that Gotou might yell in anger again, but Gotou was unexpectedly calm.

'It isn't unthinkable,' said Gotou with a stiff expression.

'Does that mean Kirino-san was a person who was easy to dislike?' asked Ishii, which made Gotou's fist come his way.

'He was an ex-cop. It's pretty much his job to be hated.'

Ishii understood now. Just as Gotou said, working as a police officer made people hate you.

If they solved the case, the perpetrators hated them, but if they couldn't solve the case, the relatives of the victim became angry with them for not being able to do anything. That was their job.

When, where, who – even if those questions remained, the possibility that Kirino was hated enough to be killed was high.

'It feels like the number of suspects just increased by a lot...' said Ishii, feeling disappointed. He glanced at Yakumo in the backseat.

Though Yakumo had been the one who brought up the topic, he was looking out the window vacantly, like he wasn't interested at all.

He had pale and well-defined features, but his face was blank. Ishii had no idea what he was thinking.

But still, Ishii felt like Yakumo might have already seen through the whole case.

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6

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Gotou was in a dark room –

There was a large window in front of him.

To be more accurate, it was a one-way mirror. Though he could see through to the other side, the opposite side couldn't see him.

Naturally, the interrogation room was on the other side of the one-way mirror.

Takatoshi was slumped over on a chair. He looked much thinner than he had when they first met. There were bruises all over his face. They were from when Gotou had hit him.

Miyagawa and Ishii sat opposite Takatoshi as they questioned him.

'How is it?'

Gotou looked at Yakumo, who was standing next to him.

He had his index on his brow and looked serious as he stared through the one-way mirror.

Gotou was having Yakumo check whether Takatoshi was possessed by a ghost or not.

He had wanted to let Yakumo meet Takatoshi directly. Since it was Yakumo, he might have been able to find some new information.

However, Gotou just hadn't been able to get permission.

Yakumo had met suspects in secret before countless times. Miyagawa had silently accepted it to solve cases, but this time, they had a tough opponent.

Takatoshi was the grandson of a retired cop. If they weren't careful, they would cause a big problem. It was even worse since Gotou had already raised a hand towards him.

'He isn't possessed by a spirit of the dead now.'

Yakumo shook his head and then turned around to lean against the one-way mirror.

Gotou didn't feel disappointed. Yakumo's not seeing anything was another piece of info. In short –

'Tozuka was lying then.'

When Gotou declared that, Yakumo snorted aloud.

'You're a helpless idiot, as usual.'

'What did you say?'

'Not being possessed by a spirit right now does not make everything Takatoshi-san said a lie.'

'What are you talking about?'

'Have you forgotten? Gotou-san, you thought that it was a prank at first.'

Now that Yakumo mentioned it, that was right.

There was the possibility that somebody was acting out these spiritual phenomena. If that was true, that would mean Takatoshi wasn't lying.

However, that was just in regards to the spiritual phenomena.

'In any case, the possibility Ishii mentioned about Takatoshi killing somebody while possessed won't fly any more.'

Though Gotou said that with confidence, Yakumo just shook his head and sighed in exasperation.

'This is why you're an idiot.'

'Why? You said that Tozuka wasn't possessed, right?' Gotou retorted, but Yakumo looked as calm as always.

'I did say that he wasn't possessed now –'

'Ah.'

– So that's what he meant.

Gotou finally understood and clapped his hands together.

'So you're saying it's possible the ghost left Tozuka's body after killing Kirino.'

'Yes.'

Though Yakumo said that with confidence, Gotou just couldn't accept it.

'Isn't that too convenient?'

'What do you mean? That's how spirits wandering the world are.'

'What are you talking about?' asked Gotou, which made Yakumo run a hand through his hair like he thought explaining would be troublesome.

Even if Yakumo acted that way, Gotou didn't understand what he didn't understand. He glared at Yakumo for an explanation, which made Yakumo finally open his mouth.

'What if the spirit possessing Takatoshi-san had a grudge against Kirino-san and wanted to kill him?'

Gotou was finally able to understand after listening to Yakumo's explanation.

'Killing Kirino got them their goal – '

After Gotou said those words like they were strangled out of him, Yakumo nodded.

Come to think of it, that had always been the case. Spirits that wandered had unfinished business. Yakumo found those feelings and helped them finish their business properly, while sometimes he made the spirits' feelings change and solved cases that way.

If Takatoshi had really been possessed by a ghost that hated Kirino and wanted to kill him, now that that business was finished, there would be no reason to wander any longer.

That would mean it was too late –

'Gotou-san.'

Yakumo called out to him.

Gotou looked over, but Yakumo had his hands in his pockets and was looking down, even though he was the one who had called out.

'What?'

'It's fine if it's just what you know. Please tell me Kirino-san's history.'

For a moment, Gotou hesitated, but nothing would change by hiding it now.

'Kirino graduated from the religion department of a university and joined the force. He worked at a station for some years and then got sent to Criminal Affairs.'

'When did he partner with you, Gotou-san?'

'About eight years ago – '

'A bit before you met me again.'

'Yeah.'

A case ended his partnership with Kirino and made Gotou partner with Miyagawa again. Then, he had met Yakumo, who had been a middle school student.

'When did he quit the force?'

Yakumo glanced at Gotou

'I hear it was right after we stopped being partners,' said Gotou, though hesitant.

Gotou had found out when Kirino quit at this morning's investigation briefing.

'What is the reason Kirino-san quit the police?'

'Some personal business. Even the boss back then doesn't know.'

'Do you not know either, Gotou-san?'

Yakumo's gaze was sharp.

Yakumo was probably suggesting that it had something to do with the end of their partnership, since Kirino had quit immediately afterwards.

'I don't know.'

To be honest, Gotou had an idea of why Kirino had quit, but he hadn't heard it from Kirino's mouth or anything.

He didn't really know.

'Is that true?'

Yakumo put his chin in his hands.

He was clearly suspicious. Gotou thought about explaining the case, but in the end, he just shook his head and said, 'I don't know.'

It's got nothing to do with this – maybe he was telling himself that.

'I understand. How about after he quit the police?'

Yakumo backed off unusually easily and asked another question.

'Seems he had some training and became a pastor at that church.'

It probably hadn't been that hard for him to change jobs to become a pastor since he had come out of a religion department.

'Did he keep in contact with people related to the police after he quit?'

'Seems nobody kept in contact. Everyone was shocked that Kirino was a pastor.'

'I see – what sort of person was he like while he was on the force?'

Yakumo narrowed his eyes.

Come to think of it, Ishii had asked the same question last night. Gotou started to speak, even though he found it annoying.

'The complete opposite of me.'

'How were you different?'

'He sees things logically, like you. He's never moved by his emotions. Just checks the facts – that type of guy.'

'That's also a way of thinking.'

Gotou knew that.

No, he should say that he had come to understand that recently.

'I'm not saying that one's right or wrong – he just had his own way of thinking. But at the time, I couldn't understand that. Obviously it was the same for him too though.'

'I see...'

'Kirino didn't try to listen to suspects talk – he just went forward with the truth. He didn't care how people were during questionings either – just gathered the facts.'

'You must not have been able to forgive him then.'

'Yeah.'

Gotou didn't deny it. It was the truth.

Humans were emotional creatures. Criminals had their excuses, and victims were sometimes partly to blame. Ignoring that wouldn't really solve cases – Gotou had believed that, never doubting it.

'So we always argued. Well, it was just me yelling at him.'

Even as Gotou said it, he started smiling without thinking.

Now that he thought back on it, it was similar to his relationship with Yakumo now.

'With just this information, I don't understand why he quit the police force and became a pastor –'

It was the same for Gotou.

What on earth happened to Kirino – Gotou wanted to ask him, but that wish wouldn't be granted.

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7

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Haruka stood in front of the gates to a city middle school –

Since there were classes right now, the grounds were quiet. It was strange how coming here made her feel nostalgic, even though this wasn't her old school.

'Sorry I'm late.'

Haruka turned towards the voice and saw Makoto coming towards her.

Makoto's grey pantsuit and tied-up hair matched her slender frame well.

'Ah, no, I just came here myself.'

'Then let's get going.'

Makoto went through the gate.

'Er... Is it all right for us just to go in?' asked Haruka as she went after Makoto.

'I've called in advance, so it's fine. I'm going to talk to his old home room teacher,' Makoto said quickly as she walked briskly.

That was a woman who could do things for you. Haruka was impressed by Makoto's preparations. But –

'What did you tell them?'

It would have been difficult to say they were investigating a spiritual phenomenon. And if they weren't careful, the story might not match up.

'Exactly what we're here for,' Makoto said frankly.

'What do you mean by exactly?'

'I told them that we want to investigate Tozuka-san's case.'

'Wouldn't the school not like that?'

'Of course they wouldn't like that if we went through the proper channels, but this is my old school.'

'Oh!'

Haruka was surprised, but she understood. Makoto was walking forward without any hesitation because this was her old school, which she knew well.

Haruka followed Makoto through the front entrance and switched into slippers.

They went down the first floor corridor. At the front of the staff office, Makoto said, 'Wait for me a bit here,' and went inside.

After a while, Makoto came out alone.

'The reception room's on the second floor. Let's go.'

'Ah, yes.'

As if being pulled forward by Makoto, who was acting swiftly, Haruka went up the stairs into a room with a doorplate that read 'Reception Room'.

It was a Spartan room that only had sofas in it.

Haruka sat down with Makoto.

'I never would have thought that this was your old school, Makoto-san.'

'Why not?'

'You have the image of somebody who came out of some private all-girls school.'

'That wouldn't go well with me,' Makoto said immediately.

'Really?'

'I was really gloomy back in middle school. I practically never talked to my classmates.'

'You don't look it.'

'It's true. When I went to the reunion, practically nobody remembered me.'

Haruka couldn't imagine it at all from how Makoto was now.

Then, the door opened and a woman who looked to be in her mid-fifties came into the room.

She was plump and had a friendly image to her.

Haruka and Makoto stood up and bowed deeply together.

'I sincerely apologise for coming at such a busy time. My name is Hijikata Makoto, and I come from Hokutou Newspaper. This is my assistant, Ozawa.'

Makoto held out her business card and introduced Haruka as well. The female teacher took the business card and said in a quiet voice, 'My name is Namioka.'

Namioka sat down opposite them and said, looking down, 'Sorry... there aren't many things to say...'

It was clear that she was on guard.

Her old student, Takatoshi, was suspect in a murder case. Haruka could understand those feelings painfully.

'I know. Please relax – I won't write anything improper about my old school,' Makoto said gently as she smiled.

'What do you want to ask?'

As Namioka said that, her expression and tone were still hard.

'I heard that Tozuka Takatoshi-san was rather rough while he was in school.'

Namioka looked surprised.

'You've heard about that?'

'Yes, I talked to other people before coming here.'

When Makoto said that, Namioka seemed to relax. Perhaps she felt better knowing that other people had talked as well.

'Well, it's true that there were problems with his behavior.'

'What sort of things exactly?'

'Hm... Dyeing his hair, smoking at school – there were even rumours of extortion.'

Namioka looked very displeased, but it sounded a bit like she was talking about something that had happened to somebody else.

– What would I do if my student were the subject of rumours like that?

Haruka suddenly thought about that.

Namioka had probably wanted to escape the problem, but had she done nothing?

'Did you ever ask him about it?' said Haruka, knowing that she was doing something she shouldn't.

'I didn't.'

'Why not?'

'A teacher's job is to teach studying, but reprimands are family problems. And if the teacher isn't careful, the parents will come in. Tozuka-kun's grandfather was in the police, so it would have been troublesome if anything happened,' Namioka said flatly.

Though Haruka just couldn't accept that, she didn't say anything else. It would just take the conversation off track.

'Were there students that he was friendly with?' asked Makoto after a moment.

'Hm... Kuriyama-kun and Nomoto-kun were friendly with him, I think.'

'Could you show us a photo of him at the time?'

'Would the graduation album be OK?'

'Yes.'

'Please wait a moment.'

Namioka stood up and left the room.

'Haruka-chan, you were in education, right?' commented Makoto after the door closed.

'I am.'

'Don't become a teacher like that.'

It was like Makoto had read Haruka's mind.

Though Haruka felt happy, at the same time, she felt heavy pressure. She might not end up become the person she wanted to be.

Namioka must have wanted to be an ideal teacher when she started. Would Haruka be able to be the teacher she wanted –

Namioka came back with the graduation album before Haruka found an answer.

'You can't take it out.'

'I understand.'

Makoto replied with a smile and opened the album.

Haruka looked from beside her.

She found Takatoshi's name in the class photos. Just as Namioka had said, his hair was dyed blond. He seemed to be glaring.

There was a picture of Kento too.

Though Takatoshi seemed to have calmed down since then, Kento didn't seem to have changed at all.

'Just as Yakumo-kun thought.'

Makoto spoke quietly as she pointed at a photo.

At first, Haruka didn't understand who it was. She remembered once she saw the large injury on the right side of the face.

The young man they'd seen at Kagami Spring. The man who had probably called Makoto –

'Do you remember him?' Makoto asked Namioka while pointing at the photo.

Namioka leant forward and then said, 'Ah,' sounding disappointed.

'Orita-kun, eh...'

'what sort of student was he?'

Namioka thought for a while.

'Well, in one word, he was a liar.'

'A liar?'

'There were a number of behaviour problems. Forgot his homework, was late often. It was tough warning him every time.'

Haruka felt there was a contradiction in Namioka's words.

Even though she had said that reprimands were for the household with Takatoshi, she gave Orita warnings. That meant she changed her attitude depending on the person.

Haruka had a number of things she wanted to say, but she managed to keep them in.

'But why do you say he was a liar?' asked Makoto.

'Ah, that's right. When I asked him why he was late, he'd say things like he was attacked by a dog or he fell in a river – just whatever he wanted.'

'Is that so...'

Makoto sounded disappointed.

'Come to think of it, he called me once saying he found a corpse.'

'A corpse?' said Haruka and Makoto at the same time.

'Yes, he said he found a corpse and wanted me to come look. Said he knew the person who did it.'

'What happened?'

'I called the police and they went there, but there was no corpse. The police complained to me – it was awful,' said Namioka, sounding fed up.

In contrast to that, Haruka felt excited. Makoto's eyes were wide open too.

'Did he say that he found a corpse at Kagami Spring? The spring on the hill to the west of the city,' asked Makoto with a serious gaze.

'You might be right, come to think of it.'

Though Namioka's response was vague, Haruka was sure of it. Makoto nodded, seeming to think the same thing.

They had asked for the main story, but Haruka had another thing she wanted to know.

'Excuse me, but how was Utsugi-kun?' she asked.

'Kento-kun? He was a serious student. He underwent a lot.'

'Is that so?'

Kento still seemed like a serious young man now.

'Kento-kun used to be in a care facility.'

'Eh?'

Haruka's eyes went wide at the unexpected response.

'His parents died young and he didn't have any relatives to take him in, so he and his older sister were in a facility.'

'Is that so...'

Kento's refreshing smile flashed through Haruka's mind.

Haruka couldn't feel even the smallest bit of sadness from living through painful experiences there. It made Haruka think that he was probably a strong person.

'A lot of people turned a cold shoulder towards him because of that. Some even said some distasteful things. It must have been hard, but he never really showed it.'

His parentless home environment was like Yakumo's.

'One last thing –'

After the conversation about Kento had ended, Makoto brought up another topic.

'What is it?'

'Namioka-san, what do you think about this incident?'

Namioka froze upon hearing Makoto's question.

'All I'll say is... that, well, Tozuka-kun was that kind of child...'

Though it was a vague response, Haruka could understand exactly what Namioka meant.

Namioka had probably been surprised by the case, but it wasn't that she couldn't believe it.

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8

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Ishii held his breath in the eerily dim corridor of the hospital basement.

– I don't like this place.

He had come here many times in the past, but he still wasn't used to it. He always felt like he would never be able to return if he went down this corridor.

'What are you standing there for?'

Gotou pushed Ishii's back. Yakumo was beside him too.

'I-I apologise.'

Ishii reluctantly walked forward.

He went down the straight corridor to the door to the room at the very back. After a deep breath, he knocked on the door.

'It's open.'

Ishii heard a hoarse voice from within.

When Ishii opened the door, he saw Hata Hideyoshi sipping tea in his seat.

He was wrinkled all over and had bulging eyes. His appearance and atmosphere were frightening, just like a demon's. He was a strange person who thought of his work as a coroner as his hobby.

'My, my, Ishii-kun, have you finally run out of patience with the bear?'

After saying that in a cool voice, Hata let out a creepy giggle.

'Who are you calling a bear?' Gotou said threateningly as he came into the room.

'What, you're alive? A useless bear like you should hurry up and be dissected by me.'

Hata's neck shook as he laugh.

Hata was frightening because you couldn't tell whether he meant things like that seriously or as a joke.

'Shut up, you demonic old man.'

Hata didn't care about Gotou's threat at all. He just kept giggling.

'It has been a long time since we last met.'

Yakumo, who came into the room last, bowed his head politely.

'Oh, Yakumo-kun. Won't you let me research that left eye already?'

Hata said something frightening again.

Yakumo didn't seem to take it seriously, as he just said lightly, 'If there's a chance – '

'So what are you all here for today?' said Hata, playing the fool as he sipped his tea.

'What are you all here for? Obviously to hear the results of the autopsy for yesterday's case.'

Hata shook his head when he saw Gotou's agitated demeanour.

'You really are just a noisy good-for-nothing.'

'Shut up and hand it over already!'

'Bears really know no manners. Here.'

Hata took a file from his drawer and threw it towards Ishii.

Because of how sudden it was and his lack of athletic ability, Ishii wasn't able to catch the file, which fell to the floor.

'What are you doing?' Gotou hit Ishii's head.

'I-I apologise.'

Ishii hurriedly tried to gather the files spread out on the floor, but then the photo of Kirino's corpse caught his eye and made him freeze.

The raw memories from then came back to him fresh in his mind. Ishii broke out into a cold sweat. It was hard to breathe.

'Are you all right?'

Yakumo was the one who came to ask him that.

'I'm fine,' replied Ishii, which made Yakumo smile slightly before picking up Kirino's photo.

He looked at the photo grimly, like he had noticed something.

'What are you spacing out for?' reprimanded Gotou. Ishii hurriedly picked up the rest of the files.

'What was the cause of death?' asked Yakumo, staring at the photo.

'Blood loss. The left artery in his neck was cut clean through. Don't know if he could've been saved even if he was taken to a hospital immediately...' said Hata with a serious gaze.

Though there were problems with the way he spoke, Hata was an excellent coroner.

'Any other external injuries?' asked Yakumo, still looking at the photo.

'Nothing. The corpse is beautiful,' Hata said firmly.

'Is the weapon definitely the knife that was at the scene?'

'From the shape of the wound, there's probably no doubt about it.'

Hata nodded a number of times like he was convincing himself.

Ishii looked at the documents he picked up and found a document saying the same thing.

'How about fingerprints on the knife?'

Yakumo looked towards Gotou.

Ishii thought that Gotou would reply immediately, but Gotou looked troubled and then turned to Ishii.

It seemed that Gotou didn't know the situation. Gotou was at a loss after letting his emotions get ahead of him.

Ishii nodded and began the explanation.

'There were two sets of fingerprints on the knife. One was Kirino-san's. The other was Tozuka-san's.'

'Did Takatoshi-san bring the knife?'

'No, it was Kirino-san's. A fruit knife you could find anyway.'

'Then it was in the room from the beginning.'

'Probably – '

As Ishii nodded, he felt like Takatoshi's crime wasn't certain from the situation.

The problem was that Takatoshi had no motive for murder. However, if he had been possessed by a ghost – that would give an explanation.

There was also the question of why the spirit possessing Takatoshi would have wanted to kill Kirino, but all Ishii could do for that was rely on Yakumo.

'Ah, that's right. There was something that caught my interest when I was analyzing the corpse,' said Hata, clapping his hands together.

'What is it?'

Yakumo looked suspicious.

'It's in the files.'

Hata sipped his tea.

Ishii was about to check the files when Yakumo took them from him.

Yakumo furrowed his brows and read the documents with a serious gaze.

– What on earth is written there?

Ishii was about to ask when Gotou's mobile phone rang.

'Who is it?'

Gotou answered the phone with his usual bad manners.

'You serious!?' shouted Gotou with a jump.

'You are a pointlessly noisy man,' complained Hata with a sigh. Yakumo continued looking at the documents like he hadn't heard anything.

'What happened?' asked Ishii once Gotou hung up.

'We've got permission to search that spring.'

'R-really?'

Ishii hadn't thought for a second that they would have been able to get the investigation team after giving such a vague explanation.

'Seems Miyagawa-san was helping out.'

Ishii understood after hearing that explanation.

Though Miyagawa said what he did, he was the sort of person who did things properly when he had to.

'We're going too.'

Gotou started moving.

'Yes sir!' said Ishii. He went right after Gotou, but Gotou suddenly stopped. Ishii was unable to stop himself from running into Gotou's back.

'Yakumo, you're going too.'

After Gotou said that, Yakumo looked up with an incredibly annoyed expression.

'I don't want to.'

'Why not?'

'I don't like cold places.'

'You –'

Ishii hurriedly tried to stop Gotou, who looked like he would hit Yakumo, but Ishii ended up being pushed back instead.

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9

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Makoto and Haruka were in a coffee shop in front of the station –

The shop had an antique interior with a calm atmosphere, unlike a chain store.

A young man named Nomoto Susumu sat opposite them.

He had an oval face with distinct features. His clothes were in a hip-hop style and his knit cap was low on his head.

They had contacted somebody who was friendly with Takatoshi back when he was in middle school.

They hadn't thought they would be able to get anyone since it was noon on a weekday, but fortunately, it seemed that Nomoto was a NEET<sup>2</sup> and they were able to call him out easily.

'If I'm to give information to two such beautiful woman, I'll welcome it any time,' said Nomoto with a frivolous smile.

His attitude was the picture of imprudence. Haruka didn't seem to like men like this either – her expression was somewhat stiff.

'We would like to talk to you today regarding Tozuka Takatoshi-san's case...'

'Right. The police came too.'

Susumu spoke over Makoto.

'Though the questions might overlap, what was he like back then?' said Makoto in an incredibly business-like manner.

This type of person would keep talking even if Makoto didn't say anything. If she was carelessly friendly, he might misunderstand.

'He just did stupid things with us.'

'Could you give specific examples?'

'Well, fights and shoplifting, I guess.'

Makoto thought that he wasn't so foolish that he would talk about shoplifting in front of police, but still, it wasn't something to talk about proudly.

Young people these days – Makoto didn't like that phrase, but when she saw this level of rashness, it made her want to say it.

'Did you contact him after graduating from middle school?'

'Sometimes. That guy went to a famous private high school, right? So we didn't really hang out after that.'

Susumu slurped his iced coffee loudly.

'Do you recall Orita-san?'

Makoto asked another question.

There's a corpse – the person who might have made that call to Makoto.

'Orita... Orita... Ah, Horata?'

Susumu clapped his hands together like he had remembered.

Even without an explanation, Makoto was able to understand where it came from. Since Orita kept telling lies, they probably called him Horata instead of Orita.

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<sup>2</sup> NEET stands for Not in Education, Employment or Training and has been picked up in Japan as a term for young people who are unemployed, not in school or training for work, not doing housework and not looking for work.

'What sort of person was he?'

'Takatoshi's servant.'

'Servant...' said Haruka, sounding shocked.

Though there was distaste in her voice, Susumu seemed to take the words differently and said with a flippant smile, 'It's convenient having a servant.'

He didn't understand that what they had done was awful. Makoto felt a fierce anger, but she swallowed it and continued asking questions.

'So there was an absolute power relationship.'

'Yeah. Takatoshi had Orita finance him.'

'Finance?'

'Yeah. Called it taxes and made him pay. A real villain, right? Well, we were a part of it too though.'

Susumu said that jokingly and laughed aloud.

Makoto was completely incapable of understand what was so funny. She glanced behind her and saw Haruka's face twitching.

Susumu continued talking, missing how Makoto and Haruka felt.

'Orita lied all the time, so it was just a penalty for that.'

'What sort of lies did he tell?'

'When we called ut Orita, he'd say things like his parents had suddenly collapsed, or when we asked him for money, he'd say it was stolen on the way. Said things like how he had had the money but it just disappeared – the worst excuses.'

– What on earth?

The anger within Makoto was close to eruption .

From what she'd heard, Orita wasn't a complete liar. The heartless Takatoshi and Susumu had been the ones who made him lie.

Namioka, the teacher, had also said that he was all excuses and lies, but it was very likely that Takatoshi and the others had been the cause of the problems with his homework and tardiness.

Orita just hadn't been able to say that aloud, so he offered the first lies that came to mind.

When Makoto thought that, a pain ran through her chest.

To be honest, she didn't even want to breathe the same air as Susumu any more. She was about to end things when unexpectedly, Haruka spoke up.

'Excuse me – '

'What? If you want my number, I'll tell you any time.'

Susumu's words made even Haruka look angry, but she went past that immediately.

'What sort of person was Utsugi-san?' asked Haruka.

'Ah...' Susumu said slowly. 'He was creepy...'

It seemed Susumu didn't like Utsugi.

'What do you mean?' asked Haruka with patience.

'Couldn't ever tell what he was thinking. He was friendly in his own way, but it was hard for us to get close to him, so we didn't talk much.'

'But Takatoshi-san and Utsugi-san are friendly though, right?'

Haruka's question made Susumu look displeased again.

'Not at all during middle school though.'

'They weren't friendly?'

'It's not like they fought or anything, but they didn't really hang out. He was pretty popular with the girls, but I have no idea what's so good about a guy like that...'

The biggest reason Susumu disliked Kento was probably Kento's popularity with girls.

It was in some ways natural for people to be worried about that during puberty.

'Did he have any good friends?' asked Haruka, going at it from another angle.

'Come to think of it, he might've been pretty friendly with Orita.'

'Orita-san...'

'Yeah. And there was a rumour that Utsugi was a sister's boy.'

'He has an older sister, right?' said Haruka, which made Susumu smile in an incredibly vulgar way.

'I saw her a couple of times – she was a real beauty.'

'Is that so?'

'She was sexy – or well, stimulating? Takatoshi was seriously aiming for her at one point.'

Susumu laughed frivolously as he talked proudly. It was incredibly unpleasant.

Haruka had shut her mouth, unable to deal with how unpleasant she felt this was, so Makoto made some vague replies instead.

'Oh! Takatoshi's friendly with Utsugi, so maybe he's still aiming for his sister,' said Susumu.

If they let this continue, they would probably hear even more useless information.

'Thank you very much.'

Makoto forced the conversation to a stop and thanked Susumu.

Susumu seemed to still want to talk, but he probably just wanted to flirt with Haruka. Makoto left it by saying they would ask him for information again.

'That was a bit unpleasant...' said Makoto with a sigh.

Haruka nodded. She seemed to feel the same way.

They had gathered a variety of information, but Makoto didn't know how it all connected.

She had come to solve the puzzle, but she didn't feel like they had advanced at all.

'Can I ask one thing?'

Makoto looked at Haruka.

'Yes.'

'Why did you ask about Kento-san?'

Haruka had asked a number of questions about Kento with Namioka and Susumu.

Makoto didn't understand the reason.

'I don't know either.'

'Eh?'

'Yakumo-kun told me to.'

'Does he suspect Kento-san?'

If Yakumo was concerned about it, there must have been some doubts there.

'I asked him the same thing.'

'What did he say?' asked Makoto, feeling rather nervous.

'It appears he doesn't think he's the culprit, but he thinks he knows something.'

'I see...'

It was unclear who had what roles, but Yakumo probably thought that Takatoshi, Orita and Kento's past would become the key to unraveling the mystery.

'Haruka-chan...'

Makoto was about to ask another question when a mobile phone rang. It was Haruka's.

'Excuse me,' said Haruka before answering the phone.

Makoto looked out the window.

Orita had to be the one who called about the corpse in Kagami Spring.

He had been called a liar in middle school, but Takatoshi and Susumu were definitely the cause of that.

What they had done was the worst. The teacher Namioka should have been able to see the truth behind Orita's lies. There must have been a number of ways she could have dealt with it.

Orita had probably suffered by himself, with darkness within him.

However, Makoto didn't understand. Why had Orita gone out of his way to contact the newspaper company to say there was a corpse in Kagami Spring?'

'Excuse me – '

Haruka's voice brought Makoto back to reality.

'What is it?'

'It's Yakumo-kun. It seems he wants to talk with you, Makoto-san.'

Haruka held her mobile out.

'Hijikata speaking.'

Makoto took the mobile from Haruka and answered.

<I apologise for asking so much of you.>

Makoto heard Yakumo's calm voice from the other end of the phone.

'It's fine. I can't leave things as they are myself...'

<Then would you allow me to ask one more thing of you?>

'That's fine.'

Makoto took out her memo pad and wrote down Yakumo's instructions.

To be honest, Makoto didn't know what investigating this would bring out, but it was Yakumo. There had to be a meaning to it.

'I understand. I will do as much as I can.'

<Thank you very much. Also, the police have finally begun the investigation for the corpse. Gotou-san and Ishii-san are going there now.>

That was new information. If a corpse was found at that spring, they would be able to answer a number of questions. Makoto would take a look afterwards.

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10

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'Damn, that Yakumo...' muttered gotou angrily.

He didn't think he'd have to walk around in the spring in this freezing cold.

He knew that it was necessary to search the spring for a corpse in order to solve the case.

They couldn't investigate if they didn't know the identity of the ghost.

But what made Gotou angry was that Yakumo hadn't come, even though he had been the one to mention it. He had been firm with his statement that he didn't like cold places.

Gotou had given up, knowing it was no use, but it didn't change the fact that he was irritated.

He had tall boots on so so that he wouldn't get wet, but it still made him cold to the core.

Gotou wasn't the only one in the spring. Ishii was walking unsteadily a little ways away.

There were about twenty investigation team members too, thanks to Miyagawa.

They were using poles to search the bottom of the spring as they walked around. They kept doing the same thing. Doing the same simple work over and over made Gotou more irritated.

'Damn it!' shouted Gotou, who thrust his pole into the ground.

'Don't splash around.' said Miyagawa, who was wearing long boots like Gotou.

'What are you doing, Miyagawa-san?'

'You can tell from looking, right?'

Miyagawa spread his arms.

It looked like he planned on helping with the investigation.

'This isn't something the chief of the detectives should do, right?' said Gotou, which made Miyagawa snort.

'I'm the one who gave you this job, and I'm the one who asked for the investigation. There's something called responsibility. And I need to get out every once in a while too. Doing paperwork all the time will make me flabby.'

Miyagawa shrugged.

He didn't just lean back on his chair haughtily. This was the main reason why people liked working under Miyagawa.

'You're getting up in years, so please don't overwork yourself.'

'Shut up. More importantly, don't blame yourself too much.'

Miyagawa's face was shadowed.

'It's fine. I'll think about everything when it's over.'

'Right. That's good. But... I can't believe Kirino was killed...'

Miyagawa spoke seriously.

Miyagawa had been a detective at the same time, so naturally he knew Kirino.

'I know.'

'Did you know Kirino'd become a pastor?'

'I didn't. I found out for the first time with this case. Did you hear anything about it, Miyagawa-san?'

'No. I heard there was a fight when he left though.'

'But nobody mentioned that during the investigation briefing.'

'Probably didn't want to say.'

Miyagawa looked up at the red sky.

Maybe that was true. Kirino's boss probably didn't want people nosing around about that now.

'Did Kirin quit because of that case?' asked Gotou, which made Miyagawa's face harden.

That was enough. As Gotou thought, Kirino had quit because of that case.

– You killed him!

The words from then flashed through Gotou's head. The words gotou had yelled at Kirino.

Maybe Gotou himself had been the one who made Kirino quit. When he thought that, it was hard to breathe.

'I told you not to blame yourself.'

Miyagawa placed a hand on Gotou's shoulder.

'But...'

'Kirino looked like that, but he had a strong sense of justice.'

'It didn't seem that way to me,' said Gotou, which made Miyagawa snort.

'Man, you're really alike.'

'Alike?'

'You and Kirino.'

It was the first time Gotou had ever been told that.

'I think we're complete opposites though.'

'No, you're really alike. Do you know why Kirino joined the force?'

Gotou felt like he'd asked before, but to be honest, he couldn't remember what Kirino had said then.

'I don't know.'

'Kirino's dad had been a pastor.'

'Then shouldn't he have just become a pastor too?'

He had even joined the religion department in a university. If he had just kept going with the path he believed in, he probably would never have met Gotou.

'He had probably planned on doing that too, but when Kirino was in the third year of university, his dad was killed.'

'Ah – I remember.'

Gotou spoke up without thinking.

That was right. When he asked Kirino why he had joined the police, he had said that his dad had been killed.

'It was an unpleasant case. A man who'd committed a robbery was being chased by the police and ran into a church. Kirino's dad bravely went to try to convince the perp.'

'And then he was killed – '

'Yeah. Right in front of Kirino. That's why he decided to join the force. Not like he wanted revenge – probably just wanted to do something.'

After hearing Miyagawa, a memory came up fresh in Gotou's mind.

– No matter how much they believe, people will betray other people, and God won't save them.

Kirino had said that.

At that time, his relationship with Kirino had been at its worst, and Gotou hadn't thought about those words properly. He had completely forgotten about them until now.

But now that he thought about it, he felt like all of Kirino's emotions were in those words.

Kirino's father's death had not only taken away Kirino's faith in God – it might have even made him lose his faith in people.

Catching a glimpse of a side of Kirino that Gotou had never tried to know made another question come to Gotou's head.

If that was the case, why did Kirino start believing again and become a pastor –

'More importantly, is there really a corpse here?' said Miyagawa, interrupting Gotou's thoughts.

It had been two hours since the start of the investigation. It wasn't that large of a spring. Most of it had been investigated, but there hadn't been any nose. But still –

'There was definitely a ghost here. Places with ghosts have corpses, from my experience.'

The other investigation team members would probably have laughed if Gotou said that in front of them, but Miyagawa was different.

'That brat of yours?'

Miyagawa looked nostalgic.

Miyagawa had met Yakumo during a certain case, and he knew about his ability too.

'Yes. And the lady from the newspaper also got an anonymous call about a corpse in this spring.'

Gotou looked towards Makoto, who was watching from the cliff.

With the requirements like this, it was worthwhile to investigate. Gotou was sure a corpse would show up.

'Guess I just have to believe that and do it.'

Miyagawa let out a small laugh and then walked away while using the pole to feel the bottom of the spring.

Gotou took in a deep breath and then began working again.

Just as he took a big step, he slipped n something.

The moment he realised, it was already too late. Gotou fell forward into the spring.

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11

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'I'm back.'

Haruka opened the door to the Movie Research Circle and went inside –

Yakumo had his arms crossed in his usual chair and looked up.

'This isn't your house.'

That was the first thing out of his mouth.

Haruka wanted to be thanked for her hard work since she had investigated what Yakumo had asked, but it seemed it was pointless to expect that from Yakumo.

'Ah, that's right.'

'So what are you here for?' said Yakumo expressionlessly.

Haruka didn't like Yakumo's tone, but there was no helping it, since this was how Yakumo always was.

Haruka had told Yakumo all the information she had gathered on the phone. The truth was that she hadn't needed to come, but she had come anyway.

There was so many puzzles with this case that everything was unclear. Haruka wanted to organise her head by coming to see Yakumo.

That said, she knew that Yakumo wouldn't reply even if she told him that.

Haruka let out a deep sigh and sat opposite Yakumo.

Since Makoto had done most of the work, Haruka had just been listening from beside her, but she was still tired.

It was probably because she had heard many things she hadn't wanted to.

'Hey, will this really solve the case? I feel like things are just getting more complicated...' said Haruka in her dissatisfaction, putting her chin in her hand.

The start had been Kento's request – to exorcise the spirit possessing Sachiko.

Then, it had become the pastor Kirino's murder case.

It felt like they were moving further and further away from their original goal.

'Right now we're looking into the backgrounds of these separated cases. Isolating the things that are related from those that aren't will make it possible to see the entirety of the case.'

Is that really true – Haruka wasn't sure.

'How much do you know now?'

'Nothing yet,' replied Yakumo with a yawn.

It was like he didn't care at all.

'Is this really OK?'

'Who knows?'

'That's irresponsible of you.'

'Why would you say that? I didn't ever say that I'd solve the case.'

It was true.

He had just told Kento that he would investigate the phenomena surrounding Sachiko.

Yakumo didn't easily say things he couldn't do. Though that could seem cold, Haruka knew it was Yakumo's own form of kindness. But still –

'It's not like you're completely unconfident, right?'

Though Haruka felt like she had a blindfold on and didn't know what to do, it was different for Yakumo.

No matter what he said,

He had given Gotou and Makoto instructions.

That meant that he knew where he should head, even if he didn't know the finish line.

'What do you want to ask?'

'I'm troubled because I don't know.'

'That's a serious problem – '

Yakumo shook his head in exasperation.

It made Haruka lose her will to ask anything. She sighed again and put her head against the table.

It was quiet –

With her eyelids shut in the dark, she could only hear the faint sound of Yakumo's and her own breathing.

Normally, she wouldn't be able to relax in a silence like this, but it was strange how she felt comfortable with Yakumo.

She felt like some of her exhaustion had left her.

'If it were you –'

Suddenly, Yakumo spoke.

Haruka slowly sat up. Her gaze met Yakumo's. It made her feel strangely embarrassed, so she looked away.

'W-what?'

'I feel like the spirit possessing the woman named Sachiko is different from the ones I've seen before.'

'Mmhm.'

The scene from the hospital flashed back in Haruka's mind.

It was completely different from the possessions Haruka had seen before. There wasn't any suffering, sadness or anger.

She had just been – singing.

'Why do you think she keeps singing?'

'I don't know. I don't know, but...'

'But what?'

Haruka couldn't answer right away.

If she said what had come to her mind now, Yakumo might laugh at her. And she didn't have any proof in the first place – it was just her feeling.

She looked at Yakumo's face.

It seemed he was silently waiting for Haruka to speak.

'That song sounded very kind to me.'

After Haruka said that, Yakumo frowned.

'Kind?'

'Yup. That's just how I felt though...'

Yakumo put his chin on his hand like he was thinking about something.

There was a long silence –

'To be honest, I don't understand...'

After a long silence, Yakumo lowered his eyelashes.

'Don't understand what?'

'I don't understand what that spirit wants.'

Yakumo looked up at the ceiling.

'You can't save Sachiko-san without knowing what the spirit wants, right?'

'Correct.'

'What'll happen to Sachiko-san then?' asked Haruka.

Yakumo lowered his head and looked straight at Haruka.

Though he didn't say anything, Haruka could easily imagine his answer. Everyone who was possessed ended up the same way.

They were slowly eaten away, and then finally –

Haruka didn't want to think about the rest.

'In any case, nothing will start until we understand who that spirit is.'

Yakumo looked up at the ceiling again.

It was just as he said. All they could do was send their hopes towards Gotou and the others searching the spring.

Just as Haruka sighed once more, a mobile phone rang.

'Hello.'

Yakumo answered the phone.

After talking for a while, Yakumo said, 'I see.' Then, he hung up, stretched, and stood.

'Are you going somewhere?'

'Yeah, there's something I want to check.'

As Yakumo said that, his eyes had a strong glint in them.

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'They didn't find anything...' said Makoto, feeling disappointed as she stood at the edge of the spring.

It was already dark. The investigation team members were already finishing up.

Makoto had heard from Yakumo that the search for the corpse had begun, so Makoto had parted with Haruka and gone to Kagami Spring.

Perhaps she could have just waited for the news, but she hadn't been able to contain herself. Perhaps she was comparing Orita to herself.

Somewhere in her heart, she had been confident that the corpse would be found.

'I'm sorry...'

Ishii bowed his head from his position beside Makoto.

'No, I should be the one to apologise. I sent you on a wild goose chase. I am truly sorry.'

When Makoto bowed from the waist, Ishii hurriedly shook his head.

'Please stop that. It's not your fault, Makoto-san.'

'But...'

'And something might come out if we search once more –'

Ishii said that, but Makoto thought it was very unlikely.

This spring wasn't that large, and it was only about four or five metres deep. It would have been different if they were looking for a ring or something, but they were looking for a corpse.

Twenty people had been unable to find it, so they'd probably get the same result no matter how many more times they tried. But –

'A spiritual phenomenon definitely happened here.'

A woman was possessed right now. Somebody had definitely died.

'Yes, that's true.'

'Did anybody die here in an accident or in a suicide before?' asked Makoto, looking for a ray of hope.

'No, Yakumo-shi asked me to look through the documents for that, but...'

Ishii stopped speaking there.

Makoto could tell what he was going to say even if he didn't finish speaking. There was no evidence of it.

'I see...'

'It seems Yakumo-shi has been thinking of something else as well.'

'Something else?'

'Yes. He requested the information regarding a certain person, without narrowing the search to the spring.'

Ishii had been given that request before leaving Hata's hospital.

'Is that so?' said Makoto in surprise.

'Yes. And after looking into this, it seems this person disappeared about six years ago.'

'Then that's the ghost?'

'He didn't tell me the details, but I think Yakumo-shi might think that.'

'I see –'

That was Yakumo for you.

As the investigation of Kagami Spring went on, he was trying to confirm the identity of the ghost from another line of questioning.

'If a corpse came up and matched with the person Yakumo-shi expected, that would have been the quickest method, but...'

'That's right,' replied Makoto, looking at Kagami Spring again.

The legend about this spring came up in Makoto's head. The spring of truth – why was there a rumour like that?

Places like this always had strange rumours, but still.

It had been in the video she watched too. You could hear a singing voice here.

How had that changed into a rumour about seeing your true reflection and being cursed to death?

When Makoto thought about it once more, it didn't settle well with her.

'It doesn't really make sense.'

'I agree,' said Ishii.

Makoto glanced at Ishii's profile. The corners of his eyes were turned a bit down and he looked unreliable at first glance, but Makoto knew that wasn't true.

Ishii was hesitant in everyday life because he was excessively concerned about how other people felt. It was a flipped version of kindness.

Perhaps it was because of Ishii's personality that Makoto could feel relaxed while she was with him.

However, it was unfortunate how Makoto always met Ishii at bloody crime scenes. Today, if there hadn't been a search for a corpse or spiritual phenomena, they might have been able to look at the beautiful night view together.

'Is something the matter?'

Ishii suddenly spoke to Makoto.

'Eh?'

'You were just smiling rather happily...'

'Eh? Is that so? You're just imagining things.'

Makoto hurriedly turned away from Ishii.

She felt like her face was on fire. She couldn't believe she'd been fantasizing like a little girl at her age –

'By the way, is Gotou-san all right?'

Makoto hurriedly changed the topic.

Makoto was very concerned about how Gotou was taking everything. There was no way that he was all right.

'Though he doesn't say it aloud, it seems he's suffering...' said Ishii, who then bit his lip.

His eyes behind his glasses looked sad enough to cry at any moment. Ishii was so kind. He must have felt the emotions like they were his own.

'Did they get along?'

'Detective Gotou says he hated him, but I think that's not completely true.'

'Not completely?'

'From what I hear, Detective Gotou and Kirino-san had different personalities and often argued, but I think that's not at all...'

'Sort of like Gotou-san and Yakumo-kun's relationship?'

When Makoto said that, Ishii said, 'That's it.'

'I think it's very similar. Even though they argue, at the root of it, they acknowledge each other and trust each other – that's how it felt.'

'Trusting each other no matter what they say aloud – it's an envious thing.'

'It is. I would be happy if Detective Gotou could trust me like that one day, but...'

Ishii bowed his head like a child that had been scolded.

If Makoto were in the same position as Ishii, she might have thought the same way, but Ishii was definitely over-thinking things.

'Gotou-san trusts you, Ishii-san.'

'Then why won't he say anything to me?'

That was difficult.

Trust relationships weren't just about sharing everything, but even if Makoto said that, Ishii probably wouldn't be able to accept that now.

'I think he'll talk to you about it eventually.'

'Really?'

'Really.'

Though Makoto meant it as encouragement, she also meant it honestly.

'I hate that I can't do anything at times like this.'

Ishii gripped his fists tightly.

His hands were shaking slightly. He was blaming himself again. It hurt Makoto to watch, but that was also one of Ishii's good points.

'I think you just have to watch over him,' said Makoto.

'Eh?' Ishii lifted his head.

'Since Gotou-san has that kind of personality, I don't think he wants somebody to tell him kind words.'

'Really?'

'That's what I think. So I think all you have to do is be by Gotou-san's side, as always.'

'Maybe you're right.'

Ishii nodded and then smiled faintly.

'What are you grinning about?'

Suddenly, Gotou appeared and dropped his fist on Ishii's head.

Ishii fell down, gripping his head.

'Did you hear that?' asked Makoto.

Gotou snorted.

'I don't make a habit of eavesdropping.'

It looked like he had heard. That said, saying that now would just make things more awkward.

'Then that's good,' replied Makoto with a smile, which Gotou responded to with a click of his tongue.

He really was an awkward man, but that made Gotou Gotou.

'Ishii, how long are you going to stay there? We're going,' declared Gotou, who then started walking briskly.

'Going? Where are we going to?'

Ishii hurriedly stood up.

'Yakumo's place. That guy – there's no corpse! I won't feel better until I punch him.'

'P-please wait.'

Ishii hurriedly ran after Gotou.

He fell –

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Haruka walked down the hospital corridor with Yakumo –

'Hey, what are you planning on doing?'

Haruka knew that Yakumo was headed for Sachiko's hospital room, but she didn't know what his goal was.

'You came without knowing anything?'

Yakumo stopped in front of the hospital room.

'Yup.'

'Honestly...' said Yakumo in exasperation, running a hand through his hair.

Even if he acted that way, he hadn't told her anything – it made sense for Haruka not to know.

Well, she couldn't deny that she had just followed him on her own –

'There's something I want to check,' said Yakumo, narrowing his eyes.

'What?'

'If it goes well, I might be able to determine the identity of the ghost possessing the woman named Sachiko.'

'Really!?' said Haruka in shock.

Yakumo gave her a look before opening the hospital room door and entering.

Haruka followed him.

She saw a man beside the bed in which Sachiko was sleeping. It was Kento.

When Kento saw them, he nodded.

'I apologise for calling you out so suddenly...'

Yakumo walked up to Kento.

'It's fine. More importantly, did you find something out?' asked Kento.

Yakumo silently accepted that gaze. Soon, he said with a shrug, 'Well, something like that.'

'Will Sachiko-chan return to normal?' said Kento pleadingly.

Yakumo slowly walked up to the window, as if to escape that question.

'You don't really want to know about her condition,' said Yakumo, looking out the window.

There were sudden, cold words.

'What do you mean?'

Kento looked confused.

Haruka felt the same way. What was Yakumo saying all of a sudden?

'Exactly what I said. I did some research. It seems that Sachiko-san used to be in a relationship with Takatoshi-san.'

'What about it?'

'You were more concerned about what was happening to your friend's girlfriend than the spiritual phenomena occurring to your friend. Don't you find that unnatural?'

Yakumo turned towards Kento.

Their two gazes clashed violently. All Haruka could do was hold her breath and watch.

'What – do you want to say?' said Kento in a hoarse voice. It looked his forehead was sweaty.

'When you went to Kagami Spring, you saw a ghost. You recognized that ghost.'

'I...'

'You came to me not because you wanted to save Sachiko-san, but because you wanted to know the identity of that ghost – am I wrong?'

'Why do you think that?'

'At first, it was just my intuition. It might be better to call it physical unease.'

'Unease?'

Kento cocked his head.

Haruka felt the same way. She hadn't felt that Kento was acting unnaturally then, and Yakumo himself had said his story had been consistent.

'Yes. You didn't seem anxious at all. Furthermore, for somebody who had ran away in a fearful panic, your story was too consistent.'

Now that Yakumo said that, Haruka had to nod.

Kento had sounded like he was talking about something that hadn't happened to him when he was explaining Sachiko's situation. Furthermore, he had been incredibly calm when talking about what happened at Kagami Spring.

Kento looked up at the ceiling, as if to escape Yakumo's straight gaze.

He didn't move. He didn't reply.

Yakumo didn't do anything either. He just kept looking at Kento.

Though it was probably only thirty seconds, because of the heavy atmosphere, it felt preposterously long to Haruka.

Finally, Kento took in a deep breath and looked at Yakumo.

'It's kind of amazing...' said Kento with a bitter smile.

'What is?'

Yakumo looked dubious.

'It's just as you say, Siatou-san. When I saw the ghost in Kagami Spring, I thought it just might be –'  
Kento's voice shook.

'But you didn't want to think that. That said, you couldn't ignore it –'

After Yakumo said that, Kento nodded.

As Kento bit his lower lip, his eyes glistened with tears.

'You thought that the ghost might be your older sister, who had disappeared six years ago.'

'Yes...'

Kento's voice, which sounded like it had been strangled out of him, was tinged with tears.

Finally, Haruka understood the situation as well. That was probably why Yakumo had made her investigate Kento.

The call earlier had probably been from Gotou or Ishii to confirm whether Kento's older sister had been reported missing.

'What will you do?' asked Yakumo.

'Eh?'

Kento looked up.

'My eye can see what others can't.'

'What others can't?'

'Yes. The spirits of the dead – in short, ghosts. I can confirm whether the ghost possessing Sachiko-san is your sister.'

When Kento heard Yakumo's words, he stared at Yakumo with wet eyes.

'Can you really...'

Kento's eyes were filled with suspicion.

Haruka understood his feelings. Haruka herself hadn't believed in Yakumo's ability at first.

'Yakumo-kun is telling the truth,' said Haruka, taking a step forward.

Kento looked at Haruka. His eyes appeared to be wavering. He was probably unsure as to whether or not to believe her.

'I don't care if you don't believe me, but you talked to me because you thought I could, correct?'

said Yakumo disinterestedly.

Kento looked down and clenched his hands into fists.

Kento probably didn't have just one worry. If his sister was possessing Sachiko, that would mean she was already dead.

He would have to accept the cruel truth.

Depending on how you looked at it, maybe it was better to believe that his sister was alive and not know the truth –

'I want to know. I want to know what happened to my sister, no matter what it was – '

Kento looked at Yakumo with a strong gaze.

'I understand. Do you have a photo of your sister?'

'If a mobile phone picture will do...'

'Would you show me?'

Kento pulled up an image on his mobile and handed it to Yakumo.

After Yakumo took it, he slowly walked up to Sachiko, sleeping on the bed, and looked down on her with sad eyes.

Kento watched him while holding his breath.

He was probably waiting for Yakumo to say he was wrong. Haruka wanted him to be wrong too as she looked at Yakumo.

Finally –

'You weren't wrong. The spirit possessing Sachiko-san is your sister.'

Yakumo's flat words rang in the silent hospital room.

'You're lying,' Kento said expressionlessly.

'No, there's no doubt about it.'

'Please tell me it's a lie. It can't be my sister. I mean, my sister...'

Kento grabbed Yakumo's shoulders and shook him.

Yakumo said nothing.

Soon, Kento collapsed to his knees.

Kento had been holding himself up frantically, but he was unable to hold up against this wave of emotion, and tears spilt from his eyes –

With that, Kento fell to the ground and started sobbing.

He probably felt a deep sadness.

Haruka looked away, unable to watch Kento like that.

How long did it last? Kento wiped his tears with his arm even as he sniffled and stood up.

'Please tell me. How did my sister die?'

Kento's voice was tinged with tears, but it was still filled with a strong will.

'I don't know that yet. In order to know the truth, could you tell me what sort of sister your sister was?'

Kento nodded in response to Yakumo's question –

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'There was no corpse anywhere!'

Right after entering the Movie Research Circle room, Gotou went right up to Yakumo, who was in the same seat as always.

Even though they had done a thorough search with that many people, they didn't find even the traces of a corpse, let alone an actual one.

Though Gotou didn't care about the people who were being obviously disagreeable, he felt like he'd done Miyagawa wrong, since Miyagawa had acted because he trusted them.

However, Yakumo yawned in boredom, like he couldn't care less about how Gotou felt.

'Are you listening?' yelled Gotou, grabbing Yakumo by the collar.

'Please don't speak so loudly. It hurts my ears.'

Yakumo looked incredibly displeased as he stuck his fingers in his ears.

Gotou had thought that Yakumo would be a bit repentant, but it looked like he didn't care at all.

'You little brat!'

Gotou raised his fist, but Ishii ran in, saying, 'Please calm down.'

'Let go!'

Gotou shook him off.

Ishii was thrust into the wall and fell to the floor. He held his back and groaned melodramatically.

'Honestly. You can let your emotions get the best of you if you want, but why don't you try listening first?' said Yakumo, running a hand through his hair.

His instructions made sense. And the way he said that made it sound like he had a plan for what to do next.

Gotou fixed his jacket and calmed down before sitting opposite Yakumo.

Ishii got up on wobbly feet and sat next to Gotou.

'You really didn't find a corpse there then,' said Yakumo once everyone had settled.

'We didn't. We searched the whole spring, but nothing came up. A complete waste of time.'

Though Gotou said that as a complaint, Yakumo didn't seem bothered at all. Rather, he seemed to be smiling in a scoffing manner.

'Why do you think finding nothing was a waste of time?'

Gotou hadn't thought that was how Yakumo would respond.

'Why? It's a waste of time 'cause we didn't find what we were looking for, right?'

'We now know that there is no corpse in that spring. That's new information, isn't it?'

'That's just quibbling...'

'It isn't quibbling. In the first place, a corpse being in that spring was only one possibility,' Yakumo said disinterestedly.

Gotou couldn't ignore that.

'You used the police to search even though you didn't know if anything was there?'

'Yes,' Yakumo said calmly.

'You... How much work do you think you made for me?'

'Why are you angry? Isn't this the work of the police in the first place?'

'What?'

'I'm saying that the work of the police is to think about all the possibilities and eliminate them by investigating them one by one.'

It was just as Yakumo said.

Police investigations was just a lot of spinning wheels, but it wasn't pointless. Investigating like this made it possible to see the truth of the case.

'Though a corpse wasn't found, I know the true identity of the spirit wandering there.'

Yakumo said something incredibly surprising like it was nothing special.

'W-what!?'

Gotou stood up in surprise, which made Yakumo look at him scornfully. 'You're so noisy...'

Yakumo's tone irritated him, but he bore with it for now.

'So who is it?' asked gotou after sitting down again.

'I requested something at Hata-san's, yes?'

'Did you?'

Gotou knew that Yakumo had requested something of Ishii before leaving Hata's hospital, but he hadn't heard what it was.

Yakumo sighed in exasperation before continuing.

'Six years ago, a woman went missing. Her name was Utsugi Kumi-san. The older sister of Kento-san, who came to consult me about a certain spiritual phenomenon.'

'What?'

'Kento-san showed me a photo for confirmation, so there is no doubt about it.'

Yakumo's expression went hard.

'Then why didn't we find a corpse?' asked Ishii, pushing up his glasses with his finger.

That bothered Gotou too. They had used so many people to search but nothing had come up – that didn't make sense.

'This is just a possibility, but perhaps Kumi-san did not die at that spring, but somewhere else – ' murmured Yakumo.

'But then why was she wandering there?' asked Gotou.

Yakumo ran a hand through his hair, seeming annoyed.

'I would actually like to ask the spirit herself, but all she will do is sing...'

That was probably what was bothering Yakumo the most.

He had nothing to go on if he didn't know what the spirit possessing the woman wanted.

'It's hopeless then.'

Gotou raised his hands in surrender.

When Yakumo saw that, he smiled wryly.

'It's still too early to give up.'

'What?'

'There is still another possibility.'

Yakumo put his finger to his brow. His gaze was frightening, to the point it made a chill run down Gotou's spine.

'What?'

'The corpse really was there – '

Now the story was in a jumble again.

It wasn't like Yakumo at all.

'I'm saying it wasn't there.'

'If you look at a case with preconceptions, you lose sight of the truth.'

That condescending attitude irritated Gotou.

'You say that but you don't get it either, do you?' said Gotou, leaning forward.

Gotou had thought that Yakumo would object, but Yakumo looked into space and murmured something.

It seemed he was contemplating something. It'd be pointless to talk to him now.

'What will you do?' asked Ishii, looking anxious.

Do? They'd done all they could. Gotou had no idea what to do next.

'No helping it. Let's go.'

Just as Gotou gave up and stood, Yakumo called out to stop him.

'Could I see the scene of the crime?' said Yakumo with a fearless smile, completely different from his expression earlier.

This response – he might've thought of something.

'Yeah, it's probably fine.'

Since the investigation of the crime scene was finished, people could look at it as long as they didn't mess things up. There were probably guards, but Gotou could fool them any day of the week.

'Then let's go.'

Yakumo stood up.

Though he was a really irritating guy, at times like this, Yakumo felt very reliable.

'Yeah, let's go,' said Gotou, full of expectation.

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15

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Haruka returned to her flat and sighed.

So many things had happened since yesterday that she was physically and psychologically

exhausted.

She boiled milk in the kitchen and made hot chocolate.

She sat in front of the table and took a sip before turning on her laptop.

She wanted to sleep immediately, but she couldn't. Yakumo had given her more instructions.

There were too many things Haruka didn't understand with this case. It seemed that Yakumo was troubled too.

Since Yakumo was always saving her, Haruka wanted to help Yakumo, even if just a little, and Haruka herself wouldn't feel good leaving things like this.

Furthermore, part of her sympathised with Kento.

Afterwards, she heard about Kento's tragic past in Sachiko's hospital room.

Kento He had lost his mother early due to a sickness, and he had lost his father too in a traffic accident eight years ago. He had been forced to go to a care facility.

Kento and his older sister Kumi had lived depending on each other.

Kumi had left the care facility first after graduating high school and started living alone. They had continued to meet frequently.

Even though they had promised to live together one day, Kumi suddenly disappeared without any warning.

Kento had become alone in the world, but still he had frantically done his best and managed to even go to university with scholarship money.

Kento had probably been able to live positively because he had believed that Kumi was alive somewhere.

That faint hope had been mercilessly crushed.

When Kento left the hospital room, he had looked impermanent, like he could collapse at any moment.

Lives lost never came back.

All they could do was find the reason Kumi had died and was wandering the world to release her spirit.

After Haruka's laptop started up, she opened a website.

It was the site that Makoto had found with a video of a spiritual phenomenon that had occurred at that spring.

There were red letters on the black screen.

Though it was a creepy site, that was probably its intention.

'This...'

Haruka clicked on the video and played it.

Three men went through a forest while chatting. Soon, the spring showed up on screen.

Haruka had only gone in the day, but looking at the spring at night like this gave it a rather different impression.

The men seemed to hear something from somewhere, which made them scream and scatter.

Haruka played the same part once more and listened carefully.

Makoto had said this too, but the voice Haruka could hear faintly had rhythm and tones to it. It could be a song.

Sachiko's song was rough and flat, as if it was being read. In contrast, though it was hard to hear what was being said in the video, there were clearly tones and rhythm.

Rather than a song, it sounded like something being played on an instrument.

'Is this...'

Haruka turned the volume up to the highest level and played the same part once more.

Though there was only a very short phrase, since the men's screams had cut it short, Haruka could hear the tones and rhythm clearly.

– I feel like I've heard this somewhere before.

Haruka tried humming the phrase. Even though she voiced it aloud, she just couldn't remember.

'Right.'

Haruka took out her mobile and listened to the video of Sachiko's song once more.

'Ah!'

A cry slipped out in Haruka's excitement.

She had thought that the lyrics were Japanese until now, but that was wrong. These were English lyrics.

Haruka listened once more with this knowledge – there was no doubt about it. She knew this song. She had played it in the orchestra circle before too.

She called Yakumo immediately.

<What?>

After a number of rings, Yakumo answered the phone in a displeased voice.

There was the sound of the wind. It seemed he was outside.

'I figured it out. I figured it out!'

<Why not try calming down a bit?>

After Yakumo said that, Haruka realised she was excited.

'Sorry. OK. I figured out what song it is,' said Haruka after taking a deep breath.

<What's the name?>

'Probably this song is – '

When Haruka explained the name of the song and the way the song had been written, Yakumo gave a short reply.

<I see – >

Haruka had thought Yakumo would be more surprised, but it was an incredibly flat response.

'Did you figure anything out?' asked Haruka, though she felt a bit disappointed.

<Vaguely, but...>

Yakumo was speaking unclearly, which was unusual for him.

'Vaguely?'

<To be honest, I don't understand the feeling, but maybe there is that sort of thing. This must be...>

After saying that much, Yakumo stopped.

'What?'

<No, it's nothing. I just think that your feeling might have been correct.>

'My feeling?'

Haruka didn't understand what on earth Yakumo was talking about, and when she asked the question, Yakumo interrupted her.

<There's no point lining up theories now.>

'That's true, but...'

<Anyway, you've helped me out – >

After saying just that, Yakumo hung up.

Haruka was a bit confused, but she decided it was fine since Yakumo had thanked her.

She put her mobile down and remembered something.

She had a CD from when she played this song. She searched through the CD rack and found it right away.

She put the CD in the CD player and played it.

The graceful, beautiful and solemn melody soon started to play –

Why was the spirit possessing Sachiko singing this song? Haruka shut her eyes and thought about that while listening to the music.

This song wasn't filled with the emotions of loathing or hatred for someone. It was the complete opposite.

This song was filled with –

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– This is creepy.

Ishii whispered that in his heart as he stepped into the church.

He had thought it was creepy the last time he came as well, but there was something else.

Maybe the fact that somebody had been killed here was making Ishii feel this way.

'Don't be scared.'

Gotou hit Ishii's head like he had read his mind.

'So what's this for, Yakumo?' gotou said to Yakumo, who was standing in front of the altar.

Yakumo slowly turned around.

It gave Ishii a start. Yakumo and a church – it was a strange combination, but something it felt solemn.

'Kirino-san was murdered in this waiting room in the back, correct?'

Yakumo pointed at the door behind the podium.

'Yeah,' replied Gotou, at which point Yakumo walked without any hesitation to the broken door, opening it and going inside.

'Let's go.'

Gotou followed im.

Ishii – didn't want to go. He had a terribly bad feeling today. He'd wait here.

'Ishii! What are you doing?' yelled Gotou, which made Ishii walk reflexively.

He hesitantly peered inside the room.

The room was six tatami mats in size.

There were still fresh dark red bloodstains on the floor. Wind blew in from the broken stained glass windows.

Yakumo crouched in front of the bloodstain and touched it lightly with a finger.

It was like he was praying.

'Gotou-san, when you came in, where was the suspect, Takatoshi-san?' said Yakumo, slowly standing up.

'That wall.'

Gotou pointed with his finger.

Yakumo walked towards it, put his hand on his chin and murmured something.

– What are you saying?

Ishii was about to ask but he shut his mouth without thinking.

He felt a chill run down his spine. Somebody had touched him – that was what it felt like. He hurriedly turned around, but nobody was there.

'What's wrong?' asked Gotou.

'Ah, no, er...'

He couldn't explain the feelings within him properly right now.

Ignoring Ishii's state of mind, Yakumo walked up to the broken stained glass window.

'You said you heard the sound of breaking glass when you were outside the room,' said Yakumo with narrowed eyes.

'Yeah.'

'How about you, Ishii-san?'

'I-I heard it too,' replied Ishii, which made Yakumo close his mouth again. He put his index finger to his brow and seemed to be thinking about something.

Ishii had no way of knowing what he was thinking about.

Also, Ishii thought that surely Takatoshi was the culprit in this murder case.

It wasn't just Ishii. The investigation team were heading that way too. Though they had been having difficulties since Takatoshi's grandfather was a retired cop, there was so much evidence that they couldn't cover up the truth.

But then what on earth was Yakumo investigating?

Ishii had that question, but that response came to him unexpectedly easily.

Yakumo wasn't an officer. He wasn't trying to solve a murder case in the first place. He wanted to save the spirit of the woman who had been in Kagami Spring.

'Could I ask one thing?'

Yakumo walked up to Gotou and Ishii after he had finished thinking.

'What?' urged Gotou.

'Why was it this room?'

'Eh?' said Ishii, unable to understand the meaning of Yakumo's question.

'Kirino-san said that he couldn't exorcise spirits. That he would clear Takatoshi-san's delusions by putting on an act.'

'He did,' said Gotou with a nod.

'Then why did he use this room?'

Yakumo cocked his head, like he didn't understand at all.

– What problem does Yakumo-shi see?

Ishii didn't know. Gotou seemed to think the same way, as he said, 'What do you want to say?'

'There's nothing in this room,' said Yakumo as he looked away.

– Nothing?

All Ishii could do was cock his head.

There was a table and chairs, though they had fallen during the fight. There wasn't nothing.

Yakumo had to know that. Which meant Yakumo was trying to say something else –

Ishii looked over the room once more.

'What are you saying?'

Gotou's brow was furrowed.

'Do you still not understand?'

'Ah!' Ishii said, interrupting Yakumo.

Ishii understood what Yakumo was trying to say. Once he reached that thought, this situation seemed incredibly unnatural.

'It appears Ishii-san has noticed. Gotou-san, why not try learning from him?'

After saying that, Yakumo left the room.

'What the hell's that supposed to mean!?' said Gotou, anger evident as he ran after Yakumo.

Ishii tried to follow, but before he could, the door closed and blocked his way.

Did Gotou close it, or did –

Ishii reached towards the door, but then he stopped.

Again. The same feeling as earlier –

The cold gaze on his back. There was somebody right behind him.

'There's no way,' denied Ishii aloud.

Yakumo and Gotou had left the room. He had to be the only person in this room.

Even though Ishii was telling himself that, the unpleasant gaze didn't leave him.

He would turn around to check. If nobody was there, then he would be able to accept that it was just his mistake.

Ishii took a deep breath and then turned around.

He stopped breathing –

There shouldn't have been anyone there. And yet. And yet – in front of him, there was a man.

Ishii didn't have a red left eye, but he still knew that the man in front of him wasn't alive.

He looked at Ishii with cold eyes.

He didn't know if it was from anger or sadness. He just knew it was an incredibly unpleasant gaze –

Ishii tried to run, but his feet tangled and he fell.

He hurriedly tried to get up, but the man reached forward with both hands to assault Ishii.

'Aahhh!'

Ishii's consciousness and scream were swallowed by the darkness –

# 祈りの 枢

## 第三章

FILE:  
03

### file 03: the coffin of prayer

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1

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Makoto sat at a window seat in a twenty-four hour family restaurant and stared outside.

Seven in the morning – the shop was unexpectedly busy with businessmen coming before work.

Makoto was looking at an old lot.

She was waiting for somebody here. Orita Ryou. The person they thought had called Makoto.

Last night, she had looked up a variety of things about Orita. Though he had gone to a local high school, he had stopped attending school and quit.

Now, he lived with his parents and worked part-time as a security guard at night.

She had talked to people who knew him, but their impressions were all consistent. He was quiet and nobody knew what he was thinking.

She hadn't been able to find any friends who were close to him.

She recalled what Namioka, his middle school teacher had said. Makoto herself had been bullied before.

The cause of it had been a very little thing that anybody could have done.

However, that had had a great influence on the rest of her life. Makoto felt it was the same for Orita.

He had lied to escape from the bullying. Unable to reveal the reality that he was being bullied, all he could do was lie.

Because he was too kind, he had even been given the heartless nickname Horata.

'He came – '

Makoto got up, interrupting her thoughts.

So that she wouldn't lose Orita, who was walking slowly while looking down, she paid for her meal and left the shop.

If she stood right in front of him, he would escape. Makoto called out to Orita from an angle.

Orita turned around and looked shocked when he saw Makoto.

He turned around and tried to run right away, but Makoto had expected that. Makoto grabbed his arm.

'You were the one who called me, right?'

'T-that's not true.'

Orita looked away from Makoto and responded in a hoarse voice.

He was probably on guard.

'I came to hear your story,' said Makoto gently.

'I don't have anything to say.'

Orita shook away Makoto's arm. Makoto lost her grip for a moment, but she grabbed Orita's arm again immediately.

'I do though. You aren't a liar. Right?'

When Makoto said that, Orita's expression hardened.

Namioka's story yesterday had been bothering Makoto this whole time. She had talked about a corpse at Kagami Spring.

Namioka and the classmates had probably thought that Orita was lying again.

However, Makoto didn't think that. She felt that Orita's lies were all to protect himself.

The story about a corpse in Kagami Spring was different though.

That one lie was completely different from the others. Makoto felt there was truth there.

Furthermore, six years after that, he had called Makoto about it.

'Six years ago – you saw something in the spring. Am I right?'

That was the conclusion Makoto had been led to.

He witnessed something – if she found out what, she might be able to solve the puzzle behind the case.

Of course that wasn't all. It was necessary for Orita to face reality in order to overcome his traumatic experiences.

'I don't know...' said Orita, like the words had been strangled out of him.

Since he was looking down, Makoto couldn't see his expression.

'No, you do know.'

When Makoto tried to look at his face, Orita turned away to avoid it.

Orita's body was shaking, though only faintly.

'I don't know... I don't know anything...'

'That's not true.'

'I saw an illusion because I'm crazy...'

Orita shook his head slightly.

It felt like those words summed up everything Orita had experienced. It would have been easier for him if he could blame others, but he couldn't. That was why he suffered more than other people.

'Please. I want you to tell me what you saw.'

'I said I don't know!' yelled Orita, forcing Makoto's hand off him and running.

Makoto could catch up to him right away, and she knew where he lived. However, she just didn't feel like running after him.

For Orita – saying that was just deceit, and it might drive him into a corner.

When Makoto thought that, her feet wouldn't move.

But then why had Orita gone out of his way to call about a corpse?

Makoto's mobile rang, interrupting her thoughts. Haruka's name was on the display.

'Hello.'

<Makoto-san, it's terrible.>

She heard Haruka's very anxious voice through the speaker.

'What happened?'

<Earlier, Yakumo-kun contacted me. The situation is serious.?

Haruka herself was probably rather confused.

All she could say was that it was serious. She hadn't explained anything.

'Calm down. What happened?'

<I'm sorry... Ishii-san...?>

When Makoto heard that name, her heart dropped.

'What happened to Ishii-san?'

<He's been possessed by a ghost...>

'Eh?'

It was so unexpected that Makoto almost dropped the phone.

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2

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'What the hell is happening?' yelled Gotou, looking at Ishii who was sitting in a chair.

They were in the university's Movie Research Circle room, which Yakumo used as his secret hideaway.

In the chair, Ishii was limp like a doll, not moving at all. Gotou could tell he was alive from his faint breathing, but –

'Please don't make me keep saying the same thing. It is just as it seems. He's been possessed.'

Yakumo stifled a yawn as he spoke, seeming incredibly sleepy.

Even though they were in a situation like this, he didn't show any sign of nervousness at all, as usual. Rather than strong nerves, it felt like he didn't have any emotion at all.

'I'm asking why this happened!'

They had gone to the church last night to see the room where the crime had occurred. They had looked around and left the room when Gotou noticed that Ishii hadn't followed them.

Before Gotou could yell at him, he heard Ishii's scream from inside the room.

Gotou and Yakumo ran inside in a hurry and saw Ishii on the floor. He didn't have any injuries and he was breathing.

What the hell happened? As if to respond to the question in Gotou's head, Yakumo said this.

'He's been possessed –'

Bringing him to a hospital would be of no help. That was why they'd brought him to Yakumo's room.

The question was why Ishii had been possessed.

'I don't know the reason, but since Kirino-san's spirit is wandering, he probably has some unfinished business.'

'I see...' replied Gotou, but then he noticed a big problem hidden in Yakumo's words.

'What did you say just now?'

'I said, he probably has some...'

'Not that. Who did you say was possessing Ishii?'

'Kirino-san is,' said Yakumo, expression not changing a white.

'You – why did you keep quiet about something so important!?'

Gotou grabbed Yakumo by the collar in his burst of emotion.

'I didn't mention it?' said Yakumo, completely calm.

Since it was Yakumo, it was definitely on purpose. It made Gotou even angrier.

Fortunately, since Ishii was in this state, there was nobody to stop him. This time, he'd really hit Yakumo.

Just as he raised his fist, he heard a groan.

'Eh... W-where am I?'

Ishii looked around in confusion.

'You OK?'

Gotou tried to approach Ishii, but Yakumo stopped him.

'Ishii-san is still being possessed,' said Yakumo quietly.

Which meant Gotou could be possessed if he wasn't careful.

'Er... What on earth am I...' said Ishii, sounding troubled.

It seemed like he didn't know he was possessed.

'Please just tell us what you remember about what happened.'

Yakumo kneeled in front of Ishii, who was sitting, and asked that question while meeting his eyes.

'I... That's right. I saw a ghost in that room. It was Kirino-san. He suddenly came towards me...'

Ishii's forehead was sweaty as he covered his face with both hands.

'Please listen calmly. Ishii-san, you are being possessed by a spirit right now.'

'Eh?'

Ishii dropped his hands to reveal a shocked expression.

'It's fine. I will definitely save you, so please tell me. What is Kirino-san pleading?'

Gotou felt there was something odd about Yakumo's words.

'You can see him, right? Don't you know?' asked Gotou.

Yakumo shook his head slightly and stood up.

'He isn't saying anything –'

'What?'

'He's just there. He should be wandering because he has unfinished business, but he won't say anything about it.'

Yakumo ran a hand through his hair in irritation.

Yakumo wasn't a mind reader. If Kirino wouldn't say anything, he wouldn't know.

That meant that Ishii, being possessed, could feel how Kirino felt better.

'Oi, Ishii. How about it?'

Gotou looked at Ishii.

However, Ishii was in shock, like he still couldn't believe what was happening.

'I...'

Ishii held his head, looking like he was in pain.

'Oi! Ishii! Hang in there!'

'It's a lie, right? That I'm possessed. Please. Tell me it's a lie. I mean, I...'

Ishii was pleading.

'Don't make a fuss.'

Gotou hit Ishii's head without thinking.

As if that was a switch, Ishii's body started convulsing, but soon that stopped.

Ishii slowly lifted his head.

When Gotou saw that expression, he felt something cold run down his spine.

'Kirino^san then –'

Yakumo looked at Ishii sharply.

Gotou also knew already that the person in front of him wasn't Ishii. The air about him was completely different.

'Go... tou...'

Ishii's mouth moved.

'What?'

'I'm... sor... I...'

Ishii – no, Kirino – spoke with ragged breathing.

However, his words were cut off and Gotou didn't know what he was trying to say.

'Kirino, who killed you? What happened there?'

'Sorry... It's all... my fault...'

When he finished speaking, Ishii slipped out of the chair. Yakumo moved quickly to catch him.

'That was Kirino, right?' asked Gotou.

'Yes,' Yakumo replied curtly.

If Gotou hadn't heard wrong, Kirino had apologized to him. What was that apology for –

'I finally see it,' said Yakumo, sitting Ishii in the chair again.

'What?' asked Gotou.

Yakumo put a finger to his brow and had such a sharp gaze it was frightening.

Gotou could tell, since they'd known each other for so long.

When Yakumo looked like this, he had come to an answer.

'We might have misunderstood something.'

'What are you talking about?'

'I can't say right now,' Yakumo said firmly.

When Yakumo became like this, no matter how Gotou pressed, Yakumo wouldn't open his mouth until the truth was clear.

Gotou could guess what Yakumo would say next too.

'So what should I investigate?' asked Gotou, which made Yakumo smirk confidently.

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3

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'Yakumo-kun!'

Haruka opened the Movie Research Circle door with great force.

'You're noisy.'

In contrast to Haruka, who was panting for breath in panic, Yakumo had his usual sleepy eyes. It made Haruka feel like she was the one who was strange.

'Where's Ishii-san? Is he OK?'

'Somehow. He's over there.'

Yakumo turned his gaze towards a corner of the room.

Ishii was sitting there with his head hung. He was as still as a doll.

'Why did this happen...'

The door opened, interrupting Haruka's question, and Makoto rushed in, looking panicked. The moment she spotted Ishii, she tried to run up to him without even greeting them.

'Please don't approach him carelessly.'

Yakumo grabbed Makoto's shoulder.

Makoto realised immediately what Yakumo was trying to say, so she said quietly, 'I'm sorry.'

'Won't you sit?' urged Yakumo.

'But –'

Makoto spoke up, but Yakumo stopped her.

'Kirino-san's spirit is possessing Ishii-san. In order to save Ishii-san, we need to solve this chain of incidents.'

In order to do that, we need to organise our information – that was probably what Yakumo was saying.

'I know that, but if things stay like this, Ishii-san will...'

'Exactly. If things stay like this, Ishii-san will be in danger. That is why we must do what we can.'

Yakumo turned his gaze, almost like a glare, towards Makoto.

Though Yakumo was acting calm and showing no emotion, he probably felt differently on the inside.

Yakumo had been there when Ishii was possessed. He had to feel guilty for not preventing it.

'First, let's sit,' urged Haruka, which made Makoto sit down as well, maybe because she also understood the situation.

Though Makoto wasn't acting like herself, perhaps there was no helping it, since Ishii was the one who was possessed.

'First, about the rumour surrounding Kagami Spring – ' said Yakumo once they had all calmed down.

Makoto seemed to have regathered her calm as she nodded and began to speak.

'Just as you said, Yakumo-kun, it appears that the rumour of spiritual phenomena at that spring started six years ago.'

'That matches up with the period when Kento-san's older sister disappeared,' said Haruka, which made Yakumo nod.

'The spring of truth – how about that legend?' asked Yakumo, chin in his hand.

The legend was a set with the rumour about ghosts at Kagami Spring. Your true self was reflected in the spring, and the people who saw it were cursed and killed –

Takatoshi had believed that to be true and gone to Kirino, the pastor.

'Regarding that rumour, it appears it was spread much later than the one about the spiritual phenomena.'

'Is that so?' said Haruka in surprise.

'I thought it was strange too...'

'Well, that sort of legend is usually added on later,' replied Yakumo calmly.

Now that Yakumo mentioned it, maybe that was true. People's rumours always brought along others. Somebody would get the story wrong somewhere, and it was likely that changed rumour would spread.

'You're next.'

Yakumo turned his eyes towards Haruka.

'Ah, right.'

'You found out something about the song, right?'

'Yup. I'm sure about it.'

Haruka took out the CD with the original song from her bag. She would have been too embarrassed to use the one she had played with the orchestra circle, so she had borrowed one from a rental shop yesterday.

Yakumo took the CD and then closed his eyes.

It was like he was listening to the song right then.

'You met Orita-san.'

After a silence, Yakumo opened his eyes and said that.

Namioka's and Nomoto's stories flashed through Haruka's head, which made a vague feeling spread grow throughout Haruka.

'Yes. I tried to talk to him this morning, but he got away, saying he didn't know anything.'

Makoto's shoulders slumped in disappointment.

'Maybe there is something he really does not want to talk about, or...'

Yakumo stopped midway, crossed his arms and looked up at the ceiling.

Perhaps Yakumo was putting together the details of the case right now in his head. Haruka and Makoto waited in the silence for Yakumo's next words.

How long did that last – Yakumo suddenly stood up.

Yakumo, lit up by the sun from the window, sometimes gave off an aura that made it hard to approach him.

Haruka thought that Yakumo would say something, but he just stared into space.

Haruka couldn't see anything, but Yakumo could see the truth of the case – that was how Haruka felt.

Finally, Yakumo quietly said, 'I see. I will go meet Orita-san.'

'Eh?'

Makoto looked surprised.

To be honest, Haruka was surprised too. She didn't think that Orita would talk if Yakumo suddenly went, but she could see confidence in Yakumo's expression.

Makoto seemed to sense that too, as she nodded. 'I understand.'

'Makoto-san, I'll leave Ishii-san to you.'

Yakumo's narrowed eyes seemed to be letting off a faint light –

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After leaving Yakumo's room, Gotou sat in the driver's seat of the car –

This was where Ishii normally sat. Come to think of it, it had been a long time since Gotou had been alone in a car.

For the car he normally felt so small to feel so large just because Ishii wasn't there –

When they first paired up, Gotou had thought he'd been given an incredible piece of luggage. He had even thought that Ishii should just quiet already and been very cold.

But still Ishii had followed him without faltering.

Even while Gotou scorned him for being clumsy and useless, Gotou had started to evaluate Ishii more kindly.

Come to think of it, it might have been like that with Kirino too.

Gotou, who let his emotions run wild, and Kirino, who viewed cases logically and free of emotion. The impact of these two people with completely different perspectives had to happen, and made everyone worry and troubled.

But now that he thought about it, it might have been a good balance in its own way.

After that incident, he and Kirino had split up and the partnership had ended. While Gotou had thought it refreshing, it was true that he had lamented the loss of their rivalry.

If Gotou hadn't been so prejudiced and had talked more with Kirino, maybe they would have had a different relationship.

'What am I thinking about...'

Gotou laughed self-deprecatingly, cleared his head and started the car.

This wasn't the time to wallow in the past. He didn't know what Yakumo was thinking, but he would believe in him and move forward.

He had to do that to save Ishii.

At the same time, it would save Kirino's spirit.

Gotou went back to the precinct by car and visited the forensics department. He looked around the room and walked up to a face he recognized among all the officers doing their own work.

'Oi.'

After Gotou spoke, a horse-faced man lifted his head.

It was Matsutani, who had joined the force at the same time as Gotou.

'What, it's you, Gotou...'

Matsutani looked blatantly displeased.

Gotou didn't like this part of Matsutani, but in a way, it was similar to how Gotou himself acted.

'There's something I want to ask.'

'Leave it for later.'

Matsutani waved a hand and went back to his computer.

– A really unpleasant guy.

Anger welled up within Gotou, but he held it back. He had to have Matsutani's cooperation no matter what.

'That's not gonna fly.'

Gotou grabbed Matsutani by the collar and pulled him up.

Though Matsutani looked shocked, he didn't resist. Perhaps he was resigned.

'What do you want to know?' said Matsutani, though he looked annoyed.

'First, I want blueprints of that church.'

'Which church?' asked Matsutani, even though he really knew. He was a dull guy.

'The church where Kirino was killed.'

'Ah... I do have it, but what do you want it for?'

Gotou couldn't answer Matsutani's question, because he himself didn't know. Yakumo had just told him to bring it.

'Just take it out!' threatened Gotou. Matsutani reluctantly opened his desk drawer and started searching.

'I hear the dead Kirino was partnered with you,' said Matsutani as he continued to search.

'Yeah.'

'Seems you really didn't get along.'

'Where'd you hear that?'

'Just around.'

Info travelled fast in the police. Just as Matsutani said, rather than from a specific someone, a lot of people who knew about the situation back then were probably talking about it.

'I don't get along with anyone,' said Gotou with a snort.

It was fact. If there was one thing Gotou couldn't accept about himself, it was how he bit back at everyone.

Because of that, he was stuck in this do-nothing job.

But he didn't regret it. He didn't want to lick shoes to the point of bending his own beliefs.

'Maybe. Well it seems like the guy called Kirino had his own bad habits. There was a rumour he

was dating a woman who had some problems too.'

'What?'

It was the first Gotou had heard of Kirino having a woman.

'It was a rumour, so I don't know that much either. Here.'

Matsuyama held out the blueprints.

'Thanks.'

Gotou took the blueprints and made a move to leave when Matsutani called out to him.

'Is that all?'

Like Gotou had said at first, the blueprints were only the first thing on his list. He had almost forgotten something important.

'Right. Actually, I want to ask about audio equipment.'

Gotou walked to Matsutani again.

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5

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Haruka went to a care facility in the city –

Of course, Yakumo was with her.

They had left Ishii in the Movie Research Circle room, but it was probably fine, since Makoto was taking care of him.

The problem was why they had come here –

From the flow of the conversation, Haruka had been sure they were going to meet Orita.

'What are you going to investigate here?' asked Haruka once they reached the entrance, which made Yakumo stop.

'Utugi Kumi-san, of course.'

'I see –'

Kumi was the start of this case. Why did she possess Sachiko and keep singing – as long as they didn't solve that puzzle, they wouldn't be able to solve the case.

'She probably doesn't wish it, but still...' murmured Yakumo.

What on earth did that mean? Haruka was about to ask but Yakumo went through the entrance as if to escape that.

After giving a name at reception, they went right to the waiting room. It seemed Yakumo had

Makoto make an appointment by phone beforehand.

He really was good at laying groundwork.

After waiting for a while on the sofa in the waiting room, a man came into the room. He had a long face and had an incredibly gentle demeanour.

'I sincerely apologise for the wait.'

'No, I apologise for coming at such a busy time.'

'Not at all. My name is Sone.'

The man held out a business card.

The name Sone Satoshi was printed on the business card. It said he was a care worker.

'I am Saitou of Hokutou Newspaper. This is my assistant, Ozawa. I'm sorry, but I've just run out of business cards,' said Yakumo with an innocent look.

Even though he normally looked so sour, Haruka thought he really was skilled at times like this.

'You're here regarding Utsugi Kumi-san's case, correct?' said Sone once they had exchanged greetings and he had settled on the sofa.

It seemed like Makoto had properly conveyed what they wanted to know.

'Yes. When did Kumi-san come here?' Yakumo asked politely.

'I think it was about eight years ago. She was a seventeen-year-old high school student, and her younger brother was a primary school student,' said Sone, gaze wandering as he looked through his memories.

'If I remember correctly, their father passed away in a traffic accident...'

'Yes. Well, if it were just a traffic accident, there probably wouldn't have been such a problem, but the situation was as it was.'

Sone rubbed his hands together with a wry expression.

'What sort of situation was it?'

'I don't know if I should say... Everything has finally died down. The name Utsugi is really their mother's. It used to be Sumida.'

'Sumida?'

'Yes. There was a reason that they had to change their family name. If possible, please understand that and keep that quiet.'

From the way he spoke, he probably wouldn't talk even if they pressed further. Yakumo didn't ask anything else and just nodded.

'But because of the age they came, didn't it take time for them to acquaint themselves with the

others?' asked Yakumo, to which Sone nodded.

'The older sister, Kumi-san, was friendly with everyone immediately. She was a kind woman with good manners, and she was good at singing too.'

'Singing –'

Yakumo reacted to that word.

That song flashed back through Haruka's head too. Why was she still singing now? She felt like there was a hint there.

'Yes, she joined the choir here too. The church even had her join during weddings and Christmas.'

'What happened to Kumi-san after she left?'

Yakumo continued to ask questions in a disinterested manner.

'She had such a good voice. She could have continued down the music path, but since she couldn't, she started work at a factory in a nearby town.'

'Is that so...'

'She came to visit often after that too. Her brother Kento-kun was here too. Every time she came, she'd sing to the younger children.'

From what Haruka heard, just as Sone had said at first, Kumi probably had been a very kind woman.

'How about her younger brother, Kento-san?'

Yakumo changed the topic to Kento.

'It took Kento-kun some time to become friendly with everyone. He was a very sensitive child and he hadn't accepted what happened to his father either. Maybe he was afraid of the new environment, or troubled.'

Since Haruka had never been in such a situation, all she could do was imagine it.

But still, she could easily believe that his hardships would have been beyond description. Perhaps that was why he hadn't been able to make many friends in middle school.

Perhaps Yakumo and Kento were alike.

Contrary to what they wanted, they were put in tough environments and had had to battle alone.

'But because Kumi-san was so reliable, she might have both a sister and a mother for Kento-kun –'

Sone's eyes were narrowed, like he was looking into the distance.

'I hear that she's missing now...'

When Yakumo said that, Sone's face grew dark.

'Yes. Kento-kun said that he hadn't been able to contact Kumi-san. I was the one who filled the

missing persons report.'

'Is that so?'

'It seemed like she hadn't been going to work for the past few days at the factory too... The police just took the report. They didn't do anything.'

Sone's eyes were wet with anger.

'The police do not think something is a case unless they believe it to be very serious,' Yakumo said flatly.

It looked like he didn't plan on mentioning that Kumi was dead here. Maybe he suspected Sone, or –

'It's true. We searched too, but in the end, we couldn't find her. I tell myself that she must have gone somewhere far away because of some circumstances.'

Sone's expression was sorrowful.

Perhaps this was a twisted way of thinking, but Haruka thought that Sone had already given up and thought that Kumi was no longer living.

'Did Kumi-san seem strange before she disappeared?' asked Yakumo.

Sone's brow furrowed, seeming troubled.

'From what I saw, I don't think there was anything. No, maybe there was. But Kumi-san was a woman who never let that show on her face.'

'Was she the type who shouldered the burden alone?'

'If that was the case, I would have been able to notice too, but./.. Anyway, she was a woman who always smiled gently. She accepted everything and enveloped it...'

'Do you mean she was broadminded?'

'Maybe. If the Virgin Mary really lived at some point, she was probably like her... sometimes I think that. Now that I think about it, we relied so much on her open heart and couldn't understand her suffering and sadness. When I think that, it makes me sad.'

Though Sone spoke calmly, his expression painfully expressed his troubles.

At the same time, Haruka's impression of the woman named Kumi changed.

Kumi was probably a woman who helped many and was loved by many. Why did a woman like that have to do? And why did she keep singing now?

Haruka couldn't find an answer to that question –

'One last thing.'

Yakumo leant forward, as if to say that this was the main topic.

'What is it?'

'You know this person, right?'

After saying that, Yakumo placed a photograph on the table.

'Yes. It's been all over the news,' replied Sone.

'Not that - you knew this person before this was news, correct?'

After saying that, Yakumo smirked.

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6

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Makoto sighed as she looked at Ishii, slumped in a chair –

It was great that Yakumo had relied on her to watch over Ishii, but all she could do was watch him suffer.

She felt herself incredibly powerless and small.

Would they really be able to save Ishii like this?

There were too many things she didn't understand with this case. She didn't know what direction they were headed, let alone where they were going.

On top of that –

Interrupting Makoto's thoughts, Ishii let out a groan.

'Ishii-san!'

Makoto went towards him immediately. She almost touched him, but she recalled Yakumo's words and stopped.

If she approached him carelessly, she might be possessed.

'M-Makoto-san...'

Ishii sounded surprised when he opened his eyes.

'Are you all right?' asked Makoto.

Ishii looked around.

'Where am I? What on earth did I...'

Yakumo had said that he'd told Ishii he was possessed, but from that reaction, Ishii was probably still confused.

Makoto had experienced the same thing.

When you were possessed, a stranger's spirit ate away at you and made your consciousness hazy,

your memories vague.

'It's fine. You don't have to be afraid,' Makoto said kindly.

'I see... I've been... possessed by Kirino-san...'

Ishii's forehead was sweating.

'Ishii-san...'

'Kirino-san... is inside me...'

After saying that much, Ishii hugged his head, as if he was in great pain.

'Are you all right?'

'Kirino-san... to Gotou-san... That person is really...'

After saying that in a hoarse voice, Ishii fainted and almost slipped out of the chair.

Makoto hurriedly caught him.

Maybe she would be possessed, but to be honest, she would be fine with that. If that would make Ishii get better, rather, that was –

Just as Makoto was embracing Ishii's body, her mobile rang. Yakumo's name was on the display.

'Hello, Hijikata speaking.'

Makoto sat Ishii down on the chair again before answering.

<How is the situation on your end?>

She heard Yakumo's lazy voice from the opposite end.

'He woke up earlier, but he's fainted again...'

<What did he say?>

Ishii had said something in spurts and Makoto hadn't understood, but maybe Yakumo would be able to see it from another perspective.

Makoto explained her short exchange with Ishii.

<So Gotou-san really is the key this time – >

– Gotou-san is the key?

What on earth did that mean? Makoto thought about asking, but Yakumo spoke before she could.

<Actually, there is something I want to request.>

'What is it?'

<I would like you to investigate Utsugi-san's father's history. It appears he died in a traffic accident eight years ago. I would like to know about the situation there in particular.>

In this situation, Makoto was ready to cooperate. However –

'Then wouldn't it be faster for Gotou-san to investigate?'

If the accident involved a case, Makoto felt like a police officer would be more effective than a newspaper journalist.

<I'd prefer that, but Gotou-san has his hands full right now. He doesn't like investigating either.>

'That's...'

<I would ask Ishii-san if he weren't in such a state, but...>

Yakumo sighed on the opposite side of the phone.

Makoto looked at Ishii once more. It was true that Makoto was the only one who could do anything right now.

Why did Yakumo want to know that – Makoto had that question, but she would work on it to save Ishii.

'I understand. I'll look into it. But...'

<What is it?>

'What should I do with Ishii-san?'

If Makoto left to investigate, Ishii would be left here alone.

<There's rope on top of the refrigerator. Please tie him down with that?>

'Eh?'

<It's fine. It's what's normally done. Now – >

Yakumo hung up after saying that.

When Makoto took a look, there was a rope on top of the refrigerator, just as Yakumo said. She picked it up, but she still felt hesitant about tying Ishii down.

However, it would be more of a problem if he wandered around possessed.

'Ishii-san, sorry.'

Makoto came to a decision and started tying Ishii down.

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7

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When Gotou entered the interrogation room, he saw Takatoshi there, looking exhausted –

There were shadows under his eyes and he had started to grow stubble. He looked like a different person.

'Again...?' said Takatoshi weakly when he saw Gotou.

He probably thought that he would be asked the same questions again.

'There are a few things I want to ask.'

'I've already said this countless times. I don't know anything,' interrupted Takatoshi. Gotou understood how he felt, but with that attitude, they wouldn't get anywhere.

'Listen to what I have to say first.'

'Give me a break already. I...'

'Listen!'

Gotou slammed his fist into the desk, which made Takatoshi finally be quiet.

'I want to ask about the spiritual phenomena happening to you – '

It seemed that question was rather unexpected, as Takatoshi's eyes went wide.

Well, Gotou understand that response too. He probably hadn't thought that he'd be asked about that now.

'You went to that spring to look at the night sky, right?'

'Yes.'

Takatoshi gave an honest reply, unlike before.

'Who was the one who suggested that?'

'It was probably Sachiko.'

'Were you and Sachiko dating?'

'That's a bit uncertain. I thought it'd be nice, but we weren't really dating yet, or well...'

They were probably more than friends but less than lovers.

Well, Gotou didn't mean to say anything about that.. He wanted to know something else now.

'What happened after you went to that spring?'

'We were all waiting for the meteor shower, but Sachiko suddenly started talking about the legend surrounding the spring...'

'That thing about the spring of truth?'

'Yes. Then I looked into the water as a joke – '

After saying that much, Takatoshi took in a deep breath.

Gotou thought that Takatoshi would continue immediately, but Takatoshi didn't open his mouth.

'What did you see?' urged Gotou, unable to wait.

'At first, I just saw my face in the water... but then it changed into a woman's face.'

'A woman's face?'

'That's how it looked to me. Then I heard somebody singing from somewhere, and I was scared...'

Takatoshi's shoulders slumped as he looked down.

'Then you ran?'

'Yes...'

Gotou decided not to say anything about how Takatoshi had left the woman he had an uncertain relationship with. It just meant he was that kind of guy.

'Then you started hearing the voice,' said Gotou.

Takatoshi looked up and said, 'Yes.' There were tears in his eyes.

'Did you just hear a voice?'

'Eh?'

Takatoshi cocked his head like he didn't understand the question.

'You didn't see a ghost or anything?'

'Ah, no, I didn't see one,' replied Takatoshi firmly with a sniff.

When Yakumo told Gotou to get another testimony from Takatoshi about the spiritual phenomena, Gotou had been wondering what the point was, but this could be some good information.

Because he'd met Kirino again and then Kirino had died, they had just had vague information and might have gone on without correcting that.

'I see. That was helpful.'

Gotou stood up, but he remembered that he'd forgotten to ask one thing and sat down once more.

'Could I ask one more thing?'

'What is it?'

'Was all you heard from the voice the words "I'll kill you"?''

'No, the voice said a number of other things too.'

'Like what?'

'Like "I won't forgive you"... "You're a murderer, so admit your crime" ...'

'Why didn't you say that?'

'Even if you ask me why...'

Takatoshi furrowed his brows, looking troubled.

Well, Gotou could understand. It was natural to say the most impactful thing when telling others your story.

Plus, it was true that Gotou and Takatoshi's mother, Yukiko, hadn't tried to listen to Takatoshi's story properly.

When Gotou stood up again, Takatoshi called out to him.

'What's going to happen to me?'

Unfortunately, Gotou didn't have the answer to that.

Gotou himself had no idea where this case would end.

'I don't know,' Gotou said carelessly. Then, he left the investigation room with painful reluctance –

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8

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After leaving the care facility, Haruka and Yakumo went to a multi-unit apartment –

They were here to talk with Orita.

To be honest, Haruka was very anxious. If Makoto hadn't been able to do it, would he really talk to them?

She glanced at Yakumo, who was standing beside her.

He didn't look nervous – he was as expressionless as always.

They went up to the third floor, checked the room number and pressed the intercom button. After a while, there was the sound of the door unlocking and a young man showed his face. It was Orita.

Orita looked surprised at the sudden appearance of a man and woman he didn't know.

'Orita-san, correct? My name is Saitou Yakumo. I want to ask something about the incident that occurred six years ago.'

The moment Yakumo said that, Orita tried to close the door.

'Please wait.'

As Yakumo said that, he stepped within the gap between the door and the wall.

'Who are you? Please leave.'

Orita tried to push Yakumo out.

However, Yakumo didn't budge.

'The corpse you saw in Kagami Spring six years ago was Utsugi Kento-san's older sister, Kumi-san. Am I wrong?' said Yakumo swiftly, which made Orita stop.

'Why do you...?' said Orita, his lips trembling.

This response. He hadn't just seen the corpse. He had probably known who it was too.

'You aren't a liar. The corpse was definitely there six years ago.'

'But it wasn't...'

Orita's shoulders drooped.

Because he was too kind, all he could do was lie. However, because of that he had been called a liar.

That Orita had seen something at that spring six years ago –

As a result, he had been branded firmly as a liar.

'No, there was a corpse there. There is only one possibility. Somebody moved the corpse elsewhere.'

'Moved?'

Orita looked at Yakumo.

'Yes. Who moved the corpse, and for what purpose – that is what I want to know,' Yakumo said with force.

For a while, Orita and Yakumo looked at each other across the entrance, but finally Orita left the door and went inside.

It seemed he would talk to them.

Haruka and Yakumo exchanged nods and followed Orita in.

After entering the Japanese-style room in the back, Orita sat down cross-legged. Haruka and Yakumo knelt across the table from him.

'I went to that spring that day...'

After a long silence, Orita said just that.

'When was this?' asked Yakumo, his eyes slightly forceful.

'I don't remember the exact date... I think it was in my second year of middle school.'

Orita was speaking politely, unlike how he had been earlier.

'Why did you go to Kagami Spring?'

Yakumo's question made sense.

Kagami Spring was on top of a hill. You wouldn't normally pass by it.

'I was called there. By Tozuka...'

The moment Orita said the name Tozuka, his face seemed to twist with pain.

That wound within him had probably not healed over yet.

'Why?'

'The reason... It was close to my middle school, and people wouldn't see is there, so he always called me out there...'

Even if he didn't say the reason, Haruka could understand. It was probably to extort money from him or to hurt him in an awful way.

It was the same with the previous incident, but hearing the story like this made something close to hatred well up within Haruka.

It had probably been the same for Orita.

'then what did you see?'

Yakumo urged Orita to continue.

'I almost lost my money, but I said I didn't want to that day.'

'Why did you resist that day?'

'Utsugi-kun... told me not to lose to them... He was the only person who was my ally...'

After saying that, Orita bit his lower lip.

For Orita, who had been in such a tough environment, Kento had probably been the only person who understood him. Though this was just Haruka's theory, Kento, who had been put in a care facility because of his father's death, might have been bullied also.

That was probably why he had been able to understand Orita's feelings.

'What happened afterwards?'

'Tozuka punched me and I ran away. But he caught me part way and hit me with a stick he picked up somewhere...'

'That's awful...'

Haruka spoke up unconsciously.

The scar on Orita's forehead was probably from then. Only the worse people would force people's hand with violence.

'I think I fainted then... Before I noticed, Tozuka was gone.'

'So he abandoned you there and left.'

Orita nodded in response to Yakumo.

'That's the kind of guy he was. And when I touched my forehead, it was wet. I thought it was blood, so I looked into the spring to check. Then...'

Orita put his hand to his mouth and moaned.

The memory of what he saw then was probably fresh in his mind.

'Please calm down,' Yakumo said, placing a hand on Orita's trembling shoulder.

'I was so afraid that I ran...'

Orita pulled at his hair.

Haruka thought there was no helping it. Orita had been a middle school student then. It would be stranger if he felt fine after seeing a corpse.

'I thought about keeping quiet about it... but...'

'So you called Namioka-sensei.'

Orita nodded.

From what Haruka had heard, Orita didn't seem like a liar. But then the problem was where the corpse had gone –

Haruka looked at Yakumo for an answer.

Yakumo didn't reply.

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9

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Yakumo stood still –

His eyes were on Kagami Spring.

The sun had already set, and the surroundings were blanketed with darkness. The sky and the water both showed the moon, letting off a pale light.

'Hey, why did we come here?'

Haruka spoke towards Yakumo's back.

Yakumo slowly turned around. His eyes seemed sad.

'I was always thinking.'

'What about?'

'Why this location?'

'What do you mean?'

'From what Orita-san said, Kumi-san was definitely killed here.'

'Yeah.'

Orita was called here by Takatoshi and saw the corpse.

Where did the corpse go, why did she die – there were many puzzles, but Kumi-san had definitely died here.

'Why this place? What did she come here to do?'

'That's – '

Now that Yakumo mentioned it, it was unnatural.

Haruka hadn't known about Kagami Spring until this incident occurred. It wasn't a place you would go normally.

'I thought that maybe somebody forced her here, but that's probably incorrect.'

'Why?'

'Because she sang here when she was alive – '

After saying that, Yakumo turned his eyes towards the moon in the sky.

'How can you know that?'

'I investigated a number of things after that too. The spiritual phenomena started occurring at Kagami Spring six years ago, when Kumi-san disappeared. However, there was a rumour that you could hear a woman singing here before then.'

'So she came here before – '

'Yes. But I don't know the reason.'

Yakumo shook his head, but Haruka could understand easily. When she said that, Yakumo looked surprised.

'Kumi-san must have wanted to sing.'

'You can sing anywhere, right?'

Yakumo's brow was furrowed.

Well, for Yakumo, who didn't play music, Haruka could understand why he felt that way.

'Sometimes I want to practise flute alone too, but it's hard to do when the circle is on break.'

'Why?'

'People complain that it's noisy.'

That happened even for flutes, which weren't that loud. For instruments that were loud and for singing, it was even harder to practise in your room.

'You can just go to a karaoke box, can't you?'

'It costs money. Kumi-san didn't have that on hand either.'

That was why, when she had time, she would go somewhere where nobody would bother her to sing as much as she wanted.

Kumi hadn't gone to university, so she hadn't been in a club or circle. After she left the care facility, she wouldn't have the chances to sing the songs she wanted either.

For her, singing here alone might have been her only pleasure.

'I see. I don't have that feeling.'

Yakumo turned away from Kagami Spring and slowly walked forward to a place where he could see the whole city.

Haruka followed him.

Looking at the light from the city, she felt like she could see Kumi here, singing by herself.

'Maybe she...'

A thought suddenly came to Haruka, but she stopped speaking.

If she didn't have any proof, she felt like Yakumo would be angry at her.

'What were you about to say?'

Yakumo looked at Haruka intently.

With him looking at her like that in a place like this, it made Haruka's chest clench. It was hard to breathe.

Of course, that wasn't because it was painful.

'I don't have any proof. It's just a thought that came to me.'

'I'm asking what that thought was.'

Yakumo ran a hand through his hair, seeming annoyed.

'OK. Maybe Kumi-san...'

Interrupting Haruka's words, Yakumo's mobile rang.

Even though the mood had been so good –

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'Sorry to bother.'

Gotou opened the door to the Movie Research Circle room.

Since Yakumo opened his mouth with a sour look, Gotou shouted 'Shut up!' before Yakumo could say anything. Yakumo had probably just meant to tell Gotou not to come if he knew he was a bother.

In a corner of the room, Ishii was slumped over like before. His shoulders were moving slightly, so

he was breathing.

'How's Ishii?' asked Gotou.

Yakumo sighed.

'He's the same. Sometimes he wakes up in a panic – to be honest, it's troublesome.'

Though that was like Ishii, it wasn't a laughing matter.

Anyway, it looked like he was fine for now.

'So how were things on your end?' asked Yakumo, crossing his arms.

'Yeah, I looked into what you asked.'

Gotou told Yakumo what he'd heard from Takatoshi and also the story about Kirino having a woman which he'd heard from Matsutani.

Yakumo listened to Gotou's story without interrupting, which was unusual for him.

'I can see most of it.'

That was what Yakumo said first after Gotou finished speaking.

'Really?'

Gotou leant forward, which made Yakumo look annoyed.

'Please keep your face away from mine. It's unpleasant.'

'You!'

Gotou raised his fist in anger, but he suddenly felt that something was odd.

Normally, Ishii would stop him here, but Ishii was in that state. Still, he couldn't hit Yakumo.

Come to think of it, no matter what he said, he never felt like hitting Yakumo.

If he wasn't going to hit him anyway, Ishii's frantic efforts to stop him were pointless, but still, he felt rather lonely.

Gotou put his fist down with a click of his tongue.

'Before I explain, do you have the blueprints?'

'Right.'

Gotou took the blueprints out of his inner jacket pocket and gave them to Yakumo.

After Yakumo took them, he quickly spread them out on the table and looked at them assiduously.

'Was there some sort of trick to that church?'

Why did Yakumo want the blueprints – that was the conclusion Gotou had come to after thinking about it, but Yakumo just shook his head in exasperation.

'You're an incredible idiot, as usual.'

Though Gotou felt angry, he didn't feel like raising his fist or yelling.

To be honest, he was surprised himself by how pointless that felt without Ishii.

'I'm looking for something else.'

'I'm asking what that is.'

'I'll talk about it soon.'

He gave Gotou the slip again.

How long was this investigation going to continue?

'When's soon?'

'Before I say anything, there is something I must ask you, Gotou-san,' Yakumo said formally.

His sharp gaze seemed to shoot through Gotou's chest.

'What?'

As Gotou asked that, his voice went up slightly.

Gotou didn't know why he was this nervous.

'I want to ask about the incident eight years ago.'

'What are you talking about?'

Though Gotou was acting calm, he didn't know how well he managed to hide it in front of Yakumo.

'Please stop playing dumb.'

'I'm not playing dumb.'

'Honestly... Gotou-san, you're the one who's made this case so complicated.'

'What are you saying? I...'

'I will ask once more. What happened between you and Kirino-san eight years ago, Gotou-san?'

'What happened eight years ago has nothing to do with this.'

'It does –'

Yakumo glared at Gotou.

It was the first time he'd seen Yakumo look like this. They were frightening eyes –

'How's it related...'

Gotou didn't understand why Yakumo wanted to know about what happened eight years ago now.

That case had nothing to do with this one. It was Gotou and Kirino's problem.

'The young man who first consulted me about the spiritual phenomenon is called Utsugi Kento, but

his family name is actually something else.'

'Something else?'

'Yes. His name is actually Sumida Kento. His father was named Sumida Yuuichirou-san. Now that I've said that much, you can't deny it any more, can you?'

– Is that how it was!?

Gotou felt so dazed that he slumped back on the chair.

He had never thought that the cases would be related like this. He had had a bad feeling from the moment he met Kirino.

– Your crime hasn't been forgiven.

He had felt like he was being told that.

'That day eight years ago – me and Kirino went to a man's apartment,' said Gotou, looking up at the ceiling.

'Sumida-san's apartment.'

'Yeah. Sumida was the suspect in a theft. We were there to question him, but he fought back...'

'Why?'

'He had children in the room. But Kirino still talked with no mercy about the theft.'

Though Gotou had just had a glance, he had seen an older sister hugging her little brother in a corner of the room.

It had looked like the younger brother didn't understand, but the older sister seemed determined, like she'd understood it all.

'I see...' said Yakumo, sounding sad.

'Sumida ran out of the room. Me and Kirino ran after him. Sumida stopped partway, maybe thinking he couldn't get away, and held up a kitchen knife. He had probably grabbed it from his house.'

To be honest, Gotou didn't want to say the rest, but running away wouldn't start anything.

With determination, Gotou sat up and looked at Yakumo.

Yakumo nodded, looking right at him.

'I tried to talk to Sumida, but he wouldn't listen. He was probably worried about what would happen to his two kids if he was put in prison.'

'Perhaps...'

'While this was happening, Kirino pulled out his gun.'

'His gun?'

Even Yakumo looked surprised.

'Of course he didn't plan on actually shooting it. It was a threat. The guy was holding a knife. Somebody could've been injured if we weren't careful. Now that I think about it, I think it was the correct decision...'

But Gotou hadn't thought so then.

Pulling out a gun would just make Sumida fight back more – that was what Gotou had thought.

'I yelled at Kirino even though we were in the middle of chasing a suspect. He didn't back down either. We believed in different things. There was no way we'd reach an agreement...'

Gotou understood now. Sumida had probably looked at Sumida and saw the man who killed his father. He'd thought that talking to a suspect who was fighting back was pointless. He had tried to suppress him with force.

But Gotou hadn't been able to understand that then, and he hadn't been able to forgive it.

It was incredibly stupid. Their antagonism had completely run wild then.

'Then what happened?' asked Yakumo.

When Gotou thought about how he would have to say what happened next with his own mouth, his heart felt heavy.

But just as Yakumo said, Gotou would have to face what happened then, if it had brought about this case.

'When Sumida saw us fighting, he decided that he'd be able to escape. So he ran into the road...'

A large truck that had just been passing by hit him.

Anger welled up within Gotou. It was anger at himself for doing something so stupid then.

But Gotou hadn't been able to think that way then. If Kirino hadn't waved his gun, this wouldn't have happened – that was what he'd thought.

In the morgue where Sumida's corpse was placed, he had beat Kirino up with all his force. The scar above his left eyebrow had been from then.

He had thought that Kirino would fight back, but he hadn't. He had just bowed his head and said, 'I'm sorry.'

That had just made Gotou even angrier. The truth was –

'It was my fault... Sumida died because of me...'

Gotou hit the table with his fist.

Just like when he'd hit Kirino, a sharp pain ran through it.

'With that, your partnership was ended and Kirino-san left the police.'

'Well, sounds about right – '

Gotou had changed his frustration then into a strong belief.

– I'll never let anyone die in front of me again.

Even though Gotou had vowed that and come all this way, he hadn't been able to save Kirino.

'I see...'

After Gotou finished speaking, Yakumo said that quietly and stood up.

His elegant posture seemed to let out power –

'What?'

'Let's end the case tomorrow.'

'end?'

'Yes. Please bring everyone involved to the church tomorrow.'

After saying that, Yakumo smiled slightly.

It was a smile so cold it made a chill run down Gotou's spine –

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11

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Ishii slowly opened his eyes –

His consciousness was blurry, as if he was in fog. He felt incredibly trapped. He tried to move, but it wouldn't work.

He saw that he was bound to a chair with rope.

'W-what is this...' said Ishii in shock.

He frantically tried to get himself out, but the more he moved, the more the rope dug into him – it just hurt him.

– What on earth happened to me?

Maybe he had accidentally obtained something that was a national secret and had been wrapped up in some international incident and then abducted by a terrorist organization.

Ishii looked around as he thought wildly.

It was a room he'd seen before. If he remembered correctly, this was the university clubroom for the Movie Research Circle, which Yakumo used as his secret hideaway.

Yakumo wasn't here, as he was always. Of course, Gotou and Haruka weren't here either. Ishii was the only one.

'Excuse me! Is anyone here?' asked Ishii, but the room was silent. Nobody made a reply.

Was this a bad prank to shock him?

'Excuse me! Yakumo-shi! Detective Gotou!'

Ishii called out again, but still nobody replied.

Ishii felt more anxious and his forehead started sweating.

Suddenly, Ishii felt like he knew why he was in this room. He tried to remember, but his instincts stopped him.

'Wait... Detective Gotou. You're here, right? Please come out.'

Ishii pleaded, half in tears, but still nobody responded. He tried to get out of the ropes again, but they wouldn't budge.

The more he fought, the more anxious Ishii became.

Suddenly, he felt a gaze on his back.

He felt like somebody was right behind him.

'Detective Gotou?'

Ishii tried to turn his neck, but he couldn't look behind him. However, he did feel somebody was behind him.

'Please calm down.'

Somebody suddenly hit his shoulder.

'Aahhhh!' shrieked Ishii as he flailed.

– No. No. No.

'Ishii-san, it's fine. It's me. Yakumo.'

After hearing that, Ishii finally came back to his senses.

Yakumo was standing in front of him. His black contact lens were off. In the dim light, Yakumo's red left eye seemed to glitter suspiciously.

'I... Right. I've been possessed by Kirino-san...'

Now that Ishii had calmed down, he could remember his situation.

'It seems you've recalled.'

Yakumo smiled faintly and started undoing the ropes tying Ishii down.

'P-please help me. I...'

The moment the ropes came off, Ishii clung to Yakumo.

He wanted to be out of this situation as soon as possible. That desire filled his heart.

'I know. There is something I want you to tell me so that I can save you, Ishii-san.'

'Something you want me to tell you?'

'What is Kirino-san asking? Since he is possessing you, Ishii-san, you should be able to feel his emotions and memories.'

After hearing Yakumo say that, Ishii saw the face of a woman in his head.

It was a woman he'd seen before, but he couldn't remember who it was. The woman had a very kind smile.

Terror, fear, hatred – the smile washed all those emotions away.

This wasn't his memory. It was probably Kirino's. Just as Yakumo said, Kirino's memories and Ishii's were mixed in his head.

'I...'

Ishii held his head in his hands.

'Please don't worry –'

Yakumo placed a hand on Ishii's shoulder.

'Eh?'

'I understand why you are wandering this world.'

Yakumo's red left eye was straight on Ishii.

No, his gaze probably wasn't on Ishii. It was on the other person within him.

Yakumo put his index finger to his brow.

'Kirino-san, please talk to me. Tell me the truth –'

When Yakumo said that, a number of images flashed through Ishii's head. They were Kirino's memories.

Touched by those memories filled with sadness, tears naturally fell from Ishii's eyes –

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12

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Haruka walked with Kento –

Haruka was given the duty of bringing him. Of course, Yakumo had given her that duty.

'What are we doing?' asked Kento as he walked beside her.

Though he was smiling, he seemed a bit nervous.

'We are going to exorcise Kumi-san, the spirit possessing Sachiko-san.'

'My sister?'

'Yes?'

'But how? And why at a church?'

Kento cocked his head.

Haruka didn't know either, but since Yakumo said he was going to exorcise a ghost, he probably had some sort of plan. He must have thought about the location too.

'It has to be done at a church. Probably...'

When Haruka said that, Kento laughed aloud.

'What's so funny?'

'You really trust him, don't you?'

It was true that Haruka trusted Yakumo, but that was just for cases. Haruka had no idea what he was thinking outside of that.

As they were talking, they reached the church.

It had come up in conversation a number of times in regards to the case, but it was the first time Haruka had actually come to it.

If she hadn't known anything, it would have seemed like a refined church that could be found anywhere, but the fact that a murder had occurred here made the entire building seem sinister.

They pushed past the decorated gates and went in.

The ceiling was arched and there was an altar at the front with a statue of Christ on the cross.

'Oh, Haruka-chan.'

Gotou stood up from the pew and waved.

'Hello, Gotou-san.'

After exchanging greetings, Haruka saw another man sitting beside Gotou.

– Who is that?

'Takatoshi,' said Kento, as if in response to Haruka's question.

He was Tozuka Takatoshi. Haruka had only heard the name. He was the person who had been arrested as a suspect in Kirino's murder and had experienced the spiritual phenomena along with Kento –

The ringleader of Orita's bullies in middle school.

With that information, Takatoshi seemed like a terribly awful person to Haruka.

– No.

Haruka shook away the thoughts in her head. If she had preconceptions, she'd lose the truth. Yakumo always told her that.

'Utsugi. Tell them. I didn't do anything.'<sup>7</sup>

Takatoshi tried to run forward, but Gotou forced him to sit down and said, 'Keep quiet.'

Takatoshi looked like he wanted to say something still, but he stopped resisting, shoulders slumping under Gotou's pressure.

'Excuse me...'

Haruka was about to speak to Gotou when the door at the front opened.

Orita came into the church with his head hung.

'Orita-kun,' said Kento.

Why him – that was how it sounded.

'It's been a while,' said Orita in a hoarse voice. Then, he sat in the pew.

'Everyone's here now,' said Gotou, after standing up and taking a look around the church.

– Everyone?

'Gotou-san, where's Yakumo-kun?'

'He's here already,' Gotou replied curtly.

Even if he said that – Haruka looked around, but she couldn't see Yakumo.

'Where is he?' asked Haruka. Then, the door behind the podium opened.

– Yakumo.

While pushing Ishii in a wheelchair, Yakumo came out, one careful step at a time, and stopped in front of the altar.

Yakumo didn't say anything. He turned his back to them and looked up at the statue of Christ on the cross.

In the light coming through the stained glass, it felt like Yakumo himself was letting out power.

Yakumo stood there for a while, but then he took a deep breath and turned around to face them.

'There are some whom I am meeting for the first time today. My name is Saitou Yakumo.'

As he gave his name, he smirked.

As if in response, Ishii looked up from the wheelchair. It seemed he was conscious.

Ishii looked around blankly and then looked at Yakumo.

'What on earth...'

From this response, it seemed it wasn't Kirino possessing Ishii but Ishii himself.

'Ishii-san, please hang in there for a bit longer.'

Yakumo placed a hand on Ishii's shoulder.

'I...'

'Right now, I do not need anything from you, Ishii-san.'

'Eh?'

'Kirino-san, it's you,' murmured Yakumo in Ishii's ear.

At the same time, Ishii's eyelids twitched violently and his body bent back, as if he was having a fit. Then, his head drooped.

'Ishii!'

Yakumo stopped Gotou from approaching.

'It's fine.'

'But...'

Yakumo shook his head as if to rebuke Gotou.

After a pause, Yakumo slowly walked down the path between the pews.

'First, let's organise the story – the start was when Takatoshi-san, Kento-san and Sachiko-san went to view the night sky at the spiritual spot called the spring of truth.'

Yakumo stopped near Takatoshi and looked at him.

'That's correct, isn't it?' asked Yakumo, which made Takatoshi look suspicious.

'Who is this guy? And what the hell is this?' Takatoshi asked immediately.

'That's right. I haven't explained yet –'

After saying that, Yakumo took out his black contact lens and revealed his red left eye.

There were a variety of responses to that.

Takatoshi let out a short shriek, while Orita's expression twisted and he looked away. Kento just looked at him expressionlessly.

'My left eye isn't just red. It can see that which others cannot –'

'That which others cannot?'

Takatoshi was the one who spoke up in fear.

'The spirits of the dead. In short, ghosts –'

Yakumo's declaration echoed through the church –

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'ridiculous...' said Takatoshi in shock from his seat beside Gotou.

Takatoshi had just experienced a spiritual phenomenon. He was probably sensitive to stories about ghosts. Gotou understood how he felt, but if he made a fuss now, they'd get nowhere.

'Shut up,' said Gotou, and Takatoshi shut his mouth, though it looked like he had something he wanted to say.

'Let's return to the story – '

Yakumo walked up to the altar again.

Though his clothing was different, he looked just like a pastor.

'Kento-san, Takatoshi-san and Sachiko-san experienced a spiritual phenomenon. Sachiko-san was possessed by a ghost and is still unconscious. Takatoshi-san has been hearing a strange voice ever since then. Am I correct – '

Yakumo's gaze shot through Takatoshi.

'Somebody whispers in my ear every day. I'll kill you, I won't forgive you, it says... I didn't understand...' Takatoshi said quickly, holding his head in his hands.

From how frightened he was, Gotou didn't think it was a delusion. Whether it was a real spiritual phenomenon or somebody's prank, Takatoshi had definitely experienced something.

'In fear, you consulted the pastor, Kirino-san.'

Takatoshi nodded an umber of times in response to Yakumo's words.

'I have one question. Why did you consult the pastor Kirino-san?'

Takatoshi looked surprised by Yakumo's question.

'Why...?'

'This is the most important part. Please try to recall it correctly. How did you find out about Kirino-san, and why did you consult him?'

For a while, Takatoshi's gaze wandered, but soon he opened his mouth.

'He called out to me...'

'Kirino-san did?'

Takatoshi nodded.

'When I was returning from university, he said that something bad was possessing me.'

– What?

A strong suspicion was born within Gotou.

Kirino had declared that he didn't believe in ghosts. Somebody like that wouldn't say Takatoshi was possessed by something.

Did that mean Kirino had really tried to trick Takatoshi?

– There's no way.

Gotou immediately denied the thought that came up in his head. Even though he and Kirino thought differently, Kirino had had his own beliefs. He would never have tricked somebody.

'In short, Kirino-san called you out – correct?'

Takatoshi nodded after Yakumo repeated that.

'That doesn't sit well with me. Kirino...'

'Please keep quiet for now.'

Yakumo immediately stopped Gotou from voicing his doubt.

Yakumo must have had the same doubts as Gotou, but since Yakumo had stopped Gotou from speaking, he was probably thinking about something.

Though Gotou didn't like it, he kept his mouth shut.

'Afterwards, you consulted Kirino-san about the spiritual phenomena and then came to this church for an exorcism on that night.'

'I was at my limit... I wanted to get it to leave me alone no matter what...'

Takatoshi tore at his hair.

He must have felt cornered psychologically. He must have heard about Sachiko's situation too, so that had probably made him act.

'Then, the incident occurred – '

'No!'

Takatoshi stood up as he denied Yakumo's words.

There was strong anger in his eyes. Anger towards something unreasonable – that was how it seemed to Gotou.

'I didn't kill him!'

Takatoshi climbed over the pew to try to grab Yakumo. He had completely lost himself.

'Calm down!' yelled Gotou, but Takatoshi shook him away and grabbed Yakumo by the collar.

– This guy!

Gotou hurriedly ran after him and tried to pull Takatoshi off Yakumo.

Unexpectedly, however, Yakumo was the one who stopped im.

'I know – '

Yakumo's words, said expressionlessly, made Takatoshi stop.

'eh?'

He probably hadn't thought Yakumo would acknowledge it so readily.

That made Gotou the one who was confused.

'Then who killed him?'

It didn't look like Takatoshi was lying, but there was nobody else who could have killed him.

'That is the big misassumption that everyone has made.'

Yakumo ran a hand through his hair in irritation.

'Misassumption?'

'That room was locked.'

'Yeah... Was there some sort of secret passageway?'

Maybe that was why Yakumo had checked the blueprints.

'There isn't anything like that.'

'what?'

'What I want to say is that saying that a murder occurred here is a misassumption.'

'What the hell are you saying? Kirino...'

'He – '

Yakumo stopped speaking and looked at Ishii, who had his head hung.

No, it wasn't actually Ishii. Yakumo was probably looking at Kirino, who was possessing Ishii.

As if in response, Ishii lifted his head with a groan. No, those weren't Ishii's eyes.

'It was a suicide – '

Yakumo's sentence hit Gotou with great force.

It was so much that Gotou couldn't say anything in his daze. He didn't understand. That was just too much.

'Don't be stupid! Why would Kirino kill himself!?!'

At least the Kirino Gotou knew wasn't the type to kill himself.

Of course nobody had a way of knowing somebody's true nature, but still, Kirino prioritized thoughts over emotions.

A man like that wouldn't take his own life.

And suicide was a sin in Christianity. It'd be unthinkable for a regular believer, but Kirino was a pastor. It would be even more unthinkable for him.

'There was a reason he did so,' said Yakumo resolutely.

When Gotou looked at that red left eye, strangely, those words seemed true, and it made Gotou's emotions die down.

'But how did he kill himself?' asked Haruka, who had been quiet until now.

– That's right.

Gotou had reached the same question and a hot emotion welled up within him again.

'It'd've made more sense if he hanged himself, but how the hell could he have killed himself in that situation?'

'It was because that was the situation that he committed suicide.'

Yakumo didn't seem bothered at all.

'What?'

'Kirino-san cut his own neck.'

'That's... ridiculous... What proof...'

Gotou retorted, but his voice was shaking.

'I first thought it suspicious when I saw his autopsy report.'

'What was strange?'

'After Kirino-san entered the room, you heard the sound of fighting, right?'

Yakumo pointed at the door behind the podium.

'Yeah.'

Gotou had definitely heard fighting then. Kirino had also yelled, 'Stop!' That was why Gotou had kicked down the door.

But he hadn't made it in time – that was what he'd thought.

'Even though they had thought, there had been no injuries other than the one on his neck.'

'That's –'

Definitely strange. If he had thought with Takatoshi, who had a knife, it would be strange if there were no cuts.

And even though the room had been a mess, there had been no bruises. But –'

'Maybe it was just a coincidence that he didn't have any injuries.'

'Are you seriously saying that?'

Yakumo's cold gaze shot through Gotou.

Even if Yakumo looked at him like that, Gotou couldn't accept what he couldn't accept.

'Of course I am. There's no reason for him to kill himself anyway.'

'That was the problem. Why did Kirino-san kill himself? And why did he need to go out of his way to create that situation? If he just wanted to die, he could have done it alone. However, he didn't do that –'

As Gotou listened to Yakumo's explanation, he felt like he was in a daze.

Even though he denied it in his head, maybe a part of his heart had accepted it.

The reason Gotou felt that way was the expression of Kirino's he saw last.

There had been sadness and determination there.

'Why did Kirino-san commit suicide? And if it was suicide, why did Takatoshi-san hold the weapon?' asked Haruka instead of Gotou, who was stupefied.

That was exactly it.

Gotou didn't know why Kirino would kill himself, and just as Haruka said, if it was a suicide, then the knife should've been on the floor. Despite that, Takatoshi had been holding onto it firmly.

If they didn't solve that, Yakumo's theory couldn't be right.

'Explain!' pressed Gotou, which made Yakumo smile confidently.

It felt like he was saying he knew everything.

'Before I answer those two questions, there is something that must be made clear.'

Yakumo left Gotou and Takatoshi and slowly walked up to Kento.

The two of them looked at each other silently.

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Haruka held her breath as she watched Yakumo and Kento look at each other –

'What are you going to make clear?'

Kento was the one who broke the silence.

Yakumo smiled slightly, like he felt satisfied.

'The true identity of the spirit that was wandering that spring and possessed Sachiko-san was Kumi-san, your older sister –'

Kento looked down after hearing Yakumo's declaration. There were tears in his eyes that felt like

they might fall at any moment.

Haruka's chest hurt when she thought about how he was feeling.

'Sister...' moaned Kento.

'Kumi-san died at Kagami Spring six years ago –'

'But there was no corpse,' said Gotou.

That was a puzzle to Haruka too. Even though the police had searched there, no corpse had been found in Kagami Spring.

Yakumo turned away from Kento towards Orita.

'There was a corpse. Aren't I right, Orita-san –'

Orita, who had been silent, suddenly jolted.

Orita didn't respond to Yakumo's question. He was unsettled and kept looking around, like he felt afraid.

Perhaps his past which had cursed him as a liar had stolen his ability to speak.

'Orita-san, you aren't a liar. Right?' said Yakumo gently.

'I...'

'Six years ago – Orita-san, you saw a woman's corpse there,' Yakumo said once more.

Orita's face was red and his body was shaking, but finally, he stood up slowly.

'I saw a corpse there. There's no doubt about it.'

Yakumo nodded in response to Orita's clear reply.

'Kumi-san was killed by someone at that spring. Orita-san saw the corpse from then.'

'So you saying somebody moved that corpse?' asked Gotou.

Yakumo's gaze wandered, as if he was thinking, and then he ran a hand through his messy hair.

'To be correct, it might be better to say they hid it –'

'Hid – to hide the evidence?' said Haruka, feeling disgusted.

'It's a bit different,' Yakumo said quietly.

'How is it different?'

'Let's leave that question aside for now. In any case, after the incident, Kumi-san's corpse was in Kagami Spring for a while.'

Yakumo's explanation had a huge contradiction.

'I said we didn't find anything when we searched,' said Gotou in irritation.

'Please listen properly. I said for a while. In short, that means Kumi-san's corpse was taken out of Kagami Spring recently and moved elsewhere.'

After Yakumo said that clearly, he moved to a corner of the church and placed a hand on the bar standing there.

– What on earth is he planning to do?

'Where's elsewhere supposed to be?'

Gotou asked another question.

Yakumo, with the bar in his hand, moved towards the altar and pointed at it.

'Probably inside here.'

He was pointing at the stone tabernacle on top of the altar. It just looked like a decorated treasure box.

'What's that?' said Gotou, which made Yakumo let out a small sigh.

'It's called a tabernacle. In Eastern Orthodoxy, it is said to have the incorrupt relics of saints, while in Catholicism, it is said to have the body of Christ under the appearance of bread.'

As Yakumo explained, he put the bar in the gap between the lid and the body of the tabernacle and tried to lift the lid.

However, it seemed to be heavier than he expected and wasn't going well.

'Could you help me?'

In response, Haruka went up to the altar. Gotou came too.

Takatoshi, Kento and Orita came close, but they watched from afar without helping.

'Let's go on three.'

At Yakumo's signal, they all put their energy into it.

The tabernacle's lid came off slightly. With more force, it fell to the ground with a loud clang.

Inside the open tabernacle, just as Yakumo said, there was a woman, crouching –

Seeing the woman's corpse, which seemed so innocent it could be called a child, Haruka was lost for words.

Though she was surprised that a corpse was in a place like this, what surprised her more was how beautiful the corpse was –

It was like she had just died – no, like she was sleeping.

'Sister...'

Kento let out a moan and collapsed to the floor.

Yesterday, Yakumo had told Kento that Kumi was already dead, but Kento might have still believed

she was alive somewhere inside his heart.

Takatoshi was turned away, perhaps because he didn't want to look.

Orita just stood there in a daze.

'Is she really Kumi-san?' asked Haruka.

The corpse in front of her didn't look like it was from six years ago.

'Adipocere,' said Yakumo. That was enough to make Haruka understand.

Yakumo had explained adipocere during a previous case. If a corpse was left in a certain level of humidity and temperature, this unique after-death hydrolysis of fat saponified the body.

Adipocere prevented the putrefaction of the body.

Earlier, Yakumo had said that the corpse had been in the spring.

The environment of that spring had probably caused Kumi's body to undergo adipocere and left her body the same way as it had been when she died.

Though Haruka understood why the corpse was so beautiful, she still had many questions.

'How did you know the corpse was here?'

Gotou asked before Haruka could.

Maybe it had been a great shock, as Gotou's face was still pale.

'When I came to this church, I thought it was strange.'

Yakumo was the only one out of them who was fine in this strange situation.

'What was?'

'Protestantism have tabernacles.'

'What?'

Gotou's eyes went wide in surprise.

Haruka felt the same way, but she also understood. Come to think of it, Yakumo had explained Eastern Orthodoxy and Catholicism earlier, but he hadn't said anything about Protestantism.

If something that wasn't normally there was there, it made sense to be suspicious.

'That's when I checked the blueprints. The original diagrams didn't have a tabernacle. In short, it was placed here afterwards.'

'I see...'

'That made me think – this is the only place to hide the corpse,' replied Yakumo calmly.

However, that wasn't really an answer.

'Why was the corpse left in the church?' asked Haruka, going closer to Yakumo.

That was the biggest question. If the only purpose was to hide it, there was no need to bring it to such a troublesome place.'

'Because Kirion-san wished for that.'

After saying that, Yakumo lowered his eyelashes.

– Wished?

Haruka was even more confused. She thought about asking questions, but Gotou pushed her aside to stand in front of Yakumo.

'Why would Kirino want that?'

He couldn't accept it. He couldn't believe this. Those emotions seemed to burst out of Gotou's body.

'Do you still not understand?'

'I don't!'

It felt like Gotou might grab Yakumo right there and then.

Haruka couldn't let this continue. Just as she was thinking about stepping in, Ishii lifted his head from his wheelchair.

'Ishii-san...'

Haruka was about to approach him, but she naturally stopped.

It was because she understood from his wide hollow eyes that it wasn't Ishii, but Kirino –

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'Kirino, you bastard, what the hell is this?'

Gotou went up to Ishii – no, Kirino, who sat in the wheelchair.

Ishii didn't reply. No, that wasn't it. He was moving his mouth to try to speak, but it wasn't being voiced.

Kirino had something he wanted to express, but since he was possessing Ishii, he probably couldn't use Ishii's body well.

But that didn't matter. Gotou wouldn't be able to accept this if he didn't get a proper explanation from Kirino.

'Answer me!'

Gotou's yell echoed through the church.

'I...'

Ishii spoke in a hoarse voice.

'Kirino-san. You loved Kumi-san, didn't you –'

Yakumo said that while looking up at the ceiling. In response, Ishii nodded.

'What did you say?'

Gotou couldn't believe Yakumo's words.

'For Kirino-san, Kumi-san was an important woman. That was why she wanted her close by when he died...' said Yakumo, ignoring how Gotou felt.

'There's no way...'

The reason being that Kumi was Sumida's daughter. The people who had chased Sumida to his death were no other than Kirino and Gotou. And yet –

'Gotou-san, you misunderstood Kirino-san.'

'What?'

'After Kirino-san caused Sumida-san to die in an accident, he often went to visit Kumi-san and Kento-san at the care facility.'

'Wha...'

Gotou was so shocked he couldn't finish his sentence.

He had thought that Kirino hadn't felt guilty. After his dad died, he had focused on investigating, as if in revenge. Why would Kirino –

'I... was wrong...' said Ishii in a hoarse voice.

'What?'

Gotou glared at Ishii.

But Ishii didn't say anything else. Instead, Yakumo opened his mouth.

'Kirino-san has been suffering all this time. You noticed that too, didn't you, Gotou-san?'

'I...'

'Because his father was killed in a robbery, Kirino-san threw away his belief once. His hatred for crime brought him to the police. That's correct, isn't it?'

'Yeah –'

He'd heard it from Miyagawa.

No, that wasn't true. The truth was that Gotou knew that, but because of his hatred for Kirino, he had never looked at Kirino's past and seen suffering.

'After Kirino-san joined the force, he was as you knew him, Gotou-san.'

'Kirino clung to the law instead of the bible.'

When they were partnered, Gotou had just thought of him as a cold guy.

He knew now though. Because Kirino's dad had been killed, he'd lost hope in everything and threw away his belief.

That was why he didn't care about the thoughts or reasons behind crimes and just relied on physical evidence in investigations.

'But Kirino-san couldn't throw away emotion. That was why he suffered. It was at that time that you met him, Gotou-san.'

Yakumo's red left eye stared at Gotou.

'I –'

'Because Kirino-san's father was killed, he threw away everything. However, Gotou-san, no matter how you were hurt, you never looked away – you kept going forward with your own beliefs. Kirino-san thought you disagreeable then, and –'

'I was envious...' murmured Ishii.

'Don't be stupid! You hated me!'

'He did,' said Yakumo with a wry smile.

'Then...'

'That's why. I understand Kirino-san's feelings. Since it was the same for me...'

Yakumo looked at Gotou with sad eyes.

A sharp pain ran through Gotou's chest. He had always felt it somewhere in his heart. Kirino and Yakumo – they were alike.

Because they had suffered something so painful it had felt like it cut through them, they had killed their emotions and tried to live only according to their thoughts. But that hadn't worked. Because they were too kind, they had suffered and fought with themselves.

'Kirino... you...'

'Kirino-san hated you, Gotou-san, who kept going forward like an idiot even with your past on your shoulders and the injuries you kept receiving. When he saw you, he probably felt like you were rejecting his existence after losing hope.'

Yakumo looked at Ishii sorrowfully.

'Rejecting?'

'Yes. If I had to say, I would say that Kirino-san and you are the same type of person.'

'Me and...'

Maybe that was true –

Even though Gotou had hated it that much, he could accept it easily now.

'Kirino-san always felt guilty after that incident. He went to the care facility countless times, wanting to apologise to Kumi-san and Kento-san. However, he just saw them from afar, unable to meet them...'

As Yakumo spoke quietly, he turned his eyes to Kento.

Kento looked away, saying nothing.

Gotou felt an unspeakable feeling of alienation. Maybe he had made Kirino take all the blame then.

I should have been the one to apologise. But –

Anger towards his own foolishness had backlashed at Kirino.

'I...'

'Kumi-san noticed Kirino-san then, and she went to meet Kirino-san...'

'Why?'

'To forgive him – '

'Forgive him?'

'She didn't hate Kirino-san. He hadn't done anything wrong. He didn't have to suffer any more – she went to tell him that.'

'T-that's... ridiculous...'

That was Gotou's raw feeling.

Her own dad had died. She forgave the man who caused that?

'That was the sort of woman Kumi-san was – '

Yakumo looked at Kumi-san in her coffin once more.

Gotou looked inside the coffin at Kumi in the same way. She was a corpse. She wouldn't see anything. But she was beautiful –

'Kirino-san vowed to keep protecting Kumi-san and Kento-san then. That was why he quit the police.'

Though there was a part of Gotou which couldn't accept it, it made sense. But the problem was –

'Why do you know that?'

'I asked Kirino-san.'

Yakumo looked at Ishii in the wheelchair.

So that's how it is – for a moment, Gotou accepted that, but he suddenly thought differently.

'Kirino's possessing Ishii, right? There's no way that would come through properly...'

When Gotou said that, Yakumo showed him an incredibly pleased smirk.

When Yakumo looked like that, something unpleasant always happened.

'That's just what you think, Gotou-san.'

'But...'

'Anyway, it didn't take too long for Kirino-san to fall in love with Kumi-san.'

The feeling of alienation spread further throughout Gotou.

He hadn't known anything. No, he hadn't tried to find out.

Though he'd felt guilty about Sumida, he never checked what happened to the siblings after that.

But Kirino was different –

Gotou had been the negligent one. Kirino hadn't shown it openly, but he'd been suffering on his own.

He probably hadn't fought back when Gotou punched him because he'd felt guilty.

'Kirino...'

Gotou glared at Ishii.

Something similar to anger welled up within him.

'After Kumi-san forgave him, Kirino-san decided to return to his original path.'

Yakumo looked at the statue of Christ.

'So he became a pastor...'

'Yes.'

'Then you should've just said that from the beginning!'

Gotou yelled at Ishii.

But that anger wasn't at Kirino. It was at himself.

– Why didn't I notice how Kirino felt?

He felt sick at how inattentive he had been.

'Now, let's get back to the story – '

Yakumo clapped his hands together and looked once more at everyone there.

He controlled the atmosphere there, like the leader of an army.

'To the reason why Kirino-san killed himself.'

Gotou looked up at Yakumo's words.

That was right. Yakumo had said that Kirino killed himself, but he hadn't made clear the reason.

'Why'd Kirino kill himself?'

'It was for revenge.'

'For revenge?'

Gotou's voice went up.

How would dying yourself get revenge against anyone?'

'Correct. I said this earlier, but Kumi-san was killed by someone at Kagami Spring six years ago. It was revenge for that.'

That explanation didn't answer the question Gotou had.

'Killing yourself won't get revenge for anything.'

'Please think carefully. This case was a suicide made to look like a murder. That is the main point.'

'What?'

'Why did Kirino-san need to make a suicide look like a murder?'

'To make... a culprit?'

Haruka replied before Gotou did. Yakumo nodded in satisfaction.

Gotou understood now. By making a suicide look like a murder, it would put the blame on somebody else and could make them suffer.

'Then how is the one who would suffer the most from this case?' Yakumo said in a loud voice.

Gotou knew the answer without thinking. The person who had been arrested as a suspect to a murder in this case was Takatoshi. In short –

'So he killed Sumida's daughter six years ago?'

Gotou grabbed Takatoshi's arm and pulled him over.

Takatoshi's eyes flew open and his face twitched in fear.

'W-wait a second. What kind of joke is this? I don't know anything.'

Takatoshi shook off Gotou's arm and tried to run.

That's not going to happen – Gotou immediately forced Takatoshi to the floor.

'I really don't know! What are you saying!? I didn't do anything!'

'Just shut up!'

Gotou pushed down Takatoshi's neck as Takatoshi continued to flail.

Gotou wanted to hear about this in detail, but they wouldn't get anywhere if Takatoshi kept flailing about.

'So you saying Kirino killed himself to make him a murderer?' asked Gotou.

Yakumo nodded.

'Don't be stupid. If he killed her six years ago, why wouldn't Kirino have gone to the police then?'

'At the time, Takatoshi-san had been in the second year of middle school. His birthday hadn't passed yet, so he was thirteen. You understand my meaning, don't you?'

Yakumo's disinterested words made a chill run down Gotou's spine.

– So that's how it was.

Even if Takatoshi had been arrested six years ago as a suspect in Kumi's murder, since he was under fourteen, he wouldn't have been charged. The revision to juvenile law made it possible for somebody to be sent to a juvenile corrective institution, but the standard for that was also vague.

It was completely unacceptable from the view of the victim, but that was reality.

Kirino, a police officer, must have seen many cases like that. That must have been why he'd buried the corpse in the spring and waited for a chance for revenge.

'Then why'd he need to wait six years?'

'He was waiting for Takatoshi-san to become an adult. That when he wouldn't just be tried – his real name would also be published.'

Gotou understood that, but –

'Why'd he choose this method? If he was going to kill himself, killing him would've made him feel better with his hatred!'

Gotou's yell made Yakumo laugh scornfully.

'I never thought that I would hear those words from your mouth, Gotou-san.'

'What?'

'I won't let anyone die – who was the one who said that?'

Those were Gotou's words. It was something like a catchphrase.

After Sumida's case, he had vowed that. He never wanted to see someone die in front of him again.

'But...'

'Kirino-san and Gotou-san are alike. He didn't want anyone to die either. It was because he knew what tragedy lay ahead of it.'

'But isn't suicide a sin in Christianity...'

Haruka was the one who asked that question.

That was exactly it. Taking your life was supposed to be taboo.

'What about that?' asked Gotou.

Yakumo ran a hand through his messy hair.

'Kirino-san lost Kumi-san six years ago and lost what he was clinging to again. He had been like a living corpse. He probably thought about killing himself countless times, but he couldn't allow that...'

'Then –

'Not then, but because. This plan was not a suicide to escape his suffering but a sacrifice to punish sin.'

So that was how he convinced himself –

But that was just fraud.

'There's no point if he dies that way!' yelled Gotou with all his force.

Rather than to Yakumo – it was more a yell to Kirino.

'Kirion-san had pancreatic cancer,' said Yakumo.

'What?'

'It was in Hata-san's autopsy report. He had been terminal, and his days had been numbered This plan was a way to use Kirino-san's life.'

'What is that...'

Gotou just couldn't accept it.

Humans lived frantically until the end. And yet –

'You keep saying things I don't understand! I didn't kill that woman!'

Takatoshi, whom Gotou was restraining, started yelling again.

This man didn't show any regret after killing someone. Because of garbage like this, good people had suffered. There was no way Gotou could forgive something that absurd.

'Shut up!'

Gotou forced Takatoshi's head to the floor.

Takatoshi's nose started bleeding and held his face quietly.

Gotou then walked up to Ishii.

'Why... Why didn't you tell me!? There must have been something you could have done before you made this decision!'

Gotou grabbed Ishii's collar and pulled him out of the wheelchair, shaking him.

'How could he have said? Gotou-san, you never tried to listen –'

Yakumo spoke in a cold tone.

Gotou knew that. It was because he knew that he was angry. Not at Kirino, but at himself –

Even while he said grand things, he hadn't seen anything. He had never tried to see.

As a result, Kirino was dead.

'Urgh...'

Ishii let out a groan, sounding like he was in pain.

'Say something!'

'...'

'I haven't apologized to you yet! And then you went and died!'

By saying it aloud, Gotou realised his feelings.

Gotou had always wanted to apologise to Kirino. About the Sumida case eight years ago. But that wasn't all.

He must have noticed somewhere in his heart that Kirino was suffering –

Yet stupid obstinacy and jealousy had made him pretend not to notice. It was because he had felt regret about that that when he saw Yakumo in his shell in his middle school days that he hadn't been able to leave him alone.

If he'd noticed, there could have been a different path, but –

'Once you're dead, that's the end of everything!'

In his anger, Gotou rammed himself into Ishii's body.

Ishii lost his balance and fell over with the wheelchair.

'Ow!'

Ishii writhed on the floor while holding his head.

– Eh?

Something was a bit strange.

'Honestly, what on earth are you doing?'

Ignoring Gotou's confusion, Yakumo helped Ishii get up again.

Ishii was still holding his head, but he stood on his own feet.

'What is this?' asked Gotou, which made Ishii jolt in fear.

'I-I... said I'm not good at this sort of thing.'

Ishii backed away.

'What?'

'Right now, Kirino-san's spirit isn't possessing Ishii-san,' replied Yakumo as if it were a matter of fact.

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– I said it.

Ishii looked at Gotou in fear.

'Explain,' said Gotou, looking like he might fly at Ishii at any moment.

With Gotou looking at Ishii like that, Ishii couldn't explain. He looked at Yakumo for help.

Yakumo smiled wryly like he thought there was nothing to be done, and then he started to speak.

'It is exactly as he said. Kirino-san's spirit left Ishii-san last night.'

Last night, Yakumo had talked to Kirino, who had been in Ishii.

They had talked about what happened eight years ago, about Kumi and the current case – Yakumo had told Kirino.

Furthermore, he had given the reason that Kirino was wandering this world.

As a result, Kirino's spirit had left Ishii's body. Ishii should have reported this to Gotou immediately, but Yakumo had stopped him.

I want you to pretend to still be possessed in order to end the case – that was what Yakumo had told him.

Of course, Ishii had refused at first, but with Yakumo's skilful words, Ishii had ended up accepting this strange role.

'What?'

Gotou cocked his head like he didn't understand.

'Kirino-san wished for his own death, but he was still wandering this world and had possessed Ishii-san. There were two reasons for that –'

After saying that, Yakumo raised two fingers.

'Two –'

Gotou thought about it in confusion.

With this question, Gotou's anger settled.

'He left Ishii-san's body, but he is here right now.'

After saying that, Yakumo turned his eyes to the podium.

Ishii looked the same way. Though he didn't see anything, he felt like Kirino was standing there.

Maybe he just felt that way because Kirino had possessed him, but –

'Kirino –'

Gotou walked up to the podium.

'He had something he wanted to convey. That was why he possessed Ishii-san.'

'Convey?'

'Yes. Ishii –san '

Yakumo placed a hand on Ishii's shoulder.

Gotou had be sure Yakumo would respond, but it looked like that wasn't the case.

Gotou's gaze was sharp.

Normally, Ishii would falter under that gaze, but he walked one step forward with determination.

'Kirino-san – he looked up to you, Detective Gotou.'

'Don't be ridiculous,' retorted Gotou with a harsh expression.

Ishii didn't know Kirino when he was alive, but he could easily tell how Kirino felt when Kirino possessed him.

'He met Detective Gotou and realized his mistake. Investigating in his hatred would change nothing – couldn't change anything –'

'I...'

'Kirino-san always wanted to apologise to you, Detective Gotou.'

'Apologise?'

'Yes. Not just about the case eight years ago. He needed a witness for this case too. He was going to use Takatoshi-san's mother, but he ended up meeting you again. He says sorry for involving you.'

'Idiot! If you're going to apologise, it should be about something else!'

Gotou grabbed Ishii by the collar and yelled in a voice that echoed through the church. Normally, Ishii would fall limp, but he was able to accept it calmly.

'Kirino-san understands your feelings as well, Detective Gotou.'

'Then...'

There were tears in Gotuo's eyes.

However, they didn't fell. No matter how tough or how painful, Gotou never stopped.

That was Gotou's strength.

'I think that's why he wants to apologise,' said Ishii, which made Gotou let go and turn towards the podium.

'No. I'm the one who should apologise. I just fought you without realizing –'

Kirino had to know very well the regret Gotou carried now.

That was why he was wandering this world.

'I'm sorry –'

Gotou bowed at the waist and lowered his head.

Though it was just for a moment, Ishii felt like he saw Kirino. It looked like he was smiling faintly.

The church was quiet –

How much time passed? Before Ishii noticed, tears were following from his eyes. Maybe they were Kirino's tears.

'Is this the end?' asked Haruka anxiously.

'Not yet,' Yakumo replied immediately. Then, he looked at everyone in the church once more.

'I said this earlier as well, but there are two reasons Kirino-san is in this world.'

'What's the other?' asked Gotou.

'The truth of the case hasn'T been revealed yet.'

'Wasn'T that the truth earlier?'

Ishii understood why Gotou was confused.

However, the truth of the case wasn't complete yet.

'The matter of the knife, correct?' said Ishii, which made Yakumo nod with a smile.

If Kirino had killed himself, that wouldn't explain why Takatoshi had held the knife after the crime.

'How did that work?' pressed Gotou, who seemed to have noticed as well.

'It's simple. He had an accomplice,' Yakumo said easily.

'Ridiculous. There was no sign of anybody breaking into that room.'

'Nobody broke into that room,' Yakumo replied calmly.

'Then...'

'The accomplice was in the room from the beginning.'

Yakumo pointed at the door behind the podium.

'What are you saying? Nobody was...'

'Did you check?'

Gotou was lost for words when Yakumo asked that.

Until coming into the church and kicking the door down upon hear Kirino's scream, Gotou, of course, and Ishii as well, had not taken one step into that room.

In short, they hadn't checked.

'What the hell...' said Gotou, half in shock.

'Before you came to this church, the accomplice was hiding in that room. After Kirino-san cut his own neck with the knife, the accomplice made Takatoshi-san hold the knife and escaped through the window – it's simple.'

It was simple, just as Yakumo said.

It was so simple that they had overlooked it. No, if they had thought calmly and checked inside the room, the case might not have even happened.

'Who on earth is the accomplice?' said Haruka.

Haruka seemed to understand who it was without an answer from Yakumo.

After a pause, Yakumo slowly walked up to one of the men there.

'You were Kirino-san's accomplice. Am I correct, Utsugi Kento-san –'

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– So it really was him.

Haruka wasn't that surprised even after hearing Yakumo's words. From what she'd heard up until now, it had had to be Kento.

When she turned to look towards him, she saw him smiling faintly.

'What are you saying? I don't know anything. I just found out that my sister died yesterday.'

Kento spoke in a clear voice.

However, that just made Haruka even more suspicious.

'I see. You are still resisting...'

'Resisting? I don't know what I don't know.'

Kento's face became slightly redder.

Even if he acted calm, his emotions were probably building up.

'No, you must have known.'

'What...'

'You talked about the legend of Kagami Spring when you came to me, didn't you?'

Haruka had heard it too.

The spring's surface reflected your true self, and the people who saw that would die within one week – so the legend went.

'What about it?'

'Where did you hear that from?'

Yakumo's eyes narrowed.

'I don't remember.'

Kento still had the composure to smile.

'I investigated a number of things, but though there were witnesses for Kumi-san's ghost and testimonies about singing at Kagami Spring, there was no legend about the spring of truth.'

'What do you want to say?'

'Even though there wasn't a legend like that in the first place, Sachiko-san talked to Takatoshi-san about it. What do you think that means?'

'I told her – is that what you want to say?'

'Correct.'

Yakumo put up his index finger.

It was like he was enjoying this situation.

'Even if that were true, what about it?'

Kento shrugged.

It was just as he said. Talking about a legend that didn't exist wasn't proof of anything.

'Why was it necessary for Takatoshi-san to hear that legend? It was to plant the seed of fear in his heart.'

'That's ridiculous.'

'It is. It really is a ridiculous thought. After that, you acted out spiritual phenomena for Takatoshi-san.'

When Yakumo said that, Takatoshi lifted his head from where it was on the ground.

He looked confused and angry. He moved his mouth as if he wanted to say something, but then he bit his lower lip, like he didn't know what to say.

'But can you produce just a voice?'

That was the puzzle.

Takatoshi had said that he had heard a woman's voice countless times with nobody else around. Haruka didn't know how somebody would create that phenomenon.

'You can. Gotou-san.'

Yakumo turned his eyes to Gotou.

'Yeah. Seems there's something called an ultrasonic directive speaker. You can use that to send sounds straight like light. That means it's possible to make just one person hear a sound.'

'Apparently,' added Yakumo lightheartedly after Gotou had explained.

'So you're saying I did that?'

Kento glared at Yakumo.

'Yes. You created spiritual phenomena for Takatoshi-san and Kirino-san approached him as a pastor – that was the plan,' Yakumo said disinterestedly.

'This is nonsense...'

'Furthermore, the reason you didn't immediately act out your plan after the spiritual phenomena was to hypnotise Takatoshi-san, am I correct? By doing that, you were able to make Takatoshi-san fall asleep immediately after entering the room.'

Yakumo was filling in Kento's moat.

He had nowhere to run. Haruka thought that Kento would give in, but unexpectedly, he laughed aloud.

'This is all just your theory, isn't it?'

'Yes, it is. But with this much in the light, the police will probably reinvestigate. If that happens, they might find evidence.'

'Evidence?'

'Yes. For example, though this has been left out of the investigation until now, your alibi, a DNA analysis – humans cannot live without leaving some traces behind.'

Yakumo put a finger on his brow.

That instant, Kento grew visibly paler. He probably understood the meaning of Yakumo's words.

This plan had needed to be simple. If a real investigation started, it would likely fall apart at the seams.

'What are you saying!?! Takatoshi killed the pastor!' yelled Kento.

Takatoshi immediately responded.

'You bastard! What the hell did you do this for!?'

Gotou frantically held Takatoshi back from leaping at Kento. Orita stepped back in fear.

'Why? Remember what you did!' screamed Kento, his eyes bloodshot.

Under that crushing pressure, Takatoshi was lost for words.

'Do you know how much we suffered after we lost Dad?'

Haruka recalled what Namioka the middle school teacher and Sone from the care facility talked about.

His father, a suspect in a theft, died in a traffic accident. Those tough circumstances made Kento alone and made him suffer. Just like Yakumo –

Haruka glanced at Yakumo.

With his blank expression, Haruka couldn't tell what he was thinking. But he was definitely –

'For me, my sister was my ray of hope. I could live because my sister was there. She was always kind to me... You took my sister away from me.'

'I don't know what you're talking about,' denied Takatoshi in a shaking voice.

'I've been watching you ever since my sister was killed. You don't realize the weight of your crime – you're living happily, smiling flippantly...'

Tears fell from Kento's eyes.

His deep sadness was conveyed to Haruka directly. Haruka looked away, unable to watch.

Kento and Takatoshi hadn't been friendly in middle school, but because Kumi died, Kento had approached Takatoshi, whom he should have hated the most.

That had probably been so that he could look for a chance for revenge, but at the same time, he had probably done that to see how Takatoshi was living.

Hoping that he felt guilty –

However, that hope didn't reach him. That probably was the final blow that caused Kento and Kirino to decide on revenge.

'I really don't know! I didn't kill your sister!'

'Stop playing dumb! I saw you! You were running through the forest with the stick. Then, when I went to the spring, my sister...'

Kento covered his face with his hands and let out a howl.

If Kento had seen that much, there was no way Takatoshi could come up with an excuse.

Kento's cries echoed through the church.

All anyone could do was stand there, dumbfounded.

Finally, Kento's sad cries stopped.

'I guess I will choose that choice...' murmured Yakumo in an almost inaudible voice.

'Eh?'

'Gotou-san! Please restrain him!' said Yakumo in a tense voice, pointing at Kento.

Gotou moved on instinct, but Kento was a moment faster. He pulled out the knife he had been hiding and went up to Takatoshi. He raised his arm and then pressed the knife against Takatoshi's neck.

All Gotou could do was stop in his tracks.

'You really are a fool,' Yakumo said coldly.

'Shut up! I was against this roundabout plan from the beginning! He was never going to make up for his actions anyway!'

Kento's eyes were like a different person's. Possessed by revenge, he might have lost his mind.

'So you thought that you would kill him quickly.'

'Something wrong with that!?'

'You don't understand anything.'

'What?'

'Kumi-san is still singing. Why do you think that is the case?'

'...'

'The answer will reveal itself if we go to Kagami Spring.'

'What...'

Kento's gaze wavered. He smiled slightly shaken.

Gotou took that chance to fly at Kento, but Kento responded instinctively and waved the knife.

Gotou tackled him anyway.

Takatoshi was thrust away and Kento and Gotou fell to the floor in a scuffle.

Kento got up first. There was blood on the tip of his knife.

'Gotou-san!'

'Detective Gotou!'

Haruka and Ishii shouted at the same time.

Haruka ran up and saw blood coming out of Gotou's arm, but Gotou wouldn't faint from something like that.

He glared at Kento with sharp eyes.

'You bastard!' yelled Gotou. At the same time, Kento turned on his heels and ran. He opened the church doors and ran out.

'Wait!'

Gotou was going to chase Kento, but Yakumo stopped him.

'It's fine. I know where he's going – '

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Kento ran through the forest –

His head was filled with regret. If this was going to happen, he should have just killed Takatoshi at the beginning.

In fact, that was what Kento had suggested.

However, Kirino hadn't allowed that. He had insisted that they definitely could not murder, no matter the reason.

Saying something so high and mighty when he had killed Kento's father, even though it was a mistake. That was why Kento had fought at first.

However, at the end, Kento was tricked into it, since Kirino said, 'Kumi wouldn't want that either.'

Come to think of it, Kento didn't like how that man called Kumi just by her given name. Kento didn't understand why Kumi had forgiven him either.

The reason was that Kento still hadn't forgiven Kirino.

That was why, when Kirino first suggested this plan, Kento had thought it would be two birds with one stone. His dad and his sister. He would get revenge for two people at once.

But acting on this plan needed time to watch, and he had had to pretend to be friends with Takatoshi, whom he hated from the bottom of his heart.

His days had been like torture.

Takatoshi didn't show any sign of regretting his actions. He played around with women, went drinking, laughed shamelessly. He had a depraved and ephemeral student life.

That character made Kento's heart well with hatred.

He didn't know how many times he thought about killing him. If he had killed him right away, this wouldn't have happened.

The plan to make Takatoshi look like a murderer had ended in failure.

Where had he gone wrong? It was him – maybe it had been a mistake to meet Saitou Yakumo.

The plan had gone fine up to the point where he went to Kagami Spring with Takatoshi and Sachiko to view the night sky. He had told Sachiko about the spring's legend in advance.

It had been his goal to make Takatoshi afraid.

The woman's ghost at Kagami Spring was unexpected. Kento had known it was Kumi from first glance.

And that ghost possessed Sachiko.

If that were really Kumi's spirit, Kento wanted to talk to her once more.

In order to confirm it, he went to Yakumo. Just as Yakumo said, he hadn't been thinking about exorcising the spirit from Sachiko at all.

If Kumi was possessing Sachiko, Kento had thought she should just stay like that for the rest of her life.

I made this fall apart at the seams myself – while thinking about that, Kento reached Kagami Spring.

Under the setting sun, the water was dyed red.

'I've been waiting.'

Somebody suddenly spoke.

It was a voice he recognized. When Kento looked up, he saw a young man appear from the forest, just as he had done.

It was Saitou Yakumo –

'Why are you...'

Yakumo laughed quietly at Kento's surprise.

'You wanted to know why Kumi-san was still singing, right?'

Kento was shocked by Yakumo's words.

Kento had thought that he had come to Kagami Spring of his own will, but that wasn't the case.

During the exchange at the church, Yakumo had led Kento here on purpose.

But Kento wouldn't give up because of something like that. He had to run, no matter how unsightly it was.

His revenge wasn't over yet.

Kento pointed the tip of the knife at Yakumo. Still, Yakumo's expression didn't change a wit.

He probably thought Kento wasn't serious, but Kento wouldn't show any mercy to anyone who got in his way.

With his knife at the ready, Kento rushed at Yakumo.

'No!'

He heard a scream from somewhere.

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Haruka ran through the forest frantically –

'Just a bit further,' said Ishii, who was running beside her.

She saw Yakumo and Kento just up ahead. Kento was holding a knife. Yakumo was calm even in that situation.

Kento rushed at Yakumo with the knife up, like he had come to a decision.

'No!'

All Haruka could do was scream.

Just before Kento's knife reached Yakumo, a dark shadow leapt out from the side.

It was Gotou. He tackled Kento and forced him down. However, Kento got up immediately and held up his knife.

Gotou stood up, lowered his centre of gravity and waited for a good time, but he couldn't approach as he wanted.

Haruka finally reached Yakumo.

'You really are a fool,' said Yakumo in disappointment as he slowly walked up to Kento.

'Oi! Yakumo!'

Gotou tried to pull Yakumo back, but Yakumo shook him off. Haruka approached Yakumo to do the same thing, but she was pushed away.

It was the first time she had seen Yakumo show his anger so clearly.

'Do you still not understand? You are at fault for this entire situation.'

Yakumo walked forward, unarmed.

There was a strange tension. Nobody could act alone.

'I...'

'Kirino-san's spirit is here.'

Yakumo's gaze turned towards empty space.

Kento glanced the same way.

'Even though Kirino-san's plan went successfully and he has achieved his goal, he still wandered

this world and possessed him. Why do you think he did so?'

Yakumo pointed at Ishii.

'W-what are you talking about?'

'Kirino-san realised on the verge of death – '

'Realised?'

'Yes. That his plan was meaningless – '

'I said, what are you talking about?'

'It appears he has arrived as well.'

Yakumo looked towards the forest.'

Orita showed up, panting.

'Orita-san, it is your turn.'

After hearing Yakumo's words, Orita walked up to Kento.

However, he just looked around with frightened eyes without saying anything.

Yakumo walked past Kento casually, even though Kento was pointing a knife at him, and went up to Orita.

'Orita-san. Please save him. You are the only one who can. You were friends, were you not – '

Yakumo murmured those words in Orita's ear.

That caused Orita's eyes to change colour. The fear disappeared, replaced with determination.

'Utsugi-kun...'

Orita spoke in a hoarse voice.

Kento turned his gaze to Orita, seeming confused.

'The one who killed your sister wasn't Tozuka...'

'What?'

'I saw... That day, Tozuka called me out to take money from me as usual... I said no and ran away, but he hit me with a stick he picked up... Then, I fainted...'

'What are you saying? Then who killed...'

Orita didn't respond to Kento's question. He just looked at his face.

– It can't be.

A thought came up within Haruka's head. It seemed like Ishii had thought the same thing, as his eyes flew wide open in shock.

'Who? Who killed her?'

Gotou turned towards Yakumo in irritation.

After letting out a quiet sigh, Yakumo turned to face Kento once more.

'Kento-san. It was you.'

Yakumo's words made everyone fall silent.

'W-what... are you saying...'

'If you think it's a lie, just look into the waters of Kagami Spring. The truth should be reflected there.'

Yakumo pointed at the water's surface.

Kento didn't move. He probably didn't have the courage to do so.

'Like hell it reflects the truth!' screamed Kento.

'Yes, exactly. You only saw the truth you wanted.'

'This is nonsense...'

'Kirino-san realised on the verge of death. That caused Kirino-san to remain here, his other unfinished business –'

'Stop joking! Me, kill my sister!? Why would I do that!? That's a lie! It's obviously a lie!' screamed Kento, waving his knife around dangerously.

His emotions, thoughts and memories were confused – probably even he couldn't control them.

'It's not a lie!' screamed Orita.

That made Kento freeze.

'I saw. You and your sister were arguing. You were saying awful things to her – asking why she was dating a guy like that.'

'Ah!'

Kento clutched at his head and fell to his knees, like he had remembered something.

His forehead was sweating furiously.

Haruka could imagine that Kento probably couldn't accept that his sister Kumi was in a relationship with Kirino, who had been the cause of their father's accidental death.

'You tried to leave, but your sister tried to stop you. You...'

'Stop it already!' screamed Kento over Orita's words. He cowered on the ground.

His body was shaking.

Haruka could easily imagine what came next without hearing it. Kento pushed Kumi away, and she

hit her head on a rock or something. Then –

Yakumo slowly walked up to Kento.

'It appears you have remembered.'

'Shut up...' moaned Kento in response.

'Unable to accept the crime you had committed, you wrote over your memories. Then, you laid all the blame on Takatoshi-san.'

Yakumo's words had an empty hollow to them.

What a sad ending. An emotion that was hard to explain spread throughout Haruka's heart. Unable to stand, she sat down right there.

'What you should be doing is not revenge – '

'Shut up!'

Kento jumped onto his feet and started waving the knife around again.

Gotou tried to run up to him, but with the knife there, he couldn't approach.

Kento's eyes were completely wild – he might start slicing at them at any moment. Still, Yakumo was not shaken.

'Kumi-san still continues to wander this world six years after her death.'

'She... must have ate me...' Kento said sadly, pressing the tip of the knife against his own neck.

'You can ask her that yourself.'

Yakumo pointed at the back of the woods.

A woman came out, pushing a wheelchair. It was Makoto. Sachiko was sitting in the wheelchair.

Everyone there held their breath, waiting for their arrival.

'She is possessed by your sister, Kumi-san,' said Yakumo once Makoto and Sachiko reached them.

Kento looked with dazed eyes at Sachiko. In response, Sachiko slowly lifted her head.

'Sister... Sorry... I...'

Kento reached out pleadingly.

Sachiko in the wheelchair seemed to smile faintly.

Yakumo stopped Gotou, who was about to use this time to leap forward.

'It was always a puzzle...' stated Yakumo as he walked up to Kento.

The ghastly look had left Kento's face. He was expressionless, like an empty shell.

'Normally, spirits that wander the living world have something tying them down. It is usually an incredibly negative emotion. However, she did not show any of that,' Yakumo said quietly.

Kento looked confused.

'What does my sister...'

'She just keeps singing.'

'Singing...'

Sachiko's mouth moved faintly.

The voice that slipped out was very faint, but it was clearly a song.

'She is singing hymn number 320.'

'Eh?'

It had been difficult to hear the notes and the lyrics had been English, which had made it take some time to determine the song, but just as Yakumo said, Kumi was singing hymn number 320 – the song named 'Nearer, My God, to Thee'.

It was famous as the song that the band had been playing when the Titanic sank and was also used in the film.

'If we translate the original lyrics, it goes as follows: Nearer, my God, to Thee. No matter the terrible hardships that await me, I offer this song to Thee – '

'...'

'It is a song of prayer.'

'Prayer...'

'Yes. She is merely singing a prayer for the people she loves, you included.'

Kumi's song was not filled with sadness or hatred. It was filled with an incredibly kind and compassionate love.

For her, it wasn't a problem who killed her.

It wasn't whether to forgive or not – she never hated anyone in the first place. That was the sort of woman she was.

Why did Kento take the wrong path, even though he had heard such a kind song?

That question came to Haruka, but when she thought about it, she had been the same.

After her older twin sister, Ayaka, died, she had always thought that Ayaka hated her. However, that wasn't true. She had just been watching over her.

Unfortunately, people never noticed the things that were the most important.

'Sis...'

It just slipped out of her mouth.

As if that were the switch, Kento dropped his knife and fell to his knees right there.

While Kento sobbed, Yakumo shut his eyes and turned his head up.

Haruka shut her eyes as well.

She felt like she heard a bright and beautiful hymn from nowhere in particular.

終章

その後

EPILOGUE

## epilogue

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Gotou stood in front of the church altar and looked up at the statue of Christ –

That face, looking down, seemed a bit like Kirino's to Gotou. In the narrow space between belief and reality, or perhaps, the narrow space between the ideal and reality, Kirino had always fought.

If he could have turned his suffering into anger like Gotou, he probably wouldn't have suffered so much, but Kirino hadn't been able to.

Because he was too sensitive and too kind, he had cornered himself into taking his own life.

'It isn't like you to wallow in your emotions in a place like this.'

Somebody suddenly called out to him.

When Gotou turned around, he saw Yakumo there.

With slow With easygoing steps, he walked down the alley between the pews and stopped beside Gotou.

'You're the one who called me here.'

One week after the incident – Gotou hadn't come here because he'd wanted to. Yakumo had called him here.

'Yes... How is the investigation?' asked Yakumo, his eyes faraway.

'It's a mess.'

Yakumo had revealed the truth of the case, but it was too complex. They had enough trouble just with Kirino's suicide, but Kumi's murder six years ago was involved too.

The whole Criminal Affairs department was making a fuss.

'How is Utsugi Kento-san being treated?'

Yakumo glanced at Gotou out of the corner of his eye.

Yakumo had empathised with Kento during this case. Probably because Yakumo had felt the same solitariness that Kento had.

'The case six years ago will probably be written off as an accident. It's lucky that Orita was there to witness it.'

'I see – how about Kirino-san's case?'

'Assisting a suicide and hiding evidence of the corpse. It'll probably be a suspended sentence.'

'I see,' murmured Yakumo, shutting his eyes.

His face seemed melancholy. What was Yakumo thinking now that the case was over – Gotou didn't know.

But there was something he wanted to ask.

'What do you think crime is?'

'What is this all of a sudden – '

Yakumo furrowed his brows.

Gotou had been thinking about it ever since the case ended.

Kento, who had made a mistake and killed Kumi, couldn't be tried for crime because of juvenile law.

Gotou and Kirino had caused Sumida to die in an accident, but they could be tried for Sumida's death.

Kirino, who had chosen to kill himself in the end, wouldn't be tried by law, but in Christianity, it was a crime to take your own life.

'Who decides what crime is?'

Gotou had grown unsure of that with this case.

'Isn't this rather philosophical for you, Gotou-san?'

Yakumo ran a hand through his messy hair.

He was probably making fun of him. Normally, Gotou would flare up, but he didn't feel like it now.

'What's crime?'

Gotou glared at Yakumo, which made him smile slightly.

'There's no way I'd know that.'

'What?'

'I don't think sin or crime is something for somebody to decide. It is born naturally in one's heart.'

'What?'

'That's why Kirino-san came up with a plan like that.'

Yakumo looked at the statue of Christ.

Maybe that was it. Nobody decided it – it was something already defined in everyone's hearts.

Even if somebody tried to punish someone, they might feel nothing. On the other hand, somebody who wasn't punished might still feel they had committed a crime.

– But is that really OK?

'I don't get it.'

'It's because you're thinking about something difficult even though you're you, Gotou-san.'

Yakumo smiled in a slightly mocking manner.

'What?'

'Gotou-san, even if you think for your whole life, you won't find an answer. Though of course that's the same for me...'

– He really is a hateful brat.

Though Gotou was irritated, he felt just a bit refreshed.

'So what was the reason you went out of your way to call me here?'

Though Yakumo probably did want to know about the case, Gotou felt like there was another reason he had asked him to come here.

'There is something I want to tell you, Gotou-san.'

'Something you want to tell me?'

'Well, it isn't from me but from Kirino-san –'

Yakumo turned his eyes to the podium.

Gotou's eyes followed. Though he couldn't see enough, Kirino was probably there.

Gotou had no proof. He just felt it.

'Kirino –' Gotou murmured.

Though it was faint, he felt like he could see Kirino there.

'I'm glad I met you –'

Gotou heard a voice. However, he couldn't tell whether it was Yakumo's or Kirino's.

'Then I'll take my leave –'

Yakumo exited the church, leaving Gotou in his daze.

Gotou, who had been left in the silence, felt a hot wave of emotion that was hard to describe surge up within his chest.

Was it anger, sadness or regret – Gotou himself didn't know.

It was probably all of them.

'You idiot! Just dying on your own! I...'

Gotou knelt in front of Christ's statue and silently wept –

\* \* \*

Haruka was waiting in front of the church when Yakumo returned, yawning –

He ran a hand through his messy hair. He looked incredibly bored. However, it was just his appearance – he had to have complex feelings within him.

'Are you done with Gotou-san?' asked Haruka.

'Yeah,' Yakumo replied curtly. He started walking away briskly.

He really just did whatever he wanted.

'Hey, where are you going?' asked Haruka. Yakumo stopped and turned around.

'There's just one more thing I want to check.'

'What?'

'You'll know if you come,' said Yakumo, who then started walking again.

Haruka didn't understand, but she followed Yakumo.

'How about the case then?' asked Haruka as she walked.

Though Yakumo seemed annoyed, he explained what had happened up until now to her.

He had probably heard from Gotou in the church.

What would happen to Kento now – though Haruka was curious, Sachiko was getting better, so in any case, the case was settled.

However, there was something Haruka was still caught on.

'Why did Orita-san tell Makoto-san that there was a corpse even though six years had passed already?'

She still hadn't heard an explanation for that.

'He didn't just see the corpse in Kagami Spring six years ago.'

'Eh?'

'He saw the corpse very recently – '

'Ah!'

Haruka understood now.

Kumi's corpse was taken out of the spring recently and moved to the corpse. Orita had probably witnessed Kirino carrying the corpse by coincidence.

'If Kumi-san's corpse hadn't undergone adipocere, Kirino-san and Kento-san might not have gone through with the plan,' said Yakumo, gaze on his feet.

'What do you mean?'

'That corpse was too beautiful – '

'Maybe you're right...'

As Haruka nodded, the image of Kumi's corpse came up in her mind.

A corpse as beautiful as if it was sleeping. If somebody said that, they probably wouldn't be able to organise their thoughts.

After walking for a while, Haruka also understood where Yakumo was going.

The origin of the case – Kagami Spring.

However, Haruka was confused by something else then. What did Yakumo want to check at Kagami Spring now?

Haruka reached Kagami Spring before realising the answer.

The surface glittered with sunlight. It was like the spring itself was golden.

'I see, so she really was here – ' said Yakumo, looking at the spring.

'Eh?'

'Kumi-san. She is still here – '

After saying that, Yakumo's eyes narrowed.

– Why?

Haruka had that question.

'That's... She isn't possessing Sachiko-san any longer.'

'She isn't.'

'Then why is she still here?' asked Haruka, which made Yakumo run a hand through his hair.

'Kumi-san possessed Sachiko-san because she wanted to stop Kento-san's plan.'

'Mhm.'

Haruka understood that.

That was why Kumi had left Sachiko's body after the case was over.

'But she had a different reason for wandering here for six years after her death – '

'Another reason?'

'Yes. That is why she's still bound to Kagami Spring after leaving Sachiko-san's body.'

'What will happen to Kumi-san now?'

'She'll continue to sing here.'

'That's... Can't anything be done?' said Haruka pleadingly.

Yakumo shook his head.

'Nothing.'

'But then Kumi-san will continue wandering forever. That's so sad. It's too pitiful...'

'That's just your perspective.'

Yakumo's eyes were frightening.

'Eh?'

'It isn't sad or pitiful.'

'Why not?'

'Because she herself wants to continue singing for the people she loves –'

Those words shook Haruka's heart violently.

It was just as Yakumo said. If Kumi wanted to sing and pray for the ones she loved, nobody had the right to stop her.

Doing this made Kumi happy.

– What a woman.

She lost her mother to sickness and her father to a traffic accident. She had supported Kento as a sister and a mother ever since.

She had forgiven Kirino, who had caused her father's death, and even healed his wounds.

That wasn't all – rather than hating Kento for causing her death, she continued singing here for his sake.

Maybe Kumi wasn't singing just for Kento but for all the people in this world.

Haruka asked herself if she could do the same thing.

Though she couldn't find an answer, she could understand how deep Kumi's love was.

'Let's go. There's nothing we can do any more.'

After saying that, Yakumo turned away from Kagami Spring and started walking.

'OK.'

Haruka turned away from Kagami Spring too.

A cold wind blew.

In that wind, she felt like she could hear the faint sound of singing.

A kind, warm song, filled with love –

'What are you doing?'

Haruka was about to turn around, but Yakumo spoke up before she did.

'Ah, right.'

Haruka slowly started to walk.

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Kumi's spirit would probably continue to wander this spring from now on.

With her song of prayer –

※本作はフィクションであり、実在の人物、団体等とは一切関係ありません。

## afterword

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Thank you for reading *Psychic Detective Yakumo: ANOTHER FILES: THE COFFIN OF PRAYER*.

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This work focuses on Gotou's past, which hasn't been discussed much before.

Gotou, who is normally foolhardy, has also experienced many worries and conflicts. By writing out that conflict, I myself feel like I was able to understand the character named Gotou better.

Gotou kneeling in front of the statue of Christ is now one of my favourite scenes.

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Only in the *ANOTHER FILES* series can I write about each of the characters pasts like this.

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I would be happy if you enjoy the ever expanding world of *Psychic Detective Yakumo*.

What story will develop next?

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Wait! And look forward to it!

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Heisei 26<sup>1</sup>, early summer – Kaminaga Manabu

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1 Heisei 26 is 2014 in the Gregorian calendar.