

心霊探偵

八

PSYCHIC DETECTIVE

YAKUMO

ШАПАВУ КАШИПАГА

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角川文庫

神永学



PSYCHIC DETECTIVE YAKUMO

シラバウ カミナガ

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序 章

P R O L O G U E

Prologue

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It was a quiet night.

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Ozawa Keiko was driving.

The dark forest road turned and twisted with trees on both sides but not even one lamppost.

Though it was the shortest route home, she always tried not to take it since it was spooky.

However, today was different. She had to return home as quickly as she could to share the news.

Keiko put her hand on her belly. Though there was no bump now, new life dwelled within this belly.

This happiness she had never tasted before was far more exalting than she had imagined.

Her husband Kazuhiro would probably cry.

When Keiko glanced forward, a tree by the road shook with a rustle, and a dark shadow jumped out onto the road.

A person –

Keiko automatically stepped on the brakes.

The car stopped suddenly with an ear-splitting screech from the brakes and white smoke from the tires.

Though it had been an automatic reaction, the car did not hit anything.

– It's fine.

Keiko said that to herself, opened the door with a shaking hand and stepped out. She saw that someone had fallen, illuminated by the headlights.

There was a woman with long hair lying face down about five metres from the car.

'Are you OK?'

Keiko rushed over.

'Please hang in there.'

Keiko put her arms around the woman who was facedown and helped her up.

Her skin was incredibly pale. The bridge of her nose was pencil-straight. The woman was shockingly beautiful.

The hem of the skirt she was wearing was torn, and her shirt was also smeared with mud.

That wasn't all. The woman wasn't wearing shoes. Her bare feet were covered with dirt, and they were grazed all over.

She ran on a mountain road in her bare feet?

Why –

'Are you OK?'

Though Keiko had some doubts, she spoke to the woman once more.

The woman twisted her body in a way that looked painful and moaned.

She was alive.

'Please hang on. I will bring you to a hospital immediately.'

The woman slowly opened her eyes, like she was responding to Keiko's words. Though she was beautiful, she didn't feel alive. Her eyes looked like they belonged to a doll.

'... Save me... that man is coming...'

The woman's lips moved.

– That man?

'What happened?'

At Keiko's questions, the woman opened her eyes wide and distorted her face. She clung on to Keiko.

'That man...'

Her fingernails dug in as she spoke with a hoarse voice.

'That man?'

'I have to run, I have to run, I have to run...'

The woman's body was shaking in fear as she said the same thing over and over.

'Calm down. Please calm down.'

Keiko embraced the woman tightly.

'I have to run... That man...'

The woman stopped speaking and suddenly fainted.

Rustle.

Keiko looked in front at the sound of a shaking tree.

A man stood on the road, lit up by the car's headlights.

He wore a black suit and dark sunglasses, even though he was on a mountain in the night.

Gooseflesh rose all over Keiko's skin.

This woman was probably running away from this man. It was not a thought. She felt that

instinctually.

It's dangerous. I have to run –

Though Keiko thought that, she couldn't move, like she had been caught in the man's gaze.

Sweat ran down her brow.

– The true nature of the human soul is darkness.

When the man said that lazily, the corners of his lips turned up.

– That woman's child proves that.

After the man said that, he slowly took off his glasses.

Both of his eyes glowed bright red like a blazing flame.

* * *

It was a sweltering night –

-

She was walking on the road that led to her apartment.

Because of the heat and the humidity, her back was moist with sweat. She wanted to return home quickly to take a shower. She naturally quickened her pace.

A tepid wind blew.

Just as she reached the apartment's courtyard, she suddenly stopped.

– Hey. Why?

She could hear someone whispering in the wind.

Where?

She looked for the source of the voice.

'Ah.'

Her voice just came out. She could see a figure on the rooftop of the seven-storey apartment.

Because it was dark, she couldn't clearly see their appearance, but they were definitely human.

Why is there someone there – she thought, and at the same time, that figure fell.

She was so shocked she could not even scream.

The figure, who had become a dark mass, made a dull thump as they hit the asphalt, pulled down by gravity.

The vibration that shook her feet turned into horror and ran up her body.

The person who fell was a woman with long hair.

The woman's arms and legs were bent at unnatural angles, and her head had sunken into the asphalt. A large amount of blood was coming out.

It was obvious that the woman was no longer alive.

– Why...

A voice reached her ears in her silent shock.

A low, growling voice.

She felt a freezing chill. She had a bad feeling.

– Why... I...

The voice continued.

'Noo!'

She held her breath and stepped back.

She knew whose voice had spoken.

The twisted arms and legs of the woman who had fallen started moving.

Though the woman had fallen from the top of the apartment, she slowly stood up, like a new-born foal.

'No way!'

It was impossible. She shook her head frantically to deny what was happening in front of her eyes, but the reality in front of her did not disappear.

The woman who had stood up let her arms hang languidly, and dragged her feet as she started walking with unnatural, zombie-like movements towards the apartment's entrance.

– Why, why, why...

The woman kept on muttering the same words.

Finally, the woman disappeared through the apartment's entrance.

Her thighs were shaking, and she sat down with a thump right there. Released from her unimaginable fear, tears were spilling out of her eyes.

Her mind was completely blank, and she was at a complete loss for what to do next.

How much time passed?

Why...

She heard the woman's voice again.

– It can't be.

She looked up at the apartment.

There was a figure on the roof.

And then –

The woman fell again.

The blood splattered on to her cheek.

– Why...

The woman opened her mouth again and slowly stood up.

Her eyes met with the blood-stained woman.

Eyes that were so fathomlessly dark it was like they were tunnels to hell –

– Hey. Why can't I die?

The woman spat out blood as she spoke.

'Noo!'

Her scream cut through the summer night.

消失

第一章

01
FILE

file 01: disappearance

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1

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Hijikata Makoto stopped the taxi in front of a multi-tenant building to see a small illuminated sign that read <Snake>.

Makoto paid and quickly descended the stairs to the basement.

It was already almost an hour past the appointed time. Her work always dragged on at times like this. Irritated, Makoto pushed open the heavy wooden door and entered the bar.

There were four table seats and a counter that could seat five. Using indirect lighting with blue as its premise, jazz played throughout the bar.

Though the place wasn't large, it had a good atmosphere.

Makoto looked around and soon found Asami, whom she had arranged to meet. She was smoking a slim cigarette at the table by the entrance.

'Sorry I'm late...'

Makoto clapped Asami on the shoulder.

'You're too late.'

Asami pouted with her puffy lips.

It had been a while since they last met. Makoto felt that Asami had changed quite a lot. During university, Asami hadn't smoked, and she had had a stronger healthy impression. It might have been because of the makeup, but now it looked like there were shadows somewhere.

However, one thing that didn't change was her beauty.

'I'm really sorry.'

Makoto put her hands together as she asked for forgiveness.

'It's OK. It'd be a different matter if it was because of a man, but you had work, right?'

'Yup. Well.'

'It was your goal, right? Working at a newspaper agency.'

Makoto somehow managed to smile back, but she couldn't actually smile honestly. It'd be difficult to say that even though she was employed at a news agency, it had been because her father was the chief of police rather than because of her own aptitude.

'Anyway, it's really been a while. When'd we last see each other?'

Makoto changed the topic.

'Hm – university?'

Now that Asami said it, Makoto felt that was right. After graduating, Asami had returned to her home in Nagano and they hadn't met directly like this since, though they had sent emails and New Year's cards.

That would mean she hadn't seen Asami in three years.

'So the last time was at the graduation ceremony.'

'I didn't go to the ceremony, so...'

Asami's expression went a bit stiff. Makoto tried tracing back in her memory.

That was right. If she remembered correctly, Asami had taken a one-month break around graduation because her health had worsened, and then graduation had come. Makoto had asked something she shouldn't have.

'That's right. Sorry.'

'Don't worry about it,' Asami said nonchalantly. She put out the cigarette she had been smoking in the ashtray.

'So when'd you come here?'

'Last month. I transferred for work.'

'So that's how it was. Then we'll be able to meet up for drinks again.'

'I won't let you get away.'

Asami just smiled. The old Asami would have laughed aloud. People could change a lot in three years.

'Anyway, sit down.'

Asami urged Makoto to sit, but there were two men she didn't know in the opposite seats.

The first was in his early thirties and had a casual feel to him, wearing a beige jacket with jeans. The other was a young man in his early twenties with a hip-hop artist's fashion sense. They were a somewhat unbalanced pair.

'Good evening.'

The man in the jacket bowed his head politely. The young man in hip-hop fashion also nodded, following the older man.

Makoto sat next to Asami and touched her elbow to ask for an explanation.

'Ah, that's right.'

Asami started introducing everyone.

The man in the jacket was called Shinichi. He worked at an event planning company. The other

younger man was Yuuya. He was Shinichi's pal and was in his third year of university. It seemed that he did part-time at Shinichi's event planning company.

Makoto also greeted the two of them simply.

'We got to know each other while waiting for you, Makoto. You don't mind if the two of them join us, right?'

'Not at all,' Makoto replied, though she was puzzled.

During university, Asami hadn't been the type to drink with men she didn't know who called out to her at a bar.

Since she wasn't a naive middle school student, it probably wasn't anything to worry about.

'What would you like to order?'

The long-haired bartender, who had been waiting for their conversation to halt, brought a menu and came to take their order, wearing a black apron.

The bartender was expressionless and calm.

Makoto looked at the menu, but in the end, she just ordered gin, like she always did.

At the time, Makoto couldn't even imagine what was going to happen afterwards –

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2

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Gotou reclined on the car seat and tied his necktie while holding a cigarette in his mouth.

In the passenger seat, Ishii was carelessly chomping down a hamburger. Thanks to that, the car was filled with the smell of burger.

Gotou was going to complain, but he changed his mind. Conversing with Ishii was as tiring as conversing with Yakumo.

<'I'm counting on you to focus.>

He heard a voice from the wireless earphone he had on.

Even though she was a woman, she had a voice that reverberated in the bottom of your belly. Her name was Shimamura Eriko.

From the perspective of Gotou, who had parked his car on the road in front of the park, she was directly diagonal from him. He could see her stooping in the forest behind the park.

In stature, size and attitude, she was heavyweight all around. She was completely visible.

'Who are you saying that to?'

<You, obviously.>

Shimamura rebutted immediately.

Why was he surrounded by so many impudent people? Gotou clicked his tongue.

<I'm the one who wants to click her tongue. I really need you to focus, since you've always been missing a few screws. You're the same with Atsuko, aren't you?>

'Shut up! That has nothing to do with you!' shouted Gotou, flaring up.

She talked on and on about unnecessary things. Why had his wife come up in conversation?

<It does have something to do with me. Who do you think introduced her to you?>

'I truly regret it.'

Gotou had met with his wife Atsuko because Shimamura, who had been at the police academy at the same time as him, had introduced her.

His wife's best friend and his co-worker. Thanks to that, his private life had been made public in the police. Not just the police either. Even Yakumo knew about it through old man Hata.

<What are you saying? I'm the one who regrets it.>

'What did you say?'

<I'm saying I shouldn't have introduced her to you.>

'What do you mean?'

<Every time she fights with you, she comes crying to me – it's troublesome. After this case is finished, come over and pick her up.>

He could hear sniggers from other investigation team members from the earphone.

That Shimamura. She was just doing this to pass the time. Gotou bit his lip and hit Ishii's head in retaliation.

'D-D-Detective Gotou, what are you doing?'

The tomato fell from Ishii's burger.

'Shut up!'

He glared at Ishii for responding.

Gotou could tell it would be hard going.

'Why do we have to be dragged into work outside of our jurisdiction?' grumbled Gotou.

'But it's true that we don't have any work. We might as well offer assistance at least,' replied Ishii, with his stupid diligence.

'I know that.'

Just as Ishii said, the Unsolved Cases Special Investigations Room was named such because they responded to unsolved cases, but in reality, they just organised the backlog of documents.

On top of that, the other divisions thought they had a lot of free time on their hands, so they were often used as supplementary personnel for stakeouts and such.

Even now, they were staking out the park on the corner of this residential street because of a serial female assault case – though it was just some perverted guy cutting women’s skirts with scissors.

This is the same as being put out in the cold –

Gotou muttered that in his heart and snorted.

On top of that, there was this stationing. If the perp ran, they hadn’t surrounded the routes. Forget about his career – why did he have to obey some brat who was younger than him? It really riled him up.

<Someone who could be the suspect has been spotted... Height is about 160 cm. Green jumper, black knitted hat... It matches with the testimony.>

A nervous voice came in through his earphone.

<He’s by the public toilet.>

Gotou looked in the direction indicated.

He was there! Directly in front of his gaze, there was a suspicious person with his back to the wall of the toilet facing the road. He kept glancing at the road.

<Shimamura. Go around from the side and question him.>

<Roger.>

<Gotou, Ishii – wait in the car.>

'What do you mean, wait? If Shimamura goes around, the back will be wide open,' Gotou retorted, putting his cigarette out in the ashtray. He opened the door and rushed out.

'Detective Gotou, the instructions were to wait here.'

Still holding his burger, Ishii called out to Gotou to stop.

'You're annoying. I know that.'

'Then...'

'Do you know the word “adaptability”?’

'Yes. It refers to the ability to change depending on the situation. That's what was written in the Koujien¹.'

'This is that situation.'

While Gotou said that, he headed towards the forest in the back of the park. It was a terrible mistake to move Shimamura. Did they really think the perp would just run for the road?

1 The Koujien (広辞苑, meaning wide garden of words) is a Japanese dictionary which is considered to be the authority on Japanese definitions – the Japanese equivalent of the Oxford English Dictionary.

'Detective Gotou, this is bad.'

Ishii hesitantly followed Gotou, like a puppy.

'Go back to the car if you think that.'

'B-but...'

Honestly, this useless guy.

'Don't come over here!'

A yell resounded.

Gotou looked toward the public toilet. The man from earlier was waving a pair of scissors about agitatedly as he screamed.

Investigation team members sidled up from both sides.

After the man looked to his left and right, he turned away from the road and fled towards the forest like a frightened rabbit.

'Wait!' yelled one of the investigation members.

See?

'Ishii, let's go!'

Gotou immediately ran after the man.

'Ouch!'

Ishii tripped.

That idiot! Gotou ignored Ishii, who had fallen and had his hands on his thighs as he got back up, and chased the man.

'Wait! I'll kill you!'

The man turned at Gotou's yell.

'D-don't come over!' the man screamed, looking like he could cry at any moment.

He was a timid and chubby middle-aged man that any crowded train stank with. Honestly, what a miserable face. It made it seem like Gotou was attacking him.

'Damn it!'

Gotou reached out to grab the scruff of his neck and drag him to the ground.

The man fell backwards and started coughing from the impact. Gotou climbed on top of him and raised his right fist.

Like he had lost all will to flee at that moment, the man pressed both hands against his face and started crying, repeating, 'I'm sorry, I'm sorry...'

Gotou muttered, 'Damn,' and hit the ground with his fist in his anger.

If he was going to cry about it, he shouldn't have done it in the first place.

The first words of the novice officer in charge who arrived late at the scene were –

'Why did you leave your station?'

Honestly, everyone was just –

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3

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It had been almost an hour since Makoto arrived at the bar.

Since it had been the first time she'd seen Asami in a while and there were Shinichi and Yuuya, whom she had just met, it had been an awkward question-and-answer session at first, but now, the atmosphere was less reserved.

It was easy talking with the man named Shinichi. He was a good listener, or rather, she ended up telling him about a variety of things.

Instead of assertively enlivening the conversation, Yuuya would laugh as he listened and respond at the appropriate times. He might have been a serious young man despite his appearances.

'Just going to go to the ladies'.'

At a lull in the conversation, Asami took her bag and stood up.

'Makoto-san, are you seeing anyone?'

After Asami left for the lavatory, Shinichi asked Makoto this question while looking directly at her eyes.

'I'm not.'

'Really?' Shinichi said in disbelief.

'Really. I'm being pushed around at work right now. Plus, I have no luck with men.'

Makoto shrugged.

Though she didn't have a boyfriend, there was somebody she harboured feelings for. However, she didn't say that aloud.

He was a detective who was so serious it was idiotic. She had made up reasons to contact and approach him, but he hadn't noticed at all, though he hadn't rejected her.

In the meantime, she had lost her excuses, so lately she hadn't seen him.

'Is that so? If it were me, I wouldn't leave you alone, Makoto-san.'

Shinichi smoothly said those words which could have been a pick-up line.

'You probably say that to every woman you meet.'

'Of course not. Right, bartender?'

After Makoto said that as a joke, Shinichi turned the conversation to the bartender, who had come to put down a glass.

The bartender gave a vague reply and escaped by walking away.

'Yuuya, you think Makoto-san is beautiful too, right?'

Shinichi poked Yuuya's shoulder.

While Yuuya drank the whiskey in his glass, he just smiled frivolously and said nothing. He might have felt it was awkward, because he looked at his wristwatch and said, 'Asami-san's been a while.'

Immediately after that –

'Aaah!'

Makoto heard Asami scream from the toilet in the back of the bar.

'Asami?'

Makoto stood up right away and ran to the lavatory.

'What happened?'

She called out in the direction of the lavatory door. There was no response. Shinichi and Yuuya came by too because they were concerned.

'Hey, Asami. What happened?'

Makoto asked again as she knocked on the door.

However, there was no response, as if nobody was inside.

Makoto put her ear against the door to try to listen for sounds from inside, but it was no use.

'Excuse me.'

The bartender cut through as he said that.

The bartender quickly took a key from his pocket and opened the door, saying, 'I'm opening the door.'

The lights were off in the dim lavatory.

Asami sat on the tiled floor and was trembling as she hugged her own shoulders.

'Asami. You OK?'

Makoto went inside the lavatory and walked up to Asami to shake her shoulders with both of her hands.

The colour drained from Asami's face, which just earlier had been flushed because of alcohol,

leaving her extremely pale.

'Hey, what happened?'

At Makoto's question, Asami pointed at the mirror in front of her with a trembling finger.

All the people there turned their eyes to the dark mirror, their gazes led by that finger.

At the same time –

Inside the mirror, a faint image of a woman appeared. Long black hair hung from her head, and the left half of her face was covered in blood.

That woman's body shook like it had been jolted.

Her cracked purple lips slowly moved.

– Die.

Her low growl made the air quiver.

Nobody there was able to keep their senses, and their screams echoed through the bar.

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4

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Haruka, whose lecture had finished, went towards the prefabricated two-storey building in the back of Building B.

There were ten rooms of about four and a half tatami on each floor. The university lent them out for student circle activities.

She was going to meet with Japan's representative for contrariness, Saitou Yakumo.

She didn't really have any trouble for him. She was just going to meet him.

Haruka thought it was amazing progress. No, she couldn't call this progress. What she had been doing before had been strange. She had always been accompanied by trouble every time she went to visit Yakumo. It was the pattern for Yakumo to say something sarcastic to her and make her depressed every time they met.

– But today is OK.

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

However, that was a downright lie. Yakumo had deceived the university to borrow this room and was using it as his secret hiding place.

'Hey,' Haruka said, opening the door.

At the same time, a wave of hot air rushed out at her. She resisted the urge to cough and looked

inside.

'You again?'

As usual, his hair looked like he had just gotten out of bed, and his eyes were sleepy. Yakumo, reclining on the chair in the front, sounded annoyed as he said that.

He had unbuttoned down to the third button of his shirt and was fanning himself with a fan.

There were beads of sweat from his forehead to the nape of his neck.

'I'm just going to say this, but this isn't a place for you to kill time.'

'I don't have as much free time as you think, Yakumo-kun. I've got reports to do and I have a part-time job too, and I often get invited out...'

She stopped speaking. He wouldn't listen. Yakumo stretched his neck as he let out a huge yawn, and then he scratched his neck. His actions were just like that of a cat's.

Haruka went inside, took a bottle of tea from the refrigerator in the back of the room and drank it.

'When did you bring that in here?' said Yakumo, looking dissatisfied.

'The last time I came. There's chocolate too. Want some?'

Haruka took out a box of almond chocolate from the refrigerator and showed it to Yakumo.

'This is my room. Don't just make it your own.'

'This is the Movie Research Circle room.'

'You aren't a member.'

She had thought that was where the conversation would go. Haruka made a victorious pose in her mind at one-upping Yakumo.

'Too bad for you, but I'm a member of the Movie Research Circle too.'

'What?'

'Yesterday, I went to the student affairs office and wrote my name on the registration list.'

Even Yakumo had nothing to say as he gaped.

– How about that? Got you there, right?

'Why would you do something like...'

'OK, OK.'

Haruka interrupted Yakumo and sat on the chair.

She felt like she had won.

'Still, how can you stay in such a hot room? Isn't there air conditioning?'

Haruka took a handkerchief out of her bag and wiped her forehead. Even though she had just

come in, it was already covered in sweat.

If she stayed here the whole day, she might get heatstroke.

'The fan is broken.'

Yakumo pointed at the corner of the ceiling with his fan.

An electric fan covered with cobwebs was hanging there.

'You could just buy a new one.'

'I don't have the money for that.'

'How are you planning on getting through this summer? It's going to get hotter.'

Copying Yakumo, Haruka took her notebook from her bag and used it as a fan.

'Can't you just go home if you're going to complain?'

'What? I came all this way to visit you.'

'I don't remember asking you to.'

'Oh, is that so.'

Haruka gritted her teeth and gave Yakumo a menacing look.

Then, there was the sound of a knock. For a moment, Haruka thought it might have been Detective Gotou, but if it had been him, he wouldn't have knocked – he would have just suddenly said, 'I'm coming in,' and entered.

'Please come in. The door is unlocked.'

Yakumo ran his fingers through his hair and called out in the direction of the door.

'Please excuse me.'

A beautiful long-haired woman in a navy blue suit opened the door and came in.

'Who might you be and where are you from?'

'I'm a fourth-year student at this university. My name is Iida Mizuho.'

She replied firmly to Yakumo's question. She seemed too mature to be a university student.

Haruka gave her seat to Mizuho and unfolded a folding chair that was in the corner of the room. She sat down next to Yakumo.

'So what can I do for you?'

'Er, I apologise for visiting in such a rude manner. I actually have something I would like to discuss and thought it might be bothersome, but...'

'Leave the introduction at that and get to the main question,' Yakumo said curtly, interrupting Mizuho to make her get to the point.

Ah, it was the same the first time for me too. Haruka remembered the first time she had come to this room a few months ago.

'Ah, yes. The truth is, I have been troubled by a spiritual phenomenon –'

'A spiritual phenomenon?'

Yakumo frowned as he raked through his hand with his fingers.

'Will you listen to my story?'

'I don't mind if I'm only listening to it.'

At Yakumo's prompting, Mizuho's expression suddenly brightened.

After that, Mizuho talked about a ghost of a woman that appeared at an apartment.

– Why can't I die?

While the female ghost muttered that, she jumped off the apartment building. After a while, she stood back up and dragged her body into the apartment. And then –

She jumped again.

The ghost of a woman who kept on committing suicide –

Why did she want to die so much? There was no way Haruka would understand.

Mizuho appealed politely to Yakumo, saying that after seeing that woman's ghost, it had been so terrifying that Mizuho couldn't sleep at night, and besought him to solve the case.

Since it was Yakumo, he would definitely say something cold like 'It's none of my business' or 'Please try your best'.

Ah, you poor thing. Haruka looked at Mizuho sympathetically.

However, what Yakumo said was completely different from what she had imagined.

'That must be worrying you. I understand. Let me accept your request.'

Eh? Wait. What? You had a completely different attitude when I asked you. Haruka swallowed the words that she almost said aloud.

'Will you help me?'

For a moment, Mizuho looked surprised, and then she relaxed, like she was exhausted.

Haruka was the one who wanted to be surprised.

'However, that does not mean it will be free.'

'How much will it be?'

Mizuho looked at Yakumo to sound him out.

'Would the regular price of twenty thousand yen plus expenses be acceptable?'

Isn't that cheaper than it had been for me? What the heck is that –

'Yes, thank you very much.'

Mizuho bowed her head deeply.

Was it OK for her to trust such an irresponsible guy so easily? She should be a bit suspicious.

This guy was just a fake who took advantage of people's weaknesses.

Since Mizuho couldn't hear Haruka's thoughts, she wrote down the address of the apartment where she had seen the ghost as well as her contact information. Then, she bowed her head again and left the room.

'You accepted that pretty easily.'

The moment the door closed, she rested her chin in her hands and said that. Since she had been holding back, her tone was a bit harsh.

'I want a new fan,' Yakumo said with a yawn.

Well, it would be hard to get through the summer in the prefabricated building with new air conditioning, but –

'The price is lower than the one you gave me.'

'There's a campaign right now.'

'Is that a campaign that gives discounts to good-looking woman? After all, I'm...'

'What's gotten you into such a bad mood?'

Really, it's just as Yakumo said.

What am I saying? Even while Haruka was thinking that, she couldn't stop the next words from coming out of her mouth.

'Her breasts were big too.'

'What – do you want to boast about your small ones?'

'Small!? ... They're still C-cups, you know.'

'What sort of joke is that?'

Yakumo raised an eyebrow.

'It's not a joke! You've never even looked at them!'

'I can tell well enough even if you're wearing clothes on top.'

Did he not know the word delicacy!? Honestly, she was so angry!

Ignoring Haruka's inner turmoil, Yakumo stretched out his arms behind him.

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'What on earth are you doing!?'

Chief Ideuchi's yell stabbed at Ishii's ears.

His forehead with its receding hairline was bright red in agitation. He looked just like a boiled octopus.

Ishii had been prepared to be scolded after he was called to the meeting room, but Ideuchi's indignation exceeded his expectations.

It was true that they hadn't obeyed orders, but because of that, they caught the criminal, so Ishii thought that Ideuchi could have at considered that a little.

'The officer in charge is a greenhorn.'

Instead of being afraid of Ideuchi's anger, Gotou flared up.

'Watch what you say.'

'I just called him a greenhorn because he's a greenhorn.'

'Know your place!'

Ideuchi and Gotou's conversation heated up.

This always happened. Gotou took an impolite attitude towards everyone. However, Ishii thought that Gotou's attitude towards Ideuchi greatly differed from his attitude towards other people.

They didn't get on well.

'Haven't you reflected on what you did!?'

'I apologise for arresting the criminal!' said Gotou in a voice dripping with sarcasm as he bowed his head and turned away. He was acting just like a rebellious child.

At many points, Ishii opened his mouth to mediate, but he was too flustered, overwhelmed by their intensity.

'What you should reflect on is how you didn't obey orders!'

'You saying it'd have been better if I listened to some greenhorn's orders, just waited in the car and let the criminal get away?'

Though Gotou's objection was extreme, this time he was right. In a situation that required adaptability, grandstanding was sometimes necessary.

Putting aside whether he would be able to do that himself, even Ishii understood that much.

'I didn't say that.'

'Then what are you saying?'

'I'm saying that if you're also a member of the police, don't glare at the people above you. This is also for your sake.'

'The job of the police is to keep public order – not to butter the boss up.'

'In order for an organisation to work, sometimes that is necessary.'

'Don't force your reasoning onto me!'

Gotou's angry voice was so loud the glass in the window shook.

Ideuchi lost his words and looked at Gotou like he was an alien.

It wasn't an exaggeration. Their ways of thinking were really that different, or so Ishii thought.

'Forget it. Get back to work.'

After a silence, Ideuchi shook his head and said that, giving up.

'Wasting my time with something so pointless,' Gotou muttered as he stood up.

'If you keep up that attitude, you won't get a promotion.'

Ideuchi said one last thing to Gotou, who was exiting the room.

'I never wanted one in the first place,' Gotou said, and then he left the room.

'You're unlucky,' Ideuchi said, casting a pitying look on Ishii.

Ishii didn't feel there was any reason to be pitied.

'I don't really...'

'If it's what you want, you can consider getting a transfer,' Ideuchi said, interrupting Ishii's objection.

'A transfer? Why would I?'

Ishii raised his eyebrows and pushed up his silver-framed glasses.

'Your future shouldn't be shut down for being Gotou's subordinate.'

Ishii couldn't understand Ideuchi's words. He had never felt bitter about working as Gotou's subordinate.

'I don't mind working where I am,' Ishii responded firmly. Then, he said, 'Please excuse me,' stood up, bowed and ran after Gotou.

He fell –

* * *

After leaving the meeting room, Gotou kicked the wall.

– I'm really pissed off.

What at? Ideuchi? No, that wasn't all.

He was angry at himself.

He hadn't been like this when he had first entered the force.

It might have been childish, but he had been filled with a sense of justice and duty. He had been drunk on fantasies that wouldn't lose even to Ishii's. He had believed without doubt that he would be able to save a lot of people.

However, that dream crumbled after just a few years.

No, that wasn't it. He had just been naive in the first place. It was impossible to solve every case like some cool anime hero.

If every person who committed a crime was a detestable villain, this would be so easy –

The real world neither rewarded good nor punished evil.

People had different perspectives and ways of thinking. Cases weren't just matters of vics and perps – they had effects on all the people around them.

Every day, people surrendered themselves to anger, resentment, sadness, jealousy – every possible negative emotion.

Senior detectives had often said this to him. 'Don't worry so much. If you don't just accept that that's how it is, you're the one who'll suffer.' Gotou thought it was just as they said.

However, Gotou couldn't do that.

He felt the same as the people involved in the crime and he called out in anger and sadness. Like that, he dug his nails into an unchangeable society.

Revolting against the large organisation that was the police who knew they were in way over their head, and he gradually became isolated.

Even so, he couldn't leave the force.

Promotions were just showing off. The investigation team could get worked up about them if they liked, but they couldn't involve the perps and the vics.

With out-and-out careerism, no matter how he tried to cooperate with officers who were trying work their way up, he knew what would happen. A power game.

There wasn't any meaning in aiming for the top in an appearance-only organisation that had lost sight of its duty.

Finally, these past years police scandals continued one after another and the number of suicides in-house was through the roof.

An organisation like this should just go belly up. Gotou truly thought that.

Why am I still in this organisation if I think that –

He didn't know. That was why he was angry.

'Damn it!'

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6

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Even while she was working, Makoto couldn't get what happened at the bar the night before out of her mind.

The long-haired woman reflected in the lavatory mirror –

If she were the only one who had seen it, she could have put it away as an optical illusion, but the five people there had seen exactly the same thing.

Even if she denied it, the fearful experience that happened a few months ago came back to her.

At the time, a dead man's soul possessed Makoto and ate away at her mind. She couldn't forget the fear she had felt then even if she tried.

If that had been a ghost, it could have been somebody who died at that bar in the past.

In order to know even just a little about that spiritual phenomenon, Makoto accessed the company database when there was a spare moment at work and tried searching for women who had died nearby, but the answer was no.

Pulled along by the spiritual phenomenon with cause unknown, she lacked concentration for her work and made a series of basic mistakes.

She had just been targeted by her boss too, who had ended it with the usual line. 'And you're supposed to be the police chief's daughter.'

No matter where she went, her father's title was waved about.

When she was in university, the boy she liked stopped contacting her once he learnt about her father's occupation, and her friends had become reserved too.

'You look a bit pale. Why don't you head home for today?' said Kazue, the clerk sitting beside Makoto.

Though it wasn't as if she was feeling unwell, she would definitely be laughed at if she explained the reason.

Then, her mobile phone rang. It was from Asami.

'I'll be fine if I rest a bit,' Makoto replied with a smile. She took her mobile and headed towards the lavatory.

After she entered, Asami had hung up, but when Makoto called back, Asami picked up on the first ring.

'Hello, it's Makoto.'

There was no response even when she started speaking.

She just heard rough breathing from the mobile.

'Hello, Asami? Can you hear me?'

<... I'm scared.>

Asami's shaking voice came through.

She's scared –

'What's wrong? Did something happen?'

<I'm scared. Please. Help me.>

Asami spoke quickly.

'Calm down. What happened?'

Makoto consciously spoke calmly, to try to alleviate Asami's agitation even if just a little.

<There's someone in my room.>

Asami sounded like she was crying.

'Someone... What do you mean?'

Makoto couldn't immediately understand what Asami was saying.

<I can't see them, but I can feel someone there.>

'Feel?'

<Yes. I can hear footsteps and the sound of running water. It's so creepy I can't stand it...>

Makoto suddenly turned pale.

There was nothing definite. It could all be Asami's misunderstanding. However, Makoto didn't think that.

Makoto had experienced the horror of a dead person's spirit first-hand. On top of that, there was the thing from last night.

'Hey, Asami. Are you home right now?'

<I'm out. I'm too scared to stay at home. Please, Makoto. I can't bear with this alone. Please come.>

Asami sounded like she was at her wit's end. There was no way Makoto could leave her alone.

'I get it. I'll finish work as quickly as I can and come over.'

<OK.>

'Don't go back to your room 'til then, OK? Stay somewhere else.'

After Makoto said that, she hung up.

There's someone who thinks I'm looking under the weather, so I'll watch my timing and leave as soon as possible.

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7

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Haruka followed Yakumo and went up the stairs to the apartment courtyard.

It was a fifteen-minute walk from the station. The apartment had been forcibly built, cutting away at the high ground. The steep steps were what remained.

Because of the dizzying sunlight, going up the steps was rather tiring.

'Hey, walk a bit more slowly.'

Haruka wiped the sweat off her forehead and complained to Yakumo.

'Are you a turtle?'

'The rabbit loses to the turtle in the end.'

'No matter how I try, I can't think that you'll catch up to me.'

'That's why I asked you to walk a bit more slowly.'

'Why are you following me anyway? I don't remember telling you to come with me.'

Yakumo didn't slow his pace or turn around.

It was true that Yakumo hadn't asked her to come, but Haruka couldn't remember him saying not to either. Haruka had interpreted that the way she wanted to and followed.

When she climbed to the top of the stairs, there was a park right in front of her.

A lawn spread out, surrounded by benches. A few toddlers were running around while letting out shrieks of delight. Behind the park, five seven-storey apartments were lined up diagonally.

Yakumo stood at the entrance of the first apartment and looked up at the roof.

It was an unusually serious gaze.

Haruka stood beside Yakumo and looked up at the roof as well.

All she could see was a brilliant blue sky and cumulonimbi rising up into the sky like columns of smoke. However, it was different for Yakumo.

He had a red left eye that could see the spirits of the dead. He loathed his unique ability and usually hid that eye with a black contact lens.

That ability had caused much of Yakumo's contrary personality.

His own mother tried to kill him and the people around him found his eye altogether uncomfortable, so he ended up closing off his heart.

That eye filled with so many sad memories was lonely but warm.

'Hey, can you see anything?'

Yakumo didn't reply.

Well, she hadn't been expecting a reply in the first place.

'There is a woman with long hair.'

Suddenly, she heard a voice.

It hadn't been Yakumo's. As proof, Yakumo also looked surprised. Haruka turned around to where the voice had come from and saw one man standing there.

He wore a black suit and white shirt inappropriate for this season. He had no tie and he had long flowing hair.

He had firm shoulders and dark skin like a surfer. His finely chiselled features were unlike that of a Japanese person's.

Though their appearances were different, he had the same atmosphere as Yakumo. Haruka felt that even if she didn't know the reason.

'And you are?'

Yakumo narrowed his eyes, like he was evaluating the man.

'Sorry for interrupting all of a sudden. My name is Kamiyama. I'm an exorcist.'

Kamiyama made a smile and proffered Yakumo a business card.

– This person is an exorcist.

He had a very different impression from what Haruka thought exorcists looked like.

Exorcism was Yakumo's most hated type of industry.

Yakumo, who could actually see the spirits of the dead, defined them as clusters of people's emotions. That was why he thought it was an uncivilised method – to him, exorcising spirits with the power of chanting was idiotic and the same as giving someone a beating.

'You think I'm suspicious. Well, that's not unexpected.'

Kamiyama smiled bitterly at Yakumo who didn't move to take the business card.

He had a low voice and a soothing way of speaking.

'I can't do anything if you doubt me, but I can see them. The spirits of the dead.'

'Eh?'

Haruka spoke in surprise without thinking.

Kamiyama just said that he could see the spirits of the dead. If that was true, that would mean he had the same ability as Yakumo.

But anybody could say that. On the contrary, if there were exorcists who couldn't see the spirits of the dead, they wouldn't be able to make money even in a bogus business.

How did Yakumo see it? Haruka turned to look at him.

His expression hadn't changed – he was just looking at Kamiyama silently.

'She killed herself...' said Kamiyama, looking up at the apartment.

Yakumo neither affirmed nor denied it. Kamiyama continued without delay.

'A woman in her early twenties. She jumped from there at the limit of her despair.'

Kamiyama pointed at one of the corners of the apartment's roof.

Yakumo's mouth moved slowly. Haruka didn't know what he was saying.

'She has a violent hatred. A strong hatred that can't even be healed by death... A deep darkness.'

Kamiyama closed his eyes and took in a deep breath before turning his gaze to Yakumo again.

'You can see them too, can't you? The same things as me.'

Yakumo's eyes turned sharp, but his lips were still pressed thinly together.

– Is this exorcist telling the truth?

Haruka restrained the impulse to ask.

'Don't you think sometimes that being able to see is a cruelty?'

Though Yakumo didn't reply to Kamiyama's question, he narrowed his eyes, looking displeased.

However, to Haruka, those eyes looked like they were saying something, and Kamiyama continued talking like he had taken Yakumo's silence as a response.

'You learn about things you don't need to know about. The spirits of the dead are people's passions unbound by morals. Looking at them directly is too painful. My heart breaks every time I see them.'

Yakumo's gaze met Kamiyama's, and a wave of tension spread.

Haruka forgot to breathe as she stared at the two of them.

After a silence, Kamiyama smiled bitterly and said, 'Sorry for suddenly bringing up such an odd topic.'

Haruka was finally able to let out the breath she had been holding.

'No, not at all.'

Yakumo ran his fingers through his hair.

'I feel like I'll meet you again.'

Kamiyama left those parting words and walked at an easy pace away from the apartment.

Haruka realised why she felt like Kamiyama and Yakumo had a similar atmosphere when she saw his retreating back. His back felt like it was burdened with a heavy, sorrowful shadow.

When they could no longer see Kamiyama, Yakumo's eyes returned to their usual sleepy look and he let out a big yawn.

'Hey, Yakumo-kun. About what that man said...'

For a moment, Yakumo's expression changed at Haruka's question.

Though she didn't know what emotions he had hidden away, it was a complicated expression she had never seen before.

'Putting aside whether he is a real exorcist or not, there is a spirit of a dead woman here, as he said.'

Does that mean that exorcist is the real thing –

Come to think of it, Yakumo had said this before. 'My ability to see the spirits of the dead is just part of my disposition.' If that was the case, it wouldn't be strange if other people had the same disposition.

'Yakumo-kun...'

Yakumo ignored Haruka and started to make a call on his mobile.

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8

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When Ishii returned from the meeting room to the Unsolved Cases Special Investigations Room, Gotou was snoring loudly as he reclined on the chair.

It looked like his quarrel with Ideuchi earlier hadn't really struck home.

– I was silly for worrying.

Ishii let out a huge sigh.

Gotou and Ishii were the only ones posted at the Unsolved Cases Special Investigations Room, which used to be a storehouse. Since nobody would see them, nobody would blame them if they took naps.

That said, Ishii didn't know what to think about dozing right in the open at noon, but he didn't have the courage to wake Gotou up.

In this situation, all Ishii could do was devote himself to whittling time away.

What he had been doing lately was reading the dossiers for unsolved cases that occurred in the past and reasoning out who the perpetrators were on his own.

Since he couldn't report them to anybody, it was only self-satisfaction, but it was fairly interesting, since it felt like he had become a famous detective such as Sherlock Holmes.

Then, a mobile phone started ringing.

Gotou got up and answered the phone without even checking who it was, still half-asleep.

'Who's this?'

Did Detective Gotou talk like that to everyone? Ishii thought that he should act a bit more polite since he was an adult.

However, there was no way he could have said that aloud.

'Eh? When did I become your gofer?'

The person Detective Gotou was talking to on the phone had to have plenty of guts to try to use him as a gofer.

Perhaps –

'You want me to lend... That really is all you can be counted on for... I got it.'

While Gotou complained, he started taking notes for some reason.

'Shut up. I don't need your concern.'

Gotou left a sharp parting remark and hung up.

'What was it?' Ishii asked, leaning forward in curiosity.

'Work,' said Gotou, and he handed a memo with an address written on it to Ishii.

'What is this?'

'There's an apartment at the address here – look up whether there are incidents in the past near there where somebody died.'

'Where somebody died?'

'Murder, accident, suicide. Anything's fine as long as they're dead.'

It was an awfully vague instruction.

'Is that all?'

'If somebody did die, look into them more so you know their personal history.'

'What case is this for?'

'It's not a case,' Gotou said bluntly.

– It isn't a case?

'It isn't?'

'It's a request from that brat.'

– By that brat, perhaps he meant...

'From Saitou Yakumo-shi?'

'Yeah. There's a ghost at that apartment.'

So it was that demon-like man.

The terrible experience from a few months ago came back to Ishii's heart, and a chill ran from the crown of his head to his toes.

He didn't want to feel that way again.

'I unconditionally disagree to this.'

'Stop whinging and go look into it.'

Gotou's fist fell down on Ishii's head.

* * *

'So, did you find out anything?' Haruka asked Yakumo, who had ended his phone call.

Yakumo looked at Haruka like she was making a fool of him.

'You haven't progressed at all, as usual.'

'What?'

'All I know now is that there is a woman's ghost at this apartment. There wouldn't be a conclusion to this so suddenly.'

'Didn't that exorcist earlier say it was a suicide?'

'You believe him?'

Yakumo's expression turned stiff.

Haruka, who couldn't see the spirits of the dead, had no way of judging whether Kamiyama's words were true or not.

'I don't know.'

'I don't know either.'

'Then...'

'That's why we can't let ourselves be caught by any preconceptions before we know whether what he said was true or not.'

Yakumo's lips went into a thin line after he spoke.

There was the sound of a mosquito buzzing far away in the silence. The light reflected from the

asphalt was scorching and felt like it could burn skin.

Yakumo's argument was sound. But –

'What are you going to do now?'

'Go back. After that, I wait for the results of the investigation.'

After Yakumo said that, he started walking away briskly.

Haruka hurriedly followed after him.

As she thought, Yakumo was a bit strange after meeting that exorcist earlier.

She wouldn't be able to say specifically what it was if asked, but she couldn't feel strong determination from his eyes.

– He's perplexed.

Just after they descended the stairs in front of the apartment, Yakumo suddenly stopped.

'When do you think a person would take their own life?' asked Yakumo, turning around.

His eyes were narrowed. Is it because of the sunlight or –

Haruka had no answer for such an abrupt question. Despite that, she racked her mind to find one.

'Maybe to run away...'

Haruka said the words that came to her.

'To run.'

'I think that everyone has their own reasons, but maybe they were using death to try to escape, or rather, be released from pain or sadness that they couldn't bear.'

Unusual for Yakumo, he listened to Haruka's words patiently.

Haruka thought that his eyes looked they carried a strange sorrow, but it was probably just a misunderstanding.

'Dying won't bring release.'

That was all Yakumo said. Haruka thought he was right.

If the dead had souls, those emotions would still remain in this world even if they died.

If they chose death as a way to escape, it was a big mistake. Whether they chose to live or die, people couldn't run from their own heart.

Still, the number of people who chose to take their own lives was endless. It was a sad truth.

A humid wind blew.

'Let's run. It's going to rain.'

Yakumo suddenly broke into a run. Haruka hurriedly started running too. Immediately after she

did, rain started pouring down loudly.

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9

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When Makoto finished work, she hurriedly headed towards the place where she had arranged to meet with Asami.

Though it was a family restaurant about a five-minute walk from the station, she ended up going by taxi because of the rain that was coming down in buckets.

After Makoto entered the restaurant, she found Asami at a seat by the window.

She was looking around like she couldn't calm down and was afraid of something.

'Sorry, I wanted to come earlier,' said Makoto, sitting in the seat opposite Asami. The moment Asami looked at Makoto's face, she shook her head vehemently.

Asami covered her face with her hands and mumbled, 'I was really scared... I can't go home anymore...'

Makoto understood Asami's fear well.

Though her situation had been different, she had been possessed by a ghost a few months ago. A soul that wasn't hers had eaten away at her.

She would probably never forget the terror she felt then.

'It's OK, it's OK.'

Makoto moved to the seat beside Asami and hugged her shoulders tightly, which made Asami burst into tears.

Makoto stroked Asami's head and patiently waited for her to stop crying.

After a while, Asami calmed down a bit and started talking in spurts about what had been happening around her.

'I always felt somebody's presence.'

'Presence?'

'Mm... I'd hear footsteps behind me when I sat on the sofa, and when I took a shower, somebody would touch my hair...'

Makoto took Asami's hand as she listened to her story.

'But I told myself I was just misunderstanding things. When I slept, I felt like I heard somebody's voice and looked out the window...'

After saying this much, Asami lost her breath.

Makoto could feel Asami's nervousness and fear. She didn't want to hear any more. While thinking that, she urged Asami to continue, asking, 'Then?'

'She was there.'

'Who was?'

'That woman. The one who had been at the toilet in the bar last night...'

After Asami said that, she closed her eyes tightly.

Makoto also remembered the blood-covered woman who had been reflected in the lavatory mirror and felt a chill down her spine.

'I live on the ninth floor of my apartment, but that woman was standing outside my window, smiling...'

Asami held her chest as her erratic breathing shook her shoulders.

'It's OK. Calm down and take deep breaths.'

Makoto rubbed Asami's back and took calm, deep breaths as an example.

After a while, Asami regained her composure and lifted her face to begin talking again.

'I was so scared I consulted an exorcist.'

'An exorcist?'

'Yeah.'

'Are they someone you can trust?'

Normal people couldn't see ghosts. Consequently, it'd be considerably difficult to judge whether that exorcist was the real thing or a fake.

While there were people who were saved, it was also true that it was a breeding ground for fraud.

'Since it's just a name I've heard from a friend... Makoto, I want you to meet him with me.'

'When you say you want me to meet him with you, do you mean you're meeting him now?'

Asami nodded, her gaze holding Makoto.

'Excuse me. Would you be Inoue Asami-san...'

While Makoto was hesitating on her decision, somebody suddenly called out to them.

When she looked over, there was a man in a black suit standing by their table. He had chiselled features, his long hair was swept back, and he looked composed.

Asami replied, 'That would be me.'

'My name is Kamiyama. I received your phone call.'

The man gave his name and bowed his head.

This man is the exorcist Asami made her request to –

In front of Kamiyama, Asami talked about the spiritual phenomena she experienced again, but Asami's agitation was more pronounced than it has been earlier, and there were many parts that were incoherent.

In the end, Makoto had to give an additional explanation including the event that occurred at the bar last night.

After Makoto finished talking, a smile appeared on Kamiyama's face, and he said, 'I see. I have understood most of the story.'

Asami ducked her head and her gaze wandered anxiously. She couldn't make calm decisions right now. Makoto would have to judge whether this exorcist was the real thing or not – that was how Makoto felt.

'Deducing from this story, I believe this may be a wandering spirit.'

'A wandering spirit?' Makoto asked.

She had heard the term before, but she didn't know what it actually meant.

'There are a variety of types of spirits with different characteristics. Many have been recognised by exorcists, but they have been split into residual spirits and wandering spirits.'

'Residual spirits and wandering spirits...'

She had heard of both of them, but she didn't know what the difference was.

'Yes. Residual spirits, as suggested by the name, are spirits that are bound after death to a specific place or thing.'

'Bound?'

'Yes. It might be easy to understand if I said they were captured by emotions. Hatred, sadness, anger – they are kept in this world by these negative emotions.'

'Lingering emotions...'

'That's right. They are often the ones who committed suicide or were killed. It is said that residual ghosts can escape that binding by possessing a living person.'

Did that mean last time Makoto had been possessed by a residual spirit –

'The other type, the wandering spirit, is also exactly what it sounds like. They are spirits that cannot rest in peace, so they wander. There are many cases where they do not know they are dead or want somebody to know they are there.'

Kamiyama's explanation was logical and easy to understand, as if Makoto were listening to a class at school.

Moreover, he didn't say anything to surprise them as a joke or fan their anxiety.

'They're wandering...'

'Yes. It's likely that the wandering spirit just happened to be in the bar when the two of you saw it. Then, when Asami-san didn't notice, she brought that wandering spirit home with her.'

'Will I be OK?'

Asami drew near Kamiyama and gripped his arm tightly.

Kamiyama wasn't perturbed by it and said kindly, 'Please calm down. Wandering spirits simply wander, so they will not inflict harm.'

'Is that true?'

'Yes. If you are still uneasy, I can go to your room now, Asami-san, and exorcise the spirit.'

'Please do.'

Asami replied immediately to Kamiyama's suggestion.

Then, she grasped Makoto's hand tightly and said, 'Makoto, you come too.'

Makoto responded with a nod, since there was no way she could have refused.

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10

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Why do I have to do this –

Ishii unhappily searched through past data on a laptop.

He had never heard of police investigating at the request of a civilian, let alone a university student.

Saitou Yakumo – to Ishii, he was an unfamiliar puzzle of a living thing.

With Yakumo's aloof attitude, there was nothing Ishii could get a hold of. He didn't know how to connect to him. On top of that, there was that red left eye.

His body trembled just from remembering it.

The greatest puzzle for Ishii was why Haruka was together with that demon-like man.

Ishii didn't know what to think of Yakumo who would order the police around like it was completely natural, but it perplexed Ishii even more that Gotou accepted Yakumo's request so easily.

That Gotou was reclining on a chair behind him and whistling while plucking out nostril hairs. Furthermore, he was scattering the nostril hairs he plucked onto the floor, which was –

While Ishii was mulling over his thoughts, the data he had been looking for showed up on his monitor.

'Detective Gotou, I've found it.'

Gotou responded to Ishii's voice and peeked at the monitor from behind him.

'April, five years ago – a woman's corpse was found in this apartment's courtyard.'

Ishii read the information displayed on the monitor.

'A murder?'

Gotou rubbed at the stubble on his chin.

'Er... The final report states that it was a suicide.'

'That's certain?'

Gotou held a cigarette in his mouth and lit it as he spoke.

'Though no note was found, it was judged to be a suicide from circumstantial evidence.'

'Circumstantial evidence?'

Gotou frowned and spat out his cigarette.

'Yes. Half a year before she committed suicide, she was the victim of an assault.'

'Assault?'

Gotou's voice cracked. He was openly discomfited.

Ishii was of the same mental state. Rape was one of the most repugnant crimes. It was not as if the perpetrator had a grudge. They had no distinct reason for why they had to do it.

It was a base and filthy crime that one-sidedly hurt women for their own lust.

'A victim report was submitted to the police.'

A suicide from psychological shock –

Though Ishii didn't know what sort of person she was, considering her feelings, she could definitely have been thinking about committing suicide. He had heard of women in the same situation who had actually killed themselves.

'Do you know her name?'

'Er... Sawaguchi Rika. She had been twenty- two at the time.'

The moment Ishii said that name, Gotou's expression stiffened.

'I can't believe it was this case...'

Gotou spoke in a quiet voice that was almost inaudible.

'Excuse me, Detective Gotou...'

'Print out that info for me,' Gotou said quickly, interrupting Ishii.

Ishii immediately printed out the documents for the case and handed them to Gotou.

'Excuse me, Detective Gotou...'

– Do you know this woman?

Ishii wanted to continue with that, but Gotou left the room before he could finish speaking.

Ishii felt something serious from that murmur.

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11

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'Sorry to disturb you.'

Gotou opened the door to Yakumo's secret hiding place.

A wave of hot air assaulted Gotou's face. How could anybody stand to stay in this sauna of a room? Yakumo was sitting in the chair in front of him, with sleepy eyes as usual.

'If you know you're disturbing me, please head home,' Yakumo said, not even looking at him.

What a remark.

'You're the one who called me.'

'I just said that there was something I wanted you to look into.'

'And I brought the documents you asked for.'

Gotou sat in the chair opposite Yakumo and threw an envelope with the documents in it at Yakumo.

'I appreciate your efforts.'

Yakumo finally looked up. He took the documents out of the envelope and lined them up on the table.

'So there really was a woman who committed suicide at that apartment...' Yakumo said while looking over the documents.

'Yeah,' Gotou replied curtly, and he looked down at his feet while putting a cigarette into his mouth.

'Gotou-san...'

'I know. I won't light up.'

Gotou interrupted Yakumo before he said it.

'You're in a bad temper,' Yakumo said with a sigh. Gotou searched for words to deny it but he didn't find any.

I'm so angry I can't do anything about it. My stomach is queasy like I've got a hangover.

This anger is at myself –

'Her death was partly my fault,' Gotou said, though it was the opposite of his intention.

'Did you commit adultery?'

'That's not it.'

And he had blurted it out in front of the most troublesome guy ever too.

'What happened?'

Yakumo looked at Gotou with serious eyes – perhaps he understood the severity of the situation.

Gotou couldn't keep his mouth shut after he had come so far. He hit his own cheek with his palm to change his mood.

'She was the victim of an assault half a year before her suicide. She was a fourth-year university student and was going to graduate soon.'

What sort of future did Sawaguchi Rika picture for herself –

She might have already decided on her occupation by that time. She probably had a boyfriend whom she talked about her future with.

It became harder to breathe the more Gotou thought about it.

'And then?'

'She was abducted on the way home from her part-time job and assaulted. She probably resisted furiously. There are several signs that she was hit in the face. After the assault, she was thrown out at the park. It was awful.'

Though Yakumo was feigning a blank expression, Gotou could tell that he was gritting his back teeth.

Gotou felt the same way. Any man who had truly loved a woman even once would never commit such an idiotic crime.

He would never be able to forgive the same thing happening to the woman he cherished.

'Then what did she do?' Yakumo pressed, running his fingers through his hair.

'What did she do?'

'Rape is a crime that requires a formal complaint from the victim to prosecute, yes?'

He really was sharp. It was just as Yakumo said. Rape required a formal complaint to prosecute. Unless there were multiple perpetrators, the police wouldn't move unless the victim pressed charges.

That could sometimes be troublesome.

Almost all of the victims ended up keeping their mouths shut in order to seal away their abhorrent memories. They wanted to forget the experience as quickly as they could and return to everyday life. That wasn't bad. It was even natural to think that way.

However, that made it so that many rapes were left unreported. Naturally, the perpetrators foresaw that.

'We were about to give up when she agreed to cooperate with the investigation.'

'Were you the one in charge then, Gotou-san?'

'To be more accurate, my partner then – a female detective called Shimamura – was the one who corresponded with her.'

Usually, female investigators would be in charge of rape cases.

Well, it was to be expected. It meant that Gotou hadn't actually directly talked to Sawaguchi Rika.

He had just seen her face in the documents.

Gotou couldn't forget Rika's face in the photo even now.

A blue bruise had surrounded her left eye. There had been a laceration on her cheek which made it look like she had been dragged, and blood had oozed from the corners of her lips.

It was a photo you would unconsciously avert your eyes from. However, Rika wasn't frightened or terrified in the photo. She was simply looking forward with strong intent.

Her will hadn't been broken.

He would drag the criminal out no matter what he had to do. Gotou had vowed that then –

'She cooperated with the investigation then.'

'Yeah.'

'Why would a person like that commit suicide...'

Yakumo was extremely doubtful.

There was a huge difference between pressing charges and not pressing charges afterwards.

The victims of assault were severely wounded emotionally, so they would lose their memories of the incident, re-experience the incident through flashbacks, suffer insomnia – a variety of stressful barriers.

There were also some people who excessively blamed themselves and felt that they brought the incident upon themselves.

Assault caused women incredible psychological damage.

In the middle of that, she faced the case on her own with a strong heart and tried to overcome it despite her injuries.

That's certain. But –

'Do you know the phrase “second rape”?’

'Yes. It refers to a psychological rape that occurs due to police interviews and slander from thoughtless people.'

This guy really was different from somebody like Ishii – the conversation went quickly.

'That's right. For her, it was the police investigation.'

'That is the worst.'

'You're right. “You're not a virgin – you brought it on yourself, didn't you? What colour was your underwear? It could be seen, couldn't it? How was your first sexual encounter?” It wasn't how the victim should have been corresponded with at all.'

Gotou hit the desk with his fist in his anger, which had built up.

There was a limit even to insensibility. They had completely ignored the victim's emotions. It was like slashing at the victim's weakened heart.

This could be called the crime of the police.

'You weren't the one who asked such vulgar questions, Gotou-san.'

'Of course not!'

'That would mean you were left out of the initial stages of the investigation.'

Gotou couldn't answer Yakumo's query and clenched his fists tightly.

His chest hurt like he had been stabbed with a needle.

'The day right after her case, a murdered corpse was found at a flat.'

'And you were sent over there?'

Ideuchi had been his boss then too.

Gotou, who couldn't understand, had naturally opposed it. However, Ideuchi didn't comply with him. At the time, Ideuchi had said, 'If you don't want to be put out to dry, obediently listen to what I have to say. Investigation is teamwork.'

It was a natural decision from the police's standpoint. They didn't have enough members to do all the investigations equally. They had no choice but to prioritise investigations.

Now it was too late to regret it.

'Me and the female detective Shimamura were left out and two newbies were sent in...'

'And then she committed suicide.'

Yakumo said just that, and suddenly Gotou's heart was throbbing.

That's right. She killed herself –

Why did I give up then? She might have died even if I had been in charge, but I might still have been able to treat her better.

No, that was wrong. Inside my heart, she wouldn't have died. That's what I thought –

No matter how many words he lined up grandly, the truth was that he didn't understand the victim's emotions.

The weight of regret clung to Gotou, and though he carried it now, it wouldn't leave.

Now that he thought about it, that had been the start of the antagonism between Gotou and Ideuchi.

After that case, Gotou wouldn't obey instructions and would cut him off whenever he could, all the while enforcing his will for an investigation that he trusted.

If he could return to that time, he would probably take charge of her investigation even if he had to punch Ideuchi to do it.

However, that was just a story of possibilities. The past couldn't be changed.

'Gotou-san, it is too late to regret it now. Let us at least save her spirit.'

This guy, putting on airs.

But it's just as Yakumo says. A life that's been lost won't come back, so at least –

'You don't have to tell me,' Gotou said with a snort.

'In order to do that, we must find the reason her spirit is wandering.'

'OK.'

'Was the perpetrator arrested?'

'Yeah, but after she killed herself. Ironically, her parents used her suicide to tell the press how awful the police's response had been. They said their daughter had been killed by the police... The press found that laughable and made a fuss. With all that excitement, a full-blown investigation got started.'

As Gotou said that, it left a terrible aftertaste in his mouth that was hard to bear.

'That investigation bore fruit then.'

'No, that's not it. Though there was info on the criminal, it was a complete coincidence that he was caught. Oori Kazushi. He had been twenty-five at the time. A regular company employee. When he was inspected to see if he had been drinking, he had been a bit strange, and when his car was investigated, there was a picture that was believed to have been taken at the time of the assault.'

'If the perpetrator has been found, there is another reason for her wandering then.'

'For example?'

'Maybe she has something she wants to tell her parents... What happened to her parents?'

Here, Gotou felt a heavy weight on his shoulders again.

'Maybe because of all the anxiety she'd felt, her mother died of heart failure right after the criminal was arrested. Her father moved out of their flat and is renting now.'

'Is that so?'

Yakumo put a finger to his brow and looked like he was thinking about something, but looked up at the ceiling in exhaustion, like his thoughts hadn't come together.

'Well, though it may be troublesome, it seems like the only thing to do is to reconsider the situation of the case.'

After a silence, Yakumo said just this.

'Yeah.'

Just as Yakumo said, it didn't seem like there was any other method.

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12

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Asami's apartment was by a large street.

It was nine storeys tall and in the shape of a left-facing square bracket. It had undressed concrete walls and a red line on the border of the floor.

It was one of those designer apartments that were so popular now.

Led by Asami, Makoto and Kamiyama took the elevator up to the ninth and highest floor and went along the outdoor corridor with Asami showing them the way.

It seemed the apartment only had an elevator on one end, so they had to walk down the long outdoor corridor.

After turning two corners, there was Asami's room at the very end.

Though Asami had been fine until she opened the door, she refused to go inside and turned away from the room while shaking.

Makoto felt afraid too, but because Asami was in such a state, she was able to bear it.

'Please forgive my intrusion,' said Kamiyama. He turned on the light and entered the room.

'Wait here,' Makoto told Asami, and then she followed Kamiyama into the room.

Since they had just met again yesterday, this was the first time she had gone to Asami's room.

Makoto took off her pumps in the entrance that only had enough room for one person to stand and went down the hall that also functions as the kitchen. The door at the end of the hall was an eight-tatami room.

Asami had said she had just moved in, and it looked like it – the room didn't feel lived in at all.

While Kamiyama mumbled something or other, he looked around the room slowly, at the veranda, the modular bathroom and the closet.

It looked more like the exorcist was inspecting the room's facilities than looking at spirits.

'So it's just as I thought.'

After he was done looking around, Kamiyama crossed his arms like he had understood something.

'Did you find something out?'

'Yes. There is no issue.'

Kamiyama gave a short reply to Makoto's question and briskly returned to the entrance.

'Asami-san, it's fine for you to come in as well.'

When Kamiyama called out to her, Asami turned around, looking surprised.

'Is it really OK?'

Makoto spoke for the doubts Asami was feeling.

'I said this before as well, but the spirit that had been Asami-san's room is probably a wandering spirit.'

'Is it OK because it's a wandering spirit?'

Makoto drew closer to Kamiyama.

'It did not have any hatred for Asami-san personally. Asami-san experienced the spiritual phenomena, so its goal has been accomplished. That's all.'

'Is that true?'

Asami's gaze clung to Kamiyama.

Kamiyama was completely unperturbed, and he calmly repeated, 'It's fine.' Asami, perhaps in her relief, sat down with a thump in the corridor like she had collapsed.

Somehow, Makoto felt like she had been deceived.

It might have been a let-down since she had been more terrified than necessary.

However, it was also true that a great uneasiness was spreading in the back of Makoto's mind, though it was obscure.

Is this really the end –

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After Haruka took a shower and returned to her room, her mobile phone started ringing.

This was rare. No, it might have been the first time. The person calling was Yakumo.

If she answered right away, it'd be like she had been waiting for a call. Haruka took her time drying her hair and then called Yakumo.

'Sorry, I was taking a shower. What is it?'

<It's about the apartment we went to today.>

Yakumo skipped exchanging greetings and started with the topic at hand.

Gotou-san had probably given him the results of the investigation. Now that she thought about it, Yakumo wouldn't call her without a reason.

Well, it was nice that he was giving her an explanation about the case without her having to ask him for one.

'Did you find something out?'

<Yeah. There really was a woman who committed suicide at that apartment.>

'Really?'

That would mean what the exorcist called Kamiyama said was true.

However, Haruka didn't dare to say that aloud.

<Her name is Sawaguchi Rika. I also tentatively know the reason for her suicide.>

'Tentatively?'

Yakumo's tone felt a bit negligent for some reason.

<Accordingly, I'd like to hear your opinion as a woman.>

'If you're fine with me.'

It made Haruka happy to hear Yakumo say <as a woman>.

However, she didn't say that aloud or let it show in her attitude. Yakumo, being contrary, would definitely say something sarcastic to ruin it. <Only biologically> or something like that.

<A few months before that woman killed herself, she was raped.>

Haruka felt a discomfort in her abdomen.

For a woman, that word had a very cold and heavy sound. Every woman had probably thought about it once.

If it had been me –

'Is that why she killed herself?'

'Well, that's how it's become formally. But something doesn't fit.'

'Doesn't fit?'

Haruka didn't understand what didn't fit for Yakumo.

If she thought about how she would feel if she had been the one who was assaulted, she understood very well the feelings of a woman who would want to die, and the number of people who actually did commit suicide wasn't small either.

Though the physical injuries would heal, the injuries of the heart from the assault would stay with them until they died.

<After that woman was assaulted, she cooperated with the police investigation.>

Yakumo said that to respond to Haruka's doubts.

She could see what Yakumo meant.

Cooperating with the police investigation meant that she wanted to officially announce what happened herself. That meant she had a lot of courage. She had to have been very strong mentally.

For a person like that to commit suicide –

Haruka also understood why something didn't fit for Yakumo.

<When the police were investigating, it seems that they said awful things to her. There is a possibility that that became the trigger.>

Haruka knew about that too.

She had heard a bit about it in her criminal psychology lecture. The mental contempt that was called second rape.

Why did victims have to remember terrible memories and have salt rubbed in their wounds?

'That's unforgivable,' Haruka said without thinking, her anger rising.

<Looking at it as a woman, what do you think was her cause for suicide?>

Yakumo's words sounded terribly funny to Haruka.

Though the gears in Yakumo's head always turned quickly, he would think about human emotions like chemical reactions, perhaps because he had shut off his heart.

Human emotions didn't adhere to fixed laws.

'I don't think there was one clear reason though.'

<What do you mean?>

'They wouldn't lead to suicide if you think about everything separately, but I think I can understand well enough if you put everything together.'

Since Yakumo was listening silently for once, Haruka continued her explanation.

'For example, if you listen to the story of why a couple broke up, there usually isn't a specific

reason – it might have been the trigger, but in the end, it's because a variety of things piled up.'

<So the composited minor factors drove her into a wall?>

When Yakumo said it, it sounded like an abstruse mathematical formula.

'Well, something like that. I think people reach their limits all at once.'

<I see.>

'But there might be some factor that we don't know about.'

Haruka didn't want to think about it, but there was a possibility that the woman got pregnant from the rape.

A man probably couldn't understand how much pain a woman would suffer psychologically if that was the case.

<As you say, there may be some reason we don't know about. In that sense, we can't throw away the possibility that it wasn't suicide.>

Really? Did that mean Yakumo thought it was possible it wasn't suicide?

It couldn't be a murder disguised as a suicide, could it? That exorcist's words came back to Haruka in her head. 'She has a violent hatred.' If it had been a murder, Haruka could understand what that exorcist had said.

Yakumo might have been thinking about the same thing.

<Thank you. That was useful.>

Haruka couldn't believe her ears.

That Yakumo said <Thank you> to her.

She endured the feeling of wanting to jump up and down and said, extremely naturally, 'No problem.'

<That's right. I've got a request for you.>

'A request?'

<You helped me with this once before too. A simple investigation.>

It didn't feel bad having Yakumo ask her for something, but why did she have an unbelievably bad feeling?

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14

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Gotou arrived at the door to the police quarters and drew back his hand, which had been about to press the intercom button.

Just as Yakumo said, the only way to save her spirit was to re-examine the case.

He knew it would be finished up in a hurry if he talked to Shimamura Eriko, who had first been in charge of the case.

The reason Gotou was hesitating was that his wife, Atsuko, might have been behind this door.

She had left home this time because Gotou had forgotten their wedding anniversary.

He hadn't forgotten. He had actually remembered it clearly. However, that didn't mean he could do something like buy flowers and bring them home. It wasn't in Gotou's character.

It might have been fine if he just apologised honestly, but a man wasn't that sort of creature. Even though he had a number of excuses, in the end, it might have just been embarrassing.

Though he didn't remember when he had first met his wife Atsuko, he could still remember clearly the clothes she had been wearing and her hairstyle.

When he'd first met her, he had thought, 'I'm going to marry this woman.'

What was he getting so worked up about? There was no reason for him to be restrained around his own wife.

Gotou shook his head to clear his mind and pressed the intercom button.

'Yes?'

The door opened immediately, and a large woman appeared. She was Shimamura Eriko.

She had a candid personality like her appearance. Atsuko had said that Gotou and Eriko were like siblings.

Gotou raised his hand and said, 'Hi.'

'Unfortunately, Atsuko's returned home. Some make-up is arriving by mail order.'

Gotou heaved a sigh in relief.

His wife wasn't here, and she had returned home. He was relieved about both those things.

'Oh.'

'Honestly, you two should really let it up. You shouldn't be fighting so much at this age,' Eriko grumbled.

This woman really went on. That's why her husband ran off. Well, Gotou wasn't in a situation where he could say anything about anyone else.

'More importantly, I want to talk to you about work.'

'What? Are you thinking about switching jobs?'

'I'm serious.'

Eriko opened the door wide and urged him inside, perhaps because she had seen how earnest his

gaze had been.

They went through a living room with bottles of alcohol and sweets wrappers scattered about.

They were really spread out. Even a man living alone wouldn't have made such a mess.

'Why don't you clean up a bit?'

'I'm just going to say this, but this is all your wife's work. I do at least clean up.'

Gotou had planned on saying something sarcastic, but he received a harsh comeback.

It made his head hurt when he thought about two women getting excited over speaking ill of their husbands.

Eriko threw the magazines on the sofa to the floor and made space for herself to sit.

'So, what did you want to talk about?'

'Do you remember that case?'

While Gotou answered Shimamura's question with a question, he sat cross-legged on the cushion on the floor.

'Which case? You never explain enough. That's why Atsuko...'

'Sawaguchi Rika.'

When Gotou said the name, Eriko's face turned stiff.

As he thought, Shimamura hadn't forgotten either. Cases with bad aftertastes stayed in your heart.

'Why are you talking about that now?'

Eriko's suspicions were natural. That case was already over.

The victim committed suicide. The criminal was arrested. That had been the end of it.

I'll have to talk about Yakumo to explain the whole story, but will she believe me –

Although Gotou broached the topic, he was at a loss for an answer.

'Could this be related to that young man you're acquainted with who can see ghosts?'

Eriko brought up the subject while looking at him with searching eyes.

This was unexpected.

'Oi, why do you know about Yakumo?'

'I heard from Hata-san.'

Hata was the perverted old man who asserted that his job as a coroner was his hobby.

They had worked together on a number of cases and he knew about Yakumo. Though his skill was excellent, he had loose lips on top of being weird.

'That old man, spouting off about...'

'Hey, is it true?'

Eriko leaned forward in immense curiosity.

'Is what true?'

'That the young man can see ghosts.'

He couldn't deny it after coming this far.

'It's true. You don't need to force yourself to believe it, but me and Yakumo are unfortunately inseparable. He's cooperated on a number of cases with his ability to see ghosts.'

Gotou lit a cigarette.

Eriko looked displeased, but she placed an empty can in front of Gotou.

'I believe you. When you do this sort of work, you experience this sort of thing even if you don't want to,' said Eriko jokingly.

'The explanation will go quickly then.'

'So you think there's still another side to that case?'

'I don't know, but according to Yakumo, that girl's spirit is still wandering...'

'Wandering?'

'Yeah. I want to know the reason too. It's already been five years since then, so why is she still wandering?'

After Eriko's gaze wandered like she was thinking about something, she gulped down the can of beer in her hand.

'That case had been full of things I didn't understand from the very beginning. It was unnatural.'

'Unnatural?'

'Wasn't it? Why did we get left out of the investigation?'

Eriko was clearly agitated.

'We were put to another investigation.'

'But it was just a lack of common sense to put two detectives new to assault cases in charge – and two men on top of that.'

'That's true.'

'Plus, in the files, it said there was no note left behind, but one of the investigation members who went to the scene said they'd seen a note. Everyone felt uncomfortable since that disappeared.'

'Really...'

This was the first time Gotou had heard that.

'There's more. After she killed herself, her parents called the police killers, right? The criminal was caught right after that, when there hadn't been a proper investigation up until then. The timing is too good!'

Eriko forcefully slammed her fist on the table.

Her breathing was erratic. It felt like she had vented all the resentment she had kept until now.

In the vertically structured police, you had to obey the instructions from above even if you couldn't understand them at all.

On top of that, cases just kept on coming. Even if you didn't understand, you had to shelve those feelings away. Resentment piled up even if you didn't want it to.

Gotou himself had experienced many hardships –

In any case, Eriko's words just now made Gotou's suspicions swell tremendously.

'Hey, I've got a request I want to make for old times' sake.'

'You asking me to re-examine the assault case?'

'Yeah. I'll look into the background of the case. Look into the detectives in charge at the time indirectly for me. '

Eriko bit her thick lips. Was she hesitating?

'Do you not want to?'

'Of course I'm going to do it.'

Eriko answered Gotou's question with a puffed chest. Though the woman had no charm, she was reliable.

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15

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Yuuya lay sprawled on the sofa, absentmindedly listening to music.

He wasn't doing anything or thinking about anything – he just really liked this feeling of rocking like he was on water.

Though his home was nearby, he almost never returned since he'd met Shinichi. He was completely freeloading at Shinichi's flat.

He didn't get along with his father. Especially after his mother had died – they'd run into each other more often at home, which made it worse.

It wasn't like they had big fights. Yuuya didn't know what to talk about. It was probably the same for the other party.

That was why his father hadn't made even one complaint about his not returning home.

– Since living alone in a 2LDK is wearisome.

Shinichi took Yuuya in quickly too, and loved him like a younger brother.

A light wind blew. He looked over and saw the curtains moving. Had the window been open? Yuuya raised his head and looked at the window that connected to the veranda.

Rattle. Something passed behind him.

Eh, but Shinichi-san wasn't supposed to be home yet. Yuuya sat up.

This time, he felt like something had passed by outside the window. What could it be? Yuuya stood up, slowly approached the window and drew open the curtains.

Suddenly, the lights in the room went out.

In the semi-darkness, a pallid light reflected in the window.

In that light, there was a figure of a person standing –

'Aagh!'

Yuuya fell down backwards while screaming.

There was a woman outside the window.

A woman whose face was dyed bright red with blood.

The woman who had been reflected in the mirror in the lavatory at the bar last night.

Yuuya crawled towards the entrance to leave the room.

When he reached the entrance, the door suddenly opened and Shinichi came in.

'Help. The woman – the woman,' Yuuya begged, clinging to Shinichi's feet.

'What are you so excited about?'

Shinichi shook Yuuya's shoulders, but Yuuya couldn't give a proper answer to Shinichi's question in his upset state.

– You die too!

Suddenly, a voice came down upon them.

Shinichi and Yuuya went stiff for a moment. After they both looked at each other, they screamed and rushed out of the room.

* * *

The bartender at Bar <Snake> was cleaning up after the bar had closed for the night with a

cigarette in his mouth.

He didn't have the surplus to hire workers. The bar was barely scraping by financially.

It hadn't been like this a few years ago. He got as much money as he wanted if he asked his parents for it. Even without doing work, he enjoyed a life of leisure with dignity.

Now, he had to stock, serve customers and even clean the shop himself.

He knew that lamenting wouldn't bring back his past life.

It was just that he'd had some extraordinary income lately.

He hadn't thought that something inherited from the past could be changed into a product. Putting it out all at once would make things difficult later. He'd look for the right time to make a bit of money.

Clank. There was the sound of something falling.

'What is it?'

The bartender walked out from the counter and looked around the bar. The mop that had been leaning against the wall had fallen. Looked like he had forgotten to put it away.

The bartender picked up the mop and opened the locker by the lavatory –

His breath got caught in his throat in his surprise so he couldn't even breathe.

There was a woman in the locker.

Her face was covered in blood and long hair hung over her face.

– Die!

That's what the woman said.

'Aaahh!'

The bartender hurriedly shut the locker door and jumped back.

His eyes must have deceived him. He said that to himself.

The fuss last night had just gotten on his nerves. It'd be clear if he just opened the locker door again.

– Die.

Just when he had put his hand on the locker's door handle, he heard a voice from behind him.

A cold sweat ran down his body.

He cautiously turned around.

The same blood-covered woman he saw earlier was there –

'Aaaaahh!'

On the floor, the bartender went down on his hands and knees. Then, he rushed out of the bar.

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16

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Ishii left the police quarters and headed for the parking lot in the back.

He had waited until the date changed at midnight, but Detective Gotou hadn't come back.

He'd tried calling his mobile a few times but he hadn't gotten a message back, so there was nothing for him to do but go home.

But recently, he'd been wondering if things were really OK like this. Other investigation team members would work to the point that they didn't even have time to sleep –

That said, he didn't like intense cases like the serial abduction case they had last time. Thrilling and exciting cases.

Just as Ishii opened the car door on the driver's side, somebody suddenly appeared in front of him.

'Excuse me, Ishii-san.'

'Eek.'

Ishii shrieked without thinking.

'Ah, sorry. It's me. Makoto.'

Makoto walked in front of Ishii and bowed her head.

'A-ah, Makoto-san. What are you doing here at this time of night?'

Though Ishii spoke as calmly as he could, his heart was still beating furiously.

Plus, Ishii was traumatised by what Makoto in her possessed state had done to him last case.

Of course, he knew it wasn't her fault, but he still felt scared.

'Actually, there is something I would like to consult you about, Ishii-san, so I decided on my own to wait for you.'

'Until this time of night?'

'Sorry - I must be troubling you.'

Makoto cast down her almond eyes.

'Ah, no, that's not it. I just thought that if you called me, I wouldn't have made you wait so long,' Ishii hurriedly explained, overcome by a strange feeling of guilt.

'I thought it would be rude to interrupt your work. That is, it's a personal matter.'

'A personal matter... is it?'

'Yes. It won't take that much time.'

Makoto bowed her head again.

'Ah, if you're fine with me, please tell me. Since it's already this late, I'll drive you home as well.'

Makoto was the daughter of the chief of the police. He couldn't turn her request down flat. Plus, it would be a problem if he let her go home alone at this time and anything happened.

'Sorry for this.'

'Please don't worry about it.'

After waiting for Makoto to get in the passenger's seat, Ishii started the car.

'So what did you want to talk about?' Ishii asked, his hands on the wheel.

'The truth is that there is something I would like to ask your opinion about, Ishii-san.'

'My opinion?'

'Yes.'

After Makoto nodded, she started talking about the spiritual phenomena at the bar and the exorcist she met this evening.

Without thinking, Ishii was lost in what Makoto was saying. He really did like this sort of thing.

However, actually experiencing it was a different matter. He had fully realised that last case. He enjoyed this because he was listening as an outsider.

'What do you think, Ishii-san?'

After she finished talking, Makoto asked for his opinion in the end.

'What exactly do you mean?'

'I can't explain this clearly, but I have a very bad feeling for some reason.'

A breath escaped Makoto's glossy lips.

She hung her head. The nape of her neck was pale and captivating, reflected in Ishii's eyes almost like a different creature entirely.

'However, that exorcist said that there was no need to worry any more since it was a wandering spirit.'

'Yes, but...'

Ishii understood well what Makoto was trying to say. It wasn't something that could easily be agreed to with 'Yes, I see' after being told 'It's fine now'.

'Well, since an expert said it, I think that it's fine.'

'Is it really fine?'

Makoto looked at Ishii worriedly and grasped Ishii's hand.

Her hand was cold. In the back of Ishii's mind, that terror came back to him.

'Eek.'

Ishii shrieked instinctively and slammed the brakes.

For a moment, Ishii's head went blank. Cold sweat dripped down his forehead.

'Is something the matter?'

Makoto looked at Ishii in surprise.

'Ah, no, er, a cat suddenly...'

Ishii hurriedly wiped the sweat from his forehead and fixed the position of his glasses with the tip of his finger.

'A cat? Was there one there?'

'Ah, no, that's. Ahaha.'

While Ishii was lost for a reply, a mobile phone started ringing.

Makoto took her mobile from her bag and picked up after saying, 'Please excuse me for a bit.'

'Asami? What's wrong?'

Asami... Was it the woman from the story earlier who experienced the spiritual phenomena?

'Hey, calm down.'

Makoto sounded cornered.

'Leave that room as soon as you can... eh, you can't leave...'

Ishii had a very bad feeling.

'Got it. I'll go right away.'

Makoto hung up just as she finished speaking.

'Ishii-san, excuse me. Thank you for today.'

Ishii stopped Makoto as she was about to open the door.

It's not as if there was any official report, but it seems like something serious is happening. I am a policeman, so I can't let this pass.

Detective Gotou had said this. Adaptability –

'Please tell me the location.'

For a moment, Makoto looked perplexed, but she bowed her head right after and said, 'Please.'

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Ishii, who stopped his car in front of the apartment temporarily to let Makoto off, went to visitor parking to park his car and followed her immediately.

Makoto was saying something to the interphone in front of the apartment's entrance.

Though she normally seemed like a calm woman, she was considerably agitated now and her voice sounded hysterical.

Then, a man in a black suit came in.

The moment Makoto saw him, she let out an 'Ah!'. The man also nodded like they knew each other.

'Makoto-san, yes? Did you also come to see Asami-san?' he said to Makoto, his breath also feeble.

'Yes.'

While Makoto was answering, the auto-lock glass front door opened.

'I was also called by Asami-san.'

The man wiped the thin layer of sweat from his brow and went through the entrance.

Both Ishii and Makoto followed.

The man pressed the button for the only elevator and looked at Ishii after breathing deeply. His gaze was piercing.

Even though Ishii hadn't done anything wrong, he felt ill at ease.

'Ishii-san, this person is the exorcist I mentioned earlier –'

Inferring the mood, Makoto introduced the man to Ishii. So this man was the exorcist –

'My name is Kamiyama.'

Following Makoto's words, Kamiyama bowed his head politely.

'My name is Ishii. I'm a detective.'

Ishii bowed his head like Kamiyama.

'Police?'

Kamiyama spoke like he hadn't heard correctly. Why is the police here – he looked like he wanted to ask that.

Just as Makoto opened her mouth to explain, a mobile phone started ringing.

'Asami!'

Makoto answered right away.

'...You OK? I'm just about to get on the elevator...'

At that point, the elevator arrived.

Makoto, Ishii and finally Kamiyama got in, and he pushed the button for the ninth floor.

With the sound of the winch, the elevator started going up.

'... Hello? Hello?'

<Aaaah!>

A woman's scream came through Makoto's phone's speaker.

Right after that, the call ended.

Makoto gripped her mobile and looked up at the ceiling anxiously.

'I apologise. This is my responsibility.'

Kamiyama looked up at the ceiling as he said that. Who was he saying it to? He bit his lower lip and looked like he was enduring the pain.

In this box full of tension, it felt like somehow only Ishii had been left behind.

When the elevator door opened, Kamiyama flew out first. Then, Makoto followed. Ishii didn't understand what was happening but he ran after the two of them.

It was a narrow passage that could only let one person through at a time.

They went through the outside corridor straight in front of the elevator they got off of and turned right after three rooms. They turned right again after three more rooms.

Makoto suddenly stopped.

Ishii almost ran into her back but stopped himself just on the verge of it.

They were in front of the room at the very end of the corridor.

'Asami-san. Are you all right?' said Kamiyama while pressing the intercom button and rattling the doorknob.

'Asami, you OK?'

Makoto couldn't bear it and butted in from the side.

Kamiyama lost his balance and stumbled, dropping to his knees.

However, Makoto didn't seem to notice – she turned the doorknob and hammered on the door. Ishii just watched, not knowing what to do.

'Asami, you're here, right? Talk to me!' Makoto shouted. However, there was no response.

'Asami-san! Are you all right? Asami-san! Asami-san!'

After standing up, Kamiyama switched places with Makoto and knocked on the door while yelling.

Makoto took out her mobile and made a call.

'Quiet,' Makoto commanded.

Though it was faint, there was the sound of a phone ringing from inside the flat.

Now Ishii understood. Makoto was calling Asami's mobile. It was certain that she was inside the room.

'Ishii-san, could you borrow the key?' Makoto suggested.

This was an emergency situation. He could probably borrow a key if he went to the management office and showed his ID.

'Understood.'

Ishii nodded and ran.

What on earth was happening? Though Ishii didn't like experiencing things like this first-hand, but things didn't look good for him.

Ishii took the elevator back to the first floor and went to the management office to say he was a policeman. He explained the situation and borrowed the master key.

Ishii returned with the key and, urged by Makoto's and Kamiyama's gazes, put the key into the doorknob without even time to breathe.

A cold sweat was slowly coming down his forehead.

– I can't open this door.

He heard someone's voice. It was his cowardly other self. However, he couldn't run away now.

'I'm opening the door,' Ishii declared, and he turned the key.

The key turned with a click. Opening the door now.

But I'm scared. I'm really scared –

What on earth was behind this door? While Ishii was thinking, Makoto pushed in from the side and opened the door forcefully.

Though Ishii didn't shriek, he did jump back from the door.

'Asami!'

Makoto ran into the room.

Kamiyama followed her. There was no way Ishii could stay outside.

He slowly passed through the door and looked around the room from the entrance. The lights were on. There were no signs of a struggle.

There was no sign in the room of a woman who could be Asami.

It was completely empty.

'Ah!'

Makoto raised her voice.

This wasn't the time to be frightened. After taking off his shoes, Ishii entered the room and went up to Makoto.

Makoto was pointing at a point on the floor. On top of the carpet by the bed.

A mobile phone red with blood had fallen there. It wasn't dry yet. Wet blood –

Ishii couldn't make a sound in his shock.

'Asami! Asami!'

Makoto's voice rose nearly to a shriek. There was no response.

Ishii couldn't understand at all.

Right before they came here, Makoto had been talking to Asami on her mobile.

The call had cut off partway through on the elevator, but they hadn't even taken a minute to reach the room.

After they arrived at the room, Ishii left to get the key, but Makoto and Kamiyama had been in front of the room.

Naturally, nobody sneaked into the room, and nobody had left.

'Asami disappeared...' Makoto said, collapsing to her knees.

That's ridiculous –

Ishii fervently looked around the room in order to deny his unbelievable thoughts.

The key to the room was on the table.

The window that led to the veranda was also locked from the inside. There was no space for somebody to hide – not in the modular bath, the closet or above the ceiling.

Ishii's hopes were crushed.

This situation is –

A woman disappeared from a locked room –

Ridiculous. Impossible.

'If I had noticed earlier...'

Kamiyama bit his lips and he looked remorseful. Noticed? What was he talking about? Kamiyama continued talking like he was addressing Ishii's doubts.

'It hadn't been a wandering spirit that was following Asami-san. It was a residual spirit with a strong and deep hatred...'

Kamiyama's words echoed in Ishii's eyes.

So that means this is the work of a ghost –

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18

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Gotou parked his car in front of the entrance of the apartment Ishii had mentioned to him.

It was a private one-room apartment and was strangely shaped like a left-facing square bracket, as if it had been forcibly built on the narrow plot of land.

He called management to have them open the auto-lock and took the elevator.

'Damn, calling me at this time,' grumbled Gotou towards the ceiling,

However, inside his heart, he was worried. Ishii's scared voice over the phone hadn't been normal.

No matter how many times he yelled at him to calm down, Ishii kept on crying that somebody had disappeared and that some vengeful ghost had done something.

After going up to the ninth floor, Gotou went down the long outdoor corridor and pressed the button for the intercom outside the room that Ishii had mentioned.

'Hey. You got dragged into this too?'

Makoto just nodded seriously at Gotou's words.

Why did everyone look like they'd just gotten home from a funeral? Though Gotou was dissatisfied, he passed through the entrance to the room.

Ishii was sitting, hugging his knees.

'Oi, what happened? Give me a proper explanation.'

Gotou gave Ishii's head a light push.

Normally Ishii would miserably say 'What are you doing?', but he slowly looked up at Gotou and gaped at him without saying anything.

They'd get nowhere like this.

'I don't care who – somebody, explain.'

After Gotou said that loudly, somebody appeared at the window connected to the veranda. He was a man in his late thirties with long, flowing hair and wearing a black suit.

'Let me explain.'

The man spoke calmly but clearly.

'Fine by me, but who are you?'

There was an embarrassed smile on the man's face, like he felt he had been careless. He held out his business card.

Exorcist, Kamiyama Eiji –

That was what it said on the business card. A detective, a newspaper reporter and an exorcist. What a combination.

'I'm Detective...'

'Detective Gotou, yes?' interrupted Kamiyama.

'Why do you know my name?'

'I asked Ishii-san earlier.'

The guy felt suspicious somehow. There were many things Gotou wanted to say, but he had to confirm the situation first.

'What happened?'

Gotou urged Kamiyama to continue.

'Today, Inoue Asami, the owner of this room, consulted me about spiritual phenomena that occurred in her room.'

'Spiritual phenomena?'

'Yes. Asami-san and Makoto-san were friends at university, so the three of us met once in the evening, and then I came to investigate the spiritual phenomena in this room.'

Unlike Ishii, Kamiyama gave an indifferent and competent explanation.

Gotou looked at Makoto, who was standing in a corner of the room. She nodded silently to affirm Kamiyama's explanation.

'Then?'

It felt like it'd be a long explanation. Gotou sat down cross-legged, lit a cigarette and urged Kamiyama to say more.

'At the time, I couldn't confirm the existence of the spirit and left temporarily. However, about one hour before, Asami-san contacted me. She said that spiritual phenomena had occurred again and that she wanted me to save her. I hurriedly came here and met with Makoto-san and Ishii-san at the entrance.'

'Ishii, why were you here too?'

Gotou glared at Ishii.

He knew why Makoto and Kamiyama, the exorcist, were here, but Ishii had no reason to be.

Ishii's shoulders shuddered as he tried to say something but no words came out.

'Um, I went to consult Ishii-san about the spiritual phenomena,' Makoto interrupted.

He decided not to boorishly ask why she would go to consult Ishii.

'And?'

'When I went to consult Ishii-san, Asami called me asking for help...'

After saying that much, Makoto's words trailed off.

'So where was the owner of the room who'd asked for help?'

'S-she disappeared...' Ishii said, looking like he was going to cry.

'Reply seriously!'

Gotou hit Ishii's head.

'No, what Ishii-san said is the truth,' Kamiyama said with a puffed chest, like he was proud.

This exorcist was pretty shameless even though he was talking to police.

'Even idiots should think carefully before speaking.'

'No, it's true,' Makoto insisted.

Everyone was saying –

'There's no way a person would disappear.'

'Why can you assert that?'

Kamiyama looked down at Gotou with narrowed eyes.

Gotou didn't like being looked down on. He stood up and glared back.

'Tell me in detail what you mean.'

After glaring at Kamiyama for a while, Gotou turned the conversation to Makoto.

With Ishii like that, she looked like the one who would explain the best.

'After Asami called me, I came with Ishii-san to the apartment. When we arrived at the entrance, we met Kamiyama-san.'

'What time was that?'

'I think it was about twelve thirty. We pressed for the intercom and Asami opened the auto-lock entrance for us.'

'So the woman called Asami was in her room then.'

'Yes. While waiting for the elevator, Asami called me on my mobile phone. She screamed and hung up when we were riding the elevator up.'

'Then?'

'When we reached the room, the door was locked. I asked Ishii-san to borrow the room key the management office. When we unlocked the door and went inside, Asami wasn't there...'

After Makoto said that, she handed something wrapped in a handkerchief to Gotou.

'What is this?'

'That was left in the room.'

Gotou took it and opened the handkerchief.

It was a flip phone. There was a dark red stain on it. It was a bloodstain.

When he looked at it carefully, there was a bloody fingerprint as well.

Is what they're saying true –

Gotou looked at everyone's faces slowly. He really had suspicions that this was a tasteless prank and that one of them might burst out laughing.

However, everyone there looked uniformly serious.

'How about the key to the room? Couldn't she just have gone out?'

'That is...'

Makoto looked to the table.

There was a key there with some small stuffed animal – a cat or a dog – attached to it on a strap.

It was a key for a pin-tumbler lock. The notches of the key were in a complex elliptical shape that would be difficult to reproduce.

'She didn't leave through the window?'

'No, the window was also locked from the inside.'

Makoto rejected Gotou's idea.

'On top of that, even if she did go to the veranda through the window, this is the ninth floor. It is not a height she could have jumped from. I checked earlier, but it also is not connected to the neighbouring veranda,' Kamiyama explained in a much more detective-like manner than Ishii.

Then there had to be another possibility. It was absolutely impossible for someone to disappear.

'Couldn't somebody have taken that woman out of the room while you were riding the elevator?'

'It was at most thirty seconds from when we lost contact with Asami-san to when we arrived in front of this room. Detective Gotou, I think you should understand better than us that that wouldn't be enough time for someone to take somebody who was resisting out of the room and leave without our discovering them,' Kamiyama replied disinterestedly.

The man himself probably didn't mean it that way, but that just sounded sarcastic to Gotou.

'I know that. I'm just going through all the possibilities. Speaking of possibilities, you're the most

suspicious. Most exorcists are frauds, right?'

'That is true.'

Gotou had been unprepared for Kamiyama's unexpected answer.

'Y-you...'

'Just as you say, Detective Gotou, there really are many exorcists who are frauds. In particular, those who are affiliated with religions are suspicious.'

'Why?'

Gotou felt it was the other way around.

'Since in Buddhism and Christianity, it is not believed that the spirits of the dead wander.'

Going off and denying himself.

'Then what about you?'

'I am not affiliated with any religion. However, as an exorcist, I may be a fraud in a sense.'

'What?'

'My method of exorcism is very different from that of other exorcists.'

'Shouldn't everyone be the same?'

'No. I don't know if you will believe me, but I do not exorcise spirits through using charms or chanting spells.'

'Then how do you exorcise them?'

'I have the ability to see spirits. I speak to them and remove their reason for staying where they are. To put it simply, I persuade them.'

'W-what...'

Gotou lost his words.

He had heard what Kamiyama said many times before. His theory was exactly the same as Yakumo's.

At that moment, the lights suddenly went out and the room was blanketed in darkness.

'Eek.'

Ishii's shriek went through the room.

What? What happened –

Something suddenly leapt into Gotou's vision in his confusion.

A woman with long hair –

The left half of her face was covered in blood.

In the dim light, only that woman appeared faintly luminescent.

– Die.

Her cracked voice reverberated.

'You...'

After Gotou said that, the lights went on again.

He closed his eyes for a moment because it was bright, and when he opened his eyes again, the woman was gone.

Where? Where did she go?

She had been standing near the window that went to the veranda. Gotou opened the window and rushed out to the veranda.

However, there was no sign that anybody had been there.

'There is no point following her. She has no body,' Kamiyama said expressionlessly. He did not seem puzzled at all.

Did someone really disappear from a grudge, just as Kamiyama said?

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第二章

02
FILE

file 02: curse

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'Old man, you here?'

Gotou opened the door by force.

He found the person he was looking for right away. He was sipping tea at his desk by the wall in the room of about four and a half tatami in size.

He was Hata Hideyoshi, the perverted old man whose job as a coroner was his hobby.

Once Hata looked at Gotou's face, he let out an ostentatious sigh.

Gotou was surrounded by guys like this. Wasn't there anyone who was more honest and serious?

Ishii's face showed up in Gotou's grumbling mind. He was no good. Though he was serious, there was a problem with his level of it.

After shaking his head, Gotou sat on the round chair opposite Hata.

'What do you need from me this early in the morning? I don't have the time to babysit you,' said Hata, a frown on his wrinkled face.

This guy was annoying. Gotou didn't have the time to drink tea with a demon either.

'There's something I want you to look into.'

'If it's an investigation, make a request through the proper channels. Last time I went in on my own, yes? I got quite a talking to for that.'

Hata let out a high-pitched giggle that didn't sound human at all.

We don't have the time to be laughing. It's really creepy, so could you stop, you demonic old man –

'But I came all this way because it isn't a request that I could make through the proper channels.'

'You like picking up trouble too, don't you?'

Of course he didn't pick up trouble because he wanted to.

Restraining his irritation, Gotou put a plastic bag with the mobile phone inside on Hata's desk. It was their only clue right now.

The blood-stained mobile phone that had been left in Asami's room.

'What's this?'

'A mobile phone.'

'I can tell that by looking. I'm asking what the details behind it are. You really are an idiot.'

This old man just went and said whatever he liked. Gotou was at the point where he wanted to break his neck, but he didn't have the time for that now.

'Yesterday, a woman living in an apartment suddenly disappeared.'

'A disappearance? Then why don't you just investigate it normally?'

'It's a bit of a messy situation.'

'Messy?'

'Yeah. Seems like Ishii had been at the scene too. That woman had been talking on that mobile until right before they got to the room, but the door was locked.'

'Meaning...'

'It was a locked room.'

If he told someone else that somebody had disappeared from a locked room, they'd probably laugh at him, but this old man – just him – was different.

This subject made Hata's eyes sparkle like a child's.

'Oh! Then this mobile phone was left at the scene. That is interesting.'

'Don't get so happy, old man. It's indiscreet.'

'But isn't it interesting? I rarely see things like this.'

Hata let out another high-pitched giggle.

'I don't know anything for sure yet. It could easily be somebody's trick.'

'But Ishii-kun was at the scene as well, yes? If it were a trick, Ishii would probably have noticed.'

'That fool's like a decoration. He wouldn't notice even if a murder happened right in front of his eyes.'

Gotou felt exhausted thinking about that scared face Ishii had.

If Ishii were more reliable, he might have heard a different story, but since he was a fool, he only got information from the reporter Makoto and the exorcist Kamiyama.

He couldn't know if the information had been distorted.

Gotou remembered the spiritual phenomenon he'd experienced in that room, but he decided not to mention it.

Inconsistent with his occupation, Hata showed an extreme interest in the occult. It might have given him a strange perspective.

'So what is Ishii-kun doing today?'

'I made him wait outside. We have to move on to the next place fast.'

'I see. I just have to analyse the blood on this mobile phone.'

'Exactly. This'll be wrapped up quickly if it isn't human blood.'

Hata picked up the plastic bag and looked at it with fish eyes. It felt like he'd stick out a long tongue and eat it if Gotou looked away.

'Well, anyway, that's all I ask,' Gotou said finally, and he left the room. Now, after the demonic old man was the monster cat.

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'I'm coming in.'

Gotou opened the door to the <Movie Research Circle>.

Yakumo was sleeping curled up in a corner of the room. He really was like a cat.

'Oi, wake up!' said Gotou, sitting down and clapping his hands.

Yakumo stirred restlessly. Just his right eye opened to look up at Gotou, but then he closed his eye again right after.

'Oi!'

'Gotou-san, just by waking me up you've ruined my entire day,' said Yakumo, still curled up.

Honestly, was this guy like this right after he woke up too?

'I don't care – just wake up!' urged Gotou, repressing his anger.

However, it still didn't seem like Yakumo was going to get up.

'That's enough.'

'I'm still sleepy. You have something to say, correct? Please go ahead – I'll listen like this.'

Gotou raised a fist, ready to punch him, but he stopped himself. A hole would open up in his stomach if he tried to deal with Yakumo fair and square.

Well, fine. Yakumo and old man Hata were essentially the same. If he talked a bit about the case, Yakumo should eat it up like a fish caught by bait.

'Hey, Yakumo. There are some mysterious things in this world.'

'What are you babbling about?'

'Last night, somebody disappeared from a locked room in an apartment.'

'I thought that you had grown a bit, but I was too naive.'

'That wasn't a joke. Somebody really disappeared. There were witnesses too. On top of that, it seems like a ghost made her disappear...'

Yakumo arched up like a zombie.

The monster cat was coming for the bait.

In a better mood, Gotou explained what happened last night in detail, including Kamiyama, the exorcist.

After Gotou finished talking, Yakumo sat down on the chair opposite him, still in a T-shirt and a jersey, while running a hand through his bedhead.

His left eye was naked so his red eye was exposed.

It was really a good thing he hadn't brought Ishii. He would've made a huge fuss again.

'What do you think?' Gotou asked Yakumo, who was rubbing at his eyes like a cat washing its face.

'I've never seen anything like that, at the very least.'

'It's the first time for me as well.'

To be honest, Gotou still didn't believe it.

The suspicious that he was being tricked hadn't gone away.

'Under my reasoning, it is impossible for spirits of the dead to make somebody living disappear.'

'Ghosts are clusters of human emotions and have no physical influence...' said Gotou, remembering what Yakumo often said.

'Yes, but that reasoning of mine has not be proven scientifically. To put it simply, it is only my guess,' Yakumo said with a bitter smile.

'So are you saying it's possible for a ghost to make somebody living disappear?'

'I did not go that far, but it would be wrong to think that what one does not believe does not exist. Even I would change my way of thinking if I were shown definite proof.'

'I see.'

There were many things about ghosts that hadn't been explained yet. Since they could only infer from experiences, it meant there were countless possibilities.

'Well, putting aside whether the phenomenon truly happened, I have met that exorcist before.'

'W-w-what did you say?'

'Please don't speak so loudly in the morning,' Yakumo said, plugging his ears.

'When and where did you meet?'

'Yesterday, when I was investigating the apartment where the ghost I mentioned had appeared.'

'So what do you think? Do you really see him as an exorcist?'

'I don't know. Even if he says he can see ghosts, that is a problem of subjectivity since nobody can completely turn into him.'

'How appropriate.'

'However, it is a fact that there was a spirit where he said there was one,' said Yakumo, his brow furrowed. No matter what he said, it seemed like he was concerned. Well, for Yakumo, it'd be weirder if he weren't.

'Which would mean he's the same as you.'

'That would be the case,' said Yakumo disinterestedly. He let out a huge yawn.

'This isn't the time to yawn carelessly.'

'Why not?'

'Well, there's a guy with the same power as you!'

'And?'

“And”, you say...'

Unlike Gotou, who was agitated, Yakumo sighed, as if to say 'Honestly'.

'I mentioned this before, but being able to see the spirits of the dead is just part of my disposition. It is only a little rare. It wouldn't be strange if there were other people with the same disposition.'

Now that Yakumo mentioned it, it was just as he said.

It wasn't like it was certain that Yakumo was the only person in this world who could see the spirits of the dead. Actually, Gotou knew another.

A man with two red eyes. A man who called himself Yakumo's father.

Though it was true that there were many exorcists who were suspicious, Gotou couldn't assert that they were all frauds.

'What do you want to do then, Gotou-san?' Yakumo asked while stretching.

'What do I want to do? I want to find out why somebody disappeared.'

Seeing Yakumo's attitude, it made how agitated he had been earlier seem stupid.

'Then just speaking here is pointless. At any rate, the place where –'

'We're going,' Gotou interrupted.

'That will be one favour.'

Honestly, this guy was only reliable for that.

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3

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Ishii was sitting on the white bench right inside the school gates of Meisei University.

He was waiting for Gotou, who had gone to see Yakumo.

The truth was he should have gone with him. However, Ishii didn't know how to deal with Yakumo. No, 'didn't know how to deal with' wasn't the right phrase. To be honest, he was scared of him. He didn't want to have anything to do with him if possible.

However, they definitely needed Yakumo's help for this case.

The event from last night replayed in his head.

No matter how many times he simulated it, he didn't find anything unnatural.

Somebody disappeared from a locked room in front of everyone. He remembered a horror movie he had watched before. A vengeful ghost dragging person after person into the dark. How terrible. He could be next.

Ishii felt something run past him.

'Ah, could it be Ishii-san?'

Haruka stood in front of Ishii, who had turned around at the voice.

'H-H-Haruka-chan.'

'It's been a while.'

Haruka bowed her head with a smile.

She matched her denim miniskirt with a pink camisole. It was a summery and refreshing outfit.

Ishii was captivated by the nape of her neck, which shimmered with a faint layer of sweat.

'What is it?'

'No, it's nothing.'

His face red, Ishii hurriedly turned his gaze to his feet.

'Why are you here today?' Haruka said, sitting across from Ishii. Ishii's neck snapped around in his nervousness.

A refreshing citrus aroma tickled his nose.

'Ah, I, um, Detective Gotou asked, that Yakumo-shi, er...'

'There was some incident then. So he went to see Yakumo-kun.'

Haruka leant forward a bit and looked at Ishii's face.

Ah, that wasn't good. Haruka-chan. She was too defenceless. With that posture, he would be able to see her undergarments.

'Yes, well. That's right.'

Ishii, who didn't know where to look, pointlessly looked up at the sky.

'Aren't you going to go, Ishii-san?'

It hurt to have her say that.

'Er, I, um...'

'Could it be that you're afraid of Yakumo-kun?'

'No, er...'

He was lost for words since she had hit the bull's-eye.

'Could it be that you really are afraid?' said Haruka, like she thought it was unexpected.

It wasn't really unexpected. It would be stranger if Ishii could connect to him normally.

'Haruka-chan, er, aren't you afraid?'

'Of Yakumo-kun?'

'Yes.'

Haruka stared afar, like she was thinking about something.

If Ishii had to say, her young face, for that moment, looked like an adult's.

'Nope. I've never felt afraid of him.'

'I-is that so?'

'Though there've been many times I thought he would hit me,' Haruka said, raising her right hand in a fist to imitate him.

Just as I thought, Yakumo habitually torments Haruka-chan. That's –

'That's unforgiveable. I will defeat your enemy, Haruka-chan,' said Ishii, standing up in his irritation.

For a second, Haruka looked blank, and then she suddenly covered her mouth and started laughing.

'Ishii-san, you're interesting.'

Ishii didn't understand what was interesting.

'Interesting, is it?'

'Sorry. It's rude to say something like that.'

'No, not at all. That's not what I...'

The atmosphere had become somewhat awkward.

He really didn't understand women's thoughts. Ishii's shoulders drooped like he had withered and he sat back down on the bench.

'Ishii-san, I think that you've definitely misunderstood Yakumo-kun.'

Haruka suddenly started speaking. Though she was smiling, the tone of her voice was firm and serious.

'Misunderstood... him?'

'Yes. Because of that ability, Yakumo-kun has suffered in a way we could never understand, and that has made him like a misanthrope.'

'Eh.'

Ishii had felt that too.

In front of Yakumo, there was a wall that stopped other people from getting near him. Without showing his heart to anyone, he observed others from the outside.

'But... for this reason, he's straightforward and can be very kind.'

Kind? Him?

It was difficult for Ishii to believe what Haruka was saying when he still doubted whether Yakumo even had feelings.

Rather, Haruka was much kinder for defending him even though he treated him that way.

'Is that how it is?'

'But since he isn't honest, he behaved that way. When you become used to it, unexpectedly, he has his cute points.'

Haruka smiled happily.

Ishii didn't understand even one millimetre of Yakumo's cuteness, but at least he understood very well how cute Haruka's smiling face was.

'What are you grinning about? It's creepy.'

Gotou's fist came down on Ishii's crown in his happiness.

'D-Detective Gotou.'

Ishii stood up instinctively.

Yakumo was behind Gotou as well. He had sleepy eyes as usual, and Ishii couldn't understand what he was thinking at all.

No matter what Haruka said about his being kind, Yakumo was a mystery to Ishii.

'Gotou-san, it's been a while.'

Haruka stood up and bowed her head.

'Oh, it's Haruka-chan. So that's why Ishii was grinning.'

'No, I wasn't really...'

Ishii made an excuse, but he shut up at Gotou's glare.

'Did you bring trouble for Yakumo-kun again?'

Haruka said that sulkily and with a pout.

That expression was cute too. Ishii couldn't help but grin a little again.

'You can't really talk about other people.'

'Please don't put me together with you, since I have no trouble this time.'

Haruka puffed her chest in pride.

'Ah, that so?'

Gotou snorted and then let his cigarette.

'Ah, Gotou-san. Smoking is forbidden on the school premises.'

'You're too fussy. You're becoming more and more like Yakumo. You won't be able to become a bride.'

Gotou left that sharp parting remark and walked away briskly. Yakumo sighed and then followed him.

'Ah, wait, Yakumo-kun. Are you going to go?'

'Yeah.'

Yakumo replied flatly to Haruka's question.

'About what you requested...'

'How was it?'

'It was just as you expected, Yakumo-kun.'

Haruka gave a proud thumbs up.

Yakumo looked like he was thinking for a while, but he finally raised an eyebrow like he had thought of something.

'There's something else I'd like you to look into.'

After walking over to Haruka, Yakumo brought his face close to hers and talked to her quietly.

What on earth was he saying? Ishii indirectly approached them and strained his ears.

'Eh, that's impossible.'

When the explanation was finished, Haruka objected loudly, but Yakumo continued talking like he didn't care.

'The address is in the documents in my room, so pick it up from there.'

'Like I said, it's impossible for me.'

'Don't think about it too hard. You just have to go take a look.'

'But what will I do if I get caught?'

'You can just say sorry and run away.'

'That's...'

Yakumo ignored Haruka's anxious expression and clapped a hand lightly on her shoulder, saying, 'I'm counting on you,' and then he walked after Gotou.

– What on earth did he ask her to do?

Ishii wanted to know. Led by that impulse, Ishii tried to call out to Haruka.

'Ishii! We're going!'

Gotou's angry voice echoed from far away.

Ishii wasn't sure which to prioritise, but he didn't have enough courage to speak to Haruka so he followed Gotou's instruction and started running.

He fell –

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4

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In order to change her mood, Makoto put aside her work and went to the lavatory.

Though there was a mountain of things she had to do, like checking manuscripts, the event from last night kept replaying in her head so she couldn't concentrate.

She sighed, looking at her reflection in the mirror about the sink.

Where did Asami go –

If somebody abducted her, how did they take Asami out of the locked room?

Did she really get taken away by a ghost like Kamiyama said?

She didn't understand anything.

She wanted to find Asami as quickly as she could, but right now all she could do was entrust the investigation to Gotou and Ishii.

She was irritated at herself for not being able to do anything during her friend's crisis.

After sighing countless times, something suddenly passed behind her.

A chill went down her spine.

It wasn't as if she had seen it clearly, but she had felt it.

Makoto stopped breathing and timidly turned around, but there was nobody there. She had merely been mistaken.

Her nerves might have been oversensitive.

Makoto let out her breath and looked at the mirror again when her mobile phone rang. Though the number was withheld, Makoto hurriedly answered, thinking, 'Could it be?'

'Hello.'

She heard a noise that sounded like rain from the receiver.

'Hello. Asami?'

Makoto called out, but there was no reply.

However, she felt someone on the other end.

'Hey, who is this? Respond...'

Makoto called out again, but she was interrupted by a groan from the receiver.

She couldn't tell whether the voice belonged to a man or a woman.

An ominous voice that sounded like it was struggling with pain –

'...Who is this?'

Though she was shaking in a strange terror, Makoto called out towards the phone.

<Diiiiieeeeeee.>

The hoarse voice jolted her eardrums.

She could clearly tell this time. That was a woman's voice.

Makoto threw her mobile phone in her surplus of emotions. It fell onto the tiled floor.

Her heart was beating so furiously it felt like it would burst out of her chest, and she was covered in a cold sweat.

Makoto crouched. Though she wanted to run away, she couldn't move for a while.

How much time had passed? Her mobile phone was ringing again.

A paralysing fear ran through her body.

Makoto timidly took her mobile phone from the floor. The number displayed on the monitor was that of the exorcist Kamiyama.

– He might have found something out.

Makoto wiped away her cold sweat and answered the phone.

'Hello?'

<My name is Kamiyama. Do you mind my calling your mobile phone, Makoto-san?>

She could hear Kamiyama's characteristic calm voice.

'Not at all.'

A request –

'For me?'

<Yes. You mentioned that the first time there was a spiritual phenomenon, it was at a bar.>

'Yes, that's correct.'

<Would it be possible to gather the members who had been at the scene then?>

Since she had exchanged email addresses with Shinichi then, she would be able to contact him. She could just have him talk to Yuuya.

'I think it'd be fine.'

<If we solve the mystery of the spiritual phenomenon, we will be able to save Asami-san.>

Kamiyama's voice was filled with confidence.

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5

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Gotou looked up at the apartment Asami had disappeared from with a cigarette in his mouth.

Since something like that had happened, to him, it looked like there was a heavy atmosphere hanging over only the building and its surroundings.

Next to him, Yakumo was looking up at the apartment in the same way.

There was no way for Gotou to know if anything was reflected in those eyes, which were narrowed like they were looking at something bright.

'You see anything?'

'The sky and the clouds,' Yakumo replied bluntly.

'I know that even without you telling me.'

'Then please don't ask.'

As usual, only his mouth was skilful. He had completely sidestepped the point of his question.

Gotou clicked his tongue and turned around to see that Ishii already had tears in his eyes from fright.

Honestly, what a useless guy. There was no way for a person to disappear anyway.

'So this really isn't some sort of prank?'

Gotou looked to Yakumo for agreement.

'If that were the case, Makoto-san, the reporter, and Ishii-san as well would be complicit.'

It was just as Yakumo said. Ishii and Makoto had been there. At the present stage, that was what it would mean.

Putting Makoto aside, Ishii isn't the sort of guy who'd do that. But –

'The medium might've planned it.'

'At this point, he does not have a motive.'

'Well there's that. Obviously he'd get some money with fraudulent exorcism.'

Gotou said the first thing that came to mind.

'It would have been different if he had saved her in the nick of time, but currently he would become the exorcist who failed to exorcise the spirit and let a woman be taken away by a vengeful spirit.'

It really was just as Yakumo said.

It would be unnatural to bring about his own failure on purpose. The best method would have been to save Asami just as she was about to be taken away, if he had wanted to trick them.

'The location is nearby,' Yakumo muttered.

'The location?'

'Yes. The apartment with Rika-san's ghost is nearby.'

'You saying there's a connection?'

'I don't know. I just said that it was nearby.'

'You're quibbling...'

'Incidentally, Ishii-san, that exorcist came to this apartment before Asami-san disappeared, yes?'

Yakumo ignored Gotou's objection and turned the conversation to Ishii.

'Ah, yes. He mentioned that. He came by that evening, but he thought it was a wandering spirit since there was nothing there...'

Ishii responded stiffly, as if he were talking to the chief of the police or something.

What was he getting so nervous for talking to a university student? He should hurry up and get used to him. Gotou restrained his feelings of wanting to hit Ishii.

'Perhaps he reached the same conclusion as I did,' said Yakumo, narrowing his eyes a little.

The same conclusion –

'What do you mean?'

'There is no spirit here.'

Yakumo gave a firm response to Gotou's question.

'Then you're saying that exorcist called Kamiyama is the real deal?'

'Why are you so hasty in jumping to conclusions?' Yakumo complained, and then he stood in front of the automatic door with the auto-lock.

'If you'd just let me say –'

Gotou was riled up, but Yakumo was not concerned at all.

'Please hurry and open the door,' Yakumo said with a yawn.

Gotou opened the door with the key he had borrowed from management the night before and took the elevator right by the entrance.

Yakumo and Ishii followed after him.

They went up to the ninth floor silently and went along the long and narrow corridor to stand in front of Asami's room.

'I'm opening the door,' Gotou said, and he opened the door.

Hot air rushed out from the room at his face, but he took off his shoes at the entrance and stepped inside the room.

Yakumo, who came into the room afterwards, walked about the room while running a hand through his messy hair.

Gotou sat cross-legged in the centre of the room and followed Yakumo's movements with his eyes.

A square space of eight tatami in size. There was a bed, a sideboard and a television on the wooden floor – a normal room that could be found anywhere.

Since it was rented, it didn't seem like there would be any secret passageways.

'Nothing stands out.'

Yakumo gave up after a while and sat with his legs stretched out across from Gotou.

'No good?'

'It's no good.'

Yakumo's brow was furrowed, and he ran his hand through his hair in his irritation.

'Damn, what's happening...'

'That's right. Ishii-san.'

Yakumo turned around and called out, cutting short Gotou's grumbling.

Gotou turned to look for Ishii too, but he wasn't there.

'But he was here just a moment ago.'

Yakumo cocked his head in curiosity. That guy probably left the room in his terror.

'Oi! Ishii!' yelled Gotou towards the entrance. At the same time, there was the sound of footsteps on the floor, and then Ishii peeked in.

'W-were you calling me?'

'Don't say "Were you calling me?", you fool!'

'Y-yes sir.'

Ishii straightened his spine so he was standing still and straight.

After shaking his head like he didn't know what to do with the two of them, he said, 'When you came into this room, Ishii-san, the door was locked, correct?'

'Y-yes. The door to the entrance and the window connected to the veranda were all locked.'

'And the door chain?'

'It wasn't on.'

'Did you find Asami's key?'

'Yes. It was on the table...'

'Nobody left the room.'

'That's correct. At that time, there were three people in the room, just like now. I think it would have been difficult for somebody to leave the room without our noticing.'

Perhaps Yakumo might have thought that somebody had been hiding in the room and then escaped afterwards, but it was impossible in that situation.

It really was a locked room.

Yakumo put his finger to his brow. The expression in his eyes changed.

'So it really is like that... but then she... am I wrong...'

He kept murmuring to himself.

'Did you realise something?'

'No, not at all.'

Yakumo shrugged dramatically at Gotou's question.

'Don't lie! Didn't you just say "So it really is like that"?''

Though Gotou drew closer to him, Yakumo didn't move. He put his fingers in his ears to complain about the noise.

'You'll annoy the neighbours.'

'It's your fault for not talking properly.'

'I have no proof.'

'Just tell me the theory.'

'What came to my mind is only a possibility. If we head forward recklessly, we will be misled like with the last case.'

Gotou couldn't deny that.

There was nothing more dangerous for a case than having preconceptions. If they didn't look at all the possibilities, the carpet could be pulled out from underneath them.

But –

'What are you planning to do?'

'There isn't anything to do but continue to straightforwardly investigate all areas, is there?' Yakumo said with a yawn.

Well, it wouldn't be as convenient as solving the case just from seeing the apartment. He wasn't that discouraged, but he was still heavy-hearted.

'No going about it – I'll reconsider everyone involved. Yakumo, you help too.'

'I would rather not.'

An immediate reply. Even if he was going to refuse, there had to be a better way to put it.

'Aren't you curious?'

'I am curious, but I'm busy.'

'Busy? All you do is sleep,' Gotou complained, a cigarette in his mouth.

'Honestly, have you already forgotten?'

Yakumo took the cigarette in Gotou's mouth and handed it to Ishii.

'Forgotten what?'

'I have another case.'

That's right –

The ghost of Sawaguchi Rika, who had committed suicide. Though Gotou hadn't been the one to make the request, he couldn't say he was unrelated.

Damn. This was really becoming troublesome.

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6

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'Honestly, he just does whatever he wants.'

Haruka walked down the road by the railroad as she looked at a memo.

Though she was half-hearted, she was following Yakumo's instructions and going to meet the father of the woman called Sawaguchi Rika, who had committed suicide.

A train roared past, bringing a wave of hot air with it.

Yakumo had asked her to go talk to him while pretending to be a friend, but would she be able to do it well? She wasn't proud of it, but she wasn't the type of person who could adlib.

While dissatisfied at Yakumo, Haruka reached the place she was aiming for.

An old two-storey apartment made of wood. Sawaguchi Rika's father lived in the corner room on the first floor.

Haruka kept looking back at the memo to make sure she hadn't gotten the address wrong.

There'd be no problem if she acted naturally. She was just going to ask him a few questions.

Plus, she always caused trouble for Yakumo, so she should help out every once in a while.

'OK!'

Haruka gathered her determination and pressed the buzzer at the entrance with a trembling finger.

After waiting for a while, the door opened, and an old man with white stubble appeared.

He had an extremely stubborn-looking face and there were deep wrinkles on his forehead.

'U-um, is this Sawaguchi-san's home?'

He nodded without saying anything.

'Ah, h-hello. My name is Ozawa Haruka. I was Rika-san's friend. I was in the area so I wanted to put out incense for her....'

He stared at Haruka with a sharp gaze, and Haruka's words fizzled out under that pressure.

– Yakumo, this is really bad.

Haruka restrained the impulse to run away deep into her heart.

After looking at Haruka like he was evaluating her, he clicked his tongue.

She really had been found out. The feeling of wanting to give up spread through Haruka.

However, he kept the door open and turned away from Haruka to walk inside.

Did that mean he wanted her to come in?

'You're putting out incense, right?'

While Haruka was hesitating, she heard his voice from the back of the room.

'Please excuse me. I'm coming in.'

Haruka went into the entrance after bowing, passed through the corridor and stepped into the tatami room at the back.

The room was six tatami in size with a Buddhist altar in it.

There were two tablets. One was Rika's. The other was Rika's dead mother's.

There were white chrysanthemum flowers and manjuu¹ at the altar. It was well maintained.

Haruka felt bad for lying but she knelt in front of the altar.

There was a photo of a smiling woman.

She's Sawaguchi Rika –

She had a smart and firm look, a cheerful and bright woman. That was the impression Haruka got.

When the photo had been taken, the woman probably had no idea what the future had in store for her.

That collapsed for her in an instant.

When Haruka thought about that, it made it hard to breath.

'What did you really come here to do?'

He said that while sitting cross-legged to Haruka, who had finished placing the incense and praying.

'Eh?'

Haruka couldn't find the words to reply in her surprise. She really couldn't do adlib.

'You're not Rika's friend, right?'

'Why... do you think that?'

'You're too young to be her friend. If she were alive, she'd already be twenty-seven.'

Now that he mentioned it, it was true. Haruka looked for an excuse, but she couldn't find one. Plus, she had a question. If he knew she wasn't a friend –

'Why...'

Why did he let Haruka into his home?

Haruka spoke, though she thought she would be crushed by her anxiety.

'You're too nervous. I felt like Rika told me to let you in.'

His eyes narrowed and a sad expression appeared on his face.

She wasn't sure if he would believe her, but she couldn't lie to him. Haruka prepared herself to tell the truth.

'I am not acquainted with Rika-san. I'm really sorry for lying.'

She thought he would be angry, but she was wrong.

1 Manjuu (まんじゅう or 饅頭) are steamed buns with fillings.

He looked at Haruka's eyes silently. It seemed like he was waiting for her to continue.

Haruka took a deep breath and then started explaining the events that had brought her here.

Rika-san's ghost was still wandering at the apartment.

If possible, she wanted to set her free, but she needed to find out why she died in order to do that.

She wanted him to tell her what he knew – anything was fine. If she had left anything behind, she wanted him to show her.

She didn't think she explained it well like Yakumo, but she did the best she could.

'That's ridiculous.'

When Haruka finished her explanation, he spat that out.

As she expected, it was no good.

Her feelings sank like she had fallen into a bottomless swamp –

'I had an older twin sister.'

Those words spilled out of Haruka's mouth unconsciously.

Haruka herself didn't understand why she had suddenly started talking about this. Though she felt doubtful, she couldn't stop.

'But she died in an accident... I thought my sister might have resented me, so I've always been suffering. But recently, I finally found out my sister's true feelings. You might wonder what this has to do anything. But even though the dead won't come back, don't you want to know the feelings the left behind?'

His lips were in a thin line and he didn't reply.

'Perhaps your daughter – Rika-san – didn't commit suicide.'

Haruka said the last bit like she was clearing out something that had been caught in her chest.

At first, she had been an outsider who was cooperating with Yakumo's request, but at some point, she had empathised with Rika and really hoped that they would find out the truth.

'I want to know the truth, but how would someone like you that I don't know anything about find out what I couldn't for five years?'

'I can't guarantee it.'

He snorted at Haruka's reply like he had been made a fool of.

'Why are you doing something like this in the first place when it won't do you any good?'

Haruka couldn't reply. There would be no point in saying something hypocritical like 'I want to save her' even if those were her true feelings.

'This is pointless,' he said, refusing her bluntly, and stood up to leave the room.

My explanation really was no good –

It'd be fine if it was just her who was depressed, but she might have hurt him.

Haruka bit her lips to keep in the feelings building up inside her.

'Oi.'

She looked up at the voice to see him standing there, when he had just left. He had a notebook with a red cover in his hand.

'Take it,' he said curtly, and he held the notebook out towards Haruka.

Haruka accepted it, though she didn't understand what was going on.

'What is this?'

'Rika's diary.'

'Why are you giving me something so important?'

'I still don't believe that Rika killed herself. Something horrible did happen to her, but Rika reported it to the police and was trying to get past it. Rika was so stout-hearted. She wouldn't...'

His eyes were red, and he covered his face as he rubbed at his nose.

His feelings pierced through Haruka's chest.

'I still think that Rika was killed – she didn't kill herself, though the police didn't believe me. Rika was a strong daughter. You're the first person who's told me that Rika didn't kill herself. That's why...'

His hoarse voice trailed off.

However, she understood even without hearing it. That's why he was giving the diary to Haruka.

He had probably tried countless times to find out the truth behind the incident.

But he couldn't do it. He still hadn't given up now, after five years.

She was somebody he'd just met who might not know anything, but he saw a slight hope there.

'Please allow me to borrow this.'

Haruka stood up, bowed her head deeply and left the room.

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7

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After splitting up with Yakumo, Gotou first called Hata.

He wanted to know the results of the mobile phone's bloodstain analysis.

<I thought you'd be contacting me soon. Since you're impatient.>

After answering the call, Hata let out a strange giggle.

That was creepy. Demonic old man.

'So how was it?'

<That was genuine human blood.>

'W-what did you say...'

For Gotou, who had been hoping somewhere in his heart that the disappearance of the woman called Asami had been a prank, those were analysis results that denied it.

<Blood type O. Is that the same as the woman who disappeared?>

'Yeah.'

He felt dizzy as he replied.

<Though it'll take some time, should I do a DNA test?>

'Yeah, thanks,' Gotou said weakly, and he hung up the phone.

'Oi, Ishii. What do you think?'

Even though Gotou thought there was no point, he asked that question to Ishii in the driver's seat.

Like he had been waiting for that, Ishii's face lit up like a puppy's before it got a treat.

'I think that she was whisked off to the spirit world by the vengeful ghost's strong spiritual power.'

'Hah?'

'The spirit world. Where people who have died go. The world after death.'

'You know.'

'In the past, there have been people who have gone to the spirit world temporarily while they were living. The gate that connects this world and that world is distorted somehow...'

What the hell is the spirit world? He should say something more convincing.

So, what to do now –

Gotou mulled over his thoughts while lighting his cigarette.

The beginning of this case was a get-together at a bar. Maybe he'd gather the members that had been there and talk to them.

Gotou called Makoto's mobile phone the moment that came to his mind.

<Hello, this is Hijikata.>

After a few rings, Makoto answered the phone.

'It's Gotou. You free now?'

<Actually, I was just thinking of calling you, Detective Gotou.>

Makoto's tone was hurried.

If she was thinking of contacting me herself –

'Did something happen?'

<Kamiyama-san just called me, actually.>

'That exorcist?'

Gotou thought of the exorcist, black from head to toe.

Was he really the real thing? Gotou hadn't arrived at that answer yet.

<Yes. He asked me to gather all the related parties in order to investigate the spiritual phenomenon.>

He can't be thinking of doing the same thing –

'So what are you going to do?'

<I have contacted them to arrange a good time. If possible, Detective Gotou, I would appreciate it if you came as well...>

He had planned on going even if she hadn't asked.

'Time and place?'

<It has been decided that we will meet at eight this evening in the bar. I will email you the address afterwards.>

'Thanks.'

Gotou spat out his cigarette and hung up.

If Kamiyama was there too, he had to call Yakumo again to have him check the situation.

Gotou called Yakumo's number from his mobile.

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8

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Haruka tottered along while looking at her fingernails.

Though she'd gotten a big lead, that didn't mean she was in high spirits.

Can we really find out the reason why Rika's ghost is still wandering?

This diary is too heavy for me –

'You'll fall if you walk like that.'

Haruka stopped at the voice.

She didn't need to check. That voice and that tone – it was Yakumo. Yakumo stood in front of Haruka. She hadn't noticed his arrival.

'Are you already done with what Gotou-san asked?'

'I thought it'd be dangerous with you by yourself. I came to check on you.'

Yakumo yawned.

'That so.'

'Well, with you looking like that, it seems like you were turned away.'

With a bitter smile, Yakumo ran his fingers through his messy hair.

She would normally get angry, but she didn't feel like it right now.

Haruka handed the diary to Yakumo silently.

'What's this?'

Yakumo was surprised – a first.

'Rika-san's diary.'

'I see...!' Yakumo murmured as he took the diary.

The face of Rika's father came up in Haruka's head.

He still hadn't accepted his daughter's death after five years.

Following that image, her mother's crying face on the day of her twin sister's death came up.

'Rika-san's father said his daughter didn't commit suicide... but nobody believed him...'

'Does he have any basis for saying that it isn't a suicide?' Yakumo said disinterestedly.

Haruka felt incredibly angry. It wasn't about basis or proof.

'That's not it!' she yelled, forgetting that she was at the side of a road.

'Rika-san's father has been suffering by himself for so long... so...'

Haruka didn't even know what she wanted to say herself.

Yakumo said something, but it was drowned out by the roar of the passing train and didn't reach Haruka's ears.

'I...'

Tears fell from Haruka's ears.

Why was she crying? She didn't know. She didn't know, but she couldn't clear away the tight feeling in her chest or the feeling that a hole had opened up inside of her.

'My bad.'

Yakumo said that gently, completely different from how he usually spoke. He drew Haruka close so her head rested against his chest.

Her legs shook at the unexpected action.

'Yakumo-kun...'

'I gave you a tough time.'

She heard Yakumo's voice close to her ear.

Though he normally wasn't honest at all, the warmth of this contrary person slowly spread to her very core.

Haruka surrendered herself to that warmth and cried with all her heart.

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9

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Ishii parked his car in a coin-operated parking space.

He saw the entrance to Bar <Snake>, where the incident had begun, about ten metres ahead of him.

The neon sign with its red letters and black snake design gave an uncanny glow.

Gotou, in the passenger seat, tried to contact Yakumo countless times, but it seemed that he hadn't been able to reach him.

Even though Ishii didn't know how to deal with Yakumo, he had hoped that he would be with them this time. While he was a mystery to him, even Ishii understood that Yakumo's insight and ability to see the spirits of the dead were indispensable to solving this case.

'That guy, running off at the crucial moment... well, fine. We're going,' Gotou said, glancing at his wristwatch.

'Er... do I really have to go?'

'Of course you do, idiot.'

Gotou's fist came down on Ishii's head.

Of course I do –

'Don't dawdle.'

Gotou got off the car with a cigarette in his mouth.

'Y-yes sir.'

Ishii followed after him immediately.

There was nothing he could do this time. He would just be a hindrance. He had to be useful, even if just a little bit.

Ishii had gathered his emotions and started walking, but with timing like a surprise attack, something hit his shoulder from behind.

'Aaagh!'

He shrieked in his surprise.

When he turned around, he saw Kamiyama standing there.

When he stood in the dim lighting with his black suit, it was uncanny how only his chiselled features stood out.

'So you came as well, detectives.'

'Ah, well...'

Before Ishii could finish his vague reply, Gotou cut in.

'We're keeping watch to make sure you don't pull any tricks,' Gotou threatened, glaring at Kamiyama.

However, Kamiyama just accepted it with a smile.

'I won't pull any tricks. I don't have any expensive items to sell either.'

Just as he said, Kamiyama's hands were empty.

Conversely, that made Ishii anxious.

'What's your reason for sticking your neck in if you're not selling stuff?' Gotou asked, lighting his cigarette.

'At the first stage, I misunderstood the situation. Because of that, this is what the situation has become. Since I feel responsible, I would like to solve this case if I can. That's all.'

'I hope that's the truth.'

Gotou said that and then briskly went down the stairs that led to the bar in the basement.

'I wonder if he dislikes me.'

Kamiyama smiled self-derisively.

'Er, is this really OK?' Ishii asked, turning his anxiety towards Kamiyama.

'What are you talking about?'

'If you're going to be exorcising the spirit, won't you need tools?'

'I said this before as well, but I can see the spirits of the dead. If anything, that is my tool.'

Kamiyama, looking full of confidence, followed Gotou down the stairs to the bar.

Please don't leave me by myself –

Ishii followed the two of them down the stairs.

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10

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While Haruka boiled water in the kitchen, she looked at the six-tatami room. Even though she should have been used to her own flat, she felt a strange sense of discomfort. The reason for that was the person who was sitting while leaning against the bed – Yakumo.

He was flipping through the pages of the diary with a serious gaze.

Now that she thought more about it, they had known each other for more than half a year, but it was the first time that Yakumo had come into her room.

That made her a bit nervous.

Haruka took out two mugs, made hot cocoa for two and carried the mugs to her room.

'What is this?'

'Hot cocoa.'

'Even though it's swelteringly hot?' said Yakumo with a sigh.

He wasn't cute at all. Haruka returned to the kitchen without saying anything, took out ice from the fridge and threw a large amount into Yakumo's mug.

'Iced cocoa.'

Yakumo scowled and drank the cocoa.

Afterwards, he let out an 'Oh!' in surprise and stared at his mug. She thought he was going to say something, but he just flipped through the diary pages and immersed himself in his task.

Does it taste good? Bad? Say something –

Haruka washed down her dissatisfaction with cocoa and sat on the cushion opposite Yakumo.

Then, she remembered how she had buried her head in Yakumo's chest and cried earlier, and she went red all the way to her ears.

Though it had been embarrassing, at the same time, she had felt an enveloping warmth.

Did Yakumo think nothing of it at all?

Interrupting Haruka's thoughts, Yakumo's mobile phone started vibrating on the table.

'Your mobile's ringing.'

'It's Gotou-san.'

Yakumo didn't look away from the diary.

'Is it OK for you not to answer?'

'It's fine. That person should think by himself a bit more.'

'That's strict of you.'

'That is a difference in opinion. This is also a form of kindness.'

That was a nice way of putting it.

After the mobile stopped vibrating, Yakumo stopped flipping the pages of the diary.

It seemed that he had found something.

Haruka peeked at it as well from the side. Rather than words, there was a design of a cross with something like a black cord coiled around it.

'What's this?'

'Who knows,' Yakumo said, running his fingers through his hair.

'I wonder if it has anything to do with her suicide.'

'I don't know, but it seems like it is related to the assault.'

'Why?'

'This date. It's the day she was assaulted.'

Yakumo pointed at the date written in the diary.

However, even if it seemed to be related at the current stage, they didn't know what it meant.

Yakumo started flipping through the pages of the diary again. Haruka silently watched Yakumo.

With the page that the design was drawn on as a boundary, Yakumo's expression became more suspicious. The contents of the diary had probably made an about-face after that date. Regardless of the actual person's hopes and intentions, her life had changed.

Every day had probably been painful and difficult.

She felt a tight feeling in her abdomen just from imagining it, but that still was not even a fragment of the pain of a woman who had actually experienced it.

Even though the crime left such great injuries on its victims, the penalty imposed on the assailants was only a three-year sentence. If it was the first offence, there was a high chance that they would get a suspended sentence, which was equivalent to essentially nothing.

Finally, Yakumo took a deep breath and shut the diary.

Even Yakumo looked exhausted. He pinched his brow with his fingers and appeared to be thinking about something, but he suddenly looked up like he had thought of something.

'There's something I'd like to ask you to do,' Yakumo said with his eyes narrowed.

Eh, again –

Haruka readied herself. Since she had been helped so many times before, she didn't mind helping out some, but she would like to hold back from something as difficult as the request Yakumo had made earlier.

'Don't look so worried. It's not anything difficult.'

It wasn't something she could believe so easily.

'Really?'

'However, it's slightly troublesome but simple work.'

Her sad nature as a woman was not being able to clearly refuse.

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11

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Gotou crossed his arms at the entrance of the bar and looked around.

Makoto, Shinichi and Yuuya, who had been at the scene, were sitting at the same table they had been that night, and the bartender was behind the counter, just as he had been.

Ishii, who looked like he couldn't find a place for himself, was walking about nervously with shrugged shoulders.

In the centre of the bar stood Kamiyama.

It felt like he was going to put on a show.

'Now.'

Kamiyama clapped his hands together loudly and started speaking.

'Yesterday, everyone experienced a spiritual phenomenon here. Is that correct?'

Nobody replied to his question. However, Kamiyama didn't appear to pay any attention to that and continued speaking.

'I believe you may already know, but Asami-san's whereabouts became unknown last night. Suddenly, from a locked room...'

Kamiyama slowly started walking towards the table where the three of them sat.

Makoto's face was pale, and she stared at him without moving. Shinichi was smoking with an unpleasant expression on his face, while Yuuya was tapping his foot like he couldn't calm down.

After a beat, Kamiyama said, 'She disappeared.'

'She disappeared? There's no way something as stupid as that happened.'

In his irritation, Shinichi put out his cigarette in the ashtray.

'No, this isn't a lie. This is the work of a strong vengeful spirit. There are witnesses as well. Isn't that right, Mr Detective?'

Kamiyama looked at Ishii sharply.

Ishii froze like his hands and feet had been bound, and he moved his lips like a fish, incapable of making a response.

'Asami did disappear from the room, but...'

Makoto answered for Ishii.

'I-is that true?' asked the bartender from behind the counter, leaning forward as he did so.

'A woman did disappear, but that's all. I don't remember the police ever saying that a vengeful spirit did it!'

If he left the situation as it was, they would all be caught up in Kamiyama's mood.

Gotou spoke wildly.

'In your position, Detective Gotou, you cannot help but say that, I see.'

Kamiyama's smile was provocative.

It was infuriating, but Gotou closed his mouth, since he felt he would just get more caught up in Kamiyama's words the more he objected.

'I will continue talking then. Regardless of the opinion of the police, I believe that Asami-san's disappearance was the work of a vengeful spirit. Accordingly, I think it may be related to the spiritual phenomenon that you all experienced here.'

Kamiyama looked around at the faces of the people in the bar.

Everyone turned their eyes away from Kamiyama. There was an unpleasant silence.

'What do you want to say?'

Gotou cut in, unable to stand it.

'If my thinking is correct, everyone is in terrible danger.'

The bar grew noisy at Kamiyama's words.

'This is just tasteless fraud, isn't it?'

Shinichi's language was harsh as he glared at Kamiyama.

'I have no intention of doing such.'

'You can't be counted on. Nobody would honestly say they were going to.'

Shinichi's complaint was natural. Nobody would reply 'Yes, I am' if asked 'Are you a fraud?'

'Well, it isn't to be unexpected that you will not believe me. However, it is the truth.'

'Ridiculous,' Shinichi muttered.

Kamiyama accepted those words with a bitter smile.

'There is one thing I would like to ask everyone. Could it be that strange phenomena have already started happening around you?'

At Kamiyama's words, everyone started rustling.

'Something has happened, has it not?'

Kamiyama looked to the bartender, Makoto and Shinichi. Then, he looked to Yuuya, the youngest –

'A w-w-woman...'

Yuuya spoke, his gaze desperate.

'Shut it.'

Shinichi interrupted Yuuya without a moment's delay.

However, Yuuya couldn't stop now that he had opened his mouth.

'That woman was in my room and looked at me... "You die too!" That's what she said...'

At the same time as he finished speaking, Yuuya held his head in his hands and let it hit the table.

'Um, actually I also got a call on my mobile phone today from an unknown number, and the person said, "Die."'

Makoto spoke up to add to what Yuuya said.

'Er, I also heard the same words everyone else did last night at that locker.'

Even the bartender continued, pointing towards a locker by the lavatory.

I don't want to accept it, but if everybody experienced the same thing –

Gotou lit his cigarette.

'I see. Then there is almost no mistaking it.'

Kamiyama looked up at the ceiling.

'Do you think you know what's happening?'

Makoto stood up.

'Yes. Yesterday, I coincidentally met a woman's ghost at an apartment. She held a very strong as well as deep resentment.'

'A woman's ghost...'

'Her name was Sawaguchi Rika...'

'W-why's she coming up?'

Gotou spoke up without thinking and drew closer to Kamiyama.

'It seems you know her.'

'You can't be saying that Sawaguchi Rika's the cause of this chain of spiritual phenomena.'

'That is exactly what I am saying. The spiritual phenomena that have been occurring around everyone are all her work.'

'Don't be ridiculous! It's not related at all!' Gotou yelled, wanting to deny it wholeheartedly.

However, Kamiyama's expression did not change a whit, and he looked straight back at him.

'I am not joking. She is wandering. Can you see them? Her pain, and her resentment.'

Kamiyama looked down and then opened each of his eyes with his hand and took something out.

'I can see them.'

He had taken out contact lenses. Upon looking up again, Kamiyama's eyes were a flaming red.

This guy has red eyes too –

'Eek.'

Ishii's shriek echoed through the bar.

Gotou reflexively hit Ishii's head and turned back to Kamiyama.

'Your eyes...'

'The spirits of the dead are reflected in my eyes.'

Kamiyama narrowed his eyes in the dim bar.

'You're kidding.'

'I think that it is not a coincidence that everyone had gathered here.'

'What do you mean?'

Kamiyama smiled at Gotou's question.

'I mean that one of the people here is the cause for her resentment. Of course, I won't ask them to come forward. However, the person should know who they are. To disclose the truth...'

'That's enough!'

Shinichi interrupted Kamiyama's speech by hitting the table.

However, unlike Shinichi, who was agitated, Kamiyama did not seem concerned at all. He looked like he was observing a reaction he had expected –

'The missing Asami-san. She was carried off to the world after death, which is filled with suffering.'

'That's insane.'

Gotou tried to oppose Kamiyama.

'It is the truth. Unfortunately, she will not return. That is how strong and deep Sawaguchi Rika-san's vengeance is.'

'If you don't stop this, I'll send you to prison!' threatened Gotou, grabbing Kamiyama by the collar.

'I wouldn't mind, as long as you take responsibility for appeasing the anger of Sawaguchi Rika-san's spirit then.'

'What did you say?'

'If you do not, there will undeniably be another victim!'

Gotou couldn't decide whether Kamiyama's words were truth or lies. He had unwittingly been caught up in his words.

He unthinkingly let go of Kamiyama.

Kamiyama fixed his collar and again looked at the people in the bar.

'You may be next. No, it may be you...'

Nobody met Kamiyama's eyes.

Though the air conditioning should have been working, the bar felt enveloped in a heavy and damp air.

In the silence, the lights in the bar suddenly went out all at once.

It was impossible to see anything. A complete darkness.

– Damn. What's happening?

In the confusion, there was the sound of something falling with a clang.

A pale light appeared in the darkness.

'Eeeek.'

Ishii's shriek reverberated.

In the pale light, there was a woman.

That woman, with the left half of her face covered in blood and long black hair –

It had to be fake. He'd find out what it really was. Gotou had just started rushing towards the woman when the lights went on again.

He closed his eyes – it was like a smokescreen had gone up.

When Gotou opened his eyes again, the woman had disappeared completely, like she had never been there in the first place.

Just like Kamiyama said, something is really trying to cause something, no doubt about it –

'Everyone saw that, correct? The woman with her deep resentment.'

'Aaaaagh!'

Just as Kamiyama finished speaking, there was a scream. When Gotou looked, Shinichi was cowering and clutching his arm.

'Are you all right?'

Makoto approached him.

'What's wrong?'

Gotou spoke as well.

Kamiyama slowly walked towards him, and the bartender also came out from behind the counter.

The right sleeve of Shinichi's white shirt was dyed red.

'Who did it?' Gotou asked as he rolled up the sleeve. There was a deep cut on Shinichi's right upper arm.

'I-I don't know... When I noticed...'

Shinichi's forehead was covered in sweat as he spoke while withstanding the pain.

'Please take this.'

Gotou took the handkerchief Makoto held out and wrapped it around the cut on Shinichi's arm.

There was a tattoo on his arm of a cross with a snake coiled around it. Blood had trickled there, making it look as if the snake had been given sacrificial blood.

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12

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Yuuya was shaking outside the bar.

The fear swelling in the bottom of his stomach. It felt ready to explode. It seemed like no matter where or when, somebody was watching him.

The injury that appeared on Shinichi's arm earlier –

What should he do now? Did he have to live every day in fear of that woman?

He could have borne it if it were just fear, but Asami had disappeared from the locked room and was still missing.

Where on earth has she been taken –

Had she gone to the world after death from which she wouldn't return, like the exorcist called Kamiyama said?

A horror movie he had seen with Shinichi some time ago came up in the back of Yuuya's mind.

It was about a pale woman with long hair disappearing with the characters one by one.

He had laughed at the time, but he hadn't thought it would actually happen to him.

'Are you all right?'

At some point, the exorcist Kamiyama had walked up to stand in front of him.

Yuuya shook his head at Kamiyama's words. No matter what, he couldn't say that he was all right.

'Actually, I have something I'd like to discuss with you,' Kamiyama said calmly.

'To discuss...'

Yuuya replied in a shaking voice.

'That is correct. I would like to save you if possible.'

'Save me?'

Was the exorcist saying that he wanted to save him from the ghost of that woman?

If he was, Yuuya would definitely accept.

'I anticipate that, unfortunately, you will be the next victim if the situation continues like this.'

The tone of Kamiyama's voice was strict.

That... hadn't been a joke.

Yuuya didn't know anything and hadn't done anything either.

He didn't want to become the next victim. He wouldn't.

'I definitely don't want that.'

'Yes, which is why I said I would save you.'

'Do you really mean it?'

Yuuya clung to Kamiyama and begged him, throwing away his pride. Even if he put his head to the ground, his life was irreplaceable.

'Please calm down. I said this earlier as well, but I would like to save you even without your asking me to.'

'Really?'

'Yes, really... However, in order to do that...'

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Ishii was walking through the corridor in order to go to work when he heard a shout from the Unsolved Cases Special Investigations Room.

Ishii rushed in to see what was happening and saw Gotou and Ideuchi yelling at each other.

'What are you planning to do!?' shouted Ideuchi.

'What do you mean, what? Of course I'm going to investigate,' Gotou spat out, holding a cigarette in his mouth.

Ideuchi turned around, bluntly showing his discomfort with his body.

'E-er, what is this?' Ishii interrupted, though he was puzzled.

'Ishii. Did you know too?'

'Eh, what am I supposed to have known?'

The conversation had suddenly turned to him, but he didn't know what on earth they were talking about.

'The assault case five years ago.'

'The assault case...'

He was talking about the case which Gotou had asked him to take the documents out for. He remembered immediately, but he wasn't sure whether he should say that aloud.

'Why are you dragging out a case that was already solved ages ago?'

'Er...'

Ideuchi drew closer to Ishii, who was lost for a reply.

'Oh, it's been solved? I didn't notice. I'll be more careful in the future,' said Gotou, his attitude all the more impudent as he spat out his cigarette.

'Be serious!'

'You're noisy.'

'What kind of attitude are you taking towards your boss!?'

'My boss, eh...' said Gotou, like he didn't want to talk any more. Then, he put out his cigarette in the ashtray, took his jacket from the chair and headed for the door.

Ideuchi called out to him.

'Where are you going?'

'To investigate, obviously.'

'Weren't you listening? The case from five years ago is...'

'I'm investigating another case,' Gotou interrupted.

'A different case?'

'The daughter of the chief of police was talking about a ghost. There's no problem with that, right?'

'You...'

Gotou ignored Ideuchi, who seemed like he still wanted to talk, and left the room.

'Ah, yes.'

Ishii hurriedly chased after Gotou, who had left the room.

'Er, why was Chief Ideuchi so angry?'

'No idea. He's just hysterical.'

Gotou's words were harsh.

Certainly, Ideuchi could sometimes be hysterical, but it still appeared that Gotou was excessively defiant towards him.

Ishii drew up his courage and asked, 'Er, Detective Gotou, do you hate Chief Ideuchi?'

Gotou suddenly stopped in his tracks and glared at Ishii with a furrowed brow.

'Yeah, he's the guy I hate most. Next to you.'

'T-that can't be...'

Ishii's head went blank. His knees threatened to buckle.

It can't be true. Detective Gotou says he hates me. What am I supposed to now that I'm hated by somebody I respect?

Detective Gotou, tell me it's a lie –

'More importantly, Ishii. I'm counting on you for that.'

'For that?'

'Honestly, you fool. I talked to you about it yesterday. I'm going to meet the exorcist from yesterday with Yakumo. You're going to look into the backgrounds of the people there yesterday.'

Gotou jabbed Ishii's chest with his finger.

That was right. He had been so shocked he almost forgot completely.

'Ah, yes, I remember.'

'Bye.'

Ishii watched as Gotou walked away with a wide stride.

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'I'm coming in.'

Gotou opened the door for the <Movie Research Circle>, which Yakumo was using as his secret hiding place.

Yakumo was sleeping with his arms crossed while reclining in his chair.

How could he sleep in this sauna of a room?

'Oi! What time are you going to sleep until? Wake up!'

'I said before that by waking me up you ruin my entire day, Gotou-san,' said Yakumo with his eyes closed. This guy really wasn't cute at all. While grumbling in his heart, Gotou sat in the chair opposite him.

'It's because you didn't answer the phone yesterday that everything's such a big mess.'

'Did your wife run away from you again?'

– As if I'd ever consult you about my wife leaving home.

'I'll kill you if you make another boring joke.'

'My, my. A policeman is announcing that he will kill somebody – what a dangerous time this is.'

Yakumo finally opened his eyes and stretched.

'I don't want to be a comedian – I don't feel like playing the straight man.'

'Why don't you try?'

'Try what?'

'Being a comedian. If you pair up with Ishii-san, you would definitely be popular.'

'Just die already!'

Honestly, he just kept on interrupting.

He didn't come to joke around. Gotou took a breath to clear his head and started speaking.

'I met somebody with two red eyes.'

The moment Gotou said that, Yakumo's expression changed.

He really was sensitive about this topic.

'What do you mean?'

Gotou explained what happened last night at the bar to answer Yakumo's question.

He described what happened as accurately as he could, of course mentioning the impossible spiritual phenomenon that occurred inside the bar, as well as the atmosphere of the bar, what the people there were wearing and even the design of Shinichi's tattoo.

In particularly, he spoke as accurately as he could about what he remembered of Kamiyama.

Yakumo did not interrupt much, but his eyes narrowed slightly in doubt when Gotou said that the ghost that appeared in the bar was Sawaguchi Rika and that Kamiyama's two eyes were red.

'This has become another troublesome affair,' Yakumo said tiredly after Gotou had finished speaking.

'It really is a pain.'

'Why didn't you call me from the start?'

This one sentence of Yakumo's brought the anger in Gotou's stomach to a boiling point.

'You're the one who didn't answer the phone!'

However, Yakumo just sleepily scratched at the back of his neck even while he looked at Gotou raising his fists. He didn't seem nervous at all. It made Gotou feel stupid for being angry.

'Gotou-san, could the tattoo on the arm of the man named Shinichi that you mentioned earlier be...'

While Yakumo spoke, he took a piece of paper that was nearby and drew something with a marker.

'Was it this?'

Yakumo showed what he had drawn to Gotou.

Something like cord coiled around a cross. Though there were slight differences, the contour was exactly the same as what had been on Shinichi's arm.

'No doubt about it. This is it. Why do you know about it?'

'The explanation would be long, so I'll omit it.'

'Don't omit it. I don't understand.'

'I understand, so it's fine.'

'You know...'

Gotou started speaking, but he didn't end up saying the rest.

There was no point saying anything to Yakumo. No matter how much he asked, Yakumo would just speak in riddles. All he could do was wait for Yakumo to bring the topic up himself.

'Let us return to the topic at hand.'

'Just do what you want.'

'In any case, it seems that we need to meet that exorcist once more.'

'Yeah, I was planning on doing that from the start.'

In order to get a breakthrough to solving our current trouble, we have to decide whether the exorcist named Kamiyama is the real deal or a fake –

And Yakumo was the only one who could judge that.

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15

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Ishii checked his notebook again after entering the reference room.

Gotou had written the names and contact addresses of everyone who had been there last night.

That was Detective Gotou for you. Ishii had been so disturbed by the event that he had just been flustered and hadn't thought that far.

Five people's names were written down. However, they knew Makoto's background.

Gotou had said he would directly meet with Kamiyama, so he just had to investigate Murase Shinichi, Ide Yuuya and the bartender Yagi Keita.

Ishii started up the computer used for searching, entered the names of each of them and started to investigate for previous offences.

If anybody's name came up, it would make the rest of the investigation easier.

That said, it wouldn't be so easy – after searching up their names, none of them had a previous offence.

Now, what would he do next?

It was impossible for one person to check three people's backgrounds in the first place.

Usually, the work would have been split up.

No, he didn't have the time to be timid. Ishii had done nothing good at all this case. He felt like he had been doing nothing but shrieking.

Inside Ishii's head, he remembered something Gotou had said to him during the last case. 'You've got some guts for a guy in charge of playing the fool. You did good.' He felt a warm feeling in his heart just from remembering it.

For a repeat of that emotion.

– Do your best, Ishii Yuutarou.

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16

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'Hey, Yakumo. Why are you helping me out?'

While driving the car, Gotou asked Yakumo in the passenger seat this question.

Yakumo looked surprised. It made sense. Gotou wasn't sure why he was suddenly asking that

either. He wasn't thinking straight.

However, he couldn't help but feel suspicious. Though he had complained about everything, Yakumo was helping him, even to the point of risking danger to himself. Why was that?

Yakumo could have just ignored him and been done with it.

Actually, Gotou might have been directing that question to himself.

Like Ideuchi had said, why was he sticking his neck into an unrelated investigation? What would come out of it?

That was no good. Lately, he kept on thinking about useless things.

'Never mind. Forget about it.'

Gotou took back his question with a bitter smile. Yakumo smiled bitterly as well.

'Gotou-san, isn't it time for you to stop blaming yourself?'

'Hah? Blaming myself? What do you mean?'

What was this guy talking about?

'I mean exactly what I said. It hurts to watch you, Gotou-san.'

'It hurts?'

'Yes. Gotou-san, you quickly empathise with the victims and assailants. Accordingly, you rile up, shout and cry together with them. Usually, these should be cordoned off by saying something such as "This is how it is".'

Gotou felt like he had been stabbed where it hurt most, but he didn't want to acknowledge it honestly and also felt that it wasn't something he could do.

'That's not true.'

'Feel free to deny it, but you've noticed yourself, have you not? When you empathise and then reach a conclusion that you do not desire, you blame yourself, saying that if you had done better, it wouldn't have turned out the way it did.'

'I said you're wrong.'

Gotou's voice was getting louder.

However, something like that wouldn't work on Yakumo.

'In the first place, the flow of fate cannot be changed by the power of one person alone. No matter how hard you work, undesirable conclusions will come your way. To blame yourself for that would be foolish.'

Gotou wanted to object, but he couldn't find the words.

He had no plans for great justice, but like Yakumo said, Gotou always thought after a case ended.

Couldn't there have been a better ending –

If he had noticed earlier, couldn't there have been a different path?

But, like Yakumo said, that was foolish. It was nothing more than regret.

'However.'

After a silence, Yakumo started speaking again. With eyes full of intent, he continued while staring straight ahead.

'However, even if one cannot change everything about the results, it might be possible to find respite, even if it is incredibly slight.'

Gotou looked at Yakumo's face in his surprise.

It was mysterious – this curt, unsociable and contrary person appeared, somehow, to be filled with kindness.

'That is why I am helping with your investigation, Gotou-san. I might be the same type of person as you.'

The moment Gotou heard Yakumo finish speaking, he started laughing at how odd it was.

'What is so funny?'

He didn't feel like responding to Yakumo's question, but it amused him so much he continued laughing with his stomach in knots.

'Let me withdraw what I said. Please make this the last time you drag me into one of your cases.'

Sulking, Yakumo turned his face away.

What a cute guy. He used to be a man whose eyes looked down on everything in the world, but he had changed. It was Haruka-chan's doing. That was youth for you.

The face of Gotou's wife, Atsuko, appeared in his mind. He shouldn't laugh at other people. It had probably been the same for him.

When I lose sight of myself and am at the ready, she leaves home like she's been watching me, but when I'm completely absorbed in the case and everything starts to storm, she unexpectedly comes back.

Women are terrifying, really –

* * *

Kamiyama's office was in the next city.

It was on the first floor of an apartment in the residential area. There was no sign. There was only a plate on the door which read <Kamiyama Psychic Research Institute>.

A while after Gotou pressed the intercom button, there was a reply: <Who is it?>

'Gotou, the detective.'

<Please wait a moment. I will open the door.>

After the door opened, Kamiyama stood there. Like yesterday, his clothes were black from top to bottom. However, his shirt was ironed stiff, unlike Gotou's.

'There's something I want to ask.'

'Please go ahead and come in, though the space is small.'

Gotou thought he'd be refused since he had come without an appointment, but Kamiyama quickly opened the door and invited Gotou in.

'He's not with the police, but there's someone I want to bring with me. You mind?'

When Gotou finished talking, Yakumo walked a step forward from behind him.

'Ah, you're from that time.'

Yakumo curtly replied with only a 'Hello' to Kamiyama's surprised exclamation.

Gotou and Yakumo went into a living room that was ten tatami in size.

The walls were lined with bookshelves full of materials related to psychic phenomena, and there was a reception area in the middle of the room, but that was all.

It didn't feel lived in. Well, that made sense if it was used as an office.

Gotou sat next to Yakumo on the sofa at the reception. Kamiyama took out cold tea and sat on the opposite sofa.

'Is it no smoking here?' Gotou asked, taking a cigarette from his pocket.

'Please go ahead,' Kamiyama replied. He took an ashtray from below the table and placed it in front of Gotou.

It was great that they had gotten this far, but what to talk about now? Gotou lit his cigarette and took in a deep breath of smoke while he mulled over his thoughts.

'You probably want to know who I am.'

Kamiyama was the one who broke the silence. Gotou felt a bit troubled when he was so direct about it, but it would go more smoothly if Kamiyama started the conversation himself.

'That's it. With the trouble this time, your existence, to put it frankly, feels out of place.'

Kamiyama smiled pleasantly at Gotou's words.

'I like people like you, Detective Gotou.'

'Eh?'

'You are a person who cannot lie.'

His attitude made it feel like he had seen right through him. Gotou couldn't relax.

Gotou looked towards Yakumo sitting next to him, but he was just looking blankly at Kamiyama. It didn't feel like he would add to the conversation.

'I gain nothing from being liked by you. Anyway, when'd you start being an exorcist?'

'About five or six years ago...'

Kamiyama replied calmly.

'What did you do before then?'

'It might surprise you to hear that I used to be a teacher.'

'Eh?'

'It's true. I don't mind if you check for yourself. I was a high school teacher.'

Teacher and exorcist – there wasn't any connection.

'Why did you decide to become an exorcist?'

At Gotou's words, Kamiyama glanced at Yakumo. Whether or not Yakumo felt Kamiyama's gaze, his expression was still blank.

'I was not able to see the spirits of the dead in the past either. I lived a peaceful life as a very normal teacher. However, at some point, I was assaulted by a terrible dizziness. I was hospitalised for a while.'

Kamiyama stopped speaking there and took a sip of tea.

'It had been a heart attack from overwork. I wandered the boundary between life and death. When I woke up, for some reason, my two eyes had been dyed red.'

Yakumo's cheek twitched in reaction to Kamiyama's words.

'The doctor did not know why either. As nothing in particular was wrong with my body, I was discharged from hospital. It was ever since then that I could see the spirits of the dead. At first, I thought that my eyes were deceiving me. However, it was no illusion.'

Yakumo's left eye had been red from birth. Was Kamiyama saying his two red eyes had been acquired?

'And then you became an exorcist?'

Gotou put out his cigarette in the ashtray.

'Regardless of one's intentions, if it is an ability that one has been endowed with, one should use it. Do you not think that it would be a great loss if one did not? It is the same as not learning music when one has perfect pitch.'

'Isn't it up to the person whether they use it or not? There are guys in this world who've got classy cars but don't drive them.'

Kamiyama laughed out loud at Gotou's response.

It was an overdramatic response. Everything he did got on Gotou's nerves.

'Detective Gotou, you truly are an interesting person. That is one way of looking at it. What do you think?'

Kamiyama's question was directed towards Yakumo.

Gotou wanted to know the answer to that as well.

'Why do you ask me?'

Yakumo's expression didn't change.

'I said this before, but it is because you have the same ability as I. Am I incorrect?'

'Why do you think that?' Yakumo replied in a low voice.

'I feel it. It might be better to say that we call out to each other.'

Yakumo snorted at Kamiyama's words.

'Please tell me the truth.'

'As expected, I've been found out. It's a simple story. There is a contact lens in your left eyes, correct? A black one. I wear those as well. On top of that, when I met you at that apartment, you followed the ghost of the woman who was falling from the rooftop with your eyes. If somebody else had been looking, there would have been nothing there. That's why I thought that you could see spirits.'

'It is as you imagine. I can see them.'

At Yakumo's response, Kamiyama smiled in satisfaction.

'I want to ask you as somebody who has the same ability. Asami-san's disappearance this time, and the serial spiritual phenomena. How do you see it?'

'What do you think?' Yakumo responded.

'I think that the ghost of Sawaguchi Rika-san, who committed suicide, wants revenge because of her furious hatred. I do not know the recipient of that hatred, but they are probably somebody who was at that bar.'

'Revenge...'

Yakumo said that quietly.

'Asami-san did something unfortunate. She was simply involved. If we do not appease the anger of Rika-san's spirit, there will be another victim.'

'Are you saying that the spirit of that woman made the woman called Asami-san disappear?'

Kamiyama nodded at Yakumo's question.

'I was at the scene. That is all I can think of. I have told you my thoughts. What are yours?'

Yakumo bit his lower lip and looked about, seeming slightly troubled, before he started talking.

'I recognise that the spirits of the dead are clusters of that person's emotions.'

'I think the same way.'

'No. In my thinking, the spirits of the dead exert no physical influence on the living.'

'Which would mean that the ghost could not have made Asami-san disappear.'

Kamiyama's expression, which had been calm until now, changed.

There was a feeling of challenge floating in the air. It was a natural response since his reasoning had been denied outright.

'Though this is only my pet theory...'

'Then how did Asami-san disappear?'

'I do not have the answer to that.'

'Then you should not be able to deny my thoughts.'

'That is correct.'

Yakumo readily affirmed what Kamiyama said. Was he accepting defeat?

'I have experienced many things since becoming an exorcist. From those experiences, I believe that the stronger the dead person's thoughts, the greater the physical influence they exert.'

'Do you have an actual example?'

'For example, lovers can feel their partners' emotions even without hearing them in words, yes? Do you not think that is a demonstration of the physical influence of emotions?'

'Calling that physical influence would be an incorrect definition. Moreover, you are making too great a leap in logic. It is the same as saying that people would be able to fly if they wished for it.'

To Gotou, it looked like Yakumo was irritated.

'Then, let me ask you once more. Why did Asami-san disappear?'

'I said this earlier as well. I do not have the answer to that.'

'Then would you cooperate with me?'

'W-what?'

Gotou had just been listening, but he spoke in surprise at Kamiyama's extremely abrupt words.

He glanced over to his side to see that Yakumo looked surprised as well.

'I also have not had that much experience. It would be a bit too heavy for me to carry this case alone. It would be reassuring to have you there with me as someone with the same ability, but...'

'Good results will not be borne from the cooperation of those with differences in opinion,

regardless of whether or not they have the same ability.'

After Yakumo said that, he stood up on his own.

At this point, it didn't seem like they could get any more information out of Kamiyama. Gotou stood up with Yakumo.

'Sorry to both you, sensei.'

'I do not like being called that.'

Kamiyama smiled bitterly at Gotou's words.

'That's right, Yakumo-kun. Do you know a man who has two red eyes like I do?'

Oi, wait a minute. A man with two red eyes?

'Oi, you know that man?'

Gotou grabbed Kamiyama by his collar in his agitation.

'Yes, though even if I say that I know him, I have only met him once.'

'Where?'

'Togakushi² in Nagano. When I was studying because I was thinking of becoming an exorcist, he called out to me.'

'Don't tell me he's the one who suggested it.'

Kamiyama shook his head.

'No, certainly not. Please stop it. Do you know that man?'

'Yeah.'

They didn't just know him – they were quite indebted.

'Then you understand, yes? There is no man more terrifying than him. I understood that the moment I met him. Those eyes have a darkness that swallows everything. There is not even a fragment of human emotion. His very existence is evil. That is how I saw it. I do not want to have him as an enemy or an ally.'

When Gotou let go, Kamiyama shook his head left and right in relief.

Gotou glanced over, but Yakumo had already left the room.

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Makoto sat on a chair in the conference room and held her head in hands while looking down.

2 Togakushi (戸隠) is a small village with only four thousand people, though there used to be ten thousand. It has a [shrine](#) and has mountains, which have a [ski resort](#).

Outrageous events had been occurring in succession. However, nothing about them was clear. Everything was shrouded in mystery, including Asami's disappearance.

Gotou had said to leave the investigation to the police, but she couldn't just watch. Newspapers had a different information network than the police.

A short man with a hunched back opened the door and came in.

'I'm Takizawa, but are you Hijikata-san?'

'Yes.'

Makoto stood up from her chair to bow, and then she urged Takizawa to sit in the chair opposite her.

'I sincerely apologise for asking you to come so suddenly.'

'Don't worry about it. You can't write a good story if you hold back.'

Takizawa let out a hearty laugh that did not suit his stature.

Makoto had passed by him countless times in the corridor, but it was the first time she'd faced him directly like this. He had seemed somewhat shady to her, but that laugh swept that impression away completely.

'The truth is, there is something I would like to ask you.'

'No problem, as long as it's something I can answer.'

Takizawa lit his cigarette and took an ashtray for portable use from his pocket, grumbling, 'Can't walk with my head held high with the company being non-smoking.' Though the conference room was actually still non-smoking even if he brought a portable ashtray, Makoto didn't say that aloud.

'The case with Sawaguchi Rika-san that occurred five years ago. Do you remember it?'

That was the very reason Makoto had asked Takizawa to come.

Five years ago, Takizawa had been in charge of the series of articles after Sawaguchi Rika's suicide five years ago that attacked the police investigation until the criminal was arrested.

Takizawa rubbed the stubble growing on his chin and moved his shoulders in circles.

'I remember. Not just Sawaguchi Rika's case – I remember all the incidents I've been in charge of. You should beat all the articles you've written into your head too. They'll become your own info source and food for writing good articles.'

'Ah, yes.'

Makoto gave an indifferent response without thinking.

At the news agency, it seemed like there were many people who would go on boasting like this. It might have been because they had seen such a variety of things and had knowledge about them.

'So, why's that case got your interest now?'

'I'm currently pursuing an article about women after they have been victims of assault and became interested in Rika-san's case.'

Makoto gave the reply that she had thought up.

'If she talked about spiritual phenomena now, it would take a long explanation, and there was the chance that he might not believe her.'

She made the more reliable choice.

'Damn.'

Takizawa put his hand on the back of his neck and released his breath.

'Truth is, I've been looking into that case again too.'

'Is that true!?'

Makoto exclaimed in surprise, since she hadn't expected Takizawa's response.

'Yeah.'

'Was there something suspicious about it?'

Takizawa didn't reply – he just groaned.

It was natural for him to not want to talk about it if they were both pursuing the same topic, but she wanted to know if Takizawa had any new information.

'Well, I guess it's fine since our topics don't overlap.'

Takizawa put out his cigarette in his portable ashtray.

'What on earth is it?'

'There's a porn site that's been popular online lately.'

What Takizawa was talking about seemed to be the complete opposite of assault cases, but Makoto didn't say that aloud and simply nodded to urge him to continue.

'It caught my interest so I went to take a look. It's an image and video download site with a membership system, but the contents weren't normal.'

Takizawa lit his second cigarette.

There were some people who couldn't stop smoking once they started smoking – perhaps Takizawa was one of them.

'There're the so-called rape ones, but they're not actually that rare. It's just that virtually all the ones on the market are fake. They use anonymous actresses, put a mosaic on their face and just make it look like the real thing. That's natural, since it'd be a crime if they actually did it.'

'Could it be that that site had...'

Makoto's heart felt tight.

Putting up images of real assaults for entertainment – nothing could be more unforgiveable. If the victims found out... But –

'How did you know they were real?'

'I said this earlier, right? I remember all the articles I was in charge of. They become my original info source.'

It can't be –

The blood drained from Makoto's face. What would someone have to be thinking to do something so terrible?

Her fingers wouldn't stop trembling in her rage and fear.

'You catch on quicker than you look. It's just as you imagine. I saw a certain face on that site.'

'Sawaguchi Rika...'

'That's right. Since it was a home video, the date was right on the screen – there's no doubt about it.'

How horrible –

Makoto's hands were in fists.

'Worse still, there was a caption in the opening saying "April 2000, suicide by jumping from her apartment". Can you believe it?'

Takizawa's eyes were red as he stared straight at Makoto.

Makoto shook her head. She didn't want to believe it. At the same time, tears welled up in her eyes.

She felt like she had been touched by a fragment of the suffering and sadness of Rika, who was being disgraced even after her death. The humiliation that smeared her was so great that simply from imagining it, she couldn't look anyone in the eyes.

If somebody had really thought of doing something like this, they could not be normal.

It wouldn't have been strange at all if they were murderous.

'I don't think I've got a particularly strong sense of justice, but this I can't forgive.'

'I feel the same way.'

'I'm going to block off all their escape routes and make this into a story.'

Takizawa's voice was full of a strong intent.

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Honestly, what was happening?

Gotou's irritation had reached its peak. Yakumo had been silent ever since they left Kamiyama's office, and he just kept on saying 'I cannot say anything until there is more information' no matter what Gotou asked.

Since he couldn't do anything else, he brought Yakumo back to his secret hiding place and ended up doing the rest of the investigation alone.

He easily understood Yakumo's reason for suddenly leaving. The existence of Yakumo's father – the man with two red eyes. Was that man wrapped up in this case?

No, no. Gotou shook away his thoughts.

His already panicked head would be even more confused if he thought about that here and now. Anyway, he would just do the investigation he was responsible for.

Gotou visited the high school in the city that Kamiyama had been employed at.

It was the first time he'd gone, but he knew the name. It was famous – kids with heads somewhat different from Gotou's attended it.

He entered the school building from the front gate and switched in to a pair of slippers for visitors³.

It had been twenty years since he'd gone into a school. Schools were mysterious things. Even though this wasn't his old school, he felt nostalgic.

Upon entering, he found a plate with the words <Staff Room> on it to his right.

When he slowly opened the door, the teachers inside the room all looked at Gotou at the same time. It made him remember his days as a student, whether he wanted to or not.

'I'm Gotou – I contacted this morning. Is the teach called Mamiya here?'

Because he had been flooded with sentiment, he ended up using strange vocabulary.

'Ah, you must be Detective Gotou. Please come in.'

A thin middle-aged woman raised her hand at the back of the room. She was an oval-faced woman with tortoiseshell glasses. It felt like she might say 'zamasu'⁴ at any moment.

The teachers in the room started whispering. That's a detective? It felt like he'd start hearing voices saying that.

He could have just accepted it boldly, but he felt like a student who'd been called out and ended up walking in a clumsy manner.

'Please sit down.'

3 It is customary to take off your shoes in Japanese schools, so slippers are prepared for visitors. Here are some [plastic slippers](#) put out for a school festival. People (such as parents) may bring their [own fancier slippers](#).

4 Zamasu is an ending for sentences that originated in Edo. Though it is part of the [Yamanote dialect](#), it seems that it is not often heard outside of anime and manga. It is considered polite and a bit hoity-toity. Pointy glasses like the ones Mamiya wear used to be called [zamasu glasses](#) (ざますメガネ or zamasu megane).

Urged by Mamiya, Gotou sat down on the seat next to her.

'Now, you mentioned that you wanted to ask about Kamiyama-sensei.'

'Ah, that's right.'

'I would like to ask this first, but has Kamiyama-sensei...'

He knew what she wanted to say even if she didn't say the words aloud. Anyone would have that response if police came to ask about their old colleague.

'He hasn't done anything. This is just for confirmation. The police are an unexpectedly troublesome organisation. Even if we know there's nothing, there're a bunch of things we have to look into for reports. You probably don't just visit the homes of problem kids when you're making house calls, right?'

'I understand what you want to say, Detective, but that is also so that families can come to know the teachers.'

Mamiya sounded indignant.

He'd said something bothersome. He didn't feel like talking about education right now.

'Sorry about that. Well, anyway, I wanted to know what sort of person Kamiyama was.'

'Though it is not as if I know about his private life, he was rather popular with the students. Have you met him before, Detective?'

'Yeah.'

'Then I think you should understand. He was a very kind teacher. He would listen seriously even to the trivial stories of students, and he was sharp – he understood the students' feelings well.'

Kamiyama as a teacher, and Kamiyama as an exorcist now –

To be honest, Gotou had expected that Kamiyama would be a completely different person. He'd thought that would be a starting point for the investigation.

However, there wasn't much of a difference in his impression from listening to what Mamiya said.

'There was one student who was particularly passionate. A beautiful young girl with long hair – if I remember correctly, her name was... Kawaguchi-san? No, maybe it was Yamaguchi-san...'

Mamiya pat her wrinkled cheek as he thought.

'I heard that he quit because he'd fainted from an illness.'

The conversation would veer off topic if he let it continue. Gotou forcefully put it back on track.

'Yes. He had seemed to be overworking since a little while before, but one day, he was suddenly hospitalised. He retired then.'

'What illness?'

'It had been so sudden that I couldn't ask about the details.'

There were no inconsistencies with what Kamiyama said.

At the present stage, he could say that Kamiyama had been speaking the truth.

'I see. I said this before, but this is just a formality. It seems like this was a wasted trip, so I'll excuse myself,' said Gotou, standing up.

He didn't have to hurry so much, but Gotou didn't know how to deal with this female teacher called Mamiya. He felt it'd be better to leave before she started talking about some other nonsense.

'Excuse me, Detective.'

Mamiya called out to Gotou.

'What?'

'What is Kamiyama-sensei doing now?'

Didn't she know? Well, maybe that made sense.

'He's an exorcist.'

Upon hearing Gotou's words, Mamiya looked flabbergasted.

It was a bit dramatic, but that response made sense too –

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Ideuchi dragged himself to his apartment door.

The weight his body felt from overwork had accumulated over the years and would not budge.

He wasn't finished work now either. He had just come home to change and would have to head back in an hour.

He didn't believe in ghosts like Gotou did, but he wondered sometimes whether the weight on his body wasn't overwork but curses from people related to the cases he had handled.

He lived burdened with their hatred.

For Ideuchi, Gotou was only a troublemaker, but he sometimes felt envious. How much easier it would be for him if he could let his emotions burst out as Gotou did without being bound by the organisation.

Killing his emotions ate away at his spirit more than he had imagined it would.

When Ideuchi opened the door, the lights were on. Had he come back today? Ideuchi noticed that he had hesitated for a moment.

Why did he have to restrain himself around his own child? Ideuchi walked into the living room with deliberately loud footsteps, but he didn't see anybody. Was he in his room? Ideuchi dropped the bag on his shoulders onto the floor and sank into the sofa.

Since when? When had he started refusing to come home –

Unnecessary thoughts passed through his head. It wasn't as if he and his son were on particularly bad terms. It just always felt awkward when they saw each other.

'Dad.'

Ideuchi was taken aback when he suddenly heard his son's voice. He couldn't see him from his position, but his son was probably at the entrance to the living room.

'Oh. You were here?'

Ideuchi replied from where he was.

Didn't he already know that he was here? Even he thought what he was saying was strange.

'I've got something to talk to you about.'

Talk? With him? He was probably just asking for money again. Ideuchi had thought he'd be fine since his son had started working part-time, but it seemed like that wasn't the case.

'What? I'm not going to give you allowance anymore.'

'That's not it.'

After saying that, his son came around from behind him and sat opposite Ideuchi.

How many years had it been since he had last sat with his son like this?

Did he get more piercings again? Was it so cool to wear clothes that didn't fit him? He had many things that he wanted to say, but he didn't know how to say them. He'd used being busy as an excuse to leave all the childrearing to his wife. His wife was no longer around.

What was I trying to protect –

'I actually want your advice.'

His son's eyebrows were lowered as he spoke in a shaky voice. The expression was very similar to Ideuchi's own. Not just the expression. His cowardliness and timidity were also exactly like him.

Ideuchi smiled bitterly.

'Go ahead, but I don't have much time. Keep it short.'

'I've been cursed.'

What was he saying?

The damp uneasiness inside Ideuchi's heart grew –

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Ishii sat by himself in a booth of a real estate agency.

Coffee had been placed on the table, but he didn't feel like drinking it.

Nobody had been in the data for people with criminal records, but he hadn't been discouraged.

He had just met them once, but he didn't think any of them would commit a crime.

Next, Ishii contacted the place Shinichi worked at.

It was a small event planning company, and according to the woman at the office who answered, it seemed like Shinichi had started working two years ago, but he had a good work attitude and could become a pillar of the company.

It was also correct that the young man called Yuuya had started working part-time as well a few months ago at Shinichi's introduction.

Contrary to his appearance, he had a reputation as a serious young man.

From the conversation, the woman at the office particularly favoured Shinichi.

When he said that the police were investigating the two of them, she had been awfully disturbed and had persistently made sure that he hadn't done anything.

Next, Ishii went to the real estate agency for the apartment the two lived in. His goal was to ask about details such as the rent and the contract.

He could find out their economic situation from the rent, and he could see if the guarantor lived nearby.

'Excuse me, I apologise for the wait.'

The manager, who had left the seat, brought back an envelope.

'No, there's no need to apologise.'

The manager sat across from Ishii and handed him the envelope, only to grab Ishii's arm when he reached out for it.

'I said this earlier as well, but this is not actually something I can show you. Please do keep that in mind.'

Recently, with privacy protection acts as such, even if you said you were police, you couldn't easily get documents and investigations were delayed.

'That is fine. It is not as if I will take it out with me.'

The manager said, 'I see,' and let go of Ishii's arm, but there was still a feeling of anxiety there.

It seemed like it would be better to look at it before the manager's mind changed.

Ishii took the contract documents for the flat out of the envelope and flipped through the pages. The rent for the flat they lived in was one hundred fifty thousand a month.

It was an appropriate amount for a relatively new 2LDK outside of the twenty-three wards of Tokyo.

He flipped through some more pages.

When he looked at the leaseholder column, he suddenly let out an 'Ah' of surprise.

The manager looked over to see what had happened.

Ishii went back to the page to check the address, apartment name and room number. It was definitely the one he had received last night.

'Excuse me. This contract is definitely for that room, correct?'

'Yes.'

'This is definitely the leaseholder's name as well.'

'Yes.'

'Are you certain?'

'A copy of a licence is attached at the very end,' said the manager, sounding tired at Ishii's insistent questioning.

'Licence.'

Ishii opened up to the last page like he had been told to.

Just as the person in charge had said, there was a copy of a licence attached. The ink was blurred and the photo wasn't clear, so he couldn't confirm it. However, he could confirm the name.

'What is this...'

Ishii stood up in his agitation.

The person in charge looked at Ishii blankly.

Ishii had just found something serious. He couldn't pin down the agitation boiling up inside him.

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21

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'Yakumo-kun, you here?'

Haruka visited Yakumo's secret hiding place and found Yakumo staring at something seriously.

That gaze was on a necklace with a red stone on top of the table.

He had received that necklace along with a letter from a boy on a road by the river after the last

case.

'What? You again?'

Yakumo noticed Haruka and said that with a yawn. Really, what was with his attitude?

'I'll leave then. Even though I went all this way to help you with what you asked.'

'You should say that first.'

What? It sounded like he was saying she shouldn't come unless she had something to do.

Though Haruka felt dissatisfied, she took the seat opposite Yakumo and handed over the diary and memo.

'I'm done, but I couldn't do all of it. I left some parts out since I didn't understand them.'

'That's more than enough. You've helped me out.'

Without checking the contents, Yakumo took them and placed them in his shirt's breast pocket.

For some reason, he didn't seem like the usual Yakumo.

'Hey, what are you thinking?'

'I was lamenting the future of somebody as carefree as you.'

This person was just – he really thought of the most impudent things.

'You don't have to worry – a bright future's waiting for me.'

After Haruka said that, something suddenly came to mind.

What would Yakumo's future be like? What was he planning to do after graduating from university? He was burdened with a painful and sad past, and his future would involve seeing the spirits of the dead whether he wanted to or not.

'Hey, Yakumo-kun, what are you planning on doing after you graduate?'

'Who knows? I'll think about it when the time comes.'

Haruka didn't think those were Yakumo's true feelings.

She wanted to see what was in the depths of his heart, but he definitely wouldn't tell her even if she asked.

'Why not become an exorcist like that person we met?'

She thought he might get mad, but she was wrong.

Yakumo took a deep breath and closed his eyes.

'Sometimes, I don't know.'

Rare for Yakumo, he spoke slowly and his voice sounded helpless.

It was like a cloud floating in the sky.

'Don't know what?'

'This left eye which can see the spirits of the dead. Sometimes I wonder if it's all just an illusion and I can't actually see anything.'

'Of course not.'

Like he hadn't heard Haruka at all, Yakumo continued speaking.

'Maybe I'm just making up convenient stories to satisfy my ego, even though the truth lies elsewhere...'

'Yakumo...kun.'

'The truth is that what I and that man see are different, even if we have the same eyes. Even though I see it as sadness, he sees it as hatred. He looks at souls and sees darkness as humanity's true nature, regardless of whether they are dead or alive. I also can't deny it.'

'That's too depressing,' Haruka said, finding it hard to breathe.

She didn't want to think that the true nature of humanity was simply darkness.

'I know. My eye can see a small point of light past the darkness... I wonder which of us is correct...'

It was like he was reciting a philosophy book.

Haruka felt like she had seen Yakumo's true nature in those words.

Yakumo was always complaining and never went easy on her, but no matter what he said, he would always try his best for others.

It had to be because Yakumo believed that there was a light beyond the darkness, no matter how trying, sad or painful the darkness was.

It didn't matter whether he was wrong or correct. Even if it was just his wish, he was Yakumo because he could see that light.

'What you see isn't an illusion, Yakumo-kun. You're definitely wrong. I can guarantee it,' said Haruka, nodding multiple times.

Yakumo looked at Haruka and snorted. He looked embarrassed as he ran a hand through his hair.

'Honestly, how carefree can you be?'

'What do you mean?'

'Even things that are true would become false if you guaranteed them.'

This person really is –

'You're so contrary.'

'Well, in any case, I'll take your advice and stop thinking about boring things.'

After saying that, Yakumo picked up the necklace by its chain and stared at the red stone dangling

from it.

'This time, I doubted what I saw because of him. There will be an answer if I connect what I saw as it was, without doubting it.'

It was like there was a light of strong intent at the back of Yakumo's sleepy eyes. Haruka stared at that light like she was being sucked in.

It felt like she had gotten a little closer – just a little – to Yakumo's heart.

'What are you looking at? It's creepy.'

This person, just by saying one thing, would completely ruin the mood.

'What do you mean, creepy? I was just looking at that necklace because I thought it was pretty,' Haruka said, clenching her teeth.

Yakumo sighed and flicked the red stone with his finger.

'It really is a beautiful colour. I wonder what the stone is.'

'It's probably topaz.'

'There are red topazes?'

'They're incredibly rare. It costs as much as a work of art.'

'Really...'

'Topaz is said to increase creativity and psychic ability.'

After saying that curtly, Yakumo tossed the necklace towards Haruka.

She lost her balance since it was so sudden, but Haruka caught it with both hands.

'If you like it, I'll give it to you.'

'Eh? But isn't this important to you?'

'My mother used to wear it.'

How could she accept something like that blithely?

'Don't you have to return it to your mother, Yakumo-kun?'

When Haruka asked that, Yakumo smiled bitterly.

What did that expression mean?

'It's fine. I want you to have it. She can't wear that anymore anyway.'

When Yakumo said that, his eyes were a sad colour, like that of a deep ocean.

Could that possibly mean –

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After returning to the police quarters, Gotou was walking down the corridor to head back to his post.

He'd gotten zero info. He wasn't really hoping for anything, but it didn't seem like there was anything to do but wait for the results of Ishii's investigation.

It felt like a lot of things were connected but they didn't connect. It felt illogical.

If they were to put this case in order and explain it, what Kamiyama said seemed the most correct. Rika was cursing unrelated people in her resentment.

If she still had a grudge against someone, there was no saving them. Saving who? Her?

No. I'm the one who can't be saved –

'Where did you go? I was looking for you,' Erika said in exasperation. She grabbed Gotou's arm and pulled him into a nearby investigation room.

'Why are we going in here?'

'It's obviously because I don't want to be overheard. You really are slow.'

Yeah, yeah, he was slow.

In his anger, he crossed his arms and leant against the wall.

'So?'

'I put the screws on one of the guys in charge at the time and had him tell me some things.'

Put the screws on really wasn't something a woman should be saying.

'Chief Ideuchi said a bunch of things, and it took some time since I couldn't make my move, but it looks like the case was deliberately abandoned.'

'Deliberately?'

'Your voice is too loud.'

Eriko hurriedly covered Gotou's mouth.

'There was no clear statement, but it seems like there were orders with that nuance.'

'Seems like there's more to this than meets the eye,' said Gotou, pushing away Eriko's hand.

'Seems so. It stinks.'

'Why?'

'Don't know. That's what you should investigate,' said Eriko with a shrug.

One possibility was that there hadn't enough people.

At the same time, they had had a murder case that would affect the police's dignity if they hadn't solve it quickly.

They hadn't had the freedom to split up the detectives for an assault case. That was why Gotou and Eriko had been taken out and some newbies had been put in charge.

They'd shaken her up, gotten the case to be put away, and that'd been the end of that.

They didn't have enough people for all the cases – that was how it was with the police now. It was also a fact that they had to think about the power balance between cases of varying levels of importance.

However, if that was how it was, that meant that a woman died as a result of that policy.

'And there's another thing.'

'What?'

'I asked the person who first arrived on the scene when the suicide was discovered – seems like there really was a note.'

'You sure?'

'Yes. The guy turned the notebook that was used in the time inside out while looking through it.'

Evidence that hadn't been in the documents.

Somebody stole it. On top of that, it had to have been an inside job.

However, that would mean Gotou's idea about not enough people would be rejected.

'Somebody hushed up the fact that she killed herself.'

Gotou said the words as they came to him.

'What for?'

Eriko gave an immediate reply. It was as she said. Gotou felt like nobody would gain anything from concealing the suicide. Plus, evidence proved that it was a suicide in the end.

Maybe there hadn't been a note in the first place.

Somebody killed her and made it look like a suicide. The note was a diversion –

There's no use. It doesn't connect –

Damn. The case was really irritating.

Gotou kicked the nearby chair as hard as he could.

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It wasn't a problem she could keep to herself. Makoto felt that way so she went to the police, even though her concern might be misplaced.

After talking with Takizawa, Makoto went to see the site for herself.

She wanted what he said to be a lie. She had hoped for that, but her computer monitor displayed the truth.

Everyone was unforgiveable.

The person who had done this. The people who sold the images. Also, the people who enjoyed looking at these images.

Makoto felt so much hatred just as a bystander. From Rika's perspective as an actual victim, it wouldn't be strange if she found everything she saw detestable.

Makoto was probably part of what Rika had seen.

Her endless hatred had even enfolded Asami. The moment she thought that, Makoto saw something in that image that she remembered seeing before.

Makoto decided to hand over this information to Gotou and Ishii-san.

Takizawa might criticise her terribly, but it wasn't the time to worry about that.

Makoto was passing in front of the investigation rooms when she heard the sound of something falling. She stopped walking in her surprise.

A door to one of the investigation rooms opened and Gotou suddenly came out while roaring like a beast.

'You're so noisy. Keep it down a bit.'

A woman with the same physique as Gotou came out while complaining.

Makoto remembered seeing her before. If she remembered correctly, she was an investigation member named Shimamura.

'As if I could!'

Her eyes met with Gotou's as he yelled in his irritation.

Makoto bowed her head deeply and walked towards Gotou. Shimamura might have been taking her into consideration because she quickly left after hitting Gotou's shoulder.

'Unfortunately, we haven't found your friend yet.'

Gotou turned his gaze away from Gotou, like he felt uncomfortable.

Makoto thought that his speech and behaviour didn't match with his real self. His sense of justice and responsibility were absurdly strong and he was kind on top of it, but it felt like he was ashamed to show it openly.

'No, that isn't it. There is some information about Sawaguchi Rika-san's case that I would like to

discuss with you.'

'Information? What is it?'

'Yes, er, but here would be a little...'

It wasn't something they could talk about while standing.

She had brought her computer to explain. She wanted him to see it if possible. Gotou might have guessed that, because he started walking and gestured for her to follow.

* * *

Ishii returned to the police quarters in high and proud spirits.

Detective Gotou would definitely be happy. Ishii's expression naturally relaxed just from imagining it.

'Detective Gotou, I did it!'

Ishii opened the door with vigour.

Gotou just glared at him like he was noisy. Ishii froze.

'What are you standing there for?'

Ishii hurriedly entered the room after Gotou said that.

Makoto was there as well. Ishii sat on the round chair beside Gotou.

'A-ah, Makoto-san, w-what has brought you here?'

Ishii had planned on saying that as naturally as he could, but he was clearly stammering.

He always ended up nervous when talking with Makoto because of the memory of his terror.

'Perfect timing. You listen too.'

'Listen?'

'You're so thick-headed. She's here with info on the Sawaguchi Rika case.'

Detective Gotou, I have essential and important information too – but Ishii couldn't say that in this situation.

Ishii couldn't do anything but follow Gotou's instructions.

Makoto was using the laptop computer on the desk. Gotou and Ishii lined up their shoulders and looked at the monitor.

The monitor displayed the words <Rape Club>.

Ishii knew there were sites where fanatical people gathered, but he hadn't thought there was something so tasteless and blatant.

'Isn't this porn?'

It seemed like it was just as Gotou said.

Thinking about it, it was really strange for two male detectives and a female reporter to be looking at something like this together.

'That was what I thought at first as well.'

Makoto replied without taking her eyes away from the screen. Her voice was shaking.

'Could this be real?'

Real? Of course not – there was no way. Rape was a crime.

'Unfortunately...'

'But how do you know it's real? Aren't they just making it look real?'

Makoto didn't reply to Gotou's question. She just moved the mouse to navigate through the site.

Finally, a list was displayed on the monitor. They could probably images and videos by selecting from the list.

The slowly moving cursor stopped on one name.

Sawaguchi Rika –

That. It couldn't be. It was impossible.

When Makoto clicked on the name, the site displayed a picture of Sawaguchi Rika's face along with detailed information.

<Sawaguchi Rika. 22 years old at the time. Certain place in the metropolitan area. Can't get enough of her expression as she endures the disgrace like a champ. April 2000, suicide by jumping from her apartment.>

The comment was disgusting. Ishii was seized with a feeling of nausea.

'What kind of idiot would do this!?' yelled Gotou, who couldn't help but hit the table.

The woman who had taken her life because of this case was being humiliated even after her death. This was completely unforgiveable.

'I feel the same way.'

Makoto's words were heavy.

The emotion she felt might have been closer to hatred than anger.

Makoto clicked Sawaguchi Rika's name again.

No. He couldn't – he couldn't look at something so cruel. Ishii's knees were shaking so much it felt like they would buckle.

An image in a frame popped up and started moving. There was a woman walking down a street. The camera was probably following Sawaguchi Rika. From the image, it seemed like there was a

camera affixed to the passenger seat of a car.

In an area void of people, the car stopped and there was the sound of a door opening.

A man ran after Rika. The man covered Rika's mouth and dragged her forcefully as she resisted fiercely.

The scene changed. It appeared to be a room in a basement.

The wall was bare concrete. The room appeared fairly large, but there was nothing in it that stood out. Rika had her arms and legs bound with packing tape so she couldn't move. She was looking in fear at the camera.

A man came into the frame. He was wearing a knit mask so his face couldn't be seen.

Here, Makoto stopped the video.

'What is this?'

Gotou covered his face with his hands. He could still speak. What Ishii had seen was burnt freshly into his mind, and when he imagined what happened afterwards, there was just this feeling of agony that felt like it would crush his abdomen.

Makoto turned around and looked at Gotou's and Ishii's faces fiercely.

'Please arrest the administrator of this site no matter what.'

'You don't have to tell me.'

Gotou was grinding his teeth out of anger.

'But currently we are concerned with Rika-san. Please look here.'

Makoto looked to the monitor again, moved the cursor and zoomed in on the arm of the man who had come into the frame.

'This pattern. Haven't you seen it before?'

There was a tattoo of a cross with a snake coiled around it.

I've seen this pattern before –

'So that really is how it was!' exclaimed Ishii in his agitation.

'Don't be so loud right next to my ear.'

Gotou hit Ishii's head.

'Eh, but – but – this pattern...'

'Calm down and explain.'

After Gotou said that, Ishii took a deep breath and took out his memo.

'Actually, I was looking into the person called Murase Shinichi, but the name of the person living in his flat is the name of the person who assaulted Rika-san: Oori Kazushi.'

'So there was a connection,' Makoto said, coming to grips with what was being said. 'I was also concerned with this tattoo when I saw this video, so I came here. Last night, this tattoo was on Shinichi-san's arm.'

Gotou yelled, 'Move over!' and pushed Ishii aside to take documents from his desk drawer and spread them out. Oori Kazushi's photo was there.

All of them were frozen by the photo.

The hair was different. The shape of the eyebrows was different. The eyelids were one-fold and two-fold. Shinichi was about ten kilograms skinnier.

However, the differences between Oori Kazushi and Murase Shinichi could easily be changed with makeup, plastic surgery and diet.

Ishii's heart was beating wildly.

'Damn! So that's how it was!?'

Gotou slammed his fist into the desk.

'Murase Shinichi and Oori Kazushi were the same person,' Ishii said with confidence.

Oori's prison term ended two years ago. He had changed his identity then and started living as Shinichi.

That had to be it. That was the only thing that made sense. Then everything added up.

Rika's spirit was aiming for Murase Shinichi and Oori Kazushi in hatred. That hatred had run wild and swallowed up Asami.

Makoto had started crying without anyone's noticing.

Ishii felt startled as he looked at her back.

There was no way for Ishii with his meagre experience with woman to tell whether her tears were from sadness or relief.

All he knew was that it showed her kindness towards others. He might have been looking at her with prejudice up until now.

'You here, Gotou?'

Ideuchi's voice cut through the suffocating atmosphere and he looked in from the doorway.

That moment, Gotou openly clicked his tongue.

'What?'

'You got time?'

'I'm busy now. If you want to lecture me, do it another time.'

Gotou refused him bluntly.

Normally, Ideuchi would start yelling. Ishii stiffened, but what he actually heard was different from what he imagined.

'I'm not here to lecture you. I just want to talk.'

Gotou probably sensed something from Ideuchi's attitude, which was different from usual, because he just said, 'Get his fingerprints to confirm,' and then he left the room together with Ideuchi.

In the now quiet room, a mobile phone started ringing. Ishii leaped in surprise at the noise which he hadn't expected.

'Yes, this is Hijikata.'

Makoto answered the phone. While the conversation continued, her expression grew increasingly grim.

Ishii felt a strange apprehension –

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Gotou fixed his stare on Ideuchi's receding hairline.

How many times had he met with Ideuchi in the conference room like this before? He probably couldn't even count the number.

This man was pitiful too. Gotou was to blame for half of the hair that had fallen out. Gotou smiled self-derisively.

'What's so funny?'

'No, it's nothing.'

Gotou fixed his posture.

'Now, let me listen to that not-lecture of yours.'

'You really don't ever change. I'm envious.'

His tone let Gotou down somewhat.

In the first place, it didn't sound convincing at all if he said he was envious since he had made a fool of him so many times before.

'I don't know what you're being all sentimental about, but please keep it short.'

'That's right. I actually want to ask you for advice.'

Ideuchi looked at his feet while he spoke.

His hands had been squirming about too like he couldn't calm down. He might have been confused

as to about why he had put the words 'Gotou' and 'advice' together.

Gotou felt the same way. He quarrelled all the time with this man. Hearing that he wanted to talk with him now was unpleasant.

'Please ask for romantic advice elsewhere. That's out of my jurisdiction,' Gotou joked, unable to stand the atmosphere.

'Of course that's not it. I just want to talk a little about my son.'

'That's really out of my jurisdiction. I don't have children.'

This man had a kid?

Gotou felt a bit surprised, but when he thought about it again, it was natural for Ideuchi's age. He just hadn't had any interest at all in Ideuchi's private life up until now.

'It's an embarrassing story, but my son came to me today to ask for money.'

'Why not just give him allowance? You've got the money, don't you?'

'You've got quite the mouth. You should know how much I make. Plus, it wasn't at the level of allowance.'

Well, if comparing to what he had to do, a police officer's salary was surprisingly low.

'And?'

'I asked him why he needed so much money.'

Here, Ideuchi raised his head.

Deep wrinkles, shadows around his eyes and pale skin. He looked visibly older than people of the same age. As a part of management, his nerves might have been worn away more than was imaginable.

'My son said he had been possessed by a woman's ghost.'

'A ghost?'

'It seems like an exorcist said that if he didn't pay money, he would die. I didn't think he could be tricked by something like that, but I might not have supervised him well enough. This is your field of expertise, right?'

Of all people, this man's son.

'You telling me to look for that exorcist?'

After biting his lip, Ideuchi nodded.

As if Gotou knew about that sort of thing. He should at least wipe the ass of his own son. That's what he wanted to say, but for some reason, Gotou pitied Ideuchi.

'Give me some info. That's right – first, the name of your son and that exorcist.'

'Sorry about this...'

Ideuchi said those words like they had been squeezed out of his throat, and then he handed Gotou a business card.

– Kamiyama Eiji.

That was what was written on the business card.

'Where'd you get this?'

'I took the business card from my son.'

Gotou suddenly remembered the members at the bar last night. Makoto, the bartender, their current problem Shinichi – probably Oori. And then there was the young man who called himself Ide Yuuya.

'Could your son's name be Yuuya?'

'You know him?'

'No, I heard it from somebody before...' Gotou replied vaguely.

So it really was that young man. Ideuchi and Ide – what a half-baked alias.

But now, Kamiyama's goal was clear. Money. He'd talked all high and mighty, but he was just a hyena like the other exorcists.

It'd be easy to tell Ideuchi what he knew now, but doing that would mean bringing Ideuchi into the case.

It was obvious that if he did, he wouldn't be able to move as freely. It would be a better plan to keep quiet.

'Detective Gotou, it's terrible!'

Suddenly, the door opened and Ishii flew into the room like he was falling.

'What happened?' asked Gotou, but Ishii's breath had escaped him and he couldn't speak.

Honestly. Then there was no meaning in rushing here.

'E-e-excuse me... Earlier, the exorcist contacted Makoto-san saying another person disappeared from a locked room...'

Ishii finally spoke.

This was the second person –

'D-disappeared? Who?'

'The young man called Ide Yuuya who was at the bar last night.'

Ideuchi stood up in reaction to Ishii's words.

This idiot. His timing was the worst.

'Oi, Ishii. Tell me in detail about what you just said.'

Ideuchi seemed to have sensed the situation right away and drew closer to Ishii. Ishii replied with an energetic 'Yes sir!' and tried to continue.

'It's nothing!'

Gotou jumped up from the sofa and covered Ishii's mouth.

'I was asking Ishii.'

Ideuchi drew closer, like he felt something.

Ishii still didn't seem to understand the situation. It'd be best for them to get out of here as quickly as they could.

'It's really nothing,' Gotou said, and then he dragged Ishii out of the room.

He wanted to avoid having Ideuchi crawling around them at least. In the worst situation, he might forcefully make them wash their hands of the case.

Gotou couldn't hide it forever, but he wanted to stretch the time as much as he could.

'Ishii, we're running.'

'Eh? Running? What do you mean?'

'I don't have the time to explain. We're going before this becomes troublesome.'

Gotou started running. Ishii started running after him as well.

He fell –

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Gotou, who had run from Ideuchi, brought Ishii and Makoto straight away to Meisei University, so that they could meet one of the most contrary people in history, who had taken up residence at the university.

'What did you come here for so late at night?'

Yakumo was complaining as usual, but when Gotou started explaining the situation, he pinched his brow with his fingers and listened without saying a word.

Ishii and Makoto might not have been able to calm down, because they were standing next to each other by the wall instead of sitting down.

It took some time for Gotou to share all the information he knew.

It had felt like he'd understood the situation, hazy as it was, but when he explained from the start like this, he noticed that everything was actually still half-baked.

After Gotou finished talking, Yakumo thought for a while, but he finally gave Gotou a sharp look and started speaking.

'Did anyone see Yuuya-san disappear?'

'Nobody here did. Seems like Shinichi who I talked about just now was there with him. She called to check.'

Makoto nodded silently to confirm what Gotou said.

'There is a possibility that the person called Shinichi-san may be the same person as Oori Kazushi-san from the assault case then.'

'Yeah, that's right.'

They didn't have fingerprints or any physical evidence, but that had to be it if they looked at it from the situation.

'Then the exorcist, Kamiyama-san, declared that this series of incidents was caused by Sawaguchi Rika-san's grudge.'

'Yeah, that's right.'

Yakumo put his index finger to his brow.

'I've got it,' he said quietly.

'W-w-wha – you've got it?'

He wasn't Ishii, but Gotou had to stutter in a loud voice in his surprise.

'I've said this before – please don't speak so loudly. At this distance, I can hear you if you just speak normally.'

Yakumo was covering his ears as usual to show how loud he thought Gotou was. Even though he had to know how important what he had said was.

'Have you really got it?'

'Please don't make me say it again. Well, there are some parts that I don't understand, but I've roughly grasped the situation with this series of incidents.'

'Explain it then!'

Even if Yakumo complained about his loud voice, Gotou couldn't calm down.

It appeared that Ishii and Makoto felt the same way. The mood had been painful, but the two of them were now leaning forward, eating up the conversation.

'You really are a hasty person. This is just my conjecture – I have no proof at all. If we make a big fuss without proof, he'll get away.'

That's true –

'To say nothing of how there haven't been any victims that seem like victims in this case. The police wouldn't move for something like this.'

Well, what Yakumo said made sense.

It would be a different story if the police would acknowledge that a ghost made somebody disappear, but as long as they wouldn't, they wouldn't move at all.

But then –

'What should we do?'

'It will be troublesome, but you should investigate more. Once we have all our cards, all we can do is go to the scene.'

The corners of Yakumo's lips turned up in a smirk.

Even if Gotou asked him more, Yakumo would just be as slippery as an eel without saying anything at all. It was mortifying, but it seemed like all Gotou could do was obey Yakumo's instructions.

'Then what should we be investigating exactly?'

'First, there is something I would like you to confirm.'

'What?'

Gotou slacked his tie because he found it hard to breathe.

'The investigation has not been finished yet. Please look into the bartender's personal history. Oori Kazushi's as well. He is working at an event planning company, correct? Please look into all the work he has done.'

Gotou understood why he should look into the bartender.

However, he didn't understand why he should look into Oori Kazushi's work. It didn't seem like looking into something like that would be of any use.

'Now, Ishii-san.'

Yakumo took a nearby notebook and wrote something with his pen. He ripped the page out and handed it to Ishii.

Ishii took the memo nervously.

'It may be a bit troublesome, but please prepare the items listed there as quickly as you can.'

'What on earth is this?'

Yakumo waved away Ishii's words.

'Please don't ask me right now. If there is anything you don't know, please try asking Hata-san. He should know.'

Ishii consented with a sigh.

'E-excuse me, but is there anything I can do to help?'

Makoto stepped forward and spoke up. Yakumo looked at Makoto with a raised eyebrow. Makoto flinched, but she continued speaking.

'Asami – my friend – has gone missing. Please let me do something as well.'

Gotou understood Makoto's feelings well, so he said, 'Why not let her help Ishii? She'll do better with that too.'

Yakumo ran his fingers through his hair like he thought it troublesome.

'Please don't say something so idiotic. I will say this now, but Makoto-san is in an extremely dangerous situation.'

'What do you mean!?' Gotou shouted.

'Like I said, please don't speak so loudly.'

'Shut up! What do you mean, dangerous?'

'I mean exactly what I said.'

Yakumo responded to Gotou's question with an extremely natural expression.

'Currently, two people are missing. You are likely the next target, Makoto-san.'

Yakumo pointed at Makoto.

At that moment, the blood drained from Makoto's face. It looked like Yakumo had drained Makoto's vitality himself.

Does that mean Makoto's going to disappear too –

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Ishii was driving the car.

Gotou was in the passenger seat and Makoto was in the backseat.

Ishii didn't understand what Yakumo was thinking at all.

However, they couldn't ignore Yakumo after he'd said Makoto would be the next target, so they were driving her home.

Gotou was smoking one cigarette after another, while Makoto was looking down and rubbing her hands on top of her lap, like she was cold.

Nobody spoke.

'Is the air conditioning too strong?' said Ishii, unable to bear with suffocating atmosphere in the car, but Makoto just shook her head.

It really had become a serious state of affairs.

From the way Yakumo was talking, it sounded like the case would be over soon, but unfortunately, Ishii didn't think it would.

The series of incidents this time couldn't be settled simply with just victims and assailants.

If it was like Kamiyama said and Rika's grudge had caused these incidents, there would never be an end.

No matter what words they used to console her, her hatred couldn't be cured.

'You can just leave me at the next corner,' Makoto said from the backseat.

Her father was the chief of the police. It would be unfortunate in a number of ways if they ran into him. Makoto was probably looking out for them.

Ishii looked to Gotou for a decision.

'The next corner then.'

Gotou put out his cigarette in the ashtray.

Ishii listened to Gotou's instructions and stopped the car at the intersection with the hazard lights on. He saw a white van parked ten metres ahead of them.

It looked like somebody was in it, but the engine wasn't on.

'Really, thank you very much.'

After Makoto bowed her head deeply and got off the car, she turned left at the intersection and walked away.

A man got off the van and walked in the same direction as Makoto.

The car's licence plate was covered with black tape so it couldn't be read.

'Detective Gotou, look...'

Ishii's heart was thumping as he pointed at the back of the man turning the corner.

'What?'

'Just now, a man walked in the same direction as Makoto-san.'

'A man?'

Gotou was too slow, so when he turned his eyes, the man had already turned the corner.

Ishii remembered the feeling that was rising in the pit of his stomach. He had a bad feeling about this.

'I'm going to go check on the situation.'

'What situation?'

Ishii turned away from Gotou's question and got off the car. He started walking briskly towards Makoto and the man.

The further he went into the dark, the faster his heart pounded. His back was coated in sweat.

The residential area at night was blanketed in silence.

The streetlights placed at intervals made it all the more eerie.

Makoto's house was about fifty metres down the road, after turning the corner at the park.

When he approached the park, there was the sound of a tree branch rustling. Ishii jumped up in terror like a fish that had been caught and reeled.

He took deep breaths and looked over to see somebody's figure standing across from the shrubs.

'W-w-who's there?' Ishii called, his voice shaking.

The figure threw what he was holding – something like an iron pipe – and ran in the other direction.

Should he make chase? While Ishii was trying to come to a decision, the figure disappeared into the dark.

It was too late to start the chase now. Ishii gave up and slowly went into the park. He looked around, but Makoto was nowhere to be found.

Maybe she had gone ahead and had already gotten home. Well, that would be good.

His tension eased.

The next moment –

Something grabbed onto Ishii's right ankle.

There was a woman with blood coming out of her head by Ishii's feet.

'Aaaaahh!'

Ishii let out a bloodcurdling shriek.

'Stay away. Stay away.'

He was trying to shake off the hand gripping to his ankle when he kicked the woman's head with his left foot.

The woman lost her strength and suddenly collapsed.

Eh, could it be –

Ishii's bad feeling struck home. The bleeding woman who had collapsed was Makoto.

I know I was surprised, but what have I done –

* * *

Gotou was staring out absentmindedly from the passenger seat of the car.

What's got Ishii so worked up –

Just as he had lit up his umpteenth cigarette, he saw a man run around the intersection corner. He looked to be in a hurry, and he got in the white van that had been parked there since earlier.

The image of the assault he had seen earlier suddenly came up in Gotou's head.

The car that had been tailing Sawaguchi Rika had been a white van. The same model that was parked in front of him.

On top of that, the number was hidden with tape. It was suspicious. Maybe he should question him –

Gotou got out of the car immediately and briskly approached the white van.

'Oi. You. Show me your licence.'

Gotou peered into the white van to see the driver seat and was startled. The man in the driver's seat was wearing a black mask.

'Show me your face.'

At the same time as Gotou said that, the car engine started.

'Wait! Hey!' yelled Gotou, but the white van drove off into the dark night.

'Damn it!'

Gotou kicked the asphalt in his anger.

– It hurts.

怨念

第三章

FILE:
03

file 03: grudge

-

1

-

In the morning, Haruka visited Yakumo's secret hiding place.

She was wearing the necklace she had received from Yakumo yesterday, of course. She wanted to see how he would react.

That said, the fixture that connected the chain of the necklace she had brought home had broken, so she couldn't wear it as it was.

She just went and switched it with a leather cord from another necklace she had at home.

She thought it matched pretty well.

Yakumo was sitting in the chair he always did with his bedhead and sleepy eyes as usual, and he said, sounding like a fizzy drink that had gone flat, 'You again?'

It wasn't just his words – not even his expression changed. He didn't notice even when she tried.

'You look sleepy as usual.'

Though she felt disappointed, Haruka sat down across from Yakumo.

'I'm busy.'

'I can't tell.'

'There's somewhere I have to go after this.'

'Really. Even though I thought I'd keep you company since you were free.'

'It's the opposite,' said Yakumo in the same tone of voice, and then he slowly stood up.

So he really was heading out. Haruka was going to give up when Yakumo called out to her.

'Will you go too?'

'Go where?'

She asked that, but the truth was it didn't matter where.

Since Yakumo had gone out of his way to invite her, of course she would go.

'The continuation of the case. There's something I have to investigate.'

Ah, so that's what it was –

That case wasn't finished yet. Since she had been entrusted with the diary, she had a duty to see the case to the end.

'Of course I'll go.'

-

They walked from the university to the station, took a cab and walked another fifteen minutes.

When they reached the apartment they were aiming for, Haruka was covered in enough sweat to warrant a change of clothes.

Yakumo talked the manager into unlocking the auto-lock and lending them the key to the roof of the apartment. Then, they took the elevator up to the seventh floor and took the stairs up from there to the roof.

There was no railing or fence – the edge was just a little bit taller, like it had been folded back.

Haruka stood in front of that edge and narrowed her eyes.

She had an unbroken view of the town, cutting through the mountain like a miniature garden.

When she looked at it like this, it didn't feel like anybody lived there.

A scene with only buildings lined up inhumanly and irregularly. However, many people's emotions existed there.

Before Sawaguchi Rika-san jumped from this rooftop, what did she feel –

With his hands in his pockets, Yakumo jumped onto the highest edge. It scared Haruka to look at him.

'Why do you think she jumped from here?'

Yakumo spoke to the air.

'Because she had decided to die...'

'Correct. That was not an impulsive decision. She had decided to die with a strong intent.'

'Why do you think that?'

'Her family lived on the fifth floor of this apartment. If it had been an impulsive decision, she would have jumped from there.'

'I see...'

'However, she didn't do that. She purposefully went up the stairs, somehow opened the locked door to the rooftop and stood here.'

It was just as Yakumo said. In order to come here, she would have had to borrow the key from the manager. That would take a lot of effort. It didn't feel impulsive – it felt planned.

Yakumo looked up at the sky.

Haruka looked at the sky in the same way. A clear blue sky, discrepant with the situation, spread out above them.

The clouds carried by the wind looked like waves.

'Is there some meaning to this place?' Yakumo said, still looking up at the sky.

'Maybe it has some special memories.'

'That may be it. She might have come here in her pain to be soothed rather than to die.'

Yakumo turned his gaze to the town that spread out below them. His eyes seemed incredibly sad.

Yakumo didn't often put his own feelings honestly into words, so his eyes did a surprising amount of talking for him.

'So you really were still here,' said Yakumo as he turned around.

He was looking directly behind Haruka. Was someone there?

Haruka turned around, but she couldn't see anything. She turned back to look at Yakumo for an answer.

'Sawaguchi Rika-san, yes?' said Yakumo.

Oh, so she came here?

That was what Yakumo saw.

After a silence, Yakumo jumped off the edge and slowly started walking.

He passed by Haruka and proceeded straight forward, towards where Haruka thought Rika was.

The photo of Rika she had seen at the altar came up in Haruka's mind.

When she was in the photo, she had been about the same age as Haruka and she had smiled really happily, showing her teeth.

Haruka couldn't feel any shadow of death from it.

What sort of expression did she have here now?

Haruka followed Yakumo's back with her gaze. Even though she couldn't see her, Rika was in front of that gaze.

'Let's put an end to this already.'

Yakumo spoke in a gentle tone, like he was speaking to a child.

'Death won't bring release,' Yakumo continued.

The cry of the cicada sounded frightfully loud.

Because of the heat which scorched her skin, sweat came down from her forehead and dripped from her chin to the concrete.

'Stop already!'

Yakumo's voice drowned out the cry of the cicadas.

For a while, Yakumo stood as still as if time had stopped, but finally, he gave up and shook his head while looking down.

'It's no use. As I thought, my voice won't reach her.'

'What do you mean?' asked Haruka, who couldn't understand what he'd said.

'It looks like I really will have to have him exorcise her.'

After saying that, Yakumo took out his mobile phone.

By him, does he mean that that exorcist we met before –

-

2

-

Gotou visited Hata's hospital. He was sipping tea in his usual heedless manner.

'You look really tired.'

'I don't enjoy my work as much as you enjoy yours, old man,' said Gotou as he handed Hata a memo.

It was the one Yakumo handed to Ishii yesterday. This should have been Ishii's job, but he couldn't come since he was busy elsewhere.

Honestly. Kicking the face of the chief's daughter – there was a limit even to clumsiness.

Thanks to that, Ishii was being wrongfully doubted and was probably strictly restrained right now, even though he had gone to help Makoto.

'What is this?' asked Hata, looking at the memo with a complex expression on his face.

'I want you to collect the items on that list. And make it fast.'

'What are you going to do once you've got them?'

'I want to ask that myself.'

Gotou crossed his arms as he tossed out that comment.

Hata brought his face closer to Gotou's and looked at him with cloudy eyes, as if he were tasting him. It was creepy. Did Hata want to autopsy him?

'You should take some time off,' said Hata, finally letting his face muscles go slack. He spoke gently, like he was looking out for his kid.

'What are you saying all of a sudden?'

'I'd thought of saying it before, but you're not suited to being a detective. Why not take some time off and think about it?'

'Huh?'

Not suited to being a detective, he says –

Nobody had ever told him that before, and the thought had never crossed his mind.

'It hurts to look at you. You're rebelling against the police, an organisation you can't win against, and you empathise with the victims of each of your cases and your anger just explodes. It's like you're hurting yourself.'

'I'm not that masochistic.'

'Then why are you blaming yourself? You'll just be worn out if you keep putting the burden for everything on your shoulders even when you could just let it go.'

'Mind your own business.'

'Why are you still a detective after all that?'

Damn this perverted old man for saying the same thing as Yakumo.

Do I look like I'm suffering that much? They're wrong. I'm not suffering. Reason being –

'I just rebel against the organisation because I find it frustrating. You say I empathise with the victims? Of course I do! If you asked me, it'd be stranger to look at them like a bystander!'

Gotou talked at length in his agitation.

He wasn't trying to look good or anything – that was how he really felt.

Hata sighed like he was tired of Gotou. What's with that look of pity? Gotou didn't have the right to have people look at him with pity.

Most victims were angry at their assailants, but they couldn't let it out. Sawaguchi Rika was a good example.

She had even taken her life because of all that she suffered.

Gotou couldn't silently watch that. That was all.

He didn't know why. That was just the sort of person he was.

'Well, fine. All I have to do is prepare the items written on here, correct?'

'Does it look like it'll work out?'

'I won't be able to do it by myself, but nothing looks like it'll make for a wild goose chase.'

'I'll come again this evening.'

After saying that, Gotou left the room.

The previous case and the current one with Sawaguchi Rika. There had so much happening lately that he might have been lost in thought, which was unlike him.

It was the end for Gotou though if even this old geezer was worrying about him.

There was no point dwelling on it. He just had to work now.

Gotou left the hospital and got into the car he had parked in the parking lot when his mobile phone started ringing.

It was from Yakumo. There were a number of things he had to tell him, so the timing was perfect.

<How is the situation?>

Yakumo spoke without even greeting him first.

He was the one who was always complaining about how Gotou didn't have good phone manners. Well, conversely, it would feel creepy if that guy greeted him politely.

'Yakumo, we can't treat this lightly. Makoto was assaulted last night,' said Gotou.

<I wasn't treating this lightly. That was why I warned you.>

'Shut up!'

It was just as Yakumo said. He might have been the one treating the situation lightly.

He regretted not sending her all the way home.

<Is she all right?>

'She's in hospital. It appears that her head was hit, but she'll be fine. Seems like the perp was wearing a mask, but there was a message which said, "Don't stick your neck in any more than this."'

He left out how Ishii had kicked Makoto's face. If he told Yakumo, he'd tease Ishii until he fainted. Right now, the guy was as depressed as if he had seen the end of the world.

<A police warning?>

'Yeah. And Makoto didn't see the guy's face, but she remembers seeing that tattoo on his arm.'

<The snake and the cross?>

'That's right.'

Makoto had just started looking into the assault case from five years ago again. With this timing, Oori Kazushi was probably the one who had assaulted her.

It'd be great if he could just stop his roundabout investigation and arrest Oori.

<And how is the investigation I asked you to conduct?>

'Ah, I looked into the bartender called Yagi.'

Gotou took a memo from his pocket.

Gotou hadn't had the time to investigate with the incident last night, so he asked Eriko to. She'd replied first thing in the morning.

<How was it?>

'The bartender Yagi Keita is the son of Yagi Yasushi, the former Diet member.'

'And?' Yakumo pressed.

'Yasushi was arrested three years ago for the embezzlement of his secretary's wages and lost his standing.'

<Ah, that case.>

Yakumo sounded like he knew about it.

Gotou hadn't, but it seemed like it had been a pretty big deal. Eriko had also gotten the results of the investigation so quickly because she remembered Yasushi's name.

'After he lost his standing, he ate himself out of his fortune, but Yasushi passed away two years ago due to cancer. That bar was left behind as his son's only inheritance.'

<Is that so? And how about Oori-san's work?>

'I'm just about to head there.'

So slow – Gotou readied himself for that complaint, but Yakumo responded differently than what he had expected.

<I understand. Gotou-san, could you put off the matter with Oori-san and meet with Makoto-san?'

She'd just needed three stitches for her head injury. She was just in the hospital for a check-up now, so meeting her should be possible.

'OK.'

<I see. Please come pick me up. I am at the apartment Rika-san used to live in.>

'Am I a taxi?'

<You're something like it, aren't you?>

This guy. How much more am I supposed to take –

The call ended before Gotou could let out his anger.

-

3

-

When Gotou's car reached the front of the apartment, Yakumo got into the passenger seat.

Then, Haruka got into the back seat. She shouldn't have had anything to do with the case, but –

'You on a date?'

Gotou made fun of Yakumo with his usual response.

'If you are going to make such boring and false assumptions, I'll get off the car immediately.'

'My bad.'

Was he kidding? Like Gotou would let him do that. Gotou started the car before Yakumo could change his mind.

I'm glad we're regrouping, but –

'Yakumo, what do you want to ask Makoto?'

'There's nothing in particular that I want to ask.'

Yakumo yawned in boredom at Gotou's question.

'You're the one who said you wanted to see her.'

'That's why I'm going to see her.'

'What for?'

'Because she's in hospital.'

Gotou started grinding his teeth loudly in his irritation.

Sorry, Makoto, but Yakumo should've known better than anyone that they didn't have the time to take it easy with a visit to the hospital.

'Tell me the truth.'

'Gotou-san, it's useless. I asked him many times myself, but he won't tell me anything.'

Haruka replied in Yakumo's stead.

'You've gotten wrapped up in this too, Haruka-chan?'

'That's right. He asked me to help out with various parts of the investigation.'

Haruka said that with a sour look, but Gotou felt like she probably didn't really feel that way on the inside.

She was probably happy that she'd been promoted from the usual troublemaker to the assistant.

'Yakumo, you know the truth behind the case, right?'

'Right – why don't you just tell us?'

Haruka agreed with Gotou, who wouldn't stop pressing the issue.

'You two always come to your own conclusions right away. That's why you always call me in for your troubles.'

'Shut up!' said Gotou and Haruka at the same time.

-

The three of them went through the hospital entrance to see Ishii sitting on the sofa while cradling his head.

'What are you doing?'

'Ah, yes, er, apologising to Makoto-san...'

Ishii leapt up. His gaze darted everywhere – it seemed like he couldn't relax.

'Did you?'

'That's... er...'

Ishii looked at his feet and stopped talking.

Honestly. What a pathetic guy.

'Hurry up and go!'

Ishii's shoulders shook at Gotou's yell.

'Gotou-san, don't yell at him – he looks so pitiful,' Haruka interrupted.

Ishii's forehead was covered in sweat, and he kept on fixing the position of his glasses with his finger. He really was a pathetic guy – a girl younger than him had to stand up for him.

'Ishii-san, let's go together. We are heading to see her as well,' said Yakumo.

'Y-yes.'

Ishii finally raised his head and replied.

Honestly. It was the end for him if he needed to be saved by a university student. In any case, Gotou hit the back of Ishii's head.

They asked the employee at the reception desk where Makoto's room was and headed for the hospital room together.

'We're coming in!' said Gotou loudly while going into the room.

Yakumo followed him. The private room was about four tatami in size. When your dad was well-known, there really were differences in how you were treated for things like this.

'Ah, Detective Gotou.'

Makoto sat up on the bed.

Her head was bandaged, but she looked much better than he'd imagined she would.

'Hey. We're just here to check up on you.'

Gotou raised his hand, pulled out a round chair from below the bed and sat down. Yakumo stood by the bed with a blank expression without sitting.

'Oh, you didn't have to – I've only been hospitalised for a check-up, so I'll be let out this evening.'

Gotou was glad it wasn't a big deal.

'Sorry about my partner – Ishii.'

Gotou called for him, so Ishii finally came in with a completely red face. Haruka followed after him.

Gotou couldn't tell who had been the one who was hospitalised.

'Come on, Ishii-san.'

Haruka pushed him forward, so Ishii staggered towards Makoto's bed and bowed deeply.

'I am truly sorry.'

His voice was trembling like he would start crying at any moment.

'No, please don't worry about it so much.'

'No, but I did something awful...' said Ishii, his head still bowed.

Was he reflecting on his actions, or was he unable to look at Makoto's face... Gotou couldn't suppress the feeling that it was the latter.

'I'll apologise too. Sorry about that.'

Gotou bowed his head as well.

'It isn't as if Ishii-san had any ill will. Please raise your heads.'

Makoto, seeming flustered, placed a hand on Ishii's shoulder.

'I'm no good as a detective. I planned to save you, but...'

'That's not true at all.'

Makoto comforted Ishii, who sounded like he was going to cry.

What a pathetic scene.

'Excuse me, but since there isn't much time, could I advance the conversation?'

Yakumo interrupted the apologies while running a hand through his hair.

'Oh, that's right,' Gotou said while pushing Ishii aside.

Yakumo walked forward into the now empty space.

'Actually, there is something I would like to ask you, Makoto-san.'

'Ah, yes. If I could be of any help.'

Makoto corrected her posture on the bed. Her expression was stiff, like she was going to undergo an interrogation.

'I want to ask about Asami-san, who has disappeared.'

'About Asami?'

'She was in the same year as you when you were in university, yes?'

'Yes, she was.'

'Sickness or injury, any reason is fine. Did she ever take an extended break from school?'

'She did,' replied Makoto with a surprised expression on her face.

'When was that?'

'During our fourth year of university. Because of an illness, I couldn't contact her for about a month.'

'So that was the case then.'

Yakumo nodded in satisfaction, but Gotou didn't understand.

'Oi. Yakumo.'

'Please be quiet,' Yakumo said, cutting him off. 'How was she after that?'

'That's... Asami returned home after that. I only communicated with her through email and New Year's cards after that and didn't meet with her directly until we met again at the bar.'

'Was Asami-san the one who said to meet at the bar?'

'Yes. She had been relocated to Tokyo for work.'

'I see,' murmured Yakumo.

'Does that have something to do with this case?'

Makoto urged Yakumo for an answer, but he didn't reply.

'May I ask you one more thing?'

'Yes...'

'The tattoo with that pattern was on the arm of the person who assaulted you, yes?'

Makoto nodded to answer Yakumo's question.

'Yakumo. Our perp has to be Oori Kazushi. We have to go and —'

'I did say to please be quiet.'

Yakumo looked at Gotou, who had interrupted, with an incredibly annoyed expression.

He was unusually irritated. Gotou had thought Yakumo hadn't cared much about this case, but he had been wrong.

'The tattoo was there,' said Makoto firmly.

'Was that on the right arm or the left arm?'

'Left... I think.'

'I see.'

'Now that you mention it, Kamiyama-san asked the same thing about the tattoo just earlier.'

The moment Yakumo heard that, his cheek twitched and he looked unusually suspicious.

Why did Kamiyama come here –

'Does Kamiyama-shi know about this incident as well?'

'Yes. He kept on apologising, saying “I'm sorry” again and again.'

After Yakumo heard Makoto's response, he sighed, seeming troubled.

That exorcist apologised to Makoto. Why? Does he have a reason to apologise –

'Gotou-san, a change of plans. Preparations are not in order yet, but let us go to the exorcism.'

'Exorcism?'

Gotou's voice cracked because what Yakumo said had been so unexpected.

He hadn't thought he'd hear the word exorcism from Yakumo, who believed that that ghosts were clusters of the emotions of the dead.

'As well, Makoto-san, I have a request.'

'A request...?'

Makoto cocked her head.

Yakumo didn't pay any attention to her response and whispered something into Makoto's ear.

'Would that be possible?'

'I think it would be fine.'

Makoto replied firmly to Yakumo's request.

For some reason, it seemed like they were in a rush all of a sudden.

'Ishii-san, please help Makoto-san.'

'Eh, ah, yes.'

Ishii gave a flustered reply.

'Now, Gotou-san, we're going.'

We're going, he says –

'Where to?'

'Please, there is no time to lose.'

Yakumo briskly headed for the hospital room door.

It annoyed him to be ordered around by a university student, but there was no helping it this time.

Gotou responded with a 'Got it' and followed Yakumo.

'Wait, Yakumo-kun. How about me?'

Haruka, the only one with no instructions, grabbed onto the arm of Yakumo, who had been trying to leave hurriedly.

'You can go home already.'

'Wait, Yakumo-kun.'

Yakumo ignored Haruka and left the room.

He really just did whatever he wanted.

Gotou was grumbling on the inside, but he left the hospital room after Yakumo.

-

4

-

Before he took off in the car, Gotou contacted Hata through his mobile phone.

Of course, at Yakumo's instruction.

'Old man. You got the stuff on the memo?' said Gotou once Hata picked up.

<Don't make it sound so easy. I've only got one. The others will have to wait until tomorrow.>

'Can't you hurry it up?'

<I have other work too. Don't be so selfish. And this is all out of my jurisdiction in the first place.>

Hata was quite right.

Since Gotou had just made the request this morning, there was no way Hata would be done preparing in only a few hours.

'Says he's only got one. What're you going to do?'

Gotou covered the receiver and asked Yakumo beside him this question.

'What does he have prepared?'

'Old man, what do you have prepared?'

Gotou repeated Yakumo's words.

<The light.>

It sounded like a baseball position¹.

'Says he's got the light.'

1 The word light was written in katakana (raito or ライト) which is the same way the position of right fielder is written in Japanese.

'That's sufficient. The rest will work out somehow or other...'

Yakumo was muttering something.

'Then what are you going to do?'

'Please tell Hata-san to bring that to Inoue Asami-san's apartment.'

Did Yakumo plan to go there now?

Gotou didn't know what Yakumo was doing, but he wasn't going to grumble after coming this far. He'd go with him to the end.

'Oi, old man. I want you to bring that where I tell you to.'

<I refuse. I said this earlier – I'm busy.>

This damn old man. Gotou would go pull his head off his shoulders.

While Gotou was seething with rage, Yakumo took the mobile phone from beside him.

'Hata-san, this is Yakumo... Could I make a request? I am going to perform an exorcism now... Yes. The solution to the locked room case.'

Yakumo smirked as he talked.

'Thank you very much.'

After he said that, he threw the mobile phone back to Gotou. If he was going to interrupt, he should just talk himself in the first place, honestly.

'Gotou-san, please tell Hata-san the address.'

Yes, yes, he would be delighted to.

* * *

When Gotou arrived in front of the apartment where Asami disappeared, an old man in white was standing in front of the entrance.

He had a paper bag in his right hand.

'Hey, Yakumo-kun. It's been a while.'

Hata looked over Yakumo with eyes full of curiosity.

It really was creepy, so Gotou wished he would stop. If he took his eyes off this old man, he might go and dissect Yakumo right then.

'Hata-san, the thing we mentioned?'

Hata showed Yakumo what was inside the paper bag. Gotou had given the memo to Hata without checking its contents, so he didn't know what had been written.

He'd said 'light' earlier, but if it were just a normal light, Yakumo wouldn't have had to go out of his way to ask for it.

'This is fine, yes?'

'Yes, thank you very much. Gotou-san, what are you staring so vacantly for? We're going.'

Honestly, using a detective like a gopher. Gotou would definitely take a swing at him once this case was over. Gotou vowed that in his heart, opened the door with the key he had borrowed and went through the entrance with Yakumo and Hata.

When he pressed the elevator, the lift was fortunately on the first floor so the door opened right away.

Yakumo got into the elevator and made a call on his mobile phone while pressing the 'Open' button.

'Please keep it like this for a bit.'

Yakumo addressed the person on the other side of the phone.

Gotou heard the person on the other end say <What on earth is it?>. She was probably Haruka.

'Gotou-san, could you watch the time?'

After Yakumo said that, Gotou turned his eyes to the second hand of his wristwatch.

'OK.'

At the same time as Gotou replied, Yakumo pressed the '9' and then the 'Close' buttons.

There was the sound of the winch winding up as the elevator started moving.

'The call ended. How many seconds was it?'

Yakumo spoke at around the same time as the display showed that they were on the third floor.

'Eleven seconds.'

The elevator continued going up.

They arrived at the ninth floor. Yakumo ran out the moment the door opened.

Gotou followed after him. He headed straight out of the elevator and then turned right. Another right. It wasn't so noticeable when walking, but it was a narrow path.

'How many seconds has it been now?'

After reaching Asami's room door, Yakumo spoke. Gotou turned his eyes to his wristwatch immediately.

'Forty-five seconds.'

'Thirty-four seconds since the call cut off then? It isn't an impossible number.'

'What on earth are you doing?'

Hata had leisurely walked up to them.

Gotou had no idea either. He turned his gaze to Yakumo.

'This is an experiment related to the locked room disappearance phenomenon,' said Yakumo with narrowed eyes.

'Yakumo-kun, is that really possible?'

Yakumo shook his head at Hata's question.

'Hata-san, if you are asking whether it was a spiritual phenomenon, the answer to your question is no. If you are asking whether a person could have done it, the answer is yes. I proved it just now.'

'Y-you proved it?'

'Like I've said before, please do not speak so loudly next to my ear.'

Yakumo complained about the volume of Gotou's voice again, but it would be stranger if he had heard what Yakumo said and been calm.

'Yakumo. What do you mean?'

'More importantly, Gotou-san, do you have the key to this room?'

More importantly, this guy said.

Gotou withstood the urge to stamp his feet in frustration and handed the key to Asami's room to Yakumo.

Yakumo quickly unlocked the door and went into the room. Gotou and then Hata followed after him.

The room had been left as it was after Asami's disappearance –

'Hey, Yakumo. It's about time for an explanation. What on earth happened?' said Gotou, unable to bear it.

'Have you not noticed yet?'

'I'm asking because I haven't!' yelled Gotou angrily.

'All the spiritual phenomena this time have been tricks.'

Yakumo put his index finger to his brow as he said that.

'Tricks?'

Was he saying that Asami's disappearance from a locked room and the ghost he saw in this room – that all of these were tricks?

'Correct. I will prove that now. Hata-san.'

After Yakumo said that, Hata took something that looked like a torch out of the paper bag and handed it to Yakumo.

It had the shape of a fluorescent lampstand, but the fluorescent tube was a deep bluish purple

instead of the white colour he usually saw.

'Gotou-san, you saw the ghost near that window, yes?'

Yakumo pointed at the glass in the window that connected to the veranda.

That's right. That's where. The longhaired woman covered in blood had glared at me from that window. Those eyes had been filled with a strong hatred –

After Gotou responded with a nod, Yakumo plugged the light into a nearby socket.

'Please take a good look.'

Yakumo flicked the switch for the light. A bluish purple light hit the window.

At the same time, a faint image of a woman appeared on the window.

The woman from that time –

'W-wha – this –'

'So that's how it was!'

Hata drowned out Gotou's surprise with his wonder.

Did the old man understand already? Gotou didn't understand at all.

'What is this!?'

'You really don't know anything. This is a black light.'

Hata crossed his arms as he made fun of him.

'Black light?'

'Yes. It's made like a fluorescent light, but it uses bluish purple glass and cuts out a fixed portion of visible light.'

Hata was speaking triumphantly, but Gotou didn't understand what he meant.

'Explain it so I'll understand.'

'In short, images and words drawn using special fluorescent pigments can't normally be seen, but you can see them if you shine a black light on them,' Hata said with a snort.

'You often see it in karaoke rooms,' offered Yakumo as an additional explanation. When Gotou heard that, he finally understood the situation.

So the picture of the woman was drawn on the window so she showed up in the window when a black light was shone on it.

'If the paint is tinted, can't you tell?'

'In the past, these fluorescent pigments came only in white, but recently transparent ones have been developed. It can only be seen faintly now, but when you saw this picture, Gotou-san, it was night, and the lights had been off before the woman appeared. Is that correct?'

'Yeah, that's right.'

Gotou recalled what had happened then.

Before the woman's ghost appeared, the lights had been off. Then, the ghost appeared and the lights came back on while he was surprised.

If he'd looked longer, he probably would have noticed that it was a picture, but there had only been a short period of time.

That was the main point of the production.

'There should be a remote control switch separate from the switch on the wall to turn on and off the lights. The voice that said "Die" should have come from a small speaker somewhere. It will be difficult to search for it now without a tool, but...'

The room itself is like a haunted mansion –

Now, Gotou had a question.

'Wait a minute. If this was all set up from before...'

An unbelievable idea was growing in Gotou's mind.

'That's right. The person who lives here, Asami-san, knew about it.'

Yakumo cast his eyes down slightly as he said that.

'Why didn't Asami say anything if she knew?'

'Let's ask the person herself,' said Yakumo with an expression that looked sad. Did he know where she was?

Plus, the mystery of the ghost had been solved, but Asami's disappearance from a locked room was still a mystery. Did he plan to ask her directly for that too?

Confusion and irritation – a variety of emotions were mixed up and about to burst within Gotou.

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Gotou gripped the handle with a hunched back in his displeasure.

Yakumo was yawning in the passenger seat. Hata was grinning in the back.

'So how will you solve the disappearance?'

Gotou looked at Yakumo in the passenger seat.

'Have you still not noticed?'

Yakumo smirked, and Hata followed with a creepy giggle.

Somehow, the two of them looked like demons.

'You're slow as usual,' said Hata with shaking shoulders.

'Old man, you don't know either, right?'

'Don't use your head as a reference. If I know it's a trick, it's simple.'

Hata gave an immediate reply to Gotou's objection.

'Do you really understand?'

'You did the experiment earlier, yes? There was more than enough time.'

Hata shook his head boastfully.

So Gotou was the only one who didn't understand. That was irritating.

'Gotou-san, it took thirty-four seconds to reach Asami-san's room after the call cut off.'

Maybe he pitied Gotou, because Yakumo started explaining with sleepy eyes.

'Ah, yeah about that long.'

'If the major premise is that Asami-san knew about the trick, there is one answer.'

Yakumo paused.

Gotou's mouth felt dry, so he cleared his throat and swallowed.

'After the call cut off, she smeared her mobile phone with blood and left the room by herself.'

'W-what!?!'

Gotou was so shocked he slammed the breaks. Yakumo and Hata pitched forward.

'That's dangerous!' shrieked Hata in objection from the back seat. The cars driving behind them honked as well.

'My bad.'

Gotou gave an honest apology and started the car, but Hata was the strange one for being so calm after hearing that just now. He should have been surprised.

'Then you're saying she caused her own disappearance?'

Gotou asked to organise his thoughts.

'That's right,' Yakumo replied immediately.

'That's stupid. Putting aside that exorcist, Ishii and Makoto were at the scene too. How would she disappear in the middle of that?'

'Gotou-san, if you say that, you have already fallen for the trick.'

'What do you mean?'

'Asami-san, who disappeared, is the victim. Then, Ishii-san and Makoto-san should have seen the scene. That preconception is the spirit behind this trick.'

'Asami's not the victim?'

'No, she is not. Though I had not understood why she had done this up until now, I discovered that reason from what Makoto-san said earlier, though it is still my inference.'

'That so...'

'Yes. Asami-san had a goal and left the room of her own volition,' declared Yakumo.

Just as Yakumo said, he had been thinking with the presupposition that Inoue Asami disappeared against her will.

Asami was Makoto's friend, which may have been the reason for that preconception.

That was why the disappearance from the locked room had troubled him.

However, if she left the room on her own, there was no problem at all. Had she deceived all of them with her one-woman play? There was still something Gotou didn't understand though.

'She could leave the room if there were thirty-four seconds, but the time from when they get off the elevator to when they saw her room should've been shorter. Plus, she shouldn't have had the time to lock the door.'

Yakumo spread out his hands and sighed in a melodramatic manner.

What was with his attitude? Gotou hadn't planned on saying anything funny.

'Gotou-san, the wool has been pulled over your eyes.'

'What?'

This brat is unbelievable –

'Please remember well. Immediately after getting off the elevator, did you see the door to Asami-san's room?'

Gotou recalled the experiment he'd done with Yakumo earlier.

They couldn't get to Asami's room without turning twice in the corridor shaped like a right-facing bracket.

On top of that, the path was narrow, and Yakumo, who'd been running in front, had blocked his way, so he hadn't seen much until they reached the door to the room.

'Which means...'

'That's right. That night, the three people who headed for Asami-san's room were Ishii-san, Makoto-san and Kamiyama-shi. In order to perform this trick, the order in which they headed for the room was also important.'

'The order...'

'Yes. The person who ran in front had two roles.'

'Roles?'

'Correct. The first was to block the vision of the people behind him and to regulate the timing with which they would arrive.'

'Really.'

The guy who ran in front blocked the vision of the people behind him and made sure Asami was hidden.

If she'd left late, he could take up time by stopping or falling.

'There is one more. The role of locking the door.'

'Locking the door?'

'Just as you say Gotou-san, there was not much time to leave the room, let alone lock the door. Accordingly, trying to lock the door in a rush would be a great risk.'

'So the guy in front...'

Yakumo responded with a nod.

After fleeing from the room, Asami left the key by the door and hid herself in the emergency stairs or something.

Then, the person in front took the key, locked the door while pretending to check the doorknob and hid the key in his pocket.

After borrowing the key from the manager and entering the room, he could just leave the key casually on the table.

Now that I understand, it's a simple trick –

'And the person who had run in front then was...'

Yakumo's gaze turned sharp.

That was right. Ishii had said that the person who ran in front then was –

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6

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Ishii sat next to Haruka on the bench in the corridor in front of Makoto's hospital room.

What on earth is Yakumo thinking –

Ishii wanted to know the truth behind this case that was full of puzzles too, so he didn't mind helping out. However, he wouldn't have minded a bit more of an explanation.

'I don't really understand,' said Haruka as she sat beside him, like she had read Ishii's heart.

'Ah, yes. But Haruka-chan, it'd be better if you returned...'

'I definitely won't!' said Haruka, interrupting Ishii's sentence.

'No, but...'

Haruka had been told by Yakumo to go home.

On top of that, if there was any awful trouble in the case, she would get involved in the danger.

Makoto had already been assaulted.

Ishii wanted to avoid that no matter what.

'I'm not unrelated to this case.'

'Eh, is that so...'

This was the first time Ishii had heard what Haruka said.

'I promised Sawaguchi Rika-san's father that I'd find the truth behind her death...'

'I see...'

'That's why I can't go home by myself partway through,' said Haruka firmly.

She was surprisingly stubborn. Once she'd made her decision, she went with it until the end. Ishii was envious of that strength.

He tried to run away at every opportunity.

'I understand. I'll take responsibility for you and protect you.'

'I'll be in your care,' replied Ishii with a puffed chest.

Haruka bowed her head with a smile.

She really is cute –

'I apologise for the wait.'

Makoto came out of the hospital room. She had finished changing.

Her head was still wrapped with bandages and there was a dark red bloodstain on the collar of the white shirt she had changed into.

'Um... are you really all right?'

'Yes. It hurts slightly, but... In any case, let's go.'

'U-um...'

Ishii called out to stop Makoto, who had started walking down the hallway.

'Yes?'

'Where are you going?'

Yakumo had whispered the instructions in Makoto's ear, so Ishii didn't know what he was supposed to do, even though he had been asked to help.

Makoto appeared to realise and clapped her hands together, as if to say 'That's right'.

'Yakumo-kun told me to bring my father.'

'Eh!?' exclaimed Ishii, taken aback.

'Why would he ask for your father, Makoto-san?'

Haruka cocked her head in her puzzlement.

'Makoto-san's father is the chief of the police.'

'Wow, that's amazing.'

After Ishii explained, Haruka spoke in her surprise, but then she looked troubled.

'Why would he ask for the chief of the police?'

'That... is something I don't know either,' Makoto said nonchalantly.

In his head, Ishii was saying, 'No, no, no.' He'd be too frightened.

'We can't just call out the chief of the police without knowing the reason.'

Even if it was his daughter's request, he wouldn't come without an explanation.'

'But since Yakumo-kun said to do so, isn't it necessary?'

'I think the same way.'

Makoto agreed with Haruka's irresponsible words.

What were these two doing? Why were these women so reckless even though they didn't have a plan? Haruka and Makoto didn't pay any attention to Ishii and walked farther down the corridor.

'P-please wait.'

Ishii hurriedly ran after the two them.

He fell –

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7

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Gotou parked his car in front of Kamiyama's office.

The last time they came, it had felt like Yakumo was being pulled along by Kamiyama. Gotou had felt it wasn't like him.

However, it felt like there'd be some sort of match this time. If not, they wouldn't have come all the way here.

Gotou pressed the intercom button, but there was no response. Maybe he was out –

While he thought there was no point, he tried turning the doorknob. For some reason, it wasn't locked. He looked to Yakumo, who returned a nod.

That was right. It'd be illegal trespassing, but there was no point just standing in front of the door like this.

'We're coming in.'

While he said that, Gotou opened the door and stepped into the room.

Yakumo and Hata followed after him. The lights were on in the room, but there was no one there. They passed the kitchen and stepped into the living room.

There were two partially drunk coffee cups on the reception table.

There had to have been somebody here just earlier.

'Kamiyama! You here?'

Gotou called out towards the room in the back, but there was no response.

Even if he had been there, he wouldn't have just showed his face honestly.

'It seems Kamiyama-san isn't present.'

Yakumo walked in front.

'How do you know?'

'There weren't any shoes.'

Hata replied for Yakumo.

Gotou hadn't noticed at all. There was nothing he could do about being made a fool of if he wasn't attentive.

'You're here, are you not? Inoue Asami-san.'

Yakumo spoke towards the door at the back of the living room.

'W-what!? She's here?'

'Isn't it natural? As you know from the trick with the locked room, Kamiyama-san and Asami-san were accomplices.'

Yakumo shook his head like he couldn't believe Gotou as he continued.

'Furthermore, she was also the person who came to me with the name Iida Mizuho to request that I investigate a spiritual phenomenon.'

Iida Mizuho –

The other case Yakumo was investigating. That was how he'd become connected to Sawaguchi Rika.

'I looked into the university's name register. There is nobody named Iida Mizuho. Asami-san, you pretended that it was a coincidence and involved me in this case,' continued Yakumo.

So that's what Haruka was investigating –

After a while, the door to the room in the back opened. A woman walked out into the living room.

She's Inoue Asami –

It was the first time Gotou had seen her face-to-face.

Her long hair was tied in the back and she was looking down where she stood. Her face was so pale he almost doubted whether she was alive.

However, those eyes seemed to have a strong light in them.

Asami bowed politely, almost as if she had known that this had been going to be the outcome.

There was a bandage around her left arm. The blood left on the mobile phone at the scene had been real. She had cut her own arm and left her blood at the scene.

She had wanted to do something to the point of doing that.

'What sort of stupid game are you playing!?'

Gotou drew closer to Asami.

When he thought about how Makoto had run about in her worry for her, a hot anger boiled up in the bottom of his stomach.

'It isn't a game.'

Yakumo placed a hand on Gotou's shoulder to pacify him.

'Not a game? What is it then? Working together with that exorcist for fraud?'

'That is wrong as well.'

'Then why did she do this!?'

Gotou brushed Yakumo aside and gripped Asami by her collar.

She didn't resist and just let him grip her collar. Her downcast eyes were still alight like a candle that could go out at any moment.

Why is she looking at me with those eyes –

'Stop it, you idiot.'

Hata grabbed Gotou's arm from behind.

Gotou thought of tearing Hata's arm off by force, but he restrained himself. If he shook off this delicate old man, he could very well die.

'Their goal was not fraud but revenge,' Yakumo said quietly.

Revenge, he says –

Revenge for what? Gotou didn't know.

Yakumo turned back to Asami and looked at her directly before starting to speak again, answering Gotou's doubts.

'You were a victim as well. Isn't that right, Asami-san?'

At Yakumo's quiet words, Asami collapsed like her soul had been taken out of her. A trickle of tears went down her face as she sat on the floor.

That response proved that Yakumo's words were correct.

'Oi. Yakumo. By victim, you don't mean...'

'Correct. Like Sawaguchi Rika-san, she was also the victim of an assault. The assailant is the same as well. In Asami-san's case, since she did not press charges, it didn't come out, but...'

'How did you know?'

'Please remember what Makoto-san said earlier. In the fourth year of university, she couldn't contact Asami-san for about one month. That was probably when it happened. To tell the truth, it was a bit of a stretch in logic, but I couldn't think of any reason for her to cooperate in this series of events.'

After coming here, Gotou could obscurely see the outline of the case.

Asami, who had been assaulted, conspired with Kamiyama, the exorcist, and caused the spiritual phenomena. Their goal was revenge.

She must have done something so elaborate because she had been cornered psychologically and needed to make known the weight of what had been done to her –

That was why she'd used the story of the grudge of Rika, who'd also undergone an assault and killed herself because of it.

'When I heard of your disappearance, I immediately thought of the possibility that you were a conspirator. However, I did not have a clear reason. '

Yakumo had a sour expression on his face.

Gotou finally put everything together.

They had been dragged around by a trick, but it was more important to reveal how everyone was related in order to break through this case.

'... It had been an average day. The same tomorrow as usual should have come, but...'

Asami put her two hands on the floor and talked while hanging her head.

Her voice was filled with so much sadness it was painful.

'It was so sudden I couldn't fight back. I just had to bear it until it was over...'

'You...'

Yakumo got the better of Gotou who had started to talk.

He didn't say anything, but those eyes asked him to let her speak.

'The female detective I first met after that said this. "Why didn't you resist? That's the same as consent, isn't it?" ... I'm not a policewoman. How could I have fought back against a man with a knife...'

Asami's words were heavy on Gotou's shoulders as a policeman.

Currently, victims of assault cases in Japan were often treated as having given consent unless they actively resisted.

But, like Asami said, how many people would fight back if their lives were in danger –

Anger which had no outlet ran through his body with his blood.

'So you didn't press charges. No, you couldn't press charges,' said Yakumo, kneeling in front of Asami.

She nodded as her tears fell to the floor.

'However, since you have made revenge your goal, you have ended up bound. You understand what I am saying, yes?' said Yakumo gently.

Asami nodded again.

'Please tell me. Where is Kamiyama-san?'

'That's...'

Asami raised her tearstained face.

'You might already know, but I am the real thing.'

As Yakumo said that, he took the contact lens out of his left eye.

He turned his deep red eye towards Asami.

'Though the method will be different, your goal will be attained.'

'Do you know everything?'

Asami looked right at Yakumo. He answered with a nod.

'And there is something I have to tell him. The real reason for Sawaguchi Rika-san's death...'

'The real reason?'

'Yes. My goal is to save Rika-san and Kamiyama-san.'

'He went to the bar. The situation took a sudden turn, so he plans to use force. Please, somehow...'

Gotou didn't know what Yakumo's real intention was, but it seemed like it had gotten through to Asami.

'I understand.'

Yakumo stood up.

Gotou knew what was going to happen next. They were going to go. Gotou just said 'I'm sorry' to Asami, who had fixed her posture.

Gotou himself wasn't sure what he was sorry for, but Asami gave a silent nod.

'Hata-san, please take care of her. Now, could you see that Chief Ideuchi comes to the bar called Snake?'

Yakumo's words made Gotou remember something important.

Ideuchi's son is gone too. He's not working with them too, is he –

'I don't mind, but will he come?'

'If he doesn't want to, please say that you know where his son is.'

'That true?'

Yakumo showed Gotou a smirk and left the office.

Gotou looked at Asami again.

However, he couldn't say anything. He was too clumsy with words to comfort her. All he could was show it with his actions.

He got a grip on his emotions and followed Yakumo.

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Gotou stood in front of the multi-tenant four-storey building that the bar was in.

The sun had started to set so the white walls of the building were dyed orange.

Yakumo, standing next to him, had a difficult expression on his face, which was unusual. He hadn't spoken a word on the ride here either.

Gotou understood, since he had known him for a long time. When he looked like this –

'You in two minds?'

Yakumo looked at Gotou with his red left eye.

'I might be.'

Even though he'd usually put up a strong front, Yakumo readily acknowledged the truth.

'Well, aren't you being unusually honest.'

'I am always honest.'

It was amusing to hear that from the world's most contrary person.

'So what are you in two minds about after coming all the way here?'

'I'm wondering whether there is a need to stop this series of incidents...'

'What do you mean?'

'They haven't committed any actual crimes. No, there'll be a crime soon enough, but still, if I think about their emotions, it seems natural. I wonder whether I have the right to stop them...'

Yakumo's gaze wavered, emulating his emotions.

Since Gotou only grasped the outline of what was happening, he couldn't understand what Yakumo meant. However, there was just one thing he could say.

'To hell with rights. It's not some judgement about good and evil. I can't just leave it like this though. It's the same for you, right?'

Yakumo laughed aloud at Gotou's words.

What the hell was he laughing at?

'That's just like you, Gotou-san. That's right. I'll stop thinking about unnecessary things.'

After Yakumo said that and stopped laughing, he turned his gaze directly to the building.

It appeared that he had been able to change his mood. That was good. He was ready and had put on airs, but Yakumo couldn't be feeling that different from how Gotou was feeling.

'OK – going then?'

Gotou hit his cheeks with both hands to motivate himself and took the first step forward. That moment, a mobile phone started ringing as if to stop him.

What bad timing –

<E-excuse me, it's Ishii.>

He heard Ishii's voice from the phone. It sounded like he could start crying at any moment.

'What?'

<U-um... Where should we take the chief?>

'Oi, Yakumo. Are you really going to call out the chief?'

Gotou covered the mouthpiece and asked Yakumo that.

'Yes. I made that request to Makoto-san earlier.'

So that was what he said at the hospital then.

Chief Ideuchi and the chief of the police. What was he going to start by gathering them? Well, there was no point thinking about it now. Gotou had placed his bets on Yakumo.

'So, where should they bring him?'

'Obviously, they should bring him here.'

That made sense.

'The bar.'

Gotou said that and hung up.

Now –

'Going?'

'Yes, let's go.'

Gotou started walking before Yakumo answered. He took the stairs down to the bar in the basement and placed his hand on the doorknob. It was locked and wouldn't open.

'Please open it,' Yakumo said, as a matter of course.

Yeah, yeah, he got it.

Like a locked door would stop Gotou. He kicked the door with all his strength.

However, the wooden doorframe only warped a bit.

Gotou kicked it a second and third time.

'Damn! What a door!'

The door opened on the fourth kick.

'Isn't there a way to enter more quietly?'

'Shut up!'

Gotou intercepted Yakumo's comment with a yell and stepped into the bar.

The lights were off and the bar was completely dark. However, he felt somebody there.

Gotou advanced to the back of the bar without hesitation.

Clatter.

Gotou's ears caught a noise.

Just as he had put himself on guard, a violent shock came down on his head.

Crack. There was the sound of something breaking. It seemed like he'd been hit by something like a pole.

He saw somebody moving at the edge of his vision.

'Did you think you'd knock me out with something like that!?'

Gotou threw the hardest punch he could at that shadow. He hit it. After a yowl like that of a cat whose tail had gotten stepped on, there was the sound of something thumping against the floor.

Suddenly, everything lit up, so he put up his hands to shield his eyes from the brightness.

'You could have walked in after turning on the lights. Gotou-san, you really are an idiot beyond my imagination.'

Yeah, he was an idiot.

'Stop grumbling. If I turned on the lights, the guy inside would've noticed, right?'

'The person would have noticed the moment you kicked down the door. You really are unreasonable.'

This brat went on and on about everything –

'Shut up! I can do what I want!'

Gotou turned around and grabbed Yakumo's collar.

'You're bleeding. A fair amount at that,' said Yakumo with a smile.

Blood – Gotou put his hand to his forehead. It was wet. When he looked, his hand was covered in blood. There was a broken mop by his feet.

Damn, who the hell had done that?

Gotou grabbed the hair of the person who had fallen facedown and pulled him up to check his face.

There was blood all around the man's nose, but Gotou could tell. It was that bastard rapist who used the fake name Murase Shinichi, Oori Kazushi –

Sobbing.

Gotou heard a voice that wasn't a groan or a yell.

He'd thought it was Oori, but he was wrong. It appeared Yakumo had promptly noticed where the noise had come from. He pointed towards the lavatory in the corner of the bar.

Telling me to go then –

Gotou let go of Oori, and weaved through the space between the tables towards the lavatory.

Gotou stopped in front of the door. Makoto had said that the woman's ghost had been reflected in the lavatory mirror.

Will something appear –

Gotou opened the door forcefully.

That moment, a person who seemed to have collapsed fell out. His mouth was covered with tape

and his arms and legs were bound with rope. There were bruises all over his face and his nose was bleeding, like somebody had hit him.

He was Yagi Keita, the bartender here.

His face was drenched with sweat and he was shaking in fear.

'You OK?'

While Gotou said that, he ripped the tape of the bartender's mouth all at once.

'A woman – a woman! I-I'm going to be killed!'

The bartender Yagi was as noisy as a child having a tantrum.

When Gotou looked at the back of the lavatory, there was a faint image of a woman's face in the mirror hanging there.

That's Sawaguchi Rika –

Was she wandering because she had unresolved hatred?

Gotou turned around to see Yakumo.

'Gotou-san, please break that mirror,' said Yakumo, a faint smile on his lips.

No trouble at all. Gotou picked up a nearby chair and threw it at the lavatory mirror. It broke with a piercing crack.

'Can't you break it a little more quietly?'

Yakumo looked exasperated. He always had so much to say.

When Gotou turned back to look into the lavatory, Sawaguchi Rika was still on the opposite side of the mirror.

'Yakumo. Explain.'

'Please take a good look. That is an LCD monitor.'

As he was instructed, he took another look. He hadn't realised at first glance, but it was an LCD monitor and an image was projected on it.

'This is...'

'A trick.'

'A trick.'

'Yes. The mirror you broke earlier was a one-way mirror. When that monitor is off, it is a normal mirror, but when an image is projected there, that light faintly produces her image.'

Gotou recalled the one-way mirror in the interrogation room and understood.

A one-way mirror was a semi-transmissive mirror which split two rooms. When one room was lit up and the other made dark, it would appear to be a mirror from the bright room and would be a

glass from the dark one. If both were bright, then it would be simply glass.

If the monitor in the lavatory were turned off, it would be dark behind the mirror so it would appear to be a mirror. However, if the monitor were on, both sides would be bright because of the light so the woman would appear in the glass.

'The other spiritual phenomena were probably also done with one-way mirrors and black lights.'

It was a simple trick now that it had been explained.

'Damn, doing something so stupidly elaborate.'

Gotou dragged the monitor out and flung it to the floor.

The monitor was cracked, but it still showed an image of a woman.

'Why don't you come out already? Kamiyama Eiji-san.'

Yakumo spoke while looking from the lavatory to the counter.

That was right. Inoue Asami said that Kamiyama was here. Where was here? Where was that fake exorcist?

Gotou looked around the bar.

'Inoue Asami-san came clean. Your spiritual ability will not fool me.'

Yakumo's voice echoed through the bar.

In response to that, the small door behind the counter opened and Kamiyama came out.

He was in a black suit as usual, and his two eyes were a bright red.

'I knew that you would come, Saitou Yakumo-kun.'

Even though he was cornered, Kamiyama's tone didn't feel hurried or angry.

There was even a calm and composed smile on his lips. Was he still scheming something?

'Of course. You made Asami-san use a fake name and purposefully involved me in this case. Even my actions now are a part of your plan... isn't that right?'

Yakumo's cool tone wouldn't lose to Kamiyama's.

'Just as expected, your perception is sharp.'

'I don't know if you are praising me or mocking me,' said Yakumo, slowly approaching Kamiyama.

'I'm praising you. No, I may have underestimated you.'

'What do you mean?'

'It is still too early for your entrance.'

Yakumo and Kamiyama looked straight at each other. The air of tension made it feel like sparks would fly.

These two are the only ones who understand everything –

However, Gotou didn't. From the way it seemed, Asami had conspired with the exorcist Kamiyama to cause these incidents in order to take revenge against the rapist Oori.

But looking at these two, Gotou felt like it wasn't that simple.

Why would Kamiyama participate in Asami's plan? Why did he involve Yagi and Ideuchi's son?

Plus, Yakumo had called the chief of police and Ideuchi here. What for?

'Oi, Yakumo. Give an explanation already.'

'Gotou-san, it would be better if you made a habit of taking a proper look at the data.'

'What? This isn't the time to be complaining about things like that. Don't keep me hanging.'

In response to Gotou's irritation, Yakumo smiled wryly as he ran a hand through his hair.

'I suppose it's fine. But before I begin the explanation – Kamiyama-san, please take off those tasteless contacts.'

Yakumo turned back to Kamiyama.

Those red eyes were fake? Gotou had seen it though. Kamiyama had taken contacts off his black eyes and they'd turned red.

'Oi, Yakumo, but he...'

'It's called palming. A rudimentary magic technique for hiding things like coins in your palm.'

'It's a magic trick?'

'Yes. He made it look like he had taken off his contacts, when he had in fact put red ones in. On top of that, after making it appear like he'd taken them out, all he would have to do is show the contacts hidden in his palm,' explained Yakumo while turning around.

Kamiyama let out an amused laugh as he heard that. That was proof that he acknowledged it.

'I rather like them, personally.'

After Kamiyama said that, he took out the red contacts. He'd taken them in.

'Now, let's continue the conversation.'

Yakumo put his index finger to his brow.

'First, there is something I would like to confirm. If this is wrong, then my reasoning will completely collapse.'

Oi oi, Yakumo. Why was he showing all his cards?

If he spoke with that as the premise, the person he was talking to could change his answer to anything he wanted. He could just bluff as he usually did, couldn't he? Yakumo continued speaking, ignoring Gotou's concerns.

'I said this before, but this is only the way I perceive it. I have no hard evidence at all. However, Kamiyama-san. You were Sawaguchi Rika-san's lover. Am I wrong?'

'Though you say you have no hard proof, you sound rather confident.'

Kamiyama rubbed his nose like he was embarrassed.

'That true?' asked Gotou. Yakumo glared at him like he thought he was annoying.

'Kamiyama-san. Please answer. Is it yes? Or...'

'Why do you think that?'

'Right, Yakumo. Why?'

Gotou repeated Kamiyama's question.

'Like I said, Gotou-san, you should take a proper look at the data.'

That had nothing to do with what they were saying now, right?

'Sawaguchi Rika's lover's name wasn't written in the data. What the hell are you talking about?'

'I said it was my reasoning, did I not? It is just the conclusion that anyone would arrive at if they looked at the data.'

'I have no idea what you're talking about.'

Irritation was building up in Gotou and about to burst.

'Kamiyama-san used to be a teacher. At the same school that Sawaguchi Rika attended.'

Was that how it was? Gotou hadn't noticed at all. But just being a teacher and student at the same school didn't make them lovers.

Like he had read Gotou's mind, Yakumo continued speaking.

'That isn't all. Kamiyama-san himself brought up the topic of the ghost of Sawaguchi Rika-san who committed suicide, but he didn't behave like he knew her at all. That is unnatural. Isn't it normal to think he is hiding something?'

Now that he mentioned it, it was just as Yakumo said.

Even if the class was different, he should have known her name and face – he wouldn't have thought nothing of it.

'The time he quit his job at the school is the exact same period that she committed suicide. If we think further along these lines, you heard that there was a female student who had pursued Kamiyama-sensei then. Gotou-san, what was that student's name?'

'If I remember correctly, it was Kawaguchi or Yamaguchi... Ah!'

Gotou let out his voice without thinking.

That was right. The memories of the teacher Mamiya had been vague.

'It seems you've noticed. It might be a stretch, but it was probably Sawaguchi.'

Kamiyama let out a long sigh and walked out from the counter to the floor.

Even if he didn't say it aloud, Gotou knew. Kamiyama had given up on denying Yakumo's reasoning –

'Rika was very kind. She dreamed of becoming a teacher. She had thought that from watching me, which made me happy. She was a bit stubborn sometimes, but she had a strong will and tried to move forward.'

Kamiyama kept talking, like he was reading from a textbook.

However, Gotou felt like he was doing it purposefully rather than naturally.

'You created this plan in order for Rika-san's revenge then.'

Kamiyama smiled bitterly at Yakumo's question.

'Oi, Yakumo. Didn't that Asami make this plan?'

'No, she didn't.'

Yakumo gave an immediate reply.

'Kamiyama-san created this plan himself. Kamiyama-san gathered everyone involved in this case and enacted this plan.'

'Aaagh.'

Gotou heard a groan.

Oori, who had been on the floor since earlier, got up shakily, sat on the nearby chair and hung his head.

Maybe his mind was in a daze or he had given up on running – his movements were extremely sluggish.

'Everything started with his lust then.'

Gotou glared angrily at Oori.

One punch didn't cut it. He wanted to hit him two or three more times.

'Gotou-san, that's wrong. He's on Kamiyama-san's side.'

'Eh?'

This guy is the culprit behind the assaults. He'd ruined someone's life, sold the pictures of his crime, and still lived peacefully, this bastard.

Why would he pair up with Kamiyama –

'Perfect timing. Since it seems our guest has arrived, let us talk with him.'

Yakumo looked to the entrance. Gotou did the same.

Ideuchi was there.

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Earlier, Yakumo had told Hata to bring Ideuchi here.

However, he seemed like an out-of-place guest to Gotou.

'Gotou. What on earth is going on? I came because I heard Yuuya was here, but who are they?' said Ideuchi while looking around the room.

See, look. He was out of place.

'He knows where your son is.'

Yakumo pointed at Kamiyama.

'You... What did you do to my son!?!'

Suddenly, Ideuchi rushed at Kamiyama. It was the first time Gotou had seen Ideuchi lose control so badly.

So after all's said and done, he's still someone's dad, huh –

'Gotou-san, please stop him.'

Honestly, when he'd been the one to egg him on in the first place.

Gotou stood in front of Ideuchi and held him in place.

'Let go, you bastard!'

Ideuchi flailed his arms like a child in a fight, but there was no way he could win in a contest of strength against Gotou.

Gotou knocked him down to the floor.

'Calm down!'

Ideuchi rolled on the floor and looked dazed.

'I-I am calm,' said Ideuchi while standing up. It appeared that he was more composed – maybe he was out of breath.

'Oi, Yakumo. Why'd you call him here?'

'Obviously because he is related to the case,' Yakumo said, like it was extremely obvious.

However, Gotou didn't understand. Yakumo didn't seem to care as he walked towards Yagi, whose arms and legs were bound.

'Gotou-san, please help over here as well.'

Yakumo started untying the rope around Yagi's legs.

Gotou put his hands on the rope around his hands when Yakumo said, 'It would be better if you didn't take those off.'

Gotou didn't feel like asking any more questions. He helped untie the ropes around Yagi's legs, left his arms as is and sat him on a chair.

'Now, the point of this case is that everyone is sorted into two sides: the side which lay the trap and the side that was trapped.'

Yakumo looked around at everyone present.

Sides? Does he mean the perps and the vics –

'I will say this first. The people who attended the drinking party and witnessed the fake spiritual phenomenon were gathered intentionally. Everyone had a role. In short, the members had to be those members. The members were carefully gathered under the preliminary arrangements.'

'Forget about that. Tell me where Yuuya is. And who are you anyway!?! You're sure talking big!'

Ideuchi hit the table and interrupted Yakumo's explanation.

Yakumo did not flinch – all he did was raise an eyebrow and make an openly displeased face.

'Gotou-san, this person is annoying. Is he always like this?'

'To the point that he's being more obedient than usual,' said Gotou after clicking his tongue.

What was with that attitude when he was the one who called him here? And when that guy was here, things always got more complicated.

Yakumo sighed like he thought there was nothing to be done and then slowly approached Ideuchi to put his face close to his ear.

'As it appears you have not noticed, let me introduce you. His face has changed from plastic surgery, but this is Oori Kazushi-san.'

While Yakumo murmured, he pointed at Oori.

That moment, Ideuchi's expression changed. Surprise – no, that was wrong. To Gotou, Ideuchi looked afraid.

Yakumo nodded with a feeling of satisfaction after seeing that.

'Since Ideuchi-san has become quiet as well, I will continue speaking. Gotou-san, when you saw the images published on that website, there was a tattoo on the assailant's arm, correct?'

'Yeah.'

A tattoo of a cross with a snake coiling around it –

'The same pattern was also drawn in Sawaguchi Rika-san's diary. Perhaps she had drawn it as a clue for the assault case.'

That was right. That was how they found out Oori and Shinichi were the same person.

'Yakumo walked towards Oori.

'Oori-san. Could you show us your arm?'

After Yakumo said that to Oori, Oori pulled up his shirt sleeve and showed his right arm without any hesitation. There was no tattoo there –

What was going on?

'Gotou-san, I said this earlier as well, but you wouldn't be deceived by things like this if you would look at the data properly.'

'What did you say?'

'If Oori Kazushi-san had also had the tattoo, it should have been recorded in the data for his physical features since he was the perpetrator of an assault. However, it wasn't mentioned.'

That was right. Normally, when they made an arrest, they'd record everything about the guy – weight and fingerprints, of course, but they'd note physical features like moles and tattoos too.

However, Oori's tattoo hadn't been mentioned anywhere.

'But earlier...'

'The tattoo you saw was painted. On top of that, it was not on the right arm but the left.'

Which meant, maybe –

An uneasy feeling spread throughout Gotou.

'Oori-san's arm had been injured from the spiritual phenomenon, yes?'

'Yeah.'

When Gotou came to the bar last time, Oori's arm had suddenly started bleeding in the dark.

'That was a trick that occurred because he was Kamiyama-san's side. The truth is that something like that is impossible. I will say this again and again, but the spirits of the dead are clusters of emotions and virtually all have no physical influence.'

After Yakumo said that much, he glanced at Kamiyama.

Gotou recalled how Kamiyama and Yakumo had discussed the definition of a ghost's existence before. It had sounded like the odds were with Kamiyama then, but now the situation had completely flipped around.

Maybe the reason Yakumo hadn't wanted to persist in talking about his reasoning this time was related to that.

Gotou hadn't said it aloud, but he had wondered whether Yakumo's definition of a ghost had been wrong. Otherwise he would have reached the truth immediately.

If you applied Yakumo's definition to the spiritual phenomena that occurred this time, they were just farces.

Gotou had been drawn right along too though, so he couldn't say anything.

'They wanted to show that tattoo purposefully by enacting that spiritual phenomenon, in order to shake the heart of their true target. An appeal to say "We know everything".'

'Oi, Yakumo. Who's that true target you're talking about?'

Without answer Gotou's question, Yakumo slowly walked towards Yagi, the bartender.

Yagi stood up in fear and backed up towards the side of the room.

'I won't let you escape,' said Yakumo, staring at Yagi.

Yagi lost his will to run with that red left eye glaring at him. Yagi hung his head limply as Yakumo took his arm and rolled up the sleeve.

There it was. The tattoo of the cross with a snake coiling around it.

'It can't be that he's the real culprit behind the assault.'

Gotou couldn't stop himself from approaching Yagi.

'He is. He is also the one who assaulted Asami-san. That image is proof. Also, I dare say that before this place became a bar, it was the scene of the crime...'

Which means –

'Oori-san was falsely charged.'

Yakumo said that at a noticeably louder volume.

Those words made Gotou's footing unsteady.

'You... you...'

Oori stood up while muttering. His face was bright red and there were traces of tears in his eyes.

'Aaaahh!'

Oori suddenly let out a beastly yell and, using the table as a diving board, jumped towards Ideuchi.

It was so sudden that Ideuchi, defenceless, fell into a chair and then the floor. Oori was on top of him.

'Stop!'

Gotou rushed towards them immediately and pulled Oori off of Ideuchi.

There wasn't as much resistance as he thought there would be. Oori fell to the floor and cried with shaking shoulders.

'Oi, Yakumo. Is it true that he was falsely accused?'

'Unfortunately... it took me a while to notice which side he was on.'

'Why did you notice?'

'There were a number of things that would not hold true unless Oori-san was on Kamiyama-san's side. If he was falsely accused, I could understand both his reason for aiding Kamiyama-san in his plan and his reason for involving himself with the young man called Yuuya.'

'Falsely accused? That's ridiculous.'

Ideuchi, who had collapsed, used the table to help himself stand up. Contrary to his words, his face was drained of blood.

Yakumo's red left eye stared at him.

'I have no physical evidence. However, the circumstantial evidence is complete.'

After Yakumo said that, he suddenly walked towards Ideuchi.

Ideuchi silently averted his gaze.

'Yagi Keita-san's father was a Diet member. Sawaguchi Rika-san's case occurred during the period when he was aiming for re-election.'

'What of it? That has nothing to do with the police.'

Ideuchi was averting his gaze as he spoke.

No matter how much of a strong front he put up, that voice was shaking unreliably.

'Yagi-san didn't think that the police would mobilise. He had made light of the situation, thinking nobody was going to say anything, so all he had done was put on a mask. If an investigation actually started, it was only a matter of time before he was caught. Then, he clung to his father.'

Gotou left Oori with his head hanging low as he cried and stood up to look at Ideuchi's face.

Even though they thought differently, he was a man in the same organisation who he'd worked together with. If he had to say, he didn't like him, but Gotou had understood somewhere in his heart that people like him were necessary in an organisation.

'His father was incredibly pressed since it was election time. His son's scandal would have been fatal. Then, he thought of hushing up the incident and consulted an acquaintance of his in the police.'

That was impossible. It couldn't happen.

'The person in the police who he consulted decided to try to have the charges withdrawn. Then, this person took the detectives who had been in charge off the case and put in novices who shook up Rika-san during their questioning. In order to have her withdraw charges.'

'Yakumo! Stop screwing around! Are you saying the police hushed this up on purpose!? That's

ridiculous!' yelled Gotou.

However, Yakumo's expression didn't change a whit. He continued talking like nothing had happened.

'However, Rika-san did not withdraw the charges – she committed suicide. Then, her parents called the police killers, and the press used that to attack. Rather than hushing it up, the situation became such that the only way to settle it was to arrest the culprit.'

'I said to stop screwing around!'

Gotou grabbed Yakumo's collar.

However, Yakumo's expression still didn't change.

'Gotou-san, please be a little bit quieter. You understand already, don't you?'

He had never seen Yakumo's eyes look so cold.

He was right. Just as Yakumo said, Gotou understood already. But he couldn't accept it.

'Even if what you said so far is true, Yagi could just have been arrested then. There was no point in involving Oori!'

Gotou was still holding on. Yakumo brushed off Gotou's hand, his expression still blank.

'They couldn't arrest Yagi Keita. If they did, the fact that the police and a Diet member had done a backroom deal. In that meaning, it didn't have to be Oori-san. He was just unlucky.'

Gotou looked at Oori's hunched back.

His shoulders were still shaking. The guy had been unlucky. That was the only reason he had been imprisoned for three years and had been branded as a rapist. He'd been living with that?

Eriko had said that the timing of the arrest was too good.

They had found a picture in his car when he had been caught for drunk driving. It seemed like definite evidence, but anything could be true if the police had arranged it.

'My life was ruined because of that incident...'

Oori spoke in a trembling voice.

Gotou knew what he was going to say next even if he didn't say it aloud. He became a rapist who brought a woman to her death. That would follow him everywhere.

No matter how much he wiped, it would come back out to ruin his life.

'He was not the only one whose life was ruined.'

'What?'

'Please think about Asami-san. She had been assaulted three years before. Do you understand what that means?'

Gotou no longer had anything to say back.

Oori had been let out two years ago. He had been in prison three years ago. Oori couldn't have been the culprit.

That wasn't all. They had let the true culprit run free while knowing that.

Because of that, she – Asami had been raped. Her life after that grossly warped.

There was the true reason Kamiyama, Oori and Asami didn't directly take revenge.

As long as the police were involved, it would just be hushed up if they made a fuss about the case. They would just be oppressed if they used force.

They put on these fake spiritual phenomena so the police wouldn't get involved –

'Ideuchi-san.'

Yakumo's eyes were full of anger as they looked at Ideuchi.

'I said this earlier as well, but I do not have any physical evidence. You can deny it if you want. However, if you do, your son will not return again.'

Gotou looked at Ideuchi too.

The man looked older than he was because of the overwork that had built up. Please. Deny it. Gotou was begging him to do so in a corner of his heart.

'Please return my son to me...'

Ideuchi lowered his head as he said that desperately.

That was the sign that he admitted everything –

'That is what he has said. What will you do, Kamiyama-san?'

Yakumo turned his gaze to Kamiyama.

Kamiyama smiled triumphantly.

'Yuuya-kun has been entrusted to a new religious organisation under the pretext of exorcising evil spirits.'

So that's how it is –

Now that he thought about it, Kamiyama and Oori were the reasons they thought Yuuya had disappeared.

He hadn't been abducted or cursed. He'd been left at a religious organisation with the pretext of escaping a ghost's curse – they'd just raised a fuss about his disappearance after that.

'Is Yuuya safe?' Ideuchi said with pleading eyes.

'Yes. He is doing well.'

'That isn't all, is it?'

Yakumo replied to Kamiyama's words.

'You've seen through me, then... As expected. In order to participate in that training, he made an offering of about five million yen.'

'W-where'd he get that money?'

'There are organisations that would happily lend out money to the son of the chief of police. I think it was ten per cent interest every ten days?'

Yakumo answered Ideuchi's question. That moment, Ideuchi collapsed.

So that was how it was. That was their goal. To have the son of the chief of police borrow five million from the yakuza.

There was no method that was more effective in tormenting Ideuchi this much. He would go at full speed to his ruin.

'But why did they assault Makoto?'

Yakumo looked at Gotou like he was an idiot.

'The one who assaulted Makoto-san was Yagi-san.'

'Why?'

'Because he was afraid. That day, the woman he had assaulted in the past came to the bar as a guest. Then, a strange spiritual phenomenon occurred in the bar, he heard that Asami-san disappeared from a locked room, an exorcist appeared, and the name of the woman who had committed suicide because he assaulted her came up.'

'It shook his nerves.'

'On top of that, a reporter and the police came to investigate... Though it was like him to attack Makoto-san instead of Kamiyama-san or Oori-san...'

Yakumo bit his lip.

Gotou understood now. Makoto had been the start of it, but they had all just been there as a gallery to make the spiritual phenomena appear true.

If they had statements from a reporter and the police, even something that was difficult to believe like a person's disappearance could hold true.

'Now, Saitou Yakumo-kun. What are you going to do from here on?'

Kamiyama narrowed his eyes and looked at Yakumo challengingly.

'What are you trying to say?'

Gotou couldn't stand that triumphant attitude. He interrupted for Yakumo.

'We went mad because of their egoism. Would it have been correct for us to give up because there was nothing to be done? They should be punished. Don't you think so?' asked Kamiyama. It

sounded like his pointed comment wasn't aimed just at Yakumo but at everyone there.

'I thought that at first too. It would be fine if the truth came out after your revenge played out. Nobody would blame you...'

So Yakumo had been calculating his timing.

When he had seen through the case, that had marked the end of Kamiyama's revenge. Maybe he had been thinking of seeing their revenge through to the end.

'Then why did you get in our way?'

Even with Kamiyama's challenging gaze, Yakumo's expression didn't change at all.

'In order to explain that reason, there is something else I need to bring to light.'

Yakumo spoke slowly. The tone made it sound like everything that had happened up until now was just a sideshow.

'What is it?'

Kamiyama also spoke calmly.

Like boxers with their fists up, the two of them appeared to be enjoying the atmosphere.

'The truth behind Rika-san's death.'

'She was physically raped by that man, psychologically raped by the police and driven to her death.'

To Gotou, it looked like there a pale flame of anger had lit in Kamiyama's cool expression.

'That is not all. When I first met you, you said this. The spirit of a woman who committed suicide is here, and she had a strong hatred...'

'I remember something like that.'

'That conversation confused me slightly.'

'What do you mean?'

'Rika-san's spirit certainly had been there, but it looked different to me.'

Yakumo paused. There was silence –

It felt like time had stopped.

'To me, it looked like she was filled with sadness rather than hatred.'

Kamiyama made no response. Kamiyama had no way of ascertaining whether Yakumo's words were correct or not since he himself couldn't have seen it.

'If that person won't accept me, is there any reason for me to live...'

'What is that?' asked Gotou.

'This is a part of Rika-san's suicide note, which had been lost.'

So her suicide note really did exist?

But how did Yakumo know what was in it? Where'd he get his hands on it?

'Did you not reject her as a woman after she was assaulted? Many women who are assaulted think of themselves as impure. How painful do you think it was for her when the person she loved turned his back on her?'

Kamiyama closed his eyes calmly without saying anything at Yakumo's words.

'I see... That was the true reason Rika committed suicide...'

'There could be no other trigger for her suicide. You were the trigger.'

Yakumo said that one sentence at the end.

Tears were falling from the corners of Kamiyama's eyes.

Gotou would've responded too if the person he loved had been assaulted. He imagined his wife's face and thought about it.

The answer's obvious. I'd want to support her with all my strength in order to save her.

But would it go that well? I might understand it in my head, but wouldn't I end up inadvertently rejecting her like Kamiyama did Rika?

People are weak creatures –

'Kamiyama-san, she is still suffering. Even after her death, she has not been released from her pain and is still committing suicide in the same place.'

This man had also been on the wrong path. People never noticed the important things in front of their eyes.

And so tragedies repeated.

'You are probably the only one who can stop her.'

At Yakumo's last words, Kamiyama fell to the ground and started sobbing.

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Nobody said anything as they looked at the floor.

Assault cases. Under criminal law, the greatest penalty was just a few years of prison time.

However, that had ruined so many people's lives. It was the same for other crimes. They didn't just affect the people there. It became a large wave that enveloped everyone involved and engulfed them without any mercy.

Gotou had no place to vent his anger so he restrained himself by clenching his fists.

'I came here because I knew how she felt. In order to end your act of revenge.'

'Before I resented anybody, I should have embraced her...' replied Kamiyama, his eyes bright red.

His expression was gentle, like he was a completely different person than he had been before.

'Yakumo-kun, I wish I had met you first and not your father.'

'As I expected, that man did participate then.'

Yakumo's eyes changed.

That man was Yakumo's father, who had two red eyes. Kamiyama had said before that he'd met a man with two red eyes.

'He said this to me. The true nature of a person's soul is darkness. Rika's soul was filled with hatred even after death. That there was no other way to save her besides clearing that hatred.'

'If it is nonsense to say that there is always hope, it is also nonsense to say that everything is darkness. People's feelings cannot all be the same way.'

Yakumo's words were full of a strong will without any clouds.

'That's right. It appears I've been trifled with.'

Kamiyama took a plastic container out from behind the counter and started pouring it out.

The bar quickly filled with an irritating odour.

After Kamiyama threw away the plastic container that was now empty, he took a knife from his pocket, walked up to Yagi, who was hunched up on the chair. He bound his arms behind his back and made him stand.

'Oi! What are you doing!?'

When Gotou tried to approach him, Kamiyama put the blade of the knife to Yagi's neck.

'Aah!'

Yagi's shriek echoed through the bar.

'Oi! Get away!'

Kamiyama didn't react to Gotou's words. He then took a Zippo lighter from his pocket and lit it up.

Just from that, Gotou understood what Kamiyama was trying to do.

The liquid on the floor had to be flammable.

'Yakumo-kun, I understand what you are saying. If I had accepted her, she wouldn't have died. However, even if she hadn't died, the fact that she would have suffered all her life wouldn't have changed.'

'I do not deny that,' said Yakumo in a voice that sounded like it would fade away.

Gotou couldn't deny it either. Even if she didn't die then, she would have had to continue living with that injury for the rest of her life.

Rape was a crime that injured the heart.

'She had her rest stolen from her. I just can't forgive this man.'

'Oi! Don't do anything stupid! We know everything now. Yagi will be sent to prison!'

Gotou shorted the distance between him and Kamiyama.

Kamiyama shook his head, pointing the tip of the knife towards Gotou.

'I looked at the video of Rika being assaulted countless times. Every time, I was hit by a pain that felt like it would cut through my chest and thought I would go mad. In that video, she had called out my name while bearing with the humiliation, but no matter how I try, I can't go there...'

Tears were falling from Kamiyama's eyes again.

Even if he could think about it in his head, it was no more than his imagination. If he didn't want to think about it, he could run away at any time by thinking it was a fantasy.

Kamiyama had accepted it as the truth because he couldn't do otherwise.

'Detective, could you forgive it if it were you? If the person you loved was not only assaulted but had images of her humiliation uploaded to the internet for tens of thousands of people to see after her death, just for a cheap way of getting money.'

After a pause, Kamiyama asked Gotou the same question again.

'Could you forgive it if it were you?'

No, he couldn't. He couldn't stop this guy.

That was how Gotou felt. Rather, he felt like this Yagi guy should die. He wasn't going to reform anyway.

At least he could let Kamiyama kill him.

'I'll apologize to her in that world. Then, I will forget everything and accept her.'

After Kamiyama said that, he dropped the lighter to the ground.

Flames started dancing up at once. On the other side of the fire, Yagi screamed while struggling.

The flame was spreading every second and the bar was filling with smoke.

Ideuchi and Oori rushed towards the exits, but Gotou didn't move as the flames spread.

What was that? How disgusting.

'Gotou-san! What are you just standing there for? Please save him!'

Yakumo was the one who yelled. He was still here too?

'When did the police start forgiving revenge? Gotou-san, no matter who it is, you aren't the sort of

person who would let someone die without helping, correct?'

Yakumo's lips turned up in a smile.

That was right. It was just as Yakumo said. What had he been doing?

No matter what sort of villain they were, killing somebody was unforgiveable. He didn't understand the difficult things, but that was the road he believed in.

He'd almost done something that he would have regretted for the rest of his life.

'That's right. That was right.'

'Then please hurry up and save him. Oh, but bears are afraid of fires, aren't they?'

That Yakumo – saying too much even at a time like this.

Gotou would definitely punch him after this was over. He'd remember.

'Don't think that a fire like this could stop me!'

Gotou stooped and ran into the fire.

He broke through the wall of flames and hit Kamiyama. Gotou, Kamiyama and Yagi – the three of them fell over together.

Gotou stood up immediately, grabbed Yagi first and pushed him out of the flames with all his strength. Thump! There was a loud sound.

He might've hit the ground strangely. Well, that's better than dying. Next –

'Why are you getting in my way?' asked Kamiyama, slowly getting up.

Why? The answer was obvious, right?

'I won't let anybody get killed in front of me. I won't let anybody die. That's the sort of guy I am!'

'But you couldn't save my lover... Rika.'

Just as Kamiyama says, I couldn't save her. But that's why I have to do this –

'I'm going to save you!'

'You are fascinating people. It was only a brief time, but it was a very enjoyable one. It will become a good tale to tell her.'

After Kamiyama said that, he thrust Gotou away.

Gotou was suddenly knocked out of the flames.

'Damn.'

The moment Gotou was about to jump back into the flames, the ceiling board fell down right in front of him.

The flames engulfed it.

Kamiyama was staring at something through the gap.

His gaze was on Yakumo.

The two of them were looking straight at each other. They didn't say anything, but it was like they were talking.

Finally, Kamiyama smiled. He smiled – he looked truly happy.

'Gotou-san, it has reached the limit. Let us go.'

Yakumo shook his head and gripped Gotou's arm.

'He's still inside...'

'This is the path he has chosen. Even if we save him now, he will do the same thing. Moreover, we will be in a dangerous position if we stay here.'

The strength of the fire had increased, the bar was filled with smoke and they could not see Kamiyama any longer.

'Why? Why won't you try to live!?' yelled Gotou.

That yell was aimed towards Kamiyama, but it was also aimed towards Rika, who already wouldn't return.

-

11

-

When Ishii, who had brought Makoto, the chief of the police and Haruka, arrived at the building with the bar, the building was enveloped in smoke.

People had started gathering and there was the sound of a fire engine.

Oori Kazushi and, for some reason, Ideuchi were outside the building.

They're coughing like they were in the smoke. What on earth happened –

Ishii rushed towards Ideuchi.

'Chief. Where is Detective Gotou?'

Ideuchi couldn't say anything – he just looked at the stairs that led to the bar in the basement. It couldn't be. He wasn't still inside, was he?

'Hey, Ishii-san, what happened? Where's Yakumo-kun?'

Haruka looked worried as she tugged on Ishii's sleeve.

If Detective Gotou is inside, then Yakumo is probably –

Ishii wanted to say something, but he couldn't think of the words.

The fire engine arrived in front of the building and started extinguishing the fire. One firefighter tried to enter but returned because the fire was too strong.

Ah, Detective Gotou. He had been a splendid detective. Ishii respected him more than anybody else. Farewell, Detective Gotou.

Ishii Yuutarou would carry his spirit forward.

'Yakumo-kun!' shouted Haruka as she ran towards the entrance.

That was no good. Ishii grabbed Haruka's shoulders to stop her from trying to go down the stairs now.

'Haruka-chan. It's no good.'

'Please let go. Yakumo-kun is still inside!'

Tears were falling from Haruka's eyes. Ishii's chest felt tight upon seeing that.

Even now, her feelings for him –

He understood how she felt, but he couldn't let her go.

'Haruka-chan, if you go inside, you'll die as well. It is very unfortunate about Detective Gotou and Yakumo-shi, but even if their bodies have perished, their spirits will always be in our hearts...'

Something hit Ishii's head with an incredible force and he unthinkingly bit his tongue.

'Don't just go and kill me off!'

'D-D-Detective Gotou.'

It seemed that he was still alive. Ishii was glad. Really, he was glad.

Ishii was so happy that he hugged Gotou, who was covered in soot.

'You're disgusting!'

Gotou thrust Ishii away and then put down the man he was carrying over his shoulders.

This man, if Ishii remembered correctly, was the bartender, Yagi Keita.

'Yakumo-kun.'

Yakumo was standing next to Gotou.

Haruka immediately ran over to him.

'What? Are you crying again?'

'That's because...'

'Tell me why you're crying so much some other time,' said Yakumo, running a hand through his hair.

What on earth was with that attitude, as usual? The anger gathered in Ishii's chest. He thought of

saying something, but before he could, Haruka kicked Yakumo.

'I want to ask you one thing.'

Gotou stepped forward and glared at Ideuchi with the expression of a demon.

Ideuchi didn't make any reply. What was this tension? What on earth had happened inside?

Ishii just held in his breath, unable to understand the situation.

'Why did you do something so stupid?'

Ideuchi would normally have lost his temper if Gotou talked to him like this, but he just hung his head silently.

'My wife... had cancer. I needed... money.'

After a silence, he started speaking like a skipping record.

'You ruined my life for money!?' yelled Oori suddenly, raising his fists towards Ideuchi. This is dangerous –

Gotou had stepped between them much more quickly than Ishii could have acted and pushed Oori down.

'Got this? If you hit him now, that'll be assault. We just cleared your name. Leave him to me.'

Oori obeyed Gotou's words.

Gotou pat Oori lightly on the shoulder.

'I really am sorry.'

Oori looked up at Gotou in surprise and then silently nodded.

'Your wife's sickness must have been tough. It costs some money to treat cancer – a detective's cheap monthly salary wouldn't have been enough.'

While Gotou said that, he cracked his knuckles and rolled his right shoulder.

He couldn't. He couldn't. What was Detective Gotou planning on doing?

Uneasiness spread throughout Ishii. And then, that uneasiness hit the mark.

'Aaagh!'

With a yell, Gotou punched Ideuchi in the face as hard as he could.

Ideuchi fell down and rolled twice.

W-w-what is he doing –

Ishii tried to rush over to Ideuchi after he fell but Gotou went before him to step on Ideuchi's head.

'Got this? Listen up! I sympathise, but that's no reason to screw up someone else's life! You fool!'

Gotou's angry voice shook the air.

'Gotou-kun, what on earth are you doing?'

Hijikata, the chief of the police, had come over from hearing the commotion. His daughter Makoto was next to him.

'Huh?'

Gotou looked at the chief of the police with contempt.

He was just like some juvenile delinquent loitering at a train station. Ishii was flustered by everything that was happening.

'I'm saying to explain what's happened,' the police chief said in a forceful tone.

'Chief Ideuchi was asked with money to hide the assault case that happened five years ago. On top of driving the victim to her suicide, the crime was put on the head of somebody who was completely unrelated.'

Yakumo was the one who explained.

So that was what happened. That was what happened in this case. While Ishii had been away, there had been so many rapid developments in the case that Ishii couldn't follow.

'Who are you?'

The police chief looked at Yakumo. His suspicions were natural.

'Even if you ask me who I am, I am just a university student who happened to pass by.'

This young man has that attitude even in front of the police chief –

'Is what he's saying true?'

The police chief pushed Gotou aside, pulled up Ideuchi's upper body and asked him that.

Ideuchi wiped the blood around his lips off and then said quietly, '... I sincerely apologise.'

The chief of the police stood up with a sigh.

'I'll listen to the details after. Then I'll announce it officially,' he said coldly.

The police chief tried to leave after that, but Gotou blocked his way.

'Don't tell me you're planning on hiding this again.'

Gotou glared at the police chief sharply, but the police chief didn't try to look him back in the eye and just looked fed up.

'You should understand this a bit better. If something like this became public, the police organisation itself would shake.'

'What about it?'

'You still don't understand it? It's said that scandals should be kept as small as possible.'

'Oh. I get it. You'll clear Oori's name but say it was because of an investigation mistake.'

'For the sake of all the police in the country.'

'That's wrong,' said Gotou while rolling his neck.

He couldn't. Detective Gotou. When Ishii thought that, it was already too late.

Gotou's head rammed into the chief of the police's face.

'What the hell do you mean by "for the sake of all the police in the country"? You kokeshi doll!
You're just protecting your own ass!'

While Gotou yelled, he tried to give the police chief a final blow.

The chief of the police's front tooth stabbed into Detective Gotou's forehead. He couldn't do any more.

Ishii tried to jump at Gotou from behind to pin him down.

However, unlike what Ishii had expected, his body floated away. Eh? Ah, Detective Gotou hurled him away. Just as he thought that, his back hit the ground.

He lost consciousness –

終章

その後

EPILOGUE

epilogue

-

Ishii had come to the door that had the plate which read <Movie Research Circle> on it.

He was here to discuss what happened after the incident. Though this was usually Gotou's job, that wasn't the situation now.

'I'm not going to bite. Why not come in?'

Ishii was startled when a voice suddenly called out to him.

He restrained his fear and opened the door. The owner of the room was sitting in a chair with sleepy eyes, as usual. His hair was all mussed up.

'Ah, hello.'

'Please sit.'

Unlike Ishii, who was hesitant, Yakumo was calm.

Ishii sat as he was told. Yakumo yawned, stood up and opened the refrigerator in the corner of the room.

'Ishii-san, would tea be acceptable?'

'Ah, yes.'

Yakumo brought back two plastic bottles of tea.

'Now, what has happened?'

Yakumo drank a mouthful of tea from one of the plastic bottles and sat in the chair.

'You may already know...'

'You're stiff.'

'Ishii-san, since you are older than me, you don't need to speak so politely.'

'Ah – oh...'

Ishii would try, but it wasn't something he could do something about right away even if he was told to fix it.

Perhaps he empathised with Ishii, who didn't know what to say next, because Yakumo said, 'Well, it's fine,' urging him to continue.

'Makoto-san has reported on the series of police scandals, so nothing can be hidden any longer.'

Makoto's article had been taken up to the top.

After that, there had been a grand journalism war from all news outlets, and it continued even a week after the incident. It had developed into a huge scandal.

It was ironic, now that he thought about it. A scandal from police history had been reported by the daughter of the chief of the police.

Yesterday, Makoto had called him and said that she had finally been disinherited.

She had said she felt better, but Ishii thought that wasn't true.

Just the one case had showered sparks on so many people and warped their lives.

However, Ishii thought this now. If Gotou and Yakumo hadn't been there, that warping might have become even greater.

'I read in the newspaper that the chief of the police resigned. How about the others?'

'Chief Ideuchi was given a disciplinary dismissal. Currently, there is an investigation.'

It was a natural punishment, but Ishii had complicated feelings on it.

What Ideuchi had done had been completely unforgiveable, but was it really fine to reject all of Ideuchi as evil because of it?

'How about his son?'

'Ah, yes. He was taken back yesterday. The situation was explained to him, but it was too much for him to understand. He felt a bit like Urashima Tarou¹.'

'How amusing.'

Yakumo forced a smile at Ishii's boring joke.

He spoke so smoothly that Ishii felt stupid for bracing himself.

In Ishii's head, he suddenly remembered something Haruka had said. 'Yakumo can be very kind.' She might have really understood him.

'Well, how about the middle-aged man?'

Yakumo put out the most important question.

To be honest, it was difficult for Ishii to answer.

'We don't know yet. Detective Gotou hasn't done anything wrong this time, but... well, there was the thing where he rammed his head into the chief of the police.'

'That was interesting.'

Yakumo let out a laugh – maybe he was remembering the scene.

'It isn't something to laugh about.'

'No, it is. I mean, the police chief's front tooth stabbed into Gotou-san's forehead. Do you know what Detective Gotou did afterwards?'

¹ Urashima Tarou is similar to Rip Van Winkle, in that he is allowed to visit the palace of the dragon god in the sea for three days and comes back to find that three hundred years have passed.

'Who knows?'

Ishii had been knocked out of the way by Gotou and lost consciousness, so he didn't know the circumstances after that very well.

'Gotou-san took out the tooth stuck in his forehead, put it back in the mouth of the police chief, who had his eyes wide open, and said, "Yakumo, glue." He tried to cover it up.'

Yakumo laughed even more loudly.

No, no, that really wasn't something to laugh about.

'In any case, if the detective who exposed an internal scandal is fired in front of society, it would be rather bad for them, so there probably won't be any particular punishment, but...'

The problem was what would happen next.

'Gotou-san is a traitor to the organisation now.'

'Yes.'

He really was sharp. Even if there wasn't any official punishment, he would be labelled as the man who sold his colleagues.

He wouldn't be able to escape as long as he was in the police.

'I have no idea what Detective Gotou will do now.'

'Well, no matter what that middle-aged man chooses, it isn't any concern of mine. Rather, it would be less trouble for me if he quit the police,' said Yakumo with a yawn.

What was he saying? Ishii had started thinking that Yakumo might be kind, but there was no doubt that he was, as he thought, a cold man.

'And how about Kamiyama-shi?'

After laughing for a while, Yakumo narrowed his eyes and spoke.

'When the firefighters went in, he was already...'

'I see.'

Yakumo's expression didn't change, but it felt like there was a shadow in his eyes.

Ishii felt like Kamiyama himself had been a residual spirit.

A sad man who tied his own soul down for revenge –

However, if he hadn't done that, he wouldn't have been able to deal with his own emotions.

'Er, actually, there was something I wanted to ask.'

'What is it?'

To say the truth, they were more Gotou's doubts than Ishii's.

In the basement bar, Yakumo had read a portion of Rika's suicide note, which had been lost. However, that note had not been found at Ideuchi's house.

Ideuchi had snatched it since he suspected the note might have had something that would connect it to the culprit.

However, the contents of that note weren't written anywhere. He had wanted to return it when it was safe, but he had lost his chance.

If Kamiyama had seen the suicide note – if he had known Rika's true intention – this case might not have happened. When Ishii thought about that, it really was complicated.

A minor misunderstanding could bring about such darkness.

Putting that aside, what Gotou and Ishii wanted to know was why Yakumo knew about the contents of the note.

'About the suicide note. Where did you find out its contents?'

'I read the heart,' said Yakumo with a sharp gaze.

Ishii was startled. He could read people's hearts? No. That was terrifying. Was he reading Ishii's heart now?

Ishii's mouth felt parched.

Yakumo smiled when he saw how openly afraid Ishii was.

'It's a joke. Please don't mind so much.'

'Please stop it, really.'

Ishii uncapped the plastic bottle and drank tea to wet his throat.

Yakumo stretched out his hand, picked up Rika's diary from the shelf by him and opened up to a page for Ishii to see.

There were signs that a page had been ripped out.

'She probably took the feelings she wrote into her diary and used them as they were for a suicide note. You can faintly read the words on the next page from the strokes. I looked at those strokes one by one to come up with the note.'

'Oh,' Ishii said in his admiration.

'Why are you saying that so proudly? I was the one who did the work.'

The person who had come in while criticising Yakumo was Haruka.

'H-Haruka-chan.'

'It's simple work that could have been done by anyone.'

Yakumo scratched at his head like he found Haruka annoying.

'Treating people like idiots again. I won't help you ever again.'

Haruka stuck out her tongue. That expression was cute too.

'Oh, don't say that. That necklace matches you fairly well, doesn't it?' said Yakumo, his voice devoid of emotion.

'What? It's too late to say that now. Ah! You're drinking my tea!'

'Eh?'

Ishii's heart skipped a beat at Haruka's words.

Could it be? Ishii looked at the plastic bottle in his hand.

'I-I-I sincerely apologise. I...'

Ishii stood up to bow his head deeply.

'Ishii-san, you did nothing wrong. He's at fault.'

Haruka glared at Yakumo.

'You're the one using somebody's fridge without permission,' said Yakumo while stifling a yawn.

'Honestly! That's enough of that.'

Haruka approached Yakumo.

'Aah! You're so loud!'

A yell echoed through the room. This voice was –

Everyone's gazes fixed on the entrance.

In a wrinkled-up shirt and loose tie, the bearlike figure of Gotou stood there.

'What's with all of you? It's creepy!' complained Gotou, as he always did.

'D-D-Detective Gotou, I was worried.'

Ishii clung on to Gotou.

'Worried about what?'

'I thought that you might quit the police, Detective Gotou.'

'Why?'

'That is, er...'

Ishii's words were caught in his throat.

'Ishii-san was worrying pointlessly that you would become independent of the police organisation and leave, Gotou-san.'

Yakumo added his explanation in Ishii's stead.

'Why are you saying something so idiotic? I've always been independent of them!' yelled Gotou, hitting Ishii.

That wasn't something to say with a puffed chest.

'Anyway, this isn't the time to play around. Ishii, we're going!'

Gotou grabbed Ishii's arm and pulled at him.

'Go? Where are we going to?'

'To the case, obviously!'

Gotou was yelling again. Case. But it had just finished –

'Oi! Yakumo. You come too!'

'I refuse.'

Yakumo gave an immediate answer to Gotou's words.

'What did you say?'

'Currently, I have done you two favours. I refuse to allow any more advances.'

'You're so annoying! Ah, that's right. I remembered. I promised I'd punch you once the case was over.'

Gotou leapt at Yakumo.

Ishii clung to Gotou frantically to stop him. Yakumo reclined on his chair like he didn't care.

Haruka-chan laughed happily as she watched them.

Please, give a man a break!

-

At the time, Ishii hadn't noticed the large shadow drawing near him.

添付ファイル

返却

E X T R A FILE

extra file: repayment

-

This happened a week after that case.

-

My feet brought me to the <Movie Research Circle> room in the back of Building B.

I came to meet the most contrary person on campus: Saitou Yakumo.

It's not that I had any trouble. Today was the last day of classes for the first semester, and starting tomorrow the university would enter summer vacation. I would be going home to Nagano. I thought I'd pay a visit to see his sour face first.

Plus, I didn't properly thank him for the necklace I got from him a while back.

'Hey.'

When I opened the door, Yakumo was sitting in the chair he always did, running a hand through his messy head.

The room was as hot as a sauna.

'What, it's you?'

Yakumo looked at me with incredibly sleepy eyes and spoke while holding back a yawn.

'What? I came all this way.'

'I didn't ask you to.'

'Oh, that's right. I was in the wrong.'

There'd be no end to it if I took what Yakumo said seriously and got angry.

Exhausted, I sat on the chair.

'Sorry, but I have to head out now.'

'Head out?'

'Yeah. There's something I still have to do with the case from last time.'

Yakumo looked like he thought it was troublesome as he mussed up his hair.

'The case from last time – do you mean the one with Kamiyama-san?'

'Yeah.'

'Isn't that already over?'

'No, I have to return this.'

Yakumo held up the red paperback diary in his right hand to show me.

'Ah.'

That was Rika-san's diary.

Come to think of it, I'd borrowed the diary without going back to return it.

It was something I borrowed from her father. It reminded me of his sad expression. I promised that I would find out the reason Rika-san died –

And then the truth had become clear.

'Hey, can I go too?' I said, looking at Yakumo's eyes.

To say the truth, meeting him again would make me depressed. That man believed that his daughter hadn't killed herself, but that wasn't the truth. I didn't know what I'd say if I met him. There was no meaning in any comforting words I could say.

But I still had a duty to meet him.

'Do what you want.'

For a while, Yakumo looked troubled, but he finally sighed and said that, handing the diary to me.

That was right. This was something I should hold.

After a nod, I took that diary.

'Don't be slow,' said Yakumo as he left the room.

Hey, he's just going to leave the door open? Honestly, he just did whatever he wanted.

I took the door key from the fridge, locked up and then hurriedly ran after Yakumo.

I thought Yakumo would go meet Rika-san's father right away, but he said, 'There's somewhere I want to drop by first,' and he went to the apartment where Rika-san killed herself.

'You wanted to drop by here?'

'Yeah. There was something I wanted to check.'

After responding to my question, Yakumo looked up at the apartment roof while narrowing his eyes at the summer sun.

I lined up shoulders with Yakumo and looked up at the sky too, the same way he was.

After coming all the way here, even someone as thick-headed as me knew what Yakumo had come to check.

When we came here last time, Rika-san had been jumping from the apartment roof over and over, repeating her suicide.

What was she doing now that the case was over?

I wanted to know that before we met with Rika-san's father. At least that could be some comfort for him.

– What’s happened to Rika-san?

Before I asked, Yakumo ended up walking towards the manager who was by the entrance.

Yakumo made a request to the manager in the same way he did the last time we came to have the manager open the automatic doors at the entrance and borrow the rooftop key.

I silently took the elevator with Yakumo.

In that small space where our shoulders were almost touching, I sneaked a peek at Yakumo.

From the small gap between his body and his white shirt, there was a thin layer of sweat on his chest. He was as pale as porcelain.

Suddenly, I remembered what happened that time.

On a road by the train tracks, Yakumo had held my head against that chest when I had been falling apart, hurt after receiving the diary from Rika-san’s father.

That moment, a variety of emotions had mixed together and I had buried my head in his chest and cried in my incomprehension, but now that I remembered it, I suddenly felt embarrassed and I went red to my ears, dropping my gaze to my feet.

'What is it?'

My heart skipped a beat when Yakumo asked me that.

'N-nothing.'

'It's fine that you like to eat, but you should be moderate about it.'

Hey, what sort of misunderstanding did he have to make to get to that conclusion? He was really offensive.

I thought of rebutting, but I couldn’t say what I had really been thinking and just sniffed and said, 'Honestly.'

We got off the elevator at the top floor of the apartment and took the stairs to the rooftop from there. We used the key Yakumo had borrowed and went out to the rooftop together.

I held my hands up over my head and looked up at the scorching summer sky.

The sky was clear blue and cumulonimbi went up the sky in columns like smoke. I could hear the faraway cries of the cicadas.

Yakumo walked forward slowly and stood straight on the edge, which was slightly taller than the roof.

I thought Yakumo might just jump off right then. Since he was like a cloud, not bound by anything –

Even though Yakumo should have been somewhere my hand could reach easily, he felt very far away.

'Not here.'

Yakumo said just that as he looked up at the sky.

'Kamiyama-san?'

'Yeah, she must have gone to meet him.'

'I wonder if he accepted Rika-san this time.'

'I don't know.'

Yakumo turned around and jumped off the edge.

His eyes looked sad. Yakumo really was a very kind person. That was why he had been hesitant and troubled over this case.

'Let's believe he did.'

I smiled at Yakumo.

It might have just been a convenient way of thinking about it, but I still wanted to believe it.

'You're carefree.'

Yakumo was looking down as he scratched the tip of his nose, like he was embarrassed for some reason.

'Why am I carefree?'

'Don't turn on me like that.'

'I'm not turning on you. Unlike somebody, I'm honest.'

'Rather than honest, you're dense.'

'What do you mean by that?'

'I mean exactly what I said.'

I couldn't find the words to reply and stamped my foot.

Yakumo's lips turned up in a smirk, like he thought he had won. There was no way I'd win in an argument against Yakumo, but it was still vexing.

'OK, shall we go?'

Yakumo stretched and then slipped past me to walk towards the door briskly.

I was going to follow after him, but when he reached the door, Yakumo stopped walking like he had felt something.

'What is it?'

I called out at the same time he turned around.

For a moment, I thought like our eyes met, but I was wrong. Yakumo was looking at something behind me with a surprised expression.

'You're still here...' said Yakumo in a hoarse voice.

This response. Was Rika-san still –

I turned around to follow Yakumo's gaze, but I couldn't see anything.

Even though I just said to believe that Kamiyama-san accepted Rika-san and they were resting in peace –

Was all we did pointless?

That would be too sad.

'I see.'

After a suffocating silence, Yakumo said that. I turned back to look at him in response to that.

He was different than how he had been before. His expression looked somewhat gentle.

'Is Rika-san here?'

'She passed away this time,' replied Yakumo while looking up at the sky.

'What did she say?'

'She gave me a message.'

'A message.'

'She wants me to pass it on to her father –'

'What was it?'

'I'm going to tell him now.'

There was a tinge of embarrassment in Yakumo's voice as he said that. That was right. There was still something we have to do.

I nodded and then started walking beside Yakumo.

※本作はフィクションであり、実在の人物、団体等とは一切関係ありません。

afterword

-

The paperback version of *Psychic Detective Yakumo* has also safely had its third volume published.

This is also thanks to everyone who has been reading this series with pleasure. I will take this chance to offer my heartfelt thanks.

-

This time as well, at the request of K-san, the editor in charge, I did a large-scale revision of the manuscript.

-

While advancing the manuscript revision, I checked on a whim the date in the colophon for the volumes, but the first Yakumo volume was released in October of 2004 and the third in July of 2005, which means that three works in ten months. They have been published at the high pace of one work about every four months.

On top of that, there was a period where I was still working as a company employee, so I remembered how I had written without even looking aside.

In the afterword for the third volume, I wrote that even I don't know what lives they are walking, but that probably came from the situation.

When I look back, I feel like I let the characters run and frantically chased after them.

However, at this stage where I am revising for paperback, the series has already reached its seventh volume, and I know the near future of the characters.

Writing while knowing what is coming and writing without knowing what is coming – I fully realise now that there is a big difference between the two and feel in my skin how interesting that is.

If the situation changes, the way one thinks and the way one feels changes as well –

After a few years, I'd like to do revisions again –

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Heisei 20¹, heat wave – Kaminaga Manabu

1 Heisei 20 is 2008 in the Gregorian calendar.