

心霊探偵

八

PSYCHIC DETECTIVE

YAKUMO

MAPABU KAMIPAGA

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赤い瞳は知っている

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角川文庫

神永学



PSYCHIC DETECTIVE YAKUMO

ΠΑΠΑΒΥ ΚΑΜΠΑΓΑ

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プロローグ

P R O L O G U E

That day, the thick layers of clouds that had been there since morning blocked out the sun.

Nevertheless, the delivery room was enveloped with a coiling heat.

'You'll be fine.'

The nurse, Iida Youko, repeated those words to the pregnant woman like they were a spell.

Her forehead was covered in sweat and her pale blue veins stuck out from her skin. She was clenching her teeth as she contorted her body.

She was desperately withstanding a bone-jarring pain.

Youko wanted to relieve her pain, even if it was only by a little. While rubbing the pregnant woman's back, they performed the Lamaze breathing technique together.

'Haa, haa, haa.'

It had already been some time since she had come to the delivery room. It was a considerably difficult birth.

The pregnant woman's eyes were already vacant.

Wasn't it better in some situations to switch to obstetric analgesia?

Youko looked at the doctor, Kinoshita Eiichi.

'The head's out. Just a bit more,' said Kinoshita, quelling Youko's thought.

'Now, just a bit more – do your best.'

Youko spoke while patting the pregnant woman's shoulders. Though her face was slack from the pain, she nodded.

'Don't push. Relax.'

'Please relax.'

Youko repeated Kinoshita's words.

The pregnant woman was breathing painfully with tears in her eyes.

'OK! The baby's out!'

Just as Kinoshita said that, the cry of a healthy baby echoed through the delivery room.

'Aah!'

The pregnant woman's breathing still sounded painful, but she let out a cry of relief and joy.

'Congratulations. From today on, you're a mother.'

Youko smiled at the woman and wiped the sweat off her forehead.

The woman might not have heard, since she didn't reply and just regulated her rough breathing with a relaxed expression on her face.

It had been a difficult birth, but this was a relief. Just when Youko thought that, Kinoshita spoke up.

'Bring a penlight.'

Though Kinoshita's tone was definitely not wild, there was a tinge of impatience and nervousness.

Youko immediately handed the penlight on the operation table to Kinoshita.

'Ha –'

The moment she saw the baby's face, Youko unconsciously swallowed her breath.

She couldn't believe what she saw in front of her.

'Don't react. The mother's here,' muttered Kinoshita.

At those words, Youko regained her calm.

However, that moment of panic reached the mother.

'My baby,' she gasped.

Her expression was exuding anxiety.

'Please wait a bit longer.'

'How is my baby?'

Youko approached the mother and spoke while patting her body.

However, she couldn't stop her anxiety.

'Where? Where is my baby?'

The mother gripped Youko's arms with her fingernails.

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

Youko tried to calm down the mother while bearing with the pain, but there was no effect.

Youko could feel the mother's growing anxiety through her skin.

'My baby. Is my baby safe?'

The mother looked like a demon.

Youko ended up looking away without thinking under that pressure. She shouldn't have done that.

'My baby!' shrieked the mother, thrusting Youko away.

'He's fine. He's a healthy baby.'

The one who replied was Kinoshita.

Kinoshita took off his mask and slowly walked towards the mother with the baby in his arms.

The mother's franticness disappeared and her expression changed into a gentle smile for her child, whom she had just seen for the first time.

Youko immediately walked towards Kinoshita and whispered in his ear.

'Is this really OK?'

'It can't be hidden forever.'

Kinoshita's expression stiffened.

It was just as he said. It couldn't be hidden forever. She would find out eventually. It was just a matter of when.

'Go ahead.'

Kinoshita brought the baby to the mother's chest.

'Ah, my baby.'

The mother took her baby and hugged him tightly, looking blissful as tears rolled down her cheeks.

Then –

With a smile, she peered at her child's face.

The mother's expression went cold in an instant.

'Nooooo!'

That bitter cry echoed through the delivery room.

Youko bit her lip and put her hands together in front of her chest, struggling with pessimism as she thought about the new-born baby's future.

The baby had been born with his left eye open.

That eye glowed red like a blazing flame –

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FILE I

At the edge of the university campus, there was a forest.

Since the campus had been built on a hill, it wasn't strange.

Deep in that forest, there was a one-storey concrete building.

Nobody knew what it had been built for.

Now, it was just a deserted building.

Since it was deep in the forest, many students wouldn't notice it was there at all if they lived normal student lives.

There had long been rumours that ghosts appeared in that deserted building.

Someone claimed to have spotted a figure near that deserted building, but the figure had suddenly disappeared when chased. Another person said that they'd heard a pitiful cry of 'Save me, save me' when they passed the deserted building. Somebody else said that it wasn't 'Save me' but a curse: 'I'll kill you.'

There was more to the rumours of this deserted building.

In the very back of the building, there was a locked room behind an iron door.

Nobody knew what was inside. The reason was that nobody who had seen it ever returned –

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Because of the strong, dry wind, the clouds had all floated away by noon.

The pale moon could easily be seen.

It was a full moon –

Somebody had once said that moonlight absorbed noise. The night was so quiet that that nonsense seemed believable.

Miki, Kazuhiko and Yuuichi had been drinking at a bar when they missed the last train. Now, they were thinking of a way to spend the time before the first train.

Then, the topic of the rumour spreading across campus came up.

The three of them knew about the rumour, but none of them had ever checked it out.

'Let's go see if that rumour's true,' said Miki.

Kazuhiko and Yuuchi agreed to Miki's suggestion. They ended up sneaking into the university at night.

They climbed over the mesh fence, passed the back of the school building and went into the forest.

They pushed their way through the branches on a trackless path.

It felt like a little adventure.

The path was much harder to walk than Miki had imagined.

When they reached the deserted building, she was covered in sweat and she had sobered up. Miki had lost her initial energy and was starting to regret her decision.

The building had one storey with a flat roof and was built out of concrete. It felt cold – rather than a building, it was more like a clump of concrete had just been left there.

'Since we've come all this way, let's take a photo to commemorate this,' said Yuuichi.

Kazuhiko took the camera first and took a photo with the deserted building as a backdrop. The pale light of the flash made Yuuichi's shadow appear on the dark wall of the deserted building.

Next, Yuuichi took the camera. Kazuhiko and Miki stood next to each other and turned towards him with a smile.

The flash lit up again.

Clunk!

There was the sound of metal hitting metal.

Miki's shoulders jolted in her surprise.

'Did you hear something just now?'

Miki looked around. Kazuhiko and Yuuichi held their breath as they looked around and listened.

Rustle.

All they heard was the sound of branches shaking in the wind.

'Can't hear anything.'

Yuuichi put his hand to his ear.

'What? You're the one who suggested this, but you're scared now?' said Kazuhiko coolly.

Miki glared at Kazuhiko sulkily.

'I'm not scared.'

Miki walked to the entrance and tried the knob on the rusty iron door.

Next, Kazuhiko tried the knob, but it still wouldn't open.

'For times like this, tada!'

Yuichi took a thin metal hook out of his trouser pocket.

'What's that?' asked Kazuhiko.

'Well, just look. Ah, Kazu, give me some light with your lighter.'

Kazuhiko lit up his lighter as asked and put it near the doorknob. Yuuichi stood in front of the door, knelt down and put the metal tool he had taken out earlier into the keyhole.

'What are you doing?'

'Now, now.'

A few minutes after Yuuichi started grappling with the doorknob, he stood up and turned it.

Creak.

There was the sound of metal scraping against metal as the door opened.

'You're amazing!' said Kazuhiko, sounding impressed.

'Anybody could do this with the right tools.'

Yuuichi rubbed at his nose, seeming proud.

'Where'd you get something like that?'

'Online. I'll give you the URL later so you can take a look.'

Kazuhiko and Yuuichi went inside with no hesitation.

Since Miki didn't want to be left by herself, she hurriedly followed them.

The cold wind from outside blew inside, lifting the dust that had gathered on the floor. The building was warm in comparison to how it felt outside, but it was so dark it was difficult to see her fingers.

Kazuhiko lit his lighter, but the small, flickering flame wasn't of much use so they couldn't see the inside of the building.

For a moment, a pale light flashed and lit up the room.

Miki jumped in surprise at that light. Yuuichi smirked when he saw how frightened Miki was. Yuuichi had used the flash on the camera.

'I'm going home,' said Miki.

'What? You scared?' said Kazuhiko and Yuuichi at the same time.

'B-but I feel like somebody's watching me.'

Miki clung to Kazuhiko's arm, as if trying to hide.

For a while, the three of them looked around in the dark. Nothing was there but the complete darkness that covered the room.

'It's fine. Nothing to worry about.'

After Kazuhiko said that to Miki, he started walking slowly by the walls.

'Hey, protect me.'

Miki tugged at Kazuhiko's arm.

'Yeah, leave it to me.'

Kazuhiko casually patted Miki on the shoulder and then started walking again.

They passed through the room right at the entrance and went down the corridor.

The corridor was narrow enough for people to bump shoulders. On both sides, there were evenly spaced doors with windows. Behind those doors were rooms of about four tatami in size.

In each room, there was one bed, and nothing else.

The three of them walked along the walls to the locked room in question.

The room was at the end of the corridor.

It was an incredibly eerie room. The metal door looked heavy, clearly different from the other rooms. There was an observation window with iron bars. Besides the normal lock, the doorknob was bound to the pipe that went up the wall with chains and had a combination padlock.

'Can't open this,' grumbled Yuuichi.

'What's inside?' Kazuhiko peered into the room through the window.

'See anything?'

'Nothing. Can't make anything out in the dark.'

The moment Kazuhiko gave up –

Rustle.

Something moved in the dark. In the very corner of the room, where the shadows were darkest.

What was there? Kazuhiko stared at it.

Eyes!

Kazuhiko's eyes met with the eyes of whatever was in the dark.

The eyes in the dark were unusually vivid. White, cloudy eyes. The blood vessels were showing. Eyes that were filled with hatred that felt like it would swallow everything up –

Kazuhiko screamed and jumped back, falling on his behind.

'What's wrong? Is something there?'

When Miki called out to him, Kazuhiko opened and shut his mouth in his fright, but his breathing was erratic and he couldn't speak.

There was just the sound of his raspy throat.

Kazuhiko managed to get up with Yuuichi's help.

'Did you see something?' Yuuichi asked.

Kazuhiko looked to the door.

Yuuichi looked also.

The next moment, Kazuhiko and Yuuichi lost their words.

From the gap between the bars of the window, a hand so pale it didn't look like that of a living person reached out and suddenly gripped the shoulder of Miki, who had her back to the door.

Miki gasped.

Kazuhiko and Yuuichi were in front of her.

Then who was the person grabbing her shoulder?

She didn't have the courage to turn around and check. The blood drained from Miki's face.

She lost all her strength – she couldn't even scream.

Miki reached out with a trembling hand to ask Kazuhiko and Yuuichi for help. However, Kazuhiko and Yuuichi couldn't move from fear.

'... Please... save me...'

Miki spoke in a rasping voice. Yuuichi put his hand out towards Miki to try to pull Miki away from the door.

That moment.

Those eyes peered out again from the gap between the bars.

'Aaahhh!'

Kazuhiko and Yuuichi's heads both went blank. They screamed and ran away without looking behind them.

'Wait – don't leave me by myself!'

Miki's bitter cry didn't leave her mouth.

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This was only the beginning of the case –

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After the morning lecture, Ozawa Haruka refused an invitation from a friend and left the classroom.

The wind was cold.

In just a rough outfit of skinny jeans and a grey parka, it was chilly, as was to be expected.

She regretted not wearing something warmer.

Since she had short hair, her neck felt especially cold.

Haruka was headed for the prefabricated two-storey building behind Building B in order to visit somebody introduced to her by Aizawa, an upperclassman from the orchestra circle.

There were a number of small four-and-a-half tatami rooms on the first and second floor which the university leant out to students for club and circle activities.

The room she was headed for was at the very end of the first floor.

Movie Research Circle.

Haruka checked the plate on the door and then knocked.

There was no response. She said, 'Hello,' but the result was the same. She thought it was a bit rude, but she opened the door and peeked inside.

When she opened the door, her eyes immediately met those of the man sitting in front of her.

His skin was as white as porcelain.

He looked at her with half-closed eyes, as if he would fall asleep at any moment, and she found herself lost for words.

'E-er...'

'Could you close the door once you come in?' said the man, interrupting Haruka.

She hurriedly went in and closed the door.

The man wore a white shirt with the first two buttons unfastened, so his chest showed through.

It was unclear whether he was showing it on purpose or he was just sloppy.

Judging by the hair as messy as a bird's nest, it was probably just sloppiness.

Recently, the so-called bedhead hairstyle had been getting popular, but this man's hair was clearly just bedhead.

Besides the man at the front, there were two other men in the room.

Those two men were looking at a playing card while hiding it from the man facing her.

It was the five of spades.

'Sorry, but could you sit down? I can't concentrate.'

'Ah, yes.'

Haruka stepped away from the door and sat on the folding chair by the wall that the man gestured at.

Inside the room, other than the table, there was a fridge in the corner and a shelf next to it that had been covered with a cloth.

Rather than a clubroom, it felt more like somebody's flat.

The man who had spoken earlier closed his eyes and pinched his brow with his fingers, like he was thinking. Finally, he opened his eyes and his red lips parted.

'The five of spades.'

He was right. Amazing!

The card that the men had been looking at earlier had definitely been the five of spades. Haruka couldn't hide her surprise, while the men let out cries of dismay and threw the card on the table.

'Damn. You got us again.'

The men took thousand yen bills out of their pocket in a displeased manner, hit the table and left the clubroom.

'Please sit down. You have a request, don't you?'

The man put the thousand yen bills in his shirt pocket and yawned as he spoke.

Haruka sat on the chair that the men had sat on earlier.

'Er, might you be Saitou Yakumo-san?'

'There's no might about it – I am,' the man responded.

This person is Saitou Yakumo –

Aizawa had told Haruka to consult Saitou Yakumo of the Movie Research Circle if she ever had to talk about something related to ghosts.

According to rumour, he could sense the supernatural and might be able to help with things of that nature.

To be honest, she had been dubious before coming here and hadn't known what sort of ability he had.

However, there was the card from earlier.

Maybe he had read their minds or was clairvoyant, but he definitely appeared to have some sort of ability.

'So?'

Yakumo urged her to continue.

'The truth is, an upperclassman from my circle introduced me.'

'Who?'

'Aizawa-san.'

'Don't recognise the name. Who is that?'

'Eh?'

That didn't make sense. Since Aizawa had introduced Yakumo, she'd been sure that they knew each other.

'Well, it doesn't matter who introduced you. Explain in a summary what you've come here for.'

'Um, er, my friend is in trouble. Saitou-san, I've heard that you were an expert on that sort of thing, so, er, I want you to help her...'

'You've summarised too much. I don't understand at all. What is "that sort of thing"?'

'Ah, sorry. I'll explain properly.'

'By the way, who are you?'

What an unpleasant guy –

This person's expression hadn't changed at all the whole time. He still looked sleepy. It was like he enjoyed seeing people all flustered.

'Ah, my name is Ozawa Haruka. I'm a second-year student at this university in the education department in the faculty of literature...'

'Just your name is fine.'

Yakumo waved his hand like he found her bothersome and stopped her words.

Her anger towards this unpleasant person was escalating.

'So what do you want?'

'The truth is, a few days ago, my friend Miki went to a deserted building on campus, since there was a rumour that ghosts appeared there. Then, it seems like she actually saw a ghost.'

'What sort of ghost?'

'I don't know the details either. I didn't go with her. She went with her boyfriend Kazuhiko and a friend called Yuuichi-kun.'

'So you came all this way to tell me a ghost story?'

'That's not it. Ever since then, Miki's been acting strange. She has a high fever and she's been sleeping the whole time.'

'The cold going around recently is a frightful thing.'

'Like I said! Please listen until I'm finished!'

Unable to restrain her irritation, she spoke in a loud voice that even surprised herself.

However, Yakumo leant back on his chair, and his eyes still looked sleepy.

'So? What happened next?'

Yakumo urged her to continue, running a hand through his messy hair.

'... She isn't just sleeping. She keeps on muttering things like "Save me" and "Let me out of here".'

'And the doctor?'

'Of course a doctor's been to see her, but besides the fever, apparently there's nothing in particular wrong with her body... The doctor said it was probably something psychological.'

'Something psychological...'

Yakumo crossed his arms and leant on the back of the chair.

'She lives alone, so I contacted her parents, but the call didn't go through... I don't know what to do...'

She wanted to do something for her friend, but she didn't know what to do in a situation like this.

Meanwhile, Miki was wasting away.

'So you want me to look into the matter since her condition might be related to the ghost she saw in that room?'

'Yes. I've heard that Saitou-san was an expert on that sort of thing.'

Yakumo took in a deep breath and looked up at the ceiling, like he was thinking about something.

'No good? Is that a no?'

Haruka looked at Yakumo's expression with wide eyes.

'Twenty-five thousand yen. Tax included.'

'Eh? You're asking for money?'

'Are we friends?'

'No, we aren't.'

'Are we lovers?'

'Of course not.'

'So, money.'

'Why?'

'Wouldn't it be strange for me to do something for you for free when we're not friends or lovers?'

What he said was logical in a sense, but somehow, she couldn't honestly accept it.

That said, she couldn't just leave things like this.

'I understand. I'll pay. I'll pay, but please let me defer the payment.'

'Ten thousand yen up front. The remaining fifteen thousand yen after this is finished.'

Haruka took a thousand yen bill from her wallet and put it on the table.

Yakumo shook his head. Haruka took out another two thousand yen, but Yakumo shook his head again.

'You're missing a digit.'

'That's all I have on my right now.'

Haruka waved her empty wallet in front of Yakumo's eyes.

'I understand. I'll look into it,' said Yakumo with a yawn, like there was nothing else he could do.

From the flow of the conversation up until now, she was dubious about whether he would actually look into it for her, but she had nobody else to rely on.

'Please contact me if you find something out.'

Haruka put a memo with her contact information on it on the table, stood up and put her hand on the doorknob.

This is –

She noticed something unbelievable.

Movie posters and photographs were stuck on the door.

In a gap between them, a pair of eyes and her own not very tall nose was reflected back at her.

It was a small mirror.

She'd been fooled.

'That playing card from earlier...' said Haruka, turning around.

'I was almost tricked. When you guessed the number of the playing card earlier, you were cheating. The mirror on the door – from your position, you could've seen the number on the card... I see – that's why you told me to move away from the door.'

Haruka said that all at once with a face red from anger.

How could he! She was angry at how stupid she was for believing in this person for even a moment. This was why her friends made fun of her for being naive.

'Correct. You're the first person who's seen through it.'

Yakumo said that nonchalantly, not ashamed at all as he clapped his hands.

'You're the worst. Please give me back my money.'

'Why?'

'Don't say "Why". You tried to trick me out of my money. Please give it back.'

She couldn't believe him. Taking advantage of a person's weakness. She really felt that way.

'Don't say something so rude.'

'What was rude about it?'

'I don't plan on tricking you. I'll give you back the full amount if I can't save your friend.'

'How can I believe that?'

This man called Saitou – there was a limit to shamelessness.

'What can you do anyway? I came because I heard you had some sort of psychic ability, but aren't you just cheating?'

'Who said I had some sort of psychic ability? I definitely didn't. Just as you said, the thing with the playing card earlier was fraud.'

There was no reason for him to sound so proud as he said that.

'If you don't have a psychic ability, how are you going to save Miki?'

'You're free to choose whether to believe what I am about to say next or not. If you'll believe me, then you can leave it to me. If you won't, the exit is over there.'

Yakumo gestured at the door.

'I'll give back your money too.'

Yakumo put three thousand yen bills on the table.

'I can see things that other people can't.'

'Is this a riddle?'

'You can interpret it as you will. What's the answer?'

'I don't know.'

'The spirits of the dead.'

'Spirits?'

'To put it simply, ghosts.'

'That's idiotic.'

'You're the idiot.'

Yakumo pointed at Haruka.

Calling somebody he'd just met an idiot –

'But you said earlier you didn't have any psychic ability...'

'I did. I don't have a psychic ability. I can just see the spirits of the dead.'

'That's the same thing.'

'It isn't. It isn't a psychic ability but a physical one.'

'Physical?'

He had been quibbling for a while – it felt like he was just trying to make the conversation confusing.

'For example, you wouldn't call perfect pitch a psychic ability, right? You'd call it an ability they were born with or a talent... Anyway, I'm not clairvoyant and I can't use telekinesis. I was just born with the ability to see the spirits of the dead.'

'If you're going to say that much, can you prove it?'

'I don't know whether this will count as proof, but there is a ghost in this room right now.'

Yakumo put his index finger between his well-shaped eyebrows.

She didn't have to check – only the two of them were in here.

'You can't trick me with that.'

'The ghost in here right now is your older sister. Your twin...'

'You're lying.'

She shook her head. Her fingers were trembling.

'Yes, your sister. Her name is Ayaka. She died in a traffic accident at the age of seven.'

'How do you know...'

Her throat felt tight.

'I said so, didn't I? I can see her.'

Even her childhood friends didn't know that she had an older sister.

Then why did this person who she'd just met know? Rather than nonsensical, it was mysterious.

'You still think that your sister's accident was your fault.'

That one sentence from Yakumo pierced deep into Haruka's heart.

The blood left her face. Her head went blank – she felt like she might faint.

The ball that fell to the asphalt.

The sound of the car horn.

The deep red blood kept pouring out.

'Your sister ran into the road to catch the ball you threw. Then...'

'Stop... I... That isn't... I didn't think it would end up like that...'

Haruka shut her eyes tightly and covered her eyes.

– No matter how I yelled, my sister Ayaka didn't move at all.

It was so sudden that I couldn't cry or scream.

My palms were dyed red with the blood from my sister's head.

Blood –

She could remember the wet feeling clearly. She had frantically tried to stop the blood, but it was no good.

She'd felt her sister Ayaka's life disappearing from her hands.

'I see... So you threw the ball far away on purpose.'

'You're wrong!'

Haruka lifted her head at Yakumo's words and clenched her teeth.

Yakumo continued speaking regardless.

'You always missed the ball, but your older sister always caught it skilfully. So you threw the ball far away on purpose so your sister wouldn't be able to catch it.'

'Stop it!'

Her hands were shaking. Her breathing was ragged.

Why? She had never talked about this to anyone. Nobody should have known about it. Her eyes were filled with tears even though she didn't want to cry.

'Why are you doing this...' asked Haruka in a hoarse voice, wiping her tears away with her fingers.

'...'

Yakumo didn't reply to Haruka's question.

After Haruka glanced at Yakumo, she picked up her bag and stood. She opened the door and tried to leave.

'If you don't believe me, there's more. Your sister says there's something she regrets.'

'Regrets...'

'She was the one who hid your mother's ring. Your mother got angry at you then. The ring was stuck to the top of a shoe cupboard with gum. She was going to confess, but she couldn't say it...'

Haruka couldn't breathe. The corners of her eyes felt hot.

'I...'

'Also, your sister said she doesn't blame you,' said Yakumo, interrupting Haruka's words.

Doesn't blame me? That's ridiculous. I mean, it's my fault that my sister –

She felt the urge to run away and fled from the room.

* * *

When Haruka reached the courtyard, she collapsed onto a bench.

The dry autumn wind made her short hair flutter.

The noise from the students passing by hurt her ears.

She looked down, covering her face with her hands.

The memories from her past – she had never talked to anybody about them before.

A man she had just met guessed everything right in such a cold manner.

She thought that she would be assaulted by unstoppable anger and humiliation, but that wasn't actually the case.

It would be a lie if she said she didn't feel that way at all.

However, her heart felt a bit lighter –

It was a mystery even to her why she felt that way.

Haruka took her mobile phone out of her bag and, after thinking for a while, punched in her parents' phone number. After a number of rings, her mother Keiko answered.

'What is it?'

Her mother said that first thing.

'Nothing really. I just...'

'You've always been bad at lying. Something happened, right?'

Her mother saw right through her after just that.

Haruka felt like she'd cry if she talked at length.

'Hey, Mum. You lost your ring a while back, right? Back when Sis was still alive.'

'What is this all of a sudden?'

'Could you look at the top of the shoe cupboard?'

'Why are you talking about that now?'

'Just go and look.'

'Fine, fine.'

Her mother sounded exasperated. Then, the hold tone started playing.

It was Chopin's Farewell^[1]. Her sister Ayaka had been good at piano. Her slender fingers appeared to dance as they played this song that even adults had difficulty with.

While I wasn't good at music, not just piano. My rhythm was always off. I was always compared to my sister.

Not just for piano. Even for school and sports, I couldn't beat my older sister.

When we were together, we were often mistaken for an older sister and her younger brother.

[1] Since it was named Wakare no Kyoku (別れの曲) in the original text, I used the name Farewell, but Chopin never called it by that name himself even though it is known as that (or L'Adieu). It's Étude Op. 10, No. 3 and it is absolutely beautiful. [Here](#) is Lang Lang playing it.

Part of it was because of my short hair, but we were completely different even though we were twins.

I had even thought that having my sister there was unpleasant.

And then that accident –

Just as Saitou had said, Haruka had thrown the ball far away on purpose.

She hadn't thought it would end up like that.

When she saw her grieving parents, how could she live in a carefree manner?

She had lived with the fear that somebody would someday find out how her sister died.

'It was there. It really was there.'

Her mother's voice from the phone brought Haruka back to reality.

'Haruka, so it really was you?'

'No, it was Sis.'

'Eh? What?'

Haruka hung up without answering her mother's question.

I didn't know where the ring was hidden.

So my sister really was –

-

3

-

Haruka knocked once more on the Movie Research Circle clubroom door.

When she opened the door and went inside, a paper aeroplane was circling about.

'What are you doing?'

'Throwing a paper aeroplane.'

The paper aeroplane made a wobbly landing at Haruka's feet.

'I can tell just by looking. I'm asking why you're doing it.'

Haruka picked up the landed plane. It was made out of a thousand yen bill.

'I was killing time until you came back.'

'...'

'Go ahead.'

Yakumo urged Haruka to sit.

Haruka put the plane she picked up on the table and then sat down.

'Could I ask you one thing?

Yakumo nodded as he stretched his arms behind him.

'This is the clubroom for the Movie Research Circle, right? Is there nobody in the club besides you, Saitou-san?'

'There isn't. Since this is my room.'

'What do you mean?' asked Haruka, raising a shapely eyebrow.

The conversation was advancing naturally, but she didn't understand it.

'In the first place, the Movie Research Circle doesn't exist.'

'But this is...'

'It's simple. I went to the student affairs office, borrowed some student's name and applied for a clubroom to make a circle. That's all. It's like a secret hiding place.'

'Aren't you just using this room as your own?'

'Exactly.'

'You really are the worst – you're even deceiving the university.'

'Ah, I'll give you back your three thousand yen.'

Yakumo ignored Haruka's objections and gestured at the thousand yen bills on the table.

'Because your trick was exposed?'

'You came back because you didn't think it was a trick. Isn't that right?'

She didn't deny it, but his know-it-all tone irritated her.

'That's...'

'It was there, right? Your mother's ring.'

Yakumo crossed his arms behind his head and leant back on his chair.

'How do you know that?' asked Haruka, her eyes wide in surprise.

Yakumo didn't reply.

The way he stuck out his chin was like he was saying 'I've already explained it, right?'. But she couldn't accept that.

'Please tell me.'

'Your sister told me.'

'Stop lying. A fraud like you is just saying you can say ghosts so you can trick people out of their money, right?'

Haruka leant forward as she said that, putting herself closer to Yakumo.

Yakumo tapped the table rhythmically with a long, white finger, as if he were considering something.

Finally, his finger stopped and his almond eyes looked right at Haruka.

'Then let's do this. Let's go to that deserted building together.'

'By together, do you mean me and you?'

'Who else would it be?'

'That's true, but...'

This person keeps on –

'If you go with me, then you can tell whether I'm a fraud or not. Like with the mirror on the door.'

'...'

She couldn't reply right away.

It was just a coincidence that she saw through the trick with the mirror on the door. There was no guarantee that she'd see through the next thing.

Haruka looked at Yakumo's expression with her own black eyes.

She thought she'd be able to see through him if he was lying, but that was naive.

His eyes were still sleepy and he had his chin in his hand.

'Well, it doesn't matter to me either way. To be honest, I don't care at all what happens to your friend.'

Just from that one comment by Yakumo, Haruka made up her mind.

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4

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Yakumo wanted to meet up with Miki before they went to the deserted building.

At his request, Haruka brought Yakumo to the hospital Miki was in.

It was a twenty-minute walk from the university. After passing through the station and exiting from the north, the hospital was about two hundred metres down the main road.

While walking on the sidewalk, Haruka glanced at Yakumo's profile.

He had a pencil-straight nose and sharp chin – he would probably be popular if he kept his mouth

shut, but he had an unapproachable atmosphere to him.

'What?'

Yakumo looked at her coldly, like he had noticed her gaze.

'Can I ask you one thing?'

'Only one thing.'

'Can you exorcise spirits?'

'I can't do something as handy as that.'

'Eh?'

Haruka was taken aback.

He was full of coincidence, but how did he plan to save Miki?

'I'll say this again, but all I can do is see the spirits of the dead.'

'But you said you'd save my friend...'

'I might be able to save her. It's an "if" situation,' said Yakumo, as if it were completely obvious.

'That's irresponsible. There's no point to what we're doing now then, right?'

'That isn't true.'

'Why?'

'By seeing something, it means I understand that something is there. If I understand what is there, I can understand why. If I understand why, I might be able to remove the cause for it.'

She understood his logic.

However, she didn't know what he meant specifically. She couldn't imagine it at all.

While she was doing that, they arrived at the hospital.

She didn't completely understand, but it seemed as if there was nothing to do but go with him.

The hospital was a four-storey building with white walls.

They passed the asphalt parking lot and wrote down their names in the visitors log as instructed by the nurse. Then, they took the elevator at the back of the waiting room.

'Could I ask you one thing too?'

Yakumo spoke just as the elevator doors closed.

'If it isn't a rude question,' replied Haruka guardedly.

'Three people went to that deserted building. How are the other two?'

'Kazuhiko and Yuuichi-kun were both so scared they ran away, but Yuuichi-kun realised at the

campus exit that he'd separated from everyone and went back even though he was scared.'

'I see.'

'After getting back to the forest, he found Miki collapsed there... and then he carried Miki back.'

'Was she conscious then?'

Haruka shook her head.

'Miki wouldn't wake up so he brought her right to the hospital. The next morning, Yuuichi-kun contacted me, and then I...'

'And how about Kazuhiko?'

'I don't care about a guy like that. Even though he's Miki's boyfriend, he left her behind.'

'It's not like I deserted her.'

As Yakumo said that, the elevator doors opened.

At Haruka's instruction, they went down the corridor, stopped in front of the third hospital room. After knocking, they went inside.

It was a large room with four beds, but besides the bed in the front that Miki was sleeping in, the room was completely empty.

An IV catheter went along Miki's arms.

It was probably for nutrients or something like that. Her eyes were open, but they were empty – they didn't appear to be looking at anything.

There was sweat on her forehead and her face was pale. If Haruka didn't hear the faint breathing – like air being let out of a balloon – there'd be no difference between Miki and a corpse.

'Even though she's in this state, the doctor said there's nothing in particular wrong with her body and that she was probably overworked from stress... Do you think somebody who was talking so cheerfully yesterday could end up like this?'

Haruka was agitated, but Yakumo didn't seem to be listening.

He stood by the bed and gazed at Miki. There was a wrinkle between his well-defined eyebrows, and Yakumo's eyes, which had been sleepy until now, were grim.

'Do you see something?'

Haruka spoke up, bewildered by Yakumo, who seemed like a completely different person.

'Who are you?' murmured Yakumo.

'... ve me... Save me... Ple... a... se...'

Miki's mouth opened, and out came a voice that sounded like the groan of a beast.

Yakumo leant over Miki and put his ear near her mouth.

'... Let me out... of here...'

Miki's mouth moved again and spoke.

'Where are you now?'

Yakumo took Miki's face in his hands and stared into her eyes. When Yakumo looked at Miki, her eyes seemed to move slightly.

'... I can't see... Where am I... Let me out...'

'Where are you now? Tell me.'

Miki made no response. Her faint breathing turned ragged.

'No!'

Miki suddenly shrieked, threw her hands up towards the ceiling and arched her back.

What? What was happening?

While Haruka was confused, Miki dropped her arms, as if tired, and was as still as the dead.

Yakumo didn't say anything. He just sighed and left the hospital room.

'Wait.'

Haruka hurriedly followed Yakumo out of the room.

Yakumo was leaning on the wall right outside of the hospital room and had a hand on the left side of his forehead and eye.

His breathing was ragged. His shoulders shook as if he were in pain.

'Are you all right?'

Haruka approached Yakumo and tried to look at his face, but Yakumo quickly fixed his posture and started walking, as if to avoid her.

His left hand was still against his forehead and eye.

'Does it hurt?'

Haruka chased after him.

'No.'

'I think it'd be better if you get that checked.'

'Shut up!' Yakumo said sharply as he turned around.

A cold sweat was running down his forehead. His wide eyes were glaring at Haruka.

'W-what is it...' said Haruka, accepting Yakumo's pained gaze directly.

'There'd be no point in telling you.'

'You can't know that until you tell me.'

'You ask too many questions.'

Yakumo started walking away quickly to get away from Haruka.

'Honestly! Just explain a bit,' complained Haruka as she ran a bit to catch up to Yakumo.

'Hey, what'd you see in the hospital room?' asked Haruka as they got into the elevator.

However, Yakumo didn't reply.

He had his back against the elevator wall and crossed his arms, looking displeased.

Honestly –

'Why don't you just tell me? You're the one who told me to go with you, Saitou-san.'

'I regret it.'

Yakumo ran a hand through his hair and finally started an explanation.

'Your friend's possessed by the ghost of a woman probably around the same age as us. However, that would be when she died... Her hair went to her shoulders and there was a mole underneath her eyes.'

'And?'

'Dark. A completely dark room... Narrow... The sound of water... Hunger... A heavy atmosphere... Pain... Terror... Terror... Terror...'

'What do you mean?'

'If I could understand it so easily, I wouldn't be suffering. Think about me a little.'

'Please don't talk to me like I'm an idiot.'

'Am I wrong?'

When the elevator reached the first floor, Yakumo started walking briskly again.

Haruka had to run to catch up again.

* * *

The autumn sunset showed its unique colours.

The sky looked like a brilliant stained glass window.

When Haruka and Yakumo arrived at the station after leaving the hospital, there was a crowd.

It was rush hour, but it was clearly different from that.

The station was teeming with people who couldn't get onto the platform.

There were ambulances parked nearby and emergency personnel were still stepping out.

The words <Outward and inbound lines have been suspended because of an accident> were scrolling on the electric signboard that displayed train times.

'Because an accident occurred at this station, train operation has currently been suspended! As accident procedure is in place, please step outside the gates. We sincerely apologise for the inconvenience.'

A train attendant was saying that message loudly. There were people trying to rush out and curious onlookers, so everyone was crowded together.

'Seems like there was an accident.'

'You can tell just from looking,' said Yakumo with his arms crossed.

This person really just goes on and –

'Ah, Professor Takaoka.'

Haruka spotted a face she knew in the crowd and called out.

'Professor Takaoka?'

'A lecturer for one of my seminars. Please wait.'

Haruka made her way through the crowd towards Takaoka.

'Professor Takaoka.'

She bumped into countless people but finally reached the one she was looking for.

Takaoka acknowledge Haruka with a flat 'Ah'.

He had round glasses and looked at first glance to be a man of delicate features, but his shoulders were wide and solid in his suit.

He gave an immaculate and refreshing impression.

With his gentle manner and friendly personality, he was rather popular with female students.

'Professor, did something happen?'

Takaoka looked around, seeming troubled by Haruka's question, but he finally spoke.

'Ichihashi-kun jumped in front of a train...'

'Ichihashi – do you mean Yuuichi-kun?'

Takaoka nodded.

'When you say jumped, do you mean...'

Her heart was beating loudly. Her throat dried up.

I can't believe it –

'It was a suicide.'

'That's...'

More of her friends were meeting with misfortune. And they were the two who had tested their courage by going to the deserted building.

'I can't believe it either. I didn't notice at all.'

Takaoka looked pained as he spoke.

'It isn't your fault, Professor.'

'Haruka-kun, did you hear anything from Ichihashi-kun?'

Haruka shook her head. Takaoka wouldn't believe her even if she told him.

The atmosphere was suffocating.

In the middle of that, somebody who looked like a station attendant called out to Takaoka and he walked away towards the stationmaster's office.

'What was it?'

Yakumo had walked up to her at some point in time.

'Yuuichi-kun committed suicide...'

When she said it aloud, she felt how terrible it was.

I didn't think he'd do something like kill himself when I was talking to him on the phone yesterday

–

'Is Yuuichi one of the three who went on that test of courage?'

Haruka nodded.

Her legs were shaking – she could barely stand.

'It seems like it'd be better to look for the one who's missing,' said Yakumo as he ran a hand through his hair.

'He was normal yesterday, but...'

Her words got caught in her throat. She couldn't speak.

'I have no hard evidence, but I can say this. It isn't a suicide –'

Yakumo said that as he looked straight towards the station gate.

It was so unexpected that Haruka's eyes went wide.

It isn't a suicide –

'What do you mean?'

'I said I didn't have any hard evidence, didn't I?'

Yakumo had his hands in his pockets as he started walking with his gaze on his feet.

'Miki was possessed by a ghost –'

Haruka started speaking as she followed him.

'That's impossible.'

'Impossible.'

'The ghost possessing your friend is afraid of something. She has no ill will.'

'Afraid... Ill will...?'

'Why don't you try thinking with your own head a bit?'

This person keeps on –

'I'm asking because I don't understand even after thinking about it.'

Yakumo suddenly stopped walking.

'I believe the incident this time involves somebody living,' said Yakumo as he looked up at the sky with its lines of clouds.

Involves somebody living, he says –

'What do you mean?'

'I'm going to investigate that.'

'Huh.'

'That's all for today. Until tomorrow...'

After Yakumo declared that, he gave the duty of looking into Kazuhiko's disappearance to Haruka, and they split up there for the day.

-

5

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Haruka's morning lecture ended, and she went to Yakumo's secret hiding place after noon, as promised.

Even though it was after noon, Yakumo looked as sleepy as always.

'Good morning,' said Haruka, sitting in the chair opposite Yakumo.

'And?'

Yakumo brought up the topic at hand in a displeased tone.

Haruka explained to Yakumo that she had called Kazuhiko's mobile multiple times, but it looked like the battery had been off, and she hadn't been able to contact him.

She had asked the acquaintances of Kazuhiko that she knew, but nobody knew where he was.

He had been missing since the incident –

'Let's put things in order,' said Yakumo, letting out a large yawn. 'Tell me once more in detail about the test of courage.'

'Put things in order?'

Haruka searched her memories, as Yakumo suggested, and started explaining how the three of them had gone on a test of courage.

There were a number of points when he asked questions, but Haruka couldn't respond.

She was just telling the story she had heard from Yuuichi as accurately as she could. She hadn't been at the scene herself.

Even if she wanted to confirm, Yuuichi was already dead.

When Haruka finished speaking, Yakumo ran a hand through his messy hair and then crossed his arms.

'What are you going to do now then?' Haruka asked, knowing that he would get angry at her.

'Right. First, who is the spirit possessing your friend? I'm going to look into that.'

'Do you have any idea?'

'If you ask whether I do, I guess I do?'

'You're always so vague.'

'The world is full of vague things.'

Yakumo stood up.

* * *

Haruka was brought by Yakumo to the reference room in Building A.

She had come to this room a number of times before.

It was a white-walled room of about fifty tsubo in size, lined with moving cabinets that went up to the ceiling.

The student registry and class materials were kept here.

'What are you going to look into here?'

'I believe that the spirit possessing your friend was a student at this school.'

'You're not going to look at everything here, are you?'

'I plan on it,' said Yakumo matter-of-factly.

Searching from the very beginning would –

'How many students do you think have enrolled in this school? You'll stay here until you're an old

man.'

Haruka sat in front of the rack of three computers at the back of the room and clicked the mouse.

That turned off the screensaver and showed a screen asking for a password.

'Searching with the computer is great, but what will you do about the password?'

Yakumo crossed his arms and snorted.

'They organised the data here last year. Since they didn't have enough hands, a few students did part-time.'

'And you were one of them.'

'Yes.'

'Do you think the password hasn't been changed since then?'

That made sense.

But it was better than not trying. The password then had been the date of the school's founding in numbers.

She input the numbers with the number pad and clicked the enter key.

The monitor displayed the next screen. She felt somewhat triumphant.

'What dreadful security,' said Yakumo with a sigh.

'Though looking into all of these documents would have been dreadful too,' said Haruka with all the spite she had garnered until now.

For once, Yakumo didn't say anything back. Though he was acting calm, he must not have been inside.

Haruka clicked the file with the student registry. A screen listing name, address, birthdate, contact information and school department showed up.

'Are there photos too?' said Yakumo, expression his wonder as he looked at the screen.

'Just the past ten years.'

'That's enough.'

'So who are you looking for?'

'The name Yuri. I don't know the kanji.'

Haruka typed Yuri into the furigana table and searched. There were almost two hundred results.

'This would be tough. Don't you have any other information?'

'They're female.'

'I know that.'

'She has a mole under her eye.'

'I can't search for that.'

There, the conversation stopped.

They had suddenly become stuck. Haruka thought over it, but she couldn't come up with anything.

Yakumo ran a hand through his hair in his irritation, but he suddenly looked up.

'Absences. Or withdrawals. Can you search with those parameters?'

That was right. That would lower the number drastically.

'I can probably do it.'

Haruka searched again and found three people.

'It's her!' exclaimed Yakumo upon seeing the second woman's photo.

Shinohara Yuri. In the Arts and Humanities faculty, department of English. Absent.

She had long hair that was tied in the back with glasses that looked strong. Just as Yakumo had said, there was a mole underneath her eye.

Overall, she looked sensitive.

I –

'I know this person,' said Haruka, looking up at Yakumo who was standing beside her.

'A friend?'

'We were in the same seminar in first year. I haven't spoken to her directly, but I've seen her a number of times before. At the end of last month, she suddenly stopped coming to school.'

'What is the reason for her absence?'

'I don't know... But it seems like she's disappeared. Her parents asked the police to search – there was a bit of a fuss.'

'Disappeared, eh?' said Yakumo, rubbing his sharp nose.

It was too much for this to just be a coincidence.

'That's right! Professor Takaoka might know something!' Haruka said quickly, unable to hide her excitement.

However, Yakumo was the picture of calm. He put his index finger in his ear like he thought her noisy.

'Talk more calmly. And who's Professor Takaoka?'

'Did you forget? You met him at the station yesterday, right? That's Professor Takaoka. He was in charge of our seminar.'

'That isn't much help,' said Yakumo with a yawn.

'You're negative about everyone.'

'Do you believe in anyone?'

'Anyone besides you.'

'That's an honour.'

Yakumo didn't seem to care about Haruka's unpleasantness. He took a mobile phone out of his pocket and started making a call.

'Ah, Gotou-san? There's something I'd like to request...'

Yakumo started speaking – it seemed like the call had connected.

Though Haruka couldn't hear the voice of the person on the other side of the line, she could get the gist of the conversation. Yakumo wanted the other person to look into everything about Shinohara Yuri.

Yakumo just gave his request and then hung up.

'Who was that just now?' Haruka asked, unable to think of somebody who could respond to a search request.

'An acquaintance.'

'Would that person know about news regarding missing people?'

'I wouldn't call him if there wasn't the possibility.'

That made sense, but what sort of acquaintance could it be if just one call was enough to look into a missing person?

While Haruka was thinking about it, Yakumo opened the door and left.

'Again?'

He really did just do whatever he wanted. Though Haruka was fed up, she went after Yakumo and left the room.

'Haruka-kun.'

Just as she left the reference room, somebody called out to her.

When she turned around, she saw Takaoka walking towards her – the person they had just been talking about.

'Professor – '

For a moment, Haruka wasn't sure if she should chase Yakumo, but in the end, she stood there and waited for Takaoka to reach her.

'Yesterday must have been tough for you.'

'No, no – it must have been more so for you, Professor.'

Takaoka had clearly been worn out yesterday. It made sense – his own student had died.

On the contrary, Haruka wouldn't know what to do if he smiled at her.

'That's not true. Though of course I'm not well.'

Takaoka's expression softened, but that hurt even more.

'Anyway, you can't overdo yourself at a time like this.'

'It goes for you too, Professor –'

'That's right,' said Takaoka with a wry smile, and then he walked away from Haruka.

'E-excuse me, Professor.'

Haruka called out to Takaoka, who was about to leave.

Takaoka stopped walking and turned around.

'What is it?'

'No, er...'

Haruka was lost for words.

She had called out to Takaoka because she felt like she had to ask him about Yuri, but she didn't know how to bring up the topic.

'What's wrong? Don't worry about it and just tell me,' urged Takaoka, who seemed to sense that Haruka was troubled.

She let herself talk as he said.

'Professor, do you remember Shinohara Yuri-san?'

'I do. She's on leave right now, yes?'

'Yes. She's gone missing.'

'Is that so... But why are you suddenly talking about Shinohara-kun?'

Takaoka looked suspicious.

It made sense.

'I can't talk about it in detail now, but it might be related to the matter with Yuuichi-kun.'

'Ichihashi-kun?'

'Yes. Do you remember anything?'

'Anything I remember, eh...'

Takaoka scratched his chin – it looked like he was thinking.

'Anything is fine. Like how she was before she went missing, students she was friends with, or her boyfriend...'

Haruka listed a number of topics to help Takaoka remember.

'Her boyfriend –'

Takaoka seemed to have remembered something, as his mouth suddenly opened.

'Did you recall something?'

'Ah, Shinohara-kun did have a boyfriend. Aizawa-kun, in the year above her.'

'By Aizawa, do you mean the one in the orchestra circle?'

'Yes, yes, that Aizawa-kun.'

Haruka was so surprised she couldn't say anything else. The name that Takaoka had just said now was one Haruka knew.

'I just remembered something I have to do. Please excuse me.'

She had to tell Yakumo as soon as she could.

Urged on by that impulse, Haruka made a bow at Takaoka and ran down the corridor.

After turning the first corner, she suddenly spotted Yakumo.

'Where are you going in such a hurry?' said Yakumo with a yawn.

'Ah!'

People can't stop suddenly. Haruka almost fell as she screeched to a halt and had to take a few steps back.

'I heard most of the story.'

What kind of monster ears did he have? But if he had heard, that was easier.

'The boyfriend of the person named Yuri was Aizawa-san.'

'I said that I heard.'

Then be more surprised! Haruka bit down the urge to yell.

'Aizawa Tetsurou-san is the one who introduced me to you. Isn't that too suspicious to be just a coincidence?'

'You're a hundred times more suspicious.'

Yakumo started walking briskly, seeming completely uninterested.

Really, what a man!

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Yakumo led Haruka to a prefabricated building in behind the main school building.

It was used as the janitors' room.

Why had they come here? No matter how Haruka asked, Yakumo didn't answer.

'Hello.'

Yakumo spoke up at the entrance.

When there was no response, Yakumo opened the door and went inside the room.

'Hey. Is it OK just to go in?'

Haruka couldn't bring herself to go in and peered into the room from behind Yakumo.

Right past the entrance, there was a long table and folding chairs. In the back, there was a refrigerator and a sink. There were tools like shovels and sickles against the wall.

'Hey, isn't this bad?'

Haruka called out to Yakumo's back, but she was ignored.

Haruka had just let out a sigh when a person appeared from the door in the back of the room.

'Eek!'

Haruka leapt instinctively.

'W-w-what are you d-d-doing?'

A middle-aged man in a grey uniform came in.

He had a thin face with deep wrinkles. The tip of his nose and his cheeks were red. His skin was dark. He looked like a stereotypical alcoholic.

Though Haruka didn't know his name, she'd seem him around campus a number of times before.

This man, who was a caretaker for this university, always dragged his left leg as he walked.

Haruka didn't know if it was true, but there was a rumour that a female student had almost been molested by him.

It put Haruka a bit on guard.

'I'm sorry for coming so suddenly. Actually, I was wondering if I could borrow the key to the deserted building in the back.'

Even though they had been found trespassing, Yakumo spoke calmly.

'W-w-what do you want to g-g-go to that place for.'

The man's voice was piercing, like a cicada's.

'Actually, my friends went to that building earlier for a test of courage.'

'Test of courage?'

'Yes. It seems like they dropped something important to them then, so I want to go look for it.'

Yakumo kept speaking at random, like he had thought this up in advance.

The caretaker didn't seem to doubt Yakumo's lie, but there was a wrinkle between his thick eyebrows – he looked obviously exasperated.

'Please, Yamane-san.'

Yakumo bowed his head.

The caretaker was called Yamane? It was the first Haruka had heard of it.

Yamane slowly dragged his foot over to the key box on the wall and took a key out, throwing it at Yakumo.

'Y-y-you don't have to return the key today. I'm going home.'

'Thank you very much.'

'D-d-don't do something as s-stupid as a test of courage again.'

'So they do appear?'

Yakumo pretended to be a ghost.

'T-that isn't it... The b-building is old. It'll be taken down n-next month...'

'I see. I understand.'

Yakumo was about to leave when he stopped and turned to look at Yamane.

'Excuse me, but is there a dial-type padlock there?'

'I-I-I don't know. I've never had anything to do at t-that place, so I've n-never gone in.'

Yakumo bowed once more and left.

'Hey, why did you know that caretaker's name?' asked Haruka.

'His name was sewn on his uniform. What on earth were you looking at?'

I see –

* * *

When Haruka stood in front of the deserted building, the sun had already set.

There was just a faint blue at the line of mountains in the distance –

It was quiet. The sound of the wind rustling the tree branches sounded unnecessarily loud.

With the creepiness of the building, the fact that Yuuichi was died felt heavier in Haruka's chest.

If she didn't focus, her legs would collapse underneath her.

Even though this was for a friend, she had stuck her neck into something unbelievable. She was regretting her decision.

She glanced at Yakumo beside her.

He didn't look disturbed. He yawned and wiped away the tears that appeared in his eyes with his arm.

'Come save me if I need help.'

Though he was a slippery man, there was nobody else she could depend on.

'I'll try, but I can't guarantee it.'

It was like a politician's reply.

'I was an idiot for asking.'

The biggest mistake was involving herself with this man named Saitou Yakumo. She felt that way.

'Are you afraid?'

'Not really. I'm fine.'

Haruka tried to act strong when Yakumo said that, but if she didn't focus on her throat, her voice would tremble.

'Then, shall we go?'

Yakumo stood in front of the door and stuck the key he'd borrowed into the keyhole.

However, there was no point. The door opened before he turned the key.

The two silently pushed open the door and stepped inside.

They lit up the room with a torch.

Leaves from outside were scattered on the floor.

Every time they stepped on them, there was a crunching sound.

They went down the corridor to the back of the room.

The air was thick and cloudy. It made it hard to breathe.

Yakumo used the torch to light the rooms on the left and right while looking around.

Each room appeared to be fashioned in the same way. Square rooms with one bed, one window. Perhaps this had been used as a student dormitory.

Haruka gripped Yakumo's shirt sleeve so that she wouldn't be separated from him in the dark. She walked carefully.

– When Yakumo suddenly stopped.

'Your friend saw a ghost in the locked room at the end of this corridor, right?'

'Yes.'

'There was a dial-type padlock so they couldn't get in.'

'This was something that was told to me, so I'm not sure, but...'

'This.'

Yakumo stooped over and took something in his hand.

There was the sound like change being rubbed together.

'What's that?'

Yakumo lit it with the torch so that Haruka would also be able to understand.

Haruka saw chains that hung to the ground and a dial-type lock.

'It doesn't look like it's been cut. The numbers <7483> match... Somebody's opened it.'

Haruka looked at Yakumo's face, unable to understand.

'The locked room has been unlocked –'

Yakumo put the chains at his feet and put a hand on the door in front of him.

A chill ran down Haruka's spine. Yuuichi had said that something was in this room.

'Please wait.'

She spoke without thinking.

Before Haruka's inhibitions reached Yakumo's ear, there was a rusty metal sound and the door opened –

Haruka went stiff from fear, but nothing happened.

There was a deep darkness that made her wonder if her eyes were closed.

Yakumo used the torch to light up the room.

The room looked the same as the others. There was just one bed, nothing else.

However, something felt different.

A smell like something had gone bad pierced her nose.

'It's a bit creepy,' said Haruka, looking into the room from behind Yakumo's back.

'It's the window.'

'Window?'

With the light of the torch, Haruka looked around the room.

It was just as Yakumo said. Though the other rooms had had windows, though small, there wasn't one in this room.

Yakumo slowly walked into the room.

Haruka followed him, as if led in.

That moment, the air suddenly felt heavier, like she was underwater.

Yakumo silently looked around.

It didn't look like there was anything in particular in the room to Haruka.

'Is there something here?' asked Haruka, gripping Yakumo's sleeve tightly.

'Nothing. But there should be.'

'If you find out what that is, will you be able to save Miki?'

'I don't know, but it's possible. The spirit that has possessed your friend is afraid of something in this room.'

Yakumo knelt on the concrete and looked around diligently.

Haruka crouched too, but she couldn't find anything.

'Is it this...'

Yakumo suddenly murmured that.

'Eh? What?'

'Look here.'

Yakumo lit up the foot of the bed with the torch.

Haruka stared, but she couldn't understand.

'What is it?'

'Here.'

Yakumo pointed at a part of the floor.

It looked like something had been dragged. The bed had probably been moved.

But –

'What about it?'

'Why was only this bed moved?' murmured Yakumo, as he tried to peer underneath the bed.

And then...

<Watch out! Behind you!>

Suddenly, Haruka heard a girl's scream.

Haruka turned around in shock.

A person was standing there. She couldn't tell what gender they were in the dark, let alone what

their face looked like.

She could just tell that they had something like a rod in their hand.

They were waving it around. It was a shovel. It came down towards Haruka's head.

Frozen by fear, Haruka couldn't move.

Thunk!

Haruka heard something that sounded like a large rock hitting the ground.

The strength in her body escaped her. She fell. It didn't hurt.

'Ugh...'

Haruka heard a groan and opened her eyes.

'!'

Yakumo was collapsed in front of her.

He was bracing his legs as he tried to get up. It looked like his body wouldn't move the way he wanted it to, as he stayed on his arms and legs.

Did he protect me? That was all Haruka could think in her confusion.

'A-are you OK...'

'Ru... Run...'

Yakumo said that in a hoarse voice while pressing a hand against his forehead. Even if he told her to run, she couldn't just leave him here.

'... It's fine! Just run!' yelled Yakumo.

Haruka stood up instinctively.

'But...'

'It's fine – just go!'

Pressured by Yakumo's insistence, Haruka ran towards the door.

However, a dark shadow was waiting there.

Something hit her shoulder with a thump, thrusting her to the back of the room.

The dark shadow slowly approached her.

Even if she wanted to run, her back was pressed against the wall. She couldn't go back any farther.

The shadow picked up the shovel again.

All Haruka could do was grip her fists in front of her chest.

It's too late –

Then, something suddenly hit that shadow.

The two shadows seemed to be fighting, and then they collapsed.

There was the sound of something hitting something else multiple times.

All Haruka could do was watch.

Suddenly, one of the shadows stood up.

'We're running!'

She heard a voice. It was Yakumo.

He was OK.

<Down.>

There was a girl's voice again. In contrast to Haruka, who didn't understand, Yakumo quickly responded.

Yakumo took Haruka's head and forced them both to the ground.

There was a whizzing sound as the shovel went straight over her head.

It hit the wall and let off sparks.

Haruka was still bewildered as Yakumo grabbed her arm and ran out of the room.

'Aahhh!'

There was a howl as the shadow came after them, waving a shovel. Yakumo slammed the door shut with his body. There was a dull thump.

Yakumo took the chains on the floor and wrapped them around the door right away.

Rattle, rattle.

Thump, thump.

It appeared that the shadow was trying to get out from the other side, turning the doorknob and hitting the door.

Suddenly, the sound stopped. Did they give up? Haruka had just thought that when –

Bang!

There was an incredible noise.

It seemed like they were smashing their body against the door from inside.

Haruka's body shook in shock. There was a slight gap between the door in the wall. Then, a gloved hand wormed its way out.

Yakumo grabbed Haruka's arm again and pulled her along.

Haruka couldn't even scream.

'We're going!'

Dragged along by Yakumo, Haruka started running.

Tree branches hit Haruka's cheeks and arms.

Strangely, it didn't hurt. She just ran deliriously, with Yakumo pulling her arm –

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7

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She couldn't remember where or why she was running.

When she noticed, Haruka was at Yakumo's secret hideaway, the Movie Research Circle room.

Sitting on the floor, it hurt just to breathe.

Sweat fell from her forehead.

Her heart was breathing quickly and furiously within her chest.

'It hurts...' said Yakumo, pressing his forehead.

'You OK?'

Haruka remembered that Yakumo had been hit with a shovel earlier and hurriedly spoke to him.

'Yeah.'

Though Yakumo nodded, he was gritting his teeth with a frown on his face.

'Please show it to me.'

Haruka went around to Yakumo's front and looked at his face.

Yakumo lifted the hand he was using to press his forehead.

A bit above his right eyebrow, there was a cut three centimetres long.

The flesh looked like it had been turned inside out. Though the bleeding had stopped, it wasn't a shallow cut.

Haruka took out her handkerchief and put it to Yakumo's injury.

'It's fine. I'll do it myself.'

Yakumo took the handkerchief from Haruka and pressed it against the wound himself.

Then, a large teardrop rolled down Haruka's cheek.

Eh? Why is there a tear –

When she realised it, it made it harder to stop.

Why? Why am I crying?

'Was it frightening?'

Yakumo's palm gently touched Haruka's shoulder.

It was very warm –

The tension within her lessened at once.

That's right. I was frightened.

I'd really thought I would die when that shadow stood in front of me with the shovel.

I've never been so afraid before. But Yakumo saved me and I'm still alive –

Haruka nodded. Led by her impulses, she gripped Yakumo's shirt sleeve and started to cry loudly.

Yakumo just waited silently for Haruka to stop crying.

Haruka had never cried like this in front of somebody before.

Ever since her sister died, she had decided not to cry. However, this was the second time she'd cried in front of Yakumo.

In front of this unfriendly and contrary person, for some reason, her heart weakened. That was baffling to Haruka.

'Sorry...'

After crying for a while, Haruka said that and wiped her tears with her palm.

Yakumo didn't say anything. That just made her more embarrassed.

'Show me your injury again.'

Haruka forcefully took the handkerchief from Yakumo when he refused and looked at the cut on his forehead.

The bleeding had stopped completely.

'You should have it properly checked at a hospital.'

'It's fine,' said Yakumo in his usual curt tone.

'What do you mean, it's fine? Think of the place – what will you do if some strange symptom occurs?'

'You're so meddlesome...'

He always said one thing too much. That one sentence of his ruined everything.

'You know, you're...'

Haruka started speaking, but when she saw Yakumo's left eye, she was lost for words.

Illuminated by the fluorescent light, Yakumo's left eye glowed red like a blazing flame.

It was a deep red, more vivid than any she'd seen before.

'I was born with it...' said Yakumo in an annoyed tone, perhaps noticing Haruka's gaze.

'It's beautiful...'

'Hah?'

'The eye is beautiful.'

For a while, Yakumo looked puzzled, but he finally started laughing quietly.

That laughter became louder, until he was finally laughing while clutching his stomach.

What was so funny –

'Hey, why are you laughing?'

Haruka hit Yakumo's shoulder.

'I mean... That's amazing. Beautiful? There's something wrong with your senses.'

'What?'

Yakumo took deep breaths to calm his laughter before continuing.

'I thought you'd scream. Or look like you saw something disgusting, or with pity...'

'Why would I scream? Nobody would scream after seeing something beautiful, right?'

'That's why I said there's something wrong with your senses. All the people who have seen my eye up until now have first screamed or acted like it was disgusting. Sometimes, there are people who'll look at it with pity. You're the first who's done something as ridiculous as call it beautiful.'

Ridiculous – what an awful way of saying it.

After a few more breaths, Yakumo continued.

'I dropped my contact lens when I was hit earlier.'

'Contact lens?'

'Normally, I hide it with a contact lens. There are the ones you can change your eye colour with.'

'You said you were born with it earlier...'

'That's right. It's been red since I was born. And it seems like I was born with just my left eye open. I heard that even my mother screamed when she saw my red eye. Funny, right?'

It wasn't funny at all. Being thought of as disgusting by his mother – how deep an injury must that have left on his heart?

Haruka couldn't even imagine.

'Though I don't know if it's because of that eye, my left eye can see things other people can't.'

'Things other people can't?'

'That's right. I said it before, but I can see the spirits of the dead. It took some time for me to

realise only I could see them. I was treated differently for it. Nobody believes me when I say I really can see them.'

That made sense. Haruka hadn't believed it either.

She slightly understood why Yakumo took such a contrary attitude.

Nobody had faced him properly before.

Fright, fascination, pity – the people that connected with Yakumo had had that as a pretext. Even his mother –

She wanted at least to face Yakumo properly herself, without sympathy.

That feeling bloomed within Haruka.

'It hurts.'

Yakumo spoke up again.

It looked like the pain came in spurts.

He got that injury because of me. I haven't thanked Yakumo yet for saving me.

'Thank you for saving me earlier.'

'Thank your sister.'

'My sister?'

Haruka cocked her head, unable to understand what Yakumo meant.

'At the time, your sister told me there was danger. If she hadn't, your brains would currently be spilt out on that room's floor.'

Haruka had heard a girl call out <Watch out> then too.

'That voice was my sister?'

'It was. She's always behind you. She's watching over you.'

'Really?'

Haruka looked around, but she couldn't see anything.

'It's your choice whether to believe me or not.'

'Sis...'

She might not have believed Yakumo's words up until yesterday.

However, it was different now.

What feelings does my sister have while watching over me? How does she feel, and what does she think?

'If only I could see her too. I'm jealous...'

Haruka's eyes were teary again.

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8

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The next day, Haruka went to Yakumo's secret hiding place in the afternoon.

It wasn't locked.

It was incredibly careless what with what had happened last night.

Haruka opened the door and Yakumo was right in front of her, curled up in a sleeping bag. Just like a caterpillar. Haruka poked him lightly with her toe, and he opened his eyes, seeming annoyed.

'It's past noon already.'

Yakumo slowly got up, rubbing his eyes.

'It amazes me that you can live in a place like this.'

Haruka sat on a folding chair and waited for Yakumo to dress himself.

'I go back sometimes.'

'You have a home?'

Without answering, Yakumo took a toothbrush out of the refrigerator and started brushing his teeth.

Why the fridge?

'If you have a home, why not just go back? Your parents must be worried.'

'Worried? They're not.'

Yakumo mumbled a reply while brushing his teeth.

He was talking just like a rebellious teenager.

'How can you say something so selfish? Why not think a bit about your parents' feelings?'

Yakumo nonchalantly gargled like he wasn't interested in what Haruka had to say.

'Hey, are you listening?'

'Things I don't want to hear don't enter my ears.'

Yakumo wiped his forehead with a towel as he sat down on the chair opposite Haruka.

'Respond if you can hear me.'

'If they were worried, they wouldn't try to kill me, right?'

'Eh?'

'I'm talking about my parents.'

'?'

That was just more confusing.

'My red left eye. It can see things people can't. Maybe she was frightened? Or she hated it? I don't know, but one day, my mother took me out for a car ride.'

Yakumo continued to speak in a disinterested tone.

'She kept saying 'Sorry" as she put her hands on my neck. She kept putting more force into it, so I became faint...'

Yakumo was talking about a tragedy that was beyond Haruka's imagination as if it were something that happened to somebody else.

'A police officer who just happened to be passing by saved me. My mother ran away. She's been missing since. I have no memories of my father.'

'That's...'

Haruka tried to say something, but she couldn't speak.

Haruka often heard stories like Yakumo's on the news or in dramas, but she had thought of them as something from a world completely different from hers...

'I'm saying that in this world, there are parents that don't love their children and children who don't love their parents.'

When Yakumo finished speaking, he let out a yawn, raking his fingers through his hair.

Behind that attitude of his that wouldn't let anybody in, there was an immeasurably large wound –

'I'm staying at my uncle's now.'

'Oh?'

'Though my uncle tells me not to hold back, I can't cause him that much trouble, and there are circumstances.'

Yakumo had already put the contact lens in his left eye, so it was black.

'I...'

Haruka lowered her long eyelashes and bit her lip.

I said something without knowing the whole situation. I feel so ashamed.

'Don't worry about it,' said Yakumo, as if he'd sensed how Haruka was feeling.

'I'm sorry.'

Haruka bowed her head.

'Why are you apologising?'

'Because...'

'You didn't run even after seeing my eye. That's enough.'

Though Yakumo said that himself, he seemed to find the words that came out of his mouth unexpected as his face scrunched up like he had eaten something strange.

Haruka laughed a bit upon seeing that.

Yakumo glared at her. Haruka hurriedly covered her mouth and stopped laughing.

'I've found out one thing from yesterday.'

Yakumo quickly changed the topic. Perhaps he'd felt very awkward.

'What?'

'That shadow that assaulted me. It was definitely a living human being.'

'How can you be sure?'

'My eyes are convenient. My right eye can only see the physical. My left eye can only see the spirits of the dead,' aid Yakumo, his index finger on his brow.

'So you could see the shadow that attacked you yesterday with your right eye but not your left?'

'Exactly. I'm also concerned about how the locked room was unlocked yesterday.'

'But who could've done it?'

'Who knows? There are many candidates.'

'The caretaker, Yamane-san.'

That face came up in her head first thing.

'It's possible. He knew we were going to that abandoned building, and with the key, he could go in and out all he wanted.'

'Aizawa-san might be related too.'

'Aizawa?'

Yakumo cocked his head.

'Remember? Professor Takaoka said this yesterday. He was Yuri-san's boyfriend. He introduced me to you, Saitou-san.'

'It's not impossible,' said Yakumo, crossing his arms and looking up at the ceiling.

'That's quite negative.'

'That isn't it, but something feels off.'

'Then let's go ask him directly. And I think it'd be good to talk to Professor Takaoka once more...'

'If you want to investigate, go,' said Yakumo, interrupting Haruka.

'Do you mean I should go myself?'

'Call it splitting up the work. There are a number of other things I'm concerned about, so I'll be investigating those.'

That would be more effective.

In the end, Yakumo and Haruka agreed to meet again in the evening and went separate ways.

Haruka had to make three promises to Yakumo for acting alone.

Don't go to places with few people.

Ask in a roundabout way when questioning people.

Contact him immediately once she found something out.

He also instructed her to be very careful, since there was what happened yesterday, though she probably wouldn't be attacked in the middle of the day.

* * *

After walking around for a while, Haruka found Aizawa in the cafeteria.

It seemed like he'd skipped out in the middle of class. He was reading an employment magazine while drinking a can of coffee.

There were a lot of people here, so it was probably OK.

'Aizawa-san.'

Haruka called out to him and sat in the opposite seat. Aizawa looked up and gave her a friendly smile.

He was short and plump – cute, like a stuffed animal.

Haruka put Yuri and Aizawa together in her mind, but she felt like they didn't quite fit.

'How is it? Found out something?'

Haruka shook her head.

Rather than finding anything out, she felt even more confused.

'But it must be tough for you, Ozawa. That Saitou Yakumo's quite odd, right?'

'Yes, definitely. That reminds me, he said that he didn't know you, Aizawa-san.'

Aizawa laughed aloud.

'Of course. I must have been just like scenery to him. I just went with a friend once to see him guess the number on cards.'

That was a trick. Haruka wanted to say that, but she stopped herself.

But still.

'Please tell me that from the beginning.'

'But you looked troubled, and I didn't say I was his friend, right?'

It was true that she'd consulted her friend from the circle and Aizawa had just happened to be there and told her to talk to Saitou Yakumo.

Come to think about it, he'd never said that they were acquainted.

'Well, that's so...'

'Seems tough, but hang in there.'

Aizawa made a move to stand up.

'Ah, please wait.'

Haruka hurriedly called out to stop Aizawa.

'What is it?'

Aizawa sat down again.

Ask in a roundabout way –

Haruka recalled Yakumo's warning, but she didn't know how to bring up the topic and ended up asking the question straight.

'Aizawa-san, do you know someone called Shinohara Yuri?'

'Shinohara Yuri –'

The moment Aizawa heard that name, his cheek twitched – he looked clearly displeased.

There was something in that response. Haruka continued without any hesitation.

'I heard that you dated Shinohara-san, Aizawa-san.'

'We didn't date.'

'Eh? But...'

Aizawa clicked her tongue.

'I don't know who you heard it from, but we didn't date.'

'Is that so?'

'I just confessed to Shinohara and was rejected. And does that have something to do with this?'

Aizawa was tapping his foot underneath the table.

'Is that really true?'

'There's no way I'd lie about getting rejected.'

That was true.

The conversation stopped there.

'I'm going.'

Haruka couldn't say anything. She just watched Aizawa leave.

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9

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Yakumo was in the reference room.

He moved the sliding bookcases and looked at the neatly lined up files.

He found what he was looking for immediately. As-built plans for the student dormitories.

Yakumo took the document on the very top of the bookcase out. It was considerably old. It was yellowed and smelt of mildew.

It said it was built in Showa 30^[2]

Yakumo moved to the table and flipped through the pages.

The information was detailed, with a line map of the area and a rendering.

After about ten pages, Yakumo found building floor plans.

There were two floor plans. One was the first floor of the abandoned building. The other was for the basement –

Yakumo looked at the floor plan carefully, following it with his finger.

He found it. The locked room had a door that went to the basement.

Yakumo took the key he had borrowed from Yamane yesterday out of his pocket.

There were three keys on the key holder.

One was the entrance door key. One was the room master key.

The last was the basement key.

The reason only the bed of the locked room had been in a different place was probably to hide the door to the basement. There had to be something there.

Taking care not to stand out, Yakumo left the campus and went into the forest.

It took more time than he expected to walk through the pathless forest.

Fallen leaves filled his shoes.

He might have been a bit naive. His regret grew the more his forehead sweated.

He silently walked along, brushing aside the tree branches.

[2] Showa 30 is 1955 in the Gregorian calendar.

Haruka looked at the clock – it was just past three.

There was about an hour before she had to meet up with Yakumo.

She couldn't question Aizawa more. Haruka didn't have anything in particular to do, so she just whiled away time in the cafeteria.

She laid her head on the table and sighed.

Did Yakumo find something out?

It would annoy her if she were the only one who had found out nothing.

'Haruka-kun.'

Haruka lifted her head when somebody called her.

It was Takaoka. His eyes were bloodshot – he looked more exhausted than yesterday.

'Professor, there's something I want to ask.'

This was a good chance. She could ask about Yuri again.

'Something you want to ask?'

Though Takaoka cocked his head, he sat opposite her at the table.

'Er, about Shinohara Yuri-san, who you talked about yesterday...'

She didn't know if he would believe all the strange things that had happened to her, like Miki's state after the test of courage and the attack at the abandoned building. She just wanted more information, even if it was just a little.

Just, if he thought of something upon hearing her story –

Takaoka covered his face with both hands and shook his head.

'I'm sorry for saying something strange.'

'No, don't worry about it. But I remembered something important upon hearing what you said,' said Takaoka, lifting his head.

'Eh? Really?'

'But talking here might not be a good idea. Let's go somewhere else.'

Takaoka spoke in a lowered tone.

Haruka agreed to his suggestion and stood up from her seat.
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Yakumo reached the abandoned building and put his hand on the doorknob.

It was locked.

Somebody had locked it after what happened yesterday.

Probably the person who had attacked them –

Yakumo unlocked the door and stepped inside.

The light from the window made it easier to see than yesterday.

He headed down the corridor to the locked room at the end.

Here too –

The chains were wrapped around and the dial-type lock was on. Yakumo put the numbers <7483> on the dial.

The numbers that had been there yesterday.

There was a click and the lock came off.

He took the chains from the handle, unlocked the door and carefully stepped inside.

Partially because there was no window, this room alone was impossible to see clearly in without the light of his torch, even though it was day.

He dragged the bed in the corner of the room with all his force.

Just as he expected, underneath the door, there was a one-metre square of metal floor.

To be more accurate, it was a door. There was a handle.

It was shut with a padlock with a keyhole.

Yakumo put the third key in – it fit perfectly. He gripped the handle and pulled it up with all his strength.

There was the sound of creaking metal as dust flew up.

A square hole appeared, completely black.

He used his torch to peer inside, but he could see virtually nothing.

Yakumo decided to climb down the wooden ladder.

The wood creaked underneath his foot.

It was too late when he realised.

His foot slipped and he fell to the basement all at once.

His face twisted from pain after he hit the floor, but he forgot that immediately when a strong rotten smell assaulted him. He bent back and hurriedly covered his nose and mouth.

To look for the source of the smell, Yakumo picked up the torch he had dropped and illuminated different areas of the room.

He saw something like a black line on the wall.

He slowly approached the wall and focussed –

'What is this...'

Yakumo spoke aloud without thinking.

It was a scratch in the wall.

Not just in one or two places. The whole wall was covered in scratches.

And these scratches weren't natural or from a machine.

Yakumo put his hand up to it.

From the size, it was probably human – is

Somebody had clawed the wall with their fingernails.

Some of the scratches had dark red stains on them.

Somebody had probably scratched the walls again and again to try to escape, even though they knew it was useless.

He found a detached fingernail stuck to the wall.

There was blood and even part of the flesh of the finger, but still the scratches continued.

Yakumo touched the scratch lightly with his finger.

'This is a real locked room...'

Yakumo suddenly felt something cold on his neck.

Yakumo looked up with his torch and saw two pipes on the ceiling.

Probably water pipes. Water was dropping from the place where they connected.

The woman who had been in here had probably loved here for a number of days with that water.

If she hadn't had those pipes, the time she suffered might have been slightly shorter.

This water had given her hope and pain.

She hadn't been frightened of something in this room – she had been trying to escape from the room itself.

The question was why had kept her in here, and for what reason –

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12

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After Yakumo crawled out of the basement, he quickly went down the corridor out of the abandoned building.

The cold wind made him feel revived.

He knew that Yuri had been stuck in that place, but he had no decisive evidence.

A corpse –

The person who had locked Yuri in there had probably moved it.

'W-w-what are you doing here?'

Somebody called out from behind him. For a moment, Yakumo stopped thinking. He knew that husky voice.

It was the caretaker, Yamane, who had a key and could go in and out of the abandoned building whenever he wanted.

Yamane's face was red from alcohol as usual, and he had a towel around his neck. He was holding a rusty shovel.

'Y-y-you're looking for this, right?'

Yamane took a digital camera from the pocket of his work pants and handed it to Yakumo.

'I-i-it was on the ground there.'

Yamane pointed at the forest about ten metres away.

Yakumo thanked him and took it.

This was probably the camera Yuuichi had used to take photos.

There was still battery left.

Yakumo turned on the camera and looked at the pictures on the camera monitor.

It was probably from some bar. There were a number of people drinking in a lively manner.

After about ten photos, a photo of the abandoned building came up.

First, there was Yuuichi. Then, there was Kazuhiko and Miki. Next was a close-up of Miki's frightened profile.

Then, in the back, there was a man in the back, hiding behind the corner of the room. He was dragging something.

It was too dark to see properly, but it was probably Yuri's corpse –

'What is this...'

Yakumo's expression froze over. Then, he ran as quickly as he could.

Yamane yelled something from behind him, but Yakumo didn't have the time to pay attention to that.

As Yakumo ran, he called Haruka's mobile.

However, the call tone just kept going –

'Where'd she go?' muttered Yakumo as he kicked the ground.

<This way.>

A girl's voice came from somewhere –

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13

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Haruka was led to the rooftop of Building B by Takaoka.

They stood in front of the water tower right by the roof entrance.

The concrete roof had no fence – just a ledge about thirty centimetres tall.

The view was good, but when she looked down, her legs shook.

Why did he bring me here?

Haruka had that question as she looked at Takaoka.

'Where should I start – ' said Takaoka, looking at the reddish purple clouds, which were lit up by the setting sun.

'Wherever is fine,' Haruka replied.

'I lied to you about one thing.'

'Lied?'

Haruka brushed her hair behind her ear.

For some reason, she couldn't calm down.

'About how Aizawa-kun was dating Yuri. That was a lie,' said Takaoka with a blank expression.

Haruka had a really bad feeling.

Her heart was beating more quickly.

'Why would you make that up...'

At Haruka's question, Takaoka's thin lips twisted into a smile that showed his white teeth.

However, his eyes weren't smiling. They were cold eyes.

'That was a failure. I didn't think I'd hear Yuri's name from your mouth. It was so sudden that I tried to turn the conversation around, but that was no good...'

Takaoka's voice sounded faraway.

It was difficult to breathe.

Her ears were ringing. Run. Her instincts were telling her that, but her feet didn't move.

'Professor. Could it be that you and Yuri-san...'

'That's right. I committed adultery with Yuri.'

'Professor... did you kill her?'

Haruka was hoping for a denial rather than affirmation from Takaoka.

'That's not quite it...'

Takaoka grabbed Haruka's arm.

Haruka's body froze in resistance, but she couldn't win in strength.

When Haruka tried to bite Takaoka's arm, Takaoka's fist hit the back of her head.

Haruka's head shook, and she fell to her knees.

'Sorry, but you're going to have to die. You're going to jump off the roof – a suicide. Like with Ichihashi-kun.'

Takaoka grabbed Haruka's hair and dragged her to the edge of the roof.

No –

Haruka frantically tried to resist, but she couldn't move properly from the pain.

'That was an accident. On that day, she said that she was pregnant. That she was going to tell my wife everything. That was against the rules. You have to obey the rules. Don't you think so too?'

Takaoka's words just sounded like an excuse to justify what he'd done.

'But killing her for that...'

Even while bearing with the pain, Haruka glared at Takaoka in her anger.

'I didn't plan on killing her. We had a fight, and I hit her. Then, she stopped moving...'

'She wasn't dead.'

Haruka suddenly heard a voice. A voice she recognised.

When she turned around to look, Yakumo was there.

There was sweat on his forehead. His shoulders were shaking.

'What are you talking about?'

Takaoka's face muscles twitched at Yakumo's sudden appearance, but he played dumb.

Yakumo sighed and ran a hand through his messy hair before starting his explanation, though he seemed to find it troublesome.

'You must have noticed. In that basement, there are signs that she tried to escape.'

Takaoka made no response. He just looked away, his cheek twitching.

Yakumo took one step closer to approach Takaoka and continue speaking.

'You probably thought that you had killed her when you saw that she had stopped moving, and you abandoned her in that basement. However, she had just fainted...'

There, Yakumo took a breath and looked at Takaoka with a piercing gaze.

'You shut a living person in that room.'

'What proof do you have for your lie...'

'Don't play dumb.'

Yakumo's voice was full of anger.

'You saw them, didn't you? The basement's walls.'

'I don't know what you're talking about.'

'The countless scratches. She made them in her frantic attempt to escape. A dead person wouldn't be able to do that.'

Takaoka's shoulders heaved as he spoke. His eyes were darting about.

'You were also the person who killed the student named Ichihashi Yuuichi.'

Yakumo continued to pursue the wounded Takaoka.

'What proof do you...'

'I have proof. I should have noticed earlier. At the station, you said that a student called Ichihashi had jumped – correct?'

'What's strange about that?'

'How could you be sure he jumped? The police said there was no note and called it an accident.'

'That's – '

'Unless you witnessed his death, there was no way for you to declare that at that stage. You wanted to make it seem like he jumped in front of the train and committed suicide, right?'

'There's no reason I would kill him,' said Takaoka in a shaking voice.

Haruka didn't know that reason either.

Though she could understand the reason Professor Takaoka might kill Yuri-san, Yuuichi-kun was unrelated.

Yakumo's thin lips turned up in a faint smile as he continued to speak.

'After you shut Yuri-san in that basement, you had peace of mind. However, when you heard that that abandoned building was going to be torn down, you panicked. If her corpse was found, everything would be exposed. So you went back to move the corpse. Then...'

'He met Miki and the others,' finished Haruka.

Everything was connected.

Yakumo nodded before continuing.

'You coincidentally ran into the group of three that had come for a test of courage, and you tried to hide. However, they took photos at that building. Without knowing that you were there – '

Yakumo's eyes narrowed as he looked at Takaoka.

Takaoka's body turned stiff, as if frozen by that gaze.

'I don't know what you're talking about.'

'I have proof.'

'Proof?'

Yakumo took a digital camera out of his pocket.

'You want this, right?'

After Yakumo said that, he threw the digital camera towards Takaoka.

Takaoka grabbed it with both hands. At the same time, the hand that had been holding Haruka let go.

Haruka used that chance to run up to Yakumo.

Takaoka looked at Yakumo angrily.

'Finding out that much is admirable, but if I destroy the proof, how will you prove it?'

Takaoka was acting tough, but he was standing on a cliff.

'I forgot to say one thing.'

After saying that, Yakumo took a digital camera memory card out of his pocket and showed it to Takaoka.

'The image data is here.'

Laughter escaped Takaoka's lips.

It might have been pointed towards his foolish self, for trying to hide his own crime.

'This is the end. The police have been called already.'

Takaoka turned pale – everything he had built up collapsed at once.

His laughter finally turned into tears –

'That's right... It's the end...' said Takaoka in a hoarse voice, sitting on the concrete like his soul had left him.

Haruka heard the sound of sirens in the distance.

It echoed in her ears like a cry –

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14

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Yakumo and Haruka were questioned by the police as witnesses.

Yakumo spoke for most of the time, with Haruka just nodding.

They gave the summary of the events. Neither Yakumo nor Haruka mentioned the spirit possessing Miki. Nobody would believe them if they did.

Haruka heard about this after, but Yuri's corpse was found buried at the root of a tree only ten metres from the abandoned building.

Everything seemed so ill-prepared.

Another thing was that she wasn't pregnant. Her strategy for love had caused a misunderstanding, and in the end, two people had lost their lives. It was awful –

'Hey. Well done.'

After the questioning, Haruka was about to leave with Yakumo when a man in a suit called out to them.

He had a huge frame, like a bear, and wore a loose tie with a wrinkled shirt. The man had stubble on his face and a sleepy expression like Yakumo's.

'What, if it isn't Gotou-san,' said Yakumo, sounding displeased as he ran a hand through his hair.

'Don't just say "What"! You should be grateful to me.'

The man called Gotou suddenly let out a loud voice.

Gotou frowned and stuck his fingers in his ears.

'You've put me through a lot of trouble. Please don't complain so much just because I made one request. It's childish.'

'You...'

Gotou started speaking, but his eyes suddenly went wide when he spotted Haruka.

W-what?'

Haruka's shoulders hunched up unconsciously under that pressure.

'Hmm,' murmured Gotou, rubbing his chin like he'd understood something.

Haruka didn't know how to respond, so she quickly put a smile on her face and nodded.

'She's pretty cute, isn't she?' said Gotou with a smirk.

'What are you talking about?'

Yakumo looked displeased, the complete opposite of Gotou.

'So you're that age too, eh, Yakumo? And she's cute.'

'That isn't it.'

'If you say cold things like that, she'll get away.'

'Like your wife, Gotou-san?'

'Shut up! I don't need to hear that from you!' said Gotou with a click of his tongue.

'If you have the time to worry about other people, please do your work for once. If the police had looked into this properly in the first place, I wouldn't have been involved in this.'

Yakumo's opinion made sense.

'Don't say that. The police haven't got enough hands either. Girls of that age often disappear. If we had to look into all those cases, there wouldn't ever be enough people.'

'I'm glad you seem busy.'

'Well, anyway, it was tough. I'll make the story fit with the paperwork.'

Yakumo hit Yakumo's shoulder lightly and walked with a bowlegged gait.

'Hey, who was that just now?' asked Haruka after she couldn't see Gotou any longer.

'Even though he's like that, he's a detective,' said Yakumo, pointing at the direction Gotou had gone with his chin.

'Oh, you know a detective?'

'Rather than know, it's more that I can't avoid him.'

'Can't avoid?'

'He's the one who saved me right before my mother almost killed me. A number of things have happened since.'

'A number? Does he look out for you?'

'That isn't it. To me, there are two types of people in this world. People who see my red left eye as a monstrosity, and those who try to use it. Gotou-san is one of the latter.'

Haruka couldn't understand what Yakumo said.

Could you divide everyone into just two types? The relationships between people should have been more complicated and meaningful than that.

However, Haruka didn't know how to explain that, so she kept her mouth shut –

'Now that I've said that though, there's one strange person who's an exception.'

Yakumo said just that and walked away briskly.

'Hey, by strange person, you don't mean me, right?'

Haruka hurriedly ran after Yakumo.

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15

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A few days afterwards, Haruka went to Yakumo's secret hideaway again.

Miki became much better after that.

She appeared to have forgotten everything that happened after losing consciousness at the abandoned building.

Kazuhiko, who had gone missing, returned to the university like nothing had happened. When Haruka asked him about it, it turned out he'd returned to his parents' home in fear.

Haruka was so exasperated she couldn't even be angry.

At the university, the media came because of the incident – there was quite some fuss.

The news announcers commented that the entrance rates for the next year would probably be the lowest ever, and some students had transferred to other universities, thinking that the incident could have an effect on their job searching.

However, the clamour would probably fade away with time.

Even though it was past noon, Yakumo had his usual bedhead and sleepy eyes.

He was like a cat lazing in the sun.

'No matter when I see you, you always look like you've just woken up.'

'Because you only come when I'm just waking up.'

Yakumo replied bluntly, as usual.

Yakumo's slightly sulky expression was so funny to Haruka that she laughed.

'What do you need today?'

He was clearly telling her to go home if she didn't need anything.

Haruka covered her mouth to stop her laughter and took an envelope out of her bag, placing it on the table.

'What's this?'

'The money, as promised. A lot of things happened, but Miki is better.'

Yakumo pushed the envelope back.

'I don't want it.'

'Why not?'

'I owe your older sister a favour. We're even.'

'A favour?'

Haruka cocked her head, unable to understand.

'Your sister's the one who told me that you were on the roof.'

'Sis...'

She tried to save me –

Thinking that was enough to make her chest feel warm.

'Sorry.'

'?'

'When I first met you, I called you a fraud, Saitou-san...'

'Don't worry about it.'

'But...'

'And stop calling me Saitou-san,' said Yakumo, pointing at Haruka.

'Then what should I call you?'

'I don't mind if you just call me by my name normally.'

Haruka felt like she'd taken a step into his heart.

'I accept that your mysterious power isn't fraud, Yakumo-kun.'

'I'm very grateful.'

Yakumo yawned, like he didn't care.

His actions were just like a cats.

'I'm jealous of you, Yakumo-kun.'

'Jealous?'

'You can meet my sister, right? I can't meet her even if I want to. I've always wanted to apologise

and I have so many things I want to tell her, but I can't see her.'

Haruka's voice was shaking slightly.

My sister died because of me.

She had carried that burden for thirteen years.

She couldn't put it down even if she wanted to. When she thought about how she would continue carrying it for the rest of her life, she couldn't help but curse her own sin.

'Don't blame yourself like that. I said this before, but your sister doesn't blame you.'

'That's a lie. My sister died because of me...'

'Then just ask her yourself.'

Yakumo took off the contact lens in his left eye and turned towards Haruka with his red eye.

No matter how many times she saw it, it was a beautiful red colour.

It was like it was letting off a light of its own.

'Close your eyes.'

Haruka closed her eyes like Yakumo said.

Her vision went dark –

'Sis.'

Suddenly, her sister was standing in front of her.

She looked just like she had then.

From the accident when she was seven –

'Sis, sorry. At that time... because I threw the ball far away...'

Haruka bit her lip. She forced the words out of her throat.

Ayaka didn't say anything. She just smiled.

That was enough.

Tears fell from Haruka's eyes. She was helpless to stop them.

Ayaka's incredibly warm and gentle smile.

It felt like all her pains were being washed away.

Haruka kept wiping her endless tears and opened her eyes again.

Ayaka had disappeared. Instead, Yakumo was standing there with sleepy eyes.

'Thank you...'

Yakumo looked up at the ceiling, like he hadn't heard anything.

'I've cried in front of you twice now, Yakumo-kun.'

'Three times.'

Yakumo corrected her, putting up his fingers.

'Don't keep track. I'm not crying because I want to.'

Haruka used her handkerchief to wipe her tears and stood up.

'I'm really thankful for all you've done. This is farewell then.'

Yakumo didn't respond to Haruka's words.

He just yawned.

He's not honest at all –

Haruka smiled and put her hand on the doorknob.

Would this really be farewell for her and Yakumo? That thought suddenly came to her head.

'Hey, what should I do if I want to meet my sister again?'

Haruka asked that question, her back still facing Yakumo.

Yakumo didn't respond.

What did I expect? Haruka tried to cover up the words that had unexpectedly come out of her mouth with a laugh.

'Just open that door and come here.'

Haruka hurriedly turned around.

Yakumo was leaning back on his chair with his usual sleepy eyes.

'Eh?'

'I'm saying you can come whenever you want. But I'm taking money next time.'

'I'll be negotiating the price next time though.'

Haruka said just that and opened the door, leaving the room with a smile.

Even though the sky was the same colour as usual, it looked refreshing to her –

ファイルⅡ

トンネルの闇

FILE:
02

That tunnel was the shortest path from the residential area to the shopping district, but nearly no locals used it.

It was a famous tunnel for having a high accident rate.

There was a death every year.

Inside the tunnel, there were no lights, and it was dim and hard to see even during the day.

there was a sharp curve right outside the tunnel, and unlucky cars got into accidents there so often it was almost guaranteed.

However, the reason for the accidents appeared to be more than just bad visibility.

There had long been endless rumours about how something mysterious appeared in the tunnel –

Some drivers said they'd seen human heads fly by their window.

When they tried to escape in their fear, then their brakes stopped working – they would barely avoid hitting the guard rail.

Others said they'd seen countless human faces in the tunnel walls.

Some cab drivers said they'd taken on a drenched woman in front of the tunnel, but when they looked in the rear-view mirror after exiting, she would suddenly be gone –

Nobody knew the truth.

All that was certain was that many people had died at that tunnel's exit –

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1

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It was a quiet night –

'It's cold.'

Haruka tried her best not to be hit by the wind, putting up the collar of her beige coat and hunching over as she walked.

It was late at night on Sunday, so even though she was in front of the station, there was practically nobody there.

She just heard the echo of her boots hitting the ground.

She had gone to a party because Miki had forced her to, but when she went in, it had turned out to be a mixer.

Perhaps she was outdated, but she didn't really like parties of that sort.

Miki would die from loneliness without a boyfriend. She was like a rabbit. But Haruka wasn't desperate to find someone.

'Haruka, you've never really fallen in love.'

Miki often said that to her.

It was true.

Even when she thought back, she felt like she'd never had a romance that felt like a romance.

'So just go date someone.'

Miki said that too.

However, Haruka didn't feel like trying desperately to meet somebody to find love.

She thought that love would come about naturally – that it wasn't something to be decided, like with shopping when deciding on goods and checking a wallet's contents.

'I really am old-fashioned...' murmured Haruka, letting out a sigh that came out white.

After reaching the roundabout in front of the station, she heard a car horn.

A white car slowed down and rolled up to her, stopping in front of her.

It was a bit suspicious. Haruka was on guard as she stepped back.

Then, the passenger seat window opened and the car's lights turned on.

'Haruka-chan, I'll give you a ride.'

Why do they know my name? She felt even more suspicious.

'You can't have forgotten already, right? We were just together earlier.'

Haruka recalled upon hearing the man's quick speech.

'Ah!'

It was one of the people from the party earlier. If she remembered correctly, his name was something like Nakahara Tatsuya.

He had a medium build and a rather plain face, but his hair was like a famous soccer player's. That said, it seemed like he didn't actually like soccer that much.

'Get on already.'

Tatsuya smiled as he hit the passenger seat.

'It's fine – the trains are still running.'

Haruka refused with a bow of her head and started walking again.

'Hey, wait a sec.'

Tatsuya quickly got off the car and ran up to stand in front of Haruka, grinning as he pointed at his left wrist.

'What time is it now?'

What's this all of a sudden?

Haruka didn't understand, but she checked the time on the wristwatch.

'11:50.'

'Sorry, but the last train's already left.'

'Eh? The last train is at 12:06.'

'Ah, that's on weekdays. This is Sunday – a holiday. Trains stop earlier. The last train on holidays is 11:48. You just missed it. Though for me, I just made it.'

Haruka hadn't known. She was really out of it today.

'That's why I said I'd drive you. You live in the same direction as I do, Haruka-chan.'

As Tatsuya said that, he opened the door on the passenger side.

"But...'

'Please. I'm frightened of going home alone.'

Tatsuya put his hands together as if praying and bowed his head.

Frightened, he says –

She didn't mind getting in the car, but...

'Nakahara-san, you weren't drinking?'

'Ah, I'm no good with alcohol, so I drank oolong tea the whole time.'

After this exchange, Haruka lost and sat in the car.

Tatsuya started talking about the car they were riding in the moment he started the car.

He spoke energetically about how it was a famous sports car that he'd got cheap from an acquaintance who was a car mechanic, but since Haruka had no interest in cars, she didn't really understand.

Though she didn't know what sort of car this was, Tatsuya had turned the heat on higher than necessary, and the air freshener made her want to lean away.

Not just that – the rap music in four-four time sung by a Japanese group was so loud it echoed in her belly.

Being shut in this place would make her feel uncomfortable in just five minutes.

She felt bad and kept quiet since he had offered her a ride, but she was at her limits –

'Sorry, could you turn down the volume a bit?'

Haruka spoke to Tatsuya in the driver seat.

'Right? This song is the best.'

What was the best? He wasn't listening to her at all.

Hair mimicking a soccer player and Japanese rap. And he was wearing a rather seedy suit. What on earth were his interests?

It felt like a comedy – a mix of everything that was popular.

Haruka used the panel to turn down the volume.

Tatsuy looked at her dubiously.

Haruka ignored Tatsuya's gaze and opened the window slightly, breathing the outside air, unpolluted by the air freshener.

'Ah, it's a left at the next road,' Haruka told Tatsuya when they reached the corner with the police precinct.

'Left. Got it.'

Though Tatsuya said that, he turned the wheel right without even putting on the turn signal.

Haruka lost her balance at the sharp curve.

What dangerous driving –

'It isn't right. It's left. Please turn around.'

'There's a place with a beautiful night view ahead. Did you know?'

'I didn't.'

'Let's go take a look.'

'It's fine.'

'It's really beautiful. You'll definitely like it. Just at the top of that hill.'

It was no use. He wasn't listening at all.

It was like he thought everybody in the world had the same perspective as he did.

It was useless no matter what she said.

If she went with him to see the night view, hopefully that'd satisfy him and he'd go back. Haruka gave up and looked out the window.

Come to think of it, she knew another man who did whatever he wanted, no matter what anybody else said.

He was stubborn and contrary. Even though he hated things that were crooked, he was slightly crooked himself. A man full of contradictions.

But even though he also did whatever he wanted, Haruka felt like there was something fundamentally different when comparing him to Tatsuya.

It had been a month since then.

How was he doing? Haruka thought about that sleepy-looking face and ended up smiling slightly.

'Just ahead of this tunnel.'

Tatsuya's voice brought Haruka back to reality. She looked forward.

Just as he said, there was a tunnel in front of them.

By the entrance, she saw a sign that read 'High Accident Area. Watch Your Speed!'

It looked like there were no lights in the tunnel – an ink-black darkness opened up in front of them.

The moment the car went into the tunnel, the air suddenly felt heavier.

The sound of the engine echoed against the tunnel walls.

Ooooooooooh.

It sounded just like a person moaning.

The tunnel was really eerie.

Just as they were approaching the exit, Haruka suddenly felt like something had passed them.

'Ack!' yelled Tatsuya, suddenly slamming the brakes.

The tires screeched.

Haruka was forced forward and hit her head against the window.

Tears welled up in her eyes from the pain.

They had stopped sideways right outside the tunnel.

They'd almost hit the guard rail.

The car was filled with the smell of the burnt tires.

Haruka looked at Tatsuya in the driver's seat.

Tatsuya was clinging to the wheel, looking down while shivering.

Sweat was rushing down his forehead and his jaw was chattering.

'Hey, what's wrong?'

Tatsuya didn't look normal.

Tatsuya tried to respond, but his mouth just moved – no words came out.

'Say it clearly. What happened?'

Haruka shook Tatsuya's shoulders.

Then, Tatsuya lifted his head for the first time. His face was completely white. Even a mannequin would have more colour in its face.

'...A k-kid...'

'Eh? What about a kid?'

'...Again... I might have hit... Suddenly... a kid...'

Tatsuya's shaking finger pointed out the front window.

'Hit... You can't mean...'

A kid? Haruka didn't think there was any impact after the sudden brakes.

However, she couldn't be optimistic. Anyway, she could go check.

Haruka opened the door and tried to leave, but Tatsuya grabbed her arm.

'Don't go.'

'Why? I need to check.'

'It wasn't my fault. the kid – the kid... suddenly jumped out...'

Tatsuya was frantic as he grabbed Haruka's arm.

There were tears in his eyes.

'It's not a problem of who was at fault. We need to call an ambulance.'

'You can't... If you hit... a person, you can't drive any more, and university and finding a job... And your parents won't keep quiet... My life is a mess... Please, Haruka-chan, if you keep quiet...'

'I can't believe you.'

What a man. The moment he might have taken somebody's life, all he could think about was how to protect himself.

Arguing with somebody like this was itself pointless.

'Let go of me!' Haruka yelled, forcing Tatsuya's arm off her and getting off the car.

The intense difference in temperature shocked her.

Though it was dark outside, with the car's lights, she could see.

Haruka timidly walked to the front of the car.

She felt like they were driving pretty quickly.

If somebody were hit at that speed, it'd be no use.

Haruka's legs shook when she imagined a child, collapsed and covered in blood.

However, there was nothing there.

She just saw black lines on the asphalt from the burnt tires. She checked the car's bumper, but there wasn't even a dent.

Haruka checked the side and rear as well.

However, she couldn't find anything. Was Tatsuya just seeing things? That would be fine. They could laugh it off –

Step step step.

There was the sound of someone running.

She thought it might be Tatsuya, but he was still in the car with his head down.

Step step step.

Again.

She heard it from the opposite side, beneath the car.

Haruka crouched and peered under the car. She saw a foot that could be a child's.

It can't be! Haruka hurriedly stood up and went around.

However, nobody was there. She might have just imagined it since Tatsuya had said he'd hit a child.

If that was all, it'd be OK.

Haruka was about to go back in the car, when she felt a piercing gaze on her back and stopped.

When she turned around, she saw the large half-circle hole into the dark tunnel.

There was a woman standing there with her back facing her.

Even though nobody had been there earlier –

Haruka couldn't be sure from her back, but the woman was probably in her late twenties.

She thought that because the woman was wearing a grey suit, but she could actually be younger.

She wasn't doing anything – just standing there.

Her brown hair shook in the wind.

What was she doing here at a time like this?

'Excuse me...'

When Haruka spoke up to her, the woman slowly turned around.

Haruka thought that her heart might stop from surprise.

There was a large injury on the woman's forehead, and blood was pouring out, almost pulsing.

The chest portion of her white shirt was dyed completely red.

That wasn't all – her right arm was bent in such an unnatural way it might have been broken.

It was mysterious how she could stand at all.

'This is terrible...'

Tatsuya hadn't hit a child. He'd hit this woman.

'Are you all right?'

The woman didn't respond at all to Haruka's question. That wasn't all – her expression was blank, like she didn't feel the pain at all.

She was probably numb.

'I'll call an ambulance right away. Please sit down for now.'

The moment Haruka tried to touch the woman –

The woman shook.

Her body convulsed violently.

She was coughing when she vomited blood from her mouth.

'Aaahh!'

Haruka screamed without thinking and leapt back.

Then, as if she had been absorbed by the scenery, the woman disappeared.

Why –

Haruka was disoriented. All she could hear was the wind going through the tunnel –

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2

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The next day, Haruka went with Tatsuya to Yakumo's secret hideaway, the Movie Research Circle clubroom.

Yesterday's experience had to have been a spiritual phenomenon.

If that were the case, it would be best to consult him.

However, while Haruka experienced what had happened yesterday to Yakumo, he just played shogi by himself, as if to say he was bored.

'So it's come to this...'

Yakumo seemed to be admiring something as he moved the pieces on both sides by himself.

What was interesting about playing shogi alone? Haruka couldn't understand at all.

'Are you listening?' asked Haruka, displeased.

'Yeah, at any rate.'

'What do you mean, at any rate? Can't you listen more seriously?'

'You should be more humble. You just barged in here without thinking about how I'd feel about that and suddenly started telling a ghost story.'

Haruka couldn't think of a comeback.

It was just as he said. She had become agitated and hadn't thought about him at all.

'Sorry.'

'Well, I get the gist of it. Business is business, so shall I take it up?' said Yakumo, stretching his arms.

'Really?'

'I just have to save your boyfriend, right?'

'I'll say this again, but he's not my boyfriend.'

'You're so cold to him even though he's right there.'

Haruka let out an exasperated sigh and looked down.

Then, Tatsuya started smirking, though Haruka didn't know what was so funny.

When she caught his eye, he brought his face close to her ear and whispered.

'We look like a couple.'

'No, you don't.'

The one who denied that was Yakumo.

'We don't, you say... Weren't you the one who said we did earlier?'

'I don't recall that.'

Did too, did not – it was just like a kid's fight.

Haruka didn't feel like talking. For a while, Tatsuya looked at Yakumo's expression, but then he suddenly seemed to remember something and then started laughing.

'Oh, I see. You like Haruka-chan too. That's why you don't like me getting friendly with her. That's it, right?' said Tatsuya boastfully.

'Hey, what are you saying?' objected Haruka.

Tatsuya ignored her and continued.

'Unfortunately, an oaf like you doesn't match Haruka-chan at all.'

'That's true. I don't like stubborn women who get emotionally easily anyway. I couldn't care less if you simmered her or boiled her[1],' said Yakumo, his expression not changing even in the least.

'Is it really OK for you to say that? I'll really eat Haruka-chan up.'

'Do what you want. If you plan on eating her, you should watch out for food poisoning.'

'Hey, what do you mean by that?'

That was just saying too much. Haruka objected while hitting the table.

'I mean exactly what I said,' replied Yakumo in a flat tone without bowing his head.

Haruka's face flushed in anger and she bit her lip.

Really – this man's words always riled her up. He had to be a genius at making people angry.

'Then I'll do what I want.'

Tatsuya was still smiling triumphantly as he took a piece from the corner of the shogi board and moved it to another square.

'Checkmate.'

Yakumo had been expressionless, but now there was a deep wrinkle between his brows.

His thin lips were a straight line, and his almond eyes were narrowed.

'I'll give you just one warning.'

Yakumo put the piece Tatsuya moved back in its original spot and pointed at Tatsuya.

'Warning?'

'Yes. A warning.'

'Oh/ What is it?'

'You should use contraception and properly hold memorial services for aborted fetuses.'

'W-what are you suddenly saying?'

Tatsuya pushed Yakumo's finger away and stood up.

He looked terribly shaken. He was showing his true cowardly nature, that had been hidden behind his exaggerated confidence.

He was disturbed because it had hit home. Haruka looked at Tatsuya coldly.

'Haruka-chan, don't get the wrong idea. This guy's nuts. Oi, don't just say whatever you want. If you don't stop fooling around, I won't keep quiet.'

'I'm not fooling around. Would it be easier to understand if I said her name?'

'Who'd you hear it from?' said Tatsuya, his expression stiffening.

He fell right into the trap. What he'd said just now proved everything. Tatsuya's head was sweaty as Yakumo continued to pursue him.

'Not just one person either. Two. You didn't learn your lesson, it seems.'

'You're wrong. They just selfishly got pregnant. It's not my fault.'

Tatsuya was so shaken he was digging his own grave. And it was pretty deep.

There was no doubt about it now.

Tatsuya's careless words made Yakumo even angrier.

'They just selfishly got pregnant? What are you talking about? That might have been an acceptable excuse if it were a false pregnancy, but aren't pregnancies only possible with a partner?'

'That's...'

'Though small, it was a new life born into this world. Did you say that they just selfishly got pregnant, like some awful joke, and cruelly kill that life? I rue the fact that Japan's laws don't consider people like you murderers.'

Tatsuya's mouth opened and shut as he frantically tried to think of something to say, but in the end, he said nothing.

Tatsuya had been foolish for getting ahead of himself and challenging Yakumo in an argument.

Tatsuya's self-respect was probably in shreds.

Tatsuya stood up in a rage, slammed the door open and left. That was probably all he could do to protest.

'Is it all right for you not to go with him?' said Yakumo, looking at the shogi board again.

'That person is the worst, but you don't lose to him either.'

'Thank you for the praise.'

That sounded pointed.

'Are you angry?' asked Haruka.

Yakumo sighed,

'Think a bit. You might like him, but I hate that sort of person. He thinks he's the most important person in the world and doesn't care about anything else.'

'So that's why you lied?'

'Lied?'

'About whether there was an aborted baby or not.'

'Decide that on your own. It's completely irrelevant to me.'

'That's right. It was irrelevant. I apologise for causing you trouble,' said Haruka, standing up. She tried to leave the room.

'There's more to that story, right?'

Yakumo finally lifted his head.

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In the end, she decided that her eyes must have been playing tricks on her and went home.

However, the situation changed the day after. Tatsuya's front bumper had a bright red handprint the size of a child's.

Like a bloody hand had touched it.

Tatsuya had been frightened of it and tried to wash it off, but even after using cleansing liquid and a brush, it wouldn't come off.

He had been too frightened to drive it since.

Haruka gave a short explanation. Yakumo silently crossed his arms and looked up at the ceiling. Haruka couldn't tell if he was listening or not.

'Hey, are you listening?'

'I am. It's just that the story seems a bit convoluted.'

'Convoluted?'

'Yes, convoluted. For example...'

Yakumo started speaking, but then he ran a hand through his hair in irritation, like something was bothering him.

'What's wrong?'

'No, it's nothing. Speculation will start nothing. At times like this, the scene...'

'Let's go.'

Haruka finished Yakumo's sentence.

'Exactly.'

'Don't leave me behind this time.'

'Leave you behind? If you're talking about the last incident, you were the one who wanted to move separately. Try not to get the wrong idea.'

One sentence too many.

Haruka glared at Yakumo, but Yakumo didn't care at all.

'It's not walking distance, right?'

Even though Haruka kept glaring, Yakumo asked a question, as if he didn't care at all.

'Eh?'

'The tunnel where the incident occurred.'

'Ah. I know where it is, but it'd be difficult to walk there.'

'Do you have a car?'

'I don't even have a licence.'

'Don't act proud of it.'

'I'm not...'

'DO you have the address?'

'Should I ask Tatsuya-kun?'

'I'd rather walk.'

Yakumo tapped his temple with his finger. It looked like he was thinking, but in the end, he slowly stood up and put on a black hooded coat that was in the corner of the room and started getting dressed.

'Do you have the address?'

'I have an idea.'

Yakumo opened the refrigerator and took a key out. Why was there a key in the refrigerator?

'Promise me one thing before we go.'

As he said that, Yakumo pointed his index finger at Haruka's nose.

'What?'

'For the next little while, don't ask any questions.'

'What do you mean?'

'To put it simply, shut that chatty mouth.'

'Chatty...'

That was an awful way of putting it.

Haruka wanted to object, but Yakumo had already left the room.

'Hey, wait a second.'

Haruka ran after Yakumo.

Yakumo suddenly turned around and threw something at Haruka. It was so sudden that Haruka almost lost her balance as she caught it with both hands.

'It's cold –'

It was the key from the refrigerator.

'Shut the door properly.'

'Wait...'

'Don't forget to shut your mouth too.'

What a guy. Talking to a girl like this –

He was really insensitive, selfish and unpleasant.

'Idiot!'

Haruka couldn't stop herself from yelling.

However, Yakumo seemed to have mistaken what she said, as he just raised his hand and continued walking away briskly.

Haruka locked the door and ended up having to run after Yakumo again.

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Haruka walked behind Yakumo.

She couldn't say anything after he'd told her to shut his mouth. She had been silent for fifteen minutes.

They soon reached a steep slope.

On both sides of the road, there were gingko trees with yellow leaves.

It was a beautiful little road that made you want to stop and enjoy it.

However, Yakumo didn't seem to want to enjoy it, as he briskly climbed the slope.

At the top of the slope, there were the gates to a temple. Yakumo stopped in front of them.

It looked like a fairly old temple, but it was well kept and didn't seem wild.

Why did they come to a temple?

'Hey...'

'Did you forget? No questions.'

The moment Haruka tried to ask why, Yakumo glared at her coldly.

Am I that chatty? Though she couldn't be called quiet in comparison to her friends, she didn't think she was particularly chatty.

Of course she would have questions without any explanations, and it was human to want to ask about that.

I'm not chatty – Yakumo's just strange.

'Don't move from the gates.'

'I don't have to go?'

'No questions.'

Yakumo refused her flat with an expressionless face.

Even a wooden Buddha statue would have more emotion.

It looked like he really didn't plan on saying anything. Haruka gave up and went to the pillar by the gates and put her hands behind her back.

Yakumo seemed to be satisfied by that, as he started walking briskly.

He went on the path to the temple, surrounded by gravel on both sides, and went inside a separate building that was probably the priests' quarters.

He hadn't pressed the intercom button or greeted anybody.

Did Yakumo have some sort of connection to this temple? Perhaps that was why he didn't want to talk about it.

It's cold though –

She hadn't noticed while walking, but the wind was biting when she stood here alone like this.

Why did she have to wait here by herself?

Anger rose within her as she waited.

'Hurry back!'

Unable to keep in her anger, Haruka picked up a rock at her feet and threw it towards the direction Yakumo had walked.

'Ouch!'

She was surprised by the sudden voice.

Somebody slowly walked out from behind the gates.

'I-I-I'm sorry.'

Haruka hurriedly bowed her head.

Even though there shouldn't have been anybody in the direction she threw the rock, she'd actually hit someone –

'You might get cursed for throwing a rock at a temple.'

'I'm really sorry.'

Haruka shrunk further.

'No, no, don't look so worried. It didn't actually hit. Now, lift your head.'

Urged by the low and gentle voice, Haruka timidly lifted her head.

There was a middle-aged monk standing there in navy working robes and straw sandals.

He had an egg-shaped face and eyes thin like string. He had a warm impression to him, like Maitreya.

'Ah.'

Haruka let out a voice of surprise upon seeing the monk's face.

'What is it?'

'No, it's nothing.'

She recalled that Yakumo had asked her not to ask anything. Perhaps this was why.

The monk standing in front of Haruka had a left eye that glowed red like Yakumo's.

'What are you doing here?'

'E-er, I'm waiting for Yakumo-kun – no, a friend...'

Even though it wasn't like she was doing anything suspicious or like she was lying, she was fumbling for words.

'I see. Are you Yakumo's girlfriend? Quite the curio.'

'C-curio?'

'Ah, sorry. It's the first time Yakumo's brought a girlfriend over, so I got excited.'

Could this person be Yakumo's father?'

'U-um, do you know Yakumo-kun?'

Yakumo had said not to ask him questions, but he hadn't said not to ask anybody else questions.

Haruka changed the interpretation the way she liked and tried asking.

'I'm Yakumo's father.'

'Eh?'

Yakumo had said his father was missing –

'Ah, no, to be correct, I plan on being his father. Since he definitely won't accept it. I'm his mother's little brother. His uncle.'

Yakumo's uncle smiled wryly as he scratched his shaved head.

'Well, let's not just talk while standing. Come in.'

'Eh, but...'

'It's fine, it's fine. Just ignore what Yakumo says. No matter what you do, he'll complain.'

Haruka was troubled, but she went through the gates, as urged by Yakumo's uncle.

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After she went into the priests' quarters, she got under the kotatsu in the living room and waited for Yakumo.

His uncle brought tea on a tray and sat across from Haruka.

When she looked at him properly, he did look like Yakumo.

She wouldn't know how to explain if asked what was similar, but if she had to say, it was probably the shape of the face.

However, the atmosphere around him was completely different from Yakumo's.

'Sorry. I invited you in, but this is all I can offer. I should have bought some youkan.'

'No, please don't fuss over me.'

'It must have been cold standing there by yourself.'

'Yes, very.'

Normally, she would have said something like 'Not at all', but she ended up saying the truth.

'How honest.'

Yakumo's uncle smiled.

When he smiled, his eyes closed. It was a gentle expression.

'I'm often told I'm too honest. I think I need to fix that myself.'

'No, honesty is best. There are probably people who have been helped by your words.'

'Do you think so? I always just hurt people.'

It was strange. This person found his way into people's hearts with incredible ease.

However, it didn't feel unpleasant at all.

'Not at all. I know at least one person who's been helped by your words.'

'Eh?'

She didn't think somebody she'd just met would say that.

Even though he has no way of knowing who I've met –

'It's you, isn't it? The one who said Yakumo's eye was beautiful.'

It was true that Haruka had said that the first time she saw Yakumo's red eye.

Yakumo had laughed at her, saying she was the first person who'd said that.

'How do you know that?'

At Haruka's question, Yakumo's uncle leant forward before saying, 'This is just between us...'

'Uncle, you don't have to say anything else unnecessary.'

Suddenly, Yakumo interrupted.

Yakumo stood in the living room entrance, looking disapprovingly at Haruka. Even though Haruka

noticed, she just slowly sipped her tea.

'What are you wasting your time for? We're going.'

Yakumo's order irritated her. She decided to pretend that she hadn't heard it.

I'm not a dog. Even if I were, like I'd listen to the words of such an oppressive owner.

'What, it's you, Yakumo? Don't interrupt. I want to talk with your girlfriend a bit more.'

'She's not my girlfriend. She's a troublemaker. Don't get the wrong idea.'

'Oh, so you already have such a strong bond? Well done.'

'Uncle, listen properly to what other people have to say.'

'Saying things like that. If you dawdle too much, some other man will snatch her up. There must be a lot of takers since she's so cute.'

What on earth were they talking about with her right there? Haruka felt somewhat astonished, or rather –

'If there are people who want to take her, they can do whatever they want.'

'I'll do what I want even without you saying so.'

Haruka had planned on saying that so that Yakumo wouldn't be able to hear, but it looked like the words hadn't escaped Yakumo's ears.

His cold gaze came her way.

'Yakumo, can't you be a bit nicer?'

'I wouldn't mind thinking about it depending on the amount of money.'

His uncle shook his head in exasperation.

'Uncle, sorry, but I'm borrowing the car.'

'A drive with your girlfriend?'

'You're obstinate.'

Yakumo said just that and left the room.

Haruka thought for a while, but just as Yakumo said, this was trouble that she had brought to him. She couldn't just let Yakumo deal with it. After politely thanking Yakumo's uncle, she stood up.

'That's the sort of kid he is,' Yakumo's uncle said quietly as Haruka was about to leave the room.

It sounded somewhat lonely.

'Though Yakumo can see more than most, he's shut his heart.'

'Are you talking about ghosts?'

After nodding, Yakumo's uncle continued.

'Because he's afraid of connecting too deeply with other people, he runs away. His emotions are a little twisted. Even though he's like that, he's really a nice kid... Hm.... That isn't very convincing...'

His uncle cocked his head, looking troubled.

'I know.'

Haruka replied with a smile and left the room.

She wasn't just saying that to make Yakumo's uncle feel better. At that time, she honestly thought that, for some reason.

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'Hey, about your uncle's eye.'

When Haruka got in the white sedan, she timidly asked Yakumo in the driver seat this question.

There was no reply.

Haruka gave up and looked out the window.

Neither the car audio or radio was playing.

All she could hear was the engine and the sound of cold air blowing through the car.

In this car where there wasn't even conversation, Haruka strangely didn't feel uncomfortable.

'My uncle's eye wasn't like that from birth. He's wearing a red contact lens.'

Yakumo suddenly started speaking once they approached the slope leading to the hill.

Haruka looked at Yakumo's profile.

'Eh?'

'What? Isn't that what you wanted to ask?' said Yakumo, looking to his side.

For a moment, their eyes met. Haruka looked away in surprise. Her whole face felt hot.

'Why would he go out of his way to do that?'

'By going out of his way to make his eye red, he's trying to get the world to look at him oddly and feel the same suffering and solitariness that I do.'

'To the point of sacrificing himself?'

'That's the sort of person he is.'

Though Yakumo said that simply, what his uncle was doing wasn't something that could be done simply.

"Even though there's somebody who cares so much for you, why are you living at the university,

Yakumo-kun? You should think a little about how your uncle feels.'

She was speaking unusually strongly.

'Your faults are blabbering without thinking properly and deciding everything with your own perspective.'

'Your faults, Yakumo-kun, are your unfriendliness and your tendency to say insensitive things without thinking about other people's feelings.'

Haruka bit back, not losing to Yakumo.

Yakumo shook his head, as if he were talking to an unreasonable child.

'Do you know what sort of place that was?'

'A temple.'

'Correct. A temple.'

'What about it? Isn't that unrelated?'

'Have you forgotten? My left eye can see the spirits of the dead. Regardless of whether I want to or not.'

'Ah...'

Haruka finally understood what Yakumo was trying to say.

That was right. If a person who could see the spirits of the dead were at the temple, he would have to see dozens – no, hundreds of ghosts every day.

He would have to live with all the negative emotions from the spirits of the dead – their hatred, their anger, their sadness.

It would be impossible to stay sane.

For Haruka, it was just a temple, but it wasn't the case for Yakumo.

'Uncle knows that. It's too noisy there for me.'

Haruka felt like she had peered into Yakumo's heart for the first time.

Just as Yakumo says, I might just decide things based on my own perspective.

Haruka opened the window and stuck her head out slightly.

The wind hit her forehead. The wind which was too cool felt pleasant now –

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When they got close to the tunnel in question, Yakumo stopped the car by the road.

At the tunnel entrance, there were chrysanthemum flowers in an empty can.

They had probably been a fresh white colour before, but now they were withered and brown.

Even in the day, the tunnel felt eerie.

'This is the right place, right?'

Haruka responded with a silent nod.

It made her think of how frightening it had been then. Yakumo leant back on the seat and looked into the tunnel with a serious gaze.

Though it wasn't that long a tunnel, perhaps because it was curved or because it sloped, she couldn't see the tunnel's end.

It was just a pitch-black hole, like an entrance to another world.

The wind coming through the tunnel made a low moan, like a beast's howl.

The fallen leaves on the road danced up, rustling as they did so.

'Did you see something?'

Haruka asked Yakumo's profile.

'It's certain that there's something, but I can't clearly tell what it is from here.'

'So we have to go?'

'We do.'

After saying that, Yakumo slowly put down the side brake.

The car moved forward, as if being sucked in by the tunnel.

The car went inside the tunnel.

It suddenly grew darker. The air became heavier, and Haruka's ears were ringing. Just like then.

Oooooooooo.

For a moment, she felt like the wind's moan grew louder.

After going through about half of the tunnel, the sound of the engine clearly changed. It was the sound an engine made when failing to climb a steep slope.

'This is bad...'

Yakumo said just that and bit his lower lip.

His usual sleepy expression was gone from his face. They were the eyes of a wolf on his prey. There was sweat on his forehead.

'I was too careless.'

'Eh?'

'Cover your face until I say it's OK. Don't look outside the window.'

'Why not?'

'Just cover your face!' yelled Yakumo. He probably saw something.

Something incredibly frightening. Haruka did as she was told and covered her face with both hands, hunching over.

At the same time, Yakumo slammed the accelerator, making the engine roar. However, it felt like the speed didn't go up that much.

Haruka was bent over with her eyes closed, but she felt something outside the car.

Oooooo.

She heard something like a moan that was clearly not the sound of the engine. There was also a sticking sound of something gluing itself to the window.

What could it be? Haruka tried to lift her head.

'Don't look! Cover your face!'

Haruka's shoulders jolted and she returned to her previous posture. Suddenly, something brushed Haruka's neck.

What?

What just passed? She didn't know.

Stick.

Something touched her cheek.

Cold. Very cold.

Ooooo.

She heard the moan again. What was happening?

She didn't know.

No. I can't stand this any longer –

Haruka lifted her head.

She saw the tunnel exit. There was a sharp curve there.

Yakumo was in a daze, as if he wasn't looking forward at all.

'Watch out!'

She yelled immediately.

Gripping the wheel, Yakumo came back to his senses.

'Hold on!' shouted Yakumo.

Hold on to what?

Before Haruka could ask, Yakumo slammed the brakes. The tires locked and let out white smoke as the car started to veer.

In the end, Haruka couldn't find anywhere to hold on to and was swung about by the centrifugal force. Her cheek hit the side window hard.

This was the second time. Her vision went white.

She came back to reality with the smell of burning tires.

Yakumo was bent back on the driver's seat, breathing deeply with his eyes closed.

The car had stopped after turning around so that it was facing the tunnel again.

It was just a few centimetres from the guard rail. It was a cliff ahead of that, with ten metres to the bottom.

They had narrowly escaped death.

'If you're going to slam the brakes, tell me earlier,' said Haruka, rubbing the cheek she had hit.

'Ask me earlier.'

'Why can't you apologise honestly? There's going to be a lump here.'

'I want you to be grateful that it's just going to be a lump.'

Really, whatever this man said, it was always acerbic.

'Hey, was there something there?'

'Yeah.'

When Yakumo finished saying that, he made a U-turn and put the car by the side of the road. He got off the car.

Haruka followed him.

Yakumo went to the front of the car and pointed at the front glass.

'!'

Haruka was lost for words. Shudders crawled up from her toes to her head.

There were handprints on the car's front glass, like somebody had touched it with their bare hand.

It wasn't just one or two. There were handprints everywhere, with almost no cracks.

She had felt like something was there, but for there to be this many –

'At first, there was one person. A man in his thirties was on the car's bonnet.'

Yakumo put his index finger to his brow and started talking.

'After that, more and more stuck to the car. It was like there were trying to stop me in the tunnel.'

'They made the handprints?'

The strength left Haruka's body and she sank to the floor.

It made her think of zombies she'd seen in a late-night movie before. They had surrounded the protagonist's car – an endless number of the dead.

'An amazing number of people have died in this tunnel.'

'Why –'

'At first, they were probably just accidents. Then, the spirits that died but couldn't rest in peace wandered here and caused the next accidents. Then the spirits that couldn't rest in peace grew in number. A cycle of that. The dead call the dead, causing the same thing to happen endlessly.'

Hearing it was enough to make Haruka's spine feel a chill. A chain of death.

'Hey, what are you going to do?'

At Haruka's question, Yakumo slowly walked towards the tunnel.

'There's nothing I can do.'

Yakumo said just that.

'Can't you get them exorcised?'

'It's pointless. That wouldn't solve anything.'

'You said that before, but what do you mean?'

Yakumo smiled bitterly at Haruka's question and ran a hand through his messy hair.

'I don't believe in curses or exorcisms. It's heresy. Chanting to get ghosts to leave and exorcising them – it's really hard for me to believe in that.'

'To me, it's just as hard to believe in your eye that can see ghosts, Yakumo-kun.'

'You're mistaking spirits of the dead for something like demons.'

'What do you mean?'

'What do you think ghosts come from?'

It was a sudden question.

However, it wasn't like she couldn't answer. Naturally –

'Living people.'

'Correct. It's not like they're born from eggs or like they come from space. They were originally people with emotions. However, what do you think ghosts are?'

That was –

'I don't know.'

'This is just my theory, but I think that they might be a cluster of the dead person's wills and emotions.'

'Cluster?'

It didn't really make sense to her.

'Human memory and emotion are said to be electric signals. Some people even say that the whirlpool of information flowing in the internet resembles the construction of the brain.'

'Really?'

She kind of understood, but she kind of didn't –

'If you think that way, the moment human emotions lose their container, they don't just all return to nothing, right? Electricity flows without a container, and the information on the net moves to another container once it loses its original. It wouldn't be strange for the dead's thoughts and feelings to wander.'

'That's true.'

'It's a theory I've made from my experience, so I wouldn't be able to explain it scientifically if asked.'

'So they don't have a physical body and exist just as emotions?'

'Well, something like that. If ghosts are just emotions, returning to exorcism, what effect would mediums chanting curses and performing exorcisms have on people's emotions? I'll say this again, but ghosts are demons.'

Haruka kind of understood. Perhaps it was as Yakumo said.

Whether they were alive or dead, ghosts weren't new living things. People didn't become different life forms after dying.

They were still human.

'Let's say mediums have amazing powers and can exorcise ghosts and send them to the underworld. But that ignores the people's emotions – they would just be forcing them.'

'That's true.'

'that's the same as beating up people who don't listen to make them submit. To put it clearly, it's savage.'

It felt like he was a bit prejudiced, but Haruka could understand what he was saying.

Still, it was a bit unexpected that Yakumo saw ghosts as people.

The words Yakumo's uncle had said came up in her mind. 'His emotions are a little twisted' –

It suddenly seemed funny to Haruka, making her laugh.

'What's so funny?'

Yakumo's brows furrowed in displeasure as he glared at her.

Ooh, scary.

Haruka hurriedly swallowed her laughter and decided to ask another question.

'Then how about with Miki?'

'I just restricted the spirit, found out the reason it was suffering and explained that to the spirit. In short, it was only persuasion.'

Haruka nodded a number of times in understanding.

Now that she thought about it, it was true.

Yakumo hadn't done anything to Miki directly. By finding out the reason the female spirit that possessed her had died, she had taken away her fear.

As a result, he saved Miki.

'You said you saw a woman in front of the tunnel,' Yakumo said suddenly.

With a sharp gaze, like a beast, he looked at the tunnel. There was a tension she'd never seen in his back.

'I did, but...'

'In her late twenties. A woman with long hair and a grey suit?'

Haruka recalled the scene in her head.

With blood flowing from her brow, a woman with long hair, standing there emotionlessly –

'That's right, that's the person. Do you see her?'

'She's standing right in front of you.'

'Eh?'

Haruka looked around frantically, but she couldn't see anything.

At the time, the woman was trying to express something, but I didn't understand.

But if it's Yakumo –

Yakumo slowly walked up to the guard rail and leant over it, looking down.

Was something down there? Haruka did the same, looking down.

On the sharp cliff, weeds and pine trees were growing wildly like a forest.

When she looked carefully, there was oversized rubbish there in the back of the forest, like refrigerators, televisions and bicycles.

It looked like people had used it as a dump because it was difficult to see from the road.

'Here...' murmured Yakumo, jumping over the guard rail, gripping tree branches skilfully as he climbed down the cliff.

It was starting to grow dark.

The large entrance to the tunnel felt eerie.

It even felt like she might be sucked in.

It was getting harder to see Yakumo.

She didn't want to be left behind here. Haruka climbed over the guard rail too and went after Yakumo.

She was naive.

It had been a much steeper cliff than it had seemed from above.

Haruka tried futilely to advance and lost her balance, practically rolling down the cliff.

Countless tree branches hit her arms and legs. It hurt, but she couldn't stop. It was better than waiting alone. It was too late to regret now.

After getting down the cliff, she fell forward from the force.

It was like being hit hard in the knee. There was a jolt of pain.

She felt pathetic and wanted to cry.

When she held back her tears and looked up, she saw Yakumo holding out a hand in front of her.

She gripped the cold white hand and was pulled up.

'I told you to wait, didn't I?'

'You didn't say that!'

Haruka's tone was rough because of the pain.

Haruka sat on a nearby rock and looked at the knee she had hit. Her jeans were ripped and she could see her knee clearly. The skin was broken and it was bloody.

'It hurts...'

The words slipped out of her mouth.

Yakumo went to stand in front of Haruka, knelt on one knee and pressed a handkerchief against Haruka's knee.

'Hold it until the blood stops.'

She couldn't say thank you.

'Explain why we came here so suddenly.'

Instead of gratitude, dissatisfaction came out of Haruka's mouth.

Yakumo shook his head in exasperation and stood up. Then, he pointed at the ground a few metres ahead..

Haruka looked where Yakumo was pointing.

Her breath caught.

There was a woman in a grey suit lying face-up there.

Perhaps that woman –

Haruka didn't have to check to know that the woman was dead.

The blood from her forehead was dark, sticking to her lifeless skin. What could her cloudy eyes see as they looked up at the sky?

'There was probably an accident on that road,' said Yakumo.

How many days had she been here?

The woman must have shown up there wanting somebody to find her.

If I could see clearly like Yakumo, I could have found her sooner.

I'm sorry.

Haruka murmured that in her head and closed her eyes –

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6

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When Haruka went to Yakumo's secret hiding place, there was the man she'd seen at the police precinct during the last case.

If she remembered correctly, he was a detective named Gotou.

He had a large frame with sharp eyes. It made Haruka think he could be a professional wrestler.

Yakumo had told her to come if she was interested because there was something he'd found out about the woman they found yesterday.

Haruka closed the door, thinking she could come again if he already had a guest.

'Great timing. Come in – I'll explain.'

Yakumo urged her to sit, and Gotou pulled out the chair.

Now she couldn't not go in.

Haruka sat next to Gotou. When she thought about how a detective was next to her, it made her a bit nervous.

'You've met Gotou-san before, right?'

Haruka nodded.

'Oi, Yakumo. Introduce me properly? I don't know her name.'

Yakumo scratched his back, looking annoyed.

'She's Ozawa-san.'

'Oi, oi, that's all? There's gotta be more, right?'

'Please ask her yourself afterwards.'

'Ah, what a cold guy, really. So what's your given name?'

Gotou suddenly turned towards Haruka.

Though he had a full-faced smile, with the shadows under his eyes and his stubble, it was weird.

'Ah, it's Haruka.'

'Oh? You're too cute for Yakumo. So how'd you get to know each other?'

'Er...'

'I said afterwards, didn't I?'

Yakumo cut the conversation down. Gotou muttered 'Stingy' under his breath.

Haruka couldn't tell how these two knew each other.

Gotou was a detective and was older than them.

Though Yakumo used polite language, his attitude made it clear he was making fun of Gotou.

Gotou seemed to be talking to Yakumo as a friend.

'Now, introductions are done. Please start explaining.'

Yakumo urged Gotou to continue. So that's how it was, thought Haruka.

Yakumo had set the time to make Gotou explain everything.

'Ah, that's right. I almost forgot.'

Gotou completely ignored Yakumo's acerbity and took a notebook out of his wrinkled shirt. He cleared his throat and started speaking.

'For the corpse of that woman, the cause of death was probably a brain contusion.'

'Was it murder?' asked Yakumo.

'No. According to the coroner, the body had car paint and a light fragment on it – it's clear that she was hit by a car.'

Gotou rubbed the stubble on his chin with his palm.

Haruka was bewildered. Gotou was talking about police information.

'E-excuse me. Is it OK to talk about this?'

Haruka interrupted without thinking.

Yakumo and Gotou looked at Haruka at the same time.

She hadn't thought she'd said something strange, but that made her feel anxious. After a silence, Gotou continued like nothing had happened.

'So about the female victim, her bag and wallet – all the things we could get her identity from – were taken off of her.'

'Somebody hid her identity on purpose.'

Yakumo put a finger on his brow.

'Exactly. We found out her identity immediately from her dental records. The victim lived in a nearby residential area. Let's call her A-ko-san. She was spotted leaving her office a couple days ago and went missing after that.'

'The search request?'

'Parents put it out. We got the parents to identify the corpse. A-ko-san's parents were confused, but they said they wanted to thank the person who found their daughter.'

Gotou glanced at Yakumo, but he didn't respond.

'And the culprit?'

'Ah, because of the fragments of the car, we figured out the type of car. It didn't take that long.'

'So everything's settled?'

'Man, it's an awful story. The culprits were two middle school students who live on the same street as the victim, A-ko-san.'

'So they didn't have a licence.'

'They were full of themselves, took the car for a spin, and hit her. They say they were driving like mad out of the tunnel 'cause they were being chased by ghosts, and they couldn't turn the curve and hit the woman.'

'That story's true.'

Haruka interrupted without thinking.

'I believe it too, but unfortunately, Japanese law doesn't acknowledge the existence of ghosts.'

'Somebody's dead. The existence of ghosts isn't an excuse,' said Yakumo, bringing the off-track conversation back on topic.

'How harsh.'

Gotou smiled wryly. He loosened the already loose tie around his neck and took out a cigarette

from his inner pocket.

'I think you know.'

'I know. No smoking, right? I won't light it. just gonna hold it in my mouth,' said Gotou in irritation at Yakumo's retort.

Gotou cleared his throat and started talking again.

'Well, putting aside those kids, their parents are the problem. After the two kids caused this incident, they got afraid and called their parents. And the parents...'

'Hid the incident,' said Yakumo, biting his lip.

'Correct. They stole the wallet and bag and then tossed the corpse off the cliff...'

Haruka's shoulders shuddered upon hearing Gotou's words. She felt uncomfortable, like she would vomit.

They didn't treat her like human.

Throwing away a corpse. How cold could people be to protect themselves –

'Well, that's the gist of it. Pretty much as you expected, Yakumo.'

Gotou concluded the story and clapped his notebook shut.

As expected? So Yakumo had seen through the whole case?

Haruka had just been confused, unable to see the truth ahead at all.

It even made her want to suspect that Yakumo's eye couldn't see just the spirits of the dead but the future as well.

'Ah, I forgot to say one thing. The car that caused the accident's already been repaired. Seems like they requested some car shop somewhere, but there must've been a lot of blood.'

'They fixed it knowing it had hit a car.'

Yakumo finished Gotou's words.

'Well, that's it. We're asking the parents now where that car shop was...'

It really was an unpleasant case.

However, there was something Haruka didn't understand.

'So what will happen with Tatsuya-kun's case?'

'Can't go near that tunnel again if he doesn't want to die,' said Yakumo with a yawn.

Well, that was probably how it would be, but the uneasy feeling didn't leave her chest...

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Tatsuya was driving the car for the first time in a while, when he spotted the back of somebody unexpected on the hill leading to the university.

When he honked the horn, the person turned to look at him with sleepy eyes.

Saitou Yakumo. He'd embarrassed Tatsuya in front of Haruka earlier.

If he loitered around any more, to say it clearly, it'd be a hassle.

It'd be better to warn him here.

Tatsuya opened the car window and drove up to Yakumo.

'Thanks for earlier. I heard from Haruka-chan. I won't go to that tunnel any more.'

Yakumo was clearly displeased as he continued to walk silently.

'Wait a second. I'm trying to thank you here.'

Tatsuya matched Yakumo's pace and slowly drove the car as he spoke.

'You have no reason to thank me,' said Yakumo, giving Tatsuya a glance.

He really didn't like this guy. That thought came to Tatsuya again.

When those eyes looked at him, like they could see to the bottom of his heart, he just couldn't relax.

'Don't say that. I'm counting on you the next time something happens.'

'There's no next time. Do something about it yourself.'

Tatsuya clicked his tongue.

'Don't want to help your rival in love?'

'Are you talking to me?'

'Is there anybody besides you?'

'If you're talking to me, you've missed the mark. I couldn't care less about what the two of you do. I won't get in your way or interfere, so do whatever you want. The reason I'm cold to you is because of a physiological dislike. Don't read that much into it.'

Tatsuya somehow managed to restrain his growing anger.

'Got it. I'm going on a make-up date with Haruka-chan now. No complains, right?'

'Do what you...'

Yakumo started speaking, but he didn't finished. His brows were furrowed as he looked at the back seat.

'Oi... Who's the kid in the back?'

'What?'

Tatsuya didn't understand what Yakumo was saying at all.

He moved his eyes to the back of the car. He didn't have to check. There was nobody there.

This guy –

'You talking about aborted babies again?'

Tatsuya didn't know who the hell this guy had heard it from, but his rumour mongering pissed Tatsuya off.

'No, not an aborted baby. That kid... maybe...'

'Man, like I can deal with you! Go die!'

Tatsuya spat that out and slammed the accelerator.

Yakumo's figure grew smaller. That guy. He was still looking this way.

What a creepy guy –

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8

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Haruka was waiting at the train station's traffic circle, which was where Miki had called her out to.

Miki was going to introduce her new boyfriend or something. To be honest, Haruka didn't care.

It was probably just the guy from the mixer last time.

It wasn't a judging fair, so what was she supposed to do upon seeing her friend's boyfriend?

Normally, this wasn't the case, but when it was romance, Haruka didn't get along with Miki at all.

Haruka looked up at the sound of a horn.

A car was stopped in front of Haruka. If she remembered correctly, this car – but the colour was different. It had been white before, but now it was a garish red.

'Hey.'

Haruka had hoped she was wrong, but the face that popped out was Tatsuya's smirking one.

Tatsuya had kept sending her texts since. All he wrote about was himself.

Haruka had been making sure not to respond.

'What are you doing?'

'I'm waiting for a friend.'

'Ah, I see. Great timing. I was ordered to pick up a princess who was waiting for a friend.'

Oh no.

Haruka should have refused Miki's invitation today.

Now that she thought about it, she understood. If Miki's new boyfriend was somebody she knew from the mixer, naturally, Tatsuya would be a friend of Miki's boyfriend.

'Let's go. Everyone's waiting.'

Haruka felt uncomfortable just thinking about riding this car again.

She couldn't cancel at the last minute now.

Haruka reluctantly got into the car.

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9

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Gotou was in front of the car shop in the suburbs.

It had a garage that could hold three cars with a small building that was probably the workshop.

There were a number of police cars surrounding the area with officers running about.

Gotou had went to the road to avoid the noise so that he could make a call on his mobile.

After three rings, Yakumo answered.

That was miraculously quick for him.

<What do you want?>

That was the first thing he said.

'Continuation of that case. We found the mechanic who we think repaired the car...'

<And?>

Yakumo urged Gotou to continue. Another rare thing.

Gotou started explaining while Yakumo was still in a cooperative mood.

The mechanic used to be in a biker gang in the city and was working at the car shop after his dead father.

The people around him thought he was bumbling.

When you brought your car in for repair, it always came back with something broken in another place. He was famous for it.

With testimony, the police searched his place, and a kid's corpse was found in the backyard.

After questioning him, the story was that the kid had been hit when he was in a car with an acquaintance. Then, they'd buried the corpse in the backyard to hide the evidence –

Everyone was rotten to the core. They were looking into the kid's identity now.

It would take time to settle things, since they didn't know the identity of the kid the mechanic hit, and the body was too damaged for easy identification.

Their own perverted coroner would probably be happy.

<So what are you telling me to do?>

When Gotou finished explaining, Yakumo said that, sounding displeased.

'I won't tell you find out who that kid is, but I thought that maybe you could at least find out any special facial characteristics,' said Gotou, though he thought it wouldn't work.

If Yakumo could see the spirit of the dead boy, the investigation would go a bit more smoothly.

Well, he'd probably just refuse, saying he wasn't interested.

<Gotou-san. Could I see a photo of the corpse?>

Yakumo's reply was unexpected.

'Really!?' exclaimed Gotou happily.

It had been worth trying.

He quickly arranged to meet up with Yakumo and hung up.

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10

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Haruka gloomily sat in the car's passenger seat.

The four-beat hip hop music played as usual.

'What do you think of the car colour?'

Haruka didn't really care. She gave a vague 'Hm' as a reply.

'Well, it had been a red handprint, so I changed the colour with that. Pretty cool, right?'

More importantly –

'Where are we going?' she asked Tatsuya in the driver seat.

The plan had been to go to Miki's house, but the direction was clearly different.

They had left the town and were climbing a mountain road.

'I was thinking we could take a look at the night view we didn't get a chance to last time.'

'Miki's waiting, and I don't really want to see the night view.'

It was like she watching a replay of a tape of last time.

'It's fine. Miki-chan knows about this.'

'Eh?'

Haruka spoke without thinking in her confusion.

'She's being considerate of us,' said Tatsuya with a smirk.

She knew about the both of them and was being considerate.

This was just harassment.

Haruka would complain to Miki at length afterwards.

But –

'The place with a nice night view is through that tunnel, right?'

'It's fine, it's fine. There's another road.'

Why do only self-centred people surround me?

Haruka felt miserable. Her shoulders slumped.

* * *

Gotou parked a ten-year-old white sedan in front of the university gates.

His beloved car, which had never been washed even once.

When Gotou stopped, Yakumo ran out from the gates and got into the car.

Had he been waiting for Gotou in this cold? Yakumo had never done something like this before.

'Please show me the photo,' said Yakumo after catching his breath.

Gotou turned on the lights and took an envelope out from the dashboard, handing it to Yakumo.

Yakumo took the photos out and looked at each one assiduously.

They were photos that you'd want to look away from, but Yakumo's eyes were serious. His power had probably taken away the fear of death from him.

Yakumo saw blood, flesh and bone – and their decay – on a daily basis –

Yakumo put his head in his hands and sighed.

'Do you have an idea?'

'Unfortunately, I do.'

Though Yakumo smiled, his eyes weren't smiling at all.

'Tell me. What do you mean?'

'I'll explain later. More importantly, we have to confirm it.'

After saying that, Yakumo took his mobile phone out of his coat pocket and made a call.

* * *

In the passenger seat, Haruka noticed her mobile phone vibrating in her bag.

'Hello?'

<Where are you now?>

She heard Yakumo's restless voice.

'In a car.'

<When you say car, is it the car of that guy named Tatsuya?>

'Yes, but...'

<Get off that car right now.>

There was no arguing with Yakumo's tone.

'Get off? What do you mean?'

<Just get off the car if you don't want to die.>

Eh? If you don't want to die –

It was true that she didn't feel good about being together with Tatsuya, but she wouldn't die from that.

While Haruka was thinking, her mobile was taken away from her.

It was Tatsuya. What was he doing all of a sudden? While Haruka was flustered, Tatsuya started talking into the phone.

'This isn't what you promised. It's got nothing to do with you, right?'

That was a considerably pointed tone.

He'd regret talking to Yakumo like that.

'Shut up! It's got nothing to do with you!'

As expected. Tatsuya was furious – it seemed like Yakumo had said something.

He deserved it from doing something as thoughtless as taking somebody else's phone.

'Anyway, let me do what I want!' yelled Tatsuya, hanging up and putting the mobile on the dashboard, as if he didn't even want to give it back to Haruka.

HE had no manners at all.

To be honest, she was sick of this.

'I'm getting off,' she said, while putting her mobile phone in her bag.

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'Oi, Yakumo. What was that? Explain.'

Gotou asked that question to Yakumo, who was gripping the mobile phone with a disappointed expression.

'I've seen the child in the photo,' said Yakumo, handing the photos back to Gotou.

'You know the kid? The face was wrecked, so...'

'Though it isn't certain, you should be able to figure it out part of it from gender, height and shape, right?'

Made sense. Gotou accepted that.

Rather than looking for an identity, Yakumo was just putting faces together.

Still –

'Where?'

'He was sitting in a car's backseat today. That was probably the car that hit him.'

'I see.'

Gotou opened the window and lit his cigarette.

'If you're going to smoke, please go outside.'

'Oi, oi – this is my car. You've got no right to complain. So does it seem like that kid's ghost is going to do something?'

'Perhaps... Though I didn't notice when I was in the tunnel, now that I think about it, I should have known. I regarded something completely different in the same light...'

Yakumo bit his lip in his frustration.

It meant that an accident could occur somewhere.

Gotou wanted to do something, but to be honest, it'd be difficult. If he used his wireless to follow the car, he might be able to avoid the accident.

However, there was no reason to do so. Police couldn't move because a ghost might cause an accident.

Even if he tried to explain that it was a car that had hit a kid, all he had to prove it now was Yakumo's testimony.

'Is the car owner your friend?'

Gotou asked the question that suddenly came to his head.

'No. I wouldn't be the friend of somebody like that even for a request.'

'I see.'

'Just...'

'Just... what?'

Even while asking that, Gotou had an idea.

He could tell from Yakumo's restlessness.

'My acquaintance is in the car.'

'That girl?'

The face of the female student called Haruka appeared in Gotou's head.

She was so cute and amiable that she didn't match with Yakumo.

'Yes,' said Yakumo.

'Damn.'

Gotou threw the documents into the backseat and leant back on his seat.

'Anyway, it was helpful.'

Yakumo ended the conversation and opened the car door.

'What are you going to do?'

'It's not like she's my friend, but I can't leave this alone.'

'You got any ideas?'

'I'll come up with them now.'

Acting tough as always.

Even though he didn't have any ideas. He could just honestly ask for help. How troublesome.

'Oi, Yakumo.'

'What?'

'You owe me one.'

Yakumo looked surprised.

It was the first time Gotou had seen him look like that. Gotou could get used to this.

'Just get on. I'll take you. You're in a hurry, right? Don't dawdle.'

'Thank you very much.'

It was probably the first time Yakumo had thanked Gotou.

'Forget about the thanks. It's as unpleasant as being told "I love you" by my wife.'

'Have you ever been told that?'

'Shut up.'

Damn, even at a time like this?

'Hold on tight.'

Gotou slammed the pedal and sped up, spinning the wheel to make a U-turn.

Yakumo lost his balance and hit his head against the side window.

'If you're going to make a U-turn, please tell me.'

'You didn't ask.'

Gotou laughed aloud in triumphant.

Yakumo put a hand against his injured head and looked like he wanted to say something, but in the end, he didn't say anything.

Gotou felt like he'd won.

'Do you always drive like this?'

'I always need to hurry for work.'

Gotou turned on the siren and drove even more quickly, caught up in the moment.

There were honks from behind him, but he didn't care.

'That was a red light.'

'I've got the siren on. The other cars will avoid us.'

'What an astonishing officer you are.'

'If you complain any more, I'll drive at the speed limit,' said Gotou as he drove even more quickly.

The mountain of documents on the dashboard fell down, scattering through the car.

'I don't want to ever sit in a car you drive again, Gotou-san.'

Though Yakumo said that, he was smirking.

'That's my line. I won't give you a ride ever again.'

'Please turn left at the next intersection.;

Gotou spun the wheel as Yakumo instructed.

The tires squealed.

'Oi, Yakumo. If we're going on this road, are we...'

'Yes, we are.'

A heavy atmosphere.

He'd been the one who said he'd drive him, but it made him want to back out.

'The ghost tunnel, eh...'

'Yes. That child is probably also heading for that tunnel.'

'How can you tell?'

'There's a call. From the amazing number of spirits that died there in similar accidents...'

It was true that the number of accidents there was abnormal. There were a quite a few of *them* in the photos taken by forensics after the accidents.

It wasn't just one or two.

Heads all over the tunnel. And all of them looking right at you.

Honestly, if people were seeing that, an accident or two would be a matter of course.

But –

'Yakumo. Can I ask one thing?'

'If it isn't a stupid question, yes.'

Yakumo frowned, troubled by the smell of the cigarette, and opened the window as he replied.

'I've always thought it strange, but you can see dead people all the time. Putting that aside, though normal people can't see them, that isn't always the case. There are some people who can see them sometimes.'

'Yes.'

'Even for spirit photography, the people in the photo don't notice, right?'

Yakumo seemed to think as he ran a hand through his hair.

Gotou forgot to tap the cigarette against the ashtray as he waited for an answer.

'Probably...'

Yakumo started to speak, like he was thinking to himself.

'I think that it changes depending on a number of conditions.'

'Conditions?'

'Yes. For example, there might be a change if the spirit of the dead has a strong will. Perhaps the will of the person who is looking has an influence. It's often said that telling ghost stories calls out ghosts.'

'Yeah.'

Gotou had heard that a lot.

There was an urban legend that if you turned off the lights and told ghost stories, another person would show up.

'There is also the possibility that neither of those matters, and that it changes depending on natural phenomena. Temperature or humidity or light...'

'Like mirages?'

'There are many possibilities, but to be honest, I don't know. If I could explain the cause, I would be able to heal my eye...'

'Right. That was a stupid question.'

Gotou smiled wryly and apologised honestly.

'Please don't be concerned about that. Though I wish you would be more concerned about the cigarette smoke.'

'How many times do I have to say this? This is my car.'

Gotou pressed his cigarette into the ashtray and lit a new cigarette.

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12

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Yakumo didn't call again.

What on earth did he mean, saying something like 'if you don't want to die'?

Though Haruka had said she was getting off the call earlier, Tatsuya ignored her.

She didn't have the courage to jump off a moving car.

As Haruka looked out the window, she noticed something strange.

This scenery. She'd seen it before.

Tatsuya had said he'd take a different road to avoid the tunnel.

However, the scenery was the same as last time.

'Hey, Tatsuya-kun. This road...'

No response. She looked at the driver's seat.

His face was completely pale. His lips were trembling.

'Hey, Tatsuya-kun. Won't we get to the tunnel if we go this way?'

'...I-I know...'

Though Tatsuya said he knew, it didn't look like he was turning around.

Rather, he was speeding up.

There was a curve in front of them, but he still didn't slow down. It was dangerous.

The tires screeched as they just managed to make the turn.

If she was in a car like this, she could actually die, just as Yakumo said.

'Hey, Tatsuya-kun!' said Haruka frantically as she glared at Tatsuya.

A cold sweat ran down Tatsuya's forehead. His eyes were bloodshot, and it looked like he was stuck to the wheel.

'Hey, wait.'

Tatsuya didn't reply to Haruka's repeated questions, but he kept looking at the rear-view window pleadingly.

Haruka looked at the rear-view window as well.

There was a boy there.

With narrow eyes and plump red cheeks, the boy was looking at them with a smile.

Haruka hurriedly turned to look at the backseat.

There was no boy there. She looked at the rear-view mirror again.

She saw the boy smiling in the backseat.

However, when she turned around, there was nobody there.

A boy that only existed in the rear-view mirror –

'What is this?'

'... The brakes... The brakes aren't working...'

Tatsuya sounded like he was going to cry.

'Aren't working? What do you mean?'

'It wasn't me. It's not my fault. Help. Please help.'

Tatsuya started yelling as tears rolled down his cheeks.

He couldn't drive properly in this condition.

What on earth should she do? Haruka was confused when she heard a police car's siren.

When she looked to the side, she saw a white car with a siren on.

The man in the passenger seat was leaning out and yelling something.

A face she'd seen before –

It was Yakumo.

* * *

'It's great that we found them, but what are we going to do now? If a car comes this way, we're

wrecked,' said Gotou in his irritation towards Yakumo as he drove.

There were two cars going in the same direction on a road with one lane for each direction.

They couldn't keep doing this.

'First, I'll confirm the situation.'

'How? By yelling from here? They won't hear.'

Yakumo took his mobile from his pocket, opened the window, leant out and gestured.

'Turn on the power! The power!'

Yakumo yelled as loudly as he could.

Shit! Another car!

'Yakumo, come back in!' yelled Gotou, slamming the brakes and grabbing the belt of Yakumo's jeans so that he wouldn't fall out.

Then, he swung the wheel to the right and followed the car Haruka was in.

Next to them, the truck let out a honk as it passed.

That was dangerous.

Yakumo leant back on the seat and took deep breaths.

The wind was strong. With the sound of the engine, Gotou didn't know whether Yakumo's voice had reached.

All he could do was hope it did.

Suddenly, Gotou noticed that there was a kid in the back of the car in front of them.

He was looking back at them, with his face stuck to the window. He had a cute smile.

That's the kid's ghost –

* * *

Haruka couldn't hear what Yakumo was saying.

At first, she was confused about what Yakumo was doing here, but she didn't have the time to think about that.

Yakumo had been trying to expression something.

He had been yelling with his mobile phone in his hand.

Ah. Mobile.

Haruka took her mobile out of his bag.

She couldn't believe it – the phone was off. Did Tatsuya turn it off earlier?

Haruka hurriedly turned it on.

That moment, her mobile started vibrating.

'Hello?'

<Are you OK? Though I'll head back if I'm getting in the way of your date.>

It was Yakumo's voice. He was speaking spitefully even at a time like this. Really, what a hateful guy.

However, Yakumo's spiteful voice was her only hope now.

'It's not a date. What should I do?'

<First, stop talking and explain the situation.>

If Haruka got back alive, she'd definitely poke him in the forehead.

'He says the brakes – the car's brakes suddenly stopped working.'

<Can you turn the wheel?>

'Tatsuya-kun, can you turn the wheel?'

Haruka covered the mobile phone's receiver and spoke to Tatsuya.

Perhaps Tatsuya couldn't speak, as he just nodded a number of times while sniffing.

'It seems the wheel's OK.'

<And the hand brake?>

'Tatsuya-kun, how about the hand brake?'

Haruka asked Tatsuya another question in the same way.

Tatsuya's mouth just moved – she couldn't tell what he was saying.

'Talk properly! What about the hand brake?'

I'm frightened too. Haruka yelled at Tatsuya.

'I don't know. I didn't try...'

Tatsuya finally spoke.

* * *

'It looks like the brakes are completely dead. The wheel is working. He hasn't tried the hand brake.'

Gotou drove as he listened to Yakumo's quick explanation.

'That's bad...'

A hand brake on this downward slope.

The car wouldn't be able to stop completely.

What to do?

'Isn't there any method? They'll reach the tunnel soon.'

'Wait. I'm thinking now.'

Gotou took out his cigarette case, but he saw that it was empty and threw it out.

'It's dangerous, but there's no helping it.'

After saying that, Gotou took the mobile from Yakumo.

'Sorry, but could you hand the phone to the driver?'

Soon, he heard the trembling voice of a man half in tears say <Hello>.

'OK, listen carefully to what I'm going to say.'

Gotou spoke as slowly as he could so that he wouldn't startle the guy.

'When I give the signal, put the car in low gear. Then, use the hand brake and turn the wheel slightly to the left.'

<I-if I do that, the car'll hit the guard rail...>

'It will! Don't move the wheel after it does. Stick to the rail. Got it?'

After a while, Gotou heard Tatsuya's weak reply.

Is this guy really OK?

Gotou was anxious, but all he could do was try. He took in a deep breath and waited for the right time.

'Got it? I'm going... Now!'

The car slowed slightly. Looked like Tatsuya was going along with the instructions. Then, the car slowly approached the guard rail.

Crunch.

The front of the car hit the guard rail and let out sparks.

However, the car continued moving.

They'd be out if they hit the curve.

'Any other methods?' yelled Yakumo.

'Damn it!'

Gotou threw the mobile in his band mood.

It hit the front class and broke into parts.

'Yakumo. You'll really owe me.'

As Gotou said that, he stepped on the accelerator and drove parallel to the other car again.

'Hold on tight.'

After saying that, Gotou used his own car to hit the one beside them.

There was the sound of metal hitting metal as Gotou's car hit and drove erratically, but he forced it back again.

They hit once more, and this time, Gotou's car didn't move away and instead pushed the other one into the guard rail.

There was an unpleasant high-pitched screech as metal hit metal, letting off yellow sparks.

Finally, the sparks stopped, and the unpleasant sound of metal stopped too.

The two cars stopped just in front of the curve before the tunnel, letting out white smoke.

'If you're going to ram into the car, please say so,' grumbled Yakumo as he held a hand against his left shoulder.

'You didn't ask.'

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13

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Her head was dizzy.

Haruka's feet were shaking, but she somehow managed to get out of the car on her own.

'Oi. You OK?'

Somebody hit her shoulder. Haruka's blurry vision became clearer.

She saw Yakumo's red left eye.

Unusual for him, he looked worried.

'Somehow...' said Haruka, rubbing her forehead, which had been hit.

It didn't hurt that much, but her consciousness was fuzzy.

'It's good that you're safe.'

'Couldn't you have saved me in a better way?' complained Haruka, pushing Yakumo's chest.

'Do you have a complaint?' Gotou interrupted immediately.

'Sorry, that wasn't...'

Haruka hurriedly bowed her head towards Gotou.

Yakumo smirked upon seeing it.

'What's so funny? This is your fault anyway, Yakumo-kun.'

'Stop shifting the blame. It's just deserts, right? I even lost my contact lens – I'm really suffering here.'

'Can't you be a bit nicer?'

Thank you – why can't I say that simple phrase honestly in front of Yakumo?

Haruka tried to make sense of her inexplicable feelings, but she didn't come up with a reason.

Ooooo.

The moan of the wind interrupted the conversation.

Yakumo suddenly looked towards the tunnel.

It looked like he saw something there.

Haruka looked as well, but all she could see was the pitch-black tunnel.

Yakumo staggered towards the tunnel.

'Hey, what is it?'

It looked like Yakumo hadn't heard Haruka's words.

'Stop! You can't go there!'

Yakumo suddenly yelled out and started running towards the tunnel.

'Don't go! You won't be able to come back if you do!'

Yakumo continued to run. Like he was chasing something –

However, it looked like he couldn't catch it.

He stopped in the middle and fell to the asphalt, as if exhausted.

Then, he didn't move for a while.

Only the cold wind proved that time hadn't stopped.

How long was he there –

'Why... Why didn't you understand...'

Yakumo finally murmured that and stood up, swaying as he did so.

'Yakumo.'

Gotou called out to him.

In response, Yakumo very slowly turned around.

Haruka's spine jolted.

Yakumo was as expressionless as a dead man. But –

His red eye was trembling with anger.

'You... That child was still alive.'

With a slow but steady gait, Yakumo walked towards Tatsuya.

Yakumo's red left eye glowed in the darkness, focussed on Tatsuya. Tatsuya let out a shriek.

He backed away in fear.

'Oi, Yakumo, what's wrong?'

'Yakumo-kun?'

Yakumo didn't respond to Gotou's or Haruka's voices.

He just continued to walk straight towards Tatsuya.

'You hit that boy with this car.'

'Y-you're wrong.'

Yakumo continued, ignoring Tatsuya's excuse.

'But that boy was still alive. You killed him. Thinking it'd be better for him to die, since he wouldn't be able to be saved anyway –'

'W-what are you saying?'

'You hit his head again and again with a hammer and killed him.'

Tatsuya's fear had reached its limit.

Under the intimidating pressure emitting from Yakumo, Tatsuya started crying as he continued to back away.

However, Yakumo didn't let him get away.

'Who the hell decided that it would be better for him to die?'

'That isn't it. There wasn't anything we could do.'

'You killed that child to hide the accident! Do you understand what you did!?!'

Yakumo grabbed Tatsuya's collar and rammed his head into Tatsuya's nose.

Tatsuya's nose and upper lip seemed to have been cut, as they were bleeding as he collapsed to the ground right there.

'Oi, Yakumo. You're not saying that these guys –'

'They did! They killed a child who was still alive and buried him to hide their accident. He was still breathing – he was still conscious!'

Yakumo's words stabbed Haruka deeply in her chest.

What Tatsuya had done was completely unforgiveable.

'That isn't just illegal disposal of a body – that's murder.'

Gotou approached Tatsuya with a sharp gaze.

'S-shut up. Shut your mouth! You have no proof. Where's there proof? This guy's nuts. Nobody'll believe this story,' yelled Tatsuya, waving his hands wildly.

'I believe it,' said Gotou, looking down at Tatsuya.

'You don't have any proof. No proof.'

Tatsuya's shoulders heaved as he screamed frantically.

'Got this? That child has been wandering here this whole time. Do you understand? This whole time. Should I kill you here and have you experience the same thing?'

Yakumo grabbed Tatsuya's hair and forced him to stand up.

Tatsuya had been bluffing as well as he could, but his mind was at its limit.

Yakumo raised a tight fist.

'Stop it.'

Gotou grabbed Yakumo's arm to keep him in check.

'Why?'

'You don't need to do that. I'll take responsibility for this guy and send him to prison. So bear with it for now. There are other things you can do, right?'

Yakumo and Gotou glared at each other, unmoving.

A tension that felt like it would explode at any moment –

'Yakumo-kun! Stop!' shouted Haruka, unable to bear it.

Yakumo slowly lowered his raised fist.

'Gotou-san. Please find the evidence afterwards. You must.'

'You don't even have to ask.'

After saying that, Gotou pushed the resisting Tatsuya into the car's backseat.

'Oi, I'm going back.'

Gotou called out to him, but Yakumo didn't move.

He was looking into the dark of the tunnel, which looked like the entrance to another world.

Haruka looked at Yakumo's back, which seemed sad.

'I'll come to pick you up after.'

After saying that, Gotou made a U-turn with the car Tatsuya was in and drove away, climbing the slope.

'You found out the truth. That child must...'

Haruka spoke towards Yakumo's profile.

How on earth must Yakumo feel? Is he angry? Sad? Haruka didn't know.

'It's frustrating sometimes.'

'Frustrating?'

'I told you this before, right? I can't exorcise ghosts or anything.'

'Yeah.'

'I said that exorcism was like heresy, but the truth is, it's frustrating that I can't do it.'

'Yakumo-kun –'

'I can't do anything but see them.'

Haruka slowly walked up to Yakumo and stood next to him.

I don't have a red eye, but if I thought that I might be able to see the same things if I were in the same place.

'Just because I can see them, everyone treats me like a monster. Despite that, all I can do is see them. I can't do anything'

That isn't true. Haruka tried to say that, but her voice wouldn't come out properly.

'Why can I see with this eye, when I can't do anything...'

Yakumo said just that.

At least I was saved by Yakumo-kun.

Because of that eye, I was released from my older sister's accident, which I had been suffering from for thirteen years.

And he's saved my life three times.

Haruka whispered that in her heart as she looked into the dark tunnel as Yakumo was doing –

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14

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Haruka pedalled the bicycle frantically as she climbed the slope to the tunnel.

In the bicycle's basket, she had put white chrysanthemums that she had bought at the flower shop in front of the station.

The crime Tatsuya had committed had been proved as murder through Gotou's investigation.

If he hadn't thought about trying to get away with it, it would have just been an accident, but this incident had caused many people misfortune.

With more investigation, they found out that the boy's parents had had an accident at that tunnel and had already passed away.

When he was hit by a car, that boy might have gone to his parents.

Thinking that made Haruka feel a bit better, but it didn't change the fact that a life that didn't have to be lost had been –

Though it was winter, it was intense exercise.

Haruka was completely sweaty when she reached the tunnel.

She took off her brown jacket. She was just about to take the flowers from the basket when somebody called out to her.

'You came all the way here by bike?'

Haruka lifted her head and saw Yakumo's uncle, the priest, standing in front of the tunnel.

Unlike the last time they'd met, he was wearing black robes with a monk's stole.

Haruka greeted the priest and walked up to him.

On the path beside the tunnel, there were beautiful white chrysanthemums in a vase along with incense, which let off white smoke.

'Did you do this, sir?'

The priest shook his head.

'It was Yakumo.'

Haruka sat down and looked at the white chrysanthemums.

It was unexpected that Yakumo would do something like this.

'Yakumo called me out here. After talking about this tunnel, he told me to do something about all the spirits wandering here,' continued the priest, smiling wryly.

'Even if he tells me to do something, I can't see the spirits of the dead like Yakumo can. I really can't do anything...'

'Yakumo-kun said it was frustrating,' said Haruka, recalling the incident from before.

'Frustrating?'

The priest cocked his head.

'Yes. He said it was frustrating for him, since he can see them but can't do anything.'

Suddenly, the priest laughed, nodding a number of times.

'Is something funny?'

The priest stopped laughing and cleared his throat before speaking.

'Before, Yakumo just hated being able to see them. Wondering why he was the only one who could see them. When he was a student, he even tried to stab his own eye with a knife.'

'That's...'

'If he couldn't see them, nobody would be afraid of him, and he wouldn't have to be afraid.'

If Haruka had been in the same position, she might have thought the same things as Yakumo.

'Is that so?'

She felt like her impression of Yakumo had changed a bit.

'It's quite an improvement for that Yakumo to say that it's frustrating to just be able to see them without being able to do anything.'

'An improvement? It doesn't seem like that at all to me thought.'

The priest started laughing again.

What is so funny? Haruka didn't understand at all.

'I'm the one who gave Yakumo his name.'

The priest sat next to Haruka and started talking.

'When there are many layers of clouds, it's called "yakumo".'

'Is that so?'

'When that child was born, and I saw that red left eye, I thought that he would definitely have to undergo many trials. Like thick layers of clouds that block the sun's lights.'

'So you called him Yakumo.'

'I didn't want him to lose to those trials. The path ahead is long, but I think that Yakumo has broken through one of those clouds.'

'Yakumo...'

Haruka said that name once more.

She heard the sound of a bird from far away.

No matter what changed, time continued to flow.

'Ah, that's right.'

Haruka took out the flowers that she had brought from the basket and placed it beside the vase Yakumo had placed. She put her hands together and closed her eyes.

Did Yakumo come here and talk to that boy?

She suddenly wondered that.

'I think it'll be tough, but take care of Yakumo for me.'

'Yes.'

Haruka replied to the priest's words with a smile. Then, she stood up, thanks the priest and left.

When Haruka looked up, a cloudless blue winter sky spread above her.

Will a day like this come for Yakumo too?

That thought suddenly came to her –

ファイルⅢ

死者からの伝言

03

There is something called premonition.

It comes when somebody you are lose to is about to die. You feel it in an omen.

The omen appears differently to everyone.

Some might feel it vaguely, while it isn't rare for people to say they see something like a single firefly in the winter or someone's death in a dream.

There are people who have experienced seeing somebody who should have been very far away suddenly appearing before sleep, saying 'Thank you' or 'Goodbye' in the end and suddenly disappearing.

This premonition comes as a final farewell to those left behind from those who are going to their deaths –

That is what is usually thought, but there are cases where it is different.

Premonitions are sometimes imbued with important meanings.

The words of those who are going to their deaths, wrung out with the last of their strength –

A message that must not be overlooked –

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Haruka couldn't sleep that night.

She had her part-time job after her lecture, and she had to do her report due tomorrow when she returned home.

It was two in the morning when she got into bed.

Though she felt like she should have fallen asleep immediately, she couldn't sleep at all.

She opened her eyes slightly and looked at the clock. It was already past three. She had been in bed for over an hour.

These sleepless nights came to her frequently.

It was always when she remembered her sister's death and felt guilty about it.

However, she had been able to sleep well ever since meeting Yakumo and coming to feel her sister's presence close to her.

It had been a while since she hadn't been able to sleep like this.

Suddenly, Haruka felt a presence and opened her eyes.

She could see her dim room. She looked around as much as she could by turning her neck, but she couldn't see anything.

She had just been mistaken. There was no way that somebody would be in her room.

The moment she was about to close her eyes, she saw a shadow wriggle in the corner of her eye. She sat up reflexively.

Her heart beat wildly. She was sweating. She timidly turned her eyes towards the corner of the room that she had spotted the shadow in.

'... Shiori?'

The shadow was Shiori, one of her high school friends.

'What are you doing at this time? You could have called if you were coming.'

Shiori didn't reply.

She just looked at Haruka with a blank expression.

But how had Shiori got in?

'Did I forget to lock the door?'

As Haruka said that, she reached up to turn on the lights.

'... Ru... n...'

Shiori said that in a weak voice.

There was clearly something strange about her –

'Hey, what's wrong?'

'... Please... ru... n...'

'Run from what?'

'Hurry... Run.'

Haruka didn't understand what Shiori was saying.

Haruka got off the bed and tried to approach Shiori.

Then, a line of dark red liquid flowed down Shiori's forehead.

Drip, drip, drip.

The blood burst out, like water from a broken dam.

Shiori's face and white sweater were dyed red, and the carpet at her feet were dyed dark red as well.

Haruka froze in shock – she couldn't even scream.

Shiori said 'Run' once more and collapsed.

'Shiori!'

Haruka finally managed to scream and tried to run up to the collapsed Shiori.

However, the moment she tried to touch her, a fire burst up and enveloped Shiori's body.

Haruka instinctively leant away and fell backwards.

Why fire all of a sudden? No, she didn't have the time to think.

Haruka stood up, but the fire and Shiori had disappeared.

Haruka frantically turned on the lights.

The sudden light made her vision go white. After blinking a number of times, her eyes finally grew accustomed to the lighting.

She looked around, but she couldn't see Shiori –

Did she see an illusion? No, it was too real for that.

Thinking about it wouldn't start anything. Haruka picked up her mobile from the table and called Shiori's number.

<The number you have called is not currently in use.>

There was a message.

Did she call the wrong number by accident? Haruka checked her call log.

It had been Shiori's number. Maybe the reception wasn't good. Haruka tried calling again. The result was the same.

Shiori hadn't mentioned changing her number. Something was strange.

Haruka's heart felt uneasy.

Shiori's apartment was about a five-minute walk from here.

There was no point just thinking. She'd go take a look.

Haruka picked up her beige coat from the coatrack and wore it over her pyjamas. Then, she put on sandals and ran out of the room.

When she took the elevator and left the apartment building, she cursed her rashness.

The cold air bit at her through her coat.

She was also wearing open-toe sandals. Her toes had already lost feeling.

She thought about going back to her room to change, but she had slipped up. The apartment entrance had an automatic lock.

Her key was in her room.

There was nothing she could do.

Haruka felt disappointed, but now that she thought about it, Shiori's apartment was just nearby.

If she held on for a bit and went to Shiori's to explain, Shiori would probably giggle in her usual way and make some warm cocoa for her.

Shiori's cocoa was a bit different from the instant kind you could buy at the super market. The aroma was exceptionally good.

It seemed like she used a secret ingredient, but she wouldn't tell Haruka even after she asked.

Haruka would get Shiori to tell her this time.

Haruka walked quickly on the road to Shiori's apartment.

She had gone to the same high school as Shiori and were going to the same university.

They lived near each other, so they often made visits.

Rather than going places together, they would go to one of their places and read or watch television together, just doing what they wanted.

However, they hadn't had many chances to meet as of late.

Shiori's parents had died in a fire at the end of last year, and she had quit the university.

Haruka had thought that Shiori would return home, but she started working at a department store and was still living in the same apartment.

Haruka had been happy, thinking they'd be able to keep in touch, but the rhythm of a university student's life and a working person's was different. They weren't able to meet up as frequently as they had.

She had last seen Shiori about two months ago.

She remembered telling her about meeting Yakumo and the gist of the case surrounding that.

After walking about five minutes, Haruka reached Shiori's apartment.

Shiori's room was at the very end of the second floor.

Haruka looked up – the room lights were off.

Of course. While thinking that, Haruka took the steel stairs up to the door at the very end for room 204.

She rang the doorbell. No response.

She tried once more and placed her ear to the door. Still no response.

She couldn't continue ringing the doorbell at a time like this. She couldn't yell or knock loudly either.

'Shiori.'

Haruka put her face to the door and quietly knocked the door with her finger.

Please. Wake up. Haruka prayed that, but the door didn't open.

Haruka leant against the door and looked up. The sky was starting to brighten.

It felt somewhat like she was in water.

'The person in that room moved out.'

Haruka came back to her senses when somebody suddenly called out to her.

A young man was looking at her curiously. It made sense.

'E-excuse me. When you say moved out...'

Haruka couldn't believe his words and asked him that.

'Yeah, about a week ago? There was a call, saying to cancel the newspaper subscription since she was moving.'

'Is that true?'

'There's no reason for me to lie, right?'

That was true.

'Do you know where she moved to?'

'I don't know. I asked, thinking she might subscribe to our newspaper after moving, but she didn't say.'

Was Shiori really gone?

'More importantly, you'll catch a cold.'

The young man said just that and returned to delivering newspapers.

Haruka was stunned –

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2

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Gotou Kazutoshi's eyes narrowed as he looked up at the sun, which was starting to set. He lit his cigarette.

There was a burnt house in front of him.

The walls and roof were mostly gone. The pillars were pitch-black, and a number of them had collapsed.

Though the firefighters were using hoses to clean up, they looked fatigued.

It made sense. Surrounded by cars parked on the road, when they arrived, it had already been too late.

Corpses covered in black sheets were carried out.

'Damn it.'

Gotou spat that out with a glob of saliva.

Police had been too late with everything this time.

It made sense. The culprit's movements had been beyond the imagination. They'd even sent a will to the police and used gasoline to set everything on fire.

It was an unpleasant case.

Gotou threw away his cigarette.

'Do you feel like starting another fire?'

There was a shrill voice.

A small-framed old man in a medical gown walked up beside Gotou.

His facial features were in the centre of his square face. He was wrinkled all over like a dried persimmon.

It was Hata Hideyoshi, the coroner.

'What, it's you, old man?' said Gotou, bored.

'But they really got us good.'

Hata's shoulders shook as he laughed.

This old man was as creepy as usual. Even Rat Man^[1] would be cuter.

'Yeah, they really did.'

'Well, that's the end of it, anyway.'

'What do you mean, end of it? Is it OK for you to be loitering around here, old man? You have to autopsy the corpse, right?'

'I'm not autopsying it. With it all black like that, the autopsy won't show anything.'

'You're not going to do it?'

'I'm not. I'll leave it to somebody else. They have the blood type and belongings like rings. They just have to look into the cause of death.'

This old man really was quite a pervert.

His attitude towards work changed completely depending on the state of the corpse.

The more destroyed the corpse was, the more excited he became, but he didn't do burnt corpses. The family of the corpse would probably faint if they knew the body was being autopsied by a man like this.

[1] Rat Man (Nezumi Otoko / ねずみ男) is a character from GeGeGe no Kitarou. He is a youkai and human halfbreed who looks like a rodent. He is characteristically stinky and filthy.

'Isn't that skipping work?'

'Do you know how many corpses I get to autopsy in a year?'

Hata suddenly turned serious.

'Who knows? Probably a hundred?'

'One hundred thousand in the whole country. I don't have the time to do all that personally.'

Gotou couldn't say anything to that.

'Corpses really should be fresh.'

After saying something awful, Hata laughed again. Why did strange people like this surround Gotou

–

He was fed up.

'By the way, Gotou-kun. That boy who can see ghosts. Could you let me meet him next time?'

Why did Hata know Yakumo? For a moment, Gotou was surprised, but then he remembered.

Come to think of it, he had carelessly talked to Hata about Yakumo during the last case.

'Why do you want to meet Yakumo?'

'Scientific interest.'

I refuse!'

Gotou cut Hata down immediately.

Scientific interest? It was just his perverted desires.

If he thoughtlessly let Hata meet Yakumo, he might autopsy him alive.

'Don't say stupid things and get back to work.'

Gotou waved his hand like he was shooing away a wild dog. Then, he took out another cigarette and lit it.

'Gotou-san, do you have some time?'

Who was it now? It was a rookie who'd just been placed.

Gotou had forgotten his name. No, he hadn't known it in the first place.

'What?'

'There is something I would like you to look at.'

The rookie held a photo out towards Gotou. This was –

Gotou couldn't hide his surprise.

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Haruka woke up to the sound of rustling fabric.

She had fallen asleep on the table at some time.

Her blurry vision slowly became clearer. She saw a man sitting in front of her looking displeased.

'What on earth are you doing here?'

A pointed way of talking. Ah, so it was Yakumo.

Haruka rubbed her eyes and lifted her head.

Yakumo had his usual bedhead. He was wearing a black jersey.

'Morning.'

As Haruka greeted him, she looked at the clock in the corner of the room.

It was still before six. It looked like she'd slept for about fifteen minutes.

'Explain what you're doing,' said Yakumo, running a hand through his messy hair. He sounded irritated.

It made sense. Anybody would be angry if somebody broke into their room.

'Actually –'

Haruka explained the strange thing she had experienced.

Something must have happened to Shiori.

When Haruka was sure of that, she went to see Yakumo, even though she knew it was an unusual time.

He didn't answer when she knocked or called.

Haruka had been troubled and finally tried the doorknob – it had opened without any resistance.

Yakumo had been sleeping in the corner of the room, curled up in a sleeping bag. He had looked like he was in a bad mood even while sleeping, so Haruka had decided to wait until he woke up and sat down on the chair.

Then –

'So you'll go into people's room without permission if the door is unlocked?'

Once Haruka finished her explanation, that was the first thing Yakumo said.

'You're at fault for being careless. Locks are there to be locked. Did you know that?'

'I don't want to hear that from a blockhead who left her auto-locked apartment without her key.'

Haruka had no way of winning against Yakumo in an argument.

Yakumo yawned and stood up. Then, he turned his back to Haruka and suddenly started taking off his shirt.

'Wait – what are you doing?' said Haruka, covering her eyes with her hands.

'I'm obviously changing.'

Haruka was astonished.

How insensitive was he?

'Starting to change in front of a girl – what kind of sense do you have?'

'I'm just going to say this, but this is my room. I can do what I want. Don't speak so loftily when you sneaked into a guy's room without permission.'

Now that he said that, it was true.

So many things had happened that Haruka was less wary of Yakumo, but now that she thought about it, this was the same as sneaking into the house of a man who lived alone at dawn.

Her face went red like it had been lit on fire.

And, now that she thought about it more, she had no makeup on.

'Yakumo, you here?'

After hearing a familiar thick voice, the door suddenly opened.

Gotou was the one who showed up.

When Gotou saw Haruka in Yakumo's room, his eyes went wide.

It was like he had seen the end of the world.

The cigarette in his mouth fell to the ground.

'Ah, sorry.'

'E-er, this is – that's – that's not it...'

Haruka frantically made excuses, but she couldn't find an appropriate explanation and was flustered.

The misunderstanding just grew bigger.

'No, it's fine. I'll come after.'

Gotou closed one eye clumsily. He had probably meant it to be a wink.

Then, he closed the door and left.

What terrible timing. He had completely misunderstood. Haruka would have misunderstood too if she had been in the situation.

'Everyone's noisy this morning,' mumbled Yakumo, sounding annoyed.

When Haruka looked, Yakumo had already finished changing and was scratching his bedhead.

He was pretty carefree.

'Hey, what should we do? He misunderstood and left.'

'Is that inconvenient?'

'Inconvenience isn't the problem here, right?'

'It's nothing to be concerned about. People will wonder about other people's actions even if they don't do anything. People will suspect you no matter what you do.'

'That's...'

Was it true –

'Well, you don't have to fuss so much – that old man always follows the same pattern in his actions.'

After saying that, Yakumo walked up to the frosted glass window opposite the door and forced it open.

Standing there, stooped over and peering into the room, was Gotou.

'You found out?'

'What do you mean, you found out? Please don't act like a child at your age. If you keep doing things like that, your wife will run away again.'

'Again? What do you mean, again? Got this, Yakumo? Women who run away once won't come back a second time. It's too late to regret afterwards.'

'Oh, so your wife isn't back yet. And it looks like you're reflecting on your actions a bit.'

Gotou gritted his teeth.

'I don't want to hear that from a gutless guy who won't do anything even with such a cute girl in front of him.'

Gotou snorted.

'The reason I won't do anything with her isn't a matter of will.'

'What?'

'It's this person's tastes. That is, it's a matter of my preferences.'

Saying that right in front of me –

Haruka didn't even feel like objecting.

'If you've got the time to say boring things, please get in already. You have some business, don't you?'

'Ah, that's right, that's right. I almost forgot.'

Gotou nodded, ending their joking conversation, and went to the front, coming in through the door.

Haruka felt awkward facing Gotou like this. She had to change too, and she was concerned about her room, which she had left unlocked.

Haruka told Yakumo that she would come back later and left his secret hideaway.

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4

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'Even though she came all the way here. I feel like I did something bad.'

Gotou scratched his stomach as he sat in the chair Haruka had been in.

However, it was also true that he didn't want Haruka to hear what he was about to say.

Though last time it had all been facts that he knew, this time it was just Gotou's theory, and it was also a personal privacy issue.

Forget about his boss – he hadn't even talked to his colleagues about this.

'Though I'm grateful that there's one fewer noisy person here,' Yakumo said in his usual acerbic tone as he yawned.

Gotou smiled wryly.

Though this guy was saying this, Gotou thought that he actually felt differently on the inside.

Maybe it wasn't romantic, but Yakumo definitely trusted Haruka. They had some problems, but Yakumo definitely thought her more important than others.

But if Gotou pointed that out, Yakumo definitely wouldn't acknowledge it.

Yakumo might not have noticed himself.

'What are you smirking about? It's creepy.'

Gotou came back to his senses.

He was annoyed, but he had no way of beating Yakumo in an argument.

'So what does the busy detective need from me so early in the morning?'

When Yakumo spoke politely, it just sounded like superficial courtesy.

'It might be morning for you, but it's still night for me – I haven't slept a wink.'

'I don't really care about your lack of a sense of time.'

'Ah, yeah, you don't care.'

Yakumo's words really irritated him, but if Gotou retorted to each one, it'd burn a hole through his

stomach lining.

Gotou decided to continue talking.

'There's something I want you to look at.'

'It's spirit photography, isn't it.'

'Correct. How'd you know?'

'There isn't anything else you'd show me, Gotou-san,' said Yakumo.

'I don't remember showing you anything else either.'

As Gotou said that, he placed the brown envelope in his hand on the table, took a number of photos out and spread them out.

A burnt house was in the first photo.

The photos were probably from right after the fire.

Some of the pillars that were left were still smoking.

Gotou placed the second photo down. There was a person burnt completely black in it. The person was face-up, reaching up with a hand and looking pained.

'Taken this morning. And...'

Gotou placed another photo down.

There was a woman probably in her early thirties.

The photo was probably taken at a wedding reception. She wore a gaudy purple dress and was laughing with her mouth wide open.

'Is this woman the burnt corpse from earlier?'

'Yeah.'

Gotou placed one more photo down.

It was the same burnt house in the earlier photo, but there was somebody standing in the house in this one. A woman in white.

'This is...' said Yakumo.

Gotou smirked at that.

'So you can tell? It's probably just what you think. There wasn't anybody there when the photo was taken...'

'Thinking normally, it would probably be the spirit of the woman who burnt to death, but since you went out of your way to bring it here, is there something that makes you think otherwise?'

'You really are sharp. I'd like to have you as a subordinate.'

'I'd rather die first.'

'Do you dislike the police so much?'

'Please don't misunderstand me. The one I dislike is you, Gotou-san.'

That was quite a firm tone.

Gotou ignored Yakumo and took out another photo to put on the table.

There was a dark-skinned man in his late thirties. He had a sharp profile that didn't look Japanese.

Though he was handsome, he looked sickly and swollen.

'This person has a disease in his internal organs, doesn't he.'

'Correct again – congrats. You win a trip to Hawaii.'

'Says someone who's never left the Kantou region,' muttered Yakumo loudly so that Gotou would be able to hear.

Shut up! No, just ignore it. Ignore it.

Gotou continued his explanation.

'The man's name is Katou Kenichi. Died of a heart failure last month, but there was something suspicious about his death. After investigating, it turns out he'd been taking small doses of poison for a long time.'

'How'd you find that out?'

'There's a perverted old man who loves looking into that sort of stuff, see.'

'How excellent. You should learn from him, Gotou-san.'

Gotou felt unpleasant just recalling that perverted old man's face.

Is he kidding? Who'd learn from that?

'Since the culprit's got to be somebody who can give him doses of poison continuously, that naturally narrows down the suspects.'

'A relative then.'

'Right. Katou Kenichi was pretty wealthy. Well, he himself only had a small realtor's office, but his dad had a lot of land.'

'For the inheritance then?'

'Right. He had one younger brother, but he was quite the player. His dad ended up leaving all the inheritance to his brother Kenichi.'

'So you suspected the younger brother?'

'The younger brother came up in the investigation, but he lives in the next city and doesn't really come here, so he was left out. Remaining is...'

'He had a wife. And that burnt corpse is that wife.'

Gotou clapped his hands together without thinking.

'Exactly. It's easy explaining to you.'

'Please forget about the boring interjections and finish your explanation already.'

What an impatient guy.

'The police marked his wife, Emiko. After getting the evidence, the police were on the verge of arresting her when a letter came. It was from Emiko, saying she couldn't deal with her guilty conscience and would take her own life...'

'And that fire in the photo was a result of her suicide.'

'Right. When we got there, the house was already burning.'

'Is it definitely from her?'

'Yeah, the handwriting analysis is done.'

'Isn't that nice? That's the end of it then.'

Yakumo yawned, seeming bored.

The end of it? To hell with that.

'Do you think I'd come all the way here if it was?'

'You have a lot of free time.'

Gotou would punch this guy.

'This is just my gut – I have no evidence.'

'Will that be of any use?'

And he never shut up!

'I don't think that woman had the balls to kill herself. Looking at the way she killed her husband, Kenichi, she's careful and cunning.'

'Well, that's true.'

'Without that perverted coroner, we probably wouldn't have found out the truth behind the murder. She'd been intent on killing her husband for years and years and acted like she didn't know it. It's not your average brand of boldness.'

Gotou said that all at once and hit the table in his agitation.

Yakumo pinched his brow with his fingers – it looked like he was thinking.

'So what do you think actually happened, Gotou-san?'

'I suspect the brother, Junichi. Kenichi was killed by his wife, Eriko, and Eriko was killed by his

younger brother, Junichi. Since then the inheritance would go to Junichi.'

'Then, can't you just go get the person named Junichi-san?'

Gotou groaned and scratched his head.

'Tried that already, but the guy's got an alibi. Got a parking ticket and went to the precinct. And it was because of Junichi's car that the firefighters arrived late. The story's too neat.'

A steel alibi.

Gotou was at the end of his rope.

'So what are you telling me to do?'

Asking that even though he knew.

Though Gotou thought that, he explained anyway.

'I think this ghost photo might be a lead.'

'I see. I understand, but there is too little information and the story is too abstract – I don't know where to start at all.'

'So it's really no use...'

'I can't guarantee it, but I'll look into what I can.'

'Really?'

The conversation ended quickly for one with Yakumo – Gotou stood up in his surprise.

'But please allow this to clear the favour from last time,' said Yakumo, pointing at Gotou.

Gotou understood now.

So Yakumo had anticipated it.

If Yakumo refused, Gotou had been thinking about threatening him with the favour from last time.

This guy really is cunning –

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5

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Haruka asked the apartment administration to unlock the entrance and somehow managed to enter the room.

Since the entrance did have an auto-lock, her room was fortunately intact.

After letting out a sigh of relief, her phone rang.

It wasn't her mobile, but the home phone she rarely used.

'Hello?'

When Haruka picked up the review, there was a long silence. Then, the phone call ended.

A prank call?

Haruka took a shower and changed.

She wanted to go straight to Yakumo's, but she didn't want to meet Gotou again. She sat down on the bed and looked out the glass door.

She tried to understand what had happened last night, but it wouldn't be so easy.

She couldn't even tell what was reality and what was illusion.

The curtains waved in the wind.

That was strange. The glass door should not have been open.

Haruka stood up and walked to the glass door

Between the lace curtains, on the other side of the glass door, there stood Shiori.

'... Shiori?'

Haruka hurriedly pushed the windows aside, opened the glass door and went out on to the veranda.

However, no matter how she looked, she didn't see Shiori.

Where did she go?

Haruka leant over the veranda to look, but there was no way she'd be there. This was the fourth floor of the apartment.

There was no way for somebody to be on her veranda.

It must have been an illusion –

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6

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Haruka went to Yakumo's secret hiding place after noon.

She had put on makeup properly this time and was wearing a turtleneck sweater with a denim skirt, instead of pyjamas.

'Honestly, I'm not a detective. Why does everyone do this...'

That was what Yakumo said right after Haruka came to visit again.

As Yakumo spoke without even hiding his displeasure, he boiled water with an alcohol lamp and beaker.

Gotou had probably brought him some sort of trouble too.

Though Yakumo was complaining, to be honest, Haruka thought it'd be better for everyone if he became a spiritual detective or something.

While Haruka was thinking that, a teacup was placed in front of Haruka.

It was green tea.

'Eh? Could you have been boiling this in the beaker earlier?'

'There's no "could" about it – I was. I borrowed it from the lab. It'll be happy being used by me than for some incomprehensible scientific experiments.'

Ack. What kind of nerves did he have?

'I don't think that's the problem... If I drink this, it'll hurt my stomach.'

'Stop complaining and just drink it. The secret ingredient is hydrochloric acid.'

Like she'd drink this!

'So what did you want to talk about?' urged Yakumo.

How should she explain? Haruka couldn't think of an effective way, so she just told Yakumo what had happened in order.

Yakumo crossed his arms and leant back on his chair, listening silently as he looked up at the ceiling.

If somebody who didn't know him were looking, his attitude might have made them feel indignant, but Yakumo was still listening properly even if he acted like this.

'A better explanation than Gotou-san's.' Yakumo smiled as he put his hands together and placed his elbows on the table. 'That old man tries to make his stories dramatic and throws the order out the window – it makes it hard for the listener.'

Haruka hadn't experienced herself, so she couldn't say.

'So what can you understand?'

'That's different. An easy-to-understand story is different from understanding what's behind a story.'

That was true.

However, Haruka didn't have anything to say back to that.

Her shoulders drooped in disappointment.

'However, I understand to a point the possibilities of what might have happened around you.'

Yakumo started to speak, bringing the conversation together.

'Possibilities?'

'Yes. There are two possibilities I can think of. Even you should have come to this conclusion if you heard the story objectively, but you've been very subjective about it.'

'Subjective?'

'Because of that, you rejected both of the possibilities you could naturally have reached before noticing either of them.'

'Huh...'

Haruka didn't understand what Yakumo was talking about.

'Let's verify that. First, one possibility is that all you saw was an illusion.'

'That's not it. I saw it with these eyes,' Haruka said firmly.

'See, you just rejected a possibility, right?'

Haruka understood now what he'd meant.

Just as Yakumo said, if she had been listening as a third party, she would have definitely suggested that possibility first.

So that was what he was talking about.

'What you saw was all an illusion, and your friend moved away without telling you because of some circumstances...'

'Shiori definitely wouldn't...'

'Listen to me until the end,' reprimanded Yakumo.

'But...'

'It's because you erase possibilities like this that your reasoning fails.'

'But...'

'It is entirely possible that she had to move in a hurry and will contact you afterwards. Maybe you'll be able to laugh it off as something silly once you hear the circumstances.'

That was true, now that Yakumo said it.

Haruka felt her shoulders relax slightly. Though Yakumo didn't seem to like it, she really was glad that she'd talked to Yakumo.

'And the other possibility?'

When Haruka asked that, Yakumo's expression clearly changed.

'I didn't want to talk about it until I knew more about the situation if possible, but...'

'It's one of the possibilities, right?'

'Yes. I want you to listen to this just as a possibility.'

Haruka nodded.

Yakumo ran a hand through his hair and started to speak.

'Supposing what you saw wasn't an illusion...'

I don't want to hear it.

Somebody in her head said that. Probably herself. Another self.

But that voice didn't reach Yakumo. Yakumo's words continued mercilessly.

'Perhaps your friend is already dead. If she appeared in front of you as a ghost...'

Haruka felt like she had fallen from a high place.

Her ears were ringing. She couldn't hear the rest of Yakumo's words.

Dead because she's a ghost? Shiori was dead? No. That can't be. I don't want to acknowledge it. Aren't there living ghosts?

Living ghosts –

'Hey, there are things like living ghosts, right? Aren't those the spirits of living people?'

Haruka gripped the table and leant forward.

Though Yakumo looked dubious at Haruka's sudden action, he still responded to Haruka's question.

'It isn't entirely impossible. Just as I said before, if ghosts are the clusters of people's emotions, I can't deny the possibility that they'd leave the body even without dying. The living ghosts you're talking about are often returned to as out-of-body experiences. A third possibility...'

Yakumo kept talking as he rubbed his furrowed brows.

Haruka waited for Yakumo to gather his thoughts.

'Though it's a hopeful perspective, it isn't as if that wouldn't work. Shall we bet on that possibility?'

A flame of hope lit up in Haruka's chest just from hearing Yakumo's words.

She'd be able to meet Shiori. Definitely.

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7

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Yakumo and Haruka first headed for the management company of the apartment Shiori lived in.

Haruka remembered that they had looked for rooms together when they first came to Tokyo.

It was a mall shop by the shopping street in front of the station.

On the way, Yakumo bought an assortment of cookies from the bakery. It was wrapped nicely and even had origami on it.

Of course Haruka paid.

Yakumo didn't explain what it was for and just said it was a necessary expense.

There was a table for guests and a counter, with a desk in the back.

That was all there was in this constrained space.

Even though there were customers, nobody greeted them with a 'Welcome'. But it wasn't like the employees were working so hard that they wouldn't notice.

'Excuse me.'

When Yakumo leant over the counter and called out, a bald man appeared.

'Excuse me. I'm the older brother of Itou Shiori, who lived at 204 Heights Hinoki. It seems like my sister forgot something... I'm sorry, but could I borrow the key?'

Yakumo politely said a number of lies.

The bald man didn't check anything. He just took a key from the key rack on the wall in the back and handed it to Yakumo. He didn't say anything.

'Ah, by the way, did my sister come to greet you properly?'

The bald man shook his head, still silent.

'As I thought. That girl... I told her she had to properly greet the management company she was under the care of. She really is irresponsible that way.'

Yakumo kept going.

However, it was a natural performance.

'Ah, I'm sorry about being late, but please eat this with everyone.'

Yakumo handed the box of baked goods they bought to the bald man.

The bald man's expression went soft immediately. How easy to understand.

'The truth is, we're troubled too. She suddenly called, saying she would cancel the contract, and came the day after to return her key. We were at fault to, but we haven't even heard her address for returning the deposit.'

'I'm really sorry.'

Yakumo looked completely like an apologetic older brother as he continued.

'Ah, if there are any necessary documents, I'll write them right now, so would you show me the contract?'

'Ah, wait a sec.'

The bald man went back to his desk and took one contract from the pile of documents there.

Yakumo looked at it fastidiously.

Haruka peered at it from behind.

The cancellation form was stapled to the last page of the contract, and the new address was in Nagano. Shiori's home address was written there.

Shiori's home in Nagano was burnt there. It wasn't there any more. But –

Haruka had a bad feeling.

'I'll make Shiori come again and properly fill in what's necessary for the deposit repayment too.'

'I'm sorry about that.'

The bald man wiped his forehead with a handkerchief.

'Did my sister cause any other trouble?'

After thinking for a bit, the bald man brought his face close to Yakumo's and started speaking.

'Ah, I don't know if it's all right for me to tell this to her big brother, but a man would go in and out. Well, it's nothing strange for a woman that age, so I didn't say anything, but...'

Shiori's boyfriend? Haruka hadn't heard about that.

Haruka knew the boyfriend Shiori had had until two years ago, but Shiori hadn't shown any signs of dating someone afterwards.

Up until now, Shiori would always tell Haruka in detail even if she didn't ask.

'And then, at some point it became a warzone. Another girl was there and there was a scuffle in front of the apartment. There were complaints from the neighbours too... I think that might have been the reason she moved...'

'That's a lie!'

Haruka spoke up without thinking. The bald man stared at her.

'Ah, thank you. I'll return the key tomorrow.'

Yakumo said that quickly, grabbed Haruka's arm and left the shop.

The story just now was completely different from Haruka's image of Shiori.

Shiori wasn't the type to fight over a man.

Haruka had been with Shiori all this time. When they fought, Shiori always apologised first.

That had irritated her. It had felt like Shiori was treating her like a child. That had made them fight more.

For that Shiori to get into a scuffle –

* * *

Haruka and Yakumo stood in front of the apartment that Shiori had lived in.

It was an old two-storey apartment.

There was rust on the railings and the walls were dirty too. When Haruka thought about how Shiori wasn't here any more, it felt even dirtier.

'Probably nothing is left,' murmured Yakumo as he took the stairs up.

Haruka didn't mind. If she didn't look at it herself, she felt like she wouldn't be able to acknowledge that Shiori had gone.

Haruka followed Yakumo's back and went up to the door to Room 204.

Yakumo opened the door, letting out a sweet smell.

It was the smell of Shiori's room. She didn't really move. She was still here.

Haruka pushed past Yakumo and went inside.

'Shiori...'

However, it was just an empty space.

There weren't even cardboard boxes, let alone furniture. It was cleaned up well – somebody could move in right now and it wouldn't be a problem.

All that was left was the smell –

'How clean,' said Yakumo, who had come in.

Yakumo walked to the centre of the room and looked around.

A six-tatami room with a kitchen and bathroom. A regular one-person apartment.

'Hey, did that girl called Shiori smoke?'

Haruka shook her head.

She hadn't ever seen Shiori do that.

'Why?'

'Look at the walls.'

Haruka looked at the wall as she was told.

There was the yellow of tobacco resin on the walls.

Though Haruka didn't realise upon first look, only the places where furniture and photos had been remained their original white colour.

Parts of Shiori that Haruka didn't know kept appearing.

She felt weak. Haruka sat down right there.

The wooden floor was cold. Yakumo went to the bathroom.

'Could you come here?'

After a while, she heard Yakumo's voice.

Haruka stood up and looked inside the bathroom.

Yakumo took out a photo. Shiori was in it. She had a really gentle smile.

It was a completely different from the smile she had when looking at Haruka.

Next to her was a man with finely chiselled features. He was probably in his late thirties.

'Is this Shiori?'

'Yes... Where'd you find this?'

'The mirror... It's unnatural.'

'Why? Didn't she just forget it?'

'No. This place is so keen – she wouldn't have left behind one photo. And if the photo had always been there, it would be wet from the humidity.'

This photo wasn't wet at all and didn't look like it had been. Come to think of it, it was true.

Shiori was always meticulous. She even kept a diary.

'She probably left it on purpose.'

'Why?'

'She probably wanted somebody to see it,' said Yakumo, scratching the back of his ear.

'Who?'

'You, maybe.'

Me?

Haruka looked at the photo in her hand, but why did Shiori leave this photo? Haruka didn't understand.

'Does she not have a pinkie finger on her right hand?' said Yakumo, pointing at the photo.

'She doesn't. She was in an accident when she was strong... She said she doesn't mind at all, but I think she really did.'

'She's strong.'

'Shiori never talks to anybody even when anything tough or sad happens to her. She takes everything on herself and always tells people about it afterwards...'

Shiori was always like that. She never showed what she was thinking on her face.

'Hey, why do you think Shiori didn't tell me about her lover?'

'Probably because it was adultery.'

'Eh? How can you tell?'

'Look at the man in the photo. He has a wedding ring.'

'Eh?'

Haruka looked at the photo again.

It was just as Yakumo said. The man's left hand had a silver ring on his ring finger.

'I suspect the sensitivity of a man who would keep his wedding ring on when taking a photo with another woman.'

Yakumo didn't have the right to talk about other people's insensitivity either.

But –

'Why wouldn't she tell me it was adultery?'

'If you knew, wouldn't you object to it?'

'That...'

Haruka thought of something then.

When Haruka had heard that the man Shiori was dating had been two-timing, she had gone out of her way to go to find that man and complain.

'Probably nobody wants their lover to be rejected.'

That was true.

There was nothing sadder than having something important to you be rejected. Especially by a friend.

Haruka was angry at herself.

'What is that? Are you saying it's my fault? Because I'm stiff and stubborn, Shiori didn't tell me – that's what you're saying, right?'

'What, so you know.'

Yakumo was as acerbic as always even now.

'That's awful.'

'You don't have the time to start sobbing her.'

When Yakumo told her that, Haruka bit her lip.

That's right. I have to look for Shiori.

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8

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Gotou woke up to the sound of his mobile phone.

He remembered up to leaving Yakumo's secret hideaway and returning to the precinct by car.

It looks like he'd fallen asleep at the wheel. Natural, since he hadn't slept properly.

'Who is it?'

Gotou answered the phone in an unpleasant mood after waking up, without checking the ID.

<What sort of telephone manner is that?>

'What, it's you, Yakumo...'

Gotou rubbed his eyes, yawned and put a cigarette in his mouth, lighting it.

<Don't just say "what". Honestly.>

He heard Yakumo's usual voice.

Gotou didn't want to hear that from a voice that was even sleepier than he was.

'What do you want?'

<I acquired some useful information regarding your request, Gotou-san, but since you don't seem that interested, I'll hang up.>

Gotou woke up immediately. He leapt up from the seat.

'What did you find out?' said Gotou with vigour.

However, it looked like those words hadn't reached Yakumo.

There was just a beeping noise.

'That guy. He really hung up...'

Who the hell does he think I am?

Gotou immediately called Yakumo back, but Yakumo wouldn't answer even after multiple calls. He was enjoying Gotou's frantic response.

An even worse personality than Gotou's wife, who had left the house.

It took a full five minutes before Yakumo answered.

'Ah, Yakumo-kun, I'm sorry about earlier. I'm reflecting on it. Really.'

<Do you always apologise to your wife like this?>

'Ack.'

If Yakumo had been in front of him, Gotou would have wanted to punch him.

Well, Gotou was the one who'd made the request, so even if Yakumo were in front of him, Gotou couldn't do that.

All Gotou could do was force a laugh out. He just wanted to get to the topic.

'So what did you find out?'

<Before that, there is somebody I would like you to find out the whereabouts of.>

'What?'

<It's her friend.>

'By her, do you mean Haruka-chan?'

<Yes. Her friend's name is Itou Shiori...>

'Oi, oi. Wait a sec. Even if it's your request, I can't look for her friend. You should know that much, right?'

What on earth was he thinking?

That was too much as an exchange.

<Well, please don't make such a fuss. If you listen to what I'm about to say, you'll want to look for her, Gotou-san.>

Was this some sort of hypnotism?

'Is she some amazing beauty?' joked Gotou, but Yakumo completely ignored him.

<The woman named Shiori cancelled her contract at her apartment a few days ago and suddenly disappeared.>

'That's common among young woman.'

<I went to the apartment she used to live in today and found something interesting in her room.'

Acting all mysterious.

'What was it?'

<A photo with her lover.>

'That's not strange or anything.'

Gotou felt a bit disappointed after Yakumo had said something meaningful like 'you'll want to look for her'.

<And if the person beside her were Katou Kenichi-san? Wouldn't that pique your interest?>

'What? She was Katou Kenichi's lover!?!'

Gotou was so agitated that he hit the wheel.

The horn honked loudly, even surprising himself.

<I can't say anything for certain yet, but you can't say it's completely unrelated to your case, right, Gotou-san?'

It was just as Yakumo said.

The lover of a man who had been killed had gone missing with this timing. It couldn't be a coincidence.

'I'll go there in two hours,' shouted Gotou. Then, he hung up, got off the car and ran.

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9

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After parting with Yakumo, Haruka trudged back to her room at the apartment.

Yakumo instructed her to talk to her and Shiori's mutual friends about the situation.

Haruka took out her high school graduation album and flipped through the pages while looking for people that would fit, when her intercom rang.

What was it? She saw a mailman through the intercom monitor.

'Excuse me, could you stamp this?'

He held out an envelope that required proof of delivery.

There was no sender, but Haruka could tell it was from Shiori immediately from the handwriting. Haruka was so agitated that she snatched the envelope.

'Er, excuse me. The stamp. A signature would be fine too.'

The mailman's urging brought Haruka back to her senses.

She borrowed a pen from him and signed. Then, she shut the door.

With shaking hands, she opened the envelope. Five sheets of paper came out.

<To Haruka – >

They were sharp letters for a woman.

Haruka had made fun of Shiori because her writing was like a man's. It really was Shiori. Haruka was glad. Her chest felt warm.

She recalled one of the possibilities that Yakumo had mentioned.

He'd said that Shiori might have moved away silently and that when Haruka heard the reason, she would think it was silly.

Haruka went into her room, sat on the bed and started to read the letter.

That letter began with <Sorry>.

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10

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Gotou went to Yakumo's secret hideaway exactly two hours afterwards.

<For Gotou-san to be on time, it's rarer than a horse race ticket that pays out one hundred times its value.'

Acerbic right as he opened the door.

Gotou suspected that if Yakumo couldn't say sarcastic things, he probably wouldn't open his mouth for the whole day.

Even objecting would be troublesome, so Gotou sat down silently.

'Did you find anything out?' asked Yakumo as he stretched in a bored manner.

'You make it sound so simple. There's a limit to what you can do in just two hours. Police investigation power isn't bottomless.'

'Though you were the one who said two hours later, Gotou-san.'

'Ah, yeah, I was at fault.'

Gotou threw the envelope he'd brought on the table.

'The results of two hours of investigation.'

Yakumo took the contents out of the envelope and started looking at the documents.

'Anyway, at the current stage, I know the name and address. And workplace.'

'She's a department salesperson?'

'Yeah. She suddenly quit there a few days ago too. Seems like a request was sent in. Don't know if it was the department manager or section manager, but they were really angry.'

Gotou recalled the situation.

Even though it wasn't like Gotou was at fault, the manager had turned all that anger towards him.

Gotou was irritated just thinking about it.

'What the hell do they think the police are?'

'Thank you for your hard work protecting the safety of citizens. I'll listen to your complaints afterwards, so please continue.'

Right.

Gotou cleared his throat and continued.

'Her parents died a year ago in a fire. Her only relative is her grandmother, but she's got dementia. She's in a facility. Seems like she'll be taken care of until her death with the girl's parents' insurance.'

'Not a single relative then?'

'Yeah. Her grandmother can't even recognise her grandkid's face. The land where the burnt house

was has already been sold...'

After saying that much, the feeling of discomfort Gotou had had during the investigation came up again.

'What's wrong?' said Yakumo, who had already noticed Gotou's unease.

'No, I was just wondering why she didn't return home when her parents died.'

'Maybe she didn't have anywhere to return to?'

'Maybe. Places for people to return to come about when there's somebody there for them.'

'It seems you've grown to understand other people's feelings slightly.'

Yakumo smirked.

'You're the last person I want to hear that from!'

Gotou bared his teeth as he said that threatening.

'But if she had no place to return to, then where did she go?'

'There's only one place people go when they've lost the place they return to...'

Yakumo said with sad eyes.

Actually, where did Yakumo return to? That thought suddenly came to Gotou.

Maybe he was one of those people with nowhere to return too.

'I thought about asking some movers I know, but it was no use.'

'No use?'

'She sold all her furniture. The stuff she couldn't see, she got rid of. And she cancelled her mobile contract that day too. Seems like she wasn't planning on going anywhere. Just like you said...'

She wanted death.

A lonely woman killed the man she loved.

She probably had no more reason to live. Her reason to live –

Did you need a reason to live? Gotou's mind was wandering again because he was tired.

'Anyway, let's give up on finding her for now... Ah, I almost forgot. This is the only clue that I got.'

'What is it?'

'I talked to the apartment's management company. Apparently, a man who called himself her brother came today and borrowed the apartment key. She should be an only child. It's shady, right? I sent the fingerprints in – they're being analysed now.'

Yakumo thrust his thumb out between Gotou's eyes.

'Hm? What?'

'It's this.'

'What is?'

'The fingerprint on the key. It's this.'

'What?'

'I'm saying that I was the one who called himself her brother and borrowed the key. So my fingerprint will show up.'

'You idiot! Say that earlier! I was looking into it.'

'You didn't ask. Anyway, please just cover it up appropriately.'

Gotou's strength left him in his disappointment and he hung his head.

On top of the only clue disappearing, he had even more work now. This pest!

'But you've done well investigating this much in just two hours.'

'Much better than being praised by the chief, but I still don't want to hear that from you!' yelled Gotou, pointing at Yakumo. His temper had reached its limit.

'You're noisy.'

Yakumo stuck his fingers in his ears and frowned.

'Well anyway, my gut feeling is that the girl named Shiori is suspicious. No, I feel bad about Haruka-chan, but Shiori's black. She killed Emiko and disappeared. Revenge for killing her lover. It matches up.'

'It doesn't,' said Yakumo, crossing his arms.

'Why not?'

This guy always complained about what other people thought.

'Isn't there a will?'

'You know, it's that thing. Forced the wife write it with a knife or something,' said Gotou, mimicking holding out a knife.

'Does the handwriting seem like it was written under threat? And being told to write a will makes it certain that you'll be killed. If the wife had been forced to write it, she would have written something for help. Anyway, it's unnatural.'

Now that Yakumo said that, it was true.

'What you thought first is the most likely, Gotou-san,' said Yakumo, ending the conversation.

What the hell had those two hours been for?

Gotou suddenly felt exhausted.

'This is depressing...'

'Well, in any case, leaving this as it is would be unpleasant. We have nothing to lose, so let's...'

'Go to the scene of the crime!'

Gotou regained his energy and finished Yakumo's sentence.

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11

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When Haruka finished reading the letter from Haruka, her head went blank.

She couldn't believe any of it.

Even though the writing on the letter was Shiori's, it felt like the contents were from someone else.

The letter that started with 'Sorry' first wrote about the man that Shiori was dating.

Just as Yakumo thought, they had had an adulterous relationship.

They met at a bar and started talking suddenly.

He had a problem with the relationship with his wife and said that he didn't have anywhere to return to.

Shiori had felt that she didn't have a place to return to either.

They made a place they could both return to.

Soon, Shiori became pregnant. He decided to leave his wife too.

And then, he died –

It was a heart failure. Shiori had miscarried in shock.

However, Shiori didn't accept that.

Shiori remembered what he had said to her.

I'll be killed by my wife –

Could it be? Shiori was thinking that and about to investigate when the wife came to Shiori's home.

Then, the wife gave her one million yen, telling Shiori not to spread any dumb rumours.

At that time, Shiori realised. She had killed him –

Then, she had a fight with her in front of the apartment.

Ever since then, Shiori felt hate towards her and a killing intent.

She had killed the person Shiori loved and even given money to Shiori to keep her quiet. Shiori couldn't forgive her nerve. Shiori didn't have anything else to love.

Shiori killed her and decided to die herself.

Then, at the end of the letter, she wrote 'Sorry' again.

All she had kept quiet until now. Troubling Haruka, since her friend was a murderer.

Deciding to die on her own –

It was selfish. It really was. Shouldering everything herself like that. Haruka wouldn't forgive Shiori if she died.

But how can I save her if I don't know where she is –

There's one person! Just one person who might be able to save Shiori.

Haruka picked up her mobile.

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12

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Gotou looked out from the driver's seat.

The layers of clouds moved slowly, covering the sky which had started to grow dark.

'Looks like rain,' he said to Yakumo in the passenger seat.

However, Yakumo didn't respond, like he hadn't heard anything.

He had been thinking seriously about something since earlier.

Gotou had no way of knowing what Yakumo was thinking. All he could do was ask.

'Hey, what are you thinking about?'

'I'm not thinking about anything.'

Yakumo frowned, looking annoyed.

So he doesn't want to talk? Gotou clicked his tongue.

Then, a mobile phone rang.

It wasn't Gotou's. Yakumo took his mobile out of his pocket and answered.

'Hello...'

Yakumo looked suspicious.

Though Gotou couldn't hear the conversation clearly, he could hear a frantic woman's voice. Was it Haruka-chan?

'Please just calm down. I can't tell what you're saying,' Yakumo said like he couldn't stop himself.

'... SO you got a letter... I see... And then...'

Gotou almost missed a red light because he was paying attention to Yakumo's conversation.

Gotou slammed the brakes.

He thought that Yakumo would complain about it, but he seemed to be concentrating and didn't say anything.

'I see... I understand... So that's how it was...'

Though it sounded like a slow conversation, Yakumo was somehow able to get something out of Haruka, who seemed disturbed.

'I'll call you after, so wait until then.'

After saying that, Yakumo hung up.

'What was it?'

'It turns out that your gut is sometimes right, Gotou-san.'

This, after talking so seriously?

'Don't say stupid things. Get on with it.'

'She got something.'

'Haruka-chan?'

'Yes. It seems like she received a letter from the girl named Shiori, saying that she killed Fumiko and that she would die too...'

'What? That's bad! We need to stop that Shiori right away!' shouted Gotou, led on by his rising emotions.

'Stop her? How will you find her?'

'Well, somehow...'

Now that Yakumo said that, Gotou realised he was right.

A woman who had disappeared without even telling her best friend wouldn't be easy to find.

'And if she is truly intending to commit suicide, if we think about the timing, she must already be dead.'

'Why do you think that?'

'With Fumiko's death, she achieved her goal. It would be different if she had another. On the other hand, if she doesn't die now, she probably doesn't have any intention of dying afterwards, right?'

'You say that, but people's emotions aren't set results from chemical responses.'

'A difference in opinion.'

Yakumo crossed his arms and looked out the window.

'But that's the end of that. No need to go to the scene now.'

When Gotou tried to make a U-turn, Yakumo stopped him.

'No, let's go. There is something that I can't get off my mind.'

'Something you can't get off your mind? What?'

'...'

Yakumo shut his mouth.

He had probably drawn out the blueprints to the case using his train of thought.

It hurt to admit it, but this guy had never made a wrong guess before.

Gotou decided to go along with Yakumo's theory.

* * *

When Gotou and Yakumo reached the scene of the fire, it had started to drizzle.

Rain in December was so cold that it hurt.

'Hope it doesn't start to snow...' muttered Gotou, looking up at the sky.

Yakumo slowly went to the middle of the building that had burnt down.

'Wait.'

Gotou ran after Yakumo.

Yakumo had gone to the middle of the building, but the ceiling and walls were mostly burnt down – there wasn't much left that could be called a home.

On the floor, there was misshapen glass and plastic.

Puddles from the firefighting efforts were still there.

'There is one thing that concerns me.'

Yakumo's breath came out white as he stood up.

'What?'

'If the girl named Shiori killed Fumiko, why would she make Fumiko send a will to the police?'

'To fool the police, obviously.'

'Is that really the case?'

When Yakumo turned around, his eyes seemed to know something.

It made Gotou feel dread.

'What do you mean?'

'If it were to hide her crime, wouldn't that suggest she wanted to continue living?'

'Well, yeah.'

'Then why did Shiori send her a letter? And saying that she intended to commit suicide at that...'

It was just as Yakumo said.

Gotou's heart was restless.

People who intended to suicide from the beginning wouldn't need to make a murder look like a suicide.

Gotou had thought he'd seen the reality of the case, but it wasn't true.

They were still missing something important.

At his feet, there was water that had been dirtied with ash.

His breath was so white that it cut through his vision.

Yakumo knelt where the white line had been drawn in the shape of a person's body and looked at something.

'What are you looking at?'

Yakumo didn't respond to Gotou's question.

Did he not hear? Or did he not feel like answering? Gotou had no way of knowing.

Either way, all he could do was wait.

Gotou put a cigarette in his mouth and tried to light it, it wouldn't light up properly, perhaps because it was wet.

'Where are you here...' murmured Yakumo.

The sound of the rain hitting the ground continued.

Gotou couldn't see anything.

'I see...You were here from the start. Which means... she...'

When Yakumo said that, there was the sound of thunder from faraway.

'What on earth... Then...'

Yakumo stood up, his expression suddenly changing.

'Oi, Yakumo. What's wrong?'

'Gotou-san, there is something I want you to ask the coroner to confirm immediately.'

'Coroner? What are you saying?'

'Just hurry!' shouted Yakumo with an angry look.

Gotou had never seen Yakumo so agitated. It was urgent. Gotou immediately called Hata's mobile.

<What do you need?>

He heard Hata's relaxed voice after one ring.

'There's something I want you to check.'

<Something you want me to check?>

'Oi, Yakumo! What should he check?'

Yakumo took the mobile from Gotou.

'The burnt corpse from before. Was the pinkie finger on the right hand missing?'

Yakumo held the phone silently.

That response. Looked like Yakumo's hunch had been right, but Gotou didn't know at all what it meant.

When Yakumo hung up, he used Gotou's mobile to make another call.

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13

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After Haruka finished talking on the phone with Yakumo, she put the letter in her coat pocket and ran out of her flat.

Yakumo had said he'd call afterwards, but afterwards would be too late.

Shiori was trying to end her life now.

She had lost her parents. She had lost the person she loved. She had lost the child of the person she loved. She might have lost the very reason for living.

But did you need a reason to live?

Shiori was probably sad beyond Haruka's imagination.

I might not have the right to say this when I suffered hesitatingly for so many years after my sister's death.

But I still want Shiori to live.

Even if she will have to walk with suffering in the future –

Haruka left the apartment, but she didn't know where to start looking, so she wandered the streets like an abandoned cat.

Soon, rain started to fall.

She walked alone on the road to the park when she heard her mobile phone ring with the sound of the rain.

There was a number Haruka didn't recognise. Could it be? Haruka answered.

<Are you all right? Where are you now?>

IT was Yakumo's voice. What did he mean by all right?

<Where are you now?>

Yakumo repeated himself once more while Haruka was confused.

The reserved Yakumo had lost his composure.

'I'm looking for... Shiori...'

<Got this? Return to your home right now. Don't take one step out of it until I get there.>

'What are you talking about? I'm looking for...'

<She's already dead!>

Yakumo's shout pierced Haruka's ears. Her head shook.

Shiori's dead. So she really is...

Unexpectedly, that was the thought that came to her head.

I knew before Yakumo said it. But I just didn't want to acknowledge it –

The corners of her eyes felt warm.

Haruka didn't know if the drops on her cheeks were rain or tears.

<Choose a path with as many people as possible when you head back.>

Yakumo emphasised that.

Many people –

Haruka looked around. She was the only one there.

She heard the sound of a car. A van.

It slowly passed by Haruka. Then, the car door suddenly opened. Hands reached out and pinned Haruka's arms behind her back.

'Ah –'

Something was clamped over her mouth, stopping her yell halfway –

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14

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'Oi! Give me a reply! Oi! Damn it!' yelled Yakumo, throwing the mobile against the ground.

The flip phone broke in half, and the parts flew about.

'... Oi. That's mine...'

Gotou's voice didn't reach Yakumo.

Gotou picked up his mobile, which was in a sad state.

'Ahh, this is beyond repair.'

'Damn it! What should I do...'

Yakumo kicked the ground in irritation.

'Calm down. What happened?'

Gotou grabbed Yakumo's arm.

'We completely misunderstood!' sad Yakumo, shaking off Gotou's hand.

'Misunderstood?'

'The one who burned to death wasn't Katou Fumiko. It was Shiori-san!'

'W-w-what did you say!?!'

Gotou was so shocked that his voice jumped an octave.

'Fumiko's alive! Shiori is probably similar in body shape to Shiori-san. Same blood type too. That's why she used her as a substitute.'

'You're lying, right?'

'It's the truth. I checked with the coroner just now. Shiori-san lost her right pinkie finger in an accident when she was young.'

'So the burnt corpse was missing the right pinkie finger too?'

What the hell.

It's because they didn't have enough people working that they ended up here –

'She sent a will to the police on purpose, killed Shiori-san, lit the place with gasoline and burnt her house. The younger brother, Junichi, made the firefighters arrive late by parking on the road. In order to burn the body to the point that it wouldn't be able to be identified!'

'So showing up at the police for the parking ticket would become his alibi.'

And they could split the inheritance.

There'd be no search for somebody who was supposed to be dead.

So they would have had an easy life waiting for them.

A cold chill ran down Gotou's spine. It was disgusting. He wanted to throw up. They were worse than cockroaches.

And they'd totally got them good.

No matter how much forensic science had advanced, they didn't have the money or time to

analyse the DNA for every case.

If they had enough evidence, that was the end of it. They'd used that blind spot. That was why they went out of their way to send a will –

'Anyway, let's look for Fumiko right now.'

'It's too late for that!'

Yakumo yelled from the bottom of his stomach.

'Late?'

'Shiori-san sent a letter to her before she died.'

'What you were talking about earlier?'

'Yes. And Fumiko has noticed.'

'Why?'

'The diary. Shiori-san kept one. Shiori-san probably wrote about writing a letter to her in that diary. Katou Fumiko should have her.'

'What did you say!?!'

Gotou understood why Yakumo was having a fit.

The only mistake in this plan. That was the letter that Shiori-san left behind.

'So where's Haruka-chan now? I'll send someone.'

'She suddenly ended the call earlier with a scream...!' Yakumo replied lifelessly.

So even this cold-hearted person could worry about others like a normal person now.

That was quite the change. Gotou wouldn't let those emotions be stolen from Yakumo. He'd save her no matter what. Gotou was hit by that strong impulse.

'Don't dawdle! We're going!'

Gotou ran towards the car. It was still too early to give up.

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Haruka was forced into the backseat of the car.

The knife felt cold against her neck. If she moved even a bit, she would be cut.

The man holding the knife to her neck had a face that looked like Shiori's lover.

However, the air about him was completely different.

Though Haruka couldn't see her face clearly, it looked like the driver was a woman.

Her hair was permed into very large curls and the smell of perfume filled the car.

'Where are you going?' asked Haruka, focussing on her trembling throat, but the two of them didn't answer.

'What do you want with me? Who on earth are you?'

A cold sweat ran down her body.

The car stopped at a light.

The woman at the driver's seat leant towards the back and smirked, showing her teeth, yellowed from cigarettes.

'Right. I didn't introduce myself yet, Haruka-chan.'

'Why do you know my name?'

'I asked your friend. Her name was Shiori-chan, right?'

'Do you know Shiori?'

Haruka leant forward, but the man next to her immediately grabbed her and pushed her back down to the seat.

'What a noisy brat,' said the man, his cheek twitching like a mouse's. It was a spiteful and slimy voice.

'My name's Katou Fumiko. That's Katou Junichi,' said the woman driving.

Haruka felt the blood leave her face all at once. This woman was Katou Fumiko.

The woman Shiori was supposed to have killed –

But she was in front of her now. Which meant –

'From that face, you do know the situation.'

Fumiko looked at her coldly.

'...'

'Yes. I made it look like I'm dead.'

Made it look like she was dead?

Could it be –

Haruka glared at Fumiko.

'Don't look like that. I'm not going to do anything to you.'

Fumiko petted Haruka's hair.

A chill ran down Haruka's spine. There was no truth in her words.

If she really wasn't going to do anything, she wouldn't have called herself Fumiko.

'We're looking for a letter. It got to you, right? A letter.'

Ah, so that was their goal.

'I don't know anything about a letter.'

'Don't lie!' said Fumiko. Her palm came flying.

Haruka had no time to avoid it – it hit her. A flash of heat spread through her face.

'There's no point hiding it. It was written in this diary. Saying that she sent a letter to tell only you the truth!'

Fumiko threw a diary at Haruka.

Without saying anything, Haruka embraced that diary.

Oh, so Shiori was killed by this person. As a substitute...

Tremendous sadness and anger boiled up within Haruka at the same time.

'So where's that letter?'

'...'

'I thought it was rude, but I've already searched your room. You're so careless, leaving your room without locking it.'

'...'

Like I'd respond. I've never forgive these people.

'Tell me already! Where is it!?!'

The woman slapped Haruka again.

Haruka slammed into the seat. She did it on purpose. She would pretend to be collapsed in pain.

She heard a horns from behind them. The light was already green. Fumiko clicked her tongue and started the car.

Haruka took the letter out of her coat pocket in a way that they wouldn't notice and pushed it into the back of the car seat. She would probably be able to buy some time this way.

However, what was she buying time for?

Despair spread through her chest.

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They'd got on the car, but where to now?

Driving at random wouldn't solve anything. Where did they have to look to find Haruka-chan?

Damn it. What were they supposed to do? Gotou clicked his tongue.

'Gotou-san, you said that Katou Kenichi had land left to him by his parents, right?'

'Yeah, what about it?'

'What has happened to that land now?'

What the hell was he thinking about at a time like this?

Gotou looked at Yakumo's profile. His expression was the definition of seriousness.

'One plot's that burnt-down house. I think there're some in Shizuoka and Nagano too. And one more should be within the city. I think one of them was an apartment building that's in construction?'

'There,' Yakumo said with confidence.

'Really?'

Gotou was doubtful, but he didn't have any idea about where else to go.

Yakumo was probably saying it as a possibility too. Thinking about it was a waste of time. They had to bet on that possibility.

Gotou stepped on the pedal.

Gravel flew out behind the wheels as the car sped up.

'They are desperate to get that letter. They need to talk somewhere there aren't many people,' Yakumo said quickly.

'I see...'

If they made the wrong guess, they would be out of luck.

Even if they managed to catch Fumiko in the end, there would definitely be one more corpse.

'I'm gonna fly. Hold on tight.'

Gotou turned on the siren and pressed down on the pedal more.

* * *

The van Katou Fumiko was driving went onto the premises of an apartment building that was under construction.

The building itself was mostly finished.

All that was left was the interior.

They went around the two-storey building to the back, which had an entrance to the basement.

They went down the slope.

After reaching the bottom, they turned left. The car stopped at the end of the road. It looked like an underground parking lot.

The only lights were the car's headlights.

Junichi grabbed Haruka's arm and pulled her out of the car.

Haruka fell forward, still holding the diary, and hit her face.

It felt like her lips were cut. Her face twisted in pain, but she didn't even have time to gasp before Junichi grabbed her hair and pulled her up.

'Let go of me – I'll stand up on my own!' yelled Haruka, shaking Junichi's hand away.

Fumiko flicked a switch on the wall.

There was the sound of an electric motor and screeching metal. It was probably to close the garage door. Haruka went pale.

She felt like her light of hope had flickered out.

Now, the parking lot was completely closed off.

Nobody would come save her even if she screamed.

She shut her eyes, knowing that it was too late for her.

I can't stand it. Even though the people who killed Shiori are right in front of me, I can't do anything –

But even if I die, at least Yakumo will find out the truth.

That was the only good thing to come out of this.

Will Yakumo be angry for me?

If I die, will that insensitive and unfriendly contrary man be a little bit sad?

Those thoughts suddenly came to Haruka's head –

* * *

'I hope we make it in time,' murmured Gotou to nobody in particular.

His palms were sweaty because of his agitation, so they didn't have a good grip on the wheel.

'Please make it in time,' Yakumo said immediately.

'You say that so easily.'

'Is it difficult even for you, Gotou-san?'

This guy said really hateful things even at times like this.

'It's no problem.'

Gotou hadn't touched the brakes even once.

Horns kept honking as he kept passing cars.

Though Gotou could hear people screaming, honking and slamming their brakes to avoid Gotou's wild driving, he didn't have the time to worry about that.

If there were a minute – even a second – late, it would be too late.

They had to hurry.

If Haruka-chan didn't immediately hand over the letter under threat, they might be able to save her.

Don't give up. I'm bringing Yakumo now. Do your best.

Gotou thought that, though there was no way for that thought to reach her.

'Gotou-san! Look in front!' shouted Yakumo, just as Gotou was about to cut through an intersection.

The car driving in the opposite direction made a sharp right turn.

'Damn it!'

Gotou turned the wheel, but it was too late.

Thunk!

There was a terrible noise as the car shook.

The car went onto the kerb, mowing down three parked bicycles and slamming into a telephone pole.

The front glass cracked like a spider web, while white smoke came up from the bumper.

Damn it. At a time like this.

Gotou clicked his tongue. He felt something wet on his cheek. After touching it with his hand, he found out it was blood.

He looked at Yakumo in the passenger seat.

'You OK?'

'Somehow...' replied Yakumo, holding his shoulder.

Gotou looked to the back. A black car was stopped by the kerb.

Though the front bumper was damaged, it was just a scratch. Looked like Gotou and Yakumo were the only ones injured.

Gotou tried to turn on the car engine again.

It wouldn't light up. Gotou tried once more.

No luck. Damn it.

'I'm begging you! Work!'

* * *

Junichi took off Haruka's coat and checked everything that could be a pocket.

Fumiko checked Haruka's pants pockets and even stuck her hands up her shirt.

All Haruka could do was stand there and bear with the humiliation.

'Nothing here,' said Junichi, throwing the coat aside.

Fumiko seemed to have given up too, as she went to stand in front of Haruka and held up a knife.

'Why not start talking already? Where's the letter?'

Haruka would be lying if she said she wasn't afraid.

However, that didn't mean she would yield.

She was going to be killed anyway. This was all she could do. Haruka glared straight at Fumiko.

'Do you think you'll be all right? I'm just going to say this, but in the real world, protagonists die.'

'I know that. To speak honestly, you don't plan on letting me go anyway, right?'

After a moment, Fumiko's fist came flying.

It was different than her slaps from earlier. Haruka saw stars as she staggered backwards, hitting the car and falling down.

She could taste blood in her mouth.

'Talk already! We don't have the time for this either!' yelled Fumiko, her hair a mess.

This was good. No matter how tough they acted, these people were worried.

As long as they didn't know where Shiori's letter was, they would have to continue being frightened as they imagined their downfall.

Right. If I use their anxiety or –

But no matter how shaken they were, Haruka couldn't do anything against two people.

'You'll really let me go if I tell you where the letter is?' Haruka said as she stood up slowly.

Fumiko looked surprised, but then that changed right away into a high-pitched laugh.

'Of course, girl.'

Liar! Haruka shouted that in her heart.

'I put the letter in my room.'

'Don't lie. We searched the room.'

'Did you look properly? In the refrigerator, too.'

It was the first lie that came to her head.

She wasn't Yakumo – she wouldn't put everything in a refrigerator.

Junichi looked up, as if thinking.

'Tsk.'

Junichi clicked his tongue and ran towards the car.

Fumiko threw the car key at Junichi. Success.

The garage door opened and the car drove out, tires screeching. Now, Haruka was one-on-one with Fumiko.

'That had better not be a lie or you'll really get it.'

How would she get it? Haruka looked at Fumiko and smiled.

Fumiko's cheek twitched.

'Why did you kill Shiori? Because she stole your husband?'

'You're seriously misunderstanding something.'

'Misunderstanding?'

'Yes. Misunderstanding.'

Fumiko looked down at Haruka triumphantly. There was a faint smile on her lips as she put a cigarette in her mouth and lit it. She blew the smoke out at Haruka.

'Everything was to plan. Of course that includes making it look like my husband was sick and killing him, but the police seeing through that and finding out it was a murder and your friend noticing that I was the one who killed him – that was part of the plan too...'

'So you planned to kill Shiori from the start.'

'Yup. This plan wouldn't have succeeded without your friend. No, I thought up this plan because of your friend. Our physique and blood type were the same. And her parents were dead too, with no relatives. Don't you think she was asking to be killed as my substitute?'

This person –

'Of course I don't! Shiori wasn't born to be your substitute! Shiori had her own life! You ruined all of that!' yelled Haruka with all her power.

I can't forgive her. I definitely can't forgive her!

For the first time in Haruka's life, she truly hated somebody.

'Don't act so tough!'

Fumiko's fist came at her again. This time, Haruka managed to take it standing.

'You're the one acting tough.'

'Girl. Your friend wouldn't have been wrapped up in this if she didn't commit adultery. She deserved it. Her forbidden love got too hot for her, so she really ended up burning.'

Fumiko laughed aloud.

'You're just angry she stole your husband from you.'

'You just don't shut up. I'm done with you. Die.'

Fumiko put the knife to Haruka's neck.

It felt cold.

It was too late for Haruka now.

Life was too short.

If I die, I'll go meet Yakumo.

Yakumo will definitely find me.

He'll say something sarcastic with his sleepy face as usual, like 'What are you here for?' –

'Don't give up...'

Haruka heard a voice in her ear.

Shiori's voice –

Haruka's eyes snapped open. There was a light of hope.

She couldn't give up yet.

Haruka rushed at Fumiko with all her strength.

Fumiko staggered back and fell down. For a moment, she looked stunned, but then she stood right up and tried to run at Haruka.

'You've misunderstood something too,' said Haruka, pointing at Fumiko.

Fumiko stopped in her tracks.

'Misunderstood?'

'Yup, misunderstood. There are people besides you who know about the letter. And they've noticed the truth behind this case.'

'Stop making up stupid lies!' yelled Fumiko angrily, but her eyes were anxious.

She probably felt something from Haruka's sudden change in attitude.

However, it was too late even if she felt something.

'If you think it's a lie, look behind you.'

At Haruka's words, Fumiko turned slowly, like a rusty mechanical puppet.

Then, her eyes went wide in surprise.

Yakumo and Gotou were standing there.

'Katou Fumiko. I've got quite a few questions for you,' said Gotou, holding out his police ID. For some reason, his face was covered in blood.

Fumiko's mouth flapped open and shut as she tried to say something, but nothing came out.

'Ah, and we ran into Junichi at the entrance. He's handcuffed right now,' Gotou said lightly, spreading his arms.

Fumiko looked dumbfounded. It made sense. There was nowhere for her to run now.

Her plan was completely ruined.

She was just an empty shell now. Gotou placed a hand on Fumiko's shoulder.

Then, Fumiko suddenly turned to face Haruka and rushed at her with the knife.

Gotou tried to stop Fumiko, but he was a moment too late.

Fumiko avoided Gotou's arm and ran at Haruka.

Everything seemed to be in slow motion to Haruka.

She was too shocked and afraid to move.

'Aaahhh!'

She yelled as loud as she could.

Yakumo said something.

Haruka was going to be stabbed.

The moment she thought that, somebody moved to stand in front of Haruka.

Fumiko didn't reach Haruka. She tripped on something, fell forward, and dropped the knife.

Gotou didn't let the chance slip away.

He climbed on Fumiko's back, pulled her arms behind her and restrained her.

'Are you all right?'

Yakumo went up to Haruka.

'Shiori... Shiori saved me,' said Haruka as she collapsed right there.

Her body shook from fear and the relief she felt from being released from that.

'Oh, her,' said Yakumo, looking beside Fumiko.

So she really was there.

'Thank you,' said Haruka, looking in the same direction as Yakumo.

'Can you see her?'

Haruka shook her head at Yakumo's question.

'I can't see her. But I can feel her. I can tell Shiori's here right now...'

Haruka gripped Shiori's diary tightly in front of her chest.

There was the faint smell of cinnamon from the diary.

'Oh, I see now...'

Haruka started laughing quietly.

She knew the secret to Shiori's cocoa. The secret ingredient was a cinnamon stick.

'You've been saved by many people... There must be something that makes them do that,' said Yakumo, like he was thinking about something.

My sister saved me. Shiori saved me. I really have been saved by a lot of people.

Haruka looked at Yakumo's face, and all the feelings she had been restraining came up at once.

She bit her lips, but she couldn't hold them in any longer.

They came out from her eyes as tears.

Haruka clung to Yakumo and started sobbing.

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17

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Two days after the incident, Gotou visited Yakumo's secret hideaway.

During questioning, Fumiko admitted everything.

The results of the DNA test proved that the burnt corpse was Shiori.

Fumiko and Junichi were charged with two premeditated murders and assaulting Haruka. It would take a few years before the results of the trial, but if the premeditated murder charges stuck, they'd be severely punished.

The death penalty. Even if they were lucky, they'd probably get life terms.

Even though Gotou had gone all the way here to explain the aftermath of the case, Yakumo didn't seem to care.

He leant back on his chair and yawned.

'What – you're not interested even though I went out of my way to explain?' said Gotou, his

irritation evident.

'There's no point showing interest now, is there? All we can do is already done. I know the truth even without hearing the police report.'

'Well, that's true...'

'Furthermore, Shiori's spirit, which was the key to solving the case, wasn't mentioned in the police report, right? Isn't that a bit different from the truth?'

'Yeah, yeah, I got it.'

Gotou waved a hand limply.

I was an idiot for thinking about explaining to him.

'What I want to know is how you've been punished.'

Gotou didn't want to talk about that.

Even though he'd solved the case, of course that wasn't publicly acknowledged.

Though it was while he was chasing the culprit, he had hit a civilian's car and run off.

'Anyway, it's house arrest until that's decided. I might get fired.'

'It never rains but it pours.'

Saying it like it had nothing to do with him.

Gotou wanted to say that Yakumo was partly at fault, but he stopped himself

They'd saved Haruka-chan – that was good enough.

'But it's not all bad, right?'

'What?'

'It seems your wife's returned,' Yakumo said nonchalantly.

'H-how do you know that!?!'

Gotou stood up in shock.

'I heard it from somebody named Hata-san.'

'Why are you and Hata-san...'

Gotou started speaking, but then he stopped.

He could guess. It was that old man. He'd probably do anything to satisfy his urges.

'But your wife will just run off again if you lose your job.'

'I don't need your concern. And it's not like I don't have an idea,' said Gotou, sitting on the folding chair again.

'It must be a worthless idea anyway.'

'Don't decide that for yourself. I was actually thinking of opening a detective agency.'

'Do your best on your own.'

Yakumo yawned.

'About that. When I open my detective agency, I was thinking of recruiting an excellent assistant.'

Gotou stared at Yakumo.

He'd probably figure it out without Gotou saying the rest.

'Please stop looking at me. It's creepy.'

'Will you think about it?'

'I would rather die.'

As expected.

Gotou snorted.

'That's not all you're here to say, right?'

Yakumo crossed his arms and looked up.

This guy really had terrifying perception. He saw through everything.

To be honest, Gotou wasn't sure he should talk to Yakumo about it. He didn't know how Yakumo would react.

His desire not to talk about it if possible was stronger, but if he hid it now, Yakumo would have to walk that path eventually anyway.

Gotou opened his mouth, determined.

'Actually, during Katou Fumiko's questioning, it seems like she said something strange.'

'Something strange?'

'Yeah. She said that she wasn't the one who made the plan.'

'Was it Junichi?'

Gotou shook his head.

'Seems like a man visited Fumiko one day. He'd seen through her desire to kill her husband and offered up this plan.'

'...'

'She says she can't remember his name, let alone his address or his job, even though she thinks she heard them. It's too weak a story to have been made up. But even if we do believe it, if she doesn't remember him, there's nothing we can do.'

'So you're concerned, Gotou-san...'

'Yeah. I think her memory was erased with hypnotism or something. Plus, they remembered something about that man. I can't help but be concerned about this one thing.'

'What is it? Please stop putting on airs.'

'Seems like both of that man's eyes were red...'

Yakumo ran a hand through his hair and shut his eyes.

'... So he's still doing that...'

Yakumo said just that after a silence.

So that really was it. Yakumo had confirmed Gotou's fear.

He had wanted it just to be a coincidence.

* * *

Haruka visited Yakumo's room two days afterwards.

She was going to head home afterwards to attend Shiori's funeral. She wanted to visit Yakumo before then.

'Have you calmed down a bit?' said Yakumo, after he sat down opposite her.

Haruka nodded silently.

To be honest, her heart was still unsteady.

'It's like that.'

Yakumo scratched his cheek awkwardly.

'What?'

'... No, it's nothing.'

After crossing his arms and thinking for a bit, Yakumo said, 'You're always so chatty, so when you suddenly shut up like this, it's strange.'

'What? Don't make it sound like I'm a walking ball of noise.'

'Am I wrong?'

Haruka was too exasperated by Yakumo's usual attitude to say anything.

She didn't have the energy to retort right now.

Not just now. Ever since the incident, she hadn't been eating properly. She stayed inside her flat and kept crying as she read Shiori's diary.

'Shiori-san's saying "Thank you" to you,' said Yakumo.

'You can see her?' asked Haruka, leaning forward.

Yakumo nodded silently.

'I'm thankful too. And sorry,' Haruka said quietly, looking around the quiet room slowly.

There was no response.

'I wonder if she heard me.'

'She did.'

'I see...'

'Shiori-san has a message for you.'

'Message?'

'I don't know what she's talking about, but she says the guy's better than she imagined. She also says that you're obstinate about the important things, so you should be more honest...'

That was just like Shiori.

For the first time since the incident, Haruka laughed aloud.

Yakumo cocked his head, looking confused.

'Tell her I don't need her concern.'

'What on earth are you talking about?'

'It's fine. It's nothing.'

Yakumo didn't press any further.

It looked like he thought it was a pointless conversation anyway.

'I was thinking about this the whole time. If I understood more perspectives and wasn't prejudiced about things like adultery, Shiori would have talked to me sooner... It hurt. I felt really pathetic.'

'I'm not sure about that,' said Yakumo, running a hand through his messy hair.

'Eh?'

'If you were a more perceptive adult, wouldn't Shiori-san not have been your friend?'

Haruka thought about what Yakumo meant, but she still didn't understand.

'I'm saying that the relationships between people are difficult.'

Yakumo shrugged as he looked at Haruka, whose brow was furrowed.

'I don't understand.'

'I'm saying being incomplete has more meaning for people.'

'I don't understand at all.'

'... In short, I'm saying you can just stay the way you are,' said Yakumo, shaking his head in

exasperation.

'Hey, stop calling me "you" already.'

'What should I call you?'

'You can just call me by my name normally.'

'I refuse!' Yakumo said bluntly. Then, he sipped his tea.

Haruka checked the time on her wristwatch and stood up.

'I have to go soon.'

Yakumo didn't say anything, as usual.

He yawned like a cat. Was he incapable of saying 'Bye' or 'See you later'?

Though it'd just feel creepy if he said it.

'Hey. Can I come by next time when nothing's up?'

Yakumo didn't respond, as expected. Haruka gave up and put her hand on the doorknob.

'Please. Don't bring trouble with you next time.'

Haruka turned around and saw Yakumo drinking tea with his usual sleepy expression.

'I will then. I know how to make amazingly yummy cocoa. I'll make it for you next time.'

Haruka opened the door and left the room.

-

Haruka didn't even think that she'd end up breaking the promise she made with Yakumo –

添付ファイル

忘れ物

E X T R A ^{FILE}

One afternoon a week after the tunnel incident –

-

I saw him when I went to the library, thinking I'd finish up a report.

Running a hand through his messy hair, it was the contrary Saitou Yakumo, with his usual sleepy eyes.

He had an unusually serious expression on his face as he looked at the spines of books on the bookshelf.

For some reason, I couldn't call out right away. I just stood there like an idiot and stared at Yakumo.

Running into somebody unexpectedly made me feel more nervous than necessary.

Illuminated by the orange light of the setting sun, his profile looked sharper than usual.

'Do you need something?' said Yakumo, still looking at the shelf.

When I realised he'd noticed I was there, my body felt hot, like it had been lit on fire, and I dropped my gaze to the ground.

'N-not really... I was just thinking of finishing my report.'

'I see,' Yakumo replied curtly. He didn't look away from the shelf.

'What are you doing?'

'Looking for something.'

'What are you looking for.'

'If there's someone who'd look for clothes at a library, I would like you to introduce them to me.'

Why did he have to talk that way? He wasn't honest, or well –

But I know this, after the two incidents. I wouldn't be able to keep up if I got angry at something like this. It was best to just let it go.

'What's the title of the book?'

Even though I didn't think I said anything strange, Yakumo's brow furrowed and he looked my way with a suspicious look.

'What would you do if you knew?'

'Help.'

'Why?'

Why, he says –

'It'd be faster with two people, right?'

Yakumo crossed his arms and looked at me silently.

He probably didn't think anybody would do something for someone else without any conditions. That was a really sad thought.

After a silence, Yakumo finally murmured, 'The Count of Monte Cristo.'

'The Count of Monte Cristo?'

'Yes. Alexandre Dumas.'

'Dumas' Count of Monte Cristo then.'

While thinking over that, I walked to the terminal near the library entrance.

'Where are you going?' complained Yakumo as he walked with me.

I thought this during the case before, but though Yakumo's smart, since he lives in a clubroom, he really is stuck in analogue.

'You can look up where books are on the terminal now.'

Take that, Yakumo.

Yakumo snorted and hid his face. I could only retort at times like this. It felt great.

I used the terminal's touchscreen to search for 'The Count of Monte Cristo' – I found it right away.

I didn't know this since I'd never read it myself, but it had seven volumes. It seemed like quite an epic.

'Er... Since it's the foreign paperback corner, it should be on shelf D-1?'

'No.'

Yakumo cut in immediately.

'Eh?'

'I'm looking for the hardback.'

'Isn't either fine if you can read it?'

'It's not fine. It has to be the hardback.'

'Why?'

'Beacae.'

I didn't know why he cared so much. Maybe the translation was different for the hardback and the paperback?

I had some friends who enjoyed looking for differences like that.

Hm, the hardback –

I looked at the list displayed on the monitor again.

'Here. Er... Ah, it's in the archives.'

Our university library wasn't that large, but for old books that didn't fit any more, they were regularly moved to the archives and only taken out when necessary.

'No wonder I couldn't find it,' muttered Yakumo, running a hand through his hair.

After that, we borrowed a key from the librarian and went to the archives in the basement.

The bare concrete room was forty tsubo in size. There were cardboard boxes filled with books haphazardly stacked.

When I looked at one of the nearby boxes, all I saw was the date written on it in permanent marker.

That was probably the date the books were moved from the library to the archives.

'According to the data, it was moved to the archives on March 10 two years ago.'

'March 10 then,' Yakumo replied. Then, he started to check the dates of the cardboard boxes.

But still –

'This is an amazing amount.'

There were enough boxes that I had to look up at them.

Just checking the dates would still take a long time. And there could be a number of boxes with the same date.

Looking for one book out of all this wouldn't be easy.

'Is paperback really no good?'

'You don't have to do this if you don't want to. I didn't ask for your help,' said Yakumo.

Why did he have to talk like that?

Though I felt irritated, I put my bag on the nearby desk and started checking the dates on the boxes along with Yakumo.

'Why did you suddenly want to read that book?'

I tried asking Yakumo that question after checking the first box.

Since he was going so far to look for it, he must have had some special attachment to it.

'I don't plan on reading it.'

'Eh?'

My hands stopped unconsciously when I heard that.

'What?'

'Why are you looking for a book you aren't going to read?'

'If you have the time to talk, move your hands.'

'Yes, yes, I got it.'

'Only one yes.'

Even though he said earlier that he didn't ask for my help –

After that, we pretty much didn't talk. We just continued our simple work, looking for the cardboard box for March 10 to find *The Count of Monte Cristo*.

After an hour or so, Yakumo stood up and said, 'Here.'

Yakumo placed the book on the desk, wiped the sweat off his forehead and flipped through the pages.

There was a white envelope between the very last pages.

'Found it,' said Yakumo, his shoulders relaxing.

'Were you looking for...'

'Yes, this.'

Yakumo took the envelope and started walking away briskly.

"Then say that from the beginning," I protested, running after him.

'You didn't ask.'

This again. And –

'I did ask.'

'Don't take everything so seriously. And return the key.'

After saying that, Yakumo left the archives. Not even a word of thanks after I helped him.

And the key –

'Honestly! What kind of attitude is that?'

I'd definitely make him apologise. I turned off the lights, locked the door and ran after Yakumo hurriedly.

I finally caught up to him after dashing up the stairs and leaving the school building, in front of a maple tree in the courtyard.

'Why are you so selfish? I helped out, so you should explain!'

I yelled at Yakumo's back.

Yakumo stopped and shook his head in exasperation. Then, he finally started his explanation.

'A student who attended this school wrote a letter for her parents at home. She left home with the book she borrowed and her letter in her bag.'

'And that letter was in the book.'

'Yes.'

But –

'What does that have to do with you, Yakumo-kun?'

'She made a request.'

'Oh.'

Though I was the one who asked the question, I gave a rather flat response.

Since the contrary Yakumo had gone out of his way to look, she was probably close to him –

When I thought that, my chest hurt for some reason.

Why did I care? It wouldn't be strange at all for him to be dating somebody.

And there wasn't any reason for me to mind anyway.

'Also, one more request,' said Yakumo with a yawn.

'W-what?'

'Put this letter in the mail,' said Yakumo, holding out the envelope.

'Eh, me?'

'Yes.'

'Wouldn't it be better for her to do it herself?'

'She can't.'

'Why?'

'After leaving home, she was hit by a car and died.'

My body shook when I heard Yakumo's words.

Oh. A dead woman made a request to Yakumo. She wanted him to find the letter that couldn't reach her parents –

'Hey, wouldn't it be better to explain the situation to her parents?'

I said the thought that came to my mind.

'It's not necessary.'

'But they might think it's a prank if they suddenly get the letter.'

'Her parents should be able to tell it isn't a prank from the writing.'

'But...'

'You'll stop following me around now, right?' said Yakumo, turning around.

When I thought that he was saying that to me, my chest suddenly felt tight, but I immediately

realised that wasn't it.

Yakumo was looking at the tree, which had dropped its leaves, leaving its branches bare.

Yakumo was definitely looking at somebody there.

I looked in the same direction. For just a moment, I felt like I saw a woman looking down.

Probably just my eyes playing tricks on me though –

'Honestly,' muttered Yakumo. He yawned, seeming bored, and ran a hand through his messy hair. Then, he started walking away leisurely.

He was contrary and not honest, but in the end, Yakumo couldn't leave people who were troubled alone.

When I thought that, for some reason, my heart leapt.

'Hey. I helped you out – at least thank me.'

I ran after Yakumo –

※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。

Thank you very much for reading *Psychic Detective Yakumo 1 – The Red Eye Knows*.

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This story started four and a half years ago as a novel called *The Red Eye*, which I wrote when I was a businessman.

It was the first mystery that I wrote.

Though I submitted it for an award, I didn't receive it, and though I put money towards self-publishing, it didn't sell well – all that was left was my loan.

One year afterwards, when I was depressed, I met the editor Y-shi, revised the entire work and published it as *Psychic Detective Yakumo*

It's been three and a half years. There are eight works in the series and it is now in paperback.

You really don't know what will happen in life.

-

When making this paperback, I expressed my selfish desire to K-shi, the editor at Kadokawa Shoten and had it revised greatly.

The biggest reason for that was because I wanted to see how much I had changed through my work in these three and a half years.

Like this, the third revision began.

Starting this, it felt like facing my past self, which was strangely embarrassing and also enjoyable.

I believe that I was able to grow by letting time pass and facing my past work again.

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I would like to use this space to thank everyone involved at Kadokawa Shoten for giving me this chance.

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I hope that I will be able to revise the next work greatly too –

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Heisei 20^[1] spring – Kaminaga Manabu

[1] Heisei 20 is 2008 in the Gregorian calendar.