

神永学

心霊探偵

八

PSYCHIC DETECTIVE  
YAKUMO  
Hideo Kaminaga

雲

守るべき想い

4

角川文庫

PSYCHIC DETECTIVE YAKUMO

Шансан Камисага

04.

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序 章

P R O L O G U E

## prologue

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It should have been a night like any other –

Miyagawa Hideya went up the winding slope and stopped the car by the road.

He saw the three-storey home that he was headed for beyond the front glass. It felt like it could appear in a horror movie.

'Honestly. The rich just build these crazy-huge houses. This is Japan.'

Miyagawa picked up the radio his car was equipped with.

'This is Seta-chou 152. I arrived at the scene. I'll go look at the situation.'

<Roger.>

'I really never get a break.'

Miyagawa sighed as he cut off the radio.

He'd been so busy with cases recently he was practically never home. Just when he'd thought he'd be able to go home early for the first time in a while, he'd heard the radio.

Once he'd heard the radio, he couldn't ignore it. Even he thought that his personality was unfavourable.

When Miyagawa had advanced to the gate, he saw a middle-aged woman standing there.

She had a cardigan on top of her nightclothes. She also had no make-up on. It felt like she had rushed out of her house in a hurry.

'I'm Miyagawa from the Seta-chou precinct.'

When he displayed his police ID, the woman relaxed.

'You live here?'

The woman shook her head at Miyagawa's words.

'I was the one who called. I heard a terrible scream and was so afraid...'

Miyagawa understood the situation.

'Stand back. I'm going to look inside.'

After saying that, Miyagawa opened the iron gate.

'Excuse me... Detective, are you alone?' said the woman, sounding afraid.

'Backup will be here soon.'

Amateurs shouldn't worry so much. It's depressing.

Miyagawa swallowed the words he was about to say and then walked across the neatly growing

lawn towards the entrance.

'It's huge.'

When he looked up at the building at such a close distance, he felt again how large it was.

The curtains were closed so he couldn't see inside, but the lights were on.

Miyagawa rang the doorbell at the entrance. The beautiful sound of the bell could be heard outside.

However, there was no response –

'This is the police. Is anyone here?'

I'll try knocking. As I expected, there's no response –

His heart started beating noisily.

'Police – anyone here?'

Miyagawa raised his voice and placed his hand on the doorknob.

It opened.

'Anyone? Respond.'

He slowly stepped into the entrance while calling out.

The atmosphere was heavy. He'd stepped into a different world – that was what it felt like.

And there was this smell.

'This is...'

The corridor went straight forward from the entrance.

The door at the end of the corridor was slightly open.

Splash. Splash.

There was the sound of water falling, but he only heard it intermittently.

Miyagawa took the special police baton from his waist and went down the corridor in his shoes, slowly walking towards that door.

His heartbeat naturally grew quicker.

It's dangerous. His instinct was screaming that.

Miyagawa used the tip of his police baton to push open the door.

What he saw right in front of him was the anguished face of a middle-aged man.

Miyagawa knew without checking that he was dead.

He wasn't the only one collapsed there.

A man and a woman in their sixties. Plus, a woman probably in her thirties. They were in a heap, covered with blood.

There was a pool of blood on the floor.

It was like a painting of a scene in Hell –

What on earth had happened?

Miyagawa barely managed to keep calm and immediately turned around to call for backup.

'Oh!'

He cowered in his shock.

A man was standing right in front of his eyes.

His long hair flowed down his back, and he wore a black suit with sunglasses. He had a child of about elementary school age next to him.

The chest area of the white pyjamas the child was wearing was dyed bright red.

What? What on earth happened here?

In his confusion, Miyagawa slowly stepped back to put distance between them. However, he stepped on something and fell face-up.

The man in the suit smiled and slowly took off his glasses.

Both of his eyes glowed red like a blazing flame.

\* \* \*

There was a rumour in that elementary school –

-

When night fell, you could hear the sound of a child's voice.

It's hot, it's hot –

Even if you heard the voice, you couldn't turn around.

Otherwise, you'd be scorched to the bone.

It might sound like a common school ghost story.

However, there was proof behind this tale.

It went back twenty-odd years.

One child started a fire in the PE storeroom as a prank. That fire, which had been small at first, spread very quickly and swallowed that boy up.

Then, the fire swallowed up the firefighter who went to try to save that boy as well.

Afterwards, the PE storeroom was torn down and was now a pool, so that such a tragedy would

not occur again...

However, the boy wasn't released from his suffering...

# 発火

## 第一章

FILE:  
01

## file 01: ignition

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1

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When Yokouchi Kazuhito came out of the staff entrance in the back of the school building, it was already past ten.

He looked up at a beautiful moon.

A full moon –

It took more time than expected to lock up the school, which was something he wasn't accustomed to doing.

Normally, locking up at the end of the day was the caretaker's job, but the caretaker was off due to a cold.

Of course, the troublesome work fell to the rookie teacher.

Perhaps it was different for private schools, but the world of public school teachers was still firmly rooted in the old seniority system. Even if he was dissatisfied with it, he wasn't in a situation where he could say it aloud.

'This is really annoying...'

Yokouchi walked the path between the school building and the pool while grumbling. He still had to lock the school gates.

He wanted to go home as quickly as possible. That impulse quickened Yokouchi's pace.

Plop –

There was the sound of something falling into the water.

When he turned his eyes to the pool, there were ripples in the moonlit water.

He saw a black shadow on the diving board in the third lane.

'A person...' murmured Yokouchi as he stared.

He couldn't see the face well, but it appeared to be a middle-aged man from the physique.

Sneaking into the school pool at this time – and it was autumn now, on top of that.

There had been a number of incidents within the school recently. If he left it like this, it'd become a problem of responsibility.

'Er, excuse me.'

Yokouchi mustered his courage and called out to the man.

The man made no response. Had his voice not reached him?

'Hey! You over there! What are you doing?'

Yokouchi put his hand by his mouth and raised his voice.

It looked like he heard him this time.

The man slowly turned his neck to look towards Yokouchi. However, he immediately turned back.

Honestly, what was it?

'Excuse me! Please leave!' said Yokouchi as he walked towards the pool fence.

However, the man still did not move.

'I will call the police!'

Yokouchi took the mobile phone out of the pocket of his slacks.

The man would definitely run now that Yokouchi had played that card. That was what Yokouchi thought, but it was no good.

Now there was nothing to do but actually call.

'I really will call.'

Yokouchi made one more warning and then pressed the buttons 1, 1 and 0.

Eh? It won't go through –

Was the connection bad? He took a look at his mobile phone display.

It was out of range.

There was nothing he could do. Maybe he'd go back to the staffroom and call.

Yokouchi was just about to turn his heels around when somebody grabbed his jacket hem.

When he looked, he saw a young man of about ten who had gotten next to him at some point in time. He didn't remember the face. Was he from a kid from one of the classes?

At any rate, it was a problem for an elementary school student to be loitering at school at this hour.

Indifferent to Yokouchi's thoughts, the boy slowly pointed at the diving board where the man stood.

Yokouchi's eyes were led to the pool again.

The man on the diving board looked like he was glowing.

What?

While Yokouchi was being bewildered, a bright red pillar of flame rose from the man's stomach.

Sparks flew everywhere. The fire eddied up like a dragon climbing to the heavens and swallowed the man's body in a flash.

Even though the man was swallowed up by the flames, he didn't move.

Finally, he fell into the pool, raising a sheet of spray.

Why? How?

Yokouchi was so shocked by what happened that these natural suspicions didn't even cross his mind.

Horror just crept up from his feet and stole the freedom from his body.

He lost the strength in his legs and he sank down to the floor right there.

The boy from earlier peered worriedly at Yokouchi.

Why is this kid so calm? Somebody burned up in front of your eyes –

While Yokouchi was seized with fear, the boy's face started glowing.

It can't be –

His bad feeling struck home.

Just when he thought a small blaze was in the boy's cheek, his entire face started burning with the intensity of a paper being eaten away by flames.

The inflamed skin dripped.

That crackling blaze swallowed the boy whole in no time at all.

Just like the man earlier –

Yokouchi didn't think of trying to save him.

He just heard a voice in his ear as he tried to scuttle away in his fear –

It's hot... Help...

'Aaahh!'

Yokouchi's scream echoed through the school at night.

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2

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Ozawa Haruka stood in front of the lavatory sink and looked at her reflection in the mirror.

I look startlingly pale –

No matter how strong she acted, her body showed her nervousness honestly.

With today, it had been a week since she started her training as a teacher at this elementary school.

She had matched the names with the faces of all the children in the class she was in charge of and was used to that atmosphere as well.

No matter how used to it she was, today was different.

It would be stranger not to be nervous, though it was true that she also felt exhilarated.

It was similar to how she felt before a performance.

'Ah, here you were. Ozawa-san, we have to go soon.'

The person who peeked in from the lavatory door was the teacher in charge of Haruka, Komai Hiromi.

'Ah, please excuse me. I'll be out soon.'

'I'll wait outside then.'

Komai gave her a friendly smile.

There's no point complaining now. I have to do it. I'll be fine.

Haruka told her mirror self that and, after forcing the corners of her lips up in a smile, left the lavatory.

'Well, shall we go?'

'Yes.'

After Haruka replied, she started walking down the corridor beside Komai.

Even though she had readied herself, when she approached the classroom, her heartbeat was so loud it hurt her ears.

'Are you nervous?' asked Komai, turning to look at Haruka.

'Yes. Only a little,' Haruka replied honestly.

For a moment, Komai was surprised, and then she laughed happily.

It might have been rude for her to put it this way, but that expression was cute. Though the teacher was in her mid-thirties, it didn't look like that at all to Haruka.

When she actually spoke to her, the contents and method of her speech made her seem like an adult woman, but it wouldn't be strange at all to say she looked to be the same age as Haruka just from her appearance.

She had also said that she would be getting married soon, so that might have been the cause of it.

There was a small diamond ring glittering on the ring finger of the hand that combed up her hair.

'You looked relaxed to me though.'

Komai shrugged.

'Is that so? I feel like my heart will leap out of my mouth.'

'If you can say that, you're fine.'

After nodding a few times, Komai clapped a hand on Haruka's shoulders.

Recently, it felt like the way people evaluated her had changed.

Though she wouldn't be able to reply with a firm answer if asked how it had changed, when compared to before, she wasn't as timid, or perhaps she could say she felt like she had her own opinions.

It had been that way for her choice of the elementary school she would train at.

There were many students who would choose their alma mater when undergoing training. However, Haruka didn't dare to do that.

Her reason was that she didn't want to depend on the kindness of a school that she was familiar with.

This elementary had thirty students per class and five classes per year.

There were nine hundred children. It was smack in the middle of a residential area, so the scale and environment were completely different from the elementary school in the countryside that Haruka graduated from.

Since she had entered the education department, she aspired to become a teacher.

However, she'd wanted to see how serious she was in this completely different environment.

Her previous self probably wouldn't have thought of placing herself in adversity.

It might be because of him –

'That brings me back. For my first class, I couldn't do it until the end because I was nervous,' said Komai, looking up at the ceiling.

'You couldn't, Komai-sensei?'

Komai narrowed her eyes at Haruka's surprised expression.

She looked like a prankster who was scheming something.

'Is that unexpected?'

'Yes.'

'Why?'

'Sensei, your classes are really easy to understand and fair. I can't imagine that at all.'

'Everyone fails at first.'

'Yes.'

Haruka stopped walking to reply.

She felt like some of the tension had left her shoulders.

Just as Komai said, nothing went well for everybody from the very beginning. People grew as they made mistakes.

'It took me ten years to get here.'

'Ten years...'

There was still a long path ahead. She'd have to work hard.

When Haruka raised her head, she saw a plate that said <Class 5-4>.

This was the class Haruka was in charge of during training.

She could tell that the classroom was unusually noisy even from the corridor.

The children also knew that today was Haruka's first class. Perhaps the children felt anxious like she did.

'Are you prepared?'

'Yes.'

Haruka took in a deep breath before replying to Komai.

'Now, do your best.'

Komai hit Haruka's back like she was sending her off.

Haruka gripped a necklace with a red stone tightly in her left hand. It was the necklace Yakumo had given her.

Please. Lend me a little strength –

After praying silently in her heart, she opened the door.

Suddenly, the children gave a thunderous cheer. There were some children who were clapping and whistling.

Haruka went blank at the unexpected reception.

'Look at the blackboard,' said Komai.

She was still astonished as she looked over and saw the words 'Haruka-sensei, do your best!' written in chalk across the chalkboard.

It was decorated with paper flowers and ribbons.

The corners of Haruka's eyes felt warm, her chest full of surprise and joy.

'Everyone, thank you. I'll be in your care today.'

When Haruka bowed, the children cheered again.

Haruka straightened her back and stood at the platform.

When she had been in elementary school, the teacher standing at the platform had looked very

tall to her. She wondered what the children thought of her now.

As Haruka looked around the children in the classroom again, Haruka's eyes stopped at one of the boys.

Oomori Masato. He was carving something into the desk with the needle of a compass, as if Haruka's existence was completely irrelevant to him.

It looked like he was the only one who was cut off.

He was always like this. Not just in class – even during break and after school, he would be outside of the circle of the class.

Should I keep an eye on him –

'Now, start the class.'

While Haruka was troubled about what to do, Komai spoke up while erasing the words on the blackboard.

That was right. She should concentrate on class now.

'OK, let's start.'

Haruka put that behind her and opened the textbook.

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3

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Ishii Yuutarou was running at full speed down a pitch-black road.

It's hard to breathe –

Ishii didn't know why or to where he was running himself.

However, he was frantically chasing the back of the senior detective running in front of him, Gotou.

'Detective Gotou, where are you going?'

Gotou didn't even turn around at Ishii's voice.

How far had they run? Gotou suddenly came to a stop.

'Excuse me... Detective Gotou.'

Just as Ishii spoke up, Gotou's bearlike figure fell backwards.

'Detective Gotou, what has happened?'

Ishii approached because he was worried, but he was startled when he saw Gotou's face.

His eyes were wide and his face was a pale as a dead man's. And – his white shirt was dyed red at the chest.

– It's blood.

'Detective Gotou, please hold on.'

Ishii put up with his trembling legs and shook Gotou vigorously.

However, there was no response at all.

He's dead – as if to deny that thought, Ishii shook his head.

'Detective Gotou! Please wake up!'

Ishii gathered strength in the bottom of his stomach and raised his voice.

'Shut up, you fool!'

Something hit Ishii's head and he jumped up to his feet.

What he saw before him was completely different from what he had seen earlier.

Eh, this is my desk. And it's not night –

'Wake up already!'

Another fist came down on Ishii's head.

When he looked up, he saw Gotou standing there, though he had been dead earlier.

There was no blood on the white shirt so shabby it would make even Detective Columbo grimace.

He stood imposingly in front of Ishii with that demonic stature.

Oh, that was a dream –

Ishii finally understood. He had worked all night yesterday and thought he'd take a nap at dawn and rested his head on the desk.

Maybe that was why he'd seen such a dream.

'How long are you going to doze off for!?!'

As Gotou yelled, he raised his fist again.

'Eek. S-s-sorry.'

Ishii instinctively covered his head and let out a voice close to a shriek.

'It seems like you're enjoying yourselves considerably.'

There was a voice from the doorway. The characteristic thick voice of somebody who has been drinking.

When he looked over, he saw Miyagawa, the chief, standing there.

He had taken over for the previous chief, Ideuchi, who had quit because of the incident three months ago.

He was a middle-aged man of a small stature, but he didn't give the impression of being frail. He had the face of a Buddhist priest and thick eyebrows. Underneath that were a pair of piercing eyes. He could be mistaken for somebody of that sort<sup>1</sup>.

This person might kill a bear with his bare hands. Ishii really thought that.

'Of course we're not enjoying ourselves. We didn't sleep last night.'

Gotou looked incredibly listless.

'You're paying the tab for slacking off up 'til now.'

There was reason behind Miyagawa's comment.

The Unsolved Cases Special Investigations Room that had only Gotou and Ishii stationed there was, unlike its grand name, used for odd jobs. Half the time, they just acted as supporting members for other departments.

That had been fine with the previous chief, but after Miyagawa came in, the situation had made a complete about-face.

They had been ordered to look into unsolved cases, which was the actual work of this department.

It might sound like it wasn't that much work.

However, the police arrest rate was steadily declining every year and was now hanging around twenty per cent.

Currently, six million cases occurred in Japan annually. Of course, the responsibility was split up by jurisdiction, but it was still an amazing amount.

'So, what did you come here to do? Please leave if you're just here to jeer.'

Gotou had his finger in his ear as he said that unpleasantly.

'I don't have so much free time that I can jeer at you,' said Miyagawa with a snort.

Their exchange sounded rude, but there was no ill will there. To Ishii, it seemed like they were joking around.

He'd heard that Miyagawa had been partnered with Gotou back when they were rookie detectives.

They were probably very familiar with each other.

'If you're not here to jeer, what is it?'

Gotou took a cigarette from his pocket and lit it.

Miyagawa glared at Gotou.

'You lighting up knowing that I quit smoking?'

'Why not just smoke if you want to?'

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1 A closely cropped haircut is sometimes associated with the yakuza.

Gotou held his cigarette out towards Miyagawa, but he looked away like he was trying to run away from it.

'My grandkid... hates it when I smell like cigarettes.'

'People can change, gramps,' said Gotou, making fun of Miyagawa.

'Shut up!'

Miyagawa poked Gotou's chest with his finger as he yelled in his irritation. Ishii's legs shook under the pressure.

'So what did you really come here for?'

Gotou urged Miyagawa to talk as he put out the cigarette in the ashtray.

'There's actually some work I want you guys to do.'

Miyagawa flung the documents in his hand at Gotou.

'Why not get the detective department to do it?'

'I'm just going to say this, but you guys are part of the detective department too.'

'Oh, that's right.'

Gotou sulked like a child. Then, he spread out the documents he had been given.

'Isn't this the Tobe Kengo case?'

Gotou stopped flipping through the documents and muttered.

Ishii knew that case too.

The man who had beat his own father to death with a hammer one month ago –

After the crime, he had been arrested at once still at the scene. At the questioning afterwards, he displayed signs of insanity and had been taken from the prosecution to a medical specialist for an examination.

And then, during that examination, Tobe escaped –

The female doctor in charge at the time had been assaulted, but she resisted and stabbed Tobe with the scissors that had been nearby.

There had been a lot of blood left at the scene, which was the medical examination room.

They had persisted in searching for him since he could not have run far with his injuries, and there had been a large search, but they had gotten no news of him even after one month.

'I want you guys to help out with the investigation too.'

'Are you seriously asking that? It's not something that will be fixed just by adding more people.'

'I'm not telling you to help with the physical investigation.'

Miyagawa rejecting Gotou's displeasure.

'If it's not legwork, should we be putting up flyers?' said Gotou, poking fun.

'Are you an idiot?'

Just as Miyagawa said that, he smacked his palm against the back of Gotou's head.

'Aaah!'

Ishii couldn't help but shout at the unbelievable sight.

For him to raise a hand towards Detective Gotou – what a terrifying person.

'The gutsy female doctor who slashed Tobe asked the police for help.'

'Questioning?'

'No. Pro... fi... fi, fi...'

'Profiling.'

Ishii supplied the word Miyagawa was trying to say.

'Oh, that's it. Profiling. She said the culprit might be found that way.'

'You're not telling me to go with her, are you?'

Gotou's discomfort was apparent.

Profiling was used daily for investigations by police overseas.

However, Japanese police were considerably slower in comparison to police in foreign countries.

As per Gotou's response right now, profiling was still firmly recognised as an unknown.

'Her contact info's written in those documents. Go meet her.'

'She's just an amateur butting in!'

Gotou hit the desk in his irritation.

'Now, now. Don't say that. Anyway, I'm counting on you. Put in a report whenever.'

Miyagawa pat Gotou's shoulders like he was appeasing him and then left the room briskly.

A person just like a storm –

'Damn, pushing annoying work to me. I'm already worn out.'

Gotou flung the documents on the desk as he complained.

However, Ishii felt that Gotou's emotions were the opposite of what he'd said.

After Miyagawa had come, the content of their work had become incomparably harder, and while Gotou expressed his discontent, it was a fact that his eyes were brighter now.

Gotou was probably the type of person who had to be busy.

'Oi! Ishii! We're going!'

At some point Gotou had moved to the door.

'Ah, yes sir.'

Ishii hurriedly rushed over.

He fell –

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4

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The chime signalling that four hours were over rang –

'I'll stop here then.'

At the same time as Haruka finished speaking, the tension left her shoulders like the air from a balloon.

Somehow, she had managed to finish the morning class, but unfortunately, she couldn't say it had gone well.

At points, her head went completely blank and she was stiff. Each time, Komai gave her advice quietly from the side.

If she hadn't, the class would have become self-study partway through.

'I apologise for causing you trouble.'

'It was a good performance for your first time. You'll get used to it sooner or later.'

Komai smiled and encouraged Haruka, who was looking down.

'Really?'

Haruka felt there were people who were suitable and unsuitable for working in front of people, let alone children.

I wonder if I'm suitable for being a teacher –

She quickly ended up thinking that way.

While Haruka was buried in thought, the children put their desks together, carried the trays with side dishes on them and tableware and prepared for their school lunches.

'Haruka-sensei, come to our group today.'

Two girls pulled at her hand. Maiko and Eri.

They were always together and looked like twins.

'Ah, OK.'

'Come quick!'

Haruka was dragged by Maiko and Eri and sat down in the low chair that had been prepared for her.

'Hey, sensei, do you have a boyfriend?'

The one who asked was Maiko. She suddenly asked such an amazing question.

'I'm taking applications right now.'

For a moment, somebody crossed Haruka's mind, but she shook that away and answered.

'Hey, what sort of person's your type?'

This time it was Eri.

When Haruka was in fifth grade, she'd had a boy she liked, but she hadn't had the concept of boyfriend or girlfriend.

'Hm. A kind person would be nice?'

If she were to say more, somebody who was a bit contrary but dependable when it was important.

There was a parade of questions that made her falter after that, like 'When was your first date?' and 'When did you kiss?'

It was honestly difficult to reply to questions like this. Even though they were children, they probably wouldn't accept vague answers or lies.

While Haruka was being attacked with tough questions, the children who had finished setting the table had all sat down.

'Everyone's together then.'

At Komai's voice, the children replied together: 'Yes!'

'Sensei, Masato-kun isn't here.'

A little later, Maiko spoke up from beside Haruka.

Haruka glanced over – the seat diagonal from Haruka was empty. Come to think of it, Masato had already been gone by the time Haruka had sat down.

'Eh, again?'

'Who cares? Let's eat.'

'He's creepy.'

'Yeah. He said he can see ghosts.'

'Eh! No way!'

Voices called out from various parts of the classroom. Komai sighed like she was tired of it.

From that response, it appeared that something like this had happened numerous times in the past.

Haruka stood up, walked over to Komai and said, 'I'll look for him.' Komai appeared to think it over for a while, but then she replied, 'Please do.'

'I understand.'

After replying, she tried to leave but then heard unhappy cries of 'Ehh' from the group of children she had been sitting with.

'You can just ignore someone like him,' someone said.

That was bullying. She couldn't stay silent after hearing that. Just when Haruka thought that, Komai stood up.

'You promised not to say things like that, right? Everyone in this class is friends. Wouldn't it be sad if somebody said the same to you?'

Rather than speaking to anybody in particular, Komai spoke to the whole class.

That was Komai-sensei for you, Haruka thought. There were some children who looked displeased, but the classroom was so quiet the fuss earlier seemed like a lie.

'Ozawa-san, please go ahead.'

'Yes,' replied Haruka, and then she left the classroom.

Where did that child go –

Oomori Masato's face came up in Haruka's mind.

She had not spoken to him even once.

However, she was concerned about him. He felt obviously different from the other children. He was always spacing out by himself away from the group.

He had cold eyes, unlike those of an elementary student.

He might have been troubled with a big problem.

She was also concerned about what the other children had said earlier.

– He can see ghosts.

Was that true?

If it were, Haruka might have been overlapping Masato with that guy.

In any case, she had to hurry. Haruka put those thoughts aside and quickened her pace.

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After Gotou sat down in the passenger seat of the white Crown, an unmarked patrol car, he lit up his cigarette.

Damn, this was annoying.

Recently, everyone made a huge fuss about psychological analysis and profiling because of the influence of television dramas.

It wasn't a problem of numbers – he wouldn't have to work so hard if they could know who the perps were just by using a calculator.

The basis of investigation was straightforwardly getting info.

Well, it riled him up, but this let him stick his neck into the investigation. He'd been stuck organising files up until now, and he'd gotten out of shape. This was a good opportunity.

'I wonder what sort of person she is.'

From the driver's seat, Ishii spoke with a lazy expression.

'Who?'

'Sasaki-sensei, the psychiatrist, of course.'

'You're very curious.'

'There's nothing I can do about it. I looked at her personal history earlier – it seems like she studied criminal psychology in America.'

'So what?'

'Eh?'

Ishii looked blank.

'Just because she can study for tests doesn't mean she can catch criminals. Forget about that and drive!'

At Gotou's yell, Ishii's shoulders shivered in fear and he hurriedly started the car.

Honestly, Gotou wished this fool would grow up a bit. He just kept on cowering and wasn't useful at all.

Ishii might have been suitable to be a detective. Gotou might have to find some time to talk to him seriously. It was for Ishii's sake as well.

After sighing, Gotou spread out the documents for the Tobe Kengo case on his lap.

Tobe Kengo. Thirty-eight. Unemployed –

The left half of his face had been damaged in his childhood by fire so the skin was scarred and reddish purple in colour.

The eyes underneath that were so expressionless it was uncanny. It was like they were fake.

'I wonder why Tobe killed his father,' said Ishii to himself.

'He was angry?' Gotou replied curtly, putting his cigarette out in the ashtray.

'But that's so extreme. Would he kill the father he had lived with for so many years for something simple?'

'Couldn't he have had some deep grudge we don't know about because they lived together for so long? It's not like it's uncommon.'

Children kill their parents. On the other hand, parents kill their children. Nowadays, he often heard about bloody cases like that.

Something was off. He felt that way more often now.

'But something is strange,' said Ishii. He shifted about, like his seat wasn't comfortable.

'What do you mean by something?'

'Tobe's father had terminal cancer.'

When Ishii said that, Gotou looked at the documents again.

It was as he said. Tobe Kengo's father, Masashi, had had terminal cancer.

Even if he hadn't acted on his own, the man would have died soon enough. Nevertheless, Tobe had gone out of his way to knock his dad's brains out.

It really was unnatural. But –

'Maybe he just wanted to do it himself,' said Gotou as he looked at the photo taken of the scene.

It was a disastrous scene that made you want to turn his head away.

Tobe Masashi had been hit dozens of times with a hammer. His mouth and nose were completely crushed and his face was sunken in.

If he'd just wanted to kill him, there was no need to go this far. He'd cleared years of hatred with his own hand. The ill intent came through the photo.

'Is that how it is?'

Ishii cocked his head, seeming dissatisfied. Gotou thought about showing him the photo of the scene, but he decided not to. If he showed Ishii this now, he'd be startled and would definitely cause an accident.

'That's how it is.'

Gotou threw the documents towards the backseat and reclined in his seat, exhausted.

There was something Gotou was more interested in than the motive for the crime.

How could Tobe escape –

He'd been cuffed and police had been there to guard him. If you thought about it normally, there was no way he could have escaped.

He'd looked through the documents, but there were many parts he wasn't satisfied with. Plus, Gotou only believed in the things he saw and heard himself.

He'd have to check that out before profiling when he met up with the psychiatrist, decided Gotou.

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6

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Haruka searched in every nook and cranny of the school building, from the fourth floor with Class 5-4's classroom to the first floor.

Of course, she checked the lavatory, library and school infirmary – everywhere that wasn't locked.

However, she couldn't find Masato.

The teachers in charge would have noticed if he had sneaked into another class. Where on earth had he gone?

The only places she hadn't looked at yet were the schoolyard and the PE storeroom.

Haruka took her pumps from the staff shoe cupboard and went out into the schoolyard.

She had been looking around the schoolyard and just turned around to the back of the school building when she spotted Masato.

He had his back against the wall of the school building and was staring at the pool.

Haruka was relieved. She was about to approach him when she recognised the middle-aged man standing in front of Masato and stopped in her tracks.

The man had grizzled hair and was thin to the point of sickliness. He had goggling eyes. He was the vice-principal, Konno.

Konno was saying something while pointing his finger at Masato.

What should I do at a time like this –

While Haruka was undecided about what to do, Konno jabbed Masato's chest.

Masato lost his balance and fell on his behind.

That's awful –

'Please stop!' shouted Haruka as she rushed towards Masato.

'Masato-kun, are you all right?'

Haruka spoke up to him, but Masato stood up with a blank expression and brushed off his trousers.

'Are you OK? You're not hurt, are you?'

Haruka met Masato's eyes as she spoke to him.

Masato didn't seem disturbed – he just looked back at Haruka without saying anything.

His eyes were very cold.

What Konno had done was still unforgiveable.

Haruka turned towards Konno and glared at his sunken eyes.

'Why did you do such a thing?'

Her tone was harsh as her emotions seeped through.

'Who on earth are you? You just cut in so suddenly,' said Konno, crossing his arms in his displeasure.

I greeted him on my first day, and we see each other's faces at the staff meeting, but he still doesn't remember –

'I'm the trainee teacher, Ozawa.'

Konno made a cluck with his tongue in response.

He was the very definition of arrogance. Even if he was of higher rank than she was, there were things that were OK to do and things that weren't.

'Please answer my question. Why did you do such a thing?'

Haruka didn't flinch as she talked back to her superior.

'You're a trainee teacher, and I'm the vice-principal.'

'That is not an answer to my question.'

Did he think everyone would listen to him if he used his authority as a shield?

Whether it was the principal or vice-principal, it wasn't right to use violence against a child.

'Obviously, I was educating him,' said Konno shamelessly.

Konno had thrust Masato away. That action wasn't scolding – it was clearly violence.

'What are you saying he did?'

Konno heaved a sigh at Haruka's words.

'What did he do? He stole something from me. Stealing can't just be forgiven as some children's prank. It's plainly a crime. Do you understand?'

Stealing? That can't be –

'That must be a lie. Of course he wouldn't do something like that!'

Haruka spoke up before checking with Masato.

It had been one week since she started looking over Masato's class. She didn't know him well

enough to affirm it, but Haruka still felt strongly that she wanted to believe him.

'Take out what you stole from me earlier.'

Konno brushed Haruka aside and approached Masato.

Masato seemed resigned as he stuck his hand into his parka pocket, took something out of it and handed it to Konno.

Konno accepted it with satisfaction and put it in his suit pocket.

This has to be a lie –

'You understand now, right? Don't be so shameless when you don't know anything.'

Konno brought his face close to Haruka's with a jerk. He said that with a voice dripping in sarcasm and then walked away briskly.

Haruka had no reply and just bit her lip.

Haruka consciously put a smile on her face instead of suddenly scolding Masato as she turned to face him.

'You were OK then,' she said.

He didn't make any reply and just stood there with an expression of mixed surprise and bewilderment.

'Hey, Masato-un.'

Haruka tried to grasp Masato's hand.

'Don't touch me!'

Like his reticence up until now had been a lie, Masato suddenly spoke up in a loud voice and warded off Haruka's hand.

'Masato-kun...'

Masato glared at Haruka with hostile eyes.

I have nothing to say back when he looks at me with eyes like that –

'I'm cursed. Everyone who touches me dies.'

'Eh?'

Masato gave the bewildered Haruka a glance, turned on his heels and ran away.

Haruka just watched his back silently.

What on earth is his small back burdened with –

Haruka was irritated with her inexperience, unable to guess how he was feeling.

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'This is definitely the right place?'

Gotou's question made Ishii feel unsure.

A tiled five-storey building. There was a cafe with an open terrace on the first floor, and there was a Greek pattern on the pillars.

The building made one think of a boutique in Omotesando.

Ishii understood why Gotou would doubt that a psychiatry clinic would really be in a place like this.

'This is definitely the address...' said Ishii, looking at the documents in his hand again.

Once Gotou heard that, he wanted towards the building's entrance.

Ishii hurriedly followed after Gotou and they took the elevator directly in front of the entrance.

'What floor?' asked Gotou, sounding displeased.

'Er... the third floor.'

After Ishii checked the documents, he pressed the button for the third floor. The elevator slowly started going up.

When the elevator doors opened, there was a wooden door right in front of his eyes with the plate <Sasaki Mental Health> on it.

'This is definitely the place.'

While Ishii was confirming this, Gotou had already opened the door without any hesitation and gone in.

Gotou appeared to be the type who moved before he spoke.

I have to learn from him –

Ishii followed after him.

The room had glaringly white walls with a dark green carpet. It felt like they were standing in a grassy field.

Green was said to relax people, but from Ishii's perspective, it felt a bit much.

Gotou picked up the extension telephone at the reception counter.

'I'm Gotou, a detective from the Setamachi precinct. Is Sasaki here?'

He was taking a highhanded attitude towards a doctor.

Ishii thought that, but he didn't have the guts to tell Gotou his opinion.

Gotou curtly said, 'Ah, I see,' and then he put the phone on the receiver. After that, he opened the

door by the reception and briskly headed down the path that led to the back.

Did he get permission to go in?

Ishii felt anxious, but he started walking after Gotou.

When Gotou reached the door at the end of the path, he said, 'I'm coming in,' opening the door without knocking.

That was just bad manners.

'Please forgive the introduction.'

After bowing his head deeply, Ishii entered the room.

It was about ten tatami in size.

There was a set of brown leather sofas in front of him and plants were placed in the corners of the room. Light came in from the large windows.

In the back of the room, there was a wooden desk and a woman was sitting there while typing away on the keyboard at the computer.

'I've been waiting.'

The woman stopped typing and stood up with a smile.

She's probably Sasaki Anna, the psychiatrist –

She had a slender frame, straight facial features and pale, delicate skin. She had a beauty that felt appropriate for fashion magazine covers.

Her age had been listed as thirty-three in the documents, but her appearance made her seem in her early twenties.

Ishii's expression unconsciously slackened.

'Don't smile like that,' muttered Gotou, jabbing Ishii's side.

His breath caught at the surprise attack.

That was right. He'd almost forgotten his duty. Plus, he already had Haruka-chan in his heart.

Ishii braced himself and stood up straight.

'Are you Sasaki Anna?'

'Yes.'

Anna replied to Gotou's question in a clear voice.

'I'm Gotou. He's...'

'My name is Ishii Yuutarou!'

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

'Your voice is loud!'

Anna covered her mouth with her hand as she giggled at their exchange.

'You are an interesting pair. I had the impression that detectives would be tougher.'

After Anna said that in an amused tone, she undid her hair that had been tied behind her. Her long and glossy black hair fell down her back.

Ishii's heart skipped a beat.

She's different from Haruka-chan. The elegant beauty of an adult woman –

'Please sit down.'

At Anna's suggestion, Ishii and Gotou sat down on the sofa.

'I will bring out some drinks now then.'

'Don't worry about that. We don't plan on staying long.'

'I can't be the only one drinking though.'

Anna replied to Gotou's words with a smile and left the room.

\* \* \*

Gotou had thought every doctor wore white.

However, Anna, sitting in front of him, looked more like a receptionist at some company than a doctor in her white blouse and above-knee skirt.

'I did think it was unreasonable for me to offer my cooperation, but I thought that I was also responsible as well.'

Anna brought up the topic first.

What, so she knows herself –

Gotou cursed in his heart. The police sometimes asked psychiatrists to cooperate with investigations, but never the reverse.

'Is this place non-smoking?'

Though Gotou asked that, he lit his cigarette so there was no point in arguing about it.

'Please go ahead. If you would allow me to as well?'

Anna placed an ashtray in front of Gotou, took a thin menthol cigarette out and lit it.

There was a sweet smell from the smoke.

'I think the police must've asked you this countless times already, but do you mind if I ask you a few things first?'

'Not at all. Please ask away.'

Anna replied with a smile, crossed her legs and leant back on her chair.

Gotou glanced at Ishii beside him. This fool. His face had been strange for a while now.

He'd beat him half to death when they went back.

'When Tobe escaped, you were examining him in this room.'

'Yes, that's right.'

'Was anyone else here?'

'Of course. The guards were here. Two of them were outside the door. There were two standing at the wall in the back as well.'

Anna pointed behind Gotou with a slender finger.

There'd probably been blocking the door.

'He did well in getting away in a situation like that.'

Gotou felt like there was a shadow in Anna's almond eyes at his words.

'When I was examining him, the fire alarm went off.'

Anna put her cigarette on top of the ashtray. The smoke drifted up from it.

'Fire alarm?'

'Yes. It was a false alarm, but... because of it, the two guards in the corridor went outside to look at the situation, and the two in the room went into the corridor.'

What idiots –

If there were two guards in the corridor, they didn't need to go out and look themselves. It was an idiot's mistake.

Gotou put out his cigarette in the ashtray in his irritation.

'Then what did Tobe do?'

'He used that opening to lock the door from the inside... I was really afraid...'

Anna hugged her shoulders as her body shook.

Even that gesture was captivating.

'So did he assault you?'

'No. He tried to escape. From that window...'

Anna pointed at the large window behind her desk.

'I see.'

Anna pressed her hand against her brow and hung her head, looking pained.

'I tried to stop him. Then, he suddenly rushed at me and strangled my neck,' said Anna, slowly raising her face.

Talking about it again had probably brought up those memories. She was so pale it looked like she might faint.

'And then you stabbed Tobe?'

Gotou chose to put on a hard expression.

Anna nodded silently. Gotou heard Ishii swallow beside him.

'Where'd you get those scissors?'

'While I was struggling, I touched the scissors on the desk. Then, when I frantically turned to resist... I hadn't thought of hurting him...'

Anna's voice grew fainter as she talked and finally disappeared.

The tips of her fingers were trembling. Even if she tried to behave stout-heartedly, it must have been terrible for her. Normally, it wouldn't be strange to start crying, but her self-restraint was incredible.

'A-a-are you all right?' asked Ishii hesitantly.

Anna said, 'I'm fine,' with a smile, but her expression was stiff.

'Ishii-san, you're kind.'

As she said that, she looked directly at Ishii's eyes.

'Ah, no... er...'

'I've got most of the situation. Now it's your turn. You said you'd cooperate with the investigation, but I want to ask what your true motive is.'

The atmosphere had gotten a bit strange, so Gotou forcefully changed the topic.

Anna brushed her hair and sat up straight.

'My true motive?'

'Your questioning's over. You've already cooperated enough in that sense. You didn't remember some new testimony, right? Then what do you plan to do?' said Gotou, lighting up a new cigarette.

'Of course, I was wondering if I could cooperate with the investigation from a profiling perspective.'

'Do you really think something like that will catch the perp?'

He decided to reply bluntly.

'The police have a misunderstanding about profiling.'

Anna's expression was stiff as she gave a firm reply.

'Misunderstanding?'

'Yes. Profiling isn't something as unscientific as television dramas make it out to be, wherein one can discover the names of criminals and ambush them.'

'That so...'

Gotou wavered a bit at the unexpected reply.

'Profiling analyses the criminal's personality and features with behavioural science and infers from statistics.'

'Make that easier for me to understand.'

'In short, profiling, rather than finding out the criminal's whereabouts, analyses the criminal profile and analyses with statistics what sort of person the criminal is.'

'Then that's not really different from actually investigating the scene,' Gotou said.

In actual investigation, they reasoned out the criminal profile from the contents of the crime daily.

If money was stolen from the corpse that was found, the possibility was high that it was a robbery or there was some grudge –

'That is exactly it. In order to use what is garnered from the investigation of the scene more effectively, profiling takes it and studies it from a psychological point of view.'

Anna's expression became softer as she spoke.

'However, Doctor Sasaki, you studied criminal psychology in America.'

Ishii leant forward as he brought up his doubts.

'In America or in England, investigation is only the information gathering of the police. If a psychiatric examination would solve everything, it wouldn't be so difficult. What we do is only one part of the materials that make up the investigation, in order to make that information gathering more efficient.'

When Gotou heard what Anna said, he put aside the preconception in his head and decided to try listening to what she had to say.

'Then let me hear about that investigation material.'

Gotou put out his cigarette in the ashtray and crossed his arms.

'Yes. First, you do know what happened with the psychiatric examination of Tobe-san on the investigation end, yes?'

Gotou nodded.

He'd given a different name during the investigation and suddenly let out a strange voice and went wild – Gotou had heard there was a big fuss.

The investigation had suspicions that he was insane so he had been brought to an expert.

That was the situation, so the motive for why he beat his father to death was still unknown.

'When I met him, he called himself not Tobe Kengo but Ushijima Atsushi.'

'Ushijima, eh...'

'In the documents, it was written that he was suspected to have dissociative identity disorder – that is, multiple personalities. If that was the case, it would not be strange for him to have multiple names.'

'And?'

'The left side of his face had been burnt when he was young. It could be believed that this was a complex that sprang from that...'

Here, Anna closed her mouth like she was hesitating.

'Doctor, could it be that you do not think that is the case?'

Ishii interrupted the silence.

His eyes are sparkling. He's a coward, but he jumps right in for topics like this. I don't get him –

'Please listen to this as one possibility.'

'What?'

'In the past, dissociative identity disorder – that is, multiple personality disorder – was not very well-known. However, it is now spread through the media and many people know about it.'

Anna spoke slowly and was watching Gotou's expression.

'And?'

When Gotou urged her to continue, Anna nodded, licked her lips and continued.

'Since I have also only met him a number of times, I cannot say this with certainty. However, while his symptoms are extremely similar to dissociative identity disorder, he does not have the characteristic memory loss.'

'Memory loss?'

'In the case of dissociative identity disorder, when personality A comes out, personality B does not have memories from then. However, Tobe-san keeps all his memories even when his personality changes.'

'What do you want to say?'

'There is the possibility that this was an incredibly intellectual crime of intent.'

'Eehh!'

Ishii was extremely taken aback.

'You're noisy!'

Gotou smacked the back of Ishii's head.

This fool is too surprised –

'What's your basis for thinking that?'

'I said this earlier, but for multiple personalities, when the personality switches, the other personalities are asleep and have absolutely no memory of that time. However, Tobe-san, at least when I talked to him, did not seem to have lost his memories. Moreover...'

Anna suddenly stood up. She returned to her own desk, took a B5 notebook out from the drawer and placed it on the table.

It was an elementary school anthology made of straw paper, rarely seen today.

Anna opened the anthology on the table to the page that was bookmarked.

'This is a composition from when Tobe-san was in third grade.'

The page was titled 'Dream for the Future'.

Anna pointed at a point on the page. Tobe Kengo's name was written there.

<I want to become a company president like my dad – >

What irony. Even though he had a dream like this, he did that to his father.

'Please look here as well.'

Anna's finger moved along and stopped at a name. This was the dream written there.

< I want to become Tobe-kun – Ushijima Atsushi >

Gotou looked at Anna, taken aback.

Anna nodded with a serious expression.

'That's right. This is the other name he gave.'

'What does this mean?'

Gotou was a bit confused.

'I do not know for certain. However, this anthology and Tobe-san's burn were from about the same time period.'

'This is...'

Gotou felt something a shiver run down his spine.

'Whether he has multiple personalities or not, I believe this Ushijima-san holds the key.'

Something serious is going to happen –

It was vague, but that was how Gotou felt.

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When Haruka had finished writing the journal for today, it was already past seven at night.

The other trainees appeared to have trouble with the journal as well, but not as much as Haruka.

When she'd noticed, the meeting room left open for trainees to use had been empty except for Haruka.

It wouldn't have taken so much time to write the journal if she just had to write her thoughts and actions. However, Haruka could not reach a decision.

What she had seen at lunch break when she had gone to look for Masato –

The time had flown by while Haruka couldn't decide whether to tell Komai about it.

After pondering over it, she didn't mention Masato in the journal and decided not to talk to Komai about it either.

When Haruka left the meeting room, she knocked on the door to the staff room.

After opening the door, she saw Komai doing office work at her desk.

There was nobody except her. It appeared that Haruka had made her wait.

When Komai noticed Haruka, she waved her hand with a smile.

'I apologise that this is so late.'

While bowing her head, she handed the journal to Komai with both hands.

'Don't worry about it.'

Komai opened the journal to today's page and looked at it.

After a silence, Komai closed the journal loudly and sighed.

Was there a problem –

While Haruka was thinking, Komai put the journal in her desk drawer, picked up her bag and stood up.

'Haruka-san, you're heading back now, right?'

'Ah, yes.'

'Right. Then let's go together.'

After Komai said that, she started walking towards the exit.

'Ah, OK.'

Haruka gave a vague response and followed Komai.

Even though she'd said to go together, Komai walked silently like she was thinking about something.

Haruka felt that Komai seemed strange, but she didn't ask any questions, and they headed for the staff shoe cupboard on the first floor.

'Hey, Haruka-san.'

Komai finally spoke when they were switching shoes.

'Yes?'

'Why didn't you report about lunch break?'

Komai's voice didn't sound accusing. That sentence just made Haruka's chest feel tight.

It made sense.

There had been such a fuss, so even if Haruka kept her mouth shut, so it was natural that Konno, who had been there, would tell Komai himself.

Maybe Komai had been waiting for Haruka to talk about it.

I betrayed her expectation –

'I apologise.'

Haruka clenched her teeth to restrain the feelings welling up within her.

'Did you think I would be angry if you told me?'

'That isn't it. Just...'

'What?'

'I didn't see what happened directly, and I just couldn't believe that Masato-kun stole something from the vice-principal...'

Haruka had her hands in fists as she appealed to Komai.

'I feel the same way. I just can't believe it. But that's why I wanted you to talk to me. Did you think I'd scold Masato-kun without confirming the truth?'

'No.'

Now, Haruka felt her concerns were really selfish.

I misunderstood so much. I'm inexperienced as a person –

'Don't worry about this time. You'll make sure to talk to me properly next time, right?'

'I am truly sorry.'

Haruka bowed her head deeply.

When Komai saw her, she laughed aloud.

'You really are so honest it's unusual. It's not a beneficial personality.'

'Is that how it is?'

Haruka gave a vague reply.

'Well, I have to talk to Masato-kun properly.'

Komai made a cluck with her tongue, sounding embarrassed.

'Is there some sort of problem?'

'Mhm. Rather than problem, he's just been strange lately. He didn't use to be like this.'

'Is that so?'

'Yup. Ah, that's right. There's something I want you to take a look at.'

After Komai said that, she took a bundle of Japanese writing paper out of her bag and handed it to Haruka.

'What is this?'

Komai looked bitter when she heard Haruka's question.

'Do you remember when I asked the students to write about their fathers last week?'

'Yes.'

That had been the first day Haruka had been training, if she remembered correctly.

'This is Masato-kun's composition, but the contents are a bit...'

'The contents?'

'Read it. I want to hear your thoughts. That kid definitely has a big worry in his heart.'

'I will. Thank you very much.'

After Haruka replied, she put the writing paper in her bag.

They started walking out of the school building together, but Komai stopped like she had spotted something.

Her eyes were directed at the pool. Led by her gaze, Haruka looked the same way.

Masato-kun was there –

He stood in front of the fence as he stared at the pool on the other side.

'Masato-kun, what are you looking at?'

Komai spoke up before Haruka.

Masato slowly turned his face. His eyes were vacant. It felt like his heart wasn't here.

'A ghost.'

That was all Masato said.

'A ghost? There's no way something like that is here.'

'There is.'

Masato immediately denied what Komai said.

'In this pool. I've been cursed by that ghost.'

Masato said that expressionlessly and then ran off.'

'Hey, Masato-kun!'

Komai hurriedly called out to stop him, but Masato didn't turn around, disappearing into the night.

All Haruka could do was watch silently.

Can this child really see ghosts –

That was the only thought in her head.

'Er... Masato-kun said that he could see ghosts...'

Haruka spoke up, unable to hold back.

'There's a rumour about here from before.'

Komai sighed, sounding troubled.

'A... rumour?'

'This used to be a storeroom. There was a fire and a kid died. Then...'

Komai prevaricated.

She was probably the type who didn't believe in ghosts.

'Do the children know about that rumour as well?'

'Yup. You know Yokouchi-sensei from the class beside ours, right?'

'Yes.'

'He made a fuss about how he saw a ghost here when he was going home from school. Masato-kun probably heard him and said what he did.'

Haruka looked towards the pool again.

The moon reflected in the dirty surface was moving gently.

Unfortunately, Haruka couldn't confirm whether that rumour was true –

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After Haruka returned to her own room, she collapsed onto the bed.

Her body felt heavy. She was really tired today. Haruka was the type of clumsy person who couldn't

do two things at once.

When a lot of things piled up, it would really tire her out psychologically.

'That kid's lonely without his mother.'

While walking home from school, Komai explained Masato's home situation.

Masato's mother had fallen in love with one of the employees at her part-time job one year ago and left her husband and son.

She didn't even say goodbye –

It seemed that Masato and his father did not get along well, and he had closed his heart off ever since then.

His father worked at a bicycle repair shop while raising Masato, but that had bankrupted a few months ago.

Komai didn't explain in detail, but it seemed like the manager had been arrested.

Masato's father hadn't been related at all, but the rumour had stuck with him.

He couldn't find another job, so, with the family finances in a pressing situation, he sold their house, and now the father and son lived in a small flat.

Though Haruka hadn't actually seen how he lived, but she imagined it definitely wouldn't be satisfying if compared with the other children in the class.

Even though he'd done nothing wrong at all, he was suffering.

Children were powerless against this sort of bad luck. All they could do was bear it silently.

'I want to do something for him. There aren't many things a teacher can actually do.'

Komai's last words pierced Haruka's heart.

I wonder if there really isn't anything we can do –

Masato's cold expression, so inappropriate for a child, came up in Haruka's mind.

How on earth did that child feel about the unluckiness that had befallen him?

He must have forced himself to keep it all in that small body.

Even though it would be easier for him if he let all his complaints and displeasures out at somebody, he didn't.

Though he's putting on a brave front, I think he's a strong and kind child.

Just like that guy –

Yakumo was also burdened with a great unluckiness.

Though he normally hid it with a coloured contact lens, his left eye was red from birth. That eye had the special ability to see the spirits of the dead.

Consequently, those around him despised him and even his own mother tried to kill him.

He didn't talk about it much, but he had experienced suffering that the likes of Haruka could not even imagine.

Rather than an inexperienced trainee teacher like me, Yakumo might better understand Masato's feelings as somebody who has walked the same path.

'I can see ghosts.'

Masato had said that in front of the pool.

Is that the truth –

Yakumo was also the only person who could confirm that.

Fortunately, tomorrow was Saturday so there was no school. He might not like it, but Haruka would go consult him. He would definitely find a clue.

Haruka suddenly remembered the composition that Komai had handed to her. She took it the paper out of her bag.

Masato's composition was only one line.

<My dad isn't here anymore. I killed him – >

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10

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After returning to the police quarters, Ishii sat on a chair, exhausted.

He'd walked around for the first time in a while, and he'd been more tired than he thought he would be. It might be better if he exercised a bit more.

'Honestly, this is getting to be a pain.'

Sitting in front of him, Gotou lit up a cigarette as he complained.

It certainly had become something troublesome. However, it could also at the same time be called a big development.

'However, I think we have found a trail.'

'Somehow.'

Gotou was sceptical. However, Ishii didn't feel that way.

Anna showed the possibility that Tobe could be faking his dissociative identity disorder.

Supporting that claim, the other name Tobe gave for his personality, Ushijima, actually existed.

They had run about all day following that trail.

First, they checked Tobe's composition.

There had been a child called Ushijima Atsushi at that elementary school, but he had already died. He had lost his life in a fire at the school.

They found out that Ushijima had been an illegitimate child and had had no father.

There they turned their investigation around and started looking for Ushijima's parents.

They checked the family register at city hall and asked for Ushijima's address, but there was none. Then, they went and asked around and found out that Ushijima's mother was currently in a care home.

They were going to go to that care home tomorrow.

'We might actually arrive at the culprit.'

Ishii said that excitedly, but then the internal line rang and interrupted the conversation.

'Who's it?'

Gotou did not even try to hide his displeasure when he answered the phone.

That was much too arrogant an attitude, but Ishii didn't have the courage to point it out.

'I'm heading out.'

After Gotou hung up, he suddenly stood up.

'Eh? Where to?'

'Chief's call. I'll leave the report to you.'

Gotou left the room with a cigarette in his mouth.

He said that he'd leave the report to Ishii, but Gotou had not drawn up a report even once up until now.

Ishii didn't feel dissatisfied about that.

Though it was strange for him to say it himself, he wasn't usually very useful. If he didn't do this much, he wouldn't know why he was even here.

Ishii spread the report out on the desk and brought the Tobe Kengo documents close to him. After adjusting the position of his glasses with his finger, he looked at his details again.

Thirty-eight years old. Unmarried. His mother died twenty years ago of diabetes.

He received the burn scar on his face when he was ten, so he changed elementary schools to one in the next town after that.

That had probably been out of concern for the child who received such a shock from the fire.

But if they had been going to change environments, moving farther away would have been better

—

Or so he thought, but Ishii soon waved that thought away.

The Tobe family managed a real estate company there, so it probably wouldn't have been easy to move so far away.

His father, Masashi, had been adopted into the family. Perhaps that was related.

No, no. He had to hurry up and finish the report.

Ishii flipped through the pages of the documents.

Suddenly, the bloody face of an old man popped out at Ishii.

This was the murdered Tobe Masashi.

'Eek!'

Ishii unconsciously shrieked.

Beating your own father's face so terribly is definitely not normal.

What sort of person could Tobe Kengo possibly be –

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11

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Haruka stood in the prefabricated two-storey building in the back of the university's Building B.

She was in front of the door with the plate <Movie Research Circle> on it in the very back of the first floor.

In order to meet Saitou Yakumo –

Since it had been a while, she felt a bit nervous.

'Hey.'

Haruka opened the door without knocking.

He's here –

Yakumo, sitting in the chair at the front, was running his hands through his usual bedhead and yawning dramatically.

It felt like he'd just woken up. Well, it was always like that for him.

'You again? Do you have so much free time?'

Yakumo looked as displeased as if the end of the world had come.

Is this person incapable of greeting someone directly –

Haruka was half-astonished as she sat in the chair opposite him.

'I keep on saying this, but I don't have that much free time.'

'Though you don't look that busy to me.'

Yakumo snorted like she was a fool.

Honestly, this person is –

'I really am busy. I'm a trainee teacher right now,' objected Haruka as she restrained her irritation.

'That starts from fourth year, right? Also, this isn't the place you're training at, and I'm not one of the kids you're watching over, nor do I want to be.'

Was he going to mock her no matter what she said? Then she'd just take it standing.

She didn't have any basis for it, but she felt somehow like she could win today. Her fighting spirit was flaring up.

'At our uni, third-year students can participate in training too. Plus, today's Saturday so school's out. Your sense of the week is off. I'm training at an elementary school. Since contrary university students aren't covered.'

Led by that force, Haruka spoke all at once.

How about that? She struck a victory pose in her heart.

'Which means, in the end, that you have free time right now.'

It was just as he said. A turnabout KO.

Fine. There was no way she'd win against Yakumo in an argument anyway. Haruka's shoulders slumped.

'So what troubles do you have today?'

Yakumo changed the topic while yawning.

Haruka stared at Yakumo, who had suddenly hit the core.

'How did you know?'

Yakumo looked away and ran his fingers through his hair in irritation.

'You didn't sleep last night, right? There are dark shadows under your eyes.'

When he said that, Haruka hurriedly put her hands under her eyes.

She couldn't check if she had dark shadows under her eyes by touching, but it was true that she hadn't slept enough.

'Moreover, your eyes were hollow when you came into the room. You were probably thinking about something else. Furthermore, you always force yourself to smile and say "Hey" when you bring trouble in. Please stop it – it's unsettling.'

Unsettling, he says – how rude.

'Well, since it's you, you probably picked up some trouble while training. Then you came here. Am I wrong?'

She had nothing to say when he'd pointed everything out so correctly. His observation abilities were amazing as usual.

'Will you listen to what I have to say?'

'What are you saying now? Don't you always talk on and on without asking?'

Ah, she was really riled up. She'd definitely punch him one day.

In order to stave her anger, Haruka took deep breaths before starting to speak.

'At school, there's a small problem – or rather, a child with a problem...'

'You're quite the problem child yourself,' interrupted Yakumo as he rubbed his eyes.

She wouldn't be able to stand it if she replied to every comment he made. Haruka ignored him and continued.

'In the class I'm with, there's a boy called Masato-kun, but that boy said he can see ghosts.'

Haruka felt like Yakumo's expression suddenly stiffened.

Yakumo, who could see the spirits of the dead, was sensitive towards the topic.

'He can see ghosts. Did he say that himself?'

Haruka nodded.

When she met him at the pool, Masato had said himself that there was a ghost.

Haruka felt like Masato's problem was related to that.

'And that boy said he was cursed.'

'A curse?'

Yakumo narrowed his eyes like he was under a glaring sun.

'Yup. A curse.'

'Does he mean your behaviour? The curse. Because of your stupidity.'

'Listen to me seriously!'

'I'm always serious. If I were a natural airhead like you, I would be so much happier.'

Yakumo, after replying cynically to Haruka's objection, pinched his brow and started thinking about something while looking down.

Even though he said so much, it appeared that he was concerned.

If Masato's words were true, he would be in the same circumstances as Yakumo.

'Hey, what do you think? Can Masato-kun see ghosts?'

She decided to try to ask.

'His saying it himself isn't any proof at all.'

Yakumo raised his head.

His eyes looked sleepy as usual, but Haruka could see a faint waver in the back of his eyes. Though it might be her mistake –

'But I've heard that the teacher from the next class saw a ghost in the same place. It seems there was a fire there before and a child died. That's why I think it's probably true.'

Haruka talked about what she'd heard from Komai.

Why was she taking this so seriously? It was like she wanted Masato to be able to see ghosts.

'You've made a great misunderstanding.'

Unlike Haruka, Yakumo sounded very reserved.

'Misunderstanding?'

'Yes. If there was a rumour like that, it enforces how there is no proof that he can see ghosts. Rather, it makes it doubtful.'

Haruka understood what he meant.

If there was a rumour, that would mean that Masato knew about it. If he knew about it, he could say anything. There was no proof at all that it was the truth.

'Well, put aside whether he can see ghosts or not. That kid seems to have other problems.'

That was his calm power of reasoning for you.

It hurt to say it, but he was very different from Haruka, who would be led astray by the situation in front of her.

Haruka sat up and explained everything in detail. Of course, she discussed how Masato was at school usually. She also mentioned how he'd run out from the classroom at lunch break, how he'd been cornered by Konno, the vice-principal, for stealing, and also how Masato hadn't acted like a child then.

Yakumo crossed his eyes and listened to Haruka seriously.

Normally, Yakumo would say something like 'It's none of my business' and reject her, but this time was a bit different.

'Do you know what he stole?'

Haruka couldn't answer Yakumo's question.

'I don't know anything, since I couldn't see it.'

He'd usually say something sarcastic like 'Don't you have any eyes?', but Yakumo just let out a sigh,

like he'd given up.

'It'd be something that would fit in a child's hand,' muttered Yakumo, and he looked up at the low ceiling with his arms still crossed.

'Hey, are there really curses?' asked Haruka, ready for a denial.

'There are curses.'

'Eh?'

Her voice sounded strange when she heard the unexpected response.

Yakumo, who could see the spirits of the dead, had created, from his experience, the theory that ghosts were clusters of emotions.

That was why he didn't believe in exorcism that expelled spirits with chants – he was prejudiced against them.

That Yakumo had affirmed the existence of curses.

'Curses are real,' repeated Yakumo, narrowing his eyes.

'So is that boy really cursed?'

'You really are an idiot.'

What did he mean, idiot? He called her an idiot.

'But you just said so, Yakumo-kun. That there are curses.'

'That's why I said you're an idiot. It's the same as what I said before. Just because there are curses, that doesn't mean that kid is cursed.'

Unfortunately, it's just as Yakumo says. I'm an idiot and a blockhead –

'Moreover, the curses I mentioned are different from what you imagine.'

Different?

'What do you mean?'

'I'll tell you when you're old enough to understand.'

He was treating her like an idiot again! She would definitely punch him one day!

Yakumo ignored Haruka's anger and stretched his arms out towards the ceiling. Then, he suddenly stood up.

'There's no point thinking about things here. Anyway, to the place where that ghost comes out.'

'Let's go.'

Haruka finished Yakumo's words.

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Gotou and Ishii visited the care home about twenty minutes from the station.

Built alone atop a hill, it had an unbroken view of the town.

The cream-coloured outer walls made it look at first glance like an apartment, and there were benches in the grassy courtyard.

It was fairly different from what he'd imagined.

'Is she really here?'

Ishii adjusted the position of his glasses with his finger in an affected manner.

'She'll be here if she's not dead.'

'Well, that's true...'

'You want to say something?'

'Ah, no...'

Ishii's shoulders slumped like he had withered.

Honestly, this guy couldn't put anything clearly.

Gotou snorted and walked down the brick road towards the front entrance.

Talking with the psychiatrist yesterday hadn't necessarily been useless.

Gotou had thought that profiling was something like a superpower which could suddenly point out where the culprit was.

Miyagawa probably thought the same way. That was why he'd pushed the annoyance to Gotou.

However, the profiling Anna talked about used statistics to analyse the reasoning of the investigation of the scene.

Japan's police force was slower to use profiling than other countries'. Several years ago, there had been a criminology support research department in the police force, but it hadn't done anything but minor support for investigations since there hadn't been enough people and there had been differences in opinion.

Because of that situation, the incorrect knowledge of profiling had firmly taken root in the police.

Gotou had had that opinion himself.

However, it didn't change the fact that the situation right now was like trying to catch a cloud.

Is there any point to this investigation –

It was also true that he had that doubt.

Well, there was no point thinking so much. He wasn't good at thinking in the first place.

Gotou quickly went up the slope and headed for the reception in the back of the entrance. He proved his identity to the middle-aged man who was the care worker who came out. When he asked to meet with the person called Ushijima Harue, he was directed to the sofa to wait.

He sat with Ishii on the sofa.

Gotou thought of lighting up, but then he saw a sign that said the entire facility was non-smoking. It really felt shameful to be a smoker.

With time on his hands, Gotou unconsciously looked at Ishii's profile.

Ishii was always like this, but he was twisting his neck to look around like he couldn't relax. Just like a pigeon trying to group together in front of the station.

Can this guy really continue at the front of the battlefield –

Gotou was doubtful.

'Is anything the matter?'

Ishii looked dubious.

He was careless. What this guy was missing most could be a sense of danger.

'It's nothing!' spat out Gotou, crossing his arms.

'Excuse me. I apologise for the wait. Please follow me.'

The care worker from before came to call them in.

Now, what's going to come? Gotou stood up and followed after the care worker.

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13

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In order to confirm whether what Masato said was true, Haruka headed to the elementary school.

Of course, Yakumo was with her.

Along the way, Haruka explained Masato's home situation as she had heard it from Komai.

Yakumo didn't frown, but he looked like he didn't understand.

'What is it?'

Unable to bear it, Haruka directed the question to Yakumo's profile.

'Don't you think it's strange?'

He asked a question back.

'What?'

'Honestly. Being so thick-headed must be blissful.'

'Are you making fun of me?'

'I'm just giving my extremely honest evaluation.'

In her irritation, Haruka jabbed Yakumo's side with her finger.

Yakumo jolted and leapt back like a startled cat.

Recently, Haruka had found out that Yakumo's weak point was his side. When he wouldn't stop saying awful things, she would fight back this way.

Haruka looked away from Yakumo, who was glaring at her.

'Well, in any case. You heard the information about that boy from his homeroom teacher, right?'

Maybe he felt awkward, because Yakumo went back to the original topic after a silence.

'Yup. That's not really strange though, is it?'

Yakumo sighed while shaking his head.

Even if he took that attitude, she wouldn't understand the things she didn't understand. And Yakumo never explained enough.

'She knows too much.'

Perhaps he'd sensed Haruka's feelings, because Yakumo said just that.

'Do you mean Komai-sensei about Masato-kun?'

'That's right.'

'I think it's normal...'

'Then I'll ask this – normally, would an elementary school teacher know the details of all the children's family situations?'

'I think Komai-sensei probably thought Masato-kun had a few problems so she was concerned.'

Haruka herself was concerned about Masato.

If she hadn't heard from Komai, she might have looked into it herself.

'Even if that is the case. Well, by looking into it a bit, you'd find out that he's got one parent and that his dad lost his job.'

'Then there's no problem, right?'

'But where did she find out about his mother's infidelity, her partner and even the situation when she had left home?'

Now that he mentioned it, she did feel like she knew too much.

To find out about his mother's infidelity and her partner, she would have had to dive considerably

far into the matter.

Maybe she went around asking the people nearby like a detective –

Before Haruka gave that answer, they arrived at the elementary school's gates.

She'd thought that the gates would definitely be closed, but she saw children in the courtyard yelling in delight as they played soccer. They were participating in club activities.

This made it difficult for them to enter the school.

It'd be fine for Haruka, but it would be troublesome if Yakumo were spotted. There had been a number of incidents at the school, so they were sensitive about visitors.

'Oh, is that you, Ozawa-sensei?'

Suddenly, somebody called out to her. When she turned to look, she saw a man in a jersey holding a ball.

It was the teacher from the class next to hers, Yokouchi. The one who said he'd seen a ghost –

'Ah, Yokouchi-sensei. Good afternoon.'

Haruka put a smile on her face and bowed.

'Today...'

Yokouchi started speaking but then moved his gaze to Yakumo with a surprised expression. Then, a joking smile appeared on his face.

'Oh, a date?'

'No, that is absolutely not the case.'

While Haruka was thinking of an excuse, Yakumo firmly denied Yokouchi's assumption.

He always did it, but it was depressing how he didn't hesitate at all to deny it completely.

'Er...'

Yokouchi raised his eyebrows in his bewilderment.

It made sense. That would mean he didn't know who Yakumo was. However, Yakumo didn't seem concerned at all.

'I was slow in introducing myself. My name is Saitou Yakumo, and I am an exorcist, though I am still inexperienced.'

As Yakumo said that, he pressed his hands together in prayer.

'Exorcist?'

Yokouchi sounded surprised.

That would surprise him. It was extremely unnatural for an exorcist to be in a shirt and jeans.

'Yes. I heard the rumour that a ghost has been sighted at this school from this person named Ozawa-san.'

Huh. He just keeps on making things up.

Plus, Yakumo said himself that he hates people who call themselves exorcists, but he's calling himself that now –

Normally, that would make it sound like a lie.

'S-so that's really how it is?' said Yokouchi, clearly panicked.

It felt like he was overreacting, but from Yokouchi's perspective, he probably wanted any help he could get since he had experienced the spiritual phenomenon himself.

'I feel a strong and wicked spiritual power. Ah, around there.'

Yakumo spoke like he was enacting a play as he pointed with his right index finger in one direction.

He was pointing right at the pool behind the school building.

'That's right. That's where it was. I saw a ghost there.'

Yokouchi was so agitated it felt like he would leap up.

'Could you show me the way?'

'Yes, with pleasure.'

Thus, Yakumo entered the school premises unreservedly from the front entrance.

Should I call him sly, or –

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14

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Ishii followed the care worker down the corridor.

Just like the exterior, the interior of the institution was scrupulously maintained and more beautiful than he imagined it would be.

'I wonder what sort of person she is.'

He spoke to Gotou, who was walking beside him.

'You'll find out once you meet her.'

Gotou's tone was thoughtless. He might have been a bit irritated.

'That's true.'

Ishii shut his mouth and followed the care worker.

They walked to the end of the long corridor to find a place that looked like a conference room.

There was a large window in the wall which let the sunlight in. A line of cherry blossom trees could be seen outside. Though the leaves were fallen in this season, you'd be able to see the cherry blossoms in full bloom from this room come spring.

There were sofas and tables, and about ten seniors were passing the time as they pleased.

At first glance, it felt like a cafe.

'Ushijima-san, you have guests.'

The care worker who showed them in spoke to a woman sitting at the table by the window.

This person is Ushijima Harue –

Her cheeks were hollow, her wrinkles were deep and her hair was considerably thin. She looked much older than her age.

Despite that, her clothes and makeup were as flashy as that of a woman who worked at a nightclub.

'Who could you be?'

Harue raised her chin and narrowed her eyes.

'I'm Gotou from the Setamachi precinct.'

Gotou put his police ID in front of Harue's eyes.

That moment, Harue's expression stiffened. Ishii could tell they weren't welcome even if she didn't say it aloud.

'Can I sit?'

Gotou sat down on the opposite sofa without waiting for Harue's reply. Ishii followed him and sat down too.

He could smell Harue's perfume.

He could tell that she was trying frantically not to lose her dignity as a woman even at that age.

'I came today because there was something I wanted to ask you.'

Gotou spoke after clearing his throat.

'I didn't do anything. That guy was at fault.'

Harue's expression suddenly twisted as she spoke.

'What are you talking about?'

'The food here is so disgusting I couldn't eat it. That's why I threw it.'

The conversation didn't mesh.

It appeared that Harue had caused some sort of problem and mistakenly thought that the police had come because of that.

'Hey, Ushijima-san. I came here to talk about your son.'

Gotou's tone was like one that you'd use towards a child.

'My son...'

Harue's cheek twitched.

Ishii had no way of knowing what emotion lay in that response.

'That's right. Your son Atsushi-kun.'

'There's nothing to say. That child is dead.'

Harue's words were pointed.

'I know that. We want to know what sort of person your son was.'

'Why now?'

Harue puffed her cheeks like a child and turned away.

What an impolite attitude. It felt like Gotou would snap, but he persevered and continued the conversation.

'We're looking for a certain man. He was in the same grade as your son.'

'That's no concern of mine.'

'Don't say that. That man called himself the name of your son. He might be related somehow.'

'My son was killed!'

Harue suddenly declared that –

Ushijima Atsushi died in a fire. Was Harue saying that from a persecution complex?

While Ishii was mulling that over in his head, Gotou continued talking.

'Killed? By who?'

'Tobe, obviously!'

Harue let out an ear-splitting shriek as she hit the table with her palm.

Ishii's body shook in his surprise.

Was the Tobe Harue talking about the dead Tobe Masashi – if that was the case, the nature of the case would change drastically.

'What do you mean?'

'You're police – investigate it yourself.'

'If you think your kid was killed, you'd want the culprit to be caught, right? Tell us what you know.'

'It's too late now. It doesn't matter anymore.'

Harue frowned.

'It doesn't matter anymore? What do you mean?'

Gotou's tone which he was forcing to sound calm was tinged with irritation.

'Well, it was refreshing when that burden of a brat died. So it doesn't matter anymore.'

How awful –

There were some things you couldn't say even as a joke.

'Calling it refreshing is...'

Ishii couldn't help but interrupt.

'What? You have a problem with that? I didn't give birth to him because I wanted to either!'

'No, but...'

'That fretful brat. He cost money and wailed everyday – it really was a good thing he died.'

Harue kept on going with a biting force. Ishii was pushed down by that pressure and unconsciously leant backwards.

How can she say so many awful things –

Ishii turned his eyes towards Gotou, sitting next to him. Gotou suddenly stood up without saying anything and slammed his right fist into the table.

It made an amazing noise.

'Ahh!'

Harue jumped up in her surprise and slipped from her chair to land on her behind.

Gotou put his face so close to Harue's that the tips of their noses were almost touching and glared at her.

'Got this, you damned old woman? Doesn't matter whether you wanted it or not. Once the kid's been born, the parent raises it. To be happy about your kid's death – you're not human, let alone a parent. There isn't anybody in this world who should die.'

Gotou spoke slowly in a low voice.

Ishii felt a pressure one hundred times stronger than Gotou's usual angry voice. Gotou didn't wait for Harue's reply and walked away briskly.

Ishii bowed towards Harue and then hurried followed Gotou.

He fell –

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Led by Yokouchi, Haruka walked to the pool behind the school building.

She took a peek at Yakumo, who was walking beside her. His eyes were sleepy as usual. She felt silly for being nervous.

'That's where I saw it.'

Yokouchi pointed at the diving board for the pool's third lane.

Haruka looked over, but she saw nothing there now.

Just the moving of the dirty surface of the water.

However, it was different for Yakumo. There was a wrinkle in his brow, and his gaze was unusually sharp. From that response, he might have seen something.

'Could you tell me in detail the situation at the time?' said Yakumo, still staring at the pool's diving board.

Yokouchi nodded several times with a triumphant air and started talking.

'That day, I was locking up instead of the caretaker and ended up staying fairly late.'

'About what time?'

'It was probably after ten... I came out of the back entrance and passed by here on the way back when I saw someone at the pool.'

'What sort of person was it?'

'I couldn't see his face clearly, but I think he was a middle-aged man. Recently, there've been a number of incidents, right? So I thought he might've been a pervert and called out to him. Then...'

Perhaps it was because Yokouchi was remembering what happened, but his face became paler before her eyes and he couldn't say the last part because his voice was shaking.

Haruka had thought he'd just seen a ghost, but from how he looked, it felt like there was more to the story.

'It's fine. I'm accompanying you.'

Yakumo placed a hand on Yokouchi's shoulders and urged him to continue.

'After I called out to him, that man... he suddenly burst into flames.'

'Burst into flames?'

Haruka couldn't imagine it and spoke up without thinking. Without a moment's delay, Yakumo glared at her, as if to say 'Be quiet'.

Ooh, scary –

'Could you please tell me in more detail?'

At Yakumo's words, Yokouchi wiped the sweat off his brow and continued.

'How should I put it – fire erupted from his body and enveloped his body in no time.'

Yokouchi's explanation was combined with gestures.

'I see.'

After Yakumo said that while rubbing the back of his neck, he turned towards the school building like he had felt something.

Haruka turned to look as well, but she saw nothing.

However, Yakumo, with his left eye, should have been able to see something that they couldn't see.

'Sensei, there's more to the story, is there not?'

After turning around in a slow and deliberate manner, Yakumo asked Yokouchi that question.

It seemed he'd hit the mark. Yokouchi's eyes went as wide as saucers in his surprise. No, perhaps it was fear.

'Y-yes. That's right. Afterwards, I tried to run away, but a boy suddenly appeared. That boy clung to my jacket sleeve and then, that boy also...'

'Burst into flames.'

Yakumo finished Yokouchi's cut-off sentence.

Haruka had no way of determining whether what he said was true or an illusion.

'Sensei, is it true that there was a fire here in the past?'

Yakumo put his left index finger to his brow.

'Yes, though I don't know the details either...'

'I see.'

After Yakumo said that, he briskly walked towards the pool fence and skilfully climbed over the fence about as high as his chest.

'I'm going to take a look.'

After Haruka spoke to Yokouchi, she followed Yakumo and climbed over the fence.

'Hey, wait.'

Haruka jogged over to Yakumo's side.

'What?'

What, he said.

'Did you see something?'

'Yeah, I saw something.'

'Eh?'

Which meant there was a spirit of the dead nearby. The moment she thought that, she felt cold and gooseflesh rose on her skin.

'You don't have to follow me if you're scared,' murmured Yakumo as he looked at Haruka who was clearly afraid.

It was mysterious how she wanted to do the opposite of what Yakumo said when he told her that. Plus, she had a backbone. She couldn't turn back now.

'I'm fine.'

Haruka replied with a smile and then gripped Yakumo's shirt sleeve so he wouldn't notice.

Yakumo walked to the opposite side of the fence without looking at the pool and slipped into the narrow path behind the washing place.

The path was so narrow they'd have to go one at a time. Haruka walked along, hidden by Yakumo's back.

Where was Yakumo headed?

She thought of asking, but she stopped herself. If she said it aloud, he would definitely say something like 'Please shut your mouth'.

'Watch out.'

Even though she nodded at Yakumo's words, she wasn't sure where to watch out for.

Her heartbeat quickened in her nervousness and anxiety.

Then, the next moment, the ground that should have been under Haruka's feet disappeared. She lost her footing and fell forwards.

'Ah!'

Everything in front of her shook violently, and before she noticed, she was on all fours. It seemed that she had slipped from the steps.

It hurt. Her knees stung.

'Honestly. How clumsy can you be? I told you to watch out. I almost fell as well.'

When she looked up, she saw Yakumo staring down at her with his arms crossed in displeasure. Even if he said that...

'You didn't say there were steps!'

'What sort of accusation is that?'

Just as he said, it was Haruka's fault for not looking at her feet even after she was warned, but he

could have at least been a bit worried.

The corners of her eyes felt warm from her mortification and pain. She had clenched her teeth together tightly and tried to stand up when Yakumo put out his hand.

OK, she was prepared.

Haruka gripped Yakumo's hand and used it to help herself up.

When she looked around again, she saw that the path was surrounded by concrete. What was the point of coming to a place like this?

While Haruka was thinking, Yakumo continued forward.

Haruka's legs hurt, so he could have waited a bit. Haruka swallowed her dissatisfaction and followed Yakumo's back.

'Watch your head,' said Yakumo from ahead.

Head? What?

Thump!

Something hit Haruka's forehead with a dull thud.

For a moment, everything in front of her went dark.

It hurt so much she let out a strange cry of 'Oof!' and pressed her forehead.

Maybe she had a concussion because her head felt dizzy.

'Didn't I say to watch your head?'

She heard Yakumo's voice.

He had said that. It was her fault for being clumsy. She wanted to reply, but she couldn't speak in her dizziness.

'You OK?'

At the same time as he spoke, Yakumo's palm touched Haruka's forehead.

The throbbing pain left, but then she felt Yakumo's warmth through her forehead.

It was mysterious. When he held his hand against her forehead like this, it felt like her pain lessened.

It was rare for Yakumo to be kind to her. She thought of staying like this for a while, but she remembered that Yokouchi was waiting for them outside and hurriedly stood up.

'Thanks. I'm fine now.'

Haruka put a smile on her face.

'The first failure is an experience, but failing again in the same way is foolish.'

After Yakumo said that, he stooped over and continued down the path with its low ceiling.

This person is just so – ! Just when we had a good mood going, why does he ruin everything by talking? Idiot!

After yelling that in her heart, Haruka continued after Yakumo, watching her head this time.

Only the path's entrance had a low ceiling. It seemed like there was no worry of hitting her head even if she stood up ahead.

When she looked up, she saw a number of wide pipes running above her head. Were they for the water supply?

After going about fifty metres ahead, Yakumo stopped.

When she took a peek past Yakumo's back, she saw a metal door. There was a plate on the door which read Pump Room.

'Stay here.'

Yakumo spoke in a harder tone than usual and put his hand on the doorknob.

Normally, places like this should have been locked. Haruka thought there was no way it'd open, but when Yakumo pulled at the door, it opened readily.

There was a bizarre smell that made her want to cough.

What could this smell be –

'Don't move.'

Yakumo gave Haruka another reminder and then went inside, covering his nose and mouth with his arm.

The unfortunate quality of humanity was that being told not to do something conversely made them more interested. She wouldn't stand for just waiting after all the pain she'd gone through to get here.

Haruka took a peek inside through the gap left by the half-closed door.

She saw Yakumo's stooped back.

There was a strange smell of something raw and something burning that she didn't know what to call, so she covered her mouth and nose with her sleeve.

What was Yakumo doing?

Haruka moved herself to take a closer look.

'Aah!'

She shrieked in her surprise. Yakumo stood up immediately and pushed Haruka aside to leave the room.

'I told you not to look!' said Yakumo, clearly angry. Even if he said that, she'd already looked.

'A-ah, wha, tha...'

She had taken in too much air. Plus, her throat was shaking so much she couldn't speak.

What on earth was that –

Something burnt completely black like charcoal had fallen to the concrete floor. It was in the shape of a human being.

Then, from the corner of the room, a left hand only from the wrist up had fallen.

'Spontaneous human combustion,' said Yakumo with a hard look in his eyes.

# 炎上

## 第二章

02  
FILE

## file 02: blaze

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1

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'What is this?'

Those were Hata Hideyoshi's honest feelings when he saw the scene.

He had been a doctor for thirty-five years. He'd autopsied strange corpses as a coroner for more than ten years. He had seen countless corpses up until now.

Corpses with their limbs cut off. He'd seen so many drowned corpses and of course burnt corpses too. He wasn't surprised by much.

However, this was different from the corpses he had seen until now.

Detectives and examiners are walking around the scene to look at it very carefully, but I wonder how many people noticed how odd this corpse is –

Most of them definitely thought it was just a burnt corpse.

The ones like Gotou, who had left the room earlier, must have had no suspicions at all.

Hata stooped over the corpse and observed it carefully.

It was splayed spread-eagle on the floor and there was crushed charcoal spread on top of it. That was what it looked like.

'What a splendid way of burning,' said an examiner who had stooped over the corpse like Hata.

It wasn't at the level of splendid. Clothes and hair were natural, but the flesh and bones had also burnt completely and carbonised.

From somebody who didn't know, they might think that was what burnt corpses were like.

However, somebody with a bit of medical background would know this was strange.

On top of that, he was interested in why just the portion of the body above the left wrist hadn't been burnt. Why did just that part of the body not burn –

It wasn't just the corpse that was strange.

The whole floor was covered in a yellow and sticky glue-like liquid. That let out an awful smell, making it uncomfortable just to breathe.

There were many other things he didn't understand.

'Where did the fire start?'

Hata voiced one of his doubts.

'That... Nothing that looks like it could have been the start of the fire has been found.'

The examiner shook his head.

Why did the body burn in a place that didn't feel like it could have a fire?

'Is this room really the only place that burnt?'

'It appears that way.'

Hata looked around the concrete-surrounded room once more.

Black soot was drizzled on the room's walls like it had sprayed on.

Though it was a concrete room, how could the fire have spread to the point that it burnt human bone?

He had more doubts the more that he thought.

What on earth happened here –

Hata felt a shiver down his spine.

How many years had it been since he felt this way?

Come to think of it, he felt like he'd seen the same sort of thing before.

What was that? He couldn't remember.

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2

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After Gotou left the pump room, he stretched and then lit a cigarette.

Honestly, everything was so confusing. He'd come after being told 'Come to the school right away' only to find a burnt corpse.

When he shifted his gaze, he saw the person who'd called him out.

Saitou Yakumo –

He was by the pool fence and looking vacantly with sleepy eyes at the investigation members milling about.

'I didn't want to see your face for a while.'

Gotou walked up to Yakumo.

'The feeling is mutual. I didn't want to see you again for the rest of my life.'

As Yakumo spoke with his usual tone, he ran a hand through his messy hair.

Damn, this brat isn't cute at all –

'By the way, how'd you get wrapped up in this?'

'As is her habit, a repeat trouble-bringer paid me a visit.'

Yakumo looked behind Gotou.

When he turned around, he saw Haruka sitting by the school building while shivering. Ishii was beside her, looking concerned.

Now Gotou understood. Well, Yakumo wouldn't just stick his head into trouble on his own. Haruka must have picked up something about ghosts somewhere and brought it to Yakumo.

'So what do you think about the incident?'

'The duty of a virtuous citizen is just to report to the police. What comes next is your job, Gotou-san.'

This guy and his impertinent mouth – he could throw him in the pool right now.

'My, my. You're all together.'

A small-framed man in white hobbled over to them.

Hata, the coroner –

Even though he'd just seen a corpse, he was smiling so happily.

He really was a creepy old man.

'Gotou. You're a blockhead, as usual.'

Hata looked up at Gotou's face and let out a demonic giggle.

Honestly, what sort of greeting was that?

'If you don't stop that, I'll fold you into quarters and stuff you in a rubbish bin.'

'I won't burn, so put me in with the oversize garbage<sup>1</sup>.'

Saying he won't burn after seeing a burnt corpse – what a tasteless joke.

'By the way, Yakumo-kun.'

After he giggled, Hata turned the conversation around.

'What is it with the corpse this time? I've done this work for a long time, but I've never seen that before.'

'Did you notice?'

To Hata, who was speaking seriously for once, Yakumo replied with an equally serious gaze.

Gotou had seen the corpse earlier too. It was strange for a burnt corpse to be discovered at an elementary school pool.

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<sup>1</sup> Japan separates its rubbish into combustible, incombustible and oversize (among others; it's confusing).

However, it appeared that what Hata said about having never seen it before was regarding the corpse itself.

'Isn't it just a burnt corpse?'

Hata and Yakumo sighed simultaneously.

Were they making fun of him?

'Gotou-san, did you really not notice anything?'

Yakumo's eyes were narrowed with disdain.

'What?'

'You must be blind not to notice. How pitiful.'

Hata shook his head emphatically.

'You! Who'd you say was blind?'

'You!'

'Hata-san, that's incorrect. Gotou-san is just an idiot,' said Yakumo.

Hata nodded, like he understood.

Both of them – they were the worst combination.

He didn't even feel like objecting now.

'Forget about my stupidity. Tell me what's strange.'

'There are three suspicious points regarding the corpse and the scene which are suspicious.'

Yakumo put up his fingers as he started to explain.

'Three?'

'Yes. First, there was nothing at the scene which could have started the fire.'

That was right. It was a pool pump room, after all.

'Maybe it was just covered in gasoline and lit up? Maybe the guy did it or someone else did.'

Yakumo didn't respond, let alone refute Gotou's logic. He continued his explanation.

'Second, even though the person burnt so completely, the fire didn't spread to the building.'

Now that he mentioned it, that was true.

For now, they would put aside whether the burnt corpse was a suicide, murder or accident.

The room was concrete, so it would be difficult for the fire to spread, but if somebody had burnt so completely, it must have been a considerable fire.

It was unnatural for the room to escape just with soot on the walls –

'And the third problem. This is just something I have reasoned by looking at the corpse, so I would like to ask for your opinion, Hata-san.'

Yakumo turned the conversation to Hata.

'I haven't autopsied it yet either, so I can't say anything definite, but I dare say my reasoning is the same as yours, Yakumo-kun.'

Hata nodded at Yakumo.

'Is that so...'

After Yakumo murmured in a discouraged voice, he pinched his brow with his fingers.

Gotou cleared his throat and waited for Yakumo to continue.

However, both Yakumo and Hata seemed to be thinking about something and didn't say any more.

'Oi! What's that reasoning!?' Gotou yelled, unable to keep it in.

'Even the bones of that corpse were burnt,' said Hata, sounding fed up.

He said it like it was obvious, but Gotou didn't understand why that was unnatural.

It was a burnt corpse, so of course it burnt.

'What's strange about that?'

'You really are an idiot,' Hata replied without a moment's delay.

'What did you say!?! This old man! You want to test it yourself?'

Gotou's head was hot as he pulled up Hata by the collar.

However, Hata, instead of being afraid, actually laughed in enjoyment.

'There is no need to test it.'

Yakumo was the one who said that.

'What do you mean?'

Gotou let go of Hata and turned his gaze to Yakumo.

Though Yakumo was a man of pale and delicate features, sometimes he would have a frightening expression that would give you shivers. This was one of those times.

'Even if a person is burnt for cremation, the bones are left behind.'

'Yeah.'

The bones left behind were shut in funerary urns, so it'd be a problem if they were burnt up.'

'That is about nine hundred to a thousand degrees.'

Even if Yakumo mentioned a temperature of that level, Gotou couldn't actually understand it.

The conversation had as little real meaning to Gotou as talking about foreign exchange rates. He had no way of converting that temperature into something he recognised.

'Explain it in a way that makes it easier to understand.'

'All right... There are past examples of somebody carbonising like the corpse we saw earlier.'

Yakumo's eyes seemed to be far away as he answered the question Gotou had spat out in his irritation.

'What, so it's happened before?'

Hata let out another creepy giggle after Gotou said that with a snort.

Damn, he was making fun of him again. Maybe he'd pull off his head.

'The past examples I am referring to occurred at the hypocentre of an atomic bomb,' said Yakumo, giving Gotou a sidelong glance.

'Wha!? Atomic bomb? You...'

Gotou couldn't think of what to say next.

It was impossible to think of such a tremendous heat occurring in that room.

'In short, if we are to come to a conclusion about the burnt corpse at the scene, all we can say is that it is impossible.'

Yakumo's expression when he brought that to a finish was so twisted it seemed like he could cry at any moment.

Gotou also finally understood how serious the situation was.

What on earth happened here –

There was no way Gotou could understand something Yakumo and Hata couldn't.

Before he'd noticed, the cigarette in his fingers had burnt up and all that was left was the filter.

'Hot!'

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3

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With complicated feelings, Ishii looked at Haruka, who was sitting with her back to the wall of the school building.

He was happy that he had met her for the first time in a while, but he couldn't see the usual smile in her profile. Her face was pale and it looked like she was holding back her pain.

It wasn't unreasonable. Anybody would be shocked from seeing a corpse.

Ishii himself had shrieked many times. The only people who could look fine after that were the

team of three demonic men talking on the other side of the fence, starting with Gotou.

Ishii wanted to cheer Haruka up somehow, but he didn't know what to say to a woman at a time like this. He had no experience.

That made him irritated at himself.

Indifferent to Ishii's thoughts, Haruka hit her cheeks with her hands and suddenly stood up.

'A-ah, Haruka-chan, a-are you all right?' said Ishii, flustered.

'Yes, I'm all right. I apologise for worrying you.'

Haruka smiled.

Even Ishii could tell that smile wasn't natural.

'No, not at all. But it'd be better if you didn't push yourself.'

'I'm fine. Forget about me – Ishii-san, don't you have to go to the scene?'

Ishii couldn't say anything to what Haruka had pointed out.

He was worried about Haruka. That wasn't a lie. However, at the same time, it was also true that he didn't want to go to the scene.

As a detective, he had a duty to go to the scene. He knew that.

But if he went to the scene, there'd be a corpse.

To see that – it frightened him.

'What's wrong?'

'No, it's nothing. Er... I'm waiting for my turn right now.'

He'd said something strange.

'You're... waiting for your turn?'

Haruka cocked her head like she thought it was curious. Her doubts were natural.

'Yes. Er... the scene is small and there are many people there right now, so I am waiting for my turn. Ah, I hope my turn comes soon.'

Haruka laughed aloud at what he said.

A real smile, different from the one she'd put on before. Ah, he'd wanted to see her smile.

'Ishii-san, you really are an interesting person.'

Haruka brushed her hair behind her ear with her fingers.

That gesture made Ishii's heart skip a beat. Haruka-chan really was cute.

'What are you doing here?'

A slim middle-aged man walked towards them with a wide stride.

He had sensitive-looking features and wore an outfit – chino pants and polo shirt – which made him look like he was returning from a game of golf.

'Vice Principal.'

Haruka looked surprised.

'Answer my question. I asked what a trainee teacher is doing at school on a day off.'

'Er... I...'

'You know that you have to notify us in advance if you're coming to school a day off, right?'

Even though he was the vice principal, that was a very arrogant attitude. Ishii looked for words to defend Haruka but couldn't find any.

It felt like there were sparks in the air between them.

'She was the first person to see the corpse and was cooperating with the investigation. Who are you?'

Gotou walked over with good timing.

Yakumo was next to him as well.

'I'm the vice principal. I 'm asking why she's here on a day off.'

Konno flared up at Gotou.

There were some people whose positions at work overflowed into their private life. This man was the definition of one of that type.

'That's our job to investigate as the police – not yours. I don't care whether you're the vice principal or whoever – keep out of it!'

Gotou approached Konno as he threatened him.

When Gotou was like this, he had as much pressure as a yakuza. Not many people could strike back.

Konno bit his lip for a while, but then he turned around and walked away silently, like he'd decided he was out of luck.

'You were of a great help to me. Thank you very much.'

Haruka put her hands to her chest as she bowed at Gotou.

'Don't worry about it.'

Gotou waved his hand like it was nothing.

'But what a high-handed person he was,' said Ishii in his relief.

'It's true. He's always like that...'

'He probably thinks he's some big shot,' said Gotou with a frown, lighting up his cigarette.

'Gotou-san, the school premises are non-smoking,' interrupted Haruka without a moment's delay.

'You're so fussy. The police are exempt.'

After saying something selfish, Gotou blew out smoke for show.

'Don't play around – we should head back already.'

Yakumo yawned, like he was signalling the end of the situation.

It made Ishii angry to see Yakumo treat Haruka like she was his possession, but he couldn't express that aloud.

'I wasn't playing around.'

Haruka stuck her tongue out at Yakumo.

Yakumo snorted scornfully and walked away briskly.

'You guys really love trouble,' muttered Gotou, looking up at the clear autumn sky.

'Gotou-san, please don't start talking like Yakumo-kun too.'

'I'm just saying the truth.'

'If you say things like that, your wife will leave you again.'

'Shut up! That's unnecessary concern! And my wife's properly at home... probably.'

Perhaps he felt awkward, because Gotou stuck his hands in his pockets and turned around from Haruka.

'Well, I'm leaving then.'

Haruka bowed with a smile.

Ishii just felt Haruka was pitiful, as she acted so strong even though she'd not only gotten wrapped up in trouble but also had to listen to the endless comments of insensitive men.

'That's right, Ishii. You look at the scene too,' said Gotou suddenly.

'Eh, do I really have to go?'

'Of course you do, fool. What would a detective do if he didn't go look at the scene?'

'Of course...'

Ishii tried to think of a reason not to go look at the scene, but it was useless.

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4

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Haruka finally caught up to Yakumo just before he was about to pass through the school gates.

He could've waited a bit –

'You all right?' said Yakumo with his back to her.

She froze automatically at those unexpected words.

So even this blunt guy was a bit worried –

What she had seen in the room was still fresh in her mind, but she felt a bit better just from Yakumo's remark.

'How long are you just going to stand there?'

Yakumo turned around, looking exasperated.

It was mysterious how gentle his eyes looked, even though they were just as sleepy as usual.

'Ah, right.'

Haruka walked up to Yakumo and rammed into him forcefully.

Yakumo lost his balance and almost fell forward.

'What?'

'Nothing.'

She ignored Yakumo who looked like he didn't understand and continued walking.

She thought that he would say something cynical, but Yakumo didn't say anything.

For some reason, it felt kind of nice. She had been down, but now she was incredibly lively.

'So what's up with this case then?'

Deciding that Yakumo's silence was a good thing, she tried asking him a question.

'Why do you always...'

'Rush to a conclusion? That's what you want to say, right?'

She said it before Yakumo could. She was in a good mood today.

'Don't ask if you understand that.'

'Can't you just explain the situation?'

Yakumo just looked up at the sky while walking, not answering Haruka's question. The air around Yakumo felt more suffocating than usual.

'This is just my explanation of the situation. Don't get ahead of yourself.'

After running a hand through his messy hair and saying that, Yakumo started his explanation in a reluctant manner.

'Just as that boy of yours said, there was a spirit there.'

There was –

Yakumo followed that spirit of the dead and found the corpse.

'I saw two spirits there.'

'Two?'

'The first was a middle-aged man. I followed that spirit to that place.'

'And the other?'

'The spirit was right beside you. Looked like a kid of elementary or middle school age.'

'So is there one more corpse?'

Haruka unconsciously gripped Yakumo's arm.

'I don't know. From the clothes, I feel like that spirit's from a different time...'

'I see...'

'This is just my gut feeling, but I think it might be the kid that died in the fire before.'

If that was the case, it'd mean the spirit had been there for a very long time.

Yakumo had said this before. The spirits of the dead wander because of feelings that have not been dispelled – what sort of feelings did that boy have?

'Hey, what are you going to do now?' Haruka asked, prepared to hear a response like 'Think about it yourself'.

'First, I requested that Gotou-san look into the fire that occurred at the school.'

'You move quick, just as expected.'

'Don't make fun of me. There were various details about the corpse that was found today that are worth thinking about, but I'll have to wait until Hata-san has finished his autopsy...'

'Hey. Isn't there anything I can do?'

When Haruka asked that, Yakumo suddenly pulled her arm towards him with a jerk.

The movement was so sudden that Haruka staggered.

Then, at a distance where the tips of their noses were almost touching, there was Yakumo's face.

Eh, wait –

Her heart was beating furiously at this sudden development. The blood rushed to her head, making her feel dizzy.

'Continue to walk straight like this,' Yakumo whispered into her ear.

'What do you mean?'

She asked him that question, but Yakumo didn't reply. He just continued walking while pulling at Haruka's arm. It felt like he was walking at a slower pace than usual.

Finally, Yakumo stopped when they'd reached the intersection.

'Look at the mirror,' said Yakumo quietly.

She did as he said and looked at the mirror at the intersection. She could see the warped reflection of themselves in the convex mirror. She could also see a boy a little bit behind them hiding behind the telephone pole.

That's –

'Masato-kun!'

Haruka called out as she turned around.

Their eyes met. Masato froze with his eyes as wide as saucers.

Why was he here?

Haruka took a step towards Masato. At the same time, Masato jumped back like the repelling side of a magnet.

'Hey, wait!'

She took another step.

Masato turned around and fled like a rabbit.

Why was he running?

Haruka chased after Masato. However, she soon stumbled and fell.

– It hurts.

When she stood up, her hands on her knees, Masato had already disappeared.

'Honestly, are your reflexes dull? Or are you clumsy?' said Yakumo with a yawn.

She couldn't find the words to object. Since she was probably both –

'I wonder why Masato-kun ran.'

Haruka threw that question at Yakumo.

'Because he was following us,' replied Yakumo staring at the street which Masato had run down.

'Following us? Since when?'

'I noticed right as we left the school gates. At first I thought I was mistaken, but since he was so suspicious, I tried shaking him up a bit. If you hadn't yelled, I would have caught him once we turned the corner.'

'I see. My bad.'

'So you understand,' said Yakumo with a raised eyebrow.

Ah, honestly. That attitude really riled her up.

'But why was he following us...'

'It's your duty as his homeroom teacher to confirm that, though you are still a trainee.'

Just as Yakumo says, that is my duty.

Putting aside whether I can do it or not –

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5

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The day after the corpse was found, Gotou headed for the university's <Movie Research Circle> room.

He came to meet Saitou Yakumo, who lived here, using it as his secret hiding place.

'Sorry to bother you.'

When he opened the door, Yakumo greeted him with a yawn.

The guy really was like a cat. What sort of daily life was he living?

'I've said this many times, but if you know you're being a bother, please leave.'

'Stop nagging.'

Gotou sat on the folding chair opposite Yakumo.

'Gotou-san, you have a slight smell to you.'

Yakumo wrinkled his nose purposefully.

Honestly, suddenly complaining –

'Shut up!'

Of course he had a slight smell to him. He hadn't been home since yesterday.

Yakumo was the one who was strange for not smelling at all, considering he lived in a place without a bath or a water supply.

'Where is Ishii-san today?'

'He's working another case. We don't have enough hands either.'

'Isn't that because you skip out on work, Gotou-san? Ishii-san must be tired of it.'

Honestly. This guy said whatever the hell he wanted to. Gotou was the one who was pitiful with that useless subordinate. Gotou was forced to do unnecessary things.

Yesterday, Ishii had fainted the moment he'd seen the burnt corpse.

In the end, Gotou had to take him home.

'Say what you want,' said Gotou, finding it too troublesome to explain.

'So what did you discover?' said Yakumo, with his chin in his hands and a vacant look in his eyes.

He's acting like he's not interested, but it feels like he actually really wants to know. Honestly, he could just be a bit more honest –

Gotou placed the documents he'd brought on the table. Yakumo took those documents in his hands and flipped through the pages.

'First, it's true that there was a fire at that school. Seems to have happened twenty-eight years ago.'

Even though Gotou was going out of his way to explain, Yakumo just glanced up without saying anything.

Honestly, this wasn't worth it. He sort of understood how his wife's complaints every time they ate. Next time, maybe he'd comment on how delicious the food was.

Gotou threw himself into continuing the explanation.

'The fire started in the PE storeroom. It's been taken down and now it's the pool. Which means that's the location. It started because some kids were playing with fire. Somebody nearby saw the smoke and reported it. Then the firefighters came.'

After saying this much, Gotou paused. Explaining what came next would be difficult. Where on earth should he start?

'I don't care what order you explain this in, so please hurry up,' said Yakumo while tapping his brow with his finger. So he'd seen right through him? He really was an unpleasant guy.

'When the firefighters got here, there were still two kids inside. One had his face burnt but it wasn't life-threatening, but it was too late for the other.'

'So that was the kid who'd died then...'

Yakumo looked up at the ceiling, as if there were something there.

Gotou waited, thinking Yakumo might say something, but he didn't say anything else.

Honestly. He shouldn't just speak so meaningfully. It was confusing.

'This is the problem. The kid who lived transferred to a school in the next town after that. His name was Tobe Kengo... Actually, that man...'

'Killed his father and escaped during his psychiatric examination.'

Even though Gotou had been building up to an explanation, Yakumo went and said the punch line. He was probably the type of guy who was disliked.

'You know about it?'

'Even I read the newspaper. And then?'

That made sense. Not just the newspaper – it was broadcast almost daily on television. It'd be odder not to notice.

'We're following that Tobe case.'

'I know that the police also have insufficient personnel, but they must be incredibly shorthanded if they're going to make you investigate, Gotou-san,' said Yakumo with a smirk.

Couldn't this guy just quietly listen to somebody talk? Gotou felt angry, but he swallowed that anger since it would just come back to bite him if let it out.

'We met the lady who did Tobe's examination, but that lady says there's a possibility Tobe's psychological state is an act.'

'He is thought to have dissociative identity disorder, yes?'

There was a bit of force in Yakumo's sleepy gaze.

'That's right. He didn't seem to reflect at all during the questioning, and he called himself Ushijima Atsushi instead of Tobe Kengo...'

'Could that Ushijima Atsushi be the name of the boy who died in the fire?'

'Bingo.'

This guy really caught on quick.

'That doctor lady had some compositions written at Tobe's elementary school. Ushijima's name was in those compositions, and he'd written this: I want to become Tobe-kun.'

'I see.'

Yakumo pinched his brow with his fingers and listened to Gotou's explanation. It was the pose he struck when pondering over a difficult problem.

'And one more thing.'

Yakumo lifted his head just slightly at Gotou's words.

'What is it?'

'We went to see Ushijima Atsushi's mum yesterday, but she said her son was killed by Tobe.'

He didn't understand what she had said then.

But it was different now. The fire twenty-eight years ago. Had that really just started from playing with fire – Harue doubted that.

However, it was difficult to say whether Harue hated Tobe for that.

That woman had said it was a good thing her son died. She was a failure not just as a mother but

as a human being for saying something like that.

Without saying anything, Yakumo started reading the documents.

I'm counting on you, Yakumo. Gotou yelled that at the bottom of his heart. That fool Ishii couldn't be relied on, and Gotou couldn't think of anything either after going through the information.

'Gotou-san, could you obtain the composition in question? I don't mind if it's a copy.'

Yakumo spoke with his eyes still on the documents.

'Ah, probably.'

Anna had them. He could just borrow them.

'As well, please reinvestigate the fire from twenty-eight years ago. I would like you not to just look at documents but to also talk to the people who were at the scene.'

'The people at the scene?'

'Yes. There should be people who lived nearby and the people from the fire department. Please hurry.'

Got it – is what Gotou was about to reply, but he came to his senses.

'You sound so high and mighty. When'd you become my boss?'

Yakumo looked nonchalant even under Gotou's glare.

'If you don't want to, it's fine by me. I just won't ever cooperate with you again.'

Yakumo smirked.

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6

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Ishii visited Sasaki Mental Health.

Like the day before, he was sitting stiffly on the sofa in the counselling room.

Gotou told Ishii to inform the psychiatrist Anna about what they had found out so far to ask her opinion.

Will I be all right on my own –

He took a handkerchief, wiped the sweat on his forehead which came from anxiety and adjusted the position of his glasses with a finger. He just couldn't relax.

'I apologise for the wait.'

Anna, who'd left her seat, came back holding coffee.

Ishii sprung up and bowed his head deeply.

'Please don't be so formal.'

Though Anna said that with a smile, he couldn't just change his behaviour because of that. Ishii sat on the sofa again with his back straight.

'It's because I didn't have any medical examinations today. I apologise for my attire.'

Anna said that while sitting in front of him. Unlike the calming clothes she had worn the day before, she had on a casual outfit of a white blouse and jeans.

It was mysterious – at first glance, the clothes seemed boyish, but they seemed provocative when she wore them.

He could just see her bra because her blouse was unbuttoned down to her chest.

It was too much for Ishii, who had no immunity against things like this. He didn't know where to look so he stared at the coffee cup in front of him.

'Is something the matter?'

While Anna said that, she touched Ishii's arm and peered at his face. There was a sweet scent.

'I'm fine. It's nothing.'

Ishii leant against the back of the sofa and put distance between him and Anna.

This was no good. Somehow, he couldn't focus in front of this person.

'You're alone today.'

Anna's almond eyes looked at Ishii from behind long eyelashes.

'Yes. Detective Gotou has another case.'

'I've heard that it was a rule for detectives to work in pairs, but it seems that isn't the case.'

Just as Anna said, the rule was to work in twos, but rules didn't work on Gotou.

'Today is an exception. Detective Gotou had something that he had to do.'

Ishii quickly made an excuse. It would be troublesome if she mentioned it to the higher-ups.

'I see... So why are you here today?'

At Anna's question, Ishii hurriedly tried to take his notebook out of his suit, but he fumbled and dropped it.

'Ah, actually, I was going to explain what we have found out from the investigation.'

Ishii quickly picked up the notebook.

'Are you all right?'

'Please forgive me. I'm actually here to request your opinion on the matter...'

'Ishii-san. Have you been worrying about something recently?'

Anna interrupted Ishii.

When he looked at Anna's eyes, which were looking straight at him, it felt like his mind would slip far away from him.

'I-I wonder? I don't think I have any...'

Anna's fingers touched Ishii's hands, which he had clenched into fists in his nervousness. Ishii's body shivered like an electric pulse had gone through it.

'I am an expert. Please don't restrain yourself.'

'N-no, I'm really not.'

Ishii's forehead felt sweaty.

It was the first time Ishii had been touched by a woman like this.

'Are you pushing yourself too much at work?'

'No, that's...'

Just as Anna said, he really was pushing himself. He frantically chased after Gotou – but he always messed up.

He couldn't help but dislike the person he was.

'There is no need to hide it.'

Anna placed her palm on Ishii's shoulders. His stiff shoulder relaxed in that warmth, like melting ice.

'I see... a dream.'

Ishii opened his mouth unconsciously.

'What sort of dream?'

'A very frightening dream... In a dark place, I run after Detective Gotou frantically, but I can't catch up at all. Just when I think I have...'

Ishii's words caught in his throat partway.

If he said what came next, he had a vague fear that it would become true.

'Ishii-san, it is only a dream. What happens afterwards?'

Anna smiled, like she had sensed Ishii's feelings. He felt relieved.

That's right. This is a dream –

'When I catch up, Detective Gotou... is dead.'

'It seems that you are severely overworking yourself.'

Anna looked down.

'I-is that so...'

'Dreams reflect a person's mental state. Ishii-san, it appears that you want to become a person like Detective Gotou, but that has become a burden on your mind.'

He did want to become like Gotou, just as Anna said. However, he didn't think of it as a burden. If you asked him why, it was because he wanted to be like that of his own volition.

'I...'

Anna put a finger to Ishii's mouth, which had opened to object.

'Ishii-san, you are you.'

I am me –

That was obvious. However, it appeared he had forgotten that.

'Ishii-san, you are very competent. By trying to be somebody you are not, you are wasting your talents.'

'I...'

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7

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Haruka walked with her worries –

Though there was a problem, was it really all right for a teacher to involve herself so much with one student?

It might set the other children against him. However, that didn't mean she could leave him alone.

– You're a trainee teacher.

She suddenly remembered what Konno had said.

At the time, she had been very angry, but now that she thought about it again, there were things she couldn't deny.

She wasn't their official homeroom teacher – she was a trainee. She would be gone in two weeks. Even if she did all this now, she couldn't take responsibility until the end.

Haruka stopped once she reached the intersection.

When she looked up at the sky, she saw the clear blue sky, so unlike her emotions.

Masato's cold expression, inappropriate for a child, flashed across her mind.

He was obviously suffering. Haruka just couldn't overlook that.

I should stop grumbling. I'm not Yakumo, but I'll go take a look.

I'll just think about what comes next afterwards –

Haruka turned right at the intersection.

She saw a small children's park. About ten metres ahead was the apartment where Masato lived.

Haruka checked the map again as she stopped in front of the children's park.

I see it. That's it.

An old wooden apartment, portions of it had come off and the entire building seemed to be slanted.

Masato's flat was at the corner of the first floor. Haruka had planned on walking right up to it, but she hesitated when she saw that somebody was already standing in front of the door.

It was Komai. She was knocking on the door and saying something.

Something like that had happened, so Komai was probably also worried about Masato and had come to check up on him.

Haruka thought about calling out to her, but it wouldn't have been a good thing for Komai if her trainee teacher went to a child's home without the teacher in charge.

Haruka just watched from where she stood.

Finally, Komai gave up and turned around to start walking.

Oh no, she's coming this way –

Haruka quickly hid behind the public lavatory at the children's park. She let out a sigh of relief.

Rustle.

The bushes in front of Haruka shook unnaturally, though there was no wind.

Somebody's here –

She stooped and peeked behind the bushes.

'Masato-kun!'

When Haruka unconsciously called out, Masato put his finger in front of his mouth, as if to tell her to be quiet.

Haruka replied with a nod and squatted.

'Hey, why are you hiding?' asked Haruka quietly.

'Cause she came.'

Masato stuck out his neck to look at the road.

'By she, do you mean Komai-sensei?'

Masato didn't affirm or deny it.

'Komai-sensei came because she's worried about you, Masato-kun.'

Haruka said that admonishingly, but Masato looked away from Haruka.

'You don't know anything.'

She felt like his small eyes were hiding something.

She'd heard something like that before.

It had been when she'd first met Yakumo. Haruka really hadn't known anything. However, she couldn't know anything if he wouldn't tell her anything.

'Just as you say, Masato-kun, I don't know anything. So tell me.'

Masato froze at Haruka's words. His shoulders were shaking slightly.

He looked like a lamb afraid of a wolf.

'Hey, Masato-kun.'

After saying that, Haruka touched Masato's shoulder.

'Let go!' yelled Masato, like he'd lost his temper, and he brushed Haruka's hand away.

'Masato-kun...'

'Don't come over here.'

Masato stood up and backed into the fallen leaves behind him.

'Hey, Masato-kun.'

'I'm cursed.'

'What do you mean by curse?'

'Don't come over here!'

At the same time as he yelled, Masato run off.

What was he burdened with?

-

8

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I don't feel like heading home right away –

Haruka arrived at Yakumo's secret hiding place in the back of Building B at the university, like she'd been drawn there.

Yakumo would just say something cynical if she met him, so why had she come?

Unable to come up with an answer to her own question, Haruka opened the door.

Yakumo, sitting in his usual spot, welcomed Haruka with a yawn.

'You really do have a lot of free time.'

She didn't feel angry at Yakumo, who was saying sarcastic things as always.

After sitting opposite Yakumo, she rested her head on the table, exhausted.

I wonder why? It's just a folding chair and a table that's like scrap wood, but I feel so relaxed –

'Hey, let me stay here for a while,' said Haruka, still on the table.

Yakumo didn't reply. Well, whatever. She'd stay here even if he said no.

'Hey, am I really meddlesome?'

She didn't expect an answer. She just wanted to say it.

'What, so you know?'

Haruka sat up and looked at Yakumo. He was reclining with a smile, as if amused.

'That's right. I'm meddlesome.'

Haruka's expression soured as she put her chin in her hands.

Yakumo stopped smiling and raised an eyebrow as he ran a hand through his messy hair.

'When I was in middle school, I had a teacher as meddlesome as you.'

It felt like Yakumo's eyes were elsewhere as he suddenly started talking.

How had Yakumo's time in middle school been?

Haruka made Yakumo wear a *gakuran*<sup>2</sup> in her head. Hm. It didn't suit him. She frantically held back her urge to laugh.

'What sort of teacher?'

'I just said – weren't you listening? The teacher was as meddlesome as you.'

'And?'

'That's all.'

Even though Haruka wanted to hear what came next, Yakumo stopped there.

Maybe Yakumo didn't want to talk about it, but Haruka wanted to hear more.

'What did you think about that teacher, Yakumo-kun?'

Haruka continued her questions.

Yakumo frowned, looking troubled for once. Haruka still stared back at Yakumo.

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2 A *gakuran* is one version of the Japanese male school uniform, usually black. [Here](#)'s one being sold by COSPA.

After a while, Yakumo opened his mouth like he'd given up.

'I thought my teacher did pretty well.'

'Were you the teacher's pet?'

'That's not it,' Yakumo said curtly, looking away.

It looks like there are traces of tears in his eyes. I might just be seeing things though –

'I wonder what Masato-kun thinks of me?'

'He obviously thinks you're meddlesome and a pain in the neck,' replied Yakumo immediately.

He was the worst. Couldn't he have said something nicer?

'That's right. I'm...'

'I thought that teacher was meddlesome and a pain in the neck too.'

Yakumo interrupted Haruka's words.

'And?'

'I wondered why my teacher was trying so hard for a complete stranger – my teacher didn't know anything but did so much.'

In view of Yakumo's past, it made sense for him to think that way.

He might not have been able to believe somebody would selflessly do something for him.

'That's because your teacher was worried about you, Yakumo-kun.'

'Why?'

'That's your teacher's kindness. Your teacher couldn't leave a child in pain alone.'

After he heard Haruka's words, Yakumo's shoulders relaxed and he smiled slightly.

So Yakumo could smile like that too. That was what Haruka's mind was strangely preoccupied with.

'My teacher was kind. But I couldn't understand that simple kindness.'

There, Yakumo paused and looked up at the ceiling, like he was thinking about something.

Maybe he was thinking about his teacher.

'I learnt about selfless kindness from that teacher.'

Yakumo slowly looked at Haruka.

What sad eyes –

'That boy called Masato is probably afraid too. Without knowing your true intentions.'

She had no basis for it, but she felt like Yakumo and Masato were similar.

'True intentions?'

'Yes. So you should just teach him. About selfless kindness.'

Yakumo stopped there.

Taking in the slight kindness shown by Yakumo, who was normally blunt and unparalleled in his contrariness, Haruka nodded.

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9

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When Gotou returned to the station, it was already past ten.

He was able to find a firefighter who had been at the scene twenty-eight years ago and ask what happened, as Yakumo had asked him to.

The elderly man had just retired last year and might have had a lot of free time, since Gotou ended up having to listen to a number of war stories that he hadn't wanted to hear.

Gotou sank into the chair and lit his cigarette.

He was exhausted. The only good thing was that the firefighter's memories had been clear even though the event had happened so long ago.

He glanced over at the seat opposite him.

Ishii wasn't there. If he had just been going to talk to Anna, it shouldn't have taken so long. He couldn't have ended up getting counselling himself, right?

Maybe he'd call him. Just as Gotou picked up the phone, the door opened.

He thought it was Ishii, but he was wrong. The one who came in was Miyagawa.

'Hey. You look tuckered out.'

As Miyagawa said that, sounding amused, he walked briskly up to Gotou.

The way he swaggered was just like a hoodlum's.

'Whose fault do you think that is? It's already been three days.'

Miyagawa smirked as he saw Gotou grumbling with his loosened necktie.

'If you can still talk so much, you're fine. So what's happened with that lady doctor?'

'There's been no progress after that.'

'That so...'

Miyagawa was fidgety, which was unlike him.

'What is it?'

Gotou was no good with atmospheres like this. He urged Miyagawa to continue.

'When you discovered the corpse at the school, you said you got a report from a civilian.'

'Yes, I coincidentally ran into a friend.'

'Could that acquaintance perhaps be the kid who can see ghosts?'

Why does Miyagawa know about Yakumo –

Gotou was only confused for a moment.

Miyagawa had met Yakumo before. He had seen that power during the case that occurred six years ago.

Now that he thought about it, that was the first case he'd solved with Yakumo.

'That's right. That's the brat. He's a university student now.'

'Already, eh... I'm getting old.'

Miyagawa laughed, sounding embarrassed.

Gotou also felt sentimental as he thought of Yakumo in middle school.

Yakumo had denied everything in the world then. He had even wanted his own existence to disappear.

He'd had the eyes of a dead fish. But he's different now –

'Though we don't know anything for certain yet...'

Miyagawa's slowly spoken words brought Gotou back to reality.

'What is it?'

'We know the identity of the burnt corpse.'

They'd done pretty well with what they'd had.

Yesterday, he'd heard that even the bones had turned to charcoal. In that situation, it'd probably be difficult to check the DNA with the dental records, let alone fingerprints.

'So who was it?'

'Tobe Kengo.'

The name Miyagawa said shook Gotou's mind.

Why'd the guy who escaped end up burnt to a crisp there –

It was unnatural. That was what Gotou felt. He didn't have any basis for it. He felt it instinctively.

'What do you mean?'

'The corpse. The left hand didn't burn, right? The fingerprints matched Tobe Kengo's exactly.'

'Then, in any case one thing's wrapped up,' said Gotou, though he didn't mean it.

'Well, that's how it is. Tomorrow morning, the chief of the police is going to meet with the press, saying that we don't know why he died but it's likely he committed suicide.'

Making announcement at this stage seemed premature, but Gotou understood that they wanted to stop the media from ganging up on them for letting a murderer escape as soon as possible.

Looks like Miyagawa doesn't agree though. It feels like there's more to this story –

'So what are you telling me to do?'

With a laugh, Miyagawa said, 'You're sharp,' and he continued with what he had to say.

'I heard about the autopsy, but according to Hata-san, it's impossible for people's bodies to burn up like that normally.'

'Yes, that seems to be the case.'

Gotou had heard that too yesterday.

'I can't think of this as the work of a person.'

'Not the work of a person?'

Gotou furrowed his brows at Miyagawa's extraordinary statement.

'That's right. Ghost or demon or whatever. It's something we don't know about.'

'You're joking, right?'

'I'm serious. But I'm only saying this 'cause it's you. If I said this to the other guys, they'd think I was going nuts.'

Well, it made sense.

If the investigation team say their chief stand in front of them and say something like 'The culprit is a demon', it'd be a joke.

'Could you be telling me to investigate?'

Miyagawa nodded.

'The investigation's still going to go on to find out the truth, but the team's going to be cut down and it's just going to be an investigation on paper. But I want to know. What happened there?'

'I want to know as well, but it isn't something that we can do on our own.'

When Gotou flared up, Miyagawa's lips turned up in a smile.

'Don't you have an expert cooperating with you?'

So that was how it was. Gotou finally understood why Miyagawa had brought up Yakumo.

Set a thief to catch a thief. So he was telling him to use Yakumo to find out the truth.

Miyagawa had misunderstood Yakumo though. Yakumo could see the spirits of the dead. However, that was all.

He couldn't do things you'd see in a manga like use spiritual powers or exorcise spirits. The person said so himself, but he didn't have any exceptional power – just the ability to see them.

Gotou was troubled as to whether he should explain, but he finally stopped. He could tell Miyagawa would just say something like 'It's the same, right?'. Plus, he didn't think he could explain properly.

'I'll do what I can.'

'Appreciate it.'

He was probably satisfied with Gotou's answer. Miyagawa stood up and quickly headed for the door, but he came back like he'd remembered something.

'I forgot. I have one more request.'

After coming this far, getting one or two more requests didn't make much of a difference.

'What is it?'

'Truth is, the police have to hold a meeting for the children's guardians tomorrow afternoon.'

'You can't be asking what I think you're asking.'

He didn't want to. Standing up in front of people to explain something? Was he kidding? PR could do that.

'I'm counting on you,' Miyagawa said, and then he escaped from the room.

Somehow, Gotou felt ill at ease.

'I saw Chief Miyagawa run out, but did something happen?'

Changing places with Miyagawa, Ishii returned to the room.

'He just had something to talk to me about.'

Gotou looked up, feeling exhausted.

'What sort of talk?'

'A talk about how we're going to work through the night again today.'

'Eh!? Again?'

Ishii threw his head back in exaggerated surprise.

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10

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Gotou visited the university in the morning.

He instructed Ishii to wait in the car and then headed for Yakumo's secret hiding place.

When he opened the door, Yakumo wasn't where he was usually – instead, he was sleeping in a sleeping bag in the corner of the dark room.

He looked so damn comfortable. Unfortunately, Gotou wasn't nice enough to let him sleep like that.

Gotou stooped over, put his face close to the sleeping Yakumo's eye and took in a deep breath.

'Oi! Wake up!'

In response to Gotou's voice, Yakumo's body jolted up like a fish hooked out of water.

That was payback for how he always acted. Served him right.

Feeling pleased with himself, Gotou sat on the chair and waited for Yakumo to get up.

'Please don't speak so loudly in the morning. It is troublesome for the neighbours,' said Yakumo, his eyes still closed as he stayed in the sleeping bag.

'You're the only one who'd live in a place like this.'

'Going to somebody's home without permission is trespassing,' said Yakumo, still wrapped up in his sleeping bag.

He had quite the mouth for somebody who'd just woken up.

'Living somewhere without permission is called unlawful occupation.'

After Gotou made that retort, Yakumo started squirming around.

Gotou thought that Yakumo was finally getting up, but he had been completely wrong. Yakumo took out his mobile phone and started dialling.

'What are you doing?'

'I'm calling the police. To tell them there's a trespasser.'

Yakumo replied to Gotou's question while rubbing at his eyes.

This guy was really calling.

'You're not going to stop!?!'

Gotou snatched the mobile away from Yakumo.

<Is anything the matter?>

He heard a voice from the other end. The call had already gone through. Damn. What a frightening guy.

'This is Gotou from the Setamachi precinct. Called the wrong number. Don't worry about it.'

Gotou say that one-sidedly and hung up.

'What is it called when you've done something bad?'

Yakumo sat up and ran a hand through his bedhead, which was even messier than usual.

'Shut up! How would I know!?'

'I see. Good night.'

Yakumo tried to return to his sleeping bag.

Damn. He was such a pain when he sulked.

'Ah, wait. My bad. Sorry, sorry.'

Gotou hurriedly apologised, which made Yakumo stop for a moment, but then he shook his head like he was dissatisfied and went back into his sleeping bag.

'Gotou-san, is that how your parents taught you?'

What a comment.

His impulse was to hit Yakumo, but they'd get nowhere if he made Yakumo's mood any worse.

'I-I apologise.'

Gotou bowed his head while bearing with the humiliation.

'So you can do it if you try.'

After Yakumo nodded in satisfaction, he finally got out of the sleeping bag and sat in the chair opposite Gotou after yawning.

Rather than his usual shirt and jeans, he was wearing a navy jersey on top and bottom.

He looked at Gotou while mumbling incoherently. It made Gotou doubt whether Yakumo was really awake.

'So what do you need from me this early in the morning?'

Yakumo rubbed at his eyes like a cat.

They'd wasted some time with a boring exchange. He'd bring up the topic at hand now.

'We found out the identity of the body.'

Yakumo stopped moving and his gaze became sharp.

OK. The monster cat took the bait.

'That corpse was Tobe Kengo.'

Gotou had thought that Yakumo would be a bit surprised, but Yakumo yawned and scratched his back, looking comfortable.

This guy. Didn't he hear him?

'So it's come to that...'

Just when Gotou was going to confirm Yakumo was listening, Yakumo said that sentence.

It wasn't like they were playing shogi, so it hadn't come to this or come to that.

'You're not surprised?'

Gotou decided to ask anyway.

'Would being surprised solve the case?'

'That's not what I'm say...'

Gotou stopped himself. Yakumo was scratching at his neck while holding back a yawn. He wouldn't listen to what Gotou had to say. As Gotou had thought, he was more of a dog person.

'So, Gotou-san, what do you plan to do now?'

'Find out why he died.'

'Is that so? Do your best.'

He's playing dumb even though he knows –

No matter how much Yakumo didn't like it, Gotou wouldn't let him get away. He'd get him to stick with him until the end.

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11

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'Haruka-san. You OK?'

When Haruka went to work and got to the staff room, Komai's expression changed as she walked over.

'Ah, yes. I'm fine.'

After giving Haruka an evaluating look, Komai relaxed.

'Honestly. I was so worried. When I heard that you were the first person to find... It would've been OK if you didn't come today,' murmured Komai, like she found it difficult to say.

It would have been a lie if she said she hadn't been shocked. However, there was something weighing more heavily on Haruka's mind.

'I'm fine. I apologise for causing trouble.'

'I'm glad.'

Komai patted Haruka's shoulder with a smile.

Haruka was troubled as to whether she should ask about what happened yesterday, but in the end, she said nothing.

If she said it aloud, she would also have to explain why she'd gone to Masato's home.

Though the morning meeting was supposed to start soon, the staff room was not as calm as it usually was.

The staff members were noisy like children waiting for test results. It felt unreal.

There was no helping it.

Police were standing at the school gates, and a blue plastic sheet covered the area surrounding the pool.

The media were crowding about too – a number of microphones were thrust towards Haruka before she entered the school gates.

There was an incomparable atmosphere. It spread through the whole school.

'Silence, please. It is time for the morning assembly.'

The teacher on duty that day spoke up with a clap.

The staff members sat down, still noisy, and formed a circle along the walls. Konno, the vice-principal, stood at the apex of the circle.

He had his arms crossed behind his back and his eyes closed.

When the voices quieted and the room was enveloped in silence, Konno spoke.

'I believe everyone already knows, but on Saturday, a corpse was found on the school premises.'

Konno took a pause and glared at Haruka.

It was like he was saying it was her fault. Being treated like the culprit was depressing.

'Today's classes will go as planned. However, homeroom teachers should explain the incident to the children while avoiding direct expressions.'

The staffroom which had become quiet started to become noisy again.

Haruka wanted to speak up herself. If they avoided direct expressions, how were they supposed to explain to the children?

When she looked at Komai beside her, she was troubled too.

'Silence!' said Konno with intimidating force.

At the same time, the room silenced like a wave had come over it.

'Some of the children are shocked. Choose an appropriate response without overlooking that.'

I wonder what would be an appropriate response to somebody who thrust away a child –

The discomfort spread through the room.

'In the afternoon, there will be a briefing for guardians from the police. The PTA will contact them, but everyone should participate. That is all.'

After Konno said only what was required of them in that business-like manner, he briskly returned

to his own seat.

Haruka just couldn't bring herself to like that person.

'Haruka-san, let's go.'

Komai patted the shoulder of Haruka, who was holding in her anger.

'Yes,' she replied, and they left the staff room.

'I'll talk about the incident,' said Komai as she walked down the corridor.

Haruka bowed her head and said, 'Thank you.' Someone with as little as experience as her would not know how to respond.

'Komai-sensei, Ozawa-san.'

Yokouchi called out to them.

He had jogged over with a happy expression on his face.

'What is it?'

'There was one, right? A ghost.'

Yokouchi gave an agitated reply to Komai's question.

'What are you talking about?'

'An exorcist found the corpse. Right, Ozawa-san?'

Though she had expected this, Haruka didn't know what to do, so she nodded and replied vaguely, 'Ah, yes...'

'Please don't joke around.'

'I'm not lying. You should be careful too, sensei,' said Yokouchi meaningfully, and then he walked down the corridor with light footsteps.

Haruka knew that he was happy because he could prove what he said, but she felt he had gone a bit too far.

'I wonder if he's all right,' murmured Komai, sounding a bit stunned.

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12

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Gotou arrived at Hata's hospital with Yakumo and Ishii in tow.

They bypassed the entrance, took the stairs down to the basement, went down the corridor lit with fluorescent lighting and opened the door to the room in the very back.

In a space about six tatami in size, the desk and cabinets were lined up closely. The room was

untidy as usual.

Hata was sitting at his desk and sipping tea in a carefree manner.

Gotou sat on the round chair – the only one for visitors in the room.

Yakumo and Ishii stood by the door.

'A noisy bunch has come again.'

Hata's greeting was rushed – he was obviously displeased.

People didn't say these sorts of things aloud, demonic old man.

Gotou changed the topic instead of objecting.

'Did you find out anything?'

'Is that the attitude you take when asking somebody for something?'

Though Hata kept complaining, he took a file out from his drawer.

'I don't know what you're expecting, but there hasn't been much progress. It's the first time I've seen a corpse like this.'

Gotou recalled what he had seen at the scene. Pitch-black charcoal in the shape of a human being – that was what he honestly thought.

'And?'

'Seems they've determined it's Tobe Kengo from the fingerprints, but looking at the body, everything's unclear – age, gender, cause of death, when he died. To say more, from the autopsy, it's unclear what caused the fire too. We've sent in a request to the fire lab. Well, that's where we are.'

'Oi!'

Gotou got up from his chair and yelled.

'Do you have a complaint?' said Hata, unabashed. Gotou had a mountain of complaints.

'In the end, you don't know anything. I came all this way, but it was just a waste of time.'

'You're the one who came without checking.'

He stabbed him where it hurt.

'Shut up. There's no progress 'cause you don't do your work properly.'

'You don't understand. The corpse is in that condition. Estimated time of death is something we find out from bone analysis or rigor mortis. With that corpse, we can't do anything.'

What Hata was saying made sense.

However, if they didn't know the cause of death, it meant they didn't even know whether it was suicide, murder or natural death.

'Hata-san. Do you know about spontaneous human combustion?'

The one who interrupted was Yakumo.

His arms were crossed, and, though he didn't look troubled, it felt like he had thought of something.

'Of course.'

'I know about it too.'

Ishii spoke up after Hata.

However, Gotou didn't know about it. It was the first time he'd heard the phrase.

'What? What is that?'

'By the blast of God they perish, and by the breath of his nostrils are they consumed –'

Ishii replied to Gotou's question.

Contrary to how he usually was, there appeared to a sparkle in his eyes behind his glasses.

'What is that? It sounds like some spell.'

He felt like he was even more confused.

'It's a line from the Book of Job in the bible.'

'Bible?'

Gotou felt like the conversation had derailed.

'Ishii-san, it's a bit of a jump to mention the bible now. Please put that aside for now,' said Yakumo as he ran a hand through his hair.

'So what is it?'

Gotou looked at Yakumo and repeated his question.

'Spontaneous human combustion is, as its name suggests, the phenomenon wherein the body of a human being suddenly burns up in a place with no sign of fire. There have been a number of reports of it in the past. It is rather famous in those circles.'

The way he said 'those circles' is a bit odd –

'So you're saying this has actually happened?'

'Yes. Though not in Japan, there have been reports in places such as America, England and Italy. There are many stories, such as how it was due to plasma or alien invasion,' replied Ishii, sounding incredibly interested.

When this guy talked about it, it sounded really suspicious. Hadn't he just read too much stuff about the occult?

Gotou looked at Yakumo suspiciously to confirm.

'What Ishii-san says is true.'

Yakumo understood what Gotou was doing and answered clearly.

'That's idiotic. So you're saying that Tobe suddenly burned up and died from that spontaneous whatchamacallit?'

'You're making a leap in logic.'

'Eh?'

'I just want to say that the condition of the corpse matches the characteristics of spontaneous human combustion,' said Yakumo disinterestedly.

He was different from the likes of Ishii. He eliminated his preconceptions and analysed.

'Characteristics?'

'Yes. There are three main characteristics of spontaneous human combustion. The first is that the body ignites in a location with no sign of fire. The second is that the fire does not spread to the surroundings. Then the third is that even the bones of the body are burnt,' explained Yakumo, putting up one finger at a time.

Gotou understood now. Tobe's corpse fulfilled those three characteristics.

'That caught my interest too. Just as Yakumo-kun says, there are many common features. However, if we acknowledge that, this case becomes the entrance to a maze,' said Hata, drinking his tea leisurely.

'Entrance to a maze? What do you mean?'

'Even now, we still don't know the truth behind human combustion.'

After Hata said that, he giggled with shaking shoulders. The old man was really creepy.

A heavy silence spread through the room –

After a while, Yakumo put his left index finger to his brow. There was energy in his eyes.

It seemed he had thought of something. Gotou waited for Yakumo to speak.

'Hata-san. There's something I would like you to look into.'

'Ask away.'

Hata nodded.

'This is just my reasoning, but I think it could have been adipocere.'

'Adipocere... I see; that'd make it possible.'

Hata hit the table like everything was suddenly clear to him.

What the hell were they talking about so suddenly? Who was this Addie guy –

Gotou's mobile phone rang, interrupting Gotou's confusion.

'What!?' answered Gotou, clearly irritated.

<That's quite a response.'

Miyagawa was on the other side.

'What? Is it Miyagawa-san? What do you need?'

<Honestly. Don't ask me what I need. Don't tell me you forgot.>

'Eh? What are you talking about?'

<You're supposed to explain the case at the school today, right?'

Shit. He'd completely forgotten. He looked at his watch. There were only ten minutes before the set time.

'I'm going there now.'

Gotou said that one-sidedly and hung up without waiting for a response.

'Oi, Ishii! We're going!'

'Going – where to?'

Ishii had a blank look on his face.

'The school, obviously.'

'The school?'

Unfortunately, he didn't have the time to explain in detail now. Gotou dragged Ishii out the room by the ear.

'Gotou-san, if you're heading to the school, please take me with you as well.'

The one who spoke was Yakumo –

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13

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Haruka peeked in from the side of the gymnasium stage to see how things were going.

There were an amazing number of people. Even though they had put out all the chairs they had, it still wasn't nearly enough and there were people standing and people peering in from outside since they couldn't get in.

However, there was nobody at the podium and the stage was deserted.

Somebody from the police was supposed to come explain the incident, but it was already twenty minutes past the scheduled time.

The guardians who had gathered would probably get tired of waiting soon.

'Hey.'

Somebody suddenly hit Haruka's shoulders, which made her body jolt. When she turned around, somebody she hadn't expected was standing there.

'Y-Yakumo-kun. What are you doing here?'

'I'm a chaperon today.'

Yakumo turned around. Gotou and Ishii were there.

'Could the detectives who are explaining the situation to the guardians be...'

'It seems that way,' replied Yakumo with a shrug.

'As it appears the police have arrived, we will leave the explanation to the detectives.'

Yokouchi, standing under the stage, spoke into the microphone.

The noisy gymnasium quieted down like they had been splashed with water.

Gotou and Ishii were talking about something. It looked like children were joking around, and not at all like they were reflecting on their late arrival.

'Now, Detective Gotou from the Setamachi precinct, if you would.'

With Yokouchi's words as the signal, Gotou pushed Ishii forward forcefully. Ishii stumbled from the side of the stage to the podium and – he fell.

It was laughable, but unfortunately, the atmosphere didn't allow for that.

Only Ishii smiled stiffly as he got back up.

'Ishii, good luck.'

Gotou sent a quiet yell Ishii's way.

'Wait, Gotou-san. Aren't you the one who's going to explain?'

Haruka approached Gotou, surprised by his outrageous behaviour.

'It's fine. The people here won't be able to tell Gotou from Ishii.'

'That isn't the problem.'

Gotou snorted and crossed his arms. Honestly, how selfish.

Ishii hobbled towards the podium like he had given up and stood in front of the microphone.

'I-I-I am the detective naaamed...'

Ishii's voice cracked as he started speaking, and his pronunciation and intonation were completely off.

When Gotou heard that, rather than being worried, he laughed aloud.

Ah, this is a mess –

When Haruka sighed, Yakumo pulled at her arm.

'The boy who can see ghosts. Could I meet him?'

He'd said that he was Gotou's chaperon, but that was the true reason Yakumo had come here.

Haruka wanted Yakumo to meet Masato directly if possible, but –

'Classes are already over today. He might've gone home already...'

'I see...'

'But want to try looking anyway?'

'Yeah. There's something I want to look into too.'

Haruka and Yakumo left the gymnasium without anybody noticing.

She walked with Yakumo through the passage and went into the school building.

When she walked next to Yakumo in the school like this, it made her feel like she'd returned to her days as a student.

I wonder if Yakumo walked around the school next to somebody like this when he was a student –

She wanted to know, but she didn't want to imagine it. What on earth was she thinking? She felt like her face was getting warm all of a sudden.

They went down the corridor and took the stairs up. When they reached the first landing, Yakumo suddenly stopped.

His gaze was on a picture –

A wilted cherry blossom tree was drawn in it. If Haruka remembered correctly, it had been selected for a school picture contest.

'What is it?'

With a bitter smile, Yakumo replied, 'It's nothing,' and then he continued going up the stairs.

They went up to the fourth floor and stepped into the classroom for Class 5-4.

There was nobody in the classroom.

'This is my class.'

Yakumo entered the classroom silently and looked around with his arms crossed.

Haruka peered at the fish tank in the corner of the room.

There were three killifish – Hey, do you know where Masato-kun is? Of course they don't know.

'Which is his seat?' said Yakumo.

'The third from the back in the row by the window.'

Yakumo walked up to that seat and sat down in the chair too small for his body. He touched the

desk with his palm slowly, like he was checking something.

'Curse...'

Yakumo furrowed his eyebrows.

'Curse?'

'Here.'

Yakumo pointed at part of the desk.

When she glanced at it, she saw the word 'Curse' written on it.

It hadn't been written with a pencil or pen but scraped into the desk with something sharp.

Haruka remembered how Masato had been using a compass needle to carve something during class.

Was he doing this –

Ignoring Haruka's surprise, Yakumo put his chin in his hands and looked out the window.

Yakumo might have looked out the window the same way when he was an elementary student, with much too horrible a reality on his shoulders –

Haruka wondered what she would have done if she had been in the same class as Yakumo.

What would she have said when she saw him staring out the window?

She might have been swept up by her surroundings and ended up hating him without trying to see who he truly was. Though they had met differently, the emotions after that would change so much.

Even though we're all human beings, why can't we understand each other –

'Found him.'

Haruka was brought back to reality by Yakumo's voice.

'Do you mean Masato-kun?'

'Yeah.'

'Where?'

Haruka looked up, but didn't see anybody, let alone Masato.

'On the roof.'

Yakumo raised an eyebrow.

'The roof?'

There was no way he could have seen the roof from inside the building.

'Look out the room.'

Yakumo pointed out the window. Haruka followed the finger with her eyes.

She saw the pool where the corpse had been found. It was still covered with a blue plastic sheet, and there were detectives standing guard.

However, Masato was nowhere to be found.

'The shadow,' Yakumo said, perhaps sensing her confusion.

Shadow –

'Ah! There!'

Haruka finally understood what Yakumo was saying.

The school building cast a shadow between the pool and itself, and there was definitely a person's shadow on the roof.

She couldn't tell who it was, since it was a shadow.

But it had to be Masato. She was sure of it.

'Let's go.'

"K."

Haruka left the classroom with Yakumo.

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14

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Haruka opened the door to the roof. A dry wind touched her cheeks.

When she looked over, she saw a boy clinging to the fence with his backpack on.

There's no mistaking it. That's Masato –

His back, the same size as the other children's, was burdened with something.

'That him?' asked Yakumo quietly from beside her. Haruka responded with a nod.

Yakumo breathed out and then walked straight for Masato. Haruka followed with a little distance between them.

'I heard you can see ghosts.'

Yakumo stood next to Masato. He might have been surprised by how sudden it was, because his shoulders jolted before he looked up.

'I can see them too. Ghosts.'

Yakumo ran a hand through his hair, like he felt self-conscious.

'You don't know anything.'

With his hands in fists, Masato glared at Yakumo.

'Yeah, that's right. I just know your name. So tell me about you.'

Yakumo's tone was kind and consoling.

It was the first time Haruka had seen Yakumo talking this way.

'I'm cursed. If you're with me, you'll die.'

Masato raised his chin and said that while looking up. He'd said something similar before.

She hadn't thought about what the words meant before, but now that she thought about it, he might have actually wanted to play with everyone else.

However, he couldn't do that since he was cursed. Something bad would happen if he did.

He might have distanced himself because of that.

'I see. Actually, I'm cursed too.'

Yakumo crouched there and took Masato's hand to turn him around.

Masato looked away from Yakumo's gaze, seeming troubled.

'Let me tell you something good. People who are cursed can hang out together, no problem.'

Yakumo put his index finger to Masato's chest.

'That's a lie.'

Masato's body trembled, but Haruka could tell from where she was that his heart was faltering.

'It's true. I can promise that.'

Masato bit his lips at Yakumo's words. It looked just like he was trying to bear with pain. The expression didn't befit an elementary school student.

'It's true.'

Finally, Masato spoke with a cracking voice.

'You're smart.'

After Yakumo said that, he gently brushed patted Masato on the head.

Masato stared at Yakumo's face. It was a child's expression.

While Haruka thought that it really was a good thing she'd brought Yakumo and Masato together, she also painfully understood how useless she had been, unable to do anything.

Yakumo was much more suited to being a teacher than someone like her.

'That's right. Let me tell you another good thing.'

'A good thing?'

Masato cocked his head.

'Yup. The way to lift a curse.'

'That's impossible.'

Masato shook his head with damp eyes.

'It's possible. You know, for curses. The person who's cursed didn't do anything wrong – the person who curses someone else is the bad one. So if you get the person who cursed you, the curse will be lifted.'

'Really?'

'Really. I'll get them for you, so tell me who cursed you.'

Though he looked troubled, Masato's lips slowly parted.

'Haruka-san, what are you doing there?'

Haruka turned around when she was suddenly called out to and saw Komai at the door.

What terrible timing. Komai appeared to notice that Masato was standing by the fence.

'Masato-kun too... what are you doing?'

Komai approached her.

Haruka didn't know how to respond and looked at both Komai and Yakumo.

Perhaps she was exasperated with Haruka who wouldn't say anything, because Komai walked up to Masato and Yakumo.

'Masato-kun, school's already over. What are you doing here?'

Masato's expression, which had relaxed earlier, became stiff again.

Komai gripped Masato's wrist. Right as she did that, Masato bit Komai's hand.

'Ouch! Hey, stop that.'

Komai pushed away Masato's face to get her hand away.

'Don't come near me. You'll die next!'

Masato pitched forward as he yelled that and pointed at Komai.

Haruka didn't hear Masato's words as a joke or random remark. She had no basis for it, but it echoed in her ears like a true prediction.

'You shouldn't say something like that so lightly.'

Shaking free from Komai who was admonishing him, Masato ran off.

Komai shook her head in exasperation and then looked at Yakumo.

This was bad. Bringing an outsider into the school building was a considerable problem.

I can't excuse him as an exorcist to Komai. What should I do –

'Who might you be?' asked Komai cautiously.

'I apologise for the late introduction. I am the subordinate of Detective Gotou, who came here today. My name is Ishii,' said Yakumo with an innocent look, and then he bowed. How did he have the nerve –

'I see. So you're a detective?'

Though Komai said that, she gave Yakumo an evaluating look.

She was probably suspicious. It made sense. It wasn't some detective drama – she'd probably never seen a detective in jeans and a shirt.

'There was something that caught my interest, so I requested that this civilian to allow me inside. Would you like to make an enquiry?'

It seemed Yakumo had noticed Komai's suspicions, as he spread his two hands jokingly.

'No, that won't be necessary... Please excuse me.'

Komai probably felt awkward for being so suspicious. She left the roof as if running away.

Just as Haruka felt relieved, she also felt exhausted.

'How was it?'

After Haruka sighed, she walked up to Yakumo by the fence and asked him that question.

'Since I was interrupted, the conversation was stopped partway. I can't say anything right now.'

Yakumo leant against the fence and looked up at the sky.

If only there were a bit more time, Haruka thought.

A thin white cloud hung in the clear blue sky.

Yakumo pinched something like a white capsule between his fingers and raised it to his eyes.

'What is that?'

'The boy earlier dropped it.'

She hadn't noticed at all. Yakumo really was sharp.

'Is it related somehow?'

'Who knows? I'm going to look into that now.'

'That so.'

'Putting aside whether he can see ghosts or not, that kid is definitely hiding something and keeping it to himself.'

'I wonder what he's shouldering...'

'I don't know, but the truth is, he wants to talk to somebody about it.'

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15

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After Haruka saw off Yakumo and the others, she returned to the meeting room for trainee teachers to pick up her things.

When she opened the door, so saw Komai waiting there.

'You're heading home, right? Let's go together.'

Komai smiled. However, it was easy to tell it was forced.

It felt like she wanted to probe into what had happened earlier.

A number of things had happened, and time had passed, but Haruka's impression of Komai had changed.

Though I wouldn't know how to answer if you asked me how it's changed –

'Yes, let's.'

With trembling emotions in the pit of her stomach, Haruka quickly gathered up her things and followed Komai out the meeting room.

'What did you talk to the detective about?'

Once they'd gotten into the corridor, Komai brought up that topic.

Unlike her earlier smile, her tone felt pointed.

'I didn't... It was just because I had been on the scene that day...'

In the first place, Yakumo wasn't a member of the police. She couldn't think of a good excuse and felt awkward.

'What did you talk to Masato-kun about?'

Komai asked more questions.

'No, I had just been nearby and didn't actually talk...'

Of course that was a lie. She had actually heard everything.

Her palms felt sweaty. Her heart wouldn't calm down, and it felt like she was walking in mid-air.

'Why would the police talk to that child?'

Komai put a finger to her round chin.

Haruka was more interested in why Komai wanted to know so much.

It was natural for a homeroom teacher to be concerned if one of her students was talking with a

detective, but Komai's attitude right now felt completely different.

If Masato talked, something disadvantageous to her would occur. She was trying frantically to hide it.

That was just what Haruka thought, but that was how she felt.

Maybe it has something to do with yesterday –

Though Haruka knew it was unjust suspicion, she couldn't stop herself from asking.

'Um, Komai-sensei. You went to Masato-kun's house yesterday, right?'

Komai gaped at Haruka.

'Why do you know that...'

Komai gripped Haruka's arms.

Her doubt was natural, but that confusion seemed beyond that.

'With what happened before, I was concerned. Since I had happened to be nearby...'

'I see. I felt the same as you. You've developed a sense as a teacher too.'

Komai let go of Haruka and smiled. Another forced smile –

'Is that so?'

Though she replied, that didn't mean Haruka had accepted Komai's answer.

'That's right. I think I've forgotten something. You can go on first.'

After Komai said that quickly, she turned on her heels and walked away briskly.

She's hiding something –

Haruka had no basis for it, but she had that suspicion.

But even if she thought Komai was hiding something, what on earth was she hiding? Haruka didn't know. While she thought about it, Haruka walked to the shoe cupboard, changed into her pumps and went outside.

Rustle.

The bushes by the pool were shaking unnaturally.

Haruka stopped and looked cautiously, when somebody came out from the shrubs.

Haruka immediately hid behind a pillar.

It was Konno.

He was holding something like a paper bag carefully in front of his chest. After he looked around cautiously, he walked away.

The police had said nobody was allowed near the pool.

What was Konno doing there –

Haruka wanted to know, but she didn't think of calling out to stop him.

Ever since the corpse was found, strange things have been happening one after the other. I hate it

–

Haruka walked away with a quickly beating heart.

Suddenly, she felt somebody watching her and looked up.

She saw a boy peering out from one of the windows on the second storey of the school building.

He had a carefree smile on his face as he gave a big wave.

She'd never seen him before. What class was he from?

Haruka was doubtful, but she waved back.

When she did, the boy disappeared like he had melted.

Were my eyes playing tricks on me, or was that –

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16

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While Ishii drove the car, he took a sidelong glance at Gotou in the passenger seat.

He was still laughing. He was telling Yakumo in the backseat about Ishii's huge blunder.

However, it wasn't funny to Ishii.

He had never disliked Gotou as much as he had today.

Ishii had been thrust in front of such a large audience with no explanation whatsoever – of course he couldn't explain the case, even if he was told to.

It had been really terrible.

It wouldn't be an exaggeration to say it was the most embarrassing moment of Ishii's life.

He'd made an unparalleled blunder.

It wasn't an excuse, but he'd been frightened to death.

He'd planned on talking as well as he could, but the words didn't come out. The guardians had made a clamour about that.

The abuse the guardians hurled had reverberated in his head, and then –

He'd fainted.

When Ishii came to, the gymnasium had been empty. There would definitely be a flood of complaints for the police after this.

His head hurt just thinking about it.

The only good thing was that Haruka hadn't seen that blunder.

'Oi, Ishii. You angry?' said Gotou as he wiped the tears that had come up from laughing too much.

'I'm not angry.'

Ishii gripped the wheel tightly. His driving was erratic.

'You are angry.'

'That's incorrect. It's just that because of what happened, many civilians now feel that the police are unreliable. I am concerned about that.'

'Just leave that be and it'll work itself out.'

'Detective Gotou, do you not think about anything?'

Ishii spoke in a voice so loud it even surprised himself.

'Oi, oi. You rebelling?'

'No I'm not.'

Gotou smirked when Ishii denied it.

'You're becoming more and more like a detective.'

Gotou poked Ishii's shoulders.

'Why do you think that?'

'You can voice your own opinions now.'

Putting aside whether voicing your own opinions made you a better detective, the reason he could do that was because of Anna's counselling.

It felt like his emotions were more erratic than usual.

'By the way, Yakumo. How was your side of things?'

Gotou turned to the backseat and changed the topic.

'Unfortunately, there have been no leaps in progress,' said Yakumo with a yawn.

Though he had refined features, there was no expression on them and Ishii couldn't tell what he was thinking.

He could tell a few things though, after knowing Yakumo for a few months.

Though Yakumo had said there wasn't much progress, that wasn't actually true.

Yakumo wouldn't give any vague reasoning if he hadn't gathered all the information.

However, in that head, he was putting together theories and running simulations while pursuing the truth.

'Then there's no point in the investigation.'

With or without knowing Yakumo's personality, Gotou crossed his arms in irritation.

'Gotou-san, how is the investigation I asked you to do?'

When Yakumo said that, Gotou opened the glove compartment, took an old booklet from it and threw it towards the backseat.

'While Ishii was unconscious, I got the teacher called Yokochin or something to get it.'

'Isn't it Yokouchi? Please at least remember people's names,' Yakumo remarked immediately.

'Stop being so fussy...'

'How about the matter with the firefighters?'

Yakumo continued speaking, ignoring Gotou's grumblings.

'Right. That's right. I forgot about that.'

This time, Gotou took a notebook from his pocket.

However, no matter how many times Ishii saw this, it felt strange. A civilian – and a university student at that – was using a detective for his own purposes.

Plus, that was a detective as high-handed and unconventional as Gotou.

Ignoring Ishii's thoughts, Gotou started explaining while looking at the notebook.

'On the day of the incident, according to what the firefighter who went to put out the fire said, it was already a sea of fire when they got there. One kid was crying outside. After they talked to him, they'd rushed in side they heard there were still two kids inside.'

It appeared that Gotou was talking about the fire that had occurred at the elementary school twenty-eight years ago.

'And then?' Yakumo urged.

'There were two kids collapsed inside, but they'd been able to tell that one was beyond help at one look. His body was burning. They saved the kid who was injured but still alive first. That kid was Tobe Kengo.'

'How did they know it was Tobe Kengo?' asked Yakumo.

'Seems the kid said so himself. Plus, he had a toy in his hand with his name on it. The dad confirmed it when he came too.'

Gotou finished speaking and closed the notebook.

When Ishii glanced at the back mirror, he saw Yakumo pinching his brow with his fingers while looking down.

That was the pose he took when he was thinking.

To be honest, Ishii was often irritated by Yakumo's attitude and words.

He especially couldn't forgive how Yakumo acted towards Haruka. However, nobody was more reliable for their ability to think.

Yakumo's peculiar perspective had brought many cases to their solution.

It was true that there were some cases they could have solved without Yakumo.

However, it would be difficult to say that they would have been able to solve it in the same amount of time. Lives had been saved because Yakumo was there.

'Gotou-san. There's something I would like you to investigate in addition to that.'

Yakumo raised his pale face like he'd thought of something.

'Oi, oi. Again?'

Gotou's cheek twitched as he spoke up, displeased.

'It's fine if you don't want to. It doesn't matter to me if the case goes unsolved.'

After Yakumo said that in his usual tone, he put his hands behind his head with composure.

When it came to this, there wasn't any chance of Gotou winning.

'Fine, fine. I'll investigate whatever.'

'Please say that from the beginning. It's a waste of time.'

Gotou was clearly angry at those words and shouted 'You bastard!' as he turned around and raised his fist towards the backseat, but Yakumo was calm.

'Detective Gotou, please stop it.'

Ishii gripped Gotou's shoulders and frantically tried to pacify him.

'Yakumo, I'll definitely punch you someday!'

Gotou left that childlike remark and turned back forward, but perhaps he had nowhere to turn his anger because he gave Ishii's chest a horizontal chop.

'Oof.'

Ishii coughed at the surprise attack.

What a hit.

'So what do you want me to investigate?' said Gotou recklessly.

Yakumo replied, 'Please look into the background of the father of the boy called Oomori Masato. I'd also like details about Ushijima Atsushi-kun's mother, Harue, as soon as possible.'

Where on earth is this case headed –

Ishii felt vaguely anxious.

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17

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Haruka couldn't fall asleep after getting in bed.

When she closed her eyes, a flashback appeared behind her eyelids.

The whispered rumour about ghosts. The burnt corpse they found when they'd gone to confirm whether that rumour was true –

Was Masato related to that case somehow?

Yakumo had said that Masato was hiding something. He'd also said that Masato wanted to talk about that to somebody.

I want to listen to him if I can.

Why am I trying so hard for Masato –

While pondering these things, Haruka turned over and curled up so she was hugging her knees.

It had to be because Haruka carried a shadow of her own –

The death of her twin sister, Ayaka.

Haruka's older sister had died because of her. However, she couldn't tell anyone and lived with that shut away in her heart.

Yakumo was the one who had listened to her.

Haruka had been released from her curse then.

If Masato was cursed like Haruka was, she wanted to release him from that.

– I'm cursed.

When Masato had said that, the sad expression on his face had looked like Yakumo's.

I'm probably overlapping Masato with Yakumo. That's why I'm so absorbed –

Interrupting her endless thoughts, her mobile phone rang.

Who could it be at this hour?

Haruka reached out a hand from her bed to pick up the mobile phone on the table. The number displayed on it was Yokouchi's.

There was the possibility that he was contacting her in an emergency. Haruka sat up and answered.

'Hello, this is Ozawa.'

<Ah, Ozawa-san. I'm sorry for calling at this hour, but...>

His tone was dark. She could guess just from that that it wasn't good news.

'What's wrong?'

<I was just contacted earlier, but... er...>

Yokouchi's unclear words invited irritation.

Haruka's heart started beating more quickly.

'What happened?'

<Komai-sensei... I heard that she passed away.>

'Eh?'

Haruka felt suspended, as if she had fallen from a high place, and the blood drained from her face.

She lost her strength and dropped her mobile phone unconsciously.

'Why... Why?'

<I don't know the situation. I heard she was found collapsed outside her apartment...>

Haruka recalled the scene on the roof.

Masato had pointed straight at Komai and proclaimed –

'You'll die next!'

I can't believe that became reality –

残火

第三章

FILE:  
03

## file 03: embers

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1

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At the morning meeting, the vice-principal Konno informed them that Komai had passed away.

However, Haruka just couldn't believe it was real. She had been talking to her just yesterday.

The business-like manner Konno stated the facts made it feel even less real.

Komai's flat was on the eighth floor of her apartment. The front door had been closed and it seemed that she had jumped from the veranda.

There were no signs of struggle and a note that read 'I'm tired' had been found, so it appeared to be an impulsive suicide.

Haruka had only worked together with Komai for a week, so it wasn't like she knew everything about her. However, she had been happy about her upcoming wedding. Would somebody like that kill herself –

Something might have happened with her lover.

Haruka was probably hung up because of what Masato had said.

– You'll die next.

'Ozawa-san.'

When Yokouchi tapped her on the shoulder, Haruka returned to reality.

'Eh, ah, yes.'

Haruka raised her head, flustered.

'No questions, right?'

Yokouchi asked for agreement with an exasperated look on his face.

'Er...'

She couldn't think of a response because she didn't understand the point of the question.

'Honestly, please get a grip. Everyone's had a shock.'

Yokouchi normally felt gentle, but he was unusually irritated today.

'Please forgive me.'

'The vice-principal will inform the students. Other teachers will help out in shifts for class. Please look after the children in the classroom.'

'Yes, I understand.'

'Get a grip, OK?'

'Please forgive me. I just can't believe that Komai-sensei committed suicide...'

Haruka looked at her feet.

She knew that she had to keep her head up at times like this, but she felt like there was a weight on her head.

'I think it's possible though.'

Yokouchi said just that.

Haruka looked up at Yokouchi, surprised by his words.

'What do you mean?'

'Ah, Ozawa-san, you wouldn't know.'

'What about?'

'I've heard that Komai-sensei had an affair.'

'An affair?'

'I don't know the details either, but there was this whole rumour about how she'd had an affair with the dad of one of the kids. Maybe she was troubled because of that.'

'An affair?'

Yokouchi nodded.

Komai, who had been thinking about marriage, had had an affair –

Troubled because of the affair, she committed suicide. It sounded persuasive, but it felt like it just didn't link to Komai.

'Are you ready?' said Konno.

Yokouchi made his escape.

'Yes. Thank you very much.'

Haruka bowed her head politely towards Konno.

However, Konno didn't even reply and just looked at her scornfully.

She really couldn't bring herself to like this person.

Haruka buried her emotions in the pit of her stomach and left the room with Konno.

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2

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'Sorry to bother you.'

Gotou said that as he opened the door to the university <Movie Research Circle>, which was Yakumo's secret hiding place.

'If you know you're a bother, please leave immediately. Honestly, please don't make me say that so many times.'

Sleepy-eyed Yakumo was sitting in his usual seat while running a hand through his hair.

This time, he really did look like he hadn't gotten enough sleep. There were faint shadows underneath his eyes.

'Stop whining. I don't have the time to listen to you either.'

However, Gotou also hadn't gotten enough sleep.

He'd said that to get rid of the irritation he'd accumulated.

'What a coincidence. I also don't have time to waste talking with you.'

'What did you say?'

'The exit is over there.'

Yakumo pointed at the door with a yawn.

Damn, only his tongue was in good health. If Gotou talked to Yakumo any more, he'd just become more irritated. It'd probably be better to get the point quickly.

'Old man Hata called. Told me to bring you too.'

'Is that so...'

Yakumo looked up at the ceiling in exhaustion and sighed, as if he were some young man in love.

Yakumo was probably troubled too, for once.

'So you have troubles like other people do too,' teased Gotou, since it was a rare opportunity.

'It makes me truly envious of you, Gotou-san, since you have no troubles.'

'I have troubles too.'

'About what to eat?'

This bastard –

'Of course not.'

'Then, about your wife running away.'

'My wife is at home... probably.'

Gotou hung his head and put his hands on the table.

He shouldn't have said anything. He felt exhausted now.

The truth was, he didn't know where to start with this case. It was suffocating.

This case was really hateful.

'What are you dawdling for?' said Yakumo as he suddenly stood up.

'Huh?'

'If we're going, let's hurry up and go. Or can you not move from hunger?'

'You making fun of me?'

'No, I'm mocking you.'

This brat –

Yakumo quickly evaded Gotou, who had leapt for him, and left the room.

After the case was over, he'd definitely give Yakumo a good punch.

\* \* \*

Ishii thought over the details of what had happened so far while sitting in the driver's seat.

It really was an unsolvable case.

It should have been surprising for an escaped murder to be found as a burnt corpse, but what was the most complicated was the state of that corpse.

Hata and Yakumo both said it, but was it spontaneous human combustion –

If it were, they probably wouldn't be able to get even a clue as to how to solve the case with the investigation methods they've used until now. They'd have to add experts to the investigation team.

Ishii conjectured that the possibility of alien invasion regarding spontaneous human combustion was extremely high.

They definitely burnt humans, bones and all, using weapons humans couldn't even think of.

They should bring the matter to NASA. He would suggest that to Gotou.

Just as Ishii's delusions were reaching a peak, the passenger door opened and Gotou came in. Then, Yakumo sat in the backseat.

He'd thought they wouldn't return for an hour, since that was the usual pattern, but they came back more quickly than he'd imagined.

'Start the car.'

'Ah, yes sir.'

Ishii started the car as told by Gotou.

'Gotou-san, how is the investigation I requested?' said Yakumo while looking out the window. He looked unusually tired.

'I've investigated a lot about Ushijima Harue. Still investigating that brat's dad.'

While Gotou started explaining, he took a file out from the glove compartment and threw it towards the backseat.

Yakumo started flipping through the pages silently.

Gotou began a supplementary explanation.

'Ushijima Harue. Fifty-eight years old. After graduating from high school, she worked at a hostess at clubs and bars, but she stopped in her early twenties.'

'The reason being?'

'I don't know the details, but it seemed she was kept by her lover. After quitting her hostess job, she didn't do anything like work.'

'And the person who kept her?'

Yakumo furrowed his brows.

'Still investigating. According to a woman living nearby, the guy would change.'

Gotou was talking like he'd been the one who'd seen it through, but Ishii was the person who'd actually investigated.

After returning from the elementary school yesterday, he'd gone to question people who lived near the apartment where Ushijima Harue lived.

You could find gossip-loving housewives everywhere.

They'd told him in detail about how she used to be a hostess, how a man that looked like a father would sometimes visit with his kid, and how another man – much younger – would go in and out too.

When he thought about how the neighbours were watching so closely, it was exceedingly frightening.

'Then how about Oomori Masato's father?'

'All I know is the place he used to work.'

'Which is?' urged Yakumo as he looked at the documents.

'Oomori Hironori worked at a bike repair shop. He was skilful, but the manager caused some problem and was arrested, so he lost his job. He started doing part-time after that.'

'Could that be when he got his divorce?'

'Ah, that's right.'

'I see...'

Yakumo's sorrowful eyes looked at the low car ceiling.

He's realised something – that was what Ishii felt.

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3

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Haruka went into the classroom for Class 5-4 with a hard expression and stood at the front next to Konno.

The children shouldn't have known about Komai's death yet.

However, it seemed they'd felt the unrest that flowed through the whole school, because the whole classroom was unsteady.

Haruka turned her eyes to Masato, who sat by the window.

He had his chin in his hands and was looking out the window, but his eyes were puffy like he had cried, and he appeared to be holding back his pain.

That child knows something –

'Silence.'

Konno raised his voice. It was no different from the tone he'd used to reprimand teachers in the staff room. The noisy classroom was blanketed in silence.

The children were waiting for Konno's next words as they looked right at him.

If it were her, how would she explain Komai's death to the children –

The death of somebody close to them. They would experience that sometime in their life, but they couldn't just throw that reality at children who were unprepared for it.

While Haruka was thinking, Konno cleared his throat and opened his mouth.

'Komai-sensei committed suicide.'

'Eh?'

Haruka said that without thinking and looked at Konno. He looked as arrogant as always –

Haruka couldn't believe it. How could he use the word 'suicide' of all things?

The children were noisy again.

There were some children talking among themselves, and some children, who already knew the meaning of the word, were shaking and had started crying.

'Sensei, what's suicide?'

Eri, who sat in front of Masato, raised her hand and asked that question.

'Suicide means killing yourself...'

'Vice Principal. Please stop it.'

Haruka couldn't stop herself – she grabbed Konno's arms and interrupted him.

'They'll find out eventually. What's the point in hiding it?'

Konno glared at Haruka, as if he were looking at something filthy.

Did he think that doing that would make everyone do as he said? She wouldn't yield to that arrogance. Haruka glared back at Konno forcefully.

'That isn't the problem. The problem is how you expressed it.'

'You're just a trainee teacher.'

Konno brushed off Haruka's hand.

'You're the vice principal – don't you understand the children's feelings?'

'Don't talk like you do!'

Konno's angry voice, inappropriate for a classroom, echoed.

At that, Eri covered her face with her hands and started crying. Maiko comforted her from the neighbouring seat.

'What's up with him?'

'He's so annoying.'

The children started criticising Konno.

'Silence!'

Konno raised his voice again as he hit the teacher's desk.

It didn't matter that this person was the vice principal. Haruka couldn't let him stay in the classroom any longer.

'Would you please leave the classroom?'

Haruka stepped in front of Konno and looked straight at his muddy eyes as she said that.

Even though she was trying to chase the vice principal out of the classroom, she wasn't nervous or afraid at all, to the point she even surprised herself.

Konno's breather was ragged, having gone too far to back down.

'This conversation is finished, Vice Principal. Please leave.'

Haruka didn't take even one step back and said that firmly.

They glared at each other for a while, but perhaps Konno decided Haruka wouldn't back down, because he left the classroom with a click of his tongue.

The problem is what comes next –

Haruka went back to the front of the classroom and sighed as she looked at the children's faces.

'Everyone, listen to what Sensei has to say.'

To tell the truth, she didn't know what she should say in this situation, but she couldn't leave it as it was.

The children's hearts weren't mature yet. The injuries their hearts received now wouldn't heal through their whole life.

Haruka had experienced that herself.

– You can do it.

Next to her, Haruka felt like she heard Komai whisper.

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4

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After Gotou went into Hata's room, he sat on the only round chair in the room, as he had done last time.

Yakumo and Ishii stood by the wall and Hata sipped his tea at his desk. This was also the same as last time.

'Now, the wait is over.'

Hata rubbed his wrinkled hands together. He was just like a fly that gathered around excrement.

'Stop showing off and talk.'

Gotou crossed his arms. Hata let out his usual creepy giggle.

'As usual, the idiot is hasty.'

'What did you say!?!'

Gotou leant towards Hata, but he didn't seem to care.

Yakumo and the old man – he really couldn't compete with them.

'Well, anyway, take a look at this.'

Hata laid out for photos on the desk, as if he was going to start playing cards. Everyone looked at them.

The photos on the desk were all of burnt corpses.

'Eek.'

Ishii jolted and let out a shriek.

'Shut up.'

Gotou hit Ishii's head and looked at the photos once more.

They were different from the photos of the scene they were at before, but the state of the corpses was very similar. Even the bones were burnt, and everything had turned into ash.

One photo caught Gotou's attention.

Though the body had turned into ash, the feet, with the shoes on, were left behind. This was incredibly like Tobe's corpse.

'Are these photos of that spontaneous human what's it you mentioned before?'

'Spontaneous human combustion. At least remember that.'

Hata shook his head melodramatically. The old man always got on his nerves.

'So does that combustion have something to do with this case?'

'Yes, that's exactly it.'

At Gotou's question, Hata smiled happily, showing his yellow teeth. This old man really was creepy.

But wait a minute. If that was the case, it would contradict with what they'd said earlier.

'Old man, the last time I came, didn't you say that spontaneous human combustion hadn't been explained yet?'

'That's right. Spontaneous human combustion hasn't been explained.'

Hata looked composed. What was the old man putting on airs for?

'Then isn't that a contradiction?'

Gotou stood up and stared down at Hata.

'Gotou-san, please calm down,' said Yakumo.

Normally, Yakumo should've noticed a contradiction like this first, but –

'I am calm. What this old man is saying is strange.'

'It isn't strange. Hata-san hasn't said that this case involves spontaneous human combustion.'

Yakumo ran a hand through his hair like he thought Gotou was troublesome.

'What?'

'Gotou-san, you asked whether spontaneous human combustion has something to do with this case, so Hata-san just said that it does.'

'That's the same thing, right?'

'It isn't. I said this before as well, but spontaneous human combustion has three main characteristics. Do you remember?'

'Yeah.'

Gotou nodded.

The fire started in a place with no sign of fire. The fire didn't spread to the surroundings. The whole body including the bones was burnt –

He knew that.

'The first characteristic of fire suddenly starting in a place with no sign of fire has not yet been explained, though there are baseless theories such as plasma and alien invasion.'

'So we don't understand it, right?'

'However, if we take away that first characteristic, we can explain it.'

'Ah, so that's what it is!'

Ishii seemed to have understood Yakumo's explanation because he spoke up while clapping his hands together.

However, Gotou didn't understand. Perhaps Yakumo thought Gotou looked pitiful as he held his head in his hands, because he supplemented his explanation.

'In short, it isn't clear how the fire suddenly starts, but if we think of methods which could burn a body including the bones without the fire spreading to its surroundings, it is possible under certain conditions.'

'Is that how it is?'

Finally, Gotou understood as well.

Nobody had seen the fire start with this case. So, they could put that aside for now and think about how the bones had burnt.

But they needed a temperature of over six thousand degrees to burn a body including the bones. Is that possible –

'Hata-san, I leave the rest to you.'

Yakumo handed the explanation over to Hata, crossed his arms nonchalantly and leant against the wall.

Hata nodded and began the explanation.

'I should have remembered the moment I saw the corpse. My memory's gotten worse with age. Also, burnt corpses aren't my forte. I like them raw.'

'Shut up! You perverted old man!'

Gotou rejected Hata's introduction, which was extremely indiscreet.

However, Hata didn't reflect on it – rather, he laughed in his creepy voice with shaking shoulders.

'Yakumo gave a hint when he said adipocere.'

'Addie what? Who's that?'

Come to think of it, they'd mentioned the same guy before.

'Honestly. Do I have to start the explanation from there?'

Hata's face was sullen, like he had eaten something sour.

'I can explain adipocere,' interrupted Ishii – maybe he couldn't keep watching.

'Ishii-kun, thank you.'

At Hata's words, Ishii walked to the centre of the room energetically.

'Adipocere comes from adipose, as in body fat, and cera, the Latin word for wax, like in candles<sup>1</sup>.'

Which makes adipocere –

'Body fat candles?'

'That isn't it. After a person dies, if they are left under specific temperature conditions, such as a hot and humid location, the fat decomposes, becomes fatty acid, binds with the calcium or magnesium in the water and the whole body becomes something like soap.'

'Soap?'

It didn't really fit in Gotou's mind.

'Yes. In that state, the human body becomes like a wax figure and can be kept in that shape without decaying.'

Wasn't this completely occult?

'Oi, old man!'

Gotou spoke up in disbelief.

'It's true. It's not sorcery or witchcraft – it's been proven in the medical field and is completely accepted,' said Hata as he sipped his tea.

Is that so – he hadn't known.

No, that was wrong. Though it made sense for Hata, Yakumo and Ishii were the strange ones for knowing something like this.

Well, in any case he understood adipocere now. However, he still didn't understand.

'What does that have to do with burning bones?'

'In order to burn a body including the bones, there are two methods. The first is burning the body at above six thousand degrees, as mentioned before.'

Hata raised a finger.

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1 In the novel, they use the kanji for shirou (屍蠟) here wherein shi means corpse and rou means wax.

'And the other?'

'Burning the body at a low temperature for a long time. Well, it would be about ten hours.'

Ten hours –

'If there was a fire for that long there, it would've definitely spread to the school.'

Hata let out a creepy giggle at Gotou's objection.

'You know about candles, right?'

'Of course I do.'

'Wax wraps around the string that makes the wick. When you light the wick, the wax melts as the wick slowly burns.'

Even Gotou understood that. But –

'People aren't candles.'

'Gotou-san, you should study a bit more,' interrupted Yakumo as he raked his fingers through his hair.

'What did you say?'

'Just that your knowledge is inadequate, Gotou-san. The human body is built incredibly similar to a candle.'

'What do you mean?'

'You can think of the fat underneath the skin of the human body as wax and the clothes a person wears as the wick,' said Yakumo, as if it were obvious.

So the wick was on the outside? It was the opposite of a normal candle. When the clothes caught fire, that heat would burn human body fat and it would burn out like a candle.

'But would it be that easy?'

'If thinking about it normally, it probably wouldn't go that well, no matter how similar the two are. Though it was different in the past, the clothes that are supposed to make up the wick are now made of materials that are difficult to burn,' said Hata as he scratched his chin.

'Then it won't work, right?'

'Now we return to the topic of adipocere.'

Yakumo put his index finger to his brow.

'Adipocere...'

'The fat in that corpse had probably saponified into adipocere.'

Ah!'

Gotou unconsciously raised his voice at Yakumo's explanation.

I see. The fat in the body decomposed by becoming adipocere, seeped into the clothes and made them easy to burn.

But –

'Why didn't the fire spread?'

Even if the fire started from the adipocere, there should have been other things to burn.

'It was a low-temperature fire,' replied Hata matter-of-factly. There he went again, using a term Gotou didn't understand –

'Explain.'

'You know that fire needs oxygen to burn, right?'

Hata was treating him too much like an idiot. Even an elementary school student would know that.

'Of course.'

'When there is a low concentration of oxygen, the force of the fire weakens and won't spread to its surroundings.'

Hata looked up at Gotou's expression.

Gotou replied with a nod.

'However, that doesn't mean that the fire is extinguished. Even if there is no flame, it continues to burn slowly. That's a low-temperature fire.'

Gotou recalled the pump room as he listened to the explanation.

A room surrounded by concrete underneath the pool. The humidity and temperature for the fat in a human body to saponify into adipocere. On top of that, the concentration of oxygen needed for a low-temperature fire.

Those elements brought about that burnt corpse.

Wait. That would mean –

'Doesn't that mean Tobe was already dead before he was burnt?'

'That's right.'

Gotou was surprised, but Hata spoke like it was obvious.

'So what was the cause of death?'

'I don't know. The corpse is in that state, after all,' said Hata readily. Well, it probably was difficult to decide the cause of death from that state.

'Then what caused the fire?'

'Have you forgotten? I'm employed as a coroner – not an investigator. That's your job, right?'

It was just as Hata said. Gotou was lost for words.

'Well, if there's nothing there to start the fire, somebody probably lit it,' said Yakumo with a sigh.

Gotou looked at Yakumo with a snarl, but Yakumo just yawned, not nervous at all.

This guy. Doesn't he understand the importance of what he said –

'If what you say is true, this is a murder.'

'Gotou-san, are you really a detective?'

Yakumo gave Gotou his usual mocking sidelong glance.

'Yeah, unfortunately.'

After Gotou spat that out, Yakumo shook his head, like he didn't know what to do with Gotou.

'I said that somebody might have lit the fire. I said this earlier as well, but that corpse was dead before it burned. Lighting it on fire would only be the mutilation of corpse. Until we know the cause for death, we cannot determine that it was a murder.'

Ah, that was right.

There was nothing wrong with what Yakumo was saying, but that sort of irritated Gotou.

Gotou couldn't think of anything to reply so he just clicked his tongue.

'By the way, Hata-san. I actually have something I would like to request of you.'

Yakumo changed the topic, ignoring Gotou, who was sulking.

'If it's a request from you, Yakumo-kun, there's no way I could refuse.'

Hata let out a demonic laugh.

Yakumo took a white capsule from his pocket and handed it to Hata.

Hata looked at it under a fluorescent lamp.

'This is?'

'This is something that was pilfered from a certain person. I want to ask you to analyse its composition, but...'

Pilfered? Wasn't that a crime?

How did he have the nerve to be so shameless in front of the police?

'Normally, that would be out of my expertise, but I'll ask an acquaintance.'

Hata put the capsule in an envelope on the desk.

'So what are we going to do now?'

Yakumo and Hata both looked scornfully at Gotou, who was crossing his arms.

'What? Did I say something strange?'

'Yes, you did. Isn't it the detective's job to decide what to do next?'

Yakumo pointed at Gotou's nose.

This guy. Making fun of him. Even though he'd instructed him to do this and that so many times before. He just ran away when the situation was bad.

'Er... Detective Gotou. Could I suggest asking for Sasaki-sensei's opinion?'

Ishii interrupted while raising his hand like an elementary school student.

It appeared Ishii was enthusiastic about profiling, but Gotou was different. He just couldn't bring himself to like that woman.

'Well, it doesn't matter to me what method of investigation you choose, but please make sure to properly investigate what I asked of you,' said Yakumo, like it was none of his business. He rubbed at his eyes while he yawned.

'Then you help with the investigation too!'

'I would rather not.'

An immediately answer.

It felt like he was lost at sea. However, this always happened.

'Why not? It's not like you have anything to do,' said Gotou, still holding on.

'I am visiting a grave today.'

After declaring that, Yakumo left the room.

Honestly. What a transparent lie.

A man who can see ghosts visiting a grave? That's hysterical –

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5

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Komai's vigil was held at a funeral hall near the elementary school.

A number of teachers from the school attended, starting with Haruka. None of the children came. That was the decision of the Board of Education.

It appeared the suspicion that it was a suicide had had a great influence.

After passing the reception, Haruka sat on a chair in the lobby and thought about what had happened.

'Oh, I was wondering who it was – is that you, Haruka-chan?'

An enrobed monk waved as he approached.

Why would a monk know my name –

She thought it dubious, but that was only for a moment. When she saw the monk's face, she immediately understood.

A calm face that made one think of the Maitreya. On top of that, the red contact lens in his left eye.

It was Saitou Isshin, the chief priest at a Buddhist temple and Yakumo's uncle and honorary parent.

'It's been a while.'

Haruka took a formal bow.

'Was the person who passed away somebody you knew?'

Isshin had probably noticed from Haruka's expression, because he asked that with a stiff expression.

'Yes. I'm training at an elementary school, and she took care of me.'

'I see. I'm sorry for your loss...'

Isshin put his hands together and bowed his head.

'But seeing you made me feel a bit better, Isshin-san.'

'It flatters me to hear you say that.'

Isshin's narrow eyes became even narrower when he smiled.

It wasn't flattery – it was how she truly felt. Seeing Isshin's gentle face made her feel just a bit more at ease.

She hurriedly held back the tears that had welled up the moment she relaxed.

In order to change her mood, she purposefully let out a sigh, when she noticed somebody looking at her and raised her head.

Over by the crowd of people at the reception, there was a boy staring their way.

That's –

'Masato-kun.'

Haruka started walking towards Masato.

Why was Masato here –

It might have just been a wrong impression, but Haruka felt like he was trying to express something.

Just as they were almost close enough to touch, Masato noticed Haruka, took in a breath and backed up.

'Wait, Masato-kun.'

Masato turned around and ran off.

Should I chase him –

Isshin stood next to Haruka as she was lost for a decision.

'Is that child someone you know?'

'Yes. He's one of the children from my class...'

'That child...'

Isshin smiled awkwardly after he started speaking.

'What is it?'

'I thought that he looked similar.'

'Looked similar?'

'Yes. He looks similar to Yakumo when he was young.'

Isshin's gaze was far away. He was probably thinking about the past.

He was Yakumo's uncle and also the person who'd raised him, so Haruka felt like her thoughts weren't altogether wrong.

That child was shouldering something heavy, just as Yakumo was.

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6

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At Ishii's suggestion, Gotou visited Sasaki Mental Health again.

He sat on the same sofa as last time and looked at Anna.

The truth was he didn't really want to, but if Yakumo wouldn't do anything, it was true that Gotou had nobody else to rely on since thinking was his weak point.

'I want to hear what you think today.'

He'd come here already, so he'd get nowhere by griping. Gotou brought up the topic at hand.

'If I can be of any help.'

Anna smiled amiably.

Ishii had met up with Anna once without Gotou, but he couldn't tell how much information she knew.

It would be a pain to check, so Gotou decided to explain from the beginning.

At the elementary school that had a fire twenty-eight years ago, Tobe Kengo had been found as a burnt corpse and the cause of death was unknown.

However, they thought that somebody had started the fire after he died –

Also, Ushijima's mother seemed to think that her son was killed by Tobe, but she'd said that it was a good thing he died.

Anna listened silently, but when he said that the burnt corpse was Tobe, tears welled up in her eyes.

It had been in the news too, so it probably wasn't the first time she'd heard it.

It appeared that she felt guilty that he died since she had been the one to let him escape.

'In short, what I want to ask is who set Tobe's corpse on fire, in this situation.'

Gotou ended his explanation with a question.

'Would you mind if I smoke?'

After Anna excused herself, she snapped a cigarette filter with her fingernails and lit it.

She was probably trying to calm down. Her fingers were shaking slightly.

Gotou took his cigarette case out of his pocket so he could smoke too, but it was empty.

Damn. After Gotou crushed his cigarette case, Anna offered her own cigarettes.

'Sorry about this.'

Gotou took a cigarette from her case. Just as he put it in his mouth, she flicked open a lighter in front of his eyes.

A thin silver Zippo lighter.

Gotou stuck his face out so that his cigarette could be lit. He felt sort of like he was in a cabaret club.

'I can't say anything at this stage. However, I believe that the person who lit the fire had a violent hatred towards Tobe-san and has some sort of attachment to fire,' said Anna, slowly blowing out smoke.

That made sense. Putting together what Yakumo and Hata said, the person had lit somebody who was already dead on fire.

Plus, they'd waited for adipocere to form. It wasn't normal –

'I have a guess as to who the culprit could be...,' said Anna with upturned eyes after putting out her cigarette in the ashtray.

'W-what? Really?'

Gotou tried to keep his calm, but he raised his voice despite that.

'Yes. Though this is only a theory...'

'I don't care – just tell me.'

'It isn't a very difficult rationalisation. You should come to the same conclusion if you analyse the situation, Detective.'

Anna smiled mischievously.

She really looked a lot younger than she was. Gotou felt that all over again.

'Of course! That's how it is!'

Ishii hadn't said anything up until now, but he let out a shout and stood up.

'Sit down, fool.'

Gotou pulled Ishii's arm and forced him down. Ishii looked so displeased it was almost impertinent.

'Explain.'

Menthol cigarettes were really awful.

Gotou crushed the cigarette which still had more than half left in the ashtray and urged Anna to continue.

'Isn't there only one person? Somebody who holds a hatred for Tobe-san and has an attachment to fire...'

Anna avoided saying the name directly and gave another hint.

That hint was more than enough –

In Gotou's mind, there was the face of one woman.

A woman with flashy clothes and flashy makeup. She believed that her son was killed in the fire twenty-eight years ago.

So she got revenge by burning Tobe then –

'Ushijima Harue...'

When Anna heard the name Gotou said, her face stiffened and she drew in her chin. Though she didn't say it clearly, that response was sufficient.

Ushijima Harue –

Seemed they'd need to meet up again.

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7

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'Yakumo is coming home today too, so you should come by since you haven't in a while. Nao will

be happy too.'

Invited by Isshin, Haruka walked to the temple at the top of the slope.

Maybe Yakumo would be angry that she had come of her own accord again, but so many things had happened and she didn't want to be in her room alone. She also wanted to consult Yakumo about something.

After going to the living room in the priests' quarters, Haruka kneeled on the cushion and thought over what had happened.

When Isshin came back with tea and sat down opposite Haruka.

He wasn't wearing his robes anymore – he'd changed into his working clothes. The impression Haruka got from him changed a lot depending on what he wore.

'I should have bought some sweets.'

After Isshin sipped his tea, he scratched his ear, seeming a bit embarrassed.

'No, I'm the one who's come at such a late hour...'

'Don't worry about it. I'm the one who invited you. Yakumo should be back soon, so don't be so stiff and relax.'

Isshin smiled. This person's smile had the mysterious power to easily calm someone's nerves.

He was completely different from Yakumo, who was cynical towards everyone.

Haruka relaxed and breathed out. Her stiff shoulders relaxed as well.

'It's unusual for Yakumo-kun to return.'

Yakumo almost never returned home, since he lived in the little prefabricated room at the university.

For Yakumo, who could see the spirits of the dead, this place with its graves was too noisy for him.

Yakumo had said this himself before.

'I'm only saying this because it's you, Haruka-chan, but today's is actually the anniversary of somebody's death.'

Haruka couldn't believe what Isshin had said.

She couldn't imagine Yakumo going to visit somebody's grave, when she compared it to how his usual speech and conduct.

Who on earth did Yakumo think so much of?

'Um, whose death anniversary is it?'

She couldn't stop her impulse of wanting to know, so she ended up saying that aloud.

'That's right. It'd be better to talk to you about it. That Yakumo will never talk about it himself

anyway.'

Isshin's eyes narrowed as he thought about something.

Haruka felt like it was a warm and gentle memory.

'This was back when Yakumo was still a middle school student...'

Just as Isshin said that, the sliding door to the living room opened.

'Uncle, don't talk about unnecessary things without permission.'

Yakumo stood there with a displeased expression on his face.

'A little bit's fine, right?'

'No.'

Yakumo crossed his arms and shook his head at Isshin's needling.

It appeared that he didn't want her to know no matter what, but it was human nature to become more curious when things were hidden.

'You're so petty-minded.'

'That isn't the problem.'

Yakumo was being unusually stubborn.

'I'll let you know in secret from Yakumo next time,' whispered Isshin, so that Yakumo wouldn't hear.

'Why are you here anyway? I don't remember inviting you.'

Ah, an expected development –

In the past, she would have been seriously depressed, but she wasn't even surprised by it now.

'I invited her.'

'Why do you always do things like this without asking?'

Unlike Isshin, who had spoken nonchalantly, Yakumo was irritated as he objected while raking his fingers through his hair.

'This is my house. I can invite somebody if I want, right?'

You could tell Isshin had raised Yakumo. He wouldn't lose to Yakumo in an argument.

Haruka laughed without thinking at the amusing scene. Yakumo glared at her without a moment's delay.

Ooh, scary –

'Honestly...'

Now that he had been talked down, Yakumo bit his lower lip.

While they had been talking, somebody's face peered out from behind Yakumo's back.

'Nao-chan!'

It was Nao, Yakumo's niece.

Nao appeared to have noticed Haruka too, because a bright smile appeared on her face as she leapt towards her.

Rushed at by a seven-year-old girl, Haruka lost her balance and fell backwards.

Nao didn't seem to care as she moved her hands and feet about on top of Haruka's body. When Haruka saw that adorable smile, she felt happier too.

This child, who seemed so innocent at first glance, was burdened with heavy shackles.

Nao was deaf.

Yakumo said this before. People compensate for the abilities they're lacking with other abilities –

While patting Nao's head, Haruka said Good evening in her head.

– Good evening.

Nao's voice reached Haruka's mind.

Even if she couldn't hear with her ears, Nao could exchange words through her mind.

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8

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Tired from playing, Nao was asleep, using Haruka's lap as a pillow.

Nao had a smile on her face even while she slept.

'Oh, Nao's gone and fallen asleep.'

Isshin stood up to shake Nao awake.

'It's fine. Please let her sleep here,' replied Haruka, brushing Nao's glossy hair. Nao turned her head as if it tickled.

'Haruka-chan, sorry about this.'

'Please don't worry about it.'

'She's such a troublesome child. She's so pampered...'

It looked like there were tears in Isshin's eyes.

I wonder where her mother is –

That doubt suddenly came to Haruka. Now that she thought about it, she'd never seen Nao's mother.

Perhaps this child's mother is already –

'So what happened this time?' said Yakumo, interrupting Haruka's thoughts.

He'd seen right through her then. It appeared that she couldn't hide the emotions on her face.

'Komai-sensei passed away.'

She spoke in a quiet voice that was difficult even for her to hear.

She felt as if each time she said it, that truth became heavier.

'Would that teacher be the person we met on the roof before?'

When Haruka nodded, Yakumo's eyes narrowed as if he were staring at something bright.

It appeared that Yakumo was thinking about what Masato said too, even without her mentioning it.

– You'll die next.

'I don't know what I should do...'

Haruka knew herself that her voice was shaking.

She had planned on being psychologically stronger. Komai's death had been a shock, and she was very sad. But she'd thought that she would be able to withstand it.

But now that I'm in front of Yakumo, why –

Tears welled up in her eyes and fell onto Nao's cheek.

Haruka hurriedly wiped the tears away with both hands. Were they tears of sadness? Fear? Anxiety? Her shoulders shook with emotions she couldn't define herself.

'I'll let Nao sleep on the futon.'

Isshin picked Nao up from Haruka's lap.

'Sorry...'

'Don't worry about it.'

Isshin replied with a smile and took Nao, still asleep, out of the room.

Haruka frantically wiped away the tears that were welling up against her will and looked at Yakumo with her cloudy vision.

'I understand that you want to cry, but there's no time for that,' said Yakumo expressionlessly.

There was no sympathy at all for Haruka's feelings there. His tone was blunt.

'Time?'

Haruka snivelled.

'It's certain that that boy had some role in this chain of events. Our goal is to lift the curse on him.'

In that meaning, we don't understand anything yet.'

Yakumo scratched the tip of his nose awkwardly.

She knew what he wanted to say next even without him saying it. Before she lifted the curse on Masato, it wasn't the time or place to cry.

Strict but kind words –

In her heart, Haruka said, 'Thank you.' If she said it aloud, she felt like she would start crying again.

'Now, let's continue.'

Yakumo raked his fingers through his hair.

'All right.'

'First – why did that teacher die?'

'A suicide, apparently... it seems she jumped from her flat's veranda.'

She hadn't seen it herself, but in her head, she could see Komai, collapsed on the ground with blood flowing from her head.

'There must have been a reason to determine it was a suicide at this stage.'

That was Yakumo for you – he was accustomed to cases.

'There was a note in the room that read "I'm tired". Also, this is just a rumour, but I've heard that she was having an affair... but to me, Komai-sensei didn't seem like she was so troubled she would try to kill herself.'

'Nobody can know for certain the reason somebody commits suicide except for that person. At this stage, it could be a completely unrelated, for all that we know.'

Yakumo might have been right.

Everyone had different perspectives. Even if some people might find something laughable, for the person, it could have been troubling enough to commit suicide.

'Yakumo-kun, what do you think?'

'I understand a number of the tricks, but I haven't grasped the flow of everything...' muttered Yakumo, and he ran both hands through his hair.

'I see...'

'Twenty-eight years ago, there was a fire at the elementary school. I feel like that's the key, but...'

Yakumo looked bitter as he pinched his brow with his fingers.

'If it's about the fire twenty-eight years ago, I know a lot about it.'

The person who interrupted was Isshin.

It seemed that he'd put Nao to sleep and had returned at some time to the living room entrance.

Yakumo opened his almond eyes and looked up at Isshin.

Isshin didn't continue, instead sitting cross-legged with a nonchalant expression.

'Uncle!' said Yakumo in his irritation.

'You shouldn't be so hasty.'

'I'll listen to your scolding later.'

'You'd understand if you thought about it normally though. I graduated from that elementary school where the fire occurred. I was also in the same grade as Ushijima Atsushi-kun, the boy who died then.'

'Eh, is that so?'

Haruka's eyes were wide in surprise.

Isn't he the wrong age – is what Haruka thought, but now that she thought about it, she had never asked for Isshin's age.

She had just thought that he was much older because of his calm demeanour.

Which means Isshin is in his late thirties –

Haruka was stuck on that odd point.

'Why didn't you say that earlier?'

'You never asked me about it.'

Unlike Yakumo, who made a strong objection, Isshin wasn't concerned at all.

'Then did you know Tobe Kengo too?'

Yakumo threw that question out after swearing.

The murderer who killed his own father, Tobe Kengo –

When Isshin heard that name, his face became just a bit stiff as he nodded.

'Kengo-kun was a really good friend. I can't believe he'd turn out like that... Before that fire, he'd been such a gentle boy...'

As he reminisced, Isshin suddenly clapped his hands together like he'd remembered something, stood up and left the room.

'Honestly. Can't see the forest for the trees,' murmured Yakumo bitterly as he watched Isshin leave.

'Ah, sorry for the wait.'

Isshin brought an old album back with him, placed it on the table and flipped through the pages.

Haruka and Yakumo leant forward to peer at that album.

'Ah, about here.'

Isshin stopped flipping the pages.

It appeared to be a picture of a field trip. In the photo, there were children in gym uniforms wearing rucksacks.

'This is Kengo-kun.'

Isshin pointed at a photo.

There were two boys standing shoulder to shoulder. One was probably Isshin. His gentle expression hadn't changed even after twenty-eight years.

Tobe Kengo beside him had a gentle expression that wouldn't lose to Isshin's.

For this child to kill his own father –

Time really was a terrifying thing.

The faces of the children in her own class came up in Haruka's mind.

She didn't want them to turn out like that. Tobe Kengo's homeroom teacher must have felt the same way.

'Who's this?'

Yakumo pointed at another photo.

There were two other boys in that photo.

'This is Ushijima Atsushi-kun,' said Isshin as he pointed at the photo.

Ushijima Atsushi's face looked very similar to Tobe Kengo's, but his mood was the complete opposite. The shadow and light of the same thing. That was how it felt.

'His mother treated him awfully,' said Yakumo, his hands in tight fists.

'How can you tell?'

'Look at his arms and legs. Those are awful bruises.'

Just as Yakumo said, there were dark bruises on his arms and thighs. There was also a round burn on the back of his hand. That had probably been from a cigarette.

That's awful –

'But how do you know it was his mother?'

Haruka asked another question.

They could confirm that there were bruises, but it was difficult to say it was the work of the mother just from a photograph.

It could've been the father, and it could also have been bullying from the other kids.

'He doesn't have a father. Also, when Gotou-san met with his mother, it seemed she was incredibly prejudiced against her son. Though I hadn't thought she would go so far...'

Yakumo's expression was twisted to the point Haruka thought he might have felt unwell.

'I don't know the details either, but it's as Yakumo says.'

Isshin was the one who spoke.

'These injuries are already not that bad. When he took off his shirt to change into his gym uniform, sometimes his whole body would be covered in welts.'

'That's...'

Haruka's chest felt tight.

'Even if we asked why, he wouldn't say anything. He probably just took it silently. A kid that age would have nowhere to go but home...'

Isshin looked pained.

'Who's next to Ushijima-kun?'

Yakumo pointed at the other boy to clear the suffocating atmosphere.

'He's Oomori Hironori.'

Isshin answered after checking the photo. The boy looked a bit like Masato –

'So that kid's dad was also in the same grade... Seems possible.'

Yakumo had a sharp look in his eyes.

What Yakumo said just now – so he really was Masato's father? The moment she looked at the album again to check the photo, Haruka saw someone else whose face was similar.

'The person in this photo...'

Haruka pointed at the teacher standing in the middle of the group photo.

'That's the homeroom teacher Konno-sensei.'

Haruka swallowed her breath when she heard Isshin's answer. Was this just a coincidence –

'What is it?'

When Yakumo looked at the album, he immediately noticed Konno and furrowed his brows.

'This guy is the vice principal...'

Haruka nodded.

'Konno-sensei became the vice principal?'

'He's a pretty arrogant guy. How was he when he was your homeroom teacher?'

'Konno-sensei was always like that. He scolded me a number of times too. Plus, there were some girls who said Konno-sensei molested them...' said Isshin to nobody in particular as he scratched his chin.

'Tobe Kengo, Ushijima Atsushi, Oomori Hironori and the vice principal. For the people related to the case to all be present...'

Yakumo put his index finger to his brow.

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9

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Ishii was running –

He was frantically running after Gotou, but he couldn't catch up no matter how much he ran.

His back was drenched in sweat. It hurt to breathe. His legs were trembling.

'Ishii-san, you are you.'

He heard Anna's voice in his ears.

A doubt had sprouted within Ishii because of those words.

Why was he chasing after Gotou?

No matter how much he ran, he couldn't catch him. The reason for that was simple – he wasn't Gotou.

The person called Ishii Yuutarou could never become Gotou Kazutoshi.

The moment he had that doubt, he lost his footing and fell forwards.

Gotou's back was getting farther and farther away –

But Ishii didn't have the willpower to stand up and chase Gotou.

– I am Ishii Yuutarou.

He slowly stood up, turned around and started walking down the road he had taken.

His gait was light.

Suddenly, a dark shadow appeared in Ishii's path, blocking his way.

Gotou stood imposingly, occupying Ishii's route.

'D-Detective Gotou...'

Ishii stepped back.

'Why didn't you follow me...'

Gotou's voice shook the air and reverberated to the bottom of Ishii's stomach.

'No, I, er...'

He couldn't think of an excuse – he was just confused.

'Because of you...'

When he said that, the stomach area of Gotou's white shirt was dyed red before his eyes.

That's blood –

'D-Detective Gotou.'

'Because of you, I...'

Before he finished his words, Gotou collapsed, face-up.

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'D-Detective Gotouuu!' shouted Ishii as he jumped up.

'You're so noisy in the morning!'

Gotou's fist fell upon Ishii's head.

Ishii's wavering consciousness was brought back to reality. When he looked around, he saw that he was in the usual Unsolved Cases Special Investigations Room.

A dream –

It appeared that he'd worked until morning and fallen asleep at his desk. This was the second time he'd seen this dream. He had a bad feeling about it.

'I'm heading out.'

Gotou grabbed his jacket and headed for the door.

'W-where to?'

'Yakumo's.'

'Ah, but the questioning...'

'Do it yourself,' said Gotou one-sidedly, and then he briskly left the room.

Ishii just watched his back leave silently –

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10

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In the morning, classes were to be held as normal.

Though Komai's funeral service was in the afternoon, only Haruka and the year-head teacher were to attend.

The guardians were notified through letters that another teacher would come next week.

Until then, other teachers would take Class 5-4 in turns, and Haruka's training would continue as

well.

Haruka felt uncomfortable with how people were acting as if nothing had happened when she attended the morning meeting.

'Is this really OK?'

Haruka asked that question to Yokouchi, who stood beside her.

'Unfortunately, this is the normal response,' replied Yokouchi with a shrug.

At the board meeting, it appeared that the question was not the teacher's motivations or sadness but whether there was any danger to the children.

Haruka felt that was the right way of looking at it.

However, she just couldn't accept how the homeroom teacher's death had just been vaguely cleared away.

'Please engage in class without relaxing your attention.'

With that remark from Konno, the morning meeting came to an end.

What an odd expression. Would anybody relax their attention after somebody they knew died –

As if he had heard what Haruka was saying in her heart, Konno turned his gaze towards her.

It wasn't like she had anything to be guilty of, but she felt a chill down her spine.

'Trainee teacher.'

'Yes.'

Haruka stood up straight and accepted Konno's cold gaze.

'This is an important time. Don't cause any more problems.'

It felt like he was saying everything was her fault.

She wanted to object, but this person wasn't the type to listen to other people. If she gave her opinion, she would just get into a fight.

'Yes sir.'

She gave Konno a fierce look, the most defiance she could muster.

Konno made a loud click with his tongue and walked past Haruka.

'Ozawa-san, let's go.'

Yokouchi spoke up to her.

'Eh?'

'Honestly, please get it together. I'm in charge of class for first period.'

'Ah, sorry.'

Haruka hurriedly left the staff room with Yokouchi.

While walking down the corridor, she recalled the conversation she had had with Yakumo last night.

They had found out many new facts, but that didn't mean they could see the truth.

It felt like they were walking in circles in a forest blanketed with fog.

A vague anxiety spread through her heart like ripples –

After entering the classroom, Haruka stood at the teacher's desk and took in a deep breath.

'Good morning.'

She consciously acted cheerfully. However, the children didn't have much of a reaction. Just a few of them responded in quiet voices.

She looked at the third seat from the back by the window.

Masato had his head on the desk. His shoulders were shaking, as if he were cold.

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11

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'Sorry to bother!'

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

'How many times do I...'

'Shut up. I'm tired of hearing it.'

Gotou interrupted Yakumo's words.

Damn, he knows already, but he keeps on saying the same thing –

'So what did you come here for?' said Yakumo with a yawn.

This brat –

'You're the one who called me here!'

Yakumo put his fingers in his ears pointedly as he looked at Gotou, who was yelling to the point veins were popping out.

For somebody who'd asked Gotou to come because it was an emergency, Yakumo was incredibly calm.

'What a poor mind you must have if you can't understand jokes. I pity you.'

Ah, he just said whatever the hell he wanted to. It had been a joke? It was just harassment.

Gotou sat on the chair and crossed his legs.

'Just say what you want.'

'By the way, is Ishii-san not with you?'

Yakumo combed his fringe.

'Hey. I headed off by myself because you called me out so suddenly. We've got a lot of things to do too.'

Yakumo replied to Gotou's grumbling with a yawn.

Honestly. Gotou wished Yakumo would take things a bit more seriously.

'Other investigation? What are you doing?' asked Yakumo, sounding incredibly disinterested.

Gotou wanted to tell him not to ask if he didn't care, but he restrained himself.

'Ushijima Harue.'

'What do you plan to ask her?'

The corners of Yakumo's lips twisted, like he had eaten something unpleasant.

'Harue thinks her son was killed by Tobe in the fire twenty-eight years ago.'

'Do you suspect her?'

'Yeah. No physical evidence for it. Anyway, I plan on talking to the workers at the care home she's at.'

Yakumo raised an eyebrow while listening to Gotou's explanation.

'Is that your opinion or that of the rumoured psychiatrist?'

He really was sharp.

'The opinion of the psychiatrist lady.'

'I see... More importantly, how is the matter I asked you to do?'

Yakumo continued talking, though he looked discontent.

This morning, Yakumo requested that he look into people related to the Tobe family and call for them.

'I got some info so I went all the way there to look into it.'

'Thank you for your hard work.'

Everything this guy said was irritating.

'I contacted the woman who used to be the Tobe family housekeeper.'

Since somebody in the investigation department had gone to talk to her before for the chain of incidents, Gotou was able to confirm the address right away.

'Well done.'

'An investigation team member already talked to her though.'

'That's fine. I'm the one who wants to talk to her.'

'You plan on meeting her?'

'That is the plan.'

Yakumo stood up with a yawn.

Since Gotou had figured out that was what Yakumo meant when he said to call for them, he wasn't surprised.

But I don't understand –

'Is that housekeeper related to the case somehow?'

Yakumo didn't reply – the corners of his lips just turned up in a smirk.

That response – could it be?

'D-did you already figure out the puzzle behind the case?'

Gotou approached Yakumo with ragged breathing.

'I'm going to say this first, but my objective isn't solving the case.'

'Eh?'

'It's to lift the curse on a boy called Masato.'

Oi, oi – was that a joke?

Gotou had been cooperating since he thought that Yakumo would help solve the puzzle behind the case, but this was a waste of his efforts.

'You better stop underestimating the police. I don't care about some curse on some kid,' said Gotou, clearly angry.

'In order to lift the curse, I need to solve the puzzle behind the case.'

What a slow way of saying things.

I'm tired of being waved around –

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12

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After Ishii arrived at the care home, he went to the drawing room by the reception.

'I met you before too, didn't I? My name is Yonemitsu.'

The care worker that had showed him to Harue last time he came was sitting on the opposite sofa.

Perhaps it was the uniform, but he seemed gentle and friendly.

'My name is Ishii. I'm from the Setamachi precinct. Thank you for meeting with me today.'

Ishii returned the greeting and introduced himself again.

'This is about Ushijima Harue, yes?'

Ishii had been wondering how to explain, but Yonemitsu brought the topic up himself, which helped Ishii out.

'Yes. Has there been anything odd about her lately?'

Even while he said it, he thought the question was vague.

You needed to be good at talking to get information from the other party for an investigation. However, Ishii had no sense for conversation.

He couldn't read the other party. He didn't know when to pause. He didn't know when to withdraw either, which was fatal.

'Rather than recently, er, she's been strange ever since she came here.'

That was somebody who usually talked to the elderly for you.

Yonemitsu took Ishii's awkward words and gave a firm reply.

'Could you tell specific examples?'

'She often leaves without permission.'

Yonemitsu covered his head with his hands, like he really felt troubled.

'Leaves?'

'Yes. She wasn't there when I went to her room this morning.'

'Does she leave by herself?'

'Yes. The police have called in the night before. That was why I was nervous when you came last time – I thought maybe she had done something again.'

The hidden meaning behind Yonemitsu's words was that Harue could leave at any time.

That made Anna's theory more plausible.

'How frequently does this occur on average?'

'Hm... ' Yonemitsu's gaze wandered as he thought.

'She disappears about three times a week.'

Three times a week – that was fairly frequent.

'Is there anything else?'

'Of course. Ah, we're really troubled. If she had a family, I'd have a complaint or two.'

Yonemitsu looked truly troubled as he scratched the back of his neck.

'Would you let me hear about it?'

Ishii leant forward.

'Actually, er, we haven't told the police about this before but well... fire.'

'Fire, is it?'

'Yes, fire. I don't know where she got it, but she lights the sheets and desk with a lighter.'

'Arson...'

'Our facility is non-smoking, so we have heat-sensitive fire alarms. It wasn't anything major, but we really are troubled...'

Ishii was agitated and listened to Yonemitsu with open eyes.

This was an amazing find. There was almost no doubt about it now.

Ushijima Harue was the one who lit Tobe's corpse. She had always been waiting for a chance for revenge for her son.

When Tobe was pursued by the police, her chance came –

He had circumstantial evidence. All he needed now was physical evidence. Even if he couldn't find any, with Anna's cooperation, it would be possible to build a case.

This had become something amazing.

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13

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The old woman keeps going on and on –

That was Gotou's first impression of Noda Fumiko, the previous housekeeper for the Tobe family.

Even though she was almost seventy already, she kept on talking about pointless things.

It had already been thirty minutes since he'd gone into the house of Fumiko, who lived alone after her husband died five years ago.

He had no interest in the story of her eloping with her husband, but she gave him no chance to bring up his topic.

Even Yakumo had a bitter smile on his face.

'You think so too, yes?'

Fumiko pressed Gotou for agreement.

Even if she asked that, he didn't know how to respond since he hadn't been listening.

'Ah, well, that's right.'

He gave a vague response.

However, that seemed to rub Fumiko the wrong way, since she turned away with a displeased expression.

'Ma'am, this person is a blockhead whose only worth is his savageness, so talking to him is a waste of time.'

Yakumo smiled faintly as he mocked Gotou.

Who was a blockhead? He was talking pretty big for a monster cat whose only worth was his cynicism.

'He's obviously a blockhead. He's in the way just by being here. Just like my husband was.'

Oi, old woman. If you say any more, I'll turn you into a dust cloth!

Gotou yelled in his heart. After Yakumo glanced at Gotou, who was restraining his anger, he finally brought up the topic at hand.

'By the way, ma'am. I heard that the Tobe husband and wife had a wonderful romance and marriage, just like you.'

'Who said something like that? He was a money-monger. The young miss was unlucky to be caught by a man like that.'

Fumiko slapped her thighs, like she was going to start a comic story.

'Is that so?'

Yakumo looked purposefully surprised.

It really made Gotou admire him. Normally, Yakumo was blunt and didn't mince matters, but when necessary, he could act as he needed to for the other party.

'That man tricked the young miss and wormed his way into to the Tobe family to do whatever he wanted. He became an executive in the company, but he just lazed about all year round.'

'What an awful man.'

Yakumo's cheek twitched in plain displeasure.

It was probably an act to get info from the other party.

'On top of that, he was unrivalled in his womanising ways. He even asked for me a number of times.'

'If it were you, Fumiko-san, I'd do the same.'

Oi, oi. Was that really OK, Yakumo? Haruka-chan would cry from shock if she heard that.

'It doesn't matter anymore. Fortunately, I'm an unmarried woman now.'

'I see,' said Yakumo with a smile, humouring her, and then he put the conversation back on track.

'But why didn't the young miss divorce him?'

'The young miss had a big heart. And sometimes the worse the man is, the better they look. My husband was the same. He drank and gambled...'

'The master must have disliked it.'

The conversation was going off-topic again, but Yakumo forced it back.

'Of course. The master knew very well what sort of man that man was, after all. He tried to persuade the young miss many a time.'

'Is that so...'

'He didn't want the inheritance to go to that man. That's why he transferred the right of inheritance in his will to his grandson, Kengo-kun, and had a trustee take care of it until he was of age.'

'He didn't want to hand over the inheritance no matter what,' muttered Gotou.

'That's right. It was so thorough that if Kengo-kun died before he was of age, all of it would be donated to charity.'

If, like this old woman said, Tobe Kengo's father, Tobe Masashi, had married for the inheritance, that will would have derailed his plans.

'Why the grandson rather than the daughter?'

Yakumo voiced his doubts.

That was odd. If he didn't want to give the inheritance to his son-in-law, he could have just made his daughter the inheritor.

'The young miss had fallen ill from terrible diabetes a little while after giving birth to Kengo-kun. To say the truth, she could have died at any time.'

'Diabetes...'

'On top of that, since she had such a big heart, he might have been able to cajole her into giving it over.'

'I see.'

Yakumo scratched his chin and then nodded like he understood.

It appeared that the Tobe family had been a very complex household, but did that have anything to do with the case?

In contrast to Gotou's doubt, Yakumo put his left index finger to his brow and smiled in satisfaction

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Gotou left Fumiko's home. The moment he got into the car, his mobile phone rang.

'Who is it!?'

<E-er, this is the detective Ishii.>

He heard Ishii's hesitant voice from his mobile.

What an idiot, as usual. Of course –

'I know that!'

<Ah, yes. Please excuse me.>

Gotou didn't care about the chitchat – he just wanted him to get to the point already. Honestly. He'd smack Ishii if he were in front of him.

'So what is it?'

Gotou took his cigarette case from his pocket and took a cigarette out with his mouth, but Yakumo from the passenger seat immediately reached out.

What? One was OK, wasn't it?

<Er, actually according to the care worker, Harue-san frequently leaves the care home without permission. Also, she has set fire to the sheets and desk before.>

'What did you say!?'

If what Ishii said were true, Anna's theory would be spot on.

<Er... Detective Gotou, have you found any new information?>

Ishii asked his question as hesitant as always.

'No luck here.'

Gotou glanced at Yakumo in the passenger seat. He let out a big yawn, like he didn't know what Gotou was thinking.

What came next was up to Yakumo.

<E-er... I was thinking of going to Sasaki Mental Health to ask for the doctor's opinion...'

Just this time, that sounded more credible than Yakumo.

'Got it. Go ahead.'

Gotou hung up.

'Gotou-san, is that psychiatrist somebody that is usually requested?'

Yakumo looked sour, like there was something he didn't agree with.

'Who knows? I'm not sure.'

Normally, if they thought the suspect wasn't of sound mind, there would be a simple evaluation. If it couldn't be determined from that, the prosecutor would call in an expert.

Gotou had no way of knowing what criteria they used to select their experts.

'Gotou-san, could you confirm whether that psychiatrist is somebody that is usually requested, or if that isn't the case, by what method was she requested?'

If he asked Miyagawa, he could probably ask the prosecutor. But –

'Why is that necessary?'

'It's piqued my interest.'

Honestly, it was tiring having to do all this for such a vague reason.

'Though Gotou was dissatisfied, he took out his mobile phone and punched in Miyagawa's number.

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Haruka ran in her irritation.

Come lunchtime, Masato disappeared from the classroom –

It was time for her to leave school for Komai's funeral service, but she was struck by the impulse to find Masato and bring him back.

She explained the situation simply to the year-head teacher who had planned on going with her and ran down the corridor to look for Masato.

She had an idea as to where he was.

She ran up all the stairs at once and went out onto the rooftop.

Just as I thought –

She spotted Masato's back. He was looking out while leaning against the fence. His back really was like Yakumo's.

'What can you see from there?'

Haruka called out while approaching.

She thought that he'd be a bit surprised, but Masato had no response, as if he had known Haruka would come.

Haruka stood beside Masato and looked at the same view.

Looking at the town from a tall place like this made it seem like what she was looking at was a picture. It didn't feel real.

'Do you like it here?'

She couldn't expect an answer. Haruka had known that when she said it.

'Don't come any more...' said Masato, in a voice that sounded as if it would disappear at any moment. Rather than a refusal, his words sounded like a plea.

'Why?'

'I'm cursed. You'll die too, sensei.'

Masato was looking down. His shoulders shook like he was holding back tears.

Haruka hugged Masato's shaking shoulders, enveloping them.

'It's all right. Your curse will be lifted, Masato-kun.'

Haruka murmured into Masato's ears.

'You're lying! That's just a lie!'

Masato yelled in a temper and waved his limbs about to get away from Haruka.

'It isn't a lie.'

'It is... I'm a killer. Since you've never killed anyone, sensei, there's no way you can understand me...'

Masato's words struck Haruka's core, and the pain spread through her body.

Did this child really kill someone –

I don't understand the situation, so I don't know what to say. But –

'I've killed someone before too.'

Masato gaped, and his eyes were as big as saucers as he looked up at Haruka.

It's true. I've killed someone before.

I killed my older twin sister. Because of my childish jealousy, I threw a ball far away to trouble her.

When she went to get it, she was hit by a car and died.

My evil heart killed my sister –

'I'm cursed like you are, Masato-kun.'

Ever since that accident, Haruka had carried the sin of having killed her sister. She hadn't told anybody, and had lived with that shut away in her heart.

I can't become happy. I can't do what I want.

After all, I stole my sister's happiness – Haruka lived while blaming herself.

That was Haruka's curse –

'But that guy, you know. Yakumo. He lifted my curse.'

The curse Haruka had carried for so many years had been lifted by meeting Yakumo.

That contrary person had released her from the curse, as if by magic.

'You remember too, right, Masato-kun? The man with terrible bedhead that you met before. He'll definitely lift your curse too. So...'

Haruka crouched to look Masato in the eyes and tried to hug those small shoulders.

However, Masato put his hands in front of him to stop her.

'It's too late. Everything's going to end today anyway...'

Masato turned around and ran off.

Haruka couldn't move a step, as if she had been frozen in place.

It's too late –

Those words of Masato echoed again and again in her ears.

Are we unable to lift his curse – that couldn't be. There had to still be time.

Right, Yakumo?

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Ishii sat across from Anna in the counselling room.

How many times have I come to this room –

While telling Anna the information he'd heard at the care home, that thought suddenly came across Ishii's mind.

When he came to this room, Ishii felt fulfilled. He felt at home.

He could speak so smoothly, as if his hesitant self with no confidence was a lie. Rather than the mood of the room, it might have been Anna that made him feel that way.

That was a psychiatrist for you.

'So that really was the case.'

When Ishii finished talking, Anna murmured with strong emotions on her face.

With a slow and delicate movement, she took a cigarette in her fingers, lit it with a silver lighter and blew out smoke from her full lips.

Perhaps she wasn't conscious of it herself, but every one of those gestures was filled with fascinating charm.

'By the way, Ishii-san. Where is Detective Gotou today?'

She had asked the same thing before. It really was troubling.

Gotou didn't like Anna much. That was what Ishii felt. That's why he'd gone out of his way to do another investigation.

'Detective Gotou is, er, busy with another matter.'

'What exactly is that other matter?'

'An investigation.'

'What investigation is it?'

Ishii had planned on being vague, but Anna pressed for more.

'That is...'

'What is he investigating?'

Of course he couldn't talk freely about the secrets of the investigation.

In front of Ishii's troubled eyes, there was a small flame.

Anna had lit her silver lighter and put it in front of Ishii's eyes.

The flame quivered. Perhaps it was because Ishii hadn't slept much lately, but that made his eyes blink repeatedly.

'I'll ask once more. What are the contents of the investigation?'

Anna's voice sounded far away.

'I...'

'You can't hide something from me.'

That was right. Anna was cooperating with the case. There was no need to hide anything.

'Detective Gotou is questioning somebody.'

'Who?'

'I don't know.'

There was a buzzing in his ears. His body felt heavy.

He was in a hazy state. It was as if he wasn't the one who was talking.

'You don't know?'

'I don't.'

Ishii hadn't heard the details either.

'Is Detective Gotou investigating that alone?'

'No.'

'Somebody is investigating with him.'

'Yes.'

'Who is that?'

Ishii really couldn't say that a detective was conducting an investigation under the orders of a civilian, let alone a university student.

'A certain person.'

'Who?'

Anna was relentless in her questions.

Why does she want to know that –

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Next, Gotou visited an apartment on the corner of a residential street.

There was a bouquet of flowers by the bushes right after he entered the grounds. Did somebody die –

'Hey, Yakumo. What are you investigating?'

Gotou parked his car in the parking lot and turned his eyes towards Yakumo in the passenger seat.

However, Yakumo got off the car briskly without answering.

Ignoring me, eh –

Gotou got off the car as well and followed Yakumo.

Yakumo stopped in front of the automatic doors and crossed his arms in displeasure.

'Gotou-san, it's an automatic lock. Please open it.'

Yakumo pointed at the door with his chin.

That really wasn't the attitude you were supposed to take when asking somebody for a favour.

'If you want me to open it, give me a proper explanation. What are you investigating?'

Yakumo sighed, sounding exasperated.

'Gotou-san, do you really not know?'

'What?'

'Yesterday, a woman committed suicide by jumping from this apartment.'

As if I'd know something like that. My hands are full with the current case – I can't concern myself

with others.

Plus, it's a suicide, right? That's even more irrelevant. But –

'How're that suicide and this case related?'

'I'm investigating whether they are.'

Yakumo looked at Gotou like he couldn't believe he didn't even understand that.

'I'm asking what you know.'

'The woman who committed suicide by jumping was the homeroom teacher of the boy I mentioned before. As well, that boy predicted that homeroom teacher's death in front of me...'

And then she really died –

So that was how it was. It made sense for Yakumo to think they were related.

'What do you think?'

Yakumo gave Gotou a strong look for his question.

'It is impossible to predict the future.'

'Of course.'

'But it is also true that the homeroom teacher died just as the boy said. Either it was a coincidence or that boy knew that she was going to die.'

'I see.'

'If it is the latter, I want to know why the boy knew his teacher was going to die.'

Gotou wants to find out himself.

When Gotou was going to go borrow a key from management, his mobile phone started ringing.

Just when he'd been motivated too – what a pain.

'Who's it?'

<Hee hee hee. That's quite a reception.>

Hata said that with a ghastly giggle. He was as creepy as he usually was.

'Old man, what is it? I'm busy.'

<I've got the analysis results for the medicine that Yakumo-kun requested. I thought I'd let you know.>

'Don't put on airs and just tell me.'

Damn. What a patronising tone.

Gotou glanced to his side. Yakumo was listening, like he knew what they were talking about.

<It's zopiclone.>

'What? That a clone of some wild animal?'

<Zopiclone. The sleep-inducing drug. Are your ears already bad at your age? How pitiful.>

'Shut up.'

There was no reason for him to be pitied by an old man who didn't have much longer to live.

Yakumo stole Gotou's mobile phone from the side and started talking.

'Hata-san, it's Yakumo. There's something I would like to ask... Have people died after taking that zopiclone?'

'Oi, Yakumo. What are you talking about?'

Gotou spoke, but Yakumo held up his hand to control him.

Yes, yes, Gotou would keep his mouth shut.

'Is that so? Is that drug sold on the market... Then the only way to obtain it without a prescription would be to steal it... I see. Thank you very much.'

Yakumo hung up and threw the phone back at Gotou.

'Gotou-san, please open up quickly.'

Not even thanking him, Yakumo said that calmly.

I'll definitely smack him once the case is over –

Gotou buried his irritation in his stomach and proceeded to the management office with Yakumo.

He told the management he was with the police and explained the situation simply to get the key to Komai's room.

Komai's room was on the eighth floor.

It was a one-room flat of ten tatami in size. Cardboard boxes were strewn across the wooden floor.

It looked like the owner was preparing to move.

Her bereaved family were probably in the middle of organising her things.

Yakumo casually began searching through those cardboard boxes, like a cat looking for dinner.

'Oi, Yakumo. Don't tamper with it too much. What are you going to do if somebody comes back?'

Yakumo stopped for a moment at Gotou's voice. Even though he was with the police, there was no excuse for if they were spotted going through the deceased's belongings without permission from the bereaved family.

'It's fine. They won't come back for a while,' said Yakumo, moving his hands again.

'How do you know that?'

'They should be in the middle of the funeral service now.'

Now Gotou understood. So Yakumo had planned the order for the investigation too.

'What if it ends earlier than expected?'

'That's fine. Though it might end later, it won't end earlier.'

Yakumo started going through the second cardboard box.

'Confident, aren't you?'

'The person reading the sutras at the funeral service today is somebody I know. I requested that he drag it out as long as possible.'

'Is shin...?'

'That's correct.'

So that was how it was. Is shin, Yakumo's uncle, was the chief priest at a temple. Then there was no worry of anybody returning any time soon.

Gotou took a cigarette from his pocket.

'Gotou-san, if you have the time to smoke and harm your health, please help out.'

Yakumo's eyes narrowed as he combed back his hair.

Honestly. The guy acted like a brother-in-law.

'Even if you tell me to help, what am I supposed to look for?'

'Something that links the woman with this case.'

That was a vague answer even for Yakumo.

Well, there was no helping it. Gotou would help out. He didn't know what he was looking for, but he'd look for it.

Gotou took off his jacket, rolled up his sleeves and put his hands on a cardboard box that Yakumo hadn't touched yet.

'Gotou-san, I found it.'

What? Just when Gotou had gone out of his way to motivate himself.

'What'd you find?'

Yakumo held out a photo.

In the photo, there were a man and woman who looked to be in their thirties.

'Who are they?'

There was no response to Gotou's question.

That was because Yakumo's mobile phone rang and he answered it in the middle of their

conversation.

'What? It's you ...'

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Haruka left the funeral home partway through the service.

After talking with Masato on the roof, she had gone to Komai's funeral, but she couldn't help but be concerned about him.

The year-head teacher sitting beside her had looked at her critically. Haruka had come late and was leaving partway through, so it made sense for her to be looked at that way.

– I killed someone.

The words Masato said wouldn't leave her head.

Does he really mean that, or –

No matter how much Haruka thought, she couldn't find an answer. But, if it were Yakumo...

After Haruka went out into the parking lot, she took her mobile out of her bag and punched in Yakumo's number. After two rings, the call connected.

'Hello.'

<What? It's you...>

Yakumo's flat voice came through.

'There's something that concerns me about Masato-kun.'

<Keep it short.>

Yakumo's voice was harder than usual.

'Masato-kun said something strange.'

<What?>

'I killed someone, he said...'

There was a short silence. Haruka felt it was very long.

On the other side of the phone, Yakumo had to be thinking something. Haruka gripped her mobile phone tightly and waited for an answer.

<Did that kid really say that?>

'Yeah.'

<I killed someone...>

Yakumo mulled over those words.

'Hey, is it true?'

<I can't say anything at this stage.>

She really wanted him to deny it, but just as Yakumo said, they had nothing to determine whether it was true or not.

'Of course...'

<Did he say anything else?>

Haruka recalled the conversation she'd had with Masato. Even something little would be okay – she just wanted a clue. It was a desperate thought.

That's right –

'Everything's going to end today... He said that.'

<Everything's going to end today...>

'Yup.'

<That's bad.>

The tone of Yakumo's voice had clearly changed.

Even through a phone, it was obvious that he was in a hurry.

'Yakumo-kun, is there anything I can do?'

<OK, listen well. There's only one thing you can do.>

'What is it?'

<Go right home and stay there. Don't even think about doing anything.>

Yakumo's tone made it sound like he was giving an order.

'Hey, what's going to happen to Masato-kun?'

<Anyway, go home.>

Yakumo forced the conversation to end by hanging up.

The dry wind howled as it passed Haruka by. She had a bad feeling about this –

Haruka couldn't just stay still. She started running like something was chasing her.

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'What's wrong?'

Gotou spoke after Yakumo hung up.

Yakumo had probably been talking to Haruka. From Yakumo's expression, it was probably about the boy called Masato.

'No, it's nothing. It seemed like a troublemaker was going to go on a rampage, so I gave her a warning.'

Yakumo looked down while pinching his brow with his fingers and started muttering.

'Escape... burnt corpse... sleep medication... left hand... curse...'

Gotou didn't know what that list of words meant.

Yakumo's muttering stopped.

Yakumo looked up suddenly with a grim expression that made him look like a different person.

That keen gaze shot through Gotou, making him feel a shiver down his spine.

Could this guy have –

'Solved the puzzle?'

'No, not yet. However, I can now see the general framework of the case.'

'Really?'

'Yes.'

'Explain.'

Gotou gripped Yakumo's shoulders and shook them.

'I'll explain on the way. There isn't much time.'

Yakumo brushed aside Gotou's hands and left the room.

Honestly. The guy just did whatever he wanted. Gotou hurriedly followed after him.

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After Gotou left the apartment, he sat in the driver seat of his car and looked at Yakumo in the passenger seat. He still looked grim.

'So where should we go?'

'Our first priority is to protect the boy called Masato.'

Gotou could tell from Yakumo's voice that his nerves were on edge.

'Do you know his address?'

'The apartment in front of the park on 3-chome.'

Gotou stepped on the accelerator instead of replying.

'Is that boy in danger?'

'This is just my reasoning, but at this rate, he'll die. He knows that himself.'

Yakumo said something awful in a disinterested voice.

Gotou couldn't tell from Yakumo's expression whether the kid's knowledge of his death meant that someone was going to kill him or that he was going to kill himself.

'Can you explain what you mean?'

'The beginning of this case goes back twenty-eight years.'

The fire that occurred at the elementary school –

So that really was the start? But that made the theory Anna said seem more real.

'So the culprit is Harue?'

'That's wrong.'

An immediate answer.

Yakumo wouldn't put any theories he wasn't confident of into words. If he said it, there was probably no doubt about it.

'What do you mean?'

'Tobe Kengo is Ushijima Atsushi.'

'So Tobe did have dissociative identity disorder?'

'Like I said, that's wrong.'

Yakumo ran his hand through his hair in his irritation.

'Explain it in a way I can understand!' Gotou flared up at Yakumo in his anger.

Exasperated, Yakumo shook his head and started explaining, though he seemed reluctant.

'Tobe Kengo died in the fire twenty-eight years ago.'

'What?'

'That is, the person who the police believe to be Tobe Kengo is Ushijima Atsushi. They switched places during the fire twenty-eight years ago.'

Gotou's face froze in his surprise.

What was he saying? That was ridiculous. Yakumo's idea was too extraordinary.

'There's no way they could just switch places so easily. What proof do you have to say that?'

'There are several reasons. It'll be troublesome to explain them all, so I will show you something conclusive.'

After Yakumo declared that, he took a photo out of his pocket and placed it on the dashboard.

While driving with one hand, Gotou took the photo with the other.

It was an old photo. It seemed to have been taken during a field trip or something. There were four boys.

'From the right, there's Masato's father, Oomori Hironori, Ushijima Atsushi, Tobe Kengo and my uncle on the left.'

So he'd gotten it from Isshin? It was the first time Gotou had seen a photo of the young Tobe Kengo and Ushijima Atsushi, but their faces were very similar.

The difference that stood out was the mole on the cheek.

Mole – wait a second.

While handling the wheel, Gotou opened the glove compartment and tried to take the case file out. However, his hand slipped and most of the contents spilled out into the car.

Luckily, he was able to get what he was aiming for.

The photo of Tobe Kengo that was taken when he was arrested.

Though the left half of his face was burnt, there was a mole on his cheek. In the photo of his childhood, the one with the mole on the cheek was – not Tobe Kengo, but Ushijima Atsushi.

For a moment, his vision went blank.

'You've noticed then.'

Yakumo smirked.

What the hell? Gotou's hands were shaking. He hadn't even thought of people switching places. A cold sweat ran down his forehead.

'But how...'

Finally, Gotou said just that.

'First, please recall the testimony of the firefighter. When the firefighter went in, one of the boys was already burnt.'

'Yeah.'

'Then, the firefighter was able to determine that the one who was still alive was Tobe Kengo from the toy he was holding, which had the name written on it, and because the boy himself had called himself that.'

That was right. The firefighter had said that.

It could be explained if Ushijima Atsushi stole the toy from Tobe Kengo. But –

'Even if the firefighter said that, the people around should've noticed.'

'Have you forgotten? Half his face was burnt. That became his camouflage. Then, he changed

schools and didn't approach the friends he had been close to.'

The way Yakumo said it, it might have been possible to trick the people nearby. But –

'His family would've noticed, right?'

'Tobe's mother had severe diabetes. She probably had the symptoms of diabetic retinopathy and could see virtually nothing.'

'She couldn't see...'

'Probably not. Furthermore, since it was near the end, she was probably so weak she couldn't move. If that was the case, she wouldn't have been able to confirm properly.'

It sounded more and more plausible, but there was still a hole in Yakumo's argument.

'Then how about the dad? He should've been healthy.'

Since he was agitated, the hand he gripped the wheel with was sweaty.

'Of course the father knew that his son had been switched.'

Gotou was so surprised that he didn't see the traffic light and cut through a red light. Honks rang all around.

'Don't be ridiculous. You saying he knew but kept quiet?' shouted Gotou angrily as he hit the wheel.

He himself didn't what he was angry at.

'Please recall what Fumiko-san the housekeeper said.'

Yakumo was extremely calm.

'What about that old woman?'

'Tobe Kengo's father, Masashi-san, would have been in a bad situation if his son died.'

'The inheritance...'

'That's right.'

The Tobe family inheritance was to go to the grandson, Kengo, skipping over the son-in-law, Masashi.

If his wife and son died, the inheritance would be donated. That was why he kept quiet.

'Are you saying he lived with some other person's kid for money even though his own son had died?'

'That is slightly incorrect.'

Gotou was once again confused by Yakumo's words.

'What's incorrect about it? That's what you said.'

'This is my theory, but I think that Tobe Kengo and Ushijima Atsushi had the same father. In short, both were Masashi's children.'

Gotou recalled Ushijima Harue's history.

She'd had a lover. Had he been Tobe Kengo –

But if that was the case, it would explain a number of things.

'After the two changed, there was a complete change in Kengo's personality, but it was vaguely accepted as something caused by the shock from the fire.'

'Treating him with kid gloves then?'

'Furthermore, nobody looked too closely at that face, which had been so terribly burnt.'

A number of coincidences overlapped, and this terrible swap occurred –

Gotou felt sick just thinking about it.

'Why did Ushijima Atsushi call himself Tobe Kengo when he was rescued from the fire?'

'It's in that composition.'

'I want to become Tobe-kun...'

'Yes. Ushijima Atsushi wanted to be Tobe Kengo. He was attached to him.'

'Why?'

'Though they were the children of the same father, one of them lived in great comfort while the other was abused daily by his mother. He probably felt a great contradiction in that difference, which warped his mind.'

So Ushijima Atsushi's childhood aspiration had been fulfilled –

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It was dark by the time Haruka returned to the school.

Only the staff room was lit.

Yakumo had told Haruka to go straight home, but there was no way she could do that.

Masato had said that everything would end today. Was that child going to suddenly disappear from in front of her? That worry wouldn't leave Haruka's head. She couldn't stay still.

Even though she'd returned to the school, it wasn't as if she had a clue as to how to solve the case.

When Haruka started going up the stairs to head to the staff room, she suddenly felt a gaze on her and looked up.

There was a boy on the second floor landing.

It wasn't Masato.

That boy looked down at Haruka with a smile.

'Hurry home.'

When she spoke to him, the boy beckoned her.

He's telling me to come –

The boy hopped up a number of stairs and then turned around to beckon her again.

Haruka followed that boy up the stairs, just as he invited her to.

'Hey, wait.'

Even though Haruka called out to him, the boy didn't stop and just continued going up the stairs.

I've seen this child before –

It was the child who had been looking down at her from the second floor window.

Finally, they climbed up to the fourth floor and went out into the corridor. The boy stood about five metres ahead of Haruka in the corridor and was smiling as always.

Mysteriously, the boy's body was faintly lit up even though they were in the dark.

'Hey, what's your name?'

When Haruka called out to him, the boy started running.

'Hey, wait a minute.'

Haruka started running too, but she stopped and turned around because she felt something was odd.

Even though the boy should have been in front of her, she heard laughter from behind her.

She turned around again in her confusion. The boy hopped in place and beckoned her, as if to say, 'Faster, faster!'

He was in front of Class 5-4's classroom.

'Hey, what are you doing?'

The boy didn't reply to Haruka's question. He went into the classroom, as if he disappeared.

That child didn't open the door –

Haruka gripped the necklace with the red stone she was wearing and slowly and determinedly opened the door.

Nobody was in the moonlit room.

Had that child been a ghost?

Bewildered, Haruka looked at the classroom with its neatly lined-up desks.

Suddenly, she noticed something white on top of a desk. It was Masato's seat by the window.

Haruka went between the desks and walked up to Masato's seat.

It was a white envelope. 'To Haruka-sensei' was written on it in tottering pencil letters.

'To me...'

Haruka unsealed the letter and took the single piece of paper that had been inside.

<I killed someone. Sorry.>

That was the only thing that was written.

'Masato-kun...'

Haruka's body shook like electricity had gone through it.

It didn't matter whether this sentence was true or false. Masato was asking her to save him. That was how she felt.

Not just now. He must have always been looking for someone to save him.

Masato probably waited for everyone to go home to put the letter here. Then he might still be around.

Gripping the envelope, Haruka flew out of the room.

I promised him that I'd lift the curse – it's not a problem of whether I can do something or not. I want to do something for him.

The words Yakumo said rang through her head.

– He doesn't understand what kindness is. So you should just teach him.

-

21

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Gotou stood with Yakumo in front of the door to the flat Masato lived in.

Looking at it from the outside, it appeared to be a flat for a single person. It felt too small for a parent and child.

'The lights are off.'

Yakumo peered in from the window.

Are they out – well, it'd be quicker to check rather than to think about it.

Gotou pressed the intercom button by the door.

He waited for a while, but there was no response.

'I'm with the Setamachi precinct. Anyone here?'

He called out while knocking, but that was no good either.

They were definitely out then. He gave the doorknob a try.

It opened –

There was a dark room beyond the door.

Right after entering, there was a kitchen, and ahead was a six-tatami room.

Yakumo left Gotou's side and entered the room.

He had some nerve trespassing right in front of a detective's eyes.

Gotou flicked the switch on the wall.

'What the hell is this?'

Gotou unconsciously spoke up when he saw the kitchen in the light.

This is surprising – the kitchen was empty. The fridge and microwave were of course, but there wasn't any cookware or tableware.

Gotou had heard that lately there were more people who wouldn't cook and would just eat convenience store lunchboxes or eat out, but this wasn't at that level.

Gotou took off his shoes and then headed into the room beyond the kitchen.

He tried the switch by the door, but the lights didn't turn on. When he looked, he noticed that there wasn't any light fixture and that there was just a plug.

He could tell that it was just as clean and Spartan as the kitchen even in the dimness.

Yakumo stood in the room with a grim expression on his face.

'They must have moved somewhere. Should we look for where they've moved to?'

'It's no use.'

Yakumo rejected Gotou's proposal.

'What do you mean, no use?'

'He probably won't show up again. That was the original goal, after all.'

Goal?

'Oi. Explain properly.'

Yakumo didn't reply to Gotou's question. Instead, he pinched his brow with his fingers while looking down and started muttering.

It was as if he was chanting a spell.

'That kid is somewhere... Why did he have to wait until today... He should have been able to move

sooner... Did he have another goal... What... What is it...'

Gotou listened to everything Yakumo said to try to understand, but it was no use.

It seemed all he could do was wait for Yakumo to finish his train of thought.

Gotou took his cigarette case from his pocket and tried to take a cigarette out, but it was empty.

When he turned the case over, brown dregs fell down.

'Damn it.'

Gotou crushed the cigarette case and threw it.

'I've got it.'

Yakumo suddenly raised his head.

'What? Figured it out?'

Yakumo ignored Gotou again and took his mobile phone out.

-

22

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Haruka went out in the corridor to look for Masato, but she didn't know where to start.

Maybe he's on the roof again like before – but she didn't have the time to think idly.

When Haruka started walking, her mobile phone rang.

It was from Yakumo. He might have found a clue.

'Hello.'

<There's something I want to confirm. Where are you?>

That was the first thing Yakumo said after opening his mouth.

'The school.'

She thought he would complain since she had stayed behind at the school even though he'd told her to go straight home, but it wasn't the time to be hiding things.

<I see. Will you listen to my request?>

Yakumo replied readily. And a request too –

'Hey, Yakumo-kun. I'll listen to any request, but I want to know where Masato-kun is first,' said Haruka, gripping the letter Masato had left.

<My request concerns where that Masato is.>

'Eh?'

<Will you listen?>

'Got it.'

Yakumo probably had a clue as to where Masato was.

<You said before that Masato stole something from the vice principal.>

'Yeah.'

Konno had approached Masato for that and thrust him away.

She still didn't know what Masato had tried to steal.

<Also, you saw that vice principal take something from the pool. Right?>

'Yeah.'

She'd seen it. Something in a paper bag –

<I want you to confirm what that is.>

'How am I supposed to confirm it?'

<It's simple. Just sneak into the staff room and borrow it for a bit.>

That's absurd. Is he telling me to steal it? Plus –

'Finding Masato-kun comes first, right?'

<Masato is probably searching for the same thing.>

'What do you mean?'

<There's no time to explain in detail. I'm counting on you.>

The conversation felt like a wild goose chase.

'Is this really OK?'

<This is my gut feeling, but as long as you have it, Masato won't die.>

She didn't understand even a bit of what Yakumo said, but all she could do now was believe him.

'Got it.'

<I'm heading there too now.>

'OK.'

<Let's lift that boy's curse.>

Yakumo's strong words shook Haruka's heart, and the corner of her eyes felt warm.

Even though Yakumo always made complaints, he helped her with her troubles to the end.

'Thank you...'

When Haruka said that, she hung up.

The dark corridor continued in front of her eyes.

Haruka started running towards that darkness –

-

23

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Gotou rushed back to the car at Yakumo's insistence and quickly started the car.

'Could you explain already? My head feels like it's going to split because there's too much I don't understand.'

Unable to hold back, Gotou pressed Yakumo for answers.

'Before that, how is the matter with the psychiatrist?'

It seemed he didn't feel like talking right away.

Gotou connected an earphone with a microphone to his mobile phone and called Miyagawa.

<I was just going to call you.>

The call connected after one ring, and he heard Miyagawa's deep voice.

It appeared that he had results.

'So, how is it?'

There was the sound of documents being flipped through from the other end of the phone.

<Honestly. You've got some guts, making your boss work for you. Be prepared – I'm going to beat you into shape after this.>

'Please do as you will.'

Gotou accepted Miyagawa's words with a wry smile.

Yakumo, the university student who had ordered around the police, was listening beside him.

<Seems that the psychiatrist this time isn't the one the prosecutors usually call. The usual doctor was busy and recommended this one.>

'Did anybody meet with that psychiatrist before?'

Yakumo was the one who interrupted.

<Seems that way... Oi. Who are you?>

Though Miyagawa replied to the sudden question, he also retorted.

However, Yakumo continued talking regardless.

'So there wasn't a direct investigation.'

<That's probably the case... and I said, who are you!?!>

Miyagawa shouted in anger.

'I apologise. I'll explain when I return.'

Since it seemed like it'd become troublesome, Gotou said that one-sidedly and hung up.

He looked at Yakumo again.

He was as pale as a dead man, and he was biting down hard on his lower lip.

There was a faint layer of sweat on his forehead.

'Ishii-san went to see that psychiatrist, correct?'

'Yeah, that's right.'

But he'd just gone to explain the situation. He should have returned already.

While Gotou was thinking, Yakumo took Gotou's mobile phone and started making a call.

'Who're you calling?'

'Ishii-san.'

Yakumo gave Gotou a sharp look.

He probably wanted to say that it was obvious, but Gotou didn't understand why.

'What do you want from Ishii?'

'If we don't call back Ishii-san immediately, the matter will become serious.'

Call back? What did he mean?

It seemed like Ishii hadn't answered the phone. After swearing, Yakumo redialled.

Yakumo's impatience infected Gotou. He felt like his skin was tingling.

'What happened?'

'You still don't understand? That doctor is a fake.'

Yakumo's lips twisted into a frown.

A fake –

'Explain in Japanese.'

Just as Gotou said that, the call connected.

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24

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Haruka descended to the second floor, where the staffroom was, and looked down the corridor.

The lights were off. It appeared the teachers had already gone home.

Paying attention to her surroundings, Haruka slowly walked towards the staff room while concealing the sound of her footsteps.

When she reached the door, she took in a deep breath. Before letting that breath out, she put her hand on the door handle and slowly opened the door.

She opened the door just wide enough for her body to go through, and she slipped through that gap.

Clatter –

There was the sound of something falling. Haruka jumped and looked instinctively towards where the sound had come from.

She could see a shadow that looked like a boy there..

'Masato-kun?'

Haruka spoke up.

She couldn't see his face in the darkness, but she couldn't think of anybody else.

The shadow didn't reply to Haruka's question. He just stood there while looking down.

After Haruka slowly approached him, she could tell it was definitely Masato.

Masato was standing at Konno's seat.

– Masato is looking for the same thing.

Yakumo had said that. He had probably tried to steal something from Konno.

Haruka stood in front of Masato, squeezed between the desks and looked at him.

There was a grim air about Masato as he stood there, stock still.

'Masato-kun, I was worried.'

Haruka reached out to touch Masato's shoulder.

He was shivering slightly. It felt like he'd break if she put even the slightest bit of force into it. He was gripping something in his hand.

This is what Masato was searching for –

'Sensei's looking for the same thing you are, Masato-kun. The man from before said we need it to lift your curse.'

Masato looked up.

His eyes were inflamed and his eyelids were puffy. There were traces of tears on his cheeks.

This child had cried a lot without anybody knowing. though Haruka didn't know what had happened to him, he must have been crying the whole time in his pain and sadness, wanting

somebody to save him.

I'm sorry I couldn't save you until now –

'Hey, Masato-kun. Could you give what you're holding in that hand to me?'

Masato just looked at his tightly gripped small fists without responding.

'I promise I'll lift your curse, Masato-kun.'

Don't make promises you can't keep. She felt like she could hear Yakumo saying that.

But she wasn't saying that carelessly. Haruka was prepared to follow through.

'Really...?' said Masato with a snivel.

'Really. Do you know about pinky promises?'

Haruka held out her right little finger towards Masato. Masato nodded and linked it with his own.

That moment, the lights turned on in the staff room. For a moment, Haruka's vision went right because it was so bright. Somebody had come.

Haruka blinked a few times and then looked at the door.

'Why are you getting in my way?'

Konno was standing there. His cheek was twitching.

'Why are you getting in the way of my fun?'

Konno went in between the desks straight for them.

'Konno-sensei.'

'I need to discipline you two.'

When Konno was right by them, he raised his right hand.

That hand was gripping a hammer.

'We're going to run.'

The moment Haruka said that, she gripped Masato's hand, turned around and started running.

She flew into the corridor from the other door.

When she looked around, she saw Konno following right behind them.

Yakumo's going to be here soon. I need to hold on until then somehow –

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25

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I can hear an intermittent electronic sound –

Ishii was vacantly aware. After a while, the sound stopped with a snap.

His vision became clearer like a focussing camera.

He rubbed his eyes and looked around. He recognised this room. He was sitting on the sofa in Anna's counselling room.

He appeared to have fallen asleep.

When had he fallen asleep? He couldn't remember. His head kind of hurt.

Anna wasn't in the room.

The electronic sound started again. His mobile phone was ringing in his pocket.

Ishii took out the phone and saw Gotou's name on the display. Come to think of it, he hadn't contacted him at all. Ishii hurriedly answered the phone.

'Hello, Ishii speaking.'

<Are you OK?>

The voice he heard from the phone was not Gotou's but Yakumo's.

'Eh?'

<It's me. Yakumo. Ishii-san, are you OK?>

Why was Yakumo using Gotou's mobile phone, and what did he mean by OK?

'E-er... I'm OK,' answered Ishii, though he didn't understand.

Yakumo sighed in relief.

<Ishii-san, where are you right now?>

'Ah, er, I'm at Sasaki Mental Health.'

<Please leave the building immediately.>

Yakumo-shi sounded cornered, which was unusual for him.

Normally, he was aloof, so for him to be so impatient –

'E-er... did something happen?'

<Just get out of there right now, please. Ishii-san, you are in incredible danger right now.>

Danger? I am? Why?

Doubts kept coming up in Ishii's head.

'I think I'm very much safe though.'

<Listen, the psychiatrist called Sasaki is a fake. She's an imposter.>

Imposter – Anna was? That's ridiculous. I mean, that person –

Ishii felt a presence behind him and turned around.

Anna was standing behind him with a wide smile.

'Doctor...'

Anna took the mobile from Ishii's hand as he started to speak and spoke on the phone herself.

What on earth –

'So you're Yakumo-kun...'

Anna started speaking, ignoring Ishii's confusion.

'Who am I, you ask... ? I'll tell you if you come alone... I'll be waiting here with Ishii-san.'

After Anna said that, she put the mobile phone on the carpet, raised her left foot and stepped on it with her heel.

'W-what are you...'

Ishii hurriedly picked up the mobile, but it had split in half and the screen was broken – it couldn't be used.

Anna gracefully sat down on the opposite sofa, crossed her long and supple legs and combed back her black hair.

'It seems that I will have to bid you farewell, Ishii-san.'

The eyes looking at Ishii didn't even have a whit of the gentleness that they'd had before.

The eyes were so cold they chilled Ishii's body to the core.

Anna lit a cigarette and blew a thin line of smoke from her glossy lips.

Was Yakumo telling the truth earlier –

Then who was the person in front of him?

Though it was delayed, a strange terror came over him and he half-rose to his feet.

At that moment, there was a dull thump.

Ishii's head shook and he fell to the carpet.

He felt a dull pain in his head. While pressing a hand against it, he looked up to see Anna standing with a cigarette in her mouth and a glass ashtray in her hand.

Did she hit me with that –

His hand felt wet. When he looked at it, he saw that his palm was dyed red.

This is – my blood.

Anna looked down scornfully at Ishii on his hands and knees. Her eyes were filled with disgust, as if she were looking at a cockroach.

'Please settle down. Men in a fluster are unsightly.'

-

26

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'Damn it!'

Yakumo threw the mobile phone forcefully.

The mobile phone hit the front glass and split in half.

'You bastard! How many times do you have to break my mobile before you're satisfied!?'

Gotou shouted in anger, but Yakumo just covered his face with his hands and looked up at the ceiling.

This is unusual – did something happen to Ishii?

'Yakumo, what happened?'

After Gotou calmed down, he asked that question.

'Ishii-san's been caught.'

'Caught? By who?'

'The psychiatrist.'

'That's ridiculous...'

'It's the truth.'

'What for?'

Gotou was so agitated he grabbed Yakumo's arm and pulled at it.

'I'll explain, so please look forward and drive properly.'

'What?'

When he looked forward, he saw a red light.

Gotou slammed the brakes. The tires screeched and smoked as the car stopped. He'd almost driven through it.

'So what do you mean?'

Gotou wiped the sweat from his forehead.

'As I said earlier, that psychiatrist is an imposter. I can't say what method she used unless I look into it, but... that's how it is.'

So that was what he'd been checking with Miyagawa earlier?

That psychiatrist had been recommended and then employed. Nobody had met her before. That meant nobody knew what she looked like.

'But she'd been recommended by the psychiatrist they always request.'

'This is my theory. The doctor who was requested by the prosecutor for Tobe Kengo's psychological examination couldn't fit it in their schedule. Then, they contacted a doctor they knew.'

'And?'

'What if that psychiatrist contacted the doctor they knew through email? And then that email was manipulated and reached somebody else?'

What Yakumo was saying was only a theory, but when Gotou heard it, he felt a chill down his spine.

Who've we been talking to up until now –

'Why'd you think the doctor was a fake?' asked Gotou, since he couldn't believe it.

'At first it was only a theory. When I heard you talk, Gotou-san, what that psychiatrist said sounded odd to me. Particularly the part about dissociative identity disorder.'

'What about it?'

Gotou didn't think Anna's explanation was unnatural.

'When one personality is active, the others are sleeping... She said that, correct?'

'Right.'

'You wouldn't be able to say it wasn't dissociative identity disorder just from that. It differs depending on the case, but there are some cases wherein even when the personalities change, they are active and keep all their memories.'

'Maybe she didn't know?'

'That would be just as unnatural as a police officer not knowing traffic regulations.'

That would be unnatural.

After checking that the light was green, Gotou stepped on the pedal.

'As well, her diagnosis of Ushijima Harue-san was also strange. It would be impossible for a psychiatrist to analyse the personality of somebody they have never met.'

Gotou recalled the conversation he'd had with Yakumo about the psychiatrist.

– Is that the psychiatrist's opinion?

Yakumo had looked discontent when he said that.

So Yakumo had already doubted her then?

'Furthermore, the matter of the murderer's escape is also unnatural.'

Yakumo continued his explanation.

'Would both guards leave the room just because there was an alarm?'

That had bothered Gotou too.

'But that really happened.'

Yakumo raked his fingers through his hair in his irritation.

'Please listen to this as one possibility. She isn't a psychiatrist, but I think she may be a hypnotherapist or have some knowledge of the kind.'

'Hypnotherapy – like hypnotism?'

Gotou's voice cracked. Something bothersome had come up again.

He hated unrealistic psychic abilities like this.

'I'm just going to say this, but hypnotherapy isn't a psychic ability.'

Yakumo gave Gotou a glance, like he had seen right through his thoughts.

'It isn't?'

'Hypnotherapy is a legitimate form of psychotherapy. There's no need to put somebody to sleep as they do on television. As long as they are relaxed, it's easy to give simple suggestions.'

'Suggestions?'

'In other words, go out when the alarm goes off. She probably gave a suggestion like that.'

That would explain the unnatural movements of the two guards at the scene.

When the bell rang, they unconsciously responded like Pavlov's drooling dogs –

'But what for?'

'Isn't it obvious? It was to let him escape.'

'So they were accomplices?'

'That's correct.'

'But if it's like you said, why'd she cooperate with our investigation and put herself in danger?'

Yakumo shook his head.

'You still don't understand? She wasn't cooperating. She was just guiding your investigation.'

'So that's how it was...'

Now that he thought about it, Anna had been obstinately stuck on the fire that occurred twenty-eight years ago.

Then, they continued the investigation as they were told to.

'We thought Ushijima Harue was the culprit...'

'That was her goal.'

So she's been playing with us. But then –

'Who burnt the corpse?'

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27

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After Haruka and Masato went down to the first floor, they ran into the nearby school infirmary, closed the door and locked it.

They shouldn't have been seen going into this room. This way, they could buy some time.

Haruka's heart hurt so much it felt like it would stop. How long had it been since she'd run so hard?

'You OK?'

Haruka spoke to Masato.

Though Masato's shoulders were heaving, he nodded.

Haruka's strength left her body all at once and she sat on the floor.

'Hey, Masato-kun. What were you looking for?'

Masato walked up to Haruka and held out his left hand in a fist.

'This...'

As he murmured that, Masato opened his hand.

On his palm, there was an SD card, which could be used for digital camera storage and the like.

Haruka pinched the SD card with her fingers and looked at it from different angles. However, there didn't seem to be anything strange.

Why did Masato want the SD card so much, and why had Konno been so insistent on taking it back?

It felt like the key to solving that was in the data.

Rattle!

The door shook loudly.

Haruka instinctively hugged Masato and held her breath.

It was OK. If they were quiet, their presence in the room shouldn't be noticed. A cold sweat ran down her back.

Rattle rattle –

The door continued to shake loudly.

They just waited, hunched together, for him to pass.

Finally, the door stopped shaking.

Thump thump –

She heard footsteps which sounded further and further away until she couldn't hear them any longer.

Haruka let out the breath she had been holding.

She just needed to tell Yakumo where they were.

Gotou was probably with him, so he'd do something. Haruka took her mobile out from her pocket, when –

The footsteps drew nearer again.

Thump thump thump.

She could see somebody on the other side of the ground glass. So they had been noticed.

Haruka pulled Masato's hand and they hid underneath the bed.

The door opened right after.

Thump thump thump.

She could see feet walking around the room. Her heart was beating wildly from terror and nervousness.

The feet stopped in front of the bed.

– Please. Don't notice.

Haruka's plea was futile. A hand reached out and grabbed the bed, flipping it right over.

Konno stood there.

He had a twisted smile on his face, a hammer in his right hand and a ring of keys hanging from his left hand.

'Getting in the way of my hobby? I really can't forgive you.'

Haruka stood in front of Masato as a shield.

Konno held up the hammer.

It's too late –

Haruka's body stiffened as she closed her eyes tightly. However, there was no pain or impact.

She timidly opened her eyes.

Konno's eyes were wide open as he stood there. The hammer fell from his hand and he fell forward

like that.

Somebody else appeared before Haruka's eyes.

'Yakumo-kun... it's not you...'

That person opened ghastly bloodshot eyes in the dark.

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28

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'Ushijima Atsushi was the one who burnt that corpse.'

Yakumo gritted his teeth.

However, Gotou didn't understand what Yakumo said.

'Ushijima Atsushi switched places with Tobe Kengo twenty-eight years ago in the fire, right? I'm asking who killed Ushijima Atsushi.'

'Like I said, Ushijima Atsushi. In the first place, that corpse isn't Ushijima Atsushi.'

'W-w-what did you say!?'

Gotou was so shocked he let go of the wheel. The car suddenly started veering.

Shit. Gotou hurriedly grabbed the wheel.

'I knew from the very beginning that the burnt corpse wasn't the murderer who escaped,' said Yakumo nonchalantly.

He knew from the very beginning –

'What do you mean?'

'I can see the spirits of the dead. Have you forgotten?'

'I know that.'

'I found that corpse by pursuing its ghost. At that stage, I realised that the corpse was not the same person as the murderer in the photo you had shown me, Gotou-san.'

Why was he acting so high and mighty?

'Then you should've said so in the first place!'

'I don't remember ever saying that the corpse was the murderer who escaped.'

That wasn't the problem, but there was no point arguing about that now.

'Then who is it?'

Yakumo threw a photo onto the dashboard.

It was the photo they'd found at Komai's flat.

'The man's name was Oomori Hironori-san. He was in the same grade as Tobe-san and Ushijima.'

'He's that corpse?'

'That's correct. Furthermore, this person was that boy's father and also the lover of the teacher Komai Hiromi. Now that I've said so much, you understand, yes?'

'How would I understand from an explanation like that, you fool!?'

Gotou hit the horn in his anger.

'Ushijima Atsushi, after his escape, tried to impersonate another person, just as he did twenty-eight years ago.'

'He tried to change places...'

'That's right. He had his sights set on Oomori Hironori. Ushijima Atsushi murdered him. He used a low-temperature fire to burn him in the pool's pump room.'

There was no way Gotou could understand from that explanation.

'How about the fingerprints?'

'He cut off his own left hand and left it at the scene in order to make it look like he had died.'

'Why would he go all that way...'

'He couldn't make himself die if the corpse couldn't be identified, right? In that sense, the psychiatrist stabbed Tobe as preparation for this situation. What was really cut was the left wrist.'

He'd gone that far? Why'd he go so far to become somebody else? Your life was something you made yourself, right? It definitely wasn't something you got from somebody else.

But if it was as Yakumo said, there was something Gotou just couldn't understand.

'But his son would notice, right?'

'Yes. That was what I was most troubled by. However, I've solved the puzzle. It appears that Oomori Hironori-san and his son Masato-kun did not have a good relationship in the first place. Ushijima took advantage of that.'

'Took advantage of? How?'

'He probably approached Masato-kun right after he had a fight with his father and said something like "I'll give you magical medicine that will make your father disappear" while giving him that medicine.'

And then that boy gave that medicine to his father.

In Gotou's youth, he had also wished sometimes that his parents would disappear.

However, he hadn't understand the true meaning of disappear. It was on the same level of being

angry at a friend.

The boy must have understood the meaning of that word for the first time when he gave the medicine to his father and saw him stop moving.

He wouldn't have been able to say he killed his own father no matter what. Using that, he was made out to be an accomplice.

Putting such a heavy burden on such a small heart was inhuman.

A hot rage boiled up in the pit of Gotou's stomach.

'That boy's incomprehensible behaviour came from his knowledge of the crime and his fear. He wanted to be saved, but he couldn't say that. He shut all of that in his small heart. He must have suffered...'

Yakumo had a fierce look in his eyes. They looked faintly wet.

This guy knows better than anyone about irrational suffering. That's probably why he got so into this case, which is unusual for him.

But can we save the heart of a boy who killed his father –

'Please stop.'

Gotou stepped on the brakes after Yakumo said that.

The school gate was right beside them. He had been so focussed on his thoughts that he'd almost driven past it.

'Gotou-san, I leave Ishii-san to you.'

After Yakumo said that, he jumped out and ran off.

This might be the last time I see Yakumo –

For some reason, that thought came up in Gotou's mind.

'Hmph. There's no way he'd kick the bucket.'

He didn't have the time for boring thoughts. He had to do something about that fool.

Gotou stepped on the accelerator and spun the wheel around.

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29

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The left half of that man's face had been burnt and the skin was scarred.

There was also nothing beyond his left wrist.

The man looked at Haruka and Masato and laughed.

The laugh was a cold one, like frozen soil that would never melt.

This man is empty. There's nothing there – that was how Haruka felt. It was terrifying.

There was nowhere to run in this situation. Masato gripped Haruka's hand tightly. She could feel his shivering and fear through her skin.

I need to protect this child –

Haruka gripped Masato's hand back and brought the hammer that had fallen on the floor closer with her foot, making sure that the man wouldn't notice.

The man slowly approached.

Now!

Haruka quickly stooped, picked up the hammer and hit the man's toes.

Snap.

There was the sound of a plastic container or something breaking.

'Agh!'

The man let out a beastly howl and crouched, clutching his leg. Haruka was disturbed by the stronger-than-expected effect and she dropped the hammer to the floor.

'Masato-kun. Let's go.'

Haruka pulled Haruka's hand, passed by the man and flew out the infirmary.

She went out the corridor and climbed up the stairs in front of her.

The man chased after them, dragging his foot.

They ran in the dark. She was reaching her limit. The muscles in her legs were screaming.

When they reached the third floor, Haruka turned around. She could hear footsteps but couldn't see anybody. It appeared they'd gotten fairly fair.

Masato was almost in tears.

He was probably afraid. Truthfully, Haruka was afraid herself. If she hadn't been gripping Masato's hand, she would have already been crying.

'You can do it!'

Haruka encouraged Masato and ran down the third floor corridor. She put her hand on a door that she spotted.

In any case, she had to buy time until Yakumo got here.

Please open!

Her wish got through. Haruka and Masato flew into the room, closed the door and locked it from inside.

She looked around. Wooden bookshelves were lined up neatly. It was the library.

She sighed in a moment of relief when she heard the approaching sound of a foot being dragged.

Haruka hugged Masato tightly. She could feel Masato's heart beating quickly.

Please. Pass by us.

Going against Haruka's wish, her mobile phone rang. It was so sudden she thought her heart would stop.

Haruka pressed the call button and stopped the ringing.

Silence –

Good. He didn't appear to have noticed.

<Where are you now?>

When she put the phone to her ear, she heard Yakumo's voice.

Her nervousness left her all at once. She held back from crying.

'The third floor library. Please hurry.'

Haruka covered her mouth with her hand so that her voice wouldn't carry.

<I'm at the entrance now. I'll be there soon, so wait.>

He hung up.

They were saved. Yakumo was coming.

As if to smash Haruka's relief, the opposite door opened.

She saw a man peek in from the gap between the bookshelves and walk closer, dragging his foot behind him.

Even though Yakumo was almost here, they were going to be found.

Masato was shaking as he held his head in his arms. The moment Haruka saw that, she realised what she had to do.

Strangely, she didn't hesitate.

She gripped the red stone on her necklace tightly.

Yakumo. Lend me just a bit of courage again.

'Masato-kun, the man you met before is going to come here soon, so just wait 'til then, OK?'

After Haruka patted Masato's head, she jumped out from the bookshelves before she heard his response.

The man's burnt face was right in front of her.

He had been much closer than she thought. She stopped breathing in her surprise.

Haruka backed away, putting distance between them.

When the man reached out to try to grab Haruka, she stooped, ran around the bookshelf and appeared behind the man.

The man immediately turned around and chased after Haruka.

Haruka went to the door, keeping a certain distance between her and the man.

A bit more. I need to keep his attention –

Haruka opened the library door behind her with her hand and went out into the corridor.

'Agh!'

The man screamed and tried to strike her.

Haruka dodged and started running.

When she looked behind her, the man was chasing her with an incredibly enraged expression, even while dragging his foot.

It went well. She wanted to put as much distance between Masato and that man as possible.

She went down the stairs frantically. There were two sets of stairs – one on the north side and one on the south side of the school building. If she were lucky, she might meet Yakumo on the way up.

However, she discarded that hope when she got to the second floor.

If Yakumo had been coming up this set of stairs, they would have met already. But she was almost at the first floor. It'd work out somehow if she got outside.

The moment Haruka thought that and relaxed, she tripped.

She lost her balance, tumbled down the stairs and collapsed in the corridor with her face to the ground.

I need to get away quickly –

Just as she pushed herself off the ground and stood up, somebody grabbed her hair from behind her.

'Let go.'

Haruka turned around, but it was no use. The man dragged her down the corridor.

I think it's too late for me –

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– Haruka-sensei left.

Masato hugged his knees as he shook in fear.

Why did Haruka-sensei try to save someone like me? Why –

He asked that in his heart, but nobody responded to his question.

I'm a cursed kid. I don't need to be saved. It's natural for me to die – but then why am I shaking here –

– Haruka-sensei's going to be killed by that guy. Like Komai-sensei.

It's all my fault.

It's because I wanted Dad to disappear –

After Mum left, Dad started hitting me.

He must have been lonely. Dad didn't hit me when Mum was around.

If Mum comes back, Dad won't hit me anymore. That's what I thought.

And I was lonely too.

Mum disappeared so suddenly.

I couldn't ask why –

After a few months, Komai-sensei started coming to my house.

Dad stopped being violent.

There was still a hole in my heart.

'Could Sensei become your mum?'

Komai-sensei said that.

I said, 'No way.'

It wasn't because I hated Sensei. It's just that only one person can be my mum.

I want to meet Mum –

I thought that Dad knew where she was, so I took a peek at Dad's notebook when he was out and found Mum's address.

I sneaked out of school and went to meet her in secret.

Mum was in the next city. I went suddenly to surprise her, but I couldn't.

Mum was with a man I didn't know. And she was smiling –

I was so lonely and had cried so much, but Mum was smiling.

I realised that Mum wouldn't ever come back.

Then, I met that guy.

I'd fought with Dad and was crying in the park.

'If you make him take this medicine, your dad will disappear.'

That's what he said when he gave me a bottle full of medicine.

'Really?'

'Really. Then your mum will come back.'

'Mum will...'

Come back –

If Dad disappears and Mum comes back, nothing would be better.

I did as that guy said and put the medicine in the beer Dad drank.

When Dad drank the beer, he fell to his side and stopped moving. I was panicking when that guy came.

'What a bad boy. You killed your father.'

'Killed... I did...'

'That's right. You made him take that medicine and killed him. You're a cursed kid.'

I didn't think that disappearing meant dying. But –

I just wanted to live normally like I had before.

What should I have done?

My stomach hurts. My chest stings. I feel like my head's going to split in half.

– Somebody, save me. Please save me.

Something black is swelling up inside of me. If this continues –

I think I'll break.

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Gotou parked his car in front of the building with <Sasaki Mental Health>, went up three flights of stairs and opened the door.

The lights were on.

He passed the reception to stand in front of the counselling room in the back.

'I'm coming in,' said Gotou as he opened the door.

Ishii was standing by the window. He was gagged and his left hand was handcuffed to the window

frame.

He's in awful condition –

When Gotou tried to approach him, Ishii squirmed about as if to tell him not to.

He was yelling something from behind his gag, but Gotou couldn't hear him.

'Calm down.'

Gotou walked to Ishii and stooped over.

'Good evening.'

Somebody spoke from behind him. This voice –

When he turned around, he saw Anna smiling there. This woman. She looked so damn composed.

'Everything's over already.'

Gotou stood up and approached her.

The next moment, he felt something cold in his stomach.

It went through his skin deep into his flesh.

The red-hot pain ran through his whole body.

The cold changed to burning heat in the blink of an eye. When he looked down, he saw that a knife stabbing into the left side of his stomach.

The blood coming out dyed his white shirt red.

Anna pulled the knife out of Gotou's stomach.

At the same time as a paralysing pain, blood burst out like a fountain.

This was no good. The strength was leaving his body. Gotou collapsed to his knees on the carpet, unable to take it.

When he looked up while putting pressure on the wound on his stomach, he saw Anna looking down at him like she found the scene amusing. This sadist –

'You know, I hate people who don't keep promises. I remember telling Yakumo-kun to come alone.'

Anna poked Gotou's forehead with her finger.

She was a completely different person from before. A wolf in sheep's clothing then?

Anna stabbed the bloody knife into the table. It looked just like a gravestone.

I felt like I wouldn't meet Yakumo again before I came here. Is that what it meant –

'Ishii-san, this is just like your dream.'

Anna looked at Ishii and let out a vulgar giggle.

Ishii looked down and averted his teary eyes.

What an idiot. You were supposed to glare right back at the other party at times like this. You'd be looked down on otherwise.

'The plan we'd laid out has all gone to waste because of you. In exchange, please let me have some fun.'

Anna mercilessly kicked Gotou's nose with her foot.

Gotou couldn't brace himself and fell backwards.

'Da...mn...'

Damn. He couldn't speak.

Anna looked down at Gotou.

'My, how pitiful. It must hurt. Your body won't move like you want it to, right?'

Damn. Damn. Damn. This woman. He'd definitely give her a good punch!

'Ishii-san can't reach the phone. Gotou-san won't be able to move at all in this condition. It's a desperate situation. Will you be able to escape?'

Anna crossed her arms and smiled victoriously.

Oi, oi. Was this a joke? Gotou tried to stand up. Just as he got the top half of his body up, he lost his balance and fell back down.

'My, you're more energetic than I expected.'

After Anna said that, she stepped on Gotou's stomach wound twice with her heel.

'Aagh.'

That hurts, you bastard.

He tried to shout, but blood came out of his mouth.

'Ah, that's right. There's something I wanted to say to Yakumo-kun. Could you tell him for me? Ah, but Gotou-san will be no good. Since you're going to die.'

Anna walked to Ishii and murmured something in his ear.

The moment he heard it, Ishii's eyes went wide in shock.

What? What the hell did she say? While Gotou was thinking, Anna said, 'Well, good luck,' and she left the room briskly.

With a face that could cry any minute now, Ishii looked at Gotou.

A cold sweat ran down his body. His vision was becoming hazier and he was losing consciousness.

This is seriously bad –

Yakumo took the stairs up to the third floor and rushed into the library.

The bookshelves were lined up and he couldn't see anybody.

'Where are you?'

He spoke, but there was no response.

When he strained his ears, he could faintly hear somebody stifling tears.

Relying on the voice, Yakumo went to the bookshelf in the very back and peered behind it. He saw Masato sitting there hugging his news.

He's OK –

'Hey. I came to lift your curse, like I promised.'

When Yakumo spoke, Masato lifted his tearstained face.

This kid had really had a ridiculous burden on his shoulders. When Yakumo saw the boy's expression, he felt that all over again.

'That's a lie! A lie! My curse can't be lifted!' yelled Masato in a temper.

'There's no curse that can't be lifted.'

'Everyone dies! I killed them! Dad and Komai-sensei too! I killed everyone!'

As Masato shouted even more, he hit Yakumo's chest with both hands.

Yakumo accepted the hits and embraced Masato tightly.

The darkness this boy is burdened with is, just like she said, similar to mine.

But who he's really like isn't me but her.

This kid was cursed because he killed his father. She was cursed because she killed her older sister.

That's why I couldn't leave this kid alone. Unconsciously, put the darkness this kid's in together with the darkness I used to have.

'OK? Listen up. You didn't kill anyone.'

Yakumo said that while still hugging Masato. At the same time, Masato stopped moving.

'I...'

'Masato. What you made your father take was just regular sleeping medicine. That was a trap to make you think you killed your father.'

'A trap...'

Yakumo nodded silently.

'Masato, you didn't kill anybody.'

It was clear from Hata's component analysis.

The medicine this kid had had just been a sleep-inducing drug. However, Ushijima Atsushi used that to make it seem like Masato had killed his own father.

Kids of this age would probably think at least once that it'd be better if their fathers disappeared, without knowing the true meaning.

He'd cowardly used that chance.

He'd probably planned on killing this kid too if he was in the way. Like he killed his own father – who would he have tried to change into then?

Yakumo buried his anger in the pit of his stomach and wiped away Masato's tears with his finger.

This kid had really done his best.

This little body had suffered so much it wouldn't have been strange if he cracked. Yakumo had suffered a lot himself, but he'd had Isshin beside him.

But this kid was alone. No, that's not right. She was there –

That meddler might have been this kid's support, even if it was just a little.

'Where'd she go?'

'She told me to stay here... She left the classroom... Because of me, Sensei...'

Masato's expression twisted again. Tears started welling up too.

'Don't cry any more. It's something she chose to do herself. It's not your fault.'

Yakumo patted Masato's head.

That idiot. She could've stuck around a bit longer. Did she act as a decoy to protect Masato?

Since she's so slow, there's a strong possibility that she got caught. Now, what to do –

There was no time to search the huge school building. He'd have to get them to come out then.

Yakumo gripped Masato's two shoulders with resolve.

'I said this before, but I'm cursed just like you.'

'Curse.'

Yakumo nodded, took out the contact lens in his left eye and looked at Masato with his deep red eye.

Masato was so surprised his body jolted. However, he didn't seem scared. There was envy in his gaze.

'OK, Masato? Curses are in people's hearts.'

'Hearts?'

Masato repeated Yakumo's words.

'That's right. Hearts.'

Yakumo put his finger to Masato's chest.

'Whether you lift the curse or not is up to your heart. Got it?'

Masato nodded silently.

All right. What a strong kid –

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Haruka lay beside Konno on the infirmary floor.

Her mouth was covered with packing tape and her hands and legs were bound with that packing tape as well. She couldn't move.

A caterpillar could have moved more freely than she could.

The muscles in her body hurt. That man had kicked her a number of times while still holding on to her hair and dragged her here.

Nausea and the chills assaulted her in turns. She didn't have the will to fight back any more.

I wonder if Yakumo met up with Masato – that was her only concern.

The man brought rectangular cans from somewhere. Of course he spilled the liquid inside on the floor, but he poured it on Konno and Haruka too.

She could tell what that liquid was without asking from the smell. It was gasoline –

When Haruka realised what that man was trying to do, she felt like cold water had been dumped on her.

He was probably going to burn the whole school down, along with Haruka and Konno.

Terror rushed through her. She felt like giving up.

Konno let out a groan beside her and was shifting about in an attempt to escape.

However, the man spotted him immediately.

Without any hesitation, the man stomped on Konno's face. Again and again. He stomped on him until he stopped moving.

I was taken prisoner like this before. Yakumo saved my life then.

But it really might not work on this time –

Crackle.

The sound of static came out from the installed speaker.

The man's hand stopped as he looked around.

After the static, there was a click sound and then a voice came out of the speaker.

<Ah, ah... Seems like it's working.>

This was Yakumo's voice. He really had come.

He was probably using the emergency building announcement system in the staff room.

<Ushijima Atsushi-san, you're there, right?>

The man responded visibly to Yakumo's voice.

This man's name is Ushijima Atsushi – but that person should have died twenty-eight years ago.

<I have a proposal for you. Could you return the clumsy girl you've got there? If you do, I'll hand over Oomori Masato-kun and the VTR data.>

What was Yakumo saying?

Exchange with Masato? If they did that, he'd be killed. She tried to say that, but she couldn't since her mouth was covered.

Even if she could say it, her voice wouldn't reach him.

<Let's both stop playing tricks. If you kill her before meet, I'll immediately inform the police. Of course, if you follow through with your promise, I will never disclose what I know. What do you think? It isn't a bad proposal.>

The man stared at the speaker on the wall seriously.

<I'll be waiting by the pool outside. Within ten minutes... click.>

The voice was cut off.

What was Yakumo thinking?

Haruka didn't want to be saved if Masato's life would be sacrificed.

Was Yakumo OK with that?

Haruka's thoughts were interrupted when somebody suddenly grabbed her hair.

The man took the packing tape off of Haruka's feet, forced her to stand and dragged her out of the infirmary.

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Why did things turn out like this –

Ishii lost himself in a sea of regret.

He had spent the most time with Anna, but she'd made him dance around without him even noticing her true nature.

Plus, if he had just run away immediately when he got the call from Yakumo, things wouldn't have ended up like this.

His mistake would be paid for with Gotou's life. Ishii couldn't stand it.

Ishii pulled his handcuffed left hand with as much strength as he could muster. He pulled at it again and again.

Each time, the handcuff dug into his wrist, making a wave of pain shoot through him. However, the essential handcuff and the window frame it was attached to didn't budge at all.

Even if he wanted to call for help, the closest phone was on the desk.

He stretched his arm out so far he thought it would snap, but he couldn't even reach it with his fingers. It was no good –

For the past while, Gotou hadn't been moving from his collapsed position.

Ishii could tell he was barely alive, since his arm would move up and down faintly.

The blood loss was awful. If he was left like this, he probably wouldn't hang on much longer.

Ishii crouched on the carpet and dug his fingernails into it, feeling helpless.

His body shook and tears spilled from his eyes.

– How can I be so powerless?

In front of Ishii's eyes was the knife, sticking up from the table.

His hand could probably reach that knife.

Now that he thought about it, all he had done was cause Gotou trouble.

He'd tried his best to be even the slightest bit useful, but every time, he'd just spun his wheels around fruitlessly and tripped. Then, Gotou saved him again.

It was just an endless cycle of that.

Even though Gotou complained, he didn't abandon Ishii – he kept with him.

Ishii couldn't let somebody who'd saved him die.

Compared to Gotou's life, a left hand or two of his is nothing.

With strong determination, Ishii used his feet to get close to the table. All right. It went well.

He took the knife out of the table with his right hand and put it to his left wrist.

His hand was shaking. It would probably hurt. A lot of blood would come out too. But this was the only way to get out of this situation.

Ishii gripped the knife tightly.

A cold feeling ran through his skin. He was scared – but he had to do it.

The moment Ishii was about to draw the knife, a dull shock came down on the crown of his head. When he looked up, he saw Gotou standing there.

'Do..n't... do some...thing...stu...pid.'

Gotou said that in feeble breaths. Then, he took the gag off of Ishii.

'D-Detective Gotou!'

Gotou didn't respond to Ishii's shout. He just staggered over to the desk, picked up the phone and threw it at Ishii.

Clunk. The phone fell within Ishii's reach.

Gotou smiled in satisfaction and then collapsed backwards.

'D-Detective Gotou!'

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The man dragged Haruka by the hair past the locker room to the first lane of the pool.

The round moon was reflected on the dirty water surface and rippled.

The man let go of Haruka. Her strength left her and she fell right to the ground. There was a large puddle there.

It appeared that Yakumo and Masato weren't here yet. She couldn't see them.

To tell the truth, Haruka didn't want to die either, but she also wished that Yakumo and Masato wouldn't come.

The man had stood still for a moment, but then he grabbed Haruka's hair and pulled her along again.

It appeared that he didn't like the location. This was the only entrance to the pool. If Yakumo and Masato, they'd definitely run into them. That was probably why.

The man went to the sixth lane, pushed Haruka down there and skilfully bound Haruka's feet with packing tape using only his right hand.

When he was doing that, he took out a cloth cord and tied it to Haruka's left foot.

'It appears that I have made you wait.'

It was Yakumo's voice.

Yakumo appeared at the entrance like he had risen to the surface.

Masato was next to him. His hands were behind his back. Did Yakumo tie his hands so he wouldn't run –

The man stared at Yakumo, who stood in front of the first lane.

It looked like he was smiling slightly.

– Please! Don't come here!

Haruka tried to scream, but the packing tape got in the way and her words were unclear.

'Tobe Kengo-san. Ah, that's incorrect. Ushijima Atsushi-san, correct? No, that's wrong too...'

It was like Yakumo was speaking to himself.

'Shut up...!' said the man in a low voice.

'You aren't anybody.'

Yakumo pointed straight at the man.

Like the man was sensitive to the meaning of those words, his shoulders were heaving in agitation. However, Yakumo paid that no attention and continued talking.

'Well, it doesn't matter who you are. In any case, let us deal with business. How about we both leave our prisoners where they are and switch places?'

After thinking, the man nodded silently.

Yakumo took the SD card that Masato had had out of his pocket, showed it to the man, and the put it in Masato's trouser pocket.

'I will say this again, but let's both not play any tricks.'

Yakumo stepped forward.

The man took one step forward in response.

The two of them slowly closed the distance between them.

The two passed each other at the third lane. That moment, the man turned around with a victorious smile.

Haruka thought back on what had happened and looked at her own feet. There was a cloth cord tied there.

The man was holding onto the end of the cord. Her body was drenched in gasoline. This was a fuse –

Yakumo continued walking towards her with no expression on his face.

– Yakumo-kun, don't!

Haruka's shout didn't become words.

'Honestly. You're such a pain.'

Yakumo had his finger in his ear and the usual sleepy expression on his face.

– That's not it, Yakumo-kun.

Yakumo helped Haruka up from where she had collapsed on the floor.

The man had reached Masato. Then, he turned around and, though he didn't laugh aloud, he was definitely smiling.

The man took out a lighter. It's dangerous –

Haruka squirmed frantically.

'Like I said, you're such a pain.'

Yakumo took the packing tape off Haruka's mouth all at once. It hurt, but it wasn't the time for that.

'My body's doused in gasoline! A fuse is attached to my foot! Run! Get away from me!'

In response to Haruka's frantic scream, Yakumo smirked and said one thing –

'I know.'

'Eh?'

The man lit the cord.

The fire ran towards them.

Yakumo picked Haruka up and then threw her.

She felt like her body was floating when she landed in the water.

Water rushed in through her nose. Her hands and legs were bound. She was going to drown like this.

She was struggling when her feet reached the pool's bottom. When she stood up, her chest and up was out of the water.

This was an elementary school pool. An adult could stand normally, so she wouldn't drown.

Yakumo reached out from the side of the pool and pulled Haruka out.

Yakumo laughed as he saw Haruka, completely drenched and having a coughing fit.

What a person. Wasn't there a better way to save her? He must have done it on purpose.

'It's unfortunate. Your plot was transparent.'

Yakumo turned towards the man and looked at him with contempt. She could tell the man was

tightly gripping his right fist.

Yakumo, you can't provoke him. Masato is still there.

'Masato-kun! Run!'

Masato just looked down when Haruka yelled. He didn't make any response. Why wouldn't he run

–

'You've misunderstood something.'

Eh?'

'Did you think that I would really exchange hostages?'

'That's...'

'Don't misjudge me.'

Yakumo said just that and then turned to Masato again.

'Masato! Do it now!' Yakumo yelled.

Masato looked up at the voice. He had the face of a determined and tense man.

Masato raised the two hands that had been behind his back.

Now Haruka understood. Yakumo hadn't tied Masato's hands. He had them behind his back so it would look like that.

In Masato's hands was something that looked like a black cord. Masato threw the end of that cord to the man's feet.

There was a snapping sound.

After the man's body shook, he fell down face-up –

There was a puddle there. Masato had been holding an electric cord. So that was what they were doing. Haruka finally understood.

'I wanted to make it seem as if we came late, but I actually arranged this before the announcement,' said Yakumo as he undid the packing tape around Haruka's hands and feet.

I see –

Haruka had had nothing to worry about. Everything had been part of Yakumo's plan.

Now that her hands and feet were free, Haruka looked up to see Masato slowly approaching her.

Masato walked up to Haruka and stopped there, looking down. His shoulders were shaking slightly.

'You did really well. You lifted your curse yourself. You can cry now.'

Yakumo smiled gently as he patted Masato's head.

At that, Masato burst into tears and flew into Haruka's arms.

Haruka hugged him tightly and stroked Masato's back.

It's all right now. You don't have to hold back any more.

Haruka looked up and saw that man's face in front of her.

At some point, he had regained consciousness. His bloodshot eyes were wide open and he was shaking with anger as he raised his right hand.

He was gripping a knife.

That's –

'Let's end this already.'

Yakumo stood between Haruka and the man as a wall.

'Yakumo-kun, run.'

Yakumo turned his head at Haruka's shout and then grabbed the man's wrist. Then –

'You wanted love, right?'

He said that in a sorrowful voice.

That moment, the man's eyes, which had been glaring up until now, seemed to lose all their strength.

'You weren't loved by your mother. She abused you terribly. Though he had the same father, he lived in a completely different family environment. That's why you wanted to become Tobe Kengo.'

Haruka didn't know what was going on with this case.

However, Yakumo probably understood everything. This man might have also been carrying a terrible darkness, even if he hadn't intended on doing so.

'What do you know...'

The man said that to Yakumo's question.

Unexpectedly, his voice was hoarse and weak.

'I hate your face. I hate your voice. She said that and then hit me, kicked me, pulled my hair, burnt me with cigarettes. If I cried, she hit me again, but if I kept quiet, she kicked me. Every day, every day, every day that continued. What do you know?'

'I wasn't loved by my parents either. My mother tried to kill me.'

'Wha...'

The man looked surprised.

Yakumo was also somebody who had a dark past even though he hadn't wanted it.

'However, I can't understand your feelings at all.'

Yakumo had overcome that suffering, so the excuse 'I wasn't loved' wouldn't work.

Haruka looked up past Yakumo's back at the man's face.

His burnt cheek was twitching.

'I just wanted to live normally. Normally, without being hit or kicked. I'm just a person like everyone else, so what's wrong with that!?'

Anybody chased into painful circumstances would think the same as this man. Why is it only me –

'Is that why you killed them? You must have noticed yourself. Even if you impersonate other people, you wouldn't gain love. It's impossible to change somebody just by changing their name. You aren't Oomori Hironori or Tobe Kengo.'

'You're wrong! You're wrong!'

The man shook free of Yakumo's arms and raised the knife again while yelling.

'Then who are you?' said Yakumo sharply.

The man stopped moving. He just stared at Yakumo's eyes.

'No matter how undesirable the circumstances, people just have to live with it.'

After Yakumo said that, he took Masato's hand and made him stand up opposite the man.

'Please take a good look at this kid.'

The man looked dubious.

It was like he didn't understand what Yakumo was saying. Haruka herself wasn't sure what Yakumo was trying to do.

'This kid's mother left home with the lover she had an affair with. His father took out his anger on this kid by hitting him. Even so, this kid didn't run away – he continued living his own life.'

Masato had his hands in tight fists. That was right. This child had been burdened with terrible hardships and kept it inside himself as he fervently fought back.

'This kid suffered the same as you did, but you burdened him with more suffering. Do you understand what you've done?'

'I won't run. It's hard and it's painful, but... I won't run!' yelled Masato, squaring his shoulders.

'Aaah!'

The man howled, like he was trying to erase those words.

However, Yakumo and Masato were unfazed as they stood there.

'I will ask once more. Who are you?'

At Yakumo's last words, the hand that the man had been holding up – dropped the knife.

'I'm... Atsushi. Ushijima Atsushi...'

After the man muttered that, he crouched there and started sobbing. He looked as frail as a child being scolded by his mother.

'Everything's OK now.'

Yakumo turned back towards Haruka and held out his hand.

'Thank you.'

Haruka took Yakumo's hand and stood up.

'Masato. You did well. The curse had been lifted.'

Masato shook his head at Yakumo's words. His eyes were brimming with tears.

'I tried to kill Dad. Even if I didn't actually kill him, I wanted him to die. So, so...'

Haruka didn't know the details of the case.

Nevertheless, she understood how Masato felt.

He probably participated some way in his father's death. That childish hate had sprouted from the pain of not being loved.

Haruka hugged Masato as tightly as she could.

'I said this before, OK? I... also killed somebody.'

Masato's body jolted at Haruka's words.

Haruka had thought that she was comparing Masato to Yakumo, but she had been wrong. The darkness Masato held was the same as her own.

'I killed my sister. I was jealous of my older twin sister and threw the ball a bit far away to trouble her. My sister went to get it and was hit by a car...'

She said all that at once and then looked at Masato's face.

He was biting his lower lip and looking straight at Haruka's eyes. She was able to face Masato for the first time. That was how she felt.

However, she didn't know what to say next.

'Masato. No matter who it is, everyone has some degree of hate. However, there's a big difference between people who act on it and people who don't. Do you understand?'

Yakumo expressed Haruka's feelings for her. Masato nodded.

'Masato, you might have thought it'd be OK if your dad disappeared, but you didn't want him to die. Right?'

Masato nodded.

Suddenly, Haruka saw a boy standing by the pool entrance.

It was the child who led Haruka to the classroom.

'Hey, Yakumo-kun. That child...'

For a moment, Yakumo was surprised by what Haruka said, but then he had his usual sleepy expression on his face.

'You can see him too?'

Yakumo took a pause before continuing.

'That's the kid who died in the fire twenty-eight years ago. The real Tobe Kengo. He finally got back the name that was stolen for him. Though it's a bit late...'

That boy smiled from cheek to cheek and then disappeared.

Then, a burnt Ultraman doll fell where the boy had been standing.

Haruka didn't understand what Yakumo said.

That kid had probably been released from what had been binding him. That was how she felt –

終章

その後

EPILOGUE

## epilogue

-

A week after that terrible case –

Ishii was at the university in front of the door to the <Movie Research Circle>.

He was divided as to whether or not he should open this door. He still hadn't organised his feelings.

'Come in.'

There was a voice from the other side of the door.

It appeared that Yakumo had already noticed Ishii's visit. Ishii drew up his courage and opened the door timidly.

Yakumo welcomed Ishii with a yawn.

'H-hello. Sorry for intruding.'

Ishii made his greetings as he stepped inside.

'Well, please sit down.'

Ishii sat on the chair opposite Yakumo as he was told.

Ishii's goal for today was to report the case's progress. However, the truth was that the case was so complicated he didn't know where to begin.

The police still hadn't made an official announcement. Or rather, they couldn't.

That was how strange this case was.

The newspapers and television news channels had been throwing around speculations – it was out of control.

There were headings in sports news like 'Monster born from the flames!' on the front page. Ishii thought it was pertinent, in a way.

'So, what became of the situation afterwards?'

Yakumo brought up the topic, as if he had seen through what Ishii had been thinking about in his head.

'Ah, yes, Ushijima Atsushi confessed – perhaps he is resigned.'

His confession had been shocking –

Twenty-eight years ago, he switched places with his classmate Tobe Kengo at the fire.

He had gazed enviously at the completely different environment Kengo lived in, even though they had been born to the same father, and said that his name was Tobe Kengo when he was saved from the fire and asked his name.

That had probably been a child's frivolous lie.

However, Tobe Masashi's strange position regarding the inheritance, Ushijima's burnt face and the way everyone treated it – these various factors piled up and Ushijima ended up living as Tobe Kengo.

But then, Masashi was diagnosed with cancer and didn't have much longer to live. He might have felt guilty, because it seemed like he would reveal everything.

That was why he killed him –

In order to run away from that crime, Ushijima thought that he had to become another person again.

He borrowed Anna's help to escape and tried to become Oomori Hironori, his old classmate.

He tempted Masato, Oomori's son and made him out to be an accomplice. He killed Hironori, made it look like his own corpse and burnt it.

Since he'd had to cut off his own left hand to do that, it was unusual tenacity.

'Has the investigation into the teacher called Komai been going well?'

Yakumo ran a hand through his messy hair.

'Yes. Ushijima confessed to killing her and making it look like a suicide.'

'Is that so?' murmured Yakumo, looking up at the ceiling.

Now that I think about it, the teacher called Komai was unlucky. She'd committed no crime. She was Hironori's lover – that's all –

She had been concerned about Masato, who was in low spirits at school, and so Komai went to visit the Oomori home. That was the start of their relationship.

The two had been engaged and had been going to announce it soon.

Ushijima hadn't know that, so Komai got in his way when she persistently visited the Oomori home after she lost contact with her lover.

They had hidden their relationship from everyone since they were teacher and guardian. That was their ruin.

If that had been public knowledge – if Ushijima had known that from the beginning – Oomori Hironori probably wouldn't have been the target.

Masato's family situation would have been vastly different as well, and he wouldn't have had to suffer.

'Honestly, what a selfish man.'

There was weight to the words Yakumo spat out.

'Selfish... is it?'

'That man is terribly selfish and empty. That's why he could do what he did. He isn't Oomori Hironori, Tobe Kengo or even Ushijima Atsushi.'

That might have been the case. When things turned out badly for that man, he impersonated someone else as his cover.

Even though doing that won't change who he actually is –

An empty man. A man who isn't anybody –

'Er, there is one thing I don't understand.'

Ishii adjusted the position of his glasses with his fingers and looked straight at Yakumo.

'The vice principal, Konno-san.'

Yakumo's head really did work quickly. Ishii nodded.

Konno was arrested because a video camera and peeping videos were found in his desk.

What I don't understand is why he was there and what role he had –

'I didn't think he was related to this case at all.'

'He played an important part in this case. You probably know already, but he had taken videos with a hidden camera. Do you know where?'

'The locker room at the pool.'

The moment he said it aloud, Ishii realised what role Konno had played.

'It appears you understand.'

'Yes.'

'The camera was probably fixed there. When it sensed people passing, it would start filming. I think that was how it was set up.'

Summer had ended so the pool wasn't used any more, but for some reason, Konno had collected the camera.

'Ushijima thought his crime might have been recorded on that camera.'

'Exactly. Masato-kun, as directed by Ushijima, went to try to steal that video from the vice principal, who thought that he had been caught...'

So there had been a number of misunderstandings.

'This is somewhat complicated.'

'Well, what Konno-sensei did is shameful on a human level, but this time, it appears that he solved the case.'

'Eh, is that so?'

Ishii's eyes narrowed as he looked at Yakumo's face.

'Without that video, Ushijima would already have left town. He wouldn't have made Masato-kun do something as dangerous as try to steal the video.'

Now that I think about it, that might be the case.

But still –

'Well, that doesn't make what he has done forgivable.'

Yakumo smiled wryly as he said that, like he'd seen through what Ishii was thinking.

'I feel refreshed now.'

The tense muscles in Ishii's cheek relaxed.

'Ishii-san, the following investigation will be difficult for you, won't it? '

Ishii couldn't look at Yakumo, so he averted his gaze.

This case had been solved because of Yakumo.

However, there were still several details that were unclear, and they still had to gather evidence for the case.

As Yakumo said, the police had to do the following investigation. However, Ishii wasn't to be a part of it.

He'd requested a holiday from Miyagawa.

He'd thought that Miyagawa would yell at him for doing this at such a busy time, but Miyagawa told him to take the time off to think, like he sensed how Ishii was feeling.

I'm not fit to be a detective –

Ishii realised that painfully this case.

He couldn't continue just because he wanted to. Everyone had fields of work they were suited and unsuited for.

It was his fault Gotou ended up that way. He didn't know how he would apologise to Gotou's wife.

'Ishii-san, there was no preventing what happened this time.'

To Ishii, who had been silent and caught up in his thoughts, Yakumo's words only sounded like a consolation.

'No... it really was my fault. If I were more reliable...'

Ishii tried to reply, but he didn't know what to say.

'If I were plotted against that way, I might have been tricked myself.'

That was what Yakumo said, but Ishii didn't think so.

Yakumo would definitely have noticed that she was an imposter. Even though he didn't meet her even once, he saw through her –

They found the real Sasaki Anna after that. She'd been on vacation in America.

Originally, the psychiatrist the prosecutor requested for the psychological exam received a proper written request. Then, the psychiatrist asked Sasaki Anna, who the psychiatrist knew well, to substitute in an email.

Sasaki Anna's email address transmission settings had been changed so the email hadn't reached her.

Furthermore, the actual written request to the psychiatrist had been proven to be made up.

Everything had been planned. It would probably have come to light eventually, but it would have been too late by then.

The woman Ishii met – her name, her age, her history – that had all been somebody else's.

It was still unclear who she actually was.

'Ishii-san, it'd be better if you had a check-up at a hospital,' said Yakumo suddenly, looking grim.

'What do you mean?'

'She probably used hypnotism. That was how Ushijima was able to escape from the guards.'

Ishii could understand the gist of what Yakumo was trying to say. He felt his chest tighten.

'Are you saying I was hypnotised?'

'This is only a possibility. Ishii-san, you might still be under hypnotic suggestion.'

Now that he thought about it, it seemed likely. He'd often felt like his sense of time was off when he went to Anna's.

The cold smile Anna had shown Ishii in the end came up in his mind.

Gooseflesh rose on his skin because it was so frightening.

At the same time, he remembered something important.

However, Ishii couldn't decide how to convey it.

'Ishii-san, what is it?' asked Yakumo, unable to remain indifferent.

'Er, um... Actually, that woman gave me a message.'

'For me?'

Even Yakumo looked surprised. He didn't seem to think there was a reason for it.

The scene from then came back as a clear image in Ishii's mind.

Ishii was handcuffed. Gotou was covered in blood on the floor. Then, Anna said this in Ishii's ear.

'Please give my regards to my cute little brother, Yakumo... That's what she said.'

Yakumo's brows furrowed, and he was clearly displeased.

Was she really Yakumo's older sister?

Ishii wanted to know, but he couldn't ask. That was how the situation felt.

Yakumo smiled bitterly as he ran a hand through his hair.

Ishii had no way of knowing what emotions were hidden behind that expression.

\* \* \*

After visiting Yakumo's secret hiding place, he went to the hospital.

He had been coming to the hospital every day since the case ended. However, he had not entered the hospital room once.

When he came to the hospital door, his feet cramped, like he was standing in front of a tightrope.

Today – today, I'll go in – that was what he told himself.

He just couldn't take that step forward, and he ended up heading back.

Gotou had to be angry –

When he thought about that, he couldn't open the door in his fear.

But today I'll go in. And I'll properly apologise. After that, I'll tell him my thoughts. That I don't have any more self-confidence –

Just as Ishii put his hand on the door, somebody called out from inside.

Is somebody there?

Ishii was frightened again just by that.

– I really don't know how to look as I meet him.

He was going to run when the door suddenly opened.

'Eek...'

Ishii swallowed his shriek and covered his mouth with both hands as he backed into the wall.

A middle-aged woman stood in the doorway.

She was a beautiful woman. She had sharp, strong features.

'You must be Ishii-san,' said the woman in a husky voice.

'Eh, ah, yes...'

Why does she know my name –

Ishii was confused, but he gave a polite reply.

'This man's been waiting this whole time for you to come, Ishii-san.'

'For me...'

Ishii understood at this point. She was probably Gotou's wife.

'Yes. It might be a bother for you, but please go for his sake, since he's been making such a fuss about it.'

The woman smiled mischievously and walked down the corridor.

'Oi! Ishii! Hurry up and come in!'

Gotou's angry shout echoed in Ishii's ears as he stared blankly at Gotou's wife as she left.

I was noticed –

Now there was no way for him to escape. Resigned, Ishii went into the hospital room.

'Sit down!'

Ishii obeyed Gotou's order, still looking down, and sat on the round chair by the bed.

He didn't know what to do, so he just made himself look small.

'I heard that you asked for a holiday.'

Gotou suddenly brought up the main topic.

A cold sweat ran down Ishii's body. He just nodded.

'You idiot! If you've got the time to be thinking about stupid things like that, go move around! Move! This is why you're a fool!'

Ishii shut his eyes tightly and accepted Gotou's angry shouts as they came down on him.

That's right. I'm a big fool. That's why – I can't cause any more trouble.

'I'm going to train you from scratch again, you fool, so you'd better prepare yourself!'

Ishii looked up at Gotou's words.

Instead of abandoning somebody like me, he's going to train me from scratch – even though he suffered so much because of me, he still –

Tears started falling from Ishii's eyes.

'What are you crying about? It's creepy. And it's a hundred years too early for a fool like you to take a holiday. Help Chief Miyagawa out 'til I get back. I already told him about it.'

Thank you very much.

In Ishii's head, he said the same words again and again.

'You're supposed to reply if you understand!'

Gotou's fist fell on Ishii's head.

'Yes sir!'

Ishii stood up and bowed, biting down on his lower lip.

'What are you sticking around for!? Hurry up and go!'

'Yes sir!'

Ishii puffed out his chest, stood up straight and put Gotou's hospital room behind him.

\* \* \*

Haruka sat next to Masato on the bench at the train platform.

Masato was going to leave this town today. He was going to live with his uncle in Nagano.

Even after knowing Masato's situation, she didn't take Masato in.

She put a higher priority on her new life. It wasn't just Masato's mother – Haruka felt like this case had been the result of parents pushing their selfish actions to their children.

Still, Yakumo's late. Even though he said he'd definitely come to see him off –

Haruka had been looking for Yakumo for a while now, but she couldn't find him. She'd tried to contact his mobile too, but nobody had answered.

Parting is painful – since it was Yakumo, there was no way he'd think something sentimental like that.

He must have been late because he slept in. She should have just gone to pick him up.

Haruka looked at Masato's profile as he sat beside her.

It still looked like there was a shadow on his back. Though Yakumo lifted the curse, that didn't mean the injuries on this child's small heart had been healed.

Masato had given his father sleeping pills.

However, he'd wanted to kill him. He'd probably carry that weight with him for his whole life. Like I did –

'Masato-kun, do your best when you get to your new school.'

Masato nodded expressionlessly.

He really was down. Haruka touched Masato's shoulder, but then he stood up as if to escape that.

'I'm going.'

After Masato declared that, he walked towards the gate to the Shinkansen<sup>1</sup> he was waiting for.

Haruka couldn't think of anything to say as she watched his retreating back.

She really was useless.

'Hey.'

Yakumo blocked Masato's path.

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1 The Shinkansen is a system of high-speed railway lines run by JR. They are sometimes called bullet trains.

He's finally here –

Masato stopped and looked up at Yakumo.

Yakumo looked as sleepy as usual as he brought his face close to Masato's ear and opened his mouth.

'Masato. Let's make a promise...'

Just then, a train came in at the opposite platform, drowning out the words after that.

She didn't know what Yakumo had said.

She just saw that Masato looked clearly happier as he smiled, showing his white teeth.

Masato stretched his arm out and waved at Haruka. When Haruka saw that truly happy smile, she naturally smiled and waved back.

It's the first time I've seen that child smile like that –

It's like I had no space to enter. I can't make Masato smile like that. Yakumo did it so easily.

I really might not be suited for being a teacher.

Finally, Masato ran to get on the train, sat at the window and looked out at her.

The bell rang to announce the train's departure.

Next to Yakumo, Haruka ran along with the train as they saw Masato off.

– Do your best. You'll definitely be OK.

Haruka whispered that in her heart.

Finally, Haruka couldn't see the train, let alone Masato.

'Hey, Yakumo-kun, do you think I was able to do something for that child?'

Yakumo raised an eyebrow and seemed displeased as he looked at Haruka, with her hands pressed against her chest.

'How stupid are you?'

'What do you mean, stupid?'

Honestly. Why did this person say such things when she was seriously troubled?

'I said stupid because you are stupid. The way you say it, it's like you'll never see Masato again.'

Now that he'd said that to her, she felt it was right.

She might have felt like everything had finished.

'From now on, Masato will suffer, knowing he drove his father to his death. Are you going to let Masato suffer by himself?'

Haruka felt like she had been stabbed. She really was stupid, just as Yakumo said.

'In that sense, Masato's curse hasn't been lifted. That's why I made Masato a promise earlier.'

'A promise?'

'That I'd go with you to visit him some time soon.'

Haruka looked up in surprise. That was why Masato had smiled.

That was right. She could meet Masato again.

No, Haruka had promised Masato that she'd lift the curse. She had to watch over him until his heart healed.

'Thank you.'

When Haruka said that, Yakumo looked displeased again.

'It's creepy when you thank me sincerely. What are you planning?'

Could this person even honestly accept somebody's feelings?

'I'm not planning anything. But...'

Yakumo walked away briskly, not listening to what Haruka was saying. Honestly –

Haruka hurriedly followed Yakumo.

-

Haruka didn't realise that the next case had already started then –

添付ファイル

写真

E X T R A FILE

## extra file: photograph

-

It was a few days after the case at the school –

-

He'll probably complain again, saying I've brought him trouble –

I stood in front of the <Movie Research Circle> door with heavy feelings.

I took the photo out of the envelope and looked at it again.

It was a photo taken in front of a cherry blossom tree for an elementary school graduation album. Smiling children stood in rows.

At first glance it wasn't noticeable, but when I look carefully, I can see a child I know by the cherry blossom tree.

A boy between elementary and middle school age in a gym uniform.

His whole body is blurry, like he's covered by mist –

It was spirit photography, but it didn't feel terrifying. He just looked sad, like he had been left out.

When the sixth-grade teacher asked me to show my exorcist friend, I didn't refuse, since I felt like I couldn't leave this alone.

I know I'm just being meddlesome. But –

I put the photo back in the envelope, prepared myself and opened the door.

'Hey.'

'You again? I don't mind that you've got so much free time, but don't bother me.'

Yakumo sighed – he was clearly fed up already – and ran a hand through his messy hair.

I wanted to retort, but I was in a situation where I couldn't press my luck.

'It's not like I planned to bother you... I just... er...'

I sat opposite him and glanced at Yakumo's face as I put the envelope on the table.

After he yawned, he rubbed his face with a fist. He was just like a cat.

'Hey, will you listen to this?'

'I don't want to listen.'

'What do you mean by that?'

'It's just some more trouble, right?'

'That's...'

He really was sharp.

'Honestly. Why do you always pick up trouble?'

'It's not like I picked it up. But somebody asked me...'

And Yakumo was partly responsible too.

He'd told Yokouchi that he was an exorcist when they met during the case, so now there was a rumour that I was acquainted with an exorcist. That was why I ended up with spirit photography.

'It's your fault for letting your guard down.'

'Hey, what do you mean by that?'

'That guy probably took you lightly, thinking everything would work out if he just pushed his troubles to you.'

'Take me lightly...'

'You're so obtuse it oozes out of you.'

He just said whatever he wanted.

I came here because I wanted to ask him for help, but I couldn't stand it anymore.

'Fine. I'll do something about it myself.'

I hit the table with both hands and stood up.

I thought he'd be a bit surprised, but Yakumo's eyes were as sleepy as ever. I felt silly, and my anger deflated like a popped balloon.

I left the <Movie Research Circle> room with slumped shoulders.

I'd had a faint hope that he might come out after me so I walked slowly, but all I felt was a dry wind pass me by.

He's heartless –

-

I stood in front of the cherry blossom tree in the elementary school's courtyard.

Right now, it was just branches since the leaves had fallen off, but when the season came, it would have new buds and be in full bloom.

The picture had been taken around here, if I remembered correctly.

Anyway, I'd come to the scene, but the truth was I didn't know what to do next.

– If I only I could see them.

I put my hand in my jacket pocket, since I wanted to check the photo again.

'Eh?'

I thought I put it in here – it wasn't in my breast pocket or my bag.

– Did I drop it?

'Is this what you're looking for?'

I almost jumped when somebody suddenly called out to me. I turned around and saw Yakumo standing there.

In his hand was that photo.

'Why are you here, Yakumo-kun?'

'That's why I said you're obtuse.'

'Shut up.'

'You forgot this in my room earlier.'

That's right. I brought it to the room to show Yakumo. I left it on the table and came here.

But –

'How'd you know I was here?'

Yakumo shook his head, like he was exasperated.

'You said you'd do something yourself. Since it's you, like the blockhead you are, you thought that you would be able to do something about it if you went to the scene.'

The way he said it was so irritating. I wanted to complain, but I couldn't talk back since it was unfortunately just as he said.

'That's right. I'm the one at fault.'

'As long as you know that.'

I took the photo back from Yakumo, angry at how proud he was acting.

Even after Yakumo handed over the photo, he didn't leave. He stared at the cherry blossom tree like something had caught him.

'What is it?'

I tried asking him, but Yakumo started walking to the cherry blossom tree instead of replying.

I realised from that action. Yakumo's eyes saw something.

The wind was blowing –

The branches shook. They sounded like somebody was whispering.

'I've got a request for you.'

After a silence, Yakumo said just that.

'What?'

'Is there a reference room in this school?'

'The room beside the staff room is the reference room, but...'

'There's something I want you to look for.'

'You're not going to come with me?'

Yakumo raised an eyebrow, looking displeased.

'I'm an outsider. Of course I can't go in the school building.'

Even though he'd gone in with no problems last case. He probably just thought it was a pain.

'Then what should I look for?'

'Something that kid left behind.'

After Yakumo said that, he looked at the cherry blossom tree again.

In the end, I went to the reference room myself.

I got the key in the staff room by lying about how I needed to look something up, and then I went to the room beside the staff room.

The room had no windows so it was a bit suffocating. There were racks surrounding the room, and cardboard boxes with labels for the years were lined up on them.

Yakumo had instructed me to look through last year's Class 6-2 box.

I found it right away. Will what he wants really be here – I was doubtful as I opened it.

Dust flew up. Inside, there was a pile of documents.

'OK.'

I put the cardboard box on the floor and started looking through its contents.

There were a bunch of documents – test papers, compositions – but I couldn't find anything that looked like what I was looking for.

Yakumo didn't say anything, but there'd definitely been a child's ghost there.

I remembered the sad expression I'd seen in the photo.

I wonder why that child is wandering –

That wouldn't do. I could think about that later. I had to look first.

'There it is.'

Finally, I found what I was looking for. It was at the bottom of the box.

I thought it'd be in worse condition, but it was kept unexpectedly well.

OK, now things were good.

I was just about to leave the reference room when my mobile rang.

'Hello.'

<Have you found it?>

It was from Yakumo. His timing was so good it was like he'd been watching her.

'Yup, it was there.'

<Could you bring that to the temple?>

'The temple? Where?'

<Have you already forgot that my house is a temple?>

'I didn't understand since you didn't explain properly.'

In my irritation, I hung up.

-

The yellow leaves of the ginkgo trees made the road narrower.

Isshin's temple was at the top of this sloping road.

When I reached the gate, out of breath, Yakumo came out from the shadow of a pole.

'You're late.'

Can't he say something better –

'What? It's 'cause I was helping a bit.'

'You're the one who were asked to do this, right? You should be grateful that I'm even helping.'

'Ah, yes, of course.'

'I also had a number of things to prepare myself.'

What did he have to prepare?

'So where is it?'

'Here.'

I lifted up what I found in the reference room for Yakumo to see.

'Well done.'

Right after he said that, Yakumo turned around.

There was no point doing anything for this guy.

'Oh, Haruka-chan.'

Somebody called out to me, so I looked over.

Isshin stood there in priest's robes.

'Hello. I apologise for the last time I came.'

I remembered what happened during the last case and hurriedly looked down.

'What? It's nothing to worry about.'

Isshin laughed pleasantly. His expression really was relaxing.

'Leave the chitchat at that and hurry up.'

Yakumo said that sullenly and started walking away briskly.

'That's right,' said Isshin, before he followed Yakumo.

'Isshin-san, you're coming as well?'

'I am.'

Isn't that natural? Isshin's words sounded that way.

It seemed that I was the only one who didn't understand the situation.

'Um... Where are we going?'

I spoke up to the two of them heading towards the back of the cemetery.

'You still don't understand?'

Yakumo's gaze when he glanced behind him was clearly scornful.

Even if he looked at me like that, I wouldn't understand the things I didn't understand. I thought he might explain, but Yakumo walked forward silently.

I walked down the narrow road through the cemetery without knowing a thing.

Finally, Yakumo and Isshin stopped in front of a gravestone.

There was a gravestone that had Sano Family engraved on it, and beside it was a jizo statue<sup>1</sup>.

'This is...'

I finally understood. So that's how it is –

'Um...'

When somebody called out to us, I was so surprised I turned around.

A woman in her late thirties was standing there. She was holding a spirit tablet<sup>2</sup> like it was very important to her.

Her cheeks were hollow and there was no life in her eyes. She looked like she was wasting away.

'I apologise for calling you out so unexpectedly.'

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1 In Buddhism in Japan, Ojizo-sama (お地蔵様) is the saviour of souls suffering in the underworld. Jizo statues are put in graveyards for children who died before their parents. The parents often give them children's clothing to wear. [Here](#) are some pictures.

2 A spirit tablet or oihai (お位牌) is an effigy for a specific ancestor. [Here](#) is an example.

Isshin made a deep bow.

'No. Then...'

The woman appeared a bit confused.

'Actually, we haven't given Takeshi-kun his graduation certificate yet,' said Yakumo.

'Graduation certificate...'

'Yes. It's a bit late, but we thought we would give him the graduation certificate here. Takeshi-kun wants it as well.'

'Takeshi...'

The woman's voice was hoarse. There were tears in her eyes.

'Sensei, I leave it to you.'

When Yakumo said that, he hit me on the shoulder.

He's lying, right? He should've told me earlier. Even if he suddenly tells me to award a graduation certificate, I don't know how –

'Ah.'

I unconsciously spoke up.

For just a moment, I saw a boy standing next to the woman.

He disappeared right afterwards, but it was definitely the child from the photo. My eyes might've been playing tricks on me, but –

The child in the photo probably died from some circumstances before he graduated.

He was probably in the photo because he wanted some proof that he graduated.

That was why Yakumo pushed the graduation certificate on me.

Then, he worked together with Isshin-san to call his mother here. To have an out-of-season graduation ceremony –

For that child – when I thought that, I mysteriously calmed down.

'Sano Takeshi-kun.'

– Yes.

My ears might have been mistaken, but I heard a bright reply.

'Here, we acknowledge that you have completed the elementary school curriculum.'

While looking directly at the face of his mother, I handed her the graduation certificate with both hands.

She bit her lips tightly, bowed and took the graduation certificate. She was crying.

At first, she bit her lip to restrain herself, but she finally sat down on the floor, as if she had collapsed.

'Thank you so much. Thank you so much...'

Her shoulders shook as she repeated those words.

This is no good – I felt like I would cry too.

-

After we finished the graduation ceremony at the cemetery, I walked on the sloping road with Yakumo.

I felt like we'd done something good.

But there was still something I didn't understand.

'Yakumo-kun, how'd you find out the mother's contact info?'

'It's a public school, but there was a strong possibility that she lived nearby.'

'That so?'

Come to think of it, Isshin had said that he graduated from this school too.

'With that in mind, I checked with my uncle, and bingo.'

'Oh? But how'd you know that child's name?'

'His name was written on the gym uniform he was wearing.'

'Ah.'

Now that he mentioned it, the child in photo had been wearing a gym uniform.

'How'd you know he died last year?'

'Gut feeling.'

'Eh?'

I stopped walking in my surprise.

'I could tell his class from the gym uniform. In any case, he'd been wandering around here recently. I checked with my uncle and thought I'd share what was correct once I found out, but I was right,' said Yakumo calmly.

What a guy!

I was irritated, so I poked Yakumo in the side.

He jumped like a cat – it was cute.

I looked away from Yakumo, since it seemed he'd complain, and I continued talking.

'Why did he die?'

'Seems to have been a traffic accident. About half a year before the graduation ceremony. He was in a vegetative state and was in the hospital the whole time. In the end, he died a week after the graduation ceremony.'

Yakumo's voice sounded a bit sad.

'I see... So he didn't get his graduation certificate and couldn't be in the photo for the graduation album.'

'That's right.'

Ah, I forgot the most important part.

'What should I do about the spirit photography?'

'Just say it's an optical illusion.'

'OK, I will.'

That child wanted to be in the graduation album too.

-

When I looked up, a streak of clouds was in the clear autumn sky –

※本作はフィクションであり、実在の人物、団体等とは一切関係ありません。

## afterword

-

Thank you for reading *Psychic Detective Yakumo 4 – Feelings to Protect*.

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This time, the story was set at an elementary school.

A little before revising the manuscript for the paperback version, I unexpectedly ran into somebody I hadn't met for about twenty-odd years.

It was F-sensei, the homeroom teacher from when I was just about Masato's age.

My teacher faced everything honestly. If I were to compare him to a character in the Yakumo series, his appearance and his personality were like Gotou's.

It isn't that his fist often came down on my head or anything. It was just that he left a strong impression in my heart and became one of the teachers I could not forget.

I ended up going drinking with F-sensei, with the slight ulterior motive of gathering material.

Shoulder to shoulder with my elementary school homeroom teacher, I went to a bar with him and drank together.

Since I was an adult, there shouldn't have been a problem with my drinking alcohol, but it was mysterious how I felt like I was doing something wrong somehow.

While talking to F-sensei, I remembered a number of things –

Of course, I remembered the entrance ceremony and graduation ceremony, but I noticed something when memories of regular classes and the walk home came up in my mind.

Perhaps I had been projecting my younger self on Masato, the boy in this story.

In my childhood, I had shut myself away in a shell –

F-sensei had said this to me at the time.

'If you don't say it, people won't understand.'

It was obvious, but I feel like it was because of those words that I started speaking my opinions.

In the story, Masato was saved by meeting Yakumo and Haruka, but F-sensei was the one who broke my shell for me.

I really wanted to say thank you then, but I had been too embarrassed, so I decided to write it in my afterword.

I apologise for writing about personal matters, but please let me express my gratitude to F-sensei in this afterword.

F-sensei, thank you very much –

-

Heisei 21<sup>1</sup> January, in my hometown – Kaminaga Manabu

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1 Heisei 21 is 2009 in the Gregorian calendar.