

Urban Legend Detectives Case 1: The Merry's Mail



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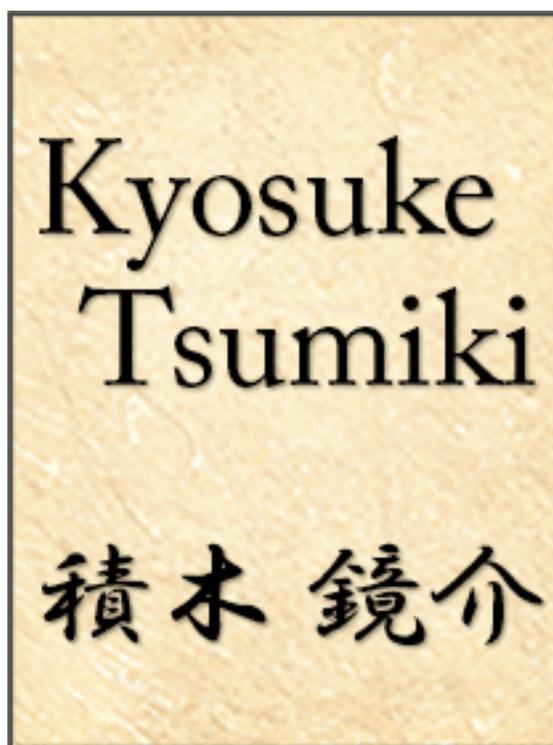
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“I knew that you would definitely come here.”

Seated at the double pedestal desk, which was placed at the center of the stark room, White Friend spoke to Black Friend, who was sitting opposite him.

White Friend was wearing a long lab coat over an open-neck shirt and had a stethoscope around his neck. His face was not visible as it was completely concealed by a black mask with no holes for his eyes and nose. Not only his mask but also his shoes, pants, shirt, and lab coat were black. Yes, White Friend was dressed entirely in black.

“Or if you prefer, should I say that I appeared before you? For me, either way is okay.”

“I can say that there was a guy who we would never want to encounter even if we were given all of the world’s treasures. Don’t you agree?” said Black Friend with a cracking voice.

In contrast to White Friend, Black Friend was dressed entirely in white. This included his shirt, cotton pants, shoes, and hoodie, which was pulled over his face in order to hide it.

White Friend shrugged and seemingly teased Black Friend, saying, “A guy who we would never want to encounter even if we were given all of the world’s treasures? Ah ... could you say that I am such a person?”

Attempting to interrupt the inquiry, Black Friend retorted, “What I want to know is whether you are still trying to cure me, sir.”

“No wonder. I am the only person in the world who can cure you.”

Black Friend then asked, “Do you truly believe that you can cure me?” Instead of answering the question, White Friend posed another question, “By the way, do you know what the original form of a human being is?” and curved his lips under his black mask. “When an ovum is fertilized by sperm and cell division occurs in a uterus, a thin bag is initially created.”

Black Friend said nothing and awaited the rest of the story.

“A bag. Can you imagine that? One mouth of the bag becomes the anus, while the other becomes the intestines. No eyes, no nose, and no brain cells. Just intestines and an anus.”

*That is the original form of a human being?* thought Black Friend to himself.

“Yes, this tiny bag is the original form of a human being,” said White Friend, as if in response to Black Friend’s thoughts. He added, “Then, the heart, lungs, nerves, muscles, and other such matter emanate from the bag. In short ...” White Friend paused to look at Black Friend, “the human being is an accessory of the intestines. The hands and legs were added, followed by the eyes and a nose, and then, the brain was attached. This is the basic human being.”

Staring at the stethoscope around White Friend’s neck, Black Friend said, with utmost irony, “If I am an accessory of the intestines, maybe I should consult a physician.”

But White Friend didn’t acknowledge the sarcastic comment and continued, “Alright, let’s begin our treatment. Make yourself comfortable. Forget our formal relationship as doctor and patient, and just relax. From this moment on, we are ‘friends’. You are now ‘a friend of White Friend’, or a ‘Friend of a Friend’.”

“Friend of a Friend?”

“Yeah. At the same time, I am also ‘a friend of Black Friend’, and thus a ‘Friend of a Friend’.”

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“You mean both you and I are ‘Friends of a Friend?’”

“Right. So please tell me everything. Do NOT hide anything since we are already ‘Friends of a Friend.’”

*What a strange conversation!* thought Black Friend. But the strange conversation inspired him to speak.

“To tell you the truth ... I feel the presence of another self.”

White Friend nodded with particular interest.

“It might be either an ‘alter ego’, a ‘shadow’, or a ‘doppelgänger’.”

“Hmm ... it is a rare case, but there are precedents, of course.”

“He is absolutely my alternate self, but he has done selfish things against my will. I feel he might do something terrible in the future ... and I can’t stop thinking about it.”

Black Friend crossed his arms with a flourish and asked, “Well, what do you think this ‘other self’ will do?”

“Murder.”

“Murder?!”

The conversation immediately stopped for what seemed like an eternity.

Breaking the silence, White Friend asked, “By the way, have you heard this story before? One day, there was a young girl ...”

## -1-

A junior high school student named Yukiko was organizing her belongings in preparation to move to a new apartment. In the back of a closet, she found an old doll that her mother gave her when she was younger. The European doll, named Merry, had green eyes and curly blonde hair, and it rekindled fond memories. Yukiko truly loved Merry and held it when she played, ate, and slept. She even embarrassingly recalled how she tried to bring Merry to the bath and how she was scolded by her mother for doing so. In fact, she carried Merry so often that the doll’s body was damaged in certain places by the time Yukiko went to elementary school. Still, Yukiko always valued Merry.

*Merry and I will forever be together ...*

One day, her mother came home and said, “Yukiko, I have a surprise for you.”

Her mother’s surprise was ... a brand new “Merry.”

Lifting the doll, Yukiko thought, *Mom gave me a new Merry instead of repairing the old Merry.*

As the new “Merry” became Yukiko’s companion, she didn’t have the heart to throw away the old Merry, so she kept it in the closet.

She stared at the doll for a while, and as she placed it into a plastic garbage bag, instead of the cardboard box being transported to her new house, she felt a pang of guilt. *Sorry Merry, but I’m afraid that there is no room for you.*

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One evening, after Yukiko’s family had moved into the new apartment and unpacked, her parents went out and left Yukiko alone. As she sat to read her favorite teen magazine on a sofa in the living room, her cell phone alerted her to a new email.

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*From whom?*

But the email included no subject or sender's name. In spite of her wariness, Yukiko curiously opened the email. She frowned at it:

**This is Merry. Why did you throw me away?**

Yukiko thought, *What the hell is this?!*

Before she could gather her thoughts, she received another email, which also included no subject or sender's name. As if manipulated by some external force, Yukiko reluctantly opened the second email:

**This is Merry. I'm lonely. It's so cold here.**

As soon as Yukiko finished reading the message, she received another message:

**This is Merry. Can I come see you?**

Yukiko dropped the cell phone onto the carpet and stood there panic-stricken.

*What the hell is this?!*

The messages made Yukiko visualize throwing Merry away in the garbage bag. She imagined the doll feeling melancholy and lonely, with her accusatory green eyes filled with hatred.

*It must be a joke!* she thought, shaking her head in disgust. *Someone must be trying to scare and tease me. Yes, that's it. There is no way that this is really Merry's email!!*

But who knew that Yukiko was alone tonight? As Yukiko reached for the cell phone on the carpet, she received another message:

**This is Merry. I just arrived at the station. I will be there soon.**

Yukiko closed the email and quickly thumbed the number of one of her friends, who she guessed was the perpetrator of this bad joke. When her friend answered the phone, Yukiko yelled, "Hey, this is Yukiko! Did you send me a strange email?"

But the lispy voice on the other end was not that of her friend, but of a little girl.

"This is Merry. I'm in front of the convenience store, which you can see from the window in your room."

Yukiko screamed and dropped the cell phone again. She thought, *What was that?! Why did I hear a little girl's voice? She told me she was Merry!*

Amidst the horror and disorder, she received another message.

Yukiko looked at the cell phone on the carpet with frightened eyes.

*I can't stand it! I don't want to answer! I don't want to read the email!*

However, the horror of not reading the email was stronger than that of reading it, so Yukiko picked up the cell phone and opened the email with trembling fingers:

**This is Merry. I'm in front of your apartment.**

With the cell phone in her hand, Yukiko ran to the balcony and gazed at the entrance of the apartment building below, which was bathed in streetlights.

No one was there ...

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*How stupid I was! Someone couldn't be there! They couldn't be!*

Yukiko attempted to force her lips into a smile and walked back to the living room.

As the cell phone alerted her to yet another message, she thought, *Stop it! You are scaring me too much! Please stop it!* Looking at the message, her breath quickened:

**This is Merry. I'm in front of your room.**

“Nooooooooo!!”

Yukiko dropped the cell phone and ran into the kitchen, where she grabbed a kitchen knife and held it in her quivering hands.

*Easy, Yukiko. No one is here. No one could be here!* as she slowly walked to the front door.

*Yes, this must just be a joke.*

She swallowed her fear, confirmed that the door was locked, and peered into the fisheye lens on the door.

*No one is here. Nothing is here. I should have more courage,* Yukiko thought to herself.

She glanced at the kitchen knife in her right hand and grasped the doorknob with her other hand.

Opening the door slowly, she looked around the empty, lit corridor and quickly shut the door.

*I knew it. It was just a joke!*

She returned to the living room and sat on the sofa, as if she was drained of her energy. The tension was replaced by the feeling of ridiculousness.

*I am so stupid. I should have known. Merry's email is so ridiculous.*

She received another message.

*What now? Do you want to say, "I am sorry, Yukiko. Was it too scary for you?"*

She reached for the cell phone. *How many times did she pick it up tonight?*

*The author of the emails has to be one of her friends.*

Yukiko imagined talking to one of her friends, who she guessed was the author.

*Scary? No way! Not at all. No one could be fooled by such a childish joke!*

Then, she opened the latest email:

**This is Merry. I'm behind you.**

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A shrill scream echoed throughout the hamburger shop. The customers turned toward the voice, which came from a group of five uniformed high school girls.

“Hey, Keiko. That story is sooo scary!”

“I, too, felt a chill when I heard the final email, ‘I'm behind you!’”

Despite these statements, no fear was visible on their faces.

Keiko said, “Haven't any of you heard this story before? It's called ‘Merry's Mail’, and it's pretty famous.”

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“Oh, really?”

“Ah ... I might have heard it before.”

“So, what happened to the girl in the story?”

“She was killed by Merry ...” whispered Keiko. “Then, her parents came home and found their daughter’s dead body.”

“Oh, that’s not the story I heard,” interrupted another girl. “I heard that she went missing.”

“No no! I heard that she was found in a pool of blood!” retorted another girl.

The girls’ discussion had become loud, which bothered the surrounding customers.

Another group of three uniformed high school girls sat at a table a little distance away. Their uniforms differed from those of the other group and consisted of a brown blazer, a white blouse, and a brilliant red ribbon. One of the three girls was chubby, cheerful, and had wavy, shoulder-length hair. She asked, “Satomi, what’s wrong with you? Is everything okay?”

“Eh? Ah, nothing is wrong. Thank you, Haruna,” she replied as she lowered her eyes, seeming to hide something. Satomi’s hair was short, and she often looked energetic, or even strong-minded.

“Really?” asked Haruna anxiously.

The other girl, Misaki, took out a cell phone with a strap and handed it to Satomi.

“Thank you, Misaki.”

Misaki was a typical high school girl with heavy makeup and brown-dyed wavy hair.

“So cute! Misaki, attach it to my cell phone too!” said Haruna, as she removed her own cell phone.

“Of course. I bought three, including mine.”

Misaki took Haruna’s cell phone and began attaching the strap to it on the table.

“Done! Now we have the same strap for each of our cell phones!” Misaki returned the cell phone to Haruna, glanced at the group of five girls, and said, “I don’t understand their behavior. They talk so loudly about such a creepy story.”

“I agree. Well, I’ve also heard the story,” Haruna said ominously. “Recently, the story was spread by email.”

“By email? You mean ...”

“Through a chain letter.”

“A chain letter?”

This conversation between Misaki and Haruna appeared to disturb Satomi.

“Yeah. The story I heard was almost the same as the one discussed by those girls. The end of the letter includes the phrase, ‘You have to forward this letter to five people within three hours. Otherwise ...’”

“Otherwise ... what?”

“Merry will visit your place tonight.”

Satomi suddenly stood up and interrupted, “Sorry, but I’m going home.”

“What?”

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“Ah, sorry, Satomi. We will stop discussing this story.”

Misaki and Haruna tried to detain Satomi, but she shook her head, “No worries. It just makes me feel weird.”

“Well, we can’t stop you. So, see you tomorrow at school.”

Satomi left the shop as her friends began to argue.

“It was your fault! You brought up the story!”

“I didn’t mean to upset her ...”

Left behind, there was an awkward silence between Misaki and Haruna.

As if trying to change the mood, Misaki took her purse, stood up, and said, “I’m going to the lavatory.”

Haruna noticed the purse and asked, “Hey, Misaki. Did you get a new purse? Wasn’t that just released by a popular brand? Was it expensive?”

“Ah, actually ... my dad bought it for me. You know, after I got the highest score on the exam the other day,” Misaki said proudly.

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It was a little after 7:00 p.m. when Satomi arrived at the station near her house. She quickly walked the deserted road along the railway track that led to a narrow, short tunnel under an elevated bridge. Her house was not far from the tunnel.

Satomi stopped. *If my memory is correct, I think I have seen THAT around here before. In somewhat of a shock, I called Ayano, who had constantly been my classmate from junior high school onward. Although we hadn’t spoken in years, I found herself calling her old friend and ...*

Suddenly, Satomi’s cell phone indicated that she had received an email.

*Who is it?*

But the email included no subject or sender’s name. She froze as she read it:

**This is Merry. Can I come see you?**

She stifled a scream as she thought, *Is this ... Merry’s mail?!*

Satomi frantically looked around with frightened eyes. No one was around. Then, she received another email. She opened it with trembling fingers:

**This is Merry. I just arrived at the station. I will be there soon.**

Satomi started running toward her house.

*This must be a joke. Someone’s joke!*

As she rushed into the tunnel, she received another message. She tried to ignore it, but something jogged her memory and compelled her to stop.

*Sorry ... Merry, I’m so sorry ...*

Crying, Satomi opened the email:

**This is Merry. I’m behind you.**

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As her fear peaked, Satomi felt a sharp pain in her back. She collapsed to her knees and crawled along the road on her stomach. Something grasped her shoulder, and as she turned, she saw long, curly, blonde hair; plastic skin; and emotionless green eyes.

*Merry!*

The last thing she saw was the razor-sharp survival knife that swung down at her.

-2-

It was early afternoon, and Kazuki Kobayashi, a detective in the First Investigation Division of the Tokyo Metropolitan Police Department, and Tetsuo Yokota, a detective in the local police department, stood before Sakura Municipal High School. Satomi Takada, who attended this school and was in her second year, was killed the previous night. Kobayashi's loosely permed hair, which was cleanly shaved around the ears, was disheveled by the wind.

Detectives were usually paired. Kobayashi was in his mid-20s and had a baby face with a sharp jaw, while his partner, Yokota, was a veteran who wore glasses that hid his aging eyes. Both men wore simple gray suits and looked like father and son.

It was a gruesome murder. The crime scene, located under the elevated bridge, was in a pool of blood. The victim was a girl who had recently turned 17. Several deep knife wounds were found on her body. The weapon had not been recovered, but it was presumed to have been at least a 30-centimeter knife.

The estimated time of death was between 7:00 and 7:30 p.m. A man discovered the scene on his way home from work. The police had not determined whether the murder was motivated by resentment or perpetrated by a phantom killer.

News of Satomi's murder was broadcast across televisions and newspapers. The teachers were advised to announce the news at the morning assembly even though all the students were aware of the incident.

Strangely enough, the detectives couldn't sense any tension in the school. The boys played football on the grounds and girls' laughter could be heard from the classrooms. The school was exceptionally noisy during the lunch hour. At least on the surface.

On their way to the principal's office, the detectives noticed some students whispering in the corner of a corridor.

"I guess they're talking about last night's murder," said Yokota.

Nodding, Kobayashi felt uncomfortable. The atmosphere was peculiar. The students were serious one moment, but giggling the next. As the students showed their cell phones to one another, a boy wore a frightened look and was teased by the others.

*What the hell is going on in this school?* thought Kobayashi.

The school officials offered them a room for questioning, under the condition that they would not upset any student. The first two students to arrive were Misaki Sakai and Haruna Watanabe. They were assumed to be the last people to see Satomi Takada alive. Both the girls' eyes were red, and it appeared that they had been crying throughout the night.

After they described the murder, Kobayashi said, "In short, Miss Takada felt sick and went home alone, right?"

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“We should have detained her!” yelled Haruna, as she burst into tears. Her outburst was not surprising. They had been with a friend who was then brutally killed. That must weigh heavily on a high school girl. Meanwhile, Misaki kept her eyes lowered.

“It might be difficult for you, but can be honest to help us arrest the criminal? Do you know someone who hated Miss Takada?” asked Kobayashi.

“No one hated her!” Haruna said firmly. “I admit that Satomi was rather strong-minded. However, no one wanted to kill her.”

Yokota interrupted, “But, young girl, in many cases, murders occur over trivial matters. So ... please tell us anything regarding her.”

Haruna whispered, “It’s Merry ...”

Misaki looked up and hastily said, “Haruna! Stop talking about that!” Kobayashi and Yokota exchanged looks and asked, “Merry?”

Misaki clearly seemed upset, and she looked back and forth between Haruna, Kobayashi, and Yokota.

“Er ... is there anything you want to say?” asked Kobayashi.

Haruna removed her cell phone, pushed some buttons, and showed the screen to the detectives. It was an email sent by one of Haruna’s friends in another class:

**Sorry. I received this dangerous email. I’m scared, so I’m sending it to you. Please take care of it.**

**One girl threw away an old, foreign-made doll named Merry, and some time after she had moved, the girl received an email that read:**

**This is Merry. Why did you throw me away?**

**Soon after she read the email, she got another:**

**This is Merry. Can I come see you?**

**Then, more emails came in rapid succession:**

**This is Merry. I just arrived at the station. I will be there soon.**

**This is Merry. I’m in front of your room.**

**The girl courageously opened the front door, but no one was there.**

**She thought that it must have been a joke, but then she received another email:**

**This is Merry. I’m behind you.**

**The person who receives this email must send it to at least five people within three hours.**

**Otherwise, Merry will appear at your place tonight.**

“What’s this?! It is a chain email, isn’t it?” asked Kobayashi suspiciously.

Haruna said, “Please read the bottom line.”

**This is a TRUE story.**

**The girl at municipal “S” high school who failed to forward the email was killed by Merry.**

“No kidding!” said Kobayashi with surprise.

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“The girl in the email was Satomi, wasn’t it?” asked Haruna, as if she needed the confirmation.

She continued to suppress her feelings and said, “Since I heard about Satomi’s death on the 9 o’clock news last night, I haven’t slept at all. Then, I got this email at around 1 a.m. After I arrived here this morning, I discovered that this email had circulated among the entire school. Some students were even amused by it,”

Haruna said disapprovingly. She added in a whisper, “I too, sent the mail to friends since I was so scared ...”

Kobayashi realized that the strange atmosphere at the school might have been a result of the chain mail.

Suddenly Haruna shouted, “The criminal must be Merry! Because no one else had reason to kill Satomi! And before we parted from Satomi at the hamburger shop ...”

“Haruna! Stop talking about it!” interrupted Misaki. But Kobayashi said, “No. Go on, please. What happened at the hamburger shop?”

Haruna nodded and confessed that as another group of girls at the shop were discussing Merry’s mail, Satomi looked strange.

Haruna said, “Satomi must have definitely been scared about Merry!”

Yokota exchanged glances with Kobayashi, as if they thought, *I think we’ve heard enough here.*

Kobayashi nodded and said, “Alright, thank you for your time.”

Yokota handed his business card to the girls and said, “If you recall anything, please call this number.”

“I still believe that Merry killed Satomi,” said Haruna.

“That’s okay, Haruna. Let’s go.” Misaki said as she and Haruna left the room.

After a brief moment, Kobayashi asked Yokota, “Well, what do you think?”

“Well ... they seem to be immature and in shock about their friend’s death. They also seem to be obsessed by that strange idea.”

“But, in fact, that email ...”

“Ah. You mean that specific information about municipal ‘S’ high school?”

Kobayashi nodded.

Yokota continued, “The murder case of Satomi Takada was broadcast on the 9 o’clock news. Since the victim was a high school girl, this became a news sensation. One of the senders of that email probably added the specific information after watching the news. It’s a disgusting joke. And ...”

“And what?”

“Well, to begin with, the victim didn’t actually receive Merry’s mail, did she?”

Yokota was right. Although the police thoroughly checked her cell phone, Satomi Takada had not received such an email. Further, no suspicious telephone or email records were found.

Thereafter, questioning continued primarily with the victim’s classmates. But all their answers were basically the same: they didn’t know of anyone who hated Satomi enough to kill her.

“It seems unlikely that she was killed because of resentment,” said Yokota.

Kobayashi nodded, but was unconvinced.

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Another girl walked into the room. Her name was Ayano Shiozaki; she had shoulder-length hair, long eyelashes, and seemingly docile characteristic. She did not know that the police were especially interested in her.

“You are Ayano Shiozaki, aren’t you?”

Lowering her eyes, she nodded without looking at the two detectives.

Ayano said, “Um ... why was I summoned? I hardly spoke to Satomi ... ah, Miss Takada.”

“We are questioning anyone who was in touch with Miss Takada based on her cell phone records. You received a call from her the night before she was killed, didn’t you?”

Ayano nodded, but didn’t raise her face.

“We noticed that Miss Takada called you on your land line, while she called everyone else on their cell phones.”

Ayano said nothing as if she was waiting for the point.

“Our investigation found that your phone number was not registered in Miss Takada’s cell phone.”

“She might have found my land line number in the junior high school directory. Um ... Miss Takada and I went to the same elementary and junior high schools, and we were always in the same class.”

Kobayashi and Yokota exchanged looks of suspicion.

“And you two were classmates again in this high school?”

Ayano nodded.

“Nevertheless, you said you hardly spoke to Miss Takada?”

Ayano didn’t nod this time and just lowered her eyes.

“By the way, what did you talk about the night before yesterday?”

“Um ... she asked, ‘why don’t we hold a junior high school class reunion?’”

Kobayashi looked surprised. “Reunion?! Only two years have passed since your graduation!”

“Ah ... maybe it was an elementary school reunion. Anyway, she said, ‘Since we will be busy next year either preparing for college entrance exams or job hunting, we should get together before that.’”

It was a convoluted explanation. Kobayashi tried to inquire further, but Yokota interrupted, “Although this is a common question we ask everyone, do you know anyone who hated Miss Takada?”

Ayano shook her head firmly.

“Alright, thank you. If you remember anything else, please call the number on this card,” said Yokota, giving her his business card. As Ayano was leaving the room, she was stopped by Kobayashi.

“Wait, Miss Shiozaki. Do you know the story of Merry’s mail?”

Ayano’s expression changed immediately. Her eyes widened and her lips quivered.

“I heard that a chain mail had circulated among the entire school. Did you receive the email?”

Ayano said nothing and only looked at Kobayashi.

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“Miss Shiozaki ...?” asked Kobayashi, but Yokota said, “Thanks, young lady. You may return to the classroom.”

Ayano bowed and left the room.

Yokota smiled wryly, “Mr. Kobayashi, that wasn’t good. We were required not to upset the students, weren’t we?”

“Ah ... sorry.” Kobayashi bowed, but he still wasn’t convinced.

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“Merry’s mail?” said chief investigator Mariko Tachibana suspiciously, after hearing Kobayashi’s report. Sitting on a chair with her long legs crossed, she didn’t even raise her face.

Kobayashi sighed quietly.

Tachibana was in her late 30s. She was tall with wavy hair and a pointed nose, and she looked great in her business suit. But she was arrogant, not only to her subordinates but also to her supervisors. Allegedly, in her younger years, she was known as “Mariah of West Tokyo,” a well-known delinquent who was feared in her local area. Her strong jaw line reflected her strong-mindedness.

Kobayashi replied, “Yes. We heard such a rumor in the school Satomi Takada attended. It was a so-called chain mail. Chief, have you heard of Merry’s mail?”

“Ah. I heard such a story when I was a kid. Of course, back then, it was a phone call and not an email. It was known as Merry’s call. It was a rather scary story, but more of an urban legend.”

“An urban legend?”

“Yeah. It’s an ordinary scary story—you know, like Dracula or Frankenstein—that everyone knows is complete fiction.”

“Yes.”

“However, the unique feature of urban legends is that many believe the story to be true.”

“Actually, some students at Sakura High School seemed to believe that the message in the email was true, and they were seriously scared.”

Tachibana continued, “There are a variety of such stories. For example, if you use a cell phone at a gas station, its electromagnetic wave will combine with the gasoline and cause a massive explosion. Another states that if you sleep with the air conditioner on at a low temperature, you will die of a heart attack or freeze to death.”

“You mean ... in reality, it won’t happen?”

“Gas stations can’t explode because of only electromagnetic waves! In the case of the air conditioner, if you are healthy, you will definitely wake up before freezing to death!” Tachibana added, “But in some countries, there are warning signs instructing against the use of cell phones at gas stations.”

She continued, “Have you heard the urban legend regarding a famous fast food chain? They say that the restaurants mass-produce genetically engineered chicken with four legs and those with no wings, no comb, no beak, and no eyes to cook them more easily.”

Kobayashi thought that it would be very creepy if this was true.

“Or that a very famous hamburger chain uses cat meat instead of beef.”

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“Ah, I know that story!”

Kobayashi recalled hearing the rumor repeatedly in school when he was a kid and how no one around him minded eating beef.

“So, when the chain opened a new branch, wildcats would begin disappearing in the area.”

*Yes, that's the story I heard,* Kobayashi thought.

“And then, wild dogs would begin disappearing.”

*What? The story continued?*

“Finally, part-time girls working at the restaurant would begin disappearing ...”

*Stupid. That must be an exaggeration!*

“I will tell you more someday,” said Tachibana, looking sharply at Kobayashi.

“So, you didn't find any important clues in this case? Perhaps a guy who hated Satomi Takada, a guy who envied her, or a guy who killed her for perverted love?”

“No, I'm sorry ...”

“Tch! You wasted your time, didn't you?”

Tachibana's cell phone alerted her to an email.

“Ah, it's from Kawashima. He's investigating the victim's family and neighbors,” said Tachibana, almost to herself. “It appears that he also wasted his time. Everybody had similar responses like, ‘She wasn't a person who would be hated by anyone.’”

Kobayashi thought, *Do you hate a girl who is liked by everyone?*

Then Tachibana said, “Resentment probably isn't the motive. We have to consider the case as an indiscriminate murder by a phantom killer. Tch ... what a bother!!”

*But you're doing nothing about it,* Kobayashi thought.

“Hey, Kobayashi. Visit the crime scene tomorrow. I want you to walk until you wear out your soles. Got it? Alright, you can go home.”

Kobayashi said, “Yes, madam,” but remained in his chair.

“What's wrong? Do you have something else to tell me?”

“No ... er ...”

Kobayashi's hesitation irritated Tachibana.

“If you want to say something, say it. I'm ready to listen, even if it is stupid. Don't worry. After listening, I will decide whether I should yell at, beat, or kick you.”

*Don't worry? I will do nothing but worry,* thought Kobayashi.

“To be frank, madam, why don't we investigate Merry's mail?”

“You're still stuck on that idea?”

As Yokota said in the afternoon, such an email should be considered a bad joke. But Kobayashi couldn't shake off the odd feeling that he had since the investigation at the school.

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Tachibana frowned and twirled her wavy hair around her finger.

“Alright. Although I don’t know how you are going to investigate this case, just do it.” Then, Tachibana added, in a slightly warmer tone, “That sounds funny. I must admit that this strange investigation is unique.”

*Funny? It’s a murder investigation!* thought Kobayashi.

With a stern look, Tachibana continued, “But make sure that your work does not adversely affect our primary investigation.”

“Of course. Thank you, madam.”

“Alright. I will give you a shadow buddy.”

Kobayashi asked back, “A shadow buddy?”

Tachibana yelled, “Sasuke!”

Suddenly, another voice replied, “Here,” behind Kobayashi. He turned to see a woman wearing a black suit, tight skirt, and glasses, with long hair that was pulled back into a ponytail. Her name was Sumire Sarutobi, a detective who worked on Tachibana’s team as well as Kobayashi’s. Fair and petite, she stood only about 150 centimeters in height. Her age was uncertain, and even though she looked older than Kobayashi, she sometimes resembled a high school student. Kobayashi had learned that she originally served in the Public Safety Department and was unsure why she had been transferred to Tachibana’s team.

Her expressionless face resembled a mask, and this helped her during undercover investigations. Moreover, although detectives tend to investigate in pairs, she generally worked alone. Due to her extremely mysterious investigation style, she had earned the nickname “Sasuke,” derived from Sasuke Sarutobi, a legendary Japanese ninja. She claimed to be a descendant of the Koga Ninja, a prominent Japanese ninja clan that included Sasuke Sarutobi.

Tachibana asked Sarutobi, “You have listened to our conversation, haven’t you?” Sarutobi nodded, and Tachibana commanded, “Pair up with Kobayashi and investigate the relationship between the murder case and Merry’s mail.”

“Yes, madam,” replied Sarutobi, without looking at Kobayashi.

“Alright. I appoint you two as ‘Urban Legend Detectives’ in the First Investigation Division of the Tokyo Metropolitan Police Department.”

“Urban Legend Detectives?” smirked Kobayashi.

“Kobayashi, are you dissatisfied with this title?”

“Not really,” replied Kobayashi, while thinking to himself, *everything has taken such a strange turn*. “By the way, Chief, I have one question.”

“What?”

“Sorry, madam. But it’s regarding the story of Merry’s mail. It ends with ‘This is Merry. I’m behind you.’”

“What is your point?” pressed Tachibana.

“I wonder what happens to the girl in the story. I heard that in some cases she was killed, and in others, she went missing.”

“You didn’t know that?”

“Sorry, madam. I think I need to study the story some more.”

---

Kobayashi thought, *I can't help it! I heard the story for the first time today!*

He fought the urge to actually say it, because if he did, he would either be punched or kicked by his supervisor.

“After she read the final email, the girl looked back and ...”

“And ...?” asked Kobayashi.

“No one was there.”

“Eh? Merry wasn't there?”

“Then, she received another message.”

“You mean Merry's mail continued?”

“Well, she opened the email and ...”

“What happened?”

“It read ‘This is Merry. I'm in the next room’. Then, she received yet another message.”

“Again?”

“Yes, she opened the email, which read ‘This is Merry. I'm in the apartment opposite yours’. Merry's mails were continual. Several years later, she received an email that read, ‘This is Merry. I'm in Hawaii. Aloha!’”

“Well ... I'll go home now.”

“Hey, wait, Kobayashi. The story doesn't end there. Several years later, she received another email, which read, ‘This is Merry. I'm in New York' ...”

### -3-

The following day, during a house-to-house investigation near the crime scene, Kobayashi and Yokota stopped by Satomi Takada's funeral. Detectives generally attend the funeral of a victim since the attendees and conversations among them often aid the investigation. The detectives stood side-by-side as inconspicuously as possible while they surveyed the situation.

Naturally, many attendees were Satomi's classmates, wearing high school uniforms. This included Misaki Sakai, Haruna Watanabe, and several other students whom the detectives had interviewed at the school.

Kobayashi spotted Ayano Shiozaki standing in the corner. Ayano was talking to a girl wearing a different uniform. She looked like a junior high school student. The girl was emotional and Ayano seemed to console her.

“Mr. Yokota, who is that girl?”

Yokota squinted to get a better look at the girl.

“Ah, she is Kozue Takada, Satomi's younger sister. If I remember correctly, she is in the first year of junior high school.”

“The younger sister of the victim?”

Kobayashi approached the two girls, “Excuse me. Miss Shiozaki, thank you for your cooperation yesterday.”

Ayano and Kozue Takada both looked at Kobayashi, the latter with tears in her eyes.

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“I’m Detective Kobayashi, in charge of the case. Aren’t you Kozue Takada, Satomi’s younger sister?”

Kobayashi inconspicuously flashed his police ID to them as Kozue offered him hostile looks.

“What do you want? I already told the police everything I know.”

“Alright. But I would like to question ...”

Kozue interrupted, “I don’t know anyone who hated my sister. Everyone liked her. So did I. I can’t think of anyone who hated her.” She lowered her teary eyes.

While investigating a murder case, detectives try narrowing down on the person who has reason to kill the victim. But the question, “Do you know someone who hated the victim?” might be misconstrued as insinuating that the victim had a problem.

“Sorry. My job requires me to ask such questions,” said Kobayashi apologetically. “But I don’t want to ask you such a sensitive thing ... I just want to ask if you know about Merry’s mail. It might sound odd, but I have something on my mind.”

Kozue looked up quickly, stared at Kobayashi with eyes wide open, and whispered, “Merry’s ... mail?” Her voice was quivering. She seemed scared. Even Ayano, standing beside her, seemed scared.

*But why?* Kobayashi wondered.

As they stood, a middle-aged woman wearing a mourning dress approached and said “Kozue,” as she gently touched the girl’s shoulder. “Let’s get back to the ceremony hall. Your sister will miss you if you aren’t with her.”

Kozue looked at the woman and Kobayashi as if comparing them. She nodded slightly and left with the woman. Ayano, too, bowed to Kobayashi and hurried away.

Kobayashi was alone, realizing that he couldn’t question underage girls anymore as he didn’t have confidence in the connection between the murder and the story of Merry’s mail. If he continued the inquiry, the girls’ parents would probably complain and question why he was scaring their daughters.

As Kobayashi was about to leave, someone behind him said, “Sir.”

It was Kozue.

“Sir, do you know the real story of Merry’s mail?”

“What?!” Kobayashi tried to probe further, but Kozue was immediately taken into the ceremony hall by the woman.

*The real story of Merry’s mail?*

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It was the break between classes at Sakura High School, and as the students ran around noisily and chatted with one another, a girl approached three boys standing in front of a classroom.

“Hey, sorry for interrupting you guys.”

The three boys gazed back at the girl. She was short and had brown-dyed hair. They could smell the perfume on her sunburned skin, which was heavily laden with makeup.

“Who are you?”

“I belong to the Information Transmission Psychology Research Club of Sakura High School.”

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“Is there such a club in our school?”

The boys looked at each other.

“It was recently established. By the way, have you received Merry’s mail?”

“Ah, I know what that is. It’s the chain mail that was spread among students in this school since the night before last. I received it.”

“Me too,” said another boy.

The girl asked, “Who did you receive it from?”

“Why do you want to know? Will you misuse the information?”

The girl said, “As I said, I belong to the Information Transmission Psychology Research Club. Our goal is to find the route of information transmission and its effects on the human mind.”

*This explanation might sound a little strange, the girl thought.*

“Hey, please! I won’t bother you.”

The boys’ eyes flittered between the girl’s pleading face and her beautiful legs, which extended beyond her short skirt.

“Alright. We’ll cooperate with you.”

“Thank you!”

The girl noted their names and classes. She thanked them and was about to leave, when the boys asked, “Hey, what’s your name?”

“I’m Sasuke. Bye.”

“What? Sasuke?!” said the boys, bewildered. “Hey, wait! Tell us your grade, class, and real name, not your nickname!”

The girl said nothing; she smiled and, leaving behind the scent of her perfume, vanished in the crowd of students.

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Later that night, after returning to his apartment, Kobayashi switched on his computer.

*I have to investigate.*

He input “Merry’s mail” into a search engine. In an instant, he obtained thousands of websites. Most of them appeared to focus on scary stories or urban legends.

*It appears to be a famous story, thought Kobayashi, as he scratched his head.*

*Well, which website should I start with?*

He visited several websites and perused their bulletin boards. There was an array of comments. Some legends were comical, such as, “You can make your breasts bigger by eating two heads of cabbage every day.” or “You can become smarter by eating different flavored candies every day for more than two weeks.” On the other hand, there were some creepy legends:

**18-year-old high school student:** Go to a decent hospital to get your pierced. A classmate of a friend of mine pierced her own ears. After a while, she found a thin thread attached to her ear. When she pulled it,

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she heard a sound as if the thread had snapped, and she suddenly lost her vision. The thread turned out to be her optic nerve. This is not a lie. My friend is not the type of person who lies.

**32-year-old housewife:** I know a boy who injured his knees while swimming in the ocean. At first, he thought the injury was not serious, but several days later, he couldn't bend them. When the doctor operated on his knees, he found barnacles on the back of his kneecaps, which may have entered from the wound before spreading. It might sound like a lie, but it is definitely true, because it happened to the child of my friend's friend.

After browsing several more websites, he chose one, called "The Negative Spiral Staircase," whose bulletin board seemed to have the most comments. Kobayashi posted a comment on the bulletin board.

*Alright, I need a name, although I don't need an elaborate one. Let me see ... hmm ... I'm a policeman, so ...*

**P:** Hello. I'm P, a company employee. Recently, the story of Merry's mail has become popular in my company. A woman in my department said, "The story of Merry's mail is actually true." Everyone was intrigued, but unfortunately, even she didn't know the details. So, does anyone know the true story of Merry's mail? If possible, I would like to share it with my co-workers. Thank you so much in advance for your cooperation.

Kobayashi walked away from his computer and killed time by taking a bath and eating a light meal. After an hour, he checked the bulletin board and found several responses:

**Princess Leia:** The true story of Merry's mail? Umm ... it might be the Merry doll that has three legs. Some years ago, an accident occurred in a factory due to which Merry dolls were made with three legs and sold on the market. The maker noticed it and immediately recalled them, but some three-legged Merry dolls were still sold. This is the only story I know.

**Jason No. 28:** Three-legged Merry dolls? They must be rare. If they were auctioned, they would definitely fetch a high price!

**No Name @ Scary Stories:** Every man has the third leg ...

**Roto Not Becoming Valiant:** That was a blue joke! Come to think of it, we don't see Merry at this bulletin board anymore. She often commented before.

**Jonah:** I know the story regarding the three-legged Merry doll. Late one night, on her way home through a park, a woman found an abandoned doll. She was suspicious of it and picked it up. The doll had three legs. Furthermore, one of them was soiled, as if it was rotting skin. Suddenly, the doll said, "This is Merry. I'm cursed." It continually repeated this. The woman was frightened, and she threw down the doll and ran away. However, Merry's voice haunted her. As if the doll was whispering in the woman's ears, the voice repeated, "This is Merry. I'm cursed." Eventually, the woman went insane and pierced her eardrums with a needle.

**Hiro:** Soiled as if it was rotting skin? Does this mean that the doll is made from human skin?

**No Name @ Scary Stories:** A doll made from human flesh?! Scary!

*A cursed doll?* Kobayashi posted another comment.

**P:** Thank you all so much for your prompt replies. In short, can I assume that the cursed Merry doll sent "Merry's mail?"

Kobayashi posted the comment and killed time by watching TV and reading a weekly magazine. He returned to the bulletin board and found several new comments:

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is always targeted by the mother's immune system, which includes greedy white blood cells and ferocious killers called lymphocyte cells or something. Not only that. If a fetus with blood group B is in a mother with blood group A, what will happen? If the mother's blood mixes with the blood of the fetus, the fetus would die. So, the uterus and placenta prevent the mother's blood from flowing into the fetus. In short, the uterus exists to protect the fetus from the mother. Furthermore, the fetus moves frequently in the mother's body. It is not playing, but shivering. According to me, it is scared, and the fear peaks when they escape from their mother's body at childbirth.

**Hiro:** Oh fetus, oh fetus, why are you dancing? Are you scared because you can read your mother's mind?

**Mortal Disease:** Hiro, you just quoted a passage from the beginning of Kyusaku Yumeno's novel "Dogra Magra."

**Princess Leia:** You know, it is unbelievably painful for elephants to give birth. Due to the pain, the mothers sometimes tread on their own calf in hate.

Kobayashi immediately closed the browser and signed off.

*These guys are all mad!!*

-4-

The following day, Kobayashi and Yokota continued their house-to-house investigation near the crime scene. Although Kobayashi did not sleep well the previous night due to the disturbing comments he read, he stifled a yawn and walked around. Tachibana, the chief of the team, had instructed him that the research regarding Merry's mail must not adversely affect their primary investigation.

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At the end of the school day, as a student was leaving the main gate of Sakura High School, someone said, "Hey, Tanaka."

The student looked back at a girl with brown-dyed hair, sun-tanned skin, and an impressively petite body.

"Aren't you Tanaka, the third-grade student who belongs to the Track Club?"

"Yeah ... but who are you?"

"I belong to the Information Transmission Psychology Research Club. As a part of our club activities, I have something to ask you."

"Ask me?"

Tanaka had never heard of that club. Observing the girl from head to toe, he said, "What do you want to ask me?"

"You sent 'Merry's mail' to Suzuki, didn't you?"

"Eh? Ah ... I remember now. I felt guilty about it, but it was so eerie ... the next day, I was surprised. I swear I didn't think that it would spread throughout the entire school." Tanaka felt awkward.

"So, from whom did you receive that email?"

"Oh, are you investigating the source of the email?"

"Yep. I belong to the Information Transmission Psychology Research Club." Her reply offered only a vague explanation, but Tanaka seemed to be convinced.

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“But I’m afraid your investigation will end with me. I don’t know the sender of the email.”

“What do you mean?”

“The email had no subject or sender’s name. Here it is.” Tanaka showed her his cell phone.

“Wait a minute! You received this email at 7:30 p.m.!”

“Yeah. Actually, I ignored this email at first. But I was surprised after watching the 9 o’clock news.”

“You mean when you heard of Satomi Takada’s murder?”

“Yes, when they said that ‘a girl at municipal “S” high school who stopped this email was killed by Merry’. Although I didn’t know Takada, the news mentioned that the victim was a student in our school. Everyone must be scared, thinking that this ‘S’ high school refers to our high school.”

Tanaka received the email at 7:30 p.m., which roughly corresponds with the estimated time of Satomi Takada’s death. If this email was sent just before or after the murder of Satomi Takada, whoever sent this email was ...

“This email ordered me to forward it to five people within three hours, and I was so upset. I received this email at 7:30 p.m., but when I heard of the murder on the 9 o’clock news, I didn’t have more than 30 minutes left before the deadline. I randomly chose people and sent them the email. Here are the records.”

As she listened to Tanaka, the girl thought, *I will definitely find Merry ...*

“I even added the following to the beginning of the email: ‘Sorry. I received a dangerous email. I’m scared, so I’m sending it to you. Please take care of it’. I am really apologetic to Suzuki and the four others.”

The girl gently placed her hand on Tanaka’s shoulder and said, “Hey, Tanaka. Can I ask you for a favor?”

\*\*\*

One evening, on her way home from school, Ayano Shiozaki stopped in front of a park. Since it was still daylight, she could safely walk through the park. If she was held up until a later hour due to club activities, she sometimes had to choose a different path, as the number of people passing through the park became smaller when it was dark.

As she contemplated her day, Ayano heard a voice from behind her, “Miss Shiozaki.”

She turned to see a man who appeared to have run there, and promptly said, “Sir.”

Kobayashi, out of breath, then said, “Sorry for surprising you, but you had already left by the time I reached the school.”

“So you followed me?”

Ayano did not make eye contact and began walking as if trying to ignore him.

Kobayashi followed her. “I met your teacher. He told me about the station nearest to your home. I hurried over so that I could meet you.”

“Sir, what do you want to ask me? About Merry’s mail again?”

Her voice was calm, but Kobayashi sensed her wariness and hostility. He was at a temporary loss for words.

He couldn’t gather enough information from the Internet alone, and attempted to obtain additional clues from Ayano. But at that moment, he didn’t know what and how he should ask her.

While Kobayashi said nothing, Ayano asked, “Sir, why do you keep focusing on Merry?”

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“Eh? Er ... I don't know. I just have a feeling.”

“Just a feeling?” Ayano repeated and finally looked at Kobayashi. “At the morning assembly, the vice principal told us that the criminal was a phantom killer. Another teacher told us that Satomi was not the only target and anyone else could become a target.”

“But I wonder if students really believe that. For example, Miss Watanabe said ...”

“Watanabe? ... Haruna said what?”

*Damn! I've said too much*, thought Kobayashi. “Ah ... yes. Miss Watanabe said Merry was the criminal.”

“Did you believe that?” Ayano stopped and said embarrassingly.

“But I didn't have a reason to doubt her,” said Kobayashi as Ayano burst into laughter.

“I thought detectives had to doubt everyone.”

It was the first time that Kobayashi saw her smile.

“Since I'm not good at doubting people, I must be unqualified as a detective.”

“So, you believe the story of Merry?”

“I don't completely believe it.”

Kobayashi was not sure how to explain himself; all he could imagine saying was, “My boss appointed me as an Urban Legend Detective.” But that answer would embarrass Ayano even more.

Then, Ayano began talking. “My grandma lives in a quiet village in the mountains. When I was in elementary school, I frequently visited her during my summer vacations. I loved spending time with her, but most interesting was listening to her mysteries and scary stories. Most of them were simply stories that involved foxes, raccoon dogs that tricked people. But there was another story.”

Walking along the path, Ayano continued, “One day, a villager was walking along a mountain path with firewood on his back, when a Buddhist monk was passing through the area. Although the monk was a stranger to him, the villager bowed and said, “Hello, Your Grace.” The monk said nothing. He grinned and suddenly grew until he reached the clouds.”

“So, what happened to the villager?” said Kobayashi eagerly.

“Well, he barely escaped with his life and returned to the village. But ... it's just superstition, isn't it?”

They said nothing for a while. Before long, Kobayashi broke the silence and said, “Superstition, rumors, or urban legends ... their origins are mysterious. I have heard strange stories ranging from mutant chickens developed for fast food restaurants to peculiar reactions to ear piercings. I wonder what type of person initiates such stories?”

Ayano slowly shook her head and said, “I guess no one will ever know that. However, the villager who witnessed the giant monk could not be found.”

As if she wanted to change the mood, Ayano added, “Actually, I don't like to regard strange stories as superstition or urban legends. Instead, I believe that so-called superstitions and urban legends are stories of people living in another world.”

“Another world?”

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“Yes. It is very similar to our world, but somewhat different. The giant monk, Abominable Snowman or Loch Ness Monster are examples of this. Furthermore, stories of ghosts, monsters, or fairies might be as common as those of the weather or celebrities are in this world.

“Wow! What a bustling world!” Kobayashi replied amusingly.

Ayano nodded, “But that is normal for them. If some of them crossed over to our world, what do you think would happen, sir?”

Kobayashi had no answer.

Ayano continued, “Since people look the same in both worlds, those who accidentally cross over into our world would not immediately notice that they have done so. They would converse with people from our world about phenomena from their world. For instance, ‘Hey, I was about to be pulled into the river by the Kappa monster!’ They would then return to their world.”

“That’s why the superstition of the Kappa exists?”

“Yep. I mean, there is no Kappa in our world.”

“What about chicken with four legs, or with no wings, crest, or eyes?”

“They might be very common in the other world.”

“What about the hamburger made with cat meat?”

“Oh, sir, if you don’t use cat meat when making hamburger, what else do you use? You don’t say beef, do you?” Ayano joked and laughed wickedly. Kobayashi smiled sympathetically.

It made sense that if the people who initiate superstition, rumors, or urban legends lived in another world, we would be unable to find them.

Ayano continued, “We could imagine the reverse. For example, if someone walking a dog in our world crossed over to the other world, what do you think would happen? Especially, if there were no dogs there.”

“Let me see ... it would probably cause a panic.”

“Think about it. A graceful woman led by a toy poodle on a leash suddenly emerges on the other side. People in that world might regard it as a new type of pet or something. But because the woman devotedly asks, ‘What’s wrong? Are you tired or thirsty?’ and even cleans the dog’s feces, it might seem that the dog is the master. Then, the woman and the dog return to our world.”

“Er ... then, what do think happened next in the other world?” asked Kobayashi.

Ayano nodded. “Of course, the people who saw the dog made a fuss and circulated a rumor according to which ‘a small mysterious creature freely manipulated this woman. It compelled a human to obey its wishes just by barking’. Some might even claim that it was an alien from another world. Others might say, ‘That’s ridiculous. It’s just superstition or an urban legend’.”

“So according to you, urban legends originate in another world?”

Ayano nodded pleasantly, but the next moment, she stopped. Her expression changed drastically, and she stared ahead along the path in fear.

*What happened?* thought Kobayashi, following Ayano’s gaze.

There was a dirty Western doll with green eyes and blonde hair. Upon closer examination, he saw that it had three legs.

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*Is that the three-legged Merry doll?!* thought Kobayashi.

Then, Ayano's cell phone alerted her to an email. She opened it with trembling fingers:

**This is Merry. I am cursed.**

Ayano's scream echoed throughout the quiet park.

Kobayashi supported Ayano, who was about to collapse from shock and fear, and took her to the nearest bench.

"I knew it. I would be next target ..."

Ayano repeated the cryptic words as if they were some mantra.

Kobayashi waited until she was slightly calmer and asked, "Why? Why are you so scared about Merry's mail?" He had wanted to ask this question from the time he first met her.

Kobayashi added, "Miss Watanabe said that Miss Takada was also scared of Merry's mail. You two were classmates in elementary and junior high schools. In addition, Miss Takada's sister Kozue was also scared. Why? Why are you all so scared about Merry's mail?"

Ayano shouted, "I ... Satomi and I killed Merry!"

There was a short silence.

"You two killed Merry?"

"Yes. We killed Merry," said Ayano, shedding a tear.

"What do you mean?"

"It was three years ago, when we were in the second grade in junior high school. Satomi and I really hit it off with another girl named Yukiko Yoshida since we entered elementary school. We were always together. But in one aspect, Yukiko differed from Satomi and myself. She was more of a realist than we were. Every girl usually loves fortune telling, but Yukiko didn't. In fact, whenever Satomi and I discussed astrology, Yukiko said, 'Don't you know? Astrology was based on the constellation from 2,000 years ago. In the meantime, each star has moved and ancient Leo has become current Cancer. So, a Taurus, who is supposed to be considerate and patient, is actually an Aries, who is selfish and short-tempered. Satomi and I nodded superficially, although we were disenchanted. Plus, when we talked about scary stories, Yukiko always said, 'That must be a fabrication' or 'I won't believe in ghosts until I actually see one'. And then ..."

Ayano looked down and hesitated to continue.

Kobayashi gently said, "Then, what did you do?"

Ayano glanced at Kobayashi's face, looked down again, and continued ...

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Satomi and Ayano were talking about Merry's mail. Yukiko joined in. "You two like such stories, don't you? When I moved into my new apartment the other day, I threw away an old Merry doll." Satomi said, "Eh? It was your favorite doll, wasn't it? When we were young, you always held it. I remember."

"Yeah, but now I have a new Merry doll."

Satomi said, "But is that okay? The old Merry doll might be crying."

"The doll cannot be crying, Satomi! Do you believe the story of Merry's mail?"

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“That’s not what I meant . . .,” stammered Satomi.

Supporting Satomi, Ayano said, “Yukiko, are you okay? You might receive an email from Merry asking why you threw her away.”

“Hey, stop it, Ayano,” laughed Yukiko, as they approached a crossroads.

Satomi asked, “Yukiko, why don’t you drop by my house?”

“Ah, sorry. I have to go home early today because my mom is going out. Dad said he would be late too.”

Yukiko left, and Satomi and Ayano went to Satomi’s house.

Soon after they reached Satomi’s house, her mother said, “Sorry, Satomi. Urgent business has come up; I have to go. Can you and Kozue eat dinner at a restaurant? Of course, you should also buy Ayano dinner.”

They killed time before leaving for a nearby restaurant early in the evening. On their way through the park, Kozue suddenly ran to a bench in front of a pond. She kneeled down behind the bench, picked something up, and said, “Hey, Satomi. Look here.” They saw a cell phone illuminated by the light of the lamps in the park. Satomi said, “Someone must have dropped it.”

“We should take it to a police box on the way to the restaurant,” said Ayano. Satomi smiled. “We should do so after dinner; I just thought of something funny.”

“You shouldn’t misuse someone’s cell phone. If the owner finds out, we’ll be in trouble.”

“Don’t worry, Ayano. I won’t make long-distance calls. If we delete the history, no one will know what we did.” Satomi took her sister’s hand and resumed walking.

After dinner, Satomi took the cell phone and said, “Why don’t we surprise Yukiko?”

Ayano asked, “What do you mean?”

“Look.” Satomi typed Yukiko’s email address and wrote a message while keeping the subject and sender’s name blank.

“With no subject or name, Yukiko won’t know who sent this email.”

Satomi showed us the message:

**This is Merry. Why did you throw me away?**

Ayano was surprised, “Hey, Satomi. This means . . .,” but Satomi had sent the e-mail.

“That was just the first mail. Next . . .”

**This is Merry. I’m lonely. It’s so cold here.**

Ayano smiled slightly, “Satomi, are you trying to fabricate Merry’s mail? But you’re wasting your time. Yukiko won’t be bothered by such a trick. She must be laughing right now.”

“You think so?” Satomi said, as she continued writing emails:

**This is Merry. Can I come see you?**

**This is Merry. I just arrived at the station. I will be there soon.**

As Satomi finished writing the next email, her own cell phone rang. Ayano said, “Hey, it must be Yukiko. She must be angry. You should apologize to her before this joke carries on for too long.”

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Satomi said, “Not yet. I’m just getting to the good part.”

Satomi gave Kozue her cell phone. “Kozue, if it’s Yukiko, answer in a cute voice, as if you are a doll. Understood?” Kozue nodded slightly and answered the call. After confirming whom she was speaking to, she smiled and spoke with a high-pitched lisp.

“This is Merry. I’m in front of the convenience store, which you can see from the window in your room.” Kozue looked so cute and funny that Satomi and Ayano chuckled.

After the call, Satomi asked, “What was Yukiko’s reaction?”

Kozue seemed worried and said, “She seemed angry at first. But when she heard my voice, she screamed.” Ayano said, “Hey, Satomi. Shouldn’t you end this joke now?”

But Satomi continued writing emails:

**This is Merry. I’m in front of your apartment.**

**This is Merry. I’m in front of your room.**

Ayano also gradually became fascinated by this plot.

Yukiko always claimed that “All scary stories are fictitious,” and laughed. That day itself, she said, “Dolls can’t cry,” and had looked down upon Satomi and Ayano.

Ayano cruelly imagined how scared Yukiko must have been.

Satomi finished typing and said, “Alright. That’s the last one.”

**This is Merry. I’m behind you.**

They switched off the cell phone and laughed, imagining Yukiko’s reaction.

“Yukiko’s probably going to call us, angry as hell,” said Satomi in amusement.

However, they did not receive any call. After about half an hour, Ayano called Yukiko’s cell phone. No one answered. The call was transferred to her voicemail.

“Yukiko didn’t answer.”

Their smiles disappeared.

Ayano said, “I’ll call her house. Her parents might have returned.”

“Do we have to? It’s alright. Maybe Yukiko’s taking a shower.”

Satomi forced her lips into a smile.

Ayano ignored her and called the phone at Yukiko’s house.

The phone rang several times before an unknown man’s voice answered, “Hello?”

“Hello? Is this Yukiko Yoshida’s house?”

“Who is this?”

The voice was calm but possessed the power to elicit a reply from Ayano. *Who was this man?* But Ayano was more worried about the screaming in the background. Obviously, something strange had happened.

“I’m Ayano Shiozaki, one of Yukiko’s classmates. Um ... is Yukiko there?”

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“Hold on a minute.” There was some discussion on the other end, followed by, “Miss Shiozaki, listen to me carefully. This is the police.”

“Police?!”

This shocked Satomi and Kozue.

We received an emergency call from this address, and we have just arrived.”

“What happened? Is Yukiko okay? She’s there, isn’t she?”

After a few seconds, the police officer said, “Miss Yukiko Yoshida is currently missing. We are looking for her.”

“Missing ...?”

“We can’t explain the situation in detail, but we think Miss Yukiko Yoshida is in great danger. Do you know where she might have gone?”

“Um ... Er ... I ...” *What has happened?*

“Please remain calm. You must be distraught. But if you recall anything that might help, call me immediately.”

With quivering fingers, Ayano noted the police officer’s contact number on a paper napkin.

As soon as Ayano hung up, Satomi asked in a worried, upset voice, “What’s the matter?”

“I don’t know. A police officer answered the phone, and I heard a woman screaming ...”

“Scream ... was it Yukiko’s?” Ayano shook her head, “I don’t think so. It was an adult woman’s voice.”

They were anxious and impatient. As if unable to bear it any longer, Satomi grabbed the receipt from the table and said, “Let’s get out of here.” They left the restaurant and reached the park without speaking. Satomi suddenly tossed the cell phone into the pond.

Ayano yelled, “What are you doing?”

“We neither found a cell phone nor sent emails to Yukiko. Got it?” She turned to look at her sister, “Do you understand, Kozue? Do not mention today’s incident to anyone.”

They later discovered that the scream Ayano heard on the phone belonged to Yukiko’s mother. Yukiko’s parents had met at the station and gone home together. As soon as Yukiko’s mother entered the living room, she went frenetic. Yukiko’s father immediately called the police.

These facts were mentioned by the teachers and police officers in school the following day.

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Reflecting on the event, Ayano said to Kobayashi, “I think Yukiko must have been more scared than we imagined. We later discovered that she even grabbed a kitchen knife to protect herself. After receiving the final email, her fear must have peaked. She must have felt something behind her ... or touching her back.”

*Something touched her back?* thought Kobayashi, as he caught his breath.

“Yukiko brandished the kitchen knife; she lost control because of her fear and swung it repeatedly. ”

Ayano paused. Kobayashi said nothing and waited.

“It was not Merry who was there, but Ryoko ... her sister.”

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“Her sister?”

“Yeah, her six-year-old sister, Ryoko. She must have been alone in her room, and after she noticed something strange occurring with Yukiko, she approached her and probably touched her back.”

“Then, what happened to Ryoko?”

“She died! The kitchen knife Yukiko was swinging injured Ryoko several times.” Ayano collapsed into tears. “She died because of our tricks. WE killed Ryoko!”

“So ... Merry was actually ...” said Kobayashi as he placed his hand on Ayano’s trembling shoulder.

“Ryoko was born when Yukiko was in the second grade. When her mother brought Ryoko home for the first time, she said, ‘Yukiko, I brought you a wonderful present’. Yukiko took her mother’s words literally. She told us that Ryoko was the new Merry.”

Ayano added, “Whenever Yukiko was with us, she called her sister ‘Merry’; she adored Ryoko. Ryoko, too, was delighted with the name, even though she didn’t know what it meant. They were very close ...” Ayano’s voice became progressively fainter.

Kobayashi believed that Yukiko must have run away because she was scared and shocked by her sister’s death.

“Sir, do you understand? Satomi and I killed Ryoko, Yukiko’s precious Merry. It was only supposed to be a childish joke,” said Ayano, as she resumed crying.

“I later heard that until she was arrested, Yukiko had been wandering the streets holding the blood-soaked kitchen knife. Witnesses informed the police that she approached several dump sites, tore open garbage bags, and scattered their contents. She must have been seeking the Merry she threw away.” Ayano continued, “After she was arrested, she only kept repeating, ‘Merry ... Merry ...’”

The police were unsure what Yukiko meant, and even her parents believed that Merry was only a doll Yukiko once treasured.

Kobayashi asked, “But your emails would have remained in her cell phone, wouldn’t they?”

Ayano shook her head. “Her cell phone was found near where she had been wandering. I heard that it had been completely destroyed. I don’t know whether she did it deliberately or it was dropped and crushed by a car.”

*Is this the true story of Merry that Kozue Takada implied?*

Kobayashi asked, “What happened to Yukiko then?”

“I don’t know the details, but I heard that Yukiko has been institutionalized ... Her parents moved soon after the murder.”

*I should investigate Yukiko Yoshida and her parents,* Kobayashi thought.

“After the case, Satomi and I planned to avoid each other, even though we went to the same high school and belonged to the same class.”

Kobayashi recalled something. “Before she died, Satomi Takada called you?”

“Satomi also saw the three-legged Merry near the murder scene. She called and told me that she saw the doll.”

Kobayashi now understood.

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“I was surprised that she called me. She didn’t seem upset, but I felt that she was scared. At the time, that was all we spoke about.”

Kobayashi asked, “So did Miss Takada get the email, the one including the message ‘I’m cursed?’”

Ayano shook head, “I don’t know.”

The police checked Satomi’s cell phone records, but never found that email. The criminal might have intentionally refrained from sending it, fearing that the record would be used as evidence.

“Alright, then ... Miss Shiozaki, please give me the email address that you received the message from.”

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After hearing Kobayashi’s report, Chief Inspector Tachibana said, “The case of Yukiko Yoshida ... okay, I will have Kawashima investigate this.” She removed her cell phone from an inside pocket and quickly wrote and sent an email.

“Chief, could you do me a favor?”

“What do you want, Kobayashi?”

Kobayashi extracted a note from his pocket and said, “Please trace this email address. I want to identify the sender.”

Tachibana took the note and said, “This is who sent the email from the cursed three-legged Merry?”

“Yeah. Actually, the third leg of another doll was glued to the Western doll ... Anyway, we need to find the sender.”

“Kobayashi, are you stupid?” Tachibana yelled. “In an age when everyone handles personal information carefully, do you think a telephone company would just agree to give us the information of the sender?”

“But if we obtain a search warrant from the court, the telephone company would obey ...”

Tachibana interrupted, “Do you really think we could obtain a warrant based on a childish email? To begin with, how can we explain it to my pigheaded bosses? Do we tell them, ‘The criminal is the cursed Merry doll?’”

Kobayashi had no response.

“Remember, the upper management of investigation headquarters regards the murder case as a random murder by a phantom killer. The criminal we are looking for is a crazy psychopath, not a doll. Don’t forget that.”

“But, madam ...”

“If you disagree, you can submit any conclusive evidence that can change the investigation policy.”

Kobayashi said nothing, but he countered in his mind, “Madam, are you saying, that the police can’t move forward unless there is an apparent case? In other words, unless Ayano Shiozaki is also killed, the police can’t identify the sender?”

At that moment, Tachibana’s phone rang.

“Yeah, this is the Tachibana team. Oh, Sasuke. What was the outcome?”

“Boss, I identified the source of the chain mail. The address is ...”

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Tachibana compared the address that Sasuke reported with the one on Kobayashi's note. They were identical.

Sasuke said, "One of the emails, sent at 7:30 p.m., corresponds to the estimated time of death. Chief, please identify the sender."

Tachibana frowned.

"Tsk, Sasuke. Do you think you could obtain a warrant regarding such a childish ..."

"The arrangements have already been made."

"The arrangements?"

"A student named Tanaka, who also received the chain mail, plans to file a claim stating that he was threatened."

"Well done, Sasuke! We will be able to make this 'a case' and obtain a warrant."

"I am a descendant of the prestigious Koga ninja clan. There's nothing to worry about."

Tachibana looked at Kobayashi, "Alright, Sasuke. Bring the boy to the local police station and have him file the claim. If the station doesn't accept it, I will intervene. By the way, why did the boy accept the offer?"

"Actually, it was very easy because I used secret Koga ninja techniques."

"Anyway, good job, Sasuke."

As Tachibana was hanging up the phone, Sasuke said, "Ah ... Chief, one more thing."

"Um ... what?"

"Could I take next Saturday off?"

"A day off? It depends on the progress of our investigation. But it's unusual for you to take a day off during an investigation. Has something happened?"

"Um ... I promised that I would go to Tokyo Disneyland ... You know, with the boy who plans to file the claim."

*You must be the best Koga ninja,* Tachibana thought smiling.

"I will reimburse your costs for the trip."

After she hung up, Kobayashi asked, "Madam, what happened?"

Tachibana answered, "We got something on that bitch Merry."

-5-

The following day, after school was over, a teacher called out, "Hey, Shiozaki. And Inoue and Takahashi."

The three girls replied, "Yes."

"Come to the teacher's office later. I have something to tell you regarding an upcoming school trip."

The three girls exchanged looks and said, "Will it take a long time? We have club activities."

"In that case, you can come after today's club activities," said the teacher, and left the classroom.

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*I might reach home late*, thought Ayano Shiozaki.

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Meanwhile, Kobayashi and Yokota continued their investigation near the crime scene.

“We can’t find any witnesses, can we?” said Kobayashi.

Irritated, Yokota said, “Surveillance cameras at the stations and shopping avenues have been thoroughly examined, but no suspicious persons were found. The criminal might be extremely careful or just lucky.”

Kobayashi looked at his wristwatch.

“What’s wrong? You’ve been checking the time frequently today.”

“Ah, not really,” Kobayashi said awkwardly. *It will be night soon and the sender of the email has not been identified. Where is Yukiko Yoshida? Is Ayano Shiozaki still safe?*

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Mariko Tachibana frowned as she sat on a chair with her long legs crossed. She stood as if she recalled something and stared at the setting sun through the window.

“Excuse me, Chief. I brought you coffee,” said a woman police officer, placing it on the table. She glanced at the speechless Tachibana gazing outside and trotted back to the kitchen.

“As you know, Chief Tachibana is always so cool!”

Another woman police officer nodded, “She is tall and has a nice figure. I love her cool expression!”

“She must be constantly contemplating all her difficult cases.”

Meanwhile, Tachibana sat on her chair again, crossed her long legs again, and sank in the backrest. *Finally, I have decided. Today’s dinner will be a cheap beef bowl ...*

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When Ayano and the two other girls returned to the classroom after their club activities, it was already dim outside.

“I wonder what the teacher wants.”

“He might instruct us to not follow strangers while traveling.”

While the other two girls placed their bags on their seats and fooled around, Ayano’s face was becoming as dark as it was outside.

“Ayano, let’s go the teacher’s office.”

“Sure.”

After the three girls left the classroom, someone, as if lying in wait, entered, approached Ayano’s desk, and peered into the desk as well as the bag resting against her chair. The person found what he or she came looking for, and slid a hand into the bag ... At that moment, another hand appeared and grabbed the hand sliding into the bag, “What are you doing, Misaki Sakai?”

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“Misaki Sakai?!” asked Kobayashi to Tachibana on the other end of the cell phone. He finished the day’s investigation and was on his way to the investigation headquarters with Yokota.

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“Yeah. I just got the report. That chain mail and the cursed Merry mail were both sent from Misaki Sakai’s cell phone.”

Kobayashi recalled Misaki Sakai, whom he met at Sakura High School. She was a rather ... conspicuous girl. But she didn’t seem to be the type of girl to perpetrate such a case.

“One more thing. Regarding Yukiko Yoshida, I received an email from Kawashima. She has been dead for two weeks.”

“Yukiko Yoshida is dead?!”

“She died of a heart disease, not murder.”

According to Kawashima’s investigation, the case occurred three years ago, after which Yukiko lived in a facility for a while and then changed schools. She became gloomy and had no friends at her new school. Her parents were worried about her.

“What did they do?”

Hearing the tension in Kobayashi’s voice, Yokota widened his eyes.

Kobayashi told him, “Please go ahead to the headquarters.”

He considered that Yukiko’s parents may have attempted to gain revenge against Satomi Takada and the other girls.

Tachibana appeared to read Kobayashi’s thoughts, “I think it is improbable that Yukiko’s parents are involved. After Ryoko died, they had another daughter, whom they loved.

“Even though the parents were shocked by Ryoko’s death, they managed to recover and lead a relatively happy life. It is unlikely that they committed such a heinous crime.” Kobayashi said, “However, I don’t understand the connection between Misaki Sakai and Merry. Why did she need to send Merry’s mail to the students in Sakura High School, including Miss Shiozaki?”

Tachibana shouted, “You need to think later! Ayano Shiozaki might be in imminent danger. Kobayashi, go to Sakura High School immediately and find Sasuke. She has already sneaked inside.”

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The girl holding Misaki Sakai’s hand was a petite student. Both the girls had brown-dyed hair. Misaki hastily dropped the item she was holding back into the bag. It was Ayano Shiozaki’s cell phone.

“What did you intend to do with it?”

Misaki hid her free left hand behind her back. The girl released Misaki’s right hand and immediately grabbed her left hand. It was too fast for Misaki to evade.

The girl retrieved another cell phone, identical to Ayano’s.

“You were trying to switch them, weren’t you?”

Misaki shook off her captor, shoved her with both hands, and ran out of the classroom. The girl shouted, “Wait!” and followed Misaki.

Fifteen minutes later, Ayano and the two other girls returned to the empty classroom.

“We were lucky that the teacher’s errand was rather simple.”

“Well then, let’s leave.”

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Ayano noticed that her bag was half-opened. She examined in it and found nothing missing. Although she felt somewhat uncomfortable, Ayano closed her bag securely and the three girls left the classroom.

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Cornered in the back of gymnasium, Misaki was breathing very heavily.

“You can’t run anymore,” said the girl who had chased her. She, too, was breathing extremely heavily. Misaki could hear it. She removed a black notebook from an inside pocket of her brown blazer and showed it to Misaki.

“Is that a police notebook? Are you a detective?!”

The girl, a detective named Sumire Sarutobi, slowly approached Misaki. Misaki surrendered, probably because she understood that she had been followed by the police. Her shoulders dropped.

“What did you intend to do by switching your cell phone with Ayano Shiozaki’s?”

Still looking down, Misaki whispered, “I’m not sure ... I was threatened, and I was just following an order.”

“Threatened?”

“I was threatened by some guy. I had no choice ...”

“What do you mean ‘by some guy?’”

“Somehow, this guy knew that I engaged in compensated dating. He used this information to threaten me and forced me to switch my cell phone with Satomi’s.”

“Did you switch Satomi’s cell phone?”

Misaki nodded, “Yeah. At the hamburger restaurant. I bought three identical cell phone straps and suggested to Satomi and Haruna that we use the same straps ... Then, I pretended to exchange the straps under the table ...”

“So you switched the cell phones?”

“I never thought that she would be killed!” said Misaki, breaking into tears.

Satomi’s cell phone was probably switched again by the criminal after the murder. But why did he have to go to such lengths? The only conceivable reason for the swap would be to talk or email during the short period between the first switch and the murder. The criminal had to switch it again so as to not leave any evidence in the cell phone records.

Sarutobi admonishingly said, “Why didn’t you tell the police about this?”

“Because I was scared. That guy said, ‘You are already my accomplice,’ and added, ‘If you tell the police about this, you and your family will lose your lives.’ He also asserted, ‘I will never be arrested. No one will ever catch me.’”

“No one will ever catch him? Why and how?”

“Because he told me that he is a ‘Friend of a Friend’ ...”

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Kobayashi’s train arrived at the station nearest to Sakura High School. He walked toward the ticket gate without focusing on his surroundings. But he should have, because waiting for a train on the opposite platform was Ayano Shiozaki.

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Holding Misaki's arm, Sarutobi pulled her toward the classroom.

"Did you also send Merry's mail to Tanaka?"

Misaki shook her head, "I don't know. I prepared two cell phones for the switch. I bought them on my name, but I didn't use them."

"Then, this guy sent it?"

"I just gave him Tanaka's email address. In the first grade, I belonged to the Track Club and knew Tanaka, who is one of my seniors. With regard to Ayano's email address ..."

"You also gave him her email address?"

"Yeah. He wanted it."

When they reentered the classroom, Ayano's bag was gone, implying that she had left.

Satomi Takada was killed immediately after the cell phones had been switched. This switch was a failure, but it was obvious that Ayano Shiozaki was also targeted.

"Do you know Miss Shiozaki's cell phone number?" Sarutobi needed to inform Ayano that the criminal was looking for her.

"I don't know. I was just forced to find out her email address. Usually, I don't contact her," answered Misaki weakly.

Sarutobi gently placed her hand on Misaki's shoulder, "You must go to the police station and reveal everything, including the compensated dating. You can do this, can't you?"

After Misaki's affirmative nod, Sarutobi dashed out of the classroom.

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On her way home, Ayano Shiozaki hadn't decided if she would go through the park. The sun had already set and walking through the deserted park at night was a more daunting prospect than it was in the daytime.

*I think I should take a detour.* Ayano started walking, when she sensed someone behind her. She looked back and saw no one. She felt a shadow passing over her.

*Someone is following me!*

Struck by fear, Ayano hurried into the park. As if on cue, her cell phone alerted her of an email.

*An email?! From whom?*

**This is Merry. Can I come see you?**

*Merry's mail!*

As she froze in fear, she received another email. Walking faster and keeping one eye behind her, she opened the email:

**This is Merry. I just arrived at the station. I will be there soon.**

Ayano began running, *I am sorry, Yukiko. I am sorry, Ryoko.*

She received another email.

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*Is someone following me?* Ayano, frequently looking back now, opened the email with trembling fingers:

**This is Merry. I'm in front of you.**

*What?!* Ayano looked straight ahead and saw long and curly blonde hair, plastic skin, and emotionless green eyes.

*Merry!*

No, it was not Merry. It was the mask of an animated heroine, which was sold at a local festival. Behind the mask was a man wearing a white parka and a long blonde wig. He brandished a 30-centimeter survival knife.

His outstretched left hand grabbed Ayano by the collar, rendering her unable to move. The huge survival knife descended toward her. Suddenly, the assailant released his grip and the fingers grasping the knife cramped as if paralyzed. The huge survival knife dropped to the ground, making a high-pitched metallic sound as it clanged against the ground. The masked man groaned painfully, and as he cradled his knife-bearing right hand with his left, Ayano noticed a ninja throwing star stuck deep into his right wrist.

“Sasuke is here!”

Ayano heard the voice and turned. Standing before her were Kobayashi and a girl wearing the same uniform as hers, who was keenly observing the masked man and preparing a second a throwing star.

Kobayashi looked down at the throwing star in Sarutobi's hand, “Do you always carry those around?”

“It's natural because I'm a *shinobi*. And unlike guns, I don't need a permit to carry these.”

*Are you sure you don't need permission?* doubted Kobayashi.

The masked man was overwhelmed; he stepped back, and then turned and fled.

“Kobayashi, chase him!”

Kobayashi glanced at Ayano, confirmed that she was not injured, and chased the masked man.

Sarutobi ran up to Ayano, “Ayano, are you okay?”

Ayano was still in shock. Sarutobi attended to her and made a call from her cell phone, “Chief, we found the criminal. He's on the run. We need emergency deployment immediately.”

**-6-**

After Kobayashi returned to the headquarters, Tachibana said, “Tsk, you let the criminal get away.”

“Sorry, madam,” said Kobayashi, before he and Sarutobi bowed without saying a word. Sarutobi was back to her usual appearance: black hair, white skin, a pair of glasses, a black suit, and a tight knee-length skirt.

“So, who is this guy? Who is Merry?”

“I don't have any details yet,” replied Sarutobi. “According to Misaki Sakai ...”

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Misaki Sakai met “this guy” approximately one week before Satomi Takada's murder. Their meeting was arranged through an almost illegal dating website known for compensated dating.

The guy who met Misaki was dressed entirely in white: parka with a hood, pants, and shoes. His face, concealed by the hood, was never revealed. Surprisingly, his voice sounded rather young.

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Although somewhat strange, he appeared to be rich and offered Misaki significant money in advance to accompany him to the hotel.

Immediately after they entered the room, he said to her, “Are you Misaki Sakai from Sakura High School?”

Misaki tried to leave, but he added, “Are you okay if your parents or your school know about this? Don’t worry. I will keep your secret. In return, could you do me a favor?”

Misaki didn’t know how to respond.

His voice was calm, not authoritative. But Misaki seemed compelled to obey him.

Misaki bought cell phones that were identical to Satomi’s and Ayano’s, and she made the switch with Satomi’s cell phone later that day.

No matter how strongly she asked, he didn’t reveal his reasons. All he said was “It’s only a joke.”

Upon hearing of the murder on the 9 o’clock news, she was shocked and upset.

Then, the guy called Misaki on her cell phone.

“What did you do? I’ll go to the police station!” yelled Misaki.

But he wasn’t upset. He said, “Are you okay? You are now an accomplice.” He told her that if she reported anything to the police, she and her family would be in grave danger.

But it was his assertion that scared her the most: “I will never be caught, because I am a ‘Friend of a Friend’ ...”

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“Friend of a Friend?” said Tachibana in a funny voice.

Sarutobi replied, “Yes. He identified himself as a ‘Friend of a Friend.’”

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“... Yeah. I am a ‘Friend of a Friend’ whom you know well.”

“I know you well?”

“Who pierced her own ears, pulled out a white thread, and became blind? It was a friend of your friend, wasn’t it? Who was injured at a sea and found barnacles on the back of his kneecaps? It was a real accident that append to the child of a friend of your friend, wasn’t it? Although you know me well, you have never met me. I was always near you, but you couldn’t see me. Not only you but also everyone else couldn’t see or reach me.”

“Where are you from?”

“From another world.”

“Another world?”

“Yes. A world in which superstitions, rumors, and urban legends are real. I am the origin of every mystery and every wonder. The so-called ‘black men’, who threaten people researching UFOs and space aliens and force them into silence, are my friends. I made the world believe that Oswald killed John F. Kennedy. Every urban legend in this world emerges from and is spread because of me. However, no one can see me.”

“But I can clearly see you now.”

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“I’m a ‘Friend of a Friend’, and since you are my friend, you are a ‘Friend of a Friend’ as well. A ‘Friend of a Friend’ can only be seen by a ‘Friend of a Friend’. So you will also not be arrested. No one will find you. We will never be caught.”

“I’m confused ... I don’t know what is real anymore.”

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“I don’t understand a single thing this guy said,” exclaimed Tachibana, leaning back in her chair.

Kobayashi merely tilted his head and Sarutobi sat in silence following the narration of the account.

-7-

“Thank you, Sarutobi,” said Kobayashi, as he poured sake into her *tyoko*, a tiny sake cup, at a noisy Japanese-style bar.

Sarutobi took a sip, “I didn’t do anything that I need to be thanked for.”

“You saved Miss Shiozaki by the skin of her teeth.”

“It is not extraordinary for the police to save private citizens.”

“Um ... I guess you’re right,” faltered Kobayashi.

“Well, I certainly don’t mind you buying me dinner and sake.”

“Er ... I must admit, I bought dinner, but ...”

“Hey, waiter! Give us another plate of grilled chicken, boiled soybeans, assorted raw fish, and another beer!” yelled Tachibana, as she emptied her mug in one gulp.

“I didn’t say that I would buy you dinner, Chief.”

“Don’t be so fussy. This murder case was resolved due to my command. We protected Ayano Shiozaki. Operation ‘Urban Legend Detectives’ was hugely successful. Don’t you think so, Kobayashi?”

*I don’t think so; a criminal hasn’t been arrested yet. And I don’t appreciate being called ‘Urban Legend Detectives’.*

Kobayashi said, “Actually, I have something on my mind.”

“What do you mean?”

“The criminal’s behavior pattern. He met Misaki Sakai through a dating site, which we have terminated. The criminal logged in at an Internet cafe.”

“Yeah. The detectives investigating the dating site said so as well.”

“According to the local police investigation, the criminal always called Miss Sakai from a payphone. In addition, all the cell phones he used during the case were bought by Miss Sakai.”

“The criminal must have prepared carefully to escape the law. Very sly guy!”

“Was he? On the other hand, why did he spread Merry’s mail throughout the school and place the three-legged Merry doll before Miss Shiozaki? It eventually helped us save Ayano Shiozaki.”

“Even though the criminal prepared carefully, why did he intentionally leave a clue? Why did he kill Satomi Takada in the first place? He may have been acquainted with Yukiko Yoshida, who has been dead for two

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weeks, and may have been trying to avenge her death. The theory is natural but somewhat uncomfortable. Originally, the murder itself may not have been his purpose; it may have been Merry's mail."

"He may have tried to add actual flesh and blood to his formless delusion," said Sarutobi, "which may have belonged to the world of urban legends that only existed in his brain."

"What do you mean?" asked Kobayashi, but Sarutobi didn't answer. Instead, she poured sake into her *tyoko*. Tachibana sipped her new beer and said, "Well, we can safely say that our target is the 'Friend of a Friend'."

## -7.5-

"It has begun," said Black Friend. "That guy has finally begun."

"That guy? You mean the other you?" asked White Friend calmly. "What do you think he started?"

"Murder!"

"Murder?"

The conversation stopped for a while. It was unclear for how long, but it was White Friend who finally broke the silence.

"What is the bandage on your wrist for?"

Black Friend put his right hand behind his back to hide it from White Friend.

"What's wrong? What are you hiding from me? We promised we would never hide anything, right? Because we are both 'Friends of a Friend'."

But Black Friend said nothing.

"Okay, okay," said White Friend. "The cure is just taking effect."

In his black mask, Black Friend seemed to be laughing.

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**Jason No.28:** Merry hasn't been around recently, has she?

**No Name @ Scary Story:** Maybe she's dead?

**Mad Gasser:** Don't say such a thing!

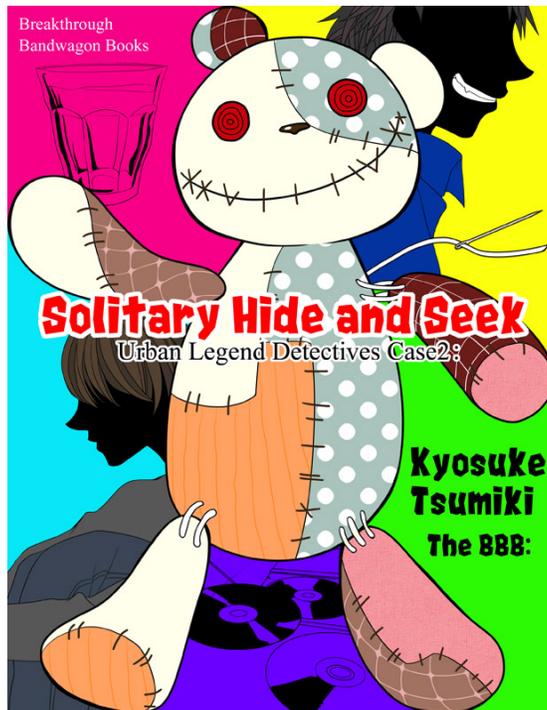
**North Stairs ♀:** But it's true. All communication with her stopped two weeks ago.

**The End**

**This book was written exclusively for The BBB: Breakthrough Bandwagon Books.**

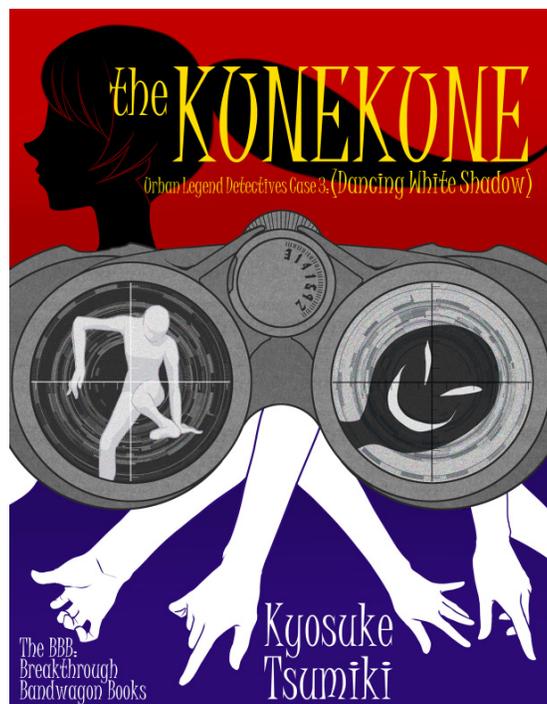
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## Kyosuke Tsumiki Works List at The BBB



### Urban Legend Detectives Case 2: Solitary Hide and Seek

<http://thebbb.net/ebooks/urban-legend-detectives-2.html>



### Urban Legend Detectives Case 3: The Konekone (Dancing White Shadow)

<http://thebbb.net/ebooks/urban-legend-detectives-3.html>

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