

"I still think this was a bad idea." Shirou glanced around the room, starting to seem a bit more like a nervous rabbit than a wolf. He was backstage in a Tokyo television studio with Michiru, Nazuna, and Marie Itami, all in human form with no other Beastmen in sniffing distance.

"At least you don't have to go on camera in front of half of Japan." Michiru retorted, looking a bit nervous and having difficulty maintaining human form. "You just have to stay back here and watch our backs."

Nazuna lay a comforting hand on her friend's shoulder. "It's okay, just let me take the lead here. I'm used to this kind of thing now."

"Besides," Marie slunk up behind Michiru, momentarily causing her control over her form to slip. "This show will help Nazuna expand her audience far beyond Animacity. Don't you want to help your best friend?"

"More like help you, Ms. Manager." Michiru muttered under her breath. Her gaze wandered down to a suitcase sitting next to them that she didn't remember any of them coming in with.

"I'm sorry," Marie said with a sneer. "Did I hear a certain tanuki say she didn't want a month's interest on her debts forgiven?"

"I'm sorry," Michiru glared right back at her. "Did I hear a certain weasel lost her lucrative black market phone business when mayor Rose took down the firewall and needed this trip to make up the lost revenue?"

"Mink..." Marie snarled, fangs starting to poke out. "Okay, how about I halt interest for a month and a half?"

"Two months." Michiru countered.

"Fifty days." Marie settled. "Not a second longer."

"Hey," the stage director, a middle-aged Japanese man in an expensive suit shouted. "Finish that up later you animals. You're on in two minutes."

All the Beastmen but Nazuna shot him a nasty look as he walked away. "Fine," Michiru whispered. "Fifty days, but I'll be checking your math."

As the kitsune and tanuki went to take their positions on stage Shirou noticed Marie grinning. "It's July." He noted.

"Yep, both this month and the next are 31 days." Marie confirmed. "Compounding interest by the month is difficult enough, let's see how miss high school dropout handles .6... something months."

Nazuna sat on a couch next to the host's desk while Michiru took a seat on the far end. While waiting for the hostess to show up Nazuna quickly scanned Michiru's outfit. She kept her usual red jacket but she'd spent the previous day shopping for new clothes (on Shirou's dime) and wore a fresh pair of blue jeans (tail hole cut discreetly in the back) and a t-shirt with the logo of some anime studio she liked under the coat. She looked dramatically underdressed compared to Nazuna, who wore a slightly less-frilly copy of her concert dress. "Are you sure that's what you want to wear for the interview?"

Michiru leaned back on the couch. "You know I hate that girly stuff, our school uniforms were bad enough. Besides, it makes you look even better by comparison, doesn't it?"

Further conversation was cut off as the hostess arrived. Soto Hana was a middle-aged woman in a fairly conservative pantsuit who looked down at the two Beastwomen with barely disguised contempt as she took her seat behind her desk. "On in ten, nine..." As the director's countdown started Michiru abruptly straightened up while Nazuna settled more naturally. "Three, two, one." The "on air" sign lit up and Soto started her spiel.

"Good morning Japan," she said with mock cheerfulness. "This is Soto Hana and today we have a pair of very... Unusual guests. Two Beastmen who claim that they were just ordinary high school students up until a year ago when they spontaneously changed. Hiwatashi Nazuna." The fox waved and nodded towards the camera. "And Kagemori Michiru." She gave a nervous wave. "Now, I think the question on everyone's minds is, if you used to be human, how did you become Beastmen?"

"Well, Mrs. Soto." Nazuna answered. "About eighteen months ago we were in an accident and needed blood transfusions. The hospital was short on our blood types, and apparently obtained a bag of blood from the black market. Unbeknownst to them the blood was Beastman blood stolen from Sylvasta Pharmaceuticals' R&D division and contained one of their experimental drugs." She gave an emphatic sigh before continuing. "One day after our injuries had healed I was back at school and just spontaneously turned into a pink fox."

"Would you mind showing us this pink fox?" Soto asked.

"Of course." Nazuna was momentarily enveloped in a pale pink light. When it receded she was covered in pink and white fur with a short muzzle, two large pointed ears, and a bushy tail sitting on the couch cushion between her and Michiru.

Soto flinched, one could guess this was the first time she'd seen a Beastman in beast-form in person. "How, intriguing Ms. Hiwatashi. Now, how about you Ms. Kagemori, when did you first change?"

Michiru slipped into tanuki form almost without thinking. "Well," she recollected. "After I watched Nazuna get abducted I ran straight home and hid in my room..."

"Wait." The hostess interrupted. "Did you say Ms. Hiwatashi was kidnapped?" She turned to the kitsune, expecting her to answer.

"Yes," Nazuna replied, pain starting to show in her eyes as she remembered. "I went to the school nurse, she made a bunch of frantic calls, then half an hour later some strange men in suits came in. They grabbed me and dragged me off to a van that brought me to some kind of underground medical lab. Then they performed all kinds of tests on me for days, maybe weeks." Tears filled her eyes as she struggled to continue. "I never found out who they were. They just held me prisoner until the Silver Wolf Order found me and freed me."

"The Silver Wolf Order..." Soto shuffled through some cue cards on her desk before picking one up to read. "It says here that they were a Beastman supremacist cult, and you were their leader Ms. Hiwatashi?"

"Hey!" Michiru jabbed a finger in Soto's face. "Creepy old Boris was the real leader. He was just using Nazuna as a figurehead for his scam."

"Michiru," Nazuna whispered, twitching an ear towards the tanuki's outstretched arm, which Michiru suddenly realized she'd stretched to nearly four meters long.

"Uh," Michiru looked momentarily embarrassed before snapping her arm back to its' normal length. "Sorry. Didn't mean to do that."

"She's a little overprotective of me." Nazuna explained. "Not without reason, mind you."

Soto half-stood, still recoiling from the now-retracted digit. "She has a long reach too."

"We are not exactly ordinary Beastmen." The kitsune replied. "Ordinary Beastmen have only two forms, one human and one beast." Nazuna began to glow again, and a pair of feathered wings sprouted from her shoulder as her muzzle lengthened and her fur turned grey. "We have more options."

Soto seemed too stunned by the sudden appearance of Nazuna's wings to offer a retort, so the shapeshifter continued. "Boris had me develop this form so I could impersonate the Beastman god Ginrou. He told me the Beastmen needed hope, even if it was delivered by a false Ginrou." Nazuna's voice rose as she returned to her goddess persona for a few moments, only to come

crashing back down as she shifted back to human form. “And he used me to destroy their hope instead.”

“Uh, okay.” Soto attempted to regain her composure. “So, if you became Beastmen from a blood transfusion. Does that mean other humans could be turned similarly?”

“If the drugs in the blood were replicated, sure.” Michiru replied. “But the scientists who sold them blew up their research when they realized they were about to be caught, and then they got killed in the Nirvasyl outbreak.” Michiru’s eyes widened as she realized she’d mentioned one of the topics Mayor Rose had warned them about and attempted damage control. “Which we cured with a serum from our blood, no worries there.”

“If you say so.” The hostess didn’t look convinced. “Now, I’m sure you’re aware of the abilities attributed to kitsune and tanuki and yokai stories. Do you think it could be possible that those stories were inspired by similar things to what happened to you?”

Michiru thought back to the time she tried using a leaf to turn herself human. “It’s probably just a coincidence.”

“I think the storytellers exaggerated the normal abilities of Beastmen for dramatic effect.” Nazuna added.

“Are you sure about that? We’ve been seeing an increase in reports of yokai sightings throughout Japan this past year.” Soto added, a smug look crossing her face.

Michiru and Nazuna both blinked in astonishment. “We know that Beastmen inspired all sorts of tales of gods and monsters all over the world.” Nazuna answered. “And there’s still Beastmen finding their way to Animacity today. Maybe they’re being spotted and mistaken for yokai?”

“We have multiple reports of sightings of a kappa in Shiga prefecture.” A projection screen lowered between the hostess and guests. “One person even took a photo.” The image of a humanoid figure with green skin, a shell covering his torso, and a mat of scraggly black hair over a beaked face, appeared on the screen.

“That just looks like a normal turtle Beastman to me.” Nasuna replied.

Michiru stared at the photo, she noticed something about his head that looked off so she shifted to eagle eyes. The “kappa’s” face instantly enlarged, allowing her to see his features in disgusting detail. She shifted her gaze around for several seconds, overshooting her target several times before finally focusing on the top of his head. It seemed to be covered in brackish water sitting in a shallow depression of his skull. *If that’s a turtle, he really needs to see a doctor about that*, she thought.

“Well, that might be, but there’s also been sightings of an amabie in Kumamoto.” Soto added.

Michiru blinked away her eagle eyes and turned away from the screen. “Like the internet meme?” She asked.

“Sort of. We’ve also heard of a tsuchigumo in the mountains.”

Nazuna turned to her friend. “A spider yokai, I don’t think I’ve seen any bug Beastmen, have you?” Michiru shrugged.

Soto continued. “There was also a nue in Kyoto, and even a dragon.”

“A dragon!” Michiru and Nazuna exclaimed in unison. They shared a look that told each other they were both thinking of the same thing. The clash of mythical beasts born from the blood sacrifice of thousands of Beastmen, was there a possibility that there were more of them out there?

“So,” Soto insinuated. “How many bags of blood do you think the Beastman yakuza sold?”

“We wouldn’t know.” Nazuna retorted. “We’re not criminals.”

*I thought they were more like the mafia anyways.* Michiru thought to herself. A bit of movement caught the corner of her eye, drawing her attention to the edge of the stage. Shirou was gesturing for her to come over. “Uh,” her gaze darted back over towards Nazuna and Soto, who was about to speak again. “I think Nazuna needs to speak to her manager.” She grabbed the fox’s hand abruptly. “Right now, bye!” Michiru dashed off at cheetah speed, dragging her hapless friend behind her.