

神永学

心霊探偵

八

PSYCHIC DETECTIVE
YAKUMO
SHINABU KAMINAGA

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失意の果てに
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PSYCHIC DETECTIVE YAKUMO

Manaav Kamimasa

06.

VOL.1

序章 _____ 5

第一章 予言 _____ 11

第二章 彷徨・陰 _____ 105

序 章

P R O L O G U E

Prologue

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The fair moon radiated a cold light –

Ishida Naoto felt suffocated, as if a weight was on his chest, and opened his eyes.

He looked at the clock. It was just past three in the morning. He had woken up too early. He closed his eyes to try to fall asleep again.

However, Ishida was bothered by the sound of other people sleeping on the opposite side of the divider curtain and was unable to fall asleep again.

– Let's try something else.

Ishida slowly got up.

At that moment, he felt a slight pain in his side. It was the place where he had stitches from the surgery three days ago.

The doctor had told him to move as little as possible the day after the surgery. That would make it recover faster.

Ishida unsteadily got up from the bed and left the hospital room.

The corridor went straight down. It was empty.

The corridor was lit up by the green emergency light, which gave it an uncanny atmosphere.

He had seen a similar corridor in a horror film before. In the story, a strange contagious disease had spread through the hospital and people had died one after another.

– What was the title of that movie?

Ishida searched his memories, but in the end, he couldn't remember the title.

Instead, he remembered something the nurse had said yesterday.

The ghost of a girl with no face was wandering the hospital. She always asked the people she met the same question.

– When are you going to die?

The people whom she asked this question always died soon afterwards.

It was a common story that could have been found at any hospital.

Ishida thought that the nurse whose eyes had been sparkling when telling the story was scarier. She had been plump and quite his type, but his emotions had cooled all at once.

Ishida walked into the lavatory at the end of the corridor.

He stood in front of the sink and put his hands at the faucet.

The sensor reacted and water started flowing. He used his hands to take that water and washed his face.

He repeated that a number of times and felt a bit better.

He wiped his eyes with the sleeve of his pyjamas and looked at the mirror.

– Hey.

Suddenly, he heard a voice.

Ishida hurriedly turned around, but there was nobody there.

He decided it was his imagination and turned towards the mirror again.

When Ishida saw what was reflected in the mirror, he jumped, like he had been splashed with cold water.

There was a girl behind Ishida in the mirror.

A girl in a red dress. She was looking down so he couldn't see her face.

‘Don't surprise me.’

Ishida turned around. However, nobody was there.

'Eh?'

He looked at the mirror again.

The girl was definitely there –

A cold sweat ran down his whole body.

– Hey, mister.

As the girl said that, she slowly lifted her face.

Her face was completely hidden by a black shadow, as if it were smeared with ink.

Ishida was so shocked he couldn't even scream –

His heart was beating wildly, thumping against his ribcage.

– When are you going to die?

When the girl said that, she thrust her two hands forward.

Ishida couldn't breathe.

Hah, hah, hah, hah.

Ishida ran out of the lavatory blindly.

He didn't have the courage to turn around. With the corridor's wall as support, he just went as far as his legs would take him.

– Hurry. Back to my hospital room. Almost there, just a bit more...

Just as the hospital door appeared in front of him, Ishida felt somebody's presence and stopped moving.

– Hey, when are you going to die?

The girl spoke.

She was in front of the hospital room.

'Augh!'

Ishida screamed and went back down the corridor.

– Where should I run to?

Ishida, in his confusion, spotted an elevator.

He ran as quickly as he could to the elevator and hit the button again and again.

– Hurry, hurry, hurry!

However, the elevator was taking its time to show up.

When he looked down the corridor, he saw the girl slowly walking towards him.

– It's no good!

Ishida gave up on the elevator and headed towards the stairs ahead of them.

He turned around.

The girl was approaching quickly.

Ishida took a step to go down the stairs.

– When are you going to die?

The girl was waiting for Ishida at the bottom of the stairs.

Ishida's body froze.

– Ah!

The moment he thought that, it was already too late.

Ishida lost his balance and tumbled down the stairs.

A sharp pain ran through his thigh and his back.

Ishida's consciousness fell into a pitch-black darkness –

予言

第一章

FILE:
01

File 01: Prophecy

-

Dawn had not come yet.

The dim interior of the temple was blanketed in silence.

A wooden statue of Gautama Buddha was enshrined at the front.

Saitou Isshin was sitting in the standard lotus position and hands in Dhyana mudra[1]. He was sitting straight up.

He was looking forward, and then he lowered his gaze, eyes half-closed.

– One, two, three...

While counting in his mind, he slowly readied his breathing.

Next, he readied his mind.

– Ensou[2].

One cannot see correctly if one does not ready one's mind.

The basic ideology of Zen.

However, Isshin felt this was incredibly difficult.

No matter how he tried to attain mu[3], worldly thoughts passed through his head.

Trivial things from his everyday life, or negative emotions like envy, resentment and jealousy, or the feeling of an empty stomach and the desire to sleep –

Most of Isshin's mind was occupied by that man.

He sometimes forgot in his regular daily life, but when he sat in meditation like this, a strong image would always come up.

However, the man that appeared never had a face.

This was because, though Isshin knew what that man was like and what he had done, he had never once met him in person.

He was in completely black, as if painted in shadow, but his two eyes glittered, dyed in red.

When Isshin thought about that man, his heart wavered.

– Hatred.

That feeling was definitely there. But it was also true that it couldn't be split up into a simple emotion when he thought about how Yakumo and Nao wouldn't be in this world without that man.

– Can I forgive him?

If he asked that question, he would probably immediately reply no.

At the same time, however, he felt something like karma.

That man stole an important person from Isshin and also gave him back someone equally as important.

He could say that that man had brought about Isshin's life now.

He always thought about the same thing, but he couldn't find an answer.

'Hm.'

Isshin opened his eyes.

– I was controlled by worldly thoughts again.

After smiling self-derisively, Isshin slowly stood up and exited the temple.

The sun had risen and bathed the world in its refreshing morning rays.

Isshin looked at the cherry blossom tree in the garden.

He saw small pink buds on its branches.

Though it was still chilly, spring would come soon. Then this garden would

probably be in full bloom.

'Maybe I'll have a flower viewing,' said Isshin to himself.

'Ah!'

In response to the voice, Isshin looked and saw Nao running to him.

In Nao's smile, Isshin could see her face. The only woman Isshin had ever given his heart to. Isshin didn't know how much that smile had supported him.

Isshin naturally smiled as he waited for Nao to arrive.

However, before Nao reached him, he was assaulted with a fierce pain in his head, and he fell to his knees.

His forehead was drenched in sweat.

Recently, these awful headaches came often. While enduring the pain that came to him intermittently, he looked up.

'Oh!'

The smile left Nao's face. She peered anxiously at Isshin.

'I'm fine,' said Isshin with a smile as he patted Nao's head.

– Once the flowers bloom, let's view the flowers with everyone.

He placed a hand on Nao's shoulder as he murmured that in his heart.

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2

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I'm bored.

Ishii Yuutarou stifled his yawn as he looked at the documents.

March was finally approaching and it was much warmer now. When he did

simple document organisation, he became sleepy, even though he knew he couldn't.

Ishii's hands stopped. He took off his silver-framed glasses and rolled his head.

Since he had been in the same position for so long, his neck cracked loudly.

The <Unsolved Cases Special Investigation Room> where Ishii was stationed was one of the departments of the police force. Though its name was splendid, in actuality, all he did was organise the files for cases that had been left behind and help other departments.

Ishii felt very dissatisfied with the situation.

– Could the <Unsolved Cases Special Investigation Room> just be a dead-end job?

He had been thinking that recently.

Though it was imprudent, since he had finally joined the police force he had been yearning for, he wanted to take part in a stimulating case.

That said, he didn't want to have a case like the one last month with Takeda Shunsuke which had been bloody and had required him to investigate alone.

He had managed somehow then, but if something like that happened again, his heart would definitely break.

– Won't a safe and stylish case come my way?

Ishii put his glasses back on as he daydreamed.

Suddenly, he saw Gotou in front of him.

He had on a wrinkled shirt and a loose tie. He was reclining on his chair with his mouth wide open as he snored in his sleep. He didn't look much different from a drunkard sleeping on a bench outside the station.

– He could help out a bit.

Though he thought that, Ishii didn't have the courage to say it aloud.

Just as Ishii sighed, the door opened.

'Hey.'

Chief Miyagawa came into the room.

Though he was of small stature, he had a bald head and a hard, sharp gaze. At first glance, he looked more like somebody on the other side than a detective.

'T-t-thank you for your hard work!'

Ishii stood up energetically and straightened his spine as he saluted.

'Where's Gotou?'

'Er, um, he is here, but...'

Ishii's reply fizzled out as he looked at Gotou, sleeping in his chair.

Miyagawa clicked his tongue and walked briskly towards Gotou

'How long's this fool been sleeping?'

'He fell asleep immediately after lunch.'

When Miyagawa glared at him, Ishii replied simply, unable to resist.

The next moment, Miyagawa raised his right fist and dropped it on Gotou's head.

Thunk –

The dull sound reverberated through the room.

Ishii felt as though he himself had been hit and unconsciously cowered.

'That hurts!'

Gotou howled as he slipped out of the chair, falling to the floor.

'E-er, are you all right?'

Ishii immediately approached Gotou.

Gotou looked up.

Their eyes met.

– Eh? He can't think that...

When Ishii thought that, it was already too late.

Gotou rose abruptly and grabbed Ishii's shirt.

'Ishii! You bastard! When'd you get so mighty that you'd raise your hand against me? Eh?'

'T-that isn't it... It wasn't me.'

'Stop complaining.'

'No, but...'

Gotou didn't listen to Ishii's explanation and tightened his grip.

'Won't you stop!?!'

Miyagawa hit the back of Gotou's head.

'You bastard! What the hell are you... doing, sir...'

Gotou turned around reflexively, but when he noticed it was Miyagawa, he immediately toned down.

'What? So it's you, Miyagawa-san?'

Gotou leapt away from Ishii.

– I was this close to choking.

As Ishii coughed, he fixed the collar of his jacket.

'When'd you get so mighty that you'd sleep during work?'

'Even if you ask me when, I've always been doing this.'

Gotou picked his nose as Miyagawa questioned him.

'Don't just shrug it off,' complained Miyagawa. He walked to a nearby chair

and sat down. Then, he took a cigarette case out of his pocket and held it out towards Gotou.

Gotou took a cigarette. Then, the two of them both lit up and had a smoke.

No matter what they said, the two got along.

When Gotou said before that he was going to quit the police, Miyagawa had been the one who'd stopped him, saying, 'Don't screw with me!'

They were scathing to each other, but they were deeply connected.

– This is a friendship between men.

Ishii gazed at them enviously as he sat down.

'So what are you here for today?'

Gotou crossed his legs and leant back on his chair lazily.

This really wasn't the attitude one should be taking towards a boss. However, Miyagawa didn't seem to mind and brought up his topic.

'There's somewhere I want you guys to go.'

– Are we going to help out another department?

That was what Ishii thought, but when he saw Miyagawa's grim expression, his thoughts changed.

Though it was vague, he became anxious that something unbelievable was happening.

'Even though we look like this, we are busy. Please ask elsewhere.'

Perhaps Gotou didn't sense the strange atmosphere, because he waved his hand as if swatting a fly.

'You're busy napping?'

'Well, yes.'

'You're fired if you don't go.'

When Miyagawa said it, it didn't sound like a joke.

'Please feel free to do so.'

Gotou didn't budge. He spat his cigarette out towards the ceiling.

Miyagawa's fist would fly with Gotou's attitude like that. That was what Ishii thought, but it didn't happen.

Miyagawa's eyebrows lowered and he sighed, which wasn't like him.

'I don't want to make you guys go either.'

'What do you mean?'

– Don't want to make us go.

Ishii interrupted because those words had sounded off.

'It's troublesome, but you guys were designated first.'

'Designated? We were? This isn't a cabaret club – what are you planning?'

said Gotou, his attitude the same as always.

'Nanase Miyuki asked for an interview with you.'

After a silence, Miyagawa said that calmly.

– Nanase Miyuki.

The moment Ishii heard that name, his body jolted, as if electricity had run through him.

Cold sweat came out from every pore of his body.

'Why...'

Ishii put his thoughts into a question.

Nanase Miyuki was a woman who had killed her whole family when she was only ten years old.

After that, she disappeared with the man with two red eyes, Yakumo's father,

and was involved with a number of cases.

They wouldn't involve themselves directly. They played with the negative emotions in the bottom of people's hearts like hatred and jealousy and led them around.

– It's more frightening than directly killing somebody.

If there were existences in this world that were evil from birth, they would be considered part of those existences. Ishii felt like all other criminals were overshadowed by her absolute malice.

During Takeda Shunsuke's case, they had finally arrested her. Currently, she was in detention and awaiting trial.

– Why would she ask for that?

Ishii wiped his sweat, which wasn't stopping.

'What does Nanase Miyuki want now?'

Gotou stretched his back and glared at Miyagawa.

Even Gotou wouldn't joke around once her name was brought up.

'Nanase Miyuki seems to have told her lawyer that there is another murder that the police do not know about.'

Miyagawa said that in a terribly flat voice.

'A murder we don't know about?'

Gotou casually put out a cigarette in the ashtray.

The smoke swayed.

'She said she would only talk about the details with you two.'

'W-why us?' asked Ishii.

Since it was Miyuki, it wouldn't be strange if she had killed one or two more people.

What I don't understand is why she would talk about that now –

He also didn't understand why she would only talk to Gotou and Ishii.

'I don't understand either. Even when we asked the lawyer, all we got was that she only planned on talking to you two.'

Miyagawa covered his face with both hands as he sighed.

Ishii understood the situation. That said, he didn't want to see Miyuki.

There was just one reason. He was afraid.

Ishii licked his dry lips and looked to Gotou for help.

With a grim face, Gotou poked himself in his left side.

Several months ago, Gotou had been stabbed with a knife there. Miyuki had been the one who did it.

– Please refuse.

Ishii hoped Gotou would do that.

He really was afraid of meeting Miyuki. Since she was stuck in detention, they probably wouldn't be in direct danger, but he was still afraid.

'I guess there's no helping it.'

Gotou said that and stood up. Then, he grabbed his jacket from the back of the chair.

'Detective Gotou, you can't. This is definitely a trap,' pleaded Ishii.

If Miyuki was acting in such a roundabout way, there had to be something behind it.

'I know that even without you telling me.'

Gotou snorted.

'If you know that, why?'

'If we don't fall for it, we won't know what the trap is, right?'

After Gotou said that, he left the room briskly with a wide gait.

– I need to follow him.

Though Ishii knew that, for some reason, his body didn't move.

'Ishii.'

Miyagawa said that in a murmur.

'Y-yes sir.'

'I leave Gotou to you.'

'Eh?'

It was so unexpected that Ishii thought his ears were playing tricks on him.

'He doesn't have anything to protect, so sometimes he loses himself.'

– Loses himself.

When Ishii heard those words, he felt like there was a truth to them.

He knew what Miyagawa was saying. But –

'I can't do anything...'

Ishii knew he was only a burden.

'You don't have to do anything in particular. Just stay with him.'

'Yes sir.'

Ishii stood up as he replied.

Even though his body had been frozen earlier, it was now so light that it felt like that had been a lie.

Ishii left the room and ran after Gotou.

He stumbled.

He fell –

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3

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After finishing the morning lecture, Ozawa Haruka went to the prefabricated building in the back of Building B.

She was going to meet Saitou Yakumo.

She walked to the courtyard and turned her eyes to the cherry blossom tree which had started to bud.

– The flowers are going to blossom soon.

She looked up at the sky, where lines of clouds were blowing by. Spring was going to come soon.

So it's already that season – she nodded and started walking again.

It had been a year and a half since Haruka met Yakumo –

It had started when her friend Miki was possessed by a ghost.

She had been troubled about what to do when she had a rumour about Yakumo's expertise in spiritual phenomena, so she decided to go meet him.

Her first impression was the worst.

He was contrary and discourteous – he treated people like idiots.

Yakumo normally hid his left eye behind a black contact lens, but it was red, with the unique ability to see the spirits of the dead.

He had used that ability during that incident too. He hadn't only saved Miki from her possession – he had even solved the murder case without it becoming an issue.

That was the start of Haruka's involvement in a number of cases.

A lot of things had happened. She had been abducted, almost drowned in a river, held at knifepoint – she couldn't count them.

It was almost mysterious how she had managed to live until now.

While these cases piled up, her impression of Yakumo, who she had just thought of as fishy and contrary, changed.

Because of Yakumo's red eye, he had endured more sadness than most.

Because of that, he had built a wall around his heart and tried not to let people get close. He still did that sometimes.

However, Haruka thought he had gotten better now than he had been when they'd met.

While Haruka was thinking, she spotted the prefabricated building she was looking for.

There were ten small rooms of four and a half tatami in size on each floor. The building was lent out by the university for club and circle activities.

At the very back of the first floor, Yakumo lived in the room with the plate that read <Movie Research Circle>.

That wasn't an exaggeration. The name Movie Research Circle was a barefaced lie. Yakumo had deceived the university and was living in this prefabricated building like it was his own.

'Yakumo-kun, you here?'

Haruka called out as she opened the door.

Normally, Yakumo would be sitting at the chair facing the door and complain – 'What did you come here to do?' – with eyes that looked like they would fall asleep at any moment, but the room was so silent it was creepy.

– Is he sleeping?

Haruka looked at the sleeping bag near the wall, but it was empty.

'What? You're not here?' said Haruka in her dissatisfaction to nobody in particular.

– Maybe he'll come back soon.

Haruka opened the refrigerator in the back of the room, took out a bottle of tea and some almond chocolate, and sat on the chair.

'What are you doing?'

Surprised by the sudden voice, Haruka stood up and turned to look at the door.

Yakumo was standing there.

As usual, he was wearing a white shirt and jeans, and he had terrible bedhead.

'Ah, Yakumo-kun.'

'You barged into somebody's room but are acting like you owned the place. Do you not know the word "restraint"?' complained Yakumo as he sat down in his usual chair. He looked as displeased as a cat whose nap had been disturbed.

'How long have you been there?' asked Haruka, sitting down again.

'Since you were smirking up at the sky like an idiot.'

Yakumo yawned like a cat.

Haruka had looked up at the sky when she was in the courtyard. Which meant –

'You were following me that whole time?'

'Don't let the screws in your head get looser every time we meet. I'm just going to say this, but this is my room. I was only heading back to my own room. I don't have enough free time to stalk you.'

Though what he was saying wasn't wrong, he always said one thing too much. Plus –

'Then you could have called out to me.'

'Why?'

'Even if you ask me why...'

Haruka was lost for words.

She had felt like the distance between her and Yakumo had grown shorter after going through so many things together, but sometimes he would say things like this.

Her friends would sometimes ask if they were dating, but the answer was no. It wasn't like she wanted to date. She felt like that would waste too much of her time.

She didn't want to ruin their relationship by bringing that up.

Just as Haruka sighed, the door opened.

'Hello.'

The person who showed up at the door was Yakumo's uncle and the person who had raised him, Saitou Isshin.

He had on black robes and a monk's stole. Since Haruka was used to his usual work attire, he had a different impression than he usually did.

However, his smile as gentle as Maitreya's and red eye were the same as always.

Though Yakumo's red eye was from birth, Isshin's was different.

He had put on a red contact lens to make his left eye red. He received strange looks so that he could try to understand Yakumo's feelings, even just a little.

Isshin's love for Yakumo was that deep.

Haruka thought that Isshin was the reason Yakumo was able to overcome the experience of having his mother try to kill him when he was young and didn't cross the line.

'It's been a while.'

Haruka stood up and bowed.

'Ah, it has been a while. You could come by once in a while. Nao'd be happy too,' replied Isshin in a dignified voice, still smiling.

'Yes, I'll take you up on your offer.'

Then, Haruka gestured at her chair. 'Please sit down.'

'Ah, it's fine. I'll stand.'

Isshin showed his usual restraint and refused.

'It's more troublesome in a situation like this if you stand,' rebuked Yakumo.

'That so?' said Isshin. He rubbed his shaved head and sat down on the chair, seeming embarrassed.

Haruka took the round chair in the corner of the room and sat next to Yakumo.

Yakumo's cheek twitched and he looked a bit displeased, but Haruka pretended not to notice. It'd be best not to pay him any attention since he'd probably just complain anyway.

'So what are you here for?'

Yakumo put his chin in his hand as he asked Isshin that, looking as melancholic as if he had seen the end of the world.

'I came to consult you about something,' said Isshin with a sigh.

– Consult?

Haruka was surprised, though she didn't express that surprise aloud.

Haruka had never heard of Isshin consulting Yakumo before.

She looked to Yakumo.

'You can't be consulting me about spirits, could you?' drawled Yakumo, chin still in his hand.

Isshin clapped his hands together.

'You really are sharp.'

'What do you mean, sharp? You know I hate trouble of that kind.'

'Really?'

'Having one troublemaker is enough,' said Yakumo, glancing at Haruka.

It was a rude way of saying it, but she'd never see the end of it if she got angry at every little thing. Haruka pretended she didn't hear him.

'So you really won't help me?' said Isshin.

'No,' Yakumo said firmly. He crossed his arms in his displeasure.

When he became like this, Yakumo wouldn't budge.

Isshin knew Yakumo's personality, so he gave up readily. 'There's no helping it.'

But, putting Isshin aside, Haruka had no plans of letting it end like this.

Isshin had never brought up ghosts before. Rather, he knew that Yakumo didn't like his unique ability, so he avoided the topic.

For Isshin to bring up the topic, it must have been a very special situation.

'Hey, why not just listen to him?'

When Haruka said that, Yakumo glared at her immediately.

'I refuse.'

'So cheap.'

'I don't want to hear that from you.'

'What? You can just listen.'

'If I listen to it, I won't be able to leave it alone,' said Yakumo irritably.

– I see.

Haruka clapped her hands together in realisation. If she flipped those words around, it meant that Yakumo would take on the trouble if he heard the story.

Though that was just a convenient way of looking at it, she didn't care.

'Isshin-san, please let me hear what you have to say.'

'I said I wouldn't listen to it,' interrupted Yakumo immediately.

'I'm talking to Isshin-san. If you don't want to listen, you can leave.'

'Do whatever you want,' Yakumo said recklessly, and he leant back on his chair, seeming exhausted.

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4

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– This is a pain.

Gotou cursed in his heart after arriving at the reception area of the detention room.

The detention room was very different than what Gotou knew of them.

Renovated with the concept of a detention room with no walls, its appearance, outside and inside, reminded him of a general hospital.

Gotou wrote his name in the interview request document at the reception and put it through the window. Then, he sat on the sofa in the waiting room.

The prosecuted persecutor left the hands of the police, went from being the suspect to the accused, was taken into custody by the prosecution and was

waiting for the trial in the detention room.

The police couldn't freely visit people in detention.

Though it was a pain, he had to do the usual interview procedures.

Next to Gotou, Ishii was fidgeting, like he was trying to keep his bladder in check.

After waiting more than long enough, a voice called them in from the speaker.

Gotou and Ishii took the lift to the fourth floor. They followed the instructions of the uniformed guard, entered the room and sat down.

Protective glass divided the room in half. Each side had its own entrance so that the accused and the visitor could not directly touch.

Sitting next to Gotou, Ishii was looking around, unable to calm down, as usual.

Gotou hit Ishii's head casually.

'Ack.'

Ishii yelped like a dog whose tail had been stepped on and held his head in his hands.

It wasn't like Gotou didn't understand how Ishii felt, but they couldn't act disturbed in front of Miyuki.

Gotou crossed his arms and snorted.

At the same time, the door on the other side of the protective glass opened and the guard brought Miyuki in.

Since she was still the accused, she wasn't wearing prison clothes. She had on casual clothes – a white blouse and jeans.

The moment Gotou saw Miyuki, an unpleasant feeling welled up in his stomach.

– Miyuki doesn't regret what she's done.

He felt that way.

Though many people would falter when taken into detention because of the sudden change in environment, Miyuki hadn't changed at all since she was arrested.

On the contrary, when her eyes met Gotou's, her glossy red lips turned up in a smile.

Miyuki sat down as gracefully as a queen in the chair that the guard directed her to.

'My, if it isn't Gotou-san. Even Ishii-san – what is it?'

Miyuki turned towards Gotou and Ishii, sitting like the woman in the Mona Lisa as she said that with half-closed eyes.

Gotou shuddered just from looking at those eyes. Ishii looked at his feet, like he couldn't bear the gaze.

– Don't get caught up at her pace.

Gotou told himself that and glared at Miyuki with his hands in fists on his lap.

'What is it? You're the one who called us here.'

'My, is that so?'

Miyuki hid her mouth with her hand and laughed with shaking shoulders.

– She's enjoying this.

'If you don't need anything, we're leaving.'

'That's fine by me, but somebody important to you will die.'

Miyuki's voice was so empty of intonation it was uncanny.

'That's not what you said. You killed somebody else and were going to tell us

about that. Isn't that what you said?'

Gotou leant forward.

– There is another murder.

That was what Miyagawa said, but from what Miyuki said just now, it sounded like that murder hadn't happened yet.

'It seems like the message wasn't carried to you properly.'

The smile left Miyuki's face.

Her expression was as inhuman as a wax figure's, but her eyes alone were sparkling. It was creepy.

'I'm *going to* kill somebody – that's what I said.'

'That's ridiculous!' yelled Gotou, overwhelmed by his emotions.

However, Miyuki didn't raise even one eyebrow. She continued to speak disinterestedly.

'It isn't impossible for me.'

'Don't make fun of us! You're in prison. There's no way you could kill anybody. Understand the position you're in,' said Gotou all at once, his nose so close to the glass it was almost touching.

Miyuki was imprisoned in the newly built Tokyo Detention House. It couldn't be compared with the old system.

All of the windows were protective glass. The door was made of steel and wouldn't open without both a key and fingerprint recognition. Furthermore, the security cameras everywhere were always on.

– It's definitely impossible for her to kill someone in this situation.

Miyuki had to be challenging them, saying she'd kill somebody because she was bored from being imprisoned. That was how she entertained herself.

'You think I can't do it.'

Miyuki looked at Gotou with eyes full of pity.

'Of course I don't.'

'Unfortunately, I can.'

'Hah?'

'Even while I'm here, I can kill somebody outside.'

'There's a limit to how far you can take a joke!' spat out Gotou.

However, even while he denied her claims, the anxiety in his chest was stuck there, like gum at the bottom of a shoe.

The reason for that was Miyuki's eyes. Even though what she was saying was absolutely impossible, there was no doubt in those eyes. On the contrary, they appeared filled with confidence.

'I thought that was what you'd say, Gotou-san.'

Miyuki's lips turned up in a smile. Then, she slowly pointed at Ishii.

'But what do you think, Ishii-san? DO you think I can kill somebody elsewhere while I'm in the detention house?'

The conversation suddenly turned to Ishii, and his mouth fell agape as he froze. He was going completely at Miyuki's pace.

– Don't fall for it!

Instead of speaking aloud, Gotou hit Ishii's back.

Ishii came back to his senses, recoiling like a spring.

'I-I don't...'

Ishii fixed the position of his glasses as he looked at his feet.

– There's no point talking any further.

'We don't have the time to go along with your stupid joke,' said Gotou with a click of his tongue. He got up from his seat.

Miyuki stood up as well, as if she were a reflection in a mirror.

Their eyes met through the glass.

The pupils of her narrowed eyes glittered like a drawn sword.

'I don't mind if you think I'm playing around. People won't acknowledge the importance of something until it's happened.'

Gotou couldn't think of a reply.

He knew in his mind that there was no way somebody in detention could kill somebody outside. But what was that numb feeling?

Could this woman really kill somebody at a distance?

A line of sweat ran down Gotou's back.

'It's time.'

The guard walked towards Miyuki. Gotou came back to his senses.

The guard stood in meetings to check that there was no issue with what was being discussed. Despite that –

Miyuki had been discussing a murder plan. It was definitely unnatural for the guard just to stand there like nothing had happened.

'Wait a second!'

Gotou called out at the guard who had tried to leave the room together with Miyuki.

The guard slowly turned around. Those eyes were hollow – it was like they didn't see Gotou.

'What are you planning to do? This woman...'

Gotou hit the glass with his hand.

'Gotou-san.'

Miyuki interrupted Gotou.

'I forgot to say the crucial point.'

'What?'

'The name of the person I'm going to kill...'

'You can't be aiming for Yakumo again, right?'

Gotou said the first thing that came to mind.

Miyuki was so focussed on Yakumo it was extraordinary. If she was going to kill somebody, Yakumo was the only person Gotou could think of.

'Nope. I *can't* kill Yakumo-kun.'

Miyuki shook her head.

'Then who? Who the hell are you planning to kill?'

Miyuki paused purposefully and then licked her lips, like a snake.

Gotou gulped.

'Saitou Isshin.'

'W-what?'

Gotou's voice caught at the unexpected name.

'I'm going to kill Saitou Isshin from inside this detention house.'

After licking her red lips, Miyuki smiled twistedly.

– Why? Why does she need to kill Isshin?

Gotou thought furiously, but he couldn't find the answer.

Miyuki walked out the door with the guard.

'Oi! Wait! We're not done talking!'

The door closed loudly, interrupting Gotou's frantic yell.

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5

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Haruka went together with Yakumo and Isshin to the hospital where the spiritual phenomenon occurred.

A number of affiliated hospitals in the city had combined and were rebuilt into a general hospital.

The glass-sided lobby looked at first glance like a high-class restaurant. Haruka had thought it'd be more eerie, so it was a bit anticlimactic.

Isshin went to the reception to call out his friend, the one who had told him about this.

Haruka sat with Yakumo on the bench in the waiting area.

Yakumo had his hands in his pockets and was staring forward, looking displeased.

'Hey, Yakumo-kun. Do you think the story earlier was true?'

Haruka recalled the story Isshin had told them earlier.

It was about a girl's ghost who appeared every night in the hospital.

That girl wandered the hospital and would ask patients a question if she found them.

– When are you going to die?

The people who were asked this question always died soon afterwards.

Yakumo's expression was grim, but finally, he opened his mouth while running a hand through his hair.

'I've said this countless times, but the spirits of the dead are clusters of

people's emotions. Therefore...'

'They have no physical effect on the living.'

Haruka finished Yakumo's sentence.

He had explained this to her again and again before.

Yakumo could see the spirits of the dead with his red left eye. It was a notion he had come up with from his experiences.

Since spirits of the dead were only clusters of people's emotions, they had no physical influence at all.

Accordingly, they couldn't curse people to death or directly harm them. The actions of exorcists were pointless. That was Yakumo's theory.

'But people actually died, right?'

Haruka said the first thing that came to mind. If the rumour were true, everyone whom the girl asked that question died.

However, Yakumo shook his head in his exasperation.

'You're such an idiot you could be in the Guinness World Book of Records.'

– When'd my idiocy become world-class?

'Did I say something so strange?'

'You did.'

'But the rumour...'

'That's why I said you're an idiot. Rumours are rumours.'

'But...'

'Plus, this is a hospital. It isn't strange for people to die.'

'Right. My bad.'

Haruka understood what Yakumo was saying, but his tone annoyed her. In the

past, she would've cried herself to sleep, but now, Haruka had a trick to fight back.

Haruka waited for a chance to poke Yakumo in the side.

A jolt ran through Yakumo's body and he stood up from the bench.

He looked so strange Haruka couldn't help but laugh.

Yakumo opened his mouth like he wanted to say something when Isshin came back. He was together with a woman in a white and a female nurse.

'Let me introduce her. This is Arai Mao-san, one of my friends from university,' said Isshin, gesturing at the woman in white.

'It's nice to meet you. My name is Arai Mao,' said Mao with good enunciation. Then, she smiled with dimples.

When Haruka heard the story from Isshin, she had thought that his friend was male, so she was a bit surprised.

Mao had an intellectual air to her, but perhaps because of her small frame and skin as smooth as an egg, she looked young.

'My name is Ozawa Haruka.'

Yakumo bowed silently while yawning.

'You must be Yakumo-kun. I've heard about you from Isshin-kun.'

Mao held her hand out towards Yakumo for a handshake.

However, Yakumo didn't appear to notice the hand, and just said, 'Nice to meet you.'

He might have disliked being talked about without his knowing.

'Sorry, Yakumo can be difficult,' said Isshin, smoothing things over.

'More importantly, please let me hear about the spiritual phenomenon.'

Yakumo brought up the main topic while running his fingers through his hair.

Pointless conversations are unnecessary – it was like he was saying that.

'She knows about it in more detail than I do, so do you mind if she explains?'

Mao smiled wryly as she looked at the nurse with her.

'Go ahead.'

Yakumo yawned, seeming uninterested in Mao's suggestion.

'Then Furukawa-san, I leave the rest to you.'

'Yes.'

After replying quietly, Furukawa took a step forward.

Her height wasn't much different from Mao's, but she was a size larger.

She had defined, childish features, but she looked somehow afraid.

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

'It's nice to meet you as well.'

Haruka bowed politely.

However, Yakumo didn't bow – rather, he looked away.

He was looking at Isshin and Mao, speaking quietly between themselves.

'... discussed... results of the examination...'

Haruka could faintly hear Mao's lowered voice.

– Results of the examination?

Perhaps it was something to do with Yakumo's red eye.

'We're going,' said Yakumo, interrupting Haruka's thoughts.

She saw that Yakumo and Furukawa had already started walking.

'Ah, wait.'

Haruka started walking after Yakumo.

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6

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– I’m scared.

Ishii finally reached the parking lot.

The distance of only a few dozen metres had felt considerably longer to Ishii.

His ears had been buzzing ever since he heard Miyuki’s voice. He was dizzy and his feet were unsteady, as if he had had a bout of anaemia.

Ishii dropped his key a number of times from his shaking hand and finally opened the door to the white Crown to get into the driver’s seat.

He leant back on the chair and could tell that his back was damp.

Miyuki’s faint smile wouldn’t leave his retinas.

Her eyes, mouth and voice – her very existence was the object of terror.

Ishii looked at himself in the rear-view mirror.

– I look awful.

His face was as pale as a dead man’s. His eyes were bloodshot.

‘Stop spacing out.’

Gotou got into the passenger’s seat and hit Ishii’s head.

‘E-e-excuse me...’

Though Ishii apologised, his feelings didn’t change.

– Even while I’m here, I can kill somebody outside.

Miyuki had said that.

Thinking about it normally, that was impossible.

However, Miyuki’s eyes then had been filled with confidence, like those of a

magician about to show his audience a marvel. Ishii was sure she was planning something incredible.

'E-er, Detective Gotou. About earlier...'

I want somebody to deny it – that was Ishii's wish as he asked his question.

'It's obviously a lie!' spat out Gotou, in a foul mood.

Though Gotou's words normally reassured Ishii, now they just sounded like a strong front.

'But she didn't look like she was lying.'

Ishii couldn't erase his anxiety.

'Listen – use your common sense. That woman's imprisoned in the Tokyo Detention House. She's locked in a room and is being watched twenty-four hours a day. It's definitely for making an alibi.'

Just as Gotou said, as long as she was imprisoned, committing a crime would be impossible.

Ishii understood that, but something in the back of his mind wouldn't accept that.

Miyuki had trapped them many times up until now. Mightn't she be able to overcome physical convention – thought Ishii.

'She might have a method that we don't know...'

He put his anxiety as it was into words.

'Give it up already. Of course she can't. The story'd be different if she could walk through walls or something,' said Gotou recklessly, lighting up a cigarette.

That moment, a light came on in Ishii's head. A bolt out of the blue –

'Detective Gotou! That's it! That!'

Ishii was so agitated he leant towards Gotou.

'You're so noisy! Calm down!'

Gotou pushed Ishii away from him as he said that.

'I understand! I know how she's going to commit the murder!'

'W-what?'

Even Gotou couldn't hide his surprise as he looked at Ishii with wide eyes.

It made sense for Gotou to be surprised, but Ishii couldn't think of any other method. Ishii was confident in his thoughts.

'Explain,' said Gotou, looking straight at Ishii's eyes.

Gotou's eyes seemed doubtful, but once he heard Ishii's explanation, that would probably change.

'It's simple. The hint was what you said about walking through walls, Detective Gotou.'

Gotou's brows furrowed, and his lips turned down in doubt.

It was such an interesting expression, but Gotou would probably get angry if Ishii laughed so he continued his explanation in a disinterested matter.

'You don't understand? Just as you said, Detective Gotou, she plans on walking through the walls.'

'Hah?'

Gotou cocked his head.

'I'm saying that she has the special ability to walk through walls. From her perspective, it doesn't matter how strictly guarded the detention house is. I mean, she can walk through walls,' declared Ishii clearly.

He was that confident in his own thoughts.

'Ishii. You seriously saying that?'

'Yes. Of course. Walking through walls is possible. I saw it on television before. A man with supernatural powers named David Copperfield...'

As Ishii continued explaining, Gotou's fist came down on his head.

It hurt so much that Ishii couldn't even scream – he just held his head in his hands.

'The next time you say something so stupid, I'm going to kill you,' said Gotou, spitting out his cigarette.

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7

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– I'm always chasing after him.

Haruka finally caught up to Yakumo and Furukawa at the lift.

It would be more correct to say they were waiting there.

'You're the type who would run away too late during a fire.'

When Haruka got in the lift, Yakumo said that in his usual tone.

He always said one thing too much.

– I don't need to hear that from you.

Haruka muttered that in her heart.

They went up to the third floor and then walked up to the men's lavatory in front of the nurse centre at Furukawa's direction.

'It's here,' said Furukawa, pointing at the door.

After hearing that a ghost was spotted here, the simple door looked like the gateway to hell.

Yakumo opened the door without any hesitation, flipped the light switch by the entrance and went inside.

Haruka and Furukawa stood at the entrance, peering inside.

It was a clean lavatory, surrounded by white walls. Urinals were on the walls with three stalls at the end.

'About a week ago, a young man hospitalised for a stomach ulcer saw a ghost here.'

Furukawa's voice was shaking.

It was like she had experienced it herself.

'Where did he see the ghost?' asked Yakumo.

'At the sink,' replied Furukawa.

'Here?'

Yakumo stood in front of the sink.

'Yes.'

'Then?'

'When he was washing his face, he turned around at the sound of someone's voice.'

Yakumo turned around at Furukawa's words.

His gaze was on the white wall of the lavatory.

'Then?'

'Nobody was there, but when he looked at the mirror again, there was a girl standing behind him.'

'A girl...' said Haruka as she imagined the scene.

When he looked at the mirror, the girl's ghost was standing there. How frightening –

'That girl asked him a question.'

'A question?'

Yakumo raised an eyebrow.

'Yes.'

'What sort of question?'

'When are you going to die – she asked him that,' said Furukawa, opening her eyes wide.

Haruka felt gooseflesh rise on her skin.

– When are you going to die?

Haruka was more frightened by the words the girl's ghost had left.

It made it sound like she wished for that person's death. When she thought about how it was a young girl who'd said that, it made it even more terrible.

'Then what happened to him afterwards?' asked Yakumo lazily after a silence.

'He hurriedly ran out of the lavatory and tried to return to his hospital room, but the girl's ghost was there... and then he headed for the stairs...'

Furukawa left the lavatory entrance and walked towards the stairs.

Haruka and Yakumo followed her.

'Here.'

Furukawa stopped in front of the stairs.

The difference in level was minimal. The stairs were wide and there were landings as the stairway turned.

'The girl's ghost came upon him and he fell here.'

As Furukawa explained, she clasped her hands in front of her chest.

'Then?' urged Yakumo.

'He hit his head, and when we found him, it was already too late...'

Furukawa covered her face with her hands as she finished.

Haruka looked down the stairs. For just a moment, she felt like she could see a bleeding man collapsed at the bottom of the stairs.

Yakumo pinched his brow with his fingers and looked down, as if thinking.

'Can you see anything?'

Yakumo shook his head at Haruka's question.

'I don't see anything now.'

'Then...'

'You make mistakes because you jump to conclusions like that.'

'Can't you say that differently?'

Haruka looked angry, but Yakumo didn't appear to care as he turned back to Furukawa.

'I understand. I'll investigate.'

Yakumo said just that and turned around on his heels. He started walking briskly.

Haruka wasn't sure what to do, so she bowed at Furukawa and chased after Yakumo.

'Hey, did you find out anything?'

Haruka spoke up to Yakumo, but he walked silently to the lift; it didn't seem like he wanted to respond.

'Hey, why are you in such a bad mood?'

She asked Yakumo another question as they waited for the lift to move.

Yakumo sighed and then scowled.

'Listening to that would put anyone in a bad mood.'

'Why?'

'What do you mean, why? Don't you think it's strange?'

Haruka looked up at the ceiling as she thought, but she couldn't think of anything in particular.

'I was an idiot for asking you,' said Yakumo as the lift doors opened. Then he walked briskly to the exit.

Haruka chased after Yakumo's back again.

'Explain properly.'

'Have you really not noticed?'

'I haven't.'

'The young man died after falling down the stairs.'

'What's strange about that?'

'That young man died.'

'Yes.'

'Then why would the nurse know what the ghost said to the young man?'

'Ah!'

Now that Yakumo said it, Haruka finally understood.

If that young man really died, there was no way the nurse could know what the ghost said to him.

'Furthermore, why wasn't it in the news?'

'That's...'

'If a patient died after falling down the stairs in a hospital, there would be a fuss.'

'Right.'

'There are other points that are strange.'

'What?'

'That hospital has been built for half a year. The way the nurse put it, a number of people have died mysterious deaths.'

'She did say that.'

'If that many people have died mysterious deaths, the responsibility of the management would be questioned.'

Yakumo's voice was filled with anger.

After hearing what Yakumo said, an uneasy feeling spread through Haruka's chest.

'Could it be...'

'Correct. That was just gossip. Though it seems like the nurse called Furukawa believes it...'

Yakumo stopped in front of the automatic door as he said that with a disappointed expression.

'How about Isshin-san?'

– Does he know this is just gossip?

Haruka was concerned about that.

'Of course he knows it's gossip.'

'Then why did he go out of his way to consult Yakumo-kun?'

'When that person sees somebody who's troubled, he can't leave them alone.'

'Right.'

Haruka felt that too.

No matter the situation, Isshin was the type of person who couldn't leave somebody who was troubled alone.

'He knew it was gossip and got me to pretend to be an exorcist to control the situation.'

'Really?'

'And that doctor called Mao doesn't believe in the ghost either.'

'Eh?'

'That's why neither she nor Uncle came along.'

'Ah...'

– Come to think of it.

Haruka clapped her hands in understanding.

Yakumo walked through the automatic doors and went outside.

'Hey, where are you going?'

Haruka immediately ran after him.

'Back, obviously.'

'You're not going to wait for Isshin-san?'

'My work is done.'

Yakumo walked away without turning around.

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8

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Ishii walked through the corridor in the basement of the hospital where the coroner Hata Hideyoshi worked.

The fluorescent lighting was dirty and broken at points, so the corridor was dim and uncanny.

Ishii didn't want to come to a place like this by himself, but he couldn't say

something like that.

Gotou was frantically looking for Yakumo and couldn't get away from his work. Plus, the person who'd suggested that they ask Hata's opinion was none other than Ishii.

Ishii stood in front of the door at the very end and knocked as he pinned down his wildly beating heart.

'It's open.'

There was a reply in a hoarse voice.

With the mood of the corridor, that voice sounded more uncanny than usual.

'P-please excuse me.'

Ishii timidly opened the door and went inside.

The room was about six tatami in size. Cabinets lined the walls, while Hata was at the desk in the back.

With white hair and a face that was wrinkled like a dried persimmon, Hata had goggling eyes which were sparkling like those of a child.

He looked just like a demon.

Hata was a perverted coroner who professed that 'corpses had to be raw'.

Gotou always said that Hata would commit a crime someday, but Ishii thought that what Hata said came from an innocent interest in the matter as a doctor.

Hata was unusually interested in the threshold between life and death.

However, just because Ishii thought that didn't mean Hata wasn't frightening.

'Oh, it's you, Ishii-kun?'

Hata took a leisurely sip of his tea.

'Ah, h-hello.'

'The bear isn't with you?'

– Bear?

For a moment, Ishii was confused, but then he realised that Hata was talking about Gotou.

'Detective Gotou is busy with another case...'

'I see. Why not sit down?'

Hata looked at the round chair in the centre of the room.

'Ah, I don't mind standing.'

'Then we can't relax and talk.'

'I-I'm sorry.'

Ishii hurriedly sat down in the chair after Hata said that, sounding depressed.

When they sat in front of each other like this, Hata seemed even more like a demon.

– He really is scary.

'So what are you here for today? You come to ask for a way to kill the bear?'

'T-that's... How could I kill Detective Gotou...'

'That idiot won't get better unless he dies,' said Hata. He seemed to find it funny as he leant backwards and giggled.

Ishii looked at him fearfully, wondering whether his chin might dislocate.

'Actually, I wanted to consult you about something,' said Ishii after Hata finished laughing.

'Consult? All I can help with is corpses.'

'I understand.'

Ishii adjusted the position of his glasses and looked straight at Hata.

Hata seemed to sense something different from usual so he looked back with a serious expression and urged Ishii to continue: 'Try telling me.'

'We went to the detention house today to meet Nanase Miyuki.'

'That must've been a trial.'

Hata's eyes popped out like a fish's.

Even Hata couldn't remain indifferent after hearing her name.

'We were called there. By her...'

'Then?'

'She gave us advance notice that she would kill Saitou Isshin from within the detention house. No, perhaps it was a prophecy.'

'Advance notice of a murder, eh...'

Hata looked grim as he rubbed the white stubble on his chin.

Even Hata was troubled by the situation.

'So I wanted to borrow your knowledge, Hata-san...'

'The method somebody would use to kill somebody else from within a detention house – that's what you want to know.'

'Yes.'

'There's no such method,' said Hata firmly.

The response was so quick that it was anticlimactic.

'No, but...'

'If it were a one-room flat, there could be some sort of trick, but it's different for a detention house.'

Ishii also understood what Hata was saying.

The detention house was fortified with metal walls. It couldn't be left or

entered easily. Ishii knew that.

However, that didn't mean he accepted it.

Ishii didn't think that Miyuki had just gave them advance notice of a murder she couldn't do to kill time. She must have been thinking something that Ishii couldn't understand.

'Can you not think of a method besides a trick?'

'Besides a trick?'

'YEs. For example, supernatural powers or curses...'

'Curses...'

'Yes. Do you know anything of them?'

'I hear many rumours of that sort, but they're all scams.'

'But...'

'The only real thing I've seen up until now is Yakumo.'

Hata snorted.

It was the same for Ishii, but he still thought there might be something.

'We are dealing with Nanase Miyuki. She might have a special ability.'

'If she is going to kill somebody with supernatural powers or curses – we have no means to stop her.'

Hata gulped down all the tea in his teacup.

'That's...'

Ishii felt like he had fallen into hell.

It was just as Hata said. If she used supernatural powers or curses, even if they knew her method, they, as normal people, had no way to stop her.

'This is just my gut talking, but is Nanase Miyuki's goal murder?' drawled

Hata.

'What do you mean?'

'Exactly what I said.'

After Hata said that, he slowly looked up at the fluorescent lights on the ceiling.

Ishii couldn't understand the true meaning behind Hata's words –

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9

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'Sorry to bother.'

Gotou opened the door to Yakumo's secret hiding place, the <Movie Research Circle>..

The dim and cold room was silent.

It seemed like Yakumo had gone out without locking the door. Gotou thought it was careless, but then he realised there was nothing to steal from the dreary room.

Gotou sat down on a chair.

– I will kill Saitou Isshin from within the detention house.

Miyuki's words kept repeating in Gotou's head.

It was absolutely impossible. Gotou understood that, but he just couldn't wipe the anxiety away from his heart.

That was why he wanted to hear Yakumo's opinion.

No, he might have just wanted to hear the words 'Killing somebody from within a detention house is impossible' from Yakumo's mouth.

However, Yakumo didn't answer no matter how many times Gotou called.

Gotou had come to Yakumo's secret hiding place because of that, but the room was empty.

'You monster cat. What are you doing at a time like this?'

Gotou clicked his tongue and cursed. Then, his mobile phone started vibrating to tell him he had a call.

– Yakumo!?

'You bastard! Where the hell have you walked off to!?'

Gotou answered the mobile without checking the display and yelled at the receiver.

<What did you say?>

The voice he heard from the other end of the phone was the thick one of Miyagawa.

'What? It's you, Miyagawa-san?'

<What do you mean, what? Honestly...>

Gotou heard Miyagawa sigh.

'What is it then?'

<What do you mean, what is it? I'm calling about Nanase Miyuki's murder.>

'Did you figure something out?' snapped Gotou.

<No, we don't know the details at all.>

'I see...'

They wouldn't have to put up with so much if they could find stuff out that easily. Gotou understood that, but he couldn't do anything about his rapidly withering feelings.

<There's one piece of bad news.>

'What is it?'

<Regarding the matter of Saitou Isshin's bodyguard...>

The moment Gotou left the detention house, he told Miyagawa the situation and requested that a bodyguard stay with Saitou Isshin for the next little while.

'What happened?'

From the tone of Miyagawa's voice, Gotou could easily imagine what the police had decided, but he decided to ask anyway.

'The guys at the top decided to keep an eye on the situation.'

– As I thought.

'Why?' asked Gotou, though he knew the answer.

<There's no way a murder can occur from within a detention house – that's what they decided.>

'Idiotic. It'll be too late if something happens,' spat out Gotou, disappointed in the answer he had expected.

It was certainly impossible to kill somebody from within a detention house. Gotou understood that. But there was always the possibility.

It would be too late once it happened.

However, the organisation that was the police wouldn't move their fat bottoms until something happened.

There was a mountain of cases wherein they had the information from the victim but no concrete action was taken.

<We'll need people to guard him. And if the press hear about the police moving because somebody gave advance notice of a murder from within a detention house, it'd be a mess.'

Gotou understood what Miyagawa was saying.

If the police moved now, that would mean they recognised what Miyuki said.

Then the press would get all stirred up.

But –

'Who the hell cares? Somebody might get killed!'

<Calm down.>

'How could I be calm?'

<You idiot! Before you go flapping your mouth off, there's something you have to do!'

Miyagawa yelled so loudly Gotou thought the speaker would break.

Gotou's breath caught at the pressure from that voice.

<I told you the decision from the guys on the top.>

'Miyagawa-san...'

<You go protect the monk who's got that murder notice.>

Miyagawa's words changed the anger eddying in the bottom of Gotou's stomach into a sense of duty.

– I'll protect him!

Gotou engraved that determination into his heart.

'I planned on doing that even if you didn't tell me to.'

<We'll look into the background of the guard who was watching when you had your interview.>

Gotou recalled the face of the guard who had watched as he met with Miyuki.

He had left Miyuki alone when she gave advance notice of a murder right in front of him. That attitude was clearly strange. There was a chance it was related to the case somehow.

'Thank you.'

After he said that, Gotou hung up. At the same time, another call came in.

This time it was –

'Who is it?'

<Ah, er, this is Ishii Yuutarou.>

He heard Ishii's hesitant voice.

'What do you want?'

<I just left Hata-san's hospital.>

'And?'

<Unfortunately, I have no new information.>

'You're useless!'

<I-I apologise...>

Even through the phone, Gotou could tell that Ishii was bowing his head.

'Anyway, come right now.'

<Er... Where to?>

'To that monk's place, of course!'

Gotou yelled at the receiver and then hung up.

– I have to protect him.

'I won't let any get killed in front of me. I won't let anyone die.'

Gotou murmured that to incite his own morale and then opened the door to leave the room.

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10

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– Yakumo really went back.

After deliberation, Haruka decided to wait for Isshin on the bench in the waiting room.

Since Isshin had been the one who asked them to come investigate, Haruka didn't think they should leave without talking to him.

Just as Yakumo said, Isshin might have known that the ghost sighting was just a rumour, but those were two different matters.

Plus, Haruka was interested in why Isshin had taken the request.

She was sure he had some sort of special reason.

While Haruka thought about that, gazing idly at the opposite side of the glass, she suddenly felt somebody's gaze.

She looked up and saw a girl of about middle-school age in front of her.

Her glossy black hair went to her shoulders. Perhaps because of her hollow cheeks, her eyes were goggling.

She just looked at Haruka without saying anything.

'What is it?'

However, the girl stood there without even a twitch, as if she hadn't heard anything.

'Haruka-chan.'

Isshin called out to her as he walked over.

'Ah, Isshin-san.'

Haruka looked up at Isshin.

Isshin noticed the girl in front of Haruka. He looked surprised.

'Yoshiko-chan.'

Isshin called out to the girl.

'Is she somebody you know?'

'She's a patient at this hospital. We were together during the examination earlier.'

'I see...'

'What are you doing here?' said Isshin, crouching down.

Yoshiko's eyes, which had been blank until now, seemed to light up a bit.

That was Isshin for you, thought Haruka. Isshin found a place in your heart no matter who you were.

'I'm looking...' said Yoshiko in a hard voice.

'What are you looking for?'

'Dad.'

Yoshiko's expression clouded over again.

'Your father, eh... You'll definitely find him.'

'Yoshiko-chan.'

A nurse called out and walked over to interrupt them.

Yoshiko turned around in response to that.

'So this is where you were. Come on, let's go back to your room.'

The nurse took Yoshiko's hand.

Yoshiko nodded weakly and was led away by the nurse.

'Her heart is weak,' said Isshin, his eyes narrowed as he watched Yoshiko leave.

'Eh?'

'When we were waiting to get our blood drawn, I talked with Yoshiko-chan a bit.'

'Is that so?'

'I was concerned because she looked so sad, so afterwards I asked the nurse, who said her heart was failing...'

Isshin's eyes looked distant as he said that.

Perhaps he was thinking about Nao.

'By the way, where's Yakumo?' said Isshin, changing the topic.

'He left earlier.'

Haruka shrugged her shoulders.

'I wanted to talk to him a bit, but I guess there's no helping it.'

Isshin knew Yakumo's selfish personality well. That said, he couldn't hide his disappointment.

Somehow, Haruka felt apologetic.

'I'm sorry.'

'No, no, there's no reason for you to apologise, Haruka-chan.'

'But...'

'Now, we should get going too.'

A carefree smile appeared on Isshin's face, and he started walking slowly.

Haruka followed after him.

When they passed through the automatic doors to go outside, the wind blew by them lowly.

That wind felt warmer than usual. Spring was coming soon.

'Yakumo-kun could have said something too.'

Haruka looked at Isshin's profile.

Normally, Yakumo lived in the room for the <Movie Research Circle> at the

university, and he rarely visited Isshin's temple, though Isshin was the one who had raised him.

Earlier, Isshin had said there was no helping it, but Haruka could tell that Isshin was regretful.

'Yakumo is a cloud,' Isshin said seriously.

'A cloud?'

'Yes. He won't be bound by anything. When somebody tries to grab him, he slips out of their grasp.'

Isshin had stopped in his tracks. He reached out towards the sky and gripped his fingers, as if trying to grab a cloud.

'That might be true.'

Though Haruka was smiling, those words had stabbed deep in her heart.

– He won't be bound by anything.

It really could be true, but that meant Haruka might have been tying Yakumo down by chasing after him so frantically.

It could be terribly annoying to Yakumo.

Haruka knew it was a bad habit to think so negatively, but she couldn't help but be concerned.

– What does Yakumo think of me?

She felt like the distance between them had closed more than before, but she also felt like there was a wall in front of her that she just couldn't scale.

More than friends, less than lovers – it was a setting that might work out if this were a drama, but being put in this position in reality made her dissatisfied and anxious.

'Are you all right?' asked Isshin, sounding concerned.

Haruka's face heated up – she felt like he had seen through to the bottom of her heart.

'Yes.'

'Did I say something unnecessary?'

'No, that isn't it.'

'Yakumo isn't good at expressing his feelings. He should be a bit sweeter to you ,Haruka-chan.'

– Yakumo being sweet?

Haruka couldn't imagine it at all. She unconsciously started laughing.

'It'd be creepy if he acted that way.'

'Hm, that might be true.'

Isshin scratched his chin and nodded.

'I know very well about Yakumo-kun's contrary act.'

'Right. You might know him better than I do, Haruka-chan.'

Isshin smiled.

It was mysterious how Haruka felt like her worries had been silly just from seeing that gentle smile.

'No, I don't think so.'

'I do though. As long as you're there for him, Haruka-chan, Yakumo will be fine.'

Isshin looked up at the sky and said that cheerfully.

Perhaps putting it this way would be an exaggeration, but he looked like a father seeing his child leaving the nest.

Haruka looked up at the sky as well.

The cloudy sky was dyed a brilliant red.

In the middle of the sky was a single line of clouds, like a brush had artlessly drawn them.

Isshin's eyes looked a bit wet as he stood next to her.

'Did something happen?' said Haruka, looking at Isshin's forlorn profile.

– He's going to disappear.

Isshin looked so fleeting then that Haruka felt that way.

'No, it's nothing.'

'If you're sure.'

Haruka didn't accept that answer, but she couldn't ask further. Haruka felt that way so she looked away from Isshin.

After that, Haruka parted with Isshin at the train station.

'Haruka-chan, from now on, I'll leave Yakumo to you.'

When they parted, Isshin said that with a solemn expression.

Haruka felt like those words had a special meaning to them, but she didn't ask what it was. She just replied, 'Yes.'

Only afterwards did Haruka realise what those words meant –

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11

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– To hell with it!

Gotou cursed in his heart as he leant back on the passenger seat with a cigarette in his mouth.

He had called Yakumo earlier, but his phone appeared to be off so all Gotou's

calls had gone to voicemail.

Yakumo wasn't the only person he couldn't get a hold of.

Gotou went to the temple to guard Isshin, but he had also been out.

The car was parked in front of the temple gates, but all Gotou could do was wait for the person he was supposed to protect.

That just increased his irritation.

Gotou lit up his cigarette to try to calm down.

'Er, Detective Gotou...'

In the driver's seat, Ishii spoke up, sounding troubled.

'Eh?'

'What do you think Nanase Miyuki's goal is?'

'What are you saying?'

Gotou cocked his head.

Her goal was clear. I will kill Saitou Isshin – Miyuki had declared that. That was her goal.

'Hata-san said this.'

'What?'

“Is her goal really murder?”

Ishii adjusted the position of his glasses with his fingers and looked forward.

'Idiot. Don't take that demonic old man seriously.'

Gotou hit Ishii.

However, now that Ishii said that, Gotou realised that there were a number of things that were off.

– Why Saitou Isshin?

Gotou didn't think that Miyuki had a reason to kill Isshin.

If she had a grudge, it would have been Yakumo, who had cornered Miyuki, or Gotou, who had arrested her.

'What do you think?' said Gotou without thinking.

That very moment, Ishii raised his head with sparkling eyes.

'I think it's an experiment.'

'An experiment?'

'Yes. Nanase Miyuki found a way to kill with a supernatural power and she wants to try it on Saitou Isshin...'

Gotou dropped his fist on Ishii's head before he finished speaking.

– I was an idiot for asking.

Ishii had saved Gotou during the last case. Gotou had thought that Ishii had grown a bit, but it appeared he had been mistaken.

'There's no way supernatural powers could kill somebody,' said Gotou with a click of his tongue, putting his cigarette out in the ashtray.

He leant back on the seat and was about to light another cigarette when Ishii suddenly sat up.

'He's here.'

Gotou looked out the window.

He saw somebody climbing the long slope to the temple gates.

– No doubt about it. It's Isshin.

He was walking slowly in his robes and monk's stole as he held Nao's hand.

Gotou leapt out of the car and ran to Isshin.

Isshin may have been surprised to see Gotou running at him at full speed, because he stopped in his tracks with wide eyes, but he soon started smiling

gently again as he usually did.

'This is unexpected. Even Ishii-kun is here. What is it?' said Isshin casually, as he looked at Gotou and Ishii, who had arrived a bit later.

'That's not the issue. Where'd you go?'

The irritation that had piled up within Gotou exploded.

Nao winced at that and hid herself behind Isshin, peeking out with just her face.

'I had some business today. I left Nao with an acquaintance, so I went to pick her up.'

'I-I see...'

'Why are you in such a hurry?'

Gotou felt like Isshin's disinterested tone sounded reprimanding.

'There's trouble.'

Gotou took a deep breath to gather himself and then looked straight at Isshin.

'Trouble?'

The smile left Isshin's face; perhaps he felt something unusual from Gotou's gaze.

'Nanase Miyuki gave advance notice of a murder.'

'She's the culprit from last time, yes?'

'Right.'

'Isn't she in the detention house?'

'Yeah. She said she'd kill somebody from inside there.'

'Oh, that'd be quite a feat,' said Isshin.

Isshin, who didn't know the situation, was talking about it as if it were

unrelated to him.

'That isn't the problem.'

'Which means?'

'The problem is who she said she's going to kill.'

'It can't be Yakumo, could it?'

There was a glint in Isshin's eyes.

Because he was normally so gentle, the face was so frightening it made Gotou want to step back.

Isshin was always kind, but he couldn't remain calm when it came to Yakumo. However, Miyuki's target wasn't Yakumo.

'It's you.'

Gotou said that, but Isshin didn't seem to understand. He stood there with his mouth half-open.

'Nanase Miyuki said she'd kill you,' repeated Gotou.

This time, Nao seemed to sense something, though she couldn't hear, and she gripped Isshin's hand tightly and looked up.

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12

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In the living room of the temple's priests' quarters, Ishii knelt on a cushion.

Gotou was sitting cross-legged next to him, and Isshin was across the table from them.

Gotou explained the details of the situation so far to Isshin.

'I understand the gist of it,' said Isshin after Gotou finished.

'Eh?'

Ishii looked up without thinking.

Isshin's expression was as gentle as always as he sipped from his teacup.

– Does he really understand?

Ishii wasn't sure.

Isshin was calm even though his life was in danger.

'You might be killed,' said Gotou forcefully, leaning forward.

Ishii understood how he felt.

Isshin wasn't nervous at all. Perhaps it was so sudden that he hadn't seriously accepted it.

'I know that.'

'Then when?'

'Would panicking here solve the problem?'

Isshin kept his calm even while Gotou was agitated.

'That's not the problem! If you get killed, what would Yakumo and Nao do?'

Gotou smashed his fist against the table angrily.

Still, Isshin did not even move his eyebrow.

– This person understands.

As Ishii watched the exchange, he felt that Isshin did understand the situation he was in.

Isshin knew he was in danger and was preserving his calm.

After a silence, Isshin quietly said, 'I'll leave Yakumo and Nao in your care then.'

'Please don't say that.'

That sounded like a will to Ishii. He looked at Isshin pleadingly.

– I don't want you to die.

It wasn't as if he and Isshin had a particularly deep relationship, but Ishii still sincerely meant that.

'Fine, you damn monk!'

Gotou stood up. His yell shook the whole room.

His face was bright red from anger.

'Don't talk so loudly.'

Isshin smiled wryly.

'It's your fault for saying something morbid!'

'Is that what it sounded like to you?'

Isshin played dumb.

'It did. You idiot. And you don't like me, right? You'll leave the rest to me?'

What's wrong with you?'

Gotou crossed his arms and sat.

'It's true that at first I didn't think well of you.'

Ishii was surprised to hear Isshin's words.

It was unexpected – it was the first time Ishii had heard that Isshin didn't like Gotou. Ishii couldn't imagine Isshin not liking anyone.

More than anything, Ishii didn't understand the reason.

'See?'

Gotou snorted angrily.

'Gotou-kun, you made Yakumo, a civilian, cooperate in your investigations of murders. I thought you were an unbelievable detective.'

'That isn't true. Detective Gotou didn't blindly involve Yakumo in cases,' interrupted Ishii, unable to stay silent.

There was an absolute trust between Gotou and Yakumo that others couldn't come into. Ishii felt that painfully as somebody who got to see it up close.

Furthermore, Gotou felt conflicted about involving Yakumo too.

'It is just as you say, Ishii-kun. Gotou-kun has a good subordinate,' said Isshin with a nod.

When Isshin accepted what he said so easily, it felt a bit anticlimactic.

'But earlier...'

When Ishii said that, Isshin's expression became gentler as he looked up at the ceiling.

'By taking part in classes with Gotou-kun, Yakumo became somebody who faces his own fate,' said Isshin seriously.

Ishii had felt that Yakumo had changed too, however slightly. At first, he'd made every complaint he could think of even though he did cooperate, and it had felt like he was being forced into helping against his will.

However, recently, it seemed to Ishii that Yakumo was helping because he wanted to.

'Yes.'

'Recently, I was forced to realise that Gotou-kun has always been thinking of Yakumo and watching over him.'

'What are you saying now?'

Gotou clicked his tongue.

'I think you are a man I can trust.'

'I'm not.'

Gotou looked at the floor awkwardly.

'I don't dislike your boorishness.'

'Don't say something so unpleasant!' said Gotou forcefully, but Isshin smiled like he was enjoying the scene.

Though they were two completely different types of people, they were deeply connected through Yakumo.

To Ishii, Gotou and Isshin looked like very old friends.

'I should get going soon.'

Now that the conversation had calmed down, Isshin sat up.

'Where to?' said Gotou immediately.

'I'm going to do my daily mediation, but will you join me?'

'Don't joke with me,' said Gotou. Then, Isshin nodded and left the room.

His back looked somewhat sad.

'Ishii.'

Gotou stuck out his chin.

Watch Isshin – that was probably what he meant.

'Yes sir.'

Ishii gave a bright reply, but as he stood up, his legs stung from kneeling too long.

Before he took his first step, he fell –

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13

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The guard Ishikawa was patrolling the building with his subordinate, Sudou.

It had just passed six in the evening, so the lights in the rooms were still on.

Patrolling was much easier at the new detention house.

There was a rectangle of protection glass in the steel doors, so they could check inside just by walking down the corridor.

There was no need to go up to each door to peer in like before.

'Do you know about Number 607?' Sudou said with a smirk.

He was still young. Ishikawa could tell because he would say something like that.

In room 607 was the defendant named Nanase Miyuki. In front of her beauty, everyone stopped.

However, Ishikawa felt afraid of her.

Though she was beautiful, there had to be something dark eddying behind that smile. Plus –

'Do you know what that woman did?'

Though Ishikawa's expression was hard, Sudou was still smirking.

'She's a murderer.'

'Right.'

Because of juvenile law, she couldn't be tried, but she had brutally killed her family when she was just ten years old.

It wasn't something a proper human being would do.

If there were people in this world who were born as criminals, she would probably be one of them.

'But I don't think she did it.'

'That's not something for us to decide.'

'But she said that before.'

When Ishikawa heard Sudou's words, he stopped in his tracks.

'Don't talk to the defendants. I said that.'

Ishikawa walked right up to Sudou.

– Don't talk to the defendants.

Back when he'd just become a guard, Ishikawa was told that by his superior.

There were some defendants who would use words to entice guards. Then the guards would be used and fall down the slope to destruction.

Ishikawa had seen a colleague run errands for defendants before.

That was why Ishikawa was warning Sudou too.

'A little bit is fine, right?' said Sudou, with no concern whatsoever.

The truth was that Ishikawa wanted to say more, but Sudou probably wouldn't listen. Ishikawa gave up and sighed before starting to walk again.

Thump, thump, thump –

The sound of something hitting something echoed through the corridor.

It kept repeating.

Thump, thump, thump –

Ishikawa looked at Sudou. Then, they ran towards the source of the sound.

Thump, thump, thump –

The sound was coming from room 607.

– What is going on?

Ishikawa stood in front of the door and looked inside through the glass.

It wasn't time for the lights to be turned out, but the lights were off. Ishikawa couldn't see inside clearly.

He took the torch from his waist and turned it on.

He saw something squirming in the back of the room.

'What's wrong?' he said, pointing the torch's light at the corner of the room.

There, Number 607 was lying down and convulsing like a fish out of water.

Those four limbs were hitting the walls, making the sounds they'd heard earlier.

– What is going on?

'Calm down!' said Ishikawa frantically, but there was no response.

He wanted to carry her to the infirmary immediately, but because of security, the patrols didn't carry room keys.

'W-what should we do?' said Sudou, face pale.

'Call for aid! Quickly!'

'Y-yes sir!'

Sudou hurriedly called for aid on the wireless.

Ishikawa used his torch to watch what was happening inside the room.

Number 607 wasn't moving at all.

It seemed that she had coughed up blood – the floor was covered in it.

– What on earth happened?

All Ishikawa could do was wait for aid to arrive.

Finally, a number of men with the medical officer reached the room.

'What is the situation?' asked the jailer in charge as he unlocked the door.

Ishikawa quickly told him that he had been on patrol when he saw that the defendant had fainted and appeared to have coughed up blood.

When he finished speaking, the door opened.

He went inside with the medical officer and walked up to Number 607.

The area around her was dyed red with blood.

'Stay with me.'

When the medical officer spoke to Number 607, she opened her eyes slightly.

'... Ki... ll... ed.'

Number 607's mouth moved faintly as she said something.

– What? What is she saying?

Ishikawa put his ear closer to try to hear her.

That moment, Number 607 opened her eyes completely and she gripped Ishikawa's arm.

'I just killed somebody.'

Her weak tone from earlier changed completely – her words were clear.

– What is she saying?

Indifferent to Ishikawa's confusion, Number 607 was put on a stretcher and carried out of the room.

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14

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In the temple, Isshin sat on the wooden floor to meditate.

The light of the candle was trembling.

A moth scattered its scales as it fluttered about.

Isshin took a deep breath to the bottom of his stomach and went into a half-asleep state.

Doing this calmed his mental state, so that man naturally passed by a corner of his heart.

– The man with two red eyes.

However, his nature was different from usual today.

Mysteriously, Isshin didn't feel hatred or resentment.

He didn't think that things he couldn't even try to make disappear would disappear so easily.

The teachings of Zen did not acknowledge the spirits of the dead.

Believing in the existence of the soul would create an attachment to life and would become an obstruction to discipline. He now actually felt the things he had understood in his head.

– Don't you hate me?

He heard a voice deep in his ear.

Isshin couldn't determine whether that was real or an illusion, but it didn't matter.

'Up until this morning, I thought I hated you,' Isshin said to the candle flame, still sitting in the lotus position.

– Everyone lives with hatred.

The voice spoke.

'That isn't always true. I decided not to hate.'

– Will you always be able to?

The voice was challenging.

However, Isshin's heart still did not waver.

'Forever...'

– Yakumo will fall into darkness ahead.

'He won't fall.'

– No, he will definitely fall. Into a deep darkness.

'It's pointless. No matter how you struggle, you won't be able to capture Yakumo.'

Isshin confirmed that today.

Yakumo was tied with a bond stronger than blood.

They shared with each other the things they each lacked.

At first glance, it looked like a frail relationship wherein they licked each other's wounds, but that wasn't it. It was a firm bond – they supported each other, understood each other and walked together.

Yakumo had found the road he was supposed to take.

Clunk –

There was the sound of something falling. Isshin was brought back to reality.

He opened his eyes.

The flame of the candle was flickering in the wind.

Isshin felt somebody behind him and stood up slowly.

'Who is it?' he said, but nobody replied.

However, he felt an electrifying pressure.

– A thirst for blood.

'Have you really come to kill me?'

Isshin slowly turned around.

In the dim light of the candle, he saw glittering eyes.

There was no hatred in those eyes. A stronger emotion –

'Love...'

Isshin said that in a murmur.

Then, those glittering eyes moved.

The cold flash of a blade thrust forward.

Isshin felt no fear.

Dying here is my fate –

But he wished that he could see the faces of the children he loved once more.

Nao, and Yakumo –

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15

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– For some reason, my heart's beating strangely.

With crossed legs, Gotou looked out the living room window.

He saw Ishii keeping guard outside the temple. He should've been able to tell if there were any intruders.

Gotou took a cigarette out of his shirt pocket and lit it with his lighter.

He felt the heavy air fill his lungs.

Though Isshin would probably complain – smoking was forbidden – if Gotou didn't smoke a cigarette, he would feel itchy from sitting.

Gotou blew out smoke as he thought about what to do next.

He didn't really think somebody in a detention house could kill somebody in another place, but Miyuki must have had some sort of scheme.

– What the hell is she scheming?

'Ah, damn it!' spat out Gotou, mussing up his hair.

Thinking had never been his strong point. He moved according to instinct.

– If only Yakumo were here.

Just as Gotou clicked his tongue, his mobile phone rang. On the display was the number for Yakumo, who he'd been waiting for.

'Why didn't you answer!?'

Gotou let out all the dissatisfaction that had built up.

<Please don't speak so loudly.>

He heard Yakumo's usual drawl through the phone.

It riled Gotou up to hear Yakumo sounding completely unconcerned.

'I don't have enough time to banter with you!'

<I feel the same way. If that's all then.>

'Wait! Listen to what I'm saying!'

Gotou hurriedly stopped Yakumo from hanging up.

<I said, please don't speak so loudly.>

Yakumo spoke in a disagreeable tone.

However, no matter how disagreeable he found it, Gotou couldn't hang up now.

'Nanase Miyuki said she's going to kill somebody.'

Gotou quickly told Yakumo the main point.

<What do you mean?>

Yakumo returned a question.

Even Yakumo couldn't hide his surprise at the unexpected development.

'She said she's going to kill somebody from inside the detention house.'

<That's impossible. Isn't this sort of faking her specialty?>

Yakumo let out a dry laugh in his exasperation.

'The problem is what comes next.'

<Next?>

'Yeah. The person Nanase Miyuki said she's going to kill – is Saitou Isshin.'

The other end of the phone was so silent it made Gotou doubt whether anybody was listening, but Yakumo was definitely there.

Gotou cleared his throat and swallowed as he patiently awaited the next words.

<Uncle...>

After a long silence, Yakumo finally said just that.

'Yeah.'

There was another silence.

– Where'd that joking attitude go?

Gotou gripped the mobile phone tightly with a sweaty hand.

This was different from making an alibi. Killing somebody from inside a detention house was physically impossible – please say that.

<Gotou-san, where are you now?>

'Isshin's temple.'

<You've told my uncle the situation then.>

'Yeah.'

Gotou could tell that Yakumo's voice was becoming more agitated.

Yakumo, who was normally calm, was clearly disturbed.

<Where is my uncle now?>

– What's wrong, Yakumo? This isn't like you.

Gotou murmured that in his heart to shake off his uneasiness.

'Meditating in the temple.'

He looked out the window again as he said that. Ishii was standing as still as a statue, like he had been before.

<In the temple by himself?>

'He said he had to do his daily meditation. Ishii's guarding the entrance now.'

The moment Gotou finished saying that, the sliding door to the living room opened and Nao rushed in with a panicked expression.

Nao was completely white and half in tears as she tugged at Gotou's shirt.

'What's wrong? Calm down.'

Gotou patted Nao's head to try to pacify her, but it was no use.

She shook her head and ran out of the living room.

– What happened?

<Gotou-san, please go to the temple right now!>

Yakumo's voice was close to a shout.

Gotou sprang up.

'The temple?'

<Just go!>

Gotou didn't understand, but he ran out of the living room after Nao.

'What's going on?'

<Nanase Miyuki knows that my uncle is alone when he does his daily meditation!>

The blood left Gotou's face the moment he heard Yakumo say that.

If she knew in advance that Isshin would be alone, she wouldn't need to wait for a chance.

She could just wait there ahead of time.

Gotou ran in bare feet past Nao, pushed Ishii away and went up the wooden stairs to the temple.

His heart was pounding. His blood pulsed through his veins.

– Don't screw with me. As if I'd let something so stupid happen!

Gotou pushed open the sliding door in one swift movement.

For a moment, time stopped.

'...'

He couldn't speak.

– Damn it! What the hell!

The unreliable flame of the candle lit up Isshin's body, collapsed on the floor.

Stabbed into his stomach like a gravestone was a knife with a silver design.

The blood from the wound pooled on the floor, outlining the contours of Isshin's body in dark red.

'Ishii! Ambulance! Now!'

Gotou approached Isshin as he yelled that.

He picked up Isshin's wrist to check his pulse. It was very weak, but it was still there.

Then, he put his ear near Isshin's mouth to check his breathing. Though it was faint, he was still breathing too.

– It's OK. He's still alive.

'Oi! Can you hear me? Give me a response!'

Gotou called out to try to wake Isshin up as he looked at the wound in his stomach.

The knife was below his left rib and thrust in up to the hilt. If he took the knife out unskilfully, it would injure him even further.

From the length of the design, the blade was probably ten to fifteen centimetres.

'It's OK. You won't die from something like this!' said Gotou, as if reprimanding his own weakness.

– Anyway, I have to stop the blood.

He ripped his shirt sleeve, scrunched it up and pressed it against the wound.

The shirt was soon dyed a deep red.

Isshin's expression twisted as he opened his eyes slightly.

Did he wake up?

'Oi! What the hell are you sleeping for!? Wake up!' said Gotou all at once.

Isshin's face was twisted from pain, but he moved his mouth slightly. He was trying to say something.

However, it didn't make it into words.

'What is it? What do you want to say?'

Gotou put his ear closer to try to hear the words, but Isshin closed his eyes again.

'Idiot! If you've got something you want to say, say it clearly!'

He hit Isshin's cheek with his flat palm.

However, there was no response.

– Damn. Did he faint?

Gotou heard a child crying.

He looked to the temple entrance and saw Nao standing there while crying.

'Don't cry! It's fine! He won't die! I definitely won't let him die! So don't cry!'

Partly because Gotou was in chaos, he made it sound like a threat.

In response, Nao nodded firmly, though she couldn't hear.

'Right. That's good.'

– Nao, you're a strong girl.

Gotou even felt angry when he saw her brave figure. It was anger towards Isshin.

'Oi! You'd better not die! You absolutely can't do something to make that girl sad! You've got a family you have to protect! No matter what happens, you have to live! If you die, I'll kill you again! Got it!?''

Gotou's veins stuck out as he frantically yelled at Isshin in his anger.

However, Isshin didn't open his eyes again.

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Notes:

[1] Dhyana mudra is the gesture for meditation in Buddhism, called hokkai jouin (法界定印) in Japanese. [This](#) is an example of what it looks like.

[2] An ensou (円相) is a circle drawn in one stroke in Zen buddhism and symbolises enlightenment and the universe. It is written with the kanji for circle and appearance in this book but the latter can be exchanged for the kanji meaning window (窓). [Here](#) is one being sold on Rakuten.

[3] Mu (無) is a Buddhist term meaning without or nonexistence. It comes up in a Zen koan which goes something like as follows: 'Does a dog have Buddha-nature or not (無)?' 'Not (無).'

第二章

彷徨・陰

02
FILE:

File 02: Fluctuation (Yin)

-

– I can't believe it.

Haruka dressed herself hurriedly, left the flat and rushed into a cab.

Even after she told the driver the address, it felt unreal, like she was watching a television drama.

The city scenery passing her by in the window that should have been familiar also looked like something from a different world.

Her fingers were trembling slightly.

– Why did this happen?

<Isshin-san was stabbed and taken to the hospital.>

When Ishii told her that, all she could say was 'Is that so?' because she hadn't known what to reply since it was so unexpected.

How was his condition? Why did something like this happen? And who did it?

She had many questions, but at that moment, all of them flew out of her head.

– This is a dream.

She thought that many times. Even now, as she rode in the cab, she still wondered if she would wake up.

There was no reason for Isshin to be stabbed.

He was the sort of person who others would be grateful for rather than begrudge.

– Then why?

Haruka clasped her hands together and just prayed that Isshin would be all

right.

When she got to the bed, Isshin would be lying on the bed and smile, saying, 'I'm fine. It's just a graze.' Then, Yakumo would complain, saying, 'Uncle, you shouldn't scare people like that.'

– Right. That's how it'll go. Please let it go that way.

The more Haruka wished, the more the uneasiness in her heart grew.

Finally, the cab arrived at the hospital entrance.

It was the hospital she had visited with Yakumo and Isshin today. She hadn't thought she would return like this.

Haruka paid the driver the fare and got off the cab to go into the hospital's night entrance.

She went through the passage and stepped into the dim and quiet lobby.

She saw people sitting next to each other on the bench in the corridor.

It was Gotou and Nao.

Gotou had his head hung low, and his shirt was dyed deep red.

Nao was hugging her knees as she sat.

– This really isn't a dream.

'Detective Gotou.'

Haruka put strength into her body and called out to Gotou.

Gotou slowly looked up.

His usual hearty demeanour was gone – he looked like he could die at any moment.

'Oh, it's you, Haruka-chan?' replied Gotou, raising his right hand.

Nao looked up as well.

Her eyes were filled with tears, but she was biting her lip to keep them from falling.

It hurt to look at her trying to act strong.

'Nao-chan, you OK?' said Haruka, sitting down next to her.

Nao's face was red from holding in her emotions.

'You can cry,' said Gotou, patting Nao on the head.

With that, Nao flew towards Haruka.

Haruka accepted Nao and hugged her tightly.

Nao sobbed, shoulders shaking. Haruka's shirt was wet with Nao's tears.

Haruka gently rubbed Nao's back.

'It's fine. It'll be fine,' murmured Haruka, hugging Nao more tightly.

Since Haruka hadn't heard the situation, there was no evidence behind those words, but all they could do now was believe in them.

After crying for a while, Nao calmed down.

Finally, she wiped her tears and sat back down on the bench, hugging her knees.

'Damn, what a strong girl,' said Gotou with a wry smile.

'It's true. Nao-chan is a strong girl,' agreed Haruka.

'This girl was there too. She was crying because of what happened, and I told her not to. Then, she completely stopped and had held it in until now.'

Gotou appeared to be regretting what he said.

'Nao-chan, you did well.'

Haruka patted Nao's hair and gripped her hand.

Nao gripped Haruka's hand too.

It was a small but very strong hand.

'How is Isshin-san's condition?'

Haruka said the thing highest up on her mind.

'Still in surgery. I don't know anything either.'

Gotou gave a vague response.

However, from looking at the blood on his shirt, Haruka could easily imagine that the situation wasn't good.

– But it'll be fine. Isshin-san won't die so easily.'

'Where's Yakumo-kun?'

She'd thought he'd be here first, but she didn't see him.

'Ishii went to pick him up.'

'I see...' murmured Haruka, looking at her feet.

After that, nobody spoke.

The silence made it feel like even time was in a stupor.

I wonder how much time has passed –

The sound of footsteps echoed through the lobby.

Haruka looked up.

Yakumo was there, like he had come out of the darkness.

He didn't appear rushed. He walked slowly, like he was checking every step.

'Yakumo-kun...'

Haruka stood up and called out to him.

However, she didn't know what to say next, so she shut her mouth.

Yakumo walked up to them with a blank expression and patted Nao lightly on the head.

Though his mouth didn't open, it looked like the two of them, who were facing each other, were saying something to each other.

'How's Uncle?' said Yakumo to nobody in particular.

'In surgery. He lost consciousness, but he was breathing,' explained Gotou in a plain tone.

'Is that so?'

Yakumo said just that and then fell silent.

'I'm sorry that happened while I was there.'

Gotou stood up and bowed deeply towards Yakumo.

However, Yakumo made no response, as if he hadn't heard anything. It was like his spirit had left him.

Ishii returned, a little late.

'How is the situation?'

Ishii ran in and spoke in an inappropriately loud voice.

'Quiet!' said Gotou. He put a cigarette in his mouth and sat on the bench.

Haruka wanted to say something to Ishii, who looked confused, but she couldn't bring herself up to it.

Haruka silently looked down again.

'Are you relatives?'

After a while, a man in a green operating gown spoke to them.

His oval face looked exhausted. He was so pale somebody might suspect he was a patient.

'I am the doctor on duty, Sakakibara.'

The man in the operating gown gave his name.

A nurse was behind him. It was Furukawa, the nurse who had shown the around the hospital for the ghost sighting.

'Oi! How's his condition?'

Gotou was the first to speak.

Yakumo was standing and looking forward, like he had been before.

'He escaped death, but he hasn't woken up yet. We cannot say anything for certain until we observe his condition for longer.'

'Is he OK?'

Gotou stood up forcefully.

'We don't know. At this stage, he cannot breathe automatically,' said Sakakibara quickly, perhaps disturbed by Gotou's fierceness.

'What do you mean, you don't know!? Aren't you supposed to be a doctor?'

Gotou gripped Sakakibara by the collar and shook him threateningly.

'Please calm down.'

Furukawa stepped between them to try to stop him, but she was thrust away.

'Shut up! If anything happens to him, I'll kill you instead!' threatened Gotou further.

Things couldn't keep going like this. Haruka stood up to stop Gotou, but Yakumo spoke up before she could.

'Gotou-san, please stop.'

Though he didn't speak loudly, that one sentence made everyone stop moving.

Gotou lost his force, like a balloon leaking air, and he let go of Sakakibara's collar.

Yakumo bowed towards Sakakibara, saying, 'I apologise.'

'Anyway, the patient will be moved to the ICU. At this stage, we cannot allow visits, but you can look from outside.

'I will show you the way,' said Furukawa.

'Damn it!'

Gotou kicked the bench, letting his anger out at something since it had nowhere to go. The loud noise reverberated through the loudly.

Yakumo's murmur blended into the sound.

– I couldn't save anyone this time either.

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2

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– I couldn't save him, even though I was right there.

Gotou's anger was directed towards his own weak-mindedness.

The anger couldn't have been settled by kicking a bench. He knew that, but if he hadn't done it, he might have collapsed.

Gotou's life operated like this.

– I won't let anyone be killed. I won't let anyone die.

He had come so far believing that, but those thoughts never reached the whole way.

He saw Yakumo and the others walking down the corridor, led by the nurse.

However, Gotou didn't feel like following them.

He was frozen in the corridor like he had become a rock.

– Even though I vowed to protect him no matter what, I couldn't do anything.

He felt close to despair as the strength left his body.

He looked at his palms – they were dyed dark red with Isshin’s blood.

‘Damn it.’

Regretting wouldn’t turn back the clock, but he still couldn’t help but think about it.

– Why did I leave Isshin by himself?

‘It isn’t your fault, Detective Gotou,’ said Ishii, looking like he might start crying at any moment.

The trite consolation made Gotou even angrier.

‘Then whose fault is it?’

‘Eh?’

Ishii stepped back when Gotou glared at him.

‘If it’s not my fault, whose is it?’

‘That’s...’

Ishii looked frightened, but Gotou approached him more.

‘Is it your fault?’

‘I...’

‘Who? Whose fault is it?’

‘No... I...’

‘Tell me!’ yelled Gotou, lifting Ishii by his shirt.

Normally, Ishii would have shrieked, but his mouth turned into a hard line and he took Gotou’s anger head-on.

‘That’s right. It’s my fault.’

Ishii’s shoulders shook. There were tears in his eyes.

– Don't make that face.

'You...'

Though Gotou said that, he felt his anger rapidly dissipating.

Ishii was suffering himself because he felt responsible, but he had still spoken to Gotou in his consideration.

Gotou hadn't thought he'd need a weak man like Ishii to be considerate of him.

– What am I doing?

He felt very small for blaming himself and stopping.

He could regret as much as he wanted later, but there were other things he had to do now.

'If I had noticed something in the temple, Isshin-san wouldn't have been stabbed. It was my fault. Everything was my fault.'

Ishii's face was wet with tears as he spoke pleadingly.

'Don't cry!'

Gotou hit Ishii's head.

It felt like something had been woken from its sleep.

– There are things I still have to do.

He remembered.

He needed to reveal the truth of the case and make Miyuki pay for it. That wasn't all.

– I'll leave Yakumo and Nao in your care then.

Isshin's words came up in Gotou's head.

– He left Yakumo and Nao to me.

When Gotou thought that, he was stirred up by a strong force.

'It wouldn't have mattered if somebody like you were there or not.'

Gotou let go of Ishii and clicked his tongue.

Ishii staggered backwards.

'What are you spacing out for?'

Gotou hit Ishii's head again.

At first, Ishii shrugged in pain, but when he looked at Gotou, his expression became brighter immediately.

'I-I apologise.'

'There are things we've still got to do. We'll regret later.'

Gotou said that to Ishii, but the words were actually also directed to himself.

It wasn't like him to regret the past and think about questions with no answers. He'd move, move and move.

– That's the sort of guy I am.

'Yes sir.'

Ishii stood up straight.

He'd never live down letting Ishii notice the important things before him.

Gotou hit Ishii once more.

'We're going.'

Gotou spoke up loudly and then he started walking after Yakumo.

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3

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Haruka walked down the corridor, holding Nao's hand.

More than being considerate of Nao, it felt like Haruka would lose herself if she didn't hold onto somebody.

She looked at Yakumo, walking ahead of them.

His back wasn't crying or angry.

– Yakumo's empty shell.

It wasn't an exaggeration – Haruka really felt that way.

Finally, they reached the ICU with Furukawa's guidance.

Through a thick glass, Haruka could see Isshin lying on a bed.

Machines such as an ECG and EEG surrounded him, their many cords and tubes stretching over Isshin's body.

A respirator covered his mouth and nose, so Haruka couldn't see his face clearly.

Sakakibara and a number of nurses kept going in and out. It appeared that they were working hard to treat him.

Nao's eyes were completely red as she pressed herself against the glass to look through it.

The difficult reality that was happening in front of her eyes –

Haruka's chest hurt when she saw Nao accepting that and bearing it.

– Does Nao have any relatives besides Isshin?

That question suddenly came up in Haruka's head.

Nao wasn't old enough to live on her own. On top of that, she was deaf.

'How's his condition?'

A voice interrupted Haruka's thoughts.

She turned around to see Gotou standing there. Ishii was behind him.

'We cannot make any predictions yet.'

Furukawa spoke instead of Haruka.

'You better not die.'

Gotou said that threateningly to Isshin through the glass.

'Isshin-san won't die and leave Nao-chan behind,' said Haruka, clutching Nao's hand.

Nao nodded in response.

When Gotou saw that, he seemed to become determined and he patted Nao's head with a nod.

'Hey, Yakumo.'

Gotou looked at Yakumo.

Yakumo slowly raised his pale face. Though he didn't respond, Gotou continued.

'I'll take care of Nao.'

Haruka's eyes went wide at those unexpected words as she looked at Gotou.

Even Yakumo appeared surprised. He gaped at Gotou.

'I'll leave Nao in your care – that's what Isshin said to me.'

Gotou scratched his head awkwardly and sat in front of Nao.

'Hey. That's OK, right?'

Gotou turned a gentle smile that Haruka had never seen before towards Nao as he asked for her agreement.

Nao nodded, though Haruka didn't know if she heard the words.

Gotou patted Nao's head and then stood up.

He had to stay firm. Though Gotou didn't say that aloud, Haruka felt that

from Gotou.

'Yakumo. You don't have any complaints either, right?'

Yakumo nodded silently at Gotou's question.

Yakumo was always calmer than anybody and distant no matter where or when, but right now, he was like a piece of glass that would break if you touched it.

– Can I do anything at a time like this?

Haruka thought about it, but she couldn't find an answer.

'I would like to discuss the patient with a relative...'

Sakakibara came out of the ICU and called out to them.

Yakumo silently nodded.

'Would you come to the first-floor examination room? Let's talk there.'

After Sakakibara said that, he looked at all of them, bowed and then stuck his hands in the pocket of his white coat before walking down the corridor.

Even after Sakakibara left, Yakumo just looked down the corridor.

As if something was there –

Haruka looked down the corridor as well.

– What's that?

She was so surprised she couldn't speak.

A girl stood there.

Only her face was enveloped in a black shadow, as if it were dyed with ink.

– She isn't from this world.

Haruka felt that immediately. She could see through the girl.

Perhaps that's the ghost in the rumour that's spreading through the hospital –

That girl opened her mouth.

'... die... soon... too...'

With the noise, Haruka couldn't clearly hear what she said.

Finally, the girl disappeared, as if she had been swallowed by the darkness.

Nao looked at Yakumo questioningly.

She might have heard something.

'Yakumo-kun. That...'

Though Haruka spoke to him, there was no response from Yakumo.

Yakumo took out the black contact lens in his left eye.

Yakumo's vivid red left eye was exposed.

'This...'

After murmuring that, Yakumo dropped his contact lens to the floor and stepped on it.

Crack –

The sound of the lens breaking sounded incredibly loud to Haruka.

'Yakumo-kun...'

Yakumo was clearly acting strange.

– Yakumo's going to disappear.

Haruka spoke up in her uneasiness.

'Take care of Nao for me,' muttered Yakumo. Then, he walked towards the darkness down the corridor.

– You're OK, right, Yakumo?

Haruka murmured that in her heart.

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4

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Gotou was driving the car.

He looked at the rear-view mirror and saw Haruka and Nao sitting in the backseat.

They seemed afraid of something.

'OK?' said Gotou, turning around after stopping the car at the red light.

– Is what OK?

He had just been trying to put them at ease, but even he thought it was a stupid question.

However, Haruka seemed to understand Gotou's feelings and showed him a smile.

'Yes.'

Though she had a stiff smile instead of her usual bright one, it made him feel a bit better.

'I see...'

Gotou said just that and started the car.

'Er... is it all right not to say anything to your wife?' asked Haruka, sounding concerned.

'It's not a big deal.'

Gotou shrugged with a smile.

However, the truth was that Gotou had no idea how his wife Atsuko would react.

There was no time to make a fuss about it – would be his excuse.

It wouldn't be the first time he used it.

– When did that start?

He found the answer to that immediately.

It was when Atsuko had had a miscarriage. Because of that, she could no longer bear children.

– Sorry.

Atsuko had said that to Gotou as an apology.

– Why are you apologising? Having no children isn't a big deal. I'm fine as long as I have you.

That was what Gotou had really felt.

However, for some reason, he hadn't said it aloud.

At the time, all Gotou had done was nod silently.

– Idiot!

Gotou had yelled that at himself, but he just couldn't honestly express his feelings.

After that, the number of conversations he had with his wife rapidly lessened.

'What a stupid man...'

He unconsciously spoke aloud.

'Eh?' said Haruka.

'Nothing,' responded Gotou with a wry smile. Then, he parked his car in the parking lot for the police residence, where he lived.

'We're here.'

Gotou turned off the engine and got off the car. Then, he looked up at the fourth-floor window for his flat.

The light was on.

It was always like this. No matter how late Gotou returned, the light would still be on.

When his relationship with Atsuko began, he had once mentioned that lonely it was living alone and returning to a dark room.

Now that he thought about it, it had implicitly suggested that he wanted to marry her.

Atsuko still hadn't forgotten that conversation – she always kept the light on.

'OK, let's go,' said Gotou, waiting for Haruka and Nao to get off the car.

He didn't know how Atsuko would react, but there was no point grumbling now.

Determined, Gotou went through the entrance, took the elevator up to the fourth floor and stood in front of the door to his flat.

He never pressed the intercom button.

Whether Atsuko was asleep or awake, he'd unlock the door with his own key and go inside. However, today, the situation was different.

Gotou took a deep breath and pressed the intercom button.

Soon there was a sound and the door opened.

Atsuko didn't look surprised even after seeing Haruka and Nao at Gotou's side.

'Oh, what is it?' said Atsuko without any delay.

'We're taking care of this girl for the next little while,' said Gotou quickly, pulling Nao towards him.

For some reason, his hand was shaking.

'OK,' said Atsuko, crouching to greet Nao with a smile.

Nao smiled back.

Even though it was an unreasonable request, Atsuko just accepted it, without asking anything. Though Gotou felt grateful to her, he didn't know how to express it.

This wasn't the first time for that either.

He was always grateful to Atsuko, but he never said anything. That had become natural for him.

Despite that, Atsuko never asked for a divorce.

– Why does she stay with me?

Sometimes Gotou wondered about that.

What was fun about being with somebody like him who never considered the home like him? Wouldn't Atsuko have preferred a different life?

Gotou didn't have the courage to ask.

'I'm going back to the precinct now. Ask Haruka-chan for the details.'

'Eh?'

Haruka sounded confused, but Gotou pretended not to hear and left to escape.

– Why am I running?

He didn't know.

After he reached the elevator, his feet suddenly stopped and turned around.

It looked like Atsuko and the others had already gone inside – he couldn't see them.

– What am I doing?

Gotou clicked his tongue and went into the elevator.

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After Ishii returned to the precinct, he sank into his chair.

– I couldn't do anything.

That sense of helplessness made him feel even more exhausted.

The image of Isshin bleeding on the floor kept flashing in front of his eyes.

I should have been able to save him. But –

Interrupting Ishii's thoughts, which were becoming increasingly negative, his mobile phone rang. The number on the display was Hijikata Makoto's.

'Hello, Ishii speaking.'

Ishii answered the phone with a heavy heart.

<The situation has become serious.>

That was the first thing Makoto said.

Makoto, who was a newspaper reporter, had probably heard that Isshin had been stabbed.

'Yes...'

Ishii gave a flat reply.

<Are you all right?>

Makoto's worried voice reverberated in Ishii's weakened heart.

'It's my fault...'

He hadn't planned on saying it, but he'd let it out of his mouth before he noticed.

The first impression Ishii had of Makoto was fear.

However, after a number of cases, he had come to know her and that impression had changed greatly.

Makoto was somebody who could be attentive of others. During the last case, Makoto had been the one who held out her hand towards Ishii, who had lost his way.

<What's wrong?>

Makoto spoke in a gentle voice.

'I was at the scene. I was guarding Isshin-san, but...'

<Ishii-san...>

'That's why everything's my fault.'

<That's not true!>

Makoto let out a loud voice on the other side of the phone.

'Eh?'

<If anybody is responsible, it's the culprit. Don't you think so?>

'Yes,' replied Ishii, pressured by Makoto's forceful tone.

<Let's work our hardest to arrest the culprit. I'll help as well.>

'I understand. Thank you very much.'

After saying his thanks, Ishii hung up.

He felt like his spirits were just a bit refreshed.

Just as Makoto said, I have to work my hardest to arrest the culprit now –
Ishii felt like he had cleared his mind.

Just as Ishii turned back to the desk with a fresh mind, the door opened.

'You were back?'

Miyagawa came into the room.

Though he didn't say anything, there was regret on his face.

– If I'd put out more guards.

His thoughts were clear on his face.

'Yes sir.'

'Then where's Gotou?' asked Miyagawa, looking at the chair across from Ishii.

'He returned to the official residence.'

'Hm?'

Miyagawa frowned. He looked dubious.

'E-er, um... He took in the victim's daughter, so...'

Ishii quickly gave an explanation. Miyagawa's frown deepened.

When Gotou said he would take Nao in, Ishii had been surprised too. He hadn't thought Gotou would say that.

However, now that he thought about it, it was like Gotou.

Gotou was more soft-hearted than anyone. He wasn't somebody who could refuse when asked to do something.

'Gotou took in the victim's doctor?'

'Yes. The victim, Saitou Isshin-san, said he would leave the rest to Detective Gotou...'

'I see...'

Miyagawa looked up at the ceiling with great feeling and lit a cigarette.

The smoke slowly rose.

'Right. I almost forgot something important.'

After a silence, Miyagawa threw a file onto the desk.

'What is this?'

'The background of the guard on duty during the interview.'

'Ah,' said Ishii in understanding.

The guard had been silent when Miyuki announced that she was going to kill somebody. Gotou had said it was suspicious and asked Miyagawa to look into his background.

Ishii flipped through the pages and looked at the documents.

Yamamura Mikio. Twenty-six years old. After graduating high school, he passed the examination to become a guard and took that on as his job.

'Ah!'

Ishii had been disappointed, but he unconsciously spoke up when he saw the address.

'What?'

Miyagawa probably felt something. His eyes were sharp.

'It's Yamamura's address.'

'Address?'

'Yes. It's ○○. On the map...'

Ishii searched through his drawer, took out an atlas and spread it out on the desk.

He flipped through the pages to find ○○.

'Here,' said Ishii, pointing at a spot on the map.

Right then, Miyagawa's expression completely changed.

'That's where Nanase Miyuki's case occurred fifteen years ago...'

Tension ran across Miyagawa's face.

The place Yamamura lived and the place Miyuki lived were only a hundred metres apart, though the town names were different.

Though Ishii had no idea what that meant, he couldn't write it off as just a coincidence.

'Perhaps Nanase Miyuki and Yamamura might have interacted when they were younger.'

By saying that aloud, Ishii became agitated.

He adjusted the position of his glasses with his finger and looked at the map again.

Their ages were close, so it was very possible.

If he imagined a bit further, he couldn't deny the possibility that they had kept in contact even after the incident fifteen years ago.

'We can't say anything with just this. It might just be a coincidence,' growled Miyagawa, scratching his chin.

'Right...'

Ishii had no reply to that.

When he thought about it more, it was too hasty to think that Yamamura might be a conspirator just because he lived close by.

'But it's too good to ignore.'

Miyagawa smirked at Ishii.

Ishii had been withering, but that was enough to make him swell up.

'Yes sir.'

'All right. I'll look into Yamamura some more in the detective department. You and Gotou can look into other lines for me.'

'Other lines?'

'Any trivial thing is fine. Look into what happened at the scene again.'

'Yes sir.'

They had been at the scene.

Did we miss something – by looking into their memories again, they might be able to make new discoveries.

'I'm counting on you.'

Miyagawa picked up the documents and left the room.

– I'm counting on you.

The last thing Miyagawa said circled in Ishii's mind.

Ishii had virtually never been counted on to do something in his life before. The exhilaration he had never felt before naturally brought a smile to his face.

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6

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Yakumo left the hospital through the night exit.

His body was heavy.

It felt like he would sink into the floor if he stopped even shortly.

Where should I head – without the answer to that question, Yakumo started walking.

He treaded along the asphalt road.

The sound of the passing cars was discomfiting.

He wanted to stifle his five stimulating senses and go to a world with nobody in it.

However, no such place existed.

No matter how much he ran, he would not be able to escape.

When Sakakibara informed him of Isshin's condition, he could not possibly accept it. He wanted to believe it wasn't the case.

– Why did this happen?

In Yakumo's heart, rather than pondering over that question, he thought about how it was his fault that Isshin was in this situation.

Before he noticed, he had reached an empty lot.

It had originally been a building – but now it had been demolished, its rubble left behind.

– I should have died here.

Fifteen years ago, Yakumo's own mother strangled him here and brought him near death.

However, he did not die.

To put it correctly, he was saved by one man.

– If I had died then.

That thought had passed Yakumo's head countless times.

It is not as if I resent anybody. But perhaps I would have been happier if I had not existed – he would think that way.

He had seen the lives and deaths of many people up until now.

He had thought that he would become accustomed to it, but the wounds they carved into him grew deeper each day.

If he had died then, he would not have lost the people important to him.

He might not have suffered this way.

Naturally, he had experienced happiness in his life, but he felt that it had come together with the unhappiness of others.

My own cursed existence continues to make those around me unhappy –

Yakumo looked up at the sky.

The moon was out.

Its pale light was dazzling.

'What should I do?'

Nobody answered his question.

Yakumo started walking again in pursue of that answer.

He passed the shopping street in front of the train station and silently climbed the slope up to the university.

He finally reached the university.

In the moonlight, the lone school building stood like a gravestone.

Yakumo went around the back to the prefabricated building in Building B.

He opened the door to the <Movie Research Circle> and the very end of the first floor and stepped inside.

It was a dreary room, furnished with only a table, a refrigerator and a sleeping bag, but he had many memories here.

He had not had any memories until a year and a half ago.

However, her existence had made memories in this inhuman place.

Like being submerged in lukewarm water, he had even felt like his own existence had been recognised.

– That is a delusion.

He heard a voice.

Yakumo was uncertain as to whether it was his own inner voice or somebody else's.

– Your red left eye is cursed. It makes everyone around you unhappy.

'Then what should I do?'

Yakumo looked up at the sky and asked that question to nobody in particular.

– The fleeting illusion of being loved will make you suffer.

'This voice...'

Yakumo realised the voice was not his inner one but that of a third party.

This voice's owner was outside the room.

Yakumo immediately flew out of the room to look around.

However, all that was there was a pitch-black darkness.

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7

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Haruka woke up with a gasp.

Her hands were clammy with sweat.

She must have had an incredible nightmare, but she couldn't remember what happened in it.

Nothing was clear. It was like her brain was refusing to accept what was happening.

Haruka was lying on top of a beige sofa.

Wind blew in from the window, moving the white lace curtain.

She didn't recognise the room.

– Where am I?

Haruka slowly sat up.

'Are you all right? It seems like you've had quite the nightmare.'

She heard someone's voice.

Haruka looked up to see a woman come into the room.

She looked to be in her late thirties. Her almond eyes seemed a bit strict, but she was a beautiful woman with a tidy air.

Haruka finally realised where she was when she saw this woman's face.

She was Gotou's wife, Atsuko.

When Haruka remembered that, the memories of last night came afresh to her mind.

Haruka couldn't leave Nao alone when she looked so anxious, so she had come with her.

Gotou told Atsuko that they would be taking care of Nao for a while and left without explaining the details.

However, Atsuko hadn't thought anything of it despite that.

– Welcome.

She had taken Haruka and Nao into her home with a smile, prepared a futon and kept busy until Nao fell asleep.

Once things calmed down, Haruka explained what had happened up until now.

It had taken longer than she thought it would. Gotou didn't seem to have explained anything about the case yet, so Haruka had had to start from everyone's relationships.

It seemed like Haruka had fallen asleep in her exhaustion.

To be honest, she wasn't even sure how much she had explained.

'I'm sorry. It looks like I fell asleep.'

'Oh, don't worry about it.'

'How much did I explain?'

'You were kind enough to explain to the end,' said Atsuko, sticking up her thumb.

'I see... I'm sorry.'

'Ah, that's right. You'll eat breakfast, won't you?'

Atsuko wiped her hands on her blue apron and tied up her hair as she said that.

From just their faces, it felt like Beauty and the Beast, but her brisk way of talking was very similar to Gotou's.

They really are married – Haruka felt strangely touched by that.

'No, I'm sorry for staying so long. I should go soon...' said Haruka quickly, getting up.

'That's no good.'

'Eh?'

'I've already made it, so you have to take responsibility.'

If Atsuko said that much, Haruka couldn't refuse.

'I really am sorry.'

Haruka bowed her head.

Atsuko put a hand on her waist and looked at Haruka like she thought her mysterious.

'What a strange girl. Why are you apologising?'

'Even if you ask me... why...'

She didn't have a reason.

Apologising had always been her habit.

'Taking things on yourself, blaming yourself and apologising.'

– That's tedious.

Atsuko's words had that echo to them.

Haruka couldn't deny it. She knew she took things on herself.

'That might be the case...'

'If you blame yourself for everything, you'll end up like my husband,' said Atsuko, sticking out her tongue.

When Haruka saw that, she couldn't help but laugh.

'Is Gotou-san also like that?'

'He is. Even though I'm not concerned about it myself, he'll say "Sorry" with a grumpy face.'

'Really?'

'Like an idiot, isn't he?'

'That's...'

'If he's worried, he can just say it aloud. Little things like this don't surprise me anymore,' said Atsuko.

It was true that Gotou did tend to take things on by himself. Now that Haruka thought about it, Isshin was the same too. The worst of them was Yakumo.

Without saying anything to anyone, he took everything on. Even if he suffered, he wouldn't talk to anybody.

They might have all gathered because of their similarities.

'Honestly. What's so fun about taking everything on yourself?'

Haruka felt like there was a bit of a shadow on Atsuko's face as she said that.

– She wants them to understand each other.

Haruka felt that when she looked at Atsuko's profile.

Happy things, sad things and painful things – she wanted to share them with the person she loved, but he wouldn't say anything, taking everything on by himself.

He might not have wanted to trouble her, but that wasn't what she wanted.

'I'm sorry.'

'See, you're apologising again.'

Atsuko made an angry face.

'I am.'

Haruka smiled wryly.

'Women have to be reliable, especially during troubling times. Men just complain and don't do anything at all.'

Atsuko snorted.

Even though so many things were happening, Atsuko wasn't bothered at all.

Perhaps she had always been a strong woman, or maybe she had become stronger from living with Gotou, but it appeared that she wasn't too concerned about the matter this time either.

'That's right.'

Haruka nodded.

'Anyway, at times like this, let's work together and do our best,' said Atsuko, gripping Haruka's hand. Atsuko's hand was a bit cold.

'Yes.'

Haruka felt a bit better after talking to Atsuko.

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'T-that's ridiculous!' yelled Gotou, unable to understand the reality in front of him.

Ishii leapt up in surprise from his seat across from Gotou.

Miyagawa, who had spoken up first, just glared at Gotou with his arms crossed.

Gotou could tell Miyagawa wasn't joking from seeing his eyes, but he just couldn't accept what Miyagawa said.

In the report that Miyagawa brought in this morning, there was something Gotou had to be surprised by.

– The fingerprints on the knife Isshin was stabbed with were a perfect match with Nanase Miyuki's.

'Are they really Miyuki's fingerprints? There must have been a mistake,' said Gotou again, unable to accept it.

'They're the fingerprints we got when she was arrested. No doubt about it,' said Miyagawa flatly.

– What the hell is going on?

Though he was surprised, if the fingerprints matched, there was no doubt about it.

'Let's arrest Nanase Miyuki right now.'

Gotou stood up forcefully.

'Can't do that,' said Miyagawa, shaking his eye.

'Why not? It's simple!'

Gotou slammed his fist into the desk as he said that.

He didn't understand why they were hesitating.

'Did you forget? Miyuki has a cast-iron alibi.'

'A crime from within the detention centre is impossible... is what you mean then,' added Ishii.

– I forgot the most crucial point.

Miyuki was being held in the detention house. It'd be understandable if Miyuki had escaped the detention house and gone to stab Isshin.

However, that wasn't the case. Miyuki was still in the detention house now.

'Er... Would it be possible for her to have left once and returned?'

'How?'

'By walking through walls, she...'

Before Ishii could finish speaking, Gotou dropped his fist on Ishii's head.

'It's not as simple as heading home.'

By saying it aloud, Gotou accepted the fact and felt horror.

How the hell did Miyuki stab Isshin from the detention house – as long as that puzzle remained unsolved, they couldn't arrest her.

– Damn it.

Gotou clicked his tongue.

'Haven't we got anything?'

Gotou gritted his teeth.

'If Yakumo-shi were here...' said Ishii while scratching his head.

– That's right. Yakumo might be able to solve this puzzle.

Gotou recalled how Yakumo had looked last night.

Yakumo had been like an empty shell then. There was no life in his face, and his eyes had been hollow – it was like he hadn't been there.

Gotou had found some time to call him, but Yakumo hadn't answered.

'He'd be no help right now,' said Gotou, disappointed.

'I don't know if this'll help, but...'

Miyagawa spoke up, brushing away the stagnant mood.

'What is it?'

'Looks like there was a bit of a fuss at the detention house yesterday.'

'Fuss?'

'Yeah. Nanase Miyuki was coughing up blood in her room and then told a guard that she'd just killed somebody.'

'Killed somebody...'

Gotou had thought it might be a breakthrough, but he felt even more confused.

What Miyuki said to the guard last night had to be affirming that she'd killed Isshin at a distance.

'Ah! I see! So that's how it is! Detective Gotou!' yelled Ishii, suddenly standing up.

'What? You're so noisy.'

Gotou was immediately suspicious, what with Ishii's wrong guess earlier.

Ishii's reasoning was always off. Gotou would regret it if he took Ishii too seriously – he always talked about things that made no sense like magic.

'Chief Miyagawa. How was Miyuki after she coughed up blood?' asked Ishii agitatedly, fixing the position of his glasses even though they weren't off.

'She was taken to the infirmary.'

'I see. I see. So that really is the case. Do you know when she was taken to the infirmary?'

Ishii wriggled as he continued asking questions.

'Past six in the evening. She rested in the infirmary for a night and was brought back to her room in the morning.'

'Just as I thought!'

Ishii clapped his hands together and smiled triumphantly.

'What's just as you thought?' asked Gotou while glaring at Ishii.

Having only one person understand made Gotou strangely irritated.

'At the time of the crime, Nanase Miyuki was not in her room.'

'What about it?'

Gotou was becoming even more confused about why Ishii was so agitated.

'Nanase Miyuki was taken to the infirmary past six in the evening. Saitou Isshin-san was stabbed at nine in at night. That's a three-hour delay.'

'I see. That's a good point.'

It seemed like Miyagawa also understood what Ishii was trying to say – he was smirking.

However, Gotou still didn't understand.

'What are you talking about?'

'After she was taken to the infirmary, she escaped the detention room, stabbed Saitou Isshin-san and returned.'

Ishii was shaking in excitement.

'She couldn't get out so easily.'

'It would be possible if she had an accomplice.'

'Accomplice?'

'Yes. The man named Yamamura we discussed last night.'

Gotou finally understood when he heard the name.

Yamamura was the guard who had been silently watching as Miyuki gave her advance notice of murder.

'I see.'

Gotou clapped his hands together in understanding.

It'd be difficult to escape from her room, but it might have been possible from the infirmary.

That was well done for Ishii. This was possible.

'Miyagawa-san, I have a request.'

'I get it. Questioning at the detention house, right? I'll get permission,' responded Miyagawa, clapping Gotou on the shoulder.

– He's reliable as usual.

'Ishii! We're going!'

Gotou grabbed his jacket while he said that and ran out the room.

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9

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– I can't breathe.

Ishii sat in the chair in the visiting room of the detention house as he wiped the sweat on his forehead with his sleeve.

He'd corner Miyuki and reveal her trick when he got out of the precinct – that was what he had thought, but now that the meeting with Miyuki was actually looming, that thought left his head, and he just had the impulse to run.

He had planned on cornering her, but he felt like they were the ones who had

actually been cornered.

'How long do we have to wait?'

Sitting next to Ishii, Gotou was unable to hide his irritation – he had been bouncing his knee for a while now.

Ishii had never seen Gotou with a stiffer expression than the one he had now.

– Can we really win against her?

That question came up in Ishii's head.

Finally, the door on the opposite side of the glass opened and Miyuki came in.

The man who brought her in was the same as last time – Yamamura.

Ishii and Gotou thought that he was an accomplice.

Miyuki sat down gracefully with the tips of her lips turned up into a smile.

When Ishii saw that, a jolt went down his spine.

Normally, a smile would comfort a person, but Miyuki's didn't.

It was cold, insidious and full of malice. It agitated the anxiety at the bottom of a person's heart.

'What's so funny?' said Gotou, glaring at Miyuki.

Though Gotou didn't yell, his voice shook the bottom of Ishii's stomach. It oozed with irrepressible anger.

'You don't know?'

Miyuki licked her lips.

'What?'

'Isn't it obvious that I'm happy?'

'What did you say?'

'My plan succeeded.'

Miyuki crossed her legs and looked at them scornfully.

– She's challenging us.

That was how Ishii felt.

'Too bad for you. Isshin's still alive.'

Gotou leant forward, bringing his face close to the glass.

Gotou's and Miyuki's gazes met.

Ishii gulped as he watched them.

'Oh, is that so? I should've stabbed him deeper,' said Miyuki with a dissatisfied pout.

'What did you say!?'

Gotou stood up, unable to control himself.

However, if he got riled up here, they would just be going along with Miyuki's plan.

'Excuse me.'

Ishii repressed his fear and interrupted the conversation.

'From what you just said, we can determine that you admit your crime against Isshin-san.'

'Yup,' agreed Miyuki readily.

'You admit it then.'

'Of course. I'm the one who stabbed Saitou Isshin. There were fingerprints, right?'

'Why do you know that?' interrupted Gotou harshly.

Gotou's question made sense. Information was limited in the detention house.

There was no way for Miyuki to know that fingerprints were analysed from the weapon.

Furthermore, because of its importance, the information about the analysed fingerprints wasn't even released to the press.

'I wonder?'

Miyuki's gaze was close to a glare.

She was probably trying to provoke them.

'Perhaps you had an accomplice in the police?'

Ishii said the first thing that came to mind.

'Ishii-san, you really are interesting.'

Miyuki laughed with shaking shoulders.

'Of course not!' said Gotou with a red face, before dropping his fist on Ishii's head.

'Ack.'

Ishii bit down the urge to yell from the pain.

'Gotou-san, you're not imaginative enough.'

Gotou's eyes went wide at Miyuki's words.

'What?'

'Just as Ishii-san said, I might have an accomplice in the police.'

'Don't be ridiculous!' yelled Gotou, slamming his hand against the protective glass.

Ishii half-stood up from surprise, but Miyuki just kept sitting with the same smile on her face.

'Why not check for yourself?'

Miyuki crossed her stretched out legs again as she said that.

'What the hell did you say!?'

Gotou yelled even louder as he hit the glass again and again.

– Oh no. We're completely at her pace.

'D-Detective Gotou, please calm down.'

Ishii grabbed Gotou's arm.

'Calm down? It's your fault for saying something unnecessary!'

Gotou hit Ishii's head.

'But I just...'

'Don't talk back.'

Gotou hit Ishii once more.

'You really are an interesting combo.'

Miyuki covered her mouth with a hand and started laughing.

'What's so funny?' said Gotou threateningly, but Miyuki still didn't stop laughing.

'Isn't it funny? It's like watching a comedy show.'

'Who's a comedy show? I've always been a detective.'

Miyuki snorted at Gotou's claim.

'If you're a detective, you should understand why I know about the prints on the knife.'

Ishii finally solved the puzzle when he heard Miyuki's words.

'You left the fingerprints on the knife on purpose,' said Ishii, looking straight at Miyuki's eyes.

It seemed that Ishii had lost his reasoning ability after being played with by

Miyuki.

'That's right. I gripped the knife with my bare hand.'

Miyuki licked her full lips.

She had gripped the knife with her bare hand. It was natural that her fingerprints had been lifted.

But the question was –

'Why? Why did you leave your fingerprints on purpose?'

'Because you wouldn't have acknowledged that I did it otherwise, right?' said Miyuki jokingly.

'That's true, but...'

'When magicians teleport coins, they sign it with the magic, yes? It's the same thing.'

Miyuki said that with no hesitation.

'Fingerprints were found on the knife. You've confessed. You better be prepared, 'cause I'm getting an arrest warrant now,' threatened Gotou.

However, it appeared to have no effect on Miyuki. She had the same smile on her face as she had had before.

'I wonder if you'll be able to do that?'

Miyuki narrowed her eyes and stuck out her chin.

'What do you mean?'

Gotou raised an eyebrow.

'Exactly what I said. There certainly were fingerprints on the weapon. I also confessed. But at the time of the crime, I was inside the detention house. I wonder what decision the police will come to then?'

Miyuki's words were heavy on Ishii's heart.

Miyuki had confessed that she stabbed Isshin, and her fingerprints had been found on the weapon.

However, she had an iron-clad alibi – she had been held in the detention house.

If they didn't have decisive evidence that she had left the detention house at that time, she couldn't be arrested for assault against Saitou Isshin.

At first glance, it seemed like a game they couldn't win, but their chances of success weren't zero.

– There's an unaccounted time.

She had had a spasm and been taken to the infirmary at the time of the crime.

– What happened then?

If they could find out, they could break Miyuki's iron-clad alibi.

'It's time.'

The guard, Yamamura, suddenly announced the end of their interview.

Unfortunately, she was the accused, currently in detention. They could only meet her under the rules of the detention house.

'Please bring Yakumo-kun the next time you come,' said Miyuki as she stood up.

'What did you say?'

'I want to see Yakumo-kun suffering.'

'Don't tell me you stabbed Isshin to make Yakumo suffer?' said Gotou, sounding almost hesitant.

'That's right.'

As Miyuki replied, she spread her two hands why.

'Then why didn't you attack Yakumo directly?'

'There's no point to that, right? It's not like I want to kill Yakumo-kun.'

'You don't want to kill him?'

Gotou's brow furrowed. He didn't understand. That was how he looked.

However, Ishii understood what Miyuki was thinking.

Her goal wasn't to take Yakumo's life. She wanted to smile scornfully as she made him suffer – to watch as he submitted to her.

Miyuki had said this when she announced that she would kill Saitou Isshin.

– I can't kill Yakumo-kun.

I hadn't understood then, but is this what she meant –

– What an unbelievable sadist.

Ishii felt afraid of Miyuki all over again.

'That's why you should bring Yakumo-kun next time.'

'What's your purpose in making Yakumo suffer?' asked Gotou, stuck to the glass.

'I just want that person to understand that I'm better than he is.'

When Miyuki said 'that person', she probably meant Yakumo's father, the man with two red eyes.

Fifteen years ago – Miyuki, who had brutally murdered her own family, went to live with the man with two eyes.

She had come to love and respect him as a father, or perhaps as a man.

However, no matter how Miyuki tried, she just couldn't win against Yakumo.

The emotion eddying within Miyuki was probably a dark flame of jealousy.

'Just for that...' said Gotou, almost in a gasp.

Miyuki had been about to leave the room, but when she heard those words, her complexion completely changed and she whirled around.

'Just for that, you say? That's everything to me!'

'What...'

'No matter how much I love him, whenever that person opens his mouth, it's Yakumo, Yakumo, Yakumo! I'm sick of it! Is being related by blood so great? Is having a red eye that important?'

Miyuki stuck to the glass like a spider as she screamed.

Even Yamamura the guard must have been panicked as he pinned Miyuki's arms behind her back and pulled her away from the glass.

While Yamamura pulled her away, Miyuki started laughing aloud, as if she found something funny.

Her laughs were maniacal.

Even after Miyuki disappeared through the door, her laughter wouldn't leave Ishii's ears.

To show off her existence.

She had stabbed Isshin for that sole reason.

– Terrifying. Truly, she's terrifying.

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10

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Haruka sat next to Nao on the bench in the hospital waiting room.

Nao's legs were shaking as she stared at the floor.

It was the first time Haruka had seen Nao so dispirited.

– I can't do anything for her.

All Haruka could do was hold Nao's hand silently.

'Sorry for the wait.'

Atsuko ran back to them.

She had gone to check at the reception whether Isshin was allowed visitors.

'How was it?' asked Haruka as she stood up.

'They said that he's still unconscious, but we can go into meet him.'

Nao looked up at Atsuko's words.

Nao couldn't hear. Instead, she excelled at reading the atmosphere.

'Ah!'

Nao raised her voice.

– I want to see him anyway.

To Haruka, that was what it sounded like Nao was saying.

'Then shall we go?'

Atsuko crouched in front of Nao with a wide smile on her face.

Nao was led into smiling back.

It was mysterious how they looked like a real mother and child this way.

Atsuko took Nao's hand and started walking. Haruka followed after them.

'I'm really glad that you're here, Atsuko-san,' said Haruka honestly.

She had been saved by Atsuko's brightness and energy since last night. If Haruka had been by herself, she probably would only have been able to hang her head next to Nao.

'Oh, you flatter me.'

'It isn't flattery.'

'I'm glad that the two of you are here too.'

'Eh?'

Haruka was confused by the unexpected answer.

'Don't worry about it,' said Atsuko with a shrug.

Meanwhile, they arrived at the ICU.

Haruka recalled the scene from last night and was hesitant to step inside.

'Let's go then.'

Atsuko led the way. After disinfecting her hands and putting on a mask, she stepped into the ICU.

– She really is strong.

Haruka followed after Atsuko.

Isshin was lying on the bed, like he had been yesterday.

There was an intravenous tube in his arm and an artificial respirator attached to him. Cords stretched over his body for various machines, such as the ECG and the EEG.

Though visits were allowed now, that didn't mean Isshin was better. Haruka was forced to feel that anew.

Perhaps they shouldn't have brought Nao.

Right as Haruka thought that, Nao let go of Atsuko's hand and walked up to Isshin.

Then, she took Isshin's hand.

As Nao held onto Isshin's hand, she was – smiling.

'Ah, ah.'

Nao spoke in excited tones, as if urging Isshin to do something.

Haruka and Atsuko looked at each other. Then, they walked up to Isshin, brought in by the voice.

Nao gripped Haruka's wrist and brought it to Isshin's hand.

Haruka's fingers brushed Isshin's hand.

– He's warm.

Haruka felt the words Nao was trying to say with her body.

He's still warm. That meant Isshin was still alive. Nao must have been trying to say that.

'Isn't that great?'

Atsuko hugged Nao's shoulders from behind her. Nao nodded in response.

– That's right. Isshin is still alive.

Since it was him, he would definitely wake up randomly and say 'I'm sorry for worrying you' with a smile.

Having a hopeful perspective made her heart brighter.

Just as Haruka let out a sigh of relief, she was assaulted by the feeling of something sinking in her stomach.

– What?

She looked about and spotted a girl standing in the corridor through the window.

The girl wore a red dress and had long hair. Her face was dark, as if smeared in ink.

The same girl I saw in the corridor last night –

She was probably the ghost that was said to appear around the hospital.

– When... are you going to die...

Rather than in her eardrum, the voice went straight to her head.

It was probably the girl's voice.

Haruka recalled the rumour that the hospital was in a fuss over. The people whom the girl asked this question all died.

Haruka looked at Isshin.

– I can't accept that.

'Ah!'

Suddenly, Nao yelled loudly.

Her two hands were in fists. It looked like she was shaking in anger. Her eyes were on the ghost of the girl in the corridor.

– Can Nao see her?

As if answering Haruka's question, Nao ran out into the corridor.

'What's wrong?' called out Atsuko in concern.

'Ah, that's...'

Unable to explain well, Haruka also ran out into the corridor to follow Nao.

The ghost of the girl from earlier had already disappeared.

Nao was looking around frantically in the place where the girl had been standing.

Though I can't explain it, something incredibly awful is going to happen – that premonition alone whirled about in Haruka's head.

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11

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After Gotou left the visiting room, Ishii stood up as well and they walked to the infirmary.

A guard led them down the dreary corridor.

Every ten metres, there was a steel door. The guard unlocked each with a key and fingerprint, and they continued onwards.

They turned into many similar corridors, so Gotou had no idea of where he even was.

Under such strict defence, it wouldn't be easy to escape. Gotou felt that anew. After about ten minutes, they finally arrived at the infirmary.

Though it was a rather complicated process in getting here, the inside of the infirmary was made unexpectedly like a regular hospital examination room.

'Please sit.'

Urged by the white-haired doctor who was waiting, Gotou and Ishii sat on round chairs.

'I'm from the precinct. My name's Gotou.'

Gotou showed his police IC to the white-haired man.

'My name is Komatsu. I'm the medical officer.'

Komatsu fished through the desk drawer and took out a dirty business card.

While accepting it, Gotou looked once more at Komatsu's face. He was probably about fifty years old. He had a long thin face and looked like he had a nervous personality.

'I'd like to get straight to the point and ask you about last night.'

'If it's something I know,' said Komatsu. He spoke in a very prudent manner, appropriate for a doctor.

'Tell me in detail about when Nanase Miyuki was brought in.'

'Even if you ask me to tell you in detail...'

Komatsu's attitude seemed like a refusal towards Gotou's question.

Gotou kept his irritation in check.

Normally, police wouldn't be able to ask around the detention house like this. When Gotou thought about Miyagawa, who'd gone through so much to make the necessary arrangements, he decided it would be a bad idea to make a fuss.

'What were her symptoms?' asked Gotou after clearing his throat.

'She was convulsing and vomiting blood. She underwent much examination, but there weren't any abnormalities, besides the increase in white blood cells. It probably came from stress.'

Miyuki hadn't looked stressed to Gotou.

'It wasn't an act.'

Gotou didn't accept what the medical officer said, but he didn't dare to say that aloud. Instead, he asked another question.

'Wasn't there anything else that caught your attention?'

'Hm, even if you ask that...'

Komatsu looked sullen as he ran a hand through his white hair.

It didn't seem like he wanted to cooperate with the investigation at all. It felt like every time Gotou's bones would slowly break every time he asked a question.

While Gotou was pondering, Ishii interrupted: 'Excuse me.'

'When Nanase Miyuki was brought here, what time was it exactly?'

Behind Ishii's glasses, his eyes were glittering more brightly than usual.

– I'll try letting Ishii talk for a bit.

Gotou crossed his arms and focussed on watching Komatsu's movements.

'It was probably past six,' replied Komatsu, looking up at the ceiling as he searched his memories.

'Then when did she return to her room?'

'I think it was around seven this morning.'

'I see.'

Ishii fixed the position of his glasses with his finger.

There was almost a thirteen-hour gap. With that, it would be possible for Miyuki to stab Isshin and return, as Ishii had said before.

'What treatment did she undergo?'

'We took a blood sample, put her on a drip and let her sleep there.'

Komatsu pointed at the beds in the back of the room.

There were four beds in total. Each was divided from the room with a curtain.

'Were you the only person who administered treatment?'

'I was the only one here, so yes.'

Perhaps Komatsu felt like he was under suspicion, because his expression became stiff in a twinkle.'

'Was there a guard in the infirmary?'

Ishii continued his questions in a disinterested manner.

'Nobody was in the infirmary. Guards circle the corridors.'

'Then the only person here was you.'

'Yes, but... what're you trying to say?'

Komatsu's tone changed.

'There are partition curtains around the beds.'

'Yeah.'

'How frequently did you look inside?'

'How would I remember that... What are you really saying? If you've got something you want to say, just say it clearly.'

Komatsu's voice was ragged; perhaps he couldn't restrain it any longer.

– Well done, Ishii.

They might be able to get something unexpectedly good.

Gotou turned an expectant gaze towards Ishii. When Ishii noticed, he nodded.

'In short, it was possible for Nanase Miyuki to have escaped your gaze, left the room, stabbed Saitou Isshin and returned – that is what I want to say.'

'Are you serious?'

Komatsu snorted scornfully.

'Of course.'

'That's idiotic.'

Komatsu shook his head in astonishment.

'However, it would have been possible for her,' said Ishii in a triumphant manner.

'What do you mean?'

'She used supernatural powers to walk through the walls of the detention house.'

The moment Ishii said that, Gotou dropped his fist on Ishii's head.

– He's deluding himself again.

'Don't talk anymore,' snapped Gotou.

Ishii pouted in dissatisfaction.

Even if he made that face, it was no use. If he talked any more about supernatural powers, people would think he was nuts.

They wouldn't be able to hear the things they needed to.

'Sorry. Let's get back on topic.'

Gotou spoke up again.

'Ah, yes.'

'In short, we think that Nanase Miyuki got out of the detention house somehow. Otherwise, we can't explain this case.'

Gotou stopped the roundabout explanation and pinpointed the crucial point.

There were a number of cases in the past when somebody held in a detention house had escaped.

Even a few years ago, there was a fuss with an incident when a group of foreigners escaped.

'Detective, what you are talking about refers to old detention houses, correct?'

Komatsu plainly sighed.

It was true that the escape incidents might have been in the era of old detention houses.

'Can you say that it's definitely impossible?'

'It's definitely impossible,' declared Komatsu.

It looked like there was absolute confidence there.

'How can you be sure?'

'You saw it for yourself, did you not, Detective? You passed through a number of doors, yes? You can't even run ten metres.'

'Ah...'

Gotou remembered the path he took to get here.

Just as Komatsu said, there hadn't just been one or two doors. He hadn't even been able to walk forward properly.

'Furthermore, those doors are all locked with a key and fingerprint

recognition. It is a double-layer lock. Furthermore, there are security cameras everywhere.'

To pass through the door, a key wouldn't be all you need – your fingerprints would have to be registered too.

Even if you got past both of those with somebody's guidance, there was no way to escape the security cameras.

Though Gotou knew that, he still couldn't throw away the escape theory.

'She could've escaped from a window.'

'Perhaps in the era of metal grids on windows. Now they have protective glass on them. It wouldn't crack even if it were punched with a fist.'

A metal grid could have been sawed away to escape. However, with protective glass, escaping from the window wasn't a chase.

– Is it really no good?

Even Gotou looked up at the ceiling in resignation.

'The only ones who can come and go are the guards, and there is still a limit to that,' finished Komatsu in a triumphant tone.

So it was a situation where it was completely impossible to escape. It wouldn't go as simply as in a television drama.

'E-Excuse me...'

Just as the conversation had come to a half, Ishii raised his hand as he asked for permission to speak in an apologetic manner.

'What?' asked Gotou. When he did so, Ishii's face brightened immediately, like a child's.

'There is one thing I would like to ask, but didn't any workers come to check on Nanase Miyuki's condition?'

Gotou understood immediately what Ishii was aiming for.

They had come to this theory for Miyuki's escape because they had thought about this possibility in the beginning.

'Did somebody come by...'

Komatsu looked about for a while before yelping, as if he had suddenly remembered something.

'So somebody came.'

Gotou stood up in his agitation.

'Yes.'

'Who?'

Gotou approached Komatsu suddenly.

Perhaps Komatsu had been surprised, because he backed away and gave one man's name.

It was the person they had predicted it would be, Yamamura Mikio –

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12

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'Haruka-san... right?'

Just as Haruka was leaving the hospital, somebody called out to her.

Standing there was Mao, the doctor.

'Yes.'

'Things have become rather serious...' said Mao, looking troubled.

She probably didn't think that things would become like this yesterday either.

'They have...'

'Do you have some time? There's something I'd like to talk to you about.'

'To... me?'

Haruka cocked her head in confusion.

She couldn't imagine what Mao would have to say to her. She only knew Mao as Isshin's friend.

'It's about Yakumo-kun,' said Mao, perhaps sensing how Haruka felt.

'About Yakumo-kun?'

'Yes.'

After saying that, Mao turned her gaze to her feet.

It appeared to be something she didn't want other people to hear.

'We'll head back first.'

Atsuko tactfully took Nao's hand and walked away.

'Ah, yes.'

Haruka watched Atsuko and Nao leave.

'Let's go to my examination room.'

After waiting for the two of them to disappear, Mao slowly started walking.

– What does she have to say about Yakumo?

Haruka pondered that while walking after Mao.

At Mao's guidance, Haruka passed by the reception and went to the examination room at the end of the corridor.

'Sit there,' said Mao, sitting at her desk while pointing at the round chair facing it.

'Er... what do you want to talk about?' said Haruka as she sat down.

A strange anxiety gripped her heart and she couldn't calm down for some

reason.

'Actually, I want to contact Yakumo-kun immediately regarding Isshin-kun.'

'Yakumo-kun?'

'Yes.'

'I haven't seen him since yesterday.'

Haruka bit her lip.

With the commotion, she hadn't contacted Yakumo since yesterday.

She recalled how Yakumo had walked straight down the pitch-black corridor. Though it was only a corridor, it had seemed as dangerous as tightrope walking.

– I wonder what Yakumo is doing now?

'I see... You haven't seen him either.'

Mao let out a sigh in her disappointment.

'I'm sorry.'

'No, it's fine. I'll try elsewhere.'

'Er, why are you looking for Yakumo-kun?' asked Haruka, curious.

'Yesterday, Doctor Sakakibara explained Isshin-kun's condition, but that changed greatly upon the results of the examination.'

'Examination?'

'Yes. That's why I said I wanted him to come to the hospital today, but...'

'Yakumo-kun didn't come?'

'He didn't.'

– Yakumo had to be concerned about Isshin's condition too. He should have come right away.

Did something happen?

'I'll think about where he might be.'

'Thank you. That would be a great help.'

Mao's expression softened just a bit.

'Then how is Isshin-san's condition?' asked Haruka, leaning forward.

Mao's expression went stiff again and she looked away.

Haruka could easily imagine that his condition wasn't very good from Mao's response. She felt dizzy from her dark thoughts.

After thinking for some time, Mao said, 'I shouldn't actually talk to anybody but relatives, but... you're Yakumo-kun's fiancée, right?'

– I'm his fiancée?

'Isshin-san told you that?'

'Yes.'

Haruka frowned with complicated feelings.

She was surprised that Isshin saw it that way.

If it had been another situation, she would have denied it – 'Yakumo-kun and I aren't like that' – but she didn't have the energy for it.

'I...'

Haruka looked down, neither agreeing nor denying.

'We suspect that Isshin-kun may be brain-dead.'

After a silence, Mao said that in a quiet voice.

– Brain-dead.

Haruka pressed her hand against her chest. She felt like a sharp blade had gouged it out.

Her heart was pounding. Her whole body was numb.

'Brain-dead... is it?'

– I don't want to believe it.

With that feeling filling her heart, she asked that question.

'It's still just a possibility...'

'That's...'

'When Isshin-kun was carried in, he had stopped breathing for a while.

There's the possibility that his brain underwent a great deal of damage when he wasn't taking in oxygen.

– It's a lie. It's a lie. That has to be a lie.

This had to be a dream. It was obviously a lie. Haruka wanted to convince herself of that, but Mao's words mercilessly flew into her ears.

If this were true, Isshin wouldn't be able to breathe on his own, let alone walk and talk.

Not just that – the thoughts and memories that he was made up of would already be gone.

– I couldn't possibly believe that.

Haruka put her head on the table.

'Are you all right?'

Mao placed a hand on Haruka's shoulder.

'Is Isshin-san not going to get better...?'

Tears fell from Haruka's eyes naturally.

Once they started, she couldn't stop them. Haruka started to sob.

'Steady.'

'Please tell me he'll get better. If Isshin-san is gone, we'll...' pleaded Haruka, raising her head.

Then, her eyes met Mao's. Her eyes were also wet with tears.

'I was in the same seminar as Isshin-kun in university,' said Mao with a snuffle.

'Is that so...'

Haruka looked down in shame with closed eyes.

She had just been thinking of herself. She'd forgotten that Mao was Isshin's friend too.

'I always liked Isshin-kun, but because of who he is, we never became anything more than friends.'

Mao laughed as she shrugged.

Even though it must have been tough for her, she was stifling that feeling and doing her very best. When Haruka realised that, she wiped away her tears and took in a deep breath.

'I'm sorry.'

'It's fine. I don't want to believe this is happening either.'

Haruka silently bit her lip.

'I wonder why things turned out like this...'

Mao closed her eyes, looking like she was reminiscing.

Why did things turn out like this – Haruka had no way of knowing either.

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13

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– I'm worn out.

After returning to the precinct, Ishii collapsed into his chair at his desk.

His shoulders were heavy and his back felt sluggish. Furthermore, his consciousness was blurry. It was like that time he caught a cold.

He'd exhausted himself a fair amount in just a day and a half.

Gotou came in afterwards, a lit cigarette in his mouth. He sat down on the chair and crossed his arms.

Though he looked the same as always, his eyes were hollow.

'How was it?'

Miyagawa came in while calling out in a loud voice. His timing was so good it was like he'd been waiting for them to come back.

Ishii looked up at the voice, but he didn't know what to say.

It appeared that Gotou felt the same way. He just looked up without saying anything.

'This isn't a funeral – what happened?'

Miyagawa spread his two hands exaggeratedly.

Gotou looked at Miyagawa like he was something dirty and then said, 'Ishii,' looking at him.

Gotou was probably telling him to explain.

'Ah, er...'

Ishii was at a loss for words.

'Hurry up and speak,' said Miyagawa, lighting a cigarette.

'Yes sir.'

Ishii dragged his heavy body up and started reporting the information they had gathered at the detention house in order.

He started with how Miyuki had confessed to stabbing Saitou Isshin and then

discussed the situation at the infirmary on the day of the incident, which they had heard from the medical officer Komatsu. Then, he explained the particulars, including how Yamamura Mikio had visited the infirmary.

Ishii just tried his best to not to include any personal theories.

He wanted to know what Miyagawa thought.

After Ishii finished, Miyagawa nodded and said, 'I see.'

'From the situation, it's highly likely that the guard Yamamura is related somehow, like we thought.'

'You think that as well?' said Ishii happily.

So it wasn't just his own impression. Yamamura was suspicious.

'But we can't do anything at this stage.'

Miyagawa scratched his chin.

'Yes.'

Unfortunately, it was just as Miyagawa said.

Though Yamamura was certainly suspicious, that was all. If asked, Ishii wouldn't be able to say specifically how he was suspicious.

They had no evidence that Yamamura had tried to do something. He had just been near Miyuki.

In this situation, searching recklessly might just destroy the evidence.

It was unfortunate, but they would need to focus on gathering information and find out how Yamamura was related to the case.

'If we drag him in and wallop him, he'd cough the truth up, wouldn't he?' said Gotou curtly as he lit a cigarette.

It really wasn't something Ishii thought a detective would say.

'If we did that, the police and prosecutors would have a full-out war,' retorted

Miyagawa coldly.

'A war in space or a war between monsters – neither have anything to do with me.'

Gotou put his feet on top of the desk loudly.

He was acting like a rebellious high-school student.

'Leave this idiot alone, Ishii. What do you think?'

Miyagawa glared at Ishii.

'I believe that Nanase Miyuki used a certain method to escape the detention house. However, unfortunately, the method...'

Though Ishii had been the one giving his own opinion, he hesitated without continuing.

'It's impossible to escape the detention house.'

Miyagawa readily rejected Ishii's opinion.

'I think that Yamamura guided her somehow...'

Though Ishii said that, he didn't know the method. In the end, he had just returned to the beginning.

'That's not what I'm saying.'

'Eh?'

'Let's say that guy called Yamamura did guide her somehow. Though he doesn't have the key to the room, he has the key to the passage, so it'd be possible for him to take her out of the infirmary.'

'Yes.'

Though Miyagawa had denied Ishii's theory earlier, now he was agreeing with it.

Ishii felt that there was a contradiction, but he replied anyway.

'But if Yamamura took her out like that, there must've been an eyewitness.'

'That's right.'

Ishii had been stuck there too.

If Yamamura took a prisoner out without permission and loitered about, somebody would probably call out to stop him immediately. Even if he didn't meet anybody, there were security cameras.

– It really doesn't seem like it would work.

Ishii had started to give up when he suddenly got an idea.

'I see!'

'What?'

'If transporting packages was used as a diversion or Miyuki put on a guard uniform as a deception – wouldn't a method like that be possible?'

Then it would have been possible for them to leave without standing out.

Ishii had said that with confidence, but Miyagawa's reaction was lacking.

'Let's say they did use that method to let her escape. There's one more problem here. How'd she get back?'

'That's...'

Ishii couldn't think of an answer right away.

'And why did she have to return?'

'That's true...'

Ishii's answer trailed off.

That was a blind spot. If she had escaped the detention house, there was no need for her to risk returning.

She could have just escaped, but she didn't.

'Chief Miyagawa, how do you think she tried to kill him?'

Ishii tried asking a question back.

After Miyagawa hmm-ed and rubbed his bald head, he suddenly looked up, as if he had thought of something.

'This is just something that came to me, but maybe she didn't need to escape?'

'What do you mean?'

Gotou had been looking down since earlier, but the conversation suddenly caught his attention.

'That is, Miyuki set something up before coming into the detention house and used that to commit the crime – wouldn't that work?'

'Set something up... you say?'

'Right. Like using something similar to a bow and arrow to throw the knife...'

Miyagawa's voice grew quieter. Perhaps he had lost his confidence.

However, Ishii thought Miyagawa's theory was possible.

'That is possible. With a specific action, she could set off a mechanism to throw the knife.'

Ishii had read something like this in a mystery novel before. A knife was put into a bow gun, a booby trap was set up to activate once the door opened and the crime was committed that way.

Then, the criminal could create an alibi to prove they weren't related to the case and move the mechanism elsewhere.

If that method were used, Miyuki wouldn't need to escape the detention house.

'Then what sort of gadget did she use to do that?' said Gotou while stifling a

yawn.

'If we knew that, the case would be solved already.'

Miyagawa pressed his cigarette into the ashtray.

This idea felt like it would be tossed out, but it wasn't that way for Ishii.

Breaking through a situation where they were stuck wasn't half bad.

'Chief Miyagawa, let's investigate the scene once more.'

'Yeah.'

Miyagawa agreed with Ishii's suggestion.

'It was the first time somebody had honestly accepted Ishii's opinion. He felt a bit moved.

'No way about it. We've got nothing to lose, right?'

Gotou threw his cigarette into the ashtray and stood up slowly.

'Gotou, you can forget about it.'

Miyagawa shook his head.

'I'm telling you to go home for today,' said Miyagawa, poking his finger into Gotou's chest.

'W-w-what are you saying?'

Unable to accept it, Gotou flared up at Miyagawa's comment.

'I heard about what was going on from Ishii. You took in the victim's daughter, right?'

Miyagawa's gaze was serious, which was unusual for him.

'What about it? It's got nothing to do with the case, right?'

'It's got everything to do with it!'

Miyagawa's words were close to a threat.

Ishii felt surprised just from standing next to him.

'Please don't speak so loudly.'

'Listen up – you don't have enough self-awareness. Taking in a kid is a big responsibility. You think just feeding her dinner's gonna be enough? She's not a dog. At least head home early today.'

Miyagawa pushed Gotou in the chest.

Gotou staggered backwards.

'Even if I went back, I wouldn't be able to do anything. Instead I should hurry and catch the...'

'Shut up! Stop complaining! This is an order!'

Miyagawa's yell drowned out Gotou's words.

The difference in response might have been the difference between those who had children and those who didn't. That was what Ishii thought.

Even Gotou couldn't respond.

'Don't worry about the investigation. I'm more than enough to fill in for you,' said Miyagawa, turning his back to Gotou.

– So cool.

Ishii unconsciously found himself enraptured by that back.

'Right! Ishii! We're going!'

As Miyagawa said that, he left the room.

'Eh?'

Ishii finally realised.

If Miyagawa was filling in for Gotou, that meant that Ishii would pair up with

Miyagawa.

This happened last time too. Whenever he paired up with Miyagawa, something terrible always happened to Ishii.

Tormented by melancholy, Ishii ran after Miyagawa regardless.

His feet tangled.

He fell –

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14

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– I feel down.

Haruka stopped in front of the prefabricated building in the back of Building B.

It was completely dark around her.

However, there was no light on in the <Movie Research Circle> room.

After leaving the hospital, Haruka had called Yakumo's mobile countless times, but the call tone had just gone on and Yakumo hadn't answered.

She had left a voicemail, but there hadn't even been a return call.

Haruka opened the door, went inside and turned on the light.

Yakumo really wasn't here.

She had come here to search for Yakumo, but if he wasn't here, she unfortunately had no more ideas.

'Where are you?' she asked, but there was no response.

It was a small, dreary room with only a table, sleeping bag and refrigerator, but she had many memories here.

Really, a great number of things had happened. Normally, she could relax here, but sitting by herself like this just made her anxious.

She recalled what had happened during the last case.

That time as well, Haruka had chased after Yakumo, who had suddenly disappeared, and came to this room and sat down on this chair.

Yakumo often took on things by himself.

Even if he was troubled, he didn't show it on his face, and he wouldn't respond if Haruka asked.

He especially had a tendency to run amok when his relatives were involved.

– It's my fault...

The words Yakumo said in the hospital ran through Haruka's head.

The words might not have been in regards to this case but rather everything that had happened up until now.

Yakumo had fought fiercely up until now.

Against the people who despised his red left eye which could see the spirits of the dead. The spirits he saw against his will with no reward.

And then the man with two red eyes –

He had undergone much more than most and experienced many hardships and sorrows.

Yakumo had said this before.

– No matter how obscure the darkness, a small light can always be seen ahead of it.

By believing in that, Yakumo retained his psychological balance and walked forward.

However, no matter how much he advanced, the same things happened. One

person couldn't change the world, so he continued to fight people's resentment and hatred.

Not just that – he couldn't save the people close to him.

It was the same this time.

Yakumo hadn't been able to save Isshin. The cause of the incident was probably the woman called Nanase Miyuki's grudge.

Even though they were just walking the paths they believed in, because everyone thinks differently, that changed into resentment and hatred.

Yakumo, who could see the spirits of the dead, might have felt that more strongly than anyone.

Was he tired of the unending and recurring chain of negative emotions?

– That isn't it, right?

Haruka prayed silently in her heart as she tightly gripped the necklace hanging from her neck.

The main reason Yakumo had so far never stepped off the path a human should take no matter what he suffered was probably Isshin's influence.

Because Yakumo had had Isshin's support, Yakumo had been able to walk forward up until now.

If Yakumo lost Isshin, what would he become?

Haruka felt incredibly afraid when she imagined it.

Haruka held the red stone on her necklace with both hands and closed her eyes, as if praying.

In the silence, a thought came to Haruka.

It was about Yakumo's father, the man with red eyes.

He had always been a puzzle.

Why did he play with people's emotions and induce them into committing crimes?

He could see the spirits of the dead, like Yakumo.

Did that make him act the way he did?

Since Haruka didn't know much about psychology, it was just a theory, but she couldn't help but feel that way.

Because of those red eyes, he lost many important things, took in those feelings with no reward all by himself. Then, bearing those feelings, he fell into an absolute darkness –

Though those were just her thoughts, maybe he had been in a similar situation to Yakumo? If that were the case –

Would Yakumo fall into the pitch-black darkness again?

Haruka shook her head to clear away her negative thoughts.

– There's no way.

She continued to pray in her heart, but her anxiety just wouldn't go away.

– Yakumo, where are you trying to go?

Haruka murmured that in her heart.

Of course, there was no answer.

Haruka took her mobile phone out of her bag and typed out a text.

Though it was only one-way communication, she still wanted to convey something to Yakumo.

She typed in a sentence, deleted it, typed in a sentence, deleted it –

That was the cycle.

After thinking over it, she finally only typed in one sentence.

<I want to see you.>

She didn't need any other words. She just wanted to see Yakumo.

After typing her text, Haruka took her necklace off and held it in front of her eyes.

The swaying red stone glinted with a sharp light.

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Gotou stood in front of the door to his home.

He had lived in this flat from his work for five years already.

However, it was the first time in his memory that he had returned home so early.

Miyagawa had practically chased him out, but Gotou himself was concerned about Atsuko and Nao too.

That said, if Miyagawa hadn't said all that, Gotou probably wouldn't have left the investigation and gone home.

Gotou was about to open the door when he noticed that his hand was shaking slightly.

It was like he had returned home with a guilty conscience after an affair.

– Idiotic. What am I getting worked up for when I'm just returning to my own home?

Gotou encouraged himself and forcefully opened the door.

'I'm back.'

High-pitched laughter from the living room drowned out Gotou's voice.

He knew immediately that it was Atsuko's laughter. She really sounded like she was enjoying herself –

Atsuko often laughed like this in a high-pitched voice before they married.

Gotou liked the way Atsuko laughed. He would fool around just to make her

laugh.

However, after they started living together, that laughter grew quiet and they soon didn't even talk any more.

A cold relationship where they only lived together –

Gotou thought that the start of that was when Atsuko had a miscarriage. If he had faced her properly after that, they might have had a different future.

However, Gotou hadn't been able to do that. He stuck himself to his work and ran away.

Still feeling guilty, Gotou took off his shoes at the entrance and headed for the living room.

The laughter still continued.

As he stood in front of the door to the living room, he hesitated to open it.

If I open the door now, that laughter might stop – that was what he thought.

– Why am I hesitating?

Gotou told himself that as he opened the door.

A different scene from the usual flew into Gotou's eyes.

Atsuko was sitting on the sofa and Nao was on her lap. They were using drawing paper to talk.

Both of them were smiling innocently.

The air felt warm.

Nao pointed at the drawing paper and spoke falteringly: 'Ah, ah.'

Since Nao couldn't hear, she couldn't speak clearly, but Atsuko seemed to understand everything she said as she nodded a number of times.

Gotou felt like he had wandered into somebody else's home.

However, he didn't feel uncomfortable. He wanted to look at Atsuko's and

Nao's smiling faces forever. He even felt that way.

'Oh my, you're back?'

Atsuko noticed Gotou was there and looked up.

The smile on her face didn't waver.

'Y-yeah.'

How many years had it been since Atsuko had welcomed him home with a smile?

Gotou felt awkward as he walked to the sofa where Atsuko and Nao were.

'What's so funny?'

Gotou sat down cross-legged in front of the sofa.

Nao and Atsuko looked at each other and laughed.

'There's no helping it, so shall we show him?'

Atsuko spoke with Nao and then held out the drawing paper.

A man was drawn on it in crayon.

He wore something like a suit, but his whole body was fuzzy and he had his mouth wide open, baring his teeth.

'What is this?'

Gotou said the first thing that came to mind.

'It's you.'

Atsuko's shoulders shook as she laughed.

– This is me?

'This is practically a bear.'

When Gotou said that, even he started becoming amused.

A smile naturally appeared on his face.

'Oi, Nao. Am I a bear?'

Gotou pretended to roar – 'Gaaaa!' – and then pinched Nao's nose.

Nao shrieked with laughter and swung her legs.

When Gotou looked at that smiling face, he felt all his exhaustion fly away.

– Do I want to be a dad?

Gotou was surprised to find that wish at the bottom of his heart.

Gotou's eyes were half-closed as he looked at Nao as if in a trance, but then he noticed Atsuko looking at him curiously and covered up by clearing his throat.

'So how was it?'

It was the first time in a while that Gotou had spoken to Atsuko like this.

Gotou thought that Atsuko might be a bit confused, but she just started talking about what had happened today with Nao still on her map.

It was a regular conversation – she just told him that they went to visit Isshin and that Nao had helped prepare dinner. However, Atsuko's eyes sparkled like those of a child talking about an adventure.

When Atsuko's words reached Gotou's ears, he realised. Atsuko had been lonely all this time –

She sent off her husband who selfishly ran off however he wanted and had lived with her loneliness alone in this home.

It was imprudent, but Gotou wouldn't have realised such a simple thing if this hadn't happened.

He was a useless man who only knew how to thump his chest.

Perhaps Nao had grown tired of laughing, because she let out a yawn on top of the sofa.

'She must be tired.'

'Well, that happened...'

'Now, let's go to the futon.'

Atsuko picked Nao up and headed for the bedroom.

Gotou lit his cigarette as she watched them.

He felt like the smoke didn't just go to his lungs but to the deep parts of his heart.

After a while, Atsuko returned to the living room.

'Sorry,' said Gotou as he looked at Atsuko's face.

'It's fine. Something like this is nothing to worry about. Nao-chan's a strong girl too,' replied Atsuko lightly.

The 'Sorry' Gotou wanted to say hadn't just been for today but everything up until now.

'That's right. She's a strong girl,' said Gotou without explaining his intention.

– This part of myself is irritating.

Gotou laughed self-deprecatingly and slowly blew out smoke.

'...Do you think the culprit will be caught?'

After Atsuko said that, she looked like she wanted to say, 'Oh no.'

It was the first time she'd asked about a case. He'd thought that she wasn't interested, but that probably wasn't it.

She wanted to know, but she hadn't asked because she thought that she would be disliked if she asked.

'We don't know anything yet. This case has very deep roots,' said Gotou as if it were natural.

He had no proof. He wanted somebody to listen to him now – that was how

he felt.

Perhaps Atsuko was happy about getting a response, because her eyes were as bright as a girl's.

'What do you mean when you say the roots are deep?'

'It'll take a while to explain.'

Gotou felt somewhat embarrassed when Atsuko looked at him like that.

To escape Atsuko's gaze, he played with the carpet.

'I don't mind if it takes a while,' said Atsuko.

Because Gotou was looking down, he didn't know what sort of expression she was making.

Talking to Atsuko wouldn't find them the culprit.

There was the last case too. If he talked to Atsuko, he'd probably make her worry. However, his desire to let her know was still stronger.

'Could you get a beer?' said Gotou, pressing his cigarette into the ashtray.

'Mind if I have one too?'

After Atsuko said that, she headed for the kitchen without waiting for Gotou's reply and brought back two cans of beer from the refrigerator.

Gotou lit a new cigarette and took a sip of beer. Then, he started explaining the connections regarding the case.

It started fifteen years ago, when Gotou saved a boy.

He had always been bad at explaining to people, so he took a while, unable to summarise the story concisely.

However, Atsuko still listened to his story silently.

How many years has it been since I talked for so long to Atsuko –

It was a mysterious feeling, like telling an old tale to a child.

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16

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Ishii took a can of beer in both hands and passed through the gate to the temple.

The wind that blew through was cold.

Even though it would soon be spring, the night really was cold.

The temple stood out in the darkness, as if it were itself emitting light.

The outdoor lamps lit up the temple as the investigation was underway.

Though Ishii understood, it still looked creepy to him.

– What method did Nanase Miyuki use to stab Isshin?

That puzzle was still unsolved.

Ishii sighed. Then, somebody passed by him.

'Ah!'

He'd seen the face before – it was Saitou Yakumo.

'Er, Yakumo-shi.'

Yakumo might have an ingenious plan.

Ishii called out to him, but Yakumo silently walked towards the cemetery as if he hadn't heard anything.

His profile was paler than usual – he looked like a living corpse.

– I wonder what happened.

In Ishii's confusion, Yakumo disappeared, as if swallowed by the darkness.

– Was that an illusion just now?

It was to the point that Ishii thought his eyes might have been playing tricks

on him.

'Oi, Ishii. What're you standing there for!?'

Miyagawa shouted from the front of the temple.

Ishii hurriedly ran towards Miyagawa.

'E-e-excuse me.'

Ishii held out two cans of coffee for Miyagawa.

'You an idiot? One of them's yours.'

'T-thank you very much.'

Miyagawa took just one can from Ishii and pulled open the tab.

'Well, sit down.'

'Ah, yes.'

Urged by Miyagawa, Ishii sat on the steps, holding the can of coffee in his hands without opening it.

'Don't be so stiff. You underestimate yourself.'

'Underestimate... is it?'

It was the first time in his life that he had ever been told that.

He'd been called idiot and blockhead countless times.

He didn't feel frustrated or angry about it. That was because he thought it was true.

That was why he didn't understand when Miyagawa said he was underestimating himself.

'You should be more confident.'

'Ah, but...'

Miyagawa said it so simply, but it was difficult.

He wasn't hesitant because he wanted to be. He just couldn't believe in his own thoughts.

When he heard other people's opinions, he always ended up thinking that they were correct. He couldn't be decisive.

That was all.

'Want a smoke?'

Miyagawa took out a cigarette case.

'I don't smoke,' said Ishii, waving a hand.

He had tried smoking before, but it made him cough terribly. It didn't agree with him.

'I see,' murmured Miyagawa. Meanwhile, he put a cigarette in his mouth and lit it.

'Has there been any new information?' asked Ishii as he watched the investigation team move about.

'The window in the back of the temple was broken. Nanase Miyuki's fingerprints were found there,' said Miyagawa with a depressed expression.

'Was that the route she used to break in?'

'They were relatively new fingerprints so that's probably right.'

'I see.'

'But that means...'

Miyagawa trailed off.

'Ah, that's right...'

Ishii nodded, sensing how Miyagawa felt.

If they specified the back window as the break-in route, the crime using a trap that Miyagawa suggested would naturally be eliminated.

Miyagawa seemed to think it unfortunate from the expression on his profile. When Ishii looked at it, a question came up in his head.

– Is the back really the break-in route?

Ishii thought carefully about the day of the crime.

Isshin went to the temple to meditate, and Gotou told Ishii to guard the entrance.

But –

'I didn't hear anything.'

When Ishii declared that, Miyagawa's eyebrow twitched.

'What do you mean?'

'I was standing here the whole time,' explained Ishii as he climbed the stairs to stand at the temple's sliding door.

'OK.'

'I was listening so that I would be able to move immediately if there were anything out of the ordinary. However...'

'You didn't hear the window break.'

Ishii responded with a nod.

It had been a quiet, windless night. If there had been the sound of a window breaking, he would have definitely noticed.

'At least the window was not broken at the time of the crime,' finished Ishii.

'Then when was the window broken?'

'That is...'

Ishii didn't know at this stage.

'Since Miyuki's fingerprints were on it, she has to be the one who broke it.'

'Please wait a moment.'

Ishii took out a memo pad and started writing a time schedule to organise his thoughts.

Miyuki was carried to the infirmary past six PM –

Then, Isshin was stabbed at nine PM –

Ishii predicted that Miyuki escaped the detention house and committed the crime in those three hours. He put that with the information he had gathered until now.

Yamamura showed up at the infirmary at about seven PM –

Furthermore, Isshin went into the temple at eight thirty PM –

The time frame was fairly narrow.

'From seven PM to eight thirty PM, Miyuki left the detention house, broke the temple window and went in...' said Miyagawa as he peeked at Ishii's mirror.

If the investigated within this hour and a half, it would be much more effective.

'Miyagawa-san, do you have a moment?'

As the conversation came to a lull, a man in a blue uniform from investigations came towards them and spoke up.

'What?'

Miyagawa pressed his cigarette into a portable ashtray and followed the man from investigations into the temple.

Ishii's interest was piqued, so he followed after Miyagawa too.

The inside of the temple was also lit up to the point it was glaring.

'Please look at this.'

The man from investigations held up the plastic bag in his hand to show them.

In the bag there was something like a thin wire.

'What's that?' said Miyagawa, picking the bag up.

'It was caught on that statue of the Buddha.'

The man from investigations pointed at the statute of the Buddha at the front.

It was a wooden statue of Gautama Buddha. It frightened Ishii – the half – open eyes seemed to see through to the bottom of his heart.

'Though it is faint, there are also traces of blood.'

The man from investigations pointed at part of the wire in the plastic bag.

It certainly was dyed dark red.

– Wait a second.

When Ishii saw that, another thought came to mind.

Earlier, he had thought that the fingerprints on the window disproved the theory of crime by some sort of device.

However, if he thought about it differently, Miyuki might have purposefully left the fingerprints on the back window to hide the trap she used to commit the crime.

She had done the same sort of thing during a past incident. Miyuki often used this trick.

But what device could stab Isshin with a knife – Ishii didn't know.

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17

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Yakumo stood in front of a gravestone.

The engraved name stood out in the moonlight.

– Takagishi Family Grave.

The person sleeping under here was Yakumo's middle-school teacher and Nao's mother. She was also the person who might have become his mother – He couldn't save her either.

– But why can my eye see?

Yakumo touched the gravestone with his fingertips.

It was hard and cold to the touch. It was just a stone; there was no way it would answer.

His body trembled.

'Is it really my fault...' said Yakumo in a voice that trailed off.

The words were not directed to anybody in particular. He had not said them expecting an answer.

However, a response came back from the darkness.

– Yes. Everything is your fault.

Yakumo shut his eyes and sighed.

He realised immediately whose voice it was.

In the past, he had desperately prayed that he would never meet him, and now he was frantically searching for him.

'Come out.'

Yakumo's eyes snapped open as he said that in a hard tone.

'If you wish.'

At the same time as that voice, a man walked out of the darkness.

He wore a black suit and his long hair flowed down his back. Even though it

was night, he wore dark sunglasses, and his pale skin stood out.

It was the first time Yakumo had confronted this man like this.

However, he knew who it was immediately.

He didn't determine it from seeing him. The blood flowing through Yakumo's veins told him so.

'So it really was you?'

'That tone of voice isn't very appropriate when talking to your father.'

'I've never thought of you as my father.'

'It's not a problem of whether you think so or not. Doesn't that red eye of yours prove it? The bond between you and me.'

The man slowly took off his sunglasses.

The moonlight illuminated his deep red eyes, making it look as if they were glittering.

'Uncle is my father,' Yakumo said shortly.

He didn't want to acknowledge it. That the same blood that flowed through this man flowed through himself –

'But you couldn't save him.'

'You're wrong.'

'Not just him. Your mother and that woman – you couldn't save them either.'

'I...'

'Because of you, everyone died.'

The man's sentence seemed to pierce through to Yakumo's core.

– Everyone died.

Everyone important to me dies – that reality crushed Yakumo's heart.

'Your blood is cursed. You can't escape it.'

The man walked towards Yakumo like he was floating across the ground.

I want to run – that impulse made Yakumo turn away.

'Hiding won't change reality.'

A cool smile graced the man's lips.

'That's...'

'I have had a number of children up until now, but the only one who has inherited my genetics – my red eye – and remains living... is you.'

'... I don't want to understand,' said Yakumo, as if the words were strangled out of him.

However, that voice did not echo. The darkness swallowed it.

'No, you should already understand.'

'I can't understand,' said Yakumo with a furious expression.

However, that serious thought was also swallowed up by that man's red eyes.

'Seeing the spirits of the dead makes you suffer, doesn't it? It hurts, doesn't it? You end up seeing things you don't have to see. You know things you don't have to know.'

'So what?'

'Even if you can escape for a moment, it happens again.'

Yakumo gritted his teeth.

– I can't listen to what this man says.

With strong conviction, Yakumo opposed him. After all, it was just ego to justify himself.

But –

The other person hidden in the depths of his heart understood what this man said. And he agreed.

Nothing would change from trying by himself.

People were powerless.

The same thing would happen.

Then, people would die –

The resentment and hatred of the dead wandered the world.

He saw it.

Even though he didn't want to – he saw it.

Yakumo bit the inside of his lip.

Pain and the taste of blood filled his mouth.

With that he was finally able to come to his senses.

'That's why you kill people?'

The man smiled at Yakumo's words.

'Kill? Me? I haven't killed anyone. All I have done is fulfil desires. I just lend a hand. Isn't that right?'

– It's just as he says.

This man had had a hand in a number of cases.

However, he had never directly done anything. He had just given a few backs a push.

With his guidance, people were shaken by their desires; as a result, people died.

Yakumo didn't know what was right any more.

'I don't want to see my son suffer any more.'

'Suffer?'

'That's right. Isshin doesn't know your true feelings – he just says platitudes and misleads you. What Isshin says is only an illusion. You know that too, right?'

– So that really was it?

Isshin really was stabbed because of him.

When Yakumo realised that, he felt himself falling into a deep darkness.

– If I weren't here, this wouldn't have happened.

That thought ran about his head.

When his own existence was denied, Yakumo's heart lost even its usual composure and transfigured into something terribly fragile.

'What are you telling me to do...' Yakumo asked the man.

Yakumo had lost his way – he appeared to be pleading.

When the man saw Yakumo like that, he smiled broadly, as if he could not have expected anything better.

'Come with me. I'll teach you...'

The man slowly walked into the darkness.

– What is in that darkness?

Yakumo didn't know, but he felt like he would be released from his suffering if he followed the man.

In his doubt, he took the first step forward.

That moment, the mobile phone in his pocket rang to tell him he had a text.

Yakumo took out his mobile.

'Throw that away,' said the man, turning around.

'Throw it away?'

'Yes. It causes troublesome involvements which change into doubts.'

– It really was true.

Yakumo was about to throw his mobile phone when the wind blew.

– Don't throw it away.

It felt like it was saying that.

Yakumo opened the text that had arrived.

It was a text from Haruka.

Just one sentence.

– I want to see you.

That short sentence shook Yakumo's heart.

'What's wrong?' asked the man.

– I...

The wind blew again.

A cloud of dust danced by and went into Yakumo's left eye.

He pressed his hand against the left eye from the pain.

'What are you hesitating for? We're going.'

The man pressed forward.

Yakumo lifted his face, still pressing a hand against his left eye.

He heard something beating in his chest.

Yakumo took the hand off his eye and looked at the man again.

– I see. So that's how it is.

At this moment, Yakumo understood everything that had been a puzzle to

him up until now.

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18

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Before Haruka knew it, she was at the temple.

She was standing on the wooden floor with bare feet. She looked up and saw a statue of Gautama Buddha enshrined in front of her.

She stepped towards the solemn figure, as if drawn in.

Creak –

With every step, the floorboards creaked underneath her.

After walking so close she could touch the Buddha statue, she noticed somebody's presence behind her.

Haruka turned around, startled.

She saw somebody standing in the temple entrance.

He had terrible bedhead and wore a white shirt and jeans.

That's –

'Yakumo-kun,' said Haruka in her delight.

She had looked for him since yesterday. She was finally able to meet him.

With no response, Yakumo stood there like a statue.

'Hey, Yakumo-kun, where were you?'

Haruka walked towards Yakumo as she called out to him, but Yakumo didn't respond.

Clang –

Something slipped out of Yakumo's hand.

'Hey!'

Haruka looked at his feet and exclaimed in surprise.

Fallen there was a knife covered in blood.

'The true nature of humanity... is darkness.'

Yakumo's eyes were narrowed as he smiled, like he was in a trance.

'Yakumo-kun... right?'

Yakumo didn't reply to Haruka's question.

He just smiled uncannily, turned around on his heels and walked towards the exit.

'Wait, Yakumo-kun!'

Haruka hurriedly chased after Yakumo.

It was strange – even though Haruka was running after him, she couldn't catch up to Yakumo, who was walking.

Yakumo's back kept moving farther away –

'Yakumo-kun! Wait!'

Even though she was running and running, the distance between them kept growing.

'Don't go!' yelled Haruka from the bottom of her stomach, and then she sat straight up.

'You're so noisy.'

– Eh?

Haruka was quickly brought back to reality by that voice.

She couldn't see clearly since it was so bright. After blinking a number of times, she finally saw who was standing in the white light.

'Could it be you, Yakumo-kun?' asked Haruka, confused.

'There's no "could" about it.'

That blunt way of speaking – it had to be Yakumo.

'Why are you here, Yakumo-kun?'

'This is my room. It's natural for me to be here.'

'Eh?'

'Don't "eh" me. On top of worming your way into my room, you're making false accusations in your sleep. How can you be such a dunce?'

Yakumo ran a hand through his messy hair and yawned.

His left eye was a vivid red.

Now, Haruka finally realised that what she had seen earlier was a dream.

Yesterday, she had been waiting for Yakumo in this room and had fallen asleep at some point with her head on the table.

'Where did you go!? I was worried!' protested Haruka, her emotions tipping over as she pointed a finger at Yakumo.

Even though she had been so worried, Yakumo was acting so nonchalant. It irritated her.

'Don't shout,' said Yakumo fingers in his ears.

'I want to shout. When you suddenly disappear at a serious time. I...'

Haruka furiously held back the tears that were threatening to spill out.

Happiness and frustration stirred up her gloomy heart.

'My bad. In a number of ways. I had some things I had to think about,' said Yakumo as he turned his back to Haruka.

Haruka hit his back.

'Don't think by yourself, idiot.'

'That's quite the tone when you're an idiot yourself. I apologised properly, didn't I?'

Yakumo turned back to her and ran a hand through his hair in exasperation.

'Shut up. Idiot. I definitely won't forgive you.'

Even though she was so happy that Yakumo had returned that she didn't know what to do, in her stubbornness, she couldn't act honestly happy.

– I'm the idiot.

I might be the reason the distance between Yakumo and me doesn't shorten – so Haruka ended up thinking.

'How can I cheer you up? Should I buy you some chocolate?' said Yakumo lightly.

– He's making fun of me.

'I don't want chocolate!'

'Then what do you want?'

'I don't want anything. Just don't go off somewhere without my permission again!'

'I'm not your possession.'

'I know that! But I don't like it!'

Before she knew it, she was crying.

Showing her tears made it feel like she had lost. She bit her lip in mortification.

However, the more she tried to hold the tears in, the more came out.

Finally, Haruka covered her face with both hands and started sobbing.

'I get it. I'll tell you next time.'

Yakumo stood up and lightly touched Haruka's shoulder.

His white fingers seemed to trace Haruka's contours as they went from her shoulder to her neck.

Haruka's body trembled – it felt strange, like the strength was leaving her body. At the same time, she felt her heart melt, though it had been hard up until earlier.

Haruka looked at Yakumo's red eye.

– It really is beautiful.

As she thought that, she naturally closed her eyes.

It was a pleasant silence. If only time would stop now – so she thought.

Yakumo's breath brushed Haruka's earlobe.

'You saved me again,' said Yakumo, faintly – very faintly.

Yakumo's presence suddenly disappeared into the dark.

– Is this a dream too?

Haruka hurriedly opened her eyes.

Yakumo was right in front of her eyes, but he was putting something on.

'What are you doing?'

'Going out?'

'Where to?'

Haruka stood up as she wiped her tears.

'Where? Obviously to solve the mystery behind the case.'

'R-really...'

Yakumo said that in a matter-of-fact manner, but there was no way for Haruka to understand without an explanation.

'I'm going to leave you behind if you don't hurry,' said Yakumo as he ran a hand through his hair. Then, he left the room briskly.

Though Yakumo was the same as always, Haruka felt like something was wrong.

– He's too normal.

Yakumo should know Isshin's condition too, so how could he be so calm?

'Aren't you coming?'

Haruka's thoughts were interrupted when she heard Yakumo urging her.

– There's no point thinking about these things now.

Haruka followed Yakumo out of the room.

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19

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The first thing Gotou saw at work was Ishii, sleeping with his head on the desk.

Tools like scissors and screwdrivers were scattered about.

– What the hell is he using these for?

'You can't... Please stop it already...'

Ishii shook his head back and forth as he mumbled incoherently in his sleep.

– He's probably having some stupid dream.

Gotou had gone home early at Miyagawa's behest yesterday. It appeared that Ishii had stayed up all night working after that.

When Gotou thought about that, though he didn't feel guilty, he still didn't like listening to the strange sleeptalk.

'Wake up!'

Gotou hit Ishii's head.

'Ack!' yelled Ishii as he jumped up like a frog.

'You're so noisy,' complained Gotou. He put a cigarette in his mouth and sat in his own seat.

Ishii rubbed his bloodshot eyes, put on the glasses that had been on the table. After confirming it was Gotou in front of him, he said awkwardly, 'D-Detective Gotou... I apologise; it seems I fell asleep.'

Even though it had only been one day, Ishii's face looked a bit hollow.

It looked like he'd made Ishii bear the burden by himself at a difficult time.

'My bad about yesterday.'

Gotou apologised honestly.

However, Ishii didn't seem to understand. He just stared blankly for a while.

'Er, I mean, because I went home early...' said Gotou, lighting his cigarette.

Ishii looked like he finally understood. He clapped his hands together.

'Oh, I'm fine. More importantly, how is Nao-chan?'

'She's calmed down.'

Gotou would be embarrassed explaining everything that happened yesterday, so he left it at that.

'So how's the investigation?' asked Gotou. Ishii's expression clouded over instantly.

– This guy's really easy to understand.

'That is... rather difficult... regarding the method the crime was committed... er... well.'

Ishii's replies never gave him the important points.

Gotou felt, a bit late, that this characteristic of his irritated people.

'It's not like I thought the case would suddenly be solved. Tell me what you know now.'

'Ah, y-yes sir.'

Ishii took a memo pad from his jacket and started explaining the situation with the investigation.

'A broken window was found in the back of the temple, and Nanase Miyuki's fingerprints were found there as well.'

'I see.'

That made it very likely that Miyuki had gotten in from the back of the temple.

– But is that really how it happened?

'However, since I did not hear the sound of breaking glass on the night of the crime, I feel like it happened earlier,' added Ishii, as if he had expected Gotou's question.

'That'd be possible,' agreed Gotou. He was about to tap the ashes off his cigarette but he couldn't find an ashtray.

– Where is it?

Gotou looked about the room as he listened to Ishii.

'Something like a wire was also found at the temple.'

'A wire, eh...'

Gotou found the ashtray in a cabinet with glass doors.

– Why's it here?

With that question in his mind, Gotou put his hand on the cabinet to take the ashtray out.

'Ah! Detective Gotou! You can't!' shouted Ishii, standing up.

But he was too late –

When Gotou opened the door, there was a popping sound.

At the same time, something flew out.

Gotou was so surprised he couldn't avoid it.

It was a direct hit on his forehead.

'Ow.'

He put his hand to his forehead. Something was stuck there.

It didn't hurt as much as he thought it did.

– The hell is this?

Gotou pulled it off his head with another pop.

Its tip was a suction cup – a toy arrow for children.

'That's why I said that you can't open the cabinet.'

Half in tears, Ishii approached Gotou.

'Ishii, were you playing around while I was gone?'

The part of Gotou that had felt sorry earlier now felt angry. He grabbed Ishii by the lapels and shook him.

'That isn't it,' objected Ishii, shaking his head.

'What isn't it!? Eh?'

'It was an experiment.'

'Experimenting to see how I'd respond to a prank!?'

'It was an experiment since we think Nanase Miyuki's crime might not have been committed by her escaping the detention house but by using a trap like

this.'

– I see.

Gotou finally understood what Ishii was trying to say.

When the door opened, an arrow flew out. If Miyuki made a trap like this, she could make a knife fly out and stab Isshin instead.

If she used this method, she wouldn't have to go out of her way to escape the detention house.

Gotou understood that. But –

'Then why didn't you say that first!?'

'Because you opened the door before I could say it, Detective Gotou.'

'Shut up!'

'You're a hundred times noisier.'

Along with the voice, something hit the back of Gotou's head.

– Who the hell would suddenly hit somebody's head like this?

Gotou let go of Ishii and turned around with a furious expression.

Standing there was Miyagawa.

'Honestly. I can't tell if you guys are serious or playing around,' complained Miyagawa. He crossed his arms and sat on a nearby chair.

'What are you saying? We are always serious.'

'You don't say,' said Miyagawa with suspicious eyes.

'What are you here for, Miyagawa-san?'

'I finished preparing what Ishii asked for so I came all the way here for that.'

– Ishii asked for something?

Gotou felt something was off.

He couldn't imagine Ishii asking Miyagawa for anything.

'Is that so? Thank you very much.'

Ishii's eyes were sparkling.

'What did you ask for?'

'I requested for the footage from the security cameras at the detention house,' said Ishii energetically.

'I've got it set up in the conference room.'

After declaring just that, Miyagawa stood up and left the room briskly.

'Why do you need the security camera footage?'

'If she escaped the detention house, she might be in that footage.'

As usual, Ishii was excited.

However, Gotou felt there was a contradiction in that answer.

'Didn't Miyuki use a trap to stab Isshin?'

'There is that possibility.'

'Then she didn't need to leave the detention house, right?'

'That's right.'

'Then why are we looking at the security camera footage?'

Ishii's brows furrowed at Gotou's question.

'Well, that is... I feel like the trap theory is plausible, but the escape theory is also difficult to abandon... so...'

Though Ishii didn't say it clearly, in short he couldn't decide which one it was.

Normally, Gotou would hit Ishii's head and say, 'Make up your mind!'

However, Gotou couldn't come to a decision either.

Right now, thinking about it wouldn't bring about an answer.

If he looked at it a different way, checking the security camera footage would make it clear whether Miyuki escaped or not.

– We can think about what comes next after.

'Got it. Let's go.'

Gotou came to a decision and stood up.

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20

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– Solve the mystery.

Led by Yakumo, who had said those words, Haruka went to the hospital where Isshin was hospitalised.

Haruka was a bit confused by this unexpected development.

In order to solve the mystery, they'd need to meet up with Gotou and Ishii first to gather information – is what she thought.

'Is this really the right place?' asked Haruka, though she knew it was unnecessary concern.

'Does it look like I'm lost? I'm not you,' replied Yakumo with a yawn.

'Don't make it sound like I have no sense of direction.'

'Was I wrong?'

'That's not the point...'

While Haruka was talking, Yakumo briskly went into the hospital.

– He's always like this.

Haruka pinned down her irritation and followed Yakumo into the hospital.

Once inside the hospital, Yakumo went straight to the reception, declared, 'I have an appointment with Doctor Arai Mao,' and was instructed to wait on the bench in the waiting room.

When Haruka heard Mao's name, she remembered something important.

'I met Mao-sensei yesterday.'

'That so,' said Yakumo disinterestedly. He sat on the bench.

Haruka sat next to him.

'She asked me to search for Yakumo-kun so she could talk to you about Isshin-san.'

'I'm going to see her now.'

That was true, but there was something Haruka didn't understand.

'Before you solve the mystery, you're going to see Mao-sensei about Isshin-san,' said Haruka to confirm.

'Both.'

Yakumo ran a hand through his hair.

'What do you mean by both?'

'You have so many questions. More importantly, how's Nao?'

Yakumo's expression clouded over.

Though Yakumo was unsociable, Nao alone was special. Yakumo always had a gentle smile in front of her.

That was how deep his affection for her was.

'Though it seemed like she was shocked, she's calmed down a bit now.'

'I see...'

'Gotou-san's wife is reliable – Nao-chan likes her too...'

'That's great.'

Yakumo half-closed his eyes and looked up at the ceiling.

'Go visit them,' said Haruka while looking at her right hand.

It made her remember grasping Nao's small hand.

Though Nao didn't show it, it must have actually been tough on her. She must have been sad and in pain.

Yakumo was the only one who could heal her heart.

'Right...' murmured Yakumo.

Then, there was an announcement: 'Saitou Yakumo-san, please head to examination room number three.'

'OK, shall we go?'

Yakumo rubbed his hands together as he said that and briskly walked towards the corridor.

Haruka still had questions as she followed after Yakumo.

They went down the corridor by the reception desk and stopped in front of a room with a plate that read 'Examination Room #3'.

It was the same place Haruka had come to yesterday.

'It's Saitou Yakumo,' said Yakumo towards the door as he knocked.

'Please come in.'

Mao's voice came from inside.

Yakumo opened the door and went inside. Haruka followed him.

'You finally came.'

Mao was sitting at her desk. Once she saw Yakumo's face, her expression softened in relief.

'Did you bring him here?'

Mao looked at Haruka.

Unfortunately, Haruka had forgotten about Mao's request until she came to the hospital.

'No, I didn't,' replied Haruka, which made Mao look confused.

'Yakumo-kun came on his own. I didn't...'

'That doesn't matter,' interrupted Yakumo, seeming displeased.

'Anyway, sit down.'

Mao tried to change the mood and urged them to sit on the round chairs.

Haruka and Yakumo sat down.

'Now, where should I start...'

Mao spread out the doctor's chart on her desk and spun a pen in her fingers as she mumbled.

The heavy atmosphere filled the examination room. Though she was a doctor, it probably was difficult to tell relatives things they did not want to hear.

'Is my uncle's condition the same?' said Yakumo expressionlessly.

'It is. I think that Doctor Sakakibara explained this as well, but we suspect that Isshin-kun may be brain-dead.'

Hearing that once more hurt Haruka, like she had been stabbed in the chest with a needle.

'Is that so,' Yakumo replied curtly.

Haruka looked at his profile. His expression hadn't changed.

However, that didn't mean he didn't feel anything. Yakumo was holding back his feelings.

'We cannot say anything for certain until we examine him more closely, but

his condition is serious.'

Haruka wanted to cover her ears when she heard this continuation of things she couldn't believe, but she knew that doing so wouldn't change the situation.

Isshin had been fine until the day before yesterday.

Now, he could only live with the aid of a respirator –

'Then what are you telling me to do?' asked Yakumo with narrowed eyes.

It was like he suspected something.

Perhaps Yakumo doubted the fact that Isshin was brain-dead. It seemed that way to Haruka.

'It isn't a question of what to do. I just wanted to tell you the situation.'

'You didn't look for me just to tell me the situation, right?' said Yakumo disinterestedly as he yawned.

With that one sentence, the atmosphere suddenly became heavier.

For a while, Mao just sat there, but then she opened her desk drawer and took a card out.

The card had a cute picture of an angel on it.

Haruka recalled seeing that card somewhere.

– An organ donor card[1].

Also called a donor card. If you died or were in a brain-dead state, it showed whether you agreed to donate your organs or not.

'Isshin-kun is registered as a donor.'

Mao's voice was so faint it felt like it would disappear at any moment.

Haruka thought it was like Isshin to make that choice. He was incredibly self-sacrificing.

'So you want my consent – that's it, isn't it?'

Yakumo's expression didn't change.

Even if Isshin was registered as a donor, his organs couldn't be donated without his family's consent.

It appeared that the reason Mao was searching for Yakumo was to receive his consent.

Now that Haruka knew that, she had complicated feelings.

Choosing to follow up with the organ donation meant that Mao had already given up on Isshin's recovery.

'With your consent, Yakumo-kun, we will contact the donor coordinator and formally determine his brain death,' said Mao in a business-like manner, her fingernails clawing into the desk.

It was obvious she was angry.

– What are you going to do?

Haruka looked at Yakumo.

just for a moment, Yakumo's cheek twitched, but that was all.

'I will think about it,' said Yakumo shortly. He gave the card back to Mao.

Mao silently looked at the card.

– It hurts me too.

It felt like she was saying that.

Finally, Yakumo ran a hand through his hair and said, 'You still have something to say to me, right?'

When Mao heard that, she opened her mouth for a moment, but she finally shook her head.

'That's all I have to say,' she said quietly.

What was that? Haruka didn't understand what they were talking about.

– Finding out each other's intentions.

That was what it felt like to Haruka.

'I understand. I'll excuse myself for today.'

Perhaps Yakumo had given up, because he stood up and headed for the door in an extremely slow manner.

Haruka stood up too, bowed towards Mao and then followed Yakumo.

'Yakumo-kun.'

Just as Yakumo opened the door, Mao called out to him.

Haruka turned around at the voice, but Yakumo didn't.

'A tumour was found in Isshin-kun's brain.'

'A tumour in his brain?'

Haruka's voice jumped an octave.

At the same time, she recalled how Mao and Isshin had been talking about an exam the day before yesterday.

'Though it wasn't malignant, there was a problem with where it was, which made it difficult to remove in surgery.'

Mao lowered her eyelashes.

Yakumo turned around.

'Uncle would have died in any case. Is that what you want to say?' whispered Yakumo.

However, his red left eye was filled with anger.

'That isn't it.'

'Then what is it?'

'I just wanted you to know. That's all.'

When Mao said that while looking down, it just sounded like an excuse.

Yakumo left the room with a bitter smile.

– Even if the doctor has given up, we believe in miracles. Right, Yakumo?

Haruka called out to Yakumo's back as he walked down the corridor.

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21

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'Do you really plan on checking all of this?' interrupted Gotou, who was at the limit of his concentration.

There was a much greater amount of security camera footage than Gotou had expected. And it was incredibly booring footage.

Rooms with nobody in them. Corridors with nobody in them. He kept watching footage of nothing happening.

Looking at abstract paintings would be more enjoyable.

'Of course. If she escaped, it should have left a trace somewhere.'

Ishii's eyes were sparkling, like he thought this was fun.

This sort of simple work might have been his specialty.

'How much left?' said Gotou, looking up at the ceiling in his exhaustion.

'Let's see... In total, there are five hundred cameras in the detention house. We have limited it to the hour and a half when the incident took place, and one person looks at four at a time, so with two people... We will be done in ninety-three hours.'

Ishii smiled, showing his white teeth.

– You kidding me?

'That's a full four days! I give up.'

If Gotou watched this for four days, he'd go nuts. This wasn't investigation – this was torture.

Sulking, Gotou lined up three chairs and used them as a bed.

'Detective Gotou, I can't do this by myself. Please help.'

'Shut up!'

Gotou rejected Ishii, who was half in tears.

– The investigation won't get anywhere no matter how long we take if we go on like this.

As Gotou grumbled in his head, he clicked his tongue. Then, the mobile phone in his jacket pocket rang.

'Who is it?'

Still lying down, Gotou answered the phone.

<I will say this again, but please fix your phone manner.>

Gotou leapt up when he heard that voice.

'Yakumo! You bastard! Where the hell were you!?' yelled Gotou into the receiver.

<Please don't speak so loudly.>

Yakumo gave his usual complaint in his usual tone of voice.

– This idiot.

Gotou had been worried about him, thinking that he might have been psychologically cornered because Isshin had been stabbed, but he was just as impertinent as usual.

Gotou felt stupid for worrying.

'What are you doing now and where?'

<I'm at the hospital. More importantly, how far has the investigation advanced?>

Gotou wanted to yell at Yakumo for being such a pain, but he decided not to.

Since Yakumo had gone out of his way to stick his nose into the investigation, it'd be troublesome if Yakumo became angry.

Yakumo was the only one who could break through any investigation, no matter how stuck it was.

'To be honest, it hasn't advanced much.'

<Is that so?>

Yakumo's response was weaker than Gotou had thought it would be.

It was like Yakumo was saying it was just as he had expected.

'Miyuki's fingerprints were found on the knife and on the window in the back of the temple.'

<Fingerprints...>

'Yeah. It's very likely that Miyuki's the culprit.'

<What are you doing now, Gotou-san?>

'We've got a theory that Nanase Miyuki escaped the detention house so we're in the middle of checking the detention house security camera footage.'

<Gotou-san.>

Yakumo sounded gentle.

Gotou had never heard this tone of voice from him before.

'What?' Gotou asked.

<You really have a lot of free time.>

'W-what?'

Gotou was surprised by the unexpected reply.

<And you are also a blockhead.>

'You bastard! Who'd you say was a blockhead!?'

Gotou's anger went to the max in an instant, and he yelled with his face bright red.

<I called you a blockhead because you're a blockhead.>

'I'll kill you if you don't stop that.'

<But aren't I right? How many days do you think it'll take to check the security camera footage from the detention house?>

Hearing that from Yakumo hurt.

Gotou himself had thrown in the towel just earlier.

'Just shut your mouth already!'

<You anger quickly when the situation turns for the worse. You really are animalistic.>

Yakumo snorted.

Gotou wanted to retort back, but all he could think of was insults like 'idiot' and 'fool'.

<Anyway, if you have enough time to watch boring videos, please come here immediately.>

'Don't use the police as your personal cab.'

<Am I wrong?>

– This brat!

Though Gotou's chest was filled with anger, the words that came out of him weren't.

'Where should I go?'

– I hate to admit it, but I want Yakumo’s brain right now.

It was impossible for Gotou’s and Ishii’s heads to solve the case. Yakumo was absolutely necessary to beat Miyuki.

Plus, since it was Yakumo, he probably hadn’t been playing around while he was out of contact.

What is Yakumo thinking and where is he heading for – Gotou wanted to know.

<I’m waiting at the hospital.>

Yakumo said that and hung up.

It pisses me off, but there’s nothing I can do now. I’ll go with you to the end – Gotou was determined.

‘Oi! Ishii! We’re going!’

Gotou said that quickly and headed for the exit.

‘Er, how about checking the security cameras!’

‘Just leave that!’ yelled Gotou.

However, it seemed like Ishii still didn’t understand the situation. His face was blank.

– Honestly . All the guy’s got is weird knowledge. He’s got no sense at all.

‘Hurry up, you fool! I’ll smack your head off!’

When Gotou raised his fist, Ishii instinctively stood up and ran.

– He fell.

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Haruka sat on the bench in the hospital courtyard and waited for Yakumo to finish talking on the phone.

She realised quickly that he was talking to Gotou.

Though she couldn't hear the conversation in detail, Yakumo spoke like he had already solved the mystery behind the case.

– Does it have something to do with what he talked about with Mao earlier?

At first, there had been talking about Isshin's condition, but then the atmosphere changed before she knew it.

To Haruka, it looked like Yakumo suspected that Mao was related to the case somehow.

'Did you find anything out?' asked Haruka when Yakumo hung up.

Yakumo raised his left eyebrow and frowned, like he was a Kabuki actor[2].

'You really are carefree. I'm envious.'

– He's always like that.

'Yes, yes, I'm carefree.'

'What, so you do understand that?'

Yakumo started walking briskly.

– Because you just do whatever you want.

While she thought that, always chasing after his back was a depressing way to live –

Yakumo returned to the hospital again and took the elevator.

He didn't explain where he was going, but Haruka had an idea about where he was going after coming this far.

Yakumo silently got off the elevator and went straight down the corridor.

At the end of the corridor was the ICU where Isshin was accommodated.

Just as Haruka thought, Yakumo stopped in front of the ICU and looked at Isshin through the glass.

There was a doctor inside checking the machines.

Haruka remembered seeing him before. His name was Sakakibara, the doctor who first did treatment. The nurse named Furukawa was with him.

Isshin was still sleeping. He looked a size smaller.

'Yakumo-kun, is Isshin-san really brain-dead?'

She wanted him to deny it.

'I can't say, since I'm not a doctor,' replied Yakumo expressionlessly.

'Right.'

Disappointed, Haruka looked at her feet.

Haruka couldn't accept the fact. Even if it was just a silly wish, she couldn't help but want the judgement to be incorrect.

'Do you think that people who are brain-dead are dead?' Yakumo suddenly asked.

Haruka furrowed her brows as she thought.

To be honest, she had never thought about it before, so –

'I don't know... What do you think, Yakumo-kun?'

Haruka's eyes flickered to Yakumo.

His slightly downcast profile was lifeless, as if he were a statue.

'To be honest, I don't know either.'

'Oh.'

'When somebody becomes brain-dead, they cannot even breathe on their own, think or feel. The brain forms the self, so when that is stopped, it could be said that they become only a lump of meat...'

Yakumo spoke like he were reading out of a textbook.

It sounded extremely cold. Rather than Yakumo's own opinion, he was probably just listening facts.

– The body is the container of the soul.

Haruka recalled something Yakumo had said before.

That would mean –

'If somebody becomes brain-dead, what happens to their soul?'

Haruka said the question as it came to her head.

'Since this is a first for me too, I don't know. However, Uncle's soul is still in there. That's what I think.'

Yakumo sent a piercing gaze towards Isshin.

From that one sentence, Haruka felt like she could see a small light of hope.

– Yakumo hasn't given up yet.

He had probably had that exchange with Mao earlier because he still believed Isshin would get better.

– Please, Isshin-san. Open your eyes.

Haruka gripped the red stone on her necklace tightly.

'There is something called the Act on Organ Transplantation.'

This time, Yakumo brought up another topic.

'I've heard of it.'

Though she didn't know the details, she had heard the name before.

'Though there are plans to revise it, under the current law, brain-death is not recognised as death of the person.'

'Really?'

Haruka's voice showed her surprise.

She sometimes heard about organs being donated from people who were brain-dead. From that she had thought that brain death meant death of the person.

'Even if somebody is brain-dead, they are alive in the eyes of the law.'

'Then wouldn't organ donation be a problem?'

If brain-death was considered alive by the law, that would mean they were taking organs from people who were alive.

Since that would make them die, it would become murder.

'That's why there's the Act on Organ Transplantation. People who are brain-dead are only considered dead if they are registered as organ donors.'

– I'm confused.

That would mean registering or not registering to be a donor would determine whether you were alive or dead.

'That's a bit unnatural.'

Haruka said the first thing that came to mind.

'It is. It's unnatural for one card to determine whether somebody is dead.'

'Right.'

'What determines whether Uncle is dead or alive isn't science or law. It's the soul.'

Every word Yakumo spoke echoed heavily in Haruka's chest.

She felt like she understood why Yakumo had spoken coldly to Mao earlier.

The moment Yakumo agreed to the organ donation, Isshin would be determined as brain-dead. Even if his body moved, he would be considered as dead.

However, Yakumo hadn't come to a decision yet.

Where does the soul go when somebody is brain-dead – to Yakumo, the criterion for death was probably not something under the law or science but the continuation or loss of the soul.

More than anything, Yakumo believed that Isshin would recover.

'Soon...' murmured Yakumo, looking at Haruka.

'I have a request to make of you.'

He looked unusually serious.

'OK. I'll do anything I can,' said Haruka firmly.

'I want you to look into Mao-sensei.'

'Eh?' said Haruka in her surprise. Both the instructions and who they referred to were unexpected.

– So Yakumo does doubt Mao.

'When you say look into, what should I do?'

'It's simple. Just listen to what people at the hospital have to say about Mao-sensei.'

It wasn't as simple as Yakumo made it sound.

'I wonder if I'll be able to.'

'Pretend you're asking about Uncle's condition and talk to them that way.'

'But to whom? I don't know anybody...'

'Aren't there two people there?'

Yakumo pointed at Sakakibara and Furukawa inside the ICU.

She had seen them before, but –

'But what should I ask about?'

'You don't have to try to force anything out of them. Just go with the flow of the conversation and ask what sort of person Mao-sensei is.'

'I'm not confident I can do it.'

'You'll be fine.'

Yakumo patted Haruka's shoulder, turned around and started walking.

'Hey. Where are you going, Yakumo-kun?'

Haruka called out to Yakumo's back.

'Another investigation with Gotou-san. There isn't much time.'

When Yakumo turned around, his eyes looked a bit more reliable than usual.

'You'll come back, right?' asked Haruka, unable to hold back her quickly growing anxiety.

'I will.'

Yakumo gave that short reply and started walking again.

Right now, all Haruka could do was believe in Yakumo's words and see him off.

– Be sure to come back.

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(Continued in the next volume)

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Notes:

[1] Different prefectures have different cards with different pictures on them, but in Nagano, the organ donor card looks like [this](#).

[2] [Here](#) is an example of that expression.