Horror Collector

3

The Laughter in the Dead of Night



Story by
Midori Sato
Norio Tsuruta

Art by
Yon

HORROR COLLECTOR

3 The Laughter in the Dead of Night

Midori Sato and Norio Tsuruta

Illustration by
Yon

New York

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Translation by Jan Cash
Cover art by Yon

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Hina
Mei
Hey. Are you still up?
READ
12:05 AM
Hina
What is it?
It's already midnight
12:06 AM
Mei
I heard a weird sound outside
READ
12:06 AM
Hina
Weird how?
12:07 AM
Mei
Like someone laughing...
READ
12:08 AM
Hina
What?
12:08 AM
Mei
I don't know.
But I was so curious,
I came outside to check
READ
12:08 AM
Hina
This late at night?! Don't do that!
12:10 AM
Mei
But it was bothering me.
Oh
READ
12:11 AM

Hina

What?

12:12 AM

Mei

I heard it again!

READ
12:12 AM

Hina

It's dangerous! Go back inside!!

12:13 AM

Mei

Oh no! Something's here!
I'll take a video

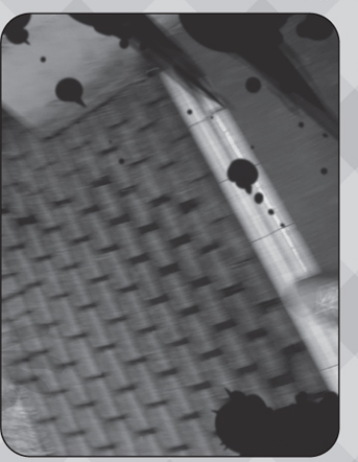
READ
12:14 AM

Hina

Stop it

12:15 AM

Mei



READ
12:17 AM

Hina

What the... What is that...?

12:18 AM

Hina

Hey, Mei?

12:19 AM

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CHARACTER INTROS



Fushigi Senno

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



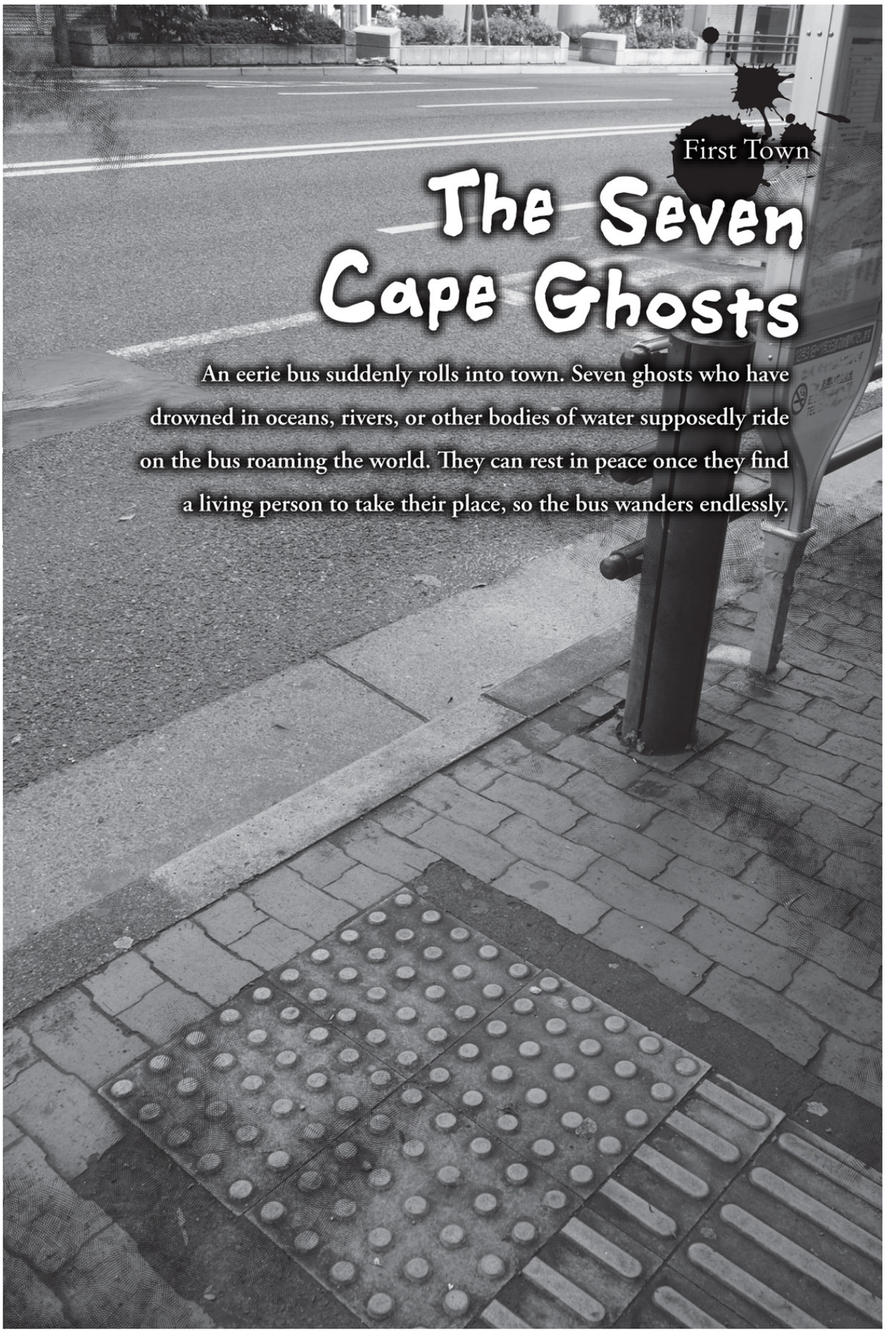
Himitsu Senno

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



Jimmy

A cameraman for a weekly magazine. He turned into a human-faced dog when Himitsu cursed him.



First Town

The Seven Cape Ghosts

An eerie bus suddenly rolls into town. Seven ghosts who have drowned in oceans, rivers, or other bodies of water supposedly ride on the bus roaming the world. They can rest in peace once they find a living person to take their place, so the bus wanders endlessly.



“You’re horrible, Naomi!” Koharu Nakagawa yelled at Naomi Shiota while they were on their way home.

They were both first-years at the same middle school, and they were even in the same class. They’d been best friends ever since the start of elementary school.

But then two weeks after they started middle school, something happened. While they were eating with some girls they’d made friends with, Naomi told them the name of the boy Koharu liked.

“I’m sorry I blabbed…,” Naomi said to Koharu, who was walking ahead of her.

But Koharu wouldn’t look at her friend at all.

“You were the only one I told about my crush!” Koharu yelled instead. She was very upset at Naomi because she felt betrayed.

“Sorry…”

“You can’t apologize your way out of this!”

“I know. But…”

When Naomi started to make another excuse, Koharu got even more upset.

“You’re the worst, Naomi! I hate you!” she shouted, then ran off.

It was nighttime.

As Koharu sat in her cram-school classroom, she thought about Naomi.

I’d imagined that we would be friends forever…

Just a month before, she’d been so happy that she and her best friend were in the same class. She was sure Naomi had been excited, too.

But then she went and did something like that…

Koharu couldn’t find it in herself to forgive Naomi.

Buzz, buzz.

Her cell phone started vibrating. She had a message.

Koharu checked her phone sneakily so her tutor wouldn’t notice.

It's from Naomi…

Koharu, I'm so sorry about today. I regret it. So please stay friends with me.

There was also a crying-face emoji with the message.

Regretting it doesn't change anything…

Naomi always went the extra mile to make sure everyone had fun. Even when she told everyone who Koharu liked, it was probably just because she wanted to add excitement to their conversation.

It's not like she was doing it to be mean…but I don't think I can forgive her…

Koharu was on her way home, waiting at the bus stop. She was holding her cell phone.

In the end, she never replied to Naomi.

I don't want to go to school tomorrow. Ugh. I don't want to see Naomi or anyone else.

"Koharu…"

When she turned around, she found Naomi standing there.

"Are you headed home from tutoring, too, Koharu?"

"Um…yeah."

Right, Naomi also has tutoring today…

They went to different cram schools, so Koharu had never seen Naomi on the way home like this before.

Then why is she here now?

As Koharu pondered that, Naomi explained herself.

"I couldn't just go straight home…," she said, looking at her feet. She was holding her cell phone, too.

Was she waiting for me to answer?

Koharu realized Naomi was serious about her apology.

Maybe I should make up with her…

But she couldn't bring herself to say anything. Naomi seemed like she didn't know what to say, either. They both silently waited for the bus to come.

After two or three minutes, they finally saw a bus far down the road.

Koharu tilted her head. According to the schedule, the bus was supposed to arrive in ten more minutes. But it was already here.

Normally, it's exactly on time. Maybe there wasn't any traffic today?

As she considered that, the bus pulled up in front of them.

"Huh?"

The bus Koharu usually rode had a blue stripe along its side, but the one in front of her had a red line instead. The red stripe even dripped like wet paint over some parts of the line.

Koharu shuddered.

Naomi stepped closer to her. "Does the bus look wrong to you?"

Naomi had noticed something was off about it, too.

"The one that stops here is supposed to be from the blue line, isn't it?"

"Yeah, it should be…"

Koharu had been going to cram school since her last year of elementary school, but she'd never seen a bus like this one before.

"Maybe a bus from another line accidentally stopped here? We shouldn't get on."

Koharu was about to agree with Naomi, but then she suddenly realized something. She was talking to Naomi like usual.

I was supposed to be mad at her…

Koharu glared at Naomi.

"I can ride whatever bus I want. It's none of your business," she said.

"Huh?"

"I'm getting on this bus. Besides, I don't like waiting."

"But…"



“You can wait here on your own!”

Then Koharu got on the bus. The doors shut right away, and the bus sped off.



While Koharu walked down the aisle, she started to feel anxious.

I wonder if this bus will go by my house.

If it was from another line, she’d need to get off at the next stop.

If it goes straight at the intersection, then I’ll know it’s heading toward home, Koharu thought, and she watched the road ahead as they neared the intersection.

The bus kept going straight.

Oh, good. This must be the right one.

It seemed like it would go in the direction of her house. Relieved, she finally sat down on the seat next to her.

“Ah!”

She stood back up immediately.

The seat was soaking wet!

As she moved to the next seat, she wondered if someone had spilled their drink.

“What?”

But that one turned out to be wet, too.

Another one?

Koharu started to get annoyed as she moved to a seat in the back. But even that seat and the one next to it were wet. The cobalt-blue seats were so soaked that they’d turned a darker shade of blue.

Every single seat was wet.

Unbelievable…

It hadn’t rained at all that day. She couldn’t think of any reason why the seats would be drenched.

Is this some sort of prank? I should probably tell the driver…

Koharu returned to the front of the bus.

“Excuse me, the seats seem to be wet…”

The driver was a man in his fifties. He stared straight ahead as he steered the bus.

“So, um…,” Koharu continued hesitantly.

He didn’t react at all even though Koharu was right next to him.

“Excuse me! The seats are wet!” Koharu shouted at him just as the bus came to a stop at a red light.

The driver slowly turned to face Koharu. But he didn’t say anything. All he did was stare at her.

“Um, excuse me!” Koharu was about to complain, but then the driver turned to look straight ahead again.

The light had turned green. Then the bus started moving again as though nothing had even happened.

What’s wrong with him?!

Koharu was upset, but she went back to the seats.

“Huh?”

She felt that something had changed.

The seats looked lighter for some reason. She tried touching a seat, and it wasn’t wet at all. Then she tried another, and that one was dry, too.

How? she thought. She was sure they had all been so sopping wet that the seats had changed color. But now all of them were dry.

Koharu looked over at another passenger.

Seven other people were on the bus with her. One of them was a boy around Koharu’s age, and he was standing in the back and holding a bag. The other six were sitting and acting as if nothing was out of the ordinary.

Maybe I just imagined they were wet?

If something was wrong with the seats, then someone else would have complained. Koharu didn’t understand what had happened, but she decided to take a seat, too.

As the bus rocked back and forth, Koharu became annoyed. Maybe her mind was playing tricks on her because she was so worked up about Naomi.

And then I said something weird to the driver... This is the worst...

Koharu sighed as she looked out the window. She noticed a familiar bus stop ahead. But even though someone was waiting there, her bus passed by without stopping to pick them up.

What?!

The bus was still headed toward her house, but she started to think she really was on the wrong line. Koharu began to worry and looked around for a map of the bus lines.

"Huh? What's going on?"

A map was supposed to be on the back of each chair, but for some reason this bus only had pictures of the ocean on the seats. She scanned the bus, trying to spot a map. But she couldn't find one anywhere.

Maybe some buses just don't have maps…?

Koharu's anxiety spiked again when the bus turned right at an intersection.

"Oh no, that's the wrong way!"

To get to her house, the bus should've made a *left* turn.

I must've gotten on the wrong line after all!

Koharu panicked.

I need to get off at the next stop. This is all Naomi's fault!

Koharu reached for the NEXT STOP button so she could get off as soon as possible.

Click.

She pressed the button over her seat, but the light didn't turn on.

I'm sure I pressed it, though.

Koharu tried the button again.

Click.

Click, click.

She pressed it over and over again, but nothing happened.

Is it disconnected?

Maybe this button was broken. She reached for another one.

Click. Click. Click.

But none of the buttons activated to signal the driver.

Why aren't they working?

While Koharu was still trying to figure out what was going on, she watched as the bus passed another stop where people were waiting. It didn't even slow down.

Again!

It didn't seem like the bus would stop at all.

Koharu shouted frantically, "Excuse me! I want to get off!"

But the bus driver kept facing forward and continued driving. At this rate, she would end up farther and farther away from her house.

Koharu ran over to the driver.

"Excuse me! I want to get off! I got on the wrong bus!" Koharu said as she looked at the man.

Splish, splish, splish.

Koharu looked down to see that the ground was covered in water.

Splish, splish, splish.

"Huh…?"

She looked at the driver again and realized his uniform was sopping wet. Actually, it wasn't just his uniform. Even his face was dripping with water, and all of it was forming a puddle on the floor.



“Ah!”

Koharu was so shocked that she took a step back.

Then the driver slowly turned to look at Koharu. His face was completely dry.

When she looked more closely, his uniform was dry, too.

“How could that be…?”

She looked at the driver’s chair, and it wasn’t wet, either. She couldn’t see a drop of water around—not even on the floor.

But everything was soaked a second ago…

Koharu had no idea what was going on, but she backed away.

What’s happening…?

She was confused.

She was sure she had seen the water.

But she couldn’t see any there now…

Buzz, buzz.

Suddenly, her phone vibrated inside her pocket. Koharu pulled it out and checked her notifications. She had a lot of missed calls from Naomi. Apparently, Naomi had sent a text when Koharu didn’t answer.

She read the notification preview:

There’s something wrong!

What’s wrong? Koharu thought as she opened the rest of the text.

I got on the normal bus just now, and the driver said there isn’t a red line anywhere near here!

“There isn’t?” Koharu said out loud.

Then what bus did I get on?

Koharu sent her a message back.

There’s no way! Don’t lie!

Naomi sent a reply right away.

I’m not lying. Are you still on that bus? You need to get off ASAP. There’s something weird about it!

Naomi was right. The seats had been wet, and so had the driver. The maps of the bus lines were missing, and none of the NEXT

STOP buttons had worked, either. Most importantly, the bus wasn't stopping.

She's right… There's something weird about this bus…

But the six seated passengers and the boy who was standing hadn't complained at all. Koharu was looking at them when she got another message.

Where are you right now?

She looked outside and saw the bus pass another stop. For some reason, this stop didn't have a name on its sign.

What's going on?

Koharu timidly glanced around the inside of the bus.

"Huh…?"

At some point, the six seated passengers had moved closer to her.

"I thought they were sitting farther back, though?"

Even though Koharu was talking to herself loudly, all of them looked down at their feet.

The bus isn't the only thing that's weird. The riders are strange, too…

Koharu kept her eyes focused dead ahead to avoid looking at them.

The driver was saying something as he gripped the steering wheel.

"Straight, straight, go straight ahead…"

As he was muttering, his head shook right and left abnormally.

The bus was going faster. Then it jolted like it had hit a pothole.

"Ah!"

The shock sent Koharu lurching forward. She turned to look behind her.

Now all six of the sitting passengers were even closer to her.

Their faces were pale, and they were dripping wet.

And they were all staring right at Koharu.

"Aaaah!" she screamed, and she tried to get away from them. But then her back hit something.

“Straight, straight, go straight ahead…”

The driver was standing right behind her. His face, which shook right and left, was also pale and sopping wet.

“Straight, straight, go straight ahead…,” he muttered as he stared directly at Koharu.

Even though no one was driving the bus, it kept going straight ahead and picked up speed all on its own. At some point, the bus had reached a seaside road far from town.

“Wh-what’s going on?”

Koharu shivered, but she was rooted to the spot.

“One person can rest in peace… One person can rest in peace…”

The six others started to chant as they stood from their seats. Their eyes were wide and bloodshot. Water spilled out of their mouths.

“I can…finally rest in peace…”

“I’ll be able to…rest in peace…”

“I’ll…”

“I can…”

The six closed in on Koharu.

“One person can rest in peace… One person can rest in peace…”

The driver was drawing close, too.

They were all talking at once.

“I’ll…” “I can…” “I’ll be the one to…”

“No, get away! Stop!”

She crouched down as the seven people surrounded her.



“Huh?”

A bus was stopped right in front of Koharu. It was painted with a drippy red line.

“Does the bus look wrong to you?” asked Naomi as she stepped closer to Koharu.

“The one that stops here is supposed to be from the blue line, isn’t it?”

“Yeah, it should be…”

Koharu had been going to cram school since her last year of elementary school, but she’d never seen a bus like this one before.

“Maybe a bus from another line accidentally stopped here? We shouldn’t get on.”

Koharu was about to agree with Naomi, but then she suddenly realized something.

I feel like I’ve had this conversation before…

“Koharu, I don’t think you should get on this bus.”

“Naomi?”

“I really think you shouldn’t.”

Huh? Wasn’t I mad at Naomi?

Koharu glared at Naomi after remembering that.

“I can ride whatever bus I want. It’s none of your business,” she said.

“Huh?”

“I’m getting on this bus. Besides, I don’t like waiting.”

“But…,” Naomi started to protest.

“You can wait here on your own!”

Koharu got on the bus.

Something feels off… But I don’t want to be near Naomi right now…

She picked a seat and sat down.

“You shouldn’t have gotten on this bus,” someone said to her.

A boy with a bag was sitting next to her.

“Didn’t you see what happens to you if you ride this bus?”

“See what? Oh! Is that what I just saw?! Th-that wasn’t a dream?”

The boy shook his head.

“It definitely wasn’t. It’s a warning from the bus.”

“Wh-what does that mean?”

“This bus is cursed. Or, more accurately, the six passengers and the driver on this bus are. So the bus was trying to warn you.”

“There are seven cursed people…?”

Koharu remembered being attacked by them, and she quickly looked around. But all six passengers and the driver were acting perfectly normal. None of them looked pale or wet.

“Maybe it really was just a dream, then…?” Koharu murmured to herself.

“Didn’t the little dude just tell ya it wasn’t?!” A voice came from the boy’s bag. The head of a man in a yellow hood popped out of it.

But when Koharu looked closely, she saw that he had a dog’s body.

“Wh-what is that thing?”

“Ya haven’t got time to be all surprised,” the man-dog said. “Didn’t ya listen to a thing we’ve been saying?”



“What?”

When Koharu just looked confused, the boy continued, “When a living human is on the bus, I can’t collect the mark.”

“What mark?”

“That’ll be the curse mark,” the man-dog said. “The two of us got on this bus to get it, you understand?”

The boy motioned with his eyes to the door.

“So you should get off,” he said.

“Get off? But…”

She couldn’t understand what was going on, but what she *did* know was that she was scared of staying. Koharu stood up and started to exit the bus.

Naomi was standing on the other side of the door.

“Were you trying to avoid me, Koharu?”

“Huh?”

“You got on a bus even though it might be the wrong line.”

“No! I wasn’t trying to avoid you…”

“Liar! Why are you mad even though I’ve been trying to apologize?!”

“I’m not mad…”

“Come on, get off the bus already,” Naomi said. “You’re just being difficult now on purpose!”

“Me? *Difficult?* ”

“Come on, get off the bus!”

“I’m not being difficult…”

“Hurry!”

Koharu glared at Naomi. “I’m *so* not the difficult one!”

“Koharu?”

“Actually, I think I *am* going to stay on this bus!”

“What?!” Naomi exclaimed.

Koharu fumed as she went back to her seat.

“Y’know, if ya stay here, you’re gonna be in a world of trouble,” the man with the dog’s body said to her.

“Who cares?! I’m not getting off here!”

The boy looked at Koharu and let out a small sigh.

“I’m not responsible for what happens to you. But I’ll warn you that this bus won’t stop again.”

“Does that mean…?” Koharu gulped.

But if I get off, then that means Naomi will say I was just being difficult. I can’t put up with that…

Koharu eyed the boy.

“I’ll just get off at the next stop! Buses can’t give people warnings!”

Koharu looked around inside the bus. The passengers all appeared to be normal. The only ones who seemed weird were the boy and the man-dog.

“I see… All right.” The boy nodded to her and stood up. “If this bus isn’t getting to its last stop, then there’s no point in me riding it.”

The boy motioned for the dog to go back into the bag; then they got off. Right as he stepped out, the doors closed, and the bus lurched forward.

“Ya sure ’bout this?” the man-dog asked the boy as he popped his face out of the bag. “If ya leave her, she’ll end up taking the place of one of the seven cape ghosts.”

The boy nodded.

“There are always seven souls on the bus, and they all drowned in a body of water. They’re looking for humans to take their spot. Each person they find allows one of them to rest in peace. Then the person who takes their place among the seven wanders forever, waiting for their own substitute.”

The boy glanced at Naomi, who was calling Koharu’s phone in a panic.

“Koharu, pick up the phone. There’s something wrong with that bus. C’mon, Koharu!” Naomi shouted desperately, but she couldn’t reach the other girl.

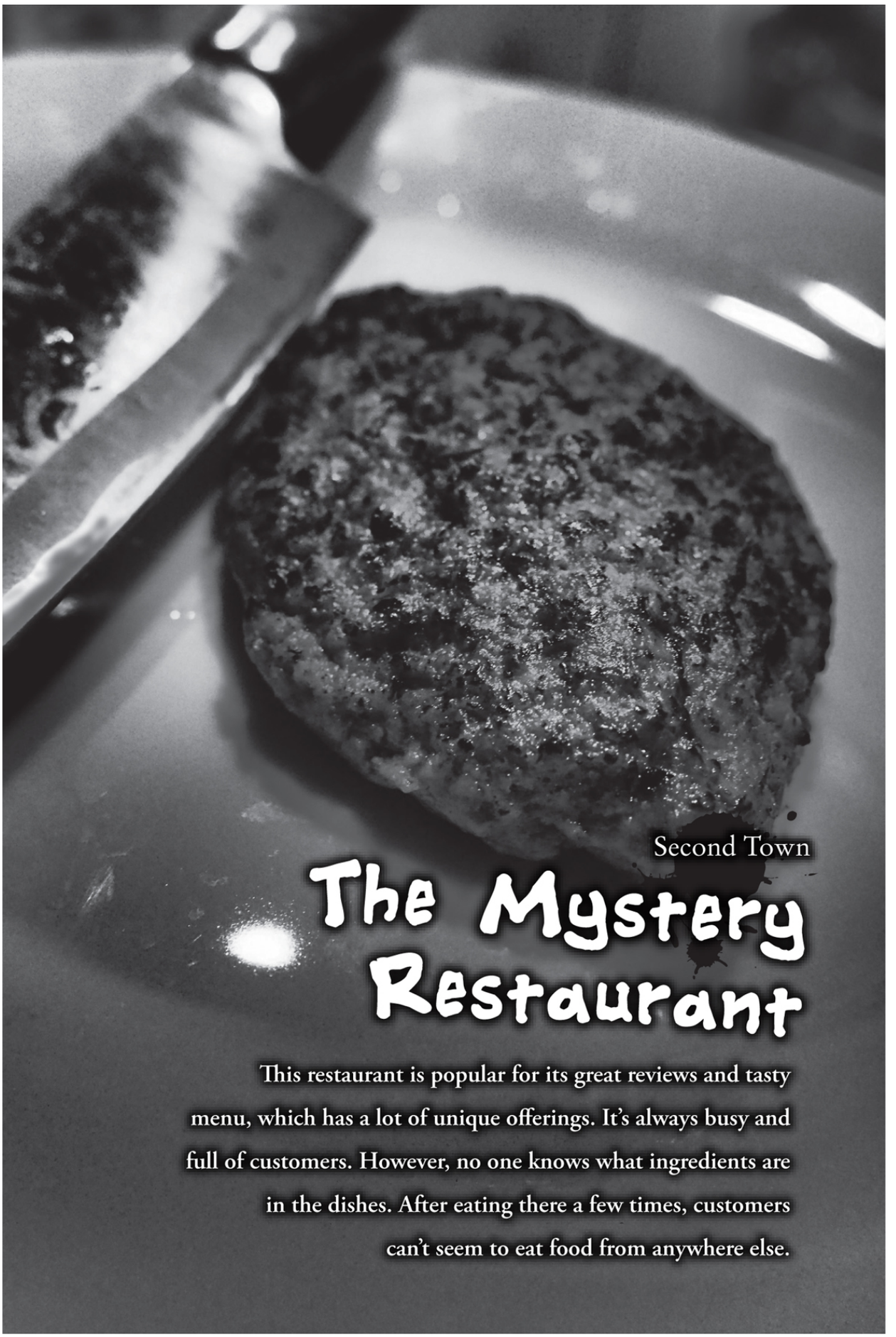
“Shouldn’t ya have kicked her off the bus or somethin’?”

“She had a chance to save herself, but she threw it away,” the boy replied.

He paused before continuing:

“The bus gives out only one warning. Anyone who ignores it doesn’t get a second chance…”

Then the boy started walking in the opposite direction of where the bus had gone.



Second Town

The Mystery Restaurant

This restaurant is popular for its great reviews and tasty menu, which has a lot of unique offerings. It's always busy and full of customers. However, no one knows what ingredients are in the dishes. After eating there a few times, customers can't seem to eat food from anywhere else.

“Aaaah!”

It was early Sunday morning.

Takuya Takahashi, who had been sleeping soundly in his bed, woke up to his mother’s scream. He ran to the first floor, where the scream had come from, and found his mom shivering in a corner of the kitchen.

“Mom, what happened?!” he shouted.

“Takuya, help! I-it’s that thing!” His mom timidly pointed toward the fridge.

Something dark scurried off.

“A cockroach?”

“That’s right! Do something! Hurry!” she said.

Just as Takuya was starting to feel exasperated by how panicked his mom was, his dad came marching in with a rolled-up newspaper.

“We’ve been seeing a lot more of these around lately,” his dad commented. He approached the refrigerator and smacked the cockroach.

“Please just get rid of it!” Takuya’s mom shouted.

“Okay, okay.”

His dad tossed out the newspaper and roach like he’d done it a million times before. Takuya’s dad worked at the health department, so he probably *had* done it a million times—and for lots of bugs and pests.

“It’s too early in the morning to be screaming about roaches,” his dad said.

“I know, but still…,” Takuya’s mom said. She hated cockroaches.

“Well, it’s been taken care of. I need to head out soon.”

His dad was going out fishing that day.

“Aren’t you going to eat breakfast?” his mom asked.

“It’s fine. I’ll pick up something on the way,” his dad said, then walked out.

“But I already made it.”

His mom sounded disappointed.

Takuya thought his dad was probably skipping breakfast on purpose.

Mom’s not a great cook…

His mom would always follow recipes to a *T*, but they never turned out right. If she made ramen, she overcooked the noodles, and her curry would always be watery—and those were the easiest meals in the world.

"Well, looks like you'll need to eat your dad's portion too, then, Takuya."

"Uh, I-I'm fine. I'm not that hungry, so I don't want to eat that much. I'm going to feed Max," Takuya said before running from the kitchen.

Phew… I don't get why I have to eat so much of her lousy cooking, Takuya thought as he headed to the garden where Max was.


MAX

Max was their pet dog—a Shiba Inu. Their family got Max for Takuya's fifth birthday, and in the six years since, they'd grown up like brothers.

Max was busy digging a hole in the garden.

"Ugh! Stop that, Max!" Takuya scolded him.

Max had apparently been digging up worms to eat.

"That's gross!"

It was bad enough that Max ate the worms, but he also liked to bring them back into his doghouse. He already had a collection of shredded-up worms.

"C'mon! I'm not going to give you breakfast if you keep doing this!" Takuya shouted at Max as he threw the worms into the trash.

"Oh my, you two are quite boisterous first thing in the morning," came a voice from the other side of the yard's fence.

Takuya looked up to see the granny from next door standing there.

She was holding a cat.

"Hana, look, it's Takuya."

The woman from next door loved her cat, Hana, as much as Takuya loved Max.

"Good morning, Hana," the boy said.

The cat meowed happily in reply. Takuya also liked the cat and the old woman.

It was afternoon, and Takuya was at a nearby grocery store buying ingredients for lunch with his mom.

"What should we have for lunch?" his mom asked.

"Um, whatever's fine with me," he said. No matter how simple a recipe was, his mom would mess it up anyway.

Even I could make food taste decent if I just followed a recipe.

Takuya sighed and was walking down the road when he spotted a crowd gathered up ahead. Someone dressed as a clown and wearing a pig mask was handing out flyers.

Takuya took one.

It seemed to be an advertisement for a new restaurant. A big picture of a juicy Salisbury steak was printed on the paper.

“Oh, looks like it’s free,” his mom said as she looked at a coupon attached to the flyer. The Salisbury steak special was on the house to celebrate the restaurant’s opening.

“This is it! Mom, let’s eat here for lunch!”

“I suppose we could. We’ve got a free meal voucher now, so might as well,” his mom agreed, and the two of them headed for the restaurant.

After following the map on the flyer, Takuya and his mom arrived at their destination, but what they saw surprised them.

“Wasn’t this place an empty lot?”

It was a three-minute walk from the grocery store, and they were sure no building had been there before. But at the moment, a white castle-like restaurant stood in front of them.

“When did they build this?”

“I’m not sure,” his mom said. She always went by this street on the way to the grocery store, but she’d never noticed a restaurant like this before.

“Let’s just get our steak specials. I’m hungry,” Takuya said, so they both went inside.

The restaurant was packed. All the employees wore animal masks, which seemed to be part of their gimmick.

An employee in a cow mask led Takuya and his mom to a table right next to the register.

“Hey, Takuya, didn’t expect to see you here, too!” a boy who had just finished his meal called out to him. The boy was Kento Aoyagi, one of Takuya’s classmates. “The Salisbury steak here is delish!”

“Oh, good to know.”

Kento’s mom was by the register, asking for the restaurant’s business hours. Apparently, she really liked the place.

Takuya and his mom ordered the Salisbury steak set with high hopes.

“This is so good!”

Takuya shouted without thinking. The juicy flavor of the steak filled his mouth and paired perfectly with the demi-glace sauce.

"I've never had a Salisbury steak like this before!"

Takuya was all smiles.

"Me neither," his mom said.

Everyone else around them was smiling as they ate, too.

I'm glad we've got a good restaurant nearby now! Takuya thought as he stabbed his fork into another piece of steak.

It was evening on the same day.

Takuya told his dad all about the restaurant once the whole family was home.

"Oh? Was it really that good? Well, I want to try them out, too," his dad said.

"Then let's go right now!"

"Right now? Didn't you just go there for lunch?" his dad said.

"We did, but I'd like to go there again," his mom chimed in.

"See, even Mom wants to go. C'mon, Dad!" Takuya said.

"Right, okay, then let's have Salisbury steak for dinner!"

"Yippee!"



The next day, Takuya's entire school was buzzing with news of the restaurant. Everyone had gone to eat there after getting the free meal voucher.

"I could eat the Salisbury steak there forever," one classmate said.

"It's also open twenty-four hours," another mentioned.

"And it's kind of fun how all the employees wear animal masks."

Everyone was excited about the new restaurant, so Takuya boasted to everyone that he'd gone for lunch *and* dinner.

But then one of Takuya's friends asked a question that brought down the mood.

"So does anyone know what the restaurant is called?"

“Huh?”

Takuya looked at the flyer he’d brought to school to show his friends, but it didn’t have a name written on it.

“There wasn’t a sign or anything at the entrance, either.”

“Or anything on the menu or inside…”

“Right, what *was* it called?”

No one knew.

“But their Salisbury steaks are so good, so who cares?” Takuya said.

“Yeah, you’ve got a point,” another classmate agreed.

“Uh-huh, you could just call it ‘that really good restaurant,’ and everyone would know what you’re talking about!”

Everyone laughed it off.

That day after school.

Takuya headed straight to the kitchen once he got home. He was going to ask his mom if they could go back to the restaurant, but she wasn’t in the kitchen.

But usually she’s making dinner by now.

It didn’t look like she was cooking at all.

Then his mom came in from the living room.

“Oh, welcome home,” she said. “I fell asleep in the living room.”

“Are you feeling sick?”

“No, I was resting, since I’m not cooking dinner tonight,” she told him. “I want to go back to the restaurant.”

“Oh, you too, Mom?” Takuya was over the moon that his mom wanted to eat out again.

“We’ll go as soon as your father gets home. Oh, make sure to feed Max before we go.”

“Okay!” Takuya said, throwing his backpack down in the living room as he headed over to the yard. “I’ll do that right now!”

Yes! We’re having Salisbury steak tonight!

He was smiling, but as soon as he saw Max, his face fell.

The Shiba Inu was crouching by the doghouse.

“Max, what’s wrong?!”

Max was always energetic, so this was the first time Takuya had seen him like this. Takuya saw lots of holes all over the yard. Maybe the dog had been eating worms again?

But something seemed wrong. Normally, Max would start collecting bits of worm in a pile in his doghouse. Today Takuya didn't see a single worm.

"Did you eat them all?"

It was possible that the dog had a tummy ache.

Why did he dig so much, though? Maybe he was really *hungry.*

Takuya was curious, so he tried digging in the yard himself, but he didn't manage to find a single worm no matter where he dug.

"Usually, there are worms all over, though…"

Apparently, Max wasn't sick because he had eaten the worms. He was just sad that he hadn't *found* any.

That night.

As soon as Takuya's dad came home, they left for the restaurant. Takuya had been preoccupied with the missing worms, but eating his Salisbury steak was more important now.

"Hey, Takuya," someone said to him as soon as he entered the restaurant.

"Oh, Kento."

This time Kento wasn't just with his mom. His dad and little sister were with him, too. Takuya's family sat down at the table next to Kento's right away and got ready to order.

"Oh?" Takuya's dad was staring at the menu.

"What's wrong?"

"Looks like they have more types of Salisbury steaks."

When Takuya looked, he saw there was a new ORMWAY-MEAT SALISBURY STEAK on the menu in addition to the steak they'd had last time.

"Ormway-meat?"

"I've never heard of that before. But it sure sounds good."

Kento grinned and said, "We just ordered that."

"Okay, then I'll get it, too!"

So Takuya and his family ordered the same thing.

About ten minutes later, their orders of ormway-meat Salisbury steak were served.

"Let's dig in!" Everyone took a bite of their steak at the same time.

"It's so good!"

“It’s so nice and tender.”

“Dad, I’ve never had anything like this before!”

It was good, but a bit different from the steak they’d had the day before.

“This restaurant is amazing.”

“I could eat this every day.”

Even his parents were happy.

Then Kento edged closer to Takuya and whispered to him, “I wish we could come to this restaurant for every meal.”

“I mean, I’d like that, too, but I think we’d get bored if we came here all the time.”

“What are you talking about? Your mom’s not even a good cook.”

Takuya had mentioned that to Kento once before.

“My mom’s bad at cooking, too,” Kento said. “I prefer eating here.”

Kento cut off another bite of his steak and brought the piece of meat to his mouth.



“So good! Yeah, this is the best thing I’ve ever had!”

He’s right. My mom is *bad at cooking*, Takuya thought as he worked on his steak.

Right then, Takuya looked at Kento and froze. His friend’s fork was halfway to his mouth.

“Huh…?”

He’d seen something reddish, thick, and rubbery on Kento’s fork.

“K-Kento, isn’t that…?”

“Hmm?” Kento hadn’t noticed at all. Whatever the thing was, it was already in his mouth.

“Uh!”

“What’s wrong, Takuya?”

“I just saw something really weird!”

“Huh? What are you talking about now?” Kento stuffed the last morsel of steak into his mouth. “This is delish.”

“Yeah, it’s so good.”

Clatter, clatter, munch, munch. So good, so good.

Everyone around the restaurant was saying the same thing as their utensils clinked against their plates and they loudly chewed their food.

I must have been seeing things…



Takuya’s family went back to the restaurant the next day, too. And it wasn’t just Takuya’s family. Everyone from all over town was going to the restaurant to eat Salisbury steaks.

But Takuya started to feel like something was wrong.

I wonder what’s up with this restaurant…

Takuya was in his classroom, thinking about the restaurant, when his thoughts were interrupted by Kento dashing in.

“We’ve got an emergency! Koko and the other animals are gone!”

Koko was a chicken that the school took care of. There were seven chickens at the school in total. It was Kento’s turn to feed them that day, but when he’d gone to the coop, all of them were gone.

“Do you think a stray cat got them?”

“That’s what I thought, too, but I didn’t see any signs of a struggle.”

The coop had been locked, and he also hadn’t seen any holes in the fence.

“Actually…,” a girl in their class suddenly said. “The butterflies in one of the first-year classes all disappeared, too.”

“They did?”

Takuya was shocked, but then a boy next to him spoke up. “My neighbor says they can’t find their parakeet. And they had a turtle, but it vanished on the same day.”

“A parakeet and a turtle?”

Takuya was bewildered.

That evening.

After Takuya, Kento, and the rest of their friends hung out at a park, they headed home. Kento’s family was going to the restaurant again that day.

As Takuya was walking home, he thought about the animals and bugs that were missing.

The worms that Max likes digging up disappeared, too…

While Takuya was pondering that, he noticed the granny from next door walking his way.

“Oh, hi,” he said.

“Oh, Takuya, it’s awful!” She looked very pale. “Hana is gone!”

“Huh? She is?”

That was the pet cat the woman loved so much.

“She almost never goes outside, since she’s so old, but she disappeared without warning.” The granny had been looking for Hana since that afternoon. “If you see her, please let me know!”

“O-okay,” Takuya said.

Takuya’s neighbor left, calling, “Hana! Hana, where are you?” as she went.

Now even Hana is missing…

Takuya started to feel more and more like something was horribly wrong.

"What's wrong, Takuya?" someone said from behind him.

His dad was standing there.

"Are you on your way home? I am as well," his dad said. "Let's walk together."

While they walked, Takuya told his dad about how Hana had disappeared.

"Her too?" his dad muttered.

"What do you mean?"

"Well, you know I exterminate pests as part of my job for the health department, right?"

"Yeah."

"Something very strange happened today. All the crows went missing around town."

"The crows?" Takuya repeated. That was when Takuya noticed he hadn't heard any of the crows cawing like they normally did.

"And it's not just the crows. We've barely received any calls to exterminate rats, bees, or spiders, either…"

All the bugs and animals in town were gone.

"I've never seen this even once since starting this line of work…"

Eventually, they arrived home. The moment Takuya went to open the front door, his mom came bursting out.

"All right, let's go!" she said.

"Go where?"

"Well, to the restaurant, of course!"

His mom wanted to have Salisbury steak again.

But there's something off about that restaurant…

Takuya remembered everything that had happened earlier and shuddered.

"I want to eat your cooking today, Mom," he said, but his mom suddenly scowled.

"My cooking? Oh, don't lie. You know I'm a terrible cook."

"Huh?"

“I heard you say so at the restaurant with Kento. Every word.”

“I—I was just…” He really had said that to his friend, though. “K-Kento said it first, so I just went with it. But I really like your cooking, Mom!”

Takuya was desperate now, but his mom shook her head.

“I want a Salisbury steak tonight from *that* restaurant!”

As Takuya tried to figure out what to do, his dad put a hand on his shoulder.

“Oh, why not? Let’s go to the restaurant, Takuya.”

“But, Dad…”

“I also want to have their Salisbury steak again.” His dad smiled.

“But…but, Mom…Dad…” Takuya’s protests faltered.

“Why are we going *again*?” Takuya asked his parents desperately while they walked to the restaurant.

“Because it’s good, of course.”

“Yeah, I’m just craving it.”

“I get that, but still…,” Takuya said.

Once they got to the restaurant and sat at their usual table, they found that Kento’s family was there next to them.

“Kento!” Takuya called out to his friend, but Kento didn’t respond.

“This Salisbury steak is so good! This Salisbury steak is so good!” his friend said over and over.

Kento’s whole family was completely engrossed in their meals.

“Oh, looks like we’ve got new menu items today, too,” Takuya’s dad said, grinning as he sat down.

Takuya checked and saw there were all sorts of new dishes. UTTERFLYBAY-MEAT SALISBURY STEAK, ARAKEETPAY-MEAT SALISBURY STEAK, URTLETAY-MEAT SALISBURY STEAK… The menu even had some entirely new dishes, like DEEP-FRIED OWCRAY, ATRAY MEATBALLS, and something called EEBAY AND IDERSPAY FRIED RICE.

While Takuya was wondering about the odd names, the employee in the cow mask stopped by.

“We have another addition to our new menu. What do you think?”

Just as the employee said that, Takuya spotted a new meal called ANAHAY STEAK.

But the drawing on the menu looked just like a cat.

“Wh-what is this?”

As Takuya started to panic, the employee went on. “Oh yes. If you wait a little longer, we should have another option very soon.”

The employee looked at Takuya’s family through the eyeholes of his mask.

“Whole-roasted axmay ♪!” the waiter proclaimed.

“Axmay…?” Takuya repeated. “Axmay… Wait!”

Takuya looked at his parents and yelled, “Mom! Dad! Where’s Max?!”

But his parents were busy grinning at their menus.

“I think I might have the urtletay Salisbury steak. Or maybe the anahay steak would be better?”

“Mom!” Takuya tried.

“Maybe we should wait a little longer so we can get the whole-roasted axmay.”

“Dad!”

Clatter, clatter, munch, munch. So good, so good.

“But then at this rate, even Max will… Aah!”

Takuya stood, pushed aside the employee in front of him, and rushed out of the restaurant.

“Max! I’m coming for you!”

Takuya was going home to save his dog.

“Your dog is fine.”

A boy wearing a red hood stood in front of Takuya. A little dog wearing a yellow hood was by his side.

They were Fushigi and Jimmy.

“Max is practically one of my own. Gotta help a bud out, y’know?” Jimmy said.

“Uh, um, what?” Takuya stammered.

“I’m the human-faced dog Jimmy. I can talk.”

“What’s happening?” Takuya said.

“Looks like you’re not fully under their influence yet,” Fushigi finally chimed in. “Did you realize something was off?”

“Y-yeah! What’s wrong with that restaurant?”

“That’s the Mystery Restaurant. It’s cursed. If you eat there for too long, you become unable to eat anything else.”

“Basically, the grub’s addictive,” Jimmy clarified. “And ya might think that’s scary, but wait till ya hear about the ingredients!”

“I knew it!” Takuya exclaimed.

“If you had eaten there a few more times, you might have fallen completely under the restaurant’s influence, too,” Fushigi said as he pulled out a red notebook and headed to the back entrance of the building.

“Uh, wait!”

Takuya had no idea what was going on, but he *did* know he was scared of being alone. He ran after Fushigi and Jimmy.

Once Fushigi was in through the back door, he started his plan to infiltrate the kitchen.

“Uh, um…” Takuya crouched just like Fushigi had.

“Shh! Ya wanna get yourself caught?!” Jimmy scolded Takuya.

In the kitchen, the cooks were fast at work.

They rustled and rummaged, rummaged and rustled.

Takuya could hear things moving inside the pots and pans. He was so curious that he couldn’t help but peek into the pot closest to him. Inside were fat, rubbery red things writhing around.

No way!

Takuya barely stopped himself from screaming as he turned away from the pot.

Next, he saw a cat on the countertop.

It was Hana.

Two cooks—one wearing a pig mask and the other a chicken mask—held down Hana's limbs. Next to them, a cook with a cow mask held up a gigantic knife.

"Hana!"

Takuya screamed before he knew it.

The cooks all turned to look at him.

"Argh! Geez! Didn't I tell ya to keep quiet?!"

"S-sorry!"

"Well, they already know we're here. We need to hurry and find the mark!" Fushigi started looking around the kitchen. His gaze landed on a spot under a gigantic refrigerator.

A strange mark was carved into the floor.

"Jimmy, distract them!" he said.

"Ya got it!" Jimmy jumped onto the countertop. "Lookie here! Don't I look delicious?! Come and get me!"

Jimmy hopped around as he shouted. The cooks all went after him.

While the restaurant employees were distracted, Fushigi dashed over to the mark and opened his notebook. He held it over the mark and said a spell.

"Resolve."

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

"Whoa!" Takuya had no idea what had happened, but he fell back on his butt.

"Looks like it's over…," Jimmy said to Takuya after a while.

"Huh? Um?"

That was when Takuya realized he was sitting in an empty lot.

His parents, Kento's family, and all the diners at the restaurant were face down on the ground and unconscious. He also saw Hana, some chickens, the worms, and a bunch of other animals.



“Dad… Mom…?” he said.

“They’ll be okay. Ya sit tight, and everybody’ll wake up soon enough.”

“Wh-what happened to the restaurant?” Takuya asked.

“The restaurant is gone,” Fushigi answered from behind him. “The only person who will remember what happened is you, since you weren’t under its influence.”

“What?”

“You shouldn’t mention it to anyone else. There are some truths in the world that are better left unknown.”

“Truths like what…?” Takuya tilted his head in confusion.

Fushigi murmured to himself, “But still… What was she thinking, setting up something like this…?”

Jimmy grinned. “I think I get it. Nobody really knows what’s in the grub they’re scarfing down. They just care whether it’s tasty or not.”

“How is that relevant?” Fushigi asked.

“C’mon, ya gotta have an idea of what I’m gettin’ at. Didja know that shrimp tails and cockroach wings are made of the same stuff? Or that candy and drinks that are pink or red have got these little red crushed bugs mixed in to give ’em that color? None of that’s urban legend—it’s all real.”

“Oh, right.”

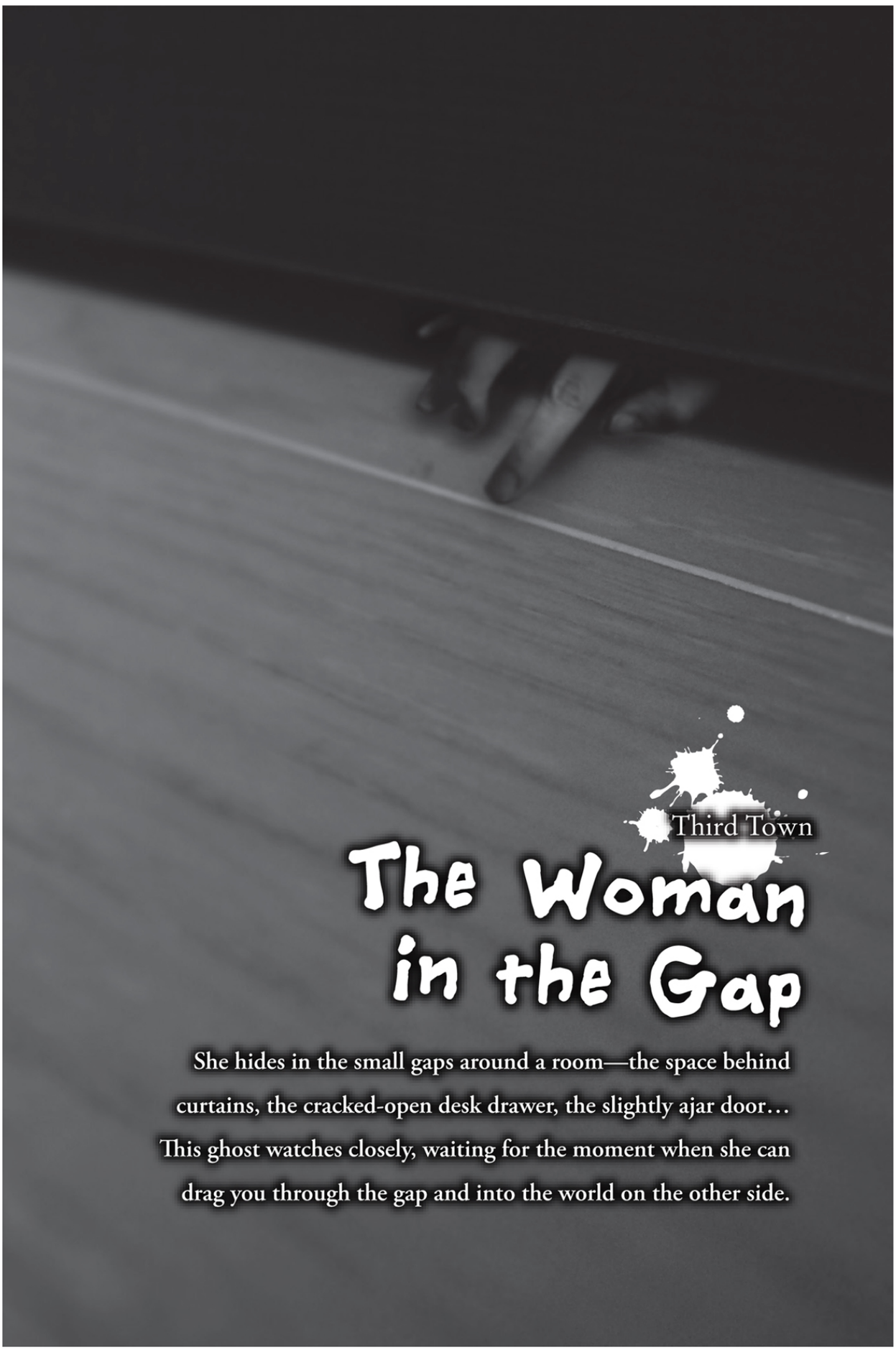
“R-really…?” Takuya shuddered.

Fushigi sighed as he looked at Takuya.

“You should try to figure out what’s in the food you eat. If you don’t, you’ll end up sucked in by another urban legend like the Mystery Restaurant.”

After Fushigi said that, he left with Jimmy.





Third Town

The Woman in the Gap

She hides in the small gaps around a room—the space behind curtains, the cracked-open desk drawer, the slightly ajar door… This ghost watches closely, waiting for the moment when she can drag you through the gap and into the world on the other side.

Why do I have this bad feeling…? Ayana suddenly thought while she was doing her homework.

She was good at fractions, so she'd thought getting through four pages of homework would be easy. But as soon as she sat down at her desk and started working, she got goose bumps.

Is there something under my desk?

She peeked at her feet, but she only saw her favorite fluffy slippers that she wore in the winter.

Maybe it's just my imagination…

She went back to her homework. The only sound in her room was the pencil as she wrote in her notebook.

But then she felt it again.

What is *that?*

This time it didn't feel like it was coming from near her legs.

It was behind her.

She turned around instinctively.

The only thing behind her was her bed and the bay window, which was decorated with pink hyacinths. Sunset came early in January, so the world past her beloved flowers was already dark.

She looked at the clock. It was just past six.

I wonder if Mom and Dad will be home soon, Ayana thought as she stared outside.

She had no idea what she had felt, but she knew *something* was there.

Is it outside the window? There's no way. This is the second floor.

The flowers by the window were Ayana's favorites. Actually, she had lots of favorite things. She loved the stuffed animals on the small bookcase to the right of her desk and on top of her dresser. The cartoon poster on her wall right over the stuffed animals also always put her in a cheerful mood.

This is paradise! That perfectly described her room.

But not right then.

Something is giving me the creeps.

Normally, she would hear her mom making dinner on the first floor around this time. But she didn't hear anything at the moment. Her mom had told her she would be late because of her part-time job.

She remembered talking to her mom on the phone in the first-floor living room.

"You're almost a sixth grader, so you can hold down the fort alone, right, Ayana?"

"Yeah, I can," Ayana said right away.

Rustle, rustle…

While Ayana was thinking about the phone call from a few hours ago, she suddenly heard a noise.

Rustle, rustle, rustle.

She got on her bed to look outside.

Are the tree branches scratching against the window?

She wiped the foggy glass with her hand, then looked out into the darkness. A new house was being built on the empty lot next door, but no one was around. She didn't see any trees tall enough to reach her window, either. *Maybe a gust of wind brought some leaves up to the window?* Ayana thought as she pulled the curtains closed.

Then she sat down on the bed. The strange feeling had started a few days earlier.

It feels like something's there… How do I describe it…?

She couldn't come up with the right words for the restless feeling.

Her mom and dad had worked really hard to buy their house. And after they moved, Ayana had finally gotten her own room, which was like a dream come true.

I can't tell Mom or Dad that I think there's something wrong with my room.

It was probably just in her head. That was what she assumed, at least.

But maybe it's not. What do I do?

Ayana looked down at the floor as she wondered this. Then, she looked up and turned around.

Huh?

One of her curtains was pulled slightly aside, creating a gap between the fabric and the window.

"Didn't I just close them?" Ayana quickly tugged the curtain closed again.

Was it the wind? But the window is closed… Where did the gap come from?

Ayana thought back to the message her mom had shown her on her phone.

It was a message to parents from Ayana's school.

> To our parents and guardians,
> The Health Department of the Municipal Board of Education has issued a notice regarding a suspicious individual. It seems several elementary students in the city have been approached by a boy in a red hood, accompanied by a dog, who has asked them whether they have seen anyone in the gaps of their house. The faculty at the school put your child's safety first…

Her mom gave her a worried look.

"Did you know about this?"

Ayana shook her head.

"It sounds really frightening. I won't be able to pick you up from school when I'm working, so be careful, Aya."

"Mom, what does it mean for someone to be in the gaps?"

Her mom gave her a puzzled look and said, "I'm not so sure."

Someone's in the gaps?

Those words sent a shiver down Ayana's spine. The hand she had raised toward the curtains trembled. What if someone appeared from the other side?

I need to get these silly thoughts out of my head! she scolded herself.

She quickly grabbed the side of the curtain, adjusting it so everything was covered. That was when she figured out what the

creepy feeling she had sensed earlier was. It was that strange feeling of being watched, like something clinging to her skin.

Ayana looked around her room again.

Is it my stuffed animals or the poster?

Ayana put her stuffed animals under the covers of her bed so she wouldn't be able to see their faces. She also pulled down her poster and hid it under the covers, too.

She made sure nothing could stare at her in her room, but…

It didn't work. I can still feel it! Someone is definitely watching me!

"Is Mom not home yet?"

Ayana felt like crying, so she decided to go downstairs to use the phone. She took a step toward the door. But right then…

Rustle, rustle…

I heard it again!

Her hand stopped right as she was about to grab the doorknob. She'd read the phrase "to have your hair stand on end" in books before, but now she was experiencing it firsthand.

Rustle, rustle, rustle, rustle!

The sound was even clearer than before. She could hear it on the other side of the door.

"What is that?!" she murmured to herself, her voice shaking so much that it was barely audible.

I need to open the door!

Ayana grabbed the knob, but…

"It won't open!"

…no matter how hard she pulled, the door wouldn't budge.

"What's going on?!"

It wouldn't move at all when she pushed on it, either.

"What's happening?! What is this?!"

It wasn't locked.

Ayana yanked on the knob with all her might, and it finally opened just a tiny bit.

I did it! Just a little more!

But then she saw something white flash past the gap in the door.

It looked like a girl's hand. Something was holding on to the doorknob.

"Ah!" Ayana was overpowered, and the door slammed shut.



She took her hand off the knob and fell backward onto the floor.

"Ow!"

She started to cry, but not because it hurt. She was crying because she was scared.

"Mom! Dad! Help me!"

Anyone! I need to get help!

Ayana leaped onto her bed and reached for her closed curtains, but then she saw something in the gap between them.

A girl's eye!

She saw it in the darkness.

"Aaah!" Ayana jerked back and fell off the bed.

But then something new happened.

Hee-hee-hee-hee.

A chill went down Ayana's spine.

"No… No…"

Hee-hee-hee-hee.

This time the snickering was even clearer.

"Stop it!" Ayana clapped her hands over her ears.

Hee-hee-hee… Hee-hee… Hee-hee-hee.

She could hear the laughter coming from inside her room.

It came from the drawers of her dresser and from inside her bookcase.

"No, no! Stop it! Stop!" Ayana shouted as she huddled into a ball.

Hee-hee-hee! Hee-hee! Hee! …Ha-ha-ha-ha!

"No, please! Stop!" Ayana yelled at all the spots in her room where the laughter was coming from.

She saw someone's eye on her bookshelf in the gaps between her books. Then there was another eye in her dresser. A small gap was in her drawer from a handkerchief stuck inside. The eyes

were appearing in the gaps between her bookcase and the dresser. Then there was the gap between her furniture and her walls.

Gaps, gaps, and more gaps!

In a panic, Ayana pulled all the books off the shelves and hid them under her covers. She even hid the books on her desk. She threw her comforter over everything in her desk drawers and left them open so they couldn't form a gap, or at least she assumed they wouldn't.

She did the same thing with her dresser drawers.

She pulled out her clothes and stuffed them between her furniture and the walls to get rid of those gaps.

Hee-hee-hee… Ha-ha-haaa.

The laughter was still inside the room.

"Stop it! Stop!" Ayana shouted as she filled all the gaps in her room, but it wasn't enough.

Ha-ha-ha-ha!

The laughter was even louder.

"Get out of my room! I'll call the police!"

She was so frightened that she had no idea what she was doing anymore.

"I'll fill all the gaps!"

Ayana pulled some tape from under her comforter.

"Gaps! The gaps!"

Ayana used her jackets, shirts, and skirts to hide everything. Then she taped down their hems so they couldn't make a gap with the floor.

Gaps! The gaps! The gaps!!!

As Ayana ripped more tape off the roll, it made a sound like it was screaming.

Screeeech!

Then she stuck it to her skirt to tape it to the ground.

Tap.

She tore off another strip.

Screeeech!

Tap.

Then she stuck that down, too.

Sweat dripped from her forehead as she kept tearing and sticking tape to the ground.

Screeeeeeeeech!

Tap.



This time she taped down a shirt.

Screeeech!

The tape screeched again, louder than before. She had only a few centimeters of it left.

“This is all I have?!”

She was bewildered, but she needed to use it.

This time she used the final bit to tape her scarf to the floor.

But as she did that…

Rustle, rustle, rustle!

…she heard the sound again from a gap.

“Stop it!”

She tried to fill the space with her hands, but at the same time, the hand of a girl with long nails reached out from the gap and grasped hers.

“Get away!”

Several hours passed after that.

A police car was stopped in front of Ayana’s house.

“Aya! Aya!”

The police were holding her mom and dad back as they broke down.



It was late at night, but a crowd had formed. Among them was a dog and a boy wearing a red hood.

“Whaddaya want to do?” the dog asked.

“There are too many people around right now. We’ll get the mark later.”

“What?! Haven’t ya got any blood running in those veins, Fushigi? Ya don’t feel bad after seeing her parents torn up like that? Don’t ya wanna help her out?”

“I did what I could.”

You didn’t do anything! Jimmy almost said, but then he seemed to realize something.

Under the hood, there was a sad look in Fushigi’s eyes.

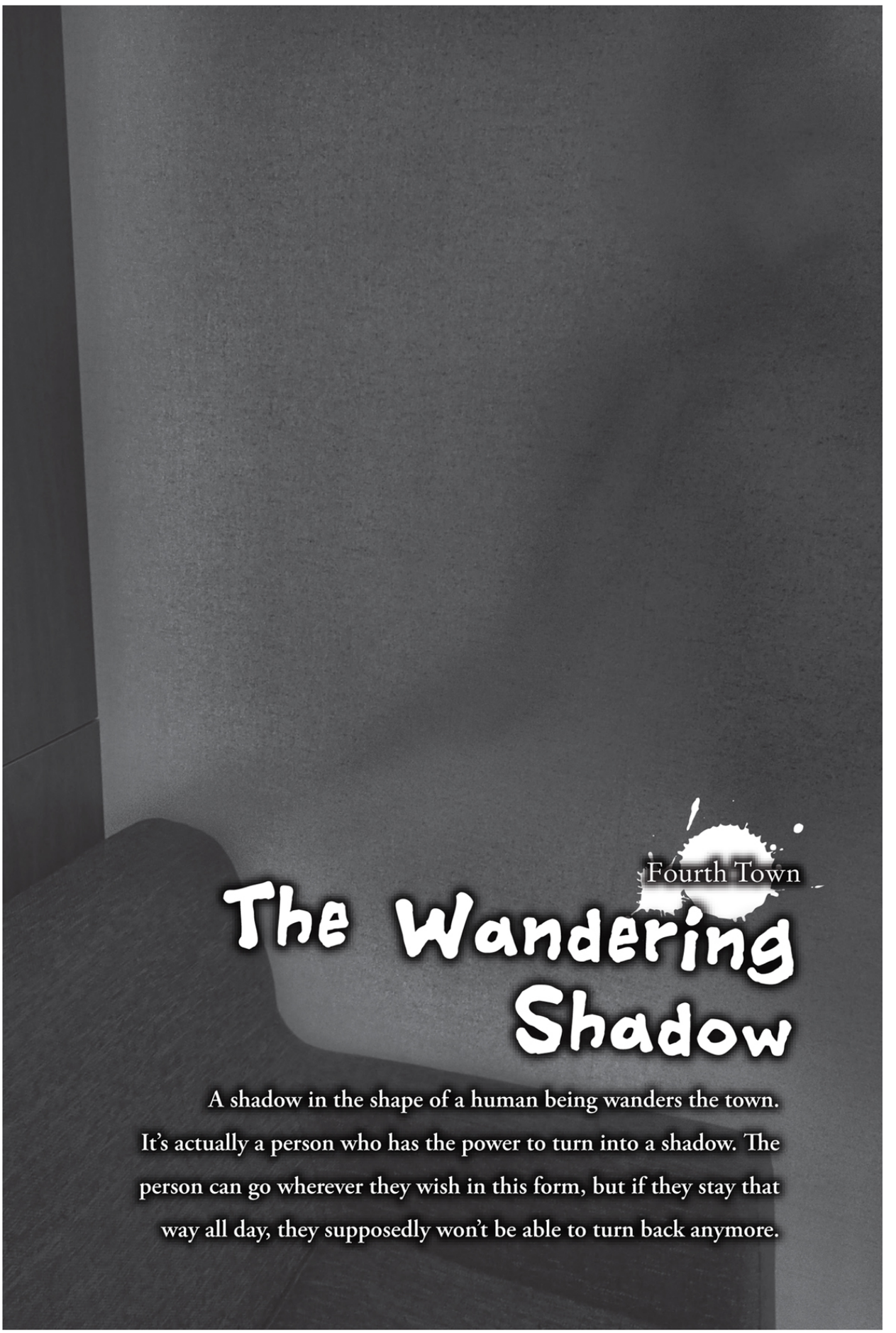
“Right. So that’s why ya went around asking if anyone noticed somebody in the gaps of their house… You were warning them.”

Fushigi didn’t answer him directly; instead, he said, “Let’s go.”

The boy and the dog walked away and down the road.

Meanwhile…a girl watched them from the shadows.

The inside of her black hood was deep and filled with darkness.


Fourth Town
The Wandering Shadow
A shadow in the shape of a human being wanders the town. It's actually a person who has the power to turn into a shadow. The person can go wherever they wish in this form, but if they stay that way all day, they supposedly won't be able to turn back anymore.

“Ya really think it’s here?”

It was early afternoon on a Sunday.

Fushigi and Jimmy had just arrived in town.

Not a cloud was in the sky, and sunlight was streaming down on the town. Fushigi stared at his shadow created by the bright sunlight.

“We need to find it before sunset, no matter what it takes,” he said.

Then he pulled out his red notebook.

Four hours until sunset.



“Really! You’ve been playing video games all afternoon!”

At a house in a certain residential area, Jin was lounging around on his living room couch playing a handheld game.

“Did you finish your homework yet? If you get another bad score on a test, I’m telling your father!”

“I got it, okay? Geez.”

After getting yelled at by his mom, Jin reluctantly set his console down on the table and got up.

“And where did that game come from anyway?”

Ever since Jin had gotten into middle school, his mom wouldn’t stop nagging him about studying. She wouldn’t buy him any of the games he wanted because of that.

“Uh… My friend from school let me borrow it.”

“They lent it? Isn’t this brand-new?”

“He still let me borrow it,” Jin muttered as he opened the living room door.

“Hey, mister, I’m still talking to you.”

“Bathroom!” Jin shouted.

“You’ve got to be kidding me!” his mother yelled behind him.

Whenever Jin was about to get a scolding, he would find some way to escape it without fail.

Still seeming frustrated, his mom grabbed a shopping bag.

“I’m going grocery shopping,” she said. “Make sure you do your homework.”

“Uh-huh, okay,” Jin replied from inside the bathroom.

His mom sighed, then left the house.

“I wish she would shut up already,” Jin grumbled as he left the bathroom.

I know I have homework, but still…

It had been a month since he’d become a middle school student. But it also felt like the classes had suddenly gotten a lot harder.

When I play games, I can forget about school.

He headed back to the living room to play while his mom wasn’t home. But then he saw something he could hardly believe was there.

A shadow.

A pitch-black shadow in the shape of a human was standing next to the sofa.

“Wh-what is that thing?”

Jin immediately tried to grab a broom that was leaning against the wall. But then the shadow noticed him and started running toward him.

“Whoa!”

Jin backed away without thinking and hit the back of his head —hard—against a wall. The sound of a dull *crack* filled the room.



“Ahhh…”

Jin clutched the back of his head as blood dripped onto the floor. He’d hit his head against a bag hook on the wall.

“Ahh, uhhh…,” Jin groaned as he slumped down on the spot.

He looked at the shadow, which held the game console in its hand.

The rays of the sun started to filter through the window, lighting up the living room.

Three and a half hours until sundown.



Fushigi and Jimmy had made their way through the neighborhood.

“Can ya feel it?”

“Looks like it’s wandering around, so it’s hard to pinpoint where it is. We’ll need to find it with what we have.”

“Okay, but what *do* we have? How’re we gonna find this thing?” Jimmy muttered just as an ambulance drove by. “What’s that?”

The ambulance stopped right in front of a house with a white wall. Fushigi and Jimmy watched as Jin came out of the house. His head was still bleeding.

“It was a shadow! A shadow!” Jin yelled at his mom with tears streaming down his face.

“All right, just get in the ambulance now!” she said.

“No, really! A shadow attacked me!” Jin wailed, begging for someone to believe him, but no one seemed to.

“Fushigi, he said somethin’ about a shadow…”

“Yeah, that has to be it.”

Fushigi headed over to speak to Jin.

Three hours until sunset.



At a big park near the outskirts of a town, there was a lake where people could go fishing or boating. Shouji Hirota stood alone, fishing on a pier for the boats. He wasn't in any after-school clubs, so he'd been fishing more often at the park.

He'd begun before noon and had already caught six fish.

This spot is perfect for a good catch.

Until last week, another kid in his grade had been fishing at the same pier. Shouji had forced that guy out so he could have the whole place to himself.

Haven't even seen him since then.

The other kid had apparently been fishing there since elementary school.

Well, it's not like I'd give up this spot if he came back anyway.

Once he caught his seventh fish, Shouji sat down on a folding chair to take a break. He reached out to grab his drink.

Crunch!

Suddenly, the can was flat.

Someone had crushed it.

"What's going on?"

He looked up to see a human-shaped shadow standing right by the can.

"Whoa!"

Shouji had no idea what was happening, so he tried to run away. But the shadow grabbed Shouji's hand.

"S-stop it! Let go!" Shouji tried to shake it off, but then the shadow used its other hand to firmly grab Shouji's shoulder and throw him.

Sploosh!

Shouji fell right into the lake.

"Wah! I—I can't swim! Help!"

The lake was too deep for his legs to reach the bottom.

Shouji started to panic.

"Heh-heh-heh…"

He heard a voice from the pier—the shadow was laughing.

"Help! Help me!" he screamed as he flailed around.

But the shadow just cackled as it watched him, then swiftly disappeared.

The sunlight shone over the pier.

Two hours until sunset.



Students were on the middle school field, shouting while they practiced their club activities.

In one corner of the field was a cushioned tennis court.

"Having to be the gofer is *so* boring."

"I know, right?"

While the upperclassmen played on the court, Miki Aoi and Eriko Matsumoto, who were both in their first year of middle school, watched from behind. First-year students had to pick up the balls, so for the first month, they weren't even allowed to hold a racket.

Both Miki and Eriko were fed up with that.

"Oh, right. I found another rare character!" Miki pulled out the cell phone she had sneaked into practice and showed Eriko.

A teacher was pictured on the screen. She was smiling and holding a rice ball with both hands as she sat on a bench in the school courtyard.

"What do you think? This is totally an S-ranker, right?"

"Um, Miki…"

Miki seemed to be enjoying herself and was all smiles, but Eriko was frustrated with this little habit of her friend's. Miki's hobby was taking pictures of "unique" people and ranking them.

"I don't think you should do that sort of thing," Eriko said.

"Why not? It's fun."

"You'll get in so much trouble if anyone finds out."

"It'll be fine. I mean, remember what happened last time?" Miki said as she showed another picture she'd taken to Eriko.

In it, a boy was riding on a skateboard through the school halls.

“Before…and after.” Miki showed her the next picture. It was of the boy close to tears as the teacher scolded him. “Look at his face! That is definitely an SS-ranker!”

Miki had taken the perfect candid shot a week ago.

“Everyone laughed so much when I showed it to them. And the kid in the picture found out, too, but nothing bad happened.”

“That’s only because you intimidated him and told him he should say it to your face if he had an issue.”

“But he looked like he wasn’t going to anyway!” Miki laughed, but Eriko didn’t feel like going along with it.

“Apparently, someone forced him to ride on the skateboard.”

“Huh? How do you know that, Eriko?”

“I’m in the same class as him. And so is that kid Takumi Shimizu in our class.”

“Oh, the scary guy?”

“Yeah, and Shimizu made him ride the skateboard down the hallway.”

“Really?”

“It seems like Shimizu orders him to do a lot of stuff.”

After hearing about that, Miki looked back at the boy in the photo.

“So that means…I’ll be able to get even more rare pictures!”

Then she laughed again.

“Okay, we’re going to do formal competition practice next! First-years, ten laps around the field!” their teacher told them, which got the club members moving.

“Miki, that’s enough about the pictures. Let’s go.”

“Uh-huh, okay.” Miki put her phone in her pocket and followed Eriko to where everyone else was going.

Crash!



But suddenly, the referee's chair next to Miki fell over.

"Ah!"

Eriko turned and saw that the chair had fallen on top of Miki, who was groaning.

"Heh-heh-heh…"

"What?"

Eriko tried searching for the source of the laughter. Then she saw a shadow in the shape of a human standing right next to her.

"One more…," the shadow murmured, then swiftly disappeared.

The sunlight spilled on the field from the west.

One hour until sunset.



"Takumi, where are you going? It's almost time for dinner," Takumi's mom called out inside their condo.

"Ugh, we can eat whenever," Takumi Shimizu muttered as he picked up his skateboard at the front door and left.

Takumi didn't misbehave just at home. He also rebelled at school against his teachers. Because of that, everyone was scared of him, and he had no friends. The only things that put him in a good mood were his skateboard and picking on a kid named Tetsuo Sugiura.

Making him skateboard down the hall was awesome.

When he remembered how close Tetsuo had been to crying, he grinned.

He headed out of the condo and to a park where there was a skateboarding area. The park was on the other side of a crosswalk on one of the main roads.

Takumi made his way to the intersection and waited for the light to change.

It was sunset. All the shadows were starting to get longer, including Takumi's.

He yawned and casually looked at one of the curved mirrors next to the crosswalk.

"What?"

The mirror showed what was around the corner. He saw something pitch-black and human shaped standing in the road.

"Wh-what is that thing?" Takumi rubbed his eyes and looked at the mirror again. "It's real…"

He held his skateboard like a weapon as he approached the corner and peered around it.

But no one was there.

"Where'd it go?"

He looked around but couldn't find anyone. He tilted his head in confusion, then headed back to the crosswalk.

Behind him, the shadow reappeared.

It stared right at him, but Takumi didn't notice. Then the shadow slowly approached.

It took one step, then another…

A truck was driving down the road.

Once the shadow was right behind Takumi, it raised both its hands up.

The truck was sailing toward the crosswalk.

As though it was waiting for the truck to pass by, the shadow brought its hands to Takumi's back.

But right then…

…someone grabbed them.

"That's enough."

It was Fushigi.

"I'm going to be collecting your power," he said.

"L-let go!" the shadow shouted and tried to shake Fushigi off. "Let go! Don't get in my way!"

Takumi had heard the commotion and turned around. "Wh-what is that shadow thing?!"

"Aw, man! Now he's noticed me!"

“What? I know that voice…” Takumi stared at the shadow’s face.

“Are you…?”

“Darn it!” The shadow pushed away Fushigi’s hands and dashed off.



“I was so close! Shoot!”

Tetsuo Sugiura had turned into a shadow. He cursed under his breath as he ran down the large street. But then he reached a dead end.

“You can’t run any farther.”

Fushigi and Jimmy were blocking the road.

“Darn it! But I have powers now! I should be able to get away easy—”

“Get away? I already told you there’s no point,” Fushigi said as he looked up at the sky.

The sky was growing darker, and the sun was even lower than before.

“The sun is going to set—then there won’t be any shadows. Once that happens, you can’t use the power of the Shadow Man.”

Fushigi and Jimmy slowly approached Tetsuo.

“H-how do you know about that?”

“I came to this town to collect that power.”

“It’s the ability to turn your body into a shadow. But why’d Himitsu give it to this dude?” Jimmy muttered.

“She thought he’d use it,” Fushigi answered him. “You used that power to hurt people you have a grudge against. We figured that out and started watching over Takumi Shimizu, who’s one of your bullies.”

“Then you came walkin’ right up, just like we expected,” Jimmy said.

Fushigi and Jimmy stepped closer to Tetsuo.

“K-keep back! As long as I have this ability, no one can underestimate me again!”

“Underestimate you?”

“With this power, I got my handheld back, and I also got revenge on the guy who stole my fishing spot and the girl who made fun of me by taking those pictures. All I had to do was get Shimizu, too. But then you…” Tetsuo looked at Fushigi.

“A kid in a red hood… I know about you. You’re Fushigi Senno, aren’t you?”

Fushigi and Jimmy were both surprised.

“A certain someone told me about you. They told me that if you take my power, I’ll end up dead.”

“What?” Jimmy said.

“You’re being tricked,” Fushigi told Tetsuo.

“Shut up! Don’t come any closer!” Tetsuo shouted, preparing to defend himself. At that moment, Tetsuo’s whole body quivered.

“Wh-what the…?” Jimmy said.

“Don’t tell me it’s already started…,” Fushigi said.

Squeeze!

They heard a sound like a rag being wrung out as Tetsuo’s body started to twist.

“It hurts! It hurts so much!”

“Fushigi!”

Fushigi looked up at the sky.

The sun had fully set.

“Once the sun sets, you’ll lose your power and get swallowed by the darkness.”

“What?!” Tetsuo shrieked.

“How can that be?! Help me! Ah! Aaah!”

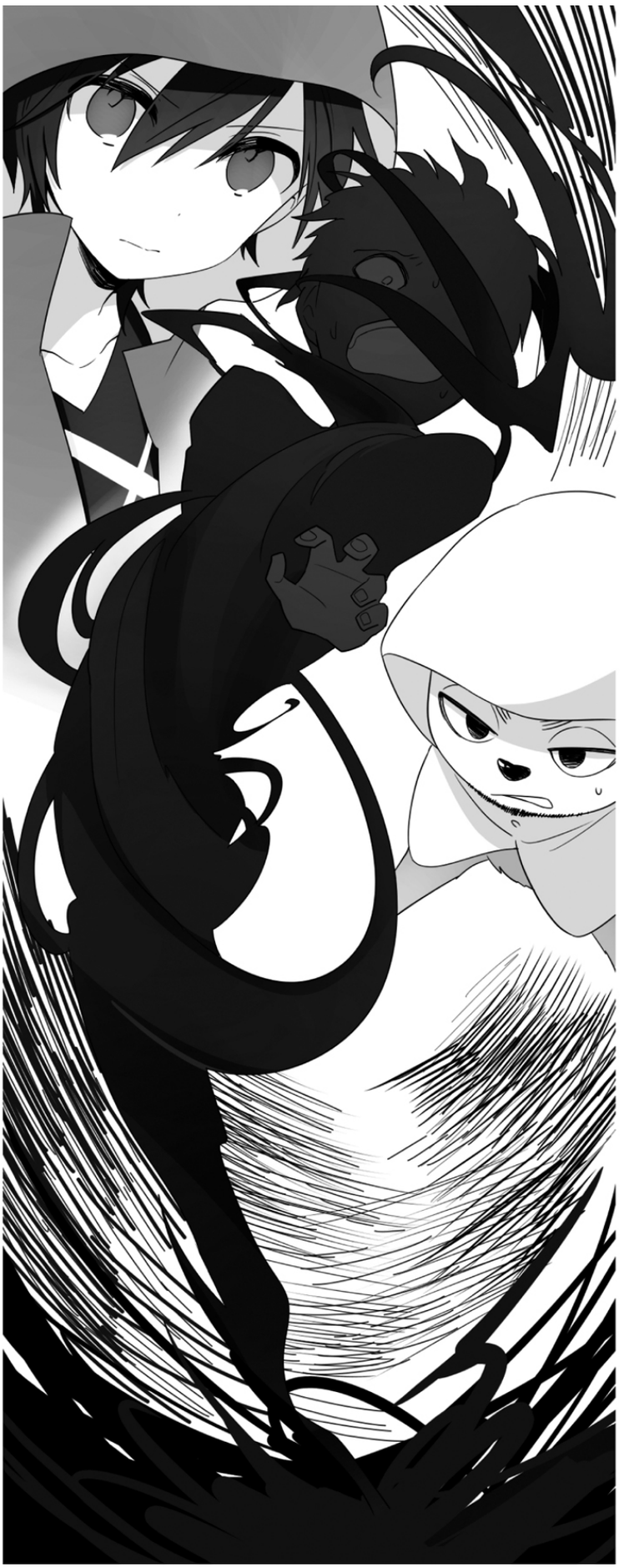
A giant shadow appeared under Tetsuo’s feet as he writhed in pain.

“Wah!”

He slowly started to sink into the shadow.

“No! It hurts! Help me! Aaaah!”

Tetsuo tried escape the shadow's hold, but the more he struggled, the faster he sank.



“At this rate, you’ll be stuck in the shadow forever.”

“No! Please! Help me! It hurts! It hurts! Aaaah!”

His whole body twisted even more.

“Help! It hurts! Help me! Ah! Agh!”

Fushigi thrust his bright-red notebook at Tetsuo as he wailed.

“Where’s the mark? When you got the power from Himitsu, she should have carved a mark somewhere.”

“Th-the mark… N-no, I don’t want to die!” Tetsu shouted.

“Hurry and show it to me. Once you’re fully swallowed by the shadow, it’ll hurt like this forever.”

Tetsuo stared at Fushigi for a while. “No! I don’t want that! Aaah!”

Tetsuo raised his head up as the shadow swallowed him to his neck. He opened his mouth and stuck his tongue out as he squirmed.

“H-help…”

A strange mark was carved into his tongue.

Once Fushigi saw that, he held up his notebook and chanted a spell.

“Resolve.”

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

“Aaah!”

Tetsuo’s scream rang out through the entire town.

When he came to, Tetsuo was crouched on the ground. He was back to his human form.

“Wh-where is the shadow?” he asked.

“I collected the power. You’re not cursed anymore,” Fushigi said as he closed his notebook.

“You…saved me…”

Fushigi sighed when he saw Tetsuo’s obvious relief.

“Himitsu completely fooled you.”

“Himitsu?”

“She’s the girl in the black hood,” Jimmy explained.

“When you use the power of the Shadow Man,” Fushigi said, “it also makes the shadow in your heart come closer to the surface, and that makes it harder to tell good from evil. In other words, you weren’t yourself.”

“What…?”

“Himitsu didn’t tell you any of that when she gave you the power, did she?” Fushigi asked, and Tetsuo shook his head weakly.

After another day of Takumi bullying him like usual, Tetsuo had been walking home from school when he ran into a girl in a black hood.

“If I gave you power, maybe people would stop underestimating you?”

He hadn’t really been able to see her face, but the girl had laughed.

Tetsuo had believed everything she’d said and accepted the power.

“But still…” Fushigi scowled. “I can’t believe she lied and said you’d die if I took your power away.”

“Yeah, that’s real lousy of her,” Jimmy said. But then Tetsuo replied:

“*She* didn’t tell me that.”

“What?”

Fushigi and Jimmy looked at him expectantly, so Tetsuo hesitantly told them, “After I got the ability from her, some guy came by. He was tall and looked kind of nice, like an older brother… He’s the one who told me I’d die.”

“Who the heck’s that? Fushigi, do ya know him?”

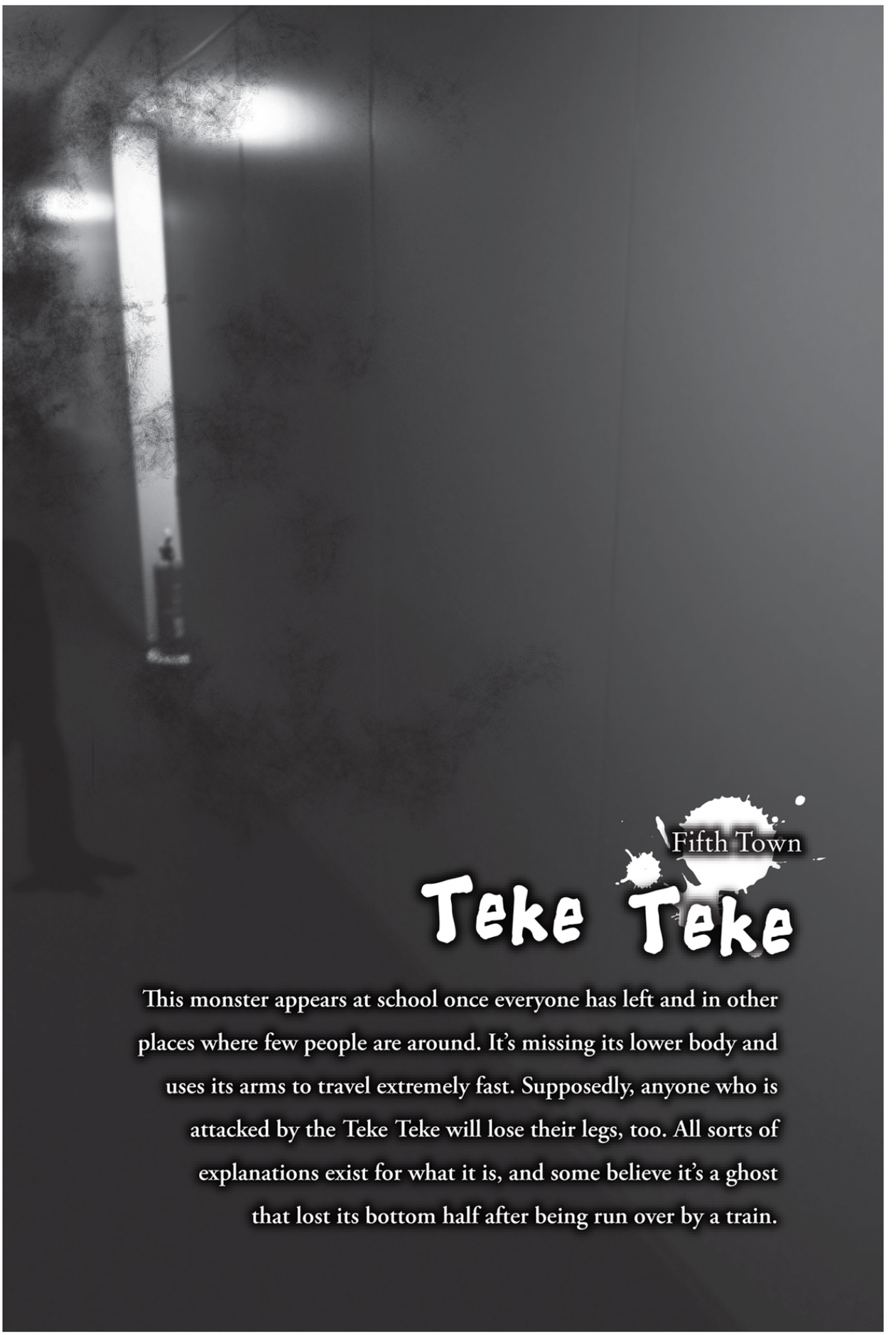
“I don’t, but why would he know my name?”

“He was carrying a blue umbrella the whole time even though it wasn’t raining.”

“A blue umbrella…?”

“Fushigi…”

“If we catch Himitsu, we might be able to find out who he is, too,” Fushigi said. His expression was grim as he looked ahead.



Fifth Town

Teke Teke

This monster appears at school once everyone has left and in other places where few people are around. It's missing its lower body and uses its arms to travel extremely fast. Supposedly, anyone who is attacked by the Teke Teke will lose their legs, too. All sorts of explanations exist for what it is, and some believe it's a ghost that lost its bottom half after being run over by a train.

Huff! Huff! Huff! Huff!

It was evening. On the gloomy third floor of a building, Mitsuki Mochida's and Moe Furuichi's harsh pants echoed all around. They looked desperate as they ran down the hallway.

"W-wait!"

"Moe, just run!"

They sneaked glances behind them as they dashed down the hall.

It was large and white like a volleyball…

…and it was coming after them.

"What is that thing?"

"How should I know?!"

It had two arms that it used like legs to rush toward them.

"It's coming closer!"

"Moe, over here!" Mitsuki grabbed Moe's hand and ran into the music room next to them.

Teke teke, teke teke, teke teke, teke teke, teke teke!

It ran after them, its hands making tapping noises as they hit the ground.

It ran right past the music room and charged straight ahead.

"At this rate, we'll both end up turning into one of those…," Mitsuki said.

After school, Mitsuki had gone with Moe to grab a homework sheet that Moe had forgotten. But when they'd tried to go into the fourth-year's classroom 5, a monster had shown up out of nowhere.

They had run over to the first-floor staff room to get help from Ms. Higuchi, the teacher who had let them in. But she was collapsed on the ground in front of the door.

Her legs and bottom half had disappeared, so only her arms and torso were left.

The other teachers in the staff room had looked the same, and all of them had been unconscious.

“Wh-what’s going on?”

“I have no idea!”

While they were panicking, the creature had shown up again. Then they’d just run as fast as they could away from it.

“Ah!”

While they were hiding in the music room, Moe suddenly shrieked.

“What’s wrong?”

“I—I thought I saw someone…” Moe pointed in front of her.

Mitsuki investigated and realized Moe had seen her own reflection in a full-length mirror.

“That’s just a mirror. The music class students probably use it to check their posture while they’re singing.”

“Oh…it’s just my reflection.” Moe seemed relieved. But she looked terrified again right away. “Mitsuki, we should get outside as soon as we can…”

“I know. But the entrance…”

Mitsuki and Moe had recently tried to run to the entrance where the shoe cubbies were.

However, the legless teachers had been there. They’d groaned, and their eyes had rolled back, showing the whites…and they’d been running around on their hands, too.

“Do you think they’ll turn us into one of them if they catch us?”

“I’m not sure. But what I do know is that those aren’t the teachers we know anymore!”

In the end, they’d never made it outside and had started running through the school instead. And now they were hiding in the music classroom.

“Mitsuki, I don’t want to get caught…”

Moe was so scared that she crouched down and tucked her knees into her chest.

Slam!

Suddenly, the door to the music room opened.

Mitsuki was convinced the monster had come back, so she stepped protectively in front of Moe. But instead of a monster, a boy in a red hood stood there, along with a dog.

It was Fushigi and Jimmy.

“Were you the ones who were running away earlier?” the boy asked.

“Thank goodness! Someone else got away from the monster, too!” Moe grinned and started approaching Fushigi.

“Who are you?” Mitsuki, on the other hand, was not so trusting. She grabbed Moe’s sleeve and cautiously pulled her back. She had her guard up. “Are you with the monsters?”



“With the monsters, huh…,” Fushigi murmured to himself.

Then Jimmy slipped in front of him. “Who’s supposed to be with those monsters, huh? Now, that’s just plain rude!”

“Th-that dog talked!”

“Quit actin’ all shocked. We haven’t got the time for this.” Jimmy looked over at Fushigi.

“I came here to collect it,” Fushigi said.

“What do you mean by that?” Mitsuki asked.

Jimmy was the one to answer.

“Basically, the two of us are tryin’ to catch that thing. You kids just keep out of our way and hide in here.”

“The monster you saw is called the Teke Teke, and it’s an urban legend that attacks people and turns them into creatures like itself.”

Fushigi muttered under his breath and looked down the hall. “Tsk, this monster Himitsu made is tricky.”

Then he exited the music room.

“You two just hang tight. You’re on your own if you walk out and get attacked,” Jimmy said, then left.

“Do you think they’ll really be able to save us?” Mitsuki murmured. She hugged Moe, who was shivering, and stared at the door.

Once Fushigi and Jimmy were in the hallway, they started searching for the Teke Teke.

They heard two loud *boom*s from far off.

“What’s that?” Jimmy asked.

“I think that must have been…”

But the moment Fushigi was about to explain, the Teke Teke suddenly appeared from the gloom of the hallway.

Teke teke, teke teke, teke teke, teke teke, teke teke!

The Teke Teke was dashing toward them, terribly fast.

“Fushigi, incoming!” Jimmy yelled.

“I can see that.”

Fushigi pulled out his red notebook and held it up to the monster.

Right at that moment, the Teke Teke charged into Fushigi and sent him flying.

"Fushigi!"

Then the monster kept running down the hall.

"Fushigi, hey! Wake up, little dude!" Jimmy ran over to Fushigi, who was still on the ground. "You okay?"

"It's too fast…"

They heard another two loud *boom*s in the distance.

Fushigi staggered to his feet and scowled.

Mitsuki and Moe were watching from the music room.

"The monster just got him. What do we do?! I don't think they can help us!"

"Moe, calm down. I-it'll be okay."

I need to figure out how to stop it…

They heard two loud *boom*s from far off again.

"It's coming back!" Jimmy shouted from the hallway.

Mitsuki peeked into the hall and saw the boy and the dog getting ready for the Teke Teke, which was charging at them.

"Fushigi, lemme have a paw at it!" Jimmy took a step forward.

"Stand back. You can't do it."

"I ain't just any dog! I'm the human-faced dog Jimmy!" Jimmy stared down the Teke Teke.

"Hraagh!"

Then he charged right at the Teke Teke.

Moments before they were about to collide, Jimmy used his back legs to launch off the ground. He curled up into a ball as he sailed through the air and hurled himself smack-dab into the Teke Teke's face.

"Graah!!!"

The Teke Teke stopped for a moment from the impact.

"Get 'im now!"

"Right." Fushigi held up his notebook to the Teke Teke.

But the monster was faster and blew past both Fushigi and Jimmy.

“Whoa!”



Teke teke, teke teke, teke teke, teke teke, teke teke!

It ran right down the hall again.

"Darn it! So stoppin' the rascal for a second isn't enough to catch it!"

Boom, boom. They heard the loud noises again in the distance.

"It's that sound again…," Jimmy said, looking unnerved.

"That's the sound the Teke Teke makes when it runs into a wall," Fushigi explained.

"When it *what*?"

"The Teke Teke can only run straight. It runs into the wall at the ends of the hallways so that it can change direction and keep running down the covered corridor to the next school building. Then, once it runs through that building, it goes through the other covered hallway to come back."

"So you're tellin' me that thing's running full speed into walls?" Jimmy said, and Fushigi shook his head.

"I doubt it. It probably slows down slightly right before it hits the wall. If it ran straight into a wall at that speed, even it would probably lose consciousness," Fushigi said. Mitsuki was eavesdropping on them from the music classroom, and the boy's explanation made her think of something.

What if we made *it run into the wall at full speed…?*

Mitsuki looked over at the giant mirror in the classroom.

"Um, excuse me!" Mitsuki called out to Fushigi.

Boom! Boom! Boom! Boom!

They had time to prepare before the Teke Teke made it back. Right after they heard the *booms*, the monster appeared in the hallway once more.

"Incoming!" Jimmy shouted again.

"Okay, don't do anything and just wait."

Fushigi and Jimmy stood in the middle of the hallway. The Teke Teke charged at them. Meanwhile, Mitsuki and Moe watched from the other side of the classroom door.

Teke teke, teke teke, teke teke, teke teke, teke teke!

Though the Teke Teke ran straight at them, Fushigi and Jimmy didn't move an inch.

In the next moment, Fushigi and Jimmy shattered to pieces.

Crash!

It sounded just like a breaking mirror. That was quickly followed by another sound.

Ka-thwam!

Mitsuki and Moe stepped out into the hallway and saw that the Teke Teke was lying on the ground unconscious.

“I-it worked.”

“Yeah…”

Shattered pieces of the mirror from the classroom were scattered all over the place. The Teke Teke was lying on the ground on top of that.

“Looks like a fine job, if I do say so myself,” Jimmy commented.

Fushigi and Jimmy walked over to where Mitsuki and Moe were looking at the Teke Teke.

“We placed the mirror at the corner of the hallway so it would look like the hallway didn’t end. When the Teke Teke ran straight into it, it crashed into the wall behind the mirror and knocked itself out.”

“So ya angled the mirror to make it seem like the hallway kept going. It also kept runnin’ ’cause it saw me and Fushigi in the mirror, too. But neither of us was really there, so the Teke Teke charged right through. Yep, couldn’t have thought of a better idea myself.”

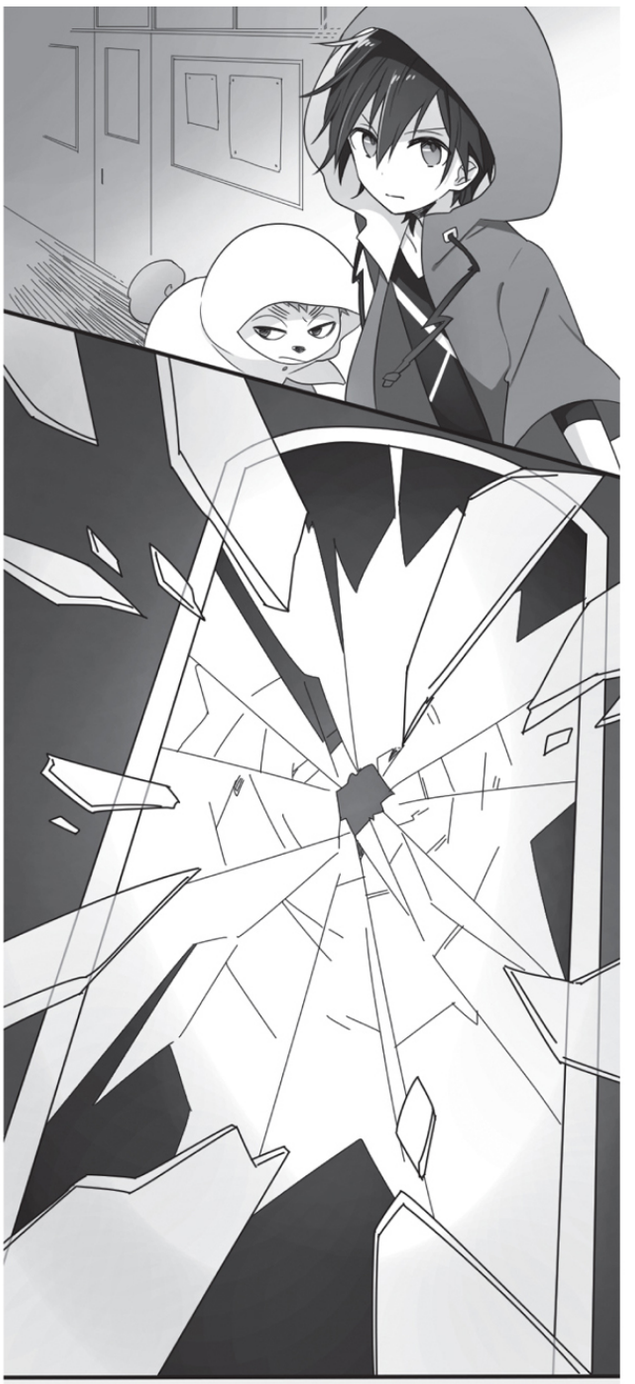
Jimmy smiled at Mitsuki.

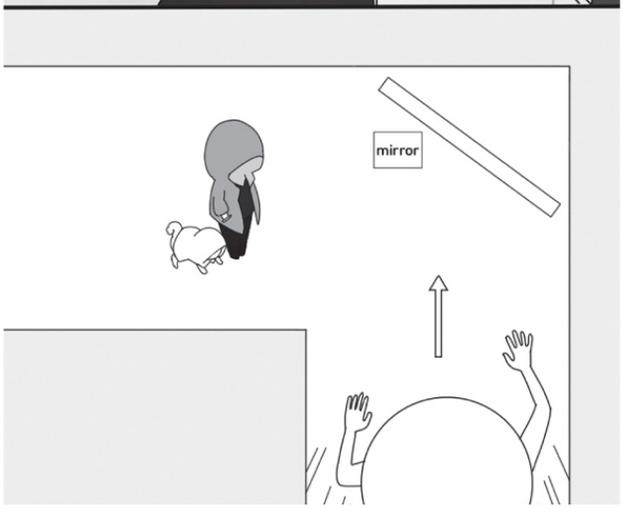
“We’ve stopped the Teke Teke thanks to you.”

Fushigi opened his notebook and held it up over a mark on the Teke Teke’s head, then chanted:



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




mirror

At the same time, the Teke Teke disappeared.

“All right! Looks like this one’s collected!”

“The teachers who had transformed into monsters should be back to normal now,” Fushigi told Mitsuki and Moe.

Mitsuki bowed her head to Fushigi. “Thank you for saving us!”

Moe did the same, but Fushigi shook his head.

“I wasn’t trying to save you.”

Then Fushigi started walking off with Jimmy.

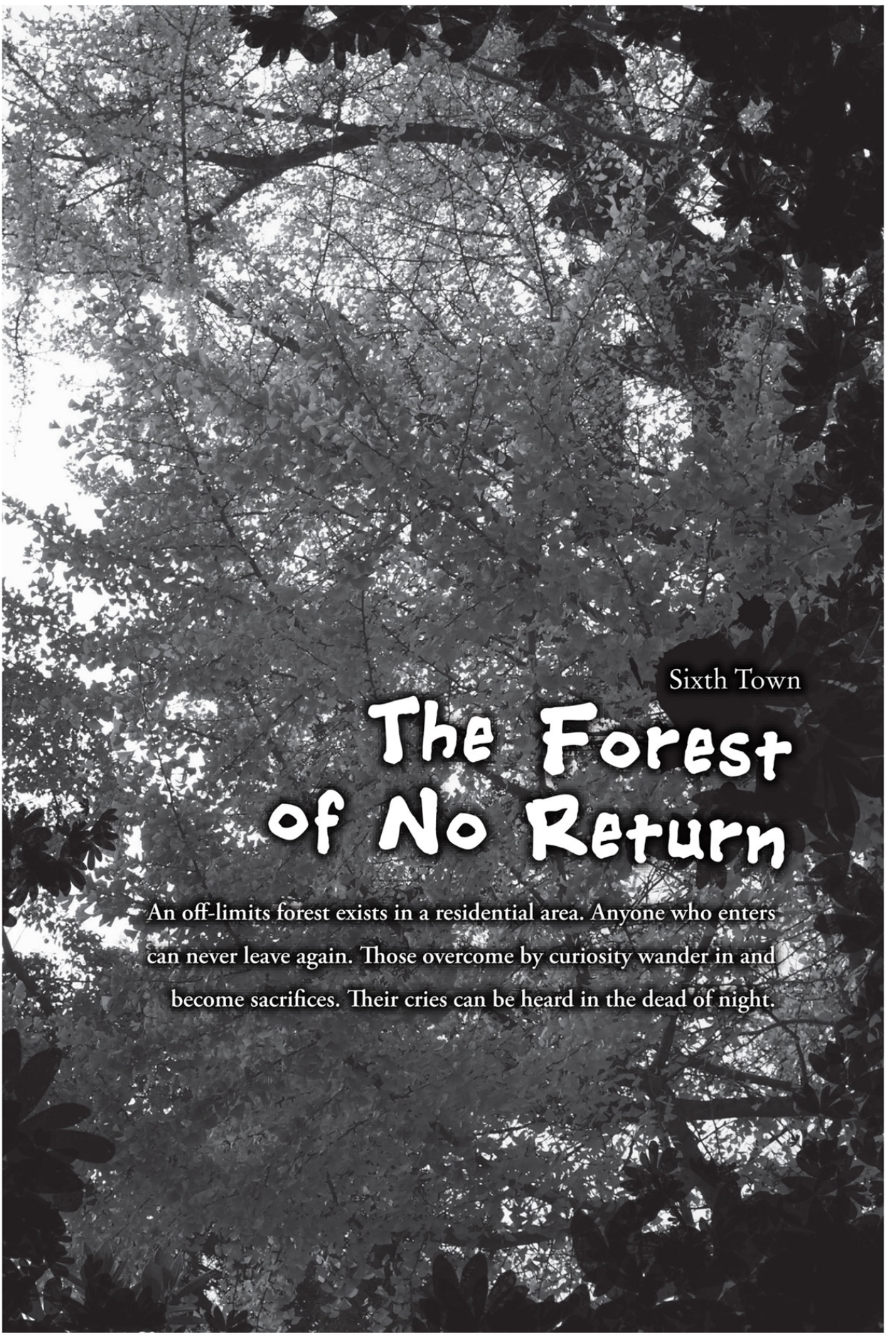
“But still!” Mitsuki called after him. “You saved the two of us! And I’m really grateful you did. So thank you!”

Fushigi paused for a moment, then looked at Mitsuki. She reminded him a little of Himitsu in a way.

“Fushigi…?” Jimmy looked up at his partner.

“It’s nothing. Let’s go…”

Fushigi faced forward again and they slowly walked away.


Sixth Town
The Forest of No Return
An off-limits forest exists in a residential area. Anyone who enters can never leave again. Those overcome by curiosity wander in and become sacrifices. Their cries can be heard in the dead of night.



“I was a fool to trust you.”

Fushigi and Jimmy were walking along a mountain road in the middle of the night.

Looking fed up, Fushigi glared at Jimmy, who hung his head in shame. The two of them were after an urban legend called the Lucky Delivery Service. According to the legend, if you touched the heart mark on the luggage rack of a certain delivery worker’s truck, you would get good luck. The catch, though, was that you had to touch it as the truck was moving.

Fushigi and Jimmy knew the legend must have been related to Himitsu in some way, so they’d started wandering the mountain roads looking for the truck.

But it had been too fast for Fushigi to catch up to it.

Then Jimmy had shouted, *“Leave it to me!”* He really thought he could keep up with the truck.

But his legs were a lot stubbier compared with when he’d been a human, and he’d completely forgotten that fact. He’d chased after the truck for a while until his legs started quivering and he tripped, falling right over.

The truck had disappeared down the road before he knew it.

“We finally found it after searching so many towns,” Fushigi said.

“I know, but I tried my best.”

Fushigi seemed to have had enough of Jimmy’s excuses and sighed; then he noticed something and looked up. He saw a town at the base of the mountain.

Fushigi eyed the lines of streets.

“It looks like there’s another urban legend in that town…”

“If the Lucky Delivery Service stays on the road through the mountains, then we’ll run into it later. We should go collect the urban legend over there first,” Fushigi said, and he started walking off on his own.

“H-hey, wait up!” Jimmy hurried after the boy in a panic.

In that town filled with rows and rows of similar-looking buildings, a man in a business suit was meandering alone down the road that night. He was swaying and humming as he walked. He seemed to be drunk.

“Hmm?”

Suddenly, he heard something.

It was midnight. Most of the lights in the houses were off, and the entire town was quiet as a mouse. The man stopped in his tracks to listen.

“Uh-wuh… Urgh, waaaah…”

It sounded like a woman’s voice. She was crying or in pain. The man listened carefully and looked for the source of the crying.

He saw a small forest nearby. It was enclosed by a fence, which had a sign that said OFF LIMITS.

A breeze swept past him and made the trees rustle in the darkness.

“Uh-wuh… Urgh, waaaah…”

“Uh, ahhh…”

The man followed the source of the sound, staggering as he climbed over the fence and into the woods.

At the same time, a light switched on in a house between the street and the forest.

Seira Takada, a girl in her first year of middle school, had turned on the light in her room. She had broken into a cold sweat and was panting. A strange voice had abruptly woken her.



“Uh-wuh…
“Urgh, waaaah…”

It was a woman’s eerie voice.
When Seira checked the clock, she saw that it was midnight.
“What *was* that just now?”
She shuddered.



The next morning, Seira told her mom and grandfather about what had happened over breakfast.

“You must have had a bad dream,” her mom said as she buttered a piece of toast and laughed.

“But it felt too real to be a dream.”

“That’s just how dreams are.” It didn’t seem like her mom was going to listen. “It was windy yesterday. I bet it was just the wind rustling the leaves.”

“But, Mom…”

“Oh, just stop worrying about it and finish your breakfast. You’re going to be late for school.”

In the end, her mom wouldn’t hear another word about it. Seira finished her breakfast and started getting ready.

If Dad were here, he would have listened…, Seira thought, but her dad wasn’t living with them for a while because of his job.

That was when her grandfather came over to her.

“Listen, Seira, did you mean what you said earlier?” he asked, looking a little frightened.

“Yeah, it’s true. Grandad, do you know anything about it?”

“N-no, I was just curious, is all.”

Then her grandfather told her, “Off you go,” and quickly disappeared in the direction of the veranda.

“That was strange…”

Seira wasn’t sure what to make of her grandfather’s behavior, but she decided to head out.

“Seira!”

When she left home and was walking down the street, a girl ran up to her from behind.

"Good morning, Kiriko."

Kiriko Yamazaki lived across the street in a house near the woods, too. She had been Seira's friend for as long as she could remember.

Kiriko made her way to Seira's side and peered into the trees next to them.

"So something strange happened to me yesterday," Kiriko said.

"What was that?"

"I heard this weird voice coming from the woods in the middle of the night."

"What?" Seira immediately peppered her friend with questions to see if it was the same voice she had heard.

Kiriko's eyes went wide, and she nodded. "Did you hear it, too, Seira?"

"I did. So it really wasn't a dream…"

Seira stared off into the woods.

Once at school, Seira and Kiriko headed to the staff office. They were going to ask Mr. Takemura, their homeroom teacher, for help.

Mr. Takemura liked creepy and scary stories. He told them to students between classes, so the kids really liked him, too.

After Seira and Kiriko told him what had happened, he suddenly looked serious and said, "You must mean *those* woods… How much do you two know about them?"

"Is there something we *should* know?"

They knew there was a sign that read OFF LIMITS at the border where the woods began. So of course they'd never tried to go in or even thought of getting close to the trees.

"But I wonder why we're not allowed to," Seira wondered. She'd never thought about why there would be a forest in the middle of a residential area.

Mr. Takemura said, "There's a god living in the woods."

"A god? Like one that you worship?" Kiriko asked.

"Yes," Mr. Takemura said. "Did you know there's a small torii gate and an altar used for ceremonies at the entrance to the woods?"

“Oh, actually…”

A small altar was hidden just beyond the forest edge.

“It’s a little scary, though,” Kiriko commented.

“Yeah, it feels creepy…,” Seira said.

“Forty years ago, this land was developed into a residential area, and the mountain was excavated as part of the project. But that little section of the woods was left untouched. People in town were strongly opposed to developing it.”

“Why’s that?”

“Supposedly, a god who protects the land lives there, so we can’t demolish it. But the developers tried anyway. Then something terrible happened.”

“What did?” Seira was surprised. Mr. Takemura stared into her eyes.

“Someone in town agreed with the developers and sneakily cut down the god’s sacred tree. He probably thought that was enough to make the townspeople give up. But that just resulted in a large number of people being spirited away…”

“Spirited away?”

“That’s when someone mysteriously vanishes without warning. The day after the tree was cut down, people started to disappear one after another. In one week, over ten people allegedly disappeared… The developers still tried to continue with the project, but then a bulldozer rolled over and killed a worker. Another worker’s heart stopped beating without warning, and another died from a mysterious illness.”

“What?”

“Even the developers started to believe they’d angered the gods, so they stopped construction. They built the torii gate and the altar to appease the god. Then the townspeople built a fence so no one else would wander in. Now people call it the Forest of No Return and fear it.”

Mr. Takemura concluded the story and continued to stare at his two students.

“You might have heard the voice of the god whose tree was desecrated. But listen carefully. If you hear the voice, you must never go near it. You didn’t know anything about the woods until now, right?”

“Yeah…”

“In other words, the adults in town avoid bringing it up. Honestly, I didn’t want to talk about it, either. But I thought it would be more dangerous to not warn you.”

Then Mr. Takemura told them again, “Don’t go near the woods.”

After leaving the staff room, Seira and Kiriko went to their classroom.

“Do you think there’s really a god there…?” Seira asked, seeming anxious as they walked down the hallway.

Kiriko peeked at Seira’s face.

“How shocked do you think everyone would be if we took a picture of the god?”

“What?”

Kiriko was part of the newspaper club, so she loved mysteries and weird stories.

“We can’t take a picture of a god.”

“You can’t just assume that,” Kiriko replied. “A long time ago in England, apparently a pair of girls took pictures of some fairies.”

“What?”

“They’re called the Cottingley Fairies, and Arthur Conan Doyle, the creator of Sherlock Holmes, said they were real, so it was a *huge* deal.”

“But *were* they real?”

“Umm, so later when they were really old, the girls said they cut pictures of fairies out of a book and took photos of those.”

“So they were fakes.”

“No, they said one of them might have been real.”

“Does that mean…?”

“In other words, that picture might actually be of a real fairy.”

After Seira heard that, her eyes went wide, but she still added, “We shouldn’t go into the woods. Mr. Takemura said not to.”

“I know. But you can’t help feeling curious after hearing that, right?”

“Curious…?”

Seira didn’t know what else to say.

Right around then, Fushigi and Jimmy reached the town on foot.

“Ya really think there’s an urban legend in this town?”

“Yeah. But I can’t sense it right now.”

“Do ya think it moves like the Lucky Delivery Service?”

“It might. We need to figure out where it is somehow.”

Jimmy’s face broke into a smile, as though he’d thought of just the thing.

“All right! Then how ’bout we split up and look for it? That should make searchin’ for the thing faster, right?”

“Are you sure you’ll be fine on your own?”

“Th-that’s a no-brainer! I won’t flub it like I did yesterday! Besides, I’ve got a good sniffer, since I’m a dog, and you know I used to be a famous cameraman! I used to get multiple scoops in a row!”

“A famous cameraman. Right…”

Fushigi seemed exasperated by Jimmy’s confident boasting, but they decided to split up and look for suspicious locations separately.



It was evening on the same day.

Seira stole glances at the woods the entire time she was eating dinner.

I would ask Mom and Grandad about it, but…

Mr. Takemura had said the adults were avoiding talking about the woods. So Seira figured they wouldn’t give her straight answers.

“Right, something terrible happened today.” Her mom paused to look at Seira and Grandad while still holding her chopsticks in her hand. “I heard the husband of Mrs. Kawakami, from the third district, disappeared last night.”

The Kawakamis lived farther past the woods.

“Apparently, he said he would be drinking and coming home late, but they suddenly lost contact with him.”

“Do you think something happened to him?”

“Well, someone saw him walking nearby. They said he was close to the woods. It was around midnight.”

Seira leaned forward. That was the time she’d heard that creepy voice.

Maybe he got spirited away? Seira thought.

Her grandfather suddenly set his bowl down on the table. “I think I’m done…”

“Oh, but you hardly ate at all.”

“No, I’m fine today…” He practically dashed out of the room.

“What’s gotten into him…?” her mom said.

“Dunno…”

What was more important right now was the forest, not her grandfather.

It was the middle of the night.

Seira was in bed, still thinking about the woods. In the end, she never got to ask her mom or grandfather any questions.

I wonder where Mr. Kawakami went off to…?

He had probably heard that same voice. What if that was actually why he had disappeared…?

Seira shuddered.

I should just sleep and stop thinking about weird stuff.

She closed her eyes, but right then…

“Uh-wuh… Urgh, waaaah…”

She heard the faint sound of a woman’s eerie voice. Seira sat up in her bed before she even realized it.

I really did hear that, I think?

“Uh-wuh… Urgh, waaaah…”

There it is again! It’s that voice!

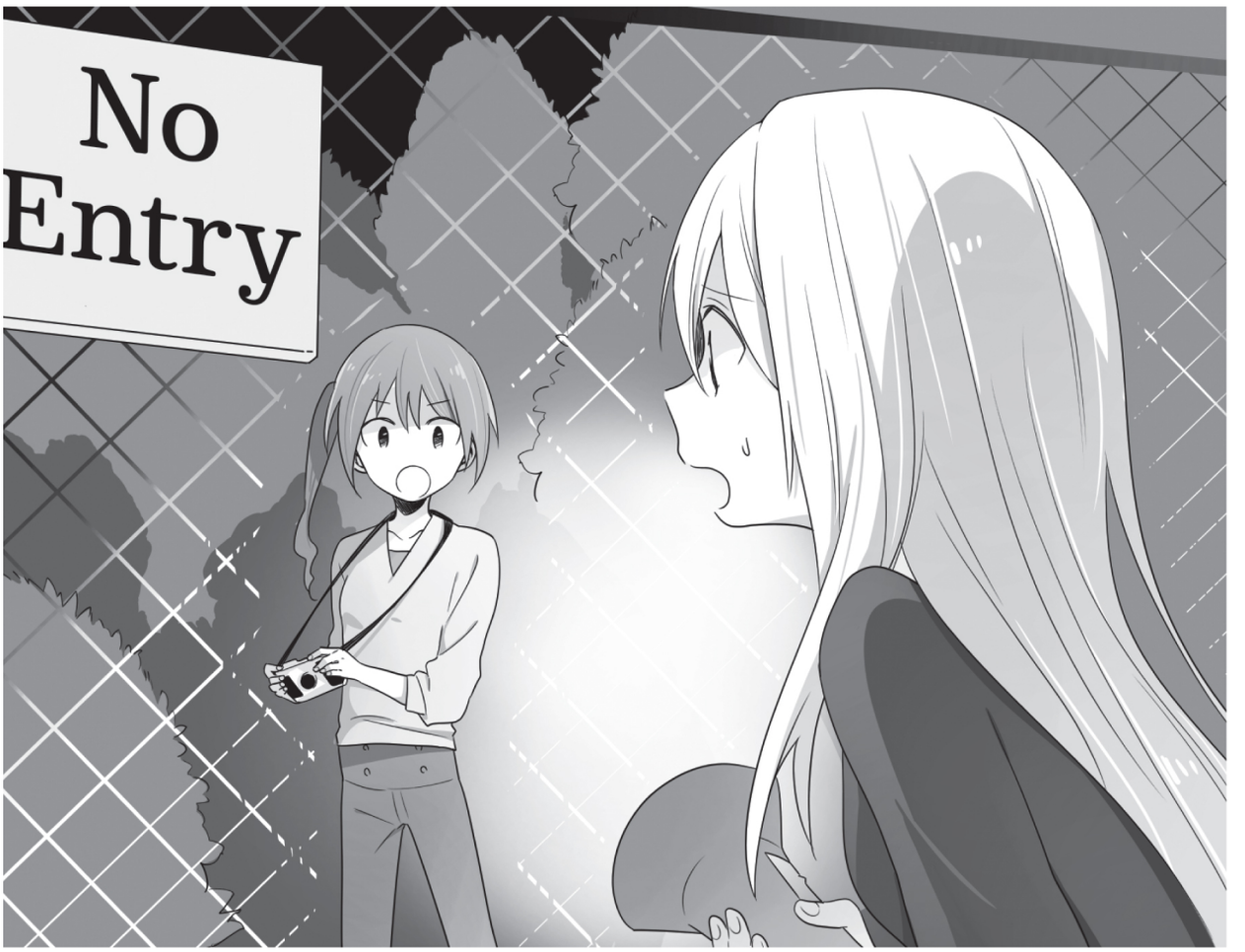
Seira was terrified, but she slipped out of bed and approached her window. Then she held her breath as she opened it and looked at the woods spread out in front of her.

She saw a light in the trees. It flashed a few times.

Wait, is that…?

She spotted a bike at the forest’s edge.

That’s Kiriko’s bike! Then that light must have been a camera flash?


No
Entry

Seira grabbed a flashlight and sneaked out of the house to see for herself.

It was midnight.

Seira made her way up to the fence around the woods and saw the flash of light again.

“Kiriko! Kiriko!” Seira shouted into the forest.

Her friend emerged from the shadows of the trees. “Seira?”

“I thought it was you,” Seira said.

Kiriko was holding her camera.

“Did you hear that sound, too, Kiriko?”

“Yeah, I thought it might be the god. So I came here to take a picture.”

She heard it again.

“Uh-wuh… Urgh, waaaah…”

“There’s definitely something in there…”

“Kiriko, I think you should come out of the woods.”

“It’ll be fine,” Kiriko said as she walked right back in.

“No, Kiriko! Wait!”

She couldn’t let Kiriko go on alone. Seira saw there was a hole in the fence just large enough for a person. She crawled through it.

Seira pointed her flashlight at the ground as she walked with Kiriko through the woods. The tree branches and weeds she shone her light on all quivered.

“Please, let’s just go home…,” Seira said.

“Why would we do that? Aren’t you curious about that voice, too?”

“I was, but…”

Seira hugged herself as she shuddered.

It hadn’t rained recently, but the ground seemed wet and squelched under their feet.

How much time had passed?

“Were these woods always this big?” Kiriko said. Seira shook her head.

“You don’t think we’re just wandering around in circles, do you?”

“No way…”

After walking through the undergrowth and trees in the dark, Seira and Kiriko realized they had lost their way. A breeze blew by, making the trees sway.

“Uh-wuh… Urgh, waaaah…”

The woman’s eerie voice drifted toward them on the wind. That definitely wasn’t the rustling of the leaves. It sounded like she was in pain, too.

“I knew something was here!”

“Y-yeah…,” Kiriko stammered.

“Please, Kiriko, I think we should leave.”

“Y-you might be right…”

Kiriko was finally regretting going into the woods.

“Uh-wuh… Urgh, waaaah… Uh-wuh… Urgh, waaaah…”

The voice was even louder than before.

“I-is it coming closer?”

“It can’t be… Seira, what do we do?!”

“We need to get out of here!”

At this rate, they would be spirited away, too. They ran as fast as they could. But then Kiriko tripped on something and fell.

“Ah!”

“Kiriko!” Seira ran over to her. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah, my foot just caught on something.”

Seira pointed the flashlight at Kiriko’s foot to check. The obstacle she’d tripped on was a tree root in the shape of a skeletal hand.

“Ah!”

Both Seira and Kiriko backed away several steps, but then the ground disappeared under their feet. They looked down to see a gigantic hole behind them.

“Ahhhh!”

Seira and Kiriko both lost their balance and fell into the hole.



“…ake up! Please wake up!”

Someone calling to her woke Seira up.

“Ugh…”

“Are you okay, Seira?”

She saw Kiriko in front of her.

“Wh-where are we…?”

“You two are in a hole.” A man wearing a hood was next to Kiriko. “Looks like you’re fine. Good thing, too.”

“Huh?!”

The man wasn’t a man at all. He had the body of a dog.

Seira got ready to scream, but Kiriko quickly explained, “Seira, don’t be scared! Jimmy is a good person.”

“Jimmy?”

“That’ll be me. But I’m not a person—I’m a dog. Anyway, this ain’t the time for chitchat. If we stick around here, who knows what kind of pickle we might end up in.”

“What?”

Seira looked around.

They were in a hole that was about five and a half yards deep and a little over three yards wide. Half of it was muddy and wet.

“Oh!” Seira noticed an unconscious man next to them. “That’s Mr. Kawakami!”

“Ugh…”

He was holding his side and seemed to be hurt.

“Looks like the poor guy broke a rib when he fell,” Jimmy commented.

“What?!”

Seira looked up at the top of the hole.

“Then we need to get out of here right now!”

But Jimmy shook his head. “No can do. There’s no way out from inside. If ya try, you’ll slip right down.”

“Then we need to get help!”

“Not an option, either. Ya can scream all ya want in the hole, but the sound doesn’t reach anybody.”

“No way…”

Seira had no idea what to do. She looked over at Mr. Kawakami.

Then she saw that half of his suit had melted.

“What happened to him?”

“It’s ’cause he’s been in the hole. If we stick around, we’re all goners,” Jimmy said.

“We’re gonna die…?”

“Uh-wuh… Urgh, waaaah…”

“Crud! There she goes again!”

“Whose voice is that?”

“I dunno. I thought somethin’ was off about these woods and followed that voice, but I didn’t think it’d be a trap.”

Then Jimmy said “Crud” again under his breath.

“Seira, what do we do?!”

“Don’t ask me!” Seira turned the flashlight toward the top of the hole. “Someone, help! Please! Help!”

She waved the flashlight and screamed.

“Help! Help!” Kiriko started shouting, too.

“It won’t work. I was shouting earlier, too, but do either of ya remember hearing me?” Jimmy bowed his head dejectedly next to the two girls. “Here I was hopin’ to find the urban legend before Fushigi did so I could make up for my Lucky Delivery Service fumble. I didn’t think I’d mess up again right away…”

Jimmy let out a long, heavy sigh.

“So this is where you were?”

Someone spoke from the top of the hole.

“Fushigi!”

“I saw the beam from the flashlight and came over,” Fushigi said.

“Please help us!”

“Who are you?” Fushigi countered.

“Who cares who they are, Fushigi?! Just get us outta here! I don’t wanna turn into goop!”

“Geez…” Fushigi looked around and spotted a sturdy-looking vine. He lowered that into the hole.

Thanks to Fushigi, everyone climbed up to the surface, except Mr. Kawakami, whom they wrapped in the vine and somehow pulled out.

“Thank goodness.”

“You’ve got that right!”

Seira and Kiriko hugged each other, relieved. Next to them, Jimmy and Fushigi were having a conversation of their own.

“I tried my best.”

“That sounds a lot like what you said last time.”

“I—I might’ve said it before…”

“Anyway, let’s go collect the mark.” Fushigi pulled out his red notebook and looked around, then scowled. “That’s not right…”

“What’s not?”

“There isn’t a mark here. These woods were never an urban legend at all. The urban legend was just *using* this place.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

Fushigi seemed to have noticed something. He suddenly looked over at the residential area next to the woods.

He was staring at Seira’s house.

Her grandfather was standing alone in their yard, holding a plastic container filled with what seemed to be kerosene.

“Why did you come back now…?”

He was looking at an old tree growing in the yard.

“Uh-wuh… Urgh, waaaah… Uh-wuh… Urgh, waaaah…”

The woman’s eerie voice was coming from the tree. Eventually, the voice turned into that of a little girl.

“You…have no right to complain… Hee-hee-hee…”

Her laugh sounded innocent.

“Huh?” Seira’s grandfather seemed taken aback when he heard the unfamiliar voice.

“Because you cut down the sacred tree forty years ago…this town has been cursed… So you planted it in your yard to

placate it… You thought you could protect this town all on your own, didn’t you?”



He became more upset the more the girl talked.

“Who are you?!”

“Hee-hee-hee.”

Then he saw someone standing on one of the branches of the tree.

“Who are you?! Who are you?!” he shouted. He couldn’t see her face under the black hood she wore.

A strange mark was on the bark of the tree.

“Wh-what’s going on?!”

“Hee-hee-hee-hee.”

“Enough!”

Though his shout sounded strong, he fell to the ground.

“It’s been eating away at me for forty years! And now you’re adding to my suffering?!”

He clutched the plastic container and started to sob.

“Grandad!”

Seira ran over to him.

Fushigi and Jimmy followed right behind her.

“Fushigi, what the heck’s with that tree?!”

“It’s Himitsu’s doing. She was here!” Fushigi scowled and looked around. “Where are you, Himitsu? Where did you go?!”

But she didn’t reply.

She had already run away.

Fushigi’s brow furrowed, and he balled his hands into fists.

“Fushigi…” Jimmy had no idea what to say to the boy.

Then at that moment, they saw something flash past over the garden wall of the house.

A blue umbrella.

“It couldn’t be!”

Jimmy ran out of the garden.

“Is that the guy the Shadow Man kid mentioned?!”

But no one was there when he got outside.

“How could that be…?”

Jimmy’s face fell, and he stood there for what felt like eons.
To be continued…



AFTERWORD

Thank you for reading *Horror Collector*, Volume 3.

Starting this volume, the human-faced dog Jimmy is officially reporting for duty. Let's see what kinds of urban legends the cool and collected Fushigi and his funny pal Jimmy run into. I think that's part of what makes this book so entertaining.

This novel is about six more urban legends in six different towns.

First Town: The Seven Cape Ghosts

While I was trying to figure out what kind of story to write next, I learned about this urban legend.

Seven roaming ghosts look for a living human to take their place… I couldn't help but shudder when I read the tale in the middle of the night.

This urban legend wouldn't be very unique with just one ghost, but there are seven of them. If seven ghosts appeared in front of me, I really don't think I'd be able to escape them. The whole story happens inside a bus.

Second Town: The Mystery Restaurant

This chapter takes its inspiration from a famous urban legend.

In that story, a restaurant uses shocking ingredients. It's all make-believe, of course, but imagine if a restaurant like that really existed. Wouldn't that be scary?

Have you ever seen a business appear out of nowhere near your house? Maybe it's this Mystery Restaurant.

Third Town: The Woman in the Gap

When you're alone in your own room, do you ever feel like someone is watching you? Then when you look around, there's no one there. But you still feel someone's eyes on you…

You really shouldn't look into any gaps when that happens. If you do and you meet eyes with whoever is in the gap, you'll probably be pulled into a world of pure terror.

Fourth Town: The Wandering Shadow

A few years ago, the Shadow Man urban legend started spreading all over the world. Supposedly, some mysterious shadow walks around like it's

a regular person.

No one knows why the Shadow Man appears or what he is.

In this story, you find out who the Shadow Man is and what he's here to do.

Fifth Town: Teke Teke

Have you ever felt the fear of being chased without knowing what was chasing after you? That's the theme of this story.

The Teke Teke looks very creepy and won't stop until it gets its victims. It's very fast and apparently can run over sixty miles per hour.

So how will Fushigi and Jimmy handle the Teke Teke? In this story, Jimmy puts in some hard work, too. But he's Jimmy, so he messes up, of course…

I had a lot of fun writing about how hard he tries to help.

Sixth Town: The Forest of No Return

Every town has one or two mysterious locations, and you can't help but wonder how they came to be.

This chapter is about one of those spots and the mystery behind it.

The concept of being spirited away is already shudder inducing enough, but this story talks about *why* people disappeared.

In this volume, Fushigi and Jimmy get one step closer to Himitsu. Do you think Fushigi will be able to catch her? In the next volume, a new character, the man with the blue umbrella, will play a significant role, too.

Fushigi's travels will continue. I hope you'll read the next volume as well.

April 2016
Midori Sato

AFTERWORD

I'm currently the main director of the TV show called *Scary True Stories*, which has been running for fifteen years. Some call me the father of J-horror. My interest in frightening stories was piqued after my first spirit sighting in the third grade. I described the incident in detail in the predecessor to this series, *Urban Legends You're Not Supposed to Know*.

So ever since I started accompanying Fushigi Senno on his "travels of terror," I've had the chance to remember not only my own unnerving experiences but also those I've heard from family. One of my dad's stories was connected to the Mystery Restaurant chapter.

When he was about your age, the Pacific War was going on and Tokyo was under threat of air raids. I'm sure that must have been more terrifying than any scary story, but he never wanted to talk about that. Instead, he always told me about the food rationing from back then. My dad loved food. So after the war, when a Chinese restaurant opened nearby and started doing delivery, he liked ordering the soup from there and drinking it down to the last drop of broth.

But one day, just as he was finishing off the soup he'd ordered like usual, he felt something hard touch his lips.

It was a giant, black, dead cockroach.

"What?! Then what did you do?" I asked my dad at the time.

"Nothing," he said. "I didn't eat the roach, and the ramen was still good."

He laughed it off. Since my dad had gone through a time when food was scarce during the war, he thought it would be a waste to vomit it all up. Nowadays, even getting a little tiny bug in your cup ramen is a big deal, but thinking about how it was during the war and right after, I feel like we're living the high life.

When we were figuring out the Golden Pay Phone story in the second volume, I remembered my mom's story.

During the war, she relocated to the countryside, which was all fields and forest. She would walk to school for an hour every day with an older girl

from the family. As she was walking home from school with the other girl while the sun was setting, a twinkling star appeared in the blue sky.

“Oh, a shooting star! Let’s make a wish!” she said.

I’m sure you all know the superstition that if you wish on a shooting star, your dream will come true.

My mom and the girl, who were in elementary school at the time, both wished to eat lots of rice and steamed buns and many other things while the shooting star was still visible in the sky.

Then my mom asked whether it was normal to have enough time to wish for that many things. A shooting star is usually in the sky for only a moment before it disappears.

Then the older girl noticed a cemetery at the side of the road. When she saw all the stars in the sky, that gave her an idea.

“They’re human souls!” she shouted.

Then the two of them screamed and ran all the way home.

Nowadays, we cremate the dead, but in the past, bodies were buried. Supposedly, will-o’-the-wisps, which are said to be human souls, would appear more frequently, too. They say the phosphorous from decaying bodies would ignite, making fireballs appear above burial grounds, which was what the “human souls,” or will-o’-the-wisps, were. Science has since debunked that. So perhaps they really were actual human souls?

I thought the story from my mom’s days as a young girl was very charming, which made me love my mom even more.

Do you know any family or friends who have had shudder-inducing experiences? If you go around collecting those, just like how Fushigi collects his, you might see a new side of the people you live with and those who are close to you.

Plus it would help Fushigi and Jimmy if more people were helping them on their travels of terror.

Also, it seems a strange man with a blue umbrella has appeared. Who could he be?

You’re not the only one who’s looking forward to the next volume. We are, too.

April 2016
Norio Tsuruta

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