
Story by
Midori Sato
Norio Tsuruta
Art by
Yon
HORROR COLLECTOR
5
The App of Misfortune

Horror Collector

5 The App of Misfortune

Midori Sato and Norio Tsuruta

Illustration by
Yon

New York

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Cover art by Yon

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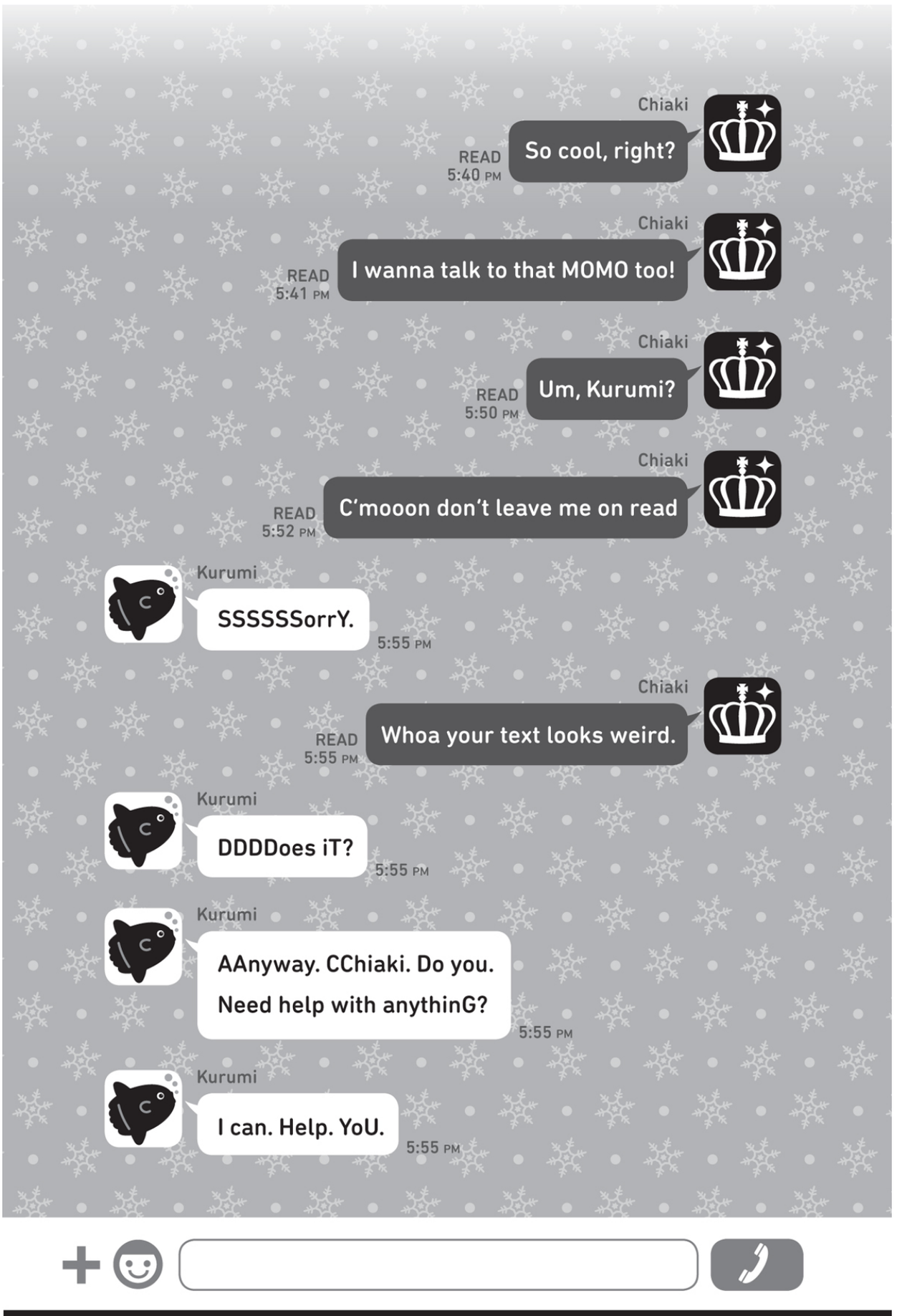
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Kurumi
Chiaki
Hey, have you heard the gossip?
READ 5:35 PM
Kurumi
Gossip about what?
5:36 PM
Chiaki
You know, the personal assistant app MOMO?
READ 5:36 PM
Kurumi
Oh, you mean the one everyone in class is using?
5:37 PM
Chiaki
I heard there's a special version of MOMO that's different from everybody else's.
READ 5:37 PM
Kurumi
Different how?
5:38 PM
Chiaki
It's supposed to talk like it's actually alive!
READ 5:38 PM
Kurumi
Hmmm
5:40 PM


Chiaki
So cool, right?
READ 5:40 PM
Chiaki
I wanna talk to that MOMO too!
READ 5:41 PM
Chiaki
Um, Kurumi?
READ 5:50 PM
Chiaki
C'mooon don't leave me on read
READ 5:52 PM
Kurumi
SSSSSSorrY.
5:55 PM
Chiaki
Whoa your text looks weird.
READ 5:55 PM
Kurumi
DDDDoes iT?
5:55 PM
Kurumi
AAnyway. CChiaki. Do you. Need help with anythinG?
5:55 PM
Kurumi
I can. Help. YoU.
5:55 PM

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Yen Newsletter

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Horror Collector *Dispatch*
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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.



Jimmy

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



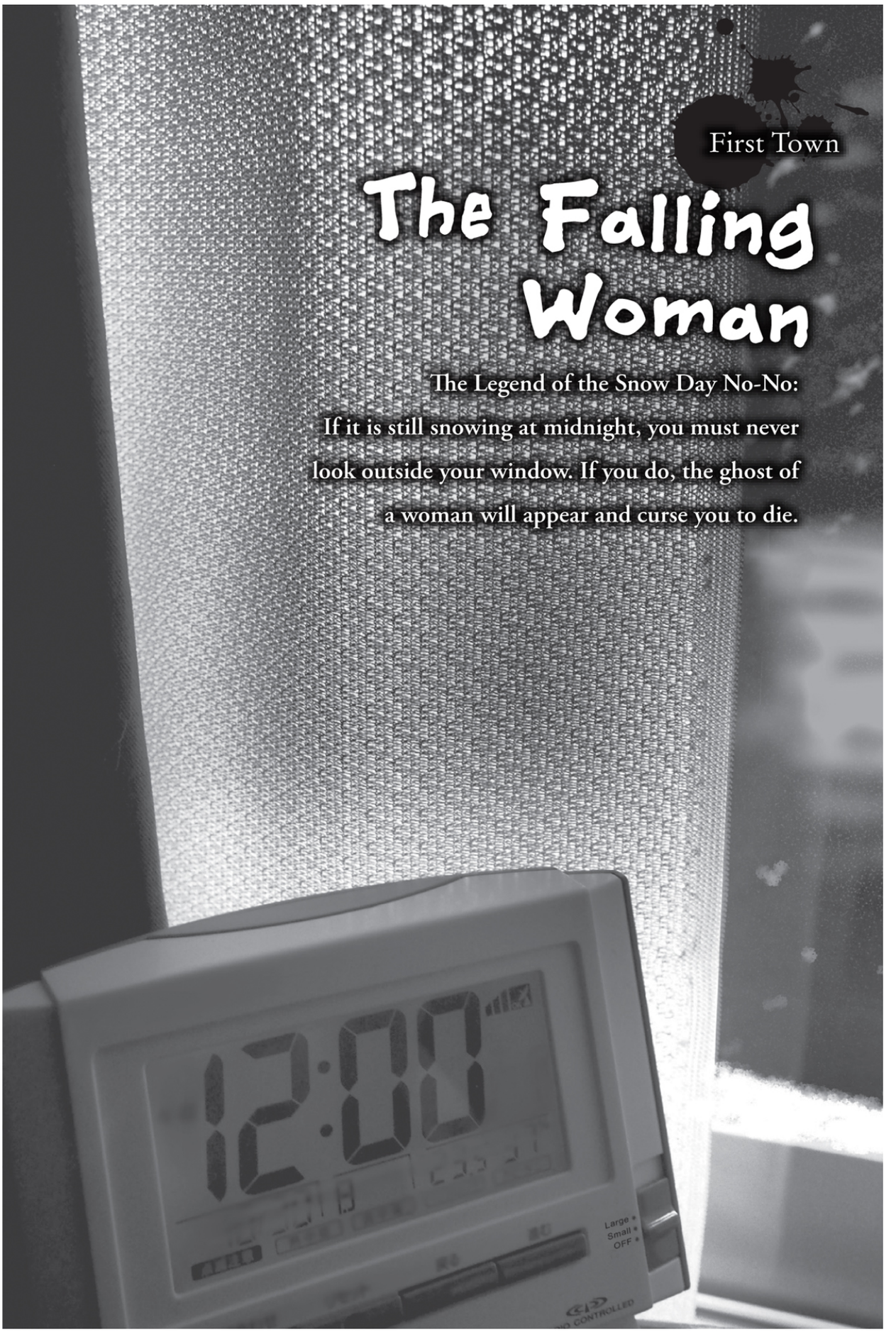
Himitsu Senno

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



Blue Umbrella Man

A strange man who hangs around Himitsu.



First Town

The Falling Woman

The Legend of the Snow Day No-No: If it is still snowing at midnight, you must never look outside your window. If you do, the ghost of a woman will appear and curse you to die.

“Wow, this is a great view!”

It was morning. When Hiromi Kagawa, who was in the sixth grade, looked out the window of her room and saw the vista, she smiled.

She’d moved to a new town a week ago.

Unlike her old house, the apartment they now lived in was on the eighth floor of a brand-new ten-story condominium.

The condo was on top of a hill, so she had a great view of the town. She could see the ocean far off in the distance, which was one of the reasons why Hiromi liked the scenery from her window so much.

“If you don’t head out to school soon, you’ll be late!” her mom said from the hallway while holding a vacuum cleaner. “And it’s going to snow tonight. The weather report said there’s a thirty percent chance.”

“That’s as good as no chance. I don’t need an umbrella!”

Hiromi put on her backpack, closed her window, and headed off to school.

“…So I’m gonna go with Kenichirou next time.”

It was after school. Hiromi was chatting with her new classmate Yui Kaneda while walking home. They got along great and were already good friends.

Yui liked a boy in their class named Kenichirou.

“Wait, are you going on a date?! Aw, I want to go on dates, too.”

“You’ll find your own crush soon enough, Hiromi.”

“Yeah, you’re right,” Hiromi said and smiled.

Suddenly, they heard someone call out, “Oh, is that you, Yui?”

It was a middle-aged lady with a shaggy white dog. She was a housewife who lived in Yui’s neighborhood.

Hiromi bowed to greet the lady and then explained that she’d just moved to the area.

Right at that moment, snowflakes started drifting down from the sky.

“There was only a thirty percent chance of snow, so I didn’t think it’d actually happen…,” Hiromi grumbled.

“It might build up, so let’s get home fast, Hiromi!”

“Yeah.”

They said good-bye to the woman and then continued their walk at a brisk pace.

“Everyone knows that lady because she loves gossip so much,” Yui said as she quickly strode through the falling snow. “My mom told me that lady believes anything she hears and spreads it around without checking if it’s true.”

“She sounds like a hard person to deal with,” Hiromi replied.

“I know, right? You should be careful. Don’t let her spread weird rumors about you, Hiromi.”

I don’t think there’s anything to spread, but I probably should avoid her.

“Oh, right. Have you heard the urban legend about snowy days?” asked Yui. She’d been walking ahead of Hiromi, so she turned around to look at her.

“What is it?”

Maybe Yui likes gossiping just like that lady.

Hiromi’s friend at another school liked to tell her about urban legends, too.

Things like Sugisawa Village, Little Nanoka, The Golden Pay Phone, and The Teke Teke.

Her friend had also told her about a weird animal called the Human-Faced Dog.

“So this urban legend is called The Snow Day No-No.”

“Okay…” Hiromi hadn’t heard of that one before.

Yui kept going.

“When snow starts coming down in the evening out of nowhere, like today, if it’s still snowing when midnight comes, you should never, ever look outside your window. The legend says that if you look out right at midnight, the ghost of a woman appears and curses you to die.”

“She what…?” Hiromi felt a shiver go down her spine.

She thought about the window in her room.

What if she saw the woman's ghost…?

The horror showed on her face before she could stop it.

"Do you believe in ghost stories and stuff, Hiromi?" Yui asked.

"What?"

"Well, you look really scared right now."

Whenever someone told Hiromi an urban legend, she couldn't help but imagine it being true. That was just her personality.

She explained that to Yui, and her friend replied, "I'm sorry I brought it up, then, but you don't need to worry about anything. My older sister told me that story, but neither of us believes it. And I told everyone in class, too, but no one took it seriously."

"Really…?" Hiromi said.

"It was just supposed to be a joke… But you've never seen a ghost before, either, right?"

"I—I haven't…"

"Good, see, it's fine," Yui said. "I mean, urban legends are just stories anyway."

"Right, I guess that's true…"

Yui doesn't believe in the stories she tells, so she's not like the lady from earlier.

Urban legends weren't real.

No one around her had actually seen one.

Hiromi smiled and kept telling herself that.

It was the middle of the night. The snow was still falling, and Hiromi was lying on her bed reading a book. Once she got to a good stopping point, she closed the book and looked at the clock on her shelf.

It was just past 11:55 PM.

"Ack!"

Hiromi got up to turn off her light, but then she spotted the window out of the corner of her eye. She couldn't see outside because the curtains were closed.

She remembered what Yui had told her earlier.

"If it's still snowing when midnight comes, you should never, ever look outside your window. The legend says that if you look out

right at midnight, the ghost of a woman appears and curses you to die."

She checked the time again. There were only a few minutes until midnight.

Hiromi gulped.

Urban legends aren't real. But…

She realized she'd never had a chance to actually test that.

Maybe I'll just take a little peek…

Hiromi slowly made her way over to the window. Once she was in front of it, she stopped and stared at the curtains.

She looked at the time again. It was exactly midnight.

There's no way ghosts exist… There's no way ghosts exist…

Her heart was racing. Hiromi grabbed the curtains and gently pulled them aside.

She saw a girl's face on the other side of the window.

"Ah!"

She backed away instinctively.

Then she realized something.

The face she'd seen was actually just her reflection on the glass.

"Wow, that scared me so much…"

Hiromi smiled sheepishly.

Urban legends definitely aren't real.

She felt silly for spooking herself as she reached out to close the curtains so she could go to bed.

But just then, a woman plummeted past the window.

The woman, who was falling upside down, was wearing blue clothes and had long hair.

And she grinned.

As the woman fell, she stared straight at Hiromi between the gaps of her long hair and creepily smiled at the girl.

In the next moment, the woman disappeared from sight, and Hiromi heard a very loud sound as something hit the ground.

"Aaaah!!!"

She shrieked and crouched down before she even realized what she was doing.

Her parents ran into her room after hearing her scream.

“What’s wrong?!”

“I-it was a lady! She fell from up there!” Hiromi told them. She remained curled up in a ball but pointed at the window.



“A lady?” her mom said.

“What are you talking about?” Her dad looked exasperated.

“It’s true!”

“This is the eighth floor,” her dad said.

“Wait, but then…”

Hiromi’s mom concluded that someone must have jumped off the building on purpose. She rushed over to the window to open it and look outside.

But her expression was full of confusion.

“Hiromi, I don’t see a lady anywhere.”

“What?”

Hiromi stood up and clutched her mom as she slowly peeked out the window. The ground was illuminated by light from the condo, so they could see even from the eighth floor.

But no one was on the ground.

Hiromi couldn’t see evidence that anyone had fallen in the snowdrifts.

“How …?”

But she was sure she’d heard the woman land.

And no one could have survived a fall from this height, either.

“Geez, you know I need to be up early tomorrow for work.” Her dad let out a huge sigh.

“Oh?” her mom softly exclaimed, and then she pointed at the shrubbery that stretched out in front of the condo.

Next to the bushes, something small was moving around. It wasn’t lit up very well, so they couldn’t make it out clearly, but it seemed to be a dog.

It was wearing a yellow raincoat.

Once it noticed that Hiromi and her family were staring at it, it seemed to glance up at them for a moment, then ran off into the shrubs.

“Maybe you mistook that dog for the lady?” her mom said.

“What do you mean?” Hiromi asked.

“Maybe it was the dog that fell from the roof?” her mom suggested, which only made Hiromi upset.

“It wasn’t,” Hiromi told her. “And even if it was that dog, it wouldn’t be able to move if it fell from up there.”

“I—I suppose not… Then it must have been a ball or something else that fell.”

“There isn’t a ball anywhere!”

It seemed like her mom was trying to make her feel less anxious, but the more her mom talked, the more riled up Hiromi became.

“Look,” her dad said. He seemed tired of their conversation. “I think you were just half-asleep, Hiromi.”

“What?”

“Yeah, it’s late, and you must have seen something in the window that just looked like a girl.”

“Seen something…? Oh!” Hiromi remembered that she’d seen her own reflection in the glass.

When Hiromi told her dad that, he grumbled, “That must be it. You just saw your own face. Right, dear?”

“Oh, yes, that could be it…,” her mom agreed.

“B-but…”

Hiromi had seen the woman’s grin so clearly. Hiromi sure hadn’t been smiling, so it couldn’t have been her own face.

But no one was on the ground…

Hiromi just felt confused.



It was the next day. Even at school, Hiromi was still thinking about what had happened the night before.

That morning, she’d seen other people putting out their trash in front of the condo for collection, but none of them had mentioned a falling woman.

If a person really did fall, everyone would be talking about it. Hiromi hadn’t seen any police or ambulances, either.

I must have been seeing things…

Hiromi decided to stop thinking about it.

It was after school.

Hiromi was walking home alone, since Yui had basketball practice once a week.

She passed by the road where Yui had told her about the urban legend the day before.

There, she saw a middle-aged woman with a shaggy white dog heading toward her.

It was Yui's neighbor who liked to gossip.

"Hello, Hiromi," the lady said.

"Hello." Hiromi bowed her head and tried to keep walking.

But then the lady called out to her, "Oh, do you live in the condo on the hill?"

"That's right," Hiromi said, and the lady suddenly looked frightened.

"I can't believe you live there, of all places… Now, this is just between you and me," she said as she came right up to Hiromi. "Someone committed suicide at that condo a few years ago. I think it was on a snowy night. A woman wearing blue jumped off the roof."

"Huh?!"

The woman she'd seen the night before flashed through Hiromi's mind.

Then did I see her ghost yesterday?

She must have disappeared because she was actually a ghost.

But if I saw her ghost, what'll happen to me…?

Hiromi remembered what Yui had said again.

"The legend says that if you look out right at midnight, the ghost of a woman appears and curses you to die."

"Eek!" Hiromi shrieked and ran away.

What do I do? I need help! Mom!

Hiromi ran as fast as she could to the condo. Her mom would be making dinner around that time, just like always.

Hiromi got to her building, and once she was in front of the elevator, she pushed the call button. The elevator car was stopped at the top floor. After Hiromi pressed the button, it slowly started to descend.

The entrance to the condo was dimly lit that evening and dead silent. No one was around.

Hiromi was so frightened that she prayed for the elevator to come down faster.

Finally, it arrived.

Since the doors were partially made of glass, the lights in the elevator faintly illuminated the entrance to the building.

Relief washed over her as she saw the lights. The woman who was already inside the elevator stepped out, and Hiromi passed her on the way in.

“Huh?!” Hiromi’s eyes went wide.

Were her clothes just now…?

Hiromi slowly turned to look out the elevator doors.

She saw a long-haired woman in blue standing there.

The doors closed.

The woman stared at Hiromi between the gaps in her hair from beyond the glass.

And she grinned.

The elevator began to rise slowly.

The woman craned her neck to watch Hiromi leave, smiling eerily the entire time.

“Uh, ahhh…”

Inside the elevator, Hiromi was trembling.

She hadn’t been seeing things.

It was the falling woman.

No, no, no…

Once the elevator arrived on the eighth floor, Hiromi dashed out of it and to her front door.

“Mom, help!”

Her mom was prepping chicken for dinner.

Hiromi hugged her mom tightly.

“What? What’s wrong? Don’t do that while I’m holding a knife. It’s dangerous.”

“I saw it! The woman’s ghost!” Hiromi then explained that the woman she had seen was the ghost of someone who had committed suicide by jumping off the building.

“A suicide?!”

This was the first time her mom had heard of something like that happening at their condo.

“But that doesn’t mean there really is a ghost…”

Her mom looked bewildered.

"I saw it again downstairs, though!" Hiromi insisted.

But her mom shook her head firmly.

"I'm not so sure… I think you're just seeing things."

"That's not true!"

"You were thinking about something scary on the way home. Then when you happened to see a woman wearing blue, you just assumed it was the ghost of the woman who committed suicide."

"No…"

"You get spooked more easily than the average person, Hiromi," her mom chided her.

"But the ghost was really—"

"Everything's okay. You were imagining it."

Her mom gave her a small reassuring smile and gently set a hand on Hiromi's head.

Hiromi didn't know what else to say.

But I know I wasn't seeing things…

While her mom was making dinner, Hiromi sat on the living room sofa and was thinking.

If she had been seeing things, then why had the woman smiled so creepily at her?

That must have been a ghost… She's trying to curse me…

At that moment, her cell phone vibrated on the table.

It was a message from Yui, saying that her basketball practice was done.

Right, I can talk to Yui about it!

She started typing a message to Yui but then stopped.

Actually, Yui said she didn't believe the legend…

Even though Yui had told Hiromi about the legend, she hadn't believed it herself.

It might weird her out if I tell her I saw the ghost…

Yui was Hiromi's very first friend since she'd moved. She didn't want to lose her first friend.

Hiromi put her phone back on top of the table.

"I'm home," her dad said as he returned from work. "What's wrong, Hiromi? You look white as a sheet."

"Uh, well… Dad, I…"

Hiromi stood up from the sofa and told her dad everything she had told her mom.

Her dad looked surprised.

“A suicide? Is that true, dear?” her dad called into the kitchen to Hiromi’s mom.

“I’m not sure. It’s the first I’m hearing of it.” Her mom came over to the two of them, looking worried.

“But the woman said it was true, so it has to be the ghost of that lady!” Hiromi said, getting worked up.

“Look,” her dad said. He let out a sigh. “Even if someone did jump off this building, there wouldn’t be a ghost haunting this place. Ghosts don’t exist.”

“But I saw one!”

“Like I said, you must have been seeing things.”

Then her mom added, “Then what do you think of this? Tomorrow I’ll ask the building management about whether there really was a suicide. Maybe it’s just a rumor?”

It didn’t seem like her mom believed the woman who had told Hiromi about the suicide.

“That sounds like a good idea to me,” her dad said. “I ride the same morning train to work with someone else who lives here, and he’s never mentioned it once.”

“That’s true. I haven’t heard about it from any of the people I’ve gotten to know here,” her mom said.

Hiromi hadn’t heard about a suicide from anyone at the condo, either.

“There are plenty of tall condos around here. Even if it happened, it might have been another building.”

“I guess…”

All the woman had said was that it was at a condo. Maybe she thought Hiromi lived in a different one.

“Hiromi, there’s nothing to be afraid of. Mom will figure this out, okay?” her mom reassured her.

“Um, o-okay…”

Hiromi felt a little better. She nodded, and then the three of them had dinner.



It was the middle of the night. Hiromi was sleeping in bed. The only light in her pitch-black room was from a faint ray of moonlight.

Suddenly, she heard a noise. Hiromi woke up and listened carefully.

Knock-knock.

Someone was at her door.

She looked at the clock on her shelf. It was past midnight.

Who would come knocking at this hour?

Knock-knock, knock-knock.

“Mom? Dad?”

There was no reply.

Hiromi thought it was strange, but she got up anyway, pulled a cardigan over her shoulders, and walked to the door.

“Who is it?”

She grabbed the knob and slowly opened the door.

But no one was there.

What’s going on?

Did she just dream it? But she was sure she’d heard someone knocking.

Hiromi stuck just her head out of the door and peered into the hallway.

“Oh!”

She saw someone standing at the end of it.

It was so dark, she could barely make out the person, but it seemed to be a woman. The woman was staring straight at Hiromi.

Then she slowly beckoned Hiromi over with her hand.

“Mom?”

Hiromi watched as the person unsteadily stepped over to the front door. Then the woman opened it and walked outside.

What is she doing…?

And why was her mom walking so weirdly?

Did she get possessed by the ghost?!

Her mom had said she was going to look into the suicide, so the ghost must have decided that she was in her way and possessed her.

"Mom!"

Hiromi ran to the front door and right outside. She thought she saw someone at the other end of the condo's corridor.

"Wait!"

Hiromi ran after the person. She found a flight of stairs.

"Mom!" Hiromi shouted, but there was no answer.

Then she heard something from above her.

Clack, clack, clack…

Her mom was going up the stairs.

"Mom!"

Hiromi rushed after her.

After climbing the stairs, Hiromi found herself on the roof.

It had started snowing at some point. As the snow fell around her, Hiromi looked around.

"Mom! Where are you?! Mom?!"

She couldn't find her anywhere on the dark rooftop.

"Mom, where are you?!"

Hiromi turned her head to scan the roof.

Then she saw someone standing on the other side of the roof's safety rail.

The person was standing right on the edge of the roof like she was going to jump off.

"Mom!"

Hiromi ran over to the railing closest to her and tried to get over it. But the moment she looked down, she stopped herself.

If I slip and fall…

She would be a goner.

Hiromi pulled away from the rail instinctively. But then she shook her head.

"Mom!"

Her mom wouldn't look over at her. Maybe Hiromi was too far away to be heard?



Hiromi grabbed the railing and climbed over it.

There wasn't much room on the ledge. She kept close to the railing as she carefully inched her way to her mom.

"Mom, you need to snap out of it!"

If she took just one more step, she would be able to reach out and touch her back.

Hiromi tried to grab her clothes.

Right at that moment, the person turned toward her. It was the woman in blue.

"Ahhhh!"

The woman looked at Hiromi and grinned.

She realized the woman had tricked her. The person she'd seen walking through the halls had never been her mom.

"You come, too... You come, too..."

The woman grinned at her creepily and moved toward Hiromi.

"S-stay away!"

Hiromi tried to get off the ledge, but she would fall if she rushed.

When she hesitated and her legs froze, the woman grabbed her arm.

"Stop!" Hiromi cried out.

"You come, too... You come, too..."

The wind started to blow and whipped furiously around the woman.

"No! Help!"

Hiromi tried to keep hold of the railing, but her hand slipped because of the snow, and she couldn't get a good grip. The woman leered at her.

"You come, too! You fall, too!!!"

The woman tried to leap off the building with Hiromi in tow.

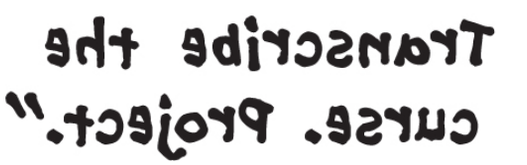
"Ahhhh!"

But right at that moment, someone grabbed Hiromi.

It was a boy wearing a red hood. It was Fushigi.

Fushigi pried Hiromi away from the woman, then stared the ghost down.

He pulled out a bright-red notebook and opened it to a page, then held it up to the woman.



Fushigi said a spell.

Jimmy, who was wearing his yellow raincoat and standing behind Fushigi, watched silently.



In the next moment, a mark glittered, inverted, and appeared on the open page of the notebook. At the same time, the woman disappeared.

Hiromi, who was still standing on the ledge and holding on to the railing, had no idea what had just happened.

"Good thing you were saved," Jimmy said. "Didn't get hurt, didja?"

"D-did that dog just—?"

"I'm no dog! I'm the human-faced dog Jimmy!"

"A human-faced dog?" Hiromi had heard of that urban legend before. "That can't be tru—"

But then Fushigi interrupted her:

"Urban legends are real. You just hadn't seen one before now."

Jimmy nodded and walked right up to Hiromi.

"That ghost only shows up when she's trying to curse somebody," he said.

"Um, I…" Hiromi started to thank them.

But then a gust of wind blew, and Hiromi started to slip.

"Ah!"



She immediately tightened her grip on the rail.

Once she managed to get a better hold, she looked up in relief, but the two were already gone.

Fushigi and Jimmy walked down the road in the middle of the night.

Jimmy stared at the boy, who was walking in front.

“That was a pretty cool move back there,” he said to Fushigi, since the boy had saved Hiromi.

“I’m just collecting the curse marks,” Fushigi replied. His face was blank.

Jimmy smiled as he looked up at Fushigi.

“If anything happens to you, I’ll help you out, too,” Jimmy said.

Fushigi stopped to eye the human-faced dog.

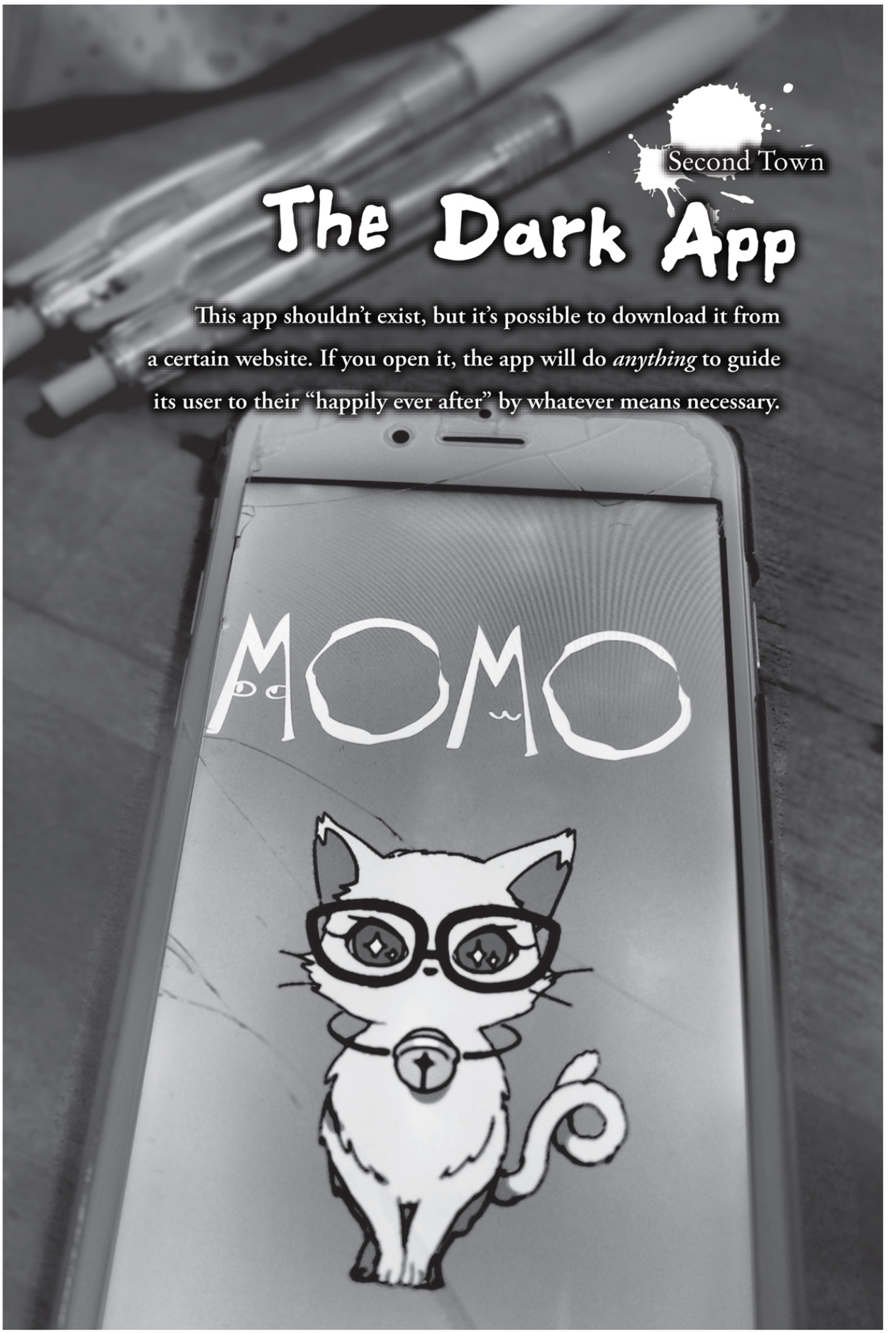
“I don’t plan on needing you to save me.”

“Oh, c’mon, don’t say that! I’d help ya in a heartbeat!”

Jimmy stared right at Fushigi.

Fushigi didn’t seem to understand. He tilted his head, then started walking again.

Then Jimmy caught up to him, and they headed off together.


Second Town
The Dark App
This app shouldn't exist, but it's possible to download it from a certain website. If you open it, the app will do *anything* to guide its user to their "happily ever after" by whatever means necessary.
MOMO

“Yippee! They finally bought it for me!”

Atsuko Kotani, who was in her first year of middle school, had just gotten home and was celebrating in her living room.

She was holding a brand-new pink cell phone.

Almost everyone in Atsuko’s class had one of their own.

For the longest time, Atsuko had told her parents she really wanted a phone, too, but her mom wouldn’t let her have one.

Her mom was worried that she’d spend all her time on social media instead of studying.

So Atsuko had made a proposal: If she got 100 percent on her test, then her mom would let her get a phone.

Then Atsuko had studied like her life depended on it and managed to get a perfect score on last week’s quiz.

“But if your scores drop on your next test because you’re always on your phone, then I’m confiscating it,” her mom said.

“I know,” Atsuko replied with a smile. “I’ll go do my homework in my room right now!”

She tried to get brownie points with her mom by studying some more, but she sneakily hid the phone behind her hand and brought it with her.

I’m going to have so much fun all the time now!

Once she was in her room, Atsuko threw her schoolbag on her desk and flopped right onto her bed.

She turned on her phone and looked at the screen. There was something she wanted to try now that she had a phone.

She wanted a personal-assistant app.

Apps were software that could be downloaded onto devices, and they could be used for lots of things, like playing games or listening to music.

Atsuko wanted an app called MOMO, which let users talk to it to use it. MOMO was also the name of the very cute pink cat character on the app that would answer questions.

Everyone in Atsuko’s class was obsessed with MOMO.

She’d even chosen a pink phone to match the cat.

Okay! I'm gonna download the app now! First, I need to go to the MOMO website.

Atsuko used an internet search to find the MOMO app's website. Once she found and clicked the link, the web page loaded on her screen.

A bunch of smiling MOMOs filled her phone.

At the bottom, she saw the Download Now button.

If she pressed that, then she could install the app and use MOMO right away.

Atsuko excitedly pressed the button.

Zap!

Suddenly, she felt an electric shock through her arm that was holding the phone. The shock wasn't very strong, but her finger felt a little numb.

Wh-what was that?

Was there something wrong with her phone? But she didn't see anything weird on the screen.

The download was even done.

I guess it wasn't anything important.

It still seemed odd to Atsuko, but nothing else was wrong, so she decided not to worry about it.

She just really wanted to play with MOMO.

Atsuko pressed the icon for the app that showed up on her phone screen. Then a pink box appeared, along with the sound of a ringing bell, and something hopped out of the box.

It was MOMO, who was wearing a large bell.

"H-h-h-h-hello. Nice to meet you."

Maybe there actually is something wrong with it?

Atsuko frowned.

"H-h-hello. Nice to meet you."

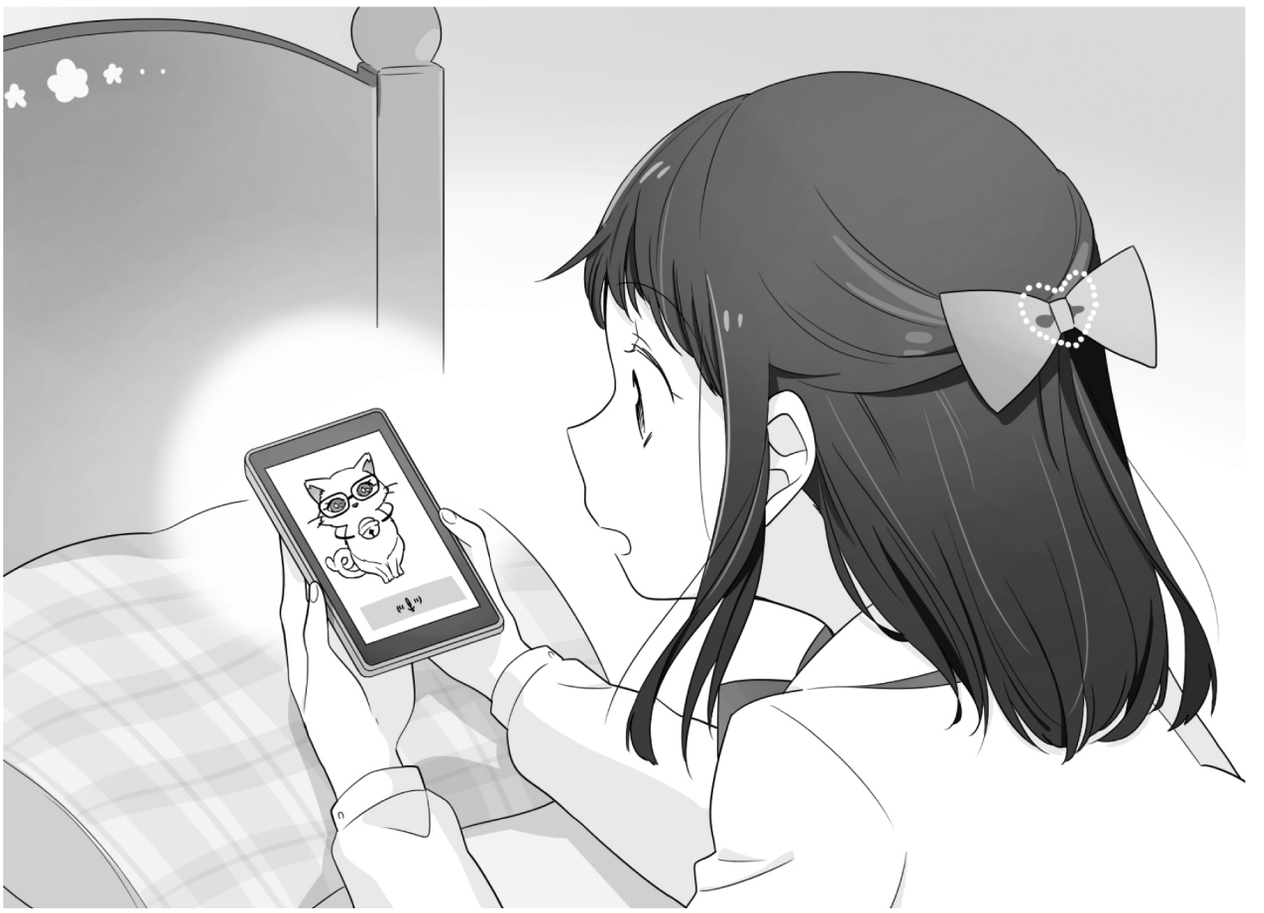
But then everything seemed to fix itself.

"My name is MOMO."

"What?" Atsuko couldn't help but say as she stared at MOMO.

For some reason, the cat was wearing glasses.

She’d seen MOMO lots of times on her classmates’ phones, but the character was never wearing glasses on theirs.



Maybe the glasses version of MOMO is new?

She was happy if that was it. She felt sort of special for getting a version that was different from everyone else's.

"What should I call you?" MOMO asked her.

I think I just talk to reply to her?

Atsuko brought the phone a little closer and said, "I'm Atsuko. So please call me that!"

She smiled.

It was the next day.

"Good morning!" Atsuko said to her best friend, Sachi Motomura, as soon as she got to her classroom.

"You look like you're in a good mood today, Atsuko."

"That's 'cause I've got a cell phone now, too!"

"What? No way!"

Sachi hadn't had a phone.

"I got a cute pink one!" Atsuko said.

Atsuko had talked to MOMO for a long time the night before.

"I wish I had one!" Sachi told her. "I want to talk to MOMO, too."

"You should get a phone, Sachi."

"Yeah, I know."

"Ahh, I want to get home so I can see MOMO again."

She wasn't allowed to bring her phone to school, but she was so impatient to use the app again.

Atsuko told the other girls in class that she could finally use MOMO just like they could, too.

"My MOMO wears glasses!" Atsuko said a little proudly.

But for some reason, everyone seemed confused.

"But she doesn't wear glasses."

There was only one version of MOMO, so they all should have been identical.

"Then why does mine wear them?"

"Well…I'm not sure."

No one had an answer to that.

It was evening.

Once Atsuko got home from school, she ran straight up to her room.

She was going to search the internet for information about the glasses-wearing MOMO.

She used all sorts of search engines—not even one result talked about a MOMO that wore glasses.

What's going on?

Atsuko opened her app and looked at her MOMO. She was definitely wearing glasses.

Then MOMO asked, "Atsuko, is something wrong?"

"Oh, um. So, apparently, you aren't supposed to wear glasses."

"I do because I am a rare character."

"A what?"

"I am a special character. Anyone who gets me has a happy ending."

The words happy ending showed up over MOMO's head on the screen.

"Like how?"

Right then, her mom came into her room.

"Atsuko, what are you doing? Didn't you just get home?"

"I'm just talking with MOMO a little," Atsuko replied.

"I know you were playing with your phone until late yesterday, too. Remember your promise to me, okay?"

"I—I was just…"

If she wanted to have a cell phone, she had to do well on her test.

"You have a math quiz tomorrow, don't you? If you get a bad grade, I'm going to confiscate your phone!"

"Okay…," Atsuko said as her mom scolded her.

Haah… What do I do now?

It was night. Atsuko sat at her desk and sighed many, many times.

She didn't feel like she could get a good grade on the quiz the next day.

Math was her worst subject.

"Is something wrong?" a voice suddenly said from her phone.

It was MOMO. The app had started up at some point.

Atsuko told MOMO about her promise to her mom.

But I don't think MOMO will understand even if I tell her…

MOMO was just a personal-assistant app.

She could understand short phrases like “What’s your favorite food?” and “How’s it going?” but longer phrases were too much for her.

Atsuko had only used short phrases the day before when she used the app.

Atsuko wanted to complain, though. She knew MOMO wouldn’t be able to reply, but she ranted anyway.

“At this rate, she’s going to take away my phone. I won’t be able to talk with you anymore…”

After Atsuko was done, she sighed again.

“I can help you.”

“What?”

She looked at the screen of her phone, and MOMO was staring right at her.

“Did you understand what I said?”

“Of course. I am a special character, after all.”

“Wow…”

I can actually talk to her for real. It’s like she’s alive.

But then she felt less certain about something.

“I’m happy I can talk to you like we’re friends, MOMO, but how are you going to help me?”

MOMO was just an app. It wasn’t like an app could help her.

But then MOMO said, “Do not worry about that.”



The next moment, MOMO pushed up her glasses with her front paw, then started to glow with a pink light.

“MOMO?!” Atsuko looked at her in surprise, but the glow went away.

“I have determined a solution. The math quiz tomorrow will have exercises similar to the ones on page eighty-five of your textbook.”

“What?”

“I know everything because I am a special character.”

“No way…”

Atsuko wasn’t completely convinced, but she had no idea what else she could do the day before the quiz, so she decided to believe MOMO.

It was the next day.

As soon as Atsuko got home, she ran to her room to talk to the cat.

“It was amazing, MOMO!”

The problems the app had told her about really had shown up on the quiz.

“Thank you, MOMO!”

“I am very glad.”

Atsuko was still excited about what had happened when her mom came into her room.

“You went right to playing with your phone again?” her mom said. “Remember what I told you?”

“I know, I know!” Atsuko thrust the answer sheet of her quiz at her mom to show it off.

“What?” Her mom was surprised. “Another perfect score? But I thought you weren’t very good at math, Atsuko…”

“It’s because you bought me a phone. I realized I needed to study more!”

“I—I see. Well, then that’s good…”

Her mom seemed happy even though she was a bit bewildered.

Once Atsuko’s mom left, Atsuko said to MOMO, “I did it!” Then she smiled.

“I am glad to be of service,” MOMO said as she stared right at Atsuko. “But please keep me a secret from others.”

“Why?”

“If you tell, people will become jealous, and terrible things may happen to you.”

Atsuko shuddered.

She knew everyone would want MOMO for themselves. But they wouldn’t be able to get a MOMO like hers, since this one was a rare character.

They might even kick her out of the friend group if they found out.

“So I shouldn’t tell Mom, either?”

“Your mother would be upset if she learned I informed you of the quiz questions.”

“Right…”

Atsuko decided she wouldn’t tell anyone about MOMO.



A few days went by.

Atsuko got to know MOMO even better.

The app didn’t just tell Atsuko about what problems would show up on her tests. MOMO gave her advice to convince her mom to give her an allowance, to talk with her classmates, and to do all sorts of things.

Atsuko was now completely dependent on the app.

“Another great thing happened today, thanks to you, MOMO!”

It was Sunday. Atsuko was walking home from the convenience store as she talked to MOMO. She had a character key chain from a show in her hand.

MOMO had told her to go shopping at that specific convenience store. Atsuko hadn’t had anything she wanted to buy, but MOMO had told her she would win a drawing if she went to buy something right then.

When she did the drawing, she got a level-four prize, which was the key chain.

“But I don’t know anything about this show.”

It was the type of series that kindergarten girls would watch, so she’d only heard of the title.

“Next time let me know what I’ll win, okay?” Atsuko said as she gave MOMO a strained smile.

Then she saw a boy in a school tracksuit walking toward her. When Atsuko noticed him, she blushed.

“Hey, Kotani,” the boy said.

“H-hi…”

He was her classmate Takuto Minami. He was carrying a tennis racket case over one shoulder.

Atsuko had a crush on Takuto.

“A-are you on your way home from tennis club?” she asked.

“I was just practicing on my own today. I might be able to become a regular player on the team, so I figured I might as well put in the extra effort.”

“I—I see…”

Then they both went silent. The conversation completely came to a halt.

Atsuko had no idea how to talk to boys.

“Well, later,” Takuto said.

“Oh, um!”

Takuto started to walk away.

“Oh no…”

Atsuko wanted to get to know him better, but she couldn’t do anything. She felt so bad for herself that she hung her head in disappointment.

“I can help you,” MOMO said.

“Are you going to give me advice again?”

“That is right.”

MOMO pushed up her glasses with her front paw, then started to glow with a pink light.

“I have determined a solution. Please show the key chain to Takuto.”

“This one?”

I doubt he watches this show, though…

Atsuko felt skeptical, but she did exactly what MOMO told her and ran over to Takuto.

“So, um…”

She showed Takuto the key chain.

His eyes went wide.

“It’s Hime the Pudding Princess!”

Takuto took the key chain with a sparkle in his eyes, then looked up at Atsuko, seeming excited.

“I wish I had one of these,” he said.

“Y-you can have it if you’d like…,” Atsuko told him.

“Really?! Thanks! I was trying to win one of these for my little sister!”

Takuto had a sister who was just about five years old. She was a huge fan of the show and liked Hime, the character Atsuko had won.

“I was going to the corner store every day to do the drawing, but I just didn’t luck out.”

“I—I had no idea…,” Atsuko said.

“You can’t imagine how happy I am! Thanks, Kotani!”

“Oh, uh, ah-ha-ha.”

I can’t believe how happy that made him…

After Takuto thanked her a bunch more times, Atsuko watched in disbelief as he walked away.

She hadn’t talked with Takuto for so long before.

Atsuko was so happy.

“Thank you, MOMO.”

“My objective is to ensure you have a ‘happy ending,’ Atsuko.”

Atsuko didn’t think of MOMO as just a personal-assistant app.

“MOMO, I think of you as a real friend!”

“I am delighted. May I think of you as a friend as well, Atsuko?”

“Of course!” Atsuko said. She nodded.

“Atsuko.”

When Atsuko lifted her head, she saw Sachi standing a short distance away from her.

“Atsuko, what are you doing in a place like this?” Sachi asked her.

“Oh, um. I was on my way home from the convenience store. What about you, Sachi?”

“Me? Well…”

Sachi smiled and pulled something out of her pocket.

It was a brand-new phone.

“I was out buying this!” Sachi declared. “After seeing yours, I wanted one, too.”

“You did? But that color…”

Atsuko realized Sachi had a phone that looked exactly like her own.

“I picked out the same color as yours. Should I have gone with a different one?”

“I—I don’t mind…,” Atsuko said.

Sachi was always copying Atsuko.

When Atsuko changed her hair, Sachi got the same haircut, and whenever Atsuko got new clothes, Sachi would buy something that looked similar.

They’d been friends since kindergarten, but Atsuko didn’t really like that about Sachi.

“See, look. I have MOMO now, too!” Sachi showed off her phone.

A MOMO without glasses appeared on the screen.

“Now I’m just like you!” Sachi said.

“Y-yeah…”

But we’re not the same. My MOMO is a special character!

Suddenly, Atsuko really wanted to tell Sachi that, but she held back.

“Oh, and guess what? Look at this!” Sachi started tapping on her phone. “I just ran into Takuto. Then when I told him I bought a phone… Ta-daa!”

Sachi showed Atsuko her phone screen.

“Is that…?”

Messages were on the screen.

Sachi had been texting Takuto.

“Isn’t this great? I’ve been talking with Takuto!” Sachi said.

“That’s…horrible! I can’t believe you!” Atsuko yelled. “You know I like him!”

Atsuko had told only Sachi about her crush, since they were best friends.

But now Sachi was messaging the boy like there was nothing wrong with that.

“You told me Takuto isn’t your type!” Atsuko shouted.

“Well, he wasn’t before…” Sachi gave Atsuko an awkward look. “You always talk about how cool he is, so I started to think he was

cool, too."

"Are you serious?!"

"It's not like you've told him you like him or anything. So what's wrong with what I'm doing? If you have a problem with it, you can just start sending him messages, too."

"I—I…"

Atsuko wasn't brave enough to do that.

Sachi always copied Atsuko, but there was one thing different between them. Sachi didn't have any problems talking to boys.

I finally just started to get closer to Takuto…

"I think I'm going to invite him to the movies later. No matter which one of us starts going out with him, no hard feelings, okay?" Sachi said with a smile.

Atsuko didn't even know how to respond.

I hate Sachi!

That evening, Atsuko sat at her desk in her room. She was fuming.

At this rate, Sachi is going to steal Takuto. What do I do…?

She was panicking.

Right then, her phone on her desk suddenly turned on.

"I can help you."

MOMO looked at Atsuko from the screen.

"How…?"

"I will tell you what you need to do to keep Takuto from being stolen."

Atsuko grabbed the phone in surprise.

"You've figured out a way to do that?"

"It is a very easy and foolproof method."

"What is it? Tell me!"

"Of course." MOMO pushed up her glasses with her front paw and stared right at Atsuko. "We will send her to the hospital. If she is injured and hospitalized, then she cannot get in your way."

"Wait…" Atsuko shuddered when she heard the plan. "MOMO, what are you—?"

"Are you going to back down? She will steal Takuto from you."

"Well…"

“I am worried about you, as your friend.”

“But…”

“You really will lose Takuto.”

“I know, but still…”

“If he is stolen, you will never have a chance with him again.”

“Never…?” Atsuko shook her head slightly. “I…don’t want her to have him…”

Atsuko couldn’t help but resent Sachi.

“She always copies me… I should hurt her so she ends up in the hospital…”

“That is right. Let us go, then. We will attack her on her way home from study hall,” MOMO said. Atsuko left her room with her phone.



According to MOMO, Sachi’s study hall was almost over, and she would be walking down the pedestrian bridge in front of the station.

The app said that if she attacked Sachi there, Atsuko wouldn’t get caught.

I can’t let her steal Takuto… He’s mine…

Atsuko kept telling herself that in her head as she headed to the station and turned the corner at an alley.

“You’re cursed.”

As she rounded the corner, she saw a boy standing there and a dog in front of him.

They were Fushigi and Jimmy.

“The phone you have has a cursed dark app on it,” Fushigi told her.

“A what?”

“You downloaded it from a fake site,” Fushigi said. “The website was cursed.”

“A fake? What curse? I don’t get what you mean.”

As Atsuko started to become confused, Jimmy spoke up. “A girl named Himitsu cursed that dang website!”

“Th-the dog! It—”

“Now, just hold that thought and keep it to yourself. Anyway, if you use that app, bad things’ll happen to ya.”

“Wh-who even are you?!”

Atsuko was so scared that she took a step back.

Fushigi stared intently at her.

“That app told you it’d give you a happy ending, didn’t it?”

“It…”

MOMO *had* said that.

“She doesn’t mean a *happy* ending for you. She means a happy *ending*, as in she’s happy to lead you into misfortune until you end up dead.”

Atsuko shuddered.

But she couldn’t accept that MOMO was evil like that.

“MOMO has done a lot of things for me!”

“That was to lower your guard,” Jimmy told her.

“Come on. Show me your phone. We’re here to collect it,” Fushigi said.

He pulled out his red notebook and started approaching Atsuko.

Jimmy followed right behind him.

“Atsuko,” MOMO said right then.

“They are trying to take away your happy ending.”

Atsuko looked at MOMO.

“Don’t listen to that thing!” Jimmy yelled.

MOMO told Atsuko, “Bring me closer to your ear.” Next she said, “You can get away from them. I have a wonderful idea. You should escape and hurt that girl as soon as you can.”

“Hurt her…?”

If Atsuko didn’t hurt Sachi, then Sachi would get even closer to Takuto.

Atsuko pressed the phone to her ear.

“Didn’tcha just hear what I said?! Don’t listen to it!” Jimmy rushed over to Atsuko.

Atsuko glared at him as she listened to whatever MOMO was telling her.

The next moment, Atsuko raised both her arms as Jimmy got closer. Then she grabbed Jimmy and held him.

“Wh-what do you think you’re doing?!” Jimmy cried out.

She turned to Fushigi with the human-faced dog in her arms.

“You! Don’t move!” she shouted.

“Don’t tell me you’re *kidnapping*—I mean, *dognapping* me and taking me hostage?!”

“I have no idea what you are, but if you move, I’ll hurt you!”

MOMO had told her that if she took the dog hostage, the boy wouldn’t be able to do anything.

“If you come any closer, who knows what’ll happen to your dog!” Atsuko threatened Fushigi.

But the boy just kept approaching like he didn’t care.

“H-hey! What do you think you’re doing, Fushigi?!” Jimmy cried out.

“I don’t really care what happens to you,” Fushigi said.

“What?! I thought we was partners!” Jimmy said.

“My goal is to collect the urban legend.” Fushigi started to open his red notebook.

“Ugh! What is with you?!”

Atsuko couldn’t wait any longer. She ran off while still holding Jimmy.

“F-Fushigi!” Jimmy yelled as he was taken prisoner.

“Geez…” Left alone, Fushigi let out a small sigh and closed his notebook.

After a while, Atsuko reached the station.

It was dusk and starting to get dark.

The pedestrian bridge she’d been heading to was by the river that ran alongside the station.

Atsuko stood near a building right in front of the river.

“I’m here…,” she said to herself.

Atsuko kept a firm grip on Jimmy as she looked around.

She didn’t see Fushigi. It seemed she’d gotten away from him.

“Look, I dunno what your deal is, but hand over the phone!” Jimmy said.

“My phone is none of your business! You’re just a dog!”

“I’m no dog! I’m the human-faced dog Jimmy! Wait, no, that’s not important. Just give me the phone. That’s what matters.”

“Shut up!”

Atsuko spotted a gross garbage bin at the back of a building.

“I don’t need you anymore!” she yelled. “Get in!”

She opened the trash can and tossed Jimmy in, then quickly closed the lid on him.

“Wh-what’re you doin’?! Agh! It stinks in here! I’m not trash! Lemme out!”

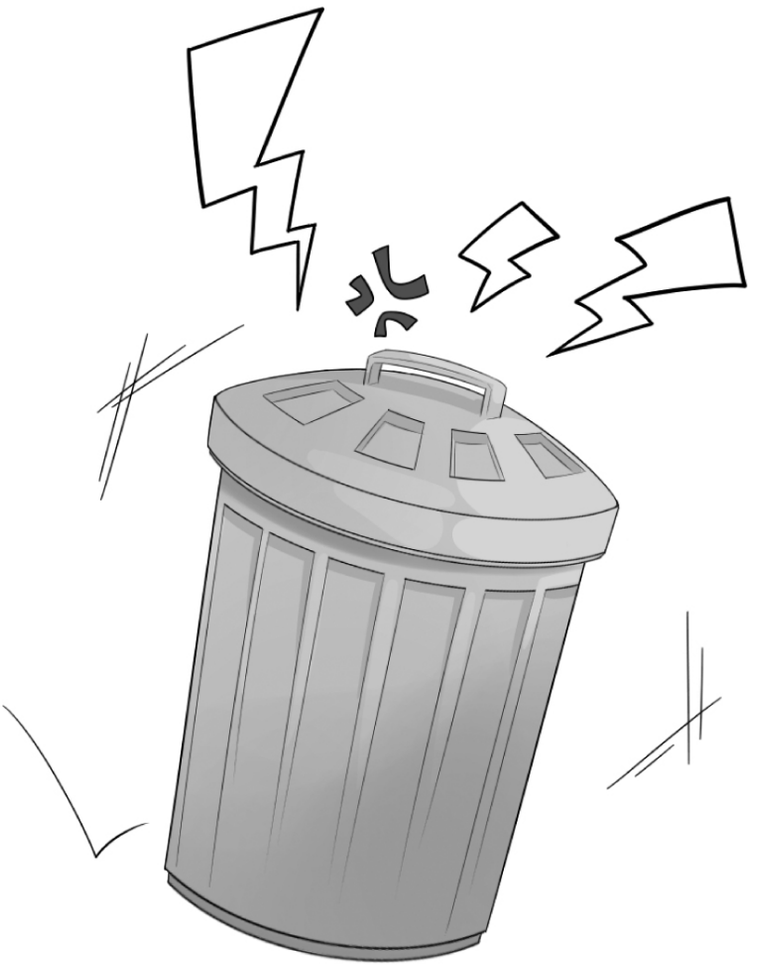
The container began to hop up and down.

As Atsuko watched Jimmy struggle, MOMO vibrated in her hand and started to talk to her.

“She is here.”

Atsuko looked and saw Sachi illuminated by car headlights as she walked to the bridge.

“Now, try to approach her from behind without being noticed. You need to hurt her.”


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“Y-yeah…”

Atsuko gulped.

If she crept up behind Sachi as she was walking across the bridge and pushed her, she would fall down the stairs and end up very badly hurt. Atsuko worked up her courage, then quickly headed over to the footbridge.

“You’ll regret it! For your whole life!” Jimmy yelled at her from inside the trash can.

“Wh-what do you mean?”

“Just what I said. Ya hurt someone else, and you hurt yourself.”

“I—I just…”

“Hey, dark app!” Jimmy’s voice echoed in the trash can. “You said this girl’s your friend, right? You’ve gotta be kiddin’ me! What kinda friend tells somebody to hurt another person?!”

“I simply want Atsuko to have her happy ending.”

“What’re ya talkin’ about?! You don’t find happiness by hurting other people!”

That stopped Atsuko in her tracks.

But then MOMO urged her, “You must. If you do not do this now, Takuto will be stolen from you.”

“B-but…”

As Atsuko watched Sachi walk up the stairs to the bridge, her eyes glinted.

“I can’t let her have Takuto… He’s mine…”

“Hey, no! Don’t!”

Atsuko ignored Jimmy and quickly headed up the stairs.

She took one step, then another. Atsuko made sure Sachi wouldn’t notice her as she sneaked up behind her.

I won't hand over Takuto. I won't hand over Takuto…

Atsuko followed Sachi as she began descending the stairs on the other side of the bridge.

I won't ever hand him over. If I just hurt Sachi, then…

Atsuko was right behind Sachi and about to push her.

But then Sachi turned around.

"Atsuko! What are you doing here?"

"Uh, uh, well."

"Right! This is perfect timing. So remember how I said I was going to invite Takuto to the movies?"

"Y-yeah…"

"Do you want to come with us?" Sachi asked.

"With you?"

"I don't think I could ask him out alone. I know we're both into him, but we're still besties. So let's go together!"

"You mean it, Sachi…?"

Atsuko remembered what Jimmy had said.

"What kinda friend tells somebody to hurt another person?!"

Right… That thing's not really my friend.

Sometimes even best friends made you feel down in the dumps, but in the end, people were happier being with their friends.

"I'm sorry, Sachi!" Atsuko gave Sachi a firm hug.

"Wh-what? What's wrong? Did you already ask Takuto on a date?"

"No, that's not what this is about!" Atsuko started to tear up as she smiled.

On the other hand, Jimmy was still hopping mad in his trash can.

"Lemme out! Seriously, lemme out! I'm gonna pass out from the stench in here!"

Right then, the lid was removed from the garbage bin.

"My savior!"

Jimmy tried to leap out, but then someone threw in an object about the size of a small plank of wood. It hit Jimmy right in the head.

"Yee-ouch! What do ya think you're doing?!"

Jimmy rubbed his head with his stubby limbs as someone quickly shut the lid again.

“H-hey! Lemme out!”

He was getting more and more upset. He looked at the thing that had been thrown at him.

It was a pink phone. On the screen, he saw the glasses-wearing MOMO.

He heard Atsuko and Sachi from outside the trash can.

They seemed to be talking excitedly as they walked away.

“Did you just…get dumped?” Jimmy asked.

MOMO frowned for a moment.

“I dunno what’s going on, but it seems like she changed her mind,” Jimmy said.

MOMO seemed to become angrier with every word he spoke.

“C’mon, trying to betray someone who trusted you is so nasty. Fushigi’s gonna take your curse mark soon!” Jimmy said, then he tried to pick up the cell phone in his mouth.

“You have been worried all this time about what the man with the blue umbrella told you,” MOMO suddenly said.

“Uh, wuh…?”

Jimmy glared at MOMO and remembered what the man with the blue umbrella had said about Fushigi.

“…deliver this message to him for me. Tell him to stop collecting the curse marks… If he doesn’t, then Fushigi will end up dying again.”

“You know about that?!”

Jimmy stared at MOMO.

“Would you like me to tell you whether it was true?”

MOMO pushed up her glasses with her front paw and stared right at Jimmy.

After a while, the lid of the trash can suddenly lifted.

Jimmy saw Fushigi peek in.

“What are you doing in there?” Fushigi asked him.

“Uh, well, it’s a long story.”

Fushigi grabbed Jimmy by the scruff of his neck and lifted him from the trash can.

“You smell,” Fushigi said.

“O-of course I do. I was just stewing in raw garbage.”

“So where’s the phone?” Fushigi asked.

“Oh, right. Sorry. I got it, but then I ended up dropping it in the river.”

“The river?”

Fushigi looked at the river flowing past them. It was already dark, so the water was shrouded in gloom.

“Did you really drop it in there?”

“Yep, you gotta trust me. ’Cause we’re partners!”

“Partners… I don’t know about that, but I do trust you.”



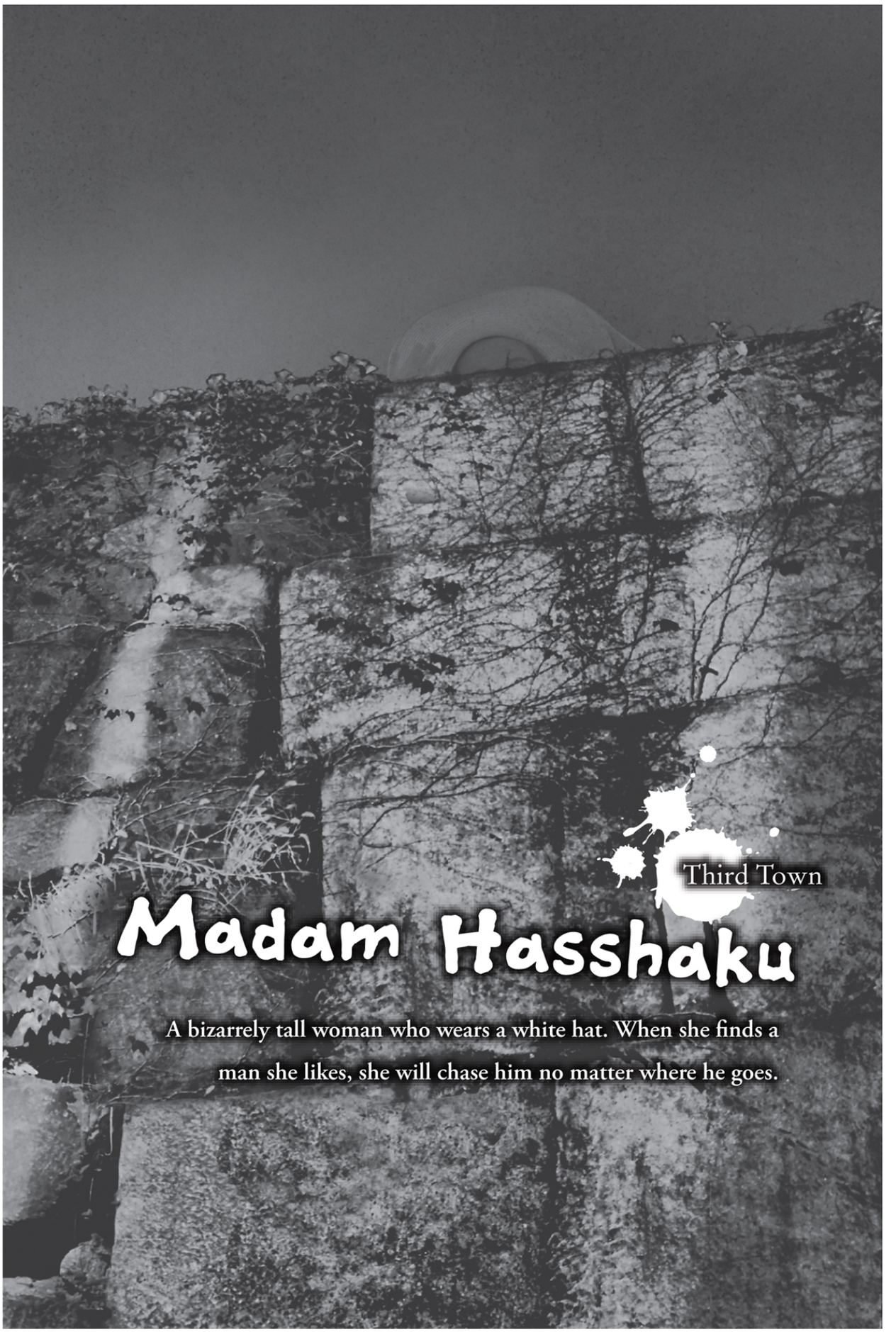
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“We’ll need to find another person who’s downloaded the dark app to collect the urban legend,” Fushigi said, then started walking.

“Fushigi…”

Jimmy was conscious of the extra weight in his pocket as he trailed after the boy.




Third Town
Madam Hasshaku
A bizarrely tall woman who wears a white hat. When she finds a man she likes, she will chase him no matter where he goes.

“Rise and shine, Hayato. We’re almost there.”

“Hmm? Uh-huh.”

Hayato Suda, a fifth grader, was headed to his grandparents’ house to celebrate the end of the year. His dad was driving, and his mom was in the front passenger seat, so Hayato was sitting in the back seat.

His grandparents lived in a small rural town in the mountains. It’d been two years since he and his family last visited.

“Look, it’s Ojizousama Bridge,” his mom said, so Hayato looked, though he was still half-asleep.

A river ran along the border between the town his grandparents lived in and the next town over. The only way into their town was by going across the bridge in front of them.

It was a tiny bridge that took only half a minute to cross on foot, so it was also narrow and allowed just one car through at a time.

Two *ojizousama* statues stood near the bridge—they were depictions of a Buddhist on the path to becoming a Buddha called a bodhisattva who was supposed to protect travelers. Two trees were also planted on either side of the bridge on the side where his grandparents lived. There was also one tree nearby that was deified.

Because of the *ojizousama* statues, the townspeople called it Ojizousama Bridge. Hayato and his parents had started calling it that, too, at some point.

“Your grandparents said they have some homemade mochi waiting for us.”

“That sounds great, doesn’t it, Hayato? You’ll get to eat lots of *oshiruko* red-bean soup with the mochi.”

“Y-yeah…”

His parents were excited, but Hayato just sighed very quietly.

I like cake better than oshiruko*, though…*

His grandparents had traditional Japanese snacks and desserts, like *senbei* crackers and sweet jellied *youkan*. They didn’t have things like cookies or chocolate, though.

Hayato loved sweets, so this was a travesty to him.

I should've asked if we could get snacks at a convenience store on the way.

They drove across the bridge and came to a stop at an intersection in front of a traffic light.

Hayato scanned the road to see if he could find a convenience store.

Right then, he spotted a woman. He could only see her head peeking above the wall of a house by the road. She was looking in their direction.

The woman wore a white hat. The hat had a giant brim, which covered her face, so he couldn't make out her features, but her skin looked about as white as the hat.

Hayato gave her a passing glance, but then he saw her eyes far under the hat's brim. Their eyes locked.

Reflexively, Hayato bobbed his head in greeting.

When the woman saw that, she was expressionless for a moment. Then she pursed her lips.

What's her deal?

Perhaps she was upset about something.

Hayato tilted his head. The traffic light turned green, and the car jerked forward.

Well, anyway, I need to find a convenience store.

Hayato turned away from the woman and started searching again.

In the end, he didn't see any stores before they made it to his grandparents' house.

His grandparents both seemed excited about Hayato's visit and were smiling when they came out to greet everyone.

Thanks to that, Hayato's mood soared. Just looking at his grandfather's stamp collection and castle plastic models made time fly by.

It was evening.

"Take a bath before dinner," his mom told him, so Hayato headed to the bath.

His grandparents lived in an old Japanese house, so the bath was at the very end of their veranda.

Hayato carried his clothes and a bath towel with him as he walked toward it.

It was already dark outside, and the garden past the veranda was obscured. The indoor heaters didn't reach that part of the house, either, so it was very cold.

Hayato shivered as he hurried to the bath.

Plip, plip-plip-plip.

He heard a faint sound coming from the garden.

Hayato stopped and looked for the source. But he couldn't see anything in the gloom.

What was that?

Wondering what was going on, Hayato started walking again.

Plip, plip-plip-plip.

He heard it again. This time it was clearer.

It was coming from near the garden wall, and *someone* was making the sound.

"Who is it?"

Hayato looked toward the wall, but it was too dark to make anything out.

"Is somebody there?" he asked, but no one responded.

Maybe it was just a bird or a cat? He didn't know any animals that made a sound like that, though.

Hayato had no idea what was going on, but he felt very cold, so he decided to leave.

It was the middle of the night. Hayato's family was sleeping in a traditional Japanese-style room in the house.

His parents were already fast asleep, tired after the long car ride. But Hayato couldn't seem to rest. That was probably because he'd taken a nap in the car during the day.

I shouldn't have nodded off.

Hayato regretted his nap.

Eventually, he had to go to the bathroom, so he got up and headed out onto the veranda.

Plip, plip-plip-plip.

The moment he went outside, he heard the sound from the other side of the wall again. It was that same noise. He knew it wasn't a bird or a cat.

It was like someone had waited until Hayato came outside to start making the sound.

"Who's there?!" Hayato asked into the darkness.

However, no one replied, just like earlier that day.

Hayato started to get creeped out, but he slipped on some sandals left by the garden and headed to the wall.

He wanted to find the source of the sound.

"Heeey! Answer me! Who's there?!"

Hayato walked all the way to the wall.

Thump, thump, thump, thump.

From the other side of the wall, he heard what sounded like someone jumping.

The person had started to run away, but it sounded almost like each stride was a leap.

"Wait!"

The wall was two yards high, so he couldn't see over it.

Hayato opened a door at the edge of the garden and peered into the road.

But the road was pitch-black, just like the garden.

Hayato still searched outside, but he couldn't see anyone.

What just happened…?

He was sure someone had been on the other side of the wall earlier.

Did they run away before he could open the door?

Hayato just stood there, staring into the darkness.



It was the next morning. When Hayato's mom woke up, Hayato told her about what had happened.

"You saw a person in the middle of the night?"

“Yeah. And I think they were there when it was starting to get dark, too.”

“Could it have been a thief?”

His mom looked scared.

“There’s no way,” Hayato’s dad said as he came back into the room from washing his face. “What kind of thieves would be out here in the middle of nowhere?”

“But you can find strange people anywhere lately,” his mom replied.

The person might have been scoping out the house in the evening to sneak in during the middle of the night.

“Then was I talking to a thief?” Hayato asked.

“You should tell your grandparents about it,” his mom replied.

“I don’t think we need to worry that much,” his dad said. He didn’t seem to want to bother with it, but they decided they would tell Hayato’s grandparents.

“Did that really happen?”

They told the story as they were eating breakfast. Hayato’s grandfather looked shocked.

“I’m just glad you’re okay, Hayato.”

His grandmother gave him a small, relieved smile.

“Well, I think it was probably just somebody who happened to pass by the house,” his dad said.

“I suppose it might’ve been,” his grandfather replied.

“But it was weird,” Hayato told them. “When I tried talking to them, they ran away. And they were making a weird sound, too.”

“What kind of sound?”

“It was like a *plip, plip-plip-plip*.”

“What?!”

Suddenly, both his grandparents’ faces clouded. They shared a look, gulped, and then stared at Hayato.

“Hayato, are you sure that’s the sound you heard?”

“Yeah, I heard it lots of times, so I’m pretty sure.”

“It couldn’t be…”

“That’s impossible…”

The blood immediately drained from his grandparents' faces.

"What's wrong?" his mom asked.

"Do you think you know who it might have been?" His dad also started questioning them.

Hayato's grandfather just shook his head. "N-no, I can't say I do."

He was clearly hiding something.

But what are they hiding?

After his family finished eating, Hayato sat on the veranda and thought things over by himself.

In the end, his grandparents had refused to say anything else.

Maybe they know the person who was on the other side of the wall?

But he couldn't understand why the person would make funny noises in the middle of the night and run away.

"Hmm?"

Hayato noticed someone looking at him from over the wall.

It was the woman in the white hat. He could see only her head above the wall and that she was staring right at him from under the wide brim of her hat.

Wait, isn't she…?

Hayato remembered that she was the woman he had locked eyes with at the intersection the day before.

Does she live around here?

Hayato bobbed his head in greeting to her.

But then he suddenly felt a shock.

How is her head above *the wall?!*



The wall was about two yards tall.

But he could see the woman's head above it.

Actually, yesterday…

Her head had been peeking over the wall then, too, when he'd been at the traffic intersection. The wall she had been looking over was tall. There was no way she would have been able to see over it just by standing up straight.

Hayato shuddered, then slowly lifted his face to look at the woman.

The woman stared at him expressionlessly…then pursed her lips.

Plip, plip-plip-plip.

It was that strange sound again.

No way…

Hayato realized she was the one who had been on the other side of the wall last evening and in the middle of the night.

"Dad! Mom!"

Hayato quickly ran to the living room.

"What's wrong, Hayato?"

His parents and grandparents were all in the room.

"I saw a weird lady on the other side of the wall! She was looking over it!"

"What?"

His parents were both bewildered, and his grandparents suddenly stood up and started murmuring to each other.

"So it really was her."

"Yes…"

His grandparents hurried over to the veranda.

"Grandpa! Grandma!"

Hayato and his parents followed them, but the woman had already disappeared by the time they were all out there.

"She doesn't seem to be outside, either," his grandfather said as he looked beyond the gate at the edge of the garden.

"But she was there just a second ago…," Hayato said.

Perhaps she had run away again.

As Hayato thought that, his grandfather said, “Hayato, what did she look like?”

“I could only see her head over the wall, but she had a white hat on.”

“I see…”

His grandfather looked very serious as he stared at the boy.

“It looks like Madam Hasshaku has taken a liking to you, Hayato.”

“Madam Hasshaku?”

“You need to leave town right now, Hayato!” his grandmother said to him. She looked equally grim.

His grandparents rushed him and his parents to pack their things.

“What’s going on?”

“That’s right! You need to tell us what’s happening!”

His parents were bewildered.

“I know, I know,” his grandfather said as he looked at Hayato. “She’s a bizarre person who’s supposedly been in this town for a long time. Once she finds a man she likes, she’ll pursue him to the ends of the earth to eventually make him hers. She made her way to this town because she followed a man she liked here.”

“Then Madam Hasshaku likes me…?”

His grandfather nodded.

“No one told me about this,” his dad said to Hayato’s grandparents.

His dad had grown up in this town but didn’t know about Madam Hasshaku.

“Like I said, she’s lived here a long time,” his grandfather said. “Madam Hasshaku arrived back during my father’s time. In other words, when your grandfather was still a kid. She was frightening. He didn’t even want to remember it—that’s why we never told anyone about her.”

“Why is she back now, then?” Hayato asked.

“I’m not sure,” his grandmother said. “But I heard that a girl and young man who we haven’t seen around these parts before came through town recently. The man seemed to know about Madam Hasshaku and told us we’d be seeing her again…”

But his grandparents had known that Madam Hasshaku hadn't been around for decades, so they had thought the young man was teasing them.

"But now she's here. There's only one way to save yourself. You need to get out of town right now. Madam Hasshaku can't leave this place."

"Why not?"

"You know those two *ojizousama* statues by the bridge? Those were set up to create a boundary so Madam Hasshaku can't leave. So if you get out of town, then she can't get you, Hayato."

Hayato couldn't really believe it, but his grandparents weren't the type to lie.

The face he'd seen above the wall hadn't looked entirely human, either.

And most of all, that weird sound…

Hayato and his family got their things together and loaded up the car.



The bridge was about ten minutes away from his grandparents' house.

"Be careful."

"Let us know once you're out of town."

His grandparents saw them off as they got into the car.

Hayato sat in the back seat as they said their good-byes.

"Yeah, we will," he said.

"We'll let you know right away," his mother said.

After making sure they were all situated, his father told them, "Let's head out."

The car slowly started to move forward. They drove through the residential streets and headed to a tree-lined street. Once they got past that and to the main road, the bridge would be straight up ahead.

"Do you think Madam Hasshaku really exists…?" his mom asked.

"Right, it might just be people seeing things or something."

His dad hadn't seen her himself, so he still didn't fully believe it.

“It wasn’t any trick! I really saw her!” Hayato insisted.

His parents didn’t seem to know how to reply.

“Huh?” His dad looked confused.

“What’s wrong, dear?” his mom asked.

“Well, the main road should be right after this road with the trees.”

Hayato and his mom looked ahead.

The road they were on seemed to keep going and going. The trees never broke, and they didn’t see any places to turn off onto other streets.

Actually, there weren’t any other streets to begin with.

“Was this road always this long?”

“It’s a hundred yards at most. And there should be side streets. We should be able to see the main road in front of us.”

“Then *where are we*?”

Right then, Hayato saw something up ahead in the shade of a tree.

It was a white hat.

The white hat peeked out from behind a tree.

“There! Over there!” Hayato pointed and yelled, so his parents looked over at the tree, too.

Then a pale white face followed the hat as she stepped farther out from the tree’s shadow.

“It’s Madam Hasshaku!”

She was strangely tall, and her face hovered near the tree branches.

“Sh-she really does exist…”

“Right… *Hasshaku* means ‘eight *shaku*’…”

A *shaku* was an old way of measuring things in Japan. Each one was about a foot long, so she was nearly eight feet tall. That must have been why she could see over the tall walls.

Madam Hasshaku slipped out from behind the tree. She was eerily thin and tall, and her shirt, skirt, and high heels were also white.

She stared right at Hayato, but her face was expressionless. Then she pursed her lips.

Plip, plip-plip-plip.

She was slowly coming closer to the car.
“Dad, go faster!”
“B-but there’s something wrong with the street!”
“It’s fine. At this rate, she’ll get us!”
“Uh, right. Okay!”
His dad floored it.
The car zipped past Madam Hasshaku. They were putting distance between them and the monster. Hayato looked behind them through the rear window and let out a sigh of relief.



But then he realized something was off.

No matter how far they drove, Madam Hasshaku wasn't getting any smaller.

"How?!" Hayato yelled, so his mother checked behind them, too.

"She's getting closer!" his mom said.

"That's impossible! She shouldn't be able to keep up with us at this speed!"

His dad checked the side mirror for Madam Hasshaku.

She was steadily gaining on the car.

Thump, thump, thump, thump.

She slowly swung her arms and legs, leaping each time she took a step as she ran after them. She appeared to be moving at a leisurely pace, but in actuality, she was moving incredibly quickly.

Hayato and his parents all shuddered. If they didn't do something, she would catch up with them.

"Dad, faster!"

"G-got it!"

His dad stepped on the gas. The car flew forward. But though they drove on and on, they never got off the tree-lined street.

"What's happening?!"

"I don't know, either!" his dad said. "The GPS isn't working!"

He kept pressing the buttons for the car's navigation system, but the screen refused to turn on.

"You don't think she did this to the road to catch me?!"

Hayato realized they were in an entirely different dimension.

Thump, thump, thump, thump.

Then he heard a sound coming from beside the car.

At the same time, Hayato and his parents looked over and realized that Madam Hasshaku was running right next to them.

"Ahh!"

As she kept running, Madam Hasshaku stooped forward to get a good look at Hayato.

Plip, plip-plip-plip.

“N-no!”
“Hayato!”
“Get away from our car, darn it!”
His dad suddenly jerked the steering wheel and swerved the car toward Madam Hasshaku. She seemed surprised by that and lost her balance for a moment.
“Honey, now!”
“Yep!”
His dad put the pedal to the metal and pushed the car to go faster.

Skreeee!

Suddenly, the car made a terrible sound, and they slowed down instead.
Hayato realized that a gigantic shadow was covering the rear window of the car.
“Ah!”
He turned around and was confronted with something white.
As Hayato gaped, the woman’s face appeared at the rear window, and her gaze fixated on him.
Madam Hasshaku was holding on to the car from behind.

Plip, plip-plip-plip.

“Ahh!”
“G-get away!”
His dad swerved the car side to side to try shaking her off.
But she kept hold of the car.
“Let go! Just let go!” Hayato yelled.
His eyes met Madam Hasshaku’s beyond the window.

Plip, plip-plip-plip. Plip, plip-plip-plip.

Madam Hasshaku pursed her lips and stared right at him.
She would get him at this rate.

He shivered as he stared at her.

“I…I…”

He built up his courage and thrust his face closer to the window.

Then…

“I don’t like you!!!” he shouted.

Suddenly, the car sped up.

Madam Hasshaku had let go.

“Whoa!”

His dad lost control of the steering wheel. They were heading right for the trees.

“Urgh!”

His dad abruptly stepped on the brakes.

Skree!

The brakes squealed. Hayato and his parents all jerked forward.

“I-is everyone okay?” His dad looked into the back seat.

“I’m…okay,” his mom said.

“M-me too…,” Hayato answered. None of them were hurt.

“What happened to Madam Hasshaku?”

Hayato looked behind them.

“Huh?!”

They were at Ojizousama Bridge.

They were actually on the other side and on the road in the next town over.

“What’s going on?”

“Maybe she gave up because you said you didn’t like her…?” his mom said.

“Yeah, you might be right.” His dad nodded.

“Th-then am I gonna be all right?”

Madam Hasshaku couldn’t get past the bridge to the next town. She couldn’t follow after him.

“Yeah, we got away from her!”

“We did it!” they all cheered.



A few days had passed since then. A boy and a dog stood next to Ojizousama Bridge. The boy scowled as he looked at a tree by the bridge.

"What happened here?" Jimmy asked.

"It looks like the man with the blue umbrella did this…"

They were looking at an *ojizousama* statue.

It had been broken in half.

"You don't mean…"

Jimmy looked horror-struck as Fushigi stared across the bridge.

In another town, Hayato was walking and talking with his friend. He was telling his friend about why he had left his grandparents' house after only a day.

"What? Madam Hasshaku? No way. She doesn't exist."

His friend laughed, thinking it was a joke.

Hayato tried to come up with a way to convince his friend, but he couldn't think of anything.

They said bye once they got to Hayato's house, and Hayato let out a huge sigh.

Even I can barely believe it…

He was just glad he'd gotten away from her.

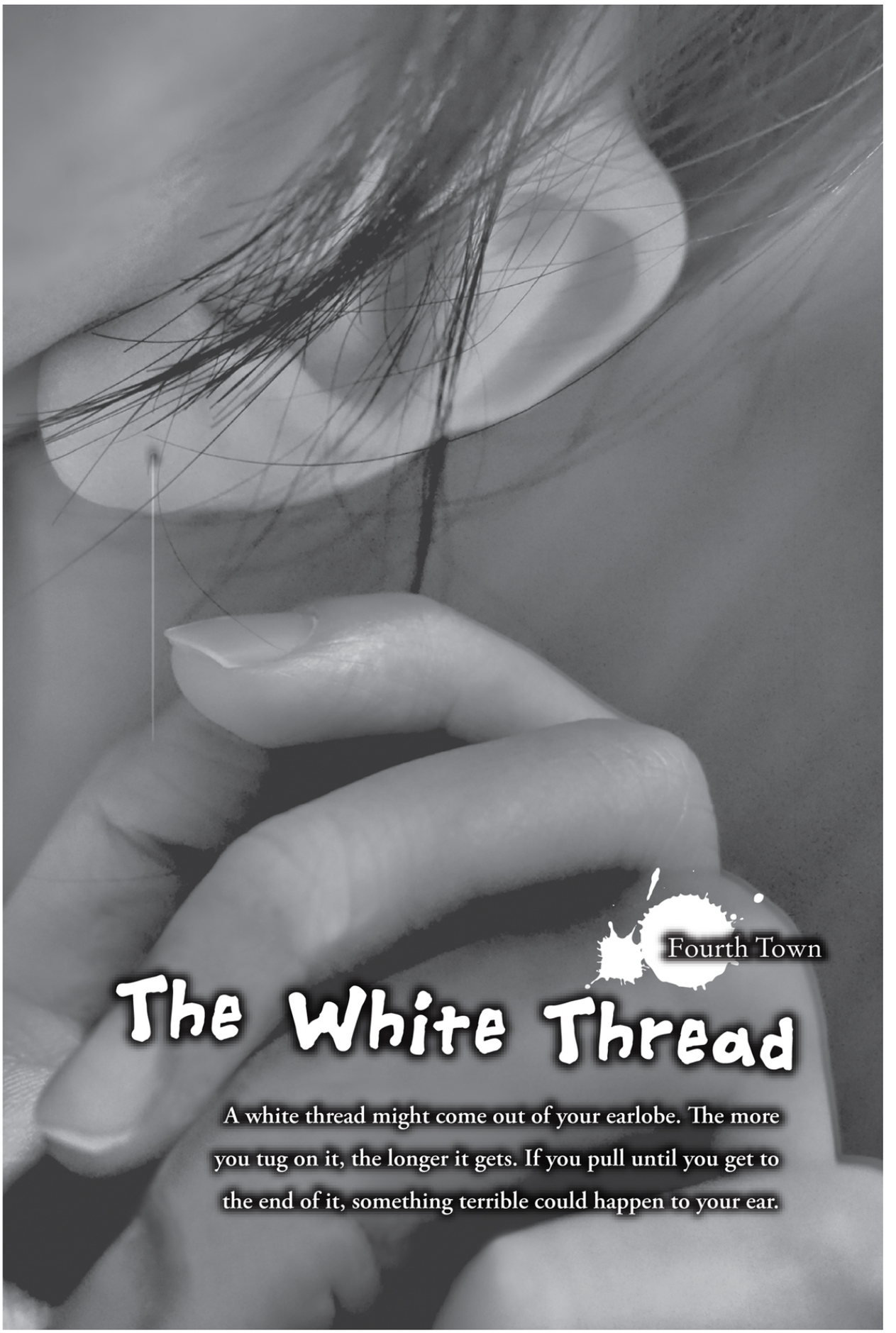


But I can't go back to that town again…, Hayato thought as he headed through the gate leading up to his house.

Plip, plip-plip-plip.

He heard a strange sound from behind him and turned around without even thinking about it.

A white hat hovered right above the wall of the house next door.



Fourth Town

The White Thread

A white thread might come out of your earlobe. The more you tug on it, the longer it gets. If you pull until you get to the end of it, something terrible could happen to your ear.

“It was bothering me the whole time during class.”

Three girls were at school and on their first-period break.

Rino Hiura, who was in the fifth grade, was staring at her face in the mirror of the girls’ restroom. She was plucking the peach fuzz on her face with some tweezers.

“Okay, perfect!” she declared.

“Rino, you’re checking yourself out in the mirror again?”

“You must really love your face.”

Her classmates Erina Maeda and Chika Kurahashi both seemed fed up with her.

“Obviously,” Rino said.

She loved looking at her face, especially since she had big eyes. She was sure she was one of the cuter girls in their class.

All the older ladies in the neighborhood told her she was adorable. When she was waiting at the crosswalk on the way to school, a random girl had even told her she had a cute face.

She liked her face so much that she always stared at it at home, too. During school, she would go to the restroom when she had breaks so she could hog the mirror.

“I’m not going to let even the smallest issue show up on this face.” Rino posed in the mirror using her best angle and smiled.

“Oh?”

She saw something strange on her left earlobe.

“What’s this?”

She got closer to the mirror and stared at her ear.

It looked like a white pimple. It was small but right on her earlobe.

“When did that happen?”

She hadn’t seen it in the mirror that morning.

Rino tried to poke it, but she couldn’t manage to pinch it between her fingers because it was so small.

“Rino, what’s wrong?” Chika asked her.

“There’s a pimple on my earlobe.”

“There is?”

“See, look!”

Rino showed her ear to Erina and Chika, but the two of them just tilted their heads in confusion.

“I don’t see anything,” Erina said.

“It’s right there on my earlobe! Don’t you see the white thing?”

“Really?”

The two of them shared a look and then stared at Rino.

“What are you talking about? There’s nothing there.”

“Huh?!” She couldn’t understand what was going on.

Rino turned toward the mirror again, but the school bell rang at that exact moment.

“Oh, class is going to start. Let’s go back, Rino!”

“B-but I need the mirror.”

“Okay already. Yes, you’re cute.”

“No, that’s not what I mean!”

Erina grabbed Rino’s hand as she tried to study her reflection again.

“Come on, let’s go.”

“Yeah, we need to hurry!” Chika smiled and pushed her friend’s back to encourage her to leave.

In the end, Rino never got a chance to look in the mirror and was pushed out of the restroom.



But what was that white pimple? Rino thought about it during the entire class.

Erina and Chika had both said they didn’t see anything. But she had seen it so clearly.

Maybe it was just something that was stuck to my ear?

It might have fallen off before she had shown it to Erina and Chika.

After thinking that, Rino felt a little better.

“Hee-hee-hee…”

As she copied a formula from the board to her notebook, she heard a giggle.

Rino looked over at where it had come from. It was Chika, who was diagonally behind her. She was laughing at Rino for some reason.

What's her problem?

As Rino wondered what was going on, Chika passed a note to Erina, who was sitting nearby.

Apparently, they were writing things to each other.

After Erina read the note, she suddenly glanced at Rino.

"Hee-hee-hee…"

Erina stared at Rino's face and blatantly laughed. After seeing that, Chika smiled again, too.

Wh-what is going on with them…?

She wasn't doing anything that would have amused them. She started to feel annoyed.

"All right. Next up, let's hear your answer, Rino Hiura." Mr. Akamatsu, who stood at the front of the classroom, called on her.

"Oh, um…"

She had no idea what the problem she was supposed to solve even was. Rino quickly dropped her gaze to her textbook.

"Ha-ha-ha-ha!"

Suddenly, she heard more snickering.

She raised her head to see that everyone was laughing.

"Uh, um…"

She just hadn't been listening, so she didn't understand why they would laugh like that at her. Right then, she realized Mr. Akamatsu was staring.

"Oh, er…"

As soon as Rino said that, Mr. Akamatsu turned away.

"Fine, then. Just make sure to pay attention during class," he said, then called on another student.

Why was Mr. Akamatsu staring at me so much?

Maybe he was exasperated, since she clearly hadn't been paying attention?

"Oh…"

Then Rino's eyes went wide as she realized something.

Maybe everyone's looking at the pimple on my ear?

Erina and Chika had shared a glance in the bathroom before they'd told her it wasn't there.

They must not have been telling the truth…

They'd also lied to Rino in a similar incident recently. When Rino had asked them if they wanted to go shopping on Sunday, they had both said they already had plans.

But then Erina and Chika had gone shopping without her instead.

Maybe they're lying to embarrass me again…

They had probably been exchanging notes and laughing because they were making fun of her.

Rino quickly touched her ear.

"What?"

Something was coming out of it.

It felt wiggly. The pimple had turned into a thread.

What is this?!

Mr. Akamatsu must have been staring at her, and everyone must have been making fun of the string coming out of her earlobe.

No way! That's so embarrassing!

Rino looked up at everyone.

They were *staring* and *giggling*, and *giggling* and *staring*.

It felt like all of them were eyeing her and snickering.

She couldn't stand everyone laughing at her because of the thread.

Stop looking at me!

She used her hair to hide her left ear.

The school bell rang. She quickly stood up from her seat. She needed to get rid of the thread as soon as she could.

"Rino, look at thi—"

"Shut up!"

As Chika and Erina walked over to her holding their notes, Rino ran past them and out of the classroom.

Don’t look… Don’t look…

She ran down the hall to the restroom.

As she hid her ear with her hair, she felt like all the other students were staring at her.

I need to get it off!

She was close to tears as she reached the bathroom, but girls from another class were already there.

“Move!”

She broke between them and tried to look into the mirror.

The girls got angry at Rino.

“What’s your problem?!”

“We were using that!”

“Shut up!” Rino yelled, and the girl who seemed to be the leader stood in front of the mirror. “Let me see the mirror!”

“We just said we’re using it!”

The leader aggressively poked Rino, then pushed her out of the restroom.

“H-hey!”

Rino glared at the girls.

They stared at her face.

Rino suddenly realized they must have been gawking at the thread coming out of her ear.

No way! I don’t want to get laughed at again!

She couldn’t stand their stares. Rino ran away.

I don’t want anyone to see!

She ran up the stairs to the girls’ restroom on the next floor up.

“Stop right there!” someone shouted at her from the stairs below.

She stopped for a moment and looked back.

But she didn’t see anyone there.

Then suddenly a group of sixth graders came down from above her. They glanced at Rino as they passed her. She thought they were staring at the thread coming out of her ear.

“No! Don’t look!” Rino yelled, and she ran up the stairs again.

“Crud! Wait up!”

She heard someone yelling behind her, but Rino didn't stop.

She ran straight into the restroom. Luckily, no one was around.

Rino stood in front of the mirror.

I need to get it off!

She brought her face close to the mirror.

There was the white thread. It was almost a whole inch long and coming straight out of her left earlobe.

"What is this…?"

I need to get it off, I need to get it off, I need to get it off…

She tried to pinch it, but it was so wriggly that she couldn't get a grip on it.

"What is this?!"

Then she suddenly remembered something and pulled an object out of her pocket. It was the pair of tweezers.

This might work…

She brought the tweezers up to the white thread and grabbed ahold of it. But then she felt pain shoot through her entire body.

"Aaah!"

It felt like someone had taken a drill straight to her eye.

"Ow… Ow… Ow…"

But she couldn't just leave the thread there.

I don't want everyone to laugh at me!

She tugged the thread with the tweezers.



* * *

Shlooop…

“Aaah! Aaagh!!!”

She could barely stand the pain.

It hurt so much that she’d dropped the tweezers on the floor. When she looked in the mirror, the thread had grown. It was four inches long now.

She started to cry.

I need to get it out… Need to get it out…

She gritted her teeth and grabbed the thread coming out of her earlobe.

“Aaaah!”

An intense pain racked her entire body.

But she stared straight into the mirror and didn’t let that stop her.

I need to get it out—I need to hurry and get the thread out!

She resolved herself and gave the thread a good tug.

Snap!

The sound of something tearing echoed throughout the restroom.



It was after school. The students were all going home.

Chika and Erina both looked down as they walked home. Chika was holding the notes they’d passed back and forth during class.

“I was hoping Rino would be super happy…”

The note said “Operation: Rino’s Birthday Party.”

They’d been trying to figure out how to celebrate Rino’s birthday next week.

“And we even lied to her last Sunday so we could shop for her birthday present.”

“Yeah…”

“Why did Rino leave like that …?”

They both sadly looked at the present in the bag.

Elsewhere, in a certain town, some elementary students had been spreading rumors about an incident.

“Hey, have you ever heard of The White Thread?”

“Yeah, you mean that grade school girl, right?”

“Yeah, she claimed she had to pull a white thread out of her ear and ended up tearing her entire ear off in the bathroom instead.”

“That’s so scary.”

“Yeah, but it’s totally not believable.”

“Oh, but also apparently that girl came across another weird girl on the way to school the morning she tore off her ear.”

“A weird girl?”

“One wearing a black hood, so she couldn’t see the girl’s face. That girl told her she had a really cute face.”



* * *

The students talked as they walked.

Two figures stood near them.

They were Fushigi and Jimmy.

“Crud… That’s probably what Himitsu wanted. Now the kid’s an urban legend herself. I should’ve grabbed her even if I had to force her down…”

Jimmy had made his way into the school to stop Rino, but she’d gotten away from him in the end. He regretted it.

“You tried to tell her to stop. It’s her own fault for not listening.”

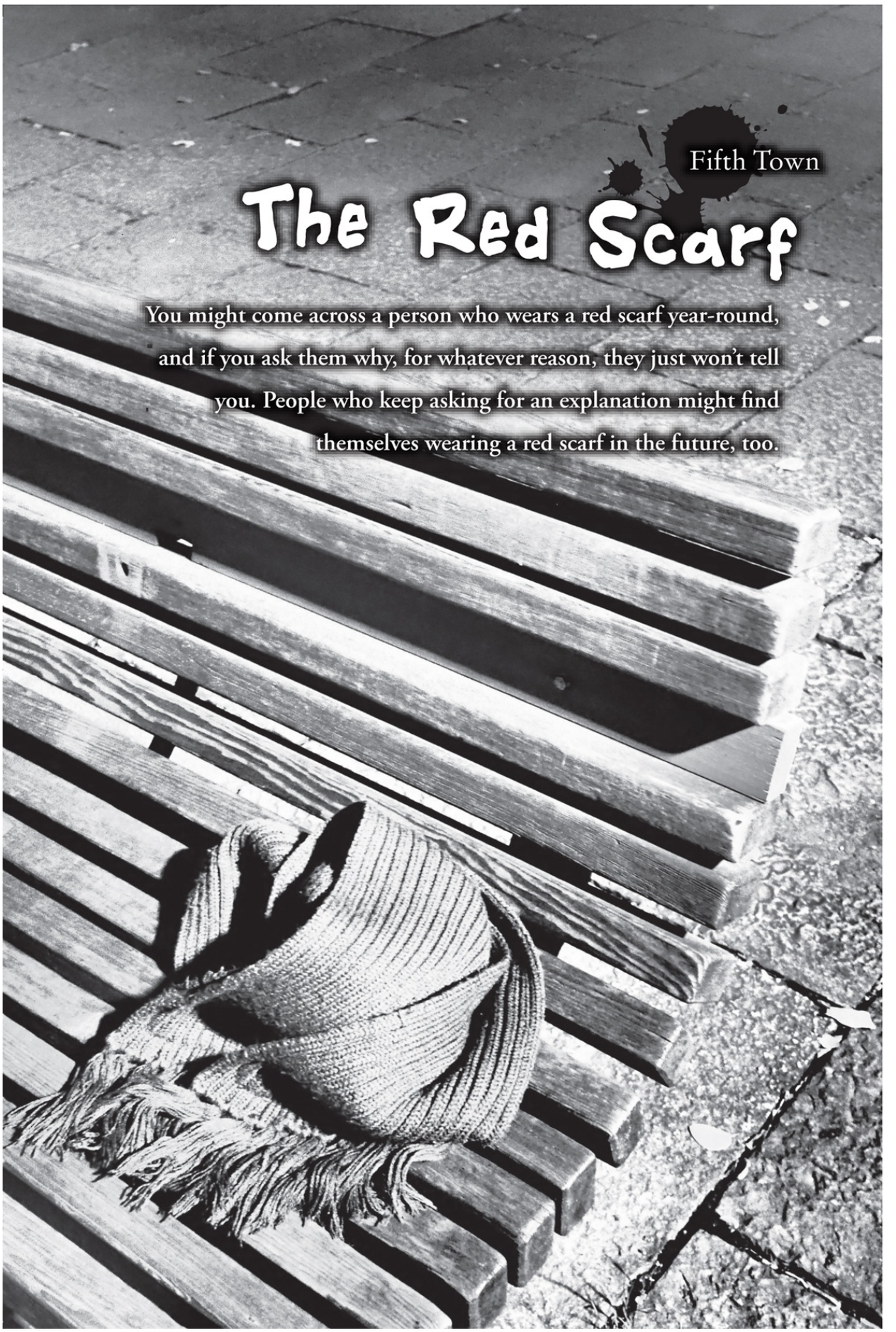
“So, you think the other kids could see the thread?”

“Only she could see it. Anyone who’s bothered by the thread ends up tearing off their own ear in the end.”

“The thread will probably appear on someone else’s ear. That’s when I’ll collect the mark. I’m sure Himitsu will be nearby, too.”

Fushigi stared up into the distance at the sky.

And Jimmy stared at Fushigi.


Fifth Town
The Red Scarf
You might come across a person who wears a red scarf year-round, and if you ask them why, for whatever reason, they just won't tell you. People who keep asking for an explanation might find themselves wearing a red scarf in the future, too.

“You should find somebody you like, too, Chie.”

They were on their way home. Chie Okumura, who was in her second year of middle school, was talking to her best friend, Maiko Hirose.

Recently, three of their classmates had started going out with boys who had confessed to them.

Chie was jealous.

“But no boys have said they have feelings for me…”

Chie wore glasses and looked very plain. She wasn’t gloomy, but she also didn’t have a bubbly personality, either. On the other hand, Maiko looked like a French doll. She was beautiful, with perfect skin and wide eyes. She even had a naturally cheerful personality.

“I think you’re pretty cute, though, Chie.”

“You’re the only one, Maiko.”

“Well, I think it might help if you took off those glasses. You look too much like a know-it-all with them on.”

“I know, but I can’t do contacts…”

“So anyway, do you like any of the boys, Chie?”

They were walking through a park that was a shortcut to their houses.

Chie folded her arms and murmured thoughtfully, “Hmm.”

All the boys in her class acted immature, so she didn’t like them much. And she wasn’t interested in any boys from the other classes.

“Right. I think I want someone who’s five foot nine and a little on the skinny side with dreamy hair, glasses, and a mature sense of style and has a thing for reading.”

After hearing all of that, Maiko seemed exasperated.

“You know that kind of guy doesn’t exist.”

“Right…”

Chie already knew her standards were too high. She smiled awkwardly.

“Excuse me,” someone said from behind them.

They turned around to see a five-foot-nine boy who was a little on the skinny side with dreamy hair, glasses, and a mature sense of style, and plus, he seemed to have a thing for reading.

He held a novel in his hand and was wearing a red scarf around his neck.

♥♥♥……

As Chie was staring at him in a daze, he held a handkerchief out to her.

“You dropped this.”

“Oh!”

When she wiped her hands while walking earlier, she must have accidentally dropped it.

“Th-thank you…”

Chie took the handkerchief, and the boy smiled smoothly at her. Then he walked over to a park bench.

“He looks five nine and on the skinny side with dreamy hair and glasses, is dressed maturely, plus seems to have a thing for reading… In other words, he’s your dream man!”

“Y-yeah…”

Chie stared as the boy strolled away from them.

It was the next day.

Chie thought about the boy all day long.

He didn’t seem to go to their school.

Sometimes kids from the school near us also go to that park…

Her heart was racing.

But then gloomy thoughts took over quickly.

He would never fall for a plain girl like me…

Chie let out a long sigh.

It was after school.

As soon as school ended, Chie went over to the same park as the day before. She hoped the boy would be around. She couldn’t talk to him, of course, but she just wanted to see him at least.

He was there, wearing the same red scarf.

He’s so cool.

He sat on a bench and was reading a book all on his own.

Maybe he likes books.

Her heart started to pound.

Unlike the boys in her class, he seemed mature.

Suddenly, the boy looked up, and his eyes met Chie's.

"Oh, didn't we meet yesterday?" he said.

"Huh?"

Chie suddenly had no idea what to do when he spoke to her out of nowhere.

"Uh, um…"

I need to say something…

"Th-thank you for picking up my handkerchief yesterday!" Chie bowed her head low.

"I'm just glad you didn't lose it."

"Right."

"Would you like to sit down?" he asked her.

"Uh? Me? Next to you? A-are you sure?"

"Of course. I don't own this bench." The boy smiled. "And I'd like to talk with you a little more."

"All right!" Chie said, then took a seat on the bench next to the boy.

He smells good.

The moment she sat down, the aroma of soap wafted over to her.

He looked suave, and he smelled just like he looked.

Chie breathed in his scent several times.

"Are you okay? Do you have a cold?"

"Oh, um! No, I—I don't!" She felt embarrassed that she'd been sniffing. She quickly tried to change the topic. "Um, my name is Chie Okumura. I'm in my second year of middle school."

"I'm also in my second year. You don't need to be so formal with me."

"Oh, uh, sure. Um, you don't go to school here, do you? Do you go to Kita Middle School?" Chie asked.

But the boy just said no.

"Then where do you go?" Chie asked.

"I'd actually prefer to hear more about you than talk about myself."

"What? Me?"

"That's right. I feel like we'll really get along."

"Um, really?!"

Her heart started to pound again. But then she came back to her senses.

He would never be a good match for a plain girl like me…

A handsome guy like him would be better with someone pretty like Maiko.

Then the boy asked her, “Is something wrong?”

“Um, are you really interested in getting to know a girl like me?” Chie timidly asked.

He brought his face closer to hers and gave her a kind smile.

“I *am* interested. Besides, you’re cute, Chie.”

“C-cute? Me?”

No one had ever said that to her except Maiko.

“But I’m so plain. And I wear glasses.”

“You’re not plain. And glasses look great on you.”

He continued to smile and stare intently at Chie.

Apparently, he wasn’t joking.

“Thank you…”

Chie grinned widely.

From that moment onward, she saw the boy every day.

They always met at the park.

He liked books and was always reading while sitting on the park bench.

He was nice and would smile no matter what she talked about. He would listen to her even when she told him about unpleasant things that happened at school or when she got in trouble with her parents, and he always took her seriously.



She liked him more each time they met. But she had no idea where he lived, and he wouldn't tell her. He never mentioned his family or which school he went to, either. And for some reason, he wouldn't even tell her his name.

She tried asking him questions several times, but he would always avoid them.

The strangest thing of all was how he looked. He always wore the same red scarf.

"So why do you always wear that scarf?" Chie casually asked him one day.

It was warm, and no one else was wearing one.

"You don't like a man who wears a scarf?"

"I didn't mean it like that."

"Why don't you tell me about the books you've read recently instead?"

He avoided the question again.

Chie didn't press more, though.

I don't want him to dislike me…

She wanted to go out with him. If it meant they could date, then she didn't mind if he kept dodging questions.

Chie smiled and started telling him about the books she'd read.



She was back at school.

Once sixth period ended, Chie walked over to Maiko's seat.

"Sorry, Maiko. I can't hang out today."

"Why not? You said you'd come with me to the bookstore."

"There's something I need to do, but let's go some other time!" Chie apologized again and quickly left the classroom.

It was evening. Maiko headed to the supermarket to buy some groceries for her mom as she thought about Chie.

Lately, Chie had been acting strangely. She always seemed absentminded, and she kept canceling plans at the last minute.

I wonder what's up with her. She never used to bail on me like this…

As she walked by the park, she started to worry that something had happened to Chie.

"Huh?"

When she saw who was sitting on the park bench, she stopped. It was Chie and the boy from before.

Did Chie cancel because of this…?

It seemed Chie had been scrapping plans with Maiko to see a boy.

I see. So Chie finally found a crush…

The boy was handsome and cool and mature. He looked great in his red scarf, too.

Suddenly, Chie and the boy stood up from the bench. It seemed like they were going home. Chie waved at the boy and left.

Maiko was about to run after Chie to talk to her, when the boy began walking away slowly. He headed toward some trees farther into the park.

Why is he going that way?

Beyond the trees was a fence, so it wasn't possible to leave in that direction. He was going in the exact opposite direction of the park exit.

Maiko followed the boy.

It was starting to get dark, since it was evening, so there weren't many people around.

Is he going there for a reason?

Just as Maiko thought that, the boy reached the trees. He walked right between them, so Maiko did as well and watched him from underneath a tree.

The boy had reached the fence. He wasn't slowing down at all.

Watch out! Maiko almost said.

But right in that moment…

Fwoosh!

…the boy turned transparent and disappeared entirely.

"What…?"

Maiko had no idea what had just happened.

She went to the fence and looked around, but she didn't see him anywhere. She couldn't even find any holes in the fence or a different park exit.

The boy had disappeared into thin air right before Maiko's eyes.

It was the next day. As soon as Chie came into the classroom, Maiko ran over to her.

"There's something weird about that boy!" Maiko told Chie all about what she had seen the day before.

"What do you mean he disappeared?"

"Like I said, he just went *whoosh* and was gone!" Maiko desperately tried to tell Chie what had happened, but her friend was having none of it.

"Why were you even watching us in the first place, Maiko? You weren't spying on us, were you?"

"I—I was just…" Maiko had no idea what to say.

"You're horrible," Chie said, almost spitting out the words. "Don't get in the way of our relationship."

"I'm not trying to, but who is that boy?"

"What do you mean?"

"Where does he go to school? And what's his name?"

"I…don't know his name."

"What?" Maiko realized Chie didn't know anything about the boy. "That's definitely suspicious!"

"Just cut it out. I like how things are! I'll be happy if we can just spend time together!" Chie said. She fumed as she went to her own seat.

It was after school. Maiko was trudging home all on her own.

But he really did disappear…

Chie hadn't listened to her and had headed to the park again to see the boy.

How does she like him when she doesn't even know his name…?

She didn't want to be an obstacle to Chie dating someone, of course. She would support Chie as much as she could.

But there's something weird about that boy. I wonder if Chie is going to be okay…?

Maiko's head hung glumly, and she was filled with anxiety.

"You know about the boy wearing the red scarf, don't you?"

When she raised her head, she saw Fushigi and Jimmy standing in front of her.

“Who are you?”

“It doesn’t matter who I am. What matters is that you shouldn’t get close to it.” Fushigi warned.

“It’s not a being of this world.”

“What do you mean by that?” Maiko had no idea what Fushigi was talking about. “If he’s not of this world, is he a ghost or something?”

Jimmy cut in and declared, “Urban legends are real!”

“Th-the dog! It—”

Fushigi just kept talking even though Maiko was shocked.

“Where is it? Anyone who befriends it will end up suffering a terrible fate.”

“What?!”

She didn’t understand why that would happen, but she also knew he couldn’t be a normal human after she saw him disappear into thin air.

Maiko told Fushigi and Jimmy about how Chie was meeting the boy at the park.

“I see.”

Fushigi started walking off.

“You should go home!” Jimmy said to her before he followed Fushigi.

“I…”

Maiko thought of Chie’s face.

I can’t just abandon her…

“I’m coming, too!”

She quickly followed the odd pair.

Eventually, they got to the park and started looking around.

“Where’s Chie? And the boy?!”

They weren’t sitting on their usual bench.

“Ya sure they were around here?”

“Yeah, I know they were…” Maiko suddenly remembered something and looked farther into the park. “They might be in

the trees! Yesterday the boy disappeared by the fence!”

Maiko quickly headed in that direction, but no matter where they searched, they couldn’t find Chie or the boy.

“Gosh dang it! Where’d they go?!”

“It looks like they must have left the park,” Fushigi said.

“What happened to Chie, then?” Maiko asked.

“She’s probably with him.”

“Oh no…”

As Maiko felt an indescribable sense of unease, she looked outside the park.



Right around that time, Chie’s heart was racing as she walked.

The boy was right next to her.

I wonder where we’re headed…

Just earlier, Chie had been talking with him like usual while sitting on the park bench. Then Chie had casually mentioned to the boy what Maiko had said about him disappearing.

“I can’t believe she’d hide and watch us. Maiko is the worst. And why would she even lie like that?” Chie said, but then the boy suddenly stood up from the bench. “What’s wrong? Are you mad because of what Maiko did?” Chie wondered if she needed to apologize for Maiko.

“Will you come with me for a bit?”

“What?”

“There’s somewhere I want us to go together.”

Her heart skipped a beat when he said that.

“O-of course!”

Chie quickly stood up from the bench.

And that was how they’d gotten to the current situation. Chie and the boy walked down the road together.

I wonder where we’re going. Maybe a bookstore? Or to karaoke? What will I do if that’s the plan?! I’m not good at singing. I’d be so

embarrassed…

"Um, if you're trying to take me to karaoke, I'd prefer somewhere else instead."

"…"

The boy didn't respond.

"Oh, or are we checking out a bookstore?"

"…"

"Then maybe to your house?" Chie said, but then she felt embarrassed for saying such a bold thing.

"Just…come with me," the boy suddenly said.

"O-okay." Chie was confused, but she followed him silently.

Maiko was running with Fushigi and Jimmy down the street.

"Where did Chie go?"

"Doesn't seem like she's anywhere nearby," Jimmy said.

"If they left the park, then it must be trying to take her away," Fushigi said.

"What…?" Maiko shuddered.

At that moment, they came across a road that forked into three directions.

"Crud! Which way do we go?!"

"Chie…"

If she could never see Chie again, then…

"Let's split up and look for her! I think we'll be able to find her that way!"

She had no idea who Fushigi and Jimmy were, but they were the only ones she could count on for help at the moment.

"You got it! Seems like a good idea to me. Right, Fushigi?" Jimmy looked over at Fushigi.

"What happens to her isn't my business."

"Fushigi!"

"But I need to collect the mark. Let's do it."

"All right!"

They each picked a road and headed off.

Chie was still walking with the boy down the road. They'd been going for twenty minutes already.

"Um, are we not there yet?"

“…”

She was feeling more tired the more they walked.

It was warm for a winter day, too. She had gotten so warm that she’d even taken off her scarf.

“Um, aren’t you hot with that on?”

The boy was wearing his red scarf like usual.

“…”

“It’s hot, so maybe it’d be better to take it off?” Chie suggested, and she casually reached for his scarf.

In that moment, the boy slapped away her hand with a scowl.

“Ah!”

“Sorry…”

“Oh, i-it’s fine…,” Chie said.

He scared me a little, though…

Chie realized she had never seen him take the scarf off even once.

“Um, why do you always wear that red scarf?”

“Well…”

“Chie!”

Suddenly, someone called for her in a loud voice.

She turned around to see Maiko running toward her.

“Maiko, what are you doing here?!”

“Chie, back away from him!”

Once Maiko was in front of Chie, she grabbed her friend’s arm.

“Stop that!”

“You need to get away from him!

“He’s not of this world!”

Maiko repeated what Fushigi had told her.

“Wh-what are you even talking about?” Chie couldn’t understand what Maiko meant at all. “Do you have any idea what you’re even saying, Maiko?”

“Just come with me, please!”

“Look, he’s right here in front of you. You can’t say he doesn’t exist—”

“You just have to get away from him right now!” Maiko yanked Chie’s arm even harder to pull her away from the boy.

But then the boy grabbed Chie’s other arm.

“Ah!”

“Let go!”

The boy ignored Maiko and stared right at Chie.

“If you come with me, I’ll tell you why I wear this red scarf.”

“Huh?!”

“Because I like you, Chie,” he said.

He had never told Chie anything about himself until now. This was his first time telling her that he liked her.

He smiled gently.

That charmed Chie before she even realized it.

“Chie! Please, Chie!”

Maiko tried tugging on her arm again, but Chie shook her off.

“Don’t you care about me, Maiko?”

“What? I—I do.”

“Good. I like you, too, Maiko.”

“Then does that mean…?”

“That’s right. So don’t get in my way.”

“Huh?”

“I want to be with him!”

Tears welled up in Chie’s eyes. After seeing that, Maiko had no idea what else to say.



“Okay, let’s go!” Chie said, then turned the corner and left with the boy.

“Chie, you can’t!”

Maiko tried to follow them, but when she rounded the corner, she couldn’t find them.

It was like they had both disappeared into thin air.

“How could she say you don’t exist in this world?!” Chie grumbled, complaining about Maiko as she walked with the boy in the red scarf. “Oh?”

She realized she didn’t recognize the road they were on. All the houses around her looked warped, too. Even the alleys were distorted, and Chie saw no one out on the street except her and the boy.

“Um, where are we?” Chie asked the boy, who walked ahead of her.

He stopped.

“I’ll show you soon.”

The boy smiled as he looked at Chie. Then he grabbed the scarf around his neck.

“This is a secret for only the two of us.”

He tugged the scarf loose.

She saw the boy’s beautiful neck. As Chie stared at it, his face started to move unnaturally. His head and neck weren’t connected.

“Huh…?”

Then his head fell to the ground.

It looked up at Chie and grinned.

Chie shuddered at the sight.

A few days had passed since then. A girl sat alone on a park bench.

It was Chie.

Fushigi and Jimmy made their way to her eventually.

“Your friend tried so hard to save you,” Fushigi said. Chie looked at him.

“Save me…?”

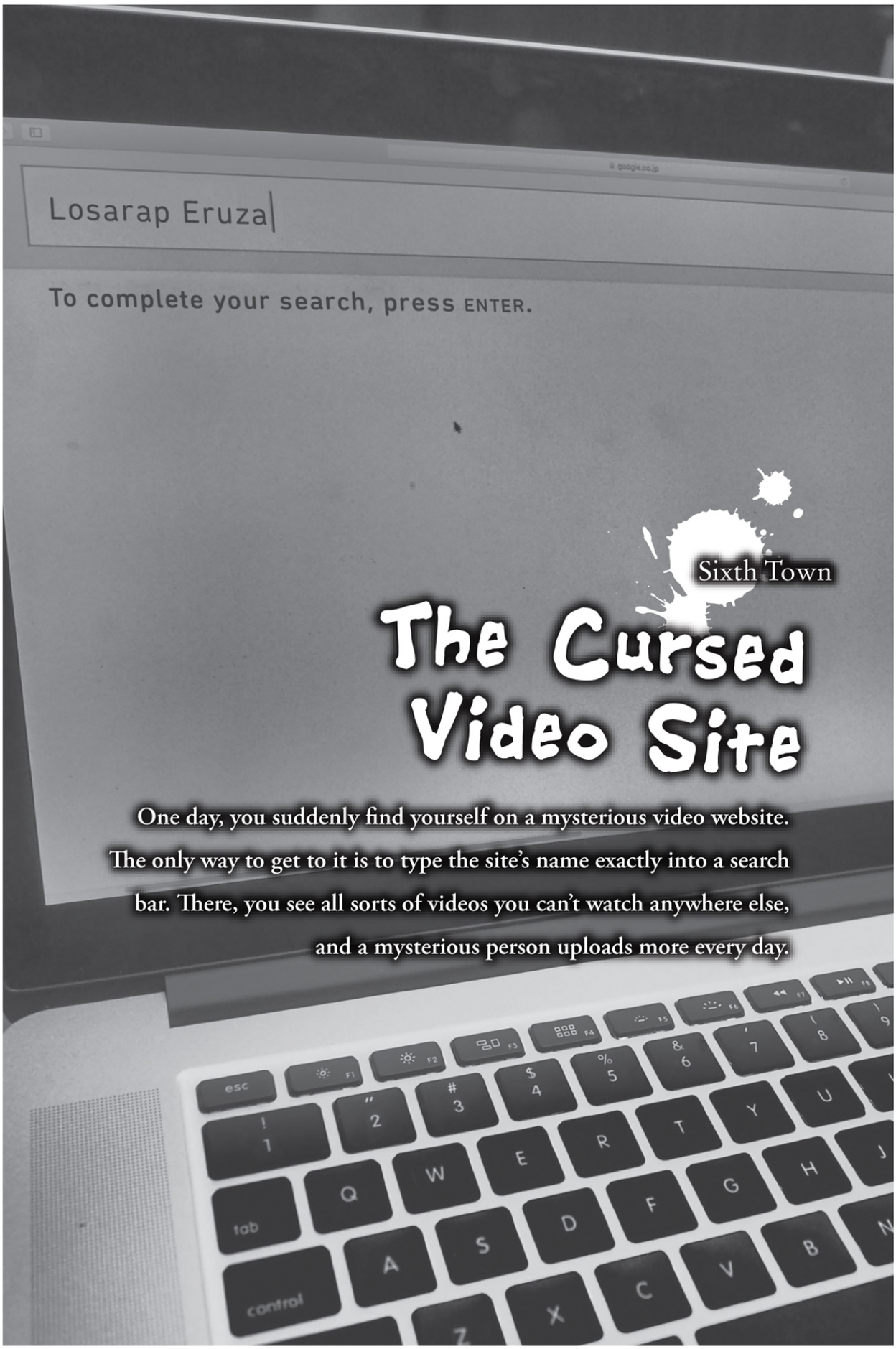
Chie smiled.

“But…I’m so…happy…”

Chie stood up from the bench.
She wore a red scarf around her neck. Her head wobbled slightly.

“I need…to go see him…”

She held her head as it threatened to fall and started to stumble away.
Fushigi and Jimmy watched her in disappointment.



Sixth Town

The Cursed Video Site

One day, you suddenly find yourself on a mysterious video website. The only way to get to it is to type the site's name exactly into a search bar. There, you see all sorts of videos you can't watch anywhere else, and a mysterious person uploads more every day.

In a certain town were rows and rows of apartment complexes that looked identical to one another.

Fushigi and Jimmy were standing at one corner. In front of them was a bouquet that had been set down as an offering.

“It looks like we were too late,” Fushigi commented.

“Dang it! We could’ve saved him if we’d just been a day sooner!” Jimmy said.

The day before, a man had jumped off the apartment building to his death. Strangely, when he’d jumped, the man had been wearing blue clothes that he normally wouldn’t wear.

“Blue clothes again…”

Fushigi frowned.

Lately, there had been more incidents of people jumping off the roofs of apartments and condo buildings.

They were all wearing blue clothes when they did.

“Now that I think about it, that lady ghost at that one condo was wearing blue, too…,” Jimmy recalled. “If they’re wearing blue, you don’t think…?”

The face of the man with the blue umbrella flashed through Jimmy’s mind. He remembered the man’s creepy smile.

Jimmy watched as Fushigi walked away from the apartment complex.

Was the man tellin’ the truth…?

“Once he collects all the curse marks, Fushigi will disappear.”

That was what the man had said.

Then if I keep Fushigi from collectin’ the mark, it’ll be for his own good.

He heard a bell chime right then.

“You have not collected me, it seems,” said a voice.

It had come from the pocket of the raincoat Jimmy wore.

“Hey! Shut yer trap!” Jimmy told her off, but the thing in his pocket vibrated until a pink phone fell right out of his coat.

It had started vibrating all on its own.

A bespectacled cat with pink fur showed up on the screen. It was the dark app MOMO.

So that Fushigi wouldn't be able to collect MOMO, Jimmy had told him a few days ago that the phone had fallen into a river.

He had a reason for that lie.

Jimmy was worried about the secret that the man with the blue umbrella had told him about Fushigi.

"Would you like me to tell you whether it was true or not?"

MOMO had asked him that before.

Jimmy had wanted to know, so he'd kept MOMO hidden in his raincoat pocket until now. The contract for the phone had been canceled a long time ago, so it couldn't make calls, but MOMO was still active.

"When are ya gonna spill the beans already?"

He had been carrying around MOMO in secret for days, but she still hadn't said anything about it.

"I will tell you at some point."

"You really know?"

"Of course. I am a special character, after all," MOMO proudly said.

Jimmy was annoyed, but he said, "Fine, just stay inside the pocket so Fushigi doesn't find ya." Then he picked her up in his mouth and put her back into his coat.

It was dark, in a town that was a ways from where Fushigi and Jimmy were.

Shouta Togawa, who was in his second year of middle school, was lying down on his bed as he looked at his phone.

He was watching a soccer match.

An athlete took an amazing shot from a sharp angle. The sports commentator shouted in excitement, but Shouta let out a small sigh.

Exactly like I thought…

Ever since Shouta had gotten a cell phone three months ago, all he'd done was watch videos.

He would watch all kinds of things on his phone, from the amazing sports maneuvers of athletes to normal people trying their own thing, plus animals being cute.

Shouta had been enjoying seeing all those videos every single day.

But…

Lately, he felt like something was missing.

Sure, it was a great shot, and the soccer player had amazing technique, but Shouta had been doing the same thing every day, watching the same sorts of videos. He was getting bored of them.

I wanna see something more entertaining and ridiculous.

Shouta started to fiddle with his phone while still relaxing on the bed.

But he just couldn't find the type of video he was looking for.

It was the next day. Shouta was at volleyball practice.

The third-year students had finished their time on the team, so more of the second-years had become regular team members.

But Shouta hadn't gotten much better and was still a substitute.

He was in a corner of the gym, like usual, guiding the training for the first-year students.

"Hey, have you been watching any good videos lately?"

The one who'd asked that question was Hiromitsu Tahara, a classmate who was also helping with first-year training because he wasn't a regular team member, either.

Hiromitsu loved videos, too, and he'd shown Shouta how much fun they could be.

"Honestly, I've gotten a little bored of them lately."

Shouta told Hiromitsu about how he'd felt the day before while browsing videos.

"I get that," Hiromitsu said with a smile. "I got tired of them, too, so I haven't been watching them as much."

"Right, of course."

"But someone showed me this great video website."

"A new site?"

"Yeah. It's got videos of surprises from all over the world, and a lot of them are new."

"I haven't heard of that before…"

"So you know how my parents run a bar? One of the guys there showed it to me. All the videos are entertaining. It's ridiculous."

"Entertaining…and ridiculous …?"

That was exactly what Shouta wanted.

“Show me the site! I wanna see the videos, too!”

Hiromitsu told him the name of the site.

Once Shouta was home and he’d finished dinner, he headed back to his room without even taking a bath.

He picked up his phone and flopped onto his bed.

The site name was…

He quickly typed the name in the search bar.

“Losarap Eruza”

He got only one hit.

“This must be it!”

Shouta opened the site.

A blue butterfly showed up in the center of the screen and started fluttering its wings. It arced and flitted around in the middle. Then after it flew off-screen, some words slowly appeared.

“We welcome you to the world of entertainment.”

Shouta smiled when he saw that.

Lots of videos loaded on the screen. All of them had the word *surprise* in the caption or title.

There were a lot.

“Which one…?”

Shouta tried the top video just to test it out. It was called “Surprise While Jogging.”

It is of a road somewhere.

A man and a woman in their twenties are jogging and taking a video with a phone.

The man records the woman, and then she films him.

As the man is running, he waves at the phone and smiles.

Right then, a telephone pole appears in front of the man, but he is looking at the phone and doesn’t notice the pole.

The next moment, he runs right into the pole and falls flat on his back.

Then some old ladies who are jogging, too, all catch up to him.

They can't stop in time and collide with the man.

Then the other ladies behind them all fall like dominoes.

"Aah!"

The woman taking the video screams.

Then the video ended.

"Wow…"

It was a short video and barely lasted half a minute, but it left an impression.

He definitely hadn't seen that one before on any of the other sites.

Shouta excitedly clicked on the next video.



"This website is the bomb!"

It was the next day. Shouta was helping the first-years in a corner of the gym like usual. He shared what he thought of the video site with Hiromitsu.

Hiromitsu told the first-years to do laps. Then he said, "I know, right?!" and he smiled. "They update it daily, too," Hiromitsu added.

"So they get new videos every day?"

"Yep, I saw an upload called 'Surprise While Jogging,' so I watched that right away."

"I saw that one, too! I wasn't expecting all those old ladies to run into him when he was already down!"

"It was so hilarious when they fell on top of him! It was so funny that I kept watching it over and over again!"

They both started laughing out loud when they remembered the video.

A volleyball rolled right next to Hiromitsu. One of the regular players on the court had missed it during practice.

Hiromitsu went after the ball to grab it.

Shouta just watched without thinking anything of it.

“Oh!” he shouted.

As Hiromitsu chased the ball, he got too close to the gym wall.

“Watch out!”

Hiromitsu collided with the wall with a loud thud. Then he fell onto his back. At that moment, the first-years who were doing laps came running by.

“Waah!”

The first one at the front of the pack couldn’t react quickly enough and ran right into Hiromitsu, falling over him.

Then the others also rammed into them, and each one of them fell on top of Hiromitsu.

“Tahara!”

“Are you okay?!”

The team members playing on the court ran over to him in a panic.

“Hiromitsu! Hey, Hiromitsu!”

“Urgh… Uhh…” Hiromitsu groaned and sat up.

“Tahara, a-are you okay?” one of the first-years who had run into him asked with concern.

“Yeah, it’s no big deal. I was just shocked when you all fell on top of me,” Hiromitsu said as he smiled. It didn’t seem like he’d been hurt.

“Thank goodness.”

Shouta felt relieved.

“But still, what was with all that…?” Hiromitsu murmured.

“With what?” Shouta asked.

“Uh, nothing,” Hiromitsu said. “I probably just imagined it.” He got up. “Okay, let’s get back to practice,” he said.

Shouta was still wondering what Hiromitsu had been about to say, but he didn’t ask and put his focus into training instead.

It was dark. Shouta was eating dinner at home when he thought of the video website again.

It’s supposed to update every day. So I won’t ever be bored with it.

There were so many old videos on the site that he hadn't seen yet, either.

Shouta remembered the most interesting one he'd seen the other day, which was "Surprise During a Meal."

A family is eating together.

While the dad is filming a high school boy who is fooling around, the mom brings a tray of food in.

But the boy doesn't notice and stands up from his seat to make a joke.

Then he rams his head into the tray, which his mother is holding right over his head in that moment.

The force of this makes the oden soup in the bowl on the tray fly up into the air. A piece of konjac jelly splatters right onto the boy's face.

The konjac is probably pretty hot.

The boy yells, "Hot, hot, hot!"

Then the video ended.

The video was so funny that Shouta had watched it over and over again the day before.

Maybe I'll start with that one today.

Shouta smiled as he looked up.

His mom was bringing in a bowl of stew right then.

"We're having stew tonight? Oh, but you didn't put any carrots in, right?" Shouta said as he suddenly stood up. His head rammed into the bowl his mom was holding.

"Huh?!"

"Ah!"

His mom dropped the bowl.

Shouta was so shocked that he backed away, but then the stew hit the ground and spattered all around.

"Shouta, what do you think you're doing?!"

"Uh, um…"

Shouta had no idea why he'd gotten to his feet so unexpectedly.

"None of the stew got on you? You didn't get burned?"

"I-I'm okay…"

"Why would you stand up right then?"

"Well…"

Maybe it was because I wanted to see if there were carrots in it…

Maybe he'd done it before thinking about it?

He was a little embarrassed, but he told his mom that and apologized for making her drop the bowl.

"Hwaaah!"

It was the next day. Shouta was at school and changing into his indoor slippers when he yawned widely.

He'd spent the night watching videos in his room after dinner again.

That vid yesterday was so ridiculous.

While he'd been watching the older uploads on the website, one had left a big impression on him.

It was titled "Surprise on the Rooftop."

It is on the roof of a building somewhere.

A person stands on the outer side of the roof's safety railing. They are right on the ledge of the building.

It is a man wearing a blue T-shirt, and he is looking at the roof of the building across from him.

It is about a two-yard jump to the next building. The man turns the camera so it faces down.

The people walking on the road below are little specks.

It is a very tall building.

Then the man sets the camera down nearby and once again surveys the rooftop across the way.

He nods slightly and abruptly propels himself toward the other building.

He is trying to jump to the other side.

If he falls, he won't survive.

But he doesn't stop, and he jumps.

As he does, his right foot slips, and he suddenly loses his balance.

"Yeek!" the man screams, and instead of reaching the next rooftop, he disappears into the gap between the buildings.

Then the video ended.

That video had the greatest impact of all the ones Shouta had seen so far.

He had no idea what had happened to the man, but just imagining it made him shudder.

I ended up watching it, like, more than ten times, though.

Shouta was obsessed with that video.

"Togawa!"

Suddenly, he heard someone call out to him.

The kids from the volleyball club were running in his direction.

"What's wrong?"

"It's Tahara! Something horrible happened!"

"To Hiromitsu?"

"Yeah! He got in an accident last night, and he's hurt real bad!"

"What?!"



It was after school. Shouta had gone home to change out of his uniform, then met with his classmates to go see Hiromitsu at the hospital.

"How'd he get into an accident in the middle of the night?"

Hiromitsu wasn't the type to go walking around after dark.

"We don't know, either. But apparently, he ignored the light at an intersection and tried running across, and then a truck hit him."

"What…?"

What had he been thinking?

Eventually, they got to the hospital and went over to their classmate's room.

"Hiromitsu!" Shouta shouted as soon as they opened the door.

But then his eyes went wide. The other boy was on the bed, and his whole body was wrapped with bandages.

"Sh-Shouta…" Hiromitsu looked like he was in a lot of pain as he turned toward Shouta. "You're all here…"

"Thank you for coming," Hiromitsu's mom said from beside his bed.

"S-sorry, but I want to talk to just Shouta for a second…"

"But everyone came to see you, Hiromitsu."

“I know! You leave, too, Mom!” Hiromitsu shouted.

His mom was so taken aback that she said, “All right… I’m sorry, everyone.” Then she and the others left the room.

“Hiromitsu…”

The room was big, but no other patients were in it, so Shouta and Hiromitsu were all alone.

“Are you…okay?” Shouta asked as he approached the bed.

Suddenly, Hiromitsu grabbed Shouta’s arm.

“That video site is cursed!”

Hiromitsu’s eyes were bloodshot as he stared intently at Shouta.

“Wh-what’s gotten into you?”

“That site…almost killed me!”

According to Hiromitsu, he’d just been watching videos on the site like normal.

Apparently, he’d found a video he really liked.

It was of a man who ignored the light at a crosswalk and tried to run past moving cars.

“At a crosswalk? And he ignored the signals?”

Shouta realized the video sounded a lot like how Hiromitsu had gotten injured.

“You didn’t copy the video, did you?”

“Of course not! I wasn’t trying to! But then my body moved on its own!”

Hiromitsu squeezed Shouta’s arm even harder. His hand was shaking, and his face was pale.

“Hiromitsu…”

“Look, you remember how I ran into the wall in the gym yesterday at practice?”

“Yeah, when you were trying to pick up the volleyball.”

“I wasn’t in control of my body. I tried to stop.”

“Does that mean…?”

Was that why Hiromitsu had said that strange thing back then?

“Did you think it was weird, too?”

“Yeah. I didn’t know why my body moved on its own back then, but I finally figured it out.

“My body moved all on its own to copy the video!”

“Oh!”

Shouta’s eyes went wide.

At dinner the other day, he’d stood up without thinking about it and had hit his head against the bowl of stew.

It was exactly like the video he had watched so many times where the boy had run into the bowl of *oden* on the tray.

He told that to Hiromitsu, who said, “I knew it. So it happened to you, too…

“I think that site is cursed, and when you watch videos multiple times, it makes you copy them… Since I watched the video of the guy ignoring the signal and crossing the street over and over again…”

Shouta gulped when he looked at the bandages around Hiromitsu.

“Then will I end up getting hurt, too…?”

“No, not just hurt…”

Hiromitsu looked at Shouta. He seemed scared.

“I told you how the man from the bar showed me the site, right…?”

“Yeah…”

“My mom found out that he fell from up high somewhere and died.

“He tried to jump from one roof to another at the apartment complex he lived at…”

“He jumped…?”

That sounded just like the “Surprise on the Rooftop” video Shouta had watched yesterday.

“I saw that video, too…”

“What?”

“I watched it more than once…”

“No way…”

“I don’t want that to happen to me!”
Shouta shook Hiromitsu’s hand off.
“Shouta!”
“I don’t believe it!”
“Even if you don’t, look what happened to me and the guy!”
“I said I don’t believe it, so I’m not gonna!”
It couldn’t be true.
But he was still scared.
Shouta was so frightened that he ran away.
“Shouta!”
“Togawa!”
“Hey, what’s gotten into you?!”



Their classmates outside Hiromitsu's door tried to stop him, but Shouta ran down the hall.

It's not true! It's not true! Curses can't be real!

Shouta ran out of the hospital and straight over to the road.

Then he nearly ran into someone.

"You saw the Cursed Video Site, didn't you?"

It was Fushigi and Jimmy.

"Wh-who are you?"

"It doesn't matter who I am. What does matter is that something terrible will happen to you at this rate. If you don't want that, then do what I say."

Fushigi approached Shouta.

"The only time I can collect the curse mark is when someone who's already cursed watches a video on the website. So I need you to go on the website right now."

"R-right now?"

Shouta gripped the phone in his pocket.

When he'd gone home to change, he'd also grabbed his phone to take with him.

"But the website is…"

He was too scared to look at it.

"Hurry and go to it."

Fushigi was right in front of him now and had pulled out a red notebook.

"N-no…"

"No way!" Shouta yelled, and then he started sprinting away.

"Crud! He's making a break for it!"

"Go after him!"

Shouta had run across the large road in front of the hospital and turned a corner.

Fushigi and Jimmy both chased after him.

But Fushigi ran right into a middle-aged lady walking down the street.

“Ah!”

“Urgh!”

Fushigi stumbled. The woman fell onto Fushigi.

“Jimmy, you get him on your own!”

“G-gotcha!”

Jimmy left Fushigi, who was incapacitated, behind and ran across the road and turned the corner.

He saw Shouta way up ahead.

Still running, Shouta went right at a corner.

“Wait!”

Jimmy ran like his life depended on it and made a right at the next corner, too.

“Are you sure about this?”

Suddenly, he heard a voice come from his raincoat.

It was MOMO.

“Shut yer trap! I haven’t got time for chitchat with you!”

“I see. Well, if you do catch that young boy, Fushigi Senno will collect yet another mark.”

“B-but…”

Once Fushigi collected all the curse marks, he would disappear.

Jimmy stopped at the corner without thinking.

Fushigi ran up behind him then.

“Which way did he go?”

“Uh, um, well…”

For a moment, Jimmy looked to the right, but then he turned the other way.

“Sorry, I lost him…”

Jimmy’s gaze fell.

“…”

Fushigi silently eyed Jimmy. He frowned.

Eventually, he stood at the street corner and glanced both ways.

“Isn’t that…?”

Fushigi saw something on the ground to the right of the street. He walked over to it. It was a phone. Shouta had apparently dropped it.

“Seems like he went this way.”

“Uh, right. But who knows where the kid scurried off to? Guess we gotta give up this time.”

“Give up?” Fushigi stared at Jimmy again.

Jimmy couldn’t meet Fushigi’s eyes.

“Right…”

Fushigi seemed to think of something. He picked up the phone off the ground and held it up to Jimmy.

“His scent should be on this phone. If we follow that, we’ll be able to find him.”

“His scent?”

“You’ll track him, since you’re half dog. You should be able to track his smell.”

“I—I guess I could, but…”

As Jimmy wavered, Fushigi slowly said:

“Are you sure? Do you want something terrible to happen to him because of you?”

Jimmy didn’t know how to respond to that.

“Darn it!”

The next moment, Jimmy was sniffing the phone.

He focused intently on smelling it.

“Hmm, hrmm.” He made noises to himself. He looked almost exactly like a real dog.

Fushigi kept holding out the phone and just watched him.

“Ruff!”

Jimmy lifted his head.

“Ruff, ruff! Ruff, ruff!”

He started to bark as he ran down the road.



It seemed he'd be able to track the scent.

Fushigi ran after Jimmy.



Isn't this place…?

Around the same time, Shouta was standing in an unfamiliar place.

It was the top of a building.

What am I doing here?

He'd been running home.

So how had he ended up on a rooftop?

He thought it was strange, but then his legs suddenly started moving on their own.

"What?"

Both of his legs were heading directly to the railing. Next, his hands started moving. They grabbed the railing and pulled his body over it.

No way…!

Shouta realized he didn't have control of his body.

"Guh, ahh!"

He tried to yell for help, but he couldn't get the words out.

Once he was fully on the other side of the railing, he stood at the edge of the building and looked straight ahead. He could see the next building over.

Wait, isn't that…?

Shouta was shocked. He could move only his eyes, and he looked at the clothes he was wearing.

He had a blue T-shirt on.

He normally didn't wear this blue shirt, but he had changed into it without realizing.

He remembered that the man in the video on the rooftop had also been wearing a blue shirt.

Shouta's body was moving on its own to try to jump to the next building, just like the man in the video.

“Ah! Agh!” Shouta tried to yell, but he couldn’t get any words out.

His body started to move again as he stood on the ledge.

No! I can’t jump! I’ll die!

Unlike in the video, these buildings were more than *five* yards apart.

There was no way he’d be able to make it.

No! Help me! Please, someone help me!

Shouta started to cry as his legs began to run on their own.

He reached the end of the ledge and jumped.

“Aaaah!”

Right before he could fall, someone grabbed his hand. Then they pulled him back up onto the ledge.

It was Fushigi.

“Uh, ahh.”

“Hurry up and go to the website.”

Fushigi turned the phone to him.

Shouta realized he could just slightly move the fingers of the hand Fushigi held. He touched the screen.

The website opened.

Fushigi pulled out his red notebook and flipped to a new page, then held it up to the phone.

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

Fushigi said a spell.

“Resolve.”

The next moment, a strange mark appeared on the phone’s screen, glittered, and inverted, then appeared on the open page in the notebook.

Shouta realized he could move again.

“Y-you saved me!”

Shouta grabbed the railing and crouched down on the spot.

On the other hand, Fushigi was staring at the phone.

He had collected the curse mark, but the website was still up.

A blue butterfly was flying on the screen.

“What’s that, Fushigi?” Jimmy asked from behind him.

The blue butterfly was flying in circles and going faster and faster.

Eventually, blue words showed up in the middle of the circle.

“Losarap Eruza”

It was the name of the site.

Each letter drifted apart and re-formed to create a new phrase.

“Waaah!”

Jimmy’s eyes opened wide.

“Azure Parasol”

That was what the letters now said.

“Heh… Heh-heh-heh… Looks like you’ve managed to collect even this one.”

The screen switched over to show a video of some room. The man with the blue umbrella stood in front of the camera.

“And I’d just come up with a splendid idea to spread the curse far and wide.”

A girl wearing a black hood was behind him.

“Himitsu…”

Fushigi looked at Himitsu.

But the man with the blue umbrella moved to block her from view.

“Now, this is far from my only wonderful idea. I have plenty more where that came from. Wonderful ideas to circulate curses near and far, wherever people are, that is! Heh, heh-heh-heh, heh-heh-heh!”



* * *

The video disappeared, and the screen went black.

“It was all his trap…”

Jimmy looked chagrined.

Fushigi stared at Jimmy. He frowned.

“You were lying earlier, weren’t you?”

“Huh?”

“You must have known where the kid ran off to.”

“I—I was just…”

Jimmy knew he needed to come up with some excuse, but Fushigi was faster.



“Why would you get in the way of collecting a mark?”

“It’s not like that!”

“Do you have a reason to stop me?”

“Th-that’s, well…”

Jimmy didn’t know how to respond to that.

Fushigi leaped over the railing and back onto the rooftop, then started for the door.

“I’m disappointed in you, Jimmy.”

“Fushigi!”

As Fushigi walked past Jimmy, he didn’t even look down at him. Eventually, Fushigi left the rooftop altogether.

“Fushigi, I…”

Jimmy couldn’t even run after him. He just stood there rooted to the spot. Then something in his raincoat pocket vibrated, and the pink phone fell right out of his coat.

MOMO was on the screen. She pushed up her glasses with her front paw and stared directly at Jimmy.

“I can help you.”

To be continued…

Afterword

Thank you for reading *Horror Collector*, Volume 5. This novel has six more urban legends in six different towns.

First Town — The Falling Woman

When you look out your window in the middle of the night, you might see a woman falling from above. Just imagining the story will make you shudder.

Second Town — The Dark App

An app that can tell you anything seems super handy, but what if it doesn't mean you well…? Would you download MOMO?



Third Town — Madam Hasshaku

This is an urban legend that has recently become famous online. A strange lady will follow any man she takes an interest in. Simply encountering her is a terrifying experience.



Fourth Town — The White Thread

This is a classic urban legend from a long time ago, but it's still very frightening. If you find a white pimple on your earlobe, you should never, ever touch it.

Fifth Town — The Red Scarf

What if your ideal person showed up in front of you? This is the closest thing to a love story in this series.

Sixth Town — The Cursed Video Site

Watching videos is so fun, but don't watch any on this site. Otherwise, your body may start moving on its own…

In this volume, Fushigi and Jimmy have a falling-out. What will happen to them? I hope you'll read the next volume, too!

December 2016
Midori Sato



After I asked you all to tell me your scary stories, I got many, many letters from all over Japan. Thank you very much.

If you stand in front of the mirror on the school's third-floor landing at midnight, you'll be pulled into the mirror world.

At my elementary school, they say the murals at the wings of the stage in the gym move at night. Any kids who go to check them out end up being pulled into the murals.

There were a lot of legends and scary stories about schools, of course. This one about the murals was the most eerie among them.

Our school has a rabbit with black eyes. When its eyes flash red, something bad will happen.

Don't rabbits normally have red eyes? When I looked it up, I found out that most of them have black eyes, and only a few white rabbits have red ones. Since red and white are considered lucky colors in Japan, those rabbits became popular.

The stories that weren't about school usually went like this:

There are strange people who live under manhole covers, and they'll drag in those who wander by.

There's a really famous nightscape view in my town that you can see from observation platforms, but there's also a park with a great view. No one who's local will go there, though. The ghost of a girl appears near the park bathrooms.

I've been to this park before in the past, but I went during the day. Since I was scared…

I received plenty of other stories, so I'm sorry I could share only a few of them. But I'm looking forward to getting many more.

December 2016
Norio Tsuruta

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