

“Well, that was a disaster.” Michiru groaned, throwing herself back in her seat. They were in the back of a van provided by Mayor Rose for the trip to Tokyo, escorted by a couple of Animacity police officers in unmarked cars watching for hunters. “Now everybody’s going to think we’re hiding something.”

“It’s not that bad.” Nazuna said in a comforting voice. “It could have been far worse.”

Michiru covered herself with her poofy tail, glad of the lack of windows in the back. “I don’t see how it could be worse.”

“Well,” Nazuna thought. “She could have asked about your job, then cast doubts on whether a high school dropout was qualified to be a social worker, making Mr. and Mrs. Horner look bad for hiring you. Or she might have asked about your love life.”

“Not helping!” Michiru cut the kitsune off, poofing her tail so much she was practically a blue fur ball wearing a seat belt.

“Whatever else may have happened, we have a serious problem now.” Shirou called back from the passenger’s seat in front. He pulled out his phone and started dialling as he kept watch on the surrounding traffic. “If those “yokai” really are Beastmen, that hostess has just painted a target on all their backs.”

Shirou entered the last digit and held the phone up to his ear. It rang for a full minute before the Beastman on the other end picked up. “Oogami.” Guiliano Flip, crime lord of Animacity, answered. “How’s your vacation in the human world going?”

“You can see that on TV.” Shirou replied gruffly. “We need to talk.”

“What’s there to talk about.” Flip snorted. “Kusakabe made a mistake, and he paid for it.”

Shirou’s mouth tightened into a snarl, but he pressed on. “We both know it didn’t end there. Now as soon as I’m back to the city I’m coming over, whether you’re ready or not.”

There was several seconds of dead air before Flip gave his response. “My people will give your people the location. Oh, and Oogami, watch those mountain roads. I hear some of their guardrails are in pretty bad condition.” He hung up.

“Trying to get a straight answer out of the big guy?” Marie, the driver, asked rhetorically. “Well, good luck with that.” The mink checked the gps on the van’s dashboard. “We’re coming up on those mountains soon, I promise I’ll be careful.”

“Didn’t anyone ever tell you not to eavesdrop on other people’s conversations?” In the corner of his eye Shirou caught a blue rabbit’s ear pulling back abruptly from his headrest.

As they entered a tunnel the wolf opened his window a crack so he could smell the air rushing past. Humans, motor oil, gas fumes, all scents to be expected here... gunpowder! Shirou tensed as they exited the tunnel ready to fight, but saw nobody. Along the right side of the road was a sheer cliff protected by a steel guardrail, a hole torn in the middle by something big.

"Hey look Michiru!" Marie called. "It's that forest where I saved your life, remember?"

"Slow down." Shirou commanded, opening his window further so he could lean out.

"We're fine, it's a shallow enough turn."

Shirou shifted into wolf form. "I said slow down!" He took a deep breath of the scents as they passed.

He could see it in his mind's eye. Not half an hour ago six humans on motorcycles had parked by the side of the road, only for a semi truck to come up the pass, leaving Animacity, and turn so sharply their trailer swerved into the humans. A couple humans were crushed instantly, another got thrown over the side of the cliff. But then a pair of Beastmen with automatic weapons leapt out of the trailer and gunned down the survivors. He admitted some relief at the lack of Beastman blood, only human, but he thought he recognized the Beastmen's scents.

The tinny sound of that song Michiru and Nazuna liked playing from the backseat momentarily interrupted Shirou's train of thought. Michiru scrambled to fish her phone out of her tail, then stared at the caller ID in trepidation. "Caller unknown," it read, causing Flip's words to run through her head as she considered whether to answer. Eventually, she resolved to get it over with and put the call on speakerphone. "Hello?" She asked with clear anxiety in her voice.

"Hi Michiru!" The bubbly voice of a peppy teenage girl emanated from the phone's speaker. "I saw you on TV this morning."

"Nina?" Michiru perked up as she realized who it was. "I didn't know you had my number?"

"Ms. Itami gave it to me." The dolphin girl replied. "That hostess was really mean to you, and your friend. Why don't you come over to my family's pool and relax?"

"You have a pool?" Michiru asked, still caught off guard by the call.

"Of course we do, we're whales." Nina retorted. While Michiru was chiding herself for not remembering that the dolphin added. "C'mon, I'll tell the ticket people to let you and your friends in for free."

What kind of pool does this girl have? Michiru thought. She wasn't sure she wanted to go anywhere near the Family after what she had overheard, but before she could say anything Marie spoke up. "Sure we can come over, I couldn't get a decent swim in at the hotel anyways. Maybe we can work out a sponsorship from Animacity's new mascot too?"

"Sure thing, see you soon!" Nina hung up and silence hung inside the van for a hot moment.

Nazuna was the first to speak up. "So, who's Nina?"

"Uh," Michiru looked sheepish for a moment. "Just this rich dolphin girl I met on Facelook posing as a human. She wanted to know what it was like to really be one."

"This is a 'pool'?" Michiru asked incredulously as soon as she saw the compound they were driving into. Beyond an archway labeled "Flipworld" in English, she could see waterslides spiralling into the sky around an Olympic-sized pool, with a hot spring-like bathhouse off on the other side of the park. Scattered throughout the area were crowds of Beastmen, most in animal form, many of them aquatic species. As she stepped out of the car she turned towards Marie "I guess crime does pay."

She watched the mink's trenchcoat fall to the ground with a clatter of concealed contraband. Marie was already a blur streaking over the fence and into the pool.

Moments after the subdued splash of Marie's dive a dolphin girl wearing a short water-resistant dress leapt out and landed on her tail just outside the fence. "You made it!" She called to the three still crossing the parking lot. "Come on it and let me show you around."

"Hi Nina," Michiru replied with a bit of trepidation. She turned to her friends to make introductions. "Nazuna, this is Nina Flip, daughter of one of Animacity's wealthiest 'businessmen'. Nina, this is..."

"Deese Louve!" Nina squealed. "I went to your concert."

"Please, call me Nazuna." The fox said, a bit of shame showing in her voice.

"Daddy tried to get me to leave the city on one of his boats." Nina continued. "But I just had to see you, so I snuck out."

Shirou snorted. "You should have listened to your father that time."

"Oh, Mr. Oogami." Nina seemed to take notice of the white-haired man just then. "Daddy told me that he wanted to see you over in his private pool, it seemed important."

Shirou scanned the crowd. The ticket taker, the lifeguard, and more than one of the “patrons” of the park smelled like members of Flip’s gang. And were all staring at him. “Fine,” he headed off in the direction of the bathhouse. “You girls try not to get into too much trouble.”

“We’ll try not to.” Michiru promised out of hand. She bent over to pick up Marie’s discarded clothes, needing a gorilla arm to lift the coat. “There someplace safe to stash these? Marie would probably bill me for anything lost.”

A weasel-like head, inexplicably still wearing sunglasses in the water, poked out of the pool at that comment. “Glad to see we finally understand each other.”

Nina pointed out a locker room where Michiru and Nazuna could go to change. The tanuki girl had packed a red bikini while the fox brought an aqua one-piece that opened down the back for her tail. They found an open locker and started to undress. Once the only other Beastwoman in the room had left Nazuna glanced back at her friend. “I wanted to ask,” she mentioned. “Is Nina’s father involved in anything... illegal?”

Michiru stopped taking her shirt off for a moment to come up with a diplomatic answer. “You remember that big white whale guy who helped us fight the drones?”

“The one with the rocket launcher and all those teeth?” Nazuna gasped.

“Yeah, I didn’t know a beluga could be that scary.” Michiru admitted. “He’s like the boss of the Animacity Mafia, but I don’t know if they’re really a Mafia, they’ve just been called ‘The Family’ whenever I’ve heard of them.” She fumbled with her bra clasp for a minute as she thought. “I wouldn’t worry too much though, Nina hates her dad’s business and she likes both of us. Besides, it’s nigh-impossible to live here without some criminal entanglements.”

Nazuna clutched the top she’d just removed protectively to her chest. “I just, don’t feel good about lying to people, not after everything that happened with the Silver Wolf.”

“Well, you didn’t know and it’s not like you claimed to be the reincarnation of a god again.” Michiru attempted halfheartedly to reassure her. “And at least you don’t have to meet with Flip like Shirou does.”

Shirou felt the stinging cold burning his bare skin, but he resisted the urge to shiver or shift to beast form. He hadn’t even stepped into the freezing pool yet. Flip lounged at the other end of the tub, in whale form and clutching a vaporizer between his fangs. “Why don’t you come on in Oogami,” he taunted. “The water’s arctic.”

Methodically, Shirou set one foot in the icy water, then the other. The appendages went numb almost instantly upon touching the inset steps. He almost shifted out of reflex, but held it in, he

wasn't here to start a fight this time. "I see your daughter finally talked you into giving up cigars." He commented.

Flip pulled out the vaporizer and looked it over for a minute. "I agreed to give it a shot if she entertained your tanuki friend while we talked. It's not the same, but at least I don't have to worry about ashes falling in my water."

Shirou maintained his stoic expression as he descended up to his waist. "We both know why I'm here." He cut to the point in carefully metered tones. He'd had frostbite before, it wasn't something he wanted to relive.

"Kusakabe's deals." Flip replied cool as the ice floating next to him in the pool. "Well, I'm afraid I'm no medium so you're out of luck."

"Of course," Shirou scoffed. "Plausible deniability, you're no fool Flip."

"No," the cetacean crime lord grinned. "I'm not."

"Wha-hoo!" Michiru called, shooting out of the end of the waterslide in a blue blur that sailed over a crowd of agitated swimmers.

Nina and Nazuna watched from the side of the pool, the dolphin poking her head just above water while the fox sat on the edge with her legs dangling in. "At least becoming a Beastman hasn't changed that about her." Nazuna commented.

Nina turned to face her. "So you two really were humans? I admit I was a little skeptical about her story, but you clearly aren't ordinary Beastmen."

"No," Nazuna shifted to wolf form and back. "We're not. Sorry I deceived you all."

"It's okay." Nina reassured her. "I mean, I was disappointed to learn that the Silver Wolf hadn't really reincarnated as a teenage girl like me. But I can understand pretending to be something you're not." Her attention was drawn to Michiru slapping away an angry swimmer with a gorilla arm. "I should probably talk to Daddy about roping off the slide areas. Oh, and speaking of humans, were you stuck in beast form for a while after transforming too? When I met Michiru she sounded like she hadn't been in human form for months."

"Oh, yes, it took Boris a couple months to teach me how to resume and maintain human form." Nazuna shifted human to demonstrate. "He might have been a creep, but he was still a decent teacher. Wait," she suddenly realized what Nina had said. "You said she still hadn't learned how to turn human when she met you?"

“Yes, that’s what she said at least.” Nina replied. “She was crying about not being able to go back to the human world, then she turned human. When I pointed it out to her, she got all excited about wearing hats.”

Michiru swam over in their direction. “Jeez, what’s his problem?” She asked about the group she’d just left. Turning back to her friends she continued. “Did you see that? Next time I want to try shifting to bird as I come out, see if I can get some real air.”

“Michiru,” Nazuna looked concerned. “Were you really stuck in beast form for more than a year?”

“Uh,” Michiru looked surprised. “Yeah, I thought I told you that before.”

“You said you hid at home for a year before setting out for Animacity.” Nazuna replied. “But I assumed you figured out how to shift before leaving. How did you manage to avoid the hunters?”

Marie popped up behind the tanuki, causing her tail to floof up reflexively. “With a little help from her mink friend. That’s how!”

Michiru sighed. “Thank you for saving me Marie. But I’d already avoided them for two days before they spotted me on top of that bus.”

The mink crept close enough to Michiru for the water sliding off her oiled pelt to drip into tanuki fur. “Well, you should have checked out my site on the dark web then. Beastman extractions, just one million yen.”

“I don’t have that kind of money.” Michiru objected. “Or know how to get on the dark web.”

“I could tell that much from your phone bills.” Marie quipped.

Michiru spun around, causing her tail to splash her two friends. “And just what is that supposed to mean?” She demanded.

As Nazuna swept her waterlogged bangs out of her eyes she spotted more splashing off in the distance. “Hey, what’s that over there?”

“Huh?” Michiru turned in the direction her friend was looking and shifted to eagle eyes for a moment. She spotted a Beastman kid with long ears and buckteeth flailing about wildly. “Hey!” She shouted. “That kid is drowning. Somebody go help him!”

Instead, the Beastmen around the kid backed off in a hurry. Michiru scanned the park for a lifeguard, and recognized Nina's pelican bodyguard perched in the tall chair, eyes locked on the dolphin girl. "Guess I have to save him myself."

As she sped off Nazuna called after her friend. "Wait, Michiru! It's dangerous!" But the shapeshifter paid her no mind.

In a flash and a splash Michiru sped across the pool, swimming at seemingly impossible speeds. Other swimmers in her path got knocked aside in her determination to reach the child. Michiru reached out, and got her arms scratched up by the panicked Beastchild's flailing. But she gritted her teeth and pressed on. She pinned the kid's arms down but he kept thrashing with his legs even as she pushed him towards the pool's edge. Finally, after several seconds of agonizing eternity, she reared back and slammed the child down onto the side of the pool.

The waterlogged bunny spat out a stream of water, then fell still. Alarmed, Michiru grew gorilla arms and pounded on his chest, producing another spout of water and a splash from his fur. Noticing that, Michiru called out. "Hey kid! Change back!"

With a soft splash, the rabbit shifted into a slightly pudgy human and at least a gallon of water slid off of him. He groaned quietly, barely able to bring air in. "My ribs hurt..."

"Somebody get a medic!" Michiru shouted.

"For both of you." Nazuna added as she came up next to Michiru. She pointed at her friend's bleeding arms and torso. A disturbingly large patch of blood was pooling around the tanuki girl. Nazuna expanded her arm's muscles and gently lifted Michiru out of the water. "He could have pulled you under. That was reckless!"

Michiru rolled over onto her back and stared down at the patchwork of narrow cuts covering her stomach, then her gaze wandered further down. "What happened to my legs?!" She exclaimed.

"Wow! You're a dolphin like me!" Nina squealed, leaping out of the reddening water. Indeed, Michiru's legs and tail had merged into a single blue-skinned unit ending in two black flukes. "Oh, and there's a first aid kit by admissions, I could go get it."

"No need. I already got it." Marie slunk up carrying a white box with a red cross on the side. "As well as this other thing." She spun a scrap of red cloth with two thin strings on the tip of a forefinger.

Michiru almost fainted when she recognized it.

Shirou could barely feel anything below his waist, Flip had just kept on denying any knowledge of where that altered Beastman blood could have gone. He didn't want to find out how much

cold he could handle, so he needed to find another angle on the beluga crime boss. He scanned the room, decorative wood paneling, ice chunks floating in the water, bare-chested whale with an e-cigarette in his mouth. Something drifted to the forefront of his mind, something that talk-show hostess had said, and a crime scene some months ago. Bodies had been dredged out of the harbor, humans covered with tattoos, chief Tachiki had said that identified them as... "Tell me," Shirou asked. "Have the yakuza been giving you any trouble lately?"

Flip snorted a cloud of vapor from his blowhole. "Those humans are always giving us grief. They know we need them to bring in goods, but even after the mayor relaxed the border they're insisting on the same extortionate prices."

Ah, Shirou thought, *a rather tense business partnership*, he could exploit this. "Have you by any chance exported anything to them?" He inquired.

"Hmm." Flip thought. "Now that you mention it, one of the clans we deal with offered a very good deal for fresh Beastman blood last week. Suspiciously good. I told them no, and now that I've seen your little friend's interview I'm glad I did so."

"Really now?" Shirou said skeptically.

"That tanuki's a loose cannon." The beluga explained. "Her meddling's messed up enough of my business already. You think I want more super-Beastmen like her and the fake Silver Wolf?"

"Of course not," Shirou pressed his opening. "After all, Sylvasta almost destroyed Beastman-kind using Nazuna. I imagine business would be most difficult for you if there were more Beastmen like her out there just waiting for someone to exploit them."

Flip growled in annoyance. "I don't know where the drugged blood ended up, Kusakabe sold them to a bunch of different yakuza clans. They might have resold them anywhere." The whale brought a hand up to his chin as he considered his next move. "I might be able to dredge up a list of his buyers, maybe you'll find a lead there."

"That would be most helpful," Shirou nodded carefully, feeling like his head was in danger of breaking off. "Thank you for your cooperation."

"Not so fast." Flip held up a hand, then snapped his thick fingers to summon an aide to the room. "I can believe that you genuinely want to help these former humans, but how do I know you won't turn this information over to the cops?"

Shirou hadn't been planning to turn over the info, but now that he thought about it he probably would do something like that. But finding the new Beastmen was more important, he couldn't jeopardize that now. "I give you my word as a Beastman that I will not use the information against the Family."

“And that you’ll keep the super-Beastmen out of my way?” Flip added with a sneer.

“And I’ll advise any former humans I find not to get involved in your affairs.” Shirou appended.

“We understand each other perfectly.” Flip held out a hand and his aide produced a switchblade, which he handed to his boss hilt-first. “They say you have the blood of a thousand Beastmen in you, Oogami.” With one smooth motion, the whale sliced across his arm. A small bead of blood welled out from one end of the narrow cut. “Here’s one more.”

A blood pact, Shirou was not surprised. In his centuries of experience it was not an uncommon ritual for such situations. He carefully stepped across the pool, staggering one step as he felt something break beneath him. As he came close to the whale he stuck out his tongue and lapped up a single red bead. He noted it was saltier and thicker than most blood he’d tasted.

“Heh.” Flip laughed, then held his arm out for the aide to bandage. “The yakuza share a cup of rice wine, but I never developed a taste for that stuff.” He flipped the knife around, holding the hilt out to Shirou.

Realizing what the crime lord meant, Shirou wrapped his stiff fingers around the hilt and gingerly lifted it from Flip’s hand. He raised an arm and brought the blade across it, only for the frozen limb to crack and break off.

Flip’s eyes widened as Shirou’s forearm fell into the pool. “Can somebody go grab that?” The silver wolf asked nonchalantly. “And check my feet too?”

The vaporizer fell from Flip’s lips into the pool, causing electricity to arc through the frigid water.

“Okay now, *that* was a disaster.” Michiru was in human form clutching a towel tightly around her waist, gauze wrapped around her stomach and arms. “Who knew bunnies had such sharp claws?”

“I did,” Marie replied. “I also know that their fur is extremely absorbent, if they get wet they can never get dry. Unlike minks.” She shook herself, splattering everyone in a five-meter radius. “I’ve got this oil that makes my hair repel water.” She shifted back to human form to show. “See, all dry.”

Nina turned from admiring Marie’s dreadlocks towards Michiru. “Speaking of hair,” she asked. “Why does yours change color when you shift but Nazuna’s doesn’t?”

“Huh, yeah that is kinda weird.” Michiru addressed her pink-haired friend. “Did you dye your hair or something? It used to be orange before we changed, wasn’t it?”

“Oh, I can change my hair at will.” Nazuna demonstrated by holding out a lock of gradually darkening hair. “Boris had me learn how to change colors so I could be the ‘silver’ wolf. I guess I never felt like going back to my old color.”

Michiru thought. “I’ve only willingly changed colors in chameleon form.”

“Your hair’s changing right now.” Nazuna pointed out.

Michiru’s gaze wandered upwards. Her human form’s brown hair had indeed turned blue with black tips to her bangs. “Huh, I hadn’t noticed.”

“No, you didn’t notice.” Nazuna’s expression started to shift into a jealous snarl. “Like you didn’t notice changing into a mermaid. You don’t ever think about, you can just see another Beastman doing something and copy it. While I have to pull in my fur.” Nazuna’s human skin was instantly covered in pink fuzz. “Shorten my muzzle.” Her mouth extended forward alongside her nose. “Relocate my ears.” Pointed ears sprouted from the top of her head. “Retract my claws.” Her nails became inch-long spikes, bigger than she usually wore them. “And pull in my tail.” A fluffy white-tipped tail popped out of the back of her swimsuit.

“Uh,” Michiru was taken aback by her friend’s outburst, reflexively shifting back to tanuki form. “You learned how to shift to human form way before I did.”

“Because I got kidnapped by a cult!” Nazuna exclaimed. “How would you have done if you had been grabbed by Sylvasta instead?”

Michiru considered her response carefully. “Well, I, uh...” She tried to think of all the forms she had seen Nazuna use, the sense of beauty and grace she’d felt, how to convey that? The first time she’d encountered the Order flashed in her memory. “I wouldn’t be able to turn into a giant wolf, or grow angel wings. You were able to figure that out though.” She answered.

“Maybe.” Nazuna sighed. “And then Boris would have gotten bored with you and set you aside. Found a different plan to destroy all Beastmen.”

“Yeah,” Michiru grinned sheepishly. “I’d just be an ordinary cultist.”

“Knowing you, you’d probably try to escape.” Nazuna retorted.

As they walked off towards the locker room Michiru’s gaze caught on the bathhouses next to them. She attempted to change the subject. “Pity I got so torn up, I’d have liked to try the hot springs. How are they Nina?”

“Oh, they’re not my thing.” Nina replied. “I’m built for colder water, the springs just make me feel like I’m being cooked.” Michiru briefly had a mental image of the dolphin girl in a soup pot. “Daddy’s got a private bath that’s kept at 10 degrees Celsius.”

“Speaking of your dad, isn’t that him over there?” Michiru pointed out a massive bald man in a business suit walking towards them, smoke curling off of him, and not just from the cigar he was holding.

“Daddy!” Nina exclaimed, noticing the smoke. “You promised you’d give...”

“Sorry kiddo.” Flip gave a violent twitch as he came up. “It looks like electronic cigarettes don’t agree with me.” He turned to the tanuki and kitsune. “Sorry you’re not feeling well. How about you come back again once you’re better, free of charge?”

“Uh, sure.” Michiru stared back up at the giant man, intimidating even in human form. “We really should be going though.”

“Your friend will be a while in the hot springs.” Flip added. “I’ll tell him you went home.”

“Okay, bye!” Michiru hurried off, pushing her friends towards the lockers.

Flip continued on towards a set of “wet floor” signs. Behind them his daughter’s bodyguard was down on his knees wiping a sponge across the ground. He held the sponge over a bucket and squeezed out a thin red liquid. “Got all of it, sir.” He reported.

“Good, it would be unsanitary of us to leave that out.” Flip grinned. That super-Beastman blood would probably turn out to be good for something, and he wasn’t one to waste an opportunity.

The girls relaxed once they were in the locker room, but Nazuna’s mind was still racing. “Where did you say Mr. Shirou was meeting your dad?” She asked Nina.

“His private pool, why... Oh!” Nina suddenly realized the implications. “I hope he’ll be okay.”

“He’ll be fine,” Michiru reassured them as she started looking for their locker. “Shirou’s been through worse than freezing water.”

In one of the hot tubs Shirou felt warmth slowly seep into his frigid body. He lifted his left arm, palm towards his face, and examined it. It looked fine, but felt off somehow. He tried to rotate the limb right, but it stopped, so he tried turning leftwards and found himself staring at the back of his hand. “Backwards,” he groaned. “Guess I’ll have to try again.”