

神永学



心靈探偵

八
PSYCHIC DETECTIVE
YAKUMO
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震

絆

SECRET FILES

角川文庫

PSYCHIC DETECTIVE YAKUMO

Manabu Kamitaga

SECRET FILES 絆

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P R O L O G U E

each wish: prologue

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After Ozawa Haruka's lecture was finished, she climbed a sloping road lined with ginkgo trees in order to meet somebody.

Yellow leaves fluttered down around her.

Autumn had finally come.

Last night, Isshin, the uncle of Haruka's university friend, Saitou Yakumo, called her.

– If you have time, I'd like you to come by after school.

It was a welcome invitation to Haruka.

After climbing the slope, she saw the gates of the temple.

Next to them, she spotted Isshin, a priest cleaning the garden in his working clothes with a bamboo broom in hand.

Isshin waved his hand with a large gesture before Haruka could call out.

'Hello.'

Haruka stopped in front of the gates and bowed.

'Thanks for coming.'

On Isshin's face, as gentle as Maitreya's, his left eye was dyed red. He wore a red contact lens.

There was a reason that Isshin wore an asymmetrical contact lens.

It was from his love towards his nephew, Yakumo.

Yakumo had had a red left eye ever since he was born which had the unique ability to see the spirits of the dead.

Because of that ability, he was alienated and thought of as strange; even his own mother tried to kill him.

Isshin made his own left eye and bared it so that he might understand even slightly the pain that Yakumo felt.

'Is it really all right for me to come?' Haruka asked Isshin.

'Of course. Today is a special day.'

Isshin's eyes closed as he smiled.

'A special day?'

'Yes. That's why I thought we could continue the conversation we had before.'

'About Yakumo-kun's past... is it?'

Isshin replied to Haruka's question with a nod.

About a week again, Haruka came here because of a case and Isshin tried to talk about Yakumo's past.

However, Yakumo himself cut Isshin off.

– Come hear about it later.

Isshin had whispered that in Haruka's ear then.

It appeared that Isshin hadn't just been saying that before.

Haruka felt opposed to hearing about Yakumo's past when he didn't want to talk about it himself, but at the same time, she still wanted to know more about Yakumo, even if it was just a little.

To Haruka, Yakumo wasn't just a university friend.

Meeting Yakumo had been the start of Haruka's involvement in incidents with ghosts.

Because of Yakumo's unique ability to see the spirits of the dead, he would solve the mysteries behind spiritual phenomena and lead unsolved murder cases to their solution.

Haruka had been involved in a number of cases with Yakumo ever since.

Yakumo had even saved her life.

They would quarrel whenever they met, but before Haruka knew it, Yakumo had become somebody important to her that she didn't want to lose, and somebody that she could trust completely.

However, there was too much she didn't know about Yakumo despite that. She knew practically nothing about Yakumo from before they met.

That was why she wanted to know, even if it was just a little –

The wind whistled.

– I've been waiting.

Haruka heard a voice from behind her on the wind.

It wasn't Isshin's voice.

– Who is it?

Haruka turned around, but there was nobody there.

'That voice...'

'I see. You heard it too, Haruka-chan?'

Haruka was confused, but Isshin seemed satisfied as he said that while nodding.

'Eh?'

'There's no point standing while we talk, so shall we go?'

Isshin looked up at the red-tinged sky and then started walking through the gravel garden to the priests' quarters.

To Haruka, his back looked somewhat sad.

Isshin led her to the living room just past the entrance.

It had a tatami floor with a low table in the middle. Though it was well organised, it did not look very lived in.

'Well, please sit. I'll pour some tea.'

After saying that, Isshin went to the kitchen, divided from the living room by a sliding door.

'Please don't trouble yourself,' said Haruka as she knelt on the cushion.

It was quiet –

It made the sounds of Isshin's taking out the teacups and boiling water sound awfully loud.

Yakumo was currently living in the university's <Movie Research Circle> room, but before that, he had lived in this temple.

When Haruka thought about that, she felt like the eight-tatami space was something special.

'Now, how far did I get last time?'

Isshin came back into the living room with two teacups on a tray.

'You said that there was somebody he could not forget,' replied Haruka, taking the teacup that Isshin offered her.

– Yakumo has somebody he cannot forget.

When Isshin said that last time, with bad timing, Yakumo came in, cutting the conversation short.

What kind of person are they –

Perhaps his first love?

Did even that curt Yakumo have a time when he thought sweetly of somebody?

Haruka had many speculations in her head.

'I see. Then it's the same as having said nothing at all,' said Isshin after taking a sip of tea.

'Sorry to bother!'

Just as Haruka thought that she'd heard an incredibly loud voice that she recognised from the entrance, a man with a body like a bear came in through the curtain of the living room.

He had a wrinkled shirt and loose tie.

'D-Detective Gotou,' said Haruka, surprised to see him here.

Gotou had a deep connection with Yakumo as well.

It was coincidence that he saved Yakumo when he was about to be killed by his mother, but every time there was a case, he dragged Yakumo out and used his power in police investigations.

'Haruka-chan, why are you here?' said Gotou, surprised.

However, Haruka was surprised as well.

'Gotou-san, why are you here?'

'Ah, I just came by to visit a grave,' said Gotou awkwardly. Then, he abruptly sat cross-legged beside Haruka.

'Weren't you injured?' said Isshin, looking at Gotou's stomach.

Haruka heard about this afterward, but during the case one week ago, Gotou had been stabbed in the stomach with a knife and hospitalised.

'Just a flesh wound.'

Gotou snorted, like it was no big deal.

'I don't mind if you become injured, but don't ask Yakumo to do anything too unreasonable.'

Cheek twitching, Isshin looked at Gotou.

'You're so fussy! That's my line! Because of Yakumo, I've had to do some pretty unreasonable things!'

'Your voice is loud as usual.'

Isshin shook his head in exasperation as Gotou shouted.

'I don't need to hear that from you. Anyway, got any incense sticks? Incense sticks.'

Gotou looked around.

'You came to visit a grave, right?'

'Yeah.'

'Then why didn't you bring incense sticks?'

'Shut up. I can't help it if I forgot.'

Gotou sulked like a child as he took a cigarette from his pocket.

'This place is non-smoking.'

Isshin took the cigarette from Gotou's mouth.

'Don't be so cold.'

'How is this being cold? That isn't how you use the word.'

'My bad. So what are you doing here, Haruka-chan?' said Gotou, shutting his cigarette case away in his pocket.

'I was talking with Isshin-san.'

'Talking?'

Gotou cocked his head.

'I wanted to talk to Haruka-chan about the case six years ago,' Isshin explained.

'Ah, that case?'

Gotou slapped his knee.

The way he spoke made it sound like he knew what Isshin was talking about. And –

'It's about a case?'

'Yes. Case of cases. It was a pretty important one. The first case where I teamed up with Yakumo on.'

'Really?' said Haruka in surprise.

Gotou's brows furrowed. He leant in.

'Really. Everything's got to start somewhere.'

It felt completely natural for Yakumo to cooperate with Gotou during investigations even though Yakumo was a university student, but that had a beginning too.

'Anyway, shall we continue?'

Isshin took a sip of tea.

'Right.'

Gotou agreed simply for once.

Isshin nodded knowledgeably and then started to speak.

'It was back when Yakumo was still in the third year of middle school. It began with a rumour...'

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There was a rumour at that school –

When night fell, you could hear a voice from the cherry blossom tree in the field behind the school.

Some said it was a woman's quiet crying of a girl, but others said it was a man's dying scream.

Some people hadn't just heard it. They had seen it as well.

It was a teacher who had committed suicide.

No, it was a kid who'd died in a traffic accident.

With the rumour so embellished, nobody knew the truth –

第一章

それぞれの願い

FILE:
01

each wish: chapter 1

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1

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Takagishi Akemi opened the classroom door at the same time as the chime went off and stood at the lectern.

The students were still noisy from the break.

Akemi put both hands on the lectern, looked around the classroom and waited for the students to quiet down on their own.

Takagishi knew that if you told children of this age to be quiet, they would just grow noisier.

Children in puberty didn't like being told what to do, even if it was a little thing like that.

Rather than being taught that, Akemi had learnt it naturally through her life as a teacher.

The students grew calmer.

'Now, let's start.'

Akemi opened the attendance record and looked around the classroom again, when she noticed there was an empty seat.

The second seat from the back of the row by the corridor –

Somebody had been there during homeroom this morning.

'Where's Saitou-kun?'

Akemi asked that question to all the students.

'Isn't he just skipping again?'

The one who spoke with blatant dislike was Tsukasa, who sat in the very front row and had a leader role in the class.

– Again?

'How long's he been gone?'

Akemi asked that question to Tsukasa, but the reply was an innocent 'I don't know'.

'Sacchan, do you know?'

Akemi looked at Sachiko, who sat beside the empty seat.

'Ah, er, he was here until the end of the first class, but he left during break... I'm sorry.'

Sachiko spoke like a mother apologising for her child's misconduct.

'It's OK. It's not your fault.'

Though Akemi said that to Sachiko, she sighed.

If he had been gone since the second class, there should have been some contact from the other teachers, but nobody had noticed that he was gone.

Akemi couldn't understand at all why something like this had been let pass.

'Let's have class already. I'm seriously itching to study,' said Tsukasa.

'Liar!'

Youhei, in the seat right behind Tsukasa, made fun of him.

There was stifled laughter from all over the classroom.

Akemi couldn't stop class for one person. She knew that. But –

'Please open to page 168 of the textbook and read that passage. I'll be right back.'

The whole class let out a shrill 'Ehhhh!' at Akemi's words.

However, she still couldn't continue class while ignoring a student who had skipped.

Akemi wrote the words 'Self Study' on the blackboard and left the classroom.

She knew where he would be.

He was always in the same place, as if waiting for someone to bring him back.

Akemi ran to the end of the corridor, took the stairs up and opened the door to the rooftop.

The dry autumn wind hit her face.

Akemi covered her eyes and went out onto the rooftop.

– Just as I expected.

She saw the back of a male student looking at the scenery while standing by the rooftop fence.

– Saitou Yakumo.

The back looked somewhat sad, as if it was burdened with something.

Akemi slowly walked up to Yakumo.

– Why did you skip class?

She knew that she wouldn't get an answer even if she asked Yakumo.

'Hey.'

Akemi called out to Yakumo's back.

In response, Yakumo slowly turned around.

He wasn't that different from Akemi in height. Around 150 centimetres. He was a bit short in comparison to other kids his age.

Akemi looked at Yakumo's face, at the same height as her own.

Yakumo was slender and had well-defined features, though they still looked slightly childish. However, he was so pale that it made her doubt whether he was really alive.

Furthermore, his eyes were endlessly dark and cold.

Akemi didn't know what he was thinking. His gaze was as expressionless as a machine's.

Though pubescent boys were prone to trying to make themselves look bigger, most of that ended at vanity.

However, it was different for Yakumo.

There was something about Yakumo that didn't match his fifteen years of age.

'What do you want?' said Yakumo, running a hand through his hair like he thought this troublesome.

An uncertain voice that had just finished changing –

It felt like there was a rejection there, telling people not to approach him.

Yakumo wasn't rejecting Akemi because she was his homeroom teacher.

Akemi had never seen Yakumo talk with the other classmates.

Of course, he talked when absolutely necessary, but that was all. The words that came out of Yakumo's mouth were only short phrases like 'Ah' and 'I see'.

What sort of person was Yakumo trying to become? What did he like? What did he dislike? There was probably nobody in this school whom he would reply to if asked.

'What are you looking at?' asked Akemi, forcing herself to smile.

'The cherry blossoms...' said Yakumo, narrowing his eyes.

Akemi felt like there was something wrong with Yakumo's words. It was autumn now. There were just dead leaves on the branches.

'Even though the flowers aren't blossoming?'

'Don't people say this? That corpses are buried under cherry blossom trees,' said Yakumo expressionlessly.

– Corpses.

Akemi thought that her heart would leap out of her mouth.

He had suddenly said such a frightening thing.

Come to think of it, she'd read something like that in a story before.

It was a story about a man had the wild idea that the reason cherry blossoms were beautiful was

that there were corpses buried underneath the tree and thought of them as symbolic of tragedy¹.

Did Yakumo think that way –

'So did you find it?' asked Akemi as a joke.

'Find what?'

'A corpse.'

Yakumo seemed surprised by Akemi's words, as his cheek twitched.

However, then his expression soon became his usual blank one, and he put his hands in his pockets and walked past Akemi to the door, as if to say he didn't need anything else from her.

'Do you like it here?' said Akemi, following Yakumo with her eyes.

The truth was, she didn't actually want to know that. She just wanted to talk more with Yakumo, even if it was just a little.

If it became a chance for him to open his heart –

It might have been naive, but Akemi had that hope, though it was faint.

'Eh?'

Yakumo stopped right in front of the door.

'Since you're always here.'

'Please just leave me alone, like everyone else.'

That was Yakumo's answer.

'There's no way I could leave you alone!'

Akemi felt irritated by what Yakumo said, and she accidentally spoke roughly.

'...'

Yakumo said something, his back still facing her.

However, she couldn't hear it.

'If you have something you want to say, say it clearly.'

The moment Akemi stepped forward to approach Yakumo, Yakumo turned around.

A chill ran down Akemi's spine when he looked at her.

It felt like that gaze would freeze her.

Akemi lost her words and just stood there in a daze, like a frog under the gaze of a snake.

'I don't really care, but you're annoying.'

1 The story being referred to is *Beneath the Cherry Trees* by Kajii Motojirou.

After a silence, Yakumo said just that and walked away briskly.

Akemi let out a huge sigh and then stood by the fence and looked at the scenery, as Yakumo had been doing.

She saw a cherry blossom tree in the courtyard.

'Annoying... eh...'

Akemi had come back from maternity leave and had been put in charge of Yakumo's class this spring.

The previous instructor had warned her, saying, 'He's not really any trouble, but you should leave him alone.'

Yakumo rejected everything besides himself, putting up an invisible wall and watching everything from inside of it.

No matter how she tried to reach out, he wouldn't come out from behind that wall.

Trying to get involved just invited heartache.

Akemi herself had thought about giving up countless times.

There was a limit to what a schoolteacher could do. She knew that. But she just couldn't leave Yakumo alone.

She knew that she had always had a meddlesome personality.

But was it just her personality making her concerned about Yakumo?

Akemi just couldn't think of Yakumo as a stranger.

Naturally, they weren't related by blood. But there was something else – she felt there was something like a connection.

She might have thought that way because of the rumours about him.

Anyway, there must have been a reason for Yakumo to close of his heart. He might have had problems in his family environment.

Come to think of it, Akemi only knew the Yakumo at school.

– Maybe I'll go visit his house today.

Akemi made that decision.

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The door opened quietly and Yakumo returned to the classroom.

– I'm glad.

Though this always happened, Sachiko felt relieved.

Every time Yakumo disappeared, Sachiko felt nervous. She would worry about whether he was causing trouble and feel anxious about whether he wouldn't return to the classroom.

However, that was just Sachiko. The other students had a different response.

Everyone silently looked at Yakumo with scorn.

Someone who stuck out, throwing everyone's circle out of order. It felt like they were blaming him that way.

However, Yakumo didn't seem to care as he sat next to Sachiko's seat and took a book as thick as a novel from his desk, flipping it open to a bookmark and then reading it with a serious expression.

At the same time, other people started talking.

'I really wish that guy would stop it already.'

'It's kinda annoying.'

'But his grades are good.'

'He's cheating, right?'

'Clairvoyance?'

'Ah, that might be true. In elementary school, there was a rumour that he could see ghosts.'

'Seriously?'

'And his eye's actually red, says the rumours.'

'And his parents are missing.'

'I heard about that. He killed them or something.'

'Murderer.'

– It's started again.

Sachiko wanted to cover her eyes.

It was Tsukasa and the others. They said awful things loudly on purpose so that Yakumo could hear them. It made sense for Yakumo to want to leave the classroom if he was treated this way.

Sachiko felt angry, but unfortunately, she wasn't brave enough to say it aloud.

She glanced at Yakumo, in the seat beside her.

As if he hadn't heard the gossip at all, Yakumo was focussed on reading. This was how Yakumo was different from the other students. He didn't pay any attention to the backbiting classmates.

– Like an adult.

It was hard to think that he was the same age as Tsukasa, who was clearly showing his ill intent.

'They're just jealous – don't pay any attention to them,' Sachiko told Yakumo.

Yakumo just lifted his head slightly without saying anybody.

He looked at her.

That was enough to make Sachiko's heart race faster.

– When did I start paying attention to Yakumo?

That thought suddenly came to Sachiko's mind. She couldn't remember clearly, but when she noticed, she was already engrossed.

It wasn't like they had particularly friendly conversations, but just looking at Yakumo was enough to make her happy for the rest of the day.

However, she had never talked about that with anybody.

Even when friends asked her if she had anybody she liked, she told them that she didn't.

Everyone thought Yakumo was creepy because of all the really irritating rumours about him – that he could see ghosts, that his eye was red, that his parents had abandoned him, that he had killed them.

If Sachiko consulted anybody, she could tell that they would say she was creepy for liking a guy like that.

However, Sachiko knew that there were other hidden Yakumo fans besides herself.

Yakumo was cool, mysterious and had an inexplicable charm.

'Hey, Saitou. I hear you can see ghosts.'

Tsukasa's voice brought Sachiko back to reality.

When she looked up, she saw that Tsukasa was standing in front of Yakumo. He had his hands on the belt at his waist as he looked down on Yakumo pompously.

– The unpleasant guy's here.

Sachiko hated Tsukasa. She had a number of reasons.

First, he didn't wear his uniform properly. His shirt buttons were open to his chest, and his necktie hung underneath that. He might have been trying to look rough, but when Tsukasa did it, it was just classless.

Furthermore, he always acted high and mighty and say he was good in a fight.

More than anything, Sachiko couldn't bear how he always picked fights with Yakumo.

'Answer me. Can you really see ghosts?'

Tsukasa spoke quickly as he pressed Yakumo for a reply.

However, Yakumo just stared at his book. He didn't even lift his head.

'Oi, you listening!?'

Tsukasa flew into a rage and smacked both of his hands on the desk, bringing his face so close to Yakumo's hat their noses were almost touching. He was clearly picking a fight.

'Hey, stop it.'

Sachiko couldn't bear it – she grabbed Tsukasa's arm. Tsukasa brushed her hand aside and glared.

'I'm just talking to him.'

'He obviously doesn't like it.'

'Why are you covering for him?'

'Eh?'

Sachiko was lost for words.

She couldn't answer that question.

'Do you like him?'

'That's not it!'

When Tsukasa hit the bull's-eye, she took it too seriously and spoke in a loud voice.

Everyone turned towards her, and her face grew hot in embarrassment.

'Oi, oi. Do you really like him?'

Tsukasa looked at Sachiko's face.

– Don't get so close to me. It's creepy.

Sachiko leant back, putting as much distance between her and Tsukasa as she could.

'So what if I can see them?'

Somebody interrupted. It was Yakumo.

Tsukasa looked towards Yakumo again.

– Did he cover for me?

'Oh, so you can see them. Then come with me for a bit,' said Tsukasa.

'For what?'

The complete opposite of Tsukasa, who was speaking threateningly, Yakumo spoke in a flat tone, as if he were reading a book.

'You've heard of it, right? The rumour that there's a ghost at this school.'

Sachiko knew the rumour too.

When night fell, you could hear a creepy crying voice. A male student in the next class had made a fuss a while back about how he'd seen a man covered in blood.

'I don't know it.'

'There's a rumour like that!'

When Yakumo gave a disinterested tone, Tsukasa was obviously irritated.

'That so.'

'Let me see if you can really see ghosts.'

'And?'

'Tonight, we're sneaking into the school to have a test of courage.'

'So?'

'You're coming too,' said Tsukasa with a smirk.

Sachiko thought it was in bad taste. It puzzled her how he could come up with something so boring.

'Got it.'

Yakumo suddenly looked up and said that quietly.

'Eh?'

Sachiko spoke up without thinking.

She had thought Yakumo would definitely refuse Tsukasa's invitation.

It wasn't just Sachiko who was surprised. Even Tsukasa, who had been the one who asked, had his mouth wide open at Yakumo's unexpected reply.

'Do you need anything else?' Yakumo said expressionlessly.

Sachiko couldn't understand why Yakumo had agreed to Tsukasa's invitation.

'Ah, no... We're meeting up at eight today at the school gates.'

'Got it.'

Tsukasa gave the instructions in his confusion, and Yakumo gave a short reply.

'Wait, just stop this idiocy.'

Sachiko couldn't help but interrupt.

Since it was Tsukasa, he would definitely do something mean to Yakumo. Going along with him in such a carefree manner was like jumping into the fire.

'Sachiko. You come too.'

Tsukasa looked at Sachiko.

'Eh?'

When the conversation suddenly turned to her, Sachiko couldn't understand right away.

'I said, you come too.'

'Me?'

'Yeah. You.'

'No, but...'

– I don't want to.

It would be easy to refuse, but Sachiko couldn't reply.

'OK, we're starting class again.'

The door opened, and Akemi came back into the classroom.

'You have to come. Don't run away.'

Tsukasa left those parting words and returned to his own seat.

– The whole thing's become a bit strange.

Sachiko looked at Yakumo's profile again.

Though he had well-defined features, he was as expressionless as a machine. She couldn't tell what he felt or thought at all.

Come to think of it, this was the only expression Sachiko had ever seen Yakumo make.

Perhaps she would be able to see another expression of his by participating in Tsukasa's test of courage.

Looking at it a different way, this could be a chance.

Sachiko felt her heart beating more quickly –

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'Damn it! He pisses me off!'

Gotou, who had returned to his seat, slammed his fists on the desk and then lit a cigarette.

The new chief was called Ideuchi. What the hell was he planning? He didn't know anything about the scene. They wouldn't be able to investigate with the personnel distributed like that.

'Damn it.'

Gotou spat that out again and leant back on his chair, loosening his necktie.

'Don't make such a fuss.'

Gotou turned around at the thick voice. It was Gotou's boss, Miyagawa.

Miyagawa had a small frame, but with his bald head and sharp glance, he looked just like a yakuza.

With his hands in his pockets and that stiff expression, it made him look even more so. If he was walking around the street like that, everyone would avoid him.

'What is it?'

'that's my line. You're acting like some rebellious brat.'

Miyagawa said that curtly and took a cigarette out of his pocket. He flicked the filter as he bit down on it.

'I'm not really.'

Gotou swallowed his irritation and offered his lighter to Miyagawa.

'You really can't hide anything.'

Miyagawa looked exasperated as he lit his cigarette.

Gotou couldn't deny it. He knew himself that his thoughts showed right through in his attitude, just as Miyagawa said.

He'd been in Miyagawa's care since he was a new recruit, so Miyagawa probably saw that in a more exaggerated fashion than most.

'So what are you so angry about?' asked Miyagawa, slowly blowing out smoke.

Just earlier, Gotou had been angry enough to flip the table, but he felt himself calming down.

It wasn't just this time. When he talked with Miyagawa, his mental state would become more stable.

No matter what the situation, it made him feel like things would work out. It might have been because of the absolute trust Gotou had in Miyagawa.

'No, I was just thinking about going on a diet.'

'Don't talk like you're asleep. If you're going to try to fool me, say something better.'

Just as Miyagawa said, Gotou himself felt no persuasive power in what he'd told him.

'That's right.'

'Well, whatever. Since it's you, you probably just don't get along with the new chief.'

Miyagawa could even see through to the type of people Gotou liked and disliked.

Instead of agreeing, Gotou scratched his head and frowned.

'Come with me for a bit.'

'Eh?'

'We're going.'

Miyagawa ignored Gotou's confusion and pressed his cigarette into the ashtray. Then, he started walking away briskly.

'Please wait.'

Gotou grabbed the jacket on his chair and hurriedly ran after Miyagawa.

'Where are you going?'

'The investigation, obviously.'

'Investigation?'

'Two men of our age wouldn't be going for tea. Think about it a bit.'

That really would have been unpleasant, but Gotou still didn't understand.

'What is the investigation for?'

When Gotou said that, Miyagawa smacked the back of Gotou's head.

'You're so noisy!'

Miyagawa glared at him with a click of his tongue.

'But...'

Gotou started speaking, but then Miyagawa slung an arm around Gotou's shoulders and pulled him close. Then, they continued like that down the corridor.

After looking around to confirm that nobody was there, Miyagawa started speaking in a quiet voice.

'There was a tip-off just earlier.'

Though he spoke quietly, the pressure from his voice was still there.

'A tip? What were the contents?'

'The contents aren't the problem. It's just a bit strange.'

'Strange?'

Gotou's expression was dubious.

Miyagawa was a veteran. He'd been on this path for twenty years. He probably wouldn't be surprised by most things. That Miyagawa was saying it was strange.

Something bad was going to happen. Gotou had that feeling.

'Actually, the person who tipped us off called the detective department directly and even asked for me.'

'Do you have an idea about who it is?'

'I don't. That's why I'm concerned.'

It made sense for Miyagawa to think it was strange.

When civilians reported things to the police, they usually chose to call 110 or the consultation window at the local police box.

It'd have been different for a personal informer, but going out of their way to contact the detective department and call out the head there really was strange.

And Miyagawa had no idea who it was –

'Was it a man, or a woman?'

'I don't know,' Miyagawa replied immediately.

'What do you mean?'

'It was a voice whatchamacallit.'

'A voice changer?'

'Yes. They changed their voice with that.'

Miyagawa looked peevish as he scratched his neck.

Looked like the person had even used a voice changer to hide their identity. That really would someone concerned –

'So what were the contents?' asked Gotou, which made Miyagawa look even grimmer.

'Well, the contents were a bit strange too...'

Miyagawa started to speak, but then he saw another investigation member walking down the corridor and shut his mouth.

From that reaction, it looked like he hadn't told anybody about the tip yet.

'Anyway, let's move elsewhere and talk.'

Miyagawa said that, hunching over as he started to walk with a quick gait.

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4

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When Akemi arrived there, it was already seven.

She had left school before five, but she had had to ask a friend to take in her daughter and call a number of people, which made her go past her intended time.

Akemi climbed the slope lined with gingko trees and stopped in front of a temple's gates. She

checked the address once more.

There was no doubt about it. Which meant that his home was a temple –

Akemi was confused as she walked up to the priests' quarters, ahead of the gravel garden.

She had called ahead of time to say that she would be visiting. Somebody who was probably his father had answered and agreed to it pleasantly.

She was visiting because she thought that perhaps one of the reasons Yakumo had shut off his heart like that was his family environment.

That was why she had been prepared for a refusal. It had been anticlimactic.

She stood in front of the entrance and pressed the doorbell.

After a while, the sliding door opened to reveal a man with a bald head probably in his thirties, wearing a priest's working clothes.

'Ah, I've been waiting,' he said with a smile.

It was a gentle expression, like Maitreya's. Akemi felt a sense of déjà vu.

– I've seen this face before.

Akemi looked at his face. She knew somebody who looked very like him. Should she say something? But she could just be mistaking him for somebody else –

'Is there something on my face?'

He cocked his head, like he thought that Akemi's staring was odd.

'Ah, sorry. I'm the one who called. I'm Yakumo-kun's homeroom teacher, Takagishi.'

Akemi came back to her senses and hurriedly bowed her head.

This time, he furrowed his brows and peered at Akemi's face, as if he sensed something.

Finally, he clapped his hands together, like he had come to an understanding.

'Could you be Takagishi Akemi-san?' he said.

He knew his name. There was no doubt about it. This person was –

'Isshin-san,' said Akemi, almost jumping up.

Isshin had been Akemi's tutor when she was in the third year of high school.

Though she had thought something was different since now he had shaved his head bald, now that she remembered, the memories came back to her, as fresh as if they had happened yesterday.

Her heart returned to those times, filling her with bittersweet feelings.

'Ah, this is nostalgic.'

Isshin nodded a number of times.

'It has been a really long time.'

Akemi felt a bit embarrassed by this unexpected reunion and looked door.

'Are your parents well?' said Isshin with his usual smile.

When Isshin was her tutor, Akemi's parents had liked him a lot as well. Her mother had even said, 'If you're going to get a boyfriend, get one like that.'

The truth was that Akemi would have liked to reminisce with her mother too, but that wasn't possible.

'They died last year in an accident.'

The car that her parents had been in had been hit directly by a truck with a dozing driver. Her father, the driver, had died immediately. Her mother had been unconscious for a week before dying.

It had been a sudden incident right when Akemi had been in sinking spirits, when she had found out she was pregnant.

If her parents had still been healthy and alive, Akemi's decision might have been very different, but that was only a hypothetical story.

Nothing would start from regret.

'That is.. a terrible lose. I've asked something inappropriate.'

Isshin put his hands together and looked down quietly.

'No...'

Akemi shook her head while the events that had happened ran through her head like a revolving lantern. The corners of her eyes felt warm.

'Let's not just stand and talk; please come inside,' said Isshin, waving away the solemn atmosphere.

'Ah, yes.'

She hadn't come here today to talk about herself. Akemi put the current mood behind her.

Isshin invited her into the living room by the entrance.

Akemi knelt on the cushion and had just relaxed when memories from the past came back to her again.

Isshin hadn't changed at all.

At the time, Isshin had been a university student, but he had had a calm demeanour and tolerance – or attractive force? – back then inappropriate for his age.

It was fun for Akemi to take lessons from Isshin.

She would be fidgety all day on the days Isshin was supposed to come, and she would take care in her hairstyle and clothing.

She tried not to think about why. If she thought about that during her lessons, she knew that she wouldn't be able to study.

– If I'd told him my feelings then, how would it have gone?

'Sorry.'

Interrupting Akemi's fantasies, Isshin came back with a tray that had teacups on it.

'Ah, no.'

Akemi looked up.

'It looks like Yakumo went off somewhere right after coming back.'

Isshin placed the tea in front of Akemi and said that with a sigh as he sat down.

'No, it's fine I wanted to talk with his guardian today.'

She couldn't let herself drown in nostalgia.

Akemi sat up straight and faced Isshin.

'But you've become a teacher, Akemi-chan. I'm surprised,' said Isshin earnestly. He sipped his tea.

'I was surprised too. I never would have thought that you were Yakumo-kun's father, Isshin-san.'

Isshin laughed aloud at Akemi's words.

Akemi didn't understand why he was laughing.

'Is that something to laugh at?'

'No, I was just thinking that I'm at the age where I would look like that.'

Isshin crossed his arms and nodded.

'Eh...'

'I'm not Yakumo's real father.'

'Which means...'

A child from his partner's previous marriage?

Akemi cocked her head.

'Though I'm acting as his parent, Yakumo's not my child. Unfortunately, I'm still single. Well, I am his godparents,' said Isshin with hearty laughter.

Now that he said that, it would have been unnatural. Isshin was four years older than Akemi. He was too young to have a fifteen year old child.

'Then...'

– Whose child is he?

'Yakumo is my older sister's child.'

'Your older sister...'

Isshin nodded.

Why had Isshin taken in his older sister's child? Akemi was curious, but she felt like she couldn't ask.

Akemi had things she wouldn't want other people to ask too.

'So you've come about Yakumo today.'

Instead of Akemi, who was lost for words, Isshin brought up the topic at hand.

'Yes.'

'Yakumo's caused a problem at school then,' said Isshin.

There was a slight shadow in his expression. The way he said it made it seem like he had been prepared for Yakumo to cause a problem at some time.

'Though it would be exaggerated to call it a problem...'

'What is it?'

'He skips class.'

That was Yakumo's only problem. His grades were good, and he didn't smoke or act violently.

The previous teacher had told her to leave him alone because his actions didn't cause the school any harm.

'Skips...'

Isshin looked up at the ceiling like he was thinking about something.

To Akemi, Yakumo's skipping class had looked like a sign.

His heart was imbalanced and could break at any moment. He wanted somebody to notice and was asking for help.

It might have just been her own thinking, but she couldn't abandon those thoughts.

'Yes. He doesn't do anything besides that, but it looks like he is somewhat depressed. It's hard to tell what he is thinking...'

It was partly because she was talking to Isshin, but Akemi unexpectedly spoke her feelings directly.

'I don't know what Yakumo's thinking either,' said Isshin, his shoulders slumping.

'Eh?'

'I'll say this because it's you, Akemi-chan, but Yakumo's mother is missing. We don't know for sure

who his father is. That's why I took him in for now.'

'Missing...?'

Isshin nodded.

'Yakumo's mother tried to kill him. Fortunately, he was saved by a passing police officer, but ever since then, his mother has been missing...'

Akemi couldn't say anything at all.

Yakumo's past, much harsher than she had imagined, just made her feel like she was suffocating. It was hard for her to keep her mind steady.

'I'm a man who hasn't even married. I just lack too much to take a child of that age in...'

'That's...'

'I don't want to complain, but the truth is I don't know how to connect to him.'

After saying that, Isshin shook his head.

The mood was heavy. The silence was so long it was like time had stopped –

'Why?'

Finally, Akemi said just that.

However, Isshin tilted his head. It looked like he didn't understand the question.

Akemi took a deep breath to strengthen herself and asked again. 'Why did Yakumo-kun's mother try to kill him?'

When Isshin heard that, he crossed his arms and said, 'Hmm.' Then, he suddenly looked up.

'It might have been fate for you to become Yakumo's homeroom teacher, Akemi-chan. I think that people meet the people they are meant to meet. Invisible threads draw people together.'

Fate –

The word Isshin said shook Akemi's heart.

Meeting Isshin again like this might also not have been a coincidence but some great power drawing them together.

'I'll tell you what I know to be true. Though I don't know if you'll believe me...'

Isshin gave that as a preface before beginning his story.

-

5

-

'So what are we investigating?'

Gotou, in the driver seat of the unmarked black sedan, spoke to Miyagawa in the passenger seat.

'Anyway, just go to the telephone booth at the intersection in Area 2. Right in front of the middle school,' said Miyagawa, lighting his cigarette.

'The... phone booth?'

Gotou had thought that asking where they were going would help him understand the contents of the investigation, but that had been a wrong guess.

Well, there was no point thinking about it. Gotou stepped on the accelerator.

'Actually, I don't know the contents either.'

Just as Gotou started driving, Miyagawa said that with a frown.

'You don't know?'

The unexpected response made Gotou's voice jump an octave.

A tip-off with unknown contents – thinking about it normally, it just seemed like a prank. He didn't understand why Miyagawa believed it.

'You look like you're not happy with this.'

'You can tell?'

Gotou admitted it honestly.

'You're too straightforward.'

Miyagawa snorted and smiled.

'Is that so?'

'You should think about fitting in more.'

'I'm no good at that,' replied Gotou with a wry smile.

'You're the only one who's going to suffer.'

Miyagawa couldn't say anything either though. He would always bare his fangs for his subordinates, be it against the chief of the department or the chief of the police.

The higher-ups were frightened of him, thinking of him as a mad dog, while his subordinates looked up to him, thinking of him as an older brother. That was who he was. He just wasn't good at getting along in the world.

It was the same with this tip.

It wasn't necessary for the head of the detectives to go out of his way to check something when nothing was clear yet.

But the stupidly straightforward Miyagawa probably couldn't leave the tip-off to somebody else, when it had been directed at him.

In that meaning, he and Gotou could be called similar.

Though Gotou thought it, he didn't say it aloud. If he said something strange, a fist would come flying at him.

'So the tip said to go to the telephone booth?'

Gotou brought the conversation back on topic while driving.

'Yeah. Said that there was proof of a crime there.'

'Proof of a crime... Is that whistleblowing then?'

'Probably.'

Miyagawa pressed his cigarette into the ashtray with displeasure.

'But it's strange for it to be a phone booth. What were they going to do if somebody else found it?'

'Practically nobody uses phone booths nowadays.'

Miyagawa leant back on his seat.

What Miyagawa said was true. Mobile phones and PHS² had become widespread recently, so public telephones were rarely used.

Because they hadn't been used for so long, at some train stations, they were starting to take them down.

Back when pagers had been popular, there had been lines at phone booths, and there had been many counterfeit telephone cards – it had even become a societal phenomenon.

With the flow of time, the phone booths had been left behind, so now they could perhaps be considered a perfect place to hide something.

Gotou understood that, but there was still something he didn't understand. That was –

'I wonder why they contacted you, Miyagawa-san.'

'That's what I want to know!' Miyagawa said brusquely, opening the window of the car.

Dry wind came into the car with a roar.

-

6

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Sachiko arrived just in time for their agreed time at the school gates.

The truth was that she had planned on leaving the house earlier, but she hadn't been able to decide on the clothes she wanted to wear.

2 PHS stands for Personal Handy-phone System. The personal handy-phone is like a cordless telephone at home and a mobile phone outside.

She had thought about wearing her favourite miniskirt, but when she stood in front of the mirror, she lost her confidence and ended up just wearing on jeans.

And then, right before she left the home, her mother had asked, 'Where are you going?' It had taken time to come up with an excuse.

In front of the gates, Tsukasa, Tae and Youhei were already gathered.

Tsukasa was leaning against the fence, looking bored, while Tae and Youhei were close together, chatting like lovers.

If Tsukasa weren't here, it could've been a double date –

That wish pressed against Sachiko's heart as she walked forward.

On the other side of the gates, she saw the white school building standing out in the dark.

The school at night had an unspeakably uncanny atmosphere to it. It felt like the school gates led to another world.

Even though hundreds of people were here during the day, once night fell, nobody remained. That gap might have made it even more uncanny.

'Hey.'

Tsukasa noticed Sachiko and raised a hand.

He had his head turned towards the ground as he peered at her. She knew very well how people saw her.

'Where's Yakumo-kun?'

Sachiko looked around to escape Tsukasa's gaze.

'Not here yet,' said Tsukasa with a click of his tongue.

'I see.'

– So he's not here yet.

She had been hopeful, which made the disappointment greater.

Sachiko's shoulders slumped as she walked up to the school gates.

'Hey you.'

Tsukasa still had his head turned down as he stood in front of Sachiko.

'What?'

'What's so good about him?'

Different from his usual ill manners, Tsukasa seemed to be squirming as he said that.

Sachiko didn't understand the meaning of his question.

'What are you talking about?'

'Well, you... about him... er...'

'Honestly. I don't understand what you're saying. Say it clearly.'

Sachiko was angry at Tsukasa's vague attitude, so she spoke in an unrelenting tone.

'You're aiming for Saitou, right?'

'What?'

Aiming or not aiming, Sachiko found that phrase discomfiting. Even though she just liked Yakumo with pure feelings, it sounded like she had secret intentions.

Love wasn't something to be conscious of.

'I can tell even if you hide it,' said Tsukasa with thin lips.

It looked like he'd taken Sachiko's words to have a different meaning.

'Honestly, you're so noisy.'

Sachiko didn't feel like explaining and ended it there, but Tsukasa continued to speak.

'I don't understand. He's gloomy, and you can't tell what he's thinking, and I look way cooler.'

Tsukasa brushed back his dyed brown hair.

– I'm better than that guy.

He probably wanted to say that. However, he just had excessive self-confidence. And the shallowness of appealing his qualities was unbearably unpleasant to Sachiko.

Yakumo definitely wouldn't do that.

'You're annoying.'

Sachiko moved her lips to form those words, so that Tsukasa wouldn't hear.

'That guy's still not here,' said Youhei, stretching his arms up above him.

'He isn't. I wonder when Yakumo-kun will be here?'

Sachiko answered Youhei to escape from Tsukasa.

'Let's try calling,' continued Tae.

'Tsukasa. You have a handy-phone?' said Youhei.

'Can't get one 'til I'm in high school.'

Tsukasa shrugged.

'Sachiko?' asked Tae.

'I don't have one.'

At Sachiko's home, mobile phones and handy-phones had been put away until after high school entrance exams.

'Youhei, go to the phone booth.'

Tsukasa hit Youhei's shoulder.

'Eh, what a pain.'

'Just go.'

Tsukasa kicked Youhei's behind.

'What are you doing?' complained Youhei, but he didn't resist any more and started walking.

'He might've run,' said Tsukasa as he watched Youhei leave.

– Yakumo didn't run.

Sachiko felt like she understood after coming here.

Yakumo wouldn't give any attention to people like Tsukasa. He'd had no intention of coming in the first place.

– If Yakumo's not coming, I'll think of an excuse to leave.

Sachiko looked up at the pale moon in the sky and thought that.

-

7

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The phone booth was underneath the pedestrian bridge.

Normally, Gotou overlooked it as part of the scenery, but because of the tip-off and the dark, it seemed to appear out of the shadows.

'That's it then.'

Gotou looked at Miyagawa in the passenger seat.

'Looks like it.'

Miyagawa gave a lazy reply and yawned.

Gotou passed the phone booth and parked the car on the side of the road before exiting.

It was a main road with two lanes on each side. There were quite a few cars. However, all of the cars were driving quickly – probably nobody would look at the telephone booth.

Gotou continued walking up to the phone booth.

Suspicious-looking advertisements were placed all over the glass, so he couldn't even see inside.

Just as he put his hand on the door, Gotou's heart started beating wildly.

– My fate will change drastically the moment I open this door.

A vague and baseless anxiety.

'What's wrong?'

Miyagawa called out to him from behind. Perhaps he had noticed Gotou's hesitation.

'If I open it, it won't go "BANG" or something like that, right?'

It annoyed him to think that his fear had been noticed. Gotou made a joke.

'If that happens, I'll pick up your bones,' said Miyagawa with an exasperated expression as he lit his cigarette.

'I'll be counting on you.'

Gotou smiled back and then turned towards the phone booth again.

He opened the door with vigour, and then a stagnant odour pierced his nose.

There was a familiar green telephone and underneath it, two thick telephone books.

Gotou couldn't see anything strange at first glance.

'Where's it hidden?' mumbled Gotou, beginning to search inside the telephone booth.

He flipped through the phonebook pages, but he couldn't find anything. Then, he looked at the ceiling.

All he saw was a fluorescent light with a broken cover.

'Is it there?' said Miyagawa, opening the door.

'I couldn't find it.'

'How about in the back?'

'The back?'

'The back of the phone.'

Miyagawa gestured at the telephone.

– That's possible.

Gotou followed Miyagawa's instruction and stuck his hand in the narrow gap between the booth and the telephone, grappling around.

His fingers touched something.

Gotou pressed his face against the booth to try to look and saw, behind the phone, something like a plastic bag stuck to the booth with tape.

'Is this it...'

Gotou thrust his hand in deeper and managed to touch the plastic bag.

Because of how narrow the place was, his body wouldn't move the way he wanted to – he couldn't get it out. After a tough battle, he finally managed to grab the plastic bag.

Inside the plastic bag was an A4-sized manila envelope.

'Got something?'

'Yes.'

Miyagawa peered inside from the entrance with a cigarette in his mouth. Gotou handed the manila envelope to him.

'So this is the info...'

Miyagawa leant against the pillar of the pedestrian bridge and opened the manila envelope, taking out a stack of documents.

Gotou picked the dust off his jacket, got out of the phone booth and was about to walk up to Miyagawa, when he suddenly stopped.

He felt someone's gaze on his back.

– Who is it?

Gotou's eyes ran everywhere and spotted a man.

The slender man wore a black suit and was staring down at the phone booth from the pedestrian bridge.

– Could he be the tipper?

'What's wrong?'

Miyagawa seemed to sense the situation as he spoke quietly.

Gotou signalled with his eyes to look up at the pedestrian bridge. Miyagawa walked up to Gotou and looked up at the bridge.

'How long's he been there?' Miyagawa said quietly.

'I don't know.'

'Going to question him?'

'Yes.'

Right after answering, Gotou started going up the stairs of the pedestrian bridge.

Perhaps noticing that, the man turned around and started walking briskly.

'Oi. Got a minute?' Gotou called out, after climbing the stairs.

However, the man continued walking at the same pace, like he hadn't heard.

'You over there! I said to wait!' Gotou yelled angrily, which made the man suddenly stop and his

shoulders jolt, as if he were surprised.

'I want to ask you something.'

Gotou went up to the man and touched his shoulder.

That moment, the man turned around swiftly and knocked Gotou off his feet.

'Agh!'

With that surprise attack, Gotou fell backwards.

The man looked at Gotou's face.

He smiled, showing his white teeth.

It was a cold smile that chilled Gotou to his core.

Furthermore, both of his eyes glowed red, like a blazing flame –

'What are you doing!?' yelled Miyagawa, running over.

When the man noticed that, he evaded and ran off in the opposite direction.

'Damn it!'

– Making fun of me!

Gotou got right up and ran after the man.

-

8

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The fate that Yakumo shouldered, told through Isshin's mouth, was much darker than what Akemi had imagined.

At the same time, it affirmed many rumours surrounding Yakumo.

The repulsive incident surrounding Yakumo's birth –

From the moment he was born, his left eye glowed red and had the unique ability, which he never wanted, to see the spirits of the dead.

Because of it, many people thought Yakumo frightening and persecuted him.

People were terribly cold towards those that were different from them. It hurt Akemi's chest just to imagine how much damage Yakumo's heart must have suffered.

That wasn't all. Normally, the mother, who should have protected her child, had tried to murder him.

From the moment Yakumo was born, he had been burdened with many things that he didn't want.

'I think Yakumo's lost hope,' said Isshin with sad eyes.

Yakumo's face came up in Akemi's head. As expressionless as a Noh mask, with lifeless eyes.

Until Akemi heard Isshin's story, Akemi had thought that expression had been from sadness or loneliness.

However, what Yakumo carried was perhaps despair.

When his own mother, who had given birth to him, tried to kill him, Yakumo's life had been saved, but his heart had died –

Those suffocating thoughts hurt Akemi.

'Why...'

Akemi said just that.

She couldn't say anything else.

— Why did Yakumo's mother try to kill him?

Akemi wanted to know why. She wanted there to be some sort of salvation there. She prayed for there to be.

'I don't know,' said Isshin, sensing Akemi's feelings.

'Ah, of course.'

She had disappeared. No matter what reasons he gave, they would only be theories. People's emotions were known only to themselves.

'I just can't believe it.'

Isshin shook his head.

'Eh?'

'My sister had been troubled by the circumstances surrounding Yakumo, but to me, those had seemed like worries about her child's future.'

'Her child's future...'

Akemi mulled over those words.

It was true that the same worries could have different implications.

'Yes. My sister had been weak psychologically, but the sister I knew was not somebody who would lay a hand on her child.'

Isshin declared that, but his voice was weak.

He was between a rock and a hard place. Akemi felt that.

His love for his sister. And his love for his nephew, Yakumo.

Isshin held both these feelings, but when he compared the events of the past, it was difficult for both loves to coexist.

Akemi looked down, hesitant to look directly at Isshin.

Drip, drip –

Water dripped onto Akemi's fists, clenched on her lap.

It took her some time to realise they were her own tears.

— Why am I crying?

Akemi knew that reason best.

She was overlapping Yakumo's and his mother's circumstances with her own.

'Are you all right?'

Isshin handed Akemi a handkerchief.

'Sorry.'

Akemi took it and lifted her head after wiping her face.

– I don't have the right to cry.

Akemi told herself that to calm her unsteady heart.

Isshin said nothing and just sat there with his usual gentle expression.

Even though it was their reunion after ten years, Akemi felt safe, like he had always been there for her.

Isshin had said he lacked too much to be a father, but Akemi thought it was the opposite.

He had the deep love essential for being a parent.

If Isshin hadn't been his parent, Yakumo would definitely have fallen into a deeper darkness than he had now. He might have even lost his life.

Isshin's existence had managed to stop that.

If Akemi had reunited with Isshin sooner, her own choice might have been different.

When she thought that, words naturally came out of Akemi's mouth.

'I have a child as well.'

Isshin looked surprised by the sudden change in conversation, but that was just for a moment.

'Oh? How old?'

'A girl who's just turned ten.'

'I see. The most blissful years.'

Isshin's smile was pleasant.

However, Akemi had circumstances that made it difficult for her to honestly accept the word

'blissful'.

'That isn't true.'

'Isn't true?'

'Actually, this child doesn't have a father.'

'Is that so?'

Isshin's gentle expression didn't change.

No matter how tough, painful or sad it was, he would forgive everything.

Isshin's heart was that wide.

Akemi started speaking falteringly, as if giving up the chains that had bound his heart.

'Actually, this child was born from rape.'

Just saying it was enough to revive her fear. Her fingers started shaking.

In her head, that man's face came up again.

Even though the good memories had finally faded away, the horror was vivid no matter how much time passed.

She still couldn't forget that man's eyes.

'Is that so?'

'The culprit hasn't been caught.'

By saying for the first time something she had always kept hidden, she felt like her pain was a bit lessened.

Akemi, who had felt the same thing, could understand slightly the pain of Yakumo's mother.

'Do you hate him?' said Isshin, his expression still the same.

'Yes.'

Akemi nodded.

She still hated the culprit now. Even if the culprit were caught and punished, that hatred wouldn't disappear.

Akemi didn't know if the culprit chose Akemi as his target by coincidence or for some reason.

However, it was a fact that the rest of her life had been ruined because of it.

'Do you think that you hate your child?' said Isshin quietly.

'I...'

Akemi was lost for words.

Two conflicting thoughts fought in her heart.

'You've thought that you hate her,' said Isshin, seeing through Akemi's heart.

In front of Isshin, no matter what she said, the truth of her heart would be revealed.

'I have.'

Though Akemi responded herself, she shook at how awful those words were.

However, they were fact.

Though it wasn't always, when she looked at her child's face, she would sometimes remember that incident. That child was her child, but she was also that man's child.

She overlapped her child's face with that man's face. Her child was not at fault. She knew that. But

—

She had thought that Isshin would scorn her, but he nodded with his usual gentle expression, like he understood.

That was enough to make Akemi feel like she had been saved.

Isshin had an open heart that accepted other's negative emotions.

'Then you love her, yes?'

After a silence, Isshin asked another question.

'Of course.'

Akemi gave a big nod.

That was no lie.

— No matter what, I'll protect her.

She had that strong feeling at the bottom of her heart.

Two conflicting emotions.

Akemi felt anew how she was standing on top of a large contradiction.

'I'm glad to hear it.'

Isshin smiled pleasantly, showing her teeth.

'But I'm a failure as a parent for thinking even once that I hate my child...'

Akemi looked down, realising how awful she was when she said it.

I need to be strong for my child – even though she thought that, at times, she was incredibly weak.

'But Akemi-chan, your child is alive.'

Isshin said those words with force, which made Akemi look up in surprise.

'Yes.'

'And Yakumo's alive. That is fact. No matter what the past is or how you feel, your child is alive now and will continue to live.'

'Continue to live...'

'That's right. Let's think about what we can do for those children. Together.'

Isshin's words sank deep into the corners of Akemi's heart.

Now that she thought about it, it was obvious. However, cornered by the burdens of life, she had forgotten the obvious.

'We might have both become parents without wanting to, but that isn't the fault of our children. Nothing will start if we just look down.'

Akemi felt like there was a line of light in front of her, when she had been in pitch-black darkness before.

Though she had come here originally to find out about Yakumo's family environment, the situation had turned around before she noticed.

This was blatantly advice for Akemi.

However, she had found out some things.

Yakumo was living with a heavy burden on his small heart.

He had Isshin's deep love and had managed to keep on, but he would break if his balance faltered even slightly.

Just as the conversation came to a lull, the phone rang.

Isshin said, 'Please wait,' and then he stood up from his seat.

Akemi slowly swallowed Isshin's words. Each time she thought about them, the warmth spread within her.

Isshin hadn't changed at all since ten years ago.

When Akemi looked at Isshin, she always became defenceless. Isshin always overcame the boundaries that people put up with ease.

It wasn't frightening.

It was pleasant, like being wrapped up in a fluffy blanket.

While Akemi was thinking about that, Isshin came back. He looked somewhat dissatisfied.

'What is it?' asked Akemi.

'Is there some sort of event at school tonight?'

Isshin cocked his head.

There shouldn't have been any events. If there had been, Akemi wouldn't have come here.

'What do you mean?'

'Ah, there was a call from Youhei-kun, a kid in Yakumo's class. He said that he was waiting for Yakumo at the school, but he wasn't there yet...'

'They can't have really gone!'

Akemi stood up as she exclaimed.

'Do you have any ideas?'

'Those kids.'

She had an idea.

After she brought Yakumo back today, she had heard Tsukasa and the others talking in the classroom. She had thought it was just talk and left it alone, but it looked like that hadn't been the class.

Akemi picked up her pack and quickly prepared to leave.

'What's wrong?'

'Those kids are definitely planning a test of courage.'

'A test of courage?'

'Yes.'

'In this season?'

Just as Isshin said, it was the wrong season. However, that wasn't the problem right now.

'I heard a number of students planning to take Yakumo-kun to the school for a test of courage. I thought it was a joke – students always make plans like that.'

Isshin responded to Akemi's hurried speech with a nod.

'Akemi-chan, are you planning to go there now?'

'Yes. It would be troublesome if a problem comes up...'

'Then I'll go with you,' said Isshin with a smile.

'Eh?'

'Yakumo might be involved.'

'Yes...'

'Then I can't leave the situation alone.'

What Isshin said made sense.

'But...'

'And it would be dangerous for a woman to walk by herself.'

Isshin finished the conversation and left the room ahead of Akemi.

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9

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Yakumo was hunched over, looking at his feet as he walked.

It was already dark.

He hadn't planned on going to the test of courage that his classmate had incited in the first place.

If he stayed at home, there was the possibility that he would be called out by phone. He left the house to avoid any complications.

Tests of courage were just a joke.

They didn't know what ghosts really were.

If they knew, there was no way they would think up something as stupid as a test of courage.

Ghosts were clusters of people's emotions.

To put it another way, they were raw, exposed emotion.

It was much more painful than others imagined to be involved with that daily.

'How stupid,' muttered Yakumo, quickening his pace.

It wasn't that he had a goal.

He was looking for somewhere he could be.

Narrow roads, riverbeds, high ground – Yakumo didn't think he had any place anywhere.

However, if he stayed in one place, it would destroy him.

Finally, as he reached a small park, he stopped.

Creak, creak.

The wind shook the swing. The sound of the rusted metal echoed.

Coming and going without a destination –

Just like him right now.

Yakumo smiled self-derisively and walked up to the swing.

– Can I be here?

He asked that in his heart, but there was no reply.

Creak, creak.

Yakumo sat on the swing.

Ever since his mother tried to kill him, Yakumo had kept asking himself that.

His existence had been rejected by the mother who had given birth to him – did he have a place anywhere?

Perhaps he really should have been killed by his mother that day. Then he wouldn't have needed to search for a place.

He wouldn't have worried or suffered –

-

10

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Sachiko leant against the fence and looked at the road.

– Won't Yakumo-kun come soon?

With time, that hope turned to resignation .

Beside her, Tsukasa sat on the asphalt and kept talking to her, but Sachiko didn't even bother listening.

Tsukasa always said the same thing.

He talked about how awesome he was, or bragged about something. Listening was just a waste of time.

'Youhei's late,' said Tae with a frown.

He was. It had already been thirty minutes since he'd gone to make the phone call. Even if he was walking slowly to the phone booth, he should have arrived there in five minutes.

He might have just gone home alone.

'Hey, let's go back already,' said Sachiko.

Tsukasa glared at her with furrowed brows. Not so much frightening as disappointing.

'Yeah, it's late. Let's go back,' agreed Tae. Then, there was the sound of someone running to them.

– Yakumo-kun?

Sachiko turned her eyes the other direction and saw that Youhei was the one running up.

'Sorry I'm late!' said Youhei, out of breath.

'You're really late! What were you doing!?! The phone booth's right there, right? Are you a turtle!?!' yelled Tsukasa, sounding like he might punch Youhei at any moment.

'I couldn't do anything about it. There were two people who looked like yakuza at the phone booth, so I had to look for another one.'

'Hah? Yakuza? Are you an idiot?'

'If you've got a complaint, you should have just gone yourself!'

Youhei was becoming enraged along with Tsukasa, and the two of them glared at each other.

The atmosphere was restless.

They probably thought that yelling at other people without letting their opinions bend was cool.

Sachiko hated seeing such childish outbursts.

She didn't even feel like taking part.

'So where's Saitou-kun?' asked Tae, stepping between the two.

Youhei calmed down immediately and his expression softened.

'He wasn't home. Seems like he went out somewhere, but I don't know where.'

'So maybe he's coming?'

Tae cocked her head.

'Probably?' agreed Youhei.

Sachiko wanted that to be the case, but she didn't feel like Yakumo would come.

Yakumo wasn't stupidly obstinate like Tsukasa. He wouldn't come if he didn't want to. That was all.

'Hey, what are you going to do?'

Sachiko turned the conversation to Tsukasa.

'That guy ran away 'cause he's afraid.'

Tsukasa sounded threatening even though the person he wanted to threaten wasn't here.

– Yakumo-kun wasn't afraid.

Sachiko murmured that in her heart. If she said it aloud, Tsukasa would just get angrier.

'Let's just forget about that guy and go,' declared Tsukasa. Then, he started to climb the fence which was about his height.

'Hey, what will you do?'

Tae asked Youhei for his opinion.

'Once that guy says something, he won't listen to anyone.'

'Right.'

Tae and Youhei seemed reluctant, but they started to climb after Tsukasa.

– No way. They're all going?

Sachiko was undecided about what to do.

'Sachiko. Hurry. We're going,' said Tae, who had finished climbing the fence.

Tsukasa walked quickly, growing increasingly farther away.

'Let's go.'

Youhei started walking.

Tae started walking with him.

Though Sachiko didn't want to go, she definitely didn't want to be the only one left behind.

Seeing no way out of it, Sachiko climbed the fence into the school grounds and ran after everyone else.

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11

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- I lost him.

Gotou had just reached the park by the main road when he slowed down and finally stopped, giving up.

'Damn it! Where the hell did he go!?'

Gotou yelled and kicked the ground in his irritation.

He had seen that man's back until he turned the second corner.

- I'll catch up soon.

Right after he thought that, the man disappeared like smoke.

- Did I underestimate him?

When Gotou thought that, he grew even angrier. Even though he knew it was no use, he looked around to see if the man might have been hiding somewhere.

Then, Gotou spotted somebody.

Five metres ahead of him, sitting on the park's swing, he was watching Gotou's behaviour.

- Could it be?

Led by his instincts, Gotou had already put himself on guard, but then he realised immediately that it was somebody else.

He was clearly different from the man he saw earlier. A boy in a blazer uniform.

Gotou had seen that uniform before. It was from a local middle school.

A middle school student was by himself on a park swing at this time. There was nothing more suspicious.

Kids these days would do anything. Just the other day, middle school students had brutally killed a homeless person sleeping in the park.

Gotou would go give a warning before the guy had any unnecessary thoughts.

Gotou walked up to the boy on the swing.

The boy stayed on the swing, as if waiting for Gotou to arrive.

'Boy. Got some time?'

When Gotou called out to him, the boy very slowly lifted his face.

His face was so pale it made Gotou doubt whether blood flowed through it. The two eyes looking at Gotou were endlessly dark.

– Is this brat on drugs?

Gotou was on guard as he continued to speak.

'What are you doing here at this time?'

'Wasting time.'

The boy replied in a voice that was still had a hint of childishness.

'Wasting time...'

'Do you need anything else?'

The boy ran a hand through his hair, like he thought Gotou annoying.

'This isn't a good time for brats to be spending alone.'

'That has nothing to do with you.'

The boy's retort lit Gotou's anger.

– This brat! Looking down on me!

It was better to scare guys like this a bit. Gotou knew it wasn't mature of him, but he took his police ID out of his jacket and showed it to the boy.

However, the boy's expression didn't change even a bit upon seeing it.

'I'm a police officer...'

'I know,' said the boy, interrupting Gotou's words.

Gotou was taken aback and didn't know what to say next.

– What does he mean, he knows?

'You're annoying. It must be nice for you to think that showing your police ID would frighten anybody.'

Ignoring Gotou's confusion, the boy spoke in a flat tone.

'What did you say?'

'The blood goes straight to your head. The same as always.'

– This brat doesn't shut up.

This type always confessed to something or other under pressure. Perhaps it'd be better to take him into custody and question him.

'What's your name?'

The boy's eyes narrowed at Gotou's question.

'I told you before, didn't I?'

'Eh?'

'Have you already forgotten?' said the boy, sounding disappointed.

This was the first time Gotou had seen this boy. He was just wrapping things up in smoke by speaking at random.

'I don't know you!'

'It amazes me that you can be a detective with such a crude memory, Police Sergeant Gotou.'

As the boy said that, he stood up.

'Wha — !'

Gotou couldn't say anything else in his confusion.

The boy turned around and started walking away briskly.

– Why does he know my name?

Gotou couldn't think up an answer. All he could do was watch that back walk away silently.

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12

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– I'm scared.

Sachiko walked with her fear.

With Tsukasa at the front, they went through the schoolyard to the main building, where all of them stopped.

In the dark, the school building stood out with impressive presence.

Sachiko pressed a hand against her chest.

Fear and anxiety shook her feet.

She wanted to run away right now, but she didn't even have the courage to leave alone. She wanted to cling to something, but there was nothing to cling to.

She saw that Tae and Youhei were holding hands. Though touching somebody else's skin might calm her down, she didn't want to hold hands with Tsukasa.

Sachiko put her hands behind her.

'But isn't that rumour strange?'

Youhei was the one who spoke.

His voice shook slightly. He was probably talking to wave away his fear.

'What's strange about it?' asked Tae.

'You're supposed to be able to hear a baby crying, but there's no way a baby would be at school.'

'Now that you say it, that's true.'

'Right?'

'People just made a fuss – it was really wind or something like that, right?'

'That might be true.'

Sachiko didn't care about Youhei's theory at all.

She didn't want to know the truth behind the spiritual phenomenon. She just wanted to get home as soon as possible.

'Let's go back,' said Sachiko, unable to hold it in.

'It's fine – I'm here.'

Tsukasa said that as he puffed out his chest – he seemed to have the wrong idea – and walked forward full of confidence.

'Wait!'

Tae suddenly called out and grabbed Tsukasa's arm.

'Augh!'

It was so sudden that Tsukasa leapt up in surprise.

Tsukasa had acted tough, but he was probably frightened too.

'What are you doing all of a sudden?'

Tsukasa glared at Youhei, who was suppressing his laughter, and stuck his hands in his pockets, acting calm, as if he hadn't been surprised at all.

'Didn't you hear something just now?'

Nobody responded to Tae's words.

In the silence, they strained their ears.

–

'Ah.'

Sachiko thought that her heart would stop.

– I heard it.

With the sound of the wind, though it was faint, she heard something.

Sachiko hoped she had just misheard as she looked at the other people's faces.

All three of them had their eyes wide open in shock.

'I'm just hearing things. You didn't hear anything, right?' Sachiko said frantically, but nobody replied.

Everyone was stunned, like they couldn't believe it.

– Wahhh.

She heard it again.

– Wahhh.

Even though she'd thought she was just hearing things.

– Wahhh.

The voice was getting louder.

'No!'

Sachiko covered her ears and sat down.

– Wahhh.

She could still here the voice.

'Over there.'

Tsukasa suddenly pointed.

Everyone looked the same way.

He was pointing at the fence that split the school and the road, and the cherry blossom trees that stood along it.

'Stop it already!'

Sachiko's plea was pointless. Tsukasa kept walking.

Tae and Youhei followed too.

I'm scared. I don't want to go. But I don't want to be alone more –

Still covering her ears, Sachiko stood up and walked forward, hiding behind Tae and Youhei.

After reaching the bottom of the cherry blossom tree, the echoing cries of the baby suddenly stopped.

Sachiko timidly took her hands off her ears.

– I can't hear it any more.

'W-w-what was that? I was really scared!' shouted Tae, grabbing Youhei's arm.

Sachiko's knees buckled underneath her from relief. She clasped her hands in front of her chest. Her heart was pounding wildly.

'What? So boring.'

Tsukasa spat on the ground, seeming dissatisfied.

– That's the end of this boring test of courage.

Sachiko let out a sigh of relief and looked up at the cherry blossom tree.

Then, she felt something heavy on her chest.

– What is that?

While she was thinking, that weight kept getting heavier.

Sachiko slowly looked down at her chest.

– Something's there.

She saw something that wasn't hers clinging to her chest.

– What is this?

It was a baby.

The baby, which had deathly pale skin, was clinging to Sachiko.

– This can't be happening.

She couldn't breathe properly.

– Hic, hic, hic, hic.

The baby slowly raised the face it had buried in Sachiko's chest.

Its two eyes were dyed a deep blood-red.

'Nooo!'

As Sachiko screamed, her consciousness fell into a pitch-black darkness.

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She really should have stopped them when she heard them talking in the hall.

A belated regret spread through Akemi.

After bringing Yakumo back, she had heard Tsukasa and the others talking about a test of courage, but she had started class again, thinking it would just end as talk.

If I had stopped them properly then –

Even though nothing had happened yet, she felt increasingly anxious.

She could see the school.

Akemi naturally began walking more quickly.

'It'd be better not to brood too much,' said Isshin soothingly from beside her.

'But I...'

'It's good that you're enthusiastic, but one person can't watch over everything. It isn't good to blame yourself for everything and think too much about it.'

'But...'

'Akemi-chan, you're a bit too serious. It'd be better to relax a bit more.'

Isshin gave her a friendly smile.

Just as Isshin said, Akemi could sometimes be a bit inflexible.

Her worrywart nature was the cause. At times, she become too strict, so the students would think of her as a nuisance.

'That might be true.'

Akemi consciously slowed her walking pace.

It was stupid to imagine what awful things might have happened when nothing had happened yet. She told herself to relax.

'Right, right. That smile's good.'

When Isshin said that, Akemi realised that she was smiling.

'When I'm with you, Isshin-san, it feels like I'm back at school again.'

Akemi felt a bit embarrassed and looked down.

Even though it was a reunion after so many years, Akemi was relying on Isshin, just as she had during her school days. It made her feel lost.

'Is that so? It's my fault for calling you Akemi-chan. You're Yakumo's homeroom teacher now, so I should properly call you Takagishi-sensei,' said Isshin formally after clearing his throat.

'No, that isn't what I meant.'

Akemi hurriedly denied Isshin's words.

– Takagishi-sensei.

If he called her that, it would just make her feel like he was putting distance between them. Though she felt lost, that wasn't unpleasant. Rather, it felt nice.

So many things had happened up until now.

Without her knowing, she had taken everything on her own shoulders – every day became a burden.

She felt like she had put down all she had been carrying in this short time – not even an hour – since she had reunited with Isshin.

So, even just a little –

'It's fine to call me Akemi-chan, like you've always done,' said Akemi, looking at her feet.

'Then please allow me to call you Akemi-chan with no reservations,' said Isshin, sounding bashful.

After that, the two of them continued walking the asphalt road silently.

It really did make her feel like she was in high school again.

'It looks like somebody's there.'

Isshin pointed upon reaching the back of the building.

Akemi saw a group of boys and girls on the opposite side of the fence drawing the boundary between the road and the school.

'Those kids...' murmured Akemi.

She had seen those faces before. The Tsukasa and Youhei pair. And Tae. Even Sachiko was there. However, Yakumo wasn't.

'Nooo!'

Just as Akemi had approached the fence, she heard a scream.

Sachiko was clutching at her chest, and then she fell down.

'Are you all right!?!'

Tae ran up to Sachiko.

Tsukasa and Youhei was flailing about like they didn't know what to do.

'Sacchan!' Akemi called out, pressing against the fence.

However, there was no reply from Sachiko. Her arms and legs just twitched.

'Sensei, help.'

Tae noticed Akemi was there and spoke, almost in tears.

'I'll be right there.'

Akemi frantically climbed over the fence and jumped onto the school grounds.

Because she was wearing pumps, she lost her balance when she landed and almost fell.

'Are you all right?'

Isshin had climbed over the fence like Akemi did and supported her.

'Thank you very much.'

While thanking Isshin, Akemi went up to Sachiko, and with Tae's help, she turned her face-up.

Sachiko's spasms wouldn't stop.

With drooped shoulders, Tsukasa and Youhei looked down on Sachiko silently.

Akemi felt angry, but rather than blaming them now, she had to help Sachiko first.

'It looks like she is having convulsions. We need to call an ambulance quickly,' said Isshin, as if he'd read Akemi's thoughts. Then, he sat Sachiko up and promptly started first-aid.

'Understood.'

Akemi took out her mobile, quickly pressed 119 and explained the current location and situation in a concise manner. Then, she looked at Sachiko, who had lost the colour in her face.

'Why did this happen...'

Akemi bit her lip.

'This is Yakumo's field,' murmured Isshin.

– Yakumo's field.

What did he mean by that?

Interrupting Akemi's thoughts, she heard a faraway ambulance siren.

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14

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– What on earth is this?

Sachiko couldn't accept what was happening to her.

It had gone past the bounds of reason and sense.

She couldn't believe it, and she didn't want to, but the reality was in front of her.

Ever since the night of the test of courage, a baby had been stuck to Sachiko's chest.

– You’re seeing a bad dream.

– You’re just tired.

Her parents and the doctor had all said that.

They didn’t believe Sachiko.

Why can only I see it?

Why can’t other people see it?

Where is the baby here?

The same questions kept running through Sachiko’s head.

– Wahhh.

It cried, clinging to Sachiko.

That continuous cry made it impossible for Sachiko to sleep properly.

She would go insane if this continued.

Please.

Somebody, save me.

The baby looked up.

Please don’t look at me.

Don’t look at me with those red eyes.

All Sachiko could do was curl up and cry.

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15

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Akemi walked down to the corridor for the next class.

She knew herself that she was lifeless today.

The events of the night before were still in a corner of her head.

After that, Sachiko had been taken to the hospital right away.

Though she was in a panicked state, there were no problems in particular with her body. She was given a sedative and brought home by her parents.

Sachiko’s father had been furious at Tsukasa and the others, who had taken his daughter, and even shouted at them, but Isshin interrupted and managed somehow to calm the situation down.

It seemed like Tsukasa had felt guilty, as he had been so dispirited that it made Akemi pity him just

from looking at his expression.

It seemed like Sachiko would take one or two days off from school, but nothing terrible had happened – it was a relief, or it should have been.

However, Sachiko still hadn't returned to school after three days.

According to Sachiko's mother, she had been shut in her room ever since that day without taking even one step outside.

Isshin's words came up in Akemi's head.

– This is Yakumo's field.

Akemi had no proof, but she thought that those words had something to do with Sachiko's current situation.

She could ask Isshin what those words meant.

While thinking, Akemi passed the classroom she was supposed to go to, when there was a loud noise, like something had been flipped over.

'Don't act all cool!'

The yell echoed. That voice was –

Akemi opened the door immediately and flew into the classroom.

There was a group of people in the corner of the classroom.

Akemi forced her way through.

Tsukasa had grabbed Yakumo by the collar and was glaring at him.

In his agitation, his eyes were wide and his shoulders were shaking.

On the other hand, Yakumo was as expressionless as if the situation had nothing to do with him.

'Why are you always like this?' yelled Tsukasa.

However, it was like Yakumo didn't hear his voice at all.

'You're just making fun of everyone else, right!?'

Yakumo's attitude made Tsukasa even angrier. His yells reverberated through the room.

'You bastard! I'll beat you up!'

Tsukasa's anger had reached its peak. He lifted his fist.

'Stop that!'

Akemi yelled as loudly as she could and tried to step between them, but it was too late.

Tsukasa's fist hit Yakumo's cheek.

There was the sound of bone hitting bone.

The left part of Yakumo's lip was cut. The blood flowing out dripped off his chin to the floor.

Akemi lost her words when looking at the strange scene.

The students around them were also so quiet that it was like the noise earlier hadn't happened.

'What are you!?!'

Tsukasa's emotions were still raging. He tried to hit Yakumo again.

'Get a hold of yourself!'

Akemi pushed herself between Yakumo and Tsukasa.

'Shut up! Get out of the way!' yelled Tsukasa after Akemi approached him.

'Stop it already!'

'I said to get out of the way!'

Tsukasa was still agitated as he pushed Akemi's shoulder aside and tried to go towards Yakumo again. In this situation, finally a group of students, with Youhei at the head, went to stop Tsukasa.

'Why aren't you angry? If you don't like it, bring it on!?! Come on!'

Even though Youhei and the others were holding Tsukasa back, he continued to yell with his face completely red.

Tsukasa still saw Yakumo as a rival. Though he might not have realised himself, it was obvious to anyone to look.

However, to Yakumo, Tsukasa was just another classmate. He didn't even see him.

That was pure humiliation for Tsukasa.

'Because of you – because of you – Sachiko – !'

Tears fell from Tsukasa's eyes.

Akemi finally realised the reason for the fight.

However, it was a false accusation. The person who had suggested the test of courage in the first place was Tsukasa. And Yakumo hadn't been there.

'You OK?'

Akemi left Tsukasa to Youhei and the others for now and spoke to Yakumo.

Akemi took out her handkerchief and tried to put it to Yakumo's lip injury, but he pushed her away.

'People who want to hit me can hit me as much as they want,' said Yakumo expressionlessly.

There wasn't any inflection in that voice, let alone emotion.

That sentence lit the fire of Tsukasa's anger again, just as it had been calmed.

'What did you say!?! You bastard!'

Tsukasa pushed aside the people around him, thrust Akemi away and hit Yakumo's left cheek again.

Yakumo's head was pushed back from the impact.

However, that was all. His arms were limp as his side. He didn't try to resist.

'Are you satisfied?' said Yakumo in his usual tone.

'You're scum! Even your parents abandoned you! You red-eyed freak! You don't have the right to live!'

Tsukasa shouted at Yakumo.

That moment, Yakumo's eyes suddenly narrowed.

– Frightening.

Akemi felt a chill upon seeing those eyes.

They were incredibly dark and cold.

'What are you looking...'

Tsukasa couldn't finish his sentence.

Yakumo quickly raised his right hand and pressed it against Tsukasa's Adam's apple, gripping his neck tightly.

Tsukasa squirmed frantically, trying to get Yakumo's hand off him, but his fingers were wrapped tightly around his neck.

Unable to bear it, Tsukasa fell to the floor.

However, Yakumo still didn't let go.

'Die.'

A smile appeared on Yakumo's lips.

'Stop!' yelled Akemi, thrusting Yakumo aside.

Yakumo's hand left Tsukasa's throat.

Tsukasa coughed a number of times and fell forward.

Yakumo watched him with a blank expression.

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16

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Gotou leant back on his seat and looked up at the ceiling while breathing out cigarette smoke.

The documents from the tip that he found with Miyagawa had the details of crimes that occurred regularly at a clinic with copies of medical reports as support.

For three days, he'd been running around investigating that, and he was completely burnt out.

'Man, I really got the short end of the stick...' said Miyagawa, sitting on the chair beside Gotou.

Gotou ended up laughing without thinking. Short end of the stick, he said.

'Aren't you the one who stuck your neck in?'

'Shut up. Anyway, bum me one.'

Gotou gave Miyagawa a cigarette.

'You finished on your end?' asked Miyagawa, lighting the cigarette.

'Yes. We have testimony from one of the patients.'

'And?' urged Miyagawa.

'Black. Completely black,' said Gotou.

It was disgusting.

The crimes from the tip were unauthorised abortion and infertility treatments at a maternity and gynaecology clinic

Abortions could only be done by doctors appointed by the medical association under conditions regarding the mother's health.

The doctor in charge had to send a report afterwards to the prefecture, but the doctor at the problem clinic hadn't even been appointed by the medical association – forget about sending reports.

If that were all, the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare would have dealt with it, but there was still a problem.

With the money from patients who wanted abortions, they offered the children who were born to couples who had fertility problems for a fee.

Though overseas they had surrogate mothers, this was completely different.

This was clearly human trafficking.

At first, Gotou had been doubtful, but from this three-day investigation, it was proven that the doctor was working without a licence, and with the testimony from the patient, that doubt turned to certainty.

'I feel black too,' said Miyagawa, blowing out smoke.

'So the tip was true.'

'Looks like it.'

'But who could it have been from?'

Gotou asked the question smoulder in his chest.

Miyagawa frowned.

The investigation into the person who had given the tip was going nowhere.

The documents from the phone booth had been sent to forensics, but they had only found a strand of hair. It would take time to analyse.

– Who did this, and why?

There was just that question.

'I don't know. Probably some random guy. You guys should just catch the culprit without thinking about pointless things,' said Miyagawa with a click of his tongue.

This guy really only had one face.

'That's right.'

Gotou ended up smiling without thinking.

Though this person was the worst in the precinct in the way he used people, but if it was him, no matter how unreasonable the instruction, Gotou could run forward without worrying.

For Gotou, who was never good at thinking anyway, having somebody he could trust irrevocably was irreplaceable.

'Anyway, do you have time?' said Miyagawa, pressing his cigarette into the ashtray.

'I do, but...'

'Want to go take a look at their face?'

'The suspect's?'

'Who else?'

Gotou wanted to know what sort of person the suspect was. But –

'I don't have a warrant.'

'We're not going to arrest them. Just taking a look.'

Gotou didn't think Miyagawa would really stop at just taking a look.

Though this would go against the orders from the top, Gotou didn't dislike Miyagawa's recklessness.

Rather, Gotou was the same way.

'Understood,' replied Gotou as he stood up.

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After finishing work, Akemi went to Sachiko's house.

If Sachiko were just tired, Akemi wouldn't go to her house, but there was that test of courage. And Akemi was concerned about the fight between Yakumo and Tsukasa.

That night, something that Akemi didn't know about might have happened.

Akemi didn't think that the problem would be solved just by her visit, but she couldn't just do nothing.

Sachiko's house was past the shopping district in front of the station. It was at the corner of a newly built residential area.

The roads were laid in a criss-cross pattern, with buildings in the same square shape.

Everything looked the same – it took more time than she thought to get there.

At the entrance door, Akemi checked the nameplate before pressing the intercom.

<Please wait.>

After hearing a voice from the intercom, the door opened, and Sachiko's mother, Tomoko, looked out.

She was a woman in her early forties who seemed fragile.

'Sorry; thank you for coming all this way.'

Tomoko bowed her head humbly.

'I apologise for coming so suddenly.'

'No, it isn't any trouble at all. Please come in.'

After exchanging greetings, Akemi went inside, as invited by Tomoko.

The house was well-kept.

'My daughter is upstairs.'

Tomoko looked gloomily at the stairs that went up from the corridor right by the entrance.

Akemi looked up as well.

'How does Sacchan look?'

'She still won't come out of her room.'

Tomoko's shoulders slumped.

'Would it be all right if I went to see her?'

'Please do.'

Tomoko went up the stairs first to lead Akemi.

'Sachiko. Sensei's here.'

After going up the stairs, Tomoko knocked on the closest door and called out.

However, there was no response.

'Sachiko, you're here, right?'

Tomoko spoke again, but the result was the same.

Tomoko shook her head in disappointment.

'Sacchan, it's Takagishi.'

Akemi put her face close to the door and spoke in as gentle a voice as she could.

'Let's talk for a bit.'

She spoke again.

'I don't want to talk.'

After a while, she heard a hoarse from the other side of the door.

She sounded like a different person.

'Everyone in the class is worried.'

Akemi put her ear near the door.

She heard the sound of cloth, but there was no response.

'Hey, I want to talk with you, even if it's just for a bit. Could I open – '

'Don't come in!'

Before Akemi could finish, she heard a shrill voice which pierced her ears.

Akemi was so shocked she backed away from the door instinctively.

'She isn't normally like this,' said Tomoko with a cloudy expression.

'I know.'

Akemi could tell easily that Sachiko wasn't acting normally. Though she was a bit quiet, she was an honest and serious girl, which was uncommon for this age.

'What should I do...'

Tomoko's voice was trembling slightly.

'Has she been like this since the day of the test of courage?'

'Yes. Ever since then, Sachiko's been talking about a ghost...'

'A ghost?'

'She says there's the ghost of a baby, but I can't see anything... I think she's just imagining things.'

Sachiko shook her head and sighed, like she had given up.

– This is Yakumo’s field.

Isshin’s words came up in Akemi’s head.

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18

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When Gotou reached the clinic, the sun had already set.

It was two storeys too, an old building that mimicked Western architecture. There was ivy on the walls.

It was a vaguely eerie building.

Gotou had seen a very similar building before. It had been in a horror movie called the devil’s something or other.

'Is this really the right place?'

Gotou cocked his head.

It really didn’t seem like a place for a maternity and gynaecology clinic.

'Says so on the sign.'

Miyagawa pointed at the metal plate stuck on the wall with his chin.

Though it was rusty, the plate did say Shimomura Maternity and Gynaecology.

It looked like was definitely the clinic in question.

Shimomura Yuusuke, forty years old, was currently working at this clinic.

However, there was something Gotou didn’t get. This clinic had been operated by Shimomura’s parent, and he had taken it up after them.

'So Shimomura's parent was a doctor too?' asked Gotou.

'Yeah.'

'Then wouldn't they have noticed that their son was working as a doctor without a licence?'

'Probably?' replied Miyagawa, as if it were natural.

'Why'd they let him take over if they knew he didn't have a licence?'

'It's decency. Well, his parent is dead, so we can't check.'

'That so?'

'You'll understand if you become a parent.'

Miyagawa awkwardly rubbed his bald head.

'Is that so...'

As Gotou gave a vague reply, the face of his wife Atsuko came up in his head.

It had been half a year since Atsuko had a miscarriage.

When Gotou got to the hospital, the surgery had already finished.

– Sorry.

On the hospital bed, Atsuko had said that with a trembling voice.

She had done nothing wrong. She had just been unlucky. She didn't need to apologise.

But Gotou had been unable to say that – he had just nodded silently.

'What's wrong?'

Miyagawa looked at Gotou's clouded expression.

'It's nothing. Let's go.'

Gotou cut off his negative thoughts and headed first, opening the gates.

He walked along the brick road up to the entrance and stood in front of the engraved door.

The pillar by the door had a sign that said 'No Consultations'.

He hadn't come as a patient today. Gotou rang the doorbell.

However, there was no response.

The building's lights were on, and there was a Benz in the garage.

'It doesn't look like he's away.'

Gotou rang the doorbell again and put his ear to the door.

There was the sound of a thump –

Then somebody's brisk footsteps –

However, the front door didn't open.

There was the faint smell of something burning.

– Something's odd.

'I'll go around.'

After telling Miyagawa that, Gotou left the entrance and went to the back of the building.

He saw a line of white smoke coming up from the duct on the wall.

'He can't be – !'

Gotou went up to a nearby window.

It had frosted glass, so he couldn't see inside clearly, but he could see crackling flames.

– The hell is going on.

Gotou used his elbow to crack the glass.

When the glass broke, a whirl of smoke and fire burst out.

'Shit!'

Gotou backed away without thinking.

'What happened!?!'

Miyagawa heard the noise and ran over.

Gotou didn't have to explain. The moment Miyagawa saw it, he ran to the car to call a firefighter.

Gotou left the calling to Miyagawa and broke another window in the back with his elbow.

Smoke came out, but the fire didn't appear to have reached here yet.

– This could work.

Gotou put his hand in and unlocked the window. After opening it, he jumped in.

The room was probably the nursery.

There were a number of small beds for babies. Gotou couldn't see clearly because of the smoke.

He took the nearby gauze and covered his nose and mouth as he looked around.

He saw a shadow moving by the entrance.

A man in a white gown.

'You're Shimomura Yuusuke, right?'

When Gotou said that, Shimomura ran away.

'Wait!'

Gotou ran right after Shimomura.

While kicking aside a number of small beds, he finally got out of the room.

He spotted Shimomura about five metres ahead of him down the corridor.

'You need to get out of here.'

Gotou signalled at him with his hand to tell him to come over.

However, Shimomura just stood there like a doll.

– Even though he was running earlier. What is he thinking?

'Do you want to die!? Hurry up!'

Gotou yelled again. At the same time, Shimomura picked up a box as large as a cooler with both of his hands.

– What is he doing?

Shimomura threw the box towards Gotou.

Gotou guarded his head with his hands and escaped a direct hit to his head.

The box fell to the floor with a thump.

The liquid in the box spilt out.

There was a unique strong smell.

– This is gasoline.

'Shit!'

It was too late when he realised.

Shimomura lit the lighter in his hand and dropped it on the floor.

Fire danced up and shot towards Gotou like a snake.

'Damn it!'

As Gotou yelled, he turned around and ran as quickly as he could down the corridor.

Fire caught his arm.

But he didn't have the time to mind.

At the end of the corridor, he saw a small window.

If I jump through there – but can my body fit?

He didn't have the time to hesitate.

Gotou covered his face with his arm and jumped at the window.

After the sound of the glass breaking, his body turned once and his back hit something. The pain made him bend over.

'Oi. You OK?'

Gotou sat up upon hearing the voice.

He saw Miyagawa running over.

It looked like he'd managed to get out of the building.

– Thank God.

Gotou sighed in relief.

'Oi – your arm's on fire!'

When Miyagawa ran up to him and said that, Gotou noticed for the first time.

'Hot!'

Gotou hurriedly took off his jacket and hit it against the ground.

Then, there was an incredibly loud clattering as the second storey crumbled.

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19

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After leaving Sachiko's house, Akemi went to Isshin's temple and stood outside the priests' living quarters.

She knew it was illogical.

However, Akemi had nobody else to turn to for advice.

- This is Yakumo's field.

She was also curious about Isshin's words.

It sounded almost like he knew something.

Akemi gathered her determination and pressed the intercom button.

The sliding door opened right away and Isshin showed up with a gentle expression on his face.

'I apologise for coming late at night.'

Akemi gave an apology right away for her rudeness.

She had thought that Isshin would be suspicious about such a sudden visit, but he nodded like he understood.

'I thought that you'd be along soon,' said Isshin with a smile. 'Please come in.'

It was just like she had known about Akemi's visit from the start.

Akemi felt at a loss, but she followed Isshin into the living room.

Yakumo was there.

He was sitting with his legs crossed and was looking out the window. Even though he must have known that Akemi was in the room, he didn't move at all.

'Good evening.'

Akemi spoke to Yakumo's back, but there was no response, as expected.

'Well, please sit down.'

Urged on by Isshin, Akemi sat on the cushion.

'I'll prepare tea,' said Isshin. Then, he left the room.

'Why are you here?'

Waiting until Isshin was gone, Yakumo said just that.

It was an emotionless voice.

'There was something I wanted to ask.'

'If it's about what happened today, it's already over.'

Yakumo ran a hand through his hair.

'No it isn't. I didn't hear the reason for it either...'

'There was no reason. Go home.'

Akemi had nothing to reply to that.

'That's no way to talk.'

Isshin came back into the room with teacups on a tray.

Yakumo clicked his tongue, but he didn't object.

'Honestly,' muttered Isshin as he placed a teacup in front of Akemi and sat opposite her.

'Now, where should we start?'

Isshin brought up the topic at hand now that the situation had calmed down.

Before talking about the main point, there was something that had caught Akemi's interest.

'Could I ask one thing?'

'Please go ahead,' urged Isshin, sipping his tea.

'How did you know I would come?'

'Hm,' said Isshin, looking up at the ceiling. 'Well, to put it simply, it was a gut feeling.'

'Gut feeling?'

'Since Yakumo came home with a bruise on his face, I asked him about the situation.'

Akemi came back to her senses upon hearing Isshin's explanation.

So many things had happened that the order of events had become jumbled. Normally, she would first have to reprimand Yakumo and apologise for the fight in the school in which Yakumo had become injured.

'I sincerely apologise. It was because of my negligence. The student who hit him will apologise tomorrow...'

Akemi hurriedly apologised, but Isshin interrupted her to tell her not to worry about it.

'Yakumo was part of the problem.'

'But Yakumo-kun wasn't at fault.'

Akemi said the thought on her mind.

'Is that because Yakumo didn't do anything?'

'Yes.'

Akemi nodded.

Tsukasa had one-sidedly picked a fight with Yakumo. That was clear to anybody.

'I think that it's because Yakumo didn't do anything that he is at fault.'

Isshin's tone was unusually strict.

'What do you mean?'

'With human relationships, doing nothing can often conversely rub other's the wrong way.'

'Is that so?'

'Even if it isn't intentional, it can come off as provocative. It's because it's difficult to know what they're thinking that the other person can feel insecure.'

Isshin's words made sense.

That said, Akemi still thought that Tsukasa had done too much. No matter how angry he was, violence wasn't the answer.

'However...'

'It's fine. Yakumo probably felt better after being hit.'

'But...'

'And fighting with somebody is a big step for Yakumo.'

Isshin's eyes closed as he smiled, seeming amused.

'Is that so?'

Akemi looked at Yakumo's back.

She thought that he would object to Isshin's words, but he just sat there.

'Anyway, after looking for the cause of the fight, it seems to be that young lady.'

The young lady Isshin was talking about was probably Sachiko.

'And then you thought I'd come?'

Isshin nodded.

'She hasn't gone to school since, correct?'

'She hasn't.'

'And that was the cause of the fight. Since you're such a worrywart, Akemi-chan, I thought that

you'd show up sooner or later.'

'Ah...'

'The other day, I said something rather telling. That this was Yakumo's field...'

If Isshin knew that, the conversation would go quickly.

'Could you two not just say whatever you want?' said Yakumo, still turned away from them.

His voice was hateful, unlike his earlier expressionlessness.

'But it's true that it's your field,' said Isshin.

'I refuse. I've got nothing to do with this. I definitely won't do it.'

Yakumo refused in an even stronger tone than earlier.

'He's been like this ever since. Saying he's got nothing to do with it.'

Isshin shook his head in exasperation.

However, Akemi didn't understand what the two of them were talking about.

Whether he'd do it or not, she didn't understand what Yakumo was refusing to do.

'What are you talking about?' Akemi questioned, unable to keep it in.

'Right, I didn't explain properly. Sorry.'

Isshin smiled wryly before explaining.

'Do you remember how I talked before about Yakumo's unique ability – or rather, physical quality?

Yakumo's left eye, which had been red from birth, could see the spirits of the dead.

Isshin had told Akemi that.

He had inherited that ability – or rather, physical quality – from his missing father. For Akemi, this story was something she didn't want to forget, nor could she forget it.

'Yes.'

'Wait a second – why'd you tell her that!?' yelled Yakumo, turning around quickly.

His expression was clearly angry.

It was the first time Akemi had seen Yakumo make his emotions clear.

She had thought up until now that Yakumo didn't have any emotions – or she had had that suspicion. However, she realised now that she was wrong.

Now that she thought of it, there was no way that there would be someone without emotions.

Yakumo must have just always put a lid on all his emotions – his pain, his sadness, his anger – and endured it.

'Sorry for telling her on my own.'

Isshin sent a gentle gaze Yakumo's way before continuing.

'However, since it's Sensei, she'll definitely understand you. That's what I thought. You must have felt that way a bit too, right?'

Yakumo didn't reply to Isshin's words. He just turned around again.

At school, Yakumo was aloof, but with Isshin, it was mysterious how he looked like a regular rebellious middle-school student.

That was probably just another sign of how accepting Isshin was.

'Let's get back on topic. That girl is probably possessed by a ghost.'

Isshin looked at Akemi with serious eyes.

'Possessed by a ghost?' exclaimed Akemi in her surprise.

However, Isshin wasn't fazed; he continued speaking.

'I can't see them like Yakumo can. I can't say for certain, but from the situation, I think that is how it is.'

That night, Sachiko had been afraid of something.

Something that other people couldn't see –

The examination at the hospital had shown nothing particularly strange with Sachiko's body.

Yet, she still wouldn't leave her room.

Tomoko, Sachiko's mother, had said this.

– Sachiko's been talking about a ghost...

If Akemi accepted Isshin's theory, she felt like it would explain everything.

'Yakumo. Won't you help her?' Isshin said formally.

'They were the ones who decided to play around with something so stupid – they brought it on themselves! It's got nothing to do with me!' shouted Yakumo.

When Akemi heard those words, she understood –

Why did Yakumo refuse everyone around him to this extent?

Why didn't he show his emotions?

Why did he want to be alone?

Why did he sometimes leave class?

Everything connected –

'Yakumo-kun. You're afraid, aren't you?'

Yakumo was afraid.

'Afraid? I am?' said Yakumo, still looking away.

Yakumo was afraid that, like with his mother, the people he believed would reject his existence one day because of his unique physical quality.

From his fear, he became smaller and hid himself in his shell.

'You are, aren't you?'

'What do you know?'

Yakumo's words were tinged with irritation.

When his mother almost killed him, Yakumo must have lost hope in everything.

In order to keep the balance of his heart, he built a wall around himself.

'It's OK – I won't be afraid of you.'

Yakumo suddenly stood up, turned towards her and looked down while taking something out of his left eye.

Then, when he lifted his head again, Yakumo's left eye glowed red like a blazing flame.

Akemi didn't look away – she accepted that gaze.

'I'm cursed, just like the rumours say. Don't bother with me any more.'

Akemi shook her head.

– You haven't been cursed by anyone.

Akemi stood up and faced Yakumo directly.

Their eyes were at the same height –

Until yesterday, his expression had seemed adult-like.

However, Yakumo looked small to her now.

Yakumo, who had put up a wall around him, was probably trembling, all alone.

'It's fine. I won't be afraid of you.'

As Akemi said that, she put her arms around Yakumo and hugged him.

She could hear Yakumo's heartbeat –

He was alive. Though he didn't show it, he felt sad, he suffered, and he worried – he was alive.

For a while, Yakumo just stood there, but then he suddenly pushed Akemi away.

'What the hell are you doing? Why would a teacher go this far?'

Akemi had no way of answering Yakumo's question.

Akemi wanted to know herself why she was doing so much for just one student –

She looked at Yakumo's eyes. She felt like the answer was there.

Finally, Yakumo looked away from Akemi and tried to leave the room.

'Yakumo.'

Isshin admonishingly called out to Yakumo.

In response, Yakumo put his hand on the sliding screen and stood there, shaking his head in annoyance.

'I'm just going to say this, but I'm not an exorcist. I can't exorcise spirits.'

'Spirits of the dead aren't new forms of life or demons – they're clusters of people's emotions. That's your theory, right? If that's the case, exorcism won't be necessary,' said Isshin.

'If I'm not supposed to exorcise the ghost, what are you telling me to do? All I can do is see them.'

'But if you can see them, you might be about to take it away.'

'You make it sound so simple. Isn't that the most difficult part?'

Yakumo snorted.

To Akemi, their exchange sounded like a Zen dialogue.

They were trying to find an answer to something by conversing.

'So what are you going to do? Run away again?'

Isshin's expression was unusually strict.

Without responding to that question, Yakumo just stood there, but finally, his shoulders slumped, like he had given up.

At the same time, Isshin smirked.

'Tomorrow happens to be a day off. That's fine, right?'

'Do what you want,' muttered Yakumo as he left the room.

Dumbfounded, Akemi was just watching him when a handkerchief was held in front of her. It was from Isshin.

Akemi took the handkerchief and noticed for the first time that she was crying.

'Please sit.'

At Isshin's insistence, Akemi sat on the cushion and wiped her tears.

What emotion did these tears come from? Akemi couldn't answer that question.

'It's thanks to you, Akemi-chan.'

'I didn't...'

Akemi didn't understand what Isshin meant.

She didn't think she'd been able to do anything for Yakumo.

'Yakumo has to overcome this.'

'Overcome?'

'Yes. Yakumo hates his red left eye, which can see the spirits of the dead. He's thought of it as something useless – something that just makes others treat him like a monster.'

'It doesn't seem that way to me,' said Akemi, leaning forward.

By thinking that way, Yakumo was cornering himself.

Isshin crossed his arms and nodded.

'I think the same way as you. I think there's a reason he can see them. Like with how people meet, you see the things that you should.'

'Are you talking about fate?'

'Yes. That's why I think that actively using his ability for somebody else might help Yakumo overcome his dark past...'

Now, Akemi finally understood. That was why Isshin had suggested that Yakumo resolve the incident.

His red left eye and the ability it held were a large part of the reason why Yakumo had shut off his heart.

In order to open that heart, Yakumo himself would first need to accept that ability and conquer it.

'That's why it's thanks to you, Akemi-chan.'

Isshin added that at the end.

However, Akemi still didn't think she'd done anything. Isshin had been the one who led Yakumo.

'I didn't... I've just been watching.'

'That's important.'

'Is that so?'

It didn't seem that way to Akemi.

Her presence hadn't changed anything.

'It is. It isn't something that started now. Akemi-chan, you've always looked at Yakumo. You looked at him without averting your eyes.'

'That's natural for a teacher to do.'

'No, it isn't. Unfortunately, there hasn't been anyone until now who has faced Yakumo directly without averting their eyes.'

When Akemi heard Isshin's words, she recalled what the previous homeroom teacher had said.

– It'd be better to leave him alone.

Perhaps it was true that nobody had tried to face Yakumo.

However, something troubled Akemi.

– Is this really OK?

Thinking of Yakumo's circumstances, wouldn't continuing to stay away from others make him happier?

Was she just forcing her own perspective on him and leading him down a path he didn't want to tread?

'Well, he's still just at the start line. What happens from now on will be the most tough.'

Isshin let out a happy laugh completely different from how Akemi was feeling.

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Notes:

General comment – Yakumo uses the pronoun ore (俺) to refer to himself in this novel rather than boku (僕) as he does in the others. Both are generally masculine, but boku is seen as more polite; usually ore is used more with people you're familiar with and can be considered rude otherwise. The pronoun boku is also used more frequently by younger boys, who will often change to using ore around middle school.

each wish: chapter 2

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1

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After hearing this much, Haruka let out a deep sigh.

She had visited Isshin to hear about somebody Yakumo couldn't forget, thinking it would be a short story about his first love or something.

However, now that even Gotou had shown up, the story had taken a turn she hadn't expected.

More than anything, she was surprised about the difference in Yakumo's personality now.

Though Yakumo was curt, he wouldn't go so far as to reject other people.

As well, though he didn't think fondly of his red left eye and his physical ability to see the spirits of the dead, she felt like he recognised that it was something he could not change.

However, the Yakumo of the past was different –

'You're surprised,' said Isshin, looking at Haruka after talking so far.

'Just a bit,' replied Haruka while looking down.

If I met Yakumo in the past, what would I have thought?

That question suddenly came to her. The answer – she didn't want to think about it.

'It'd be a problem if you're troubled here. The incident's just started.'

Gotou laughed, his eyes glittering.

'This isn't a funny story,' Isshin said reprovingly.

'My bad. That's right.'

Gotou accepted his fault honestly, which was unusual.

Haruka felt like the atmosphere had become suddenly heavier.

'Let's take a short break. The tea's cold too.'

Isshin said that, clearing the stagnant air, and placed the teacups on the tray, leaving the living room.

'Yakumo really had scary eyes back then,' Gotou said suddenly.

He was playing with his cigarette case as he narrowed his eyes, as if looking into the distance.

'Scary eyes?'

'Yeah. It was like he hated everything in the world.'

'I feel like I can imagine it, and I feel like I can't...'

Yakumo's head came up in Haruka's mind.

With his always sleepy eyes, he was running a hand through his messy hair.

He was curt and unfriendly, and everything he said and did was laced with sarcasm. Though he didn't show it on the surface, he had both a strong will and kindness to him.

When Haruka was in danger, he would always come to save her, risking himself without any hesitation.

That was the Yakumo Haruka knew.

However, it was true that Yakumo's eyes were sometimes incredibly frightening.

However, Haruka felt like the emotion in those eyes was anger towards evil.

It wasn't hatred towards others.

'He changed because of that incident, but it's not like he became somebody completely different. Just an extension of the same person.'

Haruka understood what Gotou was saying, but she still felt like there was something fundamentally different.

'Sorry for the wait.'

Isshin came back with tea.

'You're late. Did you go to pick the tea leaves?' Gotou complained irrationally.

'What a short-tempered man,' said Isshin, sounding exasperated as he put the teacups in front of each of them.

'Now, where did I talk up to?'

Isshin rubbed his hands together.

'Just as Yakumo-kun was setting out to investigate the incident.'

'Ah, that's right,' replied Isshin, hitting his thigh. 'The next day...'

'You're getting the order wrong!' interrupted Gotou.

'Am I?'

'You are. My bit comes first. Otherwise it won't connect.'

Gotou crossed his arms indignantly.

'Do what you want.'

At Isshin's words, Gotou nodded in satisfaction before beginning.

'After nearly being burnt up, I...'

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2

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– Everything burned.

Gotou put his jacket with the burnt sleeve over his shoulders as he looked at the burnt remains in a daze.

Though the firefighters came right afterwards, the fire was so strong that all they could do was stop the fire from spreading to the surrounding buildings.

All that was left was a wall and a few poles – everything else had collapsed.

It was like there had been an air raid or something.

Under the lights that had been brought onto the hospital premises, people from forensics in blue uniforms were crawling about like wild dogs searching for food.

Gotou admired their persistence, but in this situation, they probably couldn't hope for any useful evidence.

'What a mess,' grumbled Miyagawa, holding a can of coffee out towards Gotou.

'It really us. I was almost burnt myself.'

Gotou opened the can of coffee and drank it all at once.

The caffeine went straight to his stomach.

Shimomura wasn't found from the burnt remains. He probably used the confusion to get away.

Gotou felt frustration rise up from his stomach. Shimomura had been right there. It was pathetic of him to let him get away.

'It isn't your fault he got away.'

Miyagawa hit Gotou's shoulders, like he'd sensed how he felt.

With Gotou's personality, he'd rather get hit with a fist at times like this. Being comforted just made him feel more pathetic.

'I definitely won't let him get away the next time I see him.'

Gotou lit a cigarette.

He felt like the smoke was more painful than usual.

'Don't get so worked up. You'll start burning again.'

Miyagawa told a terrible joke while smirking. His humour sense was already that of an old man's.

'Gotou. Got some time?'

The one who interrupted was Matsumura, an examiner from forensics who was in the same class as Gotou.

The man's face and even body were like that of a horse – there was something unrefined about him.

'What?'

'There's something I want you to look at.'

Matsumura was mumbling like there was something in his mouth.

'Got a hold of something that proves the wife's cheating or something?'

'That's not it. Just come.'

Matsumura lightly let Gotou's joke slide and walked away briskly.

– What an irritating guy.

Gotou grumbled that inwardly and followed Matsumura with Miyagawa.

They went through the passage soaked with hose water to the back of the hospital.

The persimmon tree in the backyard was lit up.

There were two examiners there with shovels around the tree.

At their feet, there was a mountain of dirt. Beside it was a hole about a metre in diameter.

'Found treasure or something?'

Gotou called out to Matsumura's back.

Matsumura stopped at the hole and glared at Gotou after sighing.

'Decide for yourself if it's treasure.'

Gotou was irritated by Matsumura's unfriendly words. He pushed aside one of the examiners and looked into the hole.

It was about as deep as a person.

He saw something like white balls at the bottom of the hole.

No, that wasn't it. They weren't balls. They were –

'Skulls?' said Miyagawa before Gotou could.

'Yes, that's right. They're all from new-borns. There are roughly four or five,' replied Matsumura, wiping the sweat off his forehead.

Though Gotou hadn't known about it, he felt mortified for joking about treasure so frivolously.

Burying the corpses of new-born babies in a place like this – it made him doubt the nerves of the person who did it.

'Was this hole here before?' said Miyagawa, kneeling on one knee and peering inside.

'No, we noticed that the colour of the dirt was different here and tried digging it up... Honestly, it's awful.'

Matsumura gritted his back teeth together. Gotou felt the same way.

Miyagawa stood up and wiped the dirt off his knee. He looked up at the night sky.

'The forecast doesn't look good.'

Gotou looked up as well.

He couldn't see stars. The forecast never looked good in the city sky –

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3

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The next morning, Akemi was an hour late when she arrived at the temple.

It had taken longer than expected to find somebody to watch over her daughter. She ran around looking, but in the end, she hadn't been able to find anybody and had brought her along.

Her daughter was currently sleeping in the baby sling on her chest.

However, she would always start crying madly when she saw somebody she didn't know. Her daughter, Nao, had an abnormal fear of strangers.

Isshin and Yakumo would be troubled about how to treat Nao too, now that she'd brought her along so suddenly.

Akemi had thought about cancelling, but she had already contacted Sachiko's family, and she also didn't want to crush Yakumo's thoughts just as he'd started to move.

There wasn't any point thinking about any more. She would talk with Isshin about what to do.

With renewed determination, Akemi went through the temple premises and pressed the intercom button by the priests' quarters.

After a while, the sliding door opened, and Isshin, in his work robes, greeted her with his usual smile.

'Welcome.'

'Ah, sorry, I couldn't find anybody to look after my daughter...'

Akemi said that first off.

'So this is your daughter, Akemi-chan?'

She had thought that Isshin would be a bit surprised, but he just smiled like usual at Nao and patted her head.

In response, Nao opened her eyes.

Isshin's and Nao's eyes met.

Akemi thought that Nao would start crying, but her response was unexpected.

Nao reached a hand out towards Isshin and kicked her feet, laughing happily.

This was the first time she hadn't cried in front of somebody she'd just met.

'What's her name?' said Isshin, taking Nao's hand.

'Ah, her name's Nao.'

Akemi was taken aback, but she gave her daughter's name.

'It's nice to meet you, Nao-chan.'

Isshin looked at Nao's face.

Nao seemed even happier.

'Would you let me hold her?'

Isshin took Nao before Akemi responded, picking her up skilfully and rocking her in his arms.

Nao's face would always stiffen just from approaching others, but Isshin, who'd she just met, was holding her. Isshin was also looked so loving that it could make someone suspect that he was her actual father.

– If only this person were Nao's father.

That wish which wouldn't be granted suddenly came to Akemi.

'What is it?'

While she was lost in her own thoughts, Isshin looked at her, which made her feel so embarrassed even her ears went red.

'Ah, Nao's actually really shy. It's the first time she hasn't cried when meeting someone new...'

Isshin nodded upon hearing Akemi's explanation.

'That's because you're wary of other people, Akemi-chan.'

Akemi was startled, like she had been suddenly pushed on the back.

'I'm wary?'

'You are.'

Isshin said that with narrowed eyes as he poked Nao's cheek.

Nao's face scrunched up like it had tickled. When Akemi saw that, she understood what Isshin meant.

If the parent were wary, the child would feel that wariness too. That was probably it.

That made a lot of sense. Akemi hadn't been able to open her heart up to anyone since that event. She was afraid that they would pry into the incident, so she was wary and looked away from everyone else.

Nao wasn't crying because Akemi wasn't wary of Isshin –

'It's cold out. Well, please come in.'

After Isshin urged her to do so, he went inside with Nao in his arms.

Akemi followed him.

When she entered the living room, Yakumo was already waiting there.

He wore jeans and a white shirt. He was sitting with his legs out and looking up at the ceiling in boredom.

When he noticed Akemi there, he let out a purposefully large yawn.

'Yakumo, this is Nao-chan.'

Isshin sat in front of Yakumo, still holding Nao.

Yakumo didn't look that surprised either and just looked at Nao.

Nao reached out and grabbed Yakumo's hair.

Akemi thought that Yakumo would be angry, but he didn't look displeased and just let her continue.

'Is this your kid, Sensei?' asked Yakumo in a drawl.

It was the first time Akemi had ever been asked a question by Yakumo.

'Yes, she is.'

'Hm,' said Yakumo, sounding uninterested as he stared at Nao's face and poked her cheek.

Nao waved her arms and legs happily.

It felt rather strange. It made sense with Isshin, but Nao wasn't wary of Yakumo either.

Even though they were complete strangers, it was even possible to think of the people in this living room as family.

For just a moment, Yakumo's expression seemed to soften.

A gentle and warm expression he had never shown anyone at school –

– Yakumo really is shutting away his emotions.

Akemi felt that anew.

'This kid...'

Yakumo's brow suddenly furrowed as he clapped his hands near Nao's ear.

Nao didn't respond and just laughed.

'Is there something wrong with her ears?'

Akemi nodded in response.

Nao couldn't hear. It was discovered when she was a child.

When Akemi thought about Nao's future, it sometimes made it hard for her to breathe. Nao had been given a difficult life from birth.

It was nobody's fault. Everyone said that, but Akemi couldn't help but blame herself.

– It must be my fault that Nao is like this.

Akemi tried to put away the chain of bad thoughts in her head and put a smile on her face.

However, Akemi was the only one forcing a smile.

Now that Yakumo knew the facts, he seemed satisfied, and he was playing with Nao.

Isshin was doing the same.

– She can't hear. So what?

It was like Isshin and Yakumo were saying that. Worrying about her daughter's handicap might already have been discrimination.

Akemi felt like she had been taught something very important.

'We can't keep playing. We have to go soon,' said Isshin, looking at the clock.

'Let's put an end to this,' agreed Yakumo, standing up.

They had almost forgotten their goal.

They had gathered to go with Yakumo to Sachiko's house. However, there was a reason Akemi couldn't agree immediately.

– What should I do about Nao?

She couldn't bring her to Sachiko's.

'I'll watch out Nao-chan until you come back,' offered Isshin, who seemed to have sensed what Akemi was thinking.

'Eh, but...'

Since Nao was so friendly with him, it wasn't something she didn't want to ask, but he would have to do more than just rock her.

There were many things to do – change her diapers, feed her milk.

'It's fine. The families of the temple have left their children with me before. And I've changed Yakumo's diapers too,' said Isshin, reading Akemi's thoughts.

It was true that it wouldn't be a problem leaving Nao with Isshin if he had experience, but Akemi still felt bad about it.

'He wants to, so just let him,' said Yakumo, running a hand through his hair to push Akemi to a decision.

His words weren't pointed like they usually were.

'It's just as Yakumo says. Please hurry up and go,' urged Isshin.

Yakumo ignored Akemi, who was still undecided, and left the room briskly.

'I'm truly sorry. I'll leave her in your care.'

Akemi gave the bag with diapers and milk to Isshin and gave a simple explanation before following Yakumo out the room.

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4

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The day after the fire, Gotou and Miyagawa were walking in the basement corridor of a hospital.

There was clearly insufficient lighting. It wasn't just dim – the ventilation was bad as well, so the corridor was filled with humid air.

When compared with the clean glass entrance, it was like it wasn't even the same building.

In the end, they found a total of seven corpses in the yard –

All of them were new-born children.

It would probably be hard work to find the mothers of those children who looked like they could even have been put in the birth registry.

Now that the evidence had been burnt in the fire, they would have to catch the missing Shimomura and ask him. That was the most certain method.

Normally, Gotou would want to join the search for the suspect Shimomura, but because of Miyagawa's arrangement, he was going to the coroner's to hear about the autopsy.

They went straight down the corridor. Miyagawa stopped at the door in the very back.

Miyagawa had had a long face ever since it was decided that they'd go meet the coroner.

Gotou was suddenly curious about what sort of person could make Miyagawa this gloomy.

'Miyagawa-san, what sort of person is the coroner?'

'He's called Hata – an old man who's so old he looks like he could die at any moment. Well, to put it in one word, he's a pervert.'

'Pervert?'

– Did the old man wear a nurse uniform or something?

Imagining it was enough to make Gotou want to laugh.

'Anyway, no matter what the old man says, just ignore it. You won't be able to keep up otherwise.'

After hearing Miyagawa's warning, it was even harder for Gotou to imagine what sort of person the coroner was.

Gotou wanted to ask another question, but before he could, Miyagawa knocked on the door.

'It's Chief Miyagawa.'

'It's open.'

Gotou heard a hoarse voice from the other side of the door.

Miyagawa opened the door and went inside. Gotou followed him.

It was a small rectangular room of about six tatami in size. Probably because of the lack of windows, it was so dim that it looked like something might pop out if this were a horror movie.

There was a desk at the very back of the room, surrounded by cabinets.

In front of the desk that was covered in documents, there was an old man lazily sipping tea in a white gown.

With white hair, the old man was just skin and bones and looked like he could die at any moment.

'You again?'

Hata scratched his forehead like he was annoyed.

'Like I'd come here because I wanted to.'

Hata giggled at Miyagawa's words, his shoulders shaking as if he was having convulsions.

He was somewhat creepy.

'Who's the blockhead behind you?' said Hata, pointing at Gotou with his chin.

Calling somebody he'd just met a blockhead was quite something.

'He's Gotou, my subordinate. He'll probably be around every once in a while.'

'My name is Gotou. It's nice to meet you.'

Gotou bowed at Hata after Miyagawa introduced him.

However, Hata just rolled his head around like he was bored.

– This old man. I'm bowing my head to him. Maybe I'll pull his head off.

Gotou swallowed his rising anger.

'Well, just sit over there.'

Though Hata said that, there were no chairs in the room.

– Is he making fun of us?

In contrast to Gotou's confusion, Miyagawa's expression didn't change at all as he went to a nearby cabinet.

From that attitude, Hata was probably always like this.

– No matter what the old man says, just ignore it.

Gotou felt like he slightly understood what Miyagawa had meant.

Unable to do anything else, Gotou crossed his arms and leant against the wall by the door.

'I came because of the corpses from the maternity clinic.'

Miyagawa brought up the topic at hand.

At that moment, Hata's wrinkled face lit up, like he was a child who had found his toy.

'Ah, that was a big catch.'

Hatch laughed happily.

– Big catch? Oi, oi. Those weren't words to use about children's corpses.

Gotou's dislike for Hata grew.

'So what did you find out?'

Miyagawa looked at Gotou, as if to tell him to keep quiet, and continued talking.

'It was just yesterday. I don't know anything yet.'

'Don't say that. With your skill, old man, you must know something from experience.'

It was rare for Miyagawa to butter someone up.

Perhaps Hata was pleased, as his expression slackened slowly as he opened his mouth.

'Well, they were skeletons. I don't know anything for certain, but from what I've seen, there weren't any obvious injuries. If they were killed, drugs or something were probably used.'

'Is it possible that they were strangled?'

Gotou said the question that came up in his head.

Then, Hata looked at Gotou scornfully.

'If an adult strangled the neck of a new-born child, their bones would break.'

Hata mimicked strangling a neck.

It was true. Gotou realised how foolish his question was, but at the same time, he was irritated.

He could've put that another way –

'How about the time of death?'

Miyagawa continued regardless.

'At this stage, I don't have detailed results, but from what I see, it's all over the place. There are things from a month or so ago, and there are some that might be from more than ten years ago.'

If what Hata said was correct, then that place had been abandoning children's corpses there for over ten years.

– Treating people's lives like things.

Gotou felt hatred and anger in the bottom of his stomach that almost made him shake.

'Found out anything else?' asked Miyagawa.

Hata shook his head.

It looked like it'd take some more time before they found anything else.

'Ah, that's right. There was one odd thing.'

Hata scratched his back as he called out to Gotou and Miyagawa, who were about to leave.

'An odd thing?'

Gotou's brow furrowed.

'The number doesn't match.'

'The number doesn't match?'

Gotou didn't understand just from that.

Perhaps he'd sensed what Gotou was thinking, as Hata spread out the documents in front of him on the desk.

There were several photos of the discovered children's corpses.

Even though Gotou should have been used to this, the spectacle was more awful than he'd imagined, making Gotou want to look away.

Hata took a photo out and tapped it with his finger.

In the photo, there was something like a small white rod.

It was probably an arm or a leg.

'There's one arm too many.'

So they hadn't found the other bones?

No, that probably wasn't it.

They had dug up everything around there. There probably wasn't anything left. It would have made sense if they were missing one, but having too many –

'That is odd. Probably wouldn't have just cut off the arm and buried it there,' murmured Miyagawa, rubbing his chin with his palm.

Hata finished drinking his tea and let out a long breath.

'But if they were going to kill them anyway, I wish they'd done it after they'd grown up a bit. Autopsying this isn't any fun at all.'

'Oi! Old man! What did you just say!?'

Gotou spoke before thinking.

Even after hearing Gotou's angry yell, Hata was nonchalant.

'Exactly what I said. I like fresh adult corpses.'

Now, Gotou understood what Miyagawa had said at first.

– This pervert! Of all the things to say!

Gotou lifted his hand to grab Hata, but Miyagawa pinned him down.

'Please don't stop me! I'll feel bad unless I punch this old man!'

'Cool your head!' yelled Miyagawa, pushing Gotou against the wall.

Gotou hit his chest and started coughing violently.

'I said this earlier. Don't listen to what the old man has to say!'

'But...'

'Shut up!'

Miyagawa's fist came down on Gotou's head. The pain made his anger lessen slightly.

Even with all the clamour in front of him, Hata looked calm. That wasn't all – he was giggling demonically.

– I really can't forgive him.

Gotou struggled, but then Miyagawa's hammer of a fist came down on Gotou's head again.

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5

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Akemi stood in front of Sachiko's house with Yakumo.

Yakumo had not said anything as they came here.

Akemi had talked about general topics, but like an athlete gathering concentration before a match, Yakumo hadn't responded.

He might have been unexpectedly nervous.

'Are you prepared?'

Akemi asked Yakumo before pressing the intercom button.

'There's nothing to prepare. I just need to look,' said Yakumo with a blank expression.

Akemi had felt like she'd shortened the distance between her and Yakumo a bit when at his house, but it seemed she had been mistaken, as if it were a mirage.

She felt disappointed, but she told herself that it wasn't that easy to connect to somebody and pressed the intercom button.

After a while, Tomoko opened the door.

They had talked on the phone last night, so she invited Akemi and Yakumo in without any explanation.

Of course, Akemi wouldn't have been able to tell the truth even if asked to explain.

Your daughters appears to be possessed by a ghost, so I will be bring a classmate who can see ghosts. If she said that, she would be treated like she were insane.

She had just said that she was coming with a classmate who wanted to visit Sachiko when she was sick.

Tomoko led them to Sachiko's room on the second floor.

'Sachiko, your teacher's here,' said Tomoko, knocking on the door.

However, there was no response.

'Sacchan, it's Takagishi. We're here to visit. Could we come in?'

Akemi tried calling out instead.

'Don't come in!'

Akemi heard Sachiko's refusal through the door.

Akemi had been prepared for this, so she wasn't that shocked.

'Sacchan, Yakumo-kun came today too. He's worried.'

Akemi continued speaking.

Yakumo's cheek twitched, like he didn't like being used as an excuse.

'No way...'

After a while, Akemi heard Sachiko's faint voice through the door.

The classmate she liked had suddenly come to visit her. Sachiko was probably shaken, feeling happy and confused.

'It's true. That's why I want you to open the door.'

Akemi tried pushing further, but Sachiko didn't respond.

Even though she'd brought Yakumo, nothing would start if the door wasn't opened.

Akemi was thinking of what to say next when Yakumo walked forward and tried the doorknob.

However, the door was locked and wouldn't open. That had been a rather forceful approach.

'It's me. Saitou. You're possessed by a ghost,' said Yakumo, knocking on the door as he did so.

Tomoko was surprised by Yakumo's words and actions – her eyes went wide and she covered her mouth with her hands.

Tomoko didn't believe her daughter when she said that there was a ghost. It would be stranger for her not to be shaken by the attitude of this classmate who was supposed to have come to visit.

'Sensei, this child is Sachiko's classmate, right?'

Tomoko looked at her suspiciously.

'Ah, yes. That's true, but... er...'

Akemi tried to smooth things over, but she couldn't think of an excuse and was fumbling.

'Hurry up and open the door. If you leave things like this, you won't be able to turn back. People possessed by the spirits of the dead will die.'

Yakumo ignored Akemi's turmoil and continued to speak to Sachiko through the door.

'Die... What are you saying?'

Tomoko grabbed Yakumo's shoulder, unable to hold back.

'If I don't say something like this, she won't open, right?'

Yakumo looked at Tomoko with a blank expression.

Though he wasn't glaring, there was a light in his eyes that pressured his opponents.

Tomoko nervously shut her mouth.

A suffocating silence continued.

Akemi wasn't sure what to do when she heard the sound of the door unlocking.

'See? It's open,' said Yakumo with satisfaction, shaking off Tomoko's hand and opening the door to step inside.

Akemi was about to follow Yakumo in when Tomoko grabbed her arm.

'Excuse me, Sensei...'

Tomoko still didn't seem to accept what had happened as she looked at Akemi for an explanation.

'It's fine. That was a means to get Sachiko-san to open the door. Please stay outside, ma'am.'

Akemi gave her a lie for appearances and left Tomoko behind, though Tomoko still looked dubious.

Akemi went inside and shut the door behind her.

She sighed –

Sachiko's room was clean, as she had expected.

Even though she wasn't going to school, she was probably studying properly. There were textbooks and notebooks spread open on the desk. There were reference books on the bookcase beside it.

The room seemed to symbolise a middle school student on the brink of entrance exams.

By the window, there was a full-length mirror that had been turned around and a bed, on which Sachiko, in pyjamas, was sitting while hugging her knees.

The teddy bear by her pillow looked at them.

Yakumo stood in the middle of the room, put his index finger to his brow and looked at Sachiko.

'Yakumo-kun. What is it?'

'You're noisy. Be quiet for a bit,' said Yakumo, unmoving.

An electrifying tension –

Perhaps Yakumo was concentrating in his own way to see the spirits of the dead.

Akemi looked at Sachiko, sitting on the bed.

Her hair was brushed neatly as usual, but her eyes were bloodshot and there were dark circles underneath them.

Her face was pale, and even her lips appeared to have faded in colour.

'Sacchan, are you OK?'

'... I'm scared... Nobody'll believe me... I don't know what to do...'

Sachiko's voice trembled

Akemi could tell clearly that she was suffering. Even though she said there was a ghost, of course the doctors and her parents didn't believe her.

For a girl in puberty, being believed by nobody must have hurt more than being possessed by a ghost.

Akemi went close to Sachiko to hug her, to try to make her feel even slightly better.

"Don't touch her!" Yakumo yelled, his expression changing completely.

Surprised by Yakumo, who wasn't acting normal, Akemi stopped without thinking.

– Why can't I touch Sachiko?

She looked at Yakumo for a response, but Yakumo just stood there while looking at Sachiko.

'Yakumo-kun. I...'

'Who is the child you're holding at your chest?' said Yakumo, interrupting Sachiko.

At the same time, Sachiko's shoulders jolted.

– Child?

Akemi couldn't see anything.

However, did Yakumo see something there?

Akemi had thought it would be necessary to perform rites or chant spells to see the spirits of the dead.

However, from Yakumo's attitude now, he could probably see ghosts every day, even if he didn't want to.

If that were the case, Yakumo had lived his life seeing a world that Akemi and others like her could never imagine.

'I'll ask once more. Who is that child?'

Yakumo pointed at Sachiko's child.

'I don't know either.'

Sachiko covered her face with her hands and shook her head, flinging her hair about.

'Has that child been there since the test of courage?'

'I don't know. Yakumo-kun, what should I do!?'

Sachiko was in hysterics. It looked like her emotions were tipping open.

'Has the child been there since the test of courage?'

Yakumo repeated his question with no care for Sachiko's emotional state.

'... I think that's probably it,' replied Sachiko in a quiet voice.

'So that really is it,' murmured Yakumo. He walked up to Sachiko and looked at her with a piercing gaze.

Under that pressure, Sachiko leant back.

There was a freezing silence –

Akemi forgot to breathe as she watched.

After a while, Yakumo suddenly turned around and looked at Akemi, seeming surprised.

'You...?'

Yakumo spoke in a lowered tone.

– What happened?

Ignoring Akemi, who didn't understand the situation, Yakumo pressed a hand against his left eye

and collapsed to his knees.

His body shook, like he was in pain.

'Are you OK?'

Yakumo didn't respond to Akemi's question.

Beads of sweat formed on his forehead, and his shoulders heaved as he breathed.

'Hey, Yakumo-kun.'

Akemi was about to try to help him get up, but Yakumo stood up himself as if to avoid that.

He was swaying, as if he were dizzy.

'What's wrong?'

Akemi put a hand on Yakumo's shoulder.

'Let go!'

Yakumo brushed Akemi's hand aside and glared at her fiercely.

There was a violent wrath in that gaze.

For a while, Yakumo glared at Akemi, but then he left the room silently.

'Sacchan, wait a bit.'

Akemi left Sachiko's room and went after Yakumo.

When she reached the corridor, Tomoko came out, asking, 'What happened?'

'I will be right back.'

Akemi waved Tomoko off and ran out the entrance.

She found Yakumo immediately.

He was leaning against a telephone pole with his left hand on his face as he looked down. His breathing was ragged, as if he had run at full speed.

'Yakumo-kun, are you all right?'

When she touched Yakumo, he leapt away with the agility of a cat and put distance between himself and Akemi.

'Stay away.'

Yakumo glared down at her, pointing his index finger at her as a warning.

Why was Yakumo so guarded? And what had he seen?'

'Did you know?' said Yakumo, his breathing unsteady.

Akemi didn't understand the question, so all she could do was keep quiet.

While neither of them spoke, the silence continued, to the point that the sound of the wind was hurting her ears –

The strength suddenly left Yakumo's shoulders, and he turned his back towards Akemi.

However, that didn't mean the dismissive air around Yakumo had disappeared.

'It's fine. You go back first. And don't go near that woman again.'

After saying that quickly, Yakumo walked away with a shaky gait.

'Where are you going.'

There were many things that she wanted to ask, but Yakumo didn't stop or turn around.

– It might not have been a good decision to bring Yakumo.

Regret gradually grew within Akemi.

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6

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Left behind by Yakumo, Akemi returned to Sachiko's house, apologised for what had happened earlier, and then went back to the priests' quarters where Isshin and Nao were waiting.

'It isn't your fault, Akemi-chan.'

After Akemi explained, Isshin said that with a shake of his head.

Wasn't Yakumo supposed to use this spiritual incident to break his own shell? That was what Isshin had thought, so this must have been below his expectations.

Though he didn't say it, he must have been disappointed.

'If it's all right, would you let me wait until Yakumo-kun returns?' asked Akemi, even though she thought herself it was an impudent request.

Yakumo's attitude had changed suddenly after going to Sachiko's room.

He might have seen something unbelievable. She wanted to know what on earth it was.

Also, she did want to be with Isshin a little longer.

'It's a humble place, but please feel comfortable. I want to play with Nao-chan a little longer too.'

Isshin was holding Nao and looking at her face as she said that.

Nao happily stuck her finger in Isshin's nose.

– What is she doing?

'Um, I –'

Akemi hurriedly tried to take Nao, but Isshin stopped her.

That wasn't all – even Nao shook her head.

'Being with you almost makes me forget that I'm a teacher, Isshin-san.'

It was a bit strange now that she thought about it. The teacher had gone to her student's home and was letting her student's guardian hold her own child.

'From how I see it, Akemi-chan, while being Yakumo's teacher, you're also my cute student. You don't have to worry about those details now, do you?'

Though Isshin's words were rather strong, they were also convincing to her.

He really was a mysterious person.

'If you're sure it's all right.'

'Then I'll pour some tea.'

After saying that, Isshin stood up, Nao still in his arms.

'No, I'll do it.'

Akemi stood up as well.

'No, it's fine. Please sit then.'

'Then I'll take Nao.'

'That's fine too.'

Isshin's only fault might have been that he wanted to do things himself.

However, that also made him look cute.

'Please choose one of those options.'

Akemi put her hands on her waist and pretended to be angry as she approached Isshin.

Isshin looked troubled, but finally he chose Nao and sat back down.

Akemi went to the kitchen and looked around.

It was kept well, but there were oppressively few seasonings. When she opened the fridge, as expected, there was virtually nothing that could be called an ingredient.

'Isshin-san, what do you normally eat?'

'Well, we're just two men. We eat frozen food and side dishes purchased from the supermarket – a variety.'

That wasn't a variety.

However, perhaps it couldn't be helped. Isshin was doing his work as a priest and acting as Yakumo's parent on his own.

It would be difficult to provide meals on top of that.

Akemi found it very difficult to cook herself while also working.

– All right, I've decided.

'Sorry, please watch Nao for a while.'

Akemi returned to the living room to declare that to Isshin as she picked up her bag.

'Where are you going?'

Isshin looked confused as he looked up at Akemi.

'To buy dinner.'

Isshin looked surprised by Akemi's response.

Even Isshin had taken time to understand what she meant.

'No, that's too much. Er...'

Isshin stood up and was fumbling for words.

He was probably trying to refuse, but he didn't know how to do it.

'Please leave it to me.'

Akemi said just that and left the living room before he could stop her.

It was strange. Even though she was old enough to know better, when she looked at Yakumo, she had been so caught that she wouldn't lose to Sachiko.

There must be something wrong with me –

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7

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Yakumo stood in the school's backyard.

The cherry blossom tree, the start of the incident –

Because it was a Saturday, he had thought that nobody would be at school, but the basketball club was in the gym, and practising. Their yells and the sound of the balls echoed.

Yakumo knelt with a deep sigh.

At the root of the cherry blossom tree, there was a long rock sticking out, just like a gravestone.

Though it'd be hard to tell at first glance, this area only had different coloured soil.

Yakumo had understood the gist of what was happening to Sachiko when she went to her room.

He also knew how to solve the spiritual phenomenon.

However, he didn't feel like actually doing it.

Yakumo stood up and lightly touched the tree trunk.

'Were you unwanted too?'

There was no response.

There was a suffocating feeling in his chest.

Why did he have to suffer like this?

If he didn't know anything, he wouldn't be troubled like this.

'I...'

'What are you doing, you bastard!?'

Yakumo heard a voice, interrupting his murmur.

When he turned around, he saw Tsukasa there in a jersey.

Like they were obeying Tsukasa, there was a posse of students, with Youhei at the start.

'I'm asking you. Answer.'

Tsukasa spoke quickly as he approached Yakumo.

– These guys might be nice enough to destroy me.

That ruinous thought suddenly came to Yakumo's head.

'It's got nothing to do with you,' said Yakumo challengingly as he tried to leave.

'Wait!'

Tsukasa glared at Yakumo with animosity as he blocked Yakumo's way.

Yakumo stopped and looked back at Tsukasa.

'You're in my way.'

'What? If you get too ahead of yourself, I'll beat you up!'

Tsukasa glared at Yakumo and brought their foreheads close together.

– Oh, so he'll kill me.

'Do it,' said Yakumo expressionlessly.

'What?'

'You're going to kill me, right?'

'You...'

Tsukasa took a step back, as if afraid.

'Kill me. That's what you want, right? Or are you scared?'

'You brat...'

'It looks like your leader is too afraid to put a hand on me.'

Yakumo spoke to the posse behind Tsukasa.

Tsukasa's expression twisted into humiliation.

'Get him!' said Youhei.

'Yeah, get him!'

The other posse members spoke up too.

'Show your stuff.'

When Yakumo said that, Tsukasa's right fist came flying.

Yakumo took that surprise hit and lost his balance.

Then, he underwent a shower of kicks.

As he fell to the ground, the other students joined in, and he was showered with blows.

– Now I don't have to suffer any more.

In that intense pain, Yakumo felt bliss at being released.

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8

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After Gotou left the perverted coroner's hospital, he went straight to the investigation on the informant with Miyagawa.

Though it was called an investigation, it was just boring work, questioning people around the telephone booth.

For Gotou, who wasn't good at using his head, this work was more suitable for him.

However, he hadn't found any useful information. There wasn't anything to do about it. The telephone booth was under a pedestrian bridge and at a dead end.

Furthermore, numerous people used telephone booths.

It wouldn't be that easy to get eyewitness testimony.

It would be different if they at least had the date and team, but even that was vague.

If the informant had figured out that much, they would have to be quite keen.

Gotou recalled the man he'd seen on the walkway.

An unsettling man in all black. He had to be the informer. Gotou was near certain.

'Gotou, let's take a break.'

Without waiting for Gotou's reply, Miyagawa leant against the fence dividing the school and the road and lit a cigarette.

'Miyagawa-san, you're getting on in years if you're going to throw in the towel here.'

Gotou threw a little bite into his usual comeback.

Gotou thought that Miyagawa would get angry, but Miyagawa just let it slide with a snort.

'Don't chat – get me something warm to drink.'

Miyagawa threw a five hundred yen coin at Gotou.

'Would coffee be all right?'

'Black!' yelled Miyagawa with a wave.

– There should be a vending machine around here.

Gotou turned right at the road along the fence and went to the back of the school.

Just as he'd remembered, there was a vending machine there.

Gotou jogged up to the vending machine and put money in. He couldn't find the black coffee Miyagawa wanted.

It'd be a pain looking for another vending machine –

'Tea will be fine, right?'

Gotou was pressing the vending machine button when he suddenly voice.

'Die! Take that!'

There were jeers unsuitable for an area near a middle school.

Gotou looked around and spotted four or five middle school students standing in a circle underneath the dead cherry blossom tree behind the fence.

There was a boy of the same age on the ground inside that circle.

Gotou ran before thinking.

'Oi, you brats! What are you doing!?'

He climbed onto the fence and yelled from the bottom of his stomach.

The boys scattered in all directions at this sudden intruder, leaving the boy collapsed on the ground by himself.

'Oi. You all right?'

Gotou jumped off the fence and went up to the boy.

He tried to give him a hand, but the boy stood up on his own as if to say it wasn't necessary while pressing a hand against his left eye.

However, it looked like the injuries were severe. He was staggering like a fawn.

'Oi. Don't overdo it.'

Gotou forced the boy to sit on the ground and looked at his face to check his injuries.

The boy opened his eyes.

'You! You're the kid from that time!' exclaimed Gotou in surprise.

This was the boy he met at the park when he was chasing the man that he thought was the informant.

'You're speaking too loudly right next to my ear,' said the boy, spitting out a glob of bloody saliva.

– He's damn impertinent for his awful state.

'Do you know those guys?'

'I know them, but I don't plan on telling you who they are.'

The boy tried to stand up using the tree trunk without even wiping the dirt off his clothes.

Gotou quickly grabbed the boy's arm.

Gotou had a lot of other things he wanted to ask this kid.

'Let go of me!'

'Nope, not going to. I've got a lot of questions for you.'

'I don't have anything to say.'

'Shut it. Don't act clever – you're just a brat who can't do anything without his parents!'

Gotou had planned on saying that to get him to submit.

However, Gotou was the one who became lost for words.

The boy slowly took the hand off his left eye. His glowing red eye woke Gotou's sleeping memories.

– I've seen this red eye before.

It was a rainy night nearly ten years ago –

At the time, Gotou had been working as an officer at a police box, and a man showed up then.

– A child is about to be murdered.

The man had said that.

Gotou did as the man instructed and went to a building under construction.

He saved a kid who was about to be strangled to death by a woman there.

That kid had had a red left eye, like the boy in front of him.

He found out later that the woman who tried to kill the boy was his mother.

– What sort of life will this kid live after his mother's tried to kill him?

Gotou recalled thinking that at the time.

And now, he had the answer in front of his eyes.

He was in a rage. His eyes seemed to reject everything in the world.

Did this boy have hatred or despair in his heart –

'Your name was Yakumo, right?'

Gotou said the name left in the corner of his head.

'You've just remembered?' said Yakumo, glaring at Gotou.

– What kind of tone is that, you brat?

Gotou forced himself not to lift his raised fist.

'Ah, that's right. I should've noticed the other time we met, but I didn't realise since you'd changed so much. And you were smaller then.'

Gotou put his palm parallel to the ground and placed it at his waist.

Yakumo looked at him coldly.

– Cold eyes for a brat. Don't look at me like that.

'Were the guys who beat you up earlier classmates?'

Gotou felt uncomfortable and brought the conversation back on track.

However, Yakumo didn't reply. Even though it was regarding himself, he seemed uninterested.

'Tell me their names. That was clearly assault.'

Gotou touched Yakumo's shoulder, but he leapt away that instant.

'Don't meddle in worthless things,' said Yakumo, voice clearly hostile.

'It's not worthless. I'm thinking of you when I say that.'

'That's what's called worthless. You'll just help here and then act like you've got nothing to do with it later, right? Then you shouldn't get involved in the first place.'

– This brat. If I keep quiet and listen, he just says whatever the hell he wants.

Gotou's reasoning short-circuited.

'Enough already! You think you're the only guy who's got it tough, don't you?'

'What do you want to say?'

'You're not the only guy who has it tough! People live while helping others! If I didn't save you then, you'd be dead!'

Gotou grabbed Yakumo's collar and threatened him.

'... Who...'

Yakumo looked away from Gotou and spoke quietly.

'If you've got something to say, say it clearly!'

Yakumo's red eye looked at Gotou again when he yelled.

A chill ran down Gotou's spine.

'Who asked you to save me?'

'What?'

Gotou didn't understand what Yakumo meant.

'Who asked you to save me!? I should've just died then! I'm suffering because I'm alive! Why did my mother try to kill me? Am I unwanted? Why was I born? Can you give me those answers?'

Yakumo's face was red – he was so formidable it made Gotou think he might grow horns and fangs.

Under that pressure, Gotou couldn't even think calmly about the meaning of the questions.

'You saved me even though you can't give me those answers? Why!?' shouted Yakumo.

What the hell is he saying? I just saved the life that looked like it was going to disappear from in front of me. I wasn't thinking about anything after that.

With anger and confusion, Gotou completely lost his reason.

Without realising it himself, he raised his fist and punched the side of Yakumo's face.

Yakumo fell backwards.

All his force from earlier disappeared – he looked dazed, like he'd fallen for a tasteless trick.

'Shut up, you brat! Think about that yourself! If you want to die so much, I'll kill you right here!'

In the heat of his anger, Gotou lifted his fist again.

'You idiot! What the hell are you doing!?'

Along with that yell, a violent impact hit the back of Gotou's head.

The ground shook – Gotou couldn't stand and collapsed to his knees.

– Who the hell was that?

With his head in his hands, Gotou looked up.

'Are you shaking someone down at your age?'

Miyagawa looked down on Gotou with an intimidating stance.

I can't tell if his timing is good or bad –

'I want to hear about the situation in detail.'

Gotou looked at Yakumo again.

He didn't understand himself why he had become so serious while dealing with a kid.

Perhaps it was because he was like Gotou had been in the past.

Gotou smiled self-derisively.

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9

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– Yakumo will probably return while I'm preparing dinner.

Though Akemi thought that, even after she went from the kitchen to the table, Yakumo hadn't returned.

She really should have followed him. Hindsight was 20/20.

'This looks delicious. Let's eat without waiting for Yakumo.'

Isshin said that in a carefree manner while picking up a piece of fried chicken and eating.

Isshin smiled broadly, as if to express how yummy it was, and tried to feed Nao in his lap too.

'Nao can't eat that yet.'

'Oh, that's too bad – it's so delicious.'

Isshin shrugged his shoulders like a kid whose prank had been found out.

Akemi knew she was a worrywart, but she felt like Isshin, on the other hand, was too carefree.

'I'm going out for a bit.'

Akemi stood up just as Yakumo came into the living room.

'What happened?'

Akemi spoke up without thinking upon seeing Yakumo's face.

He looked awful. There were scratches all over, and there was blood on his lips and a bruise on his cheek.

Furthermore, the contact lens in his left eye wasn't there, so his red eye was in the open.

'Are you OK?'

Akemi tried to look at his injuries, but Yakumo pushed him away.

'It's nothing.'

'You can't call this nothing, right?'

'Leave me alone!' threatened Yakumo, glaring at Akemi.

Akemi couldn't say anything when he responded so emotionally to her.

'Where did you go?'

Isshin asked instead of Akemi.

'Investigating the requested case.'

It had to hurt. Yakumo was holding his chin with a twisted expression as he replied.

'School?'

'Yeah.'

Yakumo gave a short reply and sat down cross-legged.

'I see,' said Isshin with a nod. He didn't ask Yakumo anything else.

Just from asking the location, it looked like he'd understood the cause of the injuries.

'What's this?'

Yakumo pointed at the food on top of the table with a suspicious expression.

'You can tell from looking, right? It's dinner.'

Isshin smiled happily.

'That's not what I'm asking.'

'Then what are you asking?'

With the question turned back to him, Yakumo awkwardly ran a hand through his hair.

Things like that made Akemi think he really was a boy in puberty.

'Let's eat quickly. It'd be a waste if it gets cold.'

Isshin urged Yakumo, but he just looked at the table like a wary cat.

Akemi went to the kitchen and scooped rice out into a bowl, handing it to Yakumo.

Yakumo probably still hadn't understood the situation. He just stood there with the rice bowl, dazed.

'Let's eat.'

Isshin put his hands together and started eating the rice heartily.

At first, Yakumo looked at them, but perhaps his appetite won out, as he began to eat silently.

Even though this was the first time they'd sat around a table like this, it felt like something that had happened hundreds of times in a daily life comic strip.

– If only that were the case.

Akemi couldn't help but wish for that.

She had always been afraid ever since that incident –

She had felt despair after imagining herself ten years in the future. She had believed that she couldn't have a bright future any more.

However, mightn't it be possible for her to have a happy future like this too?

Wouldn't a day come when she could have a daily life like this, at a table with her family?

If it were with Isshin –

Akemi felt embarrassed for wishing something that couldn't be granted, and her cheeks went red, which was unsuited for her age.

'Hey, Yakumo. What did you find out about that ghost?' said Isshin after finishing his food.

Yakumo's expression had softened slightly, but it quickly stiffened.

'I don't want to talk about it.'

Yakumo said just that and shut his mouth.

It felt like he had grasped the solution to the spiritual phenomenon, but he didn't want to act on it.

'It'd be a transgression if you knew but didn't do anything,' Isshin said quietly.

'I don't know what to do.'

Yakumo's voice was so weak it sounded like it could fade away at any moment.

'Even if you don't understand, shouldn't you do something now that you know?'

'Will doing that bring some benefit to me?'

Yakumo stood up, as if to run from the conversation with Isshin.

'That's not what I'm talking about.'

Even though Yakumo had set out to solve the spiritual phenomenon that was occurring to Sachiko yesterday, his attitude had turned 180 degrees.

Did it have something to do with his injuries?

'I did what I could. I don't want to stick my neck in any further.'

Yakumo declared that and ignored Isshin, leaving the living room.

'Honestly. He's so stubborn.'

Isshin looked down, looking like he was smiling and crying –

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While driving, Gotou glanced at Miyagawa in the passenger seat.

He was smoking with a grim expression.

Miyagawa's face was already scary enough, so it was hard to tell when he was angry.

'I'm really sorry.'

Gotou apologised for the nth time.

'Don't worry about it. It worked out fine,' Miyagawa said clearly.

It was true that it worked out fine, but Gotou didn't feel good about it.

After Miyagawa stopped him, Gotou was prepared for Yakumo to complain.

However, Yakumo had said something else.

– I've already forgotten it.

He had said that so readily that it was anticlimactic.

And Gotou couldn't tell what Yakumo was thinking.

His doubt had smouldered into irritation and finally something like anger.

'Gotou, do you know that brat?' said Miyagawa, pressing his cigarette into the ashtray.

'Yes. I'd forgotten him until just then, but that brat's mother tried to kill him when he was a kid.'

'And?'

Miyagawa urged him to continue.

'At the time, I was working at the police box and coincidentally saved him.'

'I see. So why'd his mother try to kill him?'

Miyagawa lit a new cigarette and leant back on the seat.

Gotou had that question too. The mother had been missing ever since, so Gotou didn't know, but he had an idea.

'You saw it too, right, Miyagawa-san? That eye...'

'Yeah.'

Miyagawa closed his eyes, perhaps recalling Yakumo's red left eye.

'That eye might have something to do with it.'

'A forced double suicide from thinking of their disabled child's painful future... Stories like that come up often.'

As Miyagawa said, Gotou often heard about stories like that.

There were often cases where guardians became neurotic and lost their ability to reason coolly. Yakumo's mother might have been in the same situation –

However, Gotou couldn't accept it. He knew why.

'But for him, it was just a red left eye.'

His appearance was just a bit different. That was all. It wasn't like a disability that would hinder his life.

'It'd be nice if everyone were like you.'

Miyagawa laughed.

'What do you mean?'

'People can be incredibly cold towards others that are different from them.'

'Huh...'

'That brat must have suffered countless times because of that eye.'

Perhaps it was as Miyagawa said.

– Who asked you to save me?

The words Yakumo said earlier came up in Gotou's mind.

'Should I not have saved him?'

He hadn't meant on saying that, but the words came out of his mouth.

'What do you mean?'

Miyagawa looked bewildered, like he was reading an English-language newspaper.

Now that Gotou had said it, he had to explain.

'Earlier, he said this to me. Asked me why I saved him. Said that he'd just been suffering as he lived...'

'Meaning he wouldn't have had to suffer if his mother had killed him...' Miyagawa said in a growl.

'Yes.'

'That makes sense, but that's not going to work with you.'

'Why is that?'

'You'd save any life that's about to disappear, no matter whose life it is. That's the sort of guy you are.'

'Ah...'

Gotou didn't know if he was being praised or made fun of, so he gave a vague reply.

Should he have saved Yakumo ten years ago? Or –

Nobody knew which choice was correct.

People lived selfishly, so if somebody were forsaken, they would just complain, 'Why didn't you save me?'

– Man, he's seriously impertinent. I don't like that brat.

But he wanted to do something for him.

Gotou didn't know why. He was just led by that impulse.

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11

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Akemi walked beside Isshin –

Isshin was holding Nao.

When the three of them were like this, it was like they were a real family.

At first, Akemi refused Isshin's suggestion that he walk them home, but in the end, he won out.

Though Akemi felt bad about it, it was also true that she felt elated.

Especially on a cold night like this, having somebody there, even if they weren't touching, made her feel warmer.

'I'm really sorry,' said Isshin, looking up at the sky full of stars.

His breath was white.

'If you're talking about Yakumo-kun, I'm sorry as well.'

When Akemi bowed her head, Isshin shook his.

'Yakumo knows something.'

'Is that so?'

Akemi agreed with Isshin, but she decided to express a different opinion.

'You think that too, right, Akemi-chan?'

It was like he'd seen right into her heart.

In front of Isshin, vague answers had no meaning.

'I do,' agreed Akemi.

'Anybody would think that the change in Yakumo's attitude was unnatural.'

Just as Isshin said, Yakumo, who should have understood how to solve the puzzle of the spiritual phenomenon, had had a sudden change in attitude.

– He found out something and is trying to hide it.

That was what Akemi felt, but then what was Yakumo trying to hide?

'Perhaps it has something to do with his injuries today?'

Though Akemi didn't think they were concretely related, that was all she had to go on.

'No, that was unrelated.'

Isshin rejected the idea.

They hadn't heard from Yakumo what had happened.

'Why do you think that?'

'Yakumo said he went to school, right?'

'Yes.'

'He probably got into a fight with his classmates again.'

'Really?'

Akemi grabbed Isshin's arm without thinking.

Yakumo had been considerably injured. If Tsukasa and the others had done something, that would be a problem.

This wasn't at the level of schoolyard bullying any more.

They would need to be properly reprimanded.

'Well, please calm down. It's not like I have evidence of it.'

'But...'

Akemi had started thinking that Isshin's reasoning was correct.

Tsukasa was in the soccer club. He had practice on Saturdays, so he would have been at school.

If Yakumo had really gone to school, it was very possible that they'd run into each other there and had some trouble.

The fuss at school before –

It had looked like Tsukasa had hit Yakumo on his own, but in the end, he received harsh payback. A boy of that age would be too humiliated to let that go quietly.

That was especially so for Tsukasa, who was arrogant and was the type to boast about his strength.

'I talked about this before, but Yakumo is also very responsible for his fights with his classmates.'

Isshin was calm, unlike Akemi.

'But Yakumo-kun isn't wrong.'

'Thinking one isn't wrong won't create human relationships. This is a request from me as his guardian, so please just watch the situation for a while.'

'But...'

Akemi opened her mouth, but Isshin covered it with his hand.

He looked straight at Akemi.

'It's fine. In a way, the child who fought with Yakumo is also a person who is facing Yakumo directly.'

'Is that so?'

That felt like an incredibly optimistic perspective.

'There hasn't been a classmate like that for Yakumo before. Everyone avoided him.'

Isshin's words came out easily, like the spring wind.

However, though watching over somebody seemed easy, Akemi thought that it was the choice that took the most courage.

Akemi couldn't look at the long term like Isshin. She looked at the reality in front of her and acted accordingly.

She couldn't say which was correct, so all she could do was agree to Yakumo's guardian's request.

'Well, whatever Yakumo knows and is hiding, he needs to be urged on again, for the sake of that girl,' said Isshin, the strength leaving his shoulders.

Akemi agreed with his opinion.

– Nothing is over yet.

They couldn't move forward without solving the mysterious phenomenon occurring to Sachiko.

'Yes. I'll do my best.'

Akemi raised a fist as she said that, making Isshin laugh.

'What is it?'

'Ah, sorry. I was just thinking of the past. When you were solving a difficult problem, Akemi-chan, you would say the same thing. You haven't changed – it makes me happy to think that.'

Now that he said that, that might have been true.

But –

'I feel like I have changed.'

So many sad and painful things had happened that sometimes she felt like she had even lost her original self.

The hopes she had in her youth had withered, and she was now fully preoccupied with facing the

reality in front of her.

Perhaps that was what it meant to become an adult.

'No, Akemi-chan, you're the same as before.'

Isshin looked at Akemi-chan with an unusually solemn expression.

When he looked at her like that, it made her feel somewhat embarrassed.

Come to think of it, Akemi hadn't looked at Isshin face-on when he was her tutor.

While lost in this light uncomfortableness, they reached her apartment.

'This is my place.'

'I see.'

Isshin's usual smile was back on his face.

'Thank you very much.'

Akemi bowed her head and then took Nao from Isshin.

Then, Nao started bawling loudly.

It was the first time Nao had cried like this upon parting with anybody.

It was late already, so Akemi was flustered.

Though this child was young and couldn't hear, she sensed that she would have to part with Isshin and didn't like it.

'Nao-chan, see you later.'

Isshin petted Nao's head as she cried.

Then, Nao started smiling, as if Isshin had performed a magic trick.

Akemi bowed once more to Isshin and climbed the stairs to her apartment.

When she reached her entrance, she saw Isshin looking up at her.

'Good night.'

Akemi murmured that softly.

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12

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Gotou leant on the chair and stretched his arms.

His joints cracked.

He hadn't had a chance to lie down and sleep even once since that incidence. His body was

exhausted and he had an uneasy conscience.

He thought about smoking, but his cigarette case was empty.

'Damn it!' he yelled, throwing the case.

'It's not like you to be tired.'

Miyagawa offered him coffee in a paper cup.

'It's not like you to be considerate to me either, Miyagawa-san.'

'Want to wash your face with coffee?'

Miyagawa glared at him fiercely.

It didn't sound like a joke. Gotou accepted the coffee before Miyagawa could actually act on it.

The bitter taste of the coffee filled his dry mouth.

'But it's rare for there to be so little eyewitness testimony,' said Gotou with a sigh.

He had gone around questioning people who might have seen the informant, but none of the testimonies stood out.

The team searching for Shimomura had no trace of him either.

They were perfectly stuck.

'Of course. We misunderstood.'

Miyagawa smiled triumphantly.

'Misunderstood?' repeated Gotou, who didn't understand.

'We thought that the man looking down at us from the pedestrian bridge that day was the informant.'

It was just as Miyagawa said.

That's why they were looking for a person with that man's characteristics in the eyewitness testimonies.

But Miyagawa's tone made it sound like –

'Are we wrong?'

'Yeah. We got a face from forensics. There was hair in that envelope, right?'

Gotou remembered that clearly from hearing Miyagawa's words.

Just one strand of hair.

'Yes.'

'Forensics found out that there was hair product on that hair.'

'Hair product...?'

That was evidence, but it'd probably be difficult to find the person from that.

'Yeah. Seems like it's something that's sold at convenience stores.'

'Anybody could get it then.'

'That's not the problem.'

'Which means?'

'It's a hair product for women,' said Miyagawa triumphantly.

– Women.

Gotou's head went blank.

'Then we...'

'Right. We made the wrong guess when we thought that the man we saw was the informant. We have to redo the questioning.'

Miyagawa said that in a carefree manner and slapped his head.

– What the hell!

This time was a chain of mistakes. If he didn't redeem himself, he'd be branded as somebody useless.

'Let's go!'

Gotou stood up with vigour.

'Wait. There's one more thing.'

In contrast to Gotou's impatience, Miyagawa slowly lit his cigarette.

'What is it?'

Gotou sat back down and faced Miyagawa.

'This morning, a woman who was a nurse at the Shimomura clinic turned herself in.'

'The nurse turned herself in? Is she related to the case?'

Miyagawa nodded.

'That nurse is asking the police to protect her in exchange for telling what she knows.'

'Does that mean she knew what Shimomura was doing?'

'Yeah.'

Now that Gotou thought about it, she should have known.

This case wasn't something that a doctor could have done alone. He would have needed an

accomplice. But –

'What does protection mean? Is she being chased by someone?'

'Seems like Shimomura went to her house last night, asking if she was the one who tipped off the police...'

– I see.

While Shimomura was being chased by the police, he was probably searching in a frenzy for the person who trapped him.

'Then that nurse was the informant?'

'Would've been easy if that were the case...'

– So she isn't?

'It would be better for us to find them before Shimomura.'

'Yeah.'

Miyagawa nodded.

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13

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Even after the week drew to a close, Sachiko did not come to school.

– How long is this going to continue?

Akemi felt uneasy about the future as she went into the room.

The students were restless.

Akemi looked around the classroom from her stand as usual and noticed three empty seats.

One was Sachiko's. Another was Yakumo's, beside hers –

And the third was the seat at the very front, Tsukasa's.

They had both been here doing homeroom this morning.

If it were just Yakumo, it might have just been his usual escape, but something was off if Tsukasa was missing too.

'Where are Yakumo-kun and Tsukasa-kun?' she asked the class.

However, nobody responded.

They weren't keeping quiet because they didn't know. They knew but didn't want to respond. That was how it felt.

After Akemi waited, Tae in the window seat raised her hand.

'Tae-chan, do you know?'

'I think they're both on the roof,' Tae said in a clear voice.

Youhei in the seat diagonally behind her said 'Oh man' in an exaggeratedly disappointed voice.

'The roof? Why?'

Youhei pulled Tae's arm.

'Don't say anything unnecessary.'

Youhei had probably meant to whisper that, but Akemi heard it clearly.

'Youhei-kun, I'm asking Tae-chan.'

Akemi had a bad feeling, so she spoke in a strict tone that she didn't usually use.

'Tsukasa called him out there,' explained Tae, despite noticing Youhei's gaze.

'What are you saying!? This is a problem between men! Girls should keep their mouths shut!'

Youhei said agitatedly.

'You're so noisy! You're not like men at all! Just earlier you ganged up on Saitou-kun, right? I saw!'

Tae spoke in a voice so loud that it rivalled Youhei's, covered her face with both hands and burst into tears.

The girls in the nearby seats gathered around Tae.

'Ah, Tae-chan's crying.'

'You're the worst!'

The group of girls started badmouthing Youhei altogether.

Under fire, Youhei couldn't bear it and put his head on the table, covering his ears.

The classroom was in chaos.

Akemi had to regain control, but there was something she had to do first.

'This is self-study now!'

Akemi declared that and ran out of the classroom.

– In a way, the child who fought with Yakumo is also a person who is facing Yakumo directly.

Isshin had said that about Tsukasa.

However, Akemi thought that Tsukasa had crossed the line. He might continue to be violent if she didn't keep him in check.

– I want to make it in time.

With that wish, Akemi pushed open the door to the roof.

– They're here!

Yakumo and Tsukasa stood facing each other.

There was a tension in the air, like a gong might go off at any moment.

The moment Akemi was about to step between them, Tsukasa bowed his head towards Yakumo.

'Please. You can save Sachiko, right?'

Akemi froze at the unexpected words that came out of Tsukasa's mouth. She swallowed the words that she had been about to say.

'What are you talking about?'

Yakumo looked at Tsukasa expressionlessly.

'I went to see Sachiko yesterday. She said that she was possessed by a ghost and that you knew a way to save her. Right? So please.'

Tsukasa grabbed Yakumo's shoulders and bowed his head again and again as he clung to him.

Tsukasa had probably come here with the appropriate determination.

He was bowing his head to his rival in love.

For a boy in puberty, there couldn't have been anything more humiliating.

'Don't just...'

Yakumo pushed Tsukasa's hand off.

Akemi faced Yakumo, who had turned around.

Akemi had thought about saying something, but her voice got caught in her throat.

'Please. Save Sachiko.'

Tsukasa went after Yakumo and continued to plead.

Yakumo's shoulders started to tremble. It was like there was a black flame coming up from his body.

'You keep on mocking me, but now you're asking me to save someone? What you're saying is too convenient for you.'

Yakumo's hands were in tight fists as he spoke towards the clouds.

Tsukasa had looked at Yakumo as an enemy and slandered him all this time.

That wasn't all – he had even ganged up on him and beat him.

From Yakumo's perspective, it was impossible to accept a request from Tsukasa, but Yakumo's question probably hadn't just been directed towards Tsukasa at this moment.

It must have been anger towards everyone in his life, including his mother –

'Yakumo-kun.'

Akemi called out to him, which made Yakumo look at her with a hot glare.

Even without words, she could feel the negative emotions buried in Yakumo's chest.

Just as Isshin said, Yakumo had to face somebody head-on right now.

– I'll take on that responsibility.

A strong determination was born in Akemi's heart.

Perhaps this was the bond she had always felt towards Yakumo.

'I'm asking too. Yakumo-kun, save Sacchan.'

The anger disappeared from Yakumo's eyes upon hearing Akemi's plea. They looked a bit wet.

'I don't want to! I don't owe these guys anything! Why do I have to save them to the point of sacrificing the things that are important to me!?'

Akemi understood that Yakumo was refusing.

However, the reason was different from what she'd imagined.

– Sacrificing the things important to me.

Had Yakumo stopped solving this case partway in order to protect something important?

What could Yakumo, who acted like he rejected everything in the world, be trying to protect –

There was no way for Akemi to know.

'What are you trying to protect, Yakumo-kun?'

Yakumo looked away when Akemi asked that.

'Does this event have something to do with what's important to you?'

'Shut up!'

Yakumo pushed Akemi away and tried to leave.

However, Akemi stood in his way.

– I need to face Yakumo.

'Move out of the way.'

'No. I won't move. What's important to you, Yakumo-kun?'

'It's got nothing to do with you.'

Akemi took Yakumo's shoulders and forced him to face her.

Their eyes met.

They really were sad eyes.

'I won't understand unless you tell me properly. So tell me.'

Yakumo pushed Akemi's hands away.

'Stop this already. Why are you stopping me? I don't have a duty to save them to the point of losing something myself.'

Akemi didn't know what emotions Yakumo had in his heart, but his expression was twisted, and he looked like he was trembling weakly.

He was troubled and in pain –

Though he looked like he was expressionless, he had always been keeping his emotions in. This was the time to break out of his shell.

'Do you really think that?'

'What if I do?'

'Then you've made a big mistake.'

'Mistake?'

'Happiness that stands on others' unhappiness is wrong. You can't step on something in order to protect something else, right?'

Yakumo looked up at the sky upon hearing Akemi's words, as if he were exhausted.

He didn't respond. He just looked up at the sky.

Akemi looked at Yakumo's eyes and waited patiently for his next words.

'Do you really think that?'

Yakumo's voice sounded like they were recorded on a bad tape.

'I really do.'

Yakumo went quiet again after hearing Akemi's words.

Tsukasa was looking at them dumbly.

'Yesterday, my uncle said the same thing to me.'

After a silence, Yakumo said that while looking straight at Akemi.

'Isshin-san...'

'I'll ask one more time. Do you really think that?'

When he asked her again like this, her confidence was shaken.

Was this really OK? Wouldn't this place a heavy burden on Yakumo's heart?

'Yes. I think that.'

Akemi nodded, though divided.

Yakumo's expression softened, and for just a moment – he smiled.

'Tonight, come to the cherry blossom tree. Then...'

After saying that, Yakumo looked behind him and pointed at Tsukasa.

'You bring the girl who's been possessed.'

With the conversation suddenly turned towards him, Tsukasa's eyes went wide in surprise.

'Yakumo-kun, I'll bring Sacchan.'

She would have to explain to Sachiko's parents.

There was what happened last time, and if Tsukasa went, there might be some trouble.

However, it looked like Yakumo didn't like that, as he ran a hand through his hair in irritation.

'I said this before, right? You can't do it. There's an order to things. You just need to come to the cherry blossom tree at night. You bring that girl. Got it?'

Yakumo repeated his instructions and waited for their agreement.

Akemi and Tsukasa both nodded without understanding what was happening.

Yakumo seemed satisfied by that, as he put his hands in his pockets and walked away while looking down.

Akemi had no way of knowing what they had just started –

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14

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Today's info gathering was a miss too.

Gotou sluggishly parked his car in the precinct's parking lot.

Though they changed their investigation to look for a woman instead of a man as the informant, there weren't any results.

He didn't think they'd suddenly find him, but his body still felt exhausted.

'Can we really catch the culprit like this?' mumbled Gotou to nobody in particular as he got off the car.

Miyagawa hit his head.

'Don't complain like some rookie. It's not whether we can catch the culprit – we will.'

Miyagawa said just that and walked towards the front entrance with his bowlegged gait.

It was just as Miyagawa said.

Gotou shook his head to change his pace and followed Miyagawa.

'Gotou, you've got a guest.'

Just as he was about to pass reception, the officer in the general affairs department called out to him.

'Guest?'

There shouldn't have been a visitor for him.

Gotou was confused as he looked towards the lobby.

On the bench in the lobby, a boy in a blazer uniform sat while looking down.

– That guy.

'Kid, how're your injuries?'

Miyagawa spoke up before Gotou could.

Yakumo slowly lifted his head. His expression was so dark it was like he'd returned from a funeral.

'Do you need something?'

Gotou walked up to Yakumo too and spoke to him.

Yakumo ran a hand through his hair in irritation and stood up.

His eyes were steady.

It was like he had come to a grim decision.

'There's somewhere I want you to go with me,' said Yakumo.

'Where to?'

'You'll find out if you come.'

– What the hell was with this guy? What kind of attitude was that when talking to an officer?

Gotou couldn't come to a decision, so he looked at Miyagawa.

Miyagawa seemed to sense something, so he signalled for him to go with his chin.

He couldn't do anything if there was an order from the boss. Gotou didn't know what would happen, but he'd go along with it.

'You'll show the way, right?'

Yakumo nodded.

With Miyagawa in front, they left the precinct they had just returned to.

– So what on earth could this brat be thinking?

After reaching the parking lot, Gotou got into the unmarked police car's driver seat, and Miyagawa

into the passenger seat. Yakumo got into the backseat.

'So where should I go?'

Gotou looked at Yakumo through the rear-view mirror.

'The school.'

Yakumo seemed to be thinking about something as he spoke, looking out the window.

'The school?'

– I'm even more confused.

School was over already. Was he going to sneak into the school at night and have a test of courage?

'You know, you're bringing two police officers with you. Give us an explanation,' said Miyagawa admonishingly.

'It'll be better to have police there to avoid any problems afterwards,' said Yakumo with his usual attitude.

'There's no way we'd understand from that explanation,' interrupted Gotou, unable to stop himself.

It was too abstract – Gotou had no idea what was going on.

'You wouldn't believe me even if I explained.'

Yakumo yawned, seeming bored.

'Sorry, but we're busy too. If you can't explain the situation, get off the car,' said Gotou, turning around to face the backseat.

He thought that Yakumo would explain properly, but he just murmured 'I see...' and went to get off.

'Well, isn't it fine?'

Unexpectedly, it was Miyagawa who called out to stop Yakumo.

'Miyagawa-san.'

'It's an apology for hitting him the other time. Why not accompany him for a bit?'

After Miyagawa said that to Gotou, all Gotou could do was shut his mouth and obey.

'I just need to go to the school then,' Gotou said curtly, starting the car.

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Akemi stood by herself in front of the cherry blossom tree in the school's backyard.

The sleeping schoolyard had an eerie presence to it.

Though it was already past eight, Yakumo and Tsukasa hadn't shown up yet.

I really should have taken Sachiko myself –

As if it had felt Akemi's regret, the cherry blossom's dead branches rustled in the wind.

– I wonder what Yakumo is going to start here.

Yakumo could see ghosts. However, he couldn't exorcise them. That was what he'd said.

However, he was trying to gather everyone involved at the place the incident started.

It was just like an exorcism you could see on television.

After sighing for the nth time today, she spotted somebody coming towards her. Two people.

She focussed her eyes.

It was Tsukasa and Sachiko.

Sachiko was looking down while Tsukasa pulled her arm along.

'Where's that guy?' said Tsukasa as he arrived, looking around the area.

'He isn't here yet.'

'That guy. Did he run away again?'

Tsukasa tightened his hands into fists and bit his lip.

Sachiko didn't say anything, but she looked at Akemi with hollow eyes as she pressed a hand against her chest, looking like she was in pain.

She was like a dead person with no purpose.

'It's fine. Yakumo-kun won't run away.'

Akemi wasn't saying that to comfort Tsukasa or Sachiko. Yakumo definitely understood everything and knew a method to fix it. That was why he wouldn't run.

Akemi had no proof, but she was sure of that.

'No!'

Suddenly, Sachiko screamed and fell to her knees, covering both of her ears.

She appeared to be afraid of something. Her shoulders shook violently.

Beads of sweat appeared on her forehead.

'Sacchan, are you OK?'

'It's crying! This baby's crying!' screamed Sachiko, her hair dishevelled.

Tsukasa's mouth gaped in surprise.

'Who do you mean by this baby?'

Sachiko didn't respond to Akemi. Her body started convulsing.

– Oh no.

Akemi reached out to try to embrace Sachiko.

'Don't touch her yet!'

A voice echoed in the darkness.

This voice was Yakumo's –

However, she couldn't see him.

While Akemi was looking around, Sachiko's convulsions grew more violent. Her hands were gripped together in front of her chest, and her body bent backwards. The whites of her eyes were showing.

It looked like she'd lost consciousness.

'Sacchan, hang in there.'

Akemi tried to sit Sachiko up.

'I said not to touch her, didn't i? She's just lost consciousness. Don't get so worked up.'

Yakumo appeared in the darkness.

He had taken off his contact lens.

His red left eye seemed to glow in the darkness.

As he stood there coolly, it looked like he had come to a decision about something.

Yakumo walked forward with a firm gait.

'Get out of the way.'

Yakumo pushed Akemi aside and crouched in front of Sachiko. Then, he moved her arms away and looked at her chest with a sharp gaze.

'What's happening?'

Yakumo ignored Akemi's question and slowly stood up.

'Oi. Is Sachiko really OK?' Tsukasa asked, unable to stop himself.

'Keep your mouth shut!' Yakumo said sharply, looking at Tsukasa.

The two looked at each other.

'Eek. Y-y-you're eye...'

Tsukasa's mouth trembled as he spoke.

His face muscles were tightened in fear.

Yakumo must have seen reactions to his eye like this hundreds of times before.

Hurt each time, it must have made him doubt his right to live –

'I said to keep your mouth shut, didn't I?'

His expression still blank, Yakumo pushed Tsukasa aside.

Tsukasa staggered away, still lost for words.

Yakumo walked to the roots of the cherry blossom tree and knelt on one knee. He pushed the dead leaves at the tree roots aside and started tracing the exposed dirt with his finger.

Then, with a nod to nobody in particular, he stood up again.

'Dig here.'

Yakumo turned around and spoke into the darkness.

At the signal, two men appeared with shovels. There was a man about thirty years old who looked like a bear and a middle-aged man with a short frame and scary face.

Akemi knew one of their faces.

The two men that were called out looked dubious, but they started to dig at the tree's roots, just as Yakumo told them.

Yakumo slowly turned his head to look at Akemi.

There was no strength in his gaze. It was as feeble as a candle flame that could disappear at any moment.

The moment those eyes looked at her, Akemi understood everything.

Why Yakumo, who had started to solve the spiritual phenomenon, had suddenly changed his attitude.

What Yakumo had been hesitant about.

Yakumo really was a very kind person, just as Akemi had imagined.

Because of that, he carried many burdens and suffered for it.

He couldn't even hate his mother, even though that would have made it easier.

I might make Yakumo suffer greatly –

Akemi felt like it was hard to breathe.

'What the hell is this?'

After the bearlike man had dug up to his waist, he called out.

He threw a large rock from the hole and then took out a rectangular wooden box with twenty-centimetre sides.

'Is this what you were looking for kid?' asked the small-framed man.

Yakumo nodded and brushed the dirt off the wooden box.

There were two kanji characters written on it.

– Yuuta.

'Open it.'

The bearlike man put his hand on the box as told and took off the cover to look inside.

'T-this is... Isn't this a skeleton!?'

His roar echoed in the darkness.

'You're a police officer – don't make a fuss over a skeleton.'

After saying that calmly, Yakumo picked up the wooden box and slowly walked up to Sachiko.

'Oi. Don't just touch the evidence!'

The bearlike man let out a yell, but Yakumo didn't seem to care as all as he sat beside Sachiko with the wooden box.

For a while, Yakumo just sat there, but he finally lifted his head and looked at Akemi.

'You. Wake her up.'

Akemi nodded and sat Sachiko up.

That moment, Akemi felt something like a weight on her chest.

'Is this really OK?' murmured Yakumo as he looked at Akemi.

– Don't look like that. Don't blame yourself. You definitely aren't wrong.

A smile appeared on Akemi's face naturally.

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Gotou looked up at the cherry blossom tree and blew out cigarette smoke.

Though cherry blossoms bloomed in spring to demonstrate their existence, in another season, it really became eerie.

The roots of the tree were surrounded by a blue plastic sheet, illuminated by outdoor lights. Forensics and police officers were milling about.

On the other side of the fence, there was a crowd of curious onlookers – it was like somebody

famous had come.

'Hey, Yakumo.'

Gotou spoke up to Yakumo, who was looking up at the tree beside him, just as Gotou was doing.

There wasn't any reply, but Gotou continued.

'How did you know there was a corpse here?'

Yakumo hadn't said anything before coming, but he'd known from the very start that there was a corpse underneath the cherry blossom tree.

Otherwise, it wouldn't make sense.

If Gotou couldn't get an explanation he understood, he wouldn't be able to stop himself from suspecting Yakumo was related to the case.

'I can see...'

Yakumo's eyes narrowed as he murmured.

'You can see?'

'Yes. My left eye isn't just red. It can see the spirits of those who have died – that is, ghosts.'

– Ghosts?

'Don't joke around. There's no such thing as ghosts.'

Gotou spat on the ground.

He wished that Yakumo would put a limit on how much he mocked him. Did Yakumo think that Gotou would accept that?

'To turn the question around, what is your evidence for believing ghosts don't exist?' Yakumo said with a serious look.

His pale profile seemed to stand out in the darkness.

'What?'

'You're just denying their existence because it exceeds your understanding, right?'

'So can you explain them?'

Gotou knew he wasn't being mature, but he ended up speaking angrily anyway.

'Ghosts are not a new form of devil or monster. They are like clusters of people's emotions. After the body dies, their thoughts are all that are left, like a form of electric signal. That is the true form of a ghost...'

'Clusters of people's emotions?'

'Yes. That's why they don't curse and kill people like how people like you imagine.'

'So were you exorcising ghosts at the bottom of that tree earlier?'

Yakumo shook his head, seeming disappointed.

'I'm not a spirit medium – I can't exorcise ghosts. I just have the physical ability to see the spirits of the dead.'

'Then what did you do?'

'I just explained to the child's spirit that he was dead and who his true mother was.'

There was no cloudiness to Yakumo's explanation.

It was so logical it wouldn't allow rebuttals.

'It believed that?'

'I wasn't trying to make it believe it or anything. It asked, so I answered.'

Yakumo's shoulders slumped, as if he was resigned.

Gotou had seen many criminals using demons and ghosts as ambiguous reasons for their crimes.

That was why they just sounded like excuses to him.

However, when Yakumo said it, it sounded like the truth to him.

– I fail as a detective for believing a joke like this.

Gotou smiled wryly, dropped his cigarette on the ground and crushed it with his foot.

'Then could you tell me? Who's the kid's mother?'

Yakumo's eyes went wide in surprise at Gotou's question.

'You believe me?'

'Who said that? I'm just telling you to tell me if you know.'

When Yakumo heard Gotou's reply, he shrugged, shook his head and took a step forward.

'It's not something for me to say. The mother will be found soon. And...'

From that tone, it sounded like he really did know who the mother was.

Gotou waited for Yakumo to continue, but in the end, Yakumo didn't open his mouth.

'Oi.'

Yakumo ignored Gotou's call and walked away.

Gotou's chest hurt when he looked at Yakumo's back.

– What's he looking so sad for when he's just a brat?

Brats should just act like brats, only worrying about tomorrow – why was he so sad?

'What are you spacing out for? You lovesick?'

Miyagawa had walked up to him at some point. He poked Gotou's shoulder.

'Lovesick? Miyagawa-san is?'

'Don't be stupid.'

Miyagawa smiled wryly and put a cigarette in his mouth.

However, he didn't light it and just bit the filter.

'I heard from forensics earlier. That corpse is missing one arm bone.'

After hearing the explanation, even Gotou, who was simple, could understand.

The corpse found in the backyard of the Shimomura clinic. Hata had said that there was an extra arm. The cases were linked then.

'Why was it buried here?'

'I don't know. We're going to investigate that now, right?'

Just as he said.

'More importantly, how did that brat know the corpse was there?'

Miyagawa said the same question Gotou had earlier. Thinking about it normally, anybody would have the same question.

'Seems like he can see them.'

Gotou spoke before he thought.

'He can see them?'

Miyagawa's voice cracked and his brows furrowed – it looked funny.

Maybe I looked the same way earlier – when Gotou thought that, it made him smile.

'Don't just smile – answer properly.'

'That guy... Yakumo can see the spirits of the dead.'

'The spirits of the dead.'

Miyagawa cocked his head like he couldn't understand the meaning of the words.

That made sense. It was too sudden – the brain refused to accept it. Gotou had felt the same way earlier.

'That guy can see ghosts.'

When Gotou said that, the cigarette dropped from Miyagawa's mouth.

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The next day, Akemi took a day off work for health reasons and visited Isshin's temple.

It was because she wanted to tell Isshin everything from her own mouth before everything came to light.

Isshin silently listened to Akemi's sorry and accepted everything.

Akemi felt her chest tighten in face of his wide heart.

People were mysterious. A very little thing could make a big change.

Akemi had thought that she could only go where life made her go, but that had changed when she met Isshin and Yakumo.

However, it was too late for her to notice now –

She knew that she couldn't be forgiven with just an apology. She didn't want to be forgiven.

But still –

She went through the temple gates and was approaching the slope when she saw a boy walking towards her and stopped.

'Yakumo-kun.'

When Akemi spoke up, Yakumo stopped as well.

When he stood between the ginkgo trees, he looked like a middle school student that could be found anywhere.

However, there was a heavy darkness on his shoulders.

'What are you doing here?'

Yakumo looked at his feet awkwardly.

'The same to you, Yakumo-kun. School shouldn't be over yet.'

Perhaps Yakumo felt like Akemi's words were pointed, as he ran a hand through his hair in irritation.

'I don't want to hear that from a teacher who skipped class and is hanging around here.'

'That's true.'

It was just as Yakumo said.

It was somewhat amusing to Akemi, and she ended up laughing.

'What are you laughing at?'

'Sorry. Don't worry about it.'

After Akemi's laughter quelled, she slowly walked up to Yakumo.

She thought that he would run away, but Yakumo stood there, waiting for Akemi's arrival.

For the first time, she had been able to step past the walls guarding Yakumo's heart.

That was how Akemi felt.

Though perhaps it was just her thinking things –

'You know everything already, right?' said Akemi, putting a smile on her face.

Yakumo's narrowed eyes trembled. He was probably still troubled.

– Is this really OK?

'Yeah.'

After a silence, Yakumo made a short response.

'Since when?'

'You know too, right? From when we first went to that girl's room.'

– So that really was it.

It was because Yakumo had realised everything that his attitude had changed after going to Sachiko's room.

– Did you know too?

The words Yakumo had said then came up in Akemi's head.

'I see...'

'That child didn't know he was dead. He was looking for his mother.'

Yakumo's words carved themselves into Akemi's chest

– Looking for me this whole time.

'But then why possess Sacchan?'

If that child was looking for his mother, the person he possessed shouldn't have been Sacchan.

It's me –

'Many people pass at lunch, so there was no way to determine who his mother was. When that child woke up at night, that girl happened to be there for the test of courage, and their wavelengths matched. That was the only reason that girl was possessed.'

Yakumo took a pause here.

Akemi didn't understand ghosts well, but she somehow understood what Yakumo was saying.

It was just a coincidence.

'How could you tell?'

'When we went to her room, the crying child stopped crying. He reached out, left that girl, and stuck to you, his true mother.'

Yakumo pointed at her.

Akemi felt despair, like she had been called for the death penalty.

Yakumo had found out everything then and warned Akemi, telling her not to approach that girl again.

However, there was still something Akemi didn't understand.

When Sachiko opened her eyes last night, she had said that the child was gone.

If the child was gone from Sachiko –

'Where's that child's spirit now?'

Yakumo looked at Akemi's chest without saying anything.

That was enough of an explanation.

– He's possessing me now.

The weight on her chest he had felt then had been Yuuta.

'Some people are more prone to seeing the spirits of the dead than other. It has nothing to do with the depth of love – it's a physical trait,' Yakumo said quietly.

– I see. So that's how it is. I'm sorry.

Akemi clasped her hands in front of her chest tightly, as if in an embrace.

'I also have something I would like to ask.'

'What is it?'

'Why kill him? Because his eyes were red?'

Sharp words came out of Yakumo's mouth.

They stabbed deep into Akemi's heart. It hurt – but she had to respond.

It was her duty to do so.

'Yes.'

The silence rang in her ears.

Akemi had given birth to twins.

One was Nao. The other was Yuuta.

Both of Yuuta's eyes had been red from birth.

The man who assaulted Akemi had had the same red eyes.

Every time she saw that child, she felt the same fear.

There had been no sign. She was suddenly kidnapped one day. She didn't even know where she was, but she was raped and hurt countless times.

That man had murmured in Akemi's ears.

– Your child will unleash the same hatred for humanity as I do.

Akemi couldn't understand what those words meant.

She just knew instinctively that they were terrifying.

Now that she thought about it, she felt like that man's goal hadn't been to satisfy sexual urges but to make children.

She had been chosen for some reason –

'I was afraid. I didn't know what to do. I remembered my fear every time I looked at my own child.'

Akemi continued her story falteringly.

Yakumo said nothing. He just listened.

The truth was that perhaps she should have just lied and said that wasn't true, when thinking about Yakumo's emotions. However, for some reason, she felt like she couldn't do that.

She had to face Yakumo directly.

At that time, her parents had died in a traffic accident.

She had been cornered psychologically – Akemi had been near depression.

When she found out she was pregnant, it was too late for an abortion.

Reality and her memories of the past had become blurred.

Yuuta cried loudly. It had sounded like that man's voice, and she'd screamed.

'That day, I embraced Yuuta, who had just been born.'

Alone in the hospital room –

Though Nao was sleeping quietly, Yuuta wouldn't stop crying even when held.

Akemi's emotions had been shaken.

'That child's cries sounded like that man's voice to me, and my arms failed me in my fear... When I noticed, Yuuta had fallen to the floor. I...'

Did I drop Yuuta by accident or hit him –

Akemi's memories were uncertain.

Even if they were certain, it would just be an excuse.

'I was afraid of those red eyes and killed my child...'

Akemi knew her voice was shaking. She just forced herself not to cry.

In her confusion, Akemi had called a doctor called Shimomura.

This was what he'd said.

– Fortunately, there isn't a birth certificate yet. We can just say that child wasn't born.

Akemi's heart was shaking by that whisper from a devil.

Perhaps she would have made a different choice if she were alone, but there was Nao.

She couldn't leave Nao alone.

Akemi agreed to Shimomura's suggest. As a fee, she gave him everything her parents had left her.

Every day after that, she lived afraid of the gazes from others.

– The truth might be found out one day.

The peace Akemi should have grabbed a hold of had just been an illusion.

Even though she must have known from the start that this would happen, at the time, she hadn't been able to notice the obvious.

'You really are a clumsy person.'

Yakumo smiled.

It was a friendly smile. A gentle smile, like Isshin's.

– Why is he smiling?

Akemi didn't understand.

'Clumsy?'

'Yes. That was an accident.'

'That's just a convenient excuse.'

Yakumo shook his head.

'It was an accident. You didn't hit your child against the floor. You dropped him.'

'You're wrong. I killed him! I was afraid of those red eyes and my hands let go of my child! I killed him!'

Akemi wrung those words out of her throat.

Her lower stomach tightened.

'Then why did you bury his corpse? Why would you bury him in the school backyard?'

'That's...'

She hadn't been able to bury Yuuta behind the hospital.

A child who hadn't been born – at least, she wanted to keep him by her.

However, she couldn't put him in her room since she couldn't cremate him.

She lived in an apartment, so she couldn't bury him in the garden.

Her last resort was to bury him underneath the cherry blossom tree by the school.

She had thought about finding a time to move to a house with a garden and bury him there.

'You blame yourself a bit too much.'

Yakumo frowned, looking a bit troubled.

Isshin had said the same thing as Yakumo.

– Will Yakumo save me as well?

'But I...'

'You don't have to say any more,' said Yakumo, interrupting her and shaking his head.

Akemi couldn't help it. She started to cry.

– I wish I had met them sooner.

If I had, maybe I wouldn't have been led astray, and I would have been able to continue holding my child in my arms.

But that wish won't be granted –

No matter how Akemi wiped away her tears, they continued to fall.

Who are these tears for – there was no way for her to know just from thinking about it.

She would probably find out much, much afterwards.

– Can even someone like me live facing tomorrow?

After waiting for Akemi to stop crying, Yakumo looked away and asked, 'What are you going to do now?'

'... I plan on confessing to the police.'

Yakumo didn't seem satisfied by Akemi's response. He ran a hand through his hair in irritation.

'No, that isn't it. Er... I meant about Uncle.'

After Yakumo said that, his ears went a bit red, and he looked up at the ginkgo trees with their yellow leaves.

This side of Yakumo, like a boy in puberty, was strangely cute.

'I met Isshin-san earlier.'

'And?'

'After I told him everything, he proposed to me.'

After Akemi finished explaining the situation, Isshin's Maitreya-like face went as a ride as a boiled octopus, and he said, 'If it's fine with you, would you marry me?'

It had been so sudden that Akemi had just been frozen.

'That's like Uncle.'

Yakumo bent over, clutching his stomach as he laughed.

– So Yakumo can laugh like this too.

No matter what was said, he was still a child. Akemi realised that obvious fact anew.

– Will a day come when I can laugh like this too?

'So what did you do?' asked Yakumo after he had finished laughing.

'Isshin-san was my first love.'

'And?'

'Yakumo-kun, do you oppose it?'

'That isn't something for me to decide. Do what you want.'

'I'm a murderer.'

'You're so longwinded! There's no law against murderers and monks marrying, right? And you didn't commit murder. If you're worried about my reputation, that's misdirected. I couldn't care less.'

Yakumo spoke very quickly.

It was a fairly clumsy congratulatory address.

However, they spread through her heart more than anybody else's words –

'Watch over Nao until I get back.'

Yakumo nodded with a shy smile.

If they were here, Akemi wouldn't have to worry about Nao. Everyone was clumsy, but that home was filled with love.

'Call me Mum from now on.'

'I refuse!'

Yakumo looked away again.

He really was stubborn. This was fine for now, but she would definitely get him to call her that eventually.

'And since there aren't any other teachers who'll come call you out, attend class properly from

now on.'

'I don't need your concern.'

A number of unexpected things had happened, but perhaps Yakumo would start to change greatly after this case, just as Isshin thought.

– I want to be with everyone longer.

Though that was tempting, Akemi shook her head.

She would spend more time with them after. So until then –

'I have to go. If I don't hurry up, it won't be a confession – it'll be an arrest.'

After saying that wryly, Akemi took the first step.

'Hey, was this OK?'

Akemi had walked a few steps when she heard Yakumo's voice.

Akemi didn't turn around. Because Yakumo was definitely looking the other way too –

'You weren't wrong. No matter how sad the result, stick to what you believe in. I think you'll definitely show the way for many people who don't think they can be saved, Yakumo-kun. So...'

'Don't just say that.'

Yakumo interrupted Akemi.

It was true that perhaps she was just saying that, but she still hoped for it –

'I'll see you later then.'

Akemi said that, still turned away, and started walking slowly between the ginkgo trees.

The yellow leaves fluttered down.

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Akemi stood in front of the hospital that had been burnt down.

After going to the precinct and asking where Chief Miyagawa was, she was told that he was here.

The investigation of the scene was already over. Though there was rope around the area, she didn't see anybody there.

Akemi went past the rope and stepped onto the premises.

It was mysterious how she felt a bit sad about this place being gone, when she had so many bad memories of it.

– If only all of it were a lie.

'This place is off-limits.'

Akemi turned around at the voice and saw two men there.

One was a man like a bear. The detective named Gotou. The other was Chief Miyagawa.

Akemi silently bowed.

'You're the teacher that was at the school yesterday,' said Gotou, pointing at Akemi.

Miyagawa's brow furrowed, and he rubbed at his chin as if thinking about something. Finally, he clapped his hands together.

'I remember now. You were at that incident two years ago...'

After saying that much, Miyagawa shut his mouth. It was probably difficult to talk about.

Akemi had met Miyagawa two years ago –

She was released from her confinement and put into police custody.

Though the one who received Akemi was a female officer, at that time, the member of the investigation team who chased after the culprit was Miyagawa.

Normally, they wouldn't have talked directly, but they had met each other by chance at the hospital waiting room.

– I'll definitely catch him.

Miyagawa had murmured that then.

Perhaps it hadn't been to Akemi but to himself.

However, there had been no doubt in his expression.

He had reminded Akemi of her father.

It was for that reason that Akemi had chosen Miyagawa as the person she secretly divulged the information about Shimomura's crimes to.

'Actually, I have something to talk to you about, Miyagawa-san.'

Akemi had been worried that she would back out before coming here, but she was so calm that it surprised herself.

Miyagawa responded with a nod.

'Should we go somewhere else?'

'No, here is fine.'

Upon hearing Akemi's words, Miyagawa went past the rope and stepped onto the premises.

Gotou followed him.

'Sorry. I haven't caught him yet.'

Miyagawa lit a cigarette with a sour expression.

'No, it's fine.'

Akemi shook her head.

Miyagawa silently bit his lip.

Gotou had his arms crossed and looked confused, like he didn't understand the conversation, but he didn't interrupt.

'So what did you want to talk about?'

'I came here today to confess.'

Miyagawa probably didn't understand what Akemi meant. He blew out a puff of smoke and looked up at the sky.

'Confess?'

'Yes. I decided to confess because I regret my crime.'

'Did you shoplift or something?'

The cigarette dropped out of Miyagawa's mouth.

His sharp glaze was turned towards Akemi, as if to confirm whether she was being genuine.

Akemi accepted the gaze.

After about a minute, Miyagawa cleared his throat and said, 'Could you explain what you mean?'

Akemi nodded and started to speak.

'A child's corpse was found at the school last night, yes? That was my child. His name is Yuuta. I killed him with my hands only days after he was born.'

'Could that kid be from that incident...'

When Akemi nodded, Miyagawa looked like he could cry at any moment.

Perhaps he blamed himself for being unable to catch the culprit.

However, even if he had caught the culprit, Akemi would probably still have killed Yuuta. There was no reason for Miyagawa to blame himself.

'The doctor at this hospital suggested I hide that I killed my child. I accepted it and buried my child without sending a birth certificate.'

It looked like Miyagawa was thinking.

'Sensei, were you the one who sent in the tip to me?'

Akemi nodded silently.

Shimomura had told Akemi about his crimes.

Human trafficking. Illegal abortions. Murders after birth. She couldn't forgive Shimomura for boasting about it.

She had chosen to tip Miyagawa off secretly to hide her own crime, but now that she thought about it, that had probably just been a convenient reason she was telling herself.

At the bottom of her heart, though she hadn't known it, she had probably thought that it would be easier for her if he was caught.

'Hey, Sensei. Did you hate your child? Did you want to kill him so much you couldn't do anything about it?'

'It wasn't anything like hate... I was just afraid. He made me remember that incidence.'

Though she said that, it just sounded like a convenient excuse to her.

'I see... So how'd you kill him?'

'I was holding him in my arms. When I heard his crying, I lost consciousness and dropped him to the floor. Then...'

Miyagawa's mouth gaped as he looked at her.

'That's all?'

'Yes.'

When Akemi said that, Miyagawa started laughing aloud.

'Sensei. you can't call that murder.'

Miyagawa put a hand on Akemi's shoulder and continued talking.

'You make a case for murder when there's murderous intent. You didn't have that, right? So it's not murder. And it'd be difficult to make a case for negligent homicide, since it's not like you were holding the kid at a bad angle.'

'What do you mean?'

The conversation was too technical for Akemi to understand.

'To put it simply, it was just an accident. Hiding the corpse and the issue with official documents bother me, but well, if you do things right, you might get off with a suspended sentence.'

When Akemi understood Miyagawa's words, she almost collapsed to her knees.

She had thought that she wouldn't be able to leave prison for ten or even twenty years.

Now she wouldn't have to wait and would be able to live with Isshin and Yakumo –

She knew that it was imprudent, when she had made her old child die, but she still felt happiness welling up in her chest.

– I have a tomorrow too.

It made her think that way.

– Wahhh.

She heard a baby's cry in her ear.

Then, she felt a sharp pain run through her back.

A burning pain.

Pressing a hand against her back and turning her head, she saw Shimomura standing there.

His eyes were bloodshot and he was gritting his teeth. He had stuck a knife in Akemi's back.

'Did you tip them off!? When I was the one who saved you!'

Miyagawa and Gotou tried to subdue Shimomura.

However, it was too late.

Shimomura pulled the knife out of Akemi's back and sliced sideways.

The tip of the knife hit the artery in Akemi's neck.

Bright red blood flew out in front of her eyes.

Her eyes were ringing. Her body was losing its strength. She couldn't breathe – it was like she was in water.

She saw the sky.

Layers of clouds were blocking out the sun.

Miyagawa rushed up to her. He was yelling something. However, Akemi couldn't hear anything –

Her consciousness was fading.

It hurt.

I wonder if Yuuta felt the same way.

Right. Sorry, Yuuta –

I can't be happy by myself after killing you.

I'll be with you soon, so wait.

Sorry, Nao –

It looks like Mommy can't be with you.

I wanted to watch you grow up.

Sorry, Isshin-san –

I'm really happy I met you.

Even though it was for just a moment, I could see a dream. I felt happy.

Sorry, Yakumo-kun –

Thank you forgiving somebody like me.

Thanks to you, I was saved in the end –

There are going to be a lot of difficulties in your future.

But you'll be fine, Yakumo-kun.

Because you –

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Sachiko took the stairs up to the roof.

She didn't know what Yakumo had done, but ever since that night, the baby had not shown up again.

She felt very fortunate to have been saved by the person she liked.

– I need to thank him properly.

That was what she'd thought, but then there was the shocking incident wherein their homeroom teacher, Akemi, had been killed, and Yakumo hadn't shown up for a while after that.

Today, when he'd finally come to school, he escaped as usual once homeroom ended.

Nobody would call out to him now that Akemi was gone.

– I need to call out to Yakumo from now on.

It felt like her duty.

Because Yakumo had saved Sachiko, she felt something like fate – her feelings for him had grown even stronger than before.

After climbing the stairs, Sachiko opened the door and stepped onto the roof.

She saw Yakumo's back. He was by the fence, looking at the backyard.

To Sachiko, it looked like he was waiting for someone.

'Yakumo-kun.'

Sachiko called out to him.

However, Yakumo didn't even turn around.

'You saved me, Yakumo-kun. Thank you.'

Sachiko bowed her head.

'It's not like I planned on saving you,' Yakumo said listlessly.

He wouldn't boast about what he'd done or expect anything in return.

That was why Yakumo was cool.

'That's fine. Let me do something as thanks sometime.'

Sachiko forced herself to sound cheerful.

– Hey, Yakumo. Turn this way.

Sachiko prayed in her heart.

Perhaps that wish reached Yakumo, because he slowly turned around and looked at Sachiko with narrowed eyes.

His face looked like it had been carved out of marble.

Sachiko's heart beat faster just from his gaze.

– This is probably the only chance I'll have to tell him the feelings I've always had.

Sachiko felt that instinctively.

'Um, I've always kept quiet about it, but I like you, Yakumo-kun. Since a long time ago.'

It just came out of her mouth.

Sachiko's face went bright red as she waited for Yakumo's response.

Even though she felt like her heart might jump out of her throat in her nervousness, Yakumo's expression didn't change at all.

'Am I no good?' asked Sachiko, finding it hard to breathe.

Yakumo looked down silently, took off the contact lens in his left eye, and looked up.

His left eye, dyed a deep red, looked at Sachiko.

– Red eyes, like that child.

The horror that had faded in Sachiko's heart came back anew.

– No. I'm scared.

Sachiko covered her mouth and looked away from Yakumo without thinking.

'You all only look at me in that way. If you can only see my appearance, keep away from me.'

Yakumo said that in disgust and slowly walked away.

Sachiko collapsed to the floor right there.

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Gotou parked the car outside of the middle school's gates and leant back on the driver's seat.

He could hear the clamour of students from the grounds.

The incident that had occurred a few days ago seemed like a lie.

People always forgot about unpleasant experiences. That wasn't a bad thing. You forgot and continued living.

Gotou was one of those people himself.

– But how about that guy?

Yakumo's face appeared in Gotou's head.

If he accepted everything directly like that, his heart would break someday.

That said, there wasn't anything Gotou could do.

He knew that. But he just couldn't leave him alone.

– He's here.

Gotou saw Yakumo outside the window and got off the car.

'Oi. Yakumo.'

Though Yakumo acknowledged Gotou's presence, he pretended not to have noticed and tried to walk away.

'Oi. Wait.'

Gotou grabbed Yakumo's shoulder as he tried to pass him.

'What do you want?'

Though Yakumo stopped, he brushed away Gotou's hand and glared at him.

Honestly. A harsh guy, as usual.

'Two things.'

'Talk already. You're wasting my time.'

Yakumo ran a hand through his hair.

'First, I wanted to tell you that teacher's last words.'

The upturned corners of Yakumo's eyes lowered slightly.

'Last... words?'

His eyes even looked watery.

Yakumo really had been acting strong all this time.

'Right. That teacher said your name at the end.'

'Mine?'

Yakumo's mouth opened in surprise.

It made sense for him to be surprised, but it was the truth.

Akemi had been stabbed, and her throat had been cut. When she had been on her last breath, she called out Yakumo's name.

Gotou didn't know the details, but since he'd seen her die, he felt like it was his duty to tell Yakumo that.

It was the least he could do for not saving Akemi.

'Thank you for forgiving me. Yakumo-kun, you're...'

Gotou stopped there.

'What came next?'

Of course he would ask that, but unfortunately –

'I don't know. She stopped breathing then.'

'You really are useless.'

Yakumo frowned and sighed. Then, he tried to walk away.

'Wait a sec. I said there were two things, right?'

Gotou grabbed Yakumo's arm and made Yakumo face him.

Yakumo clicked his tongue in irritation, but Gotou wouldn't back off because of something like that.

'You can see ghosts, right?'

'Didn't you not believe me?'

That hurt.

Defending himself for every little thing would be a pain, so Gotou ignored it and continued.

'There's something I want you to look at.'

As Gotou said that, he took a photo out of his pocket and put it in front of Yakumo's eyes.

'What is it?'

Yakumo looked taken aback.

'Spirit photography taken at a scene where a corpse was found.'

'I can tell from looking.'

'Help with the investigation.'

Yakumo shook his head like he couldn't believe what Gotou had said.

'Are you saying you're going to use me?'

'Is that bad? All the smart guys put their energy to paperwork. Muscle heads like me run around. Everyone does what they're good at. That's what society is.'

'What do you want to say?'

'It's the same for you. If you can see them, use that. It's nothing special.'

Yakumo looked at Gotou like he was something unpleasant.

– I don't understand.

It was like he was saying that.

However, Gotou didn't think he'd said anything wrong.

'If you can see them, help me out.'

Gotou tried once more, but it was no use.

Yakumo walked away briskly without saying anything.

Gotou thought about whether he should chase after him, but he decided to leave it for today.

There'd be more chances in the future.

'You're not special! You're just a brat. So what if you can see ghosts? That's not that big of a problem. So don't give up.'

Gotou murmured that towards Yakumo's back.

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21

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Yakumo entered the temple and sat down cross-legged.

The high ceiling. The cold wooden floor. The smell of incense.

Yakumo always came here when he couldn't sort out his emotions.

He faced the statue of Buddha.

In front of those half-open eyes which had reached enlightenment, Yakumo felt like his heart was naked.

– What I did was wrong.

Right now, Yakumo's heart was being hit by a wave of regret.

Because of his choice, Akemi had died.

– I should have kept quiet.

He should have just left Sachiko alone.

Something might change if I'm involved with the case. Yakumo had had that faint hope.

However, sticking his neck in where it wasn't necessary had made many people unhappy.

The truth wasn't everything. There were many things people were better off not knowing.

He didn't believe in God or Buddha.

They didn't save anyone. Yakumo saw the spirits of people who hadn't been saved every day with his eye.

Most of them just disappeared in the end with their regrets –

Why could he see them even though he couldn't save them?

Why had he been born with an ability which made people unhappy?

Because of this eye, people alienated him. His mother had tried to kill him.

Because of this eye, he made the people important to him unhappy and even made them lose their lives.

– I'm sick of this.

He didn't want this eye any more.

Yakumo put his hand in his bag and took out a box cutter from his pen case.

– I won't suffer if I can't see.

Yakumo used his thumb to push the cutter's blade out.

The clicks it made echoed through the temple.

Yakumo raised the cutter's tip.

He wasn't afraid of the loss of sight or the pain.

He would be released this way. He wouldn't make anybody unhappy any more.

That pleasant peace of mind spread through his heart.

– If you can see them, use that. It's nothing special.

The words Gotou had said when they met in front of the school gates ran through his head.

He wasn't running away. After using his ability, somebody had died. Yakumo couldn't bear any more of this.

This eye made people unhappy.

Yakumo pushed the cutter's blade towards his left eye.

He felt it hit something. But there was no pain.

Drip, drip.

Blood dripped to the floor.

Isshin's hand was in front of his eyes.

Only millimetres in front of Yakumo's left eye, Isshin had grabbed the blade and stopped it.

The blade snapped with a crack.

Yakumo couldn't understand Isshin's action.

Why had he protected Yakumo's left eye to the point of volunteering his own body as sacrifice?

'Don't do stupid things.'

Isshin was smiling gently even while blood dripped from his palm.

'Why did you stop me?'

'There must be some reason your left eye can see the spirits of the dead. Don't run away from that,' Isshin said quietly.

'Reason? Like there's such a thing! My left eye makes people unhappy!'

'You're wrong.'

Isshin hugged Yakumo tightly.

Yakumo could hear Isshin's heartbeat in his ear.

– It's warm.

'As long as I have this eye, people treat me like a monster. I see things I don't have to. I suffer!'

Yakumo struggled to try to get out of Isshin's arms.

Isshin hugged Yakumo even more tightly to stop him and shook his head.

'Then I choose to be viewed with the same odd gazes as you receive.'

– Why? Why does this person do so much for me?

Yakumo didn't understand.

Even though his own mother had abandoned him, why –

'I'm troubled because there are people like you and Sensei.'

'Isn't that OK? People live with troubles.'

'Nothing will change like that!' yelled Yakumo.

'Things will change.'

'They won't!'

'No, they will. One day, there'll be someone who'll say your left eye is beautiful.'

'Don't try to console me.'

'I'm not. One day, somebody will accept you for who you are, just like that person.'

'Like somebody like that exists!'

Yakumo was sick of the response of people who saw his red left eye.

Fear, pity, sympathy –

Even though it was just a different coloured eye, people looked at him like he was a different living being.

If Yakumo held hope, it would just make him suffer me.

'No, there definitely is,' Isshin declared in a strong tone.

'Even if there were, I would just make them unhappy, like Sensei...'

A sad future awaited them, like with Akemi.

Isshin shook his head again.

'Was Akemi-chan really unhappy?'

'Eh?'

'I can't see Akemi-chan, but you should be able to. Tell me, Yakumo. Is Akemi-chan crying?'

Yakumo looked up at Isshin's words.

Yakumo's eye saw her clearly.

'She's there right now, right?'

Yakumo bit his lip and nodded.

'She is... smiling. She's smiling... very happily...'

'I see.'

Isshin said that and looked up at the ceiling.

Tears fell from Yakumo's eyes –

She started to disappear.

Don't go.

Yakumo wrested himself out of Isshin's arms and crawled after Akemi's spirit.

'Don't go!'

He reached out as he called.

However, his hand didn't reach her.

Akemi disappeared, as if she had melted into the air.

At the last moment, Yakumo thought he heard something faintly.

– Yakumo-kun. You weren't wrong. Stick with your beliefs.

– And thank you.

each wish: epilogue

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Tears fell on her clenched fists.

After hearing the end of the story, Haruka started sobbing, without thinking about how the others might look at her.

She couldn't restrain her wave of emotions.

A heart-wrenching feeling that cut into her –

Akemi had not been hoping for much. Each was a little wish towards living a peaceful life.

However, none of those was granted. Those wishes had been popped like bubbles.

Haruka imagined what Akemi might look like, though she had never met the woman once, and started crying again.

How long did she continue?

When she finally wiped her eyes, she lifted her head and saw Isshin's smiling face.

'Are you all right?'

Though Haruka nodded silently, it was a weak nod – she felt like she might collapse if she didn't focus her energy on avoiding that.

'That's why that guy never abandons hope, no matter what happens,' said Gotou, awkwardly scratching his head.

Words that Yakumo had said to Haruka before came up in her head.

The kindness she sometimes saw beneath his contrary exterior.

The strength he had to find hope and believe in people, even after his mother tried to kill him.

Yakumo was probably that way because of Isshin and Akemi.

After thinking that, Haruka almost started crying again.

'Do you have any photos of Akemi-san?' asked Haruka. She wanted to see the woman named Akemi who had changed Yakumo, even if it were only once.

'Photos... I'll go look,' murmured Isshin. he stood up and left the living room.

'I'll say this because Isshin isn't here, but...'

Gotou started talking.

'What is it?'

'There was more to that incident. Isshin asked me to do something.'

'Asked you to do something?'

Haruka thought about it, but she couldn't imagine what it was at all.

'Yeah. A falsification of the teacher's death certificate.'

'Falsification?'

As a rule, Isshin and the word falsification didn't connect.

Why would he need to do that? And what was falsified?

There must have been a meaningful reason, but Haruka had no way of knowing.

Gotou looked around the room cautiously and then started speaking after clearing his throat.

'I made it one day later.'

'One day later?'

– What for?

'He wanted to send in the marriage certificate first,' answered Gotou.

That was enough to explain.

Haruka could understand Isshin's thought.

He had probably wanted to accept her into his family. However, the biggest reason was probably to take in Nao.

To take in the child of somebody you weren't married to, there were a number of difficulties, but there wouldn't be any problem with a stepfather.

When Haruka thought about Isshin coming to that decision, her chest hurt again and her eyes grew wet.

'You don't have to talk about unnecessary things.'

Isshin had returned to the living room at some point.

Gotou hurriedly looked away and pretended not to have heard.

'Well, it's fine,' said Isshin in resignation as he sat down. Then, he placed a photo on the table.

It had been taken at school with the schoolyard in the background and the whole class in the photo.

She was at the very front in the first row.

The photo was so small that Haruka couldn't see the face clearly, but she could tell that Akemi was a gentle and beautiful woman.

'This is the only photo I have of Akemi-chan,' Isshin said sadly.

'Is that so...'

'If things had to happen this way, I wish I had taken more photos, but... it's too late to say this sort

of thing now.'

Though perhaps there were no photos, Akemi was in Isshin's and Yakumo's hearts.

Haruka hadn't met Akemi directly, but she still hoped to keep her in her heart.

As Haruka looked at the photo, she suddenly spotted somebody who caught her eye.

The person on the very right of the first row was the only person looking down, seeming displeased.

He was short and had a different hairstyle, but the contours of his face hadn't changed at all.

'Could this be Yakumo-kun?'

'Yes. He seems quite different, doesn't he?'

Isshin nodded.

Now that Isshin said that, Yakumo did have a different atmosphere to him. He seemed hard to approach.

'Yakumo hasn't changed at all since then. He's just as contrary as before.'

Gotou crossed his arms in discontent.

'Who did you say was contrary?'

Haruka hurriedly looked towards the source of the familiar voice.

Yakumo's eyes were as sleepy as usual as he stood in the living room entrance. Nao was with him too.

Yakumo yawned, seeming bored, and ran a hand through his messy hair.

'Hide the photo. Quickly.'

Haruka grabbed the photo reflexively and put her hands behind her.

Then, Yakumo's eyes met hers.

'What did you hide just now?'

'Nothing, really... I'm not hiding anything. Aren't you thinking too much?'

Haruka tried playing bun.

However, Yakumo had to be able to tell.

'Why are you here anyway?'

Yakumo frowned, seeming exasperated.

Haruka had no way to answer that.

She was trying to think of an excuse when Nao jumped towards her.

Theorising from the story earlier, for Yakumo, Nao was a sister from another mother.

Perhaps Yakumo was kind to Nao because she was the existence closest to him.

– Your mother was a really wonderful person.

Haruka patted Nao's head as she spoke in her heart.

It seemed to reach Nao, as she looked up at Haruka's face and nodded.

'Answer my question.'

Yakumo crossed his arms and pressed Haruka for an answer.

Haruka had thought that Nao's appearance had changed the topic, but Yakumo wasn't that naive.

'Well, isn't it fine?'

Isshin smiled as he sipped his tea.

'It isn't fine. And Gotou-san, what are you doing here too? Please leave me out of your cases already.'

'It's not like I chase cases because I want to.'

Gotou gave an incomprehensible retort.

'Honestly, all of you.'

Yakumo spoke in an irritated tone, but he seemed to have given up as he sat down cross-legged.

When Haruka saw these faces surrounding the table, they seemed like a real family.

The people who thought of, respected and used Yakumo –

Each of them had their own feelings, but everyone was linked with a strong bond.

'Shall we get sushi today?' suggested Isshin, clapping his hands together.

'I only eat the best.'

'I don't remember inviting you, Gotou-kun.'

Isshin glanced at Gotou.

Gotou was about to say something, but then he snorted and turned around, like he knew he had no way of winning in an argument.

'Sushi? Then I'll make something,' suggested Haruka.

Yakumo snorted.

'I'll pass. I don't want to destroy my stomach.'

Yakumo stood up and made an X with his arms.

'I'm just going to say this, but I'm pretty confident in my cooking,' interrupted Haruka, flaring up.

However, Yakumo just yawned, seeming bored.

Gotou laughed aloud, cooling the tension.

Isshin had a gentle smile on his face.

-

– Akemi-san. Though your wish wasn't granted, we're heading forward like this now. Please watch over us.

-

So that these days can always continue –

-

Will my little wish be granted?

That thought suddenly came to Haruka.

亡霊の叫び

第二章

02
FILE

the cry of the dead

-

Haruka looked out the window from the passenger seat.

After that, they ordered takeaway and had sushi together. Gotou was driving her home.

Isshin and Gotou had told her about Yakumo's past, which was alien to her –

It was hard to breathe, like something was constricting her chest, but for some reason, she also felt safe, like she was being enveloped by something warm.

A strange feeling –

'You thinking about Yakumo?' said Gotou from the driver's seat.

'That isn't it.'

Haruka quickly denied it.

'Liar. It's written on your face.'

Gotou looked at her meaningfully – it seemed like she hadn't been able to fool him.

Haruka knew she was the sort of person who couldn't hide things, but being seen through so easily made her feel pathetic.

'I just thought that I really didn't know anything about Yakumo-kun at all...' said Haruka in resignation.

That was how she truly felt.

The more she found out about Yakumo's unknown past, the further she felt from him.

'Haruka-chan, you know Yakumo now the best of all. Isn't that good enough?' said Gotou, lighting his cigarette at the traffic light.

'I want to know more...' said Haruka without thinking.

'You're completely a maiden in love.'

Gotou laughed aloud.

Haruka went red up to her ears and hid her face.

'No, that isn't it.'

Though she tried to deny it, she felt herself that she wasn't convincing.

'Then let's talk about another story from Yakumo's past.'

Gotou waited for the light to turn green and started talking.

'Another...'

'Yeah. It was a week after the incident with his teacher...'

-

1

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'A corpse was found.'

Gotou Kazutoshi was told that a week after the incident with Akemi.

-

The scene was a park about five minutes from the train station.

With a pond in the shape of a gourd, the park had floating piers over the narrow parts. You could take small boats onto the large pond for fun.

The path around the pond was laid with bricks, and there were benches facing the pond about every ten metres.

It was also a local date spot.

In contrast to that, when you went to the back of the pond, there were knee-high weeds and a thicket with oak trees – it was like a completely different place.

After passing through the steel gates to the park and walking along the pond on dead leaves, Gotou spotted a crowd of people at a floating pier.

In the middle was a woman's corpse –

Gotou pushed his way through the crowd and went up to the woman's corpse near the floating pier.

A woman with long hair.

Though she was wearing clothes, her body was completely soaked.

It was almost winter, so she probably hadn't been playing in the pond.

Since she was face-down, Gotou couldn't see her face, but from her clothes and skin, she was probably a young woman.

A fly had stopped on the woman's swollen fingers.

It was crawling about, rubbing both legs together.

'This is awful...'

Gotou waved the fly away.

'Gotou-kun, right?'

A hoarse voice called out to him. Gotou looked up.

An old man with white hair and a face like a dried persimmon. He was wearing a white doctor's gown and had a grin on his face inappropriate for a scene where a corpse was found.

It was Hata, the perverted coroner who said that autopsying was his hobby.

'Don't grin next to a corpse. It's indiscreet.'

Gotou stood up with a click of his tongue.

'Your existence is more of a indiscretion,' Hata said shamelessly, without faltering.

'The hell does that mean, you damn old man?'

'My interest helps the investigation, but all you do is take up space. I'm saying you're no help at all.'

– Acting like I'm an object.

'Am I oversized rubbish?'

'So you know.'

Hata smiled, showing his teeth like a skeleton.

'Since you're here, is this an unnatural death?' asked Gotou, restraining himself from kicking Hata down.

'You really are an idiot.'

'What?'

'All deaths that we can't tell the cause of are unnatural deaths,' said Hata in a mocking tone. Then, he giggled, which made his shoulders shake.

– Tripping me up.

'So do you have an idea about the cause of death?'

'You're so impatient. I get to look forward to that after investigating.'

Hata let out another creepy laugh.

'Ah, I see. Accident, suicide, murder – anyway, tell me what you know.'

'This is a murder, no doubt about it,' Hata said coolly.

– Murder?

Gotou couldn't ignore that.

'You just said that you didn't know the cause of death earlier. What are you talking about?'

Without responding to Gotou's question, Hata crouched in front of the woman and rolled up her blue blouse.

Her white back was revealed.

'W-what the hell is this!?!'

There were countless injuries there – it looked like she had been cut with a knife.

The injuries were quite deep –

Her skin was turned up at the edges, like trenches had been dug into it.

'You can tell from looking, right? They're cuts.'

'Are these the cause of death?'

'No. Probably these were done while she was still alive.'

Hata scratched his chin.

'While she was still alive... Was she tortured?'

In Gotou's head, an image of a woman crying out while her back was being cut appear.

A chill ran down his spine. Maybe the culprit was an unbelievable sadist.

'That isn't it.'

Hata shook his head.

'Then what is it?'

'Think with your head a bit. This is a message.'

'A message?'

Hata nodded. Then, he stuck out his chin to signal for Gotou to look at the back again.

– If you understand, just explain.

Gotou swallowed his irritation and looked once more at the woman's back.

'What... is this...'

Gotou could understand what Hata meant.

This was a message –

The cuts on the woman's back spelt words.

<UGLY DIE>

Writing words into somebody's skin – this was mad.

The culprit must have hated the victim.

– Looks like it'll be an unpleasant case.

A vague anxiety was born within Gotou.

-

2

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Gotou left that confusing place and went to the park's management office.

Miyagawa had transferred after Akemi's case. The reorganisation of partners in the detective department wasn't going well, so now Gotou had no partner.

There was a problem with the command of the new chief, Ideuchi.

Thanks to that, it had been a while since Gotou had returned to the scene.

'That half-baked baldy,' muttered Gotou as he went to the management office's prefabricated building.

It looked like you could borrow boats from here. It had a front counter and there was the office behind it.

Gotou saw a woman in a blue uniform with her head on the table and both hands over an electric heater.

'You an employee?'

When he called out to her, her shoulders jolted and she lifted her head.

Her makeup was so thick it seemed inappropriate for the situation.

'Ah, yes,' the woman replied in a low voice.

Ignoring the location, Gotou felt like he'd slipped into a bar in the rundown districts.

'What's your name?'

'My name is Tachibana Fumiko.'

'What are you doing here?'

Gotou put out his police ID.

'Eh, er, I was told to stay here.'

'By who?'

'A detective named Shimamura. Er... The woman's corpse. I was the first one who found it.'

Fumiko's speech was as faltering as if she were making excuses for adultery.

'It's not like I suspect you.'

Gotou lit a cigarette.

'Is that so...'

'So what's the situation?'

'Ah, yes. I told Shimamura-san...'

'Sorry, but could you tell me one more time?'

Gotou didn't wait for Fumiko to reply. He sat on the chair opposite her.

'It'll be the same story I told before...'

Fumiko looked up at Gotou with hesitation.

'I don't mind.'

After Gotou said that firmly, Fumiko nodded reluctantly.

'Excuse me... Where should I start...'

'When did you find the corpse?'

Gotou hated roundabout questions. He went straight for the topic.

'I don't know exactly, but it was probably before nine.'

'Where were you until then?'

'Cleaning the park.'

'When did you come to the park?'

'I came before 7:10, used my time card, changed and then picked up rubbish and swept..'

Fumiko looked up at Gotou again, like a child who was being scolded.

It seemed like she felt she was being suspected.

'I'm just checking the facts.'

'Oh.'

Though it didn't look like Fumiko accepted that, Gotou continued talking regardless.

'What'd she look like when you found her?'

'At first I didn't realise. I just thought there was something floating on the water... Then when I went up...'

It seemed like Fumiko was recalling the scene, as her brow was furrowed and her lips were trembling.

'Was anybody nearby?'

'I fainted, so I don't know.'

Fumiko looked like she might cry at any moment. She placed her palm against her mouth and lay down.

Gotou spotted her red manicure, which didn't match for an employee who cleaned up rubbish.

'So was there anything that caught your concern? Not just from today.'

'Hm...'

'Like suspicious people hanging around recently or screams you might have heard. Anything's find.'

Fumiko looked up at the low ceiling like she was thinking. Finally, she let out an 'Ah!'.

'Did you remember something?'

Gotou's hopes went out even if he didn't want them to.

'N-no. It isn't anything big. There was just something I was concerned about...'

'Something you were concerned about?'

'Ah, but even if I tell you this, Detective...'

'It's fine. Just tell me,' Gotou said forcefully.

He'd be too curious if the story just stopped in the middle like this.

Though Fumiko looked troubled, she started speaking.

'A ghost appears in this park.'

'A ghost?'

Gotou's voice cracked at the unexpected reply.

– A ghost of all things.

Gotou understood why Fumiko didn't want to talk.

'I really shouldn't have mentioned that to you, Detective.'

Fumiko looked apologetic as she hunched her shoulders.

If it were Gotou from a bit before, he would probably have ended the conversation right there for being ridiculous, but now Gotou couldn't make light of stories about ghosts.

It was because Saitou Yakumo, the boy with a red left eye that could see the spirits of the dead, was in his head.

'I don't mind. Let me hear it.'

'All right... There's a rumour that a ghost appears in this park.'

Fumiko sounded hesitant.

'What sort of rumour?'

'People say that a girl was killed in this park, and when night comes, you can see a girl in a uniform with a ponytail walking around...'

'Have you seen her?'

'Eh?'

Fumiko looked blank.

'I said, have you seen the ghost?'

'At first I didn't believe it either. But...'

Fumiko hugged her shoulders as her body shook before continuing.

'One day, I took some time tending the plants and left the office late at night. Then, near the pond, I heard somebody wailing.'

'Then?'

'I went to the pond. Then...'

Fumiko swallowed.

'At the floating pier, there was a girl with a ponytail. When I asked her what she was doing, that girl disappeared like smoke.'

'Disappeared?'

'Yes. Even though the girl disappeared, I could hear her voice...'

'What did she say?'

'I'll curse you! I'll curse you and kill you! That's what she said.'

Fumiko leant forward with wide eyes, as if she herself had become that ghost.

Gotou leant back under that force.

Then, his cigarette ash fell to the floor –

-

3

-

After Gotou left the office, she went with forensics and other officers to investigate the area.

They walked around the thicket surrounding the pond until late at night, but they couldn't find anything that stood out.

However, Gotou didn't feel disappointed.

He knew that this was how investigations were.

Especially for muscle idiots like himself who acted more than thought, Gotou thought that they had to do what they were good for.

Gotou left the officers at the scene and went to the floating pier.

He looked at the water where the victim had probably been floating.

The pale moon was reflected in the moving water surface.

Gotou lit a cigarette and blew out the smoke towards the sky.

The image he'd seen earlier came to his head. The words cut into the woman's back.

<UGLY DIE>

The words sounded hateful, if just looking at the meaning.

However, Gotou didn't think it was just that.

Hata had said it was a message. Then who was the message for?

Maybe there was a code in that short message.

Splash.

A koi leapt out of the pond.

– Well, I don't think I'll reach the answer by thinking about it.

Gotou smiled self-derisively, pushed his cigarette in an ashtray and turned away from the floating pier.

He walked on the path by the pond.

He took the car he had parked near the entrance and leant back on the driver's seat. When he reached out to try to turn the key, he felt like he heard something.

– What is that?

Gotou stopped breathing and focussed on listening.

However, all he heard was the sound of wind rustling the trees.

Because of the ghost story he'd heard from Fumiko, he might have become too sensitive.

'It's not like me.'

Even though there was nobody he had to make an excuse to, he laughed wryly. He turned the engine key and started the car.

Then, somebody stood in front of his eyes, blocking his car.

A person.

A girl in a uniform with a ponytail.

– Crap!

Gotou slammed the brakes and spun the wheel.

– I won't make it.

Everything seemed to be moving in slow motion.

For a moment, his eyes met the girl's.

They were opened wide, but they were dark with no life in them –

The car spun halfway around, kicking up sand.

– Damn it! What the hell!

Gotou ran out of the car.

'Oi! You OK?'

Even though Gotou was yelling frantically, nobody was there.

Just the dark and the quiet.

He looked around for the girl, but he couldn't find her anywhere.

Gotou checked the car bonnet and under the car, but there wasn't even a scratch.

He hadn't hit anybody. But it would have been impossible to avoid with that timing.

– Was I seeing things?

'Damn it! What's happening!?!'

Gotou kicked the tire as hard as he could and went back to the driver's seat with unsettled feelings.

Maybe he'd seen an illusion because of the story earlier?

'Am I tired?'

Gotou asked himself that, lit a cigarette and leant back on the seat.

Rustle.

Gotou heard something moving behind him.

He sat up and looked at the rear-view mirror.

In the rectangular rear-view mirror, he saw something like a black shadow.

– That's a person.

Somebody had got into the backseat.

Calm down. Gotou told himself that and took a deep breath. His back was sticky with sweat.

His eyes were growing accustomed to the dark. Though it was blurry, he could see the contours of the person in the backseat.

It was a girl in a blazer uniform.

The same girl I saw earlier –

Her ponytail was drenched.

Drip, drip, drip.

Water dripped onto the seat.

'Who are you!?!'

Gotou raised his fist and turned around as he said that.

There was –

Nobody there.

Even though she was there just earlier –

Bzzzz!

The police wireless attached to the car suddenly let out noise.

Gotou leapt up at how unexpected it was.

He reached out to turn down the volume.

– Aaaahh!

The wireless let out a strange voice, like a wail or a scream, interrupting Gotou.

'... Le...t... me... di.. e...'

'Shut up!'

Gotou lifted his foot and kicked the wireless.

The sound stopped.

'I'm not scared! Ghosts can just go to hell!'

-

4

-

The next day, an investigation meeting was held early in the morning.

Gotou sat at the table in the very back and listened to Ideuchi talk about the investigation.

The victim's name was Kaneda Misako. Twenty years old. An office worker at a cosmetics company.

The cause of death was pressure on the neck.

There were signs on her neck that she was strangled with a rope.

The injuries on her back were, as Hata had first theorised, done while she was alive.

Since money hadn't been stolen from her wallet, the investigation department had decided that this was likely caused by a grudge.

They were told to continue the investigation with a focus on Fumiko's companions, including cabaret club customers, and the meeting was adjourned.

However, Gotou still had no partner and didn't receive directions for the investigation either.

Maybe Ideuchi didn't like him.

After leaving the conference room by himself, Matsumura from forensics called out to him.

'Got some time right now?' Matsumura said in a quiet voice after looking around.

Time –

'I got tons.'

'I see. There's something I want your advice on...'

– Advice?

Gotou had joined at the same time as Matsumura, but they hadn't really talked before. It'd be the first time they'd talked in years when they talked during the last case.

It was partly because they were in different departments, but it was also because Matsumura was an incredibly serious man who gave the impression that he was hard to approach.

Even if Matsumura asked for advice, Gotou had no way of answering if he didn't know Matsumura well.

'You've got the wrong guy. If you're unhappy with the investigation, say that to the chief.'

'No, it has to be you.'

What's he saying such creepy things for? Is he making fun of me?

Gotou glared at Matsumura, but Matsumura didn't falter and returned a serious gaze. He put his hands together. 'Please.'

It actually piqued Gotou's interest with Matsumura so intent.

'Advice for what?'

'There's a photo I want you to look at.'

– Photo?

Gotou was even more confused.

'Got it.'

There was no point worrying about it. When Gotou responded, Matsumura's expression brightened and urged him to return to the conference room.

Looked like he didn't want other people to hear.

'So what am I supposed to look at? A matchmaking photo?' joked Gotou, sitting opposite Matsumura.

'Aren't you married, Gotou?' responded Matsumura, his eyes incredibly serious.

This was why Gotou kept a distance from him.

'Then what am I supposed to look at?'

When Gotou urged Matsumura to continue, he took a photo out of the file he was carrying and placed it on the table with trembling fingers, as if it were something expensive.

It looked like a regular photo of yesterday's scene.

It was an enlarged shot. In the middle of the photo, there was a corpse, and there were detectives and guys from forensics around it.

Gotou was in there too.

It wasn't some school trip, so the photo probably hadn't been taken for memory's sake.

'What's up with the photo?'

'Look at the corpse's side.'

Matsumura spoke in a low voice.

'The corpse's side?'

Gotou looked at the photo again.

'Ah!'

The photo slipped from his hand.

A chill ran down his spine.

– My eyes might have been playing tricks on me.

As Gotou thought that, he looked once more at the photo that had fallen on the table.

– They weren't.

Gotou felt an unpleasant jolt.

There was a girl in a blazer uniform standing at the corpse's side.

A girl with her hair in a ponytail.

She was completely soaked, like she had come out of the water.

Since she was looking down, Gotou shouldn't have been able to see her face, but he felt like there was a faint smile there.

'The girl from last night...'

Gotou said that without thinking.

He thought 'Crap' immediately afterwards.

– Did he hear me?

Gotou hurriedly looked at Matsumura, but then he was the one who looked at him with a question in his eyes.

'That girl should not have been there,' said Matsumura in a trembling voice.

There was no objection in that voice. Which means he must have noticed.

'What do you think?' asked Gotou.

'I think she might be a ghost.'

Matsumura sounded even confident.

'Quite a thing to say for someone as deadly serious as you.'

'Then how would you explain the girl?'

Gotou couldn't answer Matsumura's question.

Just from looking at the photo, it would make sense to think she was a ghost.

But if there was a ghost here, that would mean somebody there'd there before.

– Wait.

Gotou's sleeping memories suddenly started moving.

– I remember.

Gotou had gone to that pond before.

I think it was six years ago –

A girl's corpse had showed up before at that pond, just like this time.

Her father had contacted the police, saying his daughter in middle school hadn't come home for two days.

Gotou had been a traffic officer at the time. He looked around the park.

The officer who searched the park with him found the corpse floating in the pond.

Gotou hadn't been in Criminal Affairs then, so he didn't know the details of what happened afterwards.

However, he did remember the father's strange actions when he saw his daughter's corpse after it was taken out of the pond.

At the time, the girls' father had been crying, but at the same time, he'd laughed aloud –

Gotou couldn't understand the feeling of losing a child, but he still felt that laughing was odd –

'Do you have any ideas?'

Matsumura seemed dubious when he saw Gotou deep in thought.

'No, that's not it. Anyway, why did you show the photo to me?'

'The maternity clinic case last time. Didn't the case get solved because you did something with some spiritual nonsense?'

'What?'

That was unexpected.

'Can't you see ghosts? That's how you solved the case, right? That's why this time...'

Gotou stopped listening partway through.

– Is he kidding?

Even though it was said that rumours became embellished, this was too much. Gotou couldn't say anything in his astonishment. What sort of information would have to be shared for it to come to that? Gotou had no idea.

He wouldn't stand for being treated like some fake medium on a television special.

'The hell are you saying? I'm... er...'

Gotou opened his mouth to object, but he couldn't think of what else to say.

In order to explain the case with the maternity clinic, he would have to talk about Yakumo.

Yakumo hated his own ability. Talking about that felt like breaking the rules somehow.

'Anyway, I'll hand the photo over. I'll leave the rest to you,' declared Matsumura. He left the room.

– The story's getting kind of warped.

-

5

-

Gotou parked his car at the middle school's gates, leant back on the seat and looked at the schoolyard.

The brats were running about energetically. The event that happened a week ago seemed like a lie.

In that clamour, Gotou found one boy walking in the shadows.

– Saitou Yakumo.

'Oi. Yakumo.'

Gotou got off the car and went up to Yakumo, who was walking while looking down.

Yakumo glanced upwards, but then he tried to walk away like he hadn't noticed.

'Oi, wait.'

Gotou ran after Yakumo, grabbing his shoulder to force him to stop.

'What do you want?'

Yakumo turned around and pushed Gotou's hand aside, glaring.

He was clearly acting hostile.

'Two things.'

'Talk already. You're wasting my time.'

'One – I wanted to tell you what that teacher's last words.'

The corners of Yakumo's eyes seemed to drop.

'Her last... words?'

He murmured that in a voice that trembled faintly.

'Right. That teacher said your name at the end.'

'Mine?'

Yakumo's mouth opened in surprise.

It made sense for him to be surprised, but it was the truth.

Gotou didn't know the details, but Akemi had been stabbed, and her throat had been cut. When she had been on her last breath, she called out Yakumo's name.

'Thank you for forgiving me. Yakumo-kun, you're...'

Gotou stopped there.

'What came next?'

Of course he would ask that, but unfortunately –

'I don't know. She stopped breathing then.'

'You really are useless.'

Yakumo frowned and ran a hand through his hair. Then, he turned around, like he didn't need anything more.

'Wait a sec. I said there were two things, right?'

When Gotou grabbed Yakumo's arm and made him turn around, Yakumo clicked his tongue in irritation.

'You can see ghosts, right?'

'Didn't you not believe me?'

That hurt.

Defending himself for every little thing would be a pain, so Gotou made the conversation move along.

'There's something I want you to look at.'

As Gotou said that, he took a photo out of his pocket and put it in front of Yakumo's eyes.

It was the photo he had received from Matsumura earlier.

'What is it?'

Yakumo looked taken aback.

'Spirit photography taken at a scene where a corpse was found.'

'I can tell from looking.'

'Help with the investigation.'

Yakumo shook his head like he couldn't believe what Gotou had said.

'Are you saying you're going to use me?'

'Is that bad? All the smart guys put their energy to paperwork. Muscle heads like me run around. Everyone does what they're good at. That's what society is.'

'What do you want to say?'

'It's the same for you. If you can see them, use that. It's nothing special.'

Yakumo looked at Gotou like he was something unpleasant.

Gotou didn't think he'd said anything wrong.

He didn't know about what other people might think, but from how Gotou saw it, Yakumo was just a brat who could see ghosts.

'If you can see them, help me out.'

Gotou tried once more, but it was no use.

Yakumo brushed Gotou's hand aside and walked away briskly without saying anything.

– Should I chase him?

After thinking about it, Gotou decided to silently watch Yakumo leave.

He still had time. He could just meet him again.

-

6

-

After returning to the precinct, he sat in his own seat and lit a cigarette.

The large criminal affairs division room was empty.

Everyone was out investigating.

In contrast, on top of hearing a ghost story from the first person to find the corpse and being forced to take a ghost photo from a guy in forensics, Gotou had gone to talk to some cheeky brat –

The cigarette smoke got into his eyes and made him tear up.

'I wonder why...' murmured Gotou, looking at the photo he'd received from Matsumura again.

When he looked at it again, the ghost in the photo looked like the girl who was found as a corpse in the pond six years ago.

– No point worrying about it.

Gotou picked up the receiver and dialled the internal line to forensics.

Fortunately, Matsumura answered.

'How're things going?'

<The work at the scene is finished. All that's left is analysis.>

'Well done.'

<How about you? Did you find something out?>

Matsumura sounded a bit agitated.

He was an unexpectedly impatient man.

'Like I'd find anything out that easily. I've got a request.'

<What?>

'A girl's corpse should've come up in that pond before. I think it was six years ago... I want the investigation documents from then.'

<It's your job to investigate, isn't it?>

It was as Matsumura said.

However, Matsumura was the one who'd forced this weird story on him. If he didn't cooperate a bit, it wouldn't be worth it.

'It's fine if you don't want to. I'm just investigating because you asked me. If you don't cooperate, that's the end of the investigation.'

<Isn't that cold of you?>

– Who's cold?

Gotou buried his dissatisfaction in the bottom of his stomach.

'Matsumura, did you know this?'

<What?>

'The people who take pictures of ghosts get cursed. If you leave things like this, I just hope you don't die in some unfortunate accident.'

<You're kidding, right...'

Matsumura's voice was shaking.

It looked like his seriousness made it easy for him to believe lies.

'You'll find out soon enough if I'm lying or not. Well, you probably won't be in this world any more then.'

<I-I-I got it. I'll investigate.>

Matsumura sounded like he might start crying at any moment.

Maybe Gotou had scared him a bit too much, but now he'd probably cooperate well.

'I'm counting on you.'

Gotou placed the receiver down, pressed his cigarette into the ash tray and stood up from his seat.

Nothing would start if he just sat here.

There was no guarantee that he could face a ghost yet, but he decided to return to the park once more.

-

7

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It was already dark when Gotou arrived at the park.

Even though it was still about five, the sun set earlier now.

Gotou got off the car, went through the parking lot and walked to the park entrance.

At the gates, there were officers who looked as alike as twins.

'I'm Gotou from Criminal Affairs.'

He showed his police ID. They opened the steel gates for him.

'Anybody inside?'

'Ah, yes. There are two officers on patrol and the owner of the boathouse.'

'That all?'

'Eh?'

The officer seemed to have heard Gotou's mutter.

'It's nothing.'

It wasn't Gotou's problem to talk about the placement of investigation team members.

He waved and went to the middle of the park.

He walked to the park management office on the path by the pond, covered with dead leaves.

Splash.

Something was splashing in the lake.

Probably a duck or a carp.

After reaching the management office, he spotted the two uniformed officers on patrol.

'Thank you for your hard work.'

The officer, wearing sharp silver glasses, bowed politely.

'Hey. Anything odd?'

'Er, nothing in particular. Excuse me...'

'What?'

'I heard that the investigation within the park was already finished.'

– Is this guy politely telling me how to investigate?

Gotou clicked his tongue and glared at the bespectacled officer.

'I know that without you telling me.'

'Ah, no, that's...'

'Keep going to the scene 'til everything's done. That's the job of a detective.'

'I-I truly apologise,' said the officer in a frightened tone, straightening his spine and bowing once more.

– Honestly.

Gotou turned away from the officers and went to the back of the pond.

The tiles from the path disappeared and became plain earth.

Weeds as high as his knees grew around the pond.

The very back of the pond. After reaching a cherry blossom tree that almost covered the water surface, Gotou took a break.

He wiped the sweat off his forehead.

He thought about sitting down to rest, but he didn't find any benches.

He gave up and was about to start walking when he heard something.

– Oooh.

Wind?

Gotou's heartbeat quickened as he tensed up.

Rustle.

A tree shook, and something black passed in front of him.

A dog or a cat? Well, something like that. Gotou heaved a sigh in relief.

Plunk.

He saw something on the pond. A duck –

No, it's not!

He jumped over the fence by the path, ran through the thicket and jumped into the pond.

– A person.

A long-haired woman was floating face-down in the pond.

Gotou grabbed her body and tried to pull her to the shore.

However, his footing was unsteady and it wasn't going well.

– Damn it! I really can't do this alone!

'Oi! Anybody! Lend a hand!'

Anger suddenly welled up in Gotou's stomach.

A park wasn't like a building. There wasn't any point closing off the entrance.

You could get in from anywhere if you wanted to sneak in.

The culprit knew that there weren't enough people on guard.

That's why they dared to choose the same place –

'Hurry up! You idiots!' screamed Gotou in his rage.

After a while, the officers finally came around. The two of them had torches in their hands and were standing there dumbly.

'Don't just watch! Help me out!' shouted Gotou.

Finally, the two officers jumped into the pond and started helping.

The three of them pulled the woman to the shore. They turned her face-up to try to resuscitate her.

'Wha –'

Gotou's words were caught in his throat.

The woman's lips had been sewn together with a needle or something.

She had probably struggled frantically.

There were signs of scratches from fingernails around her lips.

'Aaaahhh!'

The officer with the glasses let out a shriek and fell backwards.

'Shut up! Don't make a fuss! Hurry and make a call already!'

Though Gotou yelled that, he couldn't repress the bad feeling in his stomach.

– Oooh.

He heard a wail from somewhere.

It definitely wasn't his ears playing tricks on him.

Gotou stood up, looking around.

'Where are you? Where the hell are you?'

– There!

Five metres ahead.

There was a girl up to her waist in the pond.

Like before, it was the girl in a uniform with a ponytail.

Gotou jumped into the pond immediately.

'Oi!'

While yelling, Gotou splashed forward through the pond.

Just a bit farther and my hand will reach her –

The moment he thought that, the girl melted into the darkness –

-

8

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At the investigation meeting the next morning, Ideuchi's face was completely pale as he stood at the podium.

It looked like he'd aged ten years.

Since corpses had been found at the same park two days in a row, he was probably unimaginably anxious.

However, it was Ideuchi's fault for prioritising catching the culprit and not guarding the scene of the crime well.

The victim was Ozaki Kiyomi. Twenty years old. A part-timer.

Like the first victim, Misako, she had died from asphyxiation due to pressure on the neck.

It was confirmed that her lips were sewn together when she was alive.

Hata was definitely crying out in happiness now while dancing around.

Furthermore, when confirming her identity, it turned out that the first victim, Misako, was from the same middle school as Kiyomi and that they had been friends.

It was likely that they had been murdered by a classmate with a grudge.

One of the investigation members suggested a man called Takimoto Yuuichi as a suspect.

He had been a classmate of the victims and had a criminal history of sexual assault.

'Investigate Takimoto thoroughly.'

Ideuchi gave his orders, sending the investigation members scattering out of the conference room.

However, Gotou was against this method of investigation.

– Takimoto isn't the culprit.

Gotou was sure of that.

He had one reason. It was because the victims showed no signs of being sexually assaulted.

That meant it'd be difficult to think that Takimoto had gone to his classmates intent on sexual assault.

'This is too rushed.'

Even Gotou could tell. If Ideuchi were calm, he would have known that Takimoto wasn't the culprit too.

However, he was frantically trying to redeem himself and rushing ahead.

Stumbling in the first stages of the investigation made for a stormy voyage afterwards. A case in the past had proven that.

'Gotou!'

Just as Gotou was about to stand, somebody called out to him.

It was Matsumura.

'What? Don't startle me.'

Gotou spoke angrily, but Matsumura's eyes sparkled like those of a kid who had spotted a stag beetle.

'What are you saying? I'm the one who's surprised.'

'Eh?'

'You knew from the beginning, right? You really are a psychic detective.'

Matsumura grabbed Gotou's shoulders in an over-friendly manner and nodded a number of times.

'I have no idea what you're talking about. Explain properly!'

Matsumura's shoulders slumped, looking disappointed, and he held a file out in front of Gotou.

'The hell is this?'

'What do you mean by that? It's the case file you requested yesterday.'

'O-oh. Right.'

Gotou took the file from Matsumura and flipped it open. Then, he suddenly saw a girl in a uniform. A chill ran down his spine. He almost dropped the file.

She had a ponytail and a blazer uniform. She had a slender face and was looking down.

– No doubt about it.

Gotou had seen this girl at the park.

'So that really was it..' mumbled Gotou without thinking.

'I was surprised when I saw that to. The girl who died in that pond six years ago was in the same class as the two victims this time.'

'W-what did you say!? Is that true?'

Gotou was so shocked that he grabbed Matsumura by the collar.

'It's easy to check in the documents. Isn't that what you were suspecting?'

'Do I look that clever to you?'

Matsumura shook his head, like he didn't understand.

-

9

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Gotou looked at the documents for the case six years ago again.

The name of the girl whose corpse showed up in that pond was Hara Kimie. She had been fourteen then.

Her parents were divorced, and she had been staying with her father, Kazunori.

It must have been tough for a girl of that age to be living alone with her father.

She died from suffocation –

It was suspected to be murder when she was found.

There had been signs that there was a rope around her neck.

There were other reasons to suspect it was murder too.

Her father, Kazunori, had acted in an inexplicable way.

First, there was a two-day gap before he made a request for an investigation.

Furthermore, Kimie hadn't left a note behind, and there had been a considerable sum of insurance money.

At first, the police investigated her father, thinking he was the suspect, but then the case took an unexpected turn.

From the coroner's report, it was determined to be a suicide.

She had planned on killing herself, putting a rope on the branch of a cherry blossom tree, but the branch broke from the wait and she fell into the pond.

Kimie had looped the rope on the branch when she hanged herself, so after she fell, the rope fell as well. It was the truth.

The rope was found in the pond, and her homeroom teacher at the time said that Kimie had been bullied, so it was said that she had killed herself because of the bullying and the case was closed.

However, Gotou didn't accept that.

Gotou thought about talking to her homeroom teacher at the time, but when he saw that name, it felt like a revelation.

Gotou went right for Isshin's temple.

After climbing the steep slope, Gotou parked his car at the temple gates and went towards the priests' quarters past the gravel garden.

Gotou stopped in front of the entrance and pressed the intercom button. After a while, the sliding door opened.

Isshin showed up in his working robes.

He had a gentle smile that made you want to breathe a sigh of relief.

'It's you, Gotou-san?'

Isshin's expression went a bit stiff.

'There's something I want to talk to you about – that OK?'

'Please go ahead.'

With Isshin's invitation, Gotou went into the living room.

'Don't worry about me,' said Gotou, but Isshin prepared tea and snacks and sat opposite Gotou, holding a crying child.

'That kid's that teacher's...'

'No, she's our child,' Isshin said firmly, as if it were a matter of fact.

– What a great monk.

Gotou smiled wryly.

Even though Isshin had liked her, they weren't related by blood. And that woman was already dead.

Isshin had known that and taken this kid in anyway. Gotou couldn't say anything in his astonishment.

The other kid in this temple, Yakumo, wasn't Isshin's real child either. He was the kid of his older sister, who had tried to kill her own child.

Isshin's self-sacrificing spirit could fight with Gandhi's.

'Thank you very much for your help.'

Isshin bowed his head politely.

'I didn't do anything.'

Isshin was probably thanking Gotou for the issue with the marriage with Akemi, who had already died.

But Gotou didn't have the right to receive thanks for that.

The person who'd actually dealt with it wasn't Gotou but Miyagawa. Gotou didn't even know how Miyagawa had done it.

'I am truly grateful. It is thanks to you that I can hold this child like this,' said Isshin, patting the kid's head.

'Forget about that already,' Gotou said brusquely.

'All right.'

Isshin scratched his chin, seeming troubled.

Gotou noticed that there was a bandage around his right hand's palm.

'Did something happen to your hand?' asked Gotou, pointing with his chin.

'It's embarrassing. I accidentally cut it when chopping up cabbage.'

'Don't make things up. If you were chopping up cabbage, you'd cut your fingers, right?' rebutted Gotou.

Isshin imitated chopping vegetables with his hand and then said, 'Ah.' Then he cocked his head, looking troubled.

There wasn't any man worse at lying.

'Well, forget about that. I came here for another matter today.'

'Another matter?'

'Right. I want to talk to Yakumo.'

'Why?'

Isshin's eyes narrowed, like he had sensed Gotou's intentions.

He looked like a wary cat.

Gotou had wanted to talk to Yakumo without explaining his reason if possible. If he talked to Isshin, it was as clear as day that Isshin would refuse.

– Can't I make something up somehow?

Gotou thought about it, but he gave up immediately.

He was awful at lying – he could give Isshin a run for his money. It'd just make the situation worse if he made up an obvious lie.

Gotou cleared his throat and then went straight for the heart of the matter.

'Do you know about the incident with the girl's corpse at the park?'

'Yes, though only from what I've read in the newspaper...'

The conversation would be quick then.

Gotou took a photo from his pocket and placed it on the table.

The moment Isshin took the photo, his expression stiffened instantly.

'Spiritual photography...' said Isshin.

– The guy's quick.

It looked like he understood Gotou's intentions without his saying them.

'Yeah. Taken at the scene of the crime.'

'And?'

'That girl's ghost. She killed herself at that pond six years ago. And the victims this time were her classmates. Don't you think there's something there?'

'It's got nothing to do with Yakumo,' Isshin said quietly, placing the photo on the table again.

It sounded like a refusal.

'If Yakumo can really see ghosts, I want him to help.'

'Are you trying to use Yakumo?'

Isshin's expression didn't change as he looked Gotou in the eyes.

Even though Isshin wasn't threatening him or anything, there was a pressure that was above that.

'That's not...'

'Then what is it?' continued Isshin, his gaze hard.

'I can't explain it properly... I'm just concerned about that guy.'

'What are you concerned about?'

'To me, it looks like that guy's cursing himself to death.'

Maybe Gotou had said too much, but Isshin listened to Gotou silently.

'Looks like he's troubled by being able to see ghosts, but the way I see it, it's not that special. Actually, I think that if he has some special power that other people don't have, he should use it.'

'Which is why you're telling him to cooperate with the investigation?'

'Yeah, that's right.'

'It just sounds like you're trying to use him to me.'

Isshin sighed.

Perhaps he was disdainful of Gotou, but Isshin couldn't blame Gotou one-sidedly. The reason being –

'You used Yakumo during that teacher's case too, didn't you?'

Isshin was clearly glaring at Gotou.

'This is different from a test of courage. You can't involve him in a murder.'

Gotou understood how Isshin felt. But –

'You can't see this case isn't related to you.'

Isshin cocked his head.

'What do you mean?'

'The victim's teacher six years ago was that kid's mother.'

Gotou looked at the kid Isshin was holding to his chest.

'Akemi-chan's..'

'You curious, right?'

There was a suffocating silence –

Gotou held his breath as he waited for Isshin's reply.

Finally, Isshin said these words, as if they were wrung out of him. '... If that's the case, I'll cooperate on Yakumo's behalf.'

A choice appropriate for Isshin –

But this wasn't like grunt work. It wasn't like anybody would do. It had to be Yakumo.

Gotou opened his mouth to object when –

The sliding door opened.

'It would just be a waste of time if you went, Uncle. You can't see anything.'

Yakumo was standing there.

His eyes were narrowed as he ran a hand through his hair, looking annoyed.

'No, but...'

Isshin looked at Yakumo and started to speak, but then he sighed and dropped his shoulders when nothing else came out.

'Take me to the place where the ghost was,' Yakumo said disinterestedly.

Though the damn brat's attitude irritated Gotou, he was grateful that Yakumo was sticking his neck in. It'd probably be better to move before the contrary kid's mood changed.

'Got it,' replied Gotou, standing up.

'Yakumo, you shouldn't say things like that so simply. It'll be dangerous,' interrupted Isshin, looking like he still didn't accept it.

'Danger is everywhere,' rebutted Yakumo.

It didn't sound like an offhand phrase.

'Exactly. I don't want you to run towards danger yourself,' continued Isshin, standing up.

'You said this yourself yesterday, didn't you, Uncle? That there was some reason I could see ghosts. I'll confirm that reason for myself. That's all.'

'But...'

'Is there really a reason for my left eye? If I don't look for that answer, I won't find it. And I'm also concerned about Sensei.'

Yakumo interrupted Isshin, turned around and left the room.

'I'm accountable too, for wrapping him up in this. I'll definitely protect Yakumo,' Gotou declared firmly.

'I'll count on you.'

Gotou accepted Isshin's humble request and left the room.

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10

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Gotou explained everything that had happened so far to Yakumo as he drove his car to the park.

In the passenger seat, Yakumo looked forward as he silently listened to Gotou talk.

'I think the girl who killed herself six years ago has something to do with this time's case.'

Gotou offered his own opinion after explaining and put a cigarette in his mouth.

'Let me say one thing.'

Yakumo looked at Gotou coldly.

'What?'

'If you light that, I'll get off the car right now.'

'Ah, my bad. So what do you think?'

– What a fussy brat.

Gotou put the cigarette back in the case and asked a question instead.

'What about?'

– Wasn't he listening?

'I'm saying the case from six years ago might be related to the case this time.'

'What do you mean?' said Yakumo, yawning as if he was bored.

Even though he must have known from the flow of the conversation. He was making Gotou say it on purpose.

'I'm saying that I think the culprit this time might be a ghost.'

The truth was Gotou didn't want to believe it either.

However, he thought that way after so many strange things had happened.

'Do you really think a ghost killed someone?'

'Like I could say that as a joke.'

If the culprit this time were a ghost, how would the police handle the case? That thought suddenly came to Gotou's head.

'You're really...' muttered Yakumo.

He spoke so quietly that Gotou couldn't hear the important part.

'Eh? What'd you say?'

'I said that you're really an idiot.'

'Who are you calling an idiot!?'

– There had to be a better way to say it.

Gotou yelled in anger without thinking.

'Don't yell in the car.'

Yakumo put his fingers in his ears.

'How the hell can you call an adult an idiot!? An idiot!?'

'Don't make me say the same thing again and again. If you think a ghost's killed someone, you've

watched too many horror films. Ghosts are the emotions left behind by people when they die and lose their bodies.'

'People's emotions?'

Gotou had the feel of it, but he repeated the words, unable to understand.

'Yeah. That's why...'

Yakumo swallowed the words he was about to say. He narrowed his eyes and stared at Gotou's face.

However, he didn't say anything else. He shook his head in exasperation and stayed silent.

– What the hell is up with this brat?

'If you've got something to say, say it.'

'Saying it would be pointless. Your brain wouldn't be able to understand.'

– Oh, that was quite a mouth.

Gotou thought about giving him a good punch, but he decided against it.

There was what happened last time. Yakumo wasn't the type of guy who'd talk after being hit.

Just as Gotou let out a sigh, he spotted the park –

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11

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Gotou got off the car and brought Yakumo into the park.

Once Yakumo stepped into the park, he started walking briskly, as if something was leading him.

He passed the management office and turned right at the pond.

'Here...' murmured Yakumo as he stopped.

There was a cherry blossom tree there with branches hanging over the pond.

Exactly where the corpse was found –

Yakumo's gaze was looking straight at the water.

– Can he see something?

Gotou wanted to ask, but the air about Yakumo was as cold and sharp as a knife – Gotou couldn't even approach.

'Who are you?' said Yakumo, still looking at the pond.

But there was nobody in the pond. Just two ducks on the water.

'Why are you here?'

Yakumo's questions continued.

The dry wind made ripples in the water.

'I see... So that's how it was...'

After saying that in a faint voice, Yakumo slowly closed his eyes.

It was hard to approach him, as if he were meditating.

'Thank you for your hard work.'

Gotou turned around at the sudden voice.

Standing there was the first at the scene, Fumiko.

'Oh, it's you?'

'I apologise for last time.'

Fumiko let go of the wheelbarrow she was holding, took off her hat and bowed her head.

'What are you talking about?'

'Er... Because I talked about something strange to a detective...' Fumiko said in a small voice as her brows furrowed.

'Don't worry about it. Anyway, did you see it after?'

For a moment, Fumiko looked surprised.

'See what?'

'The ghost.'

'A-ah. Actually, the day before yesterday, after you left, Detective...'

'Really?'

'That day, I ended up leaving the park at night. When I was heading home, I heard somebody wail out these words: "I'll kill you."'

'Oh...'

– It matches.

Gotou swallowed the words he was about to say.

A detective couldn't say he had seen a ghost in front of a civilian.

The ghost really was related to the case. Gotou was sure of it.

'If something like that happens again, contact me,' said Gotou, giving Fumiko his business card.

Then, he turned towards Yakumo again.

Since Yakumo hadn't said anything, Gotou had thought he'd been listening, but Yakumo was still looking out at the pond.

'How is it?'

'Just as you said, there is a girl's spirit wandering this park,' replied Yakumo, still looking at the pond.

– So I was right.

'Why's that girl's ghost wandering here?' asked Gotou.

'She has a strong hatred...'

Yakumo looked down.

He looked sad.

'Hatred?'

'Yes. But at the bottom of that hatred, there is sadness and loneliness.'

Sadness and loneliness at the bottom of hatred –

Gotou couldn't understand such delicate emotional states, but if that ghost had a strong hatred –

'So that ghost really did kill those two girls?'

The moment Gotou said that, Yakumo's expression twisted, like he was looking at something filthy.

'Is that something a detective should say? When did the police become so irresponsible?'

– This brat! Every time I let him speak!

Gotou's anger had reached its peak.

'You're the one who said the ghost was wandering in hatred!'

'I don't recall saying that the ghost killed anybody. And ghosts can't kill people anyway.'

– Can't kill?

Yakumo had said the same thing earlier.

'What do you mean?'

'I don't mean anything. I said that ghosts were clusters of people's emotions, right?'

'Yeah.'

'They aren't new life forms or demons. They're like residual thoughts. That's why we can't touch them. On the other hand, they can't touch us. If they can't have physical contact, it's impossible for them to kill.'

Yakumo spoke in a disinterested tone, like he was reciting a boring book.

'That so?'

'I think so.'

Gotou wasn't an expert.

But if somebody who could see them was saying that, it was probably right.

'Then is that ghost unrelated to the case?'

'You really are dumb.'

'What?'

– The guy really just gets on my nerves.

'Just because the ghost didn't kill them directly doesn't mean the ghost is unrelated. A detective would be shocked if they heard you.'

Now that Yakumo said that, it was true, but Gotou didn't like the way he talked.

'Even without your concern, I am a detective.'

'I don't know about that.'

'You – if you don't stop that, I'll punch you!'

Gotou raised his fist in his anger.

'Do it if you want,' Yakumo said expressionlessly.

Nobody would want to punch somebody after hearing that.

Gotou kicked the ground.

'More importantly, do you have the documents for the case from six years ago?'

Yakumo changed the subject, paying no heed to Gotou's anger.

'In the car.'

'Show them to me,' Yakumo said matter-of-factly.

'You make it sound so simple. There's no way I can show investigation files to a civilian.'

'Isn't asking a civilian to help with an investigation also a problem? What are you saying after already involving me this much?'

Though Yakumo's tone irritated Gotou, it was just as he said.

– Being with this guy knocks me off my stride.

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12

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Gotou went back to the car and handed the investigation file to Yakumo.

Yakumo's lips moved occasionally as he looked at the documents with a serious gaze. The look matched him.

You couldn't tell who the detective was.

'I see...'

Yakumo nodded and looked up.

'Find something out?'

'I found out that your reading comprehension is lower than that of an elementary school student's.'

'Whose reading comprehension is low?'

– This guy has a comment for everything.

'You, obviously. Did you look at this file properly?'

'Of course I did,' Gotou responded confidently, but Yakumo sighed in exasperation.

That attitude spurred Gotou's anger further.

'You said that girl's homeroom teacher six years ago was Takagishi-sensei, right?'

'Yeah.'

– I did say that.

That was why Gotou thought that the case wasn't unrelated to Yakumo. Yakumo knew that and agreed to cooperate.

Gotou didn't think Yakumo would point that out now.

Gotou was drawing a blank as Yakumo pointed at part of the file.

The name written there was –

'This is read Takamine Tomomi,' said Yakumo.

'Ah!'

– I got it wrong.

That teacher's name was Takagishi Akemi.

'Well, the characters look similar, don't they?'¹

'They don't. Even an elementary student wouldn't get that wrong.'

That was an awful way of putting it.

However, Gotou was the one who got it wrong. He couldn't talk back.

'Well, it's fine, right?'

1 For comparison, here is Takagishi Akemi (高岸明美) and Takamine Tomomi (高峰朋美) in kanji.

'It isn't fine,' Yakumo said, cutting him down.

'Everybody makes mistakes. Anyway, did you find anything else out?'

Gotou tried to force the conversation along, but Yakumo shut his mouth and glared at him.

As long as Akemi wasn't related to the case, Yakumo had no duty or responsibility to stick his nose into the case.

But Gotou couldn't back down after coming this far.

'Don't glare at me like that. You're already a part of this. If you leave this now, you won't be able to sleep at night, right? You got on the ship already. Help me out.'

Gotou tried his best to convince Yakumo.

Yakumo looked dispirited, his mouth still shut.

Yakumo had always shut himself in his shell like this. By doing that, he could protect himself, but on the other hand, he couldn't change the situation.

'You going to run again?'

It slipped out of Gotou's mouth.

'What did you say?'

Yakumo looked suspicious.

It was like he didn't think Gotou would have said that, but Gotou didn't stop.

'I said, are you going to run again? That teacher didn't run. But you're running from your own fate.'

Gotou knew the words were harsh, but he said it all at once.

Yakumo's gonna be furious – is what Gotou thought, but unexpectedly, there was no response.

Yakumo covered his face with both hands and looked down.

Gotou didn't know what Yakumo was thinking right now. He waited for Yakumo to talk.

After a silence, Yakumo lifted his head slowly and said, 'I want to meet the father of the girl who died sixteen years ago.'

His expression was blank as usual. There was no way for Gotou to understand what thoughts had led Yakumo to that conclusion.

'That really OK?'

'You're the one who asked me to help, right?'

Yakumo's lips formed a sulky scowl.

'Right. Let's meet her dad.'

Gotou started the car before Yakumo changed his mind.

After driving about ten minutes from the park, they reached the home they were looking for.

It was at the corner of a quiet residential street on the top of a hill.

It had probably been ready-built. All the houses looked the same, making it more time than expected to find the house they were looking for.

They stopped behind the house and looked at the house through the front glass.

It was a two-storey house with a tiled roof. It was probably the size of a 3LDK.

At the front of the house, there was a sorry-looking garden.

It wasn't well kept – weeds grew wild.

It wasn't just the garden that was in disrepair. The walls were stained and cracked in places, and the gates were also rusted.

The file was from six years ago. The guy might not be living here any more.

Then they would have to start from finding out his address.

'This the place?' said Yakumo in the passenger seat, sounding displeased.

'Says so in the file, but he might've moved...'

'Then you can go check, right?'

Yakumo pointed at the house with his chin.

– Man, this brat. Using the police like a gofer.

'You wait here.'

Gotou swallowed his anger and got off the car.

HE took the path through the premises and went to the entrance.

He saw the name 'Hara' on the mailbox by the gate.

Looked like he was still living here.

Gotou reached out to press the intercom button, but he suddenly thought of something.

Gotou didn't know what he'd say if he met Kazunori.

'What? Not going to go?'

Gotou heard a voice from behind him.

Gotou whipped around and spotted Yakumo standing there.

'I told you to wait in the car, didn't I?' Gotou said in a low voice.

'I don't remember saying I'd do as you say,' Yakumo said nonchalantly.

'Don't say that. What do you plan on asking the dad when you meet him anyway?'

'It's obvious, isn't it? I'm going to confirm how the girl died six years ago,' Yakumo said without any hesitation.

Even if it was an amateur's reasoning, Gotou couldn't ignore that.

'The case six years ago wasn't a suicide. You want to say that?'

'That's why I came all the way here to check, right?'

– Talking all high and mighty.

Gotou hadn't heard any explanation like that from Yakumo before coming here.

And Gotou didn't know why Yakumo doubted the cause of death either. Maybe Yakumo already had a grasp on something.

'You're hiding something from me, right?'

Gotou asked a leading question.

'Yeah, of course,' Yakumo replied calmly, with no shame at all.

'The hell do you mean, of course?! If you're hiding something, tell me!'

'I refuse!' declared Yakumo. Then, he opened the gates, went up to the front door, and pressed the intercom button without any hesitation whatsoever.

– The brat's more reckless than I thought.

Gotou hurriedly ran after Yakumo to the entrance.

However, no matter how long they waited, the door didn't open.

'He away?' muttered Gotou.

Strangely, it made him irritated that the guy wasn't here.

'Yeah.'

'Let's come again,' said Yakumo, but Yakumo looked dissatisfied as he stuck his hands in his pockets and looked up at the second floor without moving.

Even if they waited for the dad to come back, they'd just look suspicious if they stayed here at the entrance.

'Wait in the car.'

Gotou grabbed Yakumo's arm and brought him back to the car.

'So what are you going to do now?'

Gotou spoke to Yakumo in the passenger seat, but he didn't reply.

He crossed his arms and looked stubbornly at the house. He looked just like a sulky brat.

'Are you gay?'

'What?'

Gotou cocked his head without thinking and Yakumo's sudden words.

'Don't stare at people's faces. It's creepy,' said Yakumo.

There was a limit to how you could mock somebody.

'Who'd look at the face of a damn brat like you? My eyes would rot.'

Gotou looked away from Yakumo, turning his gaze towards the window.

There was a couple that looked like they were in middle school. They were flirting as they pushed their bicycles. Even though Yakumo was the same age, it was like he lived in a different dimension.

– Where and how did he go wrong?

There was no way for Gotou to know the answer to that.

'Can I ask one thing?'

Yakumo interrupted the silence with a question.

It might have been the first time Yakumo had asked Gotou a question.

'What?'

'Why are you following me around?'

Following around was an awful way of saying it.

But Gotou knew there was no helping it if Yakumo thought that way.

'No reason, really. I needed your ability to see ghosts. That's all.'

Gotou said that without thinking.

Even though he wanted to say something else, the words wouldn't come out properly.

Gotou always spoke curtly, unable to express his honest feelings to the person he was talking to.

He was bad at that sort of thing. It made him feel antsy.

'Didn't you not believe me when I said I could see ghosts?'

'I believe it now. Not happy with that?'

'So there are people like you too...'

Yakumo said that in a faint voice.

'Whaddaya mean by that?'

'That' you're an idiot unlike my uncle and Sensei.'

'How many times do you have to say "idiot" until you're happy!?' shouted Gotou. Yakumo put his hand up to stop him.

– Thump!

There was the sound of something hitting something else.

It sounded like it had come from Kazunori's house.

– Somebody there?

'Yakumo! You wait here!'

After giving those instructions, Gotou got off the car and sneaked onto the house premises.

After getting to the door and turning around, he saw Yakumo sitting in the car's passenger seat.

Looked like he was going to listen to what Gotou said this time.

Just as Gotou reached out to press the intercom button –

'Aaaagh!'

There was a yell from behind the door.

There was the sound of something falling.

– There's definitely somebody in the house.

'Police! open the door!' shouted Gotou. He turned the doorknob, but it was locked and wouldn't open.

He went around to the back and broke the living room window with his knee, breaking into the house.

He carefully passed through the living room and went into the corridor.

There, he spotted a man lying face-up.

He'd seen the guy before. It was Hara Kazunori.

Blood was flowing from his head.

'Oi! Hang in there!'

Gotou ran up and shook his shoulders.

However, there was no response.

He put his ear near his nose. There was the faint sound of breathing.

– He's still breathing.

Thump!

Just as Gotou stood up, intent on calling an ambulance, he heard something falling.

His throat went dry as he stopped.

– I was too careless.

From the situation, it was clear there was another person in the house.

– Where?

Gotou looked around.

His heartbeat quickened.

– Where are they?

Creak.

The floor creaked.

'Behind you!'

Gotou turned around at the yell.

Suddenly, a shovel came down on her.

He couldn't evade it completely, but it missed his face just by a bit.

It grazed his ear, hitting his shoulder.

Wham!

Along with that dull noise, the impact shook him, making him fall to the ground.

In the corner of his vision, he saw somebody running around, hunched over. Gotou tried to chase them, but his body wouldn't move properly and he couldn't stand up.

'Damn it! Wait!' yelled Gotou as he pressed a hand against his shoulder. It was all he could do.

'No culprit would wait after being told to wait.'

At some point, Yakumo had entered the living room.

It looked like Yakumo had been the one who said 'Behind you!' earlier. Thanks to him, Gotou's life had been saved. But –

'I said to wait in the car, right?'

'I'll say this again, but I won't listen to your instructions,' said Yakumo with no shame.

'Damn, what a contrary brat you are.'

Gotou smiled wryly.

'I don't want to hear that from an adult who would cry just from being hit by a shovel.'

– Oh, that's quite a mouth.

Gotou gritted his teeth, bearing the pain as he sat up.

A cold sweat ran down his back.

'Did you see the face of the guy who hit me earlier?' asked Gotou as his face twisted in pain.

'You didn't see it when you were at such a close distance?'

Yakumo responded to the question with a question.

– This is why I hate youngsters.

'I was suddenly hit by a shovel. I didn't have the time for that.'

'Police are unexpectedly weak.'

'Stop that... Ow...'

Gotou was about to yell, but his voice didn't come out properly in his pain.

Yakumo snorted mockingly.

– This brat really gets on my nerves.

-

14

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The residential street, which had been quiet, became as loud as a festival.

There were ambulances, police cars and curious onlookers.

Kazunori regained consciousness before the ambulance came, but he didn't seem to be all there – he didn't respond to any of Gotou's questions.

After Kazunori was carried away, Gotou was interrogated by the uniformed officers.

– What happened here?

– What sort of incident is this?

– What should we do?

Gotou ignored all the questions and ran back to his car.

Gotou himself didn't know what was happening.

In the car, Yakumo was sitting in the passenger seat, staring with a serious gaze at what looked like a notebook.

'What are you reading?'

Yakumo sighed, sounding annoyed.

'The diary of the girl who died six years ago.'

'Diary?'

'Yeah.'

He said it so matter-of-factly.

'Where the hell did you get that from?'

'It was in the pocket of the man who fainted.'

– Stealing in front of a detective. This guy had some guts.

Gotou was more astonished than angry.

'Give that back right now!'

Gotou thought that Yakumo would refuse, but Yakumo readily threw the diary onto the dashboard.

'Aren't you being obedient today?'

'I don't need it – I'm already done reading.'

I see, so that's why. So –

'Find anything out?'

'Yeah. Just as I theorised from the story.'

Though those words would normally sound like boasting, from Yakumo, it was strange how they were convincing.

'That makes it sound like you already know the culprit, doesn't it?'

'Of course.'

Though Gotou had said that sarcastically, Yakumo readily agreed.

'If you know, tell me!'

'That isn't necessary. The case will be solved tomorrow.'

It sounded like a prophecy.

'What do you mean?'

'I don't mean anything by it. The culprit will commit suicide. That's why the case will be over.'

'S-s-suicide!? Why is that gonna happen? Where the hell is the culprit?'

Gotou was so agitated that he grabbed Yakumo's shoulders and shook him.

However, it didn't look like Yakumo wanted to answer, looking away from Gotou.

It felt like he knew but didn't want to talk.

'Hey! What is this? Tell me!' continued Gotou, shaking Yakumo's shoulders more.

'What do you plan to do once you know?'

Yakumo's cold gaze pierced threw Gotou.

Gotou was at a loss for words for a moment at the unexpected question, but he knew the answer.

'I'm obviously going to catch them.'

'If they want to die, why not just let them die? They're a murderer. No need to get so worked up,' Yakumo said disinterestedly.

Gotou had thought he'd become closer to Yakumo, but he felt like he'd been pushed away all at once.

'Y-you seriously saying that...'

'Naturally. No matter what's said, it's got nothing to do with me.'

Yakumo's words made Gotou's anger flare up.

'You – you can't just keep going like that! It's not all right for anybody in this world to die! Why don't you get that when you can see ghosts!? What the hell have you been looking at this whole time, huh!? Answer me!'

Gotou punched Yakumo's left cheek, his emotions spilling over.

He was acting childish towards a brat. He knew that.

But he just couldn't forgive him.

Yakumo could see ghosts. His parent had almost killed him. Other people looked at him strangely. He'd lived this way his whole life. He knew how important life was more than anyone. That was what Gotou had thought.

And yet –

The flame of anger burning within Gotou soon turned into disillusionment.

– I might've overestimated Yakumo.

'What...'

Yakumo's lips moved as he looked down.

'If you got something to say, say it clearly!'

Gotou brought his face up close to Yakumo's and yelled.

Yakumo slowly lifted his head.

His contact lens was off.

Yakumo was looking at him with his deep red left eye –

'What do you know?' said Yakumo, like the words were strangled out of him.

'Hah?'

'If you think everyone in this world wants to live, you're completely off-base. There are people who want to die and be released.'

– People who want to die.

It was like he was talking about himself.

But Gotou wouldn't accept that way of thinking.

'It's got nothing to do with me if they want to die! If a life is about to be lost in front of me, I'll save it! It's not logic or anything! It's how I live!'

'You're acting so patronising – you couldn't save Sensei, right!?'

Yakumo's yell was close to a scream.

His red eye flickered like fire.

It was true. Gotou hadn't been able to save Akemi.

All I could do was watch the blood leave her body as she died –

If he'd noticed Shimomura with the knife earlier, Akemi might have been smiling with Yakumo now.

When Gotou thought that, his regret was infinite. But that was why –

'Shut up! I'll save them this time!' shouted Gotou.

– I refuse to have anyone die in front of me again.

Gotou had vowed that after that case. He wouldn't let anyone die in front of his eyes again.

'Even if you did save them this time, they're a murderer. They killed two people intentionally – they won't be able to escape the death penalty.'

'So what?'

'Then even if you save them now, they're just going to die in the end. It's meaningless.'

– No point since the results are the same?

Gotou couldn't think that way.

'Like I care! No matter what the results of the trial, I'm just going to run down my own path!'

Though Gotou yelled that in his agitation, but he felt like what he was saying was just ego.

Just as Yakumo said, people who wanted to die might be happier if they were allowed to. Gotou knew that. But he just couldn't accept that.

Gotou gripped his fists tightly.

'Are you an idiot?' said Yakumo, looking at Gotou like he was something filthy.

'So what if I'm an idiot!? It's better than being some bastard who knows something but ignores it!'

Arguing further would just be a waste of time.

Anyway, if the real culprit was going to commit suicide, Gotou had to stop them –

'Get off.'

Gotou gave Yakumo an order.

'What are you going to do after I get off?'

'It's obvious, isn't it? Look for the culprit.'

Yakumo smiled.

'Where?'

'Like I know! I'm just going to do what I can! That's all!'

Yakumo took in a deep breath and looked straight at Gotou, like he had come to a decision.

The coldness from earlier was gone.

They were bright eyes, like he'd snapped out of something.

'The park where the corpse was found. That's where the culprit is,' said Yakumo.

Gotou was shocked by Yakumo's words, which were the opposite of what he said before. He stared at Yakumo's face.

'This isn't the time to be slacking off, right?'

Yakumo looked out the window, like he felt awkward, and crossed his arms, leaning back on the passenger seat.

Looked like he didn't plan on getting off the car.

– Look a bit more proper now, don't you?

Gotou murmured that in his heart and started the car.

– Sensei. Looks like your hopes weren't wrong.

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'Why's the culprit trying to commit suicide?'

While driving the car, Gotou asked Yakumo that question.

Gotou had accepted Yakumo's words through the sheer force of them earlier, but now that he thought more about it, there was no way for Yakumo to read so deeply into the culprit's psyche that he'd know that the culprit would commit suicide.

And the basic questions of who the culprit was and what their intentions were still weren't clear.

'This case was an act of revenge,' said Yakumo, raising his left eyebrow.

'Act of revenge... who for?'

'Obviously the girl who committed suicide six years ago.'

'That girl was actually murdered... You saying that?'

When Gotou said the words that came to his head, Yakumo let out a dramatic sigh, as if he didn't know what to do with Gotou.

'You're jumping to conclusions. Do you always daydream?'

Anger swelled up within Gotou.

– This guy always says one thing too many.

'You just said it right now, didn't you? That it was the revenge of the girl who was killed six years ago.'

'I did, but I never said she was killed. She definitely committed suicide.'

'What's your evidence for that?'

'It was written in her diary. She was suffering from bullying. She even wrote the names of her bullies and what they did to her. Which is why...'

Yakumo stopped talking.

It seemed like he was hesitating about whether to continue.

'Which is why what?'

When Gotou urged Yakumo to continue, he shook his head in resignation and started speaking again.

'Which is why the culprit wrote words into the victims' backs with a knife and sewed their lips shut.'

Just hearing it was enough to give Gotou shivers.

In the back of his head, the two victims' awful injuries came up. Their backs had been cut with a knife, making the skin turn up. Their lips had been sewn together –

And that was all done when they were alive.

'So that was revenge...'

Yakumo nodded.

'Her bullies stuck a paper saying "UGLY DIE" on her back and taped her mouth shut – that was how she was bullied.'

Was that a joke? That was too much for revenge.

Thinking about it was enough to make Gotou feel disgusted.

'And one more thing. She did leave behind a suicide note.'

'Wait a sec. There was no note at the scene.'

What Yakumo was talking about right now was definitely not in the investigation files.

The will hadn't been found during the investigation.

'There was a note. On the last page of the diary.'

As Yakumo said that, he took the diary on the dashboard and flipped open to the last page, showing Gotou.

There was only a short sentence .

<It looks like I have no worth as a human being – >

Though it used abstract language, it did sound like a suicide note.

'Why'd the cops overlook this diary?'

'You're a cop too, aren't you? There's something wrong with asking a middle school student that.'

It was as Yakumo said, but what Gotou didn't know, he didn't know.

'If you know, tell me!'

'It's a simple story. Her dad hid this diary.'

By dad, Yakumo must have meant Kazunori, who had collapsed earlier.

'Why?'

'Proof that you weren't looking at the files properly. It was for insurance.'

'Insurance...'

'Yeah. That girl got insurance a year before she died. If there's suicide within two years of the start of the contract...'

Yakumo started the sentence, but Gotou could understand even without the rest.

'If it's an accident or a murder, there's insurance money. That's why he hid the diary with the suicide note?'

When those words came out of Gotou's mouth, he shivered.

Even though his own daughter had committed suicide, Kazunori hadn't been sad about it – he had contrived to get the insurance money.

The face Kazunori had had then, of laughter and tears, flashed through Gotou's head.

– It looks like I have no worth as a human being.

The girl's cry rang in Gotou's heart.

'What the hell does everything think a human life is!?'

With no outlet for his anger, Gotou honked the horn with as much force as he could.

'Follow me.'

After Gotou stopped the car at the park entrance, Yakumo said that and started moving.

'Can't tell which one of us is the detective.'

Gotou stifled his wry laughter and followed Yakumo.

They passed the management office and went to the bank opposite the entrance when Yakumo suddenly stopped.

Gotou calmed his breathing while looking around.

This was where the two corpses had been found.

There was the old cherry blossom tree with its branches reaching over the pond.

'I know you're there. Why not come out?'

Yakumo called out towards the tree.

After a silence, a person appeared from the tree's shadow.

Under the moonlight, their face became clear.

Gotou had seen the woman before.

'You're...'

It was the cleaner, Fumiko.

She had a hatchet in her right hand and was looking at them with a beastly glare. If they turned around, it felt like she'd rush right at them.

She seemed like a completely different person from whom he'd seen at the management office.

'You can't be saying she's the culprit?'

Gotou said that before thinking.

'That's how it is,' said Yakumo, his eyes narrowing.

This wasn't an impulsive murder. It was an awful premeditated one. There was no way some middle-aged woman could do that.

'I don't understand. What the hell is going on?'

'There's nothing to understand. Being able to walk around the park without seeming suspicious means that the culprit can only be police or a park employee. She brought the second corpse into the park without being suspected.'

'Brought in, you say, but how? There were two officers at the entrance.'

'It's not like police checked her belongings. She could just put the corpse into some beat-up bag and carry it in using a wheelbarrow.'

Gotou recalled how Fumiko had been pushing a wheelbarrow last time. He'd even heard her say she was tending the plants or something. That was why nobody had suspected her.

The logic was sound. But –

'You said this case was revenge for the girl who killed herself six years ago, right?'

'Yeah, I did,' Yakumo said like it was a matter of fact.

'Then isn't it strange? There's no reason for Fumiko to take revenge.'

'It's because you get your heart stuck on things that you miss the truth,' declared Yakumo, raising his left eyebrow and slowly lifting his arm to point at Fumiko.

Fumiko's expression twisted in hatred.

'She's the mother of the girl who killed herself.'

'W-w-w-what!?'

Gotou thought his chin might drop off in his shock.

– Fumiko is Kimie's mother?

She only lived with her father – no, that wasn't it.

She had a mother. Her parents got divorced and then she lived only with her father.

But –

'Yakumo! Don't just say things! You don't have proof, right? Proof!'

'I do have proof. When we came to this pond in the day, we met her, right? At the time, my eye saw the girl who committed suicide, and she said this.'

Yakumo stopped speaking and looked at Fumiko challengingly.

The silence was so suffocating Gotou thought that he would stop breathing.

“Mum” ...'

Even though Yakumo didn't speak loudly, this words echoed in Gotou's heart.

The tree rustled.

'I-i-is that true?'

Gotou's mouth was dry – his tongue wouldn't work properly.

'They drove my daughter to her death. It's the same as killing her. It makes sense for them to die,' said Fumiko in a low moan.

It sounded like a painful cry.

As revenge for her daughter, who had killed herself, she had killed the two people who had bullied her.

Then, she tried to kill Kazunori, who hadn't only done nothing even though his daughter had been being bullied, but had even contrived to get insurance money.

So that's how it is –

Then it was the end of that.

Gotou wouldn't let this go on any longer.

'Confess like an adult. Atone for your crimes.'

Fumiko shut her eyes and laughed when Gotou said that.

It was cold laughter to froze him to his core.

'I shouldn't be atoning my crime for the police or the court.'

As she said that, Fumiko raised the right hand she was holding that hatchet in.

'Oi! Stop that! Don't wave that thing around!'

Gotou tried to go up to her to calm her down, but Fumiko just became more agitated, waving the hatchet back and forth.

– I can't get close to her like this.

However, it was different for Yakumo.

He didn't look concerned at all as he slowly started walking towards Fumiko, who was waving the hatchet.

'Yakumo! Stop! It's dangerous!'

However, Yakumo didn't listen. Step by step, he went up to Fumiko.

– Damn it. This guy is a real handful.

'Aaaaaaaahhh!'

With determination, Gotou ran up to Yakumo while shouting and rushed into Fumiko, who was waving the hatchet.

The blade of the hatchet hit his right arm, breaking through the skin and hitting the bone.

A fierce pain jolted through him, but Gotou still didn't stop his charge.

His body slammed into Fumiko's.

The hatchet fell to the grass and Fumiko fell backwards.

An amazing amount of blood was flowing out of his arm. Gotou hurriedly put pressure on the

injury.

'You really are an idiot. She wasn't going to attack us. It was just intimidation...' said Yakumo, sounding exasperated as he ran a hand through his hair.

'What did you say?'

'I said this at the beginning, right? The culprit planned to commit suicide. And earlier – “I shouldn't be atoning my crime for the police or the court.” She said that herself...'

'What does that mean?'

When Gotou asked that, Yakumo said 'You really have no comprehensive faculty' before continuing.

'She had two goals for this incident – to take revenge for her daughter and to ask for forgiveness.'

'Ask for forgiveness? Her daughter killed herself because of bullying, right?' said Gotou as he bore with the pain in his arm.

'Bullying was a large reason behind the suicide, but not everyone who's bullied commits suicide. In the end, she decided to commit suicide because of her attitude.'

When Yakumo said that, he looked down on Fumiko with his red left eye.

Fumiko turned away, as if to escape that gaze.

'What do you mean?'

'You had a divorce because you had a lover. The father, Kazunori, ended up with the rights to the child. This isn't a great way to say it, but you left your daughter behind.'

Fumiko stood up without saying anything.

'According to the diary, before she killed herself, she called her mother – you – for advice. At the time, you didn't try to listen to your daughter's worries. At the time, this was what you said: “I'm busy, so talk to me later.” Right?'

Not only had she abandoned her daughter and run to her lover, she had even pushed her daughter away when she was suffering?

But Fumiko probably hadn't even dreamt that that would have caused her daughter to kill herself.

I want to believe that –

Fumiko covered her ears with her palm, as if she didn't want to hear any of it.

However, Yakumo continued anyway.

'The next day, she committed suicide. Neither her father nor mother saved her. Nobody needed her. She thought that and hanged herself at this pond. As the last part of her revenge, you thought you would take your own life. Right?'

Fumiko continued to shake her head as she looked down.

Gotou understood now. Fumiko's revenge wasn't just against the classmates who bullied her daughter and the father who contrived to get insurance money from his daughter's death, but also herself, for not listening to her daughter's plea.

Damn it. How stupid could people be –

'You don't know why your daughter chose to kill herself here, right?'

Fumiko looked up at Yakumo's quiet words.

'You came here to view the cherry blossoms as a family before. That was the last time you went out with all three of you...'

The old cherry blossom tree, branches hanging over the pond.

Fumiko hugged her shoulders as her body shook.

Her breathing was ragged as she gasped for breath.

'Even after you left home, your daughter always kept that memory. Not just the day she died – she came here countless times.'

Yakumo took the diary out of his pocket, flipped open to the first page and showed it to Fumiko.

Fumiko took the diary with shaking hands.

There was a photo there.

A sunny spring day. Underneath the cherry blossom tree, there was a family of three sitting on a picnic sheet, eating lunchboxes.

They looked like a warm and happy family.

Where had they gone wrong –

'This is a message from your daughter. She says she doesn't want you to die.'

When Fumiko heard that, she burst into tears.

Her body seemed to shrivel before them.

'Aaahhhh!'

Fumiko clung to the tree trunk and let out a beastly howl.

For just a moment, Gotou felt like he saw cherry blossom petals fluttering down.

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A paramedic treated Gotou's arm.

Though the blood had stopped, it still hurt like mad.

For three days, the pond had been surrounded by people from the police.

It really was an unpleasant case. Fumiko had been taken in by the police, looking like an empty shell.

'Oi, Gotou.'

Matsumura walked up to him with a broad smile.

'An annoying guy's come,' muttered Gotou, lighting his cigarette.

'You really do have spiritual powers. You solved the case from a ghost photo – that's amazing.'

Matsumura was so excited it felt like he'd start jumping at any moment.

– This guy's made an incredible misunderstanding.

Gotou thought that he should explain properly, but he didn't feel like it.

'That's not it.'

He dealt with it in an offhand manner and went to the floating pier, where Yakumo was.

Yakumo was staring at the pond sorrowfully. He didn't look like a middle school student at all.

'Sorry about this time.'

Gotou spoke as cheerfully as he could.

Yakumo continued to look at the pond like he hadn't noticed at all.

– Now that the case is over, what's this guy thinking?

'Should I have done that?' Yakumo said in a voice that sounded like it could fade away at any moment.

Was it really correct for him to involve himself in this case – that was probably what Yakumo was worrying about.

'It's fine, right? The case is solved.'

Gotou wasn't trying to make Yakumo feel better – he really thought that.

'Even if I weren't here, the police would have solved the case eventually.'

What was he acting so weak for?

'The case was solved much faster than it would've been if the police were investigating.'

'That's not the problem.'

'Yeah, it is. It's because you were here that Hara Kazunori didn't die. If we weren't there, he definitely would've been killed, right? And Fumiko didn't kill herself either.'

Yakumo had saved the lives of two people.

That was enough.

'But she wanted to die. Living will just make her suffer more. It would've been easier for her to die...'

Nobody could decide whether living or dying would make someone happier.

But it was better than regretting not doing anything afterwards.

Even if that was just ego. And –

'The daughter didn't want her mother to die, right? You granted that wish, so it's good.'

Gotou patted Yakumo's shoulder.

'You're really simple.'

When Yakumo turned around, it looked like he was smiling just a bit.

Though it might have just been Gotou's eyes playing tricks on him –

'I don't like complicated things.'

'Think with your own head next time. This is the last time I'll help,' said Yakumo, narrowing his eyes.

– Man, he always says one thing too many.

'Got it. This is the last time. Let's have a nice long chat next time, when there's no case.'

'I refuse!'

After saying that, Yakumo turned around and walked away slowly.

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At the time, Gotou didn't think that he'd break his promise with Yakumo –

the cry of the dead: epilogue

-

'And then you broke that promise, Gotou-san, and kept bringing cases to Yakumo-kun,' said Haruka, after Gotou had finished.

'Shut up. You do the same thing, right?'

Gotou snorted.

When Haruka saw his expression, she couldn't help but laugh.

Though Gotou was clumsy about it, by connecting with Yakumo through cases, he was watching over him in his own way, probably.

– Yakumo definitely understands that kindness too.

Haruka felt that way.

That was why Gotou helped out with cases even while complaining, and through that, he faced other people, and then himself.

'I wonder why?' said Haruka without thinking.

Gotou looked at Haruka with a blank expression.

'What?'

'He's so contrary, curt and hateful – I was just wondering why people gathered around him.'

It was an honest question.

'Probably because he knows other people's pain better than anyone,' replied Gotou, expression turning grim.

'Pain?'

'Yeah. Not just the way he grew up and how his mother tried to kill him. By seeing the ghosts of unhappy people, he knows people's pain better than anyone.'

'I see...'

Haruka understood where Gotou was coming from.

Yakumo's red left eye had seen many people's lives and deaths. Going against fate frantically only to result in sadness – Yakumo knew the feeling.

It was probably because Yakumo was like that that people who had the same pain were drawn to him.

Of course, that includes myself –

'We're here.'

Gotou's voice brought Haruka back to reality.

'Sorry for the trouble. Thank you very much.'

Haruka bowed her head towards Gotou as she got off the car.

'I'll see you later then.'

Gotou waved and drove off.

– I'll see you later then.

Those words were like a symbol for Gotou.

They hadn't made a promise to meet up again, but he didn't say goodbye. It was because they were definitely going to meet again.

'See you,' said Haruka, watching the car's taillights as it drove off.

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– I'll go meet up with Yakumo again too.

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E X T R A FILE

extra file: attraction

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It was the day after Haruka heard the story of Yakumo's past at Isshin's temple –

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Haruka visited Yakumo's secret hideaway.

She didn't have any business with him, really. She wanted to hear about Yakumo's past from his own mouth. She went with that desire.

'Yakumo-kun, you here?'

Haruka opened the door, but she stopped herself when she realised that there was already another guest.

The woman sitting opposite Yakumo turned around.

She had curled her dyed brown hair and wore sharp makeup, like something out of a fashion magazine.

She didn't match with Yakumo's dreary room.

After looking a bit surprised by Haruka, the woman nodded. Haruka was confused, but she returned the nod.

Yakumo crossed his arms and sat there looking dissatisfied. The woman's eyes seemed to be a bit teary.

– The mood's so heavy. It feels like some dreadful scene of romance gone wrong.

When Haruka thought that, for some reason, she felt uncomfortable.

'Sorry, I'll come back later.'

Haruka backed away to escape.

'There's no need for you to leave.'

Unexpectedly, it was Yakumo who stopped her.

'Ah, but...'

Haruka looked at the woman.

She didn't leave her seat. It looked like she still had things to talk about.

'It's fine. She's done talking.'

Yakumo spoke in an unusually firm tone.

'Yes, I'm finished...' said the woman, sounding resigned. She stood up from her seat.

The woman looked at Yakumo for a while as she stood, like she hoped he would stop her, but

Yakumo let out a yawn, seeming incredibly uninterested.

The woman sighed, like she had lost something. Then, she turned on her heels and walked out of the room with a brisk pace.

Haruka saw the woman biting her lip as she passed her. It looked like she was crying.

Only the sweet smell of the woman's perfume remained in the room –

'Hey, is that OK?' pressed Haruka, putting both hands on the table and leaning forward.

'Is what OK?' repeated Yakumo as he yawned.

'That person.'

'Why?'

'Why – because it looked like she was crying...'

Yakumo shook his head in exasperation at Haruka's protest and tapped the photo on top of the table with his finger.

The photo had been taken at a campsite somewhere.

There were ten people, the earlier woman included, who looked like they were university age. They were smiling as they bunched up together. It was probably a training camp for their circle or something.

'What's this?' said Haruka a bit roughly, irritated since it felt like her question had been sidestepped.

'Do you have holes for eyes?'

'What do you mean by that?'

'Look at the forest in the back of the photo.'

Haruka took the photo in her hand and looked carefully.

'Forest?'

'Yes. You see a woman there, right?'

'Ah!'

Haruka dropped the photo without thinking.

Though she hadn't seen it at first glance, just as Yakumo said, there was a woman in the forest looking at the people in the photo.

'That woman earlier brought this photo in to request I investigate it as spiritual photography,' said Yakumo, picking up the photo Haruka had dropped.

'I see...'

'So, er... It's not what you're thinking,' said Yakumo, looking away and awkwardly scratching the tip

of his nose.

Unusual for Yakumo, he wasn't speaking clearly. It was like he was making an excuse for cheating.

'Not what I'm thinking?' asked Haruka on purpose.

Yakumo's nostrils twitched.

'Anyway, I heard her request. So I'm done talking with her. That's all. It's nothing you should worry about.'

'So what are you going to do?'

'What I am going to do?'

'Are you taking the request?'

'Of course i can't,' said Yakumo, putting the photo in his shirt pocket.

– So that's why the woman looked like she was crying earlier.

Haruka understood now.

Yakumo treated the woman coldly, so she didn't know what to do and had probably felt afraid.

'Why did you refuse?'

Haruka couldn't help but ask as her emotions welled up.

'Because it isn't necessary.'

Yakumo yawned, seeming bored.

Even though Haruka had thought that Yakumo was somebody who could understand other people's pain, it looked like she had been completely wrong.

'How can you say something so irresponsible?'

'You're the one who's irresponsible.'

'What do you mean?'

'She herself knows very well that this photo doesn't need to be exorcised.'

Yakumo's shameless attitude just made Haruka angrier.

– I feel bad for that woman.

'I'm going.'

Talking to Yakumo any more wouldn't bring any developments.

Haruka turned around and was about to leave the room when Yakumo called out to stop her: 'Oi.'

Haruka thought that maybe he had changed his mind and would come with her, but she was wrong. Yakumo was still in his seat, rubbing his eyes sleepily.

'If you're going to chase after her, tell her this for me.'

'Tell her what?'

'You didn't hurt anybody. Don't worry about it any more.'

'What does that mean?'

'You'll find out if you tell her.'

Yakumo stretched, like he had already lost interest.

Haruka wasn't satisfied with that, but she left Yakumo's room.

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After leaving Yakumo's room, Haruka went to the courtyard.

She remembered the first time she met Yakumo.

At the time, Haruka had gone to Yakumo to consult him about a spiritual phenomenon, but unexpectedly, he had brought up her dead twin sister. Then, she had gone to the bench in the courtyard to think.

Maybe she also – that was what Haruka was hoping.

Haruka's hope was right on the mark.

Haruka spotted the woman from earlier sitting on the bench in the courtyard, with slumped shoulders and her hands covering her face.

'Excuse me...'

Haruka walked up to the woman and spoke to her.

The woman slowly lifted her face in response. Her eyes were just a bit red.

'Excuse me... Earlier, you requested that Yakumo-kun investigate a piece of spiritual photography, yes?' Haruka said quickly, noticing the woman's suspicious expression.

'Yes,' replied the woman, though she seemed confused.

'Let's try talking to Yakumo-kun once more. I'll do my best to convince him too. It's fine. He'll definitely help. Even though Yakumo-kun looks like that, he really is a good guy.'

After Haruka said that all at once, the woman laughed.

– Why is she laughing?

'Sorry.'

The woman immediately schooled her expression, perhaps sensing Haruka's feelings.

'No, it's fine.'

'Could you be Yakumo-kun's girlfriend?'

'T-that isn't it. That's not how it is. A-anyway, the ghost photo.'

Haruka frantically denied it and brought the conversation back on topic.

'That's fine already.'

The woman lowered her mascara-ed eyelashes.

'Eh?'

'That was an excuse...'

'Excuse?'

– I don't understand.

Haruka cocked her head without thinking.

'Yup. In middle school, I was attracted to him.'

'By him... do you mean Yakumo-kun?'

The woman nodded with a smile.

'In the third year of middle school, we were in the same class. I liked him that whole time, but one day, I hurt him. Even though he saved me when I was possessed by a ghost, I... I wanted to apologise for that, but I graduated without being able to...'

The woman looked up at the sky with narrowed eyes, perhaps remembering her old memories. She continued talking.

'After getting into university, I happened to see him in the courtyard. I wanted to apologise. But I didn't know how to bring it up, so...'

After saying that much, the woman stopped.

'Could that ghost photo be fake...'

Haruka said the first thing that came to mind. The woman smiled embarrassedly and nodded.

'Even though I could have just talked to him normally. I feel a bit silly.'

After Haruka had heard that much, even she with her dull perception had an idea of who the woman was. She had heard about it just yesterday.

'Could you be Sachiko-san?'

'Why do you know my name?'

The woman's eyes went wide in surprise. It looked like Haruka was right.

Now everything made sense.

Yakumo saw through the fake ghost photo and also knew what Sachiko had come to do.

That was why he hadn't taken the request. And –

'I have a message from Yakumo-kun.'

Haruka evaded the question.

'Message?'

'Yes. He said, "You didn't hurt anybody. Don't worry about it any more" ...'

Sachiko's expression stiffened.

'Did Yakumo-kun really say that?'

'Yes.'

After hearing Haruka's response, Sachiko's eyes grew wet with tears.

Haruka didn't know what exactly Sachiko had done to Yakumo, but she had probably always been dwelling on it.

She couldn't forget it. He was the person she had been attracted to –

After a silence, Sachiko said in a wavering voice, 'Sorry. And thank you... Could you tell Yakumo-kun that for me?'

Haruka actually wanted to say, 'Why not tell him yourself?' However, she couldn't say it for some reason.

'Yes.'

'Thank you.'

Sachiko stood up slowly.

Her expression looked like all the worries had been lifted from it.

'Could I ask one thing?'

Sachiko looked straight at Haruka.

'Y-yes.'

Haruka's body stiffened under that gaze.

'Do you... er... Yakumo-kun's eye...'

Contrary to her gaze, Sachiko's words were unclear.

However, Haruka immediately understood what Sachiko was trying to say.

'I know. It's a beautiful eye, isn't it?'

Haruka's impression of it hadn't changed.

Yakumo's red left eye was incredibly beautiful. That wasn't all. It comforted suffering spirits – Haruka thought it was something special.

'Yes. His eye is beautiful... If only I could've said that too.'

Sachiko laughed awkwardly and walked away.

– She didn't really want to apologise.

Haruka didn't have any evidence for that, but it was what she felt as she watched Sachiko walk away.

– If she had told Yakumo that sooner, what would have happened?

That question suddenly came up in Haruka's mind.

She felt afraid of knowing the answer. Her chest felt tight.

Interrupting Haruka's thoughts, a dry wind blew.

Haruka couldn't see her any more.

She looked up at the blue autumn sky.

There was no point looking at the past. For herself, and for Sachiko, the present was more important.

Which was why –

Haruka started walking towards Yakumo's secret hideaway.

For some reason, she really wanted to see his face.

Feeling an urge to hurry, her pace quickened, and before she noticed it, she started running –

※本作はフィクションであり、実在の人物、団体等とは一切関係ありません。

afterword

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Thank you for reading *Psychic Detective Yakumo: SECRET FILES – KIZUNA*.

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This time, the story is about Yakumo's time in middle school.

Many people were probably surprised by the gap between the present and the past Yakumo.

Yakumo's past in the series up until now has always been in fragments.

They were only moments, borrowing the lines of others or shown through recollections.

I think that this work took Yakumo, who had only been expressed through individual points up until now, and connected the dots to form a line.

People change because of their environments, experiences and their interactions with other people, but that doesn't mean they become completely different – I think they are just extensions of the same person.

Changes can be sudden or slow, but the origin is the same, like the flow of a river.

In this work, Yakumo might seem like a completely different person at first, but through the work, I think you might feel how Yakumo's heart became how it is now –

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The Yakumo series will continue to change.

What development will come next?

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Wait! And look forward to it!

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Heisei 21¹, autumn – Kaminaga Manabu

1 Heisei 21 is 2009 in the Gregorian calendar.