Canine Detective Chris

Tomoko Tabe
Illustration by
KeG



2 The Shiba Inu Detective Investigates a Haunted Mansion!

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2

Tomoko Tabe

Illustration by **KeG**

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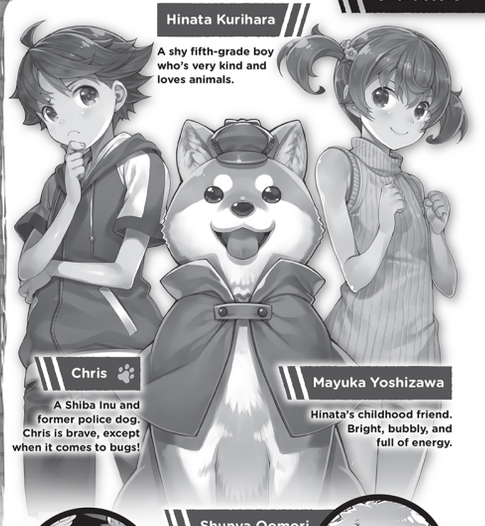
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Characters



Hinata Kurihara
A shy fifth-grade boy who's very kind and loves animals.

Chris
A Shiba Inu and former police dog. Chris is brave, except when it comes to bugs!

Mayuka Yoshizawa
Hinata's childhood friend. Bright, bubbly, and full of energy.



Officer Iwata
A policeman who works at the local police station.



Shunya Oomori
Hinata's grandfather, a dog trainer.



Suzune Kurihara
Hinata's mother, a veterinarian.

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Yuuma Terakawa
President of Soukei University's Media Studies Club.

Rui Takeuchi
Hinata's classmate.



Akane Kurosaki
Owner of Hammy the hamster.

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Yen Newsletter

Rumors of a Haunted Mansion



The days have sure gotten a lot shorter, Mayuka Yoshizawa thought as she stared into the sky.

Not long ago, it was still bright outside at six o'clock, but not anymore. It was deep into the fall season now. As she headed home from English tutoring, she clutched her lesson bag and picked up the pace.

"Better hurry on past!" she told herself. "The main street is just ahead, and that's where Officer Iwata's police station is."

If only she hadn't heard that story at school, she wouldn't have been scared of anything…

"Hey, have you heard about the haunted mansion behind Tenso Shrine?" another student from Class 5-1 asked during lunch break. "You know, that stylish, old-fashioned building. It's got vines running all over the walls, and there's a rooster decoration on the roof of the tower…"

"Yeah, I know the one! When the wind blows, the weather vane always makes a creaking sound like it's crying."

"My brother told me that, every now and then, you can hear ghosts moaning from inside."

Apparently, almost everyone knew this story. But as it happened, Mayuka passed by that building every time she went

to her English tutoring class, and she hadn't known anything about it.

"You know what I heard?" said the first kid, voice hushed. "That it's been abandoned for ages, but just in the last few months, the windows have started lighting up with a ghostly glow at night!"

The students all covered their mouths with their hands to keep from screaming.

"Someone was murdered there years ago, and their death day is just around the corner. Everyone says it's the dead person's ghost, creating balls of fire that float through the halls…"

Once again, the students all shrieked silently into their palms.

Mayuka blinked with surprise. "What's a death day?" she asked.

All her friends looked at her in exasperation. "What do you think, Mayuka? It's the anniversary of the day a person died. In other words, the day the murder took place!"

She was almost to the haunted mansion.

Mayuka squeezed her bag harder and tried to pass quickly without looking up at it, but some invisible, irresistible force made her stand still and raise her eyes toward the building.

Beyond the rusted metal gate and surrounded by large, lush trees loomed an old European-style mansion covered in vines. A faint breeze rustled through the leafy tendrils and made them appear alive.

The silhouette of the tower on the roof jutted into the navy-blue sky, and the beak of the rooster weather vane seemed to be pecking at a sliver of crescent moon.

Eeep!

Mayuka held her breath.

There was a white light hovering in one of the second-floor windows!

Her eyes locked onto it. She felt paralyzed.

The small light bobbed left and right. Then it stopped moving near the center of the window and started to grow larger.

Oh no, is it looking this way…?

Chills began to crawl up and down Mayuka's spine—and then a dark shadow suddenly writhed into the light!

“*Aaaaaah!!*” she shrieked, then she took off running for the main street, practically stumbling over her own feet.



The Girl in Black



As soon as Hinata got home from school, he ripped off his shoes in the entryway.

“Chris, I’m home!”

An energetic bark came from farther back in the house, and the moment Hinata opened the living room door, Chris came bounding toward him.

“Here I am, Chris. Let’s go for a walk.”

Hinata tossed his backpack onto the sofa and hugged Chris, rubbing the dog’s soft, fluffy back. Chris eagerly smushed his snout against Hinata’s face.

Chris was a Shiba Inu with a light-brown coat and a curly tail—and he was Hinata’s partner. The dog had only arrived four months ago, but he was already an irreplaceable member of the family.

“All right, time to walk. I’ll go get your leash and walking bag, so… *Stay!*”

Chris did as he was told and sat down on the floor, watching Hinata expectantly.

Good job, Chris! We really understand each other! Hinata thought. He was eager to take his dog on their daily walk. However…

“Hey, Hinata, are you listening to me?”

No sooner had he locked the door and reached the bottom of the stairs than he ran into Mayuka.

Mayuka was Hinata's longtime friend and classmate. Hinata tended to be shy and withdrawn, and Mayuka was one of the few friends with whom he felt like he could be himself.

However, she could be pushy at times. And at this particular moment, Hinata was fed up with it. He finished descending the last step and reached for the glass door on the left, which led into the Marron Veterinary Clinic.

"Hiiinaaataaa," Mayuka called out sulkily.

Hinata spun on his heel. "Yes, I heard you! It was the only thing you would talk about at school today!" He held up a finger. "Last night, you walked past the haunted mansion behind Tenso Shrine and saw a mysterious light in the window. And now you want to go back and check to see if it was really a ghost. But you're too scared to go alone, so you want me to help. Did I miss anything?"

Mayuka grinned and shook her head to indicate that he'd gotten it all.

Hinata continued, "Then I'm not going!"

"C'mon, Hinata… You're already taking Chris on a walk. It's just a little detour. Please!"

The white dots of Chris's eyebrows drew together in a look of consternation. He seemed to be saying "Please don't fight, you two…"

Hinata turned away from her in a huff and opened the glass door into his parents' veterinary clinic. The entrance had two sets of doors so that any pets brought in couldn't escape the lobby. Once the three of them were inside, the inner automatic doors opened up.

"Dad!" Hinata called out. Yuusuke, his father, was standing behind the reception counter. The fall afternoon's soft, welcoming light filled the lobby, making it feel warm and comfortable—*nothing* like a haunted mansion.

"I ran out of Chris's poop bags. Can I have some more?"

"Ah, of course. Is it walk time?"

Yuusuke was the clinic's nurse and groomer. He was in charge of trimming the pets' coats and helping to manage their health. He had been a rugby player back in college and was tall and well-built, but his mannerisms were always gentle and kind.

Mayuka put her hands on the counter and exclaimed, “Mr. Yuusuke, we’re going to see the haunted mansion at the end of our walk! I saw an eerie light when I passed by last night…”

“H-hey, I said I’m not going. Dad, the bags…?”

“But, Hinata! I won’t be able to sleep at night unless I know whether it was really a ghost! Please, won’t you come with me?”

Yuusuke chuckled as he handed his son a plastic bag. “Ha-ha-ha… Mayuka, I can’t tell if you’re actually scared or if you’re enjoying all this.”

“Of course I’m scared! It might be a real ghost,” she said, pouting. Hinata sighed.

“She’s definitely just having fun…,” he said.

“I agree,” said a new voice, startling Hinata and Mayuka. They spun around to see their classmate, Rui Takeuchi. He was sitting on the lobby sofa, holding a large brown striped cat on his lap. He pushed his glasses up and fixed his gaze on Hinata. “But you’re scared, aren’t you?”

Hinata blinked a few times in surprise before recovering. His face drifted down to the floor. “I—I don’t really like spooky stuff…”

Why does everyone like telling scary stories? I just don’t understand it. The only one who gets me is you, Chris…

He glanced over at the dog, who whined with apparent sympathy and wagged his tail.

Rui smirked. “I do. When I was little, my grandma would tell me scary stories at bedtime.”

Everyone knew what a grandma’s boy Rui was. His classmates would occasionally tease him for being old-fashioned. He didn’t seem to mind, though. He stroked his cat’s back and peered into his eyes. “Sometimes I wonder if Chachamaru’s tail will split in two, and he’ll turn into a *nekomata*.”

Just then, Chachamaru’s tail twitched, startling Hinata. Chris, too, watched the cat’s tail with interest.

Mayuka pointed an accusatory finger at Rui and said, “A two-tailed *nekomata* is just a cat monster—a Japanese *youkai*. I’m talking about ghosts.”

“Both *youkai* and ghosts are fantastical and mysterious, so I don’t really see the difference. Incidentally…”

Rui rummaged through his shoulder bag and pulled out two plastic capsules.

"…I'm collecting *youkai* figurines. You can have these, Hinata."

Hinata took the gift with hesitation. *What are these things…?* he wondered.

"You get these at random from capsule machines, so I have a lot of doubles. In fact, I have three of both of those, so don't feel bad; I really don't need them. They'll be good luck charms."

Hinata opened the capsules and took out the tiny figurines. One looked like a *koma-inu*, the lion dogs that stood guard outside of Shinto shrines. The other one seemed more like a bird. Both were very oddly shaped.

"This one is called Hakutaku, and the other one is Amabie. Both of these *youkai* have the power to repel evil. You should take them with you when you go to the haunted mansion."

"Th-thanks… They're very…cute…"

Hinata thanked Rui. He then put the figurines back into their capsules and stuck them into his pocket.

Rui beamed, pleased that his gift was appreciated.

The door to the examination room slid open, revealing a middle-aged woman with a corgi.

"Thank you so much, Doctor," she said.

"All right, Koko, you take care," called out another woman from over her shoulder. It was the presiding veterinarian of Marron Veterinary Clinic, Hinata's mother, Suzune.

Suzune had a short build and a friendly, round face. That and her straightforward manner and generous personality had helped her earn the trust of those around her. The clients and their pets all loved her.

If she had one flaw, however, it was her tendency to say whatever came to mind without stopping to think.

"And next is… Ah, Rui. What's wrong with Chachamaru today?"

"Thanks for all your help, Dr. Suzune. He's been having a lot of eye boogers the last few days. Do you think some germs got into his eyes?"

"All right, let me take a look at him. Come on in…"

Just as they disappeared into the examination room, the automatic doors of the entrance opened up. Hinata turned to

look, then exclaimed, “Grandpa!”

It was Shunya, his grandfather. Hinata loved and admired his grandpa. While the man’s hair was white, he always had a young and brisk manner about him.

“It’s good to see you again, Hinata. And you, Mayuka; you’re looking well.”

“Yes, sir!”

As Hinata’s longtime friend, Mayuka also knew Shunya.

Yuusuke finished checking out the corgi and its owner at the front desk, then waved at Shunya happily. “Good afternoon, Father. Suzu’s seeing a patient right now…”

“Oh, it’s fine, Yuusuke. I’m only here to see Hinata and Chris,” Shunya said, sitting on the sofa and beckoning Hinata and Mayuka over.

Hinata sat next to his grandfather and looked up at him. “It’s been a while, huh? Have you been busy?”

“Yes, with all sorts of things… Is Chris doing well, too?”

Chris barked once to confirm. Shunya bent over to rub his head, and he squinted happily.

“What kind of cases have been happening recently?” Mayuka asked, her eyes sparkling. Shunya put a hand to his chin and looked at the ceiling to think it over.

“Well, let’s see… I was at the scene of a break-in recently. The owner was out of the country on vacation and found out that a burglar had gotten inside. It’s been happening a lot these days. The police told me they’ve been on high alert.”

After Shunya reached retirement age and left his job, he took up privately training police dogs. He was currently raising three German shepherds and helping out with police investigations alongside them.

“And did they catch the bad guy?”

“Unfortunately, too much time had passed since the crime, and the scent trail had faded. But while we were investigating, the owner suddenly realized that their smartphone was no longer in their pocket. My dogs managed to find it, though. The owner had gotten home and found the place ransacked, then rushed to the nearest police station in such a panic that they dropped the phone along the way… So I guess that counts as helping, doesn’t it?”

Mayuka laughed out loud. “It’s too bad that you couldn’t catch the burglar. But at least the owner got their phone back.”

Chris lifted his head and woofed in agreement. As it happened, Chris was a very talented former police dog, raised by Shunya’s friend, a younger trainer named Kobayashi.

But there had been an accident on Chris’s very first investigation. Kobayashi stumbled across the culprits and was attacked—and had been missing ever since. Chris was also stung by a bee during the incident, and he was now terrified of bugs. It wasn’t just bees, either; Chris would yelp and run away from butterflies and even ants.

After losing Kobayashi and developing a fear of insects, Chris had no choice but to retire from the police force, and so Shunya had brought the dog to Hinata.

“I was getting a little worried, since I hadn’t stopped by to see you for a while,” said Shunya. “Nothing strange has happened?”

“Everything’s been fine,” Hinata reassured him. “Nothing has happened since that last case…”

A few months ago, Hinata, Mayuka, and Chris had faced off against a group of jewel thieves. They managed to help the police arrest the criminals, but in the process, they had worried everyone sick.

“That’s right. We’ve been behaving ourselves,” said Mayuka, though her eyes were wandering suspiciously.

Shunya laughed. “I have a hard time imagining you behaving yourself, Mayuka…”

“Heh-heh. Well, sometimes we do a little training, just in case.”

“M-Mayuka!” Hinata scolded, elbowing her. Shunya chuckled and shook his head.

But soon his face was serious again, and he leaned down to whisper in Hinata’s ear. “Listen closely, Hinata. Don’t forget that those people might still be targeting Chris.”

Chris was the only one who had witnessed what happened when Kobayashi went missing. There was a possibility that he had evidence of the crime, and so the criminals might be after him.

That was why, as Shunya had told Hinata before, it was best to keep Chris from standing out, to let him live the life of a normal pet.

Hinata nodded eagerly, then asked, “Grandpa…have you learned anything more about Mr. Kobayashi?”

Shunya’s expression clouded. “No, nothing yet… They still haven’t found any clues.”

Hinata was slightly relieved, then felt disgusted with himself for thinking that way.

Of course it would be best if Kobayashi was found safe and sound. But if that happened, wouldn’t Chris go back to living with him? That would be really painful. *I love Chris, and I can’t imagine my life without him. I wonder if that means I’m a bad, selfish person…*

Hinata reached down to pet Chris’s head, trying to ease his guilt. Chris looked up and barked happily.

Shunya seemed to sense what was going on in Hinata’s mind, and he gently patted his grandson’s shoulder.

“Just take care of Chris. Right now, you’re his number one partner, Hinata…”

The thought of his grandfather having so much faith in him made Hinata’s heart sing. Satisfied with the message he’d imparted, Shunya got to his feet.

“Aw! Are you leaving already, Mr. Shunya?” Mayuka exclaimed.

“I’m sorry, Mayuka. I only stopped by because I happened to be passing through. I’d like to spend more time here, but my dogs are waiting at home.”

“Oh, that’s right. Say hi to the shepherds for us,” Hinata offered, getting to his feet, too.

“Hello, Hinata’s grandfather,” said a voice from the chair across the room. “I’m Rui Takeuchi. Dr. Suzune’s been helping me with my cat.”

Rui bowed, then tried to lower Chachamaru’s head, too. Shunya returned the courtesy.

“Ah yes. We met here before, didn’t we? Thank you for helping Hinata and Chris, young man.”



“When did you come out of the exam room, Rui? I never noticed!” Mayuka exclaimed. “How are Chachamaru’s eyes?”

Rui smiled at her. “He just got dirt in them. The doctor gave him some eye drops.”

“Well, that’s good to hear!”

“I should get going now,” said Shunya. “See you, kids…”

“Visit again soon, Grandpa,” said Hinata, squeezing Shunya’s arm.

“Of course, of course. Take care, Chris!” he said, giving the dog one final pet. Then, after waving to everyone, he stepped out of the clinic.

“Your grandpa always seems so cool,” marveled Rui. “It must be the police-dog trainer in him.”

Behind the counter, Yuusuke crossed his arms. “That’s right. He doesn’t seem his age at all. Must be because he’s doing an important job that he’s passionate about. I should really take a page from his book…”

Just after Shunya left, a girl came in.

She was dressed all in black, with a frilly black hairband, a black dress, and thick-soled black shoes. The dress was lacy, had a wide ribbon tied around the waist, and featured a puffy skirt. The only accent was the color of her inward-curling bob haircut, which was bleached a light shade of brown.

Was she in high school? She looked like a princess from the underworld.

“S-so cute… ♡ ” Rui squeaked. His eyes were wide, and his cheeks were red.

The girl walked elegantly up to the counter, her dress swaying with the movement.

“Hello. I’ve never been here before. Do you think I could make an appointment?”

Yuusuke was taken aback, too. The girl had fine pale skin, peach-pink cheeks, small red lips, and big eyes rimmed by long lashes, which fluttered as she blinked.

“Um, Doctor?”

Yuusuke came back to his senses and pulled a form out from under the counter.

“Oh… I’m sorry. On their first visit, we ask every new client to fill out this form with vital information. And uh, what sort of pet…?”

“Hammy.” She lifted a small carrying case and set it down on the counter.

“Oh, a hamster. And what’s the matter with it?”

“Poor Hammy hasn’t been feeling well since this morning. Will you be able to take a look at him, Doctor?” she asked, staring holes into Hinata’s father with her large, dark eyes.

“W-well, I’m only the groomer. I just handle trimming and hygiene,” Yuusuke told her. “The doctor who examines the animals is…”

“Ahem!” Suzune peered around the side of the exam room door and cleared her throat. “That would be me. Just fill out the form for now and have a seat,” she said, then shut the door.

Oh, geez. Is Mom getting jealous? Hinata wondered.

The girl glanced over the form, then pressed her hand to her cheek and wondered aloud, “Um, where it says ‘Pet’s birthday’…”

Yuusuke peered at the paper. “Oh, do you not know it? I suppose you bought him at a pet shop. When was that…?”

While they talked it over, Mayuka sneakily pointed a finger at the counter and whispered, “I guess Rui Takeuchi likes girls like her. Even Mr. Yuusuke was admiring her for a second, wasn’t he? We were just talking about ghosts, and now it feels like we summoned a witch. Spooky!”

“Shh, Mayuka! She’ll hear you…”

Yuusuke entered Hammy’s information into the computer, then told the girl, “Go ahead and enter the examination room.”

She picked up the carrier, politely knocked on the door, then headed through.

“So cute,” Rui murmured again.

“Yes, very pretty. She’s like a porcelain doll,” Yuusuke agreed, tapping away at the keyboard.

“That’s what they call Gothic Lolita style,” Mayuka noted to herself. Hinata turned to her in wonder.

“Gothic Lolita?”

Chris copied Hinata, tilting his head to the side.

“When people wear those fancy black dresses with cute accessories, it’s called Gothic Lolita style. It’s a whole fashion

movement."

Hmm, really? Three boys and one dog looked at Mayuka with newfound admiration.

Just then, the door to the examination room opened, and the girl dressed in black emerged.

That was fast! everyone thought in unison.

She headed right for the reception counter, so Yuusuke quickly examined the computer record in front of him; Suzune had just typed it in from the other room.

"Let's see, this is for Hammy… Well, looks like everything is just fine. No medicine prescribed; that's good. Now I'll just calculate your exam fee…"

The girl cradled the pet carrier on the counter with both arms and batted her eyes. "It's my first time having a pet. So when he's not acting like his usual self, I get worried… Worried that I might not be taking good care of him."

Yuusuke pulled down a pamphlet from the shelf behind him and set it on the counter.

"If you're worried, take a look at this," he said. "It's all about how to take care of your hamster, with helpful illustrations. It's very straightforward. They're easy to care for in the first place, so there's no need to be nervous about it."

"May I have this? Thank you very much, sir."

"Oh, it's nothing… If you ever have any concerns, feel free to come back for another visit."

The girl bowed politely, put the pamphlet in her frilly black handbag, paid the exam fee, and left the lobby. Rui stood up with Chachamaru in his arms, following her path with his eyes through the window.

"Mmmm, so cute…," he murmured once again. His cheeks were still red.

Yuusuke, who was still typing away, nodded. "Yes, indeed. Very cute. The Gothic Lolita look suits her."

"…Yuusuke…," said a cold voice. Suzune was leaning against the door of the examination room and giving her husband a very piercing look. "I noticed you were being *extra* kind to her."

"Hmm?" He looked up from the computer, mystified. "Well, of course. Marron Veterinary Clinic's motto is 'Kind to animals, kind to owners,' after all…"

“But I don’t recall you acting that way with Koko’s owner. Do you?”

“What are you talking about? I’m always kind to all our clients. And since that girl was taking care of her first pet, she seemed extra anxious…”

“Are you sure you weren’t drooling over her? Plus, that hamster was perfectly fine. Why did she bring it to us?”

“No, I was not drooling. I said she was pretty, because she *was* pretty. She only came to the vet because she doesn’t have much experience and wanted guidance. Try to have some compassion.”

“It sounds like you had enough compassion for her for the both of us.”

“Suzu, can you just calm down—?”

“I’m always calm!”

Hinata listened to them argue as sweat rose on his forehead. This was bad—Mom was only going to get angrier if they didn’t stop soon. But how could he resolve the situation…?

Suddenly, Hinata bolted upright and called out, “T-t-time for a walk! We’re going to go out now!”

Chris stood up, too, and barked loudly. Instantly, the waiting room was quiet.

Then Rui spoke up. “So are you going to the haunted mansion?”

Hinata briefly froze.

Huh? What? Oh, right, I guess we were *talking about that…*

Mayuka got to her feet as well, balling her fists. “We are! Of course we’re going. Thanks for reminding us, Rui. I had nearly forgotten after all that.”

She tugged on Hinata’s arm, clearly agitated. Hinata could curse Rui for bringing it back up. *If only she’d forgotten about it… I won’t go. I don’t want to go!*

Suddenly, his father cried out, went around the reception counter, and crouched down in front of it.

“She forgot something,” he said, and picked up a black frilled handkerchief. It must have fallen out of her bag when she paid for the visit.

“I wonder if we can catch her in time. I’ll go check!” said Mayuka, rushing out of the building. She came back moments later and shook her head. “Nope. I don’t see her anywhere.”

Yuusuke examined her information sheet and dialed her number using his smartphone. “Let’s see… She’s not answering. And her address is… Well, it’s the next neighborhood over, but this doesn’t make sense. Suginami only has five blocks, but here it says she lives on the sixth…”

“She must have written it down wrong,” Rui said, pushing up his glasses. But Hinata wasn’t so sure about that. Would someone really get their own address wrong…?

Yuusuke took another look at the form and gaped. “It says she’s only fifteen! She seemed much older than that. I guess she’s in her first year of high school, then.”

Suzune gave him a sidelong look and snorted. “Just keep the handkerchief behind the desk. After all, a very nice groomer told her to come back anytime, so I’m sure we’ll see her again before long.”

Yuusuke opened his mouth to argue back, but Mayuka interjected, “Oh, I know! I’ve got an idea.”

“Wh-what is it?” Hinata asked warily. Mayuka’s spur-of-the-moment notions were never good. She put her hands on her hips and grinned confidently.

“We’ll have Chris search for her.”

The dog looked up and barked curiously. Normally, Hinata would be opposed, especially after his grandpa had just told them not to do anything that would stand out. But at the moment, he was all for it. Anything to keep them away from the haunted mansion.

“Y-yeah, let’s do that! Chris will be able to track down the handkerchief’s owner. H-hey, Dad, what was her name?”

Yuusuke checked the form once more. “Uh, it’s Akane. Akane Kurosaki.”

Hinata took the handkerchief from his father and held it up to Chris’s snout.

“Time to investigate, Chris. We need you to search for Akane, the owner of this handkerchief. Smell!”

The others watched with bated breath as Chris sniffed the piece of cloth. After several seconds of careful concentration, the Shiba Inu looked up at Hinata, indicating that he was ready.

“Okay, search!”

On Hinata’s signal, Chris put his nose to the floor and started walking toward the automated door leading outside.

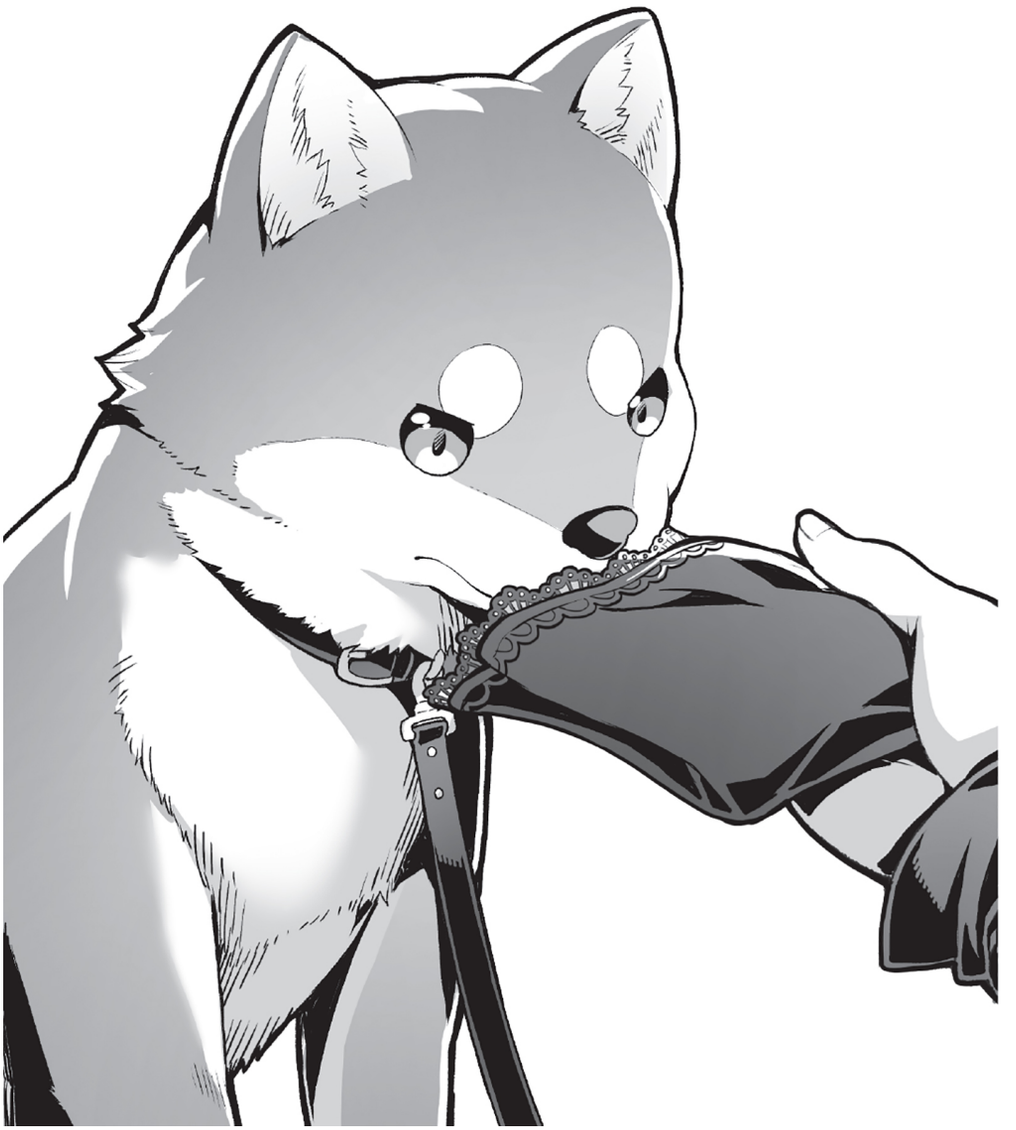
“Very impressive,” Suzune murmured. Hinata squeezed Chris’s leash and headed for the exit.

“Isn’t it? Chris is amazing,” said Mayuka proudly, turning to follow. “Well, we’ll be back soon!”

“Um, excuse me,” said Rui, facing Yuusuke. “Is the bill for Chachamaru ready yet?”



Marron Veterinary Clinic was located at the edge of the shopping district just outside Aoba Station. It wasn’t the busiest area, but the stores there were crucial to the neighborhood and supported the lives of its residents: supermarkets, drugstores, bakeries, restaurants, general stores, flower shops…



There was also a small store called Sakura Jewelry, which had been closed for a time after the heist a few months ago. But now it was open again and had a beautiful selection of accessories on display.

Going left from the clinic would take you to Aoba Station. To the right, the street intersected in a T shape with a large road. On the other side was the local police station. Chris immediately turned to the right and marched off.

Of course, Chris was properly trained and knew to wait at the light before crossing. When it turned green, the Shiba Inu put his snout to the ground and began pacing across the crosswalk.

“I wonder if Mr. Iwata’s there,” Mayuka said, rushing ahead to peer inside the building. “Good afternoooon, Officer Iwataaa!”

“Oh, it’s you, Mayuka,” said the young patrolman, popping his head out the window. “Out walking Chris?” Iwata loved dogs and had joined the force hoping to become a police-dog trainer. He was on patrol duty now, but one day, he hoped to make that dream come true.

“No, we’re not walking; we’re working.”

“Working?” Iwata said with surprise, pressing down on the top of his police cap to hold it in place.

“We’re trying to find someone who dropped their handkerchief at the vet clinic. It’s an investigation,” she explained.

Chris had crossed the street, still sniffing the ground, and proceeded to the right, past the police station. Hinata turned just long enough to wave at Mr. Iwata before Chris pulled him away.

“I see. So you *are* on an investigation… You said you were looking for the owner of a handkerchief, right? Not chasing any thieves, I hope,” he added, just in case. Last time they went investigating, he’d had to run all over the place looking for the three of them.

“Don’t worry, we’re not after a bad guy. We’re searching for a pretty girl with a pet hamster. See you later!”

Mayuka waved good-bye and trotted after Hinata and Chris.

Iwata seemed confused, but he called out after her anyway.

“Well, have a good time, and be safe!”

Chris continued straight down the main road. They passed the fork that split off toward Tenso Shrine, then turned left. It seemed

the trail was still strong.

Hinata and Mayuka followed in silence, careful not to distract Chris from the task at hand.

“You know…,” Mayuka murmured at last.

Hinata hissed back at her. “Hey, don’t make it harder for Chris to concentrate.”

“I know. But we seem to be heading there anyway…”

Heading where? He looked at her, confused.

“You know… *There.*”

Mayuka pointed, and Hinata gasped.

Through a thick clump of trees, he could make out a tower with a weather vane on top.

Hinata couldn’t believe it… It was the haunted mansion!

Sneaking In!



Chris kept going, then plopped down in front of the gate on the right-hand side of the road.

“I knew it…,” Mayuka said, sighing happily.

Hinata held his breath as he observed the rusted, arched gate. It had two doors that met in the middle, where a metal chain tied them shut.

In the daytime, the haunted mansion didn’t look all that creepy. Built a ways back from the street, it was surrounded by a garden full of big trees. You might not even realize it was there if you were just walking down the street.

But as they stood still and viewed it now, the difference from the other houses nearby was very noticeable.

The blue tile roof ran at a steep angle and contained a number of bay windows. The mansion had probably been very fashionable when it was built. The faded and dusty tiles were warped here and there—and looked like they were hanging on for dear life. The once-white walls were now discolored and covered all over with leafy vines.

The most notable feature, however, was the little tower that poked up from one section of the roof. It was sharpened at the tip like a four-sided pencil, with a rounded orb at the end. Out of the orb stretched a tall metal pole ending in a weather vane.

The weather vane's black rooster seemed to be glaring down at the land around the house.

"Wh-what should we do…?" Hinata whispered. "Chris stopped —does that mean Akane is here, too?"

Mayuka swallowed loudly. "Maybe she dresses like that because she really *is* a witch…"

"Even if it's abandoned, it's still someone's property. We can't just go inside. And besides, it's locked," Hinata said, pointing to the chain on the gate. "C'mon, let's turn back…"

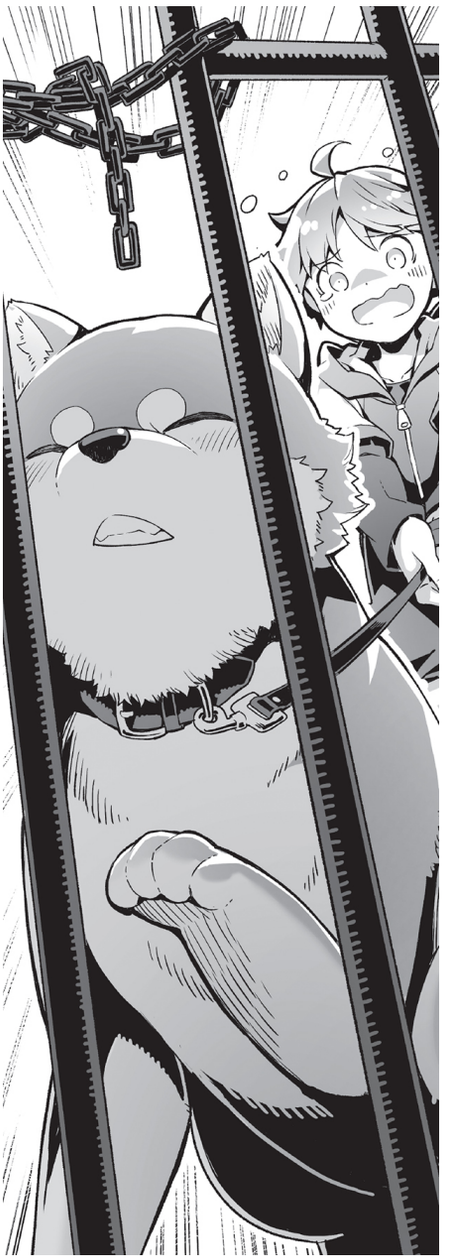
He was just about to leave when the breeze picked up. Suddenly, Chris started making noise.

"Hewww…"

After one mournful whine, Chris began to pant and paw restlessly at the ground.

"What's the matter, Chris?" Mayuka called out. The well-behaved police dog almost never acted like this.

"M-maybe it's because the mansion is haunted," Hinata suggested, backing away. Dogs were more sensitive than humans. Chris must have picked up on the eerie atmosphere around the place and become distressed.



“That’s enough, Chris. You can stop now. Stop! C’mon, let’s go…”

Hinata turned his back to the gate and pulled hard on the leash. But Chris tugged even harder.

“Whoa!” Hinata stumbled a bit and spun back toward Chris in surprise. The dog had worked his snout into the gap between the gate doors and was trying to pry them open.

“No, Chris, you can’t do that…”

Hinata crouched down and tried to pull Chris away from the gate, but Chris only shoved his snout in farther. The chains wrapped around the gate clattered and loosened.

“Oh, look. It’s not actually locked,” Mayuka pointed out. She was staring, astonished, as the doors of the gate creaked farther and farther apart.

“H-help me, Mayuka! I’m trying to stop Chris!” Hinata cried, right as the Shiba Inu slipped out of his hands and squeezed through the gate doors. “Oh noooo!”

With Chris pulling on the leash, Hinata found himself stuck between the two doors, one arm yanked through the gap.

Wh-what do I do now…?

“Oh, fine.” Mayuka sighed, then she used both hands to pry open the gate. The chains jangled loosely, and the doors swung wide. Hinata practically tumbled into the front yard.

What was that for, Mayuka? I wanted you to help me get Chris out, *not push me* in*!*

Chris trotted up the cracked concrete walk, then came to a stop in front of the mansion and started whining sadly once again. *“Hewww, hewww…”*

“Please, Chris, don’t go sneaking into places like this,” Hinata grumbled, pulling on the leash in an attempt to turn the dog around. But Chris sat down, kept whining, and refused to budge. Mayuka looked troubled.

“What do you think is wrong with Chris? Does this mean Akane is here after all?”

“Even if that’s true,” Hinata said, sweating from the effort of pulling, “Chris has never completely ignored an order like this before!”

“I mean, there’s no way the front door’s unlocked, too,” Mayuka said, grabbing the round knob and turning. “Wh-whaaat…?”

Please, don't!! Hinata screamed inwardly, but his silent prayer went unheard. Mayuka pulled open the door.

Once again, Chris wriggled through the doorway and hurried ahead of the others. And once again, Hinata found himself being pulled by the leash.

Tchik-tchik-tchik… Chris's claws clicked on the floor as he trotted through the entrance hall. Finally, he stuck up his nose at a big interior door straight across from the entrance. He reached out with a front paw and scratched at it.

"Chris, pleaaase!" Hinata pleaded, on the verge of tears. "This is someone else's home. If we barge in like this we're no better than burglars!"

Mayuka was the last to come in, and she stealthily caught up to Hinata and Chris. "This really is a haunted mansion," she whispered. "It's so creepy in here…"

Her words sent a jolt through Hinata, who finally looked up.

The entrance hall was dark and gloomy, and the air was stale and musty. Dust was piled up on the hardwood floor, and though the walls had probably once been white, there were now large brown stains all over them.

Something like a thin veil wavered in the air in front of the door on the left—probably a spiderweb.

The front hall had a high ceiling that reached all the way to the roof, making the upper story visible from the entrance. There was nothing but darkness beyond the handrail of the second-floor hallway above, and the tall, tall ceiling seemed almost like a black hole. It felt as if there was pure, malevolent darkness falling down on them, like invisible black snowflakes.

For a while now, they had been hearing a ceaseless, dry rattling somewhere in the distance. Hinata imagined skeletons clacking their bones together. The cold emanating from the floor seemed to permeate his entire body. He started to shiver.

"M-Mayuka… T-take the leash… I—I—I don't think I can…"

Hinata was worried Chris's leash would soon slip completely out of his fingers. But just as he tried to hand it off to Mayuka, they both heard footsteps descending the staircase to their left. They turned to look, then froze.

On the landing where the staircase doubled back was a stained-glass window. They could see the person coming down as they crossed in front of it. The black silhouette stumbled a bit, and the light landed on the figure's face.

"Eeeek!" Mayuka shrieked.

For a brief moment, they had glimpsed the person's profile… and it was dyed red with blood! Long, disheveled white hair stuck out from the scalp, while tattered clothes just barely hung from their shoulders.

"Aaaah!! Z-zombie!" Mayuka screamed, causing Hinata's brain to short out.

He leaped away, body-slammed the front door, and burst outside.

Compared to the darkened mansion, the sunlight was blinding. Hinata squinted against the glare and stumbled out of the mansion's front gate.

On and on he ran, barely aware of what he was doing. He rushed to the main road, then turned right…

The next thing he realized, there was a person in front of him.

Officer Iwata?! Is this the police station?!

"What's the matter, Hinata?"

To Hinata, the police officer looked like an invincible superhero. As Hinata stood stock-still, breathing heavily, Officer Iwata spread his arms.

Officer Iwata!!

He then hugged Hinata tightly as the boy sobbed. Hinata could feel himself trembling.

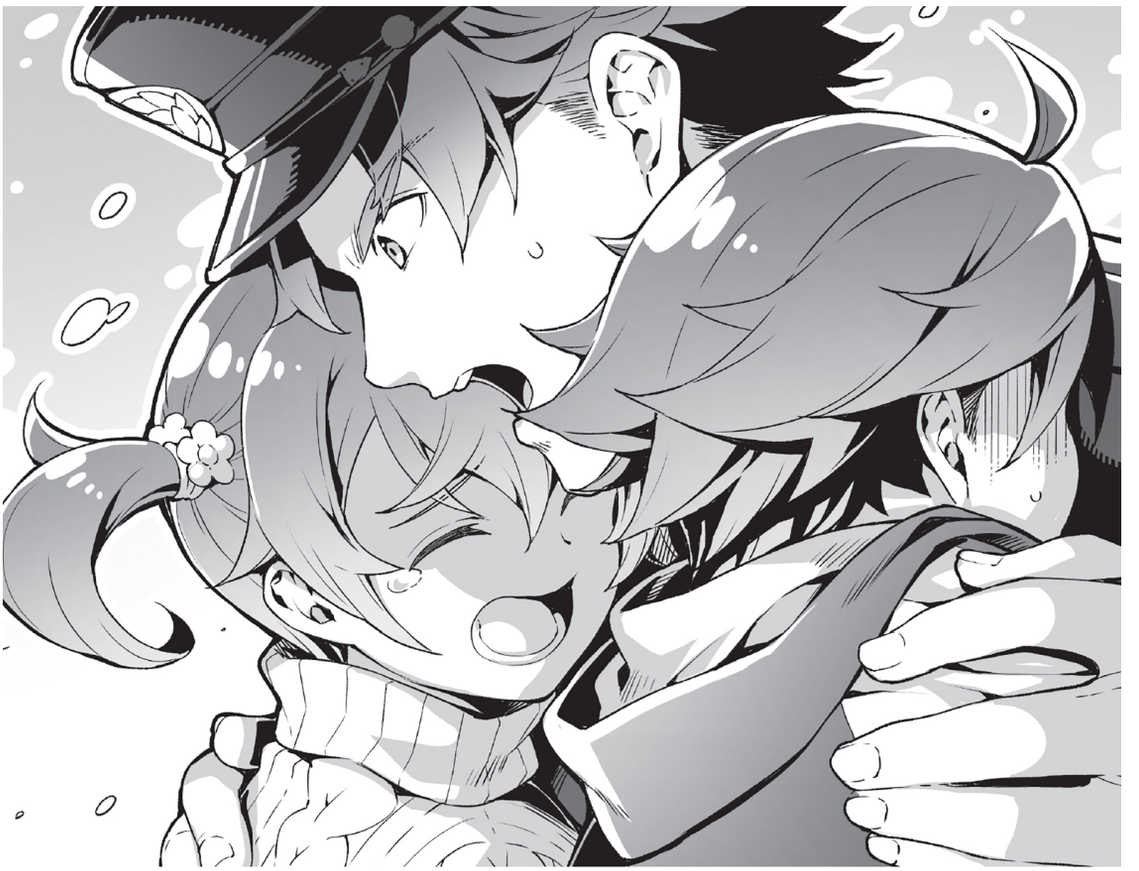
"What's the matter? What happened? Can you tell me?" the policeman asked gently, rubbing Hinata's back to calm him down. But Hinata couldn't bring himself to speak.

Mayuka came running up to them next. Her face was pale, and there were tears in her eyes.

"M-Mr. Iwata…"

"You too, Mayuka?"

He held out one of his hands to catch her and embraced them both at once. He had just seen them head off on their investigation looking so excited and full of purpose, and the dramatic change in their demeanor startled him.



“Can you tell me what happened?” he said. “Was it something scary?”

Mayuka looked up and, through trembling lips, stammered, “A z-z-zombie…”

“Zombie? You mean, like, a *zombie* zombie?”

She nodded, her eyes full of tears.

“W-we went into the haunted mansion, and there was a zombie…”

“Haunted mansion? Are you talking about that big European-style house down the street? You went inside?”

She grimaced and started to murmur something about Chris.

“Hmm? Come to think of it,” said Iwata, “where *is* Chris?” The question struck Hinata like a lightning bolt. He brushed off the officer’s hand and leaped backward.

Chris! I left Chris behind! I ran away and forgot all about my partner!!

Hinata was so shocked that he fell backward onto his rear. Then he started crawling toward the haunted mansion, sobbing.

“What have I done…? I—I left Chris…behind…”

“Oh no! Chris!” Mayuka shrieked.

“All right, all right,” Iwata said, grabbing Hinata under the arms and standing him on his feet before putting his hands on the boy’s shoulders. “You’ve got to calm down, Hinata. Don’t worry, I’ll be with you. We’ll go and get Chris back. And let me be clear: I don’t believe in ghosts or zombies one bit. It’s important to verify the truth of the matter.”

Hinata nodded over and over again, wiping the hot tears from his cheeks.

The officer went back into the police station and put a sign saying Out on Patrol up on the desk. Then he adjusted his cap and came back out.

“You must have been really scared, huh?” he said, peering into Hinata’s face. “Can you walk? Do you need a piggyback ride?”

Hinata quickly shook his head. Piggyback? He was in fifth grade now! He insisted that he was fine and started walking on his own.

Once he was moving again, he suddenly felt impatient. Now that Officer Iwata was with them, they needed to move fast.

“Ch-Chris,” he murmured, speeding up into an unsteady jog.

I'm sorry, Chris, I'm sorry! I can't believe I left you behind and ran away. What a terrible partner I am. Please be safe!



Back at the haunted mansion, there was an unfamiliar old man standing around near the gate.

"Oh, perfect timing! Officer!" he said, rushing over with a hand on his balding head. He had indoor sandals on—it looked like he had just rushed outside. "I live across the street from that mansion there."

Officer Iwata nodded. "What's the matter?"

"Well… The place has been empty for ages, but I've noticed people coming and going lately. I was hopin' it wasn't folks up to no good, but sure enough, just a few minutes ago, I heard the most terrible screams!" the old man exclaimed, spittle flying from his mouth. "It's nerve-racking living next to an abandoned home. I'm always worried about criminals making it their hideout or someone burning it down…"

Hinata nervously tugged at Officer Iwata's uniform. They needed to find Chris.

"Oh, sorry, Hinata…" He held up a hand to cut off the old man's story. "As it happens, I'm here to inspect the premises, but on a different matter. If there's anyone in the building, I'll be sure to ask them what's going on, and we'll get to the bottom of it. Please be patient."

Once he'd placated the old man, he straightened up and called out through the half-open front gate.

"Excuse me! I'm with the police, on patrol. Please forgive my intrusion." Then he marched through the gate. Hinata followed him. He felt his heart racing, but there was no turning back now. He needed to find Chris…

"Oh, there's an intercom up there," said the officer. "I wonder if it works."

Between the vines growing on the wall to the left of the front door was an old intercom. Iwata used his thumb to push down the button.

A scratchy *ding-dong* sounded from inside the mansion.

"…That doesn't seem like something a haunted mansion would have, right…?" murmured Mayuka, who had followed them. Despite his shivers, Hinata agreed. It was a very normal intercom system, the kind most homes had. It felt like the unearthly eeriness of the mansion was fading a little.

"Is no one home?" Iwata tried the button again.

Ding-dong…

After a few moments, he turned to look at Hinata and frowned. "Just because I'm a police officer doesn't give me the right to walk into someone's home without permission. Hopefully there's someone around… And you're sure that Chris is in there?"

Hinata nodded, but he wasn't sure what to do now. If even Officer Iwata couldn't go inside, then how were they going to rescue Chris?

"Maybe we can call for Chris from here," Iwata suggested, just as the doorknob slowly turned, and the door clicked open. "Oh, someone *is* home. Pardon me, I'm a patrol officer from the local police station. Is this…?"

He trailed off. Mayuka screamed again.

"Eeeeek! Z-z-z…"

Both children clung to the officer's back and buried their faces in his uniform.

But then the bloody zombie peering through the crack in the door mumbled in a very normal sounding voice, "Oops, sorry for lookin' like this…"

Huh?

Hinata and Mayuka shared a confused look.

Officer Iwata paused to catch his breath, then asked calmly, "Is that a costume or something?"

"Hmm, I guess you could call it that… I was going to film a little horror video, and I was trying out some clothes and makeup. What did you want?"

"Well, that's good." Iwata turned around and laughed. "See? It's fine; he was just shooting a video."

Hinata felt like he was going to fall over, but for a different reason this time. *You mean it was just a regular person?*

In the light of day, it was clear now that the blood was unnaturally bright, and the white-haired wig was floating up off

the man's scalp. The skull-themed accessories around his ears and neck were even a little cartoonish.

Now I feel really embarrassed about being so terrified…

Mayuka's mouth hung open.

The zombie poked his head through the door and peered at the two children hiding behind Officer Iwata.

"Are you the kids who were in here earlier? The ones who walked in without permission and screamed at me before running away? And now you've brought the police with you? Sheesh!"

At that, Hinata felt a very different kind of shiver run up his spine. Words like *thief* and *breaking and entering* and *perjury* and *false allegations* flew around in his mind. Had they just committed a crime?

Officer Iwata smiled and said to the zombie, "Actually, about that. This boy's dog seems to have wandered into your home. He and his friend told me that they went in looking for him. Would the dog happen to be inside right now?"

The zombie shrugged and muttered, "Dog? Hmm, dog, dog… I'm not sure."

"I know Chris is inside!" Mayuka shouted. Now that she knew the man wasn't a real zombie, she suddenly felt much braver.

Iwata looked back at the gate and gave the old man peering in a meaningful look. "We've also had reports from the neighborhood about some activity here. I'd like to ask you about that for a moment. Are you the owner of the house?"

"Uh, no, I'm just borrowing it to film my video, that's all." The zombie looked over his shoulder, choosing his words carefully. "The, um, owner is inside. I guess I could go get them…"

"I'd appreciate it."

The zombie offered them a friendly wave, asked them to wait, and started to close the door.

"Wh-what about Chris?!" Hinata said, going pale. What if the man closed the door and then refused to come back?

Chris is still inside, right? I can't just wait out here!

He grabbed the side of the door, then slipped under the zombie's arm and rushed through the doorway.

"Hinata!"

"Stop, Hinata!"

He ignored Mayuka's and Iwata's cries and ran through the front hall and down to the door that Chris had been scratching at when they first went in.

"Chris?"

The dog was nowhere to be seen. Hinata felt around the door until he found the knob, then turned it—but it was locked. Was there no way inside?

He looked around the darkened hall. Where could Chris be?

"Hey! You can't just keep barging in here, kid!" yelled the zombie as he advanced toward Hinata.

I'm not going to run this time! Hinata was determined to stand his ground.

"Where is Chris?" he demanded. "My dog was in front of this door earlier, remember? You saw it, too, didn't you, Mr. Zombie?"

The zombie faltered. "I—I was…"

Iwata and Mayuka came in after them. The officer beckoned toward Hinata. "I'm very sorry about this, sir. We'll leave at once. C'mon, Hinata, let's wait outside."

"But Chris is…"

Suddenly there came a thumping and scuffling from upstairs.

"Yiiiipe!" They heard a dog's shriek echo through the house.

"Chris?!" Hinata shouted. A shadow came hurtling down the staircase with incredible speed. "Chris!"

Hinata crouched and spread his arms for Chris to jump into.

"Yipe, yipe, huff, huff…"

Chris was letting out high-pitched barks and breathing heavily, pressing his snout into Hinata's chest and thrashing about.

"I'm sorry, Chris! I can't believe I ran away and left you behind… What's wrong? Are you okay?"

Hinata hugged Chris and rubbed the dog all over. Chris was prancing in place and panting hard.

There, there, Chris, you're safe now…

"That startled me!" said a clear, bright voice from the top of the stairs, drawing everyone's attention. Descending in front of the stained-glass window was none other than the girl dressed in black from earlier, Akane.



The moment Hinata saw her, the dark clouds that had been swirling through his mind instantly cleared. The owner of the handkerchief *was* here! Chris really had followed the scent trail right to her.

The girl in black pouted. “I was just playing with the doggy when it started freaking out. I think it was scared by a tiny spider. What a wimp!”

So that’s it! He was just panicking over a bug, like usual, thought Hinata. He calmly caressed Chris’s back as the dog gradually quieted down. *There, there, no need to be afraid anymore…*

“I was petting it and saying that everything was fine, but then it bit me,” Akane said, rubbing her left hand. Her eyes narrowed as she gazed at Chris resentfully.

Huh? Chris bit someone? Hinata was stunned. *Why on earth…?*

“You got bit?!” the zombie said, hurrying over to take Akane’s hand and examine it. “You all right, Akane? Are you bleeding?”

She smiled and slipped her hand out of the zombie’s, which was adorned with a skull-shaped ring.

“It’s just a little red. I’m fine, Yuu.”

Hinata was relieved to hear that. If she’d been bitten by his dog and injured, it would be a big problem. And it just didn’t seem like the kind of thing Chris would do…

Akane turned to the rest of them and asked, “Who are these people…?”

Officer Iwata bowed slightly and stepped forward. “Pardon me. My name is Iwata, and I’m from the local police station. These kids told me that their dog got into your house, so I came to help them search. Please forgive me for entering without permission. I’m glad we found the dog, though.”

“I didn’t know whose dog it was,” she said, “so I took it upstairs to my room. Why did it come in here, though?”

Mayuka hopped to her feet and approached Akane. “We were looking for you,” she explained, “to deliver something you forgot.”

“Something I forgot?”

“Go on, Hinata. Take it out.”

Now that Chris had calmed down, Hinata felt able to let go. He looked the dog in the eye to reassure him that it was safe, then

grabbed the leash and took the black handkerchief out of his walking bag.

Mayuka trotted over to take the handkerchief and passed it to Akane.

“You left this in the vet clinic earlier, didn’t you, Miss Akane? Chris followed the scent from the handkerchief all the way here to find you. Isn’t that amazing?!”

Akane’s eyes widened, and she looked from the handkerchief to Chris. The dog backed away slightly.

Mr. Iwata finally understood. “Aha! So Chris was just following the scent of the handkerchief’s owner into the building.”

Both he and Mayuka seemed satisfied with this answer.

But something’s wrong… Hinata got the strange feeling that things weren’t adding up.

He had never seen Chris get so worked up while following a scent. Hinata had given the order to stop, but Chris had pushed his way into the mansion anyway. That had never happened before…

Trying to dispel the unease clouding his mind, Hinata said, “I-I’m glad we managed to return the handkerchief. My dad was worried about it…”

Akane looked at him with curiosity. “Your dad?”

“Um, the groomer at Marron Veterinary Clinic. The one at the desk,” Hinata explained.

Mayuka jumped in, saying, “You know, the tall guy who looked like a rugby player. We were in the waiting room. Did you not see us? Chris was there, too.”

Akane looked troubled as she tried to recall the scene. “I remember the groomer, of course. He was very helpful and gave me that pamphlet. But I was so worried about Hammy that I don’t remember you at all… I’m sorry. I suppose I get tunnel vision when I’m focused on something. I just lose sight of everything else.”

In the brief silence that followed, they could hear the same soft clattering sound from before. It had made Hinata think of skeletons clacking their bones together.

“Do you hear the wheel going? Hammy’s feeling much better now. I need to thank the doctors for their help.”

Oh, it's just a hamster wheel! Hinata was embarrassed again. When he started feeling scared, it made everything more frightening…

"Well, uh," Iwata began, putting his hand on the back of his neck. "We found Chris, and we confirmed that the ghosts were just someone shooting a video, so I guess that's a wrap on this case, huh? But just to clear things up, who is the owner of this house, exactly?"

Akane cautiously lifted her hand up to cheek level. "It's me."

"You?" Iwata said with surprise.

She nodded. "Yes. This was my great-grandfather's home. It went unused after his death… I recently inherited it, so I came to inspect the property. I thought Yuu could use it to shoot videos for his college club."

"You inherited it! Fascinating… And you are?" Iwata asked, turning to the zombie.

"Uh, I'm Akane's cousin, and I'm studying film in college. Like I said earlier, I'm trying to make a horror video. When Akane showed this place to me and asked if I wanted to use it, I was stunned. Have you ever seen a better location for a horror shoot? It's gonna go viral; I know it. Scoring a place like this is practically a miracle!"

I bet it will *go viral. It sure scared us*, Hinata silently agreed.

"Anyway, I was just getting ready for the shoot. There's no problem, right?" said the zombie, rubbing his hands together.

"Of course not," said Iwata pleasantly. "If the owner has given you permission, you're free to go ahead."

"I…," Mayuka began hesitantly. "I was walking by last night and saw a white light flickering in the upstairs window. Was that…?"

Akane put a hand to her red lips and made a face. "That was me. Yuu told me not to clean up under any circumstances, because it would ruin the atmosphere of the place. But I really wanted at least the room where I was staying to be clean…so I was tidying up late into the evening yesterday."

"Ohhh. I thought it was a ghostly ball of light, hovering and flickering in the window. That's why I screamed and ran away."

The zombie rubbed his hands together excitedly. "Ooh, that's a good idea for a scene, too. I'll put it into the script."

Grinning, Iwata took out his notepad and turned back to Akane. “If you’ll pardon me, may I ask your name and which school you attend?”

“Akane Kurosaki. I’m a first-year student at Soukei University High School.”

“And your cousin?”

“Yuuma Terakawa. Third-year at Soukei University. President of the Media Studies Club.”

Determined to prove himself, Yuuma even pulled out his wallet and offered to show his student ID. Akane, too, opened her handbag and brought out her ID card.

Iwata took their cards, looked them over, and handed them back.

“Thank you very much for your cooperation. This is my job, unfortunately… Anyway, I’ll get out of your hair now. I need to explain the situation to your neighbors…”

He gave a quick salute and ushered the kids back toward the door.

“Hey, Miss Akane?” Mayuka asked, turning back to look over her shoulder.

“What?”

“May I come visit again? I want to watch the filming. Your cousin is going to upload it to a video site, right? I’d really like to see it. Oh, and I won’t get in anyone’s way.”

Hinata froze. She wanted to come here *again*?

“Sure, if you’re interested,” replied Yuuma the zombie. “There’s only the two of us today, but more of the group should be here tomorrow. We’re going to go over the script and practice our lines.”

He rubbed his hands together, as if to say, “Come on back.”

“In fact, would you like to be in the video? You could be the girl who sees the ball of fire in the upstairs window and runs away. We’re going to upload it to WeTube when we’re done.”

“Oooh, yay! Okay, I’ll come back tomorrow. I promise! See you then!”

“But can you keep the shoot a secret from your friends? We don’t want a whole bunch of kids hanging around.”

“Of course! I won’t tell anyone besides Hinata. Pinkie swear! See you then.”

She skipped her way to the front door. Hinata followed her out, his shoulders slumped. He was already certain she would try to drag him along the next day…

He was feeling so down in the dumps about it that he failed to notice how even after they left through the front gate, Chris kept turning back to look at the haunted mansion.

Later that night, Hinata gave Chris a brushing. It was one of Chris's favorite activities, and the happy pup would often roll on his back and close his eyes with pleasure as the brush raked over his tummy.

The first time she saw it, Suzune had declared with surprise, "A lot of Shiba Inu hate getting brushed, but you're so well-behaved, Chris."



Hinata took extra care this time and said softly, “Sorry for being such a cowardly owner, Chris. I’ll never run away and leave you behind again. Can you forgive me?”

Chris’s eyes popped open, and he hopped to his feet and barked.

“Don’t worry, partner!” he seemed to say.

Relieved, Hinata hugged his dog tight.

4

The Haunted Mansion Again



“So it wasn’t a real ghost after all? That means Amabie and Hakutaku did the trick,” Rui said happily.

Hinata and Mayuka were chatting with their classmate on the way home from school the following day. He was very curious about what had happened after they left the vet’s waiting room.

“So their reputation as evil-repelling *youkai* was accurate! I’m glad I gave them to you, Hinata.”

Hinata, meanwhile, was having a hard time remembering what Rui was talking about. At last, he recalled the capsule toys the other boy had given him the day before.

Oh, right. I left them in my pants pocket and had to take them out when I took my bath. Where did I put them after that? I’ll have to look for them when I get home…

“You should have seen how depressed Hinata was,” Mayuka said. “He kept crying and crying because he left Chris behind at the mansion.” She stretched out her hands and shrugged theatrically.

“I—I wasn’t crying! I was just feeling guilty about it,” Hinata shot back. He kicked at the ground with the tip of his shoe.

“So Akane owns that mansion, then? She must be really rich!” Rui exclaimed excitedly, putting his hand to his chin and nodding. “I *knew* she was someone special.”

“We’re going back there again today, to help Yuuma the zombie with his video—”

“Mayuka!” Hinata interrupted. Yuuma had told them not to tell anyone else about the shoot.

…And sure enough, she’s already saying “we”…

“Oh, that’s all right. I’ll pass. I’m really only interested in *youkai*. Western monsters like ghosts and zombies don’t do anything for me,” Rui said. He paused, then blushed and added, “But if you see Akane, say hi to her for me. She probably doesn’t remember me, though.”

“Okay, I will,” Mayuka said. “How are Chachamaru’s eyes doing?”

“Thanks for asking. He seems to be feeling perfectly fine now. Would you let Dr. Suzune and Mr. Yuusuke know, Hinata?”

Hinata said he would pass on the message, and then they went their separate ways.

“It always ends up like this…”

After briefly returning to their own homes, Hinata and Mayuka took Chris out for a walk. Hinata grumbled under his breath as they made their way toward the police station.

I knew she was going to drag me into this. But at least it wasn’t a real haunted mansion, I guess…

Hinata had a shy nature and didn’t like to visit people he didn’t know very well.

“Of course we’re going together,” said Mayuka happily. “You, Chris, and I are a team.” Chris seemed more relaxed that day, too, since he didn’t have a job to do.

They waited at the light to cross the main road and noticed that Officer Iwata was on the sidewalk across the street, waving. When the signal turned green, he rushed across to meet them.

“Hey, kids. Hinata, are you feeling better after yesterday?”

“Thanks for helping us, Officer Iwata!” Mayuka said, waving energetically.

Hinata bowed. “Th-thank you. Chris told me not to worry about it so much last night…”

“Huh? Chris talked to you? No wayyy.” Mayuka laughed.

“Not like that…”

That’s just how it felt to me, Hinata thought.

Officer Iwata held up his finger and waggled it at Mayuka. “Dogs are very adept at sensing human emotions,” he said. “There are times when you really feel that your minds are connected, and it’s like having a real conversation.”

Hinata nodded happily. Somehow, Iwata had known just what he was thinking. He looked down toward his feet and saw Chris wagging his tail in agreement.

“Oh, I see. Well, Chris is so smart, I wouldn’t be surprised if he really *could* talk!” Mayuka chuckled again.

Then Iwata’s expression turned serious. “Are you on your way back to that mansion?”

“Yeah. Yuuma the zombie invited us.”

“Well, I was curious, so I did some digging. As it happens, there have been people breaking into empty houses in the area lately. In order to prevent crime and arson, we can’t let that trend continue, so we’re stepping up our patrols. And that mansion is within my jurisdiction, so…”

He took out his notepad and opened it, appearing to double-check something.

“It turns out that mansion *did* once belong to a man named Kurosaki. It’s listed as being unoccupied since about twenty years ago, but the ownership is currently in the hands of his great-granddaughter, Akane Kurosaki.”

Hinata was stunned. Twenty years! That meant the mansion was empty long, long before he was born. No wonder it seemed so haunted.

“I guess Rui Takeuchi was right—Akane *is* rich. And she’s only in high school,” Mayuka marveled.

Iwata grinned wryly and continued, “On the official home page for Soukei University, there is indeed a Media Studies Club listed, and the student representative is one Yuuma Terakawa. Given my profession, I have a tendency to be suspicious, but so far his story checks out. I think it’s probably fine for you two to join in the filming, as long as that’s all you’re doing.”

This surprised Hinata. *Officer Iwata did this for us! To make sure we wouldn’t be put in danger. Meanwhile, we were ready to march off to the haunted mansion without a care in the world.*

“Can I ask you something, Officer Iwata?” Mayuka said.

“What is it?”

“Aren’t you curious about Akane at all?”

“Hmm? What do you mean?” he asked, lips pursed.

“Well… Rui Takeuchi and Yuuma seem to be head over heels for her! Even Mr. Yuusuke said she was pretty. What do you think, Officer?”

His eyes bulged for a moment. Then he burst into laughter.

“Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! Rui? And even Mr. Yuusuke? Well, sounds like there’s some stiff competition out there. I suppose she is a good-looking young lady.”

He wiped tears from his eyes and turned to Mayuka. “And what do *you* think of Akane?”

“I think she’s wonderful,” Mayuka replied. “She’s soooo pretty, like a perfect doll… But I wouldn’t say I’m head over heels for her.”

Hinata jumped in, adding, “I—I think she’s pretty, too. But…I’m not head over heels…”

Iwata nodded. “Well, everyone has different tastes, after all. I suppose I prefer the three of you.”

Mayuka looked delighted. Then she smacked Iwata’s arm. “Now you’re just buttering us up.”

“Ha-ha. Not at all. I’m telling the truth. Now go and get a move on. The days are getting shorter, and it’ll be dark before you know it.”



Once again, the three of them were standing at the door of the haunted mansion.

Chris was well-behaved this time, not agitated the way he’d been the day before.

Mayuka brushed the vines aside and pressed the button on the intercom. After a minute, the door opened, and an unfamiliar man peered out at them.

“Yo! We’ve been waiting for you.”

“Umm…” Mayuka hesitated. But Hinata recognized the man’s voice. It was…

“Oh, sorry, sorry. I was all done up in zombie gear yesterday. It’s me, Yuuma. C’mon in.”

“Sheesh! I thought you were a different person!” Mayuka exclaimed.

They followed him inside. Unlike the gloomy atmosphere from the day before, the entrance hall was now brightly lit. There were lights along the wall, and a chandelier hung from the high ceiling. The upstairs handrail and above were no longer shrouded in darkness.

“We finally got the power back on. It’s really hard to do anything without electricity.”

Huh? Something about the man’s statement nagged at Hinata. They had used the intercom yesterday. It wouldn’t have worked without power, right?



Yuuma's long, oval face was beaming as he guided them to the door in the back.

Instead of the zombie makeup from last time, he was now wearing a casual button-down shirt over a tee and skinny jeans. His upturned hair was a mix of black and dyed brown, and there was the faintest hint of a beard on his chin. The only element that remained from the previous day's costume was the skull ring on his left middle finger. The eyes of the skull glittered in the chandelier's light; there were little bits of black glass embedded in the sockets.

"I didn't know you were so fashionable. You look even better now than you did as a zombie," Mayuka said. This made Yuuma double over with laughter.

"Ha-ha-ha! Well, I sure hope so. If someone said I looked better as a zombie, I'd never recover," he said as he reached for the doorknob. "The club's all here working on the video today."

Yuuma pulled open the door. Hinata recalled that it had been locked last time.

Inside, a rather wide room spread out before them. It was dusty here, too. There were large, dirty windows on the wall across from the door, offering a distorted view of the backyard beyond.

On the right side of the room was a long table, where four young people were busily working on something. Each one either had a computer or smartphone at their fingertips. Pieces of paper scrawled with text littered the tabletop. Compared to how old-fashioned the rest of the mansion looked, this place seemed like an alternate dimension—as though they'd just walked through a rift in time.

One of the people stood up and smiled at the newcomers.

"Welcome…"

It was Akane. Her skirt bounced as she came around the table. Like the day before, she was dressed all in black.

"Um, what were your names again?"

Mayuka raised her hand up to cheek level and said, "Mayuka and Hinata. And the dog is Chris."

"Mayuka, Hinata, and Chris… I'll have to commit those to memory. I tend to be a bit absent-minded," Akane said, tapping her head with a finger.

Yuuma, who had been smiling at Akane as she spoke, then pointed to the other three people at the table. “Those are my buddies from the Media Studies Club. We’re figuring out the script, composition, and sequencing of our video right now.”

The others briefly looked up and nodded, but at the moment, they seemed absorbed in their computers and phones. Every now and then, someone scribbled something on a piece of paper.

“Where are your cameras and stuff?” Mayuka asked.

“We haven’t brought in the equipment yet. Plus, I want it to look as amateurish and unprofessional as possible. Only natural light. We might even use our smartphone cameras to film it,” Yuuma explained. “When the footage is grainy and rough, it looks more real, doesn’t it? The viewers feel like they’re really infiltrating a haunted mansion. The plan is to do a fifteen-minute short. Of course, it takes a whole lot longer than fifteen minutes to film it…”

“Because you do a bunch of takes and only use the best ones?”

“See? You know how it works, Mayuka. Want me to film you with my smartphone?”

Mayuka squealed with excitement. Hinata, meanwhile, had his attention focused elsewhere.

There was a round table against the back wall. A clear hamster cage sat atop it. When Hinata walked closer, he saw that the table was wiped very clean, and there were bags of food and litter next to the cage.

Hammy was curled up into a ball inside a tiny hut within, sound asleep. The hamster was a white-and-gray Djungarian, with a short little tail. Its round, poofy butt rose up and down as it breathed. The hamster wheel that had made so much noise the previous day was now at rest.

“Your family runs the vet clinic,” said Akane, approaching him with a smile, “so I bet you know a lot about animals, don’t you, Hinata?”

“Y-yeah, a little,” Hinata admitted. Chris sidled up closer to Hinata’s legs. He seemed nervous, and his eyebrows were drawn together slightly.

“What do you think of this setup? I made it a special table just for Hammy.”

“I—I think it’s very nice. And it’s not in direct sunlight…”

“I’m glad to hear you agree,” Akane said as she bent over and squinted to peer into Hammy’s tiny hut.

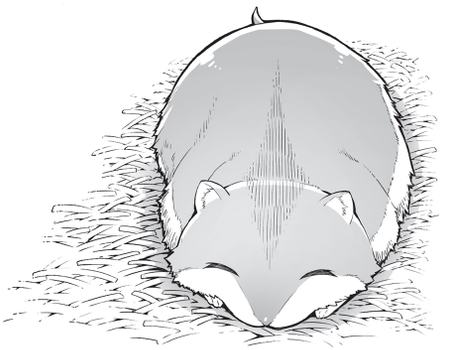
Suddenly, Hinata remembered the message Rui had entrusted him with.

“Um, m-my friend wanted to say hi…”

“Hmm? Who’s that?”

“Um, he was in the waiting room at our clinic yesterday. He was watching you the whole time. The boy with the cat.”

“I’m sorry; I really am absent-minded…”



She tapped her head again. Hinata shook his head to signal that it was all right, then summoned the courage to ask something he'd been wondering about.

"Akane, do you live here?"

She widened her eyes. "Of course not! I would never sleep in a dusty, dirty place like this. However, I do keep Hammy here, though I feel bad about it…"

So the sound of the hamster wheel *had* been coming from here. But the door had been locked. Had Hammy been all alone inside?

Hinata glanced over at the college students working at the long table. Akane rubbed the hamster cage and murmured softly, "I wish I could be with him all the time, but my family doesn't like animals…"

This struck Hinata right in the heart.

From his perspective, the beautiful and mysterious girl Akane appeared to be was merely a mask she was always wearing. Maybe the reason he couldn't be "head over heels" for her like Rui was because he couldn't let down his guard around someone so careful to hide her true thoughts.

But her words just now had sounded genuine. Was there something going on between her and her family?

Just then, he remembered there was something else he needed to say to Akane.

"Um… I'm sorry that Chris bit you yesterday. Is your hand all right?"

"I'm fine. It didn't draw any blood, so it's no big deal," she said, showing him her left hand. It was slender and pale, with no marks on the skin.

Whew! Hinata was relieved.

It was still strange, however. Normally, Chris would never bite a person unless ordered to do so. Even when he was panicking over a bug, Chris had never bitten Hinata. Maybe the spider had been really, really big.

As if on cue, Chris whined a little and tilted his head.

Across the room, Mayuka exclaimed, "Ooh, is that a fireplace?"

She was pointing to the wall on the left. There was a recessed area along the base of the wall, surrounded by a firm stone hearth. Hinata had never seen one in person before.

“They’re actually real! I thought they were only in fairy tales. You know, like *Cinderella* or *The Three Little Pigs*!”

Hinata and Chris went over to inspect it, too. There was an iron grate in front of the fireplace but no signs that there had ever been a fire burning there.

To either side, running from one edge of the wall to the other, was a long decorative relief, right at Hinata’s eye level. It was piled high with dust, but he could make out a bunch of chrysanthemum-like flowers carved into the wood. It was clearly very fine work, and little carvings of chickens, barely visible, decorated the spaces between the flowers.

“How funny. Look at these little chickens. Here and there… Oh, and there’s another one!” Mayuka said, pointing each one out.

“Chickens are everywhere here,” Akane said.

“Oh, like the rooster on the weather vane? But why chickens?”

“My great-grandfather operated a poultry business. It’s how he got rich.”

“Pole tree?” Mayuka repeated, dumbstruck. Akane giggled.

“It means he had farms where they kept chickens and produced eggs. In the past, eggs were a luxury item, on top of being nutritious, so they sold very well. Great-Grandfather owned several poultry farms and saved up his money until he could build this mansion. That’s why it’s decorated all over with chickens.”

“Ohhh, I see.” Mayuka looked around, then pointed at a faded rug on the floor. “There’s a chicken there, too! And there!”

“I never realized there were so many,” Yuuma said, rubbing his hands together. “I bet you could have fun just finding them all, like hidden characters at a theme park.”

“Ooh, I wanna try!” Mayuka said, folding her hands together in a pleading gesture.

Akane smiled and walked toward the door.

“Let’s go look upstairs, then.”

“Look at the glass piece hanging at the center of the chandelier. Is that shaped like a chicken, too?” Mayuka exclaimed, looking at the ceiling in the foyer.

“Whoa, dang. You’ve got good eyes,” Yuuma said. “You’re right; there’s even one up there…”

Akane was delighted. “Even I never noticed that one.”

Hinata glanced around, trying to join in on the fun. There was a chicken design carved onto the closet just past the front door. Another door across from it had a matching design.

Mayuka rushed over to the stairs. “Look here, on the railing.”

A round little chicken sat on the end of the handrail at the very bottom of the staircase.

“It’s so cute!” she said. “May I go up?”

Akane nodded, and Mayuka ran up the stairs. Toward the top of the stained-glass window along the landing was a very majestic rooster with long tail feathers. It looked a lot like the weather vane on the roof.

The upstairs hallway was built in a large U shape around the open foyer. You could look down at the entryway from the railing, and on the other side was a wall with several doors.

“There’s one here, too!” Yuuma shouted, pointing at the pillars of the handrail. Each one was engraved with flowers and chickens.

Hinata wandered down the hallway, continuing his search. “They’re on the doors, too…”

Four wooden doors each featured a different chicken design near the top. A rooster crowing, a hen turning around…

“What’s this for?” Mayuka asked, pointing to a metal ladder affixed to the wall. Looking up, Hinata saw that the ladder traveled through a large square hole in the ceiling. It was dark up there, and he couldn’t tell what was on the other side.

“That’s the ladder to get into the tower,” Akane explained.

“With the weather vane?”

“That’s right. But it doesn’t go to a room or anything. This ladder only exists so you can go up and inspect it. I don’t really know what it’s like, because I’ve never gone myself…”

Oh, I see, thought Hinata. The tower was like the mansion’s symbol, but it was only decorative, not practical. You could probably get a nice view from up there, but since the way was this dark, there must not have been any windows. Too bad.

“That reminds me,” said Akane, putting a hand to her cheek and thinking. “When Great-Grandfather passed away, they said he left a rather odd will behind.”

“Odd how?” asked Mayuka.

Akane chuckled. “My family thought it had to be a message referring to some hidden treasure, so they went crazy searching for it. But they didn’t find it anywhere. Eventually, everyone gave up. Apparently, they concluded it was just nonsense.”

Yuuma leaned forward. “This is the first I’m hearing of it. What did the old man say?”

“The message was ‘Search for the youngest chicken.’”

“That’s it?!” He laughed and clapped his hands.

Hinata shook his head. “B-but there are so many chickens here… And how are you supposed to tell which one’s the youngest…?”

“You’re right. I wonder which one it is,” Mayuka said, crossing her arms and looking at the ceiling.

“Hey, why don’t we split up and look for it?” said Yuuma, holding up a finger in delight. “Whoever finds the youngest chicken gets the treasure; what do you say? I mean, it’s more fun looking for hidden characters when you know there’s a prize at the end! Now then, on your mark, get set, go!”

He ran down to the end of the hallway and turned right, heading into the farthest room.

Mayuka pointed to the door next to the ladder and exclaimed, “I’ll search here!”

“Then I’ll take this one…” Akane opened the door to the left of Mayuka’s. She sounded like she was enjoying herself.

Hinata and Chris were the last ones left.

“Um, do you wanna look, Chris…?”

Chris glanced up at Hinata in confusion, as if to say he had no idea what was going on.

5

Treasure Hunt



The idea of hunting for treasure sounded fun, but…

There was something fishy about everything here.

Hinata turned left down the hallway and opened the door closest to the entrance of the house. He left it open, just to be safe. He was pretty sure that this was the room where Mayuka had seen the ghostly light and where Akane had been cleaning.

“Chris, is this where she brought you yesterday?” he asked. The dog just looked confused. “Well, I guess you found that bug and got startled, so maybe you don’t remember. Hopefully that spider’s out of sight by now…”

Before going inside, Hinata poked his head in to check for any insects. The left wall of the room was inclined to match the slope of the roof. There were two large bay windows in it, long and skinny and forming a point at the top. These had to be the windows where Mayuka saw the ball of fire.

Just to be sure, he looked through them and saw the front yard and the street beyond it. This was the spot, then.

Akane said she had been cleaning it up, but the room didn’t look particularly clean to Hinata. However, there was a selection of cleaning supplies including disinfectant and deodorizing spray on the table in the middle of the room, so maybe she just hadn’t gotten to it yet.

“Oh, right—the chicken!”

Hinata got back on track and started looking for decorations.

There was another artistic relief running the length of the wall here, like the one over the fireplace downstairs. But this one was closer to the floor, rather than eye level. Sure enough, there were flower patterns and a few hidden chickens among them. But it was impossible to tell which of them was supposed to be young.

Then he looked at the ceiling. There was no chandelier here, just a rounded glass light fixture—no chickens.

There was an old clock on the wall, but it was a cuckoo clock. No chickens there, either.

"Chris, sniff around for chickens!" Hinata commanded.

"Woof?" Chris just looked confused.

"You're right, Chris. Sorry, I'm just joking." Hinata laughed, hugging the dog. The action brought a dark-brown pattern below him to his attention.

In the middle of the wood flooring, wood of a different color had been worked in. And it was in the shape of a chicken! Hinata ran his fingers over the little chicken shape, which was about four inches to a side, and tried pushing it.



“Seems like it’s just a decoration… And I have no idea how young it is…”

After another look around the room, Hinata took Chris back out into the hallway.

“I found it! The youngest chicken!!” Mayuka cried, hurrying out to the hall.

“Where?!” replied Yuuma as he rushed over. Akane came back to see as well.

“Over here…”

Mayuka grabbed Hinata by the arm and dragged him into the room where she’d been searching.

“Look at this!”

She was pointing at a relief near the room’s floor, much like the one Hinata had found.

“See this super-tiny one? I think it must be the youngest chicken.”

There was indeed a very small carving of a chicken on it, about five centimeters in size.

“Oh, but there was one about that big in my room, too,” Akane said coolly.

“In mine, too,” noted Yuuma. “Besides, it might be tiny, but it’s still got a big cockscomb on top and a fancy tail. It doesn’t seem very young.”

Mayuka looked deflated. “Oh… But how are we supposed to tell how young they are? If they have a big crest and tail, does that mean they’re not young?”

“…That’s probably why they all had trouble finding it, because nobody knows the answer,” Hinata mumbled.

“Crest… Tail…” Akane blinked, her long lashes fluttering, as she considered something. Then her eyes popped open. “That’s it! Wouldn’t a ‘young chicken’ just be a chick?”

“Oh! Th-that’s it!!” cried Mayuka and Yuuma in unison.

“Wow, Akane!” said Hinata. “That must be the answer!”

She smiled broadly. It was easily the happiest Hinata had ever seen her.

“So you agree that I’m onto something? Shall we look for baby chicks this time?”

“Yeah! Let’s try again!”

Everyone went back to the same rooms they had initially investigated.

"Not here. Not here…"

Hinata searched all over the room. He got down on all fours, peered up at every inch of the ceiling, and examined the decorative relief from end to end, looking for a baby chick. At some point, he'd gotten really enthralled with this treasure hunt.

Chris, meanwhile, yawned with boredom.

"I don't see any chicks."

There were dozens of chickens all over, but not one sign of a chick.

Eventually, Hinata gave up and headed out into the hallway to look at the posts of the handrail. As it happened, the three others were doing the same thing. They must not have found anything in the other rooms, either.

They scoured the walls, then looked up at the ceiling… And ultimately, four people and one dog met again at the top of the stairs, totally exhausted.

"I didn't find anything," Akane said sadly. "But when the family got together after Great-Grandfather's death, they didn't, either. I guess we shouldn't be surprised…"

"We haven't checked downstairs yet, though!" said Yuuma, refusing to give up. "Come on!"

The group stomped hurriedly down the steps, full of renewed vigor.

But the search turned up nothing once again.

There were tons more chickens to find, of course. They were on the walls, the ceiling, the floor—even on the tiles in the bathroom and washroom. But there wasn't a single baby chick among them.

They searched the big room in the back together, but the results were the same. All they earned there were annoyed looks from the college students trying to do their work at the long table.

"We have to go soon… It's going to get dark," Mayuka said regretfully.

"Perhaps some other time…" Akane sounded just as disappointed.

As he watched a bored-looking Chris, Hinata considered a new thought. Chicks were younger than full-grown chickens. So what

was younger than a chick…?

"…An egg."

"Huh?" Mayuka looked at him. "What did you say, Hinata?"

"The youngest chicken isn't a chick; it's an egg!"

The others' mouths fell open.

"That's right!" Akane smacked a fist into her palm. "There's no chicken younger than an egg! And Great-Grandfather made his fortune in the egg business, so of course it would be an egg!"

"Wow, I never thought of that…"

"But was there an egg somewhere?" Mayuka wondered uncertainly. "I didn't see any chicks, but I didn't see any eggs, either…"

Hinata said timidly, "There's one place where it might be…"

"What?"

"Where?"

They all turned to Hinata.

"Um, well…"

He pointed at the ceiling.



"Ah, so *that's* the egg…"

Yuuma shaded his eyes with a hand as he stared up at the tower on the roof of the haunted mansion. The weather vane stood proudly against the darkening red of the sunset.

They had gone out to the street to see it. Hinata had pointed out a spot at the bottom of the iron pole holding the weather vane. The orb at its base was indeed shaped like an egg.

It appeared almost as if the rooster above had been born from that egg and was now rising up to look out over the town below.

"Th-the first time I looked at it, I thought it was strange that there was something round there," he explained. "I think that m-maybe if we climb up that ladder, we can reach a hand into…the inside of the egg."

"To the ladder!"

Yuuma rushed back into the mansion. The rest of them hurried after him.

The four of them (plus one dog) were once again standing around the ladder in the upstairs hallway, facing one another.

"Please do the honors, Yuu," Akane said, prodding Yuuma onward. But he pulled a pathetic face and circled back behind her, scratching his head awkwardly.

"A-actually, I've got this thing about heights…"

Mayuka, too, hid behind Hinata's back.

Well, I'm not surprised, he thought. Even bright and bubbly Mayuka had a weakness: She, too, was afraid of heights.

"Well, I can't exactly do it," said Akane. "Not dressed like this anyway."

Everyone looked at Akane's dress and agreed she should be exempt. That left only…

Hinata sighed and handed Chris's leash to Mayuka. "Make sure you hold it tight, in case there's another spider. I'll be right back…"

"All right, don't worry!" she said, waving happily. "Good luck up there." Now that she was off the hook, it was like she didn't have a care in the world.

"*Woof!*" Chris barked encouragement as Hinata grabbed the rungs.

"Oh, hang on. Take this with you." Yuuma turned on the flashlight on his smartphone and stuck it into Hinata's pants pocket. "It's dark up there, so you'll want some light."

"Th-thanks…"

Hinata began to climb.

He quickly reached the hole in the ceiling. It was about six feet to a side. Once his head was through it, there was nothing but darkness above. But by the time he got a bit higher, his eyes adjusted, and he could make out a few faint outlines.

It was like climbing a square chimney, and it occurred to Hinata that maybe this was how it felt to be Santa Claus. *Wow, it would be really difficult to climb through here lugging a big sack of presents!*

Down below, he could see the faces of everyone staring up at him. Even Chris was there, looking concerned.

Hinata glanced up again: pitch-dark. If there were windows up here, light could get in, and he'd have a great view of the area. Too bad…

How far had he come? Was he at the top of the tower yet?

He tensed his legs against the rungs, kept a tight grip with his left hand, and reached back toward his pocket for the phone.

Suddenly, the space lit up. There was still more room above; the ladder continued.

Slightly higher, there was a spot where the ceiling closed in, but only halfway. The ladder continued through the narrower space.

Hinata put the phone back into his pocket, plunging his surroundings into darkness once more. Cautiously, he stuck his head into the second stage of the shaft. His back brushed against the lip of the opening. *Uh-oh. Gotta be careful…*

After a few more hesitant steps up, he reached for the next rung and grabbed nothing but air.

Oh, the ladder ends here.

He took out the phone again to light the area and found that the space above his head was pointed, like the inside of a hollow pyramid.

That's the tip of the tower!

Hinata carefully reached out with one foot to touch the flat area above the ceiling and leaned until he was certain it would support his weight. Then he put both feet down and rested the smartphone on the floor so its beam of light shot upward.

Jutting out from the floor of the tiny attic space was a black iron pole. Hinata felt certain that this pole went through the tip of the tower to support the weather vane above.

There were short side bars extending up along its length like more rungs that could be climbed. Hinata left the phone where it was and continued upward.

The pyramid got tighter and tighter around him. Hinata reached up and stuck his arm alongside the iron pole into the tip of the tower's roof. He was most likely reaching inside the egg structure.

Hinata curved his wrist, feeling for the floor of the egg. After changing the angle and position of his hand a few times, he touched something.

His fingers closed around it, and he pulled it back down.

A key!

It was rusted and green but made of firm metal and shaped like a key.

Hinata felt his heart begin to race.

Amazing! I just found the key to a treasure!!



They all stood around staring in wonder at the green key.

"No way," Yuuma said. "It's real. That has to be it! This is crazy!"

Mayuka couldn't even speak.

Akane's porcelain-white skin was flushed. She kept looking back and forth between Hinata and the key in his hands.

"This is incredible. No one has ever been able to find the key, and you did it in a single day!"

Hinata felt himself swell with pride. *I did it, Chris! I found the key…*

"Hold on a minute!" Mayuka said, stopping everyone in their tracks. "Yes, it's amazing that he found it, but this still isn't the treasure. It's just the key that opens up the place where the treasure is. The question now is what this key unlocks."

Everyone exhaled.

"…You're right, Mayuka," Akane said, the flush gone from her cheeks. "So what *does* this key open? It looks like we've got ourselves another mystery…"

Hinata considered the question. When they figured out where the youngest chicken was, it had led them to the key. Was the keyhole also an egg…? But there hadn't been anything else that resembled an egg…

Chris reached up with a paw and placed it against Hinata.

"Woof!"

"I've been really bored! When do I get to do something? Am I being left out of the fun?" Chris seemed to be chiding him.

"Hmm."

Hinata stared at the key. It was very old, but it wasn't rotting away. It felt firm and solid. It must have been specially made for this purpose. Maybe it was formed from some unusual alloy.

Was the keyhole made of the same metal?

"Chris!" Hinata said, holding the key up to the dog's snout. "Smell!"

Excitedly, Chris hopped to attention and began to sniff the key.

“Hey, what are you doing?” Yuuma wondered aloud, trying to sneak in closer, but Mayuka shot him a stern look.

“Shh! Don’t interfere.”

Again and again, Chris sniffed the key. Then, at last, he glanced up at Hinata.

The boy looked his dog in the eye and gave the order.

“Search!”

This time, Chris didn’t press his snout to the floor. Instead, he kept it raised, searching for the scent in the air. Even so, he didn’t waver. With confident steps, he made his way across the hallway and down the stairs.

“What’s the doggy doing?” Akane asked Mayuka in wonderment.

“He’s looking for the place where the key goes. Stay quiet.”

“He can tell?”

“Chris is an amazing dog. He’s a former police dog, you know. And now he’s a canine detective.”

“Huh…?”

Akane froze for a moment, stunned. Mayuka grabbed her sleeve and pulled her along.

“C’mon, let’s follow him!”

Chris descended the stairs and pressed his snout against the door to the back room.

Hinata silently opened it for him. The determined Shiba Inu walked right through the doorway and along the left wall toward the fireplace.

He stopped to the left of the hearth, placed his paw against the wall, and pointed his nose upward.

“Woof, woof!”

“All right, there we go! Good dog,” Hinata said, giving Chris plenty of praise before he stopped to examine the wall for himself.

It was the same decorative relief paneling from before.

The chrysanthemum-like flowers were everywhere, with a few chickens scattered here and there. But where was the keyhole…?



“Mayuka,” Hinata called out. “I think there’s a keyhole somewhere around here. Help me search!”

Even Yuuma and Akane helped, walking up to the relief panels and feeling around with their fingers for anything out of the ordinary.

Suddenly, Hinata had a realization. All the carved flowers were like daisies, with petals surrounding a circular center. But one of them had a more oblong shape in the middle, like an egg!

Hinata pressed the center shape. He felt it click and depress. Once pressed in, he could slide it to the side. And what should appear beneath, but a keyhole!

There it is!!

Hinata held his breath. With trembling fingers, he put the key into the lock.

Thump! A panel below the decorative relief came loose from the wall and fell onto the floor.

“Whoa!” Hinata jumped backward out of the way. Chris skittered back, too, startled.

“Are you all right?!”

“What happened?!”

The others crowded around and stared in shock at the big hole in the wall.

There was a metal door behind the panel. It was about three feet to a side.

“Is this…the safe with the treasure inside…?” Yuuma murmured, falling to his knees. “I don’t believe it. This is crazy…”

He inched closer to the hole, then reached for the handle on the metal door.

“Uh, Akane, can I open it?” asked Yuuma. She nodded. Her face was pale. “Here goes…”

Creaaak…

It opened noisily, revealing a space packed with wooden boxes.

“Tr-treasure! Treasure!” Yuuma exclaimed, pulling the boxes out and setting them on the floor.

As everyone watched, he removed a total of twenty old wooden boxes and arranged them in a line.

Yuuma was grinning from ear to ear. He was practically drooling. “Open one up, Akane,” he said. “This is your great-grandpa’s treasure!”

With trembling fingers, she reached for one of the boxes. It was tied with an old purple string. She carefully undid it, then she lifted the lid…

“It’s a teacup…”

What emerged was a melted-looking dark-brown teacup in a traditional Japanese style.

Yuuma was stunned. “Wh-what about this one?” He tried a flat box and found a large old plate with a piece missing. It was white ceramic detailed with a blue pattern.

Hinata giggled. “I think they’re antiques. They’re probably worth a whole lot of money…”

“Aw, man!!” Mayuka lamented. She was utterly disappointed. “I don’t care how much they’re worth—these are *boring!* I was hoping for jewels and gold coins… You know, sparkly stuff!”

The rest of the boxes contained pots, vases, and so on.

“After all the hard work Hinata and Chris did, this is so boring,” Mayuka lamented.

Akane, who had seemed so alive and excited moments earlier, appeared to have put on her mysterious blank mask again.

“Indeed. What a shame… And after that former police dog worked so hard.”

For some reason, Hinata felt a shiver run up his spine.

6

Encroaching Evil



After school the next day, Mayuka said she was heading back to the haunted mansion.

“I mean, today’s the first day of filming, so I need to go and see how it works. If I only show up for my own scenes, I won’t understand how it all fits together. I *have* to go!”

“So why don’t you go on your own, then? I’ll just walk Chris in a different direction today,” Hinata said boldly.

The previous day had been fun. *Chris and I got to be useful, and while the end result wasn’t as dazzling as it could have been, we did find some valuable treasure.*

But Hinata wanted some time away from the mansion to think things over.

A bunch of little details were bugging him, but he still wasn’t able to figure out what it all meant. He couldn’t help but feel like he was missing something important.

Although he couldn’t explain what, he felt like there was something unsettling going on in that mansion. Akane seemed suspicious, too. But he couldn’t say exactly what it was that bothered him. It all weighed on Hinata’s mind, making him feel nervous and uncertain.

Mayuka grumbled, “All right. I guess we’ll split up for today.”

It was rare for Mayuka to skip Chris’s after-school walk. Hinata was a bit lonely, but he convinced himself it would be nice to

have some peace and quiet for once.

Hinata and Mayuka went out into the shopping district, said good-bye, and headed in opposite directions. Hinata and Chris went toward the train station, and Mayuka went toward the haunted mansion.

"You like taking a different route now and then, don't you, Chris?" Hinata said. "Your senses will get dull if you go in that dusty old mansion every day." Chris looked up at his partner and barked happily.

See? Even Chris agrees.

Hinata took off walking with renewed vigor, convinced he'd made the right decision. If you went toward the station and turned left at the bakery across the street, you'd pass Rui's house. That would be their route this time.

But at just that very moment, a white car slowly came up behind them before passing by.

Chris twitched and came to a stop. Then he lifted his nose and sniffed at the air.

Suddenly, Chris bolted after the car!

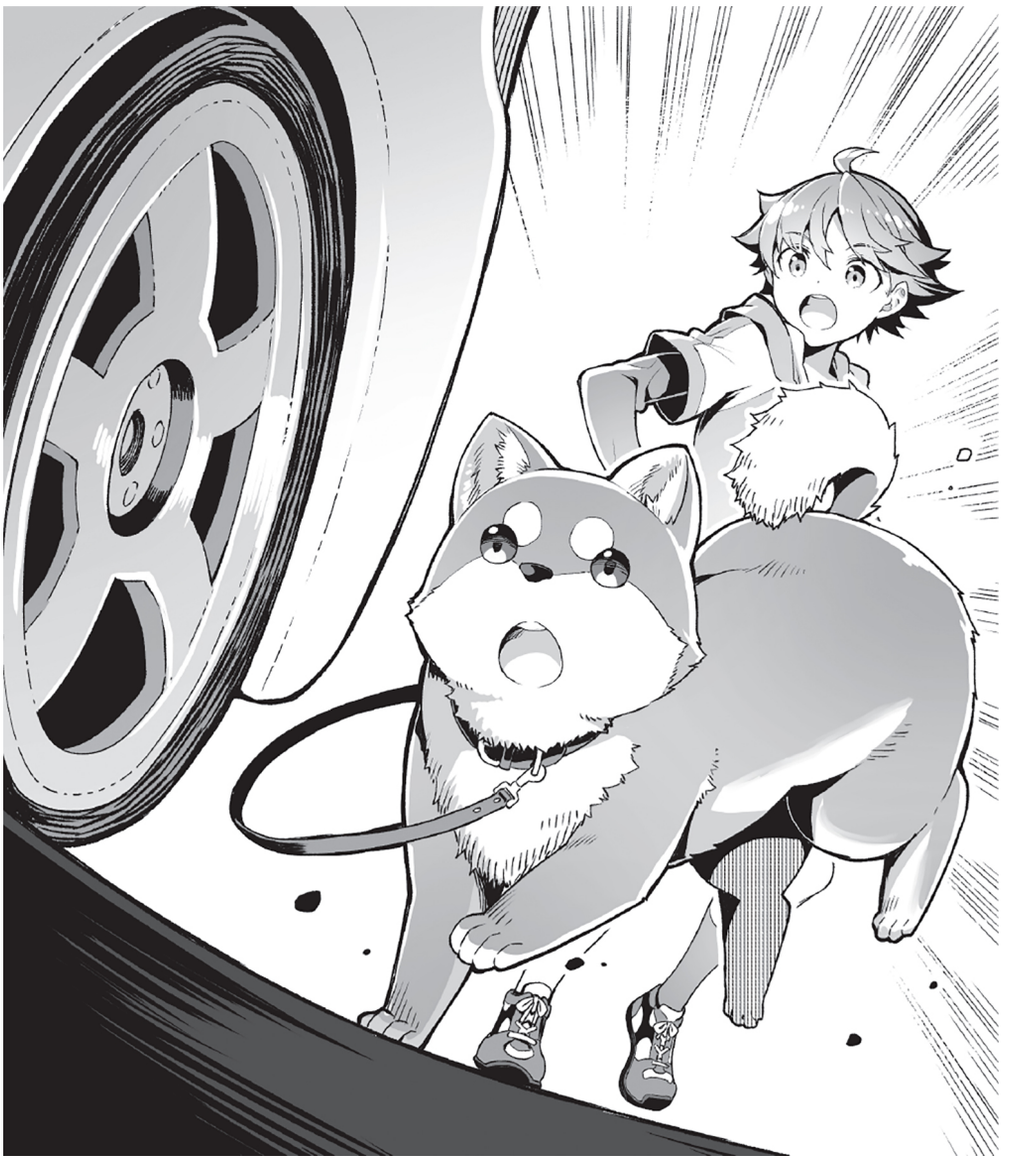
It all happened so quickly that the leash slipped right out of Hinata's hand.

"Aaah!"

"Woof, woof! Woof, woof!" Chris barked and sprinted after the white car.

Chris? What's wrong?! Hinata hurried to catch up.

Right as Chris reached the car, the vehicle began to slow down and then stopped. Chris lunged at the rear door and barked some more. The passenger door opened.



Chris had been barking at the rear door and seemed startled by the front passenger door. Then a hand reached out and grabbed his collar. Something flashed.

“Chriiiis!!”

Chris was being taken away!!

Hinata caught up to the car and dove for all he was worth.

He struck the arm reaching out from the passenger door and landed on top of Chris, flattening the Shiba Inu to the ground. Hinata clung to the struggling dog’s collar and stayed low, pressing himself to the asphalt.

Just overhead, the car door slammed shut. The white car then sped off, driving past the train station and out of sight.

“Hinata! Chris!”

Hinata could hear Mayuka’s voice calling them. He was still on the ground, holding Chris. The dog was whining sadly. Hinata’s heart raced, and he breathed heavily.

“Hinata, are you all right?” Mayuka asked fearfully, bending down beside him. “Hinata? Chris? Are you alive?”

Groaning, Hinata lifted his head a little. “M-Mayuka… Did you get the number?”

“Huh? What number?”

“The license plate number on the car. I was in such a panic that I didn’t check…”

“Neither did I! I just heard Chris barking, so I turned around and ran to catch up. I didn’t see any numbers!”

Hinata got a firm grip on Chris’s leash and slowly sat up.

Oooh, my elbow hurts. And my knee is bleeding… His head was swimming. He was afraid to look at his own blood.

Several people who had been walking around or working at nearby shops came over to help.

“Hinata, are you all right?”

“Oh no, your knee is bleeding…”

“Someone let the vet clinic know!”

“I’ll go!”

Soon there was a crowd around them, and the area was buzzing with activity.

Within moments, Yuusuke was running over from the clinic.

“What happened, Hinata?!” His face was pale as he crouched down beside him. “W-was it a traffic accident?”

“N-no, it was Chris… This car nearly took Chris away. It drove up from behind, and a hand came out and grabbed Chris’s collar…”

“But you didn’t get hit by the car?”

“N-no. I jumped because I was trying to get Chris back…”

Someone nearby said, “Um, should we call an ambulance?”

Huh? Hinata felt a little burst of panic. *No, we don’t need all that!*

“I-I’m fine. I don’t need an ambulance,” he stammered.

“Let’s get you home, then. Up you go.”

Yuusuke picked Hinata up off the ground. Hinata quickly handed the leash to Mayuka. It was embarrassing, but there was no escaping his father’s grip, and he wasn’t in any state to walk anyway…

With Hinata in his arms, Yuusuke bowed to the crowd around them.

“I’m sorry to have worried you all like this,” he said. “I’ll take him home now…”

From there, he walked back to their home above the clinic.

Suzune took Hinata to the bathroom to scrub both his elbows and his right knee clean, then stuck large bandage pads on them.

“Don’t worry; Chris isn’t hurt at all. And you just got a few scrapes, so you’ll be fine. There’s nothing to worry about,” she told him as he sat on the couch. She gave him a pat on the shoulder and looked him in the eye. “What in the world happened out there?”

Hinata exhaled. He was glad to hear that Chris was all right. And now that his scrapes were hidden under bandages, he felt much better about them.

Chris nudged Hinata’s shoulder with his snout and whined a bit every now and then.

“Well… I was taking Chris on a walk toward the station when this white car came up from behind and passed us. Chris suddenly got excited and started to chase after it… Then the car stopped, and a hand reached out and tried to pull Chris inside. I panicked and jumped on Chris to make sure that didn’t happen.”

Yuusuke marveled at his son's story. "You managed to get Chris back?! That's really something, Hinata…"

Now that Hinata thought about it, it *was* surprising for him to do something so bold. When it seemed like Chris was about to be taken away, he had simply acted, without stopping to think about it for so much as a second. *I'll never leave Chris behind again. I'll never give him up…*

"I was walking in the opposite direction," explained Mayuka from her spot beside the sofa. "When I heard Chris barking, I turned around and saw Hinata chasing after Chris, who was chasing after a car. Then the passenger door of the car opened, and someone grabbed Chris…so Hinata jumped at the hand, snatched Chris back, and fell to the ground!"

Suzune tilted her head back and exhaled. "As your mother, that's terrifying to hear. But I'm glad you're all right… And, Yuusuke?"

"What?"

"I'd say this deserves a mention to the police, wouldn't you?"

Yuusuke folded his arms to think. "You're right. After all, it was an attempted kidnapping."

Suzune shook her head. "It was Chris who was nearly kidnapped, not Hinata. So I guess it would be more like attempted theft."

"Chris is property?" Hinata scowled.

"Unfortunately, according to the law, yes," his mother explained. "And because you were hurt, maybe it would count as assault. Or maybe not, since you didn't get struck directly…"

"Tell you what; I'll run over to the police station and ask Officer Iwata for advice," Yuusuke said, getting to his feet. "I'm sure he'll be willing to hear me out."

"That's a good idea. You do that, and let's tell Grandpa about it, too. He did ask to be informed immediately if anything strange happened with Chris."

Suzune went over to the dining table to get her phone.

Officer Iwata rushed to their place at once and listened to what Hinata and Mayuka had to say. Then he went back outside to find witnesses from around the shopping district and get their stories, too.

After a while, Shunya showed up, looking tense. Yuusuke and Suzune had already gone back downstairs to reopen the veterinary clinic. It was now fully dark outside.

“I heard you got hurt, Hinata. How are you feeling?”

“Grandpa! I’m sorry for worrying you.”

Hinata rushed over to his grandfather. Chris barked and sidled up against Shunya’s leg. Shunya bent down and gave the dog a good petting.

“There, there. Looks like Chris is fine, at least. I’m so glad it wasn’t any worse… Did you scrape yourself there?” he said, noticing Hinata’s knee.

“His elbows, too,” Mayuka interrupted.

Shunya sighed. “You poor kid… What about you, Mayuka?”

“I wasn’t that close, so I’m fine!”

Shunya murmured about how glad he was, then took a seat on the living-room sofa. “I rushed here so fast that it’s left me all tuckered out…”

Hinata and Mayuka sat down in front of the sofa to tell the same story they’d recounted several times already.

“Hinata was really cool. He protected Chris!” Mayuka finished proudly, as though it were her own accomplishment.

“Well, that’s quite an achievement… And I’m very glad it didn’t turn out worse.”

Shunya’s eyes crinkled as he beamed and patted them both on the shoulder. Then he sighed again. “But if Hinata’s getting into danger, I don’t know if I can continue to keep Chris here…”

Huh? Hinata flinched and then sat back down. The movement caused his scraped knee to smart, but at the moment he had more important concerns.

“That’s not true! It’s fine. I’m Chris’s partner, and we make a good team. Don’t we, Chris?”

Chris had been restless since the incident but seemed to realize that now was the time to make a good impression, and he gave one big, brave bark to show Shunya how serious he was.

Hinata’s grandfather looked at both of them gravely, then put on a sad smile. “I would feel terrible for Kobayashi if anything happened to Chris. And more than anything, I’m concerned about you two kids getting into danger.”

“But…” Hinata’s head dropped. Then he summoned his courage and looked up with great conviction. “Grandpa, why do you think they’re after Chris? Can you tell me more about Mr. Kobayashi and Chris?”

“Oooh, oooh! I want to hear that story, too!” Mayuka said, sitting up on her knees and sidling closer to Shunya.

He tapped at the back of his neck, mulling over his options. Finally, he spoke, his voice serious. “Kobayashi had opened up a detective business.”

“Detectives? Are those real?”

Hinata was stunned. He thought that detectives were just characters who appeared in mystery novels and TV shows.

“I was surprised, too. I didn’t know that people could make a real living as detectives these days. But according to him, most of the work is just searching for lost pets. The rest is more like an odd-jobs service. He once laughed and told me he’d even repaired home appliances for old folks.”

“Wow, neat! That sounds really helpful!” said Mayuka excitedly.

Shunya grimaced. “The problem is, Kobayashi’s a little too nice. I think he ran it less like a business and more like a charity. He told me, ‘I just need enough to feed Christie and myself.’ Chris was especially good at tracking ever since he was a puppy, so Kobayashi was able to successfully find most of the pets.”

“That’s amazing, Chris. You were really helping out!” Hinata said, petting the nearby pup.

“Eventually, Chris passed the police-dog test and started a new job on the force. And that was when the incident happened.”

“The one that caused Mr. Kobayashi to go missing,” Mayuka murmured, downcast.

Shunya nodded. “Not long after that, someone ransacked his office, which was also his home. Kobayashi didn’t have any relatives, so I was called to the scene as his closest contact. They wanted me to check if anything had been stolen. I wasn’t much help, but I could tell that his laptop had been taken. It must have contained a bunch of his files. Maybe his detective work had something to do with his disappearance, as well as the burglary.”

“But didn’t you say that Mr. Kobayashi was only finding pets and helping old people?” Hinata asked.

“That’s right. But before the incident, he told me that something was bothering him. One of his regular customers, an old woman, had asked him for help with something strange. Her grandchild was getting into some odd business, and she was worried. Based on what she said, her grandchild was involved in taking stolen items and exchanging them for cash.”

“Oh! That’s just like what happened in our last case!” Mayuka shouted.

“That’s right,” Shunya agreed. “Kobayashi was trying to speak to the grandchild, but they ran away from home before he could get ahold of them…”

“Are they still missing?” Hinata asked. Shunya exhaled deeply.

“He told me that the case sounded very dark indeed, and it was troubling him. I told him to hand it over to the police instead. It sounded too dangerous to me. But he laughed it off and said he was concerned about the old woman and wanted to help. I wish I had been firmer with him,” he lamented, gazing at Chris. The dog merely whined in confusion.

“Before the incident,” he added, “I even told him about you, Hinata. I showed him a picture of you, and he said, ‘*He looks very kind and clever. I bet he’d make good friends with Christie.*’ I can remember every word of it, even now. It’s why I thought of leaving Chris with you after Kobayashi went missing…”

Shunya helplessly balled his hands in his lap.

“That just makes me want to stay with Chris even *more*, Grandpa! Let me keep him!” Hinata said firmly, looking his grandfather in the eye. Shunya’s expression softened.

“Yes, I suppose it was partly Kobayashi’s decision to have you take Chris. I can wait a little longer… But it’s clear that something’s going on behind the scenes, and we still don’t know where Kobayashi is. Will you promise me that you won’t get mixed up in anything dangerous?”

Without standing, Mayuka sidled over toward Shunya. “Mr. Shunya, I promise I won’t ever make Chris train or act like a police dog. We won’t do anything to stand out. After all, we don’t want the culprits to find him.”

Shunya chuckled and patted her on the shoulder. “Thank you. You’ve been a good friend to Chris, too, Mayuka. I appreciate that.”

Suddenly, while Shunya was talking, Chris's ears sprang to attention. A moment later, the intercom bell rang.

"It's me, Iwata!" said a loud and hearty voice through the speaker. "The clinic looked like it was busy, so I decided to try here first."

Officer Iwata stood outside the door and saluted, then asked Shunya's permission to come in.

"I hear you've been helping out Hinata. Thank you so much," Shunya replied, bowing.

Iwata bowed as well. "Oh, I just hope I can be of service… I finished asking around the shopping district and thought I'd report back on what I found."

He opened his notepad and then noticed Hinata peering around his grandfather's side. "To sum it up, Hinata, I wasn't able to get any direct eyewitness reports. Everyone there only saw what happened after you and Chris were already on the ground. The security cameras in the area caught the white car, but the incident in question happened in a blind spot. We did get the license plate number, though, so I'll run it soon… But I don't know if we'll be able to file a complaint with what we have…"

Shunya listened to everything he had to say, then asked, "Do you think Chris was targeted?"

Iwata hummed in thought. "Couldn't say for sure. They might have been trying to push him away. If only we could ask Chris why he was chasing after the car in the first place…"

Chris whined from behind Hinata.

The sound made Hinata come to his senses. *That's right! Chris has bolted off without an order more than once recently. What's going on? What could be making Chris act that way…? It's strange; usually it's so easy for me to tell what Chris is thinking…*

"Thank you very much, Officer. I appreciate all the work you've done keeping these kids and Chris safe," Shunya said, bowing once more.

"It's my pleasure. Hinata, Mayuka, and Chris are my friends. Of course I'm going to do whatever I can to help them," Iwata said, saluting again. Then he turned to Mayuka. "I'm heading back to the police station now, so I might as well walk you home."

“Yay! Thank you, Mr. Iwata!” she said, happily hopping over to where she’d left her shoes.

“Hinata,” the officer continued, “if you remember anything or figure something out, be sure to tell me. I’m always at the police station.”

“Th-thank you,” Hinata replied. He felt gratitude warm his heart, knowing that Iwata was on his side.

The police officer left with Mayuka, and the door closed behind them.

Just then, a memory flashed through Hinata’s mind.

The hand that had extended from the passenger seat of the white car. Was it a man’s hand? What had he seen…?

There was something important, a crucial detail that Hinata was forgetting. He shook his head, trying to clear the cobwebs.

Where Is Chris Going...?



The next day was Saturday, so Hinata didn't have school.

Out of caution, the family decided not to let Chris out for a while, so there was no morning walk. Instead, Hinata slept in for the first time in a long while. He got up lazily and checked the clock in the living room: It was after nine. His parents were already downstairs, and soon the clinic would open for business.

"Good morning, Chris," he said.

Chris would usually be in his pen in the middle of the room, but now, he was sitting on the sofa instead. About a third of his morning dog food was still sitting in its dish.

I'm awake and moving around, but Chris isn't coming to me. I can see his nose and ears twitching. Poor thing seems restless...

Concerned, Hinata sat down beside Chris and rubbed his back.

"What's the matter, Chris? Are you feeling tired, too? I'm sorry I can't take you for a walk today."



Chris whined sadly and rubbed his nose against Hinata. The white spots around his eyebrows pinched together.

I wonder if Chris is still in shock from yesterday…

Hinata made some toast for breakfast. He was sitting at the table eating it when the intercom rang.

It was Mayuka.

She let herself in, then hopped onto the sofa and hugged Chris.

“Good morning, Chris! Poor baby, you didn’t get to go on a walk today. Let’s hope you’re able to go back out soon.”

Chris whined again and pressed his snout into Mayuka’s hand. She turned to Hinata.

“Is something wrong with Chris?”

Hinata popped the rest of the toast into his mouth and washed it down with milk.

“Y-yeah… I think it might have something to do with yesterday. Maybe it’s best if we just take it easy at home today.”

“I had a feeling. That’s why I brought my homework.” Mayuka held up the lesson bag she’d brought from home.

When both Chris and I are feeling down, we just make things worse for each other, but having Mayuka around all day long might actually be even more annoying.

Hinata smiled uncomfortably and stood up from the table, then took his dishes to the sink.

“I didn’t get to go to the haunted mansion yesterday,” Mayuka said with a sigh as she got out her homework sheets and pen case. “I bet they’re already filming. I wonder if I wrecked the schedule by not showing up…”

Hinata rolled his eyes as he washed the dishes. “Look, you’re not the star of the video. They were only going to put you in a single shot or two, remember?”

“This time, maybe. But what if I get my big break when it goes up online?”

Hinata laughed. There was something about Mayuka’s boundless optimism that always made him feel better.

“Well, I guess I can put up with some annoyances,” he murmured to himself.

Mayuka’s head shot up, and she glared at him. “What? You just said something about me, didn’t you?”

He'd assumed the sink would drown out the sound of his voice; Mayuka's hearing was unbelievably sharp.

"W-well, if you're that worried about it, why don't you go to the haunted mansion on your own?" he said, trying to distract her.

"Hmm. I thought about it, but I decided I was more worried about Chris," she said, glancing at the dog and grinning. "We're a team, after all."

Hinata felt a comforting warmth in his chest. It was nice to have Mayuka around, after all…

Even Chris looked a little happier than before. Just then, an idea occurred to Hinata.

"Oh, right! Chris, do you feel like having a snack? I'll go down and see if I can get some cheese for dogs. Can you watch the house for a minute, Mayuka?"

"Okay," she said, wedging a pencil between her nose and lip.



Hinata opened the door to the veterinary clinic.

Saturday mornings were always busy, since a lot of people couldn't come during the week. That day was no exception.

The lobby was full of people holding carriers with cats, dogs, and birds inside. One paper-lined case even had an iguana in it.

"Hinata!" said Rui the moment the automatic door opened. Once again, he was seated on the sofa, with Chachamaru on his lap.

Hinata waved to his father behind the desk and went over to Rui. "H-hi, Rui. Is Chachamaru feeling bad again?"

"Good morning. No, there's nothing wrong with Chachamaru… But I hear you went through quite an ordeal yesterday."

Is Rui worried about me?

"Y-you knew about that…?"

"Yes. The man at the bakery on the corner told my grandma last night. I heard you got hurt," Rui said, eyeing the large bandage on Hinata's knee.

"Yeah. B-but it's only a scrape."

"Really?! The baker said you were bleeding all over, and he wanted to call an ambulance. Grandma and I were really

worried.”

So it was the baker who was fussing about calling an ambulance. That would have been way too much…

“I’m sorry I worried you. But it’s nothing, really. Say hi to your grandma for me…”

“And is Chris all right, too?” he asked. Hinata nodded, and Rui’s brows creased. “I’m glad to hear that. I wonder if the effect of Hakutaku and Amabie wore off, then. Or maybe they *were* doing their job, and it could have been much worse.”

Hinata blinked in surprise. *That’s right. I took the figures out of their capsules and left them in my desk drawer!* Feeling suddenly nervous and guilty, he told Rui, “I—I bet it would have been terrible if I didn’t have them with me…”

Maybe next time I’ll put them in my walking bag…

Just then, the door to the examination room slid open.

It was Akane! Hinata was surprised to see her.

If her visit was already over, she must have come first thing in the morning. Maybe Hammy was feeling bad again.

She was holding Hammy’s case, but she was not in her usual all-black attire. While the dress underneath was still black, she was wearing a whitish windbreaker over it with the sleeves rolled up. The jacket looked too big for her body.

Was she wearing a boy’s jacket for some fashion reason?

“Oh!”

Her face lit up in youthful surprise when she saw Hinata, but only for a brief moment. Then the mysterious mask slid down once again.

“You didn’t come to hang out yesterday, Hinata. Yuu was so disappointed. He really wanted Mayuka to be in the video…”

“I-I’m sorry. A bunch of stuff happened yesterday…,” Hinata said, feeling guilty that, in fact, he hadn’t even wanted to go. When he looked away, avoiding her gaze, he noticed Rui’s face was beet red. *Oh, right. He’s head over heels for her.*

“Oh, um, this is Rui Takeuchi and his cat, Chachamaru,” said Hinata, giving them a proper introduction. Rui bowed quietly and awkwardly, like a puppet on strings.



“The friend carrying the cat!” Akane said, remembering Hinata’s description. At this, Rui’s cheeks grew 30 percent redder.

“I’ve got the bill for Hammy here,” said Yuusuke. Akane turned to head for the front desk but lost her footing.

“Ah!”

Oh no! Hinata reached out to keep her from falling and ended up grabbing her arm. She stumbled and leaned against him as she regained her balance.

“I-I’m sorry,” she said. “Oh, I’m so glad I didn’t drop Hammy!”

She rearranged her grip on the hamster case and headed again for the front desk. Head-over-heels Rui watched her go.

“She’s gorgeous, even when wearing a white jacket.”

Once she was done checking out, she turned back to them.

“Come and visit again, Hinata. I’ll be waiting. Oh…and bring your doggy, too.”

Then she lowered her eyes to the floor and slowly walked out of the lobby through the automatic door.

“You’re so lucky she remembers you, Hinata. I should ask if you’ll take *me* to the haunted mansion with you sometime,” Rui said, clearly jealous.

Hinata smiled slightly and nodded, then pulled away and headed for the front desk. “Hi, Dad.”

“Did you eat your breakfast, Hinata? How does your knee feel? Do you need to change out the bandage?” Yuusuke reeled off a bunch of questions, not giving Hinata a chance to answer. Then he leaned in and whispered, “Sorry I couldn’t be upstairs with you. As you can see, we’re pretty busy.”

“It’s fine. I know it’s always crowded on Saturdays. Mayuka’s upstairs right now. She’s going to do her homework with me. But…Chris didn’t finish all his food. I came down to get some cheese snacks.”

“That’s a good idea. Chris loves cheese, and it’ll be good nutrition. So…he’s feeling under the weather, huh? We can have Suzu take a look at him in the afternoon when there’s time,” his father said, then pulled a small bag of cheese bites from behind the counter.

Hinata looked back at the entrance and then asked a question that had been on his mind. “Dad, was Akane’s hamster sick or something?”

Yuusuke shook his head. “She was worried that something was wrong with his poop. But when your mother checked, they were very normal and healthy pellets. Maybe she just wanted some reassurance from this kind and gentle groomer!”

He cackled at his own joke, and Hinata joined in.

“Watch out, okay? Jokes like that will just make Mom mad at you again! Oh, and Chris and I will be just fine. Don’t worry about us.”

Hinata took the bag of treats and went back to Rui. “Um, Rui, thanks for worrying about me. As for the haunted mansion, I think it’s probably best if we stay away from there… I think it’s much safer to avoid it.”

“Huh?” Rui stared at him, confused.

“Bye…”

Hinata waved to his classmate and went back upstairs.



“Open the door, please, Mayuka,” Hinata said into the intercom.

Within seconds, she let him in.

“Welcome back. Did you get a snack for Chris?”

“Yep. But I saw Akane at the clinic,” Hinata said, taking off his shoes at the door. Chris came trotting over from the living room. “Hey, Chris, you want some cheese snacks? You didn’t finish your breakfast…”

Chris barked and jumped onto Hinata. He had been leaning over and lost his balance, falling to the floor. One of his half-removed shoes flew off and landed in the doorway.

“Aaah! What is it, Chris?”

Chris placed a paw on Hinata’s shoulder and sniffed furiously at the air, practically climbing on top of him.

“Chris, c’mon, behave…”

The dog’s momentum knocked Hinata all the way to the floor. Chris continued to sniff at him, then abruptly looked up at the door.

“Whiiine…”

Without warning, Chris jumped over Hinata’s body and wriggled through the crack in the door, which was jammed on

Hinata's shoe. Before Hinata could do anything about it, the dog had slipped away and gotten outside.

"Chris!"

"Chris!!"

Hinata and Mayuka called out, trying to stop him. But the clicking sound of nails on steps continued downward and vanished.

Hinata bolted upright, grabbed the shoe stuck in the doorway, and jammed it back on his foot as he hopped outside.

He rushed down the stairs to the street, then looked both ways.

"Chris!!"

But there was no response to his call.

Why?

What happened, Chris? Where did you go without me…?

Shocked, he crumpled onto the ground and tried to think.

What was happening to Chris? What was driving this new behavior…?

"Where's Chris, Hinata?" Mayuka said, catching up.

"I don't know; he was already gone," Hinata said absent-mindedly, trying to corral his racing thoughts.

"W-we've got to search, Hinata! Wh-which way? Which way did Chris go…?"

She was trotting in place with panic.

… …*That's it!* Hinata lifted his head.

There was only one reason Chris would act so desperate.

"Mayuka, I'm going to go check something out…"

"Go? Go where?"

Hinata stood up, ascended the stairs, and darted back in. He grabbed his walking bag and stuffed the blue leash inside it. He was heading back down the stairs when Mayuka snagged his arm.

"Hey! Where are you going? Where did Chris go?"

Hinata looked her in the eye. "The haunted mansion. It might be dangerous… So you don't have to come along. I'll go on my own. I swore I'd never leave Chris alone again…"

He started to run.

"What are you talking about?! Of course I'm going with you!" Mayuka shouted, hurrying after him.

“Mayuka!” someone else called out. She looked over her shoulder and saw Rui, standing there with Chachamaru in his arms, looking stunned. “Did something happen?”

“Chris is gone! Hinata’s going to the haunted mansion to look, so I’m going with him!!” she explained before rushing off.



Hinata roughly undid the metal chain around the mansion’s front gate. It jangled and fell loose.

He then hurried over to the door and banged on it.

“Open up! Give Chris back! Open the door!”

Mayuka arrived behind him and leaped over to the intercom, hammering down the button.

“I’m part of this team, too, Hinata! You can’t just leave me behind!”

The door opened, and Yuuma peered out through the crack.

“Hey, pipe down out there… Oh, Mayuka, you’re here! We were waiting for you! We can’t start without…”

“Give back Chris!” Hinata clung to the door and tried to pry it open.

“Wh-what’s your problem? Chris? Your dog isn’t—”

“Chris is here! The people at this mansion are trying to kidnap him! You were the one who tried to pull my dog into the car, weren’t you? I saw your ring!” Hinata shouted, pointing at the ring on Yuuma’s finger, visible around the side of the door.

He had just remembered what he saw, brief as a flash, on the hand that lunged out of the passenger side of the white car.

The flash from the eye in the skull!

Yuuma suddenly tried to hide his ring, but Hinata charged at him and lunged into the entranceway.

“Wait, Hinata!” Mayuka cried.

Hinata rushed into the middle of the foyer and shouted, “Chriiiis!”

“What is it with you and breaking into this house?” Yuuma demanded, trying to pin Hinata’s arms behind his back.

“What do you think you’re doing? Give Chris back!” Mayuka shouted, kicking Yuuma as hard as she could on the butt.

“Ow! What do you think *you’re* doing?!”

The three of them were squabbling when the door to the back room opened with a click.

“What’s going on, Yuu…? Oh, it’s Hinata and Mayuka.”

It was Akane. She had taken off her windbreaker, leaving only the black dress. Hinata slipped out of Yuuma’s arms and ran over to her.

“Akane! Chris is here, right? I’m sure he was chasing after your trail.”

Her eyes, like little black buttons, traveled from his face to the top of the stairs.

“Chris is upstairs, then?” Hinata started in that direction.

“No!” Akane snapped. Hinata came to a stop. “My mother is upstairs…and she said she wants to meet you.”

“…Your mom? Wants to meet me…?”

Hinata’s mouth fell open. Why would Akane’s mother want to meet him?

“She said that she’s met you before. And that she’d like to introduce herself again.”

Akane sounded as though she were reading from a script.

She’s met me before…? Hinata was very confused. He couldn’t recall ever meeting Akane’s mother. Who was she?

“I’ll go and call her. Will you wait in the back room? Please…go on in.” She opened the door mechanically and gestured inside. “You too, Mayuka. I’ll go and get her now.”

“B-but I’m not here for that; I’m here for Chris!” Hinata shouted.

Akane dropped her eyes to the floor and said quietly, “Mother will explain about your doggy, too. Go on in…”

Feeling there was no other choice, Hinata and Mayuka walked into the room. Once they were inside, Akane shut the door.

A cold, hard *click* sounded behind them.

Hinata turned in shock and grabbed onto the knob. He rattled and turned it, but the door wouldn’t open.

She locked us in!

“Wait, are we trapped in here?!” Mayuka shrieked. Hinata tried the knob again, but it was the same as before.

Crap, they tricked us…

Hinata pounded the door with his hand and shouted, “Chris! Give Chris back!!”

In the distance, he heard what he thought was Chris barking.

“Chris?”



He stopped pounding and listened, but he couldn't hear it anymore. Maybe it was his mind playing tricks on him…

There was a familiar rattling sound nearby. Hinata rushed over to the table with Hammy's stuff on it. The hamster was running as fast as he could inside the little exercise wheel. His cage was clean, and he had food in his dish.

Oh, good, Hinata thought. Akane was taking care of Hammy after all. The hamster wasn't just a tool, an excuse for her to visit the clinic.

"Hinata," Mayuka said, her voice trembling. "Why did you think Chris would come to the mansion? Is he really here?"

Hinata looked around the still-dusty room, then replied with a question of his own.

"Why do you think Chris would ignore my command and rush out the door like that?"

"Why?" she repeated, thinking hard.

Hinata hurried around the room, checking the windows. For some reason, all of them were nailed shut and couldn't be opened. This wasn't a haunted mansion; it was a prison!

The exercise wheel stopped, and the room was quiet again. The club members from the college weren't here this time. There were no laptops or smartphones on the big table to the right; it had been cleared off. The only junk in the room were a few scrunched-up pieces of paper on the floor.

Hinata picked up one of them and smoothed it out on the table. There were names and addresses scribbled violently across the page. Next to them were dates and foreign locations, like Hawaii, Phuket, Paris, and Las Vegas.

Mayuka approached the table, shaking her head. "I have no idea why Chris would bolt out the door like that. And…what's that paper?"

"Do you think those college students were really working on a video…?"

Hinata picked up the other papers and smoothed them out, too. The next one had the same kind of list, written up in the same way.

"Maybe they've been looking up the blogs and social media posts of people who are on vacation overseas and breaking into their homes while they're away…"

“Huh…? Oh! You mean like the break-ins Mr. Shunya and his dogs were helping out with?”

“Yeah. When you go on vacation, you want to show everyone your pictures, right? So you upload them online right away. But all that’s doing is telling everyone, ‘Hey, I’m not home right now!’ And if you’re able to go on vacation to another country, it probably means you’re pretty rich…”

“Oh, I get it!” said Mayuka. “And if you do a little extra research, you can find out their home addresses.”

Hinata nodded. Maybe the “horror video” was all a lie, too. In fact, was *anything* Akane and Yuuma had said true?

The place they had found the safe full of treasure was picked clean. Maybe that treasure was the only real thing here, and Hinata and Chris had led them right to it. The treasure hunt had been fun, but in the end they’d just been handing valuables to thieves…

“Hey! Earth to Hinata!” Mayuka said with irritation. “Why would Chris have run outside?”

Oh, right! Chris! Hinata started to look around.

“Chris and I make really good partners. You agree, right? But there’s someone who means more to Chris than I do. And I think maybe Chris would ignore what I say if it had something to do with him…”

He felt his eyes grow hot. He didn’t want to admit it, but it was the truth.

“You mean, Mr. Kobayashi…?” Mayuka murmured. Hinata nodded.

“Yeah. If Chris smelled Mr. Kobayashi’s scent, he probably couldn’t control himself. He’d lunge for the scent no matter what I tried to do. I think the first time we came here, Chris detected Mr. Kobayashi’s scent and forced his way inside. But the trail must have gone cold after that.”

Mayuka was wide-eyed with shock. “You think Mr. Kobayashi has something to do with the haunted mansion?”

“I mean, there’s no other way to explain Chris’s actions. I think the reason Chris was chasing after that car yesterday was because it was carrying something that had Mr. Kobayashi’s scent on it. And I think that’s what happened today, too…”

“B-but Mr. Kobayashi’s not here,” she argued, looking around. “So what trail was Chris following?”

“When I saw Akane at the clinic earlier, she was wearing a man’s windbreaker. It was different from her usual fashion, which struck me as strange… But then she pretended to trip and rubbed it against me. I’m sure that was originally Mr. Kobayashi’s jacket. So when I walked upstairs and went inside, Chris got excited and knocked me over to get a good sniff. And that’s why Chris bolted out the door, to go after Akane and Mr. Kobayashi’s scent…”

“So where is he, then?”

“I don’t know… But Akane used his windbreaker to lure Chris here, so I’m pretty sure she knows where he is.”

Mayuka promptly ran up to the door and began to beat on it.

“Hey! Akane! Give us back Mr. Kobayashi! Give us back Chris!”

Hinata joined in: “Chris! Where are you, Chris?!”

If Chris really had evidence of a crime, they might kill him. *I don’t care if I’m not the most important person in Chris’s life*, Hinata thought. *I just want him to be safe!*

“Chris! Say something!!”

“Woof!”

There was a distant response. Hinata and Mayuka both froze and listened.

“Woof!”

It wasn’t their imagination. Chris was here!

“Where? Where are you, Chris?” Mayuka shouted.

“Shhh!” Hinata whispered, listening intently. Was it coming from outside? Or upstairs?

“Woof…woof!”

It sounded very far away. It wasn’t coming from above, and it sounded muffled…

“Below?”

Hinata pressed his ear to the dusty floor.

“Woof!”

The barking sounded louder than before. Chris was below the floor!

“Underground?” Mayuka asked. “In a basement? But where? Where’s the entrance?” Hinata found his eyes drawn to the hearth.

The secret door they had found containing the treasure was to the left of the fireplace.

So maybe…

Hinata hopped up and bounded over to the decorative relief on the other side of the fireplace—the right side. Here, there was once again a series of many chrysanthemum flowers. But none of them had an egg-shaped center.

Some of the chickens were hiding within the flowers themselves. One of them had its neck hunched up and its eyes closed, like it was asleep. What's more, it seemed to Hinata that, compared to the others, the sleeping chicken was slightly raised off the wall.

He had seen many chickens decorating this mansion, but none with their eyes closed.

Maybe the one on the left side was the youngest chicken, and the one on the right side was the oldest chicken…

He reached out and touched the carving. It was rounded, just the right size to grab with one hand.

Would it move? He tried turning the decoration.

Ga-chunk! A vertical crack appeared in the wallpaper below the relief.

"Hinata! It's a door!" Mayuka exclaimed, putting her hands over her mouth.

Hinata pushed on it and called into the opening, "Chris…"

"Woof!"

The sound was clearly louder than before!

Creaaak… He pushed the door all the way open, revealing a staircase leading downward.

Hinata ducked through the doorway and started down the darkened steps. Each one creaked under his weight…

Halfway down, the stairs made a U-turn, and at the very bottom he found a simple wooden door.

"Chris?" Hinata called out.

"*Woof!*" came the response from within.

Hinata quickly pushed the door open.

"Whiiine!"

Suddenly, Chris came barreling out through the crack in the door!

“Chris!” Hinata crouched and hugged his dog. “I’m so glad! I’m so glad you’re all right, Chris…”

The end of Chris’s nose was wet and cold. Hinata couldn’t stop the tears flowing from his eyes. He hugged the Shiba Inu once again before looking up.

The room beyond the doorway had a chair in the middle, upon which an adult man was sitting. A single, weak lightbulb hung from the ceiling. The room was barren except for a simple wooden finish. The only object was that large old cloth chair, lit by the meager bulb.

The man, whose elbows were propped up on its armrests, wore a tense smile.

Stunned and distracted, Hinata’s grip relaxed, and Chris slipped free and trotted back to the chair, then leaned against the seated man’s legs.

He had bedraggled hair, sunken cheeks, and unkempt stubble. He wore a stained white collared shirt and jeans. He was totally still and silent. Only his eyes moved, and they were trained on Chris.

Hinata didn’t need to be told who this was.

“Hinata…? Is that…?”

Mayuka came down the steps behind him and squeezed his arm.

Hinata swallowed hard and stepped closer to the man in the chair.

“Mr. Kobayashi? M-my name is Hinata.” The man’s tense cheeks relaxed slightly, and a light glinted briefly in his eyes. “I’ve been taking care of Chris for you…”

A single tear spilled from the man’s eye.

“Oh, dear. You’ve found him,” said a cold, mocking voice from behind.



Someone Important



Hinata whirled around and saw a tall woman standing in the doorway.

She wore a crisp pantsuit and high heels, and had a bob haircut. She looked very smart and glamorous, and smelled of fine perfume.

Wait, I know her…!

Hinata had a stunning realization. He had seen this person before. Once in front of Sakura Jewelry, that store back in the shopping district near the station. And then again early in the morning outside his house, when he'd taken Chris on a walk…

Chris got up and pulled away, growling. That's right—even back then, Chris hadn't liked her.

"Helen Mehito," Hinata murmured.

She laughed, surprise in her voice. "Oh, you remember me! I guess I should have expected as much, after you found both the treasure and this basement room. You're very clever!"

"Wh-who is she…?" Mayuka asked, tugging on Hinata's sleeve.

"…She's the president of a jewelry business. She sells pieces to Sakura Jewelry…"

So Akane's mother was Helen all along? Hinata was stunned.

"Then you know who that is, too, I presume," said Helen, pointing a purple-painted nail at the man in the chair. Hinata nodded.

“It’s…Mr. Kobayashi.”

“Correct! You seem to know a lot for a mere child. So here’s my final question: Do you know what I want?”

Hinata thought this over for a few seconds.

What’s going to happen to us…?

Helen was here. Akane and Yuuma were up above. Perhaps the college students from before were hiding out in the mansion, too.

And we only have Mayuka, Chris, Mr. Kobayashi, who can’t seem to move, and me…

This was a truly desperate situation.

Their only option was to prolong the time they had until they were all tied up, too.

Feeling the pressure, Hinata tensed his stomach and opened his mouth.



“You’re the boss of a burglary ring, aren’t you? The guys responsible for the recent jewel heist we uncovered were working for you.”

One of Helen’s eyebrows rose.

“Oh? And?”

“I think you’re probably involved in a lot more shady stuff, too. You were using this mansion to collect information for more break-ins. I think you had some people digging around online—and then sent your other goons to go rob empty houses…”

“How rude. You act like I’m some common burglar!” Helen laughed. “But I forgive you. The antiques you found for me were actually quite valuable. That discovery alone made using this mansion as a base of operations worthwhile. I’m very grateful.”

Hinata gritted his teeth. In the end, that quest to find the treasure had only wound up enriching someone like her…

“But enough of this. I presume you’re also clever enough to know what I’m after now.”

Hinata winced. He felt a deep pain in his chest.

“…I…I think so…”

Helen’s mouth twisted. She was getting annoyed with him. “Well, out with it, then! Give me what I want!”

Mayuka shrieked softly. She was terrified.

Hinata steeled himself for what would come next, then said, “You want the information that Mr. Kobayashi has. He’s aware of some sensitive details that concern you…”

“You think *he* has dirt on *me*? Don’t be preposterous. I just want to know the name of the person who betrayed me.”

Betrayed?

So that was it. Helen had realized that someone in her organization was leaking information. If she didn’t root out the mole, her group would eventually collapse.

And Mr. Kobayashi had been trying to get information from the mole in order to rescue the grandchild of one of his regular clients.

Hinata looked Mr. Kobayashi in the face. *Mr. Kobayashi, what should I do…?*

The man’s eyes met his, but the only thing Hinata saw in them was frustration and regret.

Helen spat, “Don’t expect anything out of him. He can barely move since he got hurt. Sitting up is the best he can do. He can’t even speak. I have Yuuma and his friends taking care of him, but he’s barely alive as it is.”

“What? Really…?” Mayuka murmured.

Hinata felt crushed. Had Mr. Kobayashi been held prisoner in these circumstances for nearly half a year?

“When I caught him, he’d given his dog a USB drive with the information and let it run off. But we have the USB now. When the dog fled, it dropped it, and one of my men found it… The only problem is that I don’t have the password to open it. We even got his computer from his office, but we weren’t able to get into that, either.”

Helen began to grind her teeth.

“He won’t tell us anything,” she continued, “but when I ask about his dog, he blinks faster. I know the dog has some kind of secret. That’s why I was looking for the mangy mutt…”

Kobayashi’s eyes squeezed shut. Hinata could tell how he was feeling, and he put a hand on his shoulder.

“What was it, four or five months ago? It was around the time we started using this mansion as a base that I met you and that

dog outside the vet clinic. I asked Akane about it, and she said it might be the same breed as Kobayashi's dog. So I told her to lure you in here. She's pretty good at it, don't you think? Taking her hamster in, intentionally dropping her handkerchief, the whole works!" Helen chuckled to herself.

So it was *a setup*, Hinata realized. It was all a ruse. The haunted mansion, the video shoot…

Helen continued, "But even after we caught the dog, it didn't have any clues in its collar or inside its mouth. And it escaped while we were looking…"

"Ohhh," Mayuka said. "I guess it was a good thing for Chris that the spider popped up just then…"

Hinata nodded. They must have thought Chris had a secret compartment between his teeth or something. So when Akane got bit, it was because she had shoved her hand into Chris's mouth. Chris wouldn't bite anyone on purpose!

"And you confirmed that Chris was Mr. Kobayashi's dog based on how quickly we found the treasure, huh?" said Hinata.

"That's right. And that girl there stated very clearly that it was a former police dog. We tried to capture it with our car, but Yuuma failed," she said, shaking her head in disappointment. "I'm tired of chatting. Give me the password, Kobayashi. Do you understand what's going on? I have these children and your precious dog in the palm of my hand! I control their fates! So what do I need to do now? Where have you hidden the password on this dog?"

"Sh-she's going to kill Chris," Mayuka moaned.

Chris growled, baring his teeth at Helen.

I guess I have to do this, Hinata thought, clenching his fists.

"Mr. Kobayashi, may I tell Helen?" he asked, staring at the man. He blinked back. Hinata took that as an okay and continued, "It's a microchip, isn't it?"

Kobayashi blinked slowly once again. So it was true.

Hinata turned to Helen. "Most pet dogs and cats these days have a microchip embedded under their skin. It has a fifteen-digit identification number to identify a lost pet—and prevent pet theft and abandonment. I think the password to Mr. Kobayashi's USB and computer is Chris's ID number."

Mr. Kobayashi blinked a third time.

A cruel smile spread across Helen's face. "So all I need to do is get the microchip out of the dog?!"

"Nooo! Don't!" Mayuka screamed, holding her hands over her mouth.

"That won't work," said Hinata sharply. "In fact, it will make it impossible to find the ID number. My family runs a veterinary practice, so I know what I'm talking about. Microchips are only two millimeters thick and one centimeter long. They're small enough that they can be injected into the body with a syringe. Even a vet can't find the spot where it's been inserted and take it back out again. Plus, if the chip gets damaged, it's useless."

He clenched his fists again and willed himself to be strong.

"And if Chris dies, you'll never get another chance at that password. The microchip only emits its signal while the pet is alive. If it dies, the transmission stops," he said.

Helen exhaled. "Then how am I supposed to read this ID number?"

"…The only way is to go to a specialist veterinarian, or someplace like an animal shelter…"

She gave him a searching look, then said carefully, "Thank you for your advice. For now, hand over that dog." Then she turned toward the door and shouted, "Akane!"

The door opened, and Akane entered without looking at any of them. She had been waiting behind it the whole time.

"Akane, take that dog upstairs," Helen ordered.

The girl glanced at Chris but didn't move. "Mother, there's no leash."

"Leash?"

Hinata opened up his walking bag and pulled the blue leash out to show her. "I have it. I'll put it on him; just don't hurt Chris…"

Hinata leaned over Chris's shoulders, pretending to attach the leash to his collar. He purposely moved slowly and jittered his hands, making it look like his nerves were frayed.

The whole while, he looked Chris in the eye.

Are you ready, Chris…? The dog's ears twitched.

"Quickly now!" Helen snapped. "Akane, we're clearing out of here as soon as possible. Take the dog and go in Yuuma's car.

Don’t waste any time. We’re leaving them here.”

“I want to take Hammy, too, Mother…”

Helen clicked her tongue with annoyance. “Didn’t you hear me? Move! Now!”

Crouched next to Chris, Hinata held out the leash toward Akane. She came over to him and reached for it. At this point, Chris was hidden from Helen’s view behind Akane.

While he held out the leash, Hinata pretended to notice something to his left and murmured, “Oh, Hammy?!”

Akane’s eyes shot open. She turned to glance in the direction Hinata was facing.

Sorry, Akane!

Hinata swiped to the left, knocking Akane’s hand away!

While she lurched off balance, he turned and pointed at Helen.

“Chris, bite!!”

The dog lunged forward and jumped on top of the woman!

“Aaah!”



Chris grabbed Helen by the end of her sleeve and shook his head back and forth. She was taken by surprise and fell down to the floor.

“Aaaah! Akane!”

But Akane was slumped over in a daze and only glanced at Helen dully.

Chris growled and tugged on Helen’s sleeve.

“Stop it, you stupid mutt! Get it off of me! Yuuma!”

Hinata turned to Mayuka and shouted, “Go and call for help!”

“A-all right!”

But just as she opened the door and started to hurry up the stairs, Yuuma came stomping down from above.

“Look out, Mayuka!” Hinata called. She ducked to avoid the man’s grasp, right as Hinata took a capsule out of his bag and threw it at the door.

It worked perfectly. Yuuma passed through the doorway just in time for it to strike him on the forehead and burst open, showering him with red powder.

“Aaah! M…my eyes!!” Yuuma bellowed, holding his face and rolling on the floor. “Owwww!”

He was incapacitated for the moment and wouldn’t be able to open his eyes or do anything for a while. The spice powder bomb worked like a charm. *Thanks for the empty capsules, Rui!*

“Are you all right, Mayuka? Hurry up and go!”

She quickly got to her feet, leaped over Yuuma, and rushed up the stairs. Hinata took the leash, which he’d only pretended to put on Chris, and wrapped it around Helen’s legs as best he could.

“S-stop it! Stop this at once!” Helen raged, but Hinata only pulled the leash tighter.

It didn’t need to be permanent; it just had to hold her for a little while. As long as she had to take the time to undo it, they had a chance to escape…

Yuuma, meanwhile, was still rolling around and bellowing in agony. Once he was done with the leash, Hinata said, “Stop! Chris, stop!”

Chris let go of Helen’s sleeve and looked straight at Hinata, ears erect.

“Go, Chris! Follow Mayuka and call for help! Go—and don’t turn back!”

In an instant, Chris was darting across the room and up the stairs.

“Akane! What are you doing? Go and stop that girl!” Helen commanded, dragging herself across the floor toward Akane. She was sitting next to Kobayashi, covering her face in her hands and trembling. She didn’t seem to hear Helen.

Hinata looked at Kobayashi. He was staring back with tears in his eyes.

At last, he spoke. “H-Hinata, just go. You can’t support me on your own. Focus on getting help,” he said, his voice hoarse and weak.

Then he leaned forward, toppling off the chair and landing on Helen’s back as she was attempting to wriggle past.

“Aaaaah!” she roared with pain.

“Mr. Kobayashi!” Hinata shouted, but the older man was resolute.

“Go now, Hinata. Go and help Christie…”

Hinata regretfully tore his eyes away from Kobayashi, then rushed up the stairs and out of the basement.

9

That's My Partner!



One week later, on a Saturday afternoon…

The clinic had closed for the day, so Hinata and his parents were enjoying a late lunch and lounging around the house with Chris.

Ding-dong! The intercom rang.

"Who is it?" Hinata asked, checking the video screen. The camera showed a familiar-looking young man.

"Good afternoon! It's Iwata!"

"Huh? Mr. Iwata?"

Hinata rushed to the door. Standing outside was a handsome young man in a brown jacket.

"Is that really you, Officer Iwata? You seem so different when you're not in uniform!"

"Right? He seems like a stranger, doesn't he?" said Mayuka, who popped her head around the side and grinned.

"You're here, too, Mayuka?"

"Yep. Mr. Iwata came and asked me if I'd go with him to your house. But I didn't know who he was at first, so he kinda scared me."

"I'm not on duty today," Iwata said. "Do you mind if I come in for a minute?"

Suzune and Yuusuke looked over Hinata's shoulder and waved him in.

“Of course! Chris will be delighted!”

Iwata gratefully took the coffee cup Hinata’s parents offered him. He was sitting on the living room sofa. Chris and Hinata sat next to him, while Suzune and Yuusuke were seated on chairs they’d brought from the dining table.

Mayuka sat down in front of Chris and looked up at Iwata.

“I thought I should explain some things to you all,” he said. “It would be a bit stuffy and intimidating at the central headquarters, and our little local station has no place for you all to sit. Of course, the truth is that I’m not supposed to discuss official business like this in private, but…”

He put down his cup on the coffee table and scratched at the back of his neck.

“Hinata and Mayuka are my friends, and they’re children, so I thought maybe the usual protocol could take a back seat this time.”

“So this is a secret from the police department?” Suzune said, bringing a finger up to her lips and chuckling.

“Yes, this is all strictly off the record,” Iwata said, putting his hands on his knees and bowing to show he would appreciate their discretion. “So where to begin…?”

“What happened to the bad guys after we left?!” Mayuka asked, her nostrils flaring with anticipation. She seemed very eager to know more. “You didn’t actually catch that Helen lady and Akane, did you?”

“No… By the time we got there, the only people in the basement were Mr. Kobayashi and Yuuma Terakawa. There was no sign of the two women.”

“Even though you came as fast as you could…”

Just as Hinata was rushing out of the basement and away from the mansion, Iwata and the rest of the police officers were charging in.

Rui had helped sound the alarm after hearing Mayuka say that Chris was missing and that Hinata was headed for the haunted mansion.

“Rui’s always such a big help. He was the one who let us know what was happening last time, too,” Suzune said wistfully.

Hinata agreed. He owed Rui, big-time.

After Chris was nearly taken away in the car, Hinata packed the capsules Rui had given him full of chili powder, to serve as a means of self-defense. The figures of Amabie and Hakutaku, however, were still in his desk drawer.

“Based on Yuuma Terakawa’s testimony, we were able to arrest the three youngsters researching empty homes to rob. Hinata was right about that.”

The papers they’d left behind contained addresses, names, vacation destinations, and dates. That was the information they were using to burglarize the empty homes.

“Was Yuuma really Akane’s cousin?” Mayuka asked.

Iwata shook his head. “Nope. He was just one of Helen Mehito’s goons. And Akane’s name wasn’t really Akane Kurosaki, either.”

“What?!” everyone exclaimed at once.

“The Akane Kurosaki who owns that mansion is a totally different person. I didn’t look far enough into it the first time. I’m very sorry about that… The student ID she had was probably a fake, too. They were just squatting in that building and using it as a base.”

“But how is that possible?” said Mayuka. “Akane knew all that stuff from back when the mansion was built. Hinata found her great-grandfather’s inheritance for her!”

Hinata felt his ears go red. That had been a big mistake. He’d gone and found a treasure, then handed it right over to the bad guys…

“I have a feeling they did a lot of research on the Kurosaki family first…”

They didn’t have a full picture of exactly what Helen was up to, but according to Officer Iwata, she clearly had a wide intelligence network giving her information she could abuse.

“But thankfully,” he said, “we recovered all the antiques Hinata and Chris found. Terakawa coughed up the spot where he’d stashed them, and we were able to recover them before Helen could send anyone to move them. Eventually, they should make their way to the real Akane Kurosaki.”

“Oh, really? I’m so glad to hear that,” Hinata said. He was so relieved that he nearly slid right off the couch. Chris lifted a paw to stop him and barked.

“That’s great news!” said Mayuka, her eyes sparkling. “Maybe you’ll get some kind of reward for it, Hinata.”

Oh, Mayuka. She always has her eyes on the prize…

“So is this Helen woman actually Akane’s mother?” asked Yuusuke.

Iwata shook his head. “They both got away, so I can’t say anything for certain…”

Hinata got the feeling that they were truly related.

The way Akane looked when she said her family didn’t like animals was so…sad. She seemed to live her life wearing a mask, acting the role of the dutiful daughter, despite her misgivings about what they were doing…

He felt a pain in his chest at the memory of how happy she had looked when they were in the midst of the treasure hunt.

“Hammy’s just fine!” Mayuka reported energetically, raising her hand.

The hamster had been left behind. He was initially held at the police station but was quickly turned over to Mayuka, after she raised a huge fuss and said she wanted to take care of the poor thing.

“I’m glad you were able to do that for us,” Iwata said, beaming. “The police are too busy to be taking care of a hamster all day long, unfortunately.”

Mayuka snorted triumphantly. “I hope you’re all sufficiently grateful to have a Mayuka around,” she said.

Everyone laughed. Even Chris leaned over and booped her with his nose.

“I hear that Mr. Kobayashi’s doing better than expected,” Iwata said to Suzune after taking a sip of coffee. “I haven’t had the chance to meet him myself.”

“Yes. My father’s been visiting him just about every day. At first they were afraid that he was completely paralyzed, but his upper half has made a significant recovery. Apparently he had put on an act of being unable to communicate, thinking it would keep him safer from his captors.”

“I’m glad to hear that. He was held captive for a long time, while badly injured… It must have been a torturous ordeal for him.”

“I’m sure it was thinking of seeing Chris again that got him through it,” Suzune said, smiling at the Shiba Inu.

Chris perked up and woofed softly, wondering what they were talking about.

After the incident, Kobayashi was taken to a hospital. Chris watched him go, whining sadly, but eventually, regular life resumed. Nothing was going to change while Kobayashi was in the hospital, but Hinata couldn’t help but wonder what would happen to Chris after he got out.

He sighed. Trying to dispel his nerves, he asked, “What about the person who was feeding him information? You got their name from Mr. Kobayashi, right?”

Iwata murmured, “We discovered that after making contact with Mr. Kobayashi, that person hasn’t been seen or heard from again. Either they’re in hiding and keeping a low profile, or…”

“Aw, sheesh. You mean Mr. Kobayashi went to all that trouble to keep the password a secret, and it wasn’t even necessary?” Mayuka lamented.

“No, you don’t understand,” Iwata cautioned. “This was one of Helen’s subordinates. If she got a name, she would know who it was at once and have them eliminated. That would mean losing our chance to make contact with their organization. That’s why Mr. Kobayashi refused to speak.”

Hinata tried to imagine the situation. Maybe the person was a spy the police had sent in to infiltrate the organization… Or perhaps it was someone from a rival faction. Given how desperate Helen had seemed, there must have been something big going on behind the scenes.

Officer Iwata rubbed at his chin and said, “Since we weren’t able to take custody of the insider, it does mean that Chris or Kobayashi could still be targets. I have a feeling these people will lay low for a while, but it never hurts to be cautious. Be careful out there.”

Everyone else agreed.

“I will,” Mayuka said firmly. “But I had no idea that microchips are only active if the pet is alive. I guess they must be running off of some kind of bioenergy, huh…?”

Hinata’s parents looked at one another in stunned disbelief.

“What do you mean?” his mother asked.

“Hinata told the bad guys that, if they killed Chris, the microchip would stop sending signals, and they’d never be able to find the password. Even a vet wouldn’t be able to find and remove it. He said only specialists could read the chip…”

Hinata held his head and looked down in embarrassment.

Suzune laughed. “Oh, Hinata! I didn’t know you could bluff like that! The microchip function has nothing to do with a pet’s health, and you can buy an ID reader online these days… What if she had already known the truth?”

“W-well, it didn’t seem like she knew anything about dogs… And Akane said her family hated pets…”

“Huh? You mean microchips *don’t* turn off when the pet dies?” Mayuka exclaimed. “That was a lie?”

“Look, I had no choice!” Hinata snapped. “I didn’t want her to kill Chris!”

Iwata clapped him on the shoulder. “That was a very impressive stunt, Hinata. You’re usually so shy and quiet, but when it’s most important, you turn bold and daring. I’m proud of you!”

Oh, I wish you’d all stop, Hinata thought. He looked at the floor, his face beet red.

“We get to go visit Mr. Kobayashi in the hospital tomorrow!” Mayuka said happily. Hinata nodded silently. “Mr. Shunya said he’d take us with him.”

“I see,” said Officer Iwata. “Well, pass along the good word from me, too. I suppose Chris won’t get to see him yet, though. Hospitals don’t allow pets, after all…”

But Mayuka shook her head. “Nuh-uh! Chris is going, too!”

“Really?”

“We’re meeting in the courtyard of the hospital. The director said it would probably be all right as long we keep things outside.”

“Why, that’s great! Chris must be so excited,” Iwata said, cupping Chris’s face in his hands and squishing.

“Bwoof!”

Chris seemed to be saying “Stop iiiit” in a mixture of both annoyance and delight.



The weather was nice that day.

Not too hot, not too cool. Just a nice, pleasant Sunday. Shunya drove Hinata, Mayuka, and Chris to the hospital where Kobayashi was staying. Chris's new leash was pink.

The hospital was large—two separate buildings with a courtyard in between them. There was a path you could walk dotted with trees and flower planters and the occasional bench. Patients and hospital visitors strolled and sat here and there.

Shunya found an empty bench. "I'll go in and bring him out. You wait here," he said, before heading into the building.

Mayuka sat on the bench, lifted her legs, and let her feet dangle. "It's really nice here. I wish I could stay at the hospital just once."

"What are you talking about?" Hinata chided. "You don't go to the hospital for fun. It's for people who are sick or hurt… You can't see your friends, and you can't go out to play, either."

But she was insistent. "I dunno… Maybe they have a try-before-you-buy experience."

"They don't! Why would you think that?"

Chris was obediently sitting in front of the bench. Hinata prayed that no insects would come by to bother them.

As the hospital patients walked by, they commented on how cute Chris was. Time passed slowly, and Hinata found himself getting more and more nervous. How would Chris react when Mr. Kobayashi came out…?

Suddenly, the Shiba Inu's ears twitched.

Hinata looked up with a start and saw Shunya at the door to the building, pushing a wheelchair.

"Oh, it's Mr. Kobayashi," said Mayuka. Hinata felt his heart lurch.

Shunya took him slowly down the gentle slope toward the three of them. Chris gave a tiny bark and stood up. Hinata got to his feet, too.

The wheelchair came to a stop in front of them.

"Christie…," said Kobayashi. His voice was clearer and stronger than before.

His hair was still in need of a cut, but his complexion was better, he'd had a shave, and his eyes looked young and alive once again.

Chris didn't raise a fuss. He walked over to Kobayashi, brought his nose to the man's knee, sniffed just to be sure, then sat down, satisfied.

Kobayashi rested his hand on Chris's head and closed his eyes for a time, like he was praying.

No one spoke.

Hinata glanced at the pink leash he was holding, then slid it into Kobayashi's free hand atop the armrest of the wheelchair. Then he went back to the bench and looked away.

It was better this way. This was right.

"Hinata."

He looked up. Kobayashi's eyes were staring into his.

"Hinata, thank you for taking care of Christie." Hinata just barely managed to nod back. "Thanks for being a good partner to him."

He bit his lip, trying not to cry.

Kobayashi continued, "And thank you for saving me."

No! That's not right! Hinata thought.

There was a part of him that had hoped Kobayashi would never come back, so he could stay with Chris. A part of him hoped Kobayashi would never be found.

And he hated that part of himself. *I'm sorry…*

"I…"

He tried to speak, to say something, but Kobayashi just smiled and held out the leash.

"And I'm sure you'll continue to be a good partner. You'll do that for Christie, won't you?"

Huh?

With a start, Hinata looked up, first at Shunya, then at Mayuka, then at Chris, then back to Kobayashi.

"I—I thought that once you were better, you would take Chris again, like before…"

Kobayashi just chuckled and shook his head. "It's going to be a long time before I'm completely better. I hurt my spine, you see, so I might never walk the same way again… It'll take a lot of

training before I can take Christie on a proper walk, using this wheelchair."

"B-but once enough time has passed…"

Kobayashi's expression told him it wasn't just that. "Last week, I saw you and Christie team up in that basement. You were completely in sync as you took on the bad guys, and you did a brilliant job catching them unawares. All Christie had to do was look at your eyes to know exactly what to do. And you gave the order with perfect timing—and very few signals and commands…"

He patted Chris on the head and looked the dog in the eye. "I was stunned, Christie. In just a matter of months, you were able to become so in sync with your new partner. It's a miracle. I was so happy to see it. I'm glad you found a good partner…"

Chris barked happily. "That's right! I did find a good partner!"

"So that's why I want you to stay with Christie for me, Hinata. Could you do that?" Kobayashi asked, smiling.

I can't hold them back anymore… Hinata started to cry. The tears began to fall and wouldn't stop.

"Hinata…" Mayuka rubbed his back.

He bobbed his head. "Th-thank you, Mr. Kobayashi. I'll take good care of Chris. We'll always be best friends and partners. Thank you so much!"

Hinata took the leash back from Kobayashi and squeezed it tight.

"There's one more thing I want to ask of you, Hinata."

Huh? Hinata rubbed the tears away with the back of his hand and looked at Kobayashi again.

"I have two dreams, you see. One is to have my own private investigation business. And that one more or less came true, so when I'm feeling better, I intend to open it back up. The other dream…"

He turned back to look at Shunya, then laughed.

"I'm positive that your grandpa's going to laugh at me for this one, but I'll say it anyway." He held up a finger. "I want to form a kids' detective club to help out my office in solving mysteries!"

Shunya burst into laughter. "You really never grew up, did you?!"

“What’s wrong with that? I’ll always be a child at heart. So, Hinata and Mayuka, would you form a little band of detectives and help me out with my cases? That’s my other request.”



Mayuka grinned. “Sure thing, Mr. Kobayashi. Plus, our detective club will have”—she spread her hands and gestured toward Chris—“its very own canine detective! Isn’t that just the best?”

Chris spun around in front of the whole group, stopping in front of Hinata. He looked him right in the eye and joyfully opened his mouth.

“Woof!!”

—The End—



Afterword

Spending Time With Chris Again!



Thank you for reading the second volume of *Canine Detective Chris*.

In the first book, we met Hinata and Chris, the best pair ever, and now they've gotten involved in another mystery. This time, it's set in a haunted mansion!

Hinata's best friend, Mayuka, likes to scream with fright, but she's also clearly enjoying the spookiness of the dusty old European-style mansion. Meanwhile, easily frightened Hinata doesn't want anything to do with it. He has no desire to be anywhere that might involve ghosts.

But Hinata seems to naturally attract trouble, and he soon finds himself completely engrossed in a mystery at the mansion.

What's more, there's a possibility that he might lose his partnership with his trusty sidekick, Chris… They seemed to share one mind in two bodies, and yet something abruptly changes in Chris. What could it be? If you're curious and haven't read the book yet, maybe you should start there!

Do you like scary stories? Have you ever been to a haunted house at a theme park or a carnival? There are many long series of scary ghost stories at the bookstore, and there's always a long line at those attractions. Zombie movies are always a massive hit. Even horror-themed video games are hugely popular.

I'll be honest, dear reader: I'm on Hinata's side. I've written some scary stories on request, but I have no desire to read them. I've never set foot in a haunted house in my life, and only once before did I watch a horror movie at the urging of a friend. I've regretted it ever since.

So it makes me wonder: Why does everyone like to be scared so much? Ha-ha.

But I do think I understand a little of the mindset behind those who read ghost stories with excitement in their eyes—and who line up to go through the haunted house. When real life feels boring, a good thrill will make your heart jump and come alive. And these stories aren't real, of course!

But be careful! Is there something moving behind the curtains in your window, just over your shoulder?

Better go and take a look, just in case……

Tomoko Tabe

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