

神永学

Mamabu Kamimaga

心霊探偵

Psychic Detective

八雲の

救いの魂

角川書店

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That forest summons the spirits of the dead –

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'You can see them too, right?'

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When Aoi Hideaki called out, he slowly turned around.

It was a corner of a graveyard, twilight imminent.

His narrowed eyes were facing Hideaki directly. His eyes were dark and appeared to be filled with sadness.

They became classmates in the third year of high school. They had been in the same classroom for nearly a year, but this was the first time he had called out to him.

Hideaki had thought about doing it numerous times up until now. However, he hadn't been able to. It was because he had had an atmosphere that made it feel like others couldn't approach.

He put a wall up between himself and others and did not let anyone in. However, that didn't mean he wasn't interested in other people. He observed from a height. A superior existence –

'What is it?'

His voice was unexpectedly calm.

'Spirits of the dead... That is, ghosts.'

'Idiotic.'

He laughed quietly.

He had probably meant to feign innocence, but Hideaki wouldn't let him.

Hideaki hadn't noticed that they had the same ability at first, but because of an incident, he realised that he was the same.

He saved Hideaki's younger sister's life, but he wouldn't have been able to do so if he couldn't see.

'Don't try to hide it.'

When Hideaki glared, he grew silent.

His gaze shook slightly. It appeared to be a sign of his shaken heart.

'I don't know what you're talking about.'

'Don't play dumb. You're the same kind as me.'

'Don't put me together with you.'

He immediately denied Hideaki's words.

'Why?'

'You show off your ability to see.'

Just as he said, Hideaki didn't hide the fact that he could see. Rather, he declared it.

He definitely wasn't showing off though. There was a reason he did it.

Also, the reply just now was obviously admitting that he could see.

'Want to talk for a bit?'

'I refuse.'

'Why?'

'I have no reason to. You and I are conclusively different.'

'What's different? We're both the same in that we can see, right?'

'It's different,' he declared. Then, he tried to walk away.

Hideaki might never have a chance to talk with him again if he left now, even though Hideaki had gathered the courage to call out to him.

'Wait.'

When Hideaki called out, his feet stopped. He didn't turn around.

Hideaki continued to talk regardless.

'I've always thought that my ability was disgusting.'

'I agree.'

When Hideaki heard his sad voice, he felt like he understood the true reason he had called out.

'But it's not just a sad thing. By lending an ear to the spirits of the dead, there are people who can be saved, she said...'

'Who said?'

'My sister.'

'A joke. Seeing them doesn't save anybody.'

'It does. That's why I can see. That's what I believe.'

'I couldn't save anyone important to me...'

When he turned around, his eyes looked just a little bit wet.

He must have lost somebody important to him because of his ability. It might have been impossible then, but next time –

'You can save them.'

'You're strong.'

'Eh?'

'I'm not that strong. If I'm just going to lose them, I'd rather not have anything important to me in the first place.'

After declaring that, he slowly started to walk.

Hideaki could only watch him leave.

He had chosen to live alone.

Hideaki couldn't condemn that choice. The pain of being able to see wasn't a light matter.

However, one day, if he also found something he had to protect, his mind would probably change. Like Hideaki's had –

'Let's meet again,' Hideaki said quietly.

A strong wind blew.

Hideaki looked down to escape a cloud of sand.

When Hideaki looked up again, he was already gone.

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That was the last time Hideaki spoke to him during high school –

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1

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'Hey, let's go back already.'

Maehara Rina spoke to Hiroki, who was walking ahead of her. Hiroki might not have heard her voice, as he continued to walk farther in.

They had been walking for over fifteen minutes since entering this forest.

The forest, thick with hinoki cypress trees, was dim, even though it was day, and it was wet. Furthermore, the changeless scenery continued endlessly.

If we go any farther in, we'll never be able to get out – that anxiety was in her head.

'Let's go back!' shouted Rina, halting as she did so.

Finally, Hiroki's feet stopped.

'What? Let's just go a bit farther.'

Hiroki, smirking, held a Handycam video camera.

Rina had come to the Kawaguchi lake shore¹ cottage for the tennis circle's training camp. She'd worked up a light sweat in the morning, and then there had been free time after lunch.

Then, Hiroki, who had come with her, called out to her.

– Want to explore the Sea of Trees?

Rina had understood that as 'Want to be alone?'. She'd had an interest in Hiroki since before, so she had thought that it'd be a good chance.

However, Rina's faint expectation had been betrayed.

Hiroki was really exploring the forest. With a camera in one hand, he was focussed on trying to catch spiritual phenomena on tape.

'I don't care any more. Let's go back.'

Rina was about to cry.

'Rina-chan's afraid.'

Hiroki zoomed in on Rina's face with the camera.

To put it frankly, it was bad taste. Rina looked away to avoid the camera.

– I can't bear with him any longer.

She'd go home herself. After deciding that, Rina started to turn back through the forest.

'Honestly, this is the worst...'

Rina was walking away when she stopped, suddenly feeling something's presence.

– Ooooooh.

She heard something like a groan.

Maybe Hiroki had come following her. She turned around, but nobody was there. Just the dark forest spreading out in front of her.

'Hiroki-kun, are you there?' said Rina.

There was no response, but she felt like somebody was watching her.

'If you're there, come out!'

As expected, there was no response.

– Am I thinking too much?

1 Lake Kawaguchi is one of the Fuji Five Lakes. It is the most popular one among tourists. The [Mt Fuji site](#) has some photos of the lake in all twelve months.

Rina was just about to start walking again when her feet stopped immediately.

'Gi... ll... d...'

She heard somebody moaning in her ear.

– Eh?

She couldn't look. She knew that in her head, but her body wouldn't listen. Rina slowly turned around.

However, nobody was there.

– How creepy.

Rina was stricken by an indescribable fear and she started running to escape.

However, something caught her feet immediately and she fell.

It seemed like her foot had slipped on moss. Her knee had hit a rock, and a stinging hot pain spread through it.

'This is the worst...'

To try to get up, Rina placed her hand on something beside her that looked like a rock.

– Flump.

A soft feeling. Not a rock. What was it?

Next to her lay a large mass, burnt completely black. When she took a careful look, she saw that it was the shape of a person.

– This is a corpse.

'Aahh!'

When Rina realised that, she shrieked and tried to run.

However, as if to block her escape, a man stood in front of Rina.

Though the forest was dim, that man wore black sunglasses. With all that had happened confusing her, Rina couldn't speak.

Sneering at Rina, the man slowly took off his sunglasses.

The two eyes looking down at Rina were dyed a deep red, like fresh blood.

'The true nature of the human spirit is darkness...'

The man said that quietly –

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2

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Ishii Yuutarou was up to his head in paperwork.

He was in the Unsolved Cases Special Investigations Room, one of the divisions of the detective department.

Though the name was splendid, all he actually did was the simple task of sort paperwork for past unsolved cases by year.

Though they were sometimes sent out as additional help for other divisions, that was rare – I'm bored.

Just doing paperwork like this made him feel down. He felt like that boredom had grown especially ever since Gotou had left.

When Gotou had been here, his actions, which could be called wild, had brought about a variety of incidents.

He had been afraid at the time, but now, strangely, he felt that things had been good then.

It had been tough, but at least he hadn't been bored.

'Oi, Ishii.'

He lifted his head at the voice.

Miyagawa Hideya sat across from him and glared at the paperwork with a difficult expression on his face.

Miyagawa had been the chief of the detectives until a month ago, but he had been demoted because of the incident with Gotou and put in the Unsolved Cases Special Investigations Room.

Though he had a small frame, with his scary face and bald head, rather than a detective, he looked like the people he was supposed to be fighting.

'What is it?'

'Where am I supposed to stamp this document?'

Miyakawa tapped the document on the desk.

Even though he already had a frightening face usually, when he showed his irritation, he looked like a demon.

'Er... Here.'

Ishii peered at the document and pointed at it.

'Who the hell made a document that's so hard to understand?'

'Miyagawa-san, you did.'

Ishii spoke without thinking.

'What?'

Miyagawa turned his glare towards Ishii.

'Ah, no, I mean, Miyagawa-san, you acknowledged the introduction of these forms.'

Ishii hurriedly added an explanation.

Miyagawa hadn't been the one who made them, but he had decided to introduce these documents when he was chief of the detectives.

'You saying it's my fault?'

Miyagawa raised an eyebrow.

'Ah, no, er... I apologise.'

– He's going to hit me.

So Ishii thought, preparing his body, but nothing happened.

'I see. It was me...'

Miyagawa sighed.

It looked like he truly regretted it. His body looked a size smaller.

Though Ishii was happy that he hadn't been hit, for some reason, he felt like something was lacking. If it were Gotou, Ishii would have been hit with a fist before he even finished speaking.

– Detective Gotou, please come back.

Ishii murmured that in his heart.

It wasn't that Miyagawa was bad. If speaking about work, Miyagawa dealt with it more seriously. Gotou just leant back on the chair and slept without doing any paperwork.

But still, for some reason, Ishii longed for those times. It was a strange thought, but he wanted to be hit.

Just as Ishii sighed, the door opened and a man appeared.

It was Honda, the current chief of the detectives. A mid-career hire, he was young – he had just turned forty. The person who had taken over Miyagawa's position after he was demoted.

Ishii had no way of knowing how the higher-ups thought of him, but with his high-handed attitude being the ruin of him, his subordinates didn't trust him much. Ishii often heard people badmouthing him.

'Chief Honda.'

Miyagawa's expression clouded the moment Ishii spoke.

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

Ishii offered Honda a chair, but he ignored it and spoke while standing.

'What? Hurry up and say it.'

Miyagawa put his chin in his hands and looked up at Honda.

Speaking casually to Honda, who was his boss, was probably from his pride as the previous chief, but Ishii broke into a cold sweat from watching it.

'Watch your tone.'

Honda glared at Miyagawa.

He had his own spirit. Even if Miyagawa was the previous chief, Honda probably couldn't keep quiet when somebody below him spoke rudely.

'Shut up, brat...' Miyagawa muttered, clicking his tongue.

'So what is the matter you wanted to talk about?' Ishii questioned to cover Miyagawa's words.

Honda didn't look pleased, but after clearing his throat, he brought up the topic at hand.

Miyagawa crossed his arms sulkily.

'You know about the robbery that occurred two days ago, right?'

'Ah, yes, that.'

Though Ishii and Miyagawa weren't directly related to the case, they knew of it.

A nursing student named Aoi Yuuka who lived in a city apartment had been found fainted in her room by her older brother, Hideaki, who lived with her.

Hideaki took Yuuka to the hospital, but her head had been injured and she still hadn't regained consciousness.

Her room was a mess and her wallet was stolen, so the police were investigating it as a burglary injury case.

'The victim's older brother said he wanted the police's cooperation.'

'Did he see the culprit?'

'No, the victim's brother didn't witness the culprit.'

'Then what does he mean?' asked Ishii, which made Honda scowl. It looked like he wasn't very pleased.

'Seems like the victim's brother can see.'

'What can he see?'

'Ghosts.'

'Eh?'

Ishii spoke up without thinking.

'To be honest, I don't think I can go along with something that ridiculous, as a policeman. But it'd be a pain if the victim's family made a fuss about being treated unkindly.'

'So you're pushing the trouble to us,' said Miyagawa, voice dripping with sarcasm. However, Honda didn't lose to him.

'The work's perfect for you guys, right? You've got the free time.'

'What'd you say!?! Try saying it again!'

'Now, now.'

This was just a kid's fight. Ishii stepped in as mediator.

'Right now, he's in the reception room, so just listen to him.'

Honda said just that and left the room. Miyagawa kicked the desk before the door was even fully closed.

'Miyagawa-san, let's calm down.'

'Don't you hate this?'

Ishii knew what Miyagawa wanted to say. He was probably irritated by the tone of Honda's words, but Ishii knew well that getting angry wouldn't change anything.

'I'm used to it.'

When Ishii smiled, Miyagawa looked up at the ceiling in exasperation.

'More importantly, let's start our investigation immediately.'

Ishii stood up from his seat for a change of pace.

Is the young man who says he can see ghosts the real thing – Ishii noticed that he was a bit excited to find out.

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3

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Gotou Kazutoshi stood in front of the door with his arms crossed.

Next to him stood a middle-aged woman. Her name was Nakazato Yoriko. She was in her mid-forties.

'Please save my son...'

Yoriko put her hand on her mouth and sounded like she had a lump in her throat. It felt like tears could fall from her eyes at any moment.

Gotou looked at her face and sighed. He didn't feel like sympathising.

'Sorry, but there's nothing I can do.'

Gotou's careless words made Yoriko's eyes grow wide.

'That's... Please. My son has been possessed by an evil spirit.'

Yoriko clung to Gotou.

'What do you mean, evil spirit?'

Gotou shook Yoriko off.

With the previous case, Gotou had been let go from the police and had started work as a detective who specialised in the spiritual.

For work he could do as an ex-police officer, there was work as a guard and as a detective. He had decided to specialise on spiritual phenomena because he'd thought he could use his experience up until now and that he'd be able to pull Yakumo in if he needed to.

However, after actually starting, there weren't any real spiritual phenomena at all – all of the cases were just at the level of giving advice about concerns.

It was the same with Yoriko beside him right now.

After graduating high school, her son hadn't gone to the university he had been enrolled in and just stayed in his room. Yoriko believed it was the work of an evil demon.

However, after listening to her talk about it, it turned out that her son was just addicted to online games in his room. And on top of that, he never failed to eat rice every day. That was definitely not an evil spirit. Just a shut-in.

'Please. The evil spirit in my son...'

'You going to keep saying that!?' Gotou yelled.

'Eek.'

'Don't blame ghosts because of your own inability to raise your child!'

'B-but he won't come out of his room.'

'If he won't come out, you can just go yourself.'

'It's locked...'

Yoriko shook her head and started to cry.

– Ah, I'm pissed.

'You can get past locks if you've got the guts!' yelled Gotou and then gave the door a kick.

The door opened with a crack.

Yoriko was stunned. Her son in the room was even more surprised. He slipped from his chair and fell to the floor.

'Oi, brat.'

Gotou walked into the room briskly and glared at the face of Yoriko's son, who was on the floor.

'Y-yes...'

The son gulped loudly.

He was shivering so much it was pitiful, probably from fear, but that was convenient.

'I'm Gotou. A detective. Came at your mum's request.'

'D-detective?'

'Yeah. Seems like you're possessed by a ghost.'

'G-ghost...'

'If you keep inside this room, I'll need to come check on you every day.'

'E-every day...'

'Yeah. Every day, until you leave the room and go to school.'

'I...'

The son's face twitched.

'If you don't like that, stop playing online games and go to university every day. Got it?'

Gotou grabbed the son by his collar and glared at him. The son nodded fervently.

'Right. That's a promise.'

'Y-yes.'

'Your voice is too quiet!'

'Yes!'

'The spirit's been exorcised!'

Gotou hit the son on the head and stood up.

Yoriko looked like she wanted to say something, but Gotou ignored her. It was probably just going to be a complaint.

'Deduct the door repair fees from the payment for the request.'

After saying just that, Gotou left the house briskly.

When he quit the police, he had felt refreshed. He wouldn't have to be bound by stiff rules any more. He'd thought that he would be free.

Recently, though, the freedom he was supposed to have grasped felt strangely suffocating.

Even though he'd complained, wasn't working cases with Ishii better – he frequently thought that.

– I wonder if Ishii's doing well?

Gotou shook away the image of Ishii's face that suddenly came to his head. Then, he stuffed

himself into the driver's seat of the red Mini Cooper parked by the road.

It was too late to regret now.

And Gotou hadn't quit the police because he wanted to – he'd been forced to retire.

'Damn...'

Gotou spat that out and started the car's engine.

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4

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A dry wind blew through –

'It's already autumn now.'

That thought came to Ozawa Haruka as she looked up at the sky. Just a little while before, she had thought it was hot and humid, but in no time at all, the refreshing season had come.

Haruka walked towards the prefabricated building behind Building B.

It was in order to see Saitou Yakumo. She didn't have any trouble. She was just going to see him.

She thought that being able to just walk to him for no reason in particular was an amazing step forward.

On the other hand, the sad reality was that there had been no developments in their relationship.

The person of the opposite sex in her age group that she was the closest to – keeping that position, she hadn't advanced any further.

When she thought about that, she felt a bit heavy-hearted.

After cheering herself up, Haruka opened the door to the Movie Research Circle room, at the very end of the two-storey prefabricated building.

'You again?'

Yakumo looked up, sitting at his usual spot.

As always, he had messy hair and sleepy eyes. His left eye was also a vivid red.

Yakumo's red eye had been red from birth.

That red eye could see the spirits of the dead – that is, ghosts.

Using that unique ability, he had found the solution to many cases, but because of that strange ability, many people had shown him hatred. In order to evade that, he had hidden his red left eye with a black contact lens until a little bit earlier.

The death of Yakumo's uncle, Isshin, had changed him.

Because of Isshin's death, Yakumo had stopped hiding his red left eye. Haruka thought that he was determined to accept himself now.

'What do you mean, again? It makes it sound like I'm troublesome.'

Haruka pretended to be angry as she sat across from Yakumo.

'It doesn't make it sound like it. You are troublesome.'

'Can't you welcome me every once in a while?'

'Why?'

'Why, you say...'

'You came the other day too, right? Do you have a lot of free time?'

Yakumo yawned.

A lot of free time – she couldn't deny it. In the fourth year of university, rankings were pretty much set, so there were virtually no lectures.

'Isn't it fine?'

'If you're not careful, you'll become a jobless university graduate.'

Yakumo propped up his chin with his hand, looking bored.

'Too bad for you. I've already got that decided.'

'That's the first I've heard of it.'

'Because you didn't ask,' said Haruka, puffing out her chest. That was a line Yakumo always used.

'I can't believe a business would hire you.'

'You have it wrong. It's not a business. I'm going to be a teacher.'

She had just got the results from the teacher employment examination that she took in the summer the day before. She had come today to inform Yakumo.

It was also the seed for Haruka's worries.

'You, a teacher... It's the end of the world.'

'I don't need your concern.'

Haruka warned Yakumo but he just let out a sleepy yawn. There was really no point in talking to him.

– How long will I be able to do this?

That question suddenly came to Haruka's head.

It was fun being able to talk to Yakumo like this. It was because she didn't want to destroy this space that she had never spoken the feelings buried in her heart. However, now that her future

was determined, she realised something.

This time wouldn't last forever.

Once she graduated, she wouldn't be able to visit Yakumo like this. Their individual lives would be going on and they would drift apart – that anxiety filled her head.

'Hey, Yakumo-kun. What are you going to do?' asked Haruka, placing a hand on her chest to calm her wildly beating heart.

Yakumo's expression turned just a little stiff.

She wanted to hear the answer to the question, but she didn't – shaken by her confused feelings, Haruka's heart was in her mouth.

'If I had to say whether it's decided or not, it is.'

'What's with that vague answer?'

Because Haruka had been so concerned, she felt it was anticlimactic.

'There's a place I've been invited to, but I've put it on hold.'

'Where?' asked Haruka, leaning forward.

That was unexpected. She hadn't thought that Yakumo had been on a serious job search. Not just that – he was even worried about his placement.

'You know Professor Mikoshiya, right?'

'Yeah.'

Mikoshiya was an associate professor at Meisei University. Though Haruka had never met the professor herself, it seemed like Yakumo and Mikoshiya often played chess together.

'He...'

Yakumo started speaking, but he suddenly stood up, looking surprised.

His gaze was on the door right in front of him.

– What?

Haruka turned around to look at the door, but nothing was there.

'What's wrong?'

Yakumo interrupted Haruka.

'Why are you here...' he murmured.

Yakumo's red eye could probably see somebody there. All Haruka could do was swallow and watch him.

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Ishii cleared his throat as he stood in front of the door.

– I can see ghosts.

The young man on the other side of the doors had apparently declared that.

The answer to whether that was true or false was behind the door. When Ishii thought about that, he realised that he felt incredible excitement rather than anxiety.

'Don't dawdle.'

Miyagawa pushed Ishii aside and opened the door.

Ishii hurriedly followed him, putting aside his feelings.

A young man was sitting on the reception sofa in the back of the room.

- He is Aoi Hideaki.

Big brownish eyes and a smallish nose and mouth. His face as a whole looked soft and young.

When Hideaki noticed Ishii and Miyagawa, he stood up quickly and bowed.

'My name is Aoi Hideaki.'

'I'm Miyagawa. A detective.'

'My name is Ishii.'

After everyone exchanged greetings, Ishii and Miyagawa sat opposite Hideaki.

'I apologise for taking up your time.'

Hideaki smiled gently.

In contrast to his young appearance, he was very calm and the picture of politeness.

'Well, please sit down,' Ishii urged.

Hideaki's expression softened and he sat once more on the sofa.

Before coming here, Ishii had taken a look at Hideaki's info.

Hideaki had lost his parents in the third year of high school. He had quit high school after that. One of his father's friends got him a job at a transport company. He was working now as well.

He lived with his sister, Yuuka, in the apartment his parents left behind. It seemed like Hideaki paid for all of Yuuka's nursing school fees.

Even in such tough circumstances, he had lived with all he had, and still he had gotten wrapped up in an incident like this – it hurt Ishii's heart to think about it.

'So you say you can see ghosts.'

Unlike Ishii, who wasn't sure whether to talk about it, Miyagawa said it carelessly.

It was like he didn't believe it from the start.

Hideaki seemed to sense that too, and his face twitched slightly.

'Yes. That said, it isn't like I can do it constantly. At some times, I can only sense them, and sometimes it's faint – it's very uncertain.'

Without flinching from Miyagawa's attitude, Hideaki replied in a clear voice.

Ishii felt sincerity from those words.

He didn't feel that he was suspicious, like he would from a fake exorcist trying to deceive someone. However, that didn't mean he could just believe him.

Furthermore, his eye wasn't red. Yakumo's ability to see the spirits of the dead came from his red left eye.

'Is there any way to prove it?' asked Ishii.

Hideaki shook his head.

'There's no proof besides my words, since nobody else can see them. It's easy to prove the existence of things that can be seen, but you can't prove the existence of something that can't be seen.'

'So you saying that you can't prove it, but we should believe you anyway?'

Miyagawa looked doubtful as he lit his cigarette.

Hideaki nodded with a smile. Ishii was surprised by that uprightness.

Normally, people would make excuses here, but he was different. On the contrary, when he was so straightforward, it made Ishii want to believe him.

'I can't prove my own ability. However, I can't just keep quiet because you won't believe me. Especially since my sister is involved this time...'

Hideaki gripped his hands into fists, sounding like he had a lump in his throat.

Anger, sadness, frustration – he probably had feelings fighting within him. Hideaki's expression twisted.

'I understand how you feel, but leave the investigation to the police.'

Miyagawa hit Hideaki's shoulder.

For a while, there was silence. Hideaki slowly took deep breaths. Ishii had no way to know what thoughts were in his head.

'The police won't be able to catch the culprit...' Hideaki said.

'What do you mean?' asked Ishii. He felt like there was a special meaning to Hideaki's words.

It was hard to believe what Hideaki had said.

'It's because the culprit is already dead.'

Hideaki's eyes, directly on him, seemed for just a moment to let off the colour red.

'What do you mean? Depending on what happens, we'll have to arrest you,' threatened Miyagawa, sounding agitated. Ishii felt such pressure from him that he wanted to shriek just from watching, but Hideaki was calm.

'I met the ghost of the culprit.'

'Please speak in a more concrete manner,' interrupted Ishii, restraining Miyagawa, who was growing twitchy.

'When I went to visit my sister's hospital, a man appeared.'

'He's the culprit?'

'He apologised a number of times to my sister. Asking her to forgive him somehow, since he had paid with his own life...'

'So the person who did it killed himself,' said Ishii.

Hideaki nodded.

– This young man's the real thing.

It wasn't Ishii's reason speaking to him. He was sure of it in his gut.

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6

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'I'm back.'

Gotou opened the sliding door to the temple's priests' quarters.

While taking off his shoes, he heard Nao's laugh from the living room. She was probably playing with his wife, Atsuko. Gotou went down the corridor and opened the sliding door to the living room.

'You're late.'

The one who spoke wasn't Atsuko but Eishin, wearing a priest's robe.

Eishin had been Isshin's teacher and managed temples in the Kanto region, so he was something like a boss, but to Gotou, he just looked like a depraved monk.

'Ahh.'

Nao, who had been playing with Eishin, noticed Gotou and flew towards him.

Gotou pet her on the head and then sat cross-legged in front of Eishin. Nao followed him and sat

next to Gotou.

'What are you doing?'

'Atsuko-san's out shopping right now,' Eishin said, playing dumb.

'That's not it, you damn monk.'

'Watch your tongue. Who do you think helped you find work?'

– Hitting me where it hurts.

To be frank, Eishin had been the one who introduced the request today to Gotou.

No, not just this one. All the requests he'd had since starting his detective agency had been from Eishin.

It hurt for Gotou to say it, but without Eishin, he would've been out of a job ages ago, but Gotou didn't want to admit it honestly.

'Shut up. You're just giving me the tasks you find annoying, right?'

'Do you want to lose the roof over your head?'

– Hitting me in another place where it hurts.

When Gotou took in Nao after Isshin's death, he had looked for a place to rent for their family, but he hadn't been able to find one. Then, Eishin had offered him a helping hand.

He had let them stay in the temple's priests' quarters, where Isshin had been living.

At the time, Gotou had thought he'd take any port in a storm, but now, he felt like Eishin had got a grip of his weak point and was using him however he liked.

'My bad.'

It hurt, but Gotou had to acknowledge his defeat.

Eishin smiled triumphantly, like he was saying, 'As long as you get it.'

'So how was it?' Eishin asked more formally.

'I kicked down the door and threatened the shut-in inside.'

Gotou had thought Eishin would scold him, but unexpectedly, Eishin laughed aloud.

'That funny?'

'Good medicine for that mother and child.'

'What?'

'Ah, Yoriko-san believed it was the work of demons and wouldn't listen to anyone. And I can't be forceful like you.'

It looked like Eishin had known from the start that it hadn't been a spirit.

'You're a cunning old man,' Gotou said carelessly.

'Saying hateful things doesn't become a splendid monk.'

'What?'

Eishin's sudden words made Gotou doubt his eyes.

'I'm saying that that won't let you become a splendid monk.'

'Who?'

'You.'

'Don't be stupid.'

Gotou waved his hand, as if to brush away a fly.

For a joke, it wasn't funny at all.

'I'm serious.'

Eishin's gaze was serious, which was unusual. It had an incredible pressure.

'Why do I have to be a monk?'

'Ever since Isshin's death, this temple's had no monk.'

'I get that, but...'

After Isshin died, Eishin's disciples had been doing the work at the temple.

But that couldn't continue forever.

'With Yakumo like that, he won't agree. So only you can continue.'

'Don't be ridiculous.'

'What's ridiculous about it? If you become a monk, you can continue to use these priests' quarters. And you can keep up your spiritual detective work. Requests would just keep coming. Not a bad idea, right?'

Eishin's words were strangely convincing. Gotou almost nodded.

– This is dangerous.

'Y'know, there are things people are suitable for and things they aren't. I'm not suitable.'

'I think you are.'

'Don't be stupid.'

'You're the type of guy who can't leave people who are troubled alone.'

'If you don't keep your jokes in check, I'll hit you!'

Gotou spoke angrily, but Eishin didn't seem to care. He smirked at him.

If Gotou kept talking, he might really end up becoming a monk.

'If you don't have anything to do, get out already.'

Gotou tried to chase Eishin out, but Eishin just continued smirking at Gotou.

For some reason, Gotou had a bad feeling.

'Actually, I have another request.'

– My feeling was right.

Gotou put his head in his hands and sighed.

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7

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Haruka gulped and looked at Yakumo.

'No good, eh...'

For a while, Yakumo looked at the door, but finally he sat back down in his chair, seeming exhausted.

There was a wrinkle between his brow and he had a difficult expression on his face. He looked pale too.

'Hey, what happened?' Haruka asked, leaning forward.

'There was a ghost there earlier.'

Yakumo ran a hand through his messy hair.

Even though Haruka hadn't been able to see it herself, she had sensed it from Yakumo's reaction.

'Someone you know?'

She had sensed that from Yakumo's words and actions too.

When Yakumo looked at the door, he had said 'Why are you here...' He had said those words because it was someone he knew.

'Yeah,' replied Yakumo, pressing a hand against his left eye.

There was no will-power in his voice. He must have had a great shock.

'A friend?'

'We weren't that close.'

– That's a lie.

Haruka felt that. She could tell from how Yakumo had panicked.

She wanted to confirm it, but since it was Yakumo, he would probably just hide it.

'I see...'

'In any case, I need to look into this in detail.'

'Look into what?'

'There's something I want you to call Ishii-san about to check.'

'Ishii-san?'

'Yes. I want you to ask whether this name's come up in any deaths from incidents or accidents.'

After saying that, Yakumo quickly wrote a name on a memo.

– Aoi Yuuka.

A woman's name. Probably the ghost who had been here earlier.

The urge to ask how they knew each other came to Haruka's head, but before she could, Yakumo tried to leave the room.

'Where are you going?'

'There's something I want to check,' Yakumo said quickly. Then, he left.

I've been left behind – there were a number of things Haruka wanted to ask, but first, she had to confirm about that woman.

Haruka called up Ishii's phone number from her mobile's memory and made the call.

After a number of rings, Ishii answered.

'Hello, it's been a while. It's Ozawa Haruka.'

<H-H-Haruka-chan!>

Ishii's loud voice came through the receiver. He sounded the same as always.

'I'm sorry for calling so suddenly. Do you have any time right now?'

<Yes, if it'll just be for a bit.>

Ishii's voice dropped down a tone.

Perhaps somebody was beside him. It seemed like it would be best to keep it short.

'Actually, there's something I want to ask.'

<What is it?>

'I want to know whether a woman named Aoi Yuuka has died in an incident or accident.'

<Aoi Yuuka!>

Ishii's voice jumped an octave on the other side of the phone. From that response –

'Do you know her?'

<A woman who was assaulted in a robbery two days ago had the same name.>

'Eh?'

– Assaulted in a robbery.

Haruka felt her throat grow tight at those unexpected words.

<Right now, she's undergoing treatment at the general hospital's ICU.>

'Is she alive?'

<Yes. Though her condition isn't good...>

– Thank goodness.

Haruka sighed in relief.

She didn't know what relationship Yakumo had with that woman, but if she was important to him, Haruka wanted her to be safe. Those were her true feelings.

<Excuse me, but why are you asking about her?>

Ishii's question sounded doubtful.

'That's... I don't really understand either. Yakumo-kun just asked me...'

<Yakumo-shi did?>

'Yes.'

<Actually, there's something I'd like to ask Yakumo-shi as well.>

'Something you'd like to ask?'

<Yes. It's actually about Aoi Yuuka-san's case.>

'What is it?'

<No, er... It's a bit hard to explain...>

Ishii fumbled for words.

'I understand. I'll tell Yakumo-kun once he's back.'

<Thank you.>

After thanking Ishii, Haruka hung up.

She had no proof, but something terrible was going to happen – she had that feeling.

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8

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After Ishii finished his call with Haruka, he returned to the Unsolved Cases Special Investigations Room.

Up until now, just hearing Haruka's voice would make him beside himself with joy. He was still happy now, but something was different.

Ishii felt once more that his feelings towards Haruka had changed in a complicated manner.

It might have been because he had seen the strength of her feelings towards Yakumo during the incident one month ago.

'Who was the call from?'

Miyagawa looked up from his papers as he leant back on his seat.

'Ah, just an acquaintance...' Ishii replied with a smile.

It would definitely be bad if he told the truth. He had blabbed about the investigation to a civilian.

Though Gotou didn't really care about that, that wouldn't fly with Miyagawa.

Ishii didn't know if Miyagawa believed Ishii's lie, but he didn't press any further.

'So what do you think?' asked Miyagawa, lighting his cigarette.

'What do you mean?'

'That Hideaki guy earlier. You believe him?'

Miyagawa threw the documents onto the desk.

Those documents had a man's details in them. A man named Imoto Yasuo.

After that, Hideaki had said the name of the burglar who had assaulted his sister, Yuuka. His name was Imoto Yasuo. After checking the police database, they had found him.

About two years ago, he had been violent towards his wife and there had been a police intervention.

In the past, Imoto had entered a rising religious organisation called Jikoukoushinkai and had donated a considerable amount of money. That had been the cause of the couple's quarrel.

However, with just this information, they couldn't know what type of person Imoto was.

'I don't...'

'You don't seriously believe that the guy can see ghosts, right?'

Miyagawa leant forward, a furrow between his brow.

'I would like to deny it, but...'

'What?'

'There is Yakumo-shi's case.'

When Ishii said that name, Miyagawa made a 'hmm' sound.

Miyagawa knew that Yakumo's unique ability to see the spirits of the dead had solved a number of cases.

Because of that, he couldn't reject what Hideaki said without listening to him.

'But that guy's eye is red.'

Miyagawa pointed at his own eye.

'But we don't know whether he can see them because of the red colour of his eye.'

'Well, that's true...'

Miyagawa frowned.

Yakumo had said this before. 'I just have the physical ability to see.'

If the ability to see the spirits of the dead was just something genetic, it wouldn't be strange at all if people besides Yakumo could see the spirits of the dead. However, in contrast to that, there was Kamiyama's case as well. At that time, Ishii had completely believed him and met with unfortunate circumstances.

Earlier, this was what Ishii had wanted to consult Yakumo about. Yakumo would be able to tell whether Hideaki was the real thing or not.

Perhaps Yakumo had already stuck his neck into the case.

That's why he'd asked Haruka to look into the victim, Yuuka – Ishii had that theory.

'Well, there's no point thinking about it here.'

Miyagawa pressed his cigarette into the ashtray and stood up, determined.

'Eh?'

'What do you mean, eh? We'll find out whether he's the real thing or not if we meet Imoto Yasuo.'

Miyagawa tapped the documents.

'Ah, that's right.'

Ishii stood up from his seat.

Gotou would have probably made the same choice. The answer wouldn't come to them just from thinking about it, so they had to move.

If Imoto Yasuo was alive, that would prove Hideaki's words to be a lie, but on the other hand, if Imoto Yasuo had really committed suicide – no, he'd stop thinking for now.

Ishii hit his own cheeks and ran out after Miyagawa.

– He fell.

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'So where should I go?'

As Gotou drove the Mini Cooper, he posed the question to Eishin, who was in the passenger seat.

When two people with large frames rode it, it made Gotou feel like the air in the car was thin.

'There's a residential area away from the city, right?'

'Yeah.'

'Just head towards there.'

'What? Isn't this the opposite direction?'

'Yes, it is.'

In contrast to Gotou's anger, Eishin was nonchalant.

'Then say it earlier.'

'You're the one who slammed the pedal without asking where we were going, right?'

What Eishin was saying was true, but his tone irritated Gotou. Eishin was mouthy enough to be comparable to Yakumo.

'My bad,' grumbled Gotou. He made a U-turn and then looked at Eishin again.

'So what kind of request is it?'

'The daughter of a family who supports a temple went to Lake Kawaguchi with people from her university circle.'

'And then?'

Lake Kawaguchi had a lot of camp sites and multipurpose venues. Since it was close to the city, university circles often went there for camps.

'It seems like she went exploring with a male friend in the same circle.'

'That's just an excuse, right?'

Gotou snorted.

A guy and a girl – and in this season – would definitely not just go out with the intent of exploring.

'I thought that too, but it seems they really went to the Sea of Trees to explore.'

'By Sea of Trees, do you mean the one in Aokigahara?'

'Yeah.'

Eishin nodded, a complicated expression on his face.

A chill ran down Gotou's spine. Exploring Aokigahara's Sea of Trees of all things – it was stupid.

Aokigahara's Sea of Trees was a primeval forest at the base of Mount Fuji. It was considered a natural treasure and ideal for hiking or a peaceful walk through the woods.

However, because the same scenery continued, if an amateur just walked in carelessly, they could get lost even in the day. If they weren't careful, they wouldn't be able to leave the forest.

That wasn't the only problem.

In Aokigahara, near a hundred corpses from suicide were found a year. It was famous as a spot for suicides.

In short, there were countless hate-filled spirits in the forest. It wasn't a place you should just go for fun.

It was like asking to be possessed by a ghost.

'So you saying they saw a ghost?'

'Well, rather than saw...'

Eishin had just put his chin in his hand when a mobile phone rang. Gotou used a hands-free function to answer.

'Who is it?'

<I keep saying this, but...>

'You want to tell me to fix my phone manner, right?' said Gotou, interrupting the voice on the phone. If he had to hear Yakumo's whining on top of Eishin's annoying blather, he'd burn a hole through his stomach.

<If you understand that, please act on it.>

'I'll think about it. So what is it?'

Yakumo wasn't the type to call somebody for no reason.

<Actually, there's something I would like to request.>

'Sorry, but right now I'm being used by old man Eishin.'

Gotou glanced at the passenger seat. Yakumo wasn't good with Eishin. He wouldn't say much if Gotou was with Eishin.

<Are you still committing fraud?>

'It's not fraud. I'm a detective.'

<It's something like it, isn't it?>

'It's completely different.'

<I don't care either way, but it would be better for amateurs to keep their noses out of spiritual

affairs.>

'Acting so high and mighty.'

<Gotou-san, you'll be possessed by a ghost.>

'Enough with the chitchat. What do you want to ask?'

<Please call me once you've settled down. I'll tell you in detail then.>

After declaring that by himself, Yakumo hung up.

– The guy does whatever he wants, as usual.

'That Yakumo just now?' asked Eishin.

'Yeah.'

'If you're going to meet him, I'll come too. There are a few things I want to say.'

'Do what you want,' Gotou said carelessly.

If Eishin was with him, Yakumo would probably be a bit quieter.

'So what were you saying?'

Gotou brought the conversation back on topic.

'Ah, that's right. Actually, it seems like they found a corpse.'

Gotou's face twitched. Though corpses weren't a good thing, at Aokigahara, it wasn't that unusual.

They had probably found the corpse of somebody who had committed suicide.

'What an exploration.'

Gotou snorted.

'Indeed. Since the corpse of somebody who'd been murdered was found in that Sea of Trees.'

'W-what did you say?' said Gotou without thinking.

He'd been sure it was a corpse from a suicide, but it was a different story if it was a murder.

'Don't make a fuss.'

'It's a murder. Of course I'm making a fuss.'

'You're not a detective any more, right? And it's a different jurisdiction.'

'That's...'

Exactly as Eishin said. Gotou wasn't a detective any more. He couldn't stick his neck into the case.

Even if he were a detective, murder cases were done in the area the corpse was found. Since it was Aokigahara's Sea of Trees, that would be done by the Yamanashi precinct.

'Well, it seems like there've been questionings, but it was proven that she had nothing to do with

the case.'

'So that's settled.'

'Are you an idiot? We're talking about a spiritual phenomenon right now.'

'My bad then. What about it?'

Eishin's tone always irritated him, but there was no point quarrelling about it now. Gotou urged Eishin to continue.

'After going back, it seems like that girl got a phone call.'

'From whom?'

'The ghost.'

'What?'

Gotou's eyes flew wide in suspicion, but Eishin's expression was the picture of seriousness.

'A call from a ghost, eh...'

'She got it on her mobile. When she answered, there was the voice of a man.'

'Wasn't it somebody's prank?'

'But it'd be pretty nasty for a prank.'

'What?'

'On the other side of the phone, the man kept saying the same thing.'

Eishin slowly turned towards Gotou.

When he looked up at him, his large face seemed incredibly creepy.

'What?'

'You killed me...'

Eishin's words made a chill run down Gotou's spine.

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10

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'How was it?'

That was the first thing Yakumo said after returning to the room.

Haruka told Yakumo what she had heard from Ishii. As she did so, she felt like it was hard to breathe.

Even though she had come here to tell Yakumo about her future career, she had ended up

wrapped up in an unexpected case.

'I see...' said Yakumo curtly once Haruka was finished.

Perhaps it was because he knew that Yuuka was alive that his expression seemed a bit relieved.

However, there was something Haruka didn't understand.

'Earlier, the ghost that appeared in front of you was the woman named Yuuka-san, right?'

'Yeah.'

'Why would she show up as a ghost if she's alive?'

That was Haruka's question.

Yakumo ran a hand through his messy hair.

'To put it simply, it's an out-of-body experience.'

'Out-of-body experience?'

'Yes. Something similar happened before, right? With my uncle's incident...'

'Ah!'

Haruka finally understand.

Just as Yakumo said, something similar had happened in the past. A girl's spirit had left her living body and wandered a hospital.

Yakumo was probably saying that this incident was similar.

'It makes me suspect your memory.'

'Yes, yes, I have a bad memory. So what were you doing, Yakumo-kun?' asked Haruka.

Yakumo combed his hair back and looked up at the ceiling.

'I contacted Gotou-san, thinking I'd get him to help.'

'Is Gotou-san well?'

Haruka hadn't seen Gotou since the last case.

After hearing his name, Haruka felt like seeing him again. Come to think of it, since Gotou had quit the police, they had much fewer chances for all of them to meet.

'Yeah, he's the same as always.'

'That so?'

'And I tried calling her older brother, but the call didn't go through.'

Here, Yakumo looked displeased.

'Her older brother?'

'Yeah. Her older brother, Aoi Hideaki, was in the same class as me when I was in the third year of high school.'

'Were you friends with him?' asked Haruka.

Yakumo had a difficult expression on his face.

'Friend. Where does being a friend start and end?'

'Eh?'

Haruka didn't understand the meaning of the question.

'What's the definition of a friend?' Yakumo said reluctantly.

When Haruka looked at his face, she felt sad.

Yakumo had always been like this. He perceived the relationships between people with his thoughts rather than his feelings.

That's why sometimes he couldn't straightforwardly accept that people liked him.

– It's sad.

Haruka felt that.

'There's no definition for a friend. Isn't it fine as long as you both think that you want to be together?'

'It's fine for you. You're simple.'

Yakumo's eyes narrowed as he smiled wryly.

'You make things too difficult, Yakumo-kun.'

'That might be true...'

After saying that, Yakumo let out a quiet laugh.

'Even if you aren't friends, you're related somehow, right?'

Otherwise, Yakumo wouldn't be so disturbed.

'There was an incident when I was in the third year of high school.'

Yakumo ran a hand through his messy hair.

'Incident?'

'Though it wasn't anything that serious, that caused Hideaki to realise that I could see.'

'Eh?' said Haruka in surprise. That meant –

'He knew about my eye. One of the few people who did.'

Yakumo pointed his index finger at his left eye.

'Is that so?'

If that was true, he must have been somebody special to Yakumo.

'Anyway, let's go see how she is.'

After a silence, Yakumo stood up, as if for a change of pace.

'OK,' replied Haruka, standing up too.

The two of them had just left the Movie Research Circle room when something came to Haruka's mind.

'Hey, what did Yuuka-san's spirit say?' asked Haruka.

Yakumo stopped and looked up at the sky.

The clear blue autumn sky had just one little stray cloud, blown by the wind.

'A deep forest...'

Even though Yakumo was beside her, his voice sounded far away for some reason.

'Forest?'

'Yeah. A deep forest. And that... she wanted me to save someone...'

That moment, Yakumo looked incredibly sad.

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11

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Ishii walked on the pedestrian path beside the Tamo River.

He saw the water gate in the distance. That place had a lot of memories for Ishii. During the case that he had first paired up with Gotou, he had run down this path with all his might.

Even though it had only been a month since Gotou left the police, Ishii felt very nostalgic about the time they'd spent together.

'Honestly. What a pain,' grumbled Miyagawa, walking beside Ishii.

Ishii understood how he felt. They had really been given something troublesome to deal with. However, Ishii wasn't that negative about it.

'However, we might find out the truth to the burglary case.'

'You're optimistic.'

'Is that so?'

'Yeah. When we first met, to be honest, I thought you were a pretty hesitant man.'

'That's true...'

Ishii couldn't deny that.

Ishii couldn't be confident, and when he was hesitant, he always did nothing.

That was why he had looked up to Gotou. He was never hesitant. He didn't think about what might happen.

He just rushed straight down the path he believed in.

'But you've changed recently.'

'Eh?'

'Especially after pairing up, I've started thinking that my impression was wrong.'

'What do you mean?'

'I'm saying you've got your feet planted firmly on the ground.'

'Feet on the ground?'

Ishii repeated Miyagawa's words, but he didn't really understand.

'Yeah. On top of that, you're bad at giving up and you're stubborn. You'll be a good detective.'

'Eh?'

Ishii stopped for a moment, so surprised that he had been praised.

He'd never even thought in his dreams that he'd hear those words from Miyagawa. To be honest, he even felt that he wasn't apt to be a detective.

'Don't dawdle!' said Miyagawa, interrupting Ishii's thoughts.

Before Ishii had noticed, Miyagawa had already walked fairly far ahead. Ishii hurriedly ran after him.

His feet tangled and he almost fell, but somehow, he regained his footing.

'I think this is it.'

After walking for a while, they went off the pedestrian path to the road. Miyagawa stopped in front of an apartment building.

It was probably thirty years or so since it was built. It was an old apartment. There were cracks all over the walls and the steel stairs outside were rusty.

Ishii checked the address on the map. This was the place, no doubt about it.

'So, now we'll find out if that guy's story is the truth or a lie.'

Miyagawa rubbed his hands together as he said that.

In the files, it said that Imoto Yasuo had lived in this apartment ever since his divorce.

'Yes,' replied Ishii, though his heart was beating loudly.

For a moment, Hideaki's face came up in his head.

His eyes had had no doubt in them. They were the eyes of someone who knew the path they should take.

– Can he really see ghosts?

'Let's go.'

Miyagawa, standing in front of the door, pressed the intercom button.

However, there was no response. Miyagawa pressed the button multiple times, but there was still no response.

'Maybe he's not here?'

Miyagawa clicked his tongue and knocked on the door.

However, there was still no response.

When Ishii looked at the mailbox by the door, he saw that there were a lot of advertisements stuffed inside it.

So he hasn't been back for a while, or –

'No helping it. Let's come back later.'

Miyagawa stuck his hands in his pockets and turned around.

'Please wait a moment.'

Ishii called out to stop him.

Hideaki had said that Imoto felt guilty and had committed suicide. If that was true, there was no way that there'd be a response.

'Want to go around the back?' said Miyagawa.

Though Ishii hadn't spoken, it seemed that Miyagawa had sensed his thoughts.

Ishii responded with a nod.

They went to the back of the apartment, between the fence and the building. There was a garden facing the balcony.

'There.'

Miyagawa pointed at the balcony that was probably for room 102.

The glass door for the balcony had curtains covering it, so they couldn't see inside.

Ishii climbed the fence onto the balcony. There was a small gap between the curtains. He put his face up to it to peer inside.

It was a dim room. Then –

'Eek!'

After peering in, Ishii shrieked without thinking and leapt back. His back hit the fence.

'What's wrong?'

'A-a person...'

Ishii's voice was shaking.

Inside the room, a man had hanged himself to death –

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12

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Haruka visited the general hospital with Yakumo.

She had visited this hospital a number of times before. Hata Hideyoshi, a strange coroner who called his work his hobby, worked at this hospital.

'I was thinking about who it could be, but it's you, Yakumo-kun?'

After going through the entrance, somebody suddenly called out to them. Haruka turned around in surprise.

Speak of the devil. Standing there was Hata in his doctor's gown. His shoulders shook as he let out a creepy giggle.

He had a body like a dried mummy, but his eyes alone shone brightly.

Haruka always thought he looked like a demon.

'It's been a while.'

Yakumo bowed his head.

'That bear isn't with you today?'

'Wasn't that bear chased out of the forest for causing too much trouble?'

'Oh, that's right.'

Hata smiled, looking incredibly pleased.

'I'm here on a different matter today.'

'I see. That's too bad. Come play every once in a while.'

'You plan to dissect me, don't you?'

'You could tell?'

Yakumo and Hata were exchanging distasteful jokes.

It was hard for Haruka to join the conversation.

'Putting the jokes aside, you can come to play. I'll show you my collection,' Hata said with pride. Then, he hobbled away.

After that, they went to the reception and asked for Yuuka's hospital room. They were told that she was currently in the ICU and couldn't see anybody.

Yakumo tried to ask about it in detail, but naturally, because of privacy, they couldn't be told.

'Anyway, let's just go to the hospital room,' said Yakumo.

He started walking. Haruka nodded and followed him.

They took the stairs up to the third floor and went to the ICU with the help of signs. Then, Yakumo suddenly stopped.

Though it was through a glass, they could see inside.

There was a bed with a woman lying face-up. She was probably Yuuka.

She had a respirator attached to her mouth and IV drips hanging from her arm. Her head was wrapped in bandages, covered in blood.

'Why did this...' murmured Haruka.

From what Ishii had told her, Yuuka had been assaulted during a burglary. Why did a woman who had done no wrong have to suffer like this –

It was too much for Haruka.

'She said she wanted me to save someone...'

As Yakumo said that, he looked straight at Yuuka.

His voice sounded just a little hoarse.

'Yes.'

'Who on earth could she want me to save after being assaulted during a burglary, and how?'

'I don't know.'

Haruka shook her head.

She didn't know, but she did know that Yuuka was a kind woman. Normally, after suffering something like this, somebody would first feel hatred and resentment towards the culprit.

However, she probably had something more important to her than that.

'What are you hoping for?'

After saying that, Yakumo turned on his heels and started walking.

What is Yakumo thinking right now – Haruka wanted to know, but at the same time, she felt like knowing would be a very scary thing.

'Her brother Aoi Hideaki said something to me,' said Yakumo as he walked down the corridor.

'What did he say?'

'That he could see the spirits of the dead.'

'No way...'

Haruka was shocked by those words.

Somebody besides Yakumo could see the spirits of the dead – but now that she thought about it, it wasn't that strange.

The man with two red eyes could see the spirits of the dead too.

Haruka could see ghosts too sometimes, depending on the timing and situation.

'Couldn't you understand each other since you had the same ability?' asked Haruka.

Yakumo shook her head.

'At the time, I couldn't accept him.'

'Why not?'

Haruka didn't understand.

Because Yakumo could see the spirits of the dead, he had suffered for many years. Hideaki should have been a special existence to him, as somebody he could understand and be understood by.

'We were completely different.'

'How were you different?'

'To put it simply, hope.'

'Hope?'

'Yes. He believed that being able to see would change something. He even thought of it proudly.'

That would be the complete opposite of Yakumo, who had suffered because of his ability to see. But –

'Yakumo-kun, you also...'

Yakumo had used his ability to see to solve many cases up until now.

He had saved many spirits that hadn't been able to rest. He wouldn't have been able to do that without hope.

'I was envious of him. Even jealous.'

Yakumo's brow furrowed.

The light of the fluorescent lamps made it look like his red eye was shining.

'Jealous...'

'He naturally did something I couldn't. He had something he should protect, but I didn't...'

Yakumo smiled bitterly, looking down, and shut his mouth.

– Something he should protect.

Those words struck a chord with Haruka.

Yakumo must have felt that way in high school because of the matter with his middle school homeroom teacher, Takagishi.

After reaching the entrance, a young man stood in front of Yakumo.

His big brown eyes were impressive.

'Saitou Yakumo... Why are you here...'

He spoke up the moment he saw Yakumo. In contrast to the young man's surprise, Yakumo was calm.

'Aoi Hideaki. It's been a while,' said Yakumo, with narrowed eyes.

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13

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'Here?'

Standing in front of the house, Gotou asked that question to Eishin, who was standing next to him.

Around here, about five years ago, the mountain was cut open for a new residential area which had houses that all looked the same. Even looking at the nameplate, Gotou wasn't sure about it.

Eishin nodded and pressed the intercom button. Immediately, a woman's voice came back: 'Yes?' Eishin gave his name. After a while, the entrance door opened and a middle-aged woman welcomed them.

The woman had a plump face and was probably in her early fifties.

'Master Eishin, I'm sorry you had to come all this way.'

The woman bowed at her waist.

'Don't concern yourself about it,' Eishin said kindly. Eishin was incredibly good at keeping up appearances. His expression was gentle – he was like a completely different person than when he talked with Gotou.

The woman's expression became slightly gentler. Then, she turned her eyes to Gotou. She didn't actually ask 'Who is this?' but Gotou could hear her doubt.

'This man is my manservant. His name is Gotou Kumakichi².'

2 Kuma (熊) is Japanese for bear. Kichi (吉) is a common suffix for male names.

– Who the hell's his manservant!? Who the hell's Kumakichi!?

Gotou had a mountain of things he wanted to rebut to, but with the person who'd made the request in front of him, he managed somehow to hold it in.

'I'm Gotou.'

'My name is Maehara Fumiko.'

After Gotou introduced himself, the woman politely bowed again.

'This is sudden, but could we meet your daughter?' asked Eishin.

'Please follow me,' replied Fumiko, inviting them into her home.

After passing through the entrance, they went into what was probably the living room. Gotou and Eishin sat next to each other the sofa, while Fumiko left the room. She was probably going to call her daughter.

'Who the hell's Kumakichi?'

Gotou glared at Eishin.

'You.'

'I'm not called Kumakichi.'

'But Yakumo called you Kuma.'

'You're saying that on purpose, didn't you. I'll punch you,' said Gotou threateningly. Then, the door opened and Rina came into the room.

Though she looked young, she had dyed brown hair with heavy makeup on her eyes, like a model. She felt very much like a current university student.

'You don't have to be so afraid. Let's sit down and talk,' urged Eishin.

Rina nodded and sat down on the opposite sofa.

Then, Eishin asked her to explain what had happened in the Sea of Trees. It was pretty much the same as what Gotou had heard before.

Just as Gotou was starting to feel bored, Rina said something strange.

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

'What? Just say it,' urged Gotou.

Rina continued, though she seemed hesitant.

'Just as I was trying to run after finding the corpse, a man appeared in front of me.'

'Man?'

'Yes. That man had two deep red eyes...'

Rina's body shivered, like she was remembering the incident.

'That true?'

In his agitation, Gotou grabbed Rina's shoulders.

Rina's eyes welled up with tears, perhaps in fear, but she nodded.

'Calm down a bit,' reprimanded Eishin. Gotou let go of Rina and sat down on the sofa again.

– What's happening?

If that man showed up with the spiritual phenomenon, they couldn't go with ordinary methods. He had to be planning something inconceivable.

'Let's get back on topic. Do you have the mobile you mentioned?' said Eishin after clearing his throat.

'Yes,' replied Rina. Then, she hesitantly put her mobile on the table.

Besides the number of character straps from a pirate manga dangling from it, it was a completely normal mobile phone.

'How many calls did you get?'

Eishin continued his questions.

'I don't know. I was so afraid that I turned off the phone immediately.'

Rina shook her head.

'Did you check the call display?'

This time, Gotou was the one to speak.

'It was an unknown number...'

'What do you think?' Eishin said to Gotou quietly.

'There's something suspicious about it,' said Gotou, glaring at the mobile.

The little amount of information made it hard to come to a decision, but at this stage, rather than a spiritual phenomenon, it seemed more like a prank by somebody who knew the situation.

'It's true. Please believe me,' pleaded Rina with wide eyes, perhaps sensing Gotou's thoughts.

'I'm not denying what you experienced.'

'But...'

Rina looked down feebly.

'Anyway, we need to confirm this.'

Eishin was the one who spoke. That would probably be the quickest.

Gotou took the mobile on the table and turned it on. After a while, the screen lit up.

The waiting screen had a photo of a dim forest on it. Gotou couldn't say he really liked it.

'Why'd you make a photo like this the waiting screen?'

When Gotou showed the screen to Rina, she let out a shriek and jumped back to the sofa. Her body was shaking terribly.

'What's wrong?'

'I-I don't know... I don't recognise that photo,' responded Rina in a hoarse voice. That response – it didn't seem like she was lying.

Even Gotou had a bad feeling. Something unexpected was going to happen. He had that feeling.

Riiiiiiiing –

Interrupting Gotou's thoughts, the mobile phone rang.

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The scene was busy with activity because of the hanged corpse that was found.

An ambulance carried away the corpse as investigation members began their search of the scene. Ishii watched from a corner of the apartment grounds.

The corpse that was found was definitely Imoto Yasuo.

A will was found in the room. It appeared that the will's contents hinted that he had done the burglary himself.

Furthermore, Aoi Yuuka's lost wallet had been found.

The situation made it seem like Imoto Yasuo had assaulted Aoi Yuuka during a burglary, but in Ishii's heart, there was still something that didn't seem right.

'Oi! What the hell are you doing!?'

A yell that sounded like Miyagawa's suddenly reverberated through the area.

Ishii turned to look to see Miyagawa approaching Honda, who was giving out orders. It seemed like Miyagawa might punch Honda at any moment.

'Miyagawa-san.'

Ishii hurriedly ran over.

'You shut up!' Miyagawa responded immediately.

'But...'

'This guy's telling us to keep away from the investigation.'

'Eh?'

So that was the cause of Miyagawa's anger – the moment Ishii understood that, anger sprouted up within him too.

There was no way that Ishii could accept it if Honda had made them deal with Hideaki because he thought it was troublesome, only to tell them to back off once they found the corpse.

'This isn't a game. If you're going to complain, I've got my own thoughts too.'

Honda's words were the picture of highhandedness.

It was like throwing oil into the fire for Miyagawa's anger.

'You're the one who's playing around!'

As expected, Miyagawa shouted angrily at Honda.

'Miyagawa-san, please calm down.'

Ishii pulled Miyagawa back by force, even as he continued to yell.

If this continued, Miyagawa might get demoted again. Miyagawa's reputation had already dropped because of the matter with Gotou.

'That fool!'

After leaving the apartment premises, Miyagawa kicked the ground with as much force as he could.

'I understand how you feel, but...'

'Even if you don't tell me, I get it,' replied Miyagawa, the force completely gone from his voice.

He seemed incredibly tired.

'Miyagawa-san...'

If the incident with Gotou hadn't happened, Miyagawa would have been the one giving out orders, but now, he was completely left out of the loop.

Ishii thought that Gotou's choice then had been correct. That was why Miyagawa didn't blame Gotou either. That just made it hurt more.

Perhaps this was what it meant to make a choice.

'You think he's the real thing?'

After a silence, Miyagawa asked that question while lighting a cigarette.

'Are you talking about Hideaki-shi?'

'Yes,' replied Miyagawa, his face solemn.

They found the corpse because of Hideaki's testimony. If his ability was real, they had nothing to worry about.

However, if it was false, a number of problems arose.

'I don't... How do the higher-ups plan on dealing with this case?'

One thing bothered Ishii.

If the culprit was found from a regular police investigation, there wouldn't be any problem, but the situation was a little different this time.

Ishii was curious about how the detective department, starting with Honda, would conclude this.

'That fool's completely useless.'

Miyagawa glared at Honda, who was giving orders in front of the apartment.

'Eh?'

'He plans on pulling Hideaki in as an accomplice.'

'Why would he?'

'It's simple. His theory's that Hideaki knew about Imoto because he killed him. Honda's going to make Hideaki confess in an interrogation.'

Miyagawa's frown was so deep that it couldn't be any deeper.

'But that's...'

That was far too hasty.

Rushing forward with just a theory would make the investigation veer off course. Furthermore –

'That room was a locked room.'

The apartment door had been locked. That wasn't all – there was a chain lock on the inside too.

Ishii and Miyagawa had gone in by breaking the glass door.

'That guy's going to get that out of Hideaki too.'

'It won't go that easily!'

Even Ishii ended up raising his voice.

'Don't tell me that. If you're going to say it to anyone, say it to that pampered brat.'

Miyagawa looked at Honda again.

Ishii felt disappointment spread throughout him. If it were Gotou, he would have probably gone at Honda without mercy, but unfortunately, Ishii didn't even have the courage to share his opinion with the chief of the detectives.

Even if he could give his opinion, Honda had chosen to leave Ishii and Miyagawa out of the investigation. He definitely wouldn't listen to what they had to say.

'This leaves a bad taste in my mouth.'

Miyagawa put his cigarette into his portable ashtray.

'It really does... What do you plan to do, Miyagawa-san?'

'Nothing.'

'Eh?'

'We've been left out of the investigation. There's nothing we can do.'

After glaring at the scene, Miyagawa walked away briskly.

Miyagawa probably felt uncaring because he had been left out of the investigation. Ishii understood those feelings. Anybody would feel angry after being treated that way.

However, was it acceptable for them to back down?

Hideaki was being treated as a suspect. Ishii himself just couldn't accept that.

'I...'

Ishii was irritated with himself for being unable to make a decision.

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15

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Riiiiing –

The mobile phone rang on top of the table.

Gotou thought that Rina was going to scream, when she just covered both ears and kept repeating 'Stop it already...' like a spell, sitting down right there.

Gotou looked at Eishin.

Riiiiing –

The phone kept ringing.

Gotou slowly reached out and took the mobile in his hand. He looked at the number displayed on the screen. It read <Unknown>.

– Is it really somebody's prank?

'Why not try answering?' said Eishin, peering at the mobile.

That was right. Just looking at the mobile wouldn't get anything started. If it was a prank, Gotou could just give a good scolding. If it was really a call from a ghost, he'd bring in Yakumo. That was all.

Gotou was just about to accept the call when the ringing stopped.

'It's because you were dawdling,' Eishin said mockingly.

'Shut up.'

'Even though your body's as big as a bear's, your heart's smaller than a flea's.'

Eishin smirked.

– This damn monk!

'I can't keep it in any longer! We're going outside! I'll punch you a good one!'

Riiiiing –

The mobile phone started ringing again, drowning out Gotou's yell. Just like earlier, the display showed <Unknown>.

'Come on,' said Eishin, elbowing Gotou's stomach.

– You don't have to tell me.

Gotou answered the call and put the mobile by his ear.

'Who is it?' asked Gotou, but there was no answer.

On the other side of the phone, he could hear wind and crackling branches.

'Hello? I'm asking who's there,' said Gotou more forcefully.

He could now hear somebody breathing quietly. It looked like somebody was on the other side of the phone.

'If you don't stop screwing around...'

<You...>

Gotou heard a voice.

A man's voice, similar to a beast's.

'What?'

<You... did...>

The man's voice echoed in Gotou's ears.

A chill ran down his spine.

– This isn't a prank. It's a real ghost.

Gotou was sure of it. This was bad. Answering the phone was the wrong choice.

– I need to hang up now.

That was what Gotou thought, but his body wouldn't work the way he wanted t.

His forehead was drenched with sweat.

'What's wrong?'

Eishin spoke up. He seemed to have sensed something was wrong. However, Gotou was unable to answer.

He felt like something incredibly dark was flowing into him through the phone.

<You...>

– No. It wasn't me.

<Killed...>

– No.

Gotou frantically fought back.

However, that resistance was futile. That dark something swallowed Gotou's consciousness –

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16

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Haruka stood by a maple tree in the hospital courtyard.

Yakumo was facing Hideaki a little away from her.

Evening approached. Its reddish purple light made it difficult to see their expressions clearly.

'I feel kind of nostalgic,' said Hideaki in a gentle tone.

'Yeah,' Yakumo replied brusquely, his tone a bit stiff.

It felt like there was a difference in the distance they felt between each other.

'She your girlfriend?' said Hideaki. For just a moment, his eyes met hers.

'No, that isn't...'

Under that straight gaze, which seemed to look straight through her, Haruka felt flustered.

'No. She's just a friend,' Yakumo said bluntly.

Though he wasn't incorrect, being denied so readily like that made Haruka's heart plummet. Don't come any closer to me – it was like he was telling her that.

Hideaki started to laugh, his shoulders shaking, as if he thought something was funny.

'You've changed, Saitou.'

After laughing for a while, Hideaki looked at Yakumo again.

'Nothing's changed,' replied Yakumo a bit testily.

'You have. The old Saitou would never have called somebody a friend.'

'I don't remember.'

Yakumo looked at his feet as if to try to escape Hideaki's gaze.

'I see... Well, whatever. More importantly, what are you doing here today?'

'I came to visit your sister.'

This time, Hideaki was the one who looked away.

'To see Yuuka...'

Hideaki gripped his hands into fists and his face twisted, as if in pain.

It felt like he was forcing himself to hold back emotions that could explode out at any moment.

'I heard about the incident.'

'Is that so?'

'Your sister came to me.'

'What?'

Hideaki's eyes widened in shock.

'Her spirit left her body.'

'I see... Yuuka went to you...'

Hideaki's expression softened just a bit. It seemed like he understood what happened.

'She came to me for help.'

'Help? Why from you?'

'I don't know.'

Yakumo shook his head.

'I see...'

'She left two messages.'

'What were they?'

““Deep forest” and “I want you to save someone”.”

'Save someone in a deep forest... What does it mean?'

'I came to confirm that.'

Hideaki was silent as he looked down for a while, but then he suddenly looked up.

'I feel like I understand.'

'Understand?'

'Actually, the man who assaulted my sister appeared in front of me yesterday. Well, to put it more accurately, this was in Yuuka's hospital room. The man kept apologising to Yuuka. He probably felt

guilty about what he did...'

'And then?'

'The man was already dead. He committed suicide...'

Hideaki shook his head slightly. Though it was faint, it looked like his eyes were wet with tears.

'So why would that translate into saving someone?'

Yakumo looked at Hideaki sharply.

'Yuuka must want to save the man who killed himself...'

'I can't save someone who's already dead.'

Hideaki smiled bitterly at Yakumo's words.

'Hey, do you remember what we talked about before?'

'What we talked about?'

'How you can save people by seeing the spirits of the dead.'

'Ah... that...'

Yakumo's eyes seemed distant.

'At the time, Saitou... you said that you couldn't save anything.'

'You said that you could.'

'I still believe that. There must be something I can save.'

'Why are you so...'

Interrupting Yakumo's words, a woman in a suit moved to stand in front of Hideaki.

– What?

While Haruka was confused, a man appeared behind Hideaki. They had him sandwiched.

The woman in front showed a police ID.

'I'm Shimamura from the Setamachi precinct. You are Aoi Hideaki, correct?'

– Police?

Even Yakumo appeared surprised by the situation, but Hideaki didn't seem disturbed. He replied confidently with a 'Yes'.

'I apologise for the trouble, but there are a number of things we would like to ask. Would you come with us to the precinct?'

'Is this optional? Or is this an arrest?'

'Of course, this is optional.'

'So that means I can refuse,' Hideaki replied calmly.

That moment, the woman showing her police ID frowned.

'You can refuse, but it won't do you any good,' the man behind Hideaki said threateningly.

'I understand then. Saitou, let's talk at length at some other time.'

Hideaki smiled at Yakumo. Yakumo received that smile expressionlessly.

All Haruka could do was watch in shock as Hideaki was taken away.

'Hey, Yakumo-kun...'

Haruka spoke up, but the shrill ring of a mobile phone interrupted her.

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17

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– Did Imoto really commit suicide?

After Miyagawa left, Ishii continued to watch the scene at the apartment as he mulled over his thoughts.

If it bothered him so much, he should just snap at Honda like Miyagawa did and suggest they continue the investigation. However, Ishii couldn't do that.

It wasn't just this time either. He was always like this. Running away was his habit.

'Ishii-san.'

Just as Ishii had put his head in his hands, somebody called out to him.

When he lifted his head, he saw Hijikata Makoto walking towards him.

He had met Makoto because of a certain case. Ever since then, it had felt like something had kept bringing them together.

'M-Makoto-san...'

Makoto was a newspaper reporter. She had probably come to gather information.

Her father had been the chief of the police. The reason he had been forced to quit was his daughter's article.

There must have been a lot of conflict, but Makoto never mentioned it.

– I envy her.

Ishii looked up to Makoto's straightforwardness.

'It's been a while.'

Makoto stopped in front of Ishii with a smile on her face. Her long and glossy black hair fluttered.

Ishii had been afraid of Makoto before. The circumstances they had met under had been bad.

When he first met Makoto, she had been possessed by a ghost. Because of that, Ishii had suffered a fair amount.

As a result, his heart would start thumping every time he saw her.

However, he felt like the nature of his heart's palpitations had changed lately.

'Are you here to gather information?'

'Yes. Ishii-san, you were the one who found him, correct?'

'Yes, well... how should I put it...' replied Ishii, flustered.

Though they had been the one to find him, the path there had been complicated.

'Actually, there was something I heard...'

Makoto brought her face close to Ishii's.

'W-what is it?'

'I heard that a young man who could see ghosts was involved in the case. Could it be Yakumo-kun?'

So a rumour's already spreading throughout the reporters – Ishii was a bit surprised at the speed of information.

'No, Yakumo-shi isn't related to this case.'

'Then it was nonsense?'

'No, that's...'

Though Yakumo wasn't related, it was true that a young man who said he could see ghosts was involved.

Makoto pressed forward, not letting Ishii's moment of hesitation escape her.

'What do you mean?'

Surprised by how close Makoto's face was to his, Ishii leant back without thinking.

'No... How should I say it...'

Makoto, as a reporter, did have quite some force behind her. Even though Ishii was hesitant, in the end, he explained everything that had happened, as Makoto asked.

After Ishii finished, Makoto nodded a number of times in understanding.

'So what are you going to do, Ishii-san?'

'Eh?'

'About the case.'

'I... I've been left out of the case, so...' Ishii replied weakly.

'But you want to know the truth, right?'

'That's...'

Of course he wanted to know the truth. He wouldn't be able to sleep like this.

If he could, he wanted to see the case until the end. But –

'Then let's investigate together,' Makoto said indifferently.

'No... I...'

'Shut up. We're going.'

Makoto's sudden harsh words made Ishii's eyes widen in shock.

When Makoto saw that, she started laughing, her shoulders shaking as she did so. Ishii didn't understand what was happening.

'Er... Makoto-san?'

'Did it sound like him?'

'Like who?'

'I was mimicking Gotou-san.'

'Oh.'

After hearing that, Ishii ended up laughing too.

Gotou would have said that. It didn't matter who said what. He went forward on his own path.

'So Ishii-san, you can just investigate it if it bothers you.'

'That's right,' agreed Ishii without another thought.

He felt silly for being hesitant. There was no point floundering because he'd decided on his own that he couldn't do it.

'Chief Honda's instructions don't matter. I'll follow this case until the end.'

Ishii thrust a fist up into the air.

'That's the spirit.'

'Thank you very much. I feel like I've woken up now that you've given me a push, Makoto-san.'

'If you're all right with me, I'll give you a push any time.'

With a wide smile, Makoto pushed Ishii's back forward.

Because of how sudden it was, Ishii lost his balance and almost fell, but luckily, he managed to regain his footing.

Makoto laughed aloud happily.

As Ishii looked at the bright smile, for some reason, his heart beat loudly –

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18

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– Things are serious.

Because of all that had happened, Eishin couldn't speak at first.

After Gotou answered Rina's mobile, he had suddenly collapsed, like he had been stricken by lightning.

Even Eishin had panicked. He'd tried to shake Gotou and hit him, but he still wouldn't open his eyes.

Since Gotou was breathing and his heart was beating, he wasn't dead, but he wasn't in a good state.

'H-he's been possessed by a ghost!' shrieked Rina.

Rina was curled up in a corner of the room in her fear. Perhaps it was just as she said.

– Gotou's been possessed by a ghost.

In a situation like this, there was nothing Eishin could do any more.

– Seems like I'll need Yakumo to come.

Eishin pulled his mobile phone from his robe's sleeve and called Yakumo's number, which he had stored in his contacts.

After a number of rings, Yakumo answered.

<What do you need?>

He was cold, as always.

Since Eishin had been calling persistently to tell Yakumo to take over the temple recently, Yakumo probably held a grudge about that.

'Actually, there's been a spot of trouble.'

<There's trouble here too. Please call me later.>

Yakumo was going to hang up the phone.

Eishin didn't know what had happened, but it looked like Yakumo had some difficulties on his end too. Eishin would be in a tight spot if he let Yakumo hang up here though.

'Gotou's been possessed by a ghost,' Eishin said quickly.

Even Yakumo seemed surprised. For a while, there was silence.

<What do you mean?>

It seemed like Yakumo finally felt like listening.

'Actually...'

Eishin explained in detail from Rina's request to Gotou's collapse. When Eishin finished, Yakumo sighed.

<And then he was possessed by a ghost...>

'Looks like it.'

<I've always thought Gotou-san was an idiot, but there's really no helping him.>

'Now, don't say that. He's still Nao's father. You can do something, right?' Eishin said admonishingly.

However, there was no response.

Eishin knew though. Yakumo wasn't the type who could leave this situation alone. He was like Isshin in that sense.

<Anyway, nothing will start if I don't take a look. Could you bring Gotou-san?>

'Understood. I'll do that.'

After saying that, Eishin hung up.

– Now, the problem is how to carry this big man to the car.

Eishin crossed his arms as he thought, but as if to interrupt that, he heard a scream.

He turned to Rina and saw that her eyes were wide and her body was shaking. Gotou, who had been collapsed on the floor, was slowly getting up.

'You awake?'

Eishin tried to approach Gotou, but he stopped immediately.

There was clearly something strange. Gotou's eyes were bloodshot. He ground his teeth together as he growled.

It looked like he really had been possessed.

'You... did...'

As Gotou's huge body shook, he approached Eishin like a zombie.

'Stop that. Can't you tell it's me?' Eishin said, raising his voice. However, Gotou still kept walking towards him.

He had completely lost it.

Gotou's hands reached for Eishin's neck.

– No helping it.

With determination, Eishin struck Gotou's head with all his might.

It had an impact. Gotou's large body slowly fell forward.

'Don't blame me,' Eishin said to Gotou on the floor.

'W-w-what's happening...'

Fumiko ran into the room, perhaps because she heard the commotion.

'Ah, sorry, but do you have some rope?' asked Eishin.

Even though Fumiko's eyes were darting about in confusion, she left the room.

'Honestly... What a pain,' muttered Eishin.

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19

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Haruka waited for Yakumo's call to end.

Though she couldn't hear the call, she could tell from Yakumo's expression that it was an urgent situation.

Her heart beat loudly.

'What happened?' she asked Yakumo, who had ended the call with a sigh.

Yakumo frowned.

'It's bad...'

'Are you talking about Hideaki-san?'

'No.'

Yakumo shook his head in irritation.

'Eh?'

'I'm concerned about his situation, but there's another problem.'

– This isn't a light matter.

'What happened...'

Haruka's voice started shaking.

'I got a call from Eishin-san just now.'

'By Eishin-san, do you mean the monk?'

Haruka had met Eishin before.

He was a monk who had taught Isshin. They had met after Isshin's death. He had a round face and seemed gentle at first glance, but he was rather self-assertive.

'Yeah. You know that Gotou-san's doing detective work with him, right?'

'Yup.'

After leaving the police, Gotou had started work as a spiritual detective.

Haruka had heard from Yakumo that Eishin brought requests to Gotou.

'It seems like Gotou was investigating a spiritual phenomenon when he was possessed by a ghost.'

– Possessed by a ghost?

Haruka was becoming more confused.

Even though Haruka already couldn't understand why Hideaki had been suddenly taken away by the police, a new problem had arisen.

And for Gotou to be possessed by a ghost – to be honest, Haruka couldn't believe it.

She couldn't see Gotou as the type of person who would be possessed.

'What do you mean?'

Her tone grew restless from her irritation.

'I don't know the details, but it sounds like the ghost came out of the phone.'

Yakumo ran a hand through his hair.

– The ghost came out of the phone?

'Is it possible to be possessed through a phone?'

'It's the first time I've heard of it, but I can't deny the possibility.'

'Eh?'

'The spirits of the dead have no physical influence. However, it is possible for them to interfere with electromagnetic waves.'

'That's...'

Haruka felt like she had fallen off a cliff.

Her head felt dizzy. She felt like she might have to sit down at any moment.

'Anyway, I need to confirm Gotou-san's condition first,' said Yakumo quickly.

It was just as Yakumo said. Though Haruka was concerned about Hideaki, saving Gotou was the priority.

'That's right,' replied Haruka.

She and Yakumo started walking.

The wind felt terribly cold.

It made Haruka afraid, like it was hinting at the location they were going. Haruka suddenly looked towards Yakumo.

His left eye seemed to let out a hard glint, lit up by the setting sun.

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20

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'I can see ghosts.'

Hideaki kept repeating the same words.

They would never believe him, but he was used to that reaction.

When he was in high school, Hideaki had declared that he could see ghosts. His friends had either accepted it as a joke or made fun of him for being strange.

Hideaki didn't take it seriously and object either. It wasn't like he wanted them to believe he could see ghosts. There was just a need for him to do what he did.

Hideaki smiled self-derisively.

The moment he did so, the male detective in front of him glared at him fiercely.

If Hideaki remembered correctly, his name was Nakamura.

'Stop fooling around,' he threatened.

However, Hideaki didn't think him frightening. No matter how he was cornered, Hideaki replied with the same thing.

'I'm not fooling around. I can really see them.'

Perhaps Hideaki's cool attitude bothered Nakamura, because he grabbed Hideaki by his collar.

'Stop that.'

The female detective named Shimamura immediately stopped Nakamura from beside him.

'B-but...'

'This isn't an interrogation. This is only a voluntary questioning.'

'But...'

'Stop whining and go outside for a bit.'

Shimamura cut Nakamura down. Though Nakamura looked unsatisfied, he left the room dispiritedly.

After a moment, Shimamura said gently, 'Sorry about that.'

It was such a sudden change that Hideaki was surprised.

'No...'

'Let's pretend everything up until now didn't happen. Tell me about you.'

'About me?'

'Why did you quit high school after your parents died?'

'Because I had to live...'

His parents had died suddenly. They had been returning home from shopping when they were in a hit-and-run incident.

When Hideaki was contacted about it, his head had gone blank.

However, when he saw Yuuka sobbing, he managed to regain his senses. He had to be reliable – that was what he thought.

'But there was life insurance – you must have had some money, right?'

'Yes, but there was my little sister...'

Though there was life insurance, when Hideaki thought about reserving money for the future and about his sister, he decided to quit school and start working.

He wanted to at least let his sister Yuuka do what she wanted to do with her life, even if he couldn't do it himself.

Naturally, Yuuka had objected. She had insisted that she would work too, but Hideaki hadn't allowed it.

For a while, they had been on parallel lines of thought. In the end, Hideaki quit school on his own and started working at the company of one of his father's friends.

By acting, he had forced Yuuka to accept it.

'But she isn't your real sister, right?'

Shimamura probably meant no harm by those words, but that was a matter Hideaki didn't want to touch.

'Is there a problem with that?'

He ended up speaking more roughly without thinking.

'There isn't, but...'

'Even if we're not related by blood, we're siblings.'

Hideaki's mother had run away from home, leaving her child behind. Hideaki had been raised without knowing a mother's love.

He had always lived together with his father.

Hideaki's life had changed in middle school, when he was introduced to Kaori, his father's new wife, and her daughter, Yuuka.

Of course he had objected at first, but now that he thought about it, it might have been fear from his inexperience with love.

Kaori had been a kind woman. She had treated Hideaki like her own child.

She had scolded him at times, but that had made him happy. It had felt like she was really looking at him. For the first time in Hideaki's life, he had experienced a mother's love.

It had felt like their dark and lonely home had been lit up. It had been warm and pleasant – a place of his own. That was why –

'I see. I know a couple who've adopted a child.'

'Is that so...'

'When I see that family, I think that blood isn't the only thing that makes a family.'

Those were probably Shimamura's true feelings. She had a very gentle expression on her face.

'I believe so.'

'That was a bit off-topic. You can go home for today.'

Shimamura stood up.

Hideaki felt troubled by how sudden it was.

'Is that OK?'

'Yes. I said this earlier too, but this is a voluntary questioning.'

With a smile, Shimamura left the room.

Hideaki, left behind, leant back on his chair, exhausted.

If that accident hadn't happened, his life would have been very different. When he thought about that, his feelings became complicated.

However, what he had lost wouldn't come back, no matter how much regret he felt over it.

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21

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Before he'd noticed, Gotou had entered a dark forest –

Lush trees stood around him. At his feet, there were rocks covered in moss.

It was chilly. It felt like a creepy place.

– Where am I?

He felt like his body was floating.

While it felt like he was in a dream, for some reason, there was a sense of reality to it. It was a strange feeling.

– If I don't get back soon, Atsuko and Nao will be waiting at home.

Gotou tried to walk forward, but no matter where he went, the same scenery continued. It was like a maze.

A tree branch rustled.

– What?

Gotou looked around to see a man slowly walking towards him.

He was a young man. He had something heavy on his back as he took one step at a time through the forest, which was hard to travel through.

'Oi! You!'

Gotou called out to him, but he didn't even turn to look, like Gotou's voice didn't reach his ears.

He continued walking silently, with some sort of determination.

Finally, the man came right in front of Gotou.

'Oi.'

Gotou tried to reach out to the man, but his hand went through him.

That wasn't all. The man walked through Gotou's body and went deeper into the forest.

– What? What's happening?

Gotou turned around, confused.

'Oi! Wait!'

Gotou bellowed from the bottom of his lungs. The man stopped in front of a rock about as tall as he was.

Finally, Gotou's voice had reached him. That was what Gotou thought, but it looked like he was wrong. The man crouched carefully, put down what he was carrying and put it on the rock.

Next, the man started to pour a liquid onto his belongings.

– What's he doing?

Oblivious to Gotou's confusion, the man lit a match and threw it at his belongings.

Then, flames rushed up.

Tears fell from the man's eyes, lit up by the brilliant flames.

– What the hell's happening?

Though Gotou was still confused, he took a step towards the man. However, the ground collapsed underneath him.

'Agh!'

As Gotou screamed, his consciousness fell into a deep darkness.

– Sorry.

He felt like he heard somebody's voice in his ear.

第二章 狂乱

file 02: frenzy

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1

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Haruka was shocked as she looked at Gotou.

In the corner of the Movie Research Circle room which Yakumo made his secret hideaway, Gotou was sitting in a wheelchair.

His hands and arms were bound with rope. It looked like he wasn't conscious – he sat limp like a puppet which had had its strings cut. There was no trace of the usual Gotou there. Haruka had never even dreamt of seeing Gotou again like this.

'Please tell me in detail what happened,' Yakumo said in a harsh tone, standing directly in front of Gotou.

'Sorry. It was my fault.'

The weak response came from Eishin.

Eishin had both a large body and a large personality, but even he was listless in this situation.

'It doesn't matter right now whose fault it was.'

With a sigh, Yakumo sat in his usual seat.

'Right...' Eishin said to himself, and then he started explaining what had happened up until now.

In Aokigahara's Sea of Trees, a woman had found a corpse while exploring. Then, there had been a phone call from a ghost –

And then Gotou had answered the ghost's call, and no other than Eishin had been the one to goad him into doing it.

That was probably why he was saying it was his fault.

'Honestly. I have to say it was careless.'

Yakumo put his chin in his hand, exasperated.

Haruka felt the same way. If they had been a bit more careful, this wouldn't have happened.

'Painfully so.'

Eishin smiled bitterly.

'So what are you going to do?' asked Haruka, leaning forward.

There was no point blaming what had happened. The problem was what to do next.

'In all probability, the spirit possessing Gotou-san is probably the ghost of the corpse that was

found.'

'The problem is the corpse's identity then.'

'Yeah. But there's something that concerns me.'

'The man with two red eyes?' asked Eishin.

Haruka was concerned about that too. The man with two red eyes whom Rina had seen in the Sea of Trees – it couldn't be just a coincidence.

'If he's involved in this, there's a chance that there's some involvement with the case.'

'I see,' replied Eishin, scratching his chin.

'Well, there's no point thinking about it now. First, we have to gather information.'

Yakumo put his index finger on his brow.

His almond eyes seemed to let off a cold light.

'Then what should I do?' asked Eishin.

'That's right. First of all, Eishin-san, could you talk to the man who went exploring with Rina-san?'

'There might be new developments... right?'

'Yes.'

'Got it. I'll give it a try.'

Eishin briskly got up and left the room.

'This is really troublesome...' grumbled Yakumo. Then, he looked at Gotou again.

Haruka felt the same way as Yakumo. She had never thought that Gotou would be possessed by a ghost.

'Hey, why was it Gotou-san?'

Haruka asked the question that suddenly came to her head.

There were people who were possessed by ghosts, and people who weren't. This time, Gotou wasn't the only person who answered the phone. The woman named Rina had also answered.

But Gotou was the one who was possessed – why was that?

'I talked about this before, but I think it's something similar to wavelengths.'

Yakumo's eyes narrowed.

'Wavelengths...'

'The wavelength of a soul differs with each one. When they match up, possession can occur.'

Yakumo had compared possession to an organ transplant before. For the transplant to be successful, various conditions such as blood type had to match up.

'So Gotou-san's wavelength just happened to match.'

'That's it,' said Yakumo.

Then, Gotou slowly lifted his drooping head.

Perhaps he had woken up.

'G-Gotou-san.'

Haruka tried to rush over to him, but Yakumo stopped her.

'Give it up.'

'But...'

'Ur... gh... Ya... Yakumo... Why are you here?'

Gotou spoke in a pained voice.

Yakumo got up from his seat and crossed his arms in front of Gotou.

'How do you feel?'

'The worst... My head hurts...'

'What happened?'

'I don't know... I... answered the phone... and then...'

As Gotou spoke, it seemed like it hurt him to breathe. His body wrestled about violently. However, because he was bound with rope to the wheelchair, he couldn't move as he wanted.

Gotou's body rattled loudly.

'Gotou-san! Please get a hold of yourself!' Haruka yelled frantically.

Gotou let out a beastly howl, throwing his head back. Then, he stopped moving.

'Yakumo-kun.'

'It's fine. He's still alive.'

Yakumo ran a hand through his hair.

– Things have become really serious.

All Haruka could do was look in shock.

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2

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Ishii visited Meisei University with Makoto.

After Ishii called Yakumo to tell him there was something he wanted his advice on, Yakumo had told him to come to the Movie Research Circle room.

'It feels a bit strange,' said Makoto, looking around the campus like it was something mysterious. They had passed the school gates and were walking along the brick road.

'What do you mean?'

'Doesn't being at school remind you of your school days?'

'Ah, now that you mention it, it does,' agreed Ishii.

Ishii felt that way sometimes too. However, Ishii didn't have many enjoyable memories of his youth to remember.

I wonder what sort of university life Makoto had – Ishii suddenly wanted to know.

'And it's even stranger to be walking with you, Ishii-san.'

'I-is that so?'

'Yes. It feels a bit strange. But it's fun.'

Makoto stuck out her tongue playfully.

Why was Ishii's heart beating so loudly? He thought about it, but he couldn't find the reason.

While this was happening, they reached the prefabricated building in the back of Building B. After taking a deep breath, Ishii knocked on the door that had a plate that read <Movie Research Circle>.

'It's open.'

Yakumo's voice came from within.

'E-excuse us.'

Ishii hesitantly opened the door.

'Ishii-san.'

Ishii saw Haruka there. Next to her was Yakumo.

'It's been a long time,' greeted Ishii, putting a hand on his head.

Ishii was surprised at how strangely calm he was now, when his heart would soar just from seeing Haruka's face in the past.

'Makoto-san's with you too, I see,' said Yakumo, noticing Makoto.

'Yes. It's been a while. I apologise for coming uninvited.'

'No, I actually had a number of things I wanted to ask you too. Please come in.'

At Yakumo's invitation, Ishii and Makoto entered the room.

'Ah!'

Then, Ishii's eyes spotted somebody unexpected.

'Detective Gotou!'

Ishii had called Gotou after he quit, but it had been about a month since they had last met in person.

Ishii was so happy that he was about to embrace Gotou, but Yakumo grabbed Ishii's arm, making it impossible for Ishii to approach Gotou any further.

'Please don't carelessly approach him,' Yakumo said sharply.

'Eh? Why not?'

'Gotou-san has been possessed by a ghost,' Yakumo said with a sigh.

– Eh?

'By ghost, do you mean that ghost?'

'Yes, that ghost.'

Ishii leapt away without thinking when he heard those words, which he was so sensitive to.

'W-w-w-w-wha!?!'

When Ishii took a good look from a distance, he saw that Gotou was bound to a wheelchair and that his head was hanging limply.

It looked like he was unconscious.

'It's because he runs ahead and does unnecessary things that this happens.'

Yakumo kicked the wheelchair casually.

'T-that's awful.'

'It's fine, since the one thing that's sturdy about Gotou-san is his body.'

'No, that's not the...'

'It seems like things are quite troublesome.'

Even Makoto sounded surprised by the situation.

'Yes, it's an unwelcome nuisance. More importantly, please sit down first.'

Yakumo urged them to sit in the opposite chairs.

After Ishii shared a look with Makoto, he sat down, though he was still confused. Yakumo waited until they were seated to sit down himself.

'Excuse me... Will Detective Gotou be all right?' Ishii asked.

'To be honest, I don't know.'

Yakumo ran a hand through his messy hair.

His words sounded incredibly irresponsible.

'But that's...'

'I don't know who the ghost possessing Gotou-san is or what the ghost is trying to do. There's nothing that can be done.'

Yakumo had a point, but still –

'I need to help Detective Gotou right now!'

'Ishii-san, you're following a different case right now, right?'

'That's true, but...'

'This is just a suspicion I have, but I think that the ghost possessing Gotou-san and the case you are following are connected in some way.'

'I-is that so?'

'It's only a suspicion, but she mentioned a deep forest and told me to save someone...'

'What are you talking about?'

'Just talking to myself. Please don't concern yourself over it.'

'Haa...'

Ishii didn't understand, but he didn't press any further.

It was Yakumo. He had to be thinking of something.

'Anyway, first we have to clean up the various problems in front of us. I think that will be a shortcut to solving the case.'

It sounded like Yakumo was trying to convince himself with his words.

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3

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Eishin sat at a table in a family restaurant in front of the station.

Since it was dinnertime, the shop was rather crowded. Perhaps it was unusual for a robed monk to be sitting by himself – a lot of people were staring. He was used to it though.

'Are you the monk named Eishin?'

After a while, a young man came in front of Eishin.

He had a long, thin body and a wide grin.

Eishin had asked Rina to call out the young man who had gone with her into the Sea of Trees so that Eishin could talk to him. The truth was, it would be faster to have her here too, but she

refused.

It seemed like she had been disillusioned by the incident with him in the Sea of Trees.

'Are you Hiroki-kun?'

'Yeah,' Hiroki replied with a shrug.

– Deplorable.

Young people these days didn't know how to speak to their elders. Maybe they were trying to act like people in Europe or America, but Japan had Japanese culture.

'Well, sit down,' Eishin urged, repressing his irritation.

'Hey, you an exorcist?' asked Hiroki once he sat down.

– An incredibly rude guy.

'Decide for yourself.'

'Eh!? Seriously?! Try showing me!'

Hiroki's eyes sparkled like a child, like he was happy about something.

– He's really annoying.

'If you tell me what happened in the Sea of Trees, I'll put a curse on you.'

'OK!'

After giving that carefree reply, Hiroki started talking about the events that occurred in the Sea of Trees.

However, since there was an incredible amount of bragging and sound effects in his story, it took him a long time to get anywhere. It took a full forty minutes for Hiroki to finish, but in contrast to that length, there was no substance. If you talked normally, it would only take five minutes.

'So you didn't see a ghost?' asked Eishin.

Hiroki nodded.

'I see. So then you contacted the police.'

'Yeah. Rina-chan had fainted so I was seriously panicked,' said Hiroki, shuddering dramatically. Though his gestures were exaggerated, there was no anxiety in his words.

It looked like he couldn't even understand the gravity of finding a corpse.

'Were you questioned by the police?'

'Yeah, but they just acted where I was and stuff like that and took the video camera I was using to film.'

'Oh?'

'Actually, I'd like you to get that back.'

'Me?'

Eishin couldn't believe his ears.

'I'm begging you, man. It'd be a pain to go all the way to Yamanashi.'

Hiroki leant back and forth, like a kid begging for a toy.

– Why do I have to do your errands?

Eishin swallowed his anger right before it erupted and stood up from his seat.

'That was helpful.'

'If that's all you need, call me any time.'

Hiroki stood up and patted Eishin's shoulder.

That moment, the anger within Eishin erupted. Yelling at a brat like this wouldn't have any effect though.

'Hiroki-kun, right?'

'Yeah.'

'I'm just going to give you a warning.'

'What?'

'The spirits in the Sea of Trees are incredibly ill-willed. You'll be the next to be cursed.'

'Joking around?'

Hiroki laughed.

However, Eishin's expression didn't change. He looked straight at Hiroki.

Led by the force in Eishin's eyes, Hiroki's smile turned into a frown. Then, sweat started pouring down his forehead.

'You're kidding, right...?'

Hiroki's voice was shaking.

'Unfortunately, you'll die in the near future.'

'W-wai... Stop that.'

Eishin ignored Hiroki's frantic pleas. He went to the counter to pay and then left the family restaurant.

– It'll be good medicine for him.

Eishin let out a satisfied sigh before walking away.

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4

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Haruka headed for the temple where Gotou lived.

She was going to tell Atsuko, Gotou's wife, what had happened. She passed through the gate and went to the priests' quarters. Her legs felt weak.

She really didn't want to go tell such heavy news.

However, there was no point standing here and worrying about it. Haruka gathered her determination and pressed the intercom button at the entrance.

'Yes?'

Haruka heard a voice. Then, the entrance's sliding door opened to show Atsuko.

'Oh, hello, Haruka-chan,' said Atsuko, sounding surprised.

It was the first time Haruka had come here alone since Isshin had died.

'Good evening. Actually, there is something I need to tell you...' said Haruka, still feeling troubled.

Atsuko seemed to sense something as her expression hardened. 'Come in,' she said, inviting Haruka inside.

Haruka went to the living room and crouched on the tatami. Nao, drawing in a sketchbook, looked up.

'Nao-chan, it's been a while.'

After Haruka said that, Nao's face lit up. Nao leapt towards her.

'You doing well?' said Haruka, patting Nao's head.

– Yeah!

Haruka heard that voice in her head. Nao couldn't hear, but in exchange, she talked directly to people's hearts like this.

'Well, sit down,' urged Atsuko.

Haruka sat on a cushion. Nao sat next to her with a smile.

'Would you rather have tea or coffee?'

'Please don't mind me.'

'You don't have to restrain yourself. We're going to be relatives in the future anyway.'

'Eh?' said Haruka, confused.

'Well, when you and Yakumo-kun get married, won't we be relatives?'

Though Haruka understood what Atsuko meant, unfortunately there were no plans of that.

Haruka didn't want to take it seriously and deny it either, so she decided to let it pass with a wry smile.

'Then I'll have tea.'

After a while, Atsuko returned with tea from the kitchen.

'So what did you have to tell me?' said Atsuko, sitting across from Haruka.

With Atsuko in front of her like this, Haruka didn't know what she should say.

However, thinking about it wouldn't start anything. Haruka took in a deep breath and started to speak.

'Actually, this is about Gotou-san...'

'Did something happen?'

Atsuko's expression became grim immediately.

With a deep breath to calm herself down, Haruka told Atsuko what had happened to Gotou.

Atsuko listened to Haruka in silence. Since Atsuko's expression didn't change much, Haruka didn't know what she was feeling.

After a silence, Atsuko put a hand over her mouth and started giggling.

'Eh?'

'He really is an idiot.'

Atsuko laughed aloud like she couldn't keep it in any longer.

Nao started laughing too.

'Excuse me... I don't think it's a laughing matter...'

Haruka wasn't sure what to do with the unexpected response.

'It is. It's like that saying – going for wool and coming home shorn.'

'Aren't you worried?'

'I am.'

For just a moment, Atsuko's expression clouded over.

Those were probably her true feelings – Haruka understood that.

'I'm worried, but all I can do at a time like this is believe, right?'

Atsuko showed Haruka a smile.

'Atsuko-san...'

– She's strong.

Haruka felt that anew.

When Gotou had gone missing before, and when Isshin had been stabbed, Atsuko had stood firmly on her own.

No matter what happened, she waited and believed. Perhaps she had the resolve to do that.

'I thought it'd be tough when I married him,' Atsuko said suddenly.

'Eh?'

'I mean, he never thinks before acting, right? He always sticks his neck into danger.'

'Yes, well...'

Haruka felt like she understood.

Even though Gotou treated others' lives with care, for some reason, he didn't have that same care for his own. Yakumo was the same way.

That was why it frightened Haruka to watch. It was hard to be the one waiting.

'At first there were many sleepless nights for me, but I realised something.'

'What did you realise?'

'No matter how reckless he is, he always comes back. That's why I wait and believe in him.'

'I see. Definitely...'

'And it's fine with Yakumo-kun there. He'll do something about it.'

Atsuko patted Haruka's shoulder.

'Yes.'

Haruka nodded.

'Ah, that's right. I'll show you something good.'

It looked like Atsuko had remembered something as she clapped her hands together and stood up.

'Something good?'

'Old pictures.'

After saying that, Atsuko left the living room.

Nao took Haruka's hand and smiled. She definitely believed in Gotou too. That was why she could smile like this.

– I need to believe to.

In her heart, Haruka thought that with conviction.

After Ishii returned to the precinct, he contacted Shimamura Eriko of the Criminal Affairs division immediately.

She was one of the detectives in charge of Hideaki's case. Ishii chose her because she had been Gotou's past partner.

Ishii thought that she would give him a bit more information than another detective.

'I would like some information regarding Hideaki-shi's case, but...'

After saying that, Ishii was told to wait at the conference room.

Ishii went into the conference room, as he was instructed. It looked like Shimamura wasn't here yet. Ishii sat on a chair and leant back.

He had never thought that Gotou would be possessed by a ghost.

Yakumo had said that Gotou's incident and Imoto's suicide in his flat were connected, but Ishii didn't understand why Yakumo thought that.

However, all Ishii could do was believe and act.

'Sorry I'm late.'

About ten minutes later, the conference door opened, and a woman in a dark blue suit came in.

She had wide shoulders for a woman and a heavy frame. It felt like she could be in a gang.

'No, I'm sorry for calling you out.'

'It's fine.'

Shimamura waved away Ishii's concern and sat across from him.

'Ah, I'm sorry, I haven't introduced myself yet. My name is...'

'Ishii, right? I've heard about you from Gotou and Atsuko.'

'Eh?'

Ishii cocked his head unconsciously.

It made sense for Shimamura to know Gotou, but Ishii hadn't thought that she also knew his wife, Atsuko.

'You didn't know?'

'Didn't know what?'

'I'm the one who introduced Atsuko to Gotou.'

'Eh!?'

Ishii was so shocked that he almost fell from his chair.

'Unexpectedly, you don't know much about Gotou, even though you were his partner.'

It was true.

Though Ishii and Gotou had always been together as partners, they virtually never talked about their private lives.

They unexpectedly knew very little about each other.

'I-I'm sorry.'

'It'd be better for you to stop apologising so quickly like that.'

'Ah, no, but...'

'I'm just saying this here, but Gotou's got high hopes for you.'

'Eh?'

Ishii was shocked once more.

'He's a clumsy guy so he can be cold, but he's different on the inside.'

'I-is that so?'

Ishii couldn't believe it.

Ishii had never seen even a tiny amount of that from Gotou. Ishii felt like he had always just been tripping over himself and causing trouble.

'You didn't even realise that?'

'I-I'm sorry.'

'You're apologising again.'

'I...'

Ishii hurriedly swallowed the words he was about to say.

'Ishii'll become a good detective, he said...'

'Me?'

'When he quit being a detective, he went out of his way to find me and bowed his head to me. Telling me to help you if you were in trouble.'

'Detective Gotou did that...'

Ishii felt something warm welling up within him.

Will I be able to live up to those expectations – Ishii had lamented the lack of Gotou's presence and had given up, thinking he could do nothing, and shut himself inside a shell. His own biased view.

– I'll live up to Detective Gotou's expectations.

Ishii was filled with strong determination.

'Let's leave the sappy stories now. Here're the case files.'

Shimamura placed a bundle of documents on the desk.

<Thank you very much. Also, how did Aoi Hideaki's questioning go?' asked Ishii, looking at the files.

'He kept saying he could see ghosts, but there's no way that police can believe that.'

Shimamura smiled wryly.

As members of the police, they really had no way to accept the existence of ghosts.

'So he's still in detention?'

'We didn't keep him.'

'Eh?'

'It wasn't an arrest. It was just a questioning.'

That was true. At this stage, he was just suspicious – there was no proof.

'Do you think he's the culprit?' asked Ishii.

'It seems like Chief Honda thinks that. He's going to have him questioned again.'

'What do you think personally, Shimamura-san?'

'Innocent, obviously,' said Shimamura, seeming exasperated.

'Why do you think that?'

'I don't know how to answer, but if I had to say, it's my gut feeling from many years on the force.'

'Gut feeling?'

'Yeah. It's been a while since I've seen eyes as straight as his. He's the not the type of man who could kill someone.'

'Then he really can see...'

'I don't know about that, but that flat was a completely locked room.'

Ishii knew best, as the first eyewitness, that the flat where the corpse was found was a locked room.

'Yes, it was.'

'And Imoto had posted on an internet forum in a way that suggested he would commit suicide.'

'An... internet forum?'

'Yes. There's a site where people who want to commit suicide gather, right?'

'You're talking about that?'

Ishii hadn't accessed the site himself, but he had heard rumours.

People who wanted to kill themselves gathered on that forum and revealed the emotions they felt. In the past, people who met on that forum had committed a group suicide, making it a societal problem.

'Honestly. Even though everything's a mess already with the corpse from Aokigahara. What a mess...' said Shimamura with a click of her tongue.

'Aokigahara?'

'The Yamanashi precinct requested help regarding the Aokigahara corpse case.'

If Ishii remembered correctly, Gotou had been investigating a spiritual phenomenon in Aokigahara's Sea of Trees when he became possessed by a ghost.

– So they really are related somehow?

'Excuse me... Why was help requested for the Aokigahara case?' asked Ishii.

'Seems the victim was from here. One of the leaders of Jikoukoushinkai.'

'Jikoukoushinkai...?'

'Imoto, the guy who died in the flat, was part of the same religious group.'

'Eh?'

Yakumo's theory might really have been right. The Aokigahara case and Hideaki's case were related.

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6

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'Honestly... This is awful,' grumbled Yakumo, standing in front of Gotou, who was in a wheelchair.

If this was going to happen, I should have seriously stopped him when he told me he was going to become a spiritual detective – the wave of regret within Yakumo kept pushing forward.

'Uuuurgh...'

Gotou let out a groan. His body writhed. Then, he slowly lifted his head.

Yakumo put strength into his left eye's gaze.

'Who are you?' Yakumo asked towards Gotou.

However, there was no response. It looked like he was in pain.

'You... gil... ed...' said Gotou.

To be accurate, they were the words of the spirit of whoever was possessing Gotou.

'Were you killed?'

'Aiii... wa...'

There were no words after that. Gotou's head dropped down and he stopped moving, as if he had been unplugged.

'No luck, eh...'

Yakumo looked up at the ceiling, pressing a hand against his left eye.

The fluorescent light seemed bright.

After doing that for a while, Yakumo looked at Gotou again.

He couldn't feel the usual energy from Gotou. Yakumo was surprised that it made him feel lonely.

He had met Gotou more than fifteen years ago. Gotou had been a novice officer, and Yakumo had just been a boy.

At that time, Gotou had saved Yakumo's life.

Because fate was a mysterious thing, a few years after that, Yakumo ended up meeting Gotou again because of a certain case.

At first, Yakumo had just thought of Gotou as a greedy detective who wanted to use his ability.

It was only recently that Yakumo realised that Gotou's true intentions were not as he thought. Gotou was clumsy, but he supported Yakumo in his own way.

At some point, Yakumo himself had started to trust Gotou.

He had felt that painfully when his uncle Isshin died. At that time, Gotou had said that he would take in Nao.

Though Yakumo hadn't said it aloud, he had thought that with Gotou, he could entrust Nao to him with no concern.

During an incident a month ago, Yakumo had been pursued as a suspect. Gotou had come to save him without any hesitation.

Gotou had known that doing so would force him to leave the police, but he hadn't paused anyway.

The man was so straightforward that it was stupid. That was why –

'It would trouble me if even somebody like you disappeared,' murmured Yakumo, closing his eyes.

Then, he suddenly felt somebody's gaze.

– Who's there?

When Yakumo opened his eyes, there was a woman standing there.

'Aoi Yuuka...'

Yuuka's mouth moved, as if she was trying to urge Yakumo to do something.

However, it was too faint. Finally, Yuuka's spirit disappeared, as if it had melted into the air.

'So the two cases really are related?' said Yakumo to himself.

-

7

The next morning, Haruka went to the Movie Research Circle room.

To be honest, she hadn't been able to sleep well the day before. It had been a great shock.

'Yakumo-kun, you here?'

When Haruka opened the door, Yakumo greeted her with a yawn.

Though he always looked sleepy, it felt like he had gone a step above that today.

'You...?'

'How's Gotou-san?'

Haruka looked at the corner of the room and saw Gotou in a wheelchair, in the same spot he had been in yesterday.

'Honestly. Because of this bear, I wasn't able to sleep properly,' said Yakumo, stifling a yawn.

'Was he violent?'

'No, his snoring is loud. Seems like you snore even if you're possessed.'

Haruka ended up laughing without thinking.

It was irresponsible of her, but she thought that things would be fine if Yakumo could still speak lightly like this.

'So how are Atsuko-san and Nao?' asked Yakumo after Haruka sat down.

'They accepted it more calmly than expected.'

Atsuko had been unexpectedly unruffled. She had even shown Haruka pictures of Gotou's younger days.

However, even if Atsuko acted like that, she was actually concerned.

'I see...'

'So what are you going to do next?'

'First, I'm moving this bear elsewhere.'

'Where?'

He couldn't be put back in his home.

The ghost might leave Gotou's body and possess Atsuko or Nao.

'I was thinking of leaving him to Hata-san.'

Yakumo glanced at Gotou.

Now Haruka understood. If Gotou was left here, Yakumo wouldn't be able to move freely. Hata worked at a hospital. If anything happened, he would be able to respond to it. But –

'Is that OK?'

'What?'

'I mean, Hata-san is...'

Hata wasn't a bad person, but there was a problem with his interests.

He called his work as a coroner his hobby, and every time he saw Yakumo, he would cheerfully say something awful like 'Let me autopsy you'.

If he saw Gotou like this, he might cut him up with glee.

'Even Hata-san wouldn't do that.'

Though Yakumo was calm, Haruka was concerned.

'Right...'

Just as Haruka said that, the door opened.

'Good morning.'

It was Makoto.

'Ah, Makoto-san.'

Haruka immediately gave her seat to Makoto and moved to the seat beside Yakumo.

'I'm sorry for coming early in the morning,' said Makoto, sitting down.

It seemed like she hadn't had enough sleep either, as she looked a bit tired.

'How was it?' said Yakumo, getting to the topic at hand.

Yesterday, he had asked Makoto to investigate the corpse Rina found in Aokigahara's Sea of Trees.

'There's still a lot I don't understand, but...'

Makoto took newspaper clippings out of her bag and lined them up on the table.

Yakumo started reading immediately.

'Maehara Rina was the one who found the corpse. That's what was reported, but there was a man named Urakawa Hiroki with her.'

Makoto took out her memo pad and started explaining as she looked at it.

'The police think it's a murder.'

'Yes. The corpse was burnt black. At first, they thought it was self-immolation, but they found a stab wound in the chest.'

'Do they have the identity?'

Yakumo's eyes narrowed.

'Yes. Hiyama Kenichirou, fifty-two years old.'

Makoto placed a photo on the table.

Yakumo took the photo and gazed at it. Haruka took a peek at the photo too.

The man was slender with chiselled features. He seemed composed.

'This is definitely the person possessing Gotou-san,' said Yakumo after a silence.

Though Haruka couldn't be optimistic yet, but knowing who was possessing Gotou was a big step forward.

'What sort of person is he?' asked Haruka.

Makoto took more files out from her bag.

'Hiyama Kenichirou-san was one of the leaders of Jikoukoushinkai, a rising religious group.'

'Jikoukoushinkai?'

Haruka cocked her head. She had never heard the name before.

'I will look into the details after, but it seems like they worship mountains as sacred and suddenly grew in power in these past two years.'

'How are the police viewing this case?' asked Yakumo.

'A murder case related to the religious group's internal interests... is what they're thinking.'

'What is their reason for thinking so?'

Even the police wouldn't just suspect that it was an inside job because the victim was a leader of a rising religious group.

'A khakkhara had been dropped at the place where the corpse was found.'

'What's a khakkhara?' asked Haruka.

'To put it simply, it's a staff with a number of metal rings on top. It's used in religions like Shugendo¹ so that when walking in the mountains, the noise makes beasts and snakes scatter.'

Yakumo's explanation helped Haruka see an image in her mind. She had seen something on television before where a mountain priest walked with something that kept ringing in his hand.

¹ Shugendo is a Buddhist religion from pre-feudal Japan that combines a number of religious influences, including Shinto. [Here](#) is an example of the traditional outfit for a person who practises Shugen.

'So that religious group used a khakkhara,' said Haruka.

Makoto nodded.

However, it looked like Yakumo still hadn't accepted it.

'That isn't the only reason, right?'

'It isn't. There was a rumour of a split in the inner group before. Currently, the Yamanashi precinct and the Setamachi precinct, where the main base for the religious group is, are investigating together.'

'The religious group's base is here?' said Yakumo, sounding surprised.

It was a surprise for Haruka as well. She had been sure it was in Yamanashi prefecture.

'It seems like that.'

'That's strange.'

With a wrinkle in his brow, Yakumo rubbed his chin.

'What is?' asked Haruka.

Yakumo looked at her sharply.

'Earlier, Makoto-san said that the religious group worshiped mountains as sacred.'

'Yup.'

'Worshiping mountains as sacred means that they believe that mountains have supernatural powers, which is the reason they worship them.'

With that explanation, Haruka could also understand why Yakumo was suspicious.

'So it'd be normal for them to have their base somewhere near mountains.'

'Right.'

'That's not the only thing that's strange,' said Makoto, after Yakumo nodded.

'What else is there?'

'It seems like the founder, a woman named Minegishi Kyouka, says that she can see the spirits of the dead – that is, ghosts.'

'Is it true?' said Haruka in surprise.

However, Yakumo remained expressionless.

'Don't take everything at face value.'

'But...'

'In either case, we'll need to pay a visit,' Yakumo said quietly.

His narrowed red left eye seemed to be filled with curiosity.

Ishii woke up to the sound of his mobile phone ringing.

Since his glasses weren't on, he couldn't see properly. He fumbled around his desk and picked up his mobile.

'Hello...'

Since he had just woken up, his voice was hoarse.

He had looked at documents until late last night. Then, he had just fallen asleep at his seat without returning home.

<Good morning.>

The voice he heard from the opposite end of the phone was Yakumo's.

'Ah, hello.'

Ishii fumbled around the desk again and then put on his glasses. Then, he slapped his cheeks. That woke him up a bit.

<How was it?>

'That...'

Ishii explained the information he had received from the documents and Shimamura to Yakumo.

<In short, the possibility of suicide is high at this stage.>

'Yes, that's the case, but...'

<Ishii-san, you can't accept that explanation.>

'I can't.'

There were just too many things that didn't seem to fit together. He didn't know where to start.

<Ishii-san, did you see the scene of the crime?>

'Not too clearly...'

Ishii had been the first eyewitness, but he had had his hands full with reporting the crime and at the time, he hadn't been able to observe the scene carefully.

After that, Honda had taken them off the case, so he couldn't enter the scene.

<If possible, I would appreciate it if you could go see it with your own eyes and report what you see to me, Ishii-san.>

Ishii agreed with Yakumo's opinion. Looking at it with his own eyes might bring about new

information.

'Understood. I'll give it a try.'

Ishii had just hung up the phone when Miyagawa came into the room.

'Ah, Miyagawa-san.'

'Don't just say "ah",' said Miyagawa, sounding like he was in a bad mood. He sat at the opposite desk.

'I-I'm sorry...'

'So what did you do?'

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

For a moment, Ishii wasn't sure if he should tell the truth.

However, hiding it wouldn't start anything. Miyagawa would definitely understand.

Ishii told Miyagawa everything that had happened yesterday after they split up, including how Gotou had been possessed by a ghost.

'Idiot!'

That was the first thing Miyagawa said after he had finished hearing Ishii's story.

Even as Ishii apologised, he looked at Miyagawa with disappointment. He had been sure that Miyagawa would understand –

'If that happened, why didn't you contact me earlier!?'

Miyagawa's fist slammed down onto the desk.

In contrast to Miyagawa's anger, Ishii welled up with happiness. Miyagawa really was whom Ishii believed him to be. No matter what Miyagawa said, he wasn't the type of person who could leave something alone.

'What are you grinning for?'

Ishii quickly corrected his expression.

'I'm sorry.'

'So what did you find out?'

'Ah, yes. There are a number of parts.'

Ishii handed the documents he had borrowed from Shimamura yesterday to Miyagawa. After Miyagawa accepted them, he started reading them with a stern face.

– He might give me a new opinion.

Ishii looked at Miyagawa with hope.

'If I had to make a decision from this situation, it has to be a suicide.'

Miyagawa threw the files onto the desk.

'Looking at it from the situation, that is the case. However...'

Ishii had thought frantically last night as he stared at the files.

The flat had been locked. It didn't look like anybody had fiddled with it. That room had been completely shut off.

However, Ishii still couldn't shake away his suspicions.

'The reason for suicide isn't that strong,' said Miyagawa.

It was just as he said. That was the biggest reason for Ishii's doubt.

'Yes.'

Imoto had attempted a robbery and ended up in a confrontation. He had punched Aoi Yuuka. That had caused her serious injury, and Imoto had committed suicide in his guilt –

At first glance, it lined up, but he must have known in the first place that it was likely that somebody would be harmed in a robbery.

Furthermore, Ishii would have understood Imoto's guilt if Yuuka had died, but she was still alive. Also, the police's investigation hadn't reached Imoto. In short, he hadn't been pursued.

– Would he have thought as far as suicide in that situation?

The investigation team had had doubts about that too. That was why they had questioned Aoi Hideaki, thinking he had killed Imoto for revenge.

'But there's no evidence anywhere that it was a murder.'

'There isn't.'

Ishii had doubts, but he had returned to the same place.

'In any case, Aoi Hideaki has the key to this,' muttered Miyagawa.

'Yes.'

Was Hideaki's ability real or fake – the answer to that question would change the direction of the case.

'So what do you plan to do?'

'I was thinking of looking at the scene once more.'

He had no proof that he would find something, but perhaps he would see something by going there once more. However –

'Got it. Then the guards there will be in the way.'

Miyagawa smirked, like he had read Ishii's mind.

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9

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Eishin stood in front of Yakumo's secret hideaway, the Movie Research Circle room.

He was here to report on what happened yesterday and to move Gotou.

When he opened the door, he saw Yakumo, Haruka, and one other woman there.

'Oh?' said Eishin.

'Come to think of it, it's the first time you've met. This woman is Hijikata Makoto-san. She's a newspaper reporter. She's helping out with a variety of things,' explained Yakumo, sensing Eishin's question.

'My name is Hijikata Makoto.'

Makoto stood up and made a polite bow.

She had a refined air to her and was a woman with polite manners. Haruka, and then Makoto – why did beautiful women gather around Yakumo?

'My name is Eishin. I am pleased to make your acquaintance.'

Eishin returned the bow.

'Please sit down,' Yakumo urged. Eishin took the seat next to Makoto.

After a pause, he spotted Gotou in the corner of the room. He was in a wheelchair, completely still.

'Is he alive?'

'So far as it goes,' replied Yakumo, giving Gotou a glance.

When Eishin looked more carefully, he could see Gotou's shoulders moving up and down slightly. It was strange for a man who was like walking noise to be quiet like this.

'So how was it?'

Yakumo turned his gaze towards Eishin.

That was right. Eishin almost forgot. Eishin told them what he had heard from Hiroki yesterday.

He kept the little threat he made a secret.

'A video camera...'

As expected, Yakumo showed interest in that.

Eishin didn't know if it'd be useful, but he wanted to see himself.

'Excuse me... Perhaps I would be able to acquire it.'

Makoto was the one who spoke, raising a hand.

'Is that so?' asked Yakumo.

Makoto nodded.

'Yes. I can't guarantee it, but...'

'Could I request that of you?'

'Yes, I'll try.'

A refreshing smile appeared on Makoto's face.

'Hey, what are you going to do next?'

After the conversation came to a lull, Haruka looked at Yakumo.

'We're moving Kumakichi, right?'

Eishin responded for Yakumo.

'Ah, right. You're taking him to Hata-san, right?' said Haruka, who had heard about it before.

However, Yakumo contradicted that.

'Let's change the plan a bit.'

'What are you talking about?' said Eishin in dissatisfaction.

He had gone out of his way to borrow a HiAce² with a lift from somebody with a job related to social welfare.

If the plan was changed, all his hard work would be for nothing.

'We'll just be making a number of stopovers.'

Yakumo slowly stood up.

There was a daring smile on his face. It felt like he was planning something dastardly.

However, Eishin didn't dislike that sort of thing.

'Where're we headed?'

'A number of places,' Yakumo replied vaguely.

– I don't get it, but it feels like it'll get interesting.

Eishin felt unbecoming expectation well up within him.

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10

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Ishii went with Miyagawa to the apartment where the incident had occurred.

² The Toyota HiAce is a van that comes in many forms and is tall enough to accommodate a wheelchair. The [Wikipedia article](#) has a photo.

Ishii could see that there was a rope in front of the room barring access and one uniformed guard on watch.

'There is a guard, as expected,' said Ishii, feeling disappointed.

It was possible to go through the front and show their police IDs to gain access, but Ishii and Miyagawa had been taken off the investigation.

If the guard checked with the investigation team, that would make things troublesome afterwards.

'Leave it to me.'

Miyagawa hit his chest and then walked straight for the door.

'Wait, Miyagawa-san!' said Ishii, running after Miyagawa.

'I'm Miyagawa from Criminal Affairs,' said Miyagawa with a hard expression on his face. He placed a hand on the guard's shoulder.

'Ah...'

'Actually, I want to go inside to check it out.'

'I wouldn't mind, but...'

'I know. Honda told you not to let people in without his permission, right?'

'Yes, well...'

'That's why I'm asking you in private.'

Miyagawa suddenly brought his face closer to the guard's.

'But...'

'Did you become an officer to be Honda's dog? Or to protect the safety of the citizens?'

'Of course it was for the safety of the citizens,' responded the guard clearly, eyes shining.

'Then go along with that conviction.'

The guard, completely pulled in by Miyagawa's cajolery, handed over the key to Miyagawa.

That was definitely consent to let them in.

Ishii and Miyagawa nodded at each other. Then, they opened the door and went inside.

There was a sink and a washroom in the narrow corridor. It looked like there was a bathtub too.

That was unusual, these days.

In the back, there was a room as living space, but it was a small space, only four and a half tatami in size.

Though it wasn't unbearable, there was a strange smell. Perhaps because of the food waste around the room or because of the corpse – Ishii couldn't tell.

He held his breath as he looked around the room carefully. There was a gap in the wood above the door that would allow a rope through, and there was a mark there from friction. Imoto had probably put the rope here and hanged himself. There was a stain on the tatami below.

'Urgh...'

The image of Imoto hanging in the room came up in Ishii's mind. Ishii shut his eyes and shook his head to get rid of the image.

The glass door to the veranda was broken from the outside.

Ishii and Miyagawa had done that. At the time, they had stuck a hand through to unlock the door.

The glass door had been shut, if he remembered correctly.

Ishii looked towards the entrance. That had been locked too, and there had been a chain lock too.

This room really was a locked room –

The only place to get out would be the hole for the vent in the room's wall. Ishii had seen a movie where a liquid-metal robot had slipped in through a gap like that, but that was unrealistic.

– So there's really nothing?

Ishii was about to give up when his eyes fell on a photo in the corner of the room.

He crouched and picked it up.

It was a photo of a family. On the left of the photo, there was Imoto Yasuo. In the centre, there was a child of about two years old. On the right, there was a woman with a gentle smile.

– Why is there a photo here?

Ishii tried standing underneath the wood when Imoto had hanged himself.

He thought about Imoto's state of mind. Then, Ishii realised it.

Imoto had probably been looking at this photo when he hanged himself.

Then, he ran out of breath, so the photo slipped from his hand, falling into the corner of the room. He might have really been prepared to kill himself.

That thought grew stronger within Ishii.

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11

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'Where are we?' asked Haruka, looking up at the ten-storey apartment building. It seemed to be built for families, and was rather large from the outward appearance.

– Make a number of stopovers.

Yakumo had said that. Then, he had had Eishin and Gotou wait in the car and come to this

apartment.

'This is where the Aoi siblings live.'

Yakumo slowly walked towards the apartment.

'So for your stopover, you were going to meet Hideaki-san?'

'Yes.'

'But that person...'

Yesterday, the police had come and taken him away. Would he have been let out so easily?

'He wasn't arrested. He had agreed to questioning. Since it hadn't been forced, he was probably let out a while ago.'

Yakumo ran a hand through his messy hair and pressed the intercom button.

<Yes.>

Hideaki's voice came back immediately.

'It's Saitou Yakumo. I was thinking about talking with you for a bit.'

<'ll open the door now.>

The automatic doors opened.

With an anxious expression, Haruka followed Yakumo through the automatic doors.

They went through the entrance and into the elevator, where Yakumo pressed the button for the third floor.

'What are you going to talk to Hideaki-san about?' asked Haruka.

'I didn't think about it...' Yakumo replied briefly. Then, he fell silent.

His expression was unusually stiff.

Finally, the elevator reached the third floor. They went down the corridor to the door to the room at the very end. With good timing, Hideaki opened the door and looked out.

'It's the first time you've come, Saitou,' said Hideaki with a smile, inviting Yakumo and Haruka into the room.

They went past the entrance to the room at the end of the corridor. It was a living-cum-dining room ten tatami in size, with a kitchen counter. It had a relaxing atmosphere to it.

'Please sit.'

Hideaki urged them to sit at the dining table.

Haruka and Yakumo sat down together. Hideaki sat opposite them.

'It's a large room,' said Yakumo while looking around.

'Mum and Dad left this to us. Thanks to that, I didn't have any trouble looking for a place to live with my sister.'

Hideaki was smiling as he glanced at the sideboard.

There were photos there. In the photos, Hideaki and Yuuka, and people who were probably their parents, were smiling.

They were peaceful and happy family photos.

'Where are your mother and father?' Haruka said without thinking, and that moment, Hideaki's expression clouded over.

In that instant, Haruka thought – Shoot. Earlier, Hideaki had said, 'Mum and Dad left this to us.' She should have been able to realise from those words.

'I-I'm sorry...'

Haruka bowed her head, but Hideaki shook his head with a smile.

'It's fine. My mum and dad passed away four and a half years ago. It was a traffic accident...'

'Is that so...'

Haruka dropped her gaze to the table.

Hideaki and Yuuka had lived alone after losing their parents. On top of that, Yuuka had been wrapped up in this case.

When she thought about that, it was intolerable.

'So what did you come here for today all of a sudden?'

After a pause, Hideaki turned his eyes to Yakumo.

'It seems like it's been tough...' said Yakumo, sitting in front of Hideaki.

'That's not true.'

It wasn't just the matter with his sister, Yuuka. He had been questioned by the police too. It must have been tough, but Hideaki was showing them a smile.

Haruka couldn't tell whether he was putting up a strong front or if he was just a strong person.

'What were you asked by the police?'

'He asked why I knew the person who assaulted Yuuka.'

'How did you respond?'

'I said I could see ghosts.'

Hideaki didn't falter when he said that.

'The police didn't believe you, right?'

'They didn't. They kept asking the same question, but since it was the truth, I couldn't say anything else.'

Hideaki smiled wryly.

'A stubborn guy,' said Yakumo, more to himself, and then he got up from his seat.

He looked around the room and stopped by the sofa.

'Your sister collapsed in this room, right?'

'Yeah.'

Hideaki nodded and stood up. Then, he stood by Yakumo and looked at the floor.

He was probably remembering the incident. Hideaki's brown eyes looked like they were wet with tears.

'The culprit wasn't caught on the security cameras?'

'According to the police, the data was wiped.'

'I see...'

Yakumo's brow furrowed just slightly.

'Hey, do you remember?' Hideaki said suddenly.

'What?'

Yakumo looked at Hideaki with a bewildered expression.

'You saved Yuuka in high school, right, Saitou?'

'I don't remember.'

Yakumo looked away.

Perhaps it was a topic he didn't want others to touch.

'Don't try to hide it. Yuuka was caught up in a case. Because of that case, I realised that you could see ghosts.'

Hideaki walked to where Yakumo was now looking. Yakumo's expression was blank, like he couldn't hear him at all.

What could the case be – Haruka was curious, but she felt like she definitely couldn't ask.

'It's not like I was trying to save her. That just happened as a result.'

After a long silence, those words came out of Yakumo's mouth, like that had been strangled out.

'That's what I thought at first too. At school, Saitou, you never showed any interest in anyone else, and I thought you were really cold guy.'

'Just as you say, I'm a cold person.'

'That's not true.'

When Hideaki denied Yakumo's words, his tone changed – it was firm.

'It is.'

'It's not. Do you remember our conversation in the graveyard?'

'Did that happen...'

'At the time, Saitou, you said that even if you could see ghosts, you couldn't save anyone. But that's not true. Saitou, you're kinder than anyone else. That's why you suffer. Because you don't want to lose your friends, you didn't make them in the first place. I realised that. That's why...'

'That's enough about me,' said Yakumo in a voice that wouldn't allow any discussion, interrupting Hideaki.

Their gazes met. It felt like sparks would fly.

Haruka didn't know Yakumo in high school, but she thought that Hideaki's opinion was correct.

The reason for that was that Haruka had also thought the same way when she first met Yakumo. Yakumo wasn't a cold person. He was kinder and more sensitive than anyone.

Haruka's opinion of Hideaki had changed greatly.

The two of them might not have been friends in high school. They might not have talked. But still, Hideaki tried to understand Yakumo. He was one of very few.

Rather than being interested in Yakumo because they shared the ability to see ghosts, it was more like Hideaki had looked at Yakumo as a person.

'A stubborn guy.'

After looking at Yakumo for a while, Hideaki's expression suddenly softened.

'Me?'

'Yeah. That hasn't changed.'

'We weren't that close.'

'I could tell just from looking.'

Hideaki smiled.

'Sorry for coming over suddenly today. I'll come again.'

Saying just that, Yakumo suddenly left the room.

– Eh, no way!

'E-excuse me.'

Haruka didn't want to be left here alone. She bowed towards Hideaki and hurriedly ran after Yakumo.

She finally caught up to him in front of the elevator.

– What’s the hurry?

Haruka was about to ask when Yakumo turned around.

'I feel like I saw the truth, just slightly.'

'The truth?'

'Yeah. What his sister wanted to save...'

Yakumo’s narrowed red left eye probably saw something that Haruka didn’t understand.

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12

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– I got wrapped up in a case unexpectedly.

After Makoto returned to the newspaper company and sat at her own seat, that thought came to her.

She was the most concerned about Gotou. Makoto had been possessed by a spirit before.

She felt a chill when she recalled that time, even now.

Feelings of somebody who wasn’t her had flown through her, seeping into her heart. It was more terrifying than could be imagined.

– I want to save him, no matter what.

With strong determination, Makoto took her mobile and called the number of her old co-worker, Takizawa.

He was currently at a newspaper that dealt with Yamanashi, but he had been at the same company as Makoto before.

He had given her a variety of information during a certain case. Fortunately for her, he was at a Yamanashi newspaper company now.

<What, it’s you?>

When Makoto said her name, she heard a sigh from the other end.

It wasn’t unreasonable for him to have that reaction. She had called him last night too to get information.

The information she had given Yakumo this morning had all been from Takizawa.

'I’m sorry for calling again.'

<What do you want this time?>

'I heard that the young man who found the corpse had been filming the scene with a video camera.'

<Ah, that?>

Takizawa sounded exhausted.

'Do you know of it?'

<Yeah. There was a local detective there. He showed me it in private, but it had been pretty creepy.>

'Creepy?'

<Yeah. You're pretty knowledgeable about spiritual stuff, right?>

To be accurate, Yakumo was the one who was knowledgeable.

However, because Makoto had been involved in many incidents of that kind, she was now known within the company as a reporter who was knowledgeable about spiritual phenomena.

'Though I'm not that knowledgeable... Was something filmed there?'

<Filmed there, eh.... Anyway, that detective had been pretty afraid. Since it was from a rising religious group, the detective thought there might be a curse.>

'A... curse?'

<Anyway, I'll send the data, so once you've checked it out, I want your opinion.>

'Understood,' responded Makoto. Then, she hung up.

She had thought it'd be difficult to get the video, so this was a bit underwhelming.

After she took a break, she suddenly thought about Ishii.

He had seemed rather depressed about the incident with Gotou yesterday. Makoto picked up her phone and called Ishii's number.

<Hello, Ishii Yuutarou speaking.>

She heard a more cheerful voice than she had expected from the phone.

'It's Hijikata.'

<Ah, Makoto-san.>

'You seemed down yesterday, so I was wondering... if you were OK...'

<I'm fine. I'll do anything to save Detective Gotou. I don't have the time to be depressed.>

Makoto felt happy for some reason when she heard Ishii's energetic voice.

When they first met, she had thought that he was an unreliable person, but after getting to know him, she came to understand that he was a kind person.

She felt like he seemed more confident lately.

'That's great. Please continue to work hard. I'll help as much as I can.'

<Thank you very much.>

'Then...'

<Excuse me!>

As Makoto was about to hang up, Ishii called out to stop her.

'Yes?'

'I didn't do...'

<No, it was thanks to you, Makoto-san.>

'Then maybe I'll have you thank me somehow next time.'

<Please ask anything of me.>

'Then a date.'

When Makoto said that as a joke, Ishii became speechless on the other side of the phone.

The image of an red-faced Ishii, stock still, appeared in Makoto's mind. She thought that side of him was cute.

– Maybe that's tasteless of me.

As she thought that, Makoto said, 'I'm looking forward to it.' She hung up.

When did she start thinking of Ishii as somebody of the opposite gender – she wasn't sure. At some point, she had become attracted to him.

To be honest, Makoto liked men who pulled her in. Ishii was the complete opposite.

– So why?

Makoto asked herself that in her heart. She couldn't come up with an answer.

Mysteriously, she enjoyed not understanding.

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13

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'Let's visit Imoto's ex-wife,' Ishii suggested to Miyagawa.

At first, Miyagawa didn't look that pleased. It was because he had already gone to question her.

As a result, it was proven that she had an alibi for the date of the incident and that they hadn't kept in contact after the divorce. Miyagawa probably didn't think that going to talk to her again would get them any new information.

Ishii couldn't deny that, but he still wanted to meet her.

Putting what the wife thought aside, Imoto had thought about the family he had lost in his last moments.

He must have felt something special then.

Because of Ishii's needling, Miyagawa folded in the end.

Imoto's wife lived in a residential area two stations away.

Ishii stood in front of the door and pressed the intercom button. Then, a girl of about seven – probably Imoto's daughter – showed up.

'Excuse me, is your mother here?' asked Ishii, but she had already gone inside.

After a while, a woman in her late thirties opened the door. She was probably Manami, Imoto's ex-wife.

'Who might you be?'

She was clearly on guard.

'Excuse me, my name is Ishii. I'm from the Setamachi precinct.'

'It's Miyagawa.'

'You came yesterday as well, didn't you? I've already told you about him...'

I'm sick of this already – it was evident she felt that way. However, Ishii couldn't back down here.

'I'm sorry, but we would like to hear you once more.'

Ishii bowed from his waist.

There was no response.

'Please. When Imoto-san died, he had been looking at a photo. It was a photo with you,' Ishii said quickly, head still bowed.

'That doesn't matter.'

Manami tried to close the door, but Miyagawa held it open with his hand.

'Even if it doesn't matter to you, it mattered to Imoto, who's dead now.'

'I...'

'Even a little is fine. Talk to us.'

For a while, the two of them looked at each other, but finally Manami said, 'Please come in,' her voice as quiet as a mosquito. Perhaps she had lost to Miyagawa's stare.

Ishii looked at Miyagawa and then entered the room.

it was a 2DK. They went to a six-tatami room in the back. Ishii and Miyagawa sat opposite Manami

at a table.

She didn't put out cushions or tea. She probably wanted them to leave quickly.

'What do you want to know?' Manami said quietly, looking at her lap.

'What was the reason for your divorce?'

That was what Ishii asked first.

Since Imoto had taken great care of his family photo, Ishii knew that he hadn't wanted the divorce.

'His mother got cancer.'

'Cancer?'

'Yes. She suffered quite a bit. Then, somehow he got solicited into a strange religious group.'

'Solicited...?'

'They said that his mother's sickness would be cured if he gave them offerings. Things like that...'

'I see.'

Ishii heard about things of the like often.

'He even took out loans to give money to that group. Meanwhile, loan sharks started coming to our home...'

'I see... And how about his mother?'

'She died.'

For a moment, Manami's eyes seemed blurry with anger.

She must have known that her mother-in-law wasn't at fault, but she had to point her anger there.

'I see.'

'I thought that would wake him up, but... the group told him they needed money because his mother would suffer even after death... If that continued, my daughter might... That's what I thought, so I divorced him.'

Manami sniffled.

Ishii understood painfully how she felt. He decided to change the question.

'Excuse me, but did you really not have any contact from him before he died?'

Imoto had had a photo of his family at the time of his death. If he thought of them so dearly, he must have wanted to talk to them before he died.

'I didn't.'

Manami looked away.

– She's lying.

Ishii felt that instantly.

'Really?'

Miyagawa seemed to have sensed the same thing as he pressed Manami for an answer.

Ishii thought about pressing forward too, but before he could, he saw a letter case on the wall.

Though it was in the middle of the conversation, Ishii stood up, as if drawn towards it.

'A letter came, didn't it,' said Ishii. Manami's shoulders shuddered.

Ishii could see a man's handwriting on a letter in the letter case. Though he didn't know who the man was, it was obvious from the reaction.

'He's such an idiot...'

Manami looked down, biting her lower lip.

'What are you talking about?' asked Miyagawa.

When Manami looked up again, her eyes were red.

'There was a letter.'

'What did he write?'

Though Ishii could have found out by reaching out and looking inside the envelope, he felt like he shouldn't touch it.

'I couldn't do anything up until now. Take this in exchange for child support... His life insurance certificate was inside.'

'Life insurance...'

'He didn't pay consolation money or child support after the divorce. He couldn't have. He was troubled by his own loans...'

'Is that so...'

'But you won't get any money from killing yourself right after signing up for life insurance... He really is an idiot...'

Manami shook her head.

Tears fell from her eyes –

Ishii couldn't look at her face, so he averted his eyes.

Just as Manami said, even if he did have insurance, if he killed himself within the exemption term, he wouldn't receive the money.

And yet he had gone out of his way to send his life insurance certificate to his ex-wife.

– Why?

A new question came up in Ishii's mind.

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14

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'Are you really going?' asked Haruka, standing next to Yakumo.

After leaving Hideaki, Yakumo had said that they were going to go to Jikoukoushinkai's main base. Then, they had gone up a small hill that was about fifteen minutes from the station by car.

'Of course.'

Yakumo was expressionless as he looked up at the temple in front of him.

This temple was Jikoukoushinkai's headquarters. It seemed they had purchased a temple that had once belonged to another religion.

Perhaps it was prejudice, but since it was the headquarters of a new religious group, it felt creepy.

'Am I going too?' said Eishin, taking Gotou's wheelchair out of the car.

'That's the plan,' Yakumo said nonchalantly, but Eishin looked troubled.

'In these clothes?'

Eishin spread his arms and looked at his own monk's robes.

Haruka did feel like that would be a problem. They were going to meet a rising religious group. It was like going to a church in monk's robes.

However, Yakumo's expression still didn't change.

'Won't it be interesting to see their reactions when you go there in those clothes?'

It was like Yakumo was enjoying this. Haruka thought that Eishin would object, but then he agreed with a smile.

- I have a bad feeling about this.

Ignoring Haruka's concern, Yakumo pressed the intercom button by the door.

<Yes.>

A woman's voice responded immediately from the intercom.

'Actually, I came because I want to consult your founder.'

<What is your business?>

'One of my friends has been possessed by a ghost. Just as I was bewildered about what to do, I heard a rumour about your founder. I thought that the founder might save my friend.'

Yakumo's explanation made it sound like he was at his wits' end.

This always happened, but Haruka admired Yakumo for being able to lie so easily about something like this. Yakumo was probably the type that would never be found out even if he cheated on his partner.

<That must be of great concern to you. Please enter.>

When the intercom cut off, the door opened automatically.

'That was a pretty good response.'

Eishin seemed like he was enjoying himself a lot.

First, Eishin pushed Gotou's wheelchair through the door, and then Yakumo and Haruka went in after them.

'Please follow me.'

A woman called out to them. She wore white hakama and a black sash that had a red Brahma on it. Her clothes were reminiscent of a mountain priest's. Her fringe rested on her forehead and she wore glasses. She was so expressionless that it was creepy – she seemed rather shady.

She led them down a promenade.

'Nothing ventured...' said Eishin to himself as he followed.

'We're going.'

'Ah, right.'

At Yakumo's urging, Haruka hurriedly followed.

After reaching the building's entrance, she took a quick look around. Just as the door closed.

– Will we be able to go back?

That question flashed through Haruka's mind.

They were led into the building into a large room with wooden flooring. A unique smell like that of incense filled the room.

The ceiling was about five metres tall. There was an altar at the back of the room with a statue of Acala, sitting.

In the centre of the room, there was a large metal object that seemed like a box, surrounded by four pillars which were bound with a shimenawa.

'Hey, what's that?' Haruka asked Yakumo, pointing at the box in the centre of the room.

'That's a homa-mandala.'

Eishin was the one who responded.

'Homa-mandala?'

Even after hearing the name, Haruka didn't understand what it was.

'It's used during Shugendo cedar-burning exorcisms. The shimenawa is the boundary.'

'You know about it in detail.'

'It's my job.'

Eishin smiled proudly and then continued.

'Also, during the Meiji period, Shugendo was forbidden. Then, the people who practised Shugen had to either join a Buddhist sect which shared their world view or abandon their teachers to become Shinto priests.'

'Oh?'

After Haruka expressed how impressed she was by Eishin's explanation, a woman in white hakama and a sash with a red Brahma came into the room.

She was probably in her forties. She was as beautiful as a Japanese doll.

– Shiiing.

The khakkhara in the woman's hand rang.

'Though Shugendo was abandoned once, I now carry the teachings that had travelled down by mouth.'

The woman's voice was cool, not sharpened by the sound of the khakkhara.

'Who are you?' asked Yakumo.

'I apologise for the late introduction. My name is Minegishi Kyouka.'

Kyouka gave her name and slowly bowed.

Each of her actions was graceful and beautiful. It was like watching a dance.

'My name is Saitou Yakumo. This is Master Eishin. And she's an assistant.'

Yakumo introduced all of them.

'Why is a Buddhist master in a place like this?'

Kyouka looked at Eishin.

Her response made sense. Eishin had thought that from the beginning.

'I only came to be sure. Please don't let it concern you,' replied Eishin, puffing out his chest.

'To be sure of what?'

'To be sure that this wasn't a cult or something.'

Eishin was clearly provoking her.

However, Kyouka's expression did not change at all.

'Why would you say this is a cult?'

'I don't have to say it. I hear this group asks for a lot of money for fake exorcisms.'

'You are saying that we do...?'

'Yes.'

When Eishin nodded, Kyouka covered her mouth and laughed.

'What's so funny?' asked Eishin, astonished.

'We have never forced anyone to make offerings. Everyone gives offerings because they want to.'

'It's the same thing.'

'If what we do is a crime, what you do is the same, Master Eishin,' said Kyouka, still smiling.

'What are you talking about?'

'Don't Buddhist temples also accept offerings from families? We are no different from you, Master Eishin.'

'Wha –'

Eishin bit his lip.

Kyouka had easily deceived Eishin into believing her. She had quite a way with words.

– What are you going to do?

When Haruka looked at Yakumo, for just a moment, he was smiling.

'I apologise. Please forgive our rudeness.'

Yakumo slowly bowed his head.

'I am accustomed to it. Please do not concern yourself.'

Kyouka smiled at him.

'Though this is sudden, I have a request. I would like you to exorcise the spirit from the pitiful man who has been possessed by a ghost,' Yakumo said fluently, pointing at Gotou, who was in a wheelchair.

Shiiing.

The khakkhara rang.

'You are trying to test me, are you not?'

Kyouka slowly walked towards Gotou and murmured that.

'What do you mean?' asked Yakumo.

Kyouka turned towards Yakumo and looked at his face.

'That eye. You can see as well, can't you,' Kyouka said quietly.

Ishii stopped at the station gates.

It was because he had spotted a sign for a life insurance company. The sign had a pure and innocent actress smiling on it. Ishii often saw her on television.

Though he normally didn't notice it, because of what happened earlier, his eyes were drawn there.

'Is this your type?'

Miyagawa stopped as well and looked at the sign.

Though the actress was beautiful, that wasn't what caught Ishii's eye.

'Ah, no, that isn't it... I was just wondering... why Imoto got insurance...'

'Didn't he just want to leave his money to his wife and kid since he caused them trouble?'

'But he committed suicide...'

'He probably didn't know that he wouldn't get money if he committed suicide.'

Manami had seemed to think the same way, but Ishii couldn't accept that simple answer.

'They're supposed to explain that money isn't given out for suicides when you get insurance.'

'The insurance company probably forgot.'

That was possible, but –

'If he wanted to leave his insurance money to his wife and daughter, he should have checked that.'

'Well, that's true...'

Miyagawa cocked his head, scratching his chin.

'But he still killed himself...'

It just seemed off to Ishii.

Something was wrong. But he didn't know what that something was. Not knowing irritated him.

'Maybe the insurance and suicide were separate?' said Miyagawa, frowning as he stuck his hands in his pockets.

'Eh?'

'Like... he just happened to be solicited and signed up for insurance. After that, he committed a robbery and decided to kill himself.'

It sounded plausible, but there was a hole in that line of thinking.

'He had borrowed a lot of money. Would he pay for expensive insurance just because he was asked to?'

'That's...'

Miyagawa was lost for words.

Imoto didn't have the money to join insurance, but he still did. Then, he sent that certificate to his wife, Manami.

There must have been a reason here.

Manami's crying face, the last expression she showed Ishii, flashed through his mind. She hadn't wanted money. She hadn't wanted Imoto to die – that was what Ishii thought.

'I wonder why Imoto gave so much money to a religion – to the point that it destroyed his family.'

Ishii said the question exactly as it came to his mind.

If he hadn't joined the religious group, he might have had a different life.

'When people are faced with a reality that they just can't change with their own power, they want to cling to gods,' said Miyagawa with a bitter expression.

'Is that so?'

Perhaps it was because Ishii was an atheist, but he just couldn't understand that feeling.

'I've seen a lot of people go that way.'

'I think they'd realise it was strange when they were tricked into giving away all their money though...'

'They don't think that they're being tricked. That's the magic of religion.'

'But...'

'There was a religious group that committed a terrorist act on the subway before, right?'

'Yes.'

There had been an unprecedented terrorist attack before where poison nerve gas was let out on the subway. It had been planned by a cult.

'Even after that tragedy, the believers still believed in their founder.'

'I do remember that.'

The aforementioned religious group changed their name after the incident and still existed³.

It was terrifying.

3 Miyagawa and Ishii are referring to the Subway Sarin Incident that occurred on the Tokyo subway and was organised by Aum Shinrikyo (オウム真理教 or Supreme Truth), which is considered a terrorist organisation. The group is currently known as Aleph, and there is also a breakaway group named Hikari no Wa (ひかりの輪), which means Circle of Light.

'It's not just that group. Look at history. How many people do you think have died in the name of a god?'

Miyagawa looked straight at Ishii. His eyes were terribly dark.

Ishii felt himself shudder.

It was just as Miyagawa said. People calmly killed others for the teachings they believed in. Giving away their money to them could even be considered a better method.

'But no matter how much money he paid, the gods didn't save him,' said Miyagawa in a caustic tone.

Putting aside saving altogether, the religion had caused his downfall –

'So what are you going to do?'

Miyagawa's brow furrowed.

At times when they were stuck, they needed to go to the beginning. It would be necessary to confirm whether there was a possibility of murder.

'Let's try asking Hata-san for his opinion.'

'That demon?'

'Yes.'

'Can't say I want to...'

Miyagawa's brow furrowed even deeper.

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'You can see as well, can't you.'

The moment Kyouka said that, even Yakumo couldn't hide his surprise.

As if scorning Yakumo's reaction, a light smile appeared on Kyouka's face. It was an incredibly coquettish smile.

'What are you talking about?' Eishin asked in Yakumo's stead.

'I mean exactly what I said,' Kyouka said calmly. It made it impossible to answer.

'Just as you say, I can see as well.'

After a silence, Yakumo spoke. The surprise had already disappeared from his face.

It looked like he had managed to get a hold of himself.

'Then you should be able to save this person as well.'

Kyouka gestured at Gotou.

'Unfortunately, all I can do is see spirits. I cannot exorcise them.'

Yakumo looked directly at Kyouka.

After they stared at each other for a while, Kyouka's expression softened.

'Is that so?'

'I heard that you could exorcise spirits, Kyouka-sama. Can I ask that of you?'

Yakumo bowed his head, looking like he had nowhere else to go.

– What a frightening man.

Eishin thought that to himself. Yakumo was good at getting people to go along with him.

When Eishin tried to provoke Kyouka earlier, that was because Yakumo had instructed him to do so in advance. By doing so, she had no place to run, and they were in this situation now.

'I understand. I shall exorcise the spirit possessing this man,' declared Kyouka.

– This'll be worth seeing.

Eishin crossed his arms and looked at Kyouka.

'Thank you very much.'

Yakumo bowed at his waist.

'Preparations for exorcism!' Kyouka said, raising her voice.

'Understood.'

There was a voice from outside the room –

Then, four men who were wearing the clothes of Shugendo, just as Kyouka was, rushed in through the door.

After they moved Gotou in his wheelchair to the centre of the shimenawa barrier, they stepped outside the edges of the barrier.

As Kyouka watched, she made her khakkhara ring.

'Today, in this hall, we come to the mountain for its teachings.'

Kyouka stood in the front, raising her voice.

'Today, in this hall, we come uninvited to perform an exorcism,' the four men chorused.

This unique exchange was that of Shugendo. Kyouka wasn't a complete amateur – it looked like she had some knowledge of the religion.

'Our guides for the exorcism will perform.'

'We receive the command.'

The four men responded to Kyouka's words as well.

– Shiiing.

After Kyouka made the khakkhara ring, she entered the barrier.

Then, fire sprang up from the homa-mandala.

There was no smoke. The homa-mandala probably had a gas burner.

Actually burning wood inside would be bad.

Kyouka, who stood in front of Gotou, closed her eyes and took deep breaths, her shoulders moving as she did so.

She appeared to be gathering her concentration.

After a while, Kyouka suddenly opened her eyes.

– Shiiing. Shiiing.

She made the khakkhara ring.

'Purity of Heaven, purity of Earth, purity of within, purity of the six without...'

Kyouka started to chant⁴.

'The ceremony has been abridged a fair bit,' murmured Yakumo while covering his mouth.

Eishin had noticed that as well.

Though Kyouka had imitated the Shugendou ritual, the contents of it had been rather condensed. However, that wasn't rare.

Rituals became condensed naturally. Even the Buddhist prayers chanted in temples were different than they had been originally – they had been shortened.

'That's how it is,' said Eishin.

'That's true,' replied Yakumo quietly.

Kyouka still continued to chant.

'Purify the Heaven and Earth and within and the six roots of perception that are without – the eyes, the ears, the nose, the tongue, the body, the mind...'

Shiiing, shiiing –

The khakkhara rang.

As if in response, Gotou's body started to shake.

'Yakumo-kun...'

4 This is taken from the Tenchi Issai Shoujou Harai (天地一切清浄祓 or The Purification of Heaven and Earth). You can see the full Japanese [here](#).

Haruka looked surprised as she tugged on Yakumo's sleeve.

However, this was probably no surprise to Yakumo. He watched silently.

Shiiing –

The khakkhara rang louder and the chanting stopped.

The room fell silent.

'I ask the spirit possessing the man. Who are you?'

With narrowed eyes, Kyouka looked directly at Gotou.

As if to respond, Gotou slowly lifted his head.

'Ah!'

Even Eishin was surprised.

However, Yakumo was as expressionless as always.

'This is not your place. Leave at once.'

Shiiing –

Kyouka made the khakkhara ring.

'Uuurgh...'

Gotou let out a groan. Then, he glared at Kyouka with a sharp gaze.

His eyes were frightening, filled with hatred.

'Guides, perform the kuji⁵.'

'We receive the command.'

The four men responded to Kyouka's words.

'Rin Pyou Tou Sha Kai Chin Retsu Zai Zen⁶.'

In front of Gotou, Kyouka joined the kuji reading and put her hands together in a mudra.

Next, she held up her right hand's index finger and middle finger to form a dagger and cut sideways.

– Shiiing.

The four men rang their khakkharas together.

As if that had been a sign, Gotou slowly stood up, groaning as he did so.

It felt like he might attack Kyouka at any moment.

5 Kuji means nine syllables (九字) and refers to mantras with nine syllables used for purification. It is common in Shugendo.

6 This is the Ryobu kuji in its original Taoist syllables translated into Japanese. The translation given by Wikipedia is '[Celestial] soldiers descend and arrange yourselves in front of me'.

'Oi, Yakumo.'

Eishin looked at Yakumo.

However, Yakumo did not move.

'Yakumo-kun...'

Haruka sounded anxious too, but Yakumo was still like a rock.

Could he not move, or did he not dare to? Eishin didn't know.

'You... did...'

With saliva dripping out of his mouth, Gotou held his hands out towards Kyouka.

– Just like before.

That was what Eishin felt. When Gotou was possessed by a spirit in Rina's house, he had assaulted Eishin in the same way.

However, Yakumo didn't move. That wasn't all – Kyouka just stood with a blank expression.

'Youu...'

Gotou put his hands on Kyouka's neck.

'Eishin-san! Please stop Gotou-san,' Yakumo yelled.

Eishin ran at full speed.

He reached out and performed a lariat on Gotou's throat.

Normally, Gotou would probably have fallen on his behind, but as he was possessed by a ghost and couldn't brace himself, he fell, rolling along the floor and smashing into the wall. He stopped moving.

'I might've done a bit too much.'

'In any case, he's alive,' said Yakumo after walking up to Gotou and checking his breathing.

Haruka seemed confused about what had happened – she was just standing there with her mouth wide open.

Even in this situation, Kyouka's expression didn't change at all as she looked at Yakumo.

'That was rather violent.'

'I apologise. I thought that it was a dangerous situation...'

Yakumo returned Kyouka's gaze.

His eyes seemed to let off a sharp light.

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'It's been a while.'

Ishii and Miyagawa went to Hata's room, in the basement of the hospital.

There were no windows. Cabinets lined the walls. The room felt oppressive and suffocating.

However, Hata didn't seem to care at all as he sipped his tea lazily.

'Ishii-kun? And... who was this again?'

Hata cocked his head and looked at Miyagawa.

'Miyagawa.'

'Ah, that's right. Boiled Octopus-kun, right.'

'Old man, you're saying that on purpose, aren't you!'

Miyagawa was angry, but Hata just let out a creepy giggle.

A strange person, as usual –

'So what do the both of you want?' asked Hata, the creepy smile still on his face.

'Actually, we're here about the corpse of the person who committed suicide that was found the other day...'

When Ishii said that, Hata replied, 'Ah, that?'

'I'll ask directly. Is it possible that the corpse was murdered?' asked Ishii.

Hata crossed his arms. 'Hm.'

'So, was it?' Miyagawa urged.

Perhaps Hata didn't like that, as his eyes flashed open to glare at Miyagawa.

'It must be tough for you, Ishii-kun.'

'What must be tough for me?'

'A boiled octopus after a bear. You must be unable to bear being paired up with idiots one after another.'

'Er...'

The question was difficult to answer.

'Stop fooling around already, you demonic old man,' threatened Miyagawa. However, Hata ignored that and handed Ishii the documents.

Ishii took the documents and flipped through the pages.

Suddenly, a photo of the dead Imoto appeared in front of him. He looked away unconsciously.

'The cause of death was most definitely suffocation. There are no external wounds. No signs of drugs. There were no points of pressure besides the rope wrapped around his neck,' Hata explained disinterestedly.

'So... it really was a suicide.'

'I'm just saying the facts.'

'Which means?'

Ishii cocked his head. He didn't understand Hata's point.

At this stage, it's clear from the situation that it was a suicide – it would be simpler to understand if Hata would just say that.

'You still don't get it?'

'I don't.'

'My job is to determine the job of death. Saying whether it's suicide or murder – that's your job, right?'

'That's...'

That was exactly it, thought Ishii.

Hata just found the facts from the corpse. To look at it a different way, if it was possible to kill Imoto with a rope without using drugs or causing external injuries, it would be a murder.

Perhaps Ishii had just been naive, wanting somebody to decide for him where he should go next.

'Thank you very much.'

Just as Ishii bowed towards Hata, the business phone on top of the desk rang.

Hata answered the phone. After talking for a while, he stood up quickly.

'Did something happen?'

'Wait for a bit.'

After saying that, Hata hurried out of the room.

'The old man just does whatever he wants,' grumbled Miyagawa. Then, he sat down in the seat where Hata had been.

Ishii leant against the wall.

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'Hey, is Gotou-san OK?'

Haruka looked at Gotou again.

They had taken Gotou, who had collapsed at Jikoukoushinkai base, straight to the hospital where Hata was at.

Gotou lay on a hospital bed. His forehead was wrapped in gauze. Now, they were waiting for the results of the examination.

'He's probably fine,' said Yakumo, sounding disinterested as he leant against the hospital wall.

He didn't seem anxious at all even though it was such a critical situation.

'Probably, you say...'

'Now, don't be in such a rush,' reprimanded Eishin, sitting on the stool by the bed.

Eishin had been the one who hit Gotou. If Haruka acted worried here, it would make Eishin feel guilty.

Haruka let out a deep breath to calm herself down.

'You're all together.'

Hata came into the hospital room.

He was grinning, like he thought something was funny.

'How is he?' asked Yakumo.

'Unfortunately...'

Hata pursed his lips like he had eating something sour and looked up at the ceiling.

'Eh?'

Haruka couldn't believe it.

Yakumo and Eishin were quiet. The atmosphere in the hospital room was instantly heavier.

'There seems to be nothing wrong with his body. I thought that I'd be able to autopsy him, but I can't. It's unfortunate.'

After saying that, Hata started giggling.

Haruka couldn't laugh at all. The strength left her body all at once, to the point she wanted to collapse to the floor.

'Don't say something so inauspicious,' said Eishin, looking astonished.

'Oh? There's a sea bonze⁷ here.'

Hata goggled at Eishin.

'An old man who looks like a dried plum has no right to call someone a sea bonze.'

7 The sea bonze, or Umibouzu (海坊主), is a spirit that capsizes boats. It has a round head like a monk. [Here](#) is an illustration of it.

'You're an old man too, aren't you?'

Hata casually brushed away Eishin's retort and started cackling, which made his throat shake.

It was a strange exchange.

'Thank you very much.'

Interrupting the two of them, Yakumo spoke.

'Don't worry about it. Anyway, Ishii-kun came to visit me. I'll tell him to come here.'

After saying that, Hata left the hospital room.

Haruka was finally able to relax, but she still had questions.

'Hey, what happened to the spirit possessing Gotou?'

'Right now, Gotou-san isn't being possessed by a ghost.'

Yakumo raised his left eyebrow.

Haruka couldn't say anything from shock.

'So that exorcist was the real thing?'

'I can't say anything at this stage.'

'But the ghost isn't possessing Gotou. Doesn't that mean the exorcism succeeded?'

'Are you an idiot?'

'Idiot...'

That was an awful way to put it. Haruka didn't think that she had been so off the mark.

'Explain what you're talking about,' said Eishin.

Yakumo ran a hand through his hair, seeming annoyed. Then, he began.

'It's true that once the exorcist started the exorcism, there was an unusual change to the spirit possessing Gotou.'

'Unusual change...'

Haruka had felt that too.

Gotou's body had started to shake and he had lifted his head, as if to go with the chants.

'Though it looked like the ghost was reacting to her chants, there is another way to look at it.'

'Another way?'

'Got this? The spirit possessing Gotou is a person named Hiyama Kenichirou, who was found in Aokigahara's Sea of Trees. He had been a part of Jikoukoushinkai.'

'I see.'

Eishin showed a nod of understanding, but Haruka didn't understand.

'What are you talking about?'

'To Hiyama-san – the spirit possessing Gotou-san – that place must have had a lot of memories for him. In short, it is possible that he was responding to that.'

'So that's what you meant?'

Yakumo's explanations were always meandering and difficult to understand.

For Hiyama, who was part of the religious group's leadership, that was where he had lived. It could be called his home.

He must have felt a lot there. But –

'Right now, Gotou-san isn't being possessed.'

'That's right.'

'Where did he go?' asked Haruka.

Yakumo's mouth opened.

Haruka swallowed and waited for the answer.

However, the door burst open, thrusting the anxious atmosphere out. Ishii and Miyagawa ran into the room.

'D-Detective Gotou!'

Ishii ran straight for Gotou's bed, like he didn't see anyone else at all.

'What a busy man,' said Eishin, sounding exasperated as he stood up.

'Ishii-san, please calm down a bit,' Yakumo admonished, patting Ishii on the shoulder.

Thanks to that, Ishii came back to his senses.

'I-I'm sorry. Hata-san told me that Detective Gotou was brought here injured, so I...'

Ishii scratched his head, looking incredibly apologetic.

Since it was Hata, he had probably exaggerated the story for his own amusement.

'Please don't worry. I think Gotou-san will wake up soon,' said Yakumo as he picked up a vase on the sideboard casually and took out the flower inside.

'I-is that true?'

'Yes. If you just pour this holy water on him, he'll wake up.'

'Holy water?'

'Yes. Please pour it on his face all at once.'

Yakumo smiled.

– What a poor joke.

Even as Haruka thought that, she silently watched Ishii.

Ishii nodded. He brought the vase close to Gotou's face and emptied it all at once.

Water splashed down onto Gotou's face.

'Damn, that's cold!' yelled Gotou, flying right up.

Then, his eyes met Ishii's.

'Ishii, you bastard – did you do this?'

'Ah, no, this...'

Ishii didn't even have time to explain. Gotou's fist came down on his head.

Even though Haruka had spent the whole day in constant worry, if Gotou was this full of energy, he would be fine.

For some reason, even Ishii, who had been hit, seemed happy as he pressed a hand against his head.

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19

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'Is that true?'

Makoto was incredibly relieved after hearing Ishii's news over the phone.

<Yes. According to Yakumo-shi, the spirit that had been possessing him has also gone.>

Ishii's voice was as bright as a young boy's.

Sometimes, Ishii showed a childish side like this. To Makoto, this was so cute it was unbearable.

'That solves it then.'

<That...>

Ishii stopped speaking.

'Is there still something else?'

<Yes. According to Yakumo-shi, the incident isn't over...>

'Isn't over?'

<Yes. In the first place, Detective Gotou's possession was just an accident. My original goal was the matter of Imoto-shi's corpse, which was found in his flat.>

'Ah, that's right.'

<I'm ashamed to say it, but I was so happy that I completely forgot about that until Yakumo-shi pointed it out.>

'I'd forgotten as well,' said Makoto while laughing.

Makoto had been the one who said 'That solves it then' earlier. She had been so concerned about Gotou that she had almost forgotten the main problem.

<I have a message from Yakumo-shi requesting that you continue the investigation.>

'I understand.'

usef<Thank you.>

'Ishii-san, please don't forget that you promised me a date.'

Makoto hung up before Ishii responded.

She felt that it was a bit mean of her, but if she didn't do this, she didn't think Ishii would invite her, since he was so shy.

She looked at the computer again, and with good timing, she saw an email from Takizawa.

<I've attached the video. Please take a look at it.>

It was a short email. The attached video was a WMP file. It was probably the video taken in the Sea of Trees.

Makoto used the mouse to play the video.

The video was the Sea of Trees one, as Makoto thought. For a while, the video continued silently through the forest.

Makoto had gone to Aokigahara's Sea of Trees before, just once. At the time, she had just been going on a determined hiking route, so she hadn't run into anything inexplicable.

However, the further the video went in, the dimmer and eerier it became.

Though it was famous for suicides, why would somebody want to die here – Makoto didn't understand.

With the mouse, Makoto fast-forwarded the video and started playing just as the video changed.

<I don't care any more. Let's go back.>

The woman with the man taking the video was complaining.

The video zoomed in on her. She looked irritated by that, since she ran off.

<Hey, wait...>

Makoto heard the voice of the man holding the camera.

The camera stayed there for a while as the man grumbled, but finally, the camera followed the woman who had left.

Then, a shriek rang through the forest.

<What was that?>

After murmuring that, the man holding the camera ran towards the direction where the shriek came from.

He seemed in a hurry, as the camera was shaking violently and was pointing straight up.

Finally, the camera landed on the woman, who had fainted, and a burnt corpse.

<You OK?>

As the man said that, he threw the camera aside.

The camera fell to the ground and continued to film at an angle.

For a moment, something passed by –

'Eh?'

Makoto rewound a bit to check again.

– Here.

Makoto stopped the video at the moment that something passed by.

A chill ran down her spine. The video was showing somebody Makoto knew.

-

20

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'So I was possessed by a ghost...'

Gotou hung his head on top of the bed.

After Yakumo, Haruka and Eishin explained, Gotou understood what had happened to him.

He could remember clearly up until he answered the phone, but his memories after that were vague and patchy.

He had never thought that he would be possessed.

'In any case, I'm glad.'

'I'm not glad. Because of Gotou-san's disdainful actions, we were pulled around in a dozen different directions.'

In contrast to Haruka's smile, Yakumo appeared displeased.

'My bad.'

Gotou bowed his head honestly, which made Yakumo look away awkwardly.

'So, Gotou-san, could you tell us what you remember?' said Yakumo after clearing his throat.

'What I remember?'

'Yes. Just as it was with Makoto-san, people are filled with an image of the person possessing them while they're being possessed.'

Come to think of it, that was right.

When Makoto was being possessed by a ghost, the ghost's attachment to life had flowed through her.

Gotou looked up at the ceiling and thought about it. Then, images buried away in his memory started to come back to him slowly.

'A dark forest... A man in a mountain priest's clothes...'

Gotou said exactly what came to his mind.

'A... mountain priest?'

Yakumo's brow furrowed.

'Yeah. I couldn't see the face, but that guy lit a fire in the forest...'

'Wouldn't that be that religious group?' Haruka said excitedly.

'What?'

Gotou didn't understand what 'that religious group' was supposed to be.

'It'll take too long to talk about it,' Yakumo said, cutting the conversation short, but there was no way Gotou would accept that.

'Just explain,' Gotou said.

Yakumo shook his head, looking fed up, and said to Haruka, 'I'll leave it to you.'

'Honestly,' said Haruka, pouting, but she still explained in detail about the religious group called Jikoukoushinkai.

'In short, Minegishi or whatever founder person exorcised the spirit for me...'

'Why would you think that?'

Yakumo looked at Gotou with scorn.

'I'm wrong?'

'You're wrong,' Yakumo said firmly.

'Then...'

'That's the end of the conversation. More importantly, do you remember anything else?'

Ignoring Gotou's dissatisfaction, Yakumo urged him to continue.

Gotou clicked his tongue, but he looked through his memories again. Then, he recalled one word.

'Sorry...'

'What do you mean?'

Yakumo cocked his head.

However, Gotou had no way to answer, since those weren't words that he said.

'I heard that in my head. Sorry.'

'Sorry.'

Yakumo put a finger to his brow as he repeated the word.

– Can you think of anything?

Just as Gotou wanted to ask that, the hospital room door opened. Nao and Atsuko had arrived.

The moment Nao saw Gotou, she jumped on top of the bed and hugged him.

'Sorry for worrying you.'

Gotou patted Nao on her head.

'Honestly. You get into scrapes like this because you don't think before acting,' said Atsuko by the bed.

Though her tone was angry, her expression was gentle.

– I got back safely.

Gotou finally felt that.

'Please take your time to rest,' said Yakumo. Then, he and Haruka left the room.

To be honest, Gotou felt completely fine. He could get to work right away, but he decided to do as Yakumo said.

'Sorry...'

Gotou spoke in his own words to Atsuko and Nao.

When Eishin saw that, he smiled approvingly.

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21

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After the call with Makoto, Ishii called Shimamura to get information about the case for Hiyama Kenichirou, the corpse found in Aokigahara's Sea of Trees.

Since Jikoukoushinkai's main base was under the Setamachi precinct's jurisdiction, they were currently cooperating with the Yamanashi precinct. Come to think of it, Shimamura had been

grumbling yesterday.

After telling Shimamura what he needed in brief, they decided to meet at a cafe near the hospital, since Shimamura was out.

'Why do you need to investigate the Aokigahara case?' said Miyagawa unpleasantly as he sat next to Ishii in the cafe.

'It's connected to the current case,' Ishii said firmly, but that wasn't his own opinion. Yakumo had said it – their cases are connected.

Yakumo had instructed him to gather information about the investigation.

Without any clues, all Ishii could do right now was believe in Yakumo and follow his instructions.

'No helping it. I'll come with you,' grumbled Miyagawa, lighting his cigarette.

No matter what Miyagawa said, he accompanied Ishii. Ishii was grateful for that.

After a while, Shimamura came into the shop.

'Miyagawa-san too...' said Shimamura in surprise.

'Hey. You look well.'

'That's not true at all. It's tough being told what to do by a rich kid who doesn't know what to do.'

'Don't whine to me.'

'Miyagawa-san, won't you come back?'

'Don't get it wrong. I didn't leave – I was left out,' said Miyagawa with a snort.

Shimamura's shoulders fell down in disappointment. She sat down opposite them.

After the coffee they ordered came, Shimamura looked at Ishii and said, 'Hiyama's case, right?'

'Yes.'

'I was investigating Imoto until yesterday. You done with that already?'

It looked like Hiyama also thought something was off about that.

'Imoto's and Hiyama's cases may be related.'

'I don't think so, but...'

'Don't say that and just tell us,' Miyagawa said admonishingly.

Shimamura looked like she would say something again, but then she shook her head and took out some documents.

'You know the outline of the case, right?'

'Yes.'

Yakumo had explained before Ishii came here.

'Right now, we're gathering suspects with the idea that it was an internal incident. The information from questioning's in these documents.'

'Thank you very much.'

'To be honest, there hasn't been much of a development, but at the conference earlier, the detective that staked out the group had strange news.'

'What was it?'

Ishii leant forward.

Shimamura dropped sugar and milk into her coffee and slowly stirred it, almost teasingly.

'An old man wearing monk's robes, a young man and woman, and a man in a wheelchair visited the group.'

'Ah!'

Ishii spoke up without thinking.

They were probably – no, they were definitely –

'What?'

'Ah, that was definitely Detective Gotou and the others,' Ishii said reluctantly.

'How much are you all going to tamper with the case?' said Shimamura in exasperation. Then, she drank her coffee all at once.

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22

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– There are a number of things to investigate.

After leaving the hospital, Yakumo had said that. Now, he and Haruka were walking silently.

– I wonder where we're going.

Haruka had that question, but she didn't say it aloud.

'Here.'

After about twenty minutes of walking, Yakumo suddenly stopped.

Haruka saw a building that looked like a storehouse with a number of trucks parked outside.

Haruka could read the words 'Red Horse Transportation – Setamachi Branch' on the sign.

'A transport company?'

'Yes. Where Hideaki works.'

After saying that, Yakumo started walking towards the prefabricated building by the storehouse.

Haruka jogged after him.

'Hello.'

Yakumo opened the sliding door to the prefabricated building without any hesitation.

'Yes?'

A man in his sixties looked up suspiciously as he drank tea at his desk.

'I apologise for coming so suddenly. My name is Saitou. I'm a reporter from Hokutou Newspaper,' Yakumo lied casually.

Haruka felt like it'd be easier for to get information if he said he was Hideaki's friend, since Hideaki worked here, but Yakumo had to have a reason for lying the way he did.

'What is your business here today?'

The man stood up and walked to the sliding door.

Haruka felt her throat grow tight. The man was clearly suspicious.

'I wanted to listen to what the employees here have to say.'

'Have to say?'

'Yes. About Aoi Hideaki's case.'

When Yakumo said that, the man's expression changed at once.

'What do you want to know about Hide?'

'The police are treating him as a suspect in an incident, because his sister was injured in a robbery. I would like to write an article criticising the police for that.'

The man's expression relaxed, like he had accepted Yakumo's explanation.

'If that's it, I'll talk about anything. Come in.'

The man led them to a corner of the room separated by a partition. It looked like a break room.

Yakumo and Haruka sat on folding chairs. Then, the man gave Yakumo a business card.

The name 'Maeda Hirohisa' was written on it.

'Honestly. I don't know what the police are doing. A detective came here too and treated Hide like the culprit right from the start. It drives me crazy.'

'They really are awful,' said Yakumo, nodding.

Maeda continued talking, seeming pleased.

'He's like his father. Stubborn, but serious. He works his hardest for his sister. A man like that could never kill someone.'

'Did you also know Hideaki-san's father?' Yakumo asked briskly.

'We were in the same grade in high school. When he died, I thought about whether there was anything I could do, and then I hired Hide.'

'I see... Has Hideaki-san seemed strange recently?'

When Yakumo asked that, Maeda looked testy.

He knows something. Haruka could feel that too. However, from that expression, it didn't seem like he planned on talking.

'I don't know.'

As expected, Maeda frowned.

'It's important.'

'I don't know.'

'There is the possibility that somebody used Hideaki-san.'

'Used...'

Haruka could tell that Yakumo's push had shaken Maeda.

'Please tell me,' Yakumo pleaded.

Perhaps that convinced Maeda, as he cleared his throat and began to talk.

'I don't think it's got anything to do with the incident, but a man came looking for Hide. At the time, Hide had been out. After I said that, he gave me his contact information and left.'

'Who was it?'

'He didn't give his name.'

'Did you give Hideaki-san the contact information?'

'Yes.'

'What did he say?'

'That it was some invitation to a religion...'

– Invitation to a religion?

It looked like Yakumo was bothered by that too, as his eyes grew just slightly narrower.

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23

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'Honestly, it was awful,' grumbled Gotou on the bed.

Though he didn't have any heavy injuries – just a small cut on his forehead – he was in the hospital, just in case.

'That's what happens if you act without thinking,' said Eishin, laughing as he sat on the chair by the bed.

'You're the one who told me to answer the phone, old man.'

'That so?'

Eishin was playing dumb, even though he knew it himself.

'Don't blame other people. How worried do you think we were?' interrupted Atsuko. She looked exasperated as she sat with Nao.

'S-sorry.'

Gotou bowed his head honestly.

It was a strange feeling. In the past, Gotou wouldn't have been able to apologise to Atsuko like this.

'Honestly. You should learn to be a bit more patient.'

'What are you talking about patience for? I've lived like this my whole life.'

'You have to change. It's for their sakes too.'

Eishin looked at Atsuko and Nao with a smirk.

As usual, Eishin was unscrupulous in his methods. This was like making the two of them hostage.

'You know...'

'You'll need to be patient to be a monk.'

'You're saying that again!?' objected Gotou forcefully.

He understood why Yakumo avoided Eishin. Eishin was unimaginably persistent. He would probably keep saying that same thing until Gotou said yes.

'Come on, you're getting worked up over a small thing again.'

'What do you mean by "be a monk"?' asked Atsuko, raising her eyebrows.

'Actually, I was thinking of having this man take over for Isshin and become a monk at that temple.'

The moment Eishin finished his explanation, Atsuko started laughing aloud. Nao started laughing happily too, following Atsuko.

It kind of irritated Gotou that they were laughing so much.

'What's so funny?'

'I mean, you becoming a monk – that's like trying to stop the tide.'

'What?'

'You wouldn't even be able to remember the sutras, right?'

That was an awful way to put it. It made Gotou want to object.

'Don't make fun of me. I could be a monk.'

'Oh, so you want to now?'

Eishin crossed his arms and nodded approvingly.

'I was just saying that. Don't take it seriously.'

Though Gotou denied it hurriedly, Eishin didn't listen.

'Now I can relax a bit. I'm counting on you. Now what to do for your monk name...'

'Stop fooling around already!' yelled Gotou, forgetting that he was in a hospital room.

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24

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'What sort of person was Hideaki-san during high school?' Haruka asked Yakumo as they left the transport company, knowing that she would be ignored.

There was a long silence.

The sound of the passing cars sounded louder because of it.

'To be honest, I hated him then...'

'Why?'

There must have been a reason if Yakumo was expressing his emotions so directly.

'He could see ghosts – that's what he'd say.'

'OK.'

Haruka had heard that too.

'He didn't try to hide it. He talked about it freely. At the time, I couldn't stand it – couldn't forgive it.'

'Couldn't forgive...'

'Yeah. Even I think I'm a shallow man. Even though I was suffering, he was fine. I thought it was unfair.'

'I see...'

Haruka realised that Yakumo looked incredibly sad.

It wasn't as if she didn't understand Yakumo's feelings. Because Yakumo could see ghosts, he had undergone a lot of trauma and suffered.

And yet Hideaki didn't act that way – he even declared that he could see ghosts to other people.

'Now that I think about it, I think I looked up to him.'

'Looked up to him?'

'Yeah. I should have been able to behave the way he did, but I didn't.'

'Why not?'

'Probably because I was twisted, hiding myself in my own shell.'

Yakumo laughed self-derisively.

'That's...'

'I might have just wanted somebody to acknowledge my existence. But because I'm a coward, I was afraid of being rejected.'

'That's...'

– Not something to be ashamed of.

Haruka tried to say that, but for some reason, her voice wouldn't come out of her mouth. Instead, she softly gripped Yakumo's shirt.

Even though that wouldn't express her words –

'One day, I realised.'

Yakumo stopped walking.

'Realised what?'

'The reason he declared he could see ghosts.'

'What was it?'

'Love. A deep, deep love...'

'Love?'

Haruka didn't understand why love would make Hideaki declare he could see ghosts.

'His deep love for his sister made him do that.'

'His sister...'

'Perhaps the two of them would have been happier had they not been siblings...'

After saying that, Yakumo looked up at the sky. The clear sky spread above him.

– I wonder what Yakumo's thinking as he looks up at this sky now.

After that, they didn't talk. It looked like Yakumo was thinking so there was no chance to.

'I'll see you tomorrow.'

They parted in front of the station.

As Yakumo walked away into the darkness, he looked incredibly lonely.

For some reason, Haruka felt like she would never see that back again.

-

25

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After Ishii returned to the precinct, he spent the day reading the documents from corner to corner.

Hiyama Kenichirou, found in Aokigahara's Sea of Trees, had been an optometrist originally. Then twenty years ago, he met the exorcist Minegishi Kyouka and started his religious activities.

'Why would a doctor become completely absorbed in a religion?' said Miyagawa to himself with a cigarette in his mouth.

He probably didn't think that a doctor would be tricked by something like that, but reality wasn't like that.

'It was the same when the cult spread poison nerve gas in the subway, but many of the people who immerse themselves in these religious groups are highly educated.'

'Ah, now that you mention it...'

Miyagawa looked up at the ceiling and blew out smoke.

'Though I don't know why...'

'Maybe the wealthy have unexpectedly unsatisfied hearts,' said Miyagawa, deep with feeling.

That made sense. Though they were satisfied with money and status, that was just conceit and a sense of superiority. They didn't give relief or repose.

Ishii looked at the documents again.

Minegishi Kyouka and Hiyama Kenichirou didn't start something as large as a religious group right away.

They moved to Yamanashi prefecture and did something like consultations about spiritual phenomena.

For a while after that, they didn't do anything that stood out. However, about two years ago, they moved to Tokyo, changed their name to Jikoukoushinkai and started to gather a large number of followers.

'Two years ago... I wonder what happened?' said Ishii, putting the question that came to his mind in his mouth.

Miyagawa looked sour.

'Dazzled by money?'

'Perhaps...'

Ishii just couldn't accept that.

'People can do anything for money.'

'However... If that was the case, couldn't they have begun their activities earlier?'

'Maybe... they didn't think about it.'

'I don't think so.'

Miyagawa didn't object. He seemed to find something odd about his own opinion himself, frowning.

The two of them, who had been working quietly, wouldn't suddenly be dazzled by money. Even if that were the case, there must have been a trigger.

That's the key that will solve the mystery of this case – Ishii felt that.

'Well, in any case, Minegishi Kyouka's got to be the murderer.'

Miyagawa tapped the photo of Kyouka in the documents. Murder caused by internal strife – it would certainly be normal to think that way. However, the police couldn't arrest Kyouka. The reason being –

'She has an alibi.'

From the estimated time of death to the time when the corpse was found, Kyouka hadn't left Tokyo.

'Maybe Minegishi Kyouka killed him and got one of the followers to toss the body? A khakkhara used by the group was found at the scene, right?'

'That is possible. However...'

That was exactly what was troubling the investigation team.

If a believer had disposed of the body, they couldn't determine who that believer was. They had gone around questioning them, but as believers, their mouths were sealed tightly.

Because they wouldn't easily talk, the investigation had run aground.

'So what are you going to do?' Miyagawa said carelessly, throwing the documents aside.

Ishii understood how Miyagawa felt. Though they had tried gathering information, with a case like this, infiltration would be most useful.

Ishii didn't think that their actions would make things any clearer.

Just as Ishii sighed, his mobile rang. Makoto's number was displayed on the screen.

'Hello, Ishii Yuutarou speaking.'

<It's Makoto.>

'Ah, er, hello...'

– Please don't forget you promised me a date.

The words Makoto said came back to Ishii's head, which made Ishii heat up for some reason.

<I called Yakumo-kun, but I couldn't get him, so I called you instead, Ishii-san.>

Her voice sounded cornered.

'Did something happen?'

<Actually, there's something I want you to see.>

'W-what is it?'

Ishii had a terribly bad feeling.

-

26

After finishing a tasteless dinner at the hospital, Gotou lay down on the bed.

Atsuko, Nao and Eishin had all gone home.

He looked at the clock. It had just turned seven. Though he was tired, he just couldn't sleep.

He sat up, thinking that he could watch television, when he heard a knock on the door.

'It's open,' said Gotou.

The door opened quietly. When Gotou saw who was there, he was surprised. It was Yakumo.

'What is it?'

Yakumo should have left the hospital already.

He didn't look very good.

'This is just while I'm at it,' said Yakumo, sitting on the chair by the bed.

'While you're at it?'

'Yes. An acquaintance of mine is hospitalised here.'

'The woman who came to ask you for help?'

'Well, yes.'

'Did you find something out?' asked Gotou.

Yakumo pressed the corner of his eyes and covered his face.

It was unlike him.

'I know... whom she wants me to save.'

'Who?'

'I can't say that now.'

'Why not?'

'I don't know how to save them.'

Yakumo shook his head listlessly.

– He's lost.

Gotou felt that. Yakumo could probably see the outline of the case in his head.

However, he wasn't sure whether he should say it aloud.

Something similar had happened before. If the person in question was bad, then he could just be angry, but sometimes that wasn't the case.

Yakumo often supported the weak. Even though he could just let them slip away, that would conflict with his upright self. He suffered more than necessary.

But Gotou didn't hate Yakumo when he was like that. And it made him happy that Yakumo had come to him when he was unsure.

'Hey, want to take a walk?'

Gotou got out of bed and put on slippers.

'If you overwork yourself, your body will let you hear it later.'

'This is just a scrape. Hospitalisation is an overreaction.'

Gotou put a hand on the gauze on his forehead.

He wasn't lying. The cut was already healed. It virtually didn't hurt at all now.

'Why do you plan to go?'

'When you're troubled, you should walk around without thinking.'

'You've never been troubled by anything, right, Gotou-san?'

'I'll punch you,' said Gotou with a click of his tongue. He left the room.

Even though Yakumo had said all that, he followed Gotou silently. They went through the corridor and down the stairs to the waiting room.

Reception time was already over – the lights were off, so it was dim.

Gotou bought two cans of hot coffee from the vending machine by the wall. He threw one at Yakumo.

'This is rare for you, Gotou-san, being so stingy,' said Yakumo, looking at the can of coffee like it was something mysterious.

As usual, he wasn't honest with his feelings.

'Shut up and drink it.'

Gotou pulled the tab of the coffee can open and drank a sip. Then, he walked to the hospital's courtyard.

The air was colder than he'd expected. He shivered.

'What are you worried about?' Gotou asked.

Yakumo held the can of coffee in his two hands and looked up at the sky.

Autumn's harvest moon. The round moon shone brightly. Even in the city where stars never showed, it made Gotou feel calm.

'I don't know... how to save them...'

'Trying to save someone is just ego.'

'Those words are unlike you.'

'Maybe. But nobody knows how things'll end up. Wriggling around for somebody else's sake'll just make you regret it.'

'But you acted for my sake, Gotou-san.'

Yakumo was probably talking about the previous incident when Gotou had had to quit being a police officer. He seemed to feel a debt for that, but that chastened attitude wasn't like Yakumo.

'I was just going with my beliefs.'

'That's like you, Gotou-san.'

Yakumo smiled, just a little.

His eyes, which had been so gloomy just earlier, seemed to have a bit more strength in them.

'Hey, Yakumo...'

Just as Gotou spoke up, he was startled.

Yakumo's eyes flashed open and he slowly fell forward. The can of coffee that slipped from his hand fell onto the courtyard's lawn.

– What happened?

Gotou was bewildered. He tried to run up to Yakumo, but somebody got in his way.

He couldn't see clearly in the dark. The person wore hakama with a belled sash. In their hands was a hexagonal bar.

'You...'

As Gotou started to say that, he was hit forcefully on the head.

The ground shook. He fell forward. Then, he lost consciousness –

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'What am I supposed to look at?' Ishii asked hesitantly.

Makoto had come to the Unsolved Cases Special Investigation Room because she had something she wanted Ishii to see.

His heart had been pounding unpleasantly since earlier.

'It's a video from when the corpse was found in Aokigahara's Sea of Trees,' explained Makoto, taking the laptop she was holding and setting it up quickly.

From her expression, the video must have had something of great impact in it.

– I don't want to see it, if possible.

That was how Ishii really felt, but he couldn't say it aloud.

'A video, eh?'

Miyagawa didn't seem interested as he blew out cigarette smoke.

'I'll play the video,' said Makoto after she finished.

Ishii bit his lip and gripped his fists as he looked at the monitor.

The monitor showed Aokigahara's deep forest. Cypress trees grew thick, making it seem like everywhere was blanketed in fog.

This place was famous as a suicide spot. Ishii didn't know how people could go there for fun.

'I'll skip this part.'

Makoto used the mouse.

The setting changed. A shriek, probably a woman's, echoed through the forest.

It looked like the person filming was running, as the screen was shaking wildly. It made Ishii feel sick just to watch.

For a moment, Ishii looked away.

'Here,' said Makoto.

'Eh?'

Ishii had completely missed it. He brought his face close to the monitor. Miyagawa peered in too, his brow furrowed.

Makoto used the mouse to rewind a little.

On the screen, there was a woman collapsed on the ground and a blackened corpse.

'Ee...'

Ishii hurriedly swallowed the shriek that had almost escaped his mouth.

'Here.'

Makoto stopped the video. Ishii saw somebody's feet approach the woman on the ground.

'What about it?'

Ishii cocked his head.

It didn't seem like an image special enough for Makoto to go out of her way to show them.

'Please look here carefully.'

Makoto used the mouse to zoom in on the centre of the image.

When Ishii saw the image, he leapt back without thinking.

'T-this is...'

Ishii and Miyagawa looked at each other. Then, they looked at Makoto.

'Yes. The man with two red eyes.'

Makoto's words echoed in Ishii's head like a death sentence.

For a while after that, nobody could speak.

– That man has something to do with the case?

As if to interrupt the tense air, a mobile started to ring.

Ishii's shoulders shuddered. He put his hand on his mobile. The display showed Gotou's name. Ishii had a terrible feeling about this.

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28

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Haruka was in her bed in her room, before she'd noticed.

After parting with Yakumo, she had returned to her room in the apartment and collapsed on her bed. She remembered up to that.

She seemed to have fallen asleep.

She slowly sat up. Her head felt heavy.

These two days had just been hectic. So many things had happened that, to be honest, her head was still confused.

She looked at the clock. It had just turned ten at night.

She stretched and stood up. She was thinking about taking a shower to refresh herself when she saw her mobile vibrating on the table.

Yakumo's number was displayed –

'Hey.'

Haruka picked up the phone.

There was no response. Haruka could hear the sound of rustling branches – perhaps Yakumo was outside.

'Hey, Yakumo-kun?'

Still, there was no response.

– Something's definitely strange.

In Haruka's head, the image of Yakumo walking away came up again.

Once she imagined something dreadful, her thoughts just started getting worse, like they were rolling down a slope.

'Yakumo-kun, what's wrong? Hey, talk back to me!'

Haruka continued to talk frantically, but no response came back to her.

If she strained her ears, she could faintly hear someone breathing. However, she could tell immediately that that someone wasn't Yakumo.

'Who are you?' Haruka timidly.

There was a silence. Haruka gripped the mobile tightly.

<Saitou Yakumo is in the forest.>

It seemed like the person was using a voice changer, as their voice sounded mechanical. Haruka couldn't tell if they were a man or a woman.

'Forest? What are you talking about?'

<Where the corpse was found.>

'Who are you? What do you mean, where the corpse was found? Yakumo-kun...'

Haruka was going to continue, but she stopped.

The call had already ended.

– What happened?

Haruka took deep breaths and managed barely to stop herself from panicking.

Though she didn't know the details, she knew that something terrible had happened to Yakumo. Determined, Haruka called Yakumo's mobile again.

However, no matter how long she waited, all she heard was the phone ringing. Nobody answered.

– What should I do?

While Haruka was thinking about this, her mobile rang.

She thought that it might be from Yakumo, but Gotou's number was the one that was displayed.

However, that would be helpful.

'Hello, Gotou-san, actually, earlier...'

<Yakumo's been abducted.>

Gotou's bitter voice interrupted Haruka.

That moment, it felt like she had fallen into a dark hole.

'Abducted...'

<Sorry. If I had just...>

The words sounded like they had been strangled out of Gotou's throat.

Though Haruka felt like she was in despair, she said, to cheer up both their spirits, 'That's not true.'

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29

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- Where am I?

Yakumo slowly opened his eyes.

He could feel that his hands and feet were numb. He had been talking with Gotou in the hospital courtyard just earlier.

He forced his creaking body up and looked around.

He was in a deep forest.

A forest that had no boundaries to its darkness, because only faint moonlight shone down –

'I...'

Yakumo tried to think about what had happened, but the numbing pain stopped him.

Yakumo used a nearby large rock to support himself. It was slippery and dark – there was no way for him to move.

He searched his pockets to see if there was anything there, but his mobile and wallet were gone.

- So I'll have to spend the night here?

Yakumo's body shivered. He was quite cold.

'It's been a while.'

He heard a voice from behind him.

Yakumo's body froze at that familiar voice.

- This is the worst.

As he whispered that in his heart, he slowly turned around.

Just as he imagined, there was a man standing there. The man with two red eyes. Yakumo's father, Unkai.

In this dark forest, his eyes alone let out an unnatural light.

'I didn't want to see you,' said Yakumo, glaring.

– I can't let myself be drawn in.

He told himself that. If Yakumo showed any sign of wavering in front of this man, he'd grab a hold of it. Yakumo had to calmly observe the situation.

'That's a cold attitude you have towards your parent.'

The man shook his head slightly.

'I don't think of you as my parent.'

'It's not a problem of whether you think so or not. Isn't that red left eye of yours proof? We are father and son...'

'Even if we have the same blood, I'm different from you,' said Yakumo.

No matter what happened, Yakumo had to continue to refuse this man. If he accepted any of his words, that would be when Yakumo stopped being human.

'We're the same. You just don't know it.'

'Don't know it?'

'That's right. You don't know true despair... Once you understand that, you should understand. The true nature of the human soul is darkness.'

'Stop spewing drivel!' yelled Yakumo, gripping his fists together.

Yakumo knew despair from the terrible childhood he had suffered, but he still believed there was a light ahead of the darkness.

'Then let's try it out.'

The man with two red eyes smirked.

'What?'

'Do you know where you are?'

'Some forest, right?'

'It isn't just any forest. This is Aokigahara's Sea of Trees. Do you understand what I'm saying.'

'Urk...'

Yakumo gritted his teeth. At the same time, terror welled up within him.

Aokigahara's Sea of Trees was famous for being a suicide spot where a hundred or so unidentified corpses were found every year. In short, that number of spirits wandered here.

Furthermore, most of them were spirits who had ended their lives and were not at piece.

Before Yakumo noticed, the man with two red eyes had disappeared.

– Where is he?

Yakumo looked around, and then his eyes went wide open.

A terribly thin old man was right next to Yakumo. He had probably hanged himself. His neck was unusually long.

– Give her back! Give my daughter back!

The old man clung to Yakumo.

'T-that wasn't me.'

Yakumo tried to shake him off, but it was no use.

– It's your fault!

He heard a voice at his feet. He looked down and saw a middle-aged woman with a pale face grovelling there, looking up at Yakumo.

'Wha...'

– Why did you betray me?

He heard a voice behind him.

When he turned around, he saw a young person with blood gushing out his head. He reached out towards Yakumo.

'Stay away.'

Yakumo started to run in an attempt to escape.

However, his footing was unsteady in the forest, and he fell before he got anywhere.

– Wahhh, wahhh.

He heard a baby crying somewhere.

When he looked up, he saw a woman holding a newborn baby looking down at him.

– I died because of you.

'N-no. I...'

In this chaos, more spirits of the dead appeared from the forest. The number kept increasing.

Yakumo was surrounded by countless spirits before he'd noticed.

Their hatred, sadness and anger flowed into Yakumo's heart mercilessly.

– No. No. No.

Yakumo held his head in his hands.

No matter how he tried to shake them away, he couldn't shut off his heart. As he took in the spirits' negative emotions, Yakumo's heart – crumbled.

'Aaahhhhhh!'

Yakumo's scream echoed through the forest, as if he was in the throes of death –

第三章 救濟

file 03: salvation

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1

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Haruka cleaned herself up reasonably and flew out of her room.

She went to the main road and flagged a taxi, told the driver her destination and leant back on the seat.

She felt a sense of déjà vu as she watched the city's nightscape pass by through the window. Come to think of it, she had looked out a taxi window like this when Isshin had been stabbed too.

– No.

Haruka cleared that thought out of her head.

She couldn't think bad thoughts. 'It'll definitely be OK!' Haruka told herself that and managed to calm herself down a bit.

She got off the taxi in front of the hospital. After gathering herself, she hurriedly went to the waiting room through the night entrance.

She spotted Gotou sitting on the bench.

His head looked injured, as it was bound by gauze. The gauze was a bit wet with blood.

'Are you all right?' asked Haruka. Gotou looked up.

'Sorry. I was there, but...'

'More importantly, what's happening?'

Haruka spoke over Gotou.

Gotou glanced at the back of the waiting room. Ishii was there talking with a number of uniformed officers.

Ishii seemed to notice Gotou's gaze as he stopped talking and walked towards them.

'Haruka-chan.'

'Ishii-san. What's happening?'

Haruka quickly finished her greeting and asked Ishii for more information.

Ishii fixed the position of his silver-framed glasses with his fingertip and began his explanation.

'From the situation, it seems that the culprit stunned Yakumo-shi with a stun gun and then hit Detective Gotou with something like a rod to make him faint. And then, that person took Yakumo-shi away – is what I think.'

'Why was I the only one who was hit?' said Gotou with a frown, looking like he was bearing with the pain.

'I think the culprit was probably using a stun gun that could not be used quickly in succession.'

'So they didn't expect there to be two people,' Gotou said bitterly.

'We are currently checking the security cameras as there is the possibility that the culprit might be recorded on them.'

'The person who got me was wearing a white hakama,' said Gotou angrily.

'Jikoukoushinkai may be involved.'

'We're going to their base. Yakumo has to be there.'

Gotou threw his gauze bandage into the rubbish bin and stood up.

'Please wait.'

Haruka called out to Gotou before he could leave.

'What?'

'Actually, I had a phone call from somebody who is likely the culprit.'

'What?'

'What did you say?'

Gotou and Ishii expressed their surprise simultaneously.

Haruka explained in detail about the mysterious call she had received from Yakumo's mobile.

'The forest probably means Aokigahara's Sea of Trees in this situation.'

Gotou scratched his chin.

Haruka felt the same way. If Yakumo's abduction was related to this series of cases, it was likely that the forest in question was Aokigahara's Sea of Trees.

The culprit had also said that a corpse had been found there.

'This is definitely a trap,' objected Ishii.

Haruka had thought that too. If the person who had called was the person who had abducted Yakumo, there was no reason for them to tell Haruka where Yakumo was.

If they were going to just tell her without asking for anything, they wouldn't have needed to abduct Yakumo in the first place.

But –

'We can't ignore it.'

'That's true,' agreed Gotou.

'But there is also that video,' continued Ishii.

'What video?' asked Gotou.

'Actually... in the video the young man who found the corpse at Aokigahara took, that man... there was the man with two red eyes. So...'

'Even if it is a trap, I won't be able to relax until I go!' declared Gotou.

'B-but...'

'You go check out that religious group. I'm going to the Sea of Trees.'

'I'm going too!'

Haruka called out to Gotou, who had been about to leave.

'You can't. It's dangerous.'

Ishii grabbed her arm, but Haruka shook his hand away.

She couldn't just wait silently when all this was happening.

'You're going to come even if I say no, right?' said Gotou, turning around.

'Yes.'

Haruka looked right at Gotou.

Just as Gotou said, she planned to go no matter how they objected.

'Right! Let's go!'

'Yes,' replied Haruka. She followed Gotou out.

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2

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- They're gone.

Ishii watched Gotou and Haruka leave in a daze.

Perhaps he should have stopped them, but for some reason, he couldn't. No matter what he said, he probably wouldn't have been able to stop the two of them.

They stood on such strong bonds.

All Ishii could do now was hope they would be safe.

'Ishii.'

Ishii turned around at the voice and saw Miyagawa.

'What is it?'

'We've got the pictures from the security cameras.'

'Ah, yes.'

Ishii and Miyagawa went to the security room behind the reception.

It was a small three-tatami room. There was one desk and a folded futon by it for naps. On top of the desk, there were three monitors.

'So which one is it?' Miyagawa asked the male guard at the desk.

The man mumbled something as he used the keyboard. Then, he pointed at the monitor in the centre.

'This one.'

Ishii peered at the monitor and could see Gotou and Yakumo standing in the courtyard. Since there was no sound, he couldn't tell what they were talking about.

After a while, Ishii saw a shadow appear behind Yakumo.

White hakama with a sash with a red Brahma on it. The clothes of Shugendo. The man pressed a stun gun into Yakumo's shoulder.

Yakumo lost consciousness from the shock and collapsed right there.

Gotou noticed something was strange and put himself on guard, but the person in white quickly hit Gotou with a hexagonal bar.

It only took a moment.

After that, the man in Shugendo clothes went out of the frame. After that, a car came in and stopped in front of Yakumo.

The man in white got out of the driver's seat. It was probably the same person as the one earlier.

He picked Yakumo up and put him in the car. Then, he got into the driver's seat and drove away.

'That was efficient.'

That was how Ishii felt.

He didn't even pay attention to Gotou. It was clear that his goal was to abduct Yakumo from the start.

'Yeah,' replied Miyagawa. Then, he said to the guard, 'Could you show us the video again?'

The security guard silently rewound the video as told. Miyagawa put his face close to the screen.

'Stop!'

He spoke up when the car came into the frame.

In response, the guard stopped the video. Miyagawa was probably trying to check the car's licence plate.

Ishii also went up close to the monitor to see.

However, it was no use. The number was covered with packing tape. They had no way to see it.

He must have been thinking about the security cameras. A thorough criminal.

'Damn it,' Miyagawa said, full of feeling.

It was true that they couldn't see the number. However, Ishii had found something else. It was –

'Could you enlarge this portion?'

Ishii pointed at the chest of the man in Shugendo clothes.

'The image will be fuzzy,' said the guard, enlarging the photo.

Ishii could see the word Jikoukoushinkai on the black sash.

'So it's really that religious group...!' said Miyagawa, who seemed to have sensed Ishii's intentions.

'Yes.'

'Ishii, let's go.'

'Yes sir,' Ishii responded loudly. Then, he left the security room together with Miyagawa.

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3

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'It's fine. We'll find him,' Gotou said, driving the Mini Cooper, to Haruka in the passenger seat.

Rather than encouraging her, it was more for himself.

'Yes, definitely...'

Haruka was acting strong.

She probably would have been half in tears in the past, but she was different now.

'What's so amusing?'

After Haruka said that, Gotou realised that he was smiling.

'I was just looking back.'

'On what?'

'When I first met you, Haruka-chan, it was during that case with the university's deserted building, right?'

'It was.'

Haruka's expression softened just slightly, perhaps as she thought back on the incident as well.

'I thought you were a pretty weak girl at the time.'

Back then, Haruka had looked like she would cry at any moment as she sat next to Yakumo.

They had met again afterwards during a number of incidents, but Gotou felt like Haruka had been crying every time.

Maybe she was worrying about Yakumo, or feeling sorry for the victim – but at some point, Gotou had stopped feeling weakness from her tears.

He could feel that she had the strength to go forward even as she cried.

And now, even though she must have wanted to cry, she was restraining those feelings. Maybe she'd decided that she wouldn't cry until she found Yakumo.

Now that he thought about it again, she wasn't just a weak girl who cried all the time.

That was probably why Yakumo was charmed by her.

'Why are you using the past tense?'

Haruka puffed out her cheeks, as if in anger.

'Cause you've changed.'

'Is that so?'

Haruka might not really feel it herself, but Gotou could tell, as an observer.

Haruka had definitely changed from meeting Yakumo.

'Since I'm saying it, there's no doubt about it.'

'Hmm...'

'But you're not the only one that's changed, Haruka-chan.'

'Eh?'

'Yakumo's changed too.'

'Really?'

'Yeah. People change because they love each other.'

Gotou had started thinking that way recently.

'Somehow, that doesn't really sound like you, Gotou-san.'

'Really?' said Gotou, playing dumb.

But he understood in his heart. More than anything, Gotou himself had changed. He felt like, after meeting Yakumo and Haruka, he had found the path he was supposed to take.

It wasn't just Gotou. Atsuko, Nao and Ishii had changed too.

These people who had all been lacking something had come together, hurt each other at times, and continued to change.

But Gotou thought it was a good thing. That was why –

'Let's find Yakumo no matter what.'

'Yes.'

Haruka responded with a smile.

There was not even an atom of doubt there. Yakumo would definitely come back –

'All right. Going to put the pedal to the metal.'

Gotou stepped firmly on the pedal. If he went quickly, they would probably reach Aokigahara's Sea of Trees in two hours.

For Haruka's sake and his own, he would definitely bring Yakumo back.

Gotou reaffirmed his resolve.

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4

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'This is a bit creepy,' said Ishii without thinking.

The Jikoukoushinkai base was outside of town and was so quiet it was eerie.

It seemed like they had renovated an old temple. It was more quiet than Ishii had thought it would be. That made it even creepier.

'Yeah,' agreed Miyagawa, hands in his pockets.

To be honest, Ishii was afraid of going inside, but strangely, he didn't think about running away.

With determination, Ishii reached out to press the intercom button.

'Oi.'

Miyagawa grabbed Ishii's arm.

'What is it?'

'Is it OK not to call for reinforcements?'

Miyagawa's words brought Ishii back to reality.

'Reinforcements?'

'Reinforcements.'

'Er...'

To be honest, Ishii hadn't even thought about calling for reinforcements.

They had no decisive evidence at this point. Even if they called reinforcements, they wouldn't be able to search the place.

'You've changed,' said Miyagawa while laughing.

'I've changed?'

'Yeah. Just a little in the past, you'd've been the one who suggested calling for reinforcements.'

Now that Miyagawa said that, Ishii felt like it was true.

Yakumo's role had been to frantically step on the brakes when Gotou was running wild. No, that was an excuse – Ishii just hadn't had confidence in his actions. That was why he would want reinforcements to get instructions from the higher ups.

Mysteriously though, he didn't feel like that right now.

'Shall I call for reinforcements?' asked Ishii, thinking that he should at least ask.

'Just us two is enough.'

Miyagawa smirked and puffed out his chest.

'Yes,' replied Ishii. If they got orders from above, they would just be slowed down. Sometimes, it was necessary to take gutsy actions. Especially since Yakumo's life was in danger right now.

Ishii reached out and pressed the intercom button.

<Hello, who may you be?>

There was a response immediately.

'I apologise for coming late at night. I am Ishii of the Setamachi precinct.'

<The police?>

'Actually, we are investigating a certain case... We would just like to consult you...'

<Does it have to be today?>

It was already past midnight. Perhaps this response was normal.

'Yes. It has to be today.'

<Please wait.>

Then, the intercom stopped. They were probably checking if it was OK.

'Do you think they'll let us in?' asked Miyagawa.

'No, I think they'll refuse,' said Ishii.

If Yakumo's abduction was related to Jikoukoushinkai, there was no way they'd let them in.

Ishii's instinct was right. Through the intercom, they were told to please come again tomorrow because the founder, who had been feeling unwell, was already asleep.

After that, no matter how Ishii pressed the intercom button, there was no response.

'What are we going to do now?' said Miyagawa with a sigh.

The past Ishii would probably have retreated, but –

'Miyagawa.'

'What?'

'This wall looks climbable.'

When Ishii pointed at the wall, Miyagawa's eyes went wide.

'You serious?'

'Yes.'

'If people find out we did this, we're finished.'

Ishii knew Miyagawa was right, but –

'However, if we don't, and the person who abducted Yakumo-shi is from this group, we won't be able to undo this,' Ishii replied.

For some reason, that Miyagawa started chuckling.

'You've really changed. You're becoming more and more like Gotou.'

'Is that so?'

To be honest, Ishii didn't really feel that way.

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5

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After Makoto returned to the office, she decided to research Jikoukoushinkai again.

She was concerned about Yakumo's abduction.

However, nothing she could do would change anything. She would believe that Ishii and Gotou would bring him back and start working on what to do next.

That was the conclusion Makoto had come to –

When Gotou contacted her, her plans had fallen through, but Makoto had a theory. She was going to confirm it.

Makoto called Takizawa on her mobile.

'I apologise for calling at night.'

<What, it's you again?>

Takizawa was acting curt, but it was his usual attitude.

'I'm sorry.'

<So how was the video?>

'You were talking about the red-eyed man in the video, right?'

<Yeah, him. Well, sometimes eyes look red because of the light, but there was definitely somebody else there.>

That hadn't been because of the light.

'I know that man.'

<What? Who is he?>

Takizawa was agitated.

It was very difficult to explain who the man with two red eyes was. The reason being –

'He's already dead.'

<So he's a ghost...>

Takizawa wasn't that surprised.

A newspaper journalist had to acknowledge the existence of ghosts even if they didn't want to. They didn't proclaim it publicly, but they saw more than one or two ghosts while gathering information and taking photographs.

'So there was something I wanted to check.'

<What?>

'It's about the group called Jikoukoushinkai...'

<Yeah.>

'It seems that the base used to be in Yamanashi.'

<Seems like it.>

'I want to know of any rumours about the location.'

<Why do you want to know?>

It made sense for Takizawa to have this question.

However, this was extremely important to prove Makoto's theory.

'Jikoukoushinkai moved to Tokyo about two years ago.'

<If I remember correctly, yeah.>

'Why did they suddenly expand... I think that's the key to solving this case.'

<I don't really get it, but fine. I'll look into it for you.>

'Thank you very much.'

After thanking Takizawa, Makoto hung up.

Jikoukoushinkai had been managed by the founder, Minegishi Kyouka, and Hiyama Kenichirou, who had been found as a corpse in Aokighara's Sea of Trees.

The group had suddenly moved to Tokyo two years ago and expanded. That perfectly matched the time when she appeared.

She – that is, Nanase Miyuki.

Makoto felt a chill run down her spine just from thinking the name.

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6

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Ishii knelt on the floor, bearing with the weight on his back.

'Just a bit more.'

Miyagawa, standing on Ishii's back, reached out to try to grab the top of the wall, but it wasn't going well.

– This is no good.

Ishii's arms were shaking. At this rate, he'd collapse under the weight.

Just as he thought that, his back was hit with an impact. Miyagawa had jumped to try to grab the curb.

Ishii couldn't bear that force and fell flat on the asphalt.

'Oi, Ishii. Hurry,' said Miyagawa, reaching towards him from the top of the wall.

'Ah, yes.'

Ishii bore with the pain in his back as he grabbed Miyagawa's hand.

With good timing, Ishii jumped as Miyagawa pulled. Ishii almost fell, but he managed to hold on.

Then, they climbed over the wall onto the grounds.

However, Ishii didn't absorb the impact well and fell forward, hitting his nose.

He felt the hot pain start spreading.

– This is the worst.

Ishii had started to regret their attempt at infiltration.

'What are you doing? Let's go.'

At Miyagawa's rushing, Ishii started walking, stooped over and holding his nose.

The premises were silent. There were no lights on in the rooms.

'So what are we going to do?'

'What shall we do?' replied Ishii.

Miyagawa put his head in his hands, exasperated.

Though it was good that they had managed to get in, to be honest, Ishii didn't know what to do next.

'You can't have no plan.'

'I-I apologise.'

'Anyway, let's go take a look at places which might be monitored.'

'Ah, that'd be good,' agreed Ishii.

Miyagawa pushed Ishii's head.

'You're all talk, aren't you?'

– He was happy.

It was the first time Miyagawa had hit him like this since they partnered up. It was strange, but it felt like they were closer – like Miyagawa had acknowledged him.

'What are you grinning to yourself for?'

'I-I'm sorry.'

Ishii hurriedly made his face stern.

'There's a detached building up ahead.'

Miyagawa pointed at a building that looked like a temple and another building that was connected to it by a corridor.

'Yes.'

'Doesn't it look suspicious?'

'It does,' agreed Ishii. He and Miyagawa nodded at each other and slowly advanced.

They kept their heads low so that people wouldn't notice, so it took them a long time to advance just ten metres.

'So how are we going in?' said Miyagawa, crouching with his back to the wall.

Ishii had looked at the building as he came up to it. There were bars on the window. It didn't look like they could get in.

It meant they would have to go in through the front.

As Ishii said that, Miyagawa looked towards the front door.

'No, it's locked,' Miyagawa said quietly, making an X sign with his hands.

'Shall we go to the back?'

'Looks like we'll have to,' agreed Miyagawa.

They went to the back of the detached building with their backs still to the wall.

The back window fortunately didn't have bars. The light was even on.

'It seems like we can look in from there,' said Ishii. Then, he had a strange thought.

'It feels kind of like we're thieves.'

'Wha?'

Miyagawa cocked his head.

'Ah, I was just thinking that thieves have it tough.'

'Don't be stupid. Let's go,' Miyagawa reprimanded.

'Ah, yes sir.'

It was true that this wasn't the time to be thinking about useless things like that.

Ishii moved to look inside, but it was no use. The window was too high up.

'Ishii, act as a stool,' said Miyagawa.

'Ehh!?'

Ishii let out a loud voice without thinking. He hurriedly covered his mouth.

'They'll find out we're here.'

'I-I apologise. But... Earlier, I was the stool, so...'

To be honest, his back still hurt. He wasn't sure he could be a stool again. Perhaps Miyagawa sensed Ishii's inner feelings as he grumbled, 'Guess there's no helping it,' and kneeled on the floor.

Thank goodness – though Ishii thought that, he felt awkward about stepping on his boss's back.

'Hurry up,' said Miyagawa. Ishii gathered himself and climbed onto Miyagawa's back.

He slowly reached up to peer inside.

It was a small tatami room. In the centre, there was a woman in a white kimono. It was the founder, Minegishi Kyouka.

However, she seemed strange.

With her head hung, her body was shaking.

– What is that?

Perhaps she had sensed Ishii, as she slowly lifted her head.

There was no life in her face. Her eyes weren't focussed. Her mouth was open in an unsightly fashion and drool was coming out.

– That's just like...

'What are you doing there?'

Suddenly, Ishii heard a voice and turned around.

A man in a mountain priest's clothes had stuck his head out the temple's window.

– Oh no. They noticed us.

Immediately as Ishii thought that, Miyagawa's body shook underneath him. Ishii fell from Miyagawa's back to the ground.

He started coughing from the impact.

'Let's go!' yelled Miyagawa.

Ishii got up while bearing with the pain and hurriedly ran after Miyagawa's back.

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7

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– Dark. Complete dark.

Yakumo's consciousness wandered a dark forest.

The despair of the spirits in this forest was much deeper than he imagined.

Some were betrayed by friends, and others by the family they lived –

Some did not even have people who could betray them – those who had spent their lives alone.

– They weren't even able to find salvation by dying.

Yakumo heard a voice. He couldn't see him, but Yakumo knew who it was.

– That's not true.

Yakumo gritted his teeth together and denied it.

– What isn't true?

– They must have had hope.

– Where?

Yakumo couldn't respond right away.

Had the people who died in this forest really had hope?

Nobody had reached out to help. Even if they continued to live, their suffering would have just continued.

– This is the true nature of humanity. Do you understand the true reason they were led to their deaths?

– The true reason?

– Hope.

– Why?

– Because humans have hope, they despair. Because they believe, they are betrayed.

– That's not true!

– There is nothing untrue about it. You understand too, don't you?

– It's not true. It's not true. It's not true.

Yakumo denied it frantically, but his heart was flowing away with the current.

Yakumo couldn't completely deny what he was saying. Without hope, they wouldn't have despaired. The faint hope that people hold could make them suffer.

It had been that way for the doctor named Kinoshita. He had held the imaginary hope that he might be able to revive his dead daughter.

It was the same for Kamiyama. He had seen a dream of his bright future with his lover. That was why, when that dream was trampled on, he hadn't been able to stop himself.

That wasn't all. There had been a man who had tried to become somebody else. There had been a woman who wanted the love of a family.

Because they had hoped, they had tasted despair.

– If you say it is untrue, can you save them?

– Save?

– Can you save all the spirits in this forest?

– I... can't. I can't save them.

Yakumo felt painfully how powerless he was.

There was no way to save the countless number of spirits in their despair, since Yakumo could only see them.

– I'm powerless.

Something that he had been protecting in his heart cracked loudly.

What had he been trying to protect up until now? Where had he been trying to go?

If he hoped, all that lay ahead of him was despair. No matter how he struggled, there was no way

he could escape the current.

If that was the case, then it would have been better if there had been no hope in the first place.

If there was nothing there, there was nothing to lose.

– Ah, I'm being swallowed by the darkness.

Yakumo felt his consciousness being eaten away, but he no longer had the will to resist it.

Rather, he even felt it pleasant.

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8

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The car ran along Highway 139 –

The road that went across the Sea of Trees had no streetlights. It was like a dark tunnel.

– Yakumo is in this forest.

Haruka believed that. Her hand enveloped the necklace with the red stone that was hanging from her neck.

'It was around here.'

Gotou turned the wheel to drive onto number 300 towards Lake Motosu and parked the car after driving a bit further.

About fifteen minutes ahead was where the corpse had been found.

Aokigahara's Sea of Trees was wide. It would be impossible to search the whole area with just the two of them. They were going on the call Haruka had received and decided to search the area near the corpse.

After Haruka got off the car, she felt the cold wind blowing.

They were high up, and the wind blew down the mountain. It was very cold. Haruka's body shivered.

'Right. Go time?'

Gotou held a torch up and walked forward.

Haruka followed him into the forest.

Even though she had only taken a step forward, she had a bad feeling. The air felt suddenly heavier.

Perhaps it was because she knew this forest was famous as a suicide spot.

'Are you all right?'

Gotou turned around.

'Yes,' replied Haruka with a nod.

She couldn't stop. If she didn't go forward, she couldn't find Yakumo.

With the rocks coming out of the ground, it was very difficult to walk. She went farther and farther in through the cypress trees.

'I wonder why the perp kidnapped Yakumo...' said Gotou.

'I don't know, but...'

'What?'

'Perhaps it was because Yakumo-kun understood the core of the case.'

That was what Haruka thought.

When she parted with Yakumo on the road, Haruka had felt faintly that Yakumo had already seen through the structure of the case –

'And so the perp kidnapped somebody who was getting in the way,' said Gotou to himself.

'Yes.'

'But then why go out of their way to kidnap him?'

'That's...'

'There are other methods to get rid of somebody. And I don't know why they went out of their way to call you.'

Haruka cocked her head at that.

Why had the culprit told her that Yakumo was in the forest – that was like telling her to find the person they'd abducted.

'Well, no point thinking about it now. First, we need to find Yakumo,' Gotou said self-derisively and started walking through the forest silently again.

Haruka had thought it was cold at first, but her back was sweaty, perhaps because she was walking.

– I wonder what the people who came to this forest to commit suicide were thinking.

That thought crossed Haruka's mind.

Gotou was here now, but the people who committed suicide must have walked this forest alone. Perhaps that reconfirmed their solitariness.

And then, they died without anyone knowing. There was only deep despair there.

'No.'

Haruka shook her head.

She cleared her head and continued walking silently.

'It should've been around here...'

Gotou stopped and took a look at the map while lighting it up.

However, no matter how he looked at the map, it probably wouldn't be much use in the dark forest. They could only walk forward and judge by distance.

'Shall we split up and search?' suggested Haruka.

Gotou's face clearly hardened.

'Don't be stupid. If we split up in this forest, it'd be a disaster.'

'But...'

'Should be just a bit more. Let's go.'

Gotou interrupted Haruka and started walking again.

Haruka gritted her teeth and stepped forward.

– I'll definitely find you.

She kept wishing that in her heart as she walked forward.

However, the farther she went, she felt like that wish was being swallowed by despair.

'Ah...'

The moment her will weakened, she slipped.

She almost fell face-up when Gotou grabbed Haruka's arm. Thanks to that, even though she lost her balance, she managed to not fall.

'Thank you very much.'

'Watch out. We're close. We'll find him soon.'

Gotou's voice wasn't even slightly weak.

I'll find Yakumo no matter what – that strong will seemed to flow out of his whole body.

– I won't give up either.

Haruka gathered her strength and walked forward.

'There.'

Gotou spoke up after they headed forward some more.

With his torch, he pointed at a large rock about five metres ahead of him. The rock was green from moss.

'The corpse was found near that rock, if I remember correctly.'

As he said that, Gotou pointed the torch around the area.

That light illuminated a person.

A person sitting against the rock. It was –

'Yakumo-kun!' called out Haruka, running forward.

Even though she kept tripping on rocks, she somehow managed to reach Yakumo.

'Yakumo-kun!'

Haruka embraced Yakumo tightly.

His body was completely cold. However, she could hear his breathing.

– He's alive.

Haruka felt that with her whole body.

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9

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'Damn, I suffered a lot,' said Miyagawa a while after escaping back to the precinct.

Ishii felt the same way.

Current police officers had trespassed. If they had been caught there, it would have been a big problem. However, they couldn't relax just because they had escaped.

If people from Jikoukoushinkai reported it to the police, they wouldn't be let off easily.

'So what did you see?' asked Miyagawa, lighting a cigarette.

That was right. Ishii had been so frantic that he hadn't reported what he'd seen there to Miyagawa.

'It seems it's true that the founder is feeling unwell.'

'What?'

Miyagawa raised his eyebrows.

Ishii explained in detail what he had seen from that window.

'That's strange...'

That was what Miyagawa said first after Ishii finished.

Ishii thought it strange as well, but he had a theory.

'Perhaps she has been possessed by a spirit.'

'What?'

Miyagawa looked shocked.

'Makoto-san and Gotou-san had also been like that when possessed.'

Since Ishii couldn't see like Yakumo, he had no proof. However, Ishii's experiences told him that that was a person being possessed by a spirit.

Kyouka's face from back then came up in Ishii's head, which made him shudder.

'If that's true, it'd be a big problem for the group.'

'It would.'

If the founder of the group had been possessed by a spirit, that would affect their prestige. The believers would lose their belief and it would be difficult to continue to support the group.

'But why did that happen?'

Ishii couldn't answer that.

'Something probably happened.'

Ishii cocked his head. Then, his mobile rang. The number on the display was Gotou's.

'Hello, Ishii Yuutarou speaking.'

Ishii answered the phone with vigour.

<You don't have to say your name every time. I know it's you.>

There was a lot of noise, perhaps because of bad reception. Ishii managed to hear Gotou though.

'That is an honour.'

<Are you an idiot?>

'I-I apologise.'

<Anyway... we found Yakumo.>

'Eh? Really!?' yelled Ishii, jumping up.

<Don't be so loud.>

'I-I apologise. Was he really in the Sea of Trees then?'

<Yeah, he was.>

While Ishii was relieved upon hearing Gotou's reply, he had a question.

That would mean that the call to Haruka had been correct. Why would the abductor tell Haruka the abductee's location?

Ishii expressed his question to Gotou.

<I don't know. Anyway, we have to take Yakumo to a hospital first.>

'T-that's right.'

<Then I'll call you again later.>

After Gotou said that, he hung up.

'They found him?' said Miyagawa after Ishii was done.

'Yes, it appears that way.'

'That's a relief.'

'Well, that's true, but...'

Ishii just couldn't be completely happy.

He didn't understand the perpetrator's intentions at all. What on earth had they wanted to do –

'What's with that displeased face?'

'Ah, actually...'

Ishii told Miyagawa the question he had asked Gotou.

'That's...'

Miyagawa stopped talking halfway and became silent.

He probably couldn't find an answer either, but if they didn't solve this question, they wouldn't solve this case. Ishii felt that way.

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10

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'Let's go then.'

After Gotou finished his call with Ishii, he carried Yakumo, with Haruka's help.

He stepped forward with that heavy weight on his back.

It was slippery so he couldn't move forward as he wanted. It became hard for him to breathe.

'Gotou-san, are you all right?'

Haruka sounded concerned as she lit up the ground with the torch.

It would be pretty tough to walk through the Sea of Trees with Yakumo on his back, but Gotou still didn't plan on stopping here.

Gotou had decided long ago that he would carry this weight, so –

'This is nothing. He's light.'

Gotou showed Haruka a smile.

It wasn't a lie. If Gotou compared it to the weight Yakumo carried from seeing the spirits of the

dead, it was nothing.

Gotou told himself that and went forward.

It took much more time, but he managed to get out of the forest and carry Yakumo to the car.

'Ooph!'

He was exhausted. He put Yakumo down by the car and stretched.

His back cracked loudly.

He had called the ambulance before calling Ishii. They should be here soon.

'Are you all right?'

'I'm fine.'

Gotou looked Yakumo.

Though it was faint, Gotou felt like Yakumo's eyelids had moved.

'Yakumo-kun...'

Haruka seemed to notice that too and she peered at Yakumo's face.

'Ah...'

With a moan, Yakumo slowly lifted his head.

– I'm so glad.

Gotou was relieved, but that was only for a moment.

Yakumo's eyes slowly opened.

His red left eye looked right at Gotou.

Gotou shuddered subconsciously. That eye was just so cold.

'Yakumo-kun.'

Haruka tried to approach Yakumo.

'Keep away!'

Gotou grabbed Haruka's shoulder to stop her.

'Why?'

'That... isn't Yakumo...' Gotou said, looking at Yakumo again.

Yakumo slowly stood up.

Lit up by moonlight, his red left eye was the colour of fresh blood.

There was a faint smile on his lips. It was a terribly cold smile.

Gotou felt like he was shivering from the very core of his body.

Yakumo had had this look when Gotou first met him. Detesting everything in the world, denying his own existence.

'Dark... Complete dark...'

After standing up, Yakumo said that, the faint smile still on his lips.

'Yakumo-kun, what's wrong?' said Haruka. However, it didn't look like her words reached Yakumo's ears.

Yakumo narrowed his eyes and looked at Gotou and Haruka curiously.

Then – he started laughing loudly, shoulders shaking, as if he had gone insane.

He had completely lost his mind.

– What should I do?

'Yakumo-kun!'

While Gotou was troubled about what to do, Haruka shook off Gotou's hand.

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11

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Haruka stood in front of Yakumo –

'Yakumo-kun!'

The eyes looking right at her were clearly different from Yakumo's usual ones.

Haruka's body shook. Her instincts were speaking to her. It's dangerous. It's frightening. However, Haruka still stood her ground.

– I won't run.

Yakumo had braved countless dangers to save Haruka up until now. He had risked his life to save her. That was why –

No. That wasn't true. She wasn't saving him because he had saved her.

– I want Yakumo with me.

That pure emotion was what drove Haruka.

'Dark... Complete dark...'

Yakumo said that in a hoarse voice.

Perhaps Yakumo couldn't see Haruka right now. What was there was darkness –

'Yakumo-kun, it's fine. It's fine. It's not dark.'

Haruka hugged Yakumo tightly.

'Let me go!'

Yakumo thrashed wildly to fight her off.

However, Haruka just hugged him with more force.

'Haruka-chan, let go!'

She heard Gotou's voice.

However, Haruka wasn't going to let go of Yakumo. If Yakumo fell into a deep darkness, she would go with him. That was her resolve.

She didn't care what was there.

Where Yakumo was, she was. She'd rather –

'Aaaghh!'

Yakumo let out a howl just like a beast.

That echoing voice sounded like a cry for help to Haruka.

Haruka shut her eyes and hugged Yakumo's body even more tightly.

Their bodies, their minds – it was like they were melting together.

Haruka's eyes could see several spirits of the dead. Every one was filled with despair, grief and suffering.

– They must be the people who committed suicide here.

Haruka understand that not through thought but through feeling.

Why did the culprit bring Yakumo here – Haruka finally understood.

Aokigahara's Sea of Trees was filled with unfulfilled spirits who had ended their own lives.

For Yakumo, who could see the spirits of the dead, it must have been hell. He had received the full force of the eddying negative motions.

The culprit had destroyed Yakumo this way.

'Yakumo-kun...'

Tears rolled down Haruka's cheeks –

If only she could understand just a little of the suffering Yakumo underwent.

'Yakumo-kun.'

Yakumo's body, which had been violently protesting until now, finally lost its energy. Haruka frantically stopped Yakumo's leaning body.

However, that weight quickly lightened.

She saw Gotou hugging Yakumo.

'He's heavy if you're carrying him yourself, right?'

Gotou smiled, looking embarrassed.

'Gotou-san.'

'Sorry. I just got the jitters...'

As Gotou said that, his expression looked somewhat cheerful –

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12

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Ishii greeted the morning with his face on his desk.

This made the second day in a row. Miyagawa leant back on his seat at the opposite desk, snoring while sleeping.

Ishii's head felt heavy. He had discussed a number of things with Miyagawa last night, but they hadn't come up with an explanation in the end.

After sighing, Ishii recalled something important. He hadn't told Makoto that Yakumo had been found. She must have been worried too.

Ishii hurriedly took out his mobile and called Makoto.

<Hello, Hijikata speaking.>

He heard a hoarse voice from the other end of the phone.

'I apologise for calling so early in the morning. It's Ishii.'

<Ah, Ishii-san.>

'I just wanted to tell you that Yakumo was found safely last night...'

<Really?>

Makoto's voice became suddenly brighter.

When Ishii heard that, for some reason he was the one who was relieved.

'Yes. Detective Gotou contacted me last night. It appears he was taken to Aokigahara's Sea of Trees.'

<Is he all right?>

Makoto's voice grew lower.

'Eh?'

<Aokigahara's Sea of Trees is a famous spot for suicides. If Yakumo-kun, who can see ghosts, went there...>

Ishii understand even without Makoto finishing.

To be honest, Ishii hadn't thought that far, but now that he did, it was terrible.

For somebody who could see spirits, it was probably like hell, with all the spirits of the dead lamenting their lack of salvation in Aokigahara's Sea of Trees. Ishii felt a chill run down his spine just from imagining it.

'I will confirm with Detective Gotou afterwards.'

Just as Ishii hung up, the door to the Unsolved Cases Special Investigation Room opened.

Shimamura came into the room.

'Ah, good morning.'

Ishii hurriedly stood up and greeted her.

Miyagawa woke up in response. 'What, it's you, Shima?' he said in a gravelly voice as he stretched.

'Honestly, I'll get sick of that,' said Shimamura, leaning against the wall.

'What happened?'

'I'm so disgusted I can't even say.'

'Eh?'

It looked like Shimamura was very angry, but Ishii didn't understand what was going on at all.

'Miyagawa-san, please do something about it,' Shimamura begged.

'Tell me what happened,' urged Miyagawa.

Shimamura took in a breath loudly before beginning her explanation.

'Rich boy Honda's started saying today that Imoto, the one who died in his flat, committed suicide.'

'With what proof?' asked Ishii, which made Shimamura frown.

'I wouldn't be angry if he had proof. That spoiled idiot was told by higher-ups to solve the case already, so he's trying to clean it up quickly by calling it suicide.'

'That's awful,' agreed Miyagawa.

Though Ishii didn't say it aloud, he felt the same way.

Honda had left Ishii and Miyagawa out of the investigation because they thought it wasn't a suicide, and he'd questioned Aoi Hideaki about the case, but now, just because the higher-ups told him to, he was saying it was a suicide. It was incredibly untrustworthy.

'So what are you going to do?' Miyagawa asked Shimamura.

'Like I can do anything. The Aokigahara case that we're working on with the Yamanashi precinct isn't going well, so it's being pushed that way.'

'I see.'

Miyagawa lit a cigarette with a grim expression.

The higher-ups had probably urged them to solve the apartment case sooner because they were angry that there had been no progress with the Sea of Trees case with Hiyama.

Even though they had both had lives, they were prioritising the more sensational one. It was a sad reality.

'Come to think of it, I heard something interesting about the Aokigahara case.'

Shimamura clapped her hands together.

'What is it?'

Ishii leant forward in interest.

'Last night, some nearby residents spotted two men climbing the religious group's building walls and escaping. We don't know if they were petty thieves or believers, but it might have something to do with the case.'

– Oh no.

They couldn't ever say it was them. In contrast to Ishii's panic, Miyagawa was stifling laughter.

'I think you don't have to worry about those two,' Ishii said timidly.

'Why?'

'No, even if you say that...'

Miyagawa couldn't hold back his laughter when he saw Ishii so flustered.

Shimamura looked confused as to what was happening.

'Those two people were Ishii and me,' explained Miyagawa.

'Wha?'

Shimamura's eyes went wide in shock.

When Miyagawa saw that response, he started laughing even more loudly.

'Really... I want to join the Unsolved Cases Special Investigation Room too now.'

Ishii had thought Shimamura would be angry, but unexpectedly, she said that and left.

'So what now?' Miyagawa asked once he had calmed down.

'Shall we try talking to Aoi Hideaki-shi once more?' said Ishii, still unsure.

The apartment case had been determined to be a suicide, but it hadn't been solved at all. There had to be something there, and Aoi Hideaki had the key.

'I've come this far. I'll go with you to the end,' said Miyagawa as he stood up.

'Thank you.'

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13

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Makoto put her head on her desk at work.

She had been investigating a number of things last night and had barely slept.

The case that she had thought was simple at first had unexpectedly deep roots, making it impossible to see all of it at once.

She had been thinking the whole time when Ishii called her this morning too.

Even though she should have been happy that Yakumo had been saved, she felt anxious.

He had been found in Aokigahara's Sea of Trees.

It was an evil forest where countless spirits who had ended their own lives writhed. Yakumo must have experienced something unimaginable there.

Something so strong it could make his perspective – his character crumble –

Even if his body was fine, it didn't mean his heart was. It was very possible that he was no longer himself.

A call from Takizawa interrupted Makoto's thoughts.

'Hello, Hijikata speaking.'

<Sorry for calling so early.>

Takizawa sounded exhausted. He might not have slept much either.

'No, not at all.'

<About that thing you asked me to do yesterday... It's a bit strange.>

'What do you mean?'

<I got information about the time when Jikoukoushinkai was in Yamanashi... People had a pretty good impression of it.>

'Is that true?'

Though Makoto's voice sounded surprised, that wasn't how she really felt.

The theory in the back of her mind was becoming more real.

<They didn't have believers until two years ago. Minegishi Kyouka and Hiyama Kenichirou had just been doing fortune telling and consultations.>

'That couldn't be called a religious group.'

<Yeah, they legally registered as a religious group two years ago.>

'Is that so...'

Did something really happen to Jikoukoushinkai two years ago?

That had turned them completely around. It probably had something to do with Minegishi Kyouka and Hiyama Kenichirou's dispute.

<The local police said they cared for the people who tried to commit suicide in Aokigahara's Sea of Trees and listened to their problems.>

'Cared for people who tried to commit suicide...'

It was clearly different from how Jikoukoushinkai was now.

<It seems like they started researching ghosts afterwards.>

'Research?'

<Yeah. They were trying to explain the existence of ghosts scientifically.>

'Explain it scientifically.'

Makoto thought it over while taking notes.

The word scientifically just didn't sit right with her. Right now, Jikoukoushinkai was focussed on worshipping mountains – it was completely a religious group.

There was no science about it.

<And this is what interested me most...>

Takizawa spoke with airs of importance.

'What is it?'

<Minegishi Kyouka says she can see ghosts, right?>

'Yes.'

<There's a rumour that Hiyama Kenichirou was the one who could see tem.>

'Eh?' exclaimed Makoto.

Hiyama, not Minegishi, was the one who could see – if that was true, she would have to think things over completely.

Makoto swallowed her confusion and hung up on Takizawa.

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14

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– Thank you.

Haruka heard a voice as she slept.

It was a very kind and pleasant voice.

– Who could it be?

Haruka slowly opened her eyes. She saw white sheets. The sun's light reflecting off of them made it seem like they were sparkling.

– Where am I?

Haruka quickly recalled what had happened last night.

After Yakumo had fainted, the ambulance arrived. They took him to a nearby general hospital.

According to the doctor, Yakumo's body temperature was low and he was exhausted, but his life wasn't in danger.

In her worry, Haruka had watched over Yakumo sleeping in his bed, and it looked like she had fallen asleep herself.

'Yakumo-kun!' said Haruka, sitting up immediately.

Yakumo was sitting on the bed and looking out the window. In the morning sun, his body seemed to glow.

– Thank goodness.

It looked like his body was fine, but Haruka suddenly remembered something else.

She had another concern. Yakumo had completely lost his mind then. Even if he had looked like Yakumo, it had felt like something completely different was inside.

– How is Yakumo's mind?

'Yakumo-kun...' Haruka called out again.

Yakumo slowly turned around.

The light from behind him made it so that Haruka couldn't see his expression clearly.

– It's Yakumo-kun, right?

Haruka held her breath and softly touched her necklace with the red stone.

For a while, Yakumo said nothing. He just looked at Haruka. It felt like forever.

Finally, he slowly opened his mouth.

'Thank you...'

'Eh?'

'You called my name, didn't you?'

'Your name?'

'Yeah. When it was completely dark and I couldn't see the light, I had lost myself... but I heard it. Your voice. Your voice calling my name...'

'Yakumo-kun...'

– You came back.

Haruka felt that. The person in front of her was Yakumo, no doubt about it.

'That voice became a light for me... Thank you for calling me.'

Yakumo looked embarrassed as he smiled. Then, his hand touched Haruka's cheek.

Haruka tried to hold it back, but that warmth made her burst into tears.

'I'm so glad... I'm really glad...'

No matter how she tried to keep them in, the tears kept coming out.

Haruka tried to cover her face with her hand so that Yakumo wouldn't see her face covered in tears, but Yakumo grabbed that hand.

'It's the second time that you've saved me..'

'I'll do it any time...'

Haruka shook her head.

The number didn't matter. If anything happened to Yakumo, she would go save him without any hesitation. The reason was that for Haruka, Yakumo's existence itself was her light.

Just as Haruka was about to embrace Yakumo, the hospital room door opened.

'Sorry to bother.'

It was Gotou.

Haruka hurriedly backed away from Yakumo and wiped her tears.

'Oh, am I really a bother right now?'

After looking at Haruka and Yakumo, Gotou smirked and tried to leave the hospital.

'You aren't.'

Yakumo was the one who spoke.

'Don't worry about me. I'll let you be alone a bit longer.'

'Gotou-san!' said Haruka.

If he left now, she'd be the one who felt awkward.

'What?' complained Gotou, but he still sat on the chair by the bed.

'I need to thank you as well, Gotou-san,' Yakumo said formally, looking at Gotou.

However, Gotou just waved his hand.

'Stop that. If you thank me, something unlucky will definitely happen.'

'That's an awful way to put it.'

Yakumo smiled wryly.

'I just followed my own beliefs.'

After Gotou said that, he scratched his nose, looking like he felt embarrassed.

– That's just like Gotou-san.

Haruka felt that. Gotou hadn't saved Yakumo for his thanks. He had just done it because he wanted to.

'So who assaulted you?' said Gotou after clearing his throat.

'I didn't see their face. However... I know who it is.'

'Eh?'

Haruka spoke up without thinking.

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'What are you saying?'

Gotou leant forward from his seat by the bed to ask Yakumo that.

Yakumo said that he knew who had abducted him. His confident expression made it seem like he understood everything.

'I can't say right now.'

'Wha?'

Gotou's brow furrowed.

– It's started again.

Yakumo hated speaking when he only had speculation. Therefore, even if he understood something in his head, he didn't say it out loud. As a result, Gotou was pushed around without knowing anything.

'The corpse found at Aokigahara's Sea of Trees. Aoi Yuuka, who was robbed. The man who committed suicide. These three incidents are connected.'

Yakumo had said that before too.

Gotou and the others had run forward believing in those words, but Gotou felt like they had just

wasted their time since they hadn't been able to find the connection.

'How are they connected?' asked Gotou.

Yakumo's expression suddenly became grimmer.

It was an unusually frightening expression.

'It is because they are connected that the order is important.'

'The order?'

Haruka cocked her head before Gotou could.

'What are you talking about?' Gotou pressed, like he was landing the final blow.

'The order that will reveal the truth. If that order is incorrect, there will be victims.'

After saying that, Yakumo cast down his eyes, just slightly.

Yakumo looked like he was suffering. Even when he had been at the hospital before being abducted, he had been suffering like this.

Gotou had a ton of things he wanted to ask, but after coming this far, he decided to just go with Yakumo until the end without saying anything.

If he did that, Yakumo's suffering should become lighter, even if just by a little.

'So what should we do?' asked Gotou with resolve.

'You'll help?'

Yakumo's eyes went wide in surprise.

He wasn't used to other people's kindness. This was one of Yakumo's cute points.

'I planned on doing that from the start.'

'Well, that is natural. It was your possession that made things so troublesome from the start,' said Yakumo, running his hand through his messy hair.

'What kind of tone is that? You should thank me honestly at times like this.'

'Didn't you say that something unlucky would happen if I thanked you?' Yakumo said triumphantly.

– What a hateful brat.

But it felt like Yakumo had finally returned – it made Gotou happy. This was thanks to Haruka, who had faced Yakumo head-on without running away.

When Gotou looked at Haruka, she cocked her head, looking confused.

'Let's stop the pointless chitchat now. Please contact Makoto-san.'

Yakumo put his index finger to his brow and started his explanation.

'The newspaper woman? What do you want to ask?'

'Jikoukoushinkai was based in Yamanashi before. Please ask for the location.'

'Are you planning on going?'

'That is... if it remains.'

Yakumo smirked, looking amused.

Since Yakumo had said it, there was probably something there.

'Got it.'

'Also, please contact Ishii-san.'

'What do you want to ask him?'

'I'm not asking – I have a message.'

'A message?'

'Yes. A message from me.'

When Yakumo finished speaking, he slowly stood up. Though his expression was blank, it was frightening enough to give Gotou a chill down his spine.

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16

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'Gotou-san, I'm just glad you're OK,' Makoto said happily when Gotou called her.

<Yeah, somehow.>

'So, Yakumo-kun...' asked Makoto, gulping.

That was the biggest reason for her anxiety. He had gone into Aokigahara's Sea of Trees. It shouldn't have been an easy trip.

<Fit as a fiddle.>

'Really?'

To be honest, Makoto couldn't believe it.

<For a while, I was worried, but Haruka-chan called that guy back.>

When Makoto heard that, she relaxed.

Yakumo had Haruka. She would probably save Yakumo no matter what she had to sacrifice.

At first, Makoto had thought that Haruka was just a girl who cried all the time, but that impression had changed.

Haruka had a strong will and lived straightforwardly.

Her feelings for Yakumo had probably made her stronger. Being able to love someone so much was a happy thing.

'I'm envious...'

Makoto hadn't been planning on saying it, but the words slipped out of her mouth.

<Of what?>

Gotou had heard Makoto's words to herself. It was so embarrassing she felt like her face was on fire.

'N-nothing,' Makoto said hurriedly.

<Well, that's fine. I've got a request.>

'For... me?'

<Yeah. Yakumo asked. Jikoukoushinkai was based in Yamanashi before, right?>

'Yes.'

<He wants you to tell him the location.>

'Does he plan to go there?'

<Seems like it.>

This timing – Yakumo might have been thinking the same thing as Makoto.

Makoto told Gotou the address she had heard from Takizawa. Takizawa had said there was still an empty building there.

<Got it.>

'Er, I don't know if this will be helpful or not, but...'

Maokto stopped Gotou, who had been about to hang up, and told him the news she had heard from Takizawa about Jikoukoushinkai earlier.

Perhaps it would be the key to solving the puzzle. That was what Makoto thought.

<Then it wasn't a religious group there like it is now.>

That was what Gotou said after Makoto finished her explanation.

'Yes, it seems that way.'

<I'm even more confused.>

'I feel the same way.'

<Anyway, thanks.>

'No, I didn't...'

<I'll call again if there's anything else.>

'Please wait.'

Makoto called out to Gotou for the second time.

She had forgotten to say something important.

<What?>

'Please be careful.'

'Got it.'

After saying that, Gotou hung up.

Something terrible will happen – though it was vague, Makoto had that feeling.

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17

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Ishii received Gotou's call when he was about to leave the precinct.

'D-Detective Gotou!'

<Don't speak so loud.>

'I-I apologise... How is Yakumo-shi?'

<He's probably flirting with Haruka-chan right now.>

Gotou probably said that carelessly, but Ishii had complicated feelings about it.

Ishii had felt painfully during the incident one month ago that Haruka only had Yakumo in her eyes. Even though he should have been unbound now from his unattainable love, his feelings were swayed.

– Love is a strange thing.

<How are things on your end?>

Gotou asked that question.

Come to think of it, their call had ended after Ishii was told that Yakumo was safe.

He hadn't told Gotou anything about his information.

'That...'

When Ishii told Gotou that he and Miyagawa had infiltrated Jikoukoushinkai, Gotou burst out laughing.

Ishii glanced at Miyagawa. He was smoking, looking bored as he waited for Ishii to end the call.

He was keeping quiet because he knew Ishii was talking to Gotou.

<So what happened?>

Gotou urged Ishii to continue, still laughing.

'Ah... That...'

Ishii explained what how Minegishi Kyouka had looked when he peered in from the window.

<What?>

That was what Gotou said first off after Ishii finished his explanation.

'I think she might have been possessed by a ghost...'

<The founder, possessed by a ghost?>

Gotou's voice screeched in surprise.

'That's just my theory though.'

<Your theories can't be counted on.>

'I-I apologise...'

It was true. Since Ishii couldn't see ghosts like Yakumo, his theories weren't very trustable.

However –

<So what are you going to do next?>

That was Gotou's next question.

'Actually, I was thinking of going to speak with Aoi Hideaki-shi.'

<That's perfect.>

'Eh?'

<Actually, I've got a message for you to give to Hideaki.>

'You do, Detective Gotou...?'

<No, not me. A message from Yakumo.>

'Ah.'

Ishii understood now.

He'd heard that Yakumo and Hideaki had been classmates in high school. Perhaps the message was of a personal nature.

However, the message that came from Gotou's mouth was not what Ishii had imagined.

'Is that definitely it?'

It was so unexpected that Ishii had to confirm it.

<Yeah.>

'What does it mean?'

<Like I know.>

Gotou gave a careless reply.

Since it was Yakumo, he had probably not told Gotou the meaning of or reason for the message. He was always like that. He didn't reveal the truth until the end.

However, it was a fact that he had always shown them the correct paths.

'I understand. I'll pass on the message. When will you be back, Detective Gotou?'

<Who knows. Taking a bit of a detour now.>

'Detour?'

<Anyway, that's how it is.>

Gotou hung up.

'Gotou?'

Ishii was still a bit dumbfounded when Miyagawa spoke.

'Ah, yes.'

'What'd he say?'

'Er... I don't really know.'

'I see. Well, that's fine, isn't it?'

Miyagawa's voice was incredibly bright.

'Eh?'

'We've come this far. Why not keep going?'

'That's true,' agreed Ishii.

There was no point thinking about things now. No matter what conclusion awaited them, after coming this far, all they could do was go with Yakumo's speculations.

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18

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'Are you really all right?' said Haruka to Yakumo, who had changed quickly and left the hospital.

So much had happened. Haruka thought it would be better for him to take more of a break.

'There isn't enough time.'

Yakumo stopped and turned around.

His expression was terribly cold.

'Time?'

'Yeah. If I don't hurry, I won't be able to save anyone.'

After saying that, he looked up at the snow-capped Mt Fuji.

Though it was only three hours by car from Tokyo, when Haruka saw that grand form, it felt like they had gone incredibly far.

'Save?'

'Save is an exaggeration.'

Yakumo smiled self-derisively.

'Exaggeration?'

'Yeah. Salvation might be impossible to find anywhere. What I'm trying to do is probably just self-satisfaction...'

'Eh?'

'In that forest... when I was surrounded by spirits who had committed suicide, I realised how powerless I am. No matter how high and mighty I might act, there is no way I can save all the people who died there.'

'Yeah.'

That was probably true. Not even a god could bring salvation to all the people in the world.

'The people in that forest had no salvation anywhere. That was why they ended their lives.'

'That's so... sad.'

After saying that, Haruka bit her lip.

Haruka couldn't see the spirits of the dead. It was difficult for her to understand what Yakumo had experienced.

However, she could imagine it. Many people had chosen to end their own lives in that forest.

It was undeniably fact that many people had been forced to take that choice in this world.

'I guess it is sad... But I want to save them, if it's possible.'

'Yes.'

'But for one person to save another – it's just ego.'

'Eh?'

Haruka felt an impact, like somebody had thrust her back.

– That's not true.

Haruka tried to say that, but the words didn't come out of her mouth. It was because she could kind of understand what Yakumo was trying to say.

Is life salvation? For the people who ended their lives in Aokigahara's Sea of Trees, death might have been their only salvation.

'But I still want to save them. Even if it is ego, I don't want somebody to die in front of my eyes.'

'Of course.'

Something warm welled up within Haruka's chest.

That was why Yakumo was Yakumo. No matter the circumstances, he couldn't abandon somebody suffering in front of him.

'And if this case continues, I can't guarantee that her life will be safe.'

Yakumo narrowed his eyes in the sunlight and ran his hand through his hair.

'By her, do you mean Yuuka-san?'

'I do.'

'How is this incident related to Yuuka-san's life?'

'I'll talk about it afterwards,' said Yakumo. Then, he started walking toward the parking lot.

Everything was wrapped in smoke again. When Yakumo was like this, no matter how Haruka pressed him, he wouldn't talk.

Though Haruka felt unsatisfied, she chased after Yakumo.

'Oh, you're here?'

Gotou waved at them from in front of a red Mini Cooper in the parking lot.

'You're early. You two could've spent some more time alone,' said Gotou, smirking the moment Haruka and Yakumo arrived.

The incident from earlier in the hospital came back to Haruka and she went red to her ears from embarrassment.

'Please stop that already,' Haruka said angrily, but Gotou wasn't listening.

'Why don't the two of you stay at a hot spring inn overnight?'

– The two of us at a hot spring inn overnight.

Haruka wanted to object, but Yakumo spoke before she could.

'Next time then.'

Yakumo said that with a blank expression. He was probably just dealing with Gotou, but Haruka felt strangely self-conscious. Next time – would there be one?

'More importantly, let's go,' Yakumo said with a stiff expression.

'OK,' Gotou replied.

Haruka nodded too, after clearing her head of silly thoughts.

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19

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Ishii sat opposite Aoi Hideaki.

There was a broken wall clock at a privately-owned little cafe near the station.

Smoking was forbidden. Miyagawa played with the unlit cigarette on the table.

'So what did you need today?' said Hideaki after the coffee they ordered arrived.

The police had questioned him a number of times. Still, he did not seem resentful or irritated.

Normally, people would have expressed their anger. It wouldn't have been strange if he had a complaint or two.

– Where does his calm come from?

Ishii had that question as he looked at Hideaki.

'About ghosts.'

'You can't believe me... That's what you want to say, right?'

'No, actually, I've met Saitou Yakumo-shi as well... His help has solved a number of cases, so...'

'Is that so?'

Hideaki's face became instantly brighter.

It was a childish expression, completely different from his calm from before.

'I'm asking this as a personal question, but what is it like to see?'

Miyagawa looked displeased, furrowing his brow beside Ishii.

His response made sense. This had nothing to do with the case. It was just Ishii's curiosity.

Though he had been with Yakumo for so long, strangely, he had never asked.

'What is it like?'

'In short, how do the ghosts appear...'

When Ishii asked that, Hideaki smiled, seeming amused.

'Detective, you're an interesting person.'

'Eh?'

'I never thought that a detective would ask me that.'

'Is that so?'

'Yes. In my case, unlike Saitou, I can't see them clearly.'

'Is that so?'

'Yes. It's like a vague shadow. Well, if the spirit's emotions are strong, sometimes I can see them clearly.'

Hideaki seemed very lively as he talked about ghosts.

It was like he was proud of it. It was the opposite reaction to Yakumo, who stubbornly tried to hide it.

'When did you start being able to see?'

'Before I noticed, I could see them. Perhaps it's just my blood...'

'Blood...'

'Ishii!'

Miyagawa elbowed Ishii's side.

Get to the point already – was probably what Miyagawa wanted to say. If Ishii talked about anything else unrelated, Miyagawa would really get angry.

Ishii cleared his throat.

'I apologise for getting off track. I have something I'd like to ask about the case...'

'What is it?'

'The ghost of Imoto, who assaulted your sister, went to the hospital. You saw him... correct?'

'Yes.'

'There's one thing I don't understand.'

'What is it?'

'If Imoto-shi felt guilty, why didn't he go to the hospital when he was alive?'

The investigation couldn't find proof for murder – that passive reason was why it was determined that Imoto had committed suicide.

Ishii would have determined it was a suicide from the scene too.

However, the motive just seemed off. If Imoto felt guilty enough to kill himself for a robbery, it would be more of a retribution to confess to the police.

Perhaps people thought differently, but there was also the life insurance.

– Something is definitely off.

Hideaki took a sip of coffee and looked up as he thought. Miyagawa stopped fiddling with the

cigarette to watch Hideaki's odd change in demeanour.

There was a long silence –

'I don't know. I can only see.'

For such a long pause, it was a harmless answer.

Ishii had the impression that Hideaki was a cunning person.

'Is that all?'

Hideaki narrowed his eyes as he looked at Ishii.

'Do you have other plans?'

'I want to visit my sister.'

As Hideaki said that, his eyes were sad.

His sister, Yuuka, was still in a comatose state. She was the only person who knew the truth.

Even though the case would advance so much if they could just talk to her –

'Understood. There's just one more thing.'

Ishii took in a deep breath and looked at Hideaki.

Hideaki looked suspicious, like he sensed something from that gaze.

'What is it?'

'Yakumo-shi has a message.'

'A message?'

Ishii took out his memo and read what was written there.

'I understand what your sister wants to save. She wants to save you.'

After reading that, Ishii looked at Hideaki.

He was frozen, like time had stopped.

'Detective. Please stop with the lies.'

After a silence, Hideaki smiled bitterly.

'It isn't a lie. Yakumo-shi was abducted by someone yesterday, but he was found safely and should be coming here today.'

'Is that so. I'm glad...'

In contrast to his words, Hideaki didn't sound happy at all.

The atmosphere became heavy along with Hideaki's mood, and for a while, nobody said anything.

'Detective.'

How long was it before he spoke? Hideaki suddenly looked up.

'What is it?'

'I'm the one who killed Hiyama Kenichirou.'

Ishii was at a loss for words upon hearing Hideaki's confession.

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20

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Gotou looked out the window as he drove the Mini Cooper.

He had reached the Kawaguchi lakeshore. The lake's surface reflected Mount Fuji with its red leaves – it was quite a sight. If there weren't a case, Gotou would have liked to stop the car and appreciate its beauty.

He looked at the rear-view mirror to see the backseat, where Yakumo was sleeping, arms crossed.

He'd said a lot, but he had to be exhausted.

'Gotou-san.'

Haruka spoke from the passenger seat.

'What is it?'

'Gotou-san, you met with Yakumo-kun in high school too, right?'

'Yeah.'

Gotou had started really interacting with Yakumo because of an incident when he was in the third year of middle school.

'What was Yakumo-kun like then?'

Gotou went back through his memories.

'It felt like he was just running after cases.'

'So Yakumo-kun was involved with cases then too.'

Haruka's eyes went wide in surprise.

At that time, Gotou went to Yakumo whenever anything happened. Though part of it was because he was using that ability of his, Gotou felt like it was just an excuse to interact with Yakumo.

'Yeah. So many things happened that I couldn't tell you it all.'

'That many?'

'Yeah. Almost died a few times too.'

'How was he in school?' asked Haruka.

Unfortunately, Gotou couldn't answer.

'Hm... He almost never talked about school.'

'Is that so?'

'Yeah...'

Gotou felt a bit of hatred for himself.

He had planned on watching over Yakumo, but in the end, he might have just used him for investigations.

'I see...'

Haruka looked at her lap, seeming a bit let down.

When Gotou saw her profile, he remembered just one thing.

'Come to think of it, I don't remember exactly when, but Yakumo saved a girl who was in the same high school.'

'Eh?'

Haruka's eyes flashed open in surprise.

'There was a pair of corpses – wife and husband – that were found in the river.'

'The river?'

'Yeah. The investigation found out they'd been hit by a car.'

'That's awful...'

Haruka pressed a hand against her chest.

Gotou felt the same way. The culprit had thrown the corpses into the river after hitting the husband and wife to erase the evidence.

Come to think of it, something similar had happened to Haruka.

'The police had started their investigation on a bigger scale when a man confessed.'

'At least there was that.'

Gotou shook his head.

'Unfortunately, that wasn't the case.'

'What do you mean?'

'The true culprit was the son of the man who confessed.'

'So the father confessed to hide his son's crimes?'

Haruka's disgust was obvious.

'That's how it is. But somebody realised the truth.'

'Yakumo-kun.'

'No, before that, the victim's daughter realised the truth. The real culprit – the brat – thought it'd be bad, so he kidnapped her to try to keep her quiet.'

'Keep her quiet...'

The anger was apparent on Haruka's face.

He was a really awful guy. He didn't care about other people's lives if it was to save his own skin.

'So Yakumo and me noticed the same thing, so we went to save her and catch the real perp.'

'So the girl saved then was Aoi Yuuka-san,' said Haruka.

'I think that was her name... Ah!'

Gotou finally realised.

'I can't believe you just remembered that.'

The one who interrupted was Yakumo, who was supposed to be sleeping.

After rubbing his eyes, he let out a large yawn.

'You were awake?'

'Your voice was so loud that I couldn't sleep properly, Gotou-san.'

Yakumo was as hateful as always.

Gotou should've just left him in the Sea of Trees.

'My bad.'

'Honestly. There is something wrong with your memory,' Yakumo said, sounding disappointed.

'S-shut up...'

Though Gotou objected, there was no power in his voice.

He had always had that connection to the case, but he'd just remembered it now.

'I thought that you were talking about it because you knew, Gotou-san.'

Haruka was looking at Gotou critically too.

'Yeah, yeah, my memory is bad,' said Gotou with a click of his tongue.

'After that incident, Hideaki quit high school and started working so that his sister could continue to live the way she had,' Yakumo said in a flat voice.

'It must've been tough.'

Those were Gotou's true feelings.

Catching the culprit didn't take back the lives that had been stolen away. Cases warped people's lives.

'No, he didn't feel pain from that. Rather, he was happy. I didn't understand that feeling then.'

– So you understand it now?

Gotou wanted to ask that, but he stopped, since it felt like Yakumo would make fun of him for it.

'A big brother who cares for his little sister,' said Haruka.

However, Yakumo shook his head.

'Those two aren't real siblings. When their parents remarried, they were both kids from previous marriages who became siblings.'

'Eh? Really?'

'They're not even real siblings, and he'd go so far?' asked Haruka.

According to Yakumo's story, even though they were siblings, they weren't related by blood at all. They could be called complete strangers. But –

'There are bonds even when people aren't connected by blood. Sometimes, there are bonds even thicker than blood.'

After saying that, Yakumo looked out the window.

– Bonds even thicker than blood.

Gotou understood now that he'd taken Nao in and was raising her as his child. Even if they were just complete strangers, he would do anything for Nao's sake.

People's bonds did not come only from blood.

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21

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'What do you mean by that?' asked Ishii, leaning forward.

–I'm the one who killed Hiyama Kenichirou.

Hideaki had said that. In contrast to the weight of those words, his expression was incredibly calm.

'I mean exactly what I said. I killed Hiyama-san,' repeated Hideaki calmly.

'W-what are you talking about?'

Ishii cleared his throat, gulped and finally managed to ask that question.

'Hiyama-san tried to use me.'

'Use?'

'Yes. Hiyama-san's Jikoukoushinkai claimed to be able to see ghosts.'

'Yes.'

Ishii knew about that.

'But they didn't have that ability. I found out.'

'Because... you can see ghosts?' said Ishii.

Hideaki nodded.

'What's that got to do with killing him?' interrupted Miyagawa with a suspicious look.

That was the biggest problem. Being able or unable to see ghosts wasn't a reason to kill someone.

'Hiyama-san tried to get me to join Jikoukoushinkai to expand the group, since I can see ghosts.'

'Join...'

If Hideaki really could see ghosts, Jikoukoushinkai would be desperate to have him.

'Even though I kept refusing, they kept soliciting me. In the end, they even came to my workplace...'

'And you killed him for that?'

'I didn't plan on killing him, but when that man realised I wouldn't respond, he started to threaten my sister.'

'Could it be...'

Ishii had an idea.

Imoto, who had committed suicide in his apartment, had been in Jikoukoushinkai.

'That man ordered one of the believers to attack my sister. When I returned home, I found my sister collapsed...'

At this stage, Hideaki's face, which had been like a Noh mask, twisted.

Tears welled up in his eyes, and his voice grew faint. He seemed so weak that he might collapse at any moment.

Perhaps he felt guilty for involving his sister Yuuka.

Ishii didn't want to press any further, but as a detective, he had to.

'Then what did you do?'

'I figured out that Hiyama-san was related right away. First, I called an ambulance to take my sister to the hospital. Then, I called out Hiyama-san.'

'I couldn't forgive him... I couldn't forgive that man for doing that to my sister...'

Tears rolled down Hideaki's cheeks.

What a sad case – it was intolerable for Ishii.

Just because Hideaki could see ghosts, a religious group had pursued him this far and hurt his only family, his sister.

Even though it had been for revenge, murder was unforgiveable. Ishii knew that, but he still felt sympathy for Hideaki.

'Why did you take him all the way to Aokigahara's Sea of Trees?'

Miyagawa spoke up in Ishii's stead, since Ishii was at a loss for words.

'That was where Jikoukoushinkai's base had been before. I thought that the police investigation would focus on the religious group if I left him there...' replied Hideaki with a sniffle. His thoughts weren't wrong.

The police suspected Jikoukoushinkai's higher-ups, and had thought it was an internal incident with the believers and founder.

When Hideaki finished talking, a new question came to Ishii.

'Why did you feel like talking?'

Hideaki's expression was inscrutable.

'Saitou Yakumo.'

'Was it that message?'

'Yes. I understood after hearing it that he already realised the truth behind the case... so...'

Hideaki shivered.

Ishii realised something when he saw that.

'You were the one who abducted Yakumo-shi,' said Ishii, carefully but firmly.

'Yes,' said Hideaki, shoulders slumping.

'Why did you do that?'

'Because it was possible that he would notice.'

'The truth, you mean?'

'Yes. But I couldn't kill him. That's why I thought I'd just leave him aside for a while.'

'That's why you told Haruka-chan where he was.'

Hideaki nodded.

Now Ishii understood the inexplicable call. Hideaki hadn't want Yakumo involved in the case, but at the same time, he didn't want his friend to die.

Aokigahara's Sea of Trees was a nest for spirits that had not found peace. Hideaki had probably thought that leaving Yakumo there would give him psychological damage and make it so that he

couldn't move for a while.

'Saitou can see the spirits of the dead, like me. That's why I had a bad feeling when Saitou showed up. I thought he'd reveal the truth...' said Hideaki to himself.

Yakumo's message had probably conveyed that he knew the truth. Hideaki had sensed that and resolved to confess everything, knowing he wouldn't be able to run away any longer.

'Thank you for telling me.'

Ishii bowed his head.

Hideaki's eyes went wide in surprise.

'I didn't think I'd be thanked by a detective...'

Though Hideaki showed a smile, his voice sounded full of tears.

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They could see Kawaguchi Lake from their height.

It was a tranquil place with a lot of green.

'Let's go.'

After Yakumo called out to her, Haruka ran after him.

They reached a lone two-storey home. It looked like nobody lived here now. The garden was filled with dead leaves.

'This should be the address...'

Gotou looked up at the building.

'Let's confirm that.'

Yakumo started walking briskly. He tried the doorknob, but the door appeared to be locked and wouldn't open.

'What will you do?' asked Haruka.

Yakumo smirked.

In response, Gotou went forward and kicked the door. The door opened with a crack.

'It's open,' Gotou said proudly.

What he'd done was a bit much.

'Let's go.'

Ignoring Haruka's doubts, Yakumo and Gotou went inside.

Haruka felt like she'd become a criminal one day when she was with Yakumo and Gotou. Though Haruka was pessimistic, she followed the two in.

When she went inside, she saw bookshelves all along the walls, completely filled with books.

She looked at the spines. Most of them were books related to spiritual phenomena. She could see a number of medical ones too.

'This is an amazing number of books.'

'According to Makoto-san's information, Jikoukoushinkai used to seriously study spiritual phenomena,' said Yakumo, running a finger along a book's spine.

'So these are the ones that have been left behind?'

Gotou opened a cardboard box in the corner of the room and pulled out files and notebooks.

Just from looking at this room, it felt more like a research facility than a religious group.

'Why do you think they were researching so much?' Yakumo asked.

Gotou cocked his head.

'Who knows.'

'Perhaps to make a religious group afterwards...'

When Haruka said the first thing that came to mind, Yakumo looked incredibly displeased.

'If they had been planning to become a religious group from the start, they would keep those books, wouldn't they?'

Just as Yakumo said, the bookshelves didn't seem to have any relation to religion. Maybe they weren't interested.

'Then what are we supposed to search for here?'

'For something.'

Yakumo replied vaguely to Gotou's question and went into a room in the back.

Haruka and Gotou looked at each other.

'“Something”, he says.'

Gotou's grumbling made sense.

They had no way of helping if they didn't know what to search for.

'First, let's check what's inside that box.'

Since there was no point grumbling, Haruka crouched in front of the box Gotou had opened and started looking through it.

There were a number of old notebooks.

They were filled with writing. Haruka could see the word 'soul' a lot. She didn't really understand the contents.

When she went deeper into the box, she found an old album.

– What's this?

Just as Haruka was about to check, Gotou's mobile rang.

'Who's it?'

Gotou answered the phone.

He seemed to be having a serious conversation, as his voice kept getting lower. What had happened?

'W-what!?'

Suddenly, Gotou's loud voice reverberated through the room.

Haruka jolted and looked towards Gotou. Yakumo had come back from the other room to see what had happened too.

'What is it?' Yakumo asked when Gotou finished his call.

'It was Ishii. He went to question Aoi Hideaki and...'

'He confessed to killing Hiyama Kenichirou-san then.'

Yakumo spoke before Gotou.

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'Why do you know that?'

Gotou pressed Yakumo for an answer.

Gotou had just heard the news from Ishii that Aoi Hideaki had confessed to killing Hiyama Kenichirou.

He would understand if Yakumo had been listening to the phone next to him, but Yakumo had been in another room. There was no way for him to know.

'Please don't take it so seriously,' Yakumo said calmly, in contrast to Gotou's agitation.

That attitude just riled Gotou up more.

'Of course I'm taking it seriously! Explain what you mean!'

'I gave him a message, correct?'

'Yeah.'

'I was proving whether my theory was correct with that,' said Yakumo as he crouched in front of the cardboard box, took an old album out and flipped through the pages.

'What?'

'If my theory was correct, I believed that my message would cause him to confess to the crime.'

So his theory had been correct.

'Hey, was he the one who abducted you?' said Haruka, joining the conversation.

Gotou could reply to that too.

'He confessed to that too.'

After Gotou said that, Haruka turned to Yakumo.

'It is just as he said. Aoi Hideaki was the one who abducted me.'

'Why would he do that?' said Haruka, sounding like she might cry at any moment.

Gotou wanted to know too. Ishii hadn't given the reason.

'It's simple. I had been close to the truth.'

Gotou recalled what he had been talking about with Yakumo when Yakumo had been abducted.

Yakumo had been troubled. Not about who the culprit was, but how to save them –

At the time, Yakumo had probably already known that Hideaki was the culprit.

'That's awful. So he tried to kill you – his classmate – because you got in the way?' said Gotou.

He hadn't met Hideaki, but he had thought that he had been a better person. Killing somebody to hide a crime was a terrible thing to do.

'He didn't try to kill me,' said Yakumo. Maybe he was trying to cover for him, but...

'But he...'

'If he had planned to kill me, he could have done it at any time. He was just trying to get me to leave the case.'

'Oh, so that's why he told me where you were.'

Haruka was the one who spoke.

Come to think of it, that was right. Gotou had been wondering why the abductor would go out of their way to explain where the abductee was.

Hideaki hadn't planned to kill Yakumo, but he had wanted him to keep away from the case.

He had probably left him in Aokigahara's Sea of Trees for that purpose. Putting somebody who could see spirits there would cause them a lot of psychological damage.

But Gotou thought that was worse.

'Did Aoi Hideaki know what leaving you in the Sea of Trees would do?' asked Gotou.

Yakumo smiled bitterly.

'He probably didn't understand the true meaning of it.'

To Gotou, that sounded like Yakumo's wish.

'So what are you going to do?'

In either case, Hideaki's confession had solved the case.

'Now I will lay the final touches.'

After saying that, Yakumo shut the album loudly.

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'If he's fine, at least call to say that. Are you an idiot?' said Eishin after Gotou called. He knew it sounded like a lecture.

He was glad that Yakumo was fine, but Eishin had heard nothing about it until now. It was like Gotou, but for the people worrying about it, it was unbearable.

<I was busy too.>

'You can at least call, right?'

<You're a noisy old man.>

'Watch your tongue. Atsuko-san stayed awake all night waiting for you to call.'

<W-wait a second. Why do you know that, old man?>

'Obviously because I stayed at your house.'

<Don't just go in without asking!>

Gotou was howling on the other side of the phone.

Eishin ignored that and looked at Atsuko and Nao, who were sitting opposite him at the table.

'Anyway, it seems he's fine.'

After Eishin said that, Atsuko's expression softened.

Though she had been acting calm, she must have been terribly worried. And still she hadn't said anything – she had silently endured it.

She really was too good for the likes of Gotou.

<Oi! Old man! You listening?>

Eishin could hear Gotou's yell from the receiver.

'I can hear you even if you don't speak so loudly.'

<Liar. Listen up. The next time you just go into somebody's house without permission, I'll beat you.>

'I'd like to see you try. I'll kick you out right away.'

Though Eishin had meant that as a joke, Atsuko's eyes went wide. In response, Nao looked anxious too.

It looked like a joke of this level was a bit harsh for these two.

'It's fine. I won't do that.'

Eishin covered the receiver and smiled at Atsuko and Nao.

<Anyway, I'm leaving that to you.>

Gotou said something on the other end of the phone.

– That?

'Eh? What are you talking about?'

<You really weren't listening!>

'Like I said, don't be so loud,' rebuked Eishin, annoyed.

After a click of his tongue, Gotou explained again.

<It's a request from Yakumo. Seems he wants you to look into this person.>

'I'm not a detective.'

<According to Yakumo, it'd be faster to use the network of families that support the temple for this than for the police to investigate.>

'Hm.'

That could be true.

It was difficult for the police to gather detailed information, but the families that supported the temple were people who lived in the area, each with their own networks.

<He wants you to look into...>

Eishin took down Gotou's message on a memo and hung up.

'Noisy as always.'

After Eishin sighed, Atsuko finally laughed. In response, Nao smiled too.

To be honest, Eishin had been worried about this family at first.

Nao wasn't their real child. Eishin had worried about whether they could be a family – but that had

been needless anxiety.

Even if they weren't connected by blood, bonds arose between people.

The Gotou family had taught Eishin that.

'Maybe I should go.'

As Eishin stood up, Atsuko did as well.

'Please stay a bit longer.'

Eishin appreciated the offer, but he couldn't just slack off.

'Sorry, maybe next time. I've got a role to play too.'

After saying that, Eishin left the room.

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– I'll investigate it directly.

Makoto decided that while researching Jikoukoushinkai.

Thinking up theories wouldn't get her anywhere. If she went herself and met the founder, Minegishi Kyouka, she might figure something out.

Makoto grabbed her bag and stood up just as her mobile vibrated.

Unexpectedly, Yakumo's number was displayed on the screen.

'Hello, Hijikata speaking.'

<It's Saitou Yakumo.>

His voice, ever calm came through the phone.

'Are you all right?'

<Yes, somehow.>

'Is that so...'

Makoto was relieved.

She had heard from Gotou that Yakumo was fine, but she hadn't been able to clear her anxiety until she heard his voice.

<Actually, there is something I would like you to check, Makoto-san.>

'What is it?'

<I heard that you investigated Jikoukoushinkai. Please tell me what you know. Gotou-san's

explanation was insufficient.>

<What do you mean by that!?!>

Makoto could hear Gotou's yell through the phone.

Makoto laughed without thinking, partly in relief.

'What I've investigated...'

Makoto sat back down, took her notebook out of her bag and explained in order the information she had gathered.

<As expected, your work is organised.>

'No, not at all. More importantly, could I share my opinion with you?' asked Makoto.

<Please go ahead.>

Yakumo gave his reply.

'Why did Jikoukoushinkai suddenly change into a religious organisation two years ago... That is the biggest puzzle.'

<It is.>

'My instincts tell me they're involved...'

<The man with two red eyes and Nanase Miyuki.>

Yakumo responded in a quiet voice.

As expected, he was quick. Perhaps he had seen the same possibility from the very start too.

'What do you think?' asked Makoto.

There was a pause.

<Makoto-san, could you perhaps be thinking of going to Jikoukoushinkai now?>

'Eh?'

That was exactly it. Makoto had a jolt. It felt like Yakumo had seen right through her.

<Please wait a bit before going.>

'Why?'

<I am heading there too.>

'Is that so?'

<Furthermore, your theory is likely correct. It would be dangerous to go alone.>

– The theory's correct.

That meant that Nanase Miyuki was there.

Makoto wanted to confirm that, but before she could, the call ended.

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Ishii looked at the rear-view mirror while driving.

He saw Hideaki in the backseat. He was looking down and seemed to be enduring something. Next to him, Miyagawa had his arms crossed unhappily.

– Don't arrest him.

Yakumo had given those instructions through Gotou.

Hideaki had confessed. But Yakumo had said not to arrest him. Did that mean he wasn't the perpetrator?

Ishii stopped his car in front of Jikoukoushinkai's base. Yakumo had also been the one who directed him here.

What on earth is going to start – Ishii had that question as he got off the car.

'Ishii-san.'

Ishii looked towards the source of the voice and saw Makoto standing by the gate.

'Makoto-san. Did Yakumo-shi...?'

'Yes.'

Though Makoto replied, her expression showed bemusement.

It seemed like she didn't know the details either.

'So what are we going to do?' said Miyagawa, who had got off the car. Hideaki was with him.

Since they hadn't arrested Hideaki, he wasn't handcuffed. Miyagawa had grabbed his arm to stop him from escaping, but to be honest, Ishii was uneasy.

'I... Yakumo-shi is coming now, so there's nothing to do but wait until then.'

'Honestly.'

Miyagawa let out an exasperated sigh.

Hideaki used that chance to ram himself into Miyagawa. Miyagawa fell from the surprise attack and let go of Hideaki.

– He's going to get away.

By the time Ishii thought that, it was too late. Hideaki turned on his heels and dashed off.

'Catch him!' yelled Miyagawa as he got up.

'Yes sir!' Ishii responded, but Hideaki had put some distance between them.

I don't think I'll be able to catch him – just as Ishii was about to give up, a red Mini Cooper drove up and drifted over to block Hideaki's path, parking right there.

Hideaki turned around to try to run, but Ishii and Miyagawa were there.

'Let's put an end to this already.'

The Mini Cooper's backdoor opened and Yakumo came out.

Hideaki froze upon seeing him.

'Saitou Yakumo...' said Hideaki, gasping.

'No matter how you deny it, I will reveal the truth.'

Yakumo looked at Hideaki.

Upon receiving that gaze, Hideaki ground his teeth together in frustration and looked down. Miyagawa took that chance to grab Hideaki's arm.

'Like we'd like you get away!' said Gotou as he got out of the driver's seat.

Haruka came out the passenger seat.

'D-Detective Gotou. And Haruka-chan.'

Ishii hurriedly ran over to them only to receive a fist from Gotou on his head.

A hot, prickling pain ran through Ishii, but it made him happy.

'So what are you going to do?' said Miyagawa, still holding onto Hideaki.

'To clean up.'

Yakumo, the only one who understood everything, went straight for Jikoukoushinkai's gates.

'I don't get it, but looks like all we can do is go,' complained Gotou, though he followed after Yakumo anyway.

Ishii and Miyagawa exchanged a glance and then walked forward, with Hideaki between them.

Makoto followed as well.

Everyone gathered at the gates. Yakumo confirmed that and then pressed the intercom button.

<Who might you be?>

Perhaps the speaker had seen the commotion outside. The voice was filled with wariness.

'My name is Saitou Yakumo. I've come to exorcise the evil that has possessed your founder, Minegishi Kyouka-sama,' Yakumo declared in a ringing voice.

'Eh? Then she really...' said Ishii.

Yakumo nodded.

'Just as you theorised, Ishii, Minegishi Kyouka-san is possessed by a ghost.'

– So that really was it. But then...

'Will they let us in?'

'I'm going even if they refuse.'

'But the gates...'

'Gotou-san can destroy a gate of this level,' said Yakumo recklessly, which made Gotou roll up his sleeves eagerly.

Though Ishii wasn't sure whether the person on the other end could hear this conversation, the gate slowly opened and a woman in white hakama with a sash that had a red Brahma on it came to welcome them.

She was as expressionless as a Noh mask. She had a long fringe and wore glasses. The woman had a very dark look to her.

'Will you really save the founder?' she asked expressionlessly.

'Everyone's idea of salvation is different. All I can do is exorcise the spirit.'

Yakumo smiled daringly.

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This was the second time Haruka had come to Jikoukoushinkai's base.

Just like last time, she didn't know what was going to happen. All she could do was hold her breath and watch.

Yakumo stood in front of the homa-mandala. Gotou had his arms crossed beside him. Diagonally behind them, Ishii and Miyagawa were standing with Hideaki sandwiched between them.

Haruka stood with Makoto, watching for a bit of a distance.

'What are you going to do?' asked Gotou, tired of waiting.

'An exorcism.'

'Wha?'

Gotou's brows knitted together. Haruka understood his feelings.

– I can't exorcise spirits.

Yakumo himself had said that. And who on earth was he going to exorcise?

As if in response to that, the door opened and the woman who had shown them here came in, pushing a wheelchair.

Haruka was startled.

Minegishi Kyouka sat in the wheelchair. Perhaps she was unconscious, as her neck was limp. She looked just like Gotou had when he had been possessed.

'Please bring her here.'

The woman nodded in response to Yakumo's instruction. She pushed the wheelchair up to Yakumo and took a step back.

'Then I will start.'

Yakumo clapped his hands together.

The sound reverberated, raising the tension a level higher.

'In order to exorcise the spirit from her, there are a number of things that must be made clear,' said Yakumo. Then, he moved to stand in front of Hideaki.

Hideaki slowly lifted his head. His expression was very different than the one Haruka remembered.

He glared at Yakumo with what seemed like killing intent.

However, Yakumo didn't budge. He turned his gaze to Ishii.

'Ishii-san. He confessed to killing Hiyama Kenichirou.'

'Eh, ah, yes,' replied Ishii, though he sounded confused.

'Unfortunately, he didn't kill Hiyama Kenichirou,' declared Yakumo.

'What are you talking about?' interrupted Gotou, unable to bear it. However, Yakumo just raised a hand to quell Gotou and turned towards Hideaki again.

'He made a terrible mistake. That was the motive for murder that he gave Ishii-san.'

– Motive for murder?

Haruka hadn't heard that.

'What motive?' asked Haruka.

Yakumo looked at Ishii.

'Ishii-san, please explain.'

'Ah, yes. Hiyama Kenichirou-shi approached Hideaki-shi to try to use his ability to see spirits. Because Hideaki-shi refused, his sister was assaulted... is what he said.'

'That is a lie,' Yakumo said the moment Ishii finished his explanation.

'What do you mean, lie?' interrupted Miyagawa.

'He abducted me. He left me in Aokigahara's Sea of Trees to try to distance me from the case. Do you understand what that means?'

'Ah!'

Makoto was the one who spoke up first.

Everyone's gazes focussed on her. At Yakumo's nod, Makoto began her explanation.

'If he could see spirits, he couldn't have gone to Aokigahara's Sea of Trees and been fine.'

'I see...'

Haruka understood from that explanation.

If Hideaki could see the spirits of the dead, the moment he entered that forest, he would have been surrounded by countless spirits who had committed suicide, just as Yakumo had.

However, that didn't happen. Which meant that he couldn't see.

'I see. If he can't see spirits, there wouldn't be a motive for murder,' said Ishii.

Hideaki pushed Ishii with the face of a demon.

'That's not true! I killed him!'

'Don't make a fuss.'

Miyagawa tried to push Hideaki down, but Yakumo stopped him.

Yakumo slowly walked towards Hideaki.

'Listen. You didn't kill him. You have no reason to.'

'The reason doesn't matter! I killed him 'cause I didn't like him!'

Hideaki grabbed Yakumo by the collar.

However, Yakumo accepted that expressionlessly.

'You aren't so foolish that you would kill someone for a reason like that.'

'Don't decide that for me! What do you know? You just hid by yourself in your shell – what do you know?'

Haruka felt sad for some reason as she looked at Hideaki screaming.

Why was he going so far to claim he killed someone? What would that do for him?

The response to those questions came to Haruka surprisingly easily.

– He's trying to protect.

'It's true that I did not have any companions in high school, but still – no, because of that, I understand something.'

'What?'

'I always thought it strange. Why did you lie about being able to see?'

'Stop! Stop it! Please! Just say I killed him! Please! That's what happened! I'm begging you!'

Hideaki knelt, putting his forehead to the ground.

Yakumo's eyes seemed terribly sad as he looked down at him, but they were also kind.

'I can't do that,' Yakumo said quietly. Though the words seemed cold, Haruka didn't feel like they were. Yakumo's human warmth was there.

Hideaki looked up.

'If it's not him, who the hell killed Hiyama?' asked Gotou.

Yakumo slowly turned his gaze towards Gotou.

'Aoi Yuuka.'

The impact of those words made Haruka's head go blank.

– Why her?

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'Oi, Yakumo. What are you talking about?' said Gotou, raising his voice when he heard Yakumo speak the shocking name of the culprit.

It wasn't only Gotou who was surprised. Ishii had leapt back with an 'Ehh!?' Miyagawa's eyes were wide and he looked like he couldn't even speak.

Meanwhile, Hideaki's face was white as he looked at the floor.

'Though part of this is my theory, this is the truth.'

Yakumo paused and crouched in front of Hideaki, who had collapsed.

'When he returned home, the door was unlocked. Though he was suspicious, he entered the room and saw something unexpected. That was...'

'Stop!'

Hideaki grabbed Yakumo's arm.

Gotou could tell even from a distance that there was some force behind it, but Yakumo still continued.

'Hiyama Kenichirou-san, collapsed on the ground with a knife in his chest. And then his sister, Yuuka, collapsed, blood all over her head.'

'I said to stop!'

Hideaki thrust Yakumo away.

Yakumo fell on his behind, but he got up immediately and looked straight at Hideaki.

'I won't stop. This is what your sister wanted.'

'Stop joking away! Nobody would want this! That's just your ego speaking!'

'Perhaps...'

'Then why do you keep talking!?''

'Do you still not understand!?' yelled Yakumo at the top of his lungs.

It was the first time Gotou had seen Yakumo raise his voice like this.

Forced down by that explosion of emotions, Hideaki faltered for a moment, but he immediately gained a hold of himself and continued to bite at Yakumo.

'You're the one who doesn't understand, Saitou.'

'Listen. At this rate, your sister will die.'

Hideaki stopped at Yakumo's words.

– Die.

'What are you talking about?' interrupted Gotou, unable to bare it.

'She won't open her eyes in hospital. The doctors say she has recovered. Then why won't she wake up?'

– Why not?

'Could her spirit have left her body...'

Haruka was the one who responded to Yakumo's question. Her hands were clasped in front of her chest. She appeared to be shaking.

Yakumo nodded.

'She is trying to stop her brother – you. Those emotions have taken her soul out of her body. As a result, she cannot wake up.'

'T-that's a lie...' said Hideaki with a gasp.

'It isn't a lie. It's your fault that she won't wake up.'

'I...'

Hideaki looked at his own hands as he trembled.

Nobody could say anything to the chain of unexpected facts. There was a long silence until Yakumo spoke again.

'Let us get back on topic. When he saw this situation, he determined that his sister, Yuuka, had killed the man. Then, he tried to take the blame for the crime.'

'B-but... rescue workers went to the scene,' said Ishii, touching his silver-framed glasses with his finger.

'Ishii-san, please recall what happened. The rescue workers didn't go to their home.'

'Ah, that's right. He drove his sister there in his car...'

Ishii clapped his hands together.

'Exactly. The corpse was left there. He returned to his flat and then wiped it down for fingerprints. After that, he deleted the data from the security cameras using the internet.'

'Wait a second. There was an investigation for robbery assault after, right? Wouldn't there be results from the blood?' asked Gotou.

Even if fingerprints had been wiped away, blood wouldn't go that easily. It should have been found.

'Hiyama-san's injury was only a stab to the heart. There wouldn't be much blood if the knife were left in.'

'I see...'

It was just as Yakumo said.

If you didn't take out the knife, blood didn't splatter. That was why there was no blood left behind.

'He took Hiyama Kenichirou-san's corpse out of the flat, put it in his car and drove it to Aokigahara's Sea of Trees. Then, he lit it to make it harder to determine the time of death.'

After hearing Yakumo's explanation, Gotou could see an image in his mind.

An image he had seen when Hiyama's spirit had possessed him. Somebody walking through the forest with heavy baggage. So that had been Hideaki.

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The truth Yakumo revealed was forceful.

All Ishii could do was listen in silence.

'Though the corpse had been taken care of, his sister was in hospital, injured. He had to think of a reason for that. Then...'

'He faked the robbery assault,' said Ishii in a hoarse voice.

That was probably why the victim report had come in the day after the incident. However, there was something Ishii didn't understand.

'Excuse me... How about Imoto-shi, who committed suicide?' asked Ishii, raising his hand.

'If the corpse hadn't been found, he would have left things as is. However, the young man and

woman who went exploring in Aokigahara's Sea of Trees found the corpse. That meant there was a possibility it would trace back to him. There, he tried to make it into two separate cases.'

'Separate cases?'

Ishii cocked his head.

'To put it simply, it made it necessary to solve his sister's case.'

'I see.'

If the corpse was found and the investigation continued, Yuuka could be suspected. That meant that her case had to be solved.

'There he advanced the plan that he had prepared ahead of time.'

'The murder of Imoto-shi, whom he made to look like the perpetrator.'

'No, that isn't correct.'

Yakumo immediately rejected Ishii's opinion.

'Eh?'

'Imoto-san had planned on committing suicide from the start. He had accessed a site frequented by people with suicidal tendencies.'

'Yes.'

After responding, Ishii realised what Yakumo was trying to say.

'He accessed the site as well, chose an appropriate target and contacted him.'

'And that target was Imoto-shi...'

'Correct. He had been a believer of Jikoukoushinkai in the past and had a loan. Nobody would be a better candidate to blame for a robbery assault.'

'B-but he had life insurance...'

That was what Ishii had been troubled by.

– Why did somebody planning on committing suicide get life insurance?

'In order to make it seem like a robbery assault, there had to be evidence of it. In order for that, he needed Imoto-san's cooperation.'

'The wallet left in the room.'

'Correct. He had one requirement. He wanted him to keep proof that it was a robbery assault. In exchange, he said he would make it seem like a murder...'

'Imoto-shi believed that and committed suicide...'

After Ishii said that, Yakumo looked solemn.

Ishii understood why. Imoto had had a heavy loan and separated from his wife and child – he had been in despair.

At the end, Imoto had tried to leave behind insurance money as atonement for everything up until now.

However, that promise had not been fulfilled. How did he feel right now? And Hideaki –

Ishii looked towards Hideaki.

He seemed to have lost the will to stand. He just lay on the floor with his head hung.

'Afterwards, he made up the story about being able to see ghosts and led Ishii-san to where Imoto-san had committed suicide.'

'So we were completely used...!' said Miyagawa with a pained expression.

Ishii felt the same way. To be honest, he had completely believed that Hideaki could see ghosts.

If he had been more suspicious, he might have noticed at an earlier stage, but –

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Hideaki's shoulders slumped. He felt powerless.

He had had a bad feeling the moment he met Yakumo again. The feeling that he would reveal everything soon.

And that feeling had been correct –

'Why did he lie about being able to see ghosts?' asked Gotou from beside Yakumo.

'I had wondered the same thing in high school.'

Yakumo's response surprised Hideaki.

'You knew I couldn't see...?'

'I did,' responded Yakumo expressionlessly.

Yakumo's words had a strong impact on Hideaki.

'To be honest, I hated you. I wondered how you could lie so calmly even though you couldn't see...'

'I...'

Hideaki gripped his fists tightly.

It wasn't like he had lied because he wanted to. He had had a reason.

'But I realised during this case. The real reason that you claimed to be able to see ghosts...'

'W-what?'

Hideaki saw Yakumo's red left eye.

When he looked at that vivid colour, he felt like it saw right through to the bottom of his heart.

'I realized the reason you were lying after this incident occurred.'

'Saitou...'

'Your sister came to me for help. Why was that?'

'You...'

'She knew I could see. How did she know... It was because she herself had the ability to see,'
Yakumo said calmly.

Hideaki thought about objecting, but the words wouldn't come out of his mouth.

Just as he said, the one who could see ghosts was not Hideaki, but his younger sister, Yuuka. During high school, when Hideaki asked Yakumo, 'You can see them too, right?', that had been a request from Yuuka, who had wanted to confirm it.

'You wanted to protect your sister. That was why you said that you could see spirits.'

Yakumo's words were like an attack.

Tears spilled out of Hideaki's eyes. They wouldn't stop. Before he'd noticed, he was on the ground, sobbing.

He had first met Yuuka when he was in the first year of junior high. His father had remarried and Yuuka had been introduced to him as his father's wife's child.

Until then, Hideaki had not known a mother's love.

He had often doubted his reason for existing, thinking that he wasn't necessary to anyone.

However, after meeting Yuuka, he had been needed by somebody for the first time in his life. She had grown close to Hideaki immediately.

His life, which had been solitary up until then, quickly became full of energy.

For Hideaki, it had been a happiness he had never experienced.

He never wanted to lose the comfortable place he had found.

– I can see ghosts.

One day, Yuuka confessed to Hideaki.

She said that her friends had practically all left her because they thought it creepy. Hideaki vowed to protect Yuuka no matter what.

From the next day onwards, Hideaki began to declare in front of his friends that he could see ghosts.

He took the brunt of it himself so that others wouldn't find out about Yuuka's unique ability.

That was also why he said that being able to see was in his blood.

People knew that Hideaki and Yuuka were stepsiblings. By saying that, he was indirectly claiming that Yuuka did not have that ability.

Perhaps he had been trying to understand Yuuka's suffering by undergoing the discrimination she had.

And then, four years ago, after their parents died, Hideaki reached a decision.

– I'll at least protect Yuuka.

He didn't want to lose anything else. That was why –

'Stand.'

Yakumo held a hand out towards Hideaki.

His face still covered in tears, Hideaki looked at Yakumo.

'Your mistake was your inability to believe in your sister.'

'In my sister?'

Hideaki's eyes went wide.

He didn't understand what Yakumo was trying to say.

'What you did threw the case off track.'

'W-what are you talking about?'

'Don't get it wrong. I didn't come here to trap you. I came here to save you. So believe in me. There is still something you should say.'

Hideaki didn't know that Yakumo was the sort of person who could speak with such fervour.

Though Hideaki was hesitant, he took Yakumo's hand.

It felt like Yakumo's warmth was coming through to him via his palm, which gripped his so tightly.

'Now, the real performance begins.'

Yakumo smirked as Hideaki stood up.

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– Now, the real performance begins?

'What do you mean?' pressed Gotou, unable to stop himself. It made it sound like everything until now had been a side show.

Yakumo ran a hand through his hair, seeming annoyed.

'Exactly what I said.'

'What?'

'I'll explain now, so please stop making a fuss.'

Yakumo stuck his fingers in his ears.

Gotou bit his lower lip. Yakumo annoyed him, but all Gotou could do was deal with it.

'Now, let us begin her exorcism.'

Yakumo moved to stand in front of Minegishi Kyouka, who sat in a wheelchair.

Kyouka's body slowly shook, as if in response to Yakumo, and she let out a low moan.

'I will say this first. The spirit possessing her is Hiyama Kenichirou-san.'

'W-what?' said Gotou unconsciously.

Hiyama's ghost had been possession Gotou. Why was he possessing Kyouka now?

'When I brought you here before, Gotou-san, Kyouka-san performed an exorcism,' explained Yakumo.

Gotou couldn't remember it, but he'd heard.

'So you're saying that Minegishi Kyouka screwed up the exorcism and got possessed herself?'

'Not exactly.'

'What?'

'Minegishi Kyouka-san cannot perform exorcisms.'

'But Gotou-san had been...' said Haruka, leaning forward.

'Unfortunately, that was just your wrong impression. By bringing Gotou-san here when he was possessed by Hiyama-san's spirit, Hiyama-san met with Kyouka-san again. Hiyama-san's spirit took that chance to leave Gotou-san's body. Why?'

There was no response to Yakumo's question. Everyone kept their mouths shut.

Gotou thought about it, but he came up with nothing.

'Then let me change the question. Gotou-san.'

'Wha?'

'When you were possessed, you felt Hiyama-san's thoughts, correct?'

'Ah...'

Just as Yakumo said, Gotou had sometimes seen a few images vaguely.

'What did he say?'

'Sorry... That's what he said.'

'That was meant for the Aoi siblings.'

'W-what?'

'Furthermore, there was more to the words "You did".'

'More?'

'He had been trying to say, "You didn't kill me."'

Now that Yakumo said it, Gotou felt he was right.

He had stopped listening when he realised that the phone call was from a ghost.

'Now it is your turn to talk.'

Yakumo looked towards Hideaki.

'Me?'

'Yes. You knew Hiyama-san from before, didn't you?'

Hideaki didn't reply. However, Yakumo didn't press him further.

Yakumo probably already knew the answer.

'What are you talking about?' Gotou asked.

'Hiyama Kenichirou-san was Aoi Yuuka's real father.'

'What?'

'Hideaki and Yuuka aren't real siblings. Hideaki's father and Yuuka's mother both came into the marriage with children from their previous marriages.'

'B-but Hiyama-shi wasn't married either, so he couldn't have had children....' interrupted Ishii.

For some reason, it looked like he wanted to cry.

'Yuuka's mother gave birth out of wedlock.'

So her dad had been Hiyama Kenichirou. But –

'Why do you know that?' asked Gotou.

'There was an album in the old Jikoukoushinkai base.'

Yakumo had been looking at an album attentively then.

'What was in it?'

'Old photographs.'

After saying that, Yakumo handed Gotou a photograph.

It was old. It was a photo of Hiyama Kenichirou when he was young with another woman.

'This woman...'

'I thought that this was Yuuka's mother and had Eishin-san gather information for me.'

– Ah, I see.

Gotou understood then. Actually, he had been the one who told Eishin to do that.

He hadn't understood just from hearing the name. So that was what it meant.

'Why didn't Hiyama marry even though they had a kid?'

Gotou didn't understand.

He wouldn't have felt any disgust for that in the past, but it was different now that he was a parent. Why had Hiyama abandoned the woman who gave birth to his child –

'He hadn't known that she had given birth.'

The person who showed the most surprise at Yakumo's words was Hideaki.

'Didn't know?'

Hideaki looked pleadingly at Yakumo.

'Hiyama-san had the ability to see the spirits of the dead – that is, ghosts.'

'W-what?'

'So that really was the case,' said Makoto, in contrast to Gotou's surprise.

'How do you know that?' asked Gotou.

Makoto seemed hesitant, but she began her explanation.

'When Jikoukoushinkai was based in Yamanashi, Hiyama-san had been the one working as a spiritual consultant. But when they became a religious group...'

'They switched?' said Gotou. He understood now.

But he didn't understand why they'd needed to switch. Yakumo added to the explanation as if he had read Gotou's mind.

'Hiyama-san didn't approve of switching Jikoukoushinkai into a religious group. That wasn't all – he had left...'

'But his name is in the registry...' interrupted Ishii.

'That was probably because of her lingering affection,' said Yakumo, gesturing at Minegishi Kyouka.

– Lingering affection.

In short, Hiyama and Kyouka's relationship had been that of a man and a woman.

'So Hiyama abandoned Yuuka's mother because he got Kyouka, a new woman?'

'That's incorrect.'

Yakumo immediately rejected Gotou's words.

Gotou didn't get it any more.

'Then why?'

'Though part of this is theory, I think that Hiyama-san loathed his ability. He knew that it was something he had received from his parents. Then, he heard from Yuuka's mother, his lover at the time, that she was pregnant...'

Yakumo bit his lip.

It probably reminded him of his own situation. Yakumo's mother must have had the same conflict.

'So he tried to get her to have an abortion.'

'Yes. However, Yuuka's mother lied about getting an abortion and gave birth to her child. After that, she left Hiyama-san.'

– What the hell?

It was too much for Gotou. He understood why Hiyama would hate his own genes. He also understood why Yuuka's mother would want to give birth to her own child.

They had each had their own conflict and come to their own conclusion.

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– So that's how it was.

Ishii continued to be surprised by the chain of facts.

Yakumo slowly turned his gaze towards Ishii.

'Let us talk about Jikoukoushinkai once more.'

Here, Yakumo took a deep breath and left a pause before continuing.

'Minegishi Kyouka-san continued to try to convince Hiyama-san to return, but he did not respond. He continued trying to research the existence of souls. He didn't want the ability that he had suffered for to be used for that purpose.'

Though Yakumo was speaking disinterestedly, his expression twisted for just a moment.

If Yakumo felt like it, he could probably make a lot of money by starting a religion.

However, he didn't do that. He probably didn't want to use his ability for money, just as Hiyama hadn't.

However, from Kyouka's perspective, it had been a matter of life or death.

She had started a religious group, but she had no ability. If she didn't get Hiyama back somehow, the future would be troubling.

'Then, Minegishi Kyouka-san found out about Hiyama-san's daughter.'

'Yuuka-san.'

Yakumo had said that she could see the spirits of the dead – that is, ghosts.

She had inherited her father's ability.

'Correct. Minegishi Kyouka-san contacted Hiyama-san's daughter and tried to get her to join the religious group. However, Hiyama-san didn't forgive that.'

'Could it be...'

Hideaki lifted his head, like he had sensed something.

'That's why I said to believe.'

Yakumo's eyes narrowed. It seemed like the answer had already revealed itself to the two of them.

However, Ishii didn't understand.

'W-what happened?'

'One day, Minegishi Kyouka-san visited Yuuka's house. She was going to get her to join Jikoukoushinkai even if she had to use force.'

'There'd be no point forcing her to join, right?' said Gotou. Ishii agreed with that opinion.

Forcing somebody to do something they didn't want to do would lead to failure.

'Let me put it differently. She used her as a hostage to negotiate with Hiyama-san.'

'I see.'

Ishii understood now.

She had tried to use Hiyama's daughter as a hostage to get Hiyama to join her again.

'However, Hiyama-san could not forgive that. That situation led the three of them to gather in Yuuka's room...'

'M-Minegishi Kyouka-shi was in that room too?'

In shock, Ishii looked towards Kyouka, who sat in the wheelchair with her head hung.

Perhaps Kyouka was responding to Ishii, as she slowly lifted her head. When Ishii saw that pale face, he wanted to shriek.

Yakumo didn't hesitate. He crouched in front of Kyouka and met her eyes.

'Kyouka-san and Hiyama-san got into an argument. Yuuka tried to stop them and was thrust away. She hit her head and fainted...'

'Eh?'

Hideaki's body was trembling –

'Then, Hiyama-san was furious. Kyouka-san, in her fear, picked up a knife from the kitchen and

thrust the blade into his chest... and then she escaped from the scene. Then, you returned.'

Yakumo gave Hideaki a sharp look.

What came next was probably as Yakumo had explained earlier.

Hideaki had seen Hiyama dead with the kitchen knife in his chest, and Hideaki had mistakenly thought that his sister had killed him.

Then, he had forged evidence to protect his sister and made the case more complicated.

'I-I...'

Hideaki was shaking violently.

Yakumo slowly stood up and faced Hideaki. However, Hideaki didn't have the means or strength to oppose Yakumo.

'I said it earlier. Your mistake was your inability to believe in your sister.'

Ishii thought Yakumo was absolutely right.

Hideaki should have believed in Yuuka and just called for an ambulance and the police.

Kyouka's fingerprints would have been found in the room and on the knife, and the police would probably have been able to make a case against her.

However, Ishii couldn't blame Hideaki for his actions.

The reason was that his actions had come from love. He hadn't been trying to hurt anyone.

That wasn't all. He had sacrificed his own life to try to cover up Yuuka's crime.

'You've never thought of Yuuka as your sister.'

Yakumo's words made Hideaki's breathing ragged.

'N-no... I...'

'Don't hide it any longer. You love Yuuka. Of course, this is not as a sister, but as a woman. That's why you've done this much.'

'I...'

'She's noticed your feelings as well. That's why you can stop hiding it already.'

Yakumo placed a hand on Hideaki's shoulder.

That moment, Hideaki collapsed, as if all the strength had been stolen from his body, and started sobbing loudly.

His sobs, which sounded like cries, echoed throughout –

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– I came to save you.

Now, as Haruka looked at Hideaki, who was crying on the ground, he understood what Yakumo had meant by his words.

Even as Yakumo saw through the case, he had been trying to save Hideaki.

If Hideaki had expressed how he felt, perhaps he would have made a different choice.

Not only had he kept his feelings to himself, he hadn't been able to believe in Yuuka.

It wasn't just him. His father Hiyama, Yuuka's mother and Kyouka had been the same. If they had properly expressed their feelings, this sad incident wouldn't have occurred.

Haruka looked at Yakumo.

She replaced Hideaki's feelings with her own. If she didn't express her feelings, she might lose her ability to believe in Yakumo one day. That was why –

Haruka came to a decision.

'It's your turn,' said Yakumo. He looked at Kyouka in her wheelchair. His gaze was kind, as if he was pitying her.

In response, Kyouka let out a low moan.

'It has ended. There is no longer a reason for you to wander,' Yakumo said, placing a hand on Kyouka's shoulder. Then, for just a moment, Kyouka smiled. Then, she fainted.

Yakumo's eyes narrowed as he looked up at the ceiling, as if watching something.

'He left.'

Quietly, Yakumo declared that the incident was over.

Everyone there was relieved. It had been a painful and depressing case, but now everything was over.

However, for some reason, Yakumo's expression stiffened again.

'You're still here though.'

After saying that, Yakumo looked at the woman in a mountain priest's outfit, who had shown them in.

The woman smirked for just a moment in response.

'Whatever do you mean?'

The woman cocked her head.

'I mean exactly what I said. Let's end this lacklustre performance already, Nanase Miyuki-san.'

'Eh?'

The unexpected name that left Yakumo's lips gave everyone a chill.

They all looked towards the woman, but she didn't bear the slightest resemblance.

'Oi, Yakumo, what are you talking about?' yelled Gotou.

'I mean exactly what I said. She is Nanase Miyuki-san.'

'B-but her face...'

'It's a silicone mask. Though they are not common in Japan, you can have masks that look exactly like the person you want made to order overseas.'

'B-but...'

Wouldn't they have noticed if there was a mask?

'There have been cases in America where the police did not realise that the suspect was wearing a mask and arrested the wrong person. However, the mask has a weak point. It is expressionless.'

'Come to think of it...'

It had been the same when they met her earlier. This woman was shockingly expressionless. So that was the reason?

'Furthermore, she cannot hide that hand.'

Yakumo gestured at the woman's left hand. Now that Haruka took a closer look, she noticed that it was artificial. She hadn't looked that far.

Haruka recalled the last case. Nanase Miyuki had lost her left hand from the wrist up.

'You really are an annoying child.'

The woman's tone changed. No, not just her tone. Her voice had changed greatly as well.

Haruka had heard that voice before. It was definitely Nanase Miyuki.

Miyuki tried to escape, but Gotou moved more quickly. He tackled her to the ground.

'You think we'd let you get away!?'

Gotou sat atop her back and pulled her right arm behind her. Then, he ripped the silicone mask off her face.

Underneath it was Nanase Miyuki's face. The genuine article.

'You have to treat ladies more kindly.'

Nanase Miyuki had a fearless smile even in this situation.

'You're not even human!'

Gotou had no mercy.

'W-why is she...'

Ishii spoke up hesitantly.

Makoto was the one who responded.

'Jikoukoushinkai became a religious group two years ago. She was the one who orchestratedated that.'

'Correct,' responded Yakumo.

So she really was involved – the moment Haruka understood, she felt a sense of terror.

'So the religion was their front,' Gotou said bitterly.

'Furthermore, Hiyama-san had also been a candidate to be the vessel of the man with two red eyes,' Yakumo said coolly.

The goal of the man with two red eyes had become apparent during Isshin's case. He was searching for a new body, now that he was dead.

He had probably focussed on Jikoukoushinkai because Hiyama could see ghosts.

'That man was no good at all,' Miyuki said calmly, not shaken by the situation at all.

– There's something she's not telling us.

Haruka felt that. She could tell from what she'd experienced up until now. Miyuki was the type that flared up when things didn't go her way.

For her to be acting so calmly, something was definitely strange.

The moment Haruka realized that, the homa-mandala in the middle of the room was lit up with fire.

Sparks flew, lighting the shimenawa.

'I fiddled a bit with the homa-mandala. If you don't leave now, everyone will burn to death.'

Miyuki giggled shrilly.

Ishii and Miyagawa tried to put out the fire, but it was no use. In no time, the fire crawled across the floor and enveloped the room.

'Everyone, run!' yelled Gotou. However, that moment, he loosened his hold on Miyuki, just a little.

Miyuki didn't let the chance escape her.

She slipped out from under Gotou and pulled out a knife swiftly.

She smiled, looking extremely amused.

'You'll die too.'

Yakumo glared at Miyuki. However, she continued to smile regardless.

'Don't think you can get away with all of us here.'

Gotou got up immediately and went towards Miyuki.

It was true that it would be easy to subdue Miyuki with so many people.

'True. With all of you here, it is pretty tough. Maybe I'll cut down the number.'

'W-what?' said Gotou.

Miyuki slowly looked at all of them and then looked straight at Ishii.

'You first, Ishii-san.'

'Eh?' said Ishii in confusion.

'Freeze,' said Nanase Miyuki. Ishii's eyes went wide in shock as his body froze.

Haruka couldn't understand what had happened.

'Ishii-san, did you forget? I hypnotised you. Unfortunately, you won't be able to move any more.'

Miyuki smiled.

Those words made Haruka remember. In the past, Yakumo had said it was likely that Ishii was still under hypnotic suggestion from Nanase Miyuki.

'Damn...'

Yakumo's expression twisted.

Miyuki walked towards Ishii with her knife.

Ishii couldn't move. Fear made his face twitch.

Yakumo and Gotou ran to try to stop Miyuki, but they didn't make it in time. Haruka shut her eyes unconsciously.

A moment of silence –

When Haruka opened her eyes again, she saw something unbelievable.

Makoto stood in front of Ishii to protect him. Miyuki had stabbed her knife into Makoto's stomach.

'M-Makoto-san!'

When Haruka yelled, Makoto collapsed to the floor.

Red blood spilled onto the ground.

'I won't forgive you!'

Yakumo flew at Miyuki. Perhaps he had become emotional – that was far too careless.

'No!' screamed Haruka, but it was too late.

Miyuki turned the knife towards him.

'Aaagh!' shouted Yakumo as he fell backwards.

'Yakumo-kun!'

Haruka ran towards Yakumo.

As he lay on the ground, Yakumo had both hands on his left eye. Blood was flowing out between

his fingers.

Could his left eye –

'Haruka-chan! Get Yakumo out now! Miyagawa-san, take care of Ishii!'

Gotou gave directions to the rest of them, who were stunned, and picked up Makoto himself.

Smoke filled the room. Haruka could barely see.

She couldn't see Nanase Miyuki.

In the confusion, Haruka tried to get Yakumo up, but it wasn't going well. At this rate, everyone was going to die.

Haruka was filled with an emotion close to despair.

'I'll carry Saitou. You get her.'

Hideaki looked at Kyouka and then carried Yakumo like he was lending him a shoulder.

'Thank you.'

Haruka left Yakumo to Hideaki and pushed Kyouka in her wheelchair.

She was frantic.

After rushing out of Jikoukoushinkai, she turned around and found it red with flames.

– Yakumo-kun?

She looked around and found Yakumo leaning against Hideaki.

His left eye was dyed red with blood.

その後

epilogue

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Ishii silently looked at Makoto, who lay on the bed.

Makoto had been brought to the hospital by ambulance immediately after that. Her life have been saved by the surgery, but she hadn't woken up.

– It's my fault.

He should have been the one on that bed, but Makoto had used her own body to protect him.

He was always like this. People always protected him. He couldn't even save a single person.

Something hot welled up within Ishii.

It was anger.

– Unforgivable.

He couldn't forgive Nanase Miyuki, who had stabbed Makoto, but more than anything, he couldn't forgive his powerless self.

'Ishii-san...'

He heard a voice. Makoto's voice.

When he looked at her, he saw that she had her eyes open, though only slightly.

'M-Makoto-san,' said Ishii, in surprise and relief.

'Thank goodness... Ishii-san, you're all right,' said Makoto weakly.

Something hot stabbed Ishii in the chest.

– Why?

Makoto had suffered so much, but the first thing out of her mouth was concern for Ishii. Ishii didn't understand why.

All he understood was that there were tears coming out of his eyes.

'Why... are you crying?'

Makoto smiled, though it looked like she was in pain.

'I don't know.'

Ishii shook his head.

Perhaps it was inappropriate, but he was just so happy. He was so happy that he could speak with Makoto like this again.

Ishii sniffled and wiped his tears with his sleeve.

'Ishii-san... are you all right?'

Makoto gripped Ishii's hand. There wasn't much strength behind it. He just felt her warmth enveloping him. His heart was melting –

'Makoto-san, why did you save me?'

When Ishii asked that, Makoto's eyes narrowed. It looked like she felt awkward.

'I wonder why. I don't know... Before I'd noticed, I was standing there...'

'Please stop it.'

'Eh?'

'Next time, Makoto-san, I'll save you. So please stop doing that sort of thing. I'd rather die than lose you.'

Ishii himself was surprised by the words that came out of his mouth.

He had spoken without thinking, but at the same time, he knew that those were his true feelings. That was what Makoto meant to Ishii.

Ishii looked straight at Makoto, which made her hide her face with the blanket.

'Please don't look at me like that.'

'Eh?'

'It's a bit embarrassing.'

'Ah, er, um, I'm sorry.'

Ishii hurriedly bowed his head.

Ishii was the one who felt embarrassed now. He was about to leave the room, but Makoto grabbed his hand.

'Could you stay just a bit longer?' asked Makoto, her face red.

* * *

Gotou was sitting on the bench in the waiting room when Miyagawa walked over, grumbling, 'Damn, what a mess...'

He looked exhausted – like he had aged ten years.

'It really is,' responded Gotou with a bitter smile.

'How's that newspaper reporter, Hijikata?' said Miyagawa, sitting next to Gotou.

'The injury was shallower than expected, so her life isn't in danger. Ishii is with her now.'

'Oh? That's great.'

Miyagawa sighed in relief.

Gotou felt the same way. He had been worried for a while. He wouldn't have been able to sleep at

night if somebody became a victim in front of his eyes. And –

'How's that brat?' asked Miyagawa, interrupting Gotou's thoughts.

He was probably talking about Yakumo.

'Yakumo's life isn't in danger either.'

'That's great.'

'But the place where he was cut...'

'His red left eye...'

'Yes.'

Nanase Miyuki had cut Yakumo's left eye. They were waiting for the results, but the worst-case scenario was that he might lose his sight in that eye.

If that happened, how would Yakumo accept it?

Gotou thought about it, but he couldn't imagine.

'So how's the case?' asked Gotou. There was no point thinking about what he didn't know.

'The founder woke up. She's being interrogated now.'

'Is that so...'

'Seems she's confessed to killing Hiyama Kenichirou.'

'That's great.'

'Yeah.'

Had she realised she couldn't run any more, or had she felt regret when Hiyama Kenichirou possessed her – in either case, it seemed like the case would be solved.

'So how about that brat, Hideaki?'

'Probably going to be arrested soon for tampering with a corpse and instigating a suicide.'

Miyagawa's explanation seemed a bit careless.

Hideaki hadn't been trying to hurt anybody. He had just wanted to protect his sister, Yuuka. But that didn't mean what he had done was forgivable.

'One silver lining though. Seems his sister's woken up.'

For just a moment, Miyagawa's expression softened.

'Really?'

'Yeah. Seems her condition's stable.'

Just as Miyagawa, perhaps that was the one silver lining.

Yakumo had said that Yuuka wouldn't wake up because she was trying to stop her brother, Hideaki, and had left her body to wander.

Now that the case was solved, her spirit had probably returned to her body.

However, the problem was what came next. Even though she had been living properly, she had been wrapped up in an unbelievable case.

She would have to live while facing reality.

'The root of this awfulness was that woman.'

– That woman. Nanase Miyuki.

Nanase Miyuki had used the founder, Minegishi Kyouka, and changed Jikoukoushinkai into a religious group.

Without her, the incident might not have occurred. And Yakumo and Makoto wouldn't have ended up like this.

A fierce anger boiled up within Gotou –

'Right now, we're searching for Nanase Miyuki with all our resources, but...'

Miyagawa stopped in the middle and looked up at the ceiling quietly.

We can't catch Nanase Miyuki – that was probably what he was thinking. Gotou felt the same way.

Nanase Miyuki had slipped out of countless police nets. She wouldn't be caught so easily. She would definitely show up again though.

– I'll definitely catch her next time.

A strong resolve took root within Gotou.

* * *

Haruka timidly opened the hospital door.

Yakumo lay on the bed inside the quiet hospital room.

His left eye, which had been cut by Nanase Miyuki, was bandaged. The bandage was a bit wet with blood. It looked like it hurt.

Haruka had thought that he was sleeping, but Yakumo opened his right eye and stared up at the ceiling blankly.

'Yakumo-kun...'

She called out to him.

Without moving, Yakumo murmured, 'You...'

His voice was incredibly weak.

'How's your injury?' asked Haruka as she walked up to the bed.

If it was only the eyelid that had been cut, the injury would probably heal quickly, but if the eyeball had been injured, he might lose his sight in that eye.

Yakumo slowly sat up, pressing his left eye through the bandage.

'It's mysterious...'

'Eh?'

'I hated this left eye. Why could only I see the spirits of the dead... If all I could do was see, it would be better not to. I had thought that...'

'Yes.'

Haruka nodded.

Isshin had told Haruka in the past about an episode when Yakumo had tried to injure his red left eye himself.

He had despised his ability that much.

'And yet now it would irritate me not to see... even though I hated it so much...'

Yakumo smiled awkwardly.

Haruka understood his feelings painfully. She didn't know Yakumo in the past, but the current Yakumo believed that his red left eye with the ability to see the spirits of the dead could save people, and he was trying to accept it.

And then it had been injured. His heart must have been filled with terrible conflict.

'Yakumo-kun...'

'To be honest, I'm afraid. If I can't see any more...'

Yakumo looked up at the ceiling.

His narrowed right eye seemed a little wet.

'It's fine. You don't have to be afraid.'

Haruka enveloped Yakumo's hand with her own.

An exasperated smile appeared on Yakumo's face.

'You're optimistic.'

'Is that praise?'

'Why would I have to praise you?'

'Honestly!'

Haruka pretended to be angry, but she was a bit relieved.

The usual Yakumo had returned.

She didn't know what was waiting for them, but she swore in her heart to be by Yakumo's side no matter what happened.

-

At that time, Haruka had no reason to suspect that the next case had already begun –

本作はフィクションであり、書中の人物、団体等とは一切関係ありません。

afterword

-

Thank you for reading *Psychic Detective Yakumo 9 – The Spirit of Salvation*.

I only managed to write this far because of everyone's support. I will borrow this space to express my thanks.

-

Now, it has been two and a half years since the last addition to the Yakumo series.

Actually, the one who was the most surprised was myself.

It isn't as if I was silent for these past two and a half years. I wrote the script for the stage version of *Psychic Detective Yakumo* and had *Psychic Detective Yakumo – The Tree of Deceit* serialised in the newspaper. I did revisions for paperback versions too. I was always writing Yakumo.

And so, though there has been a gap of two and a half years, it didn't feel like I was writing Yakumo again after a long time. I was able to immerse into the world easily.

-

This time, there are a number of changes in the characters, starting with Yakumo. What ending welcomes them? To be honest, I don't know myself.

I would be happy if you could accompany them to the end, along with me.

-

What fate awaits them?

-

Wait! And look forward to it!

PS:

A story from Yakumo's high school days comes up in this work.

I'd like to write a story about Yakumo in high school too if I can –

-

Heisei 24¹, winter – Kaminaga Manabu

1 Heisei 24 is 2012 in the Gregorian calendar.