

神
永
学



心霊探偵

八

PSYCHIC DETECTIVE

YAKUMO

MANABU KAMINAGA

霊

5

つながる想い

角川文庫

PSYCHIC DETECTIVE YAKUMO

Manabu Kamihara

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序 章

P R O L O G U E

prologue

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'Fifteen years ago, a terrible and bizarre murder occurred at this house.'

At the sign of Hoshino, the cameraman and director, Yuki, the reporter, started speaking towards the camera.

Though it was a camera, it wasn't one for business use but a home-use Handycam¹, often used when variety shows shot on location. There was nothing a late-night show with a low budget could do.

Maruyama took a cross out from the pocket of his worship clothes and gripped it with both hands.

A cold wind was blowing –

Having a psychic special at a time like this could only be a prank. However, he had to endure it. Appearing on television like this was good publicity.

Maruyama sniffled and stood firm.

'Today, not a single person has approached this house.'

Yuki looked up at the second floor and pointed. Maruyama looked up as well.

It was a huge house.

He didn't know what sort of plan the owner had had, but to put it plainly, it was creepy. The house had a pointed roof and the wooden pillars were showing.

It looked like some church from the Middle Ages. It didn't match the Japanese scenery.

'There is a rumour that a ghost lurks within this house. Is this the grudge of the murdered victim? Or did the murder occur because this house had been cursed from before?'

Yuki's almond eyes narrowed as she asked these questions.

Hoshino shook the dead branches in front of the garden as planned.

Rustle –

'The answer will be revealed tonight,' said Yuki with a hard expression.

Maruyama looked at the talent called Yuki for the first time. It was mysterious how she had never showed up on stage before.

Skin as pale as porcelain and a straight-edged nose. At first glance, she seemed tidy and trim, but the almond eyes underneath her brow looked like they were challenging men.

Her beauty would make most talents run away with their tails between their legs.

She wasn't bad at speaking either. Of course she recited her lines smoothly, but her voice had a

1 A Handycam is a brand of camcorders made by Sony. [This](#) is the Sony Japan website for it.

dignified tone to it.

'Today, the exorcist Maruyama-sensei has graced us with his presence.'

Yuki welcomed him.

Maruyama fixed the sleeves of his worship clothes, put on a quiet expression and walked into the frame in front of Yuki.

'My name is Maruyama.'

He bowed with purposeful solemnity.

'Sensei, what is your impression of this house after looking at it?'

After Yuki asked that, Maruyama gripped the cross in front of his chest and closed his eyes silently.

He counted to three in his head and then opened his eyes.

'It's strong. I feel an incredibly strong grudge.'

Maruyama turned his gaze to the house.

'So there really is a ghost in this house?'

Maruyama nodded at Yuki's words.

However, it wasn't as if he really thought that.

Of course Maruyama didn't believe in ghosts, but he didn't believe in gods or devils either. He was gripping a cross, but he thought even the miracle of Christ was idiotic.

He had been in this business for a long time, but he'd never encountered a ghost.

They were just wrong impressions and obsessions. That was what Maruyama felt.

The reason Maruyama was working as an exorcist was that it was profitable. If he said that the people who came to consult him were possessed by evil spirits, they'd pay any amount of money.

He took advantage of people's weaknesses and stole their money. Maruyama knew that he was a swindler.

'There is a spirit here. Please step away from me. It is incredibly dangerous.'

Maruyama stared at the camera as he said those words that he didn't mean.

'Yes, OK. Let's hurry to the next shoot.'

At Hoshino's sign, the camera stopped and they moved to the entrance of the house.

'OK, Yuki-chan, open the door. Then, Sensei, please head in first. We'll decide what to do next from the flow.'

After those incredibly vague instructions, Hoshi handed the key to Yuki and started filming again.

'Now, I'd like to head inside immediately.'

As Yuki said that, she put the key in the keyhole and turned it slowly.

The rusted metal made a scraping sound as the door unlocked.

Yuki looked over pressingly.

Maruyama responded with a nod and slowly pulled the doorknob.

Screech –

It sounded like fingernails on a chalkboard. In response to that, the sparrows in the dead branches let out a sharp cry and flew off all at once.

'Ah!'

Yuki let out a short scream and clung to Maruyama's arm.

Her face was pale. It was like she was actually scared. If he conducted himself well, he might make some delicious memories.

Maruyama buried his wicked thoughts in the pit of his stomach and stepped into the house.

The white light installed on the camera lit the path.

The entrance was an atrium, and the corridor led straight. To the left there was a set of stairs.

Dry leaves and dust had piled up to the point that it couldn't be distinguished from the ground. The walls had yellowed with age and parts of it were peeling off.

Even though it was winter, the air felt damp. However, that just came from the atmosphere.

Maruyama gathered his thoughts and walked straight down the corridor as instructed by Yuki and Hoshino.

Creak, creak, creak –

Every time he stepped on the ground, it creaked.

Maruyama walked to the end of the corridor and stopped.

There was a door in front of him.

'I feel great spiritual power from the other side of this door.'

Maruyama gestured at the door.

The truth was he didn't feel any spiritual power. He'd heard at the meeting that the corpse was found in the living room at the end of the corridor, so he was just matching up with that.

Slip.

There was the sound of something falling down.

Yuki was trembling convulsively.

'... W-who is it?' squeaked Yuki. She sounded like a completely different person.

'What's wrong?'

'J-just now, s-somebody touched m-my shoulder...'

Yuki's eyes were filled with tears.

Maruyama looked around, but besides Hoshino with the camera, nobody was there. Sometimes, people hallucinated things that weren't there because they were caught up by the atmosphere. Yuki was probably that type of person.

Maruyama said that to himself as his heartbeat started accelerating.

'Aahh!'

Suddenly, Hoshino yelled as he jumped.

'What is it?' asked Maruyama, acting calm.

'Just now, somebody touched my neck.'

Hoshino's eyes were wide open in shock.

Was this a joke? It had to be a hallucination. Mass hysteria or something. It was idiotic.

Click.

Maruyama looked towards the sound.

The door at the end of the corridor that had been closed up until now slowly opened –

This had to be a lie. There was no way something like this was happening. These guys were just taking Maruyama for a ride. He wouldn't be tricked.

Maruyama took deep breaths as he looked into the room.

The light shone down on the floor.

He was startled by what he saw.

The whole floor was dyed black. It was the trace of blood.

Did a murder really happen here?

'No! Stay away!'

Yuki let out a shriek and gripped Maruyama's arm so tightly it hurt.

'It's fine. I'm here.'

Yuki didn't respond to Maruyama's words at all, and her body started convulsing.

The trembling grew stronger and stronger, and she fell to her knees.

'What's wrong?'

Yuki didn't respond to Maruyama's question. She vomited right there and collapsed while clutching at her chest.

Oi, oi. This wasn't happening, right?

As if ridiculing Maruyama in his disturbed state, the lights went out.

It was so dark he couldn't see his fingers –

What was happening? What on earth had happened?

Clang, clang, clang, clang.

The sound of something hitting metal echoed.

'Aah! Stop!'

Hoshino's shout pierced Maruyama's ears.

There, there was a loud noise, but within ten seconds, there was silence.

'Hoshino-san... Hoshino-san...'

Maruyama called out to Hoshino, who had been here just now, and he put both his hands out to look for him.

Clunk.

There was the sound of something falling to the floor.

Maruyama was drenched with sweat. It was hard to breathe.

What is this feeling –

Maruyama had completely lost himself in the dark.

Something brushed Maruyama's back.

Haa, haa, haa –

Maruyama was breathing erratically. He started running, not knowing where he was going.

However, he soon tripped on something and fell forward.

He didn't feel any pain.

Anyway, he had to get out of here as soon as he could.

Maruyama raised his head as he tried to get up, and in front of his eyes – a woman's face came hazily into view.

That face was covered in blood.

He had reached his limit.

'Aaaaahh!'

Maruyama screamed and fainted.

失踪

第一章

FILE:
01

file 01: missing

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1

-

Hijikata Makoto treaded firmly along the sloping road.

The road was narrow and winding. Fallen branches narrowed the road, making it seem thick.

A wind was blowing —

She wore a down coat and gloves, but her exposed ears hurt so much it felt like they might come off.

Makoto stopped walking and turned around. The shopping district and apartment buildings looked like miniatures.

She took a hand warmer out from her pocket and put it against her cheek and ear. After she had warmed up a bit, she started walking again.

She would arrive at her destination soon.

Makoto was going to a house where a murder occurred fifteen years ago.

Her boss had instructed her through email to take photos of the scene.

If possible, she wanted to write the story. She typed a reply email along those lines, but she hadn't gotten a response.

Until half a year ago, she had been a police reporter. However, that had been because her father was the chief of police rather than because of her own ability.

To prove that, when her father resigned from the police, she was taken out of the journalism scene and put into the planning department.

There was no sense of emergency. She gathered material for suspicious articles that might not even be used and her boss assigned her tasks that were essentially odd jobs.

She was going in a considerably different direction than the one she had aimed for. However, that didn't mean she cut corners. That would make her just the daughter of the ex-chief of the police.

While Makoto was being sentimental, she saw the end of the sloping road.

She saw a house with a brick wall and black iron gate.

It was much bigger than she had imagined.

She had walked because she'd thought there would be no place to park, but she could have just driven here.

The building that imitated a Tudor Renaissance church had a pointed roof and showed its wooden

pillars.

It was in an area of heavy snowfall so it had been built to be strong against snow. A building of this sort had double walls to keep in the heat, but each of those walls was thin. It wasn't strong and didn't have good soundproofing.

So they could hear the screams outside –

Makoto took a digital camera out of her bag and took many shots, changing the angle and zooming.

She checked the images she took on the screen.

The house was built like a church. The large premises encompassed it. Coupled with the lone tree in its autumn colours in the corner of the garden, it was just like a painting.

Did a murder really occur here fifteen years ago – it made you doubt that.

It began with a report from A-ko-san who lived on the corner.

Fifteen years ago, February tenth. 12:07 AM. A-ko-san reported to the police that she heard a scream from the next house.

At the time, Nanase Kanji and his wife lived in this house, along with their eldest son Katsuaki and his wife. Katsuaki's daughter Miyuki also lived there to make five.

The Nanase family had owned the nearby land for generations. Kanji had made a name for himself as the director of the private middle school. There had even been rumours he would step into the world of politics.

The first to arrive at the scene was Detective Miyagawa, on his way back.

He met with A-ko-san at the scene and received an explanation of the events.

Miyagawa determined that it was an emergency and went to the Nanase premises to confirm the situation before reinforcement arrived.

However, there was no response. Since the front door was open, Miyagawa went inside through the entrance.

In the living room at the end of the corridor, he found the bodies of men and women who had been stabbed repeatedly –

They were Nanase Kanji and his wife and his son Katsuaki and his wife.

Just as Miyagawa was heading for the entrance to call for help, he spotted Miyuki, Katsuaki's daughter. He tried to secure her, but someone hit his head and he fainted.

Reinforcements found him collapsed in the corridor and he was taken to the hospital. Fortunately, it wasn't life threatening.

However, by the time reinforcements arrived, they couldn't find Miyuki and was thought to have been kidnapped by the perpetrator.

The investigation division was immediately mobilised, and an investigation from a robbery and enmity angle started.

Miyagawa had seen the perpetrator, so a speedy resolution had been expected, but because of his head injury, he had lost the memory of the incident.

Makoto passed the gate and walked down a brick path to the entrance.

The garden had probably had grass growing in it, but now it was knee-high with weeds.

After that case, nobody would buy this house.

Not only that – there was a rumour that you could hear screams when the time of the murder rolled around, and the first person to report the crime, A-ko-san, moved away as well.

Since nothing valuable had been stolen, the police earnestly continuing the investigation narrowed it down to possible suspects with grudges.

There were many people who disliked Nanase Kanji, so the names of many suspects came up.

Finally, they found conclusive evidence.

Fingerprints left at the scene matched one of the suspects, Takeda Shunsuke, who had been thirty at the time.

Furthermore, the victim's blood had been on the fingerprint, so it was clear that Takeda had been there after the crime occurred.

Takeda also didn't go along voluntarily for questioning from the police during the investigation.

He had no clear alibi, and they got testimony that said he had visited the victim's house on the day of the incident.

The police determined that Takeda Shunsuke was the murderer. They got an arrest warrant and went to the apartment where Takeda lived. However, Takeda had already disappeared.

A knife with the blood of the victim was found at his flat. The police put Takeda on the nationwide wanted list.

However, the earnest investigation was futile. Even now, there was no news of Miyuki, let alone any trace of Takeda.

After reaching the entrance, Makoto took another photo with her camera.

The formerly white walls were now completely yellow with age and spotted with black.

If it were raining and thundering, it would look like it had come out of a horror movie.

Creak.

There was the sound of metal on metal. When she looked over, she saw that the front door was slightly open.

But I was told that it'd be locked and I wouldn't be able to go inside –

Makoto peeked inside through the gap between the door and the wall. However, she couldn't see well in the dark.

She took out her handkerchief, wrapped it around the doorknob and slowly pulled the door open.

The outside light lit up the stairs to the second floor and the dusty corridor.

When Makoto squinted, she spotted footsteps going down the corridor.

'Is anyone here?'

Just as Makoto spoke up, there was the sound of something falling.

'Ah!'

She leapt reflexively from surprise.

– Somebody's inside.

Makoto pulled herself together and walked through the front door.

She felt something at her feet. She looked down to see a Handycam video camera.

Why's something like this here –

She stooped to pick it up when somebody passed behind her.

Something cold pierced through to her core.

Though she was terrified, Makoto slowly raised her head and looked forward.

She saw something black at the end of the hall.

What is that?

While she was thinking, that object fell sideways and changed direction.

It's a person. A woman – she was very weak and her face was pale.

Her eyes met Makoto's. Her cracked, purple lips moved slightly.

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

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2

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After orchestra circle practice ended, Haruka quickly put her beloved flute away in its case and left the music room.

She refused a friend's invitation to lunch and headed on foot to the prefabricated two-storey building in the back of Building B.

Each floor of the building was lined with ten small rooms which were lent out for circle activity use by the university.

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

There was a plate on the door which read <Movie Research Circle>, but that was just a cover – no circle activities were held.

Here stayed the eccentric man Saitou Yakumo. He had tricked the school and was living here.

Normally, he hid it with a colour contact lens, but Yakumo's left eye was red and had the unique ability to see the spirits of the dead.

Haruka had first met Yakumo about a year ago –

She had become acquainted with him when he helped her with her friend Miki, who had been possessed by a ghost.

Every time she met up with him, he complained, saying things like 'Do you have nothing better to do?' and 'Are you an idiot?' , but to Haruka, being together with Yakumo was as natural and comfortable as watching television with her family.

Perhaps it was because she didn't have to pretend with him.

Still, why was it?

Her heart was beating wildly and her palms were sweaty. Why was she nervous to meet him?

It wasn't that difficult. She just had to say one thing: 'We're putting on a performance soon, so come if you have the time.'

Since it was him, he'd just say something like 'I refuse' and that'd be the end of it.

She was nervous because she had strange hopes. But if she knew she was going to get rejected, why was she asking – she didn't know herself.

The only reason she felt strange now was because she had been thinking about bringing up that topic.

And what would happen if he came to the performance anyway? It didn't matter anymore. Haruka forced the contradiction within her to the pit of her stomach and forcefully opened the door.

Yakumo's here –

He sat in his usual chair and had sleepy eyes and messy hair as usual. Even though he was inside a room, he was wearing a down coat and was shivering.

He could just buy a heater. That was what Haruka thought, but she didn't say it aloud. He'd definitely say 'Then you buy one' if she did.

'H-hey.'

Haruka greeted him in a bright voice and sat in the opposite chair.

Yakumo raised his left eyebrow in response. He looked displeased, like a cat that had had its nap disturbed.

'Yes, yes, I have a lot of time on my hands,' said Haruka before he could say anything.

How about that? Was he stumped? Haruka could tell what Yakumo wanted to say easily now that she'd known him for a year.

Yakumo scratched his head, put his chin in his hands and looked the other way, seeming irritated that his line was stolen from him.

He was sulking.

'So what trouble do you have for me today?' asked Yakumo with a yawn.

'Stop making it sound like I'm a troublemaker.'

Yakumo spread his hands wide and shook his head exaggeratedly.

'Do you know how many times you've brought trouble to me?'

'That's... I've asked you for help a number of times, but...'

'Five times in a year. Do you understand? Even Michael Jackson doesn't make as much fuss as you do. If you're not a troublemaker, who is?'

Yakumo smirked triumphantly.

'I'm just going to say this, but I didn't bring trouble this time,' said Haruka sharply.

'If it isn't trouble, what are you hiding?'

He really was sharp.

'I-I'm not hiding anything... Why do you think that?'

'Replying to a question with a question is against the rules.'

'You're saying that? That's your special ability, Yakumo-kun.'

Yakumo's cheek twitched and he had an unpleasant expression on his face.

'I said this before, but when you come into the room saying something like "Hey" in a bright voice, it's usually trouble. You force yourself to act cheerful because you've got a guilty conscience.'

What did he mean, guilty conscience?

It really riled her up.

'I don't have a guilty conscience.'

'Then what did you come here for?'

'There's a performance coming up and I just thought I'd ask you to come if you have time.'

She'd ended up saying that in a strong tone.

'Performance? Whose?'

Yakumo's brow was furrowed and he looked grim, like he was facing the mystery of the century.

'Mine.'

'Yours?'

'Didn't I mention this before? I'm in the orchestra circle.'

'I know that. But I don't understand...'

Yakumo crossed his arms like he was pondering something.

'What don't you understand?'

'The reason I would go to your performance.'

The way he said it, it was like he was thinking about the motive behind a murder.

'Obviously it's because we're friends.'

Yakumo's eyes went wide at Haruka's words, like he was surprised.

'Friends? Who?'

'Me and you, Yakumo-kun. Was I wrong...?'

When he said it like that, she felt a bit anxious.

What on earth did Yakumo think of her anyway? Did he really think of her just as a troublemaker?

It was true that she'd brought him a lot of trouble up until now. But she'd done a lot of other things too. She'd helped out with investigations before, and –

Haruka sighed. She didn't care anymore.

She lay down on the table and glared up at Yakumo's face. He was still thinking.

'Even though I thought we were friends all this time...'

She hadn't planned on saying that, but it just came out.

It felt like tears were going to come out too.

'You and I are friends, eh... I've never thought about that.'

Yakumo covered his eyes and scratched at his cheek, like he felt awkward.

Come to think of it, Yakumo had said before that there were only two types of people in this world: those who were afraid of him and those who used him.

He'd been treated badly because of his unique ability ever since he was young. Because of that trauma, he'd built a wall in his heart to separate him from other people.

The decisive event concerned his mother.

When Yakumo was young, his mother tried to kill him. A detective, Gotou, had happened to pass by the scene and saved him. Though Yakumo's life had been saved, his heart had been fatally wounded.

In one year, Haruka had thought she'd gotten a bit closer to Yakumo, but she might have been the only one who thought that way.

'It's fine. I'm leaving.'

Haruka put a smile on her face and stood up.

'When is it?'

Yakumo scratched at the tip of his nose with his finger.

'Eh?'

'Didn't you hear me? I asked what date the performance is on.'

Haruka's expression became less stiff.

'Next Saturday.'

Haruka leant forward in her excitement.

'Where?'

'The school hall.'

'If by some chance I am so bored I could die then and happen for some reason to be nearby, I might go.'

What a roundabout way of saying it. He really wasn't honest at all. But Haruka was happy.

That contrary Yakumo had agreed to her invitation.

'Got it. Come if you're so bored you could die. I'll bring a ticket next time.'

She felt like she had gotten closer to Yakumo, just a tiny bit.

'It's creepy, so wipe that grin off your face now.'

Yakumo frowned at her like he was looking at something dirty.

This person really – wasn't honest.

-

3

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He was really riled up.

Gotou leant back in the passenger seat of the car. He lit his cigarette and threw the lighter at the dashboard.

In the driver's seat, Ishii adjusted the position of his silver-framed glasses with his finger and turned his frightened gaze towards Gotou.

'What're you looking at?'

Gotou's words were close to a threat. Ishii hurriedly looked away.

'Ah, no, nothing in...'

Ishii was flustered, as he always was.

'Say it clearly!'

'Ah, yes sir. Er, you appear to be rather angry...'

Gotou's anger flared up again at Ishii's words.

The Unsolved Cases Special Investigations Room that Gotou was assigned to was under the jurisdiction of the police. His work was meant to be the investigation of unsolved cases, as per the name.

However, the instructions this time were for the investigation of a suspicious character near a building that was being demolished.

This was supposed to be the work of uniformed officers at the police station. Since Chief Miyagawa had directly given these instructions, he had to be making them do this on purpose.

He either thought they had a lot of free time or didn't like them.

'Aren't you riled up?'

'Chief Miyagawa is being considerate.'

Ishii was as optimistic as usual.

'Considerate?'

'Yes. Recently, we've just been organising documents so we haven't had a chance to go out.'

'How's that being considerate?'

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

Ishii's shoulders went up, like a turtle hiding in his shell.

'What? Just say it already.'

Gotou grabbed Ishii's neck.

'No, er, Chief Miyagawa said that recently you... were... er...'

Ishii's mouth was moving, but Gotou didn't hear the important part.

The guy wasn't reliable at all.

'Say it clearly!'

Gotou's fist paid Ishii's head a visit.

Aaack –

Ishii let out a scream like a cat that had had its tail stepped on. Maybe Gotou would grab him by

the collar too.

'That is, er, Miyagawa said that he'd send you out for some exercise...'

'Am I a dog? Don't make it sound like he's taking me for a walk.'

'No, but...'

'What?'

'Chief Miyagawa said that ever since you were hospitalised, Detective Gotou, er... you've gotten fat...'

– Fat.

Gotou looked at his own belly.

There wasn't too much of it, but it wasn't slim. He'd gone up two belt holes. His shirt buttons wouldn't close. His slacks were snug.

He pinched his belly. It was as soft as touching a marshmallow. It felt kind of nice.

'What do you think?'

Gotou looked towards Ishii for his opinion.

'What do I think about what?'

Ishii repeated the question, acting confused.

When the bastard actually knows already –

'Did I, er... get fat?' said Gotou with a cough.

'Honestly?'

'Honestly.'

'You won't hit me?'

'Just get to the point!'

Ishii gave him a distrustful gaze, but he reluctantly opened his mouth.

'I feel that there may be significantly more weight to you than there was before.'

He said it politely, but the meaning didn't change.

Gotou reflexively raised a fist towards Ishii. Ishii's shoulders stiffened as he let out a strange shriek.

'Y-you promised that you wouldn't hit me, didn't you?'

'I haven't hit you yet, right!?!'

Gotou glared at Ishii and used his raised hand to scratch his head.

'Am I that much fatter?'

While throwing his cigarette into his portable ashtray, he repeated his question.

'No, it isn't anything to worry about. Don't bears eat large amounts before hibernating in the winter? In order to survive the winter, they need a lot of fat...'

Gotou couldn't hold back any more. Who cared about a stupid promise?

Gotou hit Ishii's head with his fist.

'What do you mean, bear!? Hibernation!? You fool!'

His yell rang through the car. Gotou grabbed Ishii's collar and shook him.

'Detective Gotou, please stop it. It's dangerous.'

'Shut up! You keep going on and on...'

Before Gotou finished speaking, Ishii stepped on the brakes. Gotou tried to brace himself in his unnatural stance, but he fell forward and hit his head against the dashboard.

'Don't step on the brakes all of a sudden!'

He gave Ishii's thin chest a horizontal chop.

'E-er, Detective Gotou, we've arrived,' said Ishii, looking pained as he gripped his chest.

Gotou looked – they had arrived, just as Ishii said.

Around the premises, there were plates that had construction dates and contact information printed on them.

Gotou snorted and got off the car.

It's cold –

The cold felt like it went right to his heart.

While breathing out white puffs of air, Gotou went to the galvanised sheet iron door and opened it, entering the premises.

It was an iron and concrete five-storey building.

Including the premises, it was probably about three hundred tsubo¹. The inside demolition work was done, but the outer wall was completely untouched.

In the corner of the premises, the demolished rubble had piled up.

Gotou passed through the overgrown premises and stood in front of the building's front entrance. The door had already been taken off.

He avoided the cords that hung down like ivy and went through the entrance.

The revealed concrete was cracked and the floor was covered in dust. The ceiling boards showed through as well.

1 A tsubo is a unit of measurement used for buildings and is equivalent to 3.31 square metres.

Crack.

He'd stepped on some glass.

Thanks to that, memories that had been buried deep in Gotou's mind suddenly came up again.

I've come here before –

Fifteen years before – on a night when it was raining buckets.

Gotou had been a uniformed detective at a police station when somebody had told him a kid was going to be killed. Then, he'd headed for this building.

I'd had a bad feeling –

When he went inside the building with a torch, he spotted a woman's crouching back.

That woman had been bent over, strangling a kid.

He stopped her, though she resisted violently, and finally he was able to get the woman to get away from the kid. However, before he'd noticed, the woman had disappeared.

He found this out later, but the woman had tried to kill her own kid.

The words the woman had said then were still fresh in his ears.

– This child will kill! If I don't kill him now, he'll kill, just like him.'

Gotou still didn't know why she'd thought a baby would become a killer in the future.

All he knew was that the kid from then had grown into a bratty young man.

That guy was still living with the burden of that event.

'What is it?'

Ishii called out to him, bringing Gotou back to reality.

'Nothing. Let's go.'

Cutting off the thread to the past, Gotou went deeper into the building.

When he reached the pillar at the very back of the building, Gotou spotted something. He crouched and picked it up.

A puff of white dust came up.

'Is that a... blanket?'

Ishii peered from behind Gotou.

'Yeah.'

'Was somebody here?'

'Looks that way.'

Besides the blanket, empty cans were strewn about.

Had construction workers left it behind, or was somebody else living here?

Gotou put the blanket on the floor and stood up.

Thump.

There was the sound of something falling.

Gotou instinctively looked to the building's entrance.

A man was standing there.

He wore a green half-length coat with jeans and had a heavy-looking Boston bag on his shoulders.

Was this the guy who was living here?

'We're from the Setamachi precinct. We've got a few things we want to ask you.'

Gotou held up his police ID and approached the man.

Then, he saw the man's face clearly. A slightly wide face with thick eyebrows. Sharp eyes that looked straight forwards.

I've seen this face before. Where was it –

'Ah! Aah!'

Ishii shouted in Gotou's ear, interrupting his thoughts.

'You're so loud!'

Gotou smacked the back of Ishii's head.

'B-but.'

Ishii was still agitated.

'But what?'

'Isn't that Takeda Shunsuke?' Ishii said quickly.

'Takeda Shunsuke? The soccer player?'

'That's incorrect. And you're mixing up the players' names.'

'Then who is it?'

'Fifteen years ago, he was the suspect for the brutal murder at the house on top of the hill – Takeda Shunsuke!'

Ishii stamped his feet in irritation as he shouted.

The man looked taken aback by Ishii's words.

Gotou thought about that case. He hadn't been directly related since he'd still been working at a

police station then, but he'd seen that face on the wanted list a number of times.

It did look like him.

'Oi. You Takeda Shunsuke?'

When Gotou asked that, the man turned around and ran off.

'Wait!'

Gotou ran right after Takeda.

Damn it! Why hadn't he noticed earlier!? Ishii had had to tell him – he'd never been more ashamed in his life!

Gotou ran off the premises and turned at the first corner when his side started hurting.

It was hard to breathe. His body felt heavy.

Ishii passed Gotou as he was trying to stand up.

Damn! Why did he have to be passed by the fool Ishii!? He could still run!

Gotou tried to up his pace, but his feet were as heavy as if they were in water. Finally, he sank to the floor.

He had only run two hundred metres, so why was he like this? What had happened to his body?

Gotou forced himself to stand up and started running again, though he was staggering.

After passing the second intersection, he saw Ishii's back.

Ishii was frantically looking around a dead-end road.

'Ishii? Where's the guy?'

– Haa, haa, haa.

Gotou put both hands on his knees and was panting like a dog as he asked.

'That's... I saw him turn into this street, but – '

Ishii was restless as he answered.

'Did you lose him?'

'Rather than lose him... er... he disappeared.'

'Disappeared!?'

'Yes.'

In his anger, Gotou grabbed Ishii's collar.

'There's no way somebody could disappear! I'll beat you up if you make stupid excuses!'

'I-I apologise,' said Ishii, his face twitching.

Gotou thought about giving Ishii a punch, but his body was at its limit. His knees lost their strength and he sank to the ground.

Sweat was coming down his forehead like somebody had splashed him with a bucket of water.

– Even though I definitely would've been able to catch him before.

'Damn it!'

Gotou howled towards the sun.

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4

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When Makoto went into the hospital room, the woman on the bed slowly opened her eyes.

It was the woman who had fainted at the scene of the murder fifteen years ago.

After Makoto found her, she immediately called for an ambulance to take her to the hospital.

She was very weak, but there were no obvious injuries and she was clearly conscious. She could be let out of hospital after two or three days of treatment. Now, she had an IV drip with nutrients.

'Are you all right?'

When Makoto spoke to her, the woman tried to sit up.

'Please don't strain yourself.'

Makoto urged the woman to lie down and sat on the round chair by the bed.

'You saved me. Thank you very much,' said the woman in a hoarse voice.

'I was just passing by,' said Makoto as she shook her head. She looked at the woman's face again.

She had a pencil-straight nose and almond-shaped eyes. Though her makeup had come off, she was still very attractive.

'My name is Murakami Yuki.'

'I'm Hijikata Makoto.'

'Why were you at that place?'

The woman asked the question first.

'I work at a newspaper agency. I was gathering material on the case that happened fifteen years ago.'

'So that's why you were there...'

Yuki nodded in understanding.

From that reaction, it seemed like Yuki knew that something had happened there in the past.

'Murakami-san, why were you there?'

Yuki's expression stiffened at Makoto's question. It seemed like she didn't want to say.

Makoto couldn't force somebody to speak when they'd just met, so she looked for another conversation topic.

'I work as a television reporter,' said Yuki, breaking the silence.

'Is that so?'

Makoto followed up, though she was confused.

'Though it's just a local cable channel...'

'Were you there to gather material as well?'

'Yes, well. But it was something more vulgar than gathering material.'

Yuki smiled bitterly.

'Vulgar?'

'There is a rumour that there are ghosts there, so with the plan of chasing after the mystery of the spiritual phenomena, I went there with a director and an exorcist.'

'Is that how it was?'

Makoto understood the situation, but there was something else she didn't understand now.

If they had gone there for a show, why had the staff left Yuki there –

'What on earth happened there?'

'I... was so scared... Everyone ran away, and I was the only one left...'

Yuki's voice was shaking and there were tears in her eyes.

Makoto regretted asking her question so suddenly.

She might've been wrapped up in some sort of incident. An incident that caused her psychological damage as a woman –

In Makoto's mind, she recalled the repulsive circumstances of an incident she was involved in in the past, and she felt her chest tighten.

'Are you all right?'

Yuki covered her face with her hands as she took deep breaths.

Makoto couldn't think of the words to say so she touched Yuki's shoulder – all she could do was wait for her to calm down.

'I don't know if you'll believe my story, but...'

'What is it?'

After a silence, Yuki wiped away her tears and started speaking.

'I saw something terrible there...'

'Something terrible?'

'Yes. I was surrounded by people covered in the blood, and they told me to die too...'

Yuki's eyes were wide, as if she were seeing the scene play out right in front of her.

'You didn't run?'

'I tried to run away with everyone, but it was like my body was paralysed...'

Yuki's voice was becoming quieter, and it trailed off at the end.

Nobody would believe her. She was hiding that resignation on her face.

However, Makoto didn't doubt Yuki's story. She had experienced something similar herself.

The incident one year ago – a dead person's spirit had entered Makoto's body and stolen her freedom.

She felt the chills just thinking about it.

'I believe you. I've experienced it myself.'

Makoto gripped Yuki's hand.

Yuki's eyes were filled with confusion. Makoto nodded silently. She felt like Yuki's expression relaxed just a bit.

Still, Makoto felt extremely angry at the staff who had left Yuki there and didn't go to help her.

'Have you contacted the staff?'

Yuki shook her head.

'Actually, I called the company, but it turns out that the company hasn't been able to contact the staff since yesterday...'

'Eh?'

They've disappeared – no, it was too early to come to that conclusion.

Makoto erased that thought from her mind.

'I have a very bad feeling,' murmured Yuki.

'A bad feeling...'

'Yes.'

Yuki nodded and looked to the Handycam on the table by the bed.

'Did you use that to film?'

'It might be recorded on it.'

Yuki turned hollow eyes towards the ceiling. It was like her soul was being sucked out of her.

'It?'

'What we saw.'

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5

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- What on earth?

When Miyagawa Hideya received the call, he almost dropped the phone.

Takeda Shunsuke –

These fifteen years, never once had he forgotten that name.

That day, Miyagawa had been the first on the scene.

In the living room at the end of the corridor, there were four people collapsed on each other. He didn't need to check – he could tell that they were dead. There was no sign of life there.

An overwhelming death –

How many times had they been stabbed? There were countless wounds and the blood from them was on the wooden floor and had even gotten on the white walls.

Thinking theoretically wasn't Miyagawa's strong suit, so he couldn't explain it. However, he'd felt that the scene had been different from other murder scenes.

Rather than calling it strong, it might have been passionate. He hadn't felt hatred or resentment there. It had been so inhuman –

The murderer had destroyed the people the way he would break a toy. That was the impression it left.

'Tsuda, Baba, Shimizu. Come here right now!'

Miyagawa slammed the phone down and yelled.

The detectives in charge came immediately to Miyagawa's desk, surrounding it.

'The suspect from the case fifteen years ago, Takeda Shunsuke, has been spotted.'

The three of them look like they had met with the dead.

'He escaped, but there's a strong possibility that he's hiding nearby. You know what to do.'

Nobody responded, but each of them knew their roles. Their gazes were as sharp as hunters watching their prey.

'Catch him no matter what. There are five days until the statute of limitations.'

When Miyagawa finished talking, the three detectives in charge went to the detective office. Shouts flew about – it was as loud as a festival.

After Miyagawa found the corpses, he encountered a man thought to be the murderer. He had been standing together with Miyuki, whose location was currently unknown.

The moment Miyagawa faced that man, he'd thought that he would be killed. He was just about to run when he was hit in the head and fainted.

That impact had made it so that he couldn't clearly remember that man's face even now.

However, that dark fire of oppression had stuck to his brain. And those eyes...

When he saw Takeda's face in a photo, there had just been something off. Is this really the guy I saw at the scene? He'd talked to his boss, but nobody listened. It made sense. There was no point listening to somebody who couldn't remember the guy's face.

But it'd still felt off. Was that really...

Miyagawa decided to stop thinking about unnecessary things. If they caught Takeda Shunsuke, everything would become clear.

He didn't have the time to be sitting about. The investigation this time wouldn't get by with just the detectives. They'd need to mobilise everyone to catch the guy. There was no time.

Miyagawa took the phone to call the other departments for support.

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6

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It was already ten PM by the time Makoto finished organising her material.

Her work was delayed when she unexpectedly saved Yuki.

After sighing, Makoto turned off her computer and stood up.

Around this time, the people on the press floor would have been running about getting ready for the morning edition, but the planning floor Makoto was on was quiet.

She picked up her bag from under her desk when her eyes landed on the Handycam camera beside it.

– What we saw might be recorded on it.

Yuki's words echoed in her head.

– Could you check the video to see what was recorded?

She had gripped Makoto's arm as she asked that.

– I'm too afraid to watch it.

Makoto ended up taking the camera, since she couldn't look at Yuki's teary eyes.

To tell the truth, Makoto was interested in what was recorded. She might also be able to find out what happened there fifteen years ago.

Of course she was afraid, but that made her want to watch it more.

Makoto turned on the video camera.

There was still battery left. She wouldn't have to connect it to the computer. The camera had a moveable camera attached to it.

Makoto put down her bag, sat down again and pressed the play button.

The sound was quiet so she couldn't hear it clearly, but Yuki and a man in worship clothes were talking together calmly. It was probably set up like an appointment.

Makoto pressed fast forward.

Like scenery from the window of a car, the video sped along.

Makoto pressed play again when the house showed up.

Yuki stood in front of the house with a microphone and spoke as if she was giving a speech.

<Fifteen years ago, a terrible and bizarre murder occurred at this house...>

When she finished her explanation, Yuki invited the exorcist over.

After they talked with each other, a voice said 'OK' and the screen went dark.

When the video started again, Yuki and the exorcist were standing in front of the front door.

<Now, I'd like to head inside immediately.>

Yuki and the exorcist opened the door and walked inside.

<I feel great spiritual power from the other side of this door.>

The exorcist spoke in front of the door at the end of the corridor.

Yuki was looking around restlessly like she sensed something. Her face was also pale.

The camera shook, as if Yuki's anxiety had been contagious.

Even through a monitor, there was a strange atmosphere.

Finally, the lights suddenly went out –

The screen was completely black. However, the video was still playing.

In the dark, something was moving rapidly.

Clang, clang, clang, clang.

There was the sound of something hitting metal.

<Aah!>

<Stop!>

There was a voice that sounded like both a yell and a scream.

Then, the bloody face of a woman filled the screen.

'No!'

Makoto screamed and leapt up from her seat.

The woman's eyes were wide open and so was her mouth as she looked out of the monitor.

Blood dripped down the right side of her face.

'This is what she saw...'

The moment Makoto said that, the video stopped –

This is what Yuki saw –

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7

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Ishii sat on the lumber left on the building premises and let out a sigh.

He looked beside him – Gotou sat on the lumber as well.

His necktie hung around his neck in a sloppy manner, and his shabby old coat was pitiful. He looked just like the protagonist from a hardboiled detective story of the sixties.

After Gotou reported that they'd seen Takeda Shunsuke, a fully mobilised large-scale investigation started.

Of course the Shinkansen stations were investigated, and the citizens in the neighbourhood were questioned. There was even a special telephone number for information from eyewitnesses.

Naturally, the building premises they were at now were closed off. Lights were brought in for an expert inspection.

'Things have become serious.'

Though Ishii spoke up, Gotou didn't reply. He just glanced over at him, seeming completely exhausted.

Ishii's legs were screaming from all the running he'd did too. He couldn't walk another step.

'Worn out already? Pathetic.'

Chief Miyagawa made a rude, bowlegged entrance. Though he was short, his bald head and sharp

gaze made him look like a thug.

'Chief Miyagawa, thank you very much for your hard work.'

Ishii hurriedly stood up and bowed.

'Stop being so formal,' said Miyagawa in a thick voice as he waved his hand like he was chasing away a fly.

'Ah, yes.'

'Just sit down.'

'Yes sir.'

Ishii sat on the lumber, just as Miyagawa told him to.

'What do you want?' said Gotou with a glare.

'That's quite a greeting.'

'You're just going to lecture us because we let him get away, aren't you?'

Gotou clicked his tongue.

'Well, I want to, but to be frank, I was the one who let him get away fifteen years ago.'

Miyagawa rubbed his head as he laughed self-derisively.

'Eh!? Is that so!?'

Ishii leant forward in his surprise.

He'd heard that the detective who went to the scene fifteen years ago encountered the culprit. He fainted after being hit by the culprit and was taken to the hospital by reinforcements.

That had been Miyagawa –

'Why you so surprised? I make mistakes sometimes too.'

Miyagawa's eyes narrowed as he remembered the event.

'You're quite something.'

Gotou snorted.

'Don't get ahead of yourself!'

Miyagawa smacked Gotou's head.

'That hurts.'

'I was being nice 'cause I thought you were down, but aren't you going to reflect at all?'

'I reflected enough.'

Gotou rubbed at his head as he looked up at Miyagawa.

'Hmph. Guess so.'

Miyagawa took an artificial cigarette out of his jacket. Gotou followed up by lighting a cigarette in his mouth.

Miyagawa seemed vexed as he bit down on his artificial cigarette, but he said nothing.

'How is the investigation going?' asked Gotou as he blew smoke out his nose.

Ishii wanted to know too.

'No developments for the investigation or inspection. He disappeared like smoke. But it seems like a bunch of people in the area saw Takeda.'

'Then...'

'You were probably right. The guy you saw was Takeda Shunsuke.'

Miyagawa's expression hardened as he said that.

So it really was him –

When Ishii realised that, he felt even more mortified that they let him get away.

'But why would he come back now?'

Gotou cocked his head.

Ishii didn't know either. Probably everyone related to the investigation felt that way.

The statute of limitations would have been finished in five more days for Takeda.

They couldn't find him at all after the case. The investigation team for the case had been closed for it a few years back, so if he had just kept in hiding, the statute of limitations would have passed.

So why would Takeda come back to this town despite that danger –

Even if he had a reason that he had to come here, why now?

'I don't know. I'll ask when we catch him.'

Miyagawa's eyes as he said that shone like those of a beast chasing prey. Even though he was in management now, Miyagawa's body was still indelibly stained with the blood at the scene.

Ishii looked at Miyagawa with respect.

'Of course.'

Gotou stretched his arms up above his head, and Ishii stood up. Gotou was probably planning to continue questioning the people in the area.

'You guys can just go home,' said Miyagawa, stopping them before they could start.

'It's fine. We're still good as new.'

'I'm not worried about your health.'

Miyagawa waved his hand, like he thought the very idea ridiculous.

'What do you mean?'

Gotou seemed to sense something as he approached Miyagawa.

'Go back to your regular work.'

'Are you seriously saying that?'

Gotou's voice cracked as he spoke.

'Of course.'

'Why?'

'Since it's out of your jurisdiction.'

'I won't accept that.'

Gotou wouldn't back down.

Though Gotou was riled up, Miyagawa was calm.

'You don't have to accept it. Just think about my situation for a bit.'

'Your situation?'

'This time it'll be infiltration tactics with a focus on teamwork. There'll be a bunch of problems if I let you guys loiter around.'

Gotou didn't appear to accept it, but Ishii understood even without Miyagawa saying all of it.

He was talking about the case half a year ago. Gotou and Ishii had disclosed the crime of the previous chief.

Because of that, there was an arrest in the police and police chief had been forced to resign.

They had done the right thing, but in the loyal organisation that was the police, that had been a betrayal.

If Gotou and Ishii were added to the investigation, the morale might drop.

'As if I care about that!' shouted Gotou, his face red.

Ishii understood Gotou's anger very well. They had been the first to discover the suspect, but they couldn't be a part of the investigation. However –

'D-Detective Gotou...'

Ishii tried to pacify Gotou, who looked like he'd spring on Miyagawa.

'Let me go, you fool!'

Gotou hit him –

'Anyway, even if you tell me I can't, I won't stop.'

'Don't say that.'

Miyagawa refused Gotou flat. He turned around and started walking away right after the conversation finished.

Gotou's tightly gripped fists were shaking.

'You bastard! I'm going to kill you one day!'

Gotou howled at the night. Then, in his highly strung state, he hit Ishii's head with his fist.

Ishii's glasses fell off his head from the incredible force.

Ishii was trying to pick up the glasses from the ground when his mobile phone rang.

'Hello, this is Ishii speaking.'

<I apologise for not contacting in so long.>

The person on the other end was the newspaper reporter, Makoto.

He had met her because of a case with a ghost, and she was also the daughter of the old chief of the police.

'Ah, h-hello. Is it Makoto-san?'

Ishii had an unpleasant memory of Makoto. Whenever he heard her voice, he always ended up nervous.

It wasn't that he disliked Makoto. However, she had been possessed by a ghost before. She had attacked Ishii in a number of ways then.

Even though he knew that that had been the ghost rather than Makoto, he just couldn't erase the fear from his heart.

<I apologise for my rudeness, but I actually have a request.>

A request? For me?

Anxiety spread through Ishii's chest.

'W-w-what is it?'

<There is something I would like you to look at.>

'...What is it?'

<A video.>

Ishii could feel his heart thumping.

I can't watch this video – it was vague, but he had that premonition.

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The next morning, Gotou took Ishii with him to the <Movie Research Circle> clubroom at Meisei University.

He was there to meet the contrary university student Saitou Yakumo.

Last night, Gotou had been furious at being left out of the investigation, but the call to Ishii had been an unexpected save.

A video taken at the house where the incident occurred fifteen years ago –

Gotou hadn't seen it yet either, but apparently there was a terrifying image in it.

Even if they couldn't take a part in the Takeda investigation, by following the puzzle of the spiritual phenomenon in the puzzle, they might be able to catch Takeda as a result.

However, in order to follow a puzzle regarding spiritual phenomena, Yakumo would be necessary.

The guy was always sarcastic whenever they met, but the red left eye Yakumo had been born with could see the spirits of the dead.

Without that ability, they wouldn't be able to continue their investigation.

Yakumo was like a cat – he only did as much as he absolutely needed to. He'd definitely say something like 'That's not my job' this time too.

However, Gotou definitely wouldn't let him go. He'd make him cooperate no matter what.

In the worst case scenario, he'd drag him out by the scruff of his neck.

'Sorry to intrude.'

Gotou opened the <Movie Research Circle> door without knocking.

Yakumo sat in the chair at the front and was reading while running a hand through his hair.

'Please leave if you know you are intruding. Honestly. How many times do I have to say it before you'll understand?'

Yakumo complained like a brother-in-law without taking his eyes off the book.

The guy had a comeback for everything.

'Yeah, my bad.'

Gotou clicked his tongue and sat in the folding chair in front of Yakumo.

Ishii stood completely straight next to the door, like a plant. It looked like he was afraid of Yakumo as usual.

'I've got something I want to talk to you about.'

'I refuse.'

Gotou hadn't even said anything when Yakumo turned him down. Just like usual –

'Why not? It's just a small thing. You look like you've got some free time.'

Yakumo looked up just a bit at Gotou's words.

'I'm just going to say this, but I am a student. There are exams next week. I don't have the time to play around with you.'

'What do you mean, play around? I'm doing my work seriously!'

Even though Yakumo was just acting like he normally did, Gotou still got riled up.

His voice was louder too.

'You're talking rather big.'

'Eh?'

'Though you say you're working, haven't you gained a lot of weight? You're more like a pig than a bear now.'

Yakumo snorted.

'My weight's got nothing to do with it! Don't look down on the police!'

'Aren't you the one looking down on the police the most, Gotou-san?'

'What?'

'You said that detectives who ask civilians to investigate are incompetent and depraved. Do you have no pride or morals as a detective?'

This guy. He just keeps on saying whatever the hell he wants –

Gotou's anger reached the boiling point. He slammed both of his hands on the table.

'Shut up! I don't want to ask somebody like you for help either!'

'The exit is over there.'

Yakumo's expression didn't change at Gotou's loud voice. He pointed at the door.

'Stop blabbing and just help!'

Gotou leant forward and gripped Yakumo's by the collar, but Yakumo just scowled with his fingers in his ears.

The guy isn't cute at all –

'Gotou-san, what is one supposed to say when asking for a favour?'

The corners of Yakumo's lips were turned up in a smirk.

Anger boiled up in Gotou's stomach. He resisted the urge to acquaint Yakumo's well-defined nose with his fist.

If he got angry at Yakumo now, he'd lose everything. Restraint. Restraint. Gotou repeated that

word to himself.

'I-I sincerely apologise for coming at a busy time for you, but would you do me the favour of cooperating with the investigation?'

Gotou let go of Yakumo and looked down at his feet as he spoke.

'Isn't there one more thing you should say?' urged Yakumo, his arms crossed.

'P-please.'

Gotou gritted his teeth and lowered his head as he bore with the disgrace.

'Well done.'

Yakumo clapped mockingly.

– Ah, I really want to punch him.

'That makes four favours.'

Yakumo held up four fingers in an impressive manner.

What did he mean, favours? Who did he think saved him when his mother was about to kill him? What an ungrateful bastard.

Gotou's shoulders slumped and he sat back down in the chair, exhausted.

'So what do you plan on making me do this time?'

'Oi, Ishii. Explain.'

He'd get a hole in his stomach from stress if he talked to Yakumo anymore.

Gotou turned the conversation to Ishii.

Perhaps he was startled, because Ishii turned right and left and bowed, like a broken robot.

'Stop acting like an idiot and explain!'

Gotou gave Ishii a horizontal chop.

He was fixed –

'A-ah, yes. Er... Where should I start the explanation from?' said Ishii, as hesitant as always.

'Think about that yourself!' Gotou yelled.

Ishii leapt back with his head in his hands, like he thought Gotou was going to hit him.

'Ishii-san, there's no need to pay any attention to the words of a sea lion who hasn't gotten enough exercise. Please just talk normally in a chronological order.'

Yakumo yawned, like he was bored.

– Who's a sea lion, you monster cat!?

Gotou forcefully restrained the urge to yell.

Ishii appeared to have relaxed now that Yakumo told him how to speak. He adjusted the position of his glasses, though they hadn't slipped, and started to speak.

'The story starts fifteen years ago...'

It sounded like he was talking about some old folktale.

'I will show you the documents afterwards, but a family of four were killed at a house and the granddaughter was abducted – it was an atrocious case.'

Is this OK? Ishii seemed to be asking that as he looked at Gotou and Yakumo's faces.

'Please continue.'

After hearing Yakumo's response, Ishii breathed out and continued talking.

'The investigation after that put the suspect on the national wanted list, but the police could not find him.'

'Since it has been fifteen years, that means...'

Yakumo looked up.

'Yes. The statute of limitations is up in four days. Then, when we went to an abandoned building on another investigation yesterday, we ran into that suspect.'

'Were you able to catch him?'

Ishii was lost for words when Yakumo interrupted, and he looked to Gotou for help.

Ah, what a pain. Since it was Yakumo, he'd probably figured it out already and asked that on purpose.

'I let him get away,' said Gotou, swallowing his irritation.

'I couldn't hear you clearly. Could you say that once more?'

Yakumo put his hand to his ear, like he really hadn't heard.

Yakumo always complained about how loud Gotou's voice was. He really was an infuriating guy.

'I said... I let him get away!'

'I see. As a detective with short legs and insufficient exercise, it's natural that you let him escape.'

Yakumo laughed aloud even though he said that himself.

Gotou didn't even feel like rebutting any more. His mouth was a thin line across his face as he looked to the side with his arms crossed.

'And then?'

After Yakumo laughed for a while, he urged Ishii to continue.

'Ah, yes. Detective Gotou and I were left out of the investigation. After that, we received a call from Makoto-san.'

'Makoto-san would be the newspaper reporter, yes?'

Ishii nodded.

'Yes, that Makoto-san. She had gone to the scene for material and found a video there.'

'A video... is it?'

'Yes. The owner is a certain video company. It appears that they were filming a paranormal programme there.'

'Paranormal, eh?'

Yakumo frowned for just a moment.

For Yakumo, who could actually see ghosts, programmes that joked around with the matter were probably not interesting.

'I haven't seen the video yet myself, but according to Makoto-san, the ghost of a woman was recorded.'

After saying that much, Ishii wiped the sweat from his forehead.

'Four people died at the place where that video was taken, yes? It wouldn't be unnatural for a ghost to be recorded.'

Yakumo yawned.

'Yes, but...'

'If you've determined a suspect, I wouldn't be able to do anything even if I went now. Well, there is still the question of why the culprit returned to the town where he committed the crime right before the statute of limitations was up, but it's the police's job to investigate that.'

Yakumo rubbed at his eyes like a cat and propped up his chin with his hand.

He looked completely uninterested.

From the way the conversation had gone so far, there really was nothing to do. But there was still more –

Gotou stood up and put both hands in his pockets.

'Is there something else?'

'That's what we thought at first, but according to the woman reporter, the ghost in the video – she's definitely not one of the victims.'

When Yakumo heard Gotou's last words, his expression changed.

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Haruka used her lunch break to head towards the <Movie Research Circle>.

He had been incredibly contrary about it, but that Yakumo had agreed to go to her performance.

That Yakumo had agreed. This could be called a case of its own.

But since it was Yakumo, he'd probably fall asleep like a cat in the sun during the performance. Still, it'd make her happy if he just went to the hall.

Haruka's pace quickened.

She was almost running by the time she got to the prefabricated building.

Haruka stopped in front of the door.

If she went in with accelerated breathing, it'd be like she hurried here. She took deep breaths to calm her ragged breathing.

– OK, let's go.

When Haruka tried to put her hand on the doorknob, the door opened.

She jumped back in her surprise. A bearlike figure suddenly appeared in front of her.

'D-Detective Gotou!' exclaimed Haruka.

Perhaps it was because he was wearing a coat, but Gotou looked a size larger than the last time she'd seen him.

'Oh, Haruka-chan.'

'I apologise for not keeping in touch.'

'If you don't cut your ties with Yakumo soon, you won't be able to become a bride,' said Gotou listlessly as he sleepily scratched his neck.

'I don't want to hear that from somebody who lets his wife run away.'

Gotou snorted at Haruka's retort with a cigarette in his mouth.

If Gotou was here, that meant –

'Since you are rather large, please don't stand in the entrance.'

Yakumo pushed Gotou aside to leave the clubroom, running a hand through his messy hair all the while.

'What are you doing?' said Yakumo, the moment his eyes met Haruka's.

'Even if you ask me what I'm doing...'

Haruka was lost for words when Ishii came out of the room too.

'Ah, H-Haruka-chan, i-it's been a while.'

Ishii bowed in a stupidly formal manner.

'Hello, Ishii-san.'

There was no mistaking it now.

Gotou had probably brought Yakumo another troublesome case.

'Is it a case?'

'Well, something like that.'

After Gotou replied, he started walking away.

'Hey, what'd he mean by "something like that"?''

Haruka asked that question to Yakumo and Ishii.

Yakumo yawned – it didn't feel like he wanted to reply. Ishii seemed divided as to whether he should talk.

'Oi! Hurry up!'

Gotou's yell echoed back to them.

'Ah, yes sir. I'm coming now.'

Ishii started running from a conditioned reflex.

– He fell.

He got up immediately and started running again.

Yakumo ran a hand through his hair as he followed him.

'Hey, Yakumo-kun.'

Yakumo turned around.

'I brought the ticket for the performance I mentioned yesterday...'

'Leave it on the table.'

Yakumo started walking again.

Why is it – Haruka felt that back was very far away.

Her heart felt strange. What was this feeling? She'd felt it before. When her friend got involved in a case and died –

She had a bad feeling for some reason.

'Hey!'

Haruka called out to Yakumo's back, unable to bear it.

'What?'

Though Yakumo stopped walking, he didn't turn around.

'Er, um... Be careful.'

Haruka put the anxiety in her heart into words.

'It's rare for you to worry about me. Do you have a fever or something?'

Yakumo shrugged and started to walk again.

– He'll be fine.

Haruka gripped the red stone on her necklace tightly.

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Ishii's expression was still soft as he sat in the driver's seat.

– Ah, Haruka-chan was really cute.

Just by seeing that face, the uneasiness in his heart lessened. Her hair had grown out a bit, so he felt like she seemed more mature now.

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

'How long are you going to keep smirking like that!?! Hurry up and start the car!'

'I-I apologise.'

Ishii bore with the pain as he started the engine.

'When was the video we are going to watch filmed?' asked Yakumo from the back of the car, his arms crossed.

'I don't know very much about it myself.'

Ishii looked at Yakumo using the mirror.

Makoto hadn't actually heard the details about when the video was filmed either.

'I see.'

Yakumo leant back on the seat and looked up.

'Er... Would you find something out by knowing when the video was taken?'

Ishii didn't understand why Yakumo wanted to know.

'There's a possibility. The video was put out by a video company.'

Ishii understood from that, even if Yakumo didn't say any more.

'What are you talking about?' asked Gotou, turning around in the passenger seat.

'If time has passed since the video was filmed, we won't be able to determine whether the video was faked.'

'Composite videos or CG or something?'

'Yes. Nowadays, it's incredibly simple to edit videos just by using a computer. There are a number of those in the videos of ghosts that are shown on television.'

Yakumo gave a supplementary explanation.

It was true that it was easy to edit videos using a computer now. Unlike the composite videos of the past, it would be difficult to determine authenticity if CG was used.

A question suddenly came to Ishii.

'E-er, there's something I would like to ask.'

'What is it?'

Yakumo's eyes narrowed.

When Yakumo looked at him like that, Ishii couldn't calm down – it felt like Yakumo was seeing straight to the bottom of his heart.

'Er... in photos and videos, ghosts you can't see with your actual eyes are clearly recorded. Why is that?'

'You don't even understand that?'

Gotou hit Ishii's head, like he thought he was an idiot.

'Do you know, Detective Gotou?'

'It's that... That... Yakumo, I'll leave the rest to you.'

Gotou pushed the responsibility to Yakumo.

Yakumo ran his hand through his hair like he thought the matter troublesome, but he started an explanation.

'First, it is necessary to define what a ghost is.'

'The definition of a ghost, is it?'

'This is only my theory, but ghosts are not demons or some new life form. They are originally human.'

'That's right.'

Ishii nodded in understanding.

In horror films, they were often portrayed as strange life forms that exceeded human understanding, but when he thought about it more, it was just as Yakumo said – they were

originally human.

'Even after the human body dies, their emotions remain. I believe that the cluster of emotions that remains is the true form of the ghost.'

'A cluster of emotions... is it?'

Ishii thought over Yakumo's words.

It'd be difficult to explain if he was asked to, but he understood what Yakumo meant.

'There are two conditions for seeing these spirits of the dead. To put it simply, they are transmission and reception.'

'Transmission and reception?'

'Correct. The spirit of the dead transmits. The stronger those emotions are, the easier it is for them to transmit to people. Please think of it like mobile phone radio emissions.'

'So if the radio emissions are weak, people won't receive them?'

Yakumo nodded in satisfaction at Ishii's response.

'Exactly. The same could be said for reception. Depending on the person, they will receive the transmission better or worse. That is where the difference between seeing and not seeing comes about. Though the surrounding environment has an effect...'

Ishii understood. When the wavelengths from the transmitter and the receiver agreed and the surrounding environment was appropriate, the spirits of the dead could be seen by human eyes.

Then Yakumo's left eye could be called a high quality receiver.

However, this explanation didn't explain why ghosts could be seen in videos.

Perhaps he sensed Ishii's concern, because Yakumo started speaking again.

'Human eyes read electromagnetic waves and send the information about colour and shape to the brain. However, there are only some wavelengths that can be recognised.'

Ishii knew that as well.

It was called the visible spectrum. People could only recognise a certain range of electromagnetic waves. That was why people couldn't see ultraviolet rays or infrared.

However, cameras were different. People couldn't see the infrared from the television remote control, but cameras could recognise that a red light was being emitted –

'I see! So it's a problem of electromagnetic wavelengths. Cameras can see things the eye can't. So that's how it is.'

Ishii almost turned around in his agitation. Yakumo nodded in satisfaction again.

'Though this is just a theory.'

Contrary to his words, Yakumo's expression was full of confidence.

Yakumo's left eye could probably see a wider range of electromagnetic waves than the normal eye, which is why he could see the spirits of the dead.

It wasn't just Yakumo. The wavelengths people could see differed between people.

Some people found them easier to see and some people found them harder. Similarly, there were wavelengths for spirits of the dead. Some people's eyes spotted them more easily while others' didn't.

Along the same lines, there was a difference between how eyes and cameras recognised light. From that difference, cameras could see ghosts more easily than human eyes could.

Using Yakumo, science might be able to understand ghosts – Ishii certainly felt that way.

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

'Stop spacing out! You were supposed to turn right just now!'

– Oh no. He'd missed the road.

Ishii hurriedly stepped on the brakes and made a U-turn.

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He parked the car in the guest parking at the newspaper company and they got off the car together.

Ishii explained their purpose at the reception. It seemed that reception already knew they were coming, and they were taken to the conference room on the second floor.

'Ishii-san, I've been waiting.'

Makoto was already in the conference room. Her expression brightened as she greeted him.

Her long hair was tied up and she wore a grey pantsuit. She seemed somehow dignified – it felt like she had changed a bit.

It might have been because of her makeup, but she seemed much more mature.

'Ah, hello. I apologise for not keeping in contact.'

Ishii returned the greeting.

'Hey, it's been a while. You been doing OK?'

Gotou came in the room, acting like he always did.

'Yes, thanks to your help.'

Makoto smiled with her whole face. The way she smiled seemed different from before too.

Ishii wouldn't be able to explain if he was asked to, but the incident half a year ago might have had a great effect on her psychological state.

'Hello.'

Yakumo came in while rubbing his eyes.

'Yakumo-san, you're here as well?'

Yakumo yawned in response to Makoto's greeting and sat on the chair closest to the door.

That's enough with the greetings, so let's get started. It felt like he was saying that.

Gotou threw his coat on to the desk and sat next to Yakumo.

'Ishii-san, please sit down as well. You'll see the video soon.'

After Makoto said that, she walked to the television on the rack and started the Handycam camera that was attached to the television with a cable.

Ishii sat down next to Gotou as he was told.

'Is it true that the person in the video isn't one of the vics?' asked Gotou as he lit his cigarette.

'This is a non-smoking facility.'

Yakumo pointed at the <No Smoking> sign on the wall.

Gotou clicked his tongue and put out his cigarette in his portable ashtray.

'I would like you to confirm that,' said Makoto. She took remote control, turned off the lights and sat next to Ishii.

'Before we watch this video, please tell us the events that brought it into your possession,' said Yakumo, interrupting Makoto from pressing the remote control.

'This was taken by a video company. They were making a local cable television show.'

'I see.'

'When this was taken, it appears there were three people there: a reporter, an exorcist and the director. When they saw the spiritual phenomenon, the two besides the reporter ran off.'

'Leaving the video camera behind?' asked Yakumo.

'It seems to be the case. After that, I went to the house by chance to gather material and found the reporter collapsed there with this video.'

'Has the video company been contacted?'

'The reporter Murakami-san contacted them.'

Yakumo didn't seem to be satisfied with Makoto's explanation. There was a furrow in his brow as he ran a hand through his hair.

'Well, we can just look into the details later. Let's see the video first,' said Gotou, sounding irritated.

Ishii agreed with Gotou's opinion. It would be better to make an opinion after seeing the video.

'Then I will replay it.'

Makoto pressed a button on the remote control.

Ishii gulped.

The video that was going to play had a spiritual phenomenon on it. When he thought about that, his hands became sweaty in his nervousness.

An old house appeared on screen –

They'd gone to take a look yesterday, so he had seen the place before.

In front of the house gates, a woman and a middle-aged man in worship clothes were talking calmly.

She was probably the female reporter who had fainted.

The video stopped. Then, the house exterior showed on screen.

Then, the setting changed again. There were burst shots of the female reporter. The director gave a signal. At the same time, the woman started speaking.

<Fifteen years ago, a terrible and bizarre murder occurred at this house..>

'I feel like I've seen this woman somewhere before,' said Gotou with a sharp look.

'It's because she's a talent. It wouldn't be strange for you to have seen her somewhere before.'

In reply to Ishii, Gotou mumbled, 'Makes sense.'

After that, nobody spoke. In the tense atmosphere, they kept their eyes on the video.

Finally, the camera followed the exorcist into the house –

Then, when they arrived at the door at the end of the corridor, the disaster occurred.

The female reporter insisted that somebody had touched her.

It wasn't just the reporter – the cameraman appeared to sense something as well.

The electrifyingly tense atmosphere came through the screen.

'Please rewind a bit.'

Suddenly, Yakumo spoke in a sharp voice.

His gaze was so sharp it felt like they could cut.

'What?'

'Quiet!'

Yakumo refused to answer Gotou.

'Where should I rewind to?' asked Makoto.

'When they went through the entrance. And please raise the volume.'

Yakumo quickly gave instructions.

Makoto rewound to the part of the video where they were at the entrance, raised the volume and pressed the play button again.

This tension – Yakumo had definitely noticed something in the video earlier.

Ishii leant forward to look at the video.

On the television screen, there were the backs of the reporter and the exorcist as they walked down the corridor.

– Kill me too.

There was suddenly a voice. Like a whisper in the ear.

'Eek!' shrieked Ishii. He leapt out of his chair.

He felt a shiver down his spine. Gooseflesh had risen on his skin.

– What was that voice?

Makoto looked shocked as she pressed the pause button.

Normally, Gotou's fist would be flying at a shriek like that, but even Gotou had his mouth wide open. He couldn't speak.

Ishii turned his eyes to Yakumo for an answer.

Yakumo's lips were in a thin line. He had his left index finger on his brow and appeared to be thinking about something.

A suffocating silence continued in the conference room.

'What the hell was that just now?'

Gotou was the first to speak.

'I don't know yet,' Yakumo said grimly.

'You don't know, you say...'

'In any case, let us view the rest of the video.'

At Yakumo's instruction, Makoto pressed play.

The reporter and the exorcist stood in front of the door. It was where they had watched up to.

<I feel great spiritual power from the other side of this door.>

The exorcist spoke.

Right after that, the reporter insisted that somebody had touched her. Then, the cameraman said the same thing.

The exorcist was more frightened than necessary. Yakumo had had his doubts before, but this video wasn't staged. After the video shook furiously, the lights suddenly went out.

The screen went black.

However, the video was still playing.

There was the sound of somebody moving around.

Clang, clang, clang, clang.

The sound of something hitting metal echoed.

Then, there was a loud sound – like something falling – and noise ran across the screen. The camera had probably been dropped.

Then –

A blood-covered woman filled the screen.

Her wide eyes were red and her mouth was wide open. It seemed like she would jump out from the television.

'Eek!'

Ishii threw his body back as he screamed and fell from his chair.

'You're so damn noisy!'

Ishii hurriedly sat back on the chair with the encouragement of Gotou's fist.

After that, the video stopped.

Nobody opened their mouth. They were in mute amazement.

Even Yakumo, the most composed of all of them, was looking down with his face in his hands.

It looked like his shoulders were shaking slightly.

It certainly had been a frightful video. However, for Yakumo, who could see the spirits of the dead, it shouldn't have been anything for him to be afraid of.

What on earth has made him like this –

There was no way for Ishii to know.

After a silence, Yakumo stood up soundlessly.

He had always been pale, but his face was at a different level from that now. It was completely white, as if all the blood had left his face.

'What's wrong?'

Yakumo left the conference room, as if he hadn't heard Gotou's words.

He looked like a living corpse.

'I wonder what happened,' said Ishii to nobody in particular.

'Probably couldn't hold his bladder,' said Gotou lightly, stretching his arms out behind him.

Though Ishii didn't deny it, he felt that it was a different matter.

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After that, Yakumo didn't return to the conference room again –

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11

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After Haruka came out of the bath, her mobile phone started vibrating on the table.

Who could it be? Her hair wasn't even dry yet.

She had been planning on calling back afterwards, but she changed her mind when she saw who was calling.

It was from Yakumo. It was almost a miracle for him to be the one to call her.

Haruka dried her hands on a towel and answered the phone.

'Hellooo.'

<You sound like you've got a lot of free time on your hands, as usual.>

Yakumo made a scornful reply.

How could he say something like that all of a sudden when he was the one who'd called?

'I just got out of the bath. My hair isn't dry yet and I've got to take care of my skin too, so I'm busy.'

<Those are pointless measures.>

Honestly, Yakumo had no delicacy at all.

'I don't need to hear that from you. Why not try fixing your bedhead?'

<I'm just going to say this, but it's not bedhead. My hair grows that way.>

'It's definitely bedhead.'

<You probably wouldn't be able to understand it with your sense.>

She heard Yakumo yawn on the other side of the phone.

He just kept on saying whatever he wanted. Haruka wasn't good with comebacks, so in a way, she admired him.

'So what task do you have for me?'

Haruka brought up the topic at hand.

It hurt her to admit it, but Yakumo wasn't the sort of person who'd call her just to talk. Did he want her to help with another case?

She felt suspicious because of her past experiences.

<I wouldn't call it a task, but...>

Yakumo's enunciation was somewhat off.

'What is it?'

<I need to apologise to you.>

'Apologise?'

– Who was? To whom? Why?

Haruka was confused by Yakumo's completely unexpected words.

She couldn't think of Yakumo apologising to someone else. And he hadn't done anything that would need apologising.

Did he hit his head on something?

<About your performance...>

'Ah, OK.'

Haruka didn't understand where Yakumo was going, so she ended up sounding hesitant.

<Something came up, so I might not be able to go.>

It felt very out of place –

Yakumo's attitude was completely different than it was usually. Plus, he hadn't even promised to go, so he didn't actually need to apologise.'

'When you say something came up, do you mean the case Gotou-san brought to you?'

<Well, something like that. Sorry.>

Yakumo spoke in a low voice.

It really was strange. Haruka couldn't shake that feeling away.

'Hey, did something happen?' asked Haruka as she leant on the bed.

<Something?>

'You sound different.'

<Nothing's different about me.>

She heard Yakumo sigh from the other end of the phone.

'You're lying.'

<How can you be so sure of that?>

'Women's intuition.'

Plus, I've been looking at Yakumo for a whole year –

Haruka swallowed those last words and waited for Yakumo's reply.

<Your intuition can't be counted on either.>

Yakumo laughed.

'What do you mean by that?'

<Exactly what I said. Anyway, I'm sorry I couldn't keep my promise. I wanted to see what sort of foolish concert you'd perform...>

'You know, I can perform properly.'

This is what happened if she was a little nice to him. Even though she'd been worried about him, she felt like she'd lost somehow.

<Anyway, sorry for everything.>

Yakumo ended with that and hung up without waiting for Haruka's reply.

After Haruka hung up, she still couldn't shake that strange feeling.

It sort of felt like he'd been saying goodbye –

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12

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While driving, Ishii looked over at Gotou in the passenger seat.

He had an unlit cigarette in his mouth as he flicked his hundred-yen lighter on and off. Ishii could understand why Gotou was irritated.

Yakumo didn't come back after that no matter how long they waited.

They walked around the newspaper agency to look for Yakumo, but they couldn't find him.

Even when they contacted him by mobile, the phone just kept ringing – Yakumo didn't answer.

They thought he might have gone home by himself, so they went to his secret hiding place, but he hadn't been there. Thinking that he'd come back if they waited, they'd sat there until night, but it had been of no use.

'I wonder where Yakumo-shi has gone,' said Ishii with a disappointed sigh.

'How would I know!?'

Gotou threw his lighter at the front glass.

'What are we going to do now?'

'We won't do anything. It's all over without Yakumo.'

Gotou's resigned voice echoed through the car.

It wasn't like Gotou. Yakumo's sudden disappearance was probably a part of it, but being left out of the investigation was probably taking a toll on Gotou.

He'd been treated this way a number of times before.

It had been particularly bad with the previous chief, Ideuchi. The <Unsolved Cases Special Investigations Room> had been a post in name only – it had really been a do-nothing job.

However, Gotou still hadn't been discouraged. It didn't matter what people he hated said. He'd go his own path. He was that strong.

But this time, Miyagawa had been the one who'd told him to keep out of the investigation.

Miyagawa had been Gotou's boss before – Ishii had heard that Miyagawa had been the one who'd taught Gotou the investigation ABCs. Gotou had the greatest confidence in Miyagawa.

That was why he was so irritated. That was probably it.

'If we discuss with Chief Miyagawa once more...'

'It's obviously no use!' yelled Gotou, drowning out Ishii's words.

'But Chief Miyagawa had no ill will...'

'I don't need you to tell me that.'

Gotou clicked his tongue and reclined on his chair. He crossed his arms and closed his eyes.

All Ishii could do was silently devote himself to driving.

– Ever since we spotted Takeda, the gears haven't been turning correctly.

It was a sudden realisation, but that was how Ishii felt. Like it was an omen that something unfortunate was going to happen.

Gotou didn't move at all – he kept his eyes closed until they reached the police parking lot. Did he fall asleep –

'Detective Gotou, we've arrived.'

Ishii shook Gotou's shoulder.

Gotou took in a deep breath and opened his eyes. His expression was weak – he looked ten years older.

'Maybe I'm not fit to be a detective,' Gotou said, his voice hoarse.

– What are you saying? The police need people like you.

Ishii wanted to say that, but the words wouldn't come out, as if something was caught in his

throat.

He just stared at the darkness on the other side of the front glass.

Knock knock.

There was a knock on the side window. It was Miyagawa. He peered in from the passenger side.

'Do you need something?'

Gotou opened the window and said that, sounding annoyed. Like a rebellious child.

'Come with me for a bit.'

Miyagawa pointed his chin out, gesturing for Gotou to get off the car.

Gotou frowned but moved to open the car door, like he didn't think there was any way out of it.

'E-er, Detective Gotou.'

Ishii had seen their exchange the other day, so he felt a bit anxious and called out to Gotou.

If he let the two go like this, it might end up in a fight.

'What?'

'Shall I come with you?'

'Go home first,' Gotou replied curtly. Then, he walked away, shoulder-to-shoulder with Miyagawa.

Ishii watched the two of their backs grow farther away through the front glass.

Finally, the darkness swallowed them up and he couldn't see them anymore.

– What if Gotou disappears like this?

That thought crossed Ishii's mind –

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13

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Makoto spread out the documents on her desk and turned once again towards the case of fifteen years ago.

There had to be another story to this case. She believed that.

It wasn't that she thought the true culprit was somebody else. It was probably Takeda Shunsuke.

A knife thought to be the murder weapon was found at Takeda's flat.

Blood was on it. The blood matches the victims', and the shape of the knife matched the wound.

Furthermore, clothes with a large amount of blood on them had also been found.

The possibility that somebody had hid them in Takeda's flat couldn't be denied, but the decisive

proof was that Takeda's fingerprints had been found on the wall at the scene. And the victims' blood had been mixed in.

It was clear that Takeda had touched the wall after he touched the bleeding victims.

Takeda's refusal to go with the police and his escape also corroborated the crime.

Though they hadn't been able to get testimony from him, he had a motive.

Takeda had been following a case as a newspaper reporter. He ended up going to a certain case.

At the middle school that Nanase Kanji was director of and that his son Katsuaki was employed at, there was a suicide from bullying.

That father accused Katsuaki, the homeroom teacher, of participating in the bullying.

Takeda had written a number of articles supporting that father before.

However, the charge ended with the school's win.

Still, Takeda continued writing the article.

Katsuaki thought that disagreeable, so he put pressure on the newspaper agency behind the scenes.

Though they were a newspaper agency, as long as they were managed as a company, those sorts of things would happen.

The agency told Takeda not to pursue the matter further, but he didn't comply. He knew that he couldn't write the article, but he persisted in gathering material.

In the end, he was dismissed from the agency.

Afterwards, Takeda had to take out a number of loans.

They did not know this for certain, but Takeda insisted that he was unfairly burdened with loans at Katsuaki's instigation.

– Moving the story forward.

Takeda's ex-colleague said that Takeda had headed for the Nanase house on the day of the crime.

There was no way to determine what they discussed.

Then – the incident occurred.

'What on earth happened?' murmured Makoto, pressing against her eyes.

There had definitely been strife between Katsuaki and Takeda. He might have lost himself because of something and ended up committing murder.

Even though there shouldn't have been anything to doubt about this case – something didn't fit.

One of the reasons Makoto felt that way was Kanji's granddaughter, Miyuki.

Why had Takeda taken Miyuki with him without killing her?

Escaping with a young child would be rather risky.

There was the possibility that she had already been killed, but her corpse hadn't been found. But why wouldn't he have killed her at the crime scene then?

And the biggest puzzle – why did he show up again just a few days before the statute of limitations was up?

Since they hadn't been able to get Yakumo's analysis, they couldn't say anything for certain, but if there was a ghost there, it meant that somebody else had died in that place fifteen years ago.

And Yakumo's behaviour then had clearly been off.

Though he hadn't said it aloud, he had definitely felt something from that image.

Something unbelievably frightening is happening without our knowing it –

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14

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Miyagawa brought Gotou through the entrance of a small counter-only bar.

This was unexpected, since Gotou had thought that he would be reprimanded in the meeting room.

The ceiling's beams stuck out. It was so low that Gotou might hit his head if he stood up straighter. There were no patrons except for Gotou and Miyagawa.

At Miyagawa's suggestion, Gotou sat on a crude round chair that could often be found at counters.

'Could you take the bottle out for me?'

After Miyagawa said that, the bartender, cigarette in his mouth as he stood on the other side of the counter, disagreeably took a bottle of potato shochu from the shelf behind him and placed it on the counter.

'And please just get us something else.'

The bartender didn't reply to Miyagawa's order. He just took a bowl from the refrigerator and placed it on the counter.

It was boiled daikon that had changed colour from sitting in the broth for too long.

Meanwhile, Miyagawa took two glasses from on top of the counter, poured out shochu and placed one glass in front of Gotou.

'There's nothing to celebrate, so I'm not going to say cheers,' said Miyagawa, and he gulped down a mouthful.

What was he doing, taking him to a place like this all of a sudden?

Gotou didn't understand, but he didn't dare to mention it aloud. He took a gulp of shochu. The cheaper the alcohol the better it worked. He did have an empty stomach, but he felt his stomach warm up in an instant.

'Yesterday was my bad...' mumbled Miyagawa. He finished the rest of the glass.

'What are you talking about?'

When Gotou asked his question, Miyagawa stared at his glass and muttered, 'Damn.'

Gotou had been afraid of and looked up to the demon that Miyagawa had been in the past, but the back of the man he had followed looked smaller now.

'About how I left you out of the investigation,' said Miyagawa as he held the shochu bottle at a slant.

'What? You were worried about that? That's not like you.'

Miyagawa snorted at Gotou's attempt to poke fun.

Gotou had acted like that then, but it wasn't like he didn't understand Miyagawa's position.

He could've just acted freely in the past, as somebody at the scene, but Miyagawa couldn't do that anymore.

He had to lead dozens of investigation members while stifling his own emotions.

Teamwork was the priority. It was the right decision to leave Gotou out, since he was somebody who stood up.

Gotou had been the one who'd chased the chief of the detectives to retirement and arrested the old chief.

The people who thought that Gotou's very existence was a nuisance were not few in number.

'Calling me a chief makes me sound high and mighty, but I'm just middle management. I've become a useless old man.'

'That's not...'

Gotou swallowed his words.

He was no good with situations like this. Work before grumbling. That was the only way Gotou knew how to live.

'It was fun working the scene with you, but it's not fun at all now.'

Miyagawa hit the counter, like his emotions had reached their limit.

'There's nothing you can do, right? In your position.'

Miyagawa glared at Gotou sharply, like he hadn't liked his words. However, he didn't say anything. He emptied his glass again.

To Gotou, Miyagawa was definitely somebody he could trust.

However, he felt that that relationship of trust had changed a lot. It was unfortunate, but it couldn't be helped. He knew that.

'Oi. Got a cig?' asked Miyagawa, after pouring his third glass of shochu.

'Didn't you stop smoking?'

'Shut up! Just give me one.'

It was practically extortion. Gotou gave Miyagawa a cigarette, just as he was asked, and lit it for him. Miyagawa slowly took in the smoke.

'I'm going to say this just 'cause it's you.'

Miyagawa made that his preface before beginning.

'I forgot the face of the guy when he hit my head during that case.'

'It's laughable.'

Gotou had heard that Miyagawa had been the first on the scene for Takeda's case.

'Shut up. I forgot his face, but there's one thing I remember...'

Miyagawa slapped his hand against his neck. It seemed like it was difficult for him to say.

'What is it?'

'His eyes.'

'Eyes?'

Gotou raised his eyebrows.

Miyagawa took another deep breath of smoke.

'The man's eyes were red like fire.'

'W-w-w-what did you say!?' yelled Gotou from the bottom of his stomach, standing up.

A man with two red eyes. Could that guy be connected to the case –

'Do you have any ideas?'

'No...'

'Those eyes weren't human eyes. That was... a demon in human skin.'

If the person Miyagawa was talking about was the person Gotou was thinking of, the word 'demon' was perfect.

But –

'Why are you bringing that up?'

Gotou sat down again and drank his shochu.

'I wonder... Something just bothers me about that case.'

'You're investigating it now, right?'

'That's not it,' said Miyagawa disagreeably. He put his cigarette out in the ashtray.

After coming this far, even Gotou could tell what Miyagawa was trying to say.

'... Are you telling me to investigate along a different route?'

Miyagawa finished his glass of shochu without replying.

Damn. No matter what he said, the old man was cunning.

-

15

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The next morning, Ishii went together with Gotou to the house where the incident occurred.

Nobody had touched it for years, so the house had been left alone –

Even though it should have already died, there was an overwhelming feeling of existence from the house for some reason. The sound of the wind sounded like the house's roar.

He had heard before that scenes where there had been murders had a unique smell, so maybe this was it.

His knees were shaking, but it wasn't from the cold.

'Er, Detective Gotou, are we really going in?'

Ishii called out to Gotou's back.

'Of course.'

Gotou threw down the cigarette that had been in his mouth and crushed it with his foot before walking towards the entrance.

Gotou had been sulking so much the day before, so when he'd said 'We're going to the house where the crime occurred!' this morning, Ishii had honestly been happy.

But I really don't want to go inside this house –

Especially after he'd seen the video yesterday and they didn't have Yakumo to rely on, this was near suicide.

This wasn't just a house. There had been the horrific murder case fifteen years ago, and a ghost had been caught on video. It could be called a real haunted house.

'Er, wouldn't it be better to wait for another day?' suggested Ishii as he followed Gotou.

'You're so obstinate. Things'll work out even without Yakumo.'

'But we can't see ghosts. We should go together with Yakumo-shi.'

'Yakumo's not here. Nothing we can do about it.'

'That's true, but...'

Gotou had called Yakumo a number of times this morning and had visited Yakumo's secret hiding place before coming here just in case, but in the end, he hadn't been able to contact him.

'Things'll work out even if we don't see the ghost.'

'But...'

Ishii was lost for words. He was just afraid.

Gotou placed his hand on the door knob and slowly pulled. The door opened with something that sounded like a shriek.

That was enough to make Ishii want to shriek himself.

Perhaps because all the shutters were closed, the house was completely dark even though it was day.

Gotou turned on the torch in his hand.

That light lit up the way from the wide entrance. Ishii could see a long corridor. It was covered in dust and there were footsteps in the fallen leaves.

At the end of the corridor, there was an old wooden door.

That was – the door they'd seen in the video.

'Detective Gotou, we really...'

Gotou's fist fell on Ishii's head, interrupting his words. He bit his tongue.

'Stop whining. You don't have to come if you're so afraid.'

Ishii knew that he should say, 'I'm fine. I'll go.' However, his fear stopped him from speaking.

He couldn't look at Gotou's face, so he looked at his feet.

– I'm so useless.

'Though you'd be no use,' muttered Gotou.

Normally, Gotou would yell and hit him with his fist. But –

Ishii felt something was off so he lifted his head.

Gotou had already gone inside and was walking down the corridor.

– I've been left behind.

Ishii gathered his courage and took the first step after Gotou.

At the same time, the wind blew loudly and the front door slammed shut with a bang.

It was like it was telling him not to come in.

Ishii didn't have the courage to open the door again.

* * *

Gotou turned around at the sound of the door shutting.

He'd been sure Ishii would follow him, but it seemed like he'd been wrong.

So he really was going to wait outside. That fool. Gotou would punch him once he got back.

Gotou clicked his tongue and started walking down the corridor again.

Creak.

The floor groaned underneath him.

Maybe it was worn out. Or maybe it was because of his weight. Well, it didn't matter.

His breath was white when he breathed out. He'd thought it'd be better inside the house, but it was colder inside than out. Gotou blew on his hands and rubbed them together.

– Now, what's going to coming out?

Gotou went straight down the corridor until the door at the end.

All the corpses had been found in the living room on the other side of this door.

From the situation, it seemed that they'd all been killed in the same room rather than carried there from other rooms. There was something Gotou didn't understand.

– Why didn't anybody run?

Since there'd been four of them, even if it'd been a brawny guy, at least one of them should've gotten away, but they'd all been killed. None of them had been able to get past the door.

Well, there was no point thinking about it. Gotou knew best that he wasn't the type to come up with theories and put his logic to work.

He'd go to the scene. Look with his eyes, listen with his ears, feel with his skin and just go with his gut.

Gotou licked his lips and opened the door.

The door opened with an unpleasant creak.

It stank. The air was stagnant.

Gotou covered his nose with his coat sleeve and entered the room.

It was darker than the corridor had been. The clammy air wrapped around him.

There had been a sofa, table and television on the day of the crime, but now it was just a wide

space with nothing in it.

He could see that the floor in the middle of the room was stained.

The four corpses had been found piled up there.

Gotou stooped in front of the dark stain and lit up his surroundings to look around.

There were dark stains on parts of the floor and wall. That was – blood.

Miyagawa had said this yesterday.

– It was hell.

And the guy he'd seen there. The man with two red eyes. Had it been that man, or had Miyagawa's eyes just been playing tricks on him?

Gotou wanted him to be wrong.

That man's methods made Gotou want to vomit.

The bastard wouldn't stick his own hands into matters. He'd get close to people with his way with words and manipulate their hearts. He provoked people's weak points and drove them to crime.

He'd used this trick a number of times in cases, but Gotou had never caught him. Even if he did catch him, he wouldn't go to trial.

The bastard hadn't done anything. That was why he infuriated Gotou. All his cases left a bad aftertaste.

It was ironic that the bastard's son, Yakumo, was the one plucking the seeds he sowed.

The moment Yakumo had seen the video this time, he'd disappeared – what the hell was he thinking?

The man with the red eyes. And that video –

Gotou suddenly thought of something while musing.

– I see. So that's why Yakumo ran off.

Gotou clapped his hands together in his excitement and stood up.

If what he was thinking was correct, things were going to get serious. Gotou took up his mobile.

That moment – he felt somebody behind him.

– That idiot Ishii. So he's finally come? Honestly.

'What are you standing there for? Hurry up and come over.'

There was no response to Gotou's yell.

Even though he'd normally respond right away and run over like one of Pavlov's dogs –

The footsteps slowly approached.

– Oi, oi. This some kind of joke?

Right before Gotou could turn around, something cold was thrust against his neck. Ishii didn't have the guts to fool around like this.

'Who's there? What are you doing here?'

There was no reply.

All Gotou could hear was ragged breathing, like the person was agitated.

A druggie – if that was the case, Gotou wouldn't be able to talk to them. He'd have to use force.

Gotou prepared himself.

'I don't plan on resisting. Let's talk a bit.'

A growl came instead of a response.

– What a creep.

And where'd the guy come in from? Ishii should've been at the entrance.

Maybe Ishii could've been easily held down, but it'd taken way too little time. The guy might've been in the room from the very beginning.

'OK, I'm going to turn around.'

Gotou raised both hands to show he had no intention of resisting and slowly turned around.

He was confident that things would work out somehow if they faced each other.

He'd grab the arm with the weapon and twist it away. Since they were so close, that would be the quickest method no matter what weapon it was.

'I'm just going to turn around. I'm not going to do anything,' Gotou repeated.

For just a moment, he felt whatever was against his neck lift away.

– Now!

Gotou tried to turn around, but he had only let down his guard.

An impact ran through his body, making him bend over.

Gotou didn't even have the time to feel pain before his consciousness disappeared into a deep darkness –

-

16

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After her morning lecture, Haruka headed towards the <Movie Research Circle> club room.

The conversation she'd had with Yakumo the night before wouldn't leave her head.

It was also strange that Yakumo would call her himself, and it wasn't like he'd promised to go to the performance. Something really was off.

That feeling only grew as time passed.

– Sorry for everything.

It didn't sound like he was just talking about the performance.

I might just be thinking too much, but it'd sounded like he was saying goodbye –

That negative thought came to Haruka during her lecture.

If she was going to worry about her own delusions, it'd be better to ask the person directly. Haruka decided to come here for this reason.

She took deep breaths in front of the door.

If she opened the door, Yakumo would be there. He'd definitely say 'What did you come here for?' like he always did.

'Hey!'

Haruka put a smile on her face and opened the door.

– No one's here.

The clubroom was dark and quiet.

– Is he sleeping?

Haruka looked to the back of the room, but the sleeping bag was empty.

The ticket Haruka had brought yesterday had been left on the table.

Haruka sat on the folding chair and stared at that ticket.

If this was left here, does that mean he hasn't come back ever since he left with Gotou –

She almost relaxed, thinking that he'd gone to lecture or was investigating the case with Gotou, but the phone call from yesterday had definitely been off.

Haruka took her mobile from her bag and tried calling Yakumo.

<The number you have called is unavailable...>

The automated voice that came through sounded more hollow than usual.

Haruka had come here to reassure herself, but now she was even more anxious.

Maybe something happened to Yakumo –

Her thoughts were becoming more negative.

'No, that's impossible for Yakumo,' said Haruka, cheering herself up.

She was just thinking too much. It wasn't the first time she'd come to this room when Yakumo

wasn't here.

She felt a chill down her spine –

Haruka reflexively turned around, since she felt like somebody was watching her.

She felt like she saw a black shadow run off in the corner of her vision.

However, when she got up to look around, she didn't see anybody.

Are my eyes playing tricks on me –

'Honestly, where'd he go...'

Haruka sat back down and picked the ticket up with her fingers.

-

17

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The sparrows on the tree flew up all at once.

'Eek!'

Ishii jumped with a shriek.

He had stayed outside because he was too afraid, but he felt anxious since Gotou still hadn't come out.

He felt guilty for letting Gotou go alone too.

– I should really go inside the house too.

Ishii gulped and brought his hand close to the front door.

Jolt.

'Ack!'

A shock ran through Ishii's fingertips, making him stand up straight.

His heart was throbbing. His breathing was ragged.

– Do your best, Ishii Yuutarou.

Ishii encouraged himself and stood in front of the door again.

He slowly reached out and touched the doorknob. This time, there was no shock.

Creak.

There was a metallic shriek as the door opened.

He had to calm down. That was just because of a rusty hinge. Ishii told himself that as he walked through the entrance.

The door shut with a slam.

It was so dark that he couldn't see his feet clearly.

– I should've brought a torch.

Ishii took his mobile out of his pocket and lit up the floor with its faint light before continuing down the corridor.

Every time he took a step, it got harder to breathe and his body felt heavier. It was like he was underwater.

His palms were sweaty and his knees were shaking.

Clang, clang, clang, clang.

Suddenly, there was the sound of something hitting metal.

Ishii turned around at the sound. At some point, the front door had opened.

Fear and anxiety made his head feel dizzy.

The floor was shaking.

His ears were ringing.

– What? What? Isn't this just like that video?

Ishii couldn't stand it. He fell to his knees.

'Calm down, calm down.'

He shut his eyes and told himself that while taking deep breaths.

He felt a bit better after doing that.

Ishii stood up again and looked down the corridor. The door at the end of the corridor. He just had to go there.

'Detective Gotou.'

Ishii called out. However, there was no response.

'Detective Gotou!'

He leant forward and spoke more loudly.

He didn't hear anything at all.

'Detective Gotou!'

Ishii raised his voice even further, but there was still no response.

Could something have happened to Gotou – no, that was impossible.

'Detective Gotou, please respond.'

Silence.

The floor creaked.

His forehead was drenched in sweat. The image he'd seen in the video kept flashing back in his head. He really was afraid. His knees were shaking terribly. He had to use the wall to support himself.

'Detective Gotou! Please respond!'

There was still no response. Oh. He could use his phone. Ishii called Gotou's number using his mobile.

However, it seemed like there was no service here, so the call didn't connect.

Ishii bit down on his fear, focussed on his shaking legs and slowly took steps forward. Every time he took a step, the floor creaked underneath him. It made Ishii feel even more afraid.

He was terrified. But he had to go. Something might have happened to Gotou. With the wall as support, Ishii walked to the door.

On the opposite side of the door. Ishii's throat was dry. He wiped the sweat off his forehead and adjusted the position of his glasses before placing his hand on the doorknob. His heart was beating furiously. He slowly opened the door.

Creeeeeak.

There was nothing. The room was empty.

A torch had fallen in the centre of the room. And a mobile phone beside it. The moment he saw that, Ishii's fear vanished.

He walked to the centre of the room and yelled.

'Detective Gotou! Where are you? Please respond!'

He looked around frantically, but he couldn't spot Gotou anywhere.

He picked up the torch and the mobile and looked in every corner of the room, but Gotou was nowhere to be found.

There was only one door to the room. And all the windows were shut.

Had somebody come into the room while Ishii was standing outside? Did Gotou leave the torch and mobile here on purpose? That made no sense. Then where was he?

Ishii suddenly felt somebody's presence in a corner of the room.

'Detective Gotou...'

Ishii turned around. A woman stood there. A woman in a black dress. She was looking down so he couldn't see her face. Ishii was frozen in his fear.

'Ee...'

He couldn't even scream – his breath had caught in his throat. The woman slowly approached Ishii.

Stay away. Stay away. Stay away!

There was no way for the woman to hear the screams in Ishii's heart. She walked up to him and suddenly raised his face.

Her cloudy eyes were wide open as they stared at Ishii. Then, she opened her mouth so wide it felt like her chin would come off and vomited a large amount of liquid.

Ishii frantically wiped the liquid off of his face. When he looked at his hands, they were dyed red. It was blood. It was too late. He was going to be killed.

No. I don't want to die. I don't want to die. I don't want to die.

悲壯

第二章

02
FILE

file 02: touching

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1

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Haruka opened her eyes. Her chest felt like it was being crushed.

In the dim light, she saw the ceiling.

Dawn didn't appear to have come yet –

Even though there was no wind, the pink curtain was waving.

The suffocating feeling didn't leave her even after she opened her eyes. She pressed her hands to her chest and turned over.

The moment she turned, she noticed that her mobile's green light was blinking on the table. It seemed she had a message.

She checked the alarm clock on the table. Four in the morning –

When she woke up at dawn, something bad always happened. Haruka shut her eyes to cut off the bad memories.

– Can you hear my voice?

A voice whispered in her ear.

Haruka sat up, startled.

She saw a black shadow.

Somebody was standing in front of door that went out to the hallway. Probably a man.

Who are you? Where'd you come in from? What are you doing there?

She had so many questions, but she couldn't speak. Her eyes were ringing –

The man slowly approached.

She could vaguely see the man's face. As pale as porcelain and as expressionless as a mannequin.

'S-stay away.'

Haruka wrung those words out of her throat.

But the man kept coming closer. Haruka gripped the blanket tightly and put her back to the wall.

The man stopped in front of the table.

– Can you hear my voice?

The man's mouth moved slowly. He spoke calmly, as if he was giving a speech.

A cold sweat ran down Haruka's forehead. Her chest hurt – it felt like she had been stabbed by needles. Her body was shaking from fear.

'Calm down,' Haruka said to herself.

She had to get out of this room. Haruka looked around for a way to escape.

She spotted scissors on top of the table.

She didn't actually have to hurt him. If she could just make him flinch for a moment, she could get out of the room.

Things would work out somehow if she got out. She just needed to find good timing.

Haruka put the scissors in the corner of her vision and watched the man's movements.

– I'll ask once more. Can you hear my voice?

The man spoke.

He covered his face, as if he were tired of Haruka's refusal to respond.

– Now!

Haruka leapt from the bed and quickly grabbed the scissors on top of the table. She thrust them at the man.

The man tried to approach Haruka.

'Please. Stay away.'

Her voice was cracking.

The hand she was holding the scissors with was shaking. Her heart felt like it would burst out of her chest.

– Please. Just go away.

Perhaps Haruka's frantic plea had reached him, because the man shook his head, like he had given up, and turned around.

– You're looking for Saitou Yakumo-kun, aren't you?

'... Yakumo-kun.'

Haruka spoke without thinking.

Why does this man know Yakumo's name? And looking for him, he says –

– I can't save him.

The man's words reverberated in Haruka's ears.

'Save him, you say... Did something happen to Yakumo-kun?'

Haruka let go of the scissors and spoke in a voice near a cry.

I have a lot of questions. Who is this person? Why does he know about Yakumo? How did he get here? But I don't care about that right now.

The way the man said that makes it sound like something happened to Yakumo.

I want to know. What happened to Yakumo? And where is he now –

– He is probably in Nagano.

'Nagano? Why is he there?'

– Because that is the place where it began.

What did he mean?

– If you don't hurry, he...

The man walked away silently before Haruka could voice her question.

'Wait.'

I don't know anything. Tell me. What happened to Yakumo?

Haruka hurriedly chased after the man into the corridor.

However, the man had disappeared.

-

2

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Just as Makoto was leaving work, the internal line rang.

The timing was so good – as if she was being watched.

Makoto picked up the telephone with her coat still on.

<Hey, it's been a while. I heard you got dropped to planning?>

She heard Takizawa's voice from the receiver. The way he spoke without holding back wasn't disagreeable – rather, it was pleasant.

Takizawa helped her with the case half of a year ago.

It was an unforgettable case for Makoto. Takizawa had given all the material he had gathered himself to Makoto then.

He put revealing the truth ahead of getting an exclusive scoop. That was the type of person he was.

'It's been a while. "Dropped" is the wrong word though. I'm satisfied with the situation,' said Makoto with a laugh. It wasn't just a front – that was actually how she felt.

<You're fine if you can say that much. But it really sucks. Somebody with guts like you should be in

journalism. And the new guys here...>

Takizawa started grumbling.

Newspaper agencies tended to have longwinded people. Gathering material started from dragging out stories. That habit didn't leave them. It was an occupational disease.

'What are you calling for today?' asked Makoto, interrupting Takizawa.

He began by chatting, but they weren't close enough for him to just call using the internal line for no reason. It was clear that he had some intention.

<Ah, that's right.>

Takizawa seemed to have just recalled what he'd wanted to say. He cleared his throat and then brought up the topic at hand in a low voice.

<You know the detective called Gotou, right?>

'Yes.'

She didn't only know him – they'd just met last night.

<The police've put out a gag order so this is off-record.>

'That's all right. Did something happen to Detective Gotou?'

Her heart was beating uncomfortably.

<Seems he's disappeared.>

'Disappeared,' repeated Makoto. She didn't understand what he'd meant.

It didn't sound like something a reporter used to cases would say.

<Right. Seems he disappeared during an investigation. Don't know why. Apparently there's the possibility that somebody abducted him.>

'What did you say?'

Makoto's voice went one octave higher in surprise.

Gotou had probably made many enemies in his line of work – he lived side by side with danger.

But she just couldn't understand why a detective would be abducted. Why would anybody need to do something with such a high risk, and for what reason? There wasn't anybody more troublesome for a hostage than a detective.

And abducting Gotou wouldn't have been an easy task.

Especially if he had been in the middle of an investigation. Detectives didn't work alone. Ishii should have been there too.

– Not him too?

Takizawa sighed.

He probably sensed how deep their relationship was from Makoto's response.

'Er, when was that?'

This was no good. She had to stay calm. Right now, she wanted more information, even if it was just a little. Makoto restrained her agitation and focussed on her trembling throat as she asked the question.

<Yesterday.>

'Was it only Detective Gotou who was abducted?'

<Nobody's sure he was abducted yet. Don't know what happened to his partner either.>

'How is the scene? The investigation?'

Ishii might be together with Gotou. When Makoto thought about that, she couldn't stop herself from throwing out questions.

<Oi, oi. Calm down. We don't know the details yet.>

Makoto came to her senses after Takizawa tried to pacify her. She was gripping the phone so tightly that her fingers were white.

'Sorry, I just...'

Makoto consciously relaxed her shoulders.

<Anyway, that's how it is. Do what you like with that.>

After Takizawa said that, he hung up without waiting for Makoto's answer.

Makoto put the phone down and thought over Takizawa's words. He probably meant that she should try looking into the matter herself, now that he'd given her the info.

First, she would confirm that Ishii was safe. If Ishii was safe, she might be able to get some information from him.

Makoto took out her bag and called a number from her contacts.

Please be safe. She wished for that in her heart.

-

3

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Ishii lay on his desk in a stupor.

He remembered up until his face was showered in blood.

He couldn't remember anything after that.

When he came to, he had been collapsed in the garden. He had probably run out of the room in his fear.

He'd hurriedly wiped at his face, but there was no blood.

Was that a delusion –

Ishii had been bewildered, but he remembered about Gotou immediately and called for help from the precinct.

He met up with the police officers who came afterwards and searched the site, but they couldn't find Gotou in the end.

Investigators searched the site through the night, but nothing came up. No, that was wrong. They couldn't actually find anything specific.

That site was famous on the net for being haunted, and it appeared that a number of fanatics of the kind had stepped in and out.

There had been fingerprints and footprints, but it would take a huge amount of time to examine them.

Just earlier, the investigators had placed Gotou's mobile phone and torch, still in a plastic bag, on Ishii's desk.

There was no way Gotou would go missing.

Not just Gotou. It was extremely strange for a detective on an investigation to go missing, leaving just a mobile phone behind. It would probably be appropriate to think that somebody had abducted him.

But why was he abducted? And how?

Nobody was foolish enough to abduct a detective for no reason. There must have been a goal.

And it wouldn't have been easy to abduct Gotou. It would probably require at least three people.

There were other things Ishii didn't understand. He'd been standing at the front door then. How did the group of culprits get in and how did they get out –

Ishii raised his face in his confusion. He was so irritated he could scream.

– Things wouldn't have ended up like this if I'd gone with him then.

A wave of regret tore at Ishii's heart.

Suddenly, the door opened. Miyagawa came in and approached Ishii with an incredibly angry face.

Ishii stood up reflexively, led by that pressure.

'Explain!'

Miyagawa's thick voice shook the bottom of Ishii's stomach.

'I-I don't u-understand either.'

“I don't understand” isn't gonna cut it! Tell me! What happened!'

Miyagawa gripped Ishii by the collar.

Veins popped out on his forehead. It felt like Miyagawa might strangle Ishii depending on his reply.

'Detective Gotou and I heard about the spiritual phenomenon that occurred at that house... Er, we thought that it might be a lead, so yesterday, we went to the site...'

Ishii's throat was dry from nerves as he explained.

It felt like all the blood in his body had been drawn to his neck.

'And?'

'Ah, yes. Detective Gotou went inside the house. As he took a while to return, I went inside, and... er, he had disappeared.'

'Why didn't you go in with Gotou?'

Miyagawa's fierce look shot through Ishii.

'Er... That's...'

'Stop squirming! Say it clearly!'

Miyagawa's yell made Ishii shrink. Sweat ran down his forehead.

'I stayed outside because I was scared!'

'Scared? You seriously telling me that?'

'Y-yes sir.'

'Scared isn't gonna cut it either! You fool!'

Miyagawa thrust Ishii away with both hands.

Ishii couldn't brace himself, so he tumbled to the desk. The office supplies clattered against the floor.

Ishii couldn't retort – all he could do was bite his lip and stare at the floor.

'So what've you been doing since yesterday?'

Miyagawa made Ishii stand up again and brought his face so close that their noses were almost touching.

His eyes were blazing with rage. Ishii felt anew the affection Miyagawa had for Gotou deep in his heart, no matter how Miyagawa acted towards him.

On the other hand, I –

Ishii cursed his own weakness.

'I was here.'

'Hah? What'd you say?'

Miyagawa glared at Ishii in disbelief.

'I was here this whole time.'

'You were spaced out at your desk since yesterday?'

Ishii bit his lip, his hands in tight fists.

After determining that Gotou wasn't at home, he returned to the precinct and had, as Miyagawa said, been at his desk in a stupor.

I didn't know what to do – no, that's wrong.

I couldn't do anything alone.

'Answer me!'

Miyagawa's yell rang deep in Ishii's ears. Ishii acted like he yearned to be like Gotou, but the truth was that he just clung to him and let Gotou spoil and protect him.

'I-I apologise.'

The moment he said that, Miyagawa rammed his head into Ishii's nose.

Ishii fell to the ground in a rush of pain and pressed a hand against his head.

The lenses of his glasses had broken and were scattered on the floor.

Blood dripped onto the floor. It was mixed with tears.

Ishii dug his fingernails into the floor.

It wasn't from the pain. It wasn't from mortification. It was from anger. Anger towards himself. He couldn't forgive himself. He was so angry he wished he himself would disappear.

'There's a message from Gotou's wife.'

'A-ah...'

Ishii looked up at the unexpected words.

Miyagawa looked down at Ishii, as if Ishii were a maggot.

“I leave my husband to you.” That's what she said.'

'Eh?'

'What do you mean, eh!? Listen up! That's not a message to me or to the investigation department! That message was entrusted to you personally!'

'To me personally...'

'Do you know what these words mean!?!'

The various emotions that had welled up within him erupted all at once.

Tears kept falling from his eyes.

Ishii lay on the floor, sobbing.

'If you've got the time to wail, go find Gotou, no matter what you have to do. I'll never forgive you if anything happens to him.'

Miyagawa said those words calmly, one by one.

They echoed much more heavily in Ishii's heart than his yells.

What on earth should I do –

I've always only been a burden. It's impossible for me to find Gotou on my own.

All Ishii could do was cower in his shell like a turtle.

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4

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Haruka climbed the steep slope up to the temple.

The events of this morning had replayed over and over again in her head.

Who was that man? What did he mean by save Yakumo? And he had said that Yakumo was in Nagano.

Questions were whirling about in her head.

She waited for morning and then went to Yakumo's secret hiding place, the clubroom for the <Movie Research Circle>.

However, Yakumo hadn't been there. The ticket Haruka had given him was still on the table.

That's proof that he hasn't returned yet –

She called Gotou's mobile to see if he knew anything, but it didn't connect. She didn't know Ishii's contact information.

She had only one clue left.

– That person must know something.

Haruka couldn't restrain her impatience, so she ran up the slope and went through the gate of the temple at the top.

She passed the gravel garden and stopped at the priests' quarters at the back of the premises.

She took deep breaths to regulate her breathing.

Yakumo normally lived in the school clubroom, but this temple was his home.

She was just jumping to conclusions. Something had happened and Yakumo had returned to his home. If she opened the door, Yakumo would be there, and he'd say something like 'The scatterbrain is here'.

With that hope, Haruka rang the door chime by the sliding door.

After a moment, Isshin, the uncle who had raised Yakumo, showed up.

'Hey, Haruka-chan. Thanks for coming.'

In his working clothes, Isshin had a gentle smile reminiscent of Maitreya.

When she saw that gentle smile, Haruka felt all her worries fly away.

'I apologise for coming by so suddenly. Actually, er...'

Haruka apologised for her rudeness and tried to explain the whole story, but she couldn't find the words.

'You're looking for Yakumo then,' said Isshin, as if he had seen to the bottom of Haruka's heart.

– The way he says that, it sounds like he knows something.

'Where is Yakumo-kun now?'

Haruka, feeling suddenly emotional, gripped Isshin's arm.

'Calm down.'

Isshin touched Haruka's shoulders and spoke in a pacifying tone.

'E-excuse me.'

Haruka came to her senses and let go of Isshin's arm.

So many things happened that I lost my cool. This is really embarrassing –

'It's cold out. Let's talk inside.'

Haruka accepted Isshin's invitation honestly.

She was led to the living room, and then she sat across from Isshin, with a kotatsu¹ between them.

'Where's Yakumo-kun?' said Haruka, stopping Isshin before he could prepare tea.

She appreciated the gesture, but she wanted to find out about Yakumo as quickly as she could.

'Unfortunately, I don't know.'

'Eh?'

'Truth is, I'm searching for Yakumo too.'

Haruka had hoped he would be in this house, but that wish easily collapsed.

And –

'Isshin-san, why are you looking for...'

'The day before yesterday, Yakumo popped by. He was really odd then.'

1 A kotatsu (炬燵) is a low table with a blanket on top of it and a heater underneath, used in the winter to keep warm. [Here](#) are some very lovely ones.

'What do you mean?'

'He asked about his mother. About what sort of person she was.'

'His mother...'

If Yakumo had really asked about that, it certainly would have been unnatural.

Yakumo detested his mother.

His mother had tried to kill him when he was small. After she had failed, his mother went missing and was still missing now.

Why did his own mother try to kill him – Yakumo lived with that question. His mind wouldn't hold up if he took that squarely and thought about it.

Yakumo's logic was that he could balance his heart by hating his mother.

Perhaps because of that, Yakumo didn't bring up his mother himself, and when he talked about his mother, he always spoke recklessly and on edge.

'It appears that Yakumo is interested in the period when she tried to kill him.'

As Isshin said that, his eyes seemed to be looking far away.

'Why did his mother try to kill him... Is he looking for that reason?'

Haruka put the theory she'd come up with into words.

'Actually, I was thinking the same thing,' said Isshin with a nod.

Yakumo was chasing after his own mother. That was why he went off by himself without saying anything.

She could accept that reasoning, but then more questions came up.

'Why so suddenly?'

'I thought that you might know, Haruka-chan...' said Isshin with a bitter smile, scratching at his cheek.

She didn't have any clear proof, but she did have an idea as to where they could find out.

'Detective Gotou might know.'

'Gotou-kun...'

Isshin's brow furrowed into a difficult expression.

'I don't know the details, but the day before yesterday, Gotou-san came to visit Yakumo-kun.'

'Is Gotou-kun still dragging Yakumo into cases...'

Isshin's shoulders slumped in disappointment.

When she'd called Gotou earlier, the call hadn't connected, but it might connect if she tried now.

'I'm going to try to contact him once more.'

Haruka inputted Gotou's number on her phone.

Contrary to her hopes, the phone didn't ring – it went straight to voicemail.

'There's no need to be anxious.'

'But...'

'Let's think about it from the beginning again. There might be a hint.'

'Yes.'

Haruka gripped the red stone on her necklace tightly.

The necklace I got from Yakumo. And the necklace Yakumo's mother wore –

'Haruka-chan, why are you looking for Yakumo?' Isshin said, as if beginning a speech.

For a moment, Haruka wasn't sure whether she should mention what happened this morning. She didn't even completely believe it herself, but Isshin would believe her. That was how she felt.

'This morning, a man suddenly came into my room...'

'Somebody you know?'

'No.'

Haruka shook her head.

'Did he come to visit?'

'No. The window was unlocked, so he probably came in from there.'

'Haruka-chan...'

Isshin's expression hardened.

He didn't say anything outright, but a man had broken into the room of a woman living by herself. She knew what he meant even if he didn't say it aloud.

'I'm all right,' Haruka said firmly, sweeping away Isshin's worries. Isshin's expression relaxed once he saw how she responded.

Just when Haruka was about to continue her explanation, her mobile phone rang.

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5

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Ishii stared at the glasses on his desk.

The right lens was cracked like a spider web. The left only had shards of the lens remaining in the frame.

– Just like my heart.

Ishii bit his lip in shame.

He couldn't do anything. He had been able to move forward even though he was a burden because Gotou had been there for him up until now.

Without Gotou, he was just a dead weight. An existence that just sank to the bottom of the deep sea.

He really should have quit the force after the last case.

He had been so happy when Gotou stopped him that he'd stayed on the force, but because of that, this was how things had ended up.

A sudden knock on the door interrupted Ishii's thoughts.

He turned around and stared at the door. He didn't respond. He didn't want to see anybody right now. He wanted them to leave.

But the door opened, contrary to Ishii's desire.

'Hello.'

A woman's voice. Since he didn't have his glasses on, his vision was fuzzy and he couldn't discern who it was.

'I heard about Detective Gotou.'

It was Makoto's voice.

Why does she know about Gotou – for a moment, Ishii was confused, but he soon understood.

She was a newspaper reporter. Although reporting it was restricted, she could probably still get the information.

She was the sort of person who could be considerate of others. She had probably come all the way here because she was worried, but to Ishii right now, that was just a bother.

He didn't want to talk to anybody now. Ishii said nothing and turned his back to Makoto.

'Ishii-san, are you not going to search for Detective Gotou?'

Makoto probably didn't intend it to sound this way, but Ishii felt like those words were pointed.

'I already searched for him.'

Ishii lay on his desk and covered his ears.

He wanted to cut off all his senses. He wanted to feel nothing, like a rock on the side of the road. He wanted to be something that nobody would notice.

'Ishii-san.'

Makoto touched Ishii's shoulder.

'Please leave me alone!'

Ishii stood up and brushed away Makoto's hand.

He thought that she would leave, but Makoto just stood there. Without his glasses, Ishii couldn't tell what expression she had on her face.

Just from facing her, he felt how wretched his own existence was.

– Please just leave a useless person like me alone.

Ishii sat back down in his chair, covering his face with his hands.

'Ishii-san, let's look for Detective Gotou,' said Makoto.

'It's impossible. I can't do it.'

'Why not?'

Makoto's words sounded cruel to Ishii.

There was only one reason he couldn't look for Gotou. Because he was a coward.

'It's impossible, so I said it's impossible.'

Ishii could tell his voice was shaking.

'You can do it.'

– Don't say that so easily.

'Even though you're telling me to look for him, where and how should I search? I have absolutely no idea where Detective Gotou might have disappeared to.'

Ishii raised his head to look at Makoto.

He really couldn't see her expression. But he felt her gaze acutely.

'There must be a connection between Detective Gotou's disappearance and the case, so if you follow the case, you should reach Detective Gotou.'

Makoto spoke calmly and gently.

I know what she's trying to say. I also know that that is the only lead I have to look for Gotou. But –

'I can't do anything alone.'

'You aren't alone.'

'...'

'I will look for Detective Gotou with you.'

After Makoto said that, she took Ishii's hand. Ishii, who had no immunity towards women, moved away from Makoto in order to escape.

'Ishii-san, it's all right. You can do it.'

Makoto took Ishii's hand again, this time in both of her hands. It felt like she was showing her determination.

However, Ishii didn't understand. Why was Makoto doing so much –

No, not just Makoto. Gotou and Yakumo too hadn't abandoned somebody as useless as him – they had worked with him. Why –

Ishii's heart faltered.

'I don't know what to do...'

'First, let's solve the puzzle of that video. There's no guarantee that we will find Detective Gotou, but there is nothing else we can do.'

Makoto gripped Ishii's hands even more tightly.

It was like she was holding on frantically to Ishii who was about to fall off a cliff.

'... But I probably can't solve it.'

'I probably can't either. We might not be able to do anything in the end. But this is better than doing nothing and regretting it afterwards.'

Makoto's words weighed heavily on Ishii's chest.

What she said made sense. But as long as they had no way to look for him, it was certain they would regret it.

'It really is impossible.'

He felt more and more what a useless man he was. But there was no helping it. This was who he was. Please disdain him.

Ishii turned his gaze to the floor.

However, what Makoto said next was not what Ishii had expected.

'Ishii-san, please have more confidence. You are not as helpless as you think you are.'

He didn't want to hear that consolation.

'We can't do anything alone.'

'It might be impossible with us alone, but if we ask Yakumo-san to help, the possibility goes much higher.'

It was true that his unique ability to see ghosts and his keen mind might be able to spot a clue.

That was how they had solved a number of cases in the past. But –

'I haven't been able to contact Yakumo-shi.'

That was why Gotou and Ishii had gone to the site of the mansion alone yesterday.

'Is that so?'

'I have no idea where he is now.'

Though Ishii was disappointed, Makoto was indifferent.

'That's fine. Isn't there somebody who might know where Yakumo-san is?'

After Makoto said that, Ishii gasped. That was right –

'If we ask Haruka-chan...'

'That's right.'

Makoto nodded.

Right. He had been so upset he hadn't thought that far.

'Do you know her contact information?' asked Makoto.

'Yes. I think that the number is in Detective Gotou's mobile.'

Ishii took Gotou's mobile out of the plastic bag. He turned it on and searched through the address book.

– There it is.

He found the name Ozawa Haruka in the address book. He noted down the number and picked up the phone.

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6

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What a strange line-up –

Haruka felt that way when she looked at the faces that had gathered at Isshin's house. It was like a drama that was missing its main character. The ratings would be awful.

Haruka sat next to Isshin. Ishii and Makoto were opposite them.

All the people here were related somehow to Yakumo and Gotou, but it was the first time they'd met up without them.

While Haruka was talking with Isshin, her phone had rung.

Ishii had been the one who called her. She had hoped that he might have some sort of clue, but instead she heard that Gotou had also gone missing.

While Haruka had just been bewildered, Isshin arranged for the four of them to meet.

'Now, let's begin.'

Isshin broke the silence.

He was appropriate for the role. Unfortunately, the rest of them weren't leader types.

'Gotou-kun went missing yesterday then.'

Isshin looked towards Ishii. Ishii hung his head, as if to deny those words. His glasses were cracked for some reason.

'Is anything the matter?'

'No, er, um...'

Ishii wiped the sweat off his forehead and hunched his back as he pressed his hands against his stomach.

'Er, I'll explain. Much of what happened resulted from my actions.'

Makoto spoke up for Ishii.

'Please do.'

Urged on by Isshin, Makoto began her explanation.

'We were looking into the puzzle of a spiritual phenomenon in a video. It was put out by a video company and there had been the ghost of a woman in it. At the location, four people had been brutally murdered fifteen years ago, and one had gone missing – it was a repulsive case.'

'I know about that case as well. Wasn't the suspect who escaped spotted the other day?'

Isshin hit his knee.

'That's right. Gotou-san and Ishii-san were the one who spotted the escaped suspect.'

'I see. So that was why Yakumo was dragged into the case,' said Isshin grimly.

It felt like Isshin's tone was pointed, which was rare for him. It didn't show in his expression, but it felt like Isshin didn't think well of Gotou, who involved Yakumo in his cases.

Rather than disliking his personality, it felt like he was anxious for Yakumo.

'Yes. Yakumo-san saw the video once. But right after he finished watching, he left without saying anything.'

Yakumo sometimes acted that way.

At times like that, he had grasped almost all the threads of the case. However, Yakumo, who hated making his final judgements based on his reasoning, would leave to act on his own without saying anything.

'After that, Ishii-san and Gotou-san went to the house to try to solve the case alone. Then...'

'Gotou-kun went missing...'

'Yes.'

Makoto nodded.

There was something Haruka didn't understand from the explanation.

'Ishii-san was with Gotou-san, yes?'

When Ishii heard Haruka's question, a jolt ran through his body and he looked up. He looked frightened, like an abandoned puppy.

'N-no. Er, I was...'

Ishii's forehead was covered in sweat. He seemed flustered.

'Ishii-san, nobody blames you. Please calm down and speak.'

Isshin turned his usual gentle smile towards Ishii.

'Ishii-san, it's all right.'

Makoto placed her hand on Ishii's tightly gripped fist. She acted just like a mother. Ishii appeared to calm down slightly, and he nodded before starting to speak.

'It shames me to say that I was outside the house because I was frightened. Detective Gotou took a long time inside the house, so I was anxious and went inside, but then, it was already...'

When he finished speaking, Ishii hung his head, as if there was a weight on it.

'I see.'

Isshin crossed his arms and nodded.

'If I had gone with Detective Gotou then, this wouldn't have...'

Ishii's hands were in tight fists, and the words sounded like they had been strangled out of him.

Haruka did not blame Ishii, just as Isshin had said.

There was no helping it. If he knew this was going to happen, Ishii would have gone with Gotou no matter how afraid he was.

That was the way of regret –

If Haruka had known that Yakumo was going to go missing, she would have done something when he called.

'Yakumo and Gotou-kun both went missing. It may be dangerous to speculate, but I still think that the two events are related,' said Isshin quietly. Though his tone was different, what he said was exactly like how Yakumo would have said it.

Even though their outward personalities were different, the roots of his ideas, or rather, the way they thought was very similar. Haruka realised that anew.

'I think that too,' said Makoto.

Haruka nodded as well. Ishii only kept his head down in silence.

'And even though Gotou-kun looks like that, he isn't a reckless man. If he went to the scene of the crime, it probably means he had thought of something, even though he didn't say it aloud.'

Isshin's words made Ishii look up in surprise.

'What is it?'

'No, it's nothing.'

Ishii shook his head and looked down again.

Isshin seemed to sense something from that response, as his eyes narrowed, but in the end, he said nothing.

'Would you allow me to see that video?' said Haruka, leaning forward.

'I would appreciate it if you did. May I borrow the TV?'

'Please go ahead.'

After receiving Isshin's permission, Makoto took a video camera and cable out of her bag and quickly started connecting them.

Ishii couldn't calm down – he was looking around like a chicken. It was probably a terrifying video.

The truth was, Haruka didn't want to see something frightening either, but if she looked away, she wouldn't be able to find out if Yakumo was safe.

'May I start?'

After Makoto finished setting up, she slowly looked at each of their faces as she asked that question.

Everyone nodded silently.

Makoto pressed the play button and a video showed up on the television.

The building looked like a church. Somebody who looked like a reporter and somebody who looked like an exorcist in worship clothes were talking outside. Then, they entered the house.

The reporter seemed to feel something strange, because she looked around, frightened.

Suddenly, the lights went out and the screen went black.

It sounded like there were footsteps.

There were yells and screams.

The tense atmosphere came right through.

A moment of silence –

Then, the bloody face of a woman filled the screen.

It felt like the anguished face was going to come out of the television and chase her.

Though she didn't scream, Haruka covered her mouth and leant away from the screen.

Finally, the woman's face disappeared into the dark and the video stopped.

Nobody said anything.

It was certain that Yakumo had felt something from this video.

It was possible that Yakumo, who could see the spirits of the dead, might have felt something in this video that others couldn't see.

Haruka recalled the face of the woman.

The face that suddenly appeared on screen. It wasn't anything tangible, but the moment the face appeared, the atmosphere had changed. What was it? This strange feeling.

'I see.'

Isshin was the one who broke the silence.

'If Yakumo saw this video, I can understand his inexplicable actions.'

With his arms crossed, Isshin spoke, looking at the television with a sharp glance he didn't usually show.

'What do you mean?' said Haruka quickly, unable to restrain her agitation.

'The ghost in this video is my older sister.'

The words Isshin said quietly shook Haruka's heart.

The words were a shock. If she was Isshin's older sister, that would mean she was Yakumo's mother.

Then, just as Isshin said, Haruka could understand Yakumo's inexplicable actions.

When Yakumo saw this video, it piqued his interest in his mother. Then, he went to investigate alone.

Because he thought it was something personal, he didn't tell anybody.

'If she was captured on a video as a ghost, it means that my sister is already...'

Isshin's expression twisted as he spoke in a feeble voice like the dying flame of a candle.

Haruka knew what he was going to say even if he didn't finish his sentence. If she had been a ghost, it meant she was already dead.

Isshin had probably believed somewhere in his heart that his older sister was still alive. Then, he found out about her death in such an unbelievable manner.

It was so sad –

'If she is Yakumo-san's mother, why would she be in the video of this house?'

Makoto leant forward slightly as she proposed her question.

It certainly might be the gap they needed to solve the puzzle of the case.

Haruka was interested in how Isshin felt, so she took a glance at him.

Isshin was pinching his brow and appeared to be thinking about something. Yakumo had the same habit when he ran across a difficult problem. The two really were alike.

Finally, Isshin raised his head.

There seemed to be resignation in the back of his narrow eyes.

'Would you mind if I talk a bit about my sister?'

Nobody objected to Isshin's suggestion.

'My sister was abducted by a man twenty-two years ago and kept captive. Since my sister never said anything, I don't know what happened to her there. After two weeks of confinement, she barely escaped with her life and was taken in for protection.'

'That's...'

Makoto looked like she would cry at any moment.

'Yes. She became pregnant with Yakumo then.'

Haruka found it hard to breathe.

She'd got the general idea about Yakumo's birth through occasional conversations she'd heard before, but it was the first time she had heard it clearly like this.

That reality always tormented Yakumo.

He had been born unwanted. Then, his mother had tried to kill him. He was an unnecessary human being.

The darkness that spread within Yakumo's heart –

What had Yakumo been feeling as he chased after his mother?

'I have averted my eyes from what happened to my sister until now. I shouldn't touch the matter. That was what I thought. It wasn't something I could ask about.'

Nobody interrupted Isshin. They simply listened.

Now that Haruka thought about it, tragedy had befallen Yakumo's mother as well. Sudden misfortune had changed her fate.

'However, that might have just been running away. I didn't touch the matter because she seemed pitiful. With that excuse, I might have been avoiding facing her directly. If I had faced her directly then, she might not have tried to kill Yakumo. She might not have gone missing, and she might still be walking her own path.'

Isshin's mouth was in a thin line as he slowly closed his eyes.

Haruka understood his feelings of regret, but this was different. When Haruka thought that, she opened her mouth to speak.

'Isshin-san, you weren't incorrect. As a woman, she wouldn't have wanted to be asked about that –

she would have wanted to forget it, so...'

After saying that much, Haruka noticed that everyone's gazes were focussed on her, and she stiffened.

Isshin started chuckling.

'Did I say something funny?' said Haruka, looking at Isshin anxiously.

'No, that's not it. I just thought that was to be expected.'

'Expected?'

'Yes. Yakumo's completely under your thumb.'

She was even more confused now. Haruka didn't remember ever having Yakumo under her thumb. It appeared that Isshin had a strange misunderstanding, but Haruka couldn't think of how to deny his words.

'Anyway, it's just as Haruka-chan says. There's no point regretting the past now. We need to think of what to do now.'

Isshin's expression stiffened.

'Yes.'

'I'm going to share my reasoning, but I think that the cases are connected. The murders fifteen years ago. The suspect from that case showed up again, my sister showed up in the video, Yakumo went missing, and Gotou-kun disappeared.'

That was right. These cases were connected.

'What we can do is find the thread that connects these cases.'

The thread that connects them –

'That's right. It seems that's all we can do now.'

Makoto gave her agreement.

'In short, we gather information again and see if any data seems to correspond?'

Ishii looked up at Isshin. He seemed extremely unconfident.

'Ishii-san, Hijikata-san, I apologise for the trouble, but would you look through the data again?'

'I understand,' replied Makoto.

'I have a few ideas myself, so I will go look into them.'

As Isshin brought the conversation to a close, Makoto stood up.

'Ishii-san, let's go.'

Despite Makoto's call, Ishii did not stand up.

Ishii had always been timid, but Haruka still felt this was unlike him. Perhaps it was from the shock of Gotou going missing –

'Ishii-san.'

When Makoto hurried him, Ishii shook his head.

'Will we really find Detective Gotou by doing something like this?' said Ishii quietly. They were apathetic words.

– Why are you saying that?

The discomfort in Haruka's heart spread.

'I think it would be better if we left everything to the police instead of going ourselves. If we report Yakumo-shi's disappearance as well...'

'How many missing persons does the police look for every year and how many do they find? To say more, how many cases do investigators actually look into?'

Isshin cast out harsh questions to drown out Ishii's negativity.

Haruka didn't know the actual numbers either, but she understood what Isshin was trying to say.

For missing persons without clear cases, there were no searches. There weren't enough police to search for missing persons.

Setting Gotou aside, if they reported Yakumo as missing, it would probably be filed away with the police saying that Yakumo had disappeared of his will.

'... But with Detective Gotou and Yakumo-shi, it wasn't an abduction – there was no ransom. Which means they might already...' mumbled Ishii, looking down.

Emotions boiled up in Haruka's chest.

From the way Ishii was speaking, it was like he was telling them to give up because Gotou and Yakumo were already dead.

'Already what?'

Haruka glared at Ishii. She knew herself that her voice was angry.

'... It is probably... already too late for the two of them.'

'What do you mean by too late?'

'I'm saying that they're probably already dead...'

'How can you say that so easily? Don't just kill them off!' yelled Haruka, drowning out Ishii's words. At the same time, whatever had frozen over inside her broke and tears came falling out.

'No, er...'

Ishii seemed uneasy as he looked around frantically.

Haruka took that chance to land the final blow. Her emotions had reached tipping point and she couldn't control herself.

'Ishii-san, are you saying that we should give up because they're already dead?'

'That isn't what I...'

'Then what do you mean?'

'That's...'

Haruka's anger only grew as she saw Ishii squirming.

'Yakumo-kun saved me – he didn't give up until the end! That's why I won't give up either! Hasn't Gotou-san risked his life countless times to protect you, Ishii-san!? Then why are you giving up? Hey! Why!?!'

Haruka's throat was trembling.

It hurt. She had thought Ishii was her ally, but she felt like he'd betrayed her.

They might be dead. She knew that it was a possibility. But if she accepted that, then Yakumo and Gotou really wouldn't come back.

I won't stand for that! As long as there's even the slightest possibility, I definitely won't give up!

'Haruka-chan, it's all right already. Ishii-san doesn't really think that way either. He's just saying that we need to be prepared.'

Isshin touched Haruka's shoulder.

That moment, Haruka lost her footing and collapsed into Isshin, clinging to him as she sobbed.

I don't want Yakumo to disappear – I don't want him to.

Why did he disappear without saying anything?

I hate him!

Once more. I want to see you once more –

Having lost herself to the feelings that had welled up, Haruka continued to cry into Isshin's chest.

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7

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Led out by Makoto, Ishii escaped to the car.

Even after sitting in the driver's seat, he felt weightless, as if he were in a dream. It didn't feel real.

The words that the woman he loved had levelled at him had pierced more deeply in his heart than anything else. His chest stung, as if somebody had poured salt on his wound.

– What on earth am I doing? How could I say that?

Self-hatred boiled up within Ishii and went straight to his core.

It was just as Haruka said. Gotou had saved him so many times before, but now that Gotou was in a pinch, he didn't try to do anything and gave up by saying it was impossible for him.

– It's unforgiveable! I can't forgive myself!

Ishii wanted to destroy everything and kept on hitting his head against the steering wheel.

'Aaaargh!'

His shriek felt like it would tear through his throat.

His breathing was ragged.

His tears and snot dripped onto the steering wheel.

– What a useless man I am.

Even though Haruka, a university student, was trying so hard, he had shut himself out because he was a coward.

He had been waiting for somebody to save him.

Doing nothing was the same as making the possibility drop to zero himself.

If there was still one per cent chance, he couldn't give up.

'Ishii-san, are you all right?'

Makoto handed Ishii a handkerchief from the passenger seat.

Normally, she didn't show her emotions on her face. However, Ishii realised once more that she was considerate and caring at the bottom of her heart.

He had thought her bothersome up until earlier, but now he appreciated her kindness.

Ishii didn't take the proffered handkerchief. Instead, he wiped his tears on the sleeve of his suit.

Especially because he appreciated her kindness, he couldn't allow her to spoil him. He had to walk forward on his own now.

'I'm fine.'

Ishii snivelled and looked straight at Makoto.

No matter how wretched his circumstances, he couldn't look away. Ishii felt that strongly.

'You might be angry if I put it this way, but Ishii-san, you just don't have any self-confidence,' said Makoto, as if to herself.

Those words woke up a sleeping memory in Ishii's mind.

I had been in middle school. At the time, I'd dreamt of being a manga artist.

When my father found out, he came into my room with the face of a demon and threw all of the manga pages that I had worked so hard on into the bin.

I couldn't stop him – I just watched him silently.

– Don't have such a stupid dream. Know your own abilities.

My father kept saying that.

My strict father was a policeman, so he might not have been able to understand my dream.

No, he might have said that because he didn't want to see me every day after I failed in my dream and fell down.

My father scorned my dream and crushed it.

That hadn't been the first time my father had done something like that. He had done that ever since my childhood.

At some point, I became somebody who doubted himself, feared being yelled at and didn't put his own thoughts into words.

This wasn't just at home – it was the same at school too. Other kids bullied me and called me 'glasses monkey'.

Just as my father said, I'm an ordinary person – I can't do anything special. So I don't say anything. I don't do anything.

In the end, I decided to become a detective because of something that happened in high school.

It felt like my father was satisfied with that. But –

'My father was... No, I was wrong.'

However, Ishii had just shifted the responsibility to his father without his knowing.

How could he know it was impossible without doing anything? He had to believe in his own ability now and do something.

'This isn't the time to stop!' yelled Ishii, looking up.

In the back of his mind, an electric switch he hadn't used before switched on.

– I can do it. No, I have to do it.

It was like his blood was flowing in the other direction. He felt exhilarated. He had never felt this way before.

'I will definitely find the two of them,' declared Ishii to Makoto.

'That's the spirit.'

Makoto smiled.

'Please wait, Detective Gotou. I will definitely find you.'

The newly budded determination in Ishii firmly rooted his shaking heart.

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8

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How much did I cry –

Haruka had kept on crying heedless of her surroundings, like a child.

Yakumo was going to disappear. Just from thinking that, she was hit with an indescribable wave of sadness. She had felt the same sadness when she lost her twin sister.

Yakumo wasn't just a friend.

Yakumo was the one who had filled in the hole left in Haruka's heart when her sister died.

– Yakumo is my better half. If I lose him, I'll break.

'Have you calmed down?'

She looked up at the voice and saw Isshin's gentle face.

'Sorry.'

Haruka quickly wiped her tears and lowered her head. She sat up properly.

'Don't worry about it. But you should apologise to Ishii-san afterwards. He didn't mean any harm,' Isshin said gently, placing a hand on Haruka's shoulder.

Just as Isshin said, she had said something awful to Ishii, thought that had been because of her pent-up emotions.

Ishii had to be suffering too from Gotou's disappearance, but she had only been thinking of herself.

'Yes, I will.'

Isshin nodded in satisfaction at Haruka's response.

It was mysterious how Haruka felt like all was forgiven once Isshin looked at her.

It was said that Maitreya was the Buddha of salvation. Haruka felt like it wasn't just Isshin's appearance that was similar.

'Still, Yakumo has to start thinking differently,' said Isshin seriously as he scratched his chin.

'What do you mean?'

Haruka didn't understand the meaning behind Isshin's words.

'Because that happened to Yakumo, he thinks that nobody will love him. He's lost his meaning for living and sometimes acts in a way that treats his life lightly.'

Isshin's opinion struck Haruka too.

Sometimes, Yakumo really was reckless. He put himself in danger – it even felt like he sometimes wanted to do so when he leapt in.

Because he could see the spirits of the dead, he was more sensitive to the lives of others, but he didn't treat his own life the same way.

He wants to die – it made her feel that way.

'I've thought that too.'

Haruka put her thoughts into words. Isshin nodded a number of times.

'But there are two people here who are worried about Yakumo and feel like their hearts have been wrenched open. I wish Yakumo would realise that.'

Isshin smiled in a truly happy manner.

Haruka felt the same way as Isshin. No matter what anyone said, to Isshin and Haruka, Yakumo was an important and irreplaceable existence in their hearts.

'Do you think Yakumo-kun is all right?'

The moment Haruka relaxed, the anxiety that had been in her chest came out.

By not saying it aloud, she had been keeping the anxiety inside.

'I don't know. Yakumo might have just gone off to chase his mother himself, so we can't contact him, or he might have been caught up in some incident.'

'Yes.'

'Whichever it is, all we can do now is believe in him.'

Isshin laughed like a child.

It was true that all they could do now was believe in him. But –

'Isn't there anything I can do?'

Haruka couldn't just wait quietly.

'Of course there is.'

Isshin nodded, as if he had been waiting for those words.

'Please tell me. What should I do?'

'Well, don't be in such a rush. Before that, I want you to know a bit more about my sister, Haruka-chan.'

– Yakumo's mother.

Haruka barely knew anything about what sort of person that woman was. The only thing she knew was that she had tried to kill Yakumo.

However, that was only one action of hers. She couldn't pinpoint everything about her just from

that.

And why did Yakumo's mother want to kill Yakumo as a child anyway?

She wanted to know the reason too.

'Yes.'

Perhaps Isshin sensed how Haruka was feeling, because he started his story.

'This might sound like the partiality of a relative, but my sister was a very kind person. Though part of it was because we were far apart in age, she always took care of me.'

The bloody and anguished face came up in Haruka's head when she heard Isshin's words.

– I can't do that. I can't have any preconceptions.

Haruka shook the image out of her head and focussed on listening to Isshin.

'Though my sister was kind, it is also true that she wasn't very strong psychologically. When anything tough happens, she ended up worrying about it herself.'

Isshin crossed his arms and seemed to be looking far away. He appeared to be gathering his memories.

Haruka also tried to imagine Isshin's sister, rather than the woman who had tried to kill Yakumo.

'When I was in high school, that incident occurred. I returned home from to school to find my parents extremely worried since they couldn't contact my sister.'

'Did you contact the police?'

'We contacted them immediately and filed a report for missing persons, but they just asked about the situation and it ended there.'

Isshin paused. It looked like he was forcibly restraining his emotions.

It made Haruka remember what Isshin had said to Ishii-san earlier.

If there wasn't a clear case for the missing person, the police wouldn't move. Isshin had probably experienced that himself then.

'In the end, all we could do was ask around town. I still wonder now if there was anything else we could have done.'

Isshin sighed. It sounded like it was filled with regret.

But it would probably be difficult to say if there was anything else Isshin could have done then.

'My sister was found two weeks after. Somebody found her wandering on a mountain road in Nagano prefecture.'

'Nagano prefecture...'

Haruka reacted sensitively to the location Isshin mentioned.

'Do you know it?'

– More than just knowing.

'That's where I'm from!'

'I see, so Haruka-chan is from Nagano...'

Isshin's eyes narrowed, like he was thinking deeply about something.

'Yes. And the man who came this morning said that Yakumo-kun was in Nagano. Perhaps...'

There might be some relation.

'I see. Something might be there.'

Isshin appeared to have the same opinion.

'Er, do you know exactly where in Nagano prefecture it was?'

'It was Togakushi.'

'Togakushi – is that true!?' exclaimed Haruka in her agitation.

'That should be right,' said Isshin clearly.

– This is an amazing coincidence.

'My family is from Togakushi in Nagano prefecture.'

'What did you say!?!'

Even Isshin was surprised as his eyes went as wide as saucers.

That said, Haruka's heart was beating quickly too in her excitement. She was being called. That was how she felt.

For a while, Isshin looked up at the ceiling as if thinking, but then he narrowed his eyes like he had thought of something.

'This is an abrupt question, but your family name is Ozawa, right, Haruka-chan?'

'Yes.'

'I see... Could your mother's name be Keiko-san?'

'Eh?'

– Why does Isshin know my mother's name?

She had never said her mother's name to Isshin or Yakumo before. Haruka almost fainted in her confusion.

'So it is Keiko-san,' repeated Isshin.

Haruka's throat was dry – she couldn't speak. She just nodded silently.

– What does this mean?

'So that really is the case? What a coincidence. No, perhaps it's fate. In any case, I have to feel that this is some sort of destiny,' said Isshin to himself as he stood up.

Haruka felt like she had been left behind and looked up at Isshin's face to ask for an answer.

'Wait here.'

Without responding to Haruka's question, Isshin left the room.

After being left behind, all Haruka could do was wait with her overwhelming questions.

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9

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After Ishii returned to the precinct, he headed for the police quarters' common room.

When he went inside, the investigation members all glared at him.

– What did you come here for?

The gazes of the veterans seemed like jeers.

However, it wasn't the time or place to falter from something like that. No matter how he was ridiculed or reprimanded, he had to move forward to find Gotou.

Ishii prepared himself and walked straight to the desk in the very back of the room that belonged to Chief Miyagawa.

'Did you find Gotou?'

Once Ishii reached the front of the desk, Miyagawa said that, full of hostility.

Ishii felt like he had a sword to his neck. Normally, Ishii would have run away in fear, but today was different.

'I haven't yet.'

'Then why are you here?'

Miyagawa's thick voice was lower than usual, and it fanned up Ishii's fear.

A cold sweat ran down his back, but Ishii still faced Miyagawa directly.

'I came here today because I have a request!' said Ishii loudly, his voice coming from the bottom of his stomach so that he wouldn't be defeated by emotion.

'What?'

'I would appreciate it if you would allow me to see the dossier and related documents for the Takeda Shunsuke case.'

'Can't do it. What do you want something like that for?'

Miyagawa turned his chair around and looked to the side. It was a strong display of refusal.

'In order to find Detective Gotou, they are absolutely necessary. Please.'

Ishii bent his waist and bowed so that his head almost reached the desk.

'The whole mess is because you stuck your noses into other people's business!'

Though he wasn't sure where it came from, somebody jeered at Ishii, and sniggers echoed through the room in agreement.

Still, Ishii kept his head down in a bow.

He didn't care what anybody said. Something like this wouldn't make him give in. He wasn't the Ishii Yuutarou he'd always been. If it was to save Gotou, he'd do anything. He didn't care what anybody thought.

'Please!'

Ishii spoke up once again.

'Not a chance! I told you to look for Gotou, but I don't remember telling you to stick your neck where it doesn't belong!'

Miyagawa turned to face him again and hit his desk as he yelled.

Ishii didn't falter – he looked up and stared straight at Miyagawa's face. It was so tense it felt like sparks were flying.

'My goal is to find Detective Gotou. I do not plan on obstructing the investigation.'

'Then...'

'However, in order to search for Detective Gotou's location, it is absolutely necessary to investigate that case once more.'

'You'll get in the way if you're loitering about! No matter how many times you lower your head, things that are no good are no good!'

Miyagawa slammed his fist into his desk again.

So it really was no good? It really wouldn't be easy to convince this person. Disappointment spread throughout Ishii.

But he couldn't give up. If he couldn't get permission through official means, he would have to steal it. He would definitely be dismissed if it were found out, but that meant nothing when compared to Gotou's life.

'I understand. Please excuse me.'

Ishii bowed once more to Miyagawa and turned on his heels.

The investigation members' pitying looks washed over him. Mysteriously though, he didn't care. Ishii felt anew that this was what following a path he believed in felt.

'Ishii!'

Just as Ishii was about to start walking, Miyagawa called out to him.

'What is it?'

Ishii turned around. Miyagawa had his arms crossed and seemed to be thinking as he stared at Ishii.

'If you've got enough free time to stick your neck into an unrelated case, I'll give you some work to do.'

'Work... is it?'

Right now, he had to search for Gotou – he didn't have the time to do any other work. Miyagawa should have understood that.

Ishii didn't understand Miyagawa's true intention.

'The fourth floor toilet is dirty. Go clean it!'

Miyagawa's words made the room erupt in laughter.

This made even Ishii angry.

Wasn't Miyagawa worried about Gotou –

Miyagawa had the one who reprimanded Ishii for holing up in his room, so Ishii found Miyagawa's words hard to understand.

Ishii gripped his hands into such tight fists it felt like his fingernails would tear through his skin in his vexation.

'Especially the stall in the very back. The back of the tank is dirty. I'll go check it in an hour, so you better do it properly.'

After Miyagawa added that, he raised his left eyebrow and there was a faint smile on his lips.

When Ishii saw that expression, he understood everything.

– I see. So that's how it is.

He felt ashamed for doubting Miyagawa for even a moment.

'Understood. I will clean the toilets thoroughly.'

Ishii made a polite bow to Miyagawa and walked out of the room with long strides.

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Why does Isshin know the name of my mother –

That question was circling Haruka's head.

Isshin had said it was fate. What had he meant by that?

'Sorry for the wait.'

When Isshin returned to the living room, he was holding a long white envelope.

It looked fairly old – the colour was dull.

Is the answer to my question in that envelope – Haruka was on the balls of her feet, but Isshin was calm. He sat cross-legged on the floor.

'Excuse me...'

Haruka leant forward, unable to contain herself.

'Don't be in such a hurry. Let's talk in the proper order.'

Just as Isshin said, there was no point hurrying.

Even though she understood that, her body still reacted the way it did. Haruka put a hand to her chest and sighed.

Isshin slid the envelope across the table. <Saitou Azusa-sama> was written on it.

Azusa. That's Yakumo's mother's name –

'Just as I said earlier, my sister was kept in a mountain cottage in Togakushi, Nagano when she went missing.'

In Haruka's hometown, Togakushi, on the mountain used for skiing and mountain climbing, there were various mountain cottages.

Virtually all of them were only used during the appropriate seasons, so it was a lonely place that nobody approached during the off-seasons. It could be called the ideal location for keeping somebody captive without being found.

'My sister used a ski that the man had overlooked to thrust her way out of the cottage. She went through the forest, down the mountain and out onto the road to look for help.'

Unconsciously, the image of a woman trying to escape came up in Haruka's mind.

Without knowing where she was, she was afraid of the man coming after her – her psychological state had probably been at its limit.

Just imagining it made it hard to breathe.

'At the time, one of the people who lived there happened to pass by and saved my sister.'

'Could you mean...'

Could it be – that thought spread in Haruka's head.

'That person had been very concerned about my sister, perhaps because they were close in age. Even after the incident, she regularly sent letters to contact her.'

Haruka's eyes went wide and she stared at Isshin's face.

'When my sister went missing, all of her belongings were disposed of, but this was in the mailbox. It had probably arrived after she disappeared. The person who wrote the letter was the one who had saved my sister after that incident.'

This letter. Isshin flipped over the envelope. The sender's name was written there.

– Ozawa Keiko.

'No way...'

Haruka spoke up unconsciously.

The letters in the top left corner were unmistakably her mother's.

She'd thought it was the case partway through the story, but seeing it with her eyes like this made her shiver.

Haruka didn't know what emotion that came from.

'Mum...'

'This is really a mysterious connection. I just feel like Yakumo and you were meant to meet, Haruka-chan.'

That might have been the case. A number of feelings were welling up within Haruka, and the corners of her eyes felt warm.

Yakumo and Haruka's meeting hadn't been anything dramatic.

Because of a spiritual phenomenon, Haruka had gone to Yakumo's clubroom for the first time.

But now that she thought about it, it felt like that had had to happen.

Without their knowing, their two lives had been connected. Then, they had been drawn to their meeting.

'I was going to ask you to look for the person who wrote this letter, Haruka-chan, but it seems that isn't necessary.'

Isshin scratched his head awkwardly.

'It seems so.'

Haruka stared at the letter.

If Haruka could talk to Keiko, she might be able to find out what sort of person Azusa was and why she tried to kill Yakumo.

That wasn't all. The reason for Azusa's disappearance and her location. Then she'd be able to grasp

where Yakumo might have gone.

Here, Haruka realised something.

'Has the envelope not been opened?'

The envelope was firmly shut, and it had no signs of ever having been open.

'I couldn't open it... That might be a more correct way of putting it.'

Isshin looked away, seeming uncomfortable.

'You couldn't open it?'

'If I felt like it, I could have opened that letter, looked for that woman and talked to her, but I didn't.'

'Why is that?'

If he looked at what was written in the letter, it could have been a clue towards looking for where Azusa had gone. Then why? Haruka stated her question as it came up in her head.

'Because my sister tried to kill Yakumo.'

The words Isshin said quietly left a strong impact and shook Haruka's heart.

If she had just gone missing regularly, Isshin probably would have opened the letter and searched for Azusa.

However, Azusa had tried to kill Yakumo, her own child, and she had disappeared after she failed in doing that.

'If Azusa had been found, she would have been taken in for attempted murder. And when I thought about how Yakumo would respond if my sister returned...'

– He was afraid.

Isshin sniffed and wiped at his eye with his finger.

Yakumo hated Azusa. If the object of his hate came back – it was certainly scary to think about what might happen next.

Isshin didn't say it aloud, but Haruka could imagine that there had been painful discord within Isshin. After thinking about it, he had decided to wait.

But –

'There might have been a special reason behind why she tried to kill Yakumo.'

'What if that reason was because of his red eye?'

The blood left Haruka's face once she heard what Isshin said.

It was just as he said. If that fact thrust itself in front of Yakumo's eyes again, Haruka couldn't imagine what would happen.

Yakumo probably wouldn't react that way now, but he had been an elementary school student at the time.

If a young boy was rejected by his parent like that – Haruka grew quiet just from thinking about it.

'I decided to take Yakumo in and love him instead of searching for my sister or finding out why she tried to kill Yakumo.'

That was a very Isshin way of thinking.

In his dilemma, Isshin had chosen the young Yakumo.

'That's why I didn't open the letter. I didn't want to know anything. Well, even if I put it so nicely, I might've just been afraid of knowing the truth. Knowing the truth is filled with danger.'

Haruka thought that Isshin's decision wasn't wrong.

In the world, just knowing the truth wasn't everything. Because Yakumo had had Isshin's love, even though he held a darkness within him, he had a kind and strong heart. That was how Haruka wanted to think.

'Haruka-chan, I'll leave it to you to decide what to do with that letter. Now is different from then.'

Haruka put the letter to her chest and closed her eyes.

She felt like a flame of hope had been lit.

– Yakumo. Wait. I'll definitely find you.

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11

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After Makoto returned to the newspaper agency, she went straight to the storeroom in the basement.

The whole basement was a storeroom, lined with ceiling-high cabinets.

The cabinet shelves were lined with cardboard boxes labelled with the date which had past articles stuffed in them in a disorderly fashion.

However, Makoto's goal wasn't the cabinet. If she opened all the boxes to search through them, she wouldn't find what she wanted even if she spent years looking.

There was a booth right by the entrance. There were two tables, each with a computer terminal.

Makoto stuck her staff card into the terminal, input her ID and password and accessed the server. With this terminal, she would be able to look at the past articles saved in PDF form.

Input boxes for search terms showed up on the monitor. First, the date. She put the beginning as the date the incident occurred fifteen years ago and put no time limit. It had been such a big incident. There had been follow-up articles every time anything occurred.

She didn't choose morning or evening edition either. For the search terms, she typed in 'murder case' and 'Nanase', the family name of the victims, and then she started the search.

There would probably be a great number of articles. It would take a lot of time to check all of them, and even if she did, there was no guarantee that she would find any new information.

But she had to do it. Makoto had made up her mind.

– I won't give up.

What Haruka had said had repeated in Makoto's head again and again. That one sentence had brought Ishii back to his senses. It had been the same for Makoto.

She had planned on encouraging Yakumo, but unconsciously, in the bottom of her heart, Makoto had also given up on Gotou.

Taking the situation into account, the possibility that he was alive was extremely low. But if she went with that as a premise, it would be impossible to find Gotou.

No matter what the situation, she had to act while believing he was alive.

Makoto didn't know much about Haruka.

She had just thought of her as a slightly cute and pampered female university student who could be found anywhere.

Makoto hadn't been able to understand why Ishii was so infatuated with her.

Because of that shallow jealousy, Makoto had found Haruka hard to deal with and had had the preconceived notion that she was a weak woman who couldn't do anything on her own.

However, Makoto realised that she had been wrong from what happened this time.

Haruka hadn't been the superficial woman who tried to please everyone that Makoto had thought she was.

Makoto didn't know what sort of life Haruka had had up until now, but she was pure and honest in a way that didn't seem appropriate for her age. On top of that, she had a strong heart.

The search results displayed on the monitor, interrupting Makoto's thoughts.

'What an amazing number...'

Makoto inadvertently spoke aloud.

There were more than three hundred results. She encouraged her withering spirit and followed the displayed titles with her eyes as she scrolled down.

– Brutal murder on the hill!

– Grave police error!

– Culprit still at large!

Impactful titles leapt out of the screen.

Makoto stopped scrolling halfway down.

She'd thought she'd misread and checked again, but she hadn't.

There was a title there that was clearly different from the others.

– Apology for Nanase family murder case article misprint.

When she opened the article, it took a rather large frame. If it had just been a one-word misprint, it wouldn't have needed to be so large. They'd written so many articles on just one night. One or two misprints were inevitable.

If this much had been written, it felt like something might be there.

Makoto felt that way, so she immediately printed the article.

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12

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Exactly one hour after, Ishii went to the fourth-floor toilet that Miyagawa had mentioned.

After confirming that no one was there, he went to the cubicle in the back and shut the door.

When he reached behind the tank, he found something stuck there with packing tape.

He looked from above, but he couldn't see well, so in the end, he put his face to the tile floor and peered up from below.

'There it is.'

After a hard struggle, Ishii succeeded in taking the A4 size thick envelope that had been stuck there.

He sat on the toilet and checked what was inside.

It wasn't just a dossier.

There was even a handwritten copy – probably by Miyagawa – of the investigation materials.

– He did so much.

Something came up in Ishii's chest.

Knock.

Somebody knocked on the cubicle door.

Ishii leapt up. Careful not to make any noise, he peered through the gap between the door.

He saw a bald man taking care of his business at the urinal.

'Don't be so nervous. It's me.'

That thick voice filled with pressure. It was Miyagawa.

'Chief Miyagawa! Thank you very much!'

'Don't be so loud.'

After Miyagawa said that, Ishii hurriedly covered his mouth with both hands and then dropped the envelope with the documents in it into the toilet.

'Aah!'

Ishii hurriedly stuck his hand in to pick it up. Though there wasn't much damage to the documents, his suit was soaked.

'You're so noisy. I'm going to say something now, so shut up and listen.'

Miyagawa said that first before starting to speak.

'It'll be a problem if you sniff around and talk to the investigation members that were on the case fifteen years ago, so you'd better not do it.'

Even Ishii knew that without being told. With the response of the common room earlier, Ishii knew it would be a most reckless course of action.

'But I don't care if you talk to people outside of the police.'

'What do you mean?'

'I told you not to talk.'

Miyagawa rejected Ishii's question.

'I-I apologise.'

'The coroner who was in charge of the autopsies for that case was that perverted old man.'

If Hata had been in charge of the autopsies, Ishii might be able to hear about the case from him.

'And I've written down Gotou's wife's contact info too.'

Ishii had spotted a mobile phone number on the back of the envelope.

'Just whenever you have time. Call her yourself.'

Miyagawa's words put a new weight on Ishii's shoulders.

Will I really be able to do that –

Ishii didn't know what he should say to Gotou's wife.

– No, that's wrong. There's no need to make excuses. I will definitely find Gotou. So please don't worry. I can just say that.

'Ishii. You have to find Gotou.'

Miyagawa's last words felt laboured, unlike his earlier enraged ones.

After the sound of flowing water, his footsteps grew quieter and quieter.

– Thank you very much.

Ishii repeated those words again and again in his heart.

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13

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After Haruka returned to her own room, she looked once more at the envelope.

The postmark is from fifteen years ago –

She had been six then, so her twin sister had still been alive.

She was curious about what was written in the letter, but the letter had been written for a specific person and was probably confidential.

When she thought about that, she hesitated about opening the seal.

After contemplating, Haruka decided to call her mother, Keiko, first.

In order to explain the situation, Haruka would have to talk about the letter. She could check with her mother then.

She picked up her mobile and called home.

After a number of rings, Keiko answered brightly: <Ozawa residence.>

'Mum, it's me.'

<Oh, it's rare for you to call.>

'Do you have time to talk now?'

<Something happened, didn't it.>

The tone of Keiko's voice changed.

It seemed that she'd noticed something from just one sentence. That was a mother for you.

Haruka marvelled over that and began her story.

'There was something I wanted to ask.'

<What is it?>

'It's a bit difficult to say...'

<You don't know how the boy feels?>

Keiko said that, sounding amused. She appeared to have mistaken Haruka's call as a request for romantic advice.

'Mum, do you know someone called Saitou Azusa-san?'

Haruka went straight to the point.

She heard Keiko gulp on the other end of the phone.

Haruka could tell her mother was confused. She probably hadn't thought that she would hear that name from her daughter's mouth.

<Yes, I do, though I don't know if she's the same person you're talking about.>

Saitou Azusa. It certainly wasn't a particularly uncommon name.

'Azusa, written with the radical for wood and the word for bitter².'

<Eh?>

'The person who you wrote letters to about fifteen years ago.'

<Why do you know that, Haruka?>

Keiko's voice was hard.

'One of my friends from university is that person's son.'

<You're kidding! You go to the same university as Yakumo-kun?>

'Yes.'

<I see, so he's the same age as Haruka.>

Keiko's tone made it sound like what Haruka had said had hit home.

– My mother knew about Yakumo before I did.

Haruka realised that with complicated feelings.

<That's amazing. What a coincidence. Is Yakumo-kun doing well? How about Azusa-san? This is so nostalgic.>

Keiko sounded excited.

For her to respond in such a way even after fifteen years, it showed how deep their relationship was.

'Yakumo-kun's fine...'

Haruka felt that her words were off.

– Is Yakumo really fine?

Unconsciously, she had gripped the red stone on the necklace she was wearing.

<Yakumo is, you say... Did something happen to Azusa-san?>

2 Haruka describes the kanji used to write Azusa by breaking it up into parts, which is very common for names. Azusa is written like 粹, and on the left there is the tree radical (木) and on the right there is the character 辛, which means many things including spicy, hot and bitter.

Haruka hadn't said it that way on purpose, but Keiko had heard the difference in nuance.

Haruka wanted to hide it if she could, but it would be difficult with her personality. And if she hid that, she wouldn't be able to continue with the conversation.

'Azusa-san is missing.'

<Missing... Why?>

Keiko's voice went up an octave.

'I don't know... After she tried to kill Yakumo-kun, she disappeared.'

When Haruka said that again, she felt the cruelty of that act on her skin.

A parent killing their child –

The past few years, she often heard about such cases on the news, but she felt like it was an area that people couldn't step into.

Haruka felt a chill down her spine.

<Haruka, there are things you can say and things you can't.>

Keiko spoke slowly. She was probably doing it on purpose. Her words sounded pointed.

Azusa had been Keiko's friend. It wouldn't be easy for her to accept the reality that her friend had tried to kill her child.

Haruka understood that. But –

'It's true. I heard it from Yakumo-kun and his uncle, Isshin-san. I don't know why things ended up like that, but she's been missing ever since...'

<Haruka.>

'That's why I want to know why things ended up the way they did.'

<So it's true.>

'This isn't something I could lie or joke about.'

Haruka heard Keiko sigh on the other end.

For a while after that, a silence continued.

No matter how Keiko and Azusa met, they had been friends.

Keiko was probably in a dilemma, because as a mother, she couldn't forgive the act of laying a hand on a child.

<I was so sure that Azusa-san was living happily...>

'Happily?'

That word didn't match with the image Haruka had of Azusa.

<Azusa-san had plans to get married.>

'Married...'

Haruka raised her eyebrows.

It was the first time she'd heard that. Yakumo and Isshin hadn't said anything about that. Did they not know about it –

<That's right. Azusa-san sent me a photo of Yakumo-kun, herself and her fiancé.>

Haruka was too confused to arrange her thoughts.

If what Keiko said was true, then the image Haruka had had up until now would lose its foundation.

She'd thought that Azusa had been worrying and suffering by herself. From what she'd heard today, Isshin appeared to think the same way.

However, if somebody had been there to support Azusa, the story would be different.

That would mean that Azusa had stood up again after the incident and that she had been walking towards a new life. Then why did she try to kill Yakumo –

'Mum, do you still have that photo?'

<Yes. I think I'd be able to find it if I look.>

– I want to see it.

Young Yakumo. And his mother, Azusa. Then, the man that would have become Yakumo's father.

It would definitely be a thread towards grasping Yakumo's location. When Haruka thought that, she couldn't contain herself.

'Mum, I'll go look at the photo.'

<When?>

'Tomorrow.'

<Eh?>

Keiko's voice was hysterical.

-

14

-

Even after Miyagawa left, Ishii stayed in the toilet stall.

He gripped his mobile and stared at the name Gotou Atsuko and the phone number written on the envelope.

Even though he had vowed that he would definitely save Gotou earlier, his fingers wouldn't move for some reason.

It was easy to keep it in his heart, but the moment he said it aloud, he would be responsible for it and wouldn't be able to take it back. He might have been afraid of that.

– What are you doing, Ishii Yuutarou? You already vowed to do it!

Ishii reprimanded himself and pushed in the number written on the back of the envelope.

He put the phone to his ear with a rising heartbeat.

<Hello, Gotou speaking.>

After one ring, somebody picked up. It was a woman who spoke with a calm tone.

During the last case, he had met her just once in front of the hospital. She was definitely Gotou Atsuko.

'E-er. I am Ishii Yuutarou from the detective department.'

Ishii wiped his suddenly sweaty forehead with his wet suit sleeve and spoke firmly.

<My husband is always in your care.>

Ishii could tell that Atsuko had bowed her head on the other side of the phone.

Even though her husband was missing, she didn't seem distracted.

'No, not at all. I'm the one in his care.'

No. He didn't have the time to exchange polite greetings.

Ishii swallowed, his throat as parched as a desert, and brought up the topic at hand.

'I am truly sorry for what has happened this time.'

<It isn't your fault, Ishii-san.>

'No, it is my fault. If I had been more responsible, this wouldn't have happened.'

The shame that had sunken welled up again.

<No, my useless husband just did something reckless again. There is no need for you to feel responsible, Ishii-san.>

Atsuko spoke firmly.

As a detective's wife, she might have been prepared for something like this to happen.

That was somebody strong enough to have Gotou under her thumb.

'I...'

Ishii started speaking, but his voice wouldn't come out afterwards.

Even though he'd decided on what he was going to say already, he was silent, as if his mouth was

covered.

<Ishii-san, I know it is wrong of me to ask you to do this.>

'If it's something I can do, anything...'

<Please don't forsake my useless husband.>

Ishii could feel on his skin that a great anxiety was hiding in the shadows of that dignified voice.

His body was shaking. He felt uplifted. Ishii was prepared.

'I will definitely save Detective Gotou!'

He was no longer afraid. Ishii made his declaration in a ringing voice.

-

15

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After Makoto returned to her seat, she immediately picked up the telephone for the internal line.

She had looked through all the articles, but she hadn't found anything special.

The thing that felt the most off was that article about the misprint. She didn't know what it showed, but she wanted as much information as she could get. That was how she felt.

<'Lo.>

As if he had just woken up, Takizawa's faint voice came through the receiver. He might have actually been asleep.

'I apologise for calling when you're busy. It's Hijikata.'

<Oh, it's you? Did you find what you were looking for?>

There was the sound of documents being ruffled through on the other side of phone.

'No, not yet. Actually, there was something I wanted to ask you about.'

<'I'll answer if I can.>

'Takizawa-san, you wrote a follow-up article for the brutal murder of a family fifteen years ago, right?'

Takizawa was the one who had written the article about the misprint.

Makoto didn't mean to attack him for it. The contents of the article just bothered her, like a small bone stuck in her throat.

In the article, there had been the testimony of A-ko-san, the person who had notified the police, as it was originally.

<I did.>

'I wanted to ask you in detail about the time period when A-ko-san reported the incident.'

When Takizawa heard Makoto's words, he clicked his tongue.

<That was... After that article came out, everything got tangled up. There was a complaint from the police too. In the end, I had to apologise for it as a misprint.>

From Takizawa's tone, it didn't sound like just a misprint.

'Was it really a misprint?' asked Makoto daringly.

<Don't be stupid. I'm not defending myself, but all I did was accurately reproduce the contents of the interview. That was definitely not a misprint. I'm not such an irresponsible guy. You can tell from looking at the content, right? It can't just be shelved away as a misprint.>

Takizawa said that all at once.

He had probably remembered afresh the anger he had felt at that time.

Makoto also thought that it was as Takizawa said. It wasn't a problem that could be shelved away as a misprint. That was why it had felt off.

In Takizawa's article, it said that A-ko-san reported the incident to the police at about nine PM.

However, at the police presentation, they had said it was 12:07 AM. The difference between these times was the problem.

If only the time had been written in the article, it could have been just a misprint, but the story changed when looking at what was written before and after that.

A-ko-san finished dinner and heard a scream while watching a TV drama at about nine PM.

At first, she had thought it was the television, but then there was the sound of a struggle and she kept hearing screams, so she thought it was strange and went out.

A-ko-san confirmed that the noise was coming from the house next door and reported it to the police immediately. That was what was in the article.

On the same day as the incident, the TV drama A-ko-san mentioned was broadcast at nine PM, just as her testimony said.

She had been watching the drama from nine PM and heard the scream, so she reported it immediately to the police. They said that was at twelve AM.

There was a huge difference in time –

'Is there the possibility that A-ko-san gave false testimony...'

<For what purpose?>

Takizawa spoke over Makoto's words.

It was just as he said. There was no reason for A-ko-san to give false testimony.

Perhaps if she had been a suspect, but A-ko-san had never been treated that way. There was no point in her changing the time on purpose.

Perhaps she was covering for someone –

But if that were the case, she could have just testified that she heard the scream at twelve AM.

<If you're that curious, ask yourself.>

'Do you know her contact information?'

Makoto couldn't hide her surprise at Takizawa's words.

There was the sound of a drawer being opened and something falling from the other side of the phone.

<Yeah. Damn. Can't find it right now, so I'll message you it later.>

'That'll be a great help.'

<But be careful how you handle her. It's an annoying time we're in.>

Takizawa said that in an unpleasant tone.

'I'll be very careful. Thank you very much.'

Makoto bowed her head, the phone still in her hand.

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16

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Ishii went to the hospital early in the morning.

He passed through the entrance, opened the door to the stairwell by the elevator hall, and took the stairs down to the basement.

The dim corridor stretched out in front of him.

The door he was headed for was at the very end. Every footstep he made echoed, making it sound like somebody was following him.

I'm scared – but I'll bear it.

Ishii told himself that as he walked to the door at the very end.

When he knocked on the door, a hoarse voice called out: 'It's open.'

'Please excuse me.'

'Oh, Ishii-kun. I was wondering who you were because of your glasses.'

When Ishii opened the door, an old man in white waved from where he was seated at the desk right by the entrance.

It was Hata, the coroner. Though he was skilful, there was a bit of a problem with his taste.

Perhaps he had stayed up all night, because his eyes were red. They made Hata's demonic appearance stand out more.

'It's been a while.'

Ishii bowed towards Hata.

'Sit somewhere over there.'

Ishii looked around the room, as Hata told him to, but there were cabinets and cardboard boxes everywhere – he couldn't spot a place to sit other than Hata's desk.

In the end, he decided to stand with his back against the wall.

'So did you find it?' asked Hata as he sipped his tea.

'What do you mean by it?'

'Gotou's corpse.'

With shaking shoulders, Hata giggled, sounding amused.

Ishii didn't understand what was so amusing.

'Detective Gotou isn't dead yet!' exclaimed Ishii, in a voice so loud it even surprised himself.

However, Hata wasn't surprised – his expression didn't even change. Maybe it had been just the right volume for speaking to a senior.

'On what basis are you saying that?'

Hata's sunken eyes seemed to glitter.

'That is...'

Ishii wanted to deny it, but he didn't have any basis for it, so his voice ended up fading off.

'If you find Gotou's corpse, bring it to me. I'll check how degenerated his brain is.'

Hata giggled.

Ishii had thought that Hata and Gotou had had a relationship of trust, but it appeared that he had been wrong.

It appeared that Hata had only helped them with investigations outside of work to satisfy his own curiosity.

'But if you didn't bring Gotou's corpse, then what did you come here for, Ishii-kun?'

It felt reluctant, but Hata had brought up the matter at hand.

'Actually, I wanted to ask you about the results of the autopsy for the brutal murder case fifteen years ago.'

When Ishii mentioned the topic, Hata looked up to the ceiling as he brushed his hair back.

That response. There was something there.

'That case, eh?' said Hata, his voice so faint it sounded like he could die at any moment.

'Do you remember it?'

'That was the first corpse I took care of as a coroner. Normally, my boss would've taken charge, but there'd been four corpses, so I was asked to lend a hand.'

Ishii was inwardly surprised.

Ishii had suspected that Hata might not have been able to remember the incident fifteen years ago accurately since he autopsied corpses every day.

However, from what Hata said now, it appeared that it was clearly engraved in his memory.

'Did that case have, er... anything questionable or strange?'

Even as he said it himself, he felt disappointed in what a vague question it was.

Ishii wanted to hear a more specific recollection. That was why he had stayed up all night to read the documents from Miyagawa.

However, nothing resulted from it.

'There was... something strange,' said Hata, spinning once in his chair like he had thought of something.

'Is that true?'

Hata looked at Ishii, who had edged in towards him.

Hata's eyes were like that of a demon watching his prey for a chance to attack.

Perhaps Hata was irritated, because he didn't say anything. He gulped down his tea.

'Please tell me!'

Ishii moved towards Hata in his agitation.

'There was a disagreement about the time of death.'

'What do you mean?'

Ishii didn't understand what Hata meant.

'Exactly what I said. According to the file, the corpses were carried in around one in the morning. Which means that they'd been killed within two hours of that.'

'Yes.'

Ishii nodded.

Since the time of the crime had been reported in the documents as about twelve AM, that would

be right.

'But livor mortis was spotted on the corpses and they were stiff from rigor mortis. The body temperature was also very low.'

'Really?' said Ishii in his surprise.

Livor mortis was when blood settled in the body because of its weight. It appeared two hours after death.

If livor mortis had already been there when the corpses were brought in, that would mean that two hours had already passed by then.

It was the same for rigor mortis. Of course it depended on the person, but rigor mortis started after two hours and took about twelve hours to appear in the whole body.

'Really. From my diagnosis, I'd say they'd been dead four to six hours.'

'But in the file...'

In the file, the time of death had been said to be about twelve AM, but according to Hata's analysis, it was from seven to nine PM.

'That's why I said there was a disagreement. The police checked a lot of things, like whether that was really the time of death.'

– I see.

At the time of the crime, A-ko-san, the person living next door, had heard a scream and contacted the police at twelve AM, according to the police report. After that, Miyagawa went to the scene and met the culprit. That was definitely fact.

When the autopsy results were compared with the facts, there was a definite difference in time.

'Since it didn't match the scene, were there instructions to alter it?'

Ishii knew that that couldn't have happened, but he couldn't think of anything else.

'Even they wouldn't tell me to do that.'

'Then...'

'Livor mortis and rigor mortis aren't definite. There're differences with different people, and if there'd been some special circumstances for the temperature, sometimes the temperature dissipates more quickly. It could happen if we look at it that way.'

When Hata finished talking, he snorted.

So they made it coherent by using a broad interpretation –

However, that could be called a black hole. It felt like there had been a large distortion of time.

– This might be a breakthrough.

Nothing concrete had come out, but Ishii definitely felt a response.

'Hey, Ishii-kun. Do you really think you can find Gotou by doing this?' said Hata, wrinkling his face like he'd eaten something sour.

'I don't know. However, I will not give up as long as there is a chance!' declared Ishii loudly.

'Here's some friendly advice: give it up.'

Hata sounded like an old man who had gone through many phases of life.

'What do you mean by give it up?'

'I'm saying that with you in mind. Think about it.'

'With me... in mind?'

'Do you really think Gotou is alive?'

'Of course I do!' replied Ishii with vigour.

When Hata saw that, he shook his head sadly.

'You must know if you're not an idiot. Gotou isn't some young woman. If this isn't a kidnapping for ransom, what would be the point in abducting him?'

Hata's fish-like eyes stared at Ishii's face.

'That is...'

'Give up your foolish hope. If you don't, when the time comes, your heart will break.'

It might be just as Hata says. Gotou could already –

Tears welled up in Ishii's eyes just from thinking about it.

But it didn't mean that there was no chance. Ishii shook away his negative thoughts.

'No. Detective Gotou is still alive!'

After Ishii said that clearly, Hata let out an uncanny demonic giggle.

'Honestly, you've become a bull-headed detective like Gotou.'

'That is because I respect him.'

'Do as you like.'

Hata waved his hand, like he was chasing away some fly.

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17

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Haruka stood at the station for the Shinkansen bound for Nagano.

Even though it was a weekday morning, there weren't many people.

Before she left her home, she called Isshin to tell him the general situation. While Haruka's emotions had welled up, Isshin seemed to accept the facts reluctantly.

That person was probably prepared. That was how it seemed to Haruka.

Prepared to meet whatever ending was coming and receive it face-on. However, Haruka didn't have that readiness.

Yakumo would be safe and she would meet him again. Haruka couldn't accept any other ending.

Perhaps the inspection of the train had been completed, because the entrance to the stopped Shinkansen opened.

Haruka picked up her bag and boarded the Shinkansen.

She went through the narrow aisle and took a window seat in the middle of the carriage. She put her luggage on the baggage rack, took off her coat and sat down.

– Will I really be able to get closer to Yakumo by going to Nagano?

She was doubtful, but all she could do was believe that now.

The matter with Yakumo's mother, Azusa. And Haruka's mother, Keiko.

Furthermore, the man who had appeared yesterday morning. Everything led to the same place. Yakumo had to be there.

Haruka took the envelope out of her coat pocket.

In the end, she opened the envelope last night without her mother's permission. There was a letter inside and a photo.

To Azusa-san –

Congratulations on your marriage.

I am really as happy as if I were the one who was getting married. I saw the photo too. I was truly relieved to see you looking so happy, Azusa-san.

Many good things must be awaiting you.

I'm glad. I'm really glad...

She wasn't talented at composition, but Keiko's honest feelings for Azusa came through. Haruka could tell that Keiko wasn't just writing letters to Azusa out of sympathy.

The photo had been taken at the New Year's shrine visit, and Haruka and her dead twin sister, Ayaka, were in it.

Ayaka was smiling at the camera, but Haruka had fallen and gotten her kimono dirty, so she was unhappy about it and had her head hung low.

A short paragraph was written on the back of the photo.

<My twins have grown up so much. It'd be nice if they could meet Yakumo-kun one day.>

After this, events had befallen each family and they'd taken a detour, but at an unexpected place, Yakumo and Haruka had met.

Haruka suddenly recalled the first meeting between Yakumo and her.

His hair had been a mess and his eyes had been sleepy. A contrary person who mocked people with his words and actions. What an unpleasant guy! That had been her first impression.

She hadn't believed that he had the unique ability to see the spirits of the dead, and she'd even suspected that he didn't have a heart.

However, after a number of experiences, Haruka realised –

Yakumo's attitude was a front to make people keep away from him, and he was actually completely different.

After she realised that, Yakumo's sarcasm seemed cute.

And she enjoyed how his expression would soften into a troubled one when she was nice to him. He wasn't used to people treating him that way. He wasn't honest at all.

Yakumo had also been the one who saved Haruka when she was about to die at the river.

At the time, Yakumo had jumped into the river with no hesitation at all. He had been really cool.

I'd thought I was going to die during the last case too –

But in the end, Yakumo came to save her. Though there'd been a bit of a problem in the way he saved her.

– Hey, Yakumo. Will I never meet you again?

The Shinkansen started with a groan.

Haruka felt disheartened when a red light flashed in her eyes.

The necklace with the red stone was shining red because of the light from the window.

It was Azusa's necklace, which Haruka had received from Yakumo.

That's right. I can't be disheartened now. I'll find Yakumo no matter what I have to do. I decided that.

Haruka tightly gripped the red stone.

思慕

第三章

FILE:
03

file 03: yearning

-

1

-

We found Takeda Shunsuke –

Miyagawa received that news at about noon. He moved to the wireless to give instructions immediately.

'Report the situation!'

He yelled at the wireless. The other investigation team members who were still in the room gathered round as well.

The nerves in the detective room had peaked.

<Arai spotted him in the back of a building by the scene and is chasing him.>

The one who answered was the detective in command at the scene, Shimizu.

Shimizu and the team had received information from an eyewitness who had sighted Takeda and had been questioning civilians near the abandoned building. They had spotted him coincidentally.

'Were you able to confirm it was Takeda?'

<No, it isn't clear...>

Miyagawa felt irritated by the vague response.

'Was there anyone else who saw him?'

<There was not. Only Arai did.>

'Weren't any other investigation members nearby?'

<He had just happened to go elsewhere for a task and spotted Takeda then, so...>

Shimizu was being completely unclear. Well, fine. They'd give their undivided attention to catching Takeda now.

Miyagawa cleared his mind of his irritation.

'Where are you stationed?'

<He was sighted escaping northward on a prefecture road in 3-chome. Naitou and I are following after Arai.>

Miyagawa followed the location with his finger on the enlarged map on his desk.

He was spotted near this building, went onto the prefectural road and headed north – if it went well, they might catch up.

'I'll send reinforcements.'

When Miyagawa pointed at the map, the four investigation members by his desk ran out of the room.

If they went ahead and blockaded the escape routes, they would definitely be able to stop him.

'I won't let him get away.'

Miyagawa gritted his teeth.

<We will reach him soon.>

A message came from Shimizu over the wireless.

– I'll finally be able to catch Takeda.

The event that took fifteen years would come to an end. When Miyagawa thought that, he felt exhilarated.

There was silence –

They might be able to secure Takeda before reinforcements arrived.

Sweat rolled down Miyagawa's back in his nervous state.

<This is Shimizu.>

The hesitant voice made Miyagawa's heart beat more quickly.

'What happened?'

<Er... That is...>

'What!? Say it clearly!' yelled Miyagawa.

<It seems we have lost him...>

'Lost?'

<I sincerely apologise.>

'You bastard! Do you know what you're saying? You're not playing tag!'

It felt like his head would pop like a balloon from his anger.

'Explain what you mean!'

<That is... Arai had been following him, and according to what he said, he suddenly lost sight of Takeda...>

Those words added oil to the fire that was Miyagawa's anger.

Making such stupid excuses at a time like this!

'Come back here right now!'

Even after the transmission ended, Miyagawa's anger did not abate.

He picked up a nearby chair and threw it with all his strength out the window.

-

2

-

After leaving Hata's hospital, Ishii turned his car into the parking lot at the precinct.

He shut off the engine and leant back in his seat.

He had been working with no sleep or rest since last night. His joints were stiff. His body was heavy, as if he had become an old man. He felt like he would be drawn into sleep.

But he didn't have the time to rest. Just by delaying the investigation, Gotou's survival chances dropped. There was still a mountain of things to do.

Ishii forced his body up and got off the car.

What he'd heard from Hata was extremely interesting. The problem was how to use that as a foothold to level the case.

Investigating around with no purpose would just waste time.

It would be quickest to make a hypothesis like Yakumo and prove it.

However, he hadn't constructed that crucial hypothesis.

A feeling of helplessness ate away at his body.

'Think, Ishii Yuutarou.'

Just as Ishii was encouraging himself, his mobile phone rang.

'Ishii speaking.'

<U-um, it's Makoto.>

It sounded like Makoto was walking somewhere. Ishii could hear the rhythm of her footsteps.

'Makoto-san, what is it?'

<Ishii-san, you seem a bit different.>

Makoto laughed as she said that.

Even if she said that, Ishii didn't feel like anything was different.

'Is that so?'

<Yes. It's like you're a different person from the one you were yesterday.>

The only thing that had changed was that he was determined now. More importantly –

'What is it?'

<Ah, that's right. Actually, I was investigating the case and found something very interesting.>

'What is it?'

There was the chance that it would be timely help for Ishii, who had reached a standstill.

<It's about the testimony of A-ko-san, the person who reported the incident.>

'Was anything suspicious about it?'

<Yes. Rather than suspicious, I can't explain it very well. Ishii-san, where are you currently?>

'I've just returned to the precinct.'

<That's great. Actually, I've just arrived at the precinct as well. Shall we speak in person?>

– Arrived at the precinct?

Ishii turned around and looked at the front entrance.

He spotted Makoto there with mobile in hand.

'Ah, I see you.'

Ishii hung up and waved at Makoto.

Makoto noticed Ishii too and walked toward him with a smile.

Crack!

There was the sound of breaking glass from up in the sky.

What is it – Ishii looked up.

A chair was falling. Why was a chair –

The chair smashed right into Ishii's confused face.

Blood spurted out of his nose into the air.

-

3

-

Haruka got off the Shinkansen at Nagano Station.

She passed through the gate. The moment she went out to the station traffic circle, she heard the short honk of a horn. Haruka spotted Keiko leaning out of the window of a white minivan and waving her hand.

Even though Haruka hadn't given a proper explanation, Keiko had gone along with her daughter's whim and even come to pick her up. Keiko's kindness made Haruka lower her head.

She ran up to the car and sat in the passenger's seat.

'Welcome back,' said Keiko kindly.

Haruka couldn't look at Keiko's face properly.

'I'm home.'

Keiko gave Haruka's face a pinch when she replied without looking up.

'Ey, tha hurs, Mum.'

Keiko ignored Haruka's resistance and pinched her daughter's cheek even harder, looking like she was having fun.

– It hurts, it hurts.

Haruka flapped about to resist and somehow escaped Keiko's hand.

'Honestly, what are you doing all of a sudden?'

Keiko laughed as she looked at Haruka with a hand against her cheek in her protest.

'OK, OK. If you're that energetic, you're fine.'

Keiko patted Haruka's shoulder, put the car out of park and started the engine.

She must have been worried. When Haruka was troubled, it showed in her attitude. Haruka's chest suddenly hurt the way it did when she told a lie.

'So why are you looking for Azusa-san all of a sudden?'

Keiko looked at Haruka while driving.

Haruka didn't know how to answer the question, but she had to.

'I said that I go to the same university as Azusa-san's son, Yakumo-kun, right?'

'Yup, you told me. What sort of child is Yakumo-kun?' said Keiko with excited eyes.

Since he was the child of a friend who she hadn't heard from in fifteen years, it was natural for her to be interested.

'Even if you ask me what sort of child he is...'

Haruka was lost for words. It was difficult to explain Yakumo in one word.

'Is he cool?'

Even though her mother was going to be fifty soon, she was acting rather like an idol-obsessed girl.

'Well, in a way.'

'I've only seen photos of him as a child, but I thought he'd definitely grow up to be cool. Which Johnny's¹ member is he like?'

'Why would you use Johnny's as an example?'

'If you're talking about cool, it's Johnny's, right? Korean groups are no good. I can't bring myself to like them because they feel too perfect.'

Haruka was the one who felt embarrassed when she looked at Keiko, who was as excited as a teenage girl.

She would have preferred it if her mother liked something more tasteful such as Ishihara Gundan².

'He doesn't look like anybody in Johnny's.'

Keiko covered her mouth and smiled when she heard Haruka's refusal.

'Hey, can I say what I think?'

'What?'

'The reason you're looking for Azusa-san.'

Haruka didn't know what Keiko was thinking, but she seemed to be having fun.

Before Haruka responded, Keiko started talking on her own.

'Haruka, you and Yakumo-kun truly love each other and vowed to marry.'

'What are you saying?'

Haruka objected loudly, but Keiko wasn't listening.

'Well, just listen. You're looking for Yakumo-kun's mother, Azusa-san, so you can tell her about your marriage. Right?'

There was a limit even to delusions.

Haruka was so astonished by her own mother that she couldn't say anything. Her head hurt.

'Of course not!'

Haruka said that angrily, but Keiko was nonchalant.

It was like Haruka was talking with Yakumo.

'But you like him, right?'

'Who?'

'Yakumo-kun.'

1 Johnny's Entertainment is a talent agency with music groups such as Arashi and KAT-TUN which comprise good-looking male idols. They apparently have an English [homepage](#) promoting their groups too.

2 Ishihara Gundan is the pet name of the group of mostly older male actors in Ishihara Promotion, founded by late actor Ishihara Yuujirou. Their [homepage](#) has pictures of the actors.

Keiko smiled knowingly.

'I hate him. He's a really unpleasant guy.'

Haruka hadn't been planning on responding, but it just came out of her mouth.

'Oh, is that so?'

'It is. He's contrary and he's always making fun of me. He says things like "Do you want to be clumsy or stupid? Make up your mind." He was really awful the other day too. He threw me into a pool.'

Haruka objectively listened to the words that kept coming out of her mouth.

The more she said, the more hollow she felt. Like she was talking about somebody who was already gone –

She had been holding it back until now, but the feeling that she might never meet him again was spreading.

'What? So you really do like him, don't you?' said Keiko, sounding exasperated.

'I said I hated him, didn't I!?' said Haruka, in a voice so loud it even surprised herself.

– Why am I getting so worked up?

Haruka couldn't find the answer to that question.

'I see...'

After Keiko murmured that, she parked the car by the sidewalk and turned off the engine.

The cars passing them sounded extremely loud.

Haruka had her hands in fists on her lap. Keiko laid a hand on top of them. It was warm.

Her mother accepted her. When Haruka felt that, she relaxed from the sense of relief and the check she had put on her feelings stopped working.

'I really hate that guy. He disappeared without saying anything. Don't you think that's horrible? Even though I believe in Yakumo-kun, he's always alone. He'd be fine even if I weren't there...'

Tears started falling from her closed eyes.

– I'm frustrated.

Haruka realised that. She was frustrated that Yakumo had disappeared without saying anything.

The distance between Yakumo and her had been much, much farther than she had thought. She had been forced to feel that anew.

'Did Yakumo-kun go to search for his mother?'

Keiko pulled Haruka closer to her by the shoulder and hugged her.

Haruka's body relaxed and she nodded, resting against Keiko's chest.

'And you're searching for Azusa-san to find Yakumo-kun then?'

Haruka nodded again.

'Yakumo-kun might be dead.'

Haruka gripped Keiko's hand tightly.

'What are you saying? You're searching for him because you haven't given up, right?'

As Keiko rubbed Haruka's back, Haruka could smell her mother's scent.

It's warm –

The anxiety she had held by herself until she had felt like she was going to burst was softening.

– I haven't given up. I will definitely find Yakumo and give him a good punch.

Haruka decided that again while in Keiko's arms.

-

4

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Ishii sat at his desk and looked at the mirror he had borrowed from Makoto.

His glasses were cracked. There was gauze on his nose. A piercing pain in his nose made him wrinkle his brow. Even he thought he looked terrible.

'Are you really all right? You should go to the hospital...' said Makoto, looking troubled.

'I'm fine.'

Ishii returned the mirror to Makoto. He didn't care about his appearance at all right now.

'Why did a chair fall?'

Ishii didn't know either. It was an interesting mystery, but he didn't have the time to concern himself with that.

'More importantly, could you tell me what you were talking about, Makoto-san?'

Ishii changed the topic while bearing his pain.

Makoto still looked worried, but she reluctantly opened her notebook.

'Actually, today, I met with A-ko-san, who was the one who reported the crime. She lives near the precinct.'

I see, so that was why she called from in front of the precinct. But –

'Why did you meet with A-ko-san?'

For a moment, Makoto looked troubled by Ishii's question, but she started speaking after licking her lips.

'Actually, there was a small contradiction in her testimony.'

'Contradiction?'

'Yes. According to her testimony, on the day of the crime at nine PM, she heard a scream from next door while she was watching a television drama.'

'If I remember correctly, the dossier said that the report came in at twelve AM...'

Ishii's lips narrowed into a thin line.

'That's right. She claimed it was at nine PM, but actually, the report came in at twelve AM...'

'If what she said is correct, that would mean she reported the incident three hours after she heard the scream.'

A distortion of time –

Ishii flipped through the files he had received from Miyagawa, found the page had A-ko-san's testimony and followed it with his finger.

It really did read 12:07 AM.

– No, that's wrong.

It had been written over, stamped with a thumbprint and changed. Before the change, the time had been written as 9:10 PM.

'The police pointed out that contradiction to her and in the end, she said that her memory might have been playing tricks on her and that it might have been at twelve AM, changing her testimony.'

'She changed it...'

'But from how it felt when I was talking to her today, she appears to still doubt that.'

'I see! So that's how it is!'

Ishii stood up in his agitation. In A-ko-san's testimony, there was the same distortion of time that had resulted from Hata's autopsy.

'Ishii-san, what is it?'

Makoto's mouth was agape as she looked at Ishii.

'Actually, I just heard something similar this morning.'

'Something similar?'

'That's right. The coroner, Hata-san, was told that the time of death he gave, seven to nine PM, contradicted with the scene of the crime and had had to change it to about twelve AM using a broad interpretation of the facts.'

Makoto appeared to have understood the situation and put a hand over her mouth in her surprise.

Ishii could have jumped in his agitation.

'Now there's no more doubt about it. The actual time of death was much earlier than twelve AM.'

It was probably past nine PM –

'But how about the time of the report and the detective's testimony? And even if the time of the murder was different, what would change?'

Just as Makoto said, even if the time of the murder changed, the situation wouldn't change much.

– No, wait a second.

Ishii started diligently following the investigation materials with his finger again.

He found the passage he was looking for immediately. It was a log of Takeda's actions from the day of the crime.

They hadn't been able to get Takeda's testimony, but the testimony of those around him had been collection.

'This!'

Ishii hit the desk in his delight.

'What is it?'

Makoto looked at Ishii's face in concern.

He wasn't insane.

'Please look at this.'

Ishii pointed at the passage as he showed Makoto the document.

As Makoto looked at the paper, her expression hardened before Ishii's eyes. Then, her eyes went wide and looked up at Ishii's face.

'I see. In this testimony, Takeda's ex-colleague, C-san, was together with Takeda until about nine. Then, Takeda revealed that he was going to talk things out with Katsuaki.'

'Which means...'

'That's right. If A-ko-san did hear a scream past nine, like she said in her testimony, then Takeda has an alibi.'

Even though Ishii had meant to express his reasoning confidently, Makoto looked depressed. She had a complex expression on her face, like the food she had eaten wasn't as delicious as it looked.

'But why is there a difference in time? Why did A-ko-san report the incident to the police three hours after hearing the scream?'

It was just as Makoto said.

Nine PM and twelve AM. No matter which time they chose, it wasn't consistent.

It would make more sense if A-ko-san had mistaken the time and they looked at the autopsy

results with a broad interpretation, as the police ended up doing.

But there was another way of looking at it.

'What if somebody faked the time of death to pin the crime on Takeda?'

'Would that mean A-ko-san was an accomplice?'

'Yes. She gave a false testimony in order to cover for her accomplice.'

– That was the only way this would make sense.

'But isn't that strange?'

Makoto immediately denied Ishii's suggestion.

'Strange?'

'A-ko-san testified that it was nine PM. The police were the ones who changed that to twelve AM.'

That was certainly true. Whichever time it was, it would be difficult to think of A-ko-san as an accomplice.

'Also, the detective met the culprit at the scene. It would make the idea that the time of the crime was faked suspicious.'

It was just as Makoto said.

There was no point in faking the time of the crime if the culprit stayed at the scene.

Ishii's theory went back to the drawing board. Dispirited, he organised the documents. His head felt heavy. He felt somewhat irritated. He wanted to have a smoke.

'I also thought A-ko-san's testimony was unnatural, but I can't think of anything beyond that.'

'Right.'

'If A-ko-san's testimony is true, that would mean she heard the scream past nine PM, lost consciousness for about three hours and then called the police without noticing that.'

Lost consciousness – ?

Something clicked in Ishii's head, and the gears started turning.

The various information he had gathered up until now started coming together, leading him to one theory.

– What on earth? Is that how it is?

'Makoto-san! You're a genius!'

In his agitation, Ishii leant forward, grabbed Makoto's shoulders and shook her.

If the theory he had just constructed now was true, this was very serious.

'E-er. Ishii-san, what's wrong?'

Makoto looked at Ishii like she was looking at something unpleasant.

Please don't look like that. I mean, I –

'I've figured it out! The puzzle of this case!'

Ishii yelled that in a ringing voice.

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5

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Togakushi Soba <Ozawa> - that was Haruka's home.

Her father Kazuhiro was waiting in the garden when they parked the car in the parking lot behind the shop.

He wore an apron and had his neck out like an ostrich as he looked about. It seemed he sensed something from his daughter's sudden return.

However, he didn't approach Haruka even after she got off the car with her luggage. Even though he had many things he wanted to ask, he didn't put them into words. He was that sort of person.

'I'm home.'

Haruka called out to Kazuhiro.

'Oh, you're back?' said Kazuhiro curtly. Then, he went back into the shop.

Fathers really were afraid of their daughters –

'Honestly. Why is he running away?' said Keiko exasperatedly before entering the house through the backdoor.

Haruka followed after her.

She took the stairs by the front entrance, opened the sliding door and went into the room.

It was six tatami in size – a dreary room with only a desk and a dresser.

Still, being in her own house really did calm her down. The fatigue and anxiety that Haruka had had for so long seemed to dissipate slightly.

She put down her bag, hung up her coat and sat on the tatami.

'Sorry for the wait.'

Keiko entered the room.

She had a bundle of envelopes held together with a rubber band. Those were the letters that Yakumo's mother had sent Keiko.

Keiko sat across from Haruka and held out the bundle.

'There are a lot of letters.'

'There are. I didn't pity her because of what happened – I was just on the same wavelength as Azusa-san,' said Keiko earnestly.

Haruka felt like she understood. If they had only met because of the case, the relationship wouldn't have continued for so long.

Haruka and Yakumo were the same. Regardless of how they met, in the end, they seemed to be on the same wavelength.

'So I feel like I understand why you'd be charmed by Yakumo-kun,' said Keiko. When she said it like that, Haruka didn't want to admit it.

'Like I said, it isn't like that.'

'Big words for somebody who was crying like a baby earlier.'

Keiko laughed as she elbowed Haruka's arm.

When Keiko said that, unfortunately, Haruka could make no reply.

'Now, now, don't be angry. You have to look for Yakumo-kun, right?'

'Right.'

Haruka cleared her mind.

Just as Keiko said, she didn't have the time to get angry.

'Azusa-san said that she had a lover,' said Keiko.

Haruka also felt that that was a good thread to start from.

If Azusa had a lover, there was a good chance that that person might know where Azusa was if they could find him.

'Er, which was it...' murmured Keiko as she checked the envelopes.

A question suddenly came to Haruka.

'Mum.'

'What is it?'

'Why didn't you look for Azusa-san?'

– Oh no.

After Haruka said it, she thought what she said had been careless. That was because Keiko suddenly looked regretful when she heard Haruka's words.

'I didn't think that Azusa-san was so cornered that she would lay a hand on her son,' replied Keiko with sad eyes.

'That makes sense.'

'She said that she was getting married, so I thought that somebody like me who knew her past would get in the way, so I gave up. That's why I didn't even think of looking for her. I was a bit lonely, but I thought there was nothing to be done...'

Haruka could understand why Keiko felt that way.

If Azusa hadn't talked to the person she was going to marry about her past, it wouldn't be unnatural for her to think of keeping a distance from the friends who knew her past.

'I asked something strange. Sorry.'

'Don't worry about it. Plus, Yakumo-kun went somewhere to chase his mother, right?'

'Probably.'

'Which means that if we chase Yakumo-kun, I might also be able to meet Azusa-san, right?'

Keiko laughed pleasantly.

– Azusa-san might already be dead.

Haruka didn't have the courage to tell Keiko that.

However, Keiko seemed to understand everything from looking at Haruka, who had kept silent, and she bit her lower lip as if vexed.

'I want to know too.'

'Want to know?'

'Yes. Why did Azusa-san try to kill Yakumo-kun? A parent wouldn't normally be able to think of killing their own child. There must have been a great reason for things to end up that way.'

As Keiko said that, she looked troubled. Like Isshin, her emotions were probably divided.

Perhaps what Yakumo was looking for wasn't his mother but the reason why his mother had tried to kill him.

Haruka suddenly felt that might have been the case.

'Oh, my hands have stopped. It's a bad habit. I have to look through these quickly.'

Keiko sniffled and went back to checking what was inside the envelopes. The ability to clear her mind so quickly was one of Keiko's amazing talents.

When Haruka's older twin sister had died, the first to smile again had also been Keiko.

It wasn't that the sadness had left her. She had been thinking of Haruka.

Even under normal circumstances, Haruka had had a complex about her older sister Ayaka. And Haruka had been the cause of Ayaka's death –

The sadder Keiko acted, the more it would make Haruka suffer. Keiko had known that.

'Haruka! Look at this!'

Keiko took a letter and a photo out excitedly.

Haruka took the photo and looked at it.

A child who looked to be one year old was sleeping on top of a cushion. He was sucking on his right thumb and looked happy.

His skin was pale like a girl's.

'Could this be – '

'Yup, it's Yakumo-kun. He's cute, right?'

Haruka unconsciously grinned.

She hadn't ever thought that she'd get to see a photo of Yakumo like this. His cheeks were as puffy as marshmallows, and his expression wasn't as harsh as it was now.

Even Yakumo had had a time like this. Somehow, it was strange to imagine it.

She took a look at the letter too.

<Yakumo is one now too. He cries when I'm not near him. He's so spoiled – it's troublesome...>

It's different – Haruka felt that immediately.

The contents of the letter were incredibly different from the image Haruka had had of Azusa. Even in the short passage, her love for her child came through.

However, the only image Haruka had had of Azusa in the first place was the fact that she had failed in trying to kill Yakumo and had gone missing after that.

That had been such a strong episode that it decided the image.

Perhaps it was the same for Yakumo too.

His own mother put her hands around his neck – wouldn't that vivid memory have erased all the other ones?

'Found it. This one. The three of them are in it.'

While Haruka was thinking about the photo and letter from the past, Keiko found the photo she was looking for.

Keiko held the photo and was looking at it nostalgically.

– I want to see it right away.

Led by that impulse, Haruka moved to Keiko's side and peered at the photo.

The photo was taken somewhere like a lake.

Yakumo was probably the one standing in the centre. If the photo was taken fifteen years ago, he was about six years old. Yakumo had been short then. His eyes were narrowed from how bright it was.

Azusa was on the left. She had almond eyes and well-defined features – she was a very beautiful person.

She did look like she was carrying some shadows, but it felt like that doubled her charm.

Yakumo resembled his mother.

On the other side was the person who would have become Yakumo's father –

'Ah!'

Haruka thought she would stop breathing from the shock.

'What is it?'

'I know this person.'

– He is probably in Nagano.

It was the man who had shown up in Haruka's room the morning before.

Haruka took out her mobile phone.

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6

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After Ishii parted from Makoto, he called Miyagawa through the internal line.

Even though they could have met in person, Ishii had experienced the attitude the detectives had towards him yesterday. He didn't want to encourage that.

<It's Miyagawa.>

He heard Miyagawa's clearly displeased voice.

'This is Ishii.'

<It's you...?>

'I apologise for calling when you are busy. I would like to ask you something regarding the matter we discussed before.'

<Did you find anything out?>

Miyagawa's tone suddenly lowered. He was probably concerned about the investigation members around him.

'Nothing is certain yet.'

Then don't call. That feeling came right through the receiver.

Usually, Ishii would have been swallowed up by that feeling and hung up after apologising, but he was different now.

'However, I have grasped an important clue. In order to advance in the investigation, there is something I would like to confirm.'

<What?>

Miyagawa spoke after a silence.

'Were there any suspects besides Takeda in the case fifteen years ago? If there were, I would like to see the documents regarding that.'

<What the hell are you thinking!?!>

Miyagawa let out a loud voice all at once from the bottom of his belly.

'It is absolutely necessary.'

<What you trying to do by investigating that now?>

Miyagawa lowered his voice again.

He had probably gathered attention because of his loud voice earlier.

'Even if you say that... it would take a long time to explain. However, it is definitely related to the search for Detective Gotou.'

Miyagawa didn't reply.

All Ishii heard was the quiet sound of Miyagawa's breathing.

'Please. Please believe in me.'

Ishii bowed his head to pray.

<I'll go over there once I've finished up, so wait there.>

'Thank you very much!'

Before Ishii finished saying that, Miyagawa hung up. The strength suddenly left Ishii's shoulders and he leant against the back of the chair.

He'd told Miyagawa to believe in him, but was his theory really correct?

To be honest, Ishii was unsure. If what he was thinking was wrong, he wouldn't be able to find Gotou.

However, still, all he could do was believe and follow that faint possibility.

The mobile phone in his suit's inner pocket rang. When he looked at the display, he saw Haruka's name.

The events of yesterday passed through Ishii's head and he hesitated before answering.

– This is no good. If I stop here, it'll end up like before again.

He gathered his emotions and answered the phone.

'I apologise for the wait. Ishii speaking.'

<Ishii-san, there's something I would like you to look into.>

Ishii had been about to apologise, but Haruka had started speaking before he even had a chance to take a breath. He completely lost his chance.

Furthermore, it felt like Haruka had completely forgotten what had happened at Isshin's house.

'Something you would like me to look into?'

<Yes. I will send you a photo of a person afterwards. I would like you to search for him.>

Haruka was speaking quickly.

– Searching for someone.

It was probably somebody related to the case, but it would be difficult to look for somebody with only a photo.

Putting aside whether he even had the time to search, he would at least take a look.

It depended on how much information there was besides the photo, but it could possibly work out if he asked Makoto to help too.

'What sort of person am I looking for?'

<The lover of Yakumo-kun's mother.>

Yakumo's mother had been in that video as a ghost. He didn't know what role she played, but it was certain that she was involved in this case somehow.

There was a good chance that her lover might have some new information.

'Understood. I will do as much as I can. I'll say my email address now, so please send it there. Also, please give me as much information about that person as you can.'

After that, Ishii checked his email address while reading it to Haruka over the phone.

<I'll message you right away.>

'Er...'

Ishii stopped Haruka, who had been about to hang up.

'I am truly sorry for yesterday.'

Ishii held his breath as he bowed his head deeply.

There was a long silence –

Ishii silently waited for Haruka to reply. He wouldn't mind even if she jeered –he was prepared for it.

<I'm sorry too. I said something awful to you, Ishii-san.>

What Haruka said was very far from what Ishii had expected.

– She’s going to forgive me?

'Something was wrong with me then. Let's save Yakumo-shi and Detective Gotou with our own hands no matter what!'

<Yes.>

Haruka gave a firm reply.

Ishii closed his eyes in his happiness and grinned unconsciously as he imagined Haruka’s smiling figure.

Oops, he didn’t have the time to space out. Ishii came to his senses and started his laptop.

Since it was an old model, it took a full minute to load up.

He connected to the internet and opened the mail software to check for new mail.

It seemed Haruka had sent it from her mobile phone. The email had already arrived.

The subject was <This is the person>. The mail said <Yesterday, I met this person. I don’t know his name.>

There was too little information. He didn’t know how to search from just this. It wasn’t impossible, but it would take some time.

He opened the attached image.

The photo had probably been taken with a mobile phone camera. The image was small on the screen and difficult to make out. Ishii maximised it to fill the monitor.

'T-this man is...'

Ishii thought his chin would fall off from his surprise.

This man is Takeda Shunsuke –

Ishii immediately took out his mobile phone and called Haruka’s number.

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7

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Makoto met with the hypnotherapist named Hayashi in the booth that was sectioned off as a reception space.

He was wearing a casual suit with no tie. He was tall and solidly built, but he didn’t seem intimidating.

He had a gentle demeanour and seemed like a good listener.

He even listened seriously to Makoto’s crazy story.

That said, it wasn't actually something Makoto had thought up. The crazy story was all Ishii's theory.

Even Makoto had been surprised when she had heard Ishii's reasoning. She had thought it was very removed from reality.

'I see. I understand what you're saying.'

After Makoto finished talking, Hayashi thought silently for a while, but then he rubbed his two hands together and spoke.

'First, regarding whether what you discussed is possible or impossible, it is possible under several conditions.'

'Eh? It's possible?'

Unconsciously, Makoto half-rose from her seat.

Since she had doubted Ishii's theory, she was even more surprised.

'Well, please calm down.'

After Hayashi pacified Makoto, she sat back on the chair with a red face. Hayashi waited for her to finish before speaking again.

'The person who thought of this method is very intelligent. They understand the characteristics of hypnotic suggestion and are using it effectively.'

As Hayashi said that, he smiled bitterly.

'Characteristics?'

'Yes. Many people misunderstand this, but hypnotic suggestion cannot be used to control people freely.'

'Which means?'

'Those actions come from that person's own intentions, so it is impossible to make somebody act in a way they do not want to.'

Makoto also knew that hypnotic suggestion couldn't control people freely.

On television, she often saw hypnotists making people fall asleep with a snap of their fingers and telling those people what to do, but those were just shows.

However, then there was a contradiction in what they had said so far.

'But earlier, you said that the method was possible. Isn't it impossible to control people?'

'It is a little bit different. Even if you were hypnotised somebody and told to kill somebody once you opened your eyes, that would be absolutely impossible.'

'Why is that?'

'Because their morals wouldn't allow it. Actions that go against one's morals will not stick.'

Makoto nodded. She understood that much.

Even though they would be hypnotised, that didn't mean their personality would disappear. Accordingly, somebody wouldn't act if they didn't want to, even if forced.

'Hypnotic suggestion must stay within the range allowed by one's morals.'

Under that meaning, the trick in the method this time hadn't required anybody to directly kill somebody, so it could be said to be within the range allowed by one's morals. However –

'Wouldn't that mean anything was possible if it was morally acceptable?'

Hayashi crossed his arms at Makoto's words.

'That isn't exactly right. Being put under hypnotic suggestion is like being guided by one's intentions.'

'Yes.'

'Rather than an order, it's guidance. This is important. For example, what do you think one should say to tell somebody they could no longer lift their arm?'

Hayashi was good at explaining. Makoto was engrossed.

'Your arm will not go up. Saying that would be no good. There is a weight on your arm now. A very large and heavy weight. A weight that nobody would be able to lift, no matter how strong they were. That is the sort of image you would give.'

By giving the brain a reason and making that an image, you could guide the actions.

'Then that would mean somebody was there giving hypnotic suggestion.'

'That wouldn't be necessary,' said Hayashi firmly.

'Is it possible to put somebody under hypnotic suggestion from a distance?'

'This is a little different. The method of hypnotic suggestion is done so that the suggestion is triggered by something.'

'Huh...'

Makoto didn't understand yet.

'For example, spin at the sound of a bell. If that were the hypnotic suggestion, the person who was hypnotised would spin at the sound of a bell even if the hypnotist was not there.'

But Hayashi himself had said that even if somebody was under hypnotic suggestion, they were still conscious when hypnotised.

That would mean that they remembered being put under hypnotic suggestion.

'Wouldn't there be no point if the person under hypnotic suggestion could remember what

happened?'

Makoto voiced the question as it came to her.

'It is just as you say. Another point is necessary for hypnotic suggestion.'

Hayashi held up his index finger.

'What is it?'

'That is to tell the person going under hypnotic suggestion to forget that they were under at the same time. It is called hypnotic amnesia.'

'Hypnotic amnesia?'

'Yes. In short, people are conscious when hypnotised. They remember what they do even when guided. There would be no meaning to it then. That is why it is necessary to also give the suggestion to forget what happened under hypnosis afterwards.'

Makoto could feel her heart racing as she listened to Hayashi's explanation.

'Is that possible?'

'Yes, it is.'

This was proof. Makoto had a real response.

Putting aside whether this actually happened or not, Ishii's theory was possible.

However, if it was possible, did it really –

'That's frightening.'

Makoto said that unconsciously.

Hayashi's expression had been gentle up until now, but it turned grim.

'I apologise.'

Makoto gave an honest apology for her careless words.

'No, it's fine. But I would like for you not to misunderstand – hypnotic suggestion comes down to how it is used.'

'How it is used...'

'Yes. We hypnotherapists use hypnotic suggestion to treat the mind. We heal traumas that people do not know they have and relieve people of their psychological stress. Please don't treat us all as criminals.'

It was just as Hayashi said.

They studied hypnotic suggestion to heal people's hearts. They weren't using it for crime.

'It's the same for surgeons, isn't it? It is their job to cure people's bodies with their scalpels. However, it would be incorrect to blame their scalpels because they could be used for crime.'

Everything depends on how something is used.'

Makoto regretted her foolish remark and bowed her head deeply again.

It was wrong to reject everything because of one example of misuse. Even the medicine from hospitals would become poison if used incorrectly.

Furthermore, what happened this time had occurred from a number of coincidences and wasn't something that somebody could do that easily.

Makoto had been doubtful at first, but now she agreed with Ishii's theory and was certain that the true culprit of the case fifteen years ago was somebody different.

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When Haruka heard the information about the man in the photo from Ishii, she was stunned.

Yakumo had probably realised everything from the very start.

That the woman in the video was his own mother, and the suspect for the crime that occurred where the video was taken was the man who was supposed to become his father –

The place Haruka had finally arrived at had just been the starting line for Yakumo.

Disappointment welled up within Haruka. At this pace, it didn't seem like she would ever catch up to Yakumo.

'What's wrong?'

Haruka came back to her senses when Keiko called out to her.

'This man's name. It's Takeda Shunsuke-san,' said Haruka, pointing at the photo.

Keiko didn't appear to understand the significance of that and replied shortly, 'I see.'

'Takeda Shunsuke-san was the suspect for a murder case fifteen years ago and is on the run now...'

'Eh?'

Keiko finally understood the situation and snatched the photo back from Haruka, putting it so close to her face that her nose almost touched it.

Even though the truth wouldn't change even if she looked at it from close up or far away, Haruka understood why Keiko would do that.

She couldn't believe it, nor did she want to.

If this is true, then what sort of fate did Azusa bear on her shoulders –

One day, she was suddenly abducted and confined, and she was assaulted physically and psychologically. She ended up bearing a child that she did not want.

Still, she forced herself to stand up again and live her life.

Then, just when she finally found a partner to support her and was about to embark on her new life, that person ended up being chased by the police as the culprit to a murder case.

She must have wanted everything to be a dream. She must have wished for that countless times. But the truth was mercilessly there.

A cruel truth that was everywhere –

If Haruka had been in the same position, she might have even given up on living.

'I can't believe that this person...'

Keiko shook her head like she didn't understand.

He didn't look like the sort of person who would do such a thing. Haruka had the same impression. And there were other things she didn't understand.

If Takeda was the suspect for a murder case and the police were after him, why didn't the investigation go to Azusa –

She must have noticed.

'Mum, do you know how Takeda-san and Azusa-san met?'

'I do. When I got the letter about her marriage, I was so happy I called her.'

Keiko smiled. Her eyes seemed to be looking far away.

She was probably recalling how she felt then. Being able to share one's feelings with somebody was really amazing.

'This person was a newspaper reporter and called out to Azusa-san and Yakumo-kun when they were at the park. Asked them to let him take a photo. That was how they met.'

'I see...'

Haruka imagined Azusa and Yakumo playing at a park.

What sort of expressions did they have on their faces then –

Takeda had chosen them for a photo, so they must have been smiling.

'They probably had a lot in common. They decided to marry a month after meeting.'

'A month!?!'

Haruka's voice jumped an octave.

That was a huge difference from somebody who hadn't been able to express her feelings for over a year.

Even though she did think that was fast, it wasn't like it was impossible, and there really were people like that. Dating for months and years wasn't proof of the bond between two people.

The short time period probably hid their relationship.

That was why Isshin and the police hadn't found out.

That meant that Azusa had told Keiko about her marriage before her own brother, Isshin.

It showed how much she'd trusted her.

Haruka was even more confused now though. Why hadn't Azusa consulted Keiko even once before she was so cornered she would lay a hand on her own son?

If she had, she might not have thought of trying to kill Yakumo.

Had she been unable to talk about it because she trusted Keiko?

– No. That isn't it.

Haruka felt that something was off.

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9

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After Miyagawa left the room, he went down the corridor to the door to the <Unsolved Cases Special Investigation Room> at the very end, opposite the toilet.

When he went inside, Ishii was on his mobile. He said, 'I will call again later,' hung up, and stood straight.

'Just sit down.'

After Miyagawa said that, he sat at Gotou's seat opposite Ishii.

'I apologise for asking for something unreasonable.'

Ishii bowed his head, and he was sitting frankly for once.

– He's had a good look these past couple of days.

When Miyagawa looked at Ishii's face directly, he thought that keenly.

Up until yesterday, Miyagawa had just thought of him as a beansprout that only knew how to wail, but this case might have drawn out his sleeping ability.

Still, what was with the gauze covering his nose?

'What happened to your nose?'

'Ah, er, you might not believe this, but a chair fell down from the sky.'

– Crap. It's my fault.

'How unlucky.'

Miyagawa didn't think it was necessary to give his name, so he just let the conversation flow.

Ishii looked at Miyagawa like he wanted something.

It was like Ishii was telling him to take the documents out already. But Miyagawa couldn't just hand them over without knowing what was going on.

'Why do you need documents about suspects for a case that's already had a culprit determined?'

Miyagawa fixed Ishii with a strong gaze.

'Because there is the possibility that he isn't the true culprit.'

Miyagawa was so shocked he couldn't even be angry.

'Don't say something stupid with no basis for it.'

'I do have a basis for it.'

Miyagawa had planned on cutting Ishii down, but Ishii leant forward with a challenging gaze.

There might actually be something there if this coward was going to say this much. Miyagawa faltered.

'Try telling me.'

'Yes. Just earlier, I received a report of confirmation from an expert over the phone,' said Ishii, looking pleased. He was like a child who'd received a toy.

'Expert? In what?'

'Hypnotism.'

This guy really did have a habit of deluding himself.

'Don't make me laugh. You're not saying that somebody was hypnotised to kill somebody, right?'

Miyagawa had sad that coldly, but Ishii still did not flinch. Where did this confidence come from?

'It is impossible to make somebody kill someone else with hypnotism.'

'Doesn't that not match up with what you're saying?'

'The point is that case comes from the testimony fifteen years ago.'

Ishii adjusted his glasses with his finger and declared that in a ringing voice before starting his explanation.

'A-ko-san reported the incident at twelve AM. There is no doubt about it. However, A-ko-san actually heard the scream three hours earlier at nine PM.'

'The dossier says it was twelve AM, right?' interrupted Miyagawa.

'That's correct. However, A-ko-san first testified that it was at nine PM.'

Ishii laid out the copy of the files that Miyagawa had handed over to him earlier and pointed at a passage.

Just as Ishii said, it had read nine PM, but it had been changed to twelve AM.

'Isn't that strange? That'd mean that she heard the scream at nine and called the police right away at twelve AM. Did she use a carrier pigeon or something?'

Ishii laughed while clutching his stomach at Miyagawa's light sarcasm.

It irritated Miyagawa since he felt like he was being made fun of, but he bore with it.

'Carrier pigeon? How amusing. However, that is unfortunately not the case.'

'What is it then?'

'In short, this. A-ko-san heard the scream at nine PM. After that, somebody guided her into a deep hypnotic state.'

– Was he serious?

Miyagawa glared at Ishii, but Ishii continued speaking, paying him no heed.

'Then, at some sort of signal, she woke up after three hours and reported the incident to the police. A-ko-san lost the memory of the three hours she was hypnotised for, so she thought that she had called immediately after she heard the scream.'

'Isn't that just your delusion?'

'It isn't a delusion. I said this earlier as well, but I have confirmed this with an expert. The trick I just discussed is actually possible.'

– Really?

If what Ishii said was true, that would get rid of the bumbling time difference they'd had up until now all at once. But –

'Is it really possible?'

'It is. It is called hypnotic amnesia. One is put into a deep hypnotic state and made to forget that one was hypnotised using a suggestion.'

It wasn't coming together for Miyagawa.

'I don't get it.'

'For example, when somebody faints, what was just a moment to them could actually have been many hours. It is the same sort of thing.'

Miyagawa had experienced that himself.

Fifteen years ago, Miyagawa woke up in the hospital after having his head hit. It had been just a moment for him, but it had actually been six hours.

'But how about the autopsy? The time of death was said to be around twelve AM.'

'I checked with Hata-san. The final time of death was decided based on the scene of the crime. He

had taken a look at the situation and used a broad interpretation of the autopsy results.'

'What did you say...'

'In short, Hata-san's analysis put the time of death for the corpses from seven to nine PM.'

Miyagawa stood up unconsciously in his agitation.

'Why would anybody need to do something so troublesome?'

'In order to change the time of the crime and give the culprit an alibi.'

If the method Ishii discussed was possible and actually happened, it would be a great way to make an alibi.

However, there was something Miyagawa just couldn't accept.

'I was the first at the scene then. I saw the guy who did it there. If he was trying to give himself an alibi, why'd the culprit be there? Isn't that strange?'

Ishii's eyes narrowed behind his glasses.

'Perhaps – this is just a possibility, but, what if he wasn't the culprit?'

Miyagawa wanted to rebut Ishii's words, but he couldn't speak.

His forehead was drenched in sweat. How many years had it been since he'd sweated as unpleasantly as this?

Miyagawa had been hit in the head then and he'd fainted.

Because of that, he couldn't remember the culprit's face clearly, but the fear he'd felt then had filled his body.

He'd felt instinctively that that man wasn't Takeda.

The reason was that Takeda was human. He might have had hatred and anger, but those were peanuts compared to what Miyagawa had seen there.

An oppressive evil. He didn't believe in a god, but if he had to give an example, that had been the devil.

'Chief Miyagawa. Would you allow me to see the documents?'

Miyagawa handed the documents over to Ishii before replying.

The documents had the details for two names that had come up as suspects before the police had decided that Takeda was the culprit.

Ishii immediately started looking through the documents.

A number of things happened during that case and the police got the time of the crime wrong.

Was my testimony one of the reasons for that –

Miyagawa felt like his legs would collapse underneath him.

If what Ishii said was true, that would mean they'd been chasing an innocent for fifteen years.

But he didn't understand. Why didn't Takeda agree to be taken in for questioning?

He'd run off without agreeing, which had been one of the reasons the police had decided Takeda was the culprit.

'I've got it! I've got it!'

Ishii suddenly shouted and jumped up.

'Calm down!'

Ishii smiled even more at Miyagawa's yell.

'I can't be calm. I've finally found the true culprit.'

'What did you say!?!'

He determined the culprit from the two suspects? But on what basis?

Miyagawa wanted to ask these questions, but before he could, Ishii ran out.

'Where are you going!?!'

'To investigate, of course,' said Ishii, turning around as he did so.

He fell –

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10

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Haruka looked at the photo again.

– I can't think of anything no matter how hard I try.

She hadn't been able to question Yakumo when she'd noticed he sounded strange when he called her. It might have already been too late then.

The corners of her eyes felt warm. Tears were welling up. This was no good. She felt like she wouldn't be able to meet Yakumo again if these tears fell.

Haruka bit her lip and gripped the red stone on her necklace with both hands.

– I can't give up.

She spurred on her crumbling heart.

There had to be something she'd missed. Something very important –

'Haruka. You said you met Takeda-san, right?' said Keiko, putting a hand on Haruka's lap.

Haruka knew who he was now, but it was still a puzzle as to why he'd come to see Haruka.

'Yeah.'

'What did he say?'

'He wanted me to save Yakumo-kun. And that Yakumo-kun was in Nagano.'

'Why did he ask that of you? Hasn't Takeda-san met Yakumo-kun?'

Haruka had the same doubts as Keiko.

And how did he know I was searching for Yakumo? Why didn't he meet Yakumo directly?

The questions in Haruka's head suddenly brought up a memory.

The day she went to the <Movie Research Circle> to search for Yakumo, she'd felt somebody's gaze. That hadn't been her imagination.

– Takeda was watching me.

Takeda must have gone to meet Yakumo as well. There, he saw Haruka.

However, that didn't explain why Takeda hadn't gone to save Yakumo himself.

'If what Takeda-san said is true and Yakumo-kun is in Nagano, doesn't that mean Azusa-san is also in Nagano?'

Keiko proposed another question while Haruka was pondering.

The moment she heard that, the image from the video came back to her.

She felt like her head was being squeezed.

And then – she was led to a conclusion.

'That's right, Mum!'

Haruka's voice was close to a yell.

Keiko was taken aback by the suddenness of it.

Haruka had thought something was strange when she saw that video.

The moment the video became completely dark, she'd heard the faint sound of something like footsteps.

Isn't that from two videos being edited together –

In short, the first half and second half of that video had been taken at different places and put together.

Which meant that the second half with Azusa – she didn't know where it was taken.

No, that was wrong. She had to calm down and think.

Supposing that Yakumo realised that too, Yakumo searched for that place. Then, he arrived in Nagano –

She didn't have any basis for it, but those two lines of thought led her to one place.

'Hey, Mum, Do you know where the incident with Azusa-san occurred?'

'Ah, er... I know the area,' replied Keiko, a bit lost for words.

Keiko didn't understand what Haruka was thinking and looked like she had been caught by a fox.

'Please, Mum. Take me there,' begged Haruka as she gripped Keiko's two hands.

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11

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Ishii drove his car quickly.

Urgency and exhilaration were mixed together, making his blood run wild.

There was no margin for doubt any more. The background and actions on the day of the crime of the two suspects had been in the documents Miyagawa showed him.

Ishii had realised immediately when he saw them. If his theory was correct, that narrowed the suspects down to one.

'Oi, you're driving too fast!'

Miyagawa gripped Ishii's shoulder from the passenger seat.

Ishii didn't understand why Miyagawa had come along.

The moment Ishii started the car, Miyagawa had stopped him, standing in front of the car with his two arms spread wide. Ishii had thought Miyagawa would try to hold him back, but he'd sat in the passenger seat without a word.

The statute of limitations was almost up for Takeda, so who was going to direct the investigation of the scene? Ishii had that question, but he didn't dare to ask.

'Even if you tell me that I am driving too quickly, I am in a hurry...'

'Stop whining! You don't have the police siren on so obey the speed limit!' said Miyagawa indignantly.

'Um, could I turn it on?'

'What?'

'The siren.'

The moment Ishii said that, Miyagawa raised his hand. However, he didn't hit Ishii.

Ishii thought that Gotou and Miyagawa were very similar. There was just one thing decisively different about them. It was power. It was partly physical, but Gotou's power to rush at something overwhelmingly exceeded Miyagawa's.

This was one of those instances. If it were Gotou, he would have hit Ishii's head without any hesitation.

For some reason, I feel like something's lacking –

'And where are you heading in the first place?'

Miyagawa finally asked that question.

Ishii had been sure that Miyagawa had stepped into the car knowing that, so he let out a surprised 'Eh?'

'Isn't it obvious that I'm going to the place where the true culprit is?'

'So where is that? There were two suspects, right?'

Miyagawa stamped his foot in his irritation.

There certainly had been two suspects. One was Uematsu Shouichi. He had borrowed money from Kanji. Then, he'd been asked to return the money and they had had a rather troubling dispute.

The reason for the loan had been a failed business. However, Uematsu claimed that the failure was Kanji's fault.

The other suspect was Honda Yutaka. He had fought with the middle school Nanase Kanji was director of in court.

Honda's daughter committed suicide because of bullying. Her father, Yutaka, pressed charges, saying that his daughter's death laid with the homeroom teacher who had tolerated the bullying, Kanji's son Katsuaki.

The case was Honda's loss –

He hadn't been able to prove positive proof that the school had tolerated the bullying.

Then, there was a reporter who had followed that case vigorously. That was Takeda. This wasn't just a coincidence.

'It is Honda, of course.'

'How can you be sure? Don't you have to investigate both of them again?'

If thinking about it normally, Miyagawa's opinion was correct.

'I have two reasons. The first is that the crime probably occurred past nine PM. It isn't necessary to reinvestigate everything. All I have to do is see who doesn't have an alibi then.'

'And what's the other?'

'Chief Miyagawa, I said this earlier, but in order for the trick with the lapse in time to be realised, there is an essential condition.'

'Condition?'

Looking confused, Miyagawa parroted Ishii's words back at him.

'Knowledge of hypnotism as well as the ability to use it.'

Miyagawa's expression turned grim at Ishii's words.

It appeared he understood. The suspect Honda hadn't been able to stand up again after his daughter's death and had been troubled by insomnia, so he had undergone hypnotherapy.

'But Honda had been treated as a patient with hypnotherapy. That's different from being able to use it.'

What Miyagawa said made sense. But there was also another way of looking at it.

'Patients undergoing hypnotherapy receive an explanation about the basics of hypnotism in order to remove any preconceptions. Mightn't he have become interested in hypnotism because of that? He might have gone to lectures or taken an online course – there are countless ways he could have learnt.'

'That vague theory's just conjecture.'

'But the other suspect, Uematsu, has no connection to hypnotism.'

Miyagawa glanced at Ishii.

It was like he was saying he thought it was suspicious. Ishii didn't care if Miyagawa didn't believe him. To be honest, Ishii didn't have much confidence in this theory either.

However, if he just stayed here, nothing would change.

In order to save Gotou, he would have to rush forward, knowing it was reckless.

'Do you think Gotou's at Honda's too?' said Miyagawa, closing his eyes and crossing his arms.

Ishii nodded firmly. It wasn't a bluff – he was confident.

Something caused Gotou to realise that Honda was the real culprit. That was why Honda had abducted him. To shut his mouth –

'You think Gotou's still OK?' said Miyagawa, looking out the window. It felt like he didn't want to know the answer. However, Ishii knew.

'Detective Gotou is fine!'

Miyagawa looked at Ishii in surprise. His eyes seemed to be asking for an explanation.

'Honda is definitely keeping Detective Gotou alive.'

That wasn't Ishii's groundless wish.

'Why do you think that?'

'It's because Honda's goal is to pass the statute of limitations. All he has to do is keep Detective Gotou until the statute of limitation passes. If he killed him, that would mean he would have to

flee for another fifteen years. It wouldn't be worth it.'

Ishii and Miyagawa looked at each other and smiled silently.

Ishii knew even if Miyagawa didn't say anything. Miyagawa had completely accepted Ishii's theory.

'But what do you plan to do? We don't have the time to investigate. The statute of limitations is up in a day.'

Miyagawa looked at Ishii with searching eyes.

Just as Miyagawa said, they definitely wouldn't make it if they went to get evidence now.

It would be so easy if they could find the culprit and prevent the statute of limitations from finishing, like in some detective drama.

In reality, after capturing the culprit, the police would write up a file, collect evidence and then send it to the prosecution.

Then, the prosecution would judge whether it was appropriate. If it was, then they would write an indictment, bring it to court, and then the first accepted accusation would be finished at court.

The time lag for that would be long.

If they had Takeda as the culprit, the evidence was already gathered. Sometimes the police would make the necessary arrangements with the prosecution so that they could present an indictment to the court immediately after arrest. However, that wouldn't work if the culprit were anyone besides Takeda.

They would need to make the file and start with getting the prosecution to judge it. They couldn't waste even a second, so there was only one they could do –

'I will meet with the person himself and make him confess,' said Ishii clearly.

Miyagawa stared at Ishii's profile.

The silence continued –

Ishii knew what Miyagawa wanted to say. The chances that somebody who had been on the run for fifteen years would confess to a detective who didn't even have a warrant were close to zero.

To tell the truth, Ishii couldn't care less about arresting the culprit. Even if the statute of limitations passed, he'd be satisfied as long as he could save Gotou.

In the end, Miyagawa didn't say anything. He just opened the window and put the siren that had been on the dashboard onto the top of the car.

A piercing siren started to ring –

'Chief Miyagawa.'

'Step on it.'

'Yes sir!'

As Ishii said that, he floored the accelerator.

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12

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The car went down the dark road.

Even with the headlights on, it was impossible to see down the road, because of the way it wound. Furthermore, snow had piled up on the road, so it was also impossible to drive quickly.

Looking at the white road, Haruka felt like this road might not actually lead anywhere.

But all she could do was go down this road.

'I'm really sorry.'

Haruka bowed her head towards Keiko, who had gone along with Haruka's selfish request without even one complaint and was now driving the car.

Since they would need to drive on a snowy road, Keiko had even borrowed an acquaintance's four-wheel drive.

'Ah, aren't you being honest for a change? It'd be nice if you were always like this.'

Keiko smiled at Haruka's words, making light of them. Just from that, Haruka's feelings lightened.

'You make it sound like I'm never honest.'

'That's how you are. You're stubborn and not honest at all. That's why you always end up with a broken heart.'

She went straight for the things that bother me the most –

In Haruka's opinion, it was stranger that someone could act so spoiled in front of the person they liked.

'Stop saying so much and just drive.'

Keiko grinned as she looked at Haruka, who had forcibly changed the topic.

The way Keiko retorted was like Yakumo.

'OK, OK. We'll be there soon.'

After Keiko said that, Haruka leant forward and focussed her eyes on the dark.

However, all she could see were tall cedar trees on both sides and the snowy white road.

After driving further, Keiko turned on the hazard lights and parked the car by the side of the road.

'Are we there?'

'It's been twenty years since then already,' said Keiko, looking out at the road.

Haruka couldn't even imagine what feelings were hidden in those words.

She didn't have the time to think. Anyway, she had to go right now. Haruka took a torch and got off the car.

The air was so cold it hurt.

Her breath came out in white puffs.

The snow crunched underneath her shoes. Haruka carefully walked forward.

'Azusa-san collapsed right there.'

Keiko came after Haruka and pointed at a point on the road with a hand in a thick glove.

It wasn't as if there was some sort of sign there. Everybody would have passed the spot without noticing –

Haruka tried standing in that spot.

Everything had started in this place with nothing in it.

When she met Yakumo at the university, that had actually been the second time. Actually, they had first met here, both still in the bellies of their mothers.

It would be spoilt if she put it into words, but it really did seem destined.

We went the long way around to arrive here –

'Azusa-san suddenly burst out from that forest.'

Her mother pointed at a narrow road between the trees.

Haruka turned on the torch and lit the way.

There were footsteps on the white road. Somebody had definitely walked down this road recently.

'Mum, wait here. I'll be right back.'

After Haruka said that, she made her way towards the road.

'Wait a second.'

Keiko took off her gloves and gave them to Haruka. She would probably be angry if Haruka refused.

'Thank you.'

Haruka put on Keiko's gloves and walked through the snow.

Fwoop.

Her foot sank into the snow, but it wasn't as deep as she imagined. Her ankle was still out of the snow. Though it was troubling to have the snow in her shoe, she could probably continue walking like this.

Haruka looked once more at the footsteps that continued down the white road.

She couldn't see what was ahead, since it had been swallowed up by the darkness.

The place where Azusa had been held captive was ahead of her. Yakumo had to have gone there. These footsteps were Yakumo's. Now, Haruka was following those footsteps.

She brushed aside the tree branches and proceeded down the road. It was difficult to walk, and there was a slope ahead.

She had to put her hands to the ground and crawl ahead. It was really a good thing that she had gloves.

Haruka cleared her mind and devoted herself to climbing up the road with all her efforts.

She was short of breath. Her head felt dizzy and she was sweating.

How far did this road go? It can't go to the top of the mountain, can it –

She hadn't made any preparations at all. She wouldn't be able to camp out all night, and it could easily become a disaster if she wasn't careful.

Plus, she had left Keiko alone. She was definitely worried.

Just when Haruka's anxiety reached a peak, the road ended and she arrived at a flat, open lot.

There was a house there.

Surrounded by trees, it was a small, deserted house built like a hut. It was built out of logs – a log house then.

It appeared to have been abandoned for many years. The wood was rotten and the house was leaning.

This was probably where Azusa had been held captive.

What could be inside? Haruka didn't know. Because she didn't know, all she could do was go.

Haruka calmed her breathing and started walking again.

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13

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Honda's house was at the outskirts of the factory zone.

It was three storeys tall and had a garage on the first floor – a house built during the bubble.

The lights were on. That meant he was home. Things would've gotten troublesome if he hadn't been.

– Please wait. I will definitely save you.

Ishii put a hand to his chest and whispered that in his heart.

Ishii opened the door on the driver's side, got off the car and went up the stairs outside of the

house to the second-floor entrance.

'Wait a second!'

Miyagawa had run up after Ishii and gripped him by the lapels.

'What is it?'

'Don't you say "What is it". What are you planning on saying?'

That –

'I haven't decided.'

Ishii hadn't thought that far. However, he didn't think there was any way to go but from the front.

'You're just a smart idiot.'

Miyagawa's shoulders fell in his exasperation.

'Chief Miyagawa, there is a contradiction in what you said. 'Smart' and 'idiot' are antonyms.'

'That's something a smart idiot would say.'

Miyagawa clicked his tongue.

'Huh...'

Ishii made a vague reply, but that didn't mean he understood.

'Anyway, leave this to me.'

Miyagawa forced himself in front of Ishii and pressed the intercom button.

'Who is it?'

A voice came through the intercom.

'Ah, excuse me. I am Miyagawa from the Setamachi precinct. There are a few things that I would like to ask,' said Miyagawa, stooping to speak into the intercom.

After a while, the door opened.

A man in his fifties with a good physique showed up at the door. He had a long face with dark circles around his eyes, and he was pale and haggard.

'Honda-san, yes? My name is Miyagawa. I met you once fifteen years ago.'

At first, Honda looked confused, but that was for just a moment. Perhaps he remembered, because he pointed at Miyagawa and said, 'Ah.'

'As you probably know, the statute of limitations has almost passed for that case.'

'Is that so...'

'There are a few things that need to be checked for that case before then.'

Miyagawa scratched at his head, seeming apologetic. The conversation was flowing naturally. That was Miyagawa for you.

When Ishii tried to peer into the back of the room through the gap between the door and the wall, Honda shifted.

For a moment, Honda's eyes met Ishii's.

'If I can be of help,' said Honda. He put on his sandals and stepped outside, closing the door behind him.

– Did he notice?

Ishii felt suspicious.

'Oh, it's nothing important. We're just confirming the situation. I apologise for the inconvenience. Are you alone now?'

Honda let out a short breath at Miyagawa's words.

His eyes were narrowed, and he looked at Miyagawa and Ishii with a cold gaze. It was like he was saying 'It's your fault'.

'I am alone. Right after that case, I had a divorce with my wife.'

'How about your work?'

'I'm still working.'

'Have you been at home these past few days?' said Miyagawa nonchalantly.

– It's a bluff.

It implied that they knew everything.

'Yes, well, I've taken a few days off work.'

'Why is that?'

Miyagawa pressed further.

Honda rubbed his palms on his trousers. He couldn't calm down – his gaze was wandering.

'Well, a bunch of things...'

'What do you mean, a bunch of things?'

Miyagawa was disinterestedly but steadily cornering Honda.

'Er, well, I caught a cold...'

It was a weak excuse.

– Just one more push.

'Is that so? I understand. I apologise for bothering you.'

Contrary to Ishii's inner voice, Miyagawa readily ended the conversation.

Ishii didn't understand Miyagawa's true intentions.

'Please take care of your cold.'

After Miyagawa said that, he pulled Ishii's arm.

– The conversation isn't over.

Ishii wanted to resist, but Honda had already disappeared through the entrance.

'Why did you stop? With only a bit more...'

Miyagawa covered Ishii's mouth so he wasn't able to finish his sentence.

Miyagawa pulled Ishii forcibly by the arm to the car he had parked on the road.

'Get in!' said Miyagawa sharply, but Ishii just didn't understand.

'I don't want to.'

'Stop complaining. The guy's watching.'

Miyagawa exchanged a look with Ishii.

Ishii took a quick glance at the house. Somebody was standing by the window and watching them.

'Hurry up.'

Ishii reluctantly got into the driver's seat at Miyagawa's behest.

'Drive.'

The moment Miyagawa sat in the passenger's seat, he spoke, not letting Ishii ask his questions.

Ishii started the engine and drove.

'Honda's definitely hiding something.'

'I think so as well.'

Ishii agreed with the words Miyagawa had said in an unpleasant temper.

'Check with his company to see whether he'd asked for the days off in advance or the day of. Then we'll know if it was because of a cold.'

Normally, Ishii would definitely have been agitated, but he wasn't now.

Gotou's life depends on this –

'That would be too slow. Honda is clearly hiding something. We should step in immediately.'

'When did you start telling me what to do!?'

'But...'

'We can't do whatever the hell we want just because we're police! Illegal investigations are useless'

in court! Don't you know that much!?'

Miyagawa's yell echoed through the car.

Ishii slammed on the brakes, stopping the car. It wasn't because he was surprised. It was because he couldn't agree with Miyagawa's opinion.

'I don't care about the court. I just want to save Detective Gotou.'

'It's the same for me!'

Miyagawa hit the side window with all his strength, baring his emotions.

Normally, Ishii would have yelped in fear, but he had a determination in the bottom of his stomach that would not waver no matter what.

'It isn't the same. Chief Miyagawa, you only want to save Detective Gotou as part of the police.'

'What did you say!?'

Miyagawa gripped the collar of Ishii's jacket threateningly.

'I am different. I want to save Detective Gotou as a regular person!' shouted Ishii, brushing Miyagawa's arms aside.

'Are you prepared for that?'

– He had been prepared a long time ago.

Ishii took his police ID out of his jacket pocket and threw it against the dashboard.

Miyagawa looked at Ishii with a bewildered expression.

'What are you planning?'

'I'm not planning anything. I said this earlier. As a regular person, I can't abandon Detective Gotou.'

After Ishii declared that, he opened the door and got off the car.

Miyagawa didn't try to stop him. Even if he did, Ishii wouldn't have listened.

In order to save Gotou, he would drop his identity as a police officer with no regrets if it became a burden. There were things men had to do no matter what they would lose. This was one of those times.

– Detective Gotou. Please wait. I am going to save you now.

Ishii started to run at full speed in the freezing cold.

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Haruka advanced through the snow and climbed up to the entrance to the log house.

Creak –

The floor was rotten. It felt like it could break at any moment.

The door was slightly open.

She tried to use her torch to light up the inside through the gap, but all she saw was a dusty floor.

Nervousness and fear made her heart beat so loudly it felt like it would burst through her chest.

– It's OK. Calm down.

Haruka encouraged herself and slowly pushed open the door.

There was the unique smell of mould mixed with dust.

Right after she went in, there was a space that was probably the living room.

It was about ten tatami in size. By the wall, there was a shelf of the same kind she had at home.

There was a large table in the middle.

The glass in the window was shattered, so all that was left was the frame.

Snow fluttered in, together with the wind.

'Yakumo-kun.'

Haruka focussed on her shivering throat and spoke up.

The only reply was the howl of the wind.

– My reasoning might have been wrong.

Doubt passed through her mind.

– I can't step down now.

Haruka shook her head to clear her head of bad thoughts.

'Yakumo-kun. Aren't you here?'

As she called out, she looked around with the faint light from the torch.

She spotted a door in the very back of the room.

While confirming the feel of the rotten floor, she slowly walked to the door.

Scritch.

Something moved.

'Aah!'

Haruka leapt back instinctively.

When she pointed her torch down, she saw a mouse running across the floor.

'Honestly, don't do that.'

She lit up the door again.

There was a hook-shaped clasp on it. She tried to undo it, but her hands were shivering too much.

Haruka herself didn't know whether it was from cold or fear.

She took off her gloves. She clenched her fist and unclenched it so that she could make her fingers work the way she wanted them to. Then, she undid the clasp and opened the door.

Beyond it was a small room, like a storehouse.

There was only a large object in the middle covered with a green sheet.

Compared to how old the house was, this sheet was clearly new.

Rustle.

Haruka felt like she saw the object move slightly.

She hurriedly covered her mouth and swallowed her scream.

– Something's in there. I'm scared. I'm scared, but I have to check –

Haruka shut her eyes and took deep breaths. She gripped the sheet with trembling hands.

Then, she pulled it off all at once.

She was so surprised she couldn't speak.

Underneath the sheet was the person she had been looking for.

'Yakumo-kun!'

Yakumo was sitting on a wooden arm chair. Both his arms and legs were bound with rope.

His head drooped like a doll's and he didn't budge at all. There was a dark red stain on his red shirt.

It's blood –

'Yakumo-kun! Hang in there! Yakumo-kun!'

Haruka embraced Yakumo and shook him while yelling with all her might.

However, Yakumo didn't respond.

'Yakumo-kun! Please! Talk to me!'

Haruka felt like she was falling into a deep darkness.

A darkness that went on forever –

Her eyes welled up with tears.

– Even though we finally met up again. Why is this happening?

While crying, Haruka undid the ropes that bound Yakumo.

Because they were tied tightly, it wasn't going well.

Her fingernails snapped and her fingers were bleeding. But she didn't have the time to worry about that. She just wanted to get Yakumo out as quickly as she could.

Finally, she undid Yakumo's bindings and was able to hug him.

His body was cold.

– Am I too late?

Why did this happen? Why?

No matter how she tried, Haruka couldn't find the answer to that.

I wanted to talk to you once more. But. But –

Why?

'Yakumo-kun. Why?'

The hole in Haruka's heart spread as she was overwhelmed by a variety of emotions.

Haruka hugged Yakumo as tightly as she could.

To the point it felt like his body was a part of her own. She hugged him with all her strength.

That was all she could do –

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15

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Ishii reached the intersection where Honda's house was.

He hid behind a telephone pole and looked at the house.

If he tried to go in from the front entrance, he would probably be stopped.

He didn't even think Honda would open the door for him. Then there was only one path Ishii could take. The first floor garage.

– Was this really OK?

Ishii asked himself that.

What he was going to try to do now was illegal trespassing. It was a definite crime. He was even going to trespass when the owner was on the property.

He'd be forced to quit if this got out.

But he didn't care about that. He'd thrown away his ID earlier. He was saving Gotou as a regular person – not a police officer. He would save Gotou. That was all.

– I'm a man too. Do your best, Ishii Yuutarou.

Ishii looked around to check that nobody was there and then ran straight for the garage.

He pressed his back against the shutter door and caught his breath.

Ishii put his hand to the shutter door, but it wouldn't open. It appeared to be locked.

Things wouldn't go that easily for him.

He sidled along the wall to the back of the house.

He found a ventilation window. He could break in from there. He put his hand on it, but it also wouldn't open. It seemed like he'd have to break the glass and unlock it.

Ishii looked around to find a handy rock.

He couldn't make any loud noises. A small rock would be better.

'There.'

Ishii picked up a rock the size of a marble and threw it at the window.

Click.

It made a small noise and bounced back.

No good. I need a larger rock –

How about this one? This time Ishii picked up a rock about the size of a basketball and threw it at the window again.

Because he didn't put enough strength in his throw, it fell on his own toes.

'Agh.'

Ishii gritted his teeth and endured the pain. He writhed on the floor, gripping his toes with his hands.

– This time.

Ishii picked up a rock the size of his fist and threw that at the window.

Clang.

The rock broke through the glass. It sounded like it hit something metal. It must have hit the car.

'Oh no.'

Ishii crouched and lowered his breathing.

Silence –

Fortunately, it seemed like he hadn't been noticed.

Ishii put his hand through the broken window and unlocked it.

He looked around once more to check that nobody was there before opening the window and climbing into the garage, using the window frame for support.

'Agh.'

Ishii missed his landing and fell on his back, putting him in agony.

The garage was dark.

It was filled with the smell of petrol and dust.

Ishii took a penlight from his pocket and used its faint light to look around.

The trunk of the black sedan parked there was dented, and the rock was on top of it.

– Ah, I've really done it.

Ishii rolled and took the rock off the trunk.

It seemed like the lock of the trunk had broken from the rock's impact, and the trunk popped open.

Ishii turned his penlight towards the trunk in his surprise. Inside, there was a blue vinyl sheet covering something large.

'It can't be!'

Ishii frantically tried to rip the sheet away.

It was wrapped with vinyl tape, so it wasn't going the way Ishii wanted it to.

'What is this...'

Finally, Ishii was able to rip off part of the vinyl sheet.

Underneath it was Gotou's face. It was covered in black spots.

This was – blood. His face was ghastly pale.

'Detective Gotou! Please hang in there!'

Ishii slapped Gotou's cheeks as he called out frantically.

However, there was no reply.

– Was I too late? I can't accept that. Why?

The emotions Ishii had been holding back came up all at once.

Despondency and powerlessness made him lose his strength, and he fell to the concrete floor on his knees.

'Detective Gotou, I'm sorry. I...'

Interrupting Ishii's words, the lights in the garage turned on.

The brightness made everything turn white for a moment.

Ishii blinked a number of times and looked up to see Honda standing there.

He had a golf club in his hands. A nine iron. He wouldn't be able to do anything if he was hit with that.

Honda's narrowed eyes made his expression demonic, as if he were possessed by something.

Honda held the hand with the golf club above his head.

– My fate will be the same as Gotou's. That isn't too bad.

That thought came unbidden to Ishii's mind.

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Haruka caressed Yakumo's cheek as she hugged him.

'I'm sorry. If I had come sooner...'

She couldn't say the rest because she was crying.

The cold and quiet made her sadness deeper –

What should I do now?

If I'd never met you – If I'd never known you – I wouldn't have experienced this sadness.

But I found out about you.

And through the time I spent with you, I found out – about your warmth.

I can't go back now –

What should I do? I can't carry this sadness with me.

Haruka couldn't stop the downward spiral of her feelings or her falling tears.

The howl of the wind sounded like crying.

People always understand how important something is after they've lost it.

How stupid –

'I... ha... '

Suddenly, Haruka felt like she heard Yakumo's voice.

Her ears hadn't been tricking her. It had been faint, but his voice had definitely reached Haruka's ears.

Yakumo's eyes were slightly open.

Haruka put her ears to his purple lips.

Haa, haa.

It was weak, but she could hear the sound of breathing.

'Yakumo-kun. You're alive.'

She was glad. She was so glad.

Haruka hugged Yakumo with all her strength as relief spread out from a corner in her heart.

'It... hurts...'

Yakumo let out a groan.

She had been so excited she put a bit too much strength into her hug.

Yakumo was alive, but he had definitely sustained serious injuries.

'Yakumo-kun. Are you OK?'

'I'm not... You can tell... by looking, can't you?'

After Yakumo said that in a faint voice, he started coughing.

He spoke like that even in a time like this. He really was an idiot.

'I thought you'd really died.'

'Don't just kill me off...'

Yakumo clenched his teeth as he spoke.

She didn't care what he said to her now. He was alive. That was enough.

Haruka gripped Yakumo's hand.

'Why are... you here?'

'Isn't it obvious? Because I'm meddlesome.'

Yakumo smiled slightly at Haruka's words.

Just from seeing that smile, the hardships Haruka had experienced until now all flew away.

Nothing could replace being able to see Yakumo alive again.

'Aagh.'

Yakumo groaned and bent over.

She couldn't linger now. If she didn't get Yakumo to a hospital right away, his life would be in danger.

However, it would be impossible for Haruka to carry Yakumo on her own.

She would get Keiko to come here and carry Yakumo with her. Haruka tried to contact her mother with her mobile, but it was no good. She was out of range.

Haruka would head back to the car and bring Keiko back here with her. It would take time, but it

seemed like that was the only way.

'Yakumo-kun, wait. I'm going to get help.'

Haruka hugged Yakumo again and whispered that in his ear.

Just as she was about to leave, a cold wind suddenly blew into the room.

The door was open, and a man stood in it. A slender, tall man in a black suit with long hair that went down his back.

Even though he was on a mountain in the middle of the night, he was wearing sunglasses.

Though he was just standing there, he had an oppressive presence. It felt like the space around him was enveloped in a dark and malicious atmosphere.

He smiled, showing his white teeth, and started walking towards them slowly.

Terror –

That was the only word that could express Haruka's emotional state.

'Run.'

Yakumo's expression twisted as he said that.

Haruka didn't know who he was, but she couldn't stay here. She had to run. Haruka felt that instinctively.

Haruka tried to pick Yakumo up, but she couldn't do it well.

She lost her balance and the two of them fell to the floor.

Haruka tried to help Yakumo up, but Yakumo brushed Haruka's hand away.

Leave me here. He was probably saying that.

But Haruka couldn't do that. She had experienced the sadness that came from losing Yakumo.

No matter what happened, she wouldn't leave Yakumo.

Haruka became even more frantic in her attempts to help Yakumo up.

The man soon reached them.

'Your existence is not good for Yakumo.'

The man's low growl of a voice echoed.

– My existence is not good for Yakumo?

What did that mean? Haruka couldn't think of the reply to that question no matter how she tried.

The man took his sunglasses off slowly, as if putting himself on display.

His two eyes glowed red like a blazing flame.

This man is Yakumo's father –

The man smiled again.

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17

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The moment Honda started to bring the golf club down, something snapped in Ishii's head.

He didn't have the time to resign himself to his death so carelessly. This man had put Gotou in this state. Could he forgive that?

Even if they ended up stabbing each other, Ishii would definitely not forgive this man.

The club seemed to come down in slow motion.

Ishii bent down like a short-distance runner at the starting line and moved his head a bit to the left.

The impact missed the top of his head, but it grazed his ear and slammed into his right shoulder.

His bone might have broken, but he didn't feel any pain in his anger and agitation.

Ishii rushed right at Honda.

They fell to the concrete floor.

Before he'd noticed, Ishii was on top of Honda.

The tables are turned –

He would never forgive this guy. Ishii tried to raise his right fist, but he couldn't. He couldn't feel it.

– If my right arm isn't working, I'll use my left.

Ishii's left fist went down towards Honda's face.

Thump.

There was a dull sound.

Ishii's fist didn't hit Honda's face and slammed against the concrete floor instead. That put Ishii in pain instead. He bent back unconsciously.

In that one moment, when Ishii let his guard down, Honda thrust Ishii off of him. The back of Ishii's head hit the car's bumper.

Ishii's head was dizzy. He couldn't move, like he had received a concussion.

Honda stood up immediately and picked up the golf club.

'Don't get in my way. There's only one day left. Then I'll be free.'

As Honda said that, he started walking towards Ishii slowly.

His cheek was twitching and his shoulders heaved as he breathed. He's scared – that was what Ishii felt.

When Takeda showed up again, Honda must have been terrified that he'd be revealed as the true culprit.

Honda stood in front of Ishii and raised the golf club again.

– Can I not even get revenge for Gotou?

Ishii's eyes welled up with tears in his vexation.

That moment, someone came between Ishii and Honda.

He knocked away the golf club Honda was holding with his hand and then, with the same hand, punched Honda in the solar plexus.

It was all at lightning speed. It only took a moment.

Honda's body went stiff, as if time had stopped. Then, he threw up and fell forward, his face buried in his own vomit.

The intimidating back of a man stood in front of Ishii.

– Could this back be...

'Got this, Ishii? You're supposed to punch from your back.'

As he said that, Miyagawa turned around.

'Chief Miyagawa... Why?'

'Don't ask.'

Miyagawa turned around again at Ishii's words.

He sighed and shook his head.

'My bad. I wanted to save Gotou too. In the car, those were just the pathetic words of a guy in middle management. Forget what I said.'

'No.'

He wasn't pathetic at all. Rather, he was cool. Ishii gazed at Miyagawa's back in envy.

'How's Gotou?' asked Miyagawa.

That was right. Ishii came back to his senses and walked to the car.

Gotou was still in the trunk, wrapped up in the sheet.

'Detective Gotou... I'm sorry. If I had noticed earlier...'

The experiences Ishii had had with Gotou flashed through his head.

Feeling both regret and sadness, his snot and tears fell to the floor.

His heart was empty. His body shook.

– Even though I vowed to save you.

'Detective Gotou... I'm sorry.'

'Ishii.'

Miyagawa placed a hand on Ishii's shoulder.

'I...'

'Cry later. Let's get Gotou out of here right away.'

It was just as Miyagawa said.

They couldn't leave Gotou's corpse in this truck forever. Ishii sniffled and nodded.

'Let's go. One, two, three.'

At Miyagawa's call, they tried to pick Gotou up out of the trunk.

However, Ishii let go accidentally from the pain in his shoulder.

Thump.

Gotou's head hit the concrete floor loudly.

'That hurts! You fool!'

Gotou's eyes snapped open as he howled.

'Eh?'

'Let me out of here already!'

Gotou was flailing about as he shouted.

'You're alive...'

And energetic at that.

Ishii's eyes met Miyagawa's and they both laughed loudly.

'What the hell are you laughing at!? Are you the one who dropped me just now!?!'

Gotou's shouts echoed through the garage.

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18

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All Haruka could do was hug Yakumo tightly.

– I'm going to be killed.

Not just her body. Her soul was going to be broken into pieces and she was going to die. She had

no basis for that, but that was how Haruka felt.

There was enough malice in that man's red eyes to make her feel that way.

Even though they were the same colour, they were clearly different from Yakumo's eye.

She wanted to get out of here right now, but she couldn't leave Yakumo. Haruka shut away the terror bubbling up in her heart.

'If you weren't here, Yakumo would have gone down a different path. Why did you get in my way?'

The man crouched in front of Haruka and looked at her as he said that in his low, echoing voice.

Haruka couldn't respond, as she didn't even understand what his words meant.

The man took something out of his inner suit pocket.

A thin silver knife. Its tip glittered in the faint light.

The man slowly flicked it about in front of Haruka's eyes.

'The easiest method to make humans obey is pain. You understand, yes?'

The man quickly snapped his wrist.

The tip of the knife was on the verge of stabbing Haruka's eye. She couldn't even scream in her terror.

'Stop it!' yelled Yakumo, straining his voice.

Seeming satisfied by that, the man smiled with his white teeth showing.

The man doesn't want to hurt me but Yakumo. By tormenting me, he's making Yakumo suffer psychologically.

That was what Haruka felt.

'First, let's gouge out your eyes. Humans become doubly afraid when light is stolen away from them.'

The man was making Haruka imagine the act on purpose.

He was making her afraid by doing that.

Even though Haruka knew his plans, she imagined that knife plunging into her eyes.

The intense pain and the flowing blood – and the world enveloped by darkness.

She could feel strength in her body.

'Next would be the legs. I'll cut your Achilles tendon so you can't run away. I wonder how much you will be able to withstand?'

There was no strength in her lower body.

It's too late. I'm going to die –

Haruka was resigned to that.

But if I'm with Yakumo – I'm sorry. I came to save you, but it seems like it was no good. If I'm with you, I'll be OK wherever I am.

Haruka hugged Yakumo tightly.

She was together with Yakumo. Just from that, she no longer felt fear.

She shut her eyes and resigned herself to the end.

But – nothing happened.

There was an uncanny silence.

Haruka timidly opened her eyes.

The man was still in the room. She was glaring at Haruka.

– No.

The man wasn't looking at Haruka.

Haruka couldn't see it with her eyes, but she felt that somebody was standing in the man's way.

Somebody with a warm and strong will –

'Mother...' murmured Yakumo.

So that was how it was. Azusa's spirit was standing in front of them. That was why the man wasn't approaching.

– Is she protecting us?

The man's lips twisted into a smile, and he turned away silently.

Then, he walked away into the darkness.

– We're saved.

The moment she relaxed, she felt Yakumo's body suddenly grow heavy in her arms.

Yakumo had fainted.

'Yakumo-kun. Hey, Yakumo-kun.'

Haruka shook Yakumo but there was no response.

She put her ear to his mouth. His breathing was faint.

'Yakumo-kun. You can't do this. Wake up.'

She had to bring Yakumo to a hospital quickly. Haruka frantically tried to pick Yakumo up.

There was no strength in her arms. What should she do?

– Please! Someone. Someone. Help me!

Haruka felt like she had been left all alone.

'Haruka, where are you?'

She heard somebody's voice, carried by the wind.

It was Keiko's voice. A flame of hope lit in Haruka's chest.

'Come quickly! Yakumo-kun is! Yakumo-kun is!'

Haruka yelled as loudly as she could and tried once more to pick Yakumo up.

'Haruka!'

Keiko ran into the room.

'Mum...'

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– Please wake up.

Who was that? He was sleeping so pleasantly. When Ishii opened his eyes, he saw a nurse standing there.

It was a slightly chubby middle-aged nurse.

It appeared that he'd fallen asleep in the hospital waiting room.

'It's troublesome for us if you fall asleep here,' said the nurse without hiding her displeasure.

'Er, is Detective Gotou all right?'

Ishii came to his senses and asked that, gripping the nurse's arms.

'W-why are you asking that all of a sudden? I don't know.'

The nurse backed away, perhaps feeling pressured by Ishii.

'Relax. Gotou's fine.'

Ishii turned around at the voice and saw Miyagawa walking towards him with his bowlegs.

– That's great. Really great. My job is over now.

Ishii sat on the waiting room sofa in his exhaustion.

'He's got some bruises and scrapes, but he's fit as a fiddle. The worst injury is the egg on his head you gave him when you dropped him.'

Miyagawa sat down next to Ishii while laughing.

'Ah, that's...'

Ishii scratched his head. He couldn't laugh at that joke.

'We found a stun gun in the shape of a pen in Honda's room. He probably got Gotou with that. Gotou thought it was a gun.'

'I see...'

Even Gotou would be helpless against a stun gun with thousands of volts.

'You're much worse off than he is.'

Ishii looked at his right shoulder.

Fortunately, it hadn't been broken, but there was a crack in the bone. He couldn't move it.

'How is Honda?' asked Ishii, looking at his wristwatch.

It was already eleven PM.

The culprit for the case fifteen years ago had changed. There wasn't enough time to put out an indictment.

Furthermore, it would be difficult to gather physical evidence, so if they didn't get a confession now, the statute of limitations would pass.

'At first he'd been reluctant. Seemed to want to wait for the statute of limitations to pass.'

So that really was the case. Then they couldn't charge Honda with the case that occurred fifteen years ago. Even though they'd saved Gotou, Ishii felt regretful. His shoulders slumped.

'Don't look so depressed. I said "at first", didn't I? He gave in.'

'Eh?'

Why would he suddenly confess?

'Article 225.'

Miyagawa grinned, perhaps sensing Ishii's question.

'Criminal law article 255 – suspension of the statute of limitations.'

If the perpetrator was out of the country or in hiding, it was possible to suspend the advancement of the statute of limitations for that period.

All culprits would hide, which would suggest that the statute of limitations could never pass on any case. People often thought that way, but in reality, it was necessary to prove that the culprit had been in hiding.

However, since the police hadn't arrested him, all they could do was rely on the testimony of the culprit as to whether or not they had been in hiding.

Nobody would honestly admit that they had run in a situation like that. That was why it was impossible to prove.

'You're smart, so think a bit. That guy was in America for a month for training.'

'I see!'

Ishii stood up unconsciously.

If the culprit was out of the country, the statute of limitations would be suspended. Which meant that there was a month until Honda's was over.

Was that why Honda gave in? Even if he could have lasted a day, a month would have been impossible.

'Fifteen years ago, Honda went to the Nanase household. Just as you said, it was nine PM...'

'As I thought.'

'He lost in case, but what Honda wanted wasn't money. He just wanted Katsuaki to apologise,' said Miyagawa quietly.

Even though Ishii didn't have children, he felt like he could understand how Honda felt.

The death of one's child wasn't something that could be cleaned up with money. He had probably wanted to say that.

'Honda hadn't been planning on killing them at first, but when Katsuaki saw Honda asking for an apology, he'd laughed. To hell with your dumb daughter. He said that and laughed...'

'That's awful.'

'Yeah, he was a shitty guy. His family was watching then and they'd laughed quietly too. Seems he can't remember anything after that. Then he was in a sea of blood...'

Miyagawa's hands were in fists.

It was like he was crushing the personal anger in his heart.

Ishii felt the same way as Miyagawa. Having your daughter's death laughed at was probably the limit for a parent.

'What he did is definitely unforgiveable. But Katsuaki can't be forgiven either.'

Miyagawa's brows furrowed.

Ishii knew the motive now, but there was still something he didn't understand.

'Chief Miyagawa, did Honda really not have the intention of killing them in the first place?'

Ishii voiced the question as it came to him.

'What do you mean?'

'But isn't it the case? The alibi trick this time used hypnotism. It would be impossible if it wasn't set up in advance.'

'Which means...'

'Honda planned the murder from the beginning...'

Miyagawa stood up just as Ishii said the last word of his sentence.

Ishii thought that Miyagawa would get angry and put himself on guard, but Miyagawa just hit Ishii's shoulder lightly.

It was his injured shoulder. Ishii cowered, pressing a hand against his shoulder.

'I see. There's reason behind your opinion. I'll look into it again.'

'Thank you very much.'

Ishii looked up at Miyagawa's face.

'Why are you thanking me? That's my line. I, er... underrated you a little. My bad.'

Miyagawa bowed his head slightly towards Ishii, put his hands in his pockets and walked towards the exit with a bowlegged gait.

So cool. Ishii almost cried in his excitement.

Miyagawa stopped before he passed through the automatic door.

'That's right. Gotou wanted to see you earlier. You should go there quick since he's making a fuss.'

'Y-yes sir!'

Ishii ran to Gotou's hospital room without watching Miyagawa leave.

'Please don't run in the hospital!'

Ishii heard the nurse's voice, but he ignored it.

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The sun is bright –

When Haruka opened her eyes, a pure white wall spread out in front of her.

– Eh, where am I?

For a moment, Haruka was confused, but she soon came to her senses.

This was a hospital room. She had fallen asleep on her chair.

She rubbed at her eyes. Her fuzzy vision became clearer. She saw Yakumo sleeping in the bed in front of her.

– It wasn't a dream. I'm really glad.

According to his doctor, his left Achilles tendon had been severed, there were cuts and bruises all

over his body, and he was severely weakened, but there was no threat to his life.

The doctor had made it sound like he had undergone terrible torture.

Haruka didn't want to think of the meaning of those words. In any case, Yakumo was alive. That was enough for now.

Wouldn't he wake up soon? She'd complain all she could as payback for everything up until now.

When Haruka stretched her arms, a blanket fell to the floor.

She hadn't noticed. Keiko must have put it on her. Haruka really had to express her gratitude, since Keiko had accompanied her to the very end.

Haruka picked up the blanket and walked to Yakumo's bed.

He was sleeping well. It was strange. His mouth was half-open. So this was the face Yakumo made when he was asleep.

A mischievous desire sprouted in Haruka's heart and she pinched his cheek.

'Hey. Trying to steal his lips when he's asleep? That's a disgrace to women everywhere.'

Keiko stood in the doorway to the hospital room and was covering her mouth as she laughed.

– This is the worst.

'That's not what I'm doing!' objected Haruka firmly.

'Getting worked up makes it even more suspicious.'

Keiko was grinning.

Why was Haruka surrounded by people like this?

'It's not suspicious at all.'

Keiko ignored Haruka's anger like it was nothing.

'Anyway, I told Dad about Yakumo-kun earlier.'

'Huh?'

What was her mother saying all of a sudden?

Haruka cocked her head.

'He got very angry and said, "Bring that boy here right now!" Dad might be coming now.'

'Why is Dad coming?'

'He said he'd crush Yakumo-kun.'

Keiko laughed again.

'Wait, Mum. What did you tell Dad?'

'That's a secret.'

Keiko poked Haruka's nose with her finger.

Haruka could imagine the gist of what Keiko had said. Keiko had always been a bit too playful. Kazuhiro had known her for so long already; Haruka wished that he'd stop getting pulled along by Keiko's pranks.

'You're so noisy. I was sleeping so well too.'

Those were Yakumo's first words after waking up.

Honestly. He was the same as always. Haruka met Keiko's eyes and smiled.

'Are you finally awake?' said Haruka disagreeably.

'You must be very narrow-minded if you won't even sympathise with somebody who's been injured.'

Yakumo spoke in his usual tone.

So he was going to be like this right after waking up? He would've been easier to deal with if he'd just stayed asleep.

'It's nice to meet you, Yakumo-kun. I'm Haruka's mother,' said Keiko, looking at Yakumo's face, which was still blank.

Even Yakumo appeared to be taken aback, and his expression stiffened.

'It must be difficult dealing with Haruka, since she's duller than most.'

After Keiko said that, she winked at Yakumo.

– What is she saying right in front of me?

'It's true. She doesn't listen to what people say and she trips all the time – it's hard work.'

Yakumo took advantage of the opportunity to complain more. Haruka didn't even feel like retorting any more.

'Right? My daughter will trip even when nothing is there. And she cries easily too.'

'That's true. It's baffling.'

Why were the two being so frank with each other all of a sudden? And it was all badmouthing Haruka. It was the worst. She shouldn't have saved him.

'Honestly, stop it already. It was hard work for me too. Yakumo-kun disappeared, and then Gotou-san went missing too...'

– Ah, I'm about to cry.

When Yakumo heard Haruka's words, his expression turned grim.

He ran a hand through his messy bedhead and tried to sit up.

However, perhaps the pain had been too much, because he suddenly showed an anguished expression.

'Wait, don't move yet. Your wounds will open.'

Haruka tried to stop him, but Yakumo refused.

'I'm fine. More importantly, what happened with the case?' said Yakumo, his expression still twisted. The case Yakumo was talking about was probably what Ishii had told her about last night.

'The true culprit was arrested. Also, Gotou went missing, but it seems he's been saved safely. The case is settled.'

Haruka thought that Yakumo would relax at her words, but she was wrong.

'Damn it,' spat Yakumo, and then he forced his body up.

'Wait, Yakumo-kun. I said you can't move yet.'

'I have to go.'

Yakumo tried to get off the bed.

'Wait, Yakumo-kun. Go where? The case is already over.'

Yakumo looked at Haruka with sharp eyes.

'Nothing is over yet.'

Nothing is over – what does he mean?

Haruka didn't understand, so all she could do was stare, dumbfounded.

'Anyway, you just need to return to Tokyo, right?' said Keiko in a proud tone of voice as she spun a car key in her fingers.

'Mum.'

'I've come this far, so I'll accompany you to the end.'

Haruka thought her smiling mother looked reliable.

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21

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Gotou looked at the ceiling absentmindedly.

Can't believe I was saved by Ishii – I've fallen.

At some time, I became unable to move as freely as I did before. Not just my body, but my heart too –

No. Can't become weak at a time like this. Ishii was better than I ever thought he was. Let's leave it

as that.

'Please excuse me.'

Ishii opened the door to the hospital room and came in.

'Hey. Sorry for the fuss.'

The moment Gotou raised his hand, Ishii started crying, pulled Gotou up and hugged him.

It's heavy, it hurts, and –

'That's gross.'

Gotou hit Ishii's head.

Maybe he'd hit somewhere bad, because Ishii collapsed to the floor.

Honestly, this guy. He really was just a fool. Being saved by a guy like this was the biggest blunder of his life.

'D-Detective Gotou... I'm so glad you're all right.'

Ishii stood up while pressing a hand against his head.

'Of course I am, you fool! Did you think I'd kick the bucket so easily?'

'No. I believed in you.'

Ishii straightened his spine and saluted.

Miyagawa had said that he'd been astonished by Ishii's growth, but Gotou didn't see it.

'But Detective Gotou, it is amazing how you realised the truth behind the case,' said Ishii, sitting on the chair for visitors.

Gotou had heard the outline of the case from Miyagawa.

It appeared to have become something unbelievable. There had been another culprit to the case they'd been following for fifteen years.

'I don't know what you're misunderstanding, but I didn't know the truth behind any case.'

'You are as humble as always.'

Ishii stuck out his lip in some form of pout.

'I don't know the things I don't know,' said Gotou firmly.

'Then why were you abducted by Honda?'

'I don't know!'

Gotou wanted to ask himself.

That day, at that house, he was shocked from behind. When he opened his eyes, his body had been bound and he'd been in the trunk of that care.

He'd been in that trunk the whole time after that.

When he opened his eyes, he'd writhe about to try to escape, but then Honda would come and shock him again with the stun gun. That just kept repeating.

Gotou himself didn't know why he had been abducted.

The mobile phone on the bedside table rang.

Yakumo's name was displayed.

'Yakumo, where are you, you bastard!? I had to go through a lot because of you!'

Gotou yelled the moment he answered the phone.

<Weren't you abducted? Didn't that allow you to go on a bit of a diet?>

Yakumo said that disinterestedly.

'You making fun of me!?'

<Well done; you realised.>

'What did you say!?'

<In the first place, Gotou-san, you were abducted because you were clumsy. It isn't my fault.>

This guy. Did he call just to make fun of him!?

'It ended up like this because you wouldn't help out!'

<Are you putting the blame on me? How childish.>

Gotou was grinding his teeth in his anger.

This guy really just got on his nerves. He didn't want to talk to him anymore.

'You can just go die!'

Gotou tried to hang up.

<Gotou-san, I have a request.>

Yakumo suddenly spoke in a formal tone.

That contrary guy has a request –

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22

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The car ran down the highway.

Since it was lunch on a weekday, there weren't many other cars. They could probably arrive in three hours if the situation continued like this.

Keiko didn't ask anything and was focussing on driving, but Haruka couldn't help but be interested.

She hadn't been able to confirm what they were talking about, but Yakumo had spoken on the phone with Gotou for a rather long time.

What on earth was Yakumo planning?

'Hey, what are you trying to do?'

Haruka looked at the backseat and asked that question.

Yakumo was still in a hospital gown and had his crutch under his arm as he stared out the window.

'Returning the favour,' said Yakumo expressionlessly.

'Favour?'

'I was played like a puppet this time. Just being deceived would irritate me.'

Yakumo turned his narrowed eyes to Haruka.

Was his red eye filled with anger or sadness? Haruka couldn't tell, but she felt her chest tighten.

– Nothing is over yet.

The words Yakumo said earlier passed through her head.

Just as he said, there was still a mystery in this case.

Why did Yakumo go through that? Who had done it? And just as Isshin had said, she didn't understand the connection to what happened to Gotou.

Isshin-san –

'Aaahh! Oh no!'

Haruka realised that she had forgotten something unbelievable and almost jumped up as she shouted.

'You're so noisy,' said Yakumo and Keiko at the same time.

'What are you so worked up about?' said Yakumo, looking displeased as he ran a hand through his bird's nest of a head.

It wasn't an excuse, but so many things had happened that she'd completely forgotten.

'I didn't contact Isshin-san to say that Yakumo-kun was OK.'

'Isshin-san is Yakumo-kun's uncle, right?'

Haruka nodded at Keiko's question.

'What are you doing? Hurry up and contact him.'

Urged by Keiko, Haruka hurriedly took out her mobile phone.

'Honestly, you're as clumsy as usual.'

Haruka almost said 'Sorry' in response to Yakumo.

Wait a second? What was Yakumo sounding so high and mighty for?

Isshin had been so worried about him. Now that she thought about it, Yakumo was the one who should call.

'Yakumo-kun, call him yourself.'

'I don't want to. You're the one he asked.'

'What sort of tone is that?'

'And, because of certain circumstances, I can't use my mobile,' said Yakumo matter-of-factly.

Can't use your mobile? You were talking with Gotou just earlier –

'Right. Haruka, hurry up and call.'

Keiko spoke before Haruka could object.

Honestly, she hated these two!

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23

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Gotou switched into a suit and sat on the bench in front of the reception at the precinct as he smoked a cigarette.

His injuries weren't that serious.

His back hurt because he'd been stuck in a small space, but he didn't need to be hospitalised. Gotou ignored the doctor who had frantically tried to stop him and escaped from the hospital.

He checked his wristwatch.

Yakumo had contacted him to say he'd gotten off the interchange fifteen minutes ago, so he would probably arrive soon.

– But what is that Yakumo thinking?

Gotou couldn't see Yakumo's true intentions. He was made to explain what he knew in detail, but it hadn't seemed like enough so he gave the phone to Ishii partway through and they'd talked for a considerable length of time.

– Isn't the case over already?

As usual, Yakumo just gave out instructions without explaining the crucial bits.

'Damn, that guy is useless.'

Gotou ended up saying that aloud unconsciously in his irritation.

'Who are you saying is useless?'

Yakumo was standing right in front of him.

He was still in a hospital gown and there was no contact lens in his left eye either.

Not just that – there was scratches all over his face and he had a crutch. It looked like he wouldn't have been able to stand if Haruka hadn't been beside him for support.

He was wounded all over.

'I'm obviously talking about you.'

Gotou threw his cigarette into the ashtray on the side of the bench and stood up.

'Please do that sort of thing after looking at the reflection in the mirror.'

Gotou thought Yakumo would be a bit quieter, but he was mouthy even in this state.

'Shut up – you're injured!'

'You are as well, aren't you?'

'You're much worse off.'

It was so strange Gotou ended up smiling.

'Still, Gotou-san, you look fairly unharmed for somebody who was abducted. Were you just skiving?'

'What'd you say!?!'

Gotou gripped Yakumo by the collar.

– Making being tortured sound like work.

However, Yakumo was disinterested in Gotou's anger.

'By the way, how is the favour I asked of you?'

'Ishii's on it right now.'

Gotou felt stupid for getting angry and let go of Yakumo.

'That's good. Even you can do it if you try, Gotou-san.'

When Haruka heard Yakumo's words, she let out a laugh.

'You just keep saying whatever the hell you want!'

'Now, let's go then.'

With Haruka's support, Yakumo used his crutch to walk towards the elevator.

'That guy really gets on my nerves,' grumbled Gotou, and he followed Yakumo into the elevator.

'Gotou-san, I'm relieved to see you so energetic,' said Haruka with a smile.

'Thanks to you guys. Anyway, I heard that you were the one who saved Yakumo, Haruka-chan.'

'I was. Even though I went out of my way to save him, he started acting the same way he usually does the moment he woke up.'

'What an ungrateful bastard.'

Gotou snorted.

'He is. I kind of regret saving him,' replied Haruka, her cheeks puffed out.

However, no matter what gripes she gave, Gotou could tell from looking at her expression. The happiness she felt from being able to hear Yakumo's sarcastic remarks was written all over her face.

Haruka's tenacity had made it possible to find Yakumo and save him.

The value Haruka had in Gotou's head had grown a lot higher.

– Yakumo won't be able to get away any more.

Gotou unconsciously smirked when he imagined the two of them married. Yakumo might unexpectedly end up under Haruka's thumb.

'That's disturbing; please don't smile.'

Yakumo glanced at him.

'Shut up,' muttered Gotou, wiping the smile off his face.

They arrived at the seventh floor and the elevator doors opened.

When they went out into the corridor, Miyagawa was waiting there.

'You're going to explain properly, right?'

Miyagawa approached Gotou with his bowlegged gait.

However, Gotou had just received the request from Yakumo – he didn't know the details. He glanced at Yakumo to escape Miyagawa's question.

'You must be Miyagawa-san. It's been a while.'

Yakumo hopped out to stand in front of Miyagawa and bow.

Miyagawa looked bewildered.

The last time they had met, Yakumo had still been in middle school. He had grown much taller since then, and his features had changed. It made sense that Miyagawa didn't recognise him.

'This guy's the brat who can see ghosts.'

'Ah, from that case. You're much bigger now.'

Miyagawa raised his hand, perhaps to give Yakumo a pat on the shoulder at the long-awaited reunion. However, he changed his mind when he saw how his injuries were and ended up letting

his hand dangle in mid-air.

'Could I ask you one thing?'

Yakumo's eyes narrowed as he looked at Miyagawa.

'What is it?' replied Miyagawa, sounding confused.

'Is it true that the eyes of the man you saw at the crime scene fifteen years ago were red?'

Miyagawa turned a sharp gaze to Gotou, as if to complain about his loose mouth.

Gotou felt awkward and pretended to fix his shoelaces.

'Just as you say. But what's that got to do with anything?' responded Miyagawa, sounding reluctant.

'If possible, I would like to talk about the situation with the suspect, Honda-san,' said Yakumo.

Miyagawa looked like he couldn't decide what to do and looked at Gotou for help.

'Please believe in him,' said Gotou, his voice full of confidence.

Yakumo was an annoying guy, but when he tried to do something like this, he was never wrong.

This was how he'd solved the cases up until now.

Miyagawa crossed his arms. His face was wrinkled in thought.

In the past, he would have given his OK immediately, but his decision was delayed by the responsibility he had in his position of middle management.

'Got it.'

Miyagawa's expression changed – it appeared he was prepared.

'Thank you very much.'

Yakumo bowed his head honestly.

'But this is completely off-record. It won't be a walk in the park if people find out we let a civilian interrogate a suspect.'

'I will forget that we met here.'

Yakumo smiled.

'And I want as little people inside as possible.'

Miyagawa looked at Haruka.

That made sense. Yakumo understood what Miyagawa meant immediately, gave his crutch to Haruka and hopped on one foot towards the interrogation room.

Yakumo lost his balance.

Gotou instinctively supported Yakumo from behind. Crap. He'd inadvertently saved him. He should

have just let him fall.

Even though Gotou didn't say that aloud, Yakumo turned around and glared.

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24

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The sun set in the valley of buildings, bathing it in its faint orange light.

In the driver's seat, Ishii's eyes narrowed as he lay down on the wheel.

He had stopped his car on the road in front of the newspaper agency and had started his stakeout. It had already been three hours.

– Why do I have to hold a stakeout?

Ishii didn't understand.

Since Yakumo had asked, there must have been some reasoning behind it, but Ishii just didn't understand his instructions.

At the hospital, Gotou and Yakumo had talked on the phone for a rather long while.

Because Yakumo wanted to hear the details of the case, Ishii took the phone partway through to explain.

Yakumo's questions were very detailed – it had felt like Ishii was undergoing an interrogation.

– The case isn't over yet.

Yakumo had said that at the very end of the conversation. Did he mean exactly what he said –

The case was dotted with questions.

But why would he need to stake out Makoto? Ishii just didn't understand.

Was Yakumo saying Makoto had a part in this?

'There's no way.'

Ishii said that aloud to erase his doubts.

Makoto had supported Ishii when he had been about to collapse. She had cooperated with him – she couldn't be the opposite.

Ishii believed that. But there was something that he was concerned about.

The other instruction Yakumo gave –

The investigation of the video company that made the video this time. It was simple. He only had to make one call.

It seemed to be a small company, since when Ishii called, the company president answered.

There were three things he had to check. Was a video taken at that house? If they had gone there, when did they go?

And then, the last question regarded the purpose of the video –

Ishii just couldn't ignore what the president's response.

His head was jumbled. It was really irritating. He wanted to take his mind off it, but he couldn't. He felt like he sort of understood the feelings of a smoker.

'Ah!'

When Ishii looked up, he saw the person he was looking for and unconsciously called out.

Makoto came out of the automatic door at the front.

Finally. When Ishii thought that, his heart started beating quickly.

Ishii followed Makoto with his eyes and started the engine.

Makoto went fifty metres forward into the fenced parking lot.

After a while, a red family car came out of the parking lot.

Ishii confirmed that Makoto was the one driving and started his own car.

He sped up to close the distance and then matched their speeds, following her from ten metres behind.

The success rate of tailing depended greatly on whether the person being tailed was on guard.

Makoto had probably never even imagined that she would be under surveillance.

Even at this distance, there was no need to worry about being noticed unless something extreme occurred.

– I want her to be unrelated.

Ishii wished for that in his heart as he continued following her.

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After Gotou went into the interrogation room, he sat across from Honda.

Yakumo was in the seat beside him. Miyagawa stood in front of the door.

Normally, a clerk would be present for the interrogation, sitting by the wall to note down the testimony, but there wasn't one now. This was going to be a completely unofficial interrogation.

However, it was great that they'd gotten so far, but how were they going to explain Yakumo to Honda? Gotou couldn't think of a good way.

It would be all right with just the two detectives, but anybody would be confused if he saw a young man covered in wounds in a hospital gown sitting in front of them.

'Honda-san, the suddenness of this may surprise you, but this is not an interrogation, and I am not

a detective,' said Yakumo, scratching his head.

– Oi, oi, why are you telling the truth all of the sudden?

If Yakumo said that, Honda could refuse to cooperate. However, Yakumo continued speaking, ignoring Gotou's concern.

'However, what I am about to say is not unbeneficial to you. Would you cooperate with me for your own sake?'

Honda made no reply. He looked like a child who was sulking after the teacher had yelled at him.

It appeared he was still confused.

However, there was no point chitchatting after coming this far.

'Yakumo. Explain already.'

Gotou stuck out his chin.

Yakumo scratched the back of his neck and sighed.

'You abducted this blockhead of a detective, yes? Why did you do that?'

Yakumo pointed at Gotou.

'Oi. Am I the blockhead?'

'Is there anyone else here?'

'What did you say?'

'Could you please be quiet?'

Yakumo glanced at Gotou.

That was some nerve when he was the one who'd be picking a fight. Gotou snorted and crossed his arms.

'If what I am about to say is incorrect, please say so.'

Yakumo turned towards Honda again. Honda said nothing, just furrowing his brows grimly.

'You knew that a detective was reinvestigating the case that occurred fifteen years ago. That was this blockhead of a detective. Then, you suddenly thought that that detective was coming close to discovering the truth, so you decided to keep him captive until the statute of limitations passed. Is that correct?'

Yakumo continued to talk disinterestedly.

'Honda testified to that.'

Miyagawa replied for Honda, who remained silent.

Yakumo glanced at Miyagawa and nodded before looking to Honda again.

'Then I have one more question. Why did you think this blockhead of a detective was coming close to discovering the truth?'

– You don't need to keep calling me a blockhead.

Gotou buried his dissatisfaction in the pit of his stomach and watched Honda.

There was a wrinkle between Honda's brows. Rather than not wanting to answer, it felt more like he didn't know how to.

A slight smile appeared on Yakumo's lips. It looked like the smile of the devil to Gotou.

'You won't answer this question. That isn't because you don't want to but because you don't have the answer. Isn't that right?'

Yakumo's eyes narrowed as he said that triumphantly.

Honda's expression changed. His mouth was agape and he was shaking.

Finally, he held his head in both hands. It looked like he was trying his best to remember something, but he couldn't remember it. That irritation came through.

'Yakumo. Explain.'

Gotou didn't think Honda would talk, so asked Yakumo.

'You don't understand?'

'I'm asking because I don't.'

'Honda-san was made to think that you, a detective he had never met before, might know the truth.'

– I don't understand at all.

Unlike Gotou, who didn't get what Yakumo was saying, Honda seemed to realise something and looked up.

His gaze was wavering.

'Put it more simply.'

'I will explain properly afterwards. Anyway, let us put that aside for now.'

Yakumo changed the topic on his own.

'Is this really OK?' interrupted Miyagawa.

Since Miyagawa didn't know how Yakumo usually talked, that had probably been a nonsensical exchange to him.

However, that was just how Yakumo talked. Afterwards, they would understand what he had meant.

'It's all right. I only have one more question.'

Yakumo showed Miyagawa a composed smile.

Miyagawa's cheek twitched, as if he was angry.

'Gotou, this brat...'

'Well, please just watch.'

Gotou interrupted Miyagawa and urged Yakumo to continue.

– I'm really counting on you.

Gotou murmured that in his heart.

'This is my last question. What did you do with Miyuki-san, Nanase Katsuaki's daughter?'

'I took her back and killed her... I think.'

That was unexpected. Honda responded to Yakumo's question.

But why'd he say something as vague as 'I think'? Honda had confessed that he'd done everything.

'Why did you kill her after taking her back?'

'I didn't plan on killing the daughter. The child didn't do anything wrong.'

Honda looked down, pressing a hand against his temple.

'The child didn't do anything wrong. You thought that, but you still killed her. Why is that?'

'She was noisy when I took her back.... so I killed her.'

Honda gritted his teeth. It looked like he was withstanding pain.

His breathing was ragged, and there were tears in his eyes.

'How did you kill her? Where did you do it? And when was it? What did you do with the corpse?'

Yakumo used this chance to attack and asked all his questions at once.

'Uuugh....'

Honda moaned and hugged his head before lying on the table.

Yakumo looked at him with a serious gaze. He looked just like a scientist waiting for a chemical reaction.

Finally, the reaction he was waiting for occurred.

When Honda looked up, his expression was like that of a different person.

'It's not true. I didn't do it. I don't know where the daughter is.'

Honda leant forward and clung to Yakumo's body. Gotou hurriedly tried to separate them, but Yakumo himself got the better of him.

'Honda-san, I understand. You didn't kill anybody.'

Perhaps Yakumo's words had calmed him, because tears started rolling down Honda's cheeks.

– What the hell is happening?

Gotou didn't understand. Yakumo had said this to Honda: 'You didn't kill anybody.' Was that true?

Gotou was just about to ask when his mobile phone rang.

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26

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The surroundings were completely dark –

Ishii continued to tail Makoto.

Makoto's car passed the shopping street in front of the train station and started climbing the slope of a residential street.

There was only one road here, which few cars frequented. It was very possible that he would be noticed. Ishii slowed down and distanced himself further.

It made it easier to lose Makoto, but after coming this far, Ishii could guess where Makoto was going.

The top of this slope was the house where the murders occurred.

Ishii put his mobile phone on speaker and called Gotou.

<What?>

Gotou's voice was clearly displeased.

'This is Ishii. Makoto-san appears to be heading for that house.'

<The house where the murders occurred?>

'Yes.'

When Ishii replied, he heard something being said quietly. Gotou had probably met up with Yakumo and was now consulting him.

<Ishii-san, it's Yakumo.>

Just as he thought, after there was the sound of something being moved, Yakumo's voice came through.

<Is she alone?>

'Yes, she is.'

What role did Makoto play in this case – Ishii was struck with the impulse to ask, but Yakumo didn't give him the chance.

<How is the other investigation I requested?>

'It seems that the video really was filmed there.'

<The contents of the film?>

Yakumo immediately asked his next question.

'Yes. It wasn't a show following spiritual phenomena but a candid-camera show to trick dishonest exorcists.'

<So that really was the case.>

Yakumo's voice sounded constricted. Ishii understood how he felt.

If that was taken for candid camera, that would mean the reporter's actions were an act.

The person who brought that video in was Makoto.

<I understand. I will call you again afterwards.>

After Yakumo said that, he hung up.

When Yakumo looked up, he saw that house on the other side of the front window.

It might have been because of what happened, but the air around the house felt stagnant.

Ishii was about to up the speed when his mobile phone rang.

Yakumo's number was displayed.

Did he forget to ask something?

'Ishii speaking.'

He answered the phone.

<Ishii-san, where are you right now?>

'I'm near the house...'

I just explained that – Ishii was thinking that as he responded.

<I see. We really were tricked by Makoto-san.>

Yakumo had been ambiguous before, but now he was implying that Makoto was related.

'Is that so? I can't believe it.'

<That is the truth, even if you don't believe it.>

'No, but...'

<Anyway, we're heading for that house now too.>

Yakumo interrupted Ishii's objection.

'Ah, yes.'

<Ishii-san, please refrain from doing anything forward.>

Yakumo's words were unusually strong.

'Yes.'

<Do you understand? No matter what happens, please do not do anything – wait until we arrive.>

Yakumo gave that reminder to Ishii again before hanging up.

Ishii couldn't shake away the unnaturalness of the conversation with Yakumo. Perhaps Yakumo was mistaken about the case.

While he was thinking, Makoto's hazard lights went on and the car stopped on the road in front of the house.

Ishii parked his car too at a distance from hers.

Makoto got off the car.

Yakumo had told him not to do anything until he arrived. Ishii knew that was the better decision to make. But –

– I want to check with my own eyes.

Led by a feeling close to curiosity, Ishii got off his car.

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'Shall we go then?'

Yakumo put his mobile phone in his pocket and got up with the help of the table.

Gotou didn't understand why Yakumo had called Ishii back with his own mobile.

That wasn't all Gotou didn't understand.

'Go where?'

'What a dull-witted person you are. It's obvious that we are going to where Makoto-san is,' said Yakumo, running a hand through his hair like he thought Gotou troublesome. Then, he left the investigation room.

– Oi, oi. Wait a sec.

Gotou hurriedly followed Yakumo into the corridor.

He saw Yakumo hopping down the corridor on one foot.

'What are you going to do with Honda?'

'I have no more questions for Honda-san.'

Yakumo didn't stop. In the end, Gotou had to run after him.

'No more questions? What do you mean?'

'I mean exactly what I said,' said Yakumo, pressing the elevator button.

'You never explain enough!'

Yakumo raised an eyebrow.

– You annoyed? I'm one hundred times angrier at you!

'You heard as well, did you not, Gotou-san? Honda-san is not the true perpetrator of the case fifteen years ago.'

'I'm asking why!'

The elevator arrived and the door opened.

'Oi, Gotou! What was that? Explain!'

Miyagawa burst out into the corridor, screaming. He looked like a demon.

It made sense. Gotou had asked him to help and suddenly run off without an explanation.

Yakumo didn't pay any heed to the fuss and hopped into the elevator.

'Say something!'

Miyagawa let out another howl.

'I'll explain later! Later!'

Gotou shouted and escaped into the elevator. Yakumo smiled like he was enjoying this and pressed the 'Close' button.

What was so funny? This brat. Gotou was going to get yelled at again.

They got off the elevator and met with Haruka, who was sitting on the bench at the reception.

The three of them headed for the back exit and got in the unmarked car that was parked in the parking lot.

Gotou sat in the driver's seat, Yakumo in the passenger's and Haruka in the back – their usual positions.

'I won't drive until you explain properly,' said Gotou, glaring at Yakumo.

'Is it all right to say something so laidback?'

Yakumo smirked and looked at the rear-view mirror.

Led by Yakumo's gaze, Gotou looked as well. Miyagawa was running at them at full speed. Just like a zombie –

Gotou pretended not to hear Miyagawa's yells and quickly started the car.

This had become an unimaginable disaster because of Yakumo.

'Stop acting so high and mighty and explain already.'

Gotou spoke up when he couldn't see Miyagawa anymore.

'You really don't understand.'

'What?'

'I said this earlier, didn't I? Honda-san didn't kill anybody.'

'How can you say that? Ishii investigated and made sure that Honda was the perp. Honda confessed his own crime too. Wasn't that the end of it?'

Gotou's tone was wild in his irritation.

'Gotou-san, do you really think that?'

'I'm saying that because I do!'

Yakumo sighed mockingly.

'Honda-san was just made to think that he did it himself.'

Oi, oi. He wasn't Ishii. Did Yakumo watch too many sci-fi films?

'You saying somebody played with Honda's brain and put in some new memories?'

'That isn't possible.'

'You're the one who said it!'

Gotou was so agitated that he hit the handle.

Yakumo looked at Gotou coldly.

'Please listen properly to what people say. I said he was made to think that way.'

– Isn't that the same thing?

As if he had heard what Gotou asked in his heart, Yakumo shook his head.

'In Honda-san's testimony, he headed to the scene on the day of the incident and got into an argument with Katsuaki.'

'Right.'

'Then, before he noticed, the four of them were dead. Don't you understand that this is unnatural?'

'I don't,' spat out Gotou.

Nothing was strange. What was the problem?

'That's incredibly unnatural.'

The one who spoke was Haruka, in the backseat.

'Haruka-chan, what's unnatural about it?'

Even if Gotou asked Yakumo, he probably wouldn't answer, so he directed the conversation to Haruka.

Haruka looked a bit surprised at having the conversation turned to her so suddenly, but she started speaking, like there was no way she could avoid it.

'I don't know the details, so I can't say much, but that person killed four people, yes?'

'Right.'

'Isn't that a bit too many if he was just in a rage?'

Now that she said that, Gotou thought the same way.

It would take a lot of work and time to kill four people. It would be difficult to do that unconsciously.

'Almost completely correct. That's well done for you,' said Yakumo with a yawn.

'I feel like I'm being made fun of.'

Haruka puffed out her cheeks.

'Well, to add a bit more, there were four people at the scene. If he had been killing in a rage, why didn't anybody stop him?'

There was that too. But the same thing could be said even if the culprit wasn't Honda.

'That doesn't prove Honda didn't do it.'

'Then let's return to the main topic.'

After Yakumo declared that, he started his explanation again.

'First, Honda-san went to the scene that day and argued with Katsuaki-san. That is true. After that, Honda-san was led into a hypnotic state by somebody.'

It had come up in their last case, so Gotou knew about hypnotic suggestion too.

Yakumo couldn't be saying that Honda killed them because he was hypnotised into doing it, could he?

People often thought that hypnotism made people fall asleep, but it wasn't true. They were conscious.

That was why it was impossible to play people like puppets even if they were hypnotised.

Furthermore, it was impossible to make people do things against their moral code no matter what suggestions were given to them.

'Honda-san, in his deep hypnotic state, was led to the corpses and told that he was the one who

did it.'

Gotou understood. Honda was shown the corpses in his hypnotised state and made to think he did it then.

That could be possible.

'Gotou-san was abducted in the same manner. Honda-san was put into a hypnotic state and told that there was a detective who realised the truth of the case fifteen years ago.'

Gotou remembered the exchange that occurred in the interrogation room earlier.

– One day, you suddenly thought that there was a detective who was coming close to discovering the truth.

When Yakumo said that, Honda started behaving strangely. Honda was led into doubting himself by Yakumo.

Gotou understood the flow of the conversation. But –

'How can you be certain of that?'

Yakumo's put his left index finger to his brow.

'First, I was talking from a theory. However, the testimony about Katsuaki-san's daughter was decisive.'

'His daughter?'

Honda's testimony had changed completely then.

'Correct. Even if hypnotised, people's memories cannot be fabricated. Honda-san saw the corpses himself at that house. That is why he ended up believing he did it when he was told that under hypnotic suggestion. However...'

Yakumo's words faded out and he looked at Gotou with narrowed eyes.

'You saying he didn't see the daughter's corpse?'

'Correct.'

So that was how it was. Honda had started doubting his own memories from what Yakumo said at first, and then, when asked about the daughter, the story had crumbled.

Making him think he killed her without seeing the corpse was the same as making a new memory, so it had been impossible.

The theory that Honda had been hypnotised by someone and made to think he'd done the act was coherent.

But that meant –

'Then who the hell killed those four people? Was it really Takeda? And where'd the daughter Miyuki go?'

'Takeda-san is not the perpetrator.'

Yakumo declared that while looking straight ahead.

'Who is then?'

'Well, please calm down.'

Yakumo yawned. He wasn't nervous at all.

'How could I calm down!? I've got other questions too! Who did something so troublesome, and why!? And why was I abducted!?!'

Gotou said that all at once, overwhelmed by his emotions.

More questions came up. His head felt like it would burst from confusion.

'We are going to solve that mystery now.'

When Yakumo said that, Gotou couldn't say anything anymore.

While that had been happening, they had arrived at the house.

There were two cars parked by the road. Both were empty.

'That fool...'

Gotou clicked his tongue.

Even though Yakumo had told Ishii to wait, it appeared that Ishii had followed Makoto.

'Gotou-san, please drive the car up to the premises.'

'Why?'

Gotou tried asking.

'Obviously, it's because I have an idea,' Yakumo replied curtly.

– Of course.

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Ishii was stooped over and taking care to walk quietly as he followed Makoto at a distance.

My forehead's all sweaty –

If Makoto turned around, everything would be over. There was nowhere to hide.

He'd thought about hiding himself in the trees by the road, but, though it might have been possible in the summer, in this season, the leaves on the floor would rustle when he stepped on them and he would be found out.

He silenced his breath and just prayed that she wouldn't turn around.

Makoto passed through the metal gates and went onto the premises. Ishii counted to three in his heart and then ran up to the wall all at once, plastering his back to it. He felt like a ninja.

After his breathing had regulated, he leant out and peered to the back of the premises.

Makoto stood in front of the entrance. She turned around, checking her surroundings.

Ishii immediately hid himself. It felt like his heart was being crushed.

When Ishii peered out again, Makoto opened the entrance door and went inside.

– Now what are you going to do, Ishii Yuutarou?

Yakumo had told him to wait. Ishii thought that was a good plan too, and he also wanted to wait outside because he was afraid. But –

It was because of his weak will that the worst had happened last time.

– I'll check what happened with my own eyes.

With strong determination, Ishii jogged up to the entrance door, still stooped over.

His adrenaline was at a high, leaving him agitated.

Ishii tried to look inside through the keyhole, but it was too dark to see anything.

There were no entrances to this house beside the front entrance. It was very possible that he'd be found if he went inside.

'What to do?'

Ishii asked himself that question.

Why didn't he want to be found anyway? He could just ask the person herself without dancing around like this.

'Aaah!'

A scream from inside the house interrupted Ishii's thoughts.

The sparrows in the trees flew away all at once.

– Did something happen to Makoto?

Ishii opened the door before thinking.

A dark corridor continued in front of him. It was just like the path to Hades. He couldn't go down it. He felt that way.

He remembered the spiritual phenomena he had experienced in the past, and a shiver went down his spine.

– Calm down. I have to go ahead.

The scream just now was definitely Makoto's. If he stayed here, he would feel the same regret that he had felt before.

Ishii took the penlight out of his pocket and lit up the corridor.

At the end of the straight corridor, there was the door to the living room.

And that door was open –

Ishii slowly started walking.

That moment, he stepped on something and almost fell. He pointed his light down and saw a can.

There was the distinct smell of gasoline.

– Why here?

With that question in his head, Ishii headed down the corridor and stood at the entrance to the room.

He lit it up with his light.

'That's...'

He saw somebody lying face down in the centre of the room.

It was Makoto –

'Makoto-san!'

Ishii rushed towards Makoto.

'Are you all right? Please hang in there.'

As Ishii called out to Makoto, he shook her body, but there was no response.

He tried putting his mouth to her ear. She was breathing. It appeared that she had just fainted.

'Please wait. I'll call for help now,' said Ishii. He stood up and turned around.

'Wah!'

Somebody was standing in front of him. A woman –

– Who is that? How long has she been there?

The woman held out a knife in front of Ishii's confused eyes.

He was so surprised he dropped his light to the floor.

Ishii's body stiffened, and he gulped. A cold sweat ran down his body.

– I really should have listened to Yakumo.

Ishii was hit with a strong wave of regret.

'Who are you?'

Ishii asked that in a hoarse voice, but the woman just smiled silently.

Then, his eyes adjusted to the darkness, and the woman's face appeared in front of him, though obscure.

'You are...'

Interrupting the words Ishii was about to say, the woman went around Ishii, covered his mouth and put the knife against his neck.

If he moved even a little, his carotid artery would be cut and a lot of blood would floor.

– It's too late. I'm going to die.

Ishii resigned himself to his death.

The next moment, a glaring light hit his face. Ishii's eyes narrowed from the brightness.

The light came from a torch. Somebody was there.

It was Yakumo and Gotou.

'That was fairly quick. Were you waiting?' said the woman.

'Would you let go of Ishii-san?' said Yakumo calmly, as he entered the room with his crutch.

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– What the hell is this?

Gotou couldn't hide his surprise at the scene in front of him.

The moment he entered the living room with Yakumo, he saw Makoto on the floor and Ishii with a knife to his neck, held by the woman behind him.

However, Gotou remembered seeing the woman holding the knife somewhere.

'Yakumo. What's going on? That's the woman reporter,' muttered Gotou in Yakumo's ear.

'Correct. She's the woman who was in the video.'

'What's she doing here?'

'Let me explain in order. First, her name is Nanase Miyuki-san.'

Yakumo pointed at the woman with his crutch.

'That's ridiculous!'

Gotou's eyes went wide.

Nanase Miyuki was the girl who'd disappeared fifteen years ago during that case. What was she doing here?

'Oh no. So you really did find out.'

The woman sneered at Gotou and stuck out her tongue like a child whose prank had been revealed.

– Is this really Nanase Miyuki?

'Explain.'

Gotou muttered in Yakumo's ear again.

Yakumo looked clearly displeased and waved his hand as if swatting a fly.

'Please don't put your face so close to mine; it's disturbing. You don't have to say everything quietly.'

'What did you say?'

'I'll say it again. Please let go of Ishii-san. You can no longer escape.'

Yakumo continued talking, ignoring Gotou's objections.

Miyuki looked down, as if contemplating, but then she suddenly let go of Ishii and thrust him forward.

Ishii fell face-forward onto the floor but got up immediately and hurried to Makoto.

– She's letting her hostage get away?

Gotou glared at Miyuki in his suspicion.

Miyuki didn't appear to care. She put her hands on her waist and smiled. What a ghastly woman.

'Ishii-san, she's fine. She probably just lost consciousness from being shocked with a stun gun.'

After Yakumo said that, Ishii let out a sigh in his relief.

'Now, let's explain the situation, to respond to Gotou-san's request.'

Yakumo cleared his throat. He sounded like a teacher who was about to start class.

'First. The true culprit of the murder case fifteen years ago is the person in front of you right now: Nanase Miyuki-san.'

Yakumo's words were so sudden that Gotou couldn't understand them for a while. Ishii seemed to be the same – he just gaped at Yakumo.

'T-t-that's ridiculous! Nanase Miyuki is Katsuaki's daughter! She was just ten then! For her to have killed the four people in her family, that's...'

'Possible.'

Miyuki was the one who spoke.

With the gait of a model, she approached Gotou.

'But I didn't kill four people – I killed three.'

Miyuki flicked Gotou's nose with her fingers. Gotou was frozen by this completely unexpected childish action.

'Why did you kill them...'

That was all he could say.

'You want to know why I killed them?'

'Yeah... Why?'

Miyuki nodded, seeming satisfied.

'That family was broken. You understand?'

'I don't.'

'I was really Nanase Kanji's kid. Grandpa's kid. My mum Fuyumi was Grandpa's lover.'

Miyuki said that proudly as she slowly walked around Gotou.

'You...'

'Grandpa and Dad both knew. But they pretended they didn't.'

That really was broken. The titles of father, wife and family hadn't been performing their proper roles.

They had pretended to know nothing. It was like some love triangle in a drama.

'That's not all. My father on the family register – that is, Katsuaki – would rape me at night, maybe in some sort of revenge. I was only ten...'

'What...'

A father raping his daughter – his young one, at that.

A child who had lost their home as a place to escape had nowhere to go. It was supposed to be the parents' job to protect their children. But –

Rage boiled up in the pit of Gotou's stomach.

'Grandma was my only ally. But Grandma broke too.'

'Broke?'

'Yup. She found out. She found out what was happening at home... I told her.'

For a just a moment, it felt like a shadow passed Miyuki's eyes.

'You broke her.'

'Yup. That day, Grandma went mad and grabbed a kitchen knife.'

'Wha...'

Gotou swallowed his breath.

'What do you think the others did when they saw that? Everyone forced Grandma down and stabbed her.'

Miyuki acted it out, putting her hand to her chest and looking up at the ceiling as if she were a singer in a musical.

Her gaze was so cold it sent a chill down Gotou's spine.

'They didn't just kill Grandma – they started to talk about how to hide her. They said bad things about her – it was awful to watch. That's why I broke all of them.'

She chose the word 'break' instead of 'kill'.

To Miyuki, her family excepting her grandmother were probably no longer people to her. But –

'There's no way you could've killed the three of them by yourself.'

Gotou shook his head.

She was just ten at the time. It was impossible.

'It's simple. Kanji and Katsuaki left the room to get a cloth to wrap Grandma up and a saw to cut her. I cut Fuyumi's throat then.'

Miyuki's eyes seemed to be in a trance as she looked at the tip of the knife.

'You've got some guts killing your own mother...'

'A woman who watched silently as her husband raped her daughter isn't a mother!'

Miyuki's shrill shriek reverberated through the room.

'You...'

Gotou wanted to retort, but he couldn't find the words.

'Next, I stabbed Kanji when he came back with a cloth. Then Katsuaki came back with a saw... A ten-year-old child wouldn't be able to kill him. That preconception lost him his life.'

Miyuki's triumphant voice hurt Gotou's ears.

'But even if you did kill your family, what did you do after that?'

Gotou looked at Yakumo.

'She wasn't alone.'

Yakumo had been silent until now, but he said just that.

– She wasn't alone.

When Gotou heard that, information from the back of Gotou's memories was suddenly drawn back out.

Miyagawa had said that a man with two red eyes had been at the scene –

'That man?'

'Yes. That man took care of the scene. It was a two-fold trick.'

Yakumo ran a hand through his hair.

'A two-fold trick?'

'He didn't just make Takeda-san seem like the culprit. He also made Honda-san think he was the true culprit.'

'What for?'

'It was insurance for if Takeda-san was proven innocent.'

What the hell. Takeda and Honda had just been incredibly unlucky. Which meant –

'Then I was abducted to...'

Gotou didn't want to believe it, but no other thought came to him.

'It is just as you are thinking, Gotou-san. There was the possibility that his own crime would be revealed because of Takeda-san's reappearance. He used you as insurance. He made Honda-san abduct you and led Ishii-san there.'

So that really was how it was.

'Eh, then I...'

Ishii's mouth flapped like a goldfish that wasn't getting enough oxygen.

'Correct. Gotou-san was used to lure you out, Ishii-san – bait to lead you to Honda. In that sense, it didn't matter which of you was abducted, though you might have been easier to lead.'

Damn it. Using a guy as a lure. Gotou was furious.

'But why's Ishii easier to lead?'

'It's obviously because you're an idiot, Gotou-san.'

'You brat...'

He'd definitely punch him one day.

'Furthermore, when Honda-san abducted you, Gotou-san, that made him definitively suspicious.'

It was just as Yakumo said.

Even if the investigation had led them to Honda, it would've been difficult to arrest him just from that.

The case happened fifteen years ago. There wasn't much evidence.

However, since he'd abducted Gotou, that put all the suspicion on him.

– So we were completely played.

Ishii looked like he would cry at any moment. He'd tried his best this time, but he had actually just been being led around. When Gotou thought that, even he felt depressed.

It was mortifying, but now he understood why he had been abducted. But –

'Why were you abducted?'

When Gotou said that, Yakumo's expression twisted, like he had eaten something bitter.

'It was very probable that I would notice the truth behind the case, so it was necessary for me to be taken away from the stage. That was why the video came about.'

It had become clear from Ishii's investigation. The ghost video had been taken as a candid-camera plan to set up the exorcist.

The video of Yakumo's mother in the end had been added in later.

Disguised as a reporter, Miyuki had given the video to Makoto.

'Was that video bait?'

'Unfortunately, it is just as you say. When I saw that video, I noticed that the person in the video was my mother and acted on my own to chase that mystery. However, that was just a trap to lead me away from the case.'

Even Yakumo lost his coolheaded deduction ability when faced with a picture of his missing mother.

And Yakumo's mother had tried to kill him. Why did she do that? He had probably been looking for that reason too.

'She waited for me to show a chink in my armour. Then, when I arrived at the log house, she shocked me with a stun gun.'

Though Yakumo's teeth were gritted, Miyuki was smiling in her amusement, showing her white teeth.

She was probably happy to have hoodwinked him.

'However, the torture was unnecessary. If you had just let me sleep, I might have taken longer to notice who you were.'

Yakumo glanced at Miyuki.

Gotou looked at Yakumo's body again.

A cast on his leg. Cuts and bruises all over his body. She had probably been careful while hurting him so he wouldn't faint.

Miyuki licked her lips. This woman was an incredible sadist.

'Amazing. No wonder that person acknowledges you. You really are excellent. You're so excellent it

makes me want to kill you.'

Miyuki gave Yakumo a round of applause.

'It doesn't make me happy to be acknowledged by that man.'

Yakumo's eyes were fierce.

'That might be the case for you, but it's different for me. That man is my father – the person I love. He saved me from that hell of a house and gave me a new life.'

Miyuki spread her arms and looked up as she declared that loudly.

When Gotou saw how intoxicated Miyuki look, a chill went down his spine. The person who was the most broken was Miyuki.

'Do you really think that?'

Yakumo's one sentence made Miyuki freeze.

'What do you mean?'

'The incident fifteen years ago was only devised by that man to isolate my mother and corner her psychologically. You were only a by-product of that.'

There was a wrinkle in Yakumo's forehead.

– So that's how it is?

When Gotou heard Yakumo's words, he felt like he'd solved the many puzzles he'd dragged along with him.

When Gotou met Azusa fifteen years ago, her mind was completely broken.

– This child will kill people!

Azusa's scream was as fresh in his mind as if he had heard it yesterday.

From her perspective, it must have been an unbelievable reality. She had overcome her suffering and had almost caught a chance at happiness when the man who had accepted her and her child ended up pursued by the police as the culprit to a murder case.

However, that man's true goal had been Yakumo.

By confusing Yakumo's mother, he caught up to Yakumo and tried to draw him over. Though Yakumo didn't say it, he had also noticed.

'Shut up!'

Miyuki suddenly put her hands in her hair and crouched, screaming in a constricted voice.

'I know that! I know that even without you telling me! That person only ever looks at you! Is being related by blood and having a red eye so amazing?'

Miyuki's eyes were bloodshot and as she shouted, spit came flying out. She was like a completely

different person.

Envy towards Yakumo –

Gotou could feel it. The man she worshipped only showed interest in Yakumo. She resented that.

Yakumo and Miyuki might have had a relationship like siblings –

– Older sister?

The old wound in Gotou's stomach twitched.

He looked at Miyuki's face again. He'd seen this face somewhere before – so that was it!

'Yakumo, could she be – '

'That's right. Though she has changed her face with cosmetic surgery, this is the person who called herself my older sister in the last case.'

So that really was the case. They'd finally met again. He'd properly thank her for the injury she'd given him. But –

'Why didn't you say that earlier!?'

'I was sure that you would notice, Gotou-san.'

'Why?'

'Didn't you say when you watched the video that you remembered seeing this woman before?'

He had said that. But he'd completely forgotten.

'Your biggest mistake this time was leaving me alive.'

Miyuki lifted her head the moment she heard Yakumo's words.

'That's right. I think that too. That man told me not to kill you – told me to leave you alive, but it really would be better if you died.'

Miyuki brushed her hair back and smiled fearlessly.

That was quite some composure she had in this situation. Gotou would definitely not let him get away this time.

Gotou stepped towards Miyuki.

However, Miyuki leapt backwards with quick footwork to evade him.

Gotou wouldn't let her get away. Just as Gotou readied himself to rush at her, Miyuki ran out of the living room and shut the door.

– You think that's going to stop me?

Gotou rammed his shoulder into the door with all his strength.

However, the door didn't even budge.

'It's useless,' said Yakumo.

Gotou looked at the door. Unlike last time, the door was metal. It seemed to have been changed.

– Have we been shut in?

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– What on earth?

All Ishii could do was stare, dumbfounded by the exchange between Gotou, Yakumo and Miyuki.

Even though he had thought he'd found Gotou and saved him with his own determination, that had all been calculated.

He had completely been played. When he thought about that, he realised how small his existence was.

'Open up! Come on!'

Gotou howled at the door as he kicked it.

'Detective Gotou, it's no use,' said Ishii without thinking.

'What did you say!?!'

'If the door's shape warps, it will become even more difficult to open.'

'Then what are you saying we should do!?!' said Gotou, kicking the door once more.

'Please calm down,' said Yakumo with a nonchalant yawn.

'What are you acting all composed for? Come on – what the hell is this?'

'There's nothing to it. Please think about this seriously. Why do you think she spoke so freely?'

A very unpleasant thought came to Ishii's head upon hearing Yakumo's words.

'She plans to gather us in one place and kill us,' said Ishii with a shiver.

'Exactly. How clear-headed of you, Ishii-san.'

Unlike Ishii, who was terrified, Yakumo spoke calmly.

'W-w-what did you say!?!' yelled Gotou.

Yakumo put his fingers in his ears to show how loud he thought Gotou was.

'Please don't speak so loudly next to my ears. You really are easily unsettled for somebody of your stature.'

'You idiot. How could I be calm now?'

Ishii agreed with Gotou's opinion. Yakumo was the strange one for being so disinterested at a time like this.

Still –

'We've been completely trapped then,' said Ishii with a disappointed sigh.

'Correct. Makoto-san was bait. She might have been told to return the video or that there was a new truth to the case. It doesn't matter. Miyuki called Makoto out that way, since Makoto has a good heart, and drew us here.'

Yakumo scratched the tip of his nose with his finger.

'But isn't that strange? How'd that woman know Ishii was tailing the reporter lady?'

Gotou's question made sense.

Miyuki had used Makoto as bait because she knew she was being watched.

Yakumo had been the one who told him to watch Makoto. Why was that necessary –

Yakumo held his finger in front of his mouth to quiet them.

Though Gotou and Ishii were confused by Yakumo's sudden action, they looked at each other and then shut their mouths.

Yakumo nodded once more and then took his mobile out from the pocket of his pocket gown. He opened the cover for the battery and took out something that looked like a one-centimetre rectangular card.

Yakumo pinched it with his fingers, showed it to Gotou and Ishii. Then, he dropped it to the floor and crushed it with his crutch.

'Could that be a listening device?'

'Correct, Ishii-san.'

Yakumo put up his thumb, looking satisfied.

'When'd you notice that!?'

'From the very start. That was put there when I was abducted.'

Yakumo spoke indifferently, without flinching at Gotou's angry yell.

– From the very start.

Ishii recalled the exchange they'd had when he was tailing Makoto.

In order to explain the situation, he'd called Gotou's mobile, but for some reason, Yakumo had gone out of his way to call again from his own phone to discuss the same thing.

– We're heading there now too.

That hadn't been a message to Ishii. That had been to tell Miyuki they were going there now.

'But why did you act like you didn't notice?'

'You understand as well, don't you, Ishii-san? That woman is tenacious. If we didn't face off in this manner, she would surround us with traps again and cut off our heads one by one as we slept.'

– I see. So that's how it was.

Yakumo took Miyuki's trap and forced Miyuki's hand.

However, in this situation, that meant his plan had also failed.

Ishii smelt something burning and lifted his head.

Smoke was coming in from the gap between the door and the floor.

'So she really is going to set fire to the house,' said Yakumo, running a hand through his hair.

Ishii recalled the can he had stepped on when he came into the house. Though it was too late to realise that now –

'We're going to burn to crisps here! That woman's gonna get away! What the hell are we going to do!?!'

Gotou stamped on the floor like a child throwing a tantrum.

'Honestly. I'll make you stand in the hallway for being an unruly child.'

'I'll hit you, you bastard!'

Gotou raised his voice and yelled, but Yakumo didn't pay him any attention.

'Please calm down. She won't run. She must be making obstructive preparations so that the fire engines cannot arrive.'

Ishii thought that Yakumo was right.

If fire engines showed up to put out the fire, her efforts would have been in vain. She needed to obstruct their arrival no matter what.

'That's even worse! At this rate...'

In the middle of speaking, Gotou breathed in some smoke and started coughing violently.

The room was considerably filled with smoke.

At this rate, they would soon die of carbon monoxide poisoning.

Contrary to Ishii's anxiety, Yakumo was the picture of calm. He seemed to have a secret plan to escape.

Yakumo used his mobile to call somewhere.

Even if he called the fire department, the fire engines would be obstructed. Yakumo had said that himself. What on earth was he planning?

'It's me. It's your time to shine... Calm down. It's a simple job; just do it the way I instructed you.'

Press the accelerator down as much as you can and move the brake lever. That's all. Got it?'

Yakumo gave out instructions in a flat voice.

Who was he talking to? Ishii had no idea.

'It's fine. You can do it. Don't forget to put on your seatbelt...'

'Yakumo, I got it. So that's it? That's why you made me park the car there.'

Gotou clapped his hands together – he appeared to have realised what Yakumo was planning.

'If you get it, hurry up and move Makoto-san. The location she is in now is dangerous.'

Gotou walked over and picked up Makoto's legs. Ishii didn't understand but he decided to just do as he was told.

Ishii lifted Makoto's head, and at the count of three, they moved Makoto to the door.

After Yakumo confirmed that, he nodded.

'Now! Go!'

Right after Yakumo spoke, there was an incredible sound and dust flew up into the air.

A car broke through the wall and flew into the room.

'Aah!'

Ishii shouted in his excitement and surprise as he saw this scene that seemed to have come right out of an action movie.

– But who's driving that car?

To answer Ishii's question, the driver, whose face was buried in the air bag, looked up while pressing a hand against her head.

It was Haruka –

How reckless.

'The walls are so thin that the house next door could hear the screams. Just as I thought,' said Yakumo triumphantly.

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Gotou ran out of the house through the broken wall and looked for Miyuki.

'There she is!'

He spotted Miyuki standing at the front entrance with a dumbfounded expression.

Their eyes met. Gotou thought she'd run, but Miyuki just stood there with a faint smile.

– Did she give up? No, I can't let my guard down.

He had suddenly been caught from behind last time.

Gotou guardedly sidled up to Miyuki. However, Miyuki dropped her knife to the ground and put up both her hands.

'It's my loss.'

Miyuki winked.

– This woman's challenging me. Just what I want.

Gotou took out handcuffs and quickened his pace, walking up to Miyuki.

'Not going to let you get away again.'

'Right. Hurry up and arrest me.'

Miyuki put her two wrists together and held them out towards Gotou.

– How honest. Did she really give up?

A doubt sprouted in Gotou's mind.

'What's wrong? Not going to arrest me?'

Miyuki cocked her head, as if she was confused.

'I'm going to do that even if you don't tell me to.'

Gotou reached out to handcuff Miyuki.

That moment, Miyuki slightly lowered her right wrist. Something like a black box slid out from her sleeve into her palm.

Gotou didn't miss it.

– It's a stun gun.

Miyuki thrust the pulsing stun gun towards Gotou.

'As if I'd be caught by the same attack again!'

Gotou twisted back and evaded the attack, grabbing Miyuki's wrist in the same action.

'Let me go, you blockhead!' shrieked Miyuki, twisting about violently. Her resistance was useless. Gotou wouldn't lose in strength.

'I've a rule about not raising my hand towards women, but you're an exception!'

Gotou ripped the stun gun out of Miyuki's hand. He grabbed her hair and forced her to lean forward before kneeling her.

She responded appropriately.

Miyuki hugged her stomach, bent over and vomited.

'Have you finished?

Yakumo walked towards him, supported by Haruka.

Damn, this guy was carefree. He could've told Gotou that he had a plan. The chills had been unbearable.

'... If I had killed you.'

Miyuki's nails dug into the ground as she glared at Yakumo with a gaze full of hatred.

'No, that isn't your only mistake.'

Miyuki's brows furrowed at Yakumo's words.

'You underestimated her. That was the cause of your defeat.'

As Yakumo said that, he gave Haruka a glance.

Rare for him, his eyes were kind.

Haruka really might have been Miyuki's miscalculation.

Miyuki had misread what actions Haruka would take when it became clear that Yakumo was missing and how strong Haruka's feelings towards Yakumo were.

Even Miyuki hadn't expected Haruka to find Yakumo so quickly. She had been the biggest wild card.

More than that, her driving technique earlier had been pretty great. It was unexpected from her appearance, but the girl went at things with all her heart.

Gotou ended up smiling unconsciously. Yakumo saw that and ended up smiling too.

However, when Haruka saw their faces, she was sulking, like she didn't understand what was going on.

'I'm going to kill you. I'm going to kill all of you...'

Even at this stage, Miyuki bit her lip and expressed her hatred.

– She's as tough as a zombie.

'Gotou-san, she's annoying. Please put her to sleep,' said Yakumo.

Gotou agreed with Yakumo. He had his grudge from before.

'Die!'

Miyuki quickly picked up the knife from the ground and leaped towards him.

Gotou bent back to evade the attack and then pressed the stun gun against Miyuki's neck and pressed the switch.

There was a zap.

Miyuki collapsed to the ground just as the house came burning down –

It was a very clear day –

The day after the incident, Haruka was being driven by Keiko to the place Yakumo designated.

Haruka hadn't heard the details from Yakumo; he had just said that he was going to meet somebody.

In the backseat, Yakumo had the same sleepy eyes as usual. However, they looked a bit sad.

In front of them, there was just a half-demolished building with its concrete frame.

'Yakumo-kun, is this really the right place?'

Yakumo's only reply was a short 'Yeah' as he bit his lip.

Keiko parked the car a little bit ahead of the building.

After Haruka got off the car, she helped Yakumo out and walked towards the building's premises as directed.

She heard Yakumo's breath in her ears.

She'd heard from Gotou yesterday. This building was where Yakumo's mother, Azusa, had tried to kill him fifteen years earlier.

– I wonder what Yakumo is feeling and thinking today.

'Oh, you finally came?'

Sitting on the road facing the building, Gotou was smoking a cigarette. He raised his hand and stood up.

'It is forbidden to smoke on the streets. How can the police set an example by breaking the rules?'

Yakumo's remarks were sarcastic, as usual.

'Shut up!'

Gotou went onto the premises through the entrance, which had a leaning door.

Yakumo and Haruka followed him.

The abandoned building rose above them.

Yakumo looked up at the building's roof silently.

'Will we really meet Takeda if we come here?' said Gotou, putting his cigarette out in a portable ashtray.

Takeda Shunsuke –

In the murder case fifteen years ago, he was made to look like the culprit and was still on the run. He had also been Azusa's lover.

He was the person who might have become Yakumo's father –

Did Yakumo come to meet Takeda?

'He's already here,' murmured Yakumo.

Haruka looked around, but she couldn't see him earlier. Gotou looked around in the same fashion but he didn't appear to find him either.

'Where is he?' said Gotou, sounding displeased.

'He is right in front of you now. Though he is already starting to disappear...'

– Oh, so that's how it was.

From Yakumo's one utterance, Haruka understood everything. It was a sad truth.

'You making fun of me?'

Gotou suddenly brought his face close to Yakumo's. He didn't understand yet.

'I'm not making fun of you.'

'Then what?'

'You still don't understand? Takeda-san is dead. He died fifteen years ago...'

'Dea...'

Gotou finally understood and became lost for words.

Takeda was dead –

The person that had appeared in front of Haruka had been Takeda's ghost. That was how he could break into a locked home.

Takeda, as a ghost, couldn't save Yakumo, so he had asked Haruka to do it.

That was also why the police couldn't find him no matter how they searched.

A number of people had seen him, but nobody had directly touched him.

'Takeda-san was killed immediately after that case and buried under a building that was under construction at the time.'

Yakumo continued to speak as he pointed at the mountain of rubble with his crutch.

'But why now...'

Gotou furrowed his brow. Haruka had that question too.

'He was unburied when the building was demolished. If you look through the place where they have put all the scrap material, you should find the corpse.'

Haruka looked at the mountain of rubble.

Takeda was sleeping in that mountain –

'I see. So nobody could catch him. Ishii said he'd disappeared, but I guess that wasn't a lie.'

Gotou took out another cigarette and lit it.

'Correct. When the corpse was dug up, his soul, which had been sleeping, was dragged out of the ground for the first time in fifteen years,' said Yakumo, his head hung.

'I see.'

'Nanase Miyuki knew that and feared that Takeda-san would contact me, so this happened.'

'Because the truth would come out the moment he met you...'

'Yes.'

'Takeda was frantic to prove he was innocent, huh.'

Gotou spat out his cigarette with a frown.

'That isn't it,' said Yakumo, still looking down.

'What?'

'Takeda-san didn't care at all about his own crime.'

'Didn't care at all? What the hell are you talking about?'

Yakumo didn't respond to Gotou's question.

He looked up and stared at the mountain of rubble.

Haruka felt like, for a moment, she saw a man standing in front of that gaze. His eyes crinkled in a kind smile.

'Until the end, you cared about...'

Yakumo's voice was so quiet it was nearly inaudible.

When Haruka heard him, she understood what Takeda had been trying to do.

To Takeda, there was something much more important than his proving his innocence or getting revenge on the person who killed him. That was –

Haruka looked at Yakumo.

Yakumo's narrowed eyes were just a little bit wet.

'Hey, Yakumo-kun. Takeda-san was...'

'I know.'

Yakumo shut his eyes and interrupted Haruka.

– That’s right. Yakumo knows much better than me.

Even if his eye was red and he wasn’t his own child, there was somebody in Yakumo’s past who had wanted to become his father.

Even after this person died, he still cared about Yakumo and Azusa.

Though it was only a month – they had only known each other for a short time – it had to have been a very happy month for Yakumo and Azusa.

Haruka hoped it was true.

– Oh no. I’m going to cry.

Haruka wiped her tears with her finger.

The wind blew. Though it was still cold now, it wouldn’t be cold forever. Spring would come in the end.

So –

'Let's go,' said Yakumo, looking up at the sky.

The cloud that had passed over the sun was blown away by the wind, and a brilliant light shone down on them.

That’s right. Let’s go.

– Somebody is waiting for us.

終章

その後

EPILOGUE

epilogue

-

– Because of the case, I didn't have a lot of time to practise.

However, in the two days before the performance, Haruka put all her energy into practising and was able to finish the performance properly.

At the conductor's signal, she stood up and bowed at the audience.

In the very back seat, Keiko waved her hand.

Sitting next to her, Yakumo was sleeping with his arms crossed.

Keiko kneed Yakumo and woke him up.

– My mother really does some amazing things.

At Keiko's urging, Yakumo rubbed at his eyes and raised his hand. He might have just been stretching.

Haruka thought the sight of Yakumo and Keiko sitting together was very strange.

Keiko must have taken Yakumo out of the hospital forcibly.

Keiko had ended up staying at Haruka's flat ever since that day. Kazuhiro must have been dancing around at home.

Keiko's interest seemed to have been piqued by Yakumo, the son of her old friend, and she'd sneaked into his hospital room.

Then, she'd met Isshin and ended up interested in him too. Finally, she said that both would be hard to throw away, which was cryptic to Haruka.

If Kazuhiro heard that, he'd definitely faint.

Though the case this time had really been tough, Haruka thought that the gain was worth it.

A bond that had been cut for fifteen years had been connected again –

Haruka gave a slight wave and then left for the wings of the stage.

-

After she finished cleaning up, she left the school, only to hear the sound of a car horn.

She spotted Keiko waiting there with her car. Yakumo was in the backseat too.

'What is it?' asked Haruka as she approached. Keiko stuck her face out of the window.

'Yakumo-kun said he's going to Nagano to pick up something he forgot, so I'm going to drive him back since I'm heading there anywhere. What will you do, Haruka?'

Of course –

'I'll go!'

There was actually a meeting after the performance, but she was going to skip that today.

Haruka quickly stepped into the passenger seat. Right after she did, the car started.

'Hey, Yakumo-kun, what did you forget?' asked Haruka as she turned around.

Yakumo ran a hand through his hair, seeming bothered.

'Something I've been looking for this whole time.'

Perhaps he wasn't feeling well, because after he yawned like he always did, he lay down in the backseat and shut his eyes.

Within five minutes, he started sleeping.

'Haruka, Yakumo-kun really is such a nice boy,' said Keiko earnestly.

Haruka looked at the backseat through the rear-view mirror. Yakumo's eyes were shut, completely still.

'He is. But Yakumo-kun doesn't understand a girl's heart at all. He's too thick-headed.'

Yakumo's eyebrow twitched. He seemed to have heard. However, he didn't say anything.

Since he was pretending to sleep, it felt like Haruka shouldn't wake him up.

– It's a nice feeling.

Haruka met Keiko's gaze and smiled.

* * *

Ishii had so much paperwork to do –

With the story getting as huge as this, the police had to present some sort of opinion.

However, the situation made it difficult to present, and fifteen years had passed. There had been a search at the scene, but since the house had burnt down, that wasn't certain either.

Ishii thought that the case wasn't exemplary – the first investigation had been misread.

There was no point blaming anybody now, but if they had focussed more on why the testimony had been off, this wouldn't have happened.

However, that was just what people did, not just police. The people in charge weren't perfect.

They couldn't charge Miyuki with the case that occurred fifteen years ago.

Partly it was because the statute of limitations was up, but at the time, she had been a ten-year-old girl. She couldn't be charged for a crime.

However, the murders fifteen years ago hadn't been Miyuki's only crimes. Starting with the attempted murder of Yakumo, she had put her hand to many crimes.

They would have to start putting together cases for each of those.

If possible, Ishii wanted Miyuki to spend the rest of her life in prison.

In any case, if he didn't hurry to finish these reports, Miyagawa would yell at him again. Ishii focussed on his work.

– I wish Gotou would help a little.

Ishii looked up at Gotou, who had an unlit cigarette in his mouth.

Ever since that case, Gotou would often sit like this to think.

At first, Ishii had thought that Gotou was thinking over what had happened, but recently, Ishii started to believe that wasn't the case.

Still, Ishii had no way of knowing what Gotou was thinking.

Suddenly, Gotou stood up.

'Ishii. I've decided,' declared Gotou loudly.

'What have you decided?'

The menu for lunch? They always got Chinese delivered, so pizza would be OK once in a while. Contrary to Ishii's idle musings, Gotou's eyes were the picture of seriousness.

'I'm gonna quit the force.'

'Huh?'

Ishii's voice squeaked.

Quit the force? Gotou? What is he saying –

'Please don't joke a time like this.'

'Shut up. I've decided.'

'No, but...'

'Bye. Keep fit.'

Indifferent to Ishii's confusion, Gotou grabbed his jacket from the chair and left the room briskly.

– Eh, now? He's kidding, right?

'Detective Gotou, please wait.'

Ishii hurriedly ran after Gotou.

He fell –

* * *

Haruka supported Yakumo, who was using his crutch, as they climbed the slope through the forest.

Keiko was also pushing Yakumo from behind.

Like that, they finally reached the log house.

Since something like that had happened here, it looked uncanny even at noon.

Haruka opened the door together with Yakumo and went in.

– I wonder what he forgot.

Haruka looked around, but she didn't say anything.

Yakumo hopped away from Haruka to the storeroom where he had been shut in.

Then, he picked up a metal rod and hit the wall of the storeroom.

He kept hitting the wall.

Dust flew up and the wood snapped.

Yakumo put his hand in the gap and tore off the wood forcibly. There seemed to be something in the back.

Haruka helped Yakumo to tear off the wood. Keiko joined them and they put all their effort into breaking the wall.

After a while, a space appeared on the other side of the wall.

– Could this be?

Keiko lit up the other side of the wall with her torch.

There was a human skeleton lying there.

Yakumo didn't say anything, but Haruka understood even without an explanation.

This person is definitely –

So she hadn't been mistaken. Somebody had come to save Yakumo and stand against the man with the red eyes, standing between them to protect him.

That must have been this person –

As Keiko held the torch, she cried silently.

Yakumo looked at the skeleton with a blank expression. He had finally found what he was looking for. However, it was in an incredibly depressing state.

Haruka's chest hurt and she gripped the red stone on her necklace tightly.

I wonder what Yakumo is thinking now –

Yakumo had always kept the fact that Azusa had tried to kill him in the bottom of his heart. Now, they had met again. What could he be thinking –

Suddenly, Haruka noticed that the skeleton was gripping something.

'Hey, Yakumo-kun. That's...'

When Haruka said that, Yakumo reached out and picked it up.

It was a silver locket.

Yakumo appeared to have noticed it as well, and he opened the locket. There was a photo inside.

In the photo, Azusa and her child, Yakumo, were smiling, their cheeks pressed together.

They're smiling really happily –

This might have been the photo that Takeda took.

'I forgot that there'd been a time like this...'

Yakumo said just that, closing his eyes.

Haruka had no way of knowing what had happened in Azusa's heart.

However, there was one thing she was certain of. At least at the moment this photo was taken, Azusa had been happy.

'Yakumo-kun...'

'I know. Don't say anything.'

Yakumo interrupted Haruka's words.

Right. He had remembered something he had forgotten, so that was enough.

Yakumo put the locket in his pocket.

'Goodbye, Mother.'

Eyes brimming with tears, Yakumo bid his mother farewell.

添付ファイル

横恋慕

E X T R A ^{FILE}

extra file: illicit love

-

This happened on the way back from Nagano –

-

The case was over, so Yakumo and I were at Nagano Station to return to Tokyo.

Keiko had dropped us off at the station. Since there was some time before the Shinkansen started, so we were just passing the time.

I spotted a cafe near the traffic circle, so we walked there.

It was a small shop, with log tables and jazz playing in the background.

Because Yakumo was using a crutch, we took the table closest to the entrance and had a breather.

Now that I think about it, that was the first time I went to a cafe with Yakumo.

Whenever I was with Yakumo, it was always in the middle of a brutal incident, so we almost never had chances to talk leisurely.

Something like this wasn't bad every once in a while.

I asked for hot cocoa from the employee who had come by to take our orders.

'Ice coffee and a chocolate parfait,' said Yakumo with a disinterested yawn. I couldn't believe my eyes.

'Who's going to eat that?'

'I ordered it. Of course I'm going to eat it,' said Yakumo matter-of-factly as he crossed his arms.

'Yes, but...'

– It doesn't suit you at all.

I thought those words, but I didn't say them aloud. Yakumo would have definitely said something like 'Don't force your preconceptions onto me'.

'Sorry...'

When I accidentally overheard that voice, I looked towards the seat next to ours.

A woman who looked to be in her late twenties was looking down.

Opposite her, there was a man of about the same age. His eyes looked sad as he sighed, like he had given up on everything.

The atmosphere was suffocating. They were probably breaking up.

I felt like I'd seen something I wasn't supposed to, so I hurriedly looked away.

But Yakumo –

'Wait, Yakumo-kun.'

I unconsciously pulled at Yakumo's sleeve.

Yakumo was looking at the two of them like he was watching a scene from a drama.

'Quiet. I can't hear,' said Yakumo quietly.

There were some people who would eavesdrop on other people's love affairs, but I hadn't thought Yakumo would be one of them.

It couldn't be called a good hobby.

'I understand how you feel,' said the man, his face as stiff as a Noh mask.

'I'm really sorry...'

After the woman said that, she stood up and left the cafe, hiding her face.

'What are you doing? Hurry up and chase after her.'

Yakumo pointed at the cafe entrance which the woman had left through.

'Eh, me?'

'Who else?'

'But...'

'Bring her back here. He wants that too.'

I was confused.

Yakumo probably meant the man sitting in the next seat when he said 'he', but if he really wanted that, he could just chase after her himself. It wasn't a problem for us to involve ourselves in.

'Hurry up.'

– Even if you say that.

'How am I supposed to bring her back?'

'Just tell her that Shinichirou-san told her to come back.'

Yakumo ran a hand through his hair in his irritation as he spoke quickly.

I reluctantly left the shop.

Once I left the cafe, I spotted the woman immediately.

She was standing at the bus stop in front of the station gates with her head hung. Her shoulders looked so weak that might collapse at any moment.

She's crying –

I thought that as I walked towards her back.

To be honest, I don't know what to say in situations like this. But –

'Excuse me...'

When I called out to her, the woman turned around with a surprised expression on her face.

When I saw her eyes, wet with tears, I couldn't say anything.

An awkward silence continued.

The wind howled.

'Shinichirou-san wants you to come back...'

I remembered what Yakumo said and finally put just that into words.

However, the woman didn't react the way I thought she would to those words. She bit her lip and glared at me. Her cheek was twitching.

I really shouldn't have stuck my nose into a stranger's love life.

'Er... that's just what I was asked to say...'

'Shinichirou died half a year ago!' shouted the woman in tears, drowning out my voice.

That pressure made me stiffen.

I'd been sure that Shinichirou was the man from earlier.

– Tell me that earlier.

I buried my dissatisfaction with Yakumo in the pit of my stomach and bowed my head towards her.

'Sorry. I didn't know...'

'Why...'

The woman's confused voice reached my eyes.

'Eh?'

I looked up at the woman's face again.

'Why do you know his name?'

There was no way I could answer that question. I had just heard it from Yakumo.

'I heard it from him.'

I turned around at the voice and saw Yakumo standing there.

'Heard it from him...'

The woman furrowed her brow as she parroted Yakumo's words.

'Yes. He has been standing there since earlier.'

Yakumo expressionlessly pointed his crutch behind the woman.

The woman turned around, but after she confirmed that nobody was there, she glared at Yakumo with a red face.

She probably thought she was being made fun of.

'Yakumo-kun can see them. The spirits of the dead. That is, ghosts...'

I told the woman that.

I don't know if she'll believe me. But –

'You're lying.'

The woman shook her head, like she didn't want to hear what I was saying.

Yakumo sighed and ran a hand through his hair.

'It was an accident.'

'Eh?'

The woman's eyes went wide at Yakumo's sudden words.

'Shinichirou-san said that he wouldn't forgive you that day.'

'Why... do you know that?'

'Like I said, Shinichirou-san is standing behind you. He told me that.'

Yakumo's eyes narrowed.

'Really...'

The woman's mouth was agape like a goldfish seeking oxygen.

'Yes. After he broke up with you, Shinichirou-san was in a motorcycle accident. It was a direct impact.'

'That wasn't an accident...'

The woman covered her teary face with her hands.

'It was a suicide. That's what you think.'

The woman didn't respond to Yakumo's words. All Haruka could hear was her crying voice.

'That was honestly an accident. He tried to avoid a cat that suddenly ran onto the road and hit another car.'

'But... it's my fault...'

The woman was sobbing.

Tears fell from between her palms as she covered her eyes.

'Shinichirou-san says that isn't true. He noticed that you and Masayuki-san were attracted to each other.'

'Eh?'

The woman raised her tearstained face.

'He thought that he had to make you break up with him, but on that day, he was led by his emotions and said that he wouldn't forgive you.'

'I...'

'After he broke up with you, he always regretted that. Even after he died in the accident...'

I understood the gist of it after Yakumo had explained this much.

Shinichirou and the woman had been lovers, but the woman fell in love with someone else. That was probably the man who was in the cafe earlier.

Then – after they broke up, Shinichirou died in a traffic accident.

The woman was left behind with Shinichirou's final words – I won't forgive you – and thought he had committed suicide. She had felt guilty of that crime ever since.

But –

'Shinichirou-san wants you and Masayuki-san to be happy.'

'That can't be true.'

The woman's body was shaking, like she couldn't believe it.

'You and Masayuki-san were both his precious friends...'

'I can't do it.'

The woman's shoulders heaved as she took deep breaths.

Her tightly gripped fists appeared to be filled with anger towards herself.

A bus passed through the traffic circle. Its doors opened.

'Miho.'

Masayuki, the man who had been in the cafe, walked towards them as if drawn there by something.

The woman looked up.

Her gaze was shaking. She was confused.

The person she loved was in front of him. She wanted to leap into his arms even now. But she had a weight stopping her from doing that.

– I won't forgive you.

The words of her past lover had bound her heart like a curse.

Yakumo seemed exasperated as he ran his fingers through his hairs. Then, he grabbed the woman's arm and pulled her close to him.

She looked taken aback as she raised her head.

'As long as you drag your feet like this, Shinichirou-san can't rest in peace.'

'Eh?'

'Just like you, he feels guilty. Because of his words, you can't advance...'

'I...'

Yakumo didn't let her finish speaking.

He pushed her back so she fell forward.

She lost her balance and fell into Masayuki's chest.

The two of them looked at each other, frozen. It was like time had stopped.

They seemed to be talking each other silently.

'Let's go.'

Yakumo yawned as he said that.

'Wait...'

I really wanted to know how the two of them were going to fair. Leaving now would be like missing the last episode of a drama.

'I did what I was asked. That's enough,' said Yakumo, looking at the bus stop.

My eyes followed his. All I could see was a pole with a display for arrival times, but Yakumo must have seen Shinichirou's spirit there.

The bus shut its doors and drove off.

'Don't be so slow.'

Yakumo started walking unsteadily with his crutch.

'Wait a second.'

I hurriedly followed after him.

I thought that Yakumo was going to head for the station, but he went back to the cafe we were at earlier.

Somehow or other, a lot of time had passed. They didn't have the time to leisurely drink tea.

'Hey, the Shinkansen's going to leave soon.'

'Look at your watch.'

'Eh?'

I hurriedly turned my eyes to my wristwatch.

It was the departure time.

I heard the bell announcing the train's departure.

When I looked up at the train station, I saw the Shinkansen, which was about to leave. There was no way they'd make it in time.

We weren't in a rush to get home anyway, so talking with Yakumo leisurely like this wasn't bad either.

'If you don't hurry, the cocoa's going to get cold,' said Yakumo.

'Eh!? You didn't cancel the order?' I complained, half-jogging after Yakumo who had walked ahead.

Before I went into the cafe, I turned around and saw the two of them, still looking at each other.

I wanted to find out how they were going to work things out after this, but – well, it's fine.

※本作はフィクションであり、実在の人物、団体等とは一切関係ありません。

afterword

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Thank you for reading *Psychic Detective Yakumo 5 – Connected Feelings*.

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This time, the revision process overlapped with writing the script for the stage version of *Psychic Detective Yakumo – Whisper of the Soul* (performing June 2009).

Though I was busy, there were also many advantages to it.

In particular, I was forced to think about dialogue.

Normally, I express things in words, which ends up sounding like an explanation.

However, when writing a script, since the dialogue is actually performed by the actors, that has to be taken into account.

Rather than a passage that expresses itself through written word, it must become a passage that expresses itself through sound.

For example, when expressing the emotion of 'love' for somebody, up until now, I wrote 'love' in the dialogue.

However, if this is being played out in front of your eyes, even without putting everything into words, there are many ways of expressing this, such as small gestures, breathing and gazes.

On the other hand, for a novel, the atmosphere and breaths must all be expressed in the passage. Then how do I express it?

While repeating that, I continued my revisions while comparing the novel and the script.

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Writing my work using different ways of expression filled me with unexpected discoveries, and I think that I was able to draw out a new face of Yakumo.

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For those who are interested, please look at both the novel and the script and compare them.

Please do not take it amiss; this is definitely not an advertisement for the stage version of *Psychic Detective Yakumo – Whisper of the Soul*.

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Heisei 21¹, spring – Kaminaga Manabu

1 Heisei 21 is 2009 in the Gregorian calendar.