

心霊探偵

八

PSYCHIC DETECTIVE

YAKUMO

ШАПАВУ КАМИПАГА

霊

魂をつなぐもの

2

角川文庫

神永
学



PSYCHIC DETECTIVE YAKUMO

MAPABU KAMIPAGA

02.

序章 [Prologue]	5
第一章 憑依 [File 01: Vessel]	15
第二章 除霊 [File 02: Exorcism]	101
第三章 蘇生 [File 03: Resurrection]	217
終章 その後 [Epilogue]	323
添付ファイル 帰郷 [Extra File: Homecoming]	345
あとがき [Afterword]	358

序 章

P R O L O G U E

The rain was beating down that night.

-

Entering March, the days were becoming warmer, but it was still cold once the sun went down, especially in rain like this.

Gotou Kazutoshi was writing his work log at the police station.

He hated doing it. It had already been two years since he entered the police force, but this was the one thing he could not grow accustomed to. He would rather some sort of incident occurred.

Gotou reclined on his chair as he mulled over these indiscreet thoughts in his head.

The sound of pouring rain rang in his ears.

Suddenly, he noticed that somebody was standing in front of the police station.

He was a man in his mid-thirties. Even though it was raining so heavily, he was not carrying an umbrella, and his black coat was completely soaked.

That wasn't all. It was a rainy night. Even though visibility was already not that great under the circumstances, the man was looking down and had on dark sunglasses, as if to hide his face.

There was a strange atmosphere.

Gotou stood up and headed towards the man at the entrance while keeping a hand on the police baton in the holder at his hip.

'What are you doing there?'

When he spoke up, the man slowly raised his face.

'A child...'

'What?'

Gotou could only hear the beginning of his sentence, the rest of which had been drowned out by the rain.

'A child is about to be murdered.'

The man spoke in an emotionless voice. Almost like the synthetic speech of a machine.

'What did you say?'

'A child is about to be murdered, officer.'

The man's expression was serious, and it did not feel like he was lying or joking. However, something was missing.

Urgency.

A child might die. Even though he came to inform Gotou about such a dangerous situation, this man was not panicking at all.

'If you don't hurry, the child will die.'

The man spoke while water dripped from the tip of his chin.

He was right. There was no time to think about that sort of thing. If what the man said was true, it could be too late.

'Where's the kid?'

'I'll show you the way.'

The man said that quietly, turned around and started walking.

Gotou rushed out into the rain after him.

The rain was incredible. His uniform was soon completely soaked through. He couldn't see anything. The man was doing very well walking perfectly in a situation like this while wearing sunglasses.

Still –

'A kid's going to be killed, right?'

Gotou yelled at the man's back.

'Yes.'

The man stopped and looked up at the rainy sky.

'Then we have to hurry.'

'Yes.'

After the man replied, he started walking again, but he was not walking any faster.

What was up with him? Why was he so walking so leisurely?

'Where's the kid?'

Gotou spoke up, unable to bear it any longer.

The man stopped again. He slowly took his right hand out of his pocket and pointed down the completely dark street.

'Just down the road.'

'The kid's ahead?'

'There is a building under construction.'

'The kid's in there?'

'Yes.'

'Got it.'

At the same time as he replied, Gotou dashed down the asphalt.

He knew the building the man was talking about. It was a bit over a hundred metres ahead. If he ran, it wouldn't even take twenty seconds.

Soon, he could see the building he was looking for. There were five floors, but the concrete only went up to the second floor, while the floors above it still showed steel scaffolding.

He should have just asked in the first place. When he turned around, the man from before had been swallowed by the darkness and could not be seen.

Gotou stepped onto the premises. There was a red car parked in front of the buildings with its engine still on.

He approached and took a peek inside a window, but there was nobody inside.

'That's strange,' Gotou mumbled. Then, he went inside the building.

He was able to hide from the rain, but it was pitch-black and he couldn't see anything.

Gotou took the torch from his hip holster out and switched it on, waving it left and right.

Clunk.

There was the sound of something falling.

Gotou switched the torch to his left hand and took out the baton with his right. He slowly headed towards the direction the sound had come from.

Something moved in the shadow of a pillar.

Gotou pointed the light towards it.

Someone's there –

He could see the back of somebody crouching.

'I'm a police officer. What are you doing?'

A woman in her late twenties turned around, surprised by Gotou's voice.

She had refined features and skin that was so white it seemed almost transparent. The glossy black hair that fell to her shoulders was covered in droplets of water.

Though she was so beautiful it would make someone hold their breath, Gotou could only see that beauty as something manufactured.

The woman said nothing. Her almond eyes stared as her thin red lips trembled.

'I asked you what you were doing.'

'Ki... Il...'

Finally, the woman opened her mouth.

Unlike her appearance, her voice sounded like an old woman's. He couldn't hear what she said clearly.

'What did you say?'

'I'll kill him.'

The woman spoke again.

This time, the words properly reached Gotou's ears.

'Kill? Who are you...'

Gotou started speaking, but he stopped without thinking. In front of the woman, there was a boy of elementary-school age who had fainted face-up, and the woman had her two hands around that boy's neck.

'Stop! Take those hands off!'

Gotou shouted and pulled the woman towards him, but she clung on and put more strength into her hands around the child's neck.

'Let go!'

'No! I have to kill this child!'

'Don't be ridiculous!'

'Don't get in my way!'

The woman violently shook her body to resist.

'I'll listen to what you have to say after, so take your hands off that kid!'

'I have to kill this child now! If I don't, the child will definitely kill many people! Just like him!'

The woman's cry reverberated against the concrete.

'What are you saying!?!'

'Let go! Kill that child, and me too..'

Damn! She wants to commit double suicide –

If she wouldn't listen to him, he would have to use force.

Gotou hit the woman's arm with his baton. Just as she was bent over in pain, he thrust her away with a tackle.

The woman rolled a few times on the concrete floor and collapsed with her face to the ground.

Gotou immediately checked the carotid artery of the boy, who had collapsed facing up.

It's fine. There's still a pulse. Breathing too. That's great.

'Hey. You OK?'

When Gotou shook the boy's shoulders, he opened his eyes soon after.

He abruptly got up, still expressionless.

Even though the kid must have had some scary experiences, he didn't cry or scream. Maybe he didn't understand the situation he was in, or –

That was right. The woman.

Gotou looked towards the location where the woman had fallen, but she was already nowhere to be seen.

For a moment, he thought of chasing her, but he couldn't leave the boy by himself. He gave up and turned back to face the boy.

'Everything's OK now.'

There was no reply.

'What's your name?'

'Yakumo.'

'Oh, so you're Yakumo-kun.'

Gotou patted the boy's head. He had pale skin and almond eyes. The boy's face looked a lot like the woman's.

Was the woman from before this kid's mother?

Gotou picked up the torch that had fallen to the ground in the confusion earlier and shone it on the boy's face.

For a moment, he thought his eyes were tricking him. However, he was wrong.

The child's left eye glowed red like a blazing flame.

憑依

第一章

FILE:
01

-

1

-

The rain that had started at dawn did not seem as if would stop even after noon; rather, it was just raining more heavily.

The endless pitter-patter of the raindrops created a hazy mist.

It had become warmer with the arrival of March, but with the weather like this, even spring would hesitate to visit.

She really shouldn't have gone out in this weather. Mayuko regretted her decision as she walked along the riverside promenade.

The rain had made its way into her sneakers, making her feel uncomfortable.

In the first place, it was Miki's fault for calling her out on a day like this. She had said that she was lonely because of her broken heart, but when Mayuko thought about it, it was already Miki's fourth broken heart this year.

At the end of the season, her heart was broken, and at the beginning of the season, she fell in love. She was a calculating person. In any case, she was just going to start a love once spring called.

The more Mayuko thought about it, the stupider she felt.

Mayuko stopped in front of the water gate and held her umbrella between her shoulder and her neck so that she could breathe on her hands.

It was cold. Her breath was white. Her red fingertips were trembling slightly.

Dummm.

What sounded like subterranean rumbling reached her ears.

Mayuko examined her surroundings, moving only her eyes.

She found the source of the sound immediately. It was the river, swelling as it swallowed up earth and sand.

The water level had risen, and the current of the now brown river was just like a drove of violent oxen.

Dumbfounded, Mayuko took in the sheer intensity of the current.

The wind suddenly whooshed by.

'Ah!'

It was already too late when Mayuko cried out. Her umbrella had been carried away by the wind that had blown from below.

Her white plastic umbrella spun as it tumbled down the embankment.

'Oh, come on.'

Mayuko grumbled her displeasure to nobody in particular and chased after her umbrella. She tried to head down to the lawn of the embankment, but her feet were caught by the soggy turf and she fell on her bum, so she ended up sliding down the embankment like that.

'Argh! This is the worst!'

Resisting the urge to cry at how miserable she was, she stood using both of her hands to prop herself up. Her back and elbows were pulsing with pain. She might have grazed them.

The umbrella was being blown about by the wind on the riverbank.

Water dripped from Mayuko's fringe. While thinking that it might have already been too late to pick it up now, she started walking towards the umbrella.

'... o... p..'

Just as she was about to take the umbrella in her hands, she heard somebody's voice.

'Who's there?'

She tried asking, but nobody answered. She might have mistaken the sound of the wind for something else. Mayuko sniffled stooped over to pick up the umbrella.

Whoosh.

There was another gust of wind.

'Ah.'

The umbrella escaped her fingers and fell into the river, where it was finally swallowed by the muddy waters.

Mayuko couldn't do anything but stare, completely dumbfounded.

I've really got no luck –

She'd go to a nearby convenience store and buy a new umbrella. She'd give up on going to Miki's house for today. She would just hurry home and take a warm bath.

'...St... op.'

Just as she turned away from the river and took one step, she heard that voice.

She hadn't misheard. It was somebody's voice.

'Who's there?'

Mayuko asked as she turned around. There was no reply.

'Pl... e... se.'

She heard the voice like it was coiling around her ear.

Who was it? Where were they? Mayuko looked around for the source of the voice. Her heart was beating quickly. She had an unbelievably bad feeling about this.

Finally, Mayuko's eyes saw something incredible.

She couldn't let out the breath she had been holding. In the middle of the river. In the middle of those violent muddy waters, there was a person. A girl who looked to be in middle school.

She was up to her shoulders in water and swaying in the waves.

Her hands were reaching up towards the sky like she was struggling. There were fifty metres between the riverbank and where the girl was. The distance was much too large for Mayuko, who had no confidence in her swimming ability.

Even if she was confident, it would just make for two disasters if she jumped into save her in this current.

Mayuko yelled as loudly as she could. As if ridiculing her efforts, the river's muddy waters roared.

'I'll call for help, so hang on a little longer!'

Mayuko shouted out to the girl in the river.

The girl bobbed up, like she was replying to her. At first, Mayuko thought her eyes were playing tricks on her, but she was wrong.

The girl's shoulders, chest and waist were slowly but surely coming out of the water.

Finally, the girl was standing on top of the raging river.

'Eek!'

The unbelievable sight of the girl's figure was vividly burnt into Mayuko's mind.

She couldn't see the girl's face clearly. She could tell that the girl had long black hair tied into a ponytail and was wearing a school uniform with a blazer.

That girl slowly started walking on top of the river towards Mayuko.

How can she walk? People can't walk on top of water –

Mayuko was bewildered by this act that defied comprehension, and her body was stiff – she couldn't move even one step from that spot.

The girl approached.

'No! Don't come here!'

Mayuko screamed so loudly it felt like her throat would split. At the same time, the girl's figure disappeared.

There was only the raging river, as if that girl hadn't even been there in the first place.

Were her eyes playing tricks on her? Was it a dream?

Mayuko pressed a hand against her chest and breathed deeply to try to organise her disordered thoughts.

Gurgle.

A sound came from near her foot.

Gurgle gurgle.

Air bubbles were coming up from the river bank and popping. What? What was it?

Splash.

Something touched Mayuko's foot.

It was cold. It felt slimy. It couldn't be –

Mayuko timidly looked at her foot.

From the river, a purplish red rotten human hand had thrust out and grabbed Mayuko's foot.

'Agh!'

Mayuko's horrified scream was drowned out by the sound of rain.

-

2

-

Though the rain had lightened to a drizzle, it showed no signs of stopping.

Hijikata Makoto looked up at the sky from under an umbrella while waiting for the light at the intersection to change.

The sky was a solid grey, making for a depressing mood.

The rain wasn't the only reason Makoto felt that way. She couldn't get any information today at all. When she returned to the office, her boss would definitely complain.

Her boss's mouth was so spiteful it wouldn't lose even to this weather.

Since she was a new employee who had only been working at the company for two years, there was nothing she could do about the complaints.

However, she hated it when her father came up in conversation. 'I hired you because you were the police chief's daughter, but you're telling me you can't even bring back one piece of news?' That phrase rubbed Makoto the wrong way.

She hadn't mentioned that she was the police chief's daughter even once during the interview. She couldn't remember ever claiming that she could use her father as a source of information.

It might sound like she was just evading responsibility, but the company had just went and thought that on their own.

Even though she was his daughter, there was no way that the police chief could just chat about incidents with her. In the first place, Makoto didn't even have one memory of her father talking about work at home.

Looking at it from the police's point of view, there was nothing more troublesome than having the chief's daughter work as a newspaper reporter. They couldn't just spill the information, but they couldn't handle the situation coolly either.

The chief detective Ideuchi, for example, would openly run just from seeing her face.

Only one detective would ignore her position as the daughter of the chief. He was an extremely detective-like and uncouth man named Gotou.

Even though he would ignore her position, it wasn't like he would give her information. 'You're annoying!' 'I don't know!' 'Get lost!' Those were the only three phrases he would say. Still, it was better than being treated like a fragile article.

On that topic, she hadn't seen Detective Gotou around lately.

According to a rumour, he had had an accident while chasing a criminal, so he had been transferred to a do-nothing job.

Screech!

There was the sound of metal scraping against metal, bringing Makoto's thoughts back to reality.

Without a pause, there was the sound of a collision with something falling –

When she looked towards the direction of the sound, she saw the bloody figure of a person collapsed in the middle of the intersection.

Makoto immediately dropped the umbrella she was holding and rushed towards the person who had fallen face-up.

He was a man in his early twenties. He had refined features, but he was so thin he seemed sickly, and his sunken eyes had lost their light.

The back of his head was caved in, and a cut ran from his left cheek to his nose like a crack, with blood flowing out.

Makoto knelt on the asphalt and asked, 'Are you OK?' At the same time, she took out a handkerchief and pressed it against the wound on the man's cheek.

'Please hang in there.'

She shook his shoulders, but there was no response. She put her ear to his chest. She couldn't hear the sound of breathing or a heart at all.

It's too late to save him –

Makoto thought that as she took her mobile phone out from her bag and pressed 119¹ to call an

1 119 is the emergency number used in Japan (as well as a number of other Asian countries, such as Hong Kong).

ambulance.

Suddenly, she noticed that there was somebody standing behind her.

Maybe it was the driver who hit him. Makoto turned with the mobile phone still in her hand.

A man was standing there. He was slim and had blood flowing from his cheek.

'Eh?'

He was the same man as the one collapsed in front of her.

Why were there two of the same man?

Makoto was bewildered when she remembered a story she had heard from a senior at work.

When her senior had gone to a traffic accident to gather data, he had seen the person who was supposed to be dead loitering around nearby.

The person's soul hadn't realised he was dead and had been wandering.

A boring story made up to surprise a junior. That's what she had thought at the time. But –

The man's lips warped into a crooked smile to reveal sharp canine teeth.

It was full of ill will. A cold smile.

Blood dripped from the tip of the man's chin onto Makoto's cheek.

Drip. Drip.

She had to run. Fast. She had to get away from here. No matter what she thought, her body wouldn't move, as if it had been chained down.

Something was flowing into Makoto.

Something else. Something that wasn't her.

– I won't.

There was a voice. A man's voice. It sounded just like it was speaking directly to her mind.

– I won't die.

Her body was tingling like insects were crawling on her.

<Yes, 119.>

She heard the voice of the operator from her mobile phone.

Even though she tried to reply, her mouth wouldn't move the way she wanted it to.

– I don't want to die.

She lost her strength, and her mobile phone fell from her hand.

<Hello? What's wrong? Hello...>

The operator's voice sounded far away.

Makoto was being dragged into the darkness.

-

3

-

Ozawa Haruka sat on a park bench.

It was a small park that ran along the national highway. There was nothing except for the bench. When she looked up, she saw the towering Togakushi mountain range.

A familiar place. A children's park near her home in Nagano Prefecture.

The sunlight was warm.

Pale pink petals were fluttering down from the cherry blossom tree that stood in the corner of the park.

Two girls were playing with a soccer ball.

They were twins.

One of them was me. The other was my older sister, Ayaka.

This is a dream –

This is a memory from my past –

She knew what would happen afterwards.

She wouldn't be able to catch the ball her sister Ayaka threw, and she would run hurriedly to get it. Her sister would smile.

– You have to keep an eye on the ball.

That was what her sister said.

Her younger self stared at her sister silently after picking up the ball.

She had been mortified. Her sister could catch the ball so well, but it never went well for her.

– Haruka, hurry.

She held the ball up, as if to throw it.

'You can't! Stop! You can't throw that ball!'

Haruka stood to call out to her younger self.

However, that voice didn't reach her.

Her younger self threw the ball.

'No!'

Haruka yelled while running.

Time flowed leisurely, just as if it were in slow motion.

The ball flew higher than normal.

Her older sister jumped to catch the ball, but she couldn't reach it. The ball went out the park and rolled onto the road.

Her sister went to chase that ball.

'You can't chase that ball!'

Haruka's shout didn't reach her sister.

– Even my big sister can't catch the ball.

My younger self said that.

I didn't have any bad intentions. I just thought I'd bother her a bit.

That was all –

Her sister picked up the ball that had rolled onto the road.

A white minivan travelled towards her.

Haruka closed her eyes subconsciously.

There was the squeal of brakes and the sound of a crash that shook the ground.

My temple hurt. The strength left my knees and I collapsed to the ground.

I knew what was going to happen.

That's why I said to stop –

No matter how much she yelled, the past wouldn't change.

Her hands felt wet. She opened my eyes.

'No!'

Haruka spoke without thinking. Her hands were dyed red with blood. Blood was steadily dripping from her fingertips.

'Haruka. You threw it far on purpose.'

Her sister stood in front of her eyes.

Her temple had split, and blood poured out endlessly, dyeing her white shirt collar red.

'Sorry. I didn't think it would end up like this... Sorry...'

'It's too late to make excuses.'

'That's not it. This isn't an excuse.'

'I'm dead... Because of you...'

At the same time that Ayaka said that, her body cracked into countless pieces like glasswork.

'No!'

Haruka jumped up at the same time that she called out.

Her clenched fists were sweaty. Her breathing was erratic.

My memories are returning. Retribution for my jealousy towards my sister.

My sin will never be forgiven –

-

4

-

While the sun had not yet fully risen, the area in front of one residential dumpsite was teeming with people.

There was only a steel fence and a net to scare off crows above it across from a telephone pole – not a particularly extraordinary place. Naturally, the people had not gathered to toss their rubbish. There was currently something that should not have been at the dumpsite.

The corpse of a female middle-school student.

A businessman who had come to put out his rubbish before work was the one who had found her.

Hata Hideyoshi knelt and looked down at the face of the girl who was not yet an adult. Her eyes were open, and her face was frozen in a surprised expression.

Matsumoto Miho-chan. Her whereabouts had been unknown since yesterday. Did she know that she was going to die in pain? That suddenly came to mind.

It was the job of the coroner to accept requests from the police to autopsy the corpse.

People were needlessly afraid of corpses. However, Hata had never felt that fear, even towards the goriest of corpses.

Hata was driven by a simple interest. How much blood has to flow out? From where? How much of an impact can be taken? Which organs can be taken out –

Before a person dies?

If people have souls, death would be the separation of the body and the soul. What, accordingly, ties the body and the soul together? At what moment do the body and soul separate?

People said he was perverted, but to Hata, it wasn't strange at all.

Didn't people want to know the divide between life and death?

'Look, they're serial.'

One of the detectives said that. Hata felt uncomfortable hearing those words.

'What is supposed to be serial with what?'

'Come on. I'm talking about the incident last month.'

'Ah, the one who was strangled and then thrown into the river.'

Hata remembered the incident immediately.

That had been a gory incident as well. A girl called Kinoshita Ayaka who went to the local middle school – she was the daughter of a doctor, if he remembered correctly.

On the way home from school, she had parted with her friends and then her whereabouts were unknown. The police started investigating it as a kidnapping, but a few days after, there were still no ransom demands, and her corpse was discovered at the water gate at Tama River.

It was believed that she was thrown into the Tama River after she was strangled.

She was carried by the strong current, so there were many small injuries on her body.

This girl had also disappeared a few days earlier when the police had been asked to look for her.

Following that, there had been no demands, and her body had been discovered. Last time, it was strangulation. This time, it was drowning. The reasons for death were strangely different, but the area the incidents had occurred and the modus operandi of aiming for students heading home from school were certainly the same.

'It seems that there's another girl whose whereabouts are unknown.'

'Another one?'

'Yes, I got the confirmation now. She goes to the same school as Miho-chan, the victim this time, and her name is Katou Keiko-chan. There have been no demands since her disappearance.'

'No demands...'

If that were the case, it would make this a serial murder case with murder as the final goal.

What an unpleasant incident –

Hata stood up and left the scene of the crime, which was surrounded by blue sheets.

It wasn't a festival, so why were people making so much noise? If they wanted to see so badly, Hata thought they should just let them see.

The people making so much noise would shut up in an instant.

Unexpectedly, Hata felt a gaze that was obviously different from that of the curious onlookers.

A tall man wearing sunglasses. In the middle of the noisy bystanders, there was just one man with a thin sneer.

– The criminal will return to the scene of the crime.

Hata suddenly remembered something that the police were taught.

-

5

-

Ishii Yuutarou stood in front of the door after checking his tie countless times.

His heart was thumping loudly from nervousness.

'Calm down – first impressions are essential.'

While Ishii told himself that, he looked at the plate on the door. <Criminal Affairs Division: Unsolved Cases Special Investigations Room>. In a post that had just been created this month, Ishii had been assigned here starting today.

He hadn't thought such a day would come. Ishii was so excited he couldn't calm the loud beating of his heart.

On the other side of the door, there was a legendary detective who had led the way to the solution for many difficult cases.

A peculiar point of view and outstanding deductive powers. On top of that, he had a strange source of information.

It was said that he gathered his information from the spirits of the dead victims.

He was known as the psychic detective.

At first, he was the target of scorn. However, that changed with time to awe, and now, even the police had to acknowledge his power. Thus was born the Unsolved Cases Special Investigations Room. There were a number of rumours, but that was what Ishii thought.

The police were forced to acknowledge the legendary psychic detective, Gotou Kazutoshi.

Ishii had always loved the occult. When he was in middle school, he watched a show which used clairvoyance to search for those who had disappeared, and it excited him from the innermost depths of his heart.

He had been deeply moved when faced with the mysterious powers that people held.

From then on, he read a great number of books related to the occult. Clairvoyance, telepathy, seeing spirits, special powers that science didn't explain – he believed they existed.

For Ishii, who felt so strongly about the occult, Gotou was naturally the object of his reverence.

He kept a picture he had secretly taken of Gotou in his notebook as a charm.

He had wanted to talk with him at leisure one day. To have been reassigned to Gotou's post made him truly glad that he became a detective.

OK, I'm going. While he murmured that in his mind, he knocked.

There was no response.

For a moment, he was perplexed, but soon, he shook away those feelings. He wasn't a guest. Starting today, he would be working here as a detective. What was the point of waiting for a response?

Do your best, Ishii Yuutarou. He gave himself some encouragement and resolutely opened the door.

'Excuse me. My name is Ishii Yuutarou, the policeman who will be working here from today on. Though I am inexperienced, I would like to ask for your guidance.'

He spoke up as he bowed.

There was no response. The room was completely silent.

He took a look around. In the wide eight-tatami room¹ with not even one window, there were two desks facing each other in a small space.

Nobody was there.

Shoot. He had shown up to work on time of all things. Gotou was a detective of such merit – he had definitely left to investigate already. Ah, what to do.

Ishii cursed his own foolishness.

Rooooooar.

The sound of something like the bellow of a beast reached the discouraged Ishii's ears.

What was that –

Timidly, he went to look for the source of the sound.

'Ah.'

Behind the desk, two chairs were lined up, and a man was using them as a bed. In contrast with his muscular body, his arm lay sloppily on the floor, and his mouth was wide open as he snored.

Detective Gotou –

His face was unshaven, and his shirt had turned yellow. Just looking at his appearance, there wasn't much difference between him and a drunk who had slept at the station.

No, that wasn't right. Detective Gotou, after all his hard work, was taking a breather.

That said, he couldn't leave the situation like this.

'E-er... Excuse me...'

¹ For a better mental picture, an eight-tatami room in the Nagano prefecture would be 3.64 m by 3.64 m, since the tatami size should be (according to my Google-based research that tells me Nagano isn't east of Shizuoka and thus has chuukyouma tatami) 910 mm by 1820 mm.

Ishii approached the sleeping Gotou and shook his shoulders. Gotou brushed away Ishii's hand with his eyes still closed and turned over.

He fell from the chairs.

Surprised by the dull thunk, Ishii jumped away a step.

-

6

-

Ogouchi, an English lecturer at the university, gave a photo to the student sitting in front of him.

His name was Saitou Yakumo.

With sleepy eyes, he draped himself slovenly over the back of the chair. His attitude showed his apathy.

His hair looked mussed up from sleep, but it might have been the so-called bedhead hairstyle. His outfit consisted of worn-out jeans and a white shirt.

He had composure unusual for his age, or perhaps it could be called an enigmatic vibe.

Ogouchi couldn't calm down – he felt like Yakumo could see right to the bottom of his heart.

Yakumo gave the photo a glance and then smirked, like he understood.

'I see. I was wondering what task you had for me, but it was something like this.'

'It's gotten a bit terrible,' Ogouchi said with a weak smile.

He had handed Yakumo a photo that had been taken when he and his daughter went to a holiday house. His smiling daughter, Satoko, stood in front of a beech tree. At first glance, the photo wasn't anything special.

However, he'd noticed something strange when he put it in an album.

There was something that looked like a person's face in the trunk of the beech tree.

Ogouchi had heard a rumour about Saitou Yakumo from a student called Aizawa.

Yakumo had every spiritual ability, and he was the one who solved the murder incident last year which had been a disgrace for the university. Ogouchi was only half-convinced, but he knew that Saitou Yakumo's uncle was the chief priest at a temple, so he decided to consult Yakumo just in case.

'And?'

Yakumo let out a huge yawn.

'I heard that you were an expert in this sort of thing.'

'Since I'm a university student, my expertise is studying.'

'Well, that's true, but... Er, I was just wondering if you could give me your expert opinion of this photo.'

'I see.'

After Yakumo murmured that, he took another look at the photo and put his left index finger between his brows in thought.

'How is it?'

Ogouchi couldn't bear with the heavy silence and opened his mouth. Yakumo looked up from the photo and let out the breath he had been holding.

'Professor. This is extremely dangerous.'

'Dangerous?'

'Yes. Has anything strange occurred recently?'

'Anything strange?'

'Any little thing will do.'

Ogouchi recalled the past few days. There wasn't anything in particular that sprang to mind.

'No, not really...'

'Please try to remember. I feel a very strong sense of regret from this photo.'

'Come to think of it, yesterday, I slipped on the stairs and skinned my knee. But that's just...'

'That's it!'

Yakumo raised his voice and pointed his index at the tip of Ogouchi's nose, interrupting Ogouchi's words.

Ogouchi was startled for a moment.

'But that was just a little thing...'

It wasn't anything special. Slipping on the stairs was something that could happen to anybody on any day.

'If you continue overlooking it, it will eventually bring about a terrible catastrophe. With the situation like this, your daughter's life will also be in danger,' Yakumo said, peering up at Ogouchi.

His tone was indifferent. That only stirred Ogouchi's uneasiness up more.

'Really...'

'You can't treat this lightly. It'll be too late to regret after the fact.'

Ogouchi certainly had thought it was frightening, but for it to be a matter of life or death –

'What should I d-do...'

'I'll exorcise the spirit. I can't ignore this knowing that a catastrophe may occur.'

'But...'

Yakumo put up his hand to stop Ogouchi's words.

'I won't ask for money. I won't tell anybody about this either. However...'

'What?'

'I'm enrolled in your class, professor, but I've practically never shown up to class.'

'Really?'

'You know what I'm getting at, right?'

Yakumo said that like a reminder. After waiting for Ogouchi's nod, a faint smile graced his thin lips.

-

7

-

'Er, Detective Gotou.'

Ishii, who was sitting on the seat across from Gotou, spoke to the detective hesitantly. Gotou ignored him and turned his chair so his back faced Ishii.

It was Detective Ishii's first day on the job. He was doing everything wrong.

With a face that looked like it belonged to a delicate woman, his silver-rimmed glasses seemed a bit affected.

Ever since he came to the room, he had been squirming while looking over at Gotou.

When he opened his mouth, he would say things like 'What are your interests?' and 'What are your favourite foods?' – it wasn't a marriage interview. Gotou started suspecting that Ishii was gay.

Even under normal circumstances, Gotou could die of boredom after being thrown into this ridiculous newly-established post, but being stuck with this guy just depressed him further.

Though newly-established post had a nice ring to it, in the end, they were just getting rid of a troublemaker.

Currently, the police's solve rate for cases didn't reach twenty per cent. It was the job of this post to investigate those unsolved cases.

It sounded nice at first, but it was just organising files in the end.

It was too stupid to do.

'Er, Detective Gotou, could I ask you something?'

Ishii leant forward as he asked. Even though Gotou had gone out of his way to ignore him – the man should take a hint.

Just as Gotou clicked his tongue, the internal telephone rang with good timing.

He picked up at the first ring.

'Hello, this is the police department's something or other investigation room.'

<Say the name of your own room properly.>

It was his boss, the chief detective Ideuchi. He had goggle eyes and was always finger-pointing at the most trivial things.

He was an annoying man who put on airs, though he'd worked his way up too.

'What was it?'

<Eh?>

'The name of the room.'

<It's the Criminal Affairs Division: Unsolved Cases Special Investigations Room.>

Ideuchi sounded displeased as he replied.

'Ah, right, that's it. Can't it be a bit shorter?'

<Good grief... Well, that's not important. Come to the conference room immediately.>

'Are we going to play shogi²?'

<We're obviously going to talk about work!>

Gotou unconsciously held the phone away because of Ideuchi's shrill yell. Hysterical men really were unsightly.

'Yeah, yeah. I'll go right now. I've got nothing else to do anyway.'

<Bring the new kid with you.>

Gotou turned around and looked at Ishii.

He was leaning over with a frivolous smile on his face. If he had a tail, he'd probably be wagging it wildly.

'That's a bit...'

<A bit what?>

'I'm not good with guys like him.'

<Stop whining and get over here!>

The call ended with a click.

'What a pain.'

2 Shogi is a Japanese game that is often said to correspond to chess. If you're interested, *March Comes in Like a Lion* is an excellent manga about a shogi player that covers matches in a fair amount of detail.

While grumbling, Gotou grabbed the suit that had been draped over the back of the chair and stood up.

'E-er, Detective Gotou.'

Ishii had gotten up from his chair and was fidgeting. Man, what an irritating guy.

'What are you just standing there for? Let's go.'

'Yes sir!'

Ishii gave an energetic response, but then he stumbled over his own feet and fell.

Gotou could tell it was going to be hard going.

-

They went up the stairs to the fourth floor and opened the door to the conference room at the very end of the corridor. Ideuchi was at the conference table, looking tired of waiting.

'So what is it?'

'Well, sit down.'

Gotou sat down in a chair as asked. Ishii sat next to him.

While scratching at his receding hairline, Ideuchi sighed. From the looks of it, he didn't have good news.

'OK – don't go around telling people what I'm going to tell you now.'

A sudden change from the phone call earlier, Ideuchi was speaking in a low voice.

Since he had called him all the way to the conference room, Gotou had thought it would probably be something secretive, but it seemed that it was even more serious than he imagined. Perhaps –

'Is it about the serial abduction murders?' asked Gotou, bringing his face closer to Ideuchi's.

The current serial abduction murder case that was occurring under their jurisdiction.

Repulsive incidents were occurring wherein female middle school students were being abducted on the way home from school. Their corpses would be found before any demands were made.

Two girls had already been killed, and one had suddenly disappeared.

'There's no way I'd let somebody like you handle such an important case.'

Ideuchi was so blunt that Gotou didn't get angry.

'If that's not it, what is it?'

'This is a direct a request from Chief Hijikata.'

'Ah, that kokeshi³.'

3 Kokeshi are Japanese dolls that have a very distinctive shape and face. [Here](#) are some examples!

Chief Hijikata's face came to mind as Gotou spoke.

Anybody who had seen the chief before would agree. From the structure of his face to his physique, he looked just like a kokeshi.

Ishii, who was sitting behind Gotou, pressed a hand against his mouth. His shoulders shook as he laughed.

When Ideuchi cleared his throat, Ishii stopped laughing immediately. Ideuchi said, 'Good grief,' sounding fed up, before continuing his story.

'You know the chief has a daughter, right?'

'Yes, she's a new reporter at Hokutou Newspaper⁴. She's got guts for a woman and she has a good perspective.'

Gotou recalled her appearance.

She didn't wear makeup, and her long hair was tied in the back. She wore a navy blue suit with sneakers and would run around frantically, but no matter how hard she tried, nobody would give her any information.

'Having the kokeshi as her dad doesn't pay off,' Gotou said without thinking.

'He's not a kokeshi. He's the chief,' said Ideuchi, while grinding his teeth.

'Whether he's a chief or a government secretary, a kokeshi is a kokeshi.'

'Stop saying "kokeshi" over and over again! Everyone's holding it in!'

Holding it in, eh. The sad story of middle management who couldn't say it even if they thought the same thing.

Ideuchi's goggle eyes were roving about.

Although he didn't make a sound, Ishii was holding his sides with laughter.

'What's so funny?'

With no outlet for his anger, Ideuchi blew up at Ishii. Ishii cowered, retracting his neck and stiffening his body like a turtle.

'Now, what about his daughter?'

Gotou waited for Ideuchi to calm down before returning to the conversation.

'Well, there've been a number of problems...'

'Did she cause an incident?'

'No, that's not it, but... er...'

4 I'm not sure if the kanji is read as Hokutou or Kitahigashi here for the place where Makoto works (北東新聞) – curse you, lack of furigana! If somebody who's watched the anime or drama would tell me how it's said, I'd really appreciate it.

Even though Ideuchi was the one who had brought the topic up, he was mumbling his words terribly.

'Please say it clearly.'

'The chief's daughter is possessed.'

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

By a ghost?

'I didn't see it myself, but the chief's wife thinks that, at least.'

'Again, of all things to happen to the chief of the police's daughter. If the gossip magazines get wind of this, they'll write something interesting.'

'If the information gets out, you'll be the one I suspect first.'

Ideuchi was glaring at him with a serious expression.

'So, what are you telling me to?'

'You're an expert in that sort of stuff, so just go take a look.'

'I'm not an expert. You don't believe in ghosts in the first place, do you, Chief Ideuchi?'

'Stop complaining. Whatever the cause is, there's definitely something odd about the chief's daughter's condition. That's a problem in and of itself.'

Ideuchi talked on and on until his cheeks were red. Maybe he was troubled because of the strange story that was pushed towards him, but it was the same for Gotou.

He wasn't a spirit medium, so even if he went, he wouldn't be able to do anything. Plus –

'It has nothing to do with me.'

'Yes it does! This is an order!'

Ideuchi slammed both hands against the table and stood up. His goggle eyes looked like they would pop out with a boing.

It really wasn't really anything to pop eyes out over though. Well, nothing to be done.

'Understood. It'll be fine as long as I go, right?'

Things had really gotten troublesome.

-

8

-

Haruka absentmindedly looked out the window of the music room at the university.

The sunlight was pleasant. It had been chilly in the morning, so she had regretted leaving the

house with a thin parka, but things turned out A-OK.

The cherry blossom tree in the courtyard had green leaves. The tightly closed buds would probably come into full bloom in a week.

The university had already entered spring break. Today was the last practice of the year for the orchestra circle⁵ that Haruka was a member of.

On the platform, the conductor was giving a recap of their year. Though Haruka could hear his fervent voice, it slipped through her mind before she could understand.

She hadn't been able to concentrate during practice either and had made a series of mistakes.

She knew why.

The dream about my sister I had seen this morning –

Come to think of it, she felt like this was the first time in a while that she'd dreamt about her sister.

When had she last seen one?

If she remembered correctly, it was when she'd gotten mixed up in the case with the deserted house and met him for the first time.

He always had a sleepy look on his face, was blunt and not nice at all, and was kind of good-looking, but that was ruined by his cynicism.

Through his red eye that could see the spirits of the dead, she had met with her sister again and might have felt that her own sin had been forgiven.

Even though there's no way I would be forgiven –

What was he doing now? He was probably the same as always. She wanted to meet him. Her heart might feel a bit lighter after that.

Right. After practice was finished, she would go meet Saitou Yakumo.

He would probably let out a huge yawn and ask, 'What did you come for?' with eyes that were definitely sleepy even now.

Haruka laughed just imagining it.

'What are you so amused about?'

The conductor pointed a finger at her, so she quickly stifled her laughter.

Other people started laughing as well.

After the signal for the end of the practice, Haruka quickly finished cleaning up and put the music room behind him.

Now that she thought about it, she had made a promise with Yakumo before that next time, she

⁵ In Japan, universities have circles and clubs. In general, circles are more laidback and meet up less often, while clubs are strict and often have required practices throughout even the holidays.

would show her face when she had nothing troubling her. It seemed like that promise would be fulfilled.

Her gait was light, as if the leaden thoughts she had been accumulating since morning had been a lie.

'Haruka-chan.'

Just as she was about to leave the school building, somebody called out to her.

It was Mayuko, who was a member of the same circle as her.

Haruka played flute and Mayuko played violin. Since their parts were different, they had only spoken a couple of times before.

'What is it?'

'Do you have some time?'

'What for?'

'The truth is, there's something I want your advice about...'

Haruka wasn't friendly enough with Mayuko to be asked for advice, and she didn't know her well enough to give advice either.

Still, she couldn't refuse and vaguely replied, 'Ah, OK.' They ended up sitting side by side on a bench in the courtyard.

'This happened about three days ago, but –'

Mayuko's story, which began like that, didn't seem to need the common brand of advice about things like romance or future career paths.

Mayuko told of a terrible spiritual phenomenon she had witnessed.

On a rainy day, she had encountered a girl's ghost by the river. At the time, she had run away frantically, but ever since then, strange things kept happening to her.

She wouldn't be able to move when she woke up, and she'd feel the presence of somebody else in her room. She would hear a girl's voice saying, 'I'll curse you' –

'Please. Help me.'

After Mayuko finished her stories, she asked that with tears brimming in her eyes and trembling lips.

Haruka could understand how she felt, but –

'Why did you ask me?'

'After I asked Miki, she said that Haruka-chan would solve the problem if it was related to spirits.'

I'd been able to guess somehow once I'd heard some of what Mayuko had to say, but it really was

Miki –

The story's been pretty distorted. At some point in time, I had been labelled with spiritual ability.

'I can't do anything.'

'But you solved the problem with Miki. Miki said that you can exorcise spirits.'

She really had no responsibility.

She hadn't been the one to solve Miki's case – Saitou Yakumo had.

His left eye, which had been red since the day he was born, had a special ability: it could see the spirits of the dead. He had solved the case using that.

However, Yakumo could only see the spirits of the dead. Accordingly, he couldn't exorcise spirits.

All he did was listen to the thoughts of the dead, determine the reason they were lingering and take away that reason.

Haruka opened her mouth to explain that, but she didn't put it in words.

Yakumo detested his red eye. Because of it, he was called a monster and even his own mother had tried to kill him.

She couldn't talk so freely about that ability, which could even be called his trauma.

While Haruka hadn't made her decision, Mayuko begged her with her two hands clasped. 'Please. I'll do anything.'

Haruka herself knew best that she was the type of person who couldn't refuse when somebody asked her for something. Overwhelmed, she ended up replying, 'Ah, OK.'

Mayuko bowed her head multiple times, saying, 'Thank you – really, thank you,' and started crying in relief. In this situation, it was too late for Haruka to refuse.

Now, she would have to break her promise and go to Yakumo with her troubles.

'This might be of some help.'

As Mayuko said that, she held out a folded handkerchief.

Haruka took it and unfolded it in her palm. There was a mobile phone strap inside.

Five dice-like shapes in a row each had one letter written in them.

<AYAKA>

Haruka felt her heart grow tight.

'On the day I met the ghost, I found this caught on the button on my sleeve after I returned home.'

Mayuko's voice seemed very far away.

The same name as Haruka's dead sister. It was probably just a coincidence. Even though Haruka know that, she still couldn't stop thinking about it.

Ishii triumphantly sat in the driver's seat of the white police car.

Finally. He would finally be able to witness Detective Gotou's skill. On top of that, just imagining saving a woman possessed by a spirit got him all fired up.

Gotou sat lazily in the passenger seat and lit up a cigarette with his legs crossed.

Ishii was entranced by that brusque gesture. What a man. It was wild how his shirt revealed his chest underneath his loose tie.

If he had to say, Ishii was rather faint of heart and couldn't take action. He would always doubt other people's expressions and end up acting while wondering what they thought of him.

Gotou was the exact opposite of Ishii – he had a strong spirit. Ishii admired him for it, like earlier when he had been talking with Chief Ideuchi.

No matter whom Gotou was with, he would stick with his own beliefs, just like the Shinsengumi⁶ who had run past the end of the Tokugawa shogunate.

'We will be going to the scene first, correct?' asked Ishii, as he turned the ignition key and started the car.

'Not yet.'

Gotou spoke while squinting through the smoke.

'Eh?'

'There's somewhere we'll be going first.'

'Where is it?'

'Stop asking about everything; it's annoying.'

'Even if you say I'm annoying, we won't be able to drive unless you tell me where to go, since I'm the one at the wheel.'

Gotou's cheeks twitched like a disgruntled cat's and he clicked his tongue.

Why was Detective Gotou angry? Had Ishii said something to rub him the wrong way?'

'Head to the university.'

'Which university would you like me to head to?'

⁶ The Shinsengumi (are pretty popular nowadays so they might not need a note, but anyway) were a special police force in the late Tokugawa shogunate who were loyal to the Tokugawa bakufu even when everything was tumbling down around them and everyone else had abandoned ship. They have been heavily romanticised in everything from television shows to otome games to ridiculous gag manga. (Bit of a tangent: the police chief's family name is Hijikata, which was also the name of the vice-captain of the Shinsengumi.)

'Meisei University.'

'The university on top of the hill?'

'If you know which one, hurry and step on it.'

'Ah, yes sir.'

Ishii immediately stepped on the gas and started driving.

What on earth was at the university? Normally, in a situation like this, they should have headed to the scene.

Since it was Detective Gotou, he must have determined there was a clue at the university that would solve the case just from what Chief Ideuchi said earlier.

'Detective Gotou, may I ask a question?'

Ishii asked the question while driving. There was no response. Gotou just looked in front of him while the smoke from his cigarette wavered, as if he didn't hear him.

Taking that as a yes, Ishii continued speaking.

'Detective Gotou, you've solved many cases already.'

'Eh?'

'I know that you solved those cases with spiritual power. However, exactly what sort of power do you have, Detective Gotou?'

'What are you saying?'

Gotou lowered his eyebrows, like he had seen something unpleasant, and threw the cigarette in the ashtray.

'There's no point in hiding it.'

'I'm not hiding anything.'

'Can you see spirits? Can you speak with them? Have you been trained? Or was it hereditary?'

'Are you making fun of me?'

'I'm not. I'm serious,' Ishii said plainly.

In order to investigate together, he would have to understand what sort of power Detective Gotou had.

'OK, newbie. I don't know what you've misunderstood here, but I don't have any spiritual powers at all.'

Maybe Detective Gotou wanted to hide his special ability.

But –

'There's no need to hide it. Everyone knows that you're the psychic detective, Detective Gotou.'

He had solved so many cases. It wasn't something he could hide.

'Damn, you're annoying! Shut up for a bit and drive! You baldy!'

'Baldy? Sorry, but I'm not bald yet, though my father certainly has less hair than most. However, my father's father – that is, my grandfather – had hair until the day he died. It's called atavism. At the present stage, it would be too early to judge whether I'll be bald or...'

Just as he was about to finish speaking, something hit the top of his head.

He could see stars in front of his eyes.

'The next time you blabber on about something stupid, I'll go with rock,' said Gotou, holding out his clenched fist.

He should discover the answer to things he didn't know himself instead of asking. That was probably what Gotou was saying.

Ishii interpreted it that way and shut his mouth.

-

10

-

Haruka headed towards the prefabricated two-storey building in the back of Building B.

Ten small rooms of about four-and-a-half tatami lined each floor and were loaned out to students by the university for circle activities.

Haruka stood at the very end of the first floor in front of a door that had a plate on it which read <Movie Research Circle>.

Calling it a Movie Research Circle was a barefaced lie. He had fooled the university to borrow a room and had taken up residence. His secret hiding place.

She'd ended up coming here, but...

For a while now, Haruka had been repeatedly reaching for the doorknob only to retract her hand.

Maybe she should just stop. She'd really just wanted to show her face and chat, but because of Miki, she was in a strange state.

After the last incident, she'd promised Yakumo that she wouldn't bring any more trouble, but she'd clearly picked some up.

'What am I doing?'

She lowered her shoulders and smiled bitterly.

I'm just going to go home today without seeing Yakumo –

Though that would mean she'd be ignoring Mayuko's request, she wanted to keep her promise to

Yakumo. She felt like she was just putting off the problem, but there was no helping it.

'Are you going to come in or not? Make up your mind.'

Just as Haruka had turned her back to the door, there was a voice.

'Eh?'

She reflexively turned around, but the door was still closed. There was nobody nearby either.

'What are you glancing around restlessly for? You look really suspicious. I'll report you to the police.'

This voice full of languidness was definitely Yakumo's.

She could hear him from the other side of the door, but could he see from there? Clairvoyance? There was no way.

In any case, if Yakumo knew she was here already, she couldn't just leave.

Haruka opened the door hesitantly.

Yakumo was there.

As usual, he had messy hair and sleepy eyes. He looked like he had just woken up and was sitting on the chair behind the square table in the middle of the room.

'Your indecisive attitude is disruptive.'

He suddenly talked about what she was most worried about.

'I'm not indecisive.'

'You can't be helped if you don't recognise your problem yourself.'

Even though it was the first time they had met in a while, he was just saying whatever he wanted to.

'I don't need your help.'

Though she had spoken angrily, Yakumo wasn't concerned at all. He let out a huge yawn and raked a hand through his hair. Just like a cat.

Still –

'Hey, how did you know I was outside? Clairvoyance?'

Haruka sat on the folding chair across from Yakumo as she asked that.

'It seems you're stupider than you were the last time I saw you.'

'Calling me stupid is too much.'

'Then I'll change my wording. How about simpleton? I think it's perfect for you.'

He's really piling it on from one thing to the next –

'Forget it.'

'Look behind you,' Yakumo said while pointing at the door.

Following his finger, Haruka turned to focus her eyes on the door.

'Ah.'

It was simple once she understood.

It wasn't obvious from just a glance at the door, which had a poster for the movie *Stingstuck* on it, but there was a gaping hole the size of a fist.

In front of it, there was a mirror. She could see the other side of the door from here.

'It's a peephole,' said Yakumo proudly, folding his arms across each other.

'It's just a hole, isn't it? You can't see in from outside with a peephole.'

'Don't worry about the little things.'

It wasn't a little thing at all though.

'So what trouble do you have for me today?'

So he had figured it out.

She really had planned on showing up for the first time in a while to talk, but even if she said that, Yakumo definitely wouldn't believe her.

She suddenly remembered something Yakumo had said before. 'In this world, there are only two types of people: those who think my red eye is unsettling and those who try to use it.' When she'd heard that, she had decided that she, at least, would try to treat it differently.

That was why she decided to keep quiet about Mayuko.

'I just felt like coming by since I haven't been around in a while. I was wondering how you were.'

'You're worse at lying than you think you are,' said Yakumo, resting his chin in his hands.

She knew that even without him saying it,

'Hey, what were you doing?'

Haruka changed the topic before Yakumo said anything else.

'Studying English.'

Yakumo pointed at the photo on the table.

A smile woman in her early twenties was in the shot. She was a little plump, but she had a wonderful smile. It had probably been taken at some villa in the mountains.

'Is she your girlfriend, Yakumo-kun?'

'The screws in your head have gotten looser since the last time I saw you.'

Yakumo sighed, looking like he had seen the end of the world.

'The screws in my head? They haven't gotten looser at all!'

This person always said too much. He didn't care at all how she felt. She was an idiot for worrying.

'Take a closer look at the tree in the photo.'

Yakumo said that with his chin out. Haruka brought the photo closer to her and stared, but she couldn't find anything unusual.

'What about it? Stop putting on airs and just tell me.'

'There's something that looks like a human face in the tree trunk,' Yakumo replied while holding back a yawn.

Ah. She'd looked at it nonchalantly so she hadn't noticed, but she understood right after Yakumo told her.

The trunk of the tree in the background looked like it had a human face in it. It had its mouth open wide and appeared anguished, like Munch's painting *The Scream*.

'This is spirit photography then.'

'No, you're just seeing things.'

'Eh?'

That was different from what he said before. She felt a bit like she had been caught by a fox.

'The uneven tree trunk just looks like a face because of the lighting.'

'Really?'

'When the human brain recognises things, it compares them with things that are similar to it and identifies them.'

'True.'

She understood that intuitively.

It was the same as seeing a rabbit on the moon⁷. The shadowy parts of the moon looked similar to a rabbit, so people saw it as a rabbit.

'If the shape is similar, you'll unconsciously recognise it as a face even if it's something else entirely. Furthermore, if somebody says there's something that looks like a face there, you'll have the preconception that there's a person's face when you look and there'll be an immediate effect.'

'But that's...'

⁷ In Japanese folklore, there is a rabbit that lives on the moon. The short version of the story is that there was a monkey, a fox and a rabbit who all lived in a mountain. They came across an old man who had collapsed and they went to get him food. The monkey and fox both succeeded but the rabbit couldn't find anything, so he got his friends to light a fire and offered himself as food, jumping into the fire. The old man was actually Sakra, lord of the devas, and he brought the rabbit to the moon so that the rabbit's act of compassion would go down to posterity. (There are other versions of the story as well, but this is the one I know.)

'That's how it works. Didn't you just prove it yourself? You couldn't tell from just looking, but the moment you heard that there was a person's face, you recognised the uneven tree trunk as a face, didn't you?'

That was true. That was what happened, now that he said it.

Spirit photography often showed up on television shows, but at first, she wouldn't be able to tell what the photos were of. However, once the narration said there was something like a face in the top left, she'd suddenly see a face.

But –

'How is this studying English?'

'Do you know Ogouchi, the English professor?'

'Yeah. The American-sized person, right?'

'That was a good way of putting it. The woman in this picture is his daughter, Satoko.'

'So you agreed to look at the photo to see if there was a spirit there.'

'Exactly.'

'It's unusual for you to poke your nose into this sort of thing though, Yakumo-kun.'

'I have my reasons,' Yakumo said with a smirk.

When Haruka looked at that expression, she understood why he had agreed to look at the photo.

'Don't tell me you did this in exchange for your English credit?'

'Your guess is right for once.'

Yakumo reclined on the chair with his arms folded in an arrogant manner.

'But this is just an optical illusion, right?'

'That's no problem. Since I said it'd become a catastrophe if it wasn't exorcised right away.'

'That's plain fraud!'

Haruka's tone immediately became harsher upon hearing about such an unfair method.

'Fraud? Listen – if I'd said it was just an optical illusion, he wouldn't have believed me. He would only have been more worried and brought the matter to exorcists more suspicious than I am. Isn't it better that I dealt with it nicely and said I exorcised the spirit for him?'

'It's not better at all!'

Haruka got up and lost her temper. Yakumo put his fingers in his ears to protest how loud her voice was.

It was a ridiculous reason. Why had she wanted to meet up with a guy like this?

She felt herself growing more and more irritated.

'I can understand when I look at you why people say youth these days get angry easily. You might have a calcium deficiency.'

'I'm not angry. I'm criticising your act of fraud. Do you think it's OK to trick people like this?'

Haruka pointed at the tip of Yakumo's nose as she continued her objections. However, it wasn't effective at all on Yakumo. He was completely expressionless, like it was someone else's problem.

'Please don't say things that will damage my reputation. I sold piece of mind. This is a splendid business.'

His twisted logic again –

'I'm going to interrupt your lover's quarrel.'

The door suddenly opened, and a figure with a bearlike large build entered the room

It was Detective Gotou.

'Please return right now if you know you're interrupting.'

Yakumo replied without a moment's delay.

Gotou's large face twitched. However, his expression soon returned to normal, and he sat in the folding chair next to Haruka.

'Haruka-chan, it's been a while. Are you still seeing this obstinate idiot? If you don't cut it off soon, you'll be unmarried your whole life.'

'I'm just going to say this, but it's not my fault this woman doesn't have a boyfriend. It's a character problem.'

Yakumo immediately threw back a comment at Gotou's frivolous one.

He really was saying whatever he wanted right in front of the person he was insulting.

Who was the one with the character problem? And he just called me 'this woman'. Plus, even though neither of them had ever asked if I had a boyfriend or not, they're both talking with the assumption that I don't –

There were so many things she could retort to that she didn't even feel like opening her mouth.

'Er, Detective Gotou...'

She heard a voice that sounded so faint it could have faded out.

When she took a look, she noticed another person in front of the door.

It was a man who had vaguely delicate features and seemed intellectual, but he gave off the impression of being rather sensitive. Unlike Gotou, he wore a starched sleeved shirt and his tie was tied into a proper triangle.

'Who is that?'

Yakumo exchanged a look with Gotou.

'Ah, he's my subordinate, Ishii,' Gotou replied, looking up at the man standing at the door.

'My name is Ishii Yuutarou.'

Ishii bowed politely.

He seemed like the exact opposite of Gotou. Yakumo lowered his head slightly, as if to say, 'Nice to meet you.' Led along by the situation, Haruka bowed as well.

'Are you Gotou-san's subordinate? I won't say anything awful. You should ask for a job change right away.'

'A job change?'

Ishii responded nervously to Yakumo's sudden words.

'If you're with Gotou-san, your brain tissue will gradually change into muscle. You'll lose your ability to think and become an animal. You should change jobs while you still can.'

'Whose brain tissue are you calling muscle!?' Gotou said angrily, slamming the table.

Ishii didn't know what was happening and was fidgeting. It made sense. Anybody would be bewildered if they suddenly saw a scene like this.

Haruka had been confused at first too.

'So what trouble do you have for me this time?'

Unlike Gotou, who was agitated, Yakumo spoke in his usual lazy voice.

'Oh, that's right. You got that it was trouble right away.'

'There's no other reason for you to come here, is there, Gotou-san?'

'That's true. There's somewhere I want you to go with me.'

There was nothing timid about Gotou. Haruka couldn't suddenly get to the point like he did.

'OK.'

'Eh? OK?'

Gotou looked surprised at Yakumo's immediate response. Haruka, who had been listening, also thought Yakumo had accepted rather easily.

'What is it? Are you dissatisfied with something?'

'No, that's not it – I just thought you were being scarily obedient.'

'In exchange, please call it even with the incident from last time.'

'So you understand.'

Gotou smirked.

Ishii was still standing, looking blank. He might not have known why he was even here.

'However, today is no good.'

'Why? I thought we could go now.'

'Since I have some other trouble to deal with.'

Yakumo met Haruka's eyes.

She had planned on hiding it, but as expected, he'd seen through her.

Her chest felt tight. She didn't want to be lumped in with the people who just used Yakumo for his eye. She didn't see Yakumo that way.

'I just came to visit since I hadn't come by in a while. I said that I wouldn't bring any trouble the next time I came. Though I forgot the hot chocolate,' Haruka said quickly.

Yakumo stared at her with narrowed eyes. His eyes were sceptical. They were saying, 'That's not the truth.'

'Well, I'll be off then.'

Haruka knew that her face muscles were stiff and smiled before leaving the <Movie Research Circle> room, like she was making her escape.

She might have just made him more suspicious.

But it was fine like this.

It wasn't pity – she wanted to relate to Yakumo not as somebody who marvelled at his red eye or somebody who wanted to use it.

Haruka felt elated, as if she had won something, and started walking while looking at the perfectly clear blue sky.

-

11

-

After noon, there was an investigation meeting to report the results of the autopsy.

Hata stood on the rostrum and read out the results so far to the conference room where fifty members of the investigation team had gathered.

'The cause of the death of the first victim, Ayaka-chan, was suffocation due to pressure on her neck, as was reported before. The second victim, Miho-chan, didn't have any obvious injuries, and her lungs were filled with water. It is believed the cause of her death was drowning.'

The previously silent conference room was suddenly filled with the sound of people talking.

The second victim had been found at a dumpsite. She had died from drowning. They probably felt

something was wrong.

'As well, water plants and freshwater bacteria were found in the second girl's lungs.'

'Can we take that to mean she drowned in a river somewhere?'

One of the investigation team members raised a hand and asked that.

'Though we cannot confirm that yet, the possibility is extremely high.'

Hata gave it a moment before starting his explanation again.

'Though the causes of death are different, there are lacerations on both of their right ankles that look like they are from something like a rope being bound around them, which links the two girls' cases together.'

'How likely is it that it was the same perpetrator?'

Another question came up.

Hata thought it was the job of the police to decide that rather than his, though it might have been inappropriate to put it that way.

'Currently, no bloodstains or hair from the criminal have been discovered.'

Hata evaded the question and finished his explanation.

He gave his position on the rostrum to Hijikata, the police chief, and sat on one of the chairs at the conference table, which had been set up so the investigation team members could face each other.

He suddenly felt overwhelmed with tiredness, like his nervousness had been unravelled. He didn't really like speaking in front of people.

He also thought there hadn't been any need for him, as the coroner, to participate in the investigation meeting just to read a report.

'Next, how is the investigation going?'

To respond to Hijikata, who was standing on the rostrum, the chief detective Ideuchi stood up as well.

Currently, we are gathering information near the location where the corpse was found, but we have not found any valuable information as of yet.'

Ideuchi bit his lower lip.

Hata couldn't decide whether that action was from anger towards the detestable murderer or regret that he couldn't make an appeal to the police chief.

'Ayaka-chan, the first victim, and Miho-chan, the second victim, and the currently missing Keiko-chan. All three of them disappeared on the way home from school, so we believe the perpetrator may be singling out girls from nearby schools.'

For what purpose?

Hata murmured that in his heart.

'Hereafter, we will be gathering information while focussing on nearby schools. As well, we are narrowing the number of suspects from those who have been arrested for molestation and other obscene acts.'

Hata understood that they could only rely on witnesses since not even one fingerprint or strand of hair had been found. However –

'As well, because we cannot deny the possibility that the female victims were involved in the incident because they took part in compensated dating⁸, we are also reviewing the daily lives of the victims.'

Hata felt the words compensated dating were disproportionate for middle-school students, but that was just for a moment.

If this was a few years ago, mainly high school students would take part in compensated dating. However, the age bracket had lowered recently, and Hata had heard that it had even spread to middle-school students.

The girls would be bought by middle-aged men with daughters of about the same age.

The fathers might have been resolving their resentment at not being able to face their own daughters in a warped way.

The world really was a mystery.

'How is the correspondence with the victims' relatives going? Yesterday, the father of the second victim, Miho-chan, said on a television interview that the police hadn't made any apology to their family.'

The conference room stirred at Chief Hijikata's words.

Hata had seen that broadcast too. While the father had been angry at the police, the mother had been hunched over sobbing.

The reality that their daughter had died would never leave them.

This family carried the grief of having their daughter taken away from them irrationally and would probably continue to be eaten away by the stress that came from that for as long as they lived.

That was how Hata felt.

In any case, as long as they didn't know the murderer's goal, they couldn't narrow down the suspects.

Looking at it as the coroner, though he didn't dare to say this aloud, he thought that the investigation was veering terribly off course.

Even if the investigated previous offenders or compensated dating, there probably wouldn't be any

⁸ Compensated dating, or enjokousai (援助交際) in Japanese, is when women are paid to accompany men on dates, though it does not necessarily include the exchange of sexual services.

results, since there was no indication that any of the female victims had been sexually assaulted. However, that would mean that they didn't know the perpetrator's goal. It felt like it would be a long battle.

Hata murmured that to himself in his mind.

-

12

-

While driving, Ishii used the rear-view mirror to sneak glances at the young man called Yakumo sitting in the back.

He looked extremely bored, holding back yawns several times as he vacantly stared out the window.

However, Ishii thought that attitude might have been an act. He felt the young man had an indiscernible character.

Why did Detective Gotou bring him along in the first place?

It seemed like they knew each other from before, but he didn't understand their relationship at all. It felt like Detective Gotou treated Yakumo as a friend, and Yakumo seemed polite on the surface but was rude in intent – the end result was that Yakumo joked around with Detective Gotou even though Detective Gotou was part of the police force

Most of all, Ishii felt uncomfortable having a civilian accompany them on their investigation of the incident.

Strictly speaking, an incident hadn't occurred yet, but there were secrets to be kept in their line of work, and it would also become a problem of responsibility if anything happened.

Ishii had objected to it many times, but Gotou had ignored him, and in the end, he'd wound up here with no explanation.

What on earth was Detective Gotou thinking –

He would only have to wait a little longer. It would probably become clear soon.

'Yakumo, was it really OK letting Haruka-chan leave like that?' Gotou said, breaking the silence.

Was Haruka the name of the girl who had been in that room?

Ishii recalled what Haruka looked like. Her image was still fresh in his mind.

She was a very cute young woman.

She had slightly slanted eyes that looked kind along with a pleasant smile. Her boyish outfit of a parka and jeans matched her short hair which went to the nape of her neck.

Having said that, she didn't give off the impression of being crude. Her feminine delicateness – or

perhaps he should say her every gesture – had caught his eye.

Ishii's chest hurt when he thought about her.

'I don't know.'

Yakumo said that with a yawn, sounding bored.

'What a cold guy.'

'I just respected her intentions.'

'You'll end up losing her like that.'

Gotou started snickering as he teased Yakumo.

Judging from the flow of the conversation, was Haruka-chan Yakumo's girlfriend?'

'I've said it many times, but she's just a troublemaker.'

'You say that, but you're really interested in her.'

'She's not my type.'

Yakumo snorted.

That was good. Whatever Yakumo's true feelings were, it seemed that they weren't dating.

'So you say. I'll ask you then – what's your type?'

Gotou turned around in the passenger seat with a smirk at the gossipy topic he brought up.

However, Yakumo looked uninterested.

'I don't mind telling you if you tell me how you first met your wife, Gotou-san.'

'I-idiot. As if I could tell you that!'

Ishii found Gotou's flustered expression so funny he burst into laughter.

'What's so funny?'

Gotou was glaring fiercely. Ishii quickly stopped laughing and concentrated on driving.

'Well, you made me ride in the car without any explanation, but what trouble do you have for me this time?'

Just as they reached the large street in front of the station, Yakumo spoke up while running a hand through his hair.

'Oh, now that you mention it, I haven't explained.'

Gotou took a cigarette case from his chest pocket, drew out one cigarette and held it in his mouth.

'If you light that, I'll get off this car immediately.'

'All I did was put it in my mouth,' Gotou replied, putting the cigarette back in the case. He started

his explanation. 'Seems like a woman's been possessed by a ghost or something.'

'Why are the police involving themselves with something like that?'

Yakumo raised one of his well-shaped eyebrows as he asked, like he couldn't understand.

'Normally, the police wouldn't budge for a case like this.'

'So why are you?'

'The girl who's been possessed is the police chief's daughter.'

He said it.

Ishii could accept that Gotou had spoken without mentioning any names, but he couldn't stay silent now that Gotou had shared this much information.

'Detective Gotou, it will be a problem if you share information about the investigation with a civilian.'

'It's fine, so just shut up and drive!'

Gotou replied angrily to Ishii's objection.

'But the chief detective said to keep this a secret...'

'This guy is an exception! I said it's fine, so it's fine!'

If Gotou said that much, Ishii couldn't say anything back.

'It's fine. I'll keep this secret, so I won't cause any trouble for you, Ishii-san.'

Yakumo was the one who followed up.

Things had ended up rather strange.

Though Ishii still didn't agree, all he could do was obediently absorb himself in driving.

'Plus, it seems like the girl who was possessed has been saying crazy things around the clock.'

'Like you, Gotou-san?'

At Yakumo's jab, Gotou replied, 'Shut up,' and continued his explanation again.

'The chief's wife was really worried about her daughter's stranger behaviour, so she went and called a spirit medium. Luckily, that medium was scared and ran away. Just...'

'Were you told to clean this up before it became public?'

'Well, that sort of thing.'

'You're being used pretty well as a maid.'

'Hey! Whose fault do you think it is that things turned out like this?'

Gotou turned around and bent forward as he yelled, but Yakumo was aloof as usual.

'A problem with your driving skill caused the accident, Gotou-san. It isn't my responsibility.'

'You brat! I'll kick you out of the car!'

'I wouldn't really mind.'

Yakumo smirked, probably to make the detective angrier.

Ishii listened to their exchange in mute amazement.

He was confused by the gap between what he had imagined and reality, and he felt an indescribable uneasiness at the drive which he couldn't envision the end of.

-

13

-

After leaving Yakumo's hiding place, Haruka walked while looking at her feet.

A strong wind that made her feel the advent of spring was blowing from in front of her, so her fringe would be mussed up and dirt would enter her eyes if she didn't look down.

But was that really all –

She felt that the winding slope to the station was longer than usual.

She stopped many times along the way to sigh.

She would have to tell Mayuko she couldn't do anything.

Since she couldn't consult Yakumo, there was nothing she could do. Haruka, unlike Yakumo, couldn't see the spirits of the dead. Even if she left the matter for longer, it would just be wasting her time.

But how should she refuse?

Even though it had been a misunderstanding in the first place, she had already agreed to help.

She recalled how relieved Mayuko had looked then. She had bowed her head multiple times while crying and thanking Haruka.

It'll be difficult to tell her –

Haruka sighed again.

Why did she always stick her neck into things when it wasn't necessary?

Why did she respond that way to Mayuko then?

She knew the reason.

Ever since her twin sister had died, she had always tried hard to be a good girl.

While pretending to live in a carefree manner, she always paid close attention to how people

looked at her. She didn't complain about things she didn't like, she never let her smile fade, and she always kept her wishes and desires closed off in her heart.

I was scared –

Of having someone say, 'It'd have been better if you died.'

That was why she would pay attention to others' opinions of her and try her best not to be hated. One day, her existence might be rejected. While thinking that –

She probably wanted somebody to say this to her.

It's fine for you to continue living –

Haruka suddenly stood still and took the phone strap out from her beige handbag.

It was the one she had received from Mayuko.

The strap that had AYAKA written on it – the same name as her sister's.

If this strap belonged to the ghost Mayuko saw, that girl was probably dead.

Why, after losing her life, was the girl still wandering in the river?

Yakumo had said this before. Ghosts weren't demons or a new type of life-form. They used to be living human beings.

Why did they die? Why were they wandering? By understanding the reason, the spirits of the dead could be released.

– What sort of feelings did my sister carry?

Haruka gripped the strap in her palm tightly.

She couldn't see the spirits of the dead like Yakumo, but she still might be able to feel something.

She would go to the river where Mayuko encountered the ghost.

It wouldn't be too late to refuse after that.

Haruka raised her head – she wouldn't lose to the strong wind – and took a deep breath before she started walking.

-

14

-

Gotou stood in front of a house.

The house was about ten minutes from the station and was at the entrance of the street.

In the line of cookie-cutter houses, this house cut a remarkably brilliant image, surrounded by white walls with tiled roofs and a set of double doors.

It was a mansion that a regular businessman would never be able to obtain, no matter how hard he worked.

'Damn, building such a huge house with taxpayers' money...'

Gotou kicked at the asphalt.

'You say that, Gotou-san, but your existence itself is a waste of taxpayers' money.'

Yakumo, standing next to him, gave him a fleeting glance as he spoke.

'What did you say!? Try saying that again!'

There was no point getting riled up over everything Yakumo said. He knew that, but there was no reason he had to put up with it.

'I'm saying you should work your salary's worth.'

'Same for you – why don't you go study your school fees' worth?'

'If there wasn't a detective throwing cases at me, I'd show up in class more often.'

He always jabbed at the sensitive points.

Gotou had nothing to reply to that.

'Sorry I'm late. I got lost.'

Ishii, who had gone to park the car, came back running like a girl.

Why did he even go search for a parking lot? He could've just parked on the road.

'You're so slow! How far did you go!?!'

Gotou directed the anger that had piled up from talking with Yakumo towards Ishii.

'But it takes five minutes to walk from here to the closest parking lot, and I couldn't help being a bit lost since it's the first time I've been here,' Ishii replied. He took a deep breath and adjusted the position of his glasses with a finger.

Affected gestures like that got on Gotou's nerves.

'At least find out where you can park before coming.'

'But since we came here so suddenly, I didn't have the time...'

He keeps on making excuses. In my time, you'd admit that even your blood was blue if your senior said it was.

Well, whatever –

'Let's go.'

Gotou cheered himself up before he could feel completely depressed and passed through the gate first.

When he pressed the intercom at the entrance, a sliding door opened, and a woman of about fifty appeared.

She was a Japanese beauty. She was dressed smartly, like she was ready to go to a party at any time.

She was probably the police chief's wife.

'I'm Gotou, the detective.'

Gotou took his notebook from his jacket's inner pocket and showed his identity card.

Ishii also did the same with his notebook and introduced himself. 'My name is Ishii Yuutarou.'

'We have been waiting. I heard from my husband that you would be coming.'

The police chief's wife bowed politely from the waist and invited them in.

Gotou stepped into the entryway.

'How large. It's about the same size as my room.'

Yakumo, who had followed him in, was looking around the entryway while admiring it aloud.

'Excuse me, but who might you be?'

The police chief's wife gave Yakumo a very cautious look.

Her misgivings were natural. It might have passed in a television drama, but normally, no detective would wear a shirt and jeans. It wasn't an undercover investigation.

'Ah, he's a spirit psychology professor. He's currently cooperating with us.'

Gotou felt awkward lying to the police chief's wife, but he decided to just deceive her since he couldn't say that Yakumo was a university student who could see ghosts.

'Eh? You were a spirit psychology professor?'

Ishii turned around, extremely surprised. If he reacted like that, Gotou's lie would have been for nothing.

'Shut up.'

Gotou glared at Ishii.

'My name is Saitou. It's nice to meet you.'

Unlike Ishii, Yakumo knew how to react in situations like this, and he bowed formally without even changing his expression.

It was mysterious, but his dignified behaviour actually made him look the part.

'We'll be in your care then, professor.'

The police chief's wife didn't suspect anything and greeted Yakumo back. Then, she invited them down the corridor, saying, 'Please follow me.'

Gotou walked alongside Yakumo down the corridor, following the police chief's wife.

When he took a glance behind him, Ishii still looked like he didn't understand what was going on, but he was following them silently.

After they went up the stairs and reached the door right by them, the police chief's wife quietly said, 'Here we are.'

It might have just been the light, but she suddenly looked paler.

She rubbed her hands together in front of her stomach, like she was somewhere very cold.

'May we go in?'

When Gotou spoke up, the police chief's wife looked up in surprise. She looked a bit troubled, but then she said, 'Please do,' in a voice that sounded like it might fade out.

'Yakumo.'

'Let's go.'

Yakumo nodded.

It seemed that Yakumo could sense the strange atmosphere beyond the door. His expression was stiffer than usual.

'We're coming in.'

Gotou opened the door and stepped inside.

At that moment, the air suddenly changed.

It was difficult to breathe. He felt clammy. Shivers were running down his spine.

The lights were off, and the curtains were closed. The room was dark.

A woman sat on the bed by the window. That was –

Like all the strength had been taken from her body, her arms lay limply at her side and she hung her head, so Gotou could see the top of it. Her face was hidden by long hair.

She looked like she had lost her sense of self.

Though part of it might have been because he couldn't see her face, Gotou couldn't recognise the woman in front of him as Makoto.

He had met Makoto many times when she was working as a reporter. She wasn't naively cheerful, but she was an ambitious woman with a strong heart.

However, the woman in front of him today was just like a doll.

'Is that it?'

At some point, Yakumo had stood next to him. He spoke while stroking his chin.

'Yeah, looks like it.'

'E-er, Detective Gotou, I...'

Ishii stood in front of the door and was looking around the room nervously.

'Stay there.'

'Ah, OK.'

Man, if he was so nervous when nothing had even happened yet, he wouldn't be any help at all.

'So Yakumo, what about it?'

Yakumo didn't reply to Gotou's question. After sighing deeply, he stepped up to the bed and stood in front of Makoto.

'Who are you?'

His voice was calm as asked Makoto that question.

No, perhaps that had been a question to the ghost inside Makoto –

There was no response.

'Please respond to the question. Who are you?'

Yakumo narrowed his eyes and asked again.

Suddenly, Makoto raised her head.

Like a bamboo screen, long hair covered her face. Her wide eyes were red and inflamed.

'Who are...'

'Aaaaooooooooo!'

Makoto interrupted Yakumo's words with a beastly howl.

Her teeth were bared and her eyebrows were raised – she looked like a demon.

Saliva was dripping from her mouth.

'Eek.'

He heard a short shriek.

It had been Ishii. He had fallen to the ground and was covering his mouth with a trembling hand.

'Be quiet.'

Gotou gave him a kick and then turned around to face Makoto again.

Her body was twitching convulsively.

It was just like a horror movie. He'd scolded Ishii earlier, but the truth was that Gotou was scared too.

'Can you not speak?'

Yakumo was the only one of them who wasn't perturbed. He spoke in the same tone as before and continued asking questions.

'Geeet ouuuut.'

This time, Makoto didn't scream, but instead spoke words with a clear meaning.

When he heard that voice which reverberated to the bottom of his stomach, Gotou felt that the woman in front of his eyes today wasn't the reporter Hijikata Makoto but somebody else entirely.

'How long have you been there?'

Yakumo continued asking questions.

In exchange, the woman's body started shaking, little by little.

Then, tears started flowing from those inflamed eyes.

Her jaw quivered, making her teeth chatter.

'... He... Ip... me...'

A weak, hoarse voice, completely different from before.

Perhaps that was the voice of the real Hijikata Makoto –

'Shuuuuut uuup!'

Then, the beastly voice yelled again, and her neck cracked forward and back. She collapsed onto the bed.

Gotou walked up to the bed and looked at Makoto.

She had fainted, but she was still breathing and she had a pulse. Did she lose consciousness?

'Oi. What just happened?'

Yakumo didn't reply to Gotou's words but instead pinched his brow, breathing deeply like he was in pain.

'Oi, Yakumo. What's wrong?'

Gotou tried to take a peek at his face, but Yakumo turned around so he wouldn't be able to.

'It's nothing,' Yakumo quietly replied. Then, he left the room briskly after excusing himself.

The confused police chief's wife asked what had happened, but Gotou shook her off and followed Yakumo out of the house.

He went through the gate and had just stepped on the road when he spotted Yakumo again.

He had his back against a telephone pole and was sitting while pressing against his left eye with both hands. A cold sweat ran down his cheeks. Gotou had seen Yakumo like this a few times before.

'You OK?'

'So even you worry about other people, Gotou-san,' Yakumo said hoarsely. He acted this way even at a time like this. Trying to look strong. He had a bitter smile.

'What happened?'

'It was a little intense.'

'Intense?'

Yakumo stood up while using the telephone pole for support.

'I said before that souls were like clusters of peoples' emotions.'

'Yes.'

'My left eye can see those emotions. Naturally, the way I see them differs depending on how strong those emotions are. Accordingly, the stronger those emotions are, the greater the burden on my eye. It's like the pain you feel when looking at a bright light.'

I sort of understand, but I sort of don't –

No, there was no way he could understand. No matter how many words Yakumo used, the pain of seeing spirits of the dead was a cross that Yakumo would have to continue to bear alone.

He felt a pain in his heart, as if he had been pricked by a needle.

'W-w-what happened?'

Ishii flew out of the gate, a bit late.

He was sweating bullets for a different reason. Even though he'd been so interested, he'd ended up panicking when it came to the crunch.

'It's fine, so hurry and get the car.'

'Y-yes sir.'

As soon as Ishii answered, he started running frantically like he had been cornered by a bear in a forest.

'So what happened?'

Gotou turned towards Yakumo again.

'That woman has been possessed by a spirit of the dead. Though she looks like a woman on the outside, he's a man on the inside. On top of that, the situation is rather serious.'

'What do you mean?'

He drew closer to Yakumo.

'I've seen a number of people who have been possessed before, but this is the first case where the body has been so corroded.'

'Corroded?'

'To put it simply, that spirit is hijacking another person's body.'

'Is that possible?'

The cigarette fell out of Gotou's mouth in his surprise.

'Well, it's probably impossible. Even if the body is a spirit's vessel, it's not like any will do. It's like how organs can be rejected during transplants.'

'What? Then it's fine, isn't it?'

Gotou picked up the cigarette he had dropped and lit it.

It seemed that Yakumo was saying it wouldn't turn out like a horror movie where the body was completely taken over and became somebody else's.

'It's not fine.'

Yakumo spoke sharply, which was unusual for him.

'What?'

'Her body's being corroded from the possession. She already isn't eating properly.'

'What'll happen like this?'

'This might become debilitating – she could die.'

'Really?'

'Though that's just a possibility.'

This was becoming troublesome again.

They had to do something but –

'What are you going to do?'

'Who is the spirit that has possessed her? I need to look into that first.'

Yakumo placed his left index finger on his brow.

I understand what he's saying, but –

'How are you going to look into that?'

'Do you know when she became this way?'

'If I remember correctly, it was after she fainted at the scene of a traffic accident.'

'Was she in an accident?'

'No, that's not it. A man was hit by a car and she tried to save him, but she suddenly collapsed.'

'And the man at the accident?'

'He had died on impact...'

Oh – that was it! It was the man who died in that accident!

'We'll need to look into that man. It isn't at the level of somebody who is resentful because he died in a traffic accident. The roots are deeper. There's an attachment to life that's strong to the point of greed...'

Yakumo's words echoed oppressively in his heart.

'So, what to do?'

'First is gathering information. I want to know as much as possible about the situation, including the time of the accident.'

If that's how it is, it'd be quickest to talk to that old man –

He didn't really want to, but there was nothing to be done.

With perfect timing, the car Ishii was driving slid into view.

Gotou looked up at the window on the second floor that had its curtains closed.

He had thought he'd be able to just deal with this quickly, but things didn't look like they would turn out well.

-

15

-

Haruka walked along the embankment of Tama River, where Mayuko had seen the ghost.

There was a couple sitting together on the sloped lawn. A boat with a cheerful father and son pair on it floated along the river.

It was a relaxing landscape not even remotely appropriate for a ghost sighting.

After taking the elevated railway and walking about five hundred metres, the water gate came into view.

The large steel gate regulating the water level went across the river. There was a tower that looked like a fire lookout standing in the middle of the river.

White herons were flying around that tower.

'It should be around here.'

Haruka went down the lawn-covered embankment to the riverside.

There was a bent plastic umbrella.

Haruka slowly surveyed her surroundings and spotted a rock that rose about fifty metres from the water. Its surface was flat, but it had become wet from the water, and moss was growing on parts of it.

Haruka tried getting a bit closer. She put her bag on the riverbank and stepped towards that rock.

'Oi, missy. What are you doing over there?'

She turned around at the voice and saw a middle-aged man in work clothes carrying a bucket.

From his outfit, he was probably from the management office for the water gate. There was one more person too. A man of about the same age wearing grey slacks and a white shirt stood next to him.

'I was looking for something.'

She couldn't say she had come to see a ghost.

'What are you looking for?' asked the man in the white shirt.

His cheeks were hollow and there were bags under his eyes. He also looked pale. He felt sickly for some reason.

'Um... Er, my mobile phone...'

The phone strap suddenly came up in her mind and she lied at once.

'It's deep around there, so please be careful,' the man in the white shirt said.

'Ah, OK.'

'Give up – you should go home before it gets dark.'

The man in work clothes gave her that advice and then headed back towards the management office with the man in the white shirt.

When she looked up at the sky, she noticed that it had already started getting dark, like the two men had said.

She was wearing pumps today. She walked up the rock carefully so as not to lose her footing and stood at the tip.

She bent over just slightly and took a look at the river.

As the man in the white shirt had said, it seemed rather deep here.

The obscure surface of the water was moving slowly.

Haruka took the phone strap from her jeans pocket.

'Is your name Ayaka-chan...'

She tried asking her question towards the water, but there was no reply.

As she'd expected, there was no way she'd be able to resolve anything by coming here, since she couldn't see spirits.

'... St... p... eady...'

She heard a voice, but she wasn't sure from where.

She looked to the right and the left, but there was nobody there.

'Stop already...'

Again –

She couldn't tell the direction or the distance. The voice felt like it was talking directly to her head.

'Where is that coming from? Where are you?'

Haruka gripped the phone strap in front of her chest and spoke frantically.

Suddenly, she felt a presence –

It was at her feet.

She slowly lowered her gaze.

Gurgle. Gurgle.

Bubbles were coming up to the surface of the water.

Splash.

At the same time as the sound of the water splattering, a hand thrust out from the river.

A rotten purple hand.

The small hand that had not yet grown into an adult's one grabbed hold of Haruka's ankle.

'Aaah!'

She tried to fix her posture, but it was too late.

Haruka lost her balance and fell into the river in front of her –

The water was cold.

A numbing pain ran through her whole body.

She swallowed some water. She couldn't breathe. Her body felt heavy. She waved her hands about trying to find something to grab on to, but her hands found nothing.

A girl's face floated up in front of Haruka. She looked like she could cry at any moment.

The girl slowly sank to the river bottom.

She had to save her. She had to save that girl.

Haruka desperately stretched her arm out towards the girl, but she couldn't reach.

In a moment, all she could see was white.

There was a man. She couldn't see his face clearly. Who? Who was it?

The man's strangling her neck. It hurts. He's strangling my neck.

I can't see his face, but I know he's laughing.

Stop. It hurts. Save me.

Somebody.

Yakumo-kun.

Save me –

Her mind was growing hazy.

Am I going to die? I wonder if I can go to where my sister is –

Yakumo –

– Stop. Please, no more.

Haruka heard a girl's voice as she lost consciousness.

除靈

第二章

FILE:
02

-

1

-

Why was he being treated like a maid? He had a lot of work to do since this was a serial abduction murder case.

Hata took a file out of the cabinet.

It was an autopsy report for a traffic accident that had occurred a few days earlier. Wasn't it just a regular old traffic accident? He didn't understand at all why something like this was necessary now.

The accident had occurred three days ago.

The male victim had ignored a red light and suddenly ran into the intersection.

There were reports from eyewitnesses as well. A housewife on the way home from shopping and a middle-aged man who worked at the management office for the water gate. However, the car was still at fault. The driver hadn't watched the road.

Didn't watch the road? If somebody suddenly ran into the intersection, you wouldn't be able to avoid it even if you had been watching.

Traffic law was written in a way that completely ignored human reaction time.

It could only be called bad luck.

The driver found at the scene of the accident had seemed serious. He had been extremely pale and just barely managed to stand.

It had hurt to look at his cowering figure as he spoke in a trembling voice. He might have been imagining his future.

Hata, who had seen scenes like that many times, had decided not to drive a car.

He knew how terrifying it was to have your life crumble down around you in an instant.

'We're coming in.'

At the same time as Hata heard that casually loud voice, the door opened and Gotou came into the room. Hata felt that it must have been suffocating for Gotou to come into the extremely narrow room lined with cabinets and shelves.

'Excuse me.'

A slim young man followed Gotou in.

A light bulb turned on over Hata's head – he didn't even need to hear an explanation. Since Gotou had brought him along regarding the case, there was no mistaking it.

'Might you be Saitou Yakumo-kun?'

'There's no might about it – that's correct.'

He gave a brusque reply to Hata's question.

During the previous case, they had only spoke on the phone, but he could still tell immediately from that tone of voice.

The young man had been born with an exceptional genetic make-up that allowed him to see the spirits of the dead.

Hata stood up and shook hands with Yakumo. His body temperature was normal.

Still holding his hand, Hata took a close look at Yakumo's face.

Oh – he usually wore contacts then. The size of his left and right eyeballs and pupils didn't appear to differ much.

He wanted to confirm how it felt. Hata reached towards Yakumo's left eye, but Gotou pushed that hand away.

'What are you doing?' Hata had been so close.

'Shut up! You perverted old man! Do you plan on dissecting it?'

'Will you let me?'

'Are you an idiot? Control yourself and stick to mice!' Gotou yelled, spitting as he did so.

What a noisy man.

Even if Hata didn't go so far as to dissect it, he wanted to thoroughly examine Yakumo's left eye one day.

That which connects the body and the soul, the barrier between the living and the dead. It was likely that Yakumo's left eye could see that. Yakumo knew the answer to the question Hata had been chasing for so many years.

Gotou plopped himself down on the folding chair by the wall, and Yakumo stood by the wall with his arms folded.

At that point, another person came in – a man who felt rather frail.

'Er, please excuse me. My name is Ishii Yuutarou, and I'm working as Detective Gotou's subordinate.'

Compared to Gotou, the man seemed so fragile it was pitiful.

He bowed from the waist – it was so polite it was stupid.

'You've been paired with Gotou-kun? My condolences.'

'Your condolences? You're the one who's got his feet stuck in the Sanzu River¹.'

'My, what an annoying man.'

Hata laughed scornfully at Gotou's insolent words and tossed the file onto the table.

'That's the material you want.'

'Thanks.'

1 To put it simply, the Sanzu River is the Buddhist equivalent of the River Styx.

Gotou started flipping through the material on the table. Yakumo leant over to look as well. Since the room was too small, Ishii couldn't move and stayed by the door.

'There's no mistaking it. This is the man,' Yakumo said, pointing at the photo taken of the corpse's face at the time of the autopsy.

The skin from the cheek to the nose was cut. The blood had been wiped off before the photo was taken, but the flesh and bones still showed.

He was so thin it seemed sickly, and his face looked extremely nervous.

His name was Andou Takashi. He was twenty-five years old. His father was a member of the Kyushu prefectural assembly. He had been a legal apprentice until the end of last year, but he'd caused a little incident and had been unemployed at the time of his death.

'But why are you interested in an old traffic accident?'

He hadn't heard anything from Gotou before he came. Hata asked his question while sipping at the tea in his teacup.

'A number of reasons.'

Gotou crossed his arms standoffishly.

'I'm asking about those reasons.'

He should have guessed from the flow of the conversation, but this man was just too straight. Hata thought that it was more appropriate to call him an idiot than a hot-blooded detective.

'The spirit of the man who died in this accident has possessed a woman.'

Yakumo explained in Gotou's stead.

Hata then understood that Yakumo had probably stuck his neck into this case since they believed a ghost was involved.

'That is interesting.'

'This man has an attachment to life that knows no bounds. Furthermore, he also has very bad intentions. There must be something serious for a spirit of the dead to possess somebody living. I want to know what that something is.'

So it wasn't just seeing the spirits of the dead – he could feel so much?

It was becoming even more fascinating.

'Hata-san, was there anything you noticed?' Yakumo asked.

'Things I noticed, eh?'

He thought it over.

The cause of death was a cerebral contusion. There were no other injuries, and there had been no response from drugs. Nothing particularly strange had showed up during autopsy.

'Anything is fine.'

Even if he said that –

'There wasn't really anything.'

'I see.'

Yakumo raked a hand through his hair, looking irritated.

'Old man. Where's the corpse?'

Gotou asked an inappropriate question.

'It was cremated a long time ago. It's already been three days since his death.'

'Makes sense...'

'His family came to pick him up soon after. I think his flat's already been vacated.'

'His family must've been disturbed since their son died at such a young age in an unexpected traffic accident,' Gotou said seriously, looking through the materials.

At those words, Hata recalled his memories from three days ago anew. Andou's family hadn't been emotional like Gotou had suggested. On the contrary –

'It was so cold-hearted. They finished the paperwork in a business-like manner and that was the end of it.'

'Really?'

Gotou mulled over that.

'Seemed like he hadn't really been a member of the Andou family in the first place.'

'Kid from a previous marriage?'

'It's a bit more complicated than that. He and his mother had lived by themselves when he was young, but that mother killed herself about ten years ago so he was adopted into the Andou family.'

'Do you mean...'

Gotou was an idiot, but he had a good nose for this sort of thing from his experience as a detective.

'That's what I mean. Seems his birth mother had been a mistress. That makes him a blood-related son.'

'But why do you know so much about this, old man?' Gotou asked. His doubt was natural.

'At some point during the procedure, I got to contact his family. A servant gossiped away about this even though I hadn't asked.'

'What a disaster.'

'Well, I didn't mind since it was interesting. If you're interested, try giving a call. You'll hear much more from a servant than the family themselves.'

'Can't stop rumours, eh.'

Gotou leant back on his chair.

'After that, there was something a bit strange, though this might not be related.'

'What is it?'

It seemed like Yakumo had felt something, and he spoke with his brows furrowed.

'I think it was yesterday. A few of the things he'd had on him were returned – said they weren't their son's.'

'What were they?'

'If I remember correctly, there was a bible. A small one about the size of a notebook. There was also a key,' Hata replied as he recalled his memories.

'Where are those?'

This time, Gotou was the one who spoke up.

'In storage.'

'Ishii! Dash!'

Gotou yelled authoritatively, like he was calling a dog.

'Eh?'

Ishii had just been listening silently. He suddenly turned around and jumped in surprise. He was fidgeting like he didn't know what to do.

Gotou was awful at talking. He'd definitely just brought him along without explaining properly.

'Hurry and go bring it here!'

This time, Gotou stood up and pointed at the door as he yelled.

Ishii finally understood. It was nice how he responded with an 'Ah, yes sir!' and rushed out, but he might have been too hurried because he banged into the closed door.

'What are you doing? Get a move on!'

Gotou lost his temper at Ishii, who was crouching while pressing a hand against his nose.

Ishii replied, 'Yes sir,' in a nasal voice and left the room.

'It's a light blue envelope that has Andou written on it!'

Hata called out to Ishii's back.

He couldn't be sure whether he heard him.

'I feel really bad for your subordinate,' Hata muttered.

-

2

-

Gotou's irritation had reached its peak.

It had already been almost an hour since Ishii went out of the room. Hata had already left, saying he had some other work to do.

He acknowledged Ishii's enthusiasm, but he had probably run off in the wrong direction.

'That guy's late...'

'Then why not help him out?'

Yakumo looked up from the materials he was perusing as he sat in the seat Hata had been in it.

'If you're going to say that, you go.'

'Ishii-san is your subordinate, Gotou-san. I'm a complete stranger.'

'Ah, that's true.'

He really couldn't beat Yakumo in an argument.

'Gotou-san, you've been a bit strange lately,' Yakumo said, his lips turned up in a smirk.

Whenever Yakumo looked like that, he always had something unpleasant up his sleeve.

'I'm the same as usual.'

Gotou denied what Yakumo had said, but it was true.

It had only been one day so far, but being paired up with Ishii was driving him mad.

That guy had an unnatural interest in the occult, which ended up with him proclaiming that Gotou was a spirit detective or something.

'Gotou-san, why not be a bit nicer to Ishii-san?' Yakumo said with a big yawn.

'I never thought I'd hear about being nicer from you.'

'Gotou-san, have you really not noticed?'

'Notice? Notice what?'

Gotou put himself on guard, though he couldn't figure out what Yakumo was thinking.

'Ishii-san has feelings for you, Gotou-san.'

'He has earrings?'

'You said that on purpose. Feelings. I meant that he likes you, Gotou-san.'

'W-w-w-wha –'

What was he saying? Gotou's heart was beating wildly. Why was it thumping so much? Calm down.

It wasn't like Yakumo's words didn't echo with him. When Ishii looked at Gotou, his eyes were like that of a puppy that had been given a treat. Gotou didn't know what to do when a man looked at him with eyes like that.

'Got this, Yakumo? There's a limit to how much you should joke. I'm a man. He's a man. Understand?'

'You have an unexpectedly obstinate way of thinking. If you like someone, gender doesn't matter. The important thing is how you feel, Gotou-san.'

Yakumo replied with a serious look.

'There's nothing to feel! I don't swing that way.'

A strange sweat ran down his forehead.

'Is that really true?'

'What do you want to say?'

Damn Yakumo. What the hell is he thinking? And why am I taking this so seriously?

'Nothing really. I'm just saying that it'd be better if you were honest with yourself.'

'I don't want to hear that from you.'

'Please answer honestly. Gotou-san, men or women – which do you prefer?'

'I obviously prefer women!'

Just as Gotou stood up and shouted, Ishii opened the door.

Ishii's mouth was gaping, and he stood stock still with a surprised expression on his face.

Yakumo was holding his stomach as he shook with laughter. He had just been making fun of Gotou to waste some time. What was he going to do with this atmosphere?

It'd just be annoying to explain everything.

'Was it there?' Gotou asked, sitting back then.

'Ah, yes. I f-found it,' Ishii said hesitantly, a light blue envelope in his hand.

'Let's confirm what's inside at once.'

Yakumo's face quickly turned serious, like nothing had happened.

Ishii put the contents of the envelope on the table. Just as Hata had said, there was a notebook-sized bible bound in black leather and a key that looked brand new.

Gotou reached out to take the bible, but Ishii had been thinking of doing the same thing, and their fingertips touched on top of the table.

'Ack.'

He hurriedly pulled his hand back.

For some reason, things felt a bit strange.

He couldn't look directly at Ishii's face. What was this hazy feeling?'

'Gotou-san. Let's stop those thoughts there.'

Yakumo's lips were turned up in a smirk.

That bastard. It's because you said something strange. You haven't even noticed Haruka-chan's

feelings. I'll get you back someday –

Gotou bit his lower lip and changed his mind, taking the key on the table.

It was still new. There was a sticker with <E-3> written on it on the bow. It was a key for a disc tumbler lock. It was probably for some room.

For a moment, he thought it might have been for the flat Andou lived in, but it'd be strange for his relatives to return it if that were the case.

Yakumo took the bible in his hand and flipped through it.

Ishii looked like he didn't know what he should do, so he stood upright like a kid who had been scolded.

Can we really save Makoto from the spirit by doing this –

'Gotou-san, please look at this.'

Yakumo broke the silence and placed a photo on the table.

It had probably been carried around for a while. The photo's corners were worn.

There was a girl in the photo. Her hair was tied in a ponytail, and she wore a school uniform with a blazer.

The photo looked like it had been taken in a room. There was a smile on her lips. She looked happy at a glance, but her eyes weren't smiling.

Her eyes were wet, and it looked like she was afraid.

'Where'd you find that?'

'It was in between the bible's pages...'

Yakumo replied with his chin in his hands.

Why had Andou carried this photo with such devotion?

'T-t-this is Ayaka-chan!'

Suddenly, Ishii let out a loud voice which pierced Gotou's ears.

'You're so noisy. What are you making a fuss about?'

Ishii's behaviour was unusual. His body was shaking, and he was so agitated it felt like he could faint at any moment.

'But that's Ayaka-chan.'

'I heard you say that earlier. She somebody you know?'

'No, I don't know her, but... That's not it. This is the first victim from the serial abduction murder case...'

'W-what!?!'

Gotou became agitated as well and stood up.

Ishii was talking about that Ayaka-chan –

The police were currently in a frenzy investigating that case.

It wasn't just Ayaka-chan. The other day, the corpse of the second victim, Miho-chan, was found at a dumpsite. Three days ago, Keiko-chan had disappeared.

It was a serious incident which had shaken society. A general mobilisation of the investigation team had been called and they were currently conducting an investigation, but since Gotou was being treated as an outsider, he hadn't seen a proper photo before.

But why would Andou, who'd died instantly in a traffic accident, have the photo of the female victim?

'His relatives might have thought this wasn't his because this photo was inside,' Yakumo said, tapping the photo with his fingertip.

Surely that was it. And old Hata had just put it away without looking inside.

Thinking about it logically, there wouldn't be a link between a traffic accident and a serial abduction murder case.

But –

'There might be something here.'

'Detective Gotou, what will you do?' Ishii said with a rare snort.

Even if he asked that, it wasn't something he could answer immediately.

A man who died in a traffic accident had a photo of a victim of a serial abduction murder case. It was incredibly suspicious, but that was the limit of it.

Should I go talk to investigations –

No, that wouldn't be necessary. They'd do it themselves.

'Ishii. Look into that Andou guy's background again. His friends, his upbringing – any detail will do. Just look into it.'

'Y-yes sir!'

Ishii stood up straight and responded energetically.

The way he responds is the only respectable thing about him though –

Gotou pinned down a tinge of anxiety and decided to start their investigation.

-

3

-

I could see a light –

A faint white light.

I can see someone's face.

Who could it be –

The person is saying something.

I can't hear.

I feel myself swaying.

Where am I?

I fell into the river, and then –

I couldn't breathe –

Am I dead?

'I'm glad. It looks like you're awake.'

Haruka heard a voice.

Upon hearing that voice, the mist lifted from Haruka's vision.

A middle-aged man with a long face was peering at her from above.

She remembered seeing him before. He had been at the river.

'Everything's OK now,' he said gently, smiling. His eyes closed when he smiled. Somehow, he made her feel at ease.

'I...'

Her voice was hoarse and didn't feel like her own.

'You nearly drowned in the river. Uchiyama from the management office at the water gate saved you.'

She recalled the middle-aged man in work clothes who had been at the river.

He was tan, with thick, forceful eyebrows and a sturdy body build.

That man saved her –

She was alive.

Haruka faintly but finally understood her own situation.

'Er...'

'Don't worry. I'm a doctor, and this is my hospital.'

So this man was a doctor.

She had been lucky.

An IV tube hung from her arm.

'My name is Kinoshita. What's your name?' Kinoshita asked.

'Ozawa... Haruka.'

Though she had regained consciousness, her body still felt heavy, and her voice wouldn't come out the way she wanted it to.

'You drank a lot of water. You should rest for today.'

'But...'

'Please don't worry about it. This is a private hospital and the nurses have gone home already, but if you need anything, press that button to call me and I'll come right away.'

She decided to obediently agree to Kinoshita's proposal.

She couldn't go home by herself in this state.

'Well, have a good rest.'

Kinoshita turned around and started to leave the hospital room.

'Um.'

Haruka called out to Kinoshita, forcing the sound out of her throat.

'What is it?'

'Thank you very much.'

Kinoshita smiled pleasantly.

'After you recover, please thank Uchiyama as well.'

Haruka responded with a nod. Then, Kinoshita turned off the lights and left.

In the moonlit twilight, Haruka realised that she was alive.

She couldn't tell if she was happy or sad, but tears flowed from her eyes and wet her pillow.

– Big sister. I'm still alive.

-

4

-

First thing in the morning, there was a regular investigation meeting.

Even though they conferred every day, they didn't have much to report.

While Hata rubbed at his sleepy eyes, he half-heartedly listened to their exchange.

'When we investigated the call history on the mobile phone of the second victim, Miho-chan, it showed in the browser history that she had accessed an online dating site...'

'Regarding the white station wagon that was sighted at the scene, we currently don't know who...'

'We obtained a list of customers for a pornography shop...'

'A former instructor who was arrested before for molestation was...'

The information was snarled. They couldn't narrow down the targets.

He knew that they were just taking all the possibilities into account, but they would just be overwhelmed by all the information they gathered.

If they couldn't find an opening, this stalemate would just continue.

Hata stifled a yawn as he mulled over these thoughts.

'What do you think, Hata-san?'

Suddenly, Chief Hijikata spoke to him.

He might have meant that as a reprimand towards someone who had yawned imprudently, but he was barking up the wrong tree. Hata was a coroner.

He autopsied corpses and showed up to investigation meetings like this, but strictly speaking, he wasn't part of the police.

Hata accepted requests from the police – a subcontractor, so to speak.

'Are you asking me?'

He'd try playing dumb. Hijikata stared directly at Hata.

What an obstinate man. Since it didn't seem like he would be able to get out of this, Hata reluctantly opened his mouth.

'If you are requesting my personal opinion, I think that the aim of this case's perpetrator is to kill.'

There were exclamations from every corner of the conference room.

Hata hadn't meant to say something so surprising.

'What do you mean?'

'I mean exactly what I said.'

'I don't understand.'

Hijikata looked sullen, like a child.

'From the impression I received after autopsying the corpses, there hadn't been any injuries that stood out or indications of sexual assault, yet the ankles had been bound by something like a rope.'

'Oi, couldn't he have been planning to assault them only to have them die before he could?'

'I don't know why he wouldn't have assaulted them immediately after binding them,' Hata replied, knowing his words would rub Hijikata the wrong way.

As usual, Hijikata was emotionally overwrought and had a bright red complexion.

'Then what is his goal?'

'I don't know. He isn't doing this to satisfy his libido or for money – something else.'

'A grudge?'

'That's probably not it. If it were a grudge, it would have been better for him to injure them more.'

Both their corpses were too clean.'

Hijikata glared at him like he had spotted a cockroach.

'Keep your hobby in check. I don't want to arrest you.'

At Hijikata's words, the conference room suddenly filled with laughter.

He didn't remember saying anything laugh-worthy. As long as a man like that was in command, it would be impossible to solve the case.

Shouldn't you be worrying about your daughter who's been possessed? It'd be faster if you left a case like this to Gotou and Yakumo.

Hata muttered those words in the back of his mind and smiled bitterly.

-

5

-

Ishii first headed towards the police station in front of the station, in order to meet with Sergeant Yoda, who had been in charge of the violent incident Andou caused a month ago.

Yesterday, Ishii had stayed up all night to investigate Andou.

Ishii found out about the violent incident through that. Andou hadn't been indicted or charged, but there was still a record of it with the police.

The truth was, Ishii should have come together with Detective Gotou, but the detective had refused bluntly, saying, 'Do something like that yourself.'

Detective Gotou had to be testing him. Would he be an appropriate partner? Ishii had to stand firm here to prove that.

'Excuse me. I'm Ishii from the detective department.'

He peeked inside from the police station's entrance.

It was a small space that might not have even been four tatami mats in size. A plump policeman of about forty or so was sitting on a chair at the desk in the middle of the room, and he looked up and grunted to acknowledge Ishii's presence.

It seemed that he was Sergeant Yoda.

'Well, please. Come in.'

Invited in by Yoda, Ishii sat on the folding chair opposite him.

'I am Sergeant Yoda Tarou. Thank you for taking time out of your busy schedule to come.'

Yoda showed the identification in his police notebook and introduced himself.

'Ah, please don't concern yourself with that. You must be busy with the serial murder case too.'

'Yes, well.'

Ishii was really an outsider, but Yoda ventured to reply vaguely without really saying anything.

'Er, you spoke about the Andou case, yes?'

While Yoda said that, he took out his work log from the desk drawer. He licked his fingers and then started flipping through the pages.

'That's right.'

'If the detective department is looking into it, does that mean Andou is the perpetrator?'

Such speculation was natural, but at this point, Ishii couldn't say yes or no.

'I could ask you the same thing.' Ishii replied with a weak smile, which made Yoda scowl at him. He looked like he could start clicking his tongue at any moment. Ishii could almost hear Yoda's dissatisfaction at not being able to be informed about anything.

'Well, it's not a question we officers at the police station should be asking about,' Yoda replied, his expression once again mild.

'I'm sorry.'

'Why are you apologising?'

'Ah, er... even if you ask me why...'

'You have to be firmer. If you get flustered like that, even the perps will make fun of you.'

'Ah, yes.'

Ishii already knew what Yoda was telling him, but knowing and being able to do something about it were different stories.

Assertion was good, but what if that assertion was incorrect? He always ended up thinking about that. Naturally, that made him unable to say his own opinions.

He had ended up with his mouth shut many times because of that.

'It was unnecessary concern on my part.'

Maybe he had seen how Ishii was completely depressed, but Yoda went back to their original subject while drumming the back of his neck. 'The Andou case, right?'

'Yes. It'll be fine if you just say what you remember.'

'I remember it well. It was about one month ago... I had gone to the station because of some fuss with another incident and was returning from that. While I was going up the stairs, somebody called out to me saying, 'Officer, there's a molester.'

'A molester?'

Ishii cocked his head.

According to his data, Andou had caused a violent incident.

'That's right. She was a girl in middle school or so, and she had her hair in a ponytail. That girl said, "That man peeked up a girl's skirt."'

'That man was Andou.'

'Yes. His eyes were wide as saucers in surprise. I couldn't leave things as they were since there was a female student in a skirt right in front of him, so I questioned him.'

'Did Andou really look up a skirt?'

'It's hard to find proof for molestation, so eyewitnesses and the victims' testimonies get precedence. It's easy to falsely accuse somebody of it.'

'Then Andou...'

'This is just my gut feeling, but he probably didn't do it.'

Yoda rubbed his double chin and stared into the air for a while, looking like he was pondering something, before continuing his story.

'Andou also insisted that he didn't do it. Well, it's not like the victim pressed charges, so I thought I'd just end it by warning him.'

'It didn't end.'

Yoda nodded at Ishii's words.

'That female student said this to Andou: "Liar. Just go die."'

She said something like that to him –

They weren't words that should be said lightly to a stranger. It was an unbelievable thought, but it might not have been that surprising to hear on a news programme from a middle school student.

'When the guy heard that, his eyes suddenly looked different. They looked like they had been possessed by something. And then...'

'He assaulted that female middle school student?'

'Yeah. Since I held him back immediately, the girl wasn't harmed, but...'

'He was caught red-handed in his assault.'

'Just as you say.'

Yoda sat up in his chair, looking awkward, before continuing.

'I think that girl didn't see Andou molest anyone. She probably saw an officer nearby and decided to play a little prank, that's all.'

Ishii hadn't seen it happen, but it was probably as Yoda said.

Andou had been a legal apprentice. Even if he hadn't been arrested or charged, the event would have made his future life very difficult.

If he had been aiming to be a police officer or judge rather than a lawyer, he would have already been despairing.

Just one word closed the door on his dreams.

What feelings did Andou have afterwards?

While Ishii imagined them, he felt as depressed as if a dark cloud had been hanging over him.

'It wouldn't have ended like this if the guy had been just a bit calmer,' Yoda said with deep feeling, ending the discussion.

-

6

-

'Why do I have to go with you?'

While driving, Gotou took a peek at Yakumo, who had his arms crossed sullenly.

Yakumo's dissatisfaction was natural. Gotou didn't think that he should be bringing a civilian into the investigation either.

However, the case this time couldn't be solved without Yakumo.

They'd run into the serial murder case while pursuing the spirit possessing Makoto, but he had no idea where to go from there.

The reason Gotou had asked Yakumo to cooperate with him on the investigation wasn't just because he had the unique ability to see spirits.

Yakumo's insight and reasoning capability were essential for solving the case.

'Don't say that. You won't be able to accept things as they are yourself.'

Gotou held a cigarette in his mouth as he handled the wheel.

'You're the one who made me feel that way, Gotou-san. Also, if you light that up, I'm going home.'

'Ah, my bad.'

Yakumo really was fussy about everything. His hobby might have been making other people angry.

After they crossed the bridge over the Tama River and had just passed the shopping street in front of the station, a sign with the words <Kinoshita Surgery: Maternity and Gynaecology Department>.

'Oh, there it is.'

Gotou turned on his hazard lights and parked his car at the shoulder of the road beside the park.

The white-walled building had three floors and a flat roof. It was as big as an apartment building. Its scale was acceptable for a private hospital that also functioned as a residential building.

Gotou got off the car and headed towards the hospital's entrance. Yakumo followed after him, complaining the whole way.

A sign with the words <No Consultations> hung on the glass door, and the curtains were closed. Gotou stooped over to look inside through the window, but he couldn't make anything out.

When he pushed the door handle, it opened without any resistance – it hadn't been locked.

'We're coming in,' said Gotou, stepping into the hospital.

Nobody was in the lobby. Gotou took slippers from the shoe rack and changed into them before stepping up into the dim linoleum-tiled lobby.

'It seems like consultations are off for today only,' Yakumo said significantly as he followed after Gotou.

Gotou wondered to himself as he took a look at reception. There was nobody here either.

A hospital with no one in it was uncanny enough in itself.

'Anybody here?'

Gotou yelled in a loud voice that echoed through the hospital.

'Sorry, there are no consultations today.'

The door to the examination room ahead of the lobby opened, and a man dressed in white showed up.

'Are you Doctor Kinoshita?'

'Yes, I am, but...'

Kinoshita was a kind-looking man with an oval face and droopy eyes, but his cheeks were hollow and there were dark circles under his eyes – he appeared considerably worn out.

He was the father of the first victim of the serial abduction murder case.

The sorrow from the lingering memory of the incident surrounded him.

'My name is Gotou. I'm from the detective department.'

Gotou showed his identification.

Kinoshita sighed, looking like he might cry while smiling.

'What do you require from me?'

'I want to ask you something about the incident.'

'I see. Please come in.'

Kinoshita smiled amiably, an expression completely different from his earlier one, and invited them into the examination room.

Gotou went into the examination room where Kinoshita was together with Yakumo.

It was a dreary room with only a desk and a bed.

The room in the back behind the partition was probably an examination room with a bed or something in it.

Kinoshita lined up two round chairs on the opposite side of the desk and gestured at them to sit.

'Please forgive me. The nurses are all off today, and I'm the only one here. I can't be a good host...'

Kinoshita bowed his head several times, seeming apologetic.

'Don't worry about it. We're not here for a friendly visit.'

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

Kinoshita had said that the nurses were all off today, but that probably wasn't actually it.

Gotou had heard a rumour that everyone from the nurses to the patients had stopped coming ever since the incident with Kinoshita's daughter. Sadly, that was the way of the world.

Even though it wasn't as if Kinoshita had become the father of the victim because he wanted to, he was receiving abuse from people who didn't care about his emotional state.

'May I ask who is accompanying you?'

Kinoshita gave Yakumo a strange look as he asked that.

Well, his misgivings were natural. Gotou should have made Yakumo wear a suit or something.

'He's a detective, even though he looks like that,' Gotou replied in a very matter-of-fact manner. Half-baked lies would be no good in a situation like this.

'A detective? You are very young.'

Kinoshita had his chin in his hand and appeared to be thinking about something.

'I am Saitou Yakumo from the detective department,' Yakumo replied, as if to shake off Kinoshita's suspicions.

'Saitou... Yakumo...'

Kinoshita repeated that name like he was ruminating.

He narrowed his eyes and looked like he was thinking about something again, but finally, he looked up in surprised realisation.

'Was your mother's name Azusa-san?'

'How do you know that?'

Yakumo looked at Kinoshita with searching eyes.

'I was right then! You're Saitou Yakumo!' Kinoshita said happily in a loud voice, clapping his hands together.

'You know him?' Gotou whispered.

Yakumo shook his head, appearing displeased.

'Ah, excuse me. I was too excited. So you're Yakumo-kun. You've gotten so big. I must have aged as well.'

Kinoshita crossed his arms and furrowed his brow, looking very emotional.

'Oi, looks like you do know him.'

'Like I said, I don't know him,' Yakumo replied, as if to stifle the line of questioning. Somehow, it felt like there was a gap in the conversation.

'It seems I've confused you – please forgive me. It's natural for Yakumo-kun to have forgotten me,' Kinoshita said with a pleasant smile.

'Excuse me, but do you really know me?'

Even Yakumo couldn't hide his bewilderment.

'Yes. Let me explain. I was the doctor present at your birth.'

Oi oi, that was surprising.

'You were...'

Unusual for him, Yakumo looked like a pigeon that had been hit by a peashooter.

'Still, you have a good memory.'

'Well, it left a deft impression, in a variety of ways.'

Kinoshita replied to Gotou with a nod.

He was probably talking about Yakumo's eye. His red left eye. Kinoshita was the first person in the world to see it.

'You're hiding it with a contact lens then?'

'Yes.'

Yakumo replied to Kinoshita's question clearly.

The confusion had left Yakumo's face, but he was stiff with tension.

Wow, what karma –

'To be honest, I'm happy that you've grown up like this. Please listen without taking offence.'

Yakumo nodded silently at Kinoshita, who had become talkative.

'When I picked you up, I thought you might not have been able to live. Part of it was for medical reasons, but more than that, people can be unimaginably cruel to those who are different from them, so... you see. You've had the support of many people as you grew up.'

Yakumo smiled bitterly, like he didn't understand Kinoshita's words.

'My mother tried to kill me.'

'She tried to kill you? You must be lying.'

Kinoshita's eyes went wide from shock.

'No, it's true,' Gotou interrupted.

Whether it was good luck or bad, Gotou happened to be present then. Kinoshita shook his head back and forth fervently, as if saying he couldn't believe it.

No matter how he tried to deny it, it was the truth.

'Why...'

'She probably loathed this left eye,' Yakumo replied, refusing Kinoshita's disavowals.

'There must have been some reason. I understand, since I've lost my daughter. A parent wouldn't kill

their child just because of loathing. She must have had a reason for coming to that,' Kinoshita insisted with tears in his eyes.

Gotou could somewhat understand the doctor's feelings. From the perspective of a man who had had his beloved daughter cruelly taken away from him, it would be inconceivable to take the life of his child with his own hands.

On the other hand, from the perspective of Yakumo, whose mother had tried to kill him, the bond between a parent and a child didn't deserve his belief. If he didn't tell himself that, Yakumo's theory would fail.

Sadly, it wasn't possible for everyone in the world to live with the same values.

That was why crimes occurred. That was just how it was.

'If I meet with her again, I would love to hear why a woman would try to kill her own child.'

The corners of Yakumo's lips were turned up into a smile, but it didn't reach his eyes. They were looking forward with incredible force.

'That's true. No matter what reason she had, it isn't forgivable...'

Kinoshita looked up at the ceiling to escape Yakumo's gaze.

'Sorry, but could you have your emotional reunion some other time?' Gotou interrupted.

It wouldn't be good to let the two of them discuss any further. They would get even further off-track.

Their situations and positions were completely different. It wasn't about who was right – they were both truths, respectively.

'That's right.'

Kinoshita fixed his posture.

Yakumo mussed up his hair, like he was resetting his emotions, but the sharp look did not leave his face.

Well, nothing could be done about that.

'Actually, we came because there was something we wanted to show you today. It might be tough, but could you cooperate with us?'

Gotou asked Kinoshita again. Kinoshita nodded silently.

'First, there's this photo.'

Gotou handed over the photo that had been in the bible that was in Andou's possessions to Kinoshita.

In the photo, a girl in a ponytail was smiling while crying.

Did the girl know she was going to die when the photo was taken? That thought suddenly came to Gotou.

'Ayaka...' Kinoshita said, his voice hoarse. The hand holding the photo was trembling and his eyes were red.

'Do you recognise this photo?'

'It's the first time I've seen it.'

'Are you sure?'

'All the photos of my daughter are in albums. There's no mistaking it.'

It didn't sound like Kinoshita was lying.

Gotou noticed the photo in the silver frame on the desk.

Kinoshita's daughter, Ayaka-chan. There was a man about Kinoshita's age as well.

Had Kinoshita put this photo out after his daughter's death? Or was it from before? Gotou couldn't ask.

'Do you know about when this photo was taken?'

Upon hearing Gotou's words, Kinoshita rubbed at his eyes and moaned quietly while hunched over.

Gotou didn't want to press Kinoshita for an answer when he was trembling like that; he just waited for Kinoshita to lift his head.

'This is... a photo that was taken after my daughter disappeared.'

Kinoshita finally sat up and spoke, bright red all the way to his ears.

A balloon that was about to pop – that was what he looked like.

It felt like he was forcing himself to keep his unstoppable rage within himself. His emotion was so strong it was unfathomable to Gotou, who didn't have a child.

'How can you be certain?'

At Gotou's question, Kinoshita bit his lower lip so hard it looked like it would draw blood.

'There's a plaster on her ear. The night before she disappeared, she had gotten her ears pierced. I had opposed at first, but she said she really wanted to... My daughter usually wouldn't ask for much, so...'

Kinoshita was probably reliving the scene in his mind. He covered his face with his hands – he couldn't finish speaking.

This man blamed himself.

Even though his daughter had been taken away from him for no reason, he turned that resentment towards himself. He was hurting himself.

'I see...'

Gotou wasn't sure what he understood himself. There wasn't any special meaning to it. It was just that he couldn't think of anything else to say.

'Where did you find this picture?' Kinoshita asked in a shaking voice. He was looking down.

'Currently, I can only say that we found it during the investigation.'

For a while, Kinoshita just looked at his feet.

Gotou just waited for Kinoshita to move.

When he looked to the side, he saw Yakumo looking at Kinoshita seriously with a finger on his brow. That guy felt something. Though Gotou didn't know what it was.

'I understand.'

Finally, Kinoshita looked up with his red eyes and said just that.

'Actually, there's one more thing I'd like to show you.'

Gotou took a key in a plastic bag out from his jacket pocket and handed it to Kinoshita.

Andou had also been holding this.

'What is it?'

'A key. Don't know what it's for. Does it look familiar to you?'

'Unfortunately...' Kinoshita said apologetically, and he handed the key back to Gotou.

They'd gotten no leads for the key, but if the photo really had been taken after the girl disappeared, they couldn't say that Andou had nothing to do with the case.

This is getting interesting –

-

7

-

Haruka was in the water –

For some reason, she didn't feel cold or pain.

She let herself be dragged along by the flow, and her body moved with the water.

Something surfaced in front of her.

It was the girl she had seen at the river. She was decaying – her skin had changed colour, and her flesh was falling off, exposing the bone.

Suddenly, the girl's eyes opened.

She's looking at me –

'Why... won't you save me...'

The girl grabbed Haruka.

'Why am I the only one who died?'

Blood dripped from the girl's face.

That face –

At some point, it changed to her sister's face.

– Big sister!

She wasn't in her room. Where was she? Haruka was confused for a moment, but she remembered soon afterwards. She had nearly drowned in the river and had been brought to this hospital.

She turned her gaze to the analogue clock on the wall.

It was already nearly ten in the morning.

Her body felt heavy, as if she had a weight on her back.

Her head ached with a throbbing pain.

But she couldn't just stay here forever. Haruka got up from the bed.

Haruka's belongings were gathered on the bedside table.

Haruka finished changing, picked up her things and left the room.

She didn't see anybody in the corridor. Not only that, but the lights were also off, so the corridor was dim.

'Excuse me.'

She tried calling out, but there was no response. It was a fairly quiet hospital.

She was forced to go to the reception desk, but there was nobody there either. She hadn't paid yet, so she couldn't just go home.

Suddenly, she heard voices talking. She strained her ears. The voices came from the examination room behind the reception.

She thought it would be rude to interrupt a consultation, but she couldn't calm down if she just stood in front of the door, since it felt like she was eavesdropping.

Haruka resolutely knocked on the door.

'Come in.'

She heard a voice. Haruka opened the door.

'You look better now. I'm glad.'

Kinoshita was sitting facing her and spoke with a smile.

'Thank you very much.'

Haruka bowed deeply. At the same time, the two people who had been sitting facing the other direction turned around.

'Eh?'

She was frozen in surprise.

Detective Gotou. And Yakumo –

Why were they here?

'What are you doing in a place like this?' Yakumo asked quietly, staring at her with sleepy eyes.

No, that was what she wanted to ask.

-

8

-

Haruka sat in the backseat.

She was being driven home by Gotou in an unmarked police car.

Yakumo, in the passenger seat, was gazing out the window with an expression full of displeasure.

For some reason, Haruka felt ashamed.

'Haruka-chan. Why'd you go to the river?'

While waiting for the light to change at the intersection, Gotou turned around and asked her a question.

Well, it was an expected question. Kinoshita, the doctor, had pretty much explained how she had nearly drowned in the Tama River and was brought to the hospital, but he hadn't explained the reason.

'I was asked by a friend.'

'To almost drown in a river?' Gotou asked with a serious look.

Where would you find a friend who would request something so commendable? Even if she had been asked to do that, she definitely wouldn't have accepted.

'That's not it. Er... I heard that she saw a ghost there... and then...'

'I see. I thought you might've been hiding something the last time I saw you, so that was it.'

It hurt to hear Gotou-san say that.

She hid her face in embarrassment.

'So you just stuck your neck in without thinking.'

Yakumo mercilessly lined up harsh words.

I did go there without thinking, but that was because I didn't want to cause trouble for Yakumo – Even if she said that, it would just sound like an excuse.

'Come on, don't say it like that. Haruka-chan kept quiet because she didn't want to cause trouble for you. Isn't that praiseworthy?' Gotou said to pacify Yakumo.

'That is even more troublesome for me. If I'm just going to be brought into the situation in such a half-baked manner, it would have been easier for me if she had just spoken to me in the first place.'

'That's quite a mouth on you when you're the one who won't stop complaining about people making trouble for you.'

It was just as Gotou-san said. Haruka wanted to give him an award.

'Traffic light. It's green.'

'Ah!'

After Yakumo spoke, Gotou hurriedly stepped on the pedal.

'I'd like you to reflect a little. Though that's just if you actually have the ability to think,' Yakumo said disagreeably.

Haruka felt she was in the wrong, so she hadn't said anything, but the last bit had definitely been unnecessary.

'Hey. What do you mean by that?'

'Nothing in particular. Please take it exactly as I said it.'

He was the worst.

Why was he acting so high and mighty? Haruka had been in considerable trouble herself. He could have been a little nicer.

'It isn't as if I went there without thinking.'

'You're getting angry at me?'

'I know I can't do anything, but Gotou-san had brought in some trouble for you too, and if I troubled you on top of that...'

'Oi, oi. Now it's my fault?'

Gotou interrupted without a moment's delay.

'Sorry, that's not what I meant.'

'Well, don't worry about it. That guy's going to complain no matter what you do, so there's no point in worrying. Just ignore it and leave it to him.'

'The reason I suffer is because there are irresponsible people like you, Gotou-san,' Yakumo retorted in his annoyance.

'Hmph. You keep on running your mouth, but you're just worried.'

'It would be better for you to worry about your wife leaving you, Gotou-san.'

'My wife's got nothing to do with this!'

One sentence from Yakumo made Gotou raise his voice in anger.

'Eh? Has your wife left again, Gotou-san?' Haruka asked seriously.

'Shut up. That's not it.'

Gotou looked so cute in his franticness that Haruka ended up smiling slightly.

'It seems that Gotou-san recently started an exchange diary with his wife, even though it's unbecoming for his age.'

'Oi, what a minute! How do you know that, Yakumo?'

Even though Gotou was driving, he took his hands off the wheel to grab him.

'That's dangerous.'

At Yakumo's comment, Gotou cursed and took the wheel again.

'Gotou-san, you've got your cute points.'

'Haruka-chan, you too? Please stop.'

'If you don't look forward while driving, you'll get in an accident again,' said Yakumo, pointing forward.

'Again? What do you mean, again? Last time it was to save Haruka-chan.'

'Eh? It was my fault? That's...'

Haruka covered her face on purpose and made it look like she was sad.

'No, that's not it...'

Gotou looked flustered, like he had screwed up and didn't know what to do.

'Come on, Gotou-san. Look forward,' Yakumo said.

'Aah! Shut up!' Gotou yelled, hitting the wheel.

It was so funny Haruka laughed so hard she had to hold her stomach.

Ah, no matter what's said, I always end up being honest in front of these two. I realise that now.

It doesn't matter how other people see me. My sister doesn't have to switch places with me. I can get angry and smile and cry like I want to –

'Come tomorrow to explain properly. It would be troublesome if you died and came back to haunt me.'

Yakumo muttered that as Haruka got off Gotou's car.

He said one thing too much, but –

'I will.'

The car started at the same time as she responded.

While watching the car leave, Haruka murmured 'Thank you' in her heart.

-

9

-

'How was it?'

After Haruka got off the car, Gotou asked Yakumo that question while starting the car.

Yakumo ran a hand through his hair and spoke with a troubled expression.

'According to Doctor Kinoshita's story, that photo was taken after the disappearance.'

'Yeah, that's right.'

'That would make Andou, who died in the traffic accident, incredibly suspicious.'

'You think that too then.'

Gotou had also been thinking that.

The case with the serial abductions and murders of girls. He had a suspicion that Andou might be the culprit.

At this stage, he didn't even have one shred of evidence, but he was almost certain.

'But isn't that odd?' Yakumo said, looking up at the roof of the car.

'What?'

Gotou held a cigarette in his mouth.

'I won't talk if you light that up.'

'Damn. I got it.'

Gotou threw the cigarette onto his dashboard.

It's because there were people like Yakumo that smokers felt ashamed.

He didn't know about those separated seating places, but recently, there were even cafés that forbade smoking completely.

'If, hypothetically, Andou was the culprit, why did he only have Ayaka-chan's photo?' Yakumo said with a sigh.

'What do you mean?'

'The case this time involves serial abductions and murders. Why doesn't he have photos of the other girls?'

'That's...'

He had been going to rebut, but he couldn't find the words.

It was just as Yakumo said. If Andou was the culprit, it wouldn't be strange for him to have the photos of the other young women.

'There is another thing.'

'What?'

'There was a girl's spirit in that hospital.'

'The daughter's?'

'No.'

'Who was it?'

'I don't know. It was someone besides his daughter.'

Since Gotou couldn't see spirits, he couldn't comment.

Even if he could see them, he didn't feel like thinking about what that meant.

'But well, it's expected for a hospital to have one or two dead spirits...'

Yakumo spoke, almost to himself, and sighed.

'You might be right,' Gotou agreed half-heartedly.

'Now, where are we heading next?'

Yakumo yawned in his boredom.

It appeared that he knew Gotou had not planned on letting him go yet.

'We'll be going back a bit, but we're heading to the flat Andou lived in.'

'Hasn't everything been taken out already?'

'Seems like it.'

'Then wouldn't going be a waste of time?'

Thinking normally, what Yakumo said was correct, but Gotou had different intentions.

'If Andou's the culprit and his room was the scene of the murder, though there might not be any physical evidence left behind, there's the possibility that something else has remained.'

'So you are saying that the spirits of the girls who were killed might be there...'

'Exactly.'

'You really just do whatever you want.'

Though Yakumo complained, he didn't object.

He might've also thought the same thing –

The flat had a green roof and was by the river.

That was where Andou had lived. Gotou's suspicion that it was related to the crime was growing.

Gotou drove his car into the visitor's parking lot on the premises.

'Is it here?' said Yakumo, looking up at the apartment.

'Yeah,' Gotou replied, looking up as well. It was a family-oriented apartment with ten stories. It was aptly called Riverside Apartment.

'It's rather extravagant for someone who was a legal apprentice.'

It was just as Yakumo said.

'Plus it came with parking and he drove a black Benz.'

'He must have been of high status.'

'Damn, it's bigger than my flat.'

'Gotou-san, you have a flat?'

'Yeah, though it's company housing.'

It was a 2LDK². All of the residents were part of the police.

In police work, which often had transferrals, a feat like purchasing a flat with your own money wasn't even remotely possible.

'What a waste,' said Yakumo as he got off the car.

'What is?'

'It's obvious that a wild bear should stay at a camp or the like.'

'Don't make it sound like I'm some monster cat that lives at a school.'

Even though Gotou had actually replied, Yakumo started walking towards the entrance, like he hadn't heard anything at all.

Damn, the guy just does whatever he wants.

They went to the management office near the entrance and were able to borrow the key to the flat Andou had lived in after they said they were further investigating the traffic accident.

Andou lived in a corner flat on the top floor.

When Gotou had heard from the manager that the rent was two hundred thousand yen, he thought his eyes were going to pop out. It felt kind of stupid to work so hard.

He rode the elevator with Yakumo and opened the door to Andou's flat.

Like he had heard before, there were no belongings left. Though the walls and floor had a few marks, it would look like new with some housecleaning.

It was a 2LDK like Gotou's company one, but each and every room was larger.

There were many windows to let light in, so it gave an open and bright impression.

They went around each room. Bathroom, kitchen, toilet –

As expected, they didn't find anything important.

'Hey, Yakumo. Can you see anything?'

Gotou asked Yakumo, who was looking out the window in the twenty-tatami living room.

'No, I see exactly the same thing that you do, Gotou-san.'

An immediate answer. He hadn't been expecting much in the first place. There was no point being disappointed. They would go to the next place.

He moved to leave, but Yakumo was frozen, staring out the window.

² Japan uses letters in real estate to describe housing. 2LDK means that there are two rooms and an area which is used as the living room, dining room and kitchen. You can find some actual examples [here](#).

'What is it?'

'Gotou-san. Could you show me the key Andou had?'

'Why?'

'Please just hurry and let me see.'

After being urged, Gotou took the key in the plastic bag from his pocket and handed it to Yakumo. Yakumo took it and murmured while staring at it.

'E-3... I've found it.'

'What? Really? Where?'

Gotou looked around the living room frantically.

On the floor? The ceiling? The wall? Where? Where was it?'

'Are you trying to sniff it out?'

'Shut up! If you've got the time to make fun of me, hurry and tell me where it is.'

Yakumo's lips turned up into a victorious smile, and he slowly pointed out the window.

Gotou's eyes followed that finger.

He saw the river.

He also saw the water gate where the first victim, Ayaka-chan, had been found.

Yakumo was pointing a few hundred metres upstream.

He saw a building with a flat concrete roof. That was the old water gate. Then, he saw the large characters written in paint on the old water gate's wall.

The characters were, with no doubt –

'E-3,' Yakumo said.

-

10

-

Next, Ishii headed for the family restaurant in the neighbouring city, in order to meet with Andou Takashi's older sister, Hiroko.

Inside the restaurant, which wasn't anything special, he sat at a seat near the window. He ordered a coffee. His stomach was actually empty as well, but he hadn't come to eat.

Hiroko wasn't directly related to Takashi. Takashi was the mistress's son. Hiroko was the wife's daughter. It appeared that they did not have a good relationship.

When Ishii called Takashi's home in Fukuoka, a chatty servant talked freely even about things Ishii hadn't asked about. He also got the older sister's contact information from the servant. The servant had suggested he talk to the sister, who was married and lived there for her husband's job transfer.

The night before, Ishii had contacted Hiroko. After he had said, 'I want to talk to you about Andou Takashi-san,' she had abruptly hung up.

At that point, he had passed the baton to Detective Gotou, and he ended up getting her to agree to meet for just thirty minutes in the evening at a family restaurant away from her home. Ishii didn't know what sorts of negotiation methods were used, but that was Detective Gotou for you.

Five minutes after their arranged meeting time, Hiroko appeared at the family restaurant.

A slender woman with pale skin, she looked graceful at first glance, but her voice and choice of words were peculiarly malicious.

'So what did you want to ask?' Hiroko said, sitting in the seat opposite him.

'I apologise for taking up time in your busy sche...'

'If you think that way, forget about the niceties and get on with it,' Hiroko spoke, interrupting Ishii.

Haughty and overbearing. The type of woman Ishii didn't know how to deal with.

'I apologise. I would like to ask about Andou Takashi-san, but...'

'Oh, it's just you? Where's the detective I spoke with yesterday?'

This time, she changed the subject on her own. An inconsistent woman.

'Detective Gotou had another case, so...'

'Too bad. I wanted to meet him. I'm a sucker for aggressive men like him.'

Hiroko drank her black coffee like she was in a trance.

What was she talking about?

'May I continue?'

'Go ahead.'

Hiroko lit up a cigarette and replied while the smoke spread.

'What sort of person was Takashi-san?'

'Scum!'

'Eh?'

Ishii didn't understand how she could cut down her younger brother with one word like that, even though they weren't directly related.

'Do you have another way of explaining his character to me which would be a bit easier for me to understand?'

'It's appropriate. He was always moping around. He was the mistress's son, but was there a need to adopt him? Since she was the one who went and gave birth to him, she should have gone and raised him. She just killed herself and handed him over to us – there's a limit to shamelessness.'

It was a horrible way to put it.

Even though he was the son of a mistress, being so awful about it was unwarranted.

'Why do you dislike him so much?'

'It's natural, isn't it? He tried to kill me before,' Hiroko said, baring her teeth.

'He tried to kill you?'

'He did. It was right after he came to the house. I tried to be friendly at first, but he was always moping around, so I said this to him: You should've died with your mother. Then, he suddenly put his hands around my neck.'

That didn't really seem sudden.

Saying to someone whose heart was damaged after his mother had killed herself that he should have died with her –

Hiroko hadn't even thought about how much her words could hurt the person who was listening.

'He was influenced by his mother's death.'

'That's not it. He was just crazy.'

That was her comment.

'Did you have no love for your younger brother?'

'Why would I? He was my sibling because I had the courtesy to accept him. We were only half-related by blood. Plus, isn't that suspicious? I don't know what that woman did or where she did it.'

What you're saying isn't courteous at all –

Ishii almost said that aloud.

'In the first place, we took him in because we had to. Even Father said again and again that he'd throw him out if he didn't become someone the Andou family wouldn't be ashamed of.'

Someone the Andou family wouldn't be ashamed of –

Who on earth could that be referring to?

Had he been saying that having a mistress and having a child with her was an appropriate act for the Andou family? Ishii didn't understand.

'Well, though he tried hard to become a legal apprentice, that all went up in smoke with the incident. What an idiot. Father was so angry he said he'd dissolve the adoption.'

What is so strange –

Even though only four days had passed since Andou Takashi's death, she was talking about it as if it was some event from the distant past.

Hiroko spent the next two hours after that letting out her pent-up resentment, flying by the thirty minutes they had agreed on.

Still, how could Andou have felt staying for so long in the same house as somebody who resented him?

After experiencing his mother's death, something must have taken root in Andou's damaged heart.

Then, he was cast out like his mother had been in the end.

Everything is warped –

That was what Ishii felt.

-

11

-

It was already dark when Gotou and Yakumo arrived at the old water gate.

Since it could be seen from the flat, they decided to leave the car and head there on foot, but when they tried to walk there, it was actually unexpectedly far.

It seemed that it had been built to observe the water level and was built like a small guardhouse.

Because of the large water gate that was built five hundred metres upstream, it wasn't in use.

Unlike the rusted iron door, only the keyhole was brand new.

The building itself wasn't in use and had been abandoned for a while, so it was considerably old. Somebody had probably installed the lock afterwards –

Gotou put the key in question into the keyhole and turned it.

There was a click. It opened.

'Bingo,' Yakumo said, standing behind him.

Gotou stepped in while opening the door.

There was something like a light switch on the wall by the entrance, so he tried pushing it, but there was no response.

It's dark –

The torch was in the car. He should have brought it. It'd be a pain to go back to get it now.

Gotou flicked his lighter and lit up the room.

It wasn't a reliable light, but there wasn't anything he couldn't see.

The stink of humidity tickled his nostrils.

There was a massive motor that had probably been used when opening and closing the gate.

Clang.

There was the sound of crashing metal.

Someone was there. Behind the motor. Yakumo tapped Gotou's shoulder. When he looked over, Yakumo was holding a iron pipe that he had picked up from who knows where. What kind of concern was that supposed to be?

Gotou switched the lighter to his left hand and gripped the iron pipe in his right.

– Gotou-san.

Yakumo lowered his voice as he pointed to the right of the motor.

Gotou nodded in response and turned to the right to head behind the motor.

Yakumo turned towards the left.

This way, they would attack from both sides.

Gotou put out his lighter. He'd be able to see once his eyes got used to the dark. He made sure not to make noise as he advanced while hiding himself behind the motor.

Rustle.

There was another noise. The sound of something being dragged.

Now, there was someone ahead. Gotou wiped the sweat from his palm on his trousers and gripped the steel pipe again. He took a deep breath and jumped out at the right time, brandishing the steel pipe over his head.

The source of the noise appeared.

'What the hell!?'

After Gotou threw down the steel pipe, he hurriedly rushed over and flicked open his lighter.

There was a long-haired girl.

She was emaciated – even her breath was faint. She perceived Gotou's figure with clouded eyes and her dry lips moved as if trying to say something.

'Yakumo!' yelled Gotou, but he didn't need to give instructions.

Yakumo ran at full strength.

'It's fine. You'll be OK.'

Gotou draped his coat over the girl and laid a hand on her head.

It was possible that this was Keiko-chan, the girl whose whereabouts were unknown.

What the hell had happened? Gotou was seething with a boiling-hot anger.

-

12

-

By the time Ishii rushed over, the scene was already crowded with patrol cars, police and curious onlookers.

His time was taken up looking for a place to park his car.

Since he was Detective Gotou's subordinate, he felt like a failure for not being able to be present at the time the case was solved.

'Where are you going? What's the point of you rubbernecking too?'

Just as Ishii was trying to push his way through the crowd, Gotou's baritone rang in his voice.

'Ah, Detective Gotou.'

Ishii spotted Gotou sitting slightly apart from the commotion on the stairs at the embankment, smoking a cigarette.

The young man called Yakumo was there too, beside him.

'What on earth has happened?'

He had heard that Detective Gotou was guarding the girl who'd disappeared and had come quickly, but he didn't know any of the details.

'Andou is definitely the culprit.'

'Is that the case?'

Although Gotou glanced over for a bit, he then blew out smoke towards the sky and didn't say anything more.

'The key Andou had. It was the key to the old water gate.'

Yakumo started explaining in Gotou's stead.

'Why did he have the old water gate's key?'

'Keiko-chan, the girl who would have been the third victim, had been confined in the old water gate. Though there had been no concrete evidence until now, something horrible had been left inside.'

Just as Yakumo finished speaking, he let out a huge yawn.

Ishii was happy that Yakumo had explained for him, but Yakumo's tone suggested he was the one who had found the answer to the case.

Even though Detective Gotou is the one who solved it –

'I see you're all together.'

Hata appeared abruptly out of the darkness.

Ishii swallowed the scream that had gone all the way up to his throat. Since the man himself was already ghastly, Ishii wished he would just show up normally. It was bad for his heart.

'Why're you here, old man?'

Gotou put out his cigarette with the heel of his shoe and threw away the cigarette butt.

'Don't just throw your cigarette butt away like that,' said Hata without a moment's delay.

With a click of his tongue, Gotou picked up the cigarette butt and put it in his pocket.

'Answer the question, old man.'

'I came because I heard there was a corpse, but isn't she still living? I came for no reason.'

'Old man, don't sound so disappointed.'

Hata didn't pay Gotou's words any mind and just giggled. He really was just like a demon.

However –

'It's surprising that she's fine. She's been trapped in there for four days already since Andou died,' Ishii said to Gotou.

He was partially talking about her physical strength, but it wouldn't have been strange if she had died of dehydration.

'There were plastic plates scattered around her. There had probably been water and food in those,' Yakumo replied.

'There were things like that?'

Gotou put a hand on his chin and cocked his head.

'Really, it's surprising that you can work as a detective with that humble power of perception.'

Yakumo's manner of speaking didn't bear decorum in mind.

It felt like their places were switched around.

'Shut up,' Gotou spat out, and he lit another cigarette.

'How was your investigation, Ishii-san?' Yakumo asked extremely matter-of-factly.

Why did he need to inform a university student of his investigation? Why wasn't Detective Gotou saying anything? Ishii couldn't understand, so he looked at both of their faces.

'Yakumo. What's the point of asking Ishii now? The case is already over,' Gotou said, scratching at his face.

'It hasn't ended. Have you forgotten your original objective, Gotou-san?'

'Original objective?' Gotou said shrilly.

Yakumo shook his head dramatically, like he didn't know what to do with Gotou.

'We weren't following the serial abduction and murder case, were we? Our original objective was to find out what to do with Andou's soul, which has possessed a woman.'

'Ah, that's right.'

'That was why we needed to know his motive for murder.'

'I see,' Gotou muttered, looking bitter.

That was certainly the case. Ishii had forgotten himself. Just as Yakumo said, their goal this time was to save a woman who had possessed by a ghost.

Saving the girl this time had only been a side-line event.

'So, Ishii. How was it?'

Gotou turned the conversation to Ishii.

'Ah, yes.'

Ishii took the memo from his inner suit pocket and spoke in as much detail as he could about what he had heard from Sergeant Yoda at the police station and Hiroko, Takashi's sister, while sharing his own thoughts.

'It feels a bit sloppy.'

That was the first thing Gotou said after he finished listening to Ishii's explanation.

Ishii felt the same way as Gotou. Even while he was explaining himself, he thought that the story didn't add up.

Hata was idly watching the investigation taking place at the old water gate, like he wasn't paying attention at all.

'Hey, Yakumo. You understand anything?' Gotou asked Yakumo, whose index finger was on his brow like he was thinking about something.

In response, Yakumo suddenly raised his lowered head.

His expression was so cold that Ishii trembled.

'Thanks to Ishii-san's investigation, I have begun to understand, though this is simply my reasoning,' Yakumo said quietly.

'Then tell us,' Gotou said, walking towards Yakumo without hesitation.

'This is only a guess, but... if we put everything we have learnt so far together, doesn't it seem like Andou had necrophobia?'

'Necra... caviar...?' Gotou said, sounding like he didn't understand.

'Necrophobia. You said that on purpose, didn't you?'

'You're so fussy. So what is it?'

'It is a psychological condition wherein one feels extreme fear towards corpses or death itself.'

'So, different from this perverted old man then?' Gotou said jokingly as he pointed at Hata.

'The exact opposite,' Yakumo confirmed indifferently.

Gotou made a 'hm' sound, like he didn't understand fully.

'It is an extreme fear towards specific subjects. They are nothing special to normal people, but they are frightening to the person with the phobia. In Andou's case, the subject was death.'

Ishii didn't know the specifics, but he had heard something like it before.

A type of phobia. An extreme fear would grip the heart when confronted with a specific subject or object.

In severe cases of the condition, some people would become panicked, have spasms or find it difficult to breathe.

Though most people knew about the fear of heights and the fear of pointy objects, it seemed that there was also a fear where death itself was the subject...

'So, what does that have to do with anything?' Gotou asked disinterestedly.

'Andou's mother committed suicide. We cannot know for certain without looking into it, but I think that the young Andou may have seen his mother die. That would have been very traumatic for him.'

His mother had committed suicide in front of him.

How much would that have hurt Andou? Ishii couldn't even imagine.

Inside his head, the image of a boy staring at his mother's hanging corpse appeared. Ishii shivered at that unsettling scene.

'After he was adopted by the Andou family, he lived in great fear of death. He must have tried fervently to be accepted as part of the Andou family so that he wouldn't be abandoned like his mother... In his eyes, which had seen his mother's death, abandonment probably equated to death.'

Yakumo continued to speak in his disinterested tone.

'In that sort of situation, his adopted sister had said this to him. 'You should've died with your mother.' This was like a switch that made him go on a rampage. Those words were taboo to him.'

'I see,' said Gotou to show his comprehension.

'One wouldn't often hear the words "Go die" often if living normally. That happened at the violent incident one month ago. Andou's rampage switch was turned on again when the girl said, "Just go die."'

In Ishii's mind, he recalled Sergeant Yoda's words: 'If the guy had been just a bit calmer.'

Andou must have known himself what would happen if he was reckless then, but he still couldn't stop himself –

'With that, Andou lost the confidence he had built up to live as a member of the Andou family. He was probably terrified that he would be abandoned and die like his mother.'

'But wouldn't that girl have been the target then?' Gotou asked immediately.

'Yes, that would have originally been the case. However, the police restrained him, correct?'

Yakumo turned his gaze to Ishii.

'Ah, y-yes.'

Ishii replied, feeling flustered at the sudden attention.

'Afterwards, Andou happened to find that girl. At the riverbank...'

'That was Ayaka-chan...' said Gotou, dumbfounded.

'Actually, it was Andou's misunderstanding. The girl that time was not Ayaka-chan. Just...'

Just what? Ishii wished Yakumo would stop putting on airs and just tell them.

'Ayaka-chan looked similar to the girl from the incident.'

'Oh, the ponytail.'

Ishii spoke up without thinking.

Right away, everyone turned to look at him. He felt like he would flush at all the attention.

'It is just as Ishii-san says. Andou mistook the girl's identity because of her hairstyle.'

That was right. Ayaka-chan had just been unlucky. She had just looked similar to the other girl.

'Andou, after abducting Ayaka-chan, probably interrogated her about the day his life had been ruined, but Ayaka-chan didn't know anything. At some moment, Ayaka-chan might have said, 'You should die,' to Andou. Then, Andou ended up killing Ayaka-chan.'

After he finished speaking, Yakumo bit his lip. His expression suggested that he regretted what he had said.

'Then what about the next incident?' Gotou said, putting out the cigarette he had smoked to the end with his heel.

'His objective must have changed after that.'

'His objective changed?'

'Yes. By killing Ayaka-chan, he must have felt the fear towards death that had filled him before be mitigated. His goal became killing to divert his fear.'

'What a disgusting guy,' Gotou said, clicking his tongue.

So Andou was killing to make himself feel better from the second person on –

'I feel the same way,' Yakumo said quietly, looking down.

'I understand that much. But what do we do now?' Gotou asked Yakumo.

Why was he doing this? He was the psychic detective. Yakumo was just a university student. Why was Detective Gotou asking Yakumo for instruction despite that?

'That's right...'

Yakumo started thinking and put his index finger to his brow again.

Nobody opened their mouth. Everyone's eyes were on Yakumo.

'I have thought of one method. If we can use his fear well...'

Finally, Yakumo spoke.

'OK, let's go with that!' Gotou said.

'I haven't said anything yet. You really are an irresponsible person.'

Yakumo gave Gotou a sidelong glance, looking like he felt that Gotou was making fun of him.

'Well, this is also the first time I've tried this method, so I can't guarantee its success.'

'I get it, so just tell us.'

'In this plan, Hata-san's cooperation will be indispensable.'

'Mine?'

Hata, who had suddenly been brought up in the conversation, pointed at himself and spoke in his

confusion.

'Yes. I apologise for the inconvenience, but I would appreciate it if you would prepare what I ask of you as quickly as possible.'

What on earth was starting?

Ishii felt gooseflesh rise on his body.

-

13

-

The following afternoon, Haruka visited Yakumo's secret hiding place.

As usual, his hair made it look like he had just gotten out of bed, and his eyes looked so sleepy that Haruka almost suspected he had lost consciousness.

Then, once she arrived –

'You're late. Do you have no sense of time?'

He said something fault-finding like that.

'What do you mean, I'm late? I don't remember setting a time.'

Haruka sat on the chair facing Yakumo, who rubbed at his eyes and yawned. He looked like a cat washing its face.

'So tell me what happened in order.'

Haruka placed the phone strap she had received from Mayuko on the table and explained what had happened in the past two days in as much detail as she could.

While she explained, Yakumo had his arms crossed, and his expression didn't change.

'So you put the ghost that appeared in the river and your older sister together and went crazy.'

'Went crazy? Don't make me sound like some wild ox.'

She objected, but she really had gone a bit crazy.

When she was chasing the girl's ghost, Ayaka had always been in a corner of her mind. That was why she had been more absorbed than necessary.

'Honestly. Even you have a head to think with, don't you? You're not Gotou-san, so I would appreciate it if you wouldn't act instinctively like an animal.'

'Yes, that's right. I was wrong.'

Haruka clenched her teeth angrily, but it had no effect at all.

'If you had just talked to me from the beginning, this wouldn't have caused so much trouble.'

'Sorry.'

She really did feel it was her fault.

She had tried hard on her own not to cause anybody trouble, but in the end, she had brought the case to Yakumo.

'In the first place, this incident is linked to the one Gotou-san brought in.'

'Eh?'

What did he mean, linked?

'You really are special, aren't you?'

She wasn't special at all.

'I'm saying that the ghost your friend saw is related to the case that Gotou-san brought it.'

'It is?'

'The case Gotou-san brought was about a woman who has been possessed by a spirit. When looking for the identity of the spirit possessing her, we found a man called Andou who had died in a traffic accident.'

From what Haruka had heard so far, she couldn't think of how it was related.

'In that man's possessions, there was a photo of the daughter of the doctor at Kinoshita Hospital who took you in. Gotou-san and I were looking into that.'

Ah, so that's how it is.

That's why the two of them were at the hospital too –

'Doctor Kinoshita's daughter was abducted and murdered a month ago.'

'Murdered?'

'Yes. She was murdered and thrown into the river, and she washed ashore at the water gate.'

'That's terrible...'

Haruka remembered Kinoshita's worn-out face.

The shadow that he was burdened with. That had been the cruel reality of his daughter's murder –

'His daughter's name was Ayaka.'

Yakumo pointed at the phone strap Haruka had brought.

She understood now. They were linked.

'I wonder if the ghost I saw at the river was the girl who had been murdered.'

'That's probably the case, from what I've heard,' Yakumo said with a yawn. 'Honestly. This might have been solved faster if you hadn't been so oddly secretive and just told me in the first place.'

'Even if you say that...'

There was nothing she could have done – she wouldn't even have thought in a dream that the two cases were linked.

'Still, something doesn't fit...'

'What doesn't fit?' Haruka asked, not quite understanding.

'Honestly. Are you a dinosaur?'

'Dinosaur?'

'I'm saying that your responses are slow.'

This monster cat always said too much –

'That girl's ghost said to “stop already”, right?'

Haruka nodded.

The girl had said that at the river then.

'That's what doesn't fit. What on earth did that girl want to stop?'

'That's...'

Haruka didn't know.

'She probably can't rest because of that something we don't know – what she wants to stop.'

Yakumo rested his chin in his hands.

'What are you going to do?'

'Well, there's no point just speculating. Anyway, first, we'll go there...'

'Let's go then.'

Haruka followed Yakumo's words and stood up.

-

14

-

There's somewhere I want to go before we head to the scene –

First, Yakumo went to the temple that his uncle lived in.

The last time Haruka came, she had had to wait at the door, but this time, since Yakumo didn't say anything, she followed him in past the gravel garden towards the priests' quarters.

Yakumo opened the sliding door at the entrance and had just taken off his shoes when he looked over at her, like he had just remembered something.

'Wait in the living room.'

'Excuse me – I'm coming in,' Haruka said to nobody in particular. Then, she took off her shoes at the entrance and went into the living room as she had been told to.

The room was at least eight tatami mats in size. Nobody appeared to be here.

'Sit over there and wait.'

After Yakumo said that, Haruka said, 'Excuse me,' and she sat at the horigotatsu³ in the living room.

'Don't scamper about.'

After saying that, Yakumo left the room.

Scamper about? He was treating her like a child. She wished he would speak with her on a more equal footing. Plus, she didn't mind waiting, but he could have at least told her why they were here.

Yakumo just likes always being the only person who ever knows anything.

He doesn't care what anyone else thinks.

If someone comes, what excuse should I make –

When she was all alone in a quiet room, it made her feel a bit uneasy.

Haruka sighed.

Suddenly, she noticed somebody else was there and looked up.

'Ah!'

She had been surprised. At some point in time, a girl had sat right in front of her. She was probably around seven years old. She was a cute girl with big, round eyes and glossy black hair in a bob cut.

The girl didn't say anything and just had her chin in her hands as she stared at Haruka with a smile.

Who was she? Since she was in this house, was she Yakumo's cousin?

'Hello.'

Haruka tried speaking to the girl, but she didn't respond.

She's just looking at me with the same expression. Did she not hear me? Or does she just not want to respond –

Haruka didn't know what she should do. For a while, she just looked back at the girl.

'What's your name?'

She tried speaking to her again, but still there was no response.

While Haruka was still bewildered, the girl cocked her head curiously.

'Are you one of the children here?'

The girl still didn't answer.

'She's my cousin, Nao.'

At some point, Yakumo had returned to stand at the living room's entrance.

Once the girl called Nao saw Yakumo, she started clapping her hands and smiled without speaking.

'There's no use talking to her directly.'

3 A horigotatsu (掘炬燵) is a type of kotatsu. It is a low, covered table – sometimes heated – that is placed over a hole in the floor, so one sits at it like one would on a regular chair. [Here's](#) an example of a heated one.

'No use? What do you mean?'

'Nao can't hear.'

'Can't hear...'

I hadn't realised –

Even though this girl was burdened with a handicap, she was relentlessly cheerful. Unlike a certain somebody.

'You don't need sound if you want to speak with Nao. Try speaking with her in your head.'

Haruka didn't really understand what Yakumo was saying.

What did he mean by speak in her head? To test it out, Haruka said <Hello> to Nao without opening her mouth.

<Hello.>

'Eh?'

She had definitely heard a voice just now.

Nao hadn't opened her mouth. Yakumo hadn't spoken, but she felt like she had heard something directly in her head. Nao clapped her hands again and laughed.

The way she seemed so delighted made Haruka feel happy too.

'Nao, that's great.'

Yakumo patted Nao on the head. Nao nodded proudly.

'It's the way she communicates, since she can't hear. I don't understand the principle behind it, but she creates mutual understanding through a method besides sound waves, though she can't do this with everyone.'

Haruka felt like she understood at least some of it.

'OK, we're going.'

Haruka stood up after Yakumo spoke.

Then, Nao rushed over and clung tightly to Haruka's leg, looking up at her with a face that looked like it could cry at any moment.

'Seems like Nao likes you.'

After Yakumo said that, he bent down so that he was eye level with Nao.

He had a gentle expression on his face that Haruka had never seen before. The two of them were almost definitely talking about something.

Finally, Nao reluctantly let go of Haruka's leg.

'Good girl.'

Yakumo patted Nao's head and left the living room.

Haruka tried to follow Yakumo too, but she stopped and tried to speak to Nao once more in her head. <Bye bye. See you again.> Nao jumped and waved her hand. Her message had got across – It made her feel cheerful, somehow.

'Oh? Haruka-chan was here too?'

When she left the living room, somebody called out to her.

She looked over to see Yakumo's uncle, Isshin, standing in the corridor in monks' working clothes. He had a red contact lens in his left eye as usual.

'Hello. Sorry for intruding.'

'That Yakumo didn't even say anything. If I knew, I would have poured you some tea.'

'Oh no, that's not necessary. You don't have to pay me any attention.'

'No, it's not too late. I'm going to get some tea, so relax a bit.'

'Eh, but...'

'There's youkan⁴ in the fridge too.'

'Uncle. We don't have much time.'

Yakumo had his arms crossed sullenly in the entranceway.

'Spoilsport.'

Yakumo's uncle's lips were pursed like a sulky child.

'Honestly, Nao was more obedient. Uncle, you know the place, right? Please don't forget, since you are the key man this time.'

'I get it, I get it.'

Yakumo's uncle spoke in a light tone. Haruka didn't know what they were talking about, but she felt like whatever she heard, it couldn't be counted on.

'We're going.'

Yakumo was rushing her, sounding irritated, so Haruka thanked Yakumo's uncle once more and followed Yakumo out.

-

15

-

'Old man, you did pretty well.'

At Gotou's words, the corners of Hata's mouth turned up in a proud smile.

To put it plainly, it was gross. Gotou slightly regretted praising him.

4 Youkan (羊羹) is a type of Japanese dessert made of red bean paste, agar and sugar to form a jelly (the youkan).

It felt like the old man would eat a person someday.

The unique atmosphere of the autopsy room might have strengthened that feeling.

The combined smell of disinfectant and blood irritated his nostrils, so he had been breathing with his mouth since earlier.

'Thanks to that, I had to stay up all night,' Hata grumbled, all the while triumphantly looking at what was on the stainless steel autopsy table.

On it was an elaborately reproduced model of a person from the neck up.

From the texture of the skin to the feel of the hair, it was just like the real thing.

'But you really made it well.'

'Since it's not my area of expertise, I wasn't confident.'

As Hata said that, he covered it with a cloth.

'What material did you use?'

'Synthetic resin.'

'What's that?'

'It's a rubber often used in films for special makeup.'

Gotou understood.

In old sci-fi films, you could tell right away that the makeup was fake, but the techniques had gotten better so you couldn't tell just by looking.

'Well, I'll expose the trick – I had help from an acquaintance who does special make-up for films.'

Hata's shoulders shook with laughter, like he found something funny.

But that would mean –

'Didn't that cost you money?'

'There was some give and take.'

Gotou didn't understand what a coroner and special make-up artist had to give and take.

'What do you mean?'

'Since my acquaintance said they wanted to study in order to make things more realistic, I agreed to let them witness a few autopsies.'

So the old man had done something like that secretly? Gotou was so shocked he couldn't even be angry.

'By the way, is that young man called Ishii all right?' Hata asked, like he had suddenly remembered about him.

'No idea. He's not a kid. He'll get by.'

'You're in an unpleasant mood, I see.'

'Unpleasant isn't the word I'd use!'

Of course he was in a bad temper.

Even though he had saved the girl and should've been praised, Ideuchi had gone on and on about how Gotou had stuck his neck into a case outside of his jurisdiction.

Well, Gotou could understand why Ideuchi wasn't happy. The whole investigation unit had run around wildly for this case. White station wagon, dating sites, people at schools who might have been clues – they'd gone around everywhere but found no leads.

Then, Gotou and company, who were completely unrelated to the case, had solved it somewhere completely unexpected.

However, Gotou couldn't agree with them taking all the credit.

Girl's dramatic rescue! That was how the press release put it. Gotou's existence had been completely erased.

It really pissed him off. Gotou's anger, which had no outlet, had been turned completely towards Ishii.

'Under no circumstances would I want to work under you,' Hata said, showing his yellow teeth.

'I wouldn't want you to either,' Gotou said brusquely, which made Hata's shoulders shake with laughter again for some reason.

Like I said, stop. It's gross –

-

16

-

Do your best, Ishii Yuutarou. You're a man, right?

Ishii encouraged himself and faced the door.

It was the same as the last time he came. A feeling of chilling oppression so strong it was difficult to breathe.

On the opposite side of the door, there was a woman who had been possessed by a ghost.

When Ishii thought that, the extremely ordinary door felt like a gigantic gate leading to hell.

Though the chief's wife had said that she was sleeping now, Ishii still couldn't relax.

He recalled the nightmare he had the day before yesterday of the first time he had seen her.

That voice that resonated to his stomach. Those wide-open inflamed eyes. It was no exaggeration to say that it was the most terrifying thing he had ever seen.

I really don't want to go.

But I have to –

Ishii wiped the sweat from his palms on his trousers and placed a hand on the doorknob.

He took care not to make any noise, turned the knob and slowly opened the door.

The dim room –

The suffocating atmosphere –

He saw Makoto sleeping face-up on the bed.

Her chest went up and down quietly with her breathing.

He definitely wouldn't have her notice him while he was here. Ishii matched his steps to the rhythm of her breathing as he approached her bed.

A wheelchair had been prepared by her bed.

Ishii had asked the chief's wife in advance to have it put in the room.

He just had to sit her in the chair and push her out. It wasn't anything difficult. Ishii repeated that to himself.

He put his hands on both sides of her and tried to pick her up. At that moment, Makoto's eyes opened.

She's awake. She woke up –

Ishii stopped thinking. His head went blank.

While he was frozen, Makoto twisted herself away and bit Ishii's arm.

'Gyaah!'

Ishii's scream echoed through the room.

-

17

-

Haruka went with Yakumo to the embankment of the Tama River.

There were white herons flying.

The little waves glittered with sunlight.

'It's beautiful,' she said while quickly glancing at Yakumo's face.

However, her words were drowned out by the sound of a Keio Line⁵ train running along the overhead bridge.

'Did you say something?'

'No, it was nothing.'

Haruka shook her head.

Yakumo didn't ask any further either.

5 The Keio (京王) Line is a railway line in western Tokyo, where the Tama River is.

Haruka could see the water gate.

She remembered what Yakumo had said earlier.

That water gate was where the murdered Ayaka-chan had been found. When she thought about that, somehow, that area alone looked stagnant with darkness.

Yakumo went down the embankment silently and climbed the rock that Haruka had been standing on the day before yesterday. He looked at the river from there.

Those narrowed eyes could definitely see something.

Something that only Yakumo can see –

Like a flashback in a film, the scene that she had seen in the water came back to her.

'Stop,' that girl had said. Even though she was dead, she kept asking this. What did she want to stop?

After a while, Yakumo came back to the riverside.

He looked depressed.

'Did you find out anything?'

'You always rush to conclusions like that. It's because you try to reach a conclusion without looking at the whole picture that you do things like falling into rivers.'

The two things weren't related. He really was ridiculously cynical.

'But I've understood a few things.'

'What are they?'

'There certainly appears to be the spirit of a murdered girl wandering in this river.'

After Haruka heard Yakumo's words, her chest started feeling tight.

'Is the girl wandering because she resents having been murdered?'

She said exactly what she thought.

Yakumo raised a shoulder and made a face at her.

'Do you really think that?'

'I don't.'

'Then don't say that.'

It was just as he said.

When Haruka had been drawn into the river, she had felt like the girl's emotions were flowing through her.

They hadn't been hatred or resentment, but something mixed with sadness, though I can't explain properly what that something was –

'Something is keeping her in this place.'

'Something is keeping her?'

'Yes. A strong sentiment which is trapping her here... probably...'

Yakumo's last words sounded like they were meant for himself, and she couldn't hear until the end.

Yakumo probably hadn't put everything together yet himself.

'Missy, you were all right then?'

When Haruka turned around at the voice, she saw a man standing there in work clothes. He was Uchiyama-san, the man from the management office who had saved her.

'Thank you very much for saving me the other day. I apologise for being so late with my thanks,' Haruka said quickly, bowing her head.

'Really, I told you to be careful but you fell right in. Well, the most important thing is that you're OK.'

Uchiyama's smile filled his face.

The man's smile seemed to have the effect of easing wariness.

'I really don't know how to thank you...'

'It's fine. Ah, is this your boyfriend?' Uchiyama said, staring at Yakumo's face.

'It appears that you have taken care of my sister. I truly apologise. This girl is clumsier than the average person.'

Yakumo bowed his head. Did he hate being seen as her lover that much?

'Oh, you're her older brother? You look alike.'

There was no way they looked alike. They didn't even share one drop of blood.

'Anyway, try not to fall in again.'

Uchiyama started to leave with a smile on his face, but Yakumo called out to stop him.

'Excuse me. I'd like to ask one thing.'

'What is it?'

'Does Doctor Kinoshita come here often?'

For a moment, Uchiyama looked surprised, but then he started speaking after a sigh.

'Before, he would come once a week or so. He'd come with his daughter to take a stroll and invite me to dinner.'

'Is that so?'

'Ayaka-chan's cooking was incredibly delicious, like Kinoshita's wife's. I always looked forward to eating her cooking.'

'So you were acquaintances with Doctor Kinoshita from before.'

'Kinoshita and I were in the same class in middle school. He was the most successful of our

classmates. He became a doctor, married the school idol and had a daughter with her...'

Uchiyama gave a self-derisive laugh.

'Childhood friends then.'

'Well, I guess that's right. I played a lot with Ayaka-chan as well. Especially after Kazumi... after his wife died, Kinoshita and I said stupidly that we'd raise his daughter with two fathers to make up for the mother she lost.'

Uchiyama's eyes were glistening with tears.

His voice was trembling a bit as well.

'I'm not joking – she really was like a daughter to me. That was...'

Uchiyama snivelled and took a towel from the pocket of his work clothes to wipe his face.

'Were you the one who found Ayaka-chan's corpse?' Yakumo asked, examining Uchiyama's response.

'I was. What a fate,' Uchiyama said quietly, biting his lip in frustration.

'Where did you find Ayaka-chan's corpse?'

'Ah, there's a control tower in the river, right?'

Uchiyama pointed at the concrete tower nearly at the centre of the river.

There was a cubic building on top of the tower and about one metre of walking space around it, which was surrounded by an iron fence. It was connected to the management office by an iron bridge.

'I found the corpse just underneath there when I was checking on the water level.'

'I see.'

'I couldn't forgive the person who did that.'

The conversation didn't go any further.

Haruka couldn't look directly at Uchiyama's face and just gazed out at the moving surface of the river.

Finally, Uchiyama laughed bitterly like he felt he had said too much. After saying, 'I've got work to do,' he got into the truck parked nearby and left.

That man had feelings for Ayaka-chan that were greater than just those towards a friend's daughter. That's what Haruka felt.

'Somehow, he seems so pitiful.'

'Losing somebody important isn't something that can be so easily put away with words,' Yakumo said. Haruka understood that all too well, since her older sister had died.

The feeling of loss wasn't temporary. It followed you forever.

It appeared that Yakumo had seen something near his feet, and he stooped over to pick it up and

stare at it. It looked like a notebook.

'That's...'

'It's probably something Uchiyama-san from earlier dropped.'

If they had noticed earlier, they could have handed it right to him –

Yakumo opened the notebook. He shouldn't just look at other people's things – is what Haruka thought, but she ended up peeking too.

There was a photo on each of the pages the notebook was open to. One was of Uchiyama-san, twenty years younger than he was now, with a woman about the same age. The other was a photo of Ayaka-chan.

'Oh! So you really were here!'

A loud voice interrupted her thoughts, and she saw somebody waving from the top of the embankment. It was Detective Gotou.

'Please don't speak in such a loud voice. It's embarrassing,' Yakumo said, covering his ears pointedly.

'I'll push you into the river.'

'Please, do as you like.'

'This guy...'

Gotou was gnashing his teeth.

'So, have you finished with the preparations?'

'Yeah, everything's perfect. All that's left is you.'

'Then shall we go?'

Yakumo put the notebook he found earlier into his pocket.

'What will you do, Haruka-chan?' Gotou asked, pointing at her with his chin.

'What will I do?'

She didn't understand what the two of them were talking about at all.

'We're going to set a little trap,' Yakumo said.

'A trap?'

-

18

-

Haruka decided to follow Yakumo and Gotou without understanding the situation.

They drove to an autopsy room in the basement of a general hospital in the city.

In the centre of the windowless room, there was a stainless steel bed.

A mobile tray with tools for surgery was placed next to it.

On one side, there was a line of something that looked like doors to large refrigerators. She had seen them before in movies. Human corpses were stored inside them.

It felt much chillier than it had been outside, and gooseflesh had risen on her skin. That might have been because of the atmosphere of the autopsy room.

To be honest, Haruka had started regretting her decision.

'Are you scared?' Yakumo whispered in her ear. His mocking tone got on her nerves so she curtly retorted, 'Not really.'

'Oh, you're all together, I see.'

A small-framed old man in white appeared from the back of the room.

'This is the coroner, Hata-san.'

Gotou introduced him to Haruka.

'It's nice to meet you.'

Haruka bowed, but Hata didn't reply, like he didn't see her at all.

'Hata-san. Where is it?'

When Yakumo asked his question, Hata smiled proudly.

Though this old man had a rude way of speaking, he felt a bit like an apparition. Like he drank blood or something.

Hata opened one of the cold storages and pulled out a sliding bed.

'Eek!'

Haruka jumped and shrieked without thinking.

There was a man's corpse there. There was a large cut from the left cheek to the nose.

'Don't get surprised at everything. That's a fake.'

Yakumo's expression didn't change as he spoke, and then he approached the bed and turned over the white sheet that covered up to the neck.

Only the portion from the neck and up had been accurately reproduced, while the lower portion was just a mannequin.

'That perverted old man made it. Only the face has been constructed to be identical to the real thing.'

Gotou added to Yakumo's insufficient explanation.

'That's a fake.'

It was exquisitely created.

Just looking at the portion above the neck, anybody would think it was real.

'Hata-san, it's perfect. I didn't think it would be done so well. You truly are talented.'

Hata laughed happily like a child at Yakumo's words.

'Gotou-san. Please take that out.'

'OK.'

Gotou took a cage out from beneath the table by the bed.

There was a white mouse inside. A mouse? Things were just getting more cryptic. What on earth were these people trying to do?

Gotou put the mouse in the cage by the replica of a man.

'Now, our trap has been set.'

Yakumo covered the fake man up to his neck and said that, sounding satisfied. Gotou and Hata also smiled in the same way.

'Wait. What are you planning to do?' Haruka asked, unable to hold back.

Even she knew her voice was shaking. She felt like she had been caught by a fox.

'An exorcism,' Yakumo replied innocently.

'Exorcism? But Yakumo-kun, you...'

Can't do exorcisms. Yakumo had said that before.

During the last case, Yakumo himself had said, 'I can only see them. I can't pretend to be skilful enough to exorcise anything. It's hard to believe that chanting spells would make the spirits of the dead disappear.'

Despite that, he says he's going to do an exorcism –

'Just as you say, I did say before that I can't exorcise spirits.'

'Then what is this?'

'I said this before too, but the spirits of the dead aren't demons or a new species. Though there is the difference of physical life or death, in the end, they're still human beings.'

Haruka nodded. She certainly had heard that before.

'That's why I'm going to negotiate with the soul of the dead man and have him leave the physical body he's possessing now on his own.'

She didn't understand what he was saying at all.

'Well, it'll be quicker if you watch it happen rather than if you listen to my explanation,' Yakumo said, raking his fingers through his hair.

That might be true.

'Sorry. What should I do?'

Suddenly, the door opened, and Yakumo's uncle, Isshin, showed his face.

Instead of his usual monks' working clothes, he was wearing a proper robe⁶. It was natural since it was his actual job, but it looked good.

'Why are you saying something so inane all of a sudden? I gave you a proper explanation already, didn't I? You're the key man this time, Uncle.'

Yakumo walked towards Isshin.

'Don't put so much pressure on me. I don't do well when I'm nervous.'

Isshin scratched his head, embarrassed.

'Also, please remove that tasteless contact lens. That's my duty this time.'

'I like it though.'

While Isshin said that, he took the red contact lens out of his left eye.

'Now, preparations are complete. It's show time.'

'Yeah!' Gotou said loudly. He took out his mobile and made a call to somewhere.

'There's still time now. If you find this unpleasant, you can leave.'

Yakumo stood next to Haruka and whispered in her ear.

She really was frightened. She was frightened, but now that she had been shown such an incomprehensible scene, she couldn't just leave without seeing it end.

'I'm fine.'

'You should stand in the corner of the room so you don't stand out.'

Haruka obeyed Yakumo's instructions and stepped away from everyone.

'He'll come soon.'

Just as Gotou said that, tension filled the room.

After that, there was a long silence during which nobody opened their mouths.

Haruka held her chest – she could hear the sound of heart beating quickly in her nervousness.

After a while, there was the sound of a knock and the door opened.

Ishii stood in the doorway, pushing a wheelchair.

For some reason, there was a bruise on his eye, and his hair was all mussed up. His tie, which had been in a proper triangular knot, was also a miserable sight.

A woman sat in the wheelchair Ishii was pushing.

She hung her head, so her long hair hid her face. Both her wrists were bound to the chair's armrests. This was the woman who had been possessed –

6 Isshin would have clothes for non-spiritual duties, called samue (作務衣) and proper robes for when he was doing spiritual duties, called houe (法衣). Here is a [link](#) to a site that sells houe and accessories, while [this site](#) called Samue Life sells samue and accessories, so you can take a look at them (and gawk at prices, my heavens).

After Ishii carried the wheelchair into the room, he collapsed onto the floor right there.

Isshin walked until he stood in front of the woman in the wheelchair and he knelt there.

'You're Andou Takashi-san, aren't you?'

The woman's head slowly tilted up.

Inflamed eyes peered out from between strands of hair. Haruka shivered at the feeling of intimidation.

'Whooo aaare youuu?'

Her dry and cracked purple lips moved.

The voice was hoarse and low – it didn't sound like a woman's at all.

'I am a monk. My name is Saitou Isshin.'

Once she heard that, the woman's shoulders shook with laughter. She opened her mouth up wide, and spittle flew out.

It was a viscid laughter that followed you around.

'I'm not leaviiing. Thiiis boody is miine.'

'Please do as you like,' Isshin said innocently. 'If you don't want to leave that body, you can just stay there.'

The woman cocked her head and stared at Isshin, like she found his words odd. Isshin accepted the gaze directly and even smiled.

'Today, I have come to give you a warning.'

The woman growled.

'It's fine that you've possessed another body, but it doesn't move like you want it to. Am I wrong?'

The woman didn't respond. All Haruka could hear was the sound of heavy breathing.

'There is only one soul in a person's body. That is the way of things in this world. Though the body is called the vessel of the soul, that does not mean that any soul will do. Though the body and the soul are seen as separate things, the truth is that they are the same. The body and the soul. They are connected as one.'

Isshin said that much and paused to check his listener's response.

'If a soul enters a body that is not its original vessel, in the end, that soul will disappear...'

Isshin quietly.

His tone of voice was perfect. Haruka couldn't tell if it was an act or the truth.

'Shuuut uuup.'

The woman raised her voice and her body squirmed left and right.

'Do you remember this person?'

Isshin gestured at Yakumo, who bowed and walked to Isshin's side.

'From the moment he was born, this man has had the unique ability to see the spirits of the dead.'

'Liiies.'

'It isn't a lie. If it were, there would be no way for me to know that you are Andou Takashi.'

The woman started growling again.

'Yakumo. Show the proof.'

'Yes.'

Yakumo knelt in front of the woman and took out the contact lens in his left eye.

He looked at the woman with his completely red eye.

'Eeeeeek.'

There was an inappropriate shriek.

When Haruka took a look for the owner of the voice, every muscle in Ishii's face was stiff in shock.

That was right – he didn't know about Yakumo's red left eye. Gotou-san should have at least given him a bit of an explanation.

'Don't make such shameful noises.'

Gotou struck Ishii's head with all his strength.

'This red eye is better proof than anything else. Yakumo, do you see something?'

Isshin paid the outside commotion no mind and spoke to Yakumo.

'Yes. There are two spirits in one body. They are both resisting,' Yakumo said indifferently.

Isshin nodded several times at Yakumo's words.

'Now, Yakumo. What will happen if we leave this as is?'

'They will probably disappear.'

'They'll disappear?'

'Yes. The body has rejected the soul so it is considerably weakened. The situation is like a flame before a gust. If everything stays as is, it will not even last a day.'

'Shuuut uuup.'

The woman bent forward, and after she coughed several times, she vomited something onto the floor.

Shlop.

A dark red clump of blood.

'Uwaaaa.'

Haruka heard Ishii shriek again. Then, the sound of his head being hit. There was no point in even

looking over.

'Hm, this is not good.'

'We do not even have a moment to waste,' Yakumo said, adding to Isshin's words.

'Andou-kun. I know a way to save you,' Isshin murmured into the woman's ears.

Perhaps those words had been a sign, because Gotou pushed the wheelchair the woman was sitting in over to the imitation corpse covered with a sheet.

In response to the movements around her, the woman started flailing.

Hata took the sheet off of the imitation corpse to reveal an exquisite face of a human being. Haruka felt uncomfortable no matter how many times she looked at it.

The woman stopped moving –

'This is your corpse, is it not? This corpse is no longer functioning, but it is still alive. It only appears to be dead. However, there has been a fair amount of time since it lost its soul. Soon...'

Isshin left a moment of silence.

'It will have reached its limit.'

The woman looked down and muttered something.

Haruka could understand just from looking. The spirit's heart was shaking. The scenario Yakumo had written, the work Gotou and Hata had constructed, and Isshin's realistic performance –

So this was the trap Yakumo had been referring to.

'What will you do?'

The woman muttered something at Isshin's question.

Haruka couldn't hear what she said.

'You have the choices. I will not force you. You should make your own decision.'

Isshin touched the woman's head with a hand holding a string of beads.

The woman shook her head back and forth, throwing her hair about.

'I see. You don't want to. There's nothing to do then. That is unfortunate.'

Isshin signalled with his eyes. Hata and Gotou put their hands on the bed.

'Then...'

Isshin whispered the finishing blow in the woman's ear.

'You should die.'

'Ooooo.'

At Isshin's one phrase, the woman screamed and started trembling.

Hata made a face and tried to push her down onto the bed.

'Not yet,' Yakumo said. Hata stopped his actions.

Yakumo looked at the woman with serious eyes.

The woman's body continued to convulse.

Everyone was waiting to see what would happen next, and the tension was so thick it felt like it could be cut with a knife.

Even Haruka's fists were clammy with sweat, though she hadn't done anything.

She could hear her heart beating loudly.

'Gyaaa.'

At the same time as her scream, the woman's body bent backwards. Hata and Gotou were restless.

'Not yet,' Yakumo said immediately.

Yakumo was waiting for the right timing for something.

Suddenly, the woman's body lost its strength and it pitched forward.

'Squeak.'

There was the cry of the mouse.

That was the trap.

'Now!' Yakumo shouted. Hata pushed the bed into the cold storage. Gotou kicked the door shut. To finish, Hata locked the door.

Silence –

Nobody said anything. It felt like they couldn't believe that the plan they had come up with had occurred before their eyes.

'Is it done?'

Finally, Gotou spoke, a thin layer of sweat covering his forehead.

'Yes. It's done.'

A smile appeared on Yakumo's lips.

'What happened to the man called Andou?' Hata asked with a sniff.

'His soul left her body and tried to return to its own. However...'

'He couldn't go back, since it was a doll.' Gotou continued Yakumo's sentence.

'Exactly. Currently, he has probably possessed the nearby mouse.'

Yakumo raked his fingers through his hair and let out a deep breath, sounding exhausted.

'How was my performance?'

Isshin asked a question that was inappropriate for the situation.

Yakumo glared at him, but Haruka couldn't help but smile.

The tension that had built up had left her.

-

19

-

Ishii held his dizzy head and left the autopsy room to sit on the bench in the corridor.

He had heard from Gotou that they were going to exorcise the spirit from the woman today.

Then, just as he had said, the exorcism had taken place.

The exorcism had been drastically different from what he had imagined.

He didn't know how to explain it. Rather than an exorcism, it might have been more appropriate to call it bargaining or negotiation.

However, that was still more than enough to terrify him.

Especially the young man called Yakumo. What was that red eye?

It looked like something was burning in the back of his eye. Why was everyone OK with looking at it? He could excuse Gotou and Hata, but Ishii couldn't understand how even she was calm about it.

'Are you OK?'

Ishii raised his head when somebody called out to him.

Haruka stood in front of his eyes.

'Yes, I'm fine. Something of this level is nothing to worry about.'

Ishii was so surprised he stood up reflexively.

'You're bleeding.'

Haruka pointed at Ishii's right arm.

He had been so frantic he hadn't noticed at all. There were clearly teeth marks on his right arm, and blood was oozing out.

'I am.'

Even he thought his response was stupid.

Haruka burst into laughter. Ah, the way she looked when she laughed melted away his pain.

'Please use this.'

Haruka held out some gauze.

She treated even someone like him so kindly. What a gentle woman.

'There is a lot of gauze in that room. It should be fine if you use a little.'

'Th-th-th-thank you very much.'

'Ishii took the gauze from Haruka and pressed it against his wound.'

'You should have it examined properly afterwards,' Haruka said, sitting down on the bench.

If Ishii sat down now, that would make it so that he was sitting side-by-side with Haruka-chan. Wouldn't they almost look like lovers then?

'Are you not going to sit?'

'Ah, no, I like standing!'

His mind had gone blank.

Ishii had gone to an ex-boys' middle and high school. When Ishii had enrolled, it had been co-ed, but the number of female students had been overwhelmingly low.

He had been in science and engineering for university as well, so most of the students had been male. He had been invited to mixers and things like that, but he had obstinately refused since university was a place to work hard on his studies – not to play.

He hadn't had many opportunities to interact with woman even at this age. He had no immunity.

Ishii gave a sidelong glance at Haruka sitting next to him.

Ah, how lovely. She's just like an angel –

The door in front of him opened and Yakumo came out.

He was wearing a contact lens now, so his eye was black. Still, that red eye came up again inside Ishii's mind.

He hurriedly covered his mouth with both hands to stop himself from yelping.

'We're leaving.'

In response to Yakumo's words, Haruka stood up.

'Hey, give me a proper explanation about what happened.'

'I explained already, didn't I? Are you already trying to play the fool?'

What was he saying to Haruka-chan?

'Play the fool? ... That's not it – I'm saying explain it in a way that I can understand too.'

'Shall I draw you a picture book?'

'You – Stupid!'

Haruka rushed after Yakumo, who was walking away briskly.

Haruka-chan, don't. If you stay with that demon-like man, you'll become demon-like yourself –

Ishii's call in his heart didn't reach her.

'What are you spacing out for?'

Suddenly, he was hit in the back of his head.

When he turned around, he saw Gotou standing imposingly with a difficult expression on his face.

'We're going.'

After Gotou informed him of that, he went down the corridor with his long strides.

Ah, please wait –

Ishii hurried chased after Gotou.

I fell –

-

20

-

Hadn't it already ended?

Even Hata couldn't hide his surprise.

Andou was supposed to be the culprit.

That Andou had been exorcised by Yakumo yesterday.

In the first place, Andou had already been dead then.

Even if he hadn't been exorcised, he shouldn't have been able to commit another crime.

Despite that –

The scene of the crime was right in front of him. It was exactly the same as before. The early morning dumpsite. There was the drowned corpse of a fourteen-year-old girl.

There were lacerations on the ankle which suggested that something had bound it.

Her name was Hashimoto Rumi-chan.

After she left school yesterday, she didn't return home. She had stayed out overnight without giving notice many times before.

The parents had thought it was just her doing what she always did, so they hadn't asked for an investigation and had just waited for their daughter to return –

Then, this morning, she had been found as a corpse.

The other investigation team members probably thought the same thing. Everyone was silent. They didn't know how to accept the reality in front of them.

Hata suddenly felt somebody's gaze upon him.

Again. Somebody was looking at him again.

Hata focussed his eyes on the surrounding onlookers.

He's there –

It was him. He had been at the previous scene. The man in sunglasses.

He had a bold smile on his face. What was so funny in this turmoil? Once could have been

overlooked, but twice –

Who on earth is he –

蘇生

第三章

FILE:
03

-

1

-

'Oi! Old man! What the hell is this?'

Gotou yelled as he opened the door to Hata's room.

'You're noisy. Can't you be a little quieter?'

Hata scowled in annoyance. To hell with his annoyance.

Gotou sat on the folding chair.

'How could I be quiet about this!? There's another corpse – what the hell is happening?'

'There's nothing to it. I'd like to ask myself,' Hata replied in a casual tone.

Even the demonic old man who was doing things at his own pace couldn't hide his irritation.

'Who's the vic?'

'Hashimoto Rumi-chan. Fourteen years old. After she drowned, her corpse was disposed of in a dumpsite.'

'Is it the same?' Gotou asked to check.

When a big incident like this occurred, there were sometimes copycat crimes. In order to prevent them, the police wouldn't share all the details of the crime until it was solved.

By doing so, cases could be classed.

'The murder method and situation with the corpse are the same as with the second victim, Miho-chan. On top of that, there are lacerations on the right ankle. Those were also found on the other two victims.

On the girl they saved, they had seen the same thing – the laceration on the right ankle had probably been caused by something like chains.

Hata flipped through the documents on his desk and spoke, almost to himself.

'She didn't go home yesterday. Her parents didn't worry about it since they thought it was just her doing her usual thing. There hadn't been any request when the corpse was found. It was reported in the news that the murderer had died. That might have put them at ease.'

Damn, this was a terrible police error.

But that would mean –

'Old man, you think Andou wasn't the perp?'

'I don't think that's it. There is a mountain of things we wouldn't be able to explain if Andou weren't the perpetrator. Though the investigation is still taking place, we found Andou's fingerprints at the ex-water gate and the first victim Ayaka-chan's bag and hair. No matter how I think about it, Andou is the murderer.'

'Then why's there a third corpse?'

'I don't know. It's my job to analyse. It's your job to investigate.'

The perverted old man really had a mouth on him.

In any case, it seemed like he'd have to ask for Yakumo's appearance again.

'Sorry to bother you.'

Gotou stood up and moved to leave but Hata called out to him.

'Do you remember seeing this man?'

While he said that, he handed a photo to Gotou.

In the photo was a middle-aged man wearing sunglasses. There was a faint smile on his pale face.

Gotou felt the blood in his body go cold.

This face. As if I could forget it. This man. He's –

'Oi, old man. Where's this photo from?'

'From the location where the corpse was found. He was there when the second victim Miho-chan was found too. And this time he was looking at me from a distance too.'

He was at the place the corpse was found. Did that mean he was connected to the case somehow?

That'd make this a serious affair. The overview of the fake murder case for insurance money a month ago came up in Gotou's head.

'Once could have been overlooked, but twice. And that faint smile. No matter how you look at it, that's not the face of a curious onlooker. I took a few photos.'

'Old man. I'm borrowing this photo.'

'Borrowing? Does that mean you've got a hint as to who he is?'

Gotou ignored Hata's question and left the room.

While walking with long strides, he looked at the photo again. It wasn't just a hint.

I didn't think we'd meet up again like this –

-

2

-

The next day, Haruka accompanied Yakumo to visit Kinoshita's hospital.

They had two objectives. One was thanking Kinoshita again for saving her. The other was to ask about the spirit of the girl who had appeared at the river.

Since there was the fuss with the exorcism yesterday, they were still in the middle of their conversation.

The reason why Ayaka-chan was still in the river even though the perpetrator had died.

They wanted to find out the meaning behind that.

Even though they had visited without notifying him beforehand, Kinoshita said, 'Thank you for coming,' and he invited Haruka and Yakumo into the examination room.

'Excuse us for coming by so suddenly. I wanted to thank you for the other day. I'm really very grateful.'

The first thing Haruka did upon entering the examination room was bow her head and express her gratitude.

'Don't worry about it. I just did my job,' said Kinoshita with a smile, and he urged Haruka and Yakumo to sit.

They took him up on his offer and sat down next to each other on the round chairs.

'I came today to ask you a few things,' Yakumo said, going right to the point.

'That's right – Yakumo-kun is a detective. You've grown up splendidly.'

Kinoshita nodded with a smile.

Eh? Yakumo was a detective? Since when?

He had definitely come up with a lie on the spot again.

'I have to apologise for that.'

'Hm?'

Kinoshita looked dubious.

'I am not a detective. When I came the other day, Gotou-san had just come up with an appropriate lie.'

'Is that so?'

'I am just a student.'

Even after finding out that Yakumo had deceived him about who he was, Kinoshita didn't look particularly angry.

'Then this isn't about my daughter.'

'Though this isn't an investigation, I would still like to ask about your daughter.'

Kinoshita gave Yakumo an evaluating look.

He would talk about his murdered daughter if the listening party was the police. It wasn't something he would talk about freely with somebody he didn't know at all.

'Wasn't the case solved? I was contacted about that.'

'Yes, the perpetrator has been confirmed.'

'Then what do you want to know?'

Yakumo took a deep breath before speaking. It was unusual discretion for him.

'Kinoshita-san. What are you trying to do for your daughter?'

Kinoshita stared at Yakumo with his mouth half opened. He looked like he didn't understand what Yakumo was talking about.

'Did you promise your dead daughter something?'

'I did make a promise.'

For a moment, Kinoshita looked surprised, but his expression soon returned to normal and he answered Yakumo's question.

'But why do you know that?'

Yakumo took the black contact lens out of his left eye.

He turned his red left eye towards Kinoshita.

'You know about my eye.'

'Yes, of course.'

Eh? Of course? Doctor Kinoshita knew about Yakumo's eye from before?

Haruka felt like something had been left out of the conversation.

'This eye of mine isn't just red.'

'Meaning...'

'As a doctor, you might not believe this, but my eye can see the spirits of the dead.'

Kinoshita didn't confirm or deny Yakumo's words.

He just looked at Yakumo's eye silently.

'Yesterday, I met your daughter at the river where her corpse was found.'

The moment Kinoshita heard those words, his eyes opened wide and he gripped Yakumo's shoulders tightly.

'Really? Is that true? Then my daughter – Ayaka is really there!'

His face was red with excitement, like his calm demeanour from before had been a lie.

He won't deny it? He completely accepted Yakumo's ability to see the spirits of the dead.

Even though he's a doctor –

Why?

'Though this is very unstable so I shouldn't talk about it between people, if it's just a bit...'

Yakumo responded like he had been pressured into it by Kinoshita.

'So Ayaka – did Ayaka say anything!?!'

Kinoshita was so agitated he started shaking Yakumo's shoulders.

'Please calm down,' Yakumo said, taking Kinoshita's hands off his shoulders.

Kinoshita might have realised he was more agitated than necessary, because he hung his head and muttered, 'Forgive me,' staring at his hands.

'Your daughter said "stop already"...'

Kinoshita looked up in response to those words.

'What does Ayaka-chan want to stop? Don't you know the answer to that?'

After Yakumo spoke, Kinoshita shook his head back and forth.

His shoulders were trembling a little. It felt like he'd collapse if Haruka touched him. He felt like Haruka's mother had when Haruka's older sister had died.

That was how it seemed to Haruka –

'You said this to me before. Your mother had tried to kill you...'

Haruka had heard that before this.

Kinoshita even knew about that?

'At that time, you asked me what excuse your mother could make.'

Yakumo nodded silently.

'To say the truth, I feel the same way. I can't possibly understand the feelings of a parent who would try to kill their own child. I don't understand... but I can understand the feeling of a parent who has lost their child as well as anyone else.'

Kinoshita stopped speaking then and bit his lip.

It looked like he was trying to bear the pain.

'To be honest, I was a failure as both a parent and a husband before. It was my dream to have my own hospital. I was stubborn and lost myself in that dream. I didn't consider my family even once. On the contrary, I was even adverse to it. Then, my wife collapsed. It was cancer.'

'Cancer?' Yakumo repeated.

'Though I was a doctor, I didn't notice anything strange about her condition. When I noticed, the metastasis had already started... I was too late.'

Kinoshita's voice was filled with sadness, like he was letting out something that he had kept in for years.

'It's a truly shameful story. I couldn't save my wife... But I promised my wife something just before she died. I promised her that I would definitely protect Ayaka... How about that? I couldn't protect her...'

Kinoshita's tightly gripped fists were shaking with an anger he couldn't hold in.

That anger wasn't at the murderer but at himself.

'Why didn't I take her to and from school? Why didn't I call the police sooner? If I had looked after

her properly, Ayaka might not have died...'

No. that wasn't true. It wasn't the doctor's fault.

Haruka wanted to yell those things out, but she just couldn't put the words in her mouth.

I know that even if I say anything, it wouldn't be any consolation.

He resents himself for not being able to save someone he loves –

Haruka had experienced it too. She felt responsible for her sister's death and blamed herself for thirteen years and did so even now. When she herself was like that, she couldn't tell Kinoshita not to blame himself.

'That's why I promised Ayaka... I told her... to wait, since I would definitely save her...'

'Then, you started researching how to resurrect the dead.'

Resurrect the dead? What was Yakumo saying? There was no way that was possible. Plus, Kinoshita-san was a doctor. He should have known that better than anyone.

'How do you know that?' Kinoshita asked with a gasp.

'The books in this room. *The Definition of Soul and Body*. *The Cycle of Death and Reincarnation*. All of the titles are related to the resurrection of the dead.'

Kinoshita didn't respond.

He just looked at Yakumo with tears in his eyes.

'No matter how much you research, you, as a doctor, should know best that it is impossible,' Yakumo said slowly.

That was right. No matter how you struggled, no matter how much you suffered, the dead wouldn't come back. Yakumo could see the spirits of the dead. However, even if he could see them, that was different from them being alive.

'Yakumo-kun. Could I ask you one thing?'

Yakumo nodded at Kinoshita's words.

'The connection between the body and the soul... What do you think it is?'

'I don't know.'

An immediate answer. Kinoshita looked puzzled at how quick the reply was.

'All my eye can do is see, so I don't know the answer to something that difficult. If I knew, I would be able to fix this eye.'

'I see...'

'However, I do recognise that a soul is a cluster of a person's emotions.'

'A person's emotions?'

Kinoshita slowly thought over Yakumo's words.

'I apologise for taking so much of your time.'

After Yakumo said that, he stood up by himself and headed towards the door.

Haruka hurriedly followed him.

'Could you let me ask one last thing?'

Kinoshita called out to Yakumo. Yakumo didn't turn around.

'What is it?'

'Earlier, we were talking about your mother, but don't you want to know who your father is?'

Yakumo's father –

Before, he had said his father didn't exist as long as he didn't remember him.

However, that was just a question of Yakumo's own feelings, and he couldn't have been born without his father.

'I'm not interested,' Yakumo said lightly, like he didn't care, and he left the room.

-

3

-

Ishii was idling in the Unsolved Cases Special Investigations Room with nothing in particular to do.

He hadn't seen Detective Gotou since morning.

He had tried calling his mobile multiple times, but the phone just rang with no response.

An unauthorised absence? No, Detective Gotou wouldn't –

He might have used an enormous amount of spiritual energy to solve this case. No, that had to be it. There was no might about it.

Right now, Detective Gotou might have been suffering in a way that Ishii could not possibly understand. He couldn't just idle like this. Ishii knew where he lived. He would go check on him.

Just as Ishii stood up, he heard a knock.

After he said, 'Please come in,' the door opened.

Standing there was a young woman wearing a classy grey trouser suit with her long hair tied in the back.

There's no way I'd forget her. She's –

'Eek.'

Ishii was so shocked he jumped onto the desk.

This was the woman who had been possessed by a ghost. Hijikata Makoto.

It was unexpected that she had already gotten better to the point that she could walk by herself in

such a short time.

She was pale and her cheeks were a bit hollow, but that matched her almond eyes and slender frame.

Looking at her like this, she could be called a beauty, but Ishii's frightful impression of her was too strong.

'I wanted to express my gratitude to you for saving me.'

Makoto bowed in a calm and delicate movement.

'A-ah, no, y-you don't have to thank us...'

Ishii had consciously tried to speak in a way that his voice wouldn't shake, but it was no use.

'Excuse me, but why are you on the desk?'

'Eh? Ah, no, this – I was going to clean...'

Because you're terrifying – he couldn't say that.

Ishii hurriedly jumped off the desk. He lost his balance and almost fell.

'It seems like that has only made it messier.'

Makoto covered her mouth as she laughed.

It was only natural, since he had jumped up in his shoes.

'That's true.'

Ishii forced himself to laugh.

'Ishii-san.'

'You know my name?'

'I was conscious at the time, though it was only in bits and pieces...'

Ishii understood. So that was how it was.

That odd point caught his interest.

'I did something awful to you, Ishii-san,' Makoto said quietly, sounding ashamed as she hung her head.

Perhaps she was talking about when he had brought Makoto out. That had been awful. She had bit and chewed on him. He really had gone through a lot.

'No, that's not... There was nothing you could have done.'

'You still have the injuries. Are you OK?'

Makoto reached out with a pale, slender finger towards Ishii's bruised left eye.

At that moment, Ishii's nightmare came up in his mind. Inflamed eyes. Bared teeth. A low growl –

'Gyaah!'

Ishii yelled and jumped onto the desk again in response.

At the same time, the door opened and Gotou came in.

'What are you doing? Are you a monkey?'

'Ah, no, I have a good reason...'

Ishii got off the desk dejectedly.

'It's not the time for that! We're going!'

Was he going to do something even in this situation?

If he used any more spiritual energy, he would die. Ishii had to stop him.

'Even if you tell me to go, Detective Gotou, your spiritual energy...'

Just as he said that, Gotou's iron hammer of a fist fell on the crown of Ishii's head.

If this were a manga, stars would have been circling above his head.

'What spiritual energy, you fool!? You read too much manga! I'll give you a good wallop the next time you say something so idiotic!'

Hadn't he already walloped him?

Gotou grabbed the scruff of Ishii's neck and dragged him out into the corridor.

'E-er. Detective Gotou. I came to thank you for the other day.'

Ishii heard Makoto from behind them.

'Shut up! I'm busy now! Leave it for later!'

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

Still, Detective Gotou is in such a rush. What on earth happened –

-

4

-

'Hey – does Doctor Kinoshita know you from before?'

While they walked on the road by the river, Haruka asked this question to Yakumo, who was walking a little in front of her.

The way Kinoshita had spoken had certainly made it sound that way.

'I completely forgot. Or rather, I have no memory of it,' Yakumo said, facing forward.

He spoke so vaguely that Haruka didn't understand.

'What do you mean?'

She quickened her pace to walk beside Yakumo.

'Doctor Kinoshita was the doctor in charge at my birth.'

'Really?'

While she was surprised, she also understood. In that case, she could accept that he had forgotten.

'Well, that's all there is to it, so we're practically strangers.'

Yakumo yawned.

Haruka still had one more thing to ask –

'So what was that?'

Yakumo's feet halted at Haruka's question, as if time had stopped.

'What's wrong?'

Yakumo ran a hand through his hair with a troubled expression and lowered brows as he started talking.

'That girl's spirit is bound to that river because of Doctor Kinoshita's strong emotions.'

'Emotions?'

'Yes. He irresponsibly promised that he would definitely save his dead daughter. That keeps her in that river.'

'How can we release her?'

Yakumo didn't reply and just gazed idly at the river.

Haruka did the same, turning her eyes to the moving surface of the river.

On the other shore, young men and women were having a barbecue. White herons were resting their wings in the sandbank.

How did Yakumo feel?

Haruka stole a glance at his profile.

The pencil-straight bridge of his nose, his tightly closed lips. Was there anything reflected in his narrowed almond eyes?

'Doctor Kinoshita will have to give up for the girl to be released.'

Finally, Yakumo spoke.

'Give up?'

'Yes. As long as he doesn't acknowledge that his daughter will not be coming back, she will stay in that place.'

'How can we make that happen?'

'I don't know that much. In any case, it won't work if he is still reading books about reviving the dead and reincarnation.'

Haruka grasped the gist of what Yakumo was saying.

When she had been in the river, Ayaka-chan had said this. 'Stop already' –

Those words had been for her father, Doctor Kinoshita.

'I wonder if things will work out.'

'If things were going to work out, they already would have. This is a problem of a person's heart. It's not something we can fix by talking. Doctor Kinoshita has to acknowledge it himself.'

It was just as Yakumo said.

Outsiders like them wouldn't change anything by explaining to a father who had lost his daughter that she wouldn't be coming back.

'Well, all we can do is see how things go,' Yakumo concluded.

Haruka caught herself before she said, 'That's right.' That was dangerous. So many things had happened that she had almost forgotten the cause of all this trouble.

'Then what about the haunting Mayuko-chan is still worried about?'

'She's mistaken.'

Yakumo twisted his neck, making it crack as he spoke.

'Mistaken?'

'You saw it too, right? The spirit of the girl in the river.'

Haruka nodded.

'Which means the girl's soul is still in the river. She's not with your friend. Which means she's mistaken.'

'But she had sleep paralysis and saw a ghost of a girl. She said she heard voices...'

Yakumo scratched at the back of his neck, looking annoyed.

'Human beings have active imaginations. She had the terrifying experience of seeing a ghost of a girl in a river. That actually happened. Then she thought that she had been possessed by that ghost. However, that was a delusion.'

Haruka understood what Yakumo had said so far.

'After that, she lived her life suspicious of everything, thinking that there was a ghost near her. The result was that she thought something in a dark room that she couldn't make out was a girl. Small noises she couldn't discern became people's voices.'

'But that sort of thing...'

'Happens. Didn't you experience it yourself before?'

'Me?'

Did she do something like that? She couldn't remember at all.

'Honestly. It's because you don't learn that you always drag me into your trouble.'

He always said too much.

'It's because you always remember unnecessary things that people hate you, Yakumo-kun.'

Yakumo snorted at Haruka's cynicism.

'I'm talking about the spirit photography I showed you before. After I said that there was a person's face in the grooves of the tree, you saw a face, right? It's the same for the girl. She's living with the preconception that there may be a ghost.'

Oh. So that's how it was.

Finally, Haruka understood too. If there was a preconception, all thoughts would end up connecting to it.

I understand that. But –

'What should I do?'

Yakumo raised an eyebrow, like he was saying, How would I know?

'You might not like it, but the best method would be to tell her that everything's fine because the ghost has been exorcised.'

'That's a lie, right?'

Haruka flared up.

'Then tell her the truth. Say, "Everything you saw was an illusion. You're psychologically ill, so I recommend that you go to a hospital for counselling."'

'I will then.'

No matter how she thought about it, that was obviously the better method.

'However, if she doesn't accept that explanation, she'll bring her story to another spirit medium. If they're an unsavoury one, they'll take her money.'

To be honest, she wasn't confident Mayuko would understand if she told her the truth.

'If you can't say it, then telling her not to worry because the ghost has been exorcised will take away her fear. It's your choice.'

Haruka grabbed onto Yakumo's shirt as he tried to walk away.

Yakumo's cheek twitched in irritation like that of a cat whose sleep was disturbed.

'What?'

'Yakumo-kun. Please.'

Haruka looked up at Yakumo as she pleaded with him.

'Stop that – it's disturbing.'

Disturbing? How rude.

But she didn't say that aloud. She'd lose everything if he got angry at her here.

'Yakumo-kun. Please. Go explain.'

She pleaded with him again.

'I get it, so please don't look at me with such disgusting eyes.'

He said it again!

-

5

-

As Ishii drove, he looked at Gotou reclining in the passenger seat.

He had his arms crossed, and underneath his furrowed brows, there was a sharp glint in his eye like a hound's.

Just as Ishii had been wondering why he hadn't seen Gotou since morning, he had suddenly returned to take Ishii out, saying, 'We're going!' and now they were headed towards the university by car.

'Detective Gotou, what on earth happened?'

Ishii couldn't stand it – he asked a question.

'That's why you're useless!'

Gotou suddenly yelled at him angrily.

'But, um, since I haven't heard anything, it's natural for me not to know, or that's what I...'

'Can't you do anything without being told!? If you're a detective, perk up your ears and listen! That reporter woman's got a much leveller head on her shoulders!'

'I-I apologise...'

Ishii apologised though he didn't know why, pressured into it by Gotou's shouting.

The conversation stopped there, and then the only thing that could be heard in the car was the sound of the wind.

'This isn't public yet, but another one was found.'

Breaking the awful silence, Gotou spoke, as if to himself, while holding a cigarette in his mouth.

'Another one?'

Ishii didn't understand what Gotou was saying.

He asked his question while fixing the position of his glasses.

'Another girl's corpse.'

'Eh?'

Ishii's voice cracked at the unexpected news.

'The third victim. She was found at a dumpsite this morning.

A girl's corpse? Third victim? Dumpsite?

'You must be lying. I mean, Andou was the perpetrator, and that Andou is already dead, so the case is...'

Ishii replied quickly, like he was turning over the words he couldn't understand in his mind.

A new corpse shouldn't have been found if the perpetrator is dead –

'It's too late to be surprised! That's why I'm in a rush!'

Gotou's spittle flew through the car.

Oh. So that's why –

It's as Detective Gotou says. There's no time for careless worrying. I'm a failure as a detective for not noticing anything even in such a terrible situation.

But, with all that said, why are we going to meet the young man called Yakumo?

I couldn't understand that at all –

-

6

-

Once Haruka returned to her room, she lay on her bed, overwhelmed by exhaustion.

Was that really OK –

Haruka was assaulted by a sense of self-loathing. Even though it had been because she couldn't think of any other methods, she had ended up deceiving Mayuko.

After their talk, Haruka had gone together with Yakumo to Mayuko's flat.

The moment Yakumo entered the room, he had said, 'It's strong. I feel an extremely strong spiritual energy.' Haruka had wanted to yell 'Liar!' but she'd swallowed her words.

In the end, Yakumo had said, 'I will exorcise the spirit now. I would appreciate it if you would leave for an hour because of the danger,' and that was the end of it.

Mayuko had asked, 'Hey, I've seen that person at the university before. Is he really an exorcist?'

Haruka had lied without thinking about it. 'It's fine. That person is from a well-known family of exorcists.'

What a ridiculous monkey show –

Right after Mayuko left the room, Yakumo said, 'Wake me up in an hour,' and he went to sleep, using a cushion as a pillow. Oi.

When Mayuko returned in an hour, Yakumo pressed his hands together in prayer and innocently said, 'It was an extremely strong spirit, but somehow I was able to remove it. That ghost will not appear in front of you again.' Haruka couldn't interrupt to say he had only been sleeping.

Mayuko started sobbing in her happiness, like she had been released from her fear.

Haruka's feelings of guilt grew.

On top of that, Yakumo had received money from Mayuko.

She couldn't believe it. It was true that Mayuko was the one who had offered to pay as thanks, but would you normally accept it? Usually people would just wave it off, saying something like 'I wouldn't have been able to live with myself if I didn't help.'

This was outright fraud. And Haruka had been an accomplice.

Honestly. She felt angrier the more she thought about it.

After Haruka woke up, her mobile started ringing. It was from her mother.

<You haven't called lately – are you doing well?>

Her mother spoke in an unbelieving tone from the start of the phone call.

Haruka's anger dissipated. That was her mother for you. Just hearing the voice made her feel safer.

'Yup. I'm OK.'

<Did something happen? Your voice sounds strange.>

Her mother had seen through her.

Her anger at Yakumo had lessened. Her voice probably sounded strange because the conversation with Doctor Kinoshita still bothered her.

'Mum, were you sad when my sister died?'

Haruka didn't know why she'd asked that, but it had come out of her mouth. It had to be because she had heard Kinoshita and Yakumo talking.

<Of course I was. Why are you asking that all of a sudden?>

It was natural for her mother to be suspicious.

'I'm currently studying criminal psychology at school, and there was a lecture on the psychology of the parents of victims which caught my interest...'

Haruka said the first lie that came to mind.

Her mother replied, <I see,> but it seemed like she didn't know whether to believe Haruka.

'If my sister hadn't died in an accident but had been killed, how would you feel?'

<What do you mean?>

'For example, would you hate the murderer?'

<That I would...>

Her mother replied to her question earnestly.

'Would you want to kill that murderer?'

What on earth am I asking my mother? Would you kill him? Would you not –

What am I planning to do if my mother says she would want to kill the murderer? I'm at fault for my sister's death.

When she finds out the truth, will my mother hate me? Will she want to kill me –

For a while, the silence continued.

'Hm, if killing the murderer would bring back my dead child, I might.'

My mother's voice was warm, but also cruel.

'Bring back?'

'Yes. I don't think a parent's feelings will change whether it's a murder, accident or illness. You don't think that their death can't be helped just because it's an illness. Though it's the same for a murder...'

That might be true –

'In any case, we want them to live. That's all. That's why I would kill as many murderers as I needed to if doing so would bring back my child.'

If it would bring back her child –

Doctor Kinoshita had said the same thing. His promise with his daughter wasn't to take revenge against the murderer but to save her.

If Kinoshita could go back to the past, he would probably kill Andou without thinking.

Haruka couldn't arrange her thoughts properly in her head, but that was probably how it was.

Then, a doubt came up in Haruka's mind.

A doubt that can't come up, but a doubt that has come up so many times before. If I were the one who died instead of my sister –

<Haruka. What are you thinking about?>

Even through the phone, her mother could probably feel the change in her mood.

Her mother sounded concerned.

But I can't say this to my mother. The truth about my sister's death will be my cross to bear forever –

<What's wrong?>

Her mother's voice felt far away.

If she knew I was at fault for my sister's death, how distressed would my mother be –

<Haruka. Are you blaming yourself again?>

Haruka suddenly couldn't breathe when she heard her mother's unforeseen words, just as she had when she had been drowning in the water.

<You think you're responsible for your sister's death, right?>

Why does my mother know that? I've never mentioned this to her once, and I haven't let her see me behaving like I do either.

And yet –

'Mum... You knew...'

That was all she could say.

<Of course I do. How long do you think I've been your mother?>

'Twenty years...'

<So you know. It's not your fault that your sister died. You were just playing around and you threw the ball a little far. It's not like you tried to kill your sister. That was an accident.>

Haruka knew that much.

I never told anybody. I thought I had hid it in my heart all this time –

Her nose felt prickly, and the corners of her eyes felt warm.

<Haruka. You are you. You're not your sister. A parent doesn't care about whether their children can study or play sports or things like that. They just want their children to live and be happy. Do you understand what I'm saying?>

Haruka silently nodded.

The warmth in her mother's words filled her entire body.

Something that had frozen over was slowly melting –

When she was younger, she had always been unhappy about her older twin sister, who was better than her at everything.

Haruka had thought that her mother hated her, since she was worse at everything – studying, sports, music...

After her sister died, she had been frantic in trying to be like her. She had been scared that somebody would say 'You should have died' if she didn't.

'Mum, how did you know...'

'I even know who your first love was. Ken-chan, right? He got married some time ago.'

That was right. Ken-chan. He had dark skin and was a shorty. He had been nimble and playful.

Her mother really knew everything.

'Oh...'

<You have someone you like now, right?>

Haruka's heart skipped a beat at her mother's sudden words.

'Why do you think that?'

<When you came back home, you were grinning about something you remembered.>

'I did that?'

<You did. What sort of person is he?>

She wasn't really aware of it herself, but it was probably him.

'He's incredibly contrary. He's selfish and not nice at all.'

<My, that sounds interesting. Tell me more.>

Her mother laughed, sounding like she was enjoying herself.

'OK. Next time I come home.'

Haruka hung up.

At the same time, tears started coming out like a dam had been broken, and she cried aloud. Haruka didn't know whether it was from pain, sadness or happiness.

Her body trembled, and her chest was so hot it felt like it would burn.

In that wave of emotion that made it hard for her to breathe, Haruka realised that the cross she had been carrying up until now had been an illusion –

-

7

-

How long did Detective Gotou plan on staying here?

While Ishii had that doubt, he couldn't say it aloud, so he just looked at Gotou, sitting on a folding chair with his legs crossed.

It had already been almost thirty minutes since they'd come to the young man called Yakumo's secret hideaway at the university.

Ishii couldn't understand at all why Gotou was so fixated on him.

'Damn that bastard. Where'd he run off to? It's a serious matter,' Gotou yelled, revealing his anger.

At the same time, the door opened and Yakumo came in.

'Finally back?'

Yakumo looked obviously displeased at Gotou, who had spoken.

'This is illegal trespassing. Ishii-san, please arrest this man now.'

Yakumo pointed at Gotou.

Arrest? In that case, Ishii was committing the same crime.

'Unfortunately, I don't have the time to banter with you.'

'What a coincidence. I was just thinking that I don't have the time to play with you either.'

'That's not what I meant. She was found.'

'Your wife?'

'Stop screwing around! A girl's corpse! The third victim was found!'

Gotou's voice which he couldn't hold in burst out.

At that moment, Yakumo's expression stiffened. Even Ishii understood that it wasn't because Gotou's outcry had surprised him.

'Please let me hear the details.'

Yakumo sat on his own chair and crossed his arms as he urged Gotou.

'The victim's name is Hashimoto Rumi-chan. She's fourteen, same as the other victims. Like with the second victim, Miho-chan, she was thrown into a dumpsite after she drowned. She was found this morning. She probably died last night.'

Gotou summed it up all in one go.

Yakumo didn't open his mouth. He furrowed his brow and looked down.

Silence –

'Does that mean Andou wasn't the murderer?'

Ishii spoke up.

Yakumo and Gotou both glared at him at the same time. Being glared at by these two was truly terrifying.

'Andou is definitely the murderer,' Yakumo said indifferently.

'I checked with old man Hata this morning. Andou's fingerprints and Ayaka-chan's hair were found at the building.'

So there was evidence –

'Detective Gotou. T-t-this is just a possibility. Could that evidence have been faked?'

'Who would do that and for what purpose?' Yakumo immediately rebutted.

After hearing Yakumo's words, Gotou put a photo on the table.

'How about this? This guy did it to hide his murder.'

Yakumo's eyes went wide when he took the photo into his hands.

His teeth were clenched together so tightly it seemed like they might break with a crack.

There was a tall man wearing sunglasses in the photo.

The bridge of his nose was straight, and he looked like he was smiling. On top of that, the man's face looked vaguely like Yakumo's.

'Gotou-san. Where did you get this photo?' asked Yakumo, looking at Gotou sharply.

Gotou's expression was equally stiff.

'Seems like he was in the crowd of onlookers when the corpse was found. For both the second victim Miho-chan and this time's Rumi-chan. Old man Hata thought he was suspicious so he took the photo.'

'If this man is connected to this case, this won't end easily.'

'I know. Thirteen years ago – and that fake murder case a month ago – this is going to be difficult.'

Thirteen years ago? A month ago? What were these two talking about?

They were talking like they knew this man from before.

'Gotou-san. Do you still have the corpse of the third victim?'

'You going?'

'Yes, let's go.'

Gotou and Yakumo stood up at the same time.

Right then, Yakumo's mobile started ringing.

Yakumo curtly answered the phone. 'What trouble do you have for me this time?'

-

8

-

Haruka didn't know why that had come up in her mind herself.

The soul of the girl, still in the river, with the same name as her sister.

Yakumo had said this. That girl was bound to the river by her father's strong emotions. Haruka wanted to save her if she could.

Before she noticed, she had pressed the call button on her phone.

<What trouble do you have for me this time?>

Once the call connected, she heard a curt voice.

'It's not trouble. I just wanted to ask you something.'

'That's revolting.'

Revolting –

'Honestly. I just want to ask about Doctor Kinoshita.'

<That was already solved, wasn't it?>

'That's true, but that girl will be stuck in the river like this.'

<That's right.>

'Can't anything be done?'

<No.>

It felt like he had planned on giving up from the start, or he might have thought it wasn't their problem.

'But the girl seems pitiful.'

<How meddlesome can you be? I said it was a problem of Doctor Kinoshita's heart.>

'I know, but... I was thinking of trying to get Doctor Kinoshita to understand once more.'

<Give up. Nothing's going to change just because you said something.>

Yakumo's opinion makes sense.

It's not something I can solve on my own. But –

'Can't you come with me?'

For a while, Yakumo didn't say anything.

Doctor Kinoshita said this. His daughter died because of him –

Haruka wouldn't say she had felt the same way, but she had lived her life up until now carrying similar feelings. 'Your daughter's death wasn't your fault.' She wanted him to understand that, at least.

<How would you feel if you were in the position of the parent?>

Yakumo's tone changed slightly.

Other people might not have noticed if they heard it, but I can tell –

Haruka recalled something Isshin had said before. 'That boy is really kind, but he's bad at showing his emotions.'

'What do you mean?'

<Would you give up on your daughter if somebody explained the situation to you?>

That's –

'I think that'd be impossible.'

<Then you understand. Doctor Kinoshita has to solve this problem on his own.>

Haruka understood what Yakumo was saying.

But she still wanted to save that girl. Those strong feelings hadn't been changed.

The girl with the same name as her dead sister.

I probably want to do something to save her and be pardoned. I want to be released from the burden of having killed my sister.

I know that's just my own selfishness. But –

'I want to do something.'

<Fine. If you want to go, just go. But I can't help you right now. If you're going, you're going on your own.>

It sounded like Yakumo had given up.

'OK.'

Haruka nodded.

Now that she thought about it, it would feel like running away if she borrowed Yakumo's strength now.

<If you meet Doctor Kinoshita, tell him my message.>

'Your message?'

<Please let your daughter go. Your emotions are trapping your daughter in that dark river. What the dead want is for the living to be happy...>

What the dead want is for the living to be happy –

Those words pierced deep into her heart.

'Thank you...'

Haruka said that and hung up.

-

9

-

Kinoshita gasped, like his suffering was forcing its way out.

I failed again –

Why? What was wrong?

I promised my daughter. I promised I would definitely save her. And yet –

'Damn it!'

Kinoshita said those words like he had vomited them, and he stabbed a pen into his desk.

The plastic pen broke with a loud snap, but his anger still did not abate.

He stood up, picked up the chair he had been sitting on with two hands and threw it towards the wall.

The chair hit the cabinet and created a large dent before falling to the floor.

Blood flow invigorated him, and his temperature went up.

'Agh!'

He punched the wall with his fists.

The impact went along his arm, but he didn't feel any pain.

Lost in his anger, Kinoshita punched the wall again. He punched it again, again and again.

Not just with his fists – he also hit the wall with his head.

A crack split down his parched heart, and it started crumbling.

Emotions that weren't appeased –

The police had said the incident was over.

It was true that it had been determined who Ayaka-chan's killer was, and that killer had already died.

So what?

I already know that.

It isn't over yet for me. It's not a matter of who the murderer is. Nothing will be over under Ayaka comes back.

That which connects the soul and the body. That's the key.

Success isn't impossible if I can find the answer to that question.

But I don't have the time to wait for that.

I'm breaking –

Kinoshita felt it.

His phone started ringing. He had a call.

-

10

-

Hata was making preparations while waiting when Gotou brought Yakumo to the autopsy room.

The girl's corpse was on the autopsy table.

This very young girl –

Gotou's anger started building up again.

He looked at Yakumo standing beside him.

His face was white and proper like porcelain. At first glance, he left a composed and cold impression, but that didn't look at Yakumo's true nature.

If you brought trouble to him, he would complain a lot, but he could've just ignored it if he hated it so much.

However, he would talk on and on, but in the end, he would stick his neck in instead of letting it go. That was the type of person he was.

'Old man, sorry about this.'

'Don't worry about it. I wouldn't be able to sleep like this either.'

Hata let out an uncanny laugh.

Gotou walked with Yakumo to the side of the autopsy table.

The girl lying on the autopsy table was covered up to her shoulders with a white sheet. There weren't any noticeable injuries, but the lips on her swollen face, characteristic of drowning, had turned purple.

It didn't match up. That was how Gotou felt.

This girl's life and death were so different from each other.

Until the moment came, she might not have even thought that she would die.

She woke up in the morning, brushed her teeth, ate breakfast, went to school, talked with friends, thought about the person she liked, and now, she's here –

'Eeeeeek.'

An inappropriate shriek echoed through the tiled autopsy room.

I'd forgotten. Ishii's here too. Making such a disgusting scream. What's he so afraid of? Maybe –

'Is this the first time you've seen a corpse?'

'A-ah, yes,' Ishii replied, his teeth chattering.

Honestly – this fool. It made Gotou worry about the future. For now, Gotou just hit him.

Yakumo gazed upon the girl's face.

His brow was furrowed, and his eyes were serious. He was looking. Looking at something they couldn't see.

'You see something?'

Yakumo shook his head.

'It was no good. I thought that if the girl's spirit was still here, I might be able to grasp something, but...'

Yakumo bit his lip.

Things wouldn't be that simple.

But if he couldn't see anything, what would they do?

'There aren't any external injuries?' asked Yakumo, a hand on his chin.

Hata took the sheet off of the girl's ankles. The toenails were painted pink. The ankle showed signs that suggested it had been bound.

'There's this laceration. That's all.'

'Hata-san, the girl drowned, correct?'

'There's a lot of water in her lungs.'

'Do you know where she drowned?'

'Probably a river somewhere.'

'A river?'

'After examining the water in her lungs, we found the eggs of freshwater fish mixed in it.'

'I see. A river, eh...'

Yakumo put a finger to his brow.

Unfortunately, all Gotou could do was wait. Yakumo was in charge of thinking. He was in charge of taking action.

Gotou suddenly looked over at Ishii. In that case, would he be in charge of playing the fool? Gotou didn't need somebody in charge of that.

'Something's odd, right?' Hata said, turning his neck round and round. It seemed like his neck would turn a full rotation from the momentum.

'Since I was drawn into this case from a completely different direction this time, I knew almost nothing about the chain of incidents, but the third victim's cause of death is different, isn't it?'

'The first victim, Ayaka-chan, was strangled. The second victim, Miho-chan, and the third victim, Rumi-chan, drowned.'

Hata answered Yakumo's doubts.

'Gotou-san, there's something I would like to ask.'

'What?'

'Let us forget about whether Andou is the perpetrator or not for now. This girl was killed yesterday, correct?'

'Yeah. What about it?'

'Where was she killed?'

'The old water gate, right?'

What was Yakumo saying now?

'That's impossible.'

Yakumo had asked the question himself, but he denied the answer immediately.

'Why?'

'Please think about it. The police should be investigating the old water gate currently. Would the crime have been committed in front of the police?'

'Oh, now that you say that.'

That's right –

Silence filled the room.

Suddenly, Hata brought his hands together, like he had remembered something.

'About that old water gate. The first victim, Ayaka-chan, and the girl who was in danger of losing

her life, Keiko-chan – their DNA was found at the site, but...'

'The second and third victims' weren't found, correct?'

Yakumo continued Hata's words.

'Right.'

Hata crossed his arms and nodded.

'As I thought, that's how it was...'

Yakumo looked down and spat those words out unpleasantly.

Gotou didn't understand at all about what was 'how it was'.

'Oi, Yakumo. What are you talking about?'

'That would mean there is another perpetrator.'

Yakumo lifted his head and spoke like what he said was obvious.

'Another perpetrator!? An accomplice?'

'Not an accomplice.'

'You were the one who said it.'

Gotou drew closer to Yakumo.

'What I said was that there is another perpetrator.'

'Stop acting so important and just say it already!'

Gotou grabbed Yakumo by the collar and glared at him.

'What a violent attitude. Maybe I will just stop talking.'

Damn, this contrary little –

'Ah, I sincerely apologise. Please explain this to me.'

Gotou let go of Yakumo and bowed his head.

'I don't feel your sincerity, but I'll forgive you. We, as well as the investigation department, have made a huge mistake.'

'A mistake?'

'Yes. A mistake. First, the investigation department's title needs to be changed.'

'What?'

Who cared about the investigation department's name?

Really, what an irritating guy.

'I said this before, but the case this time has two different cases, and there are two perpetrators with different goals.'

'Eh? Really now.'

Ishii spoke before Gotou, sounding like he was playing dumb.

'There really isn't anything to be surprised about. If we take away our preconceptions and use the process of elimination, that is the only possible answer. No matter how difficult a truth it is to believe.'

Yakumo's eyes narrowed, and he stared at the autopsy wall almost as if someone was there.

'Explain it so even I can understand.'

In his irritation, Gotou put a cigarette in his mouth, but Hata immediately complained – 'This is a no-smoking area' – so he couldn't light it up.

'First, the one who killed Ayaka-chan and abducted Keiko-chan was Andou. There is no doubt about it. Evidence has been found. However, the second victim, Miho-chan. The third victim, Rumi-chan, could not have been killed by Andou.'

'Why not?'

'As you know, Andou had already died when Rumi-chan was killed.'

'Then how about Miho-chan?'

'You would understand if you think about the purpose of the murder. Though this is just my reasoning, I explained about Andou's psychological state before.'

Gotou nodded. Yakumo had said that Andou had a fear towards death that could even be called a disorder because he had seen his mother's suicide. When the girl said that he should die, those words lit the fear in his heart.

'If my reasoning is correct, it was important for Andou to kill the victim himself.'

'I see. Miho-chan and Rumi-chan died from drowning. They weren't killed by the murderer,' Hata said with crossed arms, sounding like he agreed.

'No, wait a second. Can't you kill someone by drowning them?'

Gotou interrupted the conversation.

'How so?'

'Well, you push them from the back like this...'

After Yakumo spoke, Gotou took Ishii, who had been beside him, and pushed the back of his neck forward to show an example. Ishii flailed about, surprised by the suddenness.

'Weren't you listening to what we were saying early?' Hata said, snorting.

'Shut up, perverted old man.'

'Perverted was unnecessary. I explained this before, but the girls who were drowned only had lacerations on their ankles.'

'What about it?'

'If someone pushed their necks down like you're doing now, there would be signs of pressure applied there.'

'Ah.'

Gotou understood what Hata said and took his hand off of Ishii. That's right. That's certainly true. Then that would mean –

'Then how were they killed?'

Gotou tried cocking his head, but no valuable thoughts came to him.

'From the state of the corpses, weights were probably attached to the girls' ankles so they would sink into the river,' said Yakumo, pointing at the ankles.

'That's...'

At this point, Gotou could get the gist of it.

Chains or ropes had been tied to the girls' feet. On the ends of those, there had been weights, and they had been thrown into the river. Then they wouldn't have been able to float to the top of the river, so they drowned.

If that was the method, it would mean that Andou wouldn't have killed them himself.

In short, there were two murder methods from the start.

There were also two perpetrators.

Since it was a unique situation where girls of the same age were abducted in the same area and their corpses were found without any requests, the police had ended up investigating it as a serial abduction murder case.

From the start, if looking at there being two perpetrators with separate cases, the third victim found after Andou's death still wasn't anything odd.

But –

'Then what's the second perp's motive?'

'I don't know.'

Yakumo replied immediately to Gotou's question.

Well, that made sense. It wasn't something that they'd understand just from talking about it. Since there were two cases, the investigation would have to start again.

A heavy silence filled the room.

With this strange situation in front of them, they wouldn't open their mouths quickly.

'But this murder method...'

Hata spoke with his mouth turned down at the corners.

'What about it?'

Hata smiled bitterly at Gotou's question. It seemed like he didn't plan on saying it aloud.

He ran a hand down his white hair before starting to speak reluctantly.

'I just thought that this killing method is similar to some sort of ritual for a sacrifice.'

'A sacrifice?'

Honestly. Of all things, this perverted old man –

'Ah, I thought that too.'

Ishii spoke up while raising his hand.

He had bright eyes, like a primary school student who'd solved a question on a test. What was up with that face –

'A sacrifice...'

This time, Yakumo was the one to murmur.

'Oi, oi. cut it out.'

Gotou couldn't hold it in any longer and spoke up.

'Please throw away your preconceptions,' said Yakumo, his eyes narrowed like he thought Gotou was being a fool.

'I don't have any preconceptions, but what you're saying is just some occult stuff.'

'What you blurted out is a preconception. Even if you don't believe in the occult, Gotou-san, there are people in this world who do. In the case of these people, saying that what you don't believe in doesn't exist is heading down the wrong direction, just as the investigation did this time.'

Gotou clicked his teeth and stopped objecting.

He wouldn't win even if he argued with Yakumo. He would just get knocked about by Yakumo's hair-splitting.

'If this is some sort of ritual...'

Yakumo looked down and furrowed his brow as he said something.

Hata and Ishii were roused up in a creepy conversation about people's heads and goat blood or something like that.

Even though the others were the ones being strange, Gotou felt like he had been left out.

Why did he have to feel so ashamed? He felt more and more irritated.

'Perhaps this is...'

Yakumo suddenly raised his head like he had thought of something. After a moment, his face turned pale and he ran out of the autopsy room.

'Oi, Yakumo. What's wrong?'

Gotou chased after Yakumo into the corridor.

That guy. He didn't even turn around. Yakumo had definitely thought of something. But what was

it? And why was he in such a rush?

Yakumo took his mobile out of his pocket and started making a call.

However, whoever he was calling didn't answer. He made a 'tsk' sound and stuck the mobile back in his pocket.

'What happened?'

Gotou grabbed hold of Yakumo's shoulders as he tried to walk away and stopped him by force.

Yakumo's eyes were bloodshot, and it looked like he might jump at any moment.

'Do you think you know who the perp is?'

Yakumo was just taking deep breaths, like he was trying to hold back his agitation, and he didn't answer.

'What's wrong?'

Gotou shook Yakumo's shoulders.

'Just now, a terrible thought came to me. I would like to prove it wrong if I can,' Yakumo said, his voice strained.

Gotou didn't know what terrible thought Yakumo was talking about.

Yakumo probably wouldn't tell him even if he asked, but now that he'd come here, all he could do was go with him to the end.

'Then how do we check whether your thought is correct?'

For a moment, Yakumo's eyes went wide in surprise.

His distrust towards other people was too strong.

That was why he always looked like this when other people tried to do anything for him. Gotou didn't hate it when Yakumo looked like that.

'Are you holding back? It's not like you.'

'It's not like you to worry about others, Gotou-san.'

Honestly, this guy was always like this. Not cute at all.

'Just tell me already.'

'First, I need to ask somebody something.'

No trouble at all.

'Ishii, the car!'

Gotou shouted, but there was no response. That idiot.

'Oi! Ishii!' roared Gotou angrily.

'Y-yessir!'

The door to the autopsy room opened, and Ishii came out, looking surprised.

Honestly – for a detective, he was a really careless guy.

'What are you doing!? We're going! Run!'

Ishii replied energetically with a 'Yessir!' and started running down the corridor.

He tripped –

-

11

-

Haruka went to visit Doctor Kinoshita again.

Like before, Kinoshita invited Haruka into the examination room without even the slightest bit of unpleasantness and offered her coffee.

However, Haruka didn't know how to talk to him, let alone confront him. While she was thinking, Kinoshita started speaking.

'You've come at a good time. I was just planning on looking for you myself.'

'For me?'

'Yes. There is something I would like to request of you.'

'A request for me?'

What could it be? There isn't much I can do even if I'm asked.

And still, I'm bad at saying no –

'Yes, but let me leave that matter for later. Please go ahead first.'

'Ah, yes. Er...'

Haruka's words got caught in her throat when it was important.

However, she had to tell him this: You are not responsible for your daughter's death. As long as you don't give up, your daughter will continue wandering in the same place.

'Doctor Kinoshita. I understand your feelings, even if that's only slightly.'

There was no use keeping quiet. She started speaking, saying the thoughts she had organised as they came up to her.

'My feelings, you say?'

Kinoshita furrowed his eyebrows, looking troubled.

'When I was young, I lost my older sister to a traffic accident. My sister had tried to catch a ball I'd thrown and was then hit by a car.'

Haruka met Kinoshita's eyes.

However, he looked back at her silently without speaking.

'I've always thought that my sister's death was my fault. If I hadn't thrown the ball then... I'm the same as you, Doctor. I blamed myself, regretted it and was always suffering.'

'Is that so?'

'Naturally, I think that the pain you're feeling is many times greater than mine. I know that I don't have the right to say this, but Ayaka-chan's death wasn't your fault, Doctor.'

Haruka took a pause there to calm down.

'It must have been very difficult for you.'

Kinoshita's voice was kind, like he was trying to console her.

'I apologise for suddenly talking about something like this.'

Haruka bowed her head. It sort of felt like she had just forced her opinion on him.

She remembered what Yakumo had said.

Doctor Kinoshita's emotions are binding her to the river –

Wasn't that the same for me? I thought I was responsible for my sister's death and was always blaming myself, so wasn't I tying my sister's soul down?

I feel like I sort of understood why I had gotten so involved with this case.

It was the same with me. Ayaka-chan, who had died in pain, and my sister, Ayaka. Doctor Kinoshita, blaming himself for his daughter's death, and me, blaming myself for my sister's death –

'You are a kind person.'

Kinoshita smiled gently.

'That isn't true.'

I wasn't being humble.

I was just running away from the burden I carried on my back –

'As you say, I do blame myself. You might be able to understand that. However, there is a definite difference between us.'

Kinoshita appeared full of confidence.

'A difference?'

'Yes. You have already given up. However, I have not.'

'What have you not given up on?'

Something felt slightly off.

She couldn't explain it clearly, but that was what she felt.

'I will bring my daughter Ayaka back to life.'

'Eh?'

Did he really believe he could bring someone dead back to life?

Doctor Kinoshita was a doctor, one way or another.

Bringing someone dead back to life was physically impossible.

Gooseflesh rose on Haruka's skin.

'After I lost my daughter and was in despair, a man came to me. That man took me to the river and showed my daughter's soul to me there.'

Kinoshita's face was blank, like he was wearing a Noh mask¹.

What is he saying –

'My daughter was suffering. She was suffering greatly. Since her physical body had died, the pain her soul felt was even greater.'

Kinoshita's eyes were bloodshot, like he had been possessed by something.

'That's...'

'Do you understand? Ayaka has been suffering even after she died. I have only been watching. I can't do anything...'

As if he was fighting his rising anger, Kinoshita scratched his fingernails against the desk.

An unpleasant noise that made your hair stand on end –

'I have been frantically trying to find a way to save my daughter. That man showed me several books. I found out while I was researching them. There are many people in this world who have died and came back to life.'

'But...'

Haruka started speaking, but she didn't say any more words.

She wasn't Yakumo. She didn't have the knowledge to refute the statement directly.

It might have been because she had been thinking too much.

Her head hurt like something was pressing against it.

'Humans have souls. I reached the conclusion that it is something like the aggregation of those humans' thoughts or feelings. In short, even if the body is dead, the soul still lives...'

Haruka had heard that way of thinking before.

Yakumo had said the same thing.

Her vision was cloudy, like a fog had covered it.

She blinked, but the blurred world did not return –

¹ Noh is a traditional form of Japanese musical drama which has very characteristic masks for different roles. [Here](#) is an example of the masks in use.

'The body and the soul are originally different things. If you think that way, the death of the body isn't a major problem. To use the computer as an analogy, the body is the hardware while the soul is the software. If the body, as the hardware, is broken, the soul, as software, can just be put into new hardware.'

Haruka understood the theory.

But that was all it was.

In the first place, it was wrong to replace the human body and soul with a computer's hardware and software.

Haruka had seen many times with her own eyes what happened to souls that took over bodies that weren't their own.

Miki. And that woman.

That couldn't be called living.

That was –

It was no use. Her thoughts were growing duller.

'What are you trying... to say?' Haruka asked Kinoshita.

Her voice sounded far away, and she could hear it trembling terribly.

She noticed that her thoughts about Doctor Kinoshita were changing. The depths of his heart were much, much darker and deeper than she had imagined.

'You and Yakumo both say that my daughter will not return again, but that is incorrect. My daughter's soul is still alive.'

Yes, it is alive.

And you're the one keeping her alive with your strong emotions. That's why I have to stop this.

What is this –

'Doctor Kinoshita... Ayaka-chan... your...'

Her mouth wouldn't move properly.

Her eyelids were so heavy she couldn't open them.

Her mobile was ringing in her bag.

Who is it? I have to pick up.

The floor is shaking.

It hurts... Why... is this...

Haruka fell into a deep sleep –

-

-

'We're coming in!

Gotou opened the door to Kinoshita Hospital and yelled.

However, just like last time, there was nobody at the reception or in the corridor.

'Doctor Kinoshita probably isn't here,' Yakumo said, a step behind Gotou.

'How do you know?'

'The garage is empty.'

'I see. Why don't you become a detective?'

Gotou said that to Yakumo, but Yakumo didn't hear him at all.

He was rapidly looking around him.

He was like a cat on the lookout for people. The guy probably felt something.

'Oi. Yakumo.'

Yakumo ignored Gotou's call and suddenly started running. He rushed into the examination room they had met Kinoshita in before at full speed.

Gotou didn't know what was happening, but it seemed like Yakumo's hurry had transferred to him as well. He ran to the examination room like he had been dragged along.

'Detective Gotou, what is it?' said Ishii, in charge of playing the fool. He had come late and sounded carefree.

Didn't he feel the tension?

Gotou sighed and looked around the examination room.

Kinoshita wasn't there.

However, there were signs that somebody had been there just a little while ago. The lights were on. There were two coffee cups on Doctor Kinoshita's desk.

Yakumo went through the documents on Doctor Kinoshita's desk chaotically and he opened the drawer on one side to look for something.

What was he looking for? Gotou, who didn't understand what Yakumo was thinking, could only watch him.

'Er, Detective Gotou. This is clearly unlawful trespassing. We have to stop him.'

Ishii spoke up from behind Gotou. That guy was really –

'Shut up! I'll take responsibility.'

He can't possibly think that –

A thought suddenly came to Gotou.

'Damn it!'

Maybe Yakumo had found something, because he shouted as he slammed his hand against the desk.

Gotou walked up beside Yakumo.

There were two sets of clinical records on the desk.

(Matsumoto Miho: incompatible... Blood type mismatch thought to be the cause. Disposed.)

(Hashimoto Rumi: incompatible... Cause unknown. Disposed.)

'W-what? This is...'

Gotou's voice came out unconsciously.

The clinical records for the second and third serial abduction murder victims.

This was a maternity and gynaecology department. It wouldn't have been strange if the two of them had been born here.

But what did disposal mean?

'Oi. Yakumo.'

Yakumo didn't have any response to Gotou's words, and this time he pulled open the accordion curtain that separated the examination room and the consultation room.

There was a bed for pregnant women. Until a little while ago, the room had been used for consultations, but it didn't look that way now.

– What was going on?

Books were scattered about the room. *The Mystery of the Body*, *The World of the Soul*, *The Reincarnating Soul*. It wasn't at the level of ten or twenty books. There was one more digit.

Copies of newspapers that were probably foreign were also scattered on the floor.

The wall was even worse.

Photos were pasted up to the point that the wall couldn't be seen.

At first glance, it could look like a piece of art, but it wasn't anything so pleasant.

The photos were all of people's corpses.

Shivers went down his spine just from standing there.

On the table in the middle of the room, chart paper was rolled out. Words such as body, soul and transplant were written in a graph with circles and symbols in an unrivalled scrawl.

What the hell had that doctor been doing here?

'Gotou-san, let's hurry.'

For a moment, Yakumo looked like he had also been stunned by the sight, but he spoke with a voice full of tension.

'Where are we hurrying to?'

'Doctor Kinoshita is the other perpetrator for this case.'

'W-w-what?'

Why would Kinoshita need to kill anyone? Kinoshita was the father of the victim.

Gotou was just about to ask Yakumo that when a mobile phone started ringing –

-

13

-

Kinoshita was driving.

Evening approached. Unlucky for him, it was rush hour.

Normally, operations went on late at night.

It was because he needed to take great care to avoid being noticed.

Other people probably wouldn't understand him. His past self wouldn't have understood him either.

Those ahead of their time were the targets of persecution, no matter what time they were from.

Leonardo da Vinci was a good example. In order to draw people in more detail, he autopsied bodies because he thought it was necessary to understand the construction of the body better.

He avoided being seen and dug up graves, so he was treated as a lunatic.

However, he built the foundation for art or possibly medicine, and that had continued to present day.

Will I be treated as a lunatic?

But the day that my actions will be considered great will come.

For now, it is safest for me to wait until night.

But I can't wait any longer –

He had no more time.

That man had told him. His daughter's soul would disappear –

His daughter might disappear while he waited.

And yet, and yet.

He was caught in a traffic jam on a bridge and couldn't move.

He was irritated.

There was always a traffic jam on this bridge.

Even though I can see it right in front of me –

He had to hurry.

Kinoshita took the handle forcefully and started his car in the middle of the cars.

The other cars started honking.

Some people stuck their heads out of their windows to jeer.

He couldn't stop for something like that though.

Kinoshita's car quickly went past the congested bridge.

He forced his way onto the road by the embankment.

It was right by it.

He reached the management office for the water gate.

When he got off the car, Uchiyama from the management office walked towards him.

It looked like he was just about to leave. He was wearing outside clothes – jeans and a white fleece jacket. Ayaka had bought him that fleece jacket.

'Hey, Kinoshita. What are you doing here at this time of night?'

Perfect timing. He could ask Uchiyama to help.

He had taken his time before, but he had to hurry today.

'I'd like your help.'

Kinoshita opened the car trunk.

'Kinoshita. This is...'

Uchiyama's eyes were wide in shock.

'Help me carry this.'

'What are you thinking? What are you trying to do?'

Uchiyama sounded scared.

Why is he scared –

'I understand the pain you feel from losing Ayaka, but even so... This woman has nothing to do with it.'

What is this man saying? Has he misunderstood something?

Saying he understands the pain I feel from losing Ayaka –

If he understood, why was he trying to stop him? Even though he was a friend, a man who had no children couldn't understand.

'Kinoshita. I won't say anything bad. Let this girl go and head home.'

Let her go –

'I can't do that.'

'Kinoshita, listen to what I'm saying. If you won't, I'll call the police.'

Call the police –

Why? Is Uchiyama saying he'll get in my way? Didn't he lend me the water gate key when I told

him I wanted to meet my daughter?

Didn't he say Ayaka was like a daughter to him?

Even though I thought he was my friend –

Will you get in my way?

If you're going to get in my way –

Kinoshita took the block he had used as a weight from the trunk and smacked it against Uchiyama's head.

Uchiyama collapsed to the ground.

Kinoshita wiped the blood that had spurted out from Uchiyama off his cheek with his palm and started his work again.

-

14

-

Yakumo answered the ringing mobile –

Haruka's number was displayed on the screen.

'Are you OK?'

He asked that the moment he picked up.

At the same time, he heard a quiet laugh. It was a man's voice –

&It's the first time we've talked like this.>

The voice was emotionless, almost as if it had been machine-generated.

This is his voice –

It wasn't his reason. He knew it instinctively.

'So it was you, as I expected. I didn't think that Doctor Kinoshita would have thought of such a method himself...'

A phone call with this timing.

He had to be watching them from somewhere. Yakumo looked at his surroundings, but he couldn't feel anybody's presence, let alone see anyone.

<So you have arrived at the truth. It seems that you also made great efforts during the last case as well. I'm happy to hear it.>

'Making you happy doesn't make me happy.'

<Is that something you should be saying to your father?>

'I have never thought of you as my father. The case is already over. Obediently show yourself.'

<Do you really think that?>

Yakumo had a bad feeling.

I know what he's implying. He's answering her phone, which means –

<It seemed like you were about to reach the truth, so I laid a little trap.>

Yakumo clenched his teeth.

'What trap?'

<I said this to Doctor Kinoshita yesterday. 'I found a body compatible with your daughter's.' Her name... I wonder if it's fine that I said it was Ozawa Haruka-san.>

'You bastard.'

Even though he had expected it, when he was told directly like this, it felt like his chest had been stabbed with a stake.

<When people lose something important to them, their true nature comes out. Like Doctor Kinoshita. I wonder what sort of reaction you'll show me? I look forward to seeing which kind of person you are.>

He hung up the moment he finished talking.

He was the only one Yakumo wouldn't forgive – only him!

But it wasn't the time to be chasing after him. Currently, they were in the worst-possible scenario that Yakumo had predicted.

Being even a second late would bring about a situation that could not be undone.

'Gotou-san. Please drive.'

While Yakumo said that, he ran out of the examination room at full speed.

-

15

-

My body feels heavy –

It felt like her body was made of lead.

Her thoughts felt slow.

Where am I?

I was talking with Doctor Kinoshita up until a little while ago –

In the middle of that, my head started feeling heavy –

When she tried to think, there was a pain behind her eyes which felt like something was gripping her head.

It was only faintly, but she knew that there was someone in front of her.

Who –

Their lips moved to say something.

However, she couldn't hear anything.

The person in front of her gradually became clear –

A tall, oval-faced man.

It's Doctor Kinoshita –

-

16

-

Urged by Gotou, Ishii turned on the police siren and drove the car at a furious speed.

'Why did Kinoshita need to kill the girls?'

Sitting in the passenger seat, Gotou asked this question to Yakumo, sitting in the back.

Ishii wanted to know too. Yakumo had said that Kinoshita was the culprit, but Ishii didn't know why.

There's no reason for Doctor Kinoshita to kill anyone. He's related to the victim. He should understand the pain of losing someone better than anyone. To make someone else feel that pain –

'In order to bring his daughter back from the dead,' Yakumo said, raking a hand through his messy hair in his irritation.

'Back from the dead?'

Gotou spoke in a strange voice, but Ishii could see where Yakumo was getting at just from the one sentence.

He had seen a horror movie before. It was about a scientist who was searching for a way to resurrect the dead. There was a whole mountain of stories like that.

Is Doctor Kinoshita trying to do that? But with what method –

He was a doctor, one way or another. He probably wouldn't be chanting spells.

As if he were answering Ishii's doubts, Yakumo started his explanation.

'After finding out that his daughter's soul was wandering at the water gate, Doctor Kinoshita searched for a method to save that soul. Everything scattered about that room was about spiritual phenomena – in particular, books about bringing souls of the dead back to life.'

Ishii remembered the strange scene at Doctor Kinoshita's consultation room.

It had exceeded the level of just gathering materials as a hobby. It was like he had been possessed by something.

'Was he really thinking about that?'

'It isn't particularly unusual – rather, he thought that way because he is a doctor.'

Yakumo's tone of voice wasn't cool like it always was.

Ishii could hear the agitation and irritation at points of his speech.

Ishii, who had thought that Yakumo might not have had emotions, was perplexed by this unexpected side of his.

'Because he's a doctor?'

Gotou cocked his head, like he didn't understand.

'Yes. Do you know of the Japanese Psychic Science Association²'

'What is that tongue twister of a name?'

Gotou frowned.

'It is a foundation that researches spiritual phenomena. Its members are by no means suspicious mediums. It is a gathering of psychiatry and psychology professors with doctorates.'

Ishii knew about that too.

While watching television, he would see scientists denying the existence of spiritual phenomena, but it wasn't actually true.

There were scientists who seriously researched spiritual phenomena.

'Science cannot yet explain the existence of the human soul. However, just because it has not been explained does not mean it is impossible. Formerly, science didn't explain that the earth revolved around the sun, but even at that time, the earth revolved.'

'Ah, forget it. Stop the complicated explanation here.'

Gotou waved a hand to interrupt.

'In short, what I want to say is that simply being a doctor does not mean that he would deny the existence of the soul. Hata-san is a good example. Even though he is a coroner, he believes that the soul exists.'

'But even if Kinoshita believes that there's a soul, that wouldn't lead to him trying to bring his daughter back.'

Gotou clearly looked like he had indigestion, but the conversation continued.

'Please listen to this hypothesis. There is the idea of reincarnation.'

'Ah, I know about that. After dying, the soul leaves the body and is born again in a different body – that thing, right?'

Gotou's gaze was wandering as he spoke, like he was trying to pull in his memories.

'Though that isn't exactly it, it's about right. With reincarnation, the body and the soul are separate things. The body is only the soul's vessel. Though this is only one interpretation, in that way of

2 It really exists -[this](#) is its homepage.

thinking, the soul still lives on even if the body dies.'

'Well, that's right.'

'To put it another way, for those who believe in the existence of ghosts, their theory would fail if the body and soul weren't separate.'

It was just as Yakumo said.

As somebody who believed in ghosts, Ishii felt that himself. If the death of the body meant the death of the soul, the very existence of ghosts would be denied.

They had to be separate.

'Doctor Kinoshita thought that if the body died, as long as the soul was alive, that soul could just be transplanted to a different body.'

'That's ridiculous.'

Gotou cocked his head like he couldn't believe Yakumo's explanation.

'It doesn't matter if it is ridiculous or not. Doctor Kinoshita had reason to believe it. He had almost definitely seen his daughter's soul. As well, in the newspaper clippings in that room, there were stories of people who had been resurrected in the past.'

'Did that really happen...'

Gotou looked incredulous.

There was one thing Ishii couldn't understand, separate from the case.

Why is Detective Gotou so sceptical about spiritual phenomena? Isn't he the psychic detective –

'Yes. Though it isn't well known in Japan, it is considered rather major overseas. There is something called responsive xenoglossy which is famous.

'What the hell is that?'

Gotou frowned like he had seen something filthy.

'Detective Gotou, do you really not know?'

Ishii couldn't help but speak.

'So you do?'

'There are some people who can speak languages they shouldn't know under hypnotism. It is said that memories from before birth are in the deep psyche. In India, there was a report of a girl who had all those memories from the past.'

Though Ishii said something naturally knew, Gotou looked surprised and said, 'Why do you know that?'

'It is as Ishii-san says. If this story is true, it would have to mean that the soul was born in a different body.'

Yakumo finished there.

'So I don't have to agree, but you're telling me to understand...' muttered Gotou, a cigarette in his mouth.

'But did Kinoshita use black magic or something?'

Ishii wanted to know that as well. What method was he trying to use –

'No, the method he used wasn't anything magical. He wouldn't jump that far. There is a more realistic and extremely primitive method.'

'Primitive?'

Gotou tilted his head at Yakumo's words.

Ishii felt the same as Gotou. Even if Yakumo said primitive, Ishii couldn't think of the method.

'Excuse me, Ishii-san. Could you drive a little more quickly?'

Yakumo ignored Gotou's question and spoke while leaning forward.

Even if he asked him to speed up, he was already speeding quite a bit. Plus, they might get caught in the traffic jam on the bridge up ahead like this.

'Oi, Yakumo. Answer my question.'

Gotou returned to the conversation.

'Gotou-san, you saw as well, did you not? There was a large piece of chart paper in that room.'

'Yeah, that thing with some sort of diagram on it.'

'Yes. That is the method Doctor Kinoshita used.'

'Is it a sacrifice?'

Ishii recalled how the room looked and said the thought that came to him.

'Correct. The method is similar to the live sacrifices conducted in the past. He knows that his daughter's soul is at the bottom of the river. He wants to bring his daughter back from the dead. He will make the soul he wants to resurrect possess a body...'

'Like Andou?'

'Yes.'

'How stupid...'

Gotou kicked the dashboard in his anger.

'On top of that, this time, Doctor Kinoshita chose her for his daughter's body...'

Yakumo bit his lip and tightened his hands into fists as he said that.

'Wha – you can't mean Haruka-chan!?' shouted Gotou, turning to face the backseat.

'I do.'

'But why her? She's the wrong age...'

'That man is connected to this case. He knows we're here, so he thought of a little test and told Doctor Kinoshita that her body might be compatible with his daughter's soul.'

'Why would he do that?'

'Like I said, it's a test. He wants to know what sort of response I'll show him after she dies.'

At the same time as he finished speaking, Yakumo punched the seat.

'Just for that...'

'Yes. For that man, my existence is just something to experiment with. What will my child become? He probably wanted to see that.'

'So that man was involved from the start?'

'That's likely.'

'Then he's an accomplice to murder!' Gotou shouted.

'Do you have any proof?'

After a while, Yakumo started speaking again.

'It is the same as last time. He didn't say anything about killing himself. If we are talking about things he actually did, all he did was show Doctor Kinoshita his daughter's soul and give a one-sided lecture on a theory about the soul and the body. The rest was just Doctor Kinoshita's rampage that came about because of his feelings for his daughter...'

'Damn it!'

Gotou kicked the dashboard again.

Ishii was completely lost as to what Gotou and Yakumo were saying.

Who was the man they were talking about? However, he understood that Haruka-chan was in danger.

This is a serious affair. We have to hurry and save her –

I don't want to never see her smile again. But –

In opposition to his impatient feelings, Ishii slammed the brakes at the foot of the bridge.

'Why are you stopping!?! Hurry up! We've got the siren on!' yelled Gotou as he hit the dashboard.

'I know, but...'

There was a traffic jam. Even if they went to the sides, the opposite lane had another line of cars.

It wasn't that he didn't want to force his way through, but they would just take more time if they caused an accident.

'You idiot! Make a U-turn! Turn around!'

'It's no good.'

The decision was too late.

The road behind them was blocked off as well. They couldn't move around. Even though they could see the water gate they were aiming for –

'Damn it!'

Gotou threw the cigarette he had been holding in his mouth at the windshield.

Like that had been a signal, the back door opened and Yakumo leapt out. Like that, he started running.

'That'll be faster,' Gotou muttered, and he ran, following Yakumo.

They went and left me behind –

-

17

-

I could see the river.

In the night, the river was pitch-black.

Was this the river's surface? No.

This was probably the top of the water gate's control tower.

The river was about ten metres below.

Though she had regained consciousness, her body still wouldn't move like she wanted it to.

She tried to stand up, but it was no use.

It was like her body and mind were cut off from each other –

'The drug is doing its work. You won't be able to move yet.'

Doctor Kinoshita peered at her from the ground as he said that. His words seemed very slow to her

–

'... Why... did you... do this...'

Her tongue wouldn't turn properly.

It was almost like it wasn't her own voice.

'Isn't it obvious that I'm doing this for my daughter... ' said Kinoshita with a smile.

I don't understand.

What on earth is this person trying to do for his daughter?

Why did he need to abduct me and bring me here –

Could this be what Ayaka-chan wanted to stop –

'She doesn't... want... this... Ayaka... chan...'

'Shut up! Ayaka didn't want to die!'

This person had already become someone else.

Haruka suddenly remembered her mother's words. If it would bring back their child, a parent would happily become a murderer –

I wonder if I'm going to be killed –

Haruka imagined her death, like it didn't concern her at all.

* * *

In the dark, the water gate came into view.

Gotou was running at full speed on the road by the embankment.

He saw the iron bridge that connected the management office and the tower in the middle of the river that controlled the opening and closing of the water gate.

Just a little bit more.

Still, Yakumo was really fast.

Gotou had started running to try to catch up to Yakumo, but rather than catching up, Yakumo's back was just getting farther away.

Before he noticed, Yakumo had already entered the premises of the water gate management office.

Even though he doesn't look like he exercises normally –

Gotou gasped for air.

Even though Gotou used to be able to run faster, he was already getting old. The moment he thought that, his feet got tangled and he fell forward.

He tried to get up immediately afterwards, but his knees buckled and wouldn't move the way he wanted them to.

'Damn it!'

This wasn't a joke. He had a backbone.

Gotou pushed against his thighs with his fists and forced himself up.

He took a deep breath and started running again before he let it out.

'Please. Be safe,' Gotou murmured.

That contrary Yakumo had changed so much. If anything happened to Haruka-chan, he would revert to how he was before.

Gotou wouldn't let that happen.

– Why did you save me?

Words that Yakumo had said to him before came up in the back of his mind.

He might have wanted to die, but I saved him. I didn't leave him alone.

That's why I'm going to make sure Yakumo walks a proper path.

That's my responsibility, since I saved him from being killed by his mother –
Gotou urged his feet to run faster.

* * *

Ishii had forcibly pulled his car to the side and stopped it on the bridge.

Honks came from behind him.

It wasn't acceptable to stop a car in the middle of a traffic jam like this.

However, a person's life was at stake. On top of that, it was Haruka-chan's –

He didn't have the time to look for a parking spot.

I'll save her. No matter what, I'll save Haruka-chan.

He muttered that countless times to himself in his mind.

Ishii ran through the gaps between cars and turned left once he crossed the bridge to enter the road by the embankment.

Even he thought it was a reckless choice.

But no matter how many times I'm called a fool or an idiot, I know what should take priority, and I also know that there are some times when a man has to act like a man.

She won't die from something like this.

If something happened to make her die, I – I would –

It was no good. He couldn't think about awful things like that.

Run, Ishii Yuutarou.

Do your best, Ishii Yuutarou.

Ishii encouraged himself and just sprinted determinedly –

* * *

An iron shackle was clamped to Haruka's right ankle.

A chain went through that iron shackle. On one end of that chain, there was a concrete block, and on the other end, there was a hook on an iron railing about as tall as her waist.

Haruka didn't understand what Doctor Kinoshita was trying to do.

Like he had finished his preparations, Kinoshita grabbed Haruka's arm and tried to force her to stand up, but it didn't go well and both of them fell to the iron floor.

Clang!

It made a piercing noise.

She didn't feel much pain, which might have been because her senses were dulled.

'Damn it.'

Kinoshita cursed and tried to force Haruka to stand up again.

This time, he wasn't pulling her up but pushing her up.

Somehow, Kinoshita managed to make Haruka stand up, and he picked her up and sat her on the iron railing.

Now, Haruka understood what Kinoshita was trying to do.

Though Kinoshita was holding her up now, if he let go, Haruka would fall headlong into the river. The concrete block was probably a weight to sink Haruka's body.

I'm going to be killed. That realisation filled Haruka's head.

Mum, I'm sorry. It looks like I'm going to die too –

Even though I finally found out your true feelings –

Even though there are so many things I want to talk about and do still –

Yakumo will probably be angry. He'll say something like 'It's because you just went and did what you wanted'.

I want to meet him once more –

Then I want to talk to him properly.

Even though I want to meet Yakumo without any trouble, it's always like this –

She hated it. She didn't want to die.

She didn't want to die without telling anybody anything.

She was going to live. She was going to live no matter what.

Haruka focussed her concentration on her numb hands and gripped the iron railing. She wouldn't let go. She would live and meet Yakumo once more.

She heard somebody's voice yelling. A voice she had heard before.

The hand Kinoshita had been holding her up with let go.

The wind was strong. Her body, jolted by the wind, was swaying.

She definitely wouldn't let go.

But then, Kinoshita heartlessly pushed against Haruka's body with both of his hands.

No matter how strong her thoughts were, they were powerless in the face of reality. Haruka's hands let go of the railing and she fell headlong towards the river ten metres below.

While she was falling, she saw Yakumo running towards her.

But that has to be an illusion –

The next moment, her body hit the water.

* * *

After Gotou entered the premises of the water gate management office, he saw Yakumo standing still. His shoulders moved with his breathing.

'Oi, Yakumo! What are you doing!? If you don't hurry...'

Gotou's words got caught in his throat.

He saw the figure at Yakumo's feet. It couldn't be. Were they already too late?

'It can't be...'

'You're wrong.'

Wrong? Is that right –

Gotou peered at the figure collapsed at Yakumo's feet.

There was a middle-aged man. Blood was flowing from his head, and his white fleece jacket was dyed red.

That's bad –

'He's alive. He's just lost consciousness,' said Yakumo, addressing Gotou's concerns.

Almost as if he were proving those words, the man let out a groan.

If he was alive, Gotou was sorry, but he was just going to leave him for now.

Clang!

There was the sound of something hitting something else.

There was somebody on the control tower across the iron bridge that stretched out from the management office.

That's where she is!

Just as Gotou thought that, Yakumo had already started running.

Gotou ran after him.

The iron bridge's entrance was open, though it should have been locked.

They ran down the road which was wide enough for one.

Gotou saw someone near the control tower's iron railing beyond Yakumo's back.

That was it!

'Wait!'

Gotou yelled, but it was too late.

The person he saw fell towards the river –

Damn. Where? Where did she fall?

While Gotou was thinking, Yakumo used the iron railing as a springboard and dived into the river with no hesitation.

'You idiot!'

Gotou stopped in his tracks and leaned over the railing as he yelled, but it was too late.

Yakumo landed cleanly in the water, headfirst, and started swimming. Yakumo was probably only in such a rush because the one who had fallen was Haruka-chan. All that remained was –

'Kinoshitaaa!'

Gotou yelled as he charged towards Kinoshita in the control tower like a raging bull.

Kinoshita's face was stiff with shock.

It appeared that he hadn't expected them to show up.

Gotou lowered his centre of gravity and tackled Kinoshita, aiming at his solar plexus.

'Uaargh!'

Kinoshita turned a somersault and hit the railing as he fell.

'You idiot!'

Gotou hit Kinoshita's face forcefully.

It sounded like bamboo breaking. He might have broken his nose. Suddenly, Kinoshita's mouth was bloody.

Somehow, hitting Kinoshita hurt Gotou.

He was different from the usual culprit. What he had done was the worst, but he loved his daughter from the bottom of his heart.

He lost the one he loved to a murder. The one who caused those circumstances was a madman like Andou.

He could also be a victim.

But still, he could never be forgiven.

I know that. I know that, but –

Gotou turned his anger with no outlet towards the railing and kicked it as hard as he could. He would think later. He had to do something about Yakumo and Haruka-chan in the river first.

Gotou leant over the railing and called out.

'Oi! You two OK?'

* * *

Exposed to the cold water, Haruka's senses suddenly awoke.

Her heart felt like it was being crushed. Her skin stung with pain.

She tried to float up, but her body wouldn't move the way she wanted it to.

Dragged down by the weight on her right ankle, her body was going deeper and deeper into the water –

Into the pitch-black water –

I want to live.

With that frantic thought, Haruka thrust her hands upwards, but her fingertips couldn't feel open air.

It might already be too late.

The moment she thought that, she lost her strength.

I'm just going to sink in this dark water –

The moment she accepted that, somebody grabbed her wrist.

Then, she was pulled out forcefully.

It was slow, but her body started floating up.

Who? Who is it –

Finally, her head came out of the water.

She choked on the air rushing into her lungs all at once.

'You're alive.'

That voice is Yakumo's –

Yakumo was trying to carry her body with only his right arm.

It was impossible. If he continued like this, it wouldn't just be Haruka – Yakumo would die as well.

'Oi! You two! Are you OK?'

A familiar loud voice reached her eyes.

She saw somebody peering down at them from the top of the control tower.

It was dark so she couldn't see his face clearly, but it was probably Gotou-san.

'Gotou-san! Please pull up the chain!'

After Yakumo yelled, he wrapped the chain around his left arm and tightly gripped it.

'Got it. Wait.'

Gotou took the hook off of the railing.

'OK – hold on tight,' Yakumo said.

She wanted to, but there was no strength in her arm.

'OK? I'm going to pull it up!'

Gotou started pulling up the chain.

At the same time, Yakumo went up the iron ladder step by step. The chains were digging into Yakumo's arm.

'Sorry...'

Even though he was always complaining, he didn't mind throwing away his life.

For someone like me –

'You're noisy. Be quiet and hold on.'

As expected, he had a complaint.

'You OK?'

Gotou leant over to shout.

When she looked up, she saw a figure standing behind Gotou.

'Gotou-san – behind you!'

Haruka's voice didn't reach Gotou.

Kinoshita struck Gotou's head with an iron pipe.

'Agh!'

Gotou fell and disappeared from her vision.

Then, the chain fell from his hand.

Haruka and Yakumo both fell –

But they didn't sink into the water.

Yakumo, with the chain still wrapped around his arm, held on to the ladder, and his face was just barely above the water.

'Yakumo-kun, forget about me – let go of my hand...' Haruka pleaded.

'You're annoying.'

That was Yakumo's reply.

Why?

If he let go, at least you'll be saved.

I'm begging you – please let go. If you don't, I'll –

She couldn't say any more.

She was at the limits of her strength.

Despite Haruka's wish, the hand that Yakumo had been using to grip onto the ladder let go –

* * *

Ishii finally reached the parking lot for the water gate management office.

He didn't see Gotou or Yakumo anyway. Where on earth did they disappear to?

Before he arrived, he had twice heard the sound of something loud falling into the water.

It couldn't be –

He looked around restlessly.

Suddenly, a man with blood covering his head appeared in front of Ishii's eyes.

'Ack!'

Ishii let out a shriek in surprise mixed with fear.

The man sat down there while holding his head.

'Are you OK?'

Ishii knelt down and looked at the man's face.

'I'm fine, but somebody has to save the girl over there...'

The man pointed at the control tower that was connected to the bridge while bearing with the pain.

So that was where Haruka-chan was.

'I will come back later.'

After Ishii said that, he ran towards the control tower.

'Uaargh!'

Just as he had started crossing the bridge, he heard a shout. He saw two people.

One was lying still against the railing.

The other leant over the railing and yelled, 'Are you OK?'

That voice. It's Detective Gotou. Then the person collapsed there is Doctor Kinoshita –

Gotou took the chain that had been hooked to the railing and started pulling it up. Then there was a large movement behind him.

'Detective Gotou! Behind you!'

The call had been a step too late.

Kinoshita hit Gotou's head with the iron pipe.

Gotou fell forward and let go of the chain.

'Ooooh!'

Do your best, Ishii Yuutarou! You're a man! While Ishii let out a yell, he charged into Kinoshita, who was holding the pipe.

Kinoshita's pipe turned towards Ishii.

He was just about to be hit when he avoided it by rolling to the side.

'Ishii, the chain. Yakumo and Haruka-chan are on the other end.'

Gotou spoke up. His ear was covered in blood, and he was collapsed on the ground.

Haruka-chan! Ishii instinctively grabbed the chain, wrapped it around his arm and pulled at it with all his strength.

The next moment, a sharp pain ran through his shoulders. Next, it was his back. Then, his side. His arm. Kinoshita was striking his entire body with the pipe.

'Don't get in my way! Don't get in my way! Don't get in my way!'

Kinoshita is yelling. As if I could let go. I definitely won't let go.

Haruka-chan is on the other end. If I let go, Haruka-chan will –

Ishii gritted his teeth and bore the pain.

Kinoshita raised the pipe, aiming for Ishii's head.

Aah, he was going to die! But he wouldn't let go. Ishii shut his eyes to await the impact.

'Don't get too carried away, you idiot!'

Gotou's voice. The sound of something hitting bone. Then, the pipe fell together with Kinoshita to the floor.

'You can let go. I'll pull.'

Gotou took over holding the chain for Ishii.

Ishii suddenly lost all his strength and collapsed right there.

'You've got some guts for a guy in charge of playing the fool,' Gotou muttered.

'I'm sorry I couldn't be of help...'

'No, you did good.'

He was struck with awe. Detective Gotou had praised him. Life was worth living –

'Thank you... very... mu...'

Ah, but he might die –

Like that, he lost consciousness.

-

18

-

Gotou's ear was covered in blood. He was sitting on the railing.

Blood was dripping from Kinoshita's nose, dyeing his face red, and he just sat in a stupor.

Ishii was collapsed on the ground, face-down and unmoving.

In the water, Yakumo and Haruka, were in a strange situation where they could see everything clearly.

'Why... are you getting in my way...'

Kinoshita spoke with a hoarse voice.

'Get in your way? That's not it. Your experiment will not succeed no matter how many times you

try. I came to tell you that.'

Yakumo stood in front of Kinoshita.

'That's not true. I will definitely bring my daughter back from the dead.'

'By transplanting your daughter's soul into another body?'

'Yes.'

'I will also acknowledge the existence of the soul. There are also cases where those souls will possess other people. In order to resurrect your daughter, you decided to abduct girls and drown them in the water, waiting for your daughter to possess them, but this method will definitely not bring your daughter back from the dead.'

'That's a lie!'

Kinoshita yelled with a shaking voice. It was probably impossible for him to just agree and say, 'Yes, that's true.'

Yakumo started his explanation calmly.

'There are two reasons. The first is that souls and bodies cannot be easily replaced. You should understand this as a doctor. It is the same with organ transplants, is it not? The more complex the construction, the fewer the compatible donors there are due to organ rejection. I acknowledge that a soul is like a cluster of a person's thoughts and emotions. Accordingly, the organ of the body which governs that is the most complex one in the human body – the brain. There isn't anybody who can be a compatible donor.'

'I won't give up until a body that is compatible appears.'

Kinoshita looked up at Yakumo to glare.

'How many billions of people do you plan to kill?'

Yakumo stood face-to-face with Kinoshita and met his eyes.

His red left eye with the contact lens out looked like it was aflame.

'There is one more reason. Even if transplanting souls were possible, this method won't work.'

'This method?'

Kinoshita's blood-smearred lips frowned.

'Please think about it calmly. Using this method kills the previous body.'

That was right. It was just as Yakumo said. Even if it was possible to transplant souls, the body it was transplanted to had drowned.

'I...'

Kinoshita started speaking, but in the end, he didn't finish.

'You have lost the ability to make decisions calmly. What you have done is simply murder.'

Kinoshita's eyes opened wide.

The muscles in his face were twitching. Kinoshita had realised. What he had done was meaningless

–

'I sympathise with your circumstances. However, by no means will you be forgiven. You know how it feels to lose a child. You have increased the number of people who are burdened with the same suffering and sadness that you are. You ended the lives of children who had futures like your daughter did.'

People were so foolish –

Haruka found it harder to breathe. Kinoshita's actions were based on the deep love he had for his child. That love had been so deep that he thought lightly of others' lives.

To the onlooker, it just seemed mad, but –

'Why did you go so far? You should have had many chances to stop.'

Yakumo looked like he was holding back his anger.

What on earth was that anger directed towards?

'Yakumo-kun. This isn't a reason... Not everyone is as strong as you. Even if they know it in their head, their emotions won't yield...' said Kinoshita slowly, gazing at Yakumo.

For a while, Yakumo looked back at him, like he was a mirror reflecting Kinoshita's gaze, but he finally stood up.

'Ignoring whether I am a strong person or not, saying that someone's emotions won't yield even if they know something in their head? Do you think you can use that as an excuse? If you can be forgiven like that, shall I also forgive Andou, who killed your daughter because of emotions that couldn't be controlled by reason?'

Dumbfounded, Kinoshita just stared up at Yakumo.

Those eyes were flickering wildly.

It was just as Yakumo said. Doctor Kinoshita had probably been so sad that he had forgotten that people besides him also had emotions.

And then that arrogance drove him mad –

Kinoshita finally cocked his head silently.

His shoulders were shaking. Not just his shoulders. His whole body was shaking like electricity was running through it.

He had probably realised now. The weight of the crimes he committed –

'Ayaka... Dad... couldn't save you... Sorry...'

Kinoshita spoke with a constricted voice.

His words stopped together with his shaking. Something fell from Doctor Kinoshita's shoulders.

This person couldn't say that one thing and continued to blame and corner himself. It was too late now already –

Yakumo put a finger to his brow.

'Doctor Kinoshita. Your daughter has come.'

Kinoshita looked up at Yakumo's words.

His eyes went wide.

Crying loudly, Kinoshita thrust his two arms forwards.

That doglike howl was full of sadness that was so deep there was no end to it.

Haruka could also see Ayaka-chan standing there.

She had a ponytail and she smiled with dimples on her cheeks. It was a very gentle smile.

Like it was announcing the conclusion of the case, there was the sound of a distant ambulance's siren.

Doctor Kinoshita's crime wouldn't be forgiven, but his daughter Ayaka-chan alone might forgive him.

If she told Yakumo this, he'd probably get angry and say she was too naive, but Haruka still wanted to think this.

Even if it's just a little, I want to find redemption.

Since people are sentimental and selfish creatures –

終章

その後

EPILOGUE

-

One week later –

Haruka headed for the prefabricated building in the back of Building B.

She had really wanted to show her face sooner, but she hadn't been able to. She had been hospitalised.

Though she was only hospitalised for three days, her mother had rushed over from home and shut Haruka in her room to force her to rest.

This morning, her mother finally returned home.

Haruka had talked a lot with her mother for the first time in a long, long time.

More than half of what they talked about was stories from when her older sister was alive. The time at home after that had been halted without her knowing it.

Laughing, crying and getting angry from the bottom of my heart. I haven't done that in a while.

I feel like I always live while holding myself back because of my sister.

I've noticed something from this case.

Like with Doctor Kinoshita, blaming myself for my sister's death has tied her down –

But even if I know that, I can't stop blaming myself.

I will always regret my sister's death, but I think I can look forward, little by little.

I'll try to live more as myself.

Well, it's easier said than done –

She stood in front of the door with the plate <Movie Research Circle> on it.

Still, Yakumo didn't come to visit her at the hospital even once. Even though she had kind of been hoping for it.

Though it might have just become troublesome since he would have suddenly run into her mother.

Plus, she would have felt uncomfortable for making him worry.

Ah, but maybe she could just make one complaint.

'Yakumo-kun. Are you here?' said Haruka, opening the door.

He was here. His hair looked mussed up from sleep as usual. Even though it was the first time they had seen each other in a while, he replied half-heartedly, 'Oh, it's you?' Honestly, this person.

'Hey, are you going out?'

Yakumo was dressed for something.

'Good timing. Are you going too?' asked Yakumo with a yawn.

What did he mean, going –

'Where to?'

'To check on Ishii-san.'

'When you say Ishii-san, do you mean that Ishii-san?'

'Yes. That Ishii-san.'

'Is he injured?'

When she was saved, Ishii had been collapsed faced down and wasn't moving, as if he had died.

'It's not at the level of "injured". His upper left arm, his right clavicle and three ribs on top of that are fractured. He is seriously wounded from the full-body beating.'

'Is it that awful?'

I didn't know –

'At the time, Ishii-san was the one who held us up with the chain we were on, in Gotou-san's stead, since he was attacked. Ishii-san didn't let go even when Doctor Kinoshita was hitting him with an iron pipe.'

Even though they had only met a few times, Ishii had only left a vaguely weak impression.

That Ishii did –

'In a manner of speaking, Ishii-san saved our lives.'

Haruka nodded. She hadn't known that was what happened at all. He had protected them with his body.

'I really wanted to go sooner as well, but there were a variety of things I needed to look into.'

Though Haruka had just arrived, she left the room together with Yakumo.

* * *

Hata fled from his room to the autopsy room.

Nobody would come here. He couldn't stand the noise.

It was the same with the questions from the guys in investigation who couldn't wrap up the case, but even though it was a week since the case ended, the press was only growing more energetic, to say nothing of dying down.

Doctor Kinoshita's madness –

Society was making a fuss about it, but how much of its true nature did they grasp?

Hata understood the idea behind Kinoshita's actions well. He might have done the same thing. Though Kinoshita chose the wrong method, Hata still thought he had been composed.

Hata sat on the chair by the wall.

In any case, a long trial was going to start.

It would probably be torture for Kinoshita. He would have to calmly look at what he had done. It

was too harsh a reality to sum up by calling it an infraction of the law.

Will he be able to bear it in the end –

No, he would have to. That was the only path left for him.

He would have to atone for his crimes for the rest of his life. It seemed that there were some people who were worried that Kinoshita might commit suicide, but Hata wasn't concerned.

Naturally, for somebody who believed the soul existed, the death of the body wouldn't bring respite or an end.

Death wasn't a place to escape to.

Humans, who existed to live and to die, had to think about something.

Having a soul meant that dying wasn't the end.

Still, I'm interested in that man with the sunglasses –

In this case as well, it was like the man had not even existed.

What on earth was that man's goal? Yakumo had said it was an experiment, but Hata couldn't help but think there was something more –

* * *

Before we go to the hospital where Ishii-san is, there's somewhere I have to go first.

The place they arrived at after Yakumo said that to Haruka was the water gate management office.

'It's you two. What is it?'

Just as they reached the parking lot, Uchiyama called out to them from inside the office. A bandage was wrapped around his head – an injury from the case.

Haruka had heard from Yakumo on the way here that Uchiyama had been hit in the head by Kinoshita with a block.

Uchiyama had to be confused right now, with the death of the girl he had loved as a daughter and the incident that girl's father – his friend, Doctor Kinoshita – caused.

Haruka thought that his heart might be more hurt than his head was.

'Uchiyama-san, I have a little business with you,' Yakumo said, his expression blank.

Haruka felt the atmosphere change alarmingly then. Uchiyama also felt it. The friendly smile quickly disappeared from his face.

Yakumo entered the management office silently.

Though Haruka didn't understand, she followed after him.

'Business with me, you say?'

Uchiyama urged Yakumo to sit across from him.

'No, I don't mind standing.'

With his hands in his pockets, Yakumo stood in front of Uchiyama. Haruka, who felt nervous because of the strange atmosphere, stopped a step behind the two of them.

'So, what is it?' Uchiyama asked.

'I will say this first. What I say after this is all my conjecture, with no proof to it at all.'

Though Yakumo said it was conjecture, he spoke with clear purpose.

'What is it?'

Uchiyama spoke cautiously.

'I will go right to the point. Uchiyama-san, I think that you killed Andou-san.'

Wait – what's he saying all of a sudden?

Haruka could only be shocked by Yakumo's unexpected outburst. She thought that Uchiyama would have felt the same, but she was wrong –

Rather than looking perturbed, there was a smile on his face.

'What are you saying? I don't understand what you mean.'

'I mean exactly what I said. Even after Doctor Kinoshita was arrested, there were still many things in my head that I did not understand, so I started my investigation anew.'

'What did you find out?'

Uchiyama took a cigarette from his shirt pocket and lit it up.

He was playing the fool. That was what Haruka felt.

'One: Andou's accidental death. According to the eyewitness' testimonies, he staggered into the pedestrian crossing with a red light. He had not been drunk. He had not been chased by anyone. Then why would Andou have rushed out into the intersection?'

'Who knows? I don't understand either.'

Uchiyama spread his arms wide and shook his head in an exaggerated manner.

'I found your name in the list of eyewitnesses. Don't you think that is too much of a coincidence?'

'Well, I was there. It's an amazing coincidence. But how would that make me Andou's killer?'

Uchiyama's smile made the corner of his eyes wrinkle, like he thought what Yakumo was saying was stupid.

'You chose a good time to push Andou-san from behind.'

'Why would I do something like that? There's no reason for me to, right?'

He was right. It was just as Uchiyama-san said.

There was no reason for him to kill Andou. What was Yakumo thinking, saying something with no basis for it?

'No, you do have a reason. Andou-san was the murderer who killed Ayaka-chan.'

'Are you saying that I knew the murderer?'

'I am.'

Yakumo replied immediately to Uchiyama's question with no change in his expression.

'You have a lot of confidence about something you said was just conjecture.'

'I have looked at the materials from that case many times. Ayaka-chan was killed at the water gate upstream from here. However, she was found at this water gate. Why do you think that is the case?'

'Isn't that... because she was carried here by the current?'

Uchiyama looked up at the ceiling and answered after a bit of thinking.

His voice sounded like it was trembling.

'No, that isn't right. If she had been carried by the current, Ayaka-chan's corpse should have had numerous injuries on it. However, there weren't any. Ayaka-chan was killed at the old water gate and then disposed of here in order to hide Andou's hideaway.'

'I see; so that's how it is... But how is that connected to my apparently knowing the murderer?'

Uchiyama restlessly spat out his cigarette.

'It is connected. When Ayaka-chan was disposed of here, she was submerged with a weight attached to her ankle.'

'And what about it?'

'She was submerged in the river. If you didn't see her corpse being disposed of, you wouldn't have been able to find her corpse so quickly.'

'You have an amazing imagination.'

Uchiyama nodded multiple times, like he thought it admirable.

However, it just looked like an act to Haruka.

'From a little ways away, you saw someone disposing of something in the river by chance. When you went to look, Ayaka-chan's corpse was there. At that time, you saw the murderer's face, or perhaps you looked for Andou by care. Naturally, you didn't say any of this to the police, so that you could find the murderer yourself and have your revenge...'

Uchiyama started laughing aloud.

'That is quite the masterpiece. You're amazing. Detective Columbo¹ would be white as a sheet. That said, the world would be a mess if everyone went to get revenge when their friends' children were killed.'

'Yes. That is, if she was just the daughter of a friend to you...'

Yakumo took a pause there.

The two of them looked at each other without saying anything. The first to look away was

1 Columbo is an American detective mystery television series which is special in that the perpetrator is revealed to the viewer at the beginning. [NHK](#) has it.

Uchiyama.

'There's something I planned on returning to you today.'

Like he had been waiting for this moment, Yakumo took a black notebook from his pocket and handed it to Uchiyama.

'T-this is...'

Uchiyama's expression changed completely.

'This is something you dropped at the river when we met you before.'

There had been two photos inside. One of them had been of Ayaka-chan. The other had been of Uchiyama and another woman.

'I conducted a little investigation. The woman in this photo with you is Doctor Kinoshita's dead wife. Ayaka-chan's mother.'

Gripping the notebook tightly, Uchiyama said nothing.

'Before she married Doctor Kinoshita, it seems she was acquainted with you. I don't know if something happened between the two of you, and I have no plans on investigating that far. However, I believe that carrying such an old photo with you even now is evidence that your feelings towards Ayaka-chan are greater than those one would have towards a friend's daughter.'

Uchiyama made no reply.

However, the silence was the same as affirming Yakumo's theory.

'Why did you think I was suspicious?'

After a silence, Uchiyama spoke.

'The first time I met you, you said this. "I couldn't forgive the person who did that." You spoke like everything was already over...'

'I see... But even if that's true, what you're saying is just conjecture.'

'It is as you say. This is all my conjecture. I have no physical proof,' said Yakumo plainly.

'The police?'

'I haven't told them this. I probably won't tell them anything about this case in the future either. It's up to you what to do next.'

So Yakumo had come here just to do this. Haruka didn't understand his intentions.

Uchiyama furrowed his brows, looking troubled, like he felt the same way as Haruka.

'However, please just don't forget that somebody else has taken the blame for killing Andou in a driving accident,' Yakumo said, sounding like he was completely at ease.

Finally, Haruka could also see Yakumo's intentions.

Though it was certainly up to Uchiyama what to do next, his choice would greatly change what would happen to the driver of the car that caused the accident.

Don't involve other people in your revenge –

That was probably what Yakumo indirectly wanted to say.

'We're going.'

Yakumo said that and promptly left the management office.

'Eh? Wait a second.'

Haruka followed Yakumo out the management office, escaping the suffocating atmosphere inside.

When she turned around in the middle of leaving, she saw Uchiyama hanging his head.

What choice will he make? It's not something I'll find out by thinking about it.

I hoped in my heart that he would make the nice choice.

But which choice is the right one –

* * *

Ishii was on the bed, contemplating the case.

He had a lot of time. He had thought it over a hundred times already, but he still didn't know.

How could this case have been averted –

There was a knock on the door, interrupting his thoughts.

'Please come in.'

After Ishii spoke up, a large bear-like figure came in.

It's Detective Gotou. I'm honoured. Detective Gotou came to visit me –

'Sorry. I really wanted to come earlier, but there was a lot of paperwork to do to wrap up the case.'

Gotou scratched his bristly chin awkwardly.

That was to be expected.

The case time had been solved completely separate from the investigation department.

The information was complicated, so everyone was probably in a great turmoil.

Gotou sighed loudly and sat on the round chair by the bed. There were shadows under his eyes, his shirt was slightly soiled, and his hair was messed up. He probably hadn't slept –

'Oh – even you have someone who'll bring you flowers?'

Gotou looked at the vase with a flower in it by the bed.

'No, that's not it. The chief's daughter came to visit me.'

'Oh, you're pretty good,' Gotou said, poking fun at him.

'Please stop. To be honest, I'm troubled since she comes every day.'

On top of that, the fear towards her still hadn't left his heart.

She hadn't done anything wrong, but despite that, every time he looked at her face, the terrible memory from when she had been possessed came back to him.

'That's great. You're definitely headed for a promotion.'

'Please give me a break. It means much more to me to have you come visit, Detective Gotou.'

When Ishii candidly shared his emotions, Gotou looked openly disagreeable.

What does he dislike so much?

So I have made him hate me –

'Hey, Ishii, I'm just going to say this, but I'm not gay.'

'Yes, I know.'

What was he saying all of a sudden?

If Detective Gotou were gay – Ishii felt bad for thinking this, but he would have found it disagreeable.

'So... I mean... you're a man too...'

'What is it you want to say?'

Gotou cleared his throat awkwardly.

'In short, I'm telling you to shape up as a man.'

'That was my plan from the beginning. I want to become a manly detective such as yourself, Detective Gotou.'

'Eh? You're not gay?'

'By no means. That isn't true at all. There is even a woman in my heart.'

Ishii didn't understand the point of Gotou's question.

'That Yakumo...' Gotou muttered with gritted teeth.

Yakumo. That mysterious young man –

'Detective Gotou, there's just one thing I would like to ask, but who is that young man called Yakumo?'

Gotou looked puzzled at Ishii's question.

Even if he looked like that, Ishii wouldn't understand the things he didn't understand.

'Oh, I didn't say anything to you. His left eye can see the spirits of the dead.'

'Eh!? Really?' Ishii exclaimed in surprise.

He put too much strength in it, so a current of pain ran through his body.

'You're so noisy.'

'Is that true?'

'It's true. I wouldn't drag him along to investigate civilians if it weren't.'

Gotou's words made sense. After he said that, the things Ishii hadn't understood before started lining up.

But that would mean –

'Forgive me for asking something so impolite, but aren't you the psychic detective, Detective Gotou?'

'That stupid – you're talking about that again!? I said you were wrong from the very start!' yelled Gotou, crossing his arms.

'Then, this case...'

'Not just this case – the one before this one and the one before that – Yakumo was the one who solved all of them.'

'T-that's...'

'That's what I said from the very start. I didn't do anything.'

Something shattered inside Ishii.

Ah, what is this –

What would he do from now on? He was tearing up.

'Ah, right, right. Come to think of it, that Yakumo and Haruka-chan said they were coming to visit.'

'Eh? Haruka-chan is!?'

Ishii was assaulted by pain the moment he shouted.

Haruka-chan was coming to visit. That blew away the shock.

Gotou's eyes narrowed as he smirked.

'Oi, Ishii. You mentioned that you had a woman in your heart early – were you talking about Haruka-chan?'

'Eh? No, that's... but... er...'

When Gotou suddenly cut straight to the point, Ishii became flustered.

He wasn't used to things like this.

'I see, I see. This'll be interesting.'

'What will be interesting?'

'Got this, Ishii? In order to catch Haruka-chan, you'll need to defeat a ridiculously formidable enemy.'

'A formidable enemy?'

'Yes. Yakumo.'

As I thought, that young man –

He would never accept that. He couldn't forgive that young man's attitude towards Haruka-chan. He couldn't stand watching Haruka-chan being treated that way.

She seemed pitiful like that.

'Ishii. I'll help you out.'

'Really?'

'Yeah, leave it to me.'

Gotou said that reassuringly and smirked again.

* * *

After leaving the water gate management office, they walked along the road by the irrigation channel that led to the hospital.

It had become so warm it couldn't be compared to a week ago.

Along the irrigation channel, the cherry blossoms were in full bloom.

Countless pink petals were floating on the surface of the water –

'It's beautiful.'

She stopped walking to look up at the cherry blossoms.

Yakumo, who had been walking beside her, also stopped and looked up the cherry blossom tree, like he had just noticed it.

That brusque, contrary young man with sleepy eyes who wasn't kind at all showed a side of himself that was different from usual at the water gate.

When I was in danger, he came to save me without any hesitation.

His left hand is still red from where the chain dug into it.

Proof that he held on to my life –

'Let's go.'

Yakumo started walking while still looking up at the cherry blossoms.

Haruka followed him and, for only a moment, she nonchalantly brushed the mark from the chain with the back of her hand.

– Thank you.

She murmured that in her heart.

If she said it aloud, he would definitely say something to ruin it, like 'It's not like I did it for you'.

This contrary man!

'Hey, wait.'

When he turned around at her voice, a boy of about elementary-school age ran towards him.

The boy ran around Yakumo and handed him a folded-up scrap of paper and necklace.

'An uncle with black glasses told me to give this to you.'

Yakumo looked dubiously at the folded-up scrap of paper and necklace that had been placed in his palm.

The necklace looked like it belonged to a woman, a simple one that just has a round stone on a thin chain.

That stone glowed red like a blazing flame, just like Yakumo's left eye.

'I gave it to you then,' said the boy, and then he ran off.

Yakumo unfolded the scrap of paper and looked over what was written on it.

At that moment, his expression changed.

He frantically looked around, but he finally let out his breath, like he had given up.

What was written on the page? She felt bad about it even as she did it, but she stole a look at the scrap of paper from the side.

There was only one sentence written on it –

Before too long, again...

-

Haruka would finally come to know the dreadful meaning of these words –

添付ファイル

帰郷

E X T R A ^{FILE}

-

We had been heading back after paying Ishii-san a visit –

Haruka walked alongside Yakumo on the ride by the line that led to the station.

Their conversation wasn't really like a conversation. No matter what Haruka said, Yakumo would only reply with 'ah' or 'yeah'.

Even though he would usually complain, saying 'You talk too much' or something like that, it felt like he was thinking about something.

The letter that the boy handed him earlier. He was probably hung up on that.

Just as they reached the level crossing, Yakumo suddenly stopped.

His eyes were narrowed, looking at something on the other side of the level crossing.

His gaze was on a woman.

She was as stylish as a model. She had coiffed brown hair and frankly mature makeup, and her features were well defined.

She wore a black party dress, matching it with a white cardigan.

She stood on the other side of the level crossing, and her back was hunched as she held a white handbag in her left hand like she was holding a weight.

She felt very much like a typical woman in the business of night entertainment.

Yakumo's eyebrows moved with a start, like he was responding to something.

'So that sort of woman's your type.'

She hadn't planned on saying that, but it slipped out of her mouth.

'You're...'

Yakumo said something while frowning and raking a hand through his hair, but she couldn't hear all of it since it was drowned out by the sound of a passing train.

'What?'

She waited for the train to pass before asking again, but Yakumo didn't reply. Instead, he looked down at his feet and turned his head left and right like he was looking for something.

Haruka didn't understand him.

The barrier came up.

However, Yakumo didn't cross. He just cocked his head and leaned over.

People started flowing in from the other side.

That woman was a part of them. Just as the woman passed, Haruka's nose was hit with the smell of strong perfume.

Like he had been pulled, Yakumo stood straight and looked at the woman's back. Finally, he let out

a big yawn.

'I got it. It'll be fine if I go, right? You're so annoying.'

Haruka didn't know who Yakumo was talking to, but he started walking after the woman.

'Hey, where are you going?'

Haruka chased after him at a jogging pace and called out to him.

'Following.'

'Following who?'

'That woman.'

'Why?'

'Don't ask me,' Yakumo said disagreeably.

She could have just left him alone, but for some reason, Haruka also started following the woman with Yakumo.

'Why are you coming too?'

Yakumo stopped in his tracks.

'I'm curious.'

'You know...'

Yakumo started speaking, but he gave up partway and shook his head before starting to walk again.

Haruka decided selfishly to take that as an OK and followed the woman alongside Yakumo at his pace.

Why am I doing something like this –

She tried asking herself.

It was just as she said – curiosity.

Of course, it wasn't curiosity towards the woman she didn't know at all. Why did Yakumo suddenly start chasing that woman? That was what she wanted to know.

He might just be doing something tasteless like stalking.

Plus –

The woman went down the shopping street, moving away from the station, and crossed the main line road to walk onto the Tama River embankment.

They were near the gate. They had been here at lunch.

It was completely dark around them, and the bridge stood out, lit up by the orange streetlights.

Like a somnambulist, the woman staggered towards that bridge like she was possessed by something.

'Hey, where is that person going?'

'I wouldn't be following her if I knew,' said Yakumo disagreeably.

It was just as he said.

The woman stopped in the centre.

They stopped as well at about a fifty metre distance.

Will he call out to her? Haruka wondered as she looked at Yakumo, but his lips were in a thin line as he looked with a dubious expression at the woman.

It didn't seem like the woman had noticed them. She walked towards the railing and, after crouching down, closed her eyes and clasped her hands together.

At her feet, there was a white chrysanthemum flower¹ in a can.

Somebody died here –

The woman's back was shaking slightly.

Though she made no sound and no tears were falling, it was just like she was crying.

The person who died might have been somebody important to this woman.

After a while, the woman stood up like she had reached a resolution.

She put her two hands on the railing and looked down at the jet-black river.

– I'm sorry.

The woman said that in a voice so quiet it might have gone unheard.

'This is bad...'

Yakumo clicked his tongue.

'Eh?'

While Haruka asked that question, the woman put her feet on the railing and climbed up.

'Stop her!'

Yakumo kicked the ground and started running.

Like Haruka was pushed forward by that voice, she rushed towards the woman without understanding anything.

The woman stood atop the railing and looked like she would fall at any moment.

'Watch out!'

It was too late for her to make such a big realisation now. She reached out frantically, but all she caught was air – she couldn't reach the woman.

Like everything was happening in slow motion, the woman fell towards the river.

1 White chrysanthemums represent grief in Japan.

– It's too late.

She closed her eyes unconsciously, her body stiff.

However, the sound of something dropping into the river that she should have heard didn't reach her ears. Instead –

'Don't just stand there – lend me a hand.'

It was Yakumo's voice.

When Haruka opened her eyes, Yakumo was holding the woman on the verge of falling back, restraining her with his arms.

I hurriedly rushed over to Yakumo and helped him pull the woman back to the bridge.

The woman, sitting on the concrete walkway, was scowling as she glared at them.

'Why didn't you let me die...'

The woman tried to dig her fingernails into the concrete as she spoke while crying.

'To be honest, it's none of my concern whether you live or die.'

Yakumo ran his fingers through his hair as he spoke, like he found it troublesome.

'Hey, what are you saying?'

Haruka couldn't help but speak out at that manner of speaking.

'Please keep your mouth shut.'

'How can I keep my mouth shut?'

Even though Haruka objected so vehemently, Yakumo turned back to the woman like he hadn't heard anything at all.

'Though I don't care, I had to since that kid would make a fuss.'

At Yakumo's words, the woman looked up, cocked her head, and said, 'Eh?'

Haruka felt the same. She didn't understand what Yakumo was saying at all.

'Your miniature dachshund. You know him, yes? He has a black spot on his cheek and a pink collar.'

'Hiro-kun...' the woman murmured.

'I don't know his name. All I know that he is still wandering around you.'

'You're lying...'

'I knew that you wanted to die, didn't I? We followed you all the way here.'

– So that's what it was.

Haruka finally understood the situation.

At the level crossing, what Yakumo had been looking at was a dog. The wandering spirit of a dead dog. He had followed it here.

'But... Hiro-kun...'

The woman looked at the chrysanthemum flower.

The dog had probably gotten hit by a car when the leash fell from the woman's hand on a walk or something.

'He can see him.'

It just slipped out. Haruka thought Yakumo might be mad, but he didn't say anything. He yawned while looking up at the night sky by the railing, like he was saying that his work was done.

'See him?'

'He can see them. The spirits of the dead. That is, ghosts. It's not human this time though.'

I explained to the woman in Yakumo's stead.

'What is Hiro-kun saying...'

The woman looked towards Yakumo, like she was asking for something.

'I don't understand the language of dogs,' Yakumo said curtly.

No, he wouldn't, but he could've said that a bit better –

'That's right...'

The woman bit her lip.

An awkward silence –

'But that dog has always been beside you. He's been so worried about you that he hasn't been able to move on...' said Yakumo, still looking up at the sky.

'Worried about me...'

The woman burst into tears.

Her mascara ran, so black tears went down her face.

It was like she was letting out everything that she had held in until now.

All Haruka could do was approach her and hug those shaking shoulders.

Finally, the woman sniffled and stood up on her own feet. With red eyes, she said firmly, 'I won't make Hiro-kun worry anymore.'

'We'll walk back with you.'

'It's fine. Hiro-kun is with me, after all.'

The woman said that to my offer, and then she smiled, showing her teeth, and said 'Thank you' again and again before she walked away.

Haruka still didn't know why the woman had wanted to die.

Now, she wondered if she should have asked.

'Hey, is this really OK?' she asked Yakumo.

'She knows she's not alone. It's fine.'

'Is that how it is?'

'That's how it is. It was the same for me...'

'The same for you?'

Haruka asked again, but Yakumo didn't make any reply.

'We're going.'

Instead, he said that and started walking briskly.

Honestly, he just does whatever he wants –

-

One week after that, Haruka met her again.

Just as Haruka came out of the station gates, somebody said 'Hello' to me.

She had pitch-black hair and her makeup was light. She wore jeans and trainers – a rough appearance – and had a large purse.

At first Haruka didn't recognise her, since her appearance had changed so much. After the woman said, 'Before, on the bridge...' Haruka exclaimed in her surprise.

That said, she wasn't sure what to say next. Instead, the woman started speaking first, telling her that she was going to move to her parents' home in Yamanashi and wouldn't try to die anymore.

'Hiro-kun will also come with me. I think he'd definitely be happy to see the lake,' she said with a smile.

On her wrist, there was a pink bracelet. (No, it had to be her dog's collar.)

'Take care of yourself.'

'Thank you. Tell your boyfriend that for me too.'

The woman said that and then left for the platform.

My boyfriend –

I felt a bit embarrassed for not affirming or denying that –

※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 for reading *Psychic Detective Yakumo 2 – That Which Connects Souls*.

This time as well, a short story limited to the paperback version has been included.

K-san, the editor in charge at Kadokawa, was the one who told me to include a short story.

– Could you write about Yakumo and Haruka’s everyday life, even if it’s only a little?

When I heard that request, I gave an immediate OK.

The reason is that it genuinely seemed interesting.

Plus, because of the nature of the story, gloomy incidents always shadow Yakumo and his friends, so there are not many opportunities to write about their quiet daily lives.

However, even they have everyday lives, though I do not write about them.

I felt it was very important to write out their daily lives like this on top of writing the rest of the story.

It was actually very enjoyable writing the short stories for the first and second volume, and I feel that I understand the two of them better.

-

I hope that I will be able to continue writing about their daily lives in the paperback versions in the future.

In my heart, the characters that appear in the Yakumo series are not just characters in a story but irreplaceable friends who really exist there.

-

One day, I would like to write a Yakumo series without incidents –

-

Heisei 20¹ June, at home – Kaminaga Manabu

-

1 Heisei 20 is 2008 in the Gregorian calendar.