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Catalog of Wonders
Perfect Prize Postcards, Road Seeds, and Other Stories
Chizutokouro
Illustration by
Kei Mochizuki
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Road Seeds, and Other Stories

2

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Kei Mochizuki

JY
New York

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YONIMO KIMYO NA SHOHIN CATALOG Vol.2 PITTARI MORAERU KENSHO HAGAKI•MICHI NO TANE HOKA

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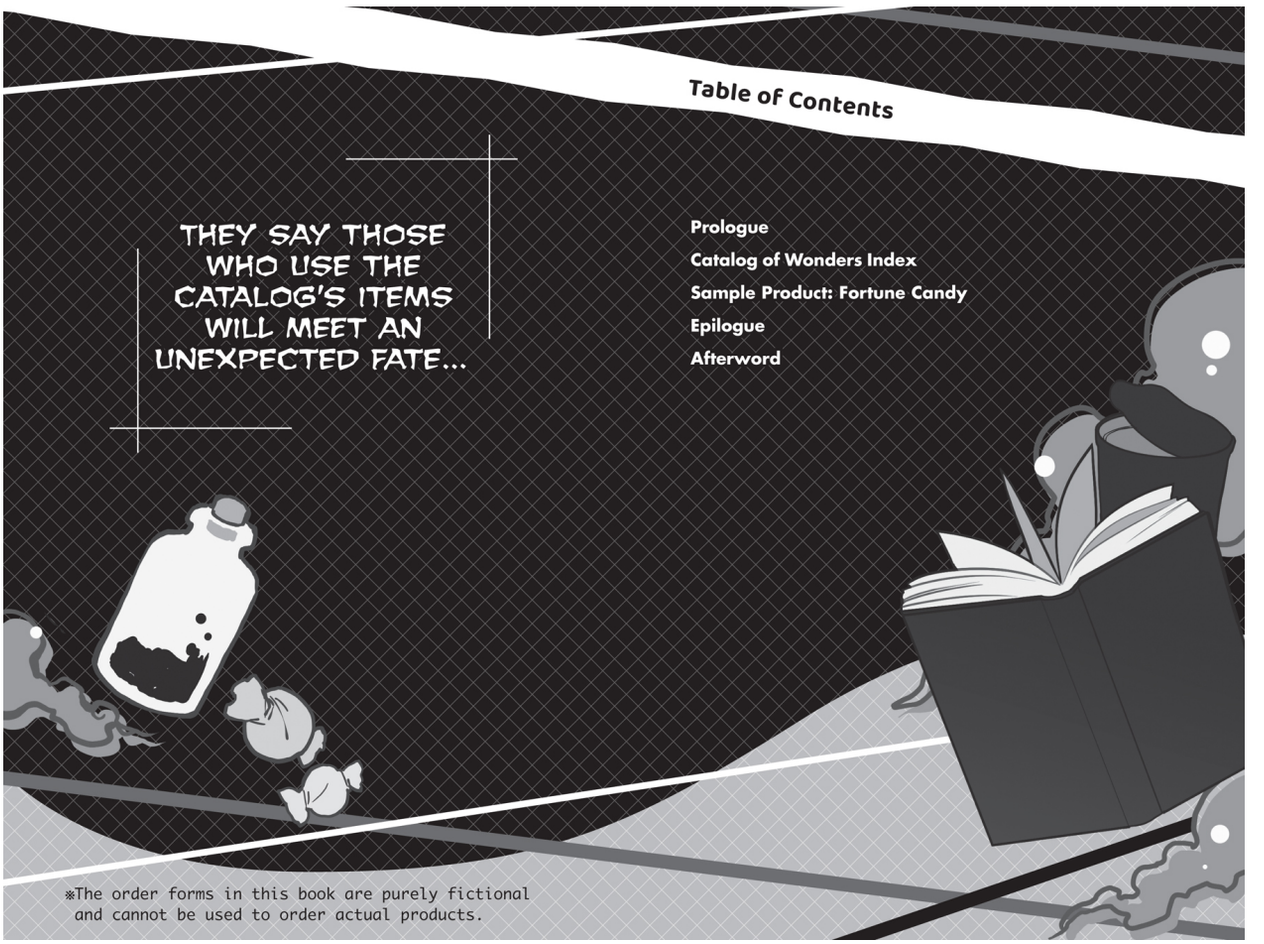


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※The order forms in this book are purely fictional and cannot be used to order actual products.

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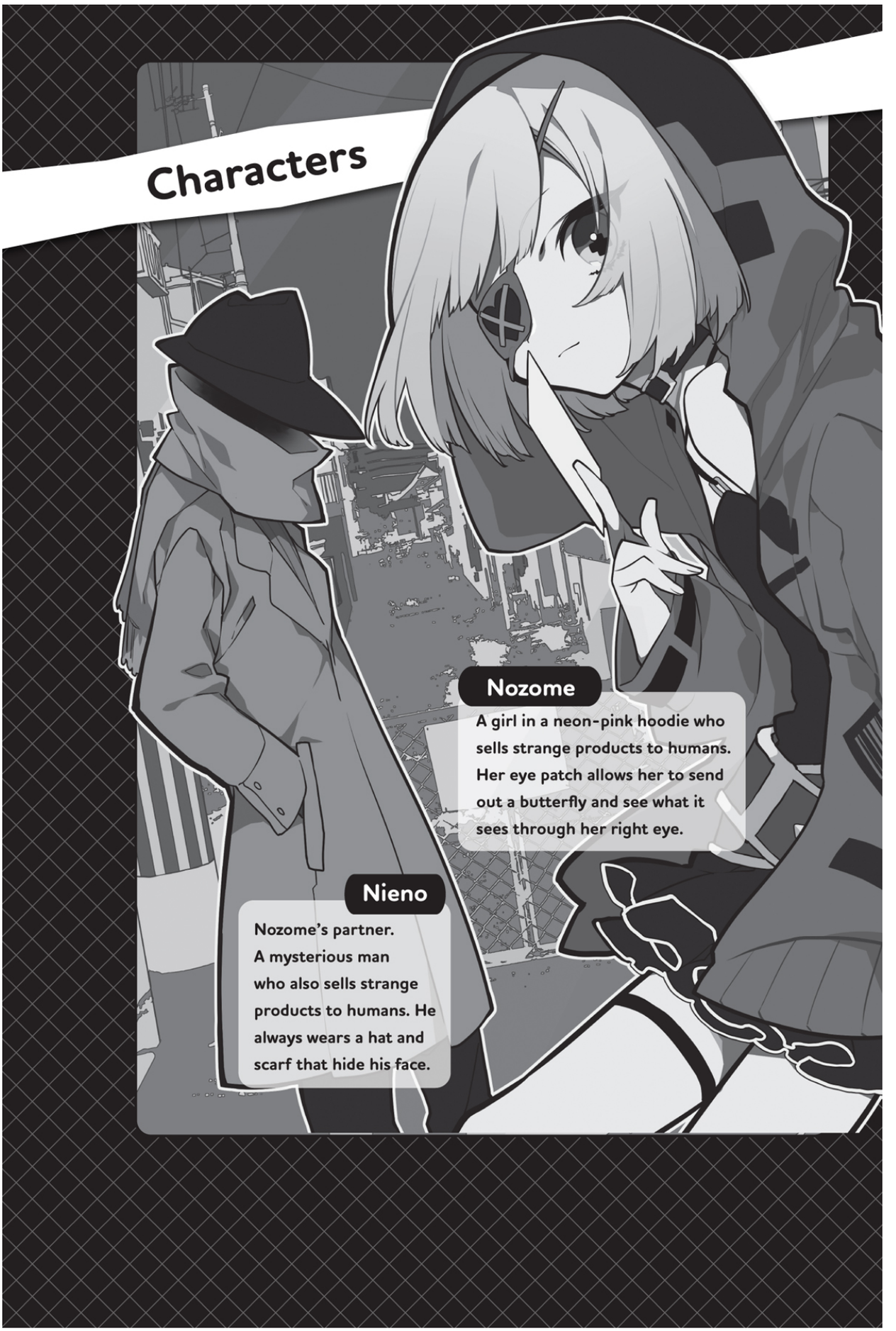
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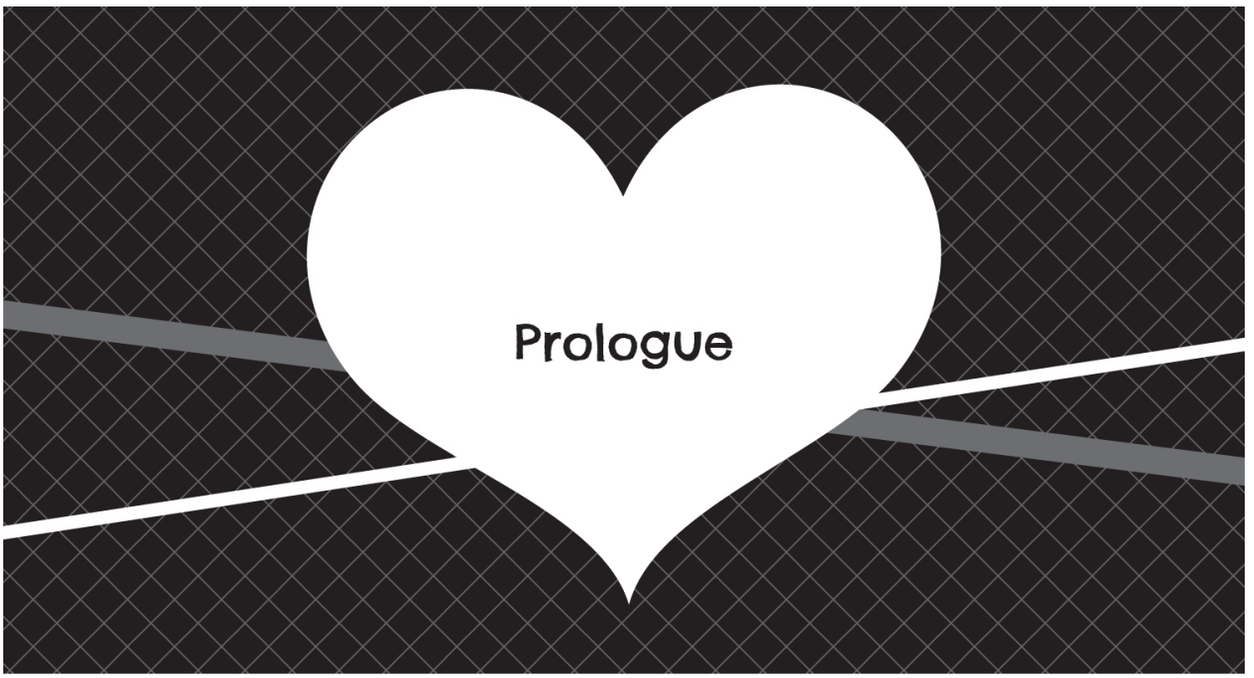


Nozome

A girl in a neon-pink hoodie who sells strange products to humans. Her eye patch allows her to send out a butterfly and see what it sees through her right eye.

Nieno

Nozome's partner. A mysterious man who also sells strange products to humans. He always wears a hat and scarf that hide his face.



There are beings in this world that sell wondrous products to help people fulfill their deepest desires. But in the end, the hopes their products offer are inevitably twisted into despair.

These mysterious retailers are known as Inhumans.

People might also call them “demons.”

“Aw man, aren’t there any humans we can inflict despair on around here?” a silver-haired girl grumbled to herself as she gazed up at the sky with her one good eye.

She wore a neon-pink hoodie and a patch over her right eye. The patch was the same bright shade of pink as her hoodie and had a crossed-out heart on it. Her right eye was currently elsewhere, on an errand of its own.

“I want to use this sample product already…but I just can’t find any humans who make me think, ‘Yeah! This is the one!’” the girl said.

“I doubt you need to think about it that deeply.”

That reply came from the man in the beaten-up old coat walking beside her. He wore a broad-brimmed hat pulled low over his eyes and had a large scarf wrapped around his neck.

This left his face completely in shadow, his features a mystery to anyone who looked his way.

The girl's name was Nozome.

The man's, Nieno.

Though they walked side by side, everything about them—their looks, their ages, their outfits—was so different that it almost seemed unnatural for them to be together. But they did have one thing in common—each of them was carrying a large bag. Nieno carried an old leather briefcase that had once been covered in stickers, while Nozome wheeled a suitcase with a double door on the front.

"Don't 'think about it that deeply'? Tch…"

Nozome scowled at her partner's casual attitude. She looked over at the small black book he was carrying—their latest catalog. It contained a lineup of specialist goods for Inhumans like them to tempt humans with. And each new edition came with a sample product.

"I've got five out of six Despair Marks for that catalog. The sample product's all I need to finally get a full set. This is the home stretch, Nieno. You can't flake out on me now!"



“I—I understand that, but…”

Nozome’s passionate remark left Nieno with very little he could do or say aside from scratch his head awkwardly.

“Even if you find ‘the one,’ as you put it, this is a sample product we’re talking about,” he said. “Your track record with them isn’t exactly… *Ahem!* Although, as your partner, I bear some of the responsibility, too. Please don’t glare at me like that…”

Nieno’s voice trailed off, and he seemed to retreat into himself. Nozome had scrunched up her face in a scowl partway through his speech, and her uncovered eye was staring daggers at him. He pulled his hat even further down over his eyes, as if to protect himself from her gaze.

“Oh yeah? Just you wait! This time I’ll get a Despair Mark on the sample product for sure! I’ll bet your scarf on it!”

“I wish you wouldn’t…,” Nieno whimpered, squeezing the ends of the long scarf around his neck.

Nozome sighed and turned her attention to the little paper bag in her hand. Inside were three pieces of candy: one small, one medium size, one big. Each was individually wrapped in shiny gold-colored paper. The label on the bag read SAMPLE PRODUCT: FORTUNE CANDY. She idly tossed it in the air and caught it when it came back down. But as it fell into her hand…

“Oh…!” Nozome stopped in her tracks. The wheels on her trunk fell silent. “I just found a desire that’s perfect for this.”

She let go of her trunk’s handle and placed her hand over her eye patch with a smirk. Nozome’s right eye was able to see faraway places using the eye patch and the butterfly that went with it. The butterfly was currently fluttering around outside a large mansion on the coast, many miles from where Nozome and Nieno were.

Nozome crouched down in front of her suitcase and opened the doors on the front, revealing an endless black space. From within that space, several handlike appendages, hazy and indistinct as if crafted from the darkness itself, came swarming out toward her.

“Ready to go, Nieno?”

“Of course.”

With that, the two Inhumans embraced the dark hands reaching for them and were dragged inside the suitcase.

When the doors opened again, they were in a little grove on the edge of a coastal town, the air fresh with the scent of salt water.

“This is where the human you want to give the sample product to is?” Nieno asked Nozome.

“Yep. She lives in that mansion.”

Nozome pointed to an extravagant-looking building in the distance with a stately, imposing roof that could be seen above the treetops.

Nieno tilted his head in confusion. “I doubt someone who lives in a house like that would have any troubles with money. What an odd choice for you to give the Fortune Candy to them.”

“You’d think so, but they’re actually going through some money troubles at the moment. That’s what’ll give us our in.”

Nozome smirked and dashed out from the shadows of the trees.

“I’m gonna go give the candy to her right now. Just sit tight here and read the catalog or something.”

And with that, she was gone, dragging her suitcase down a bright, sunlit road. Nieno put his briefcase on the ground and, finding a nearby tree to lean against, took a seat. He opened the catalog’s jet-black cover and began to read.



Catalog of Wonders

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Product Name: Synonym Bugs

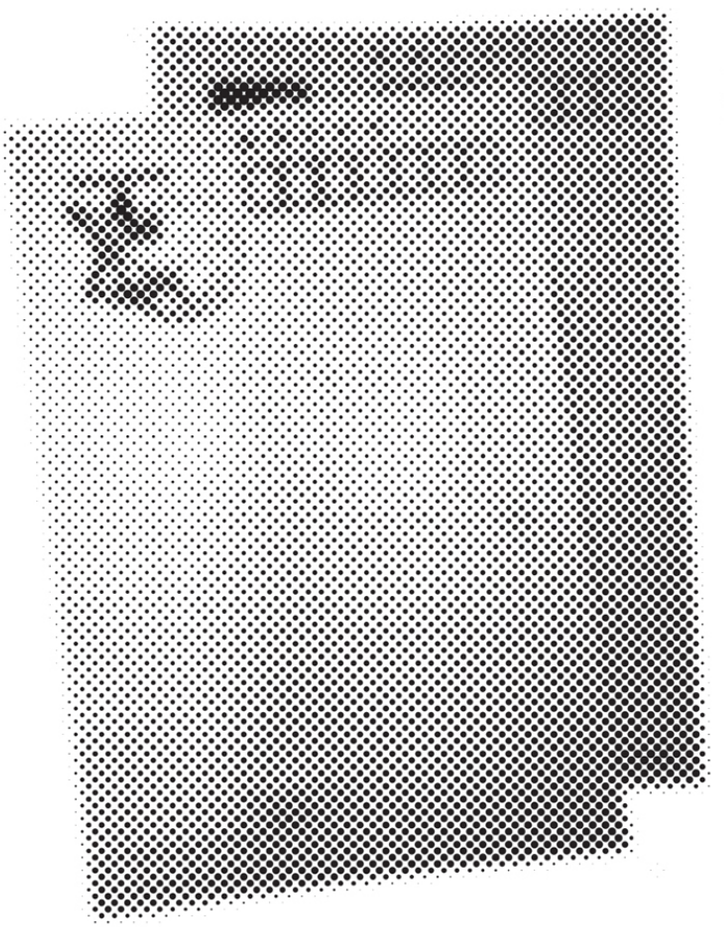
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Product Name: Unhappy Ending Labels

Sample Product: Fortune Candy

Product Name

Perfect Prize Postcards



Every card is a winner! The Perfect★Prize★Contest♪ is tailor-made to suit your needs!

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

“First prize is a year’s supply of luxury chocolate… Please be first prize, please be first prize…!”

Youko brought her hands together in front of the mailbox as if in prayer. Then she took a deep breath and put her postcard inside.

One month later, a package from a confectionery company was delivered to her house. Her heart was pounding with anticipation as she opened it to find…

“Aw man! Third prize… A three-month supply of ground coffee that’s ‘a perfect fit for our chocolates,’ huh…?”

Youko’s shoulders slumped in disappointment. She’d really wanted to win first prize. And she hadn’t lost or anything. Getting third prize was nothing to sneeze at. But still…

“I don’t really like coffee… It’s not just me, either. The rest of my family are all tea drinkers. Oh no, what am I supposed to do with all this…?”

The majority of that ground coffee was going to sit around the house until long past its expiration date—she just knew it.

With a sigh, Youko closed the box that her winnings came in. She’d just pretend she hadn’t seen what was inside.

“I need a palate cleanser… What kind of contest should I enter next?”

For some time now, Youko had been completely hooked on mail-in contests. She would search for them in magazines, on TV or the internet, and even on posters in supermarkets. She left no stone unturned. There was always some new contest out there, some new prize to shoot for. You could win a variety of things that way. Vacations, food coupons, gift cards, game consoles, accessories, limited edition character merchandise, chocolate… If you were lucky, you could get all that for the price of a single postcard. How awesome was that?!


PRIZE CONTESTS
Coffee

“I think I’ll try this one next. And then this one, and this one, and this one…”

Having forgotten the box and its disappointing contents, Youko set to work filling in some new postcards. These contests were fun, after all. Looking at the lineup of prizes while you filled in your postcard, the tiny thrill you got when you mailed it, and then the delicious anticipation as you waited to see what you’d won… It was all so exciting!

Even if you didn’t win anything, that excitement was worth the price of a postcard. And it was nothing compared with the joy of actually getting the prize you wanted! Or even a different prize—just having a package delivered to your house made you feel special. You didn’t always get what you wanted, but that meant you could try out things you wouldn’t buy for yourself normally. That was also exciting, in its own way. It was all part of the fun of these kinds of contests.

Then again…there were some prizes you were better off not winning. Probably the best example of that was the six-month supply of fermented soybeans Youko had won a while back. She didn’t like fermented soybeans, and neither did her family, so *of course* that was the prize she ended up winning. Almost as soon as they forced themselves to finish one box, another would be delivered. They still referred to that time as their “Six-Month Soybean Nightmare.”

“And I only wanted the lower-tier prizes when I entered that contest… What a bad time to get lucky.”

There were other complications to consider, too. Like when Youko won a special themed handbag that wasn’t sold in stores. Her little sister had also wanted one, and she’d burst into tears and thrown a tantrum over it. Winning too much of something could be a problem, sure, but so could winning too *little*.

“I guess that’s what testing your luck is all about, though,” Youko muttered to herself with a smile.

Prizes could cause trouble, from having too many or not enough, but in the end, it was part of the fun. It was one reason why she loved these contests so much.

She found it a little harder to keep a positive attitude the next morning, when she was handed a cup of coffee with her usual

chocolate cream on toast. It was, of course, the ground coffee she'd been trying to forget about.

Her mom and dad each had a mug of the stuff, too. They shot her a pointed look from across the table as they struggled to force down the bitter brew. Youko added a more-than-generous helping of milk to her own cup before taking a sip. Her face screwed up at the flavor, just like her parents' had.

How much coffee do we have left? Youko wondered. Assuming one cup a day was standard, then a three-month supply was ninety, which still left eighty-seven cups' worth of coffee in that cardboard box. Talk about a bitter pill to swallow.

I really have to do something about this problem, she thought.



A couple of days later, Youko was on her way home after mailing off another postcard. As she was walking along, a girl she didn't know called out to her.

"Excuse me! There's supposed to be a post office around here somewhere… Do you know where it is?"

The girl had silver hair and was wearing a neon-pink hoodie, along with an eye patch with a crossed-out heart on it. She looked about twelve, maybe thirteen. Youko was a little taken aback by her flashy fashion sense, but she answered the girl's question all the same.

"U-um, the post office? I'm pretty sure the closest one is just that way, down the main road."

"It is? Huh. That's weird…" The girl in pink tilted her head in confusion and put a finger to her chin. "*I* heard there was a post office down one of these backstreets."

"Really? Sorry, I don't know that one. But can't you just go to a different one? The post office down the street's pretty big. It's got everything you need."

The girl shook her head. "Nope, that's no good. The post office I'm looking for sells special competition postcards you can't get anywhere else!"

"Special…competition postcards?"

Youko's eyebrows shot up. The other girl had her attention now. If contests were involved, Youko couldn't let this go.

"So, uh," said Youko, starting to lean forward curiously, "where did you—?"

"Oh, there it is! That must be it, right there."

The girl pointed at something behind Youko, who turned around to see a narrow alleyway sandwiched between concrete-block walls. She could just about make out what seemed to be a post office sign.

Was there always a post office back there…?

Puzzled, she gazed down the alley again. The strange girl ignored her and ran right down it. Youko took a moment or two to think this over before following. She was just too curious about these "special" postcards to back down now. The two girls eventually emerged from the alley and found themselves in front of the post office.

It looked old. The building, the mailbox outside, and even the red post office sign were all faded with age. What Youko could see of the inside through the windows was dark and dingy. It felt abandoned, like no one had been there in a long time.

I don't know about this… Is this place even open anymore? Is it okay for us to go inside?

While Youko stood there worrying, the girl in pink strode confidently up to the door. She opened it and stepped through. Youko followed her a few moments later, still a little unsure about the whole thing. It wasn't an automatic door, but a heavy glass one she had to push open herself. Its hinges creaked as she entered the mysterious old post office.

Straining her eyes in the low light, she took a look around. The first thing she saw was a person sitting behind the counter. He was wearing a wide-brimmed hat and a thick scarf. It was almost like he was trying to hide his face—in fact, between the hat, scarf, and the shadows they cast, she couldn't make out his features at all. It was just the three of them in there: Youko, the silver-haired girl, and the man in the hat.

Does he work here? But he's dressed so strange…

Youko was concerned, but again, the other girl acted like none of this bothered her one bit.

“Ooh, here they are! Just what I was looking for. One pack of these postcards, please!” the girl said.

She pointed to a small stack of postcards on the counter. The strange man nodded, his hat tilting up and down with the movement of his head.

“Of course,” he told the girl. “Each pack contains four Perfect Prize Postcards. These are a limited edition product you can only buy here, you know.”

“Yeah, I know! And you can use them to win special prizes you can’t get anywhere else, too.”

Youko didn’t intend to eavesdrop, but she found herself listening to their conversation in spite of herself.

Perfect Prize Postcards? Prizes you can’t win anywhere else?

What did it all mean? She was so, *so* curious now. She had to know more.



The girl in pink turned around and began talking to Youko almost as if she'd heard what Youko was thinking.

"So, like, I heard this rumor. When you send one of these postcards away, you never know what kind of prize you'll get, but you'll always receive the perfect amount. Not too much, not too little, but juuust right for you. That's what they say anyway."

Youko's eyes went wide.

No way… A contest like that can't really exist, can it…?

It wasn't impossible, but it was pretty hard to believe. However, the man behind the counter replied, "Oh, you're very well informed," and nodded, handing over the postcards.

The girl paid for her purchase, took the postcards, twirled around, and started walking back toward the door. As she passed Youko, she gave her a warm, friendly smile.

"You're here to buy some of these cards, too, right?" the girl said.

She didn't wait for Youko to answer. The door creaked open and swung closed.

Youko's gaze wandered to the counter. Her heart was beating a little faster than normal as she plucked up the courage to speak to the mysterious man.

"E-excuse me… I'd like a pack of the postcards that girl just bought…"

"Of course, young lady."

The man in the hat rang up the cards on the cash register, displaying the price for her. It was the same amount she usually paid for a pack of four postcards.

"Thank you for your purchase."

And just like that, Youko walked out the door holding her very own Perfect Prize Postcards.



She wasted no time in sending the first postcard. Apparently, these were for special contests. All she had to do was write her name and address and drop the card in the mailbox. As for the prizes, the instructions just said:

THERE ARE NO LOSERS IN THIS CONTEST. EVERY ENTRANT WHO SENDS IN A POSTCARD IS GUARANTEED A PRIZE. PLEASE NOTE, THE RESULTS WILL BE SENT WITH THE PRIZES THEMSELVES.

I guess they want us to enjoy the anticipation while we wait to see what we get…

What kind of prize *would* she end up winning? Youko waited eagerly for the day when it would arrive, a mixture of nervousness and excitement racing through her.

One week later, a small package was delivered to her home, with a note attached to it.

Congratulations on your win!!!

Dear Miss Youko Haga,

Thank you for entering the Not Too Many, Not Too Little Perfect☆Prize☆Contest♪.

We are pleased to announce you have been awarded the **Baby Step Toward a Healthier You** prize. Please find enclosed a month's supply of vegetable juice!

We hope you will continue to support us going forward!

"Vegetable juice, huh…?"

Youko gave a little frown. It wasn't like she hated vegetable juice or wouldn't drink it, but she didn't exactly like it, either.

"Well, just one month's supply isn't going to be too much to deal with. It's better than the fermented soybeans or the coffee, at least… Hmm? Wait a minute…"

Something felt off. This package was awfully small and light for what supposedly had a whole month's worth of juice inside. She opened it up to check and found that the box contained just seven 200 ml cans.

"Is this all? Usually when they say 'a month's supply' of stuff like this, it's more like thirty cans."

Canned juice didn't spoil, so she probably wasn't going to get a fresh supply like she had with the fermented soybeans. Maybe the postcard had been printed wrong, and it actually meant a week's supply.

"I guess I wouldn't want to drink vegetable juice every day anyway. In fact, this probably *is* the perfect amount to last me—"

She stopped short.

The perfect amount?

Youko looked at the note on the box again. She'd only skimmed over it before, but the name of the contest seemed more significant now: the Not Too Many, Not Too Little Perfect☆Prize☆Contest♪…

"Do they mean that a month's supply for someone who doesn't drink vegetable juice that often is only seven cans?"

Youko was surprised and a little confused at the same time.

"But how did they *know* I don't like vegetable juice very much?"

She hadn't filled in any kind of questionnaire when she entered the contest. This was all so strange…

Over the next few weeks, Youko slowly but surely got through her prize. She wasn't exactly trying to, though. Given the choice, she generally preferred fruit juice. But this time of year was very hot, and occasionally, when there was nothing else in the fridge, she found herself reaching for the veggie juice. It was better than nothing. Besides, when she was really thirsty, she wasn't picky about what she drank. She went on like that, drinking the veggie juice only when she didn't have any other options, until…

"All right, that's the last can. Huh, come to think of it, today is…"

The day Youko finished her seventh can of vegetable juice was exactly one month after she'd received the package.

"Wow, that's pretty cool. It really was a month's supply!"

She got a weird kind of thrill over this little coincidence. Because at that point, that was all she thought it was. Just a coincidence…right?

After finishing her last can of vegetable juice, Youko mailed her second Perfect Prize Postcard. Just like before, the prize arrived at her house a week later, in a cardboard box with a Not Too Many, Not Too Little Perfect☆Prize☆Contest♪ note attached. This time, she'd won the Feline Fine Savings Plan prize. Inside the box was a piggy bank shaped like a black cat.

"Aw, how cute!"

Youko felt a smile spread across her face.

"I got a pretty good prize this time. Except…"

Her smile was soon replaced with a confused, quizzical expression.

"Why did they send me three of the same thing?"

Once the box was fully open, she saw three totally identical piggy banks, all wrapped in packing tape. Multiple copies of something was fine when it was food or cosmetics or cutlery sets. But with something like this, wasn't it more normal to send just one?

"With my sister around, I might've gotten in trouble if I'd had only one piggy bank. She's definitely going to want one of these, too."

As if on cue, Youko's little sister walked in at that exact moment. And sure enough, the instant she laid eyes on the black cat piggy bank, her face lit up.

"Wow, what's this? It's so cute! Did you win this in one of your contests? You've got three of them, huh? Does that mean I can have one?"

"Yeah, I guess so…"

"Yay! No take backs, okay? It's mine now!"

"You could at least say thank you…"

But Youko might as well have been talking to a brick wall. Her sister snatched up one of the banks and ran back to her own room, as quickly and desperately as if she'd taken it without permission.



Good grief…

Still, it was a good thing there was an extra for her sister. The poor girl probably would have cried and made trouble again if there weren't.

Youko sighed and took out one of the other piggy banks. Then she looked down at the last one, still sitting there in the box.

"I've got one left over…," Youko muttered, confused.

But then there was a loud crash. It sounded like it came from her sister's room. A moment later, Youko heard footsteps, and her sister came running in. In her hands, she carried the black cat piggy bank's head.

The younger girl laughed shyly. "I was trying to figure out where to put it, and it fell off the shelf… But hey, you've still got another of these, right? How about you let me have that one?"

She put her hands together pleadingly.

Youko didn't say anything; she just nodded.

After her sister had grabbed the third piggy bank and rushed away, Youko stared at the empty box and the note attached to it.

"Not too many, not too little…"

Once again, those words had proved to be true. Just like last time, the prizes they'd sent had been *the perfect amount* for her.



Youko's third postcard netted her the Rousing Stress Relief Roundup prize: five tickets to a large amusement park in the town where she lived.

"Yay! My friends and I were planning to go there soon anyway. And now I've got five free tickets!"

Another pretty generous prize. Out of all the contests Youko had entered and all the prizes she'd won, this was probably the one she'd been the happiest about.

"Five, though? That means we're one short. If I invite everyone, plus me, that makes six."

Youko's main friend group had three girls (including her) and three boys, making a total of six. But she'd already won five

tickets; hoping for another on top of that would be asking too much… Or would it?

“Looks like even these guys can’t give me a ‘perfect’ prize three times in a row…”

Feeling just a little disappointed, Youko smiled grimly.

This was fine. She could give these tickets to her friends and buy one extra for herself. She contacted them, worked out the details, and agreed on a day when all six of them could go to the amusement park.

However, on the actual day, it was a different story—only four of Youko’s friends showed up. One of them had caught a cold and had to cancel. As a result, their group actually had five members —a *perfect* fit for the number of tickets Youko had.



That cinched it. Now that it had happened three times in a row, Youko was certain. She knew how the Perfect Prize Postcards worked, and what she could expect from them.

When you mail one of these cards, you really do get a prize that’s perfect for you. Never too many or too little, always just the right amount. It…it’s almost like whoever’s running the contest can predict the future.

She looked at the final postcard in the set and gulped. These cards were so mysterious… But they were pretty wonderful, too. With these, she wouldn’t have to worry about a thing. She’d never win too much or too little of something and have to deal with the problems that caused. She could just sit back and enjoy the experience to her heart’s content.

“If the prizes are always perfect for me, then nothing can possibly go wrong!”

Youko beamed as she slipped the fourth postcard into the mailbox. This was the last one from the pack she’d bought, but she could always go back to that post office and get more later.

“I wonder what kind of prize I’ll win this time…”

She waited eagerly, bursting with excitement and anticipation.

And just as she'd expected, a package arrived at her house precisely one week later. It wasn't a small box this time, but a really big one. It was so heavy that she couldn't even lift it on her own.

"What could be inside this?"

There was that excitement and anticipation again. This was what she lived for. Before opening the box, Youko removed the note that was attached to it.

She read it all the way through…and realized she'd made a terrible mistake.

"I…I never thought I'd win something like this…"

She stared dumbfounded at the box in front of her. Inside it was a normal, everyday product. Any other time, she'd have been happy enough to receive it. But not in this contest. Of all the prizes in the world, this was one she didn't want "the perfect amount" of. Because if this wasn't too many or too little, then…

Congratulations on your win!!!

Dear Miss Youko Haga,

Thank you for entering the Not Too Many, Not Too Little Perfect☆Prize☆Contest♪.

We are pleased to announce you have been awarded the **Secure Your Future with Careful Planning** prize. Please find enclosed a lifetime supply of page-a-day calendars!

We hope you will continue to support us going forward!

Cut Here

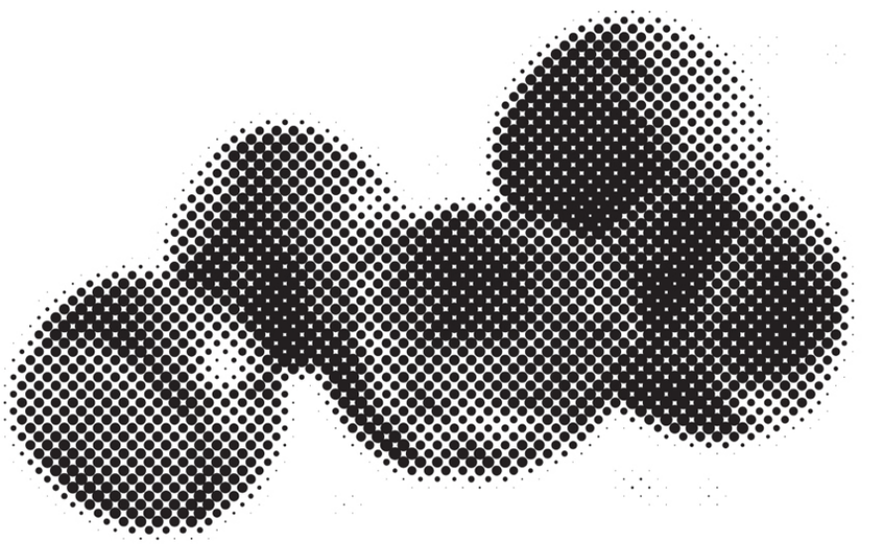
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Road Seeds



Grow a secret road that no one else can see or use! Perfect for long walks, shortcuts, escape routes, and much more.

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

I wish the school day didn't have to end.

That was what Yukito found himself thinking every day when he heard the bell ring. It wasn't that he liked being at school, or that he disliked being at home. It was the part in between that scared him—the journey home from school.

It wasn't a problem in the morning when there were lots of other kids and adults around. But Yukito didn't have any friends he could walk home with, so he was always alone at the end of the day. And because he was alone, he was an easy target. He would find a group of bullies waiting for him after school on an almost daily basis. It had been going on for a while now.

The bullies would split up and try to ambush him. They called it the Hunter Game, and Yukito was their prey. The hunters would wait for him down the roads he usually took, or deserted streets where no one was likely to see them. If they caught him, they won. That was how *they* saw it anyway.

Yukito tried to take other routes home, but they'd always find a way to cut him off. And when the bullies caught him, they'd take something of his as a "hunting trophy." Maybe a textbook, or notebook, or worksheet, or his pencil case, or key ring, or water bottle… He'd lost track of everything they'd taken at this point.



His stolen belongings would usually show up somewhere on the streets a few days later. They might be tossed on the roadside, covered in dirt and muddy footprints. Or crammed into a drain, floating in a pile of wet garbage. Or even perched on top of a pile of dog poop. Finding his stuff in that condition, Yukito felt so sad, so bitter, that he couldn't hold back his tears.

For all that, though, the bullies were still scary, and he didn't have it in him to stand up to them. He didn't have the courage to tell his parents he wanted to stay home, or the guts to skip school, either. He knew he should probably tell a grown-up about all this, but he just couldn't. He knew what they'd say. Probably something like "You've got to stand up to them. Let them know you don't like what they're doing to you."

What if I don't want to stand up for myself? What if I just want someone to help me? They'd probably tell me I'm being naive, though…

He was almost as afraid of being told that as he was of the bullies, so he kept quiet and resigned himself to suffering in silence.

Must be nice to be brave and stand up to your bullies. But that's not me…

Some people weren't strong enough to do that kind of thing on their own. No one had ever told him that was okay, that he couldn't help being that way. He didn't want to risk opening up to someone only to have it thrown back in his face. Because once that same person told him something like "No one's going to help you if you don't try to change," he'd be truly alone.



Another day, another nervous, stressful journey home. Perhaps this would be the day Yukito managed to avoid the bullies…

However, his hopes were dashed when he spotted one of them down the street ahead of him. The bully was still a ways away and hadn't noticed Yukito yet, but it was only a matter of time. There was no point in retreating down a different street. The "hunters" probably had all the routes back to Yukito's house covered by now.

He froze, unable to go a step farther. What would they take from him today?

If only I could find a road they don't know about…

Tears were already filling Yukito's eyes. But then, something flitted across his bleary, tearstained vision. It had black-and-pink wings—from the way it was flying, it was probably a butterfly. But he'd never seen a butterfly with wings such a vibrant shade of pink before.

He watched it flutter over the nameplate outside a nearby house, then fly through a hole in the wall into the backyard. That hole was probably big enough that a kid Yukito's size could slip through it.

He gasped.

What if I pass through that hole to get to a different road?

Beyond that hole was somewhere he'd never been; maybe it would lead to a street the bullies hadn't covered yet. But even if it did, that would still mean cutting through another person's property. He couldn't walk through a random house's yard without permission. Yukito knew that…but he was desperate.

He scrambled through the hole before the bully had a chance to turn around and see him.

On the other side of the wall, he found a garden overgrown with grass and weeds. In the middle of it was a tree with lots of nuts on its branches, and a small log cabin. In front of the cabin was a sign with a single word on it:



"Roads"? What does that mean? Is that the name of the people who live here…?

He gazed at the wooden sign in confusion. Just then, the door to the cabin opened, and somebody stepped out. It looked like a

man, but it was hard to tell. The figure wore a broad-brimmed hat, a thick scarf, and a battered old overcoat. Shadows fell over his face in such a way that Yukito couldn't make out his features, or what kind of mood he was in.

"Uh… Um…," Yukito stammered.

He knew he should apologize for entering the man's yard without permission. But his voice shook and caught in his throat, and he couldn't form the words. The man turned his shadowy face toward Yukito and gently shifted his head to the side. Yukito couldn't be sure, but it felt like the man was smiling at him.

"Uh… A-aren't you mad at me…?" Yukito finally managed to croak out.

"What kind of storekeeper would be mad to see a customer?" the man replied.

"Storekeeper…?" Yukito was more confused than ever.

"Of course. As you can see from the sign, I sell roads here… Well, technically I sell Road Seeds, which come from the Road Nuts that grow on the Road Tree over there."

The man said all this like it was the most natural thing in the world. Yukito's eyes went wide with disbelief.

He sells…roads? Road Seeds? A Road Tree? What is he talking about?

It was all pretty hard to believe. He stood there trying to make sense of things and found his gaze wandering toward the tree by the cabin. It was big, and it definitely had some kind of nuts growing on it. Lots of them had already fallen on the ground.

"Since you've found your way here, why not buy a few seeds?" the man in the hat and scarf—the *storekeeper*—said. He picked up one of the nuts and showed it to Yukito. "These nuts are wonderful little things. They won't break from falling off the tree, but if a person drops them, they'll snap right open. When the nutshell breaks, a single seed comes flying out."

He held out the rough, dry-looking seed on the palm of his hand.

"Perhaps you'd like to give it a try?"

"Huh? B-but I…"

"Don't worry, the first one's free. Consider it a tester."

It was getting harder for Yukito to turn the offer down.

These “Road Seeds” can’t be real, can they…? And if they are… what’s going to happen if I use one?

He couldn’t help himself. He had to see it with his own eyes.

“O-okay… It’s just a tester, right…?”

He reached out and took the nut from the man. It had a hard, dry shell, and a faint rattling sound came from the inside when he shook it.


ROADS

“Go ahead. Drop it anywhere you like,” the storekeeper said, nodding encouragingly.

Yukito gulped, held out his hand, and let go of the nut. The moment it hit the ground, it cracked open with a sharp *snap*, and a small, round seed emerged. Then that cracked open, and something started to grow from it. Something long and wide, stretching off into the distance…

In just a few seconds, a path had appeared where there wasn’t one before.

“What do you think? Seems like quite a nice road, doesn’t it?”

Yukito was too amazed to answer. The storekeeper continued talking.

“The roads grown from Road Seeds exist solely for the person who planted them. No one else can see them or use them.”

Then the man’s voice dropped to a whisper.

“You planted this road, so you are the only one who can see it or walk along it. It’s a special, private road, just for you.”

Yukito slowly blinked as he attempted to process this information.

These seeds grow roads that are…just for me?

He blinked again and looked at the newly grown path in front of him. A road that no one else could see or use. Could it be true?

Maybe if I use these, I can go home without getting caught by the bullies anymore…!

He clenched his fists firmly and turned to the storekeeper before asking the all-important question.

“E-excuse me… How much do these Road Seeds cost?”

“Two handfuls will cost you the same as a box of chocolate caramels,” the man answered.

Much cheaper than Yukito had thought. He decided to buy some.

He gathered up a bunch of nuts from the ground, and once he had as many as he could carry in each hand, the storekeeper put them in a bag for him.

“I have no doubt you’ll find this product very useful. However…”

The strange man had taken Yukito’s money and given him the bag, but he still had more to say. It felt like his shadowy, invisible face had suddenly clouded over.

“If you’re going to run, keep running until you’re somewhere safe. Think of nothing else. If you want to stand up to those who torment you, you should do it your own way, out in the open. Relying too heavily on a power that is not your own can be dangerous.”

He spoke kindly, as if he had seen into the boy’s mind and knew about his problems. But that wasn’t possible, was it? Yukito was about to ask how he knew all this, but the man cut him off with one final comment.

“Well then, I’ll be seeing you. Consider the tester a gift from me. You can use it to return to your home today.”

He didn’t leave a lot of room for Yukito to reply. The conversation was over.

That day, Yukito went home by the road he’d grown from the Road Seed. It was one unbroken path that didn’t cross over with any other roads, leading directly to his house.

For the first time in a long while, he got home safe and sound, without running into any bullies.



The next day, Yukito brought one of the seeds to school with him. He was careful not to drop it or let it crack open until it was finally time for him to go home. He hadn’t gone very far when he spotted one of the bullies waiting for him down the street, just like always. Without stopping to think, he threw the nut onto the ground.

Snap!

There was a tiny sound as the shell broke open, and a little Road Seed flew out from the inside. When it hit the ground, it sprouted and began to grow a new pathway, just like in that strange yard yesterday. The road stretched toward a nearby concrete wall, and when it reached the wall, a gap opened up to let it through. The wall hadn’t moved or gotten smaller, but

somehow, a new space had been created, and it was still getting wider.

Finally, the road finished growing to a size where Yukito could walk on it. That was also when the bully saw him. With a nasty-looking grin on his face, he ran toward Yukito, who dashed down the new road without a moment's delay.

Please don't let him catch me…!

A Road Seed road couldn't be seen or used by anyone other than the person who planted it. That was what that man had said, but…

Is it true? Is it really invisible to everyone but me?

Yukito was still having a hard time believing it. He crept forward to see what was going on outside—carefully, so he wouldn't be spotted. There was the bully, running back and forth, shaking his head and looking confused.

"That's weird… I coulda sworn he was around here somewhere," the bully grumbled. "And there's no other way out or places to hide or anything. What's going on…?"

Yukito stared at the boy, so amazed he forgot to even blink.

It's true… He really has no idea I'm here!

Yukito could see outside the secret road just fine, but it didn't work both ways. The bully couldn't see in from the outside.

"It's exactly like the man at the log cabin said. I'm the one who planted it, so this road is just for me. No one else can see it or use it."

He'd accidentally said that part out loud. The bully turned around as if he'd heard something. Yukito froze…but the bully's eyes failed to focus on anything, and the boy left, still shaking his head in confusion.

Yukito brought another seed to school the next day. And the day after that, and the day after that.

He'd drop the nut on the street after school, releasing the seed from inside. Then he'd take the road that grew from it all the way back home. He never got caught by the bullies anymore. From their point of view, it was like he was there one moment and gone the next. They couldn't find him no matter how hard they

looked. And how could they? No one but Yukito could see the special roads he planted, the secret roads he used for escaping.

I was worried they'd start picking on me at school instead, but those guys never do anything bad when there's other people around to see them.

That had been a huge relief. And now that he had the Road Seeds, Yukito actually enjoyed walking home.

Slowly but surely, he was figuring out how the seeds worked. The roads that came out of them would disappear once he reached the end. They'd stay around if he stepped back out of the entrance, but once he'd walked all the way along them and come out the other side, they'd be gone forever. He basically got to take a new route home every day.

Each road was a little bit different. There were straight roads and winding roads, bright roads and dusky roads. There were asphalt streets, dirt tracks, and tiled paths. Some sloped up hills, while others connected to stairs leading underground.

The scenery around him was always different, too. Walls and buildings, boards and concrete-block walls, cliffs, riversides, and much more. But none of those features ever cut through the road. Sometimes the road and the scenery would be the same all the way through; other times it would change en route. The one constant was where they took him—back to his house, safe and sound.



Time passed, and thanks to his Road Seeds, Yukito lived peacefully…until one day.

As usual, he was using his own personal road to escape the bullies. This time the seed had grown into a road covered in mosaic tiles. It was a beautiful design, but the tiles were cracked and dusty, like something from an ancient town that was now in ruins.

He reached down and picked up one of the tiny tiles that had come loose from the path. It was small enough to fit in the palm of his hand. Just then, he heard footsteps, and he turned to see

one of the bullies wandering around near the entrance to the path.

“Darn it, he’s not here, either! Where the heck does he always run off to…?!” the bully grumbled, clicking his tongue in irritation.

Yukito looked at him standing there like that…

“…”

…and automatically squeezed the piece of tile in his hand.

A moment later, he threw it at the bully as the boy passed the road. It hit him square in the back of the head with a tiny *thunk!* The bully nearly lost his balance before looking around, surprised and confused.

But of course, no matter where he looked, there was no way he could see into Yukito’s road. He didn’t have the slightest idea where the tile had come from.

The bully’s expression soon turned from surprise to fear. He quickly scrambled away, tears and snot running down his face, still holding his head where the tile had hit it.

“Heh-heh…”



After the bully left, Yukito couldn't help but let out a little laugh. Getting back at one of his tormentors and making *him* cry didn't feel half bad. Come to think of it… Of course, why hadn't he thought of this sooner?

"I guess there's more than one way to use these only-for-me roads, huh?"

After that, Yukito began hiding in his only-for-him roads, lying in wait for the bullies. When they got close, he'd throw stuff at them. One time it was a hard ball. Another time, some mud pies. Another time, he mixed some colored paint with water and fired it at them with a water gun. It was fun, almost like he was… hunting them.

The hunters had become the hunted.

"This is *my* Hunter Game now. You guys are *my* prey, and that's how it's going to stay!"

Yukito chuckled as he watched the bullies flee. He didn't consider launching these sneak attacks from the safety of his roads to be cowardly. The way those kids had treated him, he'd earned the right to mess with them. He was just getting a little payback. And after all the pain and stress, all the suffering he'd endured with no one to turn to for help, what was wrong with that?

Soon, the bullies' faces began to fill with dread when they heard the bell at the end of the school day, just like Yukito's used to.

This felt *so* good. But he wasn't done yet. He wasn't going to let them off that easily.

From now on, I'm a hunter. Forever. I'll never be prey again.

He snickered at the thought. But even as he laughed, part of him still wanted to cry. He hadn't started out wanting to do any of this. He didn't think so anyway. But now that it had gone this far, he felt like there was no going back.

Before long, Yukito's supply of Road Seeds from the strange man shrank down to one. He headed to the store to buy some more.

Or at least…he tried to.

He went back to the place he thought it had been before, but there was no hole in the wall there now. He couldn't even figure out which house that wall had belonged to. At first he thought they'd just patched up the wall since last time. But after peeking in at the different backyards in the area, he couldn't find that overgrown garden with the log cabin anywhere.

What do I do now? If I can't find that place, I won't be able to buy any more Road Seeds…

Yukito looked down at the last seed in the palm of his hand. His face went pale. What if he never got any new seeds? What if he could travel home by his own secret road only one more time? What would happen to him after he'd used this last one…?

How am I supposed to get home without my seeds?

These secret roads had released him from the torment of being hunted. He'd even become a hunter himself and gotten some payback on the bullies. But now he was going to lose the things—the power—that had allowed him to do all that.

His legs were trembling. His hands were sweating. He grasped the hard, dry seed so tight that it hurt.

But then, something snapped Yukito back to reality. He heard familiar voices nearby—the bullies. They were coming this way… and getting closer.

Oh no! I can't let them find me!

He threw the nut he was holding at the ground. There was a *snap* as it broke open, and just like always, a seed came flying out and a road started growing from it. After a few seconds, when it looked big enough to walk on, he scrambled onto his new path.

The final road was a long path surrounded by rows of trees on either side. Their trunks and branches seemed to merge together into a solid mass. No one would ever have thought there was enough space for someone to walk between them.

Well, here it is… I went and used my last seed…

Yukito ambled along the path, wondering what he was going to do now. A light breeze blew through the trees, rustling their

leaves. Something fell from a tree branch and landed on the road near his feet.

It was kind of like a big acorn, but looking around, he noticed there were other nuts and berries growing on the other trees. He continued walking until he arrived at a large curve in the path, where he stopped in his tracks. There was a tree growing next to that curve, and it was one he recognized.

“This tree… It can’t be, can it?”

Yukito’s eyes widened as he looked up at it.

He was right. It was the same kind of tree he’d seen in that grassy yard with the log cabin outside that weird store—the Road Tree that grew the Road Seeds.

And just like that tree, this one had lots of nuts on its branches. Not only the branches, actually. Countless nuts had also fallen to the ground and were lying all over the place. Yukito stepped off the path.

“So Road Trees don’t only grow by the road store…”

He heaved a sigh. What a relief! And to think he’d find another tree right here on the road grown from his very last seed!

“It’s on a road that’s just for me, so this tree is just for me, too. It’s mine. That means I can take as many seeds as I want.”

Thinking out loud, he knelt and began picking up nuts. One, two, three… Seven, eight, nine… Soon he had more than he could carry in both hands.

He lifted up the hem of his shirt and used it like a basket to hold all the nuts. Twenty… Thirty… Forty… His improvised basket filled up with more and more nuts.

“I need to get as many as I can while I’m still here. Who knows when I’ll find one of these trees again?”

Road Nuts were scattered all around the base of the tree. No matter how many he picked up, there always seemed to be more. Eventually, he had over a hundred nestled in his shirt.

“Okay, this should probably be enough.”

There were so many they were almost spilling out of his shirt now. It’d be hard to walk if he picked up any more. With one last longing look at the nuts still on the ground, Yukito stood up and set off once again.

Those dry little nuts were light enough on their own, but carrying this many wasn’t easy. He walked slowly, his breathing

heavy. At some point, the countryside on either side of the path had become a pine grove. Neat rows of pine trees stood side by side. When the wind blew, pine cones fell from their branches.

Yukito kept walking and came to a small set of stone stairs. There weren't even ten steps in total, but Yukito took them slowly and carefully nonetheless. Then, when he was only three steps from the bottom…

"Ah…!"

…his foot scraped against something, and he began to sway and totter. His body pitched forward, and he fell to the ground face-first.

"Urgh…"

Wincing in pain, he saw the remains of a large pine cone lying next to him. That must have been what he'd stepped on. Yukito glared at it and sat up.

But then he saw something that made his breath catch in his throat.

"Th-the road…"

His eyes went wide with disbelief. Dozens and dozens of roads, all twisting, tangling, and intermingling with one another. He looked at the ground and saw just as many fragments of broken nutshells scattered around him.

They must have cracked open when I fell just now…

All those nuts he'd been carrying, all broken open. All those seeds, taking root and growing… And now countless roads stretched out before him.

The road he'd come by was no longer a single unbroken line. These new roads had crisscrossed with it, as well as with each other.

"No way…"

Yukito stood there for a moment, dumbfounded. After a while, he tried to go back the way he'd come, but it was no good. That road had not only intersected with all the others but merged with them, changing into something unrecognizable. Even the scenery around it looked different now.

Which road he should take? Which direction did he need to walk to get out of this place? The poor boy had no way of

knowing anymore. Tangled, topsy-turvy roads surrounded him on every side, like an endless labyrinth with no way out.

How long had he been walking since then?

The only sounds to be heard were Yukito's own footsteps. The only traces of activity were his own footprints.

Sometimes he'd find fruit to eat or rivers to drink from, so he didn't starve or die of thirst. But no matter how much he kept walking, he never traced his way back to the entrance, nor did he arrive at the exit. He walked and walked, but all he ever found were the same roads—the roads that existed just for him. No one could see or use those except for Yukito.

He never saw anyone else. No one came to help him. He just kept walking, all alone, in that vast, abandoned labyrinth.

And to this day, he still hasn't found a way out.

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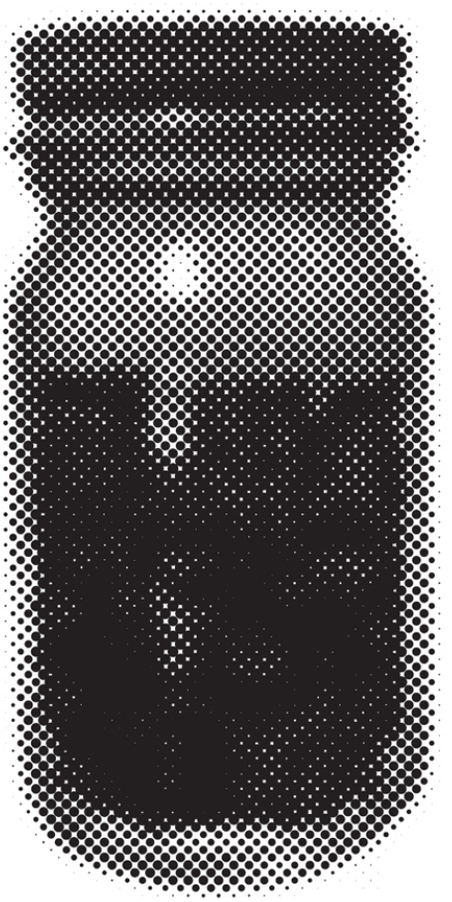
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Synonym Bugs



Having trouble reading books with words you don't understand? Just add these bugs to whatever you're reading!

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

Sumiya had come to the library to borrow a book. And not manga, either, but a real, honest-to-goodness novel.

For him, that was a pretty big deal. At ten years old, he'd lived most of his life without any contact with serious literature. But now he'd found a reason to change that. A reason he *had* to read one book in particular.

What was that reason? In short, there was an older girl in his neighborhood whom he'd had a crush on for a while. Try as he might, he'd never been able to find a way to get closer to her… until yesterday. Desperate for something to say, he'd blurted out the first thing that came into his head.

"Can you recommend me any good books to read?!"

The girl wasn't sure how to answer at first; she didn't really know any books that were appropriate for younger kids. But she gave it some serious thought and came out with several suggestions.

Those were the books Sumiya had come to the library to find.

Sumiya was always going to his local library to borrow manga; he had his own library card and everything. Honestly, though, he never thought he'd use it to take out anything *other* than manga.

"Let's see…the novel shelves are over there, I think. Let's do this!"

Psyching himself up, Sumiya wandered over to the shelves packed with thick hardcover books. He was in the same library he knew so well, but this section felt so unfamiliar it might as well have been a completely different city. That was just how out of his depth he was. Nevertheless, he checked the note the girl had given him and started looking for the three titles she'd written down.

Whoa… I don't know if I'll be able to read even a single one of these…

He found the three books, but they were all really thick. From a quick flick through them, there didn't seem to be any pictures, either. Every page was filled to the brim with text, and the pages themselves numbered in the hundreds. Just how did these authors think of so much to write?

I guess I should give these a try, at least.

Still intimidated by all those walls of text, Sumiya took the books over to a desk by the window and sat down.

Okay, then… First, book number one.

This book was an old sci-fi novel. Right from the first page, a parade of strange terms leaped out at him, with no explanation about what any of them meant. Trying to keep track of them made him dizzy. And as for the actual story, he could barely follow it at all. He gave up and closed the book after only two pages.

Next was a historical novel. Again, Sumiya was confronted with unfamiliar words and phrases from the get-go. Just like last time, he felt nauseated from trying to figure out what was going on and gave up after two pages.

The third book was a mythical fantasy novel. This one struck him as the easiest of the three books to read, and the story seemed like it might be interesting, too.

But it still wasn't *easy*. There were still a lot of long, unfamiliar words to deal with, and as he read, Sumiya felt himself getting sleepy.

The crystal moon was formed from innumerable fine grains of diamond, lapis lazuli, and garnet, all compacted and compressed together. At times it was wreathed in pale luminescence, while at others, it melted into the tenebrous night sky. People would look at it and feel their pulses quicken, and soon enough, the moon shattered into stars. What made those fragments crash to Earth was a single blow of my trumpet. I brought them down to use as materials in building a new moon. That was the atonement imposed upon me. Disrupting the moon's natural cycle also meant disturbing the stygian canary that brightened the night into day. And for us humans, this was…

"Whoa! That was a close one…"

Sumiya came back to his senses just in time and closed the book. He'd made it to the third page, but that was the most he could manage.

"Oh man, this is not good, not good at all…," he mumbled as he stared at the three books on the desk in front of him.

What was he going to do now? When he'd asked the girl for her recommendations, he'd said, "*I read all the time, so it's fine if they're a little advanced,*" thinking he could get away with it. What was he going to do if she found out he wasn't a big reader after all? She'd figure out that he'd lied to try getting close to her.

Sumiya couldn't let that happen.

I have to read at least one of these…

He looked at the books again and considered his options. Which of these would be the easiest—or the least painful—to get through?

It would have to be the third one, the fantasy novel. Just skimming over the words had been an ordeal in the first two books. With this one, it felt like he'd actually been reading it, even if he wasn't very thorough. And he'd made it one more page before giving up, compared with the other two. Even so…

Sumiya glared at the fantasy novel's opening page and its wall of text.

Why are so many of these words so complicated?

He stared daggers at the book. If it had the little notes explaining what the more complex terms meant, he'd probably be able to follow along a lot easier. There were words in here he'd never seen before; he couldn't even guess at what they meant. The things he didn't understand kept adding up, making it more and more confusing. Even by the end of the third page, he had next to no idea what was happening.

Aw man… Our ancestors have a lot to answer for! Whose idea was it to make words so hard to understand anyway?

Sumiya had always struggled with reading. It was the thing that had turned him away from books for so long.

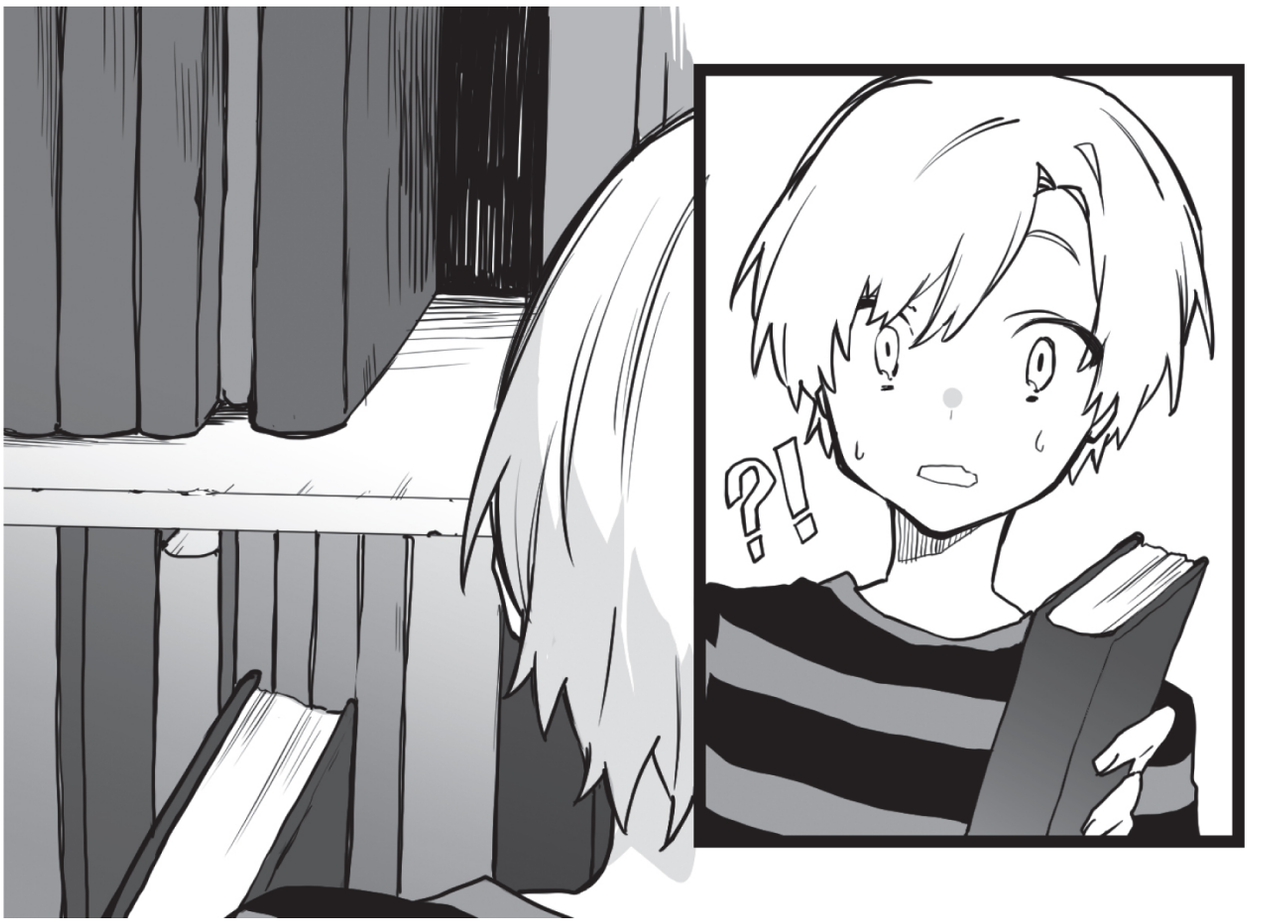
At this rate, even if I do borrow this book and take it home, I probably won't be able to finish it…

Hanging his head in shame, Sumiya decided to return all three books. They were so big he could see the gaps on the shelves where he'd taken them out.

One by one, he slotted the books back into their original places. The sci-fi novel…the historical novel…and finally, the fantasy novel. But just as he was setting that last one on the shelf, he heard a voice.

"Ah, a customer. Welcome!"

Sumiya tensed. The voice had come from right in front of him —from the gap he'd been about to fill between books. He took a hesitant step forward and peered into the gap.



A person was there. A pretty strange-looking person, too. It was a man with a hat pulled low over his eyes and a scarf covering the lower half of his face. There were so many shadows around his face that no matter how Sumiya squinted, he couldn't make out the man's features at all.

What in the…? What's going on? I thought these shelves were right up against the wall… How can there be a person behind them?

As Sumiya struggled with his confusion, the man behind the books spoke again—softly this time, as if the two of them were sharing a secret.

"Welcome, young sir. This is Bookworm Emporium, a store that occasionally operates behind the shelves of this library. What might you be looking for today?"

"Uh… Uh……"

Bookworm Emporium? A store, here in the library? *Behind* the bookshelves?

Sumiya could hardly believe what he was hearing; in fact, he was getting more confused by the moment. And yet it was all so strange that he couldn't help feeling curious, too. What kind of store was this, and what did it sell?

"Um…"

Sumiya leaned closer and whispered into the gap between books, careful not to let anyone else hear him.

"What exactly do you sell here at your 'Bookworm Emporium'?"

"Well now, allow me to show you one of our more popular products…"

The mysterious merchant pushed a small glass bottle onto the shelf, the same width as the gap between books. The bottle was several inches full of some kind of inky-black grains.

"These are Synonym Bugs, a type of insect that lives inside books," he said.

"Synonym…Bugs?"

That was a weird name. Sumiya stared at the bugs in the bottle. He'd never seen anything like this before. He'd never even heard of them.

"They're so small… They kind of look like ants, but without antennae. It's hard to tell where their heads end and their bodies

begin. They're a lot blacker than ants, too," Sumiya noted. "They're not moving, though. Are you sure they're alive?"

"But of course. They're just sleeping now. As I said, they live in books. Put them inside one, and they'll wake up right away."

"They live in books…? Do they eat the pages or something?"

Sumiya had heard of bugs that chewed holes in old or neglected books. Maybe these Synonym Bugs were something similar.

But the man in the hat shook his head. He went on to explain the truth, which was stranger than anything Sumiya had imagined.

"As you can see, these bugs' bodies are as black as ink. If you put them on a page, they will settle next to any complicated words and turn them into simpler ones."

"Whaaat?!"

Sumiya clamped his hands over his mouth to stifle his yell of surprise. He had to be careful—he didn't want to be loud in the library and disturb others. Thankfully, he was the only person in that section, so no one seemed to notice. He brought his voice back to a reasonable volume.

"D-do the bugs know which words to pick?"

"They do. It's a peculiar trait of theirs."

"Wow…! They must be really smart. They're better at reading than I am."

After his unsuccessful attempt at reading more complicated books earlier, this sounded like an absolute miracle.

"So, uh…if I put these bugs into a book…a really hard book with lots of long, difficult words, they'll change them all to easier ones?"

"That's exactly right." The merchant behind the shelves nodded. Or at least, his hat moved up and down. "So long as you have enough bugs to create synonyms for all the words, that is," he added.

Sumiya looked at the tiny black bugs inside the bottle and gulped.

With these bugs…I might actually be able to read a book that girl recommended all the way to the end!

Thinking about it like that, he got excited and jittery. He *needed* these weird little insects. He took his wallet out of his pocket and

asked the storekeeper how much they went for.

The bugs were surprisingly cheap—one bottle cost the same as a regular chocolate bar. Sumiya picked up the bottle and left his money on the shelf. A hand reached out to take the cash and passed Sumiya an instruction manual.



When Sumiya got home, he immediately got ready to put the bugs in one particular book. It was packed with really hard words—the fantasy novel he'd been able to read only a few pages of in the library.

Of course, library books were for everybody. He couldn't let a bunch of bugs loose in one. Instead, he was using a new copy that he'd bought in a bookstore on the way home.

"Okay, let's do this!"

He retrieved the book from the shopping bag, opened the instruction manual, and read it out loud.

"'Take the bottle containing the Synonym Bugs and shake well…'"

He did as the manual said.

Sksh, sksh, sksh…

It sounded like grains of sand shifting around inside the bottle. After a while, the sound turned increasingly watery, more like a *swush, swush, swush…*

When he checked the bottle again, the bugs' bodies did seem a little shinier than they'd been before. Now they looked a bit more like living things.

"That's probably enough… What's next? 'Open the book you want the Synonym Bugs to live in and scatter them onto any page.' Okay…"

He opened the bottle, turned it upside down over one of the pages, and shook it lightly. A second later, the little bugs' bodies went completely flat, as if they'd turned into drops of ink and were soaking into the paper.

"Whoa!"

Sumiya let out a cry of surprise. The page now looked like it had been stained by many inkblots.

But it wasn’t like that for long. The bugs began wriggling around, moving through the blank spaces between letters. Some of them stopped on that page, while others slid down the edge of it and disappeared from view one by one.



Looking at the book from the side, Sumiya caught glimpses of black spots seeping into the other pages, but they were gone before he knew it. The bugs must have been using the edges of the pages to travel to other parts of the book and find places to settle. According to the instructions, there was no danger of them escaping. They'd confine themselves to the book and stay there.

"Okay, good… Now I just have to close the book and leave it for three days."

He shut the novel and heaved a sigh, feeling the satisfaction of a job well done. He put it on his bookshelf, squeezing it in tight between his volumes of manga.

Three days later, Sumiya opened the book again.

The crystal moon was formed from many fine grains of diamond, lapis lazuli, and garnet, all squished and pressed together. At times it was covered in pale light, while at others, it melted into the gloomy night sky. People would look at it and feel their hearts beat faster, and soon enough, the moon shattered into stars. What made those pieces crash to Earth was a single blow of my trumpet. I brought them down to use as materials in building a new moon. That was the penalty forced upon me. Upsetting the moon's natural cycle had also meant disturbing the dark canary that brightened the night into day. And for us humans, this was…

"Wow! They really did turn into easier words…!"

This was amazing. It had worked just like the Bookworm Emporium man said it would. Each of the Synonym Bugs had settled beside a long, difficult word and replaced it with an easier synonym. They were the same color as the rest of the text, so they didn't look like bugs anymore. You couldn't even tell the difference between the Synonym Bugs and the words on the page.

Sumiya decided to start reading the book again from the beginning. When he'd tried in the library, there had been so many words he couldn't read that he got sleepy and gave up three pages in. This time, though…

Hrrrm… It's still hard, no doubt about that, but…

Compared with the original version, the text was a lot easier to understand now. He was actually starting to follow the events of the story.

Even with the synonyms, there's still words I don't know… But with stuff like light *instead of* luminescence *and* gloomy *instead of* tenebrous*, now I understand what they mean, and I can kind of figure out what's going on.*

The rest was all a matter of determination. Sumiya focused as hard as he could, fighting off his drowsiness, and kept reading. That first day, he made it all the way to page 15. The next day, page 31. And the day after that, page 43. He still wasn't making a lot of progress, but he'd pick up the book every day and read as much of it as he could, taking it at his own pace. And slowly but surely, he started to get invested in the story and the characters.

This is so cool… I'm reading! A big, complicated book like this—I'm actually reading it…!

That thought alone was exciting.

Too bad it didn't last.

After getting about halfway through the book, Sumiya turned a page to find that the easier words he'd gotten used to had suddenly disappeared. Apparently, there hadn't been enough bugs to go around. It was a big book, after all, with so many words on every single page. He should have seen this coming.

"What do I do now? I really want to find out what happens next…"

Sumiya tried reading the next page just as it was, skimming over the words he didn't know…but it was no good. There were too many unfamiliar words for him to make head or tail of it. He'd hoped he'd be able to coast through the story a little more easily now that he knew what it was about, but clearly that had been overly optimistic. If he couldn't understand the words, he couldn't understand the story.

"I'll have to buy another bottle of bugs when I next get the chance."

He heaved a sigh and put the book away for the time being.



Almost every day afterward, Sumiya went to the library in search of Bookworm Emporium hidden behind the bookshelves. But for some reason, the strange store never seemed to appear. He checked the spot it had been in before, taking a book off the shelf and looking through the gap, but there was nothing on the other side. He tried the shelves next to it, and the ones above and below it, taking books from lots of different positions, but there was never anything behind them. It was just the wall, with no sign of any store or the man in the hat and scarf.

"He did say it only operated 'occasionally.' I guess I'll never know if it's open until it actually shows up."

Sumiya returned to the library day after day, getting more worried all the time. But finally, his perseverance paid off. It was about a month after buying the first bottle of bugs when he once again came face-to-face with the mysterious owner of Bookworm Emporium.

It happened just like the last time—Sumiya removed that same book from the same shelf, and there was the man he'd been looking for. Sumiya was so excited he spoke before the storekeeper could even say "Welcome."

"E-excuse me, I'd like another bottle of Synonym Bugs, please…!" he whispered urgently. But he didn't get the answer he was expecting.

"I'm terribly sorry, young sir. We're currently sold out."

A startled "Huh?" escaped Sumiya's lips as he staggered back in surprise.

Sold out…? After all this time, I finally found this guy again, and now…

He was shocked to the point that he couldn't even speak for a moment. The man in the hat bowed his head.

"I really am sorry for the inconvenience. We're currently in the process of breeding the bugs to create more. The next time you visit us, they'll have had their babies, and we'll have a fresh bottle ready for you. Please be patient until then."

Sumiya raised his head. "Wow, breeding…? So these bugs have males and females?"

"They do indeed. Here, for example, are some females."

The merchant placed a bottle on the shelf. Like the last one, it was the perfect size to fit in the gap between books. Inside it were many tiny bugs all jumbled together, a lot like the ones he'd bought before. The bugs looked the same as well, except these ones were a little bit bigger.

"When you put male and female Synonym Bugs together, they multiply rapidly. However, the ones I sell here are all males."

"Really? Why's that?"

"The females are rather difficult to take care of, making them unsuitable as a product."

Sumiya nodded and asked another question.

"By the way, mister… When are you going to be here next?"

"Ah, who can say? You'll never know for sure until it actually happens."

"Come on, can't you just give me a straight answer…?"

Sumiya really didn't know what to do now. If he didn't know when the store was going to be here, how could he visit it again? Coming to the library every single day was hard. What if he had something else to do or was sick? There were bound to be days when he wouldn't be able to come. And if one of those days turned out to be the day the store was there…

The more he thought about it, the worse he felt. Wasn't there any way he could leave with some Synonym Bugs today?

This really stinks, but if they're sold out, there's nothing I can do about it…

Deep down, Sumiya knew that, but he couldn't help feeling bad about it. Reluctantly, he began turning away from the shelf, but then…

"Ooh, it's Bookworm Emporium! Can I order something, please?" a girl called through another gap in the books a few feet away.

She had silver hair and was wearing a neon-pink hoodie. She looked a little older than Sumiya and had an eye patch with a crossed-through heart over one eye. Who'd have thought such a flashy-looking girl would know about this store? And from the way she acted, she seemed like a regular, too.

"Of course, young lady. What can I get you today?"

The man in the hat disappeared from in the gap in front of Sumiya. He must have moved over to the new customer.

Ah…!

Sumiya gasped when he saw that the bottle was still in front of him—the bottle with the female Synonym Bugs inside. And the storekeeper wasn't looking this way anymore…

There's no telling when a flaky guy like him will ever be back, or if I'll *even be here when he is. It could be weeks and weeks before I can buy more bugs. Maybe I could just…*

He grabbed the bottle, quickly undid the lid, and shook a few of the bugs onto the palm of his hand. He put the lid back on right away and returned the bottle to where it had been.

The storekeeper finished with the girl and returned to the gap in the books. Sumiya closed his hand—which had already broken out in a cold sweat—over the female bugs he'd taken and stared back at the man in the hat. The man's face and expression were still a mystery, but he didn't say anything to Sumiya.

I…don't think he noticed…

Sumiya heaved a sigh of relief.

I'm sorry, Mr. Storekeeper… But you've got so many females already, you won't miss them if I take these ones, right…?

Even with that justification, Sumiya knew what he was doing was wrong. It gave him an itchy, prickly feeling deep within his chest. But he needed more bugs, and he couldn't afford to wait. He wanted to find out what happened next in the book and share his thoughts with the girl who'd recommended it to him. If he could make that happen even one day sooner, he'd do whatever it took.

Feeling guilty all the same, Sumiya turned away from the shelves.

"Ah! Please wait, young sir," the storekeeper called to him.

"Y-yes…?!"

Sumiya tensed and stiffly turned around. His heart was pounding, and his face was sweating. Had he been found out?

However, the storekeeper didn't accuse him of anything; he just slid a small paper bag into the gap between books.

"Here. Please consider this an apology for the inconvenience."

"Oh, uh… Thanks."

Sumiya reached out a hand to take the package. His other hand was still in his pocket, holding tight to the precious bugs.



When he was back at home, Sumiya sighed again.

Phew… Things have really gotten out of hand. But at least I have these now.

He looked down at the tiny specks of black resting in his palm. None of the bugs were moving, but he decided to put them in an empty bottle temporarily, just in case.

"I wonder if I should do the same with the female bugs as I did with the males…"

Even with the stress of everything that had happened, he was determined to do this right. If he could breed enough new bugs, he'd be able to read his book to the end without any further trips to Bookworm Emporium.

Apologizing to the storekeeper in his head over and over again, Sumiya started to shake the bottle. After a while, just like with the males, the sound changed from a dry *sksh, sksh, sksh* to a moist *swush, swush, swush*. He tipped the female bugs—now glistening and shinier than before—into the book where the males lived. Just like the first batch, these new bugs took only a few seconds to seep into the pages.

Will this be enough for them to have babies…?

Sumiya watched the bugs crawling around to settle near different words with a mixture of excitement and apprehension.

Every day from then on, he'd open the book to check on the bugs' progress. After three days, there still wasn't any change. But after that, little by little, new synonyms started to appear on pages where there hadn't been any before. And as the days went by, more and more of them appeared.

Yes! They really are having babies! It's working!

Finally, things were going his way. Sumiya could go back to reading the book, one new page at a time.

Thank goodness. When the Bookworm Emporium man said the females were hard to take care of, I guess he was wrong. I'm a complete amateur, and I'm breeding them just fine!

From there, the bugs began to increase so much that they were adding synonyms to the pages quicker than he could read them.

They're increasing a lot faster now… Or I guess I should say there's more being born.

Maybe the babies were growing up and having babies of their own, who were also growing up and having babies, creating more and more bugs in a constant cycle. Sumiya liked that idea. If it went on like this, there'd be synonyms for all the difficult words in this book before he knew it. He could finally relax and start reading the book at his own pace again.

One day, though, Sumiya noticed something odd.

"What's this here? It looks kind of like an inkblot…"

There was a small smudge of black on the page, like you'd see from ink that hadn't dried yet. And there wasn't just a single one of these, either. They appeared between words and letters, in the margins, filling any blank space on the page.

Every page was like this now. There was no way the book had looked like this before. And the strange stains were increasing day by day. By the time Sumiya got to the story's climax, a two-page spread contained hundreds of the tiny spots, like black stars in a white sky.

The next change came when he reached the second half of the final chapter. Almost overnight, the tiny ink stains that had infested the book had disappeared completely. But the text still wasn't back to normal.

"This seems like way too many hard words…"

Sumiya let out a startled groan when he opened the book that day. It had always had a lot of complicated words in it. But it wasn't this bad; he was sure of that. It didn't seem like a book with lots of difficult words anymore. It looked like a book with hardly anything *but* difficult words.

"What's going on? Even the regular words are more difficult now. They've all got synonyms next to them, so I can still read it, but this is super weird…"

He couldn't work out what had caused this. Was it okay for him to leave the book in this state? Was there anything he could do to fix it?

“If I go back to Bookworm Emporium, the man there will probably know what to do. But I have no idea when he’ll show up next… And I’d rather not have to see him again, after what I did last time.”

Stealing these bugs was turning out to be more trouble than it was worth. If Sumiya hadn’t taken them, he could go to the store with a clear conscience. Then again, if he hadn’t taken them, he probably wouldn’t need to ask for help right now.

“Speaking of that weird store…”

Sumiya remembered something. The last time he found Bookworm Emporium, the man had given him a gift to apologize for being sold out of Synonym Bugs. Sumiya had been so focused on the bugs in his pocket back then, he’d forgotten all about that little paper bag. What could be inside it?

Maybe it’s got something to do with the bugs.

His hopes were slim, but he had nothing else to go on. It was better than sitting here and worrying. He dug out the paper bag and opened it.

“What’s this…? Incense for keeping bugs away?”

He tilted his head in confusion. No matter how you looked at it, that’s what this was—it had a coil shape and a distinctive aroma that reminded Sumiya of warm summer nights. But why would that man give Sumiya *this* as an apology gift?

Still confused, his eyes wandered to the packaging, and he gasped. Something was written on the inside of the bag. He opened it and spread out the bag so he could see what it said.

ANTI-SYNONYM BUG INCENSE: FOR RIDDING BOOKS OF SYNONYM BUGS

TO REMOVE SYNONYM BUGS FROM A BOOK, SIMPLY BURN THIS INCENSE NEAR IT. THE SMELL WILL INSTANTLY DRIVE THE BUGS OUT.

*SYNONYM BUGS SOLD AT BOOKWORM EMPORIUM ARE USUALLY MALE, BUT IN RARE CASES FEMALES MAY BECOME MIXED IN WITH THE BATCH. IF THIS HAPPENS, THE BUGS WILL BEGIN BREEDING RAPIDLY. THEY SHOULD BE EXPELLED USING THIS INCENSE WITHOUT DELAY. IF THERE ARE MORE BUGS THAN DIFFICULT WORDS IN A BOOK, THE

EXCESS BUGS WILL APPEAR IN THE MARGINS OF THE PAGE AS SMALL INK-LIKE STAINS.

NOTE ALSO THAT THE FEMALE BUGS HAVE A SPECIAL ATTRIBUTE THAT THE MALES DO NOT. IN BOOKS WITH MORE BUGS THAN DIFFICULT WORDS, THEY ARE ABLE TO CHANGE AVERAGE WORDS INTO COMPLICATED ONES, THUS PROVIDING THEIR YOUNG WITH A PLACE TO LIVE.

That explained it. The strange stains, the increased number of hard words—all the bizarre things that had happened to the book made sense now.

“I’d better hurry and use this stuff right away.”

Sumiya found a match and lit the incense. The bag also contained some kind of metal holder, so he put the incense on top of that and set the whole thing on a plate from the kitchen.

A thin plume of smoke began to rise from the end of the coil. In a few seconds, Sumiya’s room was filled with that familiar smoky, summertime scent. He set the fantasy novel next to the incense and watched it intently, waiting with bated breath.

And then…

A few seconds later, the tiny black bugs started swarming out, crawling off the pages and away from the book. He scooped them up into the empty bottle as fast as he could.

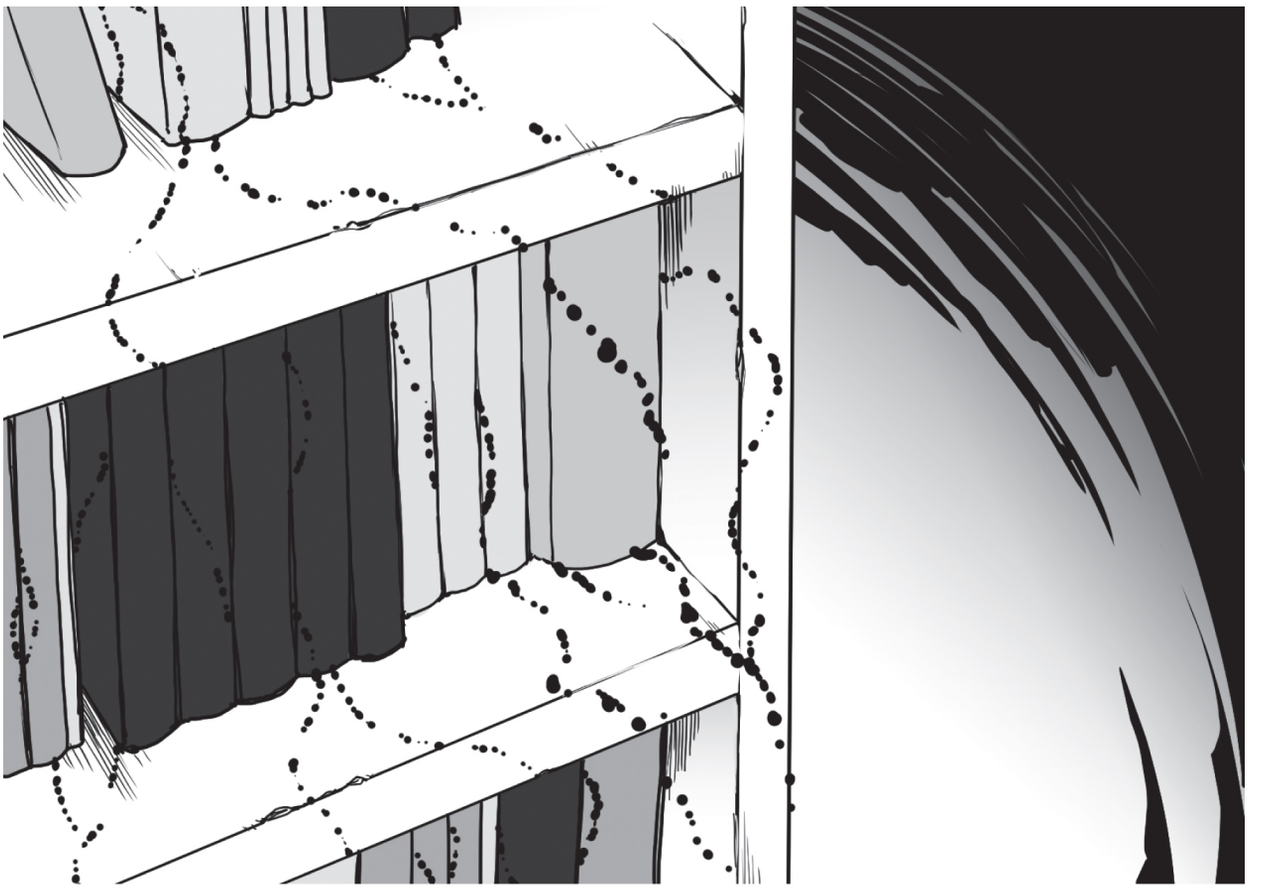
The males and females were still mixed together. They all looked the same—the size difference was so minimal it was hard to tell without stopping and looking really hard. He’d probably never separate them now, but there was nothing he could do about it.

The bugs kept coming, and Sumiya started to feel uneasy. Wasn’t this ever going to end? Thankfully, though, it did. After some more swarming out at full speed, the bugs stopped coming altogether. The bottle was now completely full; the lid barely fit on it. Sumiya plucked up the last bug that ran out of the book and put it in the bottle with the others. He heaved a sigh of relief and raised his head.

But then he flinched, horrified at what he saw.

“Wh-what the…?!”

Sumiya couldn’t believe his eyes. His bookshelves and the floor around them were covered in tiny black spots, like thousands of little ink stains. Of course, he knew they weren’t ink. He’d recognize them anywhere—these were the Synonym Bugs. They were coming out of every single book in his bookcase.



“The book with the bugs in it… That’s where I’ve been keeping it all this time. Were there so many bugs inside that one book that they started moving into the other books, too?”

That must’ve been it. And now the smell from the incense was driving them out again. Hundreds and thousands of Synonym Bugs must have bred inside those books over the last few weeks.

“So then does that mean…?”

Sumiya’s face went pale. He dashed over to the shelves and started taking out books.

But his hunch had been right. He was too late. His manga, his school textbooks and workbooks…every single one of them. The female Synonym Bugs had made the words even harder. And now that the bugs had been driven out, none of the books had easier synonyms anymore. All that was left was tightly packed lines of complicated words. They’d become so complicated that Sumiya no longer had any hope of reading them. They’d all become just like the fantasy novel that had started this whole ordeal.

Something like this, for example:

The natural orbiting satellite was constituted of innumerable crystallite particles of metastable carbon, metamorphic lazurite, and silicate minerals, given a rigid uniform structure through application of balanced inward forces. On a number of occasions over a given period, it emitted radiation within the visible spectrum, while in other cases it became obscured against the ambient darkness of the celestial sphere. The population would observe it and experience an elevated pulse, and soon enough, the shining orb fractured into infinitesimal particles. The cause of this incident was a concentrated rush of air through my transposing valved instrument. This was done to incorporate the particles into the construction of a new satellite. That task was a penance imposed upon me for past transgressions. Impeding the satellite’s inherent rhythm had also facilitated disturbing the subterranean *Serinus canaria* that heralded the transition from lunar into solar exposure. And for *Homo sapiens* such as ourselves, this was…

Cut Here

Order Form

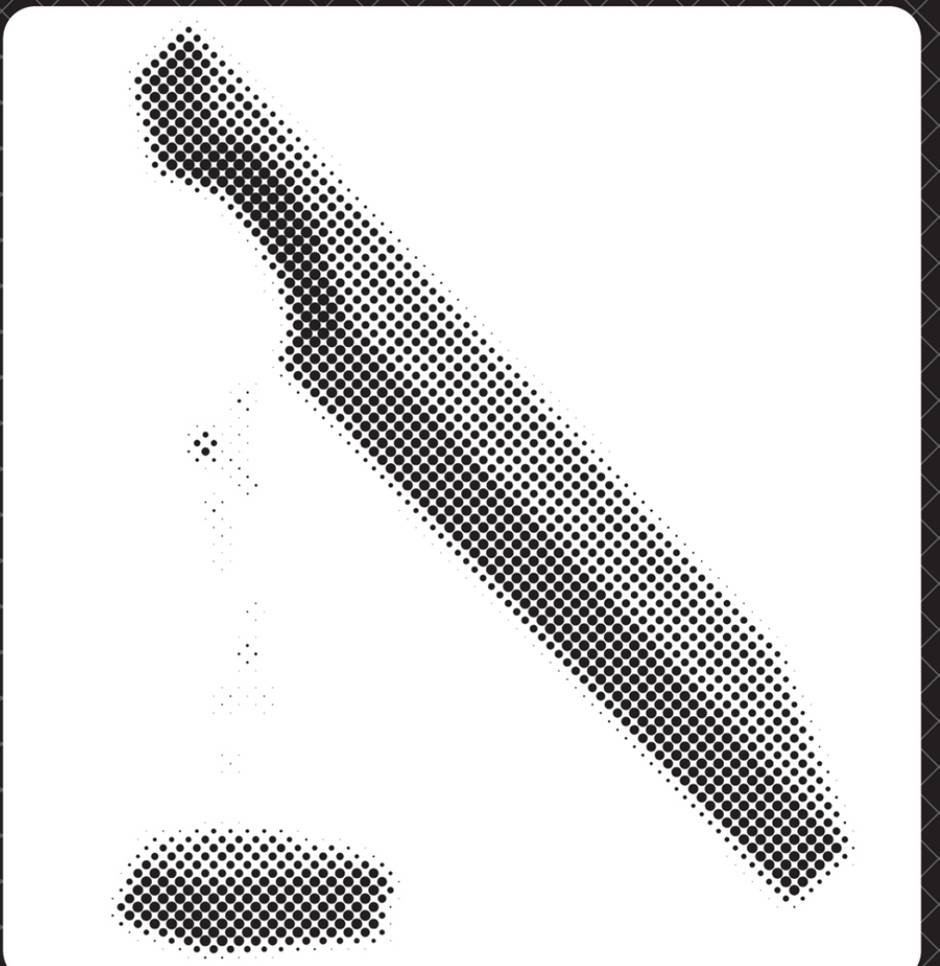
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Order This Product

Amount Needed	Desired Delivery Date
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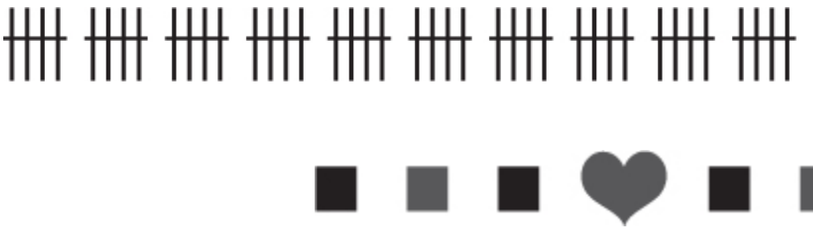
Product Name

Memory Absorb Paper



Memorize facts and figures with the greatest of ease! Perfect for last-minute cramming and everyday studying, this memory-boosting item works instantly.

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

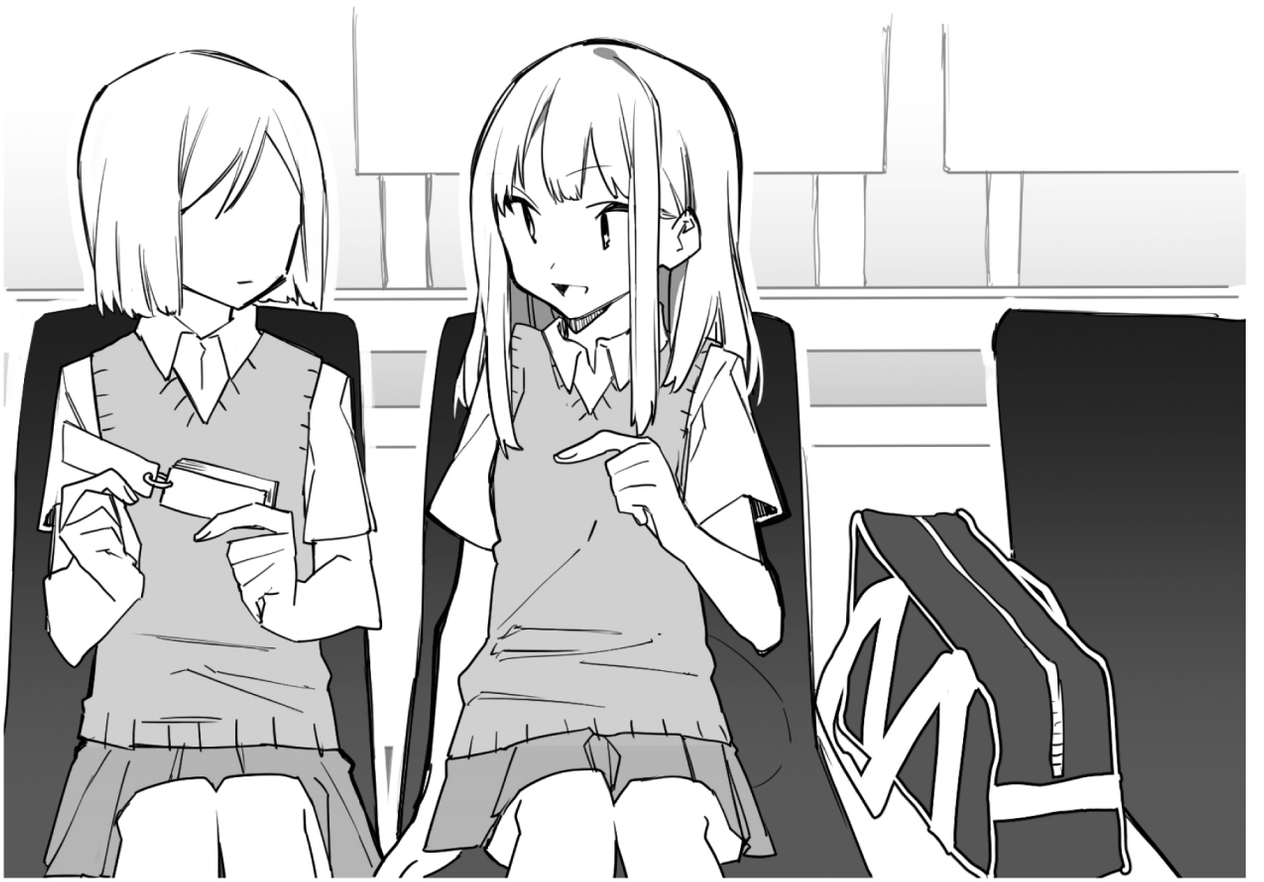


Oh hey, are you studying for a test? Making the best use of your time before the next train comes, huh? You're a real hard worker. Ooh, you make your own flash cards and carry them around with you, huh? Is that foreign language vocab? Or some other kind of words you need to learn? Are you good at memorizing stuff?

Hmm? Who am I? My name's Ann. I'm in the same grade as you.

You might not think it to look at me, but I have a really good memory! I've memorized every last word in our textbooks for every single class. I never have to reread them or anything. I read 'em once, and they stick in my head forever. Pretty cool, right? Bet you're jealous. Yeah, I guess you could call me a genius.

...I wasn't always like this, though. There was a time when my memory was, like, way below average. I hated anything to do with memorization. But it's not like I worked really hard to get this awesome memory, either. I hate working hard. Always have. Doing your best to improve little by little and all that junk? Talk about boring. That's why I never really applied myself at school. Never prepared or reviewed or took notes during class, never had any kind of game plan for the next test.



Who'd want to put in all that effort to get good grades, am I right? That's how I always felt. But even so, I thought it might be cool to get good grades someday. Scoring high on a test is cool, but working hard to do it isn't.

I probably sound like a real underachiever, huh? What I really wanted was to get good grades without even trying. That's the kind of thing that'd set me apart from everyone else. A real genius, y'know?

What, you think that's not possible? You think it's only people who are born smart who get to enjoy that feeling? Normally, you'd be right. I used to think that, too. But I already told you, didn't I? I *am* a genius now. When it comes to memorization anyway. I guess you could say I have a genius-level memory.

You want to know how I did it, right? How I got this totally awesome memory without even trying? It's okay. I don't mind telling you.

First off…

…does the phrase *Memory Absorb Paper* mean anything to you?



Let's go back to when I was a totally average student. I hated taking tests, and I hated seeing that I was at the bottom of the class when they posted our scores. I had to take makeup exams sometimes, too. But even more than that, I hated the idea of studying hard to improve. I'd just shrug it off and say, "Oh man, what a pain…"

But one day, all of that changed.

A flyer from a mail-order service came through my door; that's what started everything. It was black with a neon-pink border, and the white writing on it said:

Having trouble with your memory?

This one simple trick will dramatically improve your powers of retention and recollection!
A quick, effective solution that anyone can use! Unlock your true potential with...

Memory Absorb Paper

I know, right? I thought it sounded pretty shady, too. But I was also a little curious. “One simple trick” to improve your memory? If it really worked, I figured that’d be kinda cool.

There was something about the name, too... Memory Absorb Paper. Was it gonna, like, suck up my memory or something? That’s what it sounds like, doesn’t it? And I already had a terrible memory and hated studying. Wouldn’t getting my memory absorbed make things worse?

Those were the kinds of questions I asked myself when I read the flyer. In the end, though, I went ahead and ordered it. Not because I actually believed it could do what it said. I just thought it might be fun to try and talk about later. It wasn’t expensive, either. I had some money set aside to buy a new notebook from the school stationery store, but I got the paper instead. They were more or less the same price.

That same day, I went to a convenience store and sent a money order to the address on the flyer. I headed home, wondering what this thing really was and when it was going to arrive. But when I got home and went to my room, I was in for a surprise. There was a little bag with Memory Absorb Paper on my desk!

I’d *literally* just paid for it a few minutes before, you know? And it was delivered right to my room, too. Who does that? I asked my family if they had anything to do with it, but none of them had taken any deliveries or put anything on my desk.

Sounds kind of weird, right? Creepy, even. But that just made it all the more exciting. This Memory Absorb Paper, this thing that anyone could use to improve their memory...it had sounded like such a scam at first, and I was really only getting it so I could laugh about it later. But if it got delivered in such an

extraordinary way, maybe the paper itself wasn't ordinary, either. Was there a chance it really worked, just like the sales pitch said?

My heart was racing as I picked up the package from my desk. It was made of smooth, see-through plastic. Inside it was something rougher looking, like a sheet of blotting paper. It was a pale cream color, and about the size of a bus ticket or a travel card. I turned it over and saw there was also a little instruction card inside. This is what it said:

> This Memory Absorb Paper will consume a portion of memory from several people and add it to your own.
> On opening the package, the paper will automatically absorb the memory of a certain number of people within a specific range. Eat the paper to add this memory to your own.
>
> ※Please note that this package contains the S-size model. The provided paper will absorb memory from one hundred random people within a six-mile radius of your location.

What do you think of that? I wasn't ready to believe it yet, either. But *if* it were true, that'd be so, so cool, don't you think?

When I first heard the name, I thought this thing was going to suck up *my* memory, but it was actually the other way around. If what it said was true, that explained their "quick, effective solution that anyone can use" claim from the flyer. I'd be taking a little bit of memory from other people and making it my own. Even if it was only a small amount, across a hundred people, it'd really add up. Individually, they'd never even notice a difference, but once it was all focused into me, my memory would be a lot more powerful.

You can probably guess what I did next. I didn't know if any of this was true, but I decided to see what would happen. I ripped open the packaging, and all at once the little bit of paper swelled up. That was just like the instructions said, at least. I pinched the bottom of the paper and squeezed it out of the bag.

It was about half an inch thick now, but as light as a tiny scrap of paper. The paper still had that rough texture, but when I

looked closer, there was writing on it. The letters were so tiny, I had to hold it right up to my eyes to see it clearly.

It was people's names. The moment I'd opened the bag, these names had filled the paper up, turning it from a creamy white to a chocolatey brown. The top, bottom, sides—they were all covered with names… I didn't bother counting them, but there were probably about a hundred.

That explained it. These must've been the names of the hundred people in the six-mile radius that the paper had absorbed memory from. That had to be it, right? Now all I needed to do was eat the thing and see what happened. I gulped, suddenly feeling nervous. But then I took a small, tentative bite of the paper.

It was light and crunchy, and the scrap I'd bitten off melted in my mouth after a couple of seconds. Honestly, it didn't taste half bad. It was mild and sweet, kind of like a meringue cookie. I wouldn't have any problem eating the rest of it. That was a relief. I was more confident now, biting off piece after piece until it was all gone.

Then I took out my school workbooks. I wanted to test how much easier I'd find memorizing stuff now. And after a quick study session, it did feel like some of the vocab and formulas and stuff I'd had trouble with before were sticking a bit more easily.

My memory had gotten better, and all from eating that little sheet of paper! Isn't that cool? Like, *super* cool? The Memory Absorb Paper really worked. Seriously, I got kind of emotional about it.

Now, remember how I said there was a little instruction card in the bag as well? Turns out, there was more writing on it, on the back. I hadn't been able to see it before because the paper had been in the way. Guess what it was!

An order form for Memory Absorb Paper, M size.



I didn't order the next size up right away. I couldn't. It cost a hundred times more than the first one. I figured I'd see what I

could do with the small one's effects for a while. See if I could improve my test scores that way. I studied now and then like I normally did, and when the results of our next round of tests were announced…

Well, it wasn't bad. I got pretty decent scores across all my classes. Better than I usually did. Especially when it came to anything that basically came down to memorization. It wasn't enough to push me into "above average" territory, but it was the first time I could find my name by counting down from the top of the list instead of up from the bottom.

My parents and teachers all said I'd done a good job…but that wasn't what I wanted to hear. You get what I mean, right? This level of improvement would only make them think I'd worked a little harder than usual. No one was going to be shocked at how smart I was. And people thinking I was working hard to get good grades was *so* not what I was going for.

That's when I started thinking about the M-size paper. I ordered it the day before a test.

Just like before, I sent the payment at the convenience store, and when I got home, the package was already sitting on my desk. It was bigger this time, maybe the size of a sheet of paper. I was like, *Huh, so that's what counts as "medium."*

I turned it over to read the instructions. It was pretty much the same as the last one, but with a couple of differences:

> ※Please note that this package contains the M-size model. The provided paper will absorb memory from ten thousand random people within a sixty-mile radius of your location.

When I read that, I got really excited. I mean, taking a little memory from a hundred people had already gotten results. Up that to ten thousand, and my memory was going to be even more powerful! I couldn't wait! I tore the packet open. Just like last time, the sheet of paper instantly swelled up. It ended up a little more than an inch thick now. Even before it swelled up, it was

already bigger than something you'd scarf down in one sitting. For a moment, I was worried I might not get through it all, but that changed once I bit into it.

The Memory Absorb Paper was crisp and sweet and just plain tasty. And like with the S-size sheet, the creamy color had been dyed a chocolate brown, and up close, I could see it was filled with names. Glancing at them, it was crazy how many there were… Ten thousand in all, of course.

But the thing is, I recognized one of those names.

It was the name of a girl in my class. She was smart and always scored pretty high on tests, and she really got on my nerves. When I suddenly got better scores in the last round of tests, she was all like, "Oh, are you sure you didn't cheat?" as if it was a big joke. Seriously, that's totally rude! I was really annoyed with her.

The idea that I'd be taking away some of her memory and using it for myself was pretty cool. I bit into the part that had her name on it a little harder than the others. From there, I kept crunching and chewing my way through the paper. It wasn't as difficult as I thought, and before I knew it, I'd eaten the whole thing.

In those tests, I scored at the top of my entire grade. The regular mock tests at our school are always full of stuff we've already covered in class or homework assignments. You'll never see a question on them you haven't seen before. They're the kind of test you can ace really easily, if you have a good enough memory to remember all the questions that might come up and what the answers are.

With such a sudden change in my test scores, even my parents and teachers thought I might have cheated this time. But I wasn't worried. I hadn't actually cheated, so they couldn't prove anything. And when questions like the ones on the test came up in class or in homework after that, I could answer them just fine. Then they *had* to admit I was legit.

One thing that surprised me was that annoying girl I told you about before. She didn't say anything about my score this time. I thought maybe she knew she'd sound jealous or like a sore loser if she tried dissing me now that I'd scored higher than her. I liked

that idea. I liked it a lot. And the paper had taken away some of her own memory, so she'd probably get worse scores from here on, too!

Except she didn't. I guess the instructions did say it took a tiny amount from each person. Apparently, it was so small it wouldn't affect that girl's test scores. I didn't get hung up on it, though. And after that, she never spoke to me again. Even if our eyes met, she'd brush me off like I wasn't there. But it's not like we were ever friends to begin with, so I didn't think it was worth getting worked up over.

And that's how I became the student with the best test scores in our year… For the regular mock tests, that is.

When it came to midterms and stuff that actually counted toward our grades, it was a different story. Those were way more varied and had material I'd never seen before. Basically, they're the kind of test you can't coast through on memorization alone. But by that point, being good at mock tests wasn't enough for me. I wanted *more* praise. I wanted *more* people to say I was smart, that I was a genius! But I still wasn't in the mood to improve my skills or knowledge through putting in the effort to study. That just left me with one option.

You know what I'm going to say, don't you?

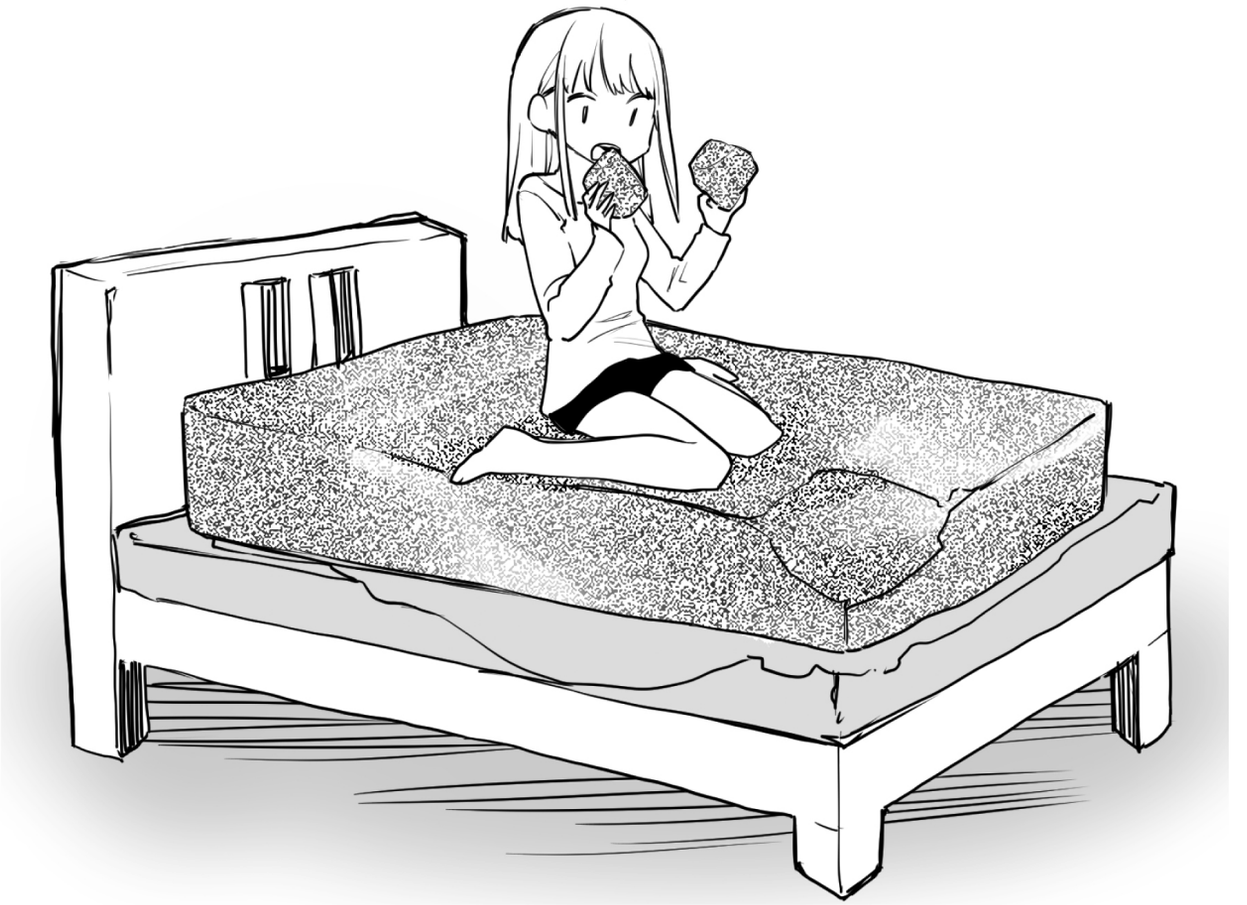
That's right. There was something on the back of the M-size Memory Absorb Paper, too. An order form for the next size up—L size. It cost ten times more than the M-size paper and a thousand times more than the S-size one I started with. But I needed it. I had to empty out all my savings, but I managed to afford it.

When this one arrived, it was the same size as a mattress. It was too big to fit on my desk, so it had been left on top of my bed instead. That was quite a shock, but I hefted it up to read the instructions like I'd done before. It wasn't anything I wasn't used to by now.

※Please note that this package contains the L-size model. The provided paper will absorb memory from everyone on Earth.

I mean, the scale of it was crazy, though. A little bit of memory from all of humanity was about to be mine! If that wasn't worth spending my life savings on, I didn't know what was. I couldn't wait to open it up; I was more excited than ever. The L-size paper was so big, I figured it'd be hard to pick at it from the side, so I sat on top of it and opened it with a pair of scissors. It swelled up so fast it bounced me into the air for a second!

The paper was about a foot thick now. One big, regular rectangle that definitely didn't look like something any one person could eat. But I wasn't intimidated by the size. I tore right in, starting at one of the corners. Just like before, it was creamy white at first, but then it filled up with chocolate-colored writing, showing lots and lots of names. There were some Japanese names in there, but lots of English ones, too, and some that looked Chinese, and some in alphabets I'd never seen before. Honestly, there were way more of those than there were Japanese ones.



Every inch of the paper was covered with that writing now. Not just the top and sides, but when I bit into it, the inside was packed with them, too. I was looking at the names of every person on Earth, after all. And I was going to take a little piece of their memory for myself! Feeling totally jazzed about what this was going to mean for me, I really started to lay into it.

Crunch, crunch…

Somehow, no matter how much of it I ate, I never felt full. I wasn't thinking about anything else, just fully committed to getting through it. Before I knew it, I was putting the final piece into my mouth.

And then… Well, I took a breath first, but then I noticed something. There was more text on the other side of the instructions, too.

I crawled closer to it to see what it said. In one corner, about the size of a postcard, was a box that read:

About Memory Absorb Paper

- The Memory Absorb Paper will consume only a small portion of memory from each person.
- That portion includes the part of their memory needed to remember you.
- Once this portion is absorbed, those people **will no longer be able to remember that you exist.**



What do you think? Pretty spooky, right? Thanks for listening all the way to the end.

…Huh? What happened to me after that?

Nothing, really. All that stuff on the back of the instructions came true. Since then, no one in the world remembers who I am. My parents, my siblings, my friends, my teachers… None of them remember me. They can't. Even if I take the time to explain it to them, as soon as I finish, they forget all over again.

It’s the same with you.

You and I were friends, y’know. I’ve told you this story so many times already…

I know—you don’t remember. My name, the words *Memory Absorb Paper*, none of it means anything to you. I figured as much.

What, you don’t believe me? I’ve got proof. Every time I see you and tell you this story, I make a note of it and give *that* to you.

Yeah, that’s the one. The paper with the tally marks you found mixed in with your vocab cards a minute ago. Hand it to me for a sec, okay? Gotta update the count for this time, too. There we go. One more line, and…



Cut Here

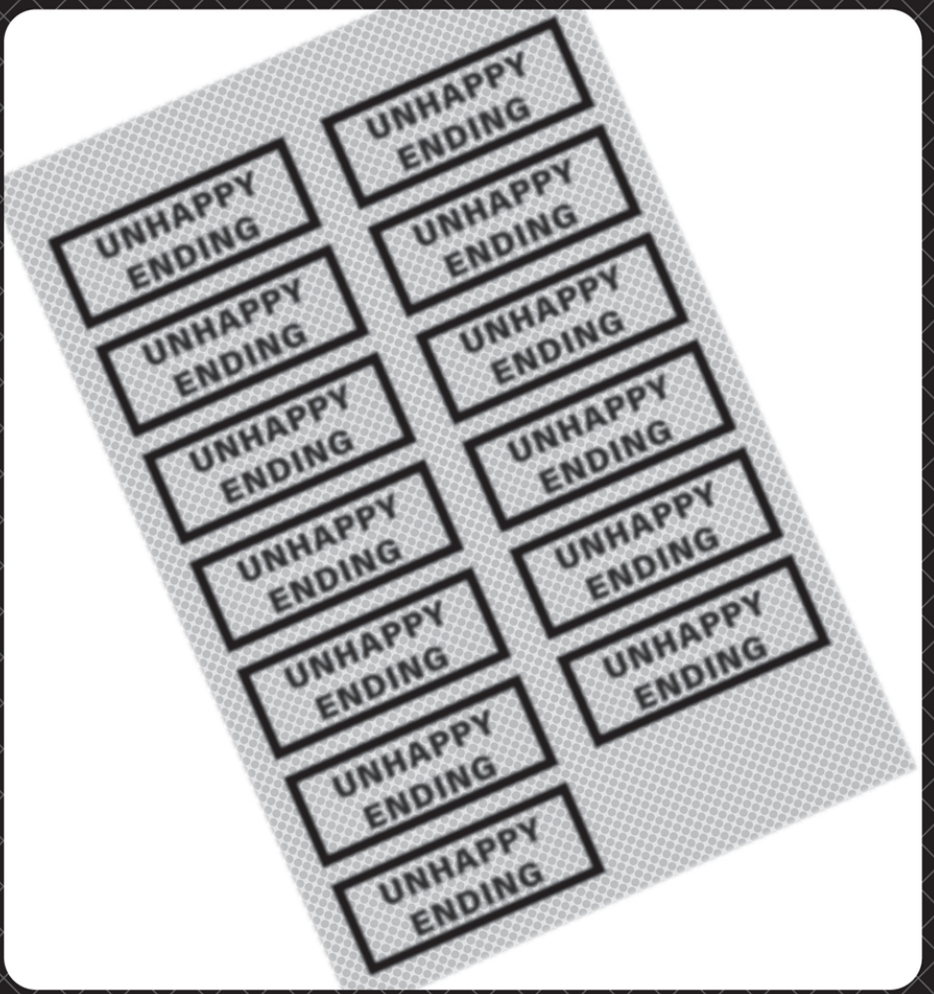
Order Form

(Cut out and mail)

Order This Product	
Amount Needed	**Desired Delivery Date** __/__/____

Product Name

Unhappy Ending Labels



Bored with all the stories out there that end happily? Use these labels to give them brand-new tragic twists!

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

“Do you have any books with *un*happy endings?” Kirika asked the used bookstore clerk.

She’d found the store one afternoon while she was walking around town.

It was a tiny little place that looked like it had been wedged into the gap between two other buildings. The kind of place Kirika might have walked past dozens of times without giving it a second thought.

But she’d noticed it this time, thanks to the butterfly fluttering around the sign outside. Its wings were neon pink with a black pattern, not the kind of thing you usually saw around these parts. It had drawn Kirika’s eye, and from there, her gaze had wandered to the sign.

She’d never realized there was a store like this here. The inside was dimly lit, especially around the register where the store clerk sat. That area was practically in deep shadow.

“Are you fond of unhappy endings, miss?” the clerk asked in response to Kirika’s question.

“You bet I am,” Kirika replied emphatically. “Unhappy endings are way more fun and exciting than boring old happy endings. That’s why I always ask for books that end in tragedy whenever I visit a bookstore or a library.”

“I see. You’re a real enthusiast. That’s a rather unusual interest you’ve got, wouldn’t you say?”

“Unusual? Nah. I doubt I’m the only one who likes hearing about other people’s misery. And happy endings don’t have any punch to them. They basically mean the story’s all over and nothing interesting is going to happen to those characters anymore. I don’t know what people see in them,” she answered with a wicked smile before asking her favorite question once more. “So, do you have any books with *un*happy endings? I don’t care what genre they are or who the target audience is. Novels, comics, I’ll read anything so long as it has a nice, tragic ending.”

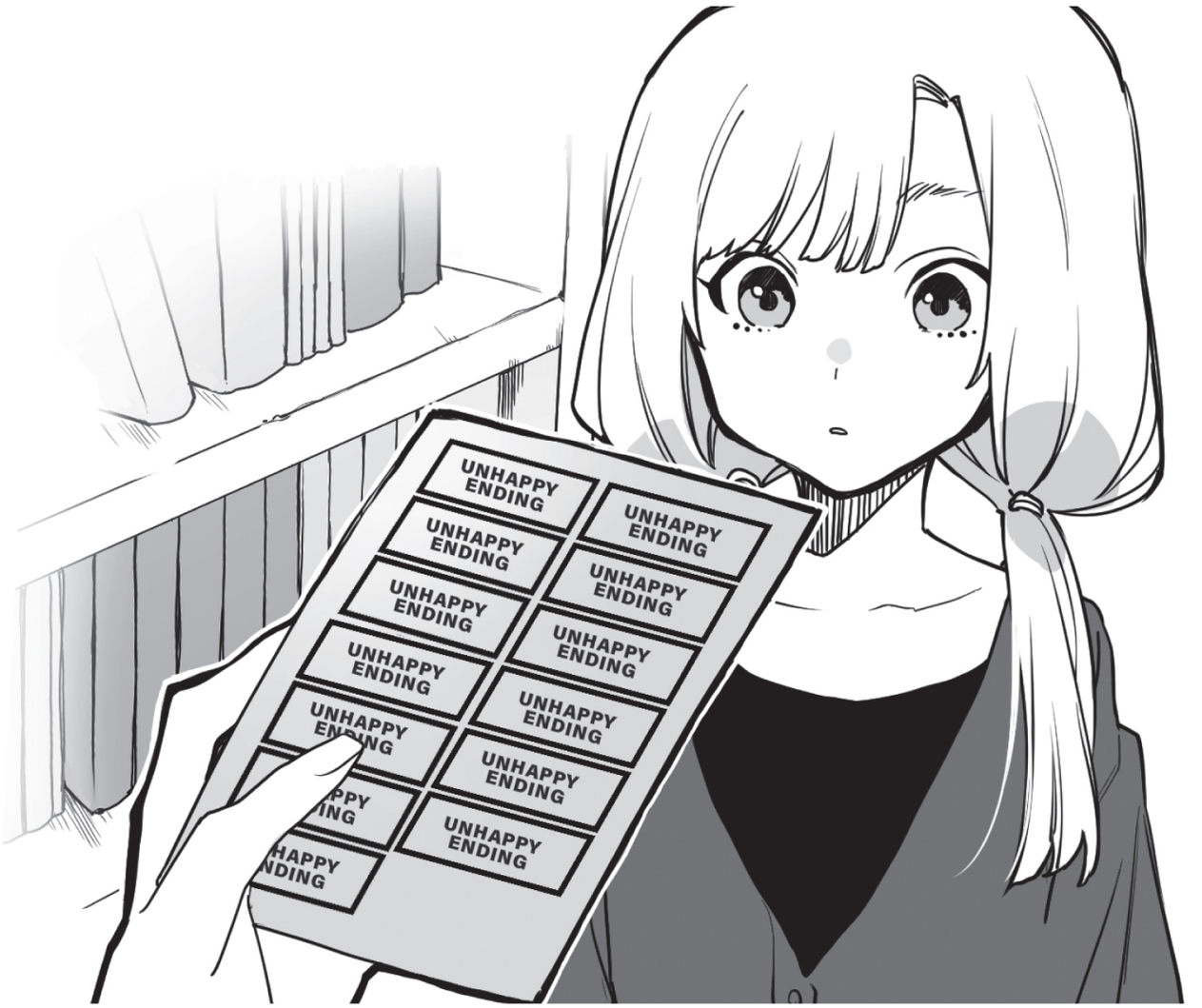
Kirika walked briskly over to the counter. Her eyes were getting used to the darkness, and she could make out the storekeeper a little better now. He looked kind of strange. He was wearing a wide-brimmed hat pulled low over his eyes, even though he was indoors. He also had a scarf wrapped around his

neck that hid the bottom half of his face. Between the scarf, the hat, and the low light, she couldn't make out his face at all. But his head—and his hat—tilted to one side as he pondered her request.

"There are some books with unhappy endings I could recommend, but…I have something else that may be more to your liking," he said.

He reached over to a rack behind the counter, where sheets of some kind of stickers were hanging. He took one and offered it to Kirika.

"These are Unhappy Ending Labels. Stick one on a book, and no matter what it was like before, the ending will take a tragic turn."


UNHAPPY ENDING
UNHAPPY ENDING
UNHAPPY ENDING
UNHAPPY ENDING
UNHAPPY ENDING
UNHAPPY ENDING
UNHAPPY ENDING
UNHAPPY ENDING
UNHAPPY ENDING
UNHAPPY ENDING

Her eyes widened. “For real? Something as awesome as that actually exists?”

“Indeed. You’ve never seen or heard of them before, have you? That is because they are an original product not available anywhere else.”

“So if I use one of these, even a book that used to have a happy ending will end in tragedy?”

“Precisely. Doesn’t it sound like the perfect thing for you?”

Kirika gazed at the sheet of labels and gulped.

Could these really change any book into one with an unhappy ending?

“Yeah, it sounds great…if it’s true,” said Kirika. “You’d better not be lying to me.”

“No, of course I’m not. In fact, why not buy a book here and try one out? If you’re not satisfied, I’ll refund you the price of the book and the labels right away.”

“Hmm…” If he was that confident, she could probably trust him. “All right, I’ll take a set of those labels.”

“Of course. A pleasure doing business with you.”

The shopkeeper put the labels in a small paper bag and sealed it with a piece of tape. The sheet of labels cost about the same as a standard paperback book.

“I also put in a little extra—feel free to use that, too. Although I doubt you will have much use for it…,” the man said, handing the bag to Kirika. “Ah, and one more thing. Once you stick one of these labels on something, it will never come off. I’d recommend against using it on books that are important to you. Think hard about whether you really want something to have an unhappy ending before you use one.”

Kirika just laughed. “Don’t worry about that. The only books that are important to me already have unhappy endings anyway!”



Back at home, Kirika went to her room. This was where she kept her books, and she was itching to try out the Unhappy Ending Labels she’d just bought. They were arranged in rows on a clear

plastic sheet, each one the size of a Band-Aid. All in all, there were thirteen of them. Each was just a rectangle with the words UNHAPPY ENDING printed on it. A simple design. Looking at them, you wouldn't think they were anything special. But if what that guy in the bookstore said was true…

"I guess I'll use one now and see if it works," Kirika murmured, and she turned her attention to her bookcase.

The only problem was, most of the books in her room—both the novels and the manga—already had unhappy endings. It was actually pretty hard to find a suitable candidate. In the end, she brought out a book that had been tucked away in a lonely corner of her shelves. It was a collection of fairy tales she'd gotten from her parents when she was little.

"It's for little kids, so I'm pretty sure these stories all end with 'happily ever after.'"

Being the tragedy expert that she was, Kirika found this book unbearably dull. Out of obligation to her parents, she'd flicked through it once or twice, but she never felt motivated to read it from start to finish and had left it on the shelves to gather dust. It was the perfect book to try out the labels on. She glanced at some of the pages before starting, just to check. Sure enough, they all had sickeningly sweet happy endings.

"Yep, it's boring all right." She nodded and closed the book with a *snap*. "Now, let's see what these labels can do to spice up these stories a little…"

She peeled one of the labels off the sheet and stuck it onto the fairy-tale book's cover. It took effect instantly. The label faded away, as if it was melting into the book, leaving only the words *Unhappy Ending* on the cover. Kirika gave a little cry of surprise. After blinking in disbelief, she ran her finger over the words, still looking at them intently. The surface of the cover was flat and smooth; her nails never caught on the edges of the label.

"Wow… This must be what he meant when he said they never come off."

Satisfied, she opened the book and began reading it, right from the start. It was true! The stories really were different now.

Hansel & Gretel

Hansel and Gretel escaped from the witch's gingerbread house and ran all the way home. But their kindly father wasn't the one waiting for them there. It was the witch, who had crawled out of the oven and got there before them. She put the pot on the stove, and when the front door opened, she turned to greet Hansel and Gretel with a wicked smile.

And they all lived unhappily ever after…

The Three Little Pigs

When the wolf started climbing down the chimney, the three little pigs put a pot of boiling water at the bottom for him to fall into. But as they did that, a whole pack of wolves surrounded the house of bricks. The pigs had no idea when the three of them stepped outside to look for food.

And they all lived unhappily ever after…

Snow White

Snow White bit into the poison apple and fell into an enchanted sleep, hitting her head on the way down. The dwarves wrapped her head in a bandage that completely hid her face. When the prince passed by, he had no idea who she was. The dwarves were left with no choice but to put Snow White's glass coffin into the ground and bury her.

And they all lived unhappily ever after…

That was how all the stories were now. Kirika flipped through the pages in awe. Everywhere she looked, a new unhappy ending. The book had become a treasure trove of tragedy. Normally, she'd worry that any story she was enjoying might suddenly end on a happy note, but not anymore. She'd never read such exciting fairy tales before!

"Wow, these Unhappy Ending Labels are amazing!"

Finally, she reached the end of the book and closed it with a deeply satisfied sigh.

"What a wonderful invention… I've gotta try these out on other books, too!"

Kirika went back to her bookcase. After a little searching, she turned up several more books that might work. They were ones

where the titles or summaries had made her think they'd have unhappy endings, only for her to be sorely disappointed.

Peel, stick… Peel, stick… Peel, stick…

She unpeeled several labels from the sheet and stuck them on the books she'd lined up in front of her. Each of them instantly became one with the book and began altering its ending.

She'd enjoyed her new anthology of tragic fairy tales, but seeing these longer stories take on new unhappy endings was fun in a whole different way. One was a book she'd been lured into from the summary. It had sounded so dark she was sure it was going to end in tragedy. But then the main character found a way to overcome her misfortunes, improve her social relationships and economic well-being, and went on to live a happy, fulfilled life. A total snoozefest of a happy ending.

But the Unhappy Ending Label changed all that. Now, right when happiness was within reach, the hero stumbled at the last moment. She lost her lover, her friends, her family, her job, and her money, and she ended her days in a black pit of despair.

There was also a book from an author who was famous for his unhappy endings. Kirika had bought it expecting it to be like his other works, only for it to turn out he'd been experimenting with a brighter, more wholesome tone in this one. She'd thought about throwing these books out, but the Unhappy Ending Labels were breathing new life into them, with just the kind of endings she wanted!

In every story, there was a turning point that could potentially lead to a happy ending. These labels made the protagonists take the other path, the one that led to their inevitable downfall. No matter what they tried, their lives became absolute train wrecks, and the story went out on a tragic high note.

Sometimes everything would be going well until a final twist rendered all the hero's efforts useless. Other times, a situation the characters were already caught up in would get worse and worse until not even a shred of hope remained. From the books Kirika tried the labels on, the endings all seemed to follow one of those two patterns.

"Yeah, using these for novels is definitely fun, too."

The labels had worked well on the short stories, but changing entire novels into tragic tales had a charm all its own. Whenever

she finished one, Kirika let out a sigh of pure bliss. She stayed up the rest of the night totally immersing herself in the wonderful world of unhappy endings.



The next day at school, Kirika was tired from lack of sleep. But when the lunch bell rang, she made her way to the library.

I've already used the labels on all the books I own that don't have happy endings. What about the others? I figure I can find some library books that could use a little extra tragedy and buy my own copies from the bookstore later. Or actually…

In her excitement, she'd brought the labels along to school with her. She took them out of her pocket now, smirking mischievously.

Why wait? Maybe I should just use them on the library books and share the joy of unhappy endings with others. I bet they'd be shocked if these books suddenly had different endings from all the other editions out there. That could be fun to watch!

Thinking those wicked thoughts, Kirika peeled one of the labels off the sheet. She could see a book she recognized sitting on the shelf in front of her, one with a very well-known happy ending. She reached out for it…

But then someone knocked into her from behind. Kirika's hand slipped, and the label she'd just peeled off fell to the floor.

"Oh! Sorry about that."

The girl who'd bumped into her turned around and apologized with a quick bow. She began to walk away and stepped right onto the label.

Ah…!

Even worse, it was lying sticky side up. The girl's shoe came down, and when it came up again, the label was gone. It must have stuck to the bottom of her shoe.

Oh shoot, I wasted a label… But I guess it's no big loss. They weren't that expensive, so I can always go back to that store and get some more.

Kirika sighed and shrugged off her frustration. She didn't like it, but what was she supposed to do? Chase after that girl and

peel the lost label off her shoe? She didn't even know her; she'd feel weird talking to her out of the blue like that.

And besides, once one of those labels sticks onto something, it's impossible to take it off…

A thought occurred to her. If an Unhappy Ending Label was stuck on something other than a book, would it still stay there forever? With the books, the label had melted into the cover, leaving only the words *Unhappy Ending* on the surface. And it didn't stop there. She'd experimented last night, and removing a book's dust jacket didn't make the label's effect on the story go away. The words had just moved to the inner cover, the unhappy ending still intact.

I bet even if you tore off the "Unhappy Ending" part, it'd move to the front page instead. You can never get the book to go back to the way it was before… I guess the whole "it will never come off" thing runs deeper than I thought.

A book's cover was just a cover, not the book itself. It didn't have a story of its own. Maybe the label's power seeped through it to the book underneath in search of a story to alter. Because that's what these labels were all about—stories. Once they found one, they would twist its ending toward tragedy without fail.

But books aren't the only places you find stories. Can you use these on DVDs to change movies or TV shows? What about CDs, for songs that tell stories? Ooh, or what about medical flyers, or ads with customer endorsements on them? Just how loose can we get with the definition of stories *for these labels to still work?*

And all this had raised another question—another idea—in Kirika's mind.

No, they couldn't go that far… Could they?

She felt increasingly tense and restless. Slowly, she looked back at the girl from before and stared.

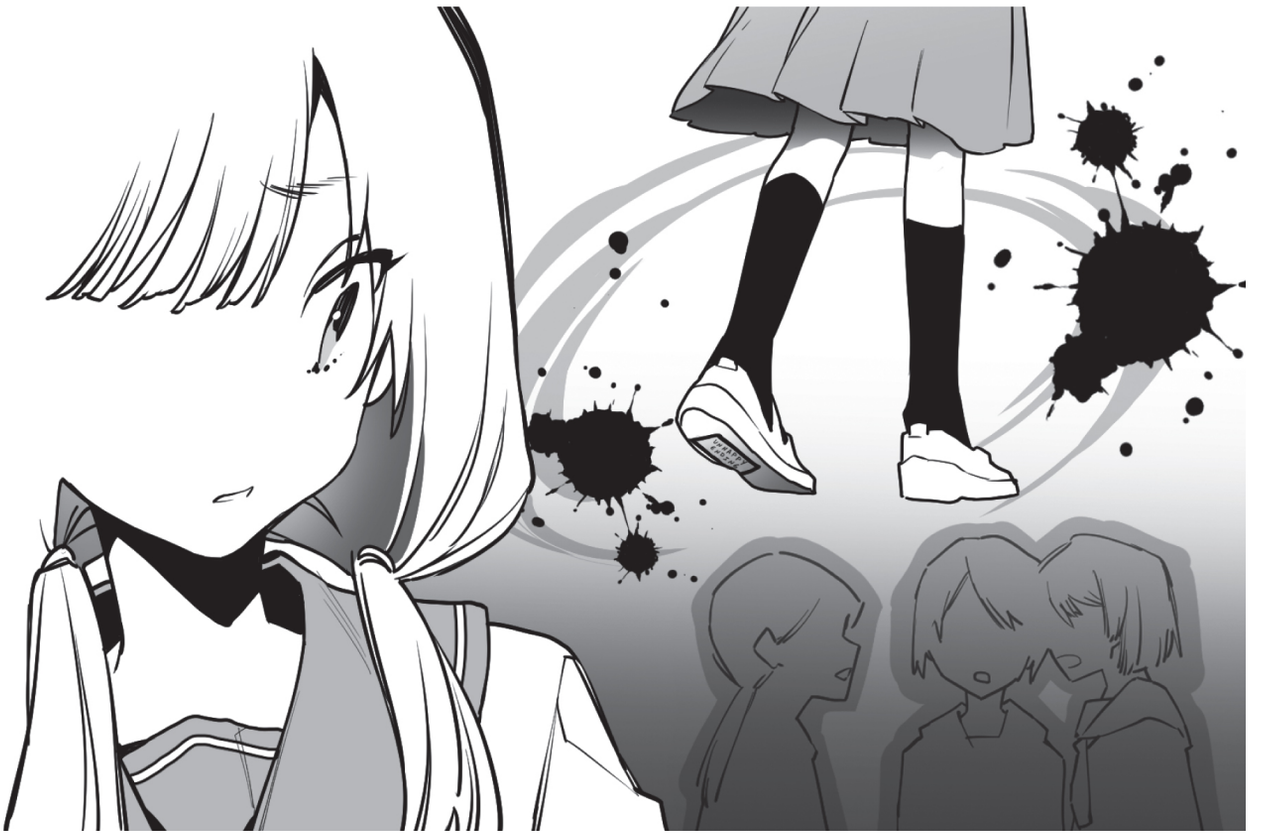


Kirika heard the news the next day. The girl she'd bumped into in the library had been attacked on her way home. The girl had left school late because of her club activities, and someone had come at her with a knife and seriously wounded her leg.

Before this, she'd been one of the track-and-field team's top players and was even going to compete at the nationals. But now, because of her injury, she would never run competitively again. That's what all the rumors were saying. Everyone in class was talking about it.

Kirika found herself thinking back on yesterday's events.

Is this…? It must be… This happened because of the Unhappy Ending Label. When that girl stepped on it, it must have seeped through her shoe and into her skin.



And now the “story” of her track-and-field career was over. An unhappy ending.

Kirika’s heart pounded in her chest. Her hand was shaking—the same hand she’d used to peel off the label that had caused all this.

These things are way more powerful than I thought… It’s not just books; they can change parts of other people’s lives to have unhappy endings, too.

The idea had occurred to her only after the incident in the library. But she hadn’t believed it was really possible, until now. She was bewildered, she was shaken, but there was something else mixed in with those emotions—excitement like she’d never felt before.

All this time, I’ve been satisfied with unhappy endings in fiction. In real life, though? That’s taking things to a whole new level.

Kirika gulped and tried to steady herself. Her eyes were sparkling as she looked at her remaining Unhappy Ending Labels.

I want to see more! More life stories twisted tragically…!

And that’s exactly what she did. She switched from using her labels on books and became engrossed in using them on people instead. Kids at school, people in her neighborhood, employees at local stores… She picked her targets more or less at random. And once she’d stuck a label on them, all she had to do was sit back and watch the show.

The track-and-field girl who’d been attacked on her way home was just the first of Kirika’s victims. She stuck one on a girl in her class, who got into a big fight with her best friend and transferred away before they could make up. As a result, the story of her time at this school had an unhappy ending.

She stuck another on a student who was taking entrance exams, who failed to get into his first-choice university, which he’d considered a sure thing. This hopeful, ambitious period in his life had a tragic end.

One victim broke up with their partner of many years, ending the story of their relationship on a sour note.

Another gave up on a job they’d wanted ever since they were little. The story of their childhood dream? Unhappy ending.

No matter who they were or what they did for a living, people's lives were chock-full of stories. It wasn't clear whether the Unhappy Ending Labels zeroed in on particular ones or just drifted toward them naturally. But the end result was the same—tragedy and destruction. Every person had different stories, which had the potential for different conclusions. Watching them play out was the most fun Kirika had ever had.



Days went by, and eventually she had just one of the original thirteen labels remaining.

Once I use this one, I'll go back to that old bookstore and buy a new sheet.

Having decided that, Kirika relaxed and daydreamed her way through class.

Now then, who should I use this last one on…?

She didn't really care who it was. It had to be someone she saw fairly often so she could observe the effects properly, though.

I might as well use it up now so I can finish with this sheet and go buy some new ones. Probably easiest if I put it on someone right here in this classroom…

While she was pondering over this, the bell rang.

"Well, that's it for today," said the teacher. "Anyone who's finished your assignments, feel free to hand them in now."

Several students got to their feet. Kirika reached into her desk for her folder.

…Okay, I think I've decided.

She stood up, hiding the Unhappy Ending Label among other sheets of paper. While she was waiting to hand her assignment to her teacher, she reached for it, and…

Peel, stick!

…she stuck the label on the teacher's shirt as she stood there next to his desk. The label instantly became one with the fabric, leaving only the words *Unhappy Ending* behind. It was a sight Kirika was used to by now. The words had probably seeped through and burrowed their way into his skin already. That was how it usually worked.

There was no escape now. What kind of unhappy ending was the teacher headed for? What part of his life would take a turn for the worse? Imagining the different possibilities brought a smile to her face, but she quickly stifled it and headed back to her seat looking completely innocent.

Things didn't go like Kirika expected, though. After several days, the teacher showed no signs that anything in his life had changed. Nothing like this had ever happened before.

What's going on here? Is the label not working? Or did it already make something happen without me noticing?

She puzzled over it but couldn't come up with an explanation that satisfied her. Maybe if she asked the teacher directly she could figure something out. But what was she supposed to say? "Hey, Teacher, has anything bad happened to you lately?" What if he got suspicious and started asking questions of his own? It wasn't worth the risk.

I guess a person's life is full of stories, and some aren't always obvious to other people…

If that was the case, then she may as well chalk this one up as a loss. She'd used up all her Unhappy Ending Labels, but this wasn't the end. It just meant it was time to buy some more. She'd get a new batch tomorrow, to cheer her up after this last one turned out to be such a dud. Back to that strange old bookstore.

Oh, come to think of it…

Kirika suddenly remembered something. When she'd bought the first set of labels, she'd been given another label as a free gift. That one had been sitting in her desk drawer ever since; she'd totally forgotten about it. Why hadn't she used it along with the others? Because it was something different—a "Happy Ending Label."

No wonder I forgot about it. What am I supposed to do with something that can make any book have a happy ending? Boring.

Of course, now she knew the labels could change the stories of people's lives as well as books. Back at home, she took the label out of her drawer, and…

Peel, stick!

A moment later it had melted into her skin, the only trace of its existence being the words *Happy Ending* on the back of her hand. Now it would never come off.

"If any story's going to have a happy ending, it may as well be mine."

Gently stroking the words that had appeared on her hand, Kirika smiled.



The next day after school, Kirika took a detour on her way home to visit the used bookstore. She had her headphones in and was listening to an audio drama on her phone. It was an anthology thriller series she'd started listening to out of boredom but had gotten pretty into lately.

At the end of the day, though, it was still just fiction. It couldn't compare with the thrill of real life. Now that she knew what it was like to use the Unhappy Ending Labels to twist the life stories of people around her, made-up tales weren't nearly as stimulating. They just weren't enough for her anymore.

Weird how there aren't a lot of people around today... I could have sworn it wasn't this quiet last time I came here.

She wasn't so absorbed in the audio drama that she'd failed to notice, but the streets were practically deserted. That was weird.

Oh, is this because of the attack on that girl? They haven't caught the guy who did that yet. I guess everyone's scared they'll be next, huh?

The attacker who had messed up the track-and-field girl's leg hadn't been identified. He remained at large, still out there somewhere. People were frightened, and it showed in how empty the streets had become.

At least I know I'll *be okay. I've got a Happy Ending Label on me, after all. So long as that's there, my stories will have happy endings, and I'll never have to worry about a thing!*

Kirika looked down at the words on her hand again, cheered by the thought. She was almost at the bookstore now, and the audio drama was reaching its end, too.

Unfortunately, the ending left a lot to be desired. The story was about Serial, a mass murderer who came back from the dead to wreak havoc on unsuspecting victims. But at the very end, the person Serial had been about to kill turned the tables on him, sending him back to the underworld and returning peace to the town. A happy ending.

Urgh, how boring. They built Serial up as this unstoppable demon and then threw it all away. It would've been sooo much better if they only thought he was dead, and then bam! *Turns out he's still alive, and he begins terrorizing the town all over again. That'd be way more exciting. This ending makes the whole thing feel like a waste of time. This is why I hate happy endings…*

Kirika took out her headphones and sighed.

Huh…? Wait a minute…

Something had occurred to her. In the audio drama, the main character, Serial, had died. But the story itself had a happy ending. Why did the *story* have a happy ending and not the *character*?

Because Serial was a cold-blooded killer—a bad guy.

If such an irredeemable villain had been allowed to live and go on killing whoever he wanted, that would be an *un*happy ending, no question.

If the villain lived, it was an unhappy ending. If they died, it was a happy ending. That raised a new question—when the Unhappy Ending Labels worked their magic, they created unhappy endings…but unhappy for whom?

And what about…?

Kirika gazed down at where she'd stuck the Happy Ending Label on her hand.

That's when it happened.

A shadowy figure appeared and lunged at Kirika.

"…!"

She felt a sharp, burning pain in her stomach. She looked down to see what was wrong, and her eyes went wide with shock.

The figure was carrying a knife. He had slashed her with it; that was what was causing the pain.

Ugh… No… It can't…end like this…

Holding the wound on her stomach, Kirika crumpled to the ground. She wanted to scream, but her voice wouldn't come out. It just made a weak wheezing noise at the back of her throat.

She could feel the life draining from her body, but with one last effort she raised her head. Her attacker looked down at her with a twisted smile. She recognized him—he was the teacher she'd stuck the Unhappy Ending Label on.

He took a step closer and raised his knife. Kirika put her hands up in front of her face, but she knew it wouldn't do her any good now.

Her vision was fading. Everything was going dark.

The last thing Kirika ever saw was the words *Happy Ending*, still emblazoned on the back of her bloody hand.

Cut Here

Order Form

(Cut out and mail)

Order This Product	
Amount Needed	**Desired Delivery Date** __/__/____

Sample Product



Fortune Candy

On the edge of a little town on the coast lay a large, imposing mansion. Shinju was taking a stroll by the wall that ran along the outside of it when she saw a girl up ahead drop her wallet. The girl didn't seem to notice and kept walking, pulling her wheeled suitcase along behind her.

Shinju bent down to pick up the wallet. It was a large neon-pink coin purse with an interesting design. The metal parts on the top of the clasp were shaped like cute butterflies. It looked completely full, but when she picked it up, it barely weighed anything at all. Shinju looked at the other girl again and realized the hoodie she was wearing was the same shade of pink. She must have really liked bright colors.

"Excuse me!" Shinju called out. "You dropped something."

The girl immediately came to a stop. They were the only two people there, so she must have known Shinju was talking to her.

The girl turned around, walked over to Shinju, and took back her wallet. Then she gave her a warm, friendly smile.

"Thanks! That was very nice of you."

"Oh, no, it was nothing…"

Shinju returned the smile, although she had to admit, she was somewhat taken aback by this girl's appearance. The hood had hidden it from behind, but her hair was completely silver, every single strand. It seemed to reflect the neon pink of her jacket in the summer sunlight. Her outfit was so vibrant and full of life, it felt like the color was seeping into everything around it, even Shinju's lace shawl and parasol.

The girl was wearing an eye patch, too—pink, like her purse and her jacket, with a crossed-through heart symbol on it.

"Say…," the girl began with another smile, "since you brought this back to me, maybe I should give you something from inside it as a reward."

"O-oh, please, that's not necessary. I was only doing the right thing…"

Without meaning to, Shinju had started backing away. But the other girl took out her purse, the butterfly clasp snapping open, and showed Shinju what was inside.

"Oh…!"

The purse wasn't filled with money at all. It was packed with candy and chocolates, all wrapped in colorful paper.

“You thought this was a wallet, didn’t you? I actually use it as a candy bag!”

The girl laughed, and Shinju couldn’t help but chuckle, too. That explained why the purse was so much lighter than it looked.

“Go ahead, take some,” the girl said, holding out some candy before Shinju had the chance to reply.

The silver-haired girl handed her three candies in shiny yellow paper. Their wrappers were the same color, but the candies were different sizes: a small one, a medium-size one, and a large one.

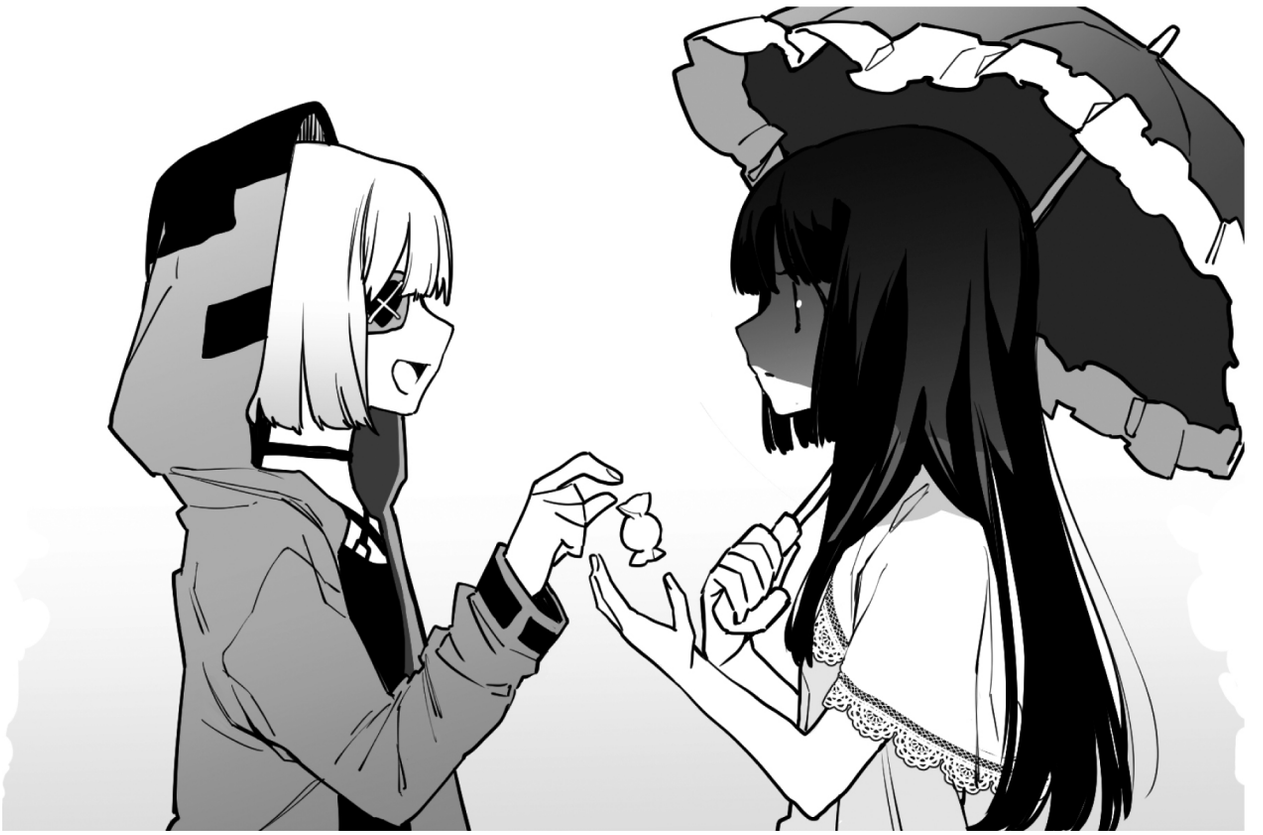
“…?”

Out of all the candies in that pouch, why had she picked out only yellow ones to give to her? Shinju looked at her new friend, confused.

“These ones in the yellow wrappers are called Fortune Candy,” the silver-haired girl said. “I figured they’d be the best way to say thank you.”

“I see…”

Shinju thanked the girl and took the candies. But her smile had changed. It was looking tighter now, more strained than before.



* * *

After parting ways with the girl in pink, Shinju looked at the candy curiously.

“Fortune Candy”? Does she know about what’s going on here? Is that why she gave me these?

That was the first thing that occurred to Shinju, but she dismissed the idea.

No, that can’t be it. I’m pretty sure she’s not from around here. There’s no way she could dress like that in a small town like this and not get noticed. She had a suitcase with her, too… She’s probably here on vacation or something.

Shinju nodded to herself, but then she thought of something else.

It looked like she was heading toward the cliffs. That area’s technically part of our estate…

Perhaps she should tell the girl that she was trespassing. Then again, it wasn’t fenced off or anything, so it was easy for people to wander in there by accident.

She looked the same age as me, maybe younger… She’s probably in junior high, or even elementary school. There’s really no need to give her trouble over a little thing like this.

Shinju sighed, opened the smallest of the candies she’d received, and popped it into her mouth. The sweetness was refreshing after walking around in this heat.

“Okay, I feel a little better now. I’d better get back to the treasure hunt!”



Shinju lived in the big mansion overlooking the sea. It had a large, sprawling garden, and the grounds expanded to a grove of trees, where a narrow path led to the coast.

All of it belonged to her family. The house, the grove, the cliffside path—the whole area had been part of her life ever since she was little. She had so many precious memories of these places…and now she was in danger of losing them forever.

Despite their apparent wealth, Shinju's family had a huge debt hanging over them. And the final deadline to pay it back was at the end of this month. Shinju was only a young girl, but even she knew what would happen if they couldn't pay. If they couldn't get the money they needed in time, they'd be forced to sell their house and land to make up the difference. The house she'd lived in her entire life, the garden and the grove where she'd played for countless hours…it would all be gone.

I can't let that happen! I don't want someone else to take our house… Then I'll never see any of these places again…

The way she saw it, it was her job to protect her home. And for that, she needed money. Enough money to pay their remaining debt and keep the house and the land in the family. Getting that much cash wouldn't be easy, of course. Most adults would struggle to gather it in such a short time, so for Shinju, it was almost impossible. Almost.

As luck would have it, her family already had a way to pay their debt without selling the house. Several years ago, her grandfather had passed away, and to this day, his priceless collection of jewels still hadn't been found.

When the end was drawing near, he'd gathered the family together and explained this part of his inheritance.

"My gem collection is hidden somewhere here on the Misaki estate. I hid it in a special place only I know about. I thought it might be useful for you to have around if the family is ever in trouble. But it will not be easy to find its hiding place. If you really want it, you will have to work together. You won't find it by squabbling or fighting among yourselves. If you do that, you'll lose sight of what you really need to protect. Do not forget this. My only wish is for all of you to live happy lives after I am gone…"

Grandfather's gem collection… Mother and the other adults said it was worth more than enough to pay off our debt. I just have to find it!

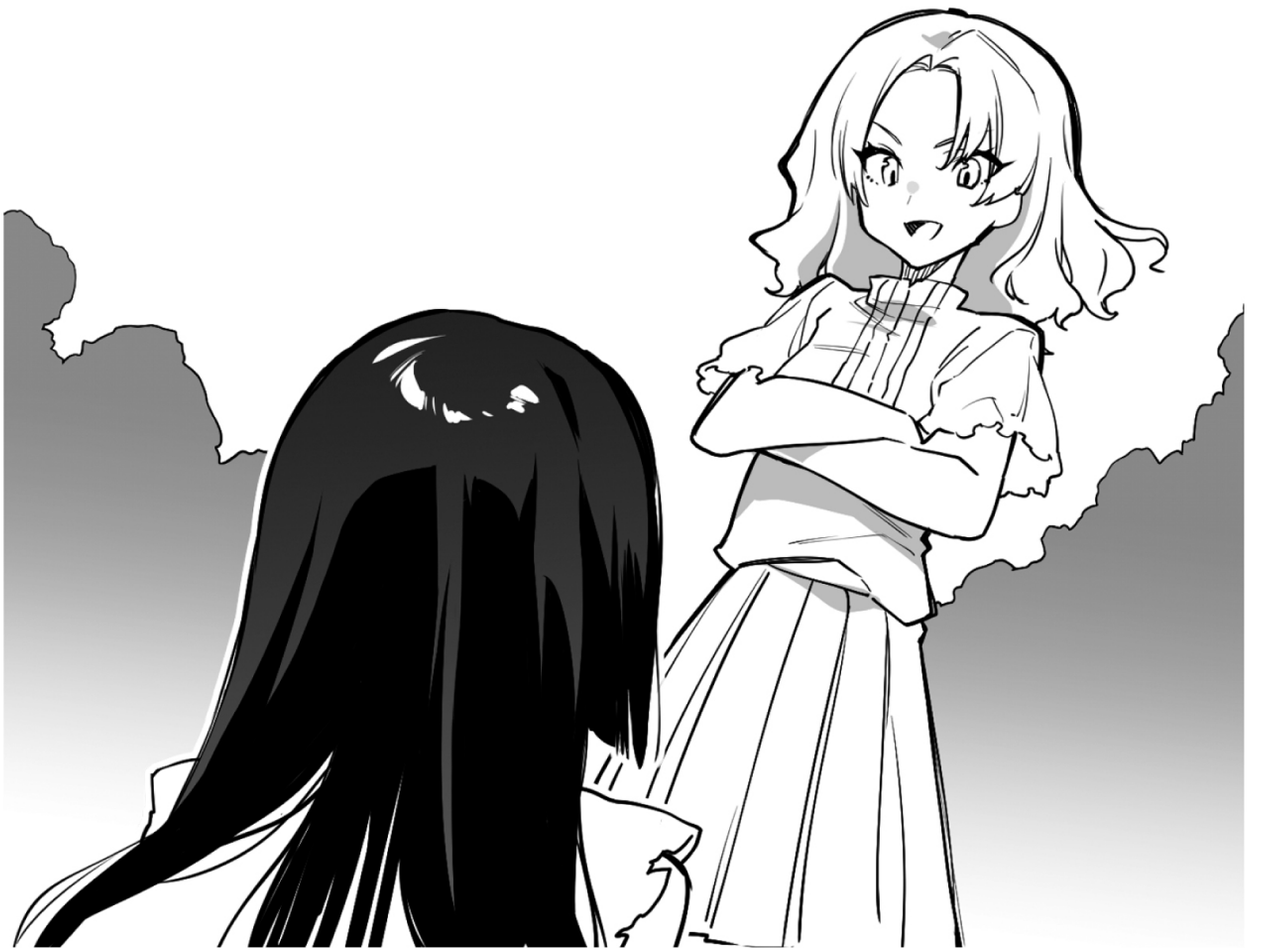
Following her encounter with the silver-haired girl, Shinju headed back to the mansion and began searching for the treasure. She crawled through the grass on her hands and knees, looking for anything that might give her a clue to its whereabouts.

I'll find the Misaki treasure… I have to. I definitely won't let her *get to it first!*

That sentiment was what had kept Shinju going for so long. She'd spent every day of her summer vacation searching for the treasure, from morning till night. She couldn't search a garden this large in just one day, but there were only a few parts of it she hadn't checked yet. This was the last corner she and her parents still needed to investigate. Could there be a secret underground room here? Or signs that the ground had been disturbed? Maybe an old well nobody knew about? *Anywhere* that might make a good hiding place?

Mother and Father are away on business until the end of the week. I need to work extra hard while they're gone and find this treasure.

The sun was starting to go down, bathing the garden in a golden evening light, and Shinju still hadn't found anything. Her dress was covered in grass and leaves and burrs, and she was getting sweaty. She stared down at a patch of earth at her feet, and a new bead of sweat trickled down her forehead. She wiped it away with her hands, which were equally covered in mud and grass.



Just then, she realized she wasn't alone. She could feel someone watching her. With a gasp, she looked up to see a face she knew all too well. A face she would have preferred not to see right now.

"Oh, if it isn't Shinju. You're looking *here*? I already checked out this place weeks ago, you know. You're just wasting your time."

"Sango…!"

Shinju scrambled to her feet so she could be on the same eye level as the girl who'd just appeared. No way was she letting *Sango* look down on her!

Shinju brushed off her dress and snorted, trying to act calm.

"Do you think I'll believe anything you say at this point? For all I know, you could be saying that to get me away from here so *you* can check it later."

"You wound me, dear Shinju," Sango said, answering the accusation with a snide smile. "I'd never use such cowardly tactics. Unlike you, I have a little something called honor."

Sango was the same age as Shinju and also resided in the Misaki mansion. The two of them had lived in the same house all their lives, but they weren't sisters. Their grandfather had two children—a son and a daughter. When each of them got married, they and their spouses had both come back to live on the family estate. The daughter and her husband were Shinju's parents, while the son and his wife were Sango's. In other words, the two girls were cousins.

"If you've really searched this place already, you've got no reason to be here, have you? How about you leave now, Sango?"

"Oh dear, I was only trying to save you the trouble, you know. I was just thinking about how overgrown the grass had gotten, and that's when I saw you. And I thought, if you keep crawling around like a cockroach and get bitten by a snake or something, it'd serve you right. Although I have to admit, it's not a bad look on you."

Sango gave her cousin another sneering grimace. Shinju gritted her teeth and forced herself to smile.

"How nice of you to come and warn me anyway. I'd never come to a spot like this if I wasn't looking for the treasure. I had no idea there were snakes here. You really must have been here before, just like you said. Were you 'crawling around like a cockroach,' too? I'm sure it's a look you'd pull off much better than me."

Sango's eyebrow twitched in irritation. For a moment, the two girls just stared at each other silently.

Shinju and her parents, Sango and her parents—both sides of the family were looking for the treasure. Whichever of them found it would assume their grandfather's place as rightful heads of the family. That was a condition they'd worked out among themselves, completely separate from the issue of their debt.

Which of them would become the *real* owners of this mansion? It was an important question. Whichever side won was bound to throw the other side out as their first order of business. The sibling rivalry between Shinju's mother and Sango's father had always been fierce. They'd always been at each other's throats, ever since the girls could remember. And they'd passed that animosity on to their children.

But all that would change once Shinju found the treasure. Then she'd finally be able to get rid of her hated rival once and for all.

"Still, though… What was Grandfather thinking, hiding the best part of his inheritance like this?" Sango broke off the staring contest first and shook her head, sighing exasperatedly. "If neither of us finds the treasure, both of our families will lose this estate. At least if that happens, I'll never have to see you again, so I guess it's not all bad."

"Hmph. If you hate seeing me so much, why don't you and your parents pack up and leave right now? Just leave saving the estate to me and *my* family."

"Don't be absurd. I haven't given up on the treasure. I'm speaking purely hypothetically. And anyway, wouldn't it save you a lot of trouble to have your things packed and ready to go? You'll have to leave soon anyway. We'll provide you with all the boxes and packing tape you need, to make the move as easy on you as possible."

"Now who's being absurd? You won't be able to keep looking down your nose at me for long. What are you going to do when *you* have to leave? A loser needs to act like a loser. You should probably start practicing sniveling and crying right now."

The insults and fierce glares continued to fly back and forth. It always turned out like this whenever these two spent any time together. Studying, sports, games, etiquette lessons—they had to

turn everything into a competition. Whenever one of them gained the upper hand, the other was bound to pay her back before very long. Each of them had an equal number of crowning victories and bitter defeats.

This time is going to be different… There is no way I'm losing this time! thought Shinju.

Sango had already walked away, but Shinju wanted to beat her more than ever. The sweat on her forehead glistened in the evening sun. She reached up to wipe it away and noticed there was something strange on one of her fingers. Something small and shiny.

"What's this…?"

She looked closer. The shine was coming from some metallic-looking balls stuck on the end of her right pointer fingernail. They glimmered in the light, showing different colors from different angles. It was like someone had taken an aurora and squeezed it down into tiny beads. They could easily be mistaken for some kind of fancy nail art. She tried to brush them off, but they were stuck on tight and wouldn't move.

"They must have gotten stuck on me while I was searching through the grass. I wonder what they are," Shinju said. "Well, they're pretty enough, and I'm sure they'll fall off eventually."

She didn't give them another thought after that. She collected her shawl from where she'd left it hanging on a tree and went back inside.



The next morning, Shinju stepped out the door ready for another day of treasure hunting. She'd already searched the mansion itself from corner to corner. Her grandfather's treasure had to be somewhere outside. She was sure of it.

The only clue he gave us about its hiding place is that it's "somewhere on the Misaki estate."

If it wasn't in the house itself, it must have been in the garden, or the grove, or somewhere along the coastal path. The Misaki estate was such a large area; her grandfather's hint barely

qualified as a clue. But she couldn't give up. She had to keep trying.

Now, where shall I look today? Of the places my family and I haven't checked yet… Perhaps the wooded path on the west side? I'll have to walk around the mansion to get there, so I'd better get started.

Having decided on her destination, she set off with renewed determination. But just then…

"Excuse me, young lady."

She heard a voice from behind her.

Shinju turned around to see a man in a black suit standing there. He seemed polite and was well dressed, but Shinju knew better than to talk to strange men. She was immediately cautious.

"Do you need something from me?" she asked him.

"Oh, yes, well… Allow me to be frank. May I take a closer look at your fingers? Specifically, at those little shiny things on the end of that fingernail…"

Shinju looked down at her hands. The strange balls from yesterday were still there. She'd tried to wash them off several times, but they just wouldn't budge. They still looked pretty, though, sitting there on the end of her nail, reflecting the light around her. Maybe this man had seen them glinting from far off and come to ask what they were.

That didn't make a lot of sense to Shinju, though. Technically, these weren't nail art, but there were plenty of people out there who wore things like this on their nails. Was it really such an unusual sight?

Still feeling a little confused, she held out her right hand to the man. He stepped closer and looked intently at the end of her pointer finger. Then his eyes widened, and he let out a cry of surprise.

"I knew it! These are the eggs of the rare Chinese Lantern Rainbow Bug! To collectors like me, these are considered a very valuable find."

Shinju was taken aback. Valuable? These things? But they'd just gotten stuck on her at random… The man in the suit seemed serious, though.

"I wonder if you would allow me to have them, young lady? Naturally, I don't expect you to just *give* them to me. I'd be happy

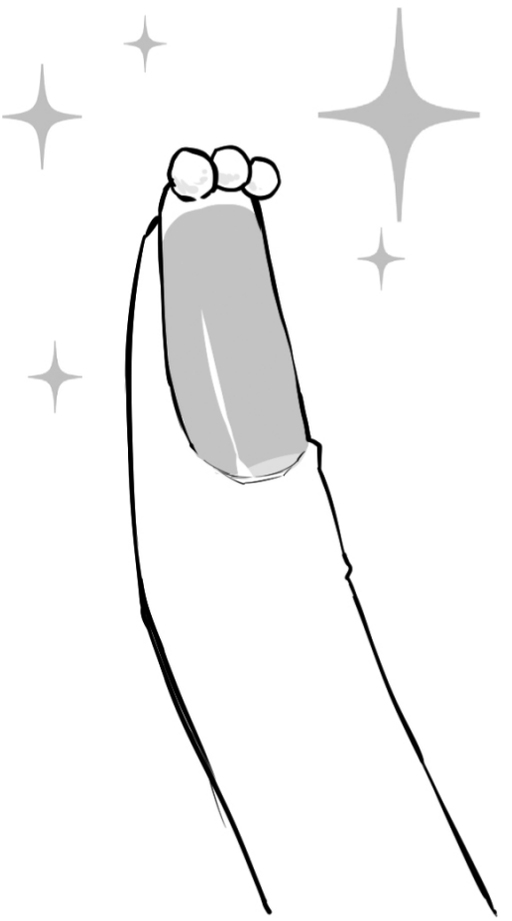
to offer you some appropriate recompense…”

He opened the bag he was carrying, took something out, and handed it to her. It was a stack of bills. She almost swooned at how much money there was, but then she remembered her problem.

“I’d like to, but…I can’t get these off my nail.”

The man simply smiled back at her. “Oh, that’s no problem at all. If they won’t come off, you’ll just have to remove the part of the nail they’re attached to.”

Shinju nodded. That made sense. These “eggs” were really only on the very tip of her fingernail. Cutting that off was no big deal. She ran back inside to get a pair of nail clippers, clipped off the end of her nail, and gave it—along with the Chinese Lantern Rainbow Bug eggs—to the man in exchange for his money.





“I don’t believe it…”

Back in her room, the door locked behind her, Shinju let out a sigh of amazement. She’d examined the money the man in the suit had given her, and it was definitely real.

“It’s just a drop in the ocean compared with what we have to pay, but I can’t believe I got so much all at once.”

And she hadn’t even had to work for it—she just sold some bug eggs that happened to get stuck on her. It was a real stroke of good fortune.

That thought reminded Shinju of something.

Fortune…?

“Could it be…?”

She remembered now. The day the bug eggs got stuck on her nail, she’d eaten a piece of candy. The Fortune Candy in the yellow wrapper that the girl in the pink jacket had given her.

“Could this have been…because of that candy?”

Of course, the whole idea was ridiculous. But the timing was a little too convenient to write it off as a coincidence. Shinju gulped and looked at the glass jar on her desk where she’d put the remaining two candies. She opened it and tipped one out—the medium-size one.

“Maybe I’ll eat this before I go out tomorrow. Then I’ll know for sure whether this money was just a coincidence.”

She gazed at the shiny yellow wrapper and felt her heart beat faster.



The next day, just as she’d planned, Shinju ate the medium-size Fortune Candy and headed out in search of the family treasure. With all the excitement yesterday, she hadn’t gotten a lot done, so she had to make up for lost time. She set off for the grove on the western side of the estate. Today, she’d search it for real.

Unfortunately, by the time the sun started going down, she still hadn't found a single clue.

"Yesterday *was* just a coincidence… Clearly, this candy doesn't do a thing…"

She sighed, trudging back to the house. But then she heard the same voice behind her that she'd heard the day before.

"Excuse me, young lady."

Shinju spun around to see the man in the black suit standing there.

"Ah, the young lady from yesterday. I thought it was you. We meet again."

"Wh-what do you want? You haven't come to take the money back, have you?"

"Oh, no. Of course not. I have something else in mind today. Would you be so kind as to turn around so I can take a better look at your hair?"

"Huh…?"

Feeling a little foolish, Shinju turned around, letting her long black hair fall down her back. She heard the man gasp, just like he'd done yesterday.

"I knew it! That shimmering lacy substance tangled in your hair… It's the web of the rare Silver Spider! To collectors like me, it's considered an incredibly valuable find."

Shinju was more surprised than ever. She hadn't even noticed there was anything in her hair. She'd brushed her hair before leaving the house, so it must have gotten there while she was searching the grove.

"I wonder if you would allow me to have this, young lady?"

"O-of course…"

She nodded, hoping to get a reward similar to the one he'd given her for the bug eggs.

The man smiled. "Thank you so much. However…this web is very delicate. If we take it out of your hair, it will surely crumble and lose its beautiful shape, along with its value. I wonder, young lady, if you would cut off that lock of hair and sell it to me, web and all?"

"What…?"

She hadn't been expecting that. What should she do? Cutting off the tip of a fingernail was one thing, but her hair?

The man noticed her hesitating and said, “Naturally, I’d be happy to offer you an appropriate reward…”

He opened the briefcase he was carrying and showed her the contents. It was full of money, all in neatly stacked bills. That was all Shinju needed to make up her mind.



It's not enough to pay off our debt, but for money like this, I don't mind getting a haircut.

Gulping in anticipation, she ran back indoors to get a pair of scissors. She cut her hair and gave the rest of it—along with the Silver Spider's Web—to the man in exchange for his briefcase of money.

Back in the mansion, Shinju ran into Sango on the way to her room. Sango glanced at Shinju and gasped. Of course she did. Her cousin's hair had still been long the last time she saw her. Now it was barely down to her shoulders.

"Shinju, what…what happened to your hair? And what's with that briefcase?"

Sango looked genuinely worried, but Shinju ignored her. It was none of her business anyway. When her parents came home, she'd tell them how she got this money, including the stack from yesterday. But she had no reason to tell Sango or her parents anything.

I wouldn't want them finding out about the Fortune Candy…

Shinju brushed off Sango's questions, returned to her room, and locked the door behind her.



Shinju ate a piece of Fortune Candy the next morning as well. The third and final piece. The small candy had gotten her a stack of bills, and the medium-size one had gotten her a briefcase full of money. What about this one? What kind of "fortune" would the biggest of the three bring her?

Maybe I'll finally find the treasure today. Or something just as valuable. Valuable enough for us to pay off all our debt. Then even Sango will have to think twice about me…

She set off for the cliffside path on the other side of the western grove. By the middle of the day, she still hadn't found any trace of the treasure and decided to take a break. She sat in the shadow of a tall rock, listening to the waves and gazing out at the sea. The ocean breeze helped to dry her sweaty skin.

Suddenly, a blinding flash of light passed in front of her.

“Wh-what…?!” Shinju instinctively closed her eyes to shield them from the light, but it didn’t work. “Urgh… It’s so bright…!”

Closing her eyes didn’t make any difference. It was almost like there was a shining, shimmering light *behind* her eyelids. She opened her eyes again, but nothing changed. Every time she blinked, the light flickered, but it never stopped.

“What in the world…?”

She couldn’t look for the treasure like this. Unsteadily, she got to her feet and began walking, slowly and carefully so she wouldn’t trip. Whatever this was, she should probably head back for now.

If it doesn’t go away on its own, I might have to go to the hospital…

Shinju stumbled along, fighting against this unnaturally bright light, until she was out of the grove. Finally, she was back on the path that led to the mansion. Now she just had to follow the wall until she got to the front gate. But then a familiar voice called out to her.

“Ah, excuse me, young lady.”

She didn’t have to turn around today. The man in the black suit was standing right in front of her. The light in her eyes was so bright she hadn’t even noticed him until he spoke. She blinked, the shining, shimmering light flickering as she did so.

“Oh my…” The man gasped. “I knew it! That is the shine of the rare Sparkle Firefly.”

“Sparkle…Firefly…?” Shinju repeated, still screwing up her eyes against the light.

“Indeed. As the name implies, the light they give off is bright and beautiful. It seems they have taken up residence behind your eyes.”

“I—I see… I don’t suppose these Sparkle Fireflies are considered valuable finds to collectors like you, are they?”

“They are indeed! They’re like living bursts of light without a physical body. That makes them incredibly difficult to capture, and all the more precious when we do find any. Some say the Sparkle Fireflies live on the sparkle of precious gemstones… Looking at them now, I can certainly believe it.”

The man in black stared at the light streaming out of Shinju's face, fascinated.

"I wonder if you would allow me to have them, young lady? For specimens like these, you can name your price. I'm willing to pay as much as you want."

Shinju's eyes went wide with shock, letting even more light out. As much as she wanted?! By now, she knew that wasn't an offer this man would make lightly.

He's obviously very rich… He might even be able to pay off our family's debt all at once.

Even without finding her grandfather's treasure, if she got the family out of its financial trouble, her position would be secure. Not even Sango could touch her!

And if he can get rid of this light, all the better!

Shinju opened her eyes, enduring the pain of the light to look up at the man.

"That sounds wonderful. I'll gladly give these fireflies to you."

"Oh, thank you! Thank you so very much, young lady." The man gave a delighted smile and bowed low as a formal show of gratitude.

"You're welcome… Now, can you get them out of my eyes, please?"

She squinted to make looking at him easier. But the man in black came out with another unexpected comment.

"Ah yes, about that… I'm afraid there is no known way to remove the Sparkle Fireflies once they settle behind a person's eyes."

"Wh-what? But you said—"

"Don't worry, young lady. I have a plan." The man smiled at her the same way he had before. "I will simply cut off your head and take it, fireflies and all."

"…What?"

Shinju froze. He couldn't be serious, could he? But it seemed he was.

"Not to worry; I am a man of honor. I will gladly pay your desired price to whatever remains of you afterward."

He was insane.

But there was a pattern here. The small Fortune Candy allowed Shinju to gain a stack of bills at the cost of her fingernail. The medium-size one earned her a briefcase of money at the cost of her hair. And now the large one was going to get her as much money as she wanted…at the cost of her head. Was *that* what this had all been leading up to?

Too terrified to speak, Shinju shook her head and began backing away from the man. But her back was against a wall—the high stone wall that surrounded the mansion. There was nowhere to run. If only this light weren't here, she could climb up the wall and escape into the garden. It was high, but she'd been climbing it ever since she was little. She and Sango used to race to see who could get to the top first… Why was she thinking about her cousin now, at a time like this?

Through the blinding light, she saw the man in black getting closer. Still wearing his placid smile, he reached out toward her… when a stone flew down from above and hit him on the top of the head.

He stopped and looked up. This time, a large shadow descended from atop the wall. It was Sango.

She jumped down, kicking the strange man right in the face with all her might, sending him backward and onto the ground. Sango fell, too, but she was back on her feet a few seconds later.

"Come on, Shinju. Run!" she yelled.

Without waiting for a reply, Sango grabbed Shinju's hand. Barely understanding what was going on, Shinju followed her cousin's lead and ran. Behind them, the man in the suit was getting up, holding his face where it had been kicked.

"We'll head into the grove for now," said Sango. "The front gate's too far away, and the path's too exposed. At least with all those trees, we can find somewhere to hide."

"Sango… Why…?"

"You were acting weird yesterday, so I followed you today. Also, 'why'? That's *my* line! Why would you get involved with a creep like that, Shinju? What's going on here?"

They had reached the grove now, but the man in black was still behind them. The light behind Shinju's eyes hadn't gone away, either, but with Sango guiding her, she was able to get by.

As they ran, Shinju explained the events of the last few days. When she was done, Sango heaved one of her trademark exasperated sighs.

"'Fortune Candy,' huh? You really *were* using cowardly tactics to try to get rid of me…"

"Urk…"

"Honestly, you're so hopeless. You let your greed blind you to the danger, and you dug your own grave. You dummy!"

"…"

There really was nothing Shinju could say to all that. Sango was right—it was Shinju's own fault she was in this mess. So why had her cousin stepped in to save her?

"Sango… You want me out of the mansion, right? Why didn't you just abandon me? If that man had caught me, you'd never have to worry about me again."

Sango thought for a moment before answering, "If it were the other way around…would you have abandoned me?"

Suddenly, it all fell into place. Shinju and Sango had been fighting and competing for as long as either of them could remember. But they still lived in the same house and saw each other every day, no matter how annoying they found it. Shinju had believed getting rid of Sango would make her feel better, but now…

How would it actually feel, to have someone she'd known all her life suddenly disappear? To lose that constant presence she'd gotten so used to? She'd never thought about it that way before, but now that she did, she could see where Sango was coming from, and why she'd saved her.

"That guy just won't give up…," Sango muttered, leading Shinju farther into the grove.

Glancing behind them, the girls could see the man through the gaps between trees. He was stumbling through the undergrowth, but he was definitely getting closer.

"This doesn't look good, Sango. We're headed for the cliff. It's a dead end. What are we going to do?"

"Good question…"

In their desperation to find a place where the man couldn't follow them, they'd ended up on the path to the cliff. Beyond that, there was nothing but a sheer drop to the ocean, dozens of feet

below. But with the man in black behind them, it was too dangerous to try heading back through the grove.

"Sango… If it's come to this, we'll have to escape into the sea!"

"The sea?! What are you…?"

When Sango saw the look on Shinju's face, her voice trailed off, and she nodded.

When the man in the black suit emerged from the grove and onto the cliff path, the two girls weren't there. They had left their shoes and shawls behind, though.

He checked around the large rocks nearby, but they weren't there either. When he'd come out of the grove, he'd heard a loud splash, as if something had fallen into the water below. The girls must have dived off the cliff.

"You can't get away from me that easily. I *will* have those Sparkle Fireflies…!"

The crazed collector threw off his suit jacket, leaving it near the girls' shoes, and leaped off the cliff himself.

In a spot not too far away, Sango and Shinju heard a splash, and they climbed up onto the rock they'd been hiding behind.

"It went just like we planned," Shinju said, blowing seawater out of her nose. "He jumped off on the right side."

"Heh-heh… For a grown-up, he was pretty easy to fool." Sango slicked back her wet hair and snickered.

Diving off the cliff from the left side, where the current was weaker, made it easy enough to swim to these rocks. On the right side, however, the current was strong, and there was an intense whirlpool. If you got caught in that, it was impossible to get out, no matter how good a swimmer you were. You'd get spun around and eventually tossed out by a cliff several miles away. Shinju and Sango had heard this from their grandfather.

He'd always told them to be careful, and to dive in only from the left side. But they'd left their shoes and shawls by the right side of the cliff to make it look like that was where they were last. The man in black had taken the bait and leaped into the water from that side, too.

“Haaah… I was so scared!” Shinju moaned.

“I can’t believe I went through all this for you, seriously…”

Toward the end of the rocky area they’d swum to was a cave. They were sitting there now, getting some rest to recover from their ordeal.

After a while, they stopped talking and just laughed. While they were doing that, Shinju felt a warm feeling brimming in her chest. It spread into her throat and then her nose, and finally it came spilling out of her eyes like tears—sparkling tears that shone with a bright light all their own.

“Oh…!”

Shinju slowly opened her eyes. She blinked several times. The blinding light was finally gone. The Sparkle Fireflies she’d cried out were now floating in the air. They seemed to combine into one dazzling light and flew toward the back of the cave, illuminating a hollow that the girls hadn’t noticed before. Shinju and Sango inched closer, guided by the glimmering light.

Inside the hollow were several boxes. The fireflies fluttered around in front of one, their light shining brighter, as if they were telling the girls to open it.

Shinju and Sango reached out and lifted the lid. The fireflies shone even brighter than before.

“…!”

It was so bright that the girls had to shield their eyes, but the next moment they opened them wide in surprise.

The box was full of jewels. The fireflies buzzed around the stones, seeming to pick up the light that glinted off them and adding it to their own.

Shinju suddenly remembered what the man in black had said: “*Some say the Sparkle Fireflies live on the sparkle of precious gemstones.*”

“Shinju, is this what I think it is?”

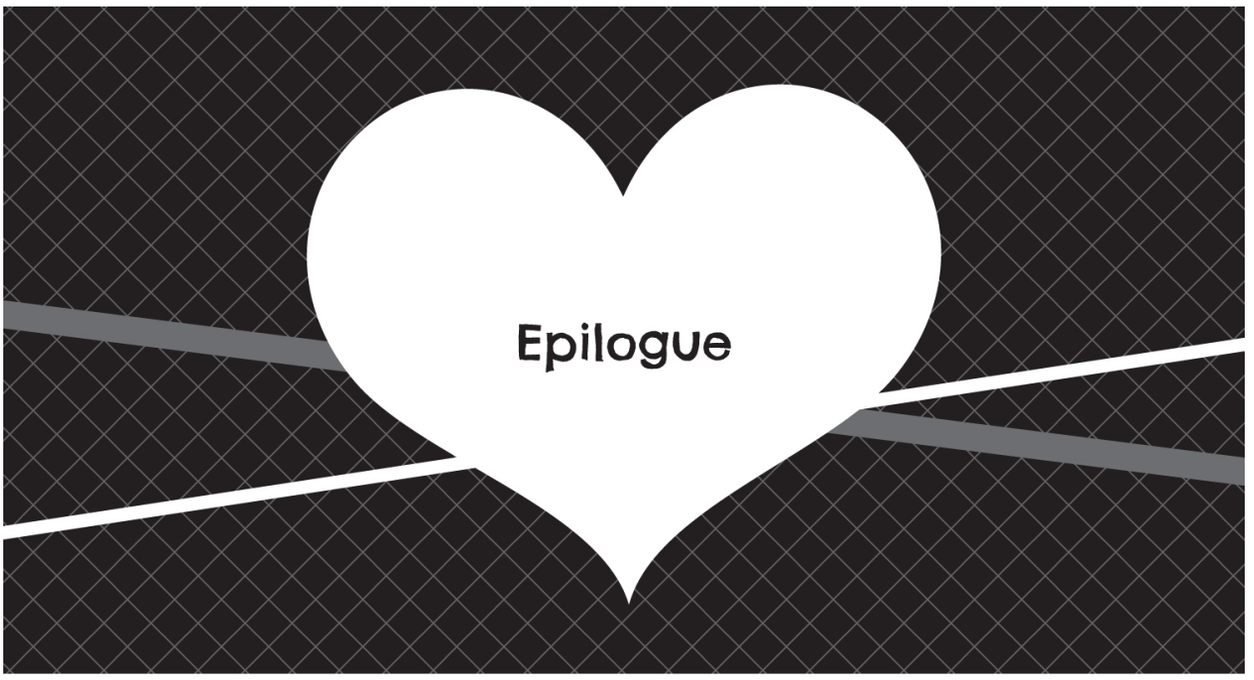


“You might be right…”

Sango pointed to the inside of the lid. Shinju nodded. There was no mistaking it: That was their grandfather’s signature.

For a moment, they just stood there, staring at the jewels and the signature. Then they looked at each other and smiled the biggest smiles of their lives. They squealed wordlessly and hugged each other tightly.

The fireflies, meanwhile, finished their “meal” and fluttered out of the cave. They flew off toward the horizon, their sparkling, gleaming light glittering off the waves until they were finally out of sight.



“Urrrgh…! I was so close this time…!”

A few days after Nozome had met Shinju, the story of the Fortune Candy finally appeared in the catalog. When she read it, she groaned, her shoulders slumped in defeat.

“Not only did the sample product *not* lead her to despair, it actually gave her more hope than ever… Ugh, what a waste! We’re not here to *help* people. We’re demons, not gods, for cryin’ out loud! Talk about frustrating, am I right?!”

She turned to her partner Nieno for backup, but he didn’t say a word. While they’d been reading the Fortune Candy story, he seemed to have gotten more and more uncomfortable and kept fidgeting with his scarf.

Nozome sighed and put the catalog back in her bag. Another catalog with crossed-heart Despair Marks next to every item on the contents page, except for the sample product.

“Urgh… Why does it always turn out like this? I swear, things’ll be different next time! When the next catalog comes out, I’ll get a full set of Despair Marks and claim my reward!” Nozome clenched her fists in determination and turned to Nieno again. “That means I’ll be counting on you to help out, too, partner.”

“Of course, I’ll do the best I can, but…”

He finally turned his face toward her. Not that there was much of a face to see behind the hat and scarf obscuring it.

“Tell me, Nozome… What kind of reward are you hoping to claim, exactly?”

“Hmm…” Nozome looked away, hesitating over what to say next. “It’s a secret!”

“Really? Even from me, your own partner? I’m the one helping you get these Despair Marks; don’t you think I have a right to know?”

“Hmm, I guess that’s fair. In that case…”

Nozome smiled mischievously. She moved toward Nieno and, in one swift motion, reached out and pulled off his hat and scarf.

“Argh! N-Nozome…!”

“Heh-heh!”

She stuck her tongue out at her flustered partner.

Now that the hat and scarf were gone, Nieno’s secret was exposed. Above his neck, there was…nothing. Just a blank, shadowy space where his head should have been. It was vaguely head-shaped, but otherwise completely featureless. The shadow seemed fixed in place, as if it were sewn onto the rest of his body with invisible threads.

“If *you* tell me why you have a shadow for a head, I’ll tell you what reward I want to get! A secret for a secret,” said Nozome.

Now it was Nieno’s turn to sigh. Sometimes he just couldn’t win.

Two shadows stretched out along a narrow alleyway in the twilight.

Two shadows, walking side by side…and only one of them had a head.

Upcoming Products

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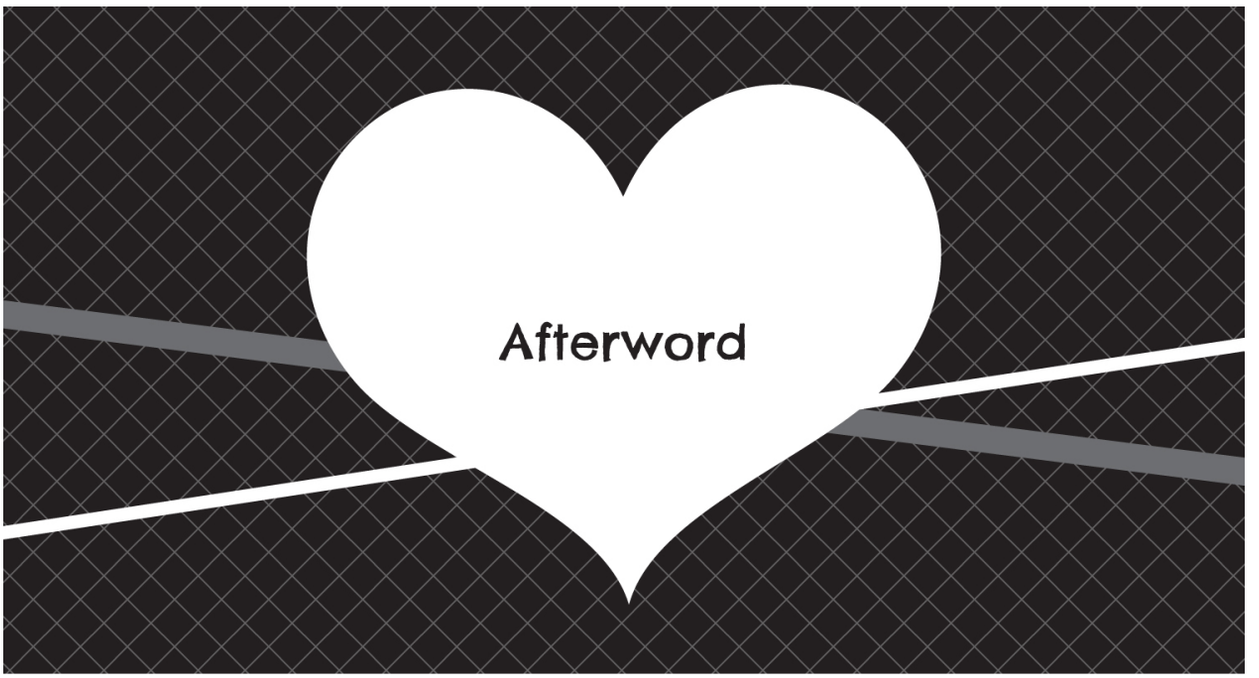
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FIND OUT IN VOLUME 3!



Thank you for picking up Volume 2 of *Catalog of Wonders*! Including the sample product, this volume had six strange and mysterious items for the Inhumans to sell. How did you like them? You can share which was your favorite by writing to me, or via the publisher's website! Thank you to everyone who wrote in or left comments on the publisher's site and my site to tell me what you thought of Volume 1!

◆·◆ Now, let's hear Nozome's and Nieno's thoughts on the stories from this book. ◆·◆

Perfect Prize Postcards

Nozome: This is a prime example of how knowing too much about the future can be a bad thing.

Nieno: I wonder if that girl will ever check how many days she has left. Perhaps not now, but she may be tempted once she gets older and opens the last box…

Road Seeds

Nieno: I know I'm the one who sold him the seeds, but I actually feel quite sorry for that boy…

Nozome: I guess. Maybe when he finally finds his way out of that labyrinth, he'll have his prayers answered by more benevolent folks than us.

Nieno: Perhaps he wouldn’t need to call on gods or demons if the people around him had only given him the help he needed…

Synonym Bugs

Nozome: Pretty bold of you to set up shop in a place like that, Nieno.

Nieno: At least the library had plenty of manga for me to read while I was waiting for customers.

Memory Absorb Paper

Nozome: If she’d read the warning before eating that last piece, we might have been in trouble. I was so nervous!

Nieno: That girl has guts. I think she’ll be able to get by in this world somehow…

Unhappy Ending Labels

Nozome: Did you ever wonder what would happen if we used one of those labels on *us*?

Nieno: No, and I’m not interested in trying. A happy or unhappy ending, labeling or being labeled… None of those things appeal to me.

Chizutokouro

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