

Shirou stuck another pin into the map of Japan he and Michiru had hung on his study's wall. "That's all of them." He said, ignoring the twinge of pain in his arm. "Everywhere the serum was sent."

Michiru scanned the over a dozen pins they'd placed based on the information Flip had given them. "Yeah," she said, picking up a pen and stretching her arm over towards one particular pin. "But I lived over here," she drew an "x" shape over a smaller city about an inch on the map away from that particular pin.

Shirou examined the two cities indicated on the map, he checked the legend for the symbols used for them. "Looks like this is a core city," he pointed to the pin. Picking up his own pen he started carefully drawing a circle around the pin, starting and ending at Michiru's hometown. "If we assume these cities were distribution centers rather than final destinations. We'll have to check every city and town around them too." He started drawing identical circles around every other pin on the map. "It might be years before we find them all, or even one of them."

"I just found three." Michiru held up her phone, the cracked screen displaying a Reddit forum devoted to the talkshow she and Nazuna had appeared on. "Some fans traced a few of the yokai sightings Ms. Sato mentioned, they're working on the rest." She drew more "x"s over Kyoto and Kumamoto labeled "nue" and "amabie", then a third over a small rural town she labeled "kappa".

"Do you think we can trust these... random humans?" Shirou snorted.

"Do you think we can trust these hardened criminals?" Michiru retorted.

Shirou turned back to the marks the tanuki had made. "Fine."

"So, we were thinking Animacity's mascot could go on a goodwill tour, visiting every sighting in the country." Michiru pointed out the map, which now had several more red "x"s and a thin line connecting all of them, starting at Animacity. "She can hold a concert in all these places, luring the humans-turning-Beastmen out of hiding, and we'll be there to help them escape to Animacity." She faced the Beastmen assembled in the conference room of the city building. "How's that sound?"

Marie snorted. "There's too many small towns and villages on your route. Too few people, too insular, we would make a loss on them. We should just focus on the distribution points like the Family did."

"I want to help as many Beastmen as I can." Nazuna added. "But I have to agree with her. Besides that would be a lot of concerts."

“But what if these new Beastmen haven’t figured out how to turn human yet?” Michiru objected. “They might be hiding in such out-of-the way places because they can’t risk walking into a city. Some of these sightings are more than 30 km from a distribution center.”

“So why don’t you go and investigate them yourself?” Michiru stared slack-jawed at the mayor. “While Nazuna spends a few days, maybe a week in each city the serum went to, you and Shirou can go to the outlying towns and investigate sightings.”

“It’s risky.” Shirou interjected before Michiru could come up with an excuse. “If we run into trouble I’d rather not split my attention between these two.” He glanced from Nazuna to Michiru.

Marie laid a possessive hand on Nazuna’s shoulder. “Relax, Animacity’s mascot will be in good paws.” She shifted to mink form and dug a few claws into her hoodie. “You just focus on keeping our troublesome tanuki friend out of trouble.”

Michiru shot a murderous glare at the mink, who pretended not to notice. Nazuna shrugged Marie’s hand off and tried to give Michiru a reassuring smile.

“Fine,” Shirou conceded. “We can do your plan, just call me the moment you run into any trouble.”

“Eh?” Michiru turned to Shirou, dumbfounded at his quick turnaround.

Nazuna stood up, “would you mind if me and Michiru spoke in private?” She asked the room.

“The office two doors to the right should be open.” Mayor Rose replied.

The kitsune and tanuki left the room, Michiru following Nazuna with some trepidation. They entered a small room empty save for a plain desk and a chair. Nazuna sighed as she closed the door behind her. “Michiru, we need to talk.”

Michiru grimaced awkwardly. “Look, I thought the route was a good idea. I didn’t think about how long it would take...”

“Not that,” Nazuna interjected. “We need to talk about our relationship.”

“What?” Michiru gasped out, confused. “We’re still friends aren’t we?”

“It seems like that.” Nazuna confirmed. “Even though I betrayed you, took advantage of our friendship.”

“But it wasn’t you.” Michiru interjected, gingerly holding up Nazuna’s hand. “You weren’t calling the shots, that was creepy Boris and Sylvasta.”

"But I didn't need to manipulate you like that." Nazuna shook her head. "I knew you'd jump to help me if I said I had a problem. And that's not all." Nazuna added before Michiru could say anything else. "The other day at the pool, I felt jealous of you and your talents. I mean, you turned into a mermaid without even thinking about it!"

"Wow," Michiru said, too stunned to say anything else. "Well, I..." she struggled to think of something. "I envy your control."

Nazuna stared at her curiously. "My control?"

"Yeah, your control over your powers." Michiru continued. "Half a second before I first grew wings I still thought I was going to die." She shifted to bird form. "And I look like a dirty sparrow while you're like an angel." She shifted back to tanuki.

"You wouldn't envy me if you knew what it took to learn that." The fox replied. "But that's beside the point. I'm a terrible friend to you Michiru."

Michiru took Nazuna's hand again. "We've both changed a lot since we were in high school, and I want to get to know you again. Spend more time with you."

Nazuna yanked her hand away. "That's my point, I'm no longer the girl hoping to be an idol one day. I'm the former leader of a cult that almost destroyed all Beastmen in Japan, if not the world. I used you, I..."

Nazuna was cut off as Michiru leaned forward and pressed her muzzle into hers. They stood there, lips awkwardly pressed together, for nearly a minute. Then Michiru realized what she was doing and pulled herself back with a start. "Sorry, I don't know what came over me."

"I didn't realize you felt that way too." Nazuna blushed through her face's white fur.

Michiru froze as she registered her friend's words. "Wait, too?"

Nazuna turned away from the tanuki's gaze. "It was in junior year, I started feeling things towards you, like I had for some of the boys. It got stronger after you tried to save me from that bus. Even moreso when we were fighting to stop Sylvesta."

"Wow," Michiru said. "I guess I just always loved you, but I never really thought it was in a lesbian way. Just, like best friends, but maybe closer."

"You don't think much, do you?" Nazuna commented, eliciting a sheepish grin from her friend. "While I couldn't help but think about it, I must have pictured a thousand different ways you could reject me if I told you."

"Is that why you didn't want to spend time with me?" Michiru asked.

“No!” Nazuna exclaimed, then settled back down. “Well, maybe a little. I don’t know if I can trust my feelings. I wasn’t sure if I could hold myself back, if given the temptation.”

“Yeah, but now we know how we feel about each other.” Michiru pointed out. “So now there’s no problem with us spending a lot of time together, continuing to be friends, girlfriends?” She added hopefully.

“Maybe,” Nazuna conceded. “But we still have a lot to talk about, I think we should follow Marie’s route. You’ve got me performing more concerts than most idols do in their entire careers. But you can still stay with us while you’re investigating, can’t you?”

“Well, yeah, but...” Michiru retorted. “What if something happens and I’m not there to protect you?”

“Oh Michiru.” Nazuna took a step back. “I’m not defenseless you know.” She started to lift up the hem of her sweater.

Michiru’s tail poofed out in alarm. “Whoa! I don’t think we’re that far in our relationship just yet!” She held her hands out in front of her to object.

Nazuna giggled. “I just don’t want to tear it, that’s all.” She pulled the hoodie up over her head, showing that she was wearing one of the t-shirts with her photo that Marie sold. “I’ll leave this shirt on, okay?” She clenched her right fist and her arm expanded, causing the sleeve to explode into tatters of cheap fabric.

“Oh, right. You can do gorilla arms too.” Michiru remembered. “That’s why I prefer tank tops you know.”

“Not just gorilla arms,” Nazuna unfurled her massive fingers and retracted claws extended out from the tips. “I made them my own.”

“That’s so cool!” Michiru exclaimed. “But I’m still a bit worried about leaving you alone with that weasel.”

A muffled voice from the far side of the door started to shout “mink!” before a thick paw muzzled her.

“Why Michiru.” Nazuna teased, shrinking her arm back down and pulling her hoodie back on. “Are you getting jealous as well?”

“What, no!” The tanuki objected. “She’s ripped me off half a dozen times. Have you seen the multi-million yen phone bills she’s charged me? Marie...” She paused when she saw Nazuna had pulled her hoodie down and shifted to human form.

“Relax, I can deal with a greedy manager.” Nazuna took Michiru’s furred hand in her hairless one. “You know, fox muzzles aren’t really that great for kissing. Why don’t we try that again?”

Michiru stared into her girlfriend’s loving eyes for a long second, then shifted human. Just before stepping back towards Nazuna she turned towards the door and told it, “you guys better clear out!”