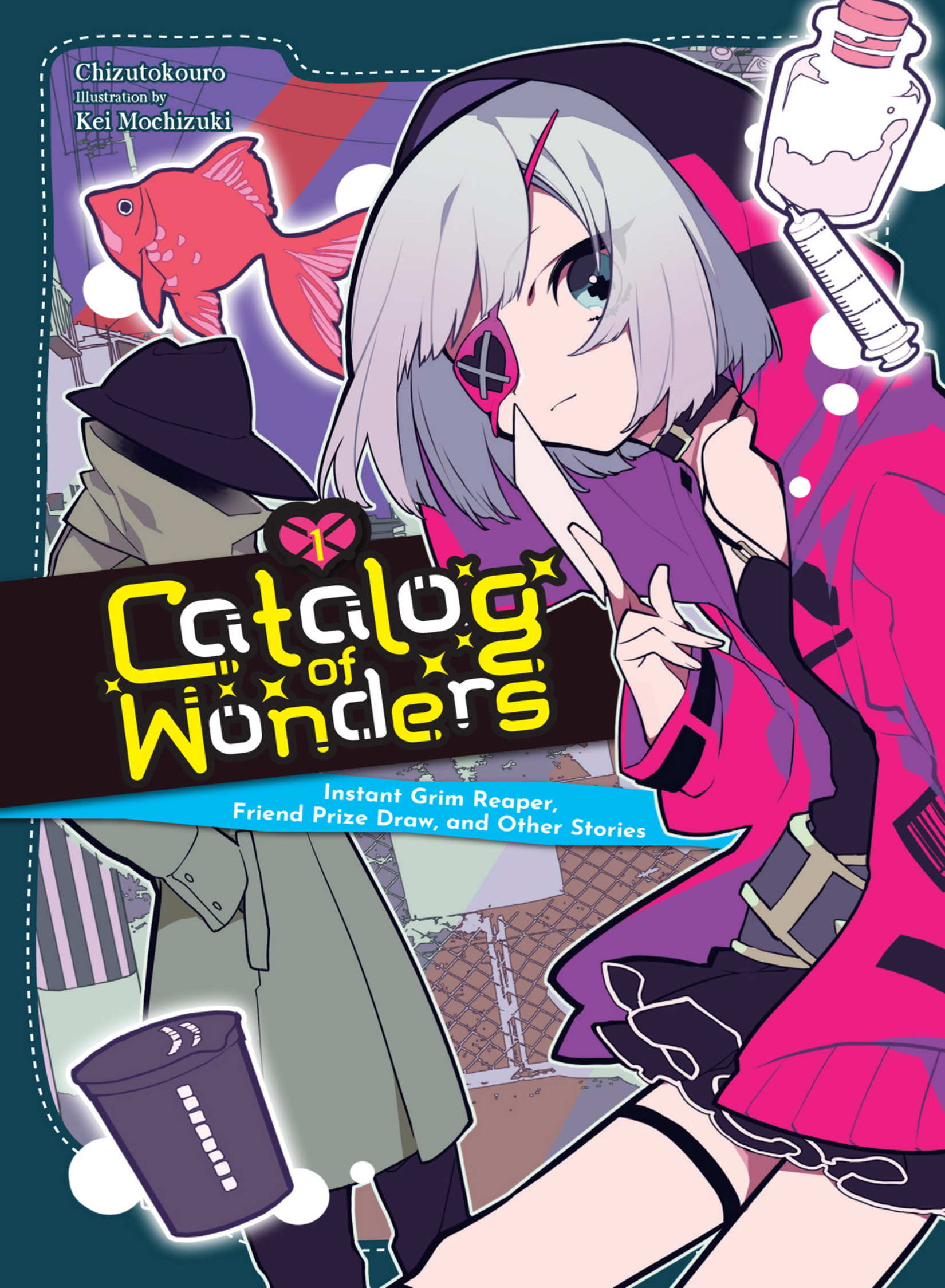

Chizutokouro
Illustration by
Kei Mochizuki
1
Catalog of Wonders
Instant Grim Reaper,
Friend Prize Draw, and Other Stories

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Friend Prize Draw, and Other Stories

1

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Kei Mochizuki

JY
New York

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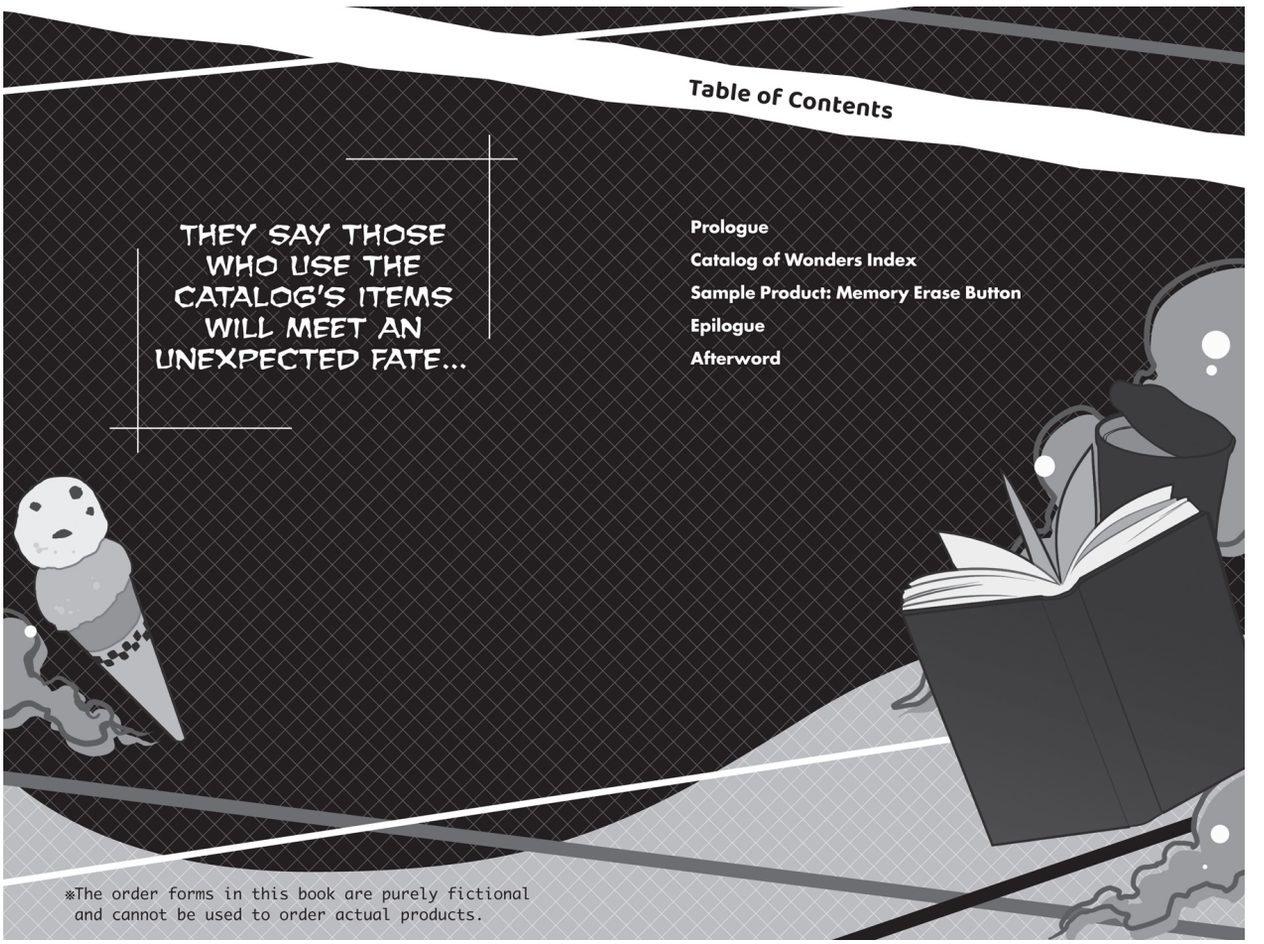


Table of Contents

Prologue
Catalog of Wonders Index
Sample Product: Memory Erase Button
Epilogue
Afterword

※The order forms in this book are purely fictional and cannot be used to order actual products.

Table of Contents

Cover

Title Page

Copyright

Prologue

Catalog of Wonders Index

Product Name: Instant Grim Reaper

Product Name: Friend Prize Draw

Product Name: Execution Kit

Product Name: Winter-Only Ice Cream

Product Name: ??? Goldfish (Red)

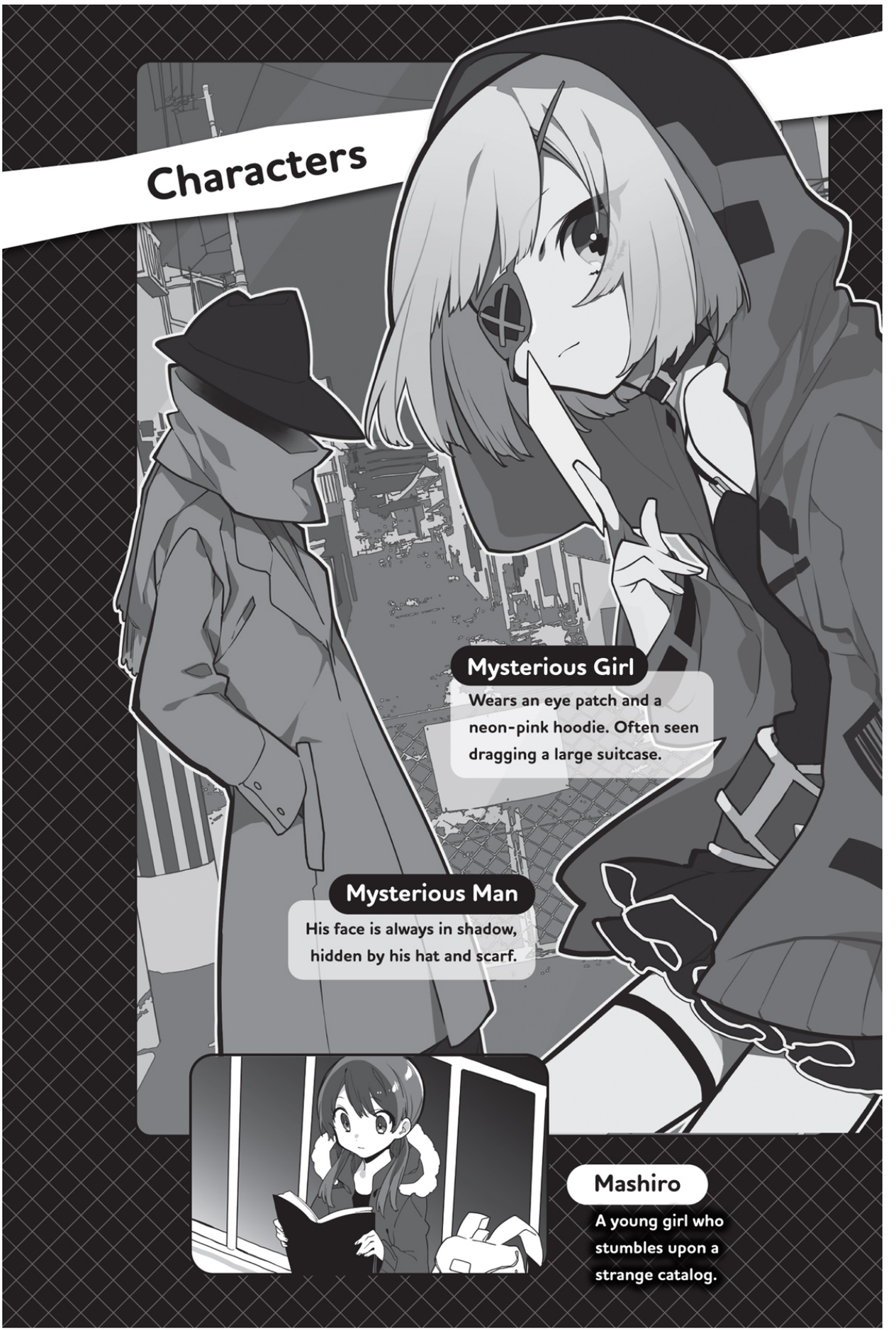
Sample Product: Memory Erase Button

Epilogue

Afterword

Yen Newsletter

Characters



Mysterious Girl

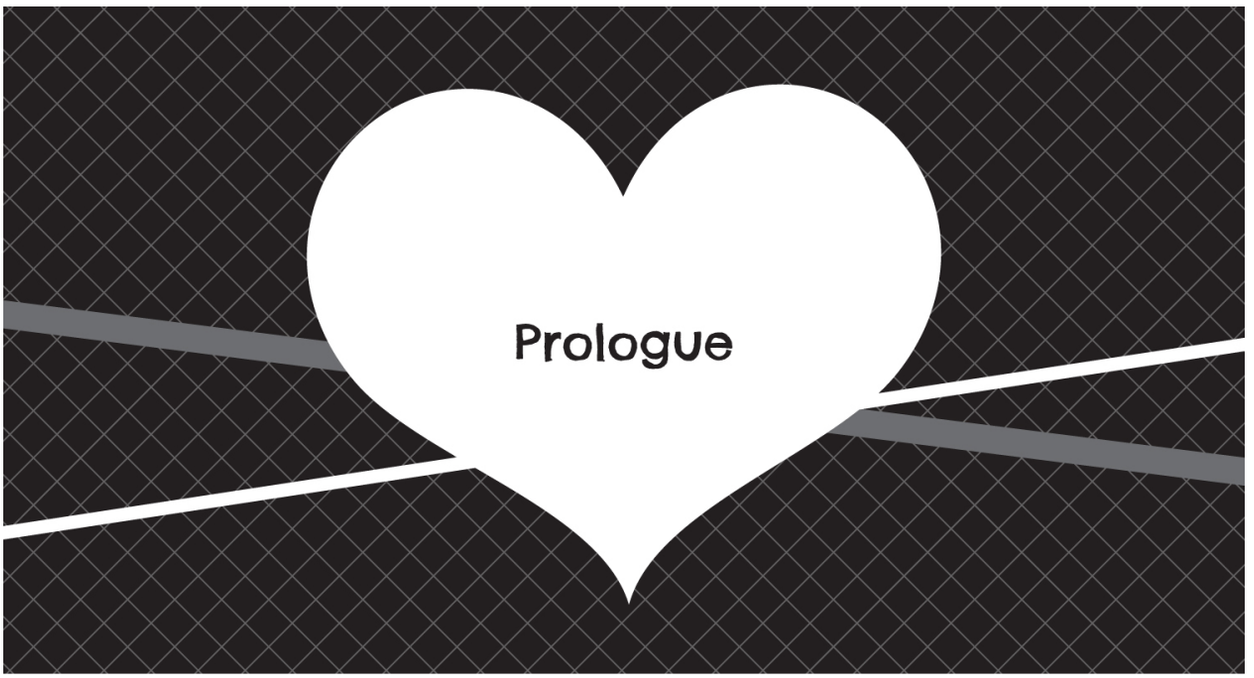
Wears an eye patch and a neon-pink hoodie. Often seen dragging a large suitcase.

Mysterious Man

His face is always in shadow, hidden by his hat and scarf.

Mashiro

A young girl who stumbles upon a strange catalog.



“Everything will be fine! I just need to disappear for a while.”

It had been half an hour since Mashiro strapped on her backpack and walked out her front door. Now she was gazing down at her hometown from an observation platform at the top of a nearby mountain. No one ever went up there. It had no cafés or vending machines; you’d probably starve if you got stranded there without any supplies. It was the perfect place to hide out for a few days.

Mashiro’s plan was simple. If she “went missing” for a while—two or three days, no more than that—her parents would be worried sick. So worried that they would forget all about…the test.

“If only I’d hidden it better… I should’ve known they’d find it just sitting there in my desk drawer.”

A few days ago, she’d gotten back her latest cram school test. The sight of it had filled her with dread. The red X marks all over that sheet of white paper added up to a score that was about as close to zero as anyone could get. And when her parents had found it, they’d just stood there, stunned into silence. Once Mashiro had seen their reaction, she’d known what she had to do.

“I’d better get out of here before they have a chance to get mad at me…”

With a heavy sigh, she'd grabbed her stuff and sneaked out, eventually finding her way to the observation platform.

There was a pair of binoculars mounted to a pole that looked as if it was growing right out of the ground. The paint was faded and flaking, but the binoculars still worked, and they weren't the coin-operated type, either.

"Nice. These'll help me kill some time."

Mashiro looked through the binoculars and began to survey the town. There was her house, her friends' houses, her school, the supermarket—all places she saw every day, but looking at them from this high up felt different. It was kind of refreshing.

The little mountain she was on wasn't far from the center of town. From here, she could make out a lot of details and see what people were doing. The more she looked, the more fun it became.

Then, all of a sudden, her eyes fixed on a splash of color: neon pink.

This one pink dot in the gray townscape stood out like a plastic bead in the middle of countless grains of sand in a desert. More specifically, this splash of pink was a hoodie worn by a girl standing between two buildings.

"What's she doing there…?" Mashiro wondered.

Next to the girl was a large, boxy bag. Maybe a suitcase or an old-fashioned trunk. And…there was a door on the front of it.

Kind of a weird design, thought Mashiro.

That was when the girl made a move. She squatted down in front of the suitcase, opened the door…and jumped inside. The next moment, she was gone, and the door was closing. When it finally shut, the entire suitcase disappeared as well.

"…Huh? What just happened?"

Mashiro stood dumbfounded for a moment. She didn't stay still for long, though, and soon dashed down the mountain path.

She arrived at the gap between the two buildings she'd seen through the binoculars. The strange girl and her suitcase were gone, but something lay on the ground where they had been: a plain black book and a small cardboard box. Mashiro hesitated, then picked them up. She opened the book to see what was written in it.





Catalog of Wonders

Index

Product Name: Instant Grim Reaper

Product Name: Friend Prize Draw

Product Name: Execution Kit

Product Name: Winter-Only Ice Cream

Product Name: ??? Goldfish (Red)

Sample Product: Memory Erase Button

Product Name

Instant Grim Reaper



No special skills or training needed!!
The world's most convenient deadly curse at your fingertips! ★

◄ ◄ ◄ ◄ Those who obtain this item may meet the following fate.

Shiine hurried past the convenience store. It was the same store she always stopped by on her way home from school, but she didn't feel like going there today. The reason was simple: A few days ago, someone had caught her shoplifting there.

Fortunately, it hadn't been an employee. The security was notoriously lax. People said no one ever got caught; that was why Shiine had decided to steal. She'd slipped some candy into her pocket, and no one had been any the wiser.

No one, that is, apart from Takakura, a girl in Shiine's class. She'd happened to be in the store at the time and seen everything. She and Shiine never really spoke much, but she'd brought it up the very next day at school.

"Uh, I saw what you did yesterday, and I—I think you should stop doing that kind of stuff…," Takakura had mumbled in that annoyingly timid voice of hers.

"Don't you dare tell anyone," Shiine had snapped back. "If you do, you'll be sorry."

She'd thought that threat would be enough, but now she wasn't so sure.

I messed up. Takakura's such a wimp that she probably won't go blabbing to the store or the school, but still…

There was no telling when she might cave and rat Shiine out, and that made Shiine uneasy. If only there was a more reliable way to keep Takakura quiet…

A butterfly fluttered past Shiine's face, interrupting her thoughts. It was a weird color. It had large black-patterned wings like a swallowtail, but instead of pale yellow, the wings were neon pink. She'd never seen a butterfly like that before. Curious, she began to walk in the same direction it was going. It was almost as if it was leading her somewhere.

The butterfly took Shiine away from her usual route home and eventually flew into a narrow alley.

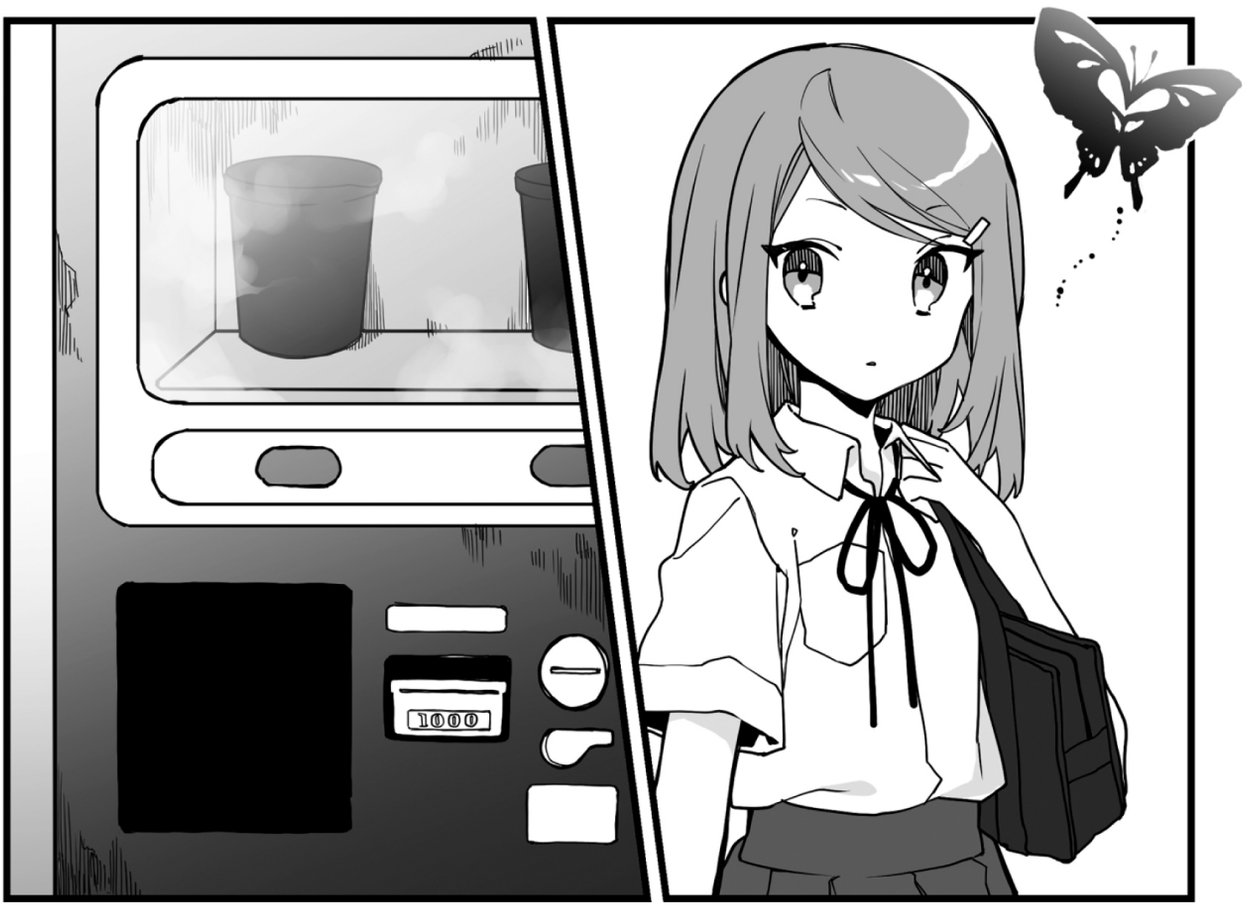
"…Huh?"

Shiine followed it into the alley but then stopped short.

"I didn't know we had anywhere like this in town…"

Looking around, she found herself in a deserted little cluster of old-fashioned backstreets. She knew this area pretty well, but she couldn't remember ever seeing somewhere like this before.

She spotted a vending machine nearby. An old one. It must've been there for years—decades, even. Its exterior was starting to rust, the paint was faded and flaking, and the display window had gotten all cloudy. Shiine didn't remember seeing anything like that around here, either.


1000

Snapping back to reality, she realized the strange butterfly was gone. But that was okay—she was more interested in the vending machine now. It was such an old and unfamiliar model, she had to wonder what kind of stuff it sold.

Shiine stepped up to the machine and peered through the cloudy window. There were just two items on display, both of them plastic cups like the kind instant noodles came in. They didn't say anything like *noodles* or *ramen* on the packaging, though. Instead, each black cup had the same words written in simple letters:

Instant Grim Reaper

Instant. Grim. Reaper.

What a weird combination of words. Shiine found herself mouthing them as she stared quizzically at the machine.

"What are these for? Like a practical joke or something?"

Curious, she peered closer at the window. Now she could see more writing on one of the cups, this time in thick cartoony letters:

JUST ADD HOT WATER AND WAIT THREE MINUTES!

CREATE YOUR VERY OWN GRIM REAPER TO INFLICT A DEADLY CURSE ON THE VICTIM OF YOUR CHOICE!

Reading that, Shiine couldn't help but smirk.

"I guess that explains the 'instant' part. A deadly curse, though? Come on."

Even as pranks went, it was in pretty poor taste. But as she thought about it, one person's face came to mind: Takakura, the one who'd seen her shoplifting.

If I really did have my own grim reaper, I could send it after Takakura and shut her up permanently…

Leaning forward against the vending machine, Shiine let out a sigh, watching her breath fog the display window even more.

This Instant Grim Reaper must've been some kind of occult item, like those curse kits that came with straw dolls and iron nails.

“I guess it could be fun. Might as well get one, since I’m here. I want to know what’s actually inside those cups.”

She fished her wallet out of her bag.

“Hmm, how much does it—? Whaaat?!”

She reeled back in shock when she saw how much the two black plastic cups cost. They looked practically identical, but their prices were very different. The one on the right was just one hundred yen, while the one on the left was ten thousand yen.

“Why is one of them so much more expensive? Aren’t they the same thing?”

Looking closer, she noticed that some extra writing was on the lid of the left cup. But with all the grime on the vending machine’s window, it was impossible to make out what it said.

“Well, whatever.”

With prices like those, it was obvious which one she should get.

Shiine took out a hundred-yen coin and put it in the slot. It dropped down into the machine, and a red light lit up on the button for the cup on the right. Shiine pressed it, and there was a clatter as something fell into the drawer at the bottom. She reached in, and just like that, she had her very own Instant Grim Reaper.



JUST ADD HOT WATER AND WAIT THREE MINUTES!
CREATE YOUR VERY OWN GRIM REAPER TO INFLICT A DEADLY CURSE ON THE VICTIM OF YOUR CHOICE!

Back at home, Shiine checked that no one was in the kitchen and once more read the words on the cup’s lid, printed in that chunky, rounded typeface.

“All right, the water’s boiling. What’s next…?”

She peeled back the lid and looked inside. The cup was empty except for a small, round, dull-white object. Shiine gave it a poke and rolled it over, revealing something like a face—a stylized, cutesy skull. It was rough to the touch, although it didn’t feel as hard as real bone would. The texture was more like a bath bomb, like something that would fizz and dissolve when put into water.

“I think I get it,” Shiine said. “When you pour hot water into the cup, this skull dissolves, and you find a little grim reaper figure or whatever inside. Doesn’t look like there’s anything else in here anyway…”

Checking to see if she’d missed anything, she turned the cup around to read the instructions printed on the side.

◇Instant Grim Reaper Instructions◇

❶ Open the lid and check that the cup contains one (1) skull.

❷ Remove the skull and place a photo of the person you wish to curse face up at the bottom of the cup. Place the skull on top of this photo.

❸ Fill the cup with hot water to the line indicated.

❹ Close the lid and wait one hundred years before reopening.

★ You will now have your very own grim reaper who will lay a deadly curse on your intended victim! ★

“You need a photo, huh? Oh, wait, I think I have one… Where did I put it…?”

Shiine went back to her room to look. If this Instant Grim Reaper really could curse anyone she wanted, she had only one person in mind: Takakura, the witness to her crime.

“It’s just a practical joke. Not like this actually does anything…”

There was no harm in trying anyway. Shiine continued to rummage around for a picture with Takakura in it, doing her best not to get her hopes up. Eventually, she found one—a class photo taken on a field trip a while back.

She took the photo to the kitchen, cut out Takakura’s face, and put it in the cup. Then, just like the instructions said, she put the skull on top of the picture, added the hot water, and closed the lid. She set a timer for three minutes, and when it began beeping…

“Okay…let’s see what we’ve got.”

She slowly reopened the lid. The moment it was all the way off, a large plume of steam billowed up from inside. From within that

steam emerged a—a person? A creature?

No… A grim reaper.

It was exactly the kind of thing Shiine imagined when she heard the words *grim reaper*. A skull for a head, a long black cloak, and a scythe. There was just one unusual detail: From the top of its head to the bottom of its robe (she couldn't actually see its feet), it measured a little less than a foot tall.

Mini or not, a real, honest-to-goodness grim reaper had just flown out of the cup and was now floating in the steamy air right in front of her.

"Wow, this is so crazy…," Shiine mumbled.

The steam gradually dispersed, but the little grim reaper remained floating just above the cup. Now that she could see it more clearly, Shiine took a closer look…and saw Takakura's face staring back at her. The photo she'd put in the cup now peeked out at her from behind the little grim reaper's eyeholes.

It was *inside* the skull. Maybe that was to show who the grim reaper's target was. Shiine covered her mouth and gasped. It was just one surprise after another today.

"An Instant Grim Reaper… I thought for sure it was just a joke, but…it's really real…"



Then she realized something. She looked into the reaper's eyes—or where its eyes would have been.

"No way… So you're actually going to…*kill* Takakura for me…?"

The tiny apparition didn't say anything. It didn't even nod. It simply turned away from her and floated toward the door.

"Whoa! Wait! Wait a minute!"

Shiine hurried after the grim reaper, reaching out to grab it. But once she saw the scythe in its hand, she thought better of it. Instead, she grabbed the now-empty cup, brought it down over the grim reaper, and quickly closed the lid.

Was she thinking that this whole thing had gone beyond a joke and that she didn't really want to curse Takakura? No, not really.

"She hasn't done anything wrong…but if she wasn't around, I wouldn't have to worry about people finding out about what I did. I can't let this chance go to waste."

Shiine's main concern was that she didn't want this grim reaper flying off on its own somewhere she couldn't keep track of it. What if it floated off somewhere without completing its mission? What if it mistook someone else for Takakura and killed them instead? What if it got eaten by a cat or a dog somewhere along the way?

This was Shiine's first time using a grim reaper, and there was so much she didn't know about how things like that worked. If possible, she wanted to keep it in sight while it did its job.

"Just stay in there for a while," she whispered to the little grim reaper inside the cup. "I'll take you to school tomorrow, and you can deal with Takakura then."



The next day, Shiine went to school as usual, carrying inside her bag the cup with the grim reaper. After she arrived, she went to her classroom to look for Takakura.

Takakura was already there, chatting with some friends at her desk. Shiine then stepped back out into the hallway.

She walked down the hall a bit before taking the plastic cup out of her bag. Facing the wall and shielding the cup from view with her body, she opened the lid a crack and peeked inside. The grim

reaper was still in there, and it still had the photo of Takakura in its skull. All exactly as it had been the day before.

"Okay, go for it!" Shiine whispered, and opened the lid all the way.

The grim reaper silently floated out of the cup and down the hall, with Shiine following a few steps behind. It didn't fly very fast, and as long as she kept up a brisk pace, she was in no danger of losing sight of it. At first, she was worried about how the other students might react to this spooky visitor, but nobody seemed to notice it. She must have been the only one who could see it.

Before long, they arrived at Shiine's classroom. Once inside, the grim reaper made a beeline straight for Takakura. Hovering in the air just behind her, it raised its scythe and brought it down in one swift movement.

Fwish!

The scythe's blade seemed to pass right through Takakura's body. It did the job, though.

Takakura stopped talking mid-sentence and slumped down in her chair like a puppet whose strings had been cut. She then toppled to the floor, and the students near her screamed.

"Eek!"

"What happened?"

"Hey, are you okay?"

Concerned classmates began to flock around Takakura, their voices getting louder and louder.

"No way!"

"She's not breathing!"

More and more people joined the scene, screams of shock and panic mixing together into one big whirlpool of chaos. Shiine stood at the edge of the group, trying to look surprised and concerned. Which she was, to be honest, but not in the way people might have thought.

Right in the middle of the crowd, visible only to Shiine, was the little grim reaper floating over Takakura's body. She watched it fade until it disappeared completely, like a sandcastle washed away by the tide.

The Instant Grim Reaper had done its job.

Wow… She's really dead.

Shiine let out a sigh. A small one so nobody around her would notice, but one packed with deep relief.

Takakura was dead. The witness to Shiine's crime was gone. She was safe.

That grim reaper may have been instantaneous, but it was the real deal. Imagine being able to make anyone I want disappear for just a hundred yen! Talk about a lucky find!

She was thrilled. An Instant Grim Reaper—what an amazing product. And what luck that she'd just happened to find her way to that vending machine that day. She almost started humming a happy tune but caught herself and tried to pass it off as a sneeze.

Ambulance sirens could be heard from outside now, and they were getting closer. Someone must have called them. Too bad it was too late. The grim reaper had already reaped its victim's soul. Sitting down at her desk, Shiine brought her hands together in a gesture of thanks.

But just as she did…

"Oh, it's okay! She's awake!" yelled one of the students kneeling by Takakura.

Shiine could hardly believe her ears. That couldn't be right. Takakura hadn't even been breathing a minute ago. The grim reaper had fulfilled its duty and disappeared. So why…?

She got up and pushed her way through the crowd.

It was true. Takakura had opened her eyes and was sitting up.

"Huh? What happened to me…?" Takakura mumbled, a dazed look on her face.

What the heck was going on? Takakura had come back to life? How? Why? Was that Instant Grim Reaper defective?

Shiine slipped out of the crowd, grabbed her bag, and retreated to the hall. Once she was far enough away that no one would see her, she took out the black plastic cup again. Examining the lid closely, she realized there was some very fine print on it that she hadn't noticed the day before:

※Please note that this Instant Grim Reaper's curse will last for only three minutes.

Her shoulders slumped in disappointment. What was the point of killing someone for just three minutes? She should have

known it was too good to be true, especially for only a hundred yen…

But wait… That means…!

With a surge of hope, she remembered something. At the vending machine the previous day, there'd been two Instant Grim Reapers on sale. She hadn't even considered buying the other one at the time because of the price. But what if that other one…?

That's got to be it. If this one can curse someone for only three minutes, maybe there's others that are different. Like the ten-thousand-yen one that was next to it. And if it costs that much, I'll bet it does a better job than this weenie hundred-yen one…

Sure, it was expensive. So what? She'd killed Takakura once and experienced the peace of mind that it brought her. She wouldn't give up on that now. She couldn't.



The next day after school, Shiine hurried home to get some money, then made her way back to the vending machine. Just like before, the display window showed two almost identical black plastic cups: The one on the right was one hundred yen, and the one on the left was ten thousand yen.

She stood on tiptoe and pressed her face right up to the glass to get a better view. That was when she noticed something—the window was clearer than it had been the day prior. Someone must have come along and cleaned it. The griminess was gone, and she could clearly read the writing on the left cup's lid:

When "instant" just isn't enough—a hardcore reaper for hardcore customers!

The silver lettering sparkled like a sharpened scythe against the lid's black background. There was another message, too, one that stood out a lot better than the one on the cheaper cup:

※Please note that this Instant Grim Reaper's curse will last for one hundred years.

Shiine inserted a ten-thousand-yen bill into the machine and pressed the button. There was a clatter as the cup fell into the drawer. She fished it out and held it firmly in her hands, taking comfort in the gleaming silver letters on the lid.

“A hardcore reaper... I wonder if you make it the same way as the cheaper one.”

She turned the cup to one side and read the instructions.

◇Instant Grim Reaper Instructions◇

❶ Open the lid and check that the cup contains one (1) skull.

❷ Remove the skull and place a photo of the person you wish to curse face up at the bottom of the cup. Place the skull on top of this photo.

❸ Fill the cup with hot water to the line indicated.

❹ Close the lid and wait one hundred years before reopening.

★ You will now have your very own grim reaper who will lay a deadly curse on your intended victim! ★

Cut Here

Order Form

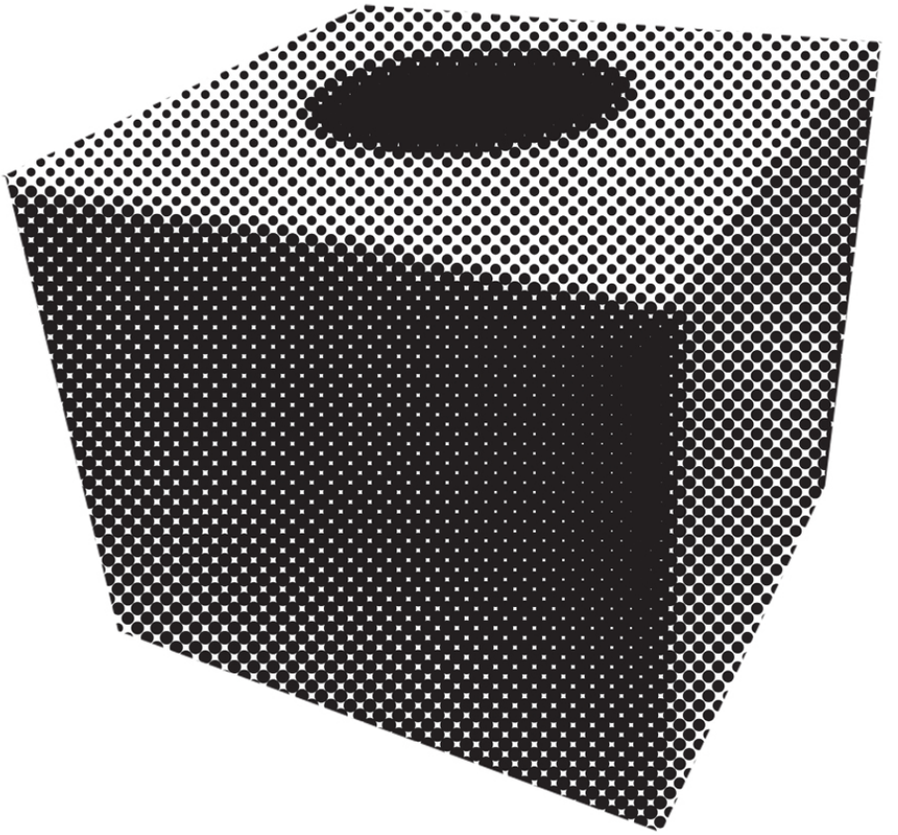
(Cut out and mail)

Order This Product

Amount Needed	Desired Delivery Date
	__/__/____

Product Name

Friend Prize Draw



If you're unlucky, you get regular bubble gum. If you're lucky, you get a special friend just for you. And if you're *really* lucky...

Those who obtain this item may meet the following fate. ▶ ▶ ▶ ▶

Tomoko wanted a friend. Not like the two friends she had now. A *new* friend. Her two other friends were best friends with each other, and she was just a regular friend who hung out with them. She knew that. They weren't a group of three—they were a group of two, plus one. And she couldn't stand that.

She'd started to *hate* the number three. You couldn't be friends and have fun together without two people involved. But a third or more was plain unnecessary.

Her two friends had no trouble chatting or playing when she wasn't around. Even when Tomoko was with them, they often got caught up in their own conversation, shutting her out and leaving her to watch on the sidelines. Every time that happened, it felt as if they were saying, "We don't need you."

Tomoko wasn't their best friend. She was *just* a friend. A spare, an extra. The thought brought tears to her eyes, and she clenched her hands into fists and bit her lip to stop herself from crying. It was so sad and so frustrating. Well, fine, let them go off and be besties without her. She didn't need friends like that!

What I really need is someone who doesn't have any other friends. Someone who'll have me as their best and only *friend.*

If she could meet someone like that, they'd become even better friends than those other two.

But I wouldn't make friends with just any kid who doesn't have friends of their own. I wouldn't want to hang out with a bully, or a liar, or someone who's mean or selfish.

Tomoko sighed. She wanted a new friend so badly.

Ideally, they'd be cute and nice and smart. But they'd also be all on their own, without any other friends.

As if someone like that actually existed.

Tomoko was absorbed in these thoughts on her way home from school and wasn't really paying attention to her surroundings. Suddenly, there was a *thump*, and she realized she'd bumped into someone. They fell onto their butt, and the things they'd been carrying scattered all over the ground.

"Ouch… S-sorry. Are you okay?" they asked, looking up at Tomoko.

It was a girl with silver hair, dressed in a neon-pink hoodie. Her right eye was covered by an eye patch the same shade of pink as her hoodie, with an crossed-out heart on it. Quite a flashy

sense of style, but she was cute all the same. She looked about the same age as Tomoko—probably in elementary school, or maybe she was a little older and in junior high already.

Now this *is the kind of girl I'd like to be friends with. I don't know if we have a lot in common, but she apologized first, even though I'm the one who bumped into her. So she must be a nice person.*

In the back of her mind, Tomoko was hoping this might be the opportunity she needed to make a new friend. She got to work helping the girl pick up the things she'd dropped.

It was candy. Round ones individually wrapped in colorful paper. There were small candies the size of cherries, and bigger ones about as large as grapes.

"I've never seen these before… Are they some kind of hard candy?" Tomoko asked as she handed them back to the girl.

"That's right. They sell them at a little candy shop down the street from here. But they're not just any candy—they're Lucky Candy. When you eat one, it gives you good luck."

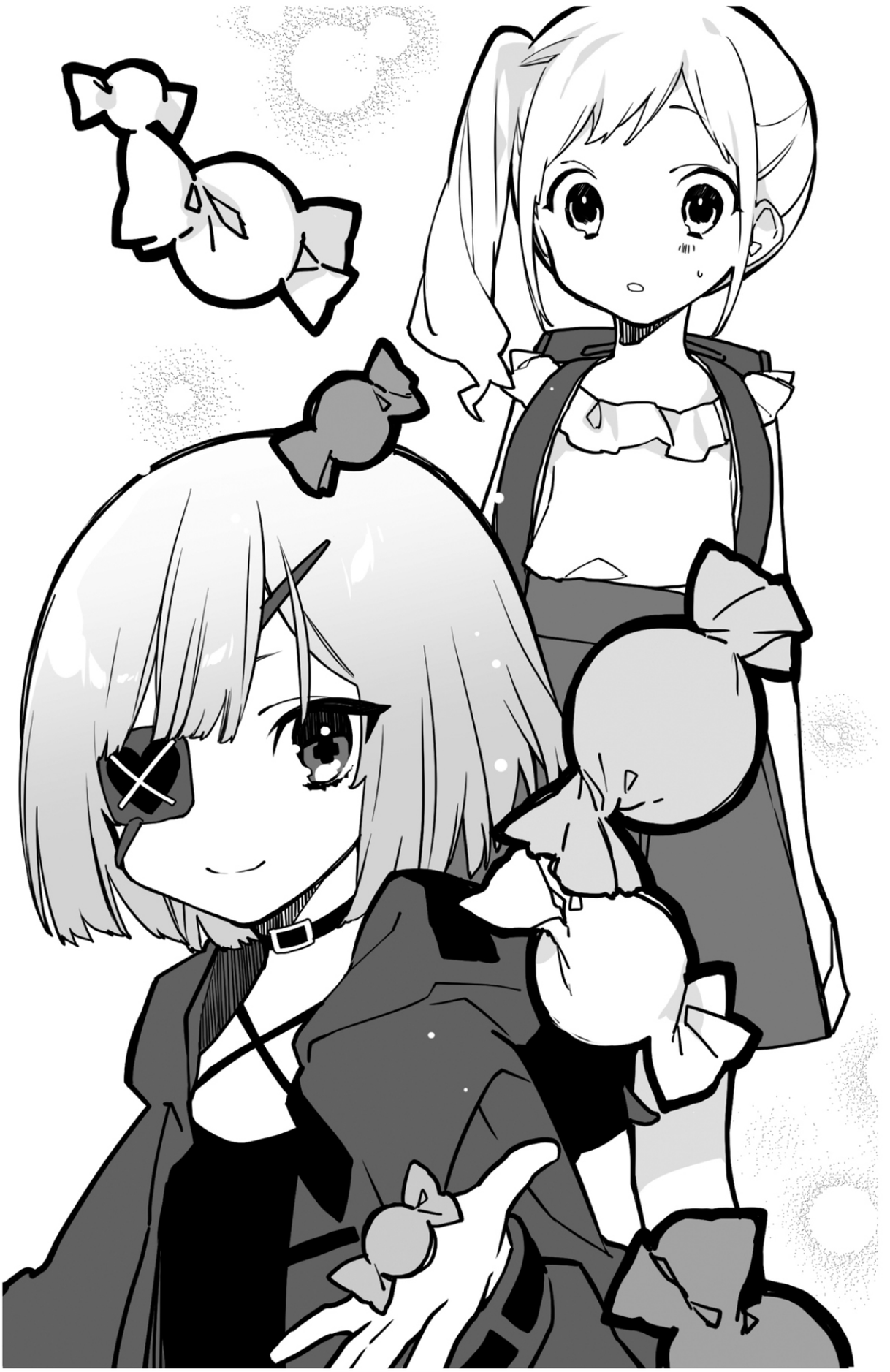
The girl said all this with a friendly smile. Tomoko could only blink in surprise.

"Lucky Candy? Candy that gives you good luck? No way…," she said.

"It's true. That store sells all kinds of rare stuff you can't find anywhere else. Like, say…"

The girl finished collecting her candies and looked Tomoko in the eye, still smiling.

"…a prize draw that can give you a new friend."



“Huh…?”

Those words set Tomoko’s heart racing.

“If you want to try it, you should go check out that store I mentioned. You see the alley between the buildings over there? Keep going straight down it, and you’ll find the candy store at the end.”

The girl pointed behind Tomoko, who turned to look. She’d taken her eyes off the other girl for only a moment, but when she turned back, the strange girl with the eye patch was gone.



Tomoko went down the narrow alleyway, and just like the girl said, a candy store was at the end.

“Wow… I didn’t think places like this even existed anymore.”

The store looked old, like it had been there for a long, long time. Tomoko had seen similar ones in malls, although those were more of a retro style, never a real one from way back when. She went inside and started to look around.

This store had little lollipops, and pocket-size bags of dried snack noodles, and reddish-brown cola gummies, and light-blue soda gummies, and gumballs that changed color when you sucked on them, and long, thin jelly sticks in lots of different colors, and yogurt packs that came with flat wooden spoons, and spicy-sweet dried squid, and chocolate coins, and powdered juice in orange and grape and other flavors, too…

There were snacks everywhere—on the shelves, in drawers, on the walls, even hanging from the ceiling. As interesting as they all looked, Tomoko passed them by without stopping, going straight to the cash register. Behind the counter were several cardboard boxes for different prize draws. One of them was labeled:

Friend Prize Draw
¥100 per try

“Is that what the girl told me about…?”

Tomoko gulped in anticipation. Then a voice came from behind the counter.

“Would you like to give it a try?”

Tomoko nodded a little hesitantly.

A prize draw that gives you a new friend… There’s no way this is real.

She knew that, of course. And yet…

I’ll give it a shot. I won’t buy any candy today; I’ll just do one prize draw…

Curiosity and anticipation were swelling inside her chest. She couldn’t hold back any longer. She reached into her skirt pocket and pulled out her coin purse.

“One try at the Friend Prize Draw, please,” she said.

“Okay, that’s one hundred yen. If you win, you’ll get a wonderful new friend.”

The person behind the counter said this as if it was nothing unusual. He seemed to be a young man, but it was hard to tell. He was wearing a big scarf and a hat pulled low over his eyes. Tomoko couldn’t really make out his face in the dim lighting.

The man went to the row of boxes, brought one over, and set it down in front of her. She stared at it for a moment.

“Does it…does it really give you a new friend?” she asked him.

“Of course. That’s what it says on the box, doesn’t it? A cute, sweet, smart new friend, just for you. If you win, that is.”

Tomoko was getting more and more excited. She took a hundred-yen coin out of her purse and handed it to the man.

“This is a bubblegum prize draw,” he told her. “You reach inside, grab a piece of gum, take it out of the wrapper, and blow a bubble with it.”

He tilted the box toward her so she could reach the hole cut into the top. Her heart pounding, Tomoko stuck her hand inside. She groped around, feeling different gum wrappers shifting beneath her fingers. Finally, she grabbed one and brought it out.

It was a square, silver-colored wrapper with a round piece of gum bulging out in the middle. She pulled on the jagged edge and tore the wrapper open. Just like the store employee had told her to do, she put the gum in her mouth and started chewing it then and there.

She chewed and chewed and chewed.

She chewed until the gum was nice and soft, then rolled it over her tongue and blew. The gum stretched and began to form a

bubble. Tomoko blew into it harder, but it didn't burst.

She blew even harder. Still it didn't burst. She blew as hard as she could, but the bubble just kept getting bigger and bigger. Eventually, it was so big that it towered over the top of her head.

And in that giant bubblegum bubble, she could see something: a silhouette.

It was hard to tell through the gum, but it looked like a person —a child…

Pop!

The bubble finally burst, and the sound echoed throughout the store. A moment later, a small strip of paper fluttered gently to the ground. Tomoko walked over and looked down at what was written on it:

TOO BAD!

"Looks like you didn't win. Feel free to try again sometime," the store clerk said, returning the prize-draw box to its position behind the counter.





Tomoko was walking home from the candy shop, thinking about what had happened and trying to contain her excitement.

It had been brief, but she'd definitely seen someone—a girl her own age—in that bubble. When it popped, all that was inside was the TOO BAD! paper, but that didn't change what she saw.

I bet if I'd had a winning piece of gum, my new friend would've come out of the bubble instead!

There was no longer any doubt in her mind. That strange prize-draw game really worked.

Now I have *to go back and try to win at it.*

If she could draw a winning piece, she'd get a brand-new friend, just for her. Then she could finally stop being a third wheel.



After that, Tomoko started going to the candy store to try the prize draw every day.

No matter how she tried, though, she just couldn't seem to win. Over the following days and weeks, she reached into the box time and time again. But every time she took out the gum and blew a bubble, it would burst and reveal one of those slips of paper with the words TOO BAD! on them.

Ugh, another loss…

That day had been no different. Tomoko was walking home from the candy store, disappointed. Was it that hard to win at the Friend Prize Draw, or was she just that unlucky?

At this rate, my only choice is to buy some of that stuff…

She thought back to one of the products she'd seen on the store shelves: Lucky Candy, the same kind the girl she'd run into had been carrying. She'd said they sold it there, and she was right. They had it in two great big glass jars. According to the clerk, the smaller candies gave you a small boost in luck, and the larger ones a big boost.

Each jar was filled with these candies in colorful wrappers. Apparently, the different colors represented different kinds of luck: yellow for luck with money, green for luck with health, blue for luck with studying, red for luck with romance. And finally, the ones in the white wrappers would give you better luck in prize draws.

If I eat one of those candies before trying the draw, I might actually win.

A simple plan, but those Lucky Candies were pretty expensive. Even the small ones were a thousand yen each, and the big ones were ten thousand yen for just a single piece!

The small ones are fine, I guess. But if I'm going to try to boost my luck, I want to use one of the big ones to guarantee I'll get an awesome new friend.

Just one win was all she needed. Once she had a best friend of her very own, she wouldn't need anything or anyone else. She had to win big and make sure she ended up with the most wonderful companion she could possibly get.

"I'll never be able to afford one of those big candies with my allowance, though…"

Tomoko sighed, her shoulders hunched in gloom as she walked along. Suddenly, there was a *thump* as she bumped into someone, who then fell down on their butt, scattering the things they'd been carrying all over the ground.

"Ouch… S-sorry. Are you okay?" the person asked.

Tomoko once more found herself looking down at the silver-haired girl wearing a neon-pink hoodie and an eye patch with a crossed-out heart on it. And the things she'd dropped were the same as last time—lots and lots of Lucky Candies. Small ones… and big ones, too.

Tomoko's eyes fixed on one candy in particular, and she drew in a sharp breath. A big Lucky Candy in a white wrapper…the kind that gave you good luck in prize draws. Just one of these was worth ten thousand yen. She wanted one so bad but couldn't afford it…and now one was lying right at her feet. She crouched down and began picking up the scattered candies.

"Here you go. That's all the ones that fell over here," she said, handing them to the girl.

Except it wasn't all of them. One big white candy was missing from the pile. She'd slipped it into her pocket when the silver-haired girl wasn't looking.

"Oh, thank you."

The girl flashed Tomoko a friendly smile like she had the last time. But then she frowned.

"Huh? That's weird… There's one missing. I could've sworn there was a big white candy in here…"

Tomoko froze.

"Hey, are you sure you didn't see a big white candy anywhere?" the girl asked.

"No, I didn't," said Tomoko, playing dumb. "Maybe it fell in that ditch over there."

The girl turned around to check, and while she had her back to Tomoko, Tomoko hurried away.

There's no harm in taking just one. She's got so many already. She's probably from a superrich family or something.

She rounded a corner and took the candy from her pocket.

"Now that I've got this, everything will be fine…," she whispered, smiling to herself.

If she'd turned around, she might have noticed a butterfly fluttering just above her head—a butterfly with black-and-pink wings.

But she didn't. She just headed down the darkening evening streets, holding her candy tightly all the way home.



The next day, Tomoko skipped to the candy shop with a spring in her step. She walked through the door and strode right up to the counter like usual. Except today, she wasn't the same old Tomoko.

Today, I ate that candy before coming here.

The white candy that granted good luck in prize draws. A big one, for a big boost in luck.

Now I'm even luckier than ever!

Humming happily to herself, she took out a hundred-yen coin.

"One try at the Friend Prize Draw, please!"

“Coming right up.”

The man behind the counter took her coin and went over to the line of boxes, taking one down and tilting it toward her so she could reach the hole in the top. Tomoko thrust her hand inside without a second thought. The Lucky Candy had boosted her confidence, so she grabbed the first piece of gum she found and took it out. It had barely left the box before she tore off the wrapper and put the gum into her mouth.

She chewed and chewed and chewed. She did her best to chew it properly, without getting too excited. When it was soft enough, she began blowing a bubble. As she blew, it grew and grew until it was towering above her head. And inside the bubble, she could make out the silhouette of a girl her own age…

Pop!

The sound of the bubble bursting echoed throughout the store. But this time, it wasn’t a TOO BAD! strip of paper that came out of it.

Instead, standing there was a girl. A girl about her own age, wearing a beautiful blue dress. She had long silky hair, lovely pale skin, and was very, very cute. When she smiled at Tomoko, Tomoko just knew that this girl was sweet and nice and smart.

“Oh, congratulations!” said the man behind the counter. “You’re lucky today. You won the draw, so you get this girl as your brand-new friend.”

Tomoko grasped the empty gum wrapper tightly, cheering *Yay!* in her head.

A wonderful girl like her—my new friend! A best friend for me and me alone!

Tomoko’s eyes sparkled with excitement. She returned the girl’s smile.

“Um, hi… I’m Tomoko,” she said, feeling a bit shy. “What’s your name?”

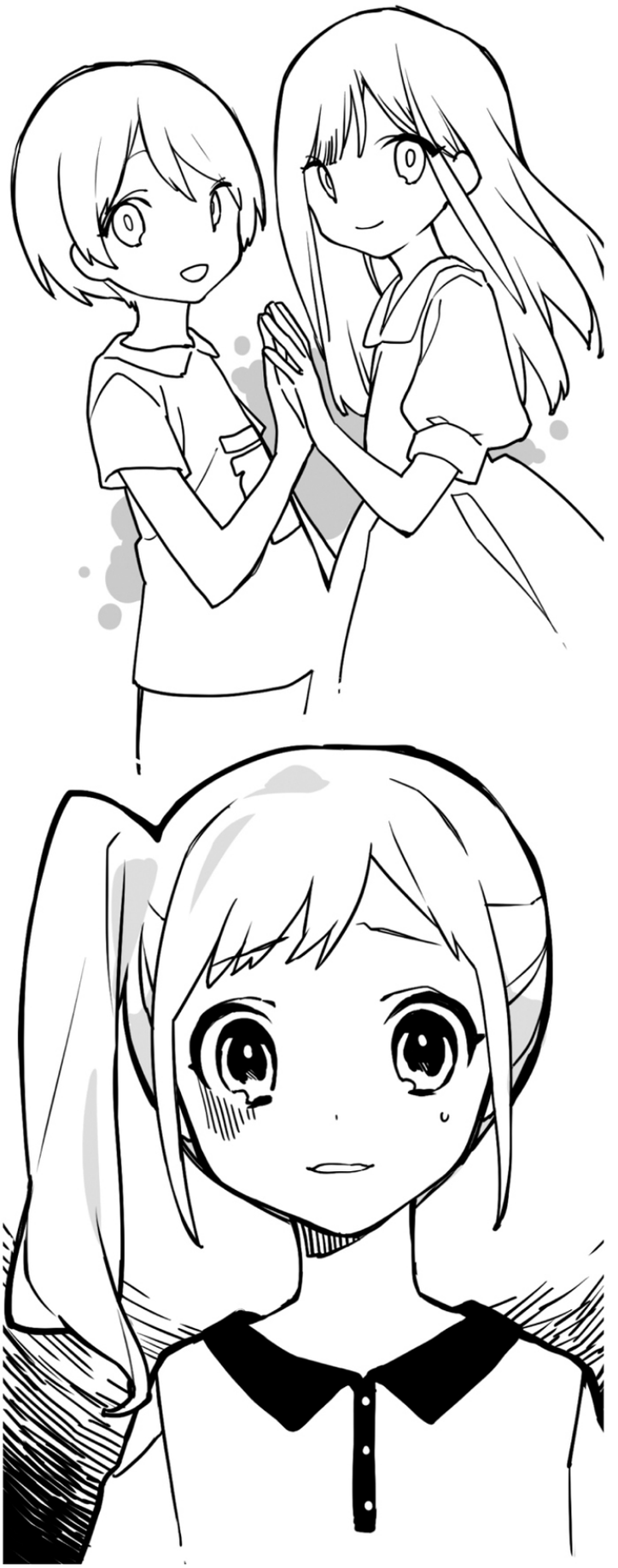
However, the girl didn’t answer. Instead, she brought one hand to her mouth and gestured for Tomoko to wait. Then she began chewing something, and a bubblegum bubble came out of her mouth. It got bigger and bigger until it was towering over her

head and burst with a loud *pop!* that echoed throughout the store.

From inside the bubble, another girl appeared. This one had short hair and was wearing an orange T-shirt. She had a different vibe from the girl in the dress, but she was just as cute and also looked sweet and nice and smart.

Tomoko was confused until the man behind the counter spoke up again.

“Oh-ho. You must be very lucky indeed. You won the grand prize. This means you get another friend absolutely free!”



Tomoko's hand went limp, and the wrapper she'd been holding fell to the floor. The two girls who had come out of the bubble gum looked at each other and smiled. Then they turned to Tomoko and spoke in unison.

""Nice to meet you, Tomoko. I just know the three of us are going to be the best of friends.""

The three of us…

All Tomoko could do was nod half-heartedly. She had a feeling she was going to hate the number three even more from then on.

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Order Form

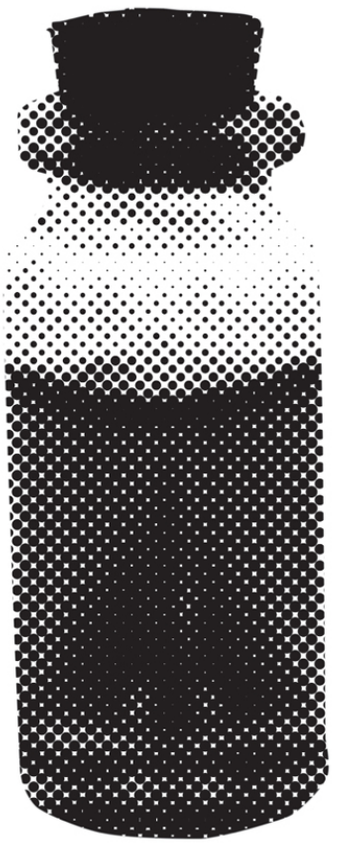
(Cut out and mail)

Order This Product

Amount Needed	Desired Delivery Date
	__/__/____

Product Name

Execution Kit



Perfect for beginners! Contains everything
you need to perform executions in
the comfort of your own home.

※This product does not endorse murder and
should be used solely for its intended purpose.

◄ ◄ ◄ ◄ Those who obtain this item may meet the following fate.

It was evening, and Keita was sitting in front of his computer like usual. This was his daily routine—every night he'd scroll through online news sites to read about all the grisly crimes that had been committed.

Unbelievable. There's always so many new incidents.

Sighing to himself, Keita clicked on another headline.

The world's way too soft on criminals. People who do bad stuff should get the death penalty.

He often found himself thinking that.

Evildoers should just disappear. People who couldn't obey society's rules didn't deserve to live. Their lives had no value, no meaning; they were just a burden on everyone else.

If only I could do something about it… If only I had some special power to punish criminals without anyone knowing, like those antihero types you see in comics.

It was a fun idea. He began to fantasize about it.

Criminals should be punished. Evildoers ought to be removed from the world. Keita couldn't be the only one who thought that way. Wasn't that what all good, upstanding citizens wanted? There were so many criminals out there, and the world would be better off without them. If only he himself had the power to pass judgment on them…

If I could do that, everyone would call me a hero.

If only…

But he knew that was impossible. Of course he did. To be an antihero and punish criminals like in comic books, you needed something special. Knowledge, technology, connections…or maybe even superpowers. Keita didn't have any of those things, and he had no way of obtaining them, either. He was just a totally average guy. He'd never be able to become a hero or give evildoers the punishment they deserved.

He heaved a sigh and turned his attention back to the computer.

Just then a little jingle played, and a pop-up ad appeared on the screen. It was bright pink, so bright it almost hurt to look at. The black text read:


Want to punish evildoers in your own home?
Get the household Execution Kit!

Keita sat dumbfounded for a minute.
“Household…Execution Kit…?”



What in the world was that? Probably just some kind of joke. Or a scam. Or clickbait.

He *was* curious, of course—he couldn't help it—but this looked way too sketchy to even consider. He decided to ignore it and moved the cursor over the headline of another news article.

But right as he went to click on it, the neon-pink pop-up ad moved itself directly under the cursor. Before Keita could stop himself, he pressed his finger on the mouse.

Click!

The screen changed, and the browser opened a new website.

"Oh shoot, I clicked it. This better not be malware or something…"

Shaken but still curious, Keita glanced at the page he'd been taken to. It looked like some kind of mail-order site.

Execution Kit: Product Details

Ever wish you had the power to punish the evildoers of the world? Then the Execution Kit is for you! We have painstakingly assembled a comprehensive kit containing everything you need to perform an execution in the comfort of your own home.

With this set, anyone can be an executioner!

※The execution tools in this kit were developed using specialized technology that reduces the victim to a pile of ash. The resulting ash is nonsticky and can be swept up and disposed of for quick and easy cleanup! ♪

He read through the product description and once again found himself dumbfounded.

"What the…? Is it okay for them to sell this stuff?"

If he thought about it rationally, there was no way this could be legal. No matter how bad a criminal was, the law would never allow people to buy a product that executed them.

But then again…

Keita couldn't help wondering. What if this was an open secret? What if this was how things really were, and he just didn't know about it until now? Maybe this kind of product was more common than he realized. Maybe the police and the government simply ignored this stuff.

Getting rid of criminals benefited society, after all. And from that point of view, the more executions that could be performed, the better. If one person could execute, say, three criminals, then ten could execute thirty, and a hundred could eliminate three hundred evildoers. Executing criminals would make the world a better place. And products like this would help increase the number of potential executioners. It all made sense.

With one of these kits, even I could do it…

The product description did say that "anyone" could become an executioner. This might just be that "something special" that would let Keita become more like the antiheroes he so admired.

But if it's that easy to use, it'd be easy to abuse, too…

He wondered about that but put those doubts out of his mind almost right away.

Eh, I'm sure it's fine. I bet they've got special measures in place for that.

The Execution Kit might have allowed anyone to dispose of criminals, but just buying it probably didn't mean you could kill whoever you wanted. There had to be limitations or conditions involved before using it.

How much is it anyway? I bet it's really expensive…

Keita had already pretty much made up his mind to buy the kit. But realistically, if he couldn't afford the price, it wasn't going to happen. Plus, there was a chance this whole thing was a trick.

Still doubtful, he scrolled down the page toward the price.

Pay just ¥1,000, and we'll send you the product.

If you're not satisfied, return your unused kit, and we will cancel your purchase.

Well, that was a relief. This way, he could see if the product was real before paying the full price.

"In that case…"

Even if it was a scam, for just one thousand yen, it was worth trying out. If the marketing was true and someone as average as him could make a difference, it was worth the risk.

Keita nodded to himself and clicked the PROCEED TO PURCHASE button.



"Delivery! Here's the item you ordered."

The Execution Kit arrived the next day, delivered straight to Keita's door. The deliveryman was wearing a long scarf, even though it wasn't cold out. Between the scarf and the hat and the light behind him, the man's face wasn't visible—it was just a huge, thick shadow.

Keita paid his one thousand yen and accepted the package.

"Would you like me to take it up to your room for you?" the deliveryman asked him.

"That would be great, thanks."

The package *was* pretty bulky. That made sense for something that was going to be used for human executions. The kit consisted of two large cardboard boxes, labeled BOX 1 and BOX 2. They were heavy enough that Keita would have struggled to lift either of them, but the deliveryman carried them both up the stairs as if it were nothing.

Once Keita was alone again, he took a good look at the boxes.

"Doesn't seem like there's any marks except for the numbers… Hmm?"

He'd spotted a small hole in the cardboard on one side of Box 2.

"What's this hole…?"

He tried to look through it, but the inside of the box was too dark for him to see anything. Box 2 was the only one with a hole in it; Keita checked the outside of Box 1 and didn't find anything.

"Whatever."

For all he knew, it could have gotten there by accident and wasn't important. It was just a tiny hole.

"Okay, let's open it up."

He turned back to Box 1, cutting through the tape on the lid with a box cutter. The first things he saw when he opened it were a slip of paper and a smaller box about the size of a pencil case. Underneath those were some things that looked like parts of a machine, wrapped in protective packaging. The paper must have been a list of the contents or a user manual or something. He tossed it aside, carefully took out the parts, and set them on the floor. Keita never read the manuals for new products anyway. He preferred to figure it out as he went.

I can always look at it later if I get confused. If the instructions fit on a piece of paper that small, it can't be too hard.

He tore through the packaging that contained the machine parts.

"I guess I just put this together, huh?"

Then he began assembling the machine, piece by piece. It was easy enough to figure out what went where. He really hadn't needed the manual after all.

After a while, the execution device was complete. It was a smooth metallic capsule, just big enough for an adult to fit inside.

He took a step back to admire it. So this was the execution tool created with "specialized technology."

I can't wait to use it…

Now that the real thing was right in front of him, he was more excited than ever. Of course, he could only return the kit unused, but not doing anything with it seemed like such a waste now. He *had* to use it.

The full price is pretty steep, but I've got my savings, so I should be able to cover it. And besides…

Keita looked at his reflection in the surface of the capsule and grew even more determined.

"Buying this…is for the good of all humankind!"

He clenched his hands tightly. His reflection stared back at him, his eyes gleaming with purpose.

"Man…assembling a whole execution chamber really makes you thirsty."

He decided to leave the capsule for a while and go to the kitchen for a drink. He was all out of tea in the refrigerator, and

he didn’t have any bottles of iced tea or soda or anything lying around, either.



“Oh well. Guess I’ll make a fresh batch of tea.”

He filled the kettle, put it on the stove, and went back to his room.

“I’ll open the rest of the kit while the water’s boiling… Now, what’s this little box?”

Keita picked up the pencil case–size box that he’d previously tossed aside with the instructions, pulled off the tape sealing it, and opened it. Inside was a syringe and a vial full of some kind of liquid. There was also a small device that looked like it might be a stun gun.

Keita was confused. What were these things for?

Are these for executions as well? Is the stuff in the vial some kind of drug?

There was no label on it, so he couldn’t really tell. Maybe it was for sedating criminals. They did say the kit contained *everything* you needed to carry out an execution, so it would make sense to include something like that, too.

“Well, I can always check the manual later. More importantly…”

Keita took his box cutter and walked over to Box 2. It was about the same size and weight as Box 1.

What’s in this one?

When he’d been putting the execution chamber together, he’d thought at first that the equipment came in two parts. But the capsule seemed as complete as it could get now. There weren’t any other places for more parts to slot into, either. So what could possibly be inside this box?

Everything you need to carry out an execution… Maybe this is something to tell whether someone is a criminal.

That theory seemed legitimate. If this kit was really as quick and convenient as it claimed, there was a risk that someone who’d done nothing wrong could be killed by accident. Of course there’d be a function that allowed the user to differentiate between evildoers and innocents.

Maybe Box 2 has some kind of machine that can read people’s brain waves and detect whether they’re good or evil.

He wasn’t sure if such a thing really existed. Not only that, he wasn’t 100 percent certain the capsule was complete, either. But he’d soon find out once he got the box open.

Keita set to work slicing through the tape that held the lid closed. Just as he was about to lift the lid, he heard a noise.

Eeeeee!

The kettle had boiled.
"Oh, right."
The water he was boiling to make tea. He'd almost forgotten.
Keita put the box cutter aside and went down to the kitchen.

A few minutes later, he was back. He'd brewed the tea, put some on ice, and had a drink.
"Huh…?"
Something was off. Keita noticed as soon as he entered the room. And he knew exactly what was amiss, too.
It was Box 2—the lid was open. He'd cut the tape on it before he left, but he hadn't actually opened it.
He took a step closer and peered inside the box.

It was empty.

Just then a figure appeared out of nowhere and flew directly at Keita. He gasped, his eyes going wide.
Who are you? How did you get here? What are you doing in my room? Countless questions sprang to his mind, but he never got to say them out loud. The figure had already raised the box cutter in their hand and was swinging it down at him.



Execution Kit Instructions

Ever wished you had the power to punish the evildoers of the world? Then the Execution Kit is for you! We have painstakingly assembled a comprehensive kit containing everything you need to perform an execution in the comfort of your own home.

With this kit, anyone can be an executioner!

Product Name: Execution Kit

Contents

Box 1: Self-Assembly Execution Chamber (×1)
Sedative (×1)
Syringe (×1)
Stun Gun (×1)

Box 2: Violent Criminal (×1)

Product Description

Use the assembled tools to execute the violent criminal included in your kit.

Warning: Please take the following precautions before opening Box 2.

- Before opening, inject the criminal with the enclosed sedative.(Simply stick the needle through the hole in the box!)
- For your safety, please keep the enclosed stun gun charged and ready when opening the box.
- Do not leave scissors or sharp objects unattended near Box 2.

※The included violent criminal is incredibly dangerous. We cannot guarantee our customers' safety if the above precautions are not followed.

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Order Form

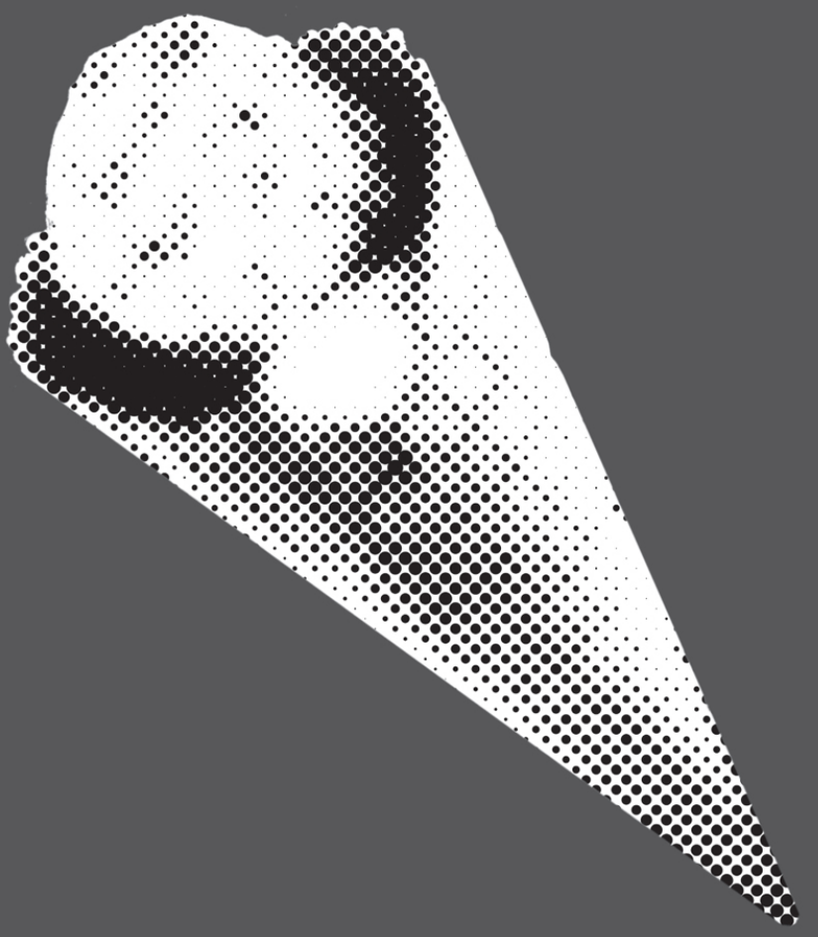
(Cut out and mail)

Order This Product

Amount Needed	Desired Delivery Date
	__/__/____

Product Name

Winter-Only Ice Cream



This delicious ice cream is available only on cold winter days. A truly magical frozen treat with an unforgettable taste. But just who is making it, and how...?

Those who obtain this item may meet the following fate. ▶ ▶ ▶ ▶

“…Oh, it’s snowing!”

Fuyumi stopped to look up at the single snowflake fluttering above her head. It was soon joined by more snowflakes falling from the night sky. All at once, the scene before her was one big mass of white.

“I did think it was pretty cold out… Wow, this must be the first snow of the season.”

She pulled her scarf around her neck a little tighter and smiled.

Fuyumi liked snow. Dancing in the air, the snowflakes looked like tiny white fairies. Who knows, maybe there was a real fairy mixed in with them somewhere. A visitor from a faraway land, hiding in plain sight. She liked to think that. These little fantasies always made her heart beat a bit faster.

Ever since she was small, Fuyumi had loved fairy tales, and that hadn’t changed even now that she was in junior high. Just the other day, she’d visited a bookstore on the edge of town and bought several picture books. That store was one of her favorites—it had a great selection of picture books, illustrated fairy tales, and fantasy novels. Whenever she got her allowance, she’d head to that store, full of anticipation for what she might find. It was one of the things she enjoyed most.

And today, she’d managed to get a hold of a very special book. It had a pale-pink cover that she remembered seeing in the library way back when she was in kindergarten. When she’d decided to try tracking down a copy of her own, it had ended up being out of print. She hadn’t even been able to find it in any used bookstores and had almost given up on ever seeing it again.

But it had recently been reprinted. Fuyumi hadn’t known that, so finding it at the store now had felt like suddenly being reunited with an old friend.

This book told the story of a mysterious cake stall. When spring arrived, it would appear under an old, old cherry tree. Its shelves were stacked with cherry-blossom mochi cakes and nothing else, but the quality was unlike any other. People who ate them would never forget the taste, and soon they were flocking from all over town to buy the cakes.

Then the stall would vanish without a trace once the old tree’s cherry blossoms began to fall, and it wouldn’t reappear until the next spring, when those same blossoms were in bloom.

The only person working at the stall was a middle-aged lady in a pale-pink apron. In fact, she wasn't a human. This person who made such delicious sweets was actually the spirit of the old cherry tree.

"Ooh… A cherry-blossom spirit making cherry-blossom mochi cakes…"

Just thinking about the illustrations of those thick, plump cherry-blossom mochi cakes was enough to make Fuyumi swoon. If only she could try one herself… Cakes made by a spirit had to taste better than anything mere humans could make. Just one bite, and you'd melt away into pure bliss… Oh, if only she could find a magical stall selling magical sweets like in this book!

Fuyumi had drifted off into fantasies like that countless times before. But of course, she knew she couldn't just go inside the world of a picture book. Believing that as a little kid was one thing, but now she was old enough to know the difference between fantasy and reality. Still, she couldn't give up that sense of wonder. It was part of who she was.

"I wish there was a store like that right here, in real life…"

Her head had started to fill with thoughts of spring, but a cold northern wind brought her back to the present with a shiver.

"Brrr, it's freezing… I should get home soon. It's already nighttime, and I don't want to catch a cold. The days are so much shorter in winter…," Fuyumi murmured to herself as she started walking again.

But then she spotted a shadowy figure in the snow and darkness up ahead. There was a *clack, clack* as they got closer and closer.

Finally, the figure stepped into the bluish glow of a streetlight. It was a girl wheeling a large suitcase.

She was about Fuyumi's age or maybe a little younger, with silver hair that really made her stand out against her dark surroundings. The girl—who had an eye patch over one eye—was pulling her suitcase along with one hand and holding an ice-cream cone in the other.

A young girl, out on her own after dark, eating ice cream in the snow. It was such an odd scene, Fuyumi couldn't help but stop and stare.

The girl seemed to notice, and when she paused, the wheels of her suitcase fell silent. Beneath the bright, pale streetlight, the two girls' gazes met.

Looking at Fuyumi with her one uncovered eye, the other girl smiled cheerfully. She licked her ice cream again without breaking eye contact.

"Um… Is that good?" Fuyumi asked, feeling as though she should say something to break the silence.

The girl smiled again and nodded. "Yeah! It's really good. I got raspberry with chocolate chips." She gave the ice cream another lick.

Fuyumi gulped.

Raspberry…? She'd thought for sure it was grape or some other flavor like that. Maybe the blue streetlight was making it look purple.



So then that hoodie the girl was wearing and her eye patch with the crossed-out heart—they weren't purple, either, but pink. These little details didn't really matter, but Fuyumi found herself getting caught up in them anyway. Then something else occurred to her.

"Huh?" she said. "You mean there's an ice cream shop open around here…?"

Fuyumi came to this part of town quite often, but she didn't remember seeing anywhere that sold ice cream like the kind this girl was eating.

The girl pointed behind her with the hand that held the cone. "Yeah, right down there. It's just a little place, but it's got tons of flavors, and they're all really tasty."

"Down there? Wow, I had no idea."

Another cold gust of wind blew. Fuyumi sneezed and brushed some snowflakes off her head. The silver-haired girl continued eating her ice cream, totally unconcerned.

"Hey… I'm sure that's really good, but isn't it a little cold for ice cream today?" Fuyumi asked her.

The girl thought for a moment. "Yeah, I guess. But you can only get this ice cream when it's cold out."

"Huh? What does that mean?"

"The store that sells this super-yummy ice cream is only open in winter. Once spring comes, it disappears. You won't find it in spring, summer, or fall, no matter how hard you look. But when winter arrives, it reappears, almost like it came out of nowhere."

Fuyumi's heart gave a little leap. A store that sold ice cream you could buy only during the winter? The season and the kind of treat were different, but this was basically the same as in the picture book she loved so much.

This, I've gotta see…!

She couldn't pass up this chance. She had to see it with her own eyes. And she wanted to try this "super-yummy" ice cream for herself.

"You said it's just down this street here?" Fuyumi asked, her voice trembling with excitement.

The girl nodded. "That's right. Down here. Keep heading straight, and you'll get there eventually."

Fuyumi thanked her and turned to look down the street, with its pale-blue streetlights. When she looked back, the strange girl had disappeared without a sound.



Fuyumi walked past one streetlight after another, until the rows of houses ended and she found herself next to a park surrounded by trees.

And right at the end of that path was another light. This one came from several light bulbs hanging from the eaves of a tiny building.

As she got closer, she heard music. It was a bright, lively tune playing from a beaten-up old speaker in front of the building. Next to it was a signboard:

WINTER-ONLY ICE CREAM

"Wow, what a cute little place!"

Fuyumi clasped her hands in wonder. It looked so magical, its gleaming white walls shimmering in the nighttime. It was small, like the girl with the eye patch had said, not much bigger than a street stall or a food truck. Only one or two people could fit inside, it seemed.

"There's no door, so…maybe you buy the ice cream outside."

After taking a look around, Fuyumi found just one door, at the back. It was plain and unmarked, so obviously it wasn't meant for customers. Probably a staff entrance.

Instead of a front door, there was a small window. It was covered with wooden boards, but an OPEN sign hung on one side of it, and some kind of intercom was on the other.

Below the window was a display case with plastic models of the store's products, and above that was a cloth awning with white and pastel-colored stripes.

"I guess you choose the ice cream you want and then order it through the intercom?"

She stepped closer to the gleaming case, looking down at the colorful samples on display.

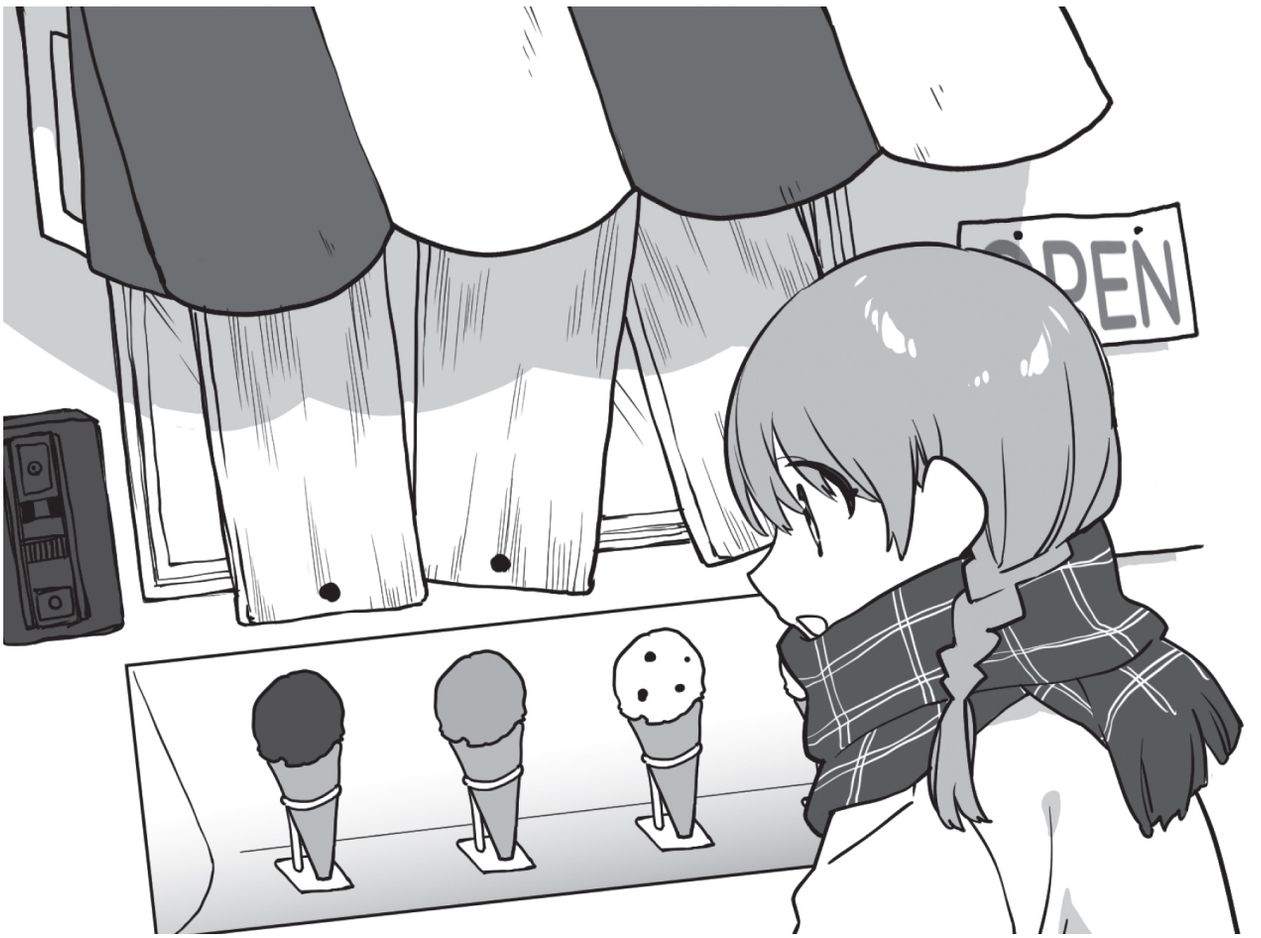
Milk, vanilla, yogurt, cheesecake, rum raisin…
Chocolate, mint, caramel, coffee…
Strawberry, raspberry…
Red bean, matcha, brown sugar syrup, sweet soy glaze…
Lemon, banana, grape, orange, pineapple…
"Ooh, I can't decide…!"
Fuyumi's eyes sparkled as they traced along the lines of flavors.
"Which one should I get? Chocolate's my favorite, but maybe I should go for something simpler for my first pick, like milk or vanilla… Or maybe one of these marbled ones that combine two flavors… The raspberry-chocolate-chip one that girl was eating looked good, too…"
Then her gaze landed on the two-scoop sample. The sight of that really made her heart race. Plus, with two scoops, she could try out multiple flavors at once. Then again…
"It'd be one thing in the summer, but I don't think I can eat that much ice cream on a day this cold."
Somewhat regretfully, she decided to order just one scoop. After a little more thought, she made up her mind on a flavor: chocolate.
"Excuse me…," she said, pressing the button on the intercom.

Bzzzt…

There was a staticky sound, followed by a voice that must have belonged to someone inside the store.
"*Hello, hello! Welcome. May I take your order?*" the voice asked in singsong.
Fuyumi couldn't tell if the speaker was a man or a woman, but it was a perfect fit for the cheery music playing out front.
"One scoop of chocolate, please."
"Coming right up!"
With those last words, the static on the other end of the intercom cut off abruptly.
A few minutes later…

Thunk!
Screeee…

One of the boards was moved aside, and the window slid open.


OPEN

“One scoop of chocolate. That’ll be two hundred and fifty yen.”

The ice cream she’d ordered slid out from inside, the cone supported by its own little stand. Fuyumi put her money into the glass tray next to the stand and took the cone.

Just as she was turning away, she caught sight of something moving inside the store. Wondering what it was, she inched closer to the window and peered through.

Huh…?

Fuyumi’s eyes widened in surprise at what she saw: a small, white, roly-poly little snowman. It turned its head to look at her with its dark coal-like eyes, and their gazes met.

The next moment, the shutter came down with a clatter, and the window closed.

For a while, Fuyumi stood rooted to the spot. She was alone with the staticky music from the stereo, the blustery cold wind, and the sweet scent of chocolate.

“…Oh, right—the ice cream!”

She came out of her daydream and looked at her frozen treat. A few snowflakes had settled on it, like a natural topping, and it sparkled under the store’s lighting.

“I’d better eat it.”

She was still curious about what she’d seen. Very, *very*, curious. But she was just as curious about how the ice cream tasted.

She took a bite.

It was just the right level of softness, and it melted on her tongue. The sweetness, the cold, and the taste of chocolate filled her entire mouth. She swallowed, savoring the refreshingly cool sensation of the not-quite-melted ice cream all the way down her throat.

“…”

Fuyumi looked at the ice cream in her hand, with only a single bite taken out of it. It was tasty beyond words.

She took another bite. And another. Pretty soon, she lost track of everything else.

Lick, slurp, gulp.

Such an interesting texture. It was almost like biting into a fruit and feeling its juices burst in your mouth.

Before she knew it, Fuyumi had eaten the whole thing. She was pretty cold by that point, so she stopped at a vending machine on her way home and bought some hot corn soup to warm herself up.



Even after she got home, Fuyumi's head was filled with thoughts of the Winter-Only Ice Cream store. Just remembering the taste of that chocolate ice cream made her mouth water. Who would have thought such delicious ice cream even existed?

"I've gotta go there again. Which flavor should I try next time? The milk or the vanilla or one of the marbled ones…?"

She found herself fantasizing about how they all might taste.

"Oh, but also…"

She felt a smile spread across her face. It wasn't just the ice cream she wanted to know more about.

"What was that thing I saw…?"

The tiny snowman she'd glimpsed through the window. It had only been for a moment, but she was certain she'd seen it moving.

A living snowman… Common sense said such a thing couldn't possibly exist.

And yet… And yet!

"It only makes sense that someone who could make ice cream that good isn't human. They must be some kind of snow spirit."

Yes. Of course. A snow spirit that took the form of a small roly-poly snowman. Just like the cherry-tree spirit that made the delicious cherry-blossom mochi cakes in her picture book. That would explain why this snow spirit was so good with frozen treats like ice cream—the cold was its whole thing.

Fuyumi could just imagine it. Inside that little building sat the snow spirit, surrounded by the sweet aromas of the different ingredients, making those lovely, brightly colored ice creams.

In her mind's eye, she could see the spirit mixing the milk and cream and syrup, adding sugar into the bowl, and mixing it all together with a whisk. *Swish, swish, swish…* In went the other ingredients: crushed fruit, caramel sauce, chocolate chips…and

then the secret ingredient—a spoonful of sparkling magic snow crystals. After that, the snowman would blow on it with its frosty breath to freeze it into ice cream.

That was how they created a taste that other stores couldn't replicate. *That* was how they got that indescribable texture…

Fuyumi imagined the scene vividly, and at the thought of the finished ice cream, she found herself craving it even more.



After that, Fuyumi started going to the Winter-Only Ice Cream store almost every day. It wasn't always open, though. On snowy days, or when it was cold enough that it felt as if it might snow, it would be open. On days when it was still wintery but a little warmer, it was shut up tight.

The snowman probably doesn't like working when it's hot.

She comforted herself with that thought on days when she couldn't get any ice cream.

The girl with the raspberry ice cream said the store disappears when spring comes. I'll bet that's why—it's too warm.

The snowman was a *snow* spirit, so it was no wonder it didn't like the heat. It wouldn't want to hang around once spring came and the days started getting warmer. It would have to go somewhere else during that part of the year. Farther north, perhaps, where it was still cold, or maybe to a land of eternal winter where other spirits of its kind lived.

Tee-hee…

Fuyumi was so excited. The more she thought about it, the more she was sure she was right.

The Winter-Only Ice Cream seller was a snow spirit. It had to be.

But even though she went to the store time and time again over the next few weeks, she was never able to confirm that theory. She'd been able to catch a glimpse of the snowman only that one time. She tried peeking through the window whenever she took her ice cream, but it was such a small, narrow opening that she could never make out what was going on inside.

On the other hand, I've never seen any people *working in there, either.*

That settled it. The snowman must work hidden away somewhere, never showing its face to customers. That first time Fuyumi visited, the snowman must have gotten careless and passed by the open window, revealing its true form. She was more certain than ever that she was on the right track.

I'd like to find out for sure, though…

She simply couldn't let this remain a theory or a fantasy. Just this once, she wanted it to be real. If she could prove to herself that fantasy and reality weren't so separate as they appeared, that would be enough.

The snowman's hiding, so it probably doesn't want anyone looking at it, but—but still…

She wanted to see the truth.

But she wasn't supposed to look.

Those two desires duked it out within Fuyumi's heart, getting stronger and stronger.

And then one day…it happened.



Fuyumi was making her way to the Winter-Only Ice Cream store like usual.

"It's snowing today, so it'll definitely be open…"

She headed toward the store, watching her breath come out in white puffs. Today, she had just one objective in mind.

Today is the day I try a two-scoop ice cream…!

She clenched her hands into fists in determination.

True, it was very cold out. But according to the weather forecast, it was going to start getting warmer, and soon enough spring would be on its way. When that happened, the ice cream store would disappear. For all she knew, this could be the last time she'd be able to buy any Winter-Only Ice Cream. With that in mind, Fuyumi had decided to try a two-scoop cone, no matter what.

And it just so happened that there were only two flavors she hadn't tried yet.

"Two scoops—one yogurt, one vanilla-chocolate-chip, please."

"Coming right up… Oh."

After taking Fuyumi's order, the person inside the store suddenly sounded troubled. Was something wrong?

"I'm terribly sorry; we're out of vanilla-chocolate-chip. But we just got a fresh shipment of the ingredients. If you wait a little while, we'll have it ready for you as soon as we can."

Oh, was that all? What a relief.

"Yes, that's fine. I'll wait."

"Thank you for your understanding. I'll let you know when it's done."

With that, the intercom switched off.

Fuyumi leaned against the building, underneath the awning. That was when she noticed a motorcycle parked behind the store. It looked like a cargo bike, with a rack for boxes attached. It was probably there to deliver the ice cream ingredients.

Just then the back door opened, and Fuyumi's heart pitter-pattered in her chest.

Who could that be? Someone who works at the store? Or maybe…

She poked her head around the corner to take a peek at whatever there was to see.

She spotted a man dressed like a delivery person. He must have been cold, because he was wearing a big scarf. With his helmet pulled low over his eyes, you could barely see his face. Locking the door behind him, he slipped the key into his pocket and went back to his motorcycle.

That must be the person who delivers the ingredients…

Maybe he was a supplier who knew the owner of the shop. If she followed him, she might be able to ask about who was running it…

While she debated whether to approach him, the man got on his motorcycle and revved the engine. As he did, a key fell from his pocket and hit the ground with a *clink*. He drove away without having seemed to notice.

"…"

When the motorcycle was out of sight, Fuyumi stepped out from her hiding place and looked down at the key. Slowly, hesitantly, she picked it up.

Fuyumi quietly slipped around to the store's back door. She paused for a moment, taking a deep breath.

She knew this was wrong.

It was wrong to take the key and open the door. The right thing to do would be to hand in the key, along with her money, when her ice cream came out. The key probably unlocked the staff door, and she ought to return it to the store owner so that they could give it back to the deliveryman.

Oh, but I wonder…is this really the key to this *door?*

The thought came into Fuyumi's head suddenly. What if the deliveryman had multiple keys in his pocket? What if this key—the one that he'd dropped—wasn't the same key he'd slipped into his pocket after locking the door?

It was certainly possible. She couldn't say for sure that that *wasn't* the case.

"If I gave them the wrong key, that could cause trouble. So then…"

She'd just have to test it out, see if this key really did unlock this door. Yes, that's what she'd do.

Fuyumi nodded to herself and pushed the key into the lock. It fit perfectly and turned with a *click*. She then twisted the knob, and the door opened inward, creaking slightly.

That answered her question. This key did in fact open this door.

She reached forward to push it open wider but stopped. What next?

Now that I've opened it without asking, it'd be rude to just shut it again without telling anyone.

True, what she should really do next was go inside, apologize to the store owner, and return the key. Satisfied with her reasoning, Fuyumi pushed the creaky door again and stepped into the building.

It was dark around the entrance, but there was a light farther in, cast by a bleak fluorescent light bulb on the ceiling. And underneath that…

"…Huh?"

A short gasp escaped Fuyumi's mouth.

Underneath the light…wasn't a person. It wasn't a snowman, either.

There was a huge machine, so large it almost touched the ceiling. She'd never seen anything like it before. One part in the middle of it seemed to be hollow. What on earth was this thing?

Fuyumi stood stock-still, dumbfounded.

And then the machine began to make noises, and some wirelike arms came writhing out from either side. Each one had a metal claw at the end, like the ones in crane games at the arcade. The wiry arms extended toward a nearby cooler, opened it, and took out the contents.

Fuyumi gasped again.

The thing it had taken out of the cooler…was a snowman. A snowman tiny enough to fit in the palm of her hand. And it was moving.

There was no doubt about it. The snowman was wriggling around, desperately trying to escape the mechanical claw's grip.

A lid flipped open on the top of the machine. The arm released the snowman, tossing it inside. It did the same with another and another—it took snowman after snowman out of the cooler and threw them all inside. When it had crammed in ten of them, the lid slammed shut.

Then there was a metallic grinding sound like a blender starting up. Mixed in with it were several screams.

VWRRR!!!
"Yaaargh…!"

It was all too easy to imagine what was going on inside the machine.



Vwrrr…
“Aaargh…”

The blender sound got smoother and smoother, and the screams started growing fainter until they faded away completely. After a few more seconds of blender-like whirring, everything was silent.

Then a door on the hollow part of the machine popped open, and an ice-cream cone was pushed out. Two scoops of ice cream were then placed on top of it, perfectly balanced.

The wire arms reached out again. One of them took the ice cream out of the machine and placed it in a stand waiting by the sales window. Another reached around and pulled open the creaky boards covering the window.

“*Thank you for waiting! One yogurt and vanilla-chocolate-chip cone. That will be four hundred yen*,” came a cheery voice from somewhere inside the huge machine.

Fuyumi recognized that voice. Even hearing it up close instead of through the intercom, she could tell it still had the telltale static mixed in.

As she stood there horrified, she caught sight of something moving near the window. It was a little snowman, trying desperately to scramble outside. One of them must have escaped the mechanical claws’ grasp.

But the machine quickly noticed it and shot out an arm to grab the snowman before it could go any farther. The other arm opened a cooler, and then the snowman was tossed inside, and the lid closed on top of it.

No…

Fuyumi staggered backward.

The ice cream really was made here in the store, but not by a person. And not by a snow spirit, either. It was a machine—one that made and sold the ice cream automatically.

And—and the ice cream she’d been eating all this time, the ice cream that tasted so wonderful, with such a distinctive texture… It was made of—!

She glanced to one side. There was a whole stack of coolers there. Each one had a label on it describing the contents, and they all said the same thing:

Living Snowmen
Box of 30

Fresh from the Land of Eternal Winter, these lively little snowmen are the perfect ingredients for unbeatable ice cream. Caught in season and shipped directly to you, they will produce a melt-in-your-mouth texture your customers will never forget!

※Caution※
Ice cream made with this product will melt easily. Retailers should take this into account when deciding business hours. We recommend restricting sales to days cold enough for it to snow.

Fuyumi staggered out the back door, her legs weak and unsteady. She looked up to see the ice cream she'd ordered still sitting in the window above the display case. Yogurt and vanilla-chocolate-chip. Two white scoops on top of each other.

For a split second, the chocolate chips in the top scoop looked like the eyes of a tiny snowman glaring back at her.

Cut Here

Order Form

(Cut out and mail)

Order This Product

Amount Needed	Desired Delivery Date
	__/__/____

Product Name

??? Goldfish (Red)



At first glance, it looks like a regular goldfish you'd find anywhere. But it's hiding a surprising secret! What kind of secret? Finding out is part of the fun!

◄ ◄ ◄ ◄ Those who obtain this item may meet the following fate.

On a certain weekend in autumn, a group of men and women gathered at a nameless lake in the mountains.

“Is this the one?”

“Looks like a regular old pond to me.”

“Does it really appear here?”

“That’s what the reports say. But who knows.”

“That’s what we’re here to find out, right? You guys get the cameras ready!”

“We’ll prepare the net, then…”

“Ooh, this is so exciting! If the rumors are true, it’ll be awesome just to see this thing, even if we can’t catch it.”

“I’ll say,” one of the group members agreed, camera in hand. “No one but us, the Rare Breeds Society, will have ever seen anything like this.”



Sometime earlier, toward the end of summer…

“Ugh, no luck today…”

Shinji returned from his latest trip to the mountains, sighing as he slumped down onto his bed. He rolled over and looked at the many cages, bug containers, and fish tanks that filled his room. They housed creatures he’d bought at pet shops or found in the mountains or at the beach or in other places. Each and every one of them was uncommon, rarer than usual. But none of them were *really* rare.

“This is no good… I’m never going to match up to the adults in the Rare Breeds Society with specimens like these.”

He groaned, closing his eyes.

For as long as Shinji could remember, he’d loved finding and raising rare creatures. As he got older and developed that interest further, he joined the Rare Breeds Society, a group of like-minded people. At their meetings, members would bring along rare creatures they’d managed to acquire and show them off to everyone.

A couple of weeks ago, Shinji had gone to his first meeting. The specimen he'd brought with him was a frog—a golden frog with red eyes. He'd stumbled upon it by a roadside rice paddy on his way home from school. After catching it and looking it up, he found out it was a type of Japanese tree frog. Apparently, the ones with this coloring were pretty rare.

Shinji treasured this unusual golden tree frog. It was the gem of his collection. He was sure everyone at the Rare Breeds Society meeting would envy him.

But it turned out he was in for a rude awakening. Several members of the group had much rarer specimens. These were grown-ups with high-paying jobs, after all. That kind of money allowed them access to incredible creatures, ones with price tags of several thousand—maybe even several million—yen. They had animals Shinji had only ever seen in books or on TV. In fact, they had things he'd never seen or even heard of before.

Seeing all this, he felt embarrassed of his little frog. At the same time, he was intensely jealous of these rich adults and all their disposable income that allowed them to buy things a high schooler like him could only dream of.

I want rarer specimens!

Yes, he wanted strange creatures like the ones the other group members had. He wanted to show them off and make all the adults jealous.

Ever since the meeting, Shinji had thought of little else. He'd become more obsessed with rare specimens than ever. Earlier, he'd taken the train to the mountains in a far-off town, just for the chance of catching something rare. But the result, as it so often was, was a resounding "no luck today." Rare creatures weren't that easy to find.

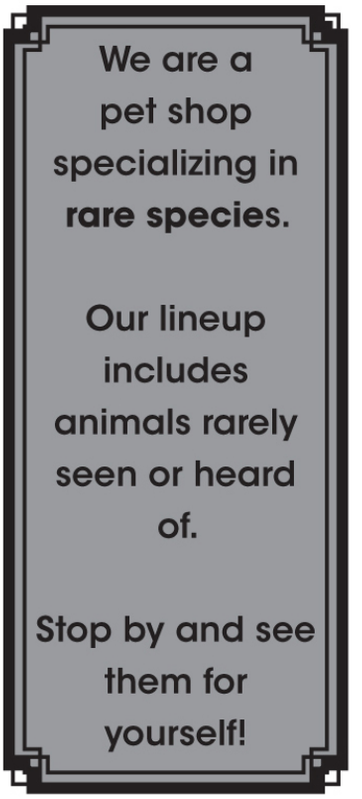
"I'm just a high schooler; I don't have money to spend on expensive pets. Looking around in the wild is the best I can do. Maybe if I found something genuinely rare and sold that, it'd be a different story…"

He yawned and shifted his position in bed. As usual, the creaking of his mattress was drowned out by the various other sounds in the room: the bubbling of the aquarium pumps, rodents gnawing, bugs rustling around, mice squeaking. Lulled

by those familiar noises, Shinji began to drift off and was soon asleep.

The next day, a flyer arrived in his mailbox. It was some kind of ad with a neon-pink border. It seemed to be advertising a new pet store that had opened nearby.




We are a
pet shop
specializing in
rare species.
Our lineup
includes
animals rarely
seen or heard
of.
Stop by and see
them for
yourself!

Shinji's eyes went wide as he read it.

"A rare-species pet shop here? I bet they've got much cooler stuff than the regular stores!"

They were probably a lot more expensive, too. But this could be his chance to find something worthy of being the true gem of his collection!

"There's no telling how long it'll take me to find something really rare on my own…"

And the next Rare Breeds Society meeting was in just a few weeks' time. He wanted a rare creature he could show off proudly at that meeting, no matter the cost. And for a specialized pet store to open up right now, of all times? And right in his own neighborhood? It must have been fate.

"Maybe I'll go there and see what they've got."

He went upstairs, gathered all the savings he had, and rushed out the door, following the map on the flyer toward the store.



The store was a little hole-in-the-wall tucked away in a back alley. Shinji could hear all sorts of animals inside, but he didn't notice any people around.

"Guess you have to be super hardcore to come to a place like this…," he muttered as he walked in. "Wow… They really do have things I've never seen or heard of before."

Despite its size, the store had an impressive lineup, all rarer specimens than Shinji could have imagined. There was an eight-eyed cat, each eye a different color; a rabbit that made sounds like a cricket; a caterpillar almost as big as a person; and a snake with a head like a bird, right down to the beak.

"They're rare, all right… So, *so* rare…"

He began to get totally absorbed in looking around the store. Eventually, he found his way to a section with lots and lots of fish tanks. Each tank had a label on the front describing what kind of fish was inside.

One tank contained fish with gleaming rainbow-colored scales.

EACH FISH WILL PRODUCE UP TO TEN RAINBOWS PER DAY, RANGING BETWEEN SEVEN AND TEN INCHES LONG. FEEDING THEM SPECIALIZED

FOOD (SOLD SEPARATELY) WILL PRODUCE RAINBOWS WITH GOLD AND SILVER MIXED IN.

Another tank had a mirror and several identical fish, right down to their detailed markings.

PLACE A FISH IN A TANK WITH A MIRROR, AND IT WILL TURN INTO TWO FISH BY THE NEXT DAY, THEN FOUR FISH, AND SO ON. WITH EACH DAY THAT PASSES, THE NUMBER OF FISH WILL DOUBLE.

*NEVER PLACE MORE THAN ONE MIRROR IN THE TANK AT ANY ONE TIME.

And in yet another tank, one with a lid on top and no water inside, was a fish with long fernlike fins.

GROUNDBREAKING NEW DISCOVERY! THE DRY GOLDFISH CAN SURVIVE WITHOUT WATER, ELIMINATING THE NEED FOR CHANGING WATER AND MAKING CLEANING THE TANK A BREEZE! PERFECT FOR BEGINNERS.

Shinji looked at them all in amazement. These went beyond *just* rare.

“What even *is* this store…?” he mumbled, not really expecting an answer.

“How do you like our wares?”

He jumped and spun around, shocked by the voice that seemed to have come out of nowhere. It turned out to be a store employee.

He’s dressed kind of weird, though…

The man standing before him wore an apron that looked like a standard store uniform. But he also wore a broad-brimmed hat and a scarf, despite being indoors. They cast deep shadows that made it hard to see his face, even if Shinji strained his eyes. The man spoke again, although Shinji still couldn’t see his mouth moving.

“Our rare creatures are unlike anything you’ve seen in other stores, wouldn’t you say?”

“Uh… Yeah, sure. But…” Shinji hesitated, looking at the labels on the fish tanks. “What it says here… Is it true?”

“You don’t believe it?”

The tall man opened the lid on one of the tanks and took out the fish with a net—the Dry Goldfish. From the outside, it definitely looked like there was no water in the tank, although that could have been a trick of the light. But when the man let the

fish out of its net, it really did swim through the air, its long fins trailing elegantly behind it.

"You see? A genuine Dry Goldfish. No water required," the employee said.

Shinji barely even heard the man. He just stood there, spellbound by the unearthly creature floating in midair in front of him.

After a while, the man caught the fish in his net again and returned it to its tank.

"Interested?" he asked.

Shinji heard that. He nodded enthusiastically. This was amazing.

Not even the Rare Breeds Society could compete with specimens like this. If he brought that fish to the next meeting, he'd be the star of the show. Except…

"I'd love to buy one, but…it's a little out of my price range."

He sighed. There were a whole lot of zeros on that price tag. Even with all the savings he'd brought with him, he was still a long way off from having enough money. And the other fish were just as pricey, if not more so. It made sense that animals like this would cost a lot, of course. But Shinji was determined to go on.

"Do you have anything more…affordable?" he asked the man in the scarf.

"Hmm, let me see…"

The man led Shinji to an area at the back of the store where there was a large fish tank. Inside, several goldfish were swimming around, and to the side of the tank was a sign that read:



Shinji looked inside at the different goldfish. One had large, shiny, flowerlike scales. One was completely pink. One shimmered like stardust. One was the color of the midnight sky.

One had transparent skin, so you could see its bones. One was a deep amber color, like honey. One was covered in some kind of fur, making it look like a plush toy. One was as white as fresh snow.

There was also an unremarkable-looking red goldfish.

“You might get your hands on a rare goldfish for only a fraction of what it’s worth,” the man said.

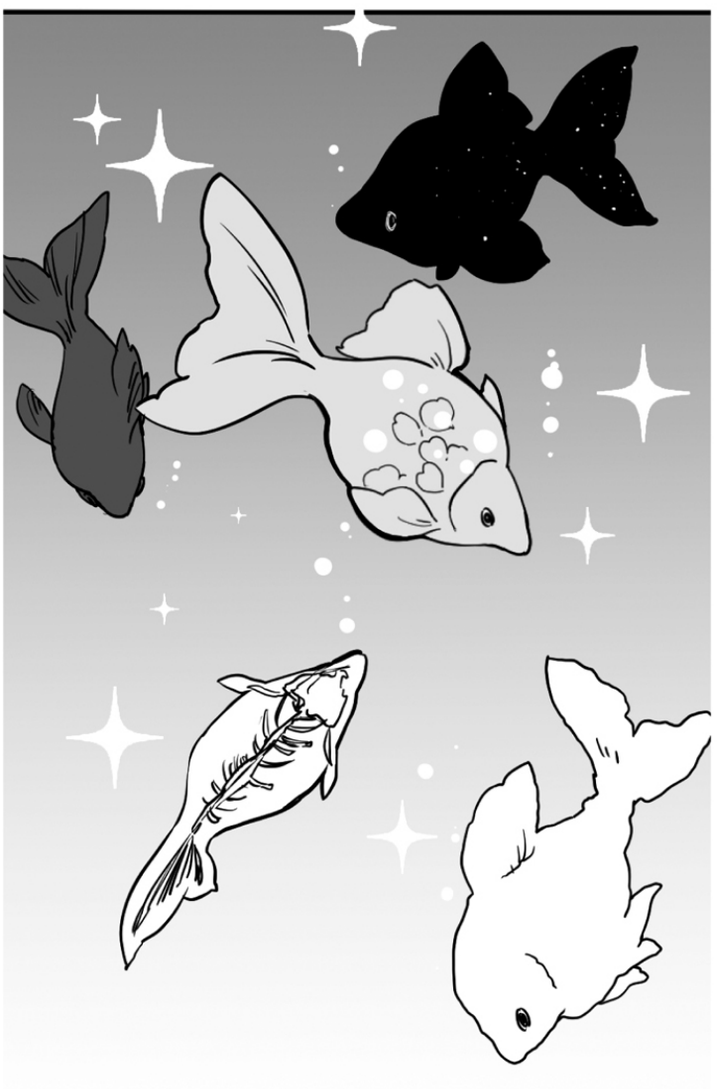
Shinji nodded. The store worker was right.

This was the only way Shinji was going to afford anything from this store. He paid his three hundred yen without a second thought, took the thin paper scoop, and stepped up to the tank.

He decided to try for the pink goldfish first and moved the scoop toward it. It broke through the paper and swam away. Shinji paid another three hundred yen and got a new scoop. This time he aimed for the midnight-blue goldfish. That one also broke the scoop before he could catch it. He tried again with the honey-colored goldfish, with the same result. He tried to catch the white goldfish, but that broke through the scoop, too.

He started to get desperate and paid for scoop after scoop after scoop. Soon enough, there was a pile of broken ones next to him. His wallet was almost empty, and he’d only managed to catch a single solitary goldfish. And it wasn’t the pink one or the midnight-blue one or the honey-colored one or the white one.





It was the plain old red goldfish.

He'd burned through his entire savings, and all he had to show for it was a regular goldfish like you could win at any festival stall.



"Darn it… All that money, and I didn't manage to get even one rare fish…," Shinji grumbled to himself on the way home.

In his frustration, he considered throwing the red goldfish away, but that felt like too much of a waste considering how much cash he'd spent.

"I'll just put it in one of the tanks with the others."

Back in his room, he sighed again and looked around. There were so many cages and fish tanks and bug tanks; there wasn't space for a new one. Besides, he wasn't about to waste more money on a tank for this common goldfish.

"What a pain… Here, you can live in this."

With that, he tossed it into a tank that already had several fish living in it.

One week later…

The next Rare Breeds Society meeting is next week…

Shinji was starting to panic. He still hadn't found any rare specimens worthy of showing the group. At this rate he'd be outdone again, seething with jealousy at the animals the other members brought.

"Oh man… If only I'd gotten one of those cool fish from the goldfish scoop…"

That reminded him: It was time to feed the fish.

He scattered some fish food onto the surface of the water in the tank. That was when he noticed something.

"Huh? The red one isn't eating."

He'd used regular flake food; a goldfish could easily eat that. The rest of the fish in the tank were eating, but the little red one showed no interest at all.

"What? You don't like this food?"

It felt even weirder that he was only noticing this after a week. The goldfish was still swimming around as happily as it had the day Shinji brought it home. But that meant it hadn't eaten anything for a whole week.

"Fine, you can starve if you want. It's not like you're rare or anything."

Then again, this *was* the thing he'd spent his entire savings on…

"Guess I'll try out some different food."

With all his different pets, he had no shortage of different kinds of pet food. He must have something the red goldfish would eat.

He tried food for tropical fish, food for turtles, food for crayfish, food for lizards… The goldfish ignored them all. Then he tried breadcrumbs, grains of rice, and tiny scraps of wheat. Still no good.

"Real picky eater, aren't you? What in the world *do* you eat?"

Shinji clicked his tongue and took out a bag of dried mealworms.

"If you don't like these, I'm done with you! You can starve to death for all I care!"

He angrily crushed a clump of the mealworms and tossed them into the water.

That was when it happened.

The red goldfish swam up with surprising speed, opened its mouth, and with a *chomp!* swallowed one of the mealworms whole. Shinji heaved a sigh, partly of relief, partly of frustration.

But the very next moment, something strange occurred. The red goldfish disappeared.

"Huh?!" Shinji yelled in surprise. "Wh-what just happened…?"

He circled the tank, checking every nook and cranny for the fish. No matter where he looked, he could see no sign of it. There were only the other fish, the ones he'd had in the tank before. That and the mealworms, some of which were sinking, while others floated on the water's surface.

"Hmm…?"

He'd noticed something odd. One of the mealworms was moving.

That was weird. These weren't live bait. There was no way one could still be wriggling around like that. Unless…

"Wait…! I wonder…"

Shinji dashed out of his room and went to the kitchen. He took the leftover grilled salmon fillet from the previous night's dinner out of the refrigerator and brought it back upstairs. There, he tore off a tiny piece and dropped it into the tank.

"Here you go. Dinnertime."



The fillet sank in the water, and the mealworm started to wriggle toward it. It bumped right into it, as if it was taking a bite, and then…

…the mealworm's body began to swell and grow.

It got bigger and bigger, it sprouted fins and scales, and before Shinji had time to blink, it had become a large, healthy salmon.

"I was right… I knew it!" he cheered.

The red goldfish hadn't disappeared at all. When it ate the mealworm, it had transformed into one itself. That was why there had been a live mealworm swimming around. And now it had eaten a piece of salmon and changed into a salmon.

"So that's how it works…"

Shinji nodded to himself. This fish really had belonged at that specialized pet store. This was no ordinary goldfish—it was a Metamor-fish, able to change into any creature it ate. Talk about a rare find!



"This is amazing… Who'd have thought I had such a rare specimen on my hands…?!"

Now that Shinji knew what the goldfish really was, all his worries flew out the window. He'd be proud to show this off at the Rare Breeds Society meeting next week. Even among the specimens the other members had, this was definitely the rarest of them all.

"Those rich, stuck-up adults are gonna be real surprised when they feast their eyes on this. They'll be dying of jealousy!"

He could see their faces now… This was going to be fun.

Shinji had a busy week after that. He mostly spent it experimenting with different types of food and seeing how the Metamor-fish reacted to them. He fed it salmon and sardines and mackerel and bream from the supermarket, as well as things besides fish: sea urchin, crab, octopus, shrimp. The goldfish seemed to have no preference, eating and transforming into each creature.

Next, he tried feeding it something that didn't live in the water. It worked—after eating chicken, the goldfish changed into a chicken. And even as a chicken, it had no problem surviving in the water, swimming around just as happily as before. A marine chicken—now *that* was a rare find!

He tried feeding it live creatures—bugs and other small animals. He tossed several of his old pets into the tank, sacrificing them with a casual "Here you go. Dinnertime."

Rhinoceros beetles, stag beetles, spiders, frogs, lizards, turtles, hamsters… Some of them were uncommon varieties, of course. But what was that compared to a Metamor-fish?

It was a sacrifice he was willing to make. And the goldfish had no trouble transforming after eating live "bait," either.

Shinji had a thought: Maybe he should just feed all his animals to the fish, providing it with even more metamorphoses. Buying different food for all of them was expensive, and their cages took up so much room… And since the goldfish could also "get rid of them" without a trace, it would be like killing two birds with one stone.

Shinji made other observations. The goldfish wasn't shy around people, and it would eat pretty much any living thing. Strangely, the other fish in the tank never got eaten. It must only eat things that a human gave it. Whenever Shinji said, "Here you go. Dinnertime," the goldfish would swim toward whatever he'd thrown into the tank and eat it without hesitation.

"So it won't eat or transform on its own…"

It hadn't changed the whole week he first brought it home, after all. That meant it could live without food for a week, at least. It wasn't going to starve in that amount of time. It could eat anything, it didn't need a special tank, it liked people, and it would do fine if you forgot to feed it for a while.

"It's not just rare—it's easy to take care of, too."

Shinji really had gotten his hands on something amazing here.

He tossed a hamster into the tank with a "Here you go. Dinnertime" and watched the goldfish swim toward its latest meal.



The next day was when the Rare Breeds Society would finally meet. Shinji had gone out to a lake in the mountains for one final test. When he arrived, he checked that no one else was around.

"Okay, good. Let's do this…"

The lake was the perfect place for this experiment. He put the bucket he was carrying down on the ground; inside it was the Metamor-fish, now the size of an easy-to-carry salmon. He opened the cooler he had with him and took out a packet of bacon. This was special bacon he'd ordered online, made from whale meat.

"A lake this big should do just fine."

Would the fish be able to morph into something as large as a whale? That was what he had come out here to test out. He couldn't possibly try this at home or somewhere people might see him, so he'd picked a remote spot out in the mountains instead.

Shinji opened the bacon and called to the fish in the bucket, using his usual message.

"Here you go. Dinnertime."

It responded to his voice, swimming up and poking its head out of the water. Shinji offered it a scrap of the whale bacon, and…

Chomp!

…the fish bit into it and began chewing it up.

Fwump…

Its body started to swell and grow. Shinji reacted quickly and tossed the contents of the bucket into the lake. The fish was already too big to fit inside the bucket. This Metamor-fish was getting bigger and bigger, changing shape and color like Shinji had seen it do so many times previously. Before long, the transformation was complete.

Shinji stared in amazement at the creature in front of him.

It was a whale. A real live whale.

It was so big it had made the lake overflow, soaking Shinji's shoes and the earth around him. But the higher ground on the other side of the lake would still hide the whale-fish from view, even if anyone happened to walk by.

“It worked… The experiment was a success!” Shinji cheered.

The Metamor-fish really could take the form of a gargantuan creature like this, one that was bigger than some boats. Now that he’d confirmed this, he was happier than ever.

“I think I’ll show off this transformation at the meeting tomorrow.”

He reached into his cooler again and got out some supermarket salmon. He couldn’t exactly take home a whale-fish, so he’d brought along something to change it back into something smaller. Once it ate this, it would be able to fit in the bucket again.

“Here you go. Dinnertime.”

The whale-fish turned in the direction of Shinji’s voice. Kicking up waves all around the lake, it slowly swam to the shore where he was standing. Then it opened its mouth. The only thing Shinji had to do now was toss in the food.

Except just as he was about to, a butterfly fluttered in front of his face. Its black-patterned wings were an astonishingly neon pink. He’d never seen a butterfly like it before.

“Ooh, that’s a rare one!”

He instinctively reached out to try catching it, but it fluttered away, barely beyond his grasp. He took a step closer, not really thinking about what he was doing…and slipped on the wet ground.

“Ah…!”

By the time he cried out, it was already too late.

Shinji fell and—the salmon still in his hand—slid toward the whale-fish’s gaping mouth.

Sometime after that, rumors started circulating about that lake.

“Have you heard? They say there’s a mermaid living in there…”

Cut Here

Order Form

(Cut out and mail)

Order This Product

Amount Needed	Desired Delivery Date
	__/__/____



Sample Product



Memory Erase Button

“…Huh? That’s it?”

Mashiro was confused. After the story of the Metamor-fish, the book just ended. The index listed all the stories she’d read so far: Instant Grim Reaper, Friend Prize Draw, Execution Kit, Winter-Only Ice Cream, and ??? Goldfish (Red). But it also had one last item, Sample Product: Memory Erase Button. Without closing it, she held the book up and looked at it intently.

This book she’d found in the alley between two buildings was a mystery, an enigma. Its front and back covers were plain black. There was no title, no author, no information about who’d published it.

But it was the contents of the book that were really interesting. Mashiro had gotten so into it, she’d taken it back to her hideout on the observation platform. And there, sitting on the ground with her back against the platform railing, she’d read it from start to finish.

“What a weird book… At first it seemed like a regular short story collection, but the last chapter’s missing… Then there’s all that stuff about ‘meeting the following fate’ and those order forms at the end of each chapter…”

It was almost as if this wasn’t just a book about strange magical products, but also…

“It lets you buy the items that appear in the stories?”

She flipped through the pages again, to one of the order forms. She ran her finger over the dotted line and the blank boxes.



“Does this mean…you can actually use these order forms?”

Mashiro gulped. Logically speaking, there was no way any of this could be real. Those products were just made-up. No way you could actually order them.

And yet she’d already seen one thing today that couldn’t possibly be real. She’d seen it with her own eyes, too. Through binoculars, of course, but it still counted.

That strange girl had jumped through the tiny door on her suitcase and disappeared. And Mashiro had found this book in that very same spot. Did this strange black book belong to the girl in the neon-pink hoodie? Had she dropped it when she went inside her suitcase?

If so, then…

“When she disappeared, it was just like magic. She couldn’t have been a normal person…maybe a witch or a wizard or something. And if this is *her* book, maybe it truly *is* a catalog of magical items!”

Mashiro’s eyes were sparkling as she looked at this catalog she’d picked up. But her thoughts came back to earth almost immediately. A magic mail-order catalog… Was that *really* what this was?

The girl in the pink hoodie had been magical, no doubt about that. But if this book was meant to be a catalog, something about it didn’t make sense.

“Would reading these stories really make a magical person want these products?”

That was the question Mashiro found herself asking. That was what was “off” about this book.

There was nothing particularly alarming about the product names, descriptions, and title pages. Even the morbid items like the Instant Grim Reaper and the Execution Kit still sounded as if they were designed to catch the reader’s curiosity and get them interested. But when you read the stories about the people who’d used those items…

“That girl who bought the Instant Grim Reaper ended up disappointed. And the guy with the Execution Kit… Well, it was his own fault for not reading the manual, but even if he had, it still wasn’t exactly what he was expecting… That’s kind of how it was for all of them.”

Mashiro flipped through the book again, trying to imagine how the other “customers” had felt.

“The girl who won the Friend Prize Draw actually got something cool out of it, but it still backfired on her. As for the Winter-Only Ice Cream…no matter how tasty it is, I don’t think I’d want to eat it now that I know how it’s made.”

She turned to another page.

“The Metamor-fish… This one’s like the prize draw—there’s nothing wrong with the actual product. I bet it’d be fun having one of those for a pet. I could feed it stuff from the supermarket and watch it transform… And if eating a fish and a human turns it into a mermaid or something, maybe I could feed it horse and bird meat to make a flying horse.”

She started to think of other things she might try if she had a Metamor-fish. Would it transform if she fed it her own hair or fingernails? What about fossils of extinct creatures like woolly mammoths or dinosaurs?

The more she thought about it, the more ideas she came up with and the more excited she got. There was just one problem.

Things hadn’t ended well for the guy who actually got the goldfish.

“This is so weird… Wouldn’t it be better to have stories about people who were happy they bought this stuff? Wouldn’t that make people want to buy them for themselves?”

Not a single one of these stories had a happy ending. It was the total opposite—they all ended with kids regretting their purchases.

Mashiro was curious about something else, too. Across all the stories, two characters kept showing up: the man in the hat and scarf, and the girl with the eye patch and neon-pink hoodie.

“The girl I saw between those buildings was dressed like that, too… That can’t be a coincidence.”

The faceless man and the girl with the eye patch—just who were they? All the people who’d obtained the catalog’s items seemed to be normal humans, but those two…

“Hmm… I’m tiring myself out just thinking about it.” Mashiro yawned, closing the book. “It’s such a pain trying to figure something out when there’s only one correct answer.”

She put the book to one side and picked up the box—the small cardboard box she'd found in the alley along with the catalog. It was unmarked, apart from a label that read:

MEMORY ERASE BUTTON



Reading through the black book would give her a better idea of what was inside the box. That was what Mashiro had thought.

"But it didn't even tell me anything. It had Memory Erase Button in the index, but no story to go with it. Does that mean this catalog came with a sample product?"

She put her hand on the box's lid. The MEMORY ERASE BUTTON label was pasted across the edge of the lid, sealing it shut. Being careful not to break that seal, she tried to peek under the gaps on either side of it.

"I can't just go around opening other people's stuff," she muttered, more to convince herself than anyone else.

Had that girl in the pink hoodie dropped this box as well as the book? Mashiro didn't know where that girl had gone, and it didn't look as if she'd be able to give these things back to her anytime soon. But that didn't mean Mashiro could just keep them. She ought to turn them in at a police station. She knew that was what she *should* do, and yet…

"It'd be one thing if it was something normal like a wallet, but a Memory Erase Button? It's gonna drive me crazy if I can't at least look at it and see what it is!"

She wasn't even making excuses anymore. Now it was more like she was defending the actions she was about to take. And while she'd been talking to herself, her fingers had been inching closer and closer to the label.

"I just want to take a little peek inside… After I've done that, I'll seal it up again and take both the box and the book to the police station."

Mashiro began peeling back the label, forcing herself to go slow so that she didn't tear it. Once it was off, she took a deep breath. Her heart was pounding. She opened the lid, and…

“Wow… So this is what a Memory Erase Button looks like.”

Inside the box, much like the label suggested, was a single mechanical button. It was big and round and mounted on some kind of palm-size device. Below the button was some text and two panels—the first panel said 1 DAY, and the second was blank. The full text read ERASE [1 DAY] OF [] MEMORIES.

On the side of the device was a small lever. Pulling it made a clicking sound, and the panel changed from 1 DAY to 1 MONTH. Mashiro pulled the lever again, and it changed to 1 YEAR. Another pull, and it was 10 YEARS. Then 100 YEARS and then back to 1 DAY.

“Oh, okay. So the lever lets you change this panel and choose how far back you want to erase someone’s memories.”

But since there were only five options, you couldn’t get really specific.

Mashiro turned the device around.

On the back was a smooth sheet of paper. She thought she recognized the texture and peeled away a little of one corner to check.


ERASE
1 DAY
OF
MEMORIES

“I see. The back of this is like a big sticker. So then…”

Did you have to stick the whole thing to whomever you wanted to use it on? Putting together what she’d learned, Mashiro tried to figure out how the button was meant to be used. It was probably something like this:

1. Use the lever to select a time period of someone’s memories to erase.
2. In the blank panel, write what kind of memories you want to erase.
3. Stick the device to the person whose memories you want to erase.
4. Press the button. They wouldn’t have put it there if it wasn’t meant to be pressed, would they?

And when you’d done all that, the person’s specified memories would be erased. There wasn’t any kind of instruction manual, so Mashiro couldn’t be 100 percent certain. But based on the name of the product and the way it was built, she was pretty sure this was how it worked. And although there wasn’t a manual, a short message was printed on the back of the lid:

Sample Product: Single-Use Only

“If you can only use it once, then there’s really no point in trying it. I’ll have to give it back to that girl as is.”

Truth be told, Mashiro was a little disappointed. The idea of trying this out, even just once to see how it worked, had definitely crossed her mind.

Then again…

She looked back at the book with the black cover. Reading through those stories had made her cautious.

“Things never worked out for anyone who got any of these magical items. There’s no telling what would happen if I actually used this. But still…”

She gazed at the button in the palm of her hand.

“…there’s no problem if I just *think* about how I’d use it, right?”

Motivated by that idea, she began to imagine the ways she might use this strange product.

“If I can erase anyone’s memory of anything, then…yeah, there’s one obvious choice.”

The first thing that had come into Mashiro’s mind was her lousy test score that had shocked her parents so much and made her run away from home. The whole reason she was up here on the observation platform was to make them so worried about her that they’d forget all about her grade. But with this button, she could erase those memories instantly and not have to leave home.

“No, wait… This is just a sample product, so it can only be used once.”

She’d realized the flaw in her plan. “Single-use only” meant exactly one person’s memories could be erased. She couldn’t use it on both her mom *and* her dad. And there was no point in using it on just one of them.

“Hmm… Only getting to use it once makes it pretty hard.”

Mashiro crossed her arms and thought some more. Crows were cawing in the distance.

She turned around to face the railing and looked down across the town. The sun was beginning to sink toward the mountains in the west, dyeing the sky a muddy twilight orange.

It would be nighttime soon. The sun was getting lower every minute, closer to the highway bypass, almost as if it was planning to slip down it on its journey below the horizon. As Mashiro watched, her heartbeat started pounding even harder.

Once the sun went down, it would be dark. There were hardly any streetlights in this area, and the observation platform was in the middle of the wilderness. Was she really going to stay up here in the dark all night long? In hindsight, this felt a lot scarier than it had before.

“Oh man… But I can’t go home *now*. That wouldn’t even count as running away or going missing.”

Mashiro sighed and got unsteadily to her feet.

She walked over to the binoculars and angled them toward her house…but then she took a step away and looked across the entire town instead. From here, she could see a ton of different houses…except there was only one of them she could return to. It sounded obvious, but for whatever reason, something about that idea felt strange to Mashiro.

“I mean…why does it have to be like that? Why can’t I just go back to some other house?”

The answer was simple: memories.

If Mashiro tried to go into a stranger’s house, they’d have no memories of her being family or of her living there. She *could* walk into some random house, but she’d be thrown out almost immediately if she tried it.

Or would she?

After all, she had a Memory Erase Button now. If she was smart about how she used it, she really could waltz into someone’s house and start living there as if it was no big deal, right? The button could only be used once, so she’d find someone who lived alone, with no other family. Then she could erase their memories of “family members” and…

No, that wouldn’t work. If they never had a family in the first place, there wouldn’t be any memories to erase. There was a chance nothing would happen when she pressed the button.

“Maybe if I narrow down the keywords, then. Would something like ‘having a family’ work?”

Mashiro clapped in triumph. *That* could work. Someone who couldn’t remember if they had a family would be perfect for this. She’d set the time to ten years; that’d be long enough that if she made up a story about living with them ever since she could remember, it would be pretty believable. She’d find an adult who lived alone, use the button to “erase ten years of family memories,” then act as though she’d always lived there with them.

Or if she was going to do this anyway, why not find a rich person and join their family? Why go to all this trouble running away for a few days, when she could become the daughter or granddaughter of someone wealthy? She’d get to eat great food all the time, buy as many games and comics as she wanted, and live in total luxury.

“No, wait… That wouldn’t work, either.”

Even as she was fantasizing about this rich new life, she started to see the problems with it.

“If anyone from outside the house sees me… Even if they do believe I’m some long-lost family member, I wouldn’t be able to

stay there forever. And I'd have to do something about my real mom's and dad's memories…"

Otherwise, they'd surely go to the police and tell them their daughter was missing. They'd send out search parties. Maybe it would make national news. Maybe there'd be posters of her face everywhere. Sooner or later, someone was bound to find her.

"But I can only erase one person's memories with this…"

Mashiro sighed again.

That was the real problem here. A sample product like this, which was good for only one use, wasn't actually all that useful. It couldn't even fulfill her measly desire to have her parents forget about her test grade. What good was that?

"Oh, but… Wait a minute." Mashiro seemed to think of something. "If this is a sample product, does that mean you can buy a real one, too?"

She thought about it some more.

"…Yeah, right."

It was a silly idea, really.

"Even if there are real Memory Erase Buttons out there, I don't know where they'd sell them, so I'd have no way of getting one. I can't use this sample button; it doesn't even belong to me. Besides, you can't just go around messing with people's memories."

She knew that, of course. This was just a game, a fantasy.

"Well, that was fun. Anyway, what should I have for dinner?"

She turned toward her backpack. It was full of pastries and juice and other snacks that she'd bought on the way here.

"Which one should I eat first? Which one should I drink first…?" Mashiro sang to herself, bounding over to her backpack.

But then she heard a noise.

FLAP…FLAP…FLAP…

It sounded like paper fluttering in the wind.

She stopped in her tracks and gulped. The noise was coming from the book with the black cover. But there was no wind. The book had somehow opened and was now turning the pages all on its own.

"What the…?"

Mashiro took a step closer and looked down at it.

“Huh…?”

Her eyes widened in surprise.

The book had changed. It was open to a page with an illustration of a black door. She was sure there hadn’t been any picture like that there earlier.

FLAP, FLAP, FLAP...

The pages started turning again. Now *every* page showed the picture of the door; they were all the same. No… Not quite the same. As the pages turned, each picture was a little different from the one before it.

The door was opening. And that wasn’t all: Below the door, where previously there had only been faint smudges, letters were forming. They became clearer with every page, until Mashiro could read them perfectly.

THIS CATALOG IS FOR INHUMAN-USE ONLY. ANY HUMAN WHO READS THIS CATALOG WILL BE REQUIRED TO FORFEIT THEIR HUMANITY.

Her heart jumped into her mouth. She felt hot all over, and then a chill ran down her spine.

FLAP! FLAP! FLAP! FLAP! FLAP...!

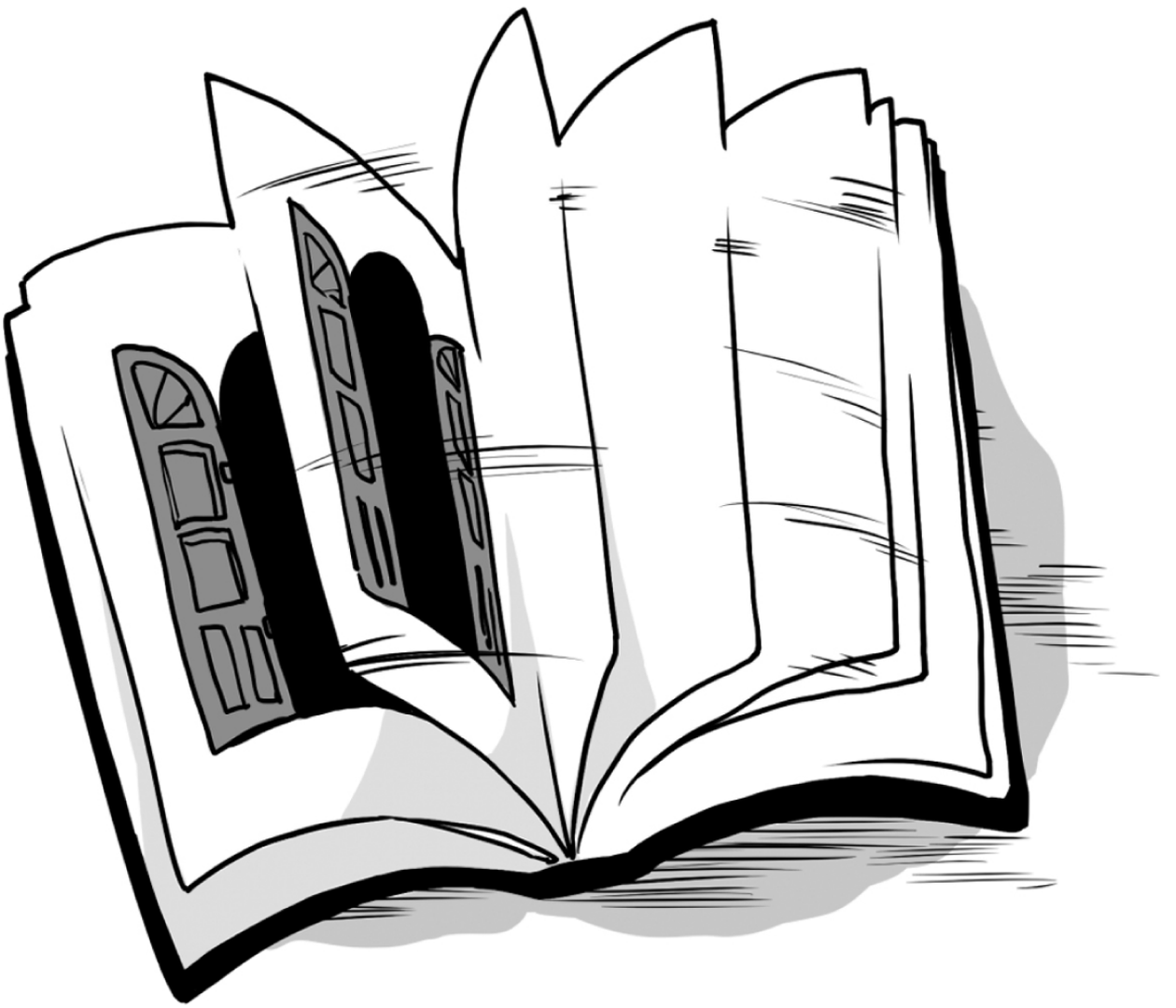
The pages were turning faster and faster now, too fast for Mashiro to keep track of. The pictures were all blurring together until it looked as if they were moving and the door was opening wider and wider. Finally, the book seemed to run out of pages, but it still didn’t close.

On the final page, the door was open all the way. Inside was a solid mass of inky black darkness.

No, wait… It wasn’t ink. It wasn’t just a picture anymore. It was a hole, an abyss, stretching on and on with no end in sight. And something was moving in there.

It was a pair of hands.

They had no skin, no fingernails, no joints. They were like transparent balloons filled with pure darkness. And there were a lot of them.



Within a few seconds, they completely filled the door—and then they sprang out of it and right off the page.

"Yargh…!"

Mashiro scrambled away from the book and ran. When she turned back, she saw the flock of ghostly hands coming after her. She broke out in a cold sweat and instinctively clenched her hands…and felt her fingers wrap around something hard.

When Mashiro looked down at it, she gasped out loud. The Memory Erase Button!

That's right! The message on that page said the catalog was "for Inhuman-use only."

Inhuman-use only.

This wasn't something regular humans should be reading. It wasn't something regular humans were supposed to know about. But maybe…

Still running for the exit to the observation platform, Mashiro peeled the cover off the sticker panel on the back of the button.

If I erase my memories of the catalog…if I go back to never having seen the book before…that'll be basically the same as if I never read it, right?

It was a long shot, but it was worth a try. She didn't have time to write anything in the blank panel. And if that didn't work and the hands kept chasing her anyway, she would only forget she was running from them. She'd have no idea what was going on, and the hands would get her. And once they caught her…

ANY HUMAN WHO READS THIS CATALOG WILL BE REQUIRED TO FORFEIT THEIR HUMANITY.

She was clear of the observation platform now and clambering down the mountain path that led back to town. She reached behind her and stuck the Memory Erase Button to the back of her neck.

The keyword panel was blank. The time panel was set to 1 DAY. She could feel the hands getting closer and closer…

Mashiro took a deep breath and pressed the button.



It's so dark…

Where am I? What am I doing here…?

Mashiro looked around. She saw dim streetlights, log stairs covered in fallen leaves, and the shadows of lots of trees.

"This looks like the path to the observation platform on the edge of town… That's weird. How did I get here?"

Confused and bewildered, she began to make her way down the path. She walked slowly so she wouldn't trip and soon arrived at the foot of the mountain. With all the trees overhead, it had felt like walking through a long, dark tunnel. But now she was in the open again and could see the setting sun just above the horizon.

"I'd better get home. I'm hungry. And Mom and Dad will get on my case if I stay out too late after dark."

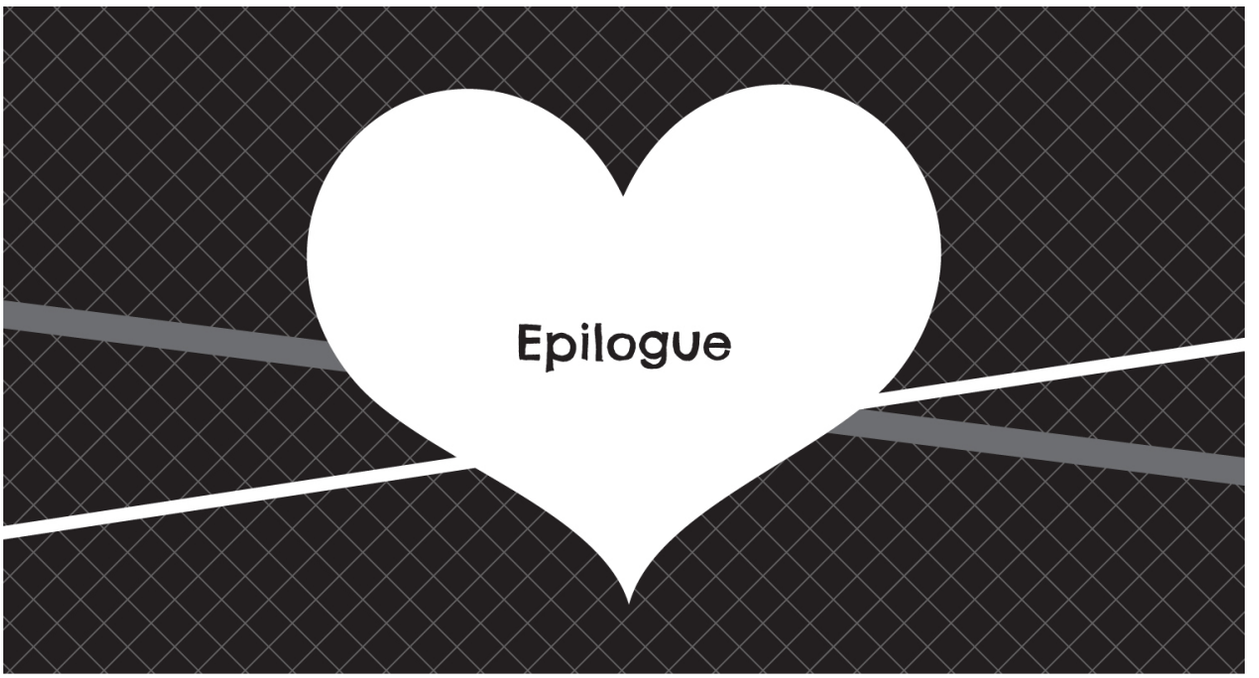
She sighed.

There was a faint sound, like something had dropped onto the ground nearby.

Probably just a berry from one of the trees, Mashiro thought. She paid it no mind and began walking.

What would she have for dinner tonight? Meat or fish? Stew or curry? One of these days, she wanted to make some instant noodles with hamburg steak and frozen fried tofu.

Those were the only things on Mashiro's mind as she made her way back home.



As Mashiro walked away, something was watching her: a butterfly with black-and-pink wings.

It turned away and fluttered close to the ground, where the Memory Erase Button that had fallen from Mashiro's neck now was. The fall had been enough to break it into several pieces.

After looking at it for a moment, the butterfly started flying up the mountain path.

"Thank goodness. I finally got my catalog back."

Atop the observation platform, the strange girl with the eye patch had picked up the book and heaved a sigh of relief. Next to her was a large suitcase with a door on the front.

"What about the sample product you dropped with it, Nozome?" a mysterious man asked her.

"Seems like she went ahead and used it. There's something that looks like a broken button at the bottom of the path."

The girl—apparently named Nozome—reported what the butterfly had seen.

"Now, let's see how she used it in the end," Nozome added, brushing dirt from the black book's cover.

She moved beneath a streetlight and opened the book. It had gone back to being a collection of short stories. There was no sign of the black door anymore. She flicked through the pages, and where it had previously ended with the Metamor-fish, there was

now a new story. Nozome stood there awhile, reading the story of the Memory Erase Button.



When she was done, she looked up at the tall man.

“Hey, Nieno. Why did that Mashiro girl use the Memory Erase Button on herself? If she became an Inhuman like us, she wouldn’t have to worry about test scores anymore. It would’ve made running away easier, too. She could’ve forgotten all about her family and gone wherever she wanted.”

Nieno tilted his head slightly, as if he was smiling down at Nozome. “Perhaps she was scared by the sight of so many hands coming out of the door.”

“You mean the Helping Hands? I think they’re cute. And they’re useful, too. They can take you anywhere in this world or even any other world.”

Nozome walked over to her suitcase and opened the door. A crowd of shadowy hands immediately reached out from the endless darkness on the other side. She shook one of the hands, then waved to them before closing the door.

Nieno chuckled to himself. Underneath his hat and scarf, there was no face at all, but Nozome could see it in her head.

“What a waste,” said Nozome. “Now she’ll never be one of us.”

“I’m sure she’ll be fine. She seemed like the type who does well with other people. Never been threatened or robbed, never lost anyone or anything… Not like us whatsoever.”

Nozome didn’t respond.

“Oh-ho? Don’t tell me you were looking forward to making a new friend.”

She turned away, sulking.

Then a butterfly flew into view. It hovered under the streetlight, the black parts of its wings camouflaged against the night sky, making the neon-pink parts that much more dazzling. It fluttered toward Nozome and landed on her eye patch, sitting on the crossed-out heart.

Nozome reached up, covered the butterfly with her palm, and pushed. There was a tinkling sound, and the butterfly melted into the eye patch.

“Is the butterfly in your right eye done for the day?” Nieno asked.

“Yep. It flew all around this town looking for my catalog. I think it’s earned a little rest.”

“Good thing we found the catalog.”

“Yeah, I’d hate to lose it now that I finally have Despair Marks on all the products. Although…”

Nozome pressed the book to her chest, then opened it and turned to the index.

“Urgh, I thought so. Nothing for the sample product.”

She sighed unhappily.

The catalog’s index showed a heart with an X through it next to each product name. That was a Despair Mark. It represented the disappointment, shock, and regret felt by the people who bought those products. When their desires backfired on them and they ended up in despair, the mark would appear next to that product. That was how the catalog worked.

The book wasn’t for humans to read. It was something that Inhumans like Nozome and Nieno ordered products from, which they would then sell to humans. When they sold a product, the catalog would record the experiences of the human who bought it. The Inhumans enjoyed collecting and trading these stories, or using them as a reference to sell the same product to different humans.

“Sheesh,” Nozome grumbled. “If that Mashiro girl hadn’t picked it up, I could’ve chosen someone to give it to and gotten my mark.”

“Maybe, maybe not. You can never tell with the sample products,” said Nieno.

“Yeah, they’re never any good. But I thought things would be different this time.”

The sample products included with the catalog were a mystery even to the Inhumans. It wasn’t always clear what they did or how they were supposed to be used. Some were obvious enough from their name and appearance, but others were unclear and could end up leading to all kinds of unexpected consequences.

“At least we learned how the Memory Erase Button works. Perhaps we should be grateful for that,” Nieno told Nozome.

“Still, though… Grrr! Darn it, Mashiro! I hope you have to eat miso eggplant for dinner!”

“Just because you hate miso eggplant, it doesn’t make it a punishment. Mashiro may actually like it. Besides, this only happened because you dropped the catalog and the sample product.”

“Ah…! Hey, look, Nieno! Look over there!” Nozome cried, trying to drown out what Nieno was saying.

She pointed to one corner of the observation platform. A small backpack was lying forgotten against the railing. Nozome unzipped it to inspect its contents, then beckoned Nieno over to her.

“Mashiro must have left this behind,” she said. “Look, it’s full of pastries and soda and all kinds of tasty stuff. Since Mashiro used our button without asking, how about we take this for ourselves?”

“I suppose that’s all right… We can look out over the town while we eat.”

Nieno nodded and knelt over the bag with Nozome, the two of them picking out the snacks they liked best. Then they drank a toast with a juice box and a soda bottle while gazing at the scenery before them.

The evening sky was getting darker and darker. Lights across town started to flicker on even before the first stars appeared. It was as if the town didn’t want night to come.

“Still a little early for a nightscape, huh?” Nozome muttered, taking a gulp from her soda bottle and feeling the carbonated beverage tingle as it went down her throat.

The lights along the bypass stretched off far into the distance. Car headlights trailed along the road, one after another.

“Where should we go next, Nieno?”

“Where indeed, Nozome?”

On the far edge of the twinkling, shimmering town, the remains of twilight finally faded beyond the horizon and melted away into the night.

Upcoming Products

A PERFECT PRIZE POSTCARD THAT GETS YOU THE EXACT NUMBER OF PRIZES YOU ASK FOR

LABELS THAT CHANGE ANY BOOK'S ENDING TO AN UNHAPPY ONE



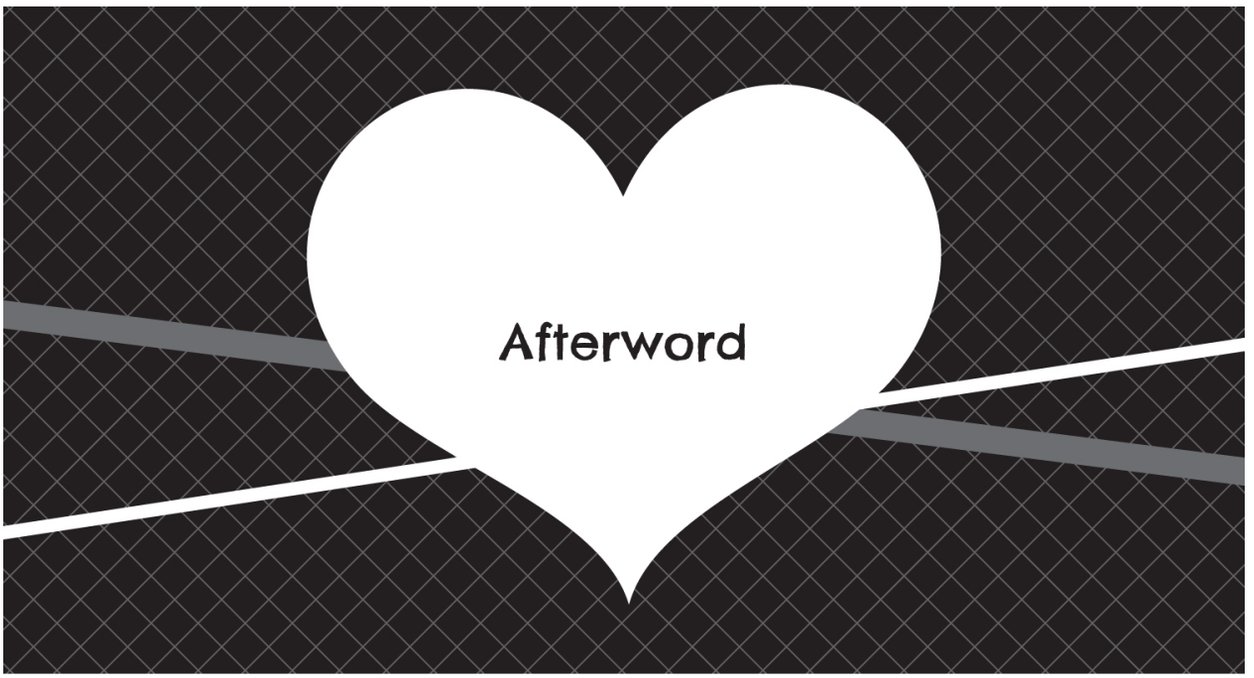
ROAD SEEDS THAT CREATE A PATH JUST FOR YOU

All these and many

more astonishing items

can be yours!

ON SALE SPRING 2025



Going shopping is a lot of fun. To buy something is to obtain a product that fulfills your desires.

I want to fill my belly. I want to wear cute clothes. I want to read something interesting. People have all kinds of desires, and there are all kinds of products out there to help you fulfill them. But sometimes you can search high and low and never find the right product for your particular desire. At least, not if you go shopping in regular stores.

The catalog in this book and the products in it are made for those kinds of “special” desires, the kinds you can’t fulfill by regular means. The Inhumans sniff these out and offer solutions to humans. If you have a strong desire that can’t be fulfilled any other way, you might run into someone like Nozome or Nieno yourself.

If you do, you’ll have a chance to get your hands on something that doesn’t exist anywhere else in the world. But you should think twice before you buy such an item. The Inhumans want their customers to experience despair, and their products are often traps designed to take advantage of human greed and curiosity.

Will you fulfill your heart’s desire? Or will your heart instead be filled with disappointment, shock, and regret? Hope and despair are two sides of the same coin. Which one will your story end on? That all depends on you.

Chizutokouro

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