
HORROR COLLECTOR
4
The Blue Umbrella Nightmare
Story by
Midori Sato
Norio Tsuruta
Art by
Yon

Horror Collector

4 The Blue Umbrella Nightmare

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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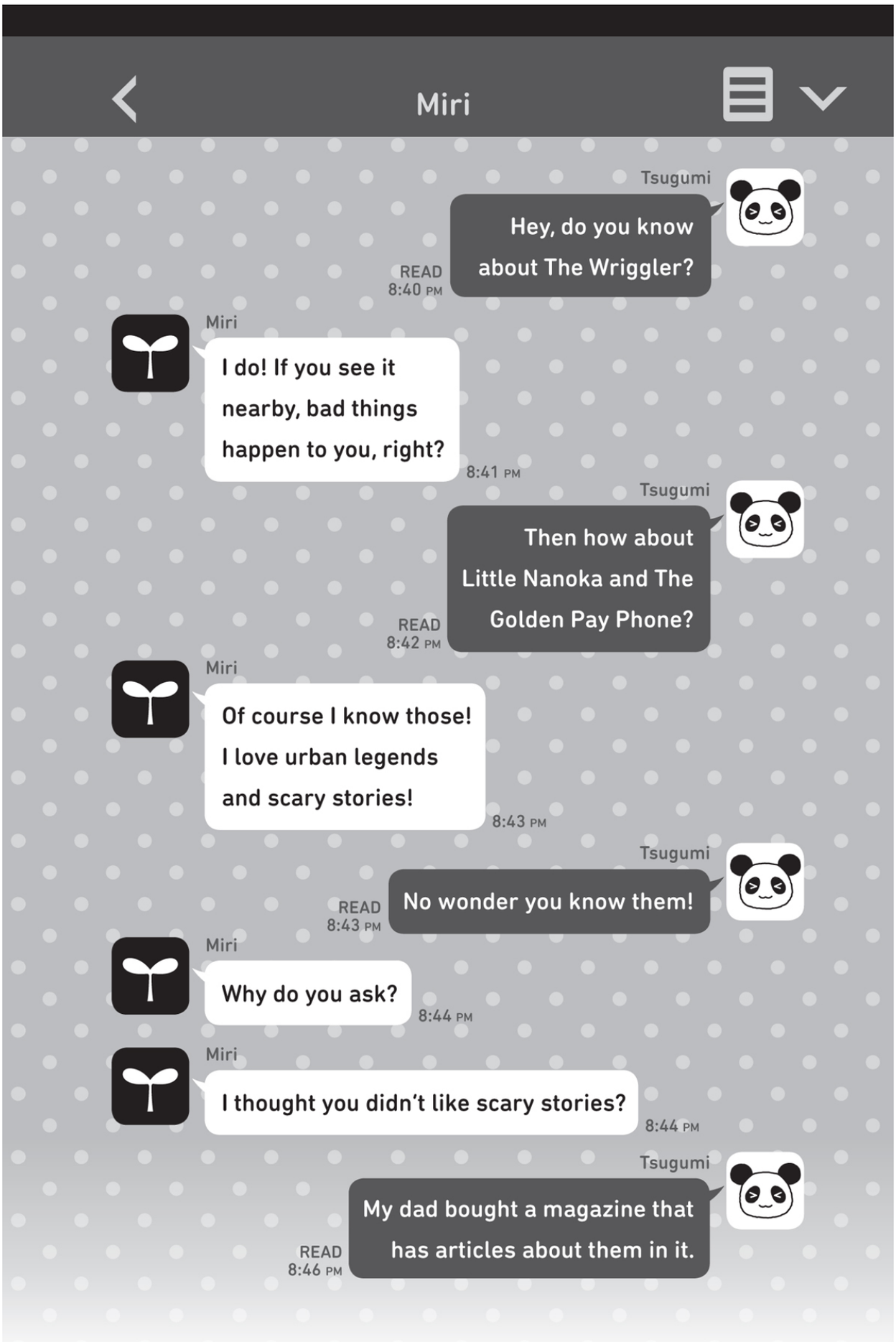
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Miri
Tsugumi
Hey, do you know about The Wriggler?
READ 8:40 PM
Miri
I do! If you see it nearby, bad things happen to you, right?
8:41 PM
Tsugumi
Then how about Little Nanoka and The Golden Pay Phone?
READ 8:42 PM
Miri
Of course I know those! I love urban legends and scary stories!
8:43 PM
Tsugumi
No wonder you know them!
READ 8:43 PM
Miri
Why do you ask?
8:44 PM
Miri
I thought you didn't like scary stories?
8:44 PM
Tsugumi
My dad bought a magazine that has articles about them in it.
READ 8:46 PM


Miri
He did? That sounds cool!
Bring it to school tomorrow!
8:47 PM
Miri
You still there?
8:50 PM
Tsugumi
Uh, there's something kinda
weird about this magazine...
READ
8:52 PM
Tsugumi
The girl in this picture is moving...
READ
8:53 PM
Miri
What do you mean?
8:54 PM
Miri
Hey, Tsugumi? You there?
8:58 PM
Tsugumi
I have to go...
READ
9:00 PM
Miri
Huh? Where?
9:01 PM
Tsugumi
The girl in the black
hood is calling me...
READ
9:02 PM
Miri
Huh? Wait, what's going on?!
9:02 PM

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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.



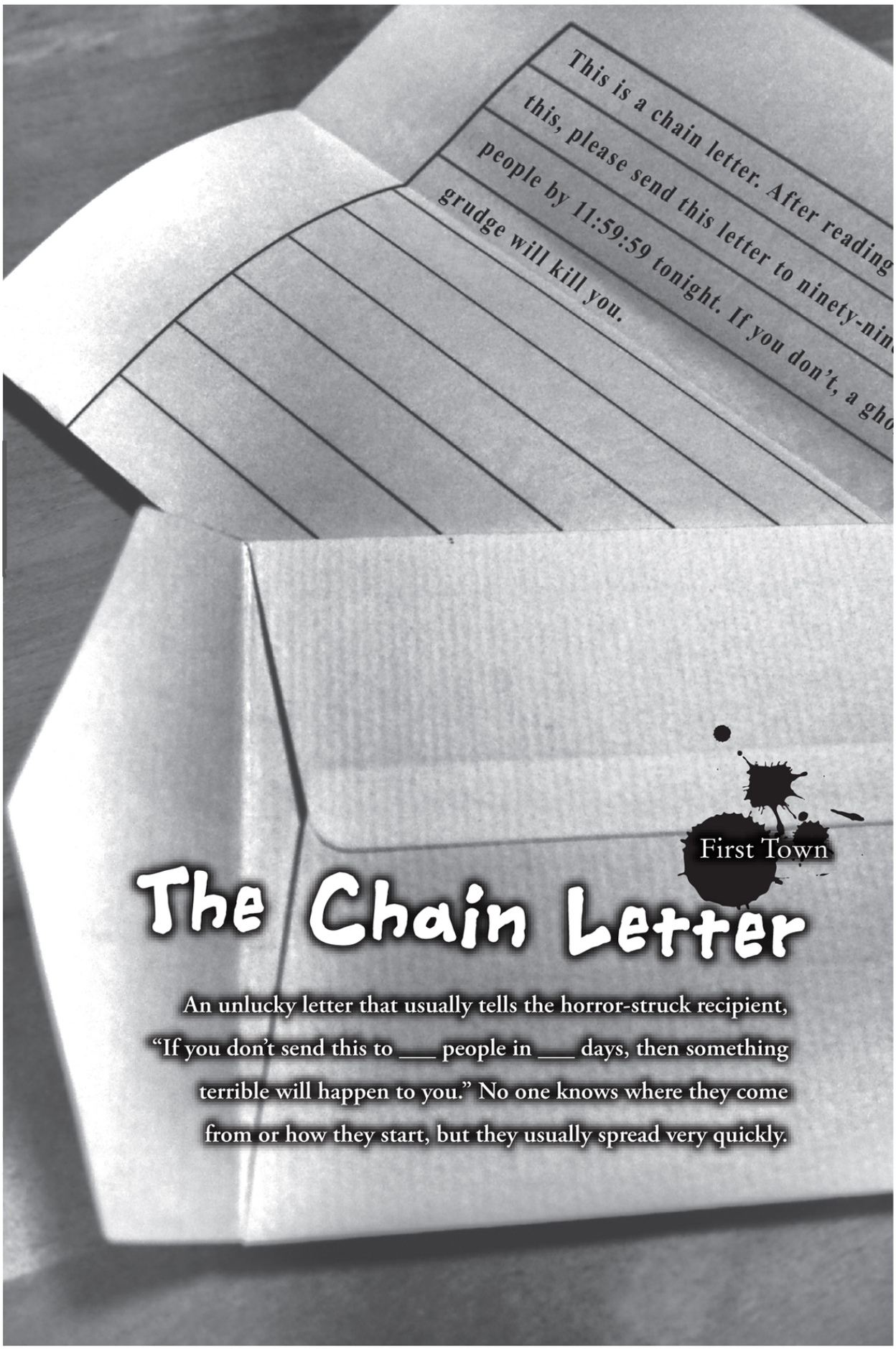
Himitsu Senno

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 Chain Letter

An unlucky letter that usually tells the horror-struck recipient, "If you don't send this to ___ people in ___ days, then something terrible will happen to you." No one knows where they come from or how they start, but they usually spread very quickly.

Buzz, buzz.

It was a summer night. As Yuuri Yamazaki, a first-year middle school student, was working on her homework, her phone vibrated.

She looked at the display and saw it was a message from Hazuki Kanou, one of her friends from school.

Yuuri read the message.

I got another chain text today.

Chain letters had been making the rounds at school lately, and everyone was getting them on their phones.

The messages said things like You've been cursed by a demon and People who read this die for real. There were lots of different versions of them.

Most ended with a sentence like, *"If you don't send this to ___ people in ___ days, then something terrible will happen to you."*

Even the text Yuuri had just gotten said Send this message to ten other people within forty-eight hours or you will be cursed by a ghost.

Hazuki had probably gotten the message and sent it to Yuuri in a panic.

But Yuuri wasn't scared when she saw it, and she didn't send it to anyone else. Instead, she seemed happy.

Because Yuuri had started this chain text.

"Good morning!" Yuuri said the next day in a cheery voice as she entered the classroom.

Let's see how far it's gotten.

When she looked around the class, she saw her classmates discussing something. Their faces looked grim.

"I got a chain text."

"I got one, too…"

“Why do people keep sending them to me? I was so scared that I couldn’t sleep!”

Everyone was talking about the chain texts.

I did it! It’s gotten to everyone, just like I planned!

A month ago, Yuuri had upgraded to a smartphone, and since then she’d started reading about urban legends on the internet.

She had always loved urban legends, but a website she liked had posted about a specific one that caught her eye.

Apparently, decades ago, there used to be things called chain letters, and now there were modern versions called chain e-mails or texts.

Yuuri was mischievous, and she liked to scare other kids with her frightening stories.

She once told so many scary stories at her ballet classes in elementary school that one of her classmates even stopped coming to lessons.

Back then, she knew she’d done something bad and regretted it, but when she read about the chain texts on the urban legend website, it made her want to pull a few pranks.

That very same day she saw the post, Yuuri wrote her own version of a chain text and sent it to some of her classmates.

Then the next day, she discovered something unbelievable.

Yuuri’s chain text didn’t reach just her classmates. It had spread around the entire school.

The texts had gone from one friend to another, then to those people’s friends. Even students Yuuri didn’t know had gotten her chain text.

Wow! It’s everywhere!

Yuuri got hooked on the excitement of making so many other kids do her bidding.

Ever since, Yuuri had been writing and spreading other chain texts.

The text she’d gotten from Hazuki the previous day was one she’d written just two days before.

Of course, she hadn’t told anyone that she was the one writing them. She just pretended she was sending texts she’d gotten from other people.

Yesterday’s was a lot different, though.

As the texts traveled from person to person, they were altered slightly. The message she'd gotten had changed from seven people to ten people, and the thing that was doing the cursing had become a ghost instead of a grim reaper.

Yuuri had no idea why the messages kept changing, but she liked seeing the differences.

But why ghosts? The grim reaper is way scarier.

While Yuuri was pondering that, a girl wearing glasses walked over to her. It was Hazuki Kanou.

"Good morning, Hazuki."

"Sorry I sent you that chain text yesterday, Yuuri." Hazuki bowed her head and looked apologetic.

"Don't worry about it. It must've been hard to find ten people to pass it on to."

Hazuki was a scaredy-cat, so Yuuri usually didn't send her chain texts. Hazuki apparently received them from other people, though.

"The one I got yesterday was different from the others, so it really freaked me out…," Hazuki told her.

"I get it, Hazuki," Yuuri replied. "It was my first time seeing that one, too, and it gave me the heebie-jeebies."

"I don't like sending them to you, since you're my friend, but…"

"You can't help it. I wouldn't want to get cursed by the grim reaper, either!" Yuuri said, and she went to her seat, but Hazuki stood there staring at her.

"How did you know it was the grim reaper?" Hazuki asked.

"Why do you ask?" Yuuri said.

"I was scared," Hazuki said, "so I changed it to a ghost before sending it."

"Oh!" Yuuri was surprised that Hazuki had been the one to change the message.

What do I do?! I need to explain this away somehow!

"Uh, so someone else sent me a chain text with the same kind of message. But that one said it was the grim reaper."

"Huh?" Hazuki said. "But didn't you say this was your first time seeing it?"

"Th-that's because…," Yuuri stuttered.

“Who sent it to you?”

“Well, that was…”

Yuuri looked around the classroom, but she couldn’t tell Hazuki it was someone they both knew, or Hazuki might talk to them.

Wait, I know!

Yuuri forced a smile and looked back at Hazuki.

“It was a friend from the tutoring classes I go to! She’s from a school in another town, but she sent me the same thing.”



“Oh, okay. So the chain texts are going around to other schools, too.”

“Yeah, I guess so. It’s kind of scary.”

“Yeah, very scary.” Hazuki nodded as Yuuri broke out into a cold sweat.

“Haah… That was a close call yesterday.”

It was Saturday morning.

Yuuri was in her living room. She sighed.

I wonder if Hazuki figured out that I wrote the chain text.

She decided that maybe it would be better to not write any more of those for a while.

Still worried, Yuuri sipped her cup of juice and tried to relax.

“Yuuri, there’s a letter for you,” Yuuri’s mom called. Her mom, who had just returned from grocery shopping, came in with a white envelope from the mailbox.

The only thing written on it was Yuuri’s name and her address. The text looked typed instead of handwritten.

“Who could it be from?” Yuuri asked. She usually didn’t get mail.

“I’m not sure. It doesn’t have a return address,” her mother told her.

Yuuri turned it around, but nothing was written on the back, either.

She tilted her head in curiosity but decided to just open it. She found a single sheet of paper inside.

This is a chain letter. After reading this, please send this letter to ninety-nine people by 11:59:59 tonight. If you don’t, a ghost’s grudge will kill you.

“What is this?”

The letter was typed, just like the address.

“What does it say?” her mom asked.

“Uh, umm…” Yuuri didn’t want to worry her mom. “It’s from a classmate. I asked her if she wanted to exchange letters instead of texts, and I guess she sent one right away.”

“Oh, really? When I was your age, I sent my friends letters, too.”

Her mom seemed relieved after hearing that. She smiled and left the living room. On the other hand, Yuuri was uneasy.

Who did this come from?

Had a stranger sent it to her at random? But if they had, how would they have known Yuuri's name and address?

Yuuri suddenly thought of something.

Maybe it's from Hazuki?

Maybe she'd figured out that Yuuri was the one behind the chain texts. Then Hazuki had probably sent the chain letter to get back at her.

She's probably just trying to scare me…

That really annoyed her. Yuuri looked at the letter, then scrunched it into a ball.

"Not like I'd ever fall for one of these things!"

Yuuri didn't believe in the chain texts or the chain letter. That was why she didn't mind sending them to her classmates.

And how am I even supposed to mail a letter to ninety-nine people before 11:59:59 tonight? There's no way I'd do something that would take that much work!

Yuuri grumbled to herself as she tossed the crumpled letter into the trash.



It was afternoon. Yuuri was strolling down the street toward her cram school.

The sun was beating down, strong and hot. Even though she wasn't rushing, she was sweating buckets.

Her cram school was right in front of the station. It was only a ten-minute walk away, so she usually went on foot.

I can't believe Hazuki would do something so dark. I'm going to give her a piece of my mind at school on Monday! Yuuri thought as she stopped at a crosswalk.

"Huh? What's with that lady…?"

Yuuri looked across the street, and her eyes widened.

Several people were waiting for the light to change color. But a very creepy woman was standing with those regular people.

Even though it was summer, the woman wore a thick coat and a scarf around her neck.



Her face was covered by her long black hair, so only her left eye was visible from between the strands.

And she was staring straight at Yuuri.

None of the other people around the woman seemed to notice anything strange about her.

The light turned green, and everyone started to cross the street.

Yuuri felt a little scared as she timidly started walking, too. The woman slowly ambled forward, glaring at Yuuri the entire time. When they crossed paths in the middle of the crosswalk, the woman turned her head to follow Yuuri with her eyes as she continued on.

Eventually, Yuuri reached the other side of the street and looked back at the woman she'd passed.

The woman was standing right where Yuuri had been waiting to cross.

She continued to stare at Yuuri from there.

"Wh-what is her problem…?"

Yuuri quickly scurried away.

I wonder who that woman was…

During tutoring, Yuuri couldn't take her mind off the woman. She hadn't seen the woman's face, but she didn't think she knew any adult women who looked like that.

She had no idea why the woman had been staring at her like that.

Maybe I was just imagining it?

Maybe the woman had very bad eyesight and was squinting so she appeared to be glaring. Maybe she was even trying to look somewhere else.

I'm probably just overthinking it, Yuuri thought, and she felt a bit better. Then she happened to look out the window.

"Huh?!"

Outside, the woman was standing on a street corner. Somehow, the woman appeared to be staring directly at Yuuri, who was in a third-floor classroom.

"Wh-what is she doing?!"

Yuuri stood up without thinking.

“Miss Yamazaki, is something the matter?” The teacher stopped writing on the whiteboard and looked over at Yuuri.

“There’s a woman…,” Yuuri said.

“A woman?”

“Yes! There’s a strange woman staring at me!”

Yuuri glanced at the lecturer and pointed at the window. All the students and the teacher peered in that direction at the same time.

But they all seemed confused.

“Miss Yamazaki, what are you talking about?”

“It’s the weird woman over there…”

“I don’t see anyone.”

“What?”

Yuuri quickly turned back to the window. She didn’t see any sign of her, either.

“She was just there!”

The window had a good view of most of the road, so it wasn’t likely that the woman could have disappeared without a trace.

“Miss Yamazaki, are you all right?”

“But…,” she started to say.

“If you’re okay, it’s time to study right now,” the teacher warned her. “Please focus.”

“I—I will…”

Though Yuuri had no idea what was going on, she apologized to the teacher and sat down.

The first lecture finished, and Yuuri headed to the sink to wash her face.

That woman was definitely staring at me…

She hadn’t been seeing things. The woman had really been standing in the road and staring right at Yuuri.

How did she vanish, though?

Yuuri wiped her face with her handkerchief and lifted her head to look in the mirror.

She saw a woman with long black hair standing right behind her.

“Aah!” Yuuri reeled back.

“Hey, what’s wrong?”

When she looked more closely, she realized that the person she’d thought was the creepy woman was actually Honoka Yoshiwara.

Like the strange woman, she had long black hair that hung all the way to her chest.

“Oh, it’s just you, Honoka. Don’t scare me like that.”

“You’re the one who scared me. Yuuri, you’ve been acting weird today.”

“Y-yeah, maybe I have…”

Yuuri decided to tell Honoka about the lady.

“I see. That *would* be pretty frightening.”

As they were going back to the classroom, Honoka said to Yuuri, “If it was just at the crosswalk, then it could have been a coincidence, but…”

Yuuri looked anxious.

“If she really was glaring at you, then she must have had a reason, right?”

“A reason? But I can’t think of why she would.”

“Maybe someone asked her to do it?”

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

“Maybe there’s someone who has a grudge against you, so they had someone they know help get back at you.”

In that moment, only one person came to mind.

Hazuki!

The chain letter that Yuuri got in the mail had said that she would need to send the letter to ninety-nine other people if she didn’t want to be killed by a ghost.

So the creepy lady was just pretending to be the ghost, then.

Hazuki is just trying to scare me…

Yuuri had secretly been sending the chain texts, so her classmate must have sent a chain letter to get back at her.

Honoka nodded. “It must be her!”

“You think so?”

“It’s gotta be. But it’s hard to believe someone would go that far,” Honoka said and giggled, seeming kind of impressed.

“Seriously? Stop acting like it’s not a big deal!” Yuuri said.

“Sorry, sorry. But once you know it’s just someone pulling a prank, it’s not like it’s scary anymore.”

“I guess you have a point…”

She had no idea who the woman was, but if Hazuki had just recruited her to mess with Yuuri, then she really wasn’t anything to fear.

“Okay! Next time I see that lady, I’m gonna call her out on it!” Yuuri said, finally feeling better.

That evening.

Cram school was over, and Yuuri was keeping an eye out on her way home.

I wonder if that lady is around…

She walked down a street filled with shops and checked the face of each person who passed by.

But she didn’t see the woman anywhere, no matter how hard she looked.

Maybe she’s done messing with me?

She reached the crosswalk where she had first seen the woman, but she wasn’t there, either.

Oh well. I guess I’ll just go home.

Yuuri was a little disappointed as she crossed the street.

Right at that moment, she saw someone standing on the roof of the apartment building in front of her. It was someone wearing a thick coat and a scarf, with long black hair that hung to their chest.

It was the woman.

The lady from earlier was staring at Yuuri from on top of the building.

“There she is!”

Yuuri ran over to the entrance.

I’m gonna catch her and tell her off!

She headed into the apartment complex and dashed for the elevator, but then she saw a notice on the door that read, OUT OF ORDER.

“Not now!”

Yuuri was annoyed, but she took the stairs up to the roof.

“You don’t scare me!”

Yuuri yelled as soon as she burst out onto the rooftop.
But she didn’t see the woman anywhere.
Where did she go?
She peered down at the road from the building and saw the woman standing down there instead.
The woman looked up at Yuuri and stared eerily.
When did she get down there?
The elevator was out of service, so she couldn’t have used it. The only way to get down was by using the stairs. But she hadn’t seen the woman on the way up.
“What’s happening?!”
Yuuri went back into the building and dashed down the stairs.
But once she got outside, the woman was gone.
She looked around for the woman but didn’t see her.
“What’s going on?!”



In the end, Yuuri never found the woman and had to go home.
How did she get down there?
Yuuri couldn’t stop thinking about it, even after she got back to her room. The elevator hadn’t been working. They hadn’t passed by each other on the stairs, either.
Maybe she really is a ghost…
Yuuri shuddered.
But then she shook her head.
No way! It’s all just Hazuki!
Maybe the elevator wasn’t actually broken. Maybe the woman had put the sign on the door and then taken the elevator down while Yuuri was climbing the stairs.
Hazuki came up with all of this just to scare me! I know it!
She was really upset and decided to call Hazuki.

“Hello, Hazuki? Can you stop playing pranks on me?!”

Yuuri started complaining the moment Hazuki answered.

"What's wrong, Yuuri?"

"I know it's you! That lady must be someone you know!" Yuuri told Hazuki what had happened that day.

But then, on the other end of the line, Hazuki said, "Um…I don't know what you're talking about, Yuuri."

"You don't?! You're trying to get back at me, aren't you?!"

"For what?"

"For the chain text! You must have figured out that I was writing them!"

Hazuki responded slowly, seeming confused.

"You were writing the texts? What do you mean?"

Hazuki clearly wasn't sure how to react.

When Yuuri heard her friend's puzzled tone, she realized that Hazuki really hadn't known anything.

"Hazuki, you didn't send a chain letter to my house?"

"I didn't. I know your phone number but not your address."

"Oh…"

Now that she thought about it, Yuuri didn't know where Hazuki lived, either.

They always used their phones to send New Year's and birthday cards, too.

"Then what about the grim reaper stuff?"

"You were the one who talked about that, Yuuri. Didn't you say your friend from cram school sent it to you, and that one said the grim reaper would get you?"

Apparently, Hazuki really had believed Yuuri's lie.

"How about the chain letter? And the woman?"

"I…don't know anything about those," Hazuki answered in a quivering voice.

"But if it wasn't you…"

After hanging up, Yuuri stared into space.

Maybe that woman was a *real* ghost. That would explain how she disappeared and reappeared out of nowhere.

Yuuri remembered what was written in the chain letter.

“Please send this letter to ninety-nine people by 11:59:59 tonight. If you don’t, a ghost’s grudge will kill you.”

Panicking, she checked the clock in her room.

It was already past 11:50 PM.

If the woman was truly a ghost and Yuuri didn’t send the letter to ninety-nine people, the horrible thing would kill her.

There’s no way ghosts exist…, Yuuri thought, but at the same time, that woman couldn’t be a normal person. *At this rate, maybe I actually will end up…*

Yuuri tensed and then opened her drawer to look for stationery. But she couldn’t find a single sheet of paper.

“Would a postcard work? But how can I send it to ninety-nine people now?! What do I do?! I’m out of time!”

Buzz, buzz.

Suddenly, her phone vibrated on the desk.

She was getting a call from Honoka Yoshiwara.

“It’s Honoka!” Yuuri picked up her phone like she’d found her savior. “Hello?! Honoka, you have to help me! It’s an emergency!”

“It is? Because it’s almost 11:59:59, you mean?”

“Y-yeah, that’s right!”

“Huh, I guess it is. But you know, this is all your own fault, Yuuri…”

“What?”

Honoka started to giggle.

“Do you remember Yukiko Noda?”

“Yukiko…Noda…?”

That was the name of a girl she’d gone to ballet class with in elementary school.

“What about her?” Yuuri asked.

“Yukiko was my best friend in middle school.”

Then Honoka added, “But then she died in a car crash a week ago.”

“No way…”

Yuuri had quit ballet as a fifth-grader, so she hadn’t talked to any of her ballet classmates since then.

“Say, Yuuri, you’ve always loved scary stories, right?”

“Y-yeah…”

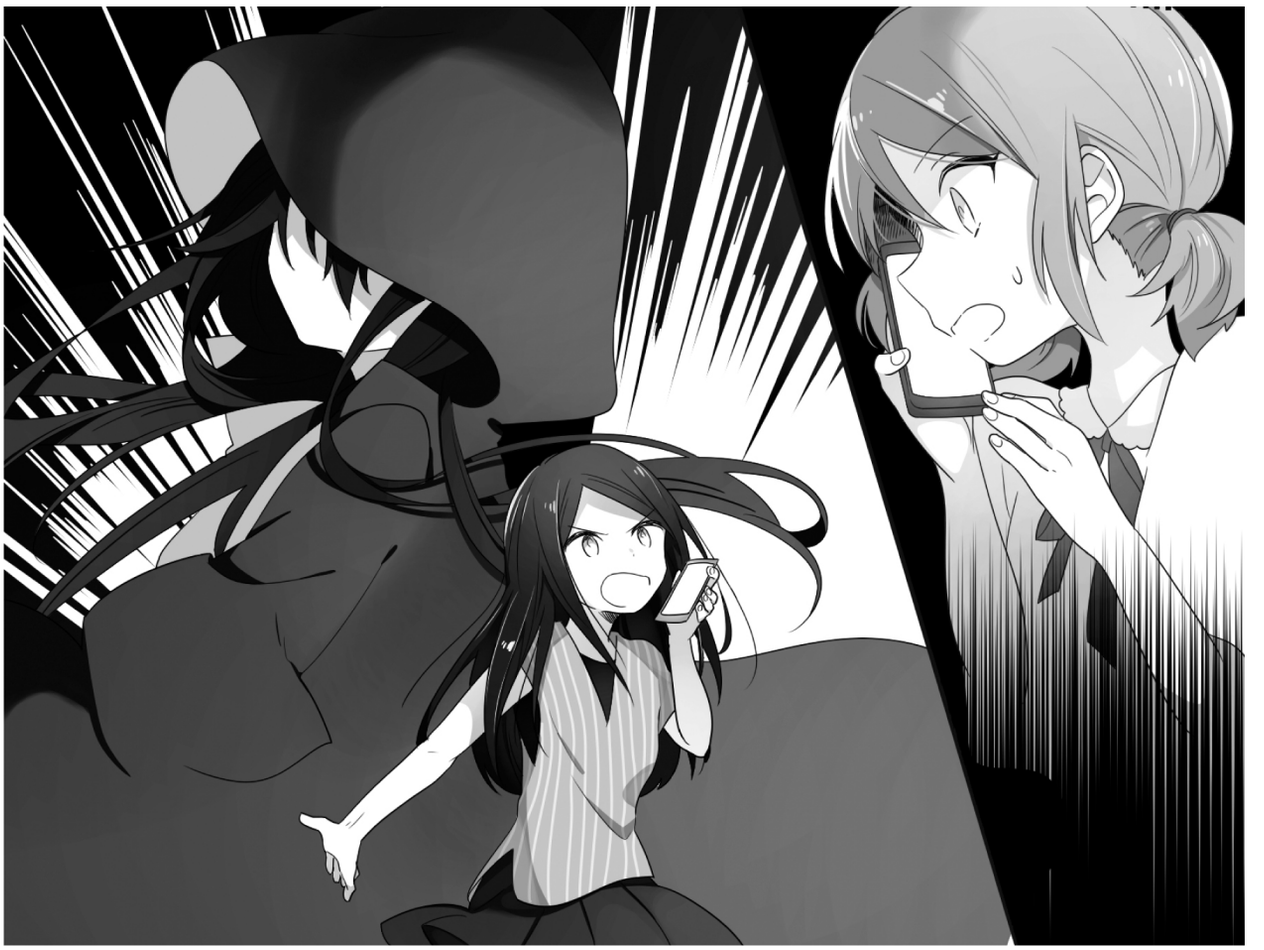
“And you remember how someone was so scared that she stopped coming to class because of you?”

“I do, but that was… Oh!” Yuuri suddenly remembered that Yukiko had quit ballet.

“Thanks to your stories, Yukiko turned into a shut-in and couldn’t leave her house anymore. She hated hearing scary stuff like urban legends, but you told her so many that she couldn’t bring herself to go out. But last week, she finally found the courage to leave home. And then she got into the accident…”

“Yukiko told me something while she was in the hospital,” Honoka said. “That she could never forgive you, Yuuri Yamazaki. Because of you, she wouldn’t be able to rest in peace even after she died.”

“What…?”



Yuuri had just been pulling pranks on people. But apparently, Yukiko had hated Yuuri for it this entire time.

"In the end, Yukiko's condition took a turn for the worse, and she died. So I did something to comfort her spirit. I'm so lucky that I was in the same cram school as you."

"But I didn't mean for—"

"Well, it's too late! Because I already made my wish!"

"Your wish?"

"I told a girl in a black hood that I wanted revenge for Yukiko."

"A girl? Do you mean that lady?"

"I don't know. She didn't tell me much about it. All I had to do was get your address from the ballet class list Yukiko's mom had, then I could send you the chain letter!"

"Y-you were the one messing with me?!"

"You're the one who was messing around," Honoka replied. "It's because you kept toying with people without thinking how it would affect them! Also, are you sure you should be wasting time like this? You've only got a minute left."

"What?" Yuuri suddenly looked at the clock.

It was 11:59:00 PM.

"Later, Yuuri."

"Uh! Wait!"

Honoka snickered as she hung up.

Pitter-patter, pitter-patter...

Yuuri heard someone walking down the hallway.

Pitter-patter, pitter-patter...

The footsteps were getting closer and closer to her room.

"Wh-who is it?!"

The door opened.

Through the gap, she saw a thick coat. Then she saw the scarf wrapped around the person's neck. And finally, she saw the black hair.

It was that woman. The woman was coming into her room.

As the woman’s hair fluttered for a moment, Yuuri saw her face.

Yuuri’s eyes went wide.

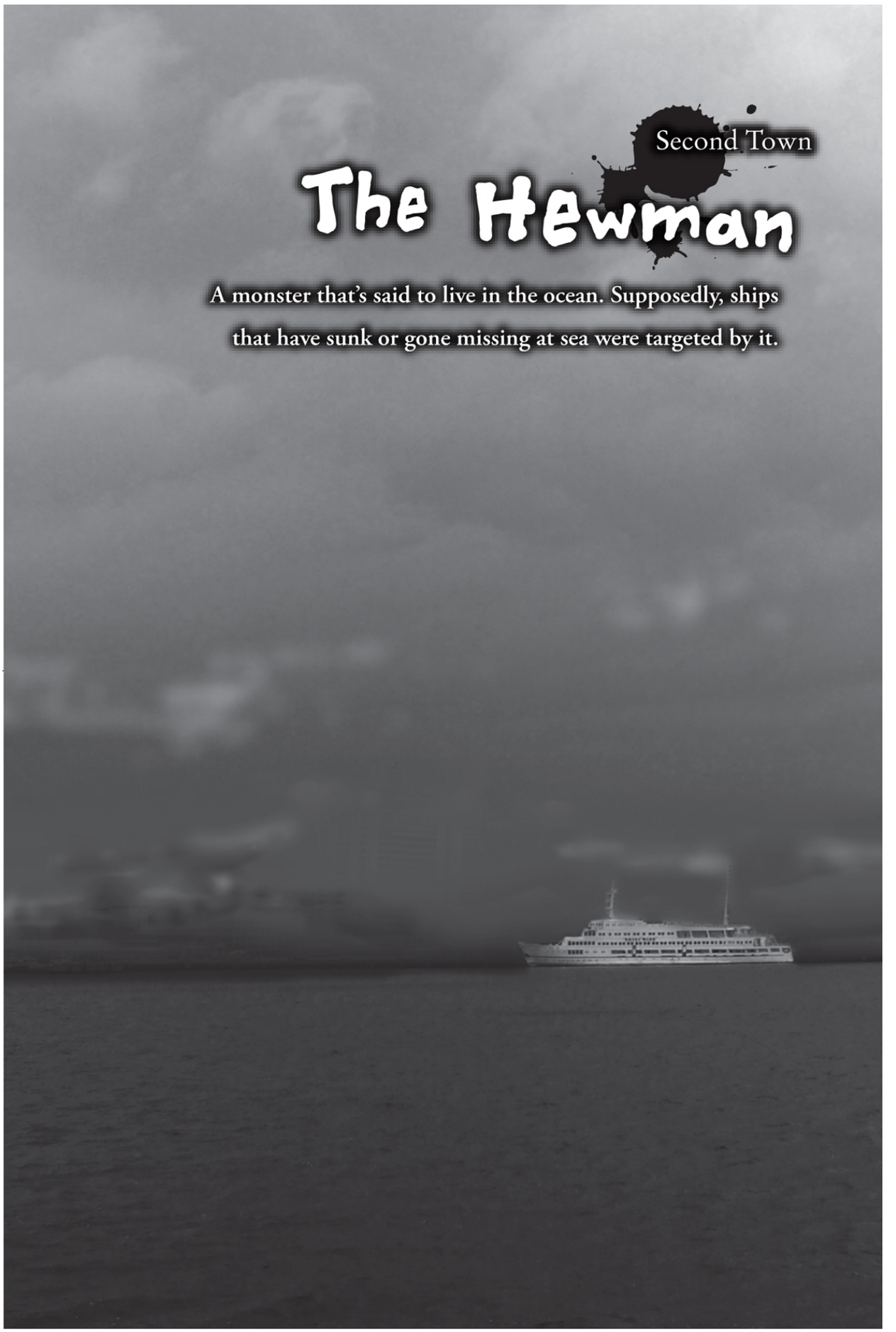
The woman was Yukiko.

“Ah… Aah… Aaaaaaah…”

It was 11:59:59 PM.

The room echoed with Yuuri’s screams.




Second Town
The Hewman
A monster that's said to live in the ocean. Supposedly, ships that have sunk or gone missing at sea were targeted by it.

“Wow! This is amazing!”

It was summer break.

Ayaka Tanimoto, who was traveling with her parents, looked at the ferry in front of her and shouted excitedly.

Ayaka was going to take that ferry with her parents to go visit her grandfather in the countryside.

“We normally go by plane, but sometimes it’s nice to travel by boat,” one of her parents said.

“Uh-huh! I’ve been looking forward to riding it!”

Ayaka, who was in the fourth grade, had never been on one before.

“Every now and then, it’s nice to take our time when we travel,” her dad said.

“Especially since it’s summer break,” Ayaka’s mom added.

With a smile, Ayaka replied, “Yeah!”

After they boarded the ferry, Ayaka put her things in her room and headed to the deck with her parents. A crowd of people were on deck, waiting to set sail.

The sun was blindingly bright. Ayaka held her hand up as she looked at the bright-blue cloudless sky. She took a deep breath, and the morning air filled her nostrils.

Hooonk, hooonk.

She heard a very loud horn.

“What was that?” she asked.

“Oh, that’s the signal that the ship is heading out.”

“See, it’s starting to move.”

The ferry slowly left the harbor.

“Wow! Awesome!” Ayaka smiled as she leaned against the handrails.

“Ayaka, that’s dangerous.”

“Oh!”

Ayaka had been so excited that she hadn't noticed she'd been very close to the edge. She quickly scooted away.

"You might fall into the ocean."

"I'm sorry…"

Even though Ayaka apologized, she wasn't actually sorry that she'd leaned out.

She had only been worried that the purse she was wearing on her shoulder had been squished between her and the wall.

I wonder if that hurt?

Ayaka wandered away from her parents, who were busy enjoying the view. Then, once she was on the other side of the deck, she peeked into her bag.

A hamster was inside it.

When she saw that it looked completely fine, Ayaka felt relieved.

Oh, good. Hammie didn't get squished.

Ayaka loved her pet, but her parents had told her she couldn't bring him with her on the trip, so she was supposed to have left him with a friend.

But she didn't have it in her to leave him behind, so she secretly sneaked him aboard instead.

I'll get in trouble with my parents if you get caught, so be good for me.

Ayaka took a sunflower seed from the outside pocket of her bag and gave it to Hammie before going back to her parents.

On the way there, a boy walked by her.

He was wearing a red hood. She also saw the head of a dog peeking out from his jacket. The dog was wearing a yellow hood.

They were Fushigi and Jimmy.

Ayaka warned the boy, "If you have your pet out, you'll get into trouble."

Pets generally weren't allowed on the boat. Dogs and cats needed to be in a special carrier to come on board.

Fushigi glanced at Jimmy.





“Don’t worry about him. He isn’t a pet anyway,” Fushigi bluntly replied.

“He’s not?” Ayaka tilted her head and looked at Jimmy.

“That’s right. I ain’t no pet! I’m the human-faced dog Jimmy!”

“Did that dog just—?”

“All right, that’s enough outta ya! Can’t have ya kickin’ up a fuss.”

Fushigi gave Jimmy a resigned look and shook his head slightly. “You could have just stayed in the bag.”

“How can I get on a boat and not get a whiff of the sea breeze?”

“What’ll we do if you cause a commotion in the process?”

Ayaka was frightened but just watched them have this very normal conversation.

“Who *are* you two…?”

“It’s none of your business,” Fushigi said.

“C’mon. Ya don’t need to be so cold to the gal! Right?” Jimmy looked at Ayaka and grinned.

“Eek!”

Ayaka quickly ran away from them.

“Hey, where ya goin’?” Jimmy muttered as he watched Ayaka turn tail and flee.

“She probably was worried you’d eat her or something,” Fushigi said.

“Now, that’s just silly.”

Jimmy was shocked, but Fushigi just sighed and scanned the ocean.

“Looks like nothing’s out of the ordinary yet…,” Fushigi said.

“Mom, Dad! It’s an emergency!” Ayaka yelled when she reached her parents.

“What’s wrong?”

“Did you see a celebrity on board or something?”

“No! It was a weird boy!” Ayaka shouted. “And he had a human-faced dog with him!”

“A human-faced dog?”

Her parents looked at each other and smiled.

“A human-faced dog—now that’s a good one.”

“I didn’t know you could make jokes like that, Ayaka.”

“It’s not a joke! I really saw it!” Ayaka insisted.

Ayaka told them all about what had happened, then tugged at her parents’ hands to take them to Fushigi and Jimmy. But once they reached the spot where she had seen them, all she found were the other passengers admiring the view.

“All right, then. Were you hoping to give your mom and me a scare?”

“No! They really were here!”

“Now, now, there’s no such thing as a human-faced dog. You probably just caught someone bringing in a dog they weren’t supposed to. I think they might have told you a fib, Ayaka.”

“A fib?” she repeated.

“That’s right. They probably made it seem like the little doggy was talking, but I bet it was just the boy the entire time.”

“What?”

I guess maybe he could have been… It’s not like a human-faced dog could exist anyway.

“I see. You’re right…” Ayaka felt relieved and stopped worrying about Fushigi and Jimmy. She headed to her room.



She stretched out on her bed, then fell asleep before she knew it.

She had been looking forward to riding on the ferry so much that she hadn’t slept the day before.

After a while, Ayaka woke up. She looked at the clock and saw that an hour had passed since the ship had set sail.

“Dad? Mom?” she called, but no one answered.

Ayaka was the only one in the room, but she saw a note on the table. It said her parents had gone to the tearoom.

“Oh, come on! They could have woken me up.” Ayaka got out of bed and looked at her bag next to her. “Just be a little patient, okay?”

She opened the top of the bag, and Hammie peeked out, looking completely fine.

“Here’s another sunflower seed,” she said. After she gave Hammie his treat, she hung her bag on her shoulder and headed to the tearoom.

When she left the room, she spotted a map of the ship on the wall in the hallway.

Um, the tearoom…is upstairs, then.

Ayaka walked toward the stairs.

"Oh?"

A middle-aged man was lying at the foot of the stairs. She wondered if he wasn't feeling well.

"Are you okay?!" Ayaka rushed over. "What's wrong? Excuse me!"

She tried shaking him, but he didn't respond at all. Thinking he could be sick, Ayaka decided to look for help.

"What?"

Her eyes went wide.

She saw an old lady also lying in the corner of the stairwell. It wasn't just her, either. A little farther away, a young man in uniform who was clearly a member of the crew was also on the floor. Next to him, she saw that a mother and her little kid had collapsed as well.

Everyone appeared to be sleeping at the base of the stairs.

"What happened…?"

Scared, Ayaka quickly went in search of her parents.

"Dad! Mom!"

As Ayaka ran up the stairs, she saw more and more people collapsed all around her.

They had lost consciousness as they were going up or down the stairs.

What's going on…?

She wanted to get to her parents as soon as possible.

Once Ayaka was at the top of the stairs, she headed for the tearoom.

People were unconscious in the chairs and on the sofas near the game corner and the lounge where there was a TV. She was so scared of seeing more collapsed people that she kept her eyes straight ahead and ran to the tearoom.

She saw her parents sitting at the counter.

“Dad! Mom!” Ayaka yelled as she rushed to them, but her parents didn’t even twitch.

“No way…”

She peered around them at their faces and realized they were unconscious just like everyone else.

“No!” Ayaka tried to shake them awake. “Dad, wake up! Mom, why are you asleep?!”

She shook them harder, but they wouldn’t open their eyes.

Ayaka seemed to be the only one who was awake.

Clack, clack, clack.

Suddenly, she heard someone approaching.

Someone else is still awake!

Ayaka ran out of the tearoom and onto the general floor.

She saw someone heading for the deck.

They were wearing red clothes.

“Wait!”

Ayaka quickly followed them.

“Ah!”

When Ayaka reached the deck, everything in front of her eyes went white.

What is this?

It was mist.

The ferry was surrounded by a very thick fog.

Where did that person go? I can’t see anything in this!

Ayaka squinted as she looked around her. She saw lots of people collapsed on the deck, just like inside.

Red clothes… Red clothes…

Ayaka was careful not to step on anyone while she looked for the person who was still awake.

“How are you conscious?”

She heard a voice come from behind her.

She spun around in surprise and saw the person in red clothes whom she’d been looking for.

“Excuse me!” Ayaka ran over to him to ask for his help.

She realized he was the boy from earlier. Ayaka hesitated, and Jimmy’s face poked out from Fushigi’s jacket.

“Oh, it’s just that gal from before.”

“The dog really is talking!”

“Yeah, of course I talk. I told ya I’m the human-faced dog—”

“You should take shelter in the ship,” Fushigi said, cutting Jimmy off.

“Why?”

“A monster is targeting this ferry.”

Boom!

Suddenly, the ferry shook, and they heard a loud noise.

“Ah!”

“Guess it’s here…” Fushigi looked into the mist, in the direction of the ocean.

Rooooar!

A deep, low rumbling came from within the fog.

“What is that?” Ayaka asked.

“It’s a hewman,” Fushigi answered her.

“A human…?” Ayaka tilted her head questioningly as Fushigi approached the handrail. “Wait a sec!” she called out.

She was scared to be alone. Ayaka raced after Fushigi toward the side of the ship. She caught sight of something in the water.

“What is that…?”

It was shaped like a person, but it was way too big to be one. The human-shaped thing, which was almost as large as the ferry, swam through the water.

“That’s the hewman.”

Fushigi didn’t even turn to Ayaka as he looked at the water and spoke. “It’s a monster from an urban legend that attacks people on boats. I heard that it appears in the ocean around here, so I got on this ferry.”

“Didn’t expect it to be that big,” Jimmy said.

“Right. It’s bigger than I expected, too.”

Right then, the hewman drew closer and head-butted the bottom of the ship.

Boom!

“Aaah!”

The deck rocked.

The hewman must have made the ship rock earlier, too. The creature grabbed on to the ferry with both hands and pulled its head out of the water.

Its face was shiny and silver.

Ayaka couldn’t make out its eyes, nose, or mouth, but she knew it was looking at them.



Rooooar!

It growled again.

“Looks like it’s angry.”

“Why?” Ayaka asked.

“Hewmans don’t like human beings.” Fushigi glanced at the unconscious people around him. “The hewman made this fog. Normal people fall asleep when they’re in the fog, but for some reason, you’re still awake. That’s why the hewman is upset.”

“Just me? But what about you?”

“This fog can’t affect us,” Fushigi told her.

“Yep! I’m a human-faced dog, and Fushigi’s somethin’ like me, too.”

“Something like you? What does that—?”

Boom!

“Ah!”

Before Ayaka could finish, the hewman head-butted the ship again.

“Fushigi, at this rate, the ship’s gonna go under. We’ve gotta collect that thing quick!” Jimmy said, and Fushigi pulled out a bright-red notebook.

But when he looked at the hewman, he scowled.

“What’s the matter?! Hurry!” Jimmy urged him.

“I can’t… It’s so big, I have no clue where the mark is.”

“What?!” Jimmy shouted.

Boooom!

Right then, the hewman rammed the ship even harder than before.

“Aaah!”

“Ack!”

Fushigi staggered forward because of the impact.

In that moment, Jimmy flew out of Fushigi’s jacket.

“Whoa!” Jimmy yelled.

“Jimmy!” Fushigi called out after him.

The human-faced dog almost fell right into the ocean. The hewman's face was right below, and there was a gigantic black hole in it.

It was the hewman's mouth.

"Waaah!"

"Careful!" Ayaka leaned out over the handrail and grabbed Jimmy's front legs. Then she pulled him back up. "A-are you okay?!"

"Ya saved me!"

"This place is dangerous. We should get inside," Fushigi said.

Ayaka and Jimmy both nodded and ran in.



Boom! Boom!

Ten minutes passed.

Outside, the hewman continued slamming into the ship.

Ayaka, Fushigi, and Jimmy hid in one of the ship's hallways.

What's going to happen now…?

Since everyone was asleep, that meant there was nobody steering the ship. If they couldn't get away from the hewman, it was only a matter of time until the ship sank.

Ayaka was afraid just imagining it. She shivered all over.

"It'll be okay," Jimmy said. "Fushigi will figure this out. And once the monster's gone, then everybody'll wake up, too."

"You mean it, Jimmy…?"

Ayaka had no idea what Fushigi and Jimmy were, but they didn't seem like bad people. Then she suddenly noticed the notebook Fushigi was holding.

"Um, what is that?" she asked.

Jimmy replied in Fushigi's place. "He's gonna use that notebook to collect the monster. Most monsters from urban legends have got a mark on 'em, see?"

Jimmy rolled over onto his back and showed off a strange mark on his stomach.

"So the hewman has one of those?"

"Yep, and it's gotta be somewhere on its body."

Jimmy explained to her that if they could collect that mark, the hewman would disappear and everyone would be saved.

“But how do you find the mark when the monster is so big?”

“Yep, that’s the issue. And since the hewman’s all worked up, it’s pretty dangerous to get near, too,” Jimmy said.

Fushigi finally spoke up. “If we can stop the hewman from moving, it should be easy to find its mark.”

The three of them had no idea how to stop the hewman from moving, though.

Snatch!

Suddenly, someone grabbed Jimmy’s foot from behind.

“What the?!”

The hand grabbing him was silver, and a very long silver arm stretched out from it.

“What the heck is this?!” he cried out.

“It couldn’t be…” Fushigi realized that the arm extended all the way to the deck. “It’s the hewman. It stretched out its arm so it could catch us.”

In the next moment, the hewman’s arm started to retract and tug Jimmy toward the deck.

“Gah!”

“Jimmy!” Ayaka screamed.

Fushigi and Ayaka both grabbed Jimmy as quickly as they could.

“Jimmy, hold on to something!”

“G-got it!” Jimmy grabbed a fire extinguisher in the hallway with both front paws. “Grr!”

He tried to kick off the hewman’s hand.

But then the hewman must have rammed them again, since the ship swayed suddenly.

“Whoa!”

When it rocked, a large man nearby rolled over in front of Jimmy. The man’s butt was right in front of Jimmy’s face.

“Wh-what in the world?!” Jimmy quickly shook his head to move away from the man’s rear. But then this time an even bigger middle-aged woman lurched toward him!

“C-crud!”

The woman's stomach rolled directly into Jimmy's face.

"Bwah!"

Then he lost his grip on the fire extinguisher.

"Guh!"

The hewman started to drag Jimmy away again.

"Help me!"

He went right through the door and disappeared onto the deck.

"Jimmy!"

Fushigi and Ayaka both ran after the human-faced dog.

When Ayaka came out onto the deck, her legs froze. The hewman had the ship in its grasp. It was holding itself out of the water, and its gigantic face was right in front of her eyes.

Rooooar!

It growled and opened its mouth wide.

"Jimmy!"

The hewman was trying to eat Jimmy whole.

"I ain't tasty, I'm tellin' ya! I'm a human-faced dog, don't ya know?! And I'm just a tiny morsel! Plus, I've even got a hood on!"

Jimmy was yelling for his life while the hewman dragged him toward its mouth.

"I need to find the mark as soon as I can." Fushigi started to search for it, but he couldn't find it anywhere.

"Fushigi! I think I'm done for!" Jimmy said, his tone heartbreaking.

Then Ayaka ran over.

"Let go of Jimmy!"

She grabbed the hewman's arm.

"It'll just get you, too," Fushigi told her.

"Yeah! Ya better get back inside!"

"No way! I wanna help! You don't seem like a bad person, Jimmy!" Ayaka said, then strained as hard as she could to tug on the hewman's arm.

In that moment, the bag that hung off Ayaka's shoulder brushed against the hewman just a little bit.

Rooooar!

The hewman suddenly roared and quivered.
At the same time, it let go of Jimmy.
“Whoa!”
“Jimmy!” Fushigi caught Jimmy right away.

R… R-roooar…

The hewman had stopped moving.
“Wh-what in the world is going on?”
Fushigi set Jimmy onto the deck and looked over at Ayaka.
“What’s in your bag?”
The hewman had started acting strangely the moment Ayaka’s bag had touched it.
“Um, it’s just Hammie. My pet hamster…”
Ayaka looked into her bag at Hammie.
“A pet? I see…” Fushigi nodded slightly. “I think I finally understand why you were the only one who didn’t fall asleep.”

“It’s because of that pet of yours. A hewman’s weakness is an animal that likes human beings,” Fushigi said.

He slowly approached the seemingly paralyzed hewman.
“These monsters don’t like people, so it can’t understand pets that like their caretakers. And things that you don’t understand cause fear.”
Fushigi stood in front of the hewman’s eyes and stared straight at it.
“I see it there…”



He spotted the mark on the hewman's side, where it had been hidden.

Fushigi opened his bright-red notebook and said a spell as he held it out toward the mark.



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

Then the hewman's body crumbled away, and silver things seemed to fly out of it.

The silver things were fish.

"So the hewman…was just a ton of fish forming one big monster?"

"Human beings pollute the water without a care in the world. That might be why the fish have grown to dislike them."

After hearing that, Jimmy thought that maybe urban legends weren't all just evil monsters that wanted to attack people. Some of them had their own reasons for those actions.

Fushigi checked his red notebook.

When he flipped through it, lots of inverted marks filled the pages.

Each of them was a curse mark that he'd collected.

Fushigi just stared at them.

Soon the people on the deck started to stir.

The fog had disappeared.

"Everyone's awake! Mom, Dad!"

Ayaka dashed into the ship to get to her parents in the tearoom.

"Looks like a human being saved our butts this time," Jimmy said as he watched Ayaka leave.

Fushigi didn't say anything and just scanned the deck.

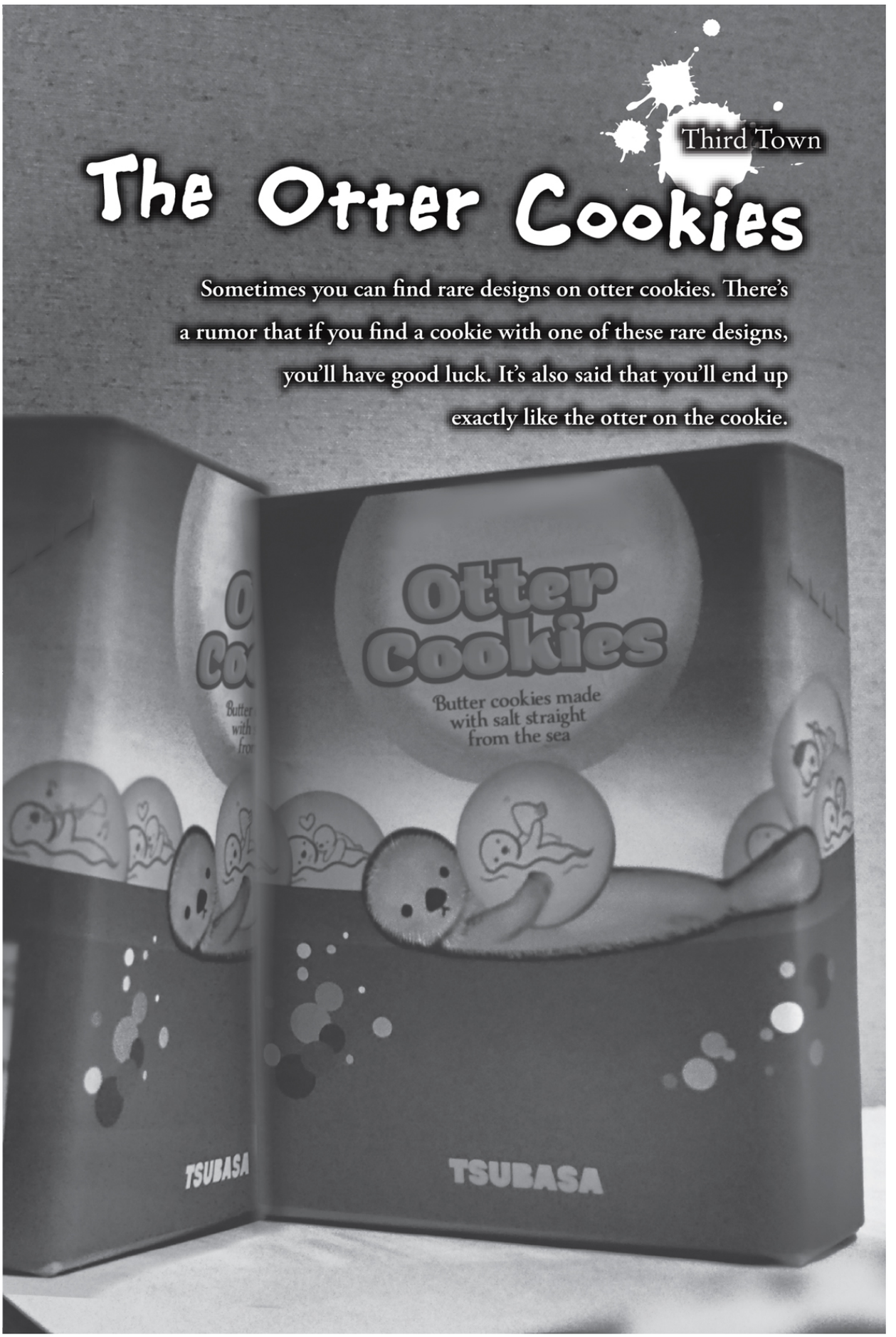
He saw a single fish flopping around on the ship. Fushigi picked it up and gently released it into the ocean.



Third Town

The Otter Cookies

Sometimes you can find rare designs on otter cookies. There's a rumor that if you find a cookie with one of these rare designs, you'll have good luck. It's also said that you'll end up exactly like the otter on the cookie.



“Tomoe, I brought back something good!”

Tomoe Endou was watching television in the living room when her older sister, Ran, dashed into the room.

“See!” she said, showing off a snack box with a cute otter design on it.

“Wow! Otter cookies?!” Tomoe said.

“I want to get the rare one this time!”

They were in the fifth grade and fourth grade, and they both loved otter cookies.

Since each one had a different design, they were a big hit with kids. And lately, there was also an urban legend going around about the otter cookies.

The usual design showed otters floating on water and cracking shells on their stomachs or taking naps. But apparently, there was also a design where the otter wasn’t doing any of that.

One in every thousand designs had an otter wearing a gold medal or holding a test paper with a perfect score. If you got one of those, then supposedly whatever was happening to the otter would happen to you. You would win a competition or get a good grade on a test, for example.

Neither Tomoe nor Ran had found a rare otter so far.

“Do you think there’s one in here this time?”

“There’s got to be! I took so much time picking out which one to buy this time!”

Their hopes were high as they each pulled a cookie from the box.

“I want a superstar-level rare otter that’ll make me popular in class,” Tomoe said hopefully.

“I think I want a lovey-dovey rare otter so my crush will fall in love with me,” Ran said.

They checked each of the cookies one at a time.

But all of them were normal.

“Maybe the rare otters don’t actually exist…”

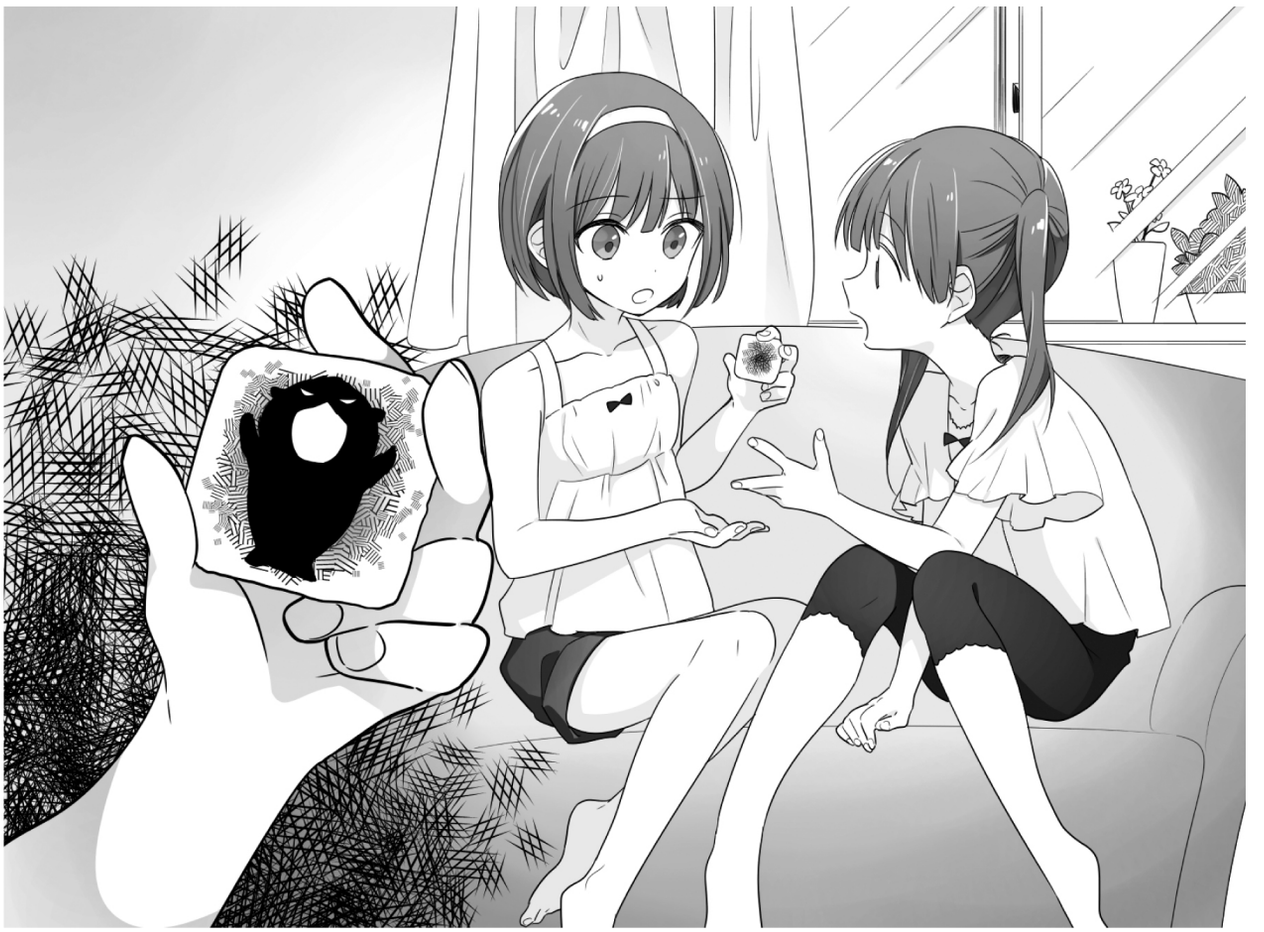
“No, they’ve got to. Just believe me,” Ran said, but then she noticed one otter cookie was left in the box.

“Please make this a rare one, please!” Ran put her hands together and pulled out the last cookie. She checked the design. “Oh!”

“Is it a rare one?” Tomoe excitedly looked at Ran’s hand. She did see a design she’d never seen before.

The otter’s whole body was pitch-black.

★ ★ ★



Its mouth was open wide like it was screaming.

"Ran, what is this…?"

"I think it's a rare otter, but…"

Neither of them had heard of one like this.

"It kind of looks like this otter is on fire…," Tomoe said nervously as she glanced over at Ran.

"Do you think this otter burned up until it became black like this?" Tomoe asked.

Ran shuddered. "Does that mean I'm going to burn up, too?"

"What?"

"Because you end up the way the rare otter looks."

"Ah!" Tomoe tried to think of something else to say, but Ran glared at her before she could speak.

"I don't believe this!" Ran suddenly yelled.

"Oh dear. What's wrong?" When their mother heard the commotion, she left the kitchen and went into the living room. "Ran, you're the older one, so you shouldn't be starting fights."

Their mother came between them. She touched Ran's shoulder.

"It's not a fight!"

The girl shrugged off her mom's hand.

"What's gotten into you, sweetie?"

"You're making it seem like it's my fault, Mom!"

Ran glared at her mother.

"I didn't mean to blame you, Ran," her mother said.

"But you did!"

"I was just—"

"But that's what you said!"

It seemed like their mom realized that Ran wasn't going to feel better about this, so she said, "I'm sorry."

Finally, Ran calmed down a little.

Their mom tried to change the subject. She glanced over at the Japanese-style room next to them.

"I have an idea, Ran. Why don't you light some incense for the household altar? We haven't done that yet today."

"Light the incense?"

"Yes, just like you always do."

Ran had been very close to their grandmother, who had passed away, so she always lit incense for her at the altar. This time, Ran stared at the Buddhist altar in the corner of the room and then glared at her mom again.

"I don't want to today! Or tomorrow, or the day after that, either!" Ran yelled and then slammed the sliding door to the altar room shut.

"What are you doing, Ran?!"
"I'm not gonna do it if I don't want to!"
"Fine. Then why don't you help cook dinner? I'm going to make fried rice."

"Cook? I don't wanna do that, either!"

"Ran, what has gotten into you?!" her mom finally snapped at her.
But Ran looked very serious as she scowled at her mom.
That was when Tomoe realized something.

"Are you worried about the fire, Ran?"

She would need to light the incense. Cooking also involved fire. Ran was probably afraid of the fire because she thought she was going to burn to a crisp, just like that otter.
"The rare otter thing is just a rumor," Tomoe told her. "Nothing bad will happen."
"Don't lie to me. You were the one who believed it was true, Tomoe!"
"I did, but…"

"You and Mom just don't care if I burn to death!" Ran yelled and dashed out of the house.

"Ran!"
"Wait, Ran!"
Both Ran's mother and Tomoe went after her.

They looked around for Ran on the street. But she was already gone.

"Tomoe, you look for her at the park! I'll go check the shops!"

"Okay!"

Tomoe left her mom and hurried to the park, looking for Ran all the way.

She was sure that Ran was upset because of her.

It's because I said the otter looked like it was burned when I saw it. That's why she's so upset…

"Ran, I'm so sorry…," Tomoe said out loud as she began to tear up.

"It's not your fault."

Suddenly, she heard someone's voice.

She realized that a boy with a dog was standing in front of her. They were Fushigi and Jimmy.

"What do you mean by that?" Tomoe asked, and Jimmy raised his head.

"It's that cookie's fault," the dog said.

"Ah!"

Fushigi ignored Tomoe's surprise at the talking dog.

"Those cookies are cursed," Fushigi told her.

"Th-they're what?"

"Yeah, someone put a curse on those cookies."

"Look, ya know how those cookies are supposed to have rare otters? Somebody used that to their advantage and added in a dark one that's cursed."

"Why would they do something like that?"

"Well, naturally it's to hurt the people who end up with the cookie."

"Then is my sister gonna burn to a crisp?" Tomoe asked.

"No, the cookie means something different," Fushigi told her.

"It's the color black that's important. It won't change if you add other colors to it," Fushigi said. "The person who gets that one won't trust anyone around them. They won't listen."

Tomoe suddenly remembered something.

Ran must have been upset at everything she and their mom had said because of that.

“But there’s more to it.” Fushigi stared straight at Tomoe. “Once someone loses faith in everyone around them, they also lose faith in themselves. And in the end, the person will hate everything and choose death.”

“Huh…?”

Then if we leave her like this, Ran will…

“We need to find her!”

Tomoe started running.

Ran! Ran!

Tomoe would do anything to save her sister.

She kept running as fast as she could. Then she spotted Ran on the overpass next to the park.

“Ran!”

Tomoe raced toward her sister. Ran glared at Tomoe.

“Go away!”

She was holding on to the handrail of the overpass and seemed close to jumping. She also held the black otter cookie in her other hand. Something that looked a lot like black smoke swirled around her entire body.

“Ran, stop it! That’s dangerous!” Tomoe said.

“Shut up!”

There was a big street below the overpass, and cars and trucks were speeding past under it.

“I know you’re just pretending to care!” Ran yelled, and the black smoke became thicker. “No one actually cares about me! No one really loves me!”

“That’s not true!” Tomoe shouted back.

“Shut up! I should just disappear!”

Then Ran tried to jump from the overpass.

“No!”

Tomoe cried out and reached for Ran’s arm.

“It’s all the cookie’s fault!”

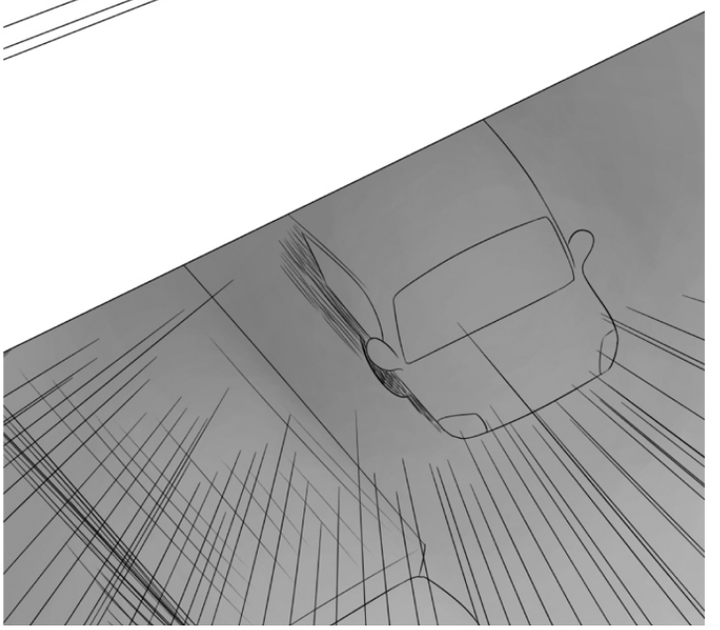
Tomoe grabbed the cursed cookie from Ran.

“Tomoe!”

“I love you, Ran! You help me with schoolwork and always hang out with me, and you even show me all your favorite shows on TV. When I can’t sleep, you even stay with me!”

“So I’m going to save you, Ran!”





★ ★ ★

Tomoe held her breath, shoved the cursed cookie into her mouth, and ate it.

“Tomoe!”

The black smoke around Ran seemed to go up in flames.

“Ran!” Tomoe yelled and hugged her sister.

As she did that, the black smoke drifted away from Ran and disappeared.

“Ran!”

“Tomoe!”

They both looked each other over to check that they were safe and then hugged tightly.

“Do you feel all right?” Ran asked.

“I-I’m fine. Are you?”

“I’m okay, too. I’m back to normal, thanks to you!”

“I’m so glad!” Tomoe smiled and hugged her sister again.

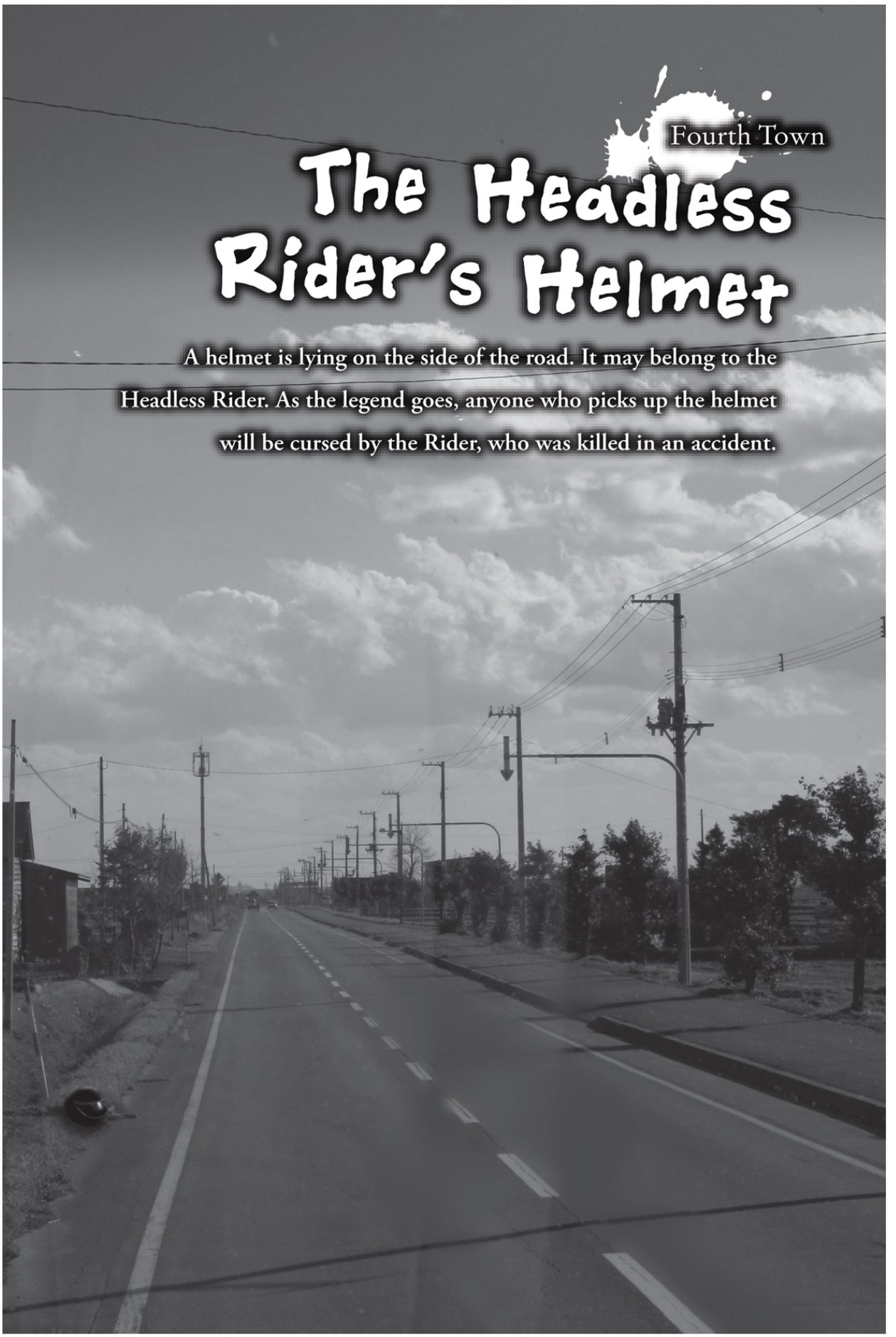
“I can’t believe the curse could be broken by a human.”

Fushigi and Jimmy had made it to the side of the overpass at some point.

“Looks like even a curse doesn’t stand a chance against the power of sisterly love,” Jimmy said with a smile.

“Sisterly love, huh…?” Fushigi repeated the words.

In his hands was the bright-red notebook. He observed the girls for a while, his grip on the notebook tight.



Fourth Town

The Headless Rider's Helmet

A helmet is lying on the side of the road. It may belong to the Headless Rider. As the legend goes, anyone who picks up the helmet will be cursed by the Rider, who was killed in an accident.

“Hey, did you hear a motorcycle just now?” Seiji sounded rattled on the other end of the phone.

He had called Daisuke Kagaya on a Monday night.

The two boys had become friends in the first grade. Now they were in the second grade.

But Daisuke had never heard Seiji sound so scared before.

“Huh? A motorcycle…?” Daisuke repeated.

“It felt like the ground was rumbling… It was really weird.”

Daisuke tried to listen for it, too. He heard the chirp of insects outside and the faint sound of cars passing by, but that was it. Daisuke’s house was far from the highway, so the area was pretty quiet.

“Sorry. I don’t hear anything…,” he said.

Then Seiji asked, seeming close to tears, “What did we do with that helmet from yesterday, Dai? We left it back there, right?”

“Yeah, we did…”

“It’s just a normal helmet, though, right? Someone just abandoned it in the woods. There’s no such thing as the Headless Rider, right?” Seiji muttered as though he was trying to convince himself.

He didn’t sound like the same person who had called Daisuke the previous morning.

The day before, Daisuke had been planning to level up his character in a game he was really into. But then Seiji invited him out to a shopping mall on the outskirts of town.

Whenever things didn’t go his way, Seiji would sulk for two or three days. Daisuke hadn’t wanted to deal with that, so he said he would go. But he wasn’t very happy about it.

He was sure Seiji wanted to play games at the arcade.

The problem was that Daisuke was better than Seiji. He always won whenever they played. But then if he tried to go easy on his friend, the other boy would get mad at him for that, too.

Daisuke thought of a great idea.

“Then how about we invite Taku, too?” he asked.

“Huh? Taku?” Seiji didn’t sound like he wanted to go along with that plan.

They’d known Takumi since they were first-graders, but everyone thought he was kind of annoying. He always talked a little too much.

But he was also a friendly guy and would join in if he was invited. Plus, most importantly, he wasn’t any good at games. So even if Seiji lost against Daisuke, he’d be able to beat Takumi and wouldn’t be in a bad mood.

“It’ll be a lot more fun with all three of us there,” Daisuke said.

“Well, I guess it might be,” Seiji replied.

“Then I’ll call Taku.”

Daisuke hung up and called Takumi right away.

“I’ll go! I’m in!” Takumi said immediately on the other end of the phone.

The shopping mall was about fifteen minutes away by bike on the highway that passed through the woods. The three of them were riding down the road together as cars passed them, the vehicles on the way to their summer vacation destinations.

“Hey, look…”

Seiji suddenly braked and pointed deep into the woods.

Daisuke’s heart skipped a beat. He saw what looked like a very tall person dressed in all black standing there and staring at them. But then he realized it was just a helmet caught on a tree branch.

“Whoa. That surprised me. I thought a person was standing there.”

Takumi, who was behind Daisuke, seemed to have also seen the same optical illusion.

While the two of them were talking, Seiji got off his bike and went to check out the helmet. Seiji was always saying he wanted to get a motorcycle as soon as he got a license.

Daisuke and Takumi shared a resigned look and followed their friend.

“Whoa, look at this thing! It’s so cool!”

Seiji grinned and grabbed the helmet, which was within arm's reach.

The helmet was decorated with swirling patterns. Since the overall color was black and glossy but the pattern was a matte black, the design wasn't visible from far away. The swirls looked like they'd been made by twisting a bunch of rope together and stamping that onto the surface.

Right then, Daisuke yelped and backed away. He pointed at the clear plastic visor of the helmet.

"I just saw eyes there!"

"You dummy! Don't scare us like that! It was probably just your reflection."

Takumi gave Daisuke a look.

Daisuke internally admitted that Takumi may have had a point.

"You didn't have to call me a dummy for it!" Daisuke glared at Takumi.

Daisuke was annoyed that Takumi was the one calling him names when Takumi was normally the scaredy-cat.



“This part’s called the shield. It protects your face from the wind. You can’t keep your eyes open without this,” Seiji said as he looked over the helmet. Then he suddenly put it on.

“Sei, don’t do that. I bet it’s all dusty inside.”

Even though Takumi said that, Seiji was already wearing the helmet.

“How is it? Does it feel comfortable?” Daisuke asked.

Seiji gave him a thumbs-up. “It’s not bad.”

“Looking slick!” Daisuke and Takumi both said as they whacked the helmet a few times.

“Cut that out!” Seiji laughed and ran off, then Daisuke and Takumi chased after him. But then, after a while, Seiji grunted and pulled off the helmet.

“I don’t feel so good…”

Seiji’s shoulders heaved as he took deep breaths. He still held the helmet, and Takumi laughed.

“That’s why I tried to tell you not to put it on. Of course you’re gonna get sick after running around and breathing in the dust in that thing. You’re such a dummy,” Takumi said.

Seiji pouted as he tried to fight through a dizzy spell.

Daisuke also frowned because Takumi had started calling people dummies again. So Daisuke decided to say something that he knew would get on Takumi’s nerves.

“That might be the Headless Rider’s helmet.”

Takumi was a scaredy-cat, so he’d always run away whenever anyone started talking about monsters or urban legends.

“What’s the Headless Rider?”

Sure enough, Takumi tensed up.

When Daisuke realized Takumi had taken the bait, he took the helmet and tried to force it onto Takumi’s head. Seiji, who had been dizzy, seemed to find this funny and joined in to help Daisuke.

“Hey! Don’t! Stop!” Takumi shouted and tried to fight them off.

But he was much smaller and stood no chance when Daisuke and Seiji ganged up on him.

“Quit it! Guys! I said stop!” He turned bright red and shouted louder. Spit flew from his mouth.

Seiji pinned Takumi to the ground, and Daisuke put the helmet on the other boy’s head.

“Urgh!” Takumi groaned, and his expression scrunched up and contorted in the helmet.

Daisuke and Seiji roared with laughter when they saw Takumi wriggling around.

Takumi was dramatic about everything. He always laughed a lot louder than everyone else whenever someone told a joke in class, and he cried way harder than anyone when he heard anything sad.

The more dramatic Takumi was, the more they wanted to see his reactions.

“Ugh! Urgh!!!”

Takumi flailed around, trying to get the helmet off, but the two of them laughed and held him down. Suddenly, Takumi stopped struggling and went limp.

Daisuke and Seiji shared a look.

“Taku, we get it, okay? We’re done. That’s it,” Daisuke said with a laugh. He took his hands off Takumi, and Seiji also loosened his grip.

But Takumi stayed on the ground. He wasn’t getting up.

“Hey, we’re done. We’re not playing around anymore.” Daisuke peeked into the helmet.

The transparent shield reflected the clouds, so he couldn’t see Takumi’s eyes.

“Hey, Taku, we’re sorry. We shouldn’t have done that,” Daisuke admitted apologetically. “C’mon, get up.” He started to feel anxious and held out a hand to Takumi.

That was when the other boy finally got up and slowly pulled off the helmet. His hair was messy, and his eyes were empty as he stood there.

“Taku, you okay?”

Daisuke turned to Seiji. Maybe they’d gone too far.

But Seiji’s eyes were blank, too, and he didn’t react to Daisuke’s question.

“Sei?”

Worried, Daisuke looked at Seiji’s face, but then Takumi said in a monotone voice behind him, “I saw it. I saw the place of the black light. The place of the black light…”

“Huh?” Daisuke had no idea what was going on. “Hey,” he said to Takumi, but his friend only stared blankly like his mind was

somewhere else.

Takumi suddenly walked over to his bike and got on.

“Taku, wait!” Daisuke called out, but then he heard a thud behind him.

Seiji had fallen to his knees and was groaning like he was going to barf at any second.

Daisuke couldn’t leave Seiji on his own when his friend was sick. He ran back over to Seiji.

While he was helping Seiji stand, Takumi disappeared, heading into town.

Daisuke had no idea why Takumi was acting so strangely, but he needed to get Seiji back home before he did anything else.

They left the helmet there.

The two boys were on the way back into town.

Seiji pushed his bike as he walked. He was looking a lot better.

“I think you must’ve felt sick ’cause you breathed in the dust in the helmet,” Daisuke said cheerfully. Seiji just silently nodded.

There was still something on Daisuke’s mind.

There was a story about the woods that involved the Headless Rider.

Supposedly, a motorcycle rider was beheaded in an accident on the highway and now wandered the woods looking for their head. If you picked up that helmet, you would end up haunted by the Headless Rider and would be taken deep into the woods.

It was just an urban legend, though, of course, and the black helmet they found wasn’t necessarily the Headless Rider’s.

But Takumi had been acting strangely. Seiji, who was pushing his bike as he walked, also wasn’t his usual self.

“There’s no such thing as the Headless Rider.” He was only trying to tell himself that, but he unintentionally said it out loud. “Oh, sorry.”

Daisuke tried to smile and brush it off, but Seiji only nodded and didn’t say a word.

The smile didn’t reach Daisuke’s eyes.

The next day.

Daisuke had gone to school like always, but Seiji and Takumi hadn't shown up.

He'd messaged them on his phone while at school, and Seiji had just told him that he had a cold.

But he didn't get any replies from Takumi.

Right after school, Daisuke called Takumi's house.

"Thanks for asking about him. He has a fever, but it seems like a cold," Takumi's mom had said.

Daisuke still worried as he headed home. He listlessly pedaled his bike.

He looked up at the clouds, just like the day before. He remembered the clouds reflecting on the visor of the helmet when Takumi had been wearing it.

Maybe it really had been the Headless Rider's?

Suddenly, a boy in a red hood who had a dog with him called out to him, "Hey, you."

Daisuke was brought out of his musing and hit the brakes.

"Have you seen a black helmet anywhere?" the boy asked. "It has a swirl pattern on it."

Daisuke was speechless.

How did this boy know about the black helmet?

The boy's face under the red hood was pale. He had a straight nose.

He was probably around the same age as Daisuke.

But Daisuke was weirded out in a way he couldn't describe. The fact that the dog at the boy's feet was wearing a yellow hood and kept its head down creeped him out even more.

Daisuke shook his head and then pedaled away as fast as he could.

Later that day.

"Hey, did you hear a motorcycle just now?"

Once Daisuke was home and the sun had set, Seiji called him.

According to Seiji, he'd been hearing what sounded like a motorcycle getting closer and closer.

"Wouldn't your folks hear it, too, then?"

"They think I'm hearing things. They don't believe me. You can't hear it, either, can you, Dai?"

For a moment, Daisuke wasn't sure whether it would be better to lie and say he could. But instead, all he could say was the truth.

"No…"

On the other end of the phone, Seiji sounded resigned. "Then it must be because I put on the helmet."

But if it was because of the helmet, then Takumi would be hearing it, too.

"Have you tried calling Taku?"

"Yeah. But he's got a fever, and they said he's sleeping."

"They told me the same thing."

Daisuke tried to think of how he could help his friends. Then he remembered Takumi's comment from the day before.

"Do you remember what Taku said? *'I saw it. I saw the place of the black light. The place of the black light…'* or whatever it was? Do you think that could be…?"

Then Daisuke heard Seiji let out a little cry. "Ah! It sounds like the motorcycle stopped outside!"

"Huh? What do you mean by *stopped*? What's going on?"

Seiji didn't answer. All Daisuke could hear was his friend's ragged breathing.

Daisuke started to get nervous. "Sei?! Sei?!" he yelled, but right at that moment, he heard something.

"Stop! No! Don't!"

After Seiji's shouts, the call disconnected.

Oh no!

Daisuke called Seiji's landline in a panic.

His friend's mom picked up.

"Oh my. That's odd. I thought he was in his room. I wonder if he went to the corner store."

She sounded completely unconcerned.

Daisuke knew she wouldn't believe it if he told her Seiji had been kidnapped. After hanging up, Daisuke thought for a moment, then called Takumi's landline.

He didn't think Takumi would answer the phone.

Takumi's mom, who seemed frantic, picked up, saying, "Takumi? Taku, is that you?"

"No, it's Kagaya. Daisuke Kagaya."

“Oh, Dai,” Takumi’s mom said. She didn’t hide her anxiety. “Takumi’s disappeared.”

“He has?”

“He was sleeping, with a fever of one hundred and four. But now I can’t find him anywhere at home! Dai, were you with him yesterday? Do you know what happened?”

“N-no… I’m not sure, but I’ll come over there right now.”

Daisuke couldn’t tell her the truth, but he hung up the phone and rushed out of the house.

Takumi’s house was only five minutes away by bike.

I made Taku put on the helmet even though he didn’t want to.

That thought kept running through his head.

And I always use him when it’s convenient for me. I only invited him the other day because Sei could beat him at games…

That thought also wouldn’t leave his mind.

When he got there, Takumi’s mom was nervously looking around outside.

“Ma’am!”

“Dai…”

She told him that Takumi had gone straight to bed without a word after getting home the day before.

“Then he hasn’t said anything since yesterday?”

“Well, he was rambling. He said he could hear a motorcycle and that he didn’t take *it*. He said he would take a helmet to the place with the black light and asked someone to forgive him. It was all very strange.”

“He’s taking the helmet to the place with the black light…?”

Someone said from behind Daisuke, “It’s no use, honey. No one’s seen him.” It was Takumi’s dad. He must have been searching the neighborhood.

“Then all we can do is call the police.”

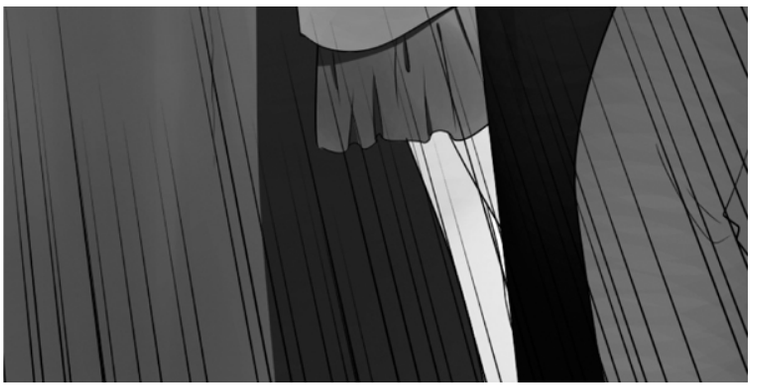
Takumi’s dad’s shoulders slumped, and his mother started to cry.

Daisuke felt his chest seize up.

I need to go save them.

* * *





He hopped onto his bike and headed straight for the forest.

He peddled as hard as he could.
He gripped the bike handles tight.

If it was real… If the urban legend was actually real, then…

The Headless Rider took people deep into the woods.
But he wasn't sure that if he put the helmet back where it was before, the Headless Rider would forgive them. He needed to put it where "the place of the black light" was, like Takumi had said. If he did that, then both of his friends would be fine.
But he had to put on the helmet to do it. That was his only option. He had to put it on and find the place of the black light.

Daisuke raced to the woods on his bike. He'd never ridden so fast before.
His bike's light shone straight ahead as he sped down the road that went through the woods.
At this time of night, no cars were on the road.
His bike's chain started to squeal. But he kept peddling. The wind made his sweat trickle across his face. His shirt started to cling to him.

Still, he kept peddling.
He kept going and going and going.

Eventually, Daisuke pulled on both handles, braking hard. His front wheel made a cloud of dust erupt as he stopped.
Dripping with sweat, Daisuke peered into the darkness.
I'm pretty sure it was around here.
The streetlights to the side of the road faintly illuminated the woods.
It must have been over there.
He finally caught sight of the black helmet in the darkness.
"There it is!"
Daisuke threw aside his bike and ran to it.

He hoped that once he put on the helmet, he would be able to figure out where to return it to.

Daisuke quickly picked it up off the ground, but then he remembered how Seiji and Takumi had acted after they'd worn the helmet.

If I put this on, then I might start acting weird, too.

His hands began to tremble as he held the helmet.

But if I don't put it on, I might not be able to save them.

Daisuke took a deep breath.

Then he put on the helmet.

He smelled a mixture of dust and mold inside it.

The transparent visor was cloudy from grime and scratches. He could see blurry rings of light dotting the road through the forest.

But nothing happened.

He started to feel nervous.

Was it not going to do anything to him even after such strange things had happened to Seiji and Takumi? Did the Headless Rider choose its victims? Or maybe he just didn't have the ability to sense something from it?

At this rate, he wouldn't be able to save his friends.

What do I do now?!

But the moment he thought that, he heard something…

Vroooom.

The wind seemed to groan.

Vroooooom, vrooom.

Then it changed.

The familiar woods started to warp.

Gwooom! Gwooowooom!

He heard a low sound like a whirlwind from inside the helmet.

He started to feel pain and got dizzy. He couldn't breathe!

When he was young, Daisuke had almost drowned. He remembered how his mind had almost felt like it was freezing over back then.

A feeling a hundred times worse than that flooded him.

In his mind, he screamed. He couldn't stand it. He needed to pull off the helmet.

At this rate, he would die!

Daisuke put his hands on the helmet…

But then…

"H-h-h— H-help! Helllp!"

…he thought he heard Takumi or Seiji.

He turned toward the voices.

"H-h-helllp!"

Was it Seiji? Or Takumi? He couldn't tell who it was, but he knew it was one of them.

"Helllp! Help me!"

He peered out with the helmet still on his head.

He saw a strange light nearby.

The light flickered as though it was wriggling.

"Taku! Sei?!"

They wouldn't be able to hear him when he was shouting in the helmet. After making sure he knew where the black light was, he pulled off the helmet.

"Takuuuu! Seiii!" Daisuke screamed so hard that his voice cracked.

Then he looked at the spot where he'd seen the black light. He saw a thick tree trunk faintly illuminated by the full moon. That was where the strange light had been wriggling.

"I'm going to bring the helmet! I'm coming right now!"

Daisuke put the helmet under his arm and started to run.

But at that moment…

"Wait!" He heard a boy call out from behind him.

Daisuke turned and saw the boy in the red hood standing there. The dog in the yellow hood was with him.

"You… I saw you earlier?"

The boy ignored Daisuke's question. Instead, he warned Daisuke in a cold tone, "You shouldn't go any deeper into the woods."

"Who are you?! *What* are you?!" Daisuke asked.

"You shouldn't go any deeper."

The boy didn't answer Daisuke's questions. He just kept repeating the same thing.

"Why not?! I need to go help my friends!"

"If you go any deeper, you won't make it back."

"What does that mean?!"

"The Headless Rider got lots of power from taking your friends away. Even if *I* entered the woods, I probably wouldn't be able to escape."

Daisuke's courage wavered after hearing that.

"But Taku and Sei are…"

Suddenly, the dog that had been looking down until that moment turned its head up and said, "Hey, Fushigi, can't ya help the kid?"

The dog had talked.





“Wh-what are *you*?!” Daisuke said to the dog this time.

“Who cares about that right now?! Don’t ya wanna save your friends?” Jimmy said, then looked up at Fushigi. “We’ve been up against other baddies we shouldn’t have been able to beat. But we still managed.”

Fushigi didn’t say anything to Jimmy and took a step toward Daisuke.

“I was planning on coming back once things settled down. Wait for me until then.”

“W-wait how long exactly?!” Daisuke glared at Fushigi, but it seemed even Fushigi wasn’t sure when he would be back. “By then Taku and Sei might end up…,” Daisuke said, then gazed into the deep, dark woods. Eventually, he came to a decision and yelled, “Taku! Sei! I’m coming to save you!”

Daisuke ran into the trees with the helmet in his arms. Fushigi and Jimmy watched as the boy was swallowed up by the darkness. The wind rustled through the leaves.

Vrooom! Vrooom! Brum, brum, brum, brum!

They could hear the faint roar of a motorcycle in the forest.

Jimmy anxiously looked up at Fushigi, but the hood cast a shadow over the boy’s face, so Jimmy couldn’t see it.

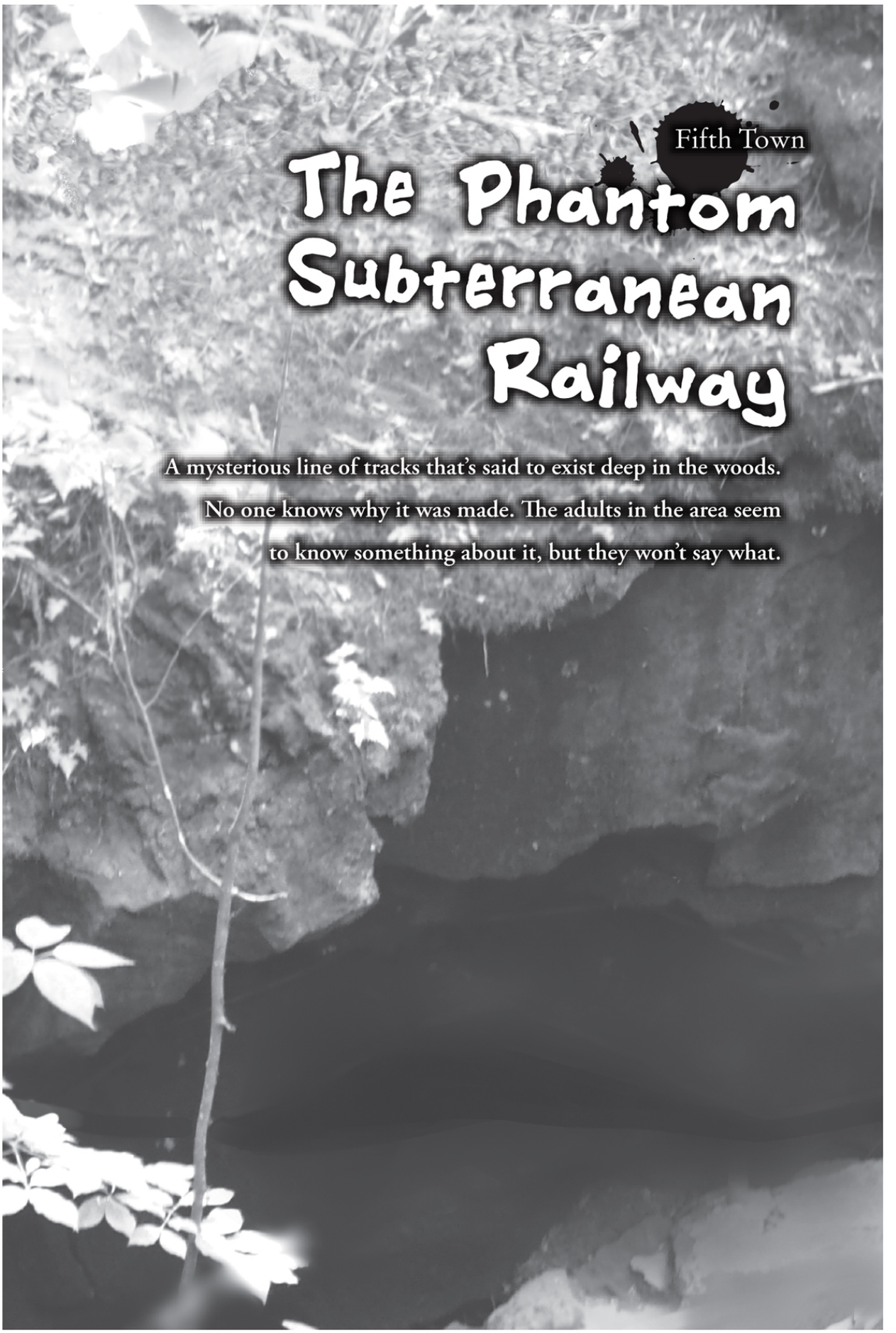
“What’ll happen to him?” Jimmy asked.

Fushigi said nothing at first.

Finally, he muttered, “Let’s go,” then started walking away.

“Hey!” Jimmy called out as he ran after Fushigi. He glanced back at the woods only once.

The wind had already died down, the trees were still, and all was silent.


Fifth Town
The Phantom Subterranean Railway
A mysterious line of tracks that's said to exist deep in the woods. No one knows why it was made. The adults in the area seem to know something about it, but they won't say what.

“I think it’s somewhere around here.”

Youichi Tanabe and his little brother, Youji, were walking through the woods.

Youichi was in the fifth grade, and Youji was in the second grade. It was their summer break, and they had come to the countryside. Since they normally lived in the city, the little town surrounded by mountains and nature was packed with new and fun things to do.

An hour before, after Youichi had finished his lunch, he’d been in the living room flipping through a magazine left behind by the uncle who lived with their grandparents.

Then he’d stopped on a specific page. It featured all sorts of urban legends, complete with pictures.

“Look, Youichi, it even has the otter cookies,” exclaimed Youji, who was next to him looking at the pictures.

Youji was eating an otter cookie right at that moment, so he noticed the one in the magazine right away.

“Oh, the rare otter. I’ve heard of that one.”

The magazine also had articles about The Wriggler, Little Nanoka, and The Golden Pay Phone. He’d heard about most of them at least once, and all the articles came with photos.

“Do you think the pictures are real?”

“Dunno. Maybe.”

Youichi was dubious as he turned the page, but then he gasped. At the center of the page was a picture of a mountain entrance and a sign. Youichi had seen them before.

“Isn’t this the sign for the mountain road in this town?”

A fox and tanuki were painted at the top of the sign.

Youichi and Youji had seen the sign at the base of the mountain when they’d gone to the nature park.

“Yeah, that’s the same marking.”

Youji seemed to remember it, too.

The article was about The Phantom Subterranean Railway in the mountain. Supposedly, deep in the mountain was a cave with

a mysterious line of tracks, but no one knew who had made it.

The article didn't show photos of the railway, but it did show the entrance to the cave.

"The Phantom Subterranean Railway?"

"Do you think it's real?"

"I'm not sure, but I'd like to go check it out," Youichi said, and Youji replied, "Me too."

Then their uncle came over to see what they were up to. Youichi showed him the magazine and told the man he wanted to go there.

"The Phantom Subterranean Railway…?"

Their uncle looked at the picture of the cave and scowled.

"That's obviously fake," he said, and then he laughed.

"And it doesn't even say where this mountain is," their uncle added.

"But the sign has a fox and a tanuki on it. It has to be that mountain near here."

"These kinds of signs are everywhere."

His uncle took the magazine out of Youichi's hands.

"Those mountains are filled with dangerous beasts, so you'd better not wander into them."

"Beasts?"

"Uh, things like wild boars and bears."

"Really?"

"Yeah," his uncle said. "And, uh, lots of people get hurt. So you stay away from there."

He put the magazine on top of some shelves and left the room.

"I didn't know the mountain was so dangerous…" Youichi had never seen a boar or a bear in real life, but he knew he didn't want to come across one. "Looks like we should avoid the mountains, then," Youichi said.

"I want to go…," Youji said.

Youji was holding the magazine and staring at the picture.

"When did you get that?"

He was sure that their uncle had put it all the way on the top shelf. Youji wouldn't have been able to reach it.

"I've had the magazine the whole time," Youji said with a smile.

Youichi had no idea what that meant. He tilted his head, but Youji didn't explain.

"You don't, Youichi?"

"What?"

"Don't you want to see the Phantom Subterranean Railway?"

Youichi was drawn to the picture in the magazine Youji held. For some reason, he felt the same way his brother did.

"I…want to go, too…," Youichi murmured.

Youji smiled wider.

"See?"

"But, Youji, our uncle said it's dangerous because of the boars and bears."

"It'll be fine. The sign says it's a fun hiking route. Plus, there's that park nearby, and if it was really dangerous, we wouldn't be allowed to play there."

"That makes sense," Youichi said and nodded.

Lots of adults had passed by the park, but none of them had said it was dangerous because of wild animals.

The local kids played there, too. He'd even seen kids playing tag in the mountain area.

"Maybe Uncle was even trying to hide the Phantom Subterranean Railway from us because he didn't want us to check it out."

"Why would he do that?"

"Maybe it's an urban legend that only the locals are supposed to know."

"Only the locals?"

Sometimes the neighborhood kids didn't want to show him their favorite places. If everyone went to the shops that served good food or to the fields with pretty flowers, then the locals wouldn't be able to enjoy those places.

"I see. So that's why Uncle is keeping it a secret."

Youichi believed his brother.

The magazine even told them exactly how to get to the cave. If they followed those instructions, then it'd be easy to get there.

"But Uncle will probably figure it out if we take the magazine with us…"

Youichi was worried about it, but Youji just grinned.

"He won't if we do this." Youji tore out the page on the railway and shut the magazine. "If we put this on the top shelf, he won't notice."

"You're right. You're so smart, Youji!"

The two of them threw the magazine onto the top shelf and stuffed their backpacks with snacks and drinks before heading to the mountain.



They hiked the mountain using the magazine page as a guide.

After walking twenty minutes along the hiking route, they came across a sign that said NO LITTERING.

A small trail split off from the hiking route at that point.

After they walked ten minutes along that path, the forest spread out in front of them, and beyond that, there was a rocky area.

The cave would be tucked away in a corner of these big rocks.

"I think it's somewhere around here."

And that was where they were now.

Youichi scanned the rocky area as he walked through the woods. They hadn't seen any of the boars or bears their uncle had mentioned so far. So that must have been a lie.

"Youichi, look!" Youji shouted and pointed into the woods.

Youichi looked over and saw more rocks.

In a corner, he spotted the entrance to a cave.

"That's it!"

"Yeah!"

They raced to the cave's entrance.

Then they noticed that someone was standing beside it.



It was Fushigi.

Jimmy was next to him, too.

Youichi and Youji weren't sure what to do, since someone was already there ahead of them, but they approached Fushigi and Jimmy.

"Did you see the magazine, too?" Youichi asked.

Instead of Fushigi answering, Jimmy replied, "What magazine?"

"Did the dog just—?!"

Jimmy looked up at the two surprised boys and then at the scrap of magazine they held.

"What is that?" he asked.

"I-it's a magazine article about the Phantom Subterranean Railway…"

"What?!" Jimmy hopped up and grabbed the magazine page with his front paws, then started reading the article. "What's this picture doing here…?"

He suddenly scowled.

"What's wrong, Jimmy?"

"Fushigi, I took this picture!"

Fushigi crouched and examined the article Jimmy was holding.

"I dropped the camera I used to take this shot when I was tryin' to get a picture of Himitsu. So it shouldn't be in a magazine."

"Someone might have picked up your camera."

"Right. Then they must've sent in the photos for the magazine. Crud! I can't believe someone would do that." Jimmy was upset, but then he looked over at Youichi and Youji, who were cowering. "Oh, I took this shot while I was still a cameraman. Was supposed to be for an urban legend article. Well, now *I'm* the urban legend, seeing as how I'm a human-faced dog."

Jimmy grinned, but Youichi and Youji didn't think it was funny.

"Wh-who are you two…?"

"We're collectin' curses connected to urban legends. We just so happened to pass by, and then I remembered this place, so we made a pit stop."

"You're collecting curses?"

This was making less and less sense.

Fushigi ignored them and stood up. He stared right at the cave. The entrance was about two yards high and just about as wide. The walls were rugged and rocky, but the ground was pretty flat,

so it was easy to walk through. Some light also filtered into the cave. It seemed like there were some holes in the ceiling, so they could faintly see deeper inside.

“It does feel like there could be an urban legend in there.”

“Thought so. I didn’t completely believe it when I was gettin’ my shot, so I didn’t go in, but looks like comin’ here was the right thing to do!”

Jimmy was starting to get worked up, but Fushigi turned slightly to look at Youichi and Youji.

“Don’t follow us,” he said. “You’ll only be a nuisance.”

“A-a nuisance?!”

“Fushigi, you’ve gotta tell ’em that it’s dangerous or somethin’ like that. Don’t be so harsh.”

But Fushigi showed no sign of caring and headed toward the cave on his own.

“What’re you all doing here?”

Suddenly, they heard the voice of another person.

A middle-aged man wearing a backpack was standing in the shade near the rocky area.

“Who’re you?” Jimmy asked. The man didn’t seem surprised by him.

“Are you a local?” Youichi asked.

The man gave him a small nod.

“Do you want to go in there?” the man asked.

“Y-yeah.”

“Then how about I show you around? I know a lot about this cave.”

“You do?” Fushigi tilted his head when he heard that.

“Hey, whaddaya mean? You can’t take kids into a dangerous cave like that!”

“It’s not dangerous. There’s an amazing secret inside this cave.” The man focused his attention on Youichi and Youji. “Would you like to go in?”

“But…” Youichi looked at the entrance to the cave and gulped.

Just like Jimmy said, it seemed dangerous. But then Youji ran over to the man.

“Take us in, mister!”

“Youji!”

“If you’re scared, you can go home, Youichi. I wanna go in and find out the secret!”

“Let’s go,” Youji told the man, and then they headed into the cave.

“You guys shouldn’t go in there!” Jimmy yelled, but Youji wouldn’t stop.

Youichi wasn’t sure what to do. But he couldn’t leave his little brother behind.

“Wait, Youji!” Youichi ran in after them.

“Hey! We told ya it’s dangerous! Fushigi, ya gotta warn ’em, too!”

As Jimmy grumbled, Fushigi watched Youichi disappear into the cave.

“There goes the nuisance. Let’s try again another day,” Fushigi said as he tried to leave.

“Hey, wait right there!” Jimmy yelled. “This is how ya always are.”

He looked upset.

“Yer the only one who can collect the urban legend curses. Are ya really okay with those siblings gettin’ into danger ’cause of the urban legend?”

“Siblings…”

Fushigi glanced back at the cave.

“C’mon, let’s get goin’!” Jimmy grabbed the hem of Fushigi’s pant leg in his mouth and tugged him toward the cave. Fushigi hesitated for a moment, then pulled his leg away from Jimmy. “Fushigi!” Jimmy looked up.

“All right already. You don’t need to bite my pant leg.”



Once they entered the cave, they found Youichi standing near the entrance.

“Where’d your little brother go?”

“I’m not sure. I can’t find him anywhere.”

“Then he must’ve gone farther in with the man.”

“What?!” Youichi exclaimed.

“Don’t ya worry. We’ll find him together!”

“Uh, th-thanks!”

The three of them headed deeper into the cave.

It was pretty dark in the cave and damp, and there were also puddles all over the ground.

They couldn't find a sign of Youji anywhere.

Youichi started to panic more and more. He took deep breaths and tried calling Youji's name.

"Don't make any loud noises," Fushigi warned him in a whisper.

"Why not?"

"There's…something in this cave." Fushigi stared deeper in.

"What is it?" Jimmy asked.

"I'm not sure. But it's something scary."

Youichi shuddered. Still, he couldn't leave Youji behind.

That means I really need to save him!

Youichi followed Fushigi and Jimmy farther into the dark.

Clunk.

Youichi's foot hit something.

The cave had opened up at some point, and he saw rail tracks in front of him.

"Is this…?"

"It's the Phantom Subterranean Railway! So it *was* real!" Jimmy exclaimed.

The tracks were rusted all over. They stretched out toward a twisty part of the cave deeper in.

"Say, why do ya think there's a track around here in the first place?" Jimmy wondered out loud. Youichi looked at Fushigi.

"Do you think this track is what the man was talking abou—?"

Right then, they heard a voice echo from the depths of the cave.

"Helllp!"

"That's Youji!"

Youichi started to run.

"Wait!"

Fushigi and Jimmy hurried after him.

Clang. Clang. Clang. Clang. Clang.

They heard the dull sound of banging metal deep inside the cave.

“What’s that sound?”

“That’s…”

Fushigi scowled. They ran through the winding tunnels and eventually reached a large space. The path split into three, and each direction had its own rail tracks.

“What?! Where are we supposed to go?!”

As Youichi panicked, Fushigi noticed something had been dropped to the right of the tracks.

“Wait, is that…?”

Youichi also looked at the ground.

“Oh! It’s an otter cookie!”

It was a cookie with an otter design on it.

“What’s that doing here?”

“That might be Youji’s!”

He’d seen Youji stuffing some cookies into his backpack. Another cookie was dropped a little farther away. Jimmy ran over to check and saw it was where the tracks split into two.

“There’s a cookie on the left track this time!”

“I see. He left a trail to show which way he went.”

“Youji!”

They followed the trail of cookies to Youji.

The farther they went, the more complex the cave became.

It was like a maze. Sometimes, instead of a fork or three paths, the route would be split into four or five paths. And all of them would have rail tracks.

They kept running and following the cookies. Then suddenly, thirty minutes later, a light appeared in front of them.

“What is that?!” Youichi shouted before he could stop himself. Fushigi lifted his hand to stop him.

“Keep quiet. Look over there.”

There was a large cavern up ahead.

Torches dotted the walls and lit up the space.

Lots of holes were along the walls, and each one had its own tracks.

At the center of the large cavern was a circular track that all the tracks were connected to.

"When ya said there was something in the cave…did ya mean *them*?" Jimmy said as he took in the round track.

He was looking at a green monster that was about three yards long.

It looked slippery like a slug. The creature had three pairs of arms, but it had no legs. Instead, it wriggled along the ground to move. And it wasn't just one creature.

In the gigantic space, there were so many monsters, they couldn't even count them.

Clang. Clang. Clang. Clang. Clang.

They heard another dull metallic sound come from a hole to the side.

They leaned out and saw a trolley fly out of the hole. One of the green monsters was riding in the trolley.

"I thought so. Those monsters built the tracks."

"What are those things?" Jimmy asked.

"I'm not sure. No one knows why they live in caves or why they make railways. But they put down a lot of track. I think they've been living here for a while."

Youichi gasped.



“Maybe my uncle knows about them.”

He told Fushigi and Jimmy about how his uncle had lied about there being boars and bears to keep him from going to the cave.

“I see. Some people have probably wandered into this cave out of curiosity.”

“So he was just worried about us…”

Now that Youichi knew what his uncle had been trying to do, he felt really guilty about ignoring the warning.

“Where’s my brother? Where did Youji go?”

Youichi needed to get himself and his brother out of the cave as soon as possible.

Then Fushigi pointed at something.

“Over there.”

Youichi looked over and saw a parked trolley on the circular track. Youji was inside it.

Lots of green monsters were wriggling around near him.

“Youji!”

“What’re they doin’?!”

“I think…” Fushigi stared at the monsters.

“…They capture the people who wander into the cave and eat them.”

“Eat them?!” Youichi shuddered. Then he noticed a little pile next to him.

The pile seemed to be made up of lots of small white things.

“Is that…? Y-Youji!” Youichi suddenly ran out of the hole they were in. “Youji, I’m going to save you!”

“Hey, ya can’t go over there!”

Youichi ignored Jimmy and ran to Youji.

“Fushigi, at this rate, he’s gonna get captured, too! Hurry up and collect the mark!”

“Right.” Fushigi pulled out his red notebook and jumped out from the hole and into the cavern.

Meanwile, Youichi was headed for Youji. But then the green monsters started to attack him.

“Youichi!” Youji called out.

“I’m going to save you!”

Each of the green monsters reached out to him with six slimy arms, and together they cornered Youichi.

Youichi grabbed a rock on the ground and threw it at the monsters.

But it didn't hurt them at all, and they just wriggled their large slimy bodies and groaned. They were getting even closer to Youichi.

"No…"

"Youichi!"

Their arms were all stretching out to grab Youichi.

"Cut that out!"

Then Jimmy dashed in.

The monsters turned to look at Jimmy.

"C'mon, over there! Try and get me!"

Jimmy hopped up and down.

The monsters started going after Jimmy instead.

"All right! Now go and help your little brother!" Jimmy yelled at Youichi once the boy could get away from the monsters.

"Y-yeah! Youji, over here!"

"Youichi!"

Youichi ran over to Youji and pulled him out of the trolley.

But then one of the monsters nearby noticed them.

Skreeeee!

It angrily bellowed, and its call echoed throughout the whole cave.

Then all the monsters in the cavern turned to look at Youichi and his brother.

Skree! Skreeee!

The monsters screeched as they raced toward Youichi and Youji.

"Oh no! Fushigi, hurry it up!"

“I know, I know.” Fushigi was standing near the tracks on the opposite side of the cavern. “So this is it…”

Fushigi looked at a large boulder in front of him.

But there wasn’t a mark there.

“Fushigi, did ya find the mark?!”

“I did. It looks like the monsters were hiding it,” Fushigi said, and then he held the open notebook toward the boulder. He said some words.

“Illuminate the curse. Transcribe the curse. Project.”

A sudden gust of wind blew and fluttered Fushigi’s red hood. The rock started to clatter and shake. In that moment, a loud noise came from the boulder, and it broke into many tiny pieces.

Under what remained of the boulder, there was a curse mark.

Fushigi held the notebook up to the mark and said a spell.

“Resolve.”

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

At the same time, all the green monsters disappeared.

Youichi and Youji were saved right in the nick of time.



Only the railways made by the monsters were left behind in the cave.

Once Youichi and Youji were outside, they gathered fallen tree branches and large rocks, then did what they could to block the entrance to the cave.

Even though the green monsters were gone, there was no way to be sure they wouldn't come back.

"I can't believe the photo I took put these kids in danger," Jimmy said, seeming guilty. He was helping block off the cave, too.

Eventually, the cave entrance was closed up enough that no one could get into it again.

"Now people who come by out of curiosity will go home instead of exploring it."

"Yeah."

Youichi and Youji were both relieved, but then they remembered something.

"I wonder who that guy was, though?"

After the man had led Youji into the cave and the monsters' den, he had disappeared.

"Maybe he was captured by the monsters, too?" Youji said, but Fushigi corrected him.

"I don't think he can be captured. Not anymore."

"What do you mean by that?"

At that moment, they realized someone was standing at the entrance to the cave.

It was the middle-aged man from earlier. He glared at them all bitterly. Then he spoke.

"I wish…you had ended up like me… I wanted to live longer… But…but then… Gaaah! Darn it! Curse youuu!"

He yelled and then disappeared.

Youichi and Youji cried out in surprise.

"Fushigi, what was that?" Jimmy seemed shaken up.

"I told you he couldn't get captured again," Fushigi said. "He must be the ghost of someone who wandered into the cave and was eaten. He wanted you to join him, so he lured you in."

“What…?”
Youichi and Youji both shuddered.
“Just like how there are bad people, there are also bad spirits.”
The sun was setting and turning the ground red.
They heard the sad cries of the evening cicadas in the woods.

Chirr, chirr, chirr…

To Youichi and Youji, it sounded like the heartbreaking cries of the people who had been eaten by the monsters.

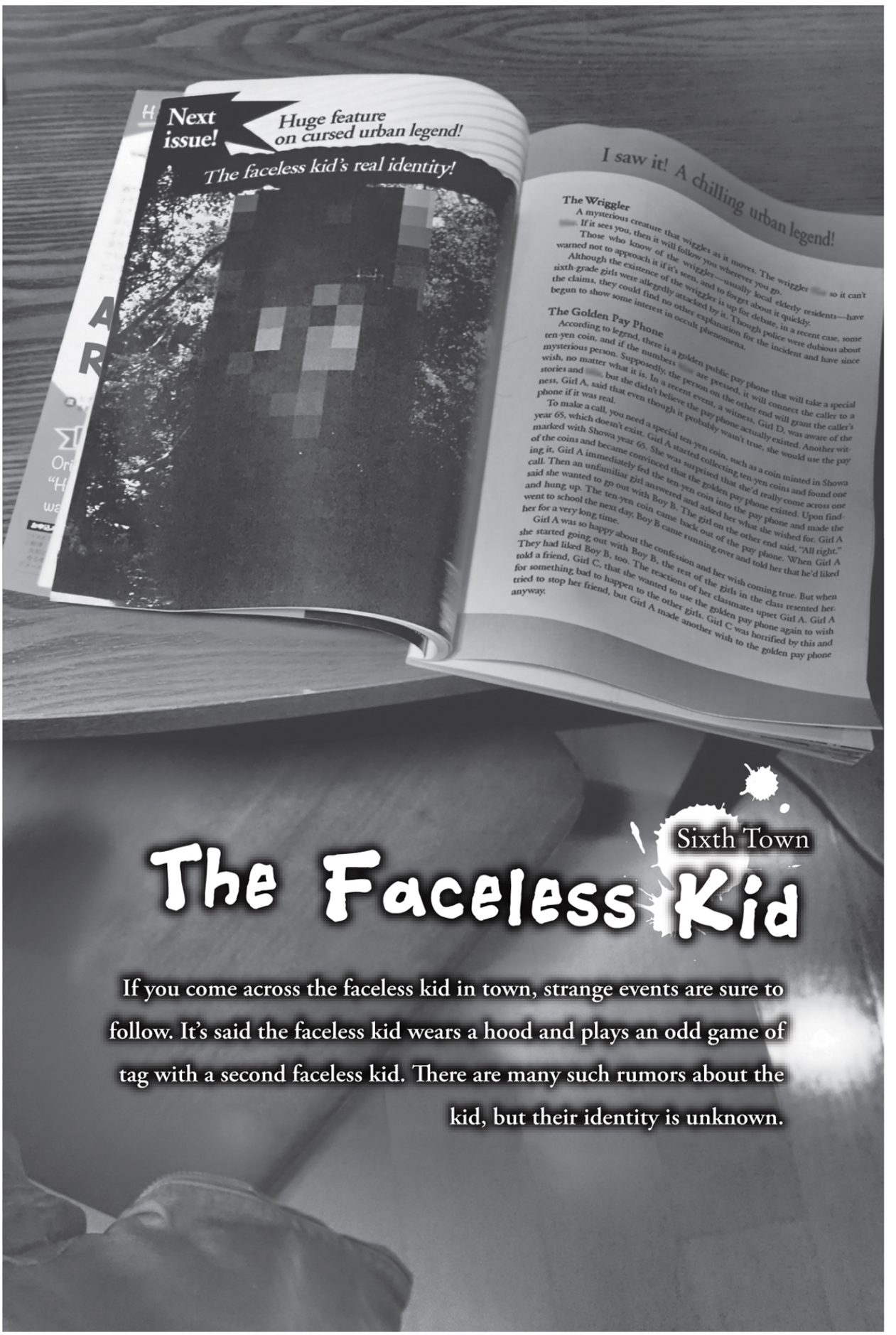
The Faceless Kid Has a *Twin!*

What's their connection to the village that disappeared *without* a trace?!

Recently, a new urban legend has been making the rounds: The Faceless Kid. Our editorial department took on the challenge of investigating the truth behind the legend, and some interesting details have been uncovered.

Documents have chronicled the case of an entire village of people disappearing from a valley in the late 1920s or early 1930s. After receiving torrential rain that continued unabated, the village fell to old customs and offered a human sacrifice. A pair of twins was selected. The boy and the girl were called gods because they supposedly had unexplainable abilities, so the village believed they would be effective sacrifices. However, contrary to expectations, this only brought them catastrophe. Immediately after the sacrificial ritual, all the inhabitants in the village disappeared without a trace. Only one person survived the affair, but it seems the child was one of the twins' siblings.

(Draft of a certain magazine article)



Sixth Town

The Faceless Kid

If you come across the faceless kid in town, strange events are sure to follow. It's said the faceless kid wears a hood and plays an odd game of tag with a second faceless kid. There are many such rumors about the kid, but their identity is unknown.

At the side of a road, Jimmy was using his stubby front legs to turn the pages of a magazine.

They'd gotten the magazine from Youichi and Youji after visiting the Phantom Subterranean Railway.

After that, Jimmy had wanted to read the rest of the magazine and not just the torn-out page, so the two brothers had gone home and retrieved the rest of the magazine for him.

Jimmy was worried that their uncle would find out, but Youichi and Youji had grinned and told him their uncle would have forgotten about it by then.

The magazine had articles about The Wriggler, Little Nanoka, The Golden Pay Phone, and other urban legends.

He saw a lot of pictures that he had taken himself next to the articles.

But all of them were credited as PHOTOGRAPHY: TAKAAKI SAITOU.

That was the junior cameraman Jimmy had trained at the weekly magazine.

So he was the one who picked up my camera. He musta gone over to the grove of trees where I got turned into the human-faced dog. Then he took credit for all my shots…, Jimmy thought as he tried to sit cross-legged and cross his arms, just like he had when he used to be human.

Thump!

But he was too short and ended up flopping over instead.

"Ouchie, ouch, ouch!"

He remembered when he'd gone back to the publisher where he used to work months ago to get help after being turned into the human-faced dog. He'd asked Saitou for help.

He had run over to Saitou, thinking he was saved. But then Saitou and another coworker who was walking with him had said something like this:

“Hey, remember our coworker who went out to take pictures? He hasn’t come back yet, huh?”

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

Then Saitou had laughed.

Thump!

“Ouchie, ouch, ouch!”

Jimmy fell over again as he reminisced about the past.

He was very upset.

So the magazine’s still running even without me, huh…? But they’re doing it all with the shots I took!

“Hmph!” he snorted, then smiled.

Jimmy read the special-edition magazine from cover to cover. Then he finally got to the last page, which was half-pixelated. It was the picture of the faceless kid that Jimmy had taken right before he’d been turned into the human-faced dog. In other words, it was a picture of Himitsu Senno.

There were pixels all over the picture of Himitsu that he’d taken at the grove of trees.

NEXT ISSUE: HUGE FEATURE ON CURSED URBAN LEGEND! THE FACELESS KID’S REAL IDENTITY!

It had a huge caption.

That was very much the magazine’s style. They were trying to play on the readers’ emotions to get them to buy the next issue.

Then Jimmy felt like someone was behind him and turned around.

Fushigi was peeking at the magazine over Jimmy’s head.

“Don’t scare me like that!”

“Isn’t this the picture you took? We should go straight to the editorial department.”

“What’s the point of going to the editorial department? I’m the human-faced dog Jimmy now, not a cameraman. What’s the use?”

“You can’t see it?” Fushigi said.

“Huh? See what?”

“The curse mark. I can see a hazy version of it on this magazine.”

“Huh?”

“I thought it was strange. Remember how Youichi and Youji said they normally wouldn’t have gone looking for the cave if their uncle told them not to?”

“Yeah, I guess they did say something like that.”

“There’s something about this magazine that deceives people.”

“What does that mean?”

“I’m not completely sure, either, but they’re making another special feature, right? If we don’t do anything and let them sell the next issue, then the people who buy the magazine will end up cursed.”

“So then horrors will spread all over the country all at once is what you mean? There’ll be Teke Tekes and Women in the Gaps all over the place, and everybody’ll have to eat ormway-meat Salisbury steak. Is that what you’re sayin’…?”

“It’ll be chaos.”

Jimmy and Fushigi hurried to the publisher.

They reached the worn-down, grimy building at night. The publisher Jimmy used to work for was on the fourth floor. They looked up at the building and immediately felt like something was wrong.

“Do you feel it?” Fushigi asked the dog wearing a yellow hood at his feet.

“Yep, somethin’ real bad’s all over this building.”

Jimmy was sniffing the air.

I’m actin’ more like a regular dog than like a human-faced dog.

Jimmy realized he was becoming more canine-like.

But at the moment, that wasn’t as important as what they were doing.

Since it was night, the front entrance was closed. If they wanted to get in through the back, they would need to pass by the security room. It would be difficult for a kid in a red hood with a dog to walk in unnoticed.

But then a medium-sized truck passed by and signaled with its blinkers that it was going into the underground garage.

“Over here!” Jimmy whispered to Fushigi before running beside the truck.

They hid behind the vehicle, which slowly drove into the parking garage.

Once inside, they headed down a gloomy hallway from the garage.

Some of the fluorescent lights on the ceiling had been taken down to save on electricity costs.

Fushigi and Jimmy creeped along the deserted hallway, which was filled with furniture and cool from the air-conditioning. They walked stealthily so their feet wouldn't make a sound.

"There's a stairway comin' up."

This time, Jimmy was leading Fushigi instead of the other way around.

Eventually, they got to the foot of the stairs. Suddenly, Jimmy heard a sharp metallic sound. His head began to hurt, and he frowned as he looked up at Fushigi, who was behind him.

It seemed like the boy in the red hood hadn't felt anything.

"Are you okay, Fushigi?"

"Yeah. But that sound must have been *her*." Fushigi braced himself. "Jimmy, look away!"

"Huh? Why?"

"Just lower your eyes!"

Jimmy looked down, just like Fushigi told him to.

Then something white in a human shape appeared in the gloomy hallway.

"It's a wriggler! If you look at it even once, it'll chase you until something terrible happens to you. You're half-human, so you can't look at it! I'll deal with it! Hurry up and get to the editorial department!"

"Okay! I'm countin' on you!"

Jimmy kept his eyes down as he ran up the stairs.

Left alone, Fushigi stared fearlessly at the wriggler.

The white human-shaped monster wriggled as it approached Fushigi.

Fushigi pulled his red notebook out of his pocket and quickly opened it to a blank page.

Then he turned it to the wriggler. A curse mark appeared on the creature as it came closer.



Fushigi chanted a spell to collect the mark.

“Illuminate the curse. Transcribe the curse. Project.”

The wriggler was right in front of Fushigi’s eyes.

Reeeee, riiing!

A high-pitched noise pierced his eardrums.

But Fushigi didn’t flinch.

“Resolve.”

A bright light flashed, and the wriggler disappeared soon after.

“Okay.” Fushigi looked at his notebook and scowled. “What? Why isn’t there anything here?”

The page his notebook was open to was blank.

Normally, he would see an inverted curse mark on the page.

Fushigi held up the notebook and said the spell again.

“Illuminate the curse. Transcribe the curse. Project.”

But the page was still white.

“Darn it!” he murmured, and he heard the ringing in his ears again.

Another wriggler had appeared behind him.

“It’s not just one?”

His ears rang again, and yet another wriggler appeared farther down the hallway.

“Another curse must be controlling them. I’ll need to collect that master curse, or it won’t work.”

Meanwhile, Jimmy dashed into the editorial department on the fourth floor.

It was sweltering in the office. It seemed they still turned off the air-conditioning at night to save on electricity. But Jimmy was looking around at all the other changes.

“What in the world is this?!”

All the desks, chairs, and even the trash cans had been replaced with blue versions.

It hadn’t been like that before. It was also strange that only one man was by the window, working in the very large editorial department. Normally, about a dozen people would still be working at that time.

The gloomy fourth floor was lit only by the light on the man’s desk. As the man typed at his computer, Jimmy approached him. The window behind him was open, and the man occasionally used a fan to cool his face.

He was so absorbed in his work that he didn’t notice Jimmy coming closer.

Jimmy looked up as he slowly approached the man.

It was Saitou.

The man Jimmy had trained finally noticed him.

“Oh, sir, you’re back?”

Jimmy was a little confused when Saitou didn’t seem surprised, but he decided to focus on asking an important question instead.

“What happened here?”

“We’re prepping for the next issue, like usual. I’ve got to say I’m thankful, sir. I was actually picked to become the associate editor-in-chief.”

“*You* were picked?”

“Yes, we have a wonderful editor-in-chief who chose me for the position.”

“What baloney! How’d a bottom-rung cameraman like you end up as associate editor-in-chief?!”

“Well, of course a dog wouldn’t believe it, but look.” Saitou showed off his business card to Jimmy. “I picked up the camera you dropped. When I started submitting those shots, the editor-in-chief recognized their value right away. Sorry, sir, but you’ve turned into a dog anyway, so I figured it’d be more meaningful if I took the glory.”


Hot Off the Press!
This Is the Faceless Kid!



Saitou was as unpleasant a guy as ever.

But now wasn't the time to be annoyed.

"See, the editor-in-chief raved about the faceless kid's picture in particular. That's why we're having a special feature about the faceless kid in our next issue. The layout just came in, so would you like to take a look?"

Saitou set a printed sheet of paper in front of Jimmy.

It had a promo and an article with a huge headline that read HOT OFF THE PRESS! THIS IS THE FACELESS KID!

The whole thing was full of stuff Jimmy was very familiar with.

He read through everything very quickly.

Eventually, he got to the headline that read THE FACELESS KID HAS A TWIN! WHAT'S THEIR CONNECTION TO THE VILLAGE THAT DISAPPEARED WITHOUT A TRACE?! and he stopped.

The girl in the black hood was shown without any pixelation.

Her face really was missing under her hood.

But Jimmy was looking at something else in the article as he murmured, "Is this…?"

Meanwhile…

Riiing!

By the stairs on the first floor, Fushigi held out his notebook with both hands toward the wrigglers that were coming down.

"Resolve."

The wrigglers would disappear with a bright light whenever Fushigi said his spell.

Fushigi quickly dashed up the stairs. He went past the landing and was just about to reach the second floor's stairway.

Suddenly, three wrigglers rushed down the hallway on the second floor.

"Urgh!"

Caught by surprise, Fushigi dropped his red notebook.

It bounced off a step on the stairs and tumbled down to the landing.

“Darn it!”

Two wrigglers also started making their way up from the first floor and were about to step all over the notebook.

The three wrigglers were approaching Fushigi from behind.

He didn’t even have time to think.

Fushigi jumped down the stairs and grabbed the notebook, then opened it to a blank page.

Then he did a somersault between two wrigglers and held his notebook out behind himself.

“.evloseR”

“.evloseR”

Fushigi headed straight toward the three wrigglers coming at him from the floor above.

They tried to surround Fushigi on the landing.

Fushigi spun around just like a figure skater and held his notebook up to each of the three wrigglers.

“.evloseR .evloseR .evloseR”

They all disappeared with flashes of light. Before he could even catch his breath, Fushigi was running up the second-floor stairs to the third floor.

Then he heard that ringing sound.

“Ugh. Again.”

Fushigi braced himself.

“What the heck is this…? E-even I can see it!” Jimmy couldn’t help but murmur as Saitou showed him the magazine’s next issue.

In the photograph of the girl in the black hood, he also saw the curse mark.

“Wait, Saitou, can’t ya see it?”

“Huh? See what?”

“Guess humans can’t. There’s somethin’ off about this shot… about this one I took.”

“Well, of course, since your photography is so terrible, sir.” Saitou gave him a teasing smile. Then he said, “But our editor-in-chief was worried about that being an issue, so he’s working on retaking it right now.”

“Right now?”

“Yes, he’s taking it right this moment. Oh, let me introduce you.”

The two of them headed to the photography studio.

“Our editor-in-chief said he’s the only one who could capture the photo.”

Saitou opened the door to the studio and urged Jimmy to enter.

It was dark inside. Once Jimmy’s eyes acclimated to the darkness, he could make out the shapes of people. All his coworkers from the editorial department were gathered in the room.

Their heads drooped eerily, like they were unconscious.

“Saitou, what’s going on…?”

Jimmy turned toward Saitou, but his old coworker, who had been making fun of him until a moment ago, now also slumped over.

Then the room filled with light.

A man slowly made his way out from under a blue umbrella that was reflecting the camera’s flash. He held a camera in his hand and seemed to be choking back laughter.



“Heh… Heh-heh-heh… You’re so very special. Indeed, so very special.”

“I saw ya at the Forest of No Return!”

The man carried a folded umbrella on the same arm he was using to hold the camera.

“I know it! I remember seeing that blue umbrella.”

Jimmy flinched when he saw how sinister the man was.

“You were the first one to take a picture of Himitsu. We published that in our magazine. Thanks to you, Himitsu realized that even her photo could summon horrors. Heh-heh-heh.”

The man with the blue umbrella laughed creepily and turned his camera toward the darkness. The shutter sound went off.

The strobe light flashed and illuminated the girl in the back of the studio.

“Himitsu Senno!” Jimmy yelled.

“Heh… Heh-heh-heh… Your terrible photo won’t do. Instead, I’ll take a much clearer one and publish that in the magazine and on the web. That will make it much stronger.”

Jimmy couldn’t see Himitsu’s face under her black hood because she was looking down. He turned back to the man with the blue umbrella.

“Who are ya?!”

The man glanced at Himitsu, then turned back to Jimmy. He answered in a cold, quiet voice, **“I am her supporter.”**

“Why would you support her?!”

The man slowly approached Jimmy.

“Do you know why Himitsu turns urban legends into reality?”

He got even closer.

His weirdly pale face was also strangely slender and long. His lips were red and eerily thin as he smiled.

“Do you know why Fushigi goes around collecting all the horrors?”

“I—I don’t…” Jimmy backed up until he was against the wall. The most he could do was squeeze out a quivering reply.

“Heh… Heh-heh-heh… Ah, heh-heh-heh!”

The man’s creepy laugh rang out, and he drew close to Jimmy’s ear.

Then he whispered, **“You’re Fushigi’s friend, aren’t you? So deliver this message to him for me. Tell him to stop collecting the curse marks.”**

“Why?”

Jimmy could just barely get out that one word as his whole body froze in horror.

“Heh… Heh-heh-heh… If you don’t, well…heh-heh-heh.”

The man seemed to find what he was about to say very funny.

Once he could finally hold back his laughter, he whispered into the yellow hood of the human-faced dog so that no one else could hear.

“If he doesn’t, then Fushigi will end up dying again. He doesn’t know that, though. So you should be the one to tell him… Heh-heh-heh, ah, heh-heh-heh…”

“Fushigi will die *again*?!” Jimmy remembered the magazine article that Saitou had shown him earlier. “Then do you mean… Fushigi was the one who was sacrificed? But whaddaya mean he’ll die again?”

“Once he collects all the curse marks, Fushigi will disappear.”

Jimmy didn’t immediately grasp what the pale man in front of him was saying.

“What…? He can’t…”

Jimmy started to wonder if he couldn’t understand what was going on because he was now half-dog. But he didn’t think that was it.

“Jimmy! Where are you?!” a voice called from outside.

“Fushigi…” Jimmy turned to the door. “I’m here! In the studio!” he yelled.

In that moment, the entire studio rumbled and shook.

Even though the room had no windows, he felt a lukewarm rush of air.

“Ack!”

Jimmy closed his eyes against the strong wind.

The gust was strong enough to fling open the doors of the studio and sweep all sorts of things away.

Jimmy felt like the wind was about to blow him away, too.

The creepy man snickered and opened the umbrella hanging off his arm.

Then the gale blew against the umbrella and started to lift it into the air.

“Heh-heh-heh-heh!”

He held the umbrella with one hand as it pulled him up along with it.

Then the man began to fade into the darkness.

“Wait!”

Jimmy quickly leaped up and stole the camera from the man’s hand. Then the man fully disappeared into the darkness.

“Jimmy!” Fushigi charged into the studio.

“Himitsu’s over there!” Jimmy said, urging Fushigi to go farther into the studio.

The open door let light into the room. Fushigi looked around the studio, but he didn’t see the girl in the black hood.

“She was right there!”

The wind only ruffled his red hood as he peered around the room. Eventually, the wind and the tremors died down. Fushigi and Jimmy stood in the spot where Himitsu had just been.

“She was right here!”

Fushigi let out a small laugh. “Yeah, I can see.”

A curse mark remained where she had been.

Fushigi pulled his notebook from his pocket and held it out…

“Wait!” Jimmy couldn’t help but shout.

“What is it?” Fushigi looked back at the human-faced dog, who was staring at him. “Is something wrong?”

“Uh…”

In the end, Jimmy couldn’t say anything and turned away.

Fushigi held his notebook up to the mark, and a bright light flashed.

Jimmy looked at the entrance to the studio and saw that the wrigglers filling the hallway were disappearing.

“So that guy was using Himitsu’s powers,” Jimmy said.

Fushigi didn’t say anything and left the room.

Eventually, the editorial department, including Saitou, all came to their senses. None of them could even remember why they were in the studio. Naturally, they didn’t remember the boy in the red hood accompanied by a dog in a yellow hood, either.

They headed back to the editorial department's area and were surprised to find the entire place a mess from the wind that had swept everything away.

The city was quiet.

The boy and the dog left the grimy building in the dead of night.

Lots of paper had flown into the road from the fourth floor because of the wind.

"I never imagined Himitsu would have a supporter," the boy muttered, but Jimmy couldn't look him in the face.

"Yeah, I know, right?"

That was all he could say.

The boy standing next to him was his partner, and the most important person to him right now.

"Let's go."

Then his partner said his usual curt catchphrase and started walking.

Normally, Jimmy would run after him, but on that day, he just stared at Fushigi's back.

He felt terrible that he was the only one who knew the secret about the boy.

It was like a giant boulder was pressing down on his heart.

"Hey, Fushigi, wait up."

As Jimmy started to run, he also kicked up one of the dropped papers at his feet.

It featured a headline about the faceless kid.

To be continued...



Hot Off the Press!

This Is the Faceless Kid!

Back in the day, there were Hanako and Tsuchinoko. Nowadays, the internet has also spread stories about Kisaragi Station. Readers probably know many tales like these. They are called urban legends, and nobody knows if they're real. Urban legends perplex society and make people shudder. One that has been making the rounds in the last few years might just be true. It's the story of the faceless kid.

Supposedly, a child around middle school age who wears a jacket with a hood has been spotted all over the country. There are many old stories about Japanese demons called yokai, and one such yokai is called a Nopperabou. The Nopperabou has no eyes, nose, or mouth, and its origin seems to be silly stories about animals like the tanuki, who tried and failed to turn themselves into humans. But the story of the faceless kid has a distinctively eerie quality to it. When the mysterious kid appears, the rumors, superstitions, and even ghost stories told in the local area become real.

Maybe the faceless kid truly exists?

Our editorial department set out to get to the bottom of this mystery! And we've gotten the scoop with a surprising picture!

(Draft of a certain magazine article)

AFTERWORD

Thank you for reading *Horror Collector*, Volume 4.

In this volume, the mystery behind Fushigi and Himitsu is revealed, and we also find out that Himitsu is being used by the man with the blue umbrella.

What will happen next? I hope you'll read the upcoming books while on the edge of your seat.

So, this novel is about six more urban legends in six different towns.

First Town: The Chain Letter

Chain letters are urban legends that have been around for a long time and that have had spikes in popularity.

Lately, chain texts and e-mails have been popular thanks to computers and phones.

Just imagine if they were real and could curse you or make unfortunate things happen to you… Why, that's shudder inducing, isn't it?

Second Town: The Hewman

The hewman is a monster that takes the shape of a person.

Its most identifying feature is its large size. It's supposed to be even bigger than a ship, and it's apparently been seen the most around Antarctica.

But why does the hewman attack humans in stories? I've written about the real reason why they do.

Maybe deciding that monsters from urban legends are always the bad guys isn't always right…

Third Town: The Otter Cookies

There are lots of urban legends about the snacks people eat.

In this story, I've used one of those.

Many of these legends are about getting good luck or having fun things happen. And this one about the otter cookies is supposed to be a fun one.

But what if someone placed a terrible trap among the rest…?

Everyone, be careful of urban legends that are actually evil tricks.

Fourth Town: The Headless Rider's Helmet

When I was in elementary school at a camp, my homeroom teacher told us about The Headless Rider.

I was afraid to walk the streets at night for a while after that.

The scariest thing about the Headless Rider is that it'll chase after you no matter where you try to run.

This story is about the mystery of the Headless Rider and how it pursues people.

Fifth Town: The Phantom Subterranean Railway

Underneath a certain town, it's said there's an underground rail no one knows about.

But who made those tracks? And why? Supposedly, no one knows.

When I heard about that, I was scared but also very excited.

Maybe wanting to solve strange mysteries is just a natural feeling people have.

But if you go to the railroad out of curiosity, then bad things will happen to you.

Sixth Town: The Faceless Kid

In this story, the mystery behind Fushigi and Himitsu is finally revealed.

Do you know what these two are?

Fushigi and Himitsu aren't just twins. They're also good and evil, front and back, two halves that make a whole.

What will happen if they meet?

In the next volume, Jimmy will find himself caught up in a big incident now that he knows Fushigi's secret.

Also, the man with the blue umbrella will slowly reveal his intentions.

What will Fushigi do? And what about Himitsu?

The story is finally reaching a huge turning point. I hope you'll read the next volume, too.

August 2016
Midori Sato

AFTERWORD

Saitama City in Saitama Prefecture, where I live, has a rice field we call Mi Swamp Paddy. In the past, there used to be a place called the Mi Swamp, and during the Edo period, the land was reclaimed from the sea to make the paddy field larger. There's also a legend that a frightening dragon lives there—the Mi Swamp Dragon God Legend.

Phwooo-wooo!

Way back when the swamp was still there, supposedly you could hear a beautiful whistle in the evening coming from some unknown source.

I'm sure it must have sounded even prettier and lovelier than modern-day recorders.

One or two of the young men in the surrounding villages would always be drawn to the sound and head to the swamp.

Then they would wander into the deep wetlands and never come home.

After so many people drowned themselves, the villagers started to think the dragon god had been angered.

So they built a memorial tower, and the whistling stopped soon after.

I think this happened a long time after the tower was built, but when the land reclamation was planned, the shogunate sent over the government official Yasobe Izawa to stay the night at a temple.

Then one night, a beautiful woman appeared in Yasobe's dreams, claiming to be the Mi Swamp Dragon God, and she asked him this:

“Please stop your work for ninety-nine days until I’m able to find a new place to live.”

But it wasn’t as though he could delay their plans for three months, and it was just a dream, after all.

So they continued with the project, and many accidents occurred. People also got sick, including Yasobe, who collapsed due to a terrible illness.

Then the woman appeared in his dreams again, and she told him she would cure him as long as he fulfilled her previous request. After that, he recovered rapidly.

She likely wanted him to get better so he could travel back to request a postponement for the project. But Yasobe didn’t pause the project.

Then one night, a vassal became frightened. He claimed to have seen a snakelike woman sitting over Yasobe and breathing red flames all over him as he slept.

After hearing that, the entire group decided to move to another temple and brought Yasobe with them, but then other strange things occurred there, like villagers disappearing from coffins and such.

After some time, the reclamation project ended, and Yasobe’s group left. Then the Mi Swamp was at peace.

After the swamp was gone, even the dragon god living there must have given up.

The dragon god supposedly moved to the Inba Swamp in Chiba Prefecture or Haruna Lake in Gunma Prefecture.

I’ve heard many other stories from people in Saitama, not just the one about the Mi Swamp Dragon God Legend.

That included this ghost story, too.

There’s a road near a certain hospital where there are a lot of car accidents, and allegedly a woman with long hair who stands by the road at night causes them. It seems that a woman who was being taken to the hospital by ambulance passed away around there.

There are lots of baffling things that happen in the places where you live.

Please tell me all about the ghost stories, rumors, and legends passed down in your towns, areas, and schools.

Himitsu and Fushigi might just pay a visit to your town.

August 2016
Norio Tsuruta

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