



WHOEVER STEALS THIS BOOK



Nowaki
Fukamidori



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Nowaki
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Illustration by Naffy




New York

Copyright

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Nowaki Fukamidori

Translation by Michael Blaskowsky Cover art by Naffy

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KONOHON WO NUSUMU MONO WA

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First published in Japan in 2020 by KADOKAWA CORPORATION, Tokyo.

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New York, NY 10001

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First Yen On Edition: February 2025

Edited by Yen On Editorial: Rachel Mimms Designed by Yen Press Design:
Madelaine Norman Yen On is an imprint of Yen Press, LLC.

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owned by the publisher.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data is available.

ISBNs: 979-8-8554-0317-6 (hardcover) 979-8-8554-0318-3 (ebook)

E3-20250128-JV-NF-ORI

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Characters

Mifuyu Mikura

A first-year high school student who lives in Yomunaga, the Town of Books, and despises reading.

Mashiro

A mysterious girl who appears in Mikura Hall. Her hair is as white as snow. She guides Mifuyu through the book worlds.

Kaichi Mikura

Mifuyu's great-grandfather. A renowned collector of books, he built Mikura Hall, the gigantic library famous in town.

Tamaki Mikura

Mifuyu's grandmother. A book collector like her father. She decided to close Mikura Hall to protect its collection.

Ayumu Mikura

Mifuyu's father. He manages Mikura Hall and runs a judo dojo.

Hirune Mikura

Mifuyu's aunt. She manages Mikura Hall and has read every book in the collection. She sleeps a lot.

Old Man Kaname

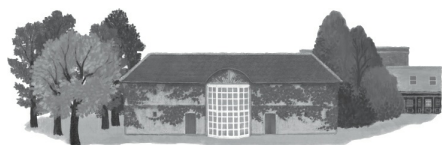
Owner of Books Mystery, a long-standing used bookstore.

Haruta

An employee at Wakaba, a new bookstore that Ayumu likes.

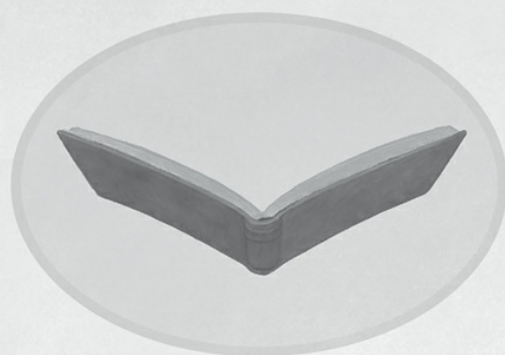
Keiko

A stylish woman with tightly cropped hair. She seems very interested in the secrets of Mikura Hall.



Chapter 1

Chased by the Flags of Magic Realism



Ask anyone about Kaichi Mikura from Yomunaga, and they'll describe for you a book collector and nationally renowned literary critic. He was a prominent local man who lived his entire life in Yomunaga, from the moment he came into this world screaming and crying until his sudden passing on his veranda with a book in his hand.

People called him a walking encyclopedia. "If you need to know something, ask Kaichi," they'd say. "If you're looking for a book, talk to Kaichi." Or: "If something's bothering you, Kaichi's better than a doctor," and so on. No one knew how many books his collection contained.

The town of Yomunaga was shaped like a rounded rhombus. Located where a wide river forked north and south, the town sat in isolation like an island where the two branches diverged and then rejoined.

And at the center of this rhombus stood Mikura Hall. By the time of Kaichi's death, multiple renovations saw Mikura Hall grow into a massive library that stretched from its second-floor basement to two stories. Famous throughout town, it was said that every resident of Yomunaga—from toddlers to the most elderly citizens—had set foot inside at least once.

Born in 1900, Kaichi had steadily built up his book collection since the 1920s until he passed away and left everything to his daughter, Tamaki Mikura, a superb collector in her own right who continued expanding the library.

And where books reside, collectors flock, though not all collectors are honorable ones.

One day, Tamaki realized that close to two hundred volumes had gone missing from Mikura Hall's rare book collection. Books had been stolen from time to time before; Tamaki had once even threatened one of Kaichi's friends, an antique bookseller, into staking out a used-book exchange, then yelled at the people trying to resell some stolen books for a hefty sum and brought the culprit to the police.

In her fury at discovering that nearly two hundred rare books had vanished from the collection, Tamaki decided to close Mikura Hall to the public. Neighbors watched as, over the course of a day, a major security company installed alarms in every nook and cranny of the building under Tamaki's

scrupulous gaze. From then on, no one save for members of the Mikura family could enter the library or borrow a book. Even famous researchers and Kaichi's close friends were resolutely turned away.

Mikura Hall was closed. As a result, people never again heard Tamaki fly into a rage whenever she realized a book had been stolen. Although it was a shame that no one would ever peruse the stacks at Mikura Hall again, things were finally peaceful. Yomunaga had earned a reputation as the Town of Books; finding things to read there was not a difficult endeavor. The townspeople enjoyed the respite from Tamaki's temper.

However, once Tamaki breathed her last, a bizarre rumor began to slowly spread.

It claimed that she hadn't resorted to simple mundane alarms to protect the books she'd so loved. Word had it that she had called upon a fox god with a long-standing connection to Yomunaga to cast a strange spell over each and every tome.

This story begins a few days after Tamaki's son, Ayumu—the current caretaker of Mikura Hall, sharing the role with his sister, Hirune—was admitted to the hospital.

But our protagonist is neither Ayumu nor Hirune. That role belongs to a girl of the next generation: Ayumu's daughter, Mifuyu Mikura.

Mifuyu nodded off as the train rocked back and forth. She was on her way home from school, her uniform still new to her as a first-year student, her head tilting almost far enough to the left to bump the silver pole. At a little past four in the afternoon, right before the evening rush, the few other passengers in the train car were mostly high school students like her.

The yellow light of the western sun seeped through the windows like melted butter. The train soon reached the bridge, and as it crossed the river, striped shadows ran over the floors, seats, and passengers. It braked to a sudden stop, the jolt waking Mifuyu, and she brought the plastic bag from the convenience store dangling in her hands up onto her lap.

Absentmindedly scratching her head, she combed back her overgrown black hair, which she had neither the time nor money to cut, before yawning wide.

The train had stopped well before the station.

She fished out her flip phone, something her classmates teasingly called *Galápagos*, from her black-and-white-striped backpack and checked the time. She needed to get to the hospital before they started serving dinner to the patients.

After one minute ticked away on the phone's digital display, the train began to crawl forward, and the view outside slowly changed from the dull gray of the river surface and the iron frame of the bridge to the domed station platform. The train passed signs for summer blowout sales at the clothing stores across from the station, as well as billboards with directions to the larger bookstores, before stopping in front of lines of people wearing suits.

"Yomunaga, Yomunaga Station."

Stifling a yawn, she stood, her eyes meeting those of a girl from her school sitting across the aisle. She wore glasses and held a book in her hands. Mifuyu recognized it—*Oh, I know that one. It's super popular*—but that was all. She didn't know what it was about, and she had no desire to know. Because she hated books.

Someone called out to her after she had jumped off the train. The girl with the book had also gotten off and walked up to Mifuyu as she stood on the platform.

"You're the Mikura girl, right?"

Mifuyu had never seen this girl with her pink-rimmed glasses, and she quickly checked the school badge pinned to the girl's collar. Blue—a second-year student. Best be polite.

"...I am," Mifuyu replied.

"I knew it! I heard that someone in the Mikura family was going to our school. I was hoping I'd get the chance to meet you."

Exasperated, Mifuyu turned and strode off, weaving through the crowded train platform.

"Hey, wait!" cried the girl whose name Mifuyu didn't even know. "Do you

want to join the literary club? Hey!”

Mifuyu ignored her, pretending not to know what she was talking about. Regretting that she had admitted to being a Mikura, she removed her train pass from her jacket pocket.

She exited the ticket gate and turned right, walking underneath an evening sky the color of melted burgundy. The university hospital, the region’s largest hospital, sat behind a row of dogwood trees fringed in light and shadow. After signing in at the visitor-registration desk, she walked inside and proceeded up to a four-person room on the third floor of the inpatient building, where white curtains partitioned the space to give each patient privacy.

“Hey, Dad.”

Opening a curtain at the back, Ayumu, her father, waved to her in his pajamas. Bandages were wrapped around his head, and the gauze on his left cheek mirrored the large welt covering his right, while a cast secured his right leg. His large body made the bed look awfully small.

“How are you feeling?”

“Absolutely fantastic. Doc says my head looks good, too.”

“But they can’t discharge you yet, right?”

Mifuyu thrust the bag from the convenience store toward him. It contained two yellow cans of his favorite Max Coffee and a bag of crispy brown-sugar *karinto* snacks.

“How much longer do you have to stay here?”

“Not sure. I still have physical therapy. But Che is taking care of the dojo, so everything’s all right.”

“That’s not the problem, though.”

Mifuyu sighed at her father as he tore at the canned coffee’s pull tab.

Ayumu, who both managed Mikura Hall and ran a judo dojo, had gotten into an accident last week. He had been leisurely riding his bicycle on top of a riverside embankment one night when a cat leaped out from the shadows. An unparalleled lover of cats, he swerved frantically to dodge the cat and tumbled

off the embankment, bicycle and all.

The cat thankfully escaped unharmed, and a jogger running behind him saw the entire incident and called an ambulance. Even with his years of training helping him fall safely, however, the doctors determined that he would need a month to fully recover. The dojo's assistant instructor, Che Jifun, could take care of the dojo, and Mifuyu could take care of herself. But one issue remained.

"What are we going to do about Aunt Hirune?" Mifuyu asked her father.

Ayumu froze, coffee still in hand.

"...Did she do something again?" he said.

"It's more like she doesn't do *anything*."

Mifuyu let out another sigh—this one deeper, from the bottom of her very soul. The sound of the tofu store's trumpet and the folk song "Yuyake Koyake" signaling the arrival of evening came through the window.

"There's already been three complaints since you've been hospitalized. The first one was because she threw an empty lunch box into the garbage area without putting them in a bag. Then yesterday, Mikura Hall's alarm system went off every thirty minutes for three hours. The problem is that Aunt Hirune can't take care of anything. City Hall even called."

She opened the bag of *karinto*, extracted one of the caramelized brown pieces, and began nibbling at it, crumbs sprinkling down onto her skirt, which covered her knees per school rules. Mifuyu frowned, picking up each crumb from her lap and popping them in her mouth.

"...How many days have I been here again?" Ayumu asked.

"Five."

"Three incidents in five days..." Ayumu scratched his head. "She said she'd be okay by herself."

"She's not, though. And that's why you've always taken care of both Mikura Hall and her. I mean, I get that she's amazing. I'm not trying to sound mean, but no matter how smart she is or whether she's read every single book in the collection, if someone has to take care of her, then she's not an adult. Plus, she

annoys the neighbors.”

Mifuyu did feel a little guilty, but she couldn't suppress her overwhelming frustration and laid it all out for her father. Her aunt turned thirty this year, so she was still young, but Mifuyu had found her difficult ever since childhood. And Ayumu knew that.

“...So what should we do, Mifuyu? How do you propose we solve the Hirune issue?”

“What?” She just wanted him to listen to her vent and clasped her hands together in a fluster. “I didn't really have anything in mind.”

“But I won't be getting out of here anytime soon. And once I do, taking care of Mikura Hall with this leg is going to be hard.”

“...So we'll move Aunt Hirune out of Mikura Hall and close it for good.”

“And move her where? Our house? Weren't you the one who was so against living with her after Grandma Tamaki died? Besides, Hirune would never leave Mikura Hall. She can't live without books.”

Ayumu's expression was gentle, but his voice was firm, so Mifuyu quickly looked away and put another piece of *karinto* to her mouth. Her fingers were sticky.

“I guess we'll just ask the neighbors to be patient with her.”

“I think that's best for now. By the way, have there been any other complaints since the thing with the lunch box in the garbage area?”

“I haven't heard anything...”

“Okay. Maybe she wizened up a little.”

“Doubt it.”

“Fair. Is she still sleeping all the time?”

Mifuyu lifted her head and looked him in the eyes, a bad feeling spreading through her chest.

“Don't you worry about her, Mifuyu? For all we know, she could be sleeping the day away, not eating or drinking a thing.”

People often teased Hirune about being “born to nap” because her name meant *nap* in Japanese. True to her name, she could sleep twelve, twenty hours at a stretch. Apparently, she’d stayed awake longer when she was young, but she had been like this since Mifuyu was born. That’s why Ayumu had been taking care of both her and Mikura Hall since Tamaki’s death.

Mifuyu thought he should hire someone to help, but Ayumu steadfastly upheld Tamaki’s decision that only members of their family could enter Mikura Hall. Mifuyu’s mother had died at a young age, and her other relatives kept their distance.

Her father worked tirelessly to take care of her aunt, who, if she wasn’t reading a book, was either eating or sleeping and could hardly do anything on her own. Mifuyu had grown up seeing him do all that and dreaded the thought that if her father passed away and left her aunt behind, she would inherit the role of caretaker for her lazy aunt.

She never thought she would experience that so soon.

There wasn’t a single good thing about being born a Mikura. Like what just happened earlier, when someone from her school suddenly approached her about joining the literary club. Mifuyu didn’t even like books. She didn’t read. She despised books.

She took the one unopened Max Coffee and tried to wash down the frustration at the base of her throat, then let out a sickly sweet burp.

“Okay, fine, I get it. I mean, it’s all on me anyway... I’ll just feed her and give her water. Good enough?”

Her father smiled and nodded.

After leaving the hospital, Mifuyu tried calling Mikura Hall but only heard the busy tone as per usual. With little other choice, she stopped by a convenience store and used the ATM to withdraw five thousand yen from her father’s shared account for daily expenses.

The area around the station bustled with workers and students on their way home, and two middle-aged men in caps stood in front of a green bulletin board, hanging a poster announcing the Minazuki Festival at Yomunaga Shrine:

VISIT THE FAMOUS SHRINE OF YOMUNAGA, THE TOWN OF BOOKS! Yomunaga Shrine stood directly behind Mikura Hall and was always crowded at this time of year. Mifuyu kicked an empty can at her feet, sending it rocketing toward a vending machine, then debated whether to leave it before scooping it up and throwing it in a garbage can.

Yomunaga sat a little above sea level, so a walk from the station into the center of town followed a naturally pleasant downward slope. The shopping district in particular rested in a depression, so the stairs to its gate provided a wonderful vista, like standing on a cliff. The stunning views had even gained the stairs a slight reputation as a photo spot. Even now, with the setting sun blazing like hot steel at the edge of town, people held their cameras and phones aloft, snapping pictures of the dazzlingly radiant sunset-lit townscape.

The smells of soy sauce and other fragrant sauces filled the shopping district, accompanied by smoke. The usual line snaked away from the butcher as workers in white aprons and rubber boots quickly stuffed freshly fried croquettes and mincemeat cutlets in bags. The fish seller had a special on bonito, and the owner's second oldest son worked a grill at the front of the store, manually searing bonito skewers to a golden brown. The alluring smell of the skin and fat from the blue-backed fish as it sizzled above the coals pulled in people passing by, with a white cat even mewling incessant appeals. One pack cost four hundred fifty yen. Condiments cost extra, with small cups of diced green onion, Japanese basil, Japanese ginger, and grated ginger at fifty yen each.

But five hundred yen per serving was a bit much. Mifuyu swallowed back the saliva forming in her mouth and tore herself away from the fish seller's to look toward the grocer. Bright-red tomatoes, green *shishito* peppers, glistening eggplants, early crops of corn, and more lined the front of the store.

Placing a bag of tomatoes, an eggplant, and a pack of Japanese ginger into her basket, she saw the same woman as always behind the register, her brown bangs held back with simple clip.

As Mifuyu approached the counter, the friendly shopkeeper asked, "Oh, Mifuyu, how's your father? Is he doing okay?"

A fast-paced, hardworking woman, she was around forty and barreled through the main points of a conversation with little regard to the person she was talking to. Mifuyu's nerves would have been frayed had her father been in worse shape, so she simply answered yes, to which the shopkeeper replied, "Good to hear!" before moving to the next customer.

Mifuyu's skills in the kitchen were limited to the essentials. She could make miso soup, but she always used instant seasoning and could never come up with new additions of her own, nor was she that interested in thinking about it. Her father usually cooked, so when he wasn't at home—like now—and she had a reason to make miso soup, she rotated between three types: tofu and seaweed, cabbage and carrot, and eggplant and Japanese ginger. To round it out and make a meal, she would cook rice and pick up something at the store.

She walked past the soba and udon restaurant and the Chinese restaurant, making her way to Hashida Broiler, a poultry butcher, where she joined a short line of people queued for yakitori at ninety yen per skewer. The large frame of the owner in his tightly permed hair filled the kitchen as he deftly turned rows of sticks on a grill stained black from years of use.

"I'd like three chicken with scallions, three chicken meatball, three plain...and four skin. With sauce, please."

She gazed through the window, which was sticky with years of sauce and chicken fat; the owner didn't seem to hear her over the din. Standing next to the owner and deep-frying chicken was his daughter, Yukari, who took Mifuyu's order instead.

"Sorry, the fan broke, so it's really loud in here. Three chicken with scallions, three plain—what else?"

"Three chicken meatball and four skin."

Mifuyu usually ate at least two skin skewers since they were her favorite.

"Got it! You really do like the skin, huh, Mifuyu? We're a little busy, so it'll be about ten minutes. Are you bringing these to your dad?"

"No, they're for me and Che, and the rest, I'll have to force-feed to Aunt Hirune..."

Yukari frowned at that. “Hirune, huh? It might be a good idea to change her order to salted chicken. How about one skewer each of salt?”

Mifuyu turned bright red, embarrassed that Yukari knew what Hirune liked, and just meekly squeaked, “Please.”

Five minutes later, the freshly grilled yakitori had been sensibly divided into three packs and placed in a plastic bag, the bottom hot enough to burn Mifuyu’s hands.

Shoving one hand in her jacket pocket, Mifuyu worked her way out of the shopping district, hunched over in exhaustion. In front of the weathered white door of a hair salon, she saw a stack of various books bundled together with string and a card with *offering* written on it. Remembering the poster for the Minazuki Festival in front of the train station, Mifuyu drooped her shoulders even further.

After leaving the shopping district, the bustle changed to a calm that was more befitting Yomunaga, the Town of Books.

Before Mikura Hall was built, Yomunaga had been an unassuming town by a river, with a large temple and a graveyard supplemented by numerous farms and plentiful forests. The nickname *Town of Books* was, of course, largely thanks to Mikura Hall. However, the town of the late 1990s at the end of the Heisei recession hardly resembled the one of the 1950s and 1960s during the Showa era boom.

On holidays, booklovers of all types filled the large avenue that ran perpendicular to the shopping district’s exit. There, they could find a cute children’s bookstore with its red door and blue sign next to a book café with a ramp for wheelchair access. Across the street, there was a chic bookstore run by a former employee of a large book retailer. Beyond that sat a long-established used bookstore, a used bookstore specializing in translated works, a café in the refurbished reading room of a local author, a national retail bookstore chain, and more, so shoppers could walk ten steps and arrive at a different store related in some way to books.

In front of Wakaba, a bookstore that Mifuyu’s father frequented, a young male employee with glasses swept the doormat, his haircut making it look like

he wore a black mushroom on his head. Their eyes met as Mifuyu walked past, and he greeted her with a quick bow.

Turning a corner on the avenue and walking down a gently curving narrow street, she saw the thick brush and vibrant green of residential lawns that would relax anyone's breathing. A sign that read BOOKS MYSTERY hung under climbing roses, while the red-bandana-clad owner of the variety shop next door organized the discounted books and reading lights in front of the store.

Mifuyu left the narrow street and emerged onto a wider road. Busier with cars, the view changed from modern bookstores to apartment buildings, dry cleaners, clinics, and other businesses catering to day-to-day life.

The bag of yakitori swung as she proceeded down the gently sloping street until the incessant *thud* of bodies landing on tatami mats told her she was approaching the dojo. White light spilled out of the frosted-glass windows set in the sturdy, two-story reinforced concrete building, shining down on the children's bicycles parked on the edge of the sidewalk. The shutters on the used bookstore next door were closed, the wind carrying the moldy scent unique to old paper through the gap at the bottom.

"Hello!"

Once Mifuyu pulled open the heavy iron door, the sound of people falling to the floor grew louder. The lights inside the dojo shone bright white, and the students sparring on the mats ranged from elementary school kids to middle-aged adults.

"Here you go, Che!" Mifuyu called.

Che walked over, rubbing a towel over his head, to take a slightly sticky package of yakitori. A black belt tied around his well-used, stretched-out gi, the young assistant instructor Che had just turned thirty and was skinnier than Ayumu. His ears were cauliflowered from a lifetime of judo, and his nose bent slightly. He was like an older brother or a young uncle to Mifuyu, who was an only child. Part of her daily errands consisted of bringing him some food in the evenings when he got a little hungry. But it wasn't free.

"All right, yakitori! Thanks. How much do I owe you?"

“Three-sixty yen for the four skewers. Don’t worry about the sixty yen, though. Three hundred’s fine.”

“Hey, good looking out. How’s Sensei?”

“Doesn’t seem like he’ll be discharged for a while, but he’s doing okay. Listen to this, though: I have to go check on Aunt Hirune every day now.”

“Hirune? Oof, rough.”

Che frowned as he removed the yakitori money from his wallet, gazing into the space behind Mifuyu—toward Mikura Hall.

“Someone called here a little while ago complaining about Mikura Hall. Said the alarm’s going off again.”

“For real? Shoot!” Mifuyu cried in irritation, ramming her back into the dojo wall.

Maybe it was time to finally kick Hirune out. Mifuyu immediately wished she hadn’t bought yakitori for her aunt and considered giving her portion to Che. He could eat it with Ms. Harada from the office, since he had a crush on her. But then Che said something else that worried her.

“We didn’t hear the alarm over here, though. Yesterday, it was blaring all throughout the neighborhood, but today, nothing. And Hirune isn’t picking up the phone.”

“Really...? Maybe she’s in the annex. You can’t even hear ambulance sirens in there. And sometimes, you head out to the store and stuff, so you could’ve missed the alarm...”

“No, I was training here all day. And it wasn’t just me—the neighborhood dogs were all quiet, and Ms. Harada said she didn’t hear anything, either.”

Che tried to hide his feelings for Ms. Harada, but they were written all over his face. It was kind of an open secret. Mifuyu wanted to give him a hard time about it like she usually did, but she knew this wasn’t the moment for that. She had to get going.

“But something must have happened if someone complained. You might not have heard it, but it was loud enough to bother somebody. And that’s no good.”

Mifuyu rushed over to Mikura Hall, not caring whether the yakitori in the bag jostled around.

Close to fifty stores related to books dotted the Yomunaga townscape, providing something for every type of book enthusiast, from those looking for beautifully bound books to decorate their homes with; those looking for bookmarks, book covers, or other miscellaneous goods; and to shoppers searching for first editions, books with rare jackets, or hard-to-find books. But among all those options, the central core—the deepest layer of the Town of Books for true, die-hard collectors—was the secondhand bookstores surrounding Mikura Hall. Exiting the dojo, Mifuyu walked back the way she came, a giant ginkgo tree and Mikura Hall appearing as she ascended the gently rising street. It split like a river butting against a sandbar, branching into two roads; row after row of faded used bookstores followed, arranged in lines as though to surround Mikura Hall.

After completing its circuit around Mikura Hall, the bisected road rejoined itself, jutting into the small hill beyond, where it split yet again at a T-junction, one side running deep into a residential area and one branch flowing toward the train station. At the top of this green hill rested Yomunaga Shrine. Banner poles already stood on the slopes, perhaps in preparation for the Minazuki Festival, which would be held in two months' time.

Throngs of visitors came to Yomunaga Shrine to pay homage to the goddess Inari, who was said to govern written works. Worshipers would toss their coins and ring a bell in prayer, and though the thoughts running through their minds at that moment varied, the comments written on the *ema* prayer blocks generally pertained to books, reading, or literary professions. For example:

Please give me the chance to buy one of the thirty-five special limited editions of Standard Text: Collected Works published in the 1980s for under one hundred thousand yen.

Please help the sci-fi writer Tarou Touhenboku find the urge to write again. I've been waiting for a new book from him for over twenty years.

I'm going to win Rookie Author of the Year! I must must must win it! Please let me win!

Please help my bookstore sell more books. If possible, have sales of the online retailer Aimaizon fall, or have the company get wrapped up in a scandal of some sort.

And so on and so forth. Every type of prayer, request, and curse related to literature swayed in the wind under clear skies. People plagued by literature-related concerns would flock from around the country to this shrine housing the “God of Books,” but very few people ever read the materials in the Yomunaga Library resource room to find out when the God of Books first became enshrined there. Those who did know kept quiet about it.

Either way, Mifuyu hated this shrine, Mikura Hall, the throng of used bookstores leading up to it, all of it. Every time the shrine held its festival, her grandmother would grow extremely agitated and worry endlessly about someone sneaking into Mikura Hall. Even now, Mifuyu could feel her long-gone grandmother standing next to her, fuming.

The sun set, taking with it the veil of yellow and red light covering the town, and stars emerged to twinkle faintly in the sky’s true deep blue. As she approached Mikura Hall, the streetlights threw complex shadows upon the large ginkgo that had survived both the great earthquake a century ago and the war twenty years later. The breeze somehow carried the scent of old books. A lush garden surrounded by a concrete block wall lay behind the giant ginkgo, the roof of Mikura Hall just visible over the barrier.

Mikura Hall was crafted in a Western style; its most striking feature to those passing by was the glass-encased sunroom underneath the gabled roof. A large, single-pane, two-story window ran down the center of the massive square building, accented by a slim, elegant, white frame.

However, only Mikura Hall’s sunroom received much natural light. The building contained very few windows; it was largely similar to a traditional Japanese warehouse, with small ventilation windows set into dirt walls covered in plaster. That was because books despised light and humidity.

Mikura Hall existed for books, not humans, and only the sunroom was built with humans in mind. Ever faithful to books, when Tamaki took over Mikura Hall, she tore up part of the yard to add the annex, building it without even any

windows—even ones with shutters—because she installed a ventilation system instead. It was practically a prison.

Whenever Mifuyu's father used to take her to Mikura Hall, she would always cry and plead to go home. The ivy on the plaster walls creeped her out and looked ready to produce a ghost at any moment. Even the rough bumps on the giant ginkgo tree made her feel gross. She couldn't find anything nice about the place.

Mifuyu peered over the concrete wall; no light came from the first floor of the sunroom, but a faint orange light seeped from the second floor, so she could tell that someone was inside.

Now in high school, Mifuyu didn't cry coming here anymore, but her heart thudded as she unlocked the yard's iron gate and stepped inside. She would check on Hirune and then immediately go home and watch a comedy on TV. The following day was a Saturday, so she could stay up late reading manga. Not like she had any friends to hang out with anyway.

Passing through the lush garden with its violets, hydrangeas on the verge of taking on color, and goutweed with white edges to its green leaves, she stood on the blue tiles lining the front steps and rang the doorbell. She didn't think Hirune would answer, and just as she thought, no one appeared.

She inserted the key her father had given her into the lock, making sure to turn it forcefully all the way until she heard the mechanical *clank*. Had that really been enough to disarm the system? She looked above the door at the security system's logo, but there wasn't a peep.

However, something puzzled Mifuyu. Next to the alarm sat a metal plaque with strange red letters that she couldn't decipher. Had that always been there? She rarely came near Mikura Hall, and on the rare occasions she did, she kept her eyes glued to the ground, so she had never looked above the front door.

Anxiety buzzing in her chest, Mifuyu hesitantly opened the door. The alarm didn't go off.

"Aunt Hirune?"

Summer hung in the air outside, but the chilly air inside sent goose bumps

running across her skin. The uniquely pungent odor of old books spread a numbness from the back of her nostrils to the area around her sinuses, and she felt on the verge of sneezing.

Mifuyu flicked the light switch, orange light immediately filling the room. Though it was a Western building, the insides followed Japanese design standards, with a large box for shoes placed in a brown-and-white-tiled entryway. Mifuyu slipped off her sneakers and went to grab a pair of slippers when she let out a scream. Dead cockroaches lay belly-up inside the shoe cubby, and she had almost touched one.

“...Ugh, I already wanna leave.”

She pleaded that the cockroach wasn't pretending to be dead, like a late summer cicada. Prayed that it wouldn't suddenly jump up and fly off. Fighting back her urge to cry, Mifuyu carefully took out a pair of slippers from the slot two spaces over.

The carpeted foyer extended into the hallway, turning to the right just before the wall at the end of the hall. A door on each side of the corridor's cream-white walls led to some of the stacks.

The small room on the right housed what could be called Mikura Hall's "Genesis Collection." This initial group of books included a copy of the magazine *Shinseinen* that Kaichi had acquired from the first issue when he was about twenty years old; a complete work of one-yen books that had been published at the end of the Taisho era; a translation of a modern classic, and more. The long, L-shaped room on the left, however, stored bookshelves crammed with Showa era picture books, children's novels, books and light reading aimed at adults, and other relics from when Mikura Hall was open to the public. Kaichi Mikura's collection focused primarily on novels and literature, containing works ranging from prewar days to the postwar era. Like most collectors, he would buy new editions and any reviews of works when they were released.

Either way, Mifuyu couldn't care less. She opened the doors to check for Hirune, but she wasn't there.

She continued down the hall, turned right, and ended up in the sunroom. Years of foot traffic had flattened the red carpet spread over the floor, and each

piece of furniture was of high quality but extremely dated. A red blanket lay bundled on top of a jade-green chaise lounge. A pillow had fallen to the floor. The room had a toilet and a small one-door refrigerator in the corner, but no kitchen to incite worries about fires. Mikura Hall didn't have an internet connection, and the only contact to the outside world was a black landline phone. The receiver was on the floor; no wonder the line was always busy.

Hirune wasn't on the first floor. Which left the second floor.

The stairs rose up from the left side of the sunroom. A dingy cardboard box at the base was crammed haphazardly with convenience-store lunch boxes, disposable chopsticks, dirty tissues that Hirune had probably used to blow her nose, and more.

Jumbles of stuff lay strewn across the room. The books on top of the table, however, were neatly piled with their spines aligned. None of the books were left open—not even one dog-eared page.

Hirune really didn't care about anything but books. Mifuyu felt a mixture of resignation and respect at this thought as she gazed out the window. The sun had set completely, and a deep sapphire sky spread out over the full, dark shadows of the houses in the distance.

She walked upstairs. Half of the sunroom extended the full two floors, bookshelves covering the entire two-story wall, while the hallway on the second floor offered views of the first. The wide hallway was built in a half-balcony style, its wall also a bookshelf overflowing with books. The only other furniture were a leather sofa and a low table plopped inelegantly near the central handrail. That's where Mifuyu finally found Hirune.

She wasn't on the sofa, but she lay on her back atop the red carpet between it and the low table, snoring heavily.

With her thick glasses and freckles dotting her pale face, she could pass for twenty as easily as she could for forty, essentially making her ageless. Her light-brown hair was scattered across the red carpet; she wore a striped shirt that looked like it hadn't been washed in who knows how long and loose pants that looked like pajama bottoms. Her legs extended straight out like a corpse in a coffin, while her hands rested lightly on her chest. She gripped what looked like

a notepad.

“Aunt Hirune. Hey, Aunt Hirune.”

Mifuyu tediously shook her aunt’s shoulders, trying to rouse her. But true to her name, Hirune hardly seemed ready to wake up and instead just let out a sleepy grunt of a snore.

A massive ledger lay open on the low table, small, neat letters recording the state of the collection. It contained a record of each book among the hundreds of thousands in the main building and the annex, separated by bookshelf, with anything in need of mending added to the list of books for the repair technician.

Mifuyu placed a bookmark in the ledger and closed it with a sigh.

“Whatever... I’ll just leave her yakitori here.”

Mifuyu couldn’t understand how her aunt, who was fifteen years older than her, could be so irresponsible, sleeping her days away. She would bring her food, but that would be it. Mifuyu removed the pack with *salt* written in red pen from the bag, placed it on the low table, thought about it for a second, and then set it on the floor next to her aunt’s drooling face. The mouthwatering aroma might wake her up.

With that done, once Mifuyu left Mikura Hall, it would take her thirty minutes to get back to her apartment, then she would make eggplant-and-miso soup with Japanese ginger in her kitchen, have a quick meal of yakitori and instant rice, and spend a leisurely Friday night at home.

But as she stood up, her eyes fell upon the piece of paper in her aunt’s hand.

At first, she had assumed it was a note that her aunt had written. But once she examined it more closely, the text wasn’t letters so much as some bizarre script written in red ink like spilled blood. She reached out, gripped the edge of the paper between her fingers, and gently pulled it free.

It wasn’t a note. It was an amulet. Or maybe a talisman.

She recalled the mysterious plaque next to the alarm by the front door. The script looked very similar. Oddly wide, flat characters ran down the long white paper. It resembled the prayer paper stuck to the faces of Chinese *jiangshi*

vampires. Mifuyu quickly turned the paper over and flipped it around.

She could read it. The stylization of the text made it look like a design, but the words were Japanese.

“Let’s see... ‘Whoever steals this book shall be chased by the flags of magic realism.’ Huh?”

The moment the words left her mouth, she immediately felt something like a cold finger run up her spine. She broke into goose bumps.

“The heck? So creepy...”

Mifuyu hurriedly released the talisman, sensing that she had touched upon some mysterious force. The moment she did, she was suddenly engulfed by a breeze that blew in from seemingly nowhere. She spun in circles trying to figure out where it had come from, but all the windows in the sunroom were shut tight.

As though driven by a will of its own, the wind left Mifuyu, lifted the talisman playfully into the air, and twirled it around before setting it down in front of a bookshelf built into the hallway.

In that spot, Mifuyu saw a pair of feet.

An innocent-looking girl stood there, wearing white running shoes and socks and a school uniform the same as Mifuyu’s.

Mifuyu screamed at the top of her lungs, falling on her behind and backing away. This girl had to be a ghost. She’d appeared without so much as a sound or warning, and her shoulder-length hair was as white as snow.

“Wh-who are you?” Mifuyu asked.

The girl didn’t answer. She slowly bent at the waist and picked up the talisman, then noiselessly walked toward Mifuyu and held out her hand.

“...You dropped something,” the girl said.

“Wh-what?”

“You dropped something. It’s yours, Mifuyu.”

Mifuyu’s face looked like a piece of crumpled paper.

“No, that’s not mine. My aunt was holding it.”

“Be that as it may, it’s yours, Mifuyu.”

This was annoying. It didn’t make sense. What was going on? This girl had suddenly appeared and started contradicting her. More irritated than scared, Mifuyu quickly calmed down. The face of the girl who’d called after Mifuyu on her way home from school surfaced from the depths of her memory.

“Oh, I get it,” said Mifuyu. “You’re with the literary club, aren’t you? I bet that girl told you to follow me here.”

Having the name Mikura in this town was like walking around with a big sign on your back. Not knowing she detested reading, bookworms would approach Mifuyu thinking they had found a friend, all because she was a Mikura. Some just wanted a way into the Mikura Hall collection. The girl who’d approached her after she got off the train earlier must have been trying to do that.

In that light, this girl was hardly peculiar, and Mifuyu didn’t have the slightest reason to fear her. She had either bleached her hair, or she was one of those people born without pigment in their hair. And her standing here had to be because a window on the first floor of the sunroom was unlocked, or she’d somehow picked the lock on the front door, or she had sneaked in earlier and hid among the stacks on the second floor. She had opened the sliding door and came out while Mifuyu was distracted by Hirune. A single door between two bookshelves led to the second-floor stacks. Yes, that’s exactly where she had come from.

With that, courage swelled up inside Mifuyu, and strength returned to her legs. Crouched on the floor, she stood, her look piercing, and jabbed a finger out with conviction.

“Scram. I’m not joining the literary club. I hate books, I have enough trouble as is with my textbooks, and I only read manga. There’s not one reason why I should join the literary club. And if that girl’s trying to win me over so that she can get inside Mikura Hall, tell her that it won’t work. I’d literally rather be clubbed to death.”

“Literary club?” The dark-eyed, white-haired girl cocked her head in confusion and blinked. “Literary club... Not a literal club. Too bad.”

“What?”

“You said you’d rather be clubbed to death, but it’s a *literary* club, not a literal club.”

“Whatever. Just get out. I don’t have time for your jokes. Don’t make me call the cops on you for trespassing.”

Mifuyu pushed the girl’s back. *Huh, so I can touch her. If she was a ghost, then my hand would’ve gone straight through*, Mifuyu thought as she led the girl to the stairs. But once they got there, the girl grabbed the banister tight and stopped.

“I’m not trespassing,” she said. “I came because she summoned me.” She pointed at Hirune, who was still asleep. “I don’t know anything about a literary club. I’m serious.”

“...Really? So you know Aunt Hirune?”

“We’re acquaintances. According to one definition, that is.”

“What are you, a dictionary? Speaking of, you both fit the definition of *weirdo*.”

She stopped pushing the girl and examined her from head to toe. She was a little taller than Mifuyu. With her flat nose and largish mouth, Mifuyu was certain, after careful examination, that she had never seen her before. Her school uniform consisted of a green necktie accenting a white blouse, along with a dark-blue jacket and skirt that were made for winter. The skirt covered her knees, so she apparently followed school regulations on skirt length, just like Mifuyu. But she didn’t have a school badge, so it wasn’t clear what grade she was in.

“What’s your name?”

Mifuyu asked that just to get an idea of who this girl was, but for some reason, the girl’s face lit up in excitement.

“Mashiro. It means *pure white* in Japanese.”

At that, something in the back of Mifuyu’s mind started twinkling, like flickers flying off a sparkler. But it lasted for only the briefest moment and disappeared

before she could grasp it. She shook her head, grabbed the girl by the arm, and walked back toward Hirune.

“Aunt Hirune, wake up. Come on already! Who is this girl?”

But no matter how much she pulled or pushed, her aunt would not open her eyes.

Mifuyu was over this. She never thought this would take so long. If she had bought the grilled bonito for dinner, it might have gone bad by now. She could microwave the yakitori at least, but making rice would be too much hassle, so she should stop by a convenience store and get some microwavable rice or something... She felt all her energy drain away. She adjusted the bag dangling from her hand and started to go downstairs. When she did, the girl who called herself Mashiro grabbed the hand holding the bag.

“...What?” said Mifuyu.

“You can’t go.”

“What do you mean?”

“You can’t go home that way. A thief came here and activated the curse.”

“Thief? Curse? What are you talking about?”

“Trust me. Mifuyu, you have to read the book.”

Mashiro’s large dark eyes stared at Mifuyu, ready to suck her in.

This girl’s even more of a weirdo than Aunt Hirune.

Mifuyu quickly tried to wrestle her arm free from Mashiro’s grip, but she was surprisingly strong and didn’t even flinch.

“Let go of me! You’re scaring me.”

“I’m sorry. But you must read the book, Mifuyu.”

Immediately after saying that, Mashiro walked over to the sliding door between the two bookshelves and threw it open.

The scent of old, moldy books immediately rushed forward and sent dust flying. Mifuyu covered her face with her hands as she burst into a fit of coughing.

Why's there a breeze in the stacks? Is it the ventilation? No way Aunt Hirune would fall asleep with that on.

Raising her head, all she could see was bookshelves. They had been installed from floor to ceiling, row after countless row stretching all the way to the back, with just enough room for a person to squeeze between them. This room alone contained more than two hundred shelves, and all of them were crammed with books. The silent scene felt like some strict religious house that came off as more oppressive than spectacular.

Sweat coated the bottom of her feet. Mifuyu hated Mikura Hall, and she found this place repugnant. She had opened this door once when she was little, but the only thing from that time she remembered was her grandmother's stern face glaring down at her.

"This way," Mashiro urged.

Mifuyu's temporary stupor slowed her response, and Mashiro dragged her into the room. Hardly half a meter separated each bookshelf, and they threaded through passages so narrow that small people could just barely pass through. None of the ceiling lights were on. Even so, a faint orange glow like candlelight filled the storehouse, causing the shadows of the bookshelves to hover.

"...There can't be any candles in here, though."

Open flames had been prohibited in Mikura Hall since Tamaki's time, and both Hirune and Ayumu would never think of bringing any fire inside. Mifuyu rubbed her eyes again and again, but the ethereal lights never faded.

Mashiro wove her way through the bookshelves that all looked the same to Mifuyu. Mifuyu anxiously watched her back and her vaguely translucent white hair as she was dragged through the shelves.

"Here we are."

Mashiro stopped in front of a bookshelf and finally released Mifuyu's hand. Massaging her slightly sore wrists, Mifuyu looked up and couldn't believe her eyes.

Even someone who despised books as much as Mifuyu could see the

difference. While every other shelf overflowed with so many books that not even a gap existed between them, this one shelf alone was completely barren. In other words, twenty or thirty books had vanished.

“...I can’t believe it,” Mifuyu said.

“Read this.”

Mifuyu looked to where Mashiro was pointing—a single book on the edge of the shelf. The writing on the cover resembled the text on the talisman. The faintest amount of dust rose as Mashiro reached out and grabbed it; the circular engraving on the front cover glowed a faint orange. It was *The Brothers of the Lush Village*, which was bound with a beautiful ivy design that seemed to wrap around the entire book.

“Read it, Mifuyu,” Mashiro urged.

Mifuyu swallowed hard. Usually, just touching a book would be enough to cause Mifuyu to flinch, but she was strangely calm now, with no sense of uneasiness.

The Brothers of the Lush Village. What a strange title. Opening the cover, she felt a somehow familiar scent wafting up to greet her.

She couldn’t begin to imagine what it might be about, but she felt irrevocably drawn to it. A desire to read it overcame her. It felt like someone hiding inside this book was gently calling her.

“I haven’t read a book outside class since elementary school.”

She breathed deep, filling her stomach with air before slowly releasing it and turning the page.



Every story has a beginning and an ending. The Lush Village began as nothing more than a dry, red-brown prairie before brothers Beysil and Keysil chased black beetles onto that wasteland. No matter how much rain the yellowed clouds produced, the drops would simply evaporate the moment they touched the scorched earth. Without water, no insects, much less humans, could ever survive.

Beysil brought the rain with him wherever he went. The moment he took his

first breath on a night with a new moon, heavy clouds covered the sky above his village and released a barrage of endless rain. The village was completely flooded by the time the moon grew full again, and the evacuated villagers had no choice but to plug their noses and ears before diving deep to return to their submerged houses and retrieve the things they had left behind.

The rain stopped when Beysil's mother visited her parents in a neighboring village with him, and it started back up again once mother and baby returned home. The people eventually started calling Beysil a rain demon, and he was only allowed to remain in the newly rebuilt village for three days and three nights. And so his mother left, carrying the infant Beysil on her back. She looked up to see dark, heavy clouds following them. She would stop, and the clouds would catch up to them, followed by a drizzle that would turn into a downpour hard enough to hurt her skin. So she walked without pause, heading toward lands where rain did not fall.

Beysil would bring rain to a parched land, and then he and his mother left for the next village before the sprouting vegetation could rot.

And so the earth turned, and after the people's clothing changed from thin to thick and back again, the mother birthed another son, Keysil.

Keysil brought the sun with him wherever he went. Entrusting the young Beysil to someone, the mother had a midwife help with the birth, after which the light of the blazing sun assaulted the village, reducing the ponds to dust before Keysil even had a chance to taste his mother's milk. The souls of the fish and crayfish left their earthly bodies and transformed into vengeful bolts of thunder that shook the soil and made the midwife scream. The dead souls sank deep into the dirt, becoming seeds and awaiting the day when they would emerge as sprouts.

Hot days of blazing sunshine continued, the fields drying up before people's very eyes. The precise moment Beysil was brought back to visit his mother as she rested in the midwife's house, rain began to fall. The sun shone high in the sky above, and yet raindrops poured from clouds, soaking the ground below. The souls of the fish and crayfish that had perished cursing the world sprouted up, spreading red buds and fields of lush green far and wide.

The sight pleased the mother, but it also saddened her. She bemoaned that the gods had abandoned the children she had grown in her womb and birthed.

Dark clouds gathered around the sun, and as soon as the clouds cried, the sun would smile. Upset at the unpredictable weather, the people turned to the leader of the land, hoisting his palanquin and carrying him to visit the prone mother and the still young brothers. This great chief would not listen to a word of the mother's lamentation, dragging her children away and entrusting them to a passing traveler. He then established a weather agency, employed scholars, and decided the dates of each brother's departure and arrival, which he then carved on an obsidian slab, ensuring that the schedule was maintained.

The brothers went with the traveler, dragging the rain and clouds behind them, growing up both admired and despised. The mother they left behind began to age and wrinkle day by day, her hair whitening and her bones growing frail. Eventually, she drew her final breath while gazing at the schedule on the obsidian slab. The news of her death reached her sons upon the petals of black flowers.

The now-grown boys were devastated and grew to despise each other. If there had been no rain, if there had been no sun, then their mother surely would not have died alone. During a patch of rain on an otherwise sunny day, as Beysil lifted a heavy stone to crush Keysil and Keysil made to stab Beysil with a sharp tree branch, the traveler rolled two dice. They stopped, one die pointing west and the other pointing east.

"Enough. Beysil, you go west. Keysil, you go east. Both of you, don't look back, don't follow the other, and never think of each other again. Just keep going forward and don't stop. Someday, an insect will lead you back together again. On the day that a sun-shower falls once more, you are to build a village in that spot."

The two did as the traveler said, heading east or west on their separate journeys. As the two brothers walked away from each other, the dark clouds that had encircled the sun followed Beysil. Relief spread through the people as they would now have peace, even as they knew the uncontrollable weather would bring its own challenges. Separated for years at ages twelve and eleven, the brothers were reunited as adults and founded the Lush Village. Beysil

searched under a heavy jug of rainwater, while Keysil explored a marketplace under the blazing sun, and each discovered their own black beetle. These stag beetles were sleeping, their fat bellies facing the sky.

“...Mashiro.” Mifuyu looked up from the book and sounded annoyed. “Do you expect me to read this whole thing?”

Mashiro was visibly confused. “You don’t want to keep reading?” she asked.

She now had pointed ears protruding from the top of her head and a long muzzle with a doglike nose.

“It’s just so long. I mean, who are these Beysil and Keysil guys? And the story is so weird. It doesn’t make any sense. I don’t get this whole rain curse and sun curse thing, either, and I can’t follow anything that’s happening. Also, the bugs are disgusting— Wait, why do you have dog ears? Are you wearing a fake nose? Quit it with the cosplay.”

Mifuyu was speaking rapid-fire. She closed the book without waiting for a reply and returned it to the barren shelf. Mashiro’s dog ears twitched and drooped like a real dog’s, but Mifuyu was too busy glaring at the book to notice.

“You didn’t like the story?” Mashiro asked her.

“It’s not that. It’s just so cramped in here, and there’s nowhere to sit down, and I can’t stand up the whole time I’m reading. Plus, if you’re someone like me who hates books to begin with, following along with all these words is tough. Seriously, it’s been ages since I read anything this long.”

Placing a hand over her sore neck, Mifuyu yawned and moved her head in a circle. She checked her watch; it was already almost seven PM.

“Anyway, I have to get back home. I’ll read the book some other time. You really should take that dog costume off before you leave, though.”

She then reached out to pick up the bag of vegetables and the pack of yakitori when—her fingertips felt the fluffy yet strangely sleek touch of a living creature.

“Cluck, cluck.”

A rooster strutted by her feet, its comb swaying with the movement. Mouth agape, she touched the rooster as though to embrace it. It was real. The

rooster's yellow legs crumpled the yakitori container, and it began to parade around the shelves.

"What...what's a rooster doing here?"

Looking down at the crushed package, she saw that the yakitori that should have been there was gone. The sticky, sweet soy sauce had disappeared without a trace, too. On top of that, three sprouts poked out of the bag of vegetables, their tops stretching ever upward.

Backing away, Mifuyu bumped into a bookshelf, staring dizzily at Mashiro. The appearance of the rooster didn't faze Mashiro; she simply looked toward the far wall. Mifuyu heard the sound of rain. Raindrops struck the walls, and water dripped from the eaves.

"But the forecast said it would be sunny today and tomorrow."

Mifuyu mumbled the words before gasping as she realized something. Ignoring the chicken and sprouts that had suddenly materialized, she spun around frantically and scuffled down the narrow passageway.

"Mifuyu, wait. Where are you going?"

"My laundry! I forgot I hung it outside to dry before going to school!"

Sensing Mashiro trailing behind her, Mifuyu ran through the maze of bookshelves, which somehow seemed more complex than before, and headed for the exit.

Eventually, she opened the sliding door and entered the hallway, her eyes flying to Hirune, who still lay sleeping on the floor. But something was different with her now. A translucent stone covered her like a crystal, ivy wound around her entire body.

"Aunt...Aunt Hirune?"

Wringing both hands tight, Mifuyu approached her aunt apprehensively, shaking at the thought that Hirune might have suffocated to death. Upon closer inspection, Mifuyu saw the woman's stomach gently rise and fall, so she knew she was breathing. The word *mother* had been written in ominous crimson letters on her eyelids.

“What is this? What’s going on?”

“Cluck, cluck.”

“Ack!”

A hen with a small wattle brushed against her feet.

“Wait, now there’s a hen?”

“It’s because the yakitori was seasoned with salt,” Mashiro said.

“That’s why? No, hang on—what’s going on with your dog ears? They’re twitching and moving...and your nose is so long.”

Now that Mifuyu saw them again in the well-lit hallway, the white ears on Mashiro’s head looked real, the moist black tip of her long nose wriggling. It was like her entire face had changed into a dog’s, save for her eyes and hair.

It was all so strange, but Mashiro simply said, “The better to help you with, Mifuyu,” completely unbothered.

“...I must have fallen asleep reading that book.”

Mifuyu closed her eyes tight, talking to her sleeping self in the real world. She needed to wake up quickly. She’d had enough; she was done dreaming.

Wake up, wake up, wake up, wake up, wake up....

She concentrated on that thought with all her might before carefully opening her eyes little by little—but her aunt was still inside the crystal, and Mashiro still had a dog’s ears and nose. If anything, they looked even more real.

“Ugh, enough already...,” Mifuyu groaned.

Mashiro just looked confused by everything Mifuyu said even as plants began to emerge from the floor, walls, and bookshelves. Everything grew rapidly; a wall of vine roses with yellow and pink flowers here, a blanket of ferns with thin, rustling leaves there, and what looked like bracken grew in one corner. The sound of water came from somewhere. A fierce rain pounded the sunroom’s large windows, a veritable waterfall running down the panes. At the base of the window, a pond had formed. Fish jumped with a splash.

Mifuyu screamed, ran down the stairs half mad, and dashed past the

grandfather clock, which had stopped at six fifty PM, when she heard a commotion.

People were talking. It was a jumble of conversations. They grew louder, overcoming the sound of the rain, the clamor loud enough to make her want to cover her ears. There were no signs of any people. And yet the infinite layers of conversations in some unknown tongue caused Mifuyu's eardrums to rumble. The bookshelves began to rock slightly back and forth, then the door to the first-floor stacks opened ever so slightly, and she realized that the sound was coming from the books.

The words are forcing their way into my head!

Mifuyu willed her quivering legs to run, fleeing out the front door. But now multicolored flags like those used to dress battleships, along with harlequin flags adorned with long hanging threads, burst forth from the smallest gaps between books and shelves, clinging to Mifuyu's arms, legs, and face.

"This is so wrong! No way this is happening! It's a dream! A dream!"

It was all because she had read that bizarre book. Because she had read that peculiarly strange story. Someone who always brought rain and someone who always made the sun shine? People like that didn't exist. Stories were nothing but lies, after all. Fish and crayfish turning into thunder and burying themselves in the earth, then emerging as a variety of buds? Her biology teacher would flunk her if she told them something like that.

Ugh, if only I'd never read that book! This is why I hate books!

Tearing at the battleship flags that had wrapped themselves around her, she looked up as she brushed them aside, then went limp as she saw crayfish raining down on the other side of the small window above the front door in the foyer.

"Mifuyu."

Startled, she turned around. Her face looking like hair had sprouted from a dog's head, Mashiro stood directly behind her and spoke as she carefully picked the flags off Mifuyu's body one at a time.

"This is no dream. It's a curse. You saw that talisman, right? 'Whoever steals

this book shall be chased by the flags of magic realism.’”

Mifuyu stared back at Mashiro, her shoulders heaving with every breath.

“Stop,” Mifuyu begged. “No more of this creepy talk about curses.”

But Mashiro did not flinch.

“The books in Mikura Hall—all 239,122 of them—are subjected to a book curse,” Mashiro explained. “The curse activates when anyone who is not a member of the Mikura family takes even one book outside the premises. The thief is then imprisoned within a story. This time, the book curse of magic realism was chosen. That’s the world the thief is trapped in.”

Flags of red and blue, yellow on green, black with brown, and a bizarre mulberry-like color crept down the hallway and emerged from the walls, trying to cling to Mifuyu’s body.

“Everything happening now is because of this curse. Before the invention of the printing press, when books were highly valuable, people placed curses on books to protect them. It’s a defensive spell. Monks call it anathema, a curse of expulsion.”

“...Are you out of your mind?”

Suppressing the urge to cry, Mifuyu reached for the shoe cubby and ended up brushing her hand against one of the upside-down cockroaches. She had completely forgotten about them. The scream she let out seemed to bring the cockroach back to life. It jumped, its shiny black wings shuddering, and felt around with its long, thin, bow-like antennae before taking flight.

Mifuyu almost fainted, but Mashiro caught her, sat her down, opened the door, and shooed the cockroach outside. It flew off into the sky that was full of rapidly swirling dark clouds and pouring rain.

Brilliant battleship flags blanketed the streets, covering the used bookstores around Mikura Hall. The leaves of the ginkgo shone yellow, accenting the gray town as they danced like flakes of gold on each passing breeze. All the while, new buds formed on the branches, creating an endless supply of leaves to fly away in the wind.

“In ancient times, each volume had its own curse, but there are so many books these days that a single curse can account for several volumes at once. As a result, the curse is much more powerful—strong enough to transform the entire town. In other words, we’re in the world of *The Brothers of the Lush Village*. The curse is limited to Yomunaga, and the thief is somewhere in town, imprisoned within the story.”

Standing in the doorway, Mashiro looked as though she was illuminated by a backlight.

“Mifuyu, you have to find the thief. If you catch them, the book curse will be lifted, and the town will return to normal.”

Lightning flashed across the dark sky, rain fell in large drops, and a deafening wind raged. But up above, the full moon hung in the sky, surrounded by a whirlpool of thick rain clouds. The full moon gazed serenely down on Yomunaga, blinking a couple of times just like the greeting from the yellow eye of a black cat.

“...The moon is winking. What’s going on?”

Mifuyu looked at the ground to see plants sprouting, just like inside, growing thick as though a green carpet was spreading out to tumble down the hill.

The town changed with maddening speed. Vines grew rampant, the roof tiles on houses danced in time to the sound of the rain, dogs sang, cats belted traditional Japanese melodies, and the asphalt was as sluggish as a mud road.

Mashiro gently took hold of Mifuyu’s hand as Mifuyu stood in disbelief. Mashiro’s face was now mostly dog, and a white tail poked out from the hem of her long school uniform skirt, but her hair, eyes, and hands were still that of a human girl.

“Come on, let’s go,” Mashiro urged. “We have to hurry up and catch the thief.”

“...If we find them, will the town really go back to normal?” Mifuyu asked, her face perfectly pale.

Mashiro nodded. “Yes! Probably.”

“Probably?!”

“Honestly, this is a first for me, too... All I know is that we need to find the thief. I was just born, so I don’t know a whole lot.”

“...You don’t look anything like a baby.”

“Well, strictly speaking, I’m not a baby.”

“Ugh, enough!”

Mifuyu stamped the ground, feeling her fear turn into anger. For some reason, this invigorated her.

“Strictly, schmstrictly, I don’t care! You act like you know everything about this world. You sounded so confident when you said that the town would go back to normal. Be more specific! If you’d never gotten me to read that book, then I wouldn’t even be having this weird dream!”

Mashiro stood trembling, her ears dropping like a dog being scolded by its owner. The rain continued to intensify, the drops growing to the size of chickpeas, the sound starting to hint at a possible hailstorm. Upon closer inspection, it wasn’t actually rain at all, but shiny white grains. Mifuyu scooped one up—it was a real pearl. A layer of pearls tumbled over the yard and street, reflecting the glimmering white moonlight.

“This is insane,” she muttered.

Mifuyu moved to take cover inside Mikura Hall, but when she did, Mashiro’s drooping ears perked up. Mifuyu didn’t hear anything, but Mashiro’s dog ears twitched, and her shiny black nose quivered.

“...Someone’s in the bushes,” Mashiro said. “Who’s there?”

The hydrangea bush in the yard shook, and a moment later, a black figure peeked its face out. Illuminated by the moon and the resplendent pearl rain, the creature was an orange fox with pointy ears. It let out an ugly, deeply wild bark.

Just then, Mashiro lunged for the fox like a dog on the hunt. The sorry fox jumped up and tried to run away, but Mashiro was faster, and she pinned it in the corner of the yard.

“Hey, what are you doing?” Mifuyu said to Mashiro.

An animal lover, Mifuyu hurriedly chased after her, deftly scooped the fox up, and put some distance between them and Mashiro.

“No one likes a bully. Right, Mr. Fox? Your poor thing,” Mifuyu cooed.

The soft, warm body in her arms trembled. Mifuyu glared hard at Mashiro, who began to tremble again.

“I-I’m sorry,” Mashiro whimpered. “I saw the fox and acted on instinct.”

“Did your brain become a dog’s, too?”

Cradling the fox, Mifuyu strode briskly through the raining pearls.

“Mifuyu, what are you going to do with the fox?”

“I can’t just leave it all alone in this messed-up world.”

Someone petting its soft, orange fur must have helped the fox relax, for its eyes turned to slits of comfort. Lines of displeasure ran across Mashiro’s doglike face, but she reluctantly went along with Mifuyu.

They left Mikura Hall and walked down the road among the falling pearls. Faint lights illuminated the old bookstores as office workers browsed discount books in front of the stores on their way home. The town had transformed so wildly, yet no one seemed the least disturbed. She’d assumed that she was alone in this strange world but was surprised to see some faces she recognized. The pudgy man searching for something on the right side of a bookshelf was a regular here, and he usually waved with a big smile, saying, “Hey, it’s the Mikura girl!” whenever he saw Mifuyu.

“Mashiro, wait here a second.”

Mifuyu made Mashiro stand in front of a vending machine before slowly walking toward him, fox still in her arms, and spoke to him as he went to pull something from the discount-books section.

“Um, good evening.”

His small eyes blinked back at her from his stout, pale face.

“What do you want?” he asked.

The sudden change from the cheerful, waving person to this cold treatment caused the words to catch in Mifuyu's throat, but she gathered her courage and continued:

"Oh, I don't really want anything. It's just... What do you think of this rain?"

"Rain?" The middle-aged man looked up, scratching the balding section on the crown of his head, craning his neck suspiciously. "What do I think...? It's the same as always. Tomorrow is Beysil's wedding, and the sky is celebrating."

"...Beysil?"

"That's right. Everyone's gathering pearls, see?"

The road glittered under the layer of accumulated pearls. Children had assembled, busy collecting the pearl drops as they fell from the sky. A group of children squatted in a circle around a wicker basket filled with a pile of pearls they had collected.

Figuring that this was just how things were in this world, Mifuyu decided that she needed to be prepared for anything. She squeezed her hands into tight fists, steeled her resolve, and turned toward the man.

"Um, would you mind telling me something else?"

"Oh? What is it this time?"

"Have you seen anyone suspicious around here? A bunch of books were stolen from our collection—an entire shelf's worth. I'm trying to find the thief."

"No idea. Also, don't let that animal get close to these precious books," the man spat. Then he took three books from the shelf, pulled the store's heavy glass door open, and hurried inside.

Same as in the regular world, the rows of aged bookstores were filled with bibliophiles fishing through the shelves inside and outside for the right book. Which was why everyone faced away from Mikura Hall—they kept their prey in front of them since no hunter would foolishly turn their backs on a good find.

"Wait a sec. Wouldn't the thief want to hide among people like this? If so, they might be somewhere around here."

Why did thieves steal books in the first place? Mifuyu figured it was either to

earn money by selling them for a lot to someone looking for rare books or to get them for themselves. She thought that chances were good the thief was somewhere among this group of booklovers.

But she couldn't talk to everyone. Already swarming with people, the crowd seemed to swell as Mifuyu hesitated. One hundred people became two hundred, two hundred became four hundred, four hundred became eight hundred... Where were they all coming from? It looked like people were somehow mysteriously popping up from the gutters on the side of the road.

"I'm going to lose my mind."

Enough was enough. She couldn't do this. Mifuyu tightened her grip on the fox she was cradling, and it looked up at her with a curious expression.

"There's no way I can find the thief. We should leave it to someone else. Yep. That's what I'm gonna tell Mashiro."

Just then, a black bug—most likely a cockroach—stretched its wings and flew, landing on the bookshelf in front of her. Mifuyu let out a pitiful yelp, and the fox barked a threat at it.

"Okay, fox, eat that cockroach!"

Mashiro then tugged at her sleeve. "Mifuyu, let's follow that bug."

"What? No way!"

"Don't say that. In *The Brothers of the Lush Village*, the black beetle-like insects were called 'carapaced bugs' and revered as messengers of the gods. They're the reason why the brothers met again after they walked east and west. And right now, Yomunaga is like the Lush Village. The bug might lead us to the thief."

This cockroach's rounded wings did make it look more like it was wearing a shell compared with the bugs that surprised Mifuyu in the kitchen or by the garbage cans. Its body quivered when a customer opened the door of a store. Then it stood its shiny black shell upright, displaying the thin, silken hind wings it had been hiding, and flew off through the pearl rain in the direction of the moon.

“...Hey. Did Yomunaga really turn into the world in that story? That guy mentioned something about Beysil or whatever.”

“Yep. That’s why we have to hurry up and find the thief.”

Mashiro pulled Mifuyu by the hand and ran like the wind, the hem of her skirt billowing. They followed the cockroach. Mifuyu felt so light that it was like she had wings, too, and she wasn’t really sure whether her feet were actually touching the ground.

It was night, but the city harbored no shadows for creatures to hide and sleep. They flew past the lights of the houses in residential areas, the white lights of supermarkets, a billboard lit in purple for a pub that looked ready to sink into the earth, and streetlights, eventually passing in front of the dojo. Right as they did, Che, the assistant judo instructor, was standing in the street and chatting with Ms. Harada, who worked in the office. She had long, dyed brown hair and attractive eyes and nose. She was listening intently to Che as she lit a thin cigarette. Che, who was completely into her, practically had hearts in his eyes.

“He’s totally head over heels.”

Neither of them noticed Mifuyu, only raising a hand to fix their mussed hair, as though a dust devil had just passed nearby.

Mashiro was fast. So fast that the fox on Mifuyu’s shoulders yipped in surprise. At some point, Mashiro’s arms and legs had changed into a dog’s, too, and she ran over the ground on all fours. Now nothing more than a dog in a school uniform, she carried Mifuyu on her back as she tore through streets packed with pearls, multicolored plants, and flags. The shelled cockroach leisurely soared through the air, not caring that a human and two animals were following it.

Clinging to the area around Mashiro’s neck, Mifuyu yelled, “Hey, Mashiro. About *The Brothers of the Lush Village*—what kind of story is it? How does it end?”

Even someone who hated reading as much as Mifuyu had now started to regret not reading the story to the end. It wasn’t that she cared about the book, but more that knowing what happened would help her escape this strange

world. Mashiro glanced back, then spoke softly.

“Rainy Beysil and sunny Keysil followed their carapaced bugs to a barren, desolate land. This was the brothers’ destiny. Now fully grown men, they could control the weather to some extent, and the land soaked up the blessings of the rain and sun. Rivers flowed, lakes formed, flowers bloomed in a dazzling display, and plants grew in an endless spring. The land thrived. Plentiful water and a flurry of vegetation made the soil rich. Livestock grew fat, and the starved land grew fertile. And as soon as that happened, people gathered there, built houses, and eventually formed a village.

“Beysil and Keysil ruled the village in tandem, with the elder brother Beysil as chief, and the younger Keysil as the director of vegetation who oversaw all agriculture. One day, however, Beysil fell in love with Hauri, a woman from the village. And from then on, his rain turned to pearls.

“The breathtaking rain pearls fetched a hefty price, making the village rich. But this rain brought harm to the crops, the key to the Lush Village’s prosperity. The villagers split into two factions—those who wanted to profit off the pearls and those who wanted to continue making their livelihood from agriculture. To protect the village, Keysil urged his brother to end his romance with Hauri. But Beysil chased Keysil away, revoked Keysil’s position as director of vegetation, and declared that all agricultural production be focused on pearls.

“Furious, Keysil sealed the full moon within a black cat, casting it into the sky before he himself vanished. Ever since, the moon never set, and night continued as the sun ceased to rise. And during this endless night amid a constant rain of pearls, Beysil and Hauri’s wedding was to take place.”

“You mean, tomorrow?”

“Yes.”

At some point, Mashiro had begun flying, and Mifuyu could feel the fox digging its claws into her shoulder to keep from falling. Yomunaga spread out beneath them.

The pearl rain abated when they rose above the clouds, and the human and two animals emerged into the inky sky. The cockroach continued to fly unfazed, but now that they were above the clouds, the previously brilliantly shining full

moon was, for some reason, nowhere to be seen. Even so, they followed the cockroach, and where the clouds swirled around an axis, they found a silver rod. It protruded from the ground, stretching what looked like kilometers into the air. Even as thin as a needle, it did not sway and stood gallantly from the earth.

The cockroach landed on the rod. Following it, they saw a black cat curled up, resting on the top.

“Great, now there’s a cat.” Mashiro snorted, annoyed. “Maybe that’s the thief.”

Mifuyu wondered if Mashiro being hostile to other animals, especially cats and foxes, was because she was transforming completely into a dog. Mifuyu lightly patted Mashiro’s back.

“It’s obviously not. How would a cat steal a book?”

“...True. I just thought that the bug would tell us who the thief is.”

Mashiro’s ears drooped. She wasn’t even trying to hide her disappointment.

“I think that’s the Black Cat of Night that Keysil sealed the full moon inside,” she added as she moved alongside the rod. “I bet morning will come if you send it back to the surface, Mifuyu. Doing that might advance the story a little.”

The cat’s eyes shone the deep yellow of a kumquat. Mifuyu recalled the moon she had seen earlier; she stood to grab hold of the cat.

But they were high above the clouds, and she was on a dog’s back. An acrobat would have made easy work of it, but standing up on the back of an animal was a difficult skill for a regular girl. Her legs trembled. After a moment of hesitation, Mifuyu removed her shoes, set them with their soles up on Mashiro’s back, set the fox next to them, and then tucked in her knees so that she could place her feet on Mashiro’s back.

From a squatting position, she slowly raised herself and straightened her legs, removing both hands from Mashiro’s back as she felt sweat moisten the bottom of her feet.

Slowly now. It’s okay. Don’t look down, just take it slow—

A cold wind blew from the east, and Mifuyu gasped as she lost her balance,

waving her arms in circles. Right as she tipped forward, her fingertips touched the silver rod, and she grabbed onto it for dear life, her long black hair and necktie fluttering in the wind.

“Don’t look down, don’t look down,” she repeated as she gripped the pole in one hand and extended the other to get the black cat. But it was thoroughly frightened and opened its red mouth in a hiss.

“Come here, good kitty.”

She couldn’t do this with one hand. Mifuyu gritted her teeth and let go of the pole. The moment she did, she once again struggled to stay upright. Her legs shook, and a cold sweat broke out on the soles of her feet. It was like the slightest breeze would knock her over, and she imagined herself falling into the endless night. Nonetheless, she reached out with both hands for the black cat.

Her fingertips reached its soft, warm body. It didn’t hiss at her this time and let her hands approach. Mifuyu slid her palms around the cat’s sides and gently lifted it up.

“Okay, got you!”

In the next instant, the night shifted.

The jet-black sky moved as one, and a ball of light suddenly blossomed in front of Mifuyu.

The full moon. The intense brightness hurt her eyes, and she inadvertently stumbled, turning over with the cat still locked in her arms as she fell through the air.

“Woof!”

Mashiro spun on a dime, tucked her arms to her body, shot her legs out straight behind her, and chased after the tumbling Mifuyu like a speeding bullet. Before Mifuyu pierced the clouds, Mashiro’s teeth grabbed hold of the hem of Mifuyu’s long, fluttering skirt, and she flung her head. Mifuyu was tossed upward, landing on Mashiro’s back.

“Th-that was so scary...”

She wiped the tears and snot from her face with her sleeve. The black cat

slipped out of her arms and sat down primly in the middle of Mashiro's back. Behind it sat the fox, which looked upset and was glaring suspiciously at the newcomer.

"The black cat is here, so why is there a full moon? And it's still night," Mifuyu muttered.

Then came a sound like rumbling earth, like some giant working a stone mortar the size of a mountain. With the noise, another full moon appeared next to the first one, and a pink hole appeared beneath them, followed by a gritty, wild "meow."

What she had assumed was the night sky was actually the body of a giant black cat. This cat let out another roar that rumbled in its throat, and then it stretched its humongous body. The night trembled, and the light purple of dawn peeked out from between its ears.

When it did, the regular-sized black cat that Mifuyu had rescued let out a happy meow, jumped up, and danced in the air—then clung to the fur of the Black Cat of Night. Looking happy that its friend had safely gotten off the rod and was back by its side, the two full moons—the Black Cat of Night's eyes—narrowed into slits in greeting. The giant creature put its friend on its back, gingerly turned around, and flew beyond the horizon with a tremendous gale.

The Black Cat of Night had disappeared and been replaced by morning.

A white sun shone, countless golden rays spreading through a pale-purple sky flushed with light blue as a crisp wind breezed past. It was a beautiful, clear morning. Mifuyu, Mashiro, and the fox looked up at the sky in awe. Mashiro tilted her head; she seemed perplexed by what had just transpired even though she was supposed to be Mifuyu's guide. Maybe she didn't know what was happening because she'd just been born.

"We'll go back to where we started," said Mashiro.

With that, they headed down to the ground, where the pearls continued to fall, irrespective of the morning wind blowing the clouds away. The feeling in the town had changed slightly. The plants that had grown rampantly immediately after the book curse activated had browned and wilted, and in their place, every building was now covered in bright-white pearls, shining

vividly.

“It’s just like you said, Mashiro. The pearl rain caused the plants to die, and now the village is drowning in riches.”

They stared numbly at the town as throngs of people assembled and welcomed them with applause.

“That was incredible!”

“You chased the giant black cat away!”

They had landed right at the entrance of the shopping district, and Mifuyu knew most of the people there. A stranger to applause, she scratched her head with a tingling sensation and responded with a bashful smile.

But none of these friendly faces seemed to recognize her. There was Yukari, who took her yakitori order at Hashida Broiler, as well as the grocery employee—she had the same frantic energy, her brown bangs held back with that same hairclip, but she spoke to Mifuyu reverently like she was famous.

“Wow, that was so impressive. And you’re still so young.”

“How brave!”

Mifuyu felt the depths of her heart cool over.

“...What’s going on with everyone?”

She had always hated being a Mikura, but right now, she practically wanted to tell everybody she was one. She held her tongue, though. It was that story—that had to be why everyone was acting so strange. In that case, it was even more urgent to return the world back to normal and interrogate Aunt Hirune.

But Mifuyu didn’t know anything about the thief. They might even be here among these people. She had no idea.

People from the shopping district and the booksellers quarter with their red, blue, and green aprons welcomed Mifuyu, beckoning her inside with a wave, hoping to congratulate her over a cup of tea. Even the mushroom-haired boy from Wakaba was among them. They all smiled, looking pleased. That warmed Mifuyu’s heart; she found herself smiling. A sort of daze had overcome her. She actually enjoyed this, and her mouth bent in a silly grin. The only one not

smiling was Mashiro, who had morphed back to a human, though she still had dog ears. She stared intently at Mifuyu as she walked among the throng of people surrounding her, like a loyal canine tasked with guarding its owner.

Under the still-raining pearls, the shopkeepers lifted Mifuyu onto their shoulders. The pearls plinked against her head but strangely did not hurt. Three people were carrying her, and just as she was thinking this was like some kind of strange chicken fight at a pool party, Mifuyu came back to her senses.

What was I doing here again?

“Oh, um, have any of you heard anything about a thief?” she asked. “Someone stole some books from our shelves.”

At that, the shopkeepers behind her started shouting.

“A book thief?!”

“We can’t have anyone stealing books!”

“What kind of books did they steal? Someone recently took a whole bunch of manga from my store, so if you catch them, get my stuff back, too!”

“My boss took the cost of the stolen goods out of my paycheck! I was so annoyed! I want someone to teach my boss a lesson, not just the thief!”

The shopkeepers—be they from the new bookstores, the used bookstores, the children’s bookstores, or even the book cafés—were all agitated and sympathized wholeheartedly with Mifuyu’s loss. As they spoke, their resentment reached a boiling point, and smoke began to pour from the ears of the shopkeeper in a blue apron before the shopkeeper shot off into the sky like a rocket. That was followed by the red-and green-aproned shopkeepers blasting off into the air as well, their aprons fluttering like capes as they soared.

“Wait, what about the thief? Do you know who it is or not? Oh...they’re gone.”

After the shopkeepers vanished, other people continued to carry Mifuyu into the shopping district. The lines of stores and the iconic light-blue and red entryway arch remained the same. But other things felt quite different.

The announcement broadcast through the speakers said things like “*Today’s*

special: as many mini tomatoes as you can fit in a bag for just a single hundred-gram pack of pearls at Two Birds One Stone Produce!” and “Today’s seafood recommendation: pond snails harvested from the quagmire of Parched Lake! Try cooking them with grasshoppers in some sweet soy sauce!” Meanwhile, children with fistfuls of pearls poked a rod into a pot at the candy store with its famous red awning, scooping up sticky rainbow-colored candy. A boy with a buzz cut held some pearls out to the old woman running the store, who craned her wrinkled neck like a turtle to count them before curtly handing him a bright-red candy wrapped in plastic.

In front of the grocer, a tomato almost the size of a pumpkin sat enshrined, surrounded by eggplant and Japanese ginger for sale. Mifuyu remembered that she had meant to have the same things for dinner, and her stomach growled. The fish seller roasted a handful of long fish.

Some things were different, but for the most part, it seemed like always. She had bought some things here on her way back from school—that had happened just a few short hours ago, but it felt like the previous day. No...maybe it was a week ago? Or perhaps a month ago? A year?

When was now, anyway?

But more peculiar than that, Mifuyu didn’t find any of this strange. Not the massive flock of chickens fleeing Hashida Broiler and causing a commotion right before her, not the humongous snails wriggling in the Styrofoam box at the fish seller’s, not the people paying with pearls.

She was starting to get used to this world.

However, Mashiro had glued herself to the back of the group and sniffed wildly, continuing to scan the area.

“Mifuyu, Mifuyu, look.”

Still carried aloft, Mifuyu jutted above the crowd of people, and Mashiro yelled to her in an attempt to alert her about the strange changes occurring on the backs of the shopkeepers. Everyone had grown large tails. Everyone had the same fat, orange tail with a white tip. They resembled the tail of the fox on Mifuyu’s shoulder. But no matter how much Mashiro tried to warn her and tried to tell her, Mifuyu’s mind was elsewhere—she didn’t hear her and so

didn't notice the change.

The procession continued down the center of the shopping district but halted when they neared the train station.

Lovely music rang out from the direction of the station and was slowly coming their way.

The station sat at the top of a hill, so getting there from the shopping district, which was at a lower elevation, required climbing stairs. The stairs were about three stories tall, making it hard to see the top from the bottom. They heard the music but didn't know what was happening. The music grew closer and closer, until at the top of the gray stairs before them, they saw a translucent flag the color of the northern lights.

"It's Beysil's wedding!"

The group of shopkeepers surrounding Mifuyu let out a unified cheer and started clapping. Yukari from Hashida Broiler, the friendly employee from the grocery, the chef from the Chinese restaurant in his white outfit—they all turned to applaud, and Mifuyu unconsciously joined them.

The sky was a soft, sleepy color. It reminded Mifuyu of when she'd peeled a quail egg and couldn't believe the color on the inside. The shell matched that gentle, creamy yellow and blue. Even though it was the weather was sunny and cloudless, it still rained pearls.

There couldn't have been any better weather for a wedding. The wedding party consisted of flags, a marching band, and a string section, all followed by a choir. They began descending the stairs to the shopping district with a beautiful song. Finally, behind the children tossing confetti into the air, the figures of the newlyweds appeared.

Mifuyu was clapping at first, but her hands gradually slowed, stopping the moment she saw their faces clearly.

"No way. That's Che and Ms. Harada!"

She gazed up at Che, the dojo's assistant instructor, and Ms. Harada from the office as they smiled at each other while walking at the most leisurely of paces. Che had on a white tuxedo, and Ms. Harada was in a wedding dress, but each

wore a square cloth on their chest like a marathon runner's bib, with Che's stating *Beysil* in crimson ink and Ms. Harada's saying *Hauri*.

"Wait... Hold on a minute!"

Mifuyu writhed and twisted her body, yelling to the three people holding her to set her down. Surprised, their arms went limp, and she got down to the ground, then slipped away from the crowd. She tried to get closer to the wedding party, but the doors of the stores in the shopping district and the neighboring houses all opened, and people came rushing out, overflowing with excitement and preventing her from getting near the newlyweds.

Ignoring the growls of protest from the fox on her shoulders, Mifuyu clawed her way through the gaps between people, rubbing against the throng as she passed, gasping for breath once she emerged.

The flag-bearers at the head of the wedding procession waved the northern lights flags, spreading the crowd like the sea as they walked down the road. Che and Ms. Harada smiled happily as they waved to the people, passing in front of Mifuyu before long.

"Che! Ms. Harada! It's me, Mifuyu! Hey!"

With her yells, the procession came to an unexpected halt, the music dying out. Che and Ms. Harada turned slowly in her direction.

"Who is this girl?" said Che.

I knew it. They forgot who I am, Mifuyu realized, unable to hide her shock.

Now fully human, Mashiro came up and gripped Mifuyu's hand. She had the same small, delicate hands as Mifuyu, but they were warm.

"Don't worry—it's only temporary," Mashiro reassured her. "Once you catch the thief and return the world to normal, everyone will go back to how they were."

Mashiro stared directly at Mifuyu with her dark, earnest eyes. Mifuyu nodded and gripped Mashiro's hand in reply.

"Attendant, who is she?" Che asked.

The skinny elderly man next to the newlyweds muttered and bowed, his

wrinkled face becoming grimmer as he approached Mifuyu. His waist and neck bent, the bald man looked like a small fish, red ribbons adorning his head and clothes. His badge read *Attendant*, but in the real world, he was Kaname, the owner of Books Mystery. One time when Mifuyu was little, she had been in the park reading a picture book and eating a snack when Kaname shouted, “*Don’t eat while you read!*” at her. Then he spat, “*I see there’s even a Mikura with no love for books!*” She’d never liked him since.

“You miscreant! How dare you interrupt the wedding. State your name!” he demanded.

Kaname was still the same grump even in a book world, and that made Mifuyu chuckle. The elderly man grew angrier, and his humorously distorted caricature mask of a face turned as red as boiled octopus. Steam billowed from his ears and nostrils. Just then, the friendly grocery employee adjusted her hair clip and stepped between them.

“Hey, don’t yell at her! This girl got rid of the Black Cat of Night. She’s a hero!”

The moment she said this, a commotion broke out at the front of the wedding procession, and old Kaname’s face turned as white as a sheet.

“I-I’m so very sorry,” he stammered. “I had no idea that you were the brave soul who did away with that troublesome cat the imprudent Keysil dispatched.”

Bending his fishlike body, Kaname bowed low to the ground. Flustered, Mifuyu quickly said, “No, please don’t,” and made him stand upright again.

Seeing all these people she knew earnestly playing their different characters was incredibly strange. Che, who looked after her when her father was away, and Ms. Harada, who would give her candy as a tip, were bowing to Mifuyu like some old royal family in a manga.

“You have our gratitude,” said Che. “Please let us know if there is anything we can do for you. Whatever you desire, all you need do is ask.”

“Anything I want? Like a manga I don’t have yet? Or a video game? Wait, never mind, you don’t have to do that.”

“But is there nothing that troubles you?” Ms. Harada asked.

Looking ever more stunning in her dress, Ms. Harada gazed serenely at Mifuyu, who answered in a fluster.

“Well...could you help me find a thief? Someone stole our books, but I don’t have any leads at all.”

She had no idea that her request would cause such a terrible commotion. She still didn’t fully comprehend that the person standing before her wasn’t Che—who was practically a brother to her—but the chief of the Lush Village.

With his paper declaring him Beysil, Che loudly ordered for the identity of everyone in Yomunaga to be checked. Muscular people wearing squares with *Military Police* on them dashed out from the wedding group toward the unarmed civilians. The shopping district devolved into chaos.

“Stop! This is too much! I only asked you to find one bad guy!”

However, Mifuyu’s pleas never reached anyone, lost in the deafening roars and screams. Shaking, the fox on her shoulders dug its claws into her jacket so deep that Mifuyu could sense its pain and terror.

“Are you okay, Mifuyu?” Mashiro called.

Mifuyu turned around to see the girl’s eyes wide in shock.

“...Your ears,” Mashiro said.

“What?”

“Mifuyu, touch the top of your head.”

Mifuyu had a bad feeling. Filled with trepidation, she reached her hands up to touch the top of her head. When she did, she realized that two furry, pointy things were growing from the top of her head. Without a doubt, the soft, velvety smooth things she was touching were animal ears. And they were unquestionably attached to her body. She had even grown a tail. She screamed.

“My...my ears! I have ears! And a tail!”

A hush fell over the area around her. With that, everyone stopped wrestling one another and stared toward Mifuyu. Silence overcame the formerly bustling, celebratory shopping district, which had turned into utter chaos.

The townspeople's eyes were cold. They'd each sprouted two animal ears and a thick, orange tail.

Mifuyu clung tight to Mashiro's arm. "What's happened to everyone?"

"I saw their tails a while ago. They kinda look like fox—"

"What?! Why didn't you tell me sooner?"

"I did, but you didn't hear me..."

"Oh, whatever. Why do we have ears and a tail?"

"I'm not sure, but we should get going. We have to catch the thief!"

Mashiro grabbed Mifuyu—who was pale-faced and toying with the furry ears on her head—slid her left hand around Mifuyu's shoulder, her right hand under her knees, and leaped into the air.

They flew. Closer to the ground this time, at about the same height as the windows on the buildings, Mashiro flew as smoothly as someone riding a snowboard. The wind rustled her ears, whooshing through them. Wrapped in Mashiro's arms, Mifuyu braced the fox on her shoulder so that it wouldn't fall, and she spoke as though entranced.

"...I think I get it. This is just a guess, but I feel like this world isn't strictly following the plot of that story. It's been tailored for Yomunaga. Everyone in town was assigned a role. Che is Beysil, and Ms. Harada is his wife, Hauri. That's it, right, Mashiro?"

"Yeah, I think that's it."

"But I don't have a role. I'm still just Mifuyu Mikura. I'm not in the story, so no one recognizes me. Because I don't belong here."

She was still a little confused, but her brain was operating in panic mode, and so she thought clearer. The wind rustled her long hair across her face, and she irritably brushed away a strand that tried to wedge itself in her mouth.

Hirune was trapped in crystal inside Mikura Hall. The word *mother* had been written on her eyelids, no doubt because that was her role.

"Hey, Mashiro. In *The Brothers of the Lush Village*, does Beysil and Keysil's

mother get trapped in crystal or anything when she dies?”

“Correct. Good work, Mifuyu. Their mother dies, and after she’s buried, she gets encased in crystal so that she won’t decompose.”

“I thought so. Then Aunt Hirune’s role is the mother. Which means that Keysil is out there somewhere. I assume someone turns into a fox at one point in the book?”

All the strange things that had happened followed the story. Realizing that, Mifuyu felt a little better. It was like watching a horror movie that you knew the ending of. However, Mashiro dispelled Mifuyu’s growing confidence.

“...I’m afraid that’s not correct. There isn’t a single fox in *The Brothers of the Lush Village*.”

Mifuyu stared in disbelief. “What? So then why is it...? Hey, how does this story end?”

Mashiro’s face clouded over before she hesitantly admitted, as though the words were hard to say, “...The village crumbles to ruin.”

“WHAT?!”

“It returns to ash. The pearl rain destroys the vegetation, and the angry villagers chase Hauri into the sky. She never returns. Furious, Beysil sets out to kill Keysil but instead dies by Keysil’s hand. Keysil is left alive, but rain never falls again, so the river dries up, the houses turn to sand and collapse, and the bodies of all the villagers wither—everything dies. Only the pearl rain continues, falling for eternity. That’s how it ends.”

“That’s horrible.”

Mifuyu looked down at the village in astonishment. Under the constant curtain of white pearls, the brown, blue, and white roofs of the town crowded into a mosaic pattern, moving figures barely visible. The plants had already begun to wither. Mifuyu’s hands grew cold, and she tightened her grip.

“It can’t end that way.”

“In magic realism, stories often end with villages and towns falling to ruin.”

“No, that’s not what I mean! That’s fine for some made-up story, but

Yomunaga can't disappear for real!"

She might not have noticed it because of the darkness, but a light yellow haze hung on the horizon, surrounding Yomunaga like a wall. Nothing was visible past the banks on the opposite side of the river or beyond the train bridge. The area around Yomunaga had been closed off like a shelter.

"It's true, just like you said. The curse only affects Yomunaga. It's like the world boundaries you see in video games and anime."

How could people get here or go somewhere else? Were Yomunaga residents outside the town cursed, too? Did the curse affect people who came from other towns? What about cars? Trains? Mifuyu looked around, searching the train tracks. Not a single train was running.

There were too many mysteries. Mifuyu suddenly remembered Che telling her about someone calling to complain when she had stopped by the dojo that night. The caller said the alarm system was going off, but Che and everyone else said they hadn't heard anything.

Something was nagging at Mifuyu, but she couldn't connect the dots.

After flying about thirty meters, Mashiro landed on the roof of the hospital where Ayumu was staying and set Mifuyu down. Pearls blanketed the moss-covered roof, browning moss visible between the pearls.

Mifuyu's transformation into a fox had continued, with her hands, legs, and face covered in soft orange fur.

"...I'm slowly turning into a fox," she muttered, examining her hands. "Agh, I feel like I get it, but I don't!"

As she spoke, dots of colorful primary colors sparkled on the edge of the haze surrounding Yomunaga and came toward them. They appeared from not one but all directions, growing bigger before their eyes. It was the group of battleship flags that had first appeared in Mikura Hall.

Leading the group of flags were the booksellers who had flown off in search of the thief. Their colorful aprons waving, they flew directly toward Mifuyu, their arms spread wide like wings.

“The thief!”

“We found the thief!”

“All units, touch down! To the surface!”

When Mifuyu looked up toward the voices, the flags landed deftly and engulfed the hospital wing.

“Oh no!”

The vehemently angry booksellers controlled the humongous bundle of flags like a net poised to engulf the entire town.

Just then, the fox that had been perched silently on Mifuyu’s shoulders yipped, jumped down, and ran like a frightened rabbit—or a frightened fox.

“Hey, where are you going?!”

The instant she reached out a hand and yelled for it to stop, a realization flashed through Mifuyu’s mind like lightning. The fox dashed to a corner of the hospital roof, squeezed through a gap in the railing, grabbed hold of the green flags wrapping around the hospital wing, bounded up, and glided quickly down to the ground.

“Mashiro, after that fox!”

But Mashiro still hadn’t figured it out. “Leave the fox alone and watch out for the flags!” she warned.

The frenzied shopkeepers moved in front of them as though possessed by demons. Without waiting for an answer, Mifuyu grabbed Mashiro’s hand and dragged her to the railing on the roof.

“Don’t you get it? The fox is the thief! I should have realized it sooner!” Mifuyu insisted.

According to Mashiro, there were no foxes in *The Brothers of the Lush Village*, the book that acted as the basis for this world. Mifuyu didn’t know why it was a fox, but for whatever reason, some rule was changing people into foxes. Put another way, chances were good that foxes in this world were originally people.

“Think about it. The fox transformation is gradual, so it takes time to change

completely. My ears are already a fox's, but my hands still look human. Which means that people don't change immediately. But that fox was already fully transformed by the time I'd read that book and left Mikura Hall. That means it arrived in this world before anyone else. So it has to be the thief that triggered the curse! Mashiro, jump! We have to catch that fox!"

Mifuyu took Mashiro's hand in hers and jumped off the roof. She shut her eyes tight at the speed of their descent, but Mashiro kept hers open wide, slipped a hand around Mifuyu's waist to support her, and kicked off the hospital wall with her long, white legs.

The second that Mashiro and Mifuyu flew away, the booksellers adjusted their course and chased after them with the flags. Mifuyu grabbed hold of Mashiro as they dashed away at an astonishing speed, her eyes slits against the intense wind as she watched the fox. It climbed a telephone pole, walked over the wires, dashed across a billboard, and crossed over the cargo of some parked trucks before returning to the ground and bolting toward the train station.

"There it is! Toward the station!" Mifuyu yelled. "I should've never rescued that fox!"

Mashiro kicked off a telephone pole, darting between the roofs of the train-station platforms to fly over the tracks. The regular blue train waited on the tracks. Mashiro and Mifuyu slipped by it and landed on the platform.

But the fox was on the other side of the gates. The automatic ticket gates rose to the height of a human's waist, so something the size of a fox could easily slip underneath them and onto the platform without a ticket. But the fox was instead headed toward a planter in the ticket area. Mifuyu and Mashiro shared a look, then flew past the ticket booth in pursuit of the fox.

The giant flags covered the sky over Yomunaga, painting the buildings and people in red, blue, and green. It was only a matter of time before the furious booksellers, still upset over the grievances inflicted by shoplifters, arrived at the train station.

The fox ran for the lockers. On the other side of the station's decorative plants sat green coin lockers with twenty small doors, ten medium doors, and four large doors. It jumped eagerly up and down on the left side of the lockers.

It had enough time to get away but was still jumping in place when it saw Mifuyu.

“...What are you doing?”

As Mifuyu approached, it turned its vexed face toward her and pointed its round paws up. The fox couldn't climb the sheet-metal lockers with its claws. It indicated the upper row with the line of large doors. Mifuyu reached out to one of the doors on the fox's behalf. But the door just rattled when she pulled at the handle.

“It's locked,” Mifuyu spat.

The fox sprang toward Mifuyu and deftly scampered up to her shoulders. It held two hairpins in its paws, obtained from who knows where.

“You can't be serious.”

The fox's mouth distorted into a grin, then it used Mifuyu's arm as a scaffold to insert the hairpins in the locker's keyhole. After playing with it for a while, the lock eventually clicked.

The next instant, the locker door flew open, and a torrent of books cascaded out.

A book with a white cover showing a human bent over in a black ink, a book with a picture of a town coiled in upon itself, a crimson book, a book with rings drawn on it, a book with people dressed for a funeral wearing strange bird masks, a book bluer than the sea—those and various other novels burst forth. The second they were outside, they spread their pages like wings and flew off into the air.

At the sight of the books flying like birds, the anger of the booksellers in their flapping aprons vanished, and the flags covering the sky shriveled and disappeared.

The sun soon set, and under a sky painted burgundy, Mifuyu watched the flock of books blend into the setting sun, almost allowing the crafty fox the chance slip away. It jumped soundlessly down from Mifuyu's shoulders, and as it tried to creep stealthily away and escape, Mashiro grabbed it by the nape.

It yelped but could not escape Mashiro's powerful grip.

"We can't take our eyes off you for a second."

Mifuyu glared at the fox and grabbed its front paws in both hands as though handcuffing it.

And then the ground shook violently.

When she woke, she found herself laying face up on the floor of the second-floor stacks of Mikura Hall. The smell of old books mixed with dust and mold combined with the rich smell of sweet soy sauce to assault her nose.

Her head spinning, she tried propping herself up on her elbows, but her body was stiff, probably from lying on the hard floor.

"Ow... Wait, Mashiro?"

There was no reply. She sat up, scratching her head as she looked around, but there was no sign of anyone on either side of the bookshelves, which stretched up to the ceiling. The fox wasn't there, either. Instead, the pack of yakitori and the bag from the grocer lingered by her side, their scent wafting toward her. It hadn't changed into a live chicken.

"What the...? Was it all a dream?"

Silence reigned over the stacks, the books still waiting quietly for someone to read them. Looking up, she saw the books were crammed into the shelves, with no shelf empty.

Massaging her joints as she stood, she picked up the yakitori, holding it by the bottom. It was slightly warm. Not much time had passed since she'd fallen asleep.

Had she returned to the normal world, or had that been a dream? To help soothe her confused mind, she checked the books lined on the shelves from one end to the other, walking around to make sure that none were missing. Books filled every shelf. There was no thieving fox and no Mashiro, the girl with dog ears.

Walking from the shelves to the hallway, Mifuyu found Aunt Hirune still sleeping on the floor. The crystal and the word *mother* written on her eyelids

were gone.

“Geez, you’ll catch a cold.”

But Hirune just snorted and showed no sign of rousing. With few other options, Mifuyu took the blanket from the sofa and placed it over her aunt. When she did, her eyes fell to the book resting on the low table. A picture of overgrown ivy covered the elaborate cloth binding. The title read:

The Brothers of the Lush Village.

She felt her heart almost stop, and she started coughing in shock. Then she reached out with trembling hands and picked up the book. It was lighter than she expected and fit easily in her hand. When she opened the cover, a tuft of orange fur fell to the floor.

She wondered what kind of fur it was. Fox, perhaps? Her heart racing wildly, she looked over her shoulder and gazed down at her snoring aunt.

“Even if I told her, she’d just laugh it off as some dream.”

Mifuyu sighed, started to walk down the staircase, reconsidered, then came back and put the book in her backpack.

She exited Mikura Hall into darkness, the white moon hanging in the night sky. Around the used bookstores, workers and students on their way home browsed discounted books, and she could hear the song of the tofu seller’s flute in the distance.

No pearls rained down from above, and no battleship flags flew in the sky. The pudgy customer she knew stood in front of a shelf, calling, “Oh, it’s the Mikura girl. Hello!” when she passed behind him.

But a strange sort of sadness accompanied the relief welling up inside her. She looked behind her time and again as she made her way home. She hoped she might find Mashiro with her dog’s face trailing behind her even now. The people she passed on the street were the same as usual: middle school students walking home and laughing with their friends, fathers riding bicycles with children tucked into child seats, women carrying shopping bags home from the supermarket. No one suddenly flew off into the sky or wore a strange paper on their chest and started talking to her.

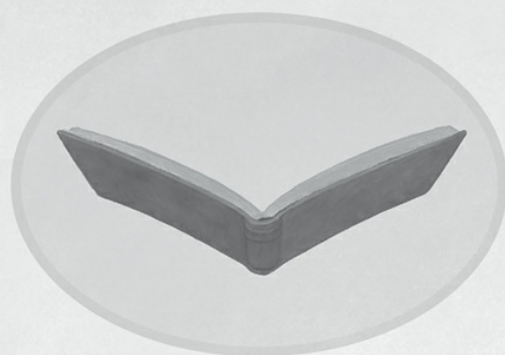
Mifuyu looked up at a moon as round as a cat's eye, imaging that silver pole standing somewhere, a black cat meowing on top. Her spirits lifted when she remembered that the following day was a Saturday and she didn't have school.

It had been ages since she'd last wanted to read a book this much. She recalled a memory of herself in her kindergarten clothes, absorbed in reading the picture book cradled in her lap.

She wanted to know what happened next in the story. She wanted to know more about that world.

Chapter 2

Trapped Inside a Hard-Boiled Egg



A white ball arced through a brilliant blue sky that spread like spilled paint. Dressed in gym clothes for fourth-period PE, the students in the school yard watched it soar high through the air, yelling to one another about where it would land. It looked set to fall to the right, and if the right fielder Mifuyu Mikura caught it, they'd get the third out.

But she simply gazed upward and didn't even raise her gloved hand, instead standing straight as a pole. The ball bounced next to her, jolting Mifuyu from her stupor and causing her to belatedly chase it in a frenzy. Her classmates' cries of "Come on!" and "What are you doing?!" pierced her back. By the time she finally grabbed the ball, the bell marking the end of class had started ringing.

At lunch, the students moved about freely, chatting, digging into their sandwiches and box lunches, erupting into fits of laughter. The sounds of people running down hallways and playfully bumping into doors and walls filled the school with a ruckus that turned the words of someone standing a meter away into unintelligible noise. The rambunctious energy of teenagers seemed ready to break the classrooms apart.

Mifuyu vented to her usual lunch companions as she bit into the *yakisoba* bread she'd bought at a convenience store on the way to school.

"I'd care more if it was a club, but it's just gym class," she grumbled.

"Forget about it. Punch yelled at me for not swinging the bat hard enough," said her classmate Hirokawa, who was sitting across from her.

Hirokawa was stuffing her cheeks with the meatballs from her lunch. By "Punch," she meant Mr. Kikuchida, the PE teacher and their substitute homeroom teacher. A stellar gymnast in his school days, Mr. Kikuchida often pointed to his small frame and proclaimed that he might be small but he packed a punch, so the students nicknamed him Punch.

These days, Mifuyu ate lunch with Hirokawa and Minoda. She'd been in school for about a month, and they had started eating lunch together because seat assignments were alphabetic and their last names were close to one another in the Japanese alphabet. Recently, though, Mifuyu was starting to think that it was time to break away from this group. No one wanted to be the

first to leave, but the group could easily change after the long weekend that started the next day. Hirokawa adored manga and had recently found a classmate whom she would probably get along with better. She was tired of talking about PE class and leaned over to join a neighboring group's discussion over some fictional character neither Mifuyu nor Minoda had ever heard of. Minoda, for her part, seemed a little uncomfortable spending time with these two, who disliked sports. She had been playing volleyball since elementary school, her tall, slender back curving like a bow when she sat her desk. She glanced away nervously when she noticed Mifuyu looking at her, and Mifuyu wondered why.

"What's up? Is something wrong?" she asked Minoda.

"It's just... During softball, why were you spacing out like that? Something on your mind?"

"Oh yeah, well..."

Now it was Mifuyu's turn to look away.

Her mind had been elsewhere during softball because something had consumed her thoughts. Had it not, she would have at least pretended to try to catch the ball in order to avoid any nagging.

But she hadn't considered that at the time. These days, she couldn't stop thinking about the bizarre events she'd experienced the previous week.

Mikura Hall, that palace of books built by her grandfather the book collector. She kept thinking about the thief stealing some books, how that had triggered a "book curse" that trapped the entire town inside a story, and her pursuit of the thief.

Mifuyu was trying to convince herself that it had all been a dream, because when she had opened her backpack after returning home, *The Brothers of the Lush Village*—the book she'd had with her and the root of the curse—had inexplicably vanished. After a full night's rest, she began to feel certain that the world she'd entered had just been a dream. She stopped by Mikura Hall the following morning and talked with her aunt Hirune, who was actually awake for once, but Hirune didn't mention anything.

“Thanks for the yakitori.”

She'd said it so casually, too. Then she asked about Ayumu; after that, Mifuyu felt embarrassed even thinking about telling her that “some white-haired girl with dog ears appeared and made me read a book, then the town went all weird. The night sky was a giant black cat and it rained pearls.” She wasn't a little girl who could amuse people by telling them about her dreams from the night before, or at least, that's what she thought. In the end, she just told her aunt that she would pick something up for her today again.

But Mifuyu still found herself pondering those distinctly clear memories. As she watched the white ball trace an arc in the air, Mifuyu had been reminded of Mashiro transforming into a white dog, and that image stopped her in her tracks.

After rescuing that black cat from the silver pole high above the clouds in that world, Mifuyu had slipped and tumbled head over heels. But Mashiro, morphed into a dog, raced down to save her, so Mifuyu escaped unharmed. She wouldn't die if she fell in a dream, but either way, when she closed her eyes, she could recall that beautiful white figure as though it was real. She vividly remembered the texture of that soft fur in her hands.

Who was that girl? Was she some phantom that Mifuyu had created? One who only appeared in her dreams?

Those thoughts tumbled through her head during her afternoon classes. As she walked down the hallway following the homeroom bell, she felt something like a folder tap the back of her head. Irritated, she turned around to see Punch, aka Mr. Kikuchida.

Mifuyu secretly thought, *What a jerk. He thinks he can do that because I'm a student*, but she simply answered, “Yes?”

Punch's white teeth flashed across his sunburned face, his smile bursting with so much energy that she practically heard it buzzing. Like fluorescent lights glaring down from close range.

“You're a real space cadet today. You mean to tell me that your dad teaches judo, and you still don't know how to focus?”

Mind your own business. I didn't choose to have a father who practices judo.

Mifuyu scratched the back of her head where she had just been hit, messing up her hair.

"How's your dad doing?" Punch asked.

"Fine as always."

"I'm going to visit him tomorrow. He's in the hospital across from Yomunaga Station, right?"

"Ew, why?"

"...Don't say 'ew.' Teachers have feelings, too, you know. Ayumu has done a lot for the judo club, and besides, I'll be in Yomunaga tomorrow anyway."

As the head instructor of a dojo, Ayumu worked to give back to the community, offering kids free judo lessons once a month and giving seminars to local high school judo clubs, including Mifuyu's. So she understood why Mr. Kikuchida, a PE teacher, would want to visit him in the hospital, and Mifuyu frantically considered ways to avoid going to the hospital with him if he asked. After all, the next day was the first day of a long weekend, and she didn't want to see teachers outside school.

As she racked her brain for excuses, he seemed to read her mind, because he put his hands on his hips in exasperation.

"Don't worry, I won't ask you to join us. It's just gonna be me and Mr. Miki. We're both adults, so we know how to visit someone at a hospital. You enjoy your weekend."

"Oh... Wait, Mr. Miki, too?"

"He said he needs to check out the Yomunaga Arts Hall in the morning. The man would get lost in his own house, so I'm going with him."

Mr. Miki taught Japanese and was the homeroom teacher for the class next door, but Mifuyu never interacted with him outside class. Almost a hundred and seventy centimeters tall with long, slicked-back hair and a pale face, he seemed completely lethargic, sighing unprovoked every ten minutes during class. His appearance and character were the polar opposite of Mr. Kikuchida's—who

was short, tanned, and had a buzz cut—but for whatever reason, they hit it off and spent a lot of time together.

But something bothered her. Why were a Japanese teacher and a PE teacher going to the Arts Hall? And in Mifuyu's town, too... Mifuyu went to school in Soba, the town next to Yomunaga, so they would normally use a building in Soba.

Realizing this, Mr. Kikuchida said, "Right," and nodded. "Mr. Miki runs the literary club. They're doing a joint dramatic reading with Yomunaga High, and he's going to scope out the venue."

That made sense. A collaboration with a local school would explain why these two would go to Yomunaga. But hearing the words *literary club* made Mifuyu's insides immediately freeze. She stepped back, her body tingling.

"Ah, I see. Um, well, have fun. I'm going home now! Feel free to visit Dad any time!"

"Hey, wait! Tell your dad that me and Mr. Miki will drop by to see him probably first thing in the afternoon!"

What a pain. But Mifuyu swallowed that thought and gingerly answered, "Will do!" as she headed toward the front door.

Of all the things she wanted to avoid most in the world, the literary club was at the top of the list. Mikura Hall contained books from all times and places, but following a theft thirty years ago, her grandmother Tamaki had ordered it closed to the public and would only allow their family inside. So as a Mikura, Mifuyu had been approached on numerous occasions by used-book fanatics and bookworms looking to get access. Sometimes, they even tried to smooth-talk their way in.

In one instance that stayed seared in her memory, she was just a first or second grader when she brought a lady who loved old books to Mikura Hall. Mifuyu just wanted to help a woman simply hoping to see the inside of Mikura Hall, but Tamaki, who was still alive at the time, ran over in alarm as the woman was removing her shoes in the entryway. She coldly chased the lady away before returning to scold Mifuyu so fiercely that Mifuyu burst into tears.

“You foolish girl. That woman tricked you so easily. Why would you trust a stranger? Only trust a Mikura. And don’t forget—the books in this hall are worth more than your life.”

After mercilessly unleashing her fury on her eight-year-old granddaughter, Tamaki walked back to the stacks on the second floor. Tears staining her puffy cheeks, Mifuyu stood alone in an entryway hall filled with the moldy scent of old books. She’d always had a hard time dealing with her stern, unforgiving grandmother, eventually growing to hate the elderly woman. That interaction was one reason why she distanced herself from all books.

Ever since then, she stayed wary of anyone who used the name Mikura in a conversation. Some stranger had even recently asked her to join the school literary club—and if she hadn’t been careful, the girl might have taken advantage of her. Tamaki was no longer around, and Mifuyu didn’t have to do what she said anymore, but she was also tired of people trying to use her.

She left school and boarded the train, crossing the river into Yomunaga. Picking up some cookies as a present at the small confectionery in front of the station, she headed toward the hospital, telling her father as he got ready for rehab that Mr. Miki and Punch would stop by the following afternoon. Ayumu scratched the thick stubble on his chin and smiled happily.

“They don’t have to do that. I’ve been stuck with those two for ages. Could you bring some drinks and snacks for us tomorrow morning? Oh, and a book, too.”

“I can bring snacks and drinks, but why a book? What about the ones you brought? You had five.”

“I read them all. And the store here hardly has anything. The one I’m looking for is a translated novel. Wakaba probably has it. Please?”

If Mifuyu was in Ayumu’s shoes, she would have just waited until she was out of the hospital, but she knew the nature of bookworms all too well.

“I’m gonna add an entry to the encyclopedia of insects,” she said. “‘The bookworm: keeps a book it wants to read close at hand at all times.’”

“That’s my daughter! That was pretty good.”

“It was not! And you’re gonna give me money for the book.”

Mifuyu took the note with the name of the book he wanted and three thousand yen for the book and snacks, stuffed some of her father’s laundry in her backpack, and left the hospital for the shopping district. She selected some delicious-looking, perfectly browned chive dumplings and Szechuan chicken in a thick leek sauce from the rows of dishes lined up in front of Koufukurou, the Chinese restaurant. The husband and wife owners had arrived in Japan ten years ago and were now quickly placing food into plastic bags under a bright-red banner waving in the breeze of a fan.

“Any vegetables?” the wife asked Mifuyu.

“No thanks. I’ll get some tomorrow.”

The wife was dressed in her pink flower-pattern apron, and her eyes seemed to scold children who avoided vegetables; she added some shredded cabbage and pickled vegetables free of charge.

Partway down the road home, Mifuyu crossed through one of Yomunaga’s key features, the booksellers quarter. More than just the large retailers, the area housed stylish stores run by individual owners, stores specializing in children’s books, small shops for leisurely reading, stores selling books connected to the adjacent expo hall, and many other bookstores that followed modern trends.

However, things seemed a little different today. It was just past four in the afternoon, but the owner of the children’s bookstore was taking in the wagon parked in front of the store. Several bookstore employees in the expo hall were also hanging posters in the showroom window for an event by the suspense author Ansolv Dimistries, while customers came outside to ask for help ringing up purchases.

Every shopkeeper looked flustered, and the customers seemed restless, too, soon leaving the stores.

Only Books Mystery, which had been around since the 1930s, remained unchanged. The gray-haired owner, Kaname, smoked a cigarette in front of the store, as relaxed as ever.

Mifuyu never really liked this skinny, hunched old man, but she asked, “What’s everyone doing?”

Kaname pursed his wrinkled lips and exhaled some smoke. “Got reporters coming,” he said. “Same thing as always. They’ll be here tomorrow.”

And with that, she understood. Yomunaga was known as the Town of Books; once or twice a year, some magazine or TV show would feature it in a report. Some people like Kaname cared about reporters as much as they cared about the weather, but others looked to take advantage of any opportunity to bring attention to their store and so tidied up in case they appeared on TV. Mifuyu thanked Kaname and continued down the curving road.

She swung by Mikura Hall before finally heading toward her house. Heading to the apartment where she and her father lived required taking the road out of the booksellers quarter, going out onto a wide road, walking down the sloping hill away from Mikura Hall and rows of used bookstores, and continuing on past the dojo.

At least twenty years old, the apartment complex consisted of two three-story, angled-roof buildings standing at attention like twins. Weeds and shrubs overran the grassy area surrounding the small parking lot, its current role as a home for stray cats a testament to Mifuyu and Ayumu’s black thumbs. The apartment’s original owner, the first landlord, was Tamaki, and Mifuyu had lived here since she was born. Her father, Ayumu, held the lease now, and between Mikura Hall and the dojo, he fell well behind on upkeep, as evidenced by the sagging gutters, sun-faded exterior walls that had been painted ages ago, and numerous black streaks running down the walls.

Mifuyu opened the mailbox, which contained a flyer from a real estate agent looking to buy houses. Sighing, she tucked everything under her arm, gripped the decorated handrail she considered hopelessly outdated, and ascended the stairs.

One might assume that the Mikura family had money because they owned Mikura Hall, but the reality was quite different. Preserving a personal library that didn’t generate income required funding—money to repair books, money to maintain the central building and annex, money for taxes. When her great-

grandfather Kaichi, who built Mikura Hall, was alive, they covered these expenses by collecting entry fees and material provision fees and supplementing them with donations. But ever since Tamaki closed Mikura Hall, it earned nothing, and the family needed to allocate funds from other income sources.

Her other relatives had cut all family ties to avoid dealing with Tamaki, Mikura Hall, and all its troubles. The only other properties her family owned were the apartment complex and the dojo. Rent from the apartments and fees from the dojo just covered their day-to-day expenses, education costs, and the funds required to maintain Mikura Hall.

For ages, Mifuyu advocated for selling Mikura Hall and all the books inside. Doing that would free Ayumu from his caretaking duties, and Mifuyu wouldn't have to concern herself with school expenses. To a new first-year high school student like her, not having to worry about life was the ultimate goal. Every time she brought it up, however, Ayumu would reply, "Okay, but then what happens to Aunt Hirune?"

Unlocking the door to their second-floor apartment, Mifuyu turned on the lights in the hallway and living room. Announcing to no one that she was home, she felt the silence of the empty rooms was all the more profound, but she had been coming back to an empty apartment since elementary school, so it didn't bother her much. She tossed her father's laundry in the washing machine, cleaned her hands, walked into the kitchen while unbuttoning her jacket, and placed the food and mail on a dining room table cluttered with tissue boxes, newspapers, and remote controls.

After changing into a T-shirt and sweatpants, she turned on the TV, microwaved some rice, poured boiling water into some instant seaweed soup, and sat down to eat her chive dumplings and chicken. The brightly colored studio set, the comedians she saw multiple times a day, the echoing laughter, the comedians' banter, and the reactions from celebrities—she couldn't pay attention to any of it.

She had too many things on her mind and too much on her plate. Listlessly chewing the chicken, she counted the days on the fingers of her left hand.

That strange dream had happened exactly one week ago. The girl who'd changed into a white dog, the thief who'd transformed into a fox. On top of that, a mountain of problems faced Mifuyu in the real world. The weekend had just started, and that was nice, but once it ended, she might need to find new people to eat lunch with—Hirokawa and Minoda would most likely do the same. She had to buy drinks and snacks for when her teachers visited her father, and a book, too. The apartment buildings sorely needed upkeep. Specifically, she needed to water the plants in the yard and call someone to fix the gutters. She had to talk with her dad about repainting the outside. And then there was a job. She wanted to do something to earn a little money. She couldn't count all her worries on one hand.

“And then there's Aunt Hirune.”

After buying the stuff for dinner, she had stopped by Mikura Hall to check on Hirune. But she hadn't had the chance to talk to her.

Mikura Hall stood wedged like a sandbank between two streets lined with old bookstores, and Hirune had been standing on the front landing talking with a young woman.

Tall, the woman had tightly cropped hair and big, eye-catching earrings that resembled sea urchins. Wearing an orange T-shirt with a long, black pencil skirt and bright-white sneakers, she looked like she had stepped out of a chic magazine. This contrasted starkly against Aunt Hirune's hair, which was held haphazardly with a hair clip; thick glasses, lint-covered gray sweater, and rubber sandals. Mifuyu would call the outfit, “Very comfortable, but one I'd hesitate even going to the convenience store in.”

She couldn't imagine a more unbalanced pair and figured that they must be struggling to find something to talk about. So Mifuyu had stepped forward to help her aunt—when Hirune laughed. The young woman must have said something funny, because Hirune broke into peals of laughter.

Mifuyu grew annoyed seeing her laughing like that when she'd done all these things to help her. Before she knew it, Mifuyu had spun around and hurried off. She'd given all of Hirune's food to Che, who was covering for her dad at the dojo.

Even she wasn't quite sure what had upset her so much about it. But irritation swirled incessantly inside her, and she flicked the TV off.

The ticking of the wall clock's second hand echoed around the silent room. Last night's laundry hung in the living room and on the frame of the door to her father's tatami room; Mifuyu had been unable to find the energy the previous day to fold it all and put it away.

There was just too much to do. She ate the rest of the half-eaten dumpling, wolfed down some instant rice, and slurped some seaweed soup.

"...It'd be nice to have someone I could ask for advice..." she mumbled to herself before eating some more rice.

Mifuyu woke the next morning to the sound of the timer on the rice cooker. Groggily opening its lid, she loaded some rice into a lunch box. She wasn't getting ready for a picnic, though. She simply felt guilty for not bringing Hirune dinner the previous day and had decided to make up for it.

She would pick up the book at Wakaba and then swing by Mikura Hall. If Hirune was awake, she'd ask her about that mysterious woman and what she'd been doing there. Repeating the plan to herself, she nestled a pickled plum and some soy-boiled seaweed deep in the center of the white rice.

She got ready to leave as she let the rice cool to prevent it from spoiling. Dragging on a pair of black jeans and a green-and-white-striped polo shirt, she arranged her long hair into a ponytail in front of the mirror by the sink. She then removed a roll of bread from its bag and ate standing in the kitchen while sipping some barley tea—something her father would definitely have given her an earful about if he were there.

Once the rice had cooled enough, she closed the lid to her lunch box. She then tucked the lunch box in the little striped bag that Ayumu had made with the clanking sewing machine, tied it tightly shut, put on her shoulder bag, and exited out the front door. Straddling the blue bicycle parked at the foot of the stairs, she pedaled away quickly toward her first stop, Wakaba.

She raced down the gently sloping road, the tailwind fluttering the hem of her clothes. The voices of children and the sound of someone beating a futon rang out from the surrounding apartments and houses. Mifuyu glided by an

abandoned pub and a supermarket with red banners proclaiming the day's specials. She slowed down once she reached the arterial road, slipping down the lush green avenue to the main street. A little farther down the road stood the green sign for Wakaba, a bookstore her father frequented.

Mifuyu hopped off her bicycle in front of the store and parked it in the dedicated space next to the shop. Walking through the automatic door, she saw new books filling a display for novels and essays from Japanese authors, with tags stating, *Unbelievably moving*, *An absolute masterpiece*, and other eye-catching phrases designed to reach out from the piles of books and lure over potential buyers. Magazines lined the right-hand side, comics filled the left, and hardcovers and paperbacks sat in the rear. The apron-clad shopkeeper was busy returning some bonus items that had fallen down from the display of how-to books running along the back wall.

Books by foreign authors sat deep in the literature section, but new books were often placed on the display at the front. The book her dad had asked for was there, but it either had been selling well, or they hadn't ordered enough, because a single copy lay toppled on its side. Even so, one of the employees must have been a fan of foreign literature, because the book's tag read, *Mysterious and amusing, with a hint of sorrow. It will touch your heart!* Mifuyu picked up the book, careful not to knock the tag over. She might not like books, but she didn't feel right ruining someone else's hard work.

Walking the book to the register, she recognized the employee behind the counter. Skinny and pale with a haircut in the shape of a mushroom, when viewed from far away, he looked like a thin *shimeji* mushroom. Stylish black glasses adorned his eyes, and he seemed like the type of person who would know a lot about underground authors. A nametag with HARUTA hung to the chest of his green apron.

"Hello," Mifuyu said with a quick nod.

Haruta bowed lightly and took the book.

Just then, someone loudly exclaimed, "Well, you see, when it comes to our sales," from the other side of the counter. Curious, she looked in the direction of the voice and saw the owner of Wakaba, a slightly pudgy middle-aged man

with scraggly hair like a well-worn scrubbing brush, talking to three people. Two of them wore business casual clothes, while the other looked like a photographer, endlessly snapping pictures with a DSLR camera. Mifuyu remembered that journalists were in town today to collect material for stories.

“It’d be great if you did a piece on the shoplifting problem,” the owner of Wakaba told them. “Huh? You want something more upbeat? Come on, it’s been so bad that some stores have had to close.”

Mifuyu was mindlessly watching the owner when Haruta said, “Um, your total...”

“Oh, sorry.”

She quickly paid, took the book, left the store, and headed toward Mikura Hall. Sunshine poured down from the expansive blue sky of early summer, shimmering off the green leaves of the giant ginkgo in front of Mikura Hall. The day was a little too hot to be invigorating. Mifuyu opened the iron gate to the yard and parked her bicycle in front of the flower bed, the light filtering through the ginkgo leaves to create a mesh pattern on the stepping stones as she crossed them.

Just then, a gust of wind came from the direction of Mikura Hall. Sand and dust danced wildly, and the thick grass swayed. Mifuyu squinted and tried to cover her face with her arm, but the grains of sand stung her face and hands. The wind quickly abated; Mifuyu righted herself and walked up to the front door.

She inserted her key, turned it, and pulled the doorknob—but the door thudded and would not open.

“...What the?”

She pulled on the door again to check that it really was locked, then inserted and turned her key again. This time, the door slid open.

“I guess she forgot to lock the door.”

The alarm above the door showed the same blue light as always. Just in case, Mifuyu yelled, “Aunt Hirune? I’m here!” and stepped inside.

The hallway of Mikura Hall responded with silence, dust glittering as it danced in the thin rays of sunlight that poured through the tiny foyer windows. The resounding clicks of the grandfather clock's pendulum made the silence all the more conspicuous. The rustling of her clothes sounded exaggerated as she removed her shoes, placed them in the shoe cubby, and stepped into the hall.

"Aunt Hirune? You're here, right?"

The ceiling lights threw crystal-like patches of light on the ivory walls. The doors to the stacks on the first floor were shut, and nothing made a sound. She checked the shoe cubby and saw the rubber sandals that Hirune always wore.

But something was different. The air felt off. Mifuyu's heart stirred with a feeling that some hidden person was watching her, like when she played hide-and-seek. She walked down the hall and into the sunroom. In contrast to the dim light of the foyer, sunlight flooded through the large glass window that stretched from the first to second floor. A low table, chaise lounge, and a sofa sat there—remnants from when the general public was permitted—and in the middle of that scene, she saw Hirune.

"...She's asleep again."

Propped up on the sofa, Hirune snored gently. Mifuyu saw a thick ledger under her face, and she snatched it up without concern for her aunt to prevent her from drooling on it. Mifuyu heard Hirune's head bounce following the loss of her pillow, but she continued snoring.

Dumbfounded, Mifuyu gazed down at the ledger. It contained a list of every book in Mikura Hall arranged in alphabetic order, and it included the title, author, publisher, date of publication, edition, and more. Alphabetic thumb indexes like those in a dictionary ran down the right side.

A thought struck her, and she flipped to *B*. Row upon row of entries filled both pages, and as she moved from *Bo* to *Br*, her hand stopped. *The Brothers of the Lush Village* was not listed.

Her chest froze. Someone as detail-oriented as Hirune would never forget to include a book, which meant, at best, that the book wasn't in Mikura Hall's collection. Mifuyu had searched the internet but couldn't find anything like it. So it had been a dream after all.

Feeling the world lose a little of its luster, Mifuyu closed the thick ledger and tossed it casually onto the low table. Even the sound and vibrations from that seemed unable to rouse Hirune.

She decided to just set down the lunch box with rice, then head to the hospital. But right as she pivoted toward the hallway, she noticed a slip of paper in Hirune's hand.

Convinced that everything that had transpired the previous week had been nothing but a dream and that this had to be a note of some kind, Mifuyu grabbed the piece of paper out of curiosity and slowly pulled it free. The strange design drawn in red ink reminded her of a talisman.

"Oh."

Her heart hammered. Cramped letters of the same design as before described words that she could just read.

"...‘Whoever steals this book shall be trapped inside a hard-boiled shell.’"

The moment the words passed her lips, a wind suddenly blew in from somewhere and spun mischievously around her feet.

It was the same as last week. Sweat moistened her palms, and she squeezed her hands into tight balls.

"Mifuyu," came a sudden voice.

Mifuyu screamed and leaped backward. She saw a girl with shoulder-length white hair, a slightly large mouth, and an innocent face.

"M-Mashiro."

As soon as that name left Mifuyu's lips, she realized the whole thing had been real. *That's right—this girl really was here.* She squeezed her eyes closed and opened them again to see if Mashiro was still there. She then scratched her palm; it hurt.

"You remembered my name," Mashiro said, grinning.

"Well, you know... I thought that whole world had been a dream."

"A dream—you mean those things that humans have at night?"

“What else would it be?!”

She always says the weirdest things, Mifuyu thought with a chuckle.

Mashiro looked genuinely confused. “Well, I don’t sleep,” she said. Then she glanced down at Hirune, who was passed out over the table. “*She* sure sleeps a lot, though.”

Mifuyu worried she’d accidentally insulted Mashiro, who might’ve had a medical reason for why she didn’t sleep, but she couldn’t read the expression on Mashiro’s face. Plus, there was something odd about her clothes. Last time, she wore a high school uniform, but today, she was dressed in a white-and-green-striped polo shirt and black jeans, just like Mifuyu.

“That outfit—are you trying to copy me?”

“I sure am. But anyway, Mifuyu...”

“Wh-what?”

“Here.”

Mashiro held out a book. The unassuming-looking black cover was actually quite intricate and shone sharply like snakeskin when the light struck it. White Gothic lettering spelled the words *Black Book*.

“...A fitting title.”

“Read it.”

This was just like last time. Mifuyu had a bad feeling about this; she glared at Mashiro.

“Don’t tell me you’re gonna ask me to find another thief.”

“That’s right! You catch on fast, Mifuyu.”

“Don’t get so excited about it.”

“I’m just happy that you understood so quickly... Yes, there’s been another book theft. This time, it’s from the stacks on the first floor. The entertainment section. Light reading. Read it, Mifuyu. The book curse is already taking effect.”

Mifuyu backed a couple steps away from Mashiro, who advanced like a friendly dog looking to rub its nose against someone they adored, but she

accepted the book. Mashiro didn't have dogs ears yet, but Mifuyu knew by now that she was no normal girl. Even though they had only met once, Mifuyu could relax more easily around her than with her classmates Hirokawa or Minoda, and their conversations flowed more smoothly.

Mifuyu stroked the black book, her fingers tracing the rough material.

"Wait a second. If I read this, then the world is gonna get all weird, right?"

"The town will change, yes. But that was bound to happen the moment the thief stole the books. The town and the books are waiting for you, Mifuyu."

Mifuyu glanced out the sunroom's large windows. Change. The sky was the same cobalt color as when she arrived, and her blue bicycle still sat parked out front. Looking carefully, though, a single green leaf from the ginkgo tree hovered in midair. The other plants were the same—frozen in the moment when the wind had blown through them. It was as though someone had taken a snapshot of a windy day and pasted it on the outside of the window.

"No way—has time stopped?" Mifuyu said.

"The town was frozen when I arrived. The only way to restore it is to read this."

"Okay, already. Not like I have much of a choice."

Mifuyu looked dismayed at this strange occurrence, but a tiny part of her grew excited.

She started to open the rough, black cover, but Mashiro stopped her for some reason.

"What is it?" Mifuyu asked her.

"Sorry, but you'd better not read it here."

Looking apologetic, Mashiro gripped Mifuyu's wrist tightly and exited the sunroom for the entryway hall. She took Mifuyu's sneakers from the shoe cubby and arranged them neatly on the floor.

"Here, put on your shoes."

"I don't understand. Why?"

“It’s the right thing to do this time. Then you’ll be ready.”

Grumbling, Mifuyu put on her sneakers and, sitting in the entryway, finally opened the book.



Ricky McCloy closed the blinds and lit a cigarette. Its bitter orange glow illuminated the otherwise blue night.

“We’re both thinking the same thing, Joe.”

Peering through the gaps in the blinds, he saw headlights shimmer down the dark road until they came to a stop directly in front of the building. Ricky tossed his cigarette and, snuffing it out with his shoe, tucked a bundle of documents inside his black coat. Then he hurried out the room, leaving its inky smell behind.

Gaudy green wallpaper, a dim hallway, a luxurious chest of drawers, an elegant bouquet of dahlias arranged in a vase. A cacophony of footsteps raced up the stairs, drawing closer. Ricky removed the bundle of dahlias with a leather-gloved hand, shaking them violently as he knocked on the door of a room two doors down. The faded door opened a crack, and a woman’s blue eyes peered out at him. A stunning, glamorous brunette. Glancing over as a scream came from behind him, Ricky saw a swarm of cops with guns drawn rushing into the room that he had just vacated.

“...Who are you? I didn’t order any flowers,” said the woman.

Neither the sound of the police nor her unexpected visitor perturbed her. Ricky McCloy’s mouth edged up in a smile as he passed the dahlias to the woman and pushed the door open. A cheap glass chandelier shone down on the sofa in the living room. The floor plan was the same as the room he’d just left.

“Would you at least tell me your name, Mr. John Smith?”

The cops’ swearing rode the dry wind leaking in through the half-open living room window. The sounds of furniture being upturned, of glass shattering.

Ricky turned to look at the woman.

“If anyone asks,” he said, “tell them McCloy was here. Joe should know what that means.”

“Joe? Who is that?”

“My gravedigger.”

Tilting his fedora, he slipped out the window onto the tiny iron balcony. Thin, dark clouds swept across a sky as black as bat wings, turning the moonlight into haze. The wind was pregnant with the smell of gunpowder as a siren blazed from somewhere in the unruly hedonistic town, creating a frenetic symphony.

Gripping the handrails of the metal ladder with his leather gloves, Ricky slid to the ground. The stench of iron resembled that of blood. His back facing the building, he walked down the cold asphalt and felt inside his coat to make sure the bundle was still hidden there. The light-brown file held a stack of papers; within those were two photos. One was a covert photograph of two men in low hats exchanging what looked like a wooden box. A cloth covered the box, but from between the gaps in the covering, one could tell that it contained books. The other photograph was of a blond woman lying face down, dead. She was outlined in white chalk that looked like fallen snow, a damaged book at her side.

The police were still inside the building. Joe the “Gravedigger” traced the dahlia petals—scattered like Hansel and Gretel’s breadcrumbs—down the hallway, not realizing that Ricky had slipped out of a window in the room two doors down.

A dark, stagnant air filled a street littered with vagrants, their alert eyes and noses gauging the wealth and strength of those passing by. Ricky walked through the growls of street dogs, footsteps reverberating through the mold-scented concrete jungle. By the time a gust rustled behind him, Ricky’s right hand had already reached the Colt M1911 in his holster.

“That was sloppy. You must be new here... Gotta be, what, a week at most?”

Ricky turned around, his left hand grabbing the neck of the young prowler who had just tried to sneak up on him while his right hand thrust his M1911 forward.

“Ten days, you bastard.”

With sullen cheeks and dark circles under his eyes, the man looked like drugs

had been keeping him awake for days. Dirt and filth ruined the snobby, gaudy tropical shirt he wore beneath his white suit, and he reeked of liquor and sweat.

In the next instant, the man grimaced under the glare of an intense light. The beams of multiple flashlights captured the two from a distance.

“Looks like Joe found Hansel’s trail.”

“...What?”

“The cops.”

Ricky loosened his grip. The second he did, the young prowler struck, his long right arm looming before Ricky’s eyes. Ricky dodged swiftly and buried his right fist in the man’s solar plexus, causing him to grunt, collapse to the ground, and vomit on the spot.

“Don’t worry. The cops’ll be here to take care of you soon enough. Forget about whoever hired you and go back to the sticks, kiddo.”

“...Hmph, you’re no better than me. Keep trying to sniff out the *books*, and the only place you’ll end up is hell, Ricky McCloy.”

“I’m no stranger to dancing with the devil.”

Turning, Ricky lit a cigarette to the groans from the man behind him. The smokes weren’t quality, but they packed a lot of nicotine. They helped keep him sane, just like the booze.

He left the alley for the main road. It was the night’s darkest hour, when the creatures who couldn’t live in the daylight felt most at home. Flamboyant neon signs, the timbre of a sax and a trumpet, rambunctious conversations. An expressionless bartender polished a glass on the other side of a cracked window.

This town had a little bit of everything. Booze, violence, handsome men, beautiful women, blood, drugs offering temporary relief—and, of course, forbidden books.

A young boy, a “newsie,” stood on the street corner, speaking to all who would listen. To tell everyone what had happened that day.

The stores didn’t sell newspapers. Ever since the act of printing letters on

paper had been banned, only verbal communication or personal, handwritten notes were permitted. Making copies was strictly prohibited. Where alcohol had once been illegal, printed words were now against the law.

A government office towered over downtown, bathed in pale, prowling searchlights. At the top of the building stood a humongous billboard bearing the face of the city's "Father"—Mayor Matthias Constantine Ellison. Pearly-white teeth, wrinkles ironed out with Botox. A million-dollar smile. Ricky McCloy tossed his cigarette butt into a stinking gutter.

"...What a strange book," Mifuyu muttered as she looked up from the book, having more or less skimmed the story up to this point.

She was struck by how radically different this world was—it didn't smell like her own. This was a city that required vigilance. The disturbing, stale air of that dark night seemed to waft toward her even now. A monochrome world.

It wasn't just in her mind, however. The wail of a siren suddenly pealed, and she heard a group of people outside Mikura Hall.

"Mifuyu, this way. Hurry."

Mashiro gripped her wrist and dragged her outside, the book still in her hands. Mere minutes before she began reading *Black Book*, the blue of the midday sky had expanded to the horizon, but it had turned pitch-black as if the clocks had advanced twelve hours. However, Mifuyu didn't have time to voice her surprise.

A row of bright-white lights lined the wall of the yard, starkly illuminating Mikura Hall. She could only see backlit silhouettes, but what looked like a group of people crowded on the other side of the wall.

"Hide!"

At Mashiro's instructions, they dived behind a hydrangea shrub next to the front door, peeping between the lush leaves to observe the scene.

Just then, someone said, "Roger. We're going in," over a walkie-talkie. Mashiro and Mifuyu watched as bolt cutters broke the lock on the yard's iron gate and a barrage of special forces and police officers carrying white shields rushed in. These officers were completely different than the ones Mifuyu

usually saw at the police station. Helmets and hats were pulled tight over their heads, and their expressions were serious, with guns or batons gripped in their right hands. The officers split into two groups, one to enter through the front door and the other to head around to the back.

“Wh-what are they doing?”

Mifuyu hadn’t done anything wrong. Neither had Hirune, probably. Sure, a lot of people had complained since Mifuyu’s father had been admitted to the hospital, but none of that would warrant a raid by armed police officers.

As Mifuyu watched, dumbstruck, Mashiro tightened her grip on her hand and urged her to get moving.

Walking in a crouch behind the hydrangea bushes, they headed toward the annex. Once there, Mashiro leaped over the wall, out of sight of the officers trying to figure out how to get inside the annex.

“Mifuyu, come on!”

“Wait, I’m not that nimble!”

Hands on top of the wall, Mifuyu set a foot on the surface and tried to climb, but her fingers couldn’t get a grip, and she slipped. She just couldn’t do it. Mashiro quickly jumped back over, said she would carry Mifuyu, and turned her back to her. Mifuyu scrunched her face up as though staring at a bright light, but eventually, she took a breath and climbed on.

“Wrap your arms and legs around me and hold on tight,” Mashiro instructed.

And with that, carrying Mifuyu on her back, Mashiro crouched and jumped, placing her hands on the top of the wall and deftly leaping over with her legs tucked to one side before landing on the other side. Dog ears had sprouted on top of her head again.

“Are you a dog? Or a human?”

“I’m both and neither. For now, though, let’s run. It’s dangerous here.”

The two girls dashed down the dark streets. But something wasn’t right. The town was Yomunaga, but at the same time, it wasn’t. The area around Mikura Hall should have been filled with used bookstores, but every shop had changed.

Strip clubs, jazz bars. A red neon sign reading FOX TOBACCO hung over the oldest bookstore, a variety of cigarettes and cigars displayed in place of aged used books. The customers seemed different, too. People who should care for nothing but books now buried their noses in cigars for a sniff, scrutinizing the wares with contemplative faces.

“This is the world of the book I just read?”

“Yes. Everything here is from *Black Book*.”

After putting enough distance between themselves and Mikura Hall, they stopped running and began to walk. A trumpet played from somewhere. It wasn't the energetic fanfare of a wind orchestra, but a moody tune imbued with the sense of the night's corruption. For some reason, it made Mifuyu think of subdued tones like purple and rich navy.

“Hey, Mashiro. What kind of story is this? I couldn't quite tell...but based on what I read, it seemed like it was trying way too hard to be cool.”

“Ricky McCloy is a private detective. His former partner was shot and killed by the police on suspicion of robbery and murder. But Ricky believes that his partner is innocent and is searching for the mastermind pulling the strings of the police union.”

“And Joe was his partner?”

“I can't say more without giving the story away, but Joe isn't that kind of character. He's more like a slow-witted police detective.”

“Okay. So then what were the police looking for at Mikura Hall? It doesn't have anything to do with this, does it?”

“They were just complying with the book-ban law.”

“There's a book-ban law?”

“It's kind of like a book version of Prohibition.”

Mifuyu furrowed her brow and looked confused. She'd slept through most of her history classes.

“‘Pro-hibishun’? Never heard of it.”

“A long time ago in the USA, it was against the law to drink alcohol. This was about a hundred years ago.”

“You can make laws like that? Wow.”

Mifuyu was underage, so she’d never had alcohol. And Ayumu didn’t drink, so the only liquor in her house was cooking sake and sherry. But the assistant instructor Che drank pretty often, and he cried a lot when he did, which Mifuyu found annoying. She couldn’t stand people who lost control when they drank.

“What’s wrong with that? Making it illegal, I mean. One of my friends ran away from home because her dad got violent when he was drunk.”

At that, Mashiro blinked her large eyes and looked seriously at Mifuyu.

“Is that what you really believe? That it should be illegal?”

“Sure. It’d be better if people didn’t drink. If the law decided everything, then no one would get drunk and do stupid stuff.”

“...The people who make the laws are only human, too, Mifuyu.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means that prohibiting harm is one thing, but can the people who decide what’s right and wrong really protect everyone’s freedom and equality?”

Mifuyu considered this, and just as she opened her mouth to reply, a small dark orange fox darted in front of her. Thick tail, large ears, and long nose.

“Hey, a fox!”

Remembering what happened last time, she immediately chased after it. If she could catch the book thief, the world should return to normal.

She knew Mashiro would follow her, but she couldn’t match Mashiro’s pace, and before long, she was panting behind Mashiro’s retreating figure. But the fox, being nimbler than Mashiro, leaped over the wall of a house and into the yard.

Mashiro stood in front of the gray block wall, turned to Mifuyu—who was wheezing with her hands on her knees—and asked, “What should we do?” as though conflicted.

“What—what should we...?”

“We have to enter someone’s property, but how should we do that?”

“Back there...phew...you jumped...over a wall. How about...that?”

Mifuyu desperately wanted some water. Her calves had been sore since this morning, probably because of PE class the day before, and she had just about been pushed to her physical limit. She wanted to tell Mashiro that, but instead, she stood up straight, looked up at the night sky, and took a deep breath. Mashiro was still lost in thought.

“...Oh boy.”

Mifuyu finally caught her breath, then examined the nameplate at the yard that the fox had run inside. She knew the people who lived here in this blue-roofed house: a kind elderly couple who filled their yard with camellias, gardenias, and snow willows. Once, when she was a child, her rubber ball had rolled into their yard, and they kindly handed it back to her. The delicate white gate had been replaced with a rusty iron door—now that she examined the wall surrounding the house, it was tall and topped with a short, spiky iron fence. It looked formidable; maybe they even a vicious guard dog. She felt a touch uneasy but pushed Mashiro forward.

“It’ll be fine. The people who live here are really nice.”

Mashiro still hesitated, however, so Mifuyu pushed her forward once more, after which Mashiro steadied herself, jumped, and disappeared over the wall. Mifuyu stretched to peer over the wall and nodded in approval—in the next instant, the lights in front of the house flashed on, and an alarm went off.

“Wh-what the—?”

Just as Mashiro bounded up on the wall, they heard the door burst open and saw an old woman standing on the porch. Curlers in her white hair, she wore a light-blue nightgown and held a shotgun in both hands. As the alarm continued to wail, she pumped the shotgun with a sharp *click*.

“Mifuyu, get down!”

Mashiro hopped down, and the next second, the harsh sound of a gunshot

roared in their ears as the concrete wall immediately to Mifuyu's right exploded, leaving a large hole. Wide-eyed, Mifuyu froze in disbelief before Mashiro tackled her to the ground and covered her. More gunshots rang out, and pieces of concrete rained down on them. When the wall resembled something like a ragged sponge, the gunfire finally stopped.

"What is it, Grams?"

"Trespassers. I knew we shoulda put up some barbed wire. Think I got 'em, though."

The voices of the old couple drew nearer. Mashiro pulled Mifuyu up by the arm, and they ran through the now completely transformed town.

"What the heck?! That old lady had a gun!"

Guns and other weapons were, in principle, illegal in Japan. Even though Mifuyu understood that the town had transformed into the land of the story, she wasn't sure she could ever get used to this.

Looking around, she noticed the other houses also had tough steel gates, barbed wire on top of their walls, and severe security measures. When they passed in front of her apartment, she was shocked to see the building she knew so well enclosed by a tall wall and the cold glow of a patrolling searchlight.

"This is horrible... I wanna go home," Mifuyu said, her voice shaking.

She was ready to burst into tears if she didn't keep her wits about her. Mashiro squeezed Mifuyu's hand.

"We have to catch the thief," Mashiro said. "The fox probably ran off and is hiding somewhere far away."

"How do we find it? Yomunaga is pretty big. And other people might have guns, too..."

The thought alone sent shivers down her spine. She wasn't even sixteen yet, and she didn't want to die in a place like this.

"Don't worry," Mashiro assured her. "I have an idea."

They left the residential area and walked onto the large avenue that would normally have rows of bookstores and miscellaneous shops. The road was wide,

giving them a good view of a tall building far in the distance that had not been there before. It bore the same sign as in the story: the massive, almost vulgar full smile of Yomunaga's current mayor, complementing a searchlight shining out into the darkness of the night.

In place of Wakaba, where Mifuyu had just bought a book, there now stood an office with a crowd forming out front. Reporters in suits shouted questions, the flashes of their cameras buzzing as they took photographs. The building housing Books Mystery had been destroyed, the old man Kaname nowhere to be seen. The general store next door had become a gun store, the red-bandana-clad owner singing happily as they rested a rifle on the wall. The children's bookstore had changed to a moneylender, and the nice owner who had once worked at a day care now sat behind a counter under blue light, feeding a cat while a cigarette dangled from her mouth.

A boy in a flat cap ran toward them from across the street, almost bumping into Mifuyu. His bounding stride scattered some of the papers he was carrying. Mifuyu looked down to see a leaflet with **RISE UP! FREE THE BOOKS!** written on it in large letters.

"Don't pick that up," Mashiro warned.

The high-pitched wail of a police siren sounded from behind Mashiro as she gripped Mifuyu's arm. The car stopped, and a policeman chased after the boy as he disappeared into the haze of night.

"What sort of idea did you have?" Mifuyu asked uneasily.

Mashiro's nose elongated, her face changed to that of a dog, and she started sniffing the area.

"...This way," she said.

Where Mifuyu could only smell the gutter, gunpowder, and booze, Mashiro's glistening black nose followed the trail of some scent.

Mashiro led them to the front of what used to be a bookstore with a space for readings and other events; now, though, it was a dance club with a red neon sign that read **CLUB FUNERAL CAPRICCIO**. By the front door, a small but tough man leaned against the wall, his sharp eyes observing the surroundings—it was Che,

who should have been in the dojo.

“Che!”

“Mifuyu, you can’t speak to people like you usually do, even friends. Everyone’s acting out roles right now, and we need to play along.”

As they watched him, several groups of customers approached, and Che searched them before letting them walk downstairs.

“He’s a bouncer,” said Mashiro. “Let’s go. Just to be safe, though, stay behind me.”

She ran a hand over her face, turning back into a human before Mifuyu’s eyes. Mifuyu stayed behind her as instructed, hunching her shoulders and trying to look as small as possible. Both she and Mashiro were wearing polo shirts and jeans. Clubs like this that only opened at night typically didn’t allow minors inside. She prayed that Mashiro could convince them otherwise.

Though she and Che were very close in the real world, when she caught his eye, he looked at her like he had no idea who she was, just like the last time. Conspicuous with his buzz cut and leather jacket bulging with muscle, he looked exactly like the bouncer at a club. He glanced back and forth between Mashiro and Mifuyu as he smacked his gum.

“Two of you?” he asked.

“Yes,” Mashiro replied. “We thought we’d stop by for a drink. We’d heard good things about this place.”

She tucked her hair behind her ear and tilted her head to the side. That natural-looking movement seemed like precisely what a character in *Black Book* would do, and Mifuyu looked impressed.

“All right, head on in.”

“Thanks.”

Winking deftly, Mashiro walked gallantly down the stairs, Mifuyu hurrying after her.

Club Funeral Capriccio was in a basement. Mifuyu felt dizzy the second the heavy iron door opened. The space was illuminated by a combination of red and

blue lights on the verge of halation; nothing looked real. Just standing there was enough to make her feel intoxicated, from the gut churning bass, the frantic melody, the blue and red lights, and the people dancing in the reddish-purple shade.

The bar sat on the right side, the center had seats covered in a haze of cigarette smoke, and on the stage in the back, a DJ was spinning records. Spotting a seat on the bar side, Mashiro sat Mifuyu down.

“Wait here for a second.”

“Huh? By myself? No way!”

“It’s okay, I’ll be right back. I’m going to look for someone.”

Mashiro squeezed Mifuyu’s shoulders to reassure her, then disappeared into the crowd bathed in red and blue light.

Perched on a high stool at the end of the bar, Mifuyu swiveled in discomfort and then leaned against the wall so as to not draw attention to herself. But bartenders were always watching their customers.

“Can I get you anything, miss?”

“Oh, umm, er...”

Flustered, Mifuyu searched desperately for a menu. But she didn’t see anything that looked like one—just kegs of beer, taps, and bottles of liquor lined up behind the bar. Nothing looked suitable for a teenager.

Mifuyu examined the bartender more carefully; this woman was the owner of a bookstore that held a book club. She was around thirty and had a flattering pixie cut. Even though the bookstore owner was playing a different role from real life, Mifuyu felt relieved to see a familiar face.

“I’m actually too young to drink,” she admitted.

At that, the bartender spun around, then turned back a few seconds later with the same expression to set down a glass in front of Mifuyu. A white beverage—milk.

“Um... Do you have anything more like, um, orange juice or...?”

But the bartender just said, “It’s today’s special,” and went back to drying glasses. With little other choice, Mifuyu sipped her milk.

From her position at the edge of the bar, she scanned the seating area and recognized many of the faces. The owner of Hashida Broiler; one of the nurses taking care of her dad in the hospital; the father of one of the tenants in her apartment building, among others.

Then she realized: Anyone here who was human wasn’t the thief.

She didn’t want to think that the thief would be someone she knew, but it was possible.

If the rules were the same as last time, then the fox they’d just been chasing was the thief. So Che, the club’s bouncer, was thankfully innocent, and she checked the face of each customer. Sitting in the darkest corner of the seating area was Kaname, who hadn’t been in his shop. The owners of the Chinese restaurant, the people from the shopping district, the Bookstore Owners’ Association—and the owner of Wakaba, and the mushroom-haired Haruta.

Come to think of it, was that woman here? The one who had been talking with Hirune in front of Mikura Hall the previous day, that young woman in the fashionable outfit. Mifuyu started looking harder.

“Thanks for waiting, Mifuyu,” said Mashiro.

“Oh yeah, sure.”

At some point, Mashiro had returned. Mifuyu quickly finished her milk and jumped down from the stool.

“I found who I was looking for. He’s in another room.”

“Who?”

Mashiro nodded, turned her back to the stage, and pushed Mifuyu toward the entrance. The room they were heading for was past the stairs, far on the other side of the club hall.

Paint peeled off the bottom of the door, perhaps from too many kicks, while numerous holes decorated the top. Mifuyu prayed that they weren’t from bullets.

“Wait, are we really going in there?”

She didn't feel good about this at all. Mashiro, meanwhile, nonchalantly opened the squeaky door.

With its windows covered, the inside of the room was dim, and it seemed to Mifuyu like an old private karaoke room. An ashtray piled high with cigarettes butts sat on a white table, surrounded by empty shot glasses. Farther back, someone had plunked their feet on the table.

A man lay sunken into a torn and dirty sofa, white smoke billowing up from his mouth. Mifuyu met the gaze of his sharp eyes as he observed them attentively. Black coat, fedora at an angle, a nihilistic gaze. Not that stylish girl.

But Mifuyu almost broke into peals of laughter upon seeing the man's all too familiar face. No matter how seriously everyone was supposed to be playing different parts, this was over the top.

“Punch...!” Mifuyu whispered.

It didn't seem like her spirited PE teacher heard her. He made a show of lifting up the tip of his hat with a grin.

“Well, what can ol' Ricky McCloy do for you young ladies?”

So spoke Ricky McCloy—or Mr. Kikuchida, the PE teacher at Mifuyu's high school—resting somewhere that resembled a private karaoke room in the basement of Club Funeral Capriccio, a place that had been a bookstore hosting events just one hour ago.

“This ain't no place for little kiddies... What? What's so funny?”

Her teacher was the protagonist in a story—talk about hilarious. Mifuyu hid behind Mashiro, trying not to die of laughter, and cleared her throat to cover up her amusement.

“Um...I just can't stop hiccuping.”

“You're a horrible liar. If you're here just for the hell of it, then do me a favor and scram.”

Mifuyu's smile faded at his cold response, and she quickly steadied her face. The normal Mr. Kikuchida was irritatingly upbeat, meddlesome, and said he was

going to visit her father, Ayumu, in the hospital today. The diminutive teacher would proclaim, “I may be small, but I pack a punch,” and so the students nicknamed him Punch. Mifuyu called him that, too. She wanted to tease him for trying to punch above his weight. However, his cool treatment disoriented Mifuyu.

Ricky McCloy tucked a pack of cigarettes and some matches into the inner pocket of his black coat, then sat up while steadying his fedora with his hand. They needed to stop him before he left.

As he sat up, Mashiro whispered, “Leave it to me,” in Mifuyu’s ear, slapped her on the back, and stepped between Ricky McCloy and the exit.

“I want to hire you. You’re a private eye, right?” Mashiro asked him.

“You could say that. But I don’t run errands for kids.”

With that, he tried to slip past Mashiro, but she pressed on.

“This is no errand. I’m looking for a thief...a book thief.”

Mifuyu noticed the detective tense up; she figured he must have been reacting to the word *thief*. But she was wrong.

“A *book*?” he repeated.

His face suddenly went rigid, like simply saying the word *book* was a mortal sin. But just at that moment, Mashiro took another step toward the detective.

“Yes,” she said. “We came here because we heard you’re the person to ask if we wanted to know about dealings with books.”

“Who told you that?”

“It’s a secret.”

Mifuyu knew that Mashiro was lying. They hadn’t talked to anyone about that since they’d arrived here, and Mashiro had gone to Ricky McCloy because he was the protagonist in *Black Book*, the book this world was based on. But the detective himself wasn’t aware of that. He looked at Mashiro and Mifuyu in total bewilderment, then exhaled a breath that reeked of cigarette smoke.

“Let’s hear it,” he said.

“A thief stole some very important books from us while we were traveling,” Mashiro explained, avoiding any mention of Mikura Hall.

“Traveling? You two are foreigners?”

“Something like that.”

Mifuyu nodded vigorously in agreement to show that their stories matched. The detective looked at them in disbelief.

“That wasn’t very smart. Don’t you know that books are illegal here? You were lucky to get them through customs. If the government found out, they would’ve deported you, or worse—you might’ve ended up six feet under if they chose to ‘interrogate’ you.”

An interrogation... Mifuyu had seen that stuff on TV. The thought of being arrested was enough to make her sick, and she didn’t even want to imagine how the police might hurt her. She gently tugged at Mashiro’s polo shirt.

“Hey, Mashiro, we’re in way over our heads. Let’s go.”

“Mifuyu...don’t you understand? We can’t leave until we catch the thief. Don’t worry—Ricky McCloy is a brilliant detective. Isn’t that right?”

Unlike Mashiro, Mifuyu wasn’t acting. She was truly terrified, but that sincerity seemed to make their case more convincing.

“Okay,” said Punch—or rather, Detective Ricky McCloy—as he scratched the back of his head. “Got any leads? A physical description of the thief or any information about when the theft occurred? This investigation is dead in the water if we don’t have any clues.”

“Oh, that’s simple. The thief is a fox.”

“A fox? Is that some kinda code word?”

“No, a literal—”

Mifuyu quickly covered Mashiro’s mouth before she said any more. Yes, the thief had turned into a fox, though Mifuyu wasn’t quite sure yet whether that was because of the curse, and it had just gotten away from them. But if they told the detective that the thief was an actual fox, then he’d get upset and leave this time for sure.

“Oh, umm, the thief has a fox with them,” Mifuyu explained. “I don’t know if it’s their pet or a bodyguard or something, but if you search for the fox, that’ll definitely lead you to the thief.”

“All right,” the detective said as he stroked his chin. “A thief with a pet fox. Strange stuff, but that’s what you get in this town. Lots of oddballs around here.”

He led the two out of the club and walked back into town.

A bright-yellow taxi dashing in front of them blared its horn. Mifuyu felt tense. Even though the moon hung in the sky, the hazy night blocked every star, either because the air quality was too poor or the town was too bright.

The detective turned right toward what used to be the booksellers quarter and headed for the shopping district. A young boy stood on a box on a street corner, calling out the day’s news, as adults stopped and turned their attention to him, tossing change into a yellow box with *News: 15 minutes for 300 yen* painted on it. None of the stores sold books, and no one sat reading a book in a café. The newspaper racks by the doors of convenience stores were gone, too.

This world really didn’t have any newspapers. No newspapers or books, not even any e-books or the internet. In Yomunaga of all places.

Mifuyu was taking in the changed townscape when Mashiro next to her suddenly said, “Thanks, Mifuyu.”

“Huh? Why?”

“For earlier. Your explanation about the fox was superb. If I had kept talking, the detective might have thought something was off and refused to help us. That was some quick thinking on your part.”

“R-really?”

It felt kind of nice being complimented. Mifuyu shyly scratched the tip of her nose as she grinned.

Her one explanation, however, hardly compared with everything Mashiro had done so far. Mifuyu was at a total loss in this town, which had been absorbed into the book’s world after the book curse activated. She was utterly helpless

and felt like she was relying on Mashiro for everything.

“Hey, Mashiro. What happens next in the story?”

“Right, you only read the very beginning. Ricky stole something from that room as part of a job, but the police were already after him.”

“I read that far. Some hoodlum or whatever attacked him, but Ricky beat the guy up.”

Ricky had made quick work of the young guy in the tropical shirt who’d jumped out of the dark alley. Looking at Ricky McCloy’s back as he walked in front of her, while she might feel disappointed that the role went to Punch of all people, she had to admit that a PE teacher definitely suited the physical demands of the character.

“After that,” Mashiro continued, “Ricky goes to a room in Club Funeral Capriccio and waits for a client who requested photographs from him. That’s when a pair of twin women appear.”

“And what do they ask him to do?”

“They aren’t there to hire him; they’re assassins. They’ve already killed the client, and when they confront Ricky, he barely gets away with the photographs. The photos show people exchanging bootleg books as well as the corpse of a woman with a torn-up volume. Ricky is hunted by those who don’t want the photos to see the light of day. He manages to escape and is saved by the underground organization that makes the bootleg books. But as his investigation continues, Ricky learns that his partner, shot and killed for robbery and murder the previous year, was actually framed because he was close to smoking out the illicit book trade. And as Ricky tries to uncover the mastermind, he gets wrapped up in a giant conspiracy involving underground books and the whole city’s top brass. That’s the basic gist.”

“...Wow, sounds kinda scary.”

“Conspiracies and bootleg goods are pretty standard in hard-boiled fiction.”

“‘Hard-boiled’?”

“It’s a genre. A pretty popular one, too, but not many people write it these

days.”

“Hmm,” Mifuyu mumbled unenthusiastically, inadvertently glancing at the showroom window behind Mashiro and then stopping in her tracks. There was a beautiful dress and a mirror showing Mifuyu’s and Mashiro’s reflections. Both girls were wearing green-and-white-striped polo shirts with jeans, looking for all the world like twins.

“Wait a second. Could we be those twin assassins?” Mifuyu wondered.

“It’s possible. Let’s hurry up, though, Mifuyu, or we’ll lose sight of Ricky.”

The detective kept walking without paying any heed to the two girls and turned right at an intersection about twenty meters ahead of them. They hurried after him, only to walk right into the glare of headlights, causing Mifuyu to gasp and shield her eyes. A classic, curved black car hardly ever seen these days idled in front of them.

“Get in,” said the detective, who stuck his head out the driver-side window.

The two girls clambered into the back seat, and the car took off before Mifuyu had fully closed the back door.

“Whoa, that’s dangerous!” Mifuyu cried.

“There’s gonna be more where that came from. Get down and cover your head.”

The detective cranked the steering wheel, the car tilted at an angle, and Mifuyu screamed. With no time to duck, she fell over, and Mashiro pulled her down. Right as she wedged Mifuyu’s face between the seats, gunfire rang out, and broken glass rained down on them.

“Stop! Stop it!” Mifuyu screamed.

Mashiro covered Mifuyu to protect her from the falling shards of glass. The detective skillfully steered the car, swerving left and right, returning fire out the driver-side window. When he emptied his last clip, the detective accelerated away, flying out onto the main road. Horns from the cars on the road behind them protested noisily, but the detective’s expression in the rearview mirror was calm as he loaded a new clip in his gun using only his left hand.

“I c-can’t do this.”

The sound of gunfire finally stopped, and Mifuyu raised her head, her sniffling face a mess of snot and tears. Small holes littered the car door, creating streaks of white light on the seat.

“I—I want to go home. I’ve had enough. I don’t want to do this anymore.”

Her body shaking, Mifuyu cried like a child. Mashiro stroked her head and held her shoulders, but she did not stop crying. Over her sobbing, she heard the detective in the driver’s seat sneer.

“I knew I never shoulda brought along a couple of kids,” he muttered. Mifuyu’s frustration and shame caused more tears to flow.

Mashiro, on the other hand, began to change from a human to a dog for some reason; white dog ears sprouted from her head, and her nose elongated quickly, while her fingers became rounder, changing into a dog’s toes. She licked Mifuyu’s wet cheeks with her pink tongue, and by the time her wet black nose rubbed against Mifuyu’s face, she had turned completely into a dog wearing a polo shirt.

“W-wait, Mashiro! Now’s not the time to turn into a dog!”

Mifuyu was used to this, but she didn’t want to spook the detective. She hurriedly pulled the collar of the polo shirt over Mashiro’s head, but it didn’t improve the situation. Catching the eye of the detective in the rearview mirror, she got ready to be kicked out of the car.

But the detective just sighed deeply. “Buncha oddballs who come to this town,” he mumbled and didn’t probe beyond that. It might have been that she was distracted, but her tears finally stopped, and the innocent dog-faced Mashiro resumed licking Mifuyu’s cheek.

“...Mashiro, wouldn’t it have been better if we tried to catch the thief on our own instead of asking the detective? I mean, he’s on the run.”

It was like they were going around looking for trouble. Mifuyu didn’t want to think about who had been shooting at him.

“I should have known that we’d get mixed up in all this. Books are books; we

ought to leave the story to the characters while we find the fox on our own.”

The car raced down the road leading to Mikura Hall. Usually a place for normal, everyday people, the area was grimier than the booksellers quarters; the foul stench blowing in from the broken windows reminded Mifuyu of Shibuya or Shinjuku’s Kabukicho.

The detective drove for another ten minutes, turning this way and that, passing by the government building decorated with its gigantic panel of the mayor, before finally stopping in the quiet, deserted northern district.

This was the farthest area from the train station, with the Tobikoe River, one of the two rivers that flowed around Yomunaga, running next to it. In the past, this area contained lots of factories and worker housing, but they all closed decades ago, and now there were only a couple of restaurants and two motels with signs outside advertising their prices.

Even after the transformation from the book curse, this place had changed little. They saw some silhouettes of couples sneaking into a motel, a few glimmering streetlights, graffiti covering the walls around the small underpass by the road, and the remnants of peeled posters scattered everywhere. A long-standing café with ivy crawling up the walls was open for business, looking just like it did in the real world. The red indicator lamps of an abandoned factory blinked like a pulsing heart but made no noise.

The detective slowed the car on a rattling gravel road and stopped in front of the café, directing the two to get out.

“You kids stay here. I’m gonna get some intel,” he told them as they left.

They didn’t have a chance to stop the car as it sped away, kicking up dust in its wake. Its red taillights disappeared into the darkness as if consumed by the night, leaving Mifuyu and Mashiro the dog behind. The surrounding silence answered them, the echo of gravel the only sound. Mifuyu moved next to Mashiro and touched her soft fur. The warmth relaxed her a little.

“...Guess we’ll go to that café,” said Mifuyu.

They peered through the window to check it out. The seats were empty, with not a single customer present. Some of the lights in the café were out, making it

hard to tell if it was open. A middle-aged man in an apron rested behind the counter, but he might have been sleeping, because he sat slumped motionless in a chair, his head on his chest. Mifuyu reached for the doorknob, then thought twice about it and pulled her hand away before looking over at Mashiro with a shake of her head.

The two had nowhere to go, so they walked back and forth between the two streetlights on either side of the café, then gave up on it, returned to the front of the café, and perched on top of a brick wall that surrounded a flower bed.

“I’m so hungry.”

Mifuyu thought about the lunch box she had made for Hirune, propped her shoulder bag on her lap, and removed the cloth-wrapped package from inside. They had run all over town and been roughly tossed out of a car, but the white rice had only bunched to one side and was fine.

“I’m glad I didn’t put anything moist in here.”

Just to be safe, she checked to see if the book she’d bought for her dad was undamaged. It looked okay. Mifuyu was going to offer Mashiro some food, but she hesitated.

“Guess you can’t eat in your dog form, huh? Turn back into a human, Mashiro.”

Once she was human again, Mashiro insisted that Mifuyu eat the food.

“Come on. You’ve been moving around a lot more, so you should eat first.”

“I’m fine. We who live in purgatory don’t need food.”

“...Purgatory? Are things about to get even weirder?”

“Don’t worry about it.”

Mifuyu decided not to press the issue. She grabbed the chopsticks and picked at her lunch of white rice with pickled plum and soy-boiled seaweed. The saltiness of the plum made her body tingle against the intense sweetness of the white rice, causing hunger to boil up inside her with each mouthful. But she closed the lid after only eating a third of it. She wasn’t sure if they would be able to get any more food later, and she knew she’d have to make Mashiro eat

sometime.

The sound of the river gurgling rose from the distance. The searchlight scanning the fully transformed city felt around the night sky.

“Do you think Punch will really come back?”

“Punch?”

“That’s the name of the guy who became Ricky. Or his nickname, actually. He’s a PE teacher at my school. He said he was coming to Yomunaga today; he must’ve gotten caught up in the curse.”

“Your school... So you attend school, Mifuyu?”

“Of course I do... Well, I guess that’s not always a given.”

She sneaked a glance at Mashiro’s profile, thinking she had said something insensitive. She felt different around Mashiro. Mashiro didn’t eat, and she obviously didn’t go to school. Mifuyu debated whether she should be more considerate to Mashiro, but Mashiro herself didn’t seem bothered.

“Do you like school?” Mashiro asked.

“Honestly, not really.”

“You don’t?”

Mashiro’s black eyes stared directly at her. They seemed filled with compassion. Mifuyu took a deep breath and dug at the gravel with the toe of her sneaker.

“...I don’t actually have any friends. It’s not that people hate me or tease me or anything, though. It’s like a social thing, like I don’t really connect with anyone.”

“Is that because you can’t open up to them?”

“Kind of. Even if I did feel like opening up to someone, nobody would want to hear about my troubles, so I just don’t talk about them. I mean, listening to other people’s problems kind of sucks and takes a lot out of you, y’know?”

Even now, she couldn’t believe that she was telling Mashiro all this. But she felt like she could talk about it with her for some reason. Mashiro responded

earnestly to what Mifuyu said and wouldn't suddenly start talking to someone else or make vague comments while keeping her face buried in a book.

"There's stuff that bothers me, and I have so many things to do. And eventually, my whole life is going to revolve around Mikura Hall, and I'd rather die than have that happen."

Mikura Hall loomed over her life. She desperately wanted to remove it, but it always remained there in her future.

"...That's tough." Mashiro nodded, her eyes on the ground the whole time. "You need to think carefully about what you do and don't want to do and stay true to that. I want to treat your decisions with respect. I'm on your side, Mifuyu. No matter what anyone says."

At those words, Mifuyu felt her nerves slowly calm down. Mashiro was hearing her out. There was someone right in front of Mifuyu who valued her opinions. But was Mashiro serious?

"Do you really mean that?" Mifuyu asked.

Just then, a child appeared in the parking lot in front of the café. Dressed in a white T-shirt and shorts, the child was maybe five or six years old, a finger in their mouth and their gaze locked on the two girls. Mifuyu looked back and forth between the child and the lunch box before holding it out to them.

"...Want some?"

Even after the kid walked into the light, it was hard to tell if they were a girl or boy. When they sheepishly approached Mifuyu and took the lunch box from her, they muttered "thank you" quietly.

The moment they did, some large men materialized from between a group of bushes on the other side of the gravel road that had seemed to be nothing more than darkness. The kid grabbed the food and fled like a frightened rabbit. Mashiro stepped forward to protect Mifuyu even though she had no chance against so many people.

They were all uniformed policemen except for the man in the center, who wore regular clothes. The most conspicuous point of all, however, was that Mifuyu knew him.

“M-Mr. Miki...”

If her PE teacher, Mr. Kikuchida, was the detective, then the next character to emerge was her Japanese teacher and homeroom teacher for the class next door, Mr. Miki, in the role of policeman. In his trench coat, he was tall enough that she had to look up to see his face. His greasy hair and pale face were the same, and he also seemed to have no idea who Mifuyu was.

“Where is Ricky McCloy?”

“I—I don’t know.”

“Liar. He dropped you two off here, then ditched our tail. You know where he’s going.”

Flanked by several police officers, Mr. Miki confronted Mifuyu, gazing at her with an expression both suspicious and concerned.

Mifuyu gripped the strap of her shoulder bag, ready to hit him with it if he moved any closer. It contained a thick, hard book, which would surely cause some damage.

The book, the book, the book. I’ll smack him with it.

She was so obsessed with the idea that Mr. Miki’s next question caught her completely off guard.

“Is that a book you’ve got there?”

“Um, er, yes.”

“Mifuyu!”

Crap!

She remembered that books were banned in this world, and that all printed material was forbidden. It was too late to lie about it; the police officers were already rushing toward them. Just as they were on the verge of apprehending her, Mashiro transformed into a giant white dog. Mifuyu grabbed her around the waist, and they ran off.

“Wait!”

Mashiro fled. But the escape happened so quickly that Mifuyu didn’t have

time to get a proper grip and her bottom half dangled, her knees dragging painfully on the gravel. Mashiro noticed and slowed down.

“The net! Throw the net!” someone yelled. Then a net was thrown toward them.

Mifuyu shut her eyes tight when the net caught her and Mashiro. The next moment, there was an explosion, like gunfire or firecrackers, followed by a burning smell that assaulted her nose. Choking, Mifuyu thought she had been shot and that it was all over for her. She turned over on to her back and passed into unconsciousness.

A cold liquid dripped on her cheek. Waking, she gasped for breath. It felt like she had been dreaming. Hazily checking her surroundings, she was flooded by a wave of utter disappointment when she realized that she wasn’t lying in her bed at home. She felt certain that she had woken up from a dream, but instead, she was still living inside one. So sleep wasn’t enough to break free of this world.

But where was she? Where was Mashiro? The bullet hole–ridden concrete ceiling stooped so low, it looked ready to collapse at any moment. A pipe might have burst inside, because water stains spread across it. Considering the walls were the same gray as the ceiling, she got the impression that this must be a factory or warehouse of some sort. The room was cramped. The bundles of paper stacked against the walls and the waist-high reams of rolled paper made Mifuyu feel extremely claustrophobic.

A rusty red door hung open a few centimeters, and the sound of machine pistons and conveyor belts combined with a strange odor in the air—the smell of ink.

Mifuyu lay on top of some cardboard spread over the floor, a thin, grimy blanket covering her. Trying to prop herself up on her hands, she felt her elbows ache, and her knees seemed injured. How much time had passed since she lost consciousness?

“Hello! Hey, excuse me!” she yelled, invigorated.

The door opened, and a small child peeked out. The child was in a white T-shirt and shorts. It was the kid from earlier whom she had given the lunch box

to. Their round, acorn-like eyes looked directly at Mifuyu.

“Are you awake?” asked a young man who appeared behind the child.

Glasses and mushroom-shaped hair. It was Haruta, who worked at Wakaba. Unlike Che, Mr. Miki, and Mr. Kikuchida, he hadn’t changed much, an apron covering his black polo shirt, still looking ready to work in a bookstore.

“Um, where am I?”

“Sorry if I scared you. We lit some firecrackers to distract the cops. We were trying to help you. I overheard you earlier. You know Ricky McCloy? The self-righteous private eye?”

“I wouldn’t say I know him. We hired him.”

“I see. And where is he now?”

“I don’t know. He said he was going to gather some intel, but that was it. Um, where is my friend?”

“The white dog? Don’t worry, she’s fine. She’s outside playing with my associates.”

“Oh, okay... Uh, what is this place?”

With the prohibition on books, it couldn’t be a bookstore. But it smelled of ink, and there were so many papers lying about.

“It’s our underground hideout. I’m sorry to get you involved, but it’s the safest place right now. Especially for those in possession of books, like you.”

“Underground hideout...?”

Haruta didn’t answer her. He offered a hand and led Mifuyu inside.

The other room also had a low ceiling and would never be described as spacious. A machine sat in the center, looking to Mifuyu like a thick, steel grand piano. A shiny silver platform, roller, and metal frame sat on a large, rectangular metal dais with a handle, levers, and an old-fashioned timepiece on one side.

A desk and chair had been placed next to the machine, followed by row after row of shelves. Five people stood in front of the shelves, tightly hunched over while feverishly moving their hands, taking individual narrow rods like stamps

one by one from the shelves and lining them up on a tray.

“Is this a factory?”

“A printshop. They take the letters from there, arrange them on the printing block, and use that press over there to print the text. We make leaflets and books here.”

“So...you’re breaking the law, right?”

“Yes, we are.”

But Haruta seemed almost proud of that. Mifuyu remembered the boy in the flat cap running from the police, scattering leaflets through the transformed booksellers quarter. She wondered if they had been printed here.

One of the women arranging letters walked toward the back of the room, her heels clicking, and said, “Boss, would you check this?” An old man sat by himself behind the biggest desk at the end of the room. It was the owner of Wakaba, with his distinctive fuzzy hair.

“How’d it turn out? Good?” he asked. “We can’t go making inferior products, or else our readers will hurt their eyes. Like methanol during Prohibition!”

Mifuyu felt a tinge of relief hearing that his enthusiasm and unique way of talking were the same as in the real world. The owner of Wakaba, whom the woman had called boss, removed his glasses and replaced them with a different pair, looking down at the letters arranged on the tray, then called, “Seb! Seb!” At that, Haruta walked from Mifuyu over to the boss. She couldn’t see him as anyone other than Haruta, but of course, he played a different role in this fictional world.

“Go on, arrange the blocks! Neatly, like always! Come now!” the Wakaba owner said.

Mifuyu made to follow Haruta, and she caught the eye of the woman who had picked the blocks. Upon closer inspection, Mifuyu recognized her—the school librarian. She helped run the literary club. She wore thick glasses and tied her long hair to one side over her shoulder. Mifuyu looked around to check whether anyone resembled the girl from the literary club, but no one did.

“Seb, are you sure it’s okay to bring an outsider here?” the librarian—she probably had a different role now—asked loud enough for all to hear.

Mifuyu took offense, but she also wondered whether she should be in a bootleg printshop.

“She’s fine,” Haruta told the librarian. “She gave Toby some food. He was hiding and got hungry, and she helped him out. Plus, she’s got a book with her. That makes her one of us.”

Haruta pleaded Mifuyu’s case, and the librarian shrugged, then went back to arranging the next row of blocks.

Haruta took the tray from the boss, aligned the letter blocks in front of the roller, tapped them flat with a wooden mallet to make sure none stuck up, and set them in the printing press. He then inserted a well-used, shiny wooden board between the blocks and the roller, set a piece of paper on top, and flipped a switch. With a growl, the printing press roared to life, the top of the metal frame starting to turn. Haruta adjusted the printing paper closer to the roller, and Mifuyu studied how the machine would lift up one piece of paper at a time and quickly print something on it. She’d never cared much for machines, but this one was rather fascinating.

After ten minutes or so had passed, she grew bored, yawned, scratched at a weird tingling at her backside, and felt something peculiar. Something soft but rough, furry, thick, and long—and when she squeezed it, she felt a little pain. Looking behind her, she couldn’t believe her eyes. It was a tail. A fox tail was growing from the area around her tailbone.

It was just like the previous week with *The Brothers of the Lush Village*. A certain amount of time after entering the world, she had grown a tail for some reason. She touched her head. Triangular ears had sprouted there.

Orange tails swished from everyone’s backs, but neither Haruta, the librarian, nor the boss had noticed.

Mifuyu didn’t know why people turned into foxes, and she didn’t know what it would mean if they transformed completely. Even Mashiro, Mifuyu’s guide, didn’t know.

“I have to find that thief soon,” muttered Mifuyu.

She couldn’t count on Ricky McCloy—no, Punch. No matter how much he acted like a private eye, Punch was still Punch.

Mifuyu decided to search for an exit. Haruta had said that Mashiro was outside.

There was one more door in addition to the one leading to the room Mifuyu had woken up in, as well as a shutter. The shutter was closed, so she should try the door. As the printing press roared and spun and everyone was absorbed in making books, Mifuyu crept silently toward the door.

Sure enough, on the other side, she found a stairwell encased in damp concrete walls. The rough metal stairs continued upward—this place was underground, so the sound of cars driving outside murmured far above. Mifuyu closed the door carefully and placed one foot on the stairs. She climbed one, two, three, about twenty steps in total before reaching the second landing and stopping dead in her tracks as she turned the corner.

A fox was there.

In the corner of a landing stacked with crumpled cardboard boxes, an orange fox lay curled up in a ball. It must have been sound asleep, because it didn’t seem to notice Mifuyu approach, snoring soundly without a care in the world.

Mifuyu extended both arms and crept closer, careful not to make a sound, finally leaping forward. The fox woke up and jumped to run at almost the exact same time that Mifuyu slid her hands underneath its sides. It flailed as it tried to flee, leaving scratches on Mifuyu’s face and arms, but she held on tight.

“Yes! I caught the thief! I caught the book thief!”

Admonishing the fox to calm down as it struggled, Mifuyu waited for the world to return to normal. It should happen almost immediately. She had caught the thief... It looked like a fox, but she knew it was human inside. Desperate eyes and a mouth flailing as though trying to say something. A real animal wouldn’t behave like that.

But nothing changed. The stairs stayed the same, the sounds of passing cars and the hum of the printing press didn’t change, the fox didn’t turn back into a

human, and even after Mifuyu closed her eyes and opened them again, the world had not returned to normal.

“Why...? What’s going on? Look, I caught the thief! Do you see this? I don’t know who you are, but come on already! Turn everything back!” Mifuyu yelled.

She appealed to the gods, to someone, to whoever was looking in on this world from afar. But her voice simply rebounded around the stairwell, disappearing as it seeped into the dark concrete ceiling. The fox still struggled in Mifuyu’s arms.

“Hey, what’s going on up there?”

She looked down over the handrail; the people from the hideout had heard her and were looking up at her in bewilderment. With no other options, Mifuyu descended the stairs.

“A thief? This fox?” Haruta asked her.

The printshop staff placed the fox inside a wooden crate, closed and locked the lid, and then stacked some books on top. The crate was poorly made, with cracks between the boards, so there was no concern about the fox suffocating.

“Yeah. It stole my books.”

“Huh. Are you sure a human didn’t train it to steal? Foxes are more nimble and have better night vision than humans.”

Well, the fox is actually a human in disguise, Mifuyu thought, although she didn’t feel like explaining all the complicated circumstances.

Everyone in the printshop—Haruta, the boss, and librarian included—had already grown fox ears in addition to their tails. Mifuyu panicked seeing how little time remained, but she didn’t know where to start.

“Hey, have you seen my friend...I mean, my dog?”

“Oh, would you like us to bring her in?”

Things might be a little better with Mashiro around, but even Mashiro didn’t understand this world’s cryptic rules. Mifuyu needed to figure them out on her own.

The rules of the book curse. She didn't even know how she got involved in this whole mess of catching a thief. If anyone from the Mikura family had to do this, excluding Ayumu since he was in the hospital, Hirune seemed like the best person. But most of the time, she was sleeping.

Why did the thief keep trying to steal books from Mikura Hall anyway? Was last time not enough for them?

Hey, wait a second.

Arms crossed and scowling, Mifuyu pondered something. She had assumed that this fox was the same thief as the last time, but what if that wasn't the case? Could it be someone else entirely?

She didn't think anyone would try to steal books from Mikura Hall again after being sucked into such a bizarre world and turned into a fox. At least, Mifuyu wouldn't. She wondered if the books in Mikura Hall were so appealing that the thief would consider taking them again after a dangerous adventure.

She had once asked her father how much Mikura Hall was worth. He just laughed and said, *"Mifuyu, you really don't care about Mikura Hall at all,"* before looking serious and adding, *"I'm sorry to say, but not very much. It's too easy to get used books from the internet. Used bookstores are going out of business and selling off their stock. Great-Grandpa collected entertainment novels, and they might be valuable to some hardcore enthusiasts, but you wouldn't get much for them."*

But maybe Mikura Hall contained a book that was very valuable to the thief, and Mifuyu just didn't know about it. If that was the case, though, they would try to steal the same book, and Mashiro said that this time, the books were stolen from the stacks on the first floor. The last time, it had been from the second floor.

It didn't make any sense.

If the thief was someone different, then there had been two thefts in the span of a week.

Tamaki had been more upset about being robbed than the books' monetary value, and she went all out in installing a security system to prevent future

theft. But Mifuyu didn't know how often theft had actually occurred at Mikura Hall. Ayumu had never mentioned anything about any other thefts. But there had been two since he was hospitalized.

"Hey, why do you steal books?" she asked, crouching down in front of the wooden crate holding the fox. "Who are you? Why did you come to Mikura Hall? There are books everywhere in Yomunaga. Choose somewhere else. Or did someone ask you to do this? Hurry up and confess, because otherwise, we could both be trapped here forever!"

The book curse might not have lifted because she only caught someone working for the thief. Mifuyu shook the wooden box, and the fox tumbled around inside, crying as though pleading for something. But she couldn't understand a word.

"You can talk to that fox all you like, but I don't think it'll reply!"

Ignoring the boss as he got his laughs, Mifuyu rose in a huff and paced the room angrily, chewing her nails—nails that were becoming sharp like a fox's. How many hours or minutes did she have until she turned into a fox completely?

Just then, the printers who had gone outside came back with Mashiro. The collar and leash perhaps being the reason she'd chosen to stay in dog form, she ran to Mifuyu when she saw her. Mifuyu gleefully petted her head the same as she would with a real dog. But something about Mashiro was different.

"What's wrong?"

Examining her closely, she saw that her nose was red. According to the lookouts posted outside, the smoke screen from the firecrackers that'd been used to evade the police had contained something like tear gas that severely affected Mashiro's keen nose.

"Poor thing," said Mifuyu as she softly scratched behind Mashiro's ears.

Mashiro let out a whimper.

One of the people binding a book at a desk tried offering Mifuyu words of encouragement.

“Seems you’ve had quite the streak of bad luck, but finding that thief by pure coincidence sure was fortunate, huh?”

Mifuyu spun around, her brow furrowed in confusion. “Coincidence?”

“That’s right. In a city this big, you almost never bump into the very person you’re looking for. Talk about lucky.”

Time seemed to stop momentarily. Mifuyu looked around the cramped printing press with its low ceiling.

“Yeah... You’re right.”

The printshop staff noticed a sudden change in Mifuyu and exchanged glances.

“What is it?” the librarian asked her.

“The books... Where are the books? The bootleg books? Where do you keep them?”

“Where...? Behind that shutter—”

Mifuyu strode over before the librarian had a chance to finish speaking. She pushed through people as she cut across the room, stood in front of the shutters, put her fingers in the opening, and tried pulling it up. But a lock connected it to the concrete floor, and it didn’t budge.

“H-hey, what are you doing?!” the librarian cried.

“Um, would you open this for me, please?” Mifuyu asked.

“No way! Why would I do that for an outsider...?”

“This is not the time to worry about outsiders. Open it and let me see what’s inside. The books that the thief stole from me should be in there.”

A coincidence. It was true that the whole reason Mifuyu was here was because of the kid she’d happened to give her lunch box to, which led to the printers helping her when the police tried to apprehend her. But the fox, the thief—that was no coincidence.

Last time, the fox hid the books in a train-station coin locker. Mifuyu, Mashiro, the thief, and the books stolen from Mikura Hall were the only things

that hadn't changed after the book curse transformed the world. So this time, what had the thief done with the books? In a world with a prohibition on books, just walking around with even one book would be conspicuous. And dangerous. Even if they wanted to hide them, there would be nowhere to do so.

The best place to hide a leaf was in a forest. In a world where books were illegal, the only places with books would either be illegal book traders or underground printshops. The safest place to stash them would surely be with the printers. That's why the fox had searched for this printshop and hid the books here. The fox must have been resting on the stairwell landing because it'd used so much stamina and cunning to hide all those books, which was a lot for such a small animal.

In other words, the books that had been stolen from Mikura Hall were somewhere in the printshop.

The thief alone wasn't enough. She had to find the stolen books, too, to finally return the world to normal.

At long last, Mifuyu understood the rules for lifting the book curse.

As she went over this in her mind, the people around her continued their transformation into foxes. Velvety-soft orange fur grew from the confrontational librarian's temple to her cheeks, and Mifuyu's palms had begun to sprout a blanket of soft fur. Mifuyu grabbed the librarian by both shoulders.

"I'm begging you—please open this shutter. We'll be in big trouble if I don't find those books soon!"

The librarian looked at Haruta and the boss, shook her head in resignation, removed the key from her pocket, and unlocked the shutter.

The warehouse was about the same size as the printing room. While the collection paled in comparison with the Mikura collection, the piles of books were enough to fill one small room at Mikura Hall.

"Th-there's so many..."

"Quite impressive, isn't it?" said the librarian. "And we made each one by hand. Books are bundles of knowledge. They contain far more information than the news pouring out of the mouths of those 'newsies.' That knowledge is

something you get from the written word. Books must exist in this world. Banning them robs the people of knowledge.”

“Books aren’t that big of a deal,” said one printshop employee. “You just read ‘em, and if they’re interesting, that’s good enough. And if they’re boring, then at least you learned something. That’s how you find what you like and what you don’t.”

“I see it differently,” said another employee. “Books make money. That’s it.”

“People with nothing but money on their minds should keep quiet.”

Mifuyu failed to hear what the grown-ups were talking about. She stood dumbstruck—not because she was awed by the volume of handmade books, but because she was wondering how she would ever find the books stolen from Mikura Hall in this sea of tomes. She was completely at a loss for what to do. It would be easy if Mashiro’s nose was working, but she couldn’t smell much now because of the smoke screen. Should she ask the thief? But if it ran away, she’d be back to square one.

There was a vent on the ceiling. The fox thief had probably come in through there. Wind passed through the opening, rustling Mifuyu’s fox tail growing from her. Mifuyu finally lifted her head, strode toward the mountain of books, and began checking each book one by one, starting at the edge. They looked completely different from the books in the real world. Each one here resembled the others, with a brown or black cover, no unique pictures or illustrations, all a simple plain hue. She took down more and more as she checked, moving five or ten books at a time, digging into the mountain of books. This would be simple; she would find the stolen books easily—but after ten minutes had passed, the book she was holding slipped from her hand. Her fingers were stubby, round, and the palms had swollen things that looked like pads.

Face pale, Mifuyu swallowed back a scream, clumsily grabbing at books with both hands and tossing them aside. Perhaps inspired by Mifuyu’s efforts, the printers and Mashiro all began to help as everyone’s noses stretched and whiskers grew from their cheeks.

Sweat dripping as they brushed books aside by the thousand, Mifuyu’s pointy ears twitched as she was pushing aside a third of a pile. She heard a siren. It was

coming closer.

Everyone raised their heads, several of them assessing the situation and frantically bolting for the door. The siren stopped directly above the hideout.

“Bad news! It’s the cops!”

“Retreat! Hurry up and get outta here!”

“You’ve got to be kidding me. How’d they find us? Do we have a mole?”

Everyone fell into a panic, running to and fro, while piles of books toppled to the floor. Someone tripped and fell against the desk, sending sheets of paper fluttering through the air. Everyone was screaming that the place was too deep for any bugs to transmit radio signals, that there was no way they should have been found out.

Mifuyu didn’t care about all that. She kept digging through the pile of books. If she could just find the books, everything would be resolved. The police, the hideout, everything. The librarian grabbed Mifuyu’s busy hands.

“Hey! You need to get out of here, too!”

“No!”

Just then, they heard a voice amplified through a bullhorn.

“Criminal book-printers, listen up! We have you surrounded! If you value your friend’s life, then surrender! I repeat, if you value your friend’s life, surrender!”

“Friend? Who are they talking about?”

The staff all looked at one another, checking whether everyone was there. No one was missing. The man who had been binding books breathed a sigh of relief.

“He’s bluffing. Don’t worry.”

“You think I’m bluffing? Listen to this.”

The voice spoke like it heard everything they said, but the next voice to reverberate out from the bullhorn belonged to a crying child. It was the boy whom Mifuyu had given her lunch box to.

“Toby!”

“No, he’s not here! Is that really him, though? When did he go missing?”

Mifuyu felt her spine go cold. It had to have happened during the commotion when she found the thieving fox. The door to the stairs had been left open, and no one must have noticed the kid leaving as they focused their attention on the fox.

“Do you think Toby tipped them off?”

“No way! He’s only five years old. Someone must have grabbed him when he went outside and...”

The librarian’s expression hardened as she realized something mid-sentence.

“Somebody must have thought Toby was lost and called the police. He couldn’t have told the cops about this place, though. He doesn’t know the address.”

“So then the person who found him told them?”

“We’re underground, though. Above us is just a vacant lot with a little shack. Even if the cops came here, the cops wouldn’t think to look for a printshop underneath a vacant lot where someone found a lost kid. The only way they’d know about us is...”

The librarian looked at Mashiro—the white dog. Mashiro had been outside.

“But there are dogs everywhere.”

“Right. Which leaves only one answer.”

In the next instant, the sound of gunfire rang out in the distance, and everyone screamed. Taking advantage of the opportunity, Mifuyu shook free of the librarian’s grip and dashed to the wooden box holding the fox. Now wasn’t the time to worry about it getting away; it was all or nothing. The thief would know where the books were. Everything needed to end here with this foolish racket.

But with just one more step to go, someone moved between her and the wooden crate holding the fox.

“What do you think you’re doing, miss?”

That someone was Haruta. Maybe he was feeling unwell, but his face was oddly paler than before, and oily sweat dripped from his forehead. Mifuyu tried to slip around him, but he stood his ground and pushed her away.

“Please step aside,” she urged him. “I have business with that fox.”

“I want you to refrain from doing anything suspicious, or else the police will arrest me, too.”

Pushing the middle of his glasses up his nose as he spoke, he wiped his forehead with his sleeve. Something seemed wrong.

“What do you mean, ‘you, too’? They’re going to arrest everyone.” Mifuyu’s throat was dry, but she somehow managed to swallow. “Haruta... I mean, um, Seb. Are you saying that you’re the mole?”

Everyone except for Mifuyu and Haruta stared in disbelief. Haruta eventually looked away.

“It’s your fault for coming here. I promised them a long time ago that I would hand Ricky McCloy over to them. To protect this place.”

“What?!”

The librarian pushed Mifuyu aside as she moved to confront Haruta, but the others restrained her.

“Calm down!”

“Let’s hear him out first, okay?”

The librarian fumed as everyone tried to console her. Behind them, Mifuyu tried to make herself small and search for Mashiro.

Now focused solely on Haruta, the printers were no longer interested in Mifuyu. The police wanted Ricky McCloy, and Haruta—“Seb”—had assumed that Mifuyu was Ricky’s associate, which was why he acted like he’d secured her in the underground hideout as a way to lure him out.

“I pretended I was safeguarding this young lady in order to lure Ricky here. When I said I brought her here because she fed Toby, that was an excuse. I’m the one who let Toby outside. It wasn’t a tip—the police were waiting for my signal. Once he knew that one of his associates was in here, Ricky would have

no choice but to show himself.”

“You got the hideout involved for that? I can’t believe it!”

“I’m very sorry to all of you, but I’m doing this for the printing press. They promised to spare it. You can be replaced, but the press can’t. If it’s lost, then books can never be made again.”

They jumped Haruta at almost the exact same time that Mashiro walked out of the bathroom, having rinsed her now-human face.

“Mashiro!” Mifuyu yelled as she immediately tossed the wooden crate with the fox toward Mashiro before it could get mangled in the ensuing brawl. Mashiro sprung up, caught the crate, and smashed it with terrifying strength.

The printers leaped ferociously upon Haruta, tearing off their clothes to become fully naked—except that they were all now almost completely fox, so the brawl resembled orange colored tufts attacking each other through screams. Mifuyu just narrowly escaped the oncoming fray, running over to where Mashiro gripped the fox tightly.

“Cough up where you hid the books!” Mifuyu shouted. “If you don’t, then we’ll all turn into foxes, and even you’ll get shot by the police, too!”

Mifuyu’s vision blurred with anger and tears. Why did this have to happen to her? She wiped at the corners of her eyes with a hand covered in velvety fur. She was already growing whiskers, her nose was elongating, and her teeth were turning to fangs.

Just then, gunshots rang out from up above.

“It’s McCloy! McCloy is here!” an angry voice shouted through a bullhorn.

Then came gunshots and an earsplitting howl. The protagonist of the story was above them. Mifuyu grabbed the motionless fox by the scruff and shook it.

“Do you really want to die in this messed-up world? Because if you do, then just go ahead and die, you coward!”

At that, the fox’s eyes burst open, and it almost bit Mifuyu’s hand as she pulled it away. The fox slipped free before bounding off and hopping from one pile of books to another.

“Hey, did you hear me? Find those books you stole! This won’t end until you do!”

The fox shook its tail as though saying it understood, jumped to the pile of books on the far-left side, and began feverishly burrowing like a cat digging up sand. Mifuyu and Mashiro removed their shoes and crawled up the pile of books to help the thief. Black cover, brown cover, black cover, brown cover, black cover—and underneath all that, she spotted the wonderfully familiar sight of a book with a real cover. A printed photograph and title in crisp lettering.

There were more books beneath it. The three of them dug single-mindedly for the books, and when they lifted up the last book, a tremendous sound emerged from the open warehouse door. Mifuyu looked toward it and saw Ricky McCloy — No, it was just Punch trying to look cool—

Waking up, Mifuyu found herself on the first floor of Mikura Hall, lying down on the floor in the middle of the visitor’s sunroom. The dazzling sunlight pouring in through the giant window made her squint as she gazed lazily at the white clouds traveling leisurely through the blue sky.

She closed her eyes and took a deep breath. She was back.

She still held *Black Book* in her hands. She knew that the story within it and the story she had just seen and lived must be different. If she and Mashiro hadn’t been there, Ricky McCloy would have most certainly done different things. What would Seb have chosen, and how would that have changed the future of the printshop?

Mulling that over, she understood less and less. What was that world even about? Why did that story even exist in the first place? And what were the keys that triggered the book curses for *Black Book* and *The Brothers of the Lush Village*? Who wrote them?

Mifuyu rose, holding the ink-black book. Hearing a gentle snore, she craned her neck to peer on the opposite side of the low table, where her aunt Hirune slept on the sofa.

What did her aunt know about the book curse? She looked after Mikura Hall, so chances were good she had some knowledge. Mashiro seemed to recognize her aunt as well.

“Come on, Aunt Hirune, wake up.”

She shook Hirune’s shoulders, trying to wake her up, but like always, she didn’t rouse. She stayed neatly seated, continuing to sleep like Sleeping Beauty after she pricked herself with the needle of her spinning wheel.

“...It’s hopeless.”

Mifuyu placed the book on the low table and started to leave Mikura Hall. Checking the clock, she noticed that hardly any time had passed since she entered that world. She had to hurry up and get some snacks, go to her father, and give them to him along with his book. That’s right, those two were going to visit him later. Ricky McCloy and the police officer, Punch and Mr. Miki. What would she do if they showed up in fedoras?

Playing with the idea as she walked toward the entryway, she noticed a note held up by a magnet on the metal part of the front door. The magnet was in the shape of a cat charm known for bringing good luck; she had bought it for her aunt as a souvenir on a trip.

“What in the world?”

The note was mint green; it was a brand commonly found in most stationery stores. Suspicious, she removed the note from underneath the magnet and read the words written there.

Her heart thundered.

Dear Mifuyu Mikura,

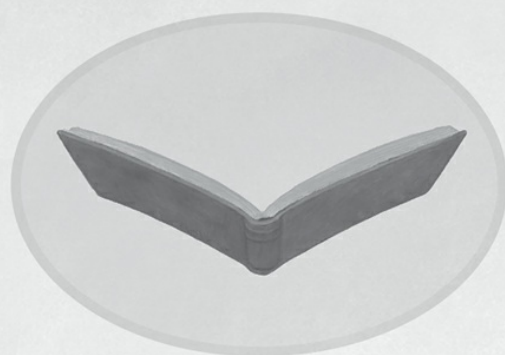
I need to talk with you. Please call me. My number is ***-***-****.

Sincerely,

Fox Thief

Chapter 3

Enveloped in a Mist of Illusions and Steam



“Don’t.”

That was the first word out of her father’s mouth. Sitting in his hospital bed, Ayumu Mikura repeated it clearly, looking directly at his frowning daughter standing before him.

“Don’t do it, Mifuyu. Ignore the note.”

“But what if it’s real? What if it’s really from the thief?”

“Then that makes it even worse. What, you’re gonna meet this thief? What if something happens to you? Why’s the thief calling themselves a fox anyway? And why’s it addressed to you?”

“...I don’t know.”

Mifuyu jutted her pouty lips even further out, scrunched up her face, and quickly racked her brains for ways to integrate that into her lie.

She knew that her father was right. The note had been on the front door after she returned from the book world—a letter left by the thief themselves. She’d fretted for a while over whether she should just toss it in the garbage and forget about ever finding it. Even if she had wanted to talk about it with Hirune, her aunt wouldn’t wake up, and so she brought it up with her father. But she omitted anything about the book curse.

“It looks like a thief might have been in Mikura Hall.”

She’d concocted a lie with an emphasis on the “looks like” part, telling him that no books had been stolen and that she’d found the note on the outside of the door. The existence of the mysterious and decidedly nonhuman Mashiro, her PE teacher becoming a private eye, having people shoot at her—regardless of how she phrased it, he would never believe her. And it would bring nothing but trouble if he reported it to the police and everything got out of hand. The only evidence was this piece of paper anyway, so she doubted the police would take it seriously.

But she wanted to know what was going on. She wanted to hear what the thieving fox had to say, and she wanted to find out who they were.

“Okay. I won’t do it.”

She exaggerated her frustration by exhaling dramatically out her nose, scooted her backless stool closer to her father's pillow, and readjusted herself. She had assumed that her father would disapprove of her meeting the thief, but she felt disappointed all the same.

Her mother passed away when she was a second grader in elementary school, and Mifuyu thought she and her father got along pretty well. They did what they could around the house, laughed at their mistakes, and anything they couldn't do, they let slide, got help from Che's family, or asked someone in the shopping district. Her father never pushed her mother's responsibilities on her, and he never seemed overprotective. But sometimes—like now—she felt like a child who had to listen to what father said.

"Good. How's Hirune doing?"

He suddenly started talking about her aunt, and Mifuyu reflexively looked around the room, her brain in high gear trying to decide how much to say and what to hide.

"...She's fine. Sleeping a lot like always. It looks like she's eating, too."

She hadn't lied. If nothing else, she'd seen her awake in the yard the other day talking with that stylish woman, and she had found evidence that she was eating. Ayumu nodded, crossed his thick arms across his chest, and looked thoughtful.

"That's good. Then you don't need to visit Mikura Hall for a while."

"Why not?" Mifuyu said, louder than she'd intended.

Someone in the four-person room coughed, and Mifuyu hurriedly lowered her voice.

"Weren't you the one who said I had to take care of her?"

"Yes, but I'm concerned about this weird prank. This thief used your name. It's creepy."

"So who's gonna look after Aunt Hirune?"

"I asked someone else to do that."

"What?!" Mifuyu blurted out, eliciting another cough of protest from the

other patient in the room. *Ugh, so petty*, she thought.

She wanted to ask her father what he meant. She didn't need to go to Mikura Hall. Someone else could look after her aunt. If those options had always existed, then why even ask her to begin with?

"Don't worry, your ol' man'll take care of it. If you do everything, then you won't have any time to study or see your friends."

"...It's a little late for that, don't you think?"

Mifuyu gradually screwed up her face, feeling like the rug had been pulled out from under her. Just then, she heard the door open and the room fill with the lively sound of people. The dividing curtain was yanked aside, revealing her PE teacher, Mr. Kikuchida, and her Japanese teacher, Mr. Miki. That's right; they said they would stop by today.

In the world triggered by the book curse based on *Black Book's* hard-boiled story, Mr. Kikuchida played the role of the protagonist, a private detective. He just recently looked so completely nihilistic in his black coat and fedora, but he now wore a neon-green tracksuit decorated with the logo of a sports clothing company. He faced Mifuyu, her eye twitching.

"Hey, you're here, too!" he yelled cheerfully.

Not a trace of Ricky McCloy. A persistent fit of coughing erupted, and the phantasmal Mr. Miki suggested they move into the lounge.

A mix of emotions swirled inside Mifuyu. She didn't want anything more to do with this book curse, but at the same time, she felt inexplicably drawn to those worlds. In fact, being forbidden to visit them bothered her. The real world was more peaceful, kinder, and posed fewer threats, but she somehow remained curious. She quickly stood to distract herself from her thoughts.

"Well, I'm off. See you later, Dad."

"What, already done visiting?"

Ignoring Mr. Kikuchida's comment, she bowed quickly to the neighboring class's homeroom teacher, Mr. Miki, and waved to her father. Large gauze still covering his face, Ayumu seemed eager to say something, but instead, he slowly

waved back.

After leaving the hospital, Mifuyu walked sluggishly, turning at the corner by the station and meandering from the shopping district to the booksellers quarter, wondering where she would go next.

So she didn't need to visit Mikura Hall for a while. Her father would find someone to look after Hirune. She mulled the decision around in her mind. She hated Mikura Hall. She should be glad that she didn't have to babysit Aunt Hirune anymore.

She was restless; her anxiety wouldn't dissipate. She found herself walking toward Mikura Hall, and so she turned right around and went back the way she came.

"...Fine, I'll never visit Mikura Hall again," she muttered to herself.

Deciding to get some fries at the fast-food place by the station, she lightly kicked at a pebble by her feet in frustration. It rolled down the sidewalk and hit the toe of someone standing in front of her.

"Oh, sorry about that."

As she apologized, she noticed the shoes that the pebble had struck. Black leather with a sparkling, rectangular, gold buckle on the top, the wholly unique design included tips curved up like the runners on a sled. And to top it off, the person wore them over sheer socks.

"...Something the matter?" the person asked.

Mifuyu jerked her head up to find a woman she didn't know. Thick silver earrings adorned her stylishly cropped haircut, complemented by her deep-green eyeshadow and glittering golden eyeliner. A red belt wrapped around her black T-shirt, which fell past her waist and covered part of her strangely off-center beige skirt. About thirty years old, she looked more suited for a larger, more cosmopolitan city than Yomunaga.

Mifuyu remembered the day before. This was the woman who'd been chatting with Hirune in the yard of Mikura Hall. That didn't matter, though, because Mifuyu wouldn't be going there anymore.

“No, I’m fine.”

Mifuyu moved to walk past her. But the woman narrowed her crescent thin eyes and blocked Mifuyu’s path.

“Um... Excuse me, but I’d like to get by.”

“I’m aware. I have business with you.”

“...What do you mean?”

“I was waiting for you in the hospital lounge. I went to the bathroom...and you left while I was in there, so I ran after you. Don’t you recognize me? I’m the fox thief.”

“What?”

“Let’s talk somewhere, shall we?”

She snatched Mifuyu by the wrist and dragged her away before she could protest. The next thing she knew, the woman had sat her down on a sofa in an old café at the entrance to the booksellers quarter and was ordering tea from the owner. The other customers, elderly patrons in their sixties and seventies, all stole glances at this oddly dressed young woman with her short hair, but she simply sipped nonchalantly from her glass of water. Mifuyu gulped down her water as she glared at the other customers, all of who quickly looked away.

“All right. Now that you’ve brought me here, would you care to explain? You’re the fox thief? Really?”

“If you don’t believe me, I’ll gladly repeat what you said to me in there. ‘Do you really want to die in this messed-up world? Because if you do, then just go ahead and die, you coward!’ Such wonderfully pointed words.”

Mifuyu stared at her in shock.

“What? That’s what you said, isn’t it?”

“Yeah...I did.”

It really was her, that thieving fox. Mifuyu sat so dumbstruck, she didn’t notice that the waiter had mixed up their orders. The woman spoke easily as she switched the white cup of tea and the ice cream float.

“The whole thing was so surprising, though,” the woman began. “Sure, it’s my fault because I stole the books and all, but who would have thought that the entire town would change so drastically and that I would turn into a fox? I was shocked when everything suddenly became night and everyone vanished. They all eventually reappeared, albeit as completely different characters. So tell me, are the Mikuras witches?”

“Of course not. I don’t really get it, either. I have absolutely no idea how or why all this stuff happens.”

Mifuyu looked down at her cup of tea, trying to organize her confused thoughts.

First, why had this woman stolen books from Mikura Hall? Second, why follow Mifuyu and question her instead of running away? Third, who even was this lady?

Mifuyu took a deep breath, then lifted her head. The woman was transferring the bright-red cherry from the top of the ice cream to two napkins she had spread neatly on the table. This woman seemed ready to dictate the conversation, and that frustrated Mifuyu.

“There are so many things I want to ask you,” Mifuyu said.

“Yes, me too. Who exactly is that Hirune lady?”

“Oh... Aunt Hirune? Honestly, I’m not really all that sure myself...”

Mifuyu should really have been the one asking the questions, but the woman asked hers so naturally that Mifuyu answered almost by reflex.

Hirune had lived in Mikura Hall for as long as Mifuyu could remember. Mifuyu could count on one hand the number of times she had seen her aunt outside. Whenever she visited, Hirune was either reading a pile of books, organizing the stacks, mending a book, or asleep and snoring. The rare occasions that they had spent together passed in uncomfortable silence. Hirune never talked unless Mifuyu spoke first. Mifuyu vastly preferred that to the time she had spent with her grandmother Tamaki, and Hirune’s infrequent smiles were pleasant. She didn’t dislike her; she just didn’t really know her very well. Her father had never heard this opinion, but Mifuyu secretly thought her aunt seemed like a fictional

character come to life.

Her father said that Hirune had read and understood every book in the building. But to Mifuyu, anyone who couldn't take care of themselves was nothing but a helpless adult, regardless of how smart they might be.

Mifuyu caught herself getting lost in thoughts of her aunt. She couldn't let this woman dictate the conversation.

"Forget about my aunt. What about you? Why are you stealing books from Mikura Hall? Were you the one who changed everything to that world that rained pearls last week? And what's the thing you wanted to talk about that you mentioned in that note? Also, I saw you talking with Aunt Hirune yesterday. What were—?"

"Hold it. One question at a time, please."

The woman held up a pointer finger with a cassis-purple nail, and Mifuyu shut her mouth tight. The woman then slid the empty ice cream float glass to the side, rested her elbows on the table, and leaned in. At this distance, Mifuyu saw her green-soda-colored tongue every time she opened her mouth.

"My name is Keiko. It means *child of the fireflies*. It's a good name, don't you think? I turn thirty-six this August, and I work as a vagabond. My hobbies include reading."

"...Please be serious."

"I am serious. Now it's my turn to ask a question."

"We never made any rule like that."

"Well, I just did. Question: How come you don't change in those other worlds like everyone else? And when I was a fox running around that dangerous city, there was another girl with you. Who is she?"

"That's two questions... For why I don't change, honestly, I have no idea. As for the other girl, all I know is that she shows up whenever a book is stolen."

"She shows up when a book is stolen? Seriously?"

Keiko appeared surprised. She removed her elbows from the table and sank back into her chair with a nasty look on her face.

“Come on,” she said. “None of this is real, right? You, me, this is all some kind of mass hypnosis.”

“What do you mean, ‘mass hypnosis’?”

“You know about hypnosis, right? Where someone says, ‘You’re getting very sleeeeeepy,’ and then you actually fall asleep. You and I got subjected to some incredibly strong hypnosis—one that made me believe I’d turned into a fox and made you see me as a fox. And we thought we saw the town and the people in it transform.”

“...And all the townspeople were hypnotized, too?”

“Probably. Everyone in this town could have been affected.”

For a second, Mifuyu almost bought into Keiko’s theory, but she told herself to not jump to conclusions and think. In the end, she disagreed.

“I don’t think so. How could anyone possibly hypnotize an entire town? Besides, I’ve heard that hypnosis affects everyone differently. And even if it was possible, anyone visiting from outside town would mention how strange things were. But there weren’t any visitors. You can’t close off an entire town with hypnosis.”

Before experiencing the book curse, Mifuyu would probably have believed in the plausibility of mass hypnosis. But sitting across from someone who had gone through the same thing, she couldn’t accept that the other world had been fake.

“That makes sense. You’re smarter than you look, Mifuyu.”

“Wow, rude.”

A frighteningly serious look passed over Keiko’s face, like her reservedness until then had all been an act, and she placed a thin finger on her sharp chin to show she was thinking.

“Then let’s head to Mikura Hall right now,” she said.

“What?”

“As they say, seeing is believing. If I steal another book, we might enter that strange world again. Let’s test it out.”

Mifuyu sat in stunned silence as Keiko snatched up the bill and stood. Regaining her senses, Mifuyu picked up her shoulder bag and, with hardly any time to throw it over her shoulder, rushed after Keiko, who was already paying at the register.

“Absolutely no stealing!” Mifuyu said, louder than she’d intended.

The elderly owner at the register cast nervous glances toward them.

Keiko smiled. “Don’t worry, your restaurant is safe from me. I’m picky about my marks.”

She then exited the store, whistling merrily, which only added to the owner’s confusion.

Keiko moved briskly down the road, the hems of her black shirt and beige skirt fluttering in the sunlight that filtered through the leaves above the sidewalk.

“Hey, wait—wait up! Are you serious about this?” Mifuyu asked her.

“If you don’t want to join me, then feel free to stay behind.”

“Come on! I can’t just let someone steal books from us...”

“Why not, Mifuyu? I thought you hated books.”

How does she know that?

Disturbed, Mifuyu stopped in her tracks before shaking her head and running after Keiko again.

“It doesn’t matter if I like books or not. I’m telling you to not steal anything! I’ll call the police!”

A white mountain bike sat parked in front of a thick camphor tree, its bike lock wrapped around a NO BICYCLE PARKING sign. Whistling, Keiko undid the lock and hopped on the bike.

“I guess you’ll have to catch me, then. Let’s play a little game of cops and robbers. Ready, set, go!”

“Hey, stop!”

Keiko dashed off as though she didn’t hear Mifuyu’s protests. Mifuyu

frantically chased her, but as someone who could scarcely run a fifty-meter dash in less than ten seconds, she just didn't have the stamina to keep up. Keiko disappeared in the distance.

Alternating between running and walking, Mifuyu was gasping for breath by the time she reached Mikura Hall, her calves screaming in pain. Steadying her breathing, she wiped the sweat from her forehead with her arm. Keiko's white mountain bike was already parked in the yard. Mikura Hall and the giant ginkgo tree stood silent, as though nothing was amiss.

Irritated, Mifuyu pushed Keiko's white mountain bike through the gate to the street in the hopes that someone would pick it up for illegal parking, and she walked back into the yard. The handle of the front door opened easily when she pulled it.

"...I'd expect nothing less from a thief."

It was like the last time. The alarm system hadn't gone off before the book curse, so Keiko must have had a copy of the key.

"Keiko? Where are you?" Mifuyu called.

She walked inside, but there was no sign of anyone—just what sounded like Hirune snoring. Mifuyu quickly removed her shoes, walking in without placing them in the shoe cubby.

Keiko's mountain bike was here, which meant that she probably hadn't left the building yet. The doors to the stacks were all closed. Mifuyu ran toward the sunroom.

Nothing there had changed since she came back from the world of *Black Book* a mere couple of hours ago. Sunlight still poured in through the large window, Hirune continued to sleep, and nothing appeared to have been moved.

Mifuyu glanced at the stairs to the second floor, then strode over to Hirune. She looked down at her hand and sighed in resignation.

Hirune held a slip of paper. A talisman with letters written in red ink, the same as those that appeared when the book thief struck.

Without hesitating, Mifuyu plucked the paper from Hirune's hand and read

aloud the strange letters adorning it.

““Whoever steals this book...shall be enveloped in a mist of illusions and steam.””

The wind blowing outside immediately stopped, and the plants and trees in the yard on the other side of the sunroom window froze, bathed in the yellow of the afternoon sun. She remembered something that Keiko had just said. Mass hypnosis. Was this really happening, or was it part of some hypnotic trick?

Mifuyu looked from the frozen scene outside to the paper in her hand. Before any other words were spoken, Mifuyu said her name.

“Mashiro.”

“It’s our second time today, huh, Mifuyu?”

Turning, she saw the girl she had just said good-bye to. White hair, with a polo shirt and jeans that matched Mifuyu’s.

“So she did steal something,” said Mifuyu.

“It’s strange, having two thefts in one day. Are you upset?”

“No. It’s just... Sorry... This time, it’s partly my fault.”

As she apologized, Mashiro’s already wide eyes swelled ever larger, and Mifuyu looked away, unable to bear her gaze. As she related everything that had happened with Keiko, a frigid sensation ran across the bottom of her feet and through her stomach—the same cold jolt as when her grandmother ruthlessly scolded her for bringing that lady to Mikura Hall all those years ago. Mifuyu slid her hands over her stomach.

She remembered very little from her childhood. She could, however, vividly recall standing in the entryway of Mikura Hall with its musty smell of old books as her enraged grandmother harshly berated her. But Mifuyu couldn’t recall how her grandmother had handled the situation; she hardly even remembered what the lady she’d brought with her looked like. Tamaki had made it abundantly clear that Mifuyu was to never bring any friends into Mikura Hall, and the lesson seared itself deep into Mifuyu’s memory.

And yet she had let Keiko inside. This woman even announced beforehand

that she would steal a book. Mifuyu had run after her to stop her, but she had failed.

“Mifuyu?”

Mashiro’s voice brought her back to the present, and she steeled herself. She saw her grandmother behind Mashiro, staring daggers at her— No, she wasn’t actually there. Mifuyu had just mistaken an old coatrack in the corner of the sunroom for her because it was covered by a lime-green cloth that was the same color as her grandmother’s favorite kimono.

“Are you okay? You look pale—”

“It’s nothing. We have to find Keiko and get that book back.”

Wiping her sweaty palms on her jeans, she urged Mashiro, who looked worried, toward the stairs.

“No, not there this time,” Mashiro said, and guided Mifuyu toward the entryway.

Doors to various stacks lined the hall. Mashiro opened the one on the far right and beckoned Mifuyu inside.

“This is it. Go on in.”

“...I should’ve checked here first instead of going to the sunroom.”

“She had already left by the time you arrived.”

“What?”

After the thief exited Mikura Hall with the stolen book, Mifuyu had no idea how they actually turned into a fox. She had assumed that Keiko was still here because her bike was parked outside, but apparently, she had been wrong about that.

“Don’t worry about it,” Mashiro assured her. “We just need to catch her, and everything will be okay. Come, let’s go.”

This storeroom was also dark; there wasn’t a single candle anywhere, though tiny, muted orange lights shone around the room. Following Mashiro as she walked between the rows of shelves, Mifuyu came upon a shelf with some

books missing, leaving an empty space on the left in the far back, the cover of a solitary book facing them.

The cover illustration showed a blue sky tinged with gray, gradually fading into darkness. There were black mountains and the silhouette of a village, with the picture of a creature like a dragon or a wolf.

“...*The Silver Beast*. What’s it about?”

“It’s a little bit like *Black Book*.”

“Ugh, not more shoot-outs.”

“What’s a shoot-out?”

“It means shooting at people and getting shot at.”

“Oh! I see. It’s an adventure story, so there might be shoot-outs.”

“What do you mean, ‘adventure story’?”

“Hmm, it’s a genre where the protagonist needs to go on a quest or a journey... Anyway, *The Silver Beast* predates *Black Book* by a bit, but it’s more than some old story about the past. A special technology has been developed in this world, so it feels quite futuristic. It’s a really good story, Mifuyu. I think you’ll like it.”



The Silver Beast—when was the first time I heard that tale?

The beautiful beast, its entire body fashioned out of the purest silver, was said to have existed long before our town of Stemhope came to be. The beast made its home in the empire’s northern lands and was known to shake its silver fur, breathe out white puffs even on the hottest days of midsummer, and cry with a voice clearer than a nightingale’s. It was the gentlest, strongest, and most magnificent creature in all the land.

That fairy tale, which Gramps recounted to me over and over, was usually sweet and peaceful, even slightly melancholic. Gramps worked as a steam-locomotive engineer and claimed to have seen the Silver Beast once with his own eyes.

His locomotive traveled distances unimaginable to me. Each time Gramps left

for work, it'd be a while before I saw him again—yet once he did return, he would rest at home until the new moon became full. During those times, he would regale my sister and me with stories.

A new coal mine called the Pincushion had just been discovered in the northern region of the empire. The miners extracting the coal that powered the steam locomotives would swing their pickaxes to unearth the material, their sweat causing their pale muscles to shine as they breathed in the stale air of the mine shafts.

One day, a young man let out a scream as he was loading coal onto a minecart. The miners who rushed to help him witnessed the young man convulsing and frothing at the mouth, pickax in hand and eyes rolling back in his head. His pickax was still embedded in the shaft, its tip glowing red as if superheated. His fellow miners hurriedly tried prying the pickax from his hand, but his body had already grown too hot to touch. A few moments later, the moisture in the young man's body evaporated, causing him to shrivel up and fall to the ground, dead.

A survey team was quickly dispatched after the incident was reported to the empire's magistrate. The Pincushion was closed, and with their livelihoods gone, countless miners ended up in poverty. The soup rations made from scraps of meat grew thinner, and as the small children and the sick began succumbing to hunger, a deafening explosion erupted from the Pincushion.

A wasteland stretched out before the people who walked outside to investigate. The Pincushion was gone. The ever-present, precipitous black peak that had loomed so intimidatingly had suddenly disappeared. Humanlike figures emerged from the thick smoke hanging over the newly formed wasteland and approached the people. It was the survey team, covered from head to toe in a cocoon of protective gear.

They walked silently through the crowd's questions and protestations, boarded their carriage, and drove off. When the smoke eventually cleared, the remaining miners and their families heard something akin to birdsong, clear and beautiful.

The next instant, the head of a great beast emerged from where the

Pincushion once stood. Its neck was long, its head nearly brushed the heavens, and its thick torso was covered in fur. It walked on four legs but had a tail like a fish. This strange, silver-colored beast was an amalgamation of mythical creatures: dragons, wolves, and mermaids.

Rays of sunlight pierced the small gaps in the overcast sky, causing its silver body to shine as bright as gold. The beast moved its head slowly, opened its long snout wide, and released a cloud of white smoke.

As the people stood motionless in shock, the beast's breath came down upon their heads. The dreadfully hot steam vaporized everyone present.

A second lungful of air chased after those who had barely avoided the first wave, evaporating the moisture inside their bodies until they withered away.

But the Silver Beast was halted in its tracks. The survey team had gone to the nearby cliffs in secret, where they ignited the blasting powder that had filled the Pincushion's mine shafts, loosening the bedrock beneath the beast's feet. That was when the waiting troops attacked the Silver Beast.

—So went the story Gramps used to tell us about the creature.

I sit here now in my factory school, writing this tale with my quill during one of my tedious classes. My teacher is droning on about immensnium. This incredible ore has propelled our nation centuries ahead of others. Unearthed in the remains of the Pincushion, this ore contains a thousand times more energy than coal.

Back when little was known about immensnium, many of the empire's scientists died in laboratory explosions, unable to control the immense energy of the ore. But they eventually discovered ways to mix immensnium with other metals, and research advanced by leaps and bounds. They created such wonders as immensteel, which was even harder than diamonds, and combustion engines capable of withstanding the metal's massive energy.

We learn how to handle immensnium at school, but they never once mention anything about the Silver Beast, which appeared at the Pincushion. Yet I believe the two are connected. After all, Gramps said he saw the Silver Beast on the day of the disaster as his train passed the nearby town.

I awake every morning at four AM. I live in the student dorms—attached to the factory workers' lodge like an afterthought—sleeping in the cramped middle bunk of a three-tiered bunk bed. The bell rings, and the dormitory director screams, "Wake up! Wake up!" until we all groggily set our feet on the wooden floors. I pull my shirt, still smelling vaguely of detergent, over my patched-up underclothes, only for the boy in the bunk below me to laugh and say the laundry-room tag is still attached to my shirt. We all then head to the cafeteria, where I—

"...Hey, do you smell something?" Mifuyu asked. Her head shot up from the book, and she sniffed the air around her. "It smells like sewage. And it's funky, like someone who hasn't taken a bath in a while."

She looked toward Mashiro, whose face was already scrunched up, both her hands covering her nose.

"I'm—ew—a d-dog, so my sense of smell is really strong..."

"Oof, that sounds rough."

Mifuyu fished around in her shoulder bag until she grabbed a tissue, ripped it cleanly in half, and shoved each piece up Mashiro's nostrils.

"Oh, ah, ahhh ... Oh, dat's a liddle bedder," Mashiro managed to say with tears in her eyes.

She looked so silly that Mifuyu couldn't help but laugh. Then Mifuyu remembered Keiko and composed herself.

"Okay, let's go," she urged. "It looks like we're already inside the book world. Who knows if Keiko is already a fox or not, but we have to find her."

They left the stacks, opening the front door of Mikura Hall with spirits high. Then their jaws dropped to the ground.

Yomunaga was already completely different.

Elevated tracks passed above Mikura Hall, accompanied by the sounds of trains. The vehicles driving on the ground looked like horse-drawn carriages without any horses; they possessed the same boxy body as the ones from a century ago that were now seen in museums, but they had thin wheels instead.

They drove at incredible speeds. The small vehicles zipped over the roads so fast that Mifuyu's head spun. Every vehicle had what looked like a kiln on the roof that emitted a glittering trail of silver steam.

Everyone's clothes were different, too. Most of the women wore long-sleeved blouses that were puffy at the shoulders, with thin waists leading to skirts that rose high in the back. The hair bundled atop their heads were accented with tiny hats. Mifuyu almost felt like she had walked onto a movie set. Some people, however, looked rather poor, with thin blouses and skirts and ratty shawls draped over their shoulders. The men wore bowler hats or flat caps with either a three-piece suit or slightly dirty jackets over faded shirts and patchy lint-covered pants.

Mifuyu waved away the mist in front of her, and passing cars honked at her as she ran to the other side. She felt people gazing at her and heard them whispering to one another:

"My, do you see how those girls are dressed? They might as well be in their skivvies."

"Must be slaves from the north."

She and Mashiro were completely out of place. Mifuyu flushed in embarrassment.

"Let's run, Mashiro."

Mifuyu grabbed Mashiro's hand and started off through the wall of people. It reminded her of something from TV—Sherlock Holmes. She had learned about that time period in school, something like nineteenth-century England. But this place was so uncomfortable.

The road had changed from its regular asphalt to European-style cobblestones, and the stench of the sewer prevailed. Flies swarmed around piles of garbage, causing Mifuyu to gag and rush off with her hand covering her mouth. The tissues clogging Mashiro's nose seemed largely ineffective; she looked pale.

"Argh, this book curse has gone too far. Nothing about this is the same as Yomunaga. It's way too elaborate!"

“Wair ah we goi’g, Bifuyu?”

“What?”

“Wair ah we goi’g?”

“...Oh, ‘where are we going?’ I don’t know. But we need to hurry up and catch that thieving fox Keiko. This place is making you sick, right, Mashiro?”

“But we don ha benny clueth.”

“I have no idea what you’re saying.”

Hurrying down the cobblestone road, they turned a corner and got ready to cross the street, but Mifuyu had not been paying attention to her surroundings.

A big black car—a massive vehicle with numerous gears turning the wheels—came from Mifuyu’s left and stopped next to her. The rattling exhaust pipe emitted a noise like a sigh as it spewed a column of steam. Mifuyu and Mashiro were too busy choking on the steam in their lungs to notice the car door rattle open and police officers in shakos emerge to stand in front of them.

The officers immediately seized them, put them in handcuffs, and dragged them toward the car.

“What are you doing? Let go of us!”

“Quiet, slave!”

One of the police officers slapped Mifuyu across her face. She sat stunned, eyes wide-open, and covered her stinging cheek with a hand.

Mashiro’s fur bristled in anger. As a ripple of scornful laughter spread through the police officers, she attacked, biting the neck of the officer who’d slapped Mifuyu. He cried out in pain.

“Restrain this one! Put her in another car!”

“Mashiro!”

Regardless of how much otherworldly power she might possess, Mashiro couldn’t overcome four adults restraining her arms and legs. Some officers shoved Mifuyu into the car, slammed the door, and drove off as other officers kept Mashiro pinned to the ground.

“Mashiro! Mashiro!” Mifuyu screamed, only able to hear Mashiro’s pained whimpers as the car drove farther and farther away.

The black-painted paddy wagon raced through the transformed Yomunaga. A massive rail line floated above the streets, while a web of thick pipes crawled over the ground, steam pouring from gaps in seams held tight with gigantic bolts. The paddy wagon had one small window, but with the iron bars and the police watching her, Mifuyu could hardly see outside. Moving even an inch would cause the black-clad officer guarding her to threateningly bang his baton against the wall. Someone from Yomunaga should be playing this role, but she didn’t recognize him.

Her face drained white, Mifuyu looked down at her hands. The handcuffs around her wrists had a strange design—two hollow gears connected in the shape of a peanut, and when someone put their hands in the hollow centers, each gear would rotate to close the hole, eventually clamping down until no gap remained. No matter how much Mifuyu struggled to free her hands, they stayed locked tight.

No partition stood between her and the driver, but she could not reach the front. A giant furnace roared in the space between the rear of the vehicle and the driver’s seat, a peculiar purple flame burning within. The furnace emitted a low growl as it pushed a piston up and down. This moved a walking beam that was connected to a bronze crank glistening from oil before rotating the wheels. She had never seen such a strange engine. If she tried to run to the front, the officers would probably grab her while she struggled to get past this device.

The paddy wagon stopped at several places, each time emitting a loud noise as the door opened and officers escorted in men and women dressed in emerald-green coveralls. She recognized most of the faces, which provided momentary relief knowing that she was still in Yomunaga, but the dejected look on each face paired with the same geared handcuffs around their wrists eventually deflated her spirits. Barely sitting on the narrow bench attached to the wall, no one spoke, and everyone simply stared at the floor.

After a rough, winding drive through town, a police whistle rang out, and the car stopped with a shrill racket.

“Get out! Out!”

The people in the coveralls were practically dragged out of the paddy wagon, with Mifuyu following.

Mifuyu had lived her entire life in Yomunaga, but she had no idea where she was.

The station, the stores, the bookshops, the hospital where her father stayed—none of them existed. In their place stood giant factories, grouped untidily together like clumps of metal. A white mixture of steam and smoke poured from the chimneys. Mifuyu looked up at the scene, dumbstruck. Rows of buildings towered high like a metal fortress. In the center, gears rotated on a machine magnitudes larger than the one in the paddy wagon.

This Yomunaga didn't focus on bookstores, but on the factories shuttered behind a giant gate. Roads led to several sides of the factory town, spreading out like the arms of an octopus. Workers in coveralls filed down every road, punching their time cards at the gates as the lines slowly advanced inside.

The detail of the worlds in the other book curses she'd experienced so far were no match for this one. Uneasiness worked itself into Mifuyu, and she wanted to run screaming, but she suppressed the urge for the sake of Mashiro, wherever she was now.

“All right, line up!”

A baton pushed her to the end of a line, where she joined the slow movement of the emerald-green workers. All the people around her, be they workers or guards, were most likely residents of Yomunaga. She recognized some of the faces farther up the line from her middle school days, and the guard who had pushed her with the baton owned a variety store in town. But everything was just so different that seeing them provided no comfort.

She had to hurry up and save Mashiro. Or would it be better to catch that despicable thieving fox first? No matter how drastically the world changed under the book curse, she knew that catching the thief and retrieving the books would return everything to normal.

But escaping this line seemed near impossible. Mifuyu was the only one not

wearing a uniform and was last in line, so she stood out. She intertwined her restrained hands, swallowed, and gritted her teeth to hold back the tears. Her only option was to proceed forward submissively. Eventually, she passed through the gate, where the workers spilt into lines along diverging pathways, finally consumed by the countless factory buildings. Mifuyu entered the largest one in the center of the complex.

Metal double doors three times as tall as Mifuyu hung at the factory entrance, each one of its iron studs as large as her fist. The shuffling line continued inside, and upon entering, she saw a mud-brown hallway stretch before her, the steamy heat intensifying with every step. The stench of steam and sweat choked her. The metal doors shut behind her, followed by the sharp sound of a key turning.

At the far end of the humid hallway, she walked into a corridor shaped like a protruding balcony, the view of the factory suddenly opening up before her. A giant vault stretched deep, deep down into the earth. The floors extended like an infinite torus toward the ground and ceiling, a strong breeze blowing through it all. The thought of accidentally falling from the railing, which was lined with beacons, sent shivers down her spine.

Everything was so different than with the printers in *Black Book* this morning—compared with this factory, that printshop was just a plaything. What did they make here anyway? Endless gears, chutes, belts, and cranks filled the spaces between each floor, roaring as they operated.

Ten or so tunnel entrances led from the wall of the torus-shaped balcony, and the workers lined up like ants returning to the nest before being swallowed by the tunnels. Signs reading SCREWS, LIQUID METAL, RODS, GLASS, and other such things hung above the tunnels, but Mifuyu couldn't make sense of any of it.

Someone called to the guard behind her, and Mifuyu took the chance to slip out of the line. No one noticed.

The front door was already closed, a giant lock hanging from it. Mifuyu sidled along the wall and darted into a nearby tunnel. The hallway narrowed quickly, and workers disappeared into the mist behind her beneath an eerie red light. Mifuyu sneaked forward, wondering if she could find a key somewhere that

would unlock her handcuffs. Creeping along, she saw the factory floor—workers in hooded masks huddled around metal machines filthy with oil, all surrounded by belt conveyors turned by a series of pulleys. At regular intervals, the mouth of a machine would open and spit out a small part, which would then travel down the conveyor belts.

She stopped and stared as people dressed in black coveralls walked among the emerald-green workers. They wore round metal goggles and a metal box strapped on like a backpack, which released steam and lifted the workers into the air. They appeared to be doing maintenance on the top of the machine, inserting the thin end of glistening oil cans into the gears and cranks to ensure that they functioned properly.

“You there,” came a voice, startling Mifuyu.

What rotten luck—I knew I should’ve kept moving.

Turning around, she saw a girl about her age with her hair in a short bob. Mifuyu had seen this girl before. The metal chain dangling from her glasses was new, though.

It was the girl from Mifuyu’s school who’d invited her to join the literary club. But the girl standing before her wore a green blouse with high collar, ruffled shoulders, a leather corset, and a long maroon skirt. Like the others, the clothes made her look like a time traveler from the Victorian era.

“...You’re from the literary club—”

“I beg your pardon?”

“Oh, um, never mind.”

“You’re quite peculiar in both dress and speech. Come with me. You must get changed.”

Mifuyu followed the literary-club girl among the heavy sound of machinery. They walked the way Mifuyu had come, exiting the tunnel, heading back to the balcony floor, and entering another tunnel.

Red light illuminated this tunnel, too. Doors ran the length of the dim hallway, which was filled with the pungent smell of metal, an engraved plate above each

entrance: SMALL PARTS CONTROL, LARGE PARTS CONTROL, LEATHER BAND TANNING, and OIL & POLISH MIXING, among others.

Walking through one of the doors, the literary-club girl inserted a long metal key into Mifuyu's handcuffs and unlocked them. As Mifuyu rubbed at her reddened wrists, the girl handed her a pair of coveralls. It was the same emerald green as the others, with black covered buttons running from the neckline to near the stomach. Glancing quickly at the girl, Mifuyu was met with a glare that caused her to hurriedly put the clothes on. The fabric around the shoulders was stiff, and it was rather uncomfortable.

Mifuyu had secretly been hoping that the girl might leave her alone once she had finished changing, but those hopes dissipated when the girl ordered Mifuyu to follow her. She wanted to start searching for Mashiro or the thieving fox immediately, but she decided it'd be best to obey the order.

"Excuse me... What's this factory for?"

"You don't know? Well, I suppose a northerner like you wouldn't." The girl smirked at her with an air of superiority. "This is where we process immensteel."

"What's immensteel?"

"A truly robust material made by mixing immensnium with other metals. Immensnium, the miraculous ore we use for fuel, produces too much heat and destroys the engine when it's put in a normal iron machine. That is why we have to use immensteel, a mix of immensnium and other metals, to build parts and containers that can withstand the ore. This is where we forge it."

Mifuyu remembered reading a word like that. She recalled the start of *The Silver Beast*, which this world was based on, and sighed at how little sense this book made. At least her Japanese textbooks at school would never have a story like this. Who would write something like this anyway? She didn't even know who put the book curse on these books or how any of this worked. Thinking about that made her realize something.

She couldn't remember the author's name.

Had it been on the cover? Books almost always included the name of the

person who wrote the story on the front or the side. But searching through her memories of the books used for the book curses, try as she might, she couldn't recall the author's name. If she knew that, then she might be able to figure out why they created this world, or at least yell at them for everything they were subjecting her to.

Wait—they weren't listed in the book ledger. This morning, before entering the world of *Black Book*, she had looked through the ledger, which had been underneath Hirune's face as she slept, and couldn't find *The Brothers of the Lush Village*.

They approached an intersection in the hallway, and she followed the literary-club girl to the right down a small hall. It was incredibly bright. Not artificial light, but actual sunlight. Mifuyu looked up and saw that the center of the hall stood open, with just four thick bronze pillars protruding into space. A fence surrounded an area with a vaulted ceiling. It looked like some kind of device. Countless cords ran from the walls, wrapped around the pillars like snakes, and connected to a black belt, gears and pulleys running along the side.

The literary-club girl pressed a round button in front of the fence, and the gears and pulleys began turning rapidly, moving the belt vigorously, a piercing sound accompanying something rising from below. A box of glass and metal—an elevator. With a loud *thud*, it stopped in front of Mifuyu, billowing steam. The girl grabbed the handle on the forest-green door, which was wet with vapor, and slid it open.

"Rather impressive, isn't it?" she said. "This is an automatic lifting device. Just one of the conveniences that immensnium provides."

"Sure..."

Mifuyu had to admit that it was impressive. She had ridden in elevators more times than she could count, but never one this strange. She hoped the belts wouldn't snap on the way down... Mifuyu cautiously stepped inside and waited for the literary-club girl to close the door and press the button.

The elevator plummeted vertically like the drop tower at an amusement park, the belts staying intact as they safely touched down on the ground. Pale white for a while at the experience of weightlessness, Mifuyu covered her mouth and

shakily stepped out.

They proceeded underground to a place that was radically different than the factory floor. It had machines installed inside a reddish-brown tunnel that was hollowed out from bedrock, and groundwater seeped out from the walls. Cold air rose up from her feet, and Mifuyu rubbed at the goose bumps on her arms. This place definitely could not be called Yomunaga anymore.

“There’s one job that all new workers must do. Go through that door over there,” the girl said curtly before returning to the elevator to leave Mifuyu behind.

“What about you?”

“*I’m* not going. Just you. Best of luck.”

With another tremendous burst of steam, the elevator lifted like a rocket and disappeared from sight.

Rubbing her arms, Mifuyu pressed against the door, praying that the other side would be warm.

The other side of door certainly was warm. It was more than warm. The heat was so intense that she could feel sweat boiling out from her pores. And the noise was deafening.

“Hey, pick that up and get going! Now!”

“Don’t rush me, you moron! Handling them roughly makes them harder to clean up!”

“Whatever, just move! Unless you want more work tomorrow!”

She could barely make out the mass of people moving through the gloom. What seemed like an infinite amount of bulbs tried to provide light but failed to illuminate such an enormous room. The floor, however, glowed faintly, a purple dust glimmering mysteriously all over the ground. The air swelled with some indescribable odor—a muggy, offsetting musk. To Mifuyu, it smelled exactly like simmering mushrooms in ink and topping them with crushed nuts.

Hesitantly walking forward, she took in her surroundings. She saw at least fifty people nearby dismantling a small hill of what looked like dirt, then taking

the debris somewhere. A dozen workers stood on top of the hill, using pickaxes and shovels to break pieces off and load them in a wheeled minecart down below, where a small tractor with a rotating beacon light waited to haul them away. Like the other vehicles, the tractor contained a furnace that burned a purple flame to drive the gears.

Everyone worked intently and noisily, looking like they had no time to concern themselves with a new worker.

Now's a good opportunity to escape and find Keiko, that despicable thieving fox.

Mifuyu began to stealthily search for an exit. The place was a sort of cave, the walls of the exposed bedrock glimmering with subterranean water.

Just then, however, a tremendous roar shook the ground, rattling the underground cave.

"Wh-what was that?"

After a tremor like one from a massive earthquake, Mifuyu crouched against the wall. The roar sounded two, three times from somewhere nearby, each time shaking the ground violently. The voices of the workers rose as one and grew more frantic as they yelled to one another to hurry. Mifuyu fearfully forced her trembling legs to rise and faced the direction the roar had come from.

She saw two lights next to each other in the air ahead where there had just been darkness. It looked like two crescents had been broken off a pale-blue moon and hung upside down in the sky. She remembered the Black Cat of Night from *The Brothers of the Lush Village*, but this felt completely different. This felt frightful.

"The beast is awake!"

A creature the size of a small hill shook its neck, bumping into a lamp overhead which shattered on the ground. That set fire to some oil, which immediately grew into a carpet of flames. Illuminated by the blaze, the creature could truly only be described as a *beast*.

A long neck like a dragon that might attack a castle in a children's book she

read once, a chest covered in soft fur, four thick legs for support, and a tail like a fish's. The long nose on its face looked as much wolf as dragon. In addition to that, scales glittered around the strange beast's body, like a blend of fish and reptile. Its entire body shone a beautiful white.

"Is that the Silver Beast?"

The creature that Mifuyu had imagined emerging from the mine when she read *The Silver Beast* only slightly resembled the one she saw now. Mifuyu had pictured a creature much more ordinary, more like what you might find in a zoo.

A cage surrounded the beast, but the steel fence didn't reach the ceiling, so more than one third of its long neck protruded above the enclosure. Perhaps they had run out of materials when building it. Upon closer examination, a leather harness wrapped around its neck and torso and was connected to a chain to prevent any further movement.

The beast must have knocked down lamps frequently, because several workers sprayed water from the fire extinguishers strapped to their backs in a way that seemed almost routine. The cold air spread over to Mifuyu as the fire was brought under control.

The beast, however, let out a violent cry like a baby being disturbed from a deep sleep.

"...Wasn't it supposed to have a voice like birdsong?"

As Mifuyu recalled the story and watched, some workers climbed the cage and pulled on the chain connected to the beast's collar, guarding it. She prayed they would control it...but it wasn't that easy, with several workers being knocked to the ground the moment they grabbed the raging beast's chain.

Just then, a buzzer sounded. The beacons mounted on the wall spun, illuminating the cave like red disco balls. With this, the beast suddenly stopped thrashing, its blue eyes widening as it lifted its head, its nostrils sniffing at a scent near the ceiling. The workers rushed to get down from the cage.

Because of the darkness, the beast's long neck, and her position on the ground floor, Mifuyu hadn't noticed the rusted iron door carved into the rocks

up above until the red beacons flashed.

“What’s a door doing that high up?”

There were no stairs or ladders to the door, making it impossible to get in or out. A door and stairs that led nowhere—perhaps they were remnants from a renovation or demolition and so had lost their purpose.

That useless-looking door slowly creaked open. A short board, decorated with a mass of rattling gears, protruded from inside, followed by two workers in white hoods who began turning the handle on a series of connected gears. This extended an arm out from the board, which stopped directly above the beast’s head. More boards shot out from the bottom of the arm and instantaneously joined together, forming the shape of a long, thin catwalk. So the metal door hadn’t been useless after all.

The workers faced each other and saluted. A human figure moved inside the door.

Someone emerged, dressed in a uniform like a red trench coat. A key ring rattled at their hip, and they carried chains in their right hand. They strode down the catwalk, which floated amid flashing lights, with animals tied to the end of the chains. A yellow fox, a white dog, and a brown horse.

“Mashiro!”

The white dog had to be Mashiro. Things were so loud, however, that her voice stood no chance of reaching her. Mifuyu ran as though possessed and yelled to her again as she approached the beast’s cage.

“Mashiro! Can you hear me? Mashiro!”

At that, Mashiro’s ears twitched, and she lifted her head—but something about her seemed off. Normally, she would have recognized Mifuyu’s voice, but she instead limply drooped her head as though exhausted.

If Mifuyu pushed just a little farther forward, she would be within arm’s reach of the beast’s cage; just then, the alarm stopped. The person in red bent over and undid the chain on the fox’s collar.

“Hey, wait! What are they doing?!”

Mifuyu was so upset that she grabbed the arm of the worker next to her and asked them what was happening.

“Oh, are you new here? That’s its food. It’s time for the beast to eat.”

Mifuyu’s head was spinning. “What? Food? It eats animals?”

“Of course it does. You eat animals, too, don’t you?”

With that, the beast let forth a clear, brilliant song. Entirely different from the shrill, anger-riddled scream from earlier, this resembled birdsong. Then like a dog waiting for food from its owner, the beast raised its front legs in anticipation and placed them on the edge of the cage.

In the next instant, the catwalk floor under the fox opened, and the small yellow shape tumbled straight down. The beast stopped singing and opened its jaws wide.

Mifuyu screamed and struck the pillar-thick bars of the cage. Was that fox the thief, Keiko?

If she died in the world of the book curse, she might die in the real world, too.

But the very moment before the fox fell onto the beast’s glistening wet tongue, it righted itself, kicked off the beast’s massive teeth with its hind legs, and jumped away.

“Keiko!”

The fox moved to the beast’s nose before running between its eyes and leaping like a graceful dancer through the air over the cage, landing on the ground and bolting off at full speed. It came down on the opposite side of the cage from Mifuyu, dashing past the tractor with the minecarts and disappearing into the depths of the cave.

The beast immediately let out an irate roar. Furious at seeing its meal escape, it thrashed its tail, striking the cage as though trying to break it. The bars shook, pushing Mifuyu away. She bumped into the small hill behind her, spitting dirt from her mouth as the crowd of workers ran her direction.

“Where’s the tranquilizer team?”

“We’re here! We’re on our way! On our way!”

A swarm of feathered darts from tranquilizer guns pierced the beast's torso and neck, draining the strength of the wildly thrashing beast. It collapsed on its side in the cage, closed its blue eyes, and went to sleep. The harp-like sounds of the slumbering beast contrasted starkly with the sight of its violent rampage. The workers shook their heads at the close call and went back to their tasks. The worksite returned to normal.

"M-Mashiro."

Looking up, Mifuyu saw that the catwalk had vanished during the commotion, along with Mashiro, the person dressed in red, and the brown horse. The metal door once again stood closed.

How could she get up there? The best way would be to go inside the building, but nothing guaranteed that walking through the mazelike factory would lead her to the area behind the door. So should she wait here for it to open again?

Mifuyu looked over to the tractor carrying minecarts piled with dirt. She wondered what lay in that direction. Plus, the fox had just run off that way, too.

She knew that if she didn't save Mashiro, then she'd be fed to the beast the next time it woke up. So she tightened her shoelaces and followed the minecarts. Going after the fox would be better than blindly searching for a path that would lead her to Mashiro.

The tractor kind of looked like a golf cart to Mifuyu. Riding a minecart would probably be easiest, but she couldn't bring herself to sit down on the dirty black soil piled inside, so she decided to walk behind one instead. The rotating beacon light on the tractor acted as a signal in the dark cave, and it moved slower than a bicycle, so Mifuyu could follow without losing it. She worried more about the stagnant air and the smell. Constantly breathing that mixture of mushrooms, ink, and nuts made her want to vomit. The smell of human sweat posed its own problems.

Covering her nose and mouth with her sleeve, she breathed through her mouth as much as possible while walking in the shadow of a minecart. The tractor finally left the factory floor, but it continued down a narrow pathway. After passing through the gate, it ascended a slope; already winded, Mifuyu felt a sharp cramp in her side. She pushed herself up the hill because a white light

shone down from above, clearly light from the sun, and she felt that she needed to get there no matter what.

She was right. At the end of the sloping hallway, both the tractor and the minecarts were heading to the ground outside. The exit.

Mifuyu was too exhausted to walk, so she collapsed behind the minecart at the end of the line, having left the factory. A layer of black dirt covered a barren wilderness with no place to hide. Lying on her back, Mifuyu thought about how glad she was to have changed into the coveralls. She wondered where in Yomunaga she was now. The sky contained not one cloud, and no birds flew in the air.

Driving into the open area, the tractor stopped inside a metal enclosure that resembled the rib cage of some giant animal, the row of minecarts clanging to a stop like a line of balls. The solitary worker hopped down from the driver's seat and pressed a switch on the gate. The floor of the riblike cage rattled as it tilted, tipping the entire line of minecarts to the side. The worker then opened a gate on the side of the first minecart, releasing the dirt.

She had to move before the worker reached the end of the line. Mifuyu whipped her tired body up, and when she did, a small figure with a black mask covering their face appeared from the tractor's shadow.

"Huh?"

The black-masked human looked about ten years old. They walked right next to the riblike cage and pushed the button before quickly darting away. The cage emitted a sharp *squeak*, and the minecarts all returned to their original positions.

"Great, just great."

The solitary worker dumping out the dirt walked back to the button when, behind him, more black masks poked up from the thick piles of dirt. Every person was skinny, and they quickly climbed on top of the minecarts. One of them scrambled to the tractor's controls, but the worker was so focused on their task that they didn't notice.

"Hmm, is it broken? Huh...? Hey, you!"

In the same instant that the worker realized what was happening and yelled out, the tractor drove away, spilling clumps of dirt as it dragged the minecarts behind it. The black-masked children laughed with joy. Mifuyu grabbed the edge of a minecart, clambering onto the dirt she'd just been grumbling about. The worker stood in shock as he watched the tractor drive before suddenly coming to his senses and chasing after Mifuyu, but she hit his hands, and he fell face-first in the dirt.

"Stop! Get off there!" the worker yelled, covered in dirt, as he slowly faded into the distance.

"We have a passenger!"

"Kick her off! Get her outta here!"

"Aw, I feel bad, though. She looks about the same age as my big sister."

They lifted their masks to reveal their faces. These children really were only around ten years old.

There were about ten kids in all, two sitting on the tractor while eight rode the minecarts. Covered in dirt from head to toe, they wore strange clothes. One of them had a cloth covered in small gears and screws wrapped around their forehead. Another wore a bottomless bucket for a hat, while a third child donned a sleeveless jacket over pants with suspenders and a bare chest. Someone else wore a gown covered in rows of sewn feathers, while an adult shirt hung like a long dress on yet another.

"Who are you guys?" Mifuyu asked.

Examining the children more closely, she recognized every face. They were all students at her father's dojo. The composure that Mifuyu had forced herself to maintain melted, and she burst into tears.

"Whoa, she's crying!"

"She's crying! Why's she crying?"

"She must be hurt!"

"She's scared of us!"

The children began nudging one another on the side and shoulders,

admonishing the other to comfort her or telling someone to go do it first. Ultimately, however, they just bickered among themselves, perhaps too shy to comfort an older girl they didn't know.

Then a boy riding on the tractor's roof turned around, walked down the rows of minecarts while shaking his head in resignation, and stood among the noisy children. This boy also studied at the dojo in the real world. Mifuyu might not remember the names of the other children, but she knew his. He had the presence of a leader, excelled at judo, and both Ayumu and Che adored him. They called him Kakkie. Short hair, a strong face, and muscular arms protruding from a shirt with the sleeves ripped off.

"Pipe down, all of you."

"But she's crying."

"And? Leave her alone, then. Let her cry."

Kakkie seemed to play the role of a leader this world, too. He stood in the middle of the children, staring down at Mifuyu. Not caring about getting the dirt on her cheeks, Mifuyu wiped her tears away and confessed that she was looking for a fox.

"Has a fox come by here? I saw it run this way."

The children exchanged glances.

"Animals around these parts? They're all food for the Silver Beast, right?"

"That sounds like bad news!"

The children slowly inched backward, climbing over the rim of the minecart to escape to the ones in the front. Only Kakkie and a child with different-colored lenses in their glasses remained with Mifuyu.

Arms crossed, Kakkie looked full of arrogance, carrying himself like he was Mifuyu's equal—even though she was three or four years older than him.

"Do you have any idea where you are?" he asked irritably.

Mifuyu sheepishly looked around. "Where...?"

The sky shone clear overhead, but the surrounding buildings appeared only as

silhouettes through the haze of steam around them. The place was huge. In the real world, TV shows always noted the size of a place in hectares, but she didn't know how big a hectare was and so couldn't guess how many this place contained. If she had to compare it to something, she'd say that if this was a park, then her entire school grounds would be the size of the sandbox. Haphazard mounds of black dirt covered every surface, and the same smell as the one from underground filled the air.

"I guess...a farm?" said Mifuyu.

The dirt smelled like organic matter, which made her think of the fertilizer they spread over fields on farms. But Kakkie just laughed.

"Wrong! This is where they dispose of the Silver Beast's poop."

"...Y-you're joking, right?"

"Why would I joke about that? You came from underground, so you must've seen its feeding grounds. Feed it something, and something else has to come out. And that stuff is brought up here for processing."

Mifuyu gagged at the acrid smell wafting up to her, spitting and slapping away the stuff on her face and body. Seeing this, the boy with glasses comforted her.

"Come on, cut her a break. Honestly, though, it's just ordinary metabolite. The Silver Beast's organs are very unique, and it doesn't have an actual anus."

"Man, spare us the details. Anyway, there's no need to freak out. It won't hurt you."

"Cut it out!" Mifuyu yelled.

The boy in glasses shrank back, head tucked into his shoulders like a turtle.

"Yeesh," he said. "She's all yours."

"All right. Seriously. The Silver Beast's poop, the metabolite, isn't used for anything. It just smells funny and can't even be used as fertilizer. It doesn't mix with dirt and doesn't dissolve in water, so it's very hard to process. It just keeps piling up."

"...Why even keep an animal like that?"

“Because it makes immensnium.”

Immensnium—that ore from the story. Mifuyu realized that the purple flame glowing in the paddy wagon, the alarms, and the elevator was the blaze of immensnium. It powered every single machine in this world. The turtle boy in glasses cleared his throat, stood up straight, and stepped forward.

“Immensnium is one of the waste materials produced by the Silver Beast. It’s mixed in with the other substances excreted from between its scales and all over its body.”

“So the underground workers slave the day away searching for the immensnium buried in the Silver Beast’s poop. But it’s horrible work, so they make other people do it for them: new folks, slaves from the north, or orphans like us.”

“...You were both down there, too?”

“Yep. But we escaped. Life at the factory sucks.”

Now it was Mifuyu’s turn to snort. “You escaped, but you came back? They’ll catch you if you’re not careful.”

“Sure, but we need money.”

Right after Kakkie answered her, the tractor braked, and the final minecart where Mifuyu sat slowed to a halt. In front of them stood a long, two-story building that looked like a school. Adults as filthy and funky-looking as the children stood in front of the open doors, all gathered around a machine. It vaguely resembled a light truck, but the attached gears and ducts of some unknown purpose made it look like a device belonging to this world. It lacked the stove that would burn the unique purple flame of immensnium, and a young man turned a handle on it, sweat dripping from his brow. The machine hummed noisily and vibrated slightly, dumping volumes of black sand from the duct on the right and small lumps of glittering purple pebbles from the one on the left. The fumes from the exhaust were sooty and heavy with the familiar smell of charcoal.

“It’s weird, but I kind of miss this smell now,” Mifuyu said to herself.

Kakkie must have heard, because he laughed next to her. “You’re a strange

one. Missing charcoal? You're definitely not from here. Do you really not know what immensnium is?"

"No. This is the first time I've seen it. What's that machine doing?"

"It's harvesting the last scraps of immensnium. It's not enough to use for fuel, so we can't sell it to any factories or businesses. But it's worth something as jewelry. Foreigners like yourself buy it."

The children already lounged about inside and outside their house. Kakkie told Mifuyu that they lived here.

"We have adults, kids, babies, and old folks here. We're not related by blood. We live here together, and we're all runaways since none of us have anywhere else to go. You're welcome to live here, too. Interested?"

Looking back at Kakkie, Mifuyu gasped.

His ears. Two soft fox ears jutted out of his head, growing like mushrooms. Panicking, Mifuyu checked her head and was disappointed when her fingers felt something fluffy.

She reminded herself that she needed to focus. Stories had magical powers. She had gotten completely absorbed in this world and forgotten her original purpose. If she didn't save Mashiro, her friend would be fed to the Silver Beast once the tranquilizers wore off and it woke up. She had to find Keiko the fox and return the world to normal before that happened.

"Hey, about what I said earlier. You really haven't seen a fox? If I don't find it soon, bad things are going to happen."

"A fox, huh?" Kakkie crossed his arms and looked thoughtful. "Someone might have eaten it."

"Eaten it? Are you kidding?"

"Not in the least. We're all starving here. It's hard to get food. We don't get much for the immensnium after the middlemen take their cut. Right now, some people at the factory who know about this place sneak us cold porridge, potatoes, and fish that's about to go bad, and we get by on that. So when some of the beast's food gets loose, we catch it and eat it. We've set traps all over the

place.”

She suddenly saw the faces of the children and adults turn vicious. With their fox ears and tails, they really looked like predators now. Eyes shining, they seemed to be staring at a small animal cowering in front of them, primed to attack any second.

Mifuyu turned and ran. Kakkie yelled after her, but she ignored him. She felt her arms and legs become as smooth as velvet, and her movements gradually grew more fluid.

I'm changing into a fox!

What if she transformed completely? She didn't have any clues to help her catch the fox thief, and the Silver Beast's waste processing plant was so large that Mifuyu wouldn't be able to find her on her own. She had arrived here on a tractor, and the factory, visible through the haze, looked small in the distance. The Silver Beast might already be awake, getting ready for its next meal.

Mashiro's face appeared in the back of her mind. They had just been sitting together in front of the café, talking in the dark, dangerous world of *Black Book*.

She would not abandon her.

Determined, she found that running on her hands and knees was easier than running on two legs, no longer felt her long hair fluttering, and sensed the nerves in the tip of her tail when she flexed the area around her tailbone. She dashed across the field of metabolite at an astonishing speed.

Run, run, run. Breathe, keep moving, don't stop.

She could hear her heart pounding deep in her ears. She must keep going, keep running, even if her heart exploded.

Tearing through the fog, she saw the same pathway leading underground, and she slid into it on all fours. Using her tail to maintain her balance, she darted down the slope and back to the Silver Beast's feeding grounds.

The scene there was radically different than last time. The workers had continued their transformation into foxes, rows of tails and ears driving tractors and gathering around clumps of immensium to check the luster.

The Silver Beast still lay asleep in its cage.

Praying that it hadn't already finished eating, Mifuyu looked back and forth between the wall and her hands. Her claws were as sharp as ice axes, and her body weighed much less.

She dashed to the side of the cage, quickly removed her shoes and socks, tossed them aside, and dug her claws into the rock wall.

"I can do this."

Using her tail for balance, she climbed the craggy wall. She didn't have time to worry if anyone saw her. Hurry, hurry, hurry. She felt impatient. Scurrying her arms and legs, she passed the cage in no time, scaled the rock wall, and arrived next to the Thomasson metal door.

The rust-colored door was closed and lacked any handles. But a breeze blew through the gap at the top. Her left hand gripping the wall and her feet clinging to it, she inserted the claws on her right hand into a gap and tried to somehow open the door. But it wouldn't budge. It was like she was wearing mittens. They worked well for climbing the wall, but not for finer operations.

Mifuyu focused intently on her task. She didn't notice the crack forming in her foothold. Irritated, she put her hand inside the gap and tried to hook the door with her claws—and the moment she did so, her right foot, which supported her body, slipped, and a chunk of rock fell away.

"Ah!"

Her balance broken, Mifuyu frantically clung to the gap in the door, somehow avoiding a fall. But immediately after that, an ominous noise rang out. The rock had bounced off the Silver Beast and woken it.

Mifuyu broke out into a cold sweat. The fur on her entire body stood on edge and wouldn't stop quivering. She sensed something behind her. She heard a growl and felt warm air brush over her. Turning around in fear, she saw two giant blue eyes shining next to her, and her heart practically stopped.

Right on cue, the buzzer sounded again, and the beacons flashed. Distracted by beast's giant face, Mifuyu forgot that the door could move.

“Uh-oh.”

The swing of the door as it opened caused Mifuyu to lose her balance, and she fell straight down.

The catwalk appeared, with Mashiro at the head. Nothing had changed since the last time, with Mashiro, still a white dog, bent low and urged forward by the person dressed in red.

Part of her feeling like she was watching everything happen to someone else, Mifuyu muttered Mashiro’s name as she fell, watching as the beast’s long neck turned in her direction. It was a small whisper, but Mashiro’s ears twitched, and she looked up.

Mifuyu’s mind replayed all the events of the book curse, like watching her life flash before her eyes. Mashiro had flown down and saved her when she fell trying to help the child of the Black Cat of Night. Mashiro always saved her.

Just then, she glimpsed the face of the person in red standing next to Mashiro.

Keiko.

Her transformation into a fox was almost complete, but her face was still human. It was definitely Keiko.

“What’s going on?” Mifuyu said.

She felt the breath from the beast’s nostrils as it sat in open-mouth anticipation, and just as she felt herself land, she opened her eyes. Twisting her agile fox body, she dodged the beast’s fangs as though her ineptitude at sports had all been a lie. Its fangs just grazed the tip of her tail, but she gritted her teeth and endured the pain.

Landing on the beast’s body, Mifuyu sprung off her hind legs onto the bars of the cage and jumped high once more.

She felt like a paper airplane. A paper airplane released into space, riding air currents through the sky. She headed for the catwalk. As she flew, her nose began to itch, informing her that her nose had stretched into a fox nose. But the world continued. She would make it.

Mifuyu might have felt like a paper airplane, but everyone else saw her zoom like a projectile. She jetted to the person in red, now mostly transformed into a fox. Keiko fell backward, her paws releasing the chain.

“Mashiro!”

“Woof!”

Mifuyu desperately thrust out a hand and grabbed Mashiro’s neck. Her long, soft fur and familiar scent. Free of her chain, Mashiro let Mifuyu hop onto her back and leaped from the catwalk into the air. The Silver Beast yelled furiously, releasing a deafening roar and thrashing hard enough to break the cage.

“Mashiro, Keiko isn’t the thief. She told me she was going to steal a book, but she lied. That, or someone else sneaked in and got in the way before she was able to take it herself. Either way, there’s a different fox thief this time.”

Mashiro barked in reply, slipped between the raging beast’s legs, and dashed out of the cage.

The wheat-brown fox clung to the back of the gliding white dog, eyes shut tight against the oncoming wind. The creature inside the cage, the silvery beast that looked like an amalgamation of a wolf and a dragon, stomped the ground in dismay at seeing its food fleeing, causing the entire room to shake.

“Mashiro, put me down somewhere! I-I’m about to get blown off!” Mifuyu yelled. She was already a fox.

“Woof!” Mashiro the dog barked cheerfully in reply.

The workers looking after the Silver Beast had all changed into foxes. Managing the Silver Beast was a daunting enough task as humans, but now that the workers had shrunk to about one tenth their original size, trying to control it now was nigh impossible. Dozens of foxes worked together to pull at the chain connected to the beast’s collar in an attempt to restrain that giant creature, but with a shake of its head, the beast sent them flying like flags in a storm.

Mashiro landed for a moment before kicking off the ground again, flying above the crowd of foxes. She then passed through the entrance that Mifuyu had first come through, slowing to a walk in the dark vacant hallway before eventually stopping in a concave section of the wall. The light of the elevator

glowed.

Gripping Mashiro's long fur like a rope, Mifuyu dangled her short legs, shocked again at how her body had changed completely to one with smooth, light-brown fur. Her feet would have immediately touched the ground as a human, but now her toes hung in the air regardless of how far she stretched them. With only one option left, she steadied herself, released Mashiro's fur, and—landed on the ground with a strange sound that belied the bravery and physical prowess she had just shown. Perhaps she had relaxed a little now that she felt safe.

"This is the worst... I'm completely a fox now."

Looking down, she saw the white fluff of a furry stomach. Begrudgingly checking her arms, tailbone, and entire body, Mashiro trembled. Her white fur bristled like feathers, and she turned back into a girl.

"...Why are you the only one still human?" Mifuyu asked.

Mashiro looked a little sad under Mifuyu's persistent stare.

"Well, because I'm... Mifuyu, you really don't remember?"

"Remember what? What are you talking about?" she replied gruffly.

A tremendous *thud* erupted from the Silver Beast's room, and all the foxes fled.

"Run, run!"

"Get out of here! The Silver Beast broke out of its chains!"

The ground pulsed. Mifuyu and Mashiro looked at each other and ran in a frenzy. But there were too many foxes, and the elevator quickly filled to capacity, the remaining foxes either clinging to the box or climbing up the shaft. Each one obsessed with getting to the top floor, they left not the slightest gap to squeeze into, like aphids on a plant. As they clambered in, the beast roared as the last fox ran screaming, "It destroyed the cage!" before slamming the steel door shut and throwing the bolt across.

"What about the others?"

"They escaped through the service gate! It's coming this way!"

The footsteps grew louder, and the shaking intensified—sure signs of the beast’s approach. Mifuyu’s shoulders drooped in disappointment.

“We should have run in the other direction.”

“Why?”

“It’s the service exit, so it’s really big, and everyone would have gotten away easily.”

But she never thought that the Silver Beast would break its chains, destroy the cage, and escape. If they didn’t do something, then the beast would eat everyone.

A giant *thud* came from the metal door as it warped, and all the foxes screamed. The beast was slamming its body against the door. Mifuyu’s knees went weak. But as she saw the beast’s nose through the cracks in the dented door, she came up with a plan.

“Mashiro, change into a dog!”

Mashiro did as instructed. The situation was do or die, so the only option was to try. Mifuyu climbed up on her back and whispered in her ear.

“Once it gets inside, fly over its head. It’ll come after us, and we can lead it away from here.”

Without any time for Mashiro to even answer, the door split in two, and the rock wall connected to the hinges crumbled to dust. The beast’s long neck stretched through the rain of dust, steam billowing from its gaping red mouth.

“Now!”

At Mifuyu’s command, Mashiro kicked off the ground and leaped in front of the Silver Beast. The blue eyes followed them. Its open mouth, crimson tongue, and scarlet throat drew agonizingly close. The raw, peculiar smell assaulted Mifuyu’s now-sensitive nose, and she reflexively lowered her head. Its razor-sharp teeth might pierce and kill her. But all Mifuyu could do now was hold on tight to Mashiro’s body. She felt that she’d be okay so long as she was with Mashiro.

Mashiro dodged this way and that, slipping away right as the beast’s teeth

crashed together, luring it down the first tunnel. The diversionary plan worked like a charm. The beast ignored the foxes huddling near the elevator and chased after Mashiro instead.

The two animals cut across the cavernous work floor, heading for the opposite side as the sound of the beast's footsteps hammered behind them. But after they passed through the narrow hallway, bounded through the gate, and headed up the slope, they saw the service exit gradually shrinking. The workers who had escaped this way earlier were closing the shutter to trap the beast inside.

"Wait!"

But her cry must not have reached them, for the shutter continued its merciless descent. Mashiro sped up. Right before it closed completely, the sunlight almost extinguished, Mashiro dashed through like a lion leaping through a ring of fire.

A cool wind blew across Mifuyu's body, and she timidly raised her head, seeing them safely outside.

"Mashiro, you're incredible!"

Mifuyu flapped her arms and legs in a display of joy, stroking the white fur until it almost turned into a mess. Flattered, Mashiro blushed.

They were in the metabolite-processing area from earlier. They'd jumped so high that the foxes that had fled here looked like beans, and the black, metabolite-covered soil like a lone mushroom. Independent from the other facilities on the outside, the processing area connected to nothing. Bottomless black pits gaped around it. Mifuyu wondered if those trenches were the reason Kakkie and his group couldn't leave.

"...Do you think we can really turn Yomunaga back to normal?"

She spotted the two-story building with the machine that separated immensium from the metabolite. Smaller foxes gathered in front of the building, looking her way and waving.

"That must be Kakkie's group."

At Mifuyu's signal, Mashiro slowed, turned, and landed.

"Whoa! A flying dog!"

The boisterous children swarmed Mashiro, who turned back into a girl, which disappointed them terribly.

"Oh, it's a girl now."

"Boooo."

"How'd you do that, miss?"

Screeching, each little fox spoke simultaneously as they pressed around Mashiro before Mifuyu interrupted their barrage.

"Enough, enough! So you guys turned into foxes, too, huh?"

"What? Foxes? Please, we're humans."

So they didn't realize it. Come to think of it, no one seemed surprised to have grown ears or a tail.

"Made it out alive, did you? I heard that the Silver Beast broke free," said one outstandingly strong-looking fox—the only one that wasn't frolicking. A hint of the aura from its human form still remained. It had to be Kakkie.

"Yeah, it should be still in the harvesting area, though," Mifuyu replied. "Assuming it hasn't destroyed the shutter, at least."

Mifuyu must have gotten used to seeing foxes, because she was starting to understand the subtle differences in their individual facial expressions, mannerisms, and postures.

"...I guess it's like someone being able to pick out their cat from a sea of similar cats, huh?" she mused.

"I have no idea what you mean by that, but we need to get out of here," said Kakkie.

"You're right. We should leave soon. The Silver Beast made quick work of the door to the elevator hall."

"Okay, then. Megi, Leda, tell the adults it's time for us to use *it*."

At Kakkie's command, two of the young foxes nodded and dashed off into the building. The rest of the young foxes lined up behind Kakkie and followed him off somewhere.

"Mashiro, what should we do? Should we go with Kakkie?"

The fox thief had fled this way and should still be somewhere nearby. If they could just find the thief and the book, they could restore the world, and they wouldn't have to worry about the Silver Beast. But it didn't look like that would happen anytime soon.

"I saw the thief run this way after it escaped the Silver Beast. But how are we supposed to find them now that everyone's a fox?" Mifuyu asked.

At this, Mashiro folded her arms over her chest and cocked her head to the side, seemingly deep in thought.

"That Kakkie boy is probably playing the role of Sasha," she said.

"Who's that?"

"A friend who helps the main character in the story. He's the leader of the orphans."

"The story? Oh, the one this world is based on. That's right, that thing. And?"

"In the original story, the main character tames the Silver Beast. He has a device that 'allows any living creature to be returned to their true form' and is able to reveal the true identity of the Silver Beast. So if we find the main character, then maybe we can tame the beast and even turn the thief back into a human."

"Really? Where's the main character?"

"We might find him if we follow Kakkie."

"You should have said so earlier! We need to stick with him."

They caught up with Kakkie in front of a dome-shaped hatch. The rusted green entrance loomed massive and heavy. It seemed unlocked, but the five young little foxes pulling desperately at the handle could only open it a few centimeters.

“Allow me.”

As the only human, Mashiro grabbed the handle and, grunting and bowlegged, lifted it up slowly, the hinges squeaking as it opened. Mifuyu crept forward and peered inside. She had assumed it concealed a deep hole like a manhole connecting to a shelter of some sort. But it didn't.

“What is it?”

A light-brown cloth covered some huge thing stuffed inside the hole, with hardly enough space to hide a fox, much less a human. Mifuyu eyed it dubiously, and the fox with the different-colored lenses grinned.

“We're not meant to go down into the hole.”

“Then what's it for?”

“Boss! Specs! The device is out!” a little fox reported, dirt on its pointy ears and fluffy belly.

Some foxes had apparently excavated a machine buried under some metabolite outside the hatch. The same green color, the machine had a handle and a lever with a red ball.

“Fall back, everyone!”

At Kakkie's order, the fox children moved away from the hatch, formed a circle, and saluted. Kakkie's black hands turned the handle. As a fox, even Kakkie had a hard time with the physically demanding work, but with Mashiro's help, the handle started to rotate.

In all her life, Mifuyu had never seen a spectacle like this. The hole began to glow immensium purple, and she heard an intense crunching noise. Suddenly, the light-brown circular cloth swelled and poked up through the hole. It looked like a sponge cake with too much baking powder.

“What is that?” Mifuyu asked, her eye twitching anxiously.

The round sponge cake continued to swell until it was first the size of a giant mushroom and then as tall as playground equipment. It eventually inflated to the size of a gas tank so large, she had to crane her neck to see the top.

Stepping back, she shaded her eyes with her hands. The cloth had already

grown as enormous as the Silver Beast and was bulging with air, rising gently with a shimmer. Mooring lines extended out from it.

“Is that...a hot-air balloon?” Mifuyu said.

It was larger than any hot-air balloon she had ever seen. The light-brown cloth now glowed the purple of immensium, swaying in the wind against the ropes that held it.

Covered in sweat, Kakkie and Mashiro gasped for breath as they pushed the lever to the side, causing something under the ground to shake violently before emitting a jet of steam.

“Everyone, get back!”

Mashiro rushed behind the small foxes. A chasm opened where they had just stood, something rising up from inside.

The steam cleared, and a covered gondola in the shape of a boat appeared beneath the balloon. Larger than a regular boat, it could fit everyone in Mifuyu’s class. A giant propeller sat at the back.

“Wow,” said Mifuyu. “It’s like something from an anime.”

Cautiously advancing toward it, Mifuyu touched the steel gondola. A green hatch sat at the entrance to the gondola. It looked like the manhole cover from before.

“Quit spacing out—either step aside or get in. You’re holding up the line!”

At some point, a group of adult-sized foxes had arrived. Flustered, Mifuyu backed away from the hatch, and the small foxes boarded the gondola, followed by the adults. Mifuyu pondered what to do, but in the end, her curiosity won out, and she stepped on board.

The inside smelled of metal. The children frolicked around this strange vessel, rambunctiously crowding around the porthole windows and dashing between the benches, but it was spacious enough to accommodate everyone.

It was perhaps only meant to travel short distances, because there was no other equipment aside from the benches, and no rooms that seemed intended as sleeping quarters. The back housed an engine with gears and pistons.

Walking around oohing and aahing, the foxes suddenly screamed, “Ah! Over there!”

The Silver Beast’s head emerged from the factory’s service entrance. It had broken through the shutter and entered the open processing area. The Silver Beast saw them at almost the exact moment that the gondola’s engine sputtered to life, billowing steam as it rose into the air.

The propulsion of the spinning propeller and engine combined with the lifting force of the balloon to raise the metal gondola off the ground. Mifuyu quickly pressed herself to a window to watch the situation outside. She couldn’t see Mashiro. She wasn’t on the gondola.

The Silver Beast sang with its beautiful voice, shaking the ground with its thick legs. Then it swung its massive head and started running toward the gondola.

“Hurry, it’s going to catch us!”

Kakkie’s voice mixed in with those of the adults in the cockpit. Mifuyu’s face distorted as she pressed a cheek against the glass, yelling for Mashiro.

The gondola sputtered steam as it desperately tried to flee, but the Silver Beast’s legs were powerful. It caught up to them a moment later, its blue eyes visible directly next to the windows. Its small black pupils shone like the eyes of a bird of prey.

It sang again. The voice was smooth and clear, and as they listened, the foxes on board felt their minds wander. It sang the same song as when it had prepared to eat the thieving fox at the feeding ground. Someone yelled, “Cover your ears! Don’t listen to its song!” but everyone sat captivated by the melody. All eyes drooped, and the foxes in the cockpit began to go limp. The gondola slowly lost speed.

Just then, a giant white dog flew forward, darting between the gondola and the Silver Beast.

“Mashiro!”

Mashiro fluttered in front of the Silver Beast’s eyes like a bird, turning circles and spinning around. It was the same diversionary tactic from before. She must be trying to get the Silver Beast’s attention and draw it away from the gondola.

The beast stopped singing, its blue eyes closely following Mashiro's movements.

"Now's our chance! Turn hard to port!"

"Wait! What about Mashiro?!"

But they didn't hear her. The gondola sped up, angling away from the confrontation between Mashiro and the Silver Beast, hastily putting distance between them and the fight. Pressed hard to the window, Mifuyu could only pray that Mashiro would escape safely.

The gondola rose above the factory grounds, over the black trenches encircling it. Mashiro also spun around, moving away from the beast to follow the gondola. Perhaps Mashiro's eyes and thoughts were too focused on the gondola, for the Silver Beast, stranded by the trenches, raised its neck in a final effort and opened its large mouth.

In that moment, Mifuyu couldn't even scream. The Silver Beast snapped its jaws shut, and Mashiro disappeared. Mifuyu could only see the steamy fog and the processing area far off in the distance.

"Please go back! It ate Mashiro!"

Frantic, Mifuyu grabbed the foxes in the cockpit, and the gondola shook violently.

"There's nothing we can do about that! No point in going back!"

Mifuyu felt her entire body go pale, and she swayed before crouching on the floor. Her forehead on her knees and eyes closed, she prayed that she would wake up from this dream. This was the world of a story. The characters were just the people from town, everything was different from the real world, and it operated on its own set of rules.

"I have to help Mashiro. She can't die. She just can't..."

Repeating that to herself, she squeezed her hands into tight fists. She had to save Mashiro.

But when Mifuyu steeled herself and stood up, she saw Mashiro standing in front of her.

"Ah! A ghost!"

Mifuyu jumped back, lost her footing, and tumbled backward to the floor. The foxes that had seen the whole thing whispered to one another in a rumble of voices.

“I’m not a ghost. Look.”

Mashiro smiled, crouching down to Mifuyu’s level. She had returned to her human form and seemed perfectly fine.

“...But it just ate you. And how did you even get in here? I didn’t hear the hatch open.”

She had come in from outside without using the door.

Did she teleport? Or maybe...

“Mashiro, are there two of you?”

“Of course not. There’s only one of me, Mifuyu. Just one Mashiro.”

“I don’t get this at all. I mean, the beast closed its mouth, and you were gone. Don’t get me wrong—I’m happy that you’re alive, but I’m so confused.”

“I’m sly as a fox.”

Mashiro broke into a faint grin. Then she suddenly looked to the window and nodded.

“We’re going to land soon.”

The gondola set down on the small hill in town, and the engine stopped with one last gust of steam. Opening the hatch, Mifuyu stepped outside with the other foxes and looked around, her eyes straining against the bright sunlight. She sighed in relief. She knew this place. It was near the shrine next to Mikura Hall.

A train bridge covered in a thick blanket of soot, smoke, and steam ran directly above the hall. It looked terrible, but the area around the small hill remained strangely calm, the vibrant green vegetation swaying in the breeze. Looking toward the top of the hill, Mifuyu saw that the shrine and its red torii gate remained.

The foxes turned away from the shrine and walked down the hill, chatting

about a “Cornelius” who was supposedly waiting at the foot of the hill. Mifuyu wondered who they meant.

“The protagonist,” Mashiro whispered to her. “Good thing we came with Kakkie, right?”

Cornelius, the hero in the story *The Silver Beast*, lived with an elderly man in a narrow three-story house that resembled a stack of wooden pillars wearing a pointy hat.

The group opened the rusty door, their view immediately hazing over with steam strong enough to choke Mifuyu. The smell of oil filled the air, together with the sound of gears turning. The cramped room was a workshop, though at a much smaller scale than the factory where they fed the Silver Beast or any of the neighboring factories. Heading into the back, they saw bronze pipes running around the room, while a strange chartreuse liquid boiled in a glass jar.

“Hey, Sasha.”

A small, skinny fox inspecting a machine turned around, shifted its goggles onto its forehead, and waved hello. Watching Kakkie, who was playing the role of Sasha, as he ran forward, Mifuyu leaned into Mashiro and asked, “Is that him?”

“Yes, that’s Cornelius. This is just like in the story. Now we need to wait for Kakkie to ask him to get rid of the Silver Beast.”

“Cornelius, we need your help! The Silver Beast has escaped the factory! It’s going to eat everyone!”

“You see?”

Mashiro smiled, a little proud that events had unfolded exactly as she’d said.

Mifuyu and Mashiro sat down on a spiral staircase in the corner of the workshop, watching the foxes who had taken on roles of the characters in the story.

“...I wonder who’s playing Cornelius,” said Mifuyu. “Everyone’s a fox, so I can’t tell.”

“Definitely someone young,” replied Mashiro.

“That’s way too vague. There’s something like three thousand young people in Yomunaga.”

Mifuyu heaved a sigh, set her elbows on her knees, and rested her chin in her hands.

She had only read the first part of the story, but it seemed like Cornelius was a kind of genius inventor who had created a device that “allows any living creature to be returned to their true form,” just as Mashiro explained. Kakkie suggested using the device to tame the Silver Beast, but Cornelius didn’t seem excited by the idea.

“It’s still in the testing phase. What if it malfunctions and something terrible happens?” he said.

This served to only befuddle Kakkie. Gradually getting more and more irritated, Mifuyu walked straight up to the two of them, claws clacking against the floor, then stood on her hind legs and said, “Hey, are you guys about done here? You don’t know if it’ll go wrong unless you give it a shot. I don’t have time to waste. If you’re too chicken, then show me how to use it! I’ll do it instead!”

Cornelius stared at her, mouth agape. “Who are you?”

“That doesn’t matter. I’m at least willing to do *something*.”

Mifuyu straightened her back, the fox fur on her chest bristling.

“She’s right,” Kakkie added. “If we don’t act soon, the beast’ll come for this town, too.”

“Okay, okay. I get it. But don’t blame me if something goes awry.”

His fluffy tail drooping, Cornelius reluctantly opened the door leading to the research lab in the basement.

“What’s up with him? He doesn’t act like a protagonist,” Mifuyu grumbled.

Lanterns provided a dim light in the stairwell, elongating the shadows of the three animals and one human—Mashiro.

“Well,” said Mashiro, “you’re not in the original story, Mifuyu. Cornelius spends all night ruminating, and only makes up his mind after he has a strange dream.”

“Whatever. I don’t read. We just have to catch that thief; that’s all that matters.”

Mashiro bent over Mifuyu and looked her in the eyes.

“Hey, careful,” said Mifuyu. “You’re the only one that big right now.”

“Mifuyu, you still haven’t changed your opinion of books.”

“Why would I? I never liked them to begin with, so how would getting mixed up in this weird stuff make me like them? I don’t need an imagination. I just watch TV, mess around on my phone, and go to school like everyone else. That’s the safest, easiest way to live.”

“...I see.”

Mashiro’s voice sounded heavy.

Mifuyu cast a pointed look up at her. “Don’t be like that. I’m not making fun of people who like to read. It’s just not for me. People who like books should read them, and those who don’t shouldn’t have to. Right?”

“...Sure.”

As they reached the research lab at the bottom of several flights of stairs, Mifuyu suddenly said, “Hey, I’ve been meaning to ask. Who wrote this story? None of the books so far had the author’s name. And *The Brothers of the Lush Village* wasn’t even listed in Hirune’s ledger.”

The books that appeared when the book curse triggered didn’t list the author’s name on the cover. Slightly surprised, Mashiro looked excited.

“Mifuyu, you’re interested in who wrote the stories?”

“Don’t be silly. I’m only curious to see what kind of people would write such weird stuff.”

“...You’ve met them before.”

“What?”

“You’ve met them before, Mifuyu. Trust me.”

Mifuyu jumped over the last stair, looking puzzled. “What do you mean by that?”

“Come on, you two, this way!” Kakkie called. “It’s time to unveil the device.”

Mifuyu looked back and forth between him and Mashiro, but Mashiro must not have had anything more to say.

“Let’s go,” she told Mifuyu, nudging her in the back and walking ahead.

The device that “allows any living creature to be returned to their true form” was much smaller than Mifuyu imagined. It was a circular disk small enough for a fox to carry in two paws. Knobs and levers decorated the device, and it glowed purple in the center.

“So this has that immensium stuff inside it, too. How does it work?” Mifuyu asked.

Cornelius traced a paw over the surface of the disc. “Listen closely to the machine’s voice. When it’s in a good mood, the immensium will sparkle.”

Mifuyu resisted the urge to make fun of him. “Oh yeah, great. That’s incredible. And then?”

“Then you pull the lever on the right and press the blue button.”

“That’s all?”

Cornelius glared sharply at Mifuyu. “It might sound easy, but it’s actually quite complicated. This thing gets sulky in the blink of an eye. If you use it when it’s in a bad mood, like right now, then something could go wrong. For instance, it could try to drive anyone who doesn’t belong here out of town.”

Mifuyu thought the glittering disc flashed like a Christmas tree ornament.

“It’s sparkling,” she observed.

“A little. But it’s still not ready yet. It’ll malfunction,” said Cornelius, still indecisive.

“Argh, I can’t take it anymore!”

Mifuyu lost her temper and snatched the disc from him, quickly pulled the lever on the right, and pressed the blue button. Neither Cornelius, Kakkie, nor Mashiro had enough time to stop her.

The disc shook, and the purple light immediately went dark. Then after a

short moment when everything was as silent as a total blackout, an explosion of light burst forth. The blinding light caused Mifuyu to drop the immensteel disc, but it was unaffected. It emitted a trail of purple smoke, and Mifuyu coughed violently.

“I-I’m sorry. That was stupid of me...!”

Coughing, she felt her body change. Her hands became smoother. Her velvety fur disappeared. Her face lost its fur, her hands touched silky hair, and her ears returned to the side of her head. What’s more, she was wearing the same clothes she had arrived in.

“I’m human again!”

Mifuyu saw her face reflected in the glass of the cabinet nearby, and she emitted a squeal of joy upon seeing that she had definitely returned to normal.

“Yes! It worked!”

But as the steam cleared, Mifuyu became more perplexed.

“How come I’m the only one?”

Cornelius and Kakkie stayed the same, fretting over whether the disc was broken and not realizing that Mifuyu had returned to human form. Just then, she heard hurried stomping above. Such heavy footsteps couldn’t be from something as light as a fox.

“For instance, it could try to drive anyone who doesn’t belong here out of town.”

“You’re kidding. It can’t be, can it?”

Mifuyu clicked her tongue, jostled Mashiro to move, and burst up the stairs like a gust of wind. She climbed the stairs easily with her human legs, arriving at the first floor in a matter of seconds. Throwing the door open, she saw the dumbfounded young foxes turning to her as one.

“The door opened, but there’s no one there!”

“The front door just opened all on its own, too! What’s going on?”

The foxes let forth a volley of high-pitched screams. She must have been

expelled from the world. That's why they couldn't see her. She yelled at them to get out of her way, tiptoeing across the floor to avoid stepping on the little foxes and eventually reaching the front door. Just as the foxes had said, the front door, which should have been closed, stood ajar.

"Mashiro, turn into a dog and take me into the sky!"

"What?"

"Hurry!"

Following Mifuyu's request, Mashiro morphed back into a dog, flew into the air, and turned around before deftly picking up Mifuyu and setting her on her back. The voices of the young foxes faded as the two soared high above Cornelius's house.

Straddling Mashiro's back, Mifuyu stared intently down at the foggy town.

"We're looking for a human. The thief should've returned to their original form."

Not able to answer now that she had turned into a dog, Mashiro looked back and whimpered. Mifuyu petted her shoulders to soothe her.

"I'm serious. That disc—it might have been in a bad mood. Remember how the protagonist said it could drive anyone who doesn't fit in out of town? That means it's only me and the thief, since we're from the real world. If I turned back, then they probably did, too."

Mashiro barked a little more energetically, gliding over the mist-shrouded town.

"Search the area around Cornelius's house."

"Aroo?"

"I'll bet the thief was hiding nearby once they escaped from the processing plant, and once everyone turned into foxes, they blended in and stayed with the group. So they were probably on the gondola with us when the Silver Beast attacked. But when they turned back into a human, they panicked and fled."

The loud footsteps they'd heard must have been the human thief fleeing.

“Woof!”

Having just pieced it all together, Mashiro flew past the circular house with the pointed roof and dashed around the large roads, small streets, and steam-locomotive bridge in search of a human.

“...They’re not here. Maybe they went inside a house or a store.”

Only foxes walked the streets. Foxes left stores carrying paper bags in their arms, foxes stared out the windows of the steam locomotive, and foxes whispered sweet nothings to each other on park benches.

“Okay, Mashiro, let’s check out Mikura Hall. It’s the one place that hasn’t changed, and that might be where the thief feels safest.”

Mifuyu tapped Mashiro’s side, and she changed direction to fly along the locomotive line. Young foxes squealed in glee upon seeing a flying dog, leaning out the window and waving.

“...But they can see Mashiro,” Mifuyu muttered.

She examined Mashiro again, the fluffy back of her head.

I could’ve sworn that the beast had eaten Mashiro. And she wasn’t one of the people who “didn’t belong” here. Which means—

Mifuyu still wasn’t sure.

Of all the things in Yomunaga that had changed—the town, the land—the only things unchanged were Mikura Hall and the shrine. They stood silently, like remnants of the past left behind by a modernizing world.

They landed in front of Mikura Hall, rushed through the yard, and opened the front door. In the foyer sat a single pair of men’s sneakers; they were completely different from the funky shoes Keiko wore. One shoe rested on its side, perhaps because the thief had been in hurry.

“Mifuyu, be careful,” Mashiro warned.

Back to human form, she slipped her hand into Mifuyu’s. They crept into the hall, careful to mask their steps. At the far end of the long hallway, they saw a human figure slink through the sunlight filtering in from the sunroom. Either Hirune had finally woken up, or it was the thief. Feeling her heart pounding in

her chest, Mifuyu gripped Mashiro's hand tightly, flattened her back against the wall, and nervously peeked into the sunroom.

Hirune still lay on her side, snoring peacefully. A young man stood in front of the sofa.

"Hello."

The mushroom guy. His skinny, pale frame, a haircut like the round cap of a mushroom, a pair of glasses. A white shirt and blue jeans. She knew the face but couldn't remember the name at the moment.

"You're that guy from the bookstore..."

"Yes, I'm Haruta. Hi."

He worked at Wakaba, the bookstore her father frequented. Just this morning, he'd rung her up when she bought the book for her father. She had been so certain that Keiko was the thief; she hadn't considered anyone else. The thief's identity came as such a surprise that, for a while, her mouth wouldn't move.

Haruta looked down awkwardly as he walked forward, then held a book out to Mifuyu. It was old, with plants on the cover: *Raffles: The Amateur Cracksman*.

"I'm sorry," Haruta said to Mifuyu. "I hope you can forgive me. I only took this one book."

"You stole this from our shelves? Why...?"

Mifuyu looked between Haruta, the book, and Mashiro at her side. Once she took the book and grabbed Haruta's wrist, everything around them would return to normal, and Mashiro would disappear. In the other worlds, until now, she had caught the thief in fox form without knowing who it really was, but this time was different. Facing the thief like this felt too heavy a load for Mifuyu to bear on her own.

Haruta temporarily lowered the book and said in a low voice, "We just wanted to know how the system worked."

"'We'? 'The system'?"

“Yes. We wanted to know how Mikura Hall’s security system worked. At first, we thought it was just some urban legend, some baseless rumor. But Keiko actually tried, and something unbelievable happened. That got us excited, and everyone just—”

“Wait a second. ‘Everyone’? You said ‘we,’ too. Does that mean there’s more of you in here?”

She placed her palm on her forehead in an attempt to ease her confused mind, trying to somehow make sense of the situation. As she did, Mashiro paced around Mifuyu and Haruta, glaring viciously at Haruta like a dog trying to intimidate an enemy.

“Mifuyu, let’s catch this guy already. He doesn’t think he did anything wrong.”

Mashiro looked ready to turn back into a dog, bare her fangs, and attack. Haruta started making excuses in a panic.

“I know! I know it was wrong. I should never have done it. We’re—Yes, we’re an alliance of booksellers throughout Yomunaga. We deal with people trying to steal books every day. Keiko is one of us.”

“Wait, Keiko lives in Yomunaga?” Mifuyu asked.

She didn’t think she could forget seeing someone like Keiko with her stylish hair and funky clothes. But Haruta corrected her.

“She doesn’t, no. She runs a small used bookstore with an art gallery inside. We only just met her recently.”

“Okay. But what does shoplifting have to do with this?”

Mifuyu crossed her arms arrogantly.

Haruta heaved a deep sigh. “...Shoplifting is becoming a much bigger problem for bookstores than people think. Books disappear almost daily, so much so that the used bookstore Iwatobi closed. Even large chains with the latest security systems have left town. Some people don’t come to Yomunaga to buy books—they come to steal them.

“So we started discussing what to do about all the theft. We tried a number of things, but we never saw any definitive results. That’s when Kaname, who runs

Books Mystery, told us about Mikura Hall.”

Mifuyu silently cursed the old man, whom she never got along with anyway.

“...He said that Mikura Hall had some mysterious security system. That Tamaki, the previous owner, had installed something otherworldly, and now, Mikura Hall was the only place safe from theft.”

Hearing that made Mifuyu resentful, and she turned on Haruta.

“It’s not like we’ve never experienced theft. People stole from Mikura Hall plenty of times. Once, someone took a ton of books from us, and that’s why now only family members are allowed to enter. Plus, Mikura Hall is a pain to take care of. Honestly, it’s been a total nightmare! If the shoplifting bothers you that much, then you should just try harder.”

After that onslaught, she saw Haruta smile uncomfortably, and she covered her mouth. She understood why they wanted to know how the security system worked.

“Exactly. We thought Mikura Hall’s measures were unfair. I mean, we can’t do anything like you did. You can restrict entry to protect your collection, but people visit bookstores every day. Anyone can walk in and grab whatever book they like. We make our living by stocking and selling books. But bookstores aren’t museums, and we can’t make people stop coming.”

Haruta kept his tone measured, but he was clearly resentful.

“...I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have said that,” Mifuyu told him.

“Mifuyu, don’t apologize,” Mashiro snapped. “He’s the one who stole the book. What he did is no different from shoplifting. It doesn’t matter why he did it or how he felt; theft is theft! He doesn’t seem to regret it at all!”

Haruta flinched as Mashiro threatened him with a throaty growl, catching his heel on the carpet and falling backward onto the sofa.

“I-I’m sorry. You’re exactly right... I sincerely apologize. I’m so sorry for stealing. I regret letting this whole thing get out of hand and backfiring. I’ll never do it again.”

At that exact moment, Hirune let out a tremendous snore, and everyone

jumped in surprise. Distracted, Mashiro shrunk back a step while closing her mouth tight. His nerves settled, Haruta managed to right himself.

“I once asked Ayumu and Hirune what kind of system was installed here, but they just pretended not to know. The old man from Books Mystery said that since the system is so mysterious and no one will say anything about it, we should test it ourselves. But it’s hard to get into Mikura Hall, so we weren’t sure how we would manage that. Then we had an opportunity when Ayumu was hospitalized. The person who helped Ayumu after he fell by the river bank was a member of our booksellers alliance. They found a key that tumbled out of Ayumu’s pocket...and with Ayumu out of the picture, it was just Hirune at Mikura Hall. The temptation was too great. We’d planned to borrow a book for a little while and return it once we knew how the system worked.”

“You’re just making excuses,” Mashiro spat icily.

Haruta placed the stolen copy of *Raffles: The Amateur Cracksman* on the table and stared at it silently.

“You’re right,” he said. “We became thieves to protect ourselves from thieves. But some of us did resist it. The first two thefts were Keiko. She said she didn’t feel as bad about stealing from Mikura Hall because she doesn’t live in Yomunaga... Keiko was the one who called in the fake complaint about the alarm to make sure that Hirune was at Mikura Hall by herself.”

Mifuyu recalled her earlier conversation with the assistant instructor Che when he said someone had called about the alarm, even though he hadn’t heard it.

“Keiko experienced the security system firsthand and came back completely in awe, absolutely absorbed in telling us what had happened. But no one believed her. They said it all sounded so ridiculous and that we should stop snooping around Mikura Hall. But Keiko didn’t give up. Without mentioning anything about the theft, she tried convincing Hirune to join the booksellers alliance, but Hirune refused, of course. In the end, Keiko reached out to me personally. I got off work early today, since the media’s in town, and she asked me to take a book while she distracted you.”

“...Keiko introduced herself and said she was going to steal a book from

Mikura Hall,” Mifuyu mused. “That’s why I thought she was the thief, but it wasn’t her at all.”

“Yeah... She got me to steal the book because she wanted to see what would happen from the outside. She wanted to know if it would just be the thief and you who retained their mind while in the strange world. Or would she remain herself, too, if she was nearby? To do that, she needed an accomplice.”

In the Silver Beast’s feeding grounds, Mifuyu had seen Keiko playing the role of a character in the story. In other words, the book curse would treat people who were not the actual thief—an accomplice, for example—as innocent if they observed from the sidelines. The system had room for improvement...or so Mifuyu thought, but she first had to wrap her head around this.

“Please understand, I am truly sorry about this,” said Haruta. “I experienced the system myself, and it’s far too much for us to handle. We can’t go on these adventures every time a book is stolen. I’ll tell everyone that we need to find other ways to combat shoplifting. I’m very sorry we stole your books. It won’t happen again.”

Haruta bowed.

Mifuyu scratched her cheek. She looked at Mashiro, who seemed wary, and Hirune, who was still asleep.

Mifuyu sighed. “I want to say we’ll forgive you, but I need to talk with my dad first. I’m still a minor and not legally in charge of Mikura Hall. But like Mashiro said, theft is theft. So how about we let my dad decide how to handle this?”

“Of course. I’ll bring everyone from the booksellers alliance who was involved, too.”

“Okay. Is that good with you, Mashiro?”

“...If you say so, Mifuyu,” Mashiro replied reluctantly, still looking apprehensive.

Mifuyu picked up *Raffles: The Amateur Cracksman* from the table. “Okay, then. Haruta, give me your hands.”

Haruta calmly extended both his hands.

“I caught the thief.”

Mifuyu lightly clasped Haruta’s wrist, and the second she did, the ground beneath her feet warped, and her mind tumbled. She closed her eyes under a sensation like that of falling into a dream.

When she opened her eyes again, Mifuyu sat up quietly without any commotion. Hirune was still asleep, and she heard the clock counting off the seconds. Neither Mashiro nor Haruta were anywhere to be seen. He must have woken up first and left Mikura Hall.

“...Well, I should start by telling Dad.”

Scratching her head, Mifuyu put on her shoes in the entryway, opened the front door, and stepped outside. She noticed something amiss soon after.

The sky shone blue, the clouds swam lazily in the sky, and a gentle breeze swayed the treetops. The afternoon sun warmed her back, and the air was hot enough to make her sweat. Biting back a yawn, Mifuyu opened the iron gate and glanced at the street in front of Mikura Hall.

A car sat parked on the road. Not on the side of the road, but right in the middle of the lane. Not just one car, though. The car behind it, and the one behind that one, and the one after that—they were all parked in a row, stretching down the street. The same had happened in the lane going the other direction, no car moving, not even when the stoplight turned green. But even with that, she heard not one person complaining.

“Wh-what is happening...?”

A great silence filled the area. Mifuyu slowly approached a car and looked in through the window. It was empty. Both the passenger and driver’s seats were vacant, with no one there to drink the can of coffee in the cup holder. A pink toy dangled from the car seat in the back.

Mifuyu nervously shuffled to the next car in the line and looked inside, but no one sat on the light-blue cushion. The same held true for the next car and the one behind it. No trace of anyone remained—just the empty shells of cars and the traces of the people who had been there.

Even though the sun warmed her, a chill ran down her back, and her legs

began to tremble.

“Calm down, calm down... All the doors are open a little, so everyone decided to get out on their own.”

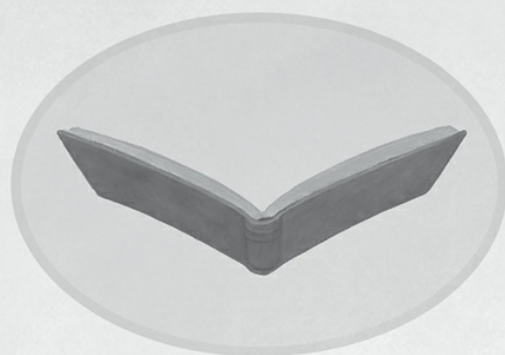
Reassuring herself with that didn't lessen her trembling in the least. Mifuyu realized she was running. She needed to find someone. She needed to ask them what had happened.

But no matter where she went, she couldn't find anyone. The sidewalk, the used bookstores, the streets—they were all empty. The lights were on, the shutters raised, the merchandise neatly arranged. But no one was around. All the humans had vanished. The wind blew a plastic bottle that someone had been drinking down the sidewalk before pushing it into the gutter.

The residents of Yomunaga had vanished.

Chapter 4

Left Behind in a Lonely Town



Mifuyu rubbed her eyes once, twice, and then closed them. She took a deep breath, steadied herself, opened her eyes, and looked around. That's what she had done one time to wake up from a dream about being chased by a harpoon-wielding person with a fish head. But it didn't work this time.

The lines of cars without passengers still stretched down the road, the only audible sound that of the wind. Among the rows of empty cars, one had crossed the middle line, perhaps braking quickly at the sudden change to the town.

"What...what in the world happened?"

She needed to find someone—anyone—so that they could tell her what had happened.

But everywhere was the same; absolutely no one was around. She didn't pass anyone on the street; she didn't see anybody walking in the distance. The cars lay abandoned, but the stoplights still worked, silently shifting from green to yellow, yellow to red, and red back to green at their predetermined rhythm.

Even so, Mifuyu diligently stood at the crosswalk and waited for the light to change before crossing and entering the supermarket on the other side of the road. She relaxed a little hearing the recorded voice welcoming her when the automatic doors slid open, but her discomfort soon returned. No one worked the fish counter, and no one walked between the aisles of products. By the time she had circled the entire store and returned to the entrance, her heart hammered on the verge of bursting, and she found it difficult to breathe.

Her knees trembled, and when she leaned against a shelf displaying fruit, an apple tumbled to the floor, bruising where it landed. But there were no signs of any employee running to help.

"Is anyone here?" she yelled at the top of her lungs, but the supermarket only answered with the in-store music and the hum of refrigerators.

Any remaining calmness she felt evaporated.

She left the store and rang the doorbells of the houses along the street. Her phone didn't have reception, and when she entered a police station to use their phone, there was no dial tone, and nothing happened when she punched in a number. The electricity worked, so why not the phone lines? Throwing open the

sliding doors to a bookstore, she found no one and ran to check the next store.

Her father's judo dojo was empty, too. On a typical Saturday, kids would fill the space from wall to wall; the sounds of people falling on the mat accompanied by Che's coaching would be audible from the street. But it was uncomfortably silent now. Pushing the heavy doors aside, she peered in. As she expected, not a soul stood on the dojo mats.

Warm tears slowly filled her eyes, blurring her vision.

"Calm down, calm down. It's got to be something with the book curse. It'll be okay."

She exhaled, wiping away her tears on her sleeve.

Leaving the dojo, Mifuyu lost the will to search for someone and simply trudged toward the shopping district with her head hanging low.

"This is the real world. I caught the thief and returned the stolen book, just like the rules said. The curse is lifted. I should be able to leave town."

She wanted to check the train station. And what about her father in the hospital?

The complex smells of food wafted over from the shopping district, just like always. The lines of sweets in front of the candy shop waiting for children, the blue-backed fish and flounder on ice in front of the fish seller's, the luscious smell of grilling yakitori wafting over from Hashida Broiler—all of it made her stomach rumble. A green basket overflowed with a mountain of juicy red tomatoes at the grocer. But no one was there to buy or sell anything.

Mifuyu stopped in front of Hashida Broiler and stood on tiptoe to peer through the oil-stained window. On a normal day, the large owner would be bent over the grill cooking yakitori, but now the broken fan just churned loudly. Not wanting to waste the yakitori on the metal grill by letting it burn if left unturned, she reached through the window and moved the chicken to a plate on a nearby table while her side threatened to cramp.

She licked the sweetly spicy sauce off her fingers, and one of the street cats the people looked after in the shopping district came up and rubbed against her legs. Its soft tail brushed against her calf.

“...But the cats are still here...”

She knelt down and petted the purring cat, scratching from behind its ears to underneath its chin. A small shadow flittered over the ground, and a pair of sparrows began pecking at the crumbs in front of the bakery. Hearing a dog bark behind her, she turned and saw a gray poodle running her way, dragging a red leash.

“No way. So its owner vanished while walking their dog?”

Mifuyu grabbed the leash and tied it around a nearby road sign so that the dog’s owner could find it easily later. All the nonhuman animals remained—that made her feel a little better.

Which meant that right now, only the humans were missing. It felt like the tiniest sliver of light appearing in a pitch-black space. And that was better than letting fear drive her into a panic.

“Okay—I need to find everybody.”

Leaving the shopping district, she ran up the stairs to the train station. The area in front of the station was vacant, too, and peeking over the fence that kept people off the tracks, she saw that no trains waited at the platforms. Feeling a slight glimmer of hope, she bought a ticket to the next station over and passed through the ticket gates. The machines operated normally and let Mifuyu head into the station easily. As she climbed the few stairs to the platform, a phone rang.

Startled, she looked around. She had just tried a phone at the police station and had gotten absolutely nothing. But that noise was definitely a phone. It seemed to be coming from the station office.

In the back of her mind, she prayed that an employee would come rushing over to answer it, but as she expected, no one appeared, and it rang for a while before finally going silent.

She sat down on a plastic bench on the empty platform and waited for a train to come. She tried calling her dad on her phone, but of course, it didn’t connect. The second hand on the clock moved, and the clouds brushed slowly across the sky, so time hadn’t stopped. Which meant that a train should eventually arrive.

That's when she heard a train whistle. Looking excitedly down the tracks, she saw a train approaching, just as she had hoped. Mifuyu stood, trying to keep her excitement in check. If she could leave Yomunaga and get to the next town over, she knew she could find someone and talk to an adult or, even better, the police.

But the train showed no signs of slowing. The blue train rocketed past Mifuyu as though the station didn't exist. She could see passengers through the rapidly passing windows. No one looked up, though; it was like they didn't realize they were at a station.

"Hey... Wait! Express trains stop here!"

Her screams dissolved into the roar of the train as it rushed past the platform and disappeared down the tracks. The trailing wind dropped leaves on the ground around Mifuyu like souvenirs. The only sounds came from singing sparrows.

Silence returned to the platform as Mifuyu stood in a daze, and then a noise brought her to her senses. The phone in the station office was ringing again.

Mifuyu hesitantly reached toward the office doorknob and turned it slowly. She assumed that it would be locked, but it rotated easily. Mifuyu nervously opened the door and entered a small room that resembled her school's teacher's lounge.

A telephone rang on a desk cluttered with papers. She decisively picked up the receiver.

"Hello?"

"—arrived three minutes early."

"I don't know. The station should have been—"

"Um... Anyone there?"

She could hear people talking, but they sounded distant, and she pressed the phone against her ear.

"Excuse me, um, but could someone help me? Something strange is going on here."

She didn't care whom she spoke to; right now, she just wanted someone, anyone, to share this unnerving situation with. But the people on the other end of the line kept talking to each other as though they hadn't heard Mifuyu at all.

"How come it didn't stop?"

"Because there's no station to stop at—"

It was a conversation. She heard two distinct voices. Mifuyu felt like she was eavesdropping. They were still saying something about a station, and Mifuyu continued listening to them for any kind of clue. But their voices were quiet. Mifuyu pressed the volume button, but nothing changed.

"—been some mistake?"

"I believe so. There's no station called Yomunaga. Check the route map—"

"It's listed on our map, though... Wait, never mind. It's not."

Horried, Mifuyu hung up the phone.

There's no station called Yomunaga?

It was impossible; she didn't want to believe it. But a train had just passed through even though Yomunaga was a stop on the express lines, and people couldn't hear her on the phone even though the lines worked. She had to assume that the town remained sealed off.

Mashiro's face flashed across her mind. If Mashiro was here, she would definitely help. But Mashiro only existed in the worlds of the book curse.

Leaving the office, Mifuyu inserted her ticket in the gate, and the doors slammed shut in error. Trying to leave the same station you got on at without traveling to another station triggered an error, and while she'd typically explain the situation to an attendant, there was no one here now. She placed a foot on the gate and jumped over, muttering about how she had no other options.

The station sat on a hill, and upon walking out the gates, all of Yomunaga stretched out before her. The sun had begun to descend, the yellowing evening light reflecting off the roofs of the houses.

The area around her was eerily quiet. She had become so accustomed to the noise of everyday life that she realized, for the first time, that complete silence

was utterly horrifying. A breeze carrying the lush smell of evening brushed through her hair, pasting a band of hair to her sweaty brow.

Standing at the top of the stairs leading down to the shopping district, Mifuyu thought for a moment before heading right, walking away from the stairs. She would go to the hospital. She was worried about her father, Ayumu.

But the moment the automatic doors to the hospital opened, her feet refused to move. The silence of the empty hospital felt so chillingly different than the supermarket with its music, the shopping district with the animals, and the station with the rumbling of the train. The white walls and hallways, the vacant reception desk, the empty waiting room with its pale-colored sofa. A pair of crutches lay collapsed on the floor, their owner lost. The numbers on the board for people waiting to be called up to the cashier did not change. The smell of disinfectant spurred uneasiness in her. She recalled a horror story set in a hospital she saw on TV once and shook her head. Wrapping her arms around herself, she proceeded further into the cold hospital.

A stretcher sat abandoned in front of the elevator. Some nurse must have been transporting a patient, for the stretcher was now empty with indentations showing that someone had been lying there.

Distracted, Mifuyu kept her eyes on the stretcher as she reached for the elevator button. Which is why she didn't notice that the elevator had actually started moving before she pressed the button.

A chime sounded, and the silver elevator doors opened. As they did, Mifuyu gasped.

A human!

"Ahhh!"

"Whoa!"

Both people shrieked. Mifuyu jumped back, and the man in the elevator toppled backward. Holding a hand to her chest, she took short breaths to still her pounding heart and looked at the man.

"Wait... Haruta?"

The mushroom-haired man from Wakaba. The book thief who'd triggered the last book curse.

"Mifuyu Mikura. I can't believe you're here..."

While they talked, the elevator doors started to close, and Mifuyu quickly pressed the button. Haruta stood up and walked out of the elevator on his skinny legs.

"Gosh, I'm sorry you had to see me like that," he said.

"Don't worry about it. I was surprised, too...but what are you doing here anyway? Why didn't you disappear like everyone else?"

"That's what I want to know. I thought I was the only person around."

They both breathed sighs of relief, then looked at each other. Gradually succumbing to the ridiculousness of the situation, Mifuyu let out a snort before grabbing her stomach and doubling over in laughter. Haruta joined in. Their noisy, carefree laughter echoed through the silent, empty hospital.

Once they laughed their fill, they told each other what they knew.

"Something strange is going on at the station," said Mifuyu. "The trains aren't stopping there. The phone rang, and when I picked it up, I heard two people talking, but they couldn't hear me. It was like I was spying on them."

"So everything outside Yomunaga is normal, then."

"Yeah. I saw people on the train when it passed. I think we're trapped inside the town, like during the book curse."

"What's the book curse?"

"The security system."

Haruta muttered, "Oh, I see," and brought a hand to his chin, thinking.

"...And what about you? Why are you here in the hospital?" Mifuyu asked him.

"Huh? Oh, that... I thought I would try talking to your father, apologize for stealing the book."

Haruta had been released from the book-curse world before Mifuyu.

“I didn’t see you,” he added. “But your shoes were still there, so I figured you hadn’t returned yet.”

So he’d left Mikura Hall and headed straight for the hospital. His head was so full with what he’d experienced in the strange world and the theft he’d committed, he hadn’t noticed the changes to the town. Once he got inside the hospital, he finally realized that no one was around.

“At first, I thought that the nurses were on strike or something, but it was strange that I didn’t see a single patient,” Haruta explained. “I panicked...and ran out of the hospital, and that’s when I realized there wasn’t anyone by the station or in the shopping district. I was so scared, I didn’t even think about getting on a train. I tried walking to the other side of the river.”

“Of course, the bridge. What happened?”

“I wouldn’t be here if it worked. It’s gone. It should be there, but no matter where I went, I couldn’t reach it. I tried walking toward the bridge like I always do, but the roads always turned and never reached the river.”

Two rivers surrounded Yomunaga, which sat between them like a sandbar. You had to cross a river to leave town.

“I tried using my phone, but I didn’t have a signal. And the internet wasn’t working, either. The Wi-Fi at Wakaba was down, too. I didn’t know what else to do, so I came back here and looked around, and that’s when I ran into you.”

“...I see.”

“But I’m worried. I can’t contact my little sister.”

“You have a sister?”

Haruta blinked at Mifuyu. “You didn’t know? She’s in the literary club at your school. She said she tried to talk to you, and you brushed her off.”

“No way. You guys are siblings?”

He had to mean that girl who’d spoken to Mifuyu after she got off the train the other day. Now that she thought about it, beyond the fact that they both wore glasses, there was a bit of a resemblance. Mifuyu scowled, and Haruta furrowed his brow.

“Take it easy on her. She just wanted some connection with the Mikura family. That’s all.”

“All the more reason for me not to join the literary club. You can tell her that it’s never going to happen. Ugh, everyone’s obsessed with the Mikuras. I mean, I knew that, but still.”

Mifuyu sighed in exasperation and dejectedly pressed the elevator button. The doors immediately opened, the soft light rushing to greet them.

“Where are you going?” Haruta asked.

“To my dad’s. I was on my way to see him.”

“Oh, then I’ll join you.”

“...Please don’t.”

She glared at Haruta, who flinched for a moment and then cleared his throat. “Please,” he said as he stepped into the elevator. “It’s just the two of us right now... And Ayumu is, well—”

“Gone, too?”

Instead of answering, Haruta simply nodded. Mifuyu didn’t say anything more or chase him away; she just roughly jabbed the button for the third floor.

They stayed silent until they reached Ayumu’s room on the third floor.

The privacy curtains sectioning off each bed in the four-person room dangled, swaying gently. The window had been left open. Mifuyu stubbornly strode across the room and yanked the curtain back on the bed where her father should be. As Haruta had said, the bed lay empty, with only signs of the previous inhabitant remaining.

“...Where on earth could he have gone?” said Mifuyu,

His phone and the book Mifuyu had bought for him rested on the bedside table. Too much had happened today; Mifuyu could hardly believe that she had just bought the book this morning.

She walked around the bed to close the window, slid the sash over, and locked the window. As she did, she noticed something by his pillow.

“What’s this?”

It was a notebook covered in brown leather. Had her father always had this? She moved over, picked it up, and stared at it. The cover was worn and wrinkled, discolored in places by oils from fingertips.

Mifuyu glanced quickly over to Haruta; he stood slightly away from the bed like a visitor not wanting to disturb the family, but he stared at her hands, seemingly interested in the book, too.

Deciding that she had nothing more to lose, Mifuyu opened the notebook. She intended to see if it was a schedule or diary of some sort, but deep wrinkles formed on her brow as she flipped through the pages.

“What the heck? These pages are packed.”

Words written in pen filled the long, thin lines of the notebook, with hardly a gap between them. The next page was the same, as was the next dozen pages, the fifty pages after that, and every page she scanned. It wasn’t a schedule or diary. It was a novel. The handwriting was, without a doubt, her father’s. And she knew the names of the characters all too well. Kaichi, Tamaki, Ayumu.

“...Dad was writing a novel.”

“What?”

Haruta rushed over, took the book from Mifuyu, and began leafing through it.

“You’re right. Seems like a story about a family modeled after his own.”

“Ew, Dad wanted to be a writer?”

Mifuyu had always secretly scorned the people who visited the shrine dedicated to the God of Books behind Mikura Hall and how they wrote nonsense like *Please let this be the year I win a prize for best new writer* on the wooden *ema* prayer boards. But Haruta just looked annoyed.

“What’s wrong with that?” he said. “I’ve been writing and submitting stories to publishers for a while. I even pray at the shrine. Granted, they’re not great stories, and I’ve only made it through the first round of competitions. What’s the problem with wanting to be a writer?”

“I mean, nothing, I guess.”

“Precisely, nothing. And Ayumu’s a Mikura, too. It’s natural that someone who grew up around books would want to write stories, right?”

Just then, a fragment of a memory danced through Mifuyu’s mind like a spark. She vividly recalled herself as a child, bent over an open sketchbook on the floor, her tiny hand scribbling intently.

There was a crayon drawing of a girl in the sketchbook. Big eyes, hair down to her shoulders, triangular ears sticking up from her head. The girl was grinning from ear to ear.

“Are you okay? You were spacing out.”

“...Huh? Oh, no, never mind. I was just thinking about something.”

“Well, pull yourself together. Look at this.”

Haruta pointed to a page of Ayumu’s open notebook. Orange fur had wedged itself between the two pages. She picked it up and rubbed it between her fingers, her eyes growing wide as she felt the fur.

“Is that...?”

It was obviously animal fur. Astonished, she nodded to Haruta.

“It’s fox fur,” he said. “No doubt about it.”

They searched for fox fur in every corner of every floor and stairwell until they left the hospital. Somehow failing to notice it all on the way in, they discovered an incredible amount of orange fur scattered around the building. Scratch marks from claws even ran down the windows.

Exhausted, they lumbered away from the hospital and began searching for evidence of foxes around town, the evening sun painting the buildings red. The wind had blown most of the fur away, but they found some caught in tree branches as well as a set of muddy footprints outside the dry cleaners in the shopping district.

Mifuyu and Haruta left for the booksellers quarter. Haruta took a seat on a bench, and Mifuyu sat down a short distance away from him. Leaning back, she felt the hard cover of her father’s notebook in her shoulder bag.

“...What happened?”

“Mifuyu, I think you know. Everyone turned into foxes.”

“But that’s only supposed to happen inside the book curse.”

In *The Silver Beast’s* book curse, which had just ended, everyone had completely transformed into foxes. Only Mifuyu and Haruta had turned back into humans thanks to the machine in the story, while everyone else remained unchanged.

“The other times, everything returned to normal once the curse was lifted. The pearl rain stopped; Che, who became that weird rain bringer, and Punch, who became a cool private eye, returned to normal along with the town.”

“But we’re finding traces of foxes everywhere. Can you think of any other explanation?”

“No, but shouldn’t we be seeing foxes in the stores and the hospital? Even if they got scared and hid somewhere, it wouldn’t be too strange to think that one of them would stay behind, so how come there’s not even one person around? Where did everybody go?”

“That’s because... Oh, don’t make this harder than it already is.”

Haruta was at a loss for words, too, and hung his head.

Crows cawed as they flew through the scarlet sky. She had once seen on TV that crows were smart and cawed to communicate with one another. They must be telling everyone that it was time to head home as they flew.

Mifuyu was hungry and thirsty. She had been moving nonstop all day, and with time flowing differently in the real world and the worlds in the book curses, she felt like she had been awake for over twenty-four hours.

“...I need a break. I’m hungry, and sleepy... I’ve been running around the entire day. I’ve been trapped in two book curses already. And it’s all because of you and Keiko.”

Her voice came out weaker than she intended, and talking about everything made her suddenly overcome with exhaustion. She wanted to go home.

“I understand,” said Haruta. “It’s almost night, so let’s think about it tomorrow. I’m tired, too. But can I ask you a favor first?”

“What?”

“Ayumu’s notebook—could I borrow it for the night?”

His request was wholly unexpected, and Mifuyu scowled reflexively.

“Huh? Why?”

“I just want to read it. I’m not going to steal it.”

Even so, was it a good idea to hand her father’s notebook over to someone who had just taken a book from her family’s stacks? She didn’t disguise her distaste as she looked at him, but she didn’t see any other options.

She sensed that her father’s notebook held something important inside. However, Mifuyu didn’t like books, and it felt kind of weird reading a story her father wrote.

“...You’d better give it back tomorrow.”

“Of course. I promise.”

Still grumpy, Mifuyu unzipped her bag, removed her father’s notebook, and handed it to Haruta.

“If anything happens to it, I’ll take it out on your sister.”

“That’s coercion, but fine, I understand.”

Even if they wanted to contact each other, neither had reception, which made exchanging phone numbers or e-mail addresses pointless.

“How about we meet at Mikura Hall at ten tomorrow morning?” Haruta suggested.

Mifuyu agreed, and they went their separate ways.

On the way home, she saw the poodle still tied up in front of the bakery in the shopping district, so she untied the leash from the road sign and checked the address on the tags. The house was nearby. She walked the poodle into the yard of the house and closed the gate. As expected, no one was inside.

Returning to her apartment, Mifuyu noticed that no lights shone in any of the units, making the building appear like a black silhouette in the red of the setting sun. She unlocked the door and vaguely hoped to hear her father’s voice

welcoming her back as she stepped inside, but, naturally, no one was home.

“He would’ve been in the hospital anyway,” she muttered to herself.

Sighing as she removed the scrunchie holding her ponytail in place, she let her long hair fall. She opened the fridge, poured some barley tea into a cup, drained it, filled the cup again, and drank the whole thing again before even taking another breath. She then took some fish sausage from a plastic bag, unwrapped it, and shoved some of the pink paste in her mouth.

She was hungry but didn’t feel like eating. There were eggs and instant ramen in the house, but turning on the stove and cooking—even just boiling water—sounded like too much hassle.

After eating four fish sausages, Mifuyu tossed the wrappers into the small food-scrap strainer in the sink, drank another cup of barley tea, walked straight to her room, and fell into bed without so much as changing. Pulling her comforter up over her head, she pressed her face into her pillow and breathed in its familiar scent. With that, she suddenly burst into tears.

The warm tears wouldn’t stop flowing, drenching her pillow. Utterly confused, she realized her feelings had finally caught up to her and brought tears with them.

“Wh-what if nothing changes back? What am I gonna do?”

Saying it out loud made it all that much harder, but she felt like keeping everything bottled inside her would tear her apart.

“Dad...you guys...where are you? I’m scared. I’m so scared.”

Curled up all alone in her comforter, she cried so hard, she felt like she was a child again. But with no one around to comfort her, all she heard was her own sniffing. She steadied her breathing before collapsing into sleep.

Mifuyu. You are a Mikura.

She woke with a start in the darkness to the outline of the round light on the inky-gray ceiling. Groaning, Mifuyu raised her head and looked at the clock next to her pillow. Five past seven. She’d been asleep for about two hours.

That voice felt like a nightmare. Waking up caused that faint residue to

dissipate, but a bad aftertaste remained. It sounded like her grandmother's voice.

Hurriedly smoothing her mussed hair, she rose and looked out the window. The view showed the same void as before, but she heard the howls of hungry dogs whose owners had vanished. She realized that she was gripping the curtain tight, and she pulled it forcefully shut.

Mikura Hall's book curse had to be why everyone had disappeared, and her grandmother was the one who had set it. What had Tamaki done? Mifuyu felt her guts boiling over with anger as she washed her face in the sink. Her eyes swollen from crying, she stared hard at her reflection in the mirror.

She had forgotten most of her dream, but those words still rang in her ears.

Mifuyu. You are a Mikura.

"Enough with the nagging already."

Biting her lip in annoyance, she flipped off the lights and turned around.

What had happened to Mikura Hall? She promised to meet Haruta there today, but she was curious to see what it was like right now. She left her house and walked down empty streets lit only by the streetlights. Perhaps because she had cried for a spell, or maybe because of her anger toward her grandmother, her heart felt hard, like a crab protected by its shell. She wasn't anxious or sad. She wanted to take a giant pair of crab claws to cut the book curse to shreds.

Arriving at Mikura Hall, she glanced at Keiko's white mountain bike, which was still parked outside the gate, as she walked into the yard. She thought she heard plants rustle as she closed the metal gate, but she figured it was a cat and proceeded down the stone path. Just then, a human face appeared from the darkness and yelled, "Boo!" in a deep voice.

"Aaaaaaahhhhhhhh!"

"Oh... Sorry about that. It's me."

Tripping over her feet, Mifuyu fell on her behind as Haruta rushed out of the dark grass, holding a flashlight. Mifuyu glared at him, ignoring his proffered hand and standing up on her own before angrily brushing away the dirt, as

upset as she had ever been in her life.

“What are you doing, hiding in our yard?”

“...I’m sorry. I couldn’t relax, so I came to search for clues.”

“But you can’t get inside without me... Oh, right, you’re a thief.”

“Keiko is the only one with a key. Once she returns, I’ll give it right back. I thought just seeing this place from the outside might help calm me down.”

“Whatever.”

She considered chasing him away but decided against it and unlocked the front door. The second it opened, she smelled the usual old-book smell of Mikura Hall.

They removed their shoes, stepped inside, and walked toward the sunroom. The lights were off, and they heard Hirune snoring in the dark. When they turned the lights on, they saw her aunt sleeping on the couch like always.

Mifuyu had seen something like this more times than she could count, and so nothing seemed amiss, but Haruta pointed out one detail.

“That’s odd. Why is Hirune here?”

“What?”

“Everyone else is gone. Don’t you think it’s a little strange that she’s still here?”

Mifuyu gasped in understanding and examined her sleeping aunt. Her strangely ageless face made her look either young or old. She had always been a complete mystery to Mifuyu. But her being here now couldn’t be explained by the old excuse about Hirune being Hirune.

“Aunt Hirune. Aunt Hirune, wake up.”

Mifuyu shook her shoulders. But she showed absolutely no signs of waking, simply snoring even louder.

“Sleeping like the dead.”

“Mifuyu, what happens to Hirune when the book curse is activated?”

“I don’t know. She just keeps sleeping, like she is now.”

“...I see.”

Haruta moved next to Mifuyu, then crouched down, held his hand above Hirune’s nose, and lightly slapped her cheeks. When he saw that she wasn’t going to wake up, he took Ayumu’s notebook from the tote bag hanging on his shoulder and gave it back to Mifuyu.

“I read it.”

“What, already?”

“It’s short. Only took about an hour.”

Even though she didn’t write it, she held it close to her chest and asked, “S-so what did you think? Was it boring?”

Haruta smiled at that. “No, it was quite interesting. He modeled the story after himself and his family. It’s a bit like an autobiography. The writing is incredibly sharp, too. It reads like a professional wrote it.”

Relieved, she relaxed her grip on the notebook. However, the look on Haruta’s face grew stern.

“But the issue is what’s written in it. Mifuyu, has anyone ever mentioned that Hirune and Ayumu aren’t actually related?”

“...What?”

“I’ve heard rumors. A longtime resident told me that, one day, Tamaki just showed up with a baby out of the blue. They said it was strange because she hadn’t appeared pregnant. She named the baby Hirune and raised her as Ayumu’s sister.”

“I bet you the old man from Books Mystery told that crazy lie, didn’t he? He hates my family...”

“I heard the rumor from Kaname, too, but it wasn’t just him. Ayumu wrote about it in his notebook—not only is Hirune not his real sister, she’s not even human.”

Her hands went limp, and the notebook fell to the floor. It bounced off the

carpet and landed open. That handwriting she had seen so many times raced across the pages—the same handwriting as the signature on her permission slips.

“Not even human?” she repeated.

She felt utterly confused and dizzy. Yet it kind of made sense. Hirune was a very curious character. Mifuyu never knew what she was thinking; Hirune always acted like she was living in some other world, and without Ayumu and Mifuyu to take care of her, she wouldn’t even eat.

That same beguiling aura resembled something about Mashiro, too. Mifuyu knew that it all somehow connected to the book curse. Every time a book was stolen, Hirune would have that talisman in her hand, and once Mifuyu read it, Mashiro would appear.

Mifuyu slowly knelt, bent over, and picked up the notebook. She had to read this. Touching the thin paper packed with her father’s writing, she squeezed her eyes tight. Then she slowly closed the notebook and placed it in her shoulder bag.

“Let’s stop for now,” she said.

“Huh?”

Haruta looked shocked at her decision, but Mifuyu had said it with such resolve.

“Aunt Hirune isn’t going to wake up, no matter what we do,” she added, determined. “And you might be able to read this in an hour, but I read a lot slower, and it’ll take me all day tomorrow. First, we have to find everyone.”

She recalled the telephone conversation she’d heard at the station.

“Right—the phone call to the station,” Mifuyu continued. “That was probably a station worker in another town talking to somebody, and for some reason, I could hear them. Almost like a wiretap...”

“I see. So trains can pass through, and the station might only be partially affected by the book curse.”

“Yeah, maybe. So according to that conversation, the station seemed to have

disappeared. One person asked why the train hadn't stopped at Yomunaga Station, and the other told them there was no such station and to check the route map. And then the first person said that they didn't see it on their map, either."

She didn't want to think about it, but if she was right, then it spelled trouble.

"One person knew about Yomunaga, while the other person didn't, and it should have been on the map, but it wasn't," Mifuyu mused. "My guess is that Yomunaga's existence is fading as time passes. First it will disappear from maps and then eventually vanish completely."

Saying it out loud made her shiver. She felt cold even in the warm air and hugged her shoulders.

"We have to find everyone soon or Yomunaga might really disappear by tomorrow," Mifuyu mumbled.

It wasn't just the people disappearing. If the world forgot about the existence of the town itself—the thought alone was terrifying. Mifuyu imagined herself never crossing the river, never getting on train, alone in an empty town, a meaningless life surrounded by books.

"...Okay. So then tonight, we search. But how are we going to do that?" Haruta asked, but instead of answering, Mifuyu silently turned to a wall and walked slowly toward it. It held a giant built-in bookshelf.

"Mifuyu?" Haruta asked, confused.

She didn't respond, instead removing one book and walking back to him.

"Here," she said, holding it out to Haruta.

"Huh?" Haruta looked dubious.

It was a thick, old book titled *The Frivolity of Farewells*. Mifuyu had never read it.

"Hurry and take this outside."

"What?"

"Steal it. Otherwise, we can't get to the world in the book curse. You said it

yourself, right? Everyone's turned into a fox. The real world shouldn't be the same as a book-curse world, so something happened. The only way to find out is to go to that world."

"...So you're telling me to be the thief again."

Mifuyu thrust the book forward. Haruta fell back a step, and Mifuyu grew irate.

"Do you have any other ideas? Because if you won't do it, then I will!"

Furious, Mifuyu grabbed the book and rushed for the front door.

"Hey, wait! Wait!" Haruta held her back. "Okay, okay." Righting his crooked glasses, he stood in front of Mifuyu, who looked angry enough that steam might start pouring out of her nostrils. "I'll be the thief. In for a penny, in for a pound, right? You're a Mikura, so the curse might not recognize you as a thief if you steal one of your family's books. Even if it does, I can't let a minor get a criminal record for theft."

With that, Haruta took the book from Mifuyu. Finally a little calmer, Mifuyu scrunched up her face.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I overreacted."

"Don't worry about it." Haruta scrutinized *The Frivolity of Farewells*, let out a small sigh, and muttered, "Forgive me," while putting the book inside his tote bag. "All right, I'm off, then. I'll be in the yard."

"...Okay."

Mifuyu stayed behind in the sunroom and watched Haruta start to walk into the hall, then she turned away. She wasn't sure if it would count as stealing if she saw him walk off with the book. She listened carefully, straining to hear Haruta putting on his shoes in the entryway and walking outside.

She heard the door close. She didn't want to imagine how things would change or what would happen now. Nervousness chilled her fingers, and she rubbed them together. As she turned back around, she stared in disbelief.

Hirune was awake. Her hair a tangled mess, she sat upright on the couch, looking straight ahead. But her eyes seemed to be staring into another world.

“A-Aunt Hirune?”

Approaching cautiously, she reached out toward Hirune’s shoulder. Her fingers touched Hirune’s thin shoulders first, followed by her palm. But Hirune didn’t react.

Her mouth open ever so slightly, Hirune muttered, “Whoever steals this book shall be left behind in a lonely town.”

In the next instant, Mikura Hall warped and distorted.

“Wh-what’s happening?”

Mifuyu quickly grabbed a nearby shelf, but the distortion only lasted a moment. Hand on her chest in relief, Mifuyu looked up, and—Hirune was lying down on the sofa again, sleeping.

Beyond the window, the giant ginkgo hovering faintly in the light sat frozen, its branches bent. Apparently, the curse recognized Haruta as the thief.

Hirune was gripping that white slip of paper, but who knows where it came from? Swallowing hard, Mifuyu removed the paper from her aunt’s hands and read the words aloud.

““Whoever steals this book shall be left behind in a lonely town.””

Her aunt had just muttered those exact words. In the next instant, Mifuyu felt the presence of someone behind her. Filled with relief, she turned around. She knew that Mashiro would know what had caused the town to change and where all the people had gone.

“Mashi—”

“Mifuyu.”

The low, husky voice made her body stiffen; she felt frozen in place. The person standing before her was not Mashiro.

“What have you just done?”

A petite old woman. Black, white, and gray hairs mixed together in a high bun secured by a tortoiseshell hairpin. A lime-green kimono, complemented by a white obi with a red ornament. Her small, pale face housed alert eyes whose

sharp gaze could make anyone cower.

“G-Grandma Tamaki...”

The old woman was Mifuyu’s grandmother, Tamaki Mikura. Her *tabi*-clad feet slid easily over the carpet, advancing step by step. Mifuyu felt cold sweat pour out of her, and she backed away, shaking her head.

“No way. You’re supposed to be dead. How are you here?”

She vividly remembered the day Tamaki died. Mifuyu was in fourth grade and had to miss a school trip to attend the funeral. Her father handed her a white chrysanthemum and told her to place it in with her grandmother, and in her fear, she gripped the flower so tightly that she almost snapped its stem. The flower was the same white as the face of her grandmother lying in the coffin—a face like plastered wax, letting Mifuyu know that there was no life left in her grandmother’s body.

But Tamaki now stood right in front of her.

“Mifuyu, what did you just do? I see everything. I’m here, watching. You let another stranger into the hall without asking your grandma’s permission. And you even let them steal something.”

Her face tensing, Mifuyu continued to back away. Her leg hit the low table, and she tumbled backward over it.

“B-but...Grandma, I had no choice. This was the only way to save everyone.”

“Save your excuses. I know I told you to never let it happen again.”

Tamaki raised a hand as she spoke, thrusting a slender finger toward Mifuyu, but Mifuyu couldn’t tear her eyes away from her ghastly, pitch-black mouth.

Just then, a gust of wind blew in from somewhere, and Tamaki’s lime-green sleeve fluttered and wrapped itself around her arm.

It was a white wind. It swirled over to Mifuyu’s side before morphing into a girl with white hair and dog ears.

“Mashiro!”

“Mifuyu, this way.”

Tamaki's face changed completely, her mouth and eyes bulging.

"Mashiro, don't you interfere!"

But Mashiro wouldn't listen to Tamaki's reprimands. Holding tight to Mifuyu's arm, she kicked fiercely off the floor into a high jump, landed on the stairs, and ran up to the second floor. Dashing down the hall, she opened the door to the large, already-lit stacks. Mashiro shoved Mifuyu in with enough force to send her flying, then quickly shut the door behind them and closed the latch. Tamaki's shrill voice let them know that she was walking up the stairs, step by frightful step. Though the old woman's body was small, her footsteps reverberated all the way to where they stood.

"Hurry, to the back!"

"B-but—"

"Just hurry. Tamaki can only exist in this transitory realm of purgatory. If we can get over there, then we'll be okay."

Doing as Mashiro said, they rushed down the dark, narrow spaces between the shelves. Arriving at the far end of the room, Mashiro flicked her fluffy tail and removed a book, then handed it to Mifuyu. A simple font on a white cover read *The City of Misanthropy*.

"Read it as fast as you can."

Tamaki hammered on the door, and they could hear her nails scraping against the other side. Mifuyu turned the page for dear life.



After two months of nonstop frantic activity, things settled down enough for me to finally take some time off. I hopped in my good ol' car and decided to go on a journey. I didn't have a destination in mind. I just hit the gas and started driving, taking a solo trip to wherever the winds guided me. Only my knapsack was in the back seat, with socks and underwear—two pairs each—some crackers, and a little money. I could buy anything else I needed.

I raced down the coastal road, seagulls squawking and circling overhead. The color of the sky was soothing and soft, like a watercolor painting made with a soaking-wet brush. I opened my window to a refreshing ocean breeze, my

shaggy bangs dancing on my forehead. I took one of my hands off the wheel to straighten my hair.

Maybe it was because it was still the offseason at the beginning of spring, or maybe this was some hidden gem, but the roads were clear, and I could count the cars in the opposite lane on one hand. Silhouettes of surfers waiting for waves dotted a beautiful sea that moved from white to light green to dark blue with the crash of each wave. A row of houses stood along the road, their paint faded from the saline air. Most of the hotels and small stores selling beach gear were closed.

I finally found a spot where I could take a break, right before the entrance to a tunnel.

Like many other establishments, the salt and ocean breeze had peeled most of the paint off the wall, and the building looked quite shabby. I parked my car in the adjacent lot and walked up to check the place out; warm light seeped through the building's glass door and the well-cleaned windows, and I could tell that the owner worked to keep the place as clean as possible. Turning the doorknob with an OPEN sign hanging from it, I walked in to the fragrant smell of coffee.

“Welcome.”

Inside the dim, cozy shop, the sixtyish-looking owner stood behind the counter in a black bow tie and red checkered vest. There were no other customers, and I sat at a table near the back. The ceiling, floor, and seats were all made of highly polished wood, highlighting the luster of the grain. An old, copper lamp with a brilliant flame sat in the middle of the round table, a small regulator on the side to control the flame. It wasn't electric, so it had to be a real alcohol lamp.

I'd assumed I was in the middle of nowhere, but it seemed like I'd stumbled into a nice little shop. I ordered a coffee, and while waiting for it to arrive, I took the map out of my jacket pocket and marked it with a red pen as I smoothed the creases. This place was about two hundred kilometers from my house. I had driven quite a bit.

“Where are you visiting from?” the owner asked me as he set my coffee down

in front of me.

“A city up north. Haven’t had a day off in a while, so I figured I’d get out of town. I just hopped in my car and ended up here.”

“I see.”

The owner smiled at first, but soon began twisting his impressive, pointed mustache as if deep in thought.

“You might want to turn around soon, though. There’s nothing past here.”

“On the other side of the tunnel? It’s all the same to me. I’d be perfectly happy going somewhere with absolutely nothing. I just want to avoid people for now.”

Lifting the white ceramic coffee cup with its dark-blue lines, I sipped the amber liquid. I felt the full-bodied fragrance of the roasted coffee pass deep through my sinuses— No, I didn’t feel that at all.

Reflexively scrunching my face up, I took another sip. Again, I couldn’t smell anything. Bizarrely, this coffee had no taste and no smell. I stared at the thick liquid lingering in the cup and wafted some steam toward me, but there was no aroma, let alone any warmth. I watched as the liquid grew darker; it became so black that I could no longer see anything reflected on its surface—not even the ceiling lights. The darkness consumed everything like a black hole.

“Excuse me, sir, what exactly is this? It doesn’t feel like coffee.”

I glanced up, but the owner had suddenly disappeared. When did that happen? But that wasn’t all. The warm light from the lamp had gone out, the area around me had grown chillingly cold and dark, and I reflexively rubbed my arms. Something wasn’t right. Looking at the ceiling, I noticed the previously beautifully polished surface was now decrepit, holes dotting the grain like mouse bites. The ceiling lights, which had definitely just been on, didn’t even have light bulbs in them. Spiderwebs covered the room, and dust flittered through the air.

I bolted upright in shock, knocking my chair over. It must have become fragile, because it broke apart once it hit the floor. It was like the entire café had aged decades in a matter of seconds. The tables were covered in worm bites, and the

frosted glass of the lamp was cracked.

The only trace of the owner was the white coffee cup resting on the faded gray table. Even the tasteless, odorless coffee had disappeared, and maggots crawled over the saucer.

“Ah!”

I froze seeing the creepy maggots and instinctively stepped backward. Just then, I felt something strange inside my mouth. Some sort of...thin, flat object on top of my tongue. I slowly stuck out my tongue and lifted the thing away with trembling fingers. It was a single strip of paper.

If this town has rejected you, seek out the crows.

“The crows”? Who wrote this eerie message? More importantly, why was it in my mouth? The coffee cup tumbled over with a *clink*, swaying on the saucer like a baby’s cradle. This was the type of thing that would make anyone shudder in fear. I quickly picked up my things and rushed out of the café.

Rain was coming down in buckets. The sunny weather earlier felt like a fantasy. Pulling my collar up to cover my head, I bolted across the thick, muddy expanse. I jumped into my beloved car. I had no idea what was going on. My heart still hammered, and my mind was a jumbled mess, but I floored the gas pedal, fleeing as fast as I could.

The rain fell with such amazing intensity that no matter how fast the windshield wipers beat, I could barely see right in front of me. The rain drops striking the roof sounded like machine-gun fire. I figured I should at least be able to go back the way I came...but before I knew it, I was driving down a dark tunnel.

There was one reason I didn’t turn around. I could still hear the downpour behind me, and yet, at the end of the long tunnel, I saw a clear, sunny sky. I kept my foot on the gas pedal half on instinct. Something felt wrong about the sudden rainstorm and the café where time passed so bizarrely.

The real road I’d come from was the one ahead of me. I must have been in a daze and passed through the tunnel without realizing. But I knew that if I could just leave the tunnel, I would find that beautiful road running along the shore.

And indeed, the ocean opened up for me at the end of the tunnel. Waves lapped against white sand, and faint bubbles appeared on the ocean surface as it moved from foam green to a deep, navy blue. But something wasn't right. Shortly after the tunnel ended, the road changed into a long railroad track.

Realizing my mistake, I pulled my car to the side of the road and got out to stand on the shoulder of the interrupted asphalt. The train tracks began suddenly—railroad ties were wedged deep in loose stones at regular intervals, with iron rails running straight on top.

I shouldn't have gone into the tunnel after all. Regret stained my heart. When I looked back, there was no tunnel behind me. Just the calm ocean, light-blue sky, and the short road bathed in sunlight. I didn't think I'd gone that far past the tunnel, but I suppose I was mistaken. I had little other option now. It wasn't like I had any destination for this trip anyway.

The ocean lay to my left, and a tall dirt embankment blocked my right side, so I couldn't go any farther by car. I got my knapsack from the back seat and started walking along the tracks. There was only one set of tracks, so any train would come from directly ahead of me. If one did appear, then I'd run toward the ocean.

But I never saw any trains, and the only sounds I heard were the wind and the calls of birds.

I sweated profusely and began to resent the clear skies. What should have been a pleasant ocean breeze stung my skin and pasted my hair to my face, and I thought about turning back countless times. But I felt compelled to not stop and keep walking.

Just then, the embankment on my right suddenly cut away, and I saw a stairway leading down. Yes! I dashed down the stairs, hoping that I wouldn't have to walk next to the ocean anymore.

The stairs ended in a shopping district. The pristine stores welcomed me, so different than the ramshackle establishments for beachgoers that I'd seen before passing through the tunnel.

Hair salons, stores selling knickknacks, a butcher, a grocer, a bar, a Chinese restaurant, liquor stores, and florists. Various stores ran on either side of a

street so narrow that a line of three people would block the road. It was an old-fashioned shopping district.

But something about this area felt strange. I couldn't hear a single voice. Rows of merchandise burst from their displays, but there was no one to buy the shiny red tomatoes or sit down to eat the stewed food that smelled so sumptuous.

"Hello? Is anyone here?" I yelled at the top of my lungs. "Anyone?"

I prayed that my words would reach someone who might appear from either inside or outside the rows of buildings. But no one answered. The cawing of crows was the only thing I heard.

Looking up, I saw some crows perched on a telephone line. I suddenly remembered that strange slip of paper I found in my mouth.

Mifuyu took a deep breath and closed the book. She hadn't finished the story, but she had read enough. The moment she opened the cover and ran her eyes over the first line, all sounds around her had vanished, and she could no longer hear her grandmother's fingernails scraping against the storeroom door. That same held true now. Only Mashiro remained next to her.

"Did you read it?"

"...Yeah."

A deflated expression on her face, Mifuyu looked down at the book in her hands. Every time she read a book Mashiro gave her, she found that all the stories described such weird worlds. The man who made it rain pearls, the solitary detective living in a violent midnight world, beasts born with strange properties and steam-powered machines. She felt they were all too unrealistic before she ever discovered anything that interested her. She only read them because there was no other way to catch the thief.

But this time, the setting and the feelings weighing down on her heart as she read were different. Mifuyu intimately understood the circumstances facing the protagonist of *The City of Misanthropy*. He encountered things that didn't mesh with reality, and as he ran confused and bewildered, he arrived in a place where an even stranger reality awaited him. What's more, he felt the same fear in a

town void of people that Mifuyu was currently experiencing.

“Mashiro, why did you choose this book?”

“What?”

“The story—it’s so much like what I’m going through now. So far, I’ve been going into all these book worlds, but this one, *The City of Misanthropy*, felt like it came to *me*.”

A little troubled, Mashiro furrowed her brow and cocked her head. “That’s probably because you’re summoned to the book you need to read the most in any given moment. It’s purely coincidence.”

But Mifuyu shook her head fiercely. “You’re wrong. This is no coincidence.”

“But...”

“Mashiro, how do you usually choose books?”

“‘How’?”

Mifuyu approached her, and Mashiro looked even more troubled as the dog ears on her head slowly drooped.

“...I don’t choose them. Hirune wakes up when a thief steals a book, and I get called in. The next thing I know, I’m right in front of the book I need to make you read.”

“But you always know what the book’s about.”

“Well, of course. I’m always in Mikura Hall. You can’t see me, though. I can’t leave, so I just read every book on the shelves from top to bottom, since I have nothing else to do.”

Now it was Mifuyu’s turn to be confused. “Wait, you’re always in Mikura Hall?”

“Yeah. It’s like I’m on the other side of a fog. The bookshelves are the only things that exist, and you and everyone else look like you’re behind thick, frosted glass. I can barely make you out. I don’t know much about what happens on the other side of the glass, and if I talk to anyone, they can’t hear me. But once a book thief appears, then I can go between that frosted glass and

the real world—to hand you a book.”

“Oh, I see.”

“I call that liminal space ‘purgatory.’”

“What’s purgatory?”

“It’s from Catholicism. People who die with impure souls go to purgatory to be cleansed before they pass on to Heaven. It’s neither heaven nor hell.”

Mifuyu couldn’t ask her if she was a ghost. After Mashiro got eaten in *The Silver Beast*, she’d appeared next to Mifuyu inside the gondola without even opening the hatch; Mifuyu wasn’t brave enough to ask if Mashiro had managed that because she was a ghost.

No, it didn’t matter what Mashiro was. The problem was Mifuyu’s insensitiveness.

She had wondered occasionally where Mashiro usually existed, but hearing that she had been in Mikura Hall this whole time pained her to hear. Mashiro had been watching her, as though through a blurry lens, and Mifuyu had never noticed.

Did Mashiro need to eat? Where were her parents? Was she alone? How long had she been here? Had she been on her own this whole time, with nothing but books for company?

Mifuyu wanted to ask all those questions. But as she considered it, Mashiro grabbed her wrist and pulled her toward the door.

“Let’s go outside. We have to find the thief!”

As Mashiro moved forward in high spirits, Mifuyu gasped. That’s right, she’d forgotten about Haruta.

“Mashiro, wait. There is no thief.”

Mifuyu filled Mashiro in before they left the stacks. When she returned from the world of *The Silver Beast*, everyone in Yomunaga had disappeared. Trains that would normally stop at the station passed right by, and everyone on the outside might be forgetting about the town completely. The only people in town were Mifuyu and Haruta, so their sole option was to return to a book

world.

“...So I made Haruta steal another book. We couldn’t think of another way to get back to this world. I never thought Grandma would come back to life and be so angry, though.”

Mashiro’s dog ears stood at full attention, and she watched Mifuyu seriously. Mifuyu had to look away from her intense gaze. She felt like she could hear Tamaki’s voice even now.

“When I was little, I brought a lady from the neighborhood into Mikura Hall, and Grandma was furious. Seems she’s still upset about it.”

“It’s okay. She’s gone. Tamaki only appears in purgatory. I usually don’t see her, but that must be why she appeared this time.”

As she spoke, Mashiro squeezed Mifuyu’s hand and opened the door. Just as she said, Tamaki was gone.

Leaving Mikura Hall, they found Haruta waiting for them out front. He was much smaller and covered in soft fur, with large ears and a long nose. Now that he had transformed into a fox, he could no longer speak; he could only wag his tail when Mifuyu called his name.

“Sorry, Haruta. Guess the thief can’t talk in fox form,” she said. “But I could talk normally when I turned into a fox in *The Silver Beast*. I wonder why.”

Mifuyu appeared relieved to have found Haruto so easily, but Mashiro looked sullen and kept her distance—perhaps recalling the events that had unfolded in *The Silver Beast*.

“Mifuyu, if you want to stay in this world, then you shouldn’t touch the fox yet, because it’ll count as you catching the thief. Where’s the book?”

At that, Haruta dashed into some azalea bushes and came back with his tote bag, pulling it by the strap with his teeth. Deftly using his black nose and claws to undo the Velcro, he showed them the inside. It was *The Frivolity of Farewells*, which Mifuyu had made him steal.

“Well, now what? Guess I’ll start by putting this back on the shelf. I’d hate to lose it.”

Mifuyu scooped up the book and headed back into Mikura Hall.

They returned the stolen book to its original location, and it slid smoothly into the space between the neighboring books, as though they had been waiting for it. The stacks were so tidy. Looking up at the house of books that her great-grandfather and her grandmother had built, Mifuyu sighed.

“Why, Grandma? Why won’t you let other people use these books?”

Mifuyu was the one who had broken the house rule, but she couldn’t help but think that her grandma bearing down on her like she was ready to disown her was simply too much.

“This might sound odd coming from a self-professed book hater like me, but books are meant to be read. That made Grandma so angry, though.”

“Because people kept stealing them,” said Mashiro.

“Sure, I get that. She said that same thing herself. But Haruta and the other booksellers don’t close their stores even though people steal from them.”

“They need to stay open to make money...”

“But still!”

Mifuyu wrung her hair and stamped the ground at Mashiro’s response. She knew she wanted to say something, but she couldn’t get the idea to form in her mind.

“Oh, whatever. Grandma might’ve placed a curse on Mikura Hall because she couldn’t trust other people, but I trust her even less.”

Just then, a vague doubt from before took shape.

“...Something’s been bugging me this whole time. What if everyone in Yomunaga vanished not because the book curse went crazy or broke down, but because that was how this system was supposed to work from the beginning? That’s the only sensible explanation.”

Until now, she had been treating the townspeople’s disappearance as some sort of bug or malfunction of the book curse. But what if it had been inevitable?

“I thought something seemed strange. I get why the thief would turn into a

fox. I still don't know why a fox specifically, but having them turn into something other than a human makes it easy to find them and hard for them to escape. But what about the innocent people who transform into foxes as time goes on? Up until *The Silver Beast*, we caught the thief before everyone became a fox, but in that world, everyone turned into foxes.

"So I started thinking, what if this is a rule of the book curse? Even though they've done nothing wrong, do people get erased from existence if they become a fox under the curse? Was that one of Grandma's rules?"

Mifuyu glared at the shelves of books, then strode toward the front door, her footsteps echoing through the building. Mashiro and Haruta hurried behind her.

Her grandmother had to be in here somewhere, watching her granddaughter through the frosted glass. Like Mashiro said she always did. Putting on her shoes, which were still resting on the entryway floor, she turned around and spoke to the rows of bookshelves in the hallway.

"Grandma, I don't know if you're a ghost or what, but if our family is the reason everyone in town is gone, I'll never forgive you."

The sound of something falling came from somewhere deep in Mikura Hall. Mashiro, Mifuyu, and Haruta were all there together, and Hirune should still be sleeping. Mifuyu swallowed hard, then opened the front door and dashed outside before her grandmother appeared again.

Mifuyu secretly expected to see everyone from town once she entered the book world. But they didn't see a soul. They were, however, unmistakably inside the world of *The City of Misanthropy*.

The darkness of night had disappeared, a pure blue spreading across the sky, the ocean visible before them. Not a trace remained of all the abandoned cars on the road, which had been replaced by an unfamiliar railroad leading off to who knows where.

The ocean was in front of them, but there was no sound of waves. A silence like time had stopped rang in their ears. The uninhabited darkness had been unnerving, but a midday town without any sign of people was also disturbing. Mifuyu reflexively reached out and grabbed Mashiro's hand. It remained unchanged, but sweat covered Mifuyu's palms, chilling them.

“Mifuyu, are you scared?”

“Who wouldn’t be? How come we can see the ocean but not hear any waves?”

Mifuyu took a deep breath, steeled her nerves, and walked forward.

“Where are you going?” Mashiro asked her.

“The café.”

“What?”

She continued walking, not answering Mashiro, who was confused. She worried that if she stopped moving, then she would freeze, so she strode confidently as if that would brush aside her fears. Haruta the fox trailed behind the two interlinked girls.

The café lay in a quiet stretch of land between the dojo and the shopping district, a little before the booksellers quarter. It was sandwiched between a tobacco store and a bar; all the surrounding stores looked worn down.

Built around the fifties, the building had been there since before Mifuyu was born. The rough white exterior paint was peeling in places, ivy crawled up the sides, and the wooden frame around the glass door was always faded. The place never interested Mifuyu in the slightest. Apparently, her father came here often, though.

The place should have been vacant, but the light under the eaves shone down on a sign reading AROMA COFFEE. Mifuyu felt her rib cage hammer. This must be the right place. But Mifuyu’s courage failed her. As she hesitated while staring at the old, metal doorknob, Mashiro spoke up in a puzzled voice.

“Why are we here, Mifuyu?”

“...There was a café in *The City of Misanthropy*, remember?”

“The strange café in front of the tunnel, right?”

“That’s the one. I recognized the owner. He always wore a bow tie and a red checkered vest. Plus, he had a moustache.”

Those words made her realize something. Her father was the one who called

the owner here “Moustache.”

Staring blankly ahead, Mifuyu heard the sound of claws scratching below her. The fox Haruta pawed at the door as if telling her to hurry up and open it.

“Yeah. Let’s go in.”

She turned the handle, the bell above the door tinkling as they entered. The smell of coffee filled the dim, mostly windowless interior, and while it seemed like someone had just been making coffee, there was, of course, no one around. The only source of light in the dark room came from a lantern sitting on a round table in the back.

“Just like in the book,” Mifuyu remarked.

Muffling her footsteps, she approached the table, with Mashiro and Hiruta behind her. The lantern on the table comprised a glass sphere and translucent base with some liquid inside; it was the alcohol lamp. She remembered seeing this lamp as a child, when her father brought her here. She had tried his coffee then, but it had been so bitter and awful that she quickly drank some of her orange juice.

Thinking back on that day as she looked at the side of the lamp, she noticed that a cup of coffee had materialized on the table. Filled with a black liquid, it looked ready for someone to drink from it. Glancing to check with Mashiro, Mifuyu loudly swallowed back the saliva that had formed in her mouth. If they were to follow the story of *The City of Misanthropy*, she had to drink it.

“Here goes nothing.”

And with that, she grabbed the cup handle, held her breath, and downed the liquid in one gulp. She couldn’t tell if it had a taste, but after drinking it all and opening her mouth again to breathe, no scent of coffee tainted her breath.

“...How was it?” Mashiro asked, staring at Mifuyu with concern.

Mifuyu rolled her tongue around in her mouth. She didn’t find anything. The tip of her tongue probed from her front teeth to her back but encountered nothing. Right as she reached her hand out to check the cup one more time, she stopped in shock.

Something felt weird. Inside her mouth, a small, stiff object butted up against her left molars. It swelled steadily as she examined it with her tongue, and Mifuyu's eyes grew wide in fear as she opened her mouth. A slip of paper rested inside.

Haruta was the most surprised of the three, probably because he hadn't read the book. With a yelp, he fell backward onto the ground.

Mifuyu stuck out her tongue, gently gripped the paper between her fingers, and extracted it. It was a regular piece of notepad paper.

"What does it say, Mifuyu?"

"... 'If this town has rejected you, seek out the god.'"

The words had been scribbled hastily in pen. She knew that handwriting.

"...Dad wrote this."

She was certain now. She gripped the paper and jammed it in the pocket of her jeans.

"I get it now. My dad wrote *The City of Misanthropy*. He called the owner of the café Mustache, and this is definitely his handwriting. Wait—it's not just *The City of Misanthropy*."

Her father's notebook. It contained a personal story about his family. She hadn't thought that her father had the talent for writing stories, but she did now.

"My dad must've written the stories used in the book curses, too. That's why they don't have an author's name; they weren't for sale. He wrote them all—*The Brothers of the Lush Village*, *Black Book*, *The Silver Beast*—for Mikura Hall. For Grandma."

Mifuyu didn't understand how it worked. Why did this piece of paper have her father's handwriting on it? Had he been here before and set it up somehow? Or was it just something that the "author" of this world could do?

"I wonder why Dad had this paper. Was it so that it would appear in my mouth?"

"...The author of a story is the god of that world. Their fingerprints are

everywhere.”

“I see.”

The author’s fingerprints. But Mifuyu sensed there was more to it than that. It seemed like this book had been made specifically for the current situation Mifuyu was facing. She felt the robust wall between the author and the reader shrink to a thin membrane. Her father had been expecting that Mifuyu would, at some point, experience the town with no one in it.

“I bet this is what he expected would happen.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“He knew he’d have to prepare *The City of Misanthropy* for me to visit someday. So the ‘god’ in this note could be my dad.”

And with that, she removed her father’s notebook from her shoulder bag. Having sat on his rump the entire time, Haruta started jumping up and down, trying to say something.

“What is it?” Mifuyu asked him.

“Maybe the fox thief has fleas,” Mashiro quipped.

Haruta became even more animated, standing on his hind legs and pointing at Mifuyu’s hands.

“What about my hands?”

Haruta shook his head in frustration, walked up to a wall in the café, and began scratching at it with a sharp claw. But neither girl knew what he was trying to do.

“Hmph, the fox thief is sharpening his claws like a cat.”

“...You really know how to hold a grudge, Mashiro.”

“A thief is a thief!”

“Sure, I guess. Hey, check it out—he’s writing something. Looks like the thief really can’t speak in fox form. I wonder why.”

With tremendous effort, the fox managed to scratch some letters on the wall:

N-O-T-E-B-O-O-K.

“‘Notebook’? Oh, Dad’s notebook.”

She handed her father’s notebook to Haruta, who began diligently flipping through the pages. He stopped when he reached a certain spot, turned the book to Mifuyu, and pushed it toward her. She took it and ran her eyes over the first few lines. The left-hand page sat crammed with writing, but the right-hand page was blank. The final sentence read:

“‘The only person who knows that this notebook exists is Hirune.’”

What was that all about? Flipping to the next page, she found that it was blank, too, and the sentence seemed like the last one. Mifuyu looked back and forth between Mashiro, Haruta, and the notebook.

“So...Grandma Tamaki didn’t know about this? But what does that mean?”

Mifuyu mumbled.

Haruta moved and waved his arms as if trying to answer, but he just couldn’t communicate what he wanted to say. He was so upset and forlorn. Mifuyu wanted to help him, but patting his back to comfort him might count as her catching the thief, so she simply said, “Um, sure, I’ll think about it,” and left Haruta slumped over.

She had no other choice; she had to read the notebook. She flipped it open to the beginning. What she saw there startled her. The first page contained a list. The header on the list read **BOOK CURSE RULES**. It hadn’t been there before.

“Oh, come on. There was a list of rules all along?!”

Maybe it appeared when they entered the book curse. Mifuyu dived into the list, tracing each entry with a finger as she read.

“‘Forbidden: Anyone of no relation to the Mikura family may not bring a single book from the collection outside Mikura Hall. When this rule is broken, the book curse shall activate immediately.’

“‘Rule: The thief shall transform into a fox. Their tongue shall be sealed, forbidding all pretext.’

“‘Rule: Upon the appearance of a thief, the world shall take the form of a book, excluding Mikura Hall and the shrine.’

“...The heck? I barely understand half of this. Especially the first part about pretext. What’s that about?”

The list’s rigidly archaic words seemed to have fried Mifuyu’s brain, so Mashiro jumped in to help.

“It means the thief is forced to become a fox and won’t be able to speak so that they can’t make excuses or try to get out of it.”

So that was why Haruta couldn’t talk. Admittedly, Haruta was working with them now because Mifuyu had let him plead his case after they came back from *The Silver Beast*.

“Okay. So next, it says, ‘Rule: Ayumu shall pen the establishing books, and Hirune shall make the selection.’

“‘Rule: Upon the passing of Ayumu and Hirune, their duties shall fall to the granddaughter Mifuyu and Mashiro.’

“Wait, what?”

Mifuyu stomped her feet and pulled her hair in utter confusion. She was so upset that Haruta jumped up on a chair to stay safe.

“At what point did I agree to get involved in this? Whatever, I’m already involved. I see that now.”

“Mifuyu, calm down.”

“I *am* calm! Otherwise I’d be smashing everything in sight!”

Practically barking her response, Mifuyu furiously paced the room.

“And this ‘Ayumu shall pen the establishing books, and Hirune shall make the selection’ part—that had to be that thing with Aunt Hirune back there.”

Back then, right after Haruta left Mikura Hall with the book Mifuyu had given him, Hirune suddenly awoke from her slumber, recited, “Whoever steals this book,” and then went back to sleep. Mifuyu still didn’t understand Hirune’s existence, but according to the rules described here, Hirune was the one who selected the book for the curse. Then Mashiro would appear, hand Mifuyu the book, and the world would change.

“When I first met Mashiro, she said that she came because Hirune summoned her,” Mifuyu muttered to herself.

“Yes?” Mashiro piped up, looking pleased to have heard her name.

Mifuyu cringed and continued reading. There was too much she needed to learn and understand.

“I swear, when all this is over, I’m selling Mikura Hall.”

“M-Mifuyu!”

“I mean, that’s the only option, isn’t it? That building is nothing but trouble. Mashiro, I leave it to you to take care of Grandma’s ghost. Anyway, there’s one more thing on the list.”

Mifuyu cleared her throat and read the last entry.

““All curses shall be carried out with the blessing of the Patron of Reading, the god worshipped in Yomunaga Shrine’... What?”

She almost dropped the notebook, but she caught it and looked at the line again. She thought that maybe she’d misunderstood or that the book curse was playing a trick on her, but no matter how she read it or looked at it, the words didn’t change.

Yomunaga Shrine was right behind Mikura Hall, and everyone in town knew the place well. Mifuyu hurriedly removed the note from her pocket and opened it up. *If this town has rejected you* probably applied to their current situation, so the only question was the *seek out the god* part.

“I thought this meant the author, since that would be the god of the story. But could it mean an actual god?”

Looking back on it, when the town transformed with *The Silver Beast*, the shrine had also remained unchanged for some reason, just like Mikura Hall. But Yomunaga Shrine wasn’t that old, and rumor said that the God of Books had been enshrined there recently. Her great-grandfather Kaichi was only born in 1900, after all.

Mifuyu suddenly recalled a memory. She’d played on the shrine grounds as a child, and her grandmother would be praying in her kimono, her parasol in tow.

When Mifuyu arranged the gravel to play shop, when she played freeze tag, when she huddled under an umbrella in lieu of a tent during the rain, her grandmother was there. Her grandmother never looked at her but always faced directly toward the shrine.

“That’s right, Grandma prayed at the shrine a lot.”

And the statues of a certain animal guarded the entrance to the main hall of the Patron of Reading.

“The goddess Inari. The fox,” Mifuyu muttered.

Haruta’s orange fur shuddered.

The two girls and the fox left the café, running without exchanging a word. At some point, night had fallen. Mifuyu worried that *someone* might be listening in on their conversations.

A line of streetlights leading to Mikura Hall ran like a string of pearls through the slick, oppressive darkness. It was the beginning of summer, but the night breeze was chilly, and Mifuyu’s lungs hurt the farther she ran. But the tightness she felt in her chest came from the intense nervousness gripping her body.

She’d always wondered why people turned into foxes. Not dogs, or cats, or bears, not even imaginary animals or inorganic matter. The thief would be so much easier to locate and catch if it got turned into a book or a rock, so why a fox, which could run away?

And to begin with, how was her grandmother able to use magic to transform the entire town into a book? No regular human could cast a book curse. Did Yomunaga Shrine possess that kind of power? Gasping for breath, Mifuyu shook her head. She couldn’t believe that.

But what other explanation was there? She regarded the shrine as one piece of the explanation for this bizarre world around her.

The three figures cut across the street, ignoring the stoplights that continued to change even with no one around. Underneath the cool illumination of the streetlights, they rushed past Mikura Hall and toward Yomunaga Shrine.

The hill, shrine, and torii gate appeared exactly the same as always, just like

during *The Silver Beast*. Normally, the sight of the shrine in the afternoon sun and the lush leaves of its camphor tree provided a sense of warmth and peace. But now a figure darker than the night sky loomed like a giant beast lying in wait, arms open wide.

The wind raged. The branches and leaves of the camphor tree flexed, and the layers of leaves rustled, blowing through the torii to the ground below. When she placed a foot on the stone steps, the wind picked up, blocking the two girls and the fox from advancing as though using air pressure to push them away. The wind was a giant shield, a massive wall protecting the shrine. Leaves from tattered tress assaulted them like knives.

The stone stairs became steeper, leaving the girls no choice but to proceed on all fours. The howling of the wind and trees sounded like the protest of some unworldly beast, and Mashiro lifted her hands, trying to cover her highly sensitive ears, only to be blown tumbling down the stairs. Haruta, with his small, frail body, dug his claws into Mifuyu's shoulder bag.

The roaring continued, the wind so strong that Mifuyu couldn't see in front of her, and Mifuyu yelled, no longer able to withstand it.

"I...I am Mifuyu Mikura! I've come in place of Grandma Tamaki! Let me pass!"

But the storm did not abate. Gritting her teeth, she forced all her energy into the hands supporting her.

"Enough! Stop it! Grandma and Dad aren't here right now, so I'm the current head of the Mikura family!"

And with that, Mifuyu was struck from the side. More correctly, the wind blew at her like a giant fist, but to Mifuyu, it felt like something ramming into her entire body.

Struck, Mifuyu fell to her side and almost hit her head, but Mashiro had morphed into a dog and rushed to cushion her fall. The impact had been enough to knock Mifuyu's bag off her shoulder.

"Haruta!"

Mifuyu just managed to grab the bag's strap, but Haruta lost his grip. The wind carried a small orange body through the torii gate. Mashiro kicked off with

a bark, flying after it.

That was as much as Mifuyu saw. In the instant that Mashiro flew off to rescue Haruta, Mifuyu was hit head-on by a tremendous gale strong enough to convince her that world was ending, and she was tossed backward. She tucked in her chin to avoid hitting her head, like Che had once taught her, and tried her best to control her fall.

Her body slammed against the road, and she looked up at the shrine, her face distorted in pain. It stood quietly serene, as though the whole storm had been a dream. Mifuyu gripped her shoulder bag, but both Haruta and Mashiro were nowhere to be seen.

Mifuyu couldn't speak.

Rubbing her aching shoulders and back, she staggered to her feet and groaned at the pain surging through her right arm. Then she climbed the stairs. The steps had returned to their normal, gentle slope.

Eventually, she reached the top. The torii gate and the camphor tree sat peacefully, like the recent windstorm had never happened. But Mifuyu stood frozen on the spot.

The shrine grounds—the entire area from the torii to the main hall—was covered in unending rows of tiny statues, packed so tightly that no space existed between them. The wind pulled the dark clouds of night away, and the moon showed its face. Moonlight bathed the swarm of tiny statues, each one just over fifteen centimeters tall. All of them were shaped like a fox with pointy ears and a bushy tail. They all faced the main hall, like they were waiting for something to appear.

She didn't see any that looked like Haruta, whom the wind had blown through the torii. But Mashiro was there. More correctly, she sat quietly before the main hall at the head of the mob of tiny foxes.

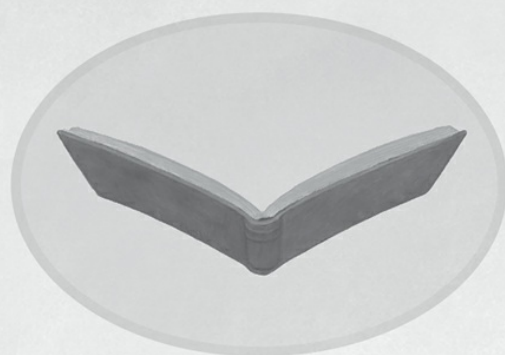
“...Mashiro.”

But she did not answer and made no sound. Even the leaves of the camphor tree, which had shaken so violently, were now quiet. Mifuyu's voice was the only thing breaking the silence.

Mashiro did not move. Even from this distance, Mifuyu could plainly see that Mashiro, like all the other figures, was made of stone.

Chapter 5

Learning the Truth



Time seemed to stand still.

The wind halted, all sound ceased, and everything in the shrine grounds stood frozen in the dark night. The top of the giant camphor didn't sway, and not even a pebble stirred.

A terrible storm had just been raging. The fierce winds blowing from deep within the shrine had dragged Mashiro and Haruta away before Mifuyu's very eyes, but the air now stayed silent, as if satiated.

Completely alone, Mifuyu stood dumbstruck beneath the torii. Packed so tight that no path allowed her to squeeze through, the small, white, fox-shaped statues running from the torii to the main hall hung eerily in the darkness. She stared transfixed at the head of the group of immobile foxes that filled the grounds. The statue of a white dog sat in front of the shrine's main hall. Conspicuously large, it looked like the leader of the outlandish group of statues.

Mifuyu knew who this dog statue was. Her guide in the world of books, the loyal white-haired girl, her friend with dog ears.

"...Mashiro!"

No response. Mifuyu tried moving toward her, but the fox statues packed like sardines stopped her. She was ready to rush toward Mashiro, not caring if she knocked any of the statues over. When she lifted her foot to do so, however, she hesitated and set it back down. Almost all the foxes faced away from her, looking directly at the main hall; only the lone fox right in front of her turned toward her. Mifuyu flinched under its pair of eyes, like thin crescent moons. Lifeless stone statue though it was, she felt it warning her, ready to spring to life at any moment.

Mifuyu crouched down and faced the fox statue. Its long nose almost looked wet, and fangs poked out from its cracked mouth.

"Do you have something you want to say? ...Were you one of the people in the shopping district?"

She tapped the statue's muzzle, but it did not reply. She tried lifting the statue, which was about the height of a young bamboo shoot emerging after a long winter.

“Unnngh.”

It was much heavier than anticipated; she eventually hoisted it onto her knees, struggling with all her might to not drop it.

The fox wasn't naked, and it had been carved with Western-style clothes. Mifuyu recalled that eccentric style from somewhere, and upon closer inspection, she saw earrings dangling from its ears.

“No way... Is this Keiko?”

The woman who had been toying with Mifuyu just before. The person who'd brought Haruta to Mikura Hall. Mifuyu tried talking to and lightly slapping the fox statue, but it didn't say a word. The sensation of seeing it ready to spring to life earlier must have been her imagination.

She returned it to its original position and examined the other statues. The one with a fish tucked under its arm and an apron tied around its waist was probably the fish seller, and the one with the hunched back could be the old man who ran Books Mystery. The fox holding out some yakitori must be the owner of Hashida Broiler, and she even saw a fox wearing the hat of a train-station employee.

There was no doubt about it. All the foxes here had to be the missing townspeople. Mifuyu knew in her heart that these hundreds or thousands of statues weren't the work of some stonemason, but the result of the book curse.

“So you're all here.”

Naturally, no statue answered her, all of them resting silently instead. Mifuyu stood up. First things first, she needed to reach Mashiro. If she didn't move the statues and make her way to the main hall, however, she'd never even be able to touch Mashiro.

To create a path, the only place she could set the foxes would be near the stairs beyond the torii, and repeating the process of moving one statue and coming back for the next would be arduous, to say the least. The statues weren't big, but each one was thick and heavy, and she worried that a statue might slip and get damaged. She flustered at the possibility that breaking or chipping a statue might kill that person.

By the time she finally stood next to Mashiro's statue in front of the main hall, she couldn't muster up any more energy. She massaged her sore back as she approached the white statue and gently ran a hand over its surface.

The statue looked exactly like Mashiro in stone form. The dog ears and long nose, the front and rear paws sitting attentively, and the splendidly bushy tail. Its eyelids were cracked slightly, and its eyes stared forward. Mifuyu waved a hand in front of Mashiro, hoping for some reaction, but nothing happened.

"Mashiro, can you hear me? Why did you turn to stone? Listen—everyone else turned to a statue, too. Am I the only who didn't?"

She stroked the mute Mashiro's cheeks and forehead, the surface of the stone feeling oddly warm and alive. This really was Mashiro, without a doubt. Mifuyu sniffled, and her vision blurred.

Even if everyone in Yomunaga disappeared, she knew she'd be okay so long as she had Mashiro.

She had faced so many dangers in the world of books. She had almost been shot in the hard-boiled world, had barely escaped the gaping jaws of the Silver Beast, and had been chased by the mythical monster. It had even eaten Mashiro, though she did return. So Mifuyu had assumed that she would be fine this time, too.

"What should I do? Now that you're a statue, too, I don't know what comes next."

She sniffed and wiped her eyes with the sleeve of her polo shirt, but her tears kept coming.

"...You were always there for me, always helping me. You're such a weirdo. You dived straight after me when I fell, and you protected me back there on the stairs."

Mifuyu spoke through her tears, petting the space between Mashiro's pointy ears.

"Is it because you're a dog? Dogs are faithful to their masters, right? But I don't remember ever adopting you."

She figured that if Mashiro had an owner, it had to be her grandmother Tamaki. If so, then she might have ordered her dog to protect her grandchild. But when Tamaki chased them inside Mikura Hall, Mashiro protected Mifuyu, not Tamaki.

It felt like she had always known Mashiro. Talking with her was like seeing someone whose name and face you had forgotten spot you in a crowd, then watching their face break into the purest smile at having found you.

Mashiro knew Mifuyu. But Mifuyu didn't remember Mashiro.

Or did she?

Back in the empty hospital, when she and Haruta were discussing the story in her father's notebook, a memory had flashed in the back of her mind. She was clutching a crayon, intently drawing a picture of a girl with pointy, triangular ears in a sketch pad. The girl had large eyes and a big smile.

That one memory unlocked others, like a chain reaction. That was neither the first nor the last time Mifuyu had drawn the girl with dog ears. She had loved that figure, drawing it so often that when her father and her aunt came to see the pictures, she told them it was her friend. Mifuyu remembered naming the finished picture.

Mashiro.

That was it. She'd named her after a white rabbit in a children's book that her father used to read to her. She wrote the s in the name backward, causing her grandmother to despair that she didn't know how to write properly.

How had she forgotten about that?

"I'm the one who drew you, aren't I?"

Every so often, Mashiro looked at Mifuyu with a pained expression. She must have desperately wanted to say something, but she held her tongue, perhaps waiting for Mifuyu to remember on her own. But now that Mifuyu had remembered, she didn't think her voice would penetrate those stone ears, and that made her cry all the harder. It was the same when her mother died. Standing in front of her grave, saying words that would never reach her. Mifuyu regretted not saying all the things she should have said earlier.

“I’m sorry I forgot. I’m so sorry...”

Emotions she couldn’t name surged forth like a tightly packed pillar bursting out of its seam, and Mifuyu hugged the stone Mashiro around the neck. The breeze picked up again, swirling around Mifuyu’s warm body and cheeks. The top of the camphor tree swayed gently, the thick clouds in the night sky moved, and the moon appeared. A white crescent moon. The curved white shape resembled Mashiro’s tail when she flew through the sky.

Why had Mifuyu stopped drawing those pictures of Mashiro? Had it started with the harsh gaze of her grandmother? Or perhaps, Mashiro had naturally vanished from her mind as she aged out of playing with imaginary friends.

No matter the reason, why had the girl she’d drawn come to life to guide her through the book curse?

Mifuyu stopped crying and slowly stepped away from Mashiro’s statue.

She reached out for her shoulder bag. Finding the thing inside she was looking for, she carefully extracted it. The leather notebook, covered with oil from fingers and wrinkles. Why had her father placed this so conspicuously by his hospital pillow now, when he had hidden it from her before? Maybe he’d transformed into a fox while writing and couldn’t hide it. Either way, Mifuyu had gotten his message to read it. He was at the center of Mikura Hall’s secrets and knew that she would arrive here. He had probably even predicted this all would happen.

The breeze became a wind. Fallen leaves blew around the fox statues. Pale moonlight bathing the notebook, Mifuyu took a deep breath and flipped it open.

The Memoirs of Ayumu Mikura

I wonder if books also love the people who love them.

It seemed that way with my grandfather Kaichi, at least. He passed away when I was six years old, so a vague recollection of his face sits in the corner of my memory along with what I pieced together from stories by my mother and people around town. But they're enough for me to know that he loved books and that books loved him.

As soon as they set foot inside Mikura Hall, visitors would weave through the narrow gaps between the giant shelves in search of my grandfather, his skinny frame bent like a fading willow tree. He read everything. From the description of the red-bean jellies my grandmother served, to the water bill, to warning labels on cold compresses, to the orange open here stickers on boxes of candy, he'd read anything made of letters. On his birthday, he'd go to the Minazuki Festival and read every last prayer block. He'd look over any written script without exception: Roman letters, Cyrillic, Chinese, Hangul, Arabic, anything. He'd stare at the text through his thick glasses, and in the next instant, he would open his dictionary, mumbling as he looked up the meaning of the words. I remember that about my grandfather well.

I do not doubt for a moment that my grandfather truly loved books and words. But did the books love him back?

You might laugh at me for claiming that books have conscious desires, but I know it for a fact. That's because whatever book my grandfather said he wanted to read, no matter how rare or how expensive, he'd find it at a used book shop, or it would be delivered to either our house or Mikura Hall as though drawn by a magnet. It was like the books wanted my grandfather to hold them.

He loved books, and they loved him. But it didn't end there. He opened Mikura Hall to the public in the hopes of adding to the world even one more reader with the same loving relationship to books. When I was young, Mikura Hall operated like a public library, so busy with people reading and talking about books that I didn't think the books belonged to us.

And my mother never liked that.

Her adoration of books outshone even my grandfather's. My mother, Tamaki, stored her books in a locked shelf and wouldn't let anyone else near them. Even her mother, my grandmother, wasn't allowed near Tamaki's shelf. The only person allowed to even look at them was Kaichi. Naturally, I, her own son, never saw them growing up. That the annex housing her collection turned into a prisonlike storehouse was testament to her fastidiousness.

According to my mother, books were sacred, and their relationship with the reader was sacrosanct, not something to be shared with others. She believed that the experience of reading a story should only exist in the mind of the individual themselves, and so discussing it was a foolish endeavor. If anything, she also seemed to believe her interpretation of a book was the only correct one. That's why she never made a single friend who shared her interest in books. Even the man she married was indifferent to them. When my mother became pregnant with me, a boy, my father left her for his mistress, abandoning all parental responsibilities. I still don't know what he looks like or even his surname. My mother being my mother, she was satisfied to have an heir who would inherit Mikura Hall, and she hardly thought of him again.

Anyone born into those circumstances would be assured a superb education. That was my fate, growing up in a house filled with a collection of books that attracted collectors and avid readers from across Japan.

I had no refuge. If my grandmother—who lived until I started elementary school—didn't force me to go to judo, I would have lived a more isolated life. I often wondered what life would have been like had I detested books—but for better or worse, I loved them, too.

More accurately, I loved writing them.

From early childhood, I was scribbling words on any scrap of paper I could get my hands on. Readers and writers are not the same, however, and though my grandfather and my mother were avid readers, they never expressed a desire to write a story themselves. But I was different. While being led down the path of letters, I discovered another door to stories. Young as I was, I continuously opened other doors, impulsively writing new stories to send out.

This pleased my grandfather, but my mother failed to understand. Among

some of my oldest memories, I can still clearly recall my mother's face, as emotionless as a Noh drama mask, as she dubiously took away a piece of paper containing a silly little story I had written. To my mother, stories were finished products, already bound and not to be spun together before one's own eyes. Until the day she died, she always told me the following: "What you write isn't creative; you're just copying existing stories."

After my grandfather passed away, however, my mother found a use for my stories.

When Mikura Hall lost my grandfather for good, it also lost the joy of reading. We still lent out books, as my grandfather's will dictated, but my mother made the rules incredibly strict, like a limit of one book per person. The mood within Mikura Hall became heavy and suffocating, like a boisterously cheerful person turning into someone gloomy, solemn, and no longer capable of feeling emotions. (I believe that this is when "it" began to grow.)

It happened one June, six years after my grandfather passed away. My mother had hurt her back, so I looked after Mikura Hall for a while when I wasn't at school. It was the rainy season, and I was twelve years old. I can't say with confidence that I was old enough to understand the importance of the responsibility I'd been given.

I was reading books at the front desk and chatting with my friends who dropped by, and I stopped paying attention to who was coming and going from the hall.

On that day, the shrine behind us was holding the Minazuki Festival, so I was more distracted than usual. Someone told me that the girl I liked would be at the festival that night. Once it was after five o'clock—the time the hall closed—I went around looking for any stragglers among the shelves. That's when I noticed around two hundred books missing from my grandfather's shelf. I remember hearing the cicadas crying even louder than usual.

Needless to say, my mother was furious. She really let me have it. My butt still has scars from the bamboo cane to this day. However, she understood that punishing me served no real purpose. We reported the theft to the police,

but the next day, she ranted and raved about how unreliable they were. She did everything she could think of to find the books. She knocked on doors around Yomunaga, grabbing the people who answered and interrogating them, until someone eventually called the police on her.

My mother became a raging storm. She turned into an unstoppable tempest that would assault even the people who dared to offer their sympathies about the theft. If the head priest at Yomunaga Shrine, who was a friend of my grandfather's, hadn't agreed to go around town apologizing with me, the Mikura family might have been chased out of Yomunaga, much less have any chance of catching the thief.

My mother's seemingly endless fury began to abate about two months after the incident.

Absorbed in her father's words, Mifuyu suddenly noticed her surroundings. Dark until then, she had been reading the letters by the faint light of the shrine. But suddenly, everything became as bright as noon.

She understood the moment she looked up. It wasn't bright "as noon" at all. The light had erased the night and actually turned the world to the middle of the day. The sun shone bright, and white clouds raced high in the sky. Most surprising of all, however, was that the throng of foxes crammed in the shrine grounds had all disappeared without a trace. Even the statue of Mashiro next to her was gone.

Mifuyu stood still, taking in her surroundings. Red leaves tumbled over the gravel spread around the empty shrine grounds. The giant camphor had begun to change colors, so at some point, the season had transitioned from early summer to autumn. In addition to that, the thick, braided *shimenawa* rope and coin donation box in front of the main hall seemed new.

Just then, she heard someone walking up the stairs. Mifuyu searched frantically for a place to hide, but there was no time.

Under the torii, a woman rose to the top of the stairs. Her black hair was combed straight back, her face was serious, and she wore a lime-green kimono with white *tabi* socks and black geta. She stepped into the shrine grounds.

Mifuyu couldn't move. No trace of white remained in the woman's hair, and

most of the wrinkles on her skin had smoothed, but there was no doubt that it was Tamaki.

“G-Grandma.”

Her mind screamed at her to run. But she stayed as still as if her feet had been glued to the ground and didn’t even look away. The fear of having been chased in “purgatory” inside Mikura Hall washed over her, and her spine froze.

But Tamaki paid Mifuyu no mind at all, even ignoring her as she walked by. Her angry gait caused the hem of her kimono to flutter as she cut across the grounds straight to the main hall. What was she doing?

Finally able to move, Mifuyu followed her. Tamaki didn’t react, even when Mifuyu stood next to her or waved a hand in front of her face. She seemed unable to see Mifuyu at all.

Tamaki tossed a coin in the donation box, grabbed the rope attached to the bell, shook it vigorously, and clapped her hands in prayer. Then with both eyes open, she muttered from deep down in her throat.

“...You, God—or whatever you are—you saw what happened, didn’t you? You have a good view of Mikura Hall from this hill. I’m sure you know who the thief is. Or perhaps you were too drunk on sake offerings.”

“The thief?”

Mifuyu recalled the incident that caused Mikura Hall to close.

“Grandma’s young, and the shrine is new... Is this...the past...? Ouch.”

Something suddenly struck the back of her head. She turned around as she rubbed the injured spot, then stared in wide-eyed wonder. Words literally floated in the air.

“Wh-what is this?”

Each letter, suspended magically in front of her, was large enough to fill a roughly five-centimeter square. The white font resembled something found in a typical paperback book.

One day, my mother, Tamaki, left the house without saying where she was going. I learned much later that she’d gone to the shrine behind Mikura Hall.

“...O-okay?”

The text dissipated like smoke after Mifuyu finished reading, but new text replaced it.

My mother never exhibited any signs of faith. She never went to the festivals or visited the temple for New Year's prayers. She showed nothing but contempt for the shrine priest my grandfather was friends with. She must have been really desperate to go to the shrine for help. She asked the priest if he saw anyone suspicious on the day of the theft, but it was no use.

“Now I understand. I haven't traveled through time. I'm inside Dad's notebook.”

She was supposed to still be in the world of *The City of Misanthropy*, but she found herself in an entirely different world. Mifuyu puzzled the whole thing over but couldn't make sense of it in the least. First of all, when had her father's notebook activated a book curse? She hadn't stolen a thing.

Just as she stood there in bewildered concentration, she heard the sound of a door open on the rear side of the main temple. A priest with a shaved head exited the office and walked calmly in their direction.

Next, just as the floating text described, Tamaki approached the priest and talked furiously with him for couple of minutes. Tamaki's visit was all for naught. The priest admonished her like a father scolding a child and walked down the steps. Tamaki yelled spitefully at him as he walked away.

The words in the air disappeared again, and new words formed.

The priest hadn't seen anything. That was no surprise, with the rows of stalls and bustling crowds for the Minazuki Festival starting around noon that day. The thief had most likely used the festival to make off with the large stash of books. They could have disguised two hundred books as food or stoves or something similar, loaded them on the back of a truck, and carried them away in one trip. Especially on that day, because the stalls ran from the back street to the shrine grounds at the top of the hill, obstructing the view. It was perfect timing for the thief.

Her grandmother chewed at her nails, pacing furiously in front of the

donation box. Mifuyu watched her and sank into thought.

“A truck... Yeah. If they’d stuffed the books into cardboard boxes when people were leaving Mikura Hall, the books would’ve been easy to move without anyone noticing they were gone. And Dad was really distracted, too.”

Mifuyu quietly moved away from the main hall, went near the bushes and trees surrounding the shrine grounds, and craned her neck to see down below. She could easily see Mikura Hall from here. Without a festival happening, a priest, visitor, priestess, or anyone standing here would certainly notice anyone acting suspicious. But only if their luck was good and the timing was right. It reminded Mifuyu how unreasonable her grandmother had been.

“Ow!”

Mifuyu bumped her head on some new words that had appeared, and she read them in a huff.

If only my mother’s connection to the shrine had ended there. But that wasn’t the case. Something residing in the shrine—I wouldn’t call it a god, but something whose existence I was unaware of—lent my mother its power.

“...What?”

A fierce wind suddenly picked up, and in the next instant, the world went dark. It wasn’t night. The darkness felt like being enclosed in a room with no windows or lights. Mifuyu thought that perhaps she was being taken to another world, but when the next line of text appeared, she understood that she was viewing what came next.

Until the day she died, she never told me how she came in contact with “it.” I never figured out what “it” looked like, sounded like, or how “it” lured my mother into placing a curse on the books.

“Is it dark now because Dad’s the author and he doesn’t know what happened?”

As she said that, a sepia brown film appeared next to the words and began to play with a *click* like an old movie projector. A caption stating MOTION PICTURE rose above it.

However, I do know one thing.

“So it’s going to be explained with a movie. I appreciate the consideration.”

The film showed an older time—small tile-roof houses, horses pulling carts, gentlemen in fedoras and suits, women with their hair in buns, workers carrying large boxes walking to and fro. A hill rose from the side of the path, with handwritten banners standing nearby. The banners read YOMUNAGA INARI SHRINE. The scene changed to a close-up of some wooden *ema* prayer blocks at the shrine. The prayers wished for health, a good marriage, or other such desires, but none involved books.

Yomunaga Shrine is now the symbol of the Town of Books, and many visitors come here with worries or prayers involving books. But it wasn’t always this way. It used to simply be one of the many shrines dedicated to the goddess Inari. I learned that by reading one of the dust-covered records in the city-records room. It was my grandfather and the head priest’s idea to make Yomunaga Shrine the God of Books.

The banners with INARI faded from the film and were replaced by the words *Patron of Reading* fluttering on a banner.

“...So the God of Books was added later to revitalize the town?”

If you think about it, something like a god of books wouldn’t have existed in ancient times. Books had become widely available to the general public only in recent history with the advent of the printing press. But my grandfather and the priest’s innocent plan ended up garnering widespread attention, and the god became enshrined in town as if it had always been there. I suspect that this is what caused “it.”

“I don’t really get what’s happening, but it seems like it started with Great-Grandpa and the priest.”

Just then, a small light shone in the darkness. A little flustered, Mifuyu walked toward it, and words appeared on her left and right, like billboards.

Whatever happened that fateful night, my mother arrived home late, looking relieved.

She seemed so comforted that everyone wrongly assumed she had an idea of

who had stolen the books.

But they were wrong. Had anyone realized the truth earlier and stopped her then, perhaps they could have saved the family from this whole mess.

At the time, we still lived in our first house, before we sold it. I sat nervously all by myself in the big, old Japanese-style house waiting for my mother to come home. She wasn't the type of person you could find comfort in, but I still wanted her close by. The ticking of a wall clock could make anyone feel uneasy.

I stayed up late into the night, waiting for her to come back. I jumped up the moment I heard the heavy front door slide open and ran to welcome her. But my greeting was cut short. She had brought a small girl home with her. Sleeping in my mother's arms, she didn't even look one year old.

My mother smiled at me and said I was now a big brother. I can only remember seeing her smile a handful of times, and that night was one of them. She staggered into the house, walked straight to her room, closed the sliding door, and didn't emerge for two whole days.

During that time, or more correctly, from that moment on, I began to look after the baby girl. But she just wouldn't sleep.

"What? Aunt Hirune wouldn't sleep?"

Startled, Mifuyu almost touched the words, then in the next moment, they morphed into new text.

Babies typically sleep a lot. I was worried that she'd die if she didn't sleep. So I named her Hirune in the hopes that this would make her sleep, since *Hirune* means "nap." She looked up at me with her big eyes, and from then on, she was my little sister.

Surprised to hear such a wildly different description of her aunt, Mifuyu moved to her father's next words.

Hirune isn't my biological sister. She was born from a pact between my mother and "it," her existence a kind of certificate and a trigger.

A light burst forth before Mifuyu, causing her to shield her eyes. She realized that she was standing in Mikura Hall.

This rendition of Mikura Hall resembled a library so much more than the one she knew. Multiple sets of reading tables and chairs populated the sunroom, a blanket to prevent dust covered the couch that Hirune usually slept on, and the room was being cleaned regularly.

A young version of her father stood in the sunroom. The black standing-collar jacket of a school uniform sat crumpled on a table, and her father wore a bandana and apron. At this age, her father could have easily passed for her classmate or someone in a higher grade.

Just like with Tamaki, the characters in this narrative couldn't see Mifuyu. She walked around, feeling invisible, before sitting in a chair and stared at her father, who was almost the same age as her. She knew intellectually that her father had lived a life before her, but seeing it caused the knowledge to bubble up within her.

He finished wiping the floor with a rag, looked up, and yelled, "Hirune! Are you up there?"

A mumbled "yeah" or "mm" answered him. Intrigued, Mifuyu stood up and walked to the second floor, where the voice had originated. There, in front of the rows of shelves, a girl of about five sat reading. But it wasn't a children's book; it was a thick tome for grown-ups.

"Whoa," said Mifuyu. "Even adults would have a hard time with that."

Now that Mifuyu knew Hirune wasn't human, it felt a little strange calling Hirune her aunt, but she found herself more amazed than surprised. After all, Hirune was still Hirune.

"If she's reading something like that at this age, then she definitely could have read all the books in here and the annex."

Knowing she was invisible to her, Mifuyu walked over and knelt next to Hirune to examine her better. Hirune's eyes darted across the page, taking in the text at a frightening pace. Mifuyu tried reading some of it, too, but Hirune turned the page before Mifuyu could get through more than a few lines.

Taking a deep breath, Mifuyu looked up and saw more words floating in the air.

Hirune absorbed books. She devoured everything from one end of a bookshelf to another, as if the pages themselves were fueling her body.

“Hirune! It’s time to go get stuff for dinner!” Ayumu called.

Mifuyu was certain that Hirune wouldn’t move, but Hirune closed her book carefully and placed it gently back on the shelf before running down the stairs to Ayumu.

Hirune isn’t a living being—and every living being has to sleep, I suppose. But she looked and acted human, and her soul was no different from a human’s. We talked often when she wasn’t reading. We were close. We got along well. We were better for each other than my mother, at least.

The young Ayumu and Hirune walked outside, holding hands.

Looking back on those days, I see now that I longed for a companion. I finally realized that, surrounded by my grandfather’s collection and subjected to my mother’s educational regimen, there was a loneliness within me that I couldn’t share with my friends. The things we knew were just too different. I could read books from Europe but couldn’t sing the songs that were popular on TV. Eventually, I became known as the weird boy who was hard to talk to. Solitude is too much for a child to bear. Hirune was the one person who understood my loneliness.

In the next instant, the sunroom changed again. The tables and chairs that evoked the atmosphere of a library disappeared, and the blanket vanished from the couch, all replaced by Hirune, now a middle schooler. She was relaxing and reading a book.

Mikura Hall remained closed after the infamous theft, never to open again. It became the personal library of the Mikura family, but I’m convinced that’s how my mother had always wanted it. It was my job to look after both Mikura Hall and Hirune, and that continued even after I graduated college and received my teaching certification in judo.

Sensing movement from the hallway, Mifuyu saw Ayumu, fully grown, appear through the door. He was younger than the present but not too young, and he seemed content. A backpack on his shoulder, he checked on Hirune before walking over to an electric kettle.

Picking up two mugs overflowing with the scent of coffee, he placed one on the low table next to Hirune. The other, he took with him and walked upstairs. Mifuyu followed him.

A table and chair sat in the hall—things that didn't exist in Mifuyu's time. Ayumu removed a key from the pocket of his blue jeans and opened a drawer under the desk. A word processor lay hidden inside.

Ayumu plopped down in the chair and turned the word processor on, then began typing gingerly on the keyboard. Mifuyu approached her father under the incessant clatter of keys clicking.

A notebook sat on one side of the word processor, handwritten lines crammed between the paper's ruled lines. Her father looked at the notebook as he typed. Glancing at the notebook from the side, Mifuyu read the words on the page and gasped.

She saw the name Ricky McCloy. This was *Black Book*.

I would write stories, telling my mother that I was actually working on Mikura Hall. Her watchful gaze saw everything at home, and I felt like I could write better at Mikura Hall because I absorbed what the other books had to teach. Even so, I couldn't deceive my mother's hawklike eyes.

"Ayumu!" a shrill voice called, and Mifuyu tensed.

Tamaki had arrived. Ayumu frantically hid the word processor in the drawer.

"What is it, Mom?"

"Hurry on down here. Hirune, stop reading for a moment. That's the last one, isn't it?"

"*The last one*"?

Something bothered Mifuyu, and she rushed after her father. Returning to the sunroom, Hirune had placed the book she'd been reading on the table as instructed and sat properly as if waiting for the next event to unfold.

Tamaki looked between her dubious-looking son and her commendable daughter before breaking out into a sudden smile.

"The two of you have done well."

Ayumu didn't try to hide his confusion at his mother's sudden congeniality, but Hirune just sat rigid, staring at a point in the distance.

"Oh, why that face, Ayumu? You should be happy as a member of the Mikura family... Hirune is about to finish reading the entire collection. This is her final book."

Mifuyu saw the tension drain from Ayumu. But Mifuyu knew where this scene led and couldn't suppress her unease. A new set of words floated in the air.

I misunderstood her. I assumed that my mother was happy that Hirune had continued reading day and night without sleeping and had finally read every book in the stacks. But that's not what she meant.

Her mouth forming a smile, Tamaki looked at her son with a gaze cold enough to freeze.

"You still don't get it? I suppose Hirune never told you—once she finishes reading every volume in the collection, a curse will be placed on all the books. Hirune is the proof of the contract between me and that unearthly god. She is a 'cursed talisman'—something they call a book curse in the west."

"What? Mom, you sound delusional."

"'Delusional'? Child, this is no delusion. You don't know what Hirune really is. How strange, since you're the one who wrote her."

"...What are you talking about, Mom?"

"So you don't remember. Well, you were quite young, after all. Whenever I took my eyes off you, you would fill the margins of one of my notebooks with stories about her. Stories about a girl who read book after book and never slept."

Mifuyu clenched her hands into fists. She squeezed, ignoring the pain of her fingernails digging into the soft flesh of her palms.

"That's why Hirune has taken to you and why I left her in your care. That way, you would continue to write more stories."

"...I don't understand."

"Then allow me to explain. The book curse is activated through Hirune. But

the individual curses must be created separately. And that was your role, Ayumu. You, who could create the stories.

“If a thief tries to steal a book, the moment they set foot outside Mikura Hall, the curse will activate—and Yomunaga will transform into a world you wrote. The thief will be trapped inside one of your stories.

“The god’s powers fuel the magic. But it comes at a cost. The god doesn’t loan out its power for nothing. That’s how transactions work; you need to provide compensation. If the thief isn’t caught—that is to say, if time runs out—then everyone in town is offered to the god along with the thief. That’s the arrangement.”

Food for the god.

As those words formed, everything went dark again, and the ground tilted. Her face stiff, Mifuyu screamed as she slid along the ground, which felt like the supports on one side had collapsed, turning it into a giant slide.

What had my mother done?

Everything in Mikura Hall slid away. The sofa, the tables, the shelves, the books—it all tumbled to the bottom of the darkness. Mifuyu shrieked and flailed in an attempt to hold on to something, but her fingers only grabbed at air.

At first, I was certain she’d finally lost her mind and that she was simply spouting nonsense. But I was wrong again. The next day, my mother brought over the wife of a used bookstore owner she knew well and told her to take a book home. She said it so invitingly—I didn’t stop her, because I didn’t think that anything would happen. I just hoped that she would come to her senses and realize that all this talk of gods and book curses was delusional. Nothing changed, and everything continued as normal. But then Hirune came over to me with a book. It was a story I had written.

Mifuyu slid further into the darkness with frightening speed. She reached out and tried to grab the floating text, but the words changed, and her hands came up empty.

The second my eyes followed the page, everything in Yomunaga transformed,

and the residents all took on the roles of characters from my story. Hirune tried to guide me in my panic, but I left her behind and ran into town. I eventually found the woman, who had transformed into a fox. That's when I realized that my mother hadn't been spouting nonsense—she actually had placed a curse on the books.

The floor sloped steeper and steeper, transforming into an almost vertical drop. Mifuyu felt her body float and tried desperately to right herself. In the next moment, a cascade of books rained down, narrowly missing her head.

“Whoa!”

She couldn't believe what she saw next. This was more than a rain of books; an avalanche of tomes came crashing toward her, their white pages flapping about wildly.

They're gonna smother me!

Mifuyu reflexively leaped off the slanting floor and flew through the darkness. Just as she arched her body, new words appeared.

Within a week of returning to reality, the used bookstore owner's frightened wife left Yomunaga. She told anyone who would listen about what had happened to her in Mikura Hall in hope of making them understand, but of course, no one believed her.

Like a cat caught on a screen door, Mifuyu hooked her fingers in the space between the letters and held on tight. As she did, the avalanche advanced without so much as a hair's breadth between the pages, then crashed down where Mifuyu had just been, and the countless pages pulled everything down into the abyss.

“I've really had enough of all this... Ahh!”

But then, the text she'd been clinging to for dear life vanished, tossing Mifuyu off into space. The next words appeared almost immediately, with Mifuyu just grabbing hold of them.

My mother played innocent, saying, “I wonder what happened to Kaname's wife.” I obeyed her orders to never tell a soul what had happened that day. Now all alone, the used bookstore owner grew suspicious and eventually came

to despise us. And who could blame him?

Dangling from the period, Mifuyu gasped.

“So that’s why that grumpy old man from Books Mystery hates me... This isn’t the time for that, though! Does Dad even know what’s happening to his only daughter right now? Ah!”

The words disappeared, and Mifuyu seemed ready to fall again, but luckily, the next words materialized directly below her, creating a platform for her to stand on. They moved up, then down, the unpredictable movements tossing Mifuyu about as she gasped for breath.

Hirune and I could no longer leave Mikura Hall. Whatever curse my mother had placed on the books, everything would be fine so long as nothing was stolen. So me and Hirune guarded Mikura Hall, ensuring that no one sneaked inside. Still, a few thieves would occasionally steal books, and we would catch them. Sometimes, I even felt like the protagonist in a manga or movie, and I got carried away thinking I was some kind of superhero tasked with thwarting evil. Hirune always put me in my place, though.

During that time, I fell in love. My mother was against the relationship, since she wanted as few people as possible involved with Mikura Hall, which is perhaps why I chose to marry this woman.

Standing on top of the words, Mifuyu jumped from foot to foot as she peered down to read the text.

“‘Marry...’ That’s gotta be Mom.”

As she spoke to herself, the words disappeared again. Mifuyu lost her balance and fell. She waited for new words—but nothing came. Mifuyu plummeted headfirst, finding a pinprick of light glowing at the bottom of the dark space.

The point expanded into a fierce explosion of light, painting the darkness white, and Mifuyu squeezed her eyes shut.

She should have been falling from a fairly high place, but she landed against nothing. The bright light she felt on the back of her eyelids ceased, and, cautiously opening her eyes, Mifuyu found herself standing in the room of an apartment. It was the tatami room that Mifuyu knew so well.

She was home. But something seemed different. Feeling the spring of the tatami under her feet, she looked around the new, spotless room, without any shelves near the wall or a cluttered computer desk.

Diaper bulging, a baby lay on the tatami, looking peculiar in the dust-filled sunlight pouring in through the small window.

She knew who it was without any meddling words appearing to explain. This was her—Mifuyu stared dumbfounded at her infant self.

“Mifuyu, what are you doing?”

Mifuyu quickly looked behind her and saw a young woman standing in the doorway. The woman had a narrow face, a beige shirt and cardigan, and long hair tied in a side ponytail that covered her delicate clavicle.

“M-Mom.”

It was her mother, who had passed away when Mifuyu was a second grader in elementary school. A concerned look on her face, her mother approached—and she walked right through the shocked and frozen Mifuyu to scoop up the infant Mifuyu from the floor.

“There, there. Were you saying hi to the sun?”

Mifuyu stared in disbelief. She couldn’t stop staring at her deceased mother cradling baby Mifuyu in her arms.

This is real, right? Like traveling back in time? Or am I just inside a story my dad made up?

All the questions in her mind formed and burst like bubbles. Her mother was standing right in front of her. This woman she’d never expected to see again.

The corners of her eyes burned, and she felt tears rolling down her cheeks. At age fifteen—the middle of her hectic adolescence—eight years was a long time for Mifuyu. But looking at her mother moving like this, those days they spent together felt like yesterday.

Sniffling, Mifuyu approached quietly, one step at a time, and reached out a hand to try and touch her mother. Her fingers passed through the cardigan without the slightest bit of resistance.

Just then, her head bumped against something. More words.

Kazune and I got married, and I moved out of the Mikura household. Actually, my mother wanted to sell the house, too. She let us live in an apartment in the only remaining property she kept, so it was really like moving from one section of an estate to another. I opened the dojo and began living my own life, but I couldn't escape my responsibilities with Mikura Hall and Hirune. Ever since Hirune finished reading the collection and activated the book curse, she began to spend most of her days in a deep slumber, like she was trying to make up for the sleep she'd missed until then.

"...Dad, you moron."

Mifuyu wiped her wet cheeks and nose with the collar of her polo shirt, then clapped both hands to her cheeks.

"Pull yourself together, Mifuyu. This is no different from a home movie. I'm just watching old videos."

She had to tell herself this. If she didn't, her suddenly deflated heart would shatter and fly off somewhere unknown.

"I'm okay. I'll keep watching your memories, Dad."

As if waiting for Mifuyu's answer, new words floated up the moment she finished speaking.

All I do is make trouble for Kazune and Mifuyu. I'm so sorry.

"...Dad?"

Mikura Hall, the book curse—and my mother, most of all—were just too much for Kazune. She tried several times to leave, but I always stopped her. She was diagnosed with cancer at a young age, and it eventually took her life. I know deep down that there was nothing I could have done, but I still regret not letting her go, if it meant she might have met a different fate.

The sight of her mother cradling the infant Mifuyu blurred like a watercolor painting absorbing liquid before gradually fading and disappearing. Then a shadow fell over the white world, Mikura Hall gradually ascended, and she saw her mother and her father fighting. Her mother held a suitcase, her father

resolutely trying to stop her from leaving.

Feeling someone looking down at them, she glanced up and saw herself as a young girl standing next to Tamaki in the sunroom balcony. The second she met her grandmother's eyes, the scene flipped and changed. Mifuyu recognized the inside of Mikura Hall and saw herself, age four or five and in a blue jumper skirt, along with her grandmother, who was old and thin like a withered tree.

Tamaki looked away from the argument between her son and her daughter-in-law, which she had been observing through the window. She bent over and took the sketchbook Mifuyu was holding. A large picture of Mashiro had been drawn on the paper.

“...I'm not letting you go anywhere. Because you—”

She remembered her grandmother saying this. These words had followed her from the dream she had during her nap.

As though reading her mind, more text appeared before her.

“You are a Mikura.”

My mother cursed me and my daughter Mifuyu with those words.

So that was it. Her grandmother had said this countless times to the young Mifuyu.

Children's books surrounded Mifuyu in her earlier years. She had enjoyed that, but her grandmother stopped her every time she tried to go outside or draw a picture, shoving a picture book at her instead. Rows of books lined up in front of her, stacked up high—the young, crying Mifuyu was buried in a pile of books deep enough to hide her.

Mifuyu realized that she was pounding at the floating words with her fists. The phrase *You are a Mikura* flaked away in chips.

“...I remember now. I loved books when I was a kid. But I grew to hate them, Grandma.”

Books could transport Mifuyu to another world even from inside her own room. Fairy tales of princesses locked in towers, legends of brave heroes proceeding down paths fraught with rampaging beasts, stories about little bears

delivering mail to the people living in town, tales dominated by witches and winter. She recalled those stories she loved but had buried deep within her heart.

Mifuyu felt the same excitement, the same adoration bubbling up inside her when she experienced the story worlds with Mashiro as her guide. She wanted to read more. It was fun.

But that joy didn't stem from just being "Mifuyu the Mikura." Even when people outside the Mikura family experienced a story, Tamaki continued to insist on the exclusivity of the Mikura name. Perhaps she believed that if she closed off the library, which had once been open to anyone, and made it a place solely for the Mikura family, then Mifuyu and subsequent generations would become paragons of books. But flowers didn't grow without air.

Mifuyu squeezed her other fist even tighter and continued to strike the letters of the word *cursed*. The letter was as brittle as dried bone, and fragments broke off from it.

"Enough!" she yelled at the top of her lungs. "This curse can go to hell!"

With those words, an intense wind began to howl. That terrible ferocity blew away the crying little Mifuyu, the books surrounding her, her grandmother, her father, and her mother, finally demolishing Mikura Hall and carrying it away with the wind, everything disappearing into the distance.

Completely alone, Mifuyu covered her face with her arms and stood firm, but the moment she stumbled against the increasingly strong wind, it swept her away. Arms flailing wildly, she searched for something to cling to but only swiped at the air; no further words from her father appeared. Instead, the leather notebook fell from somewhere, and she quickly grabbed it.

"Is that the end of Dad's notebook? Whoa!"

The wind lifted her up, and she felt herself being carried higher and higher. The view suddenly brightened, and she looked around to see that everything had returned to normal. Houses spread out below her, rooftops shimmering in the morning sun. She saw the river in the distance. This was the sky above Yomunaga.

And then, just like when the gale blew her away, the wind abruptly stopped. Arms spread wide and facing down, Mifuyu closed her eyes as she plummeted toward the ground like an airplane with failed engines.

I'm gonna crash!

As the fear of death swept through her, a cloud rushed toward her, caught her gently, and then slowly began carrying her to the ground.

"I'm s-saved..."

Lifting her head, she examined the cloud in detail. It felt more pliable than a cloud; *cotton* would be a better descriptor than *cloud*. Could her father have arranged for this, too? Confused, she poked and pulled the cotton thing, then heard a muffled voice come from underneath it.

"Huh? Wait a second—did you just say something?"

On top of the muffled voice, the oncoming rush of air made it hard for her to hear. She pressed an ear to the cotton.

"...Mm."

"What?"

"I'm sor..."

"I can barely understand you, y'know."

"Sorry... Overslept... Throat...so sore."

Eyes wide, Mifuyu sat bolt upright.

"No way. Aunt Hirune?"

At that, the cotton expanded and shrank, which Mifuyu took as a yes, and she pressed down on her temple like she had a headache. If she listened hard, she knew the voice. Her aunt had turned herself into a ball of flying cotton and come to her. But Hirune had slept so much as of late that her voice was weary.

No matter how many outlandish things kept happening, Mifuyu just couldn't get used to them all. Grimacing, she tried to explain the situation to herself when Hirune groaned again.

"Did I...shock you?" Hirune asked.

“I mean, yeah. You wouldn’t really expect your aunt to save your life by turning into a ball of cotton. But I read Dad’s notebook and now I think I get the gist of things.”

The relationship between her father and Hirune was like her relationship with Mashiro. She gently stroked the cotton, thinking it was what she would have done if the cotton ball were Mashiro.

“Thank you for everything, Aunt Hirune. You were always my strange aunt who slept all the time, but you were just doing what Grandma asked you to do, weren’t you? That must have been tough.”

“No... The sleeping was... I was sleepy...”

“Oh.”

Slightly disappointed, she sighed. Hirune was Hirune, after all. But Hirune kept speaking and said something that caught Mifuyu’s attention.

“But...so much power...needed for the curse...”

Mifuyu frowned. “You needed to sleep for the book curse?”

“...Yes. Sorry...you involved.”

“You’re sorry you got me involved? Oh, well, I’ve definitely been through enough to deserve some sort of reward.” Mifuyu sat cross-legged on top of the cloud that was her aunt, nodding arrogantly. “But why me? Was I taking over just while Dad wasn’t around?”

“That’s...part of it. But in the end, Mifuyu...Tamaki was counting on you.”

“You mean I’ll inherit Mikura Hall? No way. That thing’s going straight on the market the second I’m in charge.”

At those casual words, the cotton began to shake.

“Y-you can’t...”

“Can’t, schmant! Grandma’s not gonna get what she wants if I can help it!”

Her aunt didn’t reply but quickly sped up and began to descend. Mifuyu grabbed the cotton in a panic, tensed her stomach, and sat down so that she wouldn’t fall off. Withstanding the force of the wind, she cracked one eye open

and saw the torii and shrine grounds on top of the small hill.

“The shrine,” said Mifuyu.

The cotton landed with a small bounce and tossed off Mifuyu, who yelped. It then disappeared. Mifuyu landed in a shrub and rose unsteadily, picking twigs and leaves off herself. The morning light poured into the shrine grounds, shining on the statues of foxes and Mashiro, which remained still as ever.

“Aunt Hirune, where did you go? Did you disappear?”

The ball of cotton was gone. But seeing the figure of a human by the torii gate, Mifuyu ran over. Just as she thought, Hirune had returned to human form. Mifuyu held Hirune up, propping her back against the torii pillar.

“Aunt Hirune, are you okay? Hang in there!”

She shook her frail shoulders, and Hirune opened her eyes slightly.

“I’m okay... Just sleepy...”

Muttering that, Hirune seemed ready to fall back asleep, and Mifuyu shook her more vigorously to wake her up.

“No, wake up! You can’t go to sleep! What should I do now? Dad didn’t leave any more hints; I’ve got nothing else to go on! How do I turn everyone back? I’m the one who needs to solve this, right? And you’re the talisman for the book curse, aren’t you? So tell me!”

“...A hint?”

A faint light glimmered in Hirune’s hollow, sleepy eyes.

“...It’s just like always, Mifuyu. Like always. Catch them.”

“Catch them? Catch who? Haruta stole a book, but he’s a statue!”

“...Not him. The first one. You only have one chance. No mistakes.”

But before Mifuyu could ask her another question, Hirune began to snore, falling into a deep sleep. No matter how loud Mifuyu yelled or how much she slapped Hirune’s cheeks, she would not wake.

Mifuyu wanted Mashiro for times like this. But she had turned to stone. It was up to Mifuyu to save everyone.

Giving up on Hirune, Mifuyu stood up, exhaled forcefully, and took a deep breath. Her body, soul, and mind were all exhausted, and she considered just lying down next to Hirune and going to sleep, too, but inhaling the crisp morning air with the smell of summer grass, she felt the gears in her mind turn.

The Minazuki Festival. It was happening on the day the books were stolen. The festival was just starting in the real world, too, the whole town getting ready for it. The incident that started the book curse happened during that festival.

“By the first one, she must mean whoever stole the books back when Grandma was in charge of Mikura Hall.”

But no one had witnessed it. The festival was a crowded event, with many people coming from out of town. Could a lone high school girl without a single hint solve a crime that had stumped the police at the time?

Mifuyu silently checked her surroundings. The fox statues—everyone from town was assembled here. As though they were all thieves caught in a trap.

“...Grandma, was this what you were really after? You seriously wanted everyone turned into statues so that they’d confess, right? Or maybe you suspected all the folks in town, so you decided to punish them together. Collective punishment. You were terrible, Grandma.”

Mumbling curses at her grandmother, she walked through the rows of fox statues, examining them one by one. Somehow, the statues she had moved had all returned to their original positions, as if protecting the shrine. She could more or less recognize the people she knew from their clothes and features. The people from the shopping district, Che the assistant judo instructor, Haruta and his sister, Punch the PE teacher.

She checked each statue carefully, stopping as she ran her hands over one.

The bent back. The lips curled in a stubborn frown.

“That old fart from Books Mystery... Come to think of it, he was the one who’d egged Haruta and everyone else into stealing books.”

Old man Kaname, the used bookstore owner, hated the Mikura family because Tamaki had used his wife as a guinea pig. Why had Tamaki chosen his

wife, though?

“Were they friends? Because she was easy to choose? But what does that even mean?”

Mifuyu considered several different situations. It would be easy for Tamaki to ask a favor from someone close to her whom she could open up to, but could she use them like that? She couldn't turn the important people in her life into foxes. So then it had to be someone she disliked somewhat or didn't care much about.

“Grandma seemed to hate everyone in town, though.”

Or it was revenge. Maybe something had happened? Pondering that, Mifuyu realized something.

“The thief—maybe Grandma thought it was the Books Mystery owner. As the owner of a used bookstore, he could easily sell two hundred stolen books. So she decided to get some payback through his wife.”

She nodded with conviction and reached out to touch the statue—the books weren't here, but she hoped that if she declared him the thief, then everyone might return to normal.

“You only have one chance. No mistakes.”

She heard Hirune's words echo deep within her mind. No, it would be okay. It had to be okay.

But in a fraction of the instant before her fingers touched the sharp ears of Kaname's statute, she thought she heard a voice from the direction of the shrine.

“...Mashiro?”

The only statue shaped like a dog in front of the main hall belonged to Mashiro. Mifuyu looked back and forth between Kaname and Mashiro, slowly righted herself, and said, “No.”

“Grandma suspected Kaname...so the police must have looked into it. But they didn't arrest him. So he must be innocent, right? Plus, everyone knows everyone in a small town like this. He'd get caught right away if he tried to sell

stolen books. All our books are stamped with the Mikura Hall seal, too. Of course. There's really no benefit to stealing a lot of books from such a large, famous library."

So then why?

The wind picked up again. The tops of the trees rubbed against one another, sounding like some hushed whisper. Recalling the existence of something her father called "it" in his notes sent a shiver down her spine.

"Is anyone here?"

Mifuyu walked forward cautiously. She tried as hard as she could to not step on the fox statues but ran out of space and headed away from the main hall. When attempting to move the fox statues to clear a path, she found they were inexplicably heavier than before and couldn't lift them. Sweat streamed from every pore on her body.

The path was closed—something was blocking her way forward.

Yomunaga Shrine had originally been one of the many shrines dedicated to the goddess Inari and only became the shrine for the God of Books after Kaichi and his friend the priest thought up the idea. There was no tradition attached; it was a "newly created" god.

She'd assumed that the statues were lined up for no reason. But what if they were arranged that way on purpose? What if the statues needed to be inside the shrine? The main hall lay at the end of the grounds. And it was obstructed even now.

Mifuyu wiped away her dripping sweat and grinned.

"I know where the books are hidden."

In that instant, a fierce wind assaulted her. But Mifuyu had prepared for that and kicked off the ground, sailing into the air. The wind wanted to carry her far away from the main hall, but Mifuyu grabbed hold of the camphor tree and wouldn't let go.

The wind relaxed, perhaps losing her in the canopy of the camphor tree. Mifuyu inched silently down a branch, crept toward the main hall, steeled

herself, and dropped from the branch. The wind roared frantically, but when it blew up from below, Mifuyu sailed over the heads of the foxes and extended her arms and legs wide in hope of getting as far forward as possible. By the time the wind figured out her plan and stopped, Mifuyu had reached the space in front of the main hall.

She landed on top of the donation box and immediately jumped down to the ground.

“Sorry about that!” she called, and then threw herself at the sliding paper door sealed with a *shimenawa* rope and zigzag *shide* paper. The wind was too late.

Dusty, mold-filled air assaulted her nose, and Mifuyu broke into a torrent of sneezing as she crashed through the top of the sliding paper door.

“Come on, people! Keep this place clean! A god lives here! I’m not sure if gods actually exist, but still!”

She soon understood why the shrine had been left untouched. The inside of the hall was dark, strangely hot, and gave off a peculiar smell. Like rotten eggs, or like standing next to a hot spring... It smelled of sulfur. No one would come near somewhere like this—not even the people who worked at the shrine. They must have abandoned it if visitors couldn’t see it.

“...What is this place? It gives me the creeps.”

Rubbing her sore shoulders, Mifuyu proceeded forward.

She walked through the small, cramped room, reaching the far wall in under ten paces. But in that interval, the sulfur smell and the heat intensified, and Mifuyu wished with all her hope that she could get out as soon as possible. But she steeled her nerves and continued her search.

“Something that could hold two hundred books would have to be decently big. But since no one said anything, it would have to be somewhere hard to see. Some place like the hall housing the god.”

The morning sun had already risen high above the horizon, but she could hardly see a thing and had to shuffle around on her hands and knees to search for the books. The dust burned her throat, and she coughed time and again.

“Don’t get in my way. This is your fault, isn’t it?”

Tears stinging her eyes, Mifuyu glared into the darkness, cursing some unseen entity.

“Come on, give up. If you feel bad about what you did, then help me out!”

Just then, she felt a dent in the floor. One of the floorboards sat just a centimeter or so lower than the others. She dug her nails into the gap around the board and lifted up; it came away surprisingly easily, and she peered into an open space below.

“Oh, that’s right. My phone.”

Mifuyu removed her phone from her shoulder bag, cursed the icon telling her that its battery was low, and, using the screen as a flashlight, pointed it into the opening. She saw a large container that looked like a wicker basket. Quickly removing the next floorboard, she thrust her arms into the hole up to her shoulders. Thankfully, the box was unlocked, so lifting up on the lid with her fingers proved enough to slide it open.

Breathing heavily, she withdrew her arms and pointed her phone inside. It contained books, a large stash that looked old and was decaying from all the mold and humidity.

“I found them...!”

Her relief lasted only a moment, though, because a strong wind began to blow outside and shake the hall violently. The stench of sulfur caused her stomach to churn, and she retched.

“I found the books—what next?”

She didn’t know who’d brought the books here. Had this unknown entity that kept interfering with Mifuyu, the thing that her father called “it,” stolen the books.? In a book-curse world, “it” could surely move the books and make them vanish, but what about in the real world?

Somehow resisting her rising urge to vomit, Mifuyu examined the opening a little more, pointing her light at the basket beneath the floorboards. The books were all international mysteries and magazines that her great-grandfather

Kaichi would collect, except they all had something that every other book in Mikura Hall lacked.

A red stamp. A small piece of paper with a tiny round stamp impressed upon it had been attached to the cover of every book she could see. Mifuyu stuck an arm in the opening again and managed to bring a book up. She examined it up close, the stamp on the paper reading:

Endowment from Kaichi Mikura

“What...what in the world?”

All her strength left her.

She understood what *endowment* meant. The same thing was written on the back of the statue on her school grounds and in the corner on a plaque of a painting hanging in the library.

These books hadn’t been stolen. Her great-grandfather had donated them.

According to her father’s notebook, the day that the books had been “stolen” happened six years after her great-grandfather had passed away. Six years. A peculiar number.

Remembering something, she removed her father’s notebook and flipped it open to the beginning.

On his birthday, he’d go to the Minazuki Festival.

“Great-Grandpa’s birthday is during the Minazuki Festival.”

Had her great-grandfather arranged something with his friend, the previous priest of the shrine? If so, she had no way of knowing why six years after his death was the condition for the donation. She just knew that her great-grandfather’s birthday and the Minazuki Festival shared an important connection.

“They made a promise that these books would be donated to the priest during the Minazuki Festival on Great-Grandpa’s birthday. And so they were hauled away. Dad was too busy thinking about the girl he liked, so he might not have paid attention if the priest showed up and explained that to him. He was twelve, so no one would have told him anything anyway. And the priest might

have considered it too much trouble to try to talk with Tamaki and decided to not say anything...”

So the books had been taken without anyone knowing anything. No one told Tamaki, and her intense dedication to books caused a commotion. Even if the priest tried to confess, Tamaki was so enraged that she would never have given him the chance. He probably hoped that Tamaki would eventually cool off and just decided to keep his mouth shut, but Tamaki was vindictive.

And the precious donated books were hidden underneath the floorboards of the shrine’s main hall, since it was off-limits to outsiders, where they lay forgotten and succumbed to mold and insects.

“How horrible.”

If someone had just said something, if someone had just trusted other people, then none of this might ever have come to pass.

Mifuyu felt deflated.

“So there never was a thief...? But wait a second.”

Mifuyu looked at something directly ahead of her in the darkness.

“You helped Grandma with the book curse. You guided her to it. I bet you knew there was no thief. You live here, don’t you?”

The hall suddenly began to rattle again as if to show its discomfort.

“So you just used Grandma, is that it? And you turned everyone in town into foxes—to, what, make them your slaves? To eat them? Don’t tell me you were just lonely.”

She must have hit the mark, because the wind outside shook the building as though yelling back.

“Getting angry won’t help. It’s not okay to trick people.”

But whatever she was talking to wasn’t human, so what could she do now?

Just then, an idea popped into her head. She was a little embarrassed to say it, but it might be worth trying.

If someone had stolen the books, then—

Mifuyu removed the books from the wicker basket, gripped the books her grandfather had donated in both arms, and closed her eyes as if to pray.

“Whoever steals this book—”

The wind shrieked and howled.

“—shall leave Yomunaga and return everyone to normal!”

Following her declaration, the wind stopped, the area grew still, and the smell of sulfur vanished.

Morning light poured in, illuminating the entire room. The sinister atmosphere was gone. The peaceful hall held a perfectly regular wooden altar.

Mifuyu gradually stood, stepped over the toppled sliding paper door, and walked outside. What she saw astounded her—not a single one of the multitudinous fox statues was there, and the shrine grounds had returned to normal. Not even the statue of Mashiro remained.

In that moment, the ground shook violently, and a translucent haze appeared from the bottom of the hill before ascending into the sky. The haze appeared to have a bushy tail and pointy ears.

The people in town had absolutely no idea that they had been turned into foxes. They wore the same clothes they had on before they became foxes, drove their cars, continued shopping, and worked at their stores. Half a day’s memories should be missing, but for some reason, when they came to, completely ordinary memories filled the space, like carbon copies of their average day-to-day lives supplemented that lost time. It was like some unsuitable part of a film had been removed and replaced with a different set of film, then edited to create a smooth narrative.

Daily life continued without a hitch. No one talked about trains not stopping at Yomunaga Station, it never made the news, and no one filed any complaints.

And when Mifuyu visited Wakaba, Haruta seemed to have no recollection of their adventures together. On the street, Keiko passed by Mifuyu like a stranger.

In all of Yomunaga, only Mifuyu remembered the book curse.

Mifuyu realized that she hadn't seen Hirune the day she chased away the amorphous entity residing in the shrine. Hirune should have been sleeping at the base of the torii. Mifuyu called and called for her, but she never appeared. The same with Mashiro.

Mifuyu nervously headed over to the hospital, practically running to the room where Ayumu should be sleeping. He was there and confusedly asked Mifuyu what was wrong. He asked it so casually that she wasn't sure where to begin.

Eventually, she asked, "Where's Aunt Hirune?"

But her father looked confused. "Huh?" he replied. "Who's this Aunt Hirune you're talking about, Mifuyu? Are you okay? Maybe you should take a nap."

Ayumu had forgotten about his sister. Shocked, Mifuyu chatted for a bit before going back to Mikura Hall.

It was quiet, but it no longer felt so imposing. The ever-present Hirune was no longer there, the ticking of the clock the only sound. However, the garbage can overflowed with waste, and food remained on the table. Mifuyu felt a little relief seeing some evidence of Hirune's existence. Something beyond memories. Some trace of that person remained.

Heading upstairs, she opened the door to the stacks and looked at each shelf in turn. Where had Mashiro gone? None of Ayumu's stories were here; the shelves just contained the same books as always.

Mifuyu had ordered that thing to leave, and it had. So whatever had been powering the book curse had disappeared.

But her father's notebook was still in her shoulder bag, along with Hirune's leftovers.

After that day, Mifuyu stopped by Mikura Hall every day on her way home from school, carefully reading the cover of each book crammed on the shelves. She hoped to find some clue about how to dispel this vague feeling that remained with her.

For some reason, Mifuyu believed that Mashiro was still out there. She thought that Mashiro still lived in that place she called purgatory. Book curses didn't always rely on magic—Mifuyu believed that magic was available to more

than just the strange thing that had inhabited Yomunaga Shrine.

Summer continued, fall came to an end, winter arrived, and spring began. Ayumu left the hospital and fretted over what to do with Mikura Hall.

“We can’t hang on to Grandma Tamaki’s obsession forever,” Ayumu said to Mifuyu as he washed dishes. “What if we sold the books? We’d get a little money, and we could renovate the hall into a proper home. Don’t you want to live somewhere bigger?”

Mifuyu tucked her legs to her chin as she sat in her chair, looking around at the laundry hanging from the doorframes and the clutter in front of the TV.

“...Even a bigger house will be just as cluttered. It’d be the same wherever we live,” she said.

“You don’t want to sell it? You used to keep saying we should.”

“Yeah, but you know how it is.”

Mifuyu remembered her conversation with Mashiro in the world of *Black Book*. Under the scattered streetlights, Mashiro had listened to the things Mifuyu couldn’t even tell her friends.

“It’s not easy to get something back once it’s gone. Renovate it, and it won’t ever go back to how it was. And it might be more valuable than we think. So yeah.”

“I see. Tamaki would be very pleased to hear something like that coming from your mouth.”

It wasn’t for Grandma Tamaki. Mifuyu wanted to let him know that, but instead, she kept quiet and just played with her hair.

Instead of selling it, Ayumu reopened Mikura Hall to the general public. They limited admission to the weekends only, since Mifuyu ran the counter and could only do so on those days. People gradually came to visit, and Mifuyu observed them from the couch that Hirune had often slept on, noting them nervously gazing at all the books, knowing that they could borrow any of them.

Every now and then, as Ayumu cooked or helped organize Mikura Hall, he would stop what he was doing and get a far-off look in his eyes. One day, as

Mifuyu walked by her father's room, she saw through the crack in his door that he was eagerly searching through pictures in a photo album. Just to test something out, Mifuyu announced that she might go take a nap for a little bit, and that startled her father.

Some part of him surely remembered her aunt. Meanwhile, Mifuyu desperately wanted to see Mashiro again. It was harder for her, since she still retained her memories.

A full year after Mikura Hall reopened to the public, Mifuyu stopped by on a day where the bright early summer sky filled the world. Standing a little taller, she carried the book she was reading in her bag. After opening Mikura Hall, she heard people talking about the Mikura family less and no longer resisted reading. She felt like she had finally managed to escape Tamaki's curse.

Books were the only thing that filled the hole in her heart. She missed those adventures of hers, tromping around those magical worlds. When she realized that she earnestly wanted to do it all again, she finally understood why her father didn't do anything about the book curse even though he opposed the idea.

On weekdays when no one else was around, she would sit in the sunroom, reading on the couch where Hirune had often slept. As Mifuyu followed the words, she would start down on the road of adventure, joining hands with the hero as she immersed herself in the world, and that somehow managed to ease her loneliness.

Her eyesight got worse, probably from all the sudden reading, but the glasses didn't interfere with her life, and she didn't want to leave her books. She harbored a vague premonition that she would meet Mashiro again as she moved from story to story.

One day, after finishing her some-hundredth book, she headed toward the second-floor stacks to return her book to the shelves. Looking outside through the sunroom window, she thought over the exhilaration she would feel watching bulldozers demolish this place. She'd like to do that someday. She'd love that.

But before that, she needed to get those two out of there. Out of the world of

stories.

Standing on the protruding second-floor balcony, she saw the image of her young father from behind, the one she had seen in his notes. She bought a pen and paper and spread them out on a desk.

Pressing the pen against her chin, she thought for a moment before slowly starting to write.

Ask anyone about Kaichi Mikura from Yomunaga, and they'll describe for you a book collector and nationally renowned literary critic. He was a prominent local man who lived his entire life in Yomunaga, from the moment he came into this world screaming and crying until his sudden passing on his veranda with a book in his hand.

People called him a walking encyclopedia. "If you need to know something, ask Kaichi," they'd say. "If you're looking for a book, talk to Kaichi." Or: "If something's bothering you, Kaichi's better than a doctor," and so on. No one knew how many books his collection contained.

The town of Yomunaga was shaped like a rounded rhombus. Located where a wide river forked north and south, the town sat in isolation like an island where the two branches diverged and then rejoined.

And at the center of this rhombus stood Mikura Hall. By the time of Kaichi's death, multiple renovations saw Mikura Hall grow into a massive library that stretched from its second-floor basement to two stories. Famous throughout town, it was said that every resident of Yomunaga—from toddlers to the most elderly citizens—had set foot inside at least once.

Born in 1900, Kaichi had steadily built up his book collection since the 1920s until he passed away and left everything to his daughter, Tamaki Mikura, a superb collector in her own right who continued expanding the library.

And where books reside, collectors flock, though not all collectors are honorable ones.

One day, Tamaki realized that close to two hundred volumes had gone missing from Mikura Hall's rare book collection. Books had been stolen from time to time before; Tamaki had once even threatened one of Kaichi's friends,

an antique bookseller, into staking out a used-book exchange, then yelled at the people trying to resell some stolen books for a hefty sum and brought the culprit to the police.

In her fury at discovering that nearly two hundred rare books had vanished from the collection, Tamaki decided to close Mikura Hall to the public. Neighbors watched as, over the course of a day, a major security company installed alarms in every nook and cranny of the building under Tamaki's scrupulous gaze. From then on, no one save for members of the Mikura family could enter the library or borrow a book. Even famous researchers and Kaichi's close friends were resolutely turned away.

Mikura Hall was closed. As a result, people never again heard Tamaki fly into a rage whenever she realized a book had been stolen. Although it was a shame that no one would ever peruse the stacks at Mikura Hall again, things were finally peaceful. Yomunaga had earned a reputation as the Town of Books; finding things to read there was not a difficult endeavor. The townspeople enjoyed the respite from Tamaki's temper.

However, once Tamaki breathed her last, a bizarre rumor began to slowly spread.

It claimed that she hadn't resorted to simple mundane alarms to protect the books she'd so loved. Word had it that she had called upon a fox god with a long-standing connection to Yomunaga to cast a strange spell over each and every tome.

This story begins a few days after Tamaki's son, Ayumu—the current caretaker of Mikura Hall, sharing the role with his sister, Hirune—was admitted to the hospital.

But the protagonist is neither Ayumu nor Hirune. That role belongs to a girl of the next generation: Ayumu's daughter, Mifuyu Mikura.

She was simply mimicking the writing style of the book she had just finished. The words flew onto the page more easily than she anticipated, rather satisfyingly. Mifuyu lost herself in writing a story born from her heart, finding it more absorbing than reading ones written by other people. In this, she was the protagonist. Those sluggish days when nothing ever changed. There, she found

the figure of her father and her memories of her aunt Hirune. And then one day, something strange happened.

Mifuyu hurriedly released the talisman, sensing that she had touched upon some mysterious force. The moment she did, she was suddenly engulfed by a breeze that blew in from seemingly nowhere. She spun in circles trying to figure out where it had come from, but all the windows in the sunroom were shut tight.

As though driven by a will of its own, the wind left Mifuyu, lifted the talisman playfully into the air, and twirled it around before setting it down in front of a bookshelf built into the hallway.

In that spot, Mifuyu saw a pair of feet.

An innocent-looking girl stood there, wearing white running shoes and socks and a school uniform the same as Mifuyu's.

Mifuyu screamed at the top of her lungs, falling on her behind and backing away. This girl had to be a ghost. She'd appeared without so much as a sound or warning, and her shoulder-length hair was as white as snow.

Just then, she heard the door to the stacks open.

"Mifuyu," a familiar voice called out.

Looking up, she saw a girl standing there with pointy dog ears sticking up from her pure-white hair.

"I'm not a ghost. Look."

This girl had once said those exact words when she appeared on the gondola after being eaten by the giant beast. Looking quickly to the side through her tearstained vision, Mifuyu saw that same sleepyhead snoring lightly on the couch, just like always.

She had to tell her father. But first—

Grinning wide, Mifuyu opened her arms and hugged her friend. She felt warm. Her friend's arms wrapped around her back.

Mifuyu had no intention of letting go.



Commentary

Ritsuko Sanbe (Professional Translator)

There are many books about books.

Books containing stories (stories within stories), books with characters that love reading, books set in libraries or bookstores, books on the history or trajectory of books. People of all ages and backgrounds write about books, and *Whoever Steals This Book* is a new addition to this prestigious tradition. However, one major difference separates this story from the majority of books about books that have been published to date. The lead character, our high school student Mifuyu, doesn't like books!

Mifuyu was born into the Mikura family, who owns Mikura Hall in Yomunaga, a building that is "a massive library that [stretches] from its second-floor basement to two stories." Her great-grandfather was a book collector renowned throughout Japan. Her grandmother Tamaki greatly increased the collection, and her father, Ayumu, and her aunt Hirune now look after it. Yomunaga is known as the Town of Books, and booklovers flock to this city. The town has around fifty stores related to books, including new bookstores, stores specializing in children's books, and used bookstores handling rare books and translated novels, as well as book cafés and variety stores with things like bookmarks and other book-related goods. The town even has Yomunaga Shrine, which houses an Inari goddess that protects literature. It is a dream town for anyone who picked up this book (probably a booklover).

However, Mifuyu absolutely hates everything involving books. "Mifuyu didn't even like books. She didn't read. She despised books." However, Mifuyu gets dragged into a situation where she has to read. Because the book curse cast over Mikura Hall has been triggered.

What is a book curse, you ask? People used to write curses inside books (book curses) to prevent them from being stolen. In the library of ancient Assyria, curses were attached to books (clay tablets at the time) that would curse anyone and the descendants of anyone who walked away with a book or wrote their name in one without permission. Apparently, even in the Middle Ages, some people would write things like, “If anyone take away this book, let him die the death; let him be fried in a pan; let the falling sickness and fever seize him; let him be broken on the wheel, and hanged. Amen.” That curse was nothing but torture! Back then, the skin of hundreds of sheep was required to create the parchment for a book, and each letter had to be copied by hand, so books were extremely valuable items, and it’s no wonder that writing a curse that vicious would make some people think twice about stealing.

And now a book curse has been cast upon the books inside Mikura Hall.

One day, Mifuyu visits Mikura Hall without knowing about any of that and meets a girl with bleach-white hair. Her name is Mashiro. She tells Mifuyu that some books were stolen from Mikura Hall and that triggered the curse, which has transformed the entire town into the world of the story. The thief is trapped in this town, which has become a story world. The only way to release the curse is to catch the thief. Mifuyu refuses to believe such an absurd tale, but once she steps outside, the town has transformed into a world of magical realism, where the moon winks and it rains pearls...

And so each time a book is stolen from Mikura Hall, Mifuyu enters either a world of magical realism, a hard-boiled world, a world of fantasy and steam, or a world of a lonely town—trapped in the cage of a story.

The depictions of each of these changed towns is one appealing aspect of reading this book. The magical world where the night sky is “the body of a giant black cat,” the hard-boiled world where a swaggering detective “[tosses] his cigarette butt into a stinking gutter” while saying things like “I’m no stranger to dancing with the devil,” and the steampunk-like world where giant gears turn in a massive factory and white steam billows—the author uses such descriptions to vividly paint each world with sentences that match each genre.

It’s natural, then, that this one book should appeal to a wide variety of people. The author, Nowaki Fukamidori, made her debut with *Au Blanc no*

Shoujo (The girls of the white garden), a collection of historical fiction and dark fantasy stories, where *Armed with Skillets* and *Berlin wa Hareteiruka* (Is it sunny in Berlin?) are both set in war zones and based on a tremendous amount of references material. (Please check out the list of references at the end of the books!) She doesn't limit herself to one genre, however. *Wakaremichi Nostradamus* (Nostradamus and the forking path) is a coming-of-age story about the life of a modern high school student, *God is Hard to Find* brings together a collection of short sci-fi stories, and *Staffroll* is a feminist novel describing working conditions in the film industry. The author writes freely across a wide range of genres.

All her books, however, are mysteries of the highest caliber. Any Fukamidori book contains some aspect of solving a mystery, and she reels us into her stories. This book, of course, is no different. With it, we can't stop turning the pages as we lose ourselves in the various mysteries, from chapter-specific mysteries like what (genre of) story will Mifuyu be trapped in and the identity of the thief in that world, to mysteries that span the entire book like where the stories come from, how the book curse came to be, Mashiro's true identity, who Hirune really is, and so much more. We read, following each interweaving thread...until the author finally masterfully reveals how all the threads ultimately connect.

I'd like to mention one more wonderful aspect of Fukamidori's works. In this book, Mashiro always has Mifuyu's back. Mifuyu is utterly lost in these story prisons, but Mashiro is always there to guide her. And then Mifuyu eventually helps Mashiro. That reciprocity and discovering Mashiro's true identity are real highlights of the book.

The two of them reminded me of Marguerite and Myosotis in *Au Blanc no Shoujo* (The girls of the white garden). Looking at it from 2023, two girls supporting each other through extreme circumstances is the essence of sisterhood literature. In that way, *Kataomoi* (Unrequited love) in the same collection of short stories tells of the "core" within Iwa-sama's soul. "It is an honor that you permit me to bear part of this heavy burden." The two of them share the hardships of life while managing to survive, supporting each other and overcoming obstacles. I think that Mifuyu and Mashiro carry on the

sisterhood that Matilda and Vivienne share in *Staffroll*. They live in different times and work different jobs, but in many ways, they bear the same hardships.

I'm about at my page limit, but I'd like to discuss one more point about Fukamidori's works. And that is that all the food sounds so good! While the dishes themselves are not luxurious or anything, the depictions of the shopping district are so enjoyable. The skewers of grilled bonito where she describes "the skin and fat from the blue-backed fish as it sizzled above the coals" that comes with green onion, *shiso*, Japanese ginger, and grated ginger sound delectable. I loved the details like the chicken-butcher owner as he "deftly turned rows of sticks" of grilled yakitori and the daughter remembering which one of her customers preferred salt or sauce. The scene is filled with living depictions of Yomunaga, which is precisely what emphasizes the state of the town after its changes. Pickled plum and soy-boiled seaweed "nestled" in white rice, "Szechuan chicken in a thick leek sauce"... All of it sounds scrumptious.

In *Armed with Skillets*, I can't forget the food that the grandmother of Tim, the protagonist, prepared. Deviled eggs using sweetly tangy pickles, fried apples, and scones. Even on the battlefield, Tim cooked good meals using apples and sausage. However, the war intensified afterward, and he couldn't cook proper meals anymore. Fukamidori's works make subtle use of these culinary scenes. The alligator soup served as Auguste works in the US army kitchens in *The Berlin Sonne* (if you wonder why, then read the book); the gyro at a Greek restaurant during Matilda's training, and the food made according to the laws of kashruth (dietary regulations concerning the foods that Jewish people can eat) in *Staffroll*; and the croissant filled with red wild-strawberry jam in *The Girls of the White Garden* (an important point). In *A Lone Memory*, the smell of roasted mackerel indicates the making of amends.

One last, final point. (I know, I know!) Fukamidori's works prominently feature young protagonists, and I would love for more young readers to pick up her works.

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