

心霊探偵

八

PSYCHIC DETECTIVE
YAKUMO
MANABU KAMINAGA

雲

7

魂の行方

角川文庫

神永学



PSYCHIC DETECTIVE YAKUMO

Manabu Kamitaga

07.

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序 章

P R O L O G U E

prologue

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The woman was running –

She ran through the cedar trees.

It was hard to travel in this marshy area. Furthermore, because she was holding a child's hand, she couldn't move the way she wanted to.

However, this hand was the one thing she couldn't let go of. If she did, she wouldn't be human any longer.

The woman tightened her grip on the child's hand.

After heading forward further, she went through the forest into an open space.

The area was so overgrown with white skunk cabbage¹ it was dazzling –

She saw a small cottage ahead.

If I get there – just as the woman thought that, the child whose hand she was holding tripped.

'You OK?'

The woman helped the child up.

The child lifted a face covered in dirt and nodded expressionlessly, but the woman saw that blood was coming out of the child's knee.

The child had a deeper injury than she had thought. Running would be impossible with that leg.

'There!'

The woman leapt up at the voice that flew into her ears.

She turned around and saw somebody running from the forest. No, the expression on the person's face wasn't fit to be called human.

– Just like a demon.

With the child's leg injury, they would be caught in no time.

The woman came to her decision without any hesitation.

'Can you run there?'

The woman pointed at the cottage a little ways ahead.

The child nodded.

'What a good child you are. Live – you'll live.'

1 Asian skunk cabbage is called mizubashou (水芭蕉) which literally means water banana. The name comes from how its appearance is similar to the leaves of a certain type of banana. It has lovely white flowers (as seen [here](#)).

The woman hugged the child tightly. After feeling that warmth one last time, she pushed the child's back.

The child ran, dragging the injured leg through the skunk cabbage –

The woman turned her eyes to the farewell, as if to say farewell.

Her pursuer would soon reach her.

Tears welled up in the woman's eyes. It wasn't because she was frightened. She was sad because she was parting from the child she loved.

'Live.'

The woman said that once more, even though she knew it wouldn't reach her child's ears.

神籬

第一章

FILE:
01

file 01: altar

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1

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'Aah.'

Oomori Masato groaned without thinking as he looked up at the cedar tree.

At the centre of the marsh, surrounded by white skunk cabbage, the cedar tree stood as if it had been left behind.

It was probably taller than ten metres. The branches that jutted out seemed to cover the sky entirely.

At its roots was a gigantic rock about one metre tall. It appeared to be of ancient and honourable origin, but there was no way for Masato to know that detail.

He just felt pressured by its existence.

'You still looking around?'

Masato turned around at the voice to see his classmate Tomoya standing there.

Tomoya was short for a sixth grader. Masato had to look down at him.

'Ah, yeah.'

Tomoya looked up at the cedar tree too.

When it was decided that they would go to Kinasa¹, all he would say was 'What a pain', but it seemed like he was enjoying the trip considerably.

'That's really amazing,' said Tomoya.

'Ah, yeah.'

'That's all you ever say.'

'Eh? Ah, yeah.'

'You're weird.'

Tomoya's half-closed eyes closed even further when he smiled.

The day Masato transferred in, Tomoya had been the first to talk to him.

Why'd you move here? Where were you before? Masato had thought that he'd be asked those questions, but Tomoya hadn't asked any of those.

What anime do you like? Do you like soccer or baseball better? All he asked was silly questions like

¹ Kinasa (鬼無里), written with the kanji for place with no demons, was a village in Nagano prefecture located in Kamiminochi that has been merged into the city of Nagano. There are a number of legends about it.

that.

Masato had lost his father in the incident half a year ago. His mother already had another family, so his uncle took him in and he moved to Nagano.

Before transferring, he had been concerned about how to explain his complicated circumstances, but since he wasn't asked about it, it had been conversely anticlimactic.

At the same time, he was happy. He felt like he had been accepted.

'Hey, Masato, you come too.'

When he looked over, he saw that Tomoya had at some point climbed on top of the rock at the cedar's roots and was standing with an intimidating pose.

'Eh, but...'

'It's a great view.'

'Ah, yeah.'

'Hey, you two. It's time to group back together.'

Masato was just about to climb the rock too when his classmate Yumiko called out to them.

She was a girl who left an impression, with big round eyes and long glossy black hair. Her somewhat playful voice was similar to the trainee teacher who had supported Masato with all her might when the incident with his father happened.

The worrywart teacher who sent him letters every week to see how he was doing –

'Come on – hurry up!'

Yumiko urged them on.

Masato spotted the teacher in charge and the other students gathered in front of the cottage a little ways away.

'There's still time, right?' yelled Tomoya from the top of the rock.

'Climbing again? It's dangerous.'

'It's fine – I'm athletic, unlike you.'

'That's not the point.'

Yumiko puffed out her cheeks sulkily.

Masato ended up laughing at their amusing conversation. Then, Yumiko looked at him.

'You too, Masato-kun.'

'S-sorry.'

Masato quickly wiped the smile off his face and looked away.

'If you don't like it, try coming up here.'

Tomoya stood on one leg and held out his arms to balance himself.

'Just leave that guy alone.'

Yumiko took Masato's hand.

The pleasant coolness of her hand surprised him.

'O-OK.'

Masato started walking, pulled along by Yumiko.

'Oi, Masato! You betraying me!?' yelled Tomoya.

The next moment, Tomoya's body trembled and he slipped off the rock –

'Tomoya-kun, are you OK?'

After Masato's eyes met Yumiko's, he hurriedly ran towards Tomoya.

Tomoya wasn't moving.

'That's why I said...'

Yumiko sank to the floor with a pale face. Then, Tomoya sat up.

'That hurts!'

Tomoya stood up while scratching his back.

It seemed he was OK. Masato's expression softened, but that was just for a moment.

He shuddered –

A chill ran down his spine.

An unpleasant feeling, like somebody was watching him.

He hurriedly looked around, but all he saw was a wide field of white skunk cabbage and the mountains behind them.

However, he didn't relax.

The feeling of being followed was still there.

His heart was beating loudly.

He gulped. Suddenly, a hand touched his shoulder.

'Aah!'

Masato jumped without thinking.

'What?'

Tomoya looked surprised.

'Ah, no, it's nothing.'

Masato shook his head.

My mind's just playing tricks on me – so he told himself as he looked at the cedar again.

There was a person standing by the rock at its roots.

No, to be correct, it was a shadow in the shape of a person.

Masato knew immediately that it wasn't something from this world. He couldn't explain it. His instinct told him that.

The shadow approached Masato.

Masato stepped back as confusion and dread bubbled up within him.

'Masato-kun, are you OK?'

Yumiko looked at Masato with concern.

– Oh no.

The moment he thought that, it was too late. Yumiko's body jolted and she fell on top of the white skunk cabbage with her eyes wide open.

'Oi, Yumiko... What's wrong?'

Tomoya shook her shoulders as he spoke, sounding like he would burst into tears at any moment. However, Yumiko made no response, as if she were a doll.

– What? What's happening?

Masato stood there in confused shock.

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2

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After stepping through the ticket gates of Omotesando Station, Ozawa Haruka took the long stairs from the subway up to above ground.

There was not even one cloud in the blue sky.

'What nice weather.'

Haruka covered her eyes with a hand.

The straight road was lined neatly with green-leaved keyaki trees, with open-air cafes and shops with large show windows on both sides².

Though there were many people, it seemed relaxed, as if representing the current sunny weather.

2 [This](#) is the street in question, nicknamed Keyaki Street (けやき通り) because of the trees.

Haruka looked at Saitou Yakumo, who stood beside her.

Wearing a shirt and jeans, he yawned, looking bored as he ran a hand through his messy hair.

He was the same as always.

On the other hand, Haruka had taken over an hour to decide on an outfit.

Since she was going out with Yakumo, she had been rather troubled over how to coordinate her clothes. She had decided to change her hairstyle and makeup just a bit as well.

If she told Yakumo, he'd probably make fun of her for wasting her time.

'So where are we going?' said Yakumo, sounding sleepy.

'Are you leaving everything to me?'

'You're the one who dragged me all the way out to Omotesando because you said there were good shops here.'

– All the way out to Omotesando, he says.

Haruka thought about complaining, but she decided against it. She couldn't win against Yakumo in an argument.

However, not that she thought about it, Yakumo really didn't match up with Omotesando. It was like a cat swimming in the sea.

When she thought about that, Haruka ended up smiling at the amusing image.

'What's so funny?'

Yakumo glared at her.

Haruka's heart skipped when she saw his red left eye.

That deep and vivid red was so beautiful that she felt like she was being sucked in every time she saw it.

'N-nothing really...'

Haruka quickly stopped smiling.

Yakumo's left eye wasn't just red – it also had the unique ability to see the spirits of the dead.

In the past, Yakumo hated it and covered it with a black contact lens.

However, one month ago – because of the incident when he lost his uncle Isshin, Yakumo stopped hiding his red left eye.

It might have been Yakumo's own way of mourning.

To be honest, Haruka was a bit worried. Wouldn't some people see the left eye and find it disturbing or frightening – and if that happened, would Yakumo shut off his heart again?

However, she was being overanxious.

It would be a lie to say that nobody obviously thought it was disturbing, but it was only a small number of people. Most didn't care.

– The world won't change just because my left eye is red.

The person who had said that was Yakumo himself.

He had lost Isshin, who had been important to him, but Haruka felt like one of Yakumo's clouds had cleared.

'That's creepy.'

Yakumo glanced at Haruka.

'What is?'

'You are.'

'Me?'

'You've been smirking creepily for a while now.'

– That was an awful way to put it.

'Smirking... don't you think saying that is rude?'

'I wouldn't say it if I did.'

'Honestly.'

He ruined the mood with just one sentence. He's the worst –

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3

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'Please wait. I can't do it on my own.'

Gotou Kazutoshi ignored Ishii Yuutarou's cry and left the <Unsolved Cases Special Investigation Room>.

Though Ishii was almost in tears, it wasn't like there was a big case. All he had to do with paperwork which wasn't particularly urgent.

Gotou got in the white sedan that was parked in the parking lot and stepped on the pedal.

When he was waiting for the light to turn at the intersection, he unconsciously looked out the window.

Though the sun had already sunk into the valley of buildings, the sky was still bright.

The trailing clouds were dyed a reddish purple.

Now that he thought about it, he hadn't left the precinct this early ever since becoming a

detective.

He also felt like he had placed himself in that murderously busy atmosphere to make an excuse not to go home.

However, things were different now. He wanted to go home as quickly as he could, even if it were just by a minute or a second.

– I have somewhere to return to.

He felt surprised that he was honestly pleased by that.

Passing through the road in front of the station, he drove onto the road to the university, turned at the second corner and stopped his car at the gates of the temple on the top of the steep slope lined with gingko trees.

A few months ago, he'd come here as a guest, but now this place was Gotou's residence.

After he'd decided to take Nao in, they had looked for a place where the three of them could live, but he couldn't find one. When Gotou was troubled, the priest who was Isshin's teacher, Eishin, called out to him.

Though he was considerably old, his body and attitude were large – he was a remarkable character.

After Isshin died, Eishin had undertaken everything, from the temple's funerals to memorial services.

Because of him, the Gotou family were temporarily staying at the temple where Isshin had lived.

Normally, priests' quarters were possessed by the religious group, so Gotou, an outsider, wouldn't be allowed to stay there, but Eishin had anticipated that.

On top of acting very kindly to the Gotou family, he had urged Yakumo to take over for Isshin.

Thanks to that, Yakumo showed up even less frequently at the temple.

Though Gotou felt bad about Yakumo, they now had a place they could live at a reasonable price, though it was only temporary.

Gotou went through the gravel garden and opened the sliding door to the priest's quarters.

'You're early.'

Atsuko called out from the kitchen.

Instead of replying, Gotou took off his shoes at the entrance, passed through the living room and entered the kitchen.

'Where's Nao?'

He asked that straightaway.

'Reading in her room,' said Atsuko, shaking her head in exasperation.'

'I see.'

'Hey, is it really OK for you to skip out and come home?' asked Atsuko when Gotou was about to go to Nao's room.

'There isn't any important work.'

'You really are a useless employee.'

'Shut up. Ah, that's right. Where are those two?'

Gotou changed the topic.

Those two of course referred to Yakumo and Haruka.

'Come to think of it, they're not back yet. Even though we can't start until the cake's here.'

'Aren't they just loafing around on their date?'

'They might not come back.'

'It's possible.'

When Gotou shrugged, Atsuko laughed aloud.

After they started living with Nao, Atsuko really laughed much more often. It wasn't a bad thing. It was pleasant talking to her like this.

However, Gotou just couldn't get used to it. He felt embarrassed.

Gotou escaped from the kitchen just as Nao came into the living room.

She wore a pink shirt under her overalls and had a book as thick as a dictionary in her hand.

The back of her bob cut stuck out like a spring.

'Ooh aah eii,' said Nao, lifting her head to show her big and round eyes, which were sparkling.

Other people might not be able to understand Nao's words, since she was deaf. However, Gotou understood more than enough.

'Hey. I'm back.'

He patted Nao's head.

Right as he did so, Nao smiled brightly and leapt into his arms.

There were people who would sacrifice everything and even kill others for their children. Gotou couldn't understand it before.

However, things were different now. He felt like he could lose anything if it were the sake of this child.

When he'd first taken Nao in, he had felt anxious.

Would a seven-year-old child who had just lost Isshin, the person who raised her, ever accept

them? More importantly, would he be able to become a parent? That anxiety had coiled about him.

Though he didn't know if he'd become a parent, Nao's smile saved him.

He sat cross-legged in front of the table and Nao sat on his lap. Then, the sliding door opened.

'Honestly. I can't believe you.'

Haruka showed up as she voiced her dissatisfaction. She had paper bags in both hands.

Though she spoke in an angry tone, she looked like she was enjoying herself.

'It's a difference in knowledge.'

Yakumo came in after her while running a hand through his hair.

He looked as sleepy as always.

Nao stood up and walked up to them.

'You're so slow! Where were you loafing about?'

Yakumo looked up at Gotou's words.

'I didn't think I'd ever hear those words from you, Gotou-san.'

'What do you mean?'

'I mean that I don't want to become an irresponsible adult.'

After the incident with Isshin, Gotou had thought Yakumo had become a bit more honest, but his mouth hadn't changed one bit.

'I'll punch you!'

'Don't fight like children – help out.'

Urged by Atsuko, who had peeked out at them, Haruka immediately went to the kitchen.

Nao followed her like a puppy.

Yakumo shrugged, looking exasperated, and he sat across from Gotou.

'It's OK, right?' Gotou said quietly.

'Who knows? I didn't choose it.'

'If you didn't choose it, it's fine.'

'What do you mean by that?'

'Just like you always say, I mean exactly what I said.'

Though Yakumo's expression was blank, his cheek twitched like a cat's.

'You should help too!'

Atsuko interrupted the conversation.

After sharing a look with Yakumo, he smiled wryly and headed towards the kitchen.

Once the preparations were completed, they had a cheerful meal.

Before Nao had come, he always eat a lunchbox from the convenience store with Ishii. He didn't eat around a table with a bunch of people like this.

Finally, Atsuko and Haruka chose a good time to leave their seats.

Yakumo yawned, seeming bored. Nao's eyes were shut, perhaps because she felt tired after eating.

'It's too early to sleep.'

Gotou shook Nao's shoulder lightly.

Nao's eyes darted around.

In the dark, Atsuko brought in a cake with candles, which faintly lit up the living room.

Haruka followed her.

'Nao. Happy birthday,' said Atsuko as she placed the cake on the table.

'This is a birthday present. Happy birthday.'

Haruka gave a wrapped box with a red ribbon to Nao.

'Happy birthday,' Yakumo murmured.

'Nao. Happy birthday. Blow out the candles then.'

Gotou patted Nao's shoulder.

However, Nao didn't move, her face downcast.

The silence continued in the flickering light of the candles.

'What's wrong?'

When Gotou spoke to her again, Nao shook her head back and forth.

Her shoulders were trembling.

Finally, she started to cry loudly.

This child had held in her feelings all this time. It was her custom.

She had probably acted cheerfully so as not to worry the people around her.

Now that Gotou thought about it, Nao had lost her real mother soon after she was born. After that, she lost Isshin, the person who had raised her, and Gotou and Atsuko had taken her in.

There was no way she could have remained composed with such great changes in her living environment. The young girl had lived her life while doing her best to bear with everything.

– No matter what anybody says, Nao is my daughter.

With that thought, Gotou hugged Nao tightly.

Nao hugged him back as she sobbed.

'That's right. You're our daughter,' said Atsuko in a tearful voice.

Haruka had tears in her eyes as well.

'I don't care, but if you don't blow out the candles soon, the cake will burn.'

With the perfect timing to ruin the moment, Yakumo interrupted.

Though he was looking away, as if he thought the whole scene uninteresting, Gotou didn't miss how his eyes were wet.

– Honestly. What an awkward guy.

Though Gotou thought that, he didn't say it aloud.

Nao nodded. She took a deep breath in front of the cake and then blew out the candles.

A moment of darkness –

When the lights turned on again, Nao was smiling.

I will protect this space.

– That is what I live for.

Gotou vowed that once again in his heart.

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4

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'I wonder if she's OK...'

With a backpack³ on, Masato was talking with Tomoya as they walked away from school.

Ever since the day they went to Kinasa for their field trip, Yumiko had not come to school. It had already been three days.

'It's probably just a cold,' Tomoya replied carelessly.

'But...'

There was a reason Masato couldn't accept it as lightly as Tomoya did.

The black shadow that had appeared then –

After Yumiko collapsed at the bottom of the cedar tree, she hadn't come to school. Masato didn't

³ Masato is wearing a randoseru, which is the iconic backpack used by elementary students in Japan. Traditionally these would be red or black but there are many more varieties now, as can be seen on this [website](#).

know what that shadow was, but she thought there might have been a connection.

'If you're so concerned, why not go?'

'Eh?'

Masato was surprised by Tomoya's suggestion, which he hadn't expected.

'Just go visit her.'

'But...'

'She'll be OK.'

'Really?'

'Really. Let's go.'

Tomoya turned around before Masato could answer and started running, making his backpack rattle.

Masato ran after him.

Tomoya's actions always surprised Masato. At the same time, he was envious. Masato always thought twice before doing anything. His past experience had a great influence on that.

The case he lost his father in –

– It isn't your fault.

That person said that to him. However, that case still stayed in his heart.

Somebody might be hurt because of me – when Masato thought that, he felt like his lungs were being constricted.

'It's probably just ahead.'

Tomoya stopped and pointed at the narrow footpath by the convenience store.

Masato saw a house with a black roof at the end of the twisting road. To Masato, it had a terribly uncanny feel to it, partly because it had started getting dark.

'Let's go.'

'Ah, yeah.'

Masato swallowed and then walked after Tomoya, as if hiding behind him.

It felt like it was getting darker with every step they took down the footpath.

'Eh?'

After walking about halfway, Tomoya stopped.

'What is it?'

Masato stopped too.

Tomoya turned around with a suspicious expression as he pointed down the footpath.

There was a black shadow there.

It was getting closer –

Masato recalled the shadow he had seen at the cedar tree and stiffened.

'Oh, it's Yumiko,' said Tomoya.

'Eh?'

Masato squinted in the dim light.

Since she was looking down as she walked, Masato couldn't see her face clearly, but it was definitely Yumiko.

'Oi, Yumiko.'

Tomoya waved.

Normally, she would run towards them with a smile, but she was acting strange. She continued to walk forward with her head down, as if she hadn't heard Tomoya's voice.

'Yumiko-chan.'

Masato spoke when Yumiko was right in front of them.

Yumiko stopped firmly.

'Are you OK?' said Tomoya.

Yumiko didn't move, staring at her feet. She was definitely acting strange.

'Are you crying?' asked Masato, trying to look at Yumiko's face.

Yumiko still didn't reply.

'What's wrong?'

Tomoya's hand brushed Yumiko's shoulder.

Then, Yumiko slowly lifted her face.

'Ah!'

Masato yelped without thinking when he saw that face.

Yumiko's face was as pale as a corpse's. That wasn't all. Her wide eyes were bloodshot and her half-open mouth was foaming.

'Are you really Yumiko?' said Tomoya in a trembling voice.

Yumiko looked back and forth between Masato and Tomoya with her bloodshot eyes.

Then, her purple lips moved. They looked like a different living thing entirely.

'Whaaarr...'

Her voice shook the earth.

Tomoya reflexively leapt away from Yumiko.

'Uuunnn... Gaagiii...'

Yumiko looked at Masato.

– Eh? What?

Masato couldn't move in his confusion and terror.

Yumiko stuck out both hands, put them on Masato's neck and tightened her grip.

– I can't breathe.

Yumiko's bloodshot eyes looked right at Masato. Her face was that of a demon's.

– I'm going to be killed.

The moment Masato realised that, he used all his strength to force Yumiko away from him.

'Aaah!'

While screaming, Masato ran away at full speed.

I'm scared – controlled by that emotion, he continued to run as fast as he could –

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5

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'Ishii-san.'

After Ishii finished work, he was leaving the precinct when somebody called out to him.

Ishii turned around at the familiar voice.

– It really is Hijikata Makoto.

Perhaps because of her hair, which she had put up today, she looked more elegant than usual. With a slender body, her grey pantsuit matched her well.

'Ah, hello.'

Ishii stopped to greet her.

As she was a newspaper reporter, he often met her like this.

'Are you finished work?'

'Yes, for now...' he replied vaguely.

Ishii was stationed at the department of the <Unsolved Cases Special Investigations Room>. It

sounded nice, since it could be called following up cases that were unsolved, as per the name, but it was actually just paperwork.

There was an incredible amount of it, which made it near impossible to finish. Accordingly, he wasn't sure if he had actually finished work or not.

'Would you like to have dinner?'

'With... me?'

Ishii couldn't hide his confusion at Makoto's sudden suggestion.

It wasn't as if he had any special feelings for Makoto. It was just that he hadn't ever been invited out by a woman like this.

'Yes. Actually, there was something I wanted to consult you about, Ishii-san...'

'Me?'

'Yes.'

Makoto nodded happily.

However, Ishii was even more confused. Makoto was an intelligent woman. He couldn't think of anything she would want to consult him on.

'Do you have other plans?'

Makoto peered at Ishii's face when he didn't reply. She looked incredibly lonely.

'No, that isn't...'

'Then, let's go.'

'Eh, ah, yes...'

Ishii left the police precinct, led away by Makoto.

They headed for a family restaurant about a five-minute walk from the precinct.

'So what is it you wanted to consult me about?' asked Ishii after they sat at a window seat.

Then, Makoto's expression suddenly became hard. It appeared to be a serious topic. Ishii gulped and waited for her to reply.

'Actually, I am writing a report on somebody for work.'

'A... report?'

'Yes.'

'Who is this report on?'

'Nanase Miyuki.'

When Ishii heard that name, he felt like he had been pushed off a cliff.

With gooseflesh on his skin, for a while he couldn't even open his mouth in his shock.

Nanase Miyuki hadn't only brutally murdered her own family at the age of ten – she had also been involved in a number of cases while cooperating with Yakumo's father, the man with two red eyes, In the case that occurred half a year ago, she stabbed Gotou and seriously injured him.

Just remembering that cold smile made Ishii shiver.

'W-why?'

Ishii was finally able to squeeze just those words out of himself.

Thinking about writing a report on such an evil crime was enough to make him frightened.

'It's work. But it's also true that I have a personal interest in her.'

'Interest?'

Ishii didn't understand. What was interesting about a woman who would kill people for fun – and there was no way you would understand her no matter how much you investigated.

'Yes. Why did Nanase Miyuki commit those crimes?'

'She always had that disposition.'

That was how Ishii truly felt.

There were some things about Nanase Miyuki, such as her family environment, that he should have empathised with. However, her act of killing her whole family at the age of ten was beyond understanding.

Rather than the environment changing her, Ishii felt like she had been born with an evil disposition.

'Is that really the case?' said Makoto doubtfully.

'What do you mean?'

'I've just started investigating, but I think that there was a deep love behind her actions.'

'Love?'

Ishii mulled over it.

– Love.

There was no word that could be more inappropriate for Nanase Miyuki. Ishii thought that it was because she didn't have anything resembling human love that she went mad.

'I think that she killed her family in the beginning because she wanted love.'

'Killing because she wanted love... I feel like it doesn't connect.'

'Is that so?'

'Eh?'

'I think there is a paper-thin difference between love and madness.'

Makoto's eyes were sparkling so brightly it was uncanny.

Ishii even felt afraid – he looked away and bit his lip.

'A woman can be incredibly cruel for love. No, I don't think it's cruel. Rather, it could be perceived as sublime.'

'Sublime...'

'When Nanase Miyuki killed her family at ten, she met the man with two red eyes.'

'Yes.'

'What sort of existence was the man with two red eyes to her?'

'That's...'

Ishii did feel that their relationship was connected more deeply than just conspirators.

However, Ishii didn't know what it was.

'I think that to her, he was a lover and a father.'

'Huh...'

'I think that she loved the man with two red eyes from the bottom of her heart and worshipped him. To her, I think he might have been a symbol of her existence.'

'A symbol of her existence?'

Ishii hadn't had that perspective.

He hadn't even thought about how Nanase Miyuki and the man with red eyes had been tied together.

'A woman could go anywhere if it were with the person she loves.'

'Is that so?'

'Yes. There was a person named Abe Sada in the past, yes?'

'Yes.'

Ishii knew the outline of the incident.

Abe Sada, who worked at a small restaurant named Yoshidaya, had an adulterous relationship with the owner of the shop named Ishida.

When that relationship was revealed, the two of them ran away together. After having sex, she strangled Ishida to death.

The disturbing actions of Abe Sada came afterwards. She cut off Ishida's penis and kept it on her person until she was arrested.

'Abe Sada killed the man she loved. It wasn't because she hated him. She killed him because she loved him. It seems contradictory, but in her head, it was the same.'

She killed him because she loved him?

'I don't really understand...'

Ishii, who didn't have proper experience with love, had no way of understanding the warped shapes of love –

-

6

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'I don't know. She was gone before I noticed...'

Masato spoke to the uniformed officer sitting in front of him.

After that, Masato and Tomoya went together to Yumiko's house. They had thought that their eyes must have been playing tricks on them and that Yumiko was at home. However, they were wrong.

When Masato and Tomoya visited, Yumiko's family also realised that Yumiko had disappeared and called the police in a panic.

Since they were the ones who saw her last, Masato and Tomoya were called to the local police station and were questioned by the police.

'Do you remember anything else?'

'No.'

Tomoya shook his head.

It seemed like he didn't plan on talking about how Yumiko had strangled Masato. Masato felt the same way.

He wanted that to be some sort of mistake.

'How about you?'

The officer turned to Masato with narrowed eyes.

Even though somebody had gone missing, this officer didn't seem nervous or impatient. It was like the officer didn't care about Yumiko at all.

Masato might have been irritated by that attitude. He said something he hadn't planned on saying.

'A demon...'

'What?'

The officer's eyebrows furrowed.

'A demon was there.'

'Demon?'

The officer shook his head, like he was fed up.

– He really didn't believe me.

After Masato sighed in resignation, somebody gripped his shoulder.

– Who's there?

Masato turned around and saw an old woman there, about seventy years old. He had greeted her once before. It was Yumiko's grandmother.

Though her face was wrinkled, her eyes were opened unusually wide. It was bloodcurdling.

'Is what you said just now true?' said Yumiko's grandmother.

Her hand gripped Masato's shoulder even more tightly. It was surprising that there was such strength in such a thin hand.

'Granny, we'll talk to you later, so please wait.'

The uniformed officer tried to turn Yumiko's grandmother away, but she pressed Masato further.

'Did you really see a demon?'

'Y-yeah, I did...'

When Masato responded, Yumiko let out a cry – he couldn't tell whether it was a shriek or a moan – and stumbled backwards.

She had lost her strength from earlier and was trembling, as if afraid of something.

'Are you all right?' the uniformed officer asked, panicked.

'She was spirited away. That girl was spirited away.'

Yumiko's grandmother covered her face with trembling hands and sat on the floor.

The uniformed officer frantically tried to sooth her, though he seemed confused.

Masato didn't understand what had happened.

However, the words 'spirited away' remained incredibly raw in Masato's ears –

After leaving the local police station, Tomoya spoke to him.

His eyes were filled with a strong anger. Masato looked to his feet, unable to face his eyes directly.

'It's your fault,' Tomoya said with ragged breathing.

'Eh?'

'Yumiko disappeared because you ran away.'

Tomoya's quiet words pierced Masato's heart.

– Because I ran away.

He felt like everything that had built up until now had collapsed all at once.

'I...'

While Masato was looking for a reply, Tomoya turned on his heels and ran off at full speed.

– Tomoya's gone too.

All Masato could do was see that back off.

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7

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Higashino Hiroyuki gripped the wheel nervously.

It wasn't that he wasn't used to driving. It was just that it had been five years since he started working as a guard. It was the first time he'd driven a patrol wagon with a prisoner on it.

Nothing would change just because a prisoner was there. He knew that, but he just felt an incredible pressure from behind him.

When he looked at the rear-view mirror, he saw a woman sitting with her head down between two guards in the backseat through the metal grid that divided them.

The woman's name was Nanase Miyuki.

She had fair skin and elegant features that would make you think she was a model, but she was a criminal who had been involved in a number of crimes up until now.

Higashino couldn't understand why she had committed such repulsive crimes.

She had a faint smile on her face.

Higashino didn't know if it was a natural smile or a smile because she had noticed him, but it was so beautiful he had to swallow his breath.

'You curious?' said Yano, the senior guard sitting in the passenger seat.

His eyes were cold.

'No, that isn't...'

'It's said that beautiful roses have thorns.'

Yano smiled frivolously, like he thought something was funny.

'Is she really a criminal?'

Yano let out an incredibly gloomy sigh.

'That's not for us to think about.'

'But if she was falsely accused...'

'Why do you think that?'

'That's...'

He couldn't reply immediately. Higashino had just said what he felt – he didn't have any proof.

It could be called a feeling close to delusion.

'You're the type who'd get serious about a hostess.'

'There's no way I would,' replied Higashino, offended.

Then, he looked up and saw something unbelievable.

In the middle of the road lit up with headlights, there stood a man. He had long hair that flowed down his back and wore a black suit and sun glasses.

He was just ten metres away.

'Watch out!'

Higashino slammed the brake just as Yano yelled.

Just as he thought his body had shaken from the recoil, the car veered sharply to the right. The violent impact ran through his body.

Higashino fainted –

How long had he been out? There was the smell of something burning when Higashino opened his eyes.

Black smoke filled his vision.

Higashino took off his seatbelt and climbed out the car from the broken front window.

Black smoke was coming out from the area where the petrol tank was. It seemed like it had caught fire from the accident.

The tank might burst at this right.

'Yano-san...'

Higashino looked around. Yano was still buckled into the passenger seat. If he didn't save him now –

Before Higashino could return to the car, a man stood in his way.

A black suit and sunglasses – the man who had suddenly appeared in the world earlier.

'You're lying...'

Higashino spoke those words without thinking.

When he slammed on the brakes, the man had already been in front of his eyes. He couldn't have

made it in time. but the man had no injuries at all.

The man looked at Higashino and smiled.

A cold smile that sent a shiver down Higashino's spine.

Then, the man slowly took off his sunglasses.

His two eyes glowed red like a blazing flame –

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8

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Haruka ran –

She passed through the gates and went straight for the back of Building B to see the two-storey prefabricated building.

It was used by student circles, lent out by the university. The <Movie Research Circle> at the very end of the first floor was where Haruka was headed.

'Yakumo-kun, there's big trouble!'

Haruka opened the door forcefully.

'You're being so noisy so early in the morning.'

At the back of the room that was about four and a half tatami in size, Yakumo sat up in his sleeping bag.

He ran a hand through his messy hair and yawned with half-open eyes.

<Movie Research Circle> was just the name – Yakumo actually lived here. He made up some bogus documents, tricked the university and used the place as his own room.

'It's not the time to be relaxed.'

'It would be stranger to get worked up without knowing the reason.'

'Oh, I see.'

She strangely understood.

'Slow and steady wins the race. Anyway, why not sit down?'

At Yakumo's suggestion, Haruka became just a bit calmer.

It was true that there was no point getting worked up by herself. First, she would calm down.

Haruka told herself that and sat in the chair.

Yakumo slowly got up and sat in the chair opposite Haruka while rubbing his eyes.

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

Though the way he said it irritated Haruka, since she really had brought trouble this time, she couldn't object.

'I got a call from Masato-kun this morning,' said Haruka after taking a deep breath.

'When you say Masato, do you mean that Masato?'

'Yeah.'

'Come to think of it, we promised to go visit him, but we still haven't gone...'

Yakumo's eyes narrowed.

Haruka and Yakumo met Masato about half a year ago – he was a student at the elementary school where Haruka was a trainee.

He was involved in a certain case, lost his father and received a grave wound psychologically.

Yakumo had run about with her to save him.

After the case was over, Masato's uncle took him in and he moved to Nagano, but Haruka had still been concerned so she continued to send him letters.

She was worried about his emotional state and about whether he was used to his new environment.

However, it seemed like his uncle and aunt treated him well and he had made friends at school – he seemed to be much more cheerful than when she'd first met him. Masato might have been able to stand up again. Haruka had thought that, and then she had received the phone call.

'What's wrong?'

After Haruka asked, Masato explained all the strange things that had been happening around him at once.

Going to Kinasa for a field trip. His female classmate who had suddenly fainted there. And then her disappearance –

When Haruka heard that, she went to Yakumo to consult him.

At times like this, Yakumo was really the only person she could rely on.

'So what happened to Masato?'

Yakumo still didn't seem nervous. He stifled a yawn.

'He called me earlier.'

'Is he doing well?'

'He asked me to help him...'

'What do you mean?'

Finally, Yakumo's expression became serious.

'He said his friend was spirited away...'

Haruka stated Masato's words just as he had.

'Spirited away?'

'Yeah.'

'Tell me in more detail.'

Yakumo's eyes glittered.

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9

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'What a pain,' grumbled Gotou, once he saw the pile of documents on the desk.

Gotou had always been better at acting than thinking, but all he did day in and out was paperwork. He hated it from the bottom of his heart.

His building irritation made him want to start smoking again.

'Detective Gotou.'

Sitting at the opposite desk, Ishii spoke up while smartly adjusting the position of his silver-framed glasses.

'What?'

'Your hands have stopped.'

'Shut up!' said Gotou, clicking his tongue.

Somehow or other, Ishii had started sharing his opinions with Gotou recently.

Though Gotou was happy Ishii had grown, he didn't like having Ishii nag at him like a sister-in-law.

'No, but...'

'To hell with your "but"s. I hate paperwork.'

'But if we don't finish this, we can't participate in the investigation. We have to pick up what we didn't do last night.'

Even though Ishii talked around it, Gotou didn't like being complained about.

Just as Gotou raised a fist to hit Ishii, his mobile phone rang.

'Who is it?' answered Gotou with a snort.

<'I'll say it again, but please correct your telephone manner.>

From the phone, he heard Yakumo's extremely sleeping-sounding voice.

Yakumo's voice was grating.

'I don't want to hear that from an unsociable guy like you.'

<Even without your saying it, anybody would know that you're incorrigible.>

He was acting like he misheard on purpose.

Yakumo had to be the best in Japan at angering others.

'You making fun of me!?'

<Correct.>

'I'm gonna hang up if you've got nothing to say.'

<Do you think I have so much free time that I would call you for no reason, Gotou-san?>

There had to be a better way to say that.

'Then tell me what you're calling me for.'

<Please come now.>

'Hah?'

<I'll wait at the front gates.>

'Am I a cab?'

<Something like it, right?>

'What!?'

<Please don't speak so loudly.>

Gotou stamped his foot.

<Anyway, it's an emergency. Please hurry.>

'Don't screw with me.'

<Why not? You must have nothing to do anyway.>

'You bastard! What do you mean by that!?'

Gotou let out a yell, but Yakumo had already hung up.

– Really, what a selfish guy.

Gotou grumbled inwardly and looked at Ishii, who was quietly doing paperwork.

Though Gotou could just ignore Yakumo's request, it'd let Gotou get out of this boring work.

'No way out of it.'

Gotou put his mobile in his pocket and stood up.

'Detective Gotou, where are you going?'

Ishii looked up.

Though Ishii might not have intended it to sound this way, it felt pointed.

'Going out for a bit. I'll leave the rest to you,' said Gotou. Then, he left the room.

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10

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'He left...'

Ishii watched Gotou leave the room and grumbled without thinking.

From the earlier phone call, Yakumo had probably called Gotou out. Gotou probably thought it was a way to escape the paperwork. Ishii didn't mind. But –

'I wish he would have invited me...'

Those were Ishii's true feelings.

Gotou wasn't the only one who didn't like paperwork.

Ishii was depressed too, stuck in this room.

'Gotou, you here!?'

Interrupting Ishii's thoughts, the door opened, and Chief Miyagawa came in.

Though he was of small stature, he had a shaved head and a glint in his eyes. If you didn't know him, he looked more like a member of a gang than a detective.

'Ch-Chief Miyagawa.'

Ishii stood up automatically.

'Where's Gotou?'

'Ah, er, Detective Gotou went to the washroom...' lied Ishii, still standing pencil-straight.

Miyagawa's eyes were wide open as they stared at him.

'By washroom, you of course mean that he went home.'

'Ah, er...'

He found out –

'Well, fine. Ishii, you come alone,' said Miyagawa.

'W-where to?'

'The investigation, obviously.'

'Eh? Just me? Detective Gotou is...'

'Stop flapping your mouth. You're a detective too, aren't you?'

Miyagawa's words pierced Ishii's chest.

That was right. He was a detective too.

Up until now, he had relied too much on Gotou and even forgot such an obvious thing. That thought roused his body.

'Y-yes sir!'

Ishii took the jacket from the back of his chair and ran after Miyagawa, who had left the room with a wide stride.

He fell –

'Don't lag behind!'

Ishikawa was pulled back up by Miyagawa's yell and he jogged up to Miyagawa.

'Excuse me, but what investigation is it exactly?' asked Ishii, taking a memo pad and pen out of his shirt pocket as he did so.

Miyagawa stopped and pulled Ishii's shoulder close as he started speaking quietly.

'A patrol wagon carrying a prisoner yesterday was in an accident.'

'An accident? Shouldn't that be the duty of traffic...'

'I know that without you telling me. Wait 'til I'm done!'

'Y-yes sir.'

Ishii stiffened under Miyagawa's pressure.

Miyagawa cleared his throat awkwardly, like he thought he had said too much.

'The patrol wagon in the accident was carrying Nanase Miyuki.'

– Nanase Miyuki.

When Ishii heard that name, he thought his heart might stop.

'W-what happened to her?'

'That's what we're investigating.'

'I see...'

'If you've got it, let's go.'

Miyagawa started walking briskly.

Ishii wanted to follow, but his feet wouldn't move the way he wanted them to.

– I don't want to go.

It seemed his body was reflecting that.

Something incredibly awful was going to happen. That premonition disturbed Ishii's heart.

'Hurry up!'

Miyagawa yelled back at him.

Ishii automatically replied with a 'Yes sir!' and started running. His feet tangled.

He fell –

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11

-

Gotou drove the car.

He took the main street in front of the station and went up the curving road to see Meisei University, his destination.

When he approached the front gate, lined with red bricks, he spotted Yakumo standing there.

Gotou honked and started the car. Yakumo got into the passenger seat immediately.

'I was tired of waiting.'

That was the first thing Yakumo said.

'What kind of tone is that?'

Though Gotou complained, Yakumo let out an incredibly bored yawn. He even finished with another complaint: 'If you have the time to complain, please start the car already.'

'I don't mind starting the car, but where to?'

'Anyway, please head to the Kobomatsu intersection[3].'

'2-chome?'

'Yes.'

Gotou felt somewhat like he really had become a cabbie.

'So what happened?' Gotou asked while stepping on the pedal.

Since it was Yakumo, he wouldn't call Gotou out for no reason. There must have been some sort of trouble.

'Do you remember Masato?'

'That kid from the incident at the school?' said Gotou as the boy's face came up in his mind.

He had an atmosphere incredibly similar to Yakumo's and seemed to have a considerable psychological wound from the incident.

'Yes. It seems he's got into some sort of trouble.'

'So you're going to help him?'

'Well, yes.'

Yakumo looked out the window.

Unusual for him, Yakumo had a proactive reason.

Gotou wasn't unrelated either. He was concerned about the boy.

'Got it. I'll go too.'

He said that naturally.

Yakumo looked surprised.

'How rare.'

– You too, buddy.

Gotou swallowed the words he was about to say. Yakumo would just complain anyway.

After a while, the car reached a junction of five streets.

'Around here then?'

'Please go to the front of that apartment.'

Yakumo pointed ahead of the intersection.

With cream-coloured walls, it was a pretty apartment with a glass entrance. It was probably for students living alone.

'Meeting somebody?'

Though Gotou asked that, Yakumo just yawned and looked out the window. It looked like he didn't want to explain.

– Honestly.

After Gotou sighed, he saw somebody coming out of the entrance.

It was Haruka.

She wore skinny jeans and a pink parka as she walked towards them with a large tote bag.

It was like she was going to go on a trip.

'I'm sorry for the wait,' said Haruka as she caught her breath. Then, she got into the backseat, as if it was a matter of course.

Gotou turned around and asked, 'Haruka-chan, you're going too?'

'Of course,' replied Haruka with ragged breathing.

'Gotou-san agreed to cooperate,' Yakumo said with a smirk.

'That's Gotou-san for you.'

Haruka clapped her hands together.

Somehow, Gotou didn't feel happy. He had no proof, but he felt like Yakumo had cornered him.

'Anyway, please head onto the highway and drive along the road,' instructed Yakumo with a yawn.

Though Yakumo's lofty attitude riled Gotou up, there was no point saying it now. Gotou just started the car.

After a while, Gotou asked, 'So where are we going?'

'Nagano,' replied Yakumo, still looking out the window.

– Nagano, eh?

Gotou mulled over it for a while, but he thought something was off.

'Which Nagano?'

'Obviously the one in Nagano prefecture.'

Gotou slammed the brakes, shocked by what Yakumo had said in such an obvious manner.

Gotou was forced forward. The seatbelt dug into his shoulder.

'Gotou-san, that's dangerous,' protested Haruka from the back seat.

Yakumo was glaring at him furiously from the passenger seat too.

However, Gotou was the one who wanted to complain.

'Shut up. I didn't hear anything about going to Nagano!' Gotou yelled.

'Of course you didn't. I didn't mention it,' Yakumo said naturally. It made Gotou even more irritated.

'What?'

'I said, I didn't mention it. It's natural that you didn't know.'

'That's not what I'm talking about.'

'That what is it?'

'I have work. I can't go so far away with you!'

Gotou hit the wheel in his agitation.

'Didn't you say you would cooperate for Masato's sake?' said Yakumo in an expressionless voice as he ran a hand through his hair.

'That's a different story.'

'How is it different? Your heartlessness doesn't change.'

'You brat...'

Gotou ground his teeth together.

'I understand. If you don't want to, it's fine.'

'Eh?'

When Yakumo backed off like this, it gave Gotou a bad feeling.

'I'll consult Atsuko-san.'

'Why're you bringing up my wife?'

'If it were Atsuko-san, she would take us to Nagano.'

Yakumo crossed his arms and looked up at the low ceiling.

This was bad. This wasn't a threat. If Gotou refused here, Yakumo really would use Atsuko as a cab. That'd be a problem in and of itself.

'Fine. But I'm just driving you to Nagano.'

'Yes, drop off and pick up is enough.'

Yakumo smiled with narrowed eyes.

When he showed this expression, he was always plotting something.

– I've got a bad feeling about this.

Gotou started the car with uneasy feelings.

-

12

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– Yumiko's gone because you ran away.

As Masato took the bus to Nagano Station, those words kept repeating in his head.

Tomoya had said that last night.

Those words pierced to the deepest part of Masato's heart, making him remember what happened with his father half a year ago.

Masato had run away in his fear then too.

As a result, his father died. That wasn't all. A lot of awful things happened too.

– I won't run away any more.

He had made that vow and started his new life in Nagano, but he had run away again. Because of

that, Yumiko was gone.

Anxiety curling in his chest, Masato got off the bus at the Nagano Station traffic circle.

He sat on the blue bench at the bus stop and hated that all he could do was wait.

The regular bell for the departing Shinkansen pierced his ears.

When it was decided that he would live with his uncle in Nagano, he had been anxious, but his uncle and aunt had welcomed him kindly.

The two of them didn't have children of their own – they'd said that Masato was like their own son.

Though they sometimes scolded him, it wasn't through illogical violence the way his past father had done. They would reasonably explain what was wrong with what Masato had done.

He'd fit in more quickly at the new school that he'd thought he would too, because Tomoya and Yumiko were there.

Their smiles had saved him.

To Masato, they were the first friends he'd made – they were irreplaceable. But still, he ran away - that thought kept running through his head.

'What should I have done?'

Though he spoke aloud, nobody replied.

When he looked up, he could see a chain of tall mountains overlooking the whole town. Masato now felt resent towards those sublime mountains.

The field trip he'd taken to those mountains had been the start of it.

Then –

He looked towards the clock by the escalator to the station platform.

It was exactly five o' clock. It was the arranged time.

He looked around, but the person he was looking for wasn't there.

– Will she really come?

He wanted to believe in her, but with his heart as fragile as it was now, he couldn't help but be anxious.

To escape the weariness in his shoulders, Masato curled up and hugged his knees. Though it was May, the wind was cold at this time. It chilled him to the centre of his body.

– What should I do?

'Sorry for the wait!'

At the same time as the voice, somebody tapped him on the back.

Masato leapt up in surprise.

In front of his eyes stood Haruka's smiling figure.

Unlike the suit she wore during training, her casual attire of jeans and a parka made her look younger.

Next to her stood a large-framed middle-aged man. He raised his hand and said, 'Hey.'

After the incident with his father, Haruka told Masato the story. This was probably Detective Gotou.

'It's been a while.'

Yakumo appeared from behind Gotou.

As usual, he wore a shirt and jeans and had a hand in his messy hair as he yawned.

However, one thing had changed.

When Masato had last seen Yakumo, he had hid his red left eye with a black contact lens. However, now the red left eye was bare and unhidden.

Yakumo also seemed to have a different air to him.

'Sorry we're late,' said Haruka, touching Masato's shoulder.

'It's all this bear's fault.'

Yakumo pointed at Gotou.

'Why's it my fault?'

'Didn't you get lost?'

'You! Who do you think brought you here!?!'

'Please don't speak so loudly in the middle of the street. It's embarrassing.'

Yakumo put his fingers in his ears to complain.

'I...'

Masato opened his mouth, but he couldn't think of what to say.

When he saw Haruka's and Yakumo's faces, he felt whatever it is that had been stuck in his chest snap. He started crying.

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13

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Together with Miyagawa, Ishii went to the hospital affiliated with the police.

Yano, the man who had been in the passenger seat, wasn't gravely injured, but his whole body was

bruised. He also had third-degree burns on his legs and was currently undergoing treatment in the ICU.

Higashino, the man who had been driving, got off with light injuries and was able to talk.

When Ishii went into the hospital room, he saw a man in his early thirties lying on a bed. He was probably Higashino. He had a cut on his cheek, but there were no other obvious injuries.

Higashino seemed to notice Ishii and Miyagawa and sat up with a nervous look.

'I'm Miyagawa of the Setamachi precinct.'

'My name is Ishii.'

Ishii followed Miyagawa and showed his police ID.

'Oh,' Higashino replied flatly. There was no energy in his face – it was like his heart wasn't here.

'Please tell us about the incident,' said Miyagawa, pulling the round chair for guest use that was nearby and sitting down. Ishii remained standing and took out his memo pad.

'What happened?' Miyagawa asked directly.

Higashino's brows furrowed as he played with his fingernails, looking troubled.

'It was so sudden...' Higashino said helplessly.

'What was?'

Miyagawa turned his sharp gaze towards him. To escape it, Higashino looked out the window.

'A man suddenly appeared on the road.'

'He jumped out?'

When Miyagawa asked that, Higashino shook his head vigorously.

'That isn't it. It was sudden. A man in the middle of the road...'

'Then?'

Miyagawa didn't look like he had accepted Higashino's testimony, but he urged him to continue.

'It was too late when I noticed. I couldn't make it in time... so I thought as I slammed the brakes and turned the wheel.'

'And then you turned sideways,' said Ishii, recalling the state of the scene.

'What was the distance?' asked Miyagawa, his voice one step lower.

'About ten metres...'

'How many KM were you driving at?'

'I think it was about fifty.'

'Then you probably didn't make it even if you stepped on the brakes.'

Higashino's shoulders shuddered in fear.

It was just as Miyagawa said. If he had been driving at fifty kilometres per hour and suddenly stepped on the brakes, it would take thirty metres to stop. If the man had been ten metres ahead, he would have definitely been hit.

'I thought that I hadn't made it in time too.'

'Did you hit that man?' interrupted Ishii.

'No guy like that was at the scene.'

Miyagawa was the one who rejected Ishii's thought.

That was right. If that man had been hit, he should have been at the scene, but there was no such man there.

'He was,' said Higashino, gripping the sheets tightly.

'What are you talking about?' Miyagawa pressed.

'I got out of the car immediately. Yano-san was still inside and the car was burning. I was going back to save him. Then, that man appeared in front of my eyes.'

'The man who'd been standing in the road?'

'Yes. He had a creepy smile on his face and he took off his sunglasses. The man's eyes were...'

After saying that much, Higashino's whole body shook and he covered his face with both hands.

He was probably gripped by terror. That emotion came through to Ishii as well. Then, Ishii realised. What Higashino was afraid of –

'That man's eyes were deep red.'

When Ishii said that, Higashino raised his face in shock.

There was a silence.

So it really was that man.

If Higashino had seen the man with two red eyes, it would explain how he suddenly appeared in the road and also how the car didn't hit him.

He was already dead. In short, he was a ghost.

'Then what happened?' said Ishii.

With ragged breathing, Higashino continued his story.

'That man said this. Open the back of the car and take off her handcuffs – '

'So you did what he said without saving your colleague!?' Miyagawa yelled angrily, standing up as he did so.

Higashino covered his face under that pressure.

'There was nothing I could do. He would've killed me if I didn't. So...'

'So you let a criminal escape?'

With a frightful expression, Miyagawa gripped Higashino by his shirt.

'W-wait, Chief Miyagawa. Please calm down.'

Ishii frantically separated Miyagawa from Higashino.

Making a fuss now wouldn't change anything. Though Ishii didn't want to admit it, this was absolute proof that Nanase Miyuki had escaped.

'Are you all right?' Ishii asked Higashino.

'There was nothing I could do...' said Higashino in a tearful voice.

'I understand.'

'Eh?'

'Because I felt the same way.'

'Same?'

Higashino cocked his head, confused by Ishii's words.

Ishii had felt himself the terror that was the man with two red eyes. He had died, so he couldn't directly harm the living.

However, Ishii couldn't blame Higashino. If Ishii had been in the same situation, he would have let Nanase Miyuki escape too.

That was how frightening that man's red eyes were.

'Excuse me, but would you allow me to ask one thing?'

Higashino nodded.

'Was Nanase Miyuki injured?'

Ishii had seen pictures of the scene – it had been quite an accident. It would have been near impossible for Nanase Miyuki to escape without injury. There had also been blood thought to be hers on the asphalt.

'Yes. It looked like she had broken her arm, and there were burns on her face as well...'

'There's chance she would've gone to a hospital then. OK, Ishii – let's go.'

No sooner than Miyagawa had said it, he flew out of the hospital room.

'Thank you very much.'

Ishii thanks Higashino and followed Miyagawa out the hospital room.

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'I ran away then,' said Masato, his small hands in fists.

Though there were tears in his eyes, he was trying his hardest not to let them fall.

Haruka could feel that painfully.

'Masato-kun.'

Haruka hugged Masato tightly.

She could feel Masato shaking through her palm.

He was probably afraid, but more than that, he was filled with anger at himself for not being able to do anything – that was how it seemed to Haruka.

After meeting them again, Masato told them everything that happened so far, spilling out everything he had held in until now.

His field trip to old Kinasa village to see the skunk cabbage. The ghost-like thing he'd seen there, and his classmate Yumiko's sudden collapse after that.

Then, the terrifying experience he'd had going to visit Yumiko last night, and how he'd run away.

Haruka thought it made sense for him to, but Masato didn't feel the same way, so he was blaming himself.

'I get the gist of it. Let's calm down a bit and discuss.'

At this lull in the conversation, they went with Gotou's suggestion to a coffee shop in the station.

It was a cramped chain store, but the interior was beautifully kept.

After ordering drinks for four at the counter, they went to a table that seated four at the back of the shop.

'So what's happened to that girl Yumiko?' asked Yakumo after a moment.

'I don't know. They said they're looking but can't find her...' replied Masato in a trembling voice.

Not just a ghost sighting. A girl had gone missing too – that fact made the atmosphere one level heavier.

'I wonder if she was kidnapped...'

'Then there should be a ransom request.'

Gotou shot down Haruka's suggestion.

'That's right.'

'You two are too hasty,' Yakumo said scornfully as he sipped his coffee.

'I can't let that pass,' Gotou replied immediately.

'Ransom isn't the only goal of kidnapping.'

'Ah!'

'Gotou-san, are you really a detective?'

Yakumo looked needlessly surprised.

'Shut up.'

Gotou sulked like a child.

When Haruka understood, a bad feeling spread through her chest.

Just as Yakumo said, ransom wasn't the only goal of kidnapping. Sometimes the goal was the murder or to satisfy some twisted lust – there was many motives.

'Could that girl...'

Those words slipped out of Haruka's mouth.

If it wasn't for ransom, that girl might have already been killed.

'I said, you're too hasty.'

Yakumo glared at Haruka.

Then, Haruka finally remembered that Masato was beside her. She shouldn't say anything careless about his classmate when he was right beside her.

'Sorry...'

'Right. We don't even know if it's a kidnapping or now.'

Gotou offered timely help.

'Anyway, more information is necessary. Do you know anything else?'

Yakumo turned the conversation to Masato.

Masato suddenly took a photo from his pocket, as if he'd just remembered it, and placed it on the table.

In the photo, there was a cedar tree and a large rock at its roots. There were three children speaking by it.

One was Masato. The other two were a boy and girl of about the same age.

'What's this?'

Yakumo took the photo into his hand with furrowed brows.

'My teacher took the picture. After this, Yumiko-chan fainted...'

replied Masato.
'This was the ghost Masato saw then.'

'Mm.'

Yakumo and Masato both seemed to understand, but Haruka didn't.

'Is there a ghost in this photo?'

'Do you have holes for eyes?'

Yakumo always said one thing too much.

'Thanks to you.'

'Here.'

Yakumo put the photo on the table and tapped the area by the rock with his finger.

Haruka and Gotou leant forward to look at the photo.

'Oh!'

Gotou noticed first and shouted out.

Haruka noticed it too. She'd thought it was a shadow at first, but it wasn't. Though it was faint, she could see a person there.

She couldn't see the face clearly, but it was probably an adult woman.

'How is this related?'

'I don't know yet. Is there anything else?'

Yakumo looked to Masato again.

'Spirited away – '

After a silence, Masato whispered that.

'You said that on the phone too, right? Who'd you hear it from?'

Yakumo looked at Masato with a searching gaze.

Gotou, who didn't read the atmosphere, slurped his iced coffee loudly through his straw in a carefree manner.

'You're noisy.'

After reprimanding Gotou, Yakumo urged Masato to continue again.

'Yumiko-chan's granny said that. That she was spirited away,' said Masato, leaning forward.

'Spirited away? Does that mean the culprit is a tengu⁴?' Haruka asked Yakumo to confirm.

'Though the tengu are famous for it, depending on the location, it might be a demon, fox spirit or mountain witch.'

4 A tengu (天狗) literally translates to heavenly dog and is a legendary creature. In Japan it is depicted with a very long nose. [Kurama Mountain](#) has a statue of one.

'A youkai war, eh?' joked Gotou, but Yakumo sent him a piercing gaze to shut him up before continuing his explanation.

'Normally, disappearing without notice in sacred mountains and forests is called being spirited away.'

'Do people really get spirited away?' asked Makoto.

'Recently, sudden disappearances have been called being spirited away. In that meaning, they do happen.'

'Can people be found after being spirited away?'

'There are occasions when people will be suddenly found in a faraway location, while there are also occasions where they are never seen again.'

'I don't want to happen.'

Masato looked straight at Yakumo.

Masato couldn't forgive himself for running away. That fastidious of his, so similar to Yakumo's, would corner him. Yakumo probably felt it himself as he awkwardly ran a hand through his hair before speaking.

'I acknowledge the existence of ghosts, but I don't acknowledge the existence of as-yet-unknown creatures like tengu and demons.'

'Eh, but you just said people do get spirited away...'

Yakumo did say that earlier.

When Haruka interrupted, Yakumo looked at her scornfully.

'Listen properly to what people say. I said that people disappear without notice – in that sense, people are spirited away. The people of the past just assumed that that was the work of tengu and demons.'

'It isn't?'

'That girl suddenly disappeared. That's the only reason it could be called spirited away.'

So that's what he meant – Haruka understood now. But the problem still remained.

'Is there a way to find her?'

'I really shouldn't have run away,' declared Masato.

His fists were shaking. It hurt to look at him.

'Listen. Even if you didn't run away then, Masato, what could you have done?'

Yakumo stared at Masato.

Masato's head drooped under that pressure.

'I...'

'Depending on the situation, running away can be the best choice.'

'But...'

Masato looked up again to talk back.

'If you didn't run away then, you might have disappeared as well. Then there would be the possibility that the very existence of the incident would have been unknown to us.'

Yakumo spoke in his usual well-reasoned way with harsh words, but his tone was gentle.

He was trying to lighten Masato's psychological load, even if only by a little.

'Let's put aside what has happened so far. The question is what we do from now on.'

Though Masato still didn't look like he had accepted Yakumo's opinion, he nodded.

It was just as Yakumo said. There was no point regretting what had happened.

Haruka gripped Masato's hand.

'Hey, wouldn't it be better to leave it to the local police?' interrupted Gotou, biting his straw.

'We will leave the search to them, but there is something we can do as well.'

Yakumo's words were unusually forceful.

His sharp gaze was almost frightening.

'Something we can do?'

Gotou crossed his arms with a frown.

'What is the true nature of the ghost Masato saw? If we understand that, we might know where that girl has disappeared to.'

Yakumo licked his thin lips and narrowed his eyes.

'What do you plan to do?' said Gotou, seeming bored as he looked up at the ceiling.

'First, we'll go to the place where the incident started.'

Yakumo tapped the photo with his finger.

'I'm going too.'

Masato stuck out his chin and spoke up loudly.

He sent a forceful gaze towards Yakumo.

'Naturally,' said Yakumo with a smile.

'Then I'm going back.'

Gotou stretched and stood up.

Though Haruka wished he would accompany them a bit longer, he'd already brought them all the way to Nagano.

But –

'I think it'd be impossible to get to the place where the cedar tree is without a car.'

'So he says.'

Yakumo shrugged and looked up at Gotou.

'Oi, oi. I'm in charge of dropping off and picking up. I've done my job.'

What Gotou said made sense.

'Dropping off and picking up means that you have to drop us off and pick us up. You'll be done when you drop us off at Tokyo.'

'That's just quibbling.'

Gotou ground his teeth together.

However, his expression didn't make it look like he completely objected. It felt like he even enjoyed the situation.

'Now, let's head out.'

Yakumo finished drinking his cup of coffee and stood up.

'So? You know where the place is?'

Standing next to him, it appeared that Gotou had already come to a decision.

'I know where it is. It's near my parents' home,' said Haruka.

It would be best to go before Gotou changed his mind.

With Masato's hand in hers, Haruka stood up.

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15

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When Ishii left the hospital room and went into the corridor, Miyagawa was talking on his mobile.

'Go straight to the nearby hospital. Nanase Miyuki might be undergoing treatment there. This is an emergency.'

After saying that in a frenzy, Miyagawa turned to Ishii.

'All right. We're going too.'

'W-where to?'

'Weren't you listening? Nanase Miyuki should be being treated at a hospital. We're gonna get her

before she runs.'

'Oh...' Ishii replied listlessly.

Nanase Miyuki was injured. Just as Miyagawa's decision to search the hospital was not incorrect. However, something felt odd to Ishii.

– What could it be?

'Anyway, let's go.'

Miyagawa interrupted Ishii's thoughts and started walking away with wide strides.

Ishii followed after him.

Nanase Miyuki was a coldblooded, heartless woman. However, that wasn't all. She was also a woman who could coolly and objectively look at a situation.

That cunning smile appeared in Ishii's eyes.

Then, he realised what was strange.

'Excuse me, Chief Miyagawa,' said Ishii once they got to the parking lot.

'What?'

Miyagawa looked at him, clearly irritated.

'Nanase Miyuki is a fugitive.'

'I know that.'

'With this much evidence, she must know that the police have realised she escaped.'

'So what?'

'Would she go to a hospital in this situation?'

That was what felt off to Ishii.

If she went to hospital, she was likely to be caught by the police. It would be difficult to run while being treated.

This was Miyuki, who had tricked the police a number of times. She must have known that.

'But this isn't just some scratch. Even she'd need treatment.'

According to Higashino, she'd even broken bones.

With that level of injury, it would be difficult to escape without treatment. However, that didn't wave away Ishii's suspicion.

'Er, this is just a possibility, but...'

'What?'

'She could treat it herself...'

'Hah?'

Miyagawa cocked his head.

Even Ishii thought it was a ridiculous idea, but he couldn't throw away the possibility. He thought that she might do something like that.

'But she'd need things to treat it herself,' said Miyagawa.

It was just as he said. If the injury was serious, it would need to be stitched up, and if there were broken bones, they would need to be set. Burns needed to be disinfected. Furthermore, she would have to do this in a place where other people wouldn't notice.

– So that's no good then?

Ishii felt the thought disappear.

Just like Miyagawa said, it might be good to check the hospitals thoroughly.

'That's right...'

There was no strength in Ishii's reply as he got into the driver's seat.

'Don't be discouraged. It was a good idea,' said Miyagawa, getting into the passenger seat.

There was sympathy in that voice. Ishii had thought Miyagawa was something like a demon, but it appeared he was a bit wrong.

'Hah...'

'You're a bit too focussed on Nanase Miyuki. Well, I shouldn't talk.'

Miyagawa smiled dryly.

It was fifteen years ago – when Nanase Miyuki committed her first crime, Miyagawa had been the first at the scene. In a way, he'd known her longer.

Ishii first encountered Nanase Miyuki half a year ago with the incident at the school. No, that was wrong. She hadn't showed herself then, but she'd been involved in the case earlier –

'Ah!'

A light bulb flashed in Ishii's head.

There would be some medical equipment there. Not just that – people wouldn't see her.

'What's wrong?'

'I know where Nanase Miyuki is hiding.'

'What?'

Miyagawa looked at Ishii in surprise.

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After leaving the cafe, Haruka got into the passenger seat of Gotou's car.

Now that they knew where the place was, they had bought a guide. In the back seat, Yakumo and Masato sat next to each other.

'I'm sorry you have to come all this way with us.'

Haruka bowed her head to Gotou in the driver's seat as he started the car.

'I wish that guy'd learn a bit from your honesty, Haruka-chan,' said Gotou, looking at Yakumo through the rear-view mirror.

However, Yakumo didn't appear to hear. He just looked out the window to look at the dark scenery. Haruka had no idea what he was thinking about.

Masato's knees were tightly together and he was looking at his hands, as still as a statue.

He probably had a lot to think about.

Haruka turned to face the front and noticed that the mobile phone on the dashboard was vibrating.

'Gotou-san, your phone is ringing.'

When Haruka said that, Gotou frowned, looking annoyed.

'It's Ishii. Been calling this whole time. What a persistent guy.'

'Is it all right not to answer?'

'I'll answer when I'm back.'

Gotou smirked. It was a mean way to put it.

'The way you said that was similar to Yakumo-kun.'

'Don't compare us. Anyway, wouldn't it be better to call that kid's home?'

Gotou changed the topic.

Come to think of it, he was right. A girl from the neighbourhood had just disappeared. There would be a big fuss if Masato disappeared too.

'That's right.'

Haruka took her mobile phone out immediately and called Masato's home.

When she gave her name, Masato's aunt, who answered the phone, immediately recognised her. Since Haruka had called a number of times before in her concern, they were rather familiar with each other.

After Haruka explained the situation, Masato's aunt replied that she understood.

Masato's aunt apologised so many times that Haruka felt ashamed herself. It was clear that Masato's aunt loved Masato like her own son.

For Masato, who had been involved in such a ghastly case, his uncle and aunt might have been a stroke of happiness within that bad luck.

Haruka promised to bring Makoto back home before it was late and hung up.

'So where should I head?'

Gotou asked for guidance after waiting for her to finish.

'Please head right.'

'Right.'

Up until now, they had gone straight along a street in Kinasa.

If they turned at the intersection and went towards Togakushi around Arakurayama, they would reach the cedar they were headed for.

From now on was a winding mountain road. The road suddenly became narrower, and there were no traffic lights either.

There were only houses with lights on popping up every once in a while.

'Is this your hometown, Haruka-chan?'

While driving, Gotou changed the topic.

'It is.'

'I feel like I know why you're so pure.'

'What do you mean?'

'He's saying that this is way out in the country,' Yakumo said loftily, his legs crossed.

He only responded at times like this.

'My bad.'

Though it was just a thought, this was her hometown, so she wanted to object.

'You're probably friends with tanuki.'

– Well.

'They're human.'

'They just changed shape. Since you're easy to trick.'

This person just –

'Tanuki changing shapes – what age do you think we live in?'

'Don't take things so seriously.'

– Ah, honestly.

'Oi. Where to next?' interrupted Gotou.

'Please head along this road.'

'Which road?'

'Just straight ahead.'

'Straight ahead? There's no road here.'

'There is.'

Haruka pointed with her finger.

Though it was only wide enough for one car to pass, there was a road there.

'That's a road?'

Gotou cocked his head.

She knew it was just that he wasn't used to it, but she felt like she was being made fun of.

'Please just go!'

She ended up speaking in an irritated tone.

'Y-yes,' replied Gotou, sounding a bit afraid.

In the back seat, Yakumo and Masato stifled their laughter.

Were they just making fun of her? Or were they trying to make Masato feel more at ease? Though Haruka didn't know, since Masato had laughed, she let it go.

About forty minutes from Nagano Station, they finally reached the place they were headed for.

They went up the twisty wooded road to an opening, where there was a marsh.

'This is the right place, right?'

'Yes.'

'Where to park...'

Speaking to himself, Gotou stopped the car in front of the cottage by the marsh.

– We're finally here.

Haruka stretched as she got off the car.

The air was different here in the middle of the mountains. It prickled her with cold.

'The stars are amazing,' said Yakumo, as he got off the car and looked up at the sky.

Haruka looked up as well.

'They are.'

Unlike Tokyo, the air was clear. Nothing got in the way of the shining stars.

'Let's finish this quickly.'

Gotou got a torch from the back of the car and started walking briskly. Then, he yelped.

It seemed he'd gotten stuck in one of the marsh's puddles.

'It's because you advance without thinking,' said Yakumo scornfully as he carefully stepped only on the firm parts of the ground and walked along the skunk cabbage.

'Shut up,' complained Gotou, following after Yakumo.

'Let's go.'

Masato pulled Haruka's hand.

His face was stiff. No matter what he'd said, he was probably frightened about returning to the place where he saw something so terrifying.

Haruka took Masato's hand and started walking.

Finally, they reached the cedar in the middle of the marshy area. At its roots was a large rock about a metre tall.

'Amazing,' said Gotou, pointing the torch's light up at the cedar tree.

Just as he said, the cedar tree had a strange presence to it.

It probably wouldn't have stood out much in the middle of a forest, but because it stood alone, surrounded by a flat marsh, it found excessively amazing.

'Gotou-san, please lend that to me.'

As Yakumo said that, he took the torch from Gotou and crouched by the roots, lighting it up.

'Aah!'

She yelled without thinking.

Lit up by the torch, there was a statue of the Buddha at the tree's roots.

The stone statuette was broken at places from wind and rain. The right half was covered in green moss.

It must have been here for a while without any care.

Masato gripped her hand tightly.

'It's all right,' she said, to herself as well.

Masato didn't say anything; he just nodded.

'Masato. Do you remember this?'

Yakumo picked something up from the ground and handed it to Masato. It looked like an old rope.

'Yeah. It was wrapped around the stone, but when Tomoya-kun fell from it, the rope fell off too,' replied Masato.

'I see. This is a shrine,' said Yakumo, placing the rope on the stone.

'Shrine?' replied Gotou.

'A shrine. A place where Shinto spirits gather. Like an altar,' Yakumo replied disinterestedly.

'Altar?'

Haruka looked at the cedar tree and rock again.

Come to think of it, it did look like that.

'The rope wrapped around the rock was used to cordon off the consecrated area. It probably enshrined this cedar tree.'

'So that's why the Buddha statue is here.'

'Somebody put this here later.'

'How can you tell?'

'Having a statue of the Buddha at a Shinto shrine is unnatural.'

'That's right... but why?'

'Who knows? I don't know that much. Anyway, it would be better to come back when it's bright,' drawled Yakumo.

'What?' exclaimed Gotou exaggeratedly.

'The light of a torch won't be enough.'

Yakumo threw the torch back to Gotou and looked at the cedar tree.

'What? I thought I'd be able to get back home today too,' complained Gotou as he started walking to where he'd parked the car.

'Let's go.'

Haruka pulled Masato's hand and started walking away from the tree, but then she turned around, noticing that Yakumo wasn't walking with them.

Yakumo stood silently, facing the cedar tree.

'Wait a bit.'

Haruka left Masato there and walked back to Yakumo.

Even though she was standing next to him, Yakumo just looked up at the tree, unmoving.

It wasn't that he didn't notice her. It felt like he knew but was still looking up at the tree.

It was like he was talking with the cedar tree.

'Hey, Yakumo-kun.'

When Haruka called out to him, Yakumo murmured quietly.

'This is Kinasa...'

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Notes:

A general note about the chapter title. In Japanese it is called himorogi (神籬), a Shinto term for a sacred place where one worships. Originally, a himorogi was just an area of sacred land surrounded by evergreens. Rocks in the middle of a himorogi are called iwakura (岩座). [Here](#) is an example on Wikipedia of the one at Rokkosan Country House.

([4] [This](#) is the intersection in question; zoom in to see the five roads. – Couldn't find the note tag inside the text)

鬼女

第二章

02
FILE

file 02: witch

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1

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After parking the car, Ishii took deep breaths.

He was near the Tamo River at one corner of the residential street, in front of the <Kinoshita Surgery: Maternity and Gynaecology Department >.

A flat-roofed three-storey building with white walls – it stood uncannily in the darkness.

The first time Ishii came here was about half a year ago, during his first case with Gotou. During that case, the owner of this hospital was arrested, so it was now empty.

All the windows were covered by curtains, and weeds grew at the entrance. The sign with the name of the hospital was written in dirty undistinguishable letters.

It was completely abandoned.

Ishii thought Nanase Miyuki was hiding in this building.

'Why do you think she's here?' asked Miyagawa.

'There are materials she could use here to treat herself without being spotted. Those are the requirements.'

'But there are other abandoned hospitals.'

Just as Miyagawa said, there were other abandoned hospitals too, if those were the only requirements. However, if they became too old, the materials couldn't be used for treatment. Furthermore –

'The man with two red eyes was involved in the case with Doctor Kinoshita. Though she didn't appear in the foreground, Nanase Miyuki was probably involved as well... so she must know about this place.'

That was why Ishii thought that Nanase Miyuki would use <Kinoshita Surgery: Maternity and Gynaecology Department> as her hideout.

'Why do you think she'd choose a place she knows?'

'I used geographic profiling.'

'Profiling, eh? How complicated.'

Miyagawa smiled wryly.

'That isn't the case. Profiling is just thinking from the standpoint of the criminal.'

'Though people look as if they are behaving erratically, they unconsciously limit their actions.'

'Limit?'

Miyagawa cocked his head.

'Yes. Concealment means hiding yourself. People unconsciously choose some place they think is safer.'

'So places you don't know are unsafe.'

'There are exceptions, but this is not an escape but concealment. Furthermore, she is injured. There is a high risk to hiding in a place you don't know.'

'Well, instead of thinking about it, we'll find out if we go in.'

As Miyagawa said that, he got off the car.

Ishii took the torch and got off the car.

– Nanase Miyuki might be here.

Now, fear welled within him and his feet froze. However, he had suggested this himself. He couldn't run now.

'Let's go.'

Unlike Ishii, Miyagawa spoke as lightly as if they were heading out for a stroll and walked briskly. Ishii gulped and started walking as well.

They stood in front of the glass entrance.

'All right.'

Then, Miyagawa smashed the glass, put his hand in and unlocked the door.

That was the person who taught Gotou for you. His methods were forceful.

'Don't dawdle.'

'Y-yes sir.'

Ishii went into the building, hiding behind Miyagawa's back.

Ishii lit the torch. Though they were small, there was a reception and waiting room and a cavernous corridor beyond them.

– I'm really frightened.

Ishii wanted to cling to something, so he stuck to Miyagawa's back.

'That's creepy. Back off.'

Miyagawa pushed Ishii away.

'I-I apologise.'

'I'll look at the examination room. You check the delivery room,' said Miyagawa, sounding

exasperated. Then he opened the door and went into the examination room.

– I'm going alone?

Ishii wiped his sweaty palms on his trousers and gripped the torch tightly. He felt like his heart would leap out of his throat.

The delivery room was at the end of the corridor.

Ishii walked a step at a time.

'It's OK. It's OK.'

Ishii said that to himself as he pushed open the door to the delivery room.

Then, the smell of disinfectant assaulted his nose. Without thinking, he covered his nose and mouth with his hand.

On the dusty metal cart, there were medicine and medical tools, and there was a bed in the middle of the room.

Ishii immediately noticed something was strange.

There were bandages at his feet. He turned the torch towards them and realised they were bloody.

'It's still fresh...'

When Ishii spoke up, he saw something move in the corner of his eye.

'Eh?'

It was too late when he noticed.

Something leapt out of the darkness and attacked Ishii.

Ishii couldn't even scream.

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2

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'Hello!' said Haruka, opening the door to the soba restaurant.

They dropped by after seeing Masato off.

It was thirty minutes by car from Nagano city. It was a soba restaurant for tourists, the middle of five at the bottom of Togakushi mountain.

It had a long history – a wooden shop with a thatch roof. White walls that stood out even from the road. It had a wide parking lot. Besides the table for eight inside the shop, there were two tatami rooms. There was also an inn, though it was simple and at a bit of a distance.

To be frank, it was Haruka's home.

'Sorry, we're already closed...'

Haruka's mother, Keiko, came out of the kitchen in an apron.

'I'm back.'

'Oh, it's you, Haruka,' replied Keiko, sounding a bit disappointed.

'Couldn't you be a bit more surprised?'

Haruka pouted, but Keiko didn't care. She didn't respond to anything. That was her personality.

'My body wouldn't be able to bear it if I was surprised by everything you did.'

'It's not like I do anything that surprising.'

'Really now. Didn't you come home crying about how "Yakumo-kun disappeared" the other time?'

– She couldn't say anything to that.

'I wasn't crying.'

'Oh really,' said Keiko mischievously.

Haruka wanted to retort, but she couldn't just keep talking like this.

'Hey, friends came with me, but could I ask them in?'

Haruka didn't wait for Keiko's answer. She opened the sliding door and showed Yakumo and Gotou in.

'Sorry to bother.'

Gotou passed through the curtain first.

'Oh my, you're Nao-chan's...'

Keiko clapped her hands together before Haruka could introduce him.

Haruka had thought they hadn't met before, but now that she thought about it, they'd met at Isshin's funeral.

'Oh, is this your home, Haruka-chan?' said Gotou, looking at Keiko.

'I didn't say?'

'Didn't hear anything about it.'

'If you're going in, please hurry up. You're in the way,' interrupted Yakumo, sounding displeased.

'You're so fussy,' complained Gotou, but he stepped inside the shop to let Yakumo in.

'Oh, Yakumo-kun too!'

Though Keiko didn't have much of a response to her daughter's return home, when she saw Yakumo, she was so pleased it looked like she'd leap up.

'Hello.'

Yakumo greeted her with his usual expression.

'What is it? Why are you all here?'

Keiko was as excited as if she had met old friends ago.

'A lot happened.'

'Oh, did you decide when to have your marriage?'

'Whose?'

'What? Don't play dumb.'

Haruka refused to be dragged along by Keiko's excitement.

'Anyway, I'm starved.'

Gotou interrupted the parent-child banter.

'We came all this way because you said you'd let us eat something.'

Yakumo made a follow-up comment.

It seemed like neither of them knew the word restraint.

'Sorry. This was so sudden. The part-time worker's already gone home, so it'll just be whatever we have on hand.'

'I don't mind.'

'No problem here.'

After Yakumo and Gotou replied, Keiko urged them to sit – 'Would the tatami room be all right?' – and they went to the tatami room.

The three of them sat at a long table.

Haruka hadn't thought she'd be here at home with Yakumo and Gotou. It was strange.

'Anyway, I'll get a beer,' said Gotou the moment he sat down, without looking at the menu.

'You can't drive if you drink, right?' interrupted Yakumo.

'We can just sleep in the car.'

'I refuse.'

'A sleeping bag and a car seat aren't that different, right?'

'How about this?' interrupted Keiko. She had a hand at her waist with a triumphant expression.

Haruka had a somewhat bad feelings.

'You can just stay here,' said Keiko, eyes sparkling.

'Eh?'

Ignoring Haruka's surprise, Gotou slapped his knee. 'That'd be great.'

'We don't have many hands since it's the off season, so we won't be able to do much for you.'

'Anywhere's fine as long as I can sleep. Yakumo, let's stay here tonight.'

Gotou hit Yakumo's shoulder to ask for his agreement.

For just a moment, Haruka's eyes met Yakumo's. Even though it wasn't like they would be sleeping together, Haruka's face suddenly grew hot and she looked down at the tatami without thinking.

'If it isn't any trouble,' said Yakumo, running a hand through his hair.

'OK! It's decided then.'

After saying that, Keiko took a bottle of beer out of the fridge and placed it on the table along with glasses for all of them.

Gotou opened the bottle immediately and started pouring beer into each glass.

For some reason, Yakumo was looking at the amber-coloured liquid filling his glass unpleasantly.

Perhaps –

'Yakumo-kun, you can't drink?'

He glared at her.

With Keiko, Gotou called out and they clinked their glasses for form's sake.

Yakumo stuck took one sip, like he was lapping it out of the glass, and then he stuck out his tongue again, scowling. It looked like he really couldn't drink.

– That's a bit cute.

When Keiko asked for their orders, Gotou just said, 'We'll leave it to you.'

'Leave it to me then,' said Keiko. She finished drinking her glass of beer and then went into the kitchen.

Haruka couldn't hear clearly, but there was talking in the kitchen. Keiko was probably talking with Haruka's father, Kazuhiro.

'This your parents' shop, Haruka-chan?' asked Gotou, pouring himself a second glass of beer.

'Yes. Though there are also a number of part-time workers.'

'Is your dad the cook?'

'My father's fairly famous. He's even been in some gourmet magazines.'

'Oh? We should greet him. Since we'll be staying for a night.'

'I'll introduce you afterwards.'

When Haruka finished speaking, there was a loud cracking sound of something breaking in the kitchen.

– What?

Haruka turned around to see Kazuhiro fly out of the kitchen with a red face.

He had a small frame with his hair trimmed short, but his eyebrows and the corners of his eyes were low on his face, so he looked a bit unreliable. He was normally gentle – Haruka couldn't remember him ever being angry.

Now, Kazuhiro's cheeks were twitching and he was gritting his teeth as he glared.

'D-Dad, I'm home.'

Haruka called out to him, but Kazuhiro didn't appear to hear. He alternated his glare between Yakumo and Gotou.

'Which one's Yakumo?' asked Kazuhiro in a low voice.

Haruka looked at the kitchen and saw Keiko peering out from inside as she stifled her laughter.

'He's Yakumo.'

Ignoring Haruka, who was troubled for a response, Yakumo pointed at Gotou with a disinterested expression.

'You?'

'Hah?'

Kazuhiro approached Gotou.

Gotou cocked his head in confusion.

'Somebody like you.'

'Hah?'

'What's good about this unattractive middle-aged man?'

Kazuhiro looked at Haruka.

There appeared to be a crazy misunderstanding.

'That's not it. Yakumo's that one.'

Gotou seemed to realise what had happened and pointed at Yakumo.

'What?'

With the speed of a beast hunting prey, Kazuhiro looked to Yakumo, but Yakumo just looked with disinterest at the soba refining process written on the back of the menu.

'He treats Haruka-chan like a slave. If you don't do something soon, it'll be a problem,' Gotou continued with a large grin as he fanned the fire.

'A-a slave?'

Kazuhiro's eyes went so wide they looked like they would fall out.

Kazuhiro was serious, but because of that, he didn't understand jokes. He believed everything he was told.

'All right, all right. Calm down a bit, dear.'

Keiko, perhaps satisfied by the teasing she'd done, took Kazuhiro's arm and pulled him back into the kitchen.

– This is the worst.

Haruka lay on the table, exhausted.

'Why is your father picking a fight with me?' complained Yakumo, his chin in his hands.

'Because you're toying with his unmarried daughter.'

Gotou's shoulders were shaking in laughter.

'What are you talking about?'

'Don't act like you don't understand.'

'I don't.'

Even Yakumo was angry now.

There was no point continuing this conversation.

'Hey. What are we going to do next?'

Haruka sat up straight and changed the topic.

'Ah, that's right. Let's clean this up fast,' agreed Gotou, placing his glass on the table.

'I'm also curious about where that girl has disappeared to.'

Yakumo had looked tired, but his gaze suddenly became serious.

'Is that girl OK?'

'Yes, probably.'

Yakumo replied to Gotou's question.

'How do you know?'

'Earlier, we discussed being spirited away.'

'Yeah.'

'This is my theory, but I think that such incidents are caused by ghosts.'

'What do you mean?'

Gotou's face twisted in confusion.

'Tengu and demons only exist in humans' imaginations. Things that do not exist cannot make somebody disappear.'

'Right,' replied Gotou with a belch.

'However, people really do disappear without any notice – in that sense, people are spirited away. Then why do they disappear?'

'They were in some sort of accident.'

Haruka said the first thing that came to mind. Then, Yakumo glared at her.

'I'm not talking about accidents right now.'

'S-sorry.'

You don't have to say it that way – Yakumo was unusually displeased, perhaps because of what just happened earlier.

'So why do they disappear?'

Gotou went back on topic.

'Probably...'

As Yakumo said that, Kazuhiro brought bowls for the three of them on a wooden tray.

Kazuhiro wasn't good with words so he rarely left the kitchen, leaving the customers to Keiko. So what was happening now –

Kazuhiro placed the bowls in front of them silently.

He didn't forget to glare at Yakumo when he left.

'What's this?'

Gotou stuck his chopsticks into the bowl.

'You don't know? It's sobagaki¹.'

'Sobagaki?'

Gotou cocked his head.

Though it was famous in Nagano as local cuisine, it wasn't common in Tokyo restaurants – perhaps there were many people he didn't know about it.

'Buckwheat flour is kneaded into a mochi-like state. It's delicious.'

Its appearance and colour was similar to a rock, but its fluffy texture and the way the aroma of buckwheat spread through your mouth was amazing.

'Oh! This goes well with the beer.'

1 For the curious, [here](#) is an English recipe with pictures to make sobagaki.

As Gotou ate, he expressed his pleasure.

'Right?'

It made Haruka happy to hear her home cooking praised.

Come to think of it, Haruka hadn't eaten sobagaki at home much recently either. After murmuring 'Let's eat' in her heart, she picked up her chopsticks. Kazuhiro's sobagaki was softer than the other stores'. That feeling filled her mouth.

– This taste. It's Dad's.

'Is this really sobagaki? It just looks like a rock to me,' said Yakumo, ruining the atmosphere.

– Honestly. This contrary guy.

'If you're going to say that, you don't have to eat.'

'Look.'

Yakumo showed the inside of his bowl.

There was a plop as a rock rolled in his bowl.

Haruka couldn't believe it. Yakumo's bowl had a real rock in it.

'Hey! Dad!'

Haruka let out an angry yell.

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3

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'Ack.'

Ishii fell backwards.

The black shadow that came flying at him was human. The person sat on top of Ishii and swung something.

A sharp pain ran through his left shoulder.

'Aah!'

It appeared he had been stabbed by something.

He looked to see a surgical scalpel. It had stabbed the top of his shoulder. Blood was coming out, dyeing his shirt.

'Ishii-san, it's been a while.'

He heard a voice in his ear.

Though it had a bewitching echo to it, there was something incredibly dark eddying in it. It was a

voice he could never forget.

– Nanase Miyuki.

'You can scream if it hurts.'

Nanase Miyuki brought herself close to Ishii's face.

The left half of her was covered in burns. There was no trace of her graceful self.

Miyuki twisted the scalpel in Ishii's shoulder, gouging the wound. A pain incomparable to the one earlier ran through his shoulder.

'Ack...'

Ishii bore with the pain.

If I scream now, it'll be her win – that was how he felt.

'Why not call for help? Chief Miyagawa might come.'

'Eh?'

She knew that Miyagawa was here.

For her to be so composed – a bad feeling spread within Ishii.

'From that world.'

Miyuki's eyes had a cold light.

'T-that's...'

Miyagawa was killed – Ishii couldn't accept what Miyuki said.

'Even though I thought you were just useless, you sniffed this place out. You're unexpectedly troublesome.'

'I...'

'Would you die already?'

Miyuki smirked.

The terror in Ishii suddenly grew. She wasn't joking. If she said she would kill him, she really would.

Miyuki pulled the scalpel out of Ishii's shoulder.

Then, an electrifying pain ran through it, and he twisted his face without thinking.

'Farewell,' said Miyuki, raising the bloody scalpel.

– No. No. No. I don't want to die yet!

Within Ishii, stronger than fear, a tenacity for life took root. Compelled by that feeling, Ishii suddenly grabbed Miyuki's left arm.

'Aah!'

Then, Miyuki screamed and let go of Ishii.

Ishii stood up reflexively.

Miyuki held her left arm as she knelt on the floor and glared at Ishii. Then, Ishii remembered what Higashino had said.

She broke her arm in the accident –

Ishii's action of the moment had luckily hit her weak point. However, though he had saved his life, that was only temporary. He would be killed unless he got out of this situation.

While pressing the injury in his left shoulder, he confronted Miyuki.

– What do I do?

He tried to work his brain, but his fear was getting in the way. A cold sweat ran down his back and his knees were shaking.

While he couldn't think of anything, Miyuki slowly got up. Her right hand held the scalpel. He would be killed like this.

He tried to run, but his legs wouldn't move.

– Move, move, move.

He hit his knees, but it was no good. Miyuki slowly walked towards him and raised the scalpel.

– It's too late.

The moment he thought that, the door opened and Miyagawa ran in.

'Ishii!'

'Chief Miyagawa...'

Miyagawa was bleeding from his forehead. Miyuki had probably hit him.

There was the sound of something cracking.

Ishii looked to see that Miyuki had broken the glass in the window and was about to climb out.

– I have to follow her.

Ishii thought that for a moment before his knees buckled underneath him. His nervousness had fled him.

'You kept your life then.'

Ishii looked over to see Miyagawa had sat down as well.

It was just as Miyagawa said. It was a good thing she fled –

Ishii heaved a sigh of relief.

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4

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After eating, Gotou went to the separate two-storey building.

He went in through the entrance to see a counter. He got a key there and was taken to the room at the very back of the first floor.

It was a Japanese room of ten tatami in size with a table, fridge and television.

Haruka's family mainly worked at the soba shop but it had a Japanese inn as well. It seemed that there were quite a number of soba shops with inns for tourists in the Togakushi area.

That was why Keiko could easily tell two men who suddenly came by to stay.

A yukata² was prepared for him. Though there was no hot spring, there was a cypress bath, so Gotou submerged himself in it. When he came back, two futon had been laid out.

– Good preparation.

When Gotou opened the fridge, there was a row of beer cans. This was good preparation too.

With no reservation, Gotou opened a can of beer and took a gulp.

It really was different drinking right out of the bath. The cold beer flowed through his warmed body, spreading to every part of him.

After taking a breath, he took out his mobile phone. Ishii had called an incredible number of times, but it was probably nothing, so he ignored Ishii and called home.

<Hello.>

Atsuko picked up at the first ring.

'It's me.'

<Will you be late tonight?>

Atsuko, who didn't know the situation, sounded relaxed through the phone.

'I don't think I'll be back.'

<Staying overnight?>

'I'm in Nagano now.'

<Nagano?>

Even Atsuko sounded surprised.

Gotou quickly explained what had happened up until now. When Atsuko said <I see>, it sounded

2 The yukata that would have been laid out wouldn't be a fancy summer one but just something that Japanese inns and hotels often have for their guests. It would just have a plain pattern like [this one](#).

disappointed to Gotou, but it was probably just his imagination.

'So how's Nao?' said Gotou, changing the subject. Atsuko's mood changed in an instant.

<She's already asleep. She loves the teddy bear she got for her birthday present. She even brought it to the bath. It was quite the problem.'

Yakumo and Haruka had bought it for Nao's birthday.

'She likes it that much?'

<She says it looks like you.>

Gotou snorted without thinking.

Come to think of it, when Nao drew a picture of Gotou bear, it looked just like a bear.

He'd asked, 'Am I a bear?' Then they laughed together.

<Will you be back by tomorrow?>

'I don't know. It might be a bit tough.'

They didn't know anything about this case yet. It didn't seem like there would be a sudden breakthrough. After coming this far, Gotou planned on sticking with them the whole way.

<Be careful.>

Gotou felt hot at Atsuko's words.

Am I blushing – no. Just the alcohol.

'Good evening.'

Just as Gotou hung up, the door to the room opened, and Haruka showed up in room wear.

She had probably just got out of the bath. Her hair was a bit damp.

'Hey.'

'Oh? Where's Yakumo-kun?' asked Haruka, looking around the room.

'Still in the bath.'

'It's been a while, hasn't it?'

'He's always used the school showers. He's probably relaxing in the tub.'

'I see...'

'He'll probably be back soon though?'

'Then I'll wait.'

Haruka sat on the tatami.

'Your dad was pretty angry,' said Gotou, handing Haruka a can of beer.

'Honestly. That was just too much.'

Haruka pouted, seeming displeased.

It seemed like she was rather unhappy about her father's trying to make Yakumo eat a rock. It wasn't like Gotou didn't understand how Haruka felt. But –

'I understand how your dad feels.'

No matter the situation, his daughter, who lived far away, had suddenly brought back a man. There was no way he wouldn't be angry.

'I didn't think I'd hear that from you, Gotou-san.'

'I wouldn't have understood before. But...'

'Is it Nao-chan?'

'Even I've started to feel like a parent.'

Though it had only been a short time, Nao's presence had brought a drastic change to the Gotou couple. He felt like this was what it meant to become a parent.

'Would you be angry if Nao-chan brought back a boyfriend?'

'I'd smack him down!' yelled Gotou, becoming serious without intending to.

'You wouldn't accept him?'

'Impossible.'

'How intolerant.'

'I don't care. I feel bad for your dad too, Haruka-chan. Since it's Yakumo of all people.'

'What dissatisfies you about me?'

With bad timing, Yakumo opened the door and came in.

Since Yakumo had pale skin, his cheeks were flushed more than usual after coming out of the bath. His hair was also straight, unlike its usual bedhead.

'Nothing.'

'Please think about me, since I have to use the same bath and sleep in the same room as you of all people, Gotou-san.'

In his yukata, Yakumo casually dried off his hair with a towel and sat cross-legged on the futon.

'If you don't want to be with me, why not sleep with Haruka-chan?' said Gotou, knowing Yakumo would be angry.

Just as expected, Yakumo sent Gotou an incredible glare.

Meanwhile, Haruka went red to her eyes and dropped her gaze to the tatami.

'We aren't in a situation where you can tell jokes that aren't funny,' said Yakumo, looking annoyed as he put the towel he used to dry his hair around his neck.

'All right, all right. So what are we going to do?'

Gotou finished drinking his beer, crushed the empty can and left it on the table.

'Continuing where I left off earlier, but I think that the spiring away incident is related to the ghost Masato saw.'

When Yakumo said that, Haruka recalled the spirit photo Masato had shown them.

The black shadow by the rock that was a shrine –

'So a ghost made the person disappear?'

'Gotou-san, you're an idiot,' said Yakumo, exasperated.

'That's what you said, right?'

'I didn't say anything like that. I just said that a ghost was involved.'

'How is it involved?' interrupted Haruka.

'Possession.'

Yakumo's eyes narrowed.

'Possession – so a ghost took over her body?' asked Gotou to check.

'Correct. It is likely that a ghost possessed that girl and led her to leave home with her own feet and disappear.'

'Like hypnotism?'

'Similar. I think that most cases of spiring away happen like this.'

Gotou felt like he understood.

He'd seen people possessed by ghosts before. They did things they wouldn't normally do and even lost consciousness temporarily.

Looking at it like this, it was just like being spirited away.

If the girl called Yumiko was currently in this situation, her illogical actions made sense.

But then Haruka had a question.

'Hey. Is Yumiko-chan all right?'

'I can't say anything at this stage. Furthermore, I am also concerned about her weakening body.'

Yakumo's shoulders fell, as if he was exhausted, and he looked up at the ceiling.

'What do you mean?'

'Exactly what I said. She's been possessed by a ghost and walking around without drinking or

eating.'

'Three or four days,' Gotou continued.

Since she disappeared yesterday, today would be the second. They couldn't relax.

'Hey. Let's go look for her.'

Haruka leant forward unconsciously.

'The local police and firefighters will search. Furthermore, if we move around in the forest at night, we'll be the ones who disappear.'

Even though Yakumo said that disinterestedly, his expression was hard.

It was just as Yakumo said.

Even if they did the same thing as the police and firefighters were doing, they wouldn't be much help. They would just have to find Yumiko using the methods only they could use. But –

'What should we do?'

'First, we find out what the ghost Masato saw was – we need to make that clear,' said Yakumo quietly.

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5

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'Ouch!'

Ishii cried out without thinking.

Though the emergency officers treated his wound, the disinfectant stung more than he thought it would.

But feeling pain was a part of living.

The moment Nanase Miyuki attacked him, the reason Ishii could move his body, frozen from fear, was because of his tenacity for life.

Ishii looked up in pain at the <Kinoshita Surgery: Maternity and Gynaecology Department> building.

It was surrounded by police cars and lit up by outdoor lights. Detectives and forensic officers were running amok.

The quietness from earlier had disappeared.

'You all right?'

Miyagawa walked towards him with a gauze bandage wrapped around his head.

'Yes, somehow... Thank you very much. It would have become a situation if you had not been there, Chief Miyagawa.'

Ishii bowed his head.

Even though Miyagawa had been injured then, he ran into the room to save Ishii. Otherwise, Ishii might have died.

'That doesn't warrant thanks.'

'If only Detective Gotou were here now...'

Ishii hadn't meant to say it, but it slipped out of his mouth.

For Ishii, Gotou was a pillar. Having him there made it possible for Ishii to advance.

'Still can't contact him?'

Miyagawa sent him a sharp glaze.

'I can't. I've called him a number of times, but...'

Ishii had just called him earlier, but the phone just kept ringing and Gotou didn't answer. He was worried that something had happened to him.

However, it looked like Miyagawa had a different impression.

'Just forget about that idiot.'

'B-but...'

'Ishii. You rely too much on Gotou.'

'That is...'

It was absolutely right. I have to act on my own – is what he thought, but when it came to the crunch, he froze.

'You're doing great even without Gotou.'

'I have no confidence...'

Ishii had just dropped his gaze to his feet when a forensics officer ran over with a dreadful expression.

'Chief Miyagawa.'

'What's wrong?'

'There's something I would like you to look at...'

'Got it. Ishii, let's go.'

'Ah, yes sir.'

Called by Miyagawa, Ishii followed the forensics officer through the <Kinoshita Surgery: Maternity

and Gynaecology Department> entrance.

For a moment, Ishii prepared himself, but he didn't feel frightened because the lights were on and it was full of detectives.

They went down the corridor to the delivery room where Miyuki had attacked him.

Unlike earlier, the whole room was lit up.

Medicine and medical tools were scattered across the floor which was splattered with blood. It was probably from the mess earlier.

'Please look at this.'

The forensics officer stood in front of the cold storage in the corner of the room. It was probably for medicine that needed to be refrigerated.

'May I open it?'

The officer looked at Miyagawa and Ishii.

Ishii felt strangely nervous because of the way the officer was acting. Ishii took a deep breath to calm himself down.

Miyagawa sent the officer a signal with his eyes and the officer opened the cold storage door.

'Eek!'

Ishii jumped back with a scream without thinking.

He couldn't believe what he'd seen. It wasn't possible –

'The hell is that?'

Even Miyagawa was surprised, looking inside the cold storage with a bitter expression.

Ishii wiped the sweat off his forehead and looked inside the cold storage again.

He groaned quietly. There was no mistaking what he was looking at.

In the cold storage, there was a glass cylinder. Inside it was a human head –

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6

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The next morning, Haruka waited for Yakumo and Gotou in front of the car in the parking lot.

They had decided to change their investigation direction after eating breakfast.

However, even though their appointment time was past, neither Gotou nor Yakumo had showed up. Haruka was just thinking about going to their room to pick them up when Yakumo walked towards her with an incredibly sleepy expression.

His hair was such a mess that she wanted to ask how he had slept.

'You're late,' complained Haruka as she waited for Yakumo to arrive.

However, Yakumo didn't look like he felt guilty.

'It isn't my fault. Gotou-san's snoring was so loud I couldn't sleep.'

'That's quite a mouth you've got. The way you sleep is even worse,' interrupted Gotou, coming after Yakumo.

'It makes sense for me to turn about in my sleep when your snoring is so loud.'

'You just keep going on, brat.'

'Anyway, what are we going to do?' interrupted Haruka.

It would have been fine to let them continue if they were on holiday, but they had to search for Yumiko, who had gone missing.

'We talked last night about how a ghost might be possessing the girl who's gone missing,' said Yakumo, running a hand through his hair.

'Yeah.'

'First, we need to determine what that ghost is and why its goal in wandering.'

'What do you mean by goal?'

When Haruka asked that, Yakumo let out an exasperated sigh.

'I've said this before, haven't I? Ghosts were originally human.'

'Right.'

That was Yakumo's theory.

Ghosts weren't some new form of creature or demon. They were like a cluster of the emotions of people who died – that was why there was feeling there.

'It shouldn't be wandering recklessly – there should be a goal in its actions. If we make that clear, we should be able to find it.'

'I see.' agreed Gotou.

Haruka understood that much, but the problem was –

'How do we make that clear?'

'I'm going to explain that now.'

Yakumo glared at him.

Haruka felt like he was displeased with her for getting ahead of him, so she said, 'Sorry,' looking at the floor.

'We will split up from here on. First, you and Masato will look into whether any murders and disappearances have occurred in the Togakushi and Kinasa region.'

Then they could probably determine who the ghost possession Yumiko was.

'OK. But...'

She didn't mind investigating, but she didn't know how.

'Just get Makoto-san to introduce you to some local newspaper reporter.'

'Ah, right,' said Haruka.

A newspaper reporter probably knew that sort of information. Makoto, a newspaper reporter in Tokyo, could introduce them to a local one. But –

'Wouldn't it be quicker for Gotou-san to go to the local police?'

'Don't be stupid,' Gotou replied immediately.

'Stupid...'

'I'm in the Metropolitan Police Department. IF I sniff around in the Nagano jurisdiction, there'll be a lot of fuss.'

'Really?'

'Police are serious about their own turf.'

Gotou shook his head, like he thought it annoying.

'It sounds rather troublesome.'

'Well, that's how it is. So what are we going to do?' Gotou asked Yakumo disgruntledly.

'Gotou-san and I will go there once more.'

As Yakumo said that, his eyes looked somewhat sad.

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7

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'Hey, tell me if you understand something.'

As Gotou drove, he looked at Yakumo in the passenger seat.

Though he looked like he was just gazing out the window, Yakumo's heads must have been filled with circling thoughts.

'What are you talking about?' replied Yakumo was a yawn.

No matter how he tried to look expressionless, Gotou could tell, since he'd known him for so long. Yakumo was hiding something.

'Don't play the fool. We're going there again 'cause you have some hunch, right?'

When Gotou said that, Yakumo laughed self-derisively.

'That's rather sharp for you, Gotou-san.'

'You said one thing too much.'

'That's Kinasa.'

'I know the name of the place,' replied Gotou peevisly.

A number of years ago, it had combined with three other villages to join Nagano city, but before that, it had been called Kinasa. It was a small village in the north of Nagano prefecture by the source of the Susobana River.

'That isn't it. There's a special place here.'

'Special?'

'Momijigari³.'

'Momijigari? Sounds like a school trip.'

'As usual, you have a pathetic imagination.'

'Shut up. Don't circle the subject and just get to the point.'

Gotou's irritation was obvious.

Yakumo glanced at Gotou and then started explaining with incredible reluctance.

'There once was a couple who couldn't have children, so they made an offering to the demon king and received a baby girl. Her name was Kureha. It is said that she had unusual spiritual power ever since she was born.'

'Oh?'

Though the conversation had taken an unexpected turn, it was perfect for killing some time before they got there, so Gotou urged Yakumo to continue.

'After time passed, Kureha grew to be a beautiful woman, so her name was changed to Momiji and she went to Kyoto. There, she caught the eye of an influential person at the time named Minamoto no Tsunemoto and she gained his favour.'

'Sounds like smooth sailing.'

'It wasn't. After a while, an unknown sickness spread through the imperial court.'

'Sickness?'

3 Momiji (紅葉) is both the name of of Japanese maple and for autumn colours. Momijigari hunting or momijigari (紅葉狩り), besides being the name of the legend, also means viewing autumn colours, which explains Gotou's confusion.

'Yes. A priest was called from Mount Hiei⁴ to determine the cause of the sickness. He said that the cause of the sickness was Momiji's curse, so she was chased out of Kyoto.'

'Was it really Momiji's curse?'

When Gotou asked that, Yakumo sent him a hateful glance.

'I don't know. Anyway, after being chased out of Kyoto, she reached a settlement called Minase and she lived quietly there for a while.'

For a while – which meant there was more to this story.

'Then what happened?'

'One day, she suddenly changed and led a group to attack villages.'

'Like mountain bandits?'

'Well, something like that. People started to call her a witch, or a demon woman.'

'Demon...'

'Yes. This story travelled to Kyoto, and Minamoto no Tsukemoto despatched Taira no Koremichi to subdue the witch. However, he couldn't do anything against her witchcraft. One day, an old priest appeared in Koremichi's dream and gave him a demon-killing sword. He sliced off Momiji's head with that sword and killed her.'

'Sliced off her head, eh...'

'Ever since then, the area was called the place the demon left – Kinasa.'

Gotou understood Yakumo's summary. But –

'You saying that witch was the ghost Masato saw?'

'Of course not.'

Yakumo looked at Gotou coldly.

'Hah? That's what you were talking about, right?'

'What was I talking about?'

'The story about the witch.'

'Who said that it was related? In the first place, this Momiji legend is over a thousand years old.'

It was true that Yakumo hadn't said it was related. He had just suddenly talked about it.

'Then why did you talk about it?'

'To kill time.'

4 Mount Hiei is a mountain northeast of Kyoto famous for the temple of Enryakuji. Incidentally the legend Yakumo telling is a real folktale from Nagano. I couldn't find anything about it in English but if you're curious you can look up 紅葉伝説 and Google translate it.

– This brat!

Gotou thought about yelling, but he decided against it. Even that would just be killing time for Yakumo.

Gotou didn't know what Yakumo was hiding, but there was no point talking now.

He'd understand soon enough –

-

8

-

Ishii entered the <Unsolved Cases Special Investigation Room>.

He had undergone treatment at the hospital, so he arrived a bit late, but Gotou still wasn't there.

As he sighed and sat down, a jolt of pain ran through his left shoulder.

It was where he had been stabbed the night before. Though the injury hadn't been that deep, it had required four stitches.

He didn't like the situation with Nanase Miyuki, but he was more concerned about Gotou. Ishii decided to try calling him once more. Just as he took out his mobile phone, the door opened.

Makoto came into the room.

'Ishii-san!'

Makoto rushed towards him.

'Eh, ah, Makoto-san...'

'Are you all right?'

'Yes, my shoulder is just slightly injured.'

'I'm so glad.'

Ishii smiled wryly while pressing a hand against his wound. Makoto sighed in relief.

It seemed she had been worried for him.

'I was surprised. When I heard that you were injured, Ishii-san...'

'Is that so?'

'She escaped then.'

Makoto's expression suddenly turned serious.

Even she, a newspaper reporter, had heard about Nanase Miyuki's escape.

'She did.'

There was no point hiding it now. Ishii nodded.

'Is that why Detective Gotou is in Nagano?' Makoto said quietly, bringing her face close to Ishii's.

'Eh?'

– Gotou? Nagano?

Though Makoto was calm, Ishii didn't understand what she was talking about.

'What did you say just now?'

'I asked whether Detective Gotou is in Nagano for the Nanase Miyuki case.'

'W-w-what are you talking about now? Detective Gotou in Nagano...'

Ishii was so agitated he stood up, knocking his forehead into Makoto's.

Makoto cowered, holding her forehead.

'I-I'm sorry!'

Ishii hurriedly apologised. Makoto smiled back as she rubbed her forehead.

'I'm fine. More importantly, you didn't know?'

'I didn't. Actually, I've been troubled since I haven't been able to contact Detective Gotou since yesterday.'

'Really? Actually, Haruka-chan called me this morning.'

'Haruka-chan?'

Ishii was even more confused.

'Yes. She wanted me to introduce her to a reporter in Nagano prefecture for a case no matter what. I don't know the details, but it seems Detective Gotou and Yakumo-kun are there with her too...'

'I see.'

Ishii finally understood.

Yakumo and Haruka had probably brought some trouble to Gotou, so he'd gone to Nagano.

As long as he was fine, it was OK.

'Anyway, about the Nanase Miyuki matter...'

Interrupting Makoto as she tried to get back on topic, the door opened forcefully and Miyagawa ran in with a red face.

He still had a bandage around his head.

'Gotou's still out?' said Miyagawa, looking around the room.

Though Ishii stood up, he didn't know what to say next.

He knew where Gotou was from what Makoto said just now, but it was an absence from work without permission. He wouldn't be let off the hook easily if he told Miyagawa that.

'That idiot...'

Miyagawa seemed to sense the situation even without Ishii saying anything, as he said that while clicking his tongue.

Ishii just stood there in fear.

'Ishii, we're going, even if it's just you.'

'Ah, yes sir.'

'Goodbye then,' Ishii said to Makoto with a bow. Then, he left the room with Miyagawa.

'What happened?' he asked as they walked.

'There's something I want you to see.'

'W-what is it?'

'You'll know when you see it.'

Miyagawa's careless words felt unlucky to Ishii.

-

9

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'Couldn't sleep?' said Haruka to Masato, sitting beside her.

Just like yesterday, they were sitting at a table in the coffee shop inside Nagano Station.

'I'm fine.'

Though he said that, Masato's eyes were puffy and his face was pale too.

– This child is still blaming himself.

It was obvious to Haruka. IT was the same with the last case. He blamed himself more than necessary and shut up inside himself.

'It's not your fault, Masato-kun.'

Masato shook his head.

'It is my fault. Because I ran away. Tomoya-kun said that too...'

Masato's neck stiffened along with his body.

The boy called Tomoya had been with Masato when Yumiko disappeared.

Though Haruka hadn't met him to talk, she felt like Tomoya's words had a different meaning.

The boy called Tomoya was probably blaming himself too, but he couldn't accept that so he turned his anger towards Masato.

So –

'It's fine,' said Haruka, hugging Masato's shoulders.

'Er... Ozawa-san, correct?'

A tall man greeted her. He looked to be in his thirties. He wore a casual outfit of red-framed glasses and a jacket with jeans. Though he had a beard around his mouth, it was trimmed neatly.

'Yoshii-san, yes?'

When Haruka said the name she'd heard from Haruka, he replied with an incredibly happy expression, 'Yes.'

'I'm sorry to have you come all this way.'

Haruka stood up and bowed her head. Masato did the same.

'It's a request from Hijikata. I don't mind at all.'

Yoshii waved his hand, sat down opposite them and ordered a coffee.

'Did you know Makoto-san from before?' asked Haruka.

'Actually, she was a year under me in university.'

'Really?'

'Since she was pretty quiet, I didn't know if she'd do OK in a newspaper agency, but it seems like she's just fine.'

After saying that, Yoshii laughed aloud.

It appeared he was somebody who said things straight out. Though Haruka had been a bit on guard, she felt more at ease now.

'Well, to get to the point, you want to hear about incidents around Kinasa and Togakushi, right?'

After a pause, Yoshii brought up the topic at hand as he sipped his coffee.

'Yes.'

'Ignoring crimes like theft, there was just one incident...'

Yoshii took a folder out of his bag and spread it open on the table. It was a copy of a newspaper article.

The title on the front was <Brutally murdered corpses found at Sunahachiyama!>.

Sunahachiyama was the mountain separating Kinasa and Togakushi, and it was where the witch that came up in the Momijigari legend was said to be. It was known for having a cavern of demons.

The date on the newspaper was more than twenty years ago –

The words brutally murdered stood out, piercing Haruka's heart.

After taking a deep breath, Haruka continued to read past the title.

<Brutally murdered corpses of two men were found at a cottage. The two had gone missing two days ago. The local firefighters had been searching for them →

Perhaps the brutally murdered corpses were the ghosts possessing Yumiko. That was what Haruka thought, but two men had been killed.

It seemed like it wasn't that simple.

Yoshii started explaining as he flipped through a notebook.

'It happened around Togakushi and Kinasa. It was a pretty big incident.'

'Are there no other cases?'

'There aren't. They're small villages,' said Yoshii, lighting a cigarette.

'What happened with this case?' asked Haruka, curious.

'The article after that is in the file too.'

'Thank you very much.'

'The culprit for the incident wasn't actually caught,' said Yoshii, blowing out cigarette smoke towards the ceiling.

'Eh? Really?'

'Yeah. The statute of limitations is already up. And...'

Here, Yoshii paused and leaned forward before speaking in a lower tone.

'It's clear that this wasn't some casual crime like robbery.'

'Why is that?'

'The corpses were stabbed all over with a knife.'

'Stabbed all over...'

Haruka gulped unconsciously.

'Plus, there were scrapes and bruises too. The police said there might have been torture.'

– Torture.

Haruka murmured that in her heart.

She felt her shoulders grow heavy.

'Why would they do that?'

'Who knows? The culprit wasn't caught.'

'That's right...'

Haruka looked to her side and saw that Masato was very pale.

It had been more awful than she had imagined it would be. She shouldn't keep Masato here.

'Masato-kun, want to wait outside?'

'I'm fine.'

Masato shook his head.

Though he was afraid, he probably wanted to find Yumiko more. Haruka decided to continue talking.'

'What sort of people were the victims?'

'A local officer of the village and the landowner's son. Both of them were men.'

'Why would that happen?'

'Though I investigated around...'

Yoshii smiled, like he'd been waiting, and put his cigarette out in the ashtray.

'What is it?'

'This is just a rumour, but at the time, people wondered if it was a curse.'

'There's no such thing as a curse.'

Masato was the one who said that. He leant forward, looking at Yoshii challengingly.

The word <curse> has a special meaning to Masato. In an incident he was involved in before, the word <curse> had thrown Masato about, making him suffer.

'That's right. There's no such thing as a curse,' said Haruka, agreeing with Masato.

For a moment, Yoshii leant back, seeming surprised, but then he fixed the collar of his jacket and continued.

'Well, putting aside whether there are curses or not – there's a reason why there was a fuss about that.'

'Reason?'

'Do you know about Momijigari?'

'The legend of the witch?'

'Right.'

Yoshii nodded, seeming satisfied.

Anybody from the region would know the Momijigari legend. It was known even in Noh theatre and performed every year.

'My dad used to be a reporter too and I heard from him, but forty-five years ago, there was some turmoil with the witch in Kinasa.'

'Eh, but wasn't that more than a thousand years ago...'

'Well, it'd be more correct to say it was similar.'

'Similar?'

'One day, a young man was brought into the clinic in Kinasa. He'd been healthy the day before, but after he died right after he was brought in.'

'Huh...'

Haruka nodded.

At this point, nothing connected the story to Momijigari.

'That clinic had been reputable before, but after that, it was said that this was the curse of the lady there. She was called a witch and people wanted to chase her out of the village.'

'Then what happened?'

'I don't know.'

'Eh?'

Haruka had thought Yoshii knew the circumstances from the way he was talking about it, so she felt let down.

'That clinic isn't around anymore.'

'Is that so?'

'The person who egged the villagers on to chase the witch out was the victim of this case.'

Yoshii tapped the file on the table.

A jolt went through Haruka's spine. The same thing seemed to happen to Masato. His eyes were wide open.

– That's why it was called a curse.

If what Yoshii said was true, it wouldn't be strange for there to be a rumour like that.

'If you want to find out about the case in more detail, I'll introduce you to somebody who knows about it.'

'I would appreciate it,' said Haruka, leaning forward.

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'Ahh.'

After getting off the car, Gotou put his hands at his waist, looked up at the sky and stretched.

Normally, he just drove through shopping and residential districts. He wasn't used to driving winding mountain roads. It was more exhausting than he'd thought it would be.

'It's unbecoming, so please don't make strange noises.'

Yakumo got off the car with a yawn.

– This brat.

'You drive back then. You have a licence, right?'

'I refuse.'

'Why?'

'I've decided not to drive ever since the incident with the tunnel.'

– Ah, that.

Strangely, Gotou understood.

Ignoring Gotou, Yakumo headed towards the lone cedar tree, walking through the white skunk cabbage.

'Honestly.'

Even as Gotou grumbled, he followed Yakumo's back.

'Why's such a huge cedar tree here anyway?' asked Gotou, looking up at the cedar tree once more.

In a marshy area of white skunk cabbage, there was just one cedar tree and the rock at its roots. It was elegant but also unnatural.

'I talked about the story of Momijigari earlier,' said Yakumo.

'Yeah.'

'I said this was a shrine last night too.'

'Right.'

A shrine was like an altar. Where something was enshrined.

'This is probably where the head of the witch in the story about Momijigari was buried.'

'What?'

Though Gotou was surprised, at the same time, he understood. So that was why this was a shrine.

Gotou didn't know whether the legend of Momijigari was true or not, but the people at the time might've put a large stone here and grew a cedar tree to keep her here.

There was no way for Gotou to know the truth now though.

'Gotou-san, if you have the time to space out, please help.'

Yakumo had his hand at his waist and looked incredibly resentful.

'Help with what?'

'To move this.'

Yakumo pointed at the statue by the rock.

Moving his body was Gotou's strength. After taking off his jacket and placing it on the rock, he rolled up his sleeves and moved the stone statue as Yakumo directed.

It took some effort since it was heavier than expected, but Gotou managed somehow.

'Next, please dig here.'

Yakumo pointed at the place where the statue had been.

'Why?'

'You'll find out if you dig.'

'You the Hanasaka Jiisan⁵?'

'If you have the time to tell boring jokes, please just do it already.'

'Right, right.'

– As usual, the guy never stops talking.

While expressing his dissatisfaction in his heart, Gotou took a nearby tree branch and started digging.

Since the ground was wet, the earth was soft and easy to dig. Gotou wiped his sweat with his shirt and silently continued his work.

Suddenly, he noticed that he couldn't see Yakumo anymore.

When Gotou stood up and looked around, he spotted Yakumo talking on his phone a little ways away.

Gotou thought about complaining, but he decided against it. It was probably news from Haruka.

After breathing out, Gotou started digging the earth again.

'Are you done?'

After a while, Yakumo came back.

'You help too.'

'I don't want to. My hands will get dirty.'

5 A fairy tale about a couple who had a dog they really loved. When the husband sprinkled the dog's ashes on cherry trees, they bloomed. Please read in more detail on [Wikipedia](#).

– This brat!

Gotou swallowed his rising anger.

'How's the situation with Haruka?'

'It seems there was a murder case twenty years ago.'

'Then the person in that photo...'

'The truth isn't as simple as you are, Gotou-san.'

– This guy just keeps on going.

'What do you mean?'

'The people killed were a local officer and the landowner's son. Both were men.'

The person in the photo was a woman. It didn't match up. Even though Gotou knew the situation now, Yakumo could have put it more nicely.

'Honestly...'

Gotou let out a breath and returned to digging the earth.

After digging about eighty centimetres, he hit something hard.

He put down the branch and brushed away the dirt to find something round and pale. Gotou realised what it was immediately.

There was no doubt about it. It was a skull.

'I dug up something unbelievable.'

Gotou stood up and wiped the sweat off his forehead.

'Gotou-san, please hurry up and call the police.'

'I'm...'

A police officer too, Gotou was about to say, but he stopped.

This was Nagano prefecture. This wasn't Gotou's jurisdiction. He'd need to contact the local police.

– Honestly. What a pain.

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11

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Miyagawa led Ishii to the general hospital where Hata was.

After entering the room in the basement, Hata welcomed them with a creepy demonic giggle.

The room was desolate, with just a desk and cabinets lining the room.

Hata, the coroner, was a strange man whose interests lined up with his work.

Ishii even thought that Hata himself would be arrested if he took just one step out of line.

'So, Hata-san. Is what you said true?'

Miyagawa brought up the topic at hand.

'It'd be better to see for yourself.'

Hata got up and left the room.

Miyagawa went right after him. Since Ishii didn't understand the situation, he didn't have any idea about what these two were doing.

Though he was confused, Ishii followed the two of them out of the room.

He thought that they would be going far, but it seemed he was wrong. Hata opened the door to the room beside his and went inside with Miyagawa.

Ishii entered the room as well. It was an autopsy room –

'Ugh...'

Ishii scrunched up his nose at the strange medical smell.

There was a stainless steel bed in the middle of the room with carts covered with various tools scattered around it.

The wall at the very back had doors that probably led to cold storage, and Hata opened one of them.

After putting on latex gloves, Hata took something out of the cold storage and casually placed it on top of the stainless steel bed.

'Aaah!'

Ishii leapt up with a scream.

Hata had placed a human head in a cylindrical container on top of the stainless steel bed –

'Don't make a fuss. You've seen it before, right?' rebuked Miyagawa. Hata was smiling like he thought the scene incredibly amusing.

This head was probably the one that was found last night at Kinoshita Surgery. Ishii had seen it before, but that didn't mean he could be calm.

The head was suspended in liquid in the container. It was probably formalin.

Ishii swallowed his scream and looked away from the head.

If he looked at it any longer, it would appear in his dreams.

'Ishii-kun. Get the mask and goggles from that shelf for me,' instructed Hata.

'Ah, yes.'

Ishii did as he was told and took the mask and goggles from the shelf, handing them to Hata.

'There's formalin in the container. You should wear these too,' said Hata as he put his mask on.

Formalin was antiseptic. It was popular, used in school science classrooms to preserve frogs.

However, it was on the other hand highly toxic. It would burn the mucous membrane of the eyes and mouth.

Ishii and Miyagawa put on goggles and masks as told.

'Ishii-kun, press this a bit for me.'

Hata waited for them to finish before tapping the container.

'Eh?'

– I have to touch this container?

Ishii shivered just thinking about it.

'Hurry up and do it!'

'Ah, yes, er...'

'Just hold it for a bit.'

'Just a bit.'

Ishii was forced into pressing the container with both hands.

Hata used something like pliers to take out the metal stopper and remove the container's lid.

That moment, an indescribably strong smell came through Ishii's mask.

He coughed a number of times.

Hata coolly took the head out of the container.

'Agh...'

He was already at his limit. Ishii leapt away from the bed.

'This head is a man's.'

Hata ignored Ishii and started speaking.

'I can tell from looking,' Miyagawa replied disgruntledly.

'It's been kept in formalin. The flesh is pretty swollen. It'll take quite some time to determine the time of death.'

'And?' urged Miyagawa.

'And the problem is just as I said on the phone. The eyes of this head.'

'Ishii, look.'

It seemed like Miyagawa knew Ishii hadn't been looking, because he grabbed Ishii's neck.

'Er, but...'

'To hell with your butts!'

'Y-yes sir.'

Ishii couldn't do anything when faced with Miyagawa's yell, so he looked at the head.

The colour of the skin looked strangely pale. The long black hair seemed alive. It looked like the head could start talking at any moment, which gave Ishii a shiver.

– It looks like somebody.

Ishii felt so uncomfortable he might throw up as he had that impression.

'These eyes...'

As Hata said that, he pointed at the head's eyes and wrenched them open.

There was a splintering sound.

'Aaahhh!'

Ishii was already at his limit –

Under the slowly opened eyelids were two eyes that glowed red like a blazing flame.

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12

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Haruka and Masato rode the bumpy municipal bus.

Besides Haruka and Masato, the only rider was a middle-aged woman napping in the seat in the very front.

Yoshii introduced them to somebody named Ookura who worked at the Kinasa Museum near Arakurayama Shrine and was supposed to know details about the event.

Haruka was able to contact Ookura immediately by phone.

She thought that Ookura might keep a distance if she mentioned the murder case right away, so she asked to talk as somebody researching the history of Masato's school.

If that's the case – was the answer she received immediately. Haruka felt bad about tricking Ookura, but there was nothing she could have done.

'Hey, Masato-kun.'

Haruka called out to Masato, who was looking down silently.

Instead of speaking, he lifted his head slightly.

His expression was as blank as if he were wearing a Noh mask. He had been like this the first time Haruka met him too.

– He's holding everything in again.

'You can't take on everything by yourself. We'll definitely find her.'

'I ran away...'

Masato bit his lower lip and sniffled.

'There was no helping it. I would've run away too.'

'But I promised big brother Yakumo that I wouldn't run away any more. But I still...'

– I see.

So Masato had made a promise to Yakumo during the last case, saying he wouldn't run away any more. He was blaming himself for breaking that promise.

Masato might have run away when he met Yumiko on that night right, but he had done that to protect himself – he wasn't running away from the problems in front of him.

'Aren't you facing the problem properly now?'

'I...'

'Right?'

'Yumiko-chan and Tomoya-kun were nice to me.'

Masato began to speak in a hollow voice.

'Mmhm.'

'When I transferred schools, Tomoya-kun was the first to talk to me.'

'Really?'

'And he even suddenly asked whether I watched the anime that was on the night before.'

When Haruka listened to Masato's story, she found herself growing to like the boy called Tomoya even though she hadn't met him yet.

He didn't interrogate Masato when he transferred schools – instead, he connected to him like they had always been together.

'What did you reply?'

'I told him I watched it. Then Yumiko-chan started talking to me too, asking what character I liked...'

After saying that much, Masato's voice caught.

Haruka felt like Masato was correct in moving after that incident.

He had made good friends. Without caring about why Masato had transferred there, his friends

had connected to him innocently, just happy that their number of friends had increased.

They had probably healed his heart, which had been hurt by the incident, and found him a place here.

That was why he felt so much pain at not having been able to save that friend.

'If something happened to Yumiko-chan, I...'

Masato shut his eyes tightly, like he was trying to hold something in.

He would become like how he was before. Masato might have been thinking that.

In the past, Masato put a wall up around his heart and was unconcerned about others – a bit cold. He had his hands full with his own problems.

Now, he hurt himself when trying frantically to save his friends.

It was an incredible change that would have been unthinkable for the old Masato.

'You must like Yumiko-chan.'

'That isn't it. I like Tomoya-kun and Yumiko-chan.'

Masato's face went bright red.

He had a disadvantageous personality. He shut away his feelings like this. This part of him was like Yakumo.

'If Yumiko-chan is gone, Tomoya-kun will be sad too...'

Masato's shoulders shook.

'It's OK. We'll definitely find her.'

Haruka didn't want to let such a good kid feel sad. No matter what happened, she would find Yumiko.

Haruka vowed that again in her heart.

She hugged Masato's shoulders gently and felt Masato's pulse come gently through her arms.

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13

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Gotou sat on the car's bonnet as he looked up at the cedar tree.

Though the place had felt lonely earlier, it had completely changed.

There were two men that looked like detectives and about ten uniformed officers. There were four people from investigations too. There were even some onlookers peering in.

Since it turned out there was a whole torso buried there rather than just a skull, with the help of

local construction workers, they had started to dig it up.

'It's unlike you to think.'

Yakumo walked towards him with a slightly scornful smile.

'Shut up. Anyway, you knew there was a body buried here, didn't you?'

Gotou brought his face close to Yakumo's.

Now that he thought about it, the meaningful words Yakumo had said yesterday were probably about the corpse. That was also he didn't let Haruka and Masato come with them.

'It's not like I had evidence.'

'It's the same thing, right?'

'It isn't. More importantly, Gotou-san, I have something I would like to talk to you about...'

Yakumo lowered his voice.

He was probably going to say something no good. While suspicious, Gotou brought his ear closer.

'I want to know the situation about the investigation into the girl's whereabouts.'

'About Yumiko-chan?'

'Couldn't you sniff around somehow?'

Yakumo glanced at the officers by the cedar tree.

'Don't ask the impossible. It's out of my jurisdiction.'

'Please work it out somehow.'

Gotou saw two men who looked like detectives walking towards them.

One was wearing a tight suit that wasn't the right size, a chubby man in his late twenties. The type who'd investigate with energy only.

He had his nose up and was snorting like a wild bull.

The other was a bald detective past his fifties. The corners of his eyes were lowered and he seemed gentle at first glance, but he had a sly air to him.

'Why were you digging there?'

The younger detective raised hell the moment he stopped in front of them, without checking their names or giving his own.

Crew cut, thick eyebrows. With dark skin, he looked like a member of a judo club.

He was obviously stubborn.

'Watch your tone.'

Even though Gotou knew that rebutting would just be his loss, he had a tendency to become serious when interacting with this type of person.

'Aren't you high and mighty!'

The agitated young detective grabbed Gotou by the collar. Gotou hadn't thought he'd be so violent.

– What a star.

Gotou grabbed the young detective by the wrist and flung him away.

The young detective rolled to the side, falling face-up onto the ground.

Gotou wasn't so old that he could be caught by some greenhorn.

'You bastard!'

The young detective stood up, bearing with the pain, and tried to approach Gotou again.

– Seems like the only thing good about him is his fighting spirit.

'Give it up already.'

The one who spoke was the bald detective.

Even though he didn't grab the young detective's arm or yell, that one sentence was enough to make the young detective stop immediately.

'I'm sorry. The blood goes to his head quickly, you see. Please forgive him.'

The bald detective bowed his head deeply, showing them his bare head.

'It's fine.'

'Our introductions are late. I'm Wakabayashi of the Nagano precinct, and this is Kurita.'

The young detective named Kurita wiped off the dirty portions of his jacket and just bowed for form's sake.

'I'm Gotou of the Setamachi precinct, from the Metropolitan Police.'

When he showed his ID, Wakabayashi's eyes narrowed and his expression suddenly hardened.

'So what's a detective from the Metropolitan Police doing here?'

– Like I said.

His calm tone hit exactly where it hurt – that was a veteran for you. Gotou wanted to reply honestly, but he couldn't say that they were searching for a ghost.

'I took some days off for a short vacation.'

'A detective from the Metropolitan Police just happened to take a break, just happened to come to Kinasa, just happened to dig under a cedar tree and just happened to dig up a skeleton – that's it, right?'

Wakabayashi smirked.

Gotou was even worse with this type.

'Everything just happened.'

'Does this happen a lot in Tokyo?'

'What?'

'Just happening to find corpses.'

– I'm really no good with guys like this.

'Oi! What about it?'

Kurita lost his temper, breaking the silence.

It felt like no matter how neat the lie, Wakabayashi would see through it. Gotou looked to Yakumo for help.

'Do you believe in ghosts?' said Yakumo, looking up at the sky.

Even Wakabayashi had to look blank at that.

Gotou was grateful for Yakumo's help, but it felt like this would make things unnecessarily complicated.

'This brat! You making fun of us!?'

As expected, Kurita approached Yakumo, but Wakabayashi stopped him immediately.

'I do. There are ghosts.'

The corners of Wakabayashi's eyes were wrinkled as he looked at Yakumo with a friendly smile.

It felt like he was going along with the conversation for now because he didn't understand his opponent's move.

'I think that too. Ghosts exist.'

After declaring that, Yakumo put a photo on the car's bonnet.

It was the ghost photo Masato had brought them. Though it was an incredibly straight explanation of the situation, this might have been the best move.

'That cedar...'

'Yes. We were asked by the boy in this photo to see if the ghost photo was real.'

'And then you found a corpse...'

Wakabayashi rubbed his chin as he spoke.

'That's right.'

Yakumo put the photo in his pocket.

'Is that boy somebody you know?'

'He's a friend.'

'I see. I understand the situation. But would a detective from Tokyo go all this way to investigate a ghost photo?'

Wakabayashi's grizzled brows furrowed. It looked like he was still suspicious.

'This person is something like my manservant,' said Yakumo nonchalantly.

– This guy. There's something missing from what he says.

'When'd I become your manservant?'

'The day we met.'

'What'd you say? I'll kill you!'

'Wakabayashi-san, please arrest this man. He is about to commit a murder.'

'Wakabayashi started laughing so loudly Gotou thought his jaw would come off.

'I see. It must be tough, being dragged around like this even on your days off.'

After laughing, Wakabayashi said that an unguarded expression, completely different from before.

No matter how it happened, it looked like he wasn't suspicious anymore.

However, Kurita didn't look like he'd accepted them yet and was still looking at Gotou like an enemy.

That was probably because Gotou flung him to the ground.

'Could I ask one thing?'

Perhaps thinking of something, Yakumo called out to Wakabayashi who was about to walk away.

'What is that cottage?'

Yakumo pointed at the cottage right by them.

Gotou was curious too.

'Nobody's there now,' said Wakabayashi, his eyes distant.

'Why is that?'

When Yakumo asked that, his thin lips turned up in a smile.

The guy knew the answer already.

'It's the secondary residence of the landowner here, but his successor died. That's why it's ended up like this.'

'Could that have something to do with the murder case that happened here twenty years ago?' asked Yakumo, playing dumb.

Wakabayashi looked at Yakumo, holding his tone.

– There's something there.

'Also, one more thing.'

Yakumo called out to Wakabayashi, who had tried to walk away again.

'What?'

Wakabayashi turned around, sounding annoyed.

'I heard that the girl in the photo earlier has gone missing.'

When Wakabayashi heard Yakumo's sentence, his expression immediately stiffened.

There was a heavy, malicious air.

'What about it?'

'I was wondering if you would tell us a little about the case.'

Wakabayashi closed his eyes and looked up at the sky for a while, acting like he was thinking. Then he turned towards Yakumo again.

'Is that related to the ghost?'

'I think so, yes.'

'I'll have some time at night.'

After thinking for a while, Wakabayashi turned his back and said that.

'So it seems.'

Yakumo looked at Gotou like what Wakabayashi said had nothing to do with him.

'What? I'm going?'

'I don't know how to handle police.'

'I'm a policeman too.'

'Like I said, I dislike police.'

– What a mouth. He just thinks it'd be a pain.

'Ah, also, I'd like information about the murder case that occurred twenty years ago too.'

He'd like information too? Saying it was easy enough.

Gotou wanted to complain, but Yakumo wasn't listening. He stretched his neck and peered into the cottage.

'What are you doing?'

Yakumo ignored Gotou and got into the car's passenger seat.

'Honestly...'

Gotou let out a long sigh.

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Ishii held his head while sitting on the bench in the hospital waiting room.

'Come on.'

He looked up at the voice. Miyagawa came towards him and gave him coffee in a paper cup.

'Ah, I apologise for the trouble.'

Ishii accepted the coffee and took a sip.

The hot coffee slowly went down his throat, going to his stomach. He felt a little bit better.

In the autopsy room earlier, Ishii had fainted from fear.

He would have been able to bear with it if it were just a head, but Hata had wrenched those closed eyes open. The ears peering out had been dyed a deep red.

When Ishii saw them, he lost consciousness from terror.

'Do you think it's that man?'

Miyagawa sat next to Ishii.

Ishii had thought it. It was hard to tell from the face, but those red eyes were better proof than anything.

'I think so.'

'I think so too, but I don't understand.'

'What don't you understand?'

When Ishii asked that, Miyagawa finished drinking his coffee at once and crushed the paper cut in his hand as he opened his mouth.

'If that head's the head of the man we know, who brought it to Kinoshita Surgery?'

'Eh?'

Ishii's head was full of what he'd seen so he hadn't thought that far.

However, that was a problem now that Miyagawa mentioned it.

'Did it just happen to be kept there? Or did Nanase Miyuki bring it there?'

'Wouldn't Nanase Miyuki have brought it there?'

Ishii didn't have proof, but it was too much to be a coincidence.

'Where from? What for?'

Miyagawa's eyes had a glint in them.

'I don't know.'

Ishii shook his head.

Nanase Miyuki was a fugitive. She should have wanted to make her load as light as possible. Carrying a human head would limit her movement.

'It's just like the Abe Sada case...'

One side of Miyagawa's lips turned up into a smirk.

The Abe Sada case – come to think of it Makoto and Miyagawa had both used Abe Sada as an example to describe Nanase Miyuki's actions.

'Well, no point thinking about that now.'

Miyagawa stretched and stood up. Ishii followed him in standing.

'I'll..'

Go too – is what Ishii was about to say when Miyagawa interrupted.

'You get some rest.'

'No, I'm fine.'

'It's only been a day. You're more tired than you think you are.'

'No...'

Miyagawa seemed to think that Ishii had fainted from exhaustion earlier, but that wasn't actually the case. He had just been frightened.

That said, Ishii couldn't explain.

'Stop whinging and go rest.'

Miyagawa hit Ishii's left shoulder.

When Miyagawa touched his injury, Ishii let out an 'Ow' and fell to his knees right there.

'See?'

Miyagawa walked away while laughing. It looked like he'd hit his injury on purpose. He had probably meant it as encouragement, but Ishii wished he had been a bit gentler.

'Also, call me if you get a hold of Gotou.'

Miyagawa said that as he left.

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Haruka got off the bus together with Masato.

There was a large parking lot in front of the bus stop with a souvenir shop and a food court for tourists. Across the road was the Kinasa Museum they were looking for.

The Kinasa Museum had historical and cultural exhibits about Kinasa. That sad, it wasn't that large, just a two-storey multipurpose hall.

They quickly crossed the road and went inside through the glass sliding doors.

They took their shoes off at the entrance and switched into slippers.

When Haruka went to the reception, an old person with dark hair streaked with grey in a red cardigan peered through a small window in an irritated manner.

'Hello.'

The old man spoke in a casual tone.

Haruka remembered the voice. She had heard it when making an appointment over the phone earlier. This person was probably Ookura.

'Hello, my name is Ozawa. I called earlier.'

'Ah, the call from earlier. Come in from there.'

Haruka and Masato opened the door Ookura pointed at and went inside.

The room was six tatami in size with a desk and locker. There was a white table with four folding chairs. It felt like a reception area.

'Well, sit down.'

Ookura gestured at the folding chairs.

'Thank you very much.'

Haruka and Masato sat on the folding chairs.

'So you're looking into Momijigari.'

Ookura sat on the opposite chair and lined the table with long and thin pamphlets. All of them were pamphlets in colour for tourists.

It looked like Ookura had prepared for them after accepting their call.

'Actually, what we're looking into is the incident with the witch which occurred forty-five years ago,' said Haruka, interrupting Ookura.

That moment, a tremor went through Ookura's body and his eyes went wide.

'Why do you want to know about that?'

Ookura's words sounded accusatory.

Yakumo might have been able to get the information skilfully, but Haruka wasn't as good with her words. She didn't know if Ookura would believe her, but she explained everything that had happened so far – the spiritual phenomenon Masato had experienced, Yumiko's disappearance afterwards.

Ookura had his eyes closed and arms crossed as Haruka explained.

Did he fall asleep – it made Haruka wonder.

'I heard about the girl who's gone missing too. It's terrible. But is that really related to what happened forty-five years ago?' said Ookura, slowly scratching his chin.

Haruka couldn't reply clearly to that question, but –

'I think it does.'

'Please tell us,' added Masato, bowing his head deeply.

'Can't do anything then.' Ookura rubbed his head. 'I was born in Togakushi – the village over – so I can't remember it clearly.' He started with that.

'It was about fifty years ago. A mother and child were found collapsed in the mountains in Kinasa.'

'Collapsed...'

Haruka repeated it unconsciously. That would be unthinkable now.

'That mother and child were brought to the Kinasa clinic. Luckily, they survived, but since they didn't have anywhere to go, they started living at the clinic.'

'Where were they from originally?'

If she knew the woman's origins, it might become a clue, but Ookura just said with a wandering gaze, 'Hm, where was it?'

'What were their names?'

Masato was the one who asked.

'The doctor was, if I remember correctly... Doctor Kawakami. The woman was named Rin.'

'Rin-san.'

Haruka repeated the name after Ookura.

Ookura cleared his throat and started again.

'There were some people who harassed them for being outsiders, but after a while that stopped. Doctor Kawakami and Rin actually married.'

A peaceful life in the place she ended up in –

Ookura's eyes were distant. He looked out the window for a while before continuing.

'But there was an incident forty-five years ago – the year I graduated from middle school.'

'Incident?'

Haruka swallowed as she looked at Ookura.

'There was a landowner called Kitaoka who had that piece of land. His oldest son Hidetaka suddenly had a fit. He was brought to Doctor Kawakami's, but he died within the day.'

'Was he sick?'

'Who can say? I don't know, but...'

Ookura stopped talking.

'But what?'

'There were a lot of rumours. That the doctor made a mistake, that he was poisoned – things like that.'

Though Haruka was just imagining this herself, she felt like they sounded malicious.

'Why would people make rumours like that?'

'I wonder. I didn't go myself, but while Kawakami had always been a good doctor, people stopped going there after that.'

'That's...'

'Then, Hidetaka's younger brother Takafumi and the local officer made a fuss, saying Rin's curse was why Hidetaka died.'

'That's awful.'

Even though he had died at the clinic, saying it was a curse was jumping to conclusions.

'Then the people of the village started agreeing and even wanted to chase Rin out.'

That was strange, no matter how Haruka thought about it.

She didn't know how the man died, but there was no way it was a curse.

'That's bullying!' shouted Haruka, unable to keep her anger in.

Ookura dropped his gaze to his feet and sighed.

'You might be right. Ever since there, the clinic had a bad name. People broke the windows, threw rocks – it was rather awful.'

Why would adults do something so terrible?

How much was the woman named Rin hurt by that –

Thinking about it was enough to make it hard for Haruka to breathe. Her chest hurt.

'What happened afterwards?'

'Doctor Kawakami fell into the Susobana ravine and died.

'That's...'

What an unlucky woman.

She lost the person she was relying on in when she was suffering so much –

How would she feel if she lost the people important to her who supported her when she was suffering?

That thought suddenly passed Haruka's mind.

She probably wouldn't be able to bear it.

'After that day, Rin and her son suddenly disappeared from the clinic.'

'They went missing?'

'They did. There was a rumour that on top of killing Hidetaka, Rin had even laid a hand on Doctor Kawakami and run away.'

'There's no way!' Haruka objected, leaning forward.

She couldn't forgive such an unjust accusation.

'I didn't that myself.'

Ookura looked taken aback.

'Sensei.'

When Masato spoke to her, Haruka came to her senses.

Just as Ookura said, he wasn't the one who had said those words. He was just saying that there was a rumour like that.

'I'm sorry.'

Haruka bowed her head.

'Ah, no, it's fine.'

Ookura awkwardly scratched his head.

Haruka understood the gist of the story.

However, there was one point she just didn't understand.

That was –

'Why did the villagers believe in something like a witch?'

'I didn't see them myself so I can't say, but...'

Haruka's heart was beating loudly.

Masato swallowed as well with a hard expression.

After a pause, Ookura finally opened his mouth slowly.

'I heard that the mother's and kid's eyes were both deep red.'

'Deep red...'

'Mm. And the kid's forehead had a horn growing out of it,' said Ookura, pointing at his own forehead as he did so.

Red eyes and a horn.

Wouldn't that make the child a real demon –

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'So where are you going?'

Once Gotou got into the driver's seat, he asked Yakumo in the passenger seat that question.

Yakumo hadn't explained anything, but if he'd stepped into the car, it probably meant he wanted to go somewhere.

'To the local real estate office for now.'

Yakumo stretched.

He always did this, but his movements were incredibly catlike.

'Why the real estate office?'

'Aren't you curious about that?'

Yakumo pointed at the cottage right in front of them.

With a characteristic sloped triangular roof, there was a wide terrace at the entrance with a log table and bench. There were thick cypress pillars and white walls – a building with a calm appearance.

Gotou had thought it was somebody's vacation cottage, but he'd heard Wakabayashi's explanation earlier.

'It's the landowner's, right?'

'In the past, it was.'

'Nobody's living there now.'

'Is that really true?'

The corners of Yakumo's lips turned up into a meaningful smile.

Gotou felt a chill down his spine.

'What do you mean?'

'If what Wakabayashi-san said earlier were true, that would mean it's been abandoned for over twenty years.'

'Right.'

'Then it's unnatural.'

Yakumo put his left index finger to his brow.

'What is?'

'The entrance door is locked.'

'You'd lock the door, wouldn't you?'

It's be more unnatural not to.

Yakumo's triumphant smile didn't waver even after Gotou replied.

'The shape of the lock is the problem.'

'Shape?'

'That lock is a dimple lock.'

Dimple locks were used to prevent theft through picking locks and spread after being introduced in 2000. If the building had been abandoned for more than twenty years, the years didn't match. That was probably what Yakumo was trying to say.

But –

'There's a chance that somebody switched it recently.'

'That would be possible if it were just the lock.'

'Is there anything else?'

'The wall clock.'

'Hah?'

Gotou was even more confused by the sudden change in topic.

'There is a wall clock in that cottage.'

– When did he check?

Gotou thought about asking, but he decided not to.

Yakumo had peered into the cottage through the window earlier. He'd probably checked then.

'So what's the problem with the wall clock?'

'It's working.'

'Working...'

Yakumo moved his hand back and forth like a wall clock's pendulum.

That would be unnatural. A wall clock couldn't work for twenty years without winding the key or changing the battery. But –

'But even if that were the case, how is it related?'

'The scene of the crime twenty years ago that was discussed earlier was probably that cottage.'

'W-what?'

Gotou was so surprised he got up from his seat.

This was where the landowner's son and the local officer were killed – and a skeleton had been found at the cedar tree right by it.

A village that had nothing to do with crime. It didn't seem like just a coincidence. That was why they were going to sniff around at the real estate office.

– This is becoming even more of a pain.

Gotou mumbled in his heart as he started the car.

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17

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When Ishii entered the coffee shop, Makoto was already at a table.

'I apologise for the wait.'

Ishii hurried over and bowed his head, but Makoto replied with a smile. 'I just got here as well.'

Ishii sat down, still feeling guilty.

Then, a jolt of pain ran through his shoulder.

'Is your injury all right?'

Makoto seemed to have noticed Ishii's expression because she spoke up immediately.

'Ah, yes, I'm fine.'

'It really was quite an incident.'

'It was.'

Ishii smiled faintly.

'But it's rare for you to invite me, Ishii-san,' said Makoto happily after ordering drinks from the waiter.

It was true that it was rare for Ishii to invite somebody out, but Ishii really was troubled.

'Actually, there was something I wanted to ask your opinion on, Makoto-san.'

'If I can be of help.'

'It's about Nanase Miyuki.'

When Ishii said that name, Makoto's expression stiffened immediately and the mood turned heavy.

Meanwhile, the waiter put coffee for two on the table and left.

Ishii put sugar and milk into his coffee, slowly took a sip and started talking.

'You know that I encountered Nanase Miyuki at Kinoshita Surgery yesterday, yes?'

'Yes.'

'Something was found there.'

'Something?'

'Yes. Er...'

Ishii hesitated to say it was a head.

'What was it?'

'A human head.'

'A head that was cut off then?'

A wrinkle appeared between Makoto's well-shaped eyebrows.

'Yes, furthermore, it might be the head of the man with two red eyes.'

'It's just like Abe Sada, isn't it?' said Makoto.

That was exactly the reason why Ishii had invited Makoto. She had said she was writing a report on Nanase Miyuki. Also, she had compared Nanase Miyuki's actions to Abe Sada.

Ishii thought that Makoto might be able to draw close to Nanase Miyuki's psychological state.

If he knew that, it would be helpful to finding out her location. That was what Ishii thought.

Makoto also seemed to understand Ishii's goal, as she said, 'So that's what it was.'

'To get to the point, I want to know why Nanase Miyuki had the man with red eyes!...'

'Why she had his head?'

Makoto clearly spoke the words Ishii had hesitated to speak.

'Yes, that's it.'

'I still don't completely understand Nanase Miyuki's psychological state, but Abe Sada herself had explained the reason she walked around with the genitals of the lover she killed.'

'What was it?'

Ishii gulped and leant forward.

'She didn't want to let other people touch him... so she said.'

'Didn't want to let other people touch him...'

Ishii didn't understand the line of thinking.

'I understand somewhat.'

Makoto's eyes narrowed as she propped up her chin with her hand and looked out the window.

Ishii was startled. It was partly because of the words, but it was more that he was fascinated by her profile, which looked entranced.

'W-what do you mean?'

'To put it simply, it's the desire to monopolise. Women want to make the person they love their own.'

'Make them their own...'

'Yes. Of course, walking with a part of the body like Abe Sada did is a bit much. But... I don't know how to say it, but...'

Makoto looked straight at Ishii.

Ishii looked down at his coffee to avoid that pure gaze.

– I really don't understand.

'Ishii-san,' said Makoto after a silence.

'Yes.'

'Ishii-san, are you chasing Nanase Miyuki?'

'I want to, but... to be honest, all I can do by myself is gather information like this. If Detective Gotou were here...'

He hadn't planned on it, but he ended up saying something weak.

However, it was how he truly felt.

'Have you still not been able to contact Detective Gotou?'

'I haven't. I keep calling him, but...'

Whether or not he knew the situation Ishii was in, Gotou wasn't answering the phone.

'Then why not try calling Yakumo-kun?'

'Ah!'

Ishii stood up without thinking at Makoto's words.

Makoto had told him that Gotou was with Yakumo and Haruka in Nagano.

If they were together, he could just call Yakumo.

Ishii called Yakumo immediately. Yakumo answered at the first ring.

'H-hello. Er, this is Ishii Yuutarou speaking.'

<What is it? It's rare for you to call me, Ishii-san.>

Yakumo casually answered the phone.

'Actually, I wanted to contact Detective Gotou. I've been calling him since yesterday, but he wouldn't answer...'

<He's out right now. If you have a message, I'll give it to him.>

'Actually, it's a rather serious matter...'

ishii started with the patrol wagon accident and explained everything that happened in detail to Yakumo.

<I see...>

Yakumo spoke in a quiet tone after Ishii finished explaining.

It was a weak response, to the point that it was disappointing. He didn't seem to care at all.

'I want to ask Detective Gotou to help with the search for Nanase Miyuki as quickly as possible... is what I was thinking.'

<Gotou-san won't be any help at all.>

Yakumo said that in a light tone.

'But...'

<Also, even if you leave her alone, Nanase Miyuki will show herself.>

'Is that so?'

<I believe so.>

'But...'

<I also have something I would like to ask of you, so I will call you later.>

'E-er...'

Ishii called out to stop Yakumo, but he had already hung up.

'How was it?'

Makoto lifted her head, looking concerned.

'He said Nanase Miyuki would appear even if I didn't look for her...'

'I think that too.'

Unexpectedly Makoto agreed.

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'Sorry to bother!'

Gotou went through the real estate office's automatic doors.

There was a counter for clients which would be cramped for two and two desks behind it – a small office.

'What is it'

A man who looked about fifty spoke from the desk in the back.

He sounded rather annoyed even though he was talking to a customer, which made Gotou annoyed, but he sat down without saying that.

'There was a property I was interested in.'

When Gotou said that, the man finally stood up and sat opposite the counter.

'Which property is it?'

The man took reading glasses out of his jacket pocket and put them on.

It was difficult to explain even if he asked which property. Gotou spotted a map by the counter, took it and spread it out.

After looking around the map for a while, he finally found the spot he wanted.

'Here. There's something like a cottage here, right?'

'Er...'

The man put his face so close Gotou thought he would hit the map.

'Ah, here...'

'Right. I heard nobody was living at this property now. I was looking for a vacation home around here and thought it'd be perfect.'

Gotou couldn't say he was a detective from the Tokyo Metropolitan Police in Nagano prefecture so he gave the lie he had prepared.

'Actually, this property's being rented out.'

'Rented out?'

'Yes. This property has a bit of history...'

'There was a murder there, right?'

When Gotou said that, the man lifted his head with his eyes wide behind his thick glasses.

'You knew about it?'

'It's famous,' Gotou replied matter-of-factly.

'I see... Actually, our owner bought the property at a low price from a distant relative of Kitaoka-san, the owner who was killed, who had been troubled over how to manage the property.'

'And then?'

'Well, because of that, it's always been empty, but about ten years ago, I think... we found a renter.'

'Somebody rented it knowing the history?'

'I didn't recommend it, but well...'

'Are they living there now?'

'About half a year ago, we stopped receiving rent and we lost contact as well. We were thinking of ending the contract soon.'

As the man said that, he smiled.

Gotou understood now why the man had talked so freely about the situation. If the contract was going to be ended, he wanted to have Gotou as a customer.

'What sort of guy lived there?'

'I didn't seem him myself, but according to the owner, it was a rather dashing man and his daughter...'

There was no way to find out the identities from that.

Gotou thought about asking to see the contract, but that would be too much. Since he'd come as a customer, he wouldn't be able to see the contract, which was confidential.

'Got it. I'll come again.'

Gotou flatly refused the man who asked for his contact information and left the real estate office.

When he returned to the car parked outside, Yakumo was talking to somebody on his mobile.

'Is it Haruka-chan?' asked Gotou after Yakumo finished.

He hadn't heard the speaker's voice, but he could tell it was serious news.

'It was Ishii-san,' replied Yakumo with a yawn.

'What?'

Ishii wasn't good with dealing with Yakumo. For Ishii to call Yakumo went past rare to extraordinary.

'What'd he want?'

'The patrol wagon Nanase Miyuki was on was in an accident.'

'Accident?'

Gotou had a bad feeling.

'The police are under a gag rule, but Nanase Miyuki appears to have escaped.'

'W-what!?'

'Please don't speak so loudly by my ear.'

Yakumo's face scrunched up as he stuck his fingers into his ears.

This was no time to be calm. Nanase Miyuki had escaped – it was terrible.

'Why didn't Ishii contact me about something so important?'

'Isn't it because you didn't answer your phone, Gotou-san?'

'Ah!'

That was right. Ishii had called over and over again. But Gotou hadn't answered since he figured it wasn't important.

However, now that he knew, he couldn't stay silent.

'Oi. Yakumo. We're going back.'

'Why?' Yakumo responded nonchalantly.

'What do you mean why? Obviously we're going to go back to catch Nanase Miyuki.'

'What do you plan on doing about Yumiko-chan?'

'That's –'

'Will you abandon her?' Yakumo said sharply.

'Of course I can't.'

It hurt, but it was just as Yakumo said. Gotou wasn't so coldblooded that he could leave now. Yumiko had gone missing, but more importantly, Masato was looking for her so desperately.

'Ishii-san will continue the search. Let's believe in him.'

– Believe in Ishii?

Gotou had always thought it curious. Yakumo had an incredibly high opinion of Ishii. Miyagawa did too. Gotou just thought of him as useless.

Gotou wanted to ask why, but Yakumo would just say something like 'He's better than you, Gotou-san'.

'So what are we going to do next?'

'It seems there is a place with an old clinic in Kinasa. Let's go there.'

Yakumo spoke disinterestedly, but Gotou didn't understand.

'Why a clinic?'

'According to her information, there was some fuss with a witch forty-five years ago that started at that clinic.'

It appeared that Haruka had also contacted Yakumo while he was waiting in the care.

'So what's this fuss about a witch about?'

'I'll tell you when you're older.'

Yakumo smirked.

'You making fun of me?'

'No I'm not. I'm mocking you.'

'Honestly.'

– What a hateful brat.

It was irritating, but in a situation like this, all Gotou could do was obey Yakumo. Gotou started the car.

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19

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After leaving the Kinasa Museum, Haruka visited Yumiko's house with Masato as her guide.

Her goal was to investigate how Yumiko had been before going missing.

They got off at the Asakawa bus stop, went straight and turned into the street by the convenience store. It became a footpath surrounded by rice paddies. Haruka saw a splendid house with a tiled roof ahead.

'This is where I met Yumiko-chan.'

Masato stopped about halfway down the footpath.

His back looked incredibly fragile. He probably wanted to turn time back, but that was impossible, no matter how hard he tried.

Nothing would start if they just regretted things that were past, so for now –

'Let's go.'

Haruka pushed Masato's back forward.

Masato nodded and slowly but steadily started walking.

Yumiko's house had a large, well-kept garden with big pine trees.

When Haruka pressed the intercom at the entrance, she heard a hoarse voice: 'Who is it?'

'It's Oomori Masato.'

Masato answered while Haruka was thinking up a reply.

'Oomori-san's... Please come in.'

A response came back immediately.

Haruka opened the sliding door and went inside with Masato.

An old woman about seventy years old welcomed them. It looked like she had bad legs as she was dragging her right foot slightly. She was probably Yumiko's grandmother.

'Hello.'

'Hello. Who is your acquaintance?'

'This is my teacher.'

Masato bowed politely.

'Nobody is here because they are looking for my grandchild, but please.'

Haruka did as Yumiko's grandmother insisted.

Perhaps they had just switched them, because the tatami were green in the six-tatami parlour they were led to.

'Please don't fuss over us.'

Though Haruka said that, Yumiko's grandmother diligently brought out tea and sweets regardless.

'I sincerely apologise for visiting at such a busy time.'

Haruka apologised while waiting for Yumiko's grandmother to sit.

'To be honest, I want to search with everyone as well, but my legs are bad.'

As she said that, she looked out at the veranda with slightly tearful eyes.

'Actually, I wanted to ask something about Yumiko-chan...'

'About my granddaughter?'

'We are also searching for Yumiko-chan.'

'Really? Thank you.'

'We heard a rumour that Yumiko-chan was spirited away.'

Even though Haruka's question was so sudden, Yumiko's grandmother did not like suspicious. She just nodded and started speaking.

'She had a fever right after returning from her field trip.'

'Did she go to the doctor?'

'Said it was a cold, but she had terrible nightmares. I knew immediately that there was someone inside Yumiko...'

'Someone inside her?'

'A demon.'

Yumiko's grandmother's gaze was like a glare.

Haruka had no way of knowing what emotions were in that gaze.

'A demon?'

'A demon came for her.'

Yumiko's grandmother rubbed her wrinkled hands together as if praying while saying that.

'Have you told anybody?'

'I have. To my son and his wife, but they probably just thought it was an old woman's joke...'

Her fingers were restless on top of her knees.

'They didn't believe you?'

'Everyone was so frantic right after Yumiko disappeared. I should have said it more clearly.'

When she said that, Yumiko's grandmother suddenly looked a size smaller.

'I didn't say it clearly then either.'

Masato looked right at Yumiko's grandmother's face.

'Did you see a demon?'

Yumiko's grandmother peered at Masato.

'I don't know if it was a demon, but during the field trip, I saw somebody standing nearby. But... If I had said it properly then...'

'No, no, I'm the one at fault.'

Yumiko's grandmother shook her head with slumped shoulders. Masato dropped his head as well like he had lost his will.

Haruka understood how they felt, but nothing would be solved if they just sat here depressed like this.

'Excuse me, but you mentioned that Yumiko-chan had nightmares. What were they?'

Haruka asked a question to clear the heavy atmosphere.

'Where? Where? That was what she said.'

Yumiko's grandmother put both her hands in front of her and moved them about.

'Was she looking for something?'

'It felt like she was searching for an enemy to clear away a grudge of many years.'

To clear away a grudge –

Did that mean the spirit had a strong and violent hatred that didn't disappear even after death?

'Ah!'

Masato suddenly lifted his head.

'What is it?'

'I heard that too. She said something like “Whaaar”... I didn't understand then, but it must have been “Where”. '

Masato leant forward as he said that.

'A demon. It's the work of a demon – '

As Yumiko's grandmother murmured that, her eyes looked distant.

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20

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'Is this really the right road?'

Gotou asked Yakumo in the passenger that question as he drove.

'It should be,' replied Yakumo while looking at the map.

A clinic that stopped business forty-five years ago. It wasn't on the map, so they headed for Kinasa with no directions and walked around, asking the people they met about the clinic.

However, since it was so long ago, virtually none of the people remembered it. After wandering for about thirty minutes, they finally found somebody who knew it. An old farmer with bad ears. They asked the same question multiple times before the farmer finally marked the location for them on the map.

That made Yakumo's map incredibly suspicious.

'We should arrive if we head along this road,' replied Yakumo with a yawn.

– Along the road, eh?

Gotou headed along the road for a while, but finally the road was so narrow a car couldn't pass.

'What now?'

Gotou stopped the car.

'Let's walk the rest of the way.'

Yakumo folded the map and put it in his pocket. Then, he got off the car and briskly started walking.

– Honestly. He just does whatever he wants.

Even though Gotou grumbled within his heart, he got off the car and followed Yakumo.

For a while, the road was flat, but it suddenly became a sharp slope. It wasn't even paved. The ground was wet so it was easy to slip in leather shoes.

Grass and tree branches filled the road. Gotou didn't really think a clinic would be up ahead.

'Is this really the right place?' Gotou asked Yakumo as he wiped the sweat from his head.

'Probably.'

'What an unreliable guy.'

'I don't want to hear that from you, Gotou-san.'

'Quit whining.'

On such a steep slope, even talking was difficult.

'Gotou-san, it seems like your friend is here.'

Yakumo suddenly stopped.

– A friend?

'What are you talking about.'

'That.'

Yakumo was pointing at a sign.

<Beware of Bears!>

'You bastard!'

Even though Gotou yelled, Yakumo continued walking without a care.

– How does he have the energy to make fun of people?

Gotou sighed and started walking again.

After about five minutes, Yakumo stopped again.

'What now?'

'It's here.'

– Really?

Gotou didn't believe it, but there really was an old building a little ahead on the road.

He walked forward together with Yakumo.

The branches and leaves of the many trees covered the sky, making the area dim. There was also a mist as thick as smoke.

df – It's creepy.

'It seems we've arrived.'

Yakumo breathed out in front of the building.

Since it was a clinic, Gotou had imagined something made of concrete, but in front of him there was a wooden house with a flat roof that was slightly tilted.

It felt more like house from the Edo period than a clinic.

'Is this really the place?'

When Gotou spoke his suspicions, Yakumo wiped the wooden sign by the entrance. Though it was covered with dirt and dust, Gotou could read the words Kinasa Clinic off of it.

Yakumo stood in front of the entrance and slid open the doors with the frosted glass –

Even though there was no wind, Gotou felt like something passed by him.

Though he thought it creepy, he peered in from behind Yakumo.

In the small entrance area, there was a tall shoe shelf with a waiting area about eight tatami in size.

'Gotou-san, please be careful.'

Yakumo turned around to say that and then slowly stepped in.

The floor was covered in dirt and dead leaves.

There was a half open wooden door ahead which was creaking as it shook.

Past that door –

Gotou felt a chill run down his spine.

– I can't go past that door.

It wasn't like there was anything. His instincts told him that.

'What's this?'

'Someone is here.'

Yakumo's red left eye was forceful.

Gotou couldn't see anything, but Yakumo's red left eye could see something in the back of the clinic.

'Who's there?'

Yakumo didn't answer Gotou's question. He opened the half-open door and stepped inside.

Gotou peered into the back of the room from behind Yakumo's back.

There was just a bedframe with a desk and bookshelf covered in dust and cobwebs.

This was probably the examination room.

Gotou could tell Yakumo was uneasy from his tense back.

'Who are you?'

From the centre of the room, Yakumo asked that question towards the empty room.

Gotou felt all the hair on his body stand on end. Though he couldn't see anything, Gotou could feel it as well.

– Somebody's here.

'I see... You're looking as well...' murmured Yakumo.

He wasn't speaking to Gotou. He was probably speaking to the other person in the room.

'Notebooks...'

Yakumo murmured again.

He appeared to be conversing with whoever was here.

'Is somebody here?'

'It's the person who used to be the doctor at this clinic,' said Yakumo. Then, he walked further into the room and stopped in front of the shelf.

'Gotou-san, it's your turn.'

Yakumo stuck out his chin, signalling for Gotou to come over.

Though the world was wide, Yakumo was probably the only university student who would use his chin to signal for a police officer.

'What?'

'We are going to move this bookshelf.'

'Guess I have to.'

Gotou rolled up his sleeves and dragged the dusty bookshelf aside with Yakumo's help.

He thought that something might come out, but he was wrong. There was just the mouldy floor.

Yakumo went onto his knees and wiped away the dirt on the floor as he started to search for something.

'Oi. What are you doing?'

Though Gotou spoke up, Yakumo ignored him, as was his speciality.

Finally, Yakumo found a gap between the boards, stuck his fingers in and pulled the board out.

He continued to take off three of them and stuck his hands into the hole in the floor.

After groping about for a while, he finally pulled out an old box.

He placed it on the floor. He blew on it, making the dust fly off.

The dust danced in the air like smoke.

It was a square metal box with sides about thirty centimetres in length. It looked fairly old and was completely rusted over.

'What's that?'

'I will investigate that now,' Yakumo said in a voice full of irritation. Then, he took the lid off the box. Inside there were many dusty notebooks and documents with an old photo on top.

'Found it.'

Yakumo murmured that as he took the photo into his hand –

解放

第三章

FILE:
03

file 03: release

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1

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'Masato-kun, don't be selfish.'

Haruka pulled at Masato's arm as she pleaded.

However, he didn't reply. He just looked at his feet without moving.

After leaving Yumiko's house, Haruka was going to take Masato home, but once they reached the convenience store, he started being stubborn, saying, 'I won't go back.'

It wasn't like Haruka didn't understand how Masato felt. He wanted to find Yumiko no matter what. But the sun had already set and the surroundings were becoming dark. Since they had been late the day before as well, Haruka couldn't bring him around any longer.

Yumiko, a child the same age as him, had gone missing. His uncle and aunt must have been worried.

'I won't go back.'

Masato's tone was forceful.

He wouldn't budge an inch until he found Yumiko. That strong will came through clearly.

'Your uncle will worry, right?'

'I don't want to go back.'

'Masato-kun.'

'I'm going to look for Yumiko-chan until I find her.'

It looked like Masato felt that was his duty.

Haruka looked at Masato's face and placed a hand on his shoulder.

'I can't do anything, in the end.'

Masato bit his lip.

'That's not true.'

'It is. I still haven't found Yumiko-chan.'

He really did believe everything was his fault. It hurt to watch him.

'Please believe in us.'

'I don't want to!'

Haruka had said that to console him, but Masato interrupted her with a shout.

'Masato-kun.'

'Sensei, you always save me – I can't do anything. Even though I should be the one to search, this is just the same as last time.'

Masato's face was red as his eyes welled up with tears.

Haruka was trying to determine what to do when Yakumo called.

'Hello.'

<Did something happen?>

Yakumo said that as if he had seen right through Haruka's troubles.

Even though he acted like he didn't have any interest in others, the truth was that he paid more attention than anybody else.

'Masato-kun doesn't want to go home.'

<Doesn't want to go home?>

'He says he's going to search for Yumiko-chan.'

<So you don't know what to do.>

'Yeah.'

Haruka felt like Yakumo was smiling on the other side of the phone.

<Hand the phone to Masato. I've got a request.>

'A request?'

<Just hand it over.>

Haruka did as Yakumo told her to, giving the mobile to Masato and telling him that 'Yakumo-kun has a request'.

'Hello...'

Masato answered the phone, sounding confused.

Haruka didn't know what they were saying, but she could see Masato's dispirited expression becoming energised before her eyes.

'Got it. I'll go back and look into it.'

After saying that, Masato returned the phone to Haruka.

Yakumo had changed Masato's mind in such a short time – it was just like magic.

'Hey, what did you say to Masato-kun?' asked Haruka quietly, turning her back to Masato and stepping a little ways away.

<I asked him to look into something for me.>

'Look into something?'

<Yeah. I asked him to talk to family and firefighters to find out where they've searched for Yumiko-chan.>

Could it be –

'An excuse to make Masato-kun go home?'

<I'm not you – I wouldn't lie like that.>

'But.'

<I have an idea, though vague, about where she is.>

'Eh?'

Her voice jumped an octave in her surprise.

<At this stage it is just a theory, but if that location has already been searched, that would mean my theory is wrong.>

'I see.'

<Well, I can't deny that it was also an excuse to make him go home.>

If it was just asking about the search, it didn't have to be Masato. That was probably the main intention.

<You'd be wrong if you think Masato's just a kid. He has his own firm will.>

The way Yakumo said it was like he was talking to himself.

Yakumo could be right. Masato had his own firm will. He would hate being treated as a child most.

'Then what are you going to do?'

<Gotou-san is taking me back.>

'Then I'll drop Masato-kun off and come back too.'

After saying that, Haruka hung up.

Yakumo said that he had an idea about where Yumiko was. Perhaps they would find her soon.

Haruka's chest was filled with that hope.

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2

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After exiting the clinic, Gotou drove Yakumo to Haruka's home and then drove to the town area where the Nagano precinct was.

He was going to get information from Wakabayashi.

Yakumo had given him the request easily, but it would be rather difficult getting information from a precinct in a different jurisdiction.

Gotou parked in the Nagano precinct parking lot with heavy feelings.

The three-storey building with a flat roof seemed incredibly large. Gotou hit his cheeks to clear his mind and went through the front entrance.

He passed through the waiting area lined with sofas, put his elbows on the reception counter and called out to a uniformed officer nearby.

'Sorry, but could you call the officer named Wakabayashi-san for me?'

'What is your business with him?'

The officer looked incredibly annoyed.

'Gotou from the Metropolitan Police came – he'll understand if you tell him that.'

When Gotou said that with a hand wave, the officer cocked his head but still picked up the internal phone. After a short exchange, he said, 'Please wait there.'

Gotou sat on the bench by the wall and absentmindedly watched the traffic safety video playing in the lobby.

'You really came?'

After about five minutes, Wakabayashi showed up with an exasperated smile.

When Gotou nodded back, Wakabayashi gestured with his chin to suggest they go out.

Little gestures like this reminded Gotou somewhat of Miyagawa. He was probably angry since he'd been gone for two days without leave – Gotou started worrying about that a little bit too late.

'Do you have a car?' asked Wakabayashi after they exited the front entrance.

'Yes, I do.'

'Then shall we go around the block?' said Wakabayashi.

Gotou was grateful for the suggestion. Inside the car, he wouldn't have to worry about anybody listening in and they would be able to talk in depth.

'It's this one.'

Gotou walked with Wakabayashi towards the parking space where he'd parked his car.

'I'm sorry about how Kurita acted earlier.'

Wakabayashi bowed his head as he walked.

This man was a much greater man than he'd imagined if he could offer an honest apology like this to a detective outside his jurisdiction.

'Ah, that? I did something unnecessary too.'

'That's true.'

Wakabayashi laughed heartily with shaking shoulders.

He didn't seem like a bad guy.

Gotou sat in the driver's seat and Wakabayashi sat in the passenger's.

'Do you mind if I smoke?'

Wakabayashi took a case of Short Hope cigarettes¹ from his pocket.

That was some refined taste.

'Go ahead.'

'How about you?'

With a cigarette in his mouth, Wakabayashi held the case out towards Gotou.

Gotou wanted to smoke, but he had promised Yakumo that he would stop smoking when he took in Nao.

'I stopped.'

'Worried about your health?'

'No, it's for my daughter.'

Even though he was the one who said it, he couldn't help but feel embarrassed.

'You have a daughter?'

'That surprising?'

'You don't look married.'

Gotou didn't ask why.

People often thought Gotou was still a bachelor. He didn't understand the reason well himself, but it seemed like he didn't smell like family.

'I'm often told that,' replied Gotou.

Wakabayashi smiled as he lit his cigarette.

The nostalgic smell of tobacco made him feel itchy, but Gotou started the car.

'Do you know who the body is?'

After driving for a while, Gotou spoke to Wakabayashi again.

1 Short Hope (ショートホープ) or Shoppo (ショッポ) are nicknames for the ten-cigarette pack named Hope. There used to be. It is called Short Hope because there used to be a pack of twenty for long-size cigarettes called Long Hope. Now, all Hope cigarettes are called Short Hope even if they are regular size because of the old twenty-pack of Hope. Hope cigarettes are seen as a counterpart to Peace cigarettes. Hope and Peace cigarettes are short and strong – the most typical Japanese cigarettes, which is why Gotou calls Wakabayashi's taste refined.

'I can't tell you... is what I want to say, but it's going to be in the newspapers tomorrow anyway. We don't know who it is right now. Waiting on blood type too. All we know is it's a woman.'

'Is that all...'

Gotou felt disappointed about the lack of information, but it had just been a short time. The corpse was a skeleton – it wouldn't be easy to discern anything.

'And we don't have certain investigation results yet, but that corpse is at least thirty years old.'

'It must have been buried for a while.'

'Not definitely.'

'Eh?'

'It could have been buried there recently.'

'AH.'

Gotou certainly couldn't deny that possibility.

'Are you really a detective?'

'Thinking isn't my strong point.'

'Seems like it.'

Wakabayashi snorted.

Thinking about it, it was an awful thing for Wakabayashi to say, but mysteriously, Gotou didn't get angry. Perhaps because of Wakabayashi's atmosphere.

He turned left at the intersection and left the town area.'

'Do you know how she died?'

'There was a sign of a depression of the skull. Probably hit with something blunt in the head.'

'Rather awful.'

'Really. Ganging up to beat a frail woman to death isn't something a person should do.'

Wakabayashi said that with anger.

It really wasn't something a person should do – Gotou looked out the window grimly. Though it wasn't as if there were no lights, there weren't many.

'So how's the case with the missing girl going?'

Gotou asked another question after a pause.

'That's tough too... No leads at all.'

Wakabayashi blew out smoke and scratched the back of his neck.

Gotou could feel his irritation at the investigation that wasn't going the way he thought it would.

'Has it been two days since she's gone missing?'

'We've focussed on searching around her house, but we can't even find any evidence.'

'Do you not know the reason either?'

'We don't. She's too young for a disappearance. It would be easy to think somebody kidnapped her, but there was no ransom...'

So we have no place to start searching – was probably how Wakabayashi felt.

'Do you think she was spirited away?' said Wakabayashi while pressing the cigarette into the ashtray.

'Spirited away?'

'Like when tengu or demons take children away.'

Come to think of it, Yakumo had said that.

'Putting aside whether she was spirited away or not, we think that she disappeared because of a ghost.'

That wasn't what Gotou thought. It was a second-hand opinion from Yakumo. Normally, Gotou would think he would be laughed at, but for some reason he felt like Wakabayashi might believe him.

'A ghost?'

'Yes. That girl is possessed by a ghost. That ghost is leading her to wander while ignoring what she wants to do.'

Wakabayashi didn't agree or deny what Gotou said. He just looked out the window silently.

The silence continued.

Finally, Wakabayashi spoke, like he was holding something back.

'Actually, the girl that disappeared is my relative's kid.'

Everything added up with that one sentence.

Wakabayashi was listening to crazy stories about ghosts seriously and cooperating with Gotou from outside his jurisdiction because he was in a situation where he had to take any port in a storm.

Wakabayashi suddenly seemed much older.

'Is that so...'

'You two think that the kid's disappearance and the discovery of the corpse are related somehow, right?'

'Though it's just our instinct.'

'Tell me what you're thinking.'

Wakabayashi crossed his arms.

It made Gotou feel somewhat nervous.

'The ghost that's possessing the girl is probably the corpse found under the tree.'

'I see.'

'Who is that? Why is she possessing the girl? If we understand the reason, we can find the girl. That's what we think.'

Though Gotou declared these things, this was all knowledge from Yakumo.

Wakabayashi's eyes looked distant.

'Why did this happen?'

The flickering streetlights illuminated Wakabayashi's face.

His eyes looked like they could be smiling or laughing.

For a while, neither of them spoke. The sound of the engine sounded excessively loud.

'This is the curse of the witch,' said Wakabayashi quietly with his eyes closed.

Gotou didn't understand what his words meant –

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3

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– I wonder what sort of woman Rin was.

On the bus ride back, Haruka thought about the woman whom she knew only the name of.

Curse? That was ridiculous. She was suspected and oppressed. She lost the person who supported her. How did she feel?

Was she angry at the people who cornered her? Or –

Haruka's chest prickled with pain as she imagined it.

When she returned home, she headed for the room Yakumo and Gotou were staying in.

'Yakumo-kun.'

When she opened the sliding door, Yakumo had his chin in his hand as he read something that looked difficult.

He didn't lift his head.

'What are you reading?'

She peered in from beside Yakumo.

It was a notebook covered in dust and brown from age. There was a pile of similar notebooks on the table.

Words were written closely together on it, but at points, some of them were blurred.

'I found this at the Kinasa Clinic.'

Yakumo finally lifted his head.

He had an unusually grim expression.

'The clinic – as in the place where the mess with the witch began?'

'Yeah. I found something interesting.'

Yakumo fished through the box on the table and pulled out a photo.

It looked like it was taken at a high elevation, with the Togakushi mountain ridge in the background. In the foreground stood a middle-aged man in a doctor's gown and a long-haired woman who was looking slightly downwards.

It was black-and-white with the colours warped at places, so it was hard to determine anything clearly. But –

'Could this woman be...'

'Correct. She's Rin-san,' said Yakumo.

'She...'

Haruka took the photo in her hand and looked at it again.

She really couldn't see the face clearly, but from her appearance, she didn't look like a witch at all. She looked as dignified as her name would suggest².

'The person beside her is the clinic doctor. His name is Kawakami Harunobu...'

Kawakami was smiling in the photo.

'Were they married?'

'I don't know. But...'

'What?'

'No, never mind.'

Yakumo smiled self-derisively and took back the words he had started to say.

When he responded like that, Haruka became even more interested. She thought about asking again, but Yakumo spoke up before then.

'How did your side of things go?'

2 Rin's name is written with the kanji 凛, which is used in the expression 凛とした (rin to shita) meaning dignified, commanding.

Yakumo ran a hand through his hair.

'Ah, well. A lot of things are still vague, but...'

She'd only given a summary on the phone. Haruka started from the beginning and reported the details of the information she had gathered to Yakumo.

Yakumo looked disinterested with his chin in his hand, but when she mentioned that Rin's son had red eyes and a horn on his head, his expression changed completely.

'Is that true?'

'I don't know. There was a rumour like that...'

'I see.'

Yakumo said that quietly and crossed his arms.

'Oh, also.'

Haruka gave the file she had received from Yoshii to Yakumo. It was a file of copies of articles about the murder case that had occurred at the cottage more than twenty years ago.

Yakumo looked through it with a difficult expression.

Finally, he murmured, 'I see,' and shut the file loudly.

'Did you figure something out?'

'I have no positive proof, but I see the outline of the case.'

'Hey, what do you mean?'

'There's something I need to confirm,' Yakumo said, evading Haruka's question and taking out his mobile.

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4

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Ishii received a call from Yakumo in the evening.

– There's something I want you to look into.

After receiving Yakumo's instructions, Ishii went to the hospital immediately.

He was there to meet the coroner, Hata.

He went through the entrance, took the stairs to the basement by the elevator and advanced through the dim and damp corridor to push open the door to the autopsy room.

'Who is it?'

A creepy grin appeared on Hata's wrinkled face.

Because they were in the autopsy room, it doubled how terrifying his face usually looked.

'E-excuse me... It's Ishii Yuutarou.'

'Oh, it's you, Ishii-kun? Haven't found Gotou yet?'

'No, I know where he is, but... More importantly, there is something I would like you to confirm...'

Ishii wiped the sweat from his forehead.

'Confirm? Keep it short. I've got to play with that soon.'

Hata pointed at the stainless steel bed in the middle of the room.

The head was on top of it.

Its skin was swollen so Ishii couldn't tell how old it was or what its face used to look like. Only those open eyes kept looking at Ishii blankly.

And those eyes were dyed deep red –

'Actually, that is what I would like you to confirm.'

Even while Ishii prepared to run away, he looked at the head.

'Oh? What do you want to know about this guy?'

Hata stooped over and looked at the head, smiling happily.

He really was appropriate for his job as a coroner. Ishii felt like he would faint at any moment.

'Ah, er. Actually, Yakumo-shi had a request...'

Ishii cleared his head and continued speaking.

'From Yakumo-kun?'

'Yes.'

'What is it?'

'Ah, yes. About that... He wanted to confirm whether there were any injuries on that head.'

'Injuries... That man died from a head injury... Is that what Yakumo-kun thinks?'

'I don't know...'

Ishii wasn't certain.

That was all he had heard from Yakumo on the phone. Ishii didn't have any idea why he wanted to confirm that.

'Well, fine. I planned on looking into that even without being told.'

'Is that so? Then please contact me once you have the results.'

Ishii wanted to leave this place as soon as he could.

'Ishii-kun.'

'Yes?'

'Could you help me a bit?' said Hata, rubbing his hands together.

'Eh? Me?'

– Again?

'It won't take any time at all.'

Even though Ishii didn't recall agreeing, Hata took latex gloves out of his doctor's gown and threw them at Ishii.

'Er, I have an urgent...'

'Could you hold this for a second?' said Hata, ignoring Ishii.

– Hold this?

'Hurry it up!'

'Ah, yes, er...'

'You just have to hold it.'

Hata's eyes goggled at him like a fish's. A shiver ran down Ishii's spine.

It was the first time Ishii had seen Hata look like that. If Ishii refused, he might be eaten from the head down. Ishii reluctantly put on the latex gloves he was given.

'J-just for a bit.'

'You just have to press down the head.'

'Ugh...'

When Ishii approached, the smell of formalin prickled at his nose.

Ishii held down the head with shaking hands.

The skin was swollen so it was squishier than he imagined.

– I really can't do this.

Ishii jumped back, pushing forward with both hands.

Then, the head fell off the stainless steel bed and rolled to Ishii's feet.

The deep red eyes stared at Ishii.

'Eek!'

He was already at his limit. As Ishii shrieked, he fainted.

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'I'm back.'

When Gotou opened the sliding door, Yakumo and Haruka were sitting opposite each other. The atmosphere was so suffocating they could have been talking about a breakup.

'What's with this awful mood?'

When Gotou spoke up, Yakumo lifted his head, looking extremely annoyed.

'You're much more awful, Gotou-san.'

'What's that supposed to mean?'

'Obviously, I mean exactly what I said.'

Yakumo shook his head like he was fed up.

This guy really gets on my nerves – Gotou swallowed his irritation and sat cross-legged on the tatami.

'So did you get any information?'

Though Yakumo asked the question himself, he let out a disinterested yawn.

– What kind of attitude is that?

Though Gotou was angry, he explained in as much detail as he could the information he'd got out of Wakabayashi. He wanted to keep it short, but he didn't know what Yakumo would pick up on.

'I see...'

When Gotou finished explaining, Yakumo crossed his arms and let out a sigh.

'How about you?'

Gotou wanted to know the information Yakumo and Haruka had gathered. The story was so scattered that parts of it were confusing.

Like he thought explaining would be a pain, Yakumo threw the responsibility of explaining to Haruka: 'I'll leave it to you.'

Though Haruka complained, she explained in detail about what she'd heard from the journalist named Yoshii, Ookura at the Kinasa Museum and also Yumiko's grandmother.

She spoke particularly emotionally about the woman named Rin who was persecuted as a witch forty-five years ago. It seemed that she empathised with her situation.

'So what do you know?'

When Haruka finished explaining, Gotou asked Yakumo that question.

'Before I explain, I want you to confirm what Masato has found out about the search for Yumiko-

chan,' Yakumo instructed Haruka.

'OK,' replied Haruka, taking out her mobile phone to contact Masato. She spread out a map and took notes for about ten minutes before hanging up.

'How was it?' asked Yakumo.

'The search is from the town to the mountain forest by the Togakushi plateau. It seems like they're focussing on the reservoir and river.'

'I see.'

Gotou nodded at Haruka's explanation.

It appeared they had expanded the search area from where she disappeared. Probably to determine if she had become lost or if there was an accident.

'Hey, do you know where Yumiko-chan is?' asked Haruka, hurrying Yakumo on.

For a while, Yakumo put his index finger to his brow and sat there, but he finally lifted his head like he had thought of something.

There was a sharp glint in his red left eye.

'Probably...'

Yakumo said just that one word.

Gotou and Haruka gulped as they waited for Yakumo to continue.

'She's probably around here.'

After a lengthy pause for effect, Yakumo traced an area on the map.

It included the clinic he'd gone to with Yakumo today and the cedar tree in Arakurayama.

'Why do you think she's here?' asked Gotou.

There was a twenty-kilometre distance between Asakawa, where Yumiko lived, and Arakurayama. And it was a steep mountain road. Gotou didn't understand why she would go there.

'Gotou-san, from what you said earlier, the corpse found at the cedar tree is from more than thirty years ago – correct?'

'Yeah.'

'That corpse is probably Rin-san, persecuted as a witch forty-five years ago.'

'That's... Then, Rin-san...'

Haruka's voice was filled with sorrow.

'She's already dead. She was killed,' Yakumo said indifferently.

'That's awful...'

After her surprise, Haruka lowered her eyelashes sadly.

However, Gotou wasn't surprised. After hearing what Haruka said, it linked up.

Haruka must have felt the same way. She probably just didn't want to believe it.

'Rin-san's ghost possessed Yumiko-chan and is searching.'

– Searching?

'What for?'

'I have Ishii looking into that for me now.'

– Ishii?

Why was Ishii coming up in the conversation now? Gotou didn't understand.

'That doesn't have anything to do with it, right?'

'It does.'

'How's it related?'

'You'll find out soon enough,' said Yakumo meaningfully. Then, he shut his mouth.

– Putting on airs.

Gotou clicked his tongue.

-

6

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After discussing with Yakumo and Gotou, Haruka went to the shop parking lot alone.

The jet black mountains had a strange atmosphere to them.

When she looked up, the dark night sky was filled with stars. There were many more stars than she could see in tTokyo.

The air also felt tense.

'We'll be up early tomorrow. You should sleep.'

She heard a voice from behind her.

She could tell without turning around. It was Yakumo.

'I wonder if Yumiko-chan's OK,' Haruka said, still looking up at the sky.

'If you doubt that, you won't be able to do anything any more.'

Yakumo stood next to her.

Though he always acted collected, he was just pressing down his feelings – he was anxious himself.

Haruka knew that.

'That's right.'

Haruka looked at Yakumo's profile.

With the moonlight, his red left eye seemed to glitter.

'Do you think Rin-san is resentful?'

As Yakumo said that, he looked up at the sky.

She was persecuted as a witch. She lost the person who supported her. In the end, she died herself too. It was such a sad life. It would be natural for her to hate the world.

But –

'I feel like Rin-san doesn't hate anyone.'

It was just a wish, but Haruka felt like in the ghost photo, Rin didn't have any resentment but rather some other emotion.

Normally Yakumo would get angry – 'Don't make a decision with speculation' – but he nodded, like he was agreeing.

'In my theory, Rin-san isn't resentful – that is the premise.'

'Then if she is resentful?'

'We won't find Yumiko-chan.'

Yakumo's voice reverberated deep into Haruka's ears.

Though Yakumo always revealed his theory after obtaining clear evidence, this time, it was different.

He might not have been able to do anything else.

Normally, he would meet the ghost that was possessing the person, listen to them and solve the case, but this time, Yumiko, who had been possessed, had disappeared. They hadn't met her even once.

Furthermore, the search area was wide, included dark forests, and they couldn't guarantee the time.

Even if it was just a wish, all they could do now was believe in it and act.

'This is why you grew up.'

Yakumo suddenly spoke up.

'Yup. I was born here and grew up here. This is my hometown.'

'When I came last time, I didn't know that,' Yakumo said awkwardly, smiling while showing his white teeth.

He was probably talking about the time he was abducted and confined. Yakumo had come here then too, but there hadn't been the time to look up at the starry sky like this.

'It's a nice place, right?'

Haruka knew he would complain, saying something like 'It isn't or 'It's the countryside'. But what Yakumo replied was completely different from what she expected.

'This is my hometown too.'

– Eh?

Yakumo-kun shouldn't have been born here. Then why?

'Hey, Yakumo-kun. What do you...'

'You'll understand tomorrow.'

After saying that, Yakumo narrowed his eyes.

His red left eye looked a little bit wet –

-

7

-

Gotou rubbed his sleepy eyes as he drove on the winding mountain road.

Yakumo in the passenger seat had even messier bedhead as usual as he vacantly looked out the window. In the back seat, Haruka and Masato sat next to each other, looking anxious.

'Hey, Yakumo. Who killed that Rin woman?'

From what he'd heard yesterday, Rin was killed by somebody. Gotou thought that finding that out would lead them to solving the case.

'You don't know?' said Yakumo, still looking out the window.

The way he said that made Gotou think Yakumo already knew the answer.

'I don't know.'

'Please think about it calmly,' Yakumo said quietly, turning his gaze to Gotou.

'I'm asking because I can't figure it out even after thinking about it!'

'Please don't speak so loudly.'

Yakumo stuck his fingers in his ears.

'Just tell me already.'

'Though this is just a theory, there were people who were prejudiced against Rin-san, yes?'

'The landowner's son and the local officer?'

'Yes.'

Yakumo nodded.

The first person who made a fuss about Rin being a demon were Takafumi, the second son of the landowner family Kitaoka, and the man who was the local village officer.

'So they didn't just chase her out – they killed her?'

'That is very likely.'

'They can't have really thought she was a witch, right?'

'They really thought she was a demon.'

Gotou's eyes went wide at Yakumo's unexpected answer.

'You're kidding, right?'

'No. As is clear from the information gathered yesterday, Rin-san wasn't treated as a witch just by those two but by the whole village, and she was persecuted for it.'

'Why would that happen?' Haruka interrupted, like she couldn't hold herself back.

'That's the sort of place this is.'

Yakumo ran a hand through his hair, seeming annoyed.

'What do you mean?' asked Gotou.

'I mentioned the Momijigari story in Kinasa earlier, correct?'

'Yeah, but that's just...'

'It's not *just* anything. This area has been considered as a sacred mountain where spirits gather for a very long time, and women were prohibited from entering.'

Yakumo spoke quickly.

'Oi, oi. You're kidding right?'

Gotou couldn't believe what Yakumo was saying.

'I'm not lying. There was a building called the nyonindou, which was as far as women could go.'

'I can't believe it.'

'In Togakushi, there is something called the nun's rock.'

'The nun's rock?'

'Yes. In the past, a nun stepped beyond the border. That moment, she incurred the wrath of the gods and was turned into a rock.'

'So that rock is the nun's rock³.'

Yakumo nodded.

'Why'd they do that?'

'Because women were thought of as impure.'

Impure. To put it simply, that would be dirty.

Saying something like that in current society would make people doubt your humanity, but at the time, it had been correct.

From Yakumo's explanation just now, Gotou felt like he sort of understood.

A place with a sacred mountain where spirits gathered and the legend of Momijigari where women were prohibited –

The existence of witches was much closer here than in other places. People's hearts had probably been filled with awe and fright.

A question came to Gotou after hearing this much.

'But the two guys who said Rin was a witch were found as corpses twenty years ago, right?'

There was an article about the case in the documents Haruka received from the newspaper reporter named Yoshii yesterday.

'That is the case.'

Yakumo yawned, seeming bored.

'Who killed those two?'

'Who knows? I haven't reached that conclusion yet.'

Though Yakumo shrugged, Gotou knew immediately that it was an act. He had an idea, but he didn't want to say it at this stage.

That meant Yakumo wouldn't reply no matter what Gotou asked. Well, the truth would be revealed soon enough.

Gotou gave up and drove the car.

-

8

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Ishii opened his eyes on a seat in the precinct.

3 The nyonindou is written as 女人堂 so it is a hall for women. The nun's rock is the bikuni ishi (比丘尼石), wherein bikuni refers to a bhikkuni, a fully ordained female Buddhist monastic. Like everything else mentioned in Yakumo, this actually exists.

He had planned on helping Hata last night, but he had fainted for the second time and returned branded as useless.

It seemed like he'd put his head down on the desk and fallen asleep just like that.

Just as he had stretched and put on his glasses, his mobile phone rang.

'Hello, Ishii Yuutarou speaking.'

He answered immediately and heard a creepy giggle.

He felt wide awake immediately.

<I've found out a number of things.>

'R-really?'

<There would be no point lying about it.>

'That's true...'

<Anyway, if you want to know the results, come yourself.>

After saying just that, he hung up.

You could have told me over the phone – is what Ishii thought, but he didn't say it aloud, as was his personality. When he thought about seeing that head once more, he couldn't do anything but be depressed.

Ishii picked up his jacket and left the room.

After leaving the precinct through the front entrance, he headed towards the parking lot where he had parked the car.

He had just put his hand on the door when he suddenly felt somebody's gaze on him. He looked around, but nobody was there.

– It appears to have been my imagination.

Since Nanase Miyuki had escaped, he might have been a bit on edge.

Ishii sat in the driver's seat and started the engine.

The moment he was about to step on the pedal, the door to the backseat opened.

– Eh?

He saw somebody get into the backseat through the rear-view mirror.

A woman. The left half of her face was burnt and her unusually red lips were twisted into a smile. She was –

– Nanase Miyuki.

It was already too late when Ishii realised.

She held a cold and glittering knife at his neck.

The blood left his face all at once in his terror.

'Ishii-san, we meet again.'

Nanase Miyuki's breath brushed his ear.

Ishii's terror doubled. He couldn't move even an eyebrow, let alone resist.

'Where is he?' murmured Nanase Miyuki.

– He?

'W-what are you talking about?' replied Ishii in a shaking voice.

Then, the knife at his neck drew closer. A jolt of pain ran through him. Ishii held his breath.

'You know, right? I don't mind if you don't want to say. I'll kill you and ask somebody else.'

Nanase Miyuki's sadistic smile was reflected in the rear-view mirror.

She wasn't lying. If Ishii resisted, she would thrust that knife into his neck without any hesitation.

Ishii could feel it in his skin.

'So, where is he?' said Nanase Miyuki calmly.

The 'he' she was talking about was probably the head of the man with two red eyes.

'Hospital...'

'Hospital? Why?'

'To be autopsied...'

Nanase Miyuki let out a beastly scream before Ishii could be finished speaking.

'Don't joke with me! I won't allow low-class humans like you to touch that man!'

– She didn't want to let other people touch him.

Makoto had given that reason to explain why Nanase Miyuki was walking around with the head of the man with two red eyes.

She might have been right. Nanase Miyuki wanted, loved and revered the man with two red eyes so much she was mad.

'Start the car,' said Miyuki with ragged breathing.

'W-where to?'

'You know, right? I'm going to take him back. I'm going to take that man back.'

Ishii couldn't resist.

He swallowed his fear and started the car.

Haruka held Masato's hand as they walked down the narrow road, which was like an animal trail.

Yakumo and Gotou were walking right in front of them, leading the way.

'You OK?'

It was a rather steep slope, so she spoke to Masato. Though his head was covered in sweat, Masato nodded.

He was propelled by his wholehearted wish to save Yumiko.

Finally, she saw an old wooden building in the middle of the thick forest. That was probably Kinasa Clinic.

'Nobody's here,' said Gotou in a disgruntled tone as he stood in front of the clinic with his hands in his pockets

'I just said that it was likely she would be around here,' said Yakumo in exasperation as he shook his head.

'Hey, why do you think she'll be around here?' asked Haruka.

Though she had come here because she believed in Yakumo, she didn't know what proof he had.

'This is a place close to Rin-san and her son. In other words, their home.'

'I see.'

If Rin's spirit was possessing Yumiko, it made sense to think she would visit her home.

'Let's split up.'

'That would be more effective.'

Gotou agreed with Yakumo's suggestion.

'Gotou-san and I will search over here. You and Masato wait here.'

'OK.'

Haruka nodded.

Masato looked rather tired and it would be dangerous to walk around the mountain. It would probably be better to wait and leave this to Yakumo and Gotou. The moment she thought that, Masato spoke up.

'I don't want to.'

'Masato-kun.'

Haruka wanted to comfort him, but Masato didn't respond.

'I'll look too. Yumiko-chan disappeared because of me, so...'

As Masato said that, his eyes were filled with a strong will.

He wanted to find Yumiko himself no matter what. If they crushed that will, Masato might hole up within himself again.

'Hey, I'll go search with Masato-kun,' suggested Haruka.

Yakumo ran a hand through his hair, as if to say, 'Guess I can't do anything about it.'

'Let them search. He's not a kid either – he wants to take responsibility for himself.'

Unexpectedly, Gotou agreed.

'Got it. You and Masato search near the clinic. I'll go to the east, and Gotou-san, I'll leave the west to you.'

Beaten by their persistence, Yakumo gave out instructions.

Masato's face became brighter at once.

'Promise me one thing. Even if you find Yumiko-chan, don't chase after her or approach her. Contact me. OK?' Yakumo said to Masato.

'OK, I got it.'

Masato nodded with a hard look on his face.

'Let's meet up again here in thirty minutes.'

Everyone nodded at Yakumo's words.

'I'm going then.'

Gotou briskly started walking towards the west.

'I'll leave Masato to you,' Yakumo said to Haruka quietly. Then, he started walking towards the east.

'Let's go too.'

'OK.'

Haruka and Masato started walking together.

They went along a trackless path. It was humid here and there was leaf mould, so their feet sunk into the ground. It was terribly difficult to walk. It was easy to slip on slopes too.

Furthermore, there were points which were like steep cliffs, so they had to be very careful not to lose their footing.

'Watch your step,' she said to Masato.

'OK.'

Masato nodded with a stiff expression.

He was probably worried about Yumiko.

'It's fine. She's OK.'

Yakumo might have said it was irresponsible of her if he heard, but they couldn't search without hope.

'Hey.'

Masato suddenly stopped.

Masato's forehead was covered in sweat. He might have walked too quickly.

'Shall we take a break?'

When Haruka spoke to him, Masato shook his head and took a deep breath.

'Why was it Yumiko-chan?'

'Why?'

'Tomoya-kun and I were there then. But...'

That was true. Why did Rin possess Yumiko instead of Masato or Tomoya?

Yakumo had said something before.

The wavelengths might match – a body easy to attract, or in short, somebody with a body easy to possess.

However, Haruka felt like that wasn't what Masato was trying to say.

'Masato-kun, don't blame yourself.'

'I should've been possessed instead.'

Masato's eyes welled up with tears.

He was angry at the unreasonable world. He resented himself for being powerless.

Would Masato's heart be able to take it if the worst-case scenario occurred? The upright and clean-handed Masato would blame himself.

Because he was an awkward but straightforward kid, like Yakumo –

'Let's go. Yumiko-chan's waiting.'

Haruka put both of her hands on Masato's shoulders.

'Is Yumiko-chan OK?'

'I believe so. Do you think differently, Masato-kun?'

Masato sniffled and shook his head.

His eyes were lit up again. He started walking with a strong gait, yelling, 'Yumiko-chan! Where are you?'

– I have to do my best too.

When Haruka started walking again, her heart started beating loudly.

– Rustle.

The verdant trees were shaking loudly.

She felt her breath caught, like she was in a damp cave.

– Somebody's watching us.

-

10

-

Ishii passed through the hospital entrance.

Nanase Miyuki was right behind him. Ishii wanted to run away, but he couldn't do anything about the knife at his side.

If only somebody would notice – is what he was hoping, but it appeared to be no use.

He went down the stairs to the basement by the elevator. He walked along the dim, cavernous corridor with heavy feet.

'Please knock on the door.'

After coming to the autopsy room, Nanase Miyuki whispered that in his ear.

A jolt went down his spine.

In his terror, Ishii knocked on the door just as he was told.

'Who is it?'

He heard Hata from Inside.

At Miyuki's urging, Ishii spoke, conscious of the tremor in his throat.

'I-it's Ishii.'

'It's open,' said Hata.

At Nanase Miyuki's insistence, Ishii opened the door with trembling hands.

'What? You got caught so easily? How pathetic.'

When Hata turned around, he didn't speak like he was surprised at the situation.

'Sorry, but could you return him to me?' said Miyuki, looking at the head on the stainless steel bed.

Miyuki had been calling the head 'him'. Just as Makoto had said, she didn't want to give it to anybody. It was probably special to her.

'This is a rare research opportunity. I won't give it back so easily.'

After Hata said that, he let out a laugh inappropriate for the situation.

'Would it be acceptable if I added one more head for your autopsies?'

Nanase Miyuki put the tip of the knife at Ishii's neck and pressed down so hard it hurt.

If she put in just a bit more force, it would definitely break through the skin and make him bleed.

Ishii's forehead started spewing sweat.

'There's no point in researching Ishii-kun's head. Even if you added a head like that –'

Hata was mumbling, sounding dissatisfied.

'Now, what will you do?' said Miyuki with a pointed tone.

It was a worst-case scenario. Even if Hata returned the head of the man with red eyes, Ishii didn't think Nanase Miyuki would just head home.

She would slice both Ishii and Hata up in a bloodbath.

'Got it. Do what you want.'

After saying that, Hata looked at Ishii.

– Eh?

Ishii was confused, but then he noticed Hata was holding a bottle of fluid that had been on the wagon. Ishii could read the word formalin from that bottle.

It was dangerous, but it seemed like all Ishii could do now was bet on Hata.

'My, my. You're unexpectedly honest.'

Miyuki smiled.

'Take this too.'

Hata threw the bottle in his hand.

It arced over, shattering at Ishii's feet.

Ishii shut his eyes tightly and stopped breathing.

Formalin splashed everywhere. Ishii felt an electrifying pain when doused with the strong formalin, but Nanase Miyuki appeared to feel the same way.

'No!'

Miyuki's shriek cut through the room. At the same time, the knife left Ishii's neck.

Ishii used that opportunity to run.

'Old man! You did it now!'

He heard Miyuki's furious voice.

However, the alarm bell started ringing, blocking it out. Hata had probably sat it off.

He heard somebody running off.

'She got away.'

While saying that, Hata went over to Ishii, who was on all fours, and wiped Ishii's face with a wet towel.

'It's OK now.'

When Hata said that, Ishii timidly opened his eyes.

Though there was still a stinging pain, it wasn't unbearable.

'T-thank you very much.'

While hating himself for being useless, Ishii thanked Hata.

'It'd be better to get out of the room for now.'

'Y-yes.'

Ishii stood up while answering. Then, he noticed that the head had disappeared from the stainless steel bed.

'Hata-san, the head...'

'Ah, looks like she took it away –'

Hata murmured that in a truly disappointed voice.

-

11

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– Who is it?

Haruka felt somebody watching her, so she looked around frantically in the dark forest.

Her heart was beating like a hammer.

Maybe I imagined it – is what she thought when a woman appeared in the corner of her vision.

About five metres in front of her. By a craggy rock, a woman with long hair in a white blouse and navy skirt.

– Is that...?

The moment Haruka tried to approach her, she disappeared, like she had melted into the forest.

'What was it?'

Haruka walked over to the rock where the woman had been standing. Then, she spotted a white running shoe on the floor.

– Could it be?

'Masato-kun, over here.'

Haruka called out to Masato who was a little away from her as she walked towards the rock.

There was a hole between the rock and the ground about forty centimetres tall and one metre wide.

She saw a girl lying there.

– We've found her!

She had to be Yumiko.

'Hang in there!'

Haruka crouched on the ground and shook Yumiko's body as she called out to her.

It was faint, but her chest was moving up and down.

– Thank goodness. She's alive.

Though Masato kept stumbling, he ran towards her with a pale expression.

Haruka took her mobile phone out of her pocket immediately and called Yakumo. However, she couldn't contact him since she was out of range.

'Whaaarr...'

Haruka heard a voice in her ear.

Her body froze like she was paralysed. She slowly looked up and saw the woman from earlier standing there.

Her long hair hung around her face. Her deep red lips moved like worms.

Haruka couldn't speak in her fear.

'Whaaarr...'

– I need to run.

Though Haruka thought that, her body wouldn't move the way she wanted it to.

The woman's hand reached out.

Haruka's forehead was sweating furiously. Her throat was dry. She couldn't even breathe.

– It hurts.

'Stop!'

Masato shouted out and ran in front of Haruka to protect her from the woman.

With his small body, he spread his arms as wide as he could.

'Masato-kun, no!'

– If you do that, you'll –

Haruka shouted, but it was too late.

A spasm ran through Masato's body, like he had been hit by lightning. Then, he fell to the ground, unmoving.

'Masato-kun. Are you OK?'

Haruka went to him immediately and called out.

– Oh no. What should I do?

Haruka was panicked when suddenly Masato grabbed her wrist.

'Masato-kun.'

Just as Haruka spoke, Masato opened his eyes.

Those eyes – weren't Masato's.

Somebody else was inside him. It wasn't her reasoning – Haruka could feel it.

Haruka's whole body started to sweat.

'...'

She heard somebody whisper.

It seemed to go straight to her brain.

'...Whe... re... am... I...'

Haruka was so frightened that she shook off Masato's hand and covered her eyes.

However, she could still hear the voice.

'Nooooo!'

She screamed as loudly as she could to try to erase the voice following her ears.

Her body wouldn't stop shaking.

How long have I been doing this – she suddenly came to her senses.

The voice had stopped.

She noticed that she was cowering on the floor.

She timidly lifted her gaze. Yumiko was collapsed in front of her. However, Masato was nowhere to

be seen.

'Masato-kun? Masato-kun?'

Haruka looked around frantically, but she couldn't spot him.

She heard the footsteps of somebody running towards her.

'Masato-kun?'

Haruka turned around. Yakumo was there.

'What was that scream just now?' said Yakumo, still panting for breath.

'Masato-kun... Masato-kun...'

'Was I too late?' muttered Yakumo, his eyes narrowed.

– I did something unthinkable.

-

12

-

'What happened?' Gotou asked Yakumo, who had his arms crossed as he leant against the hospital wall.

They had heard a scream from the forest and ran over to find Yumiko collapsed there. They quickly brought her to a nearby hospital. The doctor said she would be fine if she got some rest – so they had the doctor's word. However, Masato had disappeared instead.

Gotou felt like the situation had become more serious.

'It's simple.'

Yakumo lifted his head slowly.

However, he was sure tense for something that was supposed to be simple.

'What's simple?'

'The ghost that was possessing Yumiko-chan possessed Masato.'

He said it matter-of-factly, but –

'Why?'

'Because Yumiko-chan was weakened and her body couldn't move any more.'

– I see.

If they had done as Yakumo ordered and didn't add Haruka and Masato to the search, leaving them in the clinic, this might not have happened.

Gotou was partly responsible. But he didn't have the time to regret it now.

'We need to find Masato right away.'

'Yes.'

Yakumo ran and through his hair as he looked out the window.

'So what are we going to do?'

Gotou leant against the wall and looked out the window like Yakumo as he said that.

The grey clouds blocked out the sun. It made Gotou feel uncomfortable, like it was a sign of what was to come.

'We still have a trick up our sleeve.'

Gotou felt like Yakumo's red left eye was filled with force.

'What?'

Just as Gotou asked that, his mobile rang. It was from Ishii.

Gotou wanted to ignore it, but he decided that would be bad and answered.

'What?'

<D-Detective Gotou. You finally answered.>

Ishii spoke like he was talking to his only surviving parent.

'Forget about that. What is it?'

<Ah, yes sir. A-actually, it is quite the situation here...>

His voice was so faint it sounded like he would cry at any moment.

'It's even worse here.'

<No, I believe it's worse here.>

'Shut up! We've got a real situation here!'

<It is quite the situation here as well!>

'How long are you going to have this fruitless exchange for? It doesn't matter, right?'

Yakumo looked at Gotou coldly.

'What's the problem?'

Gotou urged Ishii to continue with a click of his tongue.

<Ah, yes sir. A-actually, Nanase Miyuki showed up again.>

'W-what did you say?'

Gotou's body stiffened instinctively. That really was a problem –

<She came to take the head.>

Gotou had heard from Yakumo. The head of the man with red eyes that Ishii and Miyagawa had found.

Why was she so focussed on something when she should be escaping – Gotou had no way to understand.

'Then what?'

<We let her get away...>

It felt like Ishii's voice would disappear at any moment.

'You let her get away again!? You idiot!' yelled Gotou, kicking the corridor wall in his anger.

Once was already bad enough, but to let her get away twice – he really was useless.

'Gotou-san, please lend that to me.'

Right after saying that, Yakumo took Gotou's mobile from the side. Gotou was about to complain, but Yakumo walked away down the corridor while talking on the phone with Ishii.

– Whose mobile does he think that is?

-

13

-

'It's my fault...'

Haruka held her head as she sat on the sofa in the hospital waiting room.

It was about four tatami in size with only a sofa for four and a magazine rack – a dreary room.

– Why couldn't I move then?

That thought kept circling her head.

Masato tried to save Haruka. A boy in elementary school had tried to save her, but Haruka had shut her eyes and ears in her fear.

She hated herself so much for her uselessness.

If anything happened to Masato – when Haruka thought that, her body heated up and her chest felt like it would collapse.

Masato must have felt this way ever since Yumiko disappeared.

'Want a coffee?'

Haruka looked up at the voice and saw Gotou standing there with two cans of coffee.

– How can he be so calm?

His relaxed attitude irritated Haruka for some reason.

'Anyway, drink and calm down a bit.'

Gotou held the can of coffee out towards Haruka, sat down next to her and suddenly spoke.

'The girl called Yumiko's weak, but it's not serious.'

'I see...'

'Her parents will be here soon too...'

Most of Gotou's words didn't enter Haruka's ears.

Even if Yumiko was saved, Masato had disappeared. Nothing had changed.

'It seems like she doesn't remember anything from when she was possessed.'

Gotou finished talking.

He probably didn't mean it that way, but the way he said it made it sound like the case had ended completely.

Haruka gripped the can of coffee in her hand tightly.

'It isn't over yet...'

It slipped out of her mouth.

Gotou's brows furrowed and he looked at Haruka doubtfully. She didn't understand why he looked like that.

'I know how you feel, but regretting what's happened won't start anything.'

Gotou pulled open the tab on the can and poured the coffee down his throat.

'It's my fault. Of course I regret it.'

'There's nothing you could've done.'

'There was!'

She spoke more loudly than she thought she would.

However, Gotou didn't look disturbed. He looked straight at Haruka.

It was a sharp and forceful gaze.

'There's nothing you could've done.'

'How can you say that so lightly? If I had done what Yakumo-kun said, this wouldn't have...'

Even as Haruka spoke, she could feel her throat tremble.

'You can't be sure.'

'It's a fact.'

'Got nothing to do with it.'

'That's right. This case doesn't have anything to do with you, Gotou-san.'

– What on earth am I saying?

Throwing a tantrum wouldn't change anything. Haruka knew that. But she couldn't put a stopper on her emotions.

The corners of her eyes felt warm.

'That's right. This case doesn't matter to me at all.'

'That's awful...'

While being surprised by the unexpected words that had come out of Gotou's mouth, a ripple of disappointment spread through her chest.

Gotou really had just been wrapped up in this case against his will this time, but Haruka had thought he had wanted to help. But –

'To say it outright, I don't care about the truth of the case at all. It'll be enough for me if Masato comes back safely.'

Even though Gotou looked like he felt awkward, he said it clearly.

I –

'Am I wrong?'

Haruka shook her head at the question.

Then, the tears that had welled up in her eyes came spilling down her cheeks.

'Then lift your head. We don't have the time to regret what's happened.'

Haruka nodded at Gotou's words, sniffled and lifted her head.

'So you say some good things sometimes.'

Yakumo had come up to them unnoticed.

Though he was running a hand through his hair and seemed annoyed, his red left eye was unusually sharp.

'Yakumo-kun, I –'

Yakumo looked straight at Haruka and snorted.

'If you want to blame anyone, blame me.'

'Eh?'

'No matter what you said, I shouldn't have added Masato to the search.'

'That's...'

'There'll be no end to it if we talk about things we should have done then. The past is past.'

– That's right.

'Then we'll work for the best outcome now. That's the best and only method for us now,' declared Yakumo. Then, he handed a mobile phone to Gotou.

Both Yakumo and Gotou were already thinking about what to do next, but Haruka had been stuck there, looking behind her.

When she thought about that, she felt so embarrassed she thought her face would light on fire.

– We have to go forward.

'Well, we're all on the same page now. Time to go search.'

Gotou stood up after finishing his can of coffee.

'Do you have any idea as to where he went?' asked Haruka, wiping away her tears.

'Of course not,' replied Gotou in a proud tone, hand at his waist.

Going without a plan was reckless. If they searched the wide mountain blindly, it would be hard to find Masato.

'Yakumo-kun.'

Haruka looked at Yakumo with an expectant gaze.

After thinking for a while, the corners of Yakumo's lips turned up in a smile.

It was the expression he always had when he had thought of something.

'First, we need to make the truth clear.'

As Yakumo said that, his red left eye seemed somewhat sad.

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14

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After explaining to Yakumo, Ishii sat on the bench in the hospital waiting room.

Since the fugitive Nanase Miyuki had appeared, the hospital was bustling with officers.

– I'm alive.

Ishii let out a sigh.

'That was a disaster.'

Miyagawa was the one who spoke.

'I-I sincerely apologise. I let her escape not once but twice...'

Ishii reflexively stood up and bowed.

That might have been their once-in-a-million chance to arrest Nanase Miyuki, but Ishii hadn't been able to do anything.

He was furious with how useless he was.

'There'd be no point if you died.'

Miyagawa sat on the bench with a gentle smile.

Since Ishii had thought Miyagawa would get angry at him, it was anticlimactic.

'B-but Detective Gotou would have...'

If Gotou had been in the same situation, he would have definitely rushed straight forward and caught her.

'Don't act like that idiot.'

Miyagawa snorted in exasperation.

'But...'

'He's him, and you're you.'

'H-huh...'

What Miyagawa said was obvious, but Ishii felt like his true meaning was somewhere deeper.

Ishii couldn't find that meaning, so he gave a vague response.

'Hey, Ishii.'

After a pause, Miyagawa spoke, his eyes distant.

'What is it?'

'I don't understand the woman named Nanase Miyuki.'

'Don't understand?'

'Yeah. She should be running away.'

'Yes.'

'But why would she come to take back the head, putting herself at risk of being caught? I don't understand at all.'

Miyagawa slapped his forehead with his palm.

Ishii didn't understand Nanase Miyuki's psychology either, but if he borrowed Makoto's words, it would be –

'Love...'

'Hah?'

Miyagawa's face twisted like he was looking at something unpleasant. Perhaps he had misunderstood terribly.

'Ah, this isn't from me. It's something the newspaper reporter Hijikata Makoto-san said.'

Ishii hurriedly added to his explanation.

'The ex-chief's daughter, eh...'

Miyagawa looked up, as if he were searching his memories.

'Ah, yes. In her opinion, Nanase Miyuki might be committing crimes for love...'

'Love, eh?'

Miyagawa's brows furrowed.

'That also might be the reason she came to get the head even though it would put her in danger...'

'Love? That's idiotic.'

Miyagawa snorted and stood up.

Ishii understood how he felt. Thinking about it rationally, Nanase Miyuki's actions were completely unreasonable.

However, there were people in this world who had completely different worldviews than they did.

To Ishii and Miyagawa, it was just a head, but to Nanase Miyuki, it was probably something so important she would do anything to keep it with her, no matter how dangerous.

Maybe we won't ever be able to catch her unless we understand her – Ishii felt that way.

'Just right up a report after.'

Ishii watched Miyagawa walk away after saying that.

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15

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Gotou was in the parking lot of the hospital Yumiko was in.

Yakumo was next to him. He looked discouraged.

'What are you thinking about?'

Yakumo gave a short reply – 'Nothing much' – to Gotou's question. But that wasn't the case. When Yakumo looked like this, he was looking at a truth that Gotou couldn't see.

After a while, a black family car stopped and a man came out from inside. It was Wakabayashi from the Nagano precinct.

Gotou had called him out at Yakumo's instruction.

'What are you going to do now that I've called him out?' Gotou asked Yakumo.

'You'll understand soon enough.'

'Sorry, I was a bit late.'

Wakabayashi walked towards them with a smile.

It was a good mood that didn't fit the location.

'I apologise as well for calling you out to a play like this.'

Gotou bowed his head formally towards Wakabayashi.

'Don't worry about it. You found Yumiko for me. I wanted to thank you.'

'I'm just glad she's safe.'

'I'm glad. Really glad.'

Wakabayashi looked like he would cry at any moment.

Yakumo had said that Wakabayashi was related to the case.

He was an old detective who had given information to Gotou even though he was out of his jurisdiction, because he was worried about his relative's kid Yumiko's safety. Was he really related –

'Wakabayashi-san, if it's all right with you, I have something to ask.'

Yakumo took a step towards Wakabayashi.

'You're here too? I'll tell you anything I know,' responded Wakabayashi with a smile. He was the complete opposite of Yakumo with his intimidating air.

'There's no time, so I'll be direct. What we found under the cedar tree was the woman named Rin who was killed forty-five years ago.'

'Wha... Why do you know...'

Wakabayashi's face went pale.

After a moment of silence, Wakabayashi cringed, like he was saying 'Shoot', but it was too late.

'The police haven't been able to confirm her identity yet, correct? But the response just now makes it seem like you knew who was buried there from the beginning, doesn't it?'

Yakumo looked at Wakabayashi with a sharp gaze.

'How would I know about something so long ago?'

Wakabayashi's cunning eyes were darting back and forth, unable to calm down.

'Do you really not know?'

Yakumo took another step forward, cutting down the distance between them. Wakabayashi looked down. His gesture just now admitted that it was a lie.

'I don't know.'

Wakabayashi's voice as he denied it was terribly weak.

'Then I'll ask this. You said this to Gotou-san, correct? "Ganging up to beat a frail woman to death" ... '

Wakabayashi had said that to Gotou.

He hadn't thought it was strange at the time, but now he understood what was unnatural.

'Urgh...'

Wakabayashi's forehead was damp with sweat.

Yakumo took another step towards Wakabayashi to shorten the distance between them.

'It sounds like you were saying there were multiple culprits.'

'You're just jumping to conclusions.'

Wakabayashi's breathing was ragged. Gotou could easily tell that he was troubled.

It can't be –

'Were you the one who...'

Gotou said that without thinking.

'You're wrong!'

Wakabayashi's eyes were bulging as he shook his head back and forth and stepped back.

'Please tell me the truth.'

'I don't know anything!'

He wouldn't speak no matter what. Gotou felt that stubborn will.

'Wakabayashi-san, my red left eye can see the spirits of the dead.'

As Yakumo said that, he suddenly brought his face close to Wakabayashi's.

Wakabayashi looked away to avoid that gaze. Yakumo continued regardless.

'I can hear her voice. You can hear it too, can't you...'

Yakumo whispered in Wakabayashi's ear.

'... Where?'

Gotou heard a woman's voice from somewhere.

It didn't seem like it was his ears playing tricks on him. Wakabayashi looked around too, his eyes still round.

'... Where?'

– Again.

'Where!'

A woman appeared from the thicket at the end of the parking lot.

The woman wore a white blouse and a navy skirt. Since she was far away, was looking down and had her long hair hanging around her face, Gotou couldn't see her face.

'I don't know. I really don't know.'

Wakabayashi's eyes went rounder the moment he saw the woman and stepped back while speaking in a voice close to a scream.

'Where!'

The woman let out a shrill shriek and slowly approached them.

'I'm sorry! I'm at fault! Forgive me!'

Wakabayashi prostrated himself, forehead rubbing against the ground, and yelled in a voice an octave higher than before. His body was shaking violently.

'So you really do know.'

Wakabayashi's shoulders fell at Yakumo's voice.

'You can stop now.'

When Yakumo spoke, the woman lifted her head and took off her wig. It was Haruka. That was quite the performance - Gotou had felt afraid, even though he knew.

Wakabayashi looked blank.

'W-what are you planning?'

Wakabayashi had finally understood the situation. He spoke frantically.

'You will tell us the truth.'

Yakumo knelt down on one knee to look at Wakabayashi, still on the ground.

'I...' said Wakabayashi with a gasp.

His eyes were bloodshot and his voice was trembling terribly too.

'Let's put an end to this, for your sake.'

Yakumo looked at Wakabayashi with his red left eye.

For a while, Wakabayashi accepted the gaze straight on, but he finally shook his head, giving up.

'I didn't want anyone to find her...'

Wakabayashi's voice was faint and weak.

'The person who killed her was the local officer at the time – your father, correct?'

Wakabayashi bit his dry lips and gave a small nod.

'You'll talk, yes?'

Urged on by Yakumo, Wakabayashi started speaking one sentence at a time.

'Forty-five years ago – a man died at that clinic. Kitaoka Hidetaka, the eldest son of the landowner. My father and the second son, Takafumi, said it was the curse of Rin, who lived at the clinic.'

'Why did they say that?'

Gotou's voice was ragged. He didn't understand at all.

Even if it was a place with a legend about a witch, it was ridiculous for both Takafumi and Wakabayashi's father to believe in this.

'I'll explain later. Let's listen to Wakabayashi-san now.'

Yakumo shut down Gotou's question.

Gotou didn't understand, but he decided to listen to Wakabayashi for now, just as Yakumo told him to.

Wakabayashi's legs collapsed underneath him as he continued speaking.

'The villagers believed it too and started harassing the clinic. Nobody would talk to them any more or sell them anything. I was told not to go near them too.'

'That wasn't all, right?'

Yakumo urged Wakabayashi for more.

Wakabayashi's face twisted, like he was in pain. Then, he continued.

'They threw rocks at the clinic and left dead things at the door, and some people even set it on fire...'

'Why would they do that? Rin-san wasn't a demon!' shouted Haruka, leaning forward with a hand on her chest.

'I-I'm sorry.'

Wakabayashi lowered his head again.

'Apologising won't make up for it!'

Haruka yelled more in her anger.

It really was a horrid story. What they were doing was just bullying.

'Stop.'

Yakumo placed a hand on Haruka's shoulder.

'But.'

'Wakabayashi wasn't the one who did it,' admonished Yakumo, since Haruka still wouldn't back down.

Haruka finally became calm again. She ground her back teeth and looked away from Wakabayashi.

'It was really awful...'

Wakabayashi's eyes were distant.

'So that persecution kept escalating,' said Yakumo after taking a deep breath.

'After a while of this, Doctor Kawakami from the clinic fell into the valley and died. The rumours about it being witchcraft became even louder.'

'And then the incident happened.'

'That day, I went to the mountain to gather mushrooms. Then, I saw her running away with her son. It looked like somebody was chasing her...'

'That was...'

Gotou swallowed.

'Yes. My father, the local officer, and Takafumi, the landowner's second son.'

'Finally, they caught her and killed her then,' said Yakumo.

Wakabayashi nodded. 'That – wasn't something a person should do,' he said with tears in his eyes.

'That was a demon.'

Wakabayashi's words filled the silence.

'Demon?'

When Gotou repeated it, Wakabayashi nodded again and continued.

'The two of them suddenly hit her. She collapsed to the ground. She was in pain, but they kicked her. Again, and again, and again...'

Tears rolled down Wakabayashi's face, like he was letting out sediment that had gathered for a very long time.

– Disgusting.

'Her screams echoed through the mountains. I covered my ears and shut my eyes. All I could do was cower behind the trees.'

Wakabayashi shut his eyes and covered his ears, perhaps recalling what had happened.

Haruka's face was completely pale. She was sitting down while hugging her own shoulders.

The trees moved in the wind.

After a silence, Wakabayashi suddenly opened his eyes and planted the hands that had been on his ears on the ground.

'How do you think my father looked as her tormented her?'

'That's...'

'He was smiling.'

That one word slashed at his chest like a sharp Japanese sword.

– Smiling.

Why? How could somebody laugh while tormenting someone weaker than them? Why would you smile when killing somebody?

'Please let me confirm something. Where was Rin-san killed?' said Yakumo, index finger on his brow.

'By the cedar tree... After she was killed there, she was buried...'

'So that really was the location.'

Yakumo nodded in understanding. But Gotou couldn't understand.

'Why'd you keep silent about it all this time!?'

Gotou grabbed Wakabayashi by the collar in his anger.

Wakabayashi lost his balance and fell backwards. Gotou climbed on top of him.

'Answer me!'

Gotou brought his nose close to Wakabayashi's, closing the distance further.

'He couldn't speak even if he wanted to,' interrupted Yakumo.

'Why? Somebody died!'

'Could you say it, Gotou-san? At the time, Wakabayashi-san was only ten years old, and he was his son. Would you be able to say that your own father had tormented a woman to death?'

'That's...'

Gotou was lost for words.

I could say it – he wanted to declare that, but he wasn't honestly confident that he would really be able to say it if he were in that situation.

Now he didn't know who the demon was. She had just been a victim. The real demons were the two who killed her.

Yakumo had said that Rin's spirit was searching for something.

She had to be searching with violent hatred for the two people who killed her.

-

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– Could you say it?

Yakumo's words reverberated heavily in Haruka's chest.

Whether she wanted to or not, it made her think of the case with Masato.

He was put in a similar situation. He wanted to speak, but he couldn't. He was burdened with that darkness.

At times like this, children were powerless.

'Gotou-san, please get off of him already.'

Gotou did as Yakumo said. He got off of Wakabayashi and stood up.

Wakabayashi sat up but didn't try to stand up.

'Wakabayashi-san, please let me confirm a few things.'

Wakabayashi looked frightened at Yakumo's words.

I've already told you so much. It was like he was saying that.

'What happened to her son?'

'I don't know.'

Wakabayashi shook his head.

'It isn't certain whether he lived or died, yes?'

'She made her son alone run away before she was caught... After that, I...'

Yakumo smirked, looking satisfied by Wakabayashi's answer.

'One more thing. Did your father have money troubles?'

'He had a bad alcohol problem, so he regularly borrowed money.'

'Did that suddenly fix itself after the incident?'

Wakabayashi didn't answer, but that was answer enough.

'So that really was the case,' murmured Yakumo. Then, he put his index finger to his brow.

'Lastly...'

Give me a break already – was how Wakabayashi looked when he lifted his head.

'Her son had a horn on his forehead, yes?'

'A horn? Don't be ridiculous!'

Gotou stomped on the ground as he yelled.

Wakabayashi nodded silently –

'Hey, Yakumo-kun. What does this mean?' Haruka interrupted without thinking.

'Recall what Ookura-san from Kinasa Museum said.'

Haruka let out an 'ah'.

Haruka had heard that Rin's son had a horn on his head and told Yakumo that. But –

'Is that possible?'

'Though it's called a horn, to be more correct, it's the keratin in skin.'

Yakumo ran a hand through his messy hair.

'Do you mean the layer of skin that gets all dry in the winter?'

'That's right.'

Haruka had been prepared for Yakumo to get angry at her, but his unexpected answer made her even more confused.

Keratin made up part of the skin. It was completely unrelated to horns.

'How would keratin become a horn?' Haruka asked, grabbing Yakumo's arm.

'I'm not an expert, so I can't explain in detail, but keratin preserves moisture and protects against bacteria. That's why the keratin in areas that are often impacted like the heel and the palm naturally become thicker.'

'Now that you say that.'

The skin on the heel clearly felt different from other areas.

'Keratin can become hard in areas too.'

'Really?'

'An easy-to-understand case where keratin becomes thick is the corns.'

'Corns?'

Haruka understood the word. The speck-sized wart-like things that would show up on the bottom of feet.

However, Haruka didn't really understand.

'Corns occur when skin is impacted in a local area and the keratin becomes thicker to protect itself, going under the outer layer of skin.'

'I see.'

So they occurred when people wore shoes that weren't the right size.

'Other ways that the keratin would become thicker are genetic or viral – there are a number of causes. In Rin-san's son's case, since it was on his forehead, it is likely that it was a virus.'

'But corns are only a centimetre or two, right? They don't look like horns.'

'Occasionally, the keratin becomes thicker beyond its physical boundaries. Though this differs between people, in some cases, it can exceed ten centimetres.'

'That's...'

'Yes. Like a large corn from the thickening of keratin.'

'Does that really happen?'

Gotou spoke before Haruka could.

'It is extremely rare, but there have been cases reported where things like horns have grown from foreheads.'

Haruka had heard something like that before.

She felt like she'd seen a photo of an old person with a horn in the back of the head like a water buffalo's.

'Aah!'

Gotou suddenly yelled.

Yakumo put his fingers in his ears, but Gotou continued speaking regardless.

'Her son had a horn in his head. That's why the villagers accepted the ridiculous story about the mother and son being demons.'

Just like Yakumo had been persecuted because of his red left eye, Rin and her son had been thought of as strange and persecuted because her son had a horn on his head.

People could be terribly cruel to those who were different from them.

'In the first place, she wasn't a local. She came from somewhere else and was found collapsed with her son. The doctor at the clinic saved them...'

Yakumo slowly began to speak.

Why did they collapse in a place like this? Though it was just a theory, Haruka could guess.

They had probably been persecuted in the same fashion in other places. She had run all the way here with her child.

'A parent and child with red eyes. Furthermore, her son had a horn in his head. That would be more than enough to make up a demon.'

When Yakumo finished speaking, he closed his eyes.

Did Yakumo mean that the mother and child who were chased out of the village were demons? Or did he mean the villagers who called them that?

Haruka didn't have the courage to ask.

'Rin-san lived together with Doctor Kawakami at the clinic, right?' said Haruka.

'Yes.'

Gotou agreed.

'Then he should have been able to cut off the horn.'

Haruka asked the question that had come to her head.

Yakumo took the notebook from his back pocket and handed it to her. It was the dusty notebook he had been reading yesterday.

Haruka took it into her hand and flipped through the pages.

The words written inside were blurry so she couldn't read them clearly, but she understood some of the words.

Demon... the keratin in the skin... in the cornea...

'What is this?'

'Research notes,' said Yakumo, covering his face with both hands.

'Of what?'

'Of course, they're about her son.'

Then, everything connected.

Haruka felt discomfort circling her stomach.

The doctor at the clinic had looked at the child with a horn as his own research material.

'That's awful!'

'You're mistaken.'

Yakumo's eyes were distant.

'Eh?'

'Doctor Kawakami loved that mother and son. He had been trying to treat him. That's what the research was for.'

A blank expression and sleepy eyes. Yakumo looked the same as always. However, his left red eye alone looked shadowed.

After taking a deep breath, Yakumo continued to speak.

'Even after he died, he was always at the clinic, watching over Rin-san and her son.'

Yakumo's words echoed hollowly in her heart.

She recalled how Doctor Kawakami and Rin had looked in the photo.

The two of them had been nestled together. They might have just wanted to live a peaceful life,

like everyone else.

However, that little dream was trampled underfoot.

'Let's go.'

After a silence, Yakumo spoke.

'Where to?'

Yakumo slowly turned around at Haruka's question.

'To search for Masato, of course...'

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17

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While driving, Wakabayashi's sad face came up in Gotou's head.

Come to think of it, Wakabayashi had just happened to head out to the mountain and ended up burdened with a secret that he shouldn't have had to shoulder for forty five years.

It was like the situation Masato had been in before. Children were powerless in such unreasonable circumstances.

He had probably also been a victim.

'It's rare for you to be thinking,' said Yakumo from the passenger seat, like he had seen through Gotou.

'I just think it's awful.'

'It is. To treat them as demons just because they look different...'

Haruka agreed from the backseat.

'That's a bit different.'

Yakumo was the one who spoke.

'What do you mean, different?'

'Gotou-san, do you think they were really killed just because of red eyes and a horn?'

Yakumo replied to Gotou's question with a question.

'They weren't?'

'They weren't,' Yakumo said firmly.

'Wait a second. What do you mean?'

That was different from what Yakumo had been saying earlier. Though Gotou was confused, Yakumo was as nonchalant as ever.

'According to the notes Doctor Kawakami left, aconitine was found from the body of Kitaoka Hidetaka, the land owner's eldest son.'

'Aconitine?'

'Aconite... Would that be easier to understand?'

Gotou swallowed.

Monkshood was a wild grass with beautiful purple flowers. Its roots were incredibly poisonous.

It caused breathing difficulties, arrhythmia and drop in blood pressure. On top of its prompt efficiency, there was no antidote. It was said that three milligrams was enough to kill somebody.

Despite how poisonous it was, it grew throughout the mountain forests and was incredibly easy to obtain – a rather troublesome find.

If aconitine was found, that meant –

'Could it be –'

'It could be. The first person to make a fuss about Rin being a witch was Takafumi, the younger brother of the dead Hidetaka.'

A chill went down Gotou's spine.

'So his brother Takafumi poisoned him.'

'It would be appropriate to think that way.'

'What the hell...'

That was enough for Gotou to imagine what had happened.

The second son, Takafumi, had probably poisoned the eldest son, Hidetaka, because of some inheritance issues.

After Hidetaka was carried to the Kinasa Clinic, he died, just as Takafumi wanted.

It was a village clinic without medical equipment. The incident should have been written off as a death from illness.

However, Kawakami, the doctor at the clinic, realised.

If Kawakami made a fuss, Takafumi would be in danger. Then, Takafumi joined up with Wakabayashi's father, the local officer at the time, and raised a rumour about it being a witch's curse.

– What a disgusting guy.

In his anger, a question came to Gotou.

'Wait a second. The doctor called Kawakami...'

Died after falling into a ravine. That might not have been an accident.

'The two of them probably pushed him in to kill him.'

Yakumo ground his back teeth together loudly.

'That's awful...'

Haruka raised a voice full of sadness.

If that were true, it was just as horrible as Haruka said. But –

'Do you have proof?'

'Yes.'

Yakumo flipped open to the last page of the notebook that he had shown Haruka earlier.

There was just one short sentence: I'm going to meet with him in the presence of the local officer, Wakabayashi-san.

'So he thought it'd be safe if he went with the local officer present.'

'Yes. However, he must have thought he was in danger, since he hid this notebook under the clinic floorboards just in case.'

'So the landowner was always in on it?'

'I confirmed that with Wakabayashi-san earlier. The relationship between him and the landowner's second son, Takafumi...'

Gotou had heard too.

They had been friends since they were students, and he'd also borrowed money.

'Money, eh...' said Gotou, swallowing his anger.

He probably contrived to get his cut after Takafumi got his inheritance.

At first, Takafumi had only poisoned the eldest son, Hidetaka. However, since he was found out, the situation changed.

In the end, he decided to kill Kawakami and Rin –

'That isn't something a person should do,' said Gotou with a click of his tongue.

However, Yakumo denied his anger-filled words.

'That isn't true.'

'Eh?'

'Killing people for their own selfish desires – only people do that.'

Yakumo's quiet words pierced deep into Gotou's heart.

Unable to agree or disagree, Gotou just bit his lip.

After a while, they reached their destination. Gotou parked the car in front of the cottage. When

he looked at the cedar tree with his knowledge, it felt a bit sad.

'We going then?'

Gotou was about to get off the car, but Yakumo stopped him.

'Gotou-san, I have a request.'

As he said that, a fearless smile appeared on Yakumo's lips.

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18

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Haruka stood in front of the cottage with Yakumo.

The solemn columns and white walled building matched its forested surroundings.

On top of the log table on the terrace, there were two old coffee cups which had been left behind.

What did the people who lived here before think as they looked at the cedar tree?

That thought suddenly came to Haruka's mind.

'Is Masato-kun really here?' asked Haruka, gripping onto Yakumo's arm.

'He is,' declared Yakumo.

'Why do you think that?'

Haruka didn't know why Masato – no, why Rin, who was possessing him, would come here.

Without responding, Yakumo put a hand on the front door. However, it wouldn't open – it appeared to be locked.

'You must not step away from me.'

As Yakumo murmured that, he went around to the back of the building.

After walking through the weeds for the while, Yakumo suddenly stopped like he had found something.

Yakumo was looking at a small window at his waist.

The glass was broken.

'Let's go.'

After saying that, Yakumo went inside through the window frame.

Haruka took Yakumo's hand, which he stuck out from inside, and stepped into the house as well.

Because the curtains were closed, the room was dark.

The room had a red carpet. Perhaps it was used as a bedroom, as there was a large double bed.

On top of the sideboard, there was a vase.

Though it was empty now, flowers might have kept in it before.

Yakumo turned on the torch he had borrowed from Gotou and slowly headed deeper into the building.

They went straight through the room and opened the door to see a living room with a fireplace. Chic rocking chairs were lined up next to each other.

In the back of the room, there was a large wall clock with a moving pendulum.

Rustle –

Something moved.

Yakumo slowly pointed the light of the torch at it.

Haruka saw a black shadow in the corner of the room.

'Masato-kun!'

Haruka cried out without thinking.

Masato had his back to the wall and was sitting there hugging his knees.

Haruka tried to run towards him, but Yakumo grabbed her arm.

'Don't just run over there!'

'But Masato-kun!'

'That isn't Masato. It's the spirit of Rin-san, who was called a witch.'

Haruka finally came to her senses when she heard Yakumo's words.

Even if he looked like Masato from the outside, a different person was inside him – Rin.

In the dark, Masato's bloodshot eyes stood out.

Was there a violent hatred because of being persecuted and killed in those eyes?

'What should we do?' Haruka asked Yakumo.

She knew Masato was possessed by Rin's spirit, but she couldn't leave it like this.

'She isn't resentful,' said Yakumo with pity.

'Then why is she wandering?'

'She isn't wandering. She's searching.'

Yakumo lowered his sad gaze.

'Searching? What for?'

'Obviously, the son that separated from her when she was killed.'

– Her son.

That was right. Rin had a child. Ookura and Wakabayashi had said that. That child was missing.

Yakumo had said that if Rin were filled with hatred, they wouldn't have been able to find Yumiko. Haruka felt like this was what he meant.

'But why here?'

'Yesterday, we found Yumiko-chan near the clinic where Rin was. This is where she sent her son off before she was killed.'

'I see...'

That was why Rin had chosen this place. Even after her death, she was looking for her son. This was an emotion much stronger than hatred – love.

'Rin-san.'

Yakumo slowly approached Masato as he said that.

Masato – no, Rin – let out a howl like a wolf trying to intimidate its enemies as she glared at Yakumo. It felt like she would bite his neck if he let his guard down even slightly.

However, Haruka strangely felt no fear.

'Please. Return Masato-kun. I will search for your son, so...'

Haruka looked straight at Rin's eyes as she pleaded.

She had been in a terrible situation. She was persecuted as a witch and even lost her life in the end. Still, what she wanted in the end was for her beloved son to be safe.

'Please. Don't suffer any more.'

Haruka reached out to hug Rin.

'Back off.'

Yakumo stepped between them and forced her away.

'Why?'

'Rin-san just wants to meet her own child. So...'

Haruka's body was shaking. She started crying naturally.

Why did this happen? Rin had just wanted something that was natural, so why did somebody trample on that wish?

Haruka didn't understand.

'Even though his eyes were red and he had a horn, he was still human. But...'

With anger and sadness mixed together, Haruka didn't know what she wanted to say.

'That's enough. Thank you,' murmured Yakumo, laying a hand on Haruka's head.

Why did Yakumo say 'Thank you' – before Haruka could ask, Yakumo stood in front of Rin again.

'It's nice to meet you, Rin-san.'

Yakumo had a gentle smile that didn't fit the atmosphere as he continued.

'I'm your grandchild.'

'Eh?'

Even Haruka thought her voice sounded strange.

That was how unexpected Yakumo's words were.

While Haruka was still confused, there was the sound of metal on metal as the door opened.

– Gotou-san?

Haruka glanced over, but the person standing there was completely different.

– Nanase Miyuki.

Her long hair hung around her face, covering the left half of it.

With a twisted smile on her lips, she walked straight for them with a cold gaze filled with ill intent.

She was holding a square wooden box on her left side and a knife with a wide blade that could cut firewood in her right hand.

'Look what the cat's dragged in! if it isn't Yakumo-kun,' Miyuki said in a low voice.

Haruka was shaking in fear, but Yakumo didn't look disturbed at all.

'So you really came,' he said quietly.

'Really? It's like you knew I was going to come.'

'It's not like I knew – I did know.'

'Acting so smart.'

'I'm not acting. This is an important place to you, so...'

'Shut up!'

Miyuki let out a shrill shriek, interrupting Yakumo.

Perhaps because of her anger, her right hand holding the blade was shaking. Though she acted calm when things went her way, when something unexpected happen, she suddenly became angry, losing her senses.

'You become emotionally so quickly.'

Yakumo looked at Miyuki scornfully.

'You always get in my way. Stealing the things that are important to me.'

Miyuki glared at Yakumo as she took ragged breaths.

'Steal? That isn't correct. You lost it yourself. No, that isn't correct either. What you wanted never existed in the first place.'

'Shut your mouth! What do you know? I won't give it over to you!'

Miyuki bared her teeth as her cheek twitched.

It was like something had snapped within her.

'Die!'

Miyuki raised the blade.

Right after the glinting tip came down – a huge bearlike figure rushed in.

'Gotou-san!' exclaimed Haruka in her surprise.

Miyuki was blown away by the surprise attack like she had been in a traffic accident and fell down face-up.

The wooden box fell and something like a ball rolled out, hitting the wall.

It wasn't a ball. It was a human head. And its eyes were deep red.

'Aaahh!' screamed Haruka, jumping up.

'Just as you expected,' said Gotou as he pulled up the sleeves of his shirt with ragged breathing.

'I would have preferred it outside.'

Yakumo ran a hand through his hair in irritation.

Before coming here Yakumo had told Gotou to hide himself. Now Haruka understood the reason.

But – d

'How did you know Nanase Miyuki would come?'

'I want to know too,' agreed Gotou as he took out handcuffs and cuffed Miyuki's left hand to the window frame.

'I'll explain later. First...'

Yakumo picked up the head that had rolled to the wall in both hands and turned towards Masato again.

'That was quite an interruption.'

Masato didn't respond. He just looked out.

Yakumo continued speaking regardless.

'This is what you're looking for.'

Yakumo held the head out to Masato –

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'Oi! What are you talking about?' yelled Gotou.

Why would Rin, who was killed forty-five years ago, be searching for the head of the man with two red eyes?

Gotou walked over to Yakumo with a wide stride.

'Please be quiet,' said Yakumo, turning around.

'How could I be quiet? Explain properly.'

'Rin-san isn't looking for the people who killed her.'

'Then what is she looking for?'

'Her son.'

Yakumo spoke in pieces, as if he were confirming his words.

Gotou understood now. Rin had taken her son with her when she ran from the village. Then, the son disappeared after the incident.

'Could it be...'

The answer that inevitable came to Gotou made him speak aloud in his surprise.

'Correct. The man with two red eyes is Rin-san's son.'

Gotou couldn't believe it.

But –

'He doesn't have a horn, right?'

Yakumo had said earlier that Rin's son had a horn.

However, the man with two red eyes didn't have a horn.

'He did.'

As Yakumo said that, he brushed aside the hair on the head's forehead and showed the skin underneath it.

'Ah!' said Haruka, though she was still frightened.

Gotou could see as well.

'It's the scar from removing the "horn",' said Yakumo.

'How'd you know that man and Rin's son were the same person?'

'There aren't many men with two red eyes.'

That was true –

But wasn't jumping to a conclusion from just that dangerous? Perhaps Yakumo sensed Gotou's question, because he continued his explanation.

'Furthermore, I was held captive before in a log house in the Togakushi mountain area. Kamiyama-san also met with this man in Togakushi.'

That was –

'Not a coincidence.'

As Gotou said that, he recalled what he'd heard at the real estate office.

This cottage had a parent and child living here – that was probably the man with two red eyes and Nanase Miyuki.

'Twenty years ago, the local officer and the land owner's second son, Takafumi-san, were killed here by that man.'

The story made sense. The man with two red eyes probably killed Wakabayashi's father and Takafumi in revenge for his mother.

'Afterwards, he made this his secret hiding place,' said Yakumo, looking down at Nanase Miyuki, who had fainted.

Gotou understood. That was why this woman, after having her hiding place in Tokyo by Ishii, returned here. But –

'Why'd he make this his hiding place?'

'Please remember. Fifteen years ago, this man ended up moving together with Miyuki, who had killed her own family. She had been just ten then. He needed a place to settle down.'

That was why he ended up renting this cottage to live in. There wouldn't be many people around here – they might have been able to live secretly. But was that all?

'There were other places to hide, right?'

'It was his hometown.'

'Hometown?'

'Furthermore, he could see the cedar tree where his mother was buried here.'

Yakumo pointed out the window.

When Gotou looked out the window, he could see that cedar tree through the gap in the curtains. It was just like a grave marker.

'Would that man care about that?'

Even while Gotou asked that, he came to the answer.

The man with two red eyes killed the local officer, Wakabayashi's father, and the landowner's second son, Takafumi, in revenge for his mother.

That was evidence of how he thought of his mother and his connection to his hometown.

'Though I don't know whether he himself was conscious of it...'

As Yakumo said that, he smiled bitterly.

That means –

'Nanase Miyuki didn't think you'd be here then.'

'That is a little bit wrong.'

Yakumo shook his head.

'Hah?'

'It's because I was here that she was anxious.'

'What do you mean?'

'This is where that man and Nanase Miyuki lived together. There are probably traces of the various incidents they have been involved in up until now.'

Yakumo's father, the man with two red eyes, and Miyuki had pulled the strings of a number of cases in the past, but that wasn't all. There had to be cases they didn't know about yet.

There was information here that she didn't want them to know, which was why –

'She didn't want us to find it...'

'Furthermore, to her, this place has her memories with that man. She wouldn't want me to see it.'

On top of loving the man with red eyes, Nanase Miyuki was jealous of Yakumo, who was connected to that man with blood and also had a red left eye.

Because that was who she was, when she found out Yakumo was in Nagano, she wanted to clear things up before he found anything unnecessary.

'She was also going to kill me this time since I am an eyesore to her.'

Even though his life had been in danger, Yakumo spoke coolly. Gotou understood the situation. But what were they going to do next?

While Gotou was thinking, Yakumo turned towards Masato and took a step forward.

'Rin-san. You died. Forty-five years ago...'

Masato's body shook. Resisting the truth. That was how it looked.

Masato's breathing was ragged.

It was too late when Gotou noticed.

Masato had lowered his body. He kicked the floor with incredible force and charged forward.

'Gotou-san, please stop him!'

Responding immediately to Yakumo's yell, Gotou spread his arms to block Masato's path, but it was too late.

Masato ducked under Gotou's arms and ran out.

Yakumo placed the head he was holding on the floor chased after Masato with the nimbleness of a cat.

'Don't go!'

As Haruka yelled, she ran out.

'Damn it!'

Gotou ran after the two of them a step later.

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'Don't go!'

Haruka yelled as she ran after Masato.

Yakumo was right outside the cottage. He was looking at Masato.

Masato stood between the cottage and the cedar tree and stared at Yakumo.

Standing in the middle of the skunk cabbage, the cedar tree shook in the wind.

'Masato-kun!'

'Wait!'

Haruka was about to run towards Masato, but Yakumo stopped her immediately.

'Why? Masato-kun is –'

'It's still Rin-san.'

'But...'

Masato or Rin – Haruka didn't care. If she watched silently like this, they would disappear. That was how Haruka felt.

Haruka turned away from Yakumo and started to approach Masato when she saw a man standing by the cedar tree.

His long hair flowed down his back and he wore a black suit. His eyes were dyed deep red like a blazing flame.

The man whose head had been cut off.

Even after he had died and become a spirit, he misled people's hearts and instigated a number of crimes.

'Oi! Yakumo! That guy!'

Gotou had just come out of the cottage when he yelled in surprise.

'Gotou-san, please watch her,' instructed Yakumo.

'She can't run away though.'

'Just do it!' said Yakumo in his irritation as he turned towards the man with two red eyes again.

'Yakumo-kun...'

When Haruka called out to him, Yakumo slowly started walking.

– Yakumo's going to disappear. With that worry, Haruka swallowed her fear and followed Yakumo, hiding behind his back.

In response, the man with two red eyes started walking slowly as well. They both narrowed the distance between them, stopping right as they had Masato between them.

Haruka's hands were in tight fists as she looked at Yakumo's back.

'Rin-san.'

After a silence, Yakumo opened his mouth.

Masato slowly lifted his head.

'No, I should say Grandmother. He is your son.'

As Yakumo said that, he pointed at the man with two red eyes.

Yakumo had said that earlier. Rin's son was the man with two red eyes. That he was her grandson.

– This is my hometown too.

What Yakumo said yesterday flashed through her mind. She felt like this was what he meant.

Masato slowly turned to look at the man with two red eyes.

Then, the atmosphere completely changed.

'Oh... ohh...'

As Masato spoke, he lifted his arms and pointed out shaking fingers as he walked towards the man with two red eyes.

'Yakumo-kun!'

It would be dangerous to let him go to that man. Haruka grabbed Yakumo's arm tightly in her worry.

Masato stood in front of the man with two red eyes.

'Don't move from here.'

After saying that, Yakumo grabbed Masato's arms.

'Grandmother. You don't have to search for anyone any more.'

Yakumo looked at her with pitying eyes.

It was the first time Haruka had seen his eyes look like that.

'Ah...'

Tears started falling out of Masato's – no, Rin's eyes.

She had been looking for her son this whole time.

It didn't matter that her son had a horn in his head or red eyes. To her, he was her beloved son –

But that was all.

She wasn't a demon. She was a mother who thought of her child.

'Grandmother, it's over now. You protected your son. That blood has continued and is still living now.'

When Yakumo said that, he embraced Masato from behind, enveloping his body.

The muscles in Masato's body relaxed as he slowly collapsed into Yakumo's arms.

For a moment – just a moment – Haruka felt like she saw the figure of a faintly smiling woman.

'Masato-kun!'

Haruka rushed towards Yakumo and Masato.

'I'll leave Masato to you.'

After Yakumo said that, Haruka took Masato into her arms.

He was breathing.

– Thank goodness. Really, thank goodness.

Haruka lost her strength in her relief and started crying. She wiped those tears and looked up to see Yakumo facing the man with two red eyes.

'Your hatred is directed at the wrong place.'

Yakumo's voice reverberated, pregnant with hostility.

'On that day, I saw the true nature of humanity...'

The man with two red eyes smiled dauntingly.

When he was young, he probably saw his mother killed with unreasonable violence. What did he

think as he heard his mother scream in the agony of her death? What was born in his heart?

Haruka couldn't even imagine it. No, she was afraid of imagining it.

'You didn't see everything.'

'People are arrogant, selfish and avaricious. They are different from others. That reason is enough for them to scorn, hate and fear. People are terrible beyond reason.'

'Your mother is also human. She gave up her life to protect you. That isn't some awful emotion. It is pure love.'

'You talk like you know everything. You don't know the darkness of humanity.'

'Aren't you human as well?'

'I'm a demon. At that time, I threw away all my emotions and became a demon.'

'Then why did you avenge your mother? Why did you make the place where your mother slept your hiding place?'

'There isn't a reason.'

'Then why did you carry on your family line?'

To Haruka, it looked like Yakumo's shoulders were shaking slightly.

'A whim.'

'That's a lie. My existence is a contradiction to your thoughts. Even a person like you has emotions.'

'I don't have emotions. I am a demon made by the actions of humanity.'

'Are you asking for sympathy? You weren't made by anyone. You are you. No matter what the circumstances, the person who chooses your path is you yourself.'

Yakumo's voice seemed to echo off of the trees.

Yakumo was absolutely right. Haruka did sympathise.

The man with two red eyes was born into this world as an anomaly, was persecuted and wandered as he searched for a place he belonged to.

When he finally arrived here, he was given the dirty title of murderer, chased out as a demon, and had to watch his mother beaten to death before his eyes.

But –

'Your reasoning is no reason to kill somebody!'

At the end, Yakumo declared that.

'It seems we really can't understand each other...'

With that weak ending, the man with two red eyes disappeared as if he had melted into the scenery.

Haruka felt like she had caught a glimpse of his heart.

Because he was different from others, he was scorned, persecuted and feared. The people important to him were taken away – he might have walked in despair all this time.

Like that, hatred started to well up in the bottom of his heart and he took a step onto the path of madness.

But –

'Yakumo-kun, what you said wasn't wrong. No matter what the reason, it isn't a reason to kill somebody,' Haruka said towards Yakumo's back.

'I know.'

When Yakumo turned around, his expression was his usual, which was anticlimactic. He ran a hand through his messy hair and yawned with sleepy eyes.

That was right. Yakumo knew that best.

'Is it over?'

Gotou called from the entrance.

'Yes. Rin-san has gone.'

Yakumo's eyes narrowed as he looked up at the sky.

– This is the end.

'Aaaaaahhh!'

Just as Haruka had relaxed, there was a sudden beastly howl.

It was probably a human scream.

She looked at Yakumo. They looked at the cottage, where the voice had come from.

Miyuki had been in there –

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Gotou heard a beastly howl as he stood in the entrance.

He turned around and saw Miyuki standing there.

Wasn't she handcuffed? He found the answer to that question once he looked at her.

Miyuki had the head of the man with two red eyes under her left arm and a knife with a wide blade in her right. The handcuffs hung from her left wrist.

She had broken the window frame with the knife.

She had probably hurt herself when breaking it. Blood dripped from her left wrist.

Her dry lips were twisted into a frown. The eyes that peered through her fringe were filled with madness.

Just like a witch.

'Damn it!'

– That was my mistake.

Even though Yakumo had told him to watch her, he had looked away, sure she wouldn't be able to escape.

– But I won't let you get away again.

With ragged breaths, Miyuki glared at Gotou.

'I won't let you get away.'

Gotou glared back at Miyuki.

Bend over, rush at her, grab the knife – while Gotou was thinking about his plan, Miyuki laughed aloud.

– How can she laugh in this situation?

As if responding to Gotou's question, just as he thought he smelt something burning, black smoke started enveloping the area.

Seemed like she had set the cottage on fire.

The flames danced, crackling as they did so.

Nanase Miyuki's laughter grew louder.

'You!'

At the same time as Gotou's yell, Miyuki ran at Gotou, pushing him aside as she fled out of the cottage.

'As if I'd let you get away!'

Gotou kicked the ground and ran after Miyuki.

– I'll get you this time.

Miyuki ran into the forest in front of his eyes.

On top of the ground being hard to walk on, he had to zigzag through the scattered cedar trees. The distance, rather than being shortened, was growing larger.

Miyuki's laughter echoed through the forest.

As she reached a mossy rock about as high as a person, she stopped and turned to face Gotou.

– Did she give up?

Just as Gotou thought that, Miyuki kicked the rock and jumped.

'Damn it! Wait!'

Then, she disappeared.

Gotou didn't realise at first what had happened.

Gotou dragged his feet onto the rock where Miyuki had been and then he understood.

When he looked down, he saw that he was on a cliff with a river flowing below.

He couldn't see Miyuki any more –

終章

その後

EPILOGUE

epilogue

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'Hey! Doing well?'

Haruka went with Yakumo to Masato's hospital room.

At the reception, they ran into Masato's aunt and heard in brief about his condition.

He didn't have any major injuries and didn't seem to remember the time when he was possessed by a ghost, but he was very healthy besides that. He was only in hospital for a check-up and would be able to be discharged tomorrow.

Masato's aunt apologised again and again, saying, 'I apologise for the trouble we've caused.'

'Ah!'

On the bed, Masato looked incredibly healthy. His expression brightened at once.

The inside of Haruka's chest felt warm when she thought about how this child could smile like this now.

'We're going back today so we thought we'd visit before then.'

'You're already leaving?'

Masato's voice went down.

With the fuss with the incident, Haruka hadn't been able to talk with Masato at length. She felt a bit guilty.

'We'll come another time, when there's no case,' said Yakumo, running a hand through his hair.

'You say that, but you didn't come, right?'

Masato pouted.

'We'll come next time. Promise.'

'Really?'

'Yeah. I have to visit my grandmother's grave too, so I'll visit you along the way.' said Yakumo.

That was right. Rin was Yakumo's grandmother. Yakumo's background had been a mystery until now, but a lot of that had been revealed with this case.

'Along the way?' said Masato, sounding dissatisfied, though he didn't look like he really cared that much.

'Not happy with that?'

'Well, it's fine.'

'Let's eat soba at my house then,' added Haruka.

'Your house gives out rocks as food,' said Yakumo with a discouraged expression.

Haruka's father, Kazuhiro, had given Yakumo an actual rock while calling it sobagaki.

'That was...'

'What's up with your dad anyway? Yesterday, he suddenly forced himself into the room with some rice rine.'

'You're kidding!'

Haruka hadn't heard about that at all.

'He stayed until morning. Even though I was tired – it wasn't welcome.'

What on earth had they talked about? Haruka was curious, but on the other hand, she was too frightened to ask.

'Hey. Are you two dating?' asked Masato with a wide grin.

Haruka hadn't thought that Masato would ask that question.

Her body heated up all at once.

'E-er, that's...'

Haruka was fumbling for words to reply when another boy Masato's age ran in.

She'd seen him in a photo before. It was probably Tomoya.

'Masato! I'm so glad you're OK!'

Tomoya leapt onto the bed and hugged Masato.

'Tomoya-kun, that hurts.'

'Shut up! You went off and searched on your own. This is punishment.'

Tomoya jostled Masato.

Haruka had heard that he blamed Masato when Yumiko disappeared, but it seemed like that hadn't been how he really felt – it had probably come from mortification at himself for not being able to do anything.

'Wait, Tomoya. Masato-kun doesn't like that.'

Yumiko interrupted them.

When Haruka saw the bright smile on Masato's face, she felt how much he had changed.

'Let's go.'

Turning away from the cheerful children, Yakumo said that to Haruka quietly.

'Masato-kun, see you again.'

'See you again!'

With Masato's smile behind her, Haruka followed Yakumo out.

* * *

Gotou sat on the sofa in the hospital waiting room with Wakabayashi.

Wakabayashi's eyes were distant – he looked much older than yesterday, to the point that he looked like a different person.

'Are you all right?'

Gotou spoke up without thinking when he saw how small Wakabayashi looked.

'Yeah. I haven't fallen so much that I need you to worry about me.'

Wakabayashi smiled wryly.

'So? What did you want to talk about?' said Gotou, feeling uncomfortable.

I have something I want to talk to you about – Wakabayashi had said that.

'There's something I want to give you.'

Wakabayashi took an old photo from his jacket pocket and gave it to Gotou.

'What is it?'

Gotou accepted it.

There was a middle-aged man with black-rimmed glasses. It was probably the doctor named Kawakami. Next to him stood a beautiful woman with almond eyes. She was Rin.

Between them was a boy who had his head turned down.

Gotou realised immediately who it was.

He could see a lump on his forehead.

This is the horn Yakumo talked about –

When Gotou saw it like this, it really didn't look like a horn. It was just a bulge.

There was something wrong with the people who would treat him like a demon for something like this.

'I only talked to that boy once.'

'I didn't...'

Wakabayashi hadn't mentioned that even in front of the cedar tree.

'When I went to the clinic about my father, I played cards with him in the garden.'

'Cards.'

Just from knowing the several awful things that the man with two red eyes had done, that felt incredibly unnatural.

'At the time, he smiled. He smiled just like any other kid. I thought, so even demons laugh.'

'What are you trying to say?'

Wakabayashi breathed loudly before continuing.

'Was he always a demon? Or did the children around him turn him into one?'

Was the madness within somebody always there? Or was it brought out of them because of their circumstances?

Gotou had been on many cases.

He sometimes thought that circumstances definitely changed people. But on the other hand, he also felt there was madness from birth that normal people couldn't understand.

Which is correct – Gotou thought about it, but he gave up right away.

'I don't understand things as difficult as that,' he replied curtly.

The man with two red eyes had said that the true nature of humanity was darkness. Yakumo had said that he could see a small light when he faced that darkness.

Rather than which was correct or incorrect, Gotou wanted to believe there was a light.

When he looked up, he saw Yakumo and Haruka walking towards him.

Wakabayashi stood up and bowed at both of them.

Yakumo received him with a nod.

'Let's go.'

Yakumo was the one who said that.

Right. Gotou really had to get back soon or it would be bad.

'Bye,' said Gotou as he stood up.

* * *

As usual, Ishii was dying from boredom because of paperwork.

When Gotou reported that Nanase Miyuki was spotted in Nagano prefecture, the search here had been stopped.

Why did she go to Nagano? And how did Gotou encounter her?

There was a mountain of things Ishii wanted to ask once Gotou returned.

Interrupting Ishii's thoughts, the door opened and Makoto appeared.

'Hello.'

'M-Makoto-san.'

'Detective Gotou hasn't returned yet then,' said Makoto, sounding a bit disappointed as she looked

around the room.

'He hasn't. Earlier, he contacted me to say he was returning, but...'

'I see. I have a number of things I want to ask him.'

'Is it about Nanase Miyuki?'

'Yes.'

Makoto looked somewhat sorrowful.

'Though only slightly, I feel like I understand what you were saying, Makoto-san,' said Ishii, though he was a bit divided on whether to say it.

'Eh?'

'About the reason for Nanase Miyuki's actions. She stole back the head of the man with two red eyes even though it put her in danger.'

'She will definitely show up again,' said Makoto with confidence.

'Why do you think that?'

'Because of Yakumo-kun.'

'Yakumo-shi?'

Makoto said that matter-of-factly, but Ishii didn't understand.

'To Nanase Miyuki, Yakumo-kun is...'

Interrupting Makoto's words, the door opened with a bang.

'Where's Gotou?'

Miyagawa flew into the room.

'Er, um, I think he's heading her...'

'I'm going to fire that guy!'

Miyagawa's face was red with anger. His menacing look made Ishii anxious.

'No, please, anything but that...'

Ishii wiped the sweat off his forehead as he tried to smooth things over.

For some reason, Makoto laughed as she saw that.

'Well, whatever. Ishii, come with me.'

Miyagawa signalled for him to come with his chin.

'Eh? Again?'

'You don't want to?'

Miyagawa glared at him fiercely.

'I'll go!'

Ishii stood up reflexively and ran out after Miyagawa.

He fell –

* * *

Haruka closed her eyes in front of the cedar tree, a dwelling for spirits, and put her hands together.

Surrounded by white skunk cabbage, it felt sacred here.

This was where Rin had slept for a long forty-five years.

Her son had looked different from others. Even though that was all, people didn't accept him. They persecuted her, making her lose her life.

However, she tried to protect her son until the end.

Even after death, she searched for him frantically, worried about his safety –

Though she had been in awful circumstances, it felt like her hope had been carried through.

How could Yakumo's father be in such darkness even after death when he was so loved?

He had said this.

– I am a demon made by the actions of humanity.

Haruka couldn't deny it. People were terrifyingly cruel to those who were different from them.

When those negative emotions connected, incidents like the one forty-five years ago occurred.

In that meaning, that person might also have been a victim.

But –

Yakumo said this.

The only person who chooses your path is you yourself –

Haruka wanted to believe in Yakumo's words. No matter how dark the circumstances, there was a small light ahead. When people couldn't believe in that any more, they would step off the path.

'Let's go already.'

Yakumo, who stood behind her, ran his hand through his messy hair in irritation.

'Already?'

'We're going to your sister's grave too. If we don't hurry, we'll have to stay another night.'

– That's right. I have to visit my sister too.

'OK.'

Haruka stood up and looked at the sky.

The sun had set. The dusk sky was dyed red.

The mountain was also tinged with red, like the red leaves of autumn –

添付ファイル

同乗者

E X T R A ^{FILE}

extra file: passenger

-

It was on the trip back from Nagano –

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In the backseat, Haruka gazed vacantly out the window.

Visiting her sister's grave had taken more time than expected, so it was already dark when then left Togakushi.

'He's so carefree.'

As Gotou drove, he grumbled that while looking at the passenger seat.

Yakumo was asleep.

'He is.'

Haruka laughed a bit as she looked at Yakumo's sleeping face through the rear-view mirror.

Even though Yakumo was usually intolerable, he was as innocent as a boy as he slept – it was cute.

'Maybe I'll smack him awake.'

'He'll be a pain if he wakes up – let's let him sleep.'

When Haruka said that, Gotou laughed aloud as well.

It was nicer and quieter with him asleep. But at the same time, she did want to wake him up.

It had been tough with the case this time too. She wanted to let him rest as much as he could.

'Haruka-chan, you can sleep too.'

Gotou glanced at her.

To be honest, Haruka was considerably tired herself. She was grateful for Gotou's suggestion, but he must have been tired too.

Even though he complained a lot, he accompanied them to the end.

'I'm fine...'

'Ah...'

When Haruka said that, Gotou spoke up like he had realised something.

Haruka looked up and vaguely saw someone standing at the roadside.

– A woman.

It was a considerable mountain road and there were no houses nearby. However Haruka thought about it, it was unnatural for a woman to be alone in a place like this at night.

While Haruka was thinking, Gotou stopped the car by the woman.

'What's wrong?'

Gotou opened the passenger window and called out. The woman responded with a smile. To Haruka, it looked sad.

'I want to go back,' said the woman.

'Where to?'

'Nagano City.'

'It's on the way. Get on.'

After Gotou said that, the woman nodded.

Haruka opened the backdoor. The woman came in after bowing with an apologetic expression on her face.

'What were you doing in a place like this?' asked Gotou after starting the car.

'My car... stopped moving.'

The woman looked down.

'I see.'

'I wanted to go back no matter what, but it just wouldn't go...'

'It must have been tough,' said Haruka.

The woman nodded.

After a while, the woman turned towards Haruka and said, 'Excuse me...'

'What is it?'

'It is incredibly discourteous of me, but I have a request.'

'Request?'

'Yes. I have a son who is turning three years old. His name is Daiki.'

'They're cute at that age.'

'Yes, very.'

The woman smiled, but her eyes were wet with tears.

Haruka's chest felt tight as she looked at that expression. It seemed like there were special circumstances.

'I want you to tell Daiki this. Sorry I couldn't keep the promise, but I'll always be watching you... Please tell him that.'

'Say it yourself,' interrupted Gotou.

'Eh?'

'I have a kid too. Though we're not related by blood... But still, she's my kid. No matter what the circumstances, if you love your kid, you should say it yourself.'

Gotou's words were laced with irritation. But at the same time, they were also warm.

'That's right. It would be wonderful if I could...'

The woman lowered her lashes.

– Why can't this woman meet her child?

Haruka was hit with the impulse to ask, but in the end, she couldn't say it aloud.

'Gotou-san, who did you let on?'

Yakumo suddenly opened his eyes.

'Who...'

Gotou looked at the rear-view mirror and gasped.

Haruka did the same.

The woman who had been next to her had suddenly disappeared.

'Why? Earlier there was a woman here...'

Yakumo seemed annoyed as he looked at Haruka and ran a hand through his hair.

'What happened?'

Gotou looked at the backseat.

'Gotou-san, brake!' yelled Yakumo.

Haruka looked in front to see a guard rail there.

'Ack!' shouted Gotou, slamming on the brakes.

The car screeched to a stop right before hitting the rail.

'Honestly...' grumbled Yakumo with a deep sigh.

Haruka was dazed for a while, but she slowly came back to her senses. She felt like she understood what that woman was now.

'Hey, Yakumo. Was that woman...'

'Correct. She was a ghost.'

Yakumo ran a hand through his messy hair.

'As I thought...'

It seemed like they'd given a ride to a ghost.

When Haruka realised, a shiver ran down her spine. Perhaps that woman –

'She was going to try to kill us after getting in the car then,' said Gotou.

Haruka had thought the same thing.

'Gotou-san, you really are an idiot.'

Yakumo yawned, seeming completely calm.

'What?'

'The reason you almost got into an accident wasn't the woman. It was your own lack of caution.'

Now that Yakumo said it, it was true.

'Shut up. Then what did she get on this car for?'

'Didn't she request anything?'

Yakumo returned Gotou's question with a question.

'Ah!'

Haruka had come to the answer.

That woman had given a message for her son. Because she was dead, she couldn't give it herself.

That was why –

'The message earlier...' said Gotou. He seemed to have realised too.

'Honestly.'

Yakumo looked discouraged as he crossed his arms.

'What should we do?' Haruka asked Yakumo, leaning forward.

'There isn't any choice. If we just go home, we won't be able to sleep at night, right?'

'Right.'

'Then we're taking a detour,' agreed Gotou as he started the car.

– Please be at peace. We will take responsible for the message and deliver it.

Haruka vowed that in her heart.

※本作はフィクションであり、実在の人物、団体等とは一切関係ありません。

afterword

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Thank you for reading *Psychic Detective Yakumo 7 – The Location of the Spirit*.

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Though this is a private matter, during the revisions, my awaited first child was born.

From now on, I'll take time to become a parent – I thought about things like that as I looked at the face of my child.

Come to think of it, I feel like this volume was a story of parents and children.

-

Because of Isshin's death, Gotou and Nao became parent and child, although awkwardly.

The father Kazuhiro and the mother Keiko, watching over Haruka.

Wakabayashi, who continued to suffer with the burden of his father's crime.

Rin, who tried to protect her child until the end.

Nanase Miyuki, who treated the man with the two red eyes as her lover and her parent.

And then Yakumo and the man with two red eyes, who walk completely different paths, though they both have the red eye which can see the spirits of the dead and were in similar circumstances

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Though parent and child is only three words, the relationship has many forms.

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The story is finally reaching its climax.

What end will greet them?

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Wait!! And look forward to it!

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Heisei 23¹, early summer – Kaminaga Manabu

1 Heisei 23 is 2011 in the Gregorian calendar.