

神永学



心霊探偵

八

PSYCHIC DETECTIVE
YAKUMO

Manabu Kamlnaga

震

8

失われた魂

角川文庫

PSYCHIC DETECTIVE YAKUMO

Manabu Kamimaga

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疑惑

第一章

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01

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Life is a momentary phase

The end of life is a momentary phase

– Dougen

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1

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'Stop!'

Saitou Yakumo woke up to his own yell.

His body was covered in sweat as he lay on the wooden floor.

– A dream?

After realising that, Yakumo slowly sat up.

He didn't remember the contents of his dream, but he was left with a smouldering impression in his chest that it had been incredibly unpleasant

That's how dreams are –

His vision was blurry, as if he were surrounded by fog.

The back of his neck hurt like it had been squeezed tightly.

– Did I hit it on something?

Then, his surroundings became clear. He had thought he was in the university's Movie Research Circle room, where he usually slept, but it seemed he was wrong.

It was dim –

There were candleholders in the four corners of the room, with the small lights of the candles flickering. The room was about twenty tatami in size.

At first glance, it looked like a temple, but rocks dripping with water jutted out of the ceiling and the wall in the back and the narrow pillar in the middle of the room supported the limestone ceiling, which looked like it might collapse at any moment.

This was probably built out of some limestone cave.

– Why am I here?

Yakumo was trying to search through his memories, but the pain in the back of his neck stopped him. He let out a groan and closed his eyes.

His forehead was covered with a cold sweat.

He was taking deep breaths to try to calm down when an offensive smell suddenly assaulted him.

Yakumo knew what that smell was immediately.

Blood –

'This is...'

Yakumo leant back without thinking.

There was an aging fifty-year old man collapsed there in priest's robes.

His eyes were wide. A purple tongue hung from his half-open mouth.

He had dug his fingernails into the floorboards, probably because he had frantically struggled to get away.

There were stab wounds all over the man's body.

The large amount of blood that had come out of his wounds spread around the man, as if to draw his figure.

It was clear to anyone that Yakumo was already dead.

Yakumo knew this man.

His name was Seidou. The chief priest at the temple.

'What is this...' murmured Yakumo, covering his face with his hands. Then, he suddenly felt something strange.

He felt something sticky on his palms.

– It can't be.

Yakumo held his hands up in front of his eyes.

They were a deep red –

From his palms to his fingers, congealed blood stuck to his hand.

Again, Yakumo looked at Seidou, who lay face-down.

There was a knife stuck in the floor.

The blade was stained with blood up to the handle.

Yakumo had a creeping suspicion.

There was no sign that Seidou had been dragged. The blood seeping into the floor around him also showed that he had been killed here.

– Something happened.

The more he tried to remember, the more the back of his neck hurt. Like there were memories there that he himself wanted to forget.

While bearing with the pain in the back of his neck, Yakumo slowly stood up.

– I won't forgive you.

Yakumo heard a voice from somewhere.

A woman's voice that echoed with darkness, like it had been strangled out of the bottom of her stomach –

When Yakumo turned around, he saw a woman with her head facing down standing in front of the double doors which were the only exit.

She wore a navy blazer with a short check skirt. It was probably a uniform from some high school.

Her wet hair clung to her face.

Her skin was so pale that her veins appeared, faintly blue, and she was sickly thin.

Yakumo knew that in front of him wasn't a living person but a ghost that he was seeing with his red left eye.

Yakumo looked at the girl.

– I won't forgive you.

The girl said that again in a voice filled with hatred as she slowly lifted her head.

Her eyes were bloodshot, as if she were possessed by something.

Hatred, resentment, envy – those eyes condensed a variety of negative emotions.

– Die. Pay for it with your death.

The girl repeated herself in a voice as hoarse as an old woman's.

'Why would you go so far...'

Without replying to Yakumo's question, the girl went through the entrance, as if she had been sucked in, and disappeared.

'Wait.'

Using the wall for support, Yakumo chased the girl.

Just as he was about to try to push open the doors, he suddenly stopped.

'This is...'

There was a piece of paper about the size of a business card stuck on the doors.

There was a short message on the piece of paper.

The moment Yakumo read the message, his eyes went wide.

If someone who didn't understand looked at it without knowing the point, it would probably be difficult to understand the meaning from the message. However, Yakumo was different. He

immediately understood the dreadfulness indicated by that message.

– This is bad.

Yakumo wanted to make a call, but he didn't have his mobile. That wasn't all that was missing. He couldn't find his wallet or key either.

He turned around, but they hadn't fallen in the room.

Either he dropped them somewhere, or – anyway, looking at the situation, it would be useless to stay any longer. He needed to get out of here as soon as he could.

Yakumo took the paper off the doors and stuck it in his pocket. Then, he took a candleholder in his pocket and pushed open the doors.

With the help of the faint light of the candle, he looked around.

Right in front of the doors, he saw the bare rock face of a limestone cavern.

Water dripped from the rocks above his head. The cave continued, about five metres wide and two metres tall.

– Seems like this is the only way to proceed.

Yakumo tried to advance, dragging his body forward, but his feet were unsteady, as if the ground were shaking beneath him.

After walking a few steps, he put his hand against the rock wall and took deep breaths with heaving shoulders.

He heard footsteps.

Somebody's here –

The moment he lifted his head, he was hit by a strong light.

Yakumo's vision went white, like a smokescreen had been put up in front of him.

'What are you doing here?'

It was a man's voice. It had an intimidating tone to it.

After blinking a number of times, he finally saw the person standing in front of him.

It was a middle-aged uniformed officer holding a torch.

'I...'

Yakumo was lost for words.

At the current stage, his memories were still vague, so he had no way of explaining.

'You look a bit pale...'

The middle-aged officer walked towards Yakumo.

'I'm fine,' replied Yakumo, looking away from reflex. But it was a bit late. The middle-aged uniformed officer looked surprised.

'Your eye...'

Yakumo knew what he was going to say even without hearing the rest.

His left eye was red – that was why he was surprised. In the past, seeing a response like this would hurt him deeply, but now he thought of it like nothing.

People were frightened of others who were different than they were. It was natural as a living being.

'It's terrible!'

A voice echoed through the limestone cavern, interrupting the silence.

Yakumo turned his eyes towards the doors to the cave, which were still open. A young uniformed officer stood there, pointing inside agitatedly.

It appeared he had noticed the corpse in the cave.

'What happened?' asked the middle-aged uniformed officer in a relaxed manner.

'S-somebody's dead!' shouted the young uniformed officer.

That was the sign.

Yakumo pushed the middle-aged uniformed officer aside and ran.

The middle-aged officer fell on his behind and yelled, 'Wait!' Unfortunately, Yakumo couldn't obey that command right now.

Yakumo just ran with all his strength towards the exit.

After running about fifty metres, the path took a large curve.

He saw the light of the exit after the turn.

'Oi! Wait!'

The officers' voices and footsteps followed him.

Even if he ran out of the exit, with his exhausted body, he would probably be caught soon. That would be the end of everything.

– What to do?

Yakumo stopped and looked around. He spotted a gap between the rocks.

Limestone caves were complex – there wasn't only one exit. Perhaps this gap would connect to another exit. However, if it was a dead end, that would be like running into a cage himself.

Yakumo made his decision and decided to dive into the gap, hiding himself quickly.

He stifled his breath –

The footsteps of the officers caught up soon after, but they went right by.

After a pause, Yakumo moved to look at the exit.

After the officers discussed something at the exit, they split up, running left and right.

Yakumo let out a sigh of relief, but then he returned to the problem at hand.

He couldn't hide here forever. The officers wouldn't search that far either. If they couldn't find him, they'd return to the limestone cave.

That said, going to the limestone cave's exit now would be suicide.

He really would have to go through the gap in the rocks to the end.

Yakumo stooped over and stepped into the deep darkness.

Suddenly, the bloody image of Seidou flashed through Yakumo's mind.

– Did I do that?

He wanted to deny it – there was no way – but at this point, Yakumo didn't have the evidence to.

Anyway, he had to escape now.

After moving about ten metres, he saw a small light.

There was an exit ahead.

With relief, he took another step. Then, his foot slipped.

'Damn.'

It was already too late when he spoke.

The rock he had stepped on crumbled loudly.

Yakumo fell into the darkness, dragged in by gravity –

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2

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After Ozawa Haruka finished her orchestra circle practice, she headed for the prefabricated building in the back of Building B.

There were ten small rooms of four and a half tatami in size on each floor.

Haruka stood in front of the room at the very end of the first floor. There was a plate that read Movie Research Circle on the door, but it was a blatant lie.

The owner of the room, Saitou Yakumo, had fooled the university's student union, created a fictional club and used the room as his own.

Yakumo's left eye had been red from birth and had the unique ability to see the spirits of the dead.

– A hateful guy.

That had been Haruka's first impression. A contrary person who was unfriendly and hated to deal with others.

Starting with Miki's case. Haruka had experienced many incidents with Yakumo.

Most of them had been depressing, but with those experiences, Haruka's impression of Yakumo had changed a lot.

Because of Yakumo's unique ability, his own mother had tried to kill him and others looked at him like he was strange.

After experiencing hardship, Yakumo had put a wall between himself and others to protect his damaged heart.

However, inside he noticed more than anyone and had a kind side to him.

After Haruka noticed that, Yakumo seemed cute to her.

Somehow, she could relax with him. Though he probably didn't intend it himself, she felt like she was being protected.

Now, she would go see him whenever she had time.

One of her friends had asked her if they were dating before. Unfortunately, the answer was no.

Though she had experienced many things with Yakumo, time had passed without any particular developments, and before she'd noticed it, she was here, half a year from graduation.

After that – there was probably nothing.

They might have experienced too much to become more than friends.

Close, but far. That was her relationship with Yakumo.

I wonder what Yakumo thinks – she did want to ask, but she felt like doing so would ruin everything they had built so far.

She was very afraid of that.

– What am I thinking about?

Haruka smiled self-derisively and looked towards the door again.

Today, she hadn't been involved in some case like usual. It would be Yakumo's birthday soon. She had thought about giving him a present, but she didn't know what he would like.

After worrying about it, she decided to ask the person himself and came here.

'Yakumo-kun, you here?'

Haruka called out as she opened the door.

However, Yakumo was missing.

'What? He's not here...'

With a sigh, Haruka sat on her usual seat by the door.

A dreary room with nothing in it –

Even the chair she sat on was just a rusty folding chair that could be found anywhere. That said, it made her calm.

It was a small room, only four and a half tatami in size, but she didn't have to put on airs here – she could be herself.

Haruka rested her head on the table.

It was quiet.

'Yakumo, won't you come back soon...'

Once he got back, he would definitely complain, saying something like 'What are you doing here?' or 'Do you have this much free time?'

When Haruka had first met Yakumo, she would become seriously mad by what he said.

However, now it was as natural to her as a 'Good morning'. It was comfortable.

She had never felt this way with anyone else before.

– I probably like...

To clear her head, Haruka took out her mobile and started typing a message.

It was to Yakumo.

She had never received a reply from Yakumo after messaging him. It was just a one-way digital signal.

It was mysterious how she still felt like they were connected this way.

<Do you want anything?>

Haruka sent a short message and lay on the table again.

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3

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I have so much time –

Gotou Kazutoshi yawned as he sat on the chair.

Nothing case-like had happened recently. He knew that he shouldn't want cases as part of the police, but sitting at a desk didn't suit him.

The Unsolved Cases Special Investigation Room that Gotou was stationed at had the goal of

cleaning up cases that had been placed aside, as per the name.

That said, most of it was just paperwork. For Gotou, who thought before he acted, it was like torture.

After Gotou had sighed for the nth time, the door opened.

'D-Detective Gotou! I-it's terrible!'

Ishii Yuutarou flew in with a panicked expression.

'You're so noisy,' responded Gotou with a click of his tongue.

Gotou could count on one hand the number of times things had actually been terrible when Ishii said they were.

'But...'

Ishii faltered, suddenly losing his momentum.

Gotou had thought that Ishii had grown a bit, but he really didn't have his feet firmly planted on the ground.

'What are you making such a fuss about?'

'E-er, I passed.'

'For what?'

'That. I passed.'

As usual, Ishii didn't get to the point.

'What's that? Say it clearly.'

'The promotion exam.'

Ishii's breathing was ragged.

'Promotion exam?'

'Like I said, I passed. The assistant inspector promotion exam.'

'That's good.'

Gotou wasn't properly listening, but when he understood the meaning of the words, he suddenly come to his senses.

'What did you say just now?'

'I said, the promotion exam...'

'That isn't it. I meant the rank.'

'Assistant inspector.'

Ishii puffed up his chest in pride.

'You're going to be an assistant inspector?'

'Yes sir.'

– What the hell.

Gotou's sleepiness flew away all at once.

'What's wrong? You look pale...'

Ishii looked at Gotou's face in concern.

Though he probably didn't mean it this way himself, it felt like he was pitying Gotou. It irritated him.

Gotou lifted his hand to hit Ishii's head, but he didn't drop it.

'Excuse me...'

Ishii adjusted the position of his silver-framed glasses with his fingers. His gesture, which annoyed Gotou even normally, especially grated on his nerves today.

'What?'

'Aren't you happy for me?'

– Happy? You kidding?

Gotou hurriedly swallowed the words he had almost said.

If those words left his mouth, it would be like he had acknowledged the dirty jealousy in the bottom of his heart.

'Congratulations, Assistant Inspector Ishii.'

Gotou turned his chair around so his back was facing Ishii.

He knew himself he wasn't acting like an adult, but knowing that didn't change anything.

'Are you angry?'

Ishii walked in front of Gotou as he said that.

– This guy really can't read the mood.

'I'm not angry!'

'But...'

Ishii's brows furrowed in his confusion.

'Do you know my rank?'

'You're a police inspector.'

There was no malice in Ishii's words. That just made Gotou more irritated.

'I'm the same as you. Assistant inspector.'

'Are you joking again, sir?'

Ishii shook his head, as if to say 'My, my'. That gesture made Gotou even more annoyed.

Gotou clicked his tongue and stood up.

'E-excuse me... Where are you going?'

'I will be having lunch. Assistant Inspector Ishii.'

Gotou bowed theatrically towards Ishii.

'Please stop that.'

Ishii wriggled like a mollusc and clung to Gotou.

'Let go of me!'

Gotou thrust Ishii away and left the room, but then his feet suddenly stopped.

– Why am I so angry?

He didn't have a response.

– The corporate ladder can kiss my ass!

Like that, he had done whatever he wanted up until now. He hadn't even tried taking the promotion exam, since it was annoying.

Even though nobody had told him to do it – even though it was what he himself wanted – why was he so irritated?

'Damn it!'

Gotou kicked the wall and started walking.

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4

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Splish, splish –

Yakumo regained consciousness while hearing the periodic sound of dripping water.

– I'm still alive.

When he opened his eyes, he saw limestone, winding like a gigantic organism.

Yakumo sat up from his face-up state.

He saw a faint light coming in from outside. Though it was small, there was a hole to the outside. It looked like he could get out if he crouched.

A creaking pain ran through his left leg, making Yakumo's expression contort.

The lower left half of his jeans was ripped and soaked with blood

With the support of a rock jutting out from the ground, Yakumo got up and started walking, dragging his injured left leg behind him, and escaped the limestone cave while stooped over.

He was in the middle of a forest of cedar trees.

He looked up and saw the summer sun peeking through.

He naturally narrowed his eyes and covered them with his hands. Then, he heard the sound of running water.

About five metres ahead, he saw a stream.

It was about as deep as his ankle. It seemed like a spring was the water source – he could see clearly to the bottom of the stream.

Yakumo went into the stream, put his face to the water to drink it and wet his dry throat, and washed the wound on his left leg.

Then, he rubbed his hands together in the water to wash the blood off.

The red water slowly flowed away.

It would probably soon fade into the rest of the water, making it indistinguishable.

Yakumo got out on the rock on the opposite side. He ripped the left sleeve of his shirt from the shoulder and wrapped the injury on his left leg on it, using the sleeve as a bandage.

Yakumo went to the nearby cedar tree, sat down and calmed his breathing.

– Why did this happen?

After he had regained his calm, that question came to Yakumo's brain.

The man who died was the priest of the temple, Seidou. The two of them had walked this weedy path last night and went into the limestone cavern – he remembered that.

Something was following them then.

But Yakumo wasn't sure of what. When he tried to remember, his head started hurting, as if to stop him.

Yakumo gave up on trying to remember what happened around the incident and started organising his thoughts in order.

Yesterday morning, a man came to the Movie Research Circle at the university.

It was Eishin. He was fairly old, but he had a large frame with a good physique. At first glance he looked gentle, but he was broadminded.

He had been the teacher of Yakumo's uncle, Isshin.

After Isshin's death, he had been persistent in trying to get Yakumo to continue at the temple, so Yakumo found him troublesome.

'There's something I'd like to request.'

Eishin had said that the moment he entered the room.

'I refuse.'

Despite Yakumo's refusal, Eishin continued anyway.

'Do you know about reincarnation?'

Eishin smiled.

– Reincarnation.

Yakumo was half-dumbfounded when he heard the word.

Rustle.

The rustling of a tree brought Yakumo back to his senses.

Something had run through the grass.

A raccoon.

Yakumo was relieved, but he knew he couldn't stay here forever.

If the police found his way out of the limestone cave, they would probably come here right away. He had to put as much distance as he could between them before them.

Most importantly, he couldn't just keep running like this.

He needed to gather information and confirm what had happened. No matter what terrible truth was waiting for him, it was his duty to know.

Yakumo stood up with determination and began to walk along the stream –

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5

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With complicated feelings, Ishii threw himself into the paperwork.

I want to become like Gotou as quickly as I can – he had frantically tried his hardest with that mind set and taken the assistant inspector promotion exam for that reason, but he hadn't thought he would really be able to catch up.

And he was also surprised that Gotou's rank was assistant inspector.

Did he fail the test? No, that wasn't it. He probably hadn't had the time to even take it.

Rather than taking a promotion exam, Gotou had chosen to act as a detective inspector. And how

was Ishii in comparison to that?

After asking himself that, Ishii thought he was horribly lowly.

His shoulders slumped just as the door to the room opened.

The chief of the detectives, Miyagawa Hideya, showed up.

Though he had a small frame, he had a bald head and thick eyebrows. Underneath that, he had glaring eyes with a sharp glint in them which had the pressuring air of a carnivore.

'Where' Gotou?' said Miyagawa in a forceful and gravelly voice after looking around the room.

'Ah, er, he just stepped out.'

'Slacking off at a time like this.'

Miyagawa walked in angrily with large strides and then sat on top of the desk with his arms crossed.

'Did something happen?' Ishii asked timidly.

'This morning, a corpse was found in the back of a limestone cavern in Nishitama,' said Miyagawa with a sigh.'

'A corpse...'

The victim was Todayama Seidou, the priest of a nearby temple. Fifty-eight years old.'

Miyagawa continued his explanation in a flat tone.

'The incident occurred at about nine this morning. There was an anonymous tip about a corpse in a limestone cavern in the mountain area of Nishitama.'

'Anonymous...'

It wasn't rare for anonymous information to come to the police.

Especially in big incidents, informants didn't want to get involved.

'It seems like that limestone cavern's famous as a spiritual spot.'

'Perhaps he went there to test his courage?'

'We don't know the details yet, but it's possible. Anyway, two policemen went that and found a corpse, like the tip said.'

'Oh.'

Ishii gave a response lacking feeling.

He saw the outline of the case, but it was out of their jurisdiction. He didn't know why Miyagawa had gone out of his way to talk about it.

'It seems like the corpse was stabbed all over.'

'Stabbed... all over...'

The image of a priest covered in blood in the limestone cavern came up in Ishii's head. He gulped. If he actually saw it, he probably would have screamed.

'So the Nishitama precinct sent a request for cooperation.'

'To us?'

Ishii was surprised.

'Yeah.'

'Why is that?'

'The two officers he went witnessed a suspicious man at the scene.'

Miyagawa's way of speaking was impassive, like he was reading a speech, but his expression was unusually grim.

'Is he the culprit?'

'The Nishitama precinct says it's likely.'

'I see.'

'In the officers' testimony, the man who ran from the scene had a red left eye.'

Miyagawa said that without a pause.

'Eh?'

It took some time for Ishii to understand.

Ishii only knew one person with a red left eye.

– Saitou Yakumo.

But that was just from the people Ishii knew. He couldn't deny the possibility that there were other people with red left eyes.

'Look at this.'

Miyagawa might have sensed what Ishii was feeling, because he took a piece of paper from his breast pocket and placed it on the desk.

It was a copy of an identity card which looked like a student ID.

'T-this is...'

When Ishii saw what was written there, he was lost for words.

– Meisei University, Saitou Yakumo

'There was a wallet at the limestone cavern. Seems like this was in it,' explained Miyagawa.

'That's...'

Yakumo's head flashed through Ishii's mind.

Well-defined features and skin was white as porcelain. Terrible bedhead and sleepy eyes.

He had a blank expression and acted indifferent of everything, but in the back of his eyes, he coolly observed others' words and actions.

It was true that his perception had led them to solve many cases, but at the same time, Ishii felt frightened.

When he stood in front of Yakumo, he felt like Yakumo saw right to the bottom of his heart, so Ishii couldn't relax. There was something mysterious about Yakumo.

It might have been because Yakumo was the son of that man –

'The Nishitama precinct's sending a detective over,' said Miyagawa while crossing his arms.

'Could it be that we are –'

'Exactly.'

'Eeeehhh!'

Ishii exclaimed without thinking.

They were going to cooperate with a detective from the Nishitama precinct and chase Yakumo. To Ishii, it just seemed like a bad joke.

'Don't complain. I told them in advance that you're Yakumo's acquaintances.'

'I-isn't that bad?'

'They'd find out anyway. It'd be even worse to hide it.'

'I see...'

It was just as Miyagawa said. If they hid it, the information would come out easily once they searched. If it was found out later, it would become an even worse problem.

'Anyway, get Gotou back before they get here.'

Miyagawa finished with that and then briskly walked out the room with his bow-legged gait.

Ishii felt like a gigantic weight had been placed on his shoulders. It seemed like he would be crushed flat.

– Did Yakumo really kill someone?

Ishii couldn't find the answer to the question eddying in his heart.

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Assistant detective inspector? To hell with that.

Gotou was walking on university premises in his irritation.

The first term of university had ended and now it was summer vacation. It wasn't bustling like usual – it was rather leisurely.

Gotou was headed for the Movie Research Circle room, where Yakumo was.

Gotou didn't know himself why he had come here.

If they met, Yakumo would just complain and make Gotou more irritated.

Despite that, Gotou would want to meet Yakumo when he was in an ill humour. This wasn't the first time.

It would be difficult to explain, but Yakumo made him feel that way.

'Sorry to bother!'

As Gotou said that, he opened the door to the Movie Research Circle.

'If you know you're a bother, please leave.'

– This brat!

Gotou swallowed the words he was about to say and his eyes went wide.

In front of him wasn't Yakumo but Haruka.

'... is what Yakumo would say.'

Haruka laughed, shrugging her shoulders.

'Oh, it's you, Haruka-chan?'

Gotou sat on the folding chair in the corner of the room and loosened his tie.

The room had no air conditioning – just an electric fan. If he stayed an hour in this room, he'd be drenched in sweat.

'Would you like something to drink?' asked Haruka, standing up.

'Anything's good as long as it's cold.'

'Roger, Detective Inspector Gotou.'

'It's Assistant Detective Inspector.'

Gotou hadn't meant to say it, but it slipped out of his mouth.

'Eh?'

Haruka looked confused.

'It's nothing. Anyway, something cold.'

'OK!'

After saying that, Haruka went to the refrigerator in the back of the room.

Recently, it had become so natural that he hadn't noticed, but looking at it like this, Gotou felt like he'd visited the house of a newly-wedded couple.

Even though a man and woman of the same age were at such an intimate distance, they weren't dating. It boggled Gotou's mind.

Rather than the two of them both not being honest with themselves, they were probably just not good with romance.

'Though I don't have the right to say anything...' said Gotou as he stretched.

'Did you say something?'

Haruka came back with a bottle of tea.

'It's nothing. Anyway, where's Yakumo?'

Gotou accepted the tea from Haruka and gulped it down.

'Gotou-san, you weren't together with Yakumo-san then,' said Haruka, sitting down on the folding chair and propping her head up in her hands. From that response, Haruka didn't know where Yakumo was either.

'Yeah.'

'Is there another case?'

Haruka looked at him doubtfully.

It appeared that she thought Gotou only came to see Yakumo when there was a case.

'That's not it. I was just wondering how he was since I haven't seen him around lately. How about you?'

'I felt the same way.'

Haruka smiled.

At this lull in their conversation, Gotou's mobile phone rang.

The display showed Ishii's number.

'Your mobile's ringing.'

Gotou thought about ignoring it, but with Haruka's comment, Gotou had to answer.

'What?'

<Detective Gotou, it's terrible!>

He heard Ishii's agitated voice from the phone.

'Don't make such a fuss.'

<But it really is terrible!>

'Then talk,' Gotou said curtly.

It really did make him irritated to think that this useless guy was on the same level as him.

<Ah, yes sir. After you went out, Detective Gotou, I was doing paperwork for a while, when...>

'Forget the preamble,' Gotou interrupted.

<I-I apologise, sir. This morning, a corpse was found in a limestone cavern in Nishitama.>

'And?'

Though Nishitama was a neighbouring city, it was a different jurisdiction.

The police organisation was very aware of its borders. If people stuck their necks into other jurisdictions' business, there'd be trouble.

<The police are chasing a man as an important person of interest because of evidence and eyewitness testimony.>

'So that's the culprit then.'

<W-wait! That's not it!>

Ishii hurriedly stopped Gotou before he could hang up.

'What's not it?'

<The name of the person of interest is Saitou Yakumo-shi.>

'Ah, I see.'

Gotou was about to hang up when he suddenly realised what Ishii had said.

– It can't be.

<Excuse me... Detective Gotou...>

Ishii's wavering voice came through the receiver.

'What'd you say just now?'

<I said that the person of interest was Saitou Yakumo-shi...>

Gotou hadn't heard wrong.

'When you say Yakumo... You mean that Yakumo!?!'

Gotou sat up as he shouted in his agitation.

Haruka looked at him anxiously, seeming to sense that something terrible had happened.

<Yes sir. That Yakumo-shi, the one we know.>

'You're kidding me.'

Gotou couldn't accept Ishii's words.

However, Ishii wasn't the type to fool people or joke around. That made his words ring true.

Yakumo was a person of interest in a murder case – like Gotou could accept something as stupid as that.

As if to deny Gotou's thoughts, something somebody said flashed through his mind.

– That child will kill people.

Yakumo's mother, Saitou Azusa, had said that.

It was a rainy night fifteen years ago.

That day, Azusa had had her hands on the neck of her own son, Yakumo, while incoherently saying, 'That child will kill people.'

Were those words that came from delusion or a prophecy –

Now, Gotou couldn't see the answer.

<Hello, Detective Gotou?>

Gotou came back to his senses when he heard Ishii's voice.

This wasn't the time to remember the past.

'Explain in detail.'

Gotou sat down on the chair again with a hard expression.

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7

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Yakumo stopped his walking along the river.

A drop of water hit his cheek.

He looked up. Thick clouds blanketed the sky.

'An evening shower...'

As if they had waited for Yakumo's murmur, large raindrops suddenly started to fall.

Climbing down the mountain would be dangerous in the rain.

Yakumo looked around and saw a large rock with a hollow in it a bit beyond the river.

He could probably take shelter there if he stooped over.

Yakumo quickened his pace while dragging his left foot and slid his body into the hollow of the rock.

The large raindrops hit the ground loudly, creating a light mist. Yakumo decided to rest until the shower was over.

He ran both his hands through his hair and wiped them off.

After letting out a long sigh, a woman's face flashed through Yakumo's head.

– Ozawa Haruka.

He couldn't remember clearly now what his first impression of her had been.

Somebody troublesome has come along – he had probably just thought something like that.

She would disappear once she had used him and didn't need him any more. He had thought she'd be one of that type. After some time, he wouldn't think about her again. Like scenery passing in a car window.

However, the word Haruka had said so casually had destroyed the prejudices and sense of values that Yakumo had had up until then.

– Beautiful.

Haruka had said that when she saw Yakumo's red left eye.

Though Yakumo didn't say it, that word had healed Yakumo's impoverished heart more than anything that had ever been said to him up until now.

Because of his red left eye, which could see the spirits of the dead, he was viewed as something strange and looked at by the world with curiosity.

'Creepy.'

'Scary.'

'Pitiful.'

Hate. Fear. Pity –

Each of those words hurt Yakumo's heart, as if they were sharp blades.

– I'm not wanted.

It was natural for him to think that way.

I don't want to be here. I want to disappear. Yakumo had wished for death countless times, but as somebody who could see the spirits of the death, he knew that death was not a release from pain.

Yakumo felt like the word Haruka had said when she saw his red left eye – beautiful – had pulled out a stopper that had been in his heart.

Like it had told him it was all right for him to exist.

There had been many cases after that. While going through those, Haruka had become more than somebody who was just passing by.

That wasn't all. After she had become a part of his life, Yakumo's world had started to change.

Isshin and Nao. And Gotou – Yakumo had realised that there were other people who wanted him to be there.

At some point, the world had become something he didn't want to lose, and there were people he wanted to protect.

In the past, he would have thought that troublesome, but it was different now.

It was pleasant. He had been taught that he wasn't the only person in the world. It felt like he was being released from the suffering that he had been burdened with up until now.

– Why am I suddenly thinking about this?

With a self-derisive smile, Yakumo shut his eyes.

Perhaps because his nerves had calmed, he was assaulted by a heavy sleepiness.

He had somewhere he could return. That was why he had to return. There were people who were waiting – people he wanted to see –

Just as his neck lost its strength, Yakumo's eyes flew open.

He couldn't fall asleep carelessly in a place like this.

Yakumo shook his head.

At the same time, part of his memory came back to him.

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He was in the cavern at the back of the limestone cave. Where Yakumo had woken up.

The flames of the candles were flickering.

Seidou stood there with lifeless eyes, as if his soul had left him, and gripped a knife.

'What do you plan to do after knowing the truth?' asked Seidou in a flat voice.

At the time, Yakumo had said something, but he couldn't remember what –

'I see. Then...'

Seidou smiled slightly and gripped the knife more tightly.

Everything suddenly went dark – and then another image appeared in his mind.

A place like a temple.

'Do you believe in reincarnation?' said Seidou.

A girl had been standing next to him.

She had bobbed hair and well-defined features, like a doll.

'I'm the reincarnation of my mother.'

Though the girl smiled, there was no emotion there.

This girl was empty.

– You?

While he was thinking, a jolt of pain ran through the back of his neck, bringing him back to reality.

A piece of a memory, just a moment. Everything was jumbled. He couldn't determine at this stage what it meant.

However, it appeared clear that there had been some sort of quarrel between Yakumo and Seidou.

Furthermore, Seidou had been holding a knife. It wouldn't be difficult to believe that after their quarrel, Yakumo had stabbed Seidou.

The doubt that had started to disappear came back again.

'That can't be.'

By saying it aloud, Yakumo cut down the growing anxiety in his heart.

If he theorised recklessly without all the information, he would become bound by a hard perspective and would be able to arrive at the truth.

For now, he wanted information. In order to do so, he would need to go to Seidou's temple.

Yakumo waited for the rain to stop.

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8

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'What's wrong?' Haruka asked Gotou once he finished his call.

Though she hadn't heard clearly, she could tell that something terrible had happened to Yakumo from the bits and pieces of the conversation she did hear.

Her heart was pounding.

It made Haruka recall what had happened half a year ago. The incident when Yakumo had disappeared without a word –

The corners of her eyes felt warm just from thinking about it.

She didn't want to feel that way again.

Gotou sat there silently with a stiff expression without answering Haruka's question.

It felt like he wasn't sure if he should talk.

That attitude made Haruka even more worried about the gravity of the situation.

The heavy silence continued.

The sound of the rain sounded incredibly loud.

The rain was heavy – the sound of the countless raindrops hitting the ground rang through the room.

'Please tell me.'

Haruka gripped Gotou's arm.

Guess there's no avoiding it – with that expression on his face, Gotou let out a breath in resignation and said 'I don't know the details yet' as his preface.

'A corpse was found in a limestone cave in Nishitama.'

'A corpse...'

Could it be –

Haruka felt like she had suddenly fallen into a bottomless darkness.

Tell me it isn't true – Haruka stared at Gotou with that wish.

'The person who died was the priest of a nearby temple,' said Gotou, as if he had sensed Haruka's feelings.

'I see...'

She knew it was indiscreet, but she was relieved that the corpse wasn't Yakumo.

'The police are chasing Yakumo as a person of interest.'

'Eh?'

Haruka said that without thinking.

It wasn't like she hadn't heard what Gotou said or that she didn't understand what the words meant.

She just couldn't believe it.

'The detectives witnessed a man with a red left eye fleeing the scene. And there was a wallet left behind as evidence. Yakumo's student ID had been in it.'

'That's...'

'From that situation, it's likely Yakumo's involved in the case somehow.'

Gotou had said what Haruka didn't dare to say.

She felt like a knife had been thrust through her.

'... It's a lie.'

After a silence, Haruka said just that.

She was saying that to herself. That can't be it. She wanted to believe that. She wanted that to be true.

Words from a terribly desperate wish –

'I know that.'

Unlike Haruka, Gotou's words had force behind them.

There was no doubt there. There was a confidence in them – like it was natural.

'That's right.'

'Right. There's no way he'd kill anybody.'

'You're right.'

Though Haruka gave a firm reply, she couldn't clear a niggling doubt.

– Why?

'The question is what to do now,' said Gotou, interrupting Haruka's question.

'That's right.'

They needed to find out the truth to see why this had happened. And –

'Where's Yakumo-kun now?'

'I don't know.'

Gotou crossed his arms in his displeasure.

'Did he run?'

'Seems like it.'

Haruka realised what had been bothering her.

'Why did Yakumo-kun run?'

Haruka didn't understand.

If he hadn't killed anybody, he wouldn't have needed to run. He could have just explained what he was doing.

And Yakumo must have known that running in that situation would be unbeneficial for him.

'I don't know.'

Gotou frowned.

'Was there something that happened that made it necessary for him to run?'

'It'd be faster to ask him.'

'But we don't know where he is.'

'We'll find him.'

Gotou puffed out his chest with confidence.

'But how?'

'We just have to check the places we think he might be.'

Gotou wasn't joking – he probably really meant to do that.

However, Haruka didn't think they'd be able to find Yakumo that way. Going around mindlessly wouldn't do anything – they needed to find a clue.

'Are there no leads?'

'Ah, that's right.'

Gotou seemed to recall something after hearing Haruka's words. He clapped his hands together.

'What is it?'

'Seems like the place where the corpse was found was a spiritual spot.'

'A spiritual spot...'

Haruka murmured that as she mulled it over.

It was likely that Yakumo had been there following some spiritual mystery for some reason.

Even if that were the case, it was incredibly unlikely that Yakumo would chase a case related to spirits of his own volition.

'Did somebody bring a spiritual investigation to Yakumo?'

Haruka said the question that came to mind.

'It's possible.'

'But who would it be?'

'I don't know.'

'I don't either...'

Haruka thought about it, but she couldn't think of anybody.

Just as the conversation had come to a lull, the door opened.

'Yakumo-kun?'

Haruka stood up and looked at the door, thinking Yakumo might have returned.

However, the person standing there wasn't Yakumo –

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Ishii's shoulders slumped in his disappointment.

He took off his glasses and leant on the back of the chair, looking up at the ceiling.

The detective from the Nishitama precinct would be here soon, but it didn't seem like Gotou would be coming back – he'd hung up the phone, saying <Only share info>.

Ishii understood why Gotou thought that way too.

If he met up with somebody from the Nishitama precinct, he wouldn't be able to move freely. And he probably didn't want to be asked too much about Yakumo.

However, Ishii didn't like being left behind. He couldn't explain why Gotou wasn't here, and he didn't have the confidence to do this alone.

Ishii covered his face with both hands. Then, he heard a knock on the door.

'Ah, yes.'

Ishii hurriedly put his glasses back on and stood up.

'Excuse me.'

The door opened. Ishii looked at the door and saw a woman standing there.

She was probably in her late twenties. She was tall, but she had an elegant figure.

Her hair was very short. With almond eyes, she looked strict at first glance, but she was quite the beauty with her feline features.

'My name is Natsume Youko. I'm from the Nishitama precinct.'

While saying that with good enunciation, she took out her police ID and held it in front of Ishii's eyes.

'Ah, I apologise for not introducing myself sooner. I am Ishii of the Setamachi precinct.'

Ishii was still troubled as he gave a polite bow.

'I believe that Chief Miyagawa has already contacted you.'

Youko walked right up to Ishii.

When she looked at him with her clear eyes, Ishii felt awkward and dropped his gaze to the floor.

'Ah, yes. I heard earlier.'

'So... where is the other detective?' said Youko, looking around the room dubiously.

She had hit him where it hurt.

'E-er... today... er, he wasn't feeling well...'

It didn't look like Youko was going to accept Ishii's explanation as she fixed him with a stare.

It wasn't like she was glaring at him, but it made Ishii feel timid.

'A-anyway, please sit down.'

Ishii tried to change the subject and took out the folding chair in the corner of the room.

'About cooperating with the investigation...' said Ishii once Youko sat down.

'I'll say this now, but you don't need to cooperate with the investigation.'

Youko's eyes narrowed as she said that in a clear tone.

'Eh?'

Ishii was so surprised that that was he replied with.

'I said that you don't need to cooperate with the investigation.'

'Yes, but..'

'What is it?'

Youko looked at Ishii sharply.

Though Ishii was surprised by what Youko said so suddenly, he felt like she and Gotou were a bit similar.

An aloof detective who liked working independently. That was the impression Ishii had.

'But... the superiors have said...'

'The people at the top don't know the situation. Working with an impromptu team would be no help at all. Furthermore, investigating with a man...'

Though Youko didn't finish, her feminist side could be seen.

'Then what did you come to do today?' asked Ishii after gulping.

If she didn't want to ask for help with the investigation, why did she come all the way here? Ishii didn't understand.

'You know Saitou Yakumo, right?'

That gave Ishii a start.

He couldn't reply immediately – his gaze just wandered. However, it wasn't as if the answer was stuck to the walls or the ceiling, so he was just wasting time.

'You know him, right?' repeated Youko.

'Ah, no... Rather than knowing him... Well, I do...'

Ishii wiped the sweat on his forehead.

He knew it was a pointless answer. He really was useless.

'Why is he?'

It was a straight question. Like Gotou, she appeared to be the type who hated beating around the bush.

'No, we don't know where he is either right now...'

If they did, they would have already gone to meet him.

'Then tell me where you think he would go.'

Youko's eyes were forceful.

Under that pressure, it was difficult for Ishii to breathe. No criminal could escape if she were chasing them. It made Ishii feel that way.

'Places I think he would go...'

'Places he often visits. His lover's house, his friend's house. Anything's fine. Just tell me the information you know.'

There was fervour behind Youko's words.

It appeared that she had already jumped to the conclusion that Yakumo was the culprit at this stage.

'Detective Natsume, do you think Yakumo-shi is the culprit?'

After a silence, Ishii finally said just that.

'It's certain that he's the most likely suspect.'

For a moment, Youko looked surprised by Ishii's response, but then her expression became blank again and she replied in a flat tone.

'I see...'

'What do you think?'

'I...'

When Youko asked a question back, Ishii was lost for words.

It appeared like Gotou thought there was no way for Yakumo to kill anyone, but Ishii couldn't say that for certain.

Yakumo, who could see the spirits of the dead, respected life more than anybody else. Ishii knew that.

But on the other side of that, Yakumo was sometimes cold – to the point it was obsessive – about the things he couldn't forgive.

'What's wrong?' said Youko, sticking out her pointy chin.

'I believe it is too early to say...'

'Is that from the situation? Or your personal opinion?'

Another difficult question.

'I...'

Ishii adjusted the position of his glasses.

– Which is it for me?

As if throwing a bone to Ishii in his confusion, Youko's mobile rang.

'Hello, Natsume speaking.'

Youko answered immediately.

Ishii couldn't hear the conversation, but from the atmosphere, it looked like she had new information about the case.

'Understood,' replied Youko, sounding agitated.

'Did you find something out?' said Ishii once Youko hung up.

'We were able to confirm this from a trainee monk at Seidou's temple.'

'What is it?'

'Saitou Yakumo and the victim Seidou appear to have left the temple together late last night.'

Youko smiled triumphantly.

Though they were still at the stage of gathering evidence, that testimony made it seem more like Yakumo was the culprit.

But –

'That is only one testimony about the situation.'

'That's not all.'

'Eh?'

'Fingerprints from the cup that we believe he used in the temple's living quarters match the ones left on the knife at the scene.'

'Fingerprints...'

Ishii couldn't breathe.

If even the fingerprints matched, he couldn't say anything.

No, it was still too early to come to a decision. Ishii shook his head.

There was no proof that Yakumo really used that cup. They just believed that – that was what Youko had said.

'Fingerprints will be taken from Saitou Yakumo's room,' said Youko, anticipating Ishii's thoughts.

It looked like that she hadn't overlooked anything.

If they matched the fingerprints from Yakumo's room, that would confirm their suspicion.

'If the fingerprints from the room match the knife, he would go from being a person of interest to a suspect.'

'That's...'

'Hurry and tell me where Saitou Yakumo is.'

Youko looked like she might bite her lips at any moment.

Ishii couldn't help but look away from her persistence.

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- Yakumo might be back.

Haruka looked with hope towards the door but standing there was a priest in religious clothes.

He appeared rather old, but he had a large frame that rivalled Gotou's with a round, shaved head. He had a good physique and looked like a good person.

'What an awful shower,' said the priest in a forceful tone as he wiped the raindrops off his clothes.

It was an unreserved attitude. It felt like he'd mistaken them for someone else.

'Excuse me...' said Haruka, confused.

'Oh, what's this?'

The priest looked at Haruka like he had just noticed her.

'Do you need something?'

'Oh, it's the first time we've met. You're Ozawa Haruka, right? Just as the rumours say, you're quite the pretty girl.'

After taking a hard look at Haruka, the priest said that and gave a hearty laugh.

It appeared he was a considerably lively man.

'Don't be so loud, you damn monk,' said Gotou.

'Is it OK to say that? Who do you think helped you get the place you're staying in now? You can't have forgotten.'

The priest puffed out his chest.

It looked like Gotou knew the priest. And the priest knew Haruka's name. Haruka felt like she was the only one who was left out.

'Er...'

Though Haruka spoke up, she had so many things she wanted to ask she didn't know what to say.

'That's right. I haven't introduced myself yet. That's my bad.'

The priest awkwardly scratched his head as he said that, like he couldn't overlook Haruka's confusion. Then, he sat in the chair Yakumo usually used.

'Excuse me...' said Haruka after the priest sat down.

'You don't need to worry; I'll tell you.'

'Ah, yes.'

'My name is Eishin. As you can see, I'm a humble priest.'

After Eishin said that with a voice full of energy, he smiled, his eyes closing as he did so.

'A priest...'

Actually, Isshin was my disciple. I heard about you from him, Haruka-san.'

'I-is that so?'

Isshin was Yakumo's uncle – the person who had raised him.

Haruka had been in his care a number of times too. Though he had already passed away, to Haruka, he was somebody unforgettable.

'The teacher watches his disciple and teaches him. We're alike, right?'

'Yes?'

Haruka was confused.

Though they had just met, his appearance and personality – no matter how she looked at it, Isshin was –

'You're not alike.'

Gotou spoke Haruka's feelings.

'Can you really say that?'

Eishin looked at Gotou meaningfully.

It looked like Eishin had a hold of one of Gotou's weaknesses, because Gotou just said weakly, 'My bad.'

'Gotou-san, er... Do you know Eishin-san?' asked Haruka.

'The hell I know him. He's just a damn monk.'

'Can't you give a better explanation?' Eishin interrupted immediately.

Somehow, when she watched their exchange, Eishin seemed less like Isshin and more like Yakumo.

'To put it simply, he's like my landlord.'

'Landlord?'

Even after Gotou explained, Haruka didn't really understand.

'The priests' quarters that Gotou is staying in belongs to the religious organisation.'

'Eh? Is that so?'

Eishin gave an additional explanation which made Haruka surprised.

Since Isshin had lived there before, she had thought it belonged to him. Haruka had thought that Yakumo had let Gotou stay there while thinking of Nao, but it seemed that wasn't the case.

'Normally, those unrelated to the religion are not allowed to stay there, but my wheedling got them special permission to stay there. Under the condition that Yakumo would take on the temple duties.'

'I see...'

Though Haruka spoke like she understood, the last sentence Eishin said came up in her head.

– Under the condition that Yakumo would take on the temple duties.

'Is Yakumo-kun going to become a priest?'

'Don't take what the damn monk says seriously.'

Gotou snorted.

'That's my plan.'

'Yakumo didn't agree to that.'

'He will.'

'What's with that baseless confidence of yours?'

Gotou and Eishin continued to quarrel.

'Why did you come here today?'

Haruka asked a question to stop their conversation.

'Oh, that's right.'

Eishin clapped his hands together.

'Actually, there's something I want to ask Yakumo. Where is he?'

Eishin looked around the room. The room was small. He should have been able to tell if he wasn't here, but his movements were exaggeratedly large.

– Can we tell Eishin the situation right now?

Haruka looked at Gotou since she wasn't sure.

Gotou nodded and started to speak.

'Yakumo's in some trouble right now.'

'Trouble?'

Eishin cocked his head.

'Yeah. There's no point hiding it, so I'll say it clearly. The police are chasing him as a person of interest in a murder case that occurred in Nishitama.'

'Could it be the victim is Seidou?'

'How'd you know that?'

'I heard earlier that Seidou was killed.'

'Was he an acquaintance of yours?'

Gotou bit onto the words Eishin said without any hesitation.

'Not just an acquaintance –I was the one who told Yakumo to go to see Seidou.'

'What did you say!?!'

Gotou stood up in his excitement.

Unlike him, Eishin had a sad expression on his face.

'Excuse me... Could it be that you requested Yakumo's help in an investigation of a spiritual phenomenon...?'

Haruka said what came to her mind.

'You're quite quick.'

Eishin nodded a number of times in admiration.

'How are you so calm!? You're the start of this! You damn monk!'

Gotou grabbed Eishin by the collar, but Eishin just smiled.

'Wait, Gotou-san. Please calm down.'

Haruka stepped between them and tried to pull them apart, but she didn't have the strength.

'I need to punch this damn monk.'

'This isn't the time to quarrel. Let's ask Eishin-san what happened.'

'... Fine.'

Haruka's frantic convincing finally got through to Gotou, who let go of Eishin and sat back down in a sulk.

Haruka sighed. She felt in her flesh and bones how tough it must be for Ishii.

'Would you please tell us what happened?'

After sitting down on the chair again, Haruka asked Eishin that question.

Eishin looked a bit troubled, but then he nodded and his expression changed back.

'I met Yakumo here yesterday morning.'

'Yesterday...'

'Actually, Seidou came to me for advice a little while back.'

'Was that related to a spiritual phenomenon?'

'Hm, not exactly. Well, something like it.'

It was an incredibly vague response. It looked like it was difficult to talk about.

'What does that mean?'

'To put it in one word, reincarnation.'

– Reincarnation.

In Haruka's head, that word reverberated with the inauspiciousness of a curse.

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– Reincarnation.

In the hollow of the rock, Yakumo glared at the rain while crouching. The voice echoed in Yakumo's ear.

When Eishin had said that, Yakumo had had a terribly bad feeling.

'There's a girl who says she was born again.'

Yesterday, Eishin had gone to Yakumo's room and said that with a troubled expression.

Why is he troubled – Yakumo remembered feeling that was odd.

In Buddhism, after somebody died, they were reincarnated in one of the six realms based on their actions when they were alive.

It should have been natural for a Buddhist like Eishin.

Though he didn't know too much about it, Buddhism had a no-soul stance.

The reason why Yakumo wouldn't agree to Eishin's request that he inherit the temple was largely related to that.

For me, who can see spirits, to put my faith in Buddhism, which doesn't recognise the existence of spirits –

It would be incredibly unnatural.

'That's outside my jurisdiction,' Yakumo had said.

However, Eishin hadn't backed down easily.

'Why do you say that?'

'I can see the spirits of the dead. I don't know what they were in their past lives.'

'But don't you have any interest in it?'

'I don't,' Yakumo said firmly.

'Really?'

'What do you mean by that?'

'I'm interested.'

Eishin smiled.

'Then why not go yourself?'

'I did. Now I'm asking you.'

He really was persistent. Yakumo ran a hand through his hair.

'I said this earlier. I see the spirits of the dead. Not their past lives.'

'What if that girl says she was her own mother in her past life?'

Yakumo had thought he had misheard, but Eishin just smiled with no intent of changing what he said.

'That doesn't make sense,' said Yakumo, leaning on the back of the chair.

It would have been more sensible if it were the father, but the mother gave birth to the child. It would be impossible to be reincarnated then.

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

Eishin's eyes narrowed.

He probably thought that Yakumo was the type of person who would become interested in a puzzle and act on it.

Yakumo knew himself that he had a side of himself that was like that, but he couldn't shake the thought that this case really was outside of his jurisdiction.

'Please ask somebody else.'

At the time, he really had meant to refuse.

'The girl in question was an abandoned child. She's in a temple now.'

Eishin continued speaking.

'Is that so?'

'That temple's one that Isshin trained in when he was young.'

'Uncle...'

Something shook within Yakumo.

Come to think of it, when Isshin was alive, Yakumo had just relied on his kindness – he'd never talked to him at length.

He knew practically nothing about the sort of life Isshin had walked – he hadn't tried to know either.

I can talk to him whenever. That was what he had thought.

– I should have talked to him more when he was alive.

Regret gripped his heart.

'The head priest, Seidou, was Isshin's senior disciple.'

'So?'

'You've gone to that temple before too.'

'I did?'

Yakumo cocked his head.

'That's right. That was around when Isshin decided to take you in...'

Eishin looked up, as if searching his memories. Yakumo unconsciously started searching his memories as well.

He recalled an old temple. It wasn't Isshin's. Someplace else.

There was a statue of the Buddha at the front.

Sitting atop of lotus leaves in meditation. His half-open eyes seemed to see right through Yakumo – he couldn't relax.

Isshin was next to him.

While gripping Yakumo's hand, Isshin said something. Something very important – but Yakumo couldn't remember.

– What did he say?

Yakumo closed his eyes and asked himself that.

At the time, Isshin was about the same that Yakumo was now. Yakumo had remembered thinking

that Isshin was old, but now that he thought about it, he had been quite young.

But still, Isshin had determined to take in the child that his sister had tried to kill.

– Why?

Now, that doubt bubbled up from deep within Yakumo's heart.

When Isshin was alive, Yakumo had never thought about that. He felt like the answer to that question was in the words that Yakumo couldn't remember.

– The answer is in that temple.

Yakumo had no proof, but he had started to feel that way.

'Won't you go to that temple to take a look?' Eishin asked again.

It didn't take much time for Yakumo to decide.

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The rain had stopped while Yakumo was recollecting what happened.

Yakumo crawled out from the hollow in the rock and looked up at the sky.

The clouds, which had been so thick, had become much thinner. They had probably dropped at the raindrops they had been holding.

Though the clouds were thinner, the sun had already hidden itself behind the mountains, so the sky was dyed scarlet.

Night would fall soon. It would be better to hurry.

Yakumo started walking.

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12

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Eishin's story was a strange one.

It was too confusing for Gotou to swallow.

'So that girl said she was her mother reborn?'

Eishin nodded.

'Isn't that strange?' interrupted Haruka as she leant forward.

'It is. It is strange, but...'

It was rather bad enunciation for Eishin.

'Isn't that girl just lying?'

'That's what I thought at first.'

Eishin shook his head.

'Then...'

'First, I need to talk about that girl's story.'

Eishin nodded to himself.

'The girl's?'

'That's right. That girl isn't Seidou's daughter. About ten years ago, she was abandoned in front of the temple. A baby just a few days after she was born.'

'That's horrible...'

With wide eyes, Haruka covered her mouth with both hands.

Though Gotou's expression didn't change, he felt the same way as Haruka.

It was inhuman to abandon a baby who couldn't even live on its own yet.

But it was undoubtedly true that there were parents like that.

'So the priest called Seidou took the kid in.'

'That's correct. He adopted her and named her Hatsune.'

'How about her mother?'

'She hasn't been found yet.'

'Then there's nothing to prove she's her mother's reincarnation. You don't even know if she's alive or dead.'

Gotou voiced the question that came to his head.

Gotou had seen a number of television programmes in the past about reincarnation.

The people on these shows always declared they had memories of the past, which proved that they were reincarnated.

During investigations, the information that police gave the media was limited.

Knowledge that only the culprit could know could become a confession.

In this case, since they didn't know who the mother was, they couldn't tell whether the girl was telling the truth.

'There's that.'

Eishin looked even more troubled.

'Eh?'

'About three months ago, it seems like Seidou and Hatsune went foraging for mountain plants, but

at that time, Hatsune said that there was a limestone cavern ahead.'

'And there really was one?'

Eishin nodded. 'Right.' Deciding just from that was much too easy.

'Couldn't she have gone there to play by herself?'

'It's not the sort of place a child can go alone.'

'She just happened to know, right?'

'That might be the case, but there are other odd things.'

'Like what?'

'She also said correctly that there was a lake about three kilometres from the temple,' said Eishin quietly.

'A lake... You can see that from a map.'

Gotou snorted.

It was a bit unreasonable making an uproar about past lives just from that.

'Well, you can think about it that way, but the problem's still ahead.'

'Ahead?'

'Hatsune said that there was a corpse at that lake.'

'A corpse?'

'Right. Her mother's... No, maybe I should say her own...'

Eishin crossed his arms and cocked his head, focussing on something odd.

'A corpse is quite the matter.'

'Right.'

'Then?'

Gotou urged Eishin to continue, but Eishin looked blank.

Honestly. The old man was playing the fool.

'So was there a corpse there?'

'I don't know,' Eishin replied immediately.

'You didn't check?'

'Of course not. How would I?'

'How? You could just call the police...'

'If I called the police about a corpse because a girl who said she was her mother's reincarnation

said there was a corpse there, do you think they'd send people to the lake?' Eishin said, pressing Gotou for an answer.

Even Gotou couldn't rebut after Eishin said that much.

Just as Eishin said, the police probably wouldn't move unless a part of the corpse was found. But –

'Then there's no proof of her past life.'

'Don't be in such a rush. There's still more.'

'More?'

'About ten years ago, there was a rumour near the lake.'

'What sort of rumour?'

'The people there used to say they could hear a woman's screams coming from the lake every night. That's right about the time when Hatsune was abandoned.'

'You saying something's there?'

'Though I don't like putting things together so simply, this time, Seidou was killed in the limestone cavern. Don't you think we should take the story seriously?'

After Eishin said that much, something seemed odd to Gotou.

'Could the limestone cave that the priest called Seidou was found in be...'

'You just noticed? What a fool.'

Eishin snorted scornfully.

A corpse was found in the limestone cavern pointed out by the girl who said she was her mother's reincarnation – so that was it.

That did make it seem like something was there.

'So you asked Yakumo-kun to investigate,' interrupted Haruka after listening to the story silently.

'Well, that's how it is.'

Eishin laughed loudly like he thought something was funny.

Gotou understood the gist of it. It certainly was an odd case. However, there was something that Gotou just couldn't accept.

'I can't believe Yakumo agreed to investigate.'

To be honest, Eishin's story was incredibly suspicious. Because of Yakumo's personality, Gotou couldn't think that Yakumo would stick his neck in.

'The temple in question is a place where Isshin trained in the past. Seidou is Isshin's old acquaintance too.'

'Isshin-san's...' murmured Haruka, half-closing her eyes.

– So that’s how it was.

Gotou understood now.

To the old Yakumo, it wouldn’t have mattered what sort of temple it was.

He had built a wall around him and decided to keep everyone out of it, regardless of what other people thought or how they lived their lives. However, it was different now.

Something besides spiritual phenomena had aroused Yakumo’s interest.

'The problem's what came after that,' said Gotou, clearing the heavy air.

'That's right. What can we do?'

After Haruka agreed, Eishin nodded as well.

The conversation had just got back on track when Gotou’s mobile rang. It was from Ishii.

– What bad timing this guy has.

'What do you want!?!'

Gotou yelled at the phone’s receiver.

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13

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Yakumo dragged his injured left foot along as he walked beside the river.

It was already dark.

All he could rely on was the faint light of the moon.

He didn’t even know if there was a path here. Furthermore, the shower earlier made it easy for him to slip.

He had to walk through the weeds while keeping in mind his injured leg.

Yakumo placed a hand on a cedar tree and wiped the sweat off his forehead.

It wasn’t just his forehead that was sweaty. His body was drenched with sweat, making it sticky.

How far had he walked? How much further did he have to walk before he could get out of this forest? He didn’t have any idea.

Like a realisation of Yakumo’s current state.

He had gone to the limestone cavern in Seidou’s car last night. It was about fifteen minutes away.

Even if he left out the time he had been stuck during the evening shower after falling in the limestone cave, he had walked for more than three hours. He should have been arriving at the temple soon, but it didn’t seem like it would happen.

Perhaps he'd taken a wrong turn somewhere, or perhaps he was just circling the mountain, but whichever was the case, he had made the wrong choice.

The exhaustion made his body heavy. With an empty stomach, he had no strength.

His left leg pulsed with pain like it had been struck with a hot iron.

– Why am I running like this?

That question suddenly came to Yakumo.

He had also had the choice of staying there and explaining the situation to the police. That would have been much easier than running.

Running would also make the police more suspicious.

– I might have killed him.

One big reason was that Yakumo couldn't clear that thought out of his head.

He remembered up to when he went to the limestone cavern with Seidou, but he had lost his memories of what happened after that.

Boxers who were knocked out in a match often remembered standing in the ring but forgot that they had participated in a match.

The strong impact on their brain made them forget the memories around the event.

However, that didn't mean that the memories had been erased. It was just temporary memory loss. When they watched a video of the match, they would sometimes remember that something had happened.

Yakumo had to go to that temple and recall what had happened at the limestone cavern.

– To protect somebody important to me.

Yakumo took out a piece of paper that he had stuck in his pocket. It had been stuck on the doors to the cavern.

All that was on it was a short message.

<You're the one who killed him. If you're caught by the police, somebody important to you will die.>

It was like something out of a novel.

However, Yakumo understood the true meaning of the message.

The biggest reason why Yakumo had made the choice to escape.

'I have to go.'

Yakumo now had somebody who was important to him – who he wanted to protect no matter what he had to give up in exchange.

And so –

Yakumo gritted his back teeth and started walking again.

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14

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'Was that Ishii-san just now?' said Haruka after Gotou hung up.

If it was Ishii, he might have some new information.

'Yeah. There's a problem.'

Gotou sounded depressed, which was rare.

'Eh?'

'Fingerprints thought to be Yakumo's were found at the temple. They match the ones on the knife left at the scene.'

'That's...'

Haruka couldn't say anything else.

'Well, at this stage, they're just thought to be Yakumo's. They haven't been proven to be his.'

Gotou said that in a forced cheerful voice, like he couldn't let Haruka look so down.

'That's right. You're right.'

Haruka said that for herself, but it didn't clear her worries.

'Anyway, I'm going.'

Gotou stood up.

'Where are you going?'

'Police are coming here now.'

'Police?'

'Yeah. To get Yakumo's fingerprints. If I meet up with them, it'll be a problem.'

Gotou's face looked pained.

'What if the fingerprints in this room match the ones on the knife?' asked Haruka, though she knew the answer.

Gotou looked like he felt awkward, but then he spoke after sighing.

'Then the police will change Yakumo from a person of interest to a suspect.'

Though Haruka had known, hearing it made it feel like she had been pushed off a cliff.

'Then what are you planning to do after leaving here?' said Eishin in a casual tone that didn't match the atmosphere.

He appeared to be a terrifyingly laidback guy.

'Whaddaya mean, what am I planning to do!? I'm going to look for Yakumo!' said Gotou with determination.

A complete opposite of Gotou, Eishin just said, 'I see,' like the matter wasn't related to him.

'I'm going too,' said Haruka.

She wanted to meet Yakumo as soon as possible. And she wanted to confirm.

– You haven't killed anyone, right?

It wasn't that she didn't believe in him, but she wanted to hear it from his mouth.

'You can't. Haruka-chan, you can't come along,' Gotou said firmly.

'Why not?'

Haruka stood up and pressed Gotou for an answer.

She couldn't just wait by herself in this situation. She knew she would just be a hindrance, but she still wanted to go.

'There's something else I want you to do.'

Gotou placed a hand on Haruka's shoulder.

'Something else?'

'Yeah. Even if I do find Yakumo, he's a fugitive right now.'

'That's why we have to look for him.'

'Listen to me.'

When Haruka repeated her request, Gotou rebuked her.

'I...'

'Haruka-chan, you meet up with Ishii.'

'With Ishii-san?'

'Right. To solve the puzzle behind this case. Make a place that Yakumo can return to.'

– A place that Yakumo can return to.

Gotou was probably right. Even if they did find Yakumo, they couldn't do anything if the police were still chasing him.

He would be a fugitive for his whole life if they didn't clear his name. But –

'Can I do it...'

'That's a silly question.'

Gotou snorted.

'Eh?'

'It's not about whether you can do it or not. You're going to do it.'

'Yes sir!'

Haruka gave a bright reply.

She felt like Gotou's words had saved her. All she could do now was believe and act. If they didn't do anything, they couldn't save Yakumo.

'OK, let's get out of here now. I'll walk you part of the way.'

'Thank you very much.'

'Do your best!'

As Haruka and Gotou were about to leave the room, Eishin said that with a small wave.

Gotou's face went red when he saw that response.

'You're coming with me, you damned monk!'

'Why?'

In contrast to Gotou's agitation, Eishin was just sitting on the chair placidly.

'Don't you "Why" me! You're responsible for this mess!'

Gotou's anger had reached its peak.

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15

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Ishii was waiting for Haruka at a coffee shop.

It was a privately-owned coffee shop near the station. There was a broken and unmoving wall clock there.

Ishii sat at the round table in the very back of the first floor and watched the entrance.

He would meet Haruka soon. And it would be just the two of them –

If the situation weren't like this, he would have been so happy, but he felt depressed thinking about what was going to happen.

It looked worse and worse for Yakumo.

The police were probably getting Yakumo's fingerprints from the room at the university now.

If the fingerprints matched – Ishii didn't want to think about it.

'Ishii-san.'

Ishii lifted his head at the voice.

Haruka was standing in front of him.

Ishii had been so lost in his thoughts that he hadn't noticed Haruka coming in.

A mistake he would never live down –

'E-excuse me.'

Ishii hurriedly stood up and bowed deeply.

As he did so, he knocked over the coffee cup on the table.

'Ack!'

'Ishii-san, are you all right?'

Haruka went to the counter and borrowed a towel, wiping up as much of the coffee Ishii had spilled as she could.

This act that she did so casually made Ishii feel like his heart had been pierced.

'Ah, no, I'm really sorry.'

'It's all right. Would you like the same thing?'

'Eh? Ah, yes.'

While Ishii was troubled, Haruka ordered two coffees from the waiter.

Ishii really was useless. You couldn't tell which of them was older.

'This is quite the situation.'

After they sat down across from each other and had calmed down, Haruka brought up the topic at hand.

Ishii couldn't ignore the shadow in Haruka's eyes. Though she was acting calm, it must have been tough for her.

'It has... Detective Gotou said to solve the mystery, but to be honest, I don't know where to start...'

Ishii adjusted the position of his glasses with his finger.

He wanted to act cool in front of the person he liked, but the situation this time was too serious.

'We have some new information, so I should tell you about that, Ishii-san.'

'What is it?'

Ishii's brows furrowed.

'The reason why Yakumo-kun went to the scene of the crime.'

'Ah.'

Ishii understood now.

Come to think of it, he didn't know why Yakumo had gone to Nishitama.

Though Nishitama was the neighbouring city, the scene of the crime was quite remote. It would take an hour to get there by train.

It was a bit too far just for a stroll.

'A priest named Eishin-san requested that Yakumo-kun investigate a spiritual phenomenon.'

Haruka started to explain after taking a sip of coffee.

Her explanation was a complicated and strange one related to reincarnation. A girl who said she was her mother reborn, and the screams of a woman that could be heard from the lake –

Perhaps because of the way Haruka said it or the story's innate strangeness, Ishii's hair stood on end as he listened.

'Is that really...'

That was the first thing Ishii said after Haruka finished.

Ishii had read a number of books about reincarnation.

Young children talking in a language of a country that had never been to, or talking about people from a different age – things like that.

Recently, it was even claimed that some people could recall their past memories under hypnosis.

Ishii didn't know if it was true or fake, because human memories were incredibly subjective.

'I don't know if it is true or not, but...'

Haruka put her chin in her hand and stirred her coffee with a spoon.

'What is it?'

'I thought it might have something to do with Yakumo-kun.'

'Huh...'

Ishii gave a flat reply.

It was probably true that Yakumo had gone there chasing a spiritual phenomenon, but it was difficult to think that it was related to Seidou's murder case at the current stage.

'Do you doubt it?'

'Ah, no.'

Ishii frantically shook his head after Haruka saw through his faults.

'It's all right. I think it's a bit forced myself... But I think there's no point in investigating the same thing as the police.'

'That's right.'

It was just as Haruka said.

If they investigated the same thing, they could just leave it to the police.

'That's why I thought that we could investigate from a different perspective than the police.'

'A different perspective...'

Unlike Ishii, who was troubled, the corners of Haruka's lips turned up in a confident smile.

'Yes. It might be a bit forced, but we can investigate with the premise that the spiritual phenomenon and the murder this time are related.'

Haruka leant forward.

Ishii leant back a bit from the pressure.

'But even if you say they are related, how...'

'Putting together what Eishin-san said, it is likely that somebody died near the temple, limestone cavern and the lake.'

'In short... We'll be investigating something that occurred near there in the past.'

'Yes.'

'But a murder case...'

Ishii stopped.

If a murder case occurred in the same place in the past, they should have received information about it.

'It doesn't have to be a murder,' said Haruka, like she had read Ishii's thoughts again.

'Eh?'

Ishii lifted his head in confusion.

'Accident, suicide, disappearance – anything is fine.'

'I see. We can just pick up whatever seems related.'

'Yes.'

'You really are amazing, Haruka-chan.'

'I'm not just helping Yakumo-kun for show.'

Haruka smiled bashfully.

When Ishii saw that, he felt a twinge of pain run through his chest.

I wonder if Haruka would be so frantic if I were the one being chased as a murderer – Ishii suddenly thought that.

He knew the answer.

Haruka was always glad and sad by turns while at Yakumo's side. To her, Yakumo was somebody special who couldn't be replaced by anybody.

– How cute.

That had been Ishii's genuine thought when he first met Haruka.

After experiencing a number of cases, Haruka had become much more adult-like, but that adorable smile hadn't changed.

Ishii didn't know how many times it had soothed Ishii's exhausted heart, but Haruka's eyes had never been on Ishii.

The same person was always reflected in Haruka's eyes.

Ishii felt that all over again.

'Ishii-san, what's the matter?'

Haruka waved a hand in front of Ishii's eyes.

'Ah, no, it's nothing. Anyway, I'll look into incidents and accidents that occurred in the past.'

Ishii came to his senses and spoke after clearing his throat.

'Let's both do our best.'

Haruka smiled.

'No, I couldn't...'

'I'm the one who asked.'

'No, I'd love your help, but information about cases is personal information. If we showed it to civilians, there would be a number of problems.'

'I see...'

Haruka's shoulders slumped.

It was like she was stricken with her powerlessness.

'Could you look into this on the internet for me, Haruka-chan?' suggested Ishii, feeling guilty.

'The internet?'

'Yes. I'd appreciate it if you look into rumours about spiritual phenomena or incidents in the area online.'

'I see. We could do that as well. That's Ishii-san for you.'

Haruka's expression became brighter all at once.

Normally, Ishii would feel happy about the distance between him and Haruka shortening, but today was different.

No matter how short the distance between him and Haruka, that would still be the distance between friends. That was because Haruka's heart was filled with Yakumo.

If Yakumo were arrested as a murderer, would Haruka's feelings change?

Ishii ended up thinking something imprudent –

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16

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Gotou drove the car.

He got stuck in traffic, so he took more time than he expected. It was already dark out.

He got off the highway and turned onto the winding mountain road. He was almost at his destination.

In the passenger seat, Eishin was sleeping soundly.

– Damn. He looks so comfortable.

'Oi. Wake up.'

Gotou shook Eishin's shoulder.

However, his lips just flapped open and close – it didn't look like he would wake up at all.

He was terribly laidback. Even Yakumo had his hands full with Eishin. but that he had to agree with.

'Wake the hell up already!'

When Gotou yelled, Eishin finally sat up and rubbed his eyes.

'You're so noisy. What do you eat to have such a loud voice?' said Eishin while stretching.

– This monk doesn't shut up.

It even made Gotou think Eishin, rather than Isshin, was the one who raised Yakumo.

'I'll listen to your complaints later – tell me directions.'

'Left at the next intersection. Then just drive along the road,' said Eishin, sounding annoyed, and then he lay back on the seat again and closed his eyes.

It looked like he planned on sleeping again. What kind of joke was this?

'What sort of man was Seidou?' asked Gotou, looking at Eishin.

'What is the point of asking that?'

'It might give us a lead.'

'It won't be much help.'

Eishin got up and wiped his face with both hands.

'Why not?'

'People's hearts change moment by moment. That's why there isn't one set shape of a person. In short, the person named Seidou that I know is only who he is at a certain time, and a subjective perspective on top of that.'

When Eishin spoke like that, it was like he was reading a sutra. His eyes seemed to be unfocussed as he looked forward.

'Don't say something so difficult.'

– Don't hide this with smoke.

'It isn't difficult. For example, you think that Yakumo wouldn't kill somebody.'

'Of course not.'

– What are you saying this for now?

Gotou wanted to spit that out in his irritation.

'What is your proof?'

'That's the sort of guy he is.'

'Let's change the question. When did you last meet Yakumo?'

Gotou was lost for words at the unexpected question.

He couldn't remember the exact date, but –

'About a month ago.'

'In the month you haven't met him, something might have changed in Yakumo's heart that led him to murder.'

'Don't be ridiculous. People's feelings don't change so easily.'

Gotou hit the wheel in his anger.

'Is it that ridiculous? Hasn't Yakumo changed already?'

Eishin had pointed out something that hurt, so Gotou couldn't reply.

He had first met Yakumo fifteen years ago –

On a rainy night, Gotou saved Yakumo from his mother, who was about to kill him. At that time, Yakumo had had eyes so cold and expressionless they made you think he wasn't a seven-year-old child.

– What’s going to happen to this kid?

Gotou had been worried about Yakumo’s future.

When they met again, Yakumo was fifteen.

At the time, it had been dangerous for Yakumo.

It felt like he would crumble if anything happened.

If Yakumo had killed somebody then, Gotou would have probably thought, ‘He finally did it...’

But Yakumo had met Haruka. He had changed greatly.

People’s hearts continue to change with time and outside influences. That’s how it is – Gotou understood that, but he shook his head in denial.

‘He wouldn’t kill anybody, now or in the past.’

‘How frank.’

Eishin stifled his laughter.

‘Are you going to praise me or speak ill of me? Make up your mind.’

‘Why would I praise you?’ Eishin said without a pause.

– This damn monk is really annoying!

Gotou buried his urge to yell into his stomach. They were off topic.

‘Forget about that and just tell me what kind of man Seidou was!’

‘Letting the blood get to your head so quickly is a bad habit.’

‘I don’t need your concern,’ said Gotou with a click of his tongue.

Even talking with Yakumo might have been better than talking with Eishin.

‘Well, the Seidou I knew was a good man.’

‘Anybody would be when compared with a damn monk,’ said Gotou, his voice filled with all the resentment that had built up.

‘That’s true. Seidou was meticulous and reliable. He always thought of others.’

Gotou had meant to say that sarcastically, but there was no point if Eishin was just going to admit it.

‘And?’ Gotou urged.

‘He was Isshin’s senior, but he was good at watching over him. Isshin looked up to him like a real older brother. They were quite similar.’

‘A faultlessly good guy then?’

‘I said this earlier, didn’t I? That’s just that person at a certain time.’

'I know that. You're saying that there might've been a reason you don't know that he was killed, right?' Gotou said casually.

'Well, that's what I'm trying to say. Though I shouldn't say this, Seidou had a son...'

Eishin spoke in a slow tone.

Gotou noticed that Eishin said 'had' in the past tense, but he didn't ask about it.

'And?'

'He committed suicide.'

'Suicide...'

'Yes. He hanged himself in the temple.'

Gotou swallowed. It was because he understood what Isshin was trying to say.

A faultlessly good man, but his son killed himself –

Gotou didn't know if Seidou was the cause of it, but it was a fact that Seidou hadn't noticed that his son had been cornered to the point of suicide.

People's hearts changed. The person somebody knew was only one side of them.

– What do I know about Yakumo?

Gotou asked himself that.

Perhaps I think I know but actually don't understand anything at all –

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17

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After Haruka returned to her flat, she turned on her computer right away.

She opened an internet search and typed in 'spiritual phenomena' and 'Nishitama'.

There was a considerable number of hits.

There were personal sites about spiritual spots with maps and photos.

Haruka clicked each of them and glanced over them.

Though it was boring, simple work, she also knew that this was all she could do now.

– Where's Yakumo-kun now? What's he up to?

For just a moment, Haruka's hands stopped as she looked out the window.

The evening shower had probably cleared the clouds. She could see a bright fool moon.

– What if Yakumo really killed somebody?

With no preamble, that question came up in her head. No, that wasn't true. The truth was that it had been in the back of her head, but she had tried not to think about it.

'I...'

She couldn't answer that right now.

As if pulling Haruka away from her negative thoughts, the mobile phone on the table started vibrating.

The number on the display was the newspaper reporter Hijikata Makoto's.

She had experienced many cases as well.

<Are you all right?>

The moment Haruka picked up, she heard Makoto's frantic voice.

'Yes, I...'

<OK. Yakumo-kun... is in quite the situation...>

'Excuse me... Has the information already got out?'

<Yes. Though the name was kept out, I know an officer at the scene saw a young man with a red left eye.>

That was Makoto the reporter for you. She was quick with information.

'I see...'

Haruka knew herself that she sounded depressed.

Yakumo killed somebody – though she didn't want to believe it, that information was spreading on its own.

People who didn't know the true Yakumo would just see the information and decide he was a murderer. Haruka's chest hurt when she thought about it.

– Yakumo isn't that kind of person!

Haruka wanted to yell, but that voice wouldn't carry to anyone no matter how much she did.

<Isn't there anything I can do?>

'Eh?'

<Let me help with something.>

Makoto's forceful words made Haruka happy.

When Haruka first met Makoto, she had seemed somewhat difficult to approach. Perhaps because of that, they hadn't talked very much.

However, that impression had changed after a number of cases.

Haruka didn't know if it was because Makoto had changed or because Haruka's thoughts had changed. However, it was an example of something that made her feel how human relationships changed.

'Is that all right?'

<Of course. Yakumo-kun's helped me a lot as well. Plus...>

Haruka heard Makoto breath out awkwardly.

'What is it?'

<I can't believe it either.>

'Can't believe it...'

<I can't. I can't believe Yakumo-kun would kill somebody.>

Haruka felt like Makoto's words saved her.

It wasn't just her. Other people believed in Yakumo too. Knowing that made Haruka happier than anything else.

At the same time, she felt how pathetic she was for being shaken earlier.

No matter what happened, she had to believe in Yakumo until the end. Haruka bit her lip and strengthened her feelings.

<Haruka-chan, you believe in Yakumo-kun too, right?>

'Of course.'

Haruka gave a forceful reply.

Now that she thought about it, there was no reason to doubt Yakumo.

She might have just been shaken by the flow of information and started to doubt Yakumo.

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18

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Gotou looked at the temple from his car, parked by the side of the road.

Like guards, two uniformed officers stood at the tiled roof of the temple gate. Gotou also saw a number of men in suits that looked like private detectives coming in and out.

That was foolish, even for me – Gotou cursed at himself.

He'd come all the way to the temple to search for Yakumo, but naturally, the police in the jurisdiction were here.

There was nothing he could do about it, but the problem was that he didn't have any plan now.

'What do you plan to do?' said Eishin with a grin.

He had probably sensed what Gotou was feeling. Gotou felt like Eishin was mocking him for being an idiot.

'Don't you have any ideas?'

Gotou turned the question around to Eishin.

'I was just forced here by you.'

– Damn, what a mean monk.

Gotou lay back on the seat with a click of his tongue.

It had always been Yakumo's job to think. Gotou just followed those instructions and charged.

'I have one suggestion...' said Eishin.

'What?'

'You might be able to hear the story from a trainee monk.'

– I see.

If he talked to a trainee monk at the temple, he might find out what happened between Yakumo and Seidou last night. But detectives from the Nishitama precinct were crawling around the temple.

'But we can't get in, right?'

'There's one walking around there.'

Eishin pointed out the window.

Gotou looked out and saw a young man with a shaved head walking in robes just beside the car.

– This is a chance.

'Oi, you.'

Gotou ran out of the car and called out to the man in robes.

The robed man leapt in surprise, but he stopped and timidly turned around.

'Y-yes?'

He had pale skin and was skinny, like a bean sprout. He was fidgeting like he couldn't relax. It was just like Gotou was looking at Ishii.

'Police. I want to talk to you a bit.'

Gotou showed his police ID.

'I said all I know earlier...'

The robed young man seemed confused.

'Relax. This detective is my friend.'

Eishin got off the car and said that to the young man in robes.

'Master Eishin.'

The robed man put his hands together and bowed his head in awe.

'Oi. Are you some big shot?' said Gotou, surprised by the young man's sudden change in attitude.

The person who replied was not Eishin but the robed young man.

'Master Eishin is a man of exceptional virtue.'

'That so?'

Gotou couldn't believe it.

'Yes. Without being tied to a temple, he supervises all the temples in this area. He has a role similar to that of a counsellor.'

'Doesn't look like it.'

Gotou looked at Eishin's face.

He didn't know how the people at the temple viewed him, but to Gotou, Eishin just looked like a selfish monk.

Anyway, if what the young man said was true, Eishin would be of help at the temple. At first, Gotou had regretted taking him, thinking of Eishin as luggage, but he might be unexpectedly helpful.

Gotou got the robed young man to sit in the passenger seat, and then Gotou sat in the driver's seat while Eishin sat in the back so that they could listen to the young man talk.

The robed man was named Shuuei.

Gotou didn't know whether that was his real name or his monk name, but that wasn't the problem right now.

'How many people in the temple?' Gotou asked Shuuei to understand the situation.

'Normally, there are Master Seidou and myself. Hatsune-san makes three.'

'The number of people who want to become priests has dropped lately,' lamented Eishin.

It looked like few people wanted to be bound by the rules of the temple.

'Were you there last night?'

'Yes.'

'Was Yakumo really at the temple?'

Shuuei looked up with a start, like a kid blamed for a prank. His eyes were wet and looked like they would cry at any moment.

'Yes.'

'How was he?'

'How...'

Shuuei looked troubled as his brows furrowed together.

It seemed like he was troubled about whether to speak as his mouth flapped open and shut.

'He knows about Hatsune,' interrupted Eishin.

'I see...'

Shuuei's shoulders lowered as he relaxed.

'You haven't told the others why Yakumo came?'

'Ah, er... I was told to keep quiet about Hatsune-san, so... And the police wouldn't believe it, would they?'

It hurt to hear that.

Just as Shuuei said, the police wouldn't accept a story like reincarnation. Even if there were some who personally believed in it, it wouldn't have influenced the direction of the investigation.

'Then what did you say about Yakumo?'

'Er, I said that nephew of Master Seidou's friend came to play...'

– I see. He didn't lie.

'So how were the two of them?'

'Though I wasn't there directly, they discussed with Hatsune-san for a rather long time.'

'And after that?'

'When it became night, they said that they would go out, just the two of them.'

'About what time?'

'If I remember correctly... I think it was about ten,' replied Shuuei, his gaze wandering as he tried to remember.

'Where'd they go at a time like that?'

Gotou put the question that came to his head into words.

If they were in the city, they could have gone out for a drink to chat some more, but that was difficult to believe in the middle of the mountains.

'Though I don't know what they went to do, they said that they were going to the limestone cavern,' said Shuuei in a fading voice.

'I see...'

The two of them went to the limestone cavern late at night, and one of them became a corpse, stabbed all over. The more Gotou investigated, the more unfavourable the situation seemed for Yakumo.

'If I had stopped them then...'

Shuuei's voice wavered as he sniffled.

'Nothing will start if you regret the past,' Eishin said quietly.

'Were you the one who contacted the police?'

After the conversation had come to a still, Gotou asked another question.

'No.'

Shuuei shook his head.

That was probably true. Shuuei looked like the type who couldn't lie.

'Then who was it?'

'I don't...'

Shuuei hesitated. He wouldn't know. But –

'Did you leave things as is even though Seidou didn't come back?'

'Though I was concerned, that limestone cavern is also a meditation spot. In the past, he had gone there to meditate through the night, so...'

After Shuuei replied, Gotou looked at Eishin in the backseat. Gotou couldn't tell if the story was true.

'That happens sometimes.'

Eishin nodded, sensing Gotou's intention.

'I see. That was a great help.'

Gotou let Shuuei off the car, stretched out and leaned back on the seat.

'What will you do next?' said Eishin, leaning forward from the backseat.

He didn't seem concerned at all, as usual. It was like he was enjoying the situation.

To be honest, Gotou couldn't think of a concrete plan. He wasn't Yakumo, but at a time like this, for now –

'I'll go to the scene of the crime.'

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Yakumo finally got out of the forest.

He arrived at the bank of a smile lake.

It was probably about a hundred metres to the opposite bank. Weeds grew rampant – it appeared to be a place iwth few visitors.

The shining moon was reflected on the water's surface.

– I was killed and sunk into the lake.

The words of the girl called Hatsune flashed through Yakumo's mind.

Hatsune said that she was killed by somebody before she was born and that she sank into a lake by a tree with red flowers.

Yakumo looked around and spotted a tree with red flowers. It was probably crape myrtle.

It was likely that this was the lake Hatsune had mentioned.

If the location information he'd heard from Seidou was correct, this lake was about three kilometres direct from the temple.

After falling in the limestone cavern, he had taken a long detour, but it seemed like he would be able to get to the temple soon.

Perhaps because he relaxed, his body suddenly felt heavier.

Yakumo spotted a rock nearby and sat down on it.

His muscles were screaming after walking down mountain paths that he was unaccustomed to. Dragging his injured left leg had also been a heavy burden.

Furthermore, he hadn't eaten anything since last night.

He was terribly hungry – it felt like his stomach was twisted.

– I'm exhausted.

Yakumo hung his head.

All he could hear was the sound of the wind and insects.

– It's quiet here.

He shut his eyes and let out a deep breath. Then, a sleeping memory came back to him.

A memory from when he visited Seidou's temple yesterday evening.

Yakumo walked into the temple together with Seidou. There was tatami there with a statue of the Buddha at the entrance.

It was an incredibly strange situation.

Zen Buddhism did not acknowledge the existence of spirits. The soul and body were one; they

were not to be separated.

They also believed that if one focussed on life, that would create worldly thoughts, becoming an obstruction to religion.

In such a Zen Buddhist temple, he, who could see the spirits of the dead, was standing to solve an incident regarding reincarnation.

Yakumo was smiling self-derisively when his eyes met those of a girl standing in the corner of the temple.

That was Hatsune.

A girl with glossy black hair. Her face was somewhat reminiscent of Nao's.

However, there was something decisively different.

– She's hollow.

Yakumo felt that the first time he saw her.

Not her appearance, but her heart.

She was as expressionless as a manmade doll. He couldn't tell where her round eyes were looking.

'You are?'

Yakumo bent over to ask Hatsune that.

'Hatsune. But before, I was Minami,' said Hatsune expressionlessly.

There was no ill will there. It felt like she believed that wholly.

'Which should I call you?'

'Whichever you want. I mean, both are me.'

Hatsune smiled awkwardly.

'I see. Then, Hatsune-chan, where is your mother right now?'

Yakumo stared at Hatsune's large black eyes.

The answer to that question was –

'Damn it. I can't remember.'

Yakumo said that aloud and ran a hand through his hair.

He lifted his head in resignation, but then he saw a girl in front of him.

Lit up by the moonlight, she glared at him from below the crape myrtle tree.

She had on a uniform of a knee-high skirt and a blazer – the same girl he'd seen in the limestone cavern.

– She knows something.

Yakumo stood up while pressing a hand against his hurting left leg. Dragging his heavy body forward, he started to walk towards the girl.

The distance of about ten metres felt considerably long.

'Who are you?' said Yakumo after walking up to the girl.

– I won't forgive you. Absolutely not.

The girl's dry purple lips moved as she said that in a voice that echoed to the bottom of his stomach.

It was a voice trembling with hatred.

It was almost as if a black flame of hatred had engulfed the girl's surroundings.

Yakumo felt a chill.

A strong hatred that had still not dissipated after death. Yakumo didn't know how to soothe feelings this strong.

– I won't forgive you.

The girl said that again and then disappeared into the darkness.

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20

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Ishii groaned as he looked at the computer monitor.

Though he'd declared to Haruka that he would investigate the past cases, he didn't know where to start, to be honest.

It would have been fine if it were just murder cases, but including accidents and suicides greatly increased the number of documents. Furthermore, they didn't have a set time. It was like looking for a needle that had fallen in the desert.

'Hah...'

Ishii had just let out a sigh when he heard a knock on the door.

'Please come in.'

Ishii had thought it would be Miyagawa, but the person who opened the door and came in was Youko.

'Ah!'

Ishii stood up at the unexpected arrival.

'There's something I want to ask you.'

Youko walked over briskly and sat in Gotou's seat, opposite Ishii.

'If it's something I can answer...' replied Ishii, readying himself. To be honest, there were some things he could say and some things he couldn't.

'Who is Saitou Yakumo?'

'Eh?'

The question was so sudden that Ishii didn't understand.

'I've looked into him.'

'Which means...'

Ishii looked at Youko's face.

He tried to see her true intentions, but all he could see through his glasses was Youko's cold and expressionless face.

'It appears he's stuck his nose into a number of cases.'

'Is that so?'

Why does Youko know that – though Ishii had that question, he played dumb.

When Ishii wrote work reports, he had done his best never to mention Yakumo's name – it was an ordeal every time. That meant there was no way Yakumo's name would come up in the cases.

'Don't play dumb. Most of the people at the precinct here know his name. There's a whole rumour about how he's the one solving all the cases.'

Youko said that all at once. Perhaps because she was agitated, her cheeks were a bit red.

Even if Ishii hid it in the documents and he and Gotou kept quiet, Yakumo showed up at the scene so often that it was natural for the other investigation members to suspect something.

However, he still didn't know how to explain Yakumo.

'Is it true that he can... er, see them?'

Youko glanced at Ishii awkwardly.

So the rumour's that wide – while Ishii was surprised, he came to a decision.

'Yes. Yakumo-shi can see the spirits of the dead – that is, he can see ghosts.'

'Please don't be ridiculous. There's no such thing as ghosts, right?'

Youko spread her hands in an exaggerated appeal.

Perhaps she wanted him to deny it. People didn't believe things they didn't experience themselves.

'There are,' Ishii said firmly.

'Do you have proof?'

'He has always led us to case's solution. Those cases are proof.'

'Are you saying that the cases were solved because he could see ghosts?'

Though Youko was acting tough, her heart was unsteady. Ishii could see that easily.

'I am. Yakumo-shi hears the spirits of the dead and solves the mystery behind the case as a result.'

'Even if that were true, why did he kill somebody this time?' said Youko, tapping the desk with her finger.

'I don't know. That's why I'm investigating.'

'You think Saitou Yakumo's not the culprit?'

Youko's eyes narrowed.

Ishii couldn't reply to that question immediately. The reason being –

'I don't know.'

Ishii shook his head.

The doubt within Ishii hadn't left him.

Did Yakumo kill somebody, or –

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Yakumo stared at the lake where the girl disappeared for a while, but then he turned around, suddenly having the unpleasant feeling that somebody was watching him.

His eyes met a gaze within the grass.

The two eyes, lit up by moonlight, were dyed a deep red.

Yakumo swallowed.

A speckled pattern, a triangular head. It stuck out a brown tongue as its tail went back and forth.

– A pit viper.

'This is bad.'

Yakumo regretted entering the thicket carelessly.

Pit vipers were a venomous snake common in Japan.

The venom of the pit viper was a haemotoxin which destroyed the tissues, blood and blood vessels within the body. Since it caused internal bleeding, there would be intense pain in the affected area. It could also cause fever and confusion.

A number of deaths had been reported before as well.

– I can't be bitten.

Yakumo regulated his breathing and stepped back, trying to avoid making any sound.

Crack.

He'd stepped on a tree branch.

Yakumo turned around, startled by the sound. Then, the pit viper bared its fangs and attacked.

Yakumo leapt back, but his injured left leg wouldn't move the way he wanted to. He staggered.

The pit viper's fangs sank into his left leg.

As Yakumo fell to the ground, he grabbed a tree branch and brought it down on the pit viper's head.

It hit.

The pit viper separated from Yakumo's leg immediately and disappeared into the thicket.

'Damn it.'

Yakumo took off his belt, wrapped it around his left thigh and bound it tightly.

It was to avoid letting the poison spread. However, if he bound it too tightly, it would interrupt the blood flow, speeding up the necrosis of his tissue from lack of oxygen.

He would have to regularly loosen the belt to allow blood to flow.

Yakumo rolled up his jeans to check on the injury.

There were two small red dots a bit above his ankle. Fortunately, because of his jeans, they didn't appear to be too deep.

Putting your lips to a snake bite to suck out the poison wouldn't reverse the effects.

On top of likely infection, bacteria such as those from tooth decay could invade.

All he could do now was wait.

Even if he started to walk to a hospital, he didn't know where there was one. Even if he did, it would have been very far.

If he moved, it would quicken his heartbeat, spread the poison more quickly and worsen his physical state.

Most importantly, going to a hospital would be going to get caught by the police himself.

Yakumo crawled to a nearby rock, stretched out his legs and sat, resting his back against it.

The symptoms from the pit viper's venom would show up in twenty to thirty minutes.

With exhaustion and an empty stomach, he didn't know how much he would be able to resist, but all he could do was wait.

Yakumo looked up at the shining round moon.

When he looked at the captivating pale moon, he felt himself calm down.

– I might die.

A feeling close to resignation spread throughout Yakumo.

– I wonder where I'll go when I die.

Yakumo could see the spirits of the dead. However, those were only the spirits who had unfinished business and were remaining in this world. Yakumo didn't know where spirits without unfinished business went.

Now that he thought about it, it was an unfortunate fate.

It felt like he'd been fighting against the current all this time.

All he had experienced from that was a great amount of sadness.

However, he had no regrets. The reason being –

If he had just one wish, before he died, just once more –

I wish I could have seen her again –

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22

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'Oi. How long does this slope go?'

Gotou called out to Eishin's back as they climbed up the slope.

He'd thought that they'd be able to get to the limestone cavern by car, but the asphalt-paved road had stopped. After that, he'd had to walk through the weedy path with a torch in hand.

He was out of breath. Even his underwear was soaked with sweat.

'Don't whine. It's only a bit more.'

Even though Eishin was fat, he walked with incredibly light footsteps as he climbed the slope.

They'd had this exchange a number of times already, but it had already been twenty minutes.

Gotou thought he would die from exhaustion.

'Let's take a short break.'

'I said, it's only a bit more.'

'I know.'

Gotou took off his tie, unbuttoned down to the third button of his shirt and then started walking more quickly.

'See? We're here.'

Right after that, Eishin stopped. Gotou stood next to Eishin.

There was a craggy rock mountain with a black hole in its middle.

On both sides of the entrance, there were two uniformed guards.

It looked like they'd noticed them, as they came towards them with the light of a torch.

'I'm Gotou of the Setamachi precinct.'

Gotou showed his police ID.

'Setamachi precinct?' said an officer. What's a detective out of his jurisdiction doing here? That question was written on his face.

He looked incredibly serious – inflexible. However, Gotou was used to dealing with people like this.

'The person of interest is in my jurisdiction. I was instructed to check on the situation.'

'At this time?'

'Since when've the police worked at a set time? If there's a case, the time shouldn't matter.'

'Ah, no...'

Gotou's sudden forcefulness startled the officer.

'Or does your precinct stop investigating once time's up? Who's in charge here? I'll beat them into shape.'

'P-please forgive me. G-go ahead.'

The officer looked ashamed as he replied, spine pencil-straight, but he gave Eishin a glance.

'This is Master Eishin, friend of the victim. He's coming in with me – you don't mind, right?'

'Please go ahead.'

Gotou casually walked towards the limestone cavern's entrance.

'So you can do it if you try.'

Eishin slapped Gotou's back while grinning.

Even though Gotou was being praised, for some reason, he couldn't be honestly happy about it.

'Stop talking – let's go.'

Gotou walked into the limestone cavern with Eishin at his side.

– It's cold.

Cold air enveloped him, like he had walked into a refrigerator.

It was probably because light didn't come in from outside. It was pitch black. He couldn't see anything that wasn't lit up with the torch.

Drip, drip. He could hear water falling.

'Quite a guy to think of meditating here,' said Gotou as he took careful steps.

'He was a zealous and serious man.'

'Unlike you?'

When Gotou said that, something pushed his back.

Gotou slipped and almost fell, but he managed to avoid that by grabbing a nearby rock.

'What the hell are you doing!?!'

'If you yell so loudly, you'll fall again,' said Eishin as he stifled his chuckle.

– I can't let my guard down.

'I don't like meditating in places like this,' said Eishin, suddenly stopping.

'You afraid?'

'Don't be ridiculous. It's a problem of thinking.'

'Thinking?'

'Meditation must be done in the middle of life. Walking all the way to a place like this to meditate isn't meditation.'

Eishin had his hands together and eyes half-closed – he looked solemn, as if his arrogance and laziness up until now had all been a lie.

However, admitting that would irritate Gotou.

'Forget about the pretentious talk and hurry up.'

Gotou walked briskly into the depths of the limestone cavern.

After about five minutes, there was a wide space. One corner appeared to be a room surrounded by boards. That was probably where the crime occurred.

Gotou stood in front of the door to the room.

There were lights there, probably from the investigation team. Gotou flipped the switch. The bright light disoriented him.

Just as his eyes had grown accustomed to the light, he slowly opened the door.

A raw smell pierced his nose.

'That's an amazing stink.'

Eishin coughed.

Gotou covered his mouth and nose with his arm and walked inside the room.

Creak.

Every time he took a step, the floor creaked.

Gotou turned the light of his torch towards the ground and suddenly saw a dark red stain. This was probably where Seidou was killed.

Gotou bent over and looked carefully.

The floor looked like they had been scratched with fingernails. This was where he had been trying to run away but was stabbed more.

Not just the floor. Gotou spotted blood sprayed on the walls too.

It was much more brutal than he had imagined.

'This is awful,' murmured Eishin.

'Agreed.'

Gotou sighed.

The culprit had repeatedly stabbed somebody trying to get away. Did they enjoy seeing him in pain? Or had they continued to stab because they were so absorbed they couldn't stop?

Whichever one it was, it gave Gotou a chill just imagining it.

'So what are you going to do now?' said Eishin, crossing his arms.

Gotou had thought he'd be able to find something out by coming to the scene, but it looked like things weren't going to be that easy.

However, he couldn't just wait because there weren't any leads.

'I'll go over everything with a fine-tooth comb.'

Unfortunately, that was the only method he had right now.

Eishin shook his head, looking exasperated.

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23

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– I'm losing consciousness.

Yakumo's head hung because he was unable to keep his neck straight.

His body felt hot. A burning pain ran through his left leg and had near doubled in size.

The ground was moving, as if Yakumo had just been rolling his eyes about. The pit viper's venom was eating away at his body.

He consciously breathed slowly.

He put his left hand up in front of his eyes. He couldn't focus. He saw doubles of his fingers.

– This is no good. I have no strength.

His left hand felt as heavy as a way. Unable to keep it up, it fell back to the floor.

He wanted to vomit. It felt like something was stirring up his stomach.

– Am I going to die?

Yakumo lifted his head with the last of his strength.

Standing there was a man. He had on a black suit with long hair that went down his back. He smiled triumphantly.

His eyes were dyed a deep red.

'A pathetic ending...' the man said expressionlessly.

That might have been true. Without anybody watching, rotting away all alone at the edge of a lake
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'Says a dead man.'

Yakumo gritted his teeth and glared at the man with two red eyes.

He was already died. He was just a spirit.

'How about it? Won't you come with me?'

The man held a hand out towards Yakumo.

– Where to?

Yakumo didn't know the destination, but if he took that hand, he felt like he would be released from his suffering.

'I'm waiting.'

The man disappeared into the darkness with a faint smile on his face.

– Where are you waiting?

Before Yakumo had that answer, he saw the back of a woman standing by the lake.

He thought it was the spirit of the girl from earlier, but he was wrong.

When she turned around, he saw it was Haruka.

'You...'

Yakumo's expression relaxed.

Haruka didn't say anything. Her brows were furrowed, like she was troubled, as she looked at Yakumo.

'Don't look like that... Is it trouble again?'

Haruka shook her head. There was a trace of tears in her eyes.

Yakumo hated seeing Haruka cry.

At first, he had thought it was because he was irritated, but then he noticed that wasn't the case.

'Smile for me...'

When he saw Haruka's smile, he felt the dregs in his heart wash away.

It made him feel idiotic for worrying. He felt like it said it was all right for him to be here – all right for him to live.

I should have died when my mother tried to kill me – he had always thought that.

He wasn't needed by anyway.

He hadn't ever thought that somebody would smile when they saw his red left eye.

Though Yakumo coldly thrust her away, in the depths of his heart, he was thankful that he had been able to see that smile again.

He should have talked to her properly.

The truth was there were other things he wanted to talk to her about. He wanted her to know him. And he wanted to know her.

– My eyes are blurry.

Haruka melted into the darkness.

– Don't disappear.

With all his might, Yakumo reached out, but his hand didn't reach her.

Just as Yakumo was stricken by his powerlessness, a man appeared.

A man with a smile like Maitreya. It was Isshin.

– Uncle.

Isshin made no reply. He just smiled.

– That's right. Uncle always smiled for me too.

No matter how hateful the things Yakumo said to him, Isshin had smiled and accepted them all.

– Why did you go?

What Uncle said was always correct, but I didn't try to accept them honestly.

But still, Uncle stayed with me.

He always welcomed me with a smile.

– Thank you.

I could never say the words I wanted to tell him most, even at the end.

I see. Uncle's here to take me with him.

I have a lot I want to talk to him about.

I'll be there soon, so listen to what I have to say.

I –

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Yakumo's hazy consciousness fell into a deep darkness.

逃亡

第二章

02
FILE

file 02: escape

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– Where is this?

Haruka stood up on the wooden floor in her bare feet.

There were candleholders in the four corners of the room. The small flames of the candles flickered.

It appeared to be a temple.

– Why am I here?

As if to answer Haruka's question, a dark shadow walked in front of Haruka. It was somebody Haruka knew well.

'Yakumo-kun, where did you go? I was worried.'

Yakumo didn't reply.

The muscles in his face were flaccid and his eyes weren't focussed. His fingers occasionally twitched.

He looked a bit strange.

'Hey. Yakumo-kun.'

Haruka called out once more. Then, Yakumo suddenly started laughing aloud.

He clutched his stomach as he convulsed with laughter.

'What's so funny?' Haruka said at last, though she was confused.

Yakumo suddenly stopped.

'What's so funny, you say?'

Still smiling, Yakumo held up a knife in front of Haruka's eyes.

The knife, coldly glinting, was dyed red. Blood dripped from its tip.

'Yakumo-kun... right?'

'That's right. I've finally realised my true nature.'

'True nature?'

Haruka stepped back.

Yakumo took a step closer as if to chase her.

'That's right. Killing people... is fun.'

'You're lying.'

'Want to test me?'

Yakumo licked his lips.

Before Haruka noticed, his two eyes were dyed a deep red.

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'Stop!'

Haruka sat straight up.

She opened her eyes not in a temple but her own room. It looked like she'd fallen asleep on the table.

- That was a dream.

'Thank goodness.'

Haruka heaved a sigh of relief and looked at the clock.

It was just past four in the morning. This wasn't the time to sleep. She rubbed her eyes and looked back at her computer monitor when she felt somebody's presence.

- Somebody's here.

When Haruka turned around, she saw somebody sitting against the wall.

'Aah!'

Haruka leapt up.

The person sitting there with his head hung slowly lifted his head.

'Yakumo-kun!' exclaimed Haruka, her eyes wide.

There was no doubt about it. It was Yakumo.

His skin was so pale and his lips so dry and purple that it made her doubt he was alive.

His white shirt was covered in dirt and the left leg of his jeans was stained with blood.

'Why are you here...' said Yakumo in a hoarse voice.

'Why...'

That was what Haruka wanted to ask.

But this wasn't the time for that. Anyway, she had to bring Yakumo to a hospital to fix his horrible condition.

'I ran here from the limestone cavern...'

'Tell me later. Anyway, I'll call an ambulance.'

Haruka took the mobile on the table in her hand.

'Then I went to the lake... Red flowers bloomed...'

Yakumo was talking deliriously.

'Lake?'

'I see... I'm... already dead...'

'Don't say something so stupid!'

'It's fine... I got to see you... in the end...'

As he spoke, Yakumo's shadow became gradually fainter and finally disappeared, as if he had melted into the room.

'Yakumo-kun? Hey, where are you?'

Haruka called out frantically, but Yakumo made no reply –

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2

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– So noisy.

Gotou woke up to the ringing of his mobile phone.

He'd gone round looking for Yakumo, but he couldn't find him. He hadn't thought it'd be so easy, but he still felt tired and disappointed.

He had planned on taking a break by sitting in the car's driver seat, but then he had fallen asleep.

In the passenger's seat, Eishin was sleeping while snoring loudly.

Unlike Gotou, who had searched for Yakumo frantically, Eishin had returned to the car soon after and fallen asleep after saying, 'There's no way we'll find him when it's this dark.'

Gotou looked at his wristwatch. It was just past four in the morning.

– Who's calling at this time?

'Gotou speaking.'

Gotou answered the phone while rubbing his eyes.

<Yakumo-kun came!>

He heard Haruka's hysterical voice on the other end of the phone.

The way she was so agitated wasn't normal.

'What about Yakumo?'

<I said he came! Just earlier! In an awful condition!>

'Calm down a bit. Explain what you're talking about.'

Gotou sat up and tried to calm Haruka down by speaking slowly.

Finally, it seemed like Haruka had regained her calm. He heard her take deep breaths.

<Earlier, Yakumo-kun came to my room...>

Haruka spoke in a hoarse voice.

'W-what?'

– He went back to Haruka?

It was possible. It irritated Gotou that Yakumo did that without contacting anyone, but he didn't care as long as he was fine.

'So Yakumo's there now?'

If possible, Gotou wanted to talk to him. There was a mountain of things he wanted to ask.

<;He... vanished...>

'Vanished?'

<Yes. Just like... smoke...>

'Weren't your eyes just playing tricks on you?'

<That's impossible!>

Haruka yelled loudly.

It was true that Haruka for one wouldn't mistake somebody for Yakumo, but –

'He vanished, right?'

<That might have been Yakumo-kun's spirit... Yakumo-kun might already...>

Gotou could hear Haruka start to sob.

A heat close to anger started boiling up within Gotou's stomach.

'Yakumo-kun won't die!' he yelled, overcome by his emotion.

– Don't screw with me. Yakumo died and went to see Haruka?

It wasn't that Gotou was angry at Haruka, but he didn't want to believe it. That guy wouldn't die so easily.

<But...>

'I'm saying he won't die! So he won't die!'

<That's right.>

Though it was in a tear-filled voice, Haruka's reply was firm.

She had become panicked by the sudden event, but it looked like she'd come back to her senses.

She had really become stronger. That was the woman in Yakumo's heart for you.

'If you did see Yakumo's spirit, Haruka-chan, did he say anything that could be a lead?' Gotou said quickly.

<He said, 'Why are you here? '>

'Anything else.'

<He said he got to a lake...>

'Lake?'

<And that red flowers bloomed...>

'Red flowers.'

'There's a lake nearby.'

Eishin had woken up at some point and he spoke from the passenger seat.

He had probably heard their conversation.

'Really?'

'Yeah. The red flowers are probably crape myrtle.'

Eishin let out a big yawn as he leant back. It seemed like he didn't realise the importance of his words.

'Where?'

'I said it at the beginning, right? There's a lake near the temple where a woman's screams...'

He had said that.

That was when Gotou had heard about the reincarnation of the girl called Hatsune. He'd completely forgotten because of everything that had happened.

But that was a place with spiritual connections.

'Can you go to that lake from the limestone cavern?'

'There's a path through the cavern. If you go along the river from there, you'll get to the lake.'

A path through the cavern – that was the first Gotou had heard of it.

Maybe. Just maybe. But this old man was too laidback.

'You should say that from the beginning!'

'You didn't ask,' said Eishin without any shame.

– Are you Yakumo!?

Gotou bit back the urge to retort and sighed.

<... Gotou-san, did you realise something?>

Haruka's anxious voice came from the phone.

'I'll go to the lake near the temple.'

<I'll also...>

'No. There's no time to go pick you up.'

<I understand.>

Haruka accepted it straightforwardly without fighting back.

'I'll call you later.'

<Gotou-san.>

Just as Gotou was about to turn on the car engine, Haruka spoke.

'What?'

<Please absolutely bring Yakumo-kun back.>

Though Haruka spoke firmly, Gotou felt like there was a tremor there.

To be honest, he couldn't make that irresponsible promise. But –

'I promise.'

<Thank you.>

Gotou hung up and started the car.

-

3

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Ishii turned around at the sound of the door opening.

Youko came into the room. She had a number of files in her arms.

'That was quick.'

Youko didn't reply to Ishii's words.

She mechanically placed the files on Ishii's desk and then sighed, covering her face with her hands.

'If the higher-ups knew I was helping out with things like this, it'd be quite a problem.' Youko glared at Ishii while propping her chin up in her hand.

Last night, Ishii had told Youko about the cases Yakumo had been involved in in the past.

It had been a long conversation.

At first, Youko had laughed scornfully, thinking it was ridiculous, but as Ishii continued to talk with fervour, her expression changed.

Then, with this case as the background, Ishii talked about how Yakumo had received a request to investigate a spiritual phenomenon related to reincarnation.

Youko had said she didn't need Ishii's cooperation, but that thinking had turned one hundred and eighty degrees.

She probably thought that solving the mystery behind the reincarnation story would be necessary to solve the case.

However, Ishii felt divided.

It was because he wasn't confident that the method they had chosen was correct. And his suspicion about Yakumo was still smoking inside of him.

– Perhaps Yakumo really did kill him.

'I'm sorry.'

Ishii bowed his head, feeling apologetic in a number of meanings.

It looked like Youko didn't like his attitude, because she waved her hand like she was swatting a fly and looked away.

'Then what are we doing next?' said Youko, tapping the files on top of the desk with her finger.

Ishii had asked Youko to take the files about murders, accidents, suicides and disappearances that had the name Minami in them from the Nishitama precinct.

Minami was the name that Hatsune, who said she was a reincarnation, claimed she had in her previous life.

'We're going to look for something like it in these files.'

'Something like it?'

'Yes, something like it.'

'Can't you explain more properly?'

It looked like his explanation had been too vague. Youko tapped the desk loudly in her irritation.

When she acted like this, she was somewhat like Gotou.

'That's right... Let's say people who might be Hatsune's mother...'

'Well, all right. We just have to look for something like it, right?' said Youko, sounding exasperated, but she took the files in hand and started flipping through them. Ishii started the same work, but his hands suddenly stopped.

'Excuse me...'

'What?'

Youko's brows furrowed in irritation.

'Why do you feel like helping now?'

'You said this, right? Though Saitou Yakumo is being chased by the police, he should be chasing the reincarnation mystery. If I chase that mystery as well, I'll reach him.'

Just as Youko said, Ishii had said that last night. But –

'Is that all?'

Ishii leant forward.

Though Youko usually had good enunciation, she looked troubled.

'... I have a personal interest.'

'Interest?'

'He can see them, right... Er, ghosts...'

It looked like it was difficult for Youko to say.

'Ah, yes.'

'I've seen them once too,' said Youko in a low tone as she narrowed her eyes.

'I see...'

Ishii understood now.

Normally, even if he said that Yakumo could see ghosts, people wouldn't believe it, but Youko had seen ghosts herself, so she believed what Ishii's aid.

'What sort of ghost was it?'

'What a strange question.'

Youko smiled, seeming exasperated.

So she can make this sort of expression too – it made Ishii a bit happy.

'Is it...'

'It is. You're strange.'

'Strange?'

Ishii didn't think he was different from other people. He was just a regular old useless guy.

'Yes. How should I put it...'

Though Youko started to speak, she looked down awkwardly and shook her head.

'What is it?'

'It's nothing.'

'Why not tell me? Please do.'

He couldn't help but be curious now that she had said that much. Ishii pressed further.

'I don't know how to say it, but I think you're unsuited for detective work.'

'Unsuited?'

'Yes. You're too pure.'

'Eh...'

Ishii made a vague reply.

– Too pure.

He had been told the same thing countless times before, but Ishii didn't know what part of him was supposed to be pure.

'Anyway, the ghost story,' said Youko, changing the subject.

'Ah, that's right. What sort of ghost did you see?'

'The ghost of my dead lover.'

'Eh?'

Ishii swallowed.

The regret he felt about asking spread through his chest.

Though it was just his own imaginings, he had thought that the ghost Youko had seen would have been something like a scary story.

'Though it seemed like that person was appealing to me for something, I couldn't hear that voice...'

'Is that so...'

Ishii almost asked why that person had died, but he didn't have the courage.

Youko probably wanted to meet that lover of hers again and hear those words.

That was why she was helping to look for Yakumo.

Just as the atmosphere had gotten a bit solemn, Youko's mobile rang.

'Yes, Natsume speaking.'

When Youko answered, she stood up and moved to the corner of the room.

Though Ishii couldn't hear the conversation, he saw her expression stiffen in a flash and knew how serious it was.

'I'll do the rest myself.'

Youko said that quickly and hung up. Then, she tried to leave the room.

'Did something happen?'

Ishii stood up immediately and followed Youko.

Youko put a hand on her chin and looked up at the ceiling. It looked like she wasn't sure whether she should talk about it.

'The information will come in soon enough,' Ishii said, giving it a try.

'Another corpse was found.'

'Eh?'

'It's unknown yet whether it's related to this case.'

'Do you know the identity?'

'I can't say anything else.'

Youko said just that and then briskly left the room.

– What on earth is happening?

Ishii wouldn't stand for being left behind in this situation.

He hurriedly ran after Youko.

– He fell.

-

4

-

Gotou stepped down hard on the pedal as he drove.

Haruka said she saw Yakumo. Normally, he'd have put it aside, thinking it was foolish, but he didn't feel like that right now.

He didn't have any other leads anyway, so all he could do was charge there now.

There was a sharp curve, but Gotou just turned the wheel at the same speed.

He went right out into the other lane and the tires let out white smoke.

'You're going too quickly.'

Eishin sounded displeased about being thrown around by centrifugal force, but Gotou didn't have the time for him right now.

'Hold on tight.'

Gotou pressed down further on the accelerator.

Eishin grabbed the door handle so that he wouldn't be thrown about.

'You're being rash.'

'I have to be rash, or I wouldn't be able to keep up with Yakumo.'

Eishin snorted at Gotou's reply.

Though Eishin kept complaining, he looked like he was having fun.

'Here!' yelled Eishin, like he'd suddenly remembered something.

Gotou slammed on the brakes in response. His body slammed into the seatbelt from the impact.

'Can't you stop more quietly?'

'Then tell me earlier.'

'You were driving too quickly.'

– This old man never shuts up.

'So where is it?'

'Just up this slope.'

Eishin pointed at the weedy path that stretched along the side of the asphalt.

'Another trail?'

With a click of his tongue, Gotou opened the door and got off.

The sky was starting to grow light.

He passed through the grass and practically had to crawl as he went up the slope.

After about ten minutes, he saw a lake.

Since it was called a lake, he'd thought it would be bigger, but it was only a hundred metres at most to the opposite shore – more of a pond.

'Yakumo!'

He yelled from the bottom of his belly.

The voice just echoed back into his ears with no reply.

'Where are you!? Yakumo! It's me! Gotou!'

Gotou kept yelling as he slowly walked around the lake.

'Oi! Yakumo!'

Though he kept yelling, no reply came back to him.

– Damn it! Where is he?

Gotou looked around frantically.

Red flowers came into his vision. That was probably the crape myrtle they'd talked about.

'Over there then?'

Gotou rushed there on an impulse.

He stopped in front of the crape myrtle tree, out of breath, when he saw something moving in the grass.

– A pit viper.

Gotou kicked a rock by his feet.

The viper slide away.

'Don't scare me.'

He had just wiped the sweat off his neck when he saw somebody's foot sticking out from behind a rock.

– Could it be?

Gotou ran over.

'Yakumo...'

There was no doubt about it. It was Yakumo.

He had his back against the rock and was sitting with both legs out. His arms hung at his side and his head hung limply as well.

'Oi! Yakumo! Hang in there!'

Gotou took Yakumo's face in his hands and pulled him up.

His skin was deathly pale. His body was considerably cold too.

– Don't screw with me. Did he really die?

'Yakumo, wake up!'

Gotou slapped Yakumo with an open hand.

However, he was as unresponsive as a doll.

'It looked like he was bitten by a pit viper.'

Eishin came over and said that as he pointed at Yakumo's left leg.

His jeans were rolled up to his thigh. The leg that stuck out was very swollen and there were two small injuries, as if pricked by a needle, in his shin.

'Pit viper?'

He should've bit off that pit viper earlier.

'He tightened his belt above the injury. As you can see, it looks like the bite isn't that deep.'

'Can he be saved?'

'I don't know. I can't tell how long it's been since he was bit. Anyway, we need to get him to a hospital right away.'

Gotou was about to reply when he remembered something.

'Yakumo's a fugitive.'

'So what?'

Eishin stood up with eyes wide open. He looked just like a demon.

'Well, the police...'

'Right now, Yakumo's life is the most important,' said Eishin, interrupting Gotou.

That was right. Gotou had been so upset he'd almost forgotten what was most crucial.

'Right. My bad.'

'I know a doctor near here. If I ask, the doctor probably won't report him to the police.'

Eishin's eyes narrowed back to his usual expression.

Despite what he said, Eishin seemed to be worried about Yakumo from the bottom of his heart. Gotou might have misjudged him.

'Right. Anyway, let's carry Yakumo.'

-

5

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- She left.

Ishii returned to his desk alone.

He had run out after Youko, but he fell partway and was left behind. He felt like things like this just kept on happening this time.

'No, this isn't the time to feel depressed.'

Ishii hit both of his cheeks and took the files that Youko had brought into his hands for a change of pace.

- I'll look for something like it from these documents.

Now that he thought about it, it was vague. Though that hadn't been the words Youko used, he didn't know where to start.

'Oh, you're here?'

The door opened and in came Miyagawa.

He walked over with a bowlegged gait and sat down on the desk, but he didn't seem to have his usual pressure – or rather, ambition.

Like an old soldier tired of war.

'Were you still here?'

'It's been busy on my end of things too,' replied Miyagawa with no energy in his neck. It looked like his exhaustion had really piled up.

'Is that so...'

'Anyway, there's something I want to talk to you about.'

'Ah, yes.'

'Where's Gotou?' said Miyagawa, looking around the room.

'Ah, er, he hasn't yet...'

Ishii thought that he would be yelled at and pulled up his shoulders, but all that came back was a resigned 'That so'.

'Did something happen?'

'Got a report from forensics earlier.'

Miyagawa took a cigarette out of his pocket and lit up.

'Forensics...?'

Ishii took an ashtray from the desk drawer and placed it in front of Miyagawa.

Miyagawa took in a deep breath of smoke and waited a long while before beginning to speak.

'The fingerprints in the university clubroom that Yakumo lives in match the fingerprints on the knife left at the scene.'

'Eh?'

'Seems to be ninety-nine per cent accurate.'

'That's...'

Ishii felt like somebody had hit him in the head with a blunt object.

Even though he had suspected that Yakumo might have killed him in his heart, the shock was stronger than he had expected.

Ishii realised that he, like Gotou, had been certain that Yakumo would not kill somebody.

He might have just thought Yakumo could have been the culprit because of his feelings towards

Haruka. That would have been better for him –

Ishii also knew what sort of person Yakumo really was.

Ishii didn't know how many times Yakumo had saved him. But he had forgotten his debt of gratitude and couldn't throw away the doubt that Yakumo had committed a murder from the corners of his heart because of his own terrible jealousy.

– I'm such a lowly person.

Ishii gripped his fists tightly and bit down the urge to scream.

'Jurisdiction will change Saitou Yakumo from a person of interest to a suspect.'

– Saitou Yakumo, suspect.

Ishii had never thought that Yakumo would be described that way.

'But at this stage, it's just that the fingerprints match, yes? Isn't it too early to make him a suspect?' said Ishii with a hopeful perspective.

Miyagawa shook his head forcefully.

'Besides the physical evidence, there's also eyewitness testimony. Plus, he ran away from the police himself. There's nothing that can be done now.'

'But...'

'That's all. I came to tell you guys to back off.'

Miyagawa looked at Ishii seriously.

It was a somewhat sad gaze.

'Back off?'

'Yeah. What happened so far is fine, but if you involve yourself with Yakumo any more, you'll be suspected without cause. I won't be able to stick up for you.'

What Miyagawa said made sense.

Now that Yakumo was a suspect, they would be suspected to be involved in the crime if they went in too deep. If they found out where Yakumo was and kept quiet, that would be aiding a fugitive.

Ishii knew that. But still, he couldn't reply with a 'Yes sir'.

'With all due deference to you, Chief Miyagawa, the possibility that Yakumo-shi has been falsely accused...'

'Don't say any more! I know that myself!'

Miyagawa's angry yell from the bottom of his stomach shook the room.

Though they had been brief, various emotions had been condensed in those words.

It wasn't only Gotou and Ishii who had worked with Yakumo. Miyagawa had gotten to know Yakumo as well through various cases.

Miyagawa himself thought that Yakumo wouldn't kill anybody.

However, he couldn't protect Gotou and Ishii any further.

He had forced everything he wanted to say to the bottom of his stomach and made himself to be the bad guy so as to push Gotou and Ishii away from the case.

'You guys don't want to handcuff Yakumo either, right?'

Miyagawa said just that and pressed his cigarette into the ashtray. Then, he left the room with slumped shoulders.

Ishii couldn't think of anything to say to that back.

– What should I do?

-

6

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Haruka held on to her mobile tightly as she paced around the room.

She was irritated with herself for being unable to do anything at a time like this.

Just thinking about Yakumo's state made her chest hurt like it was being ripped apart.

– Please. Be safe.

All she could do was wish for that.

She felt that she was terribly small and unreliable.

'Yakumo-kun...'

Just by saying that name aloud, a number of emotions welled up within her, bringing her close to panic.

She placed the mobile on the table. By gripping the red stone on her necklace, she was somehow able to calm her emotions, which had been threatening to explode.

The intercom rang.

– Could it be?

With that thought, Haruka rushed to the monitor.

On the display was Gotou's wife, Atsuko, and her adopted daughter, Nao.

'I'll open up now.'

Haruka quickly unlocked the auto-lock at the entrance. After a while, the doorbell rang.

She opened the door immediately and welcomed Atsuko and Nao inside.

'Sorry for coming at this time, but I just couldn't sit still...' Atsuko said quietly.

'No. I don't want to be alone now either...'

'That's right. It's really quite the matter,' said Atsuko quietly.

'Yes.'

'My head's a mess. Even though this is such a serious affair, that person won't tell me anything. When he called home yesterday to say he wouldn't be coming back, finally... And he didn't explain the situation in detail either. He just told me to ask you, Haruka-chan... There's a limit to being irresponsible.'

Atsuko said that all at once in her agitation.

Though Haruka understood how she felt, Gotou must have been frantic as well. Currently, Haruka was also doing her best to search for Yakumo – she hadn't thought to contact Atsuko and Nao.

'Haruka-chan, are you all right?'

Atsuko put her hand on Haruka's shoulder.

Haruka felt like everything that she had been holding in came loose.

She wanted to just cling to Atsuko and cry, but then Nao jumped in front of Haruka.

She buried her face in Haruka's chest and started to sob.

Haruka hugged Nao tightly.

'It's all right,' Haruka said, rubbing Nao's back gently.

It was mysterious. Though Haruka had been the one about to collapse just earlier, when she took in Nao's sobs like this, she felt her heart naturally calm down.

– I need to be more reliable.

It made her feel that way.

'Yakumo-kun hasn't...?' said Atsuko after things had calmed down.

'Gotou-san is going to search for him now.'

'I see. If he doesn't find him, feel free to hit him. I give my permission,' said Atsuko jokingly.

'It's fine. Gotou-san will definitely find him. Right, Nao-chan?'

Haruka pat Nao's glossy hair.

Nao, who couldn't hear, had no way to understand Haruka's words. But it seemed like Haruka's meaning had come across, as Nao nodded with her head still buried in Haruka's chest.

– Yakumo. Come back soon.

-

7

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The hospital was about fifteen minutes from the lake.

It was a small one-storey town clinic.

Gotou parked at the front entrance. Gotou took Yakumo's head and Eishin his feet. They went into the clinic and placed Yakumo on the bench in the waiting room.

Since Eishin had contacted ahead of time, the examination room was open, but it was still early, so there were no other patients.

After Eishin set Yakumo down, he went right into the examination room.

'Yakumo. Hang in there.'

Gotou called out to him frantically.

But Yakumo didn't wake up.

– I'm begging you. Don't die.

Gotou prayed as he gripped Yakumo's hand tightly.

Doing that wouldn't make Yakumo get better sooner. He knew that.

There are things people realise for the first time when they lose something.

Gotou had thought of him as a damn impudent brat who always said hateful things, but at some point, Yakumo had become like family to him.

It became natural for him to be there – if he disappeared, Gotou would be troubled.

Like his wife Atsuko and his daughter Nao, Gotou would protect Yakumo even if he lost his own life in the process.

'The doctor will see him now. We have to carry him to the examination room.'

When Eishin hit Gotou's shoulder, he came back to reality.

'Right,' responded Gotou immediately. Then, they carried Yakumo to the examination room.

After they placed Yakumo on the bed in the examination room, an old man with a hunched back and white hair hobbled over.

He was somewhat like the coroner, Hata.

'This is Nakamoto-san. My old friend.'

Eishin gave a simple introduction.

Gotou was about to introduce himself, but Nakamoto started to examine Yakumo, saying 'Let's see'

like he wasn't interested in pleasantries.

'It looked like he was bit by a pit viper,' said Eishin, crossing his arms.

'A pit viper... when?'

Nakamoto's eyes went wide.

'We don't know exactly, but we think it was a while back.'

'Bring me the serum immediately.'

Nakamoto instructed the nearby middle-aged nurse.

She looked a bit surprised and stood there with a blank expression for a while, but when Nakamoto urged her – 'Hurry' – she rushed out of the examination room.

Nakamoto looked at the injury with a penlight and checked Yakumo's pupils, but then he sighed deeply.

'Can you save Yakumo?' Gotou pressed.

'I don't know yet.'

'What do you mean, you don't know! You're going to save him!'

Gotou's emotions boiled over and he grabbed the collar of Nakamoto's gown.

However, Nakamoto just looked up at Gotou like he had seen something unpleasant.

'Eishin. Take this idiot outside.'

'W-what!?' yelled Gotou.

Eishin held Gotou from behind.

Gotou tried to fight, but Eishin was stronger than he had been expected and so Gotou was dragged out of the examination room.

'Calm down, idiot,' said Eishin, like he was rebuking a child.

'How could I calm down?'

'Will your yelling make Yakumo get better?'

Gotou gritted his back teeth.

He knew that even without hearing a lecture from a monk.

'Anyway, you wait there.'

Eishin pushed Gotou to sit down on the bench in the waiting room and returned to the examination room.

All Gotou could do was glare at the door, which slammed shut.

'Damn it!'

Gotou's yell echoed through the waiting room.

He was so angry he wanted to punch somebody with all his might. Just as he put his fists down on his lap, his mobile phone rang.

When he checked the display, he saw that it was from Ishii.

'What do you want?'

Gotou answered the phone with evident irritation.

<D-Detective Gotou, it's t-terrible.>

Ishii's faltering voice made Gotou even angrier. If Ishii had been in front of him, he would have smacked his fist into his head.

'Talk already.'

<Ah, yes sir. Actually, Chief Miyagawa told me this information earlier...>

'Like I said, what?'

<Yakumo-shi's fingerprints match the ones on the knife.>

'What!?!'

Gotou stood up without thinking.

Matching fingerprints was positive evidence. It looked like Yakumo had definitely held the knife.

<The Nishitama precinct is going to change Yakumo-shi from a person of interest to a suspect.>

'Don't joke with me.'

As Gotou muttered that, his eyes landed on the news on the television in the waiting room.

A horse-faced male reporter stood in front of the Nishitama precinct's entrance and spoke in a rushed manner towards the cameras.

<Just now, according to the information we received, the Nishitama precinct has concluded that city university student, Saitou Yakumo, is the suspect...>

As if to interrupt the reporter's words, a picture of Yakumo appeared on the screen.

It was probably the photo from his student ID or something like it. He had a white shirt on and a composed expression on his face.

It was probably from when he still wore his black contact lens. Gotou couldn't see Yakumo's red left eye.

<Detective Gotou?>

Gotou heard Ishii call out to him from the other end of the phone.

'I can hear you. I'm looking at the news right now.'

<And there was one more piece of news.>

'What?'

<Another corpse was found in the Nishitama jurisdiction.>

'Serial?'

<I don't know. But with this timing...>

So it could be serial.

Not just one person but two had been killed – a big case. The Nishitama precinct would probably chase Yakumo with all their strength.

Not all. Detectives from central government would be out soon.

If that happened, all of the police force would be chasing Yakumo.

<What should we do?>

Ishii's off-the-point question stopped Gotou's thoughts.

'What?'

<I said, what should we do now?>

– That?

'How would I know?'

<Eh?>

'Think about what you should do on your own!'

After yelling that, Gotou hung up.

When he sat down on the bench, Gotou realised that he'd forgotten to tell Ishii that he'd found Yakumo. He thought about calling again, but decided against it. It would be better not to tell Ishii.

If he found out, he would have to report to the higher-ups. It'd bring about problems if he knew and kept quiet about it.

– I can't get Ishii any more involved in this.

After smiling derisively, Gotou called Haruka's number from his mobile phone's contact list.

He'd call just to say they found him.

<Hello?>

She had probably been waiting for a call. Gotou heard Haruka's cornered voice right away.

She had probably been in more pain than anyone. It felt like she might start crying at any moment.

'It's Gotou.'

<Did you find Yakumo-kun?> Haruka said immediately.

So many things had happened up until now. To Haruka, Yakumo was irreplaceable, just like how he was to Gotou.

If Haruka lost Yakumo, she would probably carry that with her for her whole life.

When Gotou thought that, he couldn't speak.

<So you didn't find him...>

Haruka's voice sounded like it would fade off at any moment.

– I...

'Like I promised, I found him,' said Gotou, before his heart was determined.

<Really?>

Haruka's voice was so bright it sounded like a different person's.

Now, Gotou couldn't say the truth.

– It's fine. Yakumo will be saved.

Gotou said that to himself and made his decision.

'Yeah, really.'

<Is Yakumo-kun all right?>

'Of course.'

<I want to talk to him.>

'Ah, no, right now's no good. He's got a bit of an injury. A doctor's looking at him.'

<An injury...>

'He's fine. Nothing big. He's getting it looked at just in case.'

Gotou was hit by a wave of regret after saying that.

– What am I saying?

However, it was too late now that he'd said it. If anything happened, he'd make the same thing happen to that quack doctor.

<Thank goodness... Really, thank goodness...>

Gotou could tell that Haruka was crying on the other side of the phone.

– I'm really counting on you.

Gotou glared at the door of the examination room.

<Where are you now, dear?>

Suddenly, Gotou heard Atsuko's voice from the other side of the phone.

'W-why are you there?'

Gotou became flustered in his confusion.

<What do you mean, why? Nao and I are also worried about Yakumo-kun. Don't just run off like that.>

'I'm sorry.'

Gotou's voice toned down under Atsuko's pressure.

He'd know this, but she really had some guts.

<So how is the case?>

'Don't want to think about it. It's the worst-case scenario.'

<I see...>

'The fingerprints on the murder weapon match Yakumo's.'

<Yakumo-kun could never kill someone...>

'I know that.'

Eishin's words came up in Gotou's head.

– People's hearts change moment by moment.

That might be true. There was probably a side of Yakumo that Gotou and the others didn't know. But still, he wanted to believe in Yakumo.

There was a line that people couldn't cross. No matter what, Yakumo wasn't the sort of person who would cross that line.

'Hey, Atsuko.'

Gotou called his wife by his name.

He felt like it'd been a while since he'd done that. He didn't know why, but since they married, it'd become natural for her to be by his side and he'd just gotten by with things like 'Oi'.

But he felt like calling her by her name right now.

There was something he had to say properly while facing her.

<What?>

'The police are chasing Yakumo as a suspect rather than a person of interest. But I can't believe it.'

<Right.>

'Could I ask you one thing?'

<Yes.>

'If I end up quitting the police, what will you do?'

The moment Gotou said that, he heard laughter from the other side of the phone.

Perhaps Atsuko wasn't taking what Gotou said seriously. Or she didn't understand the meaning of the question –

But Gotou's answer cleared away those feelings of Gotou's.

<If I had to say what I like about you, there's one thing. You rush forward with your stupidly honest belief in others.>

'And if you had to say what you hated?'

<Your job.>

– She hates me being a police officer?

It was the first time he'd heard of it. It seemed like Atsuko had seen through all of Gotou's worries.

He'd thought he'd been flying around freely up until now, but it looked like he'd actually just been dancing around in Atsuko's palm.

He'd made an unbelievable woman into his wife.

'Got it. I'll try not to be hated.'

Gotou hung up and stood.

There was no reason to hesitate any more. Gotou was determined.

Yakumo might not like it, but he'd go with him to the ends of hell.

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8

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– I'm so glad.

Haruka gripped the red stone on her necklace tightly.

After seeing Yakumo in her room this morning, she recalled the time when her friend Shiori died and it had felt like her heart was in her mouth.

Nao was hopping around the room in happiness.

'That's great.'

Atsuko held Haruka's shoulders tightly.

'Yes.'

'My husband's quite the guy, isn't he?'

Atsuko really looked proud.

Haruka had to thank Gotou. Not just this time – he had stood on the front lines time and time again and protected them with his body.

'Thank you very much.'

Haruka knew her voice was trembling.

– No good. I'm going to cry again.

'Now, let's stop with the sentimentality. There's something we have to do too, right?' said Atsuko.

'Yes,' replied Haruka, wiping away her tears with her finger.

Just as Atsuko said, they had something they had to do.

Yakumo had become a suspect. If they didn't prove his innocence, he couldn't return even if he was safe.

As if to reply to Haruka's feelings, the mobile phone on the table rang.

The number on the display was Makoto's.

'Hello.'

<Sorry for calling early in the morning.>

Makoto's clear voice came through the phone.

'It's fine.'

<I found a number of interesting things while investigating.>

'Interesting things?'

<A mysterious story about that limestone cave.>

Makoto lowered her tone.

'A mysterious story... is it?'

Haruka lowered her tone as well.

<Yes. Old newspapers were no good, but about ten years ago, the publication department of my newspaper agency put out a book about spiritual phenomena and there was a story about that limestone cave in it.>

Though her voice was quiet, Makoto spoke quickly. It was evident that she was agitated.

'What sort of story was it?'

Expectation welled up within Haruka too.

<Fanatics about that sort of thing said that a woman's screams could be heard from that limestone cave.>

At this stage, Haruka didn't know what that really meant, but she couldn't ignore it.

<And there's a rumour that you can also hear a woman's screams at the lake near the limestone cavern.>

'At the lake...'

Haruka recalled what Eishin had said.

Hatsune, who said she was her mother's reincarnation, had said she was killed and sunk into the lake.

Hatsune was a girl of about ten years old. The time matched up. It could have something to do with it.

<That caught my interest, so I acted like I was going to gather material for this case and called people in the area. And then...>

Makoto spoke, interrupting Haruka's thoughts.

'Did you find something out?'

<I got different testimony.>

'Different testimony?'

<Yes. Though he was an old man already past sixty, that person said he heard a crying baby in that limestone cave when he was a kid.>

Though Haruka didn't know the precise age of the person who had given the interview, she imagined that this was about fifty years ago.

The time was completely different, and a woman's screams and a baby's cries were completely different.

She had thought things might have been related, but she felt now that everything was falling apart.

'Isn't that a different story?'

<Probably.>

Makoto said that as if it were a matter of fact.

When Makoto said that so firmly, it made Haruka more confused. Why had Makoto talked about a different spiritual phenomenon?

Makoto continued to speak, sensing Haruka's question.

<That old man went into the limestone cavern to find out where the baby's cries were coming from.>

Makoto's voice changed. Haruka's heart beat loudly.

Haruka held the mobile tightly and waited for Makoto to continue.

<He saw a woman there holding a child.>

'A woman?'

<Yes. That isn't all. He said that both of the woman's eyes were dyed a deep red...>

– A woman with two red eyes.

Haruka couldn't speak in her surprise.

<I don't know for certain, but don't you think one of these might be related to the case?>

Haruka agreed with Makoto's opinion.

Two spiritual phenomena that had occurred in the same place. Hatsune, who claimed to be her mother's reincarnation. If they found the thread that tied these three things together, they would solve the mystery of the case.

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9

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– Think about what you should do on your own!

Gotou's words kept circling his head like a round.

For a while, he had thought that Gotou had abandoned him and had been dazed in his shock.

But after some time, he had understood the true meaning behind those words, as if they had slowly spread within his heart.

Gotou hadn't abandoned him. He'd entrusted the matter to him.

When Ishii realised that, he had trembled from head to toe, like electricity was running through him.

No matter how much Miyagawa was against it, there was something he had to do.

Ishii was determined.

First, he needed to gather information. Youko had said that another corpse was found in the Nishitama jurisdiction. He would find out its identity.

The direction of his investigation would change depending on whether that corpse was related to Yakumo's case.

Ishii took the phone from the desk but was troubled about his decision.

If he contacted Miyagawa through the internal line, the chief would probably be furious. That said, calling the Nishitama precinct without an official request would cause discord.

– What should I do?

Just as he held his head in disappointment, somebody's face flashed through Ishii's mind.

'That's right. Makoto-san might know.'

Ishii quickly called Makoto's number from his mobile phone contacts list.

<Hello, Hijikata speaking.>

After a number of rings, Makoto picked up.

Ishii felt like it had been a while since he'd heard her voice. Since he had felt like he'd been left behind on his own, this relaxed him a bit.

'It's Ishii. It's been a while.'

<Actually, I was just about to contact you too, Ishii-san.>

'Eh? Is that so?'

– What could it be?

'I was investigating Yakumo-kun's case with Haruka-chan.>

Makoto answered Ishii's question.

'I see...'

<How about you, Ishii-san?>

'Of course, I'm calling about Yakumo-shi's case. There's something I want to know, but...'

<If it's a question I can reply to, of course.>

'It seems like a corpse was found in the Nishitama jurisdiction this morning.'

Makoto seemed to sense the general situation just from Ishii's explanation and put the phone on hold after saying 'Please wait'.

A melancholic melody started to play.

While listening to it, Ishii realised that his impression of Makoto had changed.

In the past, he would become nervous in front of Makoto, but now that wasn't the case.

– I wonder why.

<I'm sorry for the wait.>

Makoto spoke breathlessly, interrupting Ishii's thoughts.

'What is it?'

<Though I don't know too much...>

'That's fine.'

<His name is Matsumoto Hiroshi. Twenty-seven years old. He's a high school teacher. He had taken an unauthorised leave from work since two days ago, and when a colleague from school went to check out on him, it looked like he had been stabbed multiple times with a knife.>

Ishii felt his feet shake when he heard what Makoto said.

Stabbed multiple times with a knife – that was the exact same method that Seidou had been killed with. Though it was too early to say it was the same perpetrator just from that, it was worth looking into.

<And the location of the crime was about five kilometres from that temple.>

Makoto added to her explanation.

It wasn't that far. Ishii's suspicions grew stronger.

<Does it seem related?>

Makoto said that as if she had read Ishii's thoughts.

'I can't say anything at this stage...'

<I see...>

Ishii was about to hang up, but then Makoto stopped him, saying <Ishii-san>.

'What is it?'

<I also have information that I've gathered. Shall we meet up later?>

That was a welcome suggestion.

He had to explain the situation to Haruka as well, and it would be better to have more heads to think about it.

'That sounds good.'

<Then I'll pick up Haruka-chan and meet you.>

'Thank you.'

Ishii hung up and looked at the mountain of files that Youko had left behind. It was possible that something that connected Seidou and Matsumoto Hiroshi was in there.

Ishii rolled up his shirt sleeves and picked up a file.

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10

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– Still not done?

Gotou glared at the examination room door with his two hands in fists.

It had been more than two hours since.

He was irritated at himself for only being able to wait. At times like this, he longed for the cigarettes that he had stopped smoking.

'Damn it!'

Just as Gotou spat that out, the door opened.

Eishin came out. His forehead was drenched with sweat. He looked like he had lost weight.

'How is he?'

Gotou stood up immediately and approached Eishin.

Eishin let out a long breath and then his expression relaxed.

'Seems he'll be fine if he gets some rest.'

'T-that so?'

All the force in Gotou's body left him – it felt like he'd fall right to the floor.

Gotou was surprised himself that Yakumo's existence had had such an impact on him.

'So what do you plan to do now?'

Eishin looked at the glass door at the entrance, like he had sensed something.

Gotou looked as well.

He saw two uniformed officers approaching the examination room.

The nurse had probably informed the police after seeing the news. This was bad.

'Take Yakumo out of here,' Gotou said forcefully.

'Are you serious?'

Eishin's brow was furrowed.

Like Gotou had the time to tell jokes now.

'I'll stop the officers. You take Yakumo then,' said Gotou, glaring at Eishin.

For a while, Eishin just looked back at Gotou silently, but he finally shook his head in resignation.

'My, my. To think that I would become a partner in crime...'

'You were the start of this. You should be prepared.'

'Got it.'

Eishin smiled wryly and headed to the examination room.

'Now, time to go.'

Gotou walked over with wide strides to the officers that had come in and showed them his police ID.

'I'm Gotou of the Setamachi precinct.'

'Thank you for your hard work.'

The uniformed officer immediately replied with a salute.

'Did something happen?'

'Yes. There was a report that the escaped suspect Saitou Yakumo was here...'

– So that really was it.

Gotou clicked his tongue looked at the examination room.

With bad timing, Eishin came out, carrying Yakumo.

One of the uniformed officers noticed and tried to approach Eishin, but Gotou grabbed the officer's arm to stop him.

'Wait!'

'No, but...'

'It was decided that Saitou Yakumo will be turned over to the Setamachi precinct.'

– Please. Believe me.

Gotou looked at the officer whose arm he was holding with that thought in his head.

'I will confirm that.'

After the other officer said that, he took his wireless in his hand.

– No good, eh?

Gotou turned around and kned the officer with the wireless between the legs.

'Agh!'

The officer put his two hands to his crotch and screeched.

'Don't think badly of me.'

Gotou kicked the man's defenceless chin.

The officer fell down backwards and stopped moving, losing consciousness.

'W-what are you doing?'

The other officer seemed in shock as he put his hand to the gun holster at his waist.

– As if I'd let you do that!

Gotou grabbed the officer's arm as he tried to take out his gun and then rammed his head into his nose.

'Aaahhh!'

The officer staggered backwards while gripping his nose.

Gotou took a big step forward to approach the officer and performed a lariat with his outstretched right arm.

The officer fell backwards and stopped moving.

– I've done it now.

Though it was to save Yakumo, he was interfering with a public servant in the execution of his duties by aiding a fugitive. And he'd been violent on top of that. It wasn't something a police officer should do.

He wouldn't be able to be a police officer again with this.

Gotou had thought he would be disappointed, but strangely, his chest felt light. He had been bound by the organisation called the police up until now and had undergone many hardships, but now he was free.

'Shouldn't have done that,' Eishin said, poking fun.

As usual, this guy had no sense of nervousness.

'Anyway, let's hurry.'

Right after saying that, Gotou ran.

There was no time to be sentimental. Once the officers regained consciousness, help would probably come right away.

They had to get as far away as they could before that happened.

Gotou got in the car's driver seat and turned on the engine.

He waited until Eishin put Yakumo in the back and sat himself in the passenger seat before starting the car.

'There was a movie like this before. The one with a pair escaping after committing a train robbery,' said Eishin, smiling like he was enjoying this.

Gotou knew that movie too, but he didn't want to compare themselves to it if he could.

'Do you know how that movie ended?'

'No, how did it?'

Eishin cocked his head.

– Really, what a laidback old man.

'In the end, they were surrounded by the army and shot full of holes.'

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11

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– What's this?

Ishii was looking through the files when he spotted the circumstances of a certain case and his

hands stopped without thinking.

It was about a girl's disappearance ten years ago.

Masuoka Minami, who lived in Nishitama City, was seventeen years old at the time. She went missing on the way home from school. Minami had still not been found.

From her friends' testimony, Minami had seemed very depressed two or three days prior to the incident.

As well, on the day of her disappearance, she was spotted talking the train at the station in the direction of Shinjuku.

Her father had failed at work and lost his job and her mother was working part-time to support their family. Though she had wanted to go to university, but she was forced to give up.

It appeared that Minami had expressed her dissatisfaction with her family to her friends. The police had conjectured that she ran away from home because she hated her family.

After just looking at this much, it was a case that could happen often.

However, there was a reason Ishii had focussed on this case.

First was the name.

Furthermore, the person who had last seen Minami. That person was the victim of the case this time, Seidou.

There were other things that caught his interest. Matsumoto Hiroshi, the corpse that was found this morning, was the same age as Minami.

Was this just a coincidence – no, it was too much for that.

Ishii felt agitated.

Calling Minami's family for information would be one method.

'Where's Gotou!?'

The door slammed open. Miyagawa ran in with a terribly angry expression.

His face was completely red – it looked like he could explode at any moment.

'No, I...'

Ishii stood up reflexively, back pencil-straight.

'Where's Gotou?'

Miyagawa brought his face so close to Ishii's that their noses were almost touching.

His eyes were bloodshot. Ishii felt like Miyagawa might bite into his neck at any moment.

'No... I...'

'I told you to back off already. What idiotic...'

Miyagawa covered his face with both hands and sat down right there.

Ishii had no idea what had happened, but when he saw Miyagawa's unusual reaction, the feeling that something unbelievable was happening grew stronger.

'What on earth...'

When Ishii asked that, Miyagawa stood up there with a reproachful expression and clicked his tongue.

'There's nothing else to say. This is the end...'

As if to interrupt Miyagawa's explanation, the door opened.

Youko came in. Her expression was as wild as Miyagawa's.

'You've done it now!'

'Yes?'

'Did you know?'

Youko said that hysterically as she approached Ishii.

– What on earth is it?

Ishii's head felt like it would split in his confusion.

'What about?'

'Your partner acted violently against two uniformed officers and escaped with Saitou Yakumo.'

'Eh?'

It was so unexpected that for a while, Ishii couldn't understand the meaning of the words.

– It can't be.

'Do you understand what this means? Aiding a fugitive and interfering with a public servant in the execution of his duties. And violence, on top of that.'

'You're lying. Detective Gotou wouldn't do that.'

Ishii looked at Miyagawa for help.

'It's true. He really did something stupid...'

Miyagawa spat that out.

'That's...'

Ishii stood there, unable to believe it.

– I see.

Now, Ishii finally understood. Gotou had already found Yakumo when they talked on the phone. He had been planning on escaping with Yakumo from the very beginning.

That was why he didn't tell Ishii about finding Yakumo – so as to not cause trouble for Ishii.

– Think about what you should do on your own!

Ishii understood the true meaning of Gotou's words.

A bitter taste spread through his mouth.

'Even though... I wanted to go with Detective Gotou...' murmured Ishii.

'What did you say?'

Miyagawa pressed him for an answer, but Ishii didn't feel like replying.

– He left me behind.

That feeling quickly spread through Ishii's chest, becoming so heavy it was hard to bear.

Ishii respected Gotou from the bottom of his heart.

Gotou had everything that Ishii didn't. Ishii wanted to become like him. He wished for that. That was why he had recklessly chased after that back.

And yet –

'I need to go.'

Ishii's mouth moved naturally.

'Go? You...'

'I have to go too.'

Ishii took the file he had started reading and started running before he'd noticed himself.

'Wait!'

He didn't stop at Miyagawa's yell.

He just ran down the corridor frantically, as if he was possessed by something.

Though his feet tangled, he somehow managed to fix his posture.

He didn't have the time to fall.

If he didn't continue running, Gotou would leave him behind. That was –

'Not acceptable.'

Ishii continued to run, as if he was being chased by something.

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12

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'Is this really OK?' Eishin said to Gotou, who was driving.

'Is what OK?' asked Gotou, confused by the question.

'You can't return to the police any more.'

Eishin's narrow eyes narrowed even further.

It seemed like even this laidback old man was unusually worried.

'You should ask things like that before I actually do the act.'

Gotou snorted as he turned the wheel.

Even if Eishin said that now, Gotou couldn't take it back. And he had already known that he couldn't be a police officer any more.

It'd be much more frightening to be abandoned by Atsuko.

'... Gotou-san.'

Gotou heard a faint voice that could disappear at any moment.

He turned around frantically.

It was Yakumo –

It looked like he'd finally regained consciousness.

Gotou pulled the car over to the curb right away and leant over to check on Yakumo.

Yakumo's shoulders heaved as he took painful breaths, but he slowly got up from the backseat. It looked like his swollen left leg was in pain, as his expression twisted like he was in agony.

'So you're alive?'

Though Gotou said that with a cluck of his tongue, he naturally smiled broadly.

– I'm glad. Really glad.

It was worth running against the police. Now Haruka wouldn't have to call him a liar.

'Gotou-san, you're more of an idiot than I imagined...' said Yakumo, his expression twisting in pain.

'That's the first thing you say? Can't you honestly say "Thanks for saving me"?''

Though Gotou was grumbling, Gotou could see tears on Yakumo's face through the rear-view mirror.

– Well, I'd probably hit him if he honestly thanked me because it would be so unpleasant.

Gotou murmured that in his heart.

'... I don't remember asking you to save me.'

After saying that, Yakumo started to cough.

Gotou had to take off his hat to Yakumo, who would go to those lengths to say such hateful things.

'It's fine – just go sleep for a bit.'

'I can't... do that...'

Though Yakumo looked pained as he breathed, he looked at Gotou with a sharp glance.

Even if his body was in shambles, his mind seemed clear.

'There's something I want to ask you first.'

Eishin was the one who interrupted.

'Yes, I understand.'

Yakumo gave a small nod. It felt like he knew what Eishin was going to ask.

'Did you kill Seidou?'

There was no waver in Eishin's voice. He was just looking for the truth. That was how it seemed.

Eishin really was somewhat like Yakumo. No, would it be the other way around?

'I'll be honest...'

After saying that, Yakumo licked his dry lips.

His expression was stiff. It was the first time Gotou had seen Yakumo look this way.

– It can't be.

An uneasy feeling spread through Gotou's chest. The longer the silence, the more that thought spread. An unpleasant sweat drenched his forehead.

'I don't know.'

Yakumo looked down.

'What do you mean, you don't know?' interrupted Gotou.

For a while, Yakumo stayed silent, head looking down, but then he suddenly lifted his head.

'I was in that limestone cavern before I noticed. I remember up until I went to that limestone cavern with Seidou-san, but everything after that...'

'You don't remember?'

'I don't.'

Though Yakumo was good at speaking, he couldn't lie skilfully.

He probably really didn't remember. But if that was the case –

'Why did you run?'

Eishin spoke before Gotou could.

Yakumo stuck his hand into his jeans pocket and took out a crumpled piece of paper.

Eishin looked at it first. Then, it came around to Gotou.

There was a short message on the piece of paper.

<You're the one who killed him. If you're caught by the police, somebody important to you will die.>

Gotou's brows furrowed.

– What the hell is this?

'It was on the door to the cave,' Yakumo said, as if to answer Gotou's question.

– Who'd do this?

Gotou was about to ask, but then he suddenly realised. Gotou only knew one person who would do something as roundabout as this.

'Could it be Nanase Miyuki?'

'Probably...' said Yakumo with a sigh, running a hand through his hair.

It was that woman. Just as the note said, if the police caught Yakumo, she probably really would kill somebody close to Yakumo.

In the past, Isshin had lost his life like that to her scheme.

Is her next target Nao or Haruka – a chill ran down Gotou's spine just from thinking about it.

He was really glad he'd taken Yakumo out of there.

'Who's that?' Eishin asked, sounding interested.

'Ah. There's a reason there. She's the bitch who took Isshin's life.'

As Gotou said that, he leant back on his seat.

If Nanase Miyuki was involved, the situation was more annoying than he'd thought. And the situation was awful.

While running from the police, they had to find out the truth of the case.

There was too much to think about – it felt like his head would explode.

'What are you going to do?' asked Gotou, though he knew.

'I will solve the mystery of the case.'

Yakumo's eyes narrowed. His red left eye seemed to be filled with force.

Just the answer Gotou had expected. No matter how battered he was, Yakumo probably planned on not giving up until the end. But –

'How are you going to solve the mystery?'

'First, I will meet once more with the girl called Hatsune who claims to be her mother's

reincarnation.'

'What are you going to do after meeting her?'

'I want to fill the missing parts of my memory.'

– I see.

'Got it. I'll take you there.'

Yakumo's eyes went wide in surprise at Gotou's words.

– What's so surprising?

'I'll do it myself. I can't cause you any more trouble.'

After Yakumo said that, his mouth went into a thin line. He was trying to shoulder everything himself again.

When Gotou saw that, he felt anger start bubbling up in his chest.

'Trouble!? What are you saying now!? If we don't clear your name, I won't be able to return home, let alone to the police!'

When Eishin heard Gotou's yell, for some reason, he started to laugh.

'It's because you act without thinking ahead that this sort of thing happens,' said Yakumo with a bitter expression while running a hand through his messy hair.

That caused Gotou's anger to explode.

'You bastard! That's enough! I'll kill you right here!'

'Would you lay off?'

Eishin grabbed Gotou's hair and pulled him back.

In the backseat, Yakumo laughed.

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13

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Haruka was driven by Makoto to the police precinct so that they could meet with Ishii.

'I'm really sorry about inconveniencing you again.'

In the passenger seat, Haruka bowed her head towards Makoto.

Makoto hadn't just arranged the meeting with Ishii. She had also gone to Haruka's flat to pick her up.

Haruka had an image of Makoto as a quiet person, but through these cases, that image grew much more active.

'Don't worry about it.'

Makoto smiled.

'But...'

'It's fine. I don't believe Yakumo-kun would kill somebody either. And if this turns into a false accusation, this'll be a scoop for me. You don't have to feel sorry.'

When Makoto said that, it made Haruka feel slightly better.

Haruka put a smile on her face and replied, 'All right.'

'Ah, he's here.'

Makoto pointed at the front entrance of the police precinct.

Haruka saw Ishii running with limbs flailing.

'He looks a bit odd.'

'He does.'

Makoto agreed with Haruka's opinion.

When Haruka looked more carefully, she saw a man with an incredibly angry expression chasing Ishii.

'That person...'

– I've seen him somewhere before.

'It's Miyagawa-san, the chief of the police,' Makoto said, as if to reply to Haruka's question.

It looked somewhat like a detective chasing a criminal.

'Ah, please open the door!'

Ishii hit the window right as the car arrived and said that in a voice near a scream.

He was like a zombie from a horror movie.

'Please sit in the back.'

Makoto quickly gave the instructions.

Ishii was looking around in panic, but he opened the door, got in and immediately locked the door.

'Please drive right away!'

There was a bead of sweat on Ishii's forehead and his glasses were askew as he yelled frantically.

He looked so strange that Haruka and Makoto exchanged blank looks.

'Aah! He's here! Hurry!'

Ishii looked out the window.

Miyagawa had got to the car. His expression wouldn't lose to Ishii's – he looked like a demon.

'Ah, yes.'

Though Makoto looked confused, she started the car.

'Stop! I said stop!' howled Miyagawa.

'Is this OK?' said Makoto, looking at Miyagawa's figure growing smaller in the rear-view mirror.

'It's fine. There was a slight problem...'

Ishii heaved a sigh and wiped the sweat on his forehead with his shirt sleeve.

'Did something happen?' asked Haruka, turning around.

Ishii had been odd, but Miyagawa's appearance hadn't been normal either. She felt like something unbelievable was happening.

'Ah... It's difficult for me to say, but actually, Detective Gotou... er...'

Ishii started to speak after adjusting the position of his glasses with his finger, but then his voice trailed off and was drowned out by the car engine.

'Er...'

'Ah, sorry. Er, Detective Gotou is now also being chased by the police...'

'Eh?'

– Why Gotou too?

Haruka didn't understand at all.

'To put it simply, Detective Gotou acted violent against the uniformed officers who tried to arrest Yakumo-shi and then he fled.'

'That's...'

Haruka felt like she'd been stabbed in the chest.

She had been the one who told Gotou where Yakumo was. She wanted Yakumo to be safe. But that had been all. That had brought about results that she hadn't even thought about.

'That's just like Gotou-san.'

Makoto was smiling, the complete opposite of Haruka, whose heart was in pain.

'It is.'

Ishii agreed.

It was true that it was like Gotou to strike the people who got in his way, but that wasn't the problem.

'It's my fault...'

Just as Haruka said that, her mobile phone rang.

The number on the display was Gotou's but the voice she heard from the phone wasn't.

<It's been a while.>

'Yakumo-kun!' exclaimed Haruka.

What does he mean, it's been a while? Don't act so carefree when you don't even know how I feel. The anger flamed up in Haruka's heart.

<Don't speak so loudly.>

Yakumo said that in his usual voice.

That attitude just added oil to Haruka's anger.

'What? You don't even know how I feel. You can't imagine what I thought...'

She didn't have the words to continue.

Haruka's eyes welled with tears.

Though she had been angry, in the bottom of her heart, she was relieved by hearing Yakumo's voice.

Yakumo was important to her. That feeling was stronger than any other in her chest.

<My bad...>

Yakumo said that awkwardly.

If he did feel bad, at least a little, that was fine.

Haruka sniffled and rubbed at her eyes to clear her head.

'Where are you now?'

– I want to see him as soon as I can.

<I can't say.>

Yakumo replied immediately.

'Why not?'

<I'm the suspect in a murder case and am currently a fugitive.>

The words Yakumo said so smoothly were a heavy weight on Haruka's heart.

'Hey. How can I clear your name, Yakumo-kun?'

Yakumo laughed aloud at Haruka's question.

Haruka didn't know why he was laughing. That was a serious question –

'What's so funny?'

<You're the same as always.>

Yakumo said that in a voice that made it sound like he was smiling.

'What do you mean?'

<Aren't you going to ask?>

'Ask what?'

<Whether I committed the murder...>

Haruka hadn't even thought about asking that question. The reason being –

'You didn't kill him, right, Yakumo-kun?'

<How can you be sure?>

Yakumo said that after a pause.

Why – Haruka was troubled when asked that.

However, no matter what happened, Yakumo wasn't the sort of person who would kill somebody. She knew that best.

'I don't have a reason.'

<That's why I said you were the same as always.>

'Are you praising me?'

<Why would that be the case?>

Yakumo stifled his laughter.

Haruka felt like the conversation wasn't meshing at all.

'So isn't there anything I can do?'

Haruka returned to the heart of the matter.

<Where are you now?>

'I'm investigating the case with Ishii-san and Makoto-san.'

<I see... Stay with those two until the case is over.>

'Why?'

<Because that would be safer.>

'What do you mean?'

<Anyway, make sure you're never alone.>

Yakumo was speaking in an unusually grave tone. It made Haruka felt like she was being cross-examined.

She didn't know what had happened, but when he talked like that, it made her anxious. She had the feeling that something incredibly awful would happen –

<Sorry, but could you hand the phone over to Ishii-san?>

'To Ishii-san?'

<Please. There isn't much time.>

'All right... Ishii-san.'

Haruka handed the mobile to Ishii in the backseat.

'Me?'

'Yes.'

Ishii looked confused, but he took the mobile phone.

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'Hello...'

Ishii was confused as he took the phone from Haruka.

When he thought about how the person on the other end was a suspect in a murder case being chased by the police, it made him even more nervous than usual.

<It's Yakumo.>

'Ah, yes, it's Ishii.'

<I apologise for involving you in something so troubling.>

Yakumo said that in a formal tone.

It appeared that he hadn't lost himself even at a time like this.

'No... I haven't... Er, how is Detective Gotou?'

<Very lively. To the point that it's annoying.>

Yakumo let out a dry laugh.

'I see... I'm glad.'

Gotou had done something that he couldn't return from, but it was fine as long as he was well.

<Actually, there's something I want to ask of you, Ishii-san.>

'Me?'

Ishii's voice cracked.

His heart was beating loudly. He had a bad feeling.

And – he had no confidence. Gotou had tried to save Yakumo even though it meant abandoning his own life. Would Ishii be able to do that when it was necessary?

<Yes. It's something I can only ask of you, Ishii-san.>

'Only of me...'

Yakumo's words lifted Ishii's sunken heart.

There was something only he could do even in this situation.

<I want you to protect her.>

'Protect her?'

<Yes. I want you to protect her for me.>

Yakumo's words shook Ishii's core.

He probably meant Haruka.

Ishii looked at Haruka sitting in the passenger seat. Though she always smiled brightly, that expression was clouded right now.

'Is she in danger?'

Ishii lowered his voice.

<There was a message left at the scene of the crime. If I'm caught by the police, somebody important to me will die...>

'Somebody important...'

An uneasy feeling came to Ishii.

– Somebody important.

So Yakumo also thought of Haruka that way?

Ishii had thought so, but hearing it from the person himself made him feel like something had pierced his chest.

<Please. I don't want the same thing that happened with my uncle to happen again.>

Yakumo said that in a trembling voice, which helped jog Ishii's memories.

– Could it be?

'Is she... Is Nanase Miyuki involved in this case?'

<It is likely.>

That's why Yakumo ran away from the scene – it made sense to Ishii now.

Yakumo ran away from the police, knowing that he would be suspected as the culprit, so that he

could protect Haruka.

Ishii couldn't do nothing while Yakumo had done so much.

'Please leave it to me!'

In response to Ishii's loud voice, Haruka turned around from the passenger seat.

'What is it?'

'Ah, no, it's nothing.'

Ishii forced himself to laugh and turned away.

'I will definitely protect her,' he said in a quiet voice so that Haruka wouldn't hear.

<Thank you very much.>

Yakumo breathed out like he was relieved on the other side of the phone.

Protecting the person you yearned for. Though it made him feel proud – like he had become a knight – the person who had asked him to do so was his rival in love.

Though Ishii felt conflicted, this wasn't the time to think about that.

Protecting Haruka was his highest priority. And if Nanase Miyuki were involved, the problem was even larger.

'As long as the case isn't solved, Haruka-chan will be in danger.'

Ishii hunched over in the seat so that Haruka wouldn't hear him speak.

Yakumo couldn't keep running forever, and it would be realistically impossible for Ishii to spend his whole life watching Haruka too.

<She will.>

'Something must be done...'

<Which is why I have another request to make of you, Ishii-san.>

'What is it?'

<Could you tell me the information you know at the current stage to solve the mystery?>

'Yes.'

Ishii took out his notebook immediately.

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15

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'What did you talk about?' Gotou asked after Yakumo finished his call.

At first, it had seemed like he was talking to Haruka, but then it turned to Haruka and the call had gone on for a while.

It felt like Yakumo had been listening to something in detail.

'I asked Ishii-san to do something,' replied Yakumo, fiddling with the mobile phone.

'Asked him to do what?'

'I asked him to guard her.'

Gotou understood now.

There was that message. Yakumo had asked Ishii to guard against any attack. But –

'Is Ishii going to be enough?'

'Is there anybody else who would believe the words of a suspect?'

Yakumo responded with a question.

Gotou couldn't argue with that.

Yakumo was a fugitive – he had enemies on all sides. Though Ishii was a bit unreliable, he was the only one Yakumo could rely on.

'So Nanase Miyuki had planned even this situation...'

'Seems so.'

Yakumo ran a hand through his hair in his irritation.

Gotou was astonished by Nanase Miyuki's meticulousness.

She had stolen Yakumo's freedom with just one slip of paper. But Gotou didn't understand.

'What does she want to do by doing this?'

'I wonder... She probably wanted to look into something regarding the girl who claims to have been reincarnated on top of making me alone,' said Yakumo.

'Reincarnation, eh...'

Gotou had no way of knowing what truth waited for them if they chased that mystery.

'Gotou-san, shouldn't we get off of this car soon?' said Yakumo.

'Why?'

'Isn't it obvious? Because of the number. Moving in this car is the same as running around with a sticker that says "Culprit on board". You should know that much as an ex-police officer,' Yakumo said mockingly.

It was just as Yakumo said, but Gotou didn't like his tone.

Even though he'd been practically dead earlier, he was like this now. And he'd said ex-police officer.

'That's your fault!'

'If you are going to blame anything, please make it your own rashness.'

'I shouldn't have saved you!'

Gotou hit the wheel in his anger.

'You're so noisy. I can't sleep,' said Eishin as he rubbed his eyes in the passenger seat.

– Was this old man sleeping in this awful mess?

'Ah, that's right. Everything was my fault.'

'As long as you understand that.'

Yakumo's words made Gotou so angry he could have died, but if he responded, Yakumo would fight back exponentially. Gotou let out a long sigh.

'We can get off the car, but do you plan to go on foot?'

'Please stop with the jokes,' said Yakumo with a laugh.

'Then what are we going to do?'

'Please buy a new one.'

'Are you an idiot? Cars aren't toys.'

'You must be poor.'

'You bastard!'

'Can't you keep quiet?' interrupted Eishin.

'Do you have any ideas?'

Though Eishin hit his head like he was exasperated, he opened his mouth to speak.

'There's a temple I'm familiar with nearby. Let's borrow one there.'

'I see. So where's that temple?'

'Near the station.'

'I'm asking where that station is.'

'What should you say when asking people for something?'

Eishin smirked.

He was just like Yakumo at times like this – he was a malicious person deep down.

'Please be so kind as to tell me how to get there.'

Gotou bowed his head, bearing with the mortification.

'As long as you understand. Turn right at the next light,' said Eishin triumphantly.

He had to deal with these two malicious people. Gotou cursed his unluckiness as he turned on the right turn signal and stopped at the light.

Yakumo opened the car window completely and stuck his head out like he'd thought of something.

'What are you doing?'

Ignoring Gotou's question, Yakumo threw Gotou's mobile phone onto the back of the mini truck beside them.

'You bastard! What the hell are you doing!?!'

In the corner of Gotou's eye, the light changed and the mini truck drove on.

'It's fine. I transferred your data to the SD card.'

Yakumo seemed proud as he held up the memory card in his fingers.

– What's fine about that?

'That isn't the problem!'

'Are you really an ex-police officer?'

'What did you say?'

'Mobile phones send out radio waves. The position can be located from that.'

Yakumo smirked.

'That's no reason to throw it away.'

'I'm not throwing it away. It's a trap. The police should follow that mini truck for a while.'

Though Gotou understood Yakumo's explanation, he was still irritated. Yakumo had consigned countless of Gotou's mobile phones into oblivion.

He was just about to complain when people started honking.

– I'm going, I'm going.

Gotou stepped on the accelerator and started the car.

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16

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'So the girl's disappearance might be related somehow?' said Haruka after listening to Ishii's explanation.

The girl who disappeared ten years ago, Minami – the last who saw her was Seidou, and the name Hatsune claimed to have had before her reincarnation was Minami.

There were many points that matched up, but it still hadn't come together for Haruka.

'Though this is only my theory...'

Ishii's eyes narrowed behind his glasses.

Though Ishii said that, Haruka felt like he sounded confident.

'But how about the story that Makoto heard of the baby and the woman with red eyes that occurred fifty years ago? And reincarnation is...'

Haruka realised why she had thought the case was off.

The keywords of this case were all over the place – she didn't know where to start.

'That's right. I'm curious about that too.'

Ishii's brows lowered as he scratched his cheek, looking troubled.

'Why not stop thinking about that for now?' said Makoto as she drove.

'What do you mean?'

Ishii stuck out his neck like a chicken.

'We don't have any other leads, so let's just go with it. If we're wrong, we'll go with the next one.'

'Ah.'

'That might have come off a bit forceful.'

Makoto stuck out her tongue and smiled, seeming embarrassed.

'Right. The best plan might be to go through all of them one by one. Detective Gotou and Yakumoshi are looking into the girl who reincarnated, so let's put that aside for now.'

Ishii clapped his hands in agreement.

'How about it?' said Makoto with a smile.

'That sounds good,' agreed Haruka.

It was impossible to get to the conclusion right away. It might be fastest to clear the possibilities one by one. Haruka had so wanted to clear Yakumo's name that she hadn't been thinking clearly.

Haruka also knew that worrying without acting was one of her bad habits. Because of that, she had her current relationship with Yakumo.

I haven't said anything or approached him actively. But I wonder how he thinks of me – she just worried about that.

If she had acted, there would have probably been a different result waiting for her.

Anyway, all she could do now was act.

'You were thinking about Yakumo-kun right now, weren't you?'

Makoto smiled.

'T-that isn't true.'

Haruka hurriedly denied it, but that just made her more embarrassed. She went red to her ears.

'It's written on your face. Right, Ishii-san?'

'Eh, ah, yes.'

Ishii was flustered when Makoto suddenly turned the conversation to him.

'So where should we go first?' asked Haruka, changing the subject.

'I was thinking that we could meet up with Minami-san's mother first,' suggested Ishii.

To be honest, Haruka felt a bit anxious about investigating without Gotou, but that had been needless worrying.

She'd thought that Ishii was always following Gotou, but he looked livelier without him here.

'Do you know the address?' said Makoto, looking towards the backseat.

'Yes. It's near here... Er... in Setagaya ward...' replied Ishii, flipping through his notebook.

'Not in Nishitama?' said Makoto, surprised.

'No. It appears that she moved a number of years ago when her father died.'

'Was it illness?'

Ishii awkwardly looked down at Makoto's question.

'No. It appears to have been suicide.'

That one word from Ishii made the mood in the car much darker.

Though making everything related would be a problem, Haruka couldn't help but think this way.

– Does the father's suicide have to do with his daughter's disappearance?

Haruka couldn't give the answer to that question right now.

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17

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Gotou went to the temple gates and waited for Eishin to return.

In his boredom, it made him long for the cigarettes he'd stopped smoking.

Smoking a cigarette wouldn't change anything, but he would be able to take his mind off things.

'Your irritation won't change anything,' said Yakumo from beside him, as if he'd sensed Gotou's feelings.

'Don't want to hear that from you.'

'Right.'

Yakumo looked down with a bitter smile.

He was being unusually honest. Though he spoke hatefully, his heart probably hurt quite a lot.

'Hey, Yakumo.'

'What is it?'

'You accepted that damn monk's request because of Isshin, right?' said Gotou, recalling what Eishin had said yesterday.

'Well, something like it.'

Yakumo ran a hand through his hair.

His narrowed eyes looked incredibly sad.

'What did you want to know about Isshin?'

There was a silence –

Rather than not wanting to talk about it, it felt like he was troubled about how to talk about it.

'Uncle decided to take me in at that temple,' Yakumo said in a disinterested tone.

It wasn't that he wasn't interested, but more like he was consciously leaving out the emotion.

'And?'

'At the time, Uncle took my hand and said something.'

'What?'

'Something incredibly... important.'

Yakumo lifted his head.

His gaze was on the brilliant summer sun. Gotou had no way of knowing what was reflected in his eyes, narrowed in that brightness.

'What was it?'

'I don't remember.'

Gotou understood everything from that sentence.

Yakumo wanted to know what Isshin said at that temple – if he went there, he would remember. That was probably what he'd thought.

'Can I ask one thing as well?'

Yakumo dragged his feet a few steps forward and said that, his back to Gotou.

Yakumo's usual aloof tone was slightly perplexed.

'What?'

'Why did you save me?'

Without thinking, Gotou burst into laughter at Yakumo's question.

He didn't think that Yakumo would ask 'Why?' now.

'What's so funny?'

Yakumo turned around and glared at Gotou.

'Do I need a reason?'

Gotou replied with a question after he'd stopped laughing.

For a while, Yakumo's eyes were wide in surprise, but then he finally looked down with an embarrassed smile.

'I guess not,' he said.

– That's how it is, you contrary guy.

Gotou murmured that in his heart.

Yakumo thought that he was an unnecessary person because of the environment he'd grown up in.

That was why, when people did something for him, he would become unnecessarily perplexed and try to determine the reason behind it. But that was in the past.

'Since bears move on instinct,' said Yakumo with a smirk.

'What'd you say!?!'

– Ruining everything with just one sentence!

Gotou grabbed Yakumo's collar in his anger.

However, Yakumo remained nonchalant, like he didn't care at all. Really, what a hateful brat.

'There's no time to quarrel.'

Gotou turned around at the voice and saw Eishin standing there with two large paper bags.

Eishin had gone to borrow a car.

'What are those?'

'Change of clothes for you and Yakumo. I thought it'd be better to change your appearance,' said Eishin, sounding proud.

'Why do we have to change?'

'Isn't it obviously because we're fugitives? You really are an idiot,' said Yakumo, looking exasperated. He always said too much.

'So where's the car?'

'We can use the one in the garage. You can also change there and have something to eat.'

When Eishin stuck out his chin, as if to tell them to come with him, he started walking briskly.

'Yeah, yeah,' grumbled Gotou, though he admired how well Eishin had thought things out.

Gotou's head had been filled with the car – he hadn't thought about clothes or food at all. Come to think of it, he hadn't eaten anything since last night what with all that had happened.

When they got to the temple's garage, the car that was there was actually a black BMW.

'Is the wheel on the left¹?'

Though Gotou wasn't proud of it, he'd only ever driven cars manufactured in Japan.

'If you've got complaints, I'll get us a bicycle instead,' Eishin said without a moment's delay.

'I'll just drive then.'

'As long as you understand. And for the clothes, these are Yakumo's and these are yours.'

Eishin put the paper bags down in front of them.

Yakumo fished through his.

Inside were a monk's working clothes in navy and a towel.

'Sorry. This is a temple, so this is all they have.'

'It's fine.'

Yakumo started changing immediately. It suited him quite well. Unexpected, it might fit Yakumo well if he became a monk.

Gotou looked inside his own paper bag.

Inside was a brilliant purple shirt and skinny enamel pants.

'Sorry. This is a temple, so this is all they have.'

Eishin's shoulders shook with laughter as he said the same thing to Gotou that he'd said to Yakumo.

These were clearly clothes for some hooligan. There were even sunglasses.

'You making fun of me?'

'If you don't like it, go naked.'

The old man really never shut his mouth.

'I'll just change then.'

Gotou said that brusquely and put on the shirt and pants.

1 In Japan, people drive on the left side of the road and the steering wheel is on the right side of the car.

'Doesn't it suit you well?' said Yakumo, cackling after Gotou put on the sunglasses.

Gotou didn't even feel like retorting any more. He just snorted and looked away.

'Where's the food?' Gotou asked Eishin.

'This is Yakumo's and this is yours.'

Eishin gave a sweet roll to Yakumo and a can to Gotou.

When Gotou saw that can, he couldn't put up with it any more.

'This is cat food!' he yelled, throwing the can of cat food with all his strength.

Clunk!

The can of cat food hit the BMW's bonnet, leaving a huge dent before rolling to the floor.

'You're paying for repairs,' Eishin said nonchalantly.

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18

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Ishii stood in front of the door to the apartment and cleared his throat.

Though this was for the investigation of the case, he felt uncomfortable.

It would have been different if they had found the missing daughter, but they had no new information and were just trying to dig up the past.

He couldn't imagine what awful things would be said to him.

'Are you all right?'

From beside him, Makoto peered at his face in concern.

'Ah, yes. I'm fine.'

If they came in a large group, it would put the other party on guard, so Ishii had left Haruka in the care and come with only Makoto.

Haruka had said, 'I'll go too.' I want to do something for Yakumo – that feeling ran ahead of her.

Ishii understood, but Haruka looked like a student. If the other party became suspicious, they would need to make up an explanation. The other party might also keep their mouth shut.

Somehow, he managed to make Haruka understand and had her stay behind.

Ishii pressed the intercom button.

After a while, a woman with hair streaked with white opened the door.

'Excuse me... Are you Masuoka-san?'

'Yes,' the woman replied in a hoarse voice.

It appeared that she was Minami's mother, Masuoka Tamae.

From the documents, Minami's mother should have been in her early fifties, but she looked ten years older.

'My name is Ishii. I was the one who called. This is Hijikata,' said Ishii while showing his police ID.

They'd be out if she asked who Makoto was, but Tamae just replied 'Ah, yes' in a faint voice and opened the door to let them in.

'Excuse me.'

Ishii went inside after exchanging glances with Makoto.

It was an old one-room flat with a kitchen, probably near thirty years old.

Ishii and Makoto sat next to each other, while Tamae sat opposite them.

'Why... now...'

Tamae's wrinkled face looked at Ishii.

Her eyes were so lifeless it made Ishii suspect she might actually be dead.

Her daughter had disappeared and her husband had committed suicide. Tamae had lost far too much.

That feeling of loss had stolen all her strength.

Swallowed up by that air, the excuse Ishii had come up with got caught in his throat.

'Actually, through the investigation of another case, it seems that we may be able to attain information related to your daughter's location. Accordingly...'

Makoto responded for Ishii, who had been at a loss for words.

Ishii felt like she was more accustomed to the situation than himself, though he was a detective.

'I see...'

Tamae looked down.

'A-anything is fine. Would you please tell us what you remember?'

Ishii finally said just that.

'I know.'

'Eh?'

'She isn't alive any more,' said Tamae in a voice that sounded like it would fade away at any moment.

'Isn't alive...'

'She was killed.'

Ishii was shocked.

Partially it was because of the weight of those words, but it was also because he'd felt like there had been a black flame smouldering in Tamae's lifeless eyes for a moment.

'What is your evidence for thinking that?' said Ishii while wiping his forehead.

'I know. I'm a parent...'

Tamae looked to the corner of the room.

There was a small altar there with the images of a smiling girl and a middle-aged man. The girl was probably Minami.

She had black eyes and seemed like a refreshing girl, somewhat like Haruka.

'I understand how you feel, but...'

Makoto stopped in the middle of her sentence.

Tamae wasn't listening.

She slowly stood up and opened the sliding door to the closet, taking a cardboard box out of it and placing it on the table.

'All of her things are in here.'

Tamae's shoulders drooped like all the air had come out of her.

'Would you allow us to borrow this?'

Tamae just gave a small nod to Ishii's question.

– Tamae wants to die.

That was what Ishii thought.

Rather than living with their memories, she wanted to go to where her daughter and husband were.

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19

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The sun set between the mountains, dyeing the mountain range red.

Gotou hid in the thicket behind Seidou's temple and looked at the empty sky.

It had been over two hours. Mosquitoes had bitten him all over – it itched like hell.

And he could never be sure if he might get bitten by a pit viper like Yakumo in a place like this.

'But it's late,' said Gotou, hitting the mosquito on his arm.

– Did he run off?

At Eishin's instructions, Gotou had parked the car near the temple and walked through the thicket.

There were probably still police at the temple. Since they knew what Gotou and Yakumo looked like, they couldn't just walk up.

That was why Eishin had gone himself.

He'd given his mobile to Gotou and said something unreliable – 'I'll call you if it goes well' – before leaving.

'You can go back if you don't like it,' said Yakumo from beside him, yawning as he did so.

Easy for him to say. Unfortunately, Gotou didn't have anywhere to return to, so he was waiting for Eishin here. That came to his head, but he was too tired to even retort.

When he turned his eyes, he saw another mosquito on his arm.

'Damn it!'

Gotou brought his palm down, but the mosquito got away.

'Are you having fun?' said Yakumo, looking at Gotou like he was something dirty.

'Of course I'm not. There's a hell of a lot of mosquitoes here.'

'It's because you're wearing a tasteless shirt.'

Yakumo pointed at Gotou's purple shirt.

– This guy never shuts up.

'This isn't my shirt!'

'Please don't speak so loudly. They'll find us.'

Yakumo stuck his fingers in his ears to complain.

Gotou restrained his anger by balling his hands into fists. This guy could just get bitten by a pit viper again.

Just as Gotou had spit out, the mobile phone rang.

'You're late!' said Gotou with all his pent-up dissatisfaction.

<Don't say that. It was tough on me too. They suspected that I was the monk who ran away together with the detective at the clinic.>

Eishin said that with a sigh.

'Of course you were suspected. It was you.'

<Then should I give myself up to the police? I was forced by the violent detective – I had no choice...>

'Yeah, my bad.'

Gotou quickly apologised. Since it was Eishin, he might really do it.

<You should just be honest from the start.>

Gotou bit back the urge to scream.

'So how's the situation?'

<The police are standing guard outside the doors. Come around the back to the main temple.>

Because the temple itself wasn't the scene of the murder, the police had two guards just in case, but they hadn't gone inside. However –

'How do we get in?'

Even if the police weren't on the premises, they would notice if there were noises from the thicket.

<You can see a large rock a bit deeper in, right?>

After Eishin said that, Gotou looked to the back of the thicket.

– There it is.

A large rock covered in green moss. It was the height of a person's waist.

'I see it.'

<There's a narrow secret path by that rock. It goes to the main temple.>

'Why's there a secret path?'

Gotou cocked his head.

This wasn't some ninja house. He didn't understand why on earth somebody had made that.

<Monks in training are forced to live their lives in abstinence. Though that isn't the case now, that policy was thoroughly enforced in the past.>

'So monks in training that couldn't do it any longer dug a secret path?'

<Well, something like it. It used to be a well, but since it was no longer in use, there was a tunnel there.>

Eishin said that proudly.

From that tone, Eishin had probably played a part in the creation of that secret path. So he was a depraved monk, just like he looked.

Though Gotou felt half-astonished, he said 'Got it' and hung up.

When he looked up, the sun had set and night had fallen.

– This is a good chance.

'Yakumo. Let's go.'

Gotou went ahead and started to walk towards the rock.

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'Please go ahead.'

At Makoto's urging, Haruka went through the entrance.

After leaving Tamae's house, they went talk in Makoto's flat to organise their thoughts.

Makoto led her through the corridor to a room of ten tatami in size.

'What a lovely room,' said Haruka, looking around.

The furniture and curtains were chic and calming.

'It makes me happy to hear that. Please sit down.'

'Ah, yes.'

Haruka sat on the dining room chair near the kitchen counter.

Makoto went into the kitchen and started preparations, boiling water and taking out cups.

'I'll help.'

'Don't worry about it,' replied Makoto with a smile.

Just as Haruka was feeling like she had nothing to do, Ishii came into the room with a cardboard box. It contained Minami's belongings, which they had received from Tamae.

It looked like Ishii didn't have a good grip and might trip and drop it at any moment.

'I'll hold this.'

'Ah, sorry about that.'

Haruka helped Ishii place the cardboard box on the dining room table.

'Thank you for the help.'

'No, it's nothing.'

Haruka sat across from Ishii at the table.

With perfect timing, Makoto took a tray out with a number of coffee cups. After placing a cup in front of each of them, she sat next to Ishii.

'You look a bit like a newly married couple,' said Haruka as she looked at Ishii and Makoto sitting next to each other.

Both Ishii's and Makoto's eyes went wide in surprise. Then, they both went red up to their ears.

'More importantly, let's investigate.'

Makoto quickly opened the cardboard box and started laying its contents out on the table.

There were things like notebooks, textbooks, albums and essays.

'Where should we start...'

Haruka looked at Ishii.

'Ah, that's right... Something... that looks like it might be useful?'

Ishii cocked his head.

'Let's just look at all of it first.'

Makoto took a notebook near her and started flipping through it.

Just as she said, rather than thinking so much, just looking at it might be quicker. Haruka took an essay near her and started flipping the pages.

After that, they continued looking through the contents of the cardboard box without talking.

When Haruka looked at the papers and photos that came out of the cardboard box, the blurry image she had had of Minami became clearer.

Minami had pale skin and well-defined features – she was quite a beauty. She was in the drama club and seemed to have wanted to become an actress in the future.

Her grades weren't bad either. Though she wasn't good at maths, she was strong with the classics and world history.

Doing this made Haruka feel like Minami had been one of her own classmates.

However, Minami's life, which should have been smooth sailing, had broken off right before her graduation. Like everything before it had been an illusion –

Haruka suddenly stopped and looked up at the ceiling.

– Will doing this really clear Yakumo's name?

That question came to her head.

In the first place, they had no clear proof that Minami was related to the case. They just had the theory that she might be related to a spiritual phenomenon that occurred at the scene of the crime.

After drinking some cold coffee, Haruka spotted a white envelope.

<To Minamie> was written on it in strong, angular letters.

There was a letter inside.

<And as my love is sized, my fear is so:

Where love is great, the littlest doubts are fear.

Where little fears grow great, great love grows there.>

It looked like a quotation from a poem.

Though it was roundabout, it was easy to tell it was a love letter. At the end, there were initials.

<Y.N.>

It looked like Minami had had a lover.

Haruka was going to mention the love letter, but Ishii stood up before then with a loud noise.

'Aaahhh!'

Ishii's mouth was so wide that it felt like his chin might come off.

'What is it?'

Makoto grabbed Ishii's arm.

'Ah, no, I mean...'

Ishii pointed at the graduation album he had been looking at.

It was from a high school graduation. Ishii had it open to a page with the names and faces of the students in each class.

'Minami-san's photo is in here,' said Haruka as she looked at the page.

'Since she disappeared right around graduation, maybe she was put in the album anyway?'

'T-that isn't it.'

Ishii shook his head at Makoto's explanation.

'Is there another reason?'

'No, that isn't it. This person.'

Ishii pointed at a man on the page.

– Matsumoto Hiroshi.

He was thin and had angled eyes. Though he looked like a sensitive person, that was all.

'What about this person?' asked Haruka.

'No, I mean, it's this person.'

'Eh?'

'The person who was found dead in Nishitama this morning.'

Ishii was agitated, continually pointing at the photo as he said that.

Haruka was shocked by that fact and looked towards the album again.

'Hey, wait a second...'

Makoto put her chin in her hand as she murmured.

'What is it?' asked Ishii.

'The family name of the dead Seidou-san was, if I remember correctly...'

'Er... It was Todayama,' replied Ishii after looking at his notebook.

'I wonder if this could be...'

Makoto pointed at a young man in the middle of the page.

The young man was short and stout and had eyes as narrow as string, fat eyebrows that didn't match and fleshy lips.

– Todayama Takahiro.

Todayama was a rare family name. It would be difficult to think of it as a coincidence.

'This is troubling. I'll go back to the precinct to confirm.'

In a hurry, Ishii attempted to leave the room.

'Please wait.'

Haruka called out to stop Ishii.

There had been such an amount of information that Haruka had almost forgotten.

'What is it?'

'I also found something interesting.'

Haruka held out the letter. Ishii and Makoto took turns reading it.

'So she had a lover,' said Ishii.

'And as my love is sized... This is Shakespeare. A line from Hamlet,' said Makoto.

At that, Haruka had an idea.

'Minami-san was in the drama club, right? Somebody who'd send a love letter like this might have been in the drama club...'

'That's possible. Somebody in the drama club with the initials Y.N,' agreed Makoto.

'Yes.'

'I see.'

Ishii nodded with his arms crossed, seeming impressed.

'Let's split up the work. Ishii-san, please head back to confirm. Haruka-chan and I will look for the person with these initials.'

Makoto briskly split up the roles.

'Right. That would be more effective. Please do so.'

After Ishii replied, he quickly ran off.

'Now, let's start too.'

Makoto clapped her hands together.

'Yes,' replied Haruka.

Though they had been jumping at shadows, Haruka felt like they were now much closer to the truth.

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Gotou was stooped over as he proceeded down the dark tunnel.

It was so narrow they had to go one at a time, and if he lifted his head even slightly, he would hit the ceiling.

The uncomfortable moistness made it hard to breathe. His back was drenched with sweat, making his shirt stick to him.

– Can we really get to the temple through here?

His anxiety grew the further he advanced.

'Gotou-san.'

Yakumo spoke up from right behind him.

'What?'

'Please illuminate this.'

In this situation, Gotou had no idea where Yakumo was talking about.

Gotou painfully turned himself around.

'Here.'

Yakumo said that again and pointed at his feet.

Gotou did as he was told and pointed the light of his torch towards his feet.

Though it was faint, there was a footprint there.

The toes were pointing in the opposite direction from them. It was clear that it wasn't their footprint.

'What's this?'

'A footprint,' Yakumo replied immediately.

'I know that. What I was asking is...'

'Please hurry up and turn towards the front again,' said Yakumo, interrupting Gotou.

'What?'

'It is difficult to look at our face at such a close distance, Gotou-san.'

'That's unnecessary.'

Gotou clicked his tongue and then turned around again in the narrow tunnel before starting to walk once more.

Sweat was rolling down his forehead. After advancing about fifty metres, the path ended and he exited into a round space.

It looked like they'd reached the old well. Finally he could stretch out his waist.

Gotou stretched and looked up. It was about five metres tall. There was a wooden cover on the well.

'There's no staircase. How are we supposed to get up?'

'You can just climb, right?' said Yakumo with a yawn.

It looked like Yakumo had no intention of climbing himself. Though it irritated Gotou, for Yakumo, whose left leg was still swollen, it was true that he wouldn't be able to climb.

Gotou rolled up his sleeves, put his fingers in the cracks between the rocks in the well's walls, and dragged himself up, placing his feet in another crack. It was like rock climbing.

– Looks like it'll be all right.

Gotou gritted his teeth and climbed up the well's walls.

Though the first metre went well, it suddenly became more difficult after that.

His fingers were numb and his arms were shaking.

His legs were strained, making it difficult for him to plant his feet.

'Are you already tired?'

Yakumo was looking up in a carefree manner from the bottom of the well.

'Shut up! I'm completely fine!'

Gotou was acting strong as he reached for the next stone, but perhaps because of the loss in concentration, he couldn't grab on properly and slipped.

– Crap.

It was too late when he thought that.

Pulled down by gravity, Gotou fell to the bottom of the well.

There was a dull thump as he hit the floor.

For a moment, he stopped breathing and coughed a number of times.

'You fell because of your excess flesh,' said Yakumo, running his fingers through his hair.

– This guy is really annoying.

Gotou wanted to hit Yakumo's head, but the pain from his back made him unable to even stand up.

'You go next,' said Gotou.

'I will.'

Just as Yakumo said that, the lid to the well opened and Eishin peered in from the round hole.

'I'll lower a rope now.'

Eishin swiftly let the rope down.

– Why didn't you come earlier?

Gotou finally got up while bearing with his pain.

'Well, I'll go on ahead then,' said Yakumo triumphantly, grabbing the rope.

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22

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After leaving Makoto's room, Ishii went to the road and waved over a taxi.

'To the Setamachi precinct.'

He told the driver his destination and called Youko's mobile phone immediately.

To be honest, he felt awkward calling her when Gotou was running away.

However, it would be worse to call Miyagawa. He felt like Youko might cooperate.

'It's Ishii.'

<Where are you now?>

Youko spoke with a pointed tone.

'Even if you ask me where...'

<Answer my question.>

'I'm in a taxi, heading to the precinct.'

<Detective Gotou isn't with you?>

'He isn't.'

I'm not lying, Ishii told himself. He'd talked with Yakumo on the phone, but he didn't dare to say that aloud.

<What were you doing?>

'Actually, I was investigating a number of things...'

<Investigating?>

Ishii explained everything he'd found out so far to Youko.

Starting with the spiritual phenomenon near the limestone cavern, he investigated the missing woman named Minami and met her mother, Tamae.

Then, he spotted the name Matsumoto Hiroshi, the person who was found dead this morning, in Minami's classmates. And a name with the same family name as Seidou –

Ishii held his breath as he waited for Youko to speak.

<In short, you want to check if the Matsumoto Hiroshi in that album is the same Matsumoto Hiroshi who was killed.>

Youko said that with a sigh.

'Yes. And...'

<And you want to know whether the boy called Todayama in the same class was Seidou's son.>

Youko interrupted Ishii's agitated words.

'Yes!'

<Did you think I'd believe that?>

Contrary to Ishii's agitation, Youko's tone was cold.

If Youko didn't believe him, he wouldn't be able to get any information. Gotou wouldn't have a place to return to – he would remain a fugitive.

Ishii was determined to absolutely not back down.

'You may believe it is unrelated, but don't you think it's too much to be a coincidence?'

<That's...>

Though Youko was always firm, she was lost for words.

– She's undecided.

That was how Ishii felt.

'This isn't a coincidence.'

<If the police could solve cases by chasing spiritual phenomena, we wouldn't have any problems.>

'However, that is how we have done things before. From seemingly unrelated spiritual phenomena, we investigate a number of things and reach the truth.'

Ishii's speaking was unusually erratic from his agitation. He knew that.

<You can't say it'll be the same this time, right?>

'In order to confirm that, we need to investigate.'

<There's no time to do that. We need to search for Detective Gotou first.>

'That's wrong!'

Ishii had yelled before he'd noticed it.

<What's wrong?>

Youko said that after a pause.

Ishii didn't know either. What was he saying was wrong –

However, there was one thing Ishii did know.

'I want to save Detective Gotou.'

By saying it aloud, the anxiety in Ishii's heart grew larger and he was moved to tears.

Gotou had always walked together with Ishii without abandoning him.

'If Detective Gotou is gone, I'll just be an empty shell. I want to make a place for Detective Gotou, no matter what I have to do.'

Even though he hadn't meant to say it, those words naturally fell out from his mouth.

He knew it was inappropriate for him to say that as a detective, but those were his true feelings.

<You really like Detective Gotou.>

Youko laughed, sounding exasperated.

'I look up to him.'

<I had somebody like that before too.>

'Eh?'

Ishii recalled the story of Youko's dead lover's ghost.

That was probably the person Youko looked up to.

<I'll look into it.>

She hung up after saying that.

The strength left Ishii's body and he sank into the backseat.

'Did you make up?'

The taxi driver smirked while looking at the rear-view mirror.

It seemed like he had misunderstood something, but Ishii didn't have the energy to correct him.

'Yes, somehow,' replied Ishii with a smile.

Haruka was looking at the list of drama club members for somebody with the initials Y.N.

There weren't many male members. Even if she switched the family name and given name, the only boy that fit was Naitou Yousuke.

'Let's try calling him.'

Right after saying that, Makoto called the number in the register.

Haruka was astonished by Makoto's quick decision-making.

While Makoto was calling, Haruka sipped her lukewarm coffee and looked at the love letter from earlier.

In Haruka's head, Yakumo's face came to mind.

When Minami became missing, the person who sent the love letter must have been like her – worried about the safety of the person he thought so dearly of, believing she would return.

When Haruka thought about that, her chest hurt.

'Thinking about Yakumo-kun again?' said Makoto mischievously. She had finished her call.

'No, that isn't it. Just...'

'What?'

'It must have been tough. For his lover to have been missing for over ten years – I can't think about it...'

Haruka said exactly what she had been thinking.

'So you really were thinking about Yakumo-kun.'

Makoto laughed with shaking shoulders.

'More importantly, how was it?' asked Haruka to change the subject.

'Ah, right, right. After calling the number, I was told he was living by himself in an apartment now, so I lied and said I was a classmate from high school and got his address and mobile phone number.'

Makoto flipped open her memo pad while sticking out her tongue like a child who had played a prank.

'I'll call him now.'

'I'll do it.'

Haruka felt awkward leaving everything to Makoto.

Haruka leant forward and took the memo Makoto was holding.

'Will you be all right?'

'Yes.'

'All right. Thank you.'

Makoto seemed to have sensed how Haruka felt, as she smiled and slowly drank her coffee.

Haruka took her mobile from her bag and input the number on the memo right away. The call connected and rang.

– One, two, three.

She counted in her heart.

However, no matter how she waited, nobody picked up.

Thinking that she might have mistaken the number, she checked the memo, but she hadn't been wrong.

'Won't answer?' said Makoto.

'Yes. Perhaps it's because it's a number he doesn't recognise?'

'Perhaps...'

Haruka placed her mobile on the table and lay her head on it.

She had worked herself up and was disappointed for it. It might be better to leave some time before calling again.

'Right.'

Makoto seemed to have thought of something and snapped her fingers.

'What is it?'

'Anyway, shall we go take a look?'

'Eh?'

'At this time, I think it won't even take an hour if we drive quickly.'

Makoto stood up while looking at the clock.

'

That's right.'

Haruka stood up as well.

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Gotou stood in the temple with Yakumo.

The wide wooden space had a statue of Buddha in the front.

The air was tense.

There was a heavy atmosphere – it felt like it was a different world.

Yakumo, standing next to Gotou, was looking down while facing the Buddha statue. It was like they were talking.

'Anyway, let's sit.'

Gotou sat down cross-legged on the wooden floor, but Yakumo didn't even budge.

Perhaps because he was wearing monk's working robes, he looked like a real monk.

'Sorry for the wait.'

Eishin walked in through the corridor.

Behind him, there was the trainee monk named Shuuei that Gotou had met yesterday along with a girl about ten years old.

She was Hatsune, the girl who claimed to have been reincarnated –

With pale, almost translucent skin, her lips alone were a vivid red, which seemed ridiculously coquettish.

Perhaps Eishin had changed along with the temple's atmosphere, because his joking attitude from before had completely disappeared. He walked into the temple, pulling Hatsune along until they stood in front of Yakumo.

'I brought her, like you wanted,' said Eishin monotonously.

Yakumo nodded silently.

Gotou cleared his throat loudly and swallowed.

After Yakumo took a deep breath, he walked up to Hatsune and knelt, as if he were about to pray.

Hatsune just stood there without even a tremor.

'We've met before. Do you remember?' said Yakumo in a murmur.

Hatsune nodded.

'I have something I want to ask you today, Hatsune-chan.'

'I'm not Hatsune. I'm called Minami.'

Hatsune spoke in a pleasant, ringing voice, like the bells that monks used.

– What are you going to do, Yakumo?

Gotou watched carefully to see what would happen.

'Then, Minami-san. Could I ask you one thing?'

Yakumo ran a hand through his messy hair.

'What?'

'Have you met Minami-san – that is, your mother before?'

Gotou cocked his head. He didn't understand the point of Yakumo's question.

If Hatsune was Minami's reincarnation, there would be no way for her to meet Minami. Since she was Minami herself.

However, unlike what Gotou thought, Minami nodded with a smile.

'Yup. Mother's always with me.'

'She talks to you.'

'Yes, she does.'

'I see. So you really can hear her.'

– What does he mean?

Without saying anything, Eishin held his elbows horizontally and placed his hands together in front of his chest, standing still.

Just like Buddha.

From behind him, Shuuei was looking down, seeming troubled.

'Oi, Yakumo.'

Gotou spoke up, unable to keep quiet.

'Please be quiet.'

When Yakumo turned around, his eyes were menacing.

'M-my bad...'

Gotou shut up under that pressure.

Yakumo ran his hands through his hair in his exasperation and turned towards Hatsune again.

'Your mother said it, right? That you were her reincarnation...'

'She did. Mother told me,' Hatsune replied cheerfully.

'So that really is how it is...'

After Yakumo murmured that, he narrowed his eyes and put the index finger of his left hand to his brow.

'Did you find something out?' Gotou asked, but Yakumo glared at him right away.

'Not yet!'

When Yakumo said that, he looked incredibly sad.

'Is this kid really a reincarnation?' asked Eishin.

'You should know that she isn't, Eishin-san,' replied Yakumo with a frown.

Eishin laughed pleasantly when he heard that.

Though the two of them were on the same page, Gotou didn't understand.

'What are you talking about?'

'The one thing that is clear is that she isn't a reincarnation,' said Yakumo.

– She isn't a reincarnation.

Then what was she? She had taken Minami's name from nowhere. And why did she know the location of the limestone cavern and the lake? Where'd she hear about being murdered and sunken into the lake?

Questions kept coming up in Gotou's head, burying him as he couldn't solve them.

'Where are Seidou-san's things?'

'The police took them.'

Eishin responded to Yakumo's question.

That was natural. The police must have been frantically searching for a link to Yakumo in Seidou's things.

'I see... Does this temple have another place like an archive?'

'Does it?'

Eishin turned his head and looked at Shuuei.

'At a little distance, yes...'

Shuuei seemed to have sensed their intentions, as he responded while looking down.

'Would you show me the way?' Yakumo said quietly.

His expression was filled with confidence – as if he had solved all the mysteries.

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25

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Ishii waited for Youko in a family restaurant by the highway.

To be honest, he had wanted to return to the precinct.

Since he'd run out of there, he had just left documents on his desk. However, he had changed his mind after going close to the precinct.

The police precinct had been surrounded by an amazing number of people from the press. It was natural, now that he thought about it. A current police officer had escaped with the suspect in a murder. This was a huge incident that was yet unheard of.

Ishii didn't want to think about what the other members – not just Miyagawa – would say if he returned there so carelessly.

He wouldn't even be able to investigate.

He contacted Youko immediately and they decided to meet up at this family restaurant. Ishii used his free time to try to call Gotou's mobile, but there was no response.

He had spent nearly an hour drinking coffee while whiling away the time.

If he had known this was going to happen, he would have helped Haruka and Makoto more with the investigation, but it was too late now.

'It seems like I've made you wait.'

Youko hurried over and sat across from Ishii.

'Ah!'

Ishii's spine went as straight as a rod as he greeted Youko.

Her face seemed a bit flushed.

Did she rush here, or –

Youko called a server over with deliberately slow actions. After ordering a drink, she took a file from her bag.

'How was it?' asked Ishii, like a dog badgering for treats.

'Amazing.'

Youko breathed out and brushed back her hair. She looked satisfied.

'Er...'

'Calm down.'

After Youko reprimanded him, Ishii's shoulders slumped.

'First, Matsumoto Hiroshi, the corpse found this morning, is the same Matsumoto Hiroshi in the album.'

'A-as I thought!'

Ishii was so excited that he shouted. He hurriedly covered his mouth with both hands.

Youko looked exasperated as she put her chin in her hand.

'I don't know if you're really tired or just a scatterbrain.'

'I-I'm sorry.'

Ishii's shoulders slumped again as he lost his energy.

He knew he was clumsy. He always did something wrong. That was why he tried not to mess up, but that just made things worse.

'You feel like the type people can't leave alone.'

'It's true. I'm unreliable.'

'That isn't it – more like... Well, it's fine. Let's return to the topic at hand,' said Youko with a sigh.

'So... How about Todayama-san?' asked Ishii, regaining his spirits.

'It was as you thought on this point too. The person in the album is Seidou's dead son.'

'So it was just as I thought.'

Ishii gripped his hands into fists.

Now, it couldn't be a coincidence. Minami, who disappeared ten years ago. The murdered Matsumoto Hiroshi. And Seidou's son, Takahiro. They were in the same grade at the same school.

'Come to think of it, Seidou-san's son, Todayama Takahiro-san...'

'Committed suicide,' finished Youko.

'Do you know the reason?'

'I was curious as well and caught the person in charge before coming here to ask...'

Youko had a complicated expression on her face.

'How was it?'

Ishii brought his face closer to Youko's and held his breath.

'It seems like there was no note. It seems like there's no doubt it was a suicide from the situation. From the testimony of people around him, he had been rather depressed before the suicide.'

'I see...'

'But...'

'What is it?'

'It seems like the first to find him was his father, Seidou.'

Youko's words echoed in Ishii's chest.

The father found his child's corpse. Just thinking about it hurt. How must he have felt then?

Ishii had no way of imagining it.

Suddenly, the mobile phone on the table rang.

Ishii's shoulders jolted. He just watched the mobile phone vibrate.

He had a very bad feeling.

If he answered the phone, it would become a big problem. That vague anxiety went through Ishii's whole body.

'Aren't you going to answer?'

'Ah, yes...'

Urged on by Youko, Ishii picked up the mobile.

'Hello...'

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26

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Haruka was in front of an apartment outside of Nishitama Station's shopping street.

She was looking around from the passenger seat of the car parked at the side of the road.

It was dark. On the street devoid of people, there was a three-storey building.

Naitou Yousuke's room was Room 203. In the middle of the second storey.

'The lights are on,' said Makoto from the driver's seat.

Just as she said, there was light coming from what was probably the frosted glass window of the kitchen.

'We're lucky.'

Haruka's expression softened.

Though the owner might have just forgotten to turn the lights off, it was likely that he was in his room. It would be a waste if they came without meeting him.

'Shall we go then?'

Makoto got off the car. Haruka followed her.

They went up to the second storey using the metal stairs outside and stood in front of the door.

When Haruka put her ear near the door, she could faintly hear people talking. Haruka nodded.

Makoto pressed the intercom button.

There was a noise outside the room – ding dong.

However, the door didn't open.

Makoto pressed the button a number of times, but still nobody came out.

'Good evening.'

Haruka spoke as she knocked on the door.

However, the result was the same.

Something was strange. Haruka had a bad feeling.

'Is he out...'

Makoto tried the doorknob. There was a click – the door opened slightly.

Haruka's heart started beating more quickly.

– You can't go inside.

She felt like somebody had whispered that in her ear. Haruka knew immediately who it was. It was the cry of her own heart.

While Haruka was troubled, Makoto opened the door more widely.

There was a corridor with a kitchen in front of the entrance, and on the right, there was a washroom. Ahead of the corridor was a room with a wooden floor.

The television was on.

A talk show with a comedian was playing.

The voices Haruka had heard earlier must have been from the television.

'Excuse me, Naitou-san.'

Makoto called out from the entrance.

However, there was no reply.

'Please excuse me.'

Makoto took off her pumps at the entrance and went inside.

Haruka followed her.

'It seems like he really isn't here,' said Makoto with slumped shoulders as she peered around the room.

Leaving the television and lights on when going out – it was a bit hard to believe.

'I see...'

Though Haruka said that, the anxiety in her heart didn't clear.

– What is this feeling?

'Shall we go?'

Makoto went back to the entrance to leave.

Haruka was about to follow her when her eyes fell on the frosted glass of the bathroom.

Her forehead was covered with a cold sweat.

'What's wrong?'

Without replying to Makoto's question, Haruka stood in front of the door to the bathroom.

– Here.

She had no evidence. She just felt it instinctively.

Haruka opened the bathroom door with a sweaty hand.

When she saw the scene in front of her, she couldn't even make a sound. The strength in her body left her and she collapsed right there.

Inside the bathtub, a man, covered in blood, lay with his limbs dangling out.

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3

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Gotou opened the sliding door to the temple.

It was quiet –

All he could hear was the sound of the pouring rain.

Eishin was sitting in the middle of the temple with his hand in some sort of religious gesture.

He had his spine straight and was looking straight forward – he was as still as if he had become Buddha.

Though his half-open eyes seemed hollow, there was a strong light in them.

Gotou didn't understand the heart of Zen, but as Eishin sat there, it looked like he was emitting some mysterious aura.

'Oi.'

Though Gotou called out, Eishin didn't move.

– Did he not hear me?

'Oi, you damn monk.'

Gotou called out again while walking up to Eishin.

'I know you're there even without all that noise,' said Eishin.

When he spoke, only his lips moved – it was creepy, like he was a talking mechanical doll.

'f you know, then reply.'

Gotou sat cross-legged in front of Eishin.

'What do you want?'

'That's quite a tone. I can't think of you as Isshin's teacher,' said Gotou, expressing his dissatisfaction.

Suddenly, the days Gotou had spent with Isshin came to mind.

Isshin was a broadminded man. He was always gentle and kind to everyone. Just seeing that smile would make Gotou feel better for some reason.

– Why did Isshin have to die?

Gotou still thought that sometimes now.

'You say that because you don't know what Isshin was like before.'

Eishin breathed out, relaxing his body. His face became more human, like he had taken off a mask.

'What do you mean?'

'Isshin is very similar to Yakumo.'

Gotou didn't understand what Eishin said.

'What part of him?'

'Before Isshin took Yakumo in, he had been terribly troubled. At one point, he denied his own existence.'

'Denied?'

'He was filled with anger that had no outlet – he always had a grim expression on his face.'

'That guy did?'

Gotou really didn't understand.

No matter how Gotou searched his memories, Isshin was always smiling in them.

'Because he found out the truth.'

'The truth?'

Gotou didn't understand.

He felt like they were talking about somebody else entirely.

'It's not like Isshin was at fault, but because of his personality, he tried to shoulder all the blame.'

'What are you talking about?'

'You could call it fate...'

Eishin stared into nothingness.

– Fate?

'You talking about Yakumo?'

'Yakumo is only one part of a larger flow. I'm talking about a fate that continued from much before then. Everything started in this temple, when a man and woman met.'

'Explain in a way I'll understand.'

Gotou pressed Eishin for an answer in his irritation.

However, Eishin continued, still staring into nothingness.

'Isshin compared that fate with his own existence. At that time, he had forgotten heart of ensou, which is the basis of Zen.'

'Ensou?'

'That's right. If the heart is not in order, one cannot see clearly. Isshin's fate had shaken his heart.'

Gotou really didn't understand what Eishin was talking about.

He didn't understand, but for some reason, he was curious.

'So then what happened?'

'The one who changed Isshin's heart was Yakumo.'

Eishin's lips relaxed into a small smile.

He alone held all the cards. That was how it looked like to Gotou.

'What part of Yakumo changed Isshin?'

'His existence. By walking with Yakumo, Isshin was able to face his fate. He became his original self.'

'What's that fate you're talking about?'

'You know as well. It's that man.'

Eishin's mouth shut tightly.

Gotou knew who that man was.

'The man with two red eyes?'

'That's right. Isshin has a connection with that man that cannot be cut.'

'Isshin was just wrapped up in the incident, right?' said Gotou offhandedly.

'Wrong.'

Eishin shook his head.

'What do you mean?'

Without responding to Gotou's question, Eishin stood up.

'Answer me.'

Gotou continued to hound Eishin.

'You'll understand soon enough. More importantly, what did you come here for?'

Eishin sudden changed the subject.

Stopping the conversation right before the crucial point – he really was just like Yakumo. Eishin probably wouldn't say anything no matter what Gotou asked. Gotou gave in and stood up.

'I want to ask a favour.'

'Do you want me to introduce you to a woman?'

There was a lascivious smirk on Eishin's face.

Even though he was so solemn when meditating, there was not even a fragment of that now.

'I've got a wife.'

'So you're more proper than you look.'

– It really didn't sound like something a monk should say.

'That isn't the problem. Anyway, I came to borrow your mobile.'

'What do you say when asking for a favour?' said Eishin with a laugh.

He really was like Yakumo.

'Please lend me your mobile. I would greatly appreciate it.'

Gotou buried his anger in the pit of his stomach as he lowered his head.

'You should have been honest like that from the start,' said Eishin while taking his mobile out for Gotou.

– Meditating with his mobile there – what an awful monk.

Gotou said abusive words in his heart while taking the mobile.

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4

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'Excuse me.'

After saying that to Youko, Ishii stepped away from the door.

The number on his mobile was unfamiliar to him. Who could it be –

Though confused, Ishii answered the phone.

'Hello.'

<It's me.>

– Detective Gotou!

Ishii was about to yell that, but he hurriedly stopped himself.

'P-please wait.'

There were police officers everywhere. If they found out he was talking with Gotou, it would be a serious problem.

Ishii looked around for a place he could talk without being watched.

The first and second floors were filled with people, but there were practically none on the third.

'I apologise for the wait,' said Ishii after walking to the outside corridor of the third floor.

<It's really noisy.>

Gotou sounded displeased.

'Ah, actually...'

Ishii explained in detail everything they had investigated up until now, including how Haruka and Makoto had found a corpse.

Though it was quite the complicated story, Ishii focussed on explaining chronologically, as Yakumo always told him to.

Gotou didn't interrupt, which was unusual.

<Seems like things are a mess over there too.>

Gotou said just that after Ishii finished his explanation.

'It is a bit confusing.'

Ishii had run about frantically up until now, but once he heard Gotou's voice, he relaxed a bit and became weak.

His eyes were becoming wet with tears.

<It's my fault. Sorry.>

Gotou said that.

– Why is he apologising?

Ishii was confused. Though Gotou always got angry at him, he never apologised. Rather, Ishii was the one who wanted to apologise.

He had planned on investigating frantically to make a place for Gotou to return to, but there had been no developments at all.

He was completely useless like this.

'I'm the one who must apologise. If I had been more reliable...'

<Are you an idiot?>

'Eh?'

<This case is outside of your jurisdiction. That's not all. What I've done will make people give you a lot of flak.>

Gotou's voice was quiet and weak.

– Don't talk like that.

Ishii murmured that in his heart.

'Please don't worry about someone like me. Detective Gotou, I believe in you and Yakumo-shi. That's why I'm working. That's all.'

Ishii wasn't lying.

It was true that he had been a bit troubled earlier, but that had gone away completely.

<Well don't you sound competent.>

Gotou snorted.

Was that praise? Or was it a reprimand? Ishii didn't know.

He just felt that Gotou's voice sounded a bit stronger.

'Detective Gotou.'

<What?>

'If there's anything I can do, please tell me. If you want to flee overseas, I will help prepare.'

<Don't be ridiculous. I'm not the sort of guy who likes running.>

'That's right.'

<There's a request from Yakumo - will you hear it?>

'Of course,' Ishii replied immediately.

He would do anything if it would allow Gotou to come back, no matter what sacrifices he had to make.

<I want you to contact old man Hata and get the autopsy results for the victim.>

'Please consider it done!' declared Ishii.

<I'm counting on you, Assistant Inspector Ishii.>

'Yes sir!'

円相

第三章

FILE:
03

file 03: ensou

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1

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Gotou and Yakumo went to something like a hut connected to the main temple by a corridor.

It was fairly dark; only two bare light bulbs hung from the ceiling.

It was a Japanese room of about ten tatami in size. Right past the entrance, there was a short Japanese-style writing desk. The rest was buried in books.

'Amazing,' said Gotou in admiration, but Yakumo started searching without any care for that.

'What are you looking for?'

Gotou didn't understand the situation, so he didn't know why Yakumo had come to this archive.

Yakumo's hands suddenly stopped. He ran a hand through his hair, looking annoyed.

'Seidou-san was a meticulous person. I think he may have kept something like a diary.'

'A diary, eh...'

Gotou muttered that as he started looking for a diary in the piled-up books and accounts.

Though it was just picking up books and checking the contents, all of the words were difficult to read.

Gotou had never been good at simple work like this.

He lost his concentration in no time.

'Hey, Yakumo,' said Gotou, his hands stopping.

'What is it?'

'You said that the girl wasn't reincarnated, right?'

Yakumo appeared to have understood the answer already, but there were too many things Gotou didn't understand.

'Yes,' Yakumo replied curtly.

'Then what is she?'

'She is who she is.'

Yakumo sent a glare Gotou's way.

Even if he looked at him with such scary eyes, Gotou couldn't understand the meaning of Yakumo's words.

'She is who she is... It's like some Zen question.'

'It isn't a Zen question. I'm saying she is nothing but herself. Even if she did have memories of the past, she would still be who she is.'

Yakumo's words were like some mathematics problem, inviting sleep.

Gotou yawned.

'How complicated.'

'No. It's simple.'

'Sounds complicated to me.'

'Should I explain it with a picture book?' Yakumo's expression softened as he said that.

'You making fun of me?'

'Good job; you understood.'

Yakumo applauded.

It seemed like he was seriously making fun of him. Gotou clicked his tongue.

'This isn't the time to be making stupid jokes, right?'

'What a coincidence. I was just thinking that I didn't have the time to waste it talking with you, Gotou-san.'

– This brat never shuts up.

Though Gotou was irritated, he was happy to be able to talk with Yakumo like this again.

'Gotou-san, if you don't feel like helping, could you check the situation with Ishii-san?'

'Ishii, eh...'

Gotou looked up at the ceiling.

Come to think of it, he hadn't been able to talk properly with Ishii this time.

Before coming to the temple, Yakumo appeared to have made a request of Ishii. Gotou wanted to know what happened after that too.

That said, since it was Ishii, he had probably just wandered around without doing anything useful.

'I'll go call then.'

Gotou stood up, but then he noticed a great problem.

'Oi. Yakumo.'

'What is it?'

'I don't have a phone.'

Yakumo had thrown Gotou's mobile phone on to some guy's truck.

'Can't you just borrow one from Eishin-san?' said Yakumo, flipping through the accounts.

That was right. He'd borrowed Eishin's mobile while they were waiting outside the temple too. He could just do the same thing. But –

'Where's he?'

'Probably the temple.'

Gotou left the archive, but then he noticed another problem.

'I don't know his number.'

Since the mobile phone had become explosively popular, people would just rely on the contacts list – nobody remembered other people's numbers any more.

Gotou didn't remember other people's numbers either.

'Here.'

As Yakumo said that, he threw something at Gotou.

Though he was surprised, Gotou caught it in front of his chest. It was an SD card for a mobile phone.

'The number is on there.'

Now, Gotou recalled what Yakumo had said about moving the data and put the SD card in his pocket.

'I'm going out for a bit.'

'Ah, that's right.'

Yakumo called out to Gotou as he was about to leave.

'What?'

'If the autopsy results for the corpse are out, please tell him to ask Hata-san for information.'

'Yeah, yeah.'

After replying, Gotou left Yakumo in the archive and went to the temple through the corridor.

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2

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Ishii was irritated as he sat in the passenger seat

Rain hit the window.

'It's really pouring,' said Youko as she drove.

'It seems like a typhoon,' replied Ishii, staring out the window with bitterness.

It was because the typhoon was coming.

The rain was melancholy, fanning Ishii's anxiety.

– Somebody's dead.

The call Ishii received in the family restaurant was from Makoto.

Though her voice was shaking, she managed to keep her calm as she explained the events in order.

After receiving the information, Ishii immediately left the shop and was going to the scene in Youko's car.

Though it was only forty minutes, it felt incredibly long to Ishii.

'It's just ahead.'

Youko turned the wheel left.

Ishii could tell where the scene was right away. There was yellow tape around the area to stop people from trespassing and around it, there were curious onlookers and people from the press.

There were lights for the investigation and for cameras. Though it was night, it was as bright as noon.

'This is serious,' murmured Youko as she drove.

'It is...'

So many things had happened.

Starting with the discovery of Seidou's corpse, Yakumo's name came up as a suspect, the second corpse was found, Gotou became a fugitive while aiding Yakumo's escape, and then Haruka and Makoto found the third victim – d

To be honest, Ishii was so frightened and confused he didn't know what to do.

However, he managed to keep himself together because Haruka and Makoto had been the ones who first discovered the corpse.

– I have to keep it together.

Led on by that impulse, Ishii opened the door and ran out the moment the car stopped.

The cold rain wet his cheek.

'Sorry, excuse me.'

As Ishii shouted that, he pushed through the crowd.

He showed his police ID to the uniformed officers there and tried to pass through the yellow tape, but somebody grabbed his arm.

'Excuse me, but this is out of your jurisdiction, isn't it?'

The young uniformed officer looked at Ishii with suspicious eyes.

'Ah, yes, but...'

Ishii couldn't think of an excuse to enter right away.

He thought it was annoying himself. At times like this, Gotou would have just said something like 'Shut up' and forced himself in, but Ishii couldn't do that.

He had just run forward with the want to go in, which made things even more unnatural.

'Natsume, from Criminal Affairs. I'm bringing him along. He can come in with me, right?'

Youko had come up behind him and said that as she showed her police ID. It was a firm attitude that didn't allow anyone to doubt it.

'Ah, yes. Please go ahead.'

The uniformed officer looked divided but he let Ishii and Youko pass.

'Thank you.'

After thanking Youko, Ishii went past the yellow tape.

He spotted Haruka and Makoto sitting by the flower garden in front of the apartment.

The two of them looked exhausted, but it didn't seem like they were injured. Ishii sighed in relief and went up to them.

'Ishii-san.'

Makoto noticed Ishii immediately and stood up.

'Are you all right?'

'Yes.'

Makoto's voice was clear.

Ishii looked towards Haruka.

Though she stood up, she stayed silent. It was clear she wasn't feeling well.

She had found a corpse that was stabbed all over. There was no helping it.

'I can't believe things turned out like this...' said Makoto, putting her hands together in front of her chest.

'It really is a serious matter.'

Ishii agreed with Makoto.

This case had gone beyond their expectations.

'Are they the ones?' said Youko, sounding curious.

'Ah, yes, that's right.'

For a moment, Ishii was confused as to why Youko knew Haruka and Makoto, but then he

remembered that he'd talked to her about the investigation.

'This is Ozawa Haruka-chan and Hijikata Makoto-san.'

Ishii introduced each of them to Natsume. He was going to introduce Youko, but she showed her police ID before he could.

'I'm Natsume of the Nishitama precinct,' said Youko promptly.

'Excuse me...'

Haruka opened her mouth like she wanted to talk about it.

'I've heard most of the situation from Ishii-san. To be honest, I think Saitou Yakumo isn't the culprit of this case either.'

Youko said that in a quiet voice after looking around.

'Is that so?'

Though Ishii said that in his surprise, he understood soon after.

Come to think of it, if Youko still doubted Yakumo, she wouldn't have cooperated so much.

It could be said that he had gained a powerful ally.

'Detective Ishii, I'm going to go look at the scene, but...'

Youko looked up at the door to the room where the corpse was found.

– I don't want to see it.

The corpse had been stabbed all over. If possible, he didn't want to step into such a grisly place.

He had just one reason. He was afraid.

However, he was in front of Haruka and Makoto, and he felt like he wouldn't be able to see the truth of the case if he didn't look at it himself.

'I'll go too,' said Ishii in a trembling voice. Then, he started following Youko up the stairs to the second storey.

His legs were shaking.

He really was frightened. But he couldn't go back now.

At the door, Ishii's mobile phone rang with good timing.

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3

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Gotou opened the sliding door to the temple.

It was quiet –

All he could hear was the sound of the pouring rain.

Eishin was sitting in the middle of the temple with his hand in some sort of religious gesture.

He had his spine straight and was looking straight forward – he was as still as if he had become Buddha.

Though his half-open eyes seemed hollow, there was a strong light in them.

Gotou didn't understand the heart of Zen, but as Eishin sat there, it looked like he was emitting some mysterious aura.

'Oi.'

Though Gotou called out, Eishin didn't move.

– Did he not hear me?

'Oi, you damn monk.'

Gotou called out again while walking up to Eishin.

'I know you're there even without all that noise,' said Eishin.

When he spoke, only his lips moved – it was creepy, like he was a talking mechanical doll.

'f you know, then reply.'

Gotou sat cross-legged in front of Eishin.

'What do you want?'

'That's quite a tone. I can't think of you as Isshin's teacher,' said Gotou, expressing his dissatisfaction.

Suddenly, the days Gotou had spent with Isshin came to mind.

Isshin was a broadminded man. He was always gentle and kind to everyone. Just seeing that smile would make Gotou feel better for some reason.

– Why did Isshin have to die?

Gotou still thought that sometimes now.

'You say that because you don't know what Isshin was like before.'

Eishin breathed out, relaxing his body. His face became more human, like he had taken off a mask.

'What do you mean?'

'Isshin is very similar to Yakumo.'

Gotou didn't understand what Eishin said.

'What part of him?'

'Before Isshin took Yakumo in, he had been terribly troubled. At one point, he denied his own

existence.'

'Denied?'

'He was filled with anger that had no outlet – he always had a grim expression on his face.'

'That guy did?'

Gotou really didn't understand.

No matter how Gotou searched his memories, Isshin was always smiling in them.

'Because he found out the truth.'

'The truth?'

Gotou didn't understand.

He felt like they were talking about somebody else entirely.

'It's not like Isshin was at fault, but because of his personality, he tried to shoulder all the blame.'

'What are you talking about?'

'You could call it fate...'

Eishin stared into nothingness.

– Fate?

'You talking about Yakumo?'

'Yakumo is only one part of a larger flow. I'm talking about a fate that continued from much before then. Everything started in this temple, when a man and woman met.'

'Explain in a way I'll understand.'

Gotou pressed Eishin for an answer in his irritation.

However, Eishin continued, still staring into nothingness.

'Isshin compared that fate with his own existence. At that time, he had forgotten heart of ensou, which is the basis of Zen.'

'Ensou?'

'That's right. If the heart is not in order, one cannot see clearly. Isshin's fate had shaken his heart.'

Gotou really didn't understand what Eishin was talking about.

He didn't understand, but for some reason, he was curious.

'So then what happened?'

'The one who changed Isshin's heart was Yakumo.'

Eishin's lips relaxed into a small smile.

He alone held all the cards. That was how it looked like to Gotou.

'What part of Yakumo changed Isshin?'

'His existence. By walking with Yakumo, Isshin was able to face his fate. He became his original self.'

'What's that fate you're talking about?'

'You know as well. It's that man.'

Eishin's mouth shut tightly.

Gotou knew who that man was.

'The man with two red eyes?'

'That's right. Isshin has a connection with that man that cannot be cut.'

'Isshin was just wrapped up in the incident, right?' said Gotou offhandedly.

'Wrong.'

Eishin shook his head.

'What do you mean?'

Without responding to Gotou's question, Eishin stood up.

'Answer me.'

Gotou continued to hound Eishin.

'You'll understand soon enough. More importantly, what did you come here for?'

Eishin sudden changed the subject.

Stopping the conversation right before the crucial point – he really was just like Yakumo. Eishin probably wouldn't say anything no matter what Gotou asked. Gotou gave in and stood up.

'I want to ask a favour.'

'Do you want me to introduce you to a woman?'

There was a lascivious smirk on Eishin's face.

Even though he was so solemn when meditating, there was not even a fragment of that now.

'I've got a wife.'

'So you're more proper than you look.'

– It really didn't sound like something a monk should say.

'That isn't the problem. Anyway, I came to borrow your mobile.'

'What do you say when asking for a favour?' said Eishin with a laugh.

He really was like Yakumo.

'Please lend me your mobile. I would greatly appreciate it.'

Gotou buried his anger in the pit of his stomach as he lowered his head.

'You should have been honest like that from the start,' said Eishin while taking his mobile out for Gotou.

– Meditating with his mobile there – what an awful monk.

Gotou said abusive words in his heart while taking the mobile.

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4

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'Excuse me.'

After saying that to Youko, Ishii stepped away from the door.

The number on his mobile was unfamiliar to him. Who could it be –

Though confused, Ishii answered the phone.

'Hello.'

<It's me.>

– Detective Gotou!

Ishii was about to yell that, but he hurriedly stopped himself.

'P-please wait.'

There were police officers everywhere. If they found out he was talking with Gotou, it would be a serious problem.

Ishii looked around for a place he could talk without being watched.

The first and second floors were filled with people, but there were practically none on the third.

'I apologise for the wait,' said Ishii after walking to the outside corridor of the third floor.

<It's really noisy.>

Gotou sounded displeased.

'Ah, actually...'

Ishii explained in detail everything they had investigated up until now, including how Haruka and Makoto had found a corpse.

Though it was quite the complicated story, Ishii focussed on explaining chronologically, as Yakumo always told him to.

Gotou didn't interrupt, which was unusual.

<Seems like things are a mess over there too.>

Gotou said just that after Ishii finished his explanation.

'It is a bit confusing.'

Ishii had run about frantically up until now, but once he heard Gotou's voice, he relaxed a bit and became weak.

His eyes were becoming wet with tears.

<It's my fault. Sorry.>

Gotou said that.

– Why is he apologising?

Ishii was confused. Though Gotou always got angry at him, he never apologised. Rather, Ishii was the one who wanted to apologise.

He had planned on investigating frantically to make a place for Gotou to return to, but there had been no developments at all.

He was completely useless like this.

'I'm the one who must apologise. If I had been more reliable...'

<Are you an idiot?>

'Eh?'

<This case is outside of your jurisdiction. That's not all. What I've done will make people give you a lot of flak.>

Gotou's voice was quiet and weak.

– Don't talk like that.

Ishii murmured that in his heart.

'Please don't worry about someone like me. Detective Gotou, I believe in you and Yakumo-shi. That's why I'm working. That's all.'

Ishii wasn't lying.

It was true that he had been a bit troubled earlier, but that had gone away completely.

<Well don't you sound competent.>

Gotou snorted.

Was that praise? Or was it a reprimand? Ishii didn't know.

He just felt that Gotou's voice sounded a bit stronger.

'Detective Gotou.'

<What?>

'If there's anything I can do, please tell me. If you want to flee overseas, I will help prepare.'

<Don't be ridiculous. I'm not the sort of guy who likes running.>

'That's right.'

<There's a request from Yakumo - will you hear it?>

'Of course,' Ishii replied immediately.

He would do anything if it would allow Gotou to come back, no matter what sacrifices he had to make.

<I want you to contact old man Hata and get the autopsy results for the victim.>

'Please consider it done!' declared Ishii.

<I'm counting on you, Assistant Inspector Ishii.>

'Yes sir!'

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5

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After ending the call, Gotou returned to the archive where Yakumo was.

It looked like he had finished searching already, as he was sitting cross-legged at the Japanese-style desk while reading an account book written by hand.

The way he looked – wearing a monk's working clothes while reading accounts – was incredibly fitting.

'Is it interesting?'

When Gotou spoke, Yakumo turned around with an incredibly displeased look.

'It's a matter of subjectivity.'

'Are you saying I wouldn't be able to enjoy it?'

'You can't read, right?'

'Shut up!'

Gotou said that with a click of his tongue as he sat down on the tatami.

'So how was it?' said Yakumo, turning his eyes to the account book again.

'Things turned serious.'

Gotou told Yakumo what Ishii had just told him.

At points, Yakumo interrupted, saying things like 'In more concrete terms...', but he seriously listened to Gotou.

'I see.'

After Gotou finished speaking, Yakumo shut the account book and lifted his head.

His eyes looked unusually sharp.

'Did you figure something out?'

'There are still a number of things I need to confirm, but I can see the outline of the case.'

Yakumo ran a hand through his hair.

'So Ishii was of some use then.'

'Yes. Actually, this time, I have done practically nothing. Ishii-san, Makoto-san and her – the things they've investigated are very close to the truth.'

'That's right.'

Gotou agreed with Yakumo's opinion.

When he was talking with Ishii earlier, he'd underrated him, thinking Ishii probably wouldn't be able to get any useful information.

Gotou had thought of Ishii as the type who didn't move unless told to.

However, this time was different. They'd decided their own direction from the situation and investigated. Ishii had grown at a much quicker speed than he had imagined.

Of course, it was the same for Haruka and Makoto.

'To be honest, I'm surprised. I would have probably searched in the same manner if I had been there.'

Yakumo scratched his cheek awkwardly.

'Do you think you'll get to the truth?'

'I wonder,' Yakumo said evasively as he yawned.

Gotou stared at Yakumo's face, but he couldn't see his true feelings. All he could do now was believe in Yakumo.

'I'm counting on you. I can't go home if you don't solve the mystery.'

'Atsuko-san and Nao might be happier if you don't.'

Yakumo smirked.

'Say what you want.'

Gotou crossed his arms, looked away and walked to the wall.

– I wonder how Atsuko and Nao are doing?

Gotou had been troubled about whether or not to call home after calling Ishii. However, he decided not to in the end.

The police would probably think Gotou would call home and well probably waiting there. It was the house of a suspect, after all.

– I've caused trouble for them.

Gotou realised once more the weight of what he had done, but strangely, he didn't regret it at all.

It was probably because he believed Yakumo would bring the case to an end.

'Gotou-san.'

Yakumo was running a hand through his hair with his head facing down as he said that.

'What?'

'Could I borrow the phone?'

'Sure.'

Gotou took the mobile out of his pocket and gave it to Yakumo.

'Thank you.'

'Who are you calling?'

'There's something I want to check... with her.'

Yakumo's words were stiff, which was unlike him.

– I see.

Gotou understood everything and stood up.

'Where are you going?'

Yakumo looked puzzled.

– There's probably some things that'd be hard to talk about with me here.

Yakumo would probably get angry if Gotou said that, so he muttered it in his heart.

'It's stuffy in this room. I'm going to take a nap in the temple.'

'It's easier to sleep on tatami.'

'I'm fine. The wood's cooler.'

Gotou ended the conversation and left the archive.

When he went out into the corridor, the rain became stronger. It felt like it might cause a flood.

'Man.'

Gotou went into the temple, used a cushion in the corner as a pillow and lay down.

Come to think of it, he'd gone without sleep or rest for these two days. His body was much more tired than he'd thought.

Gotou fell asleep –

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6

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Haruka went into her room with a heavy heart.

After that, the Nishitama precinct detectives questioned her about the situation. Since she was Yakumo's friends, they had clearly suspected her at first, but with the words of Youko, the Nishitama precinct detective who had been there with Ishii, she was able to be let out quickly.

Still, the things that had happened these two days had had such an impact that she was psychologically and physically exhausted.

She went into the room and lay down on the bed.

The blanket felt nice, but she didn't feel sleepy.

– I wonder what Yakumo is doing now?

Even when she closed her eyes, questions kept coming up in her head.

'Yakumo-kun.'

Haruka opened her eyes and called out towards the white ceiling.

As if to respond to that, her mobile phone rang.

'Hello.'

<You're rather carefree in such a state of emergency.>

'Yakumo-kun!'

Haruka leapt up like a spring.

<Your voice is loud.>

Yakumo sounded nonchalant.

Though that tone irritated Haruka, she noticed that she was also relieved.

'What do you mean, carefree? You don't know anything about how I'm feeling.'

<My bad.>

Yakumo said that quietly.

So many things had happened since she heard about the case. She had been very surprised and

worn away at her nerves as she worried about his safety – terrible things had happened.

However, it was mysterious how that one sentence made her feel like she could forgive everything.

– The weakness of somebody in love.

'I'll forgive you this time.'

Haruka lay down on her bed again. Though it was the same bed, it felt more comfortable than before.

Anyway, she could hear his voice. That was enough.

'Hey, where are you now?' asked Haruka, curling up like a cat.

<A room with many books.>

'What is that? A library?'

<Your imagination is poor.>

Yakumo laughed.

Haruka felt like it had been a while since she'd heard that voice. When she talked with him like this, the situation she was in this time felt like a dream.

'Really, where are you?'

<It'd cause you trouble if you knew.>

'Why?'

<If you knew where I was and kept quiet, you would be aiding a fugitive. Since I'm a suspect.>

'I see...'

She was brought back to reality in an instant.

<I received a lot of information from Ishii-san.>

'Yeah.'

Ishii had said he'd received a phone call from Gotou when in front of the apartment.

<It was a great help.>

Haruka didn't think that Yakumo would say something like that.

'We've been doing our best too.'

<You have. But...>

'What?'

<Don't over do it.>

'But at a time like this...'

<I'm saying it because it's a time like this.>

Yakumo interrupted Haruka.

'Eh?'

<Because it's a time like this, even if something happens, I can't save you.>

Haruka's heart ached at Yakumo's words.

He's worried about me. Yakumo is –

It was natural for a friend to be worried, but Haruka was still happy.

'I won't overdo it. Ishii-san said that too. I'll be acting alongside Ishii-san tomorrow too, so it'll be fine.'

<I see. That's good. Then...>

'Hey.'

Haruka sat up and called out to Yakumo, who had been about to hang up.

<What?>

'You'll come back... right?>

She wanted to confirm just that.

She knew he wouldn't be able to reply at this stage, but she wanted an answer, even if it was a lie.

<Yeah. I'll definitely come back.>

Yakumo replied.

Even though there was no proof, if Yakumo said that, Haruka felt like she could believe it.

'I'm waiting.'

Yakumo just laughed instead of responding.

Even after hanging up, Haruka gripped her mobile tightly in that lingering memory.

– Yakumo will definitely come back.

That thought gave her peace of mind, and Haruka fell asleep.

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7

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'Don't sleep here. You're in the way.'

Gotou woke up to that voice.

Eishin had his arms crossed in a displeased manner as he looked down on Gotou.

When Gotou looked up at him like this, there was considerable pressure. Gotou's sleepiness flew away at once.

Gotou had planned on leave just while Yakumo was calling Haruka last night, but it looked like he'd fallen right asleep.

'It's my choice where I sleep.'

Gotou sat up while rubbing his eyes.

He really shouldn't have slept on the wooden floor. His body ached all over.

'That's why I told you.'

Eishin laughed when he saw Gotou's expression twist in pain.

– He's so noisy.

Gotou looked at his wristwatch in an unpleasant mood. It was only six in the morning.

'It's a pain being woken up so early in the morning.'

'Early in the morning? My day starts at four. This is actually late.'

Eishin's nostrils flared as he said that and opened the window to look out.

The large raindrops continued to hit the ground.

The wind was strong too – there was the sound of howling.

'It's really pouring.'

Gotou got up and stretched.

Something in his arm and foot made a loud crack. It was hard to move as if he was wearing a suit of armour.

'Seems like a typhoon's coming.'

'Typhoon? That'll be another issue...'

They were frantically running around – they didn't have the time to care about the weather.

'It'll land soon.'

'What a pain.'

Gotou frowned.

If it were just rain, it'd be fine, but a typhoon was different. They wouldn't be able to move freely.

'So what are you planning to do today?' said Eishin, as if he'd seen Gotou's anxiety.

Wait in the temple for the typhoon to pass, or forcefully go out – both were risky.

It was hard to come to a decision.

'I'll ask Yakumo.'

'You don't try to think on your own, do you?'

Eishin snorted.

'What did you say?'

'It's the truth, right? That's why your brain is deteriorating.'

– This monk really is annoying.

Somehow, Gotou swallowed his anger.

There was something else of more concern. What was Eishin going to do?

He had gone with them so far. Gotou had brought Eishin along because he was partially responsible for Yakumo's becoming a suspect.

However, they had found Yakumo. It could be said that Eishin's role ended here, but Eishin had clout. Though he was hateful, Gotou would rather have him here.

'What are you going to do now...'

The sliding door to the temple opened, interrupting Gotou's question.

At the door was the trainee monk named Shuuei. There was sweat on his forehead and his shoulders were heaving as he panted.

His working clothes were drenched from the rain.

'What is it?' said Eishin.

'Police have come.'

'Police?'

Gotou stood up instinctively at those words.

'Just chase them out,' replied Eishin.

However, Shuuei's eyebrows lowered as he looked troubled.

'That is... It seems that somebody reported that there is an escaped suspect here...'

Shuuei's shoulders slumped as he hung his head like a child being scolded.

It was hard to even look at him, but there was no time to sympathise. This was really problematic.

'Run right now,' Eishin said sharply while pointing to the well.

Gotou was about to respond from that force, but then he recalled something.

'How about Yakumo?'

'Shuuei. Call him right now.'

'Yes.'

Shuuei turned around briskly and ran off.

'Don't dawdle. Hurry and go.'

Urged on by Eishin, Gotou flew out of the temple.

The pouring rain continued.

He stooped over to hide in the thicket as he advanced. In front of the well, he stood up again and looked at the main temple gate.

He saw Shuuei talking to the police there.

'That bastard. He should've been going to call Yakumo...'

It seemed like Shuuei had been the one who gave the secret report to the police. Gotou gritted his teeth.

– What to do?

'Hurry up and go! Idiot!'

Eishin yelled from the corridor.

There was no point in both of them getting caught.

'Damn it! What a pain!'

Gotou used the rope to go into the well.

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8

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The rain was heavy –

Haruka watched the rain pouring down from the apartment entrance.

The news said that a typhoon was coming.

If the typhoon hit, they wouldn't be able to move freely. Haruka couldn't relax.

She saw a car parked in front of the apartment.

It was probably Ishii's car.

Haruka left the entrance and went up to the car, holding an umbrella.

'Good morning.'

Ishii nodded from the driver's seat.

His hair was as messy as Yakumo's and hair was growing in on his chin. He was also wearing the

same thing as he had been yesterday.

He had probably worked without sleep or rest. Haruka felt a bit apologetic.

'I'm sorry for asking something so selfish.'

Haruka apologised formally as she got into the passenger seat.

Last night, Ishii had said, 'Please leave the rest of the investigation to me.'

Haruka didn't think that anything would change if she continued. Rather, she'd get in the way. Though she knew that, she had still said, 'Please let me do something.'

Their arguments ran parallel, but in the end Ishii folded.

'No, to be honest, I didn't want to investigate by myself either.'

Ishii smiled as he said that, starting the car.

Haruka knew he was just being polite, but it still made her feel better.

'How are things with the police?' asked Haruka, curious.

Now that Gotou had run as a fugitive, there must have been a big fuss at the police.

'Actually, I haven't returned to the precinct.'

'Eh?'

'I've been contacting Chief Miyagawa by phone, but if I return, they probably won't let me out again.'

Ishii let out a dry laugh.

'Why would that be the case?'

'Since I'm Detective Gotou's partner...'

Ishii's eyes narrowed.

'Are you being suspected as well, Ishii-san?'

'Though that isn't the case, they think I might give Detective Gotou information.'

'That's...'

For Ishii to be suspected as well – Haruka had a heavy heart just imagining it.

'Please don't be so down. It's the truth,' said Ishii with a shrug.

'The truth?'

'Ah, well, I talked with Detective Gotou on the phone yesterday. I told him everything I know, so the police's opinion is correct.'

To Haruka, Ishii seemed nonchalant. It might have been resignation.

– He'd do anything for Gotou.

That will was probably pushing him forward.

'We'll need to clear their names then.'

Haruka smiled at Ishii.

'Of course,' Ishii replied immediately.

If they didn't find out the truth behind the case, everyone would be in trouble.

It wasn't just Yakumo's problem.

Haruka's determination became firmer.

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9

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Gotou went down the narrow tunnel at the bottom of the well, feeling like he was being pulled back by the hair.

'Dam nit!'

After getting out the tunnel, Gotou hid behind the rock and watched the second hand on his wristwatch as he waited.

'Hurry up and come.'

Gotou just prayed for that as he gripped his hands into fists.

The rain hit his body.

Even his underwear was soaked in no time.

Water dripped from his chin.

Ten minutes passed –

But Yakumo still didn't come.

If he hadn't come after Gotou had waited so long, was he hiding in the temple or caught by the police –

'What to do?' Gotou asked himself.

Only the sound of the rain replied.

Gotou stood up, left the thicket and stood on the asphalt road.

The raindrops bounced off the ground, creating a faint mist.

At the temple, Gotou could see red flashing lights. Yakumo was still on the premises.

The open ground on the opposite side of the road had a BMW there – the one they'd taken here.

Gotou put his hands in his pockets and found the key.

– If you're caught by the police, somebody important to you will die.

The words on the note that was probably from Nanase Miyuki came up in Gotou's head. If Yakumo was caught by the police, Haruka would be in danger.

In that situation, Yakumo would be stuck in the detention house. He'd probably be stricken with helplessness and an unspeakable pain.

Like with Isshin –

'I see.'

Gotou understood everything now.

That might have been Miyuki's goal. That woman had been stuck in the detention house before because of Yakumo.

Though she had escaped in the end, this was revenge for that. She probably planned on meeting Yakumo after she had placed her hands on Haruka.

When Gotou imagined that, a shiver ran down his spine.

He was looking up at the sky blanketed in thick clouds when Atsuko's and Nao's faces appeared in his head.

Even if he got away now, he couldn't get to the truth without Yakumo. He would have to continue running for the rest of his life.

He wouldn't be able to meet Atsuko and Nao.

Then it'd actually be better to be caught by the police.

Come to think of it, Gotou had decided what he should do from the moment he'd gone to save Yakumo and acted violent against the officers.

No, that was wrong –

His fate might have already been decided from the moment he'd saved Yakumo from that abandoned building fifteen years ago. It had been raining like this on that day too.

He and Yakumo were one in body and soul.

'I'll go with you to the ends of hell.'

Gotou said just that and started walking to the BMW.

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To be honest, Ishii had thought Haruka would be a bit more depressed.

However, this morning, Haruka had an energetic expression this morning – it looked like she had returned to her usual self.

Though Ishii wanted to know what had changed in her psychological state, Ishii couldn't ask aloud.

Ishii drove through the parking lot, trying to get as close to the entrance as he could.

He was at the entrance when Haruka ran out with an umbrella.

Though they only shared the umbrella for twenty minutes, it was a time of pure bliss for Ishii. They went through the entrance and took the stairs by the elevator.

They were headed for the room at the end of the basement corridor.

The dim corridor which smelled of disinfectant was always creepy to Ishii, but he felt less frightened than usual.

It might have been because Haruka was there with him.

'Hata-san, it's Ishii.'

Ishii called out as he knocked.

'It's open.'

A hoarse voice called out from the room.

'Are you all right?'

Haruka nodded in response to Ishii's words.

'Excuse us.'

Ishii opened the door to the room.

A small space of about six tatami in size. Cabinets surrounded it. Partly because there were no windows, it had a suffocating pressure to it.

There was just one desk by the wall. Hata sat there.

'You've brought an unexpected person with you.'

Hata looked at Haruka with fish eyes.

Ishii had been troubled about whether to meet Hata with Haruka, but then he remembered that they had met a number of times before.

'Do you remember me?'

Haruka bowed her head with a smile.

'My mind's still active.'

After tapping his forehead with his finger, Hata let out a creepy giggle.

When Ishii heard Hata's laugh, a chill ran down his spine. It made him afraid that Hata might one day bare his fangs and gobble someone up.

'So I see.'

Haruka smiled, though she seemed troubled.

'Excuse me... About the matter I discussed yesterday...'

Ishii brought up the topic at hand.

'I've got it for you.'

Hata patted his grizzled hair and then took two A4-size envelopes out of the drawer.

The names Seidou and Matsumoto Hiroshi were written on them.

'Thank you very much.'

Ishii picked them up immediately and took the insides out, but then his eyes saw a frightful picture that he instinctively looked away from.

Normally, he would have shrieked, but he probably couldn't do that because Haruka was next to him.

Haruka's brows grew close together as she covered her mouth with both hands.

The events of last night had probably doubled Haruka's terror.

'Are you all right?'

'Yes, I'm fine.'

Haruka acted strong at Ishii's words, but her face was completely white.

'Anyway, please sit.'

Ishii encouraged Haruka to sit in the nearby round chair.

'I'm sorry,' said Haruka, sitting on the chair and hugging her shoulders.

Hata was light-heartedly poking at youkan¹ with a toothpick.

Only Hata would be able to look at this photo and continue eating calmly.

'What do you think, Hata-san?'

Ishii put the photo back in the envelope and turned to Hata.

This was the most important. To be honest, when Ishii looked at the photo, he just felt frightened.

He wanted to hear Hata's opinion as an expert.

'Well, there were a number of things that were off.'

1 Youkan is a Japanese dessert that has the consistency of a firm jelly. It's usually sold in a big block which is then cut into slices; Hata would be poking these slices with his toothpick. [Here](#) is an example.

Hata sipped his tea.

'Things that were off?'

'Yes. First, it was a haemorrhagic death.'

That meant that there had been no fatal injury – death had been caused by blood loss.

'Is that so?'

'Though there are many injuries, each was shallow in contrast to that.'

'Shallow...'

Ishii repeated what Hata said, but he didn't know what it meant.

'It was probably done to hurt the victim.'

Hata's shoulders shook as he giggled.

Stabbing over and over while keeping the victim from dying. That was a terribly awful way of murder. The murderer might have been an unbelievable sadist. Or –

'Then there must have been quite a grudge against the victim.'

'The suspect in this case is Yakumo-kun, right?' said Hata, rubbing the white stubble growing out of his chin.

'That's wrong!' Haruka said, leaning forward.

'Missy, listen to the end of what I have to say.'

Hata's rebuke made Haruka immediately say 'I'm sorry' and look at her feet.

'What I want to say is that if Yakumo-kun committed the crime, he was ill-prepared.'

'Ill-prepared?'

Ishii repeated it without thinking.

'Think about it. How many cases do you think Yakumo has been involved in up until now?'

'That's...'

Yakumo hadn't been involved in just one or two cases. Ishii understood what Hata was trying to say.

'Yakumo-kun must know very well how the police work. Would he grip the knife and take the time to stab somebody multiple times despite that?'

'If Yakumo-shi were the murderer, he would probably pick a more effective method, wouldn't he?'

Hata nodded.

Ishii understood. If Yakumo were the culprit, he would have killed the victims differently.

At least, he wouldn't have gripped the knife with his bare hand. However –

'Wouldn't it be possible to think that he might have become emotion after some sort of trouble?'

'That's impossible,' said Hata with a snort.

'Eh?'

'Then the injuries would be deeper.'

'Is that so?'

'I said this earlier, didn't I? The culprit probably used enough force not to kill the victim in order to hurt them.'

'Ah, I see.'

Ishii understood now.

If the culprit had become emotional and lost control, they wouldn't be able to stab somebody without killing them.

'The culprit must have coldly watched the victim suffering. That might have been the goal.'

Ishii shivered at Hata's words.

'How frightening,' said Ishii in a trembling voice.

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11

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- I can't go back now.

Sitting in the driver seat of the BMW, Gotou gripped the wheel with sweaty hands as he steeled himself.

At the temple gate in front of him, he could see two police cars. The uniformed officers ahead of them were looking around frantically in their raincoats.

He looked towards the archive where Yakumo had been.

The door was open. However, he couldn't see inside. If he didn't know the situation, he had no way of moving.

As if to respond to Gotou's irritation, there was a knock on the car's side window.

Eishin peered in, completely drenched.

'You look awful,' said Gotou as he looked at Eishin, who was drenched from head to toe.

'You look worse.'

'Can't say you're wrong.'

Gotou laughed together with Eishin.

'So how's it look inside?'

After laughing for a moment, Gotou asked that, and Eishin's expression became serious.

'Sorry. Yakumo was caught.'

'As I thought... Did that trainee monk called Shuuei report him?'

Gotou glared at Eishin.

For once, Eishin looked as his feet awkwardly.

'Don't blame Shuuei. He just did what he thought was right after thinking about it.'

'I know.'

Gotou wasn't lying.

From Shuuei's perspective, on top of his master being murdered, the suspect in that had suddenly appeared at the temple.

He hadn't reported it immediately because Eishin, the temple's advisor had been there.

Gotou would think gratefully of him for keeping quiet until this morning.

'What do you plan to do?' said Eishin, wiping the water from his face.

Gotou was determined without a doubt.

'I can't go back.'

'Right. Then I'll go with you.'

Eishin smirked.

Gotou had thought of him just as a hateful monk, but in this situation, he was a strong ally. But –

'You OK with that?'

'I'm partially responsible, right?' said Eishin with a snort. That was the end of it then.

'Then shall we go?'

Gotou started the engine.

'Do you have a plan?'

'As if.'

He'd imagined things from this situation, but he couldn't see the result.

Tricks would be no use. He'd go with a straight-on surprise attack.

'It's troublesome accompanying an idiot.'

Though Eishin said that, he looked happy.

Gotou calculated the timing while waiting for the engine.

A uniformed officer came out of the archive.

Yakumo was behind the officer. Though his hands were shackled, he was looking forward with a firm gaze.

Behind Yakumo, there was another uniformed officer. He was led to the police car, surrounded.

– Not yet. A little longer.

Gotou swallowed the urge to rush.

He only had one chance. If he failed, it'd be game over.

The officers and Yakumo walked up to the police car at the temple gates. The officer in front opened the backseat door.

'Now!'

As Gotou yelled, he slammed down the pedal and drove forward.

He put his lights on high beam and kept honking the horn.

When the officers saw the BMW rushing towards them, they jumped away in different directions.

Yakumo was left in the middle.

'We're going!'

Without slowing down, Gotou rammed into the police car with the open door.

There was a grating crash – the impact ran through Gotou.

The police car's side was dented in and the door impossibly bent, but the BMW didn't have that much damage.

Foreign cars really were different in sturdiness.

'Hurry up and get on!'

Even Yakumo looked astonished by the unexpected event, though he immediately came over, sensing the situation.

However, one of the uniformed officers came to stop that.

It'd be a problem if they were caught. Gotou was about to get off the car when Eishin kicked the officer's leg.

The officer lost his balance and fell forward.

'Well done,' said Gotou without thinking.

Eishin really wasn't just a monk. Though he was hateful, he was reliable.

Yakumo took that chance to get into the backseat.

'We're going!'

Gotou waited for Eishin to get back in and made a U-turn in the BMW.

Because of the high speed, Yakumo and Eishin were flung to the side of the car from the centrifugal force, but Gotou didn't have the time to worry about that.

Gotou slammed down the pedal.

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12

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'That was rather reckless,' said Yakumo in the back seat.

'That a problem for you?'

Gotou turned around with a smile.

'No, it was a great help.'

Unusual for Yakumo, he thanked Gotou honestly.

Gotou ended up laughing at how ridiculous that attitude was.

'Is something funny?'

Yakumo said that, seeming displeased. He tried to run a hand through his hair, but the handcuffs got in his way.

His actions were like a playful cat's, making Gotou laugh aloud again.

'You're rather carefree in this emergency.'

My bad.'

If Gotou laughed any more, it felt like Yakumo would really be angry. Gotou swallowed his laughter.

'So where are you going now?' asked Eishin from the passenger seat.

He'd mentioned the part that hurt most. Gotou couldn't respond immediately. He wasn't driving with a destination in mind.

He'd gone along with vigour – he didn't know what to do next.

'As usual, you have no plans.'

Yakumo shook his head, as if disappointed by Gotou's thoughts.

'Tell me if you have any ideas then.'

Nothing would start if they argued now. Gotou asked that question to Yakumo while looking through the rear-view mirror.

Yakumo probably had some sort of plan.

'Please head to the lake,' said Yakumo with a hard expression.

'By lake, do you mean the one where you got bitten by a pit viper?'

'You don't have to say unnecessary information,' said Yakumo with a scowl.

It looked like it really bothered him. Yakumo might grow to hate snakes.

'What's there?'

'Something that will bring us to the truth of this case.'

That was a pretty vague way of putting it.

In his heart, Gotou complained – 'Explain more clearly' – but if Yakumo said that, Gotou was sure there was something there.

He might have found something important in the account books he was looking at in the archive last night.

'Oi, you damn monk. Tell me how to get there,' Gotou said to Eishin in the passenger seat.

However, Eishin just looked at Gotou like he was a cockroach or something.

'Don't make me say this again. There's a proper attitude you should take when you're asking people to do things,' said Eishin with a sigh.

'I don't know the way. Would you be so kind as to tell me how to get there?'

– Man, what annoying car passengers.

Gotou pitied his unluckiness but he bowed his head to Eishin. He'd return this humiliation when the case was over.

'Say that from the beginning.'

'Yeah, yeah.'

'Turn right at the next road.'

Eishin said that right before the intersection.

– He couldn't stop the car that quickly.

'Idiot. It was that road,' said Eishin with irritation.

'I know. Tell me sooner.'

Gotou slammed on the brakes.

The tires slipped in the rain – it took longer to stop than he'd expected.

Gotou made a U-turn and went onto the road as directed.

The road was one long, curving slope. Gotou recalled that he'd gone on this road when he had gone to search for Yakumo yesterday.

He would get to the lake if he just went straight here.

'Hey, Yakumo. You figured something out?' asked Gotou after things had calmed down a bit.

'Though it isn't everything yet, what Ishii-san investigated was of quite some use.'

'That so...'

'Yes. From what I know, Hatsune-chan is not her mother's reincarnation.'

Gotou had heard that yesterday.

'Then who is she?'

'Like I said yesterday, Gotou-san, your question is strange.'

Gotou didn't know what was strange about it at all.

He looked at Eishin in the passenger seat. He had his arms crossed and was going 'hm, hm' like he understood, lying back on the seat.

Looked like Gotou was the only one who didn't understand. It was really irritating.

'Just explain already.'

'First, if you think about it calmly, it would be impossible to think of a child being their mother's reincarnation, as the mother is the one who gave birth to them,' said Yakumo, putting his hands together as he did so.

Gotou understood that too.

'And?'

'Next, Hatsune-chan still called herself by the name of her mother, Minami, despite that.'

'yeah.'

'Hatsune-chan's mother, Minami, is probably the person who became missing ten years ago that Ishii-san is investigating.'

'I see,' replied Gotou in understanding.

'After putting these two truths together, there is only one possibility.'

Yakumo was looking straight forward.

That hard expression was sometimes frightening to the point that it gave Gotou a chill.

'What?'

'Do you really not understand?'

It was Eishin who responded.

If he was going to interrupt with boring comments, Gotou would prefer that Eishin slept.

'I'm asking because I don't understand.'

Gotou hit the wheel.

'It's simple. Somebody told Hatsune-chan this. That she was Minami's reincarnation.'

'Wha...'

Gotou was so surprised that he couldn't say anything else.

'Somebody said that over and over again to Hatsune-chan. You are your mother's reincarnation – Over many months and years, Hatsune-chan was brainwashed and grew to believe she really was her mother's reincarnation...'

Yakumo's words were as flat as if he were reading a sutra.

However, the weight of each word thrust painfully into Gotou's chest.

If what Yakumo said was true, Gotou couldn't forgive it. It was the same as robbing Hatsune of her identity.

'I see... That's why you said she was herself.'

Gotou finally understood what Yakumo had been saying.

Yakumo nodded with a grim expression on his face.

No matter what happened, you couldn't be anything but yourself. No matter what you were told otherwise, that fact didn't change.

However, there was still something that Gotou didn't understand.

'What did somebody do that for...'

'That answer will come soon.'

Yakumo gave a vague reply and then leant back on the seat, looking up at the ceiling.

It looked like his battery had run out.

Though Gotou hadn't been able to get a response out of Yakumo, Gotou had a vague idea about the answer to who it was.

– Over many months and years.

Yakumo had said that.

Only somebody who was always close to Hatsune would be able to do that –

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13

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After leaving Hata's hospital, Ishii went with Haruka to a family restaurant.

When they went inside Youko was already waiting there at a window seat.

'I'm sorry for the wait.'

Ishii and Haruka sat opposite Youko.

'You're the one from last night...'

Youko looked at Haruka with suspicious eyes. It was an expected response. There was no point making excuses now.

Ishii explained how things were to Youko.

'I understand how you feel, but what I'm going to say now is confidential information regarding the invitation.'

That was what Youko said immediately after Ishii finished his explanation.

He'd thought that she'd understand, but he had been naive. Come to think of it, it was natural. It had become natural for Yakumo and Haruka to be a part of investigations, but they were civilians. Furthermore, Haruka was in a strange position, as a friend of the suspect.

It would be more of a problem for her to be a part of the investigation.

'I'm sorry for asking something unreasonable. I'll wait outside.'

Haruka seemed to accept the situation before Ishii did and she got up from her seat.

'I'm sorry. There are circumstances. To be honest, it's enough of a problem talking with Ishii-san.'

It sounded like Youko was being considerate of Haruka.

To Ishii, Youko's attitude was unexpected.

– It is unnecessary for you to help with the investigation.

Ishii recalled what Youko had said when they first met.

It was like she was a different person. However, Ishii thought that gap in character was pleasant.

'Please wait in the car.'

Ishii handed the car key to Haruka.

'Yes.'

Haruka didn't look depressed. She responded with her usual smile and left the family restaurant.

Ishii confirmed that Haruka had got into the car through the window and then turned his eyes to Youko.

Youko was looking out the window as well.

She looked entranced, like a girl in love.

'Excuse me...'

When Ishii spoke, Youko looked surprised.

'Ah, sorry. She looks like...'

'Looks like whom?'

'A friend.'

'Ah...'

Ishii gave a vague response.

He couldn't say anything since he had never seen that friend.

'Let's talk,' said Youko after letting out a short breath.

'Ah, yes.'

'First, I want you to look at this. I looked into the case from ten years ago when Minami-san went missing.'

Youko took files out of her bag.

It was a rather impressive amount. It was as thick as a dictionary. Had she investigated that much in half a day – while Ishii took the files in his hand, he was astonished by Youko's work.

'This is amazing.'

'I've put labels on the important points.'

Just as Youko said, there were coloured labels sticking out all over the files.

'First, there are a few testimonies from the investigation of the disappearance that caught my interest.'

Youko started explaining in a flat tone.

'The last to see her was Seidou-san, but the timing of that testimony is a bit strange.'

'Strange?'

'Yes. The investigation into the disappearance had started already. After a week, he went himself to the police to give testimony.'

'That is strange.'

Ishii agreed with Youko's opinion.

It would make sense if he'd recalled after being asked by the police, but this was different.

He had suddenly said that he'd seen a person somewhere a week after.

'There is another strange testimony,' continued Youko.

'What is it?'

'The classmate that testified that Minami-san had been depressed was Matsumoto Hiroshi.'

'As I thought,' murmured Ishii.

He hadn't had proof, but he had thought that was the case.

'There are other odd points.'

After saying that ,Youko turned the files towards herself and started searching for something.

Finally, she took a copy of a class attendance sheet.

'How did you get...'

'Look here.'

Youko ignored Ishii's surprise and pointed at a specific place on the sheet.

It was Matsumoto Hiroshi's column.

From mid-February, there were many incidents where he was absent, late, or left early.

However, it wasn't that unnatural.

When students got to February of their third year at high school, most of them had obtained their placements. It wasn't strange for them to want to spend the rest of their high school lives in leisure.

'Look here.'

It seemed Youko had sensed Ishii's thoughts, as she pointed at a different column. The name of Seidou's son, Todayama Takahiro, was listed there.

There were also many absences in his column starting from mid-February.

Furthermore, they were always on the same day as Matsumoto Hiroshi. However, that wasn't too odd either.

'Might they not have been hanging out together?'

'They might have been, but I think there was something else.'

'What do you mean by something?'

'What I think is...'

Interrupting the conversation, Ishii's mobile rang.

'You can answer.'

'Ah, OK.'

With Youko's permission, Ishii answered the phone.

'Hello...'

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14

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Gotou got off the BMW ahead of the path to the lake.

He was about to head to the destination, but there was something he had to do before then. While being hit by the rain, Gotou opened the trunk.

Fortunately, there was a toolbox there.

'What do you plan on doing?' said Yakumo, sounding displeased as he stood in the rain.

'I'm going to take off the handcuffs.'

Gotou took pliers out of the toolbox.

Though it wasn't well known, the role of handcuffs wasn't just to keep the hands in check. By connecting the hands together closely, people couldn't keep their balance and wouldn't be able to run.

It was fine while moving in the car, but when thinking about what they'd had to do next – it'd be a problem if he left the handcuffs on Yakumo.

'Are you an idiot, Gotou-san? You can't take these off.'

Yakumo looked obviously disgruntled.

'It's just as Yakumo said. If you have the time for that, just head to the lake already,' said Eishin after getting off the BMW.

– Amateurs.

Gotou called them names in his heart.

'You guys didn't study at police school, did you?'

'Of course not. We aren't police officers,' said Yakumo with a shrug.

'The handcuffs police officers use aren't all the same type.'

'What differs?' interrupted Eishin.

'Strength and weight.'

As Gotou said that, he walked up to Yakumo, pulled him by the handcuffs and placed them on the car's bonnet.

'What do you mean?'

'In the past, police officers only used steel handcuffs, but then the handcuffs are heavy.'

'And?' urged Eishin, sounding interested.

'In particular, police officers have their police baton and wireless – it's pretty heavy.'

On top of that, with winter coats and raincoats, it was like wearing armour. Then they wouldn't be able to move quickly when they needed to.

Gotou put the pliers on the chains linking Yakumo's cuffs together and pressed down hard.

Yakumo seemed to have understood the situation, as he kept quiet.

'Recently, the police have been focussing on mobility, so handcuffs aren't strong – they're made of a light aluminium alloy.'

If it was for a heinous crime or arrest, police officers would carry steel cuffs, but normally, they just carried the aluminium alloy ones.

'Oh!'

'And police officers don't usually use handcuffs except in emergency arrests.'

'I see.'

Eishin clapped his hands together in understanding.

'In short, we'll be able to do something with these tools.'

'If you're taking them off, please hurry up and take them off,' said Yakumo with a yawn.

– He really is a hateful brat.

'There!'

Gotou used his body weight to press down.

However, he slipped in the rain – it wasn't going well.

'Help out some.'

'All right.'

Unusual for Eishin, he responded honestly.

Gotou had Eishin hold the chains. Gotou used both hands with force to press the pliers together.

After quite some effort, they managed to snap the chains.

'Though the cuffs are still on,' said Yakumo, sounding dissatisfied as he raised both hands.

The chains were cut and his hands were free, but the cuffs were still around his wrists.

'You can move – stop complaining,' said Gotou as he started walking the path towards the lake.

'Gotou-san.'

Yakumo called out to him.

'What?'

'Please bring the toolbox too.'

'Why?'

'It's obviously because it's necessary,' said Yakumo, running his hand through his hair.

– Damn, using me like a gopher.

Haruka leant back in the passenger seat and watched the endless rain.

Inside the car, it was warm and humid – she was sweaty even though she wasn't going anywhere.

The events so far spun through her head like a revolving lantern.

Though she felt like they were closer to the truth, she couldn't picture it, like it was an illusion.

'I wonder how Yakumo-kun is...' murmured Haruka. Then, her mobile rang.

It was a call from Makoto.

'Hello.'

<Ah, Haruka-chan. Where are you right now?>

Makoto's voice sounded a bit agitated.

'I'm waiting in Ishii-san's car.'

<I see. I called Ishii-san's phone earlier but he was in the middle of a call...>

Haruka looked at the window seat of the family restaurant where Ishii was.

Past the curtain of rain, she could see Ishii on the phone. He looked dumbfounded, like he had been surprised by something.

'He is on the phone.'

<Right. Actually, I wanted to ask something... is it OK?>

'Would I be helpful?' said Haruka, anxious.

<Of course.>

Makoto responded in a bright voice.

'What is it?'

<We might have made an unbelievable misassumption.>

Makoto's tone was hinting at something.

It sounded to Haruka like Makoto had solved the whole mystery. She naturally gripped the phone more tightly.

'Misassumption?'

<Yes. We were looking for Minami-san's lover and arrived at Naitou Yousuke.>

'Yes,' replied Haruka, recalling yesterday night's events.

He might know something as her lover. That was their thought when they acted. However, the worst result came about –

<I thought it was strange.>

'What was?'

<That Naitou Yousuke was Minami-san's lover. I thought that he didn't match...>

Haruka agreed with Makoto's opinion.

She wouldn't know how to explain it exactly, but the impression she had of him hadn't matched somehow. But –

'There are couples that work unexpectedly well even if they don't seem to suit each other though.'

<Right. At first, I thought it was just my mistake, but when I looked through Minami-san's things again – the ones we got from Tamae-san – that changed.>

'Did you find something?'

<Yes. There was a photo with Minami-san and Naitou Yousuke.>

'Is that so?'

Haruka couldn't remember seeing it.

<In the photo, Naitou Yousuke tried to put an arm around Minami-san, but she looked really unhappy about it. Like a physical rejection.'

Haruka hadn't seen the photo, so she couldn't say anything.

'Maybe it was from before they started dating.'

<I thought that at first too. Then I found something when I investigated once more.>

Haruka could tell Makoto was agitated on the other side of the phone.

'...What did you find?'

<I know who Minami-san's lover is. Y.N.-san.>

'Really?'

<Yes. My thoughts changed. A lot of things suddenly connected.>

– I want to know right now.

That feeling grew rapidly within Haruka.

'Please tell me.'

<That's...>

Haruka couldn't hear what Makoto said last.

It was because somebody suddenly opened the door on the driver's side came in.

It was somebody Haruka knew.

'You're...'

Haruka started to speak, but then a stun gun was held to her neck.

'It's been a while.'

With a smile that showed her white teeth – it was Nanase Miyuki.

The left half of her face was covered in a keloid, and from her left wrist onward, there was a stump. When Haruka saw Miyuki's glinting eyes, she went pale at once.

Sixteen years ago, this woman brutally killed her own family and had then manipulated many cases up until now with Yakumo's father, the man with two red eyes.

She was also the ringleader of the case that took Isshin's life.

Haruka could hear Makoto saying <Hello...> from the phone.

'Let's talk slowly later. Please sleep until then.'

Without waiting for Haruka's answer, Miyuki turned on the stun gun.

Haruka felt pain – like a needle had stabbed her – and fell unconscious.

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16

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The falling rain created countless ripples on the lake's surface.

'It's cold,' Gotou said without thinking.

Though it was quite warm, being hit by so much rain made his body colder.

'Please complain afterwards.'

Yakumo, who was walking behind Gotou, pushed Gotou's back.

Gotou lost his balance and was about to fall forward, but he managed to avoid it.

'What are you doing?'

'It's because you were dawdling,' said Yakumo, brushing aside the hair that stuck to his forehead after being drenched by the rain.

Eishin was laughing with shaking shoulders.

– I shouldn't have taken off those handcuffs.

With regret, Gotou walked along the lake towards the crape myrtle tree ahead.

It was where Yakumo had been bitten by a pit viper.

Perhaps because he was concerned about that, Yakumo was stepping carefully as he walked.

'This place OK?'

'Yes.'

After Yakumo answered Gotou's question, he started looking around.

At the roots of the crape myrtle tree, there was a rectangular rock – like a gravestone. It was the rock Yakumo had been resting against after being bitten by the pit viper.

'This, eh...' said Yakumo, looking at the rock.

'What's this rock?'

'Gotou-san. Please move this rock.'

That was Yakumo's response to Gotou's question.

Using a person like a slave. Yakumo had been a hundred times cuter when he was on the verge of death.

Though Gotou felt dissatisfied, he put his hands on the rock. It was quite heavy. He decided it would be impossible to lift it up and put his body weight against it to push it over, but it wouldn't move.

Eishin brought over a wooden stick and put it underneath the rock as a lever, lifting it up slightly. Gotou took that chance to push the rock with all his might.

There was a thump as the rock fell.

'Next, please dig here.'

Yakumo pointed at the revealed ground.

'Am I the Hanasaka Jiisan?' complained Gotou, but Yakumo acted like he didn't hear.

'Come on.'

Eishin gave the toolbox he had brought to Gotou.

– Looks like Eishin doesn't plan on helping any more.

Though Gotou wasn't happy about it, he took a hammer out of the toolbox and started using the side for pulling nails out to dig a hole in the ground.

– At some point, I became Yakumo's manservant.

Though he thought it, he didn't say it aloud. Since he couldn't use his head, he had to do physical work like this or he'd just be in the way.

Gotou focussed all his energy on digging, but when he had dug about fifty centimetres, he hit something.

He didn't know what was buried, but it looked like they'd reached their goal.

Gotou put the hammer aside and started scooping the dirt out with his hands.

Finally, he found something like a board.

He brushed away more dirt.

Something like a metal box appeared.

'Is this it?'

'Probably...'

Yakumo gave a short reply.

Gotou took the box out of the dirt.

When he brushed the dirt off of it, he could see it was a small portable safe. It was the type that had a password with a dial.

'Do you know the password?' asked Gotou.

'I don't. That's why I brought tools.'

Yakumo's response was as expected.

'Yeah, yeah.'

As Gotou replied, he took a flathead screwdriver out of the toolbox.

If it were a large heat-resistant safe, it'd be impossible for an amateur to open it with tools. However, they'd manage somehow for a portable one.

'Hold it down.'

'Got it.'

Eishin responded to Gotou's instructions and held the safe down.

– Things like this keep happening today.

Gotou put the screwdriver in the gap underneath the cover and hit the back of the screwdriver with the hammer as hard as he could.

There was a crack as the cover warped.

Gotou put the screwdriver deeper into the wider gap and hit the screwdriver with the hammer.

He repeated his.

After about ten minutes, the cover of the safe finally opened.

What came out was a wallet, necklace and mobile – a collection of small items.

'What's this?'

Yakumo didn't answer Gotou's question.

He just looked at the lake.

It was like somebody was at the end of his gaze.

Yakumo's red eye could probably see something. A spirit of the dead – ?

'Something there?'

'Yes.'

Yakumo responded immediately.

His eyes seemed sad.

A drop of water fell from Yakumo's chin.

'They want something?'

'She is full of hatred. She couldn't throw that hatred away even after her death.'

'Why does she hate so much?'

'She isn't at fault. It is natural for her to be full of hatred.'

'Can't it work out somehow?'

'I don't know how to heal that amount of hatred.'

As Yakumo said that, his profile looked both angry and sad.

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17

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<It's terrible!>

Through the phone, Ishii heard Miyagawa's agitated voice.

Things had been terrible throughout this case. It made Ishii think that nothing worse could happen.

'What happened?' asked Ishii, confused.

<This morning, there was a report from the Nishitama precinct. That Saitou Yakumo was hiding in Seidou's temple.>

'Eh?'

Ishii was surprised in more than one meaning of the word.

Hiding in the temple of the victim, Seidou –

There was that saying – can't see the forest for the trees. The Nishitama precinct had focussed on the rails and had searched on the mountains as well.

However, Yakumo had hid right in the middle of the wide search net.

Youko looked at Ishii with a dubious expression.

'So Yakumo-shi...'

Ishii hunched over, hiding from Youko's gaze as he spoke.

<An officer chased him and performed an emergency arrest.>

'That's...'

Yakumo had been caught.

Though Ishii was shocked, he had another question.

'Excuse me... What happened to Detective Gotou?'

Gotou should have been with Yakumo. If Yakumo was arrested, then Gotou –

<There's the problem. When the officer caught up to Yakumo, Gotou hadn't been at the scene.>

'That's great.'

<No it isn't!>

Miyagawa let out a yell that sounded like it had erupted from the bottom of his stomach.

'Eek.'

Ishii let out a voice close to a shriek.

<That idiot ran his car into the police car and escaped with Saitou Yakumo!>

It looked like Gotou and Yakumo had both been able to escape.

– Thank goodness.

Though Ishii thought it, he didn't say it aloud. That would incur Miyagawa's wrath.

<I can't cover for him any longer.>

It sounded like Miyagawa might cry at any moment.

'Could it be that Detective Gotou...'

<Reinstatement is hopeless. He's getting a disciplinary dismissal. And you and me are both getting some sort of punishment.>

For a moment, Ishii's vision went dark.

He didn't care about himself, but he couldn't accept the fact that Gotou would receive a disciplinary dismissal.

<Got this? Whether Yakumo is the culprit or not isn't the problem any more. If anything else happens, we won't be able to fix this.>

'Yes sir...'

<Forget about me. Even if I continued to work, it'd just be two or three years. But it's different for you.>

Miyagawa's voice was shaking slightly.

Even at a time like this, this person was worried about Ishii. When Ishii thought about that, his heart wavered.

<Come back right now.>

'I can't do that!'

Ishii gave a firm refusal.

He understood Miyagawa's feelings so much that it hurt, but the case wasn't over yet.

Like Ishii could go back in this situation. Though he was shaken, his determination hadn't changed.

He couldn't do anything about Gotou's not being allowed to return to the police, but he had to at least make a place that Gotou could safely return to.

<Do you understand what you're saying?>

'I do. I won't return until I reveal the truth of the case!'

Ishii interrupted Miyagawa and hung up without waiting for an answer.

'What happened?'

Youko looked troubled as she spoke.

It would probably be better to tell her the situation. Ishii opened his mouth, but then his mobile rang again.

He thought that maybe it was Miyagawa calling again, but he was wrong. The number on the display was Makoto's.

'Hello, Ishii speaking.'

<Ishii-san, where's Haruka-chan?>

Makoto was clearly upset.

'What happened to Haruka-chan?'

<Is she there?>

'Er... She should be waiting outside...'

Ishii looked out the window.

'Ah!'

The car that should have been there wasn't there. Even though it had just been there earlier – Ishii's heart beat furiously.

His hands were shaking. A cold sweat burst out on his forehead.

<Just earlier, I was talking with Haruka-chan on the phone. Then the call suddenly wouldn't connect...>

While listening to Makoto, Ishii walked unsteadily towards the exit.

His vision was unstable.

He opened the door and went outside. No matter how he looked, he couldn't find the car.

The rain continued hitting the ground loudly.

– If you're caught by the police, somebody important to you will die.

The phrase Ishii had heard from Yakumo came up in his head.

– I want you to protect her.

Ishii had made a promise with Yakumo.

– But then why did I leave Haruka alone?

'Aaagh!'

Hit by a wave of regret, Ishii fell to the ground on his knees.

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18

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When Gotou returned to the car, he turned on the engine and air conditioning.

His body was soaked. If he didn't dry off at least a bit, he would catch a cold.

In the passenger seat, Eishin was drying himself off with a towel that had been in the glove box.

In the back seat, Yakumo was focussed on checking the contents of the portable safe they had dug up, like he had completely forgotten that he was drenched.

'Did you find something?' asked Gotou as he turned around.

'Yes. It is just as I expected.'

Yakumo continued searching.

'Explain properly.'

'These items belong to Minami-san, who disappeared ten years ago.'

Yakumo held out a student ID in a leather case.

Gotou took it and looked at the photo of a girl who was looking straight forward.

It looked rather old and the colour was faded, but he could still tell that Minami was quite a

beauty.

'After Minami-san was killed, her body was sunk into the lake. Her belongings were put in this safe and buried there.'

'Yakumo. The ghost you saw earlier...'

'It was Minami-san,' said Yakumo, looking up suddenly.

– I see.

The events that had been blurry in Gotou's head came together. However, a new question came up.

'How'd you know the belongings were buried under that tree?'

'It was written in Seidou's diary... right?'

Eishin spoke before Yakumo did.

'So you did know.'

Yakumo looked at Eishin coldly.

Eishin leant back on his seat, as if to run away from that gaze, and sighed.

'I didn't know for certain, but I had felt it faintly.'

Eishin's prise was surprisingly quiet.

Yakumo and Eishin knew everything, but Gotou really didn't understand.

'Don't just continue talking. Explain it so I can understand.'

'What did you start not understanding?'

Yakumo sounded disappointed.

– Where? That's obvious.

'From the beginning.'

'You really are an idiot.'

Yakumo looked blatantly displeased by Gotou's reply as he ran a hand through his hair. It made water fly everywhere.

Like a dog coming out of a bath.

'Stop talking so much...'

Interrupting Gotou's words, Eishin's mobile rang.

'It's a number I don't know,' muttered Eishin, but he answered the phone.

After a simple conversation with the person on the other side of the phone, he handed the mobile to Gotou.

'It's probably for you.'

'What do you mean, probably?'

'He's frantic – I can't understand what he's saying.'

Eishin was frowning.

– That idiot.

Gotou was angry as he took the phone from Eishin.

'Hello.'

<Detective Gotouuuuu!>

Ishii's panicked voice came through.

Ishii was always cowering, but this level of panic wasn't natural.

'What's wrong?'

<I sincerely apologise. Because of my mistake, something awful happened...>

It sounded like Ishii was already crying.

Even if he suddenly apologised, Gotou didn't know what it was for.

'What happened? Calm down and talk.'

<Haruka-chan...>

Ishii started sobbing.

A chill ran down Gotou's spine. The message left by Nanase Miyuki ran through his mind. Could it be –

Yakumo seemed to have sensed something, as he was biting his lip as he held his breath.

No, it wasn't certain that something had happened to Haruka yet. Gotou calmed his nerves.

'What happened to her?'

<She disappeared. I took my eyes off of her for a moment...>

Ishii spoke in tears.

– Disappeared?

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19

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Ishii wanted somebody to destroy him.

Yell at him, beat him, tear him apart. He couldn't exist here right now.

The person important to him had been taken away because of his own carelessness.

If something happened to Haruka, he would be crushed by his regret.

<I'm handing the phone over to Yakumo.>

Gotou spoke on the other side of the phone.

Ishii's mind went blank. He didn't know what to say to explain things to Yakumo.

– I want you to protect her.

Yakumo had made that request, and Ishii had accepted it. But he hadn't been able to protect her.

<Ishii-san, it's Yakumo.>

'I... I'm sorry. Because of me... Even though I promised... I...'

Tears fell from Ishii's eyes.

He couldn't breathe properly.

– It hurts.

<Ishii-san, could you cry afterwards?>

That one sentence from Yakumo left a strong impact on Ishii's heart.

'I...'

<I do not plan on blaming you, Ishii-san. There's no time for that. Something must be done for her.>

Yakumo spoke curtly, but his words were filled with a strong will that encouraged Ishii, who had been about to break.

'Y-yes.'

– That's right. This isn't the time to cry.

He could blame himself for his error later. The most important thing right now was to get Haruka back safely. But –

'How can we find Haruka-chan?'

<It would probably be difficult to find her even if you start searching now. If Nanase Miyuki is the one who abducted her, murder is her goal.>

Yakumo said that quietly.

However, the meaning of those words were too heavy for one person to carry.

It was like he was saying it was hopeless.

'That's...'

Ishii had just regained his spirit, but his feelings couldn't bear the weight and started to sink again.

<Please don't be so pessimistic.>

'But...'

<Ishii-san. You know her mobile phone address, yes?>

He had it recorded in his contacts list.

However, Ishii didn't understand why Yakumo had suddenly brought that up.

'Er... Do you mean Haruka-chan's?'

<You know it, correct?>

Yakumo asked him that again.

'Yes.'

<Then please send what I am about to say in a message.>

'What are you trying to do?' asked Ishii, unable to hold back.

He didn't think sending a message would tell them where Haruka was.

<If it is impossible to search for her, I can just call her out.>

Yakumo spoke in a clear tone.

– Call?

'Do you mean, to send a message and call out Nanase Miyuki?>

<Correct.>

Ishii felt like he had been hit by lightning.

Ishii hadn't thought of that. It might really be possible to save Haruka. It made him feel that way.

<Could you note this down?>

'Yes.'

Ishii took out his memo pad immediately and wrote down what Yakumo said.

<Ishii-san.>

After conveying his message, Yakumo spoke formally.

'Yes.'

<Please don't blame yourself no matter what happens.>

'But...'

No matter what Yakumo said, Ishii couldn't stop blaming himself.

If he had watched Haruka properly, this wouldn't have happened. That was an unchangeable truth.

<I have regrets myself.>

'Eh?'

<If she hadn't met me, this wouldn't have happened to her...>

Yakumo's words carved deep into Ishii's chest.

He hadn't thought that Yakumo would think that way. But if regret piled up, that was probably where it would end.

'That's...'

<But I don't want to think that. That's why...>

'Yes.'

<Then...>

'Excuse me.'

Ishii called out to Yakumo as he was about to hang up.

<What is it?>

'I will go too.'

<You'll come even if I tell you not to, won't you.>

'Yes.'

<I understand. Then I will see you later.>

The call ended.

Ishii gripped the mobile tightly.

He didn't know how things would end. All he could do now was believe and act. That was the only and best method they had.

– I really can't win against Yakumo.

That feeling suddenly came to Ishii. There was a strong bond between Yakumo and Haruka that nobody could contend with.

'Ishii-san.'

Ishii lifted his head in surprise when somebody called out to him.

It was Youko.

'You're going somewhere, right? Shall I drive you?' said Youko, spinning her car keys.

To Ishii, she looked like a goddess come to his rescue.

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'Do you think Nanase Miyuki would really come just like that!?' said Gotou, his anger erupting out of him.

Miyuki's goal was to kill Haruka. Yakumo had said that himself. Then there was no way she'd just come at his invitation.

She'd kill Haruka and end things quickly.

No, she might already have killed her –

'She'll come,' said Yakumo with a blank expression.

His eyes even looked full of confidence.

'How can you be sure?'

'You know this as well, don't you, Gotou-san? She is an unbelievable sadist.'

Yakumo's gaze was forceful.

When those eyes looked at Gotou, it made him remember the incidents she had caused in the past.

All of them were appropriately sadistic. With Isshin, she had purposely called out Gotou and Ishii to tell them she was going to kill him.

Rather than the act of murder, she took pleasure in seeing how people suffered from it.

'But you're being chased. You can't just run around town.'

'That's why I called her out to the place where the case started – the limestone cavern.'

– I see.

At the limestone cavern, if they just got past the two uniformed guards at the entrance, it could be called a safe place where people wouldn't see them.

If they were lucky, the officers might have left because of the typhoon.

In that meaning, it was likely that she might agree to the invitation.

She'd take Haruka's life in front of Yakumo.

For a sadist like Miyuki, nothing could be a better show. But –

'She wouldn't have already killed her, right?'

After saying that, Gotou immediately regretted it, but it was too late.

Yakumo gave Gotou an amazing glare.

Under that pressure, Gotou couldn't breathe.

Gotou knew this. Even though Yakumo was acting calm, he was the one who was the most distressed.

While feeling like his chest was being wrenched apart, he was wagering on the few methods to save Haruka. By believing in them, he was managing to keep his calm.

Though it was a dangerous tightrope, it was his only path.

If Yakumo lost Haruka after Isshin, he would probably fall backwards into a deep darkness, like the man with two red eyes.

– I won't let that happen.

Isshin had entrusted them to Gotou. Nao and Yakumo both – that was why he had thrown away the bothersome ties of obligation that were the identity of a police officer and was here now.

'My bad.'

Gotou gave an honest apology.

'It's fine,' said Yakumo.

Gotou didn't understand what was 'fine' about it.

'What do you mean?'

'Nanase Miyuki wouldn't have killed her yet. She would only do it after she has made her suffer sufficiently.'

Yakumo bit down on his lip.

His veins stuck out from his tight fists.

– Don't burden yourself with all the pain.

Gotou murmured that in his heart.

As if he'd heard Gotou's voice, Yakumo looked up with a bitter smile.

'We'll get Haruka-chan back no matter what.'

'Of course. That was always my plan.'

Yakumo's expression relaxed just slightly. That was the end of the conversation. But the problem was still ahead.

'Even if Nanase Miyuki agrees to the invitation, do you think she'll just show up?'

'She'll probably set some sort of trap,' Yakumo said, as if it were a matter of fact.

'What do you plan to do?'

'Trying to imagine what sort of trap she'll set is a waste of time.'

That was true. Trying to think something up in this short time would just give them a plan full of holes.

This time, there were too many unknown variables. But –

'Is that really fine?'

'What a stupid question,' replied Yakumo, looking straight forward.

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Haruka woke up in the car's backseat.

Her hands were bound behind her with packing tape. They seemed to be wrapped quite tightly – she couldn't move even when she tried with all her strength.

'You've woken up then.'

She heard a voice.

Haruka lifted her head and saw Nanase Miyuki's face through the rear-view mirror as she drove.

She had a smile on her face that was so cold that it made Haruka shiver.

'Why...'

'You want to ask me why I'm doing this, right?' interrupted Miyuki.

Her eyes were a very deep dark.

'You should know the answer yourself.'

Miyuki's words doubled Haruka's terror.

Haruka understood somewhere in her heart as well. Nanase Miyuki wasn't the sort of person who would abduct somebody else for a ransom. Her goal was to murder –

No, that wasn't it – Miyuki was trying to hurt Yakumo by killing Haruka.

'Yakumo lost the game.'

Miyuki's shoulders shook as she giggled.

'Game?'

'Yes. I warned him. I told him that if he was caught by the police, somebody important to him would die...'

When Haruka heard Miyuki's words, everything came together.

Though she hadn't heard anything about it, it was because of that situation that Yakumo ran off and told Haruka to move with Ishii and Makoto.

– Sorry.

Haruka looked down.

In the end, she had ended up being in the way, like always.

Then, Haruka realised something.

'Yakumo-kun...'

'Was caught by the police. Somebody spotted him hiding at the temple.'

Miyuki smirked triumphantly.

'That's...'

'Though Gotou got in the way and they escaped again.'

Haruka sighed in relief.

Yakumo wasn't alone right now. He had Gotou, a strong ally. Anyway, she was just happy that he was safe.

'But he did get caught, so the game's over. You're going to die.'

Miyuki's eyes narrowed.

She looked like she was in a trance, as if she were imagining in her head how she would kill Haruka.

– I'm going to be killed.

It didn't seem real. Her heart couldn't accept it.

A mobile rang to signal a message. Haruka noticed that it was her own.

Miyuki looked at the mobile phone in the passenger seat.

'It's a last message to you.'

Miyuki smiled like she was enjoying this. While waiting at the traffic light, she picked up the mobile and read the text.

After reading it, Miyuki laughed aloud with shaking shoulders.

– What's written there? I want to know.

As if to respond to Haruka's wish, Miyuki started reading the message aloud.

'I will be waiting in two hours at the limestone cavern. Let us bring this to a conclusion at the place everything started. From Yakumo... That's what it says.'

'Conclusion...'

That word circled Haruka's head.

Since it was a message, it was difficult to see the true meaning there, but to Haruka, it sounded like Yakumo was prepared for his own death.

'Isn't he an idiot? Does he think I'd agree to an invitation like this? What a guy.'

Miyuki smiled.

It was a twisted smile that made Haruka's core shake in fear –

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The rain was growing stronger –

Gotou huffed as he took the path to the limestone cavern.

After getting out into the open, he spotted the entrance to the limestone cave.

He hid behind the trees and looked around.

Fortunately, his guess had been right. There were no officers at the cavern's entrance – just a yellow tape that forbid trespassing.

There could be a landslide or flood. He wanted to finish this quickly.

'It's OK!'

Gotou turned around and said that to Yakumo, who was hiding in the thicket.

There was rustling as Yakumo and Eishin showed up.

– Putting Yakumo aside, does Eishin really need to hide too?

Though Gotou was dissatisfied, he walked along the wet ground to the limestone cavern.

The yellow tape made a diagonal cross across the entrance.

It looked like nobody had come yet.

It'd have been troublesome if Miyuki got here first. Gotou couldn't go inside in his relief.

He ripped the tape off of the entrance.

'Shall we go then?'

Yakumo stepped into the dim limestone cave.

'You're unexpectedly hasty.'

While complaining, Eishin followed Yakumo with a torch. Gotou ended up being at the rear.

Just when he'd heard something clattering, a rock the size of a fist fell on Gotou's feet.

Water dripped from the ceiling.

'Oi – isn't this bad?'

Gotou spoke without thinking.

'A limestone cavern is a space where limestone has been corroded by rain and underground water. They become more fragile as they grow in size and in the end, they collapse. It grows with time

and dies. In the same way that people do.'

Eishin stopped and pointed his torch at the ceiling as he said that.

Points on the ceiling were wet with water.

'Let's pray that it doesn't collapse now.'

Gotou started walking again.

'Yakumo. Why did you call Nanase Miyuki here?'

Gotou thought that Yakumo had called Miyuki to this limestone cavern for a reason besides the lack of prying eyes.

'To speed things up,' Yakumo replied curtly.

'Eh?'

'Unfortunately, I am still a fugitive. Even if I get her back, that fact won't change.'

'Well, that's true.'

'In order to solve the mystery, it is necessary to check the scene of the crime once more. I called her out here so I could do that at the same time.'

'So to speed things up.'

Gotou understood now.

Yakumo's words meant that no matter what result was waiting for them, the end of the case was near. After coming this far, Gotou'd see it to the end.

Gotou walked forward with refreshed determination.

Passing through the curving path, they went to the back of the limestone cavern and finally reached the doors to the cavern which was the scene of the crime.

There was yellow tape here as well, as if to seal the doors shut.

Yakumo took the tape off, opened the door and stepped inside.

The light of the torch wasn't enough.

'I can't see anything.'

As if to interrupt Gotou's words, the sound of an engine echoed through the limestone cavern.

– What's that?

Gotou hurriedly looked around.

Suddenly, the room became bright.

Because his eyes weren't accustomed to the light, his vision went white and he had to look away.

'It's a generator,' said Yakumo.

After blinking a number of times, Gotou was able to see Yakumo standing by the doors.

At his feet, there was a small generator. The black cord that came from it went to the lights in the four corners of the room.

Then they wouldn't need the torch.

'So what are you going to investigate?'

Without replying to Gotou's question, Yakumo knelt at the location Seidou had collapsed and stared at the white outline in the shape of a human being.

The fresh bloodstains were a dark red.

Then, Yakumo went to the back of the room.

There were rusted chains there.

'So that really was the case...' said Yakumo as he ran a finger along the floorboards.

Gotou didn't know what was the case.

'Hey, Yakumo.'

As usual, Yakumo didn't answer Gotou. He just stared at the back wall of the room.

That was the only place where the rock showed through.

As if to check to the temperature, Yakumo placed his palm on the limestone and closed his eyes.

It was like he was praying –

'Unkai...'

Yakumo said just that.

'What's that?'

'Eishin-san, there is something I would like to ask.'

Yakumo ignored Gotou's question and turned towards Eishin.

It looked like Eishin already knew what he was going to ask, as he looked back at Yakumo with a stiff expression.

'How long as this room been here?'

'It's probably already been sixty years...' said Eishin while touching the pillar in the middle of the room.

'Uncle wasn't the only one who trained at that temple, correct?' said Yakumo.

– Why is he asking something so obvious?

Gotou didn't understand the point of Yakumo's question. That temple had a long history. It must have had countless monks training there.

However, it looked like Eishin did understand, as he nodded silently.

'My grandfather is included in that number, yes?'

'W-what did you say?'

Gotou spoke automatically, but then he realised it wasn't something to make a fuss about.

Though he hadn't met him, it was natural for Yakumo to have a grandfather. And temples often accepted people through a hereditary system. It wouldn't be strange for his grandfather to be a monk.

'I understand a number of things now.'

Yakumo's narrowed eyes looked side.

'What do you understand?' asked Gotou.

Yakumo ignored him again and walked towards Eishin.

'Why didn't you tell me from the beginning?'

Though Yakumo spoke quietly, his tone was full of force.

'It's not something to let other people here. Your own fate is something you should confirm with your own eyes and ears,' replied Eishin with a blank expression.

Their gazes met, and a suffocating silence continued –

Interrupting that silence, the doors to the room opened.

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With the light of the torch, Ishii advanced alone into the limestone cavern.

Youko was waiting at the cavern entrance.

Nanase Miyuki was coming. If anything happened, Ishii would call Youko for assistance immediately.

– But this place really is creepy.

Ishii's fear increased as he advanced, and he found it hard to breathe.

The echo from the rocks made his footsteps sound doubled.

Just as he had started to regret coming alone, he reached the room which was probably the scene of the crime.

With the rock face at the back and wooden walls on the other three sides, there were a set of double doors leading in.

A faint light came out of the gap between the doors.

– Gotou and Yakumo should be on the other side.

Ishii wiped the sweat on his palms on his pants and opened the door.

He spotted three people – Yakumo, Gotou, and a large-framed monk in robes.

'D-Detective Gotou!'

Ishii rushed over to Gotou.

'Don't cling to me!'

Gotou pushed Ishii aside.

Ishii lost his balance and almost fell, but he managed to hold on.

'Everyone, I am glad you're safe. Now, who might this be...'

Ishii looked at the monk he didn't recognise.

'The damn monk who was the start of this case.'

Ishii remembered after hearing Gotou's explanation.

If he recalled correctly, this was Eishin, the monk who was Isshin's teacher –

'Ah, it's nice to meet you. My name is Ishii Yuutarou.'

Ishii bowed his head.

'So who's that behind you?'

Gotou looked sharply behind Ishii's back.

'Eh?'

Ishii frantically turned around.

Youko was standing there. He sighed in relief.

'Please relax. She is a detective from the Nishitama precinct...'

Ishii was about to continue when Youko suddenly stepped forward.

'Natsume Youko of the Nishitama precinct.'

Youko showed her police ID.

Her voice had the air of one intimidating a culprit.

'Er...'

'You're Saitou Yakumo, aren't you?'

Youko interrupted Ishii again.

Yakumo looked dubious, but he finally breathed out, as if accepting it.

'Yes. So it really was you?' said Yakumo, as if he had known Youko from before.

When Youko heard those words, she didn't look particularly surprised.

'Ishii-san, I'm sorry.'

Ishii didn't know why Youko was apologising.

Youko quickly turned aside and kned Ishii in the crotch while he was still confused.

'Urgh.'

The fierce pain coming up from Ishii's lower half made him curl up and fall to the floor.

Then, Youko took a pistol from her bosom and pointed it at Yakumo.

'Saitou Yakumo. I am arresting you under suspicion of murder.'

Ishii couldn't understand what Youko was doing.

She had investigated with him. She had believed that Yakumo wasn't the murderer. Yet –

'W-why...'

Ishii looked up at Youko's face while withstanding the pain.

Her wet hair hid her face so he couldn't see her expression clearly.

'What the hell did you do that to Ishii for!'

Gotou stooped over and tried to rush at Youko.

However, Youko pointed the pistol right at Gotou and held him in check. If it were a knife, Gotou would probably have rushed on anyway, but he couldn't move in the face of a pistol.

'You don't plan on arresting me, right?'

Yakumo ran a hand through his hair.

If she doesn't plan on arresting him, then what is she going to do –

A cold sweat ran down Ishii's back as he thought frantically, but he couldn't come up with the answer.

'What do you mean?'

Gotou asked Ishii's question.

Yakumo put an index finger to his brow.

'The culprit to the series of cases this time, Natsume Youko-san, is you, isn't it.'

Yakumo's sentence pierced through Ishii's chest.

– That's impossible.

He couldn't believe it. They had worked together up until now. She had led Ishii here. For her to be

the culprit –

Though Ishii tried frantically to deny it, a theory came to his head. What if Youko got close to Ishii to find out Yakumo's movements?

– No, that can't be it.

Ishii sat up while bearing with the pain.

'That isn't true. Natsume-san isn't the culprit... You have no reason, right? Natsume-san, please stop it with the pistol. Yakumo isn't the culprit.'

Even as he pleaded, Ishii noticed that his heart was trembling.

Yakumo's reasoning had never been wrong before. Then that meant Youko really was –

'The reason why Natsume-san killed three people, starting with Seidou-san, is this.'

Yakumo took a photo out of his chest pocket.

It was completely drenched, and the distance made it impossible to see clearly. Perhaps sensing Ishii's thoughts, Yakumo pinched the photo in his fingers and flung it.

It spun in the air and fell at Ishii's feet.

'This is...'

In the photo Ishii picked up, there were two girls wearing blazer uniforms.

One was Minami, the girl who had disappeared ten years ago. And the other was –

Ishii looked up at Youko's face again.

'That's right. The girl in that photo is me.'

Youko said that coldly –

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'What did you say?'

Gotou spoke up without thinking.

The detective named Natsume was the friend of Minami, the girl who disappeared ten years ago –

Just as Gotou realised that, new questions kept coming to his head.

'In order to solve the mystery of the case, it is necessary to go back ten years in time.'

Yakumo turned his back to Youko.

It was composure that suggested he knew that Youko wouldn't pull the trigger.

'Ten years ago, Minami-san was kidnapped by the dead Matsumoto Hiroshi, Naitou Yosuke and Todayama Takahiro with the intent of assault.'

'As expected...' murmured Ishii.

Gotou had figured that much out too.

'Then... she was imprisoned here.'

Yakumo slowly walked up to the chains and ran his finger along them, as if in sympathy.

Gotou understood without him saying anything.

Minami had probably been held by those chains.

'Minami-san was a strong woman. Even while she was kept captive and bearing with the humiliation, she continued to call out: "I won't forgive you." However, that backfired on her...'

Yakumo turned towards Youko again.

Youko wasn't moving, still holding the pistol. Gotou would have flown at her if she gave him a chance, but she seemed to know that.

'Minami-san was killed by the classmates who kidnapped her...' Ishii said in a murmur.

However, Yakumo shook his head to deny it.

'No, they were not the ones who killed her. They were frightened by her words and lost the chance to let her escape.'

'So they kept her here?' said Gotou, as if the words were strangled out of him.

'Correct.'

'That's... So they were going to let her starve to death...'

Yakumo shook his head again.

'That isn't correct either. The person who killed Minami-san was Seidou-san.'

'Wha!'

Gotou shouted in his surprise.

Ishii's eyes were as round as plates and his mouth was wide open. However, Youko and Eishin were expressionless.

'Why would the monk kill her?' asked Gotou in his agitation.

Yakumo slowly walked up to Eishin.

'I said this earlier as well, but Seidou-san's son, Takahiro-san, was also a part of the members who kidnapped Minami-san.'

– So that's why.

Gotou realised what Yakumo was getting at, but that selfishness disgusted him.

'So he knew and kept quiet to hide his son's crime...'

He wanted Yakumo to deny it, but Gotou's hope was dashed.

'Though Seidou-san felt compassion for Minami-san, he couldn't indict his son. So, every night, he came to this limestone cavern and gave Minami-san food.'

Gotou wanted to cover his ears.

That wasn't compassion. It was just self-satisfaction –

It would've been different if he'd let her go, but he'd just let her live longer in captivity – who'd be satisfied with that? For her, it was probably nothing but suffering.

'Finally, Seidou-san noticed something.'

'Something?' asked Ishii.

Eishin bit down hard on his lower lip and looked down.

'Minami-san was pregnant.'

'Pregnant?' said Youko in shock.

Her eyes had been cold earlier, but now they trembled faintly.

'So you really didn't know. You were just manipulated by Nanase Miyuki. She twists the truth as she likes...'

'You're the one who's twisting the truth! Minami was tormented by them, killed by Seidou and sunk into the lake!'

Youko's voice was hysterical and tears welled up in her eyes.

– I'll be able to stop her now.

Gotou lowered his centre of gravity and tried to rush at Youko.

'Gotou-san, you can't!'

Yakumo was the one who yelled –

Youko seemed to come to her senses at that voice. She wiped her eyes and turned the pistol towards Gotou.

'Why'd you stop me?'

That could have been their last chance. Gotou glared at Yakumo, but Yakumo didn't seem to care.

'If you move now, you'll be playing into her hands,' said Yakumo with a sigh.

He probably meant Miyuki. Miyuki still hadn't come with Haruka –

'Minami... had a child...'

Youko mumbled that deliriously.

'Yes. After Minami-san gave birth, Seidou-san killed her and sank her into the lake.'

'Why did he kill her...'

Gotou looked at Yakumo again.

He had fed her to keep her alive and killed her in the end. His actions seemed inconsistent.

'He couldn't bear it any more,' replied Yakumo with sad eyes.

'His guilt?'

'It's a little different. Do you recall what happened to Seidou-san's son?'

'Yeah.'

Gotou nodded.

Eishin had told him. Seidou's son, Takahiro, had killed himself in the temple –

'To his son Takahiro, Seidou-san's act of keeping Minami-san alive was nothing short of psychological torture. When he found out that she had given birth to a daughter, he couldn't bear it...'

Yakumo's voice weighed heavily on Gotou.

Seidou had kept quiet about Minami in order to protect his son. That was also why he hadn't released Minami from her captivity.

At the same time, Seidou felt pity for Minami and kept her alive by continuing to give her food.

However, that had cornered Takahiro psychologically.

'After Takahiro-san's death, Seidou-san realised that if he had no intention of releasing Minami-san, his actions were only for self-satisfaction.'

'What the hell...' said Gotou in a shaking voice.

Seidou's first choice had been wrong. If he had notified the police after noticing his son's crime, this wouldn't have happened.

'The pregnant Minami-san gave birth to a child. It was a girl. That girl is still alive.'

Yakumo raised his voice one level higher.

'Eh?'

Youko's brow furrowed in her astonishment.

From that reaction, it looked like she really hadn't known.

However, after coming this far, Gotou knew who that child was.

– Hatsune.

The girl who claimed to be her mother's reincarnation.

After thinking that much, Gotou came to a theory.

Yakumo had said that Hatsune was told by somebody that she was her mother's reincarnation and came to claim that herself.

'Could it be that... the one who told Hatsune she was a reincarnation was...'

'Correct. The spirit of the dead Minami-san.'

So that really was it.

When Yakumo met Hatsune, he had said, 'You can hear her.' The true meaning of that was probably that she could hear the voices of the spirits of the dead.

'Why... did she...'

'To try to make her child take revenge.'

Yakumo looked down sadly.

To make her own child take revenge – Gotou couldn't understand it.

Even if parents would sacrifice themselves for children, they couldn't use children for their own selfish reasons.

Gotou looked at Yakumo unconsciously.

Come to think of it, Yakumo had been born under similar circumstances to Hatsune.

'Let's get back to the topic at hand.'

Yakumo ran a hand through his hair and suddenly walked up to Youko.

'Don't come any closer.'

Youko pointed the pistol at Yakumo.

However, Yakumo continued talking without even a slight change in expression.

'Minami-san's child was taken home by Seidou-san and treated as an abandoned child. He raised her as his own.'

'Don't say such irresponsible things. Where's the proof of that?' Youko said shrilly.

'What I've just said was all in Seidou-san's diary,' said Yakumo.

Gotou understood now. Yakumo had been looking for that in the archive last night. And he found it.

'So that's how you got to the truth?' asked Gotou.

'I actually realised the truth upon coming to Seidou-san's, and then Seidou-san and I had a dispute. However, the back of my head was hit and I fainted, and I had forgotten the crucial part...'

Yakumo frowned as he ran a hand through his hair.

That had been the most troublesome. If Yakumo hadn't lost his memory, they would have solved the case sooner.

'Natsume-san. You were the one who hit me that day, yes?' said Yakumo, looking at Youko's eyes.

Youko didn't respond.

However, that itself proved that what Yakumo said was true.

'After you made me faint, you killed Seidou-san and stabbed him with a knife, over and over again...'

'But the fingerprints...' said Ishii, standing up waveringly.

He probably still couldn't believe that Youko was the culprit.

'Do you know about fake fingerprints?'

'So that was it?'

Gotou understood immediately.

They were a problem recently. They were frequently used by illegal immigrants – silicone fingerprints about one millimetre in thickness that had other people's fingerprints on them. If you wore them on your fingers, you could pass customs.

Overseas, they could be obtained for less than seventy yen for one.

Wearing fake fingerprints, she gripped the knife and stabbed Seidou. She probably used the same method for the other victims.

'If investigated properly, it should become clear that even if the fingerprints match, the hand size is wrong,' Yakumo explained further.

However, there was still something Gotou didn't get.

'Why would she do so much? Would you do that much for a friend?'

'They weren't friends. Minami-san and Youko-san were lovers.'

Yakumo's voice echoed through the room –

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– They were lovers.

Even after hearing those words, Ishii wasn't that surprised.

He had reasoned to a point that this series of murders was revenge for Minami. He had felt like it was by a lover.

Searching for a man had been a blind spot.

However, after hearing Yakumo's words, a number of things connected.

– Furthermore, investigating with a man...

– The ghost of my dead lover.

The things Youko had said circled Ishii's head.

He should have noticed sooner.

Ishii had denied that Youko was the culprit earlier, but there were other things that pointed to her being the culprit.

Youko had agreed with Ishii that Yakumo wasn't the culprit at a fairly early stage. That had also just been an excuse to determine Yakumo and Gotou's movements.

Now that he thought about it, the documents she'd shown him at the family restaurant had been too great in number to gather in just half a day.

However, Ishii still couldn't see Youko as a cold-blooded killer.

'Lover... So Natsume wanted to be a man...'

Gotou's mouth was trembling.

– That's not it.

Ishii cried out in his heart. Romance wasn't only between men and woman.

'Gotou-san, that's prejudiced,' said Yakumo, as if representing Ishii's heart.

'What?'

'Natsume-san, as a woman, loved Minami-san, who was a woman.'

'A lesbian...'

'Don't sum up what I had with Minami with that word!' Youko said shrilly.

'I feel the same way.'

Yakumo was the one who agreed.

Youko's eyes went wide as she looked at Yakumo.

She had lived up until now under the eyes of prejudice. She probably hadn't thought Yakumo, as a man, would agree with her.

'Regardless of the partner's gender, the feeling of caring about something does not change. Just because a relationship is between two women does not make those feelings weaker than the relationship between a man and a woman. Natsume-san just happened to love a woman; that's all.'

Yakumo's voice echoed against the walls.

Youko's expression softened just slightly and her mouth moved.

Though Ishii couldn't hear her, he felt like she had said 'Thank you'.

Gotou didn't try to say anything else. It felt like he didn't agree, but he understood.

It seemed like all the mysteries had become clear, but for Ishii, there was still something odd.

'Why did you try to make Yakumo-shi the suspect?'

If Youko had been trying to take revenge, there was no reason to place the responsibility on somebody else.

If you were planning on running away, you shouldn't try for revenge.

Ishii looked at Youko.

'To buy time.'

The one who replied was not Youko but Yakumo.

'To buy... time...'

'Correct. In order to take revenge, I needed to kill three people. It took time to do that. There would be no meaning to it if I were arrested before then.'

'So you focussed the police's attention on a suspect and used that chance to kill the others?'

Gotou clapped his hands together in understanding.

'That's correct.'

Yakumo nodded.

The reason Youko had created a suspect was clear, but there was still something Ishii didn't understand.

'Why did it have to be Yakumo-shi?'

Ishii leant forward.

Then, Youko turned the pistol towards Ishii's forehead.

'Isn't that enough of the truth...'

Youko's eyes were wet with tears.

She was suffering. Ishii could feel it.

Did Youko really take revenge because she wanted to – wasn't there another goal?

'You were told by Nanase Miyuki, correct? To make me the suspect...' said Yakumo.

– I see. So it was her.'

Just from hearing that name, Ishii felt like he understood everything. Youko had been manipulated by Miyuki.

'I... wanted to save her...'

Youko turned the pistol to Yakumo.

Her voice was weak and wavering.

'Minami-san's spirit wants revenge and is still suffering, unable to rest in peace. In order to save her, you would need to take revenge. Miyuki told you that, right?'

Youko didn't respond to Yakumo's words.

She took deep breaths with her shoulders, as if to calm her surging emotions.

'To me, Minami was everything. I thought that we'd always be able to be together. But then she suddenly went missing...'

'Detective Natsume.'

Ishii looked at Youko's profile sadly.

Ishii could slightly understand how Youko felt. He was in that exact same position right now.

The woman he loved, Haruka, was missing.

That emotion wrenched his body apart. A pain that made him feel like even dying would be better

–

'Ten years ago, I searched for Minami frantically... But I couldn't find her... Minami wouldn't disappear and leave me behind. I said that again and again, but nobody believed me...'

As she spoke, tears kept spilling out of her eyes.

– It hurts. Save me.

To Ishii, it sounded like she was saying that.

'You didn't give up. You continued looking for Minami-san.'

'That's right. After graduating from high school, I became a police officer. Whenever I had time, I investigated. It took ten years for me to arrive at Matsumoto and Naitou, but I had no proof.'

'And then Nanase Miyuki appeared.'

Instead of replying to Yakumo's words, Youko started to sniffle.

Ishii could tell what was next even without her saying it.

Miyuki told her the circumstances surrounding Minami's death, twisting the truth when it was convenient to her, and made her believe that Minami's spirit was in pain and continuing to wander.

She had probably hidden the fact that she had a daughter because Youko might have chosen to live with her.

– Youko didn't want revenge. She wanted to save Minami's spirit.

Ishii felt like he had understood everything.

'Natsume-san, Minami-san's spirit is still wandering now. That is true.'

Yakumo slowly walked forward and stood at a distance close enough to touch Youko.

The hand Youko was holding the pistol with was shaking.

'Then...'

'But doing something like this cannot save Minami-san's spirit.'

'I...'

Youko bit her lip.

'The only person who can save Minami-san's spirit is you.'

'To save her... I... What should I...'

'I'll help.'

Ishii suddenly walked up to Youko.

In surprise, Youko looked at Ishii with tearful eyes.

Ishii finally realised when he looked at those eyes.

'Detective Natsume, at the bottom of your heart, you must have known that doing something like this couldn't save Minami-san,' said Ishii, leaning forward.

Youko's heart had always been wavering.

– Can this really save Minami?

She must have asked herself that countless times. While worrying and suffering, without coming to a decision, she had come here.

She wanted to end it already. That was why she gave Ishii the necessary information and even cooperated with the investigation.

Even though she had been calling out for him to notice so many times, Ishii hadn't seen it.

'I...'

Youko looked down.

Her sadness came through to Ishii so much that it hurt.

The person she loved had disappeared, leaving a hole in her heart for ten years. How painful must it have been?

But that was still –

'Let's end this.'

Ishii gripped Youko's shoulders.

In response, Youko looked up.

Her tearful expression was as artless as a young girl's.

'Ishii-san... I...'

Youko couldn't continue.

Then, there was a bang – it sounded like the door had opened – and somebody came flying into the cavern.

It was too late when he'd realised. Youko let out a moan as her body collapsed to the floor.

There was a knife in her back.

'Please hang in there!'

Ishii tried to shake Youko awake, but she didn't move at all.

'What a stupid woman. Even though I told her to exterminate the people in the way, she let herself be instigated.'

Ishii looked up at the voice and saw Nanase Miyuki standing there.

In order to hide the burnt left half of her face, she let her fringe hang down. She was smiling, showing her white teeth.

Blood rushed to Ishii's head.

It was from anger.

'Why did you...'

Ishii tried to rush at Miyuki, but she picked up the pistol Youko had dropped before he could.

With the pistol facing him, Ishii froze, like his stop button had been pushed.

'If it isn't Ishii-san? It's been a while.'

Miyuki looked at Ishii with condescending eyes.

When she looked at him, it made him feel terribly uneasy.

'So you showed up?'

Yakumo's eyes narrowed.

'What are you looking at me like that for?'

'I'm pitying you.'

Though Miyuki threatened him, Yakumo didn't seem to care.

'Aren't you composed? Can you still be composed after seeing this?'

Miyuki left the room with a leisurely gait.

– What on earth is she going to show him?

While Ishii was thinking, the door opened again and something fell to the floor.

It was Haruka.

Her wrists were bound with packing tape, and her nose and mouth were covered with packing tape too.

Perhaps because she couldn't breathe properly, she was limp.

Miyuki stepped on Haruka's back with her right foot and smiled triumphantly.

If they moved unwisely, Haruka's life would be in danger.

'What are you...'

Ishii glared at Miyuki.

He was the one closest to Miyuki right now. If he found the right opportunity to rush in, it might be possible to save Haruka.

'Sorry, Ishii-san, could you step away a bit?' said Miyuki.

It looked like she'd anticipated his thoughts. Ishii slowly stood up and staggered backwards, just as Miyuki instructed him.

– This is the worst-case scenario.

-

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-

Haruka managed to lift her head, though her consciousness was blurry.

She could see Yakumo in her cloudy vision.

Gotou and Ishii were there too. And another person. A large-framed person in robes – probably Eishin.

– It's hard to breathe.

Packing tape covered her nose and mouth. She could only breathe through a small gap.

She didn't even have the strength to fight back.

It took all her energy to keep her consciousness from falling into the darkness.

Miyuki had probably planned that and gave her a small gap to breathe through.

A cold and calculating woman.

It might have been the end of everything when she got caught by Miyuki.

– Sorry, Yakumo.

Haruka looked at Yakumo.

She couldn't see him clearly with her hazy vision.

– Even though we finally met again.

She had really wanted to meet him with a smile, but – in her pain, tears came to her eyes.

She always held him back.

If something happened to Yakumo because of her, she wouldn't be able to stand it. She would rather –

'Now, the start of an entertaining show,' murmured Miyuki.

That voice echoed unpleasantly in Haruka's ears.

A chill ran down her spine.

'Relax.'

She heard Yakumo's voice.

She couldn't see his expression, but it seemed full of confidence.

'Well, aren't you composed? Your lover might die,' said Miyuki as she laughed.

It pleased her to see other people suffer. An unbelievable sadist.

'She won't die. I'll save her.'

Yakumo's voice was firm.

Even if it was just a front, it eased Haruka's wavering heart and made her less frightened.

'I wonder about that?'

Miyuki put more strength in the foot on Haruka's back.

Her heel dug in.

With the pressure on Haruka's waist, it made it even harder to breathe.

Oh no. I'm losing consciousness –

-

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-

'Yakumo, what do you plan to do?'

Gotou spoke quietly, his eyes still on Miyuki.

To put it bluntly, this was the worst-case scenario.

Miyuki wasn't just some woman. If they moved, she would probably kill Haruka without any

hesitation. That wasn't all. She would definitely fire at anybody who went at her.

Gotou didn't want to think about how many people would become sacrifices if he ran at her. If he did anything careless, all of them would be headed for the other world.

Yakumo silently looked up at the ceiling.

Water dripped down from limestone. It looked like it was growing more fragile from the typhoon.

The pillar creaked loudly.

'Gotou-san, I'll buy some time,' said Yakumo in a voice that was barely audible.

– I see.

Gotou could tell what Yakumo was trying to do.

Though it was a considerably dangerous method, they had no other choice. Gotou nodded at Yakumo and then looked to Eishin and Ishii.

'Do you know what sort of place this is?' said Yakumo, slowly shortening the distance between him and Miyuki.

'I'm just going to say this, but if you get any closer, this girl will die. And trying to buy time is useless, so just stop,' Miyuki said coldly.

Yakumo's feet froze.

– She realised everything.

Gotou glared at Miyuki.

She really didn't let anything pass her. She had seen right through their ulterior motive.

– What are you going to do, Yakumo?

'This is where that man was born. Did you know that?'

Yakumo smiled.

For just a moment, Miyuki's expression clouded over.

'What are you saying?'

'I'm saying that this is where that man – my father – was born. Do you know his real name?'

'Name?'

'His name is Unkai² – '

'You're making this up!' spat out Miyuki.

However, there was doubt in her eyes.

2 Unkai (雲海) is written with the kanji for cloud and sea (and is usually translated as sea of clouds); incidentally, Yakumo (八雲) is written with the kanji for eight clouds (and means thick clouds).

Miyuki probably didn't know the real name of the man with two red eyes.

'I don't mind if you think that, but it is the truth. Isn't that right, Eishin-san?'

Yakumo turned towards Eishin.

In response, Eishin nodded.

'It's just as Yakumo says. In the past, a woman lived in this village. Her name was Rin...'

Gotou remembered the name Eishin said.

Three months ago, he had heard that name in Togakushi, Nagano. The woman who was the mother of the man with two red eyes, and Yakumo's grandmother –

Because of an appearance that differed from those around them, she was treated as a witch and lost her life.

Rin had taken her child with red eyes to Togakushi in Nagano. So this was where she came from –

'She fell in love with a monk. That monk was a senior apprentice to me. He was also Yakumo's grandfather,' Eishin said quietly.

'Wait a second. Then that man with red eyes...'

Gotou interrupted Eishin, unable to restrain himself.

'That's correct. The man with two red eyes was the child of my grandfather and Rin-san,' Yakumo said with a blank expression.

'Though the two of them had a child, they were not married. In the end, Rin was chased out by the people of the temple and left the village with the child,' continued Eishin.

'Why did the people of the temple force Rin out?'

Gotou voiced the question that came to his head.

'Because she could see ghosts.'

Yakumo was the one who answered.

Gotou didn't understand what he meant.

'Why would they force her out for being able to see ghosts?'

'In Buddhism, especially the temples that sympathise with Zen Buddhism, they do not acknowledge the existence of the spirits of the dead,' said Eishin with a sigh.

'W-what did you say?'

Gotou couldn't understand at all. In his everyday knowledge, temples were the ones who did funerals, and they would chant sutras to mourn the dead.

That was why he'd thought that temples believed that the spirits of the dead existed.

'It's true. In Buddhist teaching, it is believed that the body and mind are one. That's why the spirit,

which is the mind, cannot remain behind without the body...'

After Eishin said that, he looked at Yakumo.

If what Eishin said was really true, then people who could see the spirits of the dead disproved Buddhism itself.

So they forced her out –

'After Rin-san disappeared, my grandfather made a family with another woman and gave birth to my mother and my uncle,' Yakumo said, continuing Eishin's story.

– Which meant.

'So the man with two red eyes and your mother were half-siblings?'

'Yes.'

Yakumo nodded quietly.

Gotou was shocked into silence, but at the same time, he understood.

It meant Yakumo and the man with two red eyes were connected by blood stronger than that of a parent and child. That was why he was so fixated on Yakumo.

'Don't be ridiculous! Did you think that would surprise me? You're wasting your time!' screamed Miyuki.

However, in contrast to her words, it felt like her heart was shaking violently. She probably hadn't heard that fact from the man with two red eyes.

'Do you still not understand?'

Yakumo gazed sharply at Miyuki.

'I don't.'

Miyuki glared back.

'That man didn't just want to make me the suspect in this case – he wanted to reveal the truth of his birth.'

Yakumo's voice grew stronger.

'So... what...'

'No matter how you wish for it, that man will not open his heart to you. He is only using you for his own goal.'

Yakumo's voice echoed, so Gotou heard it layered.

The goal of the man with two red eyes. It was to take Yakumo's body, which had taken the most of his own blood.

Even after his death, that man was fixated on life.

'You're so noisy... I don't care about that. Even if I'm being used, I want to be with him...'

Miyuki's voice wavered terribly.

The trust she had inside of her for the man with two red eyes was shaking. That was how it felt to Gotou.

'Is that fine with you?' asked Yakumo.

There was a silence –

Miyuki's mouth was trembling, but then the expression suddenly left her face.

There was a cold glint in her eyes.

'You can just die. All of you can just die.'

That was Miyuki's answer.

'Back off!'

'Take a good look as the person important to you dies in front of your eyes!'

Miyuki put the end of the pistol at the back of Haruka's head.

'Stop it!'

Yakumo's yell reverberated.

Gotou tried to charge as well, but he wouldn't make it in time –

Just as she had cocked the pistol and was about to pull the trigger, Miyuki stopped.

Youko, who had collapsed, had grabbed Miyuki's right leg with both hands.

'Give Minami... back to me...'

Youko spoke in a hoarse voice.

On the verge of death, she had probably overlapped Haruka with Minami, her lover who had gone missing.

'Let go!'

Miyuki kicked Youko's face.

But Youko still didn't let go. She wanted to save her. Her lover –

'Stop!'

While yelling, Ishii ran out to try to stop Miyuki, just as Yakumo rushed at Miyuki.

– This is my chance.

Gotou kicked the pillar in the middle of the room with as much force as he could.

The pillar bent with a loud crack.

Miyuki noticed Yakumo and Ishii and turned the pistol towards them.

'Like I'd let you do that!'

Gotou kicked the pillar again.

The pillar snapped.

At the same time, the portion of the limestone ceiling that the pillar had barely been managing to hold up collapsed with a thunderous noise.

Gotou ducked instinctively and avoided the falling rocks.

Water poured in through the hole in the ceiling.

Yakumo thrust Miyuki away in her astonishment and picked up Haruka.

However, Haruka lay limp without moving.

'How could you do that!?!'

Miyuki was furious as she turned the pistol towards Yakumo and Haruka with the face of a demon.

– This is bad!

Gotou ran towards them right away, but he knew he wouldn't make it in time.

Time seemed to flow slowly, as if this was stop-motion.

The moment Miyuki's finger pulled the trigger, Ishii's body smashed into hers, knocking her to the floor.

There was a gunshot.

Miyuki was lying face-up on the floor. The bullet she shot hit the ceiling.

More water came out from there.

'It'll collapse! We have to run!'

Eishin was the one who yelled.

As if that had been a sign, rocks started crumbling down around them loudly. More water poured out, covering his feet.

Gotou was delirious.

He just carried Haruka together with Yakumo and ran towards the exit –

終章

その後

EPILOGUE

epilogue

-

Like an empty shell, Ishii sat at the desk and looked up at the ceiling.

Though a week had passed since the incident, he still hadn't been able to get back on his feet.

After the limestone cave collapsed, with Eishin's help, he somehow managed to carry Youko out.

However, she had already stopped breathing.

– I couldn't save her.

Ishii's regret had left a deep scar in his chest.

If he had noticed Youko's cry for help earlier, she wouldn't have lost her life.

– She had planned on dying from the beginning.

That was what Yakumo had said.

Youko might have really been thinking that way, but that didn't make Ishii's regret go away.

During the investigation afterwards, it was proven that Yakumo had been falsely charged. Though there was still the interference with a public servant in the execution of their duties, the situation was taken into account and it became a non-indictment because of extenuating circumstances.

There was a non-indictment for Gotou too, but there was a disciplinary dismissal from the police.

Even if it had been a false charge, he hadn't just helped a suspect escape – he'd even used violence against a police officer. It couldn't be overlooked.

Ishii understood that. But still, he didn't accept it.

Normally, it wouldn't have been strange if Ishii had been giving a disciplinary dismissal as well, but Gotou hadn't let that happen – he'd taken all the blame on his own shoulders.

The police wanted everything to settle down as quickly as possible too, so they dealt with the situation by saying that Gotou had ran off alone and that Ishii hadn't been involved.

'I was never suited for detective work,' Gotou had said with a laugh.

But what was he going to do now – it didn't seem like he had thought about anything in particular.

Ishii didn't know how the Unsolved Cases Special Investigation Room was going to be without Gotou either.

It would be difficult for Ishii to continue alone. The Unsolved Cases Special Investigation Room would probably be shut down, with Ishii being shafted to another division.

It was a barren room with just two desks and no windows, but it was still full of Ishii's memories.

He had first met Gotou in this room.

He had been involved in many cases after that – the time had flown by.

He would be truly unhappy about the place where he had so many memories disappearing.

Ishii took off his glasses, rubbed his arms and wiped the tears that had welled up in his eyes.

However, there was a silver lining in the case.

It was Hatsune, Minami's daughter who had been raised by Seidou. Minami's mother, Tamae, had taken her in.

Tamae had been like an empty shell until then, but then her grandchild appeared.

Tamae's eyes were energetic – like a different person's.

She would definitely treat Hatsune well. And Hatsune would probably have her own life, rather than being her mother's reincarnation.

There was another thing on Ishii's mind.

Nanase Miyuki had suddenly disappeared from the collapsed limestone cave.

– She's still alive.

Ishii was sure of it. They would meet again soon.

What would he be able to do then, by himself? He thought about it, but nothing came to mind.

'Detective Gotou, it really is impossible for me on my own.'

Ishii's shoulders drooped as he murmured that.

'Stop crying.'

The door opened.

Miyagawa was standing in the door with a cardboard box in both hands.

'C-Chief Miyagawa! W-why...'

Ishii stood up instinctively.

'You haven't heard?'

'Eh?'

'Don't just say "Eh". I was demoted. So, that's... er...'

Miyagawa fumbled for words awkwardly.

Ishii had an idea of what he was trying to say.

'Could it be that you were transferred to the Unsolved Cases Special Investigation Room...'

'Unfortunately, that's exactly it,' said Miyagawa with a sigh.

Though Ishii was happy that the Unsolved Cases Special Investigation Room hadn't been closed, he

had a terribly bad feeling.

'What's with that displeased look on your face!?'

Miyagawa glared.

'Ah, no, that isn't...'

Even while Ishii replied, he couldn't clear away his anxiety about the future.

* * *

– That felt good.

That was the first feeling Gotou had after receiving his punishment.

He'd thought that he'd feel some regret after a couple of days, but he didn't.

He realised anew that he hadn't been suited for being in the organisation in the first place.

He had been nervous about how Atsuko would react when he explained, but she was more nonchalant than Gotou had been.

'I don't like the police anyway.'

She said the same thing that she had on the phone. Gotou had thought she had just said that to encourage Gotou, but it looked like she'd meant it.

'I'll do part-time until things calm down,' said Atsuko firmly, without seeming troubled or worried.

As a man, there was nothing more embarrassing than having his wife look after him, but Gotou decided for now to honestly depend on her.

'If you drive without paying attention, you'll get into an accident.'

Gotou came back to reality when Yakumo called out to him.

Gotou noticed that the light in front of him was red and hurriedly stepped on the brakes.

'Isn't that dangerous?' said Haruka with a dissatisfied frown as she sat in the backseat.

– Man. Who do these two think kept them safe?

Gotou thought it, but he didn't say it aloud.

Though a lot had happened, he was just happy that they were all OK and together.

Of course it was the case for Yakumo, but Haruka was like family to Gotou too.

Family wasn't just made up of blood ties.

Even without them, people connected with each other. Gotou thought that.

'Gotou-san, what do you plan to do from now on?' said Yakumo.

Even Yakumo, who always spoke so hatefully, seemed to be concerned.

It wasn't like Gotou had no plans at all about the future.

'I'm thinking of starting a business.'

'What is it?' said Haruka, sounding very interested as she leant forward.

'Work that can be done by an ex-police officer is limited.'

'I have a bad feeling,' interrupted Yakumo while looking aside.

– His feeling's probably on the money.

'I'm going to open a detective agency.'

'Oh, you're going to be a detective?'

'Right. And a detective specialising in spiritual cases, at that.'

'So a spiritual detective then.'

Haruka laughed.

In contrast to that, Yakumo's expression was stiff – he seemed to sense what was coming next.

'Well, that's right. So I'm looking for an excellent assistant.'

'I'm just going to say this, but I won't help,' Yakumo said coldly, having read Gotou's thoughts.

'Whose fault do you think it is that I lost my job?'

'Please don't blame your own incompetence on others.'

Yakumo ran a hand through his messy hair.

– This brat. Acting so high and mighty just because I was holding back!

'It's your fault!'

'I don't remember asking for your help,' Yakumo said plainly.

– I really shouldn't have saved this guy.

Though it was a bit late, regret spread in Gotou's chest.

* * *

Haruka visited Seidou's temple with Yakumo.

Gotou said that he would wait in the car. It looked like he didn't want to see Eishin.

'Thanks for coming.'

The one who welcomed them in the temple was that very Eishin.

He had a gentle smile on his face. When Haruka looked at him like this, he really did seem like Isshin's teacher.

'Hello.'

Haruka bowed her head.

'That really was a terrible situation you were in,' said Eishin, scratching his bald head.

'It was,' agreed Haruka.

When she was caught by Nanase Miyuki, she thought that she really would die, but in the end, Yakumo saved her.

It seemed like she was one of the people Yakumo thought was important to him, at least. That was enough for now.

'Half of it was your fault,' Yakumo told Eishin brusquely.

'Well, I can't deny it.'

Eishin was rather bold. His expression didn't change at all when Yakumo said that to him.

'Could I ask one thing?'

'What is it?'

Eishin looked at Yakumo

'When did you realise what Seidou-san had done?'

'I was curious when he told me about Hatsune-chan's reincarnation, so I looked in to it. Though I didn't know for sure, I thought that might've been the case.'

Eishin's eyes were faraway.

'Why didn't you ask him?'

'Because I wanted to believe that Seidou still had a conscience... Would it sound like an excuse if I said that?'

'It would.'

Yakumo ran a hand through his hair as he looked down.

Haruka thought that Eishin wasn't lying.

He had wanted Seidou to go to the police himself. He had probably sent Yakumo to give him that chance.

'One more thing.'

Yakumo put up his index finger.

'What?'

'About my... grandfather. How long?'

There was a silence.

Eishin looked up at the ceiling as if reminiscing and then finally started to speak in a murmur.

'I knew from the start.'

'Why...'

'Because I didn't think it was something you should hear from another person, but something you should find out on your own,' said Eishin, interrupting Yakumo's words.

In the back of his eyes, it looked like there was a deep sadness.

'That might be true...'

Yakumo's eyes narrowed as he looked down.

'Could I ask one thing?'

This time, Eishin looked at Yakumo.

'If it isn't a pointless question.'

'What happened to Minami-san?'

'She... is with Youko-san.'

Yakumo's expression softened.

'So the two of them were able to meet again.'

'They were.'

Yakumo gave a short reply to Haruka's words.

– Was Minami released from her hatred?

That question suddenly came up in Haruka's head, but she couldn't find an answer.

If she could be with the person she loved, there was no need for her to hate anyone. Because that was the happiest thing –

Haruka thought that the both of them must have been released from their worries. Though that might have just been a convenient way for her to think –

Yakumo stood in front of the Buddha statue at the temple's entrance.

When he looked straight at it like that, it was like they were talking.

'After I was almost killed by my mother, I came here together with Uncle,' murmured Yakumo.

'With Isshin-san?'

'Yes. Uncle held my hand and said this.'

'What did he say?'

'You are my older brother's child and my older sister's child. But I decided to be with you for another reason.'

Yakumo's eyes looked a little wet.

'Another reason?'

'I want to be together with you, Yakumo. If I don't, I feel like I'll be crushed by my fate. Save me... That was what Uncle said.'

'Save...'

'That's right. But I was the one always being saved by Uncle. Without knowing anything, I had thought that I was the only unfortunate one.'

'Yakumo-kun...'

'Even though I really wanted to say thank you, he left before then...'

Yakumo bit down hard on his lip.

While supporting each other, Isshin and Yakumo had faced their fates, which they couldn't run away from. Haruka felt that anew.

Isshin wasn't here now. But Yakumo wasn't alone. There were many people who had inherited his feelings.

– I'm one of them.

Haruka gently held Yakumo's hand –

添付ファイル

火の玉

E X T R A ^{FILE}

extra file: fireball

-

'Yakumo-kun, are you here?'

Ozawa Haruka visited Yakumo's secret hideaway, the Movie Research Circle room, in the evening.

'You again...'

Yakumo was in his usual chair as he said that, fanning himself with a fan.

Though this was just their usual exchange, ever since the incident in the limestone cave, Haruka felt like Yakumo's tone had become softer.

'What do you mean, again?'

Haruka pretend to be angry as she sat down on the opposite chair.

'Do you have a lot of free time?'

'I do. It's summer vacation,' Haruka said with her head held high.

The first term's classes had ended, and the university was in summer vacation now. She planned on going home next week, but she had free time until then.

'Don't boast about your free time.'

'Don't you have free time too, Yakumo-kun?'

'Even though I look like this, I'm busy.'

'Doesn't look like it to me...'

'So what are you doing today?' asked Yakumo, running a hand through his messy hair.

'Ah, that's right. I almost forgot.'

'So you really did pick up some trouble?'

Yakumo sighed in disappointment.

'Well, I guess you could call it that, but... it's Makoto-san's request, so somehow, it's hard to refuse...'

'It's rare for her to bring trouble in.'

'It is.'

'So what is it?'

Yakumo urged her to continue.

'You'll take it?'

'She's cooperated this much. I can't refuse.'

It helped to have Yakumo say that.

When Makoto came to her, Haruka had thought about refusing since the case had just finished, but Makoto had helped a lot. Haruka had ended up taking her request, unable to refuse her flat-out.

'So what is it?'

Yakumo repeated himself.

Haruka nodded and started her explanation.

'There's a small pond behind the university – do you know about it?'

'I haven't gone myself, but I know of it.'

'There's a strange rumour about that lake. Every year, on the same day and at the same time, multi-coloured fireballs¹ appear.'

'Fireballs...'

Yakumo frowned.

'Yeah.'

'It sounds suspicious.'

Haruka agreed.

'So you won't take it?'

'Anyway, I'll go take a look. What time and date is it?'

'Today at seven in the evening.'

'Isn't it almost time then...'

Though Yakumo sounded dissatisfied, he stood up.

* * *

When they got to the pond, Haruka was sweaty all over.

It was an open area. On the opposite bank of the pond, Haruka could see the town and the winding Tamo River.

'Will fireballs really show up here?' asked Haruka, wiping off her sweat.

'Who knows,' responded Yakumo expressionlessly.

Haruka checked her watch – it was almost seven in the evening.

'It'll be soon.'

1 Though the word hinotama (火の玉) is literally fireball, in this case it can also refer to a spiritual phenomenon that appears in the shape of a fireball.

Even though she hadn't believe in the fireballs earlier, now that she had come here, she felt a bit frightened.

She quietly gripped Yakumo's shirt. It was mysterious how that was enough to calm her heart.

'Ah.'

Yakumo spoke up and looked at the sky. Haruka looked up too.

Red fireworks burst up in the night sky.

A little later, the bang echoed.

'It's beautiful...'

Haruka said that without thinking.

Yakumo suddenly let out a laugh.

'Is something funny?'

'You said the same thing when you saw my left eye.'

'Did I?'

Though Haruka pretended like she didn't recall, the truth was that she remembered it clearly. There was no way she would forget a memory so precious to her.

It made her happy that Yakumo had remembered.

While bittersweet thoughts ran through her head, fireworks kept bursting up, dying the night sky.

She'd never thought that she'd watch fireworks with Yakumo like this. The unexpectedness of it made her ever happier.

'Let's go back.'

After a while, Yakumo said that while running a hand through his hair.

'Eh, but... how about Makoto-san's request?'

They hadn't found out the truth behind the fireballs yet.

'That's the true form of the fireballs.'

Yakumo pointed at the lake.

The fireworks in the sky were reflected on the pond's surface.

'Ah!'

Haruka clapped her hands together in understanding.

Every year on the same day and the same time, fireballs appeared on the pond – so those were the fireworks reflected on the water's surface.

When Haruka came to that conclusion, she realised Makoto's true intention.

She had probably made the request to let Haruka and Yakumo view the fireworks. When Haruka realised that, it made her feel strangely embarrassed, and her face went red.

– I wonder if Yakumo's noticed.

Haruka glanced at Yakumo.

In the dim lighting, she couldn't see his face clearly.

'Hey, let's watch for a bit longer,' decided Haruka, pulling on Yakumo's shirt.

Makoto had gone out of her way to create this chance for Haruka. For just a bit longer –

Haruka was sure that Yakumo would refuse, but after a long sigh, he said quietly, 'Fine.'

Haruka resisted the urge to leap up and looked at the fireworks while at Yakumo's side.

※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 Vanished Spirit*.

It is because of everyone's earnest support that I have been able to continue the series up until now.

Please allow me to use this space to give my thanks once more.

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This novel's design is a bit different from the series up until now.

I virtually never wrote from Yakumo's perspective until now. I mainly used the eyes of people near Yakumo, like Haruka and Gotou, to view him.

However, this time, the story starts with Yakumo as a suspect, escaping on his own.

For the first time, Yakumo's emotional state became clear.

When I was first composing this, I thought that it would be quite a hard battle, but it was needless anxiety.

Without thinking about too many things, Yakumo himself made his will and heart clear to me.

Though I was the one writing, at times, I felt surprised, thinking, 'Ah, so this is how he felt...'

-

The story is finally rushing to its climax.

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What will be Yakumo's fate?

Will Haruka's feelings reach him?

What will happen to the Gotou family now that Gotou has quit the police?

And –

-

Wait! And look forward to it!

-

Heisei 24¹, midsummer – Kaminaga Manabu

1 Heisei 24 is 2012 in the Gregorian calendar.