

神永学



心霊探偵

八

PSYCHIC DETECTIVE

YAKUMO

MANABU KAMINAGA

雲



いつわりの樹

角川文庫

PSYCHIC DETECTIVE YAKUMO

Manabu Kamitaga

ΑΠΟΤΗΡ_FILES いつわりの樹

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三人の証言

第一章

FILE:
01

File 01: the Three Testimonies

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On the shrine grounds, there was a cedar tree.

There was a legend about this tree, which was over one thousand years old.

Once upon a time, there was a girl from a farming family that fell in love with a man from a samurai family.

Their families were opposed to the marriage, but they exchanged vows in front of this tree. An eternal vow.

On that moonlit night, they met up in front of this tree to elope. But the man did not come –

The man from the samurai family had a wife.

He had just been playing around.

The woman waited regardless. After waiting for three days and three nights, she slung a rope over the tree's branches and hanged herself.

Soon after, the man from the samurai family passed away from an unknown illness –

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Ever since there, there was a rumour that you would be cursed if you lied in front of this tree.

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People called this cedar tree the tree of deceit –

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In the moonlight, Ishii Yuutarou climbed the stone steps up to the shrine.

There were ninety-nine stone steps. He was covered in sweat by the time he reached the shrine.

A cedar tree said to be over one thousand years old hung over the stone steps.

The wind blew, making the cedar tree rustle.

‘How unpleasant...’ murmured Ishii as he stepped onto the gravel grounds.

It was late at night. There weren’t many people normally – it was a quiet place. Now, there were outdoor lights set up with as many people as if it were a festival.

‘Ishii!’

Ishii lifted his head at the voice and saw Gotou Kazutoshi standing at the lacquered shrine.

Gotou was an assistant inspector, a detective appointed to the Unsolved Cases Special Investigations Room, and Ishii’s superior.

Both his voice and his attitude were twice as loud as a regular person’s – he was quite the hot-blooded man. If Ishii dawdled, he’d be scolded again.

‘Y-yes sir!’

Ishii started running with fervour, but he immediately tripped and fell.

Ishii stood up. The moment he reached Gotou, Gotou hit his head. ‘What are you doing?’

‘I-I apologise...’

Ishii bowed his head while fixing the position of his glasses.

‘Honestly...’

‘Is it... a murder?’ Ishii asked hesitantly.

‘Yeah. Corpse was found at about nine at night... A resident who just

happened to be passing by called in. Victim's a man in his late twenties or early thirties. No identity yet.'

Gotou gave an explanation quickly.

'What was the murder weapon?'

'There was a fruit knife covered in blood nearby. It's probably that.'

'I see...'

'You check the corpse too.'

Gotou turned his gaze. He was looking at the corpse covered with a vinyl sheet.

'No, I'm fine.'

'What?'

'No, er, corpses are a bit...'

'We're investigating a murder case! The hell are you going to do if you don't look at the corpse!? You fool!'

'I-I apologise.'

Ishii went up to the corpse, dodging Gotou's gripped fist.

Ishii cleared his throat and held his breath.

Corpses were frightening. If he was asked which part – he wouldn't be able to explain properly. They were just scary.

However, as long as he was a detective, he couldn't run away from them.

Ishii slowly stuck his neck forward and peered at the corpse.

There was blood on the stomach and chest. The chest injury was particularly deep. That was probably the fatal injury.

'How awful...'

Ishii looked away without thinking.

He took deep breaths to calm himself before looking at the corpse's face.

Then, a memory came up in the back of Ishii's head.

A memory from a day ten years ago –

'I can't believe... This is...'

Ishii went pale at once and took a step back without thinking.

'What's wrong?'

'Eek!'

Ishii leapt unconsciously when Gotou called out to him.

Ishii wanted to explain, but he couldn't speak properly.

'Don't freak out because of a corpse.'

Gotou hit Ishii's back.

'T-that isn't it... I-I-I...'

'What? Say it clearly.'

'I know this person.'

Ishii was finally able to say it.

'What?'

Gotou's expression turned grim.

'His name is Mochizuki Toshiki. He's twenty-seven, like me,' Ishii said quickly, wiping the sweat from his forehead.

'Was it you?'

'Eh?'

'Did you do it!?!'

Gotou grabbed Ishii's collar and shook him violently. Ishii couldn't breathe.

'T-that isn't it.'

'What isn't it? Spit it out! Spit it out already!'

Once Gotou's emotions erupted, he couldn't be stopped.

'T-that really isn't it! I was in the same class! Back in high school!' shouted Ishii frantically.

Gotou finally let go of him.

'Really?'

'Yes. I can't believe this happened...'

Mochizuki Toshiki – a man Ishii couldn't forget even if he wanted to. When he thought back on that time, anger welled up in his stomach even now.

A slimy, dark and twisted emotion –

'Toshiki-san!'

A woman's voice echoed, interrupting Ishii's thoughts.

Ishii saw a woman forcing her way through the crowd. She was probably halfway through her twenties.

She had an oval face, almond eyes and glossy black hair. A Japanese beauty.

'I-It can't be...'

Ishii spoke up without thinking.

– No, it can't be.

Ishii hurriedly shook away the thought that came to his head.

'Why, Toshiki-san!?'

The woman tried to run up to the corpse as she continued to wail.

'Stay back!'

Gotou grabbed the woman and pulled her away from the corpse.

'Toshiki-san... W-why did this happen...'

The woman started to cry, her body shaking as she did so, and she collapsed to the ground right there.

'You know the victim?' asked Gotou.

The woman, who was still crying, couldn't even respond.

'Answer the question!' pressed Gotou, shaking in irritation.

If Gotou talked to her like that, she wouldn't even be able to say the things she could. Ishii stepped between Gotou and the woman.

'Excuse me. Are you all right?' Ishii said gently.

However, the woman just continued to sob convulsively without replying.

Ishii waited for the woman to calm down before asking again. 'Excuse me. Could you please tell us your name first?'

'Minowa... Yuuko...' said the woman, as if the words were strangled from her throat.

She finally answered. Ishii was relieved.

'Are you an acquaintance of Mochizuki-san?'

'Yes... We were engaged...'

'I see...'

'What did you come here to do?' interrupted Gotou.

There was clear suspicion in those eyes.

'Wouldn't somebody have contacted her?'

'We just found out his identity now.'

'Ah, that's right!'

Ishii understood why Gotou was suspicious.

It would have been different if the scene of the crime were the home or the workplace, but it was a puzzle as to why Yuuko had come to the shrine without being contacted.

'Answer. Why did you come here?'

Gotou glared at Yuuko.

Yuuko lowered her long eyelashes as if to escape that gaze – it was extremely suspicious.

'Could you have known that Mochizuki-san was dead here?'

Yuuko opened her mouth after Ishii asked that question, but she didn't end up saying anything.

There was a silence.

'Answer the question,' Gotou said forcefully in his anger.

'We were together...' said Yuuko under that pressure.

'What do you mean?' asked Gotou.

'Today, I came here together with Toshiki-san.'

'At about what time?' asked Ishii, taking notes.

'I think it was probably around seven.'

'And then?'

'We talked about a variety of things.'

'Why did you come all the way to a shrine?' asked Gotou, lighting a cigarette.

Ishii had that question too. They weren't a student couple – it was unnatural for them to go out of their way to have a date at a shrine all the way up here.

'There's a legend about this tree. People say that if you lie here, you'll be cursed...'

'Ah, that...'

Ishii had heard that before too. A mundane urban legend.

'Yes. So I was feeling a bit playful and said that I wanted to vow our love in front of this tree... I didn't think this would happen...'

Tears welled up in Yuuko's eyes again.

'Are you all right?'

Yuuko nodded before continuing again.

'A man suddenly appeared there. He took out a knife...'

Yuuko stopped there.

She clutched at her chest and started to sob.

Gotou patted her shoulder, like he sympathised. However, there was an indescribable unease in Ishii's heart.

– Something's strange.

He found the answer to that soon afterwards.

'Yuuko-san, the incident happened at about seven, right?'

Yuuko nodded.

'It's already three hours since the crime. What were you doing until now?'

Yuuko's expression froze at Ishii's question. The tears that had been flowing until now stopped at once.

If Yuuko's story were true, it would mean that she had left the scene for three hours after her fiancé was stabbed before coming back.

Gotou grabbed Yuuko's arm.

'Wanna explain that to us?'

Yuuko's gaze shook like she was afraid, but then she suddenly let out an 'Ah!'

Ishii looked towards the crowd of onlookers, following Yuuko's gaze.

'It's that man!' exclaimed Yuuko.

'Eh?'

'That's the man who assaulted Toshiki-san!'

Yuuko pointed at a man.

The man looked to be in his forties, with a black down jacket and a knitted hat.

When the man noticed their gazes, he said, 'Shit!' Then, he turned on his heels and started running.

'Wait!'

By the time Ishii shouted that, Gotou had already started running.

He reached the man in no time, tackled him from behind and held him down. That was Gotou's quick work for you.

'This is undoubtedly him. This person stabbed Toshiki-san,' Yuuko said fervently, going up to the man on the ground.

'You – planning to betray me?'

The man being held down said that while glaring at Yuuko.

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2

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Ozawa Haruka was heading for the prefabricated building behind the university's Building B to meet Saitou Yakumo.

Haruka had first met Yakumo when her friend was possessed by a ghost. She had gone to consult him after hearing a rumour that he was knowledgeable about spiritual matters.

At the time, Yakumo hadn't just saved her friend – he had even solved the murder.

Ever since then, they had experienced many cases.

Recently, she had started visiting Yakumo even if there weren't any cases.

Soon, she saw the two-storey prefabricated building she was looking for. The university lent it out for circles to use.

Haruka stood in front of the door that had a plate which read Movie Research Circle.

However, The Movie Research Circle didn't exist. Yakumo had casually filled out a form for the university and was literally living here, using the room as his own.

'Hey.'

Haruka opened the door and peered in.

Yakumo wasn't there. Normally, he would have been leaning back on his chair at the front. It looked like he was out.

He hadn't even locked the door. How careless.

'He's never here when it's really necessary. What's he doing, and where...'

'Obviously taking classes in class.'

Even though Haruka had been saying that to herself, there was a reply. She turned around in surprise and saw Yakumo standing there.

He had his usual sleepy eyes. He ran a hand through his messy hair as he yawned.

'Don't scare me,' protested Haruka.

'You're only scared because you have bad intentions,' said Yakumo with a sigh, sitting in his usual seat.

'Of course I'm in the wrong.'

'So you know?' drawled Yakumo, rubbing his left eye.

Normally, he hid it with a black contact lens, but Yakumo's left eye had been red from birth.

And that eye could see the spirits of the dead – that is, ghosts. Yakumo's red left eye had solved the case that Haruka's friend was involved in.

However, Yakumo hated his red left eye.

He had always been treated as strange by people around him and had suffered greatly. That wasn't all – it seemed like his mother had tried to kill him when he was little.

As a result, Yakumo put up a wall between himself and other people and didn't show his true feelings.

At first, Haruka had thought he was a cold person too, but that impression had changed greatly. Though Yakumo looked like that, he was more sensitive and kinder than anyone.

'If you're here to kill time, get out already. I'm busy.'

Yakumo said that in his usual tone as he opened the fridge in the corner of the room and took pudding out of the fridge. He started to eat it.

'Ah!'

Haruka spoke up without thinking.

'You're noisy.'

'That's the pudding I bought!'

'Oh?'

'Don't just say "oh". Why are you eating it?'

'Is there something wrong with that?'

'It's mine.'

'No, it's not. This fridge is mine. The moment you put the pudding in this fridge, the ownership rights transferred to me. Which means it's mine.'

Though Haruka felt like she'd been tricked, there was no way for her to beat Yakumo in a battle of words.

'So what do you want?' said Yakumo after her finished eating the pudding.

– That's right.

'I almost forgot.'

Haruka sat opposite Yakumo.

'You don't have to remember,' Yakumo said without a pause.

'What's that supposed to mean?'

'It's trouble, right?'

'Don't think of me as equalling trouble.'

'Then what?'

Though Haruka had objected, Yakumo had hit the mark.

Yakumo waved his hand, as if to say 'See?' like he'd seen through everything.

Feeling vexed, Haruka wanted to retort, but she'd win nothing getting angry now.

'Just listen,' pleaded Haruka.

'I refuse.'

An immediate answer. This person – though Haruka was irritated, she restrained herself.

'Why not listen?'

'I don't want to.'

'You ate my pudding.'

'That's irrelevant. And why do you always pick up trouble? Just throw it away in a rubbish bin or something.'

'But I can't leave people alone when they're troubled.'

'Rather than soft-hearted, I'd just say you're an idiot.'

– An idiot.

It was an awful way of saying it, but Haruka couldn't complain when she was the one requesting.

'Come on. Please.'

She put her hands together and looked up at him.

However, Yakumo looked blatantly displeased.

'That's creepy.'

– Oi, oi.

'Don't you think that's a rude thing to say to a girl?'

'I wouldn't if I thought so.'

'Fine. Then I won't ask.'

Haruka picked up her bag and stood.

If she acted a bit humble, he said whatever he wanted. She didn't care any more.

Just as Haruka was about to leave the room, Yakumo said, 'I owe you from before. I'll listen, but that's all.'

'Really?'

Haruka quickly sat back down.

'I'm just listening.'

'OK.'

'So what happened?'

'Actually, my friend, Mai, has been troubled ever since she moved since she hears a strange voice.'

'A strange voice?'

Yakumo put his chin in his hand, looking bored.

'Yup. She hears a voice whispering "I'll kill you" into her ear...'

When Haruka had first heard about it, a chill had run down her spine. The word 'kill' was nothing but ill intent.

Even Yakumo's face stiffened in response to that word.

'Is that all the information you have?'

'I didn't ask in that much detail either.'

'An investigation would be pointless with such vague information.'

Yakumo stretched.

Haruka had known Yakumo for over a year. This reaction was expected.

'I thought you'd do that, so I've called her.'

'Who?'

'Mai.'

'Why do you always do things like...'

Interrupting Yakumo's words, there was a knock on the door. When Haruka turned around, she saw Mai standing there.

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Gotou leant back on the seat in the interrogation room and lit his cigarette.

The Unsolved Cases Special Investigations Room that Gotou was stationed in was under detective jurisdiction. Though its name was splendid, its true nature was only finishing up investigations and lending extra members as help.

It was a lonely department with only Gotou and Ishii.

This time as well, they were only taking a part in the case because the other detectives had their hands full with an abduction that had occurred nearby.

'What a pain...'

'Eh?' said Ishii from beside him.

'It's nothing,' said Gotou.

The bosses thought it'd be an easy case since they had a suspect already, but Gotou couldn't look at it that way. The case would probably be more annoying than they imagined.

The victim was Mochizuki Toshiki. Twenty-seven years old –

A lawyer that worked at a law firm in the city. Seemed like he'd been preparing to open his own agency.

At the scene, there had been his fiancée, Minowa Yuuko, twenty-five years old. She was a nurse that worked at the general hospital, but she had quit a few days ago.

Some parts of her testimony and actions had been baffling.

After Mochizuki was stabbed at the scene, she returned home for some reason. When asked why, all she said was 'I don't know'.

And the male suspect who Gotou had held down at the scene, Matsuda Shunichi –

'Excuse me.'

Interrupting Gotou's thoughts, a uniformed guard brought Matsuda into the investigation room.

The guard followed Gotou's instructions and sat Matsuda down in the seat in the back. Then, he sat at the record-taking desk by the door.

Gotou looked at Matsuda's face.

He was forty-years old. He worked at a small factory in town.

He had stubble and looked a bit worn out, but he was an incredibly serious-looking guy. Gotou didn't have the impression that he would stab someone.

'Hey, Matsuda. Why'd you stab Mochizuki?' asked Gotou, putting his cigarette out in the ashtray.

'Money...' replied Matsuda, looking down.

'You assaulted him 'cause you wanted money?'

'Yeah.'

Matsuda's tone was incredibly businesslike.

If there was nothing else, Gotou might have believed Matsuda's words too, but there was what happened last night.

'Didn't you say something different last night?'

After Gotou held Matsuda down, he had glared at Yuuko, the witness, and said, 'You planning on betraying me?' –

At face value, those words made it sound like Matsuda and Yuuko were both in on it.

'What are you talking about?'

Matsuda's eyes were thin, showing his hostility as he lifted his head.

'You said this to the female witness, right? "You planning on betraying me?" What's that mean?'

'I don't remember saying that.'

'You did say that.'

Ishii was the one who objected.

After a silence, Matsuda looked up at the ceiling and said, 'I thought I'd get off lighter if I blamed that woman. That was all.'

'Don't lie.'

Gotou glared at Matsuda intimidatingly.

However, Matsuda didn't budge.

'I'm not lying. I wanted money so I...'

'Then why didn't you take his wallet?' interrupted Gotou.

The wallet had been left in Mochizuki's suit pocket. Neither his cash nor his credit cards had been stolen.

'That... That woman made a fuss so I ran off in a hurry,' said Matsuda, breathing uneven as he looked aside.

Like Gotou would accept that response. He stood up and moved towards Matsuda's side.

'Did you really do it yourself?'

'I said that, didn't I? I stabbed that guy and killed him.'

Matsuda's forehead was sweaty as he spoke quickly.

'Where did you stab him?'

The one who spoke up was Ishii.

'That doesn't matter, right?'

Matsuda glared at Ishii.

'It does matter. It is incredibly important.'

'Probably the stomach...'

'Is that true?' asked Ishii, leaning forward.

'What are you trying to say?'

Matsuda looked suspicious. It seemed like he didn't understand Ishii's intentions.

'It is true that Mochizuki was stabbed in the stomach. However, that wasn't the only injury.'

'Then I stabbed him twice.'

'Don't just say whatever you want!' yelled Gotou.

Matsuda's expression twisted, like he was trying to control himself.

'Please tell the truth,' said Ishii gently, leaning forward.

That moment, Matsuda climbed over the desk and leapt at Ishii with the face of a demon.

The two tumbled to the ground.

Matsuda climbed on top of Ishii and grabbed his collar.

'I did it! I stabbed him with this hand!'

'Let go, idiot!'

Gotou pinned Matsuda's arms behind his back and pulled him off of Ishii.

Still, Matsuda wouldn't stop struggling.

'Stay still!'

Gotou knocked Matsuda towards the wall.

Matsuda's back hit the wall. His expression twisted in pain and he finally grew still.

'Damn it! What the hell!' Gotou yelled, with nowhere to turn his anger.

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'Hello.'

Mai bowed her head.

Though she was a university student like Haruka, she had a childish face – at first glance, she looked like a high school student.

'Mai.'

Haruka stood up as she spoke, while Yakumo stayed sitting and sighed.

'Excuse me...'

Mai looked troubled.

'Mai, sit down.'

Haruka urged Mai to sit in the chair beside her, but Mai looked concerned about Yakumo and didn't move. It made sense, what with that welcome.

'Don't worry about him. He's always like this.'

Haruka pulled Mai's hand and forced her to sit. Nothing would start if they didn't hear her talk.

'Yakumo-kun, you said you'd listen, didn't you?'

Yakumo's eyes narrowed as he crossed his arms without answering. He looked at Mai like he was evaluating her.

Mai's body stiffened under that impaling stare.

'When and under what circumstances did you hear that voice?' asked Yakumo in a hard tone.

Haruka looked at Mai too. All she'd heard from Mai was that she'd heard a voice saying 'I'll kill you' – she didn't know the details.

'Ever since last night... In my ear, I hear a voice saying "I'll kill you"...'

Mai's voice was trembling slightly.

She was probably remembering the fear she felt then.

'And?'

Yakumo urged her to continue

'I felt like somebody was watching me...'

After saying that much, Mai's voice caught in her throat and tears welled in her eyes.

'It's fine. It's fine.'

Haruka placed a hand on Mai's shoulder.

Mai nodded and continued.

'I moved to my current flat three months ago. Apparently there was something up with the property, but I've never believed in that sort of thing, and the rest was cheap. But...'

She didn't finish.

Mai gripped her hands into fists on top of her lap and looked down.

'Hey, what do you think?' asked Haruka.

Yakumo looked at her like she was something filthy.

'There's nothing to think about. I don't have time to waste talking with a liar.'

After saying that, Yakumo owned.

It was awful for Yakumo to call Mai a liar when she looked so scared.

Haruka thought of complaining, but Mai stood up before then.

'I haven't lied,' she said, seeming agitated.

However, Yakumo's expression didn't change a whit even after that.

'Yes, you have.'

'I really did hear it!' Mai cried frantically, shaking her head.

'Yakumo-kun, Mai isn't the sort of person who would lie,' interrupted Haruka, unable to bear it.

Yakumo shook his head in exasperation.

'That isn't it. You moved to that property that had something up with it three months ago, right? But you started hearing the voice yesterday. Isn't that strange?'

It was just as Yakumo said. Haruka felt like the story didn't add it.

'That's...'

Mai faltered.

'And the ghost doesn't appear at the flat. It's possessing you.'

Yakumo's left index finger pointed straight at Mai.

– Possessing Mai?

'What do you mean?' said Haruka in shock.

'Exactly what I said. A spirit is currently possessing her,' said Yakumo, his expression exactly the same.

Haruka looked at Mai too.

All her eyes saw was Mai, but it was different for Yakumo.

Yakumo's red left eyes could see the spirits of the dead – that is, ghosts.

Mai stood there, dumbfounded.

'Yesterday, you did something that made a ghost possess you. Or you saw something. Am I right?'

Mai didn't respond to Yakumo's question.

To be more accurate, her lips flapped, but no words came out.

'Mai, what happened?'

Haruka held Mai's hand.

Her hand was shaking. She was probably afraid. Haruka could feel that through her skin.

'What are you going to do? If you don't plan on talking, leave immediately.'

Yakumo pointed at the door.

'Yakumo-kun, wait.'

Haruka flared up.

There might have been a lie in Mai's explanation, but it was fact that Mai was afraid of something.

'How can anything be solved if she's hiding something?'

'That's true, but...'

What Yakumo was saying was true, so Haruka couldn't rebut.

After a silence, Mai lifted her head. '... I will.'

It looked like she had reached a decision.

'I will talk. So please help me.'

Yakumo nodded.

When Haruka saw that, she felt relieved. She'd been worried about what was going to happen, but if Mai would talk honestly, they would probably find a clue to solve the case.

'So what really happened?' urged Yakumo.

Mai sat down, took a few deep breaths and started to talk.

'Last night, I went to that shrine.'

'Shrine?'

Haruka cocked her head.

'The one on the hill north of the university...'

'Ah.'

Haruka knew where it was from Mai's explanation.

North of the university. Though Haruka didn't know the name, there was a shrine ahead of long stone stairs on a slightly elevated hill, with a large cedar tree on the grounds.

Haruka hadn't gone herself, but she'd passed below the stone steps countless times.

'The place with the tree of deceit,' said Yakumo.

Mai nodded.

'What's that?'

– The tree of deceit.

It was an incredibly questionable name.

'It's the name of the cedar tree on the shrine grounds. If you lie in front of the tree of deceit, you'll be cursed – there's a rumour like that,' explained Yakumo.

'Is that true?'

'You really are a hopeless idiot.'

'What's that?'

'I'm saying you're an idiot because you're an idiot. Nowadays, even elementary students wouldn't believe a rumour like that.'

'All right, I'm an idiot.'

Haruka puffed her cheeks and acted angry, but Yakumo wasn't soft enough to

change his attitude because of that.

'Anyway, because of that rumour, it's become a date spot,' said Yakumo, stretching.

'Why? Even though there are more romantic places for lovers to go...'

'A difference in opinion. In front of the tree of deceit, you'll be cursed if you lie. You can confirm your partner's feelings. Or you could say nowhere is more appropriate for a vow for the future.'

– I see.

Though Haruka understood, she also felt it was frightening. It was like they were asking to be cursed.

'So you didn't go alone, right?'

Yakumo looked at Mai with narrowed eyes.

'I agreed to meet someone...'

Mai's eyes wandered.

'Who?'

'My boyfriend whom I've been dating since high school.'

Mai bit her lip, looking like she'd cry at any moment.

Though Yakumo put his chin in his hands, seeming bored, he urged Mai to continue. 'And then?'

'When we first started dating, I made a promise with him in front of that tree. That we'd get married after we graduate. But...'

'You fell in love with someone else.'

Yakumo supplied the words Mai couldn't say.

'I thought that I had to apologise properly and called him there.'

'But that person didn't show up.'

Mai nodded at Yakumo's words.

Just from the flow of the conversation and the expressions, the rest of the conversation was clear. Yakumo's discernment always surprised Haruka.

Tears fell from Mai's eyes.

She was probably too sad and in pain to know what to do. She was blaming herself, shouldering everything alone without telling anyone.

'It's OK.'

Haruka touched Mai's shoulder.

Her shaking shoulders looked like they carried the weight of regret.

'So what happened?'

Yakumo crossed his arms with a blank expression.

'We agreed to meet at three. I waited for two hours, but he didn't come, so I went home. When I called, it didn't connect, so I thought maybe I got the time wrong and he might be at the shrine...'

'So you went to the shrine again.'

Mai nodded at Yakumo's words.

Mai's boyfriend had probably understood even without Mai saying anything when she called him out. That was why he hadn't gone to the shrine and hadn't answered the phone.

Then, Mai felt guilty and tried to hide the true reason she went to the shrine from them.

Mai's eyes were red as she continued.

'When I was climbing the stone steps, I heard a voice.'

'A voice?'

'Yes.'

'A man? Or a woman?'

Mai shook her head. 'I don't know.'

'What did that voice say?'

'It said, "I'll kill you."'

Mai bent over and covered her ears, perhaps remembering the voice from then.

'And then what?' urged Yakumo expressionlessly.

'I was so afraid that I went back down the stairs, but even after I went home, I still heard that voice in my ears, saying, "I'll kill you."'

'I see,' said Yakumo, standing up slowly.

'Is this the curse of the tree of deceit... since I broke my promise...'

Mai looked at Yakumo with a clinging gaze.

Yakumo sighed, sounding disappointed as he ran a hand through his messy hair.

'Don't worry about unnecessary things right now.'

He said just that, opened the door and tried to leave the room.

'Where are you going?'

Nothing had been solved yet. Haruka hurriedly called out to Yakumo.

'Anyway, I'm going to the shrine.'

'I'll go too.'

'Is it OK to leave her alone?'

Yakumo looked at Mai, who was hanging her head.

It was just as he said. Mai was so scared – Haruka couldn't leave her alone.

'I'll be right back,' said Yakumo as he left the room.

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5

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After leaving the interrogation room, Gotou returned to the Unsolved Cases Special Investigations Room.

He sat down and lit a cigarette.

Awful. It felt like his tongue had gone numb.

Matsuda, the suspect, kept changing the contents of his confession. As Gotou listened, he couldn't tell what was what.

All he knew was that Matsuda was hiding something.

– What's he hiding?

'That was surprising...'

Ishii sat in front of Gotou while wiping away his sweat.

His hair was a mess, his tie slack and his glasses askew.

Earlier, Matsuda had jumped onto Ishii in the investigation room. Matsuda had grabbed Ishii's collar and jostled him about, making Ishii look like this.

Though it worked out since Gotou stepped in, if Ishii had been alone, it would have been an absolute disaster.

'You have to use brute force at times like that.'

'Even if you say that, I...'

Ishii's brows furrowed as he gave that weak reply.

It'd been some time since they paired up, but Ishii hadn't grown at all. His weak image hadn't changed even after all this time.

He always looked to other people for instructions, hesitant in his actions.

'With that weak attitude, criminals will look down on you.'

'I know. I also think that I can't stay like this, but...'

Ishii let out a dry laugh.

'Don't joke around.'

Gotou hit Ishii's head.

– Pathetic.

Gotou muttered that inwardly.

Ishii's uselessness was famous even within the precinct. His mistakes were countless. Gotou even thought that Ishii wasn't fit to be a detective.

He'd thought about saying that straight out, but when he looked at Ishii, he couldn't leave him alone. He felt like he wanted to do something for him.

– You can do it.

Perhaps saying that as encouragement would make Ishii grow more, but Gotou had always been bad with things like that. He couldn't express himself honestly. He was awkward.

As a result, he ended up reprimanding him.

However, Ishii still wasn't discouraged. It was baffling to Gotou.

'Honestly...' grumbled Gotou..

Then, Matsutani from forensics came in.

He had started at the same time as Gotou, but he had a horse face with a dark mood to him – they virtually never talked outside of cases.

Gotou wasn't good with him.

'Results for the fingerprints.'

Matsutani held out documents.

'Ah.'

Gotou took them and started looking through them.

While he was reading, Gotou's expression froze over. There was a shocking fact written then.

'What is it?'

Ishii looked at the documents with interest.

'Oi. What the hell is this?' asked Gotou.

Matsutani snorted, looking incredibly displeased.

'Only the facts are recorded there. It's your job to investigate why.'

Matsutani said just that and left the room briskly.

What he said was right, but there were better ways to say it. Gotou calmed his anger and looked at the documents again.

There were one set of fingerprints on the knife's handle. They were a match, with ninety-nine per cent likelihood, with the victim's fiancée and witness of the crime, Minowa Yuuko.

'D-Detective Gotou, this is!'

Ishii started making a fuss.

'Shut up! I know!'

Gotou hit Ishii's head.

The witness, Minowa Yuuko, had testified that Matsuda was the culprit, and Matsuda himself had acknowledged that, but there were a number of places where their testimonies didn't match up.

Furthermore, the knife's handle had Yuuko's fingerprints.

'Is Minowa Yuuko the culprit?'

Gotou held his head in his hands.

'That isn't the only possibility.'

Ishii smiled with confidence.

'What do you mean?'

'The knife was found in the thicket by the shrine.'

'What about it?'

'In short, after the crime, Yuuko-san pulled out the knife, tried to bring it home and dropped it in the thicket.'

The theory Ishii offered with sparkling eyes sounded like it could work, but –

'Why'd she do that?'

Ishii's face went blank at Gotou's question.

– As expected.

That was Ishii. He wasn't bad at observing, but he couldn't bring it together.

'That's true... It's odd...'

Ishii's shoulders slumped in disappointment.

Well, talking wouldn't get anything started. Sitting in front of a desk wasn't Gotou's style.

'Let's go!'

Gotou stood up.

'Eh? Go? Where to?'

'Obviously the scene of the crime.'

'But yesterday...'

'Stop whining! Back to the crime scene!'

Thinking at a desk wouldn't solve anything. He'd go to the crime scene as many times as he needed to until he saw the truth of the case. That was what

a detective was.

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6

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Ishii looked up at the towering cedar tree.

Looking at it like this, it seemed like it had been fated.

He suddenly recalled a memory from ten years ago.

– No.

Ishii hurriedly put a lid on it.

He didn't have to remember that. It wasn't related to this case. He needed to keep it buried in the bottom of his heart forever –

Ishii frantically restrained the dark emotions threatening to swallow him up.

'Ishii!'

Gotou called him. Ishii ran up to the shrine.

He fell –

'What are you doing!?!'

'P-please forgive me.'

Ishii hurriedly stood up and ran up to Gotou, who was kneeling at the shrine.

Gotou was looking at the spot where Mochizuki's corpse had been found last night. His expression was unusually grim.

Even Gotou, who preferred moving over thinking, seemed unsure as to where to head next with this case.

'You were in the same class as the victim, Mochizuki, right?' said Gotou, looking up.

Mochizuki Toshiki – just hearing the name made black emotions well up in Ishii’s stomach.

'Ah, yes...'

'What sort of guy was he?'

'What sort of...?'

'I'm asking what sort of guy Mochizuki was.'

'That's...'

Ishii gripped his hands into tight fists as his heart throbbed.

'Talk already!'

Gotou’s fist came flying.

Ishii’s expression twisted in pain. He really didn’t want to talk about it. If he talked about it, he’d remember something unpleasant. But he couldn’t keep silent.

'Mochizuki Toshiki-san was the soccer club captain. He had good grades too,' said Ishii, choosing his words.

Mochizuki’s face from high school came up in his mind.

With dark skin and well defined features, his eyes had always been filled with confidence. And –

'Both literary and military, then?' said Gotou acerbically.

'Yes, he was.'

'How was his personality?'

'His... personality?'

'Like his relationships and his position in class.'

'Since he was a sociable person, he had many friends. I think he was like a leader in class.'

Mochizuki was always surrounded by a lot of people, both male and female, and always at the heart of the conversation.

'So a popular guy that anybody would like.'

'Absolutely not!'

'What?'

'That is absolutely not the case for that guy!' denied Ishii in a yell.

His mouth had opened before he could think.

'What are you getting all serious for?' said Gotou, which brought Ishii back to his senses.

Ishii realised that his fingertips were shaking.

The events of that day came to him in a flashback.

The shrine, the cedar tree, the stone steps, the woman, the envelope... Ishii shook his head to shake away the memories which kept coming up.

'Do you have a grudge against Mochizuki or something?' asked Gotou.

Ishii bit his lip and looked away.

'No, that's not...'

– That day has nothing to do with this case.

He managed to calm down by telling himself that.

'What a weird guy you are,' said Gotou, sounding exasperated as he lit his cigarette.

'Bad manners for a detective.'

Ishii turned his gaze towards the voice and saw a man walking towards them as he ran a hand through his messy hair.

– Saitou Yakumo.

Right now, he was wearing a black contact lens, but his left eye was red like a glowing flame. That wasn't all – it even had the special ability to see the spirits of the dead.

His ability and excellent mind had solved many cases.

'What, it's you, Yakumo?' Gotou said curtly.

'Is it a date?' asked Yakumo, looking at Ishii and Gotou.

'You making fun of me?'

Gotou flared up, even though he could have just left it alone.

'Correct.'

'You bastard!'

'What a loud-mouthed bear.'

'Shut up!'

'Well, please calm down.'

Ishii stepped in between the two.

These two always fought when they met. Ishii had no idea whether they were on good terms or bad.

'So what are you doing here?' asked Gotou after a pause.

'I'll tell you when you've grown up a bit.'

'What'd you say!?!'

'Ishii-san, was there an incident here last night?'

Yakumo ignored Gotou, who had flown into a rage, and turned the conversation to Ishii.

'Ah, yes. A murder.'

'I see. Who was the victim?'

'A male lawyer named Mochizuki Toshiki.'

'Seems like they were classmates in high school.'

Gotou pointed at Ishii with his chin.

'That must be tough.'

Though Yakumo said that himself, he let out a bored yawn.

When Ishii saw that face, he recalled something.

'Excuse me, but there is something I would like to consult you about regarding that case.'

'Consult?' Yakumo furrowed his brows.

Perhaps Yakumo, who had solved so many cases, would be able to figure things out.

Ishii nodded and began.

'Actually, a suspect was arrested for the murder that occurred yesterday.'

'Then isn't the case solved? That's great.'

Yakumo ran a hand through his hair, looking annoyed.

'That is... The testimonies given by the suspect and the victim's fiancée have a great discrepancy.'

'How are they different?'

'The suspect admits his own crime. The witness says that it was definitely the suspect too.'

'Doesn't that match up?'

'The problem is still coming up...'

Ishii explained in detail all that they knew about the situation so far.

Matsuda, the suspect, admitted the crime, but he had said he'd stabbed the

stomach. However, there were stab wounds in both the stomach and the chest.

Yuuko, the fiancée of the victim, Mochizuki, had been at the scene and left the scene for about three hours.

When Matsuda had been arrested, he had said this to Yuuko: 'You planning on betraying me?'

Furthermore, the murder weapon – a knife – had Yuuko's fingerprints on it – 'I see. That is strange,' said Yakumo once Ishii finished.

'Damn, what a troublesome case,' grumbled Gotou with a sigh.

Ishii agreed with that opinion. With so many complications, he didn't know what to believe.

'Well, please do your best.'

After letting out a yawn, Yakumo started walking towards the stone steps.

'Where are you going?'

Gotou hurriedly called out to stop Yakumo.

'I'm obviously leaving.'

'What do you mean, obviously? Help out a bit.'

'Why?'

'Well, y'know...'

'I'm just a passing university student. It's the job of the police to investigate cases, isn't it?'

'What did you say!?!'

Gotou, who had a low boiling point, made his anger clear by grabbing Yakumo by the collar.

However, Yakumo didn't look frightened at all. He let out a yawn.

'Please calm down a bit.'

Ishii hurriedly went to stop Gotou. Ishii wondered why Gotou didn't get tired of doing the same thing each time.

After pulling Gotou away, Ishii faced Yakumo once more.

'Excuse me, but would it be possible to have the victim testify?'

Yakumo let out a sigh at Ishii's question, sounding annoyed.

'Are you an idiot!? The victim's dead!'

Gotou was the one who cut in.

'That's exactly why.'

Ishii sent Gotou a look.

Yakumo had the unique ability to see the spirits of the dead. If they used that, it should have been possible to take the testimony of the victim, Mochizuki.

Gotou let out an 'Ah!' It seemed he had sensed Ishii's thoughts.

'Hey, Yakumo. Help a man out.'

Gotou walked up to Yakumo again.

Yakumo looked blatantly disgusted, like he was looking at something filthy.

'I don't want to.'

'You bastard – what's with that attitude!?'

'I should say that to you, Gotou-san. What kind of attitude is that when you're asking somebody for help?'

'What?'

'What is it you're supposed to say when asking somebody for help?'

Gotou's face twitched.

After a silence, Gotou finally bowed his head in resignation, but his words

were weak, without their usual force.

'P-p... se.'

'I can't hear you.'

Yakumo put his hand to his ear provocatively.

'Please!'

Gotou sounded half in despair as he bowed his head.

'Well done.'

Yakumo clapped his hands mockingly.

'You brat. I'll kill you one day.'

Yakumo ignored Gotou's grumbling and looked at Ishii.

'Unfortunately, I can't help you there.'

'Eh?'

Ishii hadn't thought Yakumo would refuse so readily after all that.

'You bastard! The hell do you mean by that!?'

Gotou's anger reached a peak again as he approached Yakumo.

'Have you forgotten? All I can do is see them.'

'I know that. So...'

'If you can bring the victim's spirit here, I can listen.'

'I see...'

That was enough to make Ishii to realise how foolish what he'd said had been, but Gotou didn't seem to have understood yet, as he kept hanging on.

'Then just call him.'

'How?'

'You can't?'

'Of course not. I'm not a necromancer.'

'Well, that's true...'

Gotou lost his force.

'Well, that's how it is,' said Yakumo with a shrug. He turned on his heels and started walking away.

All Ishii and Gotou could do was watch him leave.

Just as Yakumo was about to walk down the stairs, he stopped.

There was an usual air about Yakumo, completely different from before.

'Did the man who died here have a mole on his forehead?' said Yakumo, his back still to them.

'Yes.'

When Ishii replied, Yakumo turned around.

'He's here right now.'

'Eh?'

Ishii spoke up without thinking. He stared, but he couldn't see anything.

However, it was different for Yakumo. His eye could see something there, unlike Ishii's.

When Ishii thought that, his heart started thumping loudly.

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7

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'It's OK.'

Haruka spoke to Mai with a smile.

After Yakumo left the room, Mai gradually calmed down, but she was still pale.

'Sorry for wrapping you up in something strange...' said Mai in a faint voice.

'Don't worry about it.'

Haruka shook her head.

It looked like Mai believed that the spiritual phenomenon she experienced was a curse from breaking the promise she made in front of the tree of deceit.

Haruka might have felt the same fear if she were the person she had been before.

However, ever since she met Yakumo, the way she thought of ghosts had changed greatly.

'The spirits of the dead are like clusters of people's emotions.'

That was what Yakumo thought.

To borrow his words, people were people, whether they were alive or dead.

'Clusters of emotions...'

Mai lifted her head.

'Yup. So they have no physical influence. They can't curse people.'

That was second-hand knowledge from Yakumo too.

However, with the many incidents she had experienced with Yakumo, Haruka felt that herself.

'But...'

Mai's brow furrowed. She looked anxious.

She had heard a voice saying 'I'll kill you'. It made sense that her fear made her incapable of accepting what Haruka said right away.

Though it was the musing of an amateur, Haruka thought that the legend

about the tree of deceit and the voice Mai heard were different things.

'Curses come from guilt within oneself.'

That was something Yakumo had said too, but Haruka had felt that herself too, during a case with a boy.

'So it's fine. Don't blame yourself.'

Haruka smiled at Mai to try to make her relax. Mai nodded in response.

But then – Mai's body jolted.

– What's wrong?

When that question came to Haruka's head, Mai's eyes had already rolled up and she fell from her seat.

'Mai! Hang in there!'

Haruka shook Mai's shoulders as she lay on her side.

She was breathing.

However, it looked like she was unconscious. Her breathing was shallow and she was moaning, like she was in pain. Her forehead was covered in sweat.

– Ambulance.

Haruka was just about to stand up when something grabbed her wrist.

It was Mai.

With such force it was painful, Mai gripped her wrist.

'... I'll... you...'

It was a low howl, like that of a beast.

'Eh?'

Slowly, Mai lifted her head.

Her eyes were wide open and bloodshot. Her cheek muscle was twitching

and she had her teeth gritted.

– Is this really Mai?

Haruka couldn't believe her eyes.

'I'll... kill... you...'

Mai's flickering eyeballs looked at Haruka.

A chill ran down Haruka's spine.

– I'm going to be killed.

Haruka felt that instinctively. She shook Mai's hand off and leapt back.

However, she ran into the wall and lost her escape route.

'I'll kill you...'

Mai stood up slowly.

She looked at Haruka again.

– I need to run.

Haruka thought that, but fear had frozen her body.

'Mai, what's wrong? Get a hold of yourself!'

Haruka called out frantically, but Mai didn't seem to hear her.

Mai's body was shaking as she put out both hands and walked towards Haruka.

There was no time to run.

Mai put her hands on Haruka's neck and gripped tightly.

Haruka tried to push her aside, but she couldn't move under that incredible force.

'Please... Mai... Get a hold of yourself...'

Haruka pleaded frantically, but she wasn't sure whether the words came out.

When she saw Mai's eyes, she could tell that Mai was truly intent on killing her.

– Please. Yakumo-kun. Save me.

She couldn't breathe.

She was losing consciousness.

– It's too late.

The moment she thought that, Mai's hands left Haruka.

Haruka coughed a number of times and collapsed to the floor right there.

She took deep breaths as she looked up at Mai, who was standing there in a daze.

'Mai...'

'Somebody's... in me...'

Unlike her moans from before, Mai was speaking in a weak voice that sounded like it would fade away at any moment.

'Did something happen?'

'... You're not me... Who are you... Please... Save me...'

Tells fell from Mai's eyes.

Then, Mai lost consciousness and she collapsed once more, her eyes rolling up again.

'Mai.'

Haruka hugged Mai tightly.

It looked like she was breathing.

Haruka slowly put Mai down.

– What on earth is happening?

Questions ran through her head.

Earlier, Mai had been muttering 'I'll kill you'. Perhaps it had something to do with the spiritual phenomenon Mai had experienced.

Haruka took her mobile phone from her bag and chose Yakumo's number from her contacts list.

The call tone fanned her uneasiness.

– Yakumo-kun, pick up already.

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8

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'Oi, Yakumo. That true?' said Gotou without thinking in his surprise.

Yakumo, standing on the shrine's stone steps, had said that Mochizuki Toshiki, who was killed the day before, was here.

Though Gotou couldn't see anything, it was different for Yakumo, with his red left eye.

'Yakumo. Answer.'

'Quiet!'

Yakumo cut Gotou down.

Yakumo's cold eyes made Gotou shut his mouth.

Ishii gulped beside him.

Yakumo slowly started walking and stopped in front of the shrine.

From Gotou's position, he couldn't see Yakumo's expression. It looked like he was muttering something, but Gotou couldn't hear him.

'What is he saying?'

Gotou looked at Ishii, but he just shook his head.

Gotou wiped the sweat off his forehead and held his breath as he waited.

How long was it – after Yakumo let out a long breath, he slowly turned around.

He looked incredibly exhausted.

'What did you find out?' asked Gotou.

Yakumo looked pained.

'He said he was stabbed by his lover.'

Yakumo's words made the air freeze over.

– Stabbed by his lover.

Which meant he was saying Minowa Yuuko was the culprit.

'That true?'

If it were true, the case would move.

'That's what he said.'

'Then we've got to arrest Minowa Yuuko!'

Gotou could go with this – he started walking forward with vigour. Ishii followed him.

'Gotou-san, you are a helpless idiot, aren't you?' said Yakumo coldly.

'What?'

'I said you're a gigantic idiot.'

'Bastard, try to say that one more time!'

Gotou approached Yakumo.

'I'll say it as many times as you want. Gotou-san, you're an idiot.'

'You brat!'

Gotou grabbed Yakumo by the collar.

However, rather than looking afraid, Yakumo looked exasperated as he sighed.

'There's no way you could arrest her now, right?'

'Why not? We have the victim's testimony, right!?'

'That's why I'm saying you're an idiot.'

'I see!'

Ishii clapped his hands together like he had understood something.

However, Gotou didn't understand.

'Since when did the police start using the testimony of ghosts as evidence?'

'Ah.'

Gotou finally realised he had been hasty when he heard Yakumo's chilly words.

While Gotou personally believed in ghosts because of the cases he'd been involved in with Yakumo, it was different for the police organisation as a whole.

There was no way that he could get an arrest warrant because of the testimony of a dead man. That said, he couldn't overlook such valuable evidence.

'I'll find the evidence later. First, I'm arresting Minowa Yuuko.'

'That's what makes you an idiot.'

'What did you say?'

'Please think about it properly. Even ghosts are human.'

'I know that much.'

'No, you don't know anything, Gotou-san.'

'What are you trying to say?'

'Dead people do not only speak the truth – '

Yakumo's words shook Gotou's brain like a heavy impact.

'You saying... he's lying?'

'There is that possibility.'

'But... the one who testified is...'

– The victim.

Gotou wanted to say that, but he swallowed his words partway.

Just because he was the victim didn't mean that he'd say the truth. Gotou knew that painfully after taking on so many cases.

It wasn't only the culprits who wanted to hide things.

They couldn't solve the case unless they suspected everything.

'Incidentally, Ishii-san.'

Yakumo suddenly looked towards Ishii.

'Eh, ah, yes.'

Ishii was flustered at the suddenness of it.

'What is a glasses monkey[1]?'

'What?'

Gotou cocked his head at the sudden question.

'I-I don't know...' replied Ishii, looking away.

– He's hiding something.

Gotou was going to question him about it when Yakumo's mobile rang.

'Hello..'

At first, Yakumo answered nonchalantly, but then his expression grew grim.

'What happened?' asked Gotou once Yakumo was finished with his call.

Yakumo just looked at Gotou and then left, going down the stairs without answering Gotou's question.

'The guy just does whatever he wants...' Gotou said with a click of his tongue.

He glanced at Ishii.

His eyes seemed faraway and his mouth was gaping. Like he wasn't all here.

'Ishii.'

'Y-yes sir.'

Ishii's shoulders jolted as he looked at Gotou.

'What was that glasses monkey thing Yakumo was talking about earlier?'

'I-I don't know.'

It took ten seconds for Ishii to respond.

Anybody could tell he was lying.

'Tell the truth.'

'It is the t-truth,' Ishii said quickly. Then, he walked away from the shrine, like he was running away.

'Man, everyone's just...' said Gotou with a click of his tongue before starting to walk after Ishii.

But then, his feet stopped. Somebody was watching him – he felt it. He slowly turned around.

There was nobody there. Just the toweringly large cedar tree.

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– Why did it turn out like this?

Haruka sighed while sitting on a bench in the hospital waiting room.

When she put her hand to her neck, the feeling of being strangled came back to her anew.

– I’ll kill you.

That low growl, like a beast’s. And those eyes filled with hatred – just thinking about it was enough to make Haruka shiver.

Though Mai definitely looked like herself, the person inside was somebody completely different.

‘You OK?’

Haruka lifted her head at the voice and saw Yakumo, running a hand through his messy hair.

He was normally curt, but his voice just now felt a bit kinder than usual.

‘Yakumo-kun.’

When Haruka said that, she suddenly felt relief.

Even though nothing was finished yet, she felt like Yakumo would be able to do something with this convoluted situation.

‘Where is she?’ said Yakumo, sitting down next to Haruka.

‘She’s sleeping in a hospital room right now. The doctor said it was from overwork...’

After calling Yakumo, Haruka immediately called an ambulance.

The doctor who examined Mai said there was nothing in particular that was wrong with her body and that it was just overwork – that she would get better

after staying for two or three days in hospital.

There was no way that was overwork. That said, the doctor wouldn't have believed Haruka if she had said it was because of a ghost.

'So what happened?' asked Yakumo.

Haruka nodded and began her explanation.

'After you left, Yakumo-kun, we talked regularly, but then Mai suddenly started acting strange.'

'In concrete terms.'

'She suddenly collapsed. Then, she strangled my neck...'

'Neck?'

Yakumo's expression turned grim.

'Yeah.'

Come to think of it, Haruka hadn't said she was strangled on the phone.

Yakumo brought his face near Haruka and looked closely at her neck.

Being looked at like that made Haruka strangely nervous – her face felt warm.

'It looks like there are no injuries.'

'Yeah.'

It made her a bit happy that Yakumo was worried for her.

'And?'

Yakumo urged her to continue.

'Mai said, "I'll kill you." She was like a completely different person...'

'Not "like". She probably was a different person.'

'Different person? What do you mean?'

Putting aside Haruka's confusion, Yakumo slowly stood up.

'Well, talking here won't start anything. Let's go see her.'

'OK,' replied Haruka as she stood up. She started walking to lead Yakumo to Mai's hospital room.

'By the way, what sort of relationship do you and her have?' asked Yakumo as they walked down the corridor.

'We're in the same circle. She was in the concert that you listened to before too, Yakumo-kun.'

'Are you close?'

'Friends are people you're close to, right?'

'There are different degrees, aren't there?'

'Normal then. Why are you asking?'

'She strangled you, right?'

'Yeah.'

'Even though you were afraid, you still tried to save her. Even when you were on the phone, you didn't say "Save me" – you said "Mai's in trouble".'

'That so?'

Haruka had been frantic. She couldn't remember what she said, but now that Yakumo said that, she felt like he was right.

'So I thought that you might have some special obligation to that woman called Mai.'

Yakumo's words echoed sadly in Haruka's heart.

Because of his red left eye that could see the spirits of the dead, Yakumo had suffered greatly.

Just being able to see the spirits of the dead every day must have been a

heavy enough burden. On top of that, other people thought his red left eye unpleasant, and his mother had tried to kill him.

It was probably because of those experiences that Yakumo didn't trust others and thought of human relationships as something that sprung only from profit and loss.

However, people and their relationships weren't just like that.

'It's not like an obligation or anything. I'm just worried because she's my friend. That's all.'

When Haruka replied with a smile, Yakumo's expression softened just a little.

'That's like you.'

'Really?'

'You're a troublemaker from birth.'

'Shut up.'

– He always says one thing too much.

Haruka poked Yakumo in his side.

Yakumo leapt aside in surprise. It was Yakumo's one weak point, which only Haruka knew.

Yakumo opened his mouth to complain, but in the end, he didn't say anything.

Soon, Haruka reached the hospital room.

'Here,' said Haruka.

Yakumo nodded and put his hand on the door.

Haruka's heart pounded.

It was true that she wanted to save Mai, but it was also a fact that she felt afraid.

'Let's go,' Yakumo said quietly. He opened the hospital room door.

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10

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'You have a guest.'

When Gotou returned to the precinct, the female officer at the reception called out to him.

'Guest?'

'Who could it be?'

Gotou looked at Ishii, who was standing beside him.

There weren't very many guests for detectives.

Gotou was confused as he went to the reception room for guests. He knocked on the door and opened it to find a middle-aged woman sitting inside.

When she saw Gotou, she hurriedly stood up to bow.

'I'm Matsuda's wife,' the woman said in a hoarse voice.

– Matsuda's wife?

'Matsuda isn't single?'

Gotou asked that question to Ishii in a quiet voice.

The files had said he was.

He lived in a four-and-a-half tatami bachelor apartment which had communal lavatories – it wouldn't fit a family.

'Matsuda-san had a divorce a week before the incident,' replied Ishii, glancing at the woman.

'So ex-wife then.'

'Yes...'

'Excuse me...'

The woman who had called herself Matsuda's voice spoke up.

'It is as you say. I didn't say that correctly. I am Matsuda's ex-wife. My name is Yayoi.'

'I see... Anyway, sit down.'

Gotou sat down and urged Yayoi to do the same.'

'I apologise for confusing you. The divorce was so sudden that I haven't organised my thoughts yet...'

Yayoi's words sounded like an excuse.

'You didn't talk about it before?'

'We didn't. Actually, I didn't even know I was divorced.'

'What are you talking about?'

For the wife not to know about the divorce – that was incredibly unnatural.

'One day, my husband told me that the divorce procedure was finished.'

'Can you do that?'

'The procedure is just sending documents to the government office, so I think it would be possible, once the problem of the signature and stamp is cleared.'

Ishii was the one who explained.

Maybe that was true. It would have been different if both of them needed to be present, but that wasn't the case.

'So Matsuda sent the divorce papers on his own.'

'Yes,' replied Yayoi, looking down.

If that were true, it made sense for her to be confused. It was an incredibly

selfish action.

While Gotou felt irritated, he had a question.

'Why did Matsuda get a divorce in such a forceful way?'

'I don't know either. I wanted to ask, but my husband didn't come home again after that...'

'And then the incident occurred.'

'Yes...'

Yayoi's expression twisted. It looked like she was in pain.

It must have been a double-fold shock for her.

After a silence, Yayoi asked, 'Excuse me, but... did my husband really kill someone?'

'Unfortunately, we can't say anything about the investigation.'

Gotou wasn't sure how to respond, so Ishii responded instead.

When investigating a case, the families of suspects and victims would sometimes ask questions about the investigation.

Ishii's answer was exemplary. But –

'At the current stage, it's likely.'

Gotou looked right at Yayoi.

'Is that OK?' said Ishii beside him. Gotou ignored Ishii. Sometimes talking about the investigation could bring about important information.

'That can't be.'

Yayoi shook her head, like she didn't want to accept it.

'It's true.'

'I won't believe it. My husband worked so hard. He had two jobs – he worked

night and day without resting.'

'Why did he need to work so much?' asked Ishii.

'We have a sick daughter who's in hospital.'

'A daughter...'

'We needed the money for the medical fees. Even though he worked without a break, he would find time every day to visit her. But then one week ago, he suddenly...'

After saying that much, Yayoi gritted her teeth.

It felt like she was frantically trying to keep her tears from falling. It hurt to look at her.

'I understand why you don't want to believe it, but Matsuda himself said admitted it,' said Gotou, shaking away his sympathy.

'Somebody made him say that,' Yayoi said forcefully.

Not only had he sent in divorce papers himself and left home, he had even been arrested as a suspect for a murder.

Still, Yayoi believed in her husband, Matsuda.

– How can she believe in him this much?

'Don't just say that.'

'But it's definitely strange!'

'What evidence do you have for that?'

'He's such a kind person. For him to suddenly say we're getting a divorce and then leave the house, and then a murder... It's impossible for him.'

Yayoi said that all at once.

'Calm down a bit.'

Gotou placed a hand on Yayoi's shoulder.

However, she pushed that hand aside and stood up.

'Detective, please investigate once more. That person would never kill someone.'

Yayoi reached out and clung to Gotou. She started crying.

Gotou had no words to respond with –

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11

-

Haruka followed Yakumo into the hospital room.

She saw Mai lying on the bed.

Mai slowly opened her eyes, perhaps noticing them.

'Which are you?'

Yakumo's words echoed through the hospital room.

Mai breathed loudly as she looked at them with hollow eyes.

She was as pale as a ghost.

'What is your goal?'

Yakumo walked up to Mai's bed with narrowed eyes.

Moving her dry lips, Mai said, 'I... I'll kill... you...'

'Who do you plan to kill?' asked Yakumo with a blank expression.

'I won't... forgive... I...'

'What do you have such vengeance for?'

'I...'

Mai started to speak, but she suddenly seemed to be hit by a wave of pain.

On top of the bed, she flailed her arms and legs, arching her body sharply.
'Are you all right?' said Haruka, watching the serious scene in front of her.
Mai looked like she was in even more pain.

Haruka was about to press the button to call for a nurse when Mai grabbed her hand.

Haruka's heart skipped a beat.

Mai's eyes weren't hollow like they were before.

'Please...' Mai said.

Though it was faint, Haruka could feel Mai's will in those words.

'Mai...'

'Help... Somebody's... inside me... Please...'

Tears fell from Mai's eyes.

'Mai...'

Haruka held Mai's hand tightly.

She tried to say something, but nothing came out. To be honest, there was nothing that she could do right now. She hated herself for that.

'Yakumo-kun, what's happened?'

Haruka looked to Yakumo for an explanation.

Yakumo just looked troubled as he ran a hand through his hair.

'As you can see, she's been possessed by a spirit of the dead. The spirit that is possessing her has a strong will and sometimes takes over her.'

So that was what Yakumo had meant when he said that Mai was another person earlier.

'What'll happen to Mai?'

'She'll be fine for a while. But – '

'What?'

'If this situation continues, in the end, she'll weaken...'

Haruka knew what Yakumo would say even without his saying it.

'We have to do something!' said Haruka pleadingly.

'Don't be hasty.'

'But...'

'What do you think the quickest method is for removing the spirit possessing her?'

Yakumo crossed his arms and leant against the wall.

'I don't know.'

'Granting the wish of the spirit possessing her.'

'Then we should quickly...'

'The spirit possessing her only wants one thing – '

'What?'

'The person they hate – they want to kill them.'

Haruka was lost for words.

– I'll kill you.

The words the person possessing Mai had said had meant exactly that.

'That's... I can't.'

Haruka shook her head.

She wanted to save Mai, but there was no way she could let someone else be killed for it.

'I know.'

'Hey, isn't there any other way?'

'There'd be no problem if I knew one.'

'That's so irresponsible... Do something.'

'Calm down. Making a fuss won't solve anything,' rebuked Yakumo, which made Haruka come back to her senses.

Her emotions had gotten ahead of her and she had ended up seeming accusatory of Yakumo, but doing that wouldn't solve anything.

'Sorry...'

Haruka bit her lower lip.

She couldn't be emotion. She had to calm down and think. That said, no matter how she thought, nothing came to mind.

'Have you ever hated somebody to the point you wanted to kill them?'

Haruka lifted her head in surprise at Yakumo's sudden question.

'I haven't.'

Haruka shook her head.

Since she was human, there were people she didn't like, and there were even some types of people she hated, but she had never thought about killing them.

I want to kill someone – having a desire like that wasn't normal.

'I have,' Yakumo said quietly.

'Eh?'

For a moment, Haruka looked at Yakumo, unable to understand.

How, when and towards whom did those emotions come about – Haruka had no way of knowing, but Yakumo's profile looked incredibly sad, to the point it hurt her to look at it.

'I'm not the only one who's thought that.'

'Yakumo-kun...'

'But emotions like that usually pass. There's a line between people who will act on it and people who won't.'

'Right.'

Haruka felt like she kind of understood. Just thinking about it and actually acting on it were completely different.

She felt like there was a line there that people should never cross.

'The spirit possessing her still wants to kill someone even after death.'

'Yeah,' replied Haruka, looking at Mai.

She was sleeping quietly now, but –

'How can such a hatred be cleared away – to be honest, I don't know.'

Yakumo sighed and looked up at the ceiling.

It was just as Yakumo said

Who was the person the spirit wanted to kill even after death? Why did the spirit have so much hatred?

They wouldn't be able to save Mai unless they solved that mystery.

'Anyway, first, we need to find out who the spirit possessing her is,' said Yakumo before leaving the hospital room.

'Mai. Wait. I'll definitely save you...'

After saying that to the sleeping Mai, Haruka followed Yakumo out –

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12

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After meeting with Matsuda's ex-wife, Yayoi, Gotou and Ishii went to the

interrogation room.

Gotou took a breath in front of the door.

He felt a bit hazy, perhaps because of what he'd heard from Yayoi.

'What is it?' asked Ishii, which brought Gotou back to his senses.

'It's nothing.' Gotou opened the door and went into the interrogation room.

Matsuda was sitting on a chair in the back of the room.

He had stubble and there were shadows under his eyes. His chin stuck out, like he was determined about something.

'Please let us confirm a number of things.'

Ishii spoke up first.

Matsuda made no response. Ishii seemed to take that as consent and continued.

'Did you really kill Mochizuki Toshiki-san?'

'Yes,' said Matsuda, sounding fed up.

'Is that true?'

'Yeah. Don't make me say the same thing again and again.'

'Actually, we have evidence that says differently.'

Ishii pushed up his silver-framed glasses.

'Evidence...?'

Matsuda looked suspicious.

Ishii nodded and continued.

'The knife that was the murder weapon has been examined, but Matsuda-san, your fingerprints weren't on them.'

'I wore gloves. It makes sense for there to be no fingerprints,' said Matsuda,

sounding a bit exasperated.

'There'd be no problem if that was all there was to it,' said Gotou.'

'What do you mean?'

'Another person's fingerprints were found on the knife.'

'Wha...'

'Whose fingerprints do you think they were?'

Gotou leant forward, bringing his face closer to Matsuda's.

Matsuda had been impudent earlier, but now he looked troubled.

'How could I know that?' said Matsuda, looking away.

'Then I'll tell you. The fingerprints that were found were the witness's – Minowa Yuuko's.'

When Gotou said that, Matsuda's eyes went wide in shock.

Sweat rolled down his forehead as his eyes flickered back and forth.

'Want to explain what's going on?' pressed gotou.

After a silence, Matsuda's expression suddenly relaxed and he started laughing aloud.

'What's so funny?'

'Detective, you can't be suspecting my confession just from that evidence, can you?'

'What?'

'After I stabbed him, I threw the knife in the thicket. After that, the woman touched the knife and did something,' said Matsuda triumphantly.

Gotou had thought Matsuda would say something like that.

'That's not the only problem.'

'Hah?'

'Somebody has come out to say that the person who stabbed Mochizuki Toshiki is his lover, Minowa Yuuko.'

The info they'd got from Yakumo at the shrine.

'Who said that?'

'A witness of the crime – I'll say just that.'

Gotou gave a vague reply.

The dead spirit of Mochizuki Toshiki – if Gotou said that, Matsuda wouldn't believe him anyway.

– So what now?

Gotou held his breath.

Matsuda started to sneer.

'What's so funny?'

'Detective, that testimony's a lie.'

'How can you be sure?'

'It's simple. I stabbed him. With these hands.'

As he said that, Matsuda stared at his own hands.

Gotou had wanted to shake him, but Matsuda wasn't shaken at all. Was this guy really the culprit?

– It's a lie.

Yayoi, Matsuda's ex-wife, had said that.

With a one-sided divorce, this man had suddenly disappeared, but still, she continued to believe in him.

'I met your wife earlier.'

When Gotou said that, Matsuda's lips twitched.

'Ex-wife. She's a stranger now,' Matsuda said offhandedly.

'Seems like she doesn't think that way.'

'The papers are in. Doesn't matter what she thinks. We're strangers.'

Matsuda said that casually, which incurred Gotou's fierce anger.

Why did Yayoi believe in this man?

'So your daughter's a stranger too?'

'Yeah. We're unrelated.'

Matsuda had the same attitude.

From what Yayoi had said, Matsuda had worked day and night to make money to pay off his daughter's medical fees. Could he really throw her away so easily after doing so much –

'Why?'

'Wha?'

'Why did you take someone's life, even when you have people who are important to you?'

'I said that we're unrelated, didn't I?'

'Are you serious?'

'Yeah, I am. My wife and kid – they're not related to me anymore. I couldn't care less whether they live or die.'

Matsuda's voice was aggressive, but Gotou could tell he didn't mean his words.

Matsuda was frantically trying to protect something. Even though Gotou knew that, the poison in those words made it impossible for Gotou to push down his anger.

'You seriously saying that?'

'Yeah, I am.'

'You bastard!'

As he yelled that, Gotou grabbed Matsuda.

Gotou dragged Matsuda to the floor and climbed on top of him.

'Detective Gotou! Please stop!'

With a pale face, Ishii tried to stop Gotou.

Gotou pushed him aside and raised his fist.

However, he didn't bring it down. Because he saw the tears in Matsuda's eyes.

'Damn it...'

Gotou sighed and fled the interrogation room. He leant against the wall and took deep breaths to try to calm down.

The first he hadn't punched tingled with pain.

– Why?

Gotou had just muttered that in his heart when his mobile rang.

'Who is it?'

Gotou turned his irritation towards his phone.

<Please fix your telephone manners.>

The voice he heard was Yakumo's incredibly languid one.

'Shut up!'

<You're the one who should be shutting up, Gotou-san.'

'What did you say?'

<You always become emotional so quickly. You really are a child.>

Yakumo kept going.

Gotou wanted to retort, but unfortunately, he didn't think he could beat Yakumo in an argument.

'I'm busy. I'm gonna hang up if you've got nothing to say.'

<I don't have so much time that I would call you for no reason, Gotou-san.>

Always said a thing too much.

'If you've got a reason, say it already,' said Gotou with a click of his tongue.

<There is something I would like you to investigate.>

'Something you want me to investigate?'

<Yes.>

When Yakumo made requests like these, it was usually because he had some ghost trouble.

Haruka had probably brought it to him.

'Sorry, but I'm busy.'

Gotou had his hands full with this case – he didn't have the time to investigate something else.

<I see... If I am correct, it might solve the mystery behind the murder at that shrine, but...>

'W-what did you say!?!'

<If you're busy, there is no helping it. Then...>

'Oi! Yakumo!'

Gotou frantically called out, but Yakumo had already hung up.

Yakumo had done that on purpose – he was enjoying Gotou's response.

– What a troublesome guy.

Gotou grumbled in his heart and called Yakumo's mobile. However, after a few rings, it switched to voicemail.

Looked like he really had no intention of picking up. What a completely contrary guy –

Gotou swallowed his irritation and called once more.

Finally, Yakumo answered.

<What is it? Aren't you busy?>

Yakumo's voice dripped with sarcasm.

'Don't say that. More importantly, about what you were talking about earlier...'

<Unfortunately, I am also busy right now.>

'Wait.'

<What are you supposed to say when you've done something bad?>

– The guy was seriously mean.

'S-sorry,' said Gotou, forcing the words out of his throat while bearing with the mortification.

<Very well done.>

Yakumo's triumphant tone irritated Gotou, but he would bear with it to solve the case.

'So what is it?'

<Please investigate whether somebody else has died at that shrine, besides the one in the current murder case.>

'Somebody else who's died?'

<It doesn't have to be a case. Suicide, accident – anything's fine. The person is probably female.>

'Got it. I'll do what I can.'

<I'll leave it to you.>

'So the woman who died – how's she related to this case?'

<I don't know.>

Yakumo said that firmly.

'What? That's not what you said earlier.'

<Please listen to what I say properly. I said the mystery might be solved... I don't remember making any firm declarations. It is just my instinct.>

Yakumo said that with no shame whatsoever.

Making police work just on his instinct – Gotou wanted to complain, but Yakumo's instinct had solved many cases.

'Got it.'

<Then I will leave it to you.>

Yakumo hung up.

'Detective Gotou.'

Just as Gotou sighed, Ishii called out to him.

'What?'

'Are you all right?'

Ishii's brows were furrowed in worry.

'What?'

'Well, I mean...'

It looked like Ishii was worried about how Gotou had almost hit Matsuda in the interrogation room earlier.

Gotou looked at the interrogation room door.

It'd be difficult to get any useful info out of Matsuda in this state. It would probably be better to work on what Yakumo requested.

'Ishii, we're going.'

As Gotou said that, he started walking.

'Eh? Where to?'

'We're investigating something on Yakumo's request.'

'What is it?'

'Anything.'

Gotou didn't want to explain.

'B-but.'

'What?'

'How about her interrogation?'

'Her?'

'Minowa Yuuko's.'

– That's right.

After interrogating Matsuda, they were going to ask Yuuko about the situation.

However, Gotou didn't think hearing her story again would change the situation easily. He felt depressed thinking that he would just hear more testimony that didn't match up.

'You do it.'

Gotou pushed the task to Ishii and walked away.

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Notes:

[1] I chose to translate this literally as glasses monkey (from meganezaru) even though the Japanese actually refers to the tarsier, since the word tarsier doesn't have the intended pun.

第二章

記憶の呪い

02
FILE:

File 02: The Curse Of Memory

-

Ishii stood in front of the door, took deep breaths and then pressed the intercom button.

After a while, the door opened and Minowa Yuuko showed up.

Ishii jolted upon seeing that face.

Her pale skin, smooth features and almond eyes stood out conspicuously.

The face of the Yuuko in front of Ishii overlapped with the face of the woman Ishii knew. They really did look alike.

– No, there’s no way.

Ishii shook his head. There was no way she was her.

‘I am Ishii of the Setamachi precinct. There were a number of things the police wanted to ask you about regarding the incident...’ said Ishii after he had regained his senses.

‘Come in,’ said Yuuko, urging him inside.

‘E-excuse me.’

Ishii went through the entrance to the living room at the end of the corridor, with Yuuko leading him.

There were a number of cardboard boxes by the wall.

‘I’m sorry for the mess. I was preparing to move...’

Yuuko sounded apologetic.

Yuuko had been engaged to the murdered Mochizuki. She had probably been preparing to move so that they could live together.

It was like she had fallen from the peak of happiness to the bottom of a pit.

'Please sit down.'

'Thank you.'

Ishii sat at the dining table chair as he was told.

'Are you alone?' asked Yuuko as she sat down opposite him.

Detectives were supposed to work in pairs.

That was what Ishii had planned on doing too, but Gotou, who was supposed to come with him, had gone away somewhere alone after the interrogation with Matsuda.

'I am alone today.'

'I see...'

There was a silence.

Ishii didn't know where to start.

'So what is it that you are here for today...'

Yuuko looked anxious, like she couldn't bear with the silence.

'Ah, please excuse me. I would like to hear about the day of the incident once more in detail...' Ishii said hurriedly.

He might find out something if he heard the situation in detail.

'In detail...?'

'Yes. When did you go to that shrine?'

'Just as I said the first time, it was at about seven.'

'What did you go there for?'

'We had a meeting at his house about our marriage that day. We were heading back...'

Yuuko's eyes narrowed.

Perhaps she was remembering happier days, but those days wouldn't come again.

'Do you always go to the shrine when returning from Mochizuki-san's house?'

'No.'

'Then why?'

When Ishii asked that, Yuuko's expression stiffened. She looked displeased.

'I talked about that already.'

'Please tell me once more.'

'Do you know about... the tree of deceit?'

'Yes.'

There was a rumour that if you lied in front of the cedar tree at the shrine, you would be cursed.

'I wanted to confirm it before we married.'

'Confirm what?'

'Toshiki-san's feelings...'

After saying that much, Yuuko sniffled.

Couples had used that place to confirm each other's feelings when Ishii was in high school too. It was probably the same thing.

It was too much to think that this incident had occurred as a result.

A question suddenly came up in Ishii's head.

If Yuuko had wanted to confirm her fiancé's feelings in front of the tree of deceit, did that mean Yuuko doubted Toshiki's love?

'About Mochizuki Toshiki-san, er...'

Ishii fumbled for words, not sure how to ask.

'Because Toshiki-san didn't usually express his love aloud...' said Yuuko in a hoarse voice. She seemed to have sensed what Ishii was thinking.

'I see... Then what happened afterwards?'

When Ishii urged Yuuko to continue, she went completely pale.

Perhaps she had remembered the moment of the incident.

She opened her mouth to speak, but before she did, she covered her face with both hands.

Her shoulders were shaking. Quiet sobs slipped out of her.

'Are you all right?'

All Ishii could do was speak to her.

'I'm sorry... I'm fine.'

After a while, Yuuko sniffled and lifted her head.

Their eyes met.

A memory from ten years ago flashed through Ishii's head.

He had seen a woman's back in front of the large cedar tree. A woman with long black hair. Ishii had called out to her.

She had turned around in response.

She had had a coquettish smile on her face –

'What is it?'

When Yuuko called out to Ishii, he came back to his senses.

'Ah, no, it's nothing. S-so what happened afterwards?'

Ishii urged Yuuko to continue while averting his gaze.

'For a while, we talked at the shrine...'

'How long was that?'

'I don't remember clearly, but I don't think it was that long.'

'After that?'

'We were going to leave, when...'

Yuuko's gaze wandered, like she was searching for something.

'A man showed up?'

'Yes...'

'Did he suddenly come at you?'

'No.'

Yuuko shook her head.

'Then...'

'That man appeared in front of us with a knife and said this.'

'What did he say?'

Ishii cleared his throat and swallowed.

“‘You Mochizuki Toshiki?’ That's what he said...'

'Is that true?'

Ishii leant forward.

If what Yuuko said was true, that would mean Matsuda had lied –

The suspect, Matsuda, had said that he had just happened to assault Mochizuki and stab him with a knife for money.

However, Yuuko's testimony just now said that Matsuda had shown up in front of them and said, 'You Mochizuki Toshiki?'

That would mean Matsuda hadn't just happened to assault Mochizuki – he had been aiming for him from the start.

'Excuse me... Did you realise something?' asked Yuuko, sounding anxious.

'Ah, excuse me.'

Ishii hurriedly at up.

'Would it be acceptable if I asked you another question?' asked Ishii. Yuuko nodded.

'Did Mochizuki-san incur anyone's enmity?'

'Enmity...?'

'Yes.'

Ishii held his breath and waited for Yuuko's response.

Matsuda had been hired by someone to kill Mochizuki – that was Ishii's theory.

'There's no way. Not Toshiki-san...'

'Are you sure?' asked Ishii without thinking.

Something rattled in the back of his head. Something that he had shut away was trying to leap out. An ominous feeling –

'Toshiki-san was a kind person... Though I don't know about his work, he was somebody who understood other people's pain. Nobody could hate him.'

Ishii couldn't believe it.

It was as unrealistic as a fairy tale.

– Glasses monkey.

A voice rang in his ears.

Mochizuki's voice. Malicious, slimy, scornful and hostile –

'That's a lie. There must have been somebody who hated him. It'd be strange otherwise.'

Before Ishii realised, he had said it.

'Eh?'

'Ah, no. Excuse me.'

Ishii quickly covered it up, but it was too late.

'What do you know about Toshiki-san?'

Yuuko glared at him.

Under that pressure, a cold sweat covered Ishii's forehead.

'T-that's not it.'

'What's not it?'

'I was his classmate...'

'Eh?'

Yuuko's face left her in her shock.

'Mochizuki Toshiki-san and I were classmates in high school.'

'Is that so...'

'I'm sorry. That image was a bit different from how he was back then, so I just...'

Ishii wiped the sweat off his forehead.

For a while after that, neither of them said anything.

'Then you know about my older sister.'

How long was that silence? Yuuko spoke in a voice that sounded like it could fade away at any time.

'Your older sister?'

When Ishii said those words, he had an unpleasant feeling.

– They look similar.

That feeling had come back to him.

Perhaps – that thought popped up, but he erased it. He didn't want to believe it.

'My sister was named Kosaka Yukari.'

Yuuko's confession hit Ishii's head like an incredible impact.

He had almost forgotten that name. No, to be correct, he had been trying to forget that name –

'Are you really Kosaka Yukari-san's... younger sister?'

'Yes.'

'But your family names...'

'If you were classmates, you know about the incident with my sister, yes?'

'Ah, yes...' replied Ishii. His body wouldn't stop shaking.

'After that incident, my parents had a divorce. I was taken in by my mother, so...'

'I see...'

That was all Ishii could say.

He had felt it from the time he first met Yuuko. Now he knew why he had thought they looked alike. No, he had actually known, but he had rejected the thought.

The memories he had shut away were coming back all at once.

'Why did this happen...' said Yuuko to herself.

Tears rolled down her cheeks silently.

'No, I...'

Ishii had no way of knowing why fate operated the way it did.

'Two people important to me have died in the same place... I wonder if this is the curse of the tree of deceit...'

'W-what are you saying? A c-curse...'

'It makes me want to think that way. Perhaps my sister also...'

'S-stop!'

Ishii stood up. He wouldn't let Yuuko say any more.

His chair fell behind him loudly.

Yuuko stared at Ishii. Her eyes looked like Kosaka Yukari's.

– You killed her.

It was like they were saying that.

He couldn't breathe.

'P-please excuse me.'

Ishii fled the room.

He ran down the stairs.

He tried frantically to shut away the memories, but it was no use.

The memories of that day ten years ago came to him against his will –

It had been a day in his third year of high school. Ishii had been climbing the stone steps to the shrine.

To meet somebody.

After climbing up the stairs, that person had looked up at the tree of deceit with sad eyes.

– Excuse me.

Ishii had called out to her.

She had slowly turned around.

– Kosaka Yukari.

The moment Ishii thought that, he tripped on something and fell forward.

While bearing with the pain, Ishii slowly stood up.

He didn't remember where he had run from, but at some point, he had reached the bottom of the shrine's stone steps.

There was a black cat sitting on the steps.

'Aaaagh!'

Ishii yelled at the cat, not knowing what he was doing.

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2

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Haruka went step by step up the stone stairs.

She really was out of breath.

'Yakumo-kun, wait.'

She called out to Yakumo, who was a bit ahead of her.

'You end up like that because you don't get enough exercise,' said Yakumo as he turned around.

Haruka knew that without his saying it.

Haruka stopped and turned around to look at the stone steps she had climbed.

For a moment, she felt dizzy.

They were rather high up. If she fell here, she wouldn't be able to get away without an injury.

She was about to start climbing again when something black jumped out from the bushes by the steps.

'Aahh!'

She leapt back instinctively, lost her balance and made a misstep.

– I'm going to fall.

She had just thought that when Yakumo grabbed her arm just in time, so that she could regain her balance.

'You are so clumsy it's unbelievable,' said Yakumo, sounding exasperated.

Though Haruka didn't like his tone, he had saved her.

'Thanks.'

Haruka gave Yakumo her honest thanks, which made him snort and start climbing the steps again.

Haruka was about to follow him when she heard a purr from behind her.

'Ah!'

There was a black cat sitting right in front of her. This cat had probably leapt out earlier.

'I almost fell, you know,' said Haruka to the cat, but there was no way for the cat to understand. It just cocked its head, looking confused.

'Stop lagging behind.'

Yakumo called out to her from the top of the steps.

'I know,' muttered Haruka. She started climbing the steps again.

Since she had almost fallen earlier, this time, she held the railing tightly as she carefully walked onwards.

After reaching the top of the stairs, she turned around and saw the town spread out before her.

It was evening. The scenery, dyed orange, had an unspeakably vivid beauty.

'If you space out, you'll fall again,' said Yakumo while stifling a yawn. He

walked straight for the cedar tree.

'Wait!' called out Haruka, running after Yakumo.

'This is the tree of deceit...'

Haruka expressed her awe as she looked up at the huge tree from its roots.

What with Mai's incident, the towering cedar tree seemed to have a mysterious spiritual energy to it.

'Looking at this tree makes you think there might really be a curse,' said Haruka to herself.

'Curses comes from the belief in the power of language,' said Yakumo as he looked up at the cedar tree with narrowed eyes.

'Belief in the power of language?'

Haruka had heard the words before, but she didn't know the details.

'To put it simply, it's the power to make something real by saying it.'

'Like a superpower?'

'No. It's a subjective impression.'

'Subjective impression?'

'Yes. For example, people write the character for "person" in their palm when they're nervous, right?'

'Yeah.'

'That's a kind of power word or curse. It's the same as somebody in sports saying they'll definitely win right before a match. They do that and give themselves suggestions.'

'I see.'

Now that Yakumo said that, Haruka had an idea of what he meant.

'Romance is also like the power of language.'

'That so?'

'Yeah. If there's someone you like, leaving it as is won't do anything. There won't be any developments in your relationship.'

'Mmhm.'

'But by expressing your feelings in words, the situation changes. If the person you like has the same feelings, then you can develop your relationship into a romantic one.'

'And if they don't have the same feelings?'

'By failing, you can move on, right? Depending on the situation, by conveying your feelings, the other person might become conscious of you and start having romantic feelings for you as well. The power of words changes relationships. It's a curse.'

– I see.

Now that Haruka understood, she looked at Yakumo.

What would happen if I put the curse of love into practice now – that impulse came to her, but she stopped herself.

She was very afraid of changing their current relationship.

'In that meaning, the legend of the tree is itself a curse.'

Yakumo ran a finger along the cedar tree's trunk.

Perhaps it was just as he said.

People like Mai who believed in the rumour about the tree of deceit would be afraid that they were cursed if they lied in front of the tree.

That feeling itself could be the curse.

'Aaaagh!'

Haruka was about to speak when she heard something like a shriek.

It sounded like it came from the bottom of the steps.

Haruka looked at Yakumo's face. Then, she turned around and ran to the steps.

When she peered down, she saw a man crouching at the bottom of the steps.

A man she knew – it was Ishii.

'Ishii-san...'

Haruka was going to call out to him, but Yakumo stopped her.

He shook his head silently.

Haruka was confused, but she obeyed Yakumo.

It seemed like Ishii hadn't noticed them.

For a while, Ishii just stayed there, but then he slowly stood up, took off his glasses and rubbed his eyes before walking away.

It looked like he'd been crying –

'Yakumo-kun...'

When Haruka looked at Yakumo, he sighed.

'Ishii-san holds the key to this case.'

Haruka had no way of understanding what Yakumo meant –

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3

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'Ah, what a pain!'

The words slipped out of Gotou's mouth as he stepped into the archives room in the basement of the precinct.

– I want you to investigate whether anybody has died at the shrine in the past.

That was Yakumo's request.

At first, Gotou searched the database, but nothing came up.

When he asked the person in charge, they said that only documents from the past five years were included in the database. If Gotou wanted to find anything else, it would be in the archives.

That was why Gotou had come here, but there were four steel racks taller than he was. They were packed with files – when Gotou saw them, he completely lost his energy.

He'd thought it'd be simple work, but it looked like he'd been naive.

Gotou really hated menial work.

– I should've left this to Ishii.

Gotou was filled with regret, but he started checking the files one by one, taking them from the rack and placing them back afterwards.

When he did simple work like this, he ended up thinking about unnecessary things.

The first thing that came to his head was Matsuda's face.

His heart beat unsteadily.

Matsuda had confessed, but Gotou couldn't see Matsuda as a guy who'd assault someone for money.

He had those eyes –

Matsuda's eyes were filled with a strong will. They weren't the eyes of somebody who'd fallen to greed. Gotou could tell Matsuda was trying to protect something.

– Who's he covering for?

And if he is, who the hell was he trying to protect?

Gotou couldn't think of someone Matsuda would try to protect to the point of sacrificing his wife and daughter.

'Damn it!'

Gotou shook his head to clear it, but it was no use.

The next thing that came to mind was, for some reason, Ishii's face.

Ishii was always useless, but this time, he seemed even weirder than usual.

Maybe he was shaken because the victim was his classmate, but Gotou didn't feel like that was all.

It was like he was afraid of something.

Maybe Ishii knew something big about the case. Or maybe he was related somehow –

'No, there's no way.'

Gotou said that aloud to reject his own thought.

Ishii was still the detective Gotou was partnered with. There was no way Gotou would be able to investigate if he suspected him.

'The hell am I thinking...'

Gotou smiled self-derisively and focussed on searching the files.

'Found it...'

After a while, Gotou finally found the file he was looking for.

Gotou glared at the file.

Somebody had died at that shrine before.

It was ten years ago.

A local female high school student had been found dead at the bottom of the shrine's steps.

Cause of death was a cerebral contusion –

The police had investigated it as both a case and an accident.

In the end, it was decided that it wasn't a case and was just an accident.

'It stinks...'

Gotou took the file with him and left the archives.

He went up the stairs and left the precinct through the front entrance. Then, he took out his mobile and called Yakumo.

<Hello.>

After three rings, Yakumo answered in his sleepy tone.

'Found it.'

Gotou lit a cigarette.

The smoke felt heavy in his lungs.

<What did you find?>

'What? You asked me whether somebody died at the shrine in the past, right?'

<Ah, that?>

He sounded pretty uninterested when he was the one who'd asked Gotou to do it in the first place.

'Man...'

<So what sort of incident was it?>

'Ten years ago, a girl's corpse was found at the bottom of the stairs to the shrine.'

<Was it a murder?>

'At first, the investigation looked at it as both a case and an accident, but in the end, it was said to be an accident.'

<I see...>

Yakumo's voice changed, though just slightly.

Gotou could tell since he'd known him for so long. When Yakumo got like this, he felt something.

'So what are you going to do?' asked Gotou hopefully.

Yakumo had said the incident at the shrine in the past was related to the current case with Mochizuki.

What conclusion would Yakumo draw – Gotou was curious.

<I won't know if I don't investigate in detail.>

'What?'

<Anyway, please bring the files for that case.>

Yakumo spoke like it was a matter of fact.

Always using me like a gofer –

'If you want to see them, come get them yourself.'

<I don't really want to see them.>

'Hah?'

The unexpected response confused Gotou.

'Gotou-san, you want to show me the files to solve the case, yes?>

'You're the one who told me to look for them.'

<I understand. If you want to show them to me, please bring them.>

'Oi, wait a sec...'

Yakumo hung up without waiting for Gotou to finish.

'I'll just bring them then. Honestly,' muttered Gotou. He put his cigarette out in his portable ashtray and stared walking towards the parking lot.

After reaching his car, he looked up without thinking and saw the clouds in the sky dyed orange –

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4

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– Why did things turn out this way?

Ishii thought while tottering down the path from the shrine to the station.

However, no matter how he did so, he wouldn't find an answer. Ishii himself knew that best.

'I...'

He had started speaking when he heard a piercing honk.

'Eek!'

Ishii fell.

Then, a truck screeched to a stop.

'Idiot!'

A fierce-faced man stuck his head out of the driver's window and shouted at Ishii.

It looked like Ishii had been thinking too much and had tried to cross the road while ignoring the red light.

'I-I'm sorry.'

Ishii hurriedly stood up and went back to the sidewalk.

He almost died.

The truck's engine roared as it drove away.

'Something's wrong with me...'

Ishii wiped the sweat off his forehead.

When he found out that Yuuko, the witness to the crime, had been the younger sister of his high school classmate Kosaka Yukari, he had become more agitated than necessary.

Come to think of it, there was no way Mochizuki's murder had anything to do with the incident ten years ago.

It was just a coincidence.

'Right. It's got nothing to do with it,' Ishii said to himself. He leant against the guard rail and took out his mobile phone.

He had to focus on investigating Mochizuki Toshiki's murder right now.

Ishii called Gotou for further orders.

After a number of rings, Gotou answered in a very displeased voice.

<Who's it?>

'Ah, Ishii Yuutarou speaking.'

<I know that.>

'S-sorry.'

<So what do you want?>

'I finished questioning the witness...'

<How was it?>

'It was...'

Ishii didn't know where to start.

<You're not speaking clearly.>

'Actually..'

After a pause, Ishii told Gotou the circumstances of the incident that he had

heard from Yuuko.

– You Mochizuki Toshiki?

When Ishii relayed Matsuda's question, Gotou interrupted.

<What's that?>

'I can't say anything for certain with just the information on hand, but...'

<What?>

'If what she said is true, that would mean Matsuda did not assault Mochizuki at the shrine by chance, but that he had intended on assaulting him from the start.'

Ishii gave his theory in one breath.

<That's possible.>

'Yes.'

<But then that would mean Matsuda was lying.>

'Yes.'

<Which do you think it is?>

'I don't know.'

It was the truth.

Both testimonies sounded true to Ishii.

<You're an indecisive guy.>

'I'm sorry...'

Ishii could tell Gotou's words were directed at himself.

However, those words came out naturally.

<Why're you apologising?>

'Ah, no, I'm sorry...'

<I said, why are you apologising?>

'I'm so...'

<Ishii!>

'Y-yes sir.'

<Don't apologise for no reason. If you're a detective, be more unreserved.>

Ishii thought what Gotou was saying was correct, but even if Ishii knew it in his head, there were things he couldn't do.

Ishii had always lived while observing other people's expressions.

Trying his best not to stand out, trying his best not to get on people's nerves – it was like a defence mechanism.

Even if he didn't think he was at fault, if he just apologised, he could fix the situation. At some point his life, that had become a habit.

<Honestly...>

It sounded like Gotou was grumbling.

Ishii almost said 'I'm sorry' instinctively, but he managed to stop himself.

'So, I wanted to ask what I should...'

<Don't ask me.>

'B-but...'

<You should have tons of things to do.>

'E-eh...'

<Check Yuuko's background, ask around Matsuda's workplaces, look into Mochizuki's relationships...>

'U-understood.'

<Man, be a bit more independent.>

Ishii was about to say 'Sorry' again but hurriedly swallowed it.

'Er...'

<What?>

'Detective Gotou...'

<I'm busy dealing with Yakumo.>

After that comment, Gotou hung up.

Ishii was putting his mobile away when he realised he'd forgotten to tell Gotou something.

The fact that Yuuko's older sister, Kosaka Yukari, was Mochizuki Toshiki's classmate.

He thought about calling again, but he changed his mind.

'It's got nothing to do with it,' murmured Ishii. He looked up and noticed a man standing on the opposite side of the road.

He wore a black suit. He had long hair and wore sunglasses. His lips were turned up in a faint smile.

– That man.

Ishii had seen this man with a strange presence before.

Feeling drawn towards him, Ishii was about to approach when a large bus passed in front of his eyes.

He stepped back in surprise.

By the time the bus had gone out of Ishii's sight, the man had already disappeared –

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5

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'Honestly...'

Gotou said that without thinking after he finished his call with Ishii.

Why was Ishii so hesitant? Even though detectives should be more unreserved, Ishii always seemed afraid of something.

However, it wasn't that Gotou disliked Ishii.

Rather, he had expectations for him. He wanted to do something for him. Gotou had always been awkward, so he didn't know how to put things into words – he always ended up speaking strictly.

He thought that Ishii would probably have grown more smoothly if he had paired with somebody else.

'What the hell am I thinking about?'

Gotou shook his head to clear it and started walking.

He passed through Meisei University's front gates and went to prefabricated building behind Block B.

'Sorry to bother.'

Gotou opened the door to the room at the very back for the Movie Research Circle.

'If you know you're a bother, please go home,' said Yakumo, rubbing his eyes sleepily as he sat on the chair by the wall.

That was his response.

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

'I don't need you, Gotou-san, but those documents.'

Yakumo pointed at the brown envelope Gotou was holding.

'Here.'

Gotou threw the files to Yakumo.

Yakumo caught the envelope, quickly took the files out and started reading them.

'Honestly...' grumbled Gotou as he sat down.

'What is Ishii-san doing today?' asked Yakumo, eyes on the files.

'Working another case.'

'The murder case at the shrine then.'

'Yeah.'

'Is it OK leaving him alone?'

'He's not some brat. He's gotta work on his own sometimes.'

'Can you really say that about someone else?'

Yakumo looked at Gotou mockingly.

'What do you mean by that?'

'Exactly what I said.'

'This brat...'

Gotou clicked his tongue.

After a pause, the door opened.

'Gotou-san.'

Haruka was the one who came in.

She had a plastic bag from the convenience store.

'Hey. It's been a while.'

'You look well.'

Haruka sat down next to Gotou with a smile.

'I'm not,' grumbled Gotou, putting his chin in his hand.

'Is there a case?'

'How are you doing, Haruka-chan?'

'Actually, there was some trouble...'

Haruka glanced at Yakumo. Yakumo seemed to be focussing on the files and didn't even lift his head.

'When you say trouble, is it ghost trouble?' asked Gotou.

Haruka nodded.

'Do you know the tree of deceit?'

'Yeah. The one at the shrine, right?'

Where Mochizuki Toshiki was murdered.

'My friend was possessed by a woman's ghost there.'

'When?'

'Yesterday.'

– I see.

Gotou understood now.

Yakumo was investigating Haruka's request when he showed up at that shrine.

At the same place, on the same day, a murder case and a spiritual phenomenon – it made sense for Yakumo to think they were related.

'So it really was you, Haruka-chan.'

'What do you mean by "really"?''

Haruka puffed her cheeks out in a sulk.

– Troublemaker.

Yakumo teased Haruka by calling her that. Because she always picked up

trouble due to her kind nature.

It was to the point, but Haruka didn't like it.

She didn't want to trouble Yakumo – she wanted to support him.

– A strong girl.

'It's nothing. Don't worry about it.'

Gotou shrugged. At this point, Yakumo lifted his head.

'Couldn't you be a bit quieter?' Yakumo said, sounding displeased. He ran a hand through his messy hair. Though his tone irritated Gotou, he wouldn't be able to keep up if he bothered with everything Yakumo said.

'Ah, my bad.'

'As long as you understand,' Yakumo said placidly.

It was irritating, but Gotou restrained himself.

'So what did you find out?' asked Gotou.

Yakumo looked at Haruka.

'Before that, food.'

'Right. Here.'

Haruka put the plastic bag from the convenience store on the table.

Haruka stuck his hand in and took a rice ball and a bottle of tea from inside.

'Would you like to eat as well, Gotou-san?'

'Sorry about this.'

Gotou was just getting hungry, so at Haruka's invitation, he decided to take a rice ball.

'So how about it?' Gotou asked again, rice ball in hand.

'The ghost possessing your friend is undoubtedly the woman in these files,

Kosaka Yukari.'

Yakumo placed a photograph from the files on the table.

'What sort of person is she?'

Haruka peered at the photo.

Kosaka Yukari was thin and had a sensitive-looking face, but she could probably be called a beauty.

'Ten years ago, this woman fell from the shrine's steps and died,' responded Gotou.

Eyes wide, Haruka put her hands over her mouth.

'Fell and died...'

'But why would a woman who died in an accident possess Haruka-chan's friend?'

Gotou didn't understand.

'I don't know the reason either, but the spirit that has possessed her keeps saying the same thing.'

'What?'

'I'll kill you –'

Upon hearing Haruka's response, a chill ran down Gotou's spine.

'Who does she want to kill?' asked Gotou.

Yakumo raised his left eyebrow.

'It'd be easy work if I knew that.'

'Well, yeah.'

'Rather than "who", it might be better to find out "why" first.'

'I see.'

It was just as Yakumo said.

To hate someone to the point of wanting to kill them, there had to be an appropriate reason. If they found out what it was, they would probably find out who the person was naturally.

'So do you have any ideas?' asked Gotou.

Yakumo grimaced.

'This is only a theory, but...'

'What?'

'What if her fall ten years ago was not an accident but a murder?'

'Don't be ridiculous!'

Gotou yelled without thinking.

'Please don't speak so loudly.'

Yakumo put his fingers in his eyes to complain.

'Stop whining. The police aren't stupid. They wouldn't say it was an accident without any evidence.'

'I looked at the files, but the reason the police decided it was an accident was because they found no evidence that said it was a murder.'

'Urgh...'

Gotou couldn't retort. It was just as Yakumo said.

The police had looked into the possibility it was a murder at first, but they found no evidence for it.

In short, they'd said it was an accident because the other possibility was ruled out.

'If Kosaka Yukari-san was killed by someone, it would make sense for her to be wandering this world with strong hatred even after ten years had passed.'

'Hatred because of her murder...' said Haruka, sounding pained as she put her hand to her heart.

Yakumo nodded.

'But who the hell killed her and why?'

'I don't know. I said this earlier, but Kosaka Yukari-san's being murdered is only my theory.'

'That's true, but...'

Even though Yakumo said it was a theory, it seemed true to Gotou.

Kosaka Yukari was killed by someone. To take revenge, she wandered the world and possessed Haruka's friend –

While thinking, Gotou suddenly came to his senses and let out an 'Ah!'.

He had almost forgotten the reason he had come here.

Gotou wasn't investigating the case ten years ago to save Haruka's friend. It was because Yakumo had said it might have something to do with Mochizuki's murder.

'So how is Kosaka Yukari, who died ten years ago, related to Mochizuki's murder?'

'Gotou-san, you can read, can you not?'

Yakumo looked at Gotou like he were something dirty.

'You making fun of me!?'

'Correct.'

Yakumo clapped his hands.

'You brat! Want me to punch you?'

'You respond with violence so quickly. Just like a wild bear.'

'Who's a bear!?'

'Who else besides you, Gotou-san?'

'If you don't stop it, I really will punch you!'

Though Gotou was shouting, it was ineffective against Yakumo. He opened his mouth wide and yawned.

Beside him, Haruka stifled her laughter.

With responses like these, Gotou lost his nerve.

'Explain what you mean.'

Gotou got back on topic. Yakumo's eyes narrowed slightly.

'Did you not notice anything upon looking at Kosaka Yukari-san's history?'

'What?'

Gotou stole the files from Yakumo and focussed his eyes on them, but he still didn't understand.

'Just tell me already.'

Gotou threw the files onto the table.

'Is that the attitude you should take when asking somebody for something?'

Yakumo put his chin in his hand.

'Stop putting on airs,' said Gotou.

Yakumo shook his head, seeming truly exasperated.

'I'm not putting on airs. I am just asking for you to act like an adult.'

'Ah, man, I got it. Please. Please tell me,' said Gotou, half in despair.

'Your attitude isn't great, but I'll let it pass.'

Yakumo shrugged.

Gotou wanted to punch him, but if Yakumo's mood worsened here, they'd get nowhere.

Gotou took deep breaths to calm himself.

'So what is it?' urged Haruka.

'Yeah, tell us already.'

'Kosaka Yukari-san, who died ten years ago, was born in the same year as Mochizuki-san, who was killed this time.'

'What?'

Gotou hurriedly looked at the files.

It was just as Yakumo said. They were born in the same year.

'Furthermore, their school was also the same.'

'Wha!'

Gotou looked at Kosaka Yukari's history, written in the files.

– Kaisei High School, comprehensive courses.

The same school as Mochizuki's.

'So the two would have known each other...'

'It is likely.'

'What the hell is this...'

Gotou felt himself growing paler. It could be a coincidence, but he didn't think it was.

The two cases were related – he was almost sure of it.

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6

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It was already dark.

Ishii staggered along the street in front of the station.

Gotou had given him a number of instructions, but he didn't know where to start – or rather, he didn't feel like doing anything.

He still hadn't accepted reality.

'Ishii-san.'

Just as Ishii took a deep sigh, somebody called out to him.

When he turned around, he saw Hijikata Makoto running towards him.

The woman had well-defined features on her elegant face and wore a grey trouser suit. For some reason, Makoto was kind to Ishii, but Ishii wasn't good with her.

It wasn't her fault. It was just that they didn't meet under good circumstances.

When Ishii first met Makoto, she had been possessed by a ghost.

She was completely normal now, but the image of her with her eyes wide as she screamed 'I'll kill you' was still vivid in his mind.

'M-Makoto-san...

Ishii greeted Makoto with a twitching smile.

'You're alone today.'

'Eh, ah, yes...'

She was probably talking about Gotou.

It felt like she was scolding him for not working in a pair, so he felt flustered.

'Did something happen?' asked Makoto, peering at Ishii's face.

'Eh?'

'You look down.'

'T-that's not true.'

'That's a lie.'

'No, I, er...'

'There's no point hiding it. It's written on your face.'

Ishii frantically touched his face.

When Makoto saw that, she laughed happily. Ishii replied to that with a wry smile.

'Right. Ishii-san, do you have some time?'

Makoto clapped her hands together.

'No, er... I could say I have time, but I could say I don't...'

'Shall we have tea?'

'Eh, but...'

'It's fine, isn't it? You need to take a breather every once in a while.'

'But...'

Ignoring Ishii's hesitation, Makoto smiled and started briskly walking towards a nearby cafe.

Ishii followed her, as if he was being dragged along.

At first, Ishii had thought of Makoto as a graceful woman, but that image had changed recently.

Completely the opposite of Ishii, Makoto was decisive and active.

When she opened the cafe door, there was the sound of a bell.

The dark and narrow shop had a counter on the left with square tables on the right.

'How about here?'

'S-sure.'

Ishii sat down at the table at Makoto's urging.

There was a clock with a large pendulum on the wall. Perhaps it was broken, as the clock's needles were pointed at the wrong time, and the pendulum was no longer moving.

When Ishii saw that, his sleeping memories woke up once more.

– I've come to this shop before.

When he was in high school. The same seat. The clock had still been working then.

Toshiki had been in the opposite seat.

This is what he'd said.

– I have a request.

A pang of pain shot through his forehead.

– No. No. No. I don't want to remember.

'Are you all right?' asked Makoto.

'Yes, it's nothing.'

Ishii shook his head.

A waiter with brown hair – probably a student part-timer – came to take their order. Makoto ordered coffee, so Ishii did the same.

After taking one sip of the coffee brought to him by the waiter, Ishii felt a bit better.

When he looked up, he saw Makoto staring at his face.

Ishii, who was an extremely late bloomer, had next to experience being looked at by women. With no idea how to respond, he started stirring his coffee with a spoon for no reason.

'So what happened?'

Makoto's question made Ishii's hand stop.

It looked like Makoto was trying to listen to Ishii's worries.

'No, I...'

'Please don't hide it.'

'No...'

'Ishii-san, you're not somebody who can lie.'

'Is that so?'

Ishii couldn't relax, feeling like Makoto had seen right through him.

'Please talk, if you don't mind my listening. That said, all I can do is listening.'

Makoto shrugged.

'No, but...'

Ishii was grateful for Makoto's feelings, but he couldn't just chat about information related to the case.

Furthermore, Ishii himself didn't know why he was so disturbed. He couldn't explain feelings he didn't understand himself to somebody else.

An awkward silence continued.

'It must be the incident at the shrine,' said Makoto without delay.

Ishii felt terrified.

'What?'

'The victim was your classmate, right, Ishii-san?'

'W-why do you...'

Ishii's shocked expression made Makoto laugh.

'I am a newspaper reporter. I know that much.'

'Ah, I see...'

Ishii wiped the sweat from his forehead.

'Were you close?'

'Eh?'

Ishii didn't understand the question.

'With the victim.'

'We... weren't that close...' replied Ishii with a bitter smile.

Even though he was just sitting still, his heart was pounding and it hurt to breathe.

'Is that so?'

Though Makoto replied, her brows furrowed in confusion.

Ishii drank all his coffee all at once, trying to clear the uncomfortable air.

'How was your high school life, Ishii-san?'

Ishii's heart skipped a beat at Makoto's question.

He wasn't sure how to respond. There was nothing he could talk about. No, the truth was a lot had happened, but he didn't want to talk about it.

If he talked about it, his heart would creak under the pain.

'N-normal. How was yours, Makoto-san?' Ishii asked, avoiding the conversation.

'I was... a gloomy student.'

'I wouldn't have guessed that.'

Ishii meant it.

Makoto was normally good at taking care of other people and seemed like an

older sister type. Ishii had thought that she would have been the same in high school, liked by everyone.

'Since my dad was a police officer, people usually stayed away from me.'

'Ah...'

Makoto's father had resigned for certain reasons, but he had been the chief of the police before.

When young, even if you didn't want it to, your parents' titles were enough to make people attack you.

'That's why I practically had no friends as a kid – I just read a lot of books. And I wasn't good at talking with people – I talked with practically no one.'

'Is that so...'

It wasn't that Ishii doubted Makoto's story, but it sounded so different than how she was now that it didn't seem real.

'Since I didn't have much of a presence, at one point, my classmates bullied me, calling me a ghost. Everyone said that they'd be cursed if they approached me...'

Makoto's expression relaxed, but there seemed to be a sadness in the back of her eyes, a dark shadow.

'Makoto-san...'

'When I approached, people would hold their breath and run away.'

'Wha...'

That was incredibly malicious bullying.

People could do unimaginably mean things. They didn't understand the pain and sadness of the people who underwent that.

From the bottom of Ishii's stomach, anger started bubbling up.

'They'd even put salt on my desk when I went to school.'

'That's awful!' shouted Ishii, unable to bear it.

Makoto looked a bit surprised. Her eyes went wide, but finally, she smiled gently.

'Ishii-san, you really are a kind person.'

Makoto's words were gentle, enveloping the anger within Ishii.

It made him feel strangely embarrassed. He looked away without thinking.

'No, not really...'

'No, you are kind, Ishii-san. You understand other people's pain.'

Makoto looked at Ishii's face.

She was wrong. It wasn't that Ishii understood other people's pain – he had just experienced the feelings of somebody being bullied himself.

'Wasn't it tough?' asked Ishii.

Makoto smiled.

'Yes... It was tough then. But...'

'What is it?'

'Now, I think of it as a good experience.'

'Good experience?'

Ishii had no idea why she thought that.

'It's because of my experiences as a student that I'm who I am now.'

'What do you mean?'

'At that time, I think that if I was on the side of the bullies then, I would have had a different life.'

'Is that how it is?'

'Yes. I wouldn't have become a newspaper reporter, and I wouldn't have met you either, Ishii-san.'

'A philosophical view.'

Ishii couldn't think of it that way.

'I started thinking that way because of a novel.'

'A novel?'

'Yes. Have you read *The Count of Monte Cristo*?'

'It's a story of revenge, right?'

Ishii hadn't read it before, but he had seen an anime based on it a few years ago, so he knew the general idea.

A man who had been imprisoned on false pretences crawled out of despair for revenge.

'There's a line in it like this. "Only a man who has felt ultimate despair is capable of feeling ultimate bliss. It is necessary to have wished for death in order to know how good life is to live."'

'I see,' said Ishii.

If you didn't experience despair, you couldn't feel happiness. You could think of it that way.

'I feel a bit embarrassed.'

Makoto smiled bashfully and took a sip of her coffee.

She hadn't lived an easy life either – she had had many troubles. Now that Ishii knew that very obvious fact, he felt strangely close to her.

'Now it's your time, Ishii-san.'

'Yes?'

'What sort of student were you?'

'No, there's nothing for me to talk about...'

As he said that, he saw the clock.

The memories of ten years ago suddenly came back to him.

– Glasses monkey.

A voice rang in his ears.

Even though Makoto was in front of him, for some reason, he saw Mochizuki's face.

His malicious eyes glared at him, like a snake.

– No.

Ishii's hands turned into fists.

Blood rushed to his face.

– Oi. Glasses monkey. Massage my shoulders.

– Glasses monkey. Buy me juice.

– Why's a glasses monkey wearing clothes? Take them off. Take them off and dance.

Ishii covered his ears, but the words kept coming.

– Glasses monkey. From today on, you're my slave.

He couldn't breathe.

He couldn't stop sweating.

– No. No. No.

'No!' shouted Ishii, shaking his head frantically.

He felt like he was falling backwards into a deep, dark hole.

'Ishii-san.'

When Makoto called out to him, Ishii opened his eyes and lifted his head.

Makoto looked at him, seeming worried, and held his hand.

'Makoto-san...'

'Are you all right?'

The feeling of Makoto's fingers helped Ishii regain his reason.

'Ah. Yes.'

'Sorry. I asked something I shouldn't have.'

'No... I just...'

Ishii took deep breaths.

– I can't think like Makoto does.

He realised that anew.

He couldn't say it was a good experience even if his mouth split open.

The injuries on his heart couldn't be healed with time. He would always continue to run in fear.

That was why, even now – he couldn't forgive Mochizuki.

'Please excuse me for today.'

Ishii bowed towards Makoto, stood up and fled the cafe.

-

7

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'I don't get it,' groaned Gotou, scratching his chin.

He understood from Yakumo's explanation that Mochizuki had been a classmate of Yukari, the girl who fell and died from the stone steps ten years ago at this shrine.

However, Gotou had another question.

'What don't you understand?'

Haruka cocked her head.

'What I want to know is who's lying.'

'Lying?'

Come to think of it, Gotou hadn't told Haruka the case summary.

Gotou explained to Haruka what had happened at the shrine last night.

In this case, Matsuda, the suspect, and Yuuko, the witness, and the victim, Mochizuki, all had different testimonies.

The strangely off testimonies warped and hid the truth.

'That's...'

Haruka sounded surprised.

Gotou looked to Yakumo for an answer.

Yakumo ran a hand through his messy hair with his usual sleepy eyes.

'So what's going on?' asked Gotou.

Yakumo looked annoyed.

'Nothing's going on.'

'What?'

'I'm saying that deciding whose testimony is true at this stage would be dangerous.'

Yakumo was speaking incredibly vaguely.

'Say it in a way I'll understand.'

'And are they even lying?'

Yakumo's unexpected question made Gotou confused for a moment, but –

'Somebody's got to be lying or things wouldn't line up,' said Gotou

agitatedly, but Yakumo looked at him with extremely cold eyes.

'That isn't definite.'

'What?'

'Gotou-san, you are a helpless idiot.'

'What did you say?'

'You are useless, with a uselessly large body.'

Yakumo smiled at him mockingly.

'I'll beat you to a pulp!'

Gotou stood up, raising his fist.

Yakumo nodded in satisfaction.

'Gotou-san, did you want to kill me just now?'

– What?

Gotou didn't think Yakumo would ask that question now.

He'd said many times that he'd beat Yakumo to a pulp or that he'd kill him, but he'd never actually acted on it. It was natural.

It was just a part of his banter with Yakumo.

'Of course not,' denied Gotou.

Yakumo smirked.

– What's so funny?

'Gotou-san, even if you don't mean it, what would other people think?'

'I see!' exclaimed Haruka, who seemed to have understood what Yakumo was hinting at.

However, Gotou didn't understand.

'What are you talking about?'

'To explain this situation from another angle, a detective from criminal affairs was irritated by a university student's rude manner and threatened him, raising his fist and saying 'I'll beat you to a pulp' – that is how it would seem. If I sued the police, it might become an intimidation case.'

'That's just quibbling...'

Gotou ground his teeth together.

'It isn't quibbling. It's a fact that you said you'd beat me to a pulp, Gotou-san.'

'That's true, but...'

'Though I didn't feel any fear from that, there are some people who would have been afraid from hearing that from a detective, yes?'

'Fear, eh...'

Gotou looked at his clenched fist.

He kind of understood what Yakumo was saying.

'In short, even if you didn't mean that as a threat, some people might have taken it that way.'

'Yeah, but that's got nothing to do with this case, right?'

'It does,' said Yakumo firmly.

'What do you mean?'

'Like the earlier example, perspective can change what seemed to happen, but that doesn't make it a lie.'

Gotou finally understood.

The testimonies weren't lies. The viewpoints might just be different – that was probably Yakumo's point.

It was true that perhaps that was the case.

'This is difficult.'

Haruka furrowed her brows and put her chin in her hands.

'It's not difficult. Cases occur because of differences in points of view.'

'Yeah,' agreed Gotou.

It wasn't just this time. As Yakumo said, there were unexpectedly many cases that occurred because of differences of opinion.

It was like that with stalkers.

From the view of the victim, they didn't feel anything but fear for their safety, but the person doing it sometimes just had pure feelings of love.

'Furthermore, to determine the lie in the testimony, rather than who, it would be better to determine where,' Yakumo said slowly, narrowing his eyes as he looked into the distance.

'You mean the scene of the crime?' asked Gotou.

Yakumo snorted, sounding disappointed.

'You really are an idiot.'

'What?'

'Even if somebody lied, that doesn't mean their whole testimony is a lie, correct.'

Gotou finally understood.

'So how do we determine that?'

'Nobody would have any difficulties if we knew that,' Yakumo said, cutting Gotou down.

– Well, that's true.

-

-

Ishii stood at the shrine where the murder occurred.

A human figure was drawn on the ground beside the tree of deceit.

There were still blood.

A black bird let out an uncanny call as it flew off.

He had returned home. He didn't know why he was here. He would go home for now. He started walking slowly.

'Glasses monkey.'

Ishii heard a voice from behind him.

He pretended not to hear it. He didn't know why, but he felt like he couldn't turn around.

However, the owner of the voice wasn't kind enough to let that pass.

Ishii was kicked in the back.

The impact forced Ishii to fall forward. A sharp pain shot through his nose.

When Ishii looked up, he was standing there.

– Mochizuki Toshiki.

The man who should have been stabbed.

– Why him?

Mochizuki wore a blazer uniform, his hands in his pockets as he smirked.

When he smiled, he showed his canines and his nose twitched.

It was an unpleasant smile. Ishii had always hated Mochizuki's smile –

'What're you looking at me like that for?'

Mochizuki kicked Ishii's stomach.

His body contorted in pain. Without a pause, Mochizuki grabbed Ishii's hair. There was a ripping sound as some of Ishii's hair came out.

However, Mochizuki didn't care – he pushed Ishii's head into the cedar tree. There was a dull thud.

'Disobeying me even when you're just a glasses monkey? You're a hundred years too early for that.'

'I-i...'

Ishii's voice shook.

'Ah!' exclaimed Mochizuki in surprise. He let go of Ishii.

There was blood on Mochizuki's uniform.

Ishii put his hand to his nose and felt something wet. It seemed like he had a nosebleed.

'Do something about this. You got it dirty.'

Mochizuki glared at Ishii with a click of his tongue.

It wasn't Ishii's fault that he had a nosebleed. It was because Mochizuki had kicked him, making Ishii fall and hit his nose. But that logic wouldn't work on Mochizuki.

'M-my bad,' replied Ishii, swallowing his shame.

Then, Mochizuki kicked him in the behind.

'What are you talking so impolitely to me for?'

Ishii and Mochizuki were classmates, but they had an absolute power relationship.

Upperclassman and underclassman – no, it was more than that. He probably only thought of Ishii as a slave.

'I-I'm sorry.'

'You think that apology's enough for me to forgive you?'

'Eh?'

'Kneel. Head to the ground. Prostrate yourself.'

'I-i didn't do...'

Mochizuki slapped Ishii, cutting off his words.

'Don't talk back to me! You wanna die?'

Mochizuki's sharp gaze shot through Ishii. He lost his will to oppose him.

He couldn't fight back. Mochizuki would just come back him with the same power multiplied. All he could do was bear it.

He hated how worthless he was, but that was how he was.

'I sincerely apologise.'

Ishii knelt and put his head to the ground.

As Ishii bore with the humiliation, he heard laughter in his ears.

Mocking, hateful laughter –

Ishii lifted his head just slightly.

It was her voice.

Standing next to Mochizuki, she looked at Ishii like he was an animal in a cage.

'Ten thousand yen tomorrow as a cleaning fee,' said Mochizuki. Then, he walked away with her.

As Ishii watched them leave, he felt his emotions well within him.

'I'll kill you...' he muttered, gripping his hands into tight fists.

– I'll kill you. I'll kill you. I'll kill you.

The words repeated in his heart like a curse, growing into a yell and slipping

out of his mouth.

'I'll kill you!'

Then, she and Mochizuki disappeared into the darkness.

For a moment, his vision went black.

When Ishii could see again, Mochizuki was collapsed at his feet.

His lifeless eyes looked up at the sky. In his chest, a knife stuck out like a gravestone. Blood was flowing out.

– What is this?

Ishii looked at his hands.

For some reason, they were dyed red.

'You...'

There was a woman's voice.

Ishii leapt in surprise. Fearful, he turned around slowly.

She stood there.

The left portion of her head was sunken in. Her face was dyed red from blood.

'Aah...'

Ishii tried to run, but he tripped on Mochizuki's corpse.

She whispered in Ishii's ear.

'You killed him.'

'No...'

Ishii covered his eyes.

However, he could still hear her voice.

'You killed him.'

'No. No. No.'

'You...'

'No!'

Ishii woke up at his own scream.

His body was drenched with sweat. It took him some time to calm his ragged breathing.

– A dream?

After a while, Ishii realised that what he had seen earlier had been a dream.

– But was that really a dream?

Ishii held his head. It had felt so real.

He wouldn't find an answer. No, he didn't need one. He told himself that and sat up.

He pulled open the curtains to reveal a grey sky.

– Something bad's going to happen.

That feeling struck Ishii's heart.

-

9

-

Gotou went to the hospital Yuuko worked at first thing in the morning.

He was going to confirm what her work attitude was at her workplace.

'Excuse me...'

After going through the front entrance, Ishii spoke up from beside Gotou in an anxious voice.

Ishii was normally hesitant, but he was more so than usual. He looked afraid

of something. He looked a bit pale too.

'What?'

'Is it all right for us to just go without an appointment?'

'Investigations wouldn't get anywhere if we had to make appointments every time we went looking for info.'

Gotou's fist came down on Ishii's head.

And if they contacted ahead of time saying they'd be questioning, people would be on guard, making it more difficult for them to get info.

'I-I'm sorry.'

Ishii rubbed his head, looking pathetic.

At this rate, he'd never be able to do anything on his own.

Gotou sighed and looked towards the reception.

'Please take a number,' said the middle-aged woman at the reception without even looking at Gotou's face.

'I'm not here for a consultation.'

Gotou held out his police ID. Finally, the woman looked up.

'What do you need today?'

'There was a nurse called Minowa Yuuko, right? I've got a few questions about her. I want you to tell me who was directly above her.'

'Please wait a moment,' the woman said quickly. She went into the back.

After a while, she returned, telling Gotou that there was a head nurse named Sasamoto in the paediatrics section in the annexe, and that she was the one Gotou was looking for.

'Let's go,' Gotou said to Ishii. They headed for the annexe.

He looked out the window as he walked down the corridor and saw thick

clouds covering the sky. It looked like it could rain at any moment.

'Ah!'

Ishii suddenly called out.

Gotou couldn't help but be surprised.

'What?'

'Ah, no... It's nothing...'

Ishii looked away evasively.

Well, since it was Ishii, it probably wasn't anything big – he'd probably just been surprised at something stupid. Gotou didn't pry any further and continued walking.

At the nurse station on the second floor of the annexe, there was a woman who was probably in her forties.

'Excuse me, are you the police?' she asked immediately upon looking at Gotou.

'You Sasamoto?' asked Gotou.

She nodded.

It looked like she had been waiting here after reception contacted her. That made things quicker.

'If you wouldn't mind, would you follow me?' Sasamoto said, sounding reserved, as she urged Gotou and Ishii into the meeting room by the nurse station.

Maybe she didn't want other people to hear what she had to say, or she was worried that the patients might be unnecessarily confused if they found out a detective was here – well, Gotou didn't care where they were if he got info.

Gotou followed Sasamoto into the meeting room.

In the space as wide as eight tatami mats, there were only two simple beds and a table for four. A desolate room.

It was probably used as a break room.

Gotou sat next to Ishii, and Sasamoto sat opposite them.

'We came about Minowa Yuuko today,' said Gotou.

Sasamoto looked pained.

'She had only just become engaged, and then that happened... Really, what a poor thing...'

Sasamoto's tone was heavy.

Gotou could tell she really felt bad about what happened.

'She wanted the marriage?'

'Of course.'

Sasamoto looked angry at Gotou's question.

It was like she couldn't understand why he'd asked that.

'She quit when she got engaged. Three days or so before the incident.'

'To become a housewife?'

'I don't know.'

'Seems like she didn't care too much about work.'

'That's not true.'

Sasamoto shook her head.

'But she planned on quitting, right?'

'That's different. She was very fervent about work. Since the paediatrics unit has children for patients, unlike the usual departments, you can't work here with half-hearted feelings,' Sasamoto said with feeling.

Rather than praising Yuuko's work, it felt more like she had pride in her own work.

'Excuse me... Yuuko-san was in paediatrics then,' said Ishii, who had been silent until now.

'Yes, she was.'

Ishii's question had sounded pointed, so Gotou thought that maybe there was something there, but Ishii just said 'Hmm' and then went silent.

– I don't get the guy.

Gotou continued his questions.

'Did Minowa Yuuko seem strange?'

'No...'

Sasamoto denied it immediately, but her expression seemed strained.

– There's something there.

Gotou felt it.

'Anything's fine. Tell us what you know.'

Gotou leant forward and looked at Sasamoto.

Maybe Sasamoto lost to that gaze, as she looked away and started talking.

'Actually, there was something...'

'What?' urged Gotou.

Sasamoto stuck out her chin and furrowed her brows, looking troubled. She had started talking, but it looked like she still wasn't sure she should.

'Anything's fine,' urged Gotou again.

'I don't think it's related to the case, but...' began Sasamoto in a serious tone.

'That's fine.'

'She's been a bit odd recently.'

'Odd?'

'She's serious about work and patients like her too, but... sometimes, she would lose concentration, or...'

Sasamoto's explanation was too vague for Gotou to understand.

'Talk in concrete terms,' said Gotou, suppressing his irritation.

'She's been spacing out more often recently.'

'Doesn't that happen often before marriage?'

Marriage blues were a common story.

It wouldn't be strange if Yuuko had felt that way too.

'That's what I thought at first too, but it was strange for that.'

'Strange?'

'Yes. She wouldn't answer even when called, or she'd just stand in the hallway...'

'Really sounds like she was out of it.'

'Yes, but that isn't all.'

'There's more?'

'It was about a week ago, but when I went into the medicine inventory, she was there. She hadn't even turned on the lights. She was just there by herself in the dark.'

'That's...'

– Creepy.

Gotou gulped.

'I tried to call out to her, but she was muttering to herself.'

'Muttering?'

'Yes. I couldn't tell what she was saying, but it was like there was someone in front of her...'

'What do you mean?'

'I don't know. Anyway, I went up to her because I was worried. Then...'

After saying that much, Sasamoto's eyes suddenly went open.

'Eek!'

Ishii let out a pitiful scream in his surprise.

Gotou had forgotten Ishii was even there – he ended up being surprised himself.

'Shut up.'

Gotou smacked Ishii in the head and urged Sasamoto to continue.

'I approached Yuuko-san and called out to her. Then, she suddenly let out a scream...'

Sasamoto's voice became a whisper.

'What happened?'

'She collapsed, like she'd fainted.'

'Collapsed?'

'Yes.'

'Was she sick?'

'I asked a doctor to look at her, but there was nothing wrong with her body... Said it was probably psychological...'

'And?'

'I recommended that Yuuko-san get counselling, but if the person themselves

doesn't want to, it's no use...'

Sasamoto shook her head.

'Did that happen more than once?'

'From what I know, she only collapsed that once, but there were rumours among the other nurses about Yuuko's strange behaviour.'

– I see.

Gotou didn't know if it had something to do with the case directly, but it looked like Yuuko had definitely been acting unnaturally.

'That was a great help.'

Gotou stood up and left the break room with Ishii.

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10

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'Good morning.'

Haruka opened the door to the Movie Research Circle to visit Yakumo.

– Eh?

Yakumo wasn't in his usual seat.

'Is he out?' said Haruka, looking around. Then, she saw the sleeping bag in the corner of the room wiggle.

– Just like a caterpillar.

'Yakumo-kun.'

Haruka poked the sleeping bag with her finger.

Yakumo just turned around in his sleep without getting up.

'Hey, Yakumo-kun.'

Haruka shook the sleeping bag. Yakumo finally opened his eyes, ran a hand through his messy bedhead and sat up.

'What, it's you?' said Yakumo, stifling his yawn.

Since he'd just woken up, he didn't have his black contact lens on.

His vivid red left eye really was beautiful.

'Don't just say "What".'

Yakumo ignored Haruka's protests and stood up, took a toothbrush from the fridge and started brushing his teeth.

– Why does he need to refrigerate his toothbrush?

Haruka wanted to ask, but she decided against it. Yakumo would just quibble.

'So what are you going to do today?' asked Haruka, sitting down in her chair.

'Nofing muh.'

Since Yakumo was talking with the toothbrush still in his mouth, Haruka couldn't tell what he was saying.

'You can finish brushing your teeth first.'

Haruka put her chin in her hand and waited for Yakumo to finish.

After a while, Yakumo sat opposite Haruka.

'What time is it now?'

'Eh?'

'I'm asking what time it is.'

'About nine thirty, probably?'

'Soon then.'

Seeming satisfied, Yakumo crossed his arms, but Haruka didn't understand what he was talking about.

'What's soon?' she asked. Then, there was a knock on the door.

'It's open,' said Yakumo.

The door opened.

The person at the door was somebody Haruka knew too.

'Makoto-san.'

Haruka had become acquainted with her because of a certain case, and ever since then, she had been involved with a number of incidents as well, in a give-and-take relationship.

Her appearance was tidy and graceful, but she was decisive and unexpectedly quick to act.

'Haruka-chan, you're here too?'

Makoto smiled.

Haruka wished that she could be as composed as Makoto.

'Please sit down.'

Haruka urged Makoto to sit in the seat next to her.

'How was it then?' said Yakumo after Makoto had sat down.

'I got what you asked for, and some information as well.'

'Thank you very much.'

Yakumo thanked Makoto honestly.

He was fairly honest with Makoto and Ishii.

'Please don't be so formal – since we're helping each other out.'

After saying that, Makoto took a blue graduation album out of her bag. It read Kaisei High School.

'Why a graduation album?' asked Haruka.

Yakumo sighed.

'Weren't you listening yesterday?'

'Don't make fun of me.'

'Then you should understand.'

'I don't!' said Haruka forcefully.

'Don't act proud of your incompetence.'

'I'm not being proud or anything. And it's not incompetence.'

'It's not?'

'What!?' shouted Haruka.

Makoto started giggling while covering her mouth with a hand.

'You get along well, as usual.'

'T-that's not...'

Haruka felt like she was being teased. Her face felt hot.

When she looked at Yakumo, he didn't seem bothered. He let out a yawn.

'So what is it? Explain properly,' Haruka asked again.

'I said the spirit possessing your friend is the woman named Kosaka Yukari who fell from the shrine steps and died ten years ago,' Yakumo said flatly, crossing his arms.

'Yeah.'

'And her classmate at the time, Mochizuki, was killed at the same shrine this time.'

'So you think those two cases might be connected somehow.'

Haruka understood so far.

'Correct. Last night, I asked Makoto-san to get this graduation album.'

Yakumo tapped the graduation album with his finger.

'Oh, I see.'

'I also asked her to investigate a number of things.'

'If it's something of this level, ask me any time.'

Makoto smiled confidently.

Haruka mostly understood, but other questions remained.

'Kosaka Yukari-san died before graduating, right?'

'Yes.'

'Then she won't be in the album, right?'

'Ah, I checked that properly,' Makoto said with a smile. She took an envelope out and placed its contents on the table.

There was a girl in a uniform in the photograph.

With light makeup on, she had a wide smile.

'I asked a teacher at the school to look for this photo,' explained Makoto.

'I see...' murmured Haruka.

When the photo was taken, Yukari probably hadn't thought that she would die.

'Ishii-san was at the same school, right?'

'Correct,' replied Yakumo.

'Then wouldn't it have been faster to ask Ishii-san?'

Why had Yakumo taken such a roundabout method, going out of his way to ask Makoto?

'That wouldn't have worked.'

Yakumo shook his head.

'Why not?'

'I thought that too. I think Ishii-san would have had it immediately if we asked, and wouldn't it have been better to ask Ishii-san, since he graduated from... ' said Makoto.

'I know, but it wouldn't have worked.'

When Yakumo said that, he looked depressed, like he was dwelling on something.

'Why wouldn't it have worked?' asked Haruka, knowing she was being obstinate.

'Because Ishii-san is a main player,' Yakumo said firmly.

– Ishii-san's a main player?

Haruka didn't understand what those words meant.

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11

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'Hey, Ishii, what do you think?' asked Gotou as he walked down the corridor. He'd got a lot out of Sasamoto, but he felt like the mystery had just grown deeper.

'From what Sasamoto said earlier, I think it's clear that Yuuko-san was not psychologically stable. Her testimony on the day of the incident was also unnatural...'

Gotou recalled what Yuuko had done right after the crime.

After her fiancé, Mochizuki, had been stabbed right in front of her eyes, she had returned home for some reason.

Normally, people would've called the hospital or the police. Even if she was

confused because of the incident, leaving the scene might have made sense, but returning home was strange.

'Maybe Yuuko really did kill him...' said Gotou without thinking.

'No, but then Matsuda-san's testimony won't hold true,' Ishii interrupted immediately.

Even without Ishii saying that –

'I know.'

Gotou hit Ishii's head.

Though Ishii looked like he didn't accept that, Gotou ignored him.

There were too many things in this case that Gotou didn't understand. It made him somewhat irritated.

'Ah!'

Ishii stopped just as they were about to take the elevator.

'What?' asked Gotou.

Ishii pointed down the corridor.

He was pointing at somebody Gotou knew.

'You...'

It looked like Gotou wasn't the only person who was surprised. The person's eyes were wide.

'Yayoi-san, yes?' said Ishii.

Standing there was Yayoi, Matsuda's ex-wife. She bowed her head deeply.

'What are you here for?' asked Gotou, but Ishii spoke before Yayoi.

'Your daughter is at this hospital, isn't she?'

'Yes.'

Yayoi nodded.

'W-what?'

'As I thought...'

While Gotou was surprised, Ishii looked satisfied.

'How'd you know?' Gotou asked Ishii.

'Even if you ask why... Since we heard that her daughter was hospitalised earlier, I just thought that maybe that was the case...'

It was just as Ishii said.

This annexe was the paediatrics department. Gotou should have figured it out if he'd thought a bit.

However, if Matsuda's daughter was hospitalised here –

'Do you know the nurse named Minowa Yuuko?'

'Yes.'

Yayoi nodded.

'Why didn't you say that earlier?' Gotou said loudly in his agitation.

In Yuuko's testimony, she'd said that she didn't know Matsuda. Matsuda had said the same thing.

But if Yuuko was a nurse at the hospital where Matsuda's daughter was, it was likely that the two had known each other before the incident.

That would put the case in a completely different light.

'I didn't know then,' replied Yayoi in a very thin voice.

'What?'

'The nurse named Minowa-san wasn't in charge of my daughter.'

'But you'd've seen her face, right?'

'Perhaps, but we hadn't really talked. To be honest, I just found out her name earlier...'

'And then?'

'I heard from the nurse in charge just earlier. That the person murdered in the case was the fiancé of one of the nurses here...'

Yayoi put a hand to her mouth.

Currently, Yuuko was being treated as the victim's fiancée and the witness. Her name wasn't in the newspapers.

It did make sense for Yayoi not to know.

But anger welled up within Gotou. For him, a policeman, not to have known, it was clearly a failure.

The higher-ups were treating the case like the culprit was already determined, so practically nobody was on it. They didn't have enough hands to gather info.

'I see. Sorry about that,' said Gotou, swallowing his anger.

'It's fine.'

Yayoi shook her head.

Anyway, there was the possibility that Matsuda and Minowa Yuuko knew each other.

– You planning on betraying me?

Gotou recalled the words Matsuda had yelled at Yuuko when Matsuda was taken in.

Now he understood. It was very possible that Matsuda and Yuuko had been conspirators for the crime.

'Excuse me...'

Ishii spoke hesitantly.

'What is it?'

Yayoi lifted her head.

'What is your daughter's illness?'

Yayoi looked down again at Ishii's question.

The silence continued. Gotou waited for Yayoi's words in that suffocating atmosphere.

After a while, Yayoi said, 'Leukaemia...' It sounded like the word was strangled out of her.

– Leukemia.

A cancer of the blood.

It probably cost a considerable amount for treatment. On top of that, recovery wasn't guaranteed. It had to be tough for the parents.

'I see...'

'I really can't believe it.'

'What?'

'That he would kill someone...'

Even in this situation, Yayoi still believed in Matsuda, her old husband.

Matsuda had left such a strong wife and his sick daughter, called for a divorce and killed Mochizuki on top of that.

– Why?

Gotou couldn't find the answer to that.

Yayoi covered her face and started to sob.

Gotou couldn't endure staying here any longer.

'Let's go,' Gotou said to Ishii. Then, he started walking towards the stairs.

'Er, how about the elevator?' Ishii said as he followed him.

'Shut up.'

Gotou smacked Ishii's head.

He didn't feel like waiting for the elevator while looking at Yayoi cry.

'Excuse me, Detective Gotou,' said Ishii, rubbing his face.

'What?'

'What are we going to do next?'

Leaving everything to other people, unable to move without somebody's instructions. Even though he had his own thoughts, because of his lack of confidence, he relied on others.

Gotou couldn't stand this part of Ishii.

He hit Ishii again.

'There's nothing to it. We're going to talk to Matsuda and Yuuko again.'

The two of them likely knew each other. If they used that, they might get some new info.

Gotou gripped his fists tightly.

– I'll get to the truth no matter what.

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12

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'What do you mean, Ishii-san's a main player?' said Haruka in surprise

'Exactly what I said. In order to understand everything properly, it is necessary to have as objective a view as possible. From that sense, Ishii-san

is completely inappropriate.'

'IS that what you meant?' said Haruka, feeling relieved.

From a rough sense of Yakumo's words, she had thought Yakumo meant that Ishii had done the crime or something.

It looked like Makoto had done the same, as she looked relieved as well.

'How about the matter I requested then?' Yakumo asked Makoto as he flipped through the graduation album's pages.

'That's right,' said Makoto. She took out her notepad and started talking.

'fortunately, I managed to meet the person who was her homeroom teacher at the time, and I heard a number of things...'

Makoto stopped there.

'What is it?' urged Yakumo, putting his finger to his brow.

'Kosaka Yukari-san was dating Mochizuki Toshiki-san at the time.'

'Eh?'

That came out of Haruka's mouth unconsciously.

Kosaka Yukari, who fell from the shrine's stone steps and died ten years ago. The person she was dating, Mochizuki Toshiki, murdered in the same place.

This couldn't be just a coincidence.

'As I thought.'

Unlike Haruka, Yakumo didn't seem surprised at all.

'You knew?'

'I just thought that might be the case.'

'Why'd you think that?'

'Even if I explained to you, you wouldn't understand.'

Yakumo was clearly mocking her.

'Because I'm an idiot.'

'SO you know? Anyway, Makoto-san, did you find anything else out?' said Yakumo, returning to the topic at hand.

'This was just a rumour, but it seems like she was pregnant.'

'Pregnant?'

Haruka got up from her seat. It was that shocking to her.

'That's a lie.'

Yakumo denied it with a blank expression.

'How do you know it's a lie?'

'I looked at the case files. The autopsy didn't mention that fact.'

'So somebody was spreading a bad rumour?'

'Or... Whichever it was, there is no way for us to confirm it now.'

'That's true...'

'Anything else?' urged Yakumo.

'Yes. Both of them had good grades and were polite. It seems like they were a good couple, but...'

Makoto bit her lip, like she found the next words difficult to say.

'They were bullies at school,' finished Yakumo with a sigh.

'How did you know?'

This time, Makoto's eyes went wide.

'Just a thought.'

'Hm...'

Makoto didn't seem to accept that, but Yakumo continued regardless.

'Furthermore, Ishii-san was the one who was bullied, correct?'

'Why do you...'

Makoto leant forward.

If he'd read that far ahead, he had to have known from the start.

'I could tell from seeing Ishii-san's reaction after Mochizuki Toshiki-san was killed.'

This was probably related to what Yakumo had said about Ishii being a main player earlier.

'I... didn't know that, and ended up asking Ishii-san something unnecessary...' said Makoto to herself, lowering her eyelashes sadly.

What happened between Ishii and Makoto – Haruka was curious, but she felt like she couldn't ask.

'But why was Ishii-san bullied?'

Haruka asked the question that came to her head.

'Any reason would be fine.'

Yakumo put his chin in his hand, looking displeased.

'Is that how it is?'

'Yes. A distinctive physical feature, being bad at sports... Anyway, people find somebody different from them and exclude them. That is the basic structure of bullying.'

'Is that really all?'

'That's all.'

Instead of Yakumo, Makoto replied.

She looked like she could cry at any moment. Perhaps she also – so thought Haruka, but she didn't say it aloud.

'No matter how you lament it, that is fact,' said Yakumo offhandedly.

However, it sounded like there were a number of thoughts behind it.

Yakumo had also suffered a lot. Other people looked at him strangely, just because he had a red left eye that could see the spirits of the dead.

Being different – even though that was natural, there were unexpectedly many people who couldn't accept that.

Earlier, Yakumo had said it was a fact – but Haruka just couldn't accept it.

'That's unforgiveable. Can't something be done?'

'All you can do is bear it. That's all... at least, that was how it was for Ishii-san,' said Yakumo. He tapped a photo in the album.

On the page with the faces of all the people in the class, Yakumo was pointed at a photo of Ishii in his high school days.

He looked a bit thinner than he was now. His fringe was long and he was looking down. It looked like he was bearing with something.

'I wonder if Ishii-san hated Mochizuki-san.'

Makoto lowered her eyelashes.

'I think so,' said Yakumo without any wavering in his voice.

Just from listening to this conversation, it sounded like Ishii had killed Mochizuki.

– No, there's no way.

Haruka shook her head and cleared away that thought.

'And her younger sister?' asked Yakumo, clearing the dark atmosphere.

'Right.'

Makoto's expression lightened as she took a photograph out of her bag.

There was one woman in it.

Her face looked like Kosaka Yukari's, but she seemed completely different. She was looking down without confidence. It looked like she would cry at any moment. Yukari and her were like black and white.

'What's this?'

'This is Kosaka Yukari's younger sister, Yuuko-san. Mochizuki Toshiki-san's fiancée.'

'She...'

'Yes.'

'Actually... I heard something strange from the person who was Yuuko-san's homeroom teacher then.'

Makoto looked serious.

'Something strange?'

Yakumo's brow furrowed.

'Yes. Sometimes she came to school with bruises.'

'Bruises...'

Yakumo's eyes were forceful. It looked like he had thought of something.

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13

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Gotou went into the interrogation room with Ishii.

In his chair, Matsuda looked older than he had yesterday.

Perhaps it was psychological exhaustion.

'You again?' grumbled Matsuda when he saw Gotou.

Though Matsuda's impudent attitude continued, it just looked like an act to

Gotou.

– Show me your real self.

Gotou said that in his heart and sat down in a chair.

'There's something I want to check with you.'

'You're persistent.'

Matsuda looked up at Gotou.

'I'm bad at giving up.'

'That so.'

'You said you didn't know Yuuko, the victim's fiancée, until the day of the incident, right?'

'Yeah.'

There was just a moment's pause before Matsuda answered.

Gotou felt like that'd be a breakthrough.

'That's strange though.'

'What?'

'She was a nurse at the hospital your daughter's at. It wouldn't make sense for you to not know her at all,' said Gotou, watching Matsuda's expression.

Maybe Matsuda had noticed, because he looked away silently.

'You knew Yuuko, right?'

Gotou leant in.

One method would be to bombard Matsuda with questions, but Gotou decided to wait.

After a long silence, Masuda looked up. 'So what?'

He was as expressionless as if he was wearing a Noh mask, but his emotions

must have been shaken. His trembling fingers were proof.

'Detective, have you gone to the hospital before?'

'Everybody's gone to the hospital.'

'Then do you remember every nurse there?'

'What?'

'To be honest, I can only remember the face of the nurse in charge. Just because she was a nurse at the hospital my daughter's at doesn't make us acquaintances.'

What Matsuda said made sense.

But it was too much to be a coincidence. Gotou wouldn't accept that easily.

'If that were all, we wouldn't be suspicious.'

Ishii was the one who interrupted.

He pushed up his silver-framed glasses with confidence.

'Oh? Got proof?'

Matsuda looked at Ishii challengingly.

Ishii cleared his throat and placed a file on the table.

'This is your mobile phone call history.'

'What about it?'

Matsuda's tone was the same, but his expression was grimmer.

Gotou felt like he finally saw to the bottom of Matsuda's heart.

'According to this history, a number from the hospital called your mobile a number of times.'

'My daughter's there. What's strange about the hospital calling me?'

Matsuda was still acting tough.

Ishii glanced at Gotou.

Gotou nodded and continued the explanation.

'I checked the times the calls came with the hospital work schedules. Turns out Yuuko was always working when you got calls from the hospital.'

Gotou held out the call log in front of Matsuda.

'A coincidence.'

Matsuda pushed Gotou's hand away.

That response just made it more obvious.

'Coincidence? As if. The only person that matched the times of all the calls was Yuuko.'

They'd looked into the work schedules for the other nurses too. There were a number who'd matched up a few times, but Yuuko was the only one who matched them all.

'Just happened that way.'

Matsuda was still feigning innocence.

'Checked with the hospital too. Seems like if they contact patients' relatives, they normally leave a note in the day log.'

'Log...'

Matsuda's voice was much weaker.

It looked like he hadn't known that.

'Yeah, they do. But that log doesn't have your mobile. Which means they weren't calling about your daughter's illness.'

Gotou hit the desk.

That meant Matsuda and Yuuko had used the hospital phone to contact each other.

Yuuko probably hadn't used her own mobile so that people wouldn't find out she was related afterwards.

– So, what excuse are you going to make next?

Gotou looked at Matsuda.

Gotou thought Matsuda would go into a frenzy or collapse into tears, but he did something unexpected.

His shoulders shook as he started to chuckle.

Ishii furrowed his brow like he was looking at something unpleasant.

Gotou felt the same way.

'What's so funny?'

'You two are funny,' said Matsuda while laughing.

'What?'

'I mean, that's all there is, but you're acting all triumphant...'

'What did you say?'

'Even if that nurse called Yuuko did contact me, what about it?'

Matsuda suddenly turned serious again.

The sudden change made Gotou falter.

'You and that nurse called Yuuko worked together and...'

'That's just your theory, right, Detective?' interrupted Matsuda.

'Then give me an explanation for it!' shouted Gotou, standing up. He couldn't lose.

For some reason, Ishii was the one who was surprised, instead of Matsuda.

'I fell for the nurse named Yuuko. But her fiancé was in the way, so I ambushed him at the shrine and stabbed him.'

Gotou could tell right away that Matsuda's explanation was a lie.

'Don't screw with me! You know about your daughter's illness, right!? You're not the sort of guy who'd abandon his daughter!'

That might have just been Gotou's wish.

'I don't care what happens to my daughter,' said Matsuda.

That moment, something snapped within Gotou.

Before he'd noticed, he had had gone to hit Matsuda.

'You bastard!'

'P-please stop.'

Ishii clung to Gotou's body.

Because of it, Gotou's fist didn't reach Matsuda and hit air.

'Let go, you fool.'

Gotou pushed Ishii aside.

The weak Ishii split from Gotou's body easily and fell to the floor.

Gotou turned to Matsuda again.

Within Gotou, there was disappointment and anger from being betrayed.

– Betrayed by what?

He asked himself that. What the hell had he been trying to believe in?

the face of Yayoi, Matsuda's wife, appeared in his head.

Gotou had probably believed in her words.

She had been divorced by Matsuda one-sidedly. Right after that, Matsuda became the suspect in a murder case.

She still continued to believe in such a selfish man.

That wasn't all – she had gone out of her way to tell the police he was

innocent.

No matter what impudent attitude Matsuda took, Gotou had wanted to believe it wasn't the truth, for Yayoi's sake as well.

But Matsuda had betrayed that incredibly easily.

– I can't forgive him.

'Hit me if you want.'

Matsuda stuck out his face.

Gotou lifted his fist, but he couldn't let it down.

Matsuda put on a blank expression, but his eyes were clouded. Gotou could tell he was holding back tears.

– Why are you crying?

'You...'

'You don't know anything.'

Matsuda sniffled and glared right at Gotou.

He looked ghastly.

'What?'

'Don't force your own prejudices on this. I live my own way.'

'Live your own way? Don't be so proud of...'

'That's why I said you don't know anything. Come on. Hit me.'

Matsuda pushed his face out towards Gotou again.

'You bastard!'

Though Gotou yelled, in contrast to that, the strength in his fist was slipping away.

He had completely been suckered in.

'Come on, hit me! Hit me!'

'Damn it!

Instead of hitting Matsuda, Gotou dropped his fist to the desk.

The searing pain ran through his hand.

Gotou looked at Matsuda and then left the interrogation room.

– Why am I this irritated?

He walked straight down the corridor to the smoking area.

He lit a cigarette, breathed in the smoke and felt his lungs grow heavy. His tongue felt numb.

– Awful.

But he managed to calm down a bit.

He understood the man named Matsuda even less now.

Normally, when criminals confessed the crime, they'd boast to make things even little better for themselves. Matsuda didn't do any of that.

– Is he really hiding something?

Interrupting Gotou's thoughts, his mobile rang.

'Who's it?'

He answered the phone.

<Honestly, your telephone manner...>

It was Yakumo. Gotou knew what he was going to say next even without listening to it.

'You're gonna tell me to fix it, right?'

<If you knew, please act on it.>

An impertinent brat, as usual.

'Shut up. So what do you want?'

<Actually, there is something I would like you to confirm.>

'I'm busy.'

<What sort of tone is that? Who do you think I'm doing this for?>

Now that Yakumo said that, that was right.

Yakumo had said that his current request might have something to do with Matsuda's case.

To clear away his current irritation, Gotou had to find out the truth.

'So what is it?'

<First, I have some information you should listen to.>

'Information?'

<Yes.>

Gotou couldn't hide his surprise upon hearing the information from Yakumo.

Sounded like the incident ten years ago wasn't unrelated to the current case.

But –

'Ishii should know about that, right?' asked Gotou.

If Ishii had kept silent on purpose, that would be a big problem.

<I think Ishii-san believes the incident ten years ago is unrelated.>

'But...'

<Please don't pester Ishii-san about this matter.>

Yakumo interrupted Gotou's words.

'Why not?'

<It'll make it impossible to draw out the truth – I'll say just that.>

'What do you mean?'

<You'll understand soon enough. More importantly, regarding the matter I wanted you to check...>

Gotou took out his memo and wrote down what Yakumo asked.

'That's got something to do with the case?' he asked after finishing.

<Depending on how she responds.>

'Honestly...'

Yakumo was always like this. He never told Gotou the important bits.

But with the investigation going nowhere, Gotou could do nothing but obey Yakumo's instruction.

<Please report to me once you've confirmed that.>

Yakumo spoke like it was a matter of fact.

'If you want to hear it, come find me,' said Gotou, but Yakumo had already hung up.

– The guy just does whatever he wants, as usual.

Gotou had just thrown his cigarette into the ashtray when the door to the smoking area opened.

'So you were here...' Ishii said, out of breath.

'You...'

Gotou was going to question Ishii, but he stopped himself midway.

Yakumo's words passed through his heads.

'Let's go.'

He stuck his cigarettes into his pocket and left the smoking area.

'E-er, where to?'

'To question Yuuko,' said Gotou. He started walking briskly.

'Ah, please wait.'

Ishii ran after him hurriedly.

– He fell.

第三章

いつわりの樹

FILE:
03

File 03: The Tree Of Deceit

-

Haruka stood with Yakumo in front of Mai's hospital room.

– Let's go see her again.

After receiving Makoto's report, Yakumo made that suggestion, but Haruka didn't understand why.

'What are we going to do when we see her?'

'There's something I want to confirm,' replied Yakumo, running a hand through his messy hair.

'What do you plan on confirming?'

'You'll know when you see it,' said Yakumo expressionlessly. He probably wouldn't say anything even if Haruka pressed further.

Haruka gave up and knocked on the door.

There was no response. When she opened the door, she saw Mai lying on the bed.

Though her eyes were open, they weren't focussed.

She looked a bit more tired than she had yesterday. Haruka wanted to save her somehow, but she had no way to do that.

Yakumo slowly walked up to the bed and sat on the round chair beside it.

Haruka watched while holding her breath.

'Kosaka... Yukari-san, yes...?'

In response to Yakumo's murmur, Mai turned to look at Yakumo.

'A... h...'

It sounded like it hurt Mai to speak.

'You know the man named Mochizuki Toshiki-san, don't you.'

The moment Yakumo said that name, Mai's eyes flew open. She pulled her body up and reached out towards Yakumo.

Her hands gripped Yakumo's neck.

'Yakumo-kun!'

Haruka tried to run out to him, but Yakumo stopped her.

Mai's hands dug into Yakumo's neck. Even in that situation, Yakumo just looked at Mai without faltering.

'I'm not Mochizuki Toshiki-san,' said Yakumo, though his breath sounded constricted.

'Ur... gh...'

Mai sounded like she was suffering.

'You understand this as well, don't you? Killing me won't dispel your grudge,' Yakumo said quietly.

Mai let go of his neck.

'Are you OK?' asked Haruka.

'Don't worry about it,' Yakumo replied, but the hands' imprints remained on his neck.

Haruka felt anew the resolve Yakumo had upon facing this case.

After a silence, Yakumo brought his face close to Mai's eyes and murmured, 'I want to ask you something. What happened that day?'

Mai's dry lips moved slightly.

'I... was betrayed...' replied Mai. No, to be correct, it was Yukari, the spirit possessing Mai.

'Who were you betrayed by?' asked Yakumo.

'That... man...'

'Mochizuki-san?'

Mai's breathing was ragged.

'I... was always... waiting... For that man... that... but...'

'He didn't come.'

'I... loved... but... that man...'

'Somebody else came to the shrine that day, correct?' said Yakumo. Like he had known from the start.

'That... monkey...'

'What did you do afterwards?'

'From behind... Agh...'

'Somebody pushed you from behind so that you fell down the stone stairs.'

'Aaaaahh!'

Mai let out a beastly howl.

Her hair flung about as she flailed her arms and legs wildly.

'M-Mai.'

Haruka couldn't stop herself from approaching to try to calm Mai down, but Yakumo stopped her.

'Stop.'

'Why? Mai is...'

'She'll possess you,' Yakumo said in a harsh tone, pushing Haruka aside.

Haruka couldn't do anything even though she was watching her friend suffer. She was mortified by her powerlessness.

Yakumo turned towards Mai again and asked, 'Who pushed you?'

Mai suddenly stopped moving.

A groan came out of her throat as she glared at Yakumo.

A chill ran down Haruka's spine.

It felt like a strong hatred was spilling out from Mai's bloodshot eyes.

'I'll... kill you...'

After saying that, Mai lost her strength and collapsed.

'Mai.'

'It's fine. She just fainted,' said Yakumo.

When Haruka looked at Yakumo, she saw that his forehead was covered in sweat. His brow was furrowed like he was in pain.

'A-are you OK?' asked Haruka.

Yakumo leant against the wall, brushed back his fringe and looked up at the ceiling.

'Yeah. It was a bit intense.'

'Intense?'

'Her emotions.'

'By her, do you mean Yukari-san?'

'Yeah. She has an incredibly strong hatred.'

Haruka could tell that too.

'Why is she so full of hatred?'

Yakumo left the hospital room, escaping Haruka's questioning.

'W-wait.'

Haruka hurriedly ran after Yakumo.

Yakumo stood with his back against the wall in the corridor in front of the

hospital room.

He had his arms crossed with a difficult expression on his face.

'As I thought, she... Kosaka Yukari-san didn't die in an accident...'

'Eh? Really?' said Haruka in surprise.

'Yeah. This is a fully-fledged murder case.'

'Which is why she hates the person who killed her...'

'Well, that's how it is.'

'Who on earth is it?' asked Haruka.

Yakumo's expression twisted, like he was withstanding pain.

'It'd be easy if I knew.'

Yakumo started walking.

'Wait.'

Haruka went right after him.

She could tell from looking at Yakumo's back.

Yakumo probably knew who killed Yukari, but he didn't want to say it right now.

– Who on earth could it be?

While Haruka was thinking, the words Yakumo said earlier came up in her head.

– Because Ishii-san is a main player.

'There's no way.'

Haruka hurriedly wiped that unfortunate thought out of her head.

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-
Ishii and Gotou sat at a table in a cafe.

They were waiting for Yuuko.

Gotou blew out smoke in irritation. Ishii had nothing to do so he just looked at the clock on the wall.

When he stared at it, it felt like time had turned back.

That day – Ishii had been in this cafe with Mochizuki.

Mochizuki had handed Ishii something and asked him to deliver it to somebody at the shrine with the tree of deceit.

No, Mochizuki hadn't asked. He had ordered.

Ishii hadn't been able to refuse.

The relationship between Ishii and Mochizuki had been an absolute one, of master and servant.

Of course Mochizuki had been the master. Ishii had to do what he said. If he didn't, he didn't even want to think about how he'd be treated.

Ishii had gone to the shrine as he was told –

The events that came afterwards flashed through his head like a revolving lantern.

– No. I don't want to remember.

He frantically tried to push the memories away, but it was no use. They were his own memories. No matter how he tried to refuse them, he couldn't erase them.

'I...'

'Shut up!'

Gotou's fist came down on him.

The impact brought Ishii back to his senses.

His palms were clammy with sweat.

'I-I'm sorry.'

After Ishii apologised, the cafe door opened and Yuuko showed up.

She arrived twenty minutes later than the appointed time.

'I sincerely apologise for the wait.'

Yuuko greeted them. There were shadows under her eyes. She looked a step more tired than she had yesterday.

'No, not at all. Please sit down.'

Ishii urged her to sit opposite them. Yuuko sat down.

Ishii called the waiter and ordered coffee for three.

'Today, we called you out because we want to check something with you,' said Gotou after the waiter brought them coffee.

'What is it?' asked Yuuko in a faint voice.

'You said you didn't know the suspect, Matsuda, right?'

Gotou pressed his cigarette out in the ashtray and looked at Yuuko.

Under that intimidating gaze, Yuuko's expression stiffened.

'I did say that. I'd never seen him before that day.'

'That's strange. His daughter's at your hospital.'

'Eh?'

'Matsuda Misaki... You know her, right?'

'That person's Misaki-chan's...'

Yuuko looked genuinely surprised.

'Yeah. He's Matsuda Misaki's father.'

'That's...'

Yuuko had a complex expression on her face.

'You said a man you didn't know suddenly assaulted your fiancé, but that's a lie, right?'

'It isn't. I've never met Misaki-chan's father.'

'Don't play dumb! You knew Matsuda, right?' Gotou said threateningly.

Yuuko's shoulders jolted up.

Ishii knew that Gotou was irritated, but if he intimidated Yuuko this way, she wouldn't be able to say the things she wanted to.

After Ishii calmed Gotou slightly, he turned towards Yuuko.

'I'm sorry. Are you all right?' asked Ishii.

Yuuko nodded.

'You talked to Matsuda-san using the hospital phone, yes?'

'I did?'

Yuuko's eyes were wide open.

'During your work hours, somebody called Matsuda-san from the hospital.'

Ishii placed the piece of paper with the call log on the table.

Yuuko took it and looked at it carefully.

'I don't know. Anybody can use the phone at the nurse station. It doesn't have to be me.'

'But you're the only person who was working during all these times.'

'That's not definite. Somebody might have worked on their day off and used it.'

'Don't try to fool me. It'll be obvious who used the phone if we check the

security camera footage for the nurse station,' Gotou cut in.

'I really don't know,' said Yuuko, sounding like she would cry.

'Matsuda said he fell for you. Weren't you in a relationship? And then Mochizuki got in the way,' said Gotou as a final blow.

'Please don't just say whatever you want!'

Yuuko hit the table, making her emotions apparent.

'Tell the truth.'

Gotou still didn't back down.

'What are you saying? I loved Toshiki-san. No – I still love him now.'

'I can't believe that. We've got proof. What sort of relationship did you have with Matsuda?'

'Stop already!' Yuuko shouted again, with tears in her eyes.

It was probably not from sadness but from anger and mortification.

'Then talk honestly.'

'The person I loved was killed, but I'm even being treated like I was complicit... I...'

She didn't say anything else.

Yuuko covered her face with her hands and went silent.

He sniffing echoed through the cafe.

Even Gotou looked away awkwardly.

She isn't lying – Ishii didn't have proof, but he felt that.

In any case, asking her anything else about the matter probably wouldn't get them any information.

'Are you all right?'

Ishii held a handkerchief out towards Yuuko.

However, Yuuko didn't take it. She took a handkerchief out of her own bag and wiped her tears.

She didn't want sympathy from the police. It was like she was saying that.

Ishii waited for Yuuko to stop crying before speaking. 'Yuuko-san, we understand that you loved Mochizuki-san. Er... Would it be all right to ask you another question?'

After wiping her tears with a handkerchief, Yuuko looked up. She didn't respond, but Ishii took that as a yes.

'I want to ask about your older sister.'

When Ishii asked that, Yuuko's eyes went wide open in surprise.

'My sister?'

'Yes. Your sister was dating Mochizuki-san before she passed away, correct?'

Yuuko didn't respond.

Ishii continued.

'Did you know that?'

Ishii saw Yuuko's hands tighten into fists as she looked down.

This wasn't a question from Ishii and Gotou.

Yakumo had told Gotou to ask it. He had said that the situation would change depending on the response.

Ishii knew the answer without hearing it.

Of course Ishii knew about Mochizuki and Yukari's relationship, but all the people in the grade did too. Even some of the teachers knew.

They'd gone to each other's houses, so Yuuko, Yukari's little sister, must have known.

'Did you know?' asked Gotou in irritation, perhaps annoyed by Yuuko's silence.

Yuuko lifted her head just slightly.

Her eyes were filled with a darkness like hatred.

'... with that.'

Yuuko's faint voice didn't reach Ishii's ears.

'What did you say?'

'This incident has nothing to do with that,' spat out Yuuko.

Her forceful tone made Ishii falter for a moment.

'No, well, yes, but...'

'Then why are you asking?'

'No, that's...'

'I'm sick of this already. Please allow me to head home.'

Yuuko stood up and tried to leave the cafe.

However, Gotou stood in front of her to stop her.

'We're not done asking questions yet.'

Gotou grabbed Yuuko's wrist.

'Please let go of me,' Yuuko protested.

The waiter looked at them suspiciously.

Unlike Ishii, who was worried that the waiter might report them to the police, Gotou continued talking without a care.

'I won't let go till you answer.'

'My sister's unrelated to this, isn't she?'

'Then you can respond, right?'

Yuuko's emotions reached their boiling point as she shouted, 'Yes, I knew!'

'...'

Ishii gulped under that pressure.

'I knew. My sister brought Toshiki-san home a number of times. So...'

'So you approached him while knowing?' asked Gotou, glaring at Yuuko sharply.

'Is there a problem with that?'

'That's...'

'That person placed flowers at the shrine every year on my sister's death anniversary. I always watched him. Even though it wasn't his fault that my sister died, he continued placing flowers for ten years.'

'So you fell for him because of that kindness of his,' said Gotou sarcastically.

'That's enough, right? I'm going home.'

Yuuko pushed Gotou away and left the shop.

Ishii didn't feel like going after her. It looked like Gotou felt the same way, as he sat down with a click of his tongue.

'Damn. What was that...' grumbled Gotou.

'Ah...'

All Ishii could do was give that listless reply.

After a while, Gotou said, 'Hey, Ishii.'

'Yes?'

'What sort of woman was that Yukari, who died ten years ago?'

'I don't really know,' Ishii replied vaguely.

'You were in the same class, right?'

'Yes, but... we weren't very close...'

'Useless.'

Gotou smacked Ishii's head.

'I-I apologise.'

Ishii smiled bitterly.

– It was a lie.

He knew Yukari well.

With a gorgeous appearance, the male students had all yearned for her.

For Yukari to date the class leader, Mochizuki, had been a natural development.

A god couple that anybody would envy – but it had been different for Ishii.

Mochizuki and Yukari had been the worst couple. The two of them hadn't treated Ishii like he was human.

Once, he had picked up a pen Yukari dropped.

Normally, people would have said thank you, but she hadn't responded that way. Instead, she had falsely accused him of stealing her pen.

After that, Mochizuki had punched him countless times.

Yukari had laughed while watching Ishii in pain.

It had been a daily cycle.

Ishii had hated the two of them.

– I want to kill them.

It was inevitable that Ishii felt that way.

It had been the same on that day too.

When Yukari looked at him scornfully, a black emotion had exploded in the

bottom of Ishii's heart.

– I.

Interrupting Ishii's thoughts, Gotou's mobile rang.

It was probably Yakumo.

'We're going.'

After Gotou's call ended, he stood up.

'Eh? Where to?'

'You'll know if you come.'

Gotou left the cafe briskly.

Ishii hurriedly tried to go after him, but then he remembered that they hadn't paid and went to the register.

After Ishii finished paying, the waiter said to him quietly, 'What an unpleasant woman.'

'Yes?'

'Getting angry when she was the one two-timing – she's not a good woman. It'd be better if you quickly forgot about her.'

It seemed like the waiter had completely misunderstood.

Ishii was about to deny it when Gotou yelled, 'Hurry up!' Ishii left the shop with a vague smile.

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3

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Haruka and Yakumo went to the shrine where the incident had occurred.

From the elevated ground, they could see the whole town.

The sun was low in the sky, dying the town a vivid orange. It was a beautiful place. When they looked out like this, it didn't seem like a murder scene at all.

'Hey, what are you going to do here?' Haruka asked Yakumo.

After leaving the hospital where Mai was, they had come here, but Haruka hadn't been able to get the reason why out of Yakumo.

Yakumo put a hand on the cedar tree that was cordoned off with a Shinto enclosing rope and closed his eyes.

It was he was feeling its pulse.

Only this cedar tree, called the tree of deceit, knew what had happened here.

It seemed mysterious when Haruka thought that.

'I want to ask something,' said Yakumo, turning around.

'Whom do you want to ask?'

'The victim, of course.'

'Eh?'

Haruka was surprised, but Yakumo was calm.

With a blank expression, he walked straight towards the shrine.

'So you were here.'

Yakumo stopped right in front of the shrine.

Haruka couldn't see anything, but Yakumo could probably see him. The spirit of the man named Mochizuki, who had been killed her - a ghost - was probably -

Haruka held her breath and watched.

'I have something I want to ask,' said Yakumo. There was no response, but it was just that Haruka couldn't hear it. Yakumo's ear probably heard

somebody's voice.

'What happened ten years ago?'

Haruka had been sure Yakumo would ask about the current case.

If Yakumo was going out of his way to talk about the incident ten years ago, it probably had a great deal to do with the case.

The wind blew –

The tree of deceit rustled, like it was pleading something.

'So Ishii-san really...'

When Yakumo said that, his shoulders slumping, Haruka reacted sensitively.

'What do you mean?'

'Keep quiet for now,' Yakumo said, cutting her down.

Haruka couldn't do anything but keep her mouth shut.

However, she couldn't erase her questions. From Yakumo's tone, Ishii was very involved with the current case.

There was no way that he was the culprit. Haruka wanted to think that, but part of her couldn't declare it.

He had clearly been strange ever since the incident occurred.

Haruka didn't have any evidence, but it felt like he was hiding something important.

'I finally see it...' said Yakumo, interrupting Haruka's thoughts.

Haruka looked at Yakumo, who turned around and slowly started walking towards her.

'What did you see?'

'who's lying and who's telling the truth – I see it now.'

Yakumo looked at the tree of deceit.

'Who's lying?' asked Haruka.

Yakumo's eyes narrowed as he smirked.

'People's memories are vague.'

'Vague?'

'Yes. Perhaps it would be better to call them subjective.'

Haruka didn't understand what Yakumo wanted to say at all.

'What do you mean?'

'For example, if you were talking about a memory with a friend.'

'OK.'

'At times like that, don't the experiences you talk about differ sometimes?'

'Come to think of it...'

Haruka had experienced that a number of times.

When she talked with a friend about a day they went out together, she'd say it'd been sunny when her friend would say it'd been cloudy.

Haruka would think they'd gone with five people, but her friend would say there'd been four.

Even though they'd experienced the same event, the colours of clothes, hairstyles – small details like that would change.

'That occurs because people's memories are subjective.'

'That so?'

'Though it seems like you remember everything, you only cut and paste the things you want. With the passing of time, those memories warp further.'

'Why?'

'Every time you remember a memory, you add emotion to it.'

'Emotion?'

'Correct. You could call it a wish. People forget the unpleasant and only accept the things they want.'

'But then the memory wouldn't make sense.'

'Exactly. That's why people unconsciously alter their memories.'

'But...'

'You've altered your memories too, with your sister.'

'Urgh.'

Haruka couldn't breathe for a moment when Yakumo suddenly brought up her sister.

'Because of your feeling of guilt, you decided that your sister hated you. As a result, even though it was an accident, you even thought you had killed her, right?'

'That's...'

Haruka couldn't deny it. She had done so.

That had shut away the enjoyable memories she'd had with her sister.

Haruka got the gist of what Yakumo was trying to say, but there was another problem with the current case.

'Then who's lying?' asked Haruka.

Yakumo sighed in exasperation.

'Probably only this tree knows.'

Yakumo looked at the tree of deceit.

At some point, it had grown dark, and the tree of deceit also had a different appearance than it had had at noon.

'What do you mean?'

Evading Haruka's question, Yakumo briskly started walking away.

– Honestly.

Haruka pouted, but she went after Yakumo.

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4

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'Sorry to bother.'

Gotou opened the door to Meisei University's Movie Research Circle, which Yakumo used as his secret hideaway.

'It looks like nobody's here,' said Ishii as he peered inside.

Even though Gotou had come all the way here, they couldn't do anything if he wasn't here.

'Where's he loitering?' said Gotou with a sigh.

– Maybe I'll come back later.

Gotou had just thought that and turned around when he saw Yakumo. Haruka was next to him.

'If you stand there with your large body, you'll get in the way.'

Yakumo looked at Gotou coldly.

'What? Were you following us?'

'Please let off with the idiocy. What good would doing that do me?'

'What did you say!?!'

'Calm down. Your body won't be able to bear it if you take everything Yakumo-kun says seriously.'

Haruka was the one who cut in.

'Right.'

It was true that responding properly to this quibbling man would be stupid.

'Anyway, please decide whether you want to go in or leave.'

Yakumo ran a hand through his messy hair.

'I'm obviously going in,' declared Gotou, stepping into the room.

He sat with Ishii and Yakumo and Haruka sat opposite them.

'So how was it?' said Yakumo the moment they'd settled down.

Even though he was the one who asked, he yawned, seeming bored. Gotou didn't like his attitude, but he could tell that complaining would just get him a painful retort.

'About Yuuko...'

Gotou cleared his throat and started explaining.

Her response when he'd pressed her about contacting Matsuda, and when he'd asked about her sister Kosaka Yukari and Mochizuki Toshiki. He spoke in as much detail as possible.

After Gotou finished explaining, for a while, Yakumo put his index finger to his brow and seemed to be thinking.

'So she isn't conscious of it...' said Yakumo after a long silence.

'What do you mean?' Gotou asked immediately.

'I can't answer right now.'

'What?'

'You don't have to understand. Since I do,' said Yakumo calmly.

However, Gotou couldn't keep calm.

'You do? So you know the culprit?'

'Well, so far as it goes,' said Yakumo quietly, scratching the tip of his nose.

'Who's the culprit? Tell me!'

'I don't want to,' Yakumo replied immediately.

'What?'

'Did you not hear me? I said I didn't want to.'

'You screwing with me?'

'No. I am completely serious.'

'Then why won't you tell me!?!'

Gotou grabbed Yakumo by the collar in his agitation.

However, Yakumo still looked unaffected.

'Detective Gotou, please calm down.'

Ishii was the one who interrupted, looking like he might cry at any moment.

'Like I could keep calm.'

'I understand how you feel, but...'

'Shut up!'

Gotou hit Ishii's head.

Gotou felt bad about Ishii, but turning his temper towards him seemed to have helped Gotou calm down.

'Why won't you tell me who the culprit is even though you know?' asked Gotou again, sitting back down on the chair.

'In this case, breaking through to the truth isn't enough.'

'What?'

Revealing the truth was the end of a case, not just with this one.

'The order in which the mysteries are solved is important.'

'Order? What are you talking about?'

Haruka spoke before Gotou could.

'Is our goal to find out who killed Mochizuki-san?'

Haruka said, 'Ah!' It seemed like she understood everything from that sentence.

'We need to save Mai, who's been possessed by a ghost,' said Haruka to confirm.

'Exactly.'

'So you don't care about our case?'

Gotou frowned.

For Yakumo and Haruka, maybe it was more important to save the girl who was possessed by a ghost. But for Gotou, it was crucial that he find out the culprit.

'I didn't say that.'

Yakumo shook his head in exasperation.

'What?'

'In order to save the woman who has been possessed by a ghost, it is necessary to solve the case you're chasing, Gotou-san. It's just that giving up the culprit reckless won't work.'

'It won't work?'

'It won't. I said this earlier, but to solve both of these problems, the order that we solve the mysteries is important.'

'The order, eh...' muttered Gotou, putting his chin in his hand.

'If we get the order wrong, we won't be able to bring out the truth.'

After saying that, Yakumo smirked.

He was the only one who understood. It was always that way for Yakumo. The attitude annoyed Gotou, but he couldn't go back after coming this far.

'So what order would be good?'

'Before that, there is something I want to confirm.'

'What?' asked Gotou.

Yakumo slowly stood up.

'Ishii-san, would you come with me?'

'M-me...?'

Ishii's eyes went wide at Yakumo's words.

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5

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Ishii took the stone steps to the shrine.

He couldn't see his feet because it was so dark. His feet felt as heavy as weights as he took one step at a time.

He stopped and looked up at Yakumo's back, a little ahead of him.

Gotou had said he'd come too, but Yakumo stopped him.

Ishii didn't know what he was thinking. No, that wasn't true. He really did know. That was why his feet felt heavy.

'What is it?' said Yakumo.

Ishii came back to his senses.

'No, it's nothing.'

Ishii smiled wryly and started climbing the steps again.

When he reached the shrine, he was a bit out of breath.

The shrine was creepy at night.

The town that spread before his eyes was lit up beautifully, but the shrine was enveloped in darkness, like it had fallen into a hole.

Yakumo went up to the large cedar tree called the tree of deceit and placed a hand on the trunk.

He looked somewhat like a loving Virgin Mary.

'Er... Why did you bring me here?' asked Ishii towards Yakumo's back.

Yakumo slowly turned around and looked at Ishii.

He had his black contact lens hiding it now, but for a moment, it looked to Ishii like Yakumo's left eye had flashed red.

Ishii couldn't bear that pressure and looked away.

'There's something I want to ask you, Ishii-san,' said Yakumo.

'Why did you need to go to the shrine to do that?' asked Ishii, still looking at his feet.

He knew the answer. It was because Yakumo was going to ask something that would have been difficult to ask in front of Gotou and Haruka.

'I want to know about your past, Ishii-san.'

'My past...'

'Yes.'

'My past isn't interesting.'

Ishii laughed bitterly.

'That isn't it.'

'Then what is it?'

'Ishii-san.'

Yakumo's eyes narrowed.

Like clairvoyant eyes that could see to the bottom of his heart –

'What is it?'

'Ten years ago – what happened here?'

The direct question pierced Ishii's chest.

Yakumo really did know everything. Ishii knew it'd be easier for him to confess, but his heart still fought back.

'I don't know what...'

Ishii tried to ask as calmly as he could, but he still couldn't stop his voice and hands from shaking.

Yakumo wouldn't be fooled by something like this.

They had gone through so many cases together, so Ishii knew that well.

'Then let's change the question.'

Yakumo walked towards Ishii.

Still frozen, Ishii gulped and held his breath.

'Glasses monkey.'

Ishii couldn't believe his ears.

'I-I...'

'Mochizuki-san called you that, Ishii-san.'

'I-I don't understand.'

'You don't need to hide it. Mochizuki-san bullied you during high school, right?'

'T-that's not...'

'You don't have to hold back any more.'

Yakumo put a hand on Ishii's shoulder. He had an expression on his face that was gentler than Ishii had ever seen before.

Ishii heard something fall off in his heart.

'It was awful...'

Even though he had tolerated it for so long, but once he said it aloud, he couldn't stop his mouth from moving.

'Even though I hadn't done anything, every time he saw me, he'd say I was an eyesore, punch me and kick me. He treated me like a slave. No, slaves had it better. He didn't even think of me as human,' said Ishii, everything gushing out of him.

'Did you not say you didn't like it?' said Yakumo.

That sentence amplified Ishii's anger.

People who had never been bullied always said that.

You were bullied because you didn't assert yourself. If you were cooperative, you wouldn't have been left out –

'Please don't say that so easily. If I resisted, I would have been treated even worse. The people around me just ridiculed me too – nobody helped. No matter how painful and frustrating was, all I could do was bear it.'

'Ishii-san...'

'All I could do was wait for the storm to pass.'

'Kosaka Yukari-san, who died ten years ago, was also one of your bullies, correct, Ishii-san?'

Yakumo's quiet words made Ishii freeze.

He hadn't thought that Yakumo knew that much.

'Urgh...'

'You don't have to hide it any more.'

'I...'

'Just like you say, Ishii-san, keeping quiet and tolerating the situation wouldn't make it worse, but on the contrary, it also can't change the situation.'

'I know...'

'That's why it's time to change it,' Yakumo said quietly.

'It's too late to do anything now. The past can't change.'

'No, it can.'

'Eh?'

Ishii looked up with surprise.

'Please think about Makoto-san.'

'..'

'She faced her painful past and changed it.'

– Now, I think of it as a good experience.

The words Makoto said in the cafe ran through Ishii's head.

Perhaps it was because she had faced her own past that she could think that way.

– Could I do the same thing?

'I hated those two from the bottom of my heart,' said Ishii, before he'd even noticed he was talking.

Just as Yakumo had theorised, Yukari had also been one of Ishii's bullies. She and Mochizuki had scorned and tyrannised him together.

It was agony going to school.

What are they going to do to me today – he had lived in fear. It didn't feel like he had been living.

He had even thought about dying.

He had also thought about killing them.

Even if it had just been playing around for them, it had been different for Ishii. There was a scar in his heart that could never be erased.

He had almost forgotten. No, he had tried to forget.

And yet –

'Ishii-san, could you tell me what happened here ten years ago?' Yakumo said gently.

Under that earnest gaze, Ishii was resigned. He couldn't hide it any more.

'That day ten years ago – I was about to go home after class,' Ishii said quietly.

Standing in front of him, Yakumo nodded to urge Ishii to continue.

'After going through the school gates, Mochizuki called out to me.'

Mochizuki had been different than usual that day.

'He took me to a cafe.'

The cafe with the wall clock.

'Just the two of you?' asked Yakumo.

Ishii nodded and continued his explanation.

'Yes. He handed an envelope to me and told me to give it to somebody.'

'To whom?'

'He didn't tell me then. He just said that I would know if I went...'

Ishii had had a bad feeling since that moment.

However, he hadn't been able to refuse. That was how strong Mochizuki's will had been.

'What was inside the envelope?'

'I didn't know then. He threatened me, saying he would kill me if I opened it...'

It wasn't a lie. Ishii had found out what was inside afterwards.

'So then what did you do, Ishii-san?' Yakumo said expressionlessly.

Ishii swallowed and continued.

'Just as he told me, I walked here...'

The scenery then flashed through Ishii's mind vividly.

He had gone to the shrine in the evening and a woman had been standing in front of the tree of deceit. Just where Yakumo was standing now.

Somebody that Ishii knew.

– You'll know if you go.

Ishii understood the meaning of Mochizuki's words then.

'Kosaka Yukari-san was there then,' said Yakumo.

He already knows that much – though Ishii was surprised, he nodded.

'Just as Mochizuki told me, I handed the envelope to Yukari-san.'

'And then what did she do?'

'She took the contents of the envelope out and went completely pale. Then, she yelled, asking why he didn't come.'

The envelope had had ten-odd ten thousand yen bills and an envelope.

Ishii had understood everything then.

There had been a rumour that Yukari was pregnant. Of course, it was

Mochizuki's child.

Mochizuki had probably handed Ishii a letter saying they would break up and money for an abortion. He had probably thought that meeting Yukari directly would have caused trouble.

He had probably asked Ishii because he didn't want other people to know. He had known that Ishii wouldn't say anything.

An awful man – is what Ishii had thought.

However, Ishii hadn't been able to say that. He had just stood there.

'Then what did Yukari-san do?'

Yakumo's eyes narrowed.

– I don't want to say what comes next.

But contrary to his will, his mouth moved.

'She cursed at me... You're not human. You're a glasses monkey... She threw rocks at me...'

Ishii gripped his hands into tight fists. His body shook.

Even though ten years had passed, the humiliation he had felt then came back to him like it had happened yesterday.

'She even told me to die...'

'That's awful. Even though it didn't have anything to do with you, Ishii-san.'

Exactly. It didn't have anything to do with Ishii. But still –

'Why did she have to say that much?'

Yakumo didn't answer Ishii's question.

Ishii knew that Yakumo had no way of answering, but the anger and hatred that welled up within him couldn't be restrained.

'After she had cursed me plenty, she thrust the envelope towards me and tried

to leave the shrine... I... was so frustrated...'

Ishii looked at his hands.

His hands were trembling.

'Then what happened?' asked Yakumo.

Ishii looked at him.

'I don't really know. Before I knew it, I had run out of the shrine...'

'Ishii-san...'

'Perhaps I... her...'

'Ishii-san.'

'The person who pushed Yukari-san off the steps – it might have been me...'

'Ishii-san!' said Yakumo, cutting in.

However, Ishii's emotions continued to run wild.

'No, that has to be it! I pushed her!'

'You didn't.'

'What do you mean, I didn't? I can still feel it in my hands!'

'You can't let yourself be overwhelmed.'

'I was frustrated! I hated those two! I thought about killing them countless times!'

'Please calm down.'

'I'm not a glasses monkey! I'm human! I'm Ishii Yuutarou!' screamed Ishii, his body twisting.

Then, all the strength left him and he fell to his knees.

Tears spilled out.

Why do only I have to suffer like this – Ishii had lived like this, shutting

away that suppressed emotion.

That emotion had exploded on that day ten years ago.

That had birthed a new darkness and had made Ishii suffer all this time.

'I know.'

A kind voice reached Ishii's ears and made him look up.

Yakumo was crouching in front of him with a gentle smile.

'I know that you're you, Ishii-san.'

'I...'

'It's the same for me. People treated me like a monster because of my red left eye. Even though I was a human, like them...'

There was a shadow in Yakumo's eyes.

His red left eye, which could see the spirits of the dead – something different from others. That would have been a target for bullying.

– It was the same for him too.

Just from realising that, Ishii's heart felt a bit lighter.

'Let's stop trawling up the past,' said Yakumo as he held a hand out towards Ishii.

'I-I...'

'Ishii-san, you aren't a glasses monkey. You're a human being – a detective now. Correct?'

'Y-yes...'

It was just as Yakumo said. He had to face the case without running away, as a detective.

With determination, Ishii took Yakumo's hand.

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6

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'Yakumo-kun and Ishii-san aren't back yet,' said Haruka.

Gotou looked up. 'Yeah.'

'I wonder what they're doing.'

Haruka had thought that Yakumo would be right back after taking Ishii out with him, but it had already been more than an hour.

It made her want to know what they were doing, since they were taking so long.

'Who knows,' said Gotou, sounding discouraged as he crossed his arms.

'I wonder if Ishii-san is related to the case,' Haruka said without really any meaning behind it, but that moment, Gotou glared at her.

'Of course not.'

His voiced sounded filled with a strong will.

Yakumo wouldn't call Ishii out if he wasn't related to the case. Gotou had to know that too.

He probably wanted to believe in Ishii anyway.

'Of course,' replied Haruka with a wry smile.

'Ishii's a guy whose redeeming feature is his cowardice. He couldn't hurt anybody.'

Gotou's words made Haruka's chest feel hot.

No matter what Gotou said, he had a great love for Ishii.

Ishii probably always followed Gotou no matter how much Gotou hit him because it was from an upside-down love rather than bullying.

'Well, in any case, there's no point thinking about it. All we can do is wait.'

Gotou stretched.

'It's because you always leave things up to others that you never grow.'

Yakumo came in while complaining.

He seemed very annoyed as he ran a hand through his messy hair.

'Eh? Where's Ishii-san?' asked Haruka.

Since Yakumo was back, Haruka had thought Ishii would be with him, but he was nowhere to be seen.

'He went back first,' said Yakumo, looking away slightly.

'What? We were waiting...' grumbled Gotou, taking out his mobile.

'Who are you going to call?' asked Yakumo as he sat down.

'Obviously Ishii.'

'Please don't.'

'Why not?' said Gotou sulkily.

'Please let him be alone today. Ishii-san is suffering too.'

As Yakumo said that, his eyes seemed somewhat sad.

'What do you mean?' asked Gotou.

'You'll find out tomorrow,' said Yakumo quietly, putting his chin in his hand.

What did he talk about with Ishii – Haruka was curious, but she couldn't ask.

'Honestly, everyone's just...' said Gotou in his dissatisfaction, putting his mobile in his pocket and standing up.

Yakumo stopped him.

'I have a request, Gotou-san.'

'What?'

'I want you to bring Matsuda-san, the suspect, and Yuuko-san, the victim's fiancée, to that shrine tomorrow.'

'Why?'

Gotou sat back down with his brow furrowed.

'You really are an idiot, Gotou-san.'

'What did you say!?!'

'We're ending the case.'

Yakumo's words made Gotou's eyes go wide.

'Sounds like you understand everything.'

'Yes, I do.'

'Explain what you mean!'

In contrast to Gotou's agitation, Yakumo was calm. He put his fingers in his ears to complain about the noise.

'Anyone'd want to speak up after hearing that. What do you mean?'

'Please don't be in such a rush. You'll understand everything –'

'Got it. I'll do something about it,' said Gotou with a snort. Just as he was about to leave the room, he stopped with his hand on the door.

'Hey, Yakumo.'

'What is it?'

'Is Ishii... related to the case?'

'Yes.'

'He'd never kill somebody.'

Gotou turned around and looked at Yakumo with a strong gaze.

'I know.'

'Then...'

'It's fine. Gotou-san, you can just believe,' interrupted Yakumo.

For a while, Gotou just looked straight at Yakumo, but then he finally said 'Got it' in a quiet voice and left.

Yakumo sighed as he watched Gotou leave.

He appeared considerably tired.

'Hey, what happened?' asked Haruka, knowing there would be no response.

Yakumo glanced at Haruka and ran a hand through his hair.

'A number of things.'

'A number?'

'You people are so hasty. You'll understand tomorrow.'

Yakumo put a finger to his brow.

'I'll really find out tomorrow?'

'Yes.'

'OK.'

'There's something I want you to help out with too.'

Yakumo smirked.

When Haruka saw that smirk, she had a terribly bad feeling –

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– It's heavy.

Ishii felt like he was being crushed under the weight of his past. Even after Yakumo had left, Ishii hadn't been able to leave the shrine.

He leant against the tree of deceit and held his head.

'Glasses monkey.'

He heard a voice from nowhere in particular.

When Ishii lifted his head, he saw Mochizuki in front of him.

His white shirt was dyed red. But still, he was smiling in a carefree manner.

'Mochizuki...'

It felt like the name was strangled out of Ishii's throat.

Had Mochizuki's spirit appeared in front of him, or was it an illusion from his heart? Ishii couldn't decide.

'Add a "-san" to that. You're acting cheeky for a glasses monkey.'

'I...'

'What? Can't hear you.'

'I-I'm not a glasses monkey... I'm Detective Ishii Yuutarou...'

'Don't make me laugh. You can't even do anything on your own.'

'T-that's not...'

'What's not true? You're still terrified of me, right? Freaking out on your own and curling up in a corner.'

It was just as Mochizuki said.

He was a coward who couldn't do anything on his own. There was no way that this would make it possible for him to face the incident. Ishii lost his strength, sat on the ground and held his head.

It was so quiet it was uncanny.

– I want to disappear.

Ishii had that wish. If he disappeared, he would be able to escape from this

unpleasantness.

'Ishii-san.'

Amid Ishii's confusion, he heard a voice.

He looked up and saw Makoto standing there, panting.

'Makoto-san... Why are you...' said Ishii in surprise.

Makoto smiled.

'I heard from Yakumo-kun that you were here.'

'Yakumo-shi told you that?'

Why did Yakumo tell Makoto where Ishii was? And why did Makoto come here?

Ishii couldn't find the answers to those questions.

'I heard most of the story from Yakumo-kun,' said Makoto. She lowered her long eyelashes, seeming sorrowful.

'I see...'

'Ishii-san, you suffered a lot as well.'

Eh?'

'I said this before, right? That I was bullied.'

Makoto shrugged.

Come to think of it, they had talked about that in the cafe.

'I'm envious of you, Makoto-san,' said Ishii without thinking.

'Envious?'

'Yes.'

'Why?'

'Even though something so painful happened in the past, you managed to

overcome that. Whereas I...'

Ishii's memories swung him about – he still lived while dragging his past behind him.

If he could cut them away, it would probably be easier, but he just couldn't do it.

'Ishii-san, you're too kind,' said Makoto with a smile. Ishii couldn't accept them honestly.

'I'm not kind. I'm just a coward.'

'It's the same thing.'

'It isn't.'

To Ishii, Makoto's words sounded like mere consolation.

Kindness and cowardice were falsely similar. He didn't have any kindness.

As proof of that, he had lived with strong hatred this whole time. If he were a kind person, he would probably have forgiven them with no hatred.

'It's the same thing. Ishii-san, it's because you're too kind that you can't blame anybody. That's why you blame yourself.'

'That isn't it. I just didn't say it aloud. I blamed Mochizuki. I hated him. I even wanted to kill him.'

'But you didn't kill him.'

In contrast to Ishii's agitation, Makoto was calm.

'No... I might have killed him.'

'Eh?'

'On that day ten years ago, I pushed Yukari-san down the stone steps in my hatred!' yelled Ishii. His heart – his body – it felt like they were breaking into pieces.

He felt that he was vile and filthy.

Yet Makoto still smiled at him.

It made Ishii feel perplexed.

'Ishii-san, you didn't push her down the stone steps.'

'How can you know that?'

Makoto hadn't been there. There was no way for her to know.

'I know. Ishii-san, you couldn't kill anybody.'

'But I hated her.'

'Everyone feels hatred, but there's a line between those who act on it and those who don't.'

'A line...'

'Yes. Ishii-san, you aren't somebody who could cross that line.'

'But I can still feel it in my hands...'

Ishii looked at his hands.

'Is that the truth?'

Makoto gripped Ishii's hands, enveloping them.

Her hands were a bit cold, but Ishii felt the bottom of his heart grow warm.

'Urgh...'

'Didn't you just tell yourself that?'

'Just tell myself...'

'That's what Yakumo-kun said too.'

'Yakumo-shi did?'

'Yes. He said that you blamed yourself so much that you even deluded yourself into thinking that you killed Yukari-san ten years ago...'

'B-but...'

'In order to solve the curse of the past, you have to face the incident. So...
Let's stand.'

Ishii stood up, led by Makoto.

– I can't run. No. I'll stop running.

In Ishii's chest, something like determination welled up within.

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8

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'Where are you planning on going?'

As Gotou drove the car, Matsuda called out from the backseat.

Matsuda had been acting tough ever since his arrest, but it looked like even he was troubled.

'The shrine where the incident occurred,' replied Gotou curtly.

'The shrine?'

'Yeah.'

'What are you planning on doing?'

Gotou didn't have the answer to that.

He'd brought Matsuda out on the pretext of inspecting the scene, but it was actually on Yakumo's request. He hadn't heard the details, but –

'To end the case.'

That was what Yakumo had said.

All he could do now was believe in Yakumo's words.

'To end the case?'

'Yeah.'

'The case is already over. I killed Mochizuki. Nothing more, nothing less.'

Matsuda's wide open eyes seemed to be filled with a strong will.

– Ah, these eyes.

Gotou understood the true nature of the unease he'd felt from Matsuda.

Matsuda had testified to assaulting and stabbing Mochizuki for his money.

However, when Gotou looked at Matsuda's straight eyes, it seemed incredibly haphazard. Matsuda didn't seem like somebody who would kill someone.

That was why Gotou was troubled and irritated.

'The case isn't over yet.'

'It's over.'

'You can say that, but the case isn't over 'til I say it is.'

'You're persistent.'

Matsuda looked in exasperation at the car's low ceiling.

'For a detective, being persistent is praise.'

'Detectives, eh... You don't look like a detective to me.'

'What do I look like?'

'Who knows. I wonder...'

After saying that, Matsuda bit his lip.

Then, he shut his mouth and sat still, like he had become a stone statue.

Gotou focussed on driving.

He would stop thinking for now. Yakumo would lead him to the truth soon.

After a while, the car reached the stone steps at the bottom of the shrine.

They would walk now.

Gotou got out of the driver's seat, opened the back door and told Matsuda to get out.

Matsuda sighed and got out of the backseat.

'We're going.'

Gotou urged Matsuda to climb the stone steps.

For just a moment, Matsuda looked up at the sky. He narrowed his eyes, like he thought the sun was bright. His expression looked sad to Gotou.

Gotou climbed the stone steps with Matsuda.

His footsteps were heavy, but Gotou continued climbing, believing that the truth was ahead.

'Gotou-san, you're late.'

Gotou heard a voice as he arrived at the shrine.

He saw Yakumo standing in front of the tree of deceit.

His eyes were sleepy as usual as he ran a hand through his messy hair.

'Shut up. I had a lot to prepare too.'

'It takes you this much time to prepare because of your inefficiency.'

'I don't need to hear that from you!'

'I can hear you even if you don't speak that loudly.'

Yakumo stuck his fingers in his ears to complain about the noise.

Yakumo always did this, but Gotou was still annoyed by the brat.

'Who's that?'

Matsuda looked openly suspicious.

– How should I explain?

Ignoring Gotou's wavering, Yakumo walked straight towards Matsuda.

'You're Matsuda-san, yes? It's nice to meet you. My name is Saitou Yakumo.'

Yakumo greeted Matsuda politely.

'You a detective too?' asked Matsuda, seeming confused.

Yakumo smiled innocently in response.

'No, I'm not a detective. I'm just a student,' Yakumo said nonchalantly.

'S-student?'

Matsuda looked even more confused.

'Yes.'

'What is this?'

Matsuda looked at Gotou for an explanation.

– I'm screwed.

While Gotou was trying to think of an excuse, he spotted somebody climbing the stone steps.

It was Ishii and Yuuko.

When Matsuda saw Yuuko, his expression hardened at once.

On the other hand, Yuuko's eyes went so wide that Gotou thought they might fall out. Her hands flew to her mouth in shock.

'W-why is that person here?' Yuuko asked Ishii.

'Ah, no, that's... Er...'

Ishii faltered, unable to explain properly.

'I gathered you here,' said Yakumo in a clear voice.

'That person is the criminal who killed Toshiki-san.'

Yuuko turned her anger towards Yakumo.

'I know.'

Yakumo was calm.

'Then why are you doing this?'

'Of course, it is to end the case.'

'The case is over. What are you saying now?' interrupted Matsuda.

In response, the corners of Yakumo's lips turned up in a carefree smirk.

'It isn't over. Matsuda-san, you know that too, don't you?'

'W-what?'

'We are going to end the case now.'

After saying that, Yakumo took the black contact lens out of his left eye and lifted his head.

'Y-your eye's red....' said Matsuda in a shaking voice, when the deep red left eye turned towards him.

It wasn't just Matsuda who was surprised. Though Yuuko didn't say anything aloud, her hands were at her mouth and her eyes were wide open.

'Don't fuss,' said Gotou, cutting Matsuda down. He looked at Yakumo.

Whether he was used to this reaction or suppression his emotions, Yakumo's expression was the same as always.

'My left eye isn't just red,' said Yakumo in a flat voice.

'W-what?'

Matsuda frowned.

'My left eye can see the spirits of the dead – that is, ghosts.'

'Eh?' said Yuuko in surprise.

'Idiotic. Ghosts? You planning on putting on an exorcism here or something?' said Matsuda scornfully.

'Shut up for a bit,' said Gotou.

'It looks like he is here too now,' said Yakumo after a silence, turning towards the tree of deceit.

'He?'

Yuuko cocked her head.

'Mochizuki Toshiki-san.'

'Eh? But he's...'

'I said this earlier. I can see the spirits of the dead.'

'Is T-Toshiki-san really here?' said Yuuko pleadingly.

'Yes.'

'Where? Toshiki-san, where are you?'

Yuuko seemed to believe Yakumo. She looked around frantically for her dead lover as she called out.

It hurt to watch her.

'Please calm down.'

Ishii couldn't bear it and soothed Yuuko.

Gotou looked at Matsuda. His brow was wrinkled – he looked troubled.

He was probably confused by the unexpected development.

'Now, everyone is here.'

Yakumo slowly looked at everyone.

'What are you going to do?'

Matsuda glared at Yakumo. Yakumo wasn't a guy who'd be frightened by

something of that level. He looked at Matsuda expressionlessly.

'Please don't make me keep saying this. I'm going to end the case.'

'I said that the case is over.'

'Then there's nothing to be frightened of. Please look there.'

'W-what?'

'Did you not hear me? I said you can just look there.'

They looked at each other, their gazes letting off sparks.

After a while, Matsuda was the first to look away.

Yakumo nodded in satisfaction.

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'So how are you planning on ending it?' Gotou asked Yakumo once everything had calmed down.

At this stage, Gotou couldn't see how they could get out of this mess.

'There is something that needs to be made clear first.'

Yakumo held up his index finger.

'What?' asked Gotou, leaning forward.

Yakumo probably already knew the truth behind the case.

'Is it the person who's lying?' interrupted Ishii, sounding agitated.

'Nobody's lying. The case is already over.'

Matsuda kicked the ground in his irritation.

That moment, Yakumo glared at Matsuda. Even Gotou found the glare scary enough to make a chill run down his spine.

'It appears it really would be better to start with you.'

Yakumo turned to face Matsuda.

'What are you saying?'

'It's because you change your testimony that things are such a mess.'

'I haven't changed my testimony,' denied Matsuda, but for some reason, there was no power to his words.

'What did Matsuda-san say to Yuuko-san when he was arrested?'

Yakumo looked at Gotou.

Gotou was able to remember the answer immediately.

'You planning to betray me...'

Matsuda had said that.

Those words meant that Yuuko and Matsuda had been working together, but after that, Matsuda had claimed that he had worked alone.

That inconsistency had been one of the problems troubling Gotou.

'That's wrong. I just said that to put the blame on that woman.'

Matsuda shook his head.

'That's a lie,' declared Yakumo.

'What do you know? Don't just say whatever you want.'

Matsuda tried to grab at Yakumo.

Gotou stopped him immediately and pulled him away from Yakumo.

Don't make a fuss... Yakumo, what are you talking about?'

'What Matsuda said when he was arrested is correct.'

'I said that it's wrong!'

Matsuda tried to leap at Yakumo again.

Gotou blocked Matsuda's foot and pushed him to the ground.

It was a forceful method, but if Gotou didn't do this, they wouldn't get anywhere.

'So Matsuda and Yuuko were working together to kill Mochizuki?'

'That's wrong! There's no way I could do that!' screamed Yuuko with a frantic expression.

She pushed away Ishii, who was trying to hold her back, and clung to Gotou.

'Why do I have to kill the person I love? Please believe me already! I didn't do anything!'

Gotou felt divided as he saw the tears roll down Yuuko's face.

He didn't think Yuuko was lying.

'Oi, Yakumo...'

Gotou looked at Yakumo.

After a sigh, Yakumo placed a hand on Yuuko's shoulders.

'I know. You didn't request for Mochizuki-san's death,' said Yakumo.

Gotou couldn't believe his ears.

'What do you mean?'

Gotou pressed Yakumo for an answer.

Yakumo had said earlier that Matsuda and Yuuko were working together, but now he had said something completely different to Yuuko.

'Right now, we need to make Matsuda's motive clear before dealing with her,' Yakumo said firmly. Then, he looked at Ishii.

After receiving that signal, Ishii took the crying Yuuko a little ways away.

'Matsuda-san, you stabbed Mochizuki-san because somebody requested that you do so.'

'I don't know what you're talking about,' said Matsuda, getting up.

His tight fists were shaking.

'There's no point playing dumb. You received a request. Then, you consented to it.'

'I said, I don't know what you're talking about!'

Matsuda's voice was wild.

'In the end, he killed Mochizuki for money?' asked Gotou.

'Mochizuki-san didn't receive money for the murder,' Yakumo said flatly.

'It wasn't money?'

'It wasn't.'

'Then what was it?'

'His daughter's life.'

Yakumo's words hit Gotou like a strong impact.

It seemed like it was the same for Matsuda. He stared, dumbfounded, at Yakumo.

'H-his daughter was a hostage?'

'That isn't exactly it, but the situation was something like that.'

'Explain it in a way I can understand,' said Gotou, irritated.

'Matsuda-san's daughter is in hospital for leukaemia.'

'Yeah.'

'The culprit said this to approach Matsuda-san: "I am a compatible donor for your daughter."''

'What!?'

Though Gotou was shocked, he understood.

In short, the culprit requested that Matsuda kill Mochizuki for a bone marrow transfusion.

Just as Yakumo said, that was the same as holding Matsuda's daughter hostage. If he refused, there would be no transfusion and his daughter might die.

'No! You're just making this up!' yelled Matsuda, curling up as he did so.

'It's natural for you to deny it. If the person who made the request is arrested, there will be no transfusion. You had to say that you worked alone no matter what happened for your daughter's sake.'

Yakumo's quiet words made Matsuda turn pale.

That response was enough.

Yakumo was probably correct. Matsuda had killed Mochizuki for his daughter's bone marrow transfusion. But –

'When he was arrested, he said, "You planning to betray me?" Why?'

'Why do you think the crime occurred in front of Yuuko-san in the first place?'

'That's...'

'In order to make her the witness and leave Matsuda-san out of the investigation.'

– That's how it was?

If Yuuko was the witness and gave an appropriate testimony, she could leave Matsuda out of the investigation.

'But Yuuko said that he was the culprit...'

'Correct. Matsuda-san thought that he had been betrayed and ended up saying, "You planning to betray me?"'

'But if Yuuko was arrested as an accomplice, there'd be no transfusion, so he

testified that he'd worked alone,' said Gotou in one breath.

Yakumo nodded.

A number of mysteries now made sense.

'Don't just say whatever you want!' yelled Matsuda, his face bright red.

'Don't get so worked up!'

Gotou glared at Matsuda, but Matsuda still didn't calm down.

'That woman's got nothing to do with it! I did everything on my own!'

'You...'

'Please... Just say I did it myself.'

Matsuda grabbed Gotou's shoulders and pleaded with tears in his eyes.

'Unfortunately, it's pointless no matter how much you flounder,' said Yakumo, running a hand through his messy bedhead.

'W-what?'

'Your daughter's bone marrow transfusion will not take place.'

'W-what are you talking about?'

'You were tricked. She probably isn't a compatible donor.'

Matsuda's eyes went wide when he heard Yakumo's words.

Finally, he looked at Yuuko. She was shaking in fear by Ishii.

'I... was tricked?' said Matsuda, like he was talking to himself.

'Yes.'

'That's a lie. I saw the compatibility chart. She should be able to be my daughter's donor.'

'The document was faked.'

Matsuda's expression hardened.

'Then what's going to happen to my daughter?'

That question made Yakumo grow silent and look away.

Matsuda fell to his knees.

He covered his face with his hands. It looked like he was crying.

This man had been trying to protect his daughter. He had even killed somebody to do it. That didn't make it forgivable, but Gotou understood why he'd done it.

'Matsuda...'

Gotou put a hand on Matsuda's shoulder, but Matsuda pushed it away and stood up.

'Can't believe... you tricked me...' growled Matsuda. He looked at Yuuko with a killing intent.

– This is bad.

Just as Gotou thought that, Matsuda flew at Yuuko.

'Stop!' yelled Gotou, running after him.

'Wait. Please calm down!'

Ishii stood in front of Matsuda as a shield for Yuuko, but Matsuda pushed him away immediately.

'You kidding me!? What did I do this for!? I'll never forgive you!'

Matsuda grabbed Yuuko's hair.

'Aahh!'

As Yuuko screamed, she flailed about to try to escape Matsuda.

Matsuda lifted his fist.

Words wouldn't be able to stop him. Gotou kicked Matsuda with all his strength.

After taking that surprise attack, Matsuda let go of Yuuko and fell to the ground on his side. He still got up again and tried to attack Yuuko.

'That's misguided resentment! You idiot!'

Gotou grabbed Matsuda by the collar and pushed him to the ground again.

Even though he was covered in dirt, Matsuda still got up to glare at Gotou. He looked like a demon.

'What do you understand!? My daughter's going to die! My daughter!' shouted Matsuda in tears.

It was true that Gotou could empathise with Matsuda, but Gotou couldn't forgive him.

'No matter what the reason, you can't take anybody's life!'

That was Gotou's belief as a detective – no, as a human being.

'Those are just pretty words! A parent would do anything for their daughter!'

'Still...'

'I promised. To save my daughter... no matter what... so...'

Matsuda dug his fingernails into the ground.

He was probably trying to bear with a pain that felt like it would cut through him. But –

'The person who died felt the same sadness as you,' said Gotou as he looked down at Matsuda.

'Like I care about the other guy! I don't care about anything else if I can save my daughter.'

'It's because you're like that that you were so easily tricked!'

Gotou grabbed Matsuda's collar and forced him to stand up.

'I...'

'You have to know that too, right?' said Gotou, his voice taking an about turn as he spoke kindly.

Matsuda's shoulders slumped as he looked down.

He wants to save his daughter – Gotou understood that. But he couldn't sacrifice another life for that.

Matsuda had to know that too.

But people were weak. That was why they got caught up in the current.

'Matsuda-san, please tell the truth.'

After a while, Yakumo walked forward.

Matsuda wiped his tears with his hand and slowly looked up.

'I met that woman one week ago...'

Matsuda looked at Yuuko.

'I-I don't know what you're talking about.'

Yuuko shook her head to deny it, but Matsuda continued talking despite that.

'She said that if I killed the man named Mochizuki Toshiki, she would be my daughter's bone marrow donor.'

'So you went to the shrine that day,' said Yakumo.

'Yeah. Just like that woman told me to, I hid behind that tree.'

Matsuda pointed at the tree of deceit.

'You're lying! That's a lie!'

Yuuko's hair flew about as she wailed.

Ishii held her back with all his might.

'Shut up! You planning on running away now?'

'I don't know what I don't know.'

'I'm listening to what Matsuda-san has to say right now. Please be quiet.'

Yakumo interrupted their conversation.

Maybe she was afraid of being looked at by that red left eye, as Yuuko shut her mouth, her face twitching.

After things had calmed down, Yakumo urged Matsuda to continue. 'What happened after that?'

'I did as I said and turned the knife towards Mochizuki, who was with that woman.'

'And then you stabbed him?' asked Gotou.

Matsuda shook his head.

'That woman got in the way.'

'Got in the way?'

'Even though she was the one who told me to kill him, when I pointed the knife at him, she tried to stop me. The man named Mochizuki fought back too – I was frantic. It became a scuffle, and before I knew it, the man named Mochizuki was on the ground, clutching his stomach...'

Matsuda was probably remembering the event. He was shaking as he looked at his hands.

Matsuda hadn't stabbed somebody because he wanted to.

He had probably lost himself.

'What happened after that?' pressed Yakumo, his eyes narrowed.

'I ran away... That woman was supposed to contact me after, but I didn't hear from her.'

'So you went back to the scene to see what was happening.'

Matsuda nodded.

Gotou knew the rest.

'Why... Why are you making something like this up?'

Yuuko was the one who spoke.

Her teary eyes were filled with anger.

'Trying to get away alone? What a cowardly woman you are,' said Matsuda disparagingly, but Yuuko didn't back down.

'I really don't know! Stop saying whatever you want!'

'Calm down!' yelled Gotou, stopping the two of them.

The new testimony from Matsuda sounded convincing and made sense. At the same time, Yuuko didn't look like she was lying.

'Who's correct?' Gotou asked Yakumo.

Yakumo ran a hand through his messy hair and smiled bitterly.

'There are no lies in Matsuda-san's testimony.'

'Then...'

'At the same time, Yuuko-san's testimony is also true.'

Gotou was at a loss for words –

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'W-what do you mean?'

Ishii couldn't believe his ears.

'I mean exactly what I said. Neither Matsuda-san nor Yuuko-san has lied.'

In contrast to Ishii's confusion, Yakumo was calm. However –

'T-that's impossible.'

Matsuda testified that Yuuko requested that he kill her fiancé, but Yuuko, on the other hand, said that she didn't know Matsuda.

Their two views were opposites. They couldn't both be true.

'No, it holds true.'

'It's impossible,' said Ishii in an unusually strong tone.

No matter how he thought about it, he couldn't solve that contradiction.

'Right!?! That makes no sense!' agreed Gotou, approaching Yakumo.

However, Yakumo still didn't budge. His red left eye probably saw a truth that Ishii and Gotou didn't know –

'She was possessed.'

Yakumo's words struck Ishii's chest.

'Possessed...'

'In short, Yuuko-san was possessed by the ghost of her older sister, Yukari-san.'

Yakumo pointed at Yuuko.

– Ah, so that's how it was?

Ishii finally understood. If that was true, it would make sense for the testimonies to contradict.

'W-what do you mean?' said Gotou, sounding like he didn't understand.

'Something similar happened before, didn't it?'

'You mean with Hijikata...'

'Yes. In this case, Yukari-san's spirit has been controlling Yuuko-san. In short, the two sometimes switch places.'

Yakumo looked at Yuuko.

'My sister?'

Yuuko's eyes went wide in surprise.

'Yes.'

Yakumo nodded.

Nobody spoke. It was like time had stopped.

'But is that really true?' asked Gotou.

'That is all I can think of,' Yakumo replied calmly.

'But Yukari died ten years ago,' said Gotou, wiping the sweat off his forehead.

'The amount of time doesn't matter. Spirits will continue to wander as long as they have unfinished business.'

Ishii felt a chill run down his spine.

Yukari's hatred – it was probably towards the person who killed her.

'I...'

Interrupting Ishii, Yakumo continued his explanation.

'Yukari-san had a strong hatred. She was pushed down the stairs to her death.'

'Urgh...'

Yuuko ground her back teeth together uncomfortably.

'In order to clear that hatred, Yukari-san possessed her sister, Yuuko-san.'

'My sister... possessed me...'

Yuuko's eyes were wide as she put her hand to her chest.

'Yes. Yuuko-san, Yukari-san's spirit sometimes switches with yours.'

'That's... that's impossible! I'm me!' pleaded Yuuko, leaning forward.

'When she switches over, it's like you're sleeping. You aren't conscious of it.'

'I see. So that's why the people at the hospital have said she's been acting strange...'

Gotou clapped his hands together.

'Probably.'

Yakumo nodded.

'T-then... who met Matsuda-san?' asked Ishii, wiping the sweat off his forehead.

'She looked like Yuuko-san. However, I believe Yukari-san was inside her.'

'W-what!?'

Gotou's body bent back in shock.

'I-in short, the person who requested Mochizuki's death was not Yuuko-san, but Yukari-san's ghost, who was possessing her...' said Ishii in a shaking voice.

'Exactly. That is why Yuuko-san didn't know Matsuda-san.'

Yakumo smirked.

If Yakumo was right, both their contradictory testimonies would be true at the same time.

However, there was still something Ishii didn't understand.

'Why did Yukari-san try to kill Mochizuki?' asked Ishii.

Yakumo slowly moved to the stone steps and looked down.

'Somebody pushed Yukari-san down these steps to her death ten years ago.'

Yakumo's tone was indifferent.

Ishii felt like he was being accused.

He might have been the one who pushed her.

'I...'

Yakumo looked up to interrupt Ishii.

His red left eye seemed sad for some reason.

'Yukari-san thought that the person who killed her was Mochizuki-san, her lover at that time.'

'But that...'

– Might have been me.

Ishii thought about saying it, but Yakumo shook his head.

'Yukari-san thought it was Mochizuki-san.'

'That's wrong!' shouted Yuuko, her hands in fists.

'Please be quiet for a bet.'

Yakumo looked at Yuuko.

Yuuko gulped loudly under that pressure and shut her mouth.

After a deep breath, Yakumo continued his explanation.

'Currently, that fact doesn't matter. The important thing is what Yukari-san thought.'

Yakumo paused before continuing.

'Yukari-san knew that the man who killed her was going to marry her younger sister. From her perspective, it was completely unforgiveable. Yukari-san's hatred grew stronger. In the short time that she took over Yuuko-san's body, she approached Matsuda-san and planned to kill Mochizuki-san.'

After finishing his explanation, Yakumo ran a hand through his hair.

'So I was tricked by a ghost...' said Matsuda in shock.

'In short, this incident was planned by the dead Yukari and executed by Matsuda – right?' said Gotou, wrapping things up.

'That's a bit incorrect.'

Yakumo immediately rejected Gotou's opinion.

'W-what's incorrect about it?' asked Ishii, confused.

Yakumo slowly walked up to the tree of deceit.

'Have you forgotten? There is one more testimony.'

'One more?'

Gotou furrowed his brow.

Ishii felt the same way. They should have had all the testimonies now.

'Whose testimony?' Ishii asked Yakumo hesitantly.

Yakumo left a tantalising pause before slowly turning around.

'The testimony of the victim, Mochizuki Toshiki.'

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'I see!'

Ishii spoke up without thinking.

Yakumo looked at the shrine. Ishii couldn't see anything but the shrine, but it was different for Yakumo's red left eye.

The murdered Mochizuki was probably there.

Yakumo slowly walked up to the shrine.

'Matsuda-san assaulted Mochizuki-san when he was with Yuuko-san at the shrine. Then, the two had a scuffle... correct?'

Yakumo stopped, turned around and looked at Matsuda.

'Yeah,' Matsuda said firmly, as if he was already resigned.

'Matsuda-san, you stabbed Mochizuki-san with a knife then. That is correct as well, yes?'

'Yeah,' replied Matsuda.

'Matsuda-san, do you remember where you stabbed Mochizuki-san then?'

Matsuda's brow furrowed in confusion at Yakumo's question.

'Stomach... I think...'

It was an unreliable reply, unlike his earlier ones.

'Did you stab him just once? Or was it twice?'

'Urgh...'

'Perhaps you don't remember how many times you stabbed Mochizuki-san because you had lost track of yourself?'

'What do you mean?'

Gotou went right up to Yakumo.

'I'll explain now, so please don't speak so loudly.'

Yakumo put his fingers in his ears to complain.

'Please tell us. What on earth happened?' asked Ishii, unable to stay silent.

According to what was said so far, Matsuda hadn't stabbed Mochizuki's chest. Then who did?

'Ishii-san, Mochizuki-san has two stab wounds, yes? In his chest and his stomach.'

'Yes.'

'Which was the lethal wound?'

'The chest,' Ishii replied immediately.

Though Mochizuki had a stomach injury too, it had been shallow – it wasn't

the direct cause of his death.

'In short, after Matsuda-san left, Mochizuki-san was still alive.'

'W-what!?' Gotou shouted again.

'I said, please don't speak so loudly.'

'Shut up! Stop putting on airs and tell us already!'

In his agitation, Gotou grabbed Yakumo by the collar.

'D-Detective Gotou.'

Ishii tried to console the agitated Gotou and stepped between them.

Yakumo sighed in exasperation before starting his explanation.

'After being stabbed in the stomach, Mochizuki-san fainted, but he woke up after a while,' said Yakumo. Then, he looked at Yuuko.

Yuuko shook like a small animal.

'What happened after?' Gotou urged.

'When Mochizuki-san woke up, he saw Yuuko-san in front of him. He pleaded for her help, but she didn't.'

'Because she was Yukari-san...' said Ishii after gulping.

Yakumo nodded.

From Mochizuki's perspective, she looked like Yuuko, but inside her had been the ghost of Yukari, who had died ten years ago.

'Yukari-san took up the knife that Matsuda-san tossed aside...'

Yakumo's eyes narrowed and he shut his mouth.

Ishii understood what was next even without Yakumo's saying it.

The knife was stabbed into Mochizuki's chest –

That was why he had an injury in his chest and his stomach, and why

Yuuko's fingerprints had been on the knife.

'I-I... didn't kill him?' said Matsuda in a hoarse voice, looking at his hands.

'I... ' said Yuuko, her voice trembling.

'You must have had an inkling that your sister's ghost had possessed you,' Yakumo said quietly.

'I thought it was... a dream...'

'A dream?'

Ishii stared at Yuuko.

'The day Toshiki-san was stabbed... My sister appeared in front of me and said... to kill him... but I thought it was all a dream...'

Tears fell from Yuuko's eyes.

'It wasn't a dream,' declared Yakumo.

'Eh?'

'Yukari-san is currently possessing another woman.'

'Another...'

'Yes. She is still filled with hatred, trying to kill someone.'

'I...'

'Who could Yukari-san be trying to kill, when she has already taken her revenge?'

'I don't know.'

Yuuko shook her head forcefully.

'Do you really not know?'

'W-what are you talking about?'

'The person who pushed your sister off the stone steps was – '

'Stop!'

'You, wasn't it?'

'No!'

Yuuko's scream drowned out Yakumo's voice.

After a silence, Yakumo said, 'So you're still going to deny it. Then I'll ask the person herself.'

– The person herself?

What did he mean?

In response to Ishii's question, a woman appeared from the tree of deceit's shadow –

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'Eeek!' shrieked Ishii, leaping up when he saw a woman suddenly appear from the shadow of the tree of deceit.

The woman wore a blazer school uniform. The one from the school Ishii had gone to.

Her hair hung in front of her face, so he couldn't see it clearly.

However, that was –

'Kosaka Yukari-san...' said Ishii.

Yuuko was shocked.

'It was you... I'll kill you...' the woman moaned, approaching Yuuko with the movements of a zombie.

'N-no...' said Yuuko, her voice trembling as she backed away.

The woman continued to walk towards Yuuko.

Even though the situation was so strange, Yakumo just watched silently.

'It was you... You killed me... You pushed me down the stairs... and killed me...'

The woman's cry echoed through the shrine.

Yuuko collapsed to the floor, perhaps in fear.

She took deep breaths as she sobbed.

– At this rate...

Ishii tried to go help Yuuko, but he was so afraid that his knees buckled. He couldn't move.

The woman's hand reached out towards Yuuko's neck.

'Stop!'

Gotou was the one who yelled.

He rammed his body into the woman.

'Aah!' shrieked the woman as she fell.

At this stage, Ishii also noticed something strange.

A ghost without a body couldn't be rammed into.

'Honestly, that hurts.'

The woman spoke in a clear voice, completely different than it had been before, and stood up, taking off her wig.

Ishii had seen that face before.

'H-Haruka-chan!'

'Why is it you, Haruka-chan?' said Gotou in surprise.

Haruka rubbed her knee and glared at Yakumo.

'Why didn't you explain beforehand?'

'I forgot.'

In contrast to Haruka's anger, Yakumo just replied with a yawn.

It looked like Yakumo had used Haruka to put on a good show.

'Honestly. Yoou're the worst.'

'Don't say that. It worked wonders.'

Yakumo responded to Haruka's complaint with a smile.

What worked wonders – Ishii glanced at Yuuko, who was kneeling on the floor while moaning.

'Why!? Why!?' screamed Yuuko.

Her eyes were wide open, showing her teeth. She looked just like a demon.

'A-are you all right...'

Ishii tried to approach her, but Yuuko stood up and pushed his hands away.

'I'm not at fault! My sister is!'

It looked like Yuuko had completely lost herself.

'Oi.'

Gotou grabbed her arm, but Yuuko flung it aside.

'She always acted like a good girl, but she hit me when nobody was looking! She rolled around with laughter when she saw me in pain! Do you know how I felt?'

– I see. This person also...

Ishii felt like he had been stabbed in the chest.

'Yuuko-san...'

'Do you know how happy I was that you died? Why are you still getting in

my way when you're dead!?' screamed Yuuko while crying.

Yuuko had probably been bullied by her older sister, Yukari, every day.

From the bully's perspective, it might have just been an extension of a joke, but from the bullied person's perspective, it was the same as torture.

Ishii understood how painful those days were –

And the bully was a relative. She couldn't escape – it would have been an eternal hell.

'It's all right now. Please calm down.'

Ishii called out frantically, but Yuuko's eruption of emotions still didn't stop.

'I'll kill you again!' yelled Yuuko as she tried to assault Haruka.

Ishii frantically held Yuuko down.

'Let go!'

Yuuko twisted her body about, but Ishii still didn't let go of Yuuko.

Soon, Yuuko became exhausted and collapsed to her knees.

'What is this?' asked Gotou, looking suspicious.

'Exactly what it looks like,' Yakumo replied curtly.

'I don't get it.'

'Yuuko-san was bullied at home by her older sister, Yukari-san. Yuuko-san's hatred built up and she pushed Yukari-san down the shrine's steps that day ten years ago,' said Yakumo in one breath. Then, he took a long sigh.

'W-what?'

'Yukari-san thought that Mochizuki-san had killed her, but after possessing Yuuko-san and killing Mochizuki-san, she realised the truth. That the one who killed her was her sister.'

'Wha!?!'

'Then, she decided to kill Yuuko-san this time.'

'So that's why she possessed Mai,' said Haruka, continuing Yakumo's explanation.

'Correct. In order to kill Yuuko-san, she had to be in somebody else's body, so she possessed your friend, who just happened to be nearby.'

After finishing his explanation, Yakumo slowly walked up to Yuuko.

Yuuko looked up, her face covered with tears.

'You actually regret it, don't you? What happened to your sister.'

Yakumo's voice seemed filled with warmth and kindness.

'I don't regret...'

'You envied your sister, but at the same time, you looked up to her.'

'That's a lie!'

'It isn't a lie. Did you two sisters always not get along?'

Yuuko shook her head.

'She was a really nice sister... but...'

'When did she start bullying you?'

'I don't really remember...'

'Wasn't it about a year before she passed away?'

Yuuko looked up in surprise.

'...'

'The reason she started bullying you was Mochizuki-san.'

'Why him...'

'When Mochizuki-san went to Yukari-san's house, he saw you and fell in love.'

'That's... I...'

'That was the cause of Yukari-san and Mochizuki-san's conversation about splitting up.'

'But...'

'Yukari-san felt like Mochizuki-san had been stolen away from her and started to bully you. That wasn't all – she thought up a plan to keep him.'

'I see. So the story about the pregnancy was Yukari-san's lie,' said Ishii in understanding.

Ishii had thought that Yukari was pregnant because of the rumour at school and the money in the envelope, but the autopsy hadn't found any signs of it.

Yukari had lied to keep Mochizuki, but he hadn't shown up.

That was why she had been so furious.

'Yes,' said Yakumo with a nod. Then, he turned towards Yuuko again.

'Yukari-san really loved you, but that just made her want you to take her lover even less. I think there was also a feeling of weakness – of being completely incapable of winning.'

Yakumo placed a hand on Yuuko's shoulder.

'Sis... I'm sorry...' said Yuuko, sounding pained, and she fell down in tears again.

It was so sad. Even though sisters should have had a different path, why did these two end up this way?

All Ishii could do was watch silently.

'Ishii-san.'

Yakumo looked straight at Ishii.

'Y-yes.'

Ishii accepted that gaze stiffly.

'It's your turn next.'

'My...'

Ishii gulped.

'Yes.'

Yakumo's sharp eyes looked at him.

'I don't...'

Interrupting Ishii's words, Yakumo shook his head.

'You understand now, yes? Ishii-san, you didn't push Yukari-san down the stairs ten years ago,' said Yakumo firmly. Then, he smiled gently.

It was clear from Yakumo's mystery solving that Yuuko was the one who pushed Yukari's back.

However, there was still a blurry shadow within Ishii.

'Is that really true? I still feel like I pushed her back with these hands...'

Ishii looked at his hands.

'It's a hallucination,' Yakumo said with determination.

If Yakumo said that, it might be true, but –

'Even if I wasn't the one who acted on it, for that moment, I did want to kill her. It's the same offence,' said Ishii all at once.

His breath was ragged, like he had been running at full speed.

Yakumo smiled upon seeing that.

'Ishii-san, you're too serious.'

'I...'

'Everybody feels hatred.'

'But...'

'And it's different now, isn't it?'

Yakumo placed a hand on Ishii's shoulder.

That moment, Ishii felt like all his tension crumble away.

'I... hated Mochizuki Toshiki and Kosaka Yukari. I was so frightened I couldn't do anything. Why did they treat me this way... I thought countless times about killing them...'

Ishii gripped his fists tightly. He knew himself that his blood had rushed to his head, making his face red.

'Ishii-san,' said Yakumo in a hoarse voice.

'I still hate them now!' Ishii yelled towards the sky.

Everything was quiet.

How long was he there? Before he noticed, Mochizuki was standing in front of him.

He didn't know if it was an illusion or his actual spirit, but Ishii still looked straight at Mochizuki.

Strangely, he didn't feel any fear

'I'm not a glasses monkey. I'm Detective Ishii Yuutarou,' declared Ishii.

Mochizuki Toshiki's expression twisted.

'So high and mighty. You...'

'I realised this after becoming a detective! Hatred produces nothing! So!'

Ishii interrupted Mochizuki.

The Mochizuki Toshiki standing in front of him disappeared, like he had melted into the air.

The moment he disappeared, Ishii felt like he had been smiling slightly.

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– It’s finally over.

Gotou sighed in relief.

‘I’ll leave the clean-up to you then,’ declared Yakumo. Then, he walked down the stone steps briskly.

‘W-wait a second.’

Haruka hurried after him.

‘Man, he just does whatever he want,’ muttered Gotou, though on the inside, he was grateful.

Without Yakumo, they probably wouldn’t have been able to solve the case, but Gotou couldn’t feel relaxed.

He always had to do this, but he needed to deal with the case while leaving out the spiritual phenomena. It hurt his head just thinking about it.

‘Detective, can I be forgiven with this?’ asked Matsuda, interrupting Gotou’s thoughts.

That caused Gotou’s anger to swell up all at once.

‘Idiot! Like you could be forgiven!’

Matsuda gulped, seeming surprised by Gotou’s yell.

‘Even if he didn’t die because of you, it was still attempted murder!’

Matsuda wasn’t the one who killed Mochizuki, but he had still tried to cross a line that could never be crossed.

Gotou felt bad about Matsuda’s daughter, but no matter the reason, you couldn’t take someone’s life.

'What... should I have done...'

Matsuda looked at Gotou pleadingly.

'Think about that yourself,' replied Gotou.

Matsuda smiled bitterly.

'How cold...'

'Like I'd be kind to you. You chose the wrong path. No matter how you try to excuse yourself, that can't be forgiven.'

'Yeah...'

Matsuda's shoulders slumped as he looked down, maybe because he finally realised how heavy his crime was.

'But if you chose the wrong path, you can just correct it.'

Matsuda looked up.

'How do I correct it?'

'Like I know.'

'How irresponsible.'

'Shut your mouth. If you don't know, look for it. I'll go with you,' Gotou said forcefully.

It wasn't consolation – it was how Gotou really felt.

Catching the criminal didn't solve the case. Clearing away the darkness that the victims and the perpetrators carried was what ended the case.

In that meaning, cases that occurred once could go on forever.

But still –

'I did... something unbelievable...'

Matsuda fell to the floor and started sobbing.

He had realised late, but it wasn't too late. He could still fix things now.

'Get up.'

Gotou stuck his hand out towards Matsuda.

Gotou lifted his tearstained face.

'Walk with your own feet. For your daughter's sake too.'

Matsuda wiped his tears with his hands and stood up.

'I'll go back with Matsuda,' Gotou told Ishii, who was with the crying Yuuko.

'Eh, but...'

'It's fine. I'll call help,' said Gotou. Then, he walked away with Matsuda.

He went down the steps and sat Matsuda in the back of the unmarked police car. Then, he started the engine.

He drove.

Matsuda looked out the window absentmindedly.

Gotou felt like he understood why Yukari had chosen this man.

Matsuda had been prepared to even throw away his own life, if it was for his daughter's sake. He was pure, in a sense.

It was probably because Yayoi knew that that she had continued to believe in Matsuda.

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'Wait a second!'

Haruka finally caught up to Yakumo after climbing down the shrine's stone steps.

'Don't dawdle.'

Yakumo yawned as he continued to walk.

'Where are you going?'

'To do the final touches,' replied Yakumo like it was a matter of fact, but Haruka didn't understand.

'Final touches? What do you mean?'

'You really are thoughtless.'

It was an awful way of putting it.

'I won't understand if you don't explain properly,' protested Haruka.

Yakumo sighed. 'That's why you're thoughtless. Do you think the case is over?'

'I-it isn't?'

Just as Yakumo said, Haruka had thought the case was over with the exchange at the shrine.

'Our original goal was to save your friend, who's been possessed by a ghost.'

'Ah!' said Haruka without thinking.

It made sense for Yakumo to think she was stupid. The original goal was to save Mai. In that sense, just as Yakumo said, the case wasn't over yet.

'If you get it, hurry up,' said Yakumo, sounding displeased as he started walking quickly.

Haruka followed him.

'Hey, what's going to happen to Yuuko-san?' Haruka asked Yakumo as they went to the hospital.

From the truth that Yakumo had revealed, Yuuko had been possessed by the spirit of Yukari, who had died ten years ago, and killed her lover, Mochizuki

Toshiki.

However, the police probably wouldn't believe in ghosts.

'She'll probably be charged with murder.'

'That's...'

Haruka felt discouraged. It wasn't like she had wanted to kill her lover, Mochizuki, but she would have to be charged.

The case had a somewhat unpleasant aftertaste.

'It's a cold way of putting it, but she killed her own sister ten years ago. She's paying the price for that. This case happened because it was bound to,' Yakumo said disinterestedly.

'But...'

'No matter the reason, that's how taking somebody's life is.'

Yakumo's words struck deep into Haruka's chest.

It was just as Yakumo said. Hatred bred more hatred, and the same thing kept happening.

– I wonder if Ishii-san was able to clear away his hatred.

That question suddenly came to Haruka. She thought about asking Yakumo, but she decided against it.

Conjecture wouldn't do anything.

They walked silently.

She thought about a number of things, but even after reaching Mai's hospital room, Haruka hadn't organised her thoughts.

'Let's go,' said Yakumo while Haruka was thinking.

'OK,'

Haruka took a deep breath and cleared her mind.

After licking his lips, Yakumo opened the hospital room door.

Mai was lying in bed.

The window was open. The curtains shook in the wind.

'Mai,' said Haruka.

Mai slowly sat up.

However, Haruka realised once seeing those eyes that it wasn't Mai. They were Yukari's eyes.

Yakumo walked up to Mai.

'Kosaka Yukari-san, correct?'

'Ooh...' moaned Mai, glaring at Yakumo.

Yakumo's expression didn't change.

Haruka put her hands together in front of her chest, as if praying. All she could do was watch.

'Your sister, Yuuko-san, confessed that she killed you ten years ago,' began Yakumo.

Then, Mai's expression changed. Her eyes flew open in shock.

'Killed,' said Mai in a low voice, reaching out towards Yakumo.

'If you want to kill Yuuko-san no matter way, you'll have to wait for her to be released from prison.'

Mai ground her teeth loudly.

'Hatred breeds nothing. Let's stop this already.'

Yakumo placed a hand on Mai's shoulder.

However, Mai shook it off immediately and stared at Yakumo with hateful eyes.

'I'll kill you...'

Mai's breathing was ragged.

Yakumo shook his head slightly.

'Yuuko-san said she regrets killing you. She said "Sorry" while crying.'

Mai's brow furrowed in suspicion.

Yakumo took a deep breath before continuing.

'You regret it too, don't you? You loved your sister, Yuuko-san, didn't you?'

Mai's face twisted in pain.

'But you were seized with jealousy and lost sight of what was important...'

'...'

'This incident began with that jealousy. You should know that best yourself, correct?'

'Urgh...'

'Wasn't the person you truly couldn't forgive yourself?'

'I was wrong...' said Mai.

Unlike her early beastly howls, her words were clear.

'Nobody will be happy with more of this hatred. Let's put an end to this already.'

Yakumo looked at Mai's face.

'Sorry... Tell my... sister... tha...'

Mai collapsed while speaking.

'Mai.'

Haruka ran up to the bed.

She was breathing. It looks like she was OK for now.

Haruka looked at Yakumo. He was looking outside the window with distant eyes.

'How'd it go?' asked Haruka.

Yakumo's shoulders relaxed.

'She left.'

'I see.'

Haruka looked out the window.

For just a moment, the clouds in the sky looked like a person's face.

'Haruka...'

There was a voice. Mai's voice.

Haruka saw Mai on the bed. Her eyes were open, though they were squinting.

'Mai!'

Haruka heaved a sigh of relief.

A lot of things had happened, but now the incident was really over –

終章

その後

EPILOGUE

Epilogue

-

Ishii walked to that shrine.

He looked at the towering tree of deceit. There was still a hazy feeling deep in his chest.

'Ishii-san.'

Ishii turned around at the voice and saw Yakumo standing there.

He was the one who had called Ishii here today.

'H-hello.'

'What lovely weather.'

Yakumo turned his narrowed eyes towards the clear sky.

'Ah, yes.'

'How was the aftermath of the incident?' said Yakumo.

He had probably called Ishii out because he wanted to know about what happened after the case, but –

'To be honest, it is a rather difficult voyage.'

Though Yuuko and Matsuda had both honestly confessed, that was troublesome.

They had to explain the case while excluding the spiritual phenomena as well as disclosing the incident ten years ago.

If the press stuck their noses in, they would probably make a fuss, saying that the investigation had been negligent.

'I see...' said Yakumo disinterestedly, running a hand through his messy hair.

For a while after that, he didn't say anything.

He looked up at the tree of deceit expressionlessly.

'Excuse me...' said Ishii, unable to bear it, and Yakumo turned his straight gaze towards him.

An unfaltering gaze that saw right through to the bottom of his heart –

'Ishii-san, do you remember when Mochizuki-san started bullying you?'

The question that came out of Yakumo's mouth was completely unexpected.

'No, not clearly...'

He wasn't playing dumb. He really didn't remember.

Before he'd noticed, the bullying had started.

'Ishii-san, it seems like you drew a manga when you were a student, correct?'

'W-why do you know...'

Just as Yakumo said, Ishii had drawn a manga when he was a student. He had even thought about becoming professional when he grew up. In the end, his father had crushed his dreams, and Ishii had given up.

The problem was why Yakumo knew that.

'I heard from Mochizuki-san.'

'Eh?'

'It seems like he wanted you to show him the manga you drew, Ishii-san, but you refused. Do you remember?'

'No...'

The moment Ishii said that, the memories he had shut away came back all at once.

He didn't remember when it was, honestly. The classroom after school. Ishii had been about to go home when Mochizuki called out to him.

– I hear you're drawing a manga?

– Ah, no, not really...

– Let me see.

Mochizuki reached towards Ishii's hand.

– No!

Ishii refused and ran away.

He had been sure that Mochizuki would make fun of the manga he drew.

At that time, Ishii had been closed off to everybody. He felt like everyone around him made fun of him.

Because of his lack of confidence, that was the only way he could think.

'Mochizuki-san actually wanted to be friends with you, Ishii-san,' Yakumo said.

'T-that's...'

'But you refused him.'

'It was my fault...'

'That's not true.'

Yakumo denied it immediately.

'But...'

'Being refused does not make bullying acceptable.'

'...'

'It's sad. Even though you might actually have been able to understand each other, because of a slight crossing of paths, you ended up hurting each other.'

Ishii nodded.

He had never tried to understand Mochizuki before.

To Ishii, Mochizuki was an object of hatred – he had become somebody Ishii

could not forgive.

'If I had tried to understand him, maybe he wouldn't have bullied me.'

'That can be said for both of you.'

'Is that so?'

'Human relationships are never one-sided... and there are people who will bully others without a reason.'

'How difficult,' murmured Ishii.

'Did you hear him?' asked Yakumo.

'Eh?'

'Mochizuki-san said "Thank you" to you, Ishii-san.'

– Thank you?

Ishii didn't understand.

'I didn't do anything worth thanking for...'

'He probably meant "Sorry" by that,' Yakumo said with a cool expression.

However, Ishii felt both were wrong. The truth was –

'Shall we go?'

After saying that, Yakumo started to walk.

'Ah, yes,' replied Ishii. He ran after Yakumo, but he stopped before the stone steps and turned around.

The tree of deceit stood beneath the blue sky –

※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

-

Thank you for reading *Psychic Detective Yakumo: ANOTHER FILES – The Tree of Deceit*.

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This work was written about five years ago as a script for an original story to be performed on stage.

As it was to be performed on stage, there were many constraints, such as the length of the play and the scene changes, but by expression through limitation, I was able to show a new face of Yakumo.

Three years after the play, I was given the chance to rewrite it as a newspaper serialisation and happily took up the pen.

However, this time, I hit the wall of word count.

Expressing without a limited amount of words. For me, it was a large constraint, just like a script was.

Then, it was decided that this work would be published, so I made many revisions to the manuscript's pacing, which had been for a newspaper serialisation.

There were no constraints like the ones that had come before.

On the contrary, I think I have finished a complete version, though I feel perplexed writing that.

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Incidentally, there were probably many people who thought, "What's with that *ANOTHER FILES* subtitle?"

To put it simply, it is a spin-off.

In the regularly numbered series, the works have the man with the red eyes, Yakumo's father, as the main.

The other spin-off I wrote previous, *SECRET FILES*, was a work about Yakumo before he met Haruka.

This work, *ANOTHER FILES* is a story that could not be written within the numbered series, situated after Yakumo met Haruka.

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Of course I will continue writing the numbered series from here on, but I would like to write many *ANOTHER FILES* and *SECRET FILES* too.

I would be happy if you would enjoy the continually growing world of *Psychic Detective Yakumo*.

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Now, what story will develop next time?

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Wait! And look forward to it!

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Heisei 25[1], early summer – Kaminaga Manabu

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Notes:

[1] Heisei 25 is 2013 in the Gregorian calendar.