

The Corridor

A Short Story

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Featured in Haunter's Tale Volume II by J. Michael Roddy

Isozuka dabbed at his brow with a handkerchief. It was August in Osaka, and even though it was barely eight in the morning, his suit sealed in the humidity like steam in a sauna. It didn't help that it was rush hour, and most of Osaka's 2.7 million residents were making the morning commute.

Isozuka swerved through the bike path to avoid the clobbering of briefcases and swinging purses. The walking pace in the city sped up during the summer months. Everyone wanted to minimize time spent under the Osaka sun, which made even the moderately air-conditioned train stations feel like an ice bath. Isozuka quickened his pace to match the stride of the crowd.

As he came toward a crosswalk, Isozuka stopped under the shade of a tree to await the traffic signal. Out of habit, he took the long way to work, skirting along the outside of Osaka station as he made his way through Umeda. He liked the time to himself, and with the hours he worked, it was the only exercise he got. Not to mention he always felt funny walking through the shortcut's unavoidable Umeda Virtual Corridor.

The traffic signal switched over, illuminating the walking green salaryman. The man's little green hat usually prompted a smile from Isozuka, but just thinking about the Virtual Corridor had made the hair on the back of his neck stand up. He shuddered and crossed with the crowd to the shaded side of the street.

The Virtual Corridor was a "trick art" exhibit: one of those paintings teens and tourists could pose with to get likes on SNS. It was just realistic enough to be unnerving and quirky enough to intensify the sensation, with something about each subject just the slightest bit off.

Like three men carrying a billboard of what was behind the billboard, the image cropped just three inches to the left; none of their torsos quite met their waists. Isozuka wasn't sure if this was an accident or a joke, but either way he didn't like it. And then there was the man before the flower shop, head thrown back in a silent maniacal laugh. Or the bride painted in the window of a dress shop, holding a glass of white wine in a toast to something unseen.

The thought gave Isozuka goosebumps, the accompanying chill a temporary relief from the heat. He reasoned that if he must venture through the Corridor this seemed as good a season as any.

Summer was the season of *kaidan*, or ghost stories. Scary tales told to evoke spine-tingling chills that brought reprieve from the city's stifling summer climate. Primary school children put on haunted houses. Movie theaters hosted horror films. Even television channels featured spooky specials to celebrate the season. As a boy, Isozuka himself would stay up well into the night to catch after-hours shows of the supernatural that starred his favorite actors and scary stories.

He smiled at a flashback of falling asleep at his junior high school desk after a late night of horror films. He used to crave the feeling of fear brought on by a good ghost story.

Decidedly, Isozuka changed course and descended the steps into the subway.

After all, it *was* just a hallway. And heat or no heat, nearing fifty, Isozuka was much too old to let his imagination run wild.

As expected, the station was filled with other pedestrians looking to escape the sun's wrath. Isozuka gave himself a minute to cool down and wipe the sweat from his forehead. Now that he was in the subway and surrounded by so many people, he felt a little embarrassed that he had allowed the idea of the Corridor to make him so nervous.

Isozuka slipped into a break in the crowd and joined the steady stream of pedestrians pulsing through the station. The sweet smells of breakfast wafted down the station's tunnels and

made Isozuka's stomach grumble. Near the stairs leading to another floor of the basement, colorful advertisements covered the walls. Pamphlets broadcasting the date and time of *kaidan* events fluttered over the curling corners of aged police posters.

The same bulletins had been plastered to this board and every other one in Osaka for as long as Isozuka could remember. In the bottom left corner, the face of a twenty-something who'd quietly gone missing in the eighties stared blankly at commuters as they passed.

Isozuka had to admit, the brief relief of air conditioning and the slower pace that accompanied the change were nice. Plus, the shortcut shaved ten minutes off the walk. He was beginning to wonder why he didn't simply cut through the station everyday, when the Umeda Virtual Corridor came into view. Holding tight to his earlier bravado, Isozuka allowed the crowd to carry him into the mouth of the tunnel.

Murals on both sides of the hall formed a slice-of-life tableau. People frozen mid-moment--all Westerners--smiled vacantly at the passing pedestrians. Even the ceiling was painted: its strokes mimicked a clouded blue sky with circling birds, trapping you in the corridor's virtual world.

Isozuka had begun to slip back into the hypnosis of the commute when he was startled by a presence at his feet. He looked down to find a purring sleek, brown cat. It was a stray, judging by the scar on the creature's nose, with flat and sharp gray eyes.

Animals were not permitted in the station. The creature must have, like him, come inside to escape the heat. Someone was bound to catch it and let it out before long, but Isozuka was in too big of a hurry to concern himself with the animal.

Isozuka nudged the cat with the toe of his shoe, and the feline took off down the Corridor, getting lost in the crowd. Reaching the end of the hallway, Isozuka ascended the steps, thus ending the trial of his first encounter with the Corridor.

Isozuka didn't think of the Corridor again until the following morning.

After his boss had finally left for the evening, he'd gotten drinks with men from the office and taken a taxi home, avoiding the station altogether. He hadn't given this morning's commute much thought, but when confronted with the choice, Isozuka decided it'd be safe to repeat Monday's refreshing shortcut and descended into the station.

A rush of cool air greeted him as he stepped into the fluorescent subway. His cheeks stung from the sun, and he envied the woman closing her parasol behind him.

He'd walked briskly through the Corridor the day before in a deliberate attempt to avoid too much thought upon his surroundings. This morning however, with the ten minutes the shortcut saved, he elected to take his time—as much as he could in the foot traffic—and really see the Corridor. This, he surmised, would illuminate the odd parts of the exhibit that so troubled him and absolve him of any prevailing discomfort. Nearing the passage, he slowed his gait.

The Umeda Virtual Corridor occupied the tunnel that connected the Midosuji Subway and Osaka Station beneath the bustling streets of Umeda. The exhibit stretched from one end of the wide hallway to the other and was designed to look like an outdoor street - an American or European avenue, Isozuka assumed, though he hadn't an inkling of which city it was meant to depict - populated by shops and cafes.

He assumed if this was the whole of the artwork, it would perturb him much less than it currently did, for the street's residents, for lack of a better term, were the part of the work that concerned Isozuka most. On either side of the Corridor, over two dozen Western patrons of varying ages sat, stood, or "moved" along the avenue, unsuspectingly frozen in time.

It's not that the Corridor was scary by nature or even that the artwork was poorly done. Isozuka found himself rather impressed by the execution and attention to detail. No, *unsettling* was a better word. And though Isozuka didn't much want to admit it, the hallway, with all its painted subjects, always made him feel simultaneously exhibitionist and as if he himself were being watched, like the eyes of the seemingly stationary forms followed him as he passed. Somehow, no one else ever seemed bothered by this, or if they did, Isozuka never caught the expression of shared unease.

Lost in his thoughts, a figure in his peripheral vision startled him, and Isozuka shuddered at the image of a man on his left. The man held a bag of groceries from which several apples had escaped out a tear in the bottom and rolled further down the Corridor. Spotting the apples, a young painted boy points, a strange look on his face. Nothing inherently unusual, and yet something about it seemed unnatural.

Beyond the man with the apples, Isozuka continued past young people seated on a bench and an entire restaurant scene. It was here he stopped with surprise when he came across an unexpected character.

At the foot of one of the depicted restaurant's outdoor tables sat the image of a brown cat, its gray eyes staring at something invisible down the hallway. The gloss of the paint made his fur sleek, and a small scar sat on the cat's nose.

Isozuka paused to examine the cat further, causing the unassuming businesswoman behind him to stumble as she stepped on his heels.

That wasn't there yesterday. He thought, and then chided himself. Of course it was. The painting had been there for years. They wouldn't still be creating additions. But what he couldn't explain was its resemblance to the stray he'd seen in the station yesterday. No, at some point in the past, he must've noticed the cat in the mural, and having it in his mind with the summer's first encounter with the corridor, merely *thought* yesterday's feline had gray eyes and a scar on its nose.

But now that he was thinking of it, the closer he looked at the surrounding images, the more he started to notice things he hadn't before.

Not that this was unusual. It *was* trick art after all, crafted to gradually reveal easy-to-miss details the longer one looked at it.

And yet...with his limited knowledge of the mural, Isozuka *knew* some things were off. The image of a young boy who Isozuka was certain had once been depicted leapfrogging over a fire hydrant now lay on the sidewalk holding a ruined knee. The boy's face was twisted in agony. The sight made Isozuka nauseous. Not just because he could have sworn that it hadn't looked like this before, but because the scene itself was oddly horrific. Why would someone create something that looked so morbid?

He forced his gaze away and quickly ran his eyes over the other panels. More and more eerie details appeared the longer he looked. Hadn't the bride in the window once been toasting out toward the street?

Isozuka shook his head. He was letting his imagination run wild again. Maybe it was the heat or stress of overtime.

Isozuka swiped at the perspiration spotting his brow. *Just stress*, He told himself. He kept his eyes carefully trained away from the empty eyes and toothy smiles.

He hurried quickly out of the tunnel and up toward the street, only making eye contact with the young woman in the bottom left corner of the missing persons poster. For a moment he felt as if he'd seen that face somewhere else, but the feeling quickly passed.

Isozuka shook his head and exited the station.

He maintained it had been stress that made his eyes play tricks on him, but really he'd thought very little of the Corridor before his commute home the following evening.

The workday had been long. His boss had stayed until half past midnight, which was even later than normal. Isozuka himself had run out of work to complete by seven p.m., but rather than leave, he had sat at his desk in solidarity and organized everything in sight. Papers, drawers, paperclips. He could tell by the clattering sounds around him that other salarymen were doing something similar.

Finally, his boss had left, and Isozuka, dizzy with fatigue from the series of late nights and early mornings, followed. It was Wednesday, and Isozuka was running on only five hours of sleep and fifteen hours spent hunched over his desk in the grueling sunlight from the office window. He had little confidence he wouldn't fall asleep on his feet before he made it home.

He did his best not to give the Corridor a thought as he disappeared into Osaka Station.

This late at night, the station was predictably empty. The trains had stopped running, and even the foot traffic had waned to only a handful of late-night stragglers. Like him, they moved with zombie-like exhaustion.

Isozuka headed toward the entrance of the Midosuji Subway. A short flight of stairs carried him down into the train station's basement. It was even quieter here. The soft scrape of footsteps had disappeared, leaving only the dismal plodding of Isozuka's own, tired feet.

He'd never seen the Corridor look so empty. And yet, it didn't *feel* empty. The Umeda Virtual Corridor felt oddly charged. He'd have thought the bright lights would give him some sort of comfort; instead, he hated how exposed it made him feel. The Corridor's colorful buildings and occupants appeared over-saturated under the harsh glare and made Isozuka's eyes throb.

He looked down to avoid the visual noise, but his eye caught on the shoes of the painting's closest subject, a woman seated at one of the restaurant's tables. They were white women's slip-ons. His sweetheart at university had had a very similar pair back in the eighties. He glanced over. Several tables down, a man wore a pair of loafers Isozuka himself had only purchased in the nineties, the time's trendy office shoes the perfect present to himself for his first promotion. Assessing the corresponding clothing, Isozuka noticed other discrepancies. The boy pointing at the apples wore a sweater meant for winter, while on the other side of the hallway, a man wore a pair of summer shorts and another wore a rain jacket, both in styles from the turn of the century.

Very few of the mural's residents, it seemed, were from the same time period or even time of year, as if taken from their own timelines and imprisoned together within the painting's depths. Isozuka was too mentally exhausted to wonder if this were an artistic choice or a sign of something more sinister, but just as he brushed the thought aside, determined to leave the

Corridor behind, his eyes trailed up to the face of the woman in the white shoes. The woman sat at one of the restaurant's tables, her brown hair twisted into a bun. For the first time, Isozuka looked at her face. He'd seen it nearly everyday for most--if not all--of his working life. Only she'd gone missing in the eighties and hadn't been seen since.

The face from the bottom left corner of the police poster.

Isozuka took a step back, involuntarily raising his arms as if to shield himself from the woman. All around him, more and more faces jumped into stark clarity, their eyes seemingly trained upon him.

Were they all from the station bulletin?

Nonsense, his mind barked, *but what if?* the thought answered.

Looking back at the faces, Isozuka found it hard to believe the heat of their gaze was just a trick of his mind.

Isozuka ran. He didn't dare look behind him, not that he was sure what he was expecting to see. He'd had enough of the Virtual Corridor.

It was no use. His trenchcoat wasn't made to withstand rain, and it was highly unlikely his shoes would dry before work in the morning if he continued his commute home in the downpour. Isozuka ducked into the station and out of the rain.

He could have bought an umbrella from a *kombini* and possibly soldiered on, but he had so many of those transparent convenience store umbrellas around his apartment already that another would pass embarrassing.

It was well past midnight. The rest of the city had long gone home, and the trains had stopped running, which left Osaka Station in a rare state of stillness.

Squish. Squish. Squish. His water-logged shoes sloshed across the floor and left watery footprints behind. Isozuka couldn't remember the last time he'd seen the train station look so empty, so lifeless. The silence seemed to magnify every step that Isozuka took toward home, making the swish of his wet clothing deafening to his own ears.

He skirted down a vacant staircase into the station's basement. He hadn't expected to see anyone else per se, but the quietness of the Corridor made his heart pound. He shuddered and felt goosebumps rise along his arms. *I'm cold from being wet*, he said to himself.

But Isozuka knew that wasn't true: he found himself honestly frightened to traverse the Corridor.

He wouldn't, he decided. There had to be a way around it, and with his sense of direction, he'd find it.

Isozuka hurried down the stairs. Instead of walking toward the Corridor, he darted straight to his left and down the next hall. He didn't dare look up as he passed the Virtual Corridor, though he was *positive* a figure had flitted past its mouth in the corner of his eye.

All of the shops and restaurants were closed for the night. Though Isozuka had traveled through this very subway station countless times, he found it hard to navigate. He chalked it up to the foreign feel of the tunnels after closing time. It looked like an entirely different building all locked up.

Following the signs to the street, Isozuka felt his chest loosen with relief. *Almost there*, he told himself, rounding another corner. He stopped dead in his tracks.

The Umeda Virtual Corridor stretched before him.

Stupid, he thought after a moment to digest. He'd just walked in a circle.

Isozuka turned on his heel and quickly retraced his steps back toward the street. He shortly found the problem. He'd missed a set of stairs. These would take him down before taking him back up and out, the toll of avoiding the Corridor. He began to descend the steps before pausing partway down. The painting of a flower shop confronted him at the bottom of the staircase, the other end of the Virtual Corridor.

He retreated back up the stairs, a little less sure of himself. At least he was on the right side of the tunnel. One of these exits had to lead to his street.

But it seemed as though, no matter how many different hallways he took, he always wound right back at the top of the Corridor. He hung a left, and then a right, and then a right, and then a left again. The front windows of the restaurants--the real restaurants, he comforted himself--were shuttered and locked, leaving little visual variation to his surroundings. The station was a giant, beige maze.

It felt as though he'd spent the better part of twenty minutes trying to find his way out. His wariness mounted into nervousness, then full-fledged fear. He kept thinking that he heard a voice, maybe of an officer doing his late-night rounds, but when he followed the sounds, it only brought him back to the Corridor.

He shivered in his wet clothes, anxious and frightened if he were being honest with himself, which he assumed he should be. His phone had no service, so he located an emergency phone box and lifted the receiver. He tried to ignore the trembling of his hand as he pressed the phone to his ear. Dead silence. He stabbed at the buttons but knew it was of no use.

This is absurd, he thought, even as he stuck his hands in his pockets to stop them from shaking. He just wanted to get out. And it was becoming clear that there was only one way.

Isozuka paused for one uncertain moment. He was back at the entrance of the Umeda Virtual Corridor. He would walk straight through. He didn't have to look anywhere but down.

His breath shaky, eyes trained on the tops of his wet shoes, Isozuka stepped forward.

One step. Two steps. Three steps.

The hallway felt as though it were stretching. Isozuka didn't dare look up and get lost in the faces of the people on the walls. He was afraid to see that something else was different, to find another face he thought he knew. As ridiculous as the idea was, Isozuka wouldn't lift his gaze; again, he felt painted eyes on him.

Thirteen. Fourteen. Fifteen.

He came across another pair of wet, silty footprints, and then another. It was an odd relief to know that someone else had been down here recently enough to leave footprints.

He felt his shoulders relax a bit, and even allowed himself to tilt his head up a bit. He was halfway through the Corridor. Almost there.

The sight of small cat pawprints made him pause, then smile. With the summer heat tempting animals inside, there was nothing odd about a cat in the subway. No doubt the same stray cat from the other day. He had been ridiculous to think that, even for a moment...

The thought trailed off as Isozuka followed the delicate paw print trail with his eyes. They meandered into the gullet of the hallway and then suddenly veered right.

Don't look, the tiny voice in his head nagged. *Leave. Continue home.*

But curiosity got the better of him. Isozuka followed the prints...right to where the floor met the wall.

The paw prints went to the wall and did not come back out.

Isozuka backed up, frozen with anxiety.

He then began to notice other sets of footprints, human footprints: not the ones that wandered up and down the hall but those that wandered *across*.

Men's shoes, women's shoes, children's shoes. Unconsciously he wandered down the Corridor, surveying the sheer number and fearing what they meant. When he finally stopped, the toes of his shoes aligned with a set of slender-heeled footprints. They advanced before him to where the peculiar bride stood in the window of the dress shop, stemmed glass raised in chilling toast. The light from the stairs at the end of the hall, just feet away, illuminated her vacant expression and the presence of...

Isozuka froze, his eyes widening at the face before him. Water poured from the portrait's mascaraed eyes, leaving trails of clumpy, black ooze dripping down her face.

Dizzily, Isozuka reached out and brushed his fingertips against the tears. They smeared beneath his fingers....

The bride flicked her eyes to him.

Isozuka yelped in surprise and jumped back. She didn't move; she *hadn't* moved. *She was nothing but a painting*. Isozuka's face went hot with humiliation.

No. He would not let the Corridor get the better of him.

Unfamiliar emotions flooded Isozuka: fear, shame, and rage. His hands shook.

Anguished, he screamed and clawed at the bride, his fingernails tearing through the paint of her eyes until he couldn't see her look at him. Then he went to the next figure and the next, a man looking down, the man laughing. He moved to the other side of the hall, ripping at the paint with his fingernails until his nails cracked and his fingers bled, leaving red streaks where their eyes had been.

At last he calmed, the pain of his hands reaching him. He stumbled back from the restaurant scene, his eyes on the girl from the police posters, now unrecognizable.

Faintly, he heard the sound of birds overhead. He looked up to see a flock circling the painted sky. The smell of decaying paint filled Isozuka's nostrils. His grip on reality began to slip.

There was the sound of paint crackling behind him, but before he could look, stiff tendrils of pigment stretched across his eyes, dragging him backwards. He screamed and strong strings of dried paint tore open his jaw, filling his mouth. They wrapped around his arms and legs, his shoulders and torso.

Isozuka knew he had to be nearing the other side of the hall. But the sensation of cold drywall against his back never came. The wall behind him seemed to have disappeared, giving way to an abyss of dust and death.

Chalk-like paint flecks filled his nose and throat, stifling his screams into coughs that grew weaker and weaker as he gasped for clean air. His lungs siphoned dust.

The last thing Isozuka remembered seeing was a cat, its gray eyes narrowed into slits as Isozuka felt his gaze fade, and then...

Silence.

The corridor bustled with activity. *Obon*, the Buddhist festival of the deceased, was just a few days away. Spirited families prepared for the occasion, running last-minute errands and

cleaning their homes in anticipation of out-of-town guests. Despite the soaring temperatures, the mood was electrifying and contagious as excitement for the festival swooped through the city. Crowds squeezed through the tunnels of the Umeda Train Station, pedestrians shoulder to shoulder as they traveled to festivities and meet-ups with friends.

The hallway of the Umeda Virtual Corridor was even more cramped with the recent addition of painters. Moving slowly, they tackled each panel one at a time, rolling pints of white paint over the images that covered the walls.

Two students marched down the corridor, their uniforms in varying stages of sloppy undress, too elated by the week of vacation ahead to concern themselves with appearances. The male student jabbed his friend in the side and indicated the painter tasked with the panel of the dress shop. The faces of the panel's bride and those around her had been vandalized. Torn strips of paint hung down from where their eyes should have been.

The students watched the man erase the bride's ruined face. Before long, it'd be just a blank wall. "I'm honestly glad they're painting that hallway," the female student confessed to her friend. "It always sort of gave me the creeps."

As they rounded the corner away from the corridor, they passed a brown cat, so still it could have been a painting. The cat sat and surveyed the progress, fixated on the slowly disappearing portrait of a middle-aged Japanese man. As it watched with gray eyes, brown trail twitching, the once vibrant street scene vanished.