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HORROR COLLECTOR
2
The Cursed Game of Tag

HORROR COLLECTOR

2 The Cursed Game of Tag

Midori Sato and Norio Tsuruta

Illustration by
Yon

New York

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Cover art by Yon

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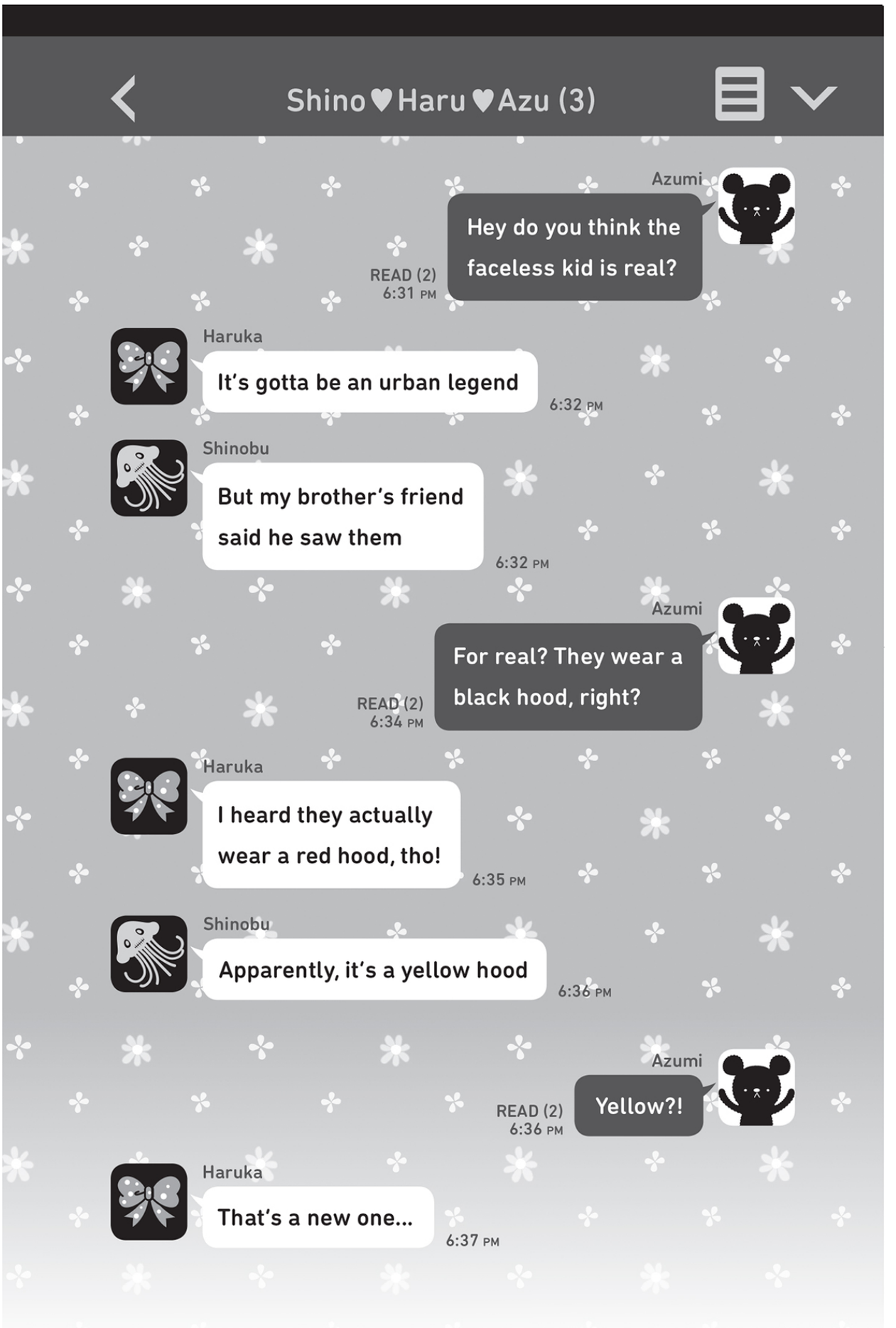
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Shino♥Haru♥Azu (3)
Azumi
Hey do you think the faceless kid is real?
READ (2)
6:31 PM
Haruka
It's gotta be an urban legend
6:32 PM
Shinobu
But my brother's friend said he saw them
6:32 PM
Azumi
For real? They wear a black hood, right?
READ (2)
6:34 PM
Haruka
I heard they actually wear a red hood, tho!
6:35 PM
Shinobu
Apparently, it's a yellow hood
6:36 PM
Azumi
Yellow?!
READ (2)
6:36 PM
Haruka
That's a new one...
6:37 PM

Shinobu

There's more than one faceless kid. Supposedly, they're playing tag with each other

6:39 PM

Haruka

Tag?

6:39 PM

Shinobu

Yeah. But it's not regular tag

6:40 PM

Azumi

READ (2)
6:40 PM

How's it different?

Shinobu

If they get caught by whoever's it...they die!

6:41 PM

Azumi

READ (2)
6:41 PM

Whaaat?!

Haruka



6:41 PM

Shinobu

And they say...the faceless kids have been playing their cursed game of tag for decades

6:42 PM

CONTENTS

Cover

Title Page

Copyright

First Town — **THE CHARLIE-CHARLIE CHALLENGE**

Second Town — **MS. HIKIKO**

Third Town — **DEATH BLOG**

Fourth Town — **CURSED CLOUDS**

Fifth Town — **THE RUNNING MAN**

Sixth Town — **THE GOLDEN PAY PHONE**

Afterword by Midori Sato

Afterword by Norio Tsuruta

Yen Newsletter

CONTENTS

First Town — The Charlie-Charlie Challenge

Second Town — Ms. Hikiko

Third Town — Death Blog

Fourth Town — Cursed Clouds

Fifth Town — The Running Man

Sixth Town — The Golden Pay Phone

Afterword by Midori Sato

Afterword by Norio Tsuruta

CHARACTER INTROS



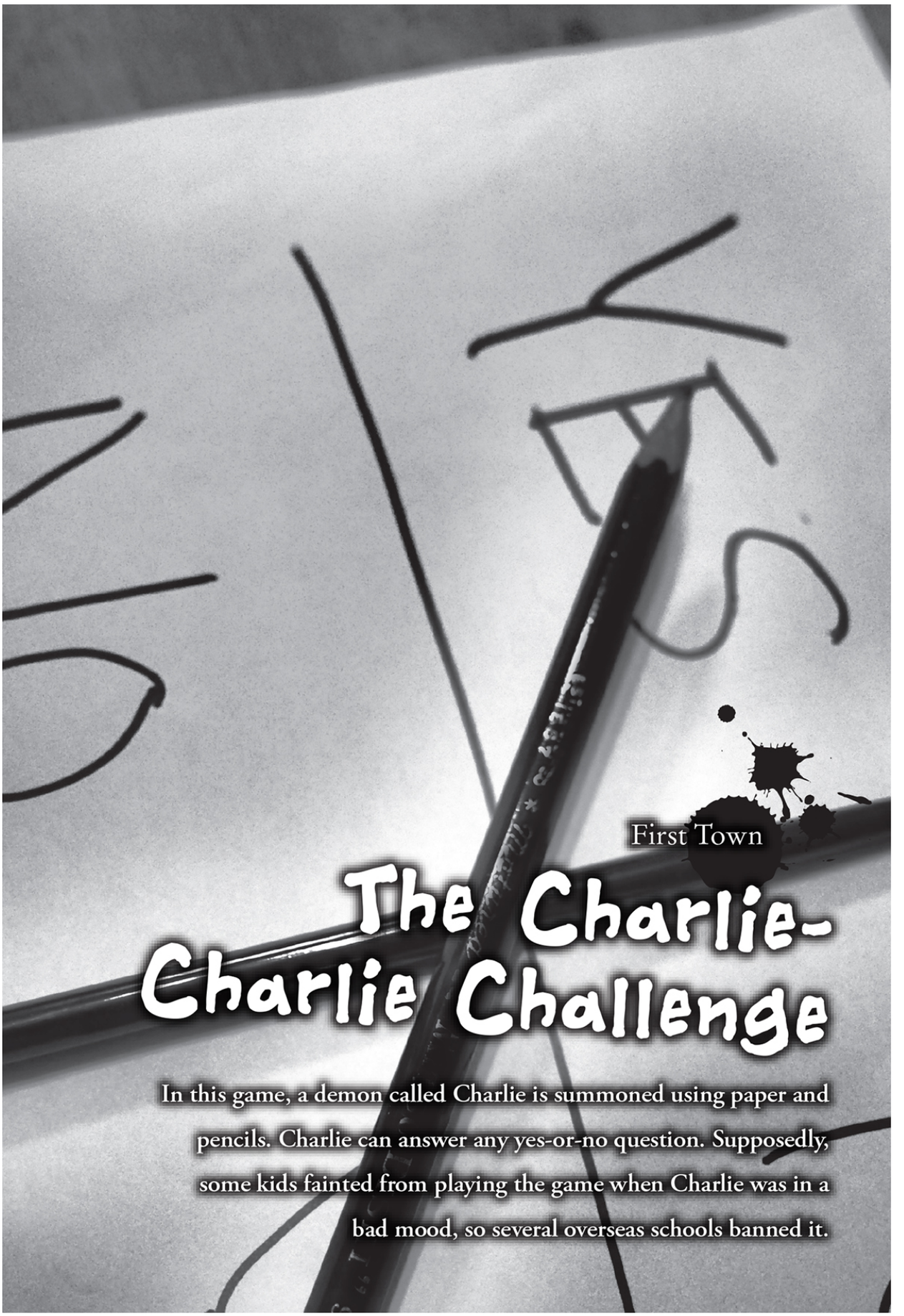
Fushigi Senno

A mysterious boy who travels from town to town chasing after urban legends. He wears a red hood.



Himitsu Senno

Fushigi's younger twin sister. She has the power to make urban legends real. She wears a black hood.



First Town

The Charlie-Charlie Challenge

In this game, a demon called Charlie is summoned using paper and pencils. Charlie can answer any yes-or-no question. Supposedly, some kids fainted from playing the game when Charlie was in a bad mood, so several overseas schools banned it.



“All right. Looks like everyone’s gone home,” Mari Kojima said to her friends Ai Saitou and Sumire Sakuma as she cracked open the door and peeked into the hallway.

School was over. The three of them were the only ones left in Class 4’s sixth-grade classroom.

Mari checked one more time that the coast was clear before closing the door. Then she pulled out a cell phone that had been tucked away in her backpack.

“Let’s watch the video again to make sure, okay? It’d be really bad if we do it wrong.”

Mari fiddled with her phone until she found the video, then glanced up at Ai and Sumire.

“Are you ready?”

“I am!” Ai said with a smile.

“M-me too…,” Sumire said.

Unlike Ai, Sumire seemed slightly anxious. Mari tilted her head as she looked at her nervous friend.

“You’re the one who wanted to do this, Sumire. You said you wanted to play the Charlie-Charlie Challenge.”

It had happened the day before, when they were walking home from school.

The three of them were standing at a street corner and staring at Mari’s cell phone. They’d come across a video from another country and were watching it.

The video was about the Charlie-Charlie Challenge, which kids all around the world were playing. Charlie was the name of a demon from Mexico who could answer any yes-or-no question. The only things you needed to play the game were some pencils and a sheet of paper. Charlie would move one of the pencils to point at the answer on the paper.

After they finished watching the video, Mari and her friends were very interested in the game.

Sumire especially hadn't been able to pull her eyes away from the screen. And even though it was Mari's cell phone, she reached out and hit the replay button.

"Aww, why'd you do that…?" Mari said.

With her eyes still glued to the video, Sumire murmured, "How about we try it, too?"

"Huh?"

Mari and Ai looked at each other.

The following day, the girls gathered again.

"I never thought you'd ask us to play yesterday," Mari said, looking at Ai for backup.

"Uh-huh," Ai said, nodding.

"You don't even believe in The Wriggler or Sugisawa Village or even the faceless kid."

Mari and Ai loved urban legends and theories about unexplained mysteries, but Sumire had never shown any interest. She always insisted they were fake.

"So why's the Charlie-Charlie Challenge different?"

Mari couldn't help but wonder about it.

Sumire gave the cell phone in Mari's hand a slightly alarmed look as she slowly replied, "It's because…I think *that* video is real."

Mari glanced at her cell phone. It was replaying the video of Charlie answering questions by pointing a pencil at a *yes* or *no*.

The pencil was moving all on its own even though no one was touching it.

"I see… You're right. After seeing this, even *you'd* become a believer."

Mari was hopeful that Sumire might be able to enjoy mysteries with them from now on.

But instead of being enthusiastic, Sumire appeared even more frightened.

"You don't have to be scared. Mari and I are here with you," Ai said with a smile, but as Sumire turned to her, she seemed just as anxious as before.

"I did some digging about the Charlie-Charlie Challenge on the internet yesterday," she said.

"You looked it up? Like how to play it?" Ai asked, but Sumire shook her head.

“Ai, isn’t Charlie a demon?”

“Huh? Oh, uh, yeah, it’s supposed to be a demon’s name.”

“I was afraid of that, so I looked into it. And then I found out that something really bad happened at an elementary school in another country because of the challenge.”

“Something bad?” Mari couldn’t help but ask.

Sumire nodded and stared right at her.

“Supposedly three girls played the challenge after school. And, like us, they even got the idea from watching a video about it on their phone,” Sumire said. “But then Charlie suddenly got angry out of nowhere. One of the girls didn’t believe in him, so then Charlie, well…he *killed* all of them.”

“He killed them?!”

“That’s right. He used a hatchet to cut them up into itty-bitty pieces.”

Mari gulped.

Ai was the next to speak up. “Is that really true?”

“It was on the internet,” Sumire insisted.

Now it was Ai’s turn to be anxious. “Um, this is starting to scare me… …” Ai loved a good mystery, but she couldn’t stand scary stories.

“Mari, Ai, are you *sure* about doing the challenge now that you know that?”

At first the other two girls didn’t know how to answer, but when Mari nodded firmly, Sumire’s eyes went wide.

“We can’t back down now!” Mari shouted, and then she pulled out a piece of paper and two brand-new pencils from her backpack.

The paper was already prepped with a cross drawn in the middle that divided the paper into four sections. Each section had a *yes* or a *no* written in it.

Mari started to set everything up on a desk.

“I was looking forward to playing. I didn’t have new pencils, so I even went out to buy some yesterday,” Mari said. “Sumire, did you see any videos or pictures online about what happened to those girls?”

“Uh? No, it was all just text… …”

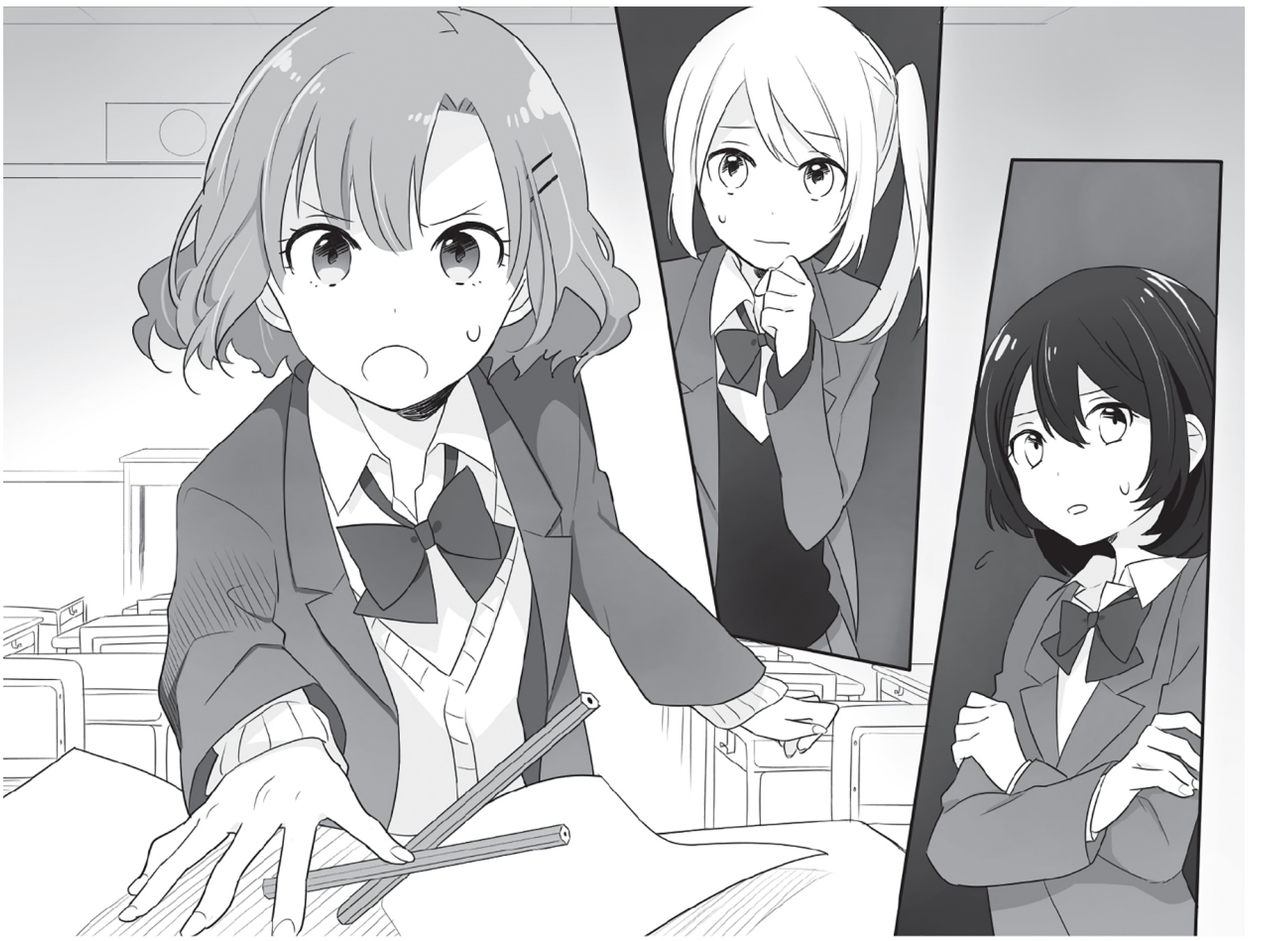
“And where did it get published?”

“Um, I’m not sure exactly. It was on this bulletin board anyone could write on.”

“Which country did it happen in?” Mari asked.

“Um…it didn’t say.”

“What was the name of the school?”



“It didn’t mention that, either… …”

“I knew it!” Mari exclaimed. “Then you have no way of telling whether it was real or not!”

Sumire looked down at her toes. Mari wasn’t done talking yet, though.

“In other words, someone might have been making up stories just to scare people. If it were true, there would be videos or pictures or something.”

Ai nodded along enthusiastically. “Right. You’re right! People around the world are doing the challenge, so if something like that happened, everyone would be freaking out!”

“Yeah, exactly. And I’m online every day, but I haven’t heard about it before now.”

Mari was *always* online—much more often than the other two girls. If anything that big had happened, she would definitely know about it.

“So it can’t be true!” Mari insisted. “Besides, the challenge isn’t supposed to be scary!”

“W-well, if you say so, I guess we can…,” Sumire murmured.

It seemed like Sumire was on board with playing, but Mari felt slightly awkward because of her friend’s response.

“Uh, sorry. But it’ll be okay. We all believe in Charlie. And if he does actually attack you with his hatchet, then Ai and I will save you. So let’s play the Charlie-Charlie Challenge! That’s the whole reason we stayed behind after school!”

“Yeah, you’re right… …” Sumire looked over at Mari and smiled.

“Okay, let’s do this, then.”

“Uh-huh, yeah.”

They checked the hallway to make sure it was clear one more time before quietly closing the door.



The Charlie-Charlie Challenge was very simple.

First, they would set the paper with the *yes*es and *no*es on a desk and the two pencils on top of each other to align over the cross. Then they were supposed to ask, *"Charlie, Charlie, are you here?"* If the top pencil moved to a *yes*, that meant they had successfully summoned Charlie. After that, it was all about asking Charlie questions, and Charlie would answer them by moving the pencil. To end the game, they'd recite, *"Charlie, Charlie, can we stop?"* Once the pencil moved to a *yes*, that ended the game. If he wouldn't move the pencil to a *yes*, then another way of forcing the game to end was by yelling, *"Charlie, Charlie, go away!"* and tearing up the paper.

They pulled chairs over and sat around the desk.

"And then we put the pencils on top of the cross, right?" Mari carefully placed the pencils down so they were straight. "Okay, it's ready."

Mari looked at Ai, who sat next to her, and then at Sumire, who was sitting right across from her.

"Are you two ready?" she asked.

Her friends both bobbed their heads in response. Then Mari took a deep breath.

"Charlie, Charlie, are you here?"

Mari's voice echoed in the hushed classroom.

All three of them stared at the pencils with intense concentration.

They didn't hear even the softest sound…

The pencils didn't move at all.

"That's weird." Mari tilted her head.

"Maybe we didn't do it right?" Ai said, to which Mari responded, "I'm pretty sure we had it, though."

They decided to try again.

"Charlie, Charlie, are you here?"

But nothing happened.

The pencils didn't even budge.

"It was moving in the video, though… …" Mari thought about it, trying to figure out what was wrong.

“I guess it all really was fake, then,” Ai said, seeming let down.

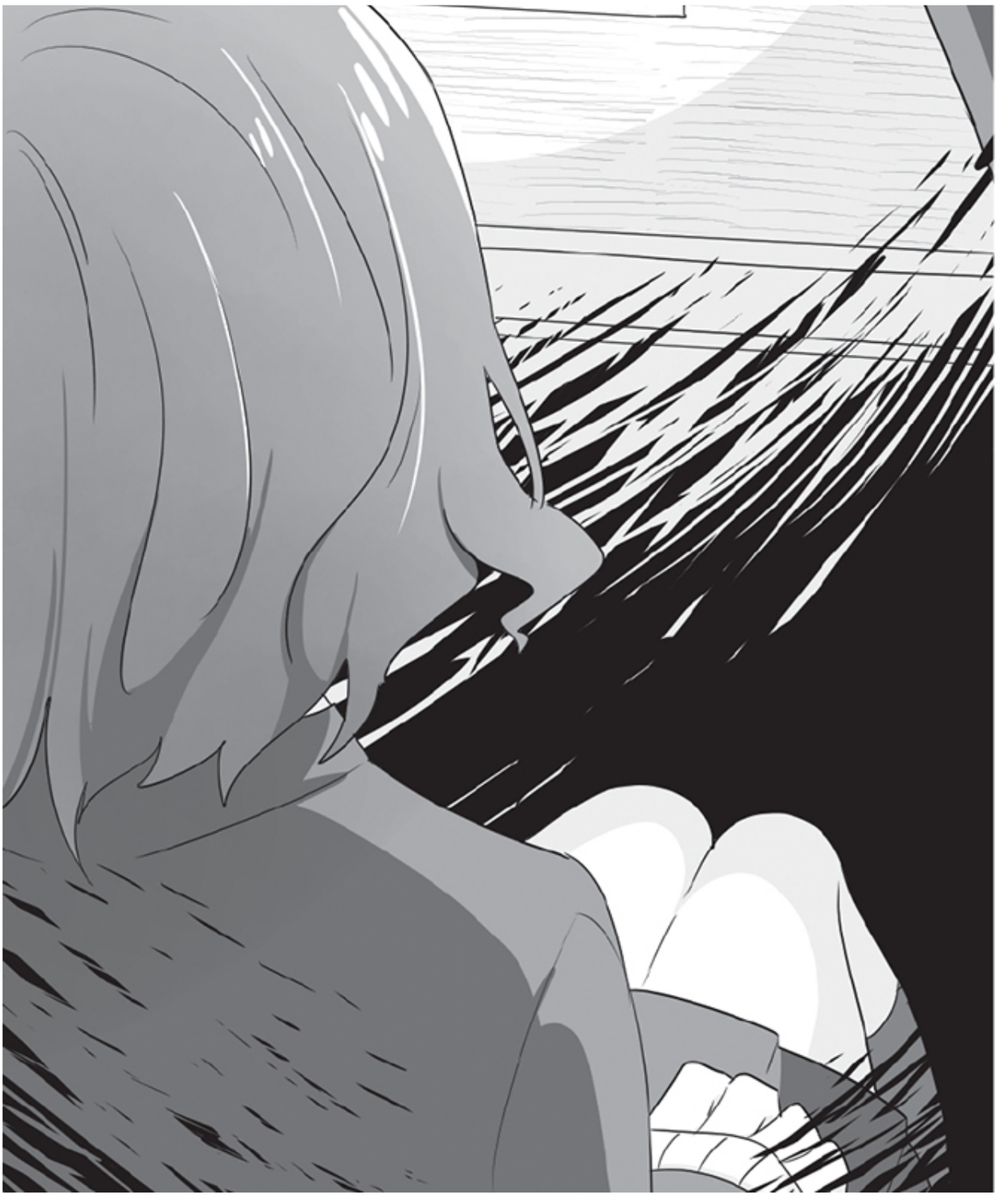
Sumire spoke up when she saw how disappointed her friends were. “Maybe calling him once or twice wouldn’t catch his attention?”

“What?”

“I’m sure he’ll answer if we keep calling him,” Sumire said as she stared hard at the pencils.

“But you were so scared just a second ago, Sumire,” Ai said.


NO
YES
YES
NO



“But she might have a point. Didn’t they have to do that in the video, too?” Mari said, thinking back to what they’d watched.

The foreign kids in the video had called Charlie’s name over and over again until the pencil started moving.

“So let’s try it again,” Sumire said.

“Yeah, you’re right,” Mari replied, sounding more upbeat than before.

The three girls each took a deep breath, eyed the paper on the desk, and chanted at the same time:

“Charlie, Charlie, are you here? Charlie, Charlie, are you here? Charlie, Charlie, are you here? Charlie, Charlie… …”

They repeated it over and over again—for as long as their breath lasted. They chanted it four times, then five times… …

All three of them were starting to feel a sense of anticipation building.

Then, on the sixth try…

…the three girls took each other’s hands and repeated: “Charlie, Charlie, are you here?”

Then…

Swoosh.

…the top pencil on the cross moved!

“Yeek!” Ai screamed and leaped back, her chair skidding away from the table.

The pencil had swiveled over to point to a *yes*.

“I-it moved…,” Mari said, and Ai cautiously came back to look.

“It really moved on its own… …”

Mari looked at Ai and Sumire.

“We did it. We did it!!!” Mari grabbed her friends’ hands and cheered. “Sumire, it really moved on its own!”

Sumire grinned and nodded.

“Okay, what do we do next? We need to ask him a question,” Ai happily said to the other two.

Then Mari smiled and said, “First we need to test if Charlie really knows everything.”

“How would we do that?”

“We ask him the answer to a problem. If he’s right, then we’ll know.”

“Okay, we can do that!”

Mari stared at the paper and slowly asked her question:

“Charlie, Charlie, is one plus one two?”

Just in case, Mari repeated the question one more time.

Then five seconds went by, and…

Swoosh!

…the pencil spun over to the other *yes*.

“He’s right! That’s amazing, Mari!” Ai’s eyes went wide, and she got really excited.

“But maybe he was able to answer that one because it was easy? Let’s ask him something he’d only know if he went to this school!” Mari said.

And so Mari asked her next question:

“Charlie, Charlie, is our homeroom teacher, Yamakawa, a woman?”

Mari repeated the question a second time, just like before.

“If he knows this, then Charlie really has to know everything,” Mari said.

“You’re right! You’re so smart, Mari!”

Mari and Ai excitedly looked at the paper.

Then the pencil slowly moved.

No.

The pencil stopped exactly on the answer.

Mari’s eyes went wide as she looked at both of her friends.

“H-he’s right… …”

Yamakawa, their teacher, was a man.

“Then Charlie really does know everything!”

“He does! Let’s ask him a ton of questions, Mari!”

Mari and Ai fought over who would ask their questions first. They had plenty of them, from things about their school and family to their favorite celebrities.

“Will I get a good grade on my next math test?”

“Will my mom buy me new clothes?”

“Will Yamauchi the actor get even more popular?”

Charlie moved the pencil each time, answering either yes or no. Eventually, Mari and Ai had asked him more than ten questions.

“Oh, and also… Umm…” But then Ai looked like she was struggling to come up with another one. “Mari, what do we do now? I don’t have any more ideas. Oh, I know! How about we ask him what we should ask next?”

“That’s not a yes-or-no question,” Mari said and pouted. Then she started to fidget.

“What’s wrong?”

“There’s one more thing I want to ask Charlie…”

“Oh, what’s that?”

“Well…” Mari’s face went red.

“Are you going to ask him about your crush?”

Ai grinned when she realized that was it.

“Yeah. I’ve been waiting the whole time to ask about Tamura…”

Mari meant Hidekazu Tamura from the class next door. They had been in the same fifth-grade class, and sometimes they still talked.

“I had no idea you liked him,” Ai said.

“Yeah, I do. But I don’t know whether he likes me back.”

Ai cried out, “Oh!” and then appeared satisfied with herself.

“What?”

“So *that’s* why you wanted to do it.”

“Do what?”

“The Charlie-Charlie Challenge.”

Mari looked away.

“Yeah…,” she admitted, nodding slightly.

“Okay, then we’ve got to ask. Charlie knows everything, so he has to know how Tamura feels!” Ai urged Sumire to back her up.

Sumire gave her a small smile. That was when Ai realized Sumire hadn’t asked a single question so far.

“Actually, Sumire…”

Just as Ai was about to point out that she hadn’t, Mari finally had enough courage to ask her question.

“Charlie, Charlie, does Tamura like me?”

Mari repeated her question twice, just like she had with the others.

But nothing happened…

The pencil had moved right away for the earlier questions.

“Charlie, Charlie, does Tamura like me?” Mari tried again. But the pencil wouldn’t budge.

“I’ll try asking, too!” Ai offered, then asked the same question, but again, the pencil showed no signs of moving.

“Maybe Tamura doesn’t like me…”

“Of course not. If he didn’t, then Charlie would reply with a *no*.”

“But if the pencil isn’t even moving, then maybe he *really* hates me.”

Tears started to well up in Mari’s eyes. Then Sumire, who hadn’t said anything so far, slowly spoke up.

“Well, I don’t know the answer to that one.”

Sumire looked down at the floor, avoiding eye contact with her two friends.

“I’d feel bad letting this go on, so I think I need to come clean.” Sumire gave them an apologetic look and bowed her head. “I’m sorry. It was all me…”

“Huh? What was?”

Ai had no idea what she meant. Mari could only stare at Sumire through her tears.

“I was the one answering the questions. Like this.”

Sumire blew air softly out of her mouth right in front of them. The pencil slowly rotated. When Ai saw that, the expression on her face immediately changed.

“Wait, you were the one answering the whole time, Sumire?”

Sumire replied with a tiny nod.

Unlike Mari and Ai, Sumire didn’t believe in urban legends or supernatural mysteries. Watching the Charlie-Charlie Challenge video hadn’t changed her mind, either.

“I kept watching the video over and over again because I knew there had to be a trick to it. And then I realized maybe they were blowing on the pencil to move it.”

Sumire had wanted to tell her friends about her discovery so much that she’d pretended to believe in the game. That was why she’d suggested playing.

“And then when I actually tried it, you two thought it was really moving on its own, didn’t you?”

“I never would have guessed you were blowing on it…,” Ai murmured, sounding genuinely astonished. “But why does it work that way?” she added.

“I think people who play the game blow on it without realizing. But it’s not like everyone’s trying to trick each other on purpose. That demon Charlie that they say is answering everyone’s questions isn’t real. There’s no way there’s really a demon,” Sumire said very bluntly.

“But why did you suddenly tell us the trick?” Ai asked.

“I started feeling bad for Mari… I have no idea how Tamura feels about you, and I don’t want to lie about it…”

Sumire bowed her head and apologized to her friends again. It seemed like she realized she’d done something terrible.

“I just wanted you two to know that the Charlie-Charlie Challenge was fake. There’s tons of stuff on the internet, but that doesn’t mean it’s all true just because there are videos or pictures __”

“But wait a second,” Mari cut in. “What about the foreign elementary school you mentioned? The one where there was a girl who wasn’t a believer, so Charlie got mad and killed all the girls with a hatchet.”

“Oh, that?” Sumire looked even more apologetic. “Sorry. That was fake, too. I just wanted to scare you two.”

“Seriously?!” Mari and Ai both howled at her.

“If you two chickened out, then I would have told you the trick, but then you said we couldn’t back out, Mari! So I went along with it…”

“Ugh, why would you do that?”

Mari and Ai were fed up with Sumire’s antics.

“So you mean that wasn’t actually on any online bulletin board?” Mari asked.

Sumire smiled awkwardly and nodded. “No one got hacked up. Charlie doesn’t exist, so how could they?”



Now the three girls were on their way home. Sumire had apologized to Mari and Ai over and over again.

“I’m really sorry. I’ll let you borrow my manga later, okay?”

“If you’re lending out stuff, I’d like a game, too.”

“Okay, then I’ll let you borrow both, Mari.”

“By the way…,” Mari said. “Could you two keep everything about Tamura to yourselves?”

“Of course! It’ll be our little secret!”

Sumire and Ai both agreed not to tell anyone.

Eventually, Sumire parted ways with her friends at an intersection and headed back home on her own.

Phew, I’m glad they both forgave me. But there’s no way urban legends or supernatural mysteries are real, Sumire thought as she walked down an alley.

“Finally found you.”

Suddenly, she heard a voice. She looked up and saw an unfamiliar boy standing in front of her. He seemed to be around her age.

“Um, who are you?”

“You played the Charlie-Charlie Challenge earlier, didn’t you?” The boy bluntly responded with a question of his own.

“Huh? How did you…?”

She was sure no one had been in the classroom with them. Maybe he’d spied on them from the hallway?

But she’d never seen this boy at her school before. He didn’t seem to care that she was confused. He kept talking.

“Charlie is upset. Since you’re not a believer.”

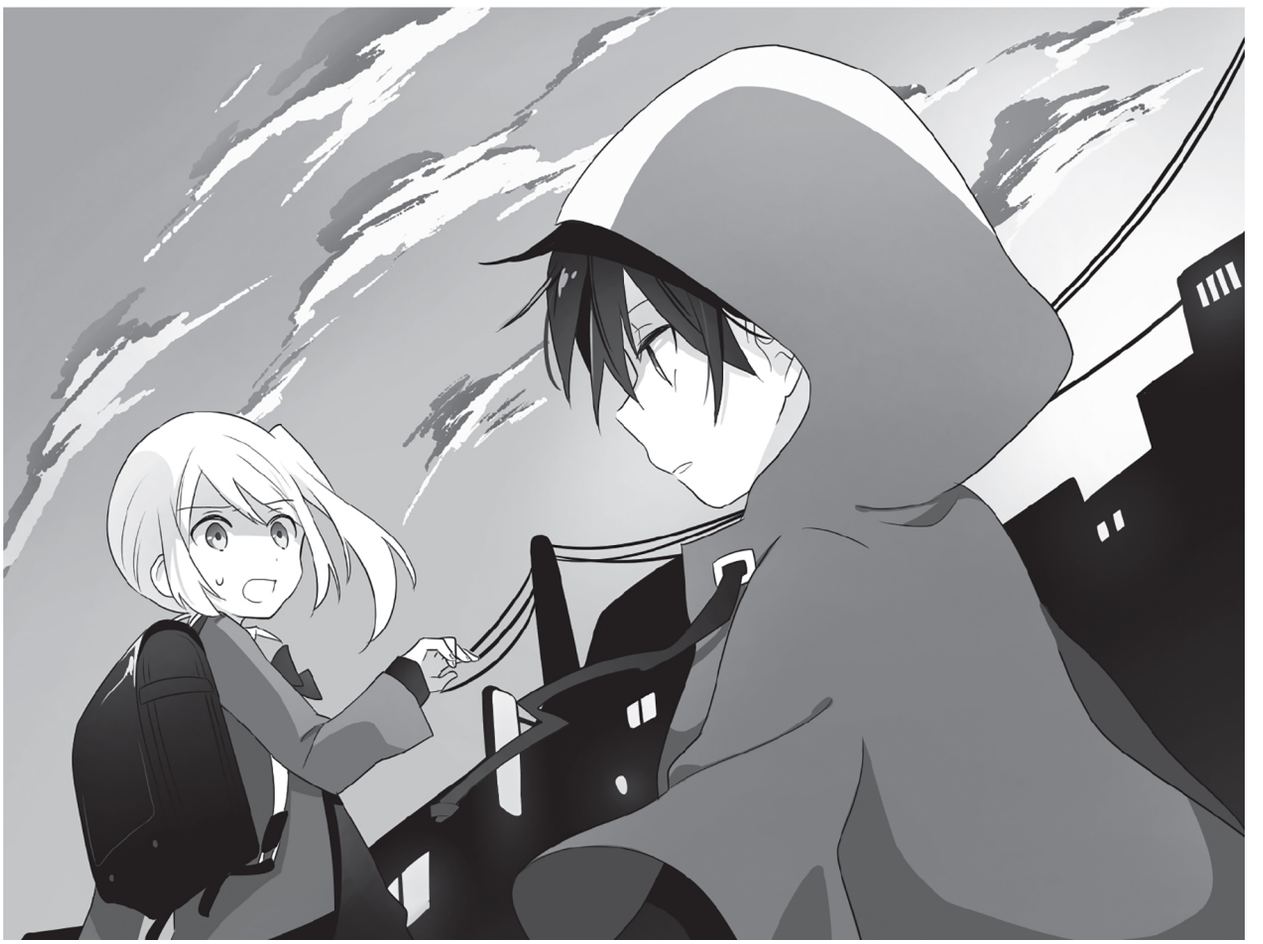
“Charlie is *what*?” Sumire frowned. “What are you talking about?! I only said those things to scare Mari and Ai. Did they ask you to get back at me?”

When Sumire started to get worked up, the boy shook his head.

“It might have been a game to start with, but the one you played was put together by Himitsu.”

“Himitsu?”

Sumire had no idea what this boy was saying. But his expression under his red hood looked serious.



“Charlie is after you. And Charlie won’t forgive anyone who isn’t a believer.”

The boy stared Sumire down and slowly approached her.

“Stay away!” shouted Sumire, frightened. She instinctively took a step back. “Who are you?”

“You don’t have to move—just stand there,” the boy said, and he put one hand into his jacket pocket.

Sumire jumped back in alarm when she saw that.

“What do you have in there? Is it a hatchet? Is that what it is? No way! Charlie can’t be real!”

The boy started to pull his hand out of his pocket, but Sumire was faster and dashed away.

“Wait! I’m not Charlie. My name is Fushigi Senno…”

But Sumire was long gone.

Fushigi looked at the bright-red notebook he’d pulled out of his jacket.

Sumire made it home. After dashing through the front door, she immediately locked it behind her.

“Oh, welcome home,” her mother said from the kitchen.

“Mom!” Sumire ran into the kitchen, looking for help. “Mom, I just met a weird boy!”

Her mom was making dinner.

Thunk, thunk, thunk.

She was chopping something.

“Mom, are you listening?!” Sumire yelled, but her mom just kept cooking.

“There was a weird boy, hmm,” her mom said.

Thunk, thunk, thunk.

“That sounds like it must have been terrible, hmm.”

Thunk, thunk, thunk.

“Mom, come on! Stop for a sec and actually listen to me!” Sumire couldn’t help but shout as she started to get more upset at her mom.

Riiiing, riiiing.

Right at that moment, the phone in the living room rang. Sumire still felt as though her mom wasn’t acting like herself, but she walked over to pick up the phone. When she got there, Mom

was showing up in red text on the display. She didn't understand what was going on.

But Sumire reached for the receiver anyway. As she did, she noticed a strange mark on the back of her hand. Had she hit it against something and bruised it?

"Hello…?"

"Oh, Sumire, you're home, then? Sorry, I'm still stuck at work. I'll buy dinner on the way home, so just hang out on your own for a while, okay?"

"What?"

Sumire turned around reflexively and peeked into the kitchen. She could see her mom's back.

Thunk, thunk, thunk.

"Sumire? What's wrong?"

She could hear her mom's voice coming from the phone.

Thunk, thunk, thunk.

"Charlie, hmm?"

Thunk, thunk, thunk.

"Does Charlie actually exist, hmm?"

"… …Mom?"

Sumire cautiously approached the kitchen.

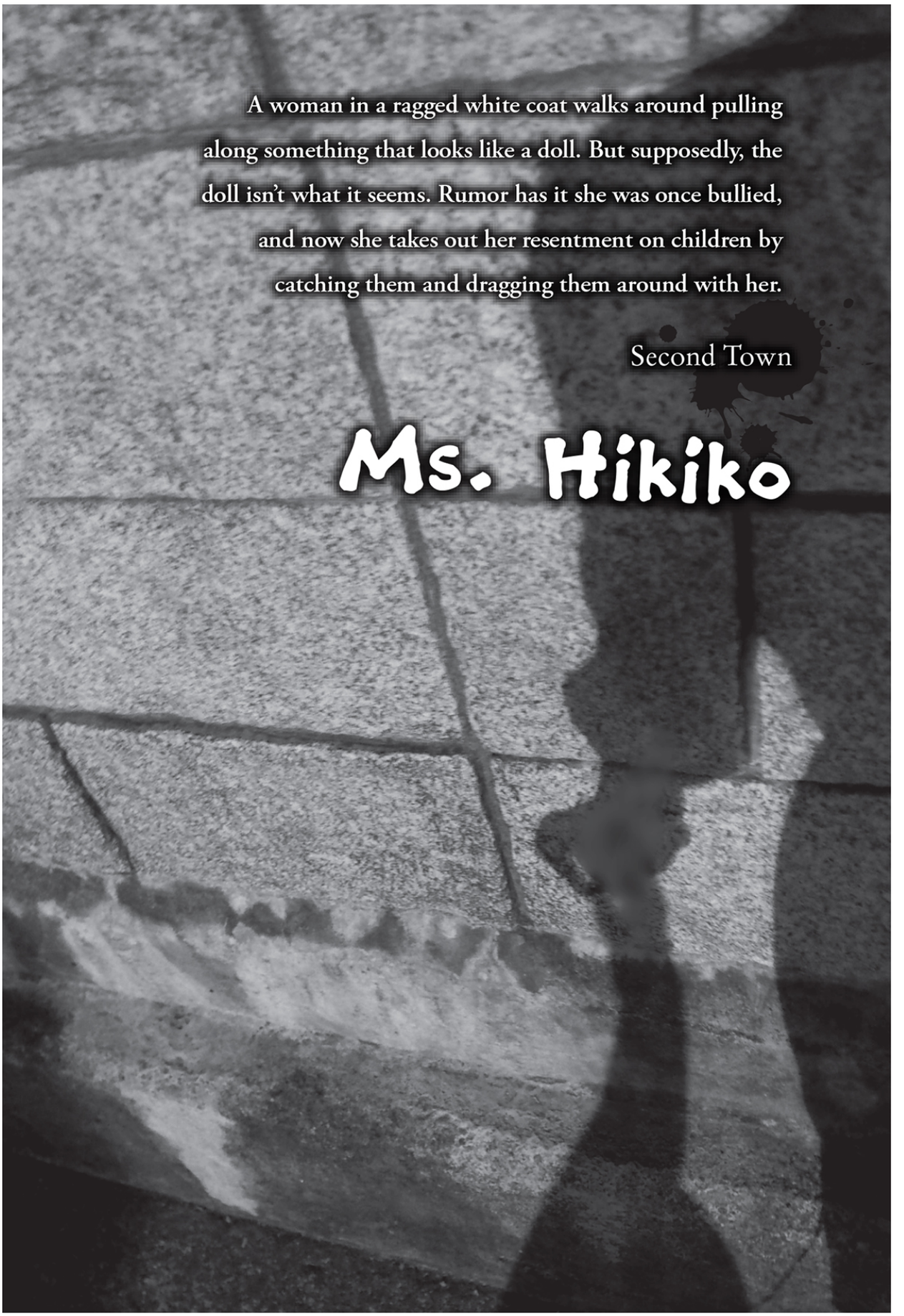
But right then the chopping stopped. Sumire could now see the woman's hands.

It turned out she wasn't holding a kitchen knife at all.

Instead, she held a bloodstained hatchet.

"Oh dear. Looks like I need more meat. I wonder if I've got any on hand?"

As the woman spoke, she slowly turned to face Sumire.


A woman in a ragged white coat walks around pulling along something that looks like a doll. But supposedly, the doll isn't what it seems. Rumor has it she was once bullied, and now she takes out her resentment on children by catching them and dragging them around with her.
Second Town
Ms. Hikiko



“Why did you delete the anime?!” Shiho’s bellow filled the Shinozakis’ living room.

Her little brother, Yuuji, was lounging on the sofa and eating potato chips.

Yuuji looked up at Shiho as she towered over him.

“Sorry. I thought you already watched it,” he said.

“Well, I didn’t! That’s the third time you’ve erased one of my recordings!”

“Huh? It’s only been two times.”

“No, it was *three*! Yuuji, you’re seriously the worst brother ever!”

Shiho and Yuuji were only a year apart. Shiho was in her second year of middle school, and Yuuji was just in his first year. They used to have a good relationship, but lately, they fought nonstop.

The reasons for their fights were all silly and didn’t really matter. Sometimes one would start because Yuuji ate the snack Shiho had been saving or because he would use her bath towel to wipe his face.

But Shiho couldn’t find it in herself to forgive Yuuji.

“Really, Shiho? I could even hear you from outside,” their mother said right as she came into the living room from grocery shopping. “You’re siblings, so you should get along.”

“Get along?” Shiho bristled. “I could never get along with him! I wish Yuuji weren’t part of our family!”

Shiho glared at her brother, then angrily stomped out of the living room.

The next day.

It was after six, and Shiho had just finished tennis practice and was heading home.

“I’m back!”

She set her racket down by the front door and started to pull off her shoes. But then her mom came running to her before she could finish.

“Say, Shiho, have you seen Yuuji?” her mom asked.

“Yuuji? He’s not in the living room?”

Yuuji wasn’t part of any school clubs, so he went straight home after school. His usual routine was to eat snacks and watch the anime they’d recorded in the living room until dinnertime.

But her mom shook her head.

“He actually hasn’t come home from school today.”

“Huh, that’s weird,” Shiho said. “Maybe he’s out playing with his friends? Did you try his phone?”

“I keep calling him, but he won’t pick up. I think it’s off.”

“What?”

“He looked sad this morning,” her mom said. “I think something’s bothering him.”

“He was sad?”

Shiho remembered something she’d said the day before.

“I could never get along with him! I wish Yuuji weren’t part of our family!”

Maybe what I said upset him…

Maybe Yuuji had been so shaken by Shiho’s words that he wasn’t coming home? No way that could really get to him.

But it still worried her. Maybe she’d hurt Yuuji even more than she’d meant to?

“I’ll go look for him!”

Shiho put her half-off shoes back on and ran outside.

She started out with the places Yuuji would most likely be.

Her first stop was the park. He usually liked to sit at a bench to read manga.

But she didn’t see any sign of him there.

“Where else would he go…?”

Shiho headed to the convenience store in front of the train station next. He often stood around talking with his classmates in the parking lot.

But he wasn’t there, either.

Where is Yuuji…?

Maybe he was at a friend’s house? Or maybe he took a train to another town?

Shiho suddenly looked over at the station across from the convenience store.

Then she caught sight of one of Yuuji's classmates crossing the street. He was in the baseball club and was on his way home.

"Hey, wait!" Shiho ran over to him. "Do you know where Yuuji is?"

"Oh, aren't you Yuuji's sister?" the boy asked. "You're looking for Yuuji? I just saw him."

"What? Where did he go?"

"To the shopping district. He looked kind of out of it."

"Thank you!"

After thanking him, Shiho headed to the shopping district.

The road was filled with rows of stores and busy with shoppers.

Shiho started asking everyone if they'd seen Yuuji.

"Yuuji? Nah, don't think I've seen him."

"It was so busy, I'm afraid I wouldn't have noticed."

"I couldn't spot him in this crowd."

She couldn't find anyone who'd seen him. Maybe his classmate had just *thought* he'd seen Yuuji?

But once she got to the fifth shop, Yao's, and asked the old man there, he said, "Actually, funny you should mention it… I saw a middle school boy head over that way into the side street. He had this robot on his shoes. It had its arms up in the air."

A robot? And its arms were up in the air? That has to be Yuuji!

The robot was a character from the anime Yuuji always watched. He liked it so much that he put it on his school shoes.

Shiho ran into the street the man had pointed to.

A bit farther down the main road, the side streets led to residential areas.

It was past six thirty now. It was also in the middle of December, and the wind was chilly. The sun was already down, so the streetlights lit the ground.

"Yuuji…where did you go?"

No one was walking around, and she saw no sign of her brother.

Did Yuuji really wander down this street?

She started to feel more anxious. At the same time, she realized she'd gone too far the day before.

"I was wrong, so please answer…"

I can't believe I made such a big deal about whether he erased the recording two or three times…

Shiho started to feel ashamed that she'd been so angry at Yuuji about such small things.

Shhhhrk, shhhhrk.

She heard something scraping along the ground.

"What's that?"

Shiho peered ahead and saw someone walking toward her in the gloom. Since the person wasn't under the streetlights, she couldn't make them out, but it looked like a woman in a skirt.

The woman was very slowly making her way to Shiho, but there was something off about her.

Shhhrk, shhhhhhrk.

Whenever the distant figure took a step, Shiho heard a strange noise.

What is that sound?!

Shiho tried to see through the darkness. Once the woman reached a streetlight, Shiho caught a glimpse of her.

"Huh?!"

The moment she saw the woman, Shiho shuddered.

The lady's face was covered by her waist-length black hair. For some reason, she was barefoot and wore a battered red coat. When Shiho looked closely, though, she realized the coat wasn't red at all.

She was wearing a *white* coat splattered with bright-red blood.

Shhhhrk, shhhhhhrk.

As the woman slowly trudged forward, she held something large in her right hand. The sound Shiho had been hearing was that object dragging along the ground.

What is *that thing?*

A shiver ran down her spine.

The woman didn’t even so much as glance at Shiho. She stared straight ahead and passed by.

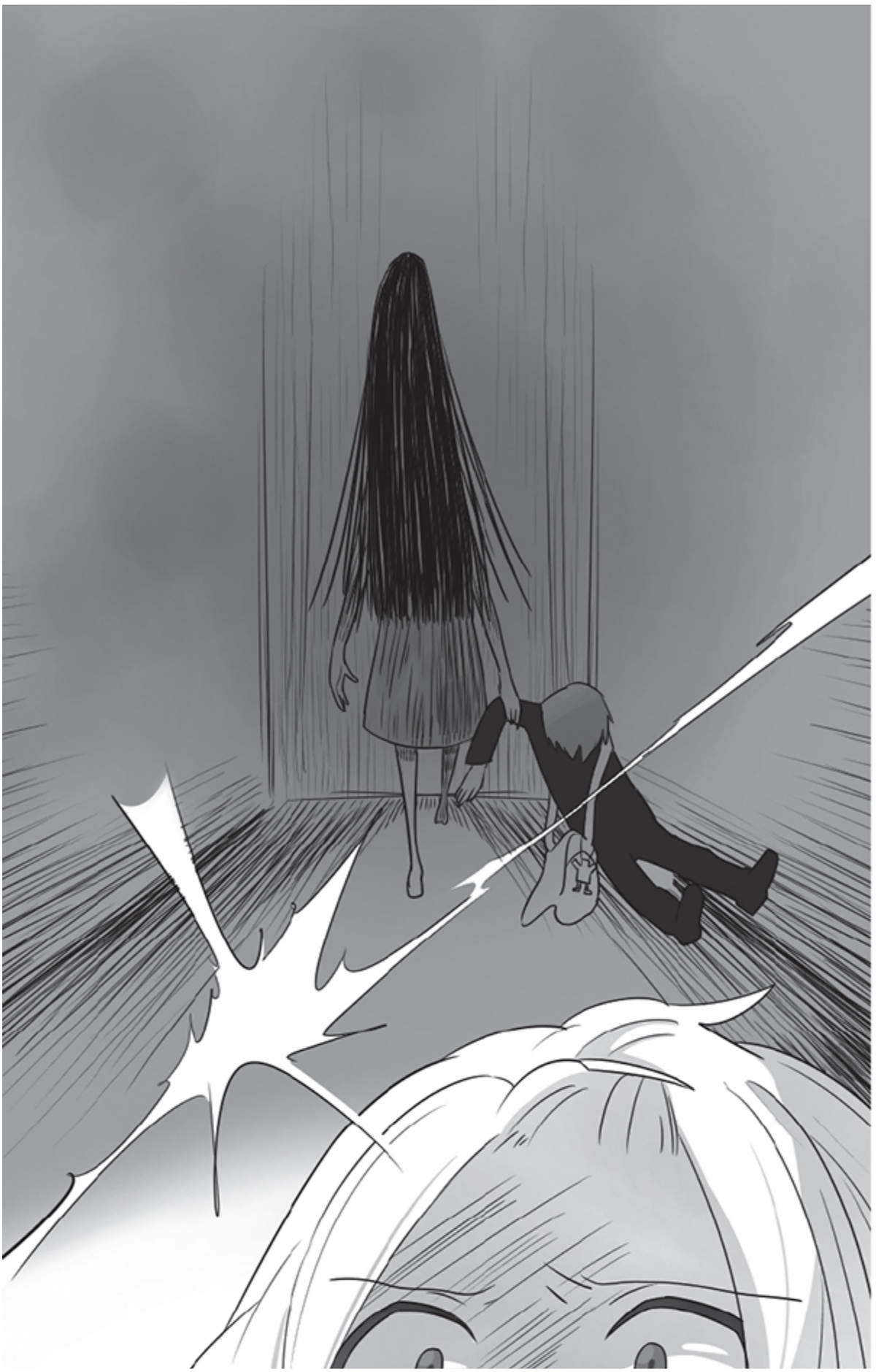
“Ahhhh!!!”

Until that point, Shiho had her hands clamped over her mouth to hold back a scream, but right then, it escaped.

The woman was dragging a doll that looked exactly like Yuuji, but its face was perfectly smooth.

What’s going on?!

Panicking, Shiho stared at the woman, who had already passed her by. Then she noticed the doll was wearing shoes with a robot on them, just like Yuuji’s.





That has to be Yuuji!

It wasn't a doll at all.

As soon as Shiho realized that, she ran after the woman, who had turned a corner while still dragging Yuuji along behind her.

"Yuuji! Yuuji!" she shouted as she turned the same corner.

It was an alley that led to a dead end.

The woman kept walking.

"Wait! Please wait!"

Shiho ran after the woman, trying to catch her.

"Hey, stop!"

But the woman ignored Shiho and continued to walk toward the wall at the end of the alley.

Then, a moment later…

Shwooo.

…the woman dragged the doll right through the wall and disappeared.

"How…?"

Shiho frantically patted the spot where Yuuji had disappeared, but all she found was a regular wall.

"Yuuji…"

She could only stand there.



The next day, Shiho's parents reported that Yuuji was missing to the police.

Apparently, her parents believed he'd run away from home. Shiho told her parents and the police about what had happened the day before, but no one believed her.

"But the alley was a dead end, wasn't it?"

"And you're saying it wasn't Yuuji but a doll that looked like him?"

Her parents were convinced Shiho had been seeing things because she wasn't thinking clearly.

The police agreed.

But Shiho still tried to convince them it really was Yuuji.

“If you truly believe that, then why don’t we go check the alley?”

Shiho was so insistent that the police made the suggestion to her parents. Her parents were annoyed, but they decided to go to the alley anyway.

They all walked through the residential area until they were standing in front of the alley Shiho had been talking about.

“The woman disappeared here!” Shiho said to her parents as she pointed at the wall. “Into this wall…”

The police tapped on the hard surface.

“Hmm, seems to be a normal wall.”

“I swear I really saw it, though! The woman dragged Yuuji through there and disappeared!” Shiho tried to explain, but despite her desperation, no one believed her.

“Thank you, Shiho. That’s enough,” her mom said eventually, gently placing a hand on Shiho’s shoulder. “You must be tired. You can go home and rest. Leave looking for Yuuji to the grown-ups.”

“But!”

“That’s enough. If you keep this up, you’ll start worrying us, too.”

“But, Mom…”

Shiho didn’t know what else to say to her mother, so she had to head home on her own while everyone else stayed out.

I wasn’t just seeing things. It really did happen…

As she walked back, she remembered the woman and how she had been dragging Yuuji along.

That wasn’t a doll. Yuuji must have been turned into a doll. I know the truth, since I saw it with my own eyes. But where did she drag Yuuji when she disappeared?

The more she thought about it, the less it made sense.

Eventually, Shiho made it back to the train station. She walked alongside the railroad toward home. But then her gaze landed on the other side of the tracks.

“Wait, isn’t that…?”

Without realizing it, she came to a stop and stared.

On the other side of the railroad, she saw a glimpse of someone in a red coat.

Maybe that's the woman!

"Wait!" Shiho yelled as she ran across the tracks.

The person in red turned at the next corner and headed down a side street.

I'm not letting you get away!

Shiho ran as fast as she could, trying to catch the woman this time.

"Wait, stop!" she yelled as she turned the corner, too.

The person seemed to have heard her and paused.

"Do you need something from me?"

"Oh…"

It wasn't the woman in the bloodstained coat. Instead, it was a boy she didn't recognize wearing a red hood.

"I'm sorry. I thought you were someone else."

"Someone else? Did you mistake me for a girl in a black hood?"

"What?"

When Shiho tilted her head, the boy knew that she hadn't. Shiho told him who she thought he had been.

"For a second, I thought you were the woman in a blood-covered coat who took my brother."

"A woman in a bloody coat?"

"My brother turned into a doll, and she disappeared with him into a wall."

Shiho told the boy all about what had happened.

There's no way he'll believe me, either…, Shiho thought as she talked.

But the boy put his hand on his chin and thought for a bit, then finally said, "I think that's probably…

"Ms. Hikiko. She must have taken your brother away."

She'd never heard that name before.

Shiho looked confused, but the boy continued, "Ms. Hikiko wanders the streets looking for people to take. I bet your brother was worried about something, wasn't he?"

“What? H-he was… I got mad at him, and he felt down because of that.”

“Ms. Hikiko finds people who are feeling low and vulnerable, then turns them into dolls so they can’t move.”

“A doll?! Then that really was him?! But what’s going on? How does she make humans into dolls?”

“She’s a monster from an urban legend. She turns people into dolls and drags them into another realm,” the boy said.

Another realm? But the boy didn’t seem to be joking.

So was Ms. Hikiko really an urban legend?

Shiho felt scared and even more worried for Yuuji.

“Then what happened to Yuuji? Is he there now?”

The boy shook his head. “The door to the realm shouldn’t be open yet. It only opens once a month on the thirteenth at six seconds past 6:06 PM.”

“What? But that’s today! Then that means when the time comes, Yuuji will end up—”

The boy nodded.

“Where’s the door? If we go there, can we save Yuuji?”

She had another hour until six. She needed to go save her brother as quickly as possible. But the boy’s hand went up and up, and he pointed somewhere very high.

It was the mountainside on the outskirts of town.

“Is there something on that mountain?” the boy asked.

“I think a big burial ground…”

“Grave sites have a mysterious power,” the boy said. “The door must be over there.”

Past the wall Ms. Hikiko had disappeared into the day before, past the rest of the houses, was the graveyard on the mountain.

“Then Yuuji must be…” Shiho looked at the boy. “Please come with me! Help me save Yuuji!”

If she told her parents or the police, they probably wouldn’t believe her.

But she couldn’t go on her own. The only person who could help her was this boy, who seemed to know about Ms. Hikiko. That was what Shiho thought.

But the boy shook his head.

“Sorry, but I have something important I need to do.”

“What?”

“I need to collect something in the next town over.”

The boy pulled out a bright-red notebook and inspected it.

“You can do that later!” Shiho said.

“I can’t. I can collect Ms. Hikiko whenever I want to, since she wanders around town. But this other one only appears once every decade.”

Shiho had no idea what the boy was saying, but what she did know was that he wasn’t going to help her.

“In that case…I’ll go save him on my own!”

Shiho clenched her hand into a tight fist.

The boy looked unimpressed, though.

“On your own? That’s impossible.”

“Why?”

“There’s only one way to save someone who’s been captured by Ms. Hikiko. You need to trade them with someone else. In other words, the only way to save your brother is to let her take you instead.”

“What…?”

She needed to sacrifice herself to save Yuuji. That meant she’d end up being taken to that other realm instead.

“But that’s…”

Shiho felt like she was about to fall over.

But then Shiho gritted her teeth, clenched both fists, and faced the boy again. She was always getting into fights with Yuuji, but Shiho was always the one picking the fights. Yuuji didn’t like arguing and was actually very kind. And Shiho knew she absolutely shouldn’t have said she wished he weren’t part of her family.

That was why Yuuji had been caught by Ms. Hikiko, because Shiho had said that terrible thing.

“I need to save Yuuji!” Shiho shouted very firmly at the boy.

“If you go to that other realm, you can never come back,” the boy warned her.

“I’m fine with that!”

“And the other realm’s full of nothing but suffering.”

Shiho stared right back at the boy.

“Yuuji’s my precious little brother! I have to save him!”

Shiho yelled this, then found the courage to head to the grave site on her own.



It was evening.

The sun had set, and the town was becoming dark. All alone, Shiho made her way to the mountainside right outside of town.

It was past 5:40 PM.

“I have about twenty more minutes until six seconds past 6:06…”

Shiho checked the time on her phone and scanned the burial markers. The plot was large and deathly quiet. She didn’t see anyone around. The chilly winter wind was whipping around her.

It was a lot colder in the mountains than in town.

“Yuuji…”

Shiho breathed on her numb hands as she searched for the doorway to the other realm.

At the same time, in an old house in the next town over, there stood a boy.

The house had been empty for a long time.

The boy made his way to the house’s garden and looked into a corner, where he found a tiny puddle.

Even though it wasn’t raining, droplets of water splashed as they hit the puddle’s surface.

It takes exactly ten years for this puddle to form. If I hadn’t found it today, it would’ve dried up overnight.

The boy crouched down and slowly reached into the puddle with his right hand. His hand sank deeper and deeper in. Once he was elbow deep, the boy’s expression changed.

“Got it…”

He grabbed something in the puddle and pulled it out. It was a purple hand mirror.

“I found you.”

The boy checked the back of the mirror, where a strange mark was carved into it. He pulled out his red notebook and held it open over the mark, then chanted a spell.

He was trying to collect the mysterious power in the mirror.

But then the boy stopped.

Shiho’s face flashed in his mind.

“Yuuji’s my precious little brother! I have to save him!”

“Ugh…”

He sighed and scratched his head, then slowly stood up.

Back at the graveyard, Shiho was still looking for the doorway to the other realm.

It was six PM.

I only have six minutes left! Where’s the door?

She wondered whether the boy had been telling the truth. Maybe the doorway had never even existed?

But this was her only lead to finding Yuuji.

So Shiho desperately searched the area.

Then she caught a glimpse of something in the thicket. It was a white wooden door in the middle of nowhere…but it was red from all the blood sprayed on it.

“Is this the door?”

She ran forward and tried to open it.

Snatch!

Suddenly, someone grabbed her arm from behind.

When she turned around, she saw Ms. Hikiko in her bloody red coat.

“Aaaah!”

She could see Ms. Hikiko’s bloodshot eyes through the gaps in her hair. Those eyes were locked on Shiho.

“Let me go!”

Shiho looked at Ms. Hikiko's other hand. The woman was still dragging Yuuji, who was still a doll.

"Yuuji!" Shiho swallowed her fear and stopped herself from running as she glared back at Ms. Hikiko.

"Let Yuuji go!" Shiho shouted, and she tried to throw off the hand holding her.

But Ms. Hikiko was very strong, and she couldn't do it.

"Don't get in the way."

The voice sounded gravelly, like it was scraping along the ground, and not like a woman's voice at all.

After giving Shiho that warning, Ms. Hikiko pulled on her arm and threw the girl to the side into a patch of grass with surprising force.

"Ah!"

It was 6:05 PM.

Ms. Hikiko dragged the doll Yuuji and stood in front of the door. Then the door slowly started to open on its own.

"What is that?"

Shiho got up and looked through the doorway.

She saw something red as blood beyond it.

Uh, uwhhhh, uwhhhhh.

She could also hear countless ominous groans.

"Yuuji!"

Even though she was scared, Shiho felt a burst of courage as she tried to take Yuuji from Ms. Hikiko.

"Give my brother back!"

She latched on to the woman's arm. But Ms. Hikiko's eyes just swiveled to stare at Shiho.

"You want this doll that much?"

Then her face twisted into a smile.

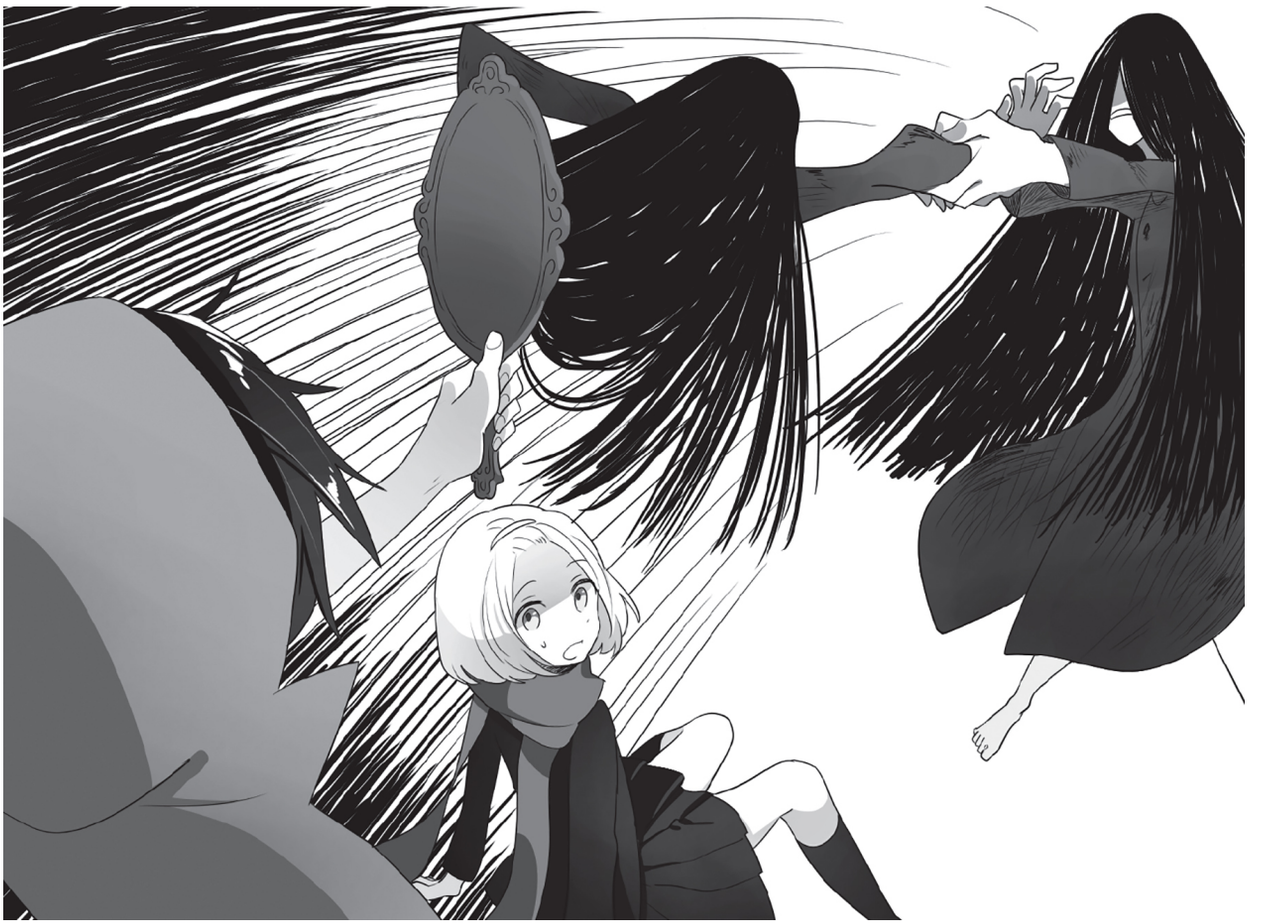
"Then you can come, too! I'll take you along!"

Ms. Hikiko kept grinning creepily as she tried to grab Shiho.

"Uhh, ahhh…"

Shiho couldn’t run anymore. But she was prepared to be taken to the other realm in Yuuji’s place.

But right then…someone suddenly appeared in front of her.
It was *another* Ms. Hikiko.



“Huh?!”

Ms. Hikiko grabbed the other Ms. Hikiko’s arm instead of Shiho’s, and the creepy women both went through the doorway.

It was six seconds past 6:06 PM.

“Hraaagh!!!”

Then the door slammed shut.

Next, the door itself disappeared.

“Wh-what just happened?!”

Shiho had no idea what was going on.

Then she realized someone else was standing next to her.

“Aren’t you…?”

It was the boy from earlier, and he was holding a purple mirror.

He showed it to Shiho.

“This is called the Purple Hand Mirror, and it’s cursed to make people die early. Normally, I’d break the curse right away and banish it from this world, but I decided to use it for something first.”

“Use it?”

“It’s a mirror, isn’t it? I used it to show Ms. Hikiko another version of herself so she’d take that to the other realm instead. In place of your brother, that is.”

“W-wait, you came to help me?” Shiho asked, but instead of answering, the boy headed into the thicket.

Shiho couldn’t help but follow him with her eyes. Yuuji was on the ground there.

“Yuuji!”

Shiho rushed over to her brother.

“Ugh, ungh…”

Shiho shook him several times until he finally woke up.

“Sh-Shiho? Where am I?”

“Yuuji!” It seemed he didn’t understand what was happening at all. “Shiho, um…”

“What?”

“I only erased the show two times, not three,” Yuuji said.

“Ugh! Who cares about all that now?!”

“What?”

“I’m just happy you’re back!” Shiho repeated “So glad! I’m really glad!” as she started to cry. Then she said, “Oh right! Someone else actually saved you from Ms. Hikiko!”

She turned around, but she didn’t see any sign of the boy.

“How could that be…?”

Shiho had no idea why the boy had helped them. But thanks to him, Yuuji hadn’t been taken away to the other realm.

“Thank you…,” Shiho said to the boy in the red hood, whose name she didn’t know, with her whole heart.

A boy walked alone in the middle of the dark town.

It was Fushigi.

“Siblings…,” he murmured to himself as he stopped at the corner of a side street. Then he pulled out his bright-red notebook and stared at it.

Eventually, he opened it to a blank page.

Then he used his other hand to hold up the mirror and held the notebook over the mark engraved on its back.

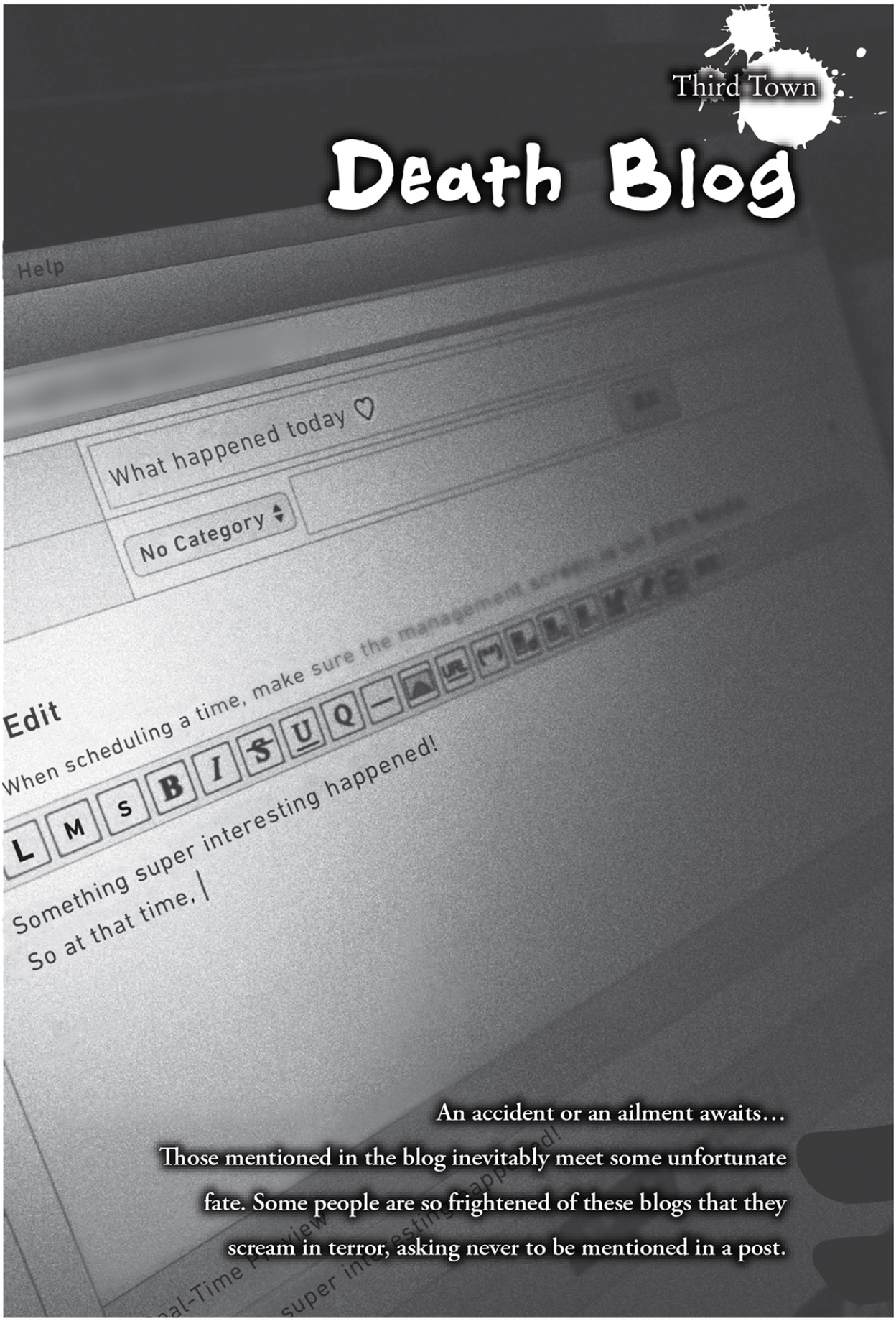
Fushigi said a spell.



In the next moment, the mark glittered, inverted, and appeared on the open page of the notebook.

The mark on the mirror disappeared.

Once he was sure it was gone, he put the notebook into his pocket and started walking again.



An accident or an ailment awaits…

Those mentioned in the blog inevitably meet some unfortunate fate. Some people are so frightened of these blogs that they scream in terror, asking never to be mentioned in a post.



♪ Asuka’s Almost Daily Blog ♪

On this rainy day, something funny happened at school.

This morning, my classmate Keisuke Hashimoto came into class.

But there was something odd about him.

If you looked really closely, you would see that his coat buttons were actually off by one!

“Oh shoot. It’s because I thought I was gonna be late.”

Hashimoto pulled off his coat and laughed about it.

But then his shirt underneath was buttoned wrong, too.

When he realized that, he turned bright red and fixed his buttons right away.

Everyone in class saw and had a good laugh.

The end. ♪

“There, all done!”

It was night. Asuka Komori was lying in bed and typing on her phone.

Ever since she got her parents to give her a phone when she started middle school, Asuka had been addicted to updating her blog.

Because only members Asuka let in could see the blog, whenever she posted something new, her classmates would always leave comments. That made Asuka so happy that she started to post every day.

“Okay! Now to post it!”

She tapped the SUBMIT button.

Then not even thirty seconds went by before someone wrote a comment.

(^0^)

It was just a text emoji.

The commenter was Nana.

“Kudou is so fast!”

It was her classmate Nana Kudou. For a whole week, Nana had been writing comments as soon as Asuka posted, but the

comments were always super short. That was because Nana only ever wrote (^0^).

"She's just posting an emoji today, too? That's it?" Asuka grumbled to herself and gave her usual simple reply back:

Thanks!

After a while, An Matsumura posted That sure was funny, and Asuka even got a Thanks for writing about me! That was hilarious! Hahaha from Hashimoto himself, who had buttoned his clothes wrong.

Asuka gleefully replied to all of them.

It was the next morning.

Asuka arrived at school and spotted Nana at the shoe cubbies.

"Kudou, morning!" Asuka said to her.

"Oh, good morning," Nana replied.

"Thanks for the comment on my blog yesterday."

"Oh, don't mention it…"

Nana looked down and replied so quietly, her voice seemed like it was about to fade away. Asuka tried to get a peek at her face.

"You're still not comfortable at school yet?" Asuka asked.

"Huh? No, I am…"

"You are? It doesn't look that way, though."

Nana practically ran away from the shoe cubbies at that point.

A strained smile came over Asuka's face. They were in the same class, so it wasn't like Kudou could *actually* run away from her.

It hadn't been a full month yet since Nana Kudou transferred to their school. Nana seemed to be the introverted type, and she'd started saying less and less to her classmates over time. But the moment Asuka mentioned her blog, Nana had joined and always posted a comment before anyone else.

But all she would write was the emoji.

As Asuka thought that over, she slowly made her way to her class—Class 2 for first-years.

"How could this happen?!"

As soon as she got to the room, An Matsumura ran up to her.

"What's wrong, An?"

All the students in the class looked troubled.

“Hashimoto was in an accident on the way to school.”

“What?” Asuka said.

“He’s on his way to the hospital now. Apparently, he’s hurt really bad,” An said.

“No way. Do you think he’ll be all right…?”

“Another teacher just came by and told us one of the teachers, Mr. Takeda, is with him and not to worry, but…”

In the end, Hashimoto actually was hospitalized. Luckily, none of his injuries were life-threatening, and he’d just broken his leg.

After school, Asuka and An walked home together and talked.

“Do you want to go with me to see him tomorrow?” An asked.

“Yeah…” Asuka’s reply was unenthusiastic.

“What’s wrong? You look kind of down.”

“Yeah, I am a little…” Asuka was holding her phone and looking at An anxiously.

“Maybe I should delete my blog post from yesterday,” Asuka said.

“Why?”

“It kind of feels inappropriate now.”

“Huh? Inappropriate?” An repeated.

“Since *that* happened to Hashimoto, I wonder if people will feel upset if they see the post today.”

“I think you’re worrying too much. Hashimoto likes reading your blog, too.”

Asuka remembered how Hashimoto had thanked her for writing about him.

“I don’t think you need to delete the post.”

That cheered Asuka back up.

That night, Asuka had her phone in hand and was trying to come up with something to write about.

It can’t be anything funny this time.

But she had no idea what to do.

Then Asuka remembered something that had happened that day. It was about their homeroom teacher, Mr. Takeda.

Since everyone in class was worrying about Hashimoto, Mr. Takeda had given them good advice.

That should be relatable.

Asuka started writing her post right away.

♪ Asuka's Almost Daily Blog ♪
Today I have something nice to write about instead of something funny.
It's about our homeroom teacher, Mr. Takeda.
Since we were all worried about Hashimoto, Mr. Takeda said this to cheer us up:
"If you all look glum, then Hashimoto's going to be, too. You should all try to keep your spirits up so that whenever Hashimoto comes back, it will be to your usual selves!"
Now, isn't that great advice?!

She wrapped up her post and started to add "The end ♪" to finish it off. But then suddenly she thought of something and stopped writing.
Actually, after Mr. Takeda had said that…
Asuka thought for a bit, then wrote a few more sentences.

♪♪
I have one more interesting thing to write about today.
It happened after Mr. Takeda talked to us.
Our classmate An Matsumura said this:
"Okay! I'm going to make sure the first bright face Hashimoto sees when he gets out of the hospital is mine. You'll see!"
An copied a famous celebrity's joke and made everyone laugh.
And that cheered me up a little, too.

This time Asuka actually wrote The end ♪ and posted to her blog.
Then just like before, Nana was the first to comment.
(^0^) Thank you for the lovely story.
"Kudou…"
Asuka smiled at her screen and replied, thanking Nana right away.



The next day.

Asuka walked into the classroom in a good mood.

When she saw Nana in a corner of the classroom, she headed over immediately.

“Morning, Kudou.”

“Oh, good morning.”

“Thank you for the lovely comment yesterday,” Asuka said. “That was the first time you wrote anything other than an emoji, right?”

“Oh…yes, I’m sorry.”

“What are you apologizing for?” Asuka said with a smile.

“Hey, something happened! It’s horrible!”

Suddenly, their classmate Takashi Setoyama ran into the room.

“What’s horrible?” Asuka asked, and Setoyama huffed and puffed as he looked at everyone.

“Mr. Takeda got into a car accident on the way to school, and now he’s headed to the hospital!”

“What?!”

Everyone started talking at once.

“That’s not all, though!” Setoyama said. “An Matsumura got a high fever this morning, but no one knows why, and she had to go to the hospital, too!”

“What? An did?!” Asuka yelled without even thinking.

“I can’t believe Mr. Takeda got into an accident.”

“But An seemed fine just yesterday.”

The students started to talk about how worried they were for the two. Then Setoyama looked at Asuka.

“Hey, Komori, I realized something,” he said.

“Wh-what?” Asuka replied.

“You wrote about them in your blog post yesterday, didn’t you?”

“What?”

She *had* written about both Mr. Takeda and An Matsumura. The students who knew that glanced at her and began talking about it, too.

“Actually, she did.”

“Yeah, it was about all the nice things they said.”

“And also…”

Setoyama started up again like he was speaking for everyone.

“…the day before, you wrote about Keisuke Hashimoto, too.”

The moment he said that, the students all suddenly seemed to realize something.

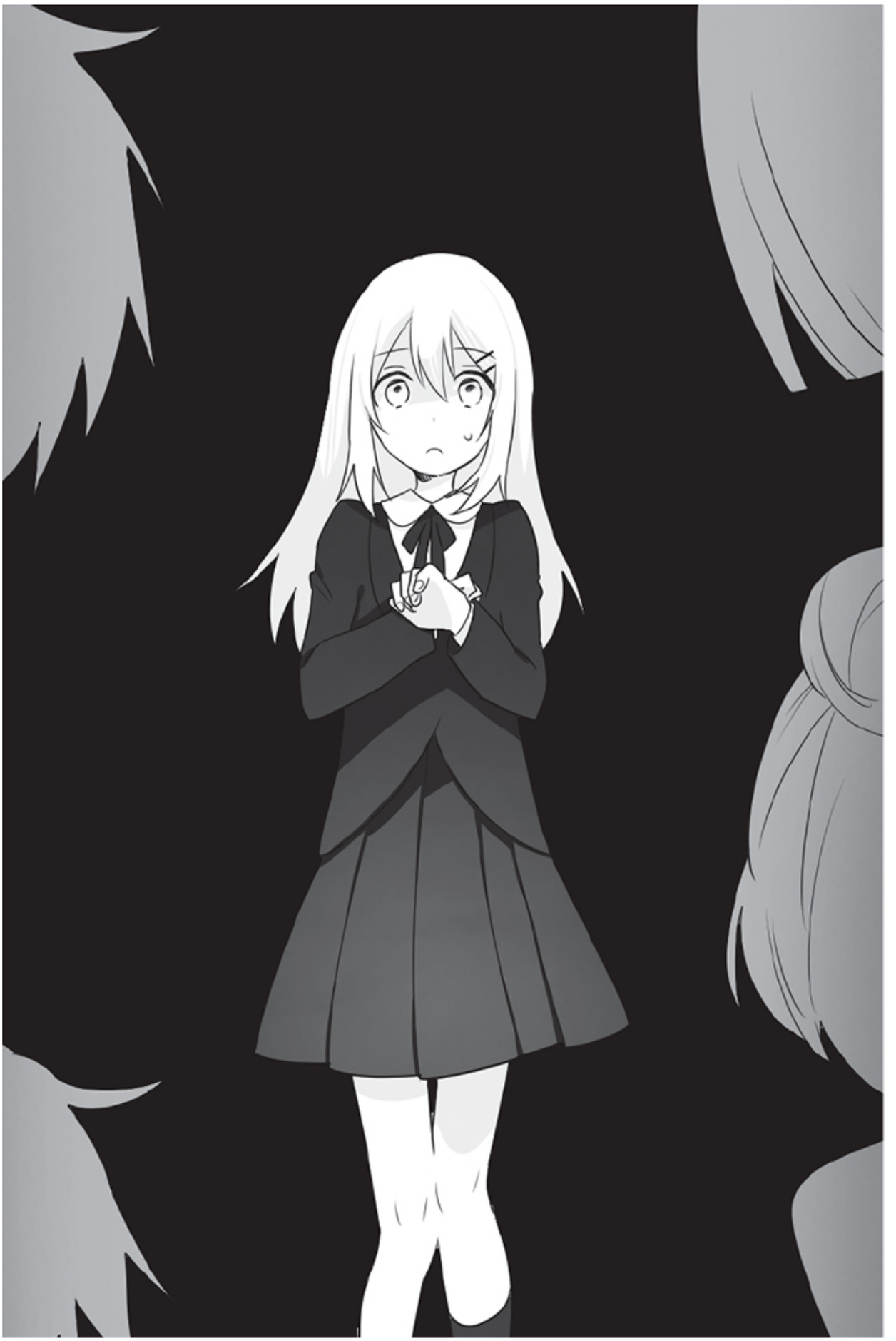
“Yeah, Asuka did write about Hashimoto.”

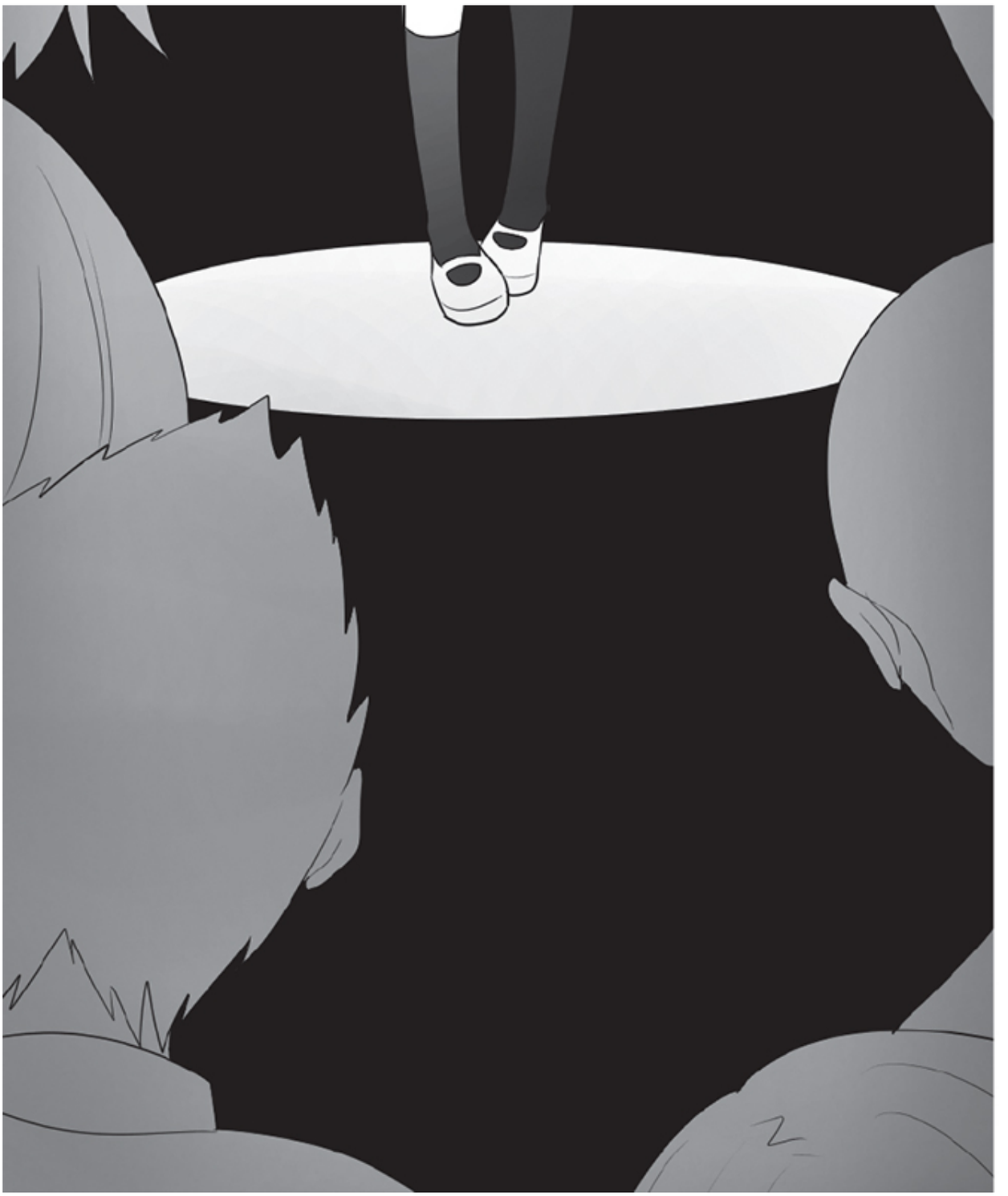
“And Hashimoto got hurt right after, didn’t he?”

The students continued their panicked discussion.

“I—I was just…” Asuka tried to deny it, but when she saw the expressions on her classmates’ faces, she didn’t know what to say.

“Komori’s blog sounds a lot like a death blog.”





* * *

Setoyama looked straight at Asuka when he said that.

“A…death blog?”

Asuka had no idea what that was, so she stared back at Setoyama.

“Death blogs are famous urban legends. Anyone whose name is mentioned in the blog ends up getting hurt. And if things get really bad, they might end up dead.”

Dead?!

At that moment, the room went quiet.

All her classmates stared at her.

“Wh-what…? Wait a sec!” Asuka stepped forward to try to convince them it wasn’t true.

But right then, everyone backed away from her into a corner.

All of them, that is, except for one person.

“A death blog? There’s no way that’s real!”

Nana stood up. She was the one who had shouted.

Everyone looked at her in shock. Surprise was written all over Asuka’s face as she stared at Nana, too.

“Kudou…”

But then someone else butted in. “But An was completely fine, and now she’s sick!”

“Keisuke and Mr. Takeda are in the hospital, too!”

The class’s anxiety fed into itself and made everyone even more distressed. It seemed like Nana was trying to stop them from panicking, but she just ended up flustered. Then Setoyama dealt the finishing blow by saying to Asuka, “Hey, Komori, could you promise me something, then? Don’t ever write about me in your blog.”

Then everyone else started to ask for the same thing.

“Or about me!”

“Or me!”

“And me!”

“Don’t write about us in your blog ever!”

Asuka could only stare blankly at everyone.

That same day after school.

Asuka sat alone on a park bench as a freezing gust of wind rushed by her.

After everything that had happened in the morning, none of her classmates would come near her. Even though Mr. Takeda and An were taken to the hospital, they fortunately weren't in danger of dying.

But Mr. Takeda had broken five of his ribs, and An's fever was apparently making her moan in her sleep.

It's all because I wrote about them…

A death blog.

Asuka stared at her phone, which she normally used to make her posts.

But why…?

She started her blog right after entering middle school. She'd been posting every day for half a year and had written about tons of classmates that entire time. She'd mentioned Hashimoto, Mr. Takeda, and An plenty of times. But since a week ago, terrible things suddenly began happening to the people she posted about.

Why?

Asuka didn't understand it.

"Komori…"

Asuka looked up to see Nana standing nearby.

"Kudou…"

Nana smiled and then tried to sit down next to Asuka.

"Stay away!" Asuka shouted before she could stop herself. "You shouldn't come near me."

Asuka scowled at Nana.

Nana looked sad, but she whispered, "Komori, um…I don't think you should believe what everyone's saying."

Asuka hadn't expected Nana to say that at all.

"Kudou…"

"I'm sorry. I know what I'm saying doesn't really matter…"

Nana bowed her head and started to walk away, but Asuka called out to her: "Kudou!"

The other girl turned around. Asuka smiled and said, "Thank you…"

After hearing that, Nana smiled, too.

“Right! You can call me Asuka.”

“Huh?”

“And I’ll start calling you Nana.”

“Okay…Asuka.”

“You don’t have to hesitate or sound so formal about it. We’re both kids, you know. Right, Nana?”

“Yes…Asuka.”

Nana sat down next to Asuka. Asuka was happy Nana was so kind.

Right then, they heard something in the cold wind whistling around them.

Shf, shf, shf…

The sound grew louder, and they realized it was the sound of footsteps.

The girls both looked toward the sound.

They saw a boy who was wearing red clothes and a red hood. It was Fushigi.

He walked over to them and stopped suddenly.

“So it’s you two, then?” said Fushigi as he eyed Asuka and Nana.

“Who are you?” Asuka couldn’t help but feel distressed that a boy she didn’t know was talking to her.

“Fushigi. Fushigi Senno. I travel around tracking urban legends.”

“Urban legends?!”

Even though both Asuka and Nana were confused, Fushigi ignored that and kept speaking. “You two are cursed. That’s why I’m here.”

“I don’t understand what you’re saying.”

Asuka was immediately wary of the boy.

“You two have the death blog’s curse.”

“Huh?!”

Asuka and Nana looked at each other automatically.

Why does this boy know about the death blog? Just as Asuka thought that, Nana stood up.

“Why are you suddenly saying this stuff?! Don’t scare Asuka!” Nana yelled and glared at Fushigi. But Fushigi’s expression didn’t change, and he just kept walking toward them.

“It’s the phone,” Fushigi said.

“A phone?” Nana repeated.

“Your phone is cursed.”

Fushigi came even closer to the two of them, holding out his hand.

“Ah!” Asuka gripped her phone tightly.

“Asuka!” Nana grabbed Asuka’s arm. “There’s something wrong with him! We need to get away!”

“Y-yeah!”

Asuka and Nana ran from the park.



As they ran, they both thought about Fushigi.

“Who is that Fushigi Senno guy?” Nana said. “How did he know about the death blog?”

“He said it was my phone that’s cursed, didn’t he?” Asuka said.

“Does that mean…?”

Asuka glanced at the phone in her hand. “Maybe my blog turned into a death blog only because I was writing it on my phone?”

So that meant death blogs were real.

“Then it actually was my fault…”

She had no idea why her phone was cursed. But Asuka suddenly felt scared and stopped running.

Nana looked at her and yelled, “You’re not cursed, Asuka!”

Nana tried her best to cheer up her friend in any way she could.

At that point, Nana noticed something up ahead, and her expression quickly changed.

“Asuka, look over there!”

They saw Fushigi walking toward them.

“We need to get away from him!”

“But…”
“We have no idea what he’ll do to us if he catches us!”

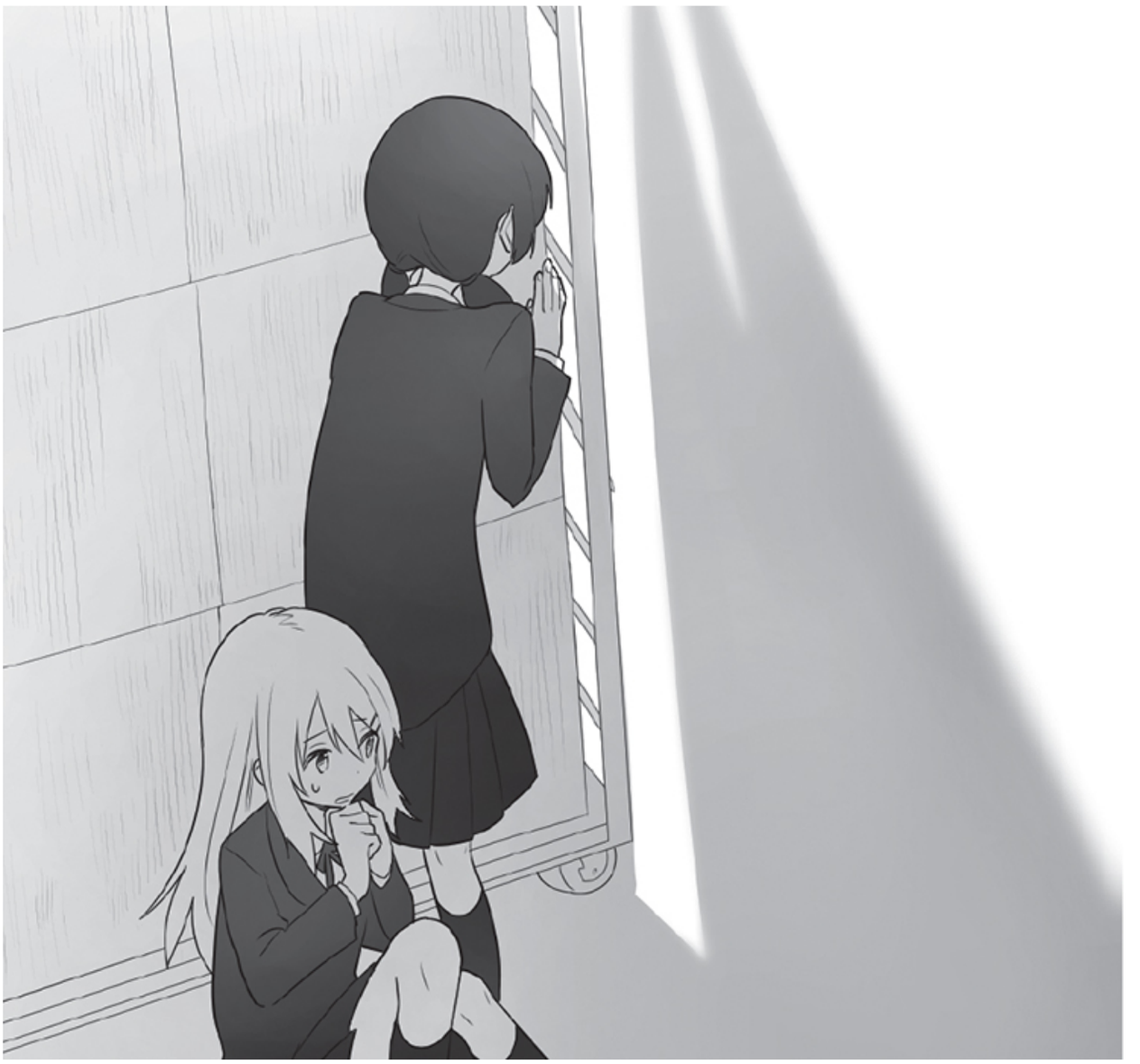
Once the two of them were close to a convenience store, they went through the parking lot and found a back door. Piles of merchandise had been set down behind the building, and there was a space large enough for them to hide between the boxes.
“Asuka, let’s hide here!”
“Okay!”
Asuka and Nana dove between the stacks of boxes and held their breaths as they hid.

Shf, shf, shf…

Nana cautiously peeked between the boxes to check where the footsteps were coming from.
Fushigi was getting closer.
“Asuka, we need to hide deeper in.”
“Yeah.”
They both moved to the very back.

Shf, shf, shf…
The footsteps became louder.
Shf, shf, shf…
Fushigi came even closer.
At this rate, he’ll find us…
Asuka shrank away in fear despite herself.
In that moment, Nana looked Asuka in the face.
“Right! The phone! Use your phone to write about him on your blog!”
When Asuka mentioned a person in her blog post, something terrible would happen to them. In other words, if she wrote about Fushigi, he would get hurt.





“But if I do that…”

Asuka didn’t want to do anything like that. She didn’t want anyone else to suffer.

“I know how you feel, but Fushigi will catch us if you don’t!” Nana said.

“I guess that’s worse than writing about him!” Asuka prepared herself to do it. “I don’t know what’ll happen to him, though!”

Half-desperate, Asuka started to write on her phone.

Right now, a boy named Fushigi Senno is trying to attack me!

As soon as she finished writing, she hit the SUBMIT button. The sentence turned into a blog post and showed up on her website.

“Will this save us…?”

Asuka cowered and watched as Fushigi approached.

Then a truck appeared behind him.

Is that truck going to hit him?

Asuka shuddered. At this rate, Fushigi would…

“Nooo!”

Asuka couldn’t help but shout. At that moment, the truck was directly behind Fushigi. But then it rushed past the boy like nothing was amiss.

“What?”

Apparently, the truck *wasn’t* going to hurt him. While Asuka was still bewildered, Fushigi made his way over to them.

“I finally found you…”

Asuka braced herself. Nana was cowering behind her.

“Give me your phone.”

Fushigi slowly reached toward Asuka, but then his hand stretched past her.

He was talking to Nana.

“What’s going on?” Asuka couldn’t help but say. Fushigi’s expression didn’t change as he quietly spoke.

“I already said. The phone is cursed. Her phone has the death blog’s curse on it.”

“How could that be…?”

Asuka had been convinced her phone was the cursed one. Nana had assumed the same thing.

“My phone’s cursed?” Nana pulled her phone from her pocket.

Fushigi nodded slightly.

“Did a strange girl talk to you recently?”

“Now that you mention it, a girl showed me this charm to help me make friends.”

Nana had come across that girl on the way home from school the other day. She looked at her phone.

“She said that if I put this mark on the back of my phone and tried exchanging messages with someone I like, I’d become friends with them.”

When they looked at it, there really was a strange symbol on the back of Nana’s phone.

“Is that thing the reason for the curse?” Asuka asked, then remembered the comments on her blog from the last few days.

She’d written about Keisuke Hashimoto, Mr. Takeda, and An Matsumura that week.

“I can’t believe it. What’s going on?”

Nana stared blankly at the mark.

Fushigi calmly said to Nana, “This isn’t a charm to help you make friends. It’s a curse to create a death blog. The blog of whoever you talk to turns into a death blog.”

“But…but then it was all my fault…”

When Nana fell to the ground in shock, Fushigi stooped in front of her.

“I can break the curse. What kind of clothes was the girl who taught you the curse wearing?”

“Huh? Her clothes? I think she was wearing a black hood…”

“Did you see her face?”

“Her face? Her face was… I’m sorry. I can’t remember it. No, actually, I couldn’t see it.”

Fushigi looked grim as he murmured, “So she must be nearby…”

Nana and Asuka watched as he pulled a red notebook from his pocket and came closer to Nana’s phone. At that moment, the

girls couldn't understand what was happening. They were dumbfounded by what they saw.

Fushigi held the notebook over Nana's phone and chanted. The mark glittered and disappeared; then it inverted and appeared on the page.

"What is that book?" Asuka asked.

But Fushigi's only response was "I broke the curse."

Then the boy closed the notebook, said, "See you," and walked away.

"Wait!" Asuka tried stopping him. "I don't understand it. Why would the girl in the black hood curse Nana's phone instead of mine?"

"Well…," Nana said. "I'm a loner with no friends, so the girl in the black hood must have thought I'd comment on a lot of blogs in order to make friends."

Fushigi didn't say anything.

"That's probably it," Nana said. "But don't worry. I didn't post on anyone's blog but yours."

"Then the girl in the black hood was trying to manipulate your feelings to spread the evil curse everywhere?"

Asuka grimaced, but Nana continued, "I lost all my friends when I left my old school, and I had no idea what to do after transferring here… But I had so much fun reading your blog, Asuka, and I wanted to actually become friends with you."

"Nana…"

Nana started to tear up as she looked down in shame. "But after all this, I could never be friends with you, never mind best friends."

"That's not true."

"What?"

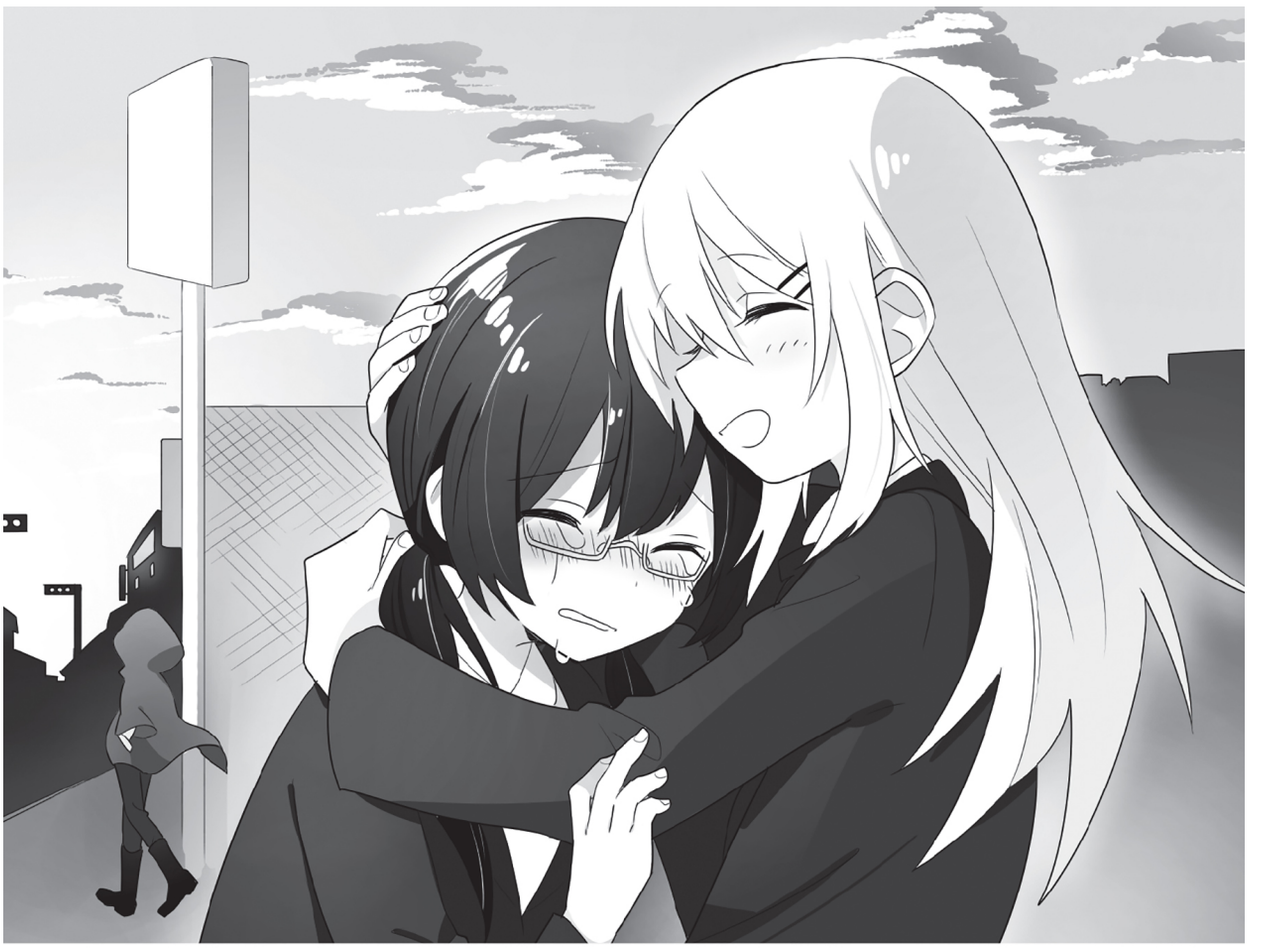
"When everyone else avoided me, you were the only one who stayed by my side." Asuka grinned as she looked back at Nana. "We're already besties."

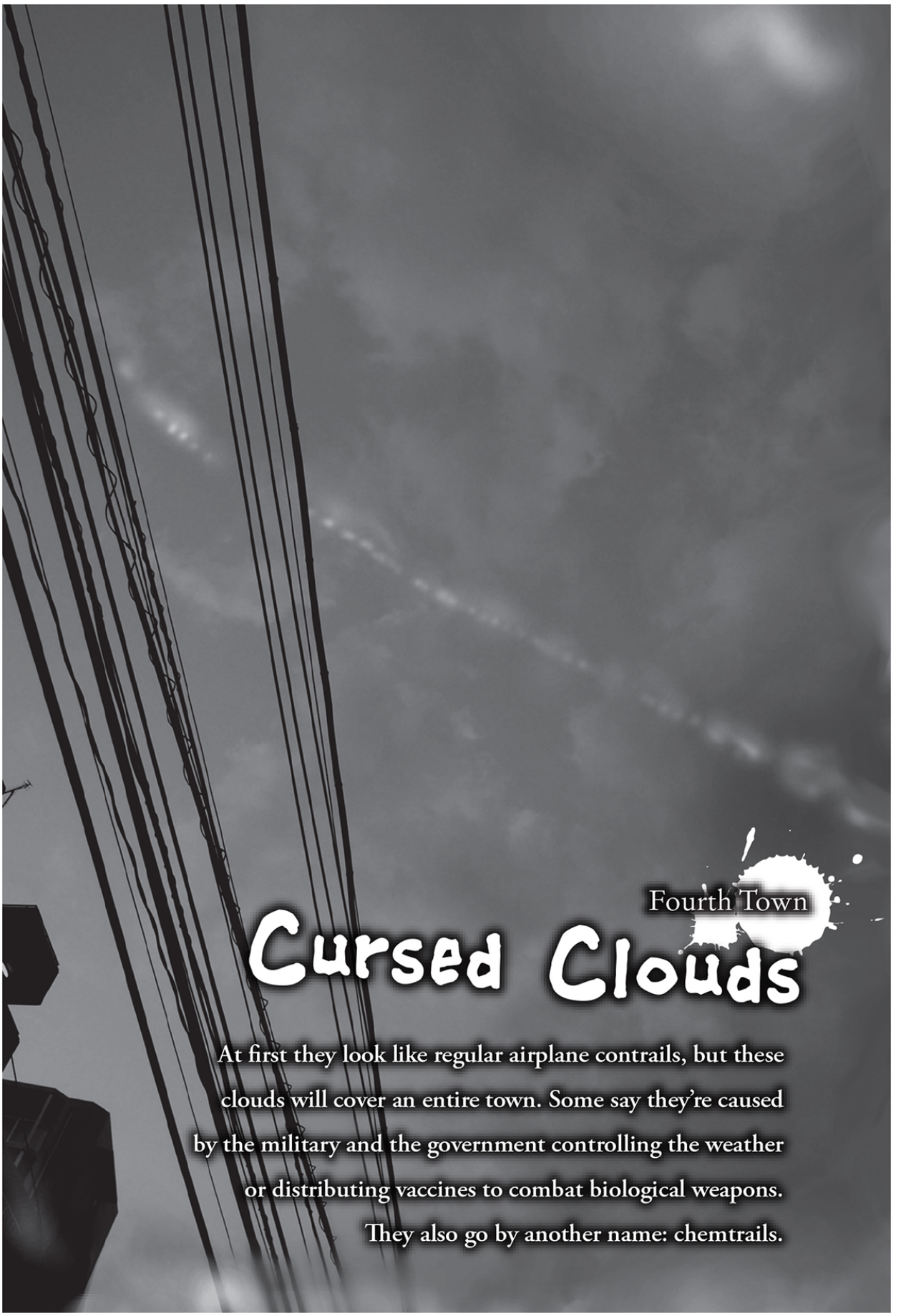
Nana wiped away the tears that ran down her face and hugged her friend.

"Thank you, Asuka."

"What are you talking about? I'm the one who should be thanking you."

The two of them hugged for a while, and by the time they thought to check, Fushigi was long gone.




Fourth Town
Cursed Clouds
At first they look like regular airplane contrails, but these clouds will cover an entire town. Some say they're caused by the military and the government controlling the weather or distributing vaccines to combat biological weapons. They also go by another name: chemtrails.



“Wow! That’s so pretty!”

Kaho Kakiuchi’s heart was stolen by the scenery she saw from the train window. She could see the ocean as the train rode along tracks parallel to the seaside.

She lived in Tokyo, so just seeing the ocean felt refreshing.

It was winter break, so Kaho—who was in the sixth grade—was going to visit her grandmother with her brother, Shinji, who was in his first year of high school. It had been three years since the last time they’d been to their grandmother’s house.

At first, they planned to go as a family, but their parents had work that would keep them busy right up to the end of the year, so Kaho and Shinji went ahead of them.

“Hey, Shinji, how much longer until we get to Grandma’s town?” Kaho asked her brother, who was sitting next to her reading a manga.

“Uh…right. I think about half an hour?”

It was their first time taking the train together without an adult. First, they had to ride the bullet train, and then they transferred lots of times. It’d been almost three hours since they started.

“Then we’re almost there!”

Kaho felt relieved they were so close.

“Ouch…”

Shinji suddenly yelped and made a face.

“What’s wrong?”

She glanced over and saw that he was holding his stomach.

“I just got a stomachache out of nowhere.”

“Maybe it was because of that gigantic lunch you had earlier?”

Shinji hadn’t been able to decide between two lunch box sets, so he bought and gobbled up both.

“I think I need to make a bathroom stop.”

“A bathroom stop…?”

They were on a local three-car train, so there was no bathroom.

“We’re almost at the station where Grandma lives, so can you wait until then?” she asked, but Shinji was looking worse by the moment.

“No way. I can’t wait any longer!”

“Seriously?”

They decided to get off at the next stop.

About three minutes later, they arrived at a small station by the coast. As soon as the train doors opened, Shinji dashed out and headed right for the bathroom at the end of the station platform.

“Geez, really?”

Shinji was supposed to be four years older than Kaho, but she couldn’t ever rely on him. He couldn’t stand scary stories, and he was even too scared to pick up bugs. The only time he acted like a big brother was when he helped her with homework every once in a while.

Kaho was *so* fed up with him. She watched the train leave and sat down on a bench.

The only other person in the station was a middle-aged man in a suit. It seemed like the man was going the opposite direction, toward Tokyo. As the man waited for his train, he scratched his head.

Two station employees were chatting away by the ticket gate. They were also scratching their arms as they talked.

This station was much smaller than the one near their grandmother’s house. Kaho could see a small shopping area outside and housewives with their kids going out to get groceries. There were even fewer people here than where Kaho or her grandmother lived, and all the buildings seemed quaint, too.

We must be way out in the countryside.

Kaho glanced at the station name written out on the sign next to the bench.

KUMOKAWA STATION

The words were written on a battered wooden sign in fading paint.

Kumokawa Station? Kumo *is “cloud,” and* kawa *means “river.” I’ve never heard of it before, though.*

“Sorry for the holdup!”

About five minutes later, Shinji was back from the bathroom.

“Whew, just in the nick of time. That was a close call.” Shinji wiped his hands with a handkerchief and smiled.

“Seriously?!”

“Sorry, really, I am. So anyway, how long until the next train?”

“What?”

Kaho hadn’t checked the schedule yet. The two of them walked over to the timetable, which was just a few steps from the bench.

“The next one is, uhh… What?! It’s over an hour from now?!”





Apparently, only one train stopped per hour at the station.

“Aw, man. Guess we’re gonna have to wait.”

“This is all your fault, Shinji.”

“I can’t help that I got a stomachache.”

“I guess, but still… …” Kaho let out a little sigh.

“What’s that?” Shinji suddenly said.

“What?”

Shinji was looking up at the sky. Kaho followed his gaze and saw a strange cloud hanging in the air. It was puffy like smoke, and the cloud drew a long line across the blue sky.

It wasn’t just one cloud, though—several of them stretched across the sky.

“Do you think planes made those?” Kaho asked, but Shinji shook his head.

“No way. Look closer. They’re going in different directions.”

Normally, trails made by planes would only be in one direction, so they shouldn’t have been crisscrossing the sky.

“Then what are they?”

“Dunno. Why are you asking me?”

The strange clouds were layered over one another like they were forming a net that covered the town.

“It feels kind of ominous.”

“Yeah, they’re a little scary…”

Why were those clouds only above the town when the rest of the sky was clear?

Kaho and Shinji had never seen clouds like these before.

“Hey, look at that guy!” Shinji shouted after surveying the platform.

“What now?”

“That guy! Over there!” Shinji animatedly pointed to the end of the platform.

The middle-aged man in the suit waiting for the train to Tokyo was standing there.

“It’s just a man. He’s been there this whole time.”

“No, look more closely. There’s something wrong with him!”

“What?”

Kaho had no idea why Shinji was saying that, but she carefully observed the man anyway. There *was* something off about him. Kaho’s eyes went wide.

“How could that be…?”

The man in the suit was standing there, just like she’d thought, but for some reason, he still had his hand up to scratch his head and hadn’t even budged.

When she looked very closely, she could see that his face was gray. Actually, it wasn’t just his face. His neck and hands and every bit of skin that wasn’t covered by his suit looked ashen.

“He must’ve been a statue this whole time.”

“No, he was moving earlier…,” Kaho said.

“Then why does he look like that now?”

Shinji’s curiosity got the better of him, and he cautiously approached the man and spoke to him. “Um, are you all right?”

Shinji gently touched the man’s shoulder.

Then…

Slam!

…the man lost his balance and fell right onto his back.

“Aaaah!” Kaho cried out in surprise.

“A-are you okay?!” Shinji tried to help the man up, but the man didn’t move at all—he was frozen in place scratching his head, just like a statue.

“Shinji, what’s going on?”

“How would I know?!”

Kaho looked around. “Right! The station employees can help!”

“Y-yeah, you’re right!”

Kaho and Shinji rushed to the ticket gates.

“Um, excuse me!”

Once they got there, they called into the employee office.

“There’s an emergency!”

“A man froze like a statue on the platform!”

Kaho and Shinji shouted at the two employees sitting in the office.

But…

“Kaho, aren’t they…?”

“Yeah, they are…”

…the two station employees were also frozen like statues.

“What the heck is happening?” Shinji said.

“But they were talking like normal just a bit ago…”

“This is bad. Something’s wrong with this place.” Shinji looked over at the ticket gates. “Kaho, let’s get out of here!”

“What?”

“As long as we stay in this station, we’re in danger!”

“But…”

“C’mon, let’s hurry!” Shinji said, and he fed his ticket through the gate, then ran straight outside.

“Shinji!”

Kaho ran after her brother, and they both fled the station.

But the moment they got outside, Kaho and Shinji stopped in their tracks.

About a dozen people were at the roundabout in front of the station, but all the old folks, the kids, the housewives, and even the babies being carried by the housewives were stiff and not moving at all.

“I can’t believe what I’m seeing…”

“Ahhh…”

They had no idea what was happening.

Kaho looked over at Shinji.

“Oh! Your phone! We can call someone for help!”

“My phone… Right!”

Shinji took his cell out of his pocket and called their mom. But he pulled it away from his ear immediately.

“What’s wrong?”

“It’s, um…” He showed it to Kaho. “It won’t connect.”

“What?”

Kaho grabbed the phone from Shinji’s hands and held it up to her ear. But it didn’t even have a signal. She couldn’t hear the dial tone.

Kaho tried to make a call on her own phone, but it wouldn’t connect, either.

“How about the internet?! We can send a message!”

Kaho pressed a button on her phone, but she couldn't get online, either.

"Why? What's happening?"

"How are you moving?"

Suddenly, they heard a voice from behind them.

It was pitched low and sounded like a man's.

Kaho and Shinji flinched and turned around to face where the voice had come from. They saw a creepy-looking guy dressed in a white hazmat suit. His face was also covered by a giant mask, so they couldn't make out his features.

But they *could* tell he was staring straight at them.

"Oh, um…"

Shinji started to answer, but the man just repeated the question.

"How? How? How are you moving?"

The man slowly started walking toward them. Every time he took a step, he would swing the arm on the same side as his foot, so his whole body swayed one way, then the other with each step.



“Wh-what’s wrong with him?!”

The way he moved was unnatural. It was almost like the way a robot, or even a doll, would move.

He closed in on them.

“Shinji, let’s go!”

“Y-yeah!”

They were so frightened, they dashed off in a panic.



As they ran through the shopping street, they became even more scared.

“Who was that man?”

“Why was he wearing a hazmat suit?!”

They looked around and saw that the people in the shopping area were frozen.

“What is all this?”

With no idea what was going on, they continued to run.

Bwrrrrrm, bwrrrrm, bwrrrrrm.

They heard something that sounded like a horn.

Bwrrrrrm, bwrrrrm, bwrrrrrm.

The sound was getting louder and louder.

“What is that?”

“I have no clue!”

Right at that moment, they also heard someone coming toward them from somewhere else in the shopping area.

“Whew! Looks like *someone’s* not frozen!” Shinji ran in the direction of the footsteps to ask for help.

“Wait!” Kaho stopped him.

She peered into the distance, but the person wasn’t a normal person at all. They wore a hazmat suit, just like the man from earlier. The person’s hands and legs moved in tandem as they swayed from side to side like a pendulum, plodding forward.

Then Kaho realized it wasn't just one of them. About ten others came out of the shops and alleys on the street and approached Kaho and Shinji.

"Ah!"

"Shinji, this way!"

Kaho pulled Shinji along back the way they'd come. But when they turned around, even more people in suits were closing in.

"How? How? How are you moving?"

All the people in the suits were saying the same thing.

"That horn must have called more of them…"

"Shinji, I'm scared…"

They were so frightened, they froze to the spot.

"…ver here!"

Suddenly, Kaho heard a whisper.

"Who is it?"

"Over here!" She heard it again.

Kaho stared in the direction the voice had come from. Then she saw a boy standing in the shadow of a telephone pole in an alley between the shops.

"You two, get over here," he quickly said to Kaho and Shinji and motioned for them to move.

For some reason, he was the only person who wasn't still as a statue.

"Shinji!"

"Right."

They had no other option.

They raced over to the boy as fast as they could.

When they went through the small side street, they came to a large two-lane road on the other side. The ocean spread into the distance beyond the road. Kaho and Shinji ran toward the boy on that road.

"Hey, who are you?"

"I'm Fushigi Senno," the boy said.

"Why's everyone frozen?"

"It's because of this town."

“The town…?”

Kaho and Shinji couldn’t follow what Fushigi was saying.

Fushigi reached his hand out to signal for the other two to stop. They were looking at a large bridge that divided this town from the neighboring one. Near the bridge, they saw more people in hazmat suits than they could count gathered around.

“What are they doing?”

“The only way out of this place is that bridge.”

“Are they waiting to ambush us?”

“That can’t be! What’s wrong with this place?” Kaho said, and Fushigi stared at the two of them.

“This place is affected by the cursed clouds.”

“The cursed clouds?”

“Do you mean those…?”

Shinji and Kaho both looked up at the same time where the fluffy clouds layered over the town like a net.

“So are those weird clouds the cursed ones?” Kaho murmured, and Fushigi nodded.

“They’re officially called chemtrails. They’re a phenomenon straight from an urban legend.”

“An urban legend? A *phenomenon*?”

“They may look like contrails from a plane at first, but they’re no ordinary clouds. Anyone in a town covered by those clouds will turn to stone.”

“What?”

Kaho remembered all the people at the station and the shopping street. That had been the cursed clouds’ doing.

“Then what about those people in the hazmat suits? Who are they?” Shinji was getting worked up as he questioned Fushigi.

“They’re the Ones Who Enjoy Freedom. They’re only free in this town when the cursed clouds are out, but they’re terrified of humans, so they wear suits to protect themselves just in case.”

The Ones Who Enjoy Freedom?

Terrified of humans?

Kaho and Shinji had no idea what Fushigi was talking about, and he was making less and less sense.

“But anyway, tell me how you two got here,” Fushigi said.

“We’re not really sure, either. We just happened to get off at this station…” Kaho told Fushigi the story of how they’d ended up there.

“I see,” Fushigi said. “So basically you two aren’t from this town.”

“That’s right.”

“It’s probably been decades since anyone other than a resident has stepped into this town.”

“What do you mean?”

“This is a special place. Only people who live here come to it,” Fushigi said.

“No one comes here unless they live here? There’s no way somewhere like that could be real,” Shinji snapped at Fushigi.

“Haven’t you seen them before? Towns you know the names of but never go to, ones you pass by on the train but never stop at? This place is one of those, but it’s even more special, since *no one* comes here unless they live here.”

“What…?”

Shinji seemed skeptical. So did Kaho.

Then Fushigi suddenly smiled.

“You two came to a town no one visits. In other words, *she* changed the rules of the urban legend.”

“She?” Shinji asked Fushigi, but he didn’t get a response.

“I feel itchy.” Kaho started to scratch her ankle.

Something felt wrong. Her ankle felt oddly hard. She glanced down and saw that her right ankle was turning gray.

“Wait, is this…?!”

“Kaho, look!” Shinji shouted beside her.

She looked over to see Shinji’s right ankle was also gray.

“Seems like you two have started to harden up, too,” Fushigi said, but he was very calm.

“We’re *hardening*? You mean like the people in this town?”

“It appears the cursed clouds’ power settled into you both.”

According to Fushigi, the clouds appeared in the town regularly.

“While the clouds are out, which can last for a few minutes to a few hours, the residents all freeze. They don’t have any memory of what happens during that time, and they have no idea the Ones Who Enjoy Freedom exist. But…” Fushigi leveled the two with a look. “After you’ve hardened like a statue once, you can’t *ever* leave this town again. You have ten minutes—no, five. You need to get out of here as soon as possible…”

Kaho and Shinji both gulped.

“Or else…you two are going to completely harden,” Fushigi said.

They had five minutes left…

The only way out was by crossing that bridge to the next town. But the Ones Who Enjoy Freedom in the hazmat suits were gathered there waiting for them. Kaho and Shinji realized then that their legs up to their shins were stiff.

“Kaho, what do we do?!”

“Don’t ask me!”

Kaho knew she couldn’t rely on Shinji, since he was already flustered, so she looked over at Fushigi. For some reason, he wasn’t hardening.

Was he not a resident of the town or one of the Ones Who Enjoy Freedom?

Then maybe he would help them.

“We want to leave this town. Please help us!”

Fushigi let out a small sigh. “Sheesh. Normally, I wouldn’t have even helped you earlier, but it’ll be harder to do what I need to with you around.”

“What’s that?”

“It’s none of your business. All right, fine… Follow me.”

“You mean it?”

“But you only have one chance,” Fushigi said, then grabbed a rock the size of a fist and stared at the bridge.

“You ready?” he said, and Kaho nodded.

But Shinji didn’t make any attempt to move.

“Kaho, I’m scared… What if we mess this up?”

“Shinji…”

“I mean, if we turn into statues, at least we won’t die. It’s better if we don’t do anything.”

“Come on! Get it together!”

“B-but…”

“Agh! Enough! You’re so pathetic!” Kaho grabbed Shinji’s hand and looked at Fushigi.

The next moment, Fushigi ran toward the bridge. Kaho and Shinji followed after him. As they ran, Fushigi swung up his arm, holding the rock in his hand.

“Hraaaaah!!!” he yelled as he threw the rock really far.

Wham!

The rock fell somewhere in the complete opposite direction of the bridge and made a loud noise.

All the Ones Who Enjoy Freedom looked over at the rock at once. Then they started doing their stiff walk to the spot where it had landed.

“Now!” Fushigi glanced at Kaho and Shinji and then sped toward the bridge, which the Ones Who Enjoy Freedom had completely abandoned.



“Shinji!”

“Got it!”

Kaho and Shinji followed after Fushigi.

The bridge was over fifty yards long. They were nearly at the bridge and started to cross, but one of the Ones Who Enjoy Freedom on the other side of the road had noticed them.

“How? How? How are you moving?”

Then all the other ones turned to the bridge at once.

“How? How? How are you moving?”

“Hurry!” Fushigi shouted.

Kaho and Shinji desperately worked through the fear that was screaming at them to freeze like a deer in the headlights, and they kept running.

But right then…

“Ah!”

…Kaho tripped on a hole and fell.

“Kaho!”

The Ones Who Enjoy Freedom rushed toward her.

“S-stay back!”

Kaho tried to scramble away, but her leg that had turned gray wouldn’t move like it normally did.

“How? How? How are you moving?”

The Ones Who Enjoy Freedom were right in front of Kaho, and they were trying to surround her.

“Nooo!!!”

“Stop! Get away from my sister!”

In that moment, Shinji slammed his body into the Ones Who Enjoy Freedom.

“Shinji!”

“Kaho! Hurry and get up!” Shinji offered Kaho a hand.

“Okay!”

Kaho firmly grabbed Shinji’s hand, but her leg still wouldn’t move.

“Stand up, Kaho!”

Shinji pulled his sister, but the Ones Who Enjoy Freedom were coming for them again.

“Get away from Kaho!” Shinji gathered all the strength he could to push them away.

Then a member of the Ones Who Enjoy Freedom staggered and tumbled to the ground. That made their mask fall off, so Kaho and Shinji could see what was underneath.

When they saw its face, their eyes went wide.

The face under the mask was a mannequin's.

"How could that be…?"

Kaho was so scared that she latched on to Shinji.

Shinji was also so frightened that his whole body started to shake.

"You saw! You saw! You saw!"

The other Ones Who Enjoy Freedom all started pulling their masks off, too.

They all had mannequin faces.

"You saw! You saw! You saw!"

The mannequins started their pendulum walk again and swayed from side to side as they chased after Kaho and Shinji.

"Kaho…"

"Shinji…"

The two of them shivered and trembled as they backed away little by little. The mannequins were still coming after them, but for some reason, they didn't attack. Even though they were right in front of Kaho and Shinji, the mannequins didn't move forward.

"You're safe now. They can't come any closer than this," Fushigi said to the two of them.

"What do you mean?"

"See."

Fushigi pointed at the ground by their feet.

They'd crossed the bridge without even realizing it.

"These guys can't leave the town."

When they'd been backing away in fear, they had stepped across town.

"Are we okay now?"

But Fushigi ignored the two of them and started walking back toward the mannequins.

“Wait, where are you going?”

“Back to town,” Fushigi replied.

“It’s too dangerous!”

“I have something I need to do there.”

“But…”

“Anyway, check your legs.”

Suddenly, Kaho and Shinji looked down at themselves.

“Oh!”

Their legs were back to normal.

“Now you don’t have anything to worry about. As long as you don’t come back to this town, you won’t start hardening up again.”

Then Fushigi stared the two of them down.

“But you probably shouldn’t tell anyone about this,” he said.

Then Fushigi turned to face the street in the neighboring town.

A black car was parked there. Two men in dark suits and sunglasses were sitting inside it.

“Who are they?”

“This is a large curse, and one that attracts attention, so you’re probably not the only people who noticed. Not everyone is scared of curses. There are plenty of people who would use this curse for their own benefit.”

Fushigi glared at the two men. Kaho and Shinji had no idea who the men could possibly be, but they did at least know they weren’t normal people.

“As long as you don’t talk about this to anyone, they—or rather the organization they belong to—won’t know that you know. Don’t forget that. And you can’t ever come back to this town, either,” Fushigi said. He was gripping something very hard in his hands.

It was a bright-red notebook.

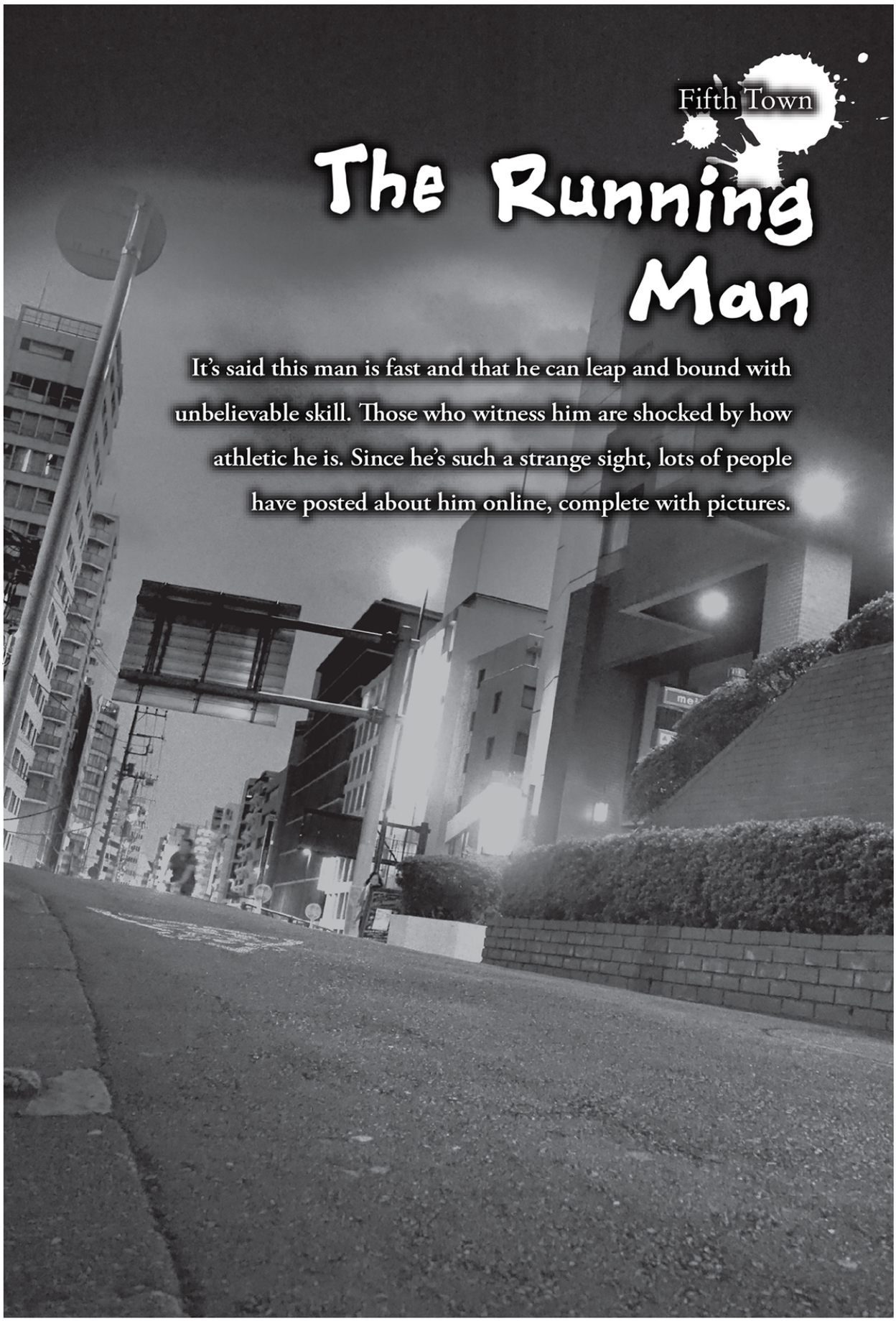
Fushigi started retracing his steps into town without looking back.

Several hours passed after that.

Kaho and Shinji made it to their grandmother's house safe and sound, but it was already night by the time they arrived. Their grandmother was worried about why they were so late, but they lied and told her it was because they ate on the way there.

After that, Kaho and Shinji never talked about that town ever again.

The town and the boy they'd met became their shared secret.


Fifth Town
The Running Man
It's said this man is fast and that he can leap and bound with unbelievable skill. Those who witness him are shocked by how athletic he is. Since he's such a strange sight, lots of people have posted about him online, complete with pictures.



A man was being chased.

“Wait!”

“Stop running!”

Some middle school kids were trailing him.

“Catch him!”

“If we capture him, we’ll be famous!”

The kids were holding tree branches, rocks—all kinds of things. Some were even wielding their cell phones.

What in the world is going on?! Why’s this happening to me?! the man thought over and over as he ran as fast as he could.

Even though it was winter, gigantic drops of sweat were dripping down his forehead. His eyes were bloodshot because he hadn’t slept.

“Stop him!”

The kid at the very front of the pack threw a rock at the man.

“Whoa!”

The rock flew toward him but fell right next to him.

“What’s the deal?! You could’ve hurt me!” the man yelled automatically.

“I-it can talk… …”

The kids stared at the man, wide-eyed.

“It’s real!”

Oh, crud!

“That’s terrifying!”

“It gives me the creeps!”

The kids’ exclamations created a commotion.

“Didja just call me creepy?”

One of the kids held up their phone to take a picture of him.

“Q-quit it!”

The man tried to escape and started running again.

“Hey! Don’t let it get away!”

“Lemme get a picture!”

The kids hollered as they chased after him.

Why the heck is this happening to me?!

The man was close to tears as he dashed away.

I never did anything wrong. But I'm still in this pickle… Sheesh!

Then he saw a truck stopped in the road. The man crouched down and hid under the truck.

"Where'd it go?"

"I'm pretty sure it went this way."

The kids filed past him. He stared right at their feet from under the truck. There were even more of them than before. Some kids now even had bats that they probably brought from home. He couldn't let them hit him with one of those.

"Find it! It's got to be close by!"

"We're gonna get a picture for sure!"

The kids yelled to each other and then left to continue searching for the man.

Five minutes passed, then ten, then fifteen…

The man kept himself hidden in the same spot the whole time. Finally, he could tell the kids weren't nearby anymore.

"Phew…"

The man was relieved and slowly made his way out from under the truck, sighing as he went.

Why is every day like this…?

Since half a month before, whenever anyone saw the man, they would scream and flee, or chase after him to try to catch him.

Why is this happening to me?!

He gritted his teeth and scowled.

Then he thought back to what had happened half a month ago.



He was a cameraman for a weekly magazine. His job was to take candid photos of celebrities for the news. It hadn't mattered to him if the people he took photos of hated him or if bad things happened after the pictures were published. The only thing that mattered was whether he got his next scoop.

"Sir, do you know about the faceless kid?"

That was back when he was in the magazine publisher's editor room. One day, after a meeting, he started chatting away with a junior cameraman named Saitou.

"The faceless kid? Like the urban legend?" the man asked.

The faceless kid was some mysterious tyke who wore a hood. Apparently, if you came across them, strange things would start happening to you.

"Yeah, exactly," Saitou said. "The faceless kid was supposedly spotted in some town not long ago."

"So what? What're you trying to say, wise guy?"

The cameraman was a fan of urban legends, but that didn't mean he believed in them.

"I don't believe in it, either, of course," Saitou said. "But if it were true, it'd be the scoop of the century, wouldn't it?"

"The scoop of the century, huh…?"

The man was hooked by those words before he knew it. Around then, there had been something else on his mind.

Another cameraman his age at the same publisher had gotten photos of a celebrity having secret meetings with someone, and he hit it big in the company.

Meanwhile, the man hadn't gotten any scoops like that at all.

If I get a shot of this faceless kid, maybe I'll get my time in the spotlight, too…

"Ya got that right—sounds like a whopper of a scoop!"

The man made Saitou tell him where the faceless kid had shown up.

A few days later.

The man was in the town Saitou had told him about. It was a small country town that wasn't special in any way. The man had his trusty camera around his neck, so he was ready to take a picture at any time. He decided to start scoping out the place by talking to the locals.

"Excuse me. Here's my card," the man said as he handed over his business card.

Most people he talked to seemed to open up and relax as soon as they saw his card.

"A faceless kid? Yeah, I've heard the rumors."

“I’ve heard that the people living here have seen the kid.”

“You want to know whether *I’ve* seen them? Come on, that stuff isn’t real.”

Everyone in town seemed to know that others had seen the faceless kid around, but all he found were rumors. He interviewed people from morning until night, but he couldn’t find anyone who had seen the kid firsthand or anyone who knew someone who had.

Darn, it must’ve all just been a rumor.

The man was upset, since he had traveled to such a faraway place and gotten nothing to show for it. But he probably wouldn’t find anything if he kept looking into the faceless kid.

So the man decided he didn’t have any other choice but to go home.

But as the man rode back to the station in a taxi, he came across some surprising testimony.

“A faceless kid? Dunno much about that, but I have seen a weird kid hanging around,” the taxi driver told him.

“Wh-where did you see them?” the man asked with great interest as he leaned forward from the back seat.

“It was around some trees on the outskirts of town.”

According to the driver, while he was driving his taxi at night, he’d seen a kid right outside a grove of trees. He said it was dark, so he hadn’t been able to see too well, but they were wearing a hood and dark clothes.

At first, he thought it was some kid from the neighborhood, but he’d only see them around midnight when they shouldn’t have been out. There weren’t any houses near the trees, either, so he normally didn’t see anyone walking around there.

The man asked the driver to take him to the trees.

Once the man was at the outskirts of town, he looked for a place to hide.

It was nine at night. If the taxi driver was telling the truth, the faceless kid would be there in three hours. Suddenly, the man saw a shack near the trees. There was a field next to it, and he

saw what he thought was farming equipment and fertilizer in the shack.

I should be able to conceal myself here.

The man hid in the shadow of the shack and pointed his camera at the trees.

C'mon, hurry it up.

Just like the taxi driver had said, no one was around.

The streetlamps weren't on, and only the moonlight faintly lit the ground. But the man didn't move an inch as he kept his camera aimed at the trees.

He was used to waiting. It was all part of the job.

If he could actually get a picture of the faceless kid, he would have a huge scoop.

He waited in anticipation for midnight.

It was 11:50 PM.

In ten more minutes, it would be time, just like the taxi driver had told him.

Any minute now…

He unconsciously gripped his camera tighter.

Then it was midnight.

But he didn't see anyone near the trees. Five minutes passed, then ten, but no one showed.

Aww, man. I thought I was getting a scoop today…

The man decided to give up, and he relaxed his grip on the camera.

But right then…

"You wanted a picture of me?"

The man felt a shudder run through him, and he spun around. He saw a child wearing a black hood behind him. Based on the voice, it was a girl.

"A-are you the kid?!"

The man scrambled for his camera and pressed the button. The shutter went off. At the same time the flash went off, he caught a brief glimpse of the girl's face. He startled when he saw her face on the LCD screen of the camera.

The girl had no eyes, nose, or mouth. He only saw perfectly smooth and pale skin under the hood.

“Whoa. You’re real. The faceless kid is real…”

“So, are you scared of me?”

The faceless kid slipped right up to the man.

“K-keep back!”

The man actually did start to feel afraid, so he tried to run away. But his body wouldn’t listen to him.

“So, are you scared?”

“Ahhh…”

“Are you scared of me?”



“Ahh, uhhh…”

“Hey… …”

The faceless kid snickered as she came uncomfortably close to the man’s eyes.

“So, why don’t you join me? You can be scary, just like me.”

“Aaaaaah!!!”

The next moment, the man saw his muddy camera on the ground.

“This camera cost a fortune! How could you do this to me…?”

That was the last thing the man remembered muttering to himself before he lost consciousness.

I should’ve gotten the heck out of Dodge back then.

The man now regretted going to the area near the trees.

For the last half month, he hadn’t had a decent meal. He hadn’t been able to sleep properly, either. The moment anyone saw him, they’d scream or chase him, and he was tired inside and out.

I just gotta hold out a little longer…

The man looked across the road from the top of a hill. He could see a skyscraper in the distance. He’d spent half a month traveling back to the town he was from.



As soon as he got back, he went to the publisher he worked for.

Everybody’s probably worried sick, since they haven’t heard a peep from me for half a month, he thought as he walked. *And I know I can count on everybody to help me outta this situation.*

That had been his only hope while he journeyed for half a month.

Eventually, the man got to the building the publisher was based in. Then he saw Saitou, the junior cameraman, at the entrance.

Bingo! I’ve found someone!

The man broke into a smile and ran over to his coworker. But then he realized Saitou was talking to another coworker.

“Hey, remember that senior cameraman who went out to get a shot? He hasn’t come back yet, huh?”

Apparently, they were talking about him.

The man listened in from the shadows.

“He hasn’t? I never noticed. We can keep this place running without that guy.”

Saitou didn’t even deny it. Instead, he laughed.

D-did he just say what I think he did?!

The man had taught Saitou the ropes back when he was still new. But this was how he repaid him…

“What are you on about?!” the man yelled, and he ran up to Saitou and his coworker. “You guys have any idea how hard it was just to make it back here?! I break my back walking all the way home, and here you two are, blabbering behind my back!”

Saitou and the other coworker were taken aback as the man shouted at them.

“S-sir, is that you…?”

“You got that right!”

“You’re serious…?”

“Do I look like I’m joking?!”

“Wow! I had no idea this stuff was real! Sir, just wait right there for a sec…”

Saitou pulled something out of his shoulder bag.

It was a camera.

“What?!”

To the man’s surprise, Saitou held up the camera and aimed it at him.

“Wh-what do you think you’re doing?!”

“There’s my scoop!”

Saitou ignored the man’s bewilderment and clicked the shutter button.

“Stop!”

Saitou kept taking pictures, and the man felt panic set in.

“Stop! Stop! Darn you!”

The man hurried away.

It was evening.

He was hiding in a back alley and staring blankly into the air. Fortunately, Saitou and his coworker hadn't caught him, but he knew he couldn't go back to his workplace.

I can't believe my own buds did me dirty, too…

But had they ever been his buddies to begin with?

He remembered that no one had been worried he was gone, and gloom showed on his face.

Whimper…

Suddenly, the man saw a puppy come over to him. It seemed to be a stray.

Whimper… Whimper…

The puppy cuddled up to him and happily wagged its tail.

"You're the only one who's been nice to me since I ended up in this pickle."

The man looked at the puppy and smiled. But he had no idea what to do now. He was close to tears again.

It's all the faceless kid's fault…

The moment he thought that, the man realized something.

That's right… I ended up in this mess because of her. Then all I've got to do is find her again!

The past half month, the man had been thinking of nothing but going home. But returning wasn't going to solve his problem.

If I find her and make her change me back, then nobody'll chase after me anymore!

The man started heading for that grove of trees to find the faceless kid.



He walked as quickly as he could to the town in the countryside.

It was past ten at night.

Right, she appears around midnight.

The man waited in the shadow of the shack near the trees just like he had before.

I'm gonna catch her. Then I'm gonna make her put things back the way they were so I can return to my old life.

The man waited for the time to come.

It was half past eleven now.

It was dark and quiet all around him, and the area was only visible thanks to the light of the moon. The man kept hidden as he watched the trees.

Almost…

The man waited, ready to pounce whenever the faceless kid appeared.

As he waited, he thought about her.

"It's all her fault…all her fault…"

When he'd met the faceless kid, he'd felt scared.

He hadn't really wanted to ever see her again. But he couldn't let her get away with this. Now he was angry.

If I see her, I'm gonna take a bite outta her. She's not gonna look down on me again…

Rustle, rustle.

Suddenly, he heard grass rustling near the trees.

"What's that?"

The man stared, trying to see what it was. Then he saw a figure come out from the trees.

Based on height, it was probably a child. It was pitch-black, so the man couldn't see much, but he could tell the kid was wearing a hood.

It's her!

The man's spirits rose as he leaped out of the shadow of the shack.

The kid who had come out from the trees was walking in the opposite direction.

"Wait! Stop!"

The man scurried after them.

No doubt about it! That's got to be her!

The man dashed forward and shouted at the figure ahead of him, "Stop! You, faceless kid!"

In that moment, the kid froze.

“I knew it! How could you do this to me?!”

The man tried to chomp down on the kid with his pearly whites, but the child shook her head.

“You’ve mistaken me for someone else.”

“What?”

That was when the man realized the kid wasn’t a girl at all, since *he* had a boy’s voice. The man came to a flustered halt.

When he looked under the kid’s hood, he saw pale skin, but also large clear eyes, a straight nose, and handsomely thin lips. The boy’s clothes in the moonlight also weren’t black. They were bright red.

The boy was actually Fushigi.

“How could that be…?”

The man realized he had gotten the wrong person. He quickly grew upset.

The man could only stare at Fushigi.

“Did the faceless kid curse you?”

“How’d you know?!” the man shouted, and Fushigi crouched down to be at eye level with the man.

“Have you ever seen a human who looks like you?”

The man’s face was just ten inches from the ground.

He wasn’t lying down or crawling, either. He also had brown fluffy fur covering his whole body, and he was standing on all fours—as in his front and hind legs. He had paw pads at the bottom of his feet and a tail sprouting out of his behind.

The man was in the body of a dog.

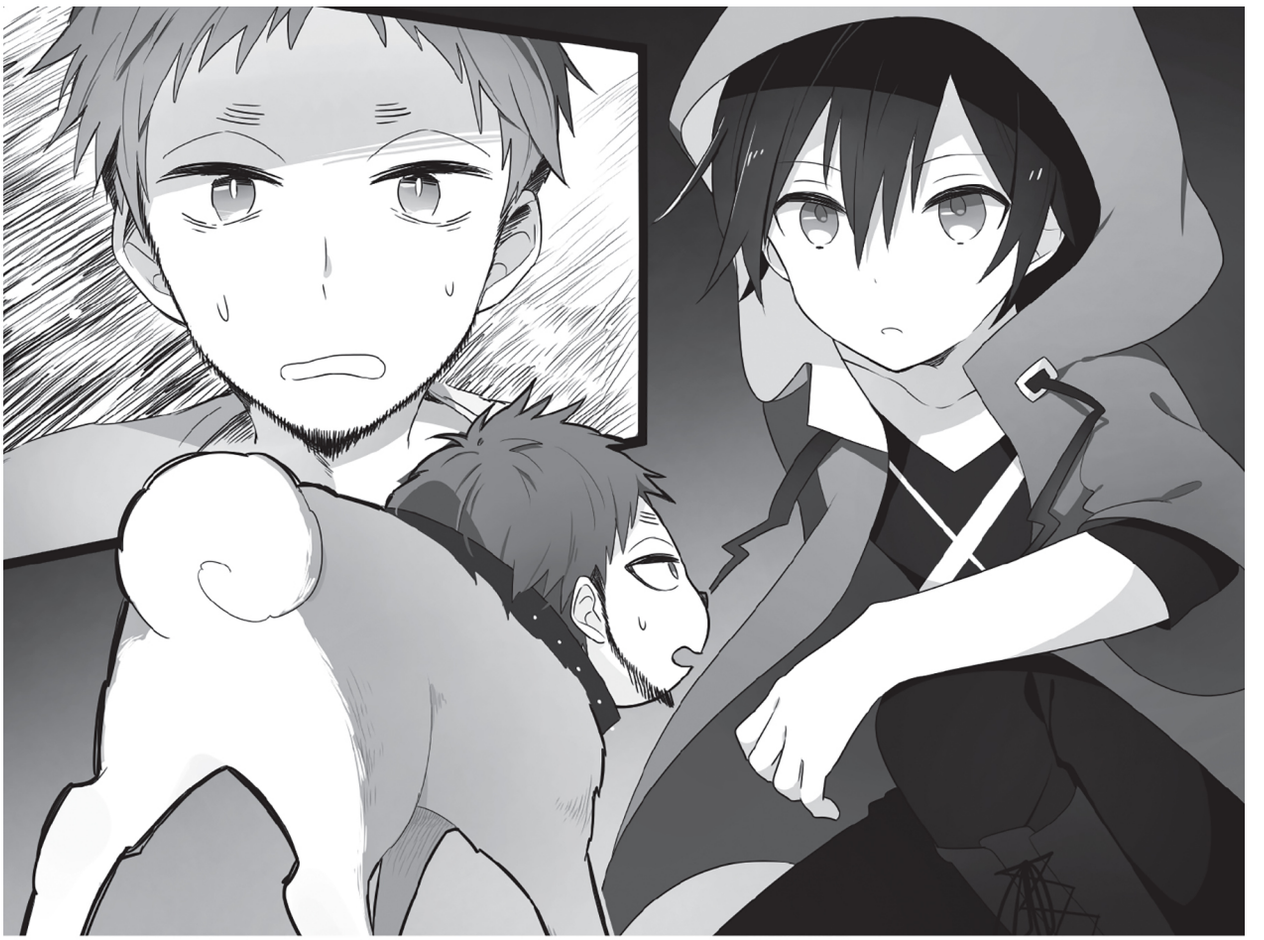
But even though he had a dog’s body, he had a human face.

The man had been turned into a Human-Faced Dog.

“She’s ruthless. How could she make an actual person into a Human-Faced Dog…?”

“She? Ya know the faceless kid?” the man asked, and Fushigi nodded.

“I’m chasing after the faceless kid, who’s actually a girl named Himitsu.”



* * *

“Himitsu…that’s her name? Wait, where the heck is she right now?!”

All Fushigi replied with was “I have no idea. I came here since I heard she was around, but I think she already left.”

“She left? How do you know that?”

“Because I can sense her. If she were nearby, I would have felt her immediately. Himitsu only left her curses in this town.”

“Curses? Whaddaya mean by that?”

But then the man automatically looked at his own paws.

“Himitsu has the power to make urban legends real. She wanders from town to town using her power to create curses to make monsters and phenomena from urban legends a reality.”

“Does that mean…?”

The man thought back to when Himitsu attacked him.

“So, why don’t you join me? You can be scary, just like me.”

“B-but why does she do that? Why’d she have to go and curse me, of all people?”

“I have no idea.”

“What do you mean you have no idea?!”

“She doesn’t just curse anyone. You might have upset her.”

The man startled.

“I see. So that’s it…”

The man told Fushigi why he thought Himitsu might have cursed him.

Then Fushigi let out a little sigh.

“I get it. So you hid away and tried to take a picture of her for some sensationalist magazine. I think that’d make anyone angry.” Fushigi seemed appalled by the man’s behavior. “Have you ever thought about the people you hurt by taking those pictures? Or the terrible things that have happened to them because you did?”

Now that Fushigi said it, the man remembered something.

In the past, the man had taken pictures of a celebrity idol who had a secret relationship with someone, and the photos were published in the magazine. It caused a scandal, and she had to

break up with her boyfriend and was kicked out of the entertainment industry.

He hadn't hurt just her, either.

Because of all the "scoops" the man had made by taking his pictures, he'd hurt lots of famous people.

"But that's just my job…"

"That doesn't matter. You tried to take a picture of Himitsu for a sensationalist story. That's the worst thing you can do to upset her."

The man had no idea how to reply to Fushigi. At the same time, he remembered all the things that had happened to him since he turned into the Human-Faced Dog.

"Find it! It's got to be close by!"

"We're gonna get a picture for sure!"

Whenever anyone found him, they would think he was creepy and start taking pictures to make a spectacle out of him.

He was afraid of that. He couldn't help but fear people.

The man finally realized he'd done exactly that to others.

"I see. So she felt the same way I do now. I'm such an idiot…"

The man drooped and shrank into himself.

Fushigi said to the man, "But I still can't let Himitsu do things like this."

Fushigi looked grim. He seemed upset about what Himitsu was doing.

"So I'll capture her. I need to stop her from making urban legends come to life," Fushigi said.

Then he walked up to the man and pulled out his red notebook.

"Show me your stomach."

"What?"

"You have a mark on your stomach, don't you?"

"Actually, now that ya mention it…"

Back when the man first turned into the Human-Faced Dog, he'd noticed a mark on his belly.

"What is it?" he asked Fushigi.

"That's the mark of a curse. If I say a spell and transfer the mark to this notebook, then you can go back to being human."

The man's eyes went wide.

“Y-you mean it? You ain’t just pulling my leg?”

“I mean it,” the boy said indifferently and slowly opened his notebook.

Jackpot! I can be human again! Finally!

The man had been waiting for this moment. After being subjected to everyone’s curiosity and all the terrible things that had happened.

I can turn back! I can be human again!

The man showed his stomach to Fushigi so he could have the curse broken.

But then something occurred to him.

Is there a point to being human again?

Even though he’d been gone for half a month, no one had worried about him. Actually, they’d said they didn’t need him.

The man stood back up and stared at Fushigi.

“Y’know what? I’m good.”

“You’re ‘good’?”

“I don’t wanna be human again.”

The boy tilted his head in confusion when he heard that.

“I wanna stay like this for a little longer.”

“Why?” Fushigi asked.

“I kinda feel like I’ve got an up-close-and-personal view into people ever since I became like this. Besides…” The man looked apologetic. “I wanna see her face-to-face and tell her I’m real sorry. I wanna tell her I shouldn’t have taken that picture. And that I wasn’t thinkin’ about how she felt. I wanna look for her with ya.”

“You want to look for Himitsu with me?”

Fushigi was surprised by the unexpected proposal. But the man ignored his shock and nuzzled his leg.

“I can join ya, yeah? I know I’ve got a human face, but I’m still in a dog’s body. You can think of me like your precious little pet. I can sneak into tight spots and be a conversation buddy. You could even hold me. I’m pretty warm, you know. C’mon, whaddaya say? Sounds better than being all by your lonesome, right? We’re gonna have a great time together, the two of us on adventures!”

On the other hand, Fushigi looked fed up with the man, who kept chattering away. It seemed like the man was going to tag along no matter what he said.

“Geez…” The boy sighed deeply and started walking away.

“Uh, wait.” The man quickly called out to him.

Fushigi kept walking without turning back, but he said to the man, “You can tag along if you want. I’m not looking after you, though.”

After he heard that, the man broke out into a smile.

“All right! Say, you never told me your name.”

The boy smiled slightly and replied, “Fushigi. My name’s Fushigi Senno.”

“Nice to make your acquaintance, Fushigi!”

“Don’t act like we’re friends.”

“What’s the problem?! Say, you’ve got some spiffy threads there. I like the red!”

Fushigi didn’t say anything at all.

“Dunno if I wanna keep this look for myself, since I’m basically naked and all.”

Fushigi didn’t reply to that, either.

“Hey, couldja buy me some clothes? I could go for a hood, too.”

Fushigi still kept quiet, but then he suddenly noticed something next to the trees and quietly picked it up.

“Then how about this?”

It seemed to be an abandoned yellow raincoat, and it was kid size.

“What? That ratty thing?”

“It’s got a hood on it.”

Fushigi placed the coat on the man’s back.

“Hey! Help a guy out here!”

“Figure it out on your own.”

“Why the cold shoulder, huh?”

“So anyway, what’s your name?” Fushigi asked.

“My name? Ah, right. I haven’t used my human name in a while now. How about you give me a new one?”

“A new name?” Fushigi stared the man in the face. “Jimmy…,” the boy said.

“Jimmy?”

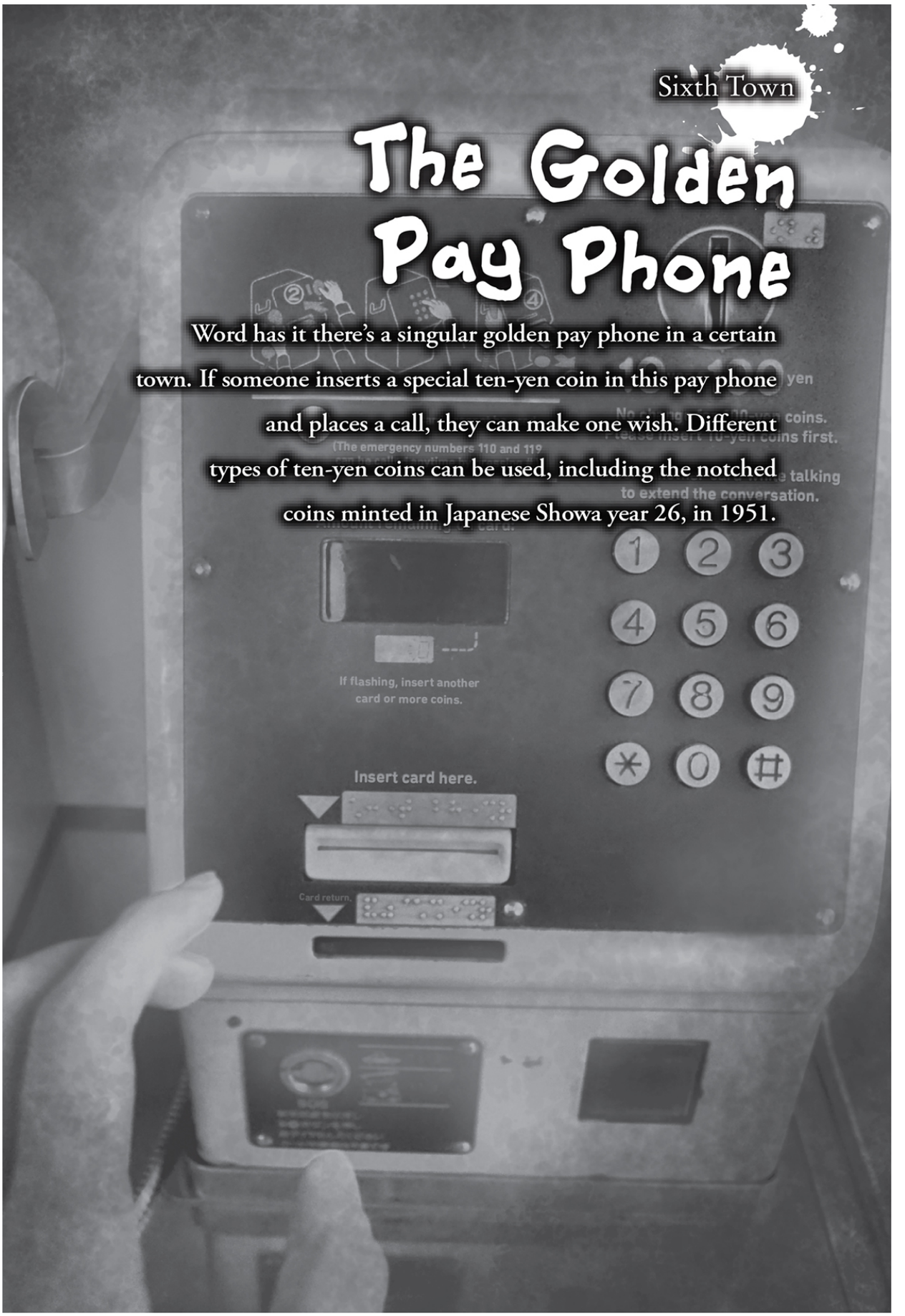
“Your face looks plain. And *jimi* is Japanese for ‘plain’…so we’ll go with Jimmy.”

“What the heck is that supposed to mean?!”

The man scowled for a moment, but Fushigi ignored him and started walking away again.

“A-all right, fine. Jimmy it is! Yeah, Jimmy, the Human-Faced Dog! Hey, wait up. Put the coat on me, will ya?! Hey! You’re walking too fast!”

Jimmy had a spring in his step as he ran after Fushigi.


Sixth Town
The Golden Pay Phone
Word has it there's a singular golden pay phone in a certain town. If someone inserts a special ten-yen coin in this pay phone and places a call, they can make one wish. Different types of ten-yen coins can be used, including the notched coins minted in Japanese Showa year 26, in 1951.
(The emergency numbers 110 and 119
If flashing, insert another card or more coins.
Insert card here.
Card return.
1 2 3
4 5 6
7 8 9
* 0 #



“So, um, I actually like Takimoto.”

While they were on their way home after school, Jyuri Makimura told her friends Momoko Nashimoto and Akari Hayashi about her crush as they walked.

“By Takimoto, do you mean Shun Takimoto?” Momoko asked, and Jyuri smiled and said yes.

Jyuri and her friends were in their second year of middle school, and Takimoto was in his third year.

He was great at sports and was the soccer club’s ace and captain. Apparently, prestigious high schools were even coming to scout him. He was doing well academically and always had tests scores at the top of his class. Plus he was five foot nine and cute, and he had a face that could have made him a superstar.

Jyuri was obsessed with him.

“But, Jyuri, have you ever talked to him before?”

“Of course I haven’t,” Jyuri bluntly said, which made Momoko and Akari share an exasperated look.

The three of them were in the arts-and-crafts club, so they never interacted with Takimoto.

“I’ve never talked to him, and I don’t even think he knows I exist.”

“*Right*… Ha-ha-ha-ha.”

Momoko and Akari elbowed each other jokingly and laughed. They couldn’t imagine that someone as smooth and cool as Takimoto would ever be a good match for any of them, when they were so ordinary.

“So I had something I wanted to ask you two about. Do you think there’s any way I can get Takimoto to go out with me?”

Momoko and Akari immediately stopped laughing. “What?!” they both said, their mouths hanging open as they looked at each other.

“It’s almost Valentine’s Day, right? I want to get together with him before that.”

Jyuri wanted to give Takimoto homemade chocolates, but she didn’t have the courage to tell him her feelings in person or to

write a message to him when she gave them to him.

So her plan was to date him *before* Valentine's Day.

"That's seriously asking too much… Actually, it's impossible, never happening, no way, no how!" Momoko denied it more passionately than anything else she'd denied in her life.

But Akari seemed to have remembered something.

"If that one story is true, you might be able to go out with Takimoto," Akari murmured very cryptically.

"What is it? Tell me!"

Jyuri and Momoko looked at Akari.

"I saw it posted on the internet. There's this urban legend called The Golden Pay Phone."

"A pay phone? And it's gold?" Jyuri looked confused.

On the other hand, Momoko's expression suddenly changed.

"You don't mean the phone in Town A, do you?" Momoko asked, and Akari replied, "You know about it?"

"One of my relatives told me about it before. She said there's a phone like that there."

"Yeah, that must be it. It's a pretty big town, and normally, pay phones in Japan are green, but there's just one that's shiny and gold."

But no one knew where in Town A it was.

"But if you find it and make a call on it, then it'll grant you any wish you want."

Jyuri's eyes started to glitter after hearing that.

"So if I actually track down that phone, then I really can start dating Takimoto?!"

They could get to Town A in an hour by train.

Apparently, Jyuri was determined to go out and search for it.

But Momoko said, "That's not happening."

"Huh?"

"No, really, you can't do it."

"Why not?"

"Because you need the phantom ten-yen coin to make a call on that phone."

"What? No one said anything about that on the internet."

After listening to Akari, Jyuri glanced at Momoko.

“Momoko, how do you know all that?”

“W-well, because my relative told me…”

“What’s the phantom ten-yen coin look like?”

“Um, I haven’t really looked at it closely, so…”

“You haven’t looked *closely*?” Jyuri stared at Momoko. “Why did you say *closely*? Does that mean you have the ten-yen coin?”

“Uh, um, well…”

“So you do have it?”

“Yeah…”

Looking genuinely serious, Jyuri held out her hand to Momoko.

“What?”

“Give it to me—let me have the coin,” Jyuri said bluntly.

“Huh?”

“I bought you a hamburger the other day! So you owe me!”

“Uh, oh, s-sure…”

“Yippee! Now I can go out with Takimoto!”

Jyuri smiled.

Momoko smiled, too, but she felt conflicted on the inside.

It was evening.

After getting home from school, Momoko headed to her room and let out a huge sigh.

What is Jyuri’s deal?! I’ve liked Takimoto since way before her!

Momoko wasn’t feeling calm at all.

When Jyuri admitted her crush, Momoko had thought it was impossible for her to date Takimoto. But after hearing about the golden pay phone, she started to believe maybe Jyuri would actually be able to do it. And then she’d even ended up telling Jyuri about the phantom ten-yen coin.

Momoko opened the drawer of her desk and pulled a coin from it.

It was the phantom ten-yen coin itself.

After her relative had told her about the golden pay phone, she’d given Momoko one. Supposedly, her relative had found it by chance.

Momoko didn’t believe in urban legends, so she’d just left it in her desk.

Can this really grant wishes?

She studied the coin and saw it was minted in Japanese Showa year 65.

“Wha—?!”

Momoko was confused.

But the Showa years only go up to 64…?

It looked like this really wasn’t a normal ten-yen coin.

Then that means the golden pay phone might be real… If I give this to her, that means Jyuri will really…

Momoko started to panic.

Then she came up with a bright idea.

The girl pulled her wallet from her pocket and took a ten-yen coin from there.



It was a few days later, when they had the day off from school. Momoko was on a train going to Town A with Jyuri.

“This is the phantom ten-yen coin.”

Momoko handed the coin over to Jyuri as the train rocked.

“Thank you!”

Jyuri stared at the coin, but this one had the mint year Heisei 15 on it, which was a completely normal year.

“How’s this a phantom coin?”

“There’s a little mark next to the ten, see? That proves it’s the phantom coin.”

“Wow… I had no idea.”

Jyuri smiled and thanked her again.

Momoko felt relieved when she realized her trick had worked.

Once they got to Town A, they started searching for the golden pay phone right away.

There were tons of pay phones right in front of the station. But all of them were normal green ones.

“Where do you think it is?”

“I think anyone could find it right away if it were in front of the station.”

The two of them decided to wander into the town to look for it.

Hours had passed since they started. The two of them had walked all over Town A, looking for the golden pay phone all the while. They'd even asked a policeman at the police station for help at one point. And then there was that waiter they'd asked, and a taxi driver, but no one knew anything about it.

Momoko and Jyuri split up to search the town's every nook and cranny, but they couldn't find the golden pay phone at all.

"How can we not find it after searching for so long?"

Jyuri leaned on a vending machine after meeting up with Momoko again and let out a huge sigh.

"It really must have been a fake story, then. It won't help to look any further, so let's go home," Momoko said, and she started heading back to the station.

"No way!" Jyuri yelled at her from behind. "It's not just some urban legend! It has to be real!"

Jyuri's eyes were bloodshot.

"B-but we couldn't find it…," Momoko said.

"We're just not trying hard enough!"

"Uh, I don't know… Urban legends are just made-up stories people tell each other."

"Then is this just a rumor, too?! You're the one who had it, Momoko!" Jyuri held the ten-yen coin up in front of Momoko. "The phantom ten-yen coin is real!

"I—I won't ever give up!" Spit flew out of Jyuri's mouth as she talked and gripped the coin hard.

But right then…Jyuri squeezed too hard, and the coin slipped from her hand to the ground. The coin tumbled to the other side of the road and threatened to fall into the gutter drain.

"No!"

Jyuri rushed after it, stretching her arm as far as she could.

That moment, before it could fall in, Jyuri somehow grabbed the coin.

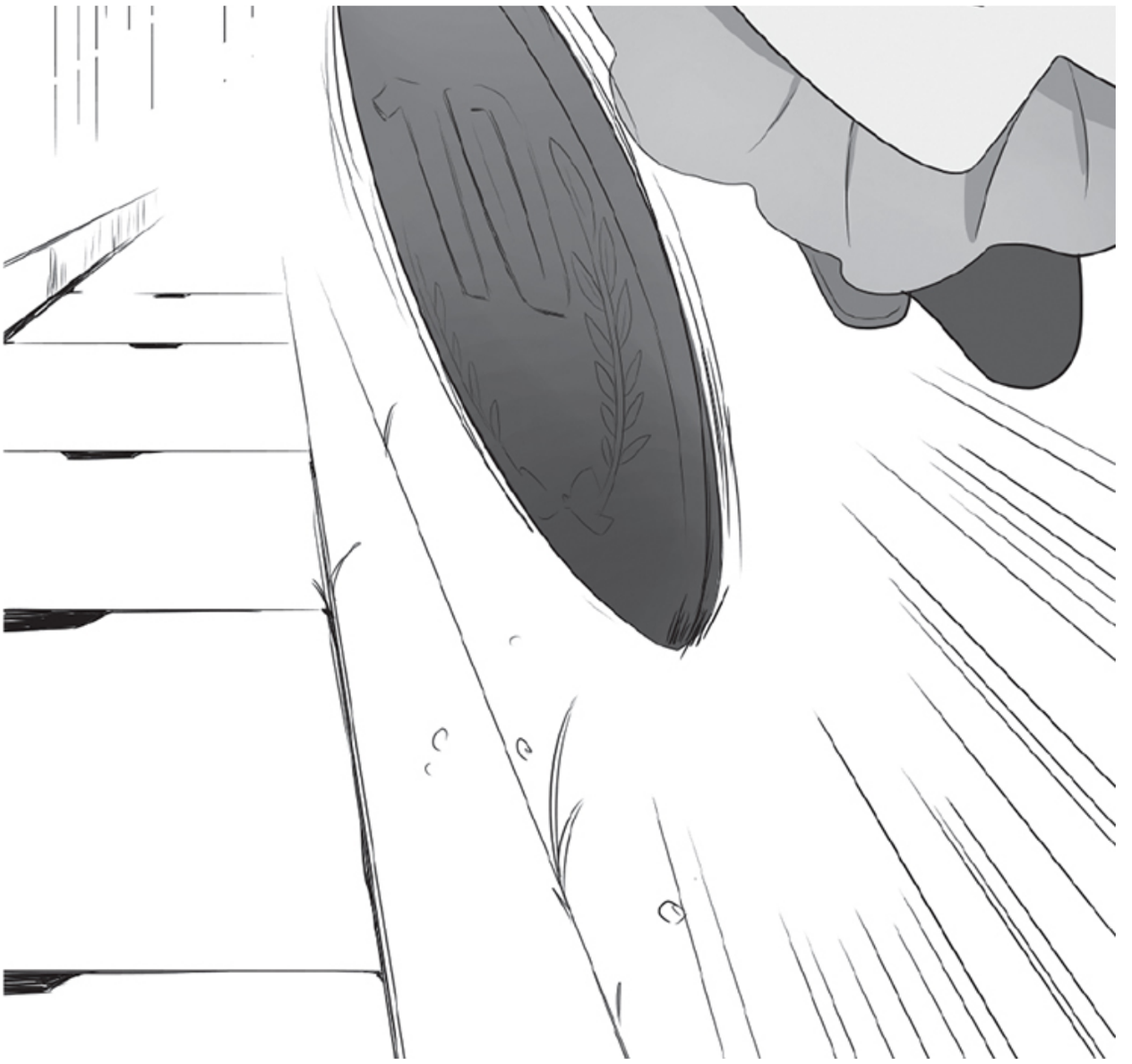
"Whew! That was close!"

"Jyuri!"

Momoko ran over to her side.

"If it'd fallen in, we couldn't have gotten it back."





Jyuri let out a sigh of relief and happened to look in front of her right at that moment.

“Huh?”

She could see something beyond the gutter.

Right between two buildings, in the very back of a very skinny space, she saw *it*.

“Wait, is that…?”

And it was gold.

“Momoko, I found it! I actually found it!”

Jyuri kept shouting “I found it!” as she ran over to the space between the buildings.

It can’t be!

Momoko was shocked but followed after Jyuri.

The golden pay phone was at the very back of the gap between the buildings and was covered in cobwebs and dust.

“Yuck! It’s so dirty. I think someone just abandoned it. It’s probably not even usable. Let’s go home,” Momoko told Jyuri, who had her back to her friend and was staring straight at the pay phone.

But Jyuri told her, “It’s not abandoned. It was hidden here so that only I would be able to find it.”

She pulled off the cobwebs and dusted the pay phone off.

Then she pressed the ten-yen coin to her chest and murmured to herself, “Please make my wish come true!”

Clink.

Momoko heard the ten-yen coin falling into the pay phone.

Jyuri put the phone to her ear, but after a while, she scowled.

“What’s wrong?”

“Why? Why can’t I hear anything?!”

Momoko checked the back of the pay phone. It wasn’t connected to anything.

“I think it actually was abandoned here,” she told Jyuri.

“What? That can’t be!”

Jyuri’s voice rose until she was practically shrieking as she hung the phone back on the receiver in disappointment.

Then…

Riiiing, riiiing.

Suddenly, the phone started to ring!
"No way!"
Momoko froze.
On the other hand, Jyuri looked at the phone and smiled.
"Thank you, Momoko. This is going to change my life."
"What?!"
But if this is the real golden pay phone, it shouldn't have worked, since she only used a regular ten-yen coin!
Momoko panicked, because she had no idea what was going on.
"I'm going to answer it!"
Jyuri picked up the phone and put it to her ear.
"Hello…?"
Her voice cracked and echoed in the cramped crevice between the buildings.

"What do you want to ask for?"

Jyuri heard a girl's voice on the other end.
"Uh, um…"
"So what do you want to ask for?"
"Oh, uh."
Jyuri was so nervous, she could hardly talk, but she used all her willpower to say her wish loud and clear!
"I want to go out with Takimoto! Please make my wish come true!"
There was only silence for a while.
Jyuri had a nervous expression on her face as she focused every bit of herself on the receiver by her ear.

"Okay, then," the girl on the other end matter-of-factly answered.

"Thank you so very much!" Jyuri said, but the girl hung up before she even finished.
The anxiety immediately drained out of Jyuri, and she fell to the ground on all fours.



It was the next day.

Momoko and Jyuri were walking to school with Akari.

“So the golden pay phone was real.” Akari was surprised when the two told her their story.

“Sorry, but I think that it probably won’t grant your wish, Jyuri,” Momoko said.

“But it still worked even though it wasn’t connected to anything?” Akari said dubiously.

“Nowadays, there are toy phones you can still talk through without a wired connection. I’m pretty sure that was just a toy someone abandoned.”

Jyuri listened patiently without saying a word.

“Good morning.”

A boy suddenly approached the three of them.

“You’re Jyuri Makimura, right?”

The boy was Shun Takimoto, the one Jyuri had a crush on.

“Huh? Yes, that’s me.”

“Right, I’m Shun Takimoto.”

“I know.”

“You do? So…do you want to walk to school together, Makimura?”

“Uh, you mean with you?”

“Yeah. I’ve been interested in you for a while now.”

Jyuri looked over at Momoko and Akari at that point. The two of them were in awe.

A huge smile came over Jyuri’s face, and she nodded enthusiastically.

“Yes! I’ll walk with you! It’s nice to meet you!”

Then she walked off with Takimoto.

“Did that seriously just happen…?” Akari’s eyes were wide as she watched the two leave.

Momoko was even more surprised.

Why? But Jyuri used a regular ten-yen coin…

Rumors about how Jyuri and Takimoto had hit it off spread throughout the school in a heartbeat.

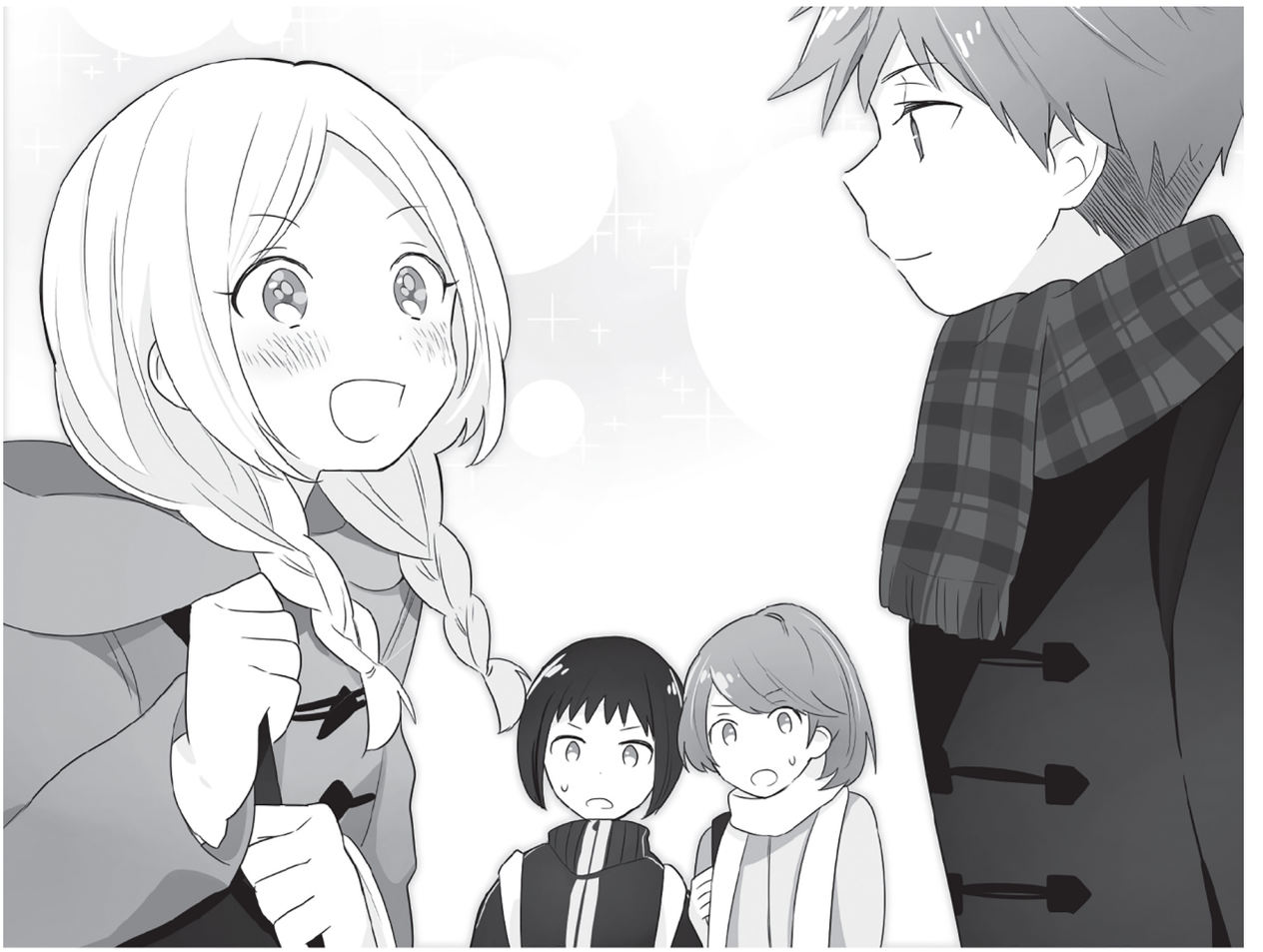
“Makimura? As in the one from the arts-and-crafts club?”

“Why would Takimoto be interested in *her*?”

“I can’t believe it. There’s nothing special about her…”

The girls at school were all talking about Jyuri. To Momoko, it seemed like the other girls were mad at her.

* * *



It was their lunch break.

Momoko and Jyuri were eating their boxed lunches on the school's rooftop while they discussed the gossip.

Then Jyuri said, "I don't care about them," and laughed. "Let them talk."

Whenever they had a break, the other girls would scowl at her as she walked around, arm linked with Takimoto's.

"The clock's ticking closer and closer to Valentine's Day, so everyone's just panicking. Too bad for them that Takimoto's already taken—by me," Jyuri said, then snickered.

Momoko was also starting to feel annoyed at Jyuri, too.

I had feelings for Takimoto, too…

Then Momoko realized something.

Right, I know where the golden pay phone is…

Momoko glared at Jyuri.

It was a day off from school a few days before Valentine's Day. Momoko made her way to Town A alone.

She held something in her hand.

It was the real phantom ten-yen coin.

If a regular ten-yen coin works, then a rare one should make the wish take hold even better, obviously.

Momoko headed straight to the gap between the buildings where the golden pay phone was. It was all on its own, just like it had been last time.

Momoko gripped the ten-yen coin and made her way to the front of the pay phone. She stared at the receiver, then gulped.

Eventually, she worked up the nerve to pick up the phone and insert the ten-yen coin. She checked to make sure she didn't hear anything on the other end; then after a while, it came…

Riiiing, riiiing.

The phone started ringing.

Momoko picked the phone up from the receiver again.

"Hello…?"

"What's your wish?"

"Huh? A man?"

"What's your wish?"

“Oh, uhh…”
Momoko took in a deep breath and stated it clearly:

“I’ve liked Shun Takimoto even longer than Jyuri Makimura has. So please let me spend Valentine’s Day with him!”

“Okay.”
The other end of the line went dead.
Momoko sighed and then hung up, too.

The next day.
Momoko was eating her lunch with Jyuri on the school roof.
“Takimoto asked me this morning to go with him to the movies on Valentine’s Day.”
“D-did he…?”
I made a wish to the golden pay phone, so why has nothing changed?
Momoko started to feel anxious, but Jyuri kept on talking about Takimoto.
“It’s my first time going to the movies with anyone but you or Akari. I’m going to go all out and try making chocolates by hand.”
“Uh-huh…”
“Maybe we’ll date and one day get married. I feel like my dreams keep getting bigger!” Jyuri said happily as she leaned back against the fence.
But something happened in that moment…

Thunk.

Suddenly, the fence came loose.
“Huh?!”
“Jyuri!”
Jyuri lost her balance and was thrown into the air.
“Aaaah!”
Then Jyuri fell off the roof.
“Jyuri!”
Momoko raced downstairs.
What?! Why did this happen?!

Once Momoko was outside the building, she headed over to Jyuri, who was lying in a flower bed.

Takimoto was standing nearby.

“Jyuri!” Momoko cried out.

“I was just walking, and…she suddenly came crashing down out of nowhere…,” Takimoto said.

“Takimoto! Please call a teacher!”

“Huh? Oh, uh?”

“Hurry!”

“R-right!”

Jyuri was bleeding from her head.

“Jyuri! Jyuri!” Momoko shouted Jyuri’s name over and over again while large groups of students and teachers gathered around them.



It was a few days later, on Valentine’s Day.

Momoko’s shoulders were drooped as she sat with Jyuri, who was sleeping in the hospital.

A section of the fence had rusted out, and Jyuri had leaned back against that part. Luckily, the flowers and soil in the flower bed had cushioned her fall, so she survived, but she hadn’t woken up yet.

Momoko looked at Jyuri, and her eyes started to water.

“Jyuri, keep holding on. Please wake up. It’s Valentine’s Day today. Aren’t you going to see a movie with Takimoto?”

Momoko couldn’t hold back her tears and lowered her head.

“I hope it wasn’t because of my wish to the golden pay phone that you ended up like this.”

“Did you…ask for something, too…Momoko?”

Momoko’s head jerked up when she heard Jyuri’s raspy voice, and she found her friend awake and staring at her.

“Jyuri…”

“What did you ask for…Momoko…? Ugh…”

“Jyuri, you shouldn’t talk.”

It seemed like speaking was painful for Jyuri, since she'd just woken up.

"So you're here, too."

Momoko turned around to see Takimoto at the entrance to the room.

He was holding a bouquet.

"I came by to visit."

"Oh, Jyuri just woke up…"

"Huh? She did?"

Takimoto looked at Jyuri on the bed, but she had fallen back asleep.

"She was talking a second ago," Momoko tried to explain. Takimoto gave her a gentle smile.

"You really care about your friends. And you kept your head the entire time you were trying to help her. I really admire that. It'd be nice to have a long conversation with you later," Takimoto said.

"Uh, well, um!"

Momoko remembered what she had wished for the other day.

"I've liked Shun Takimoto even longer than Jyuri Makimura has. So please let me spend Valentine's Day with him!"

"What have I done…?"

"Momoko…you made a wish to the pay phone, didn't you?!" she heard a raspy voice come from behind her.

She turned around to see Jyuri glaring at her from the bed. Momoko nearly pushed Takimoto to the floor as she ran from the room.

I can't believe this! How did this happen?!

Momoko made her way out of the hospital. She was so upset that she was close to tears. Right then, Momoko saw someone standing in front of her.

"Hey, there she is!"

She saw a boy in a red hood and a dog in a yellow hood with him.

“Looks like we’ve finally found ya!”

“Who are you?” Momoko asked the boy.

“Hey, not over there! This way!”

“What?”

The voice had come from the boy’s feet, where the dog was.

“Huh?!”

When she looked more closely, it wasn’t a dog at all. Under the hood that hid the dog’s head, she saw a human man’s face.

“Yeek!”

“Hey, wait a hot minute! Don’t even think about making a fuss out in public!”

The dog started hopping around and jabbering away at Momoko.

“Geez, you somehow make things harder.” The boy next to him let out an exasperated sigh.

“Aw, come on. Give a dog a break.” The dog looked over at Momoko. “I’m the Human-Faced Dog, Jimmy. Apparently, I’ve got a plain face, so I look like a Jimmy. And this here’s my pal Fushigi Senno. So anyway, nice to meetcha.”

“Wh-who are you two?”

Fushigi picked up where Jimmy had left off as Momoko started to grow frightened.

“You know where the golden pay phone is, don’t you? Tell me where it is.”

It dawned on Momoko that coming clean to the boy might make her feel better. She told him about what had happened the last few days. Then once Fushigi heard out her whole story, he tilted his head.

“In other words, you lied and gave that Jyuri girl a normal ten-yen coin?”

Momoko felt guilty as she nodded.

“I see…,” Fushigi murmured to himself.

“When Jyuri called, do you know who she spoke to?”

“Who? Oh!” Momoko remembered something. “When she had her call, she said a girl talked to her. But when I used the phantom ten-yen coin, it was a man’s voice…”

“Thought so…”

The boy thanked Momoko and then silently started to walk away.

“Hey, wait!” Jimmy quickly followed after Fushigi.

“Um…!” Momoko called out to stop them.

He turned around.

“Can you please tell me whether I’ll be able to go back to being friends with Jyuri like before?”

“I’m not sure,” he said.

“But if I ask the golden pay phone to put our friendship back the way it was, then…”

Fushigi walked back over to Momoko. “You lied to your friend. I think the conflict you feel right now might be the price you have to pay for that. You’re asking for too much if you want the golden pay phone to fix that for you.”

Then Fushigi and Jimmy both left.

Momoko’s heart felt heavy as she watched the two of them leave.

In Town A, evening was setting in as Fushigi and Jimmy stood in the alley between the buildings.

“Hey, what’s the deal? Why’ve ya got that glower on your face, huh?”

Even though Jimmy was confused, Fushigi ignored him and put a regular ten-yen coin into the pay phone. After making sure he didn’t hear any dial tone, he hung up. Then the phone started ringing.

Fushigi picked up.

“What do you want to ask for?” He heard a girl’s voice come from the other end.

“So you bent the urban legend’s rule just to make your own wish come true,” Fushigi coldly replied.

Ordinarily, the golden pay phone only worked with the phantom ten-yen coin. And typically, it was an adult man who answered the call.

But right now a girl was on the other end.

“You just wait! I’ll catch you, Himitsu!”

Then the girl started to laugh: “Heh-heh-heh-heh.”

“You can’t catch me, Big Brother.”

The line went dead.

Fushigi scowled as he held the phone.

“Was that her on the other end…?” Jimmy asked, but the boy didn’t say anything.

Eventually, Fushigi pulled out his bright-red notebook and opened it to a page; then he held it over a mark carved into the side of the pay phone.

Then he said an incantation.



In the next moment, the mark glittered, inverted, and appeared on the open page of the notebook. The mark on the pay phone disappeared, and then the pay phone itself changed color from gold to an ordinary green like one that could be found anywhere.

“Let’s go to the next town.”

Fushigi showed no emotion as he put his red notebook into his pocket and started walking with Jimmy.

To be continued…



AFTERWORD

Thank you for reading *Horror Collector*, Volume 2.

How was the book? Was it scary? Are you more interested in urban legends than you were before?

This novel is about six more urban legends in six different towns.

Each story is a little more mysterious or scary than the ones in the first volume.

First Town: The Charlie-Charlie Challenge

I used the Charlie-Charlie Challenge, which is being played all around the world right now, as the basis for this story.

No one knows if the Charlie-Charlie Challenge really works or not. But plenty of people have recorded themselves trying it and uploaded their videos.

Something about this game fascinates people enough to make them want to play and share it.

But what happens if something evil is lurking behind it?

The main characters in this story end up summoning something terrible. What would you do if something you did for fun wasn't a game anymore?

Second Town: Ms. Hikiko

Ms. Hikiko is a monster from an urban legend that's been spreading for a long time.

In this story, a creepy woman walks the town, and awful things befall anyone who happens to witness her.

Creepy anonymous women show up in urban legends constantly. I suppose they leave a powerful impression on people who see them.

This was the story that gave me the worst shudders while I was writing it.

Third Town: Death Blog

If a person's name is written in a particular blog, something terrible will happen to them… Stories about these blogs were going around a lot a few years ago.

Of course, the person writing the blog isn't to blame. Maybe the unfortunate events just keep happening to the subjects they write about by coincidence.

But I think it would be terrifying if someone's blog turned into a death blog.

Maybe all sorts of other terrifying things lurk on the internet.

Fourth Town: Cursed Clouds

People fear phenomena they don't understand. In the past, the world went into an uproar when mysterious crop circles appeared on farms and in fields.

Chemtrails are the modern version of this. They're mysterious clouds.

These clouds have been witnessed all around the world, and apparently, no one knows how they get their shape.

If you see these clouds, please make sure you never, ever go to the town directly under them.

Fifth Town: The Running Man

In this story, a certain man becomes the main character.

This man is being chased, and people even throw rocks at him, but the reason why isn't revealed until near the end of the story.

This scenario came up because, as we were developing the plot, we thought it would be a good idea for Fushigi to have a partner.

But it wouldn't be interesting if his partner were a regular person, so we gave him a little twist.

I think Fushigi's interactions with his new partner will make the story all the more entertaining.

Sixth Town: The Golden Pay Phone

Have any of you used a pay phone before? They used to be everywhere, but now the only place you might spot them is in front of a train station.

This story is about a pay phone that shows up in an urban legend.

I'm not sure if the golden pay phone actually exists or if it's just a make-believe story, but the reason everyone talks about it is that no one knows the truth.

The only people who know if it's real or not are the ones who have tried looking for it themselves.

Fushigi's travels will be continued. I'd be so very happy if you read the next volume, too.

December 2015
Midori Sato

AFTERWORD

In the first volume's afterword, I said it felt as though Fushigi Senno weren't created by any of us but existed from the start. It seems you readers aren't the only ones being pulled into Fushigi's terrifying journey, since we the creators have been as well. Which means that even we don't know what his future will be. All we can do is follow after him to document his tale.

So in the first story of this volume, Fushigi appears for Sumire, an elementary school student who plays the Charlie-Charlie Challenge. As it so happens, I played a similar game called Kokkuri-san when I was in elementary school. To play it, you write the Japanese alphabet in iroha order on a white piece of paper, then draw a torii gate, which is a type of gate in front of Japanese shrines. Then you have two or three friends lightly rest their pointer fingers on a ten-yen coin on top of the paper and chant a special spell. If you do that, supposedly the coin moves around all on its own when you ask questions. I was very interested in this game and invited my friends from class over to play it at my house. But this was a lot more complicated than the Charlie-Charlie Challenge. On top of that, if you did it incorrectly, a low-grade spirit could possess someone who participated or even the location where the game was played. So I made sure my friends taught me the right way of doing it before trying it myself. But then I was so nervous that I didn't even ask any interesting questions before it was over.

Then a few days later, I told one of my friends from another elementary school who went to the same cram school about it. That friend told me we'd written the Japanese alphabet using the wrong order, and we were supposed to do it with the vowels first. Apparently, a lot of other things were wrong, too. Then the friend told me I'd end up getting myself cursed at this rate, and I felt terribly anxious for the next few days, since I'd suggested we do it and volunteered my own house for it.

In the end, nothing particularly bad happened to me or the house.

But thinking about it now, maybe the way we had done it was right and my friend from cram school had been wrong all along. I'd been anxious for no good reason. Then I felt regret and like I never should have even tried it. Just in the same way Momoko felt about the golden pay phone…

But maybe nothing bad happened to me because Fushigi Senno copied the curse into his notebook while I wasn't aware. So does that mean Fushigi existed even when I was a kid? And why is Himitsu wandering around and making urban legends come true in the first place?

Until next volume…

December 2015
Norio Tsuruta

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